

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

Robert Joe Stout
Union Boss, Mexico

Cheers. Applause. Hands
linked above their heads.
Mariachis. Clinking glasses.
Thousands shouting, "Victory!"

Slowly he lifted his hand and drew a line
on tinted glass. His finger came away smudged,
dirty, like everything in the city was dirty,
even the air one breathed. Even one's memories.
In front of him Luis, the driver, cursed the traffic,
the car lurching as he swerved, braked, changed lanes.
"Jefe," he grunted, "we're going to be late."

Slowly he'd opened the envelope,
'What's this?'
'A bonus for being
part of the team...'

Handkerchief across his mouth to thwart
inhaling smog he thanked Luis and rang the bell.
A chunky wide-hipped woman pawed
through her briefcase as she ushered him
past closed doors to the director's anteroom.
"He'll be right with you."
"I'm sure he will."
She scowled at his mockery and he watched her
stride away.
"When I began," he said to himself,
"women weren't lawyers here."

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'Not only for what you've done
but for what you'll do....' they'd said.
More there than he'd ever be able
to earn for his wife and kids:
It hurt to fling it back.

"Come in!" The director waved towards a chair.
Two sub-directors extended their hands.
"Coffee? Brandy? I have Cuban cigars."
"Thank you, no," he frowned.
The director nodded, coughed.
"I'll get right to the point. It's been decided.
You're going to resign."

What? Me? He'd told the committee,
I'm a welder, a drop-out,
I can't be union president!
'They want you!
You're one of them!
Man! You were born to lead!

"Been decided?" he heard himself ask. "By whom?"
The sub-directors looked away, the director
pulled at his ear, coughed and repeated,
"It's been decided, that's all that you need to know."
"The workers decide!" he lunged to his feet,
each word in rhythm with a pounding fist,
"Not you! Nor you! Nor...!"
Armed guards
and the wide-hipped woman charged
through the suddenly opened door.
"We decide," the director waved to the soldiers.
"Strip him, gag him before you haul him off."

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Moving In: Oaxaca, 2006

Church domes reddened
by the setting sun.
'Elotes!' 'Tamales!'
Whippeting wind.
Diesel smell.

He closed his eyes, opened them to muslin drapes,
just-scrubbed tile. "A place to live,"
he told himself, then, quickly, "No, a home."

Daughters clattering room
to room. 'Which one is ours?'
Mulberry tree, Texas pecans.
The cats afraid. Windows vibrating
a Boeing's landing roar...

Livingroom to bedroom, kitchenette
he brushed fingers across chairs, headboard, stove
and then unpacked: laptop, half-a-dozen books,
CDs, sweater, sweats, some hang-up clothes.
The daughters, far away, now had places of their own.

Garage sale change
clattering in Mason jars.
'And this? How much?'
'That's way too steep!!'
The beds, the chairs,
his books and pictures,
gone. Just like his home.

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“Home,” he tried the word again. *Alone...*
echoes came back. Bare walls, sunlight diffused
by leafless trees, he closed the drapes,
then opened them again: A startled spider
trapezed into the hall. He laughed. Then bowed,
“I’m not alone.” The spider paused,
and then returned. To each his own.

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Out of the Mouths of Babes

Soccer ball beneath my arm,
son's hand in mine, I paused,
half-hearing his, "Hey, dad, ice cream?"
Above the counter, blurred by bad reception,
a TV flashed a coquette's smile.

"Who's she?" he asked.
I hesitated,
then replied, "Marta. You know,
'First Lady of the Land.'"

He scowled and for a minute
"...not only a commitment but conviction..."
then peered up and told me,
"That's the same thing Homer said."
"Homer who?"
"Oh dad! You know!
The Simpsons on TV!"
My turn to laugh.
"And then, guess what?"
"You tell me, son."
"A cop grabbed him and carried him away!"

Not knowing what to make of it
I ordered double chocolate chips
and looking back at the TV
thought I saw the president
wear Homer Simpson's grin.

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Children's Ballet Night

Coat around his lover's shoulders
as she burrows, laughing, tight against his chest,
the teenaged doorman grins, "*Sí, pas'usted.*"
I nod, memories of adolescent cuddling
filtering my view of sixteenth century
ornamental stone. Ponderous oak shutters creak,
buffeted by gusts of wind; bougainvillea
fills a patio with quivering chartreuse blooms.
Shadowed portraits—priests and kings—peer down
as Swan Lake creeps the corridor, muted at first,
then flagrant as tutu-ed ten-year-olds collide,
exalted by their parents' prompt applause.

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Night Walk Home

Stumbling on a cobblestone I cursed
—one brief involuntary word—
and heard response--a sharp, quick *wait!*—
and laughed and cursed again
to let entwined lovers know
that I was just passing through the alley
on my way to somewhere else.
But *somewhere else*
was half-a-century ago,
my hand was on a just-bared breast:
Again I heard Gail's frightened *wait!*
as headlights flickered and then passed
and we, still quivering, kissed.