

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/2

Alexa Mergen
Clavicles

Halfway home Dawn Ruth stopped at the service station. Usually they filled the tank on Fridays, but that routine was linked to the other routine, Chinese take-out with Fred. That routine was broken now. Patterns must change, she conceded, like fashions. Time demands it.

It was hard, though. She felt as she did when the hurricane wrested the roof from their first house, in Virginia Beach, a long time ago. The Atlantic wind had worked slowly and systematically like a hand peeling a banana to expose creamy flesh inside. So death had pried Fred from life.

The gas station fronted a road to the freeway and it was convenient. Four leaf clovers, Mexican flags and NFL stickers decorated the office's glass windows. Purple petunias filled the white-painted truck tires between the pumps.

Dawn stopped at the first pump, the one Fred had used, and took her purse from the space between the front seats. Inside, she studied candy bars, continuing to the counter without selecting one.

"Mrs. Ruth," the young man behind the counter said as he looked up from a paperback book.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Ruth," he slid off the stool and stood, extending his hand. "Jason Foster."

"Foster."

"That's right. Kindergarten. Burns Elementary. Your last year of teaching there before you deserted us for the middle school." His smile softened a square-shaped face. "I would have had you for first grade, too, if you'd stayed. Remember? They did that looping then, the teacher keeping their class."

"You came to the after-school program."

"I looked forward to granola bars and extra attention from the world's best teacher."

"Well..." Dawn looked away.

"You're a principal now? Well, the best principals are teachers. My girlfriend says that. She's getting her credential."

"Why that's terrific," Dawn had recovered herself. "What are you up to?"

"Studying at the junior college after screwing around for too long," he lowered his chin, "Goofing off. Hoping to be an EMT."

"Emergency Medical Technician. An important job." Dawn found herself slipping into her jovial principal's voice. She felt irritated by it, as if her larynx betrayed her.

"You inspired me. You and Mr. Ruth. He built all those stage sets."

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/2

"Oh, yes." A picture of Fred standing atop a scaffold facing a false door, hand on the doorknob, rose up. At the same time, something inside of her shifted, like a plate falling from a cabinet shelf when the back door slams.

She collapsed. She fell like one of those plastic animals with elastic in the legs. Push the bottom and whoops! The image made her laugh and the laugh concealed her tears.

"Mrs. Ruth!" Jason knelt, taking her head in his hands, cradling her neck. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have mentioned it." She felt his fingers on her wrist, measuring her pulse.

"I'm fine," she said. And she was. Long ago years of skiing, she still knew how to fall.

Dawn rolling to her side to get up, supported by the boy's arm. He brought a stool around and set her on it. He filled a paper cup with water and handed it to her gently.

"I'm embarrassed," she said. But she wasn't really. Mostly she was glad to have her regular voice back.

"It's okay." The boy glanced at the door. This was probably all on camera, Dawn thought.

"Time is out of joint," she said and laughed again.

"What's that?" The boy moved closer as if proximity could help.

"Oh, Hamlet," Dawn said. "Shakespeare, you know."

He nodded.

"I miss him," she added, peering at the droplets remaining in the flimsy yellow cup.

"Mrs. Ruth, please let me drive you home."

"No," she shook her head. "Thank you."

"Let me see you get home okay." The boy pulled out a small green phone from deep in his jean's pocket, dialed and entered a code. He locked the register drawer with a key on a string tucked inside his shirt, turned the sign on the windowsill to "closed." It slipped to the floor with a flat sound like a pancake. When he picked it up he set it back upside down. Dawn noticed and said nothing, just closed her eyes.

After initial adjustments of the driver's seat and mirrors and an exchange of directions, the pair traveled in silence. Dawn considered speaking, to be polite, but the quiet was companionable and she was tired. It was a relief to not converse. Since her husband's death well-meaning friends and relatives, even her own son, chatted gaily to offset sorrow. As if banter hurried time along, hurried us through the vale of years.

As they drove along in silence, Dawn indulged herself in memories of her own mother's funeral. Dawn had been about Jason's age. Her mother, a doctor, had drilled her every night on bones and organs. Surely, her mother told her, everyone must want to be a doctor, to have the skills to heal.

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/2

Dawn lifted a hand to her face. Ulna, radius, carpus, trapezoid, phalanges. Each Latin word told a story in its syllables.

She recalled her mother's waxed mortician skin in the open coffin. She stood close to the box and closed her eyes picturing the beautiful architecture of the body. Someone had pulled her away. She could still recall the feel of the padded stackable chair under her.

The only sound the day of the funeral had been crying. People moved through Dawn's mother's house dressed in black, the way it was done then. The shades were drawn and someone had covered the mirrors with tablecloths. Dark silence anchored her grief, sheltered her like the knot of an old oak. She wanted to occupy that grief like a bug in bark then and she wanted that now, too, the snugness of sorrow.

The car bumped over a speed table.

Turning away from her memories, Dawn glanced at the driver's seat. Jason's eyes remained focused on the road. She doubted he drove that carefully when he was alone. She could imagine him as a father, a child safely harnessed in a plastic shell behind him. He would catch the baby's eyes in the rear view mirror and smile.

Dawn had not wanted to look up or ahead or move on back then. Nor did she want to now. But in education it was always tomorrow. "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," she said aloud, recalling the mournful tone of Macbeth.

"Sorry?" Jason asked, darting his eyes at her.

Dawn shook her head and turned to face the window, watching the vertical lines of tree trunks pass like bars on a cage.

Tomorrow was school, she thought. The next day Fred's funeral, next week Open House. Minutes to fill. She was grateful the boy knew enough to stay quiet. Though, she supposed, he wasn't a boy. He looked grown up driving her car. She had been teaching a long time.

Jason stopped the car. He turned on his indicator in preparation for parallel parking. Dawn looked up and then over her shoulder. One car passed on the street and then another, each slowing before realizing they should go around. Jason checked the mirror again and reversed, expertly drawing Dawn's car into a tight space. There were not more than a few inches between bumpers.

Dawn's eyes sharpened as Jason parked the car. She had always appreciated the finesse required to parallel park well. Timing and a sense of space, concentration and ease.

She was waking as if from a vivid dream. She studied her own house with a stranger's eyes. She saw how the ivy needed trimming under the front window and how weeds grew greenly in the cracks of the asphalt driveway. Last night's wind had pushed the camellia blossoms from their branches and a pool of red petals lay in a circle around the tree.

"Thank you, Jason," Dawn said. She took the keys from his hand.

"No problem."

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/2

Half-heartedly she asked, "Do you have a ride? Do you want to make a call or to wait inside?"

"No, it's okay. My girlfriend'll pick me up."

"Well, let me know if you need a note or anything for your boss."

Jason laughed. "I'm the manager, Mrs. Ruth."

"Okay, then. Thank you." She itched to be alone in her house. Her house.

"Yep. Nice to see you." He walked away. Finally, he turned the corner.

She went inside, stopping to collect the mail scattered like leaves on the floor inside the door. Then she locked the door behind her, deadbolt and knob. She threw her coat over a chair and undressed on her way to the bathroom abandoning shoes, blouse, slacks, stockings, bra and panties on the blue carpet, aware of and indifferent to the fact that the window blinds were open. Passing the dining table, she pulled from a yellow vase six pink roses she had purchased at the market last week. Some petals fell from the blown blossoms as she climbed the stairs.

In the master bath she drew water so hot it scorched the skin on her feet when she stepped in. Gritting her teeth, she sank into the tub, part of her body in water, part of her body in air. Steam fogged the mirrors, water beading and dripping in rivulets to streak the glass. Sweat slicked her brow and the tips of her hair became heavy with damp. She reached forward submerging her arms, wrapping her fingers around her red toes. She brought her hands to her ankles, feeling the knobby malleolus, brushing her fingers to the fibula, around to the back of the calf, to the popliteal, the back of the knee. She would reacquaint herself with herself, from the sole of each foot to the pit of the throat, gradually.

Pausing her curious investigation, Dawn reached over the tub's edge for the roses she had let fall there. Avoiding the thorns, she held the stems above her body to shake the soft petals into the clear water. The story of St. Teresa of Avila came to mind. She had heard it years ago on a trip to Spain. The story says that nine months after the flower-loving Carmelite was buried a heavenly perfume surrounded her tomb. This was inexplicable as the body had not been embalmed. Exhumed, she was deemed a miracle.