

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/4

Robbie Gamble

Jeannette Rankin

Of all the sepia-shadowed elders of my childhood,
I remember you: Carmel, 1967, the retirement home
hanging above the Pacific, a jacaranda branch
waving out your window, the whole country
riding down the slide into the charnel paddies
of Vietnam. My parents ushered me into your study.
I was told you had been important once. You,
so comfortable for an old lady! I gushed about starring as
Saber-Tooth Tiger in my first-grade play, about the pool
at our hotel. You asked what I was reading—
“Dr. Doolittle, it’s big, and there’s hard words,
but I like the way the animals talk with him.”
“Always read, Robbie, books will open worlds for you.”
I knew nothing of your blazing struggle for suffrage,
first woman ever elected to Congress,
your lonely pacifism, twice bracing with your
hard-won vote of NO! against the patriotic shudder
as America charged into both World Wars.
Only later did I realize, when you took my hand
you were slipping me a moral compass.

Litany of the Saints

Joey shared a cigarette.

Carlene raised four boys without yelling at them much.

Sometimes we didn't have to say anything, we would just sit together.

When her best friend was being bullied by the popular girls, Zena stood up for her.

Herman turned in the money he found.

Albert let all of the bitterness drain out of his heart.

The neighborhood was getting rough. We cleaned up the empty lots. Planted flowers, yes, flowers. And sat out to make sure the kids stayed out of trouble.

Josephine got out of debt.

Vladek got sober.

Ibrahim walked his girls to school every day.

There was smoke everywhere, and we were scared, but we pounded on all the doors to make sure that everyone got out.

Nguyen survived the crossing and started a family.

There were so many coming into the city to escape the repression, what could we do? We banded together and started soup kitchens.

Carmen covered her girlfriend's shifts during the chemo treatments.

Jurgen wouldn't carry a gun, so he became a stretcher-bearer.

Jess always smiled.

For the first time in years, we could sleep through the night.

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Dontae shoveled his neighbor's walk.

Emile gave away an inheritance.

Mitzi read to her daughter.

In the evening cool, we would walk up the hill behind the town, sit down there and look out over the land. And just feel grateful.

Evan held his husband's hand and gave him permission to let go.

Modern Samaritan

O my good homeless man
Today, God that I am
I will toss you a smile and a quarter

While tomorrow you'll find
I step over you blind
Lost in musings on my own hereafter.

Talk of war casts a pall
And economies fall
While you stubbornly cling to your corner

Through fierce heat and dumb cold
You get bought, I get sold
On the fiction all lives will get better.

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Macchiato

Such a complex on the tongue,
that hot little cup of bitter
marked with a sweet foam cloud:
mmm, the good new marriage
my grown boys maturing
even the one that worries
me so: too rich! too rich!
and then aftertaste—my
brother found dead four days
on his bedroom floor, or
(stirring again) the refugee
camp testimonies, the voices
I drank that searing
Salvadoran morning:

We could taste death, but God
helped us, he put the mango tree
in the path of the mortar shells—
they exploded before burning
on our tents, and our dogs
were barking out to us
from around the perimeter—
they marked where the soldiers
would shoot from next,
and so we were able
to survive the night.

Leaving (we are always
leaving, it seems) only
the ring around the dregs.