

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/1

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The November 2015 issue of Ibbetson Street offers poetry and prose featuring a wide variety of styles, approaches, subject matters, and moods. (Disclaimer: two of my own poems have appeared in past issues, but nothing of mine appears here.) It would require a most lengthy, and patience-testing, review to cover everything. In addition to those discussed here, notable contributions include poems by Marge Piercy and Ted Kooser, an elegy for Hugh Fox by Eric Greinke and Glenna Luschei, and a review by Lawrence Kessenich of Charlotte Gordon's study, *Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Her Daughter Mary Shelley*. We are also fortunate to have "Douceur," a poem by Haitian poet Ida Faubert, with a translation by Boston Poet Laureate Danielle Legros Georges. This is part of an ongoing project (see <http://www.friendsofsouthendlibrary.org/2013/09/danielle-legros-georgess-reading-of-her-recent-work-ranged-far-and-wide-including-translations-from-the-french-of-haitian-poet-ida-faubert/>).

I was interested in "Aglets" by Gary Metras even before I knew what aglets were. It turns out that an aglet is altogether commonplace: it's the "small plastic or metal sheath typically used on each end of a shoelace, cord, or drawstring," according to some website or other. So most everyone I know handles them every day. Metras begins with two references to aglets, which spark a series of free associations: from a quoted "inelegant" pun, to a trout's leap scattering water droplets in the sun, to jewels atop a pool table, somehow landing us with a turtle in a tree.

Tomas O'Leary's "Dining Out With Our Zombie" is a hilarious kind-of-shaggy-dog story. It's premised on a highly open-minded family who not only takes a zombie into their home, but even takes him out to eat in a very liberal-minded neighborhood indeed: "But with ribs and pasta smothered in sauce / and a cheering family circled around, our zombie / assumes a transcendent grace, which gives / added charm to the famously tolerant eatery." Of course, this is also a ploy in the service of training their house guest away from human brains: "down to cauliflower, which had the right look." And by the end (the shaggy dog moment), this might only be a way of marking time: "We know the climate's changing as he eats. / Why skimp on raw gestures, bereft of good will, / while the world grows warm enough to toast us all?"

"The Teacher's Prayer" by Afaa Michael Weaver is, for me, one of the standout selections in this Ibbetson Street issue. Weaver, who teaches at Simmons College, testifies movingly to the depth of responsibility and self-questioning felt by anyone who takes seriously the complexity and ambiguity of the teacher's challenge. Here is the incessant circling of the mind and its sometimes painful leaps to doubt and memory, even in the

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/1

middle of one instant of intended purpose. One brief selection may suggest the extent of this work:

*& they are all so young, and something hurts in all
of where my joints connect, where the memories and dreams of my life
are connected with locking tubes and cylinders filled with jelly,
and it is another day without a Motrin, because I take pain
over side effects whenever possible, so I begin the questioning,
ask myself how I came to be a man who teaches women how to make
the world something they can trust will give them what they need
on their own terms, and I see my mother in her old slippers
and blue house dress, the one my father and I put in the trash*

In "Casa de la Luz," Krikor Der Hohannesian provides a sharply recalled vigil at the death of a family member, after an apparent period of separation. It begins with the abrupt declaration, "Nothing more could be done, so / on a bright desert morning they came," although as things develop the "they" might be hospice personnel, loved ones, or anyone outside the skin of the dying. The speaker feels like a stranger in the environment, musing on the feral cats, marijuana plants, and four vintage Volkswagens. The moment of death is given an image that takes the deceased's final breath, suggests his passage outside the body, and ends ambiguously, without punctuation: "Sun-up, three loud breaths, then / silence, a settled hush, a wisp of a breeze / flutters the curtains. You, unfettered, / a fresh memory stripped of its flesh"

The Fukushima, Japan, nuclear disaster may seem geographically remote to most of us on the U.S. East Coast, but it is closer than we're willing to acknowledge, as evidenced by Teisha Dawn Twomey's "They're Not That Unusual." An unsettled vagueness pervades the poem, beginning with its "Meanwhile, mutant daisies grow" and compounded in "Or so I read that day I had the nightmare for the first time" and later "... or so I read or heard somewhere // about the two-headed daisies or daughter / or was it just a single girl, one only stem // to the flowers I continue to string / individually in my nightmares." An always-almost-present disaster, however much out of sight, will link the reality of mutant daisies and a dream of mutant daughters. The poem's title might refer to two-headed daisies, but given that there is no "away" from radiation, might it not come in time to refer to two-headed girls?

Kathleen Aguero's "Night Beckons" reads to me like a curiously detailed set of images of inner stasis. Although "Night beckons like an empty staircase / promising to lead where you didn't know / you wanted to go," the speaker doesn't seem to move. She stays with a whole set of blockages, perhaps preferring some kind of collapse: "Maybe you want the house in flames." There is day as well as night, but it seems no better: "Day, the familiar hazard. / Night, the vacant dream."

Charles Coe spins a whole series of meditations from a single sound in a historic jazz recording in "A Woman Laughs." The title sound was captured in 1961, during a performance by the Bill Evans Trio. It's likely that most listeners either barely notice this laugh, or let it go without thought, but Coe takes it further. He first puts the "jarring, even sacrilegious" sound in its context: "But then again, a jazz club's not a concert hall, /

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/1

listeners in polite rows, knees together, / waiting to cough in the space between movements." He then imagines many of the possible "worlds within worlds" that might also have been associated with the moment:

*In one world,
A man who follows Evans from gig to gig
sits at the bar alone, transfixed,
ice melting in the forgotten drink.*

*In one world,
The bartender counts his cash
while dreaming of the waitress' embrace.*

What would we also learn from our infinite number of daily moments, if we could reflect on them in this way?

The story of a family finding itself in sudden danger is at the heart of "Lost on the Little Island" by Alexander Levering Kern. A father and two children are threatened with stranding on an island far from the mainland after the son cuts his foot. Kern brings the reader to the heart of the story by structuring it entirely as a set of rhetorical questions, mostly beginning with "If I told you" and concluding with an appeal to the reader to enter the situation, for example:

*If I told you that invading species curl their tongues
that chokeberry and poison oak lie in wait
would you walk this path with me?*

Although the story is told "as if," as the poem unfolds its actuality becomes clear. We don't know the extent of actual danger the family faced, but we do understand their perception, which is reality enough.

In "I Just Called to Say I Love You," Lyn Lifshin unfolds a complex series of memories, framed by a single moment in a ballroom dance studio that ricochets back to her mother's final days. The song (by Stevie Wonder) was both played in the studio and a favorite of the mother, linked too to the daughter's phone-home or the lack of one:

*waiting for another call
from me, already becoming
a balloon pulling away, getting
smaller and not the girl in college
with curls and still white teeth
getting so many calls and dates
the other women wrote,
wrote, "Frieda, give us a chance,
No one can get to us."*

And the memory of the studio moment "in a tall dark stranger's / beautiful arms, will soon become / a half remembered mirage," as has every other association with the same song. (Or with anything.)

The overwhelming barrage of bad movies swallows everything, like a black hole or "the ganged living dead," as Michael Todd Steffen tells us in "Bad Movies." Even the sensible ones in these productions "cannot escape

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/1

their roles," and neither apparently can we, as bad movies are warped images of "our tilted lives" or perhaps vice versa. The world of the bad movie invades the holiday weekend and makes it an overstuffed thing: "torpid, overfed, / Indulging the star-studded team of special / Forces, another dirty dozen of them." There's not even relief in "wholly accidental glimpses" of naked actors in these films, as they are of course "bad actors."

Pui Ying Wong's "The Wind Takes Off" speaks of an understanding of the intricate relation between the living and the dead. Or rather, of one living person's conflicted relationship with her dead, "my dead." Is she solicitous enough, she wonders? "I cause them worries. / I know because I worried for them / when they were living." Does she bear enough responsibility for them, even past grief? "Some days go by / and I wonder if I miss them enough." Somehow, she hears her dead "chuckle" and say no: "like the wind they have gone far and do not need my grief." This brief meditation exemplifies the potential for poetry to express much with comparatively little, allowing us unexpected breadth for our own reflections.