

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

Joan Colby
The City of Refuge

This room lined with the spines
Of books, some stiffly unread,
Others broken like a colt longed
Into subservience or a woman who took
The vows she said as virtue. A desk
Cluttered with intentions
Common as Times Roman. A painting of
Pheasants in the snow. Crystal horse
And jockey awarded for excellence
At a careworn task. Shelf of poems.

South light slants through the wood blinds
That afford a chill view: a winter tree,
The old wellhouse with crazed windows. It's
Vanity that makes the insensate matter.
Collections of boxes, baskets of journals,
Fake daisies on the round table
With the Unabridged and the Bartletts.

The dog lies in a puddle of sun
Legs rowing her dream. We take
Refuge in this paneled room
With its militant volumes attending and
Lucinda Williams singing
Of gravel roads and love gone wrong.

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The Nature of Innocence

Think of the toddler taken
By the hand, to be found throttled
In the rail bed. The child snatched
At the school bus stop,
Years later, discovered locked
In the shed of a mad man.
Or bad man.
The geography of definition.
Where deltas mix fresh water
With salt. If precision could save
A soul like a calibrated machine
We could resist judgments.
Sleep easier unimperiled by doubts.
That man across the avenue
With his odd cocky walk,
His curses in the dark,
His face at the window.

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Having it All

With the money from my award
I bought a mare and named her
Literary Prize. Rode her over fences
For ribbons, over the discarded
Books of poetry, the abandoned readings,
The classrooms of students
Burning with similes.
I wrote about horses,
The divots thrown from their shoes
To disfigure the turf, at auctions
It was my hand waving. Building stalls
And fences, crouching in the cold straw
Of a bitter winter to ease the foal
From its sack, to watch it struggle
Upright on spindly legs to find
The hot teat. Horses: a metaphor
For flight. How one could leap
From the dull halls of ambition
To ride like an outlaw
Into the dusty territory where my
Grandfather died gripping his pistol.
The road not taken. The famous horseman
(later jailed for killing a rival) said
How can you marry a man who doesn't love horses.
It was not my whole life. How I'd always declaimed
With bravado that nothing was mutually exclusive.,
Not love, not children, not poetry or horses.
My small daughters wailing as I exercised
The hunters, as I shouted *Silence*
Slamming the typewriter's return,
Battering the keys. This life that I insisted
Must be inclusive exhausted my patience.
I sat on my stairs and wept.

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Now reading how thirty years ago,
I was among the *voices of the Midwest*.
I remember that night at the Newberry,
The moderator cautioning me not to drink —
His eyes worried with apprehensions:
Mumbling poets, forgotten lines.
I put the glass down
Thinking it would be fine
In my red satin blouse
To outrage an audience.
Instead, I set my foot
Into a stirrup and vaulted
Out of one life, into another
Refusing to acknowledge that balance
Is what keeps one from falling.
My saddlebags heavy with all the poems
I had to write regardless.