

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

Mark Vogel

Ripped to the ground

In a civilized world the downed limbs would be carted
to the dump, the smaller branches ground into chips
for garden mulch, but on the frontier
where people come and go and great rivers swirl,
all drifts to the heart, and recent evidence
of wrath hangs as threats in surviving trees,
or squats stacked alongside the road
like weathered sculpture.

At the gas station laconic Midwesterners
with vowels stuck in the middle suggest *time will heal*,
though a hundred-mile splintered tree trail reveals
only chaos—enough for worker armies sawing
fireplace small. No one explains how to
avert eyes when devastation insists on staying.

From our rental car we see brilliant yellow
jonquils at the fence line and for a moment
can't remember when this world became damaged.
Then a memory dam thaws, releasing Weather Channel
history of Kentucky ice storms three months
before when brittle beauty pulled limbs down.

In New York City photographers would still film
the aftermath, but here in Wickliffe no one seems
to be looking as we fly into glare. Friends would say
trees can't die, and forests will come back stronger—
that nothing in this practical land is wasted.

We are distracted by the kids giggling at the DVD
as we grow close to a neighborhood deserted long ago.
We fear this ancient home, like this forest,
has altered for good, and waits tainted and unreal.

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The voice which doesn't emerge distinct

as the congregation comes alive in a comedy
that makes sense only from a distance:

a curly haired Jewish woman, a hillbilly foster child,
a lanky ex-Midwesterner father on a back pew

in Grace Lutheran Church, Boone, NC.

The why remains mostly unstated like the Blue Ridge

gentle spring outside as the father is again willing
to be converted for the sake of the boy.

With the hymnal held high he is the mentor
who sings with a voice thin and frail,

like his own father's attempts, which never
were able to soar with heft and power,

unlike the woman across the way letting go
rich and strong, a blessed gift.

This modernized father tries to improve
on his dad by adding layers and timbre and tone,

though what emerges remains mostly unheard,
broken and childlike. Maybe just trying

is mildly admirable like a wooden poem
where a smiling multi-headed god points at

words resonating. As bold March sun pours
through stained glass windows one truth is

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that his voice will stay thin, straining to
be heard, yet comfortable to be submerged

within the whole. Happy this moment
simply to be in the herd, one in many

as the congregation's voice soars.

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The adolescents

We cussed each other and spit in the wind
and called each other animal names,
such as Pig Cow Monkey Squirrel.

Friends became the crudest terms for genitalia,
for human waste, for flaunted smells,
as we swaggered, cussed, drooled, pissed,

rolling on the ground, feeling how bodies ached
to be coarse and unfinished,
in the act of becoming when so much

was acting a paper-thin future—proud to bull
ahead, sometimes destructive,
always absorbed in roles

only we could see. Who understands
in the moment, growth revealed?
Not us, no time for perspective,

us teasing brothers, acne victims with stretching
limbs, actively dissolving boundaries
ignoring evidence to be left behind—

grass and dirt lingering on clothes never needing
to be washed. A communal
wilderness shone like a distant fire, unmapped

and rough, when we were lost with no tools
but sarcasm, twisted humor.

When no clothes fit as wind whipped at

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the cliff edge we dreamed the beginnings of sex,
the smile before the kiss. We collected
the awkward language of shock,

sure it was permanent, like a new tattoo, as we
stood, lonely in our herd eating
the wild—each by choice exposed,

willingly lost, ready for more.