

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

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SILVER

Silver is the color I paint my life that year in Seattle. Mount Saint Helens had erupted days before and ashes were drifting down from the sky. I had never visited Seattle but had lived in another coastal city for three years. That city, San Francisco, was not silver, even when shrouded in the infamous fog.

I had moved to Seattle for love. Or so I thought. Perspective comes with age. I can now see there wasn't a shred of love between me and the man I will call Michael. There was certainly lust. More than anything, I wanted Michael to love me. If someone as beautiful as Michael could love me, I might learn to love myself. That was the simple truth, though not something I could have acknowledged at the time.

For half a year, I had ridden a rollercoaster of emotion, giddy at the top when Michael showered me with affection. Reality – and gravity – inevitably burst in, and Michael snatched his attention away as fast as he'd given it. I then hurtled down, barely able to catch my breath.

He left on a bright fall afternoon, a day the fog stayed off the coast. Seattle had been his home before accepting a temporary position in San Francisco. The job ended and he decided to return. He was vague about his intentions toward me. We were neither here nor there, involved and yet not.

So, I went on with my life, trying to loosen his hold on me, easier now that he was gone. We talked about my visiting Seattle, maybe moving there at some point. He made clear more than once that if I did decide to make Seattle my home, that home would not be with him.

I hadn't known Seattle would turn out to be silver. A friend who'd grown up there told me the city was green. The green in Seattle, Rodney explained, was more saturated than any ordinary green. On a walk one afternoon in Golden Gate Park, Rodney pointed to some plants growing alongside the path.

"See that green," he said, and paused, until I nodded and said yes. "Make it a thousand times greener and that's Seattle."

Rodney was right, of course. The constant rain kept the landscape alive and bright. Unlike San Francisco where buildings pressed closely together with barely a living thing in front, Seattle's charming neighborhoods were filled with homes shaded by glorious trees and bordered by flowers. I could have chosen an entire palette of colors to characterize the city. Yet whenever I think about that time, silver is what comes to mind.

Michael had been gone for months, though he'd flown to San Francisco for a short visit at Christmas. In almost daily postcards crammed with words, sometimes running along the sides, he casually made mention of other women. I weighed that information with the fact that he wrote so often. An unwieldy push-pull gave me hope one minute, while urging me to give him up in the next.

Much of the time, I was doing all right, going out dancing with friends

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from work, even having an affair I knew wouldn't go far. Little by little, I was edging away from Michael, taking advantage of the separation to reclaim my heart. Then one day I made up my mind.

I would not visit him, as I had planned. Seeing him again would only crack open my tender heart. If he didn't want to live with me, why should I move to Seattle? If I wasn't going to move, what was the point of a visit?

One night, moments after I arrived home late from work, he called. I said hello, then dove right in, giving him my news, assuming, like me, he would feel relieved. He would no longer need to argue his case, that he wasn't ready to live with me. As the saying goes, we were now on the same page.

My announcement was met with silence. And then, I thought I heard him crying. In a quiet voice I strained to hear, he said, "I want you to come."

I mumbled something like, *This is all for the best*. When he didn't respond, I said I was tired and needed to go.

Lying in bed unable to sleep, I worried. Michael had sounded so sad. I hoped he would be all right.

Concern for him, though, wasn't going to change my mind. When it came to our relationship, I was finally done.

Or so I thought.

Off and on the following day, I thought about Michael. Each time I did, I assured myself the decision I had made was right.

Late in the afternoon I took a break from work and stepped out of the office. As usual, Mission Street, the major artery through San Francisco's colorful, predominantly Latino Mission District, was bustling. My hands were full, carrying pans from an office party we'd had the night before. I walked carefully, making sure not to drop any of that load.

I shifted the pans to my left hand when I reached the small Japanese restaurant that had provided us with delicious teriyaki and rice and opened the door. I walked to the back, where I greeted Mrs. Matsumoto, the owner, and handed her the pans. Then I turned around and headed for the door.

I stepped outside and paused. For some reason, before turning to the right and heading back to the office, I looked straight ahead.

"Oh, my God," I exclaimed.

Michael was wearing a red plaid flannel shirt I knew well. He'd had it on the day he left San Francisco to return to Seattle. He stepped forward, threw his arms around me, and whispered, "I love you." I felt like I was dreaming.

Twelve hours after our phone conversation, Michael had flown from Seattle to San Francisco. Before we moved from in front of the Japanese restaurant, he told me he had changed his mind.

For two days, Michael stayed with me, repeating words I'd wanted to hear for so long. On the third day, after he boarded the plane back to

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Seattle, I gave notice at my job. Since it would take time to find a replacement, I agreed to stay for a month.

As luck would have it, my boss found the perfect replacement, and she was available right away. After she finished filling out the new employee paperwork, I started to show her around.

A day later, the letter arrived.

"I've started having doubts," the letter began.

The doubts were over the very thing Michael had just been so certain about.

The problem for me was that the doubts had come too late. I couldn't go back to my boss and admit it was all a misunderstanding. Neither was I able to ask my replacement to start sending out her resume, because the position she'd been offered was no longer available. I couldn't tell my housemate, the owner of our house, that instead of my room becoming vacant for someone else, I would be staying. Most importantly, I couldn't possibly believe this latest news. Against my better judgement, I had opened my heart to Michael, thinking I could rely on the fact that he loved me. I couldn't accept that Michael's repeated expressions of love were nothing more than a cruel joke, not real or meant to be taken seriously.

Going back was impossible. At the same time, moving forward on the planned path was a mistake. But I felt I had no choice.

Not surprisingly, I failed to appreciate the greener than green of Seattle Rodney had described. Silver stood out to me right from the start. If I could give the melancholy I experienced that year a color, silver would have been my first and only choice.

From the moment I stepped into the terminal at SeaTac airport and Michael offered a weak wave from the other side of the gate, I could see that the man who'd impulsively flown to San Francisco to declare his love had vanished. As my first days in Seattle unfolded in a cramped, crowded apartment, one of three units in a large, old crumbling house, I felt an overpowering urge to escape.

Michael made it clear he didn't love me. Rather than a partner, boyfriend or lover, I was to think of him as a roommate. We were subletting the apartment from a friend who would return in a few months. Before then, we would need to find another home. I could move out on my own or keep living with him. Either way, our lives would be separate, not intertwined as I'd expected and hoped.

In one of those first heartbreaking weeks, Michael took me for a ride on the ferry. He had no destination in mind, so we wouldn't disembark when the boat stopped at Bainbridge Island. As the ferry let riders off and on, Michael and I remained seated across from one another, at a faded Formica table.

The leisurely ride mimicked the life we were living in that small apartment. We were sailing on Puget Sound but heading nowhere. As on the ferry ride, my surroundings in the city were unfamiliar. I knew I needed to go somewhere, figure out a destination other than where I'd landed.

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But I had to get some grounding first in this place, where the only person I knew wanted to have little or nothing to do with me.

Surprisingly, that slow ride to Bainbridge Island and back was a first step, when I was introduced to the silver that is Seattle. As sad as I felt during the ride to be with a man I thought I loved but didn't love me, my feelings were mirrored back to me as beauty. Puget Sound shimmered, like finely shined metal.

And there was the light. Pale gray clouds filled the sky, letting a thread of white break through, bathing the Sound silver. This perfect mimicry of my mood comforted me, not just in the short hour-plus of the ride, but during the next weeks and months, linking me to the landscape in this otherwise foreign place.

Not long after, Michael and I moved to an apartment with a glorious view of Puget Sound and the Seattle Space Needle from a bank of windows that stretched across the living room. My relationship with Michael continued on its wobbly course, moving back and forth between intimacy and distance. I knew I should pack up and go, but I couldn't. Instead, I spent long afternoons gazing out the window at that silvery sight, water and towering space needle, soothing as a hot bath or glass of cool white wine.

Some days I headed to the Pike Place Market, enjoying soup of the day and a slab of fresh-baked, warm crusty bread, at the low wooden counter facing the water. Even though I was stationary, that expanse of molten silver, with waves occasionally catching the light, offered an invitation to sail out to some distant adventure, where exciting discoveries might be found. While I felt trapped by the hold Michael still had on me, unable to accept the demise of this dream of companionship and caring that had never materialized, silver water beckoned, not for an actual journey but an emotional one.

In reality, I didn't have much to pack, since I'd kept boxes brought from San Francisco intact, aware from the start that life with Michael was temporary. A friend offered to help, as I still didn't own a car. A light drizzle dampened the sidewalk, while we carried out boxes and a few suitcases.

Michael was quietly weeping that morning, trailing behind me to hand over a plant I'd left behind. He'd cried the same way on the phone months before. This time, I wouldn't be fooled. He was crying over some past abandonment my leaving had made him recall. He was not sad about me.

My own sorrow remained for much of the two and a half years I stayed in Seattle. To soothe myself, or at least be in the place I felt most comfortable, I gravitated toward the water.

As the months passed and I moved about the city, my attachment to Michael lessened. At the same time, my feelings for his city, especially her silvery expanses, grew. One after another, I found favorite places -- lunch at the Pike Place wooden counter or a walk along the path jutting out from the Market area into the Sound, with its display of sculptures along the way. Every so often I splurged and took myself for a ferry ride to and from Bainbridge Island, a journey with no destination, except to be on the water.

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Later a friend would move to a house whose back porch overlooked the Sound. We would sit out there, bundled up on chilly evenings, and watch that silvery light tease the water, drinking too much wine and bemoaning our single lives.

Even though Seattle's incessantly cloudy and often dripping skies added to my misery, those silvery vistas did not. Instead, they were an avenue to another place, like a session with a kind therapist providing gentle prompts to open up about the latest sorrow, followed by comfort.

I didn't analyze my attraction to Seattle's waterways. All I knew was that they beckoned me to come look, out the window while enjoying my soup or a cup of coffee on the ferry, but mostly on a walk and sometimes jogging.

Eventually, San Francisco's brighter weather beckoned. I repacked my books and one day moved back. As in Seattle, I was drawn to places in my old city where I could glimpse the water or walk on the beach. Views were different from the city I'd left behind, offering more hope and possibility.

A decade after returning to San Francisco, I met the man who would become my husband. Not surprisingly, on our first date, we had lunch on the back deck of a restaurant overlooking San Francisco Bay. Later, we headed over the Golden Gate Bridge, to Tiburon, where we boarded a ferry. Unlike that first ride I'd taken with Michael, Richard and I had a destination. When the ferry docked at Angel Island, we disembarked, and climbed the hill to take in the glorious view of the bay, on a day when sunlight winked off the blue-green water, no matter which direction we looked.