

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

John Middlebrook
Terrarium

Softly tumbling flakes make beds of snow
on vestiges of autumn and grass-worn paths.
As the woods pull inward and go to sleep,
cooling embers fade in trees,

and blackened winter seeds
cling to their hard-earned faith in spring.
Lying beneath the ashen fleece,
they dream of color.

Until, in ancient stands of pines,
under thunderclouds and lightning,
new shadows rustle boughs
and chartreuse pierces brown.

As the rain soaks through
and drizzles down,
there are murmurs in the mist
and footfalls all around.

Yet how fragile this terrarium must be
if, inside summer's tranquil twilight—
with neighboring Venus poised
like a diamond on our skyline—

one faraway dog
can crack this bowl of calm
with an unannounced volley of barks,
his unfulfilled hungers and impulse.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

Splash and Shatter

Walking by a river, my ears tune
to an anonymous splash.
From rings of ripples I'm left to infer
what leapt from the water, then disappeared.

Or perhaps this windless sky
dropped an ancient limb to the river's bed,
a breath ago, reminding me that we often miss
what's coming before it arrives.

Like someone tired from sleepwalking
who opens a book in the middle
trying to imagine the way it begins,

some stories I've appeared in
approached me slowly,
then hurried past to their own ends.

The worst were like windowpanes
that strained then shattered
leaving shards in my eyes—
through which I failed to foresee
the sharp turns that foiled
the plots I thought were ours.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

Cascade the Generations

for Catherine and Mary

Water is always with you.
You undulate upon its lap
until it breaks and you drop
into waiting arms and hands.
From baths to strides you swim,
nourished by the sustenance
water gives, just as one day
you may be drawn
to its rhythmic code:

despite gravity, water ascends
like faith, on bridges of fog
and mist, bringing full ladles
to rumbling skies that cascade
in torrents down mountains and hills,
filling the reservoirs of roots in fields
and forests and streams, restoring
over and over the oceans and seas.

Every moment, water moves forward
even as it wills itself back to the clouds—
much as one growing progeny within
may absorb the ways of water
and innately sense that she owns
not the child, but rather the charge
passing through her,

and the lives to whom
this charge is given
are renewed once again
when this child reaches back and up
to the parents of the parents
whose currents brought them here.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

The Settings of Stones

Today I placed a stone on the grave of a friend
to serve as a beacon, a summary pulse
of our days together all stopped in one.

Often, as a child I tried to remember in order
every day I had lived, restoring
the bland similarity of each one next to the rest,
faithfully searching for anything I may have missed.

But then days like this one came
to engulf the time zones of my mind,
pushing horizons over the edge
like meteorites crashing to the earth
hurling crater-loads of soil and sea back to the sun.

Washing out bridges of memory
to the mundane, some of these days
traded pots of pennies for palms of gold:
my siblings' births and their pristine scent;
that first deep and lasting kiss;
the distant view of the Rockies
rising like legions of mythical castles
from the floor of the Plains below.

Though as often there were those
that hollowed out my insides
and filled me with lead:
the charred remains of a neighbor's home;
the absence in our teacher's face as she told us
the president is dead;
the newspaper report of a classmate
lost in a faraway war.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

But as firmly settled as these days seem,
they are more like stepping stones
cut from crisscrossed sediment veins,
then placed afloat uncertain paths.

Now surrounded and shaped by quivering grass,
the loam, and the leaves--
the fragile terrain on which these stones are set
holds their solidity and defines their edge.

And so, especially on days like this,
I listen and look more than ever
for the insignificant and easily dismissed:

for the cry of the loon across the lake,
to his plaintive call. Wherever I go,
he hangs that same deep note of blues
in moonlit rooms of hazy lagoons,
until the vapor lifts the sash of morning.
When I hear a train's whistle, it's as near as it is far.
I know my last heartbeat anticipates the next
and counts on my lungs to draw in the sky.
More than ever, each day, I see a face
or a pair of hands that I cannot forget,
and I notice one tree
on the hillside I am passing
that speaks indelibly for the rest.