

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/4

Cameron Morse

An Elegy

—in memory of Peter Bonnefin

When I unlock and lift up on the brass
handle of the window to my study,
southwestern shadow breath of summer's
end goes mouth-to-mouth with me
at the lip of windowsill, its breeze stirring

the tattered cobwebs in the tracks
of the upper sash. The body of a housefly
turns over in its sleep. My cousin, Erin,
on the redeye to Sydney hears him
say it's all right and wakes up, too late

to tell her father goodbye. On the first day
of autumn, the AC is silent. I listen
to the traffic for reassurance. Cars passing
beyond the mossy pickets heave
like souls of the departed.

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At the KU Cancer Center

In waiting room, where I pilgrimage myself,
to be weighed and blood-pressure
cuffed, Pulse-Oxed and body-temped
once every four months, Lili nudges
my arm and points at her belly
without a word, as though he were listening

and might stop if he heard us. In the exam room,
she sits on table paper while the nurse
of my oncologist tells me to follow
her finger with my eyes, her finger drawing
invisible lines of a star, or the sign
of the cross. Her hands waggle right and then left,

left and then right, to test my peripheral
vision. Feeling strength
gained in my palsied arm, I wrap my hand
around her fingers and pull, pull, pull her
toward me. Push, push, push her away.

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The Piano Tuner's Eulogy

Charles Friend drags the dusting brush
of his vacuum cleaner over the tuning pins
below the lid of Grandma's baby grand,
the 1929 Wurlitzer in which dust
collects like ash from the smokestack

of a crematorium. He pulls back
on the tennis ball handle of his tuning
wrench, like he's changing gears in a stick
shift with one hand while pounding
the same key with the other.

On the day that
the moving van carrying her baby
grand turned onto our cul-de-sac, Grandma
told the driver he had the wrong address,
he should take it back to Independence.

Mr. Friend says
every piano has a memory, its own unique set
of overtones. Grandma could not remember
burning the bacon or pouring her husband bowls
of chicken soup congealed over weeks

on the stovetop. She forgot about driving the wrong
way down I-70, but I remember her liver-spotted
hands on the keys, playing "My Way"
until the sheets vanished, and then the notes.
And the lyrics.

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Day One

Strictly speaking, for a human being, there is no other practice than this practice; there is no other life than this life.

— Shunryo Suzuki

If I am to begin again when my son is born
any day now, let me get down
on my hands and knees
and clean the bathroom. Let me pour white vinegar
into hot water and mop up the pubic hairs

and cobwebs, dead spiders and chips
of sheetrock from the crumbling wall
with a rag. Let me pluck
the long black hairs that fall out of your head
out of the rug because I love you. When I'm done,

let me stand, wearing only my underwear,
and finish for lunch the power greens from Costco.
Let the red stems trigger my gag reflex, the bent,
bleeding leaves of baby spinach go down with the rest.

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Baby's First Ekphrasis

My first photograph finds me squinting
into the light, RESEARCH MEDICAL CENTER
1987 printed on my T-shirt, the fingers of my right hand
raised to my temple like a psychic who is trying to get
a reading on an audience member. I frown in concentration
so intense, it looks as if I might burst into tears at any
second, squinting into the dark beyond the spotlight.

Little has changed since the year of my birth to my firstborn's.
I am still trying to read a face that lies beyond the range
of visible light. My irises stretch open in October
brightness. High wind hisses in oak leaves beyond
my comprehension. The red rash has left my cheeks
but the frown remains with the sense that something,
vague as it is, still needs to be said.