

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

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the chart

my father says i talk with an accent
but what does he know
his memory roams the living room
scattered words he casts
then hauls back to pull me into *the boat*
like in the old days
i draft a medication chart for the week
he knocks the coffee over
staggers to the restroom
and did i ever get married

dad momentarily
drifts back to the kitchen table
can't beat this rip tide no more
i pick clean clothes and put him to bed
throw in a casual comment
about places i've been
where they use words
nobody knows in our town

he says he's heard my accent before
in some café back in the city
when he was young
says keep talking so i can hear it
sounds rough and beautiful
like i was then back in the city

is it the coffee sonny
is that what's getting to me

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so i keep talking to dad
tell him about that harbor café
he maybe went to
when he or i was young
then crumple up the chart into a paper ball
he begs me not to throw it overboard

i talk for hours hoping
he will get used to me again
come back to land

in the morning dad and i
sail in uncharted territories
unaware of accents

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i can hear my neighbors fight

i can hear my neighbors fight
at dinner every night
they bicker over putting out the trash
chores he or she was meant to do
duties that fell off the calendar

then there's this silence
brings back years-old resent
from the time they were dating
grievances they never got around to
i'm sure you did that bitch
and i ain't sure this kid is mine
i guess it's their way to go back to dating

they call each other names
unlikely to happen in love
names i have heard before
in other houses

sometimes they shout
and i cover my head with my pillow
i slump into my own years-old thoughts
revisit stories i had forgotten
wishing somebody heard me
fight at dinner
some night

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mud on your shoes

you want to leave home before you're sixteen
play hookie and do all that crazy shit
you've seen in the movies
climb a redwood
meet some cute wild chick
talk about coffee and horses
and baseball bases
not come back for dinner
so you tell mom not to wait up for you

you're born in this barn
let's call it a barn
learn to deal with the words
the blows
take up the routines
you're happy because you think
that you're not the blows
just the routines
you still don't know about the words

and then one day sixteen happens
and you climb the redwood
ride the chick
and forget about baseball metaphors
'cause you're fully grown-up now
and who cares about mom or dinner

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cute wild chick calls up before Christmas
says you gotta talk
probably not about coffee
she throws in a metaphor and a cuss
says she's pregnant and living in Montana
mentions baby routines
you get one more beer
order Chinese
change clothes for your date

next thing you know
your son shows up at your doorstep
twenty years later
he looks about the right age
gives you a black eye
spits at you in an accent
you'd swear is almost native

guy's honey's waiting in the car
watching you get beaten up and cursed
looks strangely familiar
probably seen her in town or in a movie

and you're back to thinking you wanna leave home
stop getting into fights with strangers
and when did late get to be too late

you would love to go down by the river
take a dip and swim up that creek
go back to baseball practice
and talk with the horses
be wild and unlearn the words
pretend you have a place to go back to

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so you climb down the stairs
get in the car and leave
like everybody you've seen in those movies
wishing there was something to say
if only you could tell mom

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my neighbor's dog

my neighbor's dog barks in the backyard
barks most nights
her moans tear at my efforts
to beat insomnia

i will go to bed
think of repetitive sounds
like falling rain or a washing machine
anything meaningless that can
ease me to sleep
her grumble will then
subtly cuddle up to my ribs
find a spot like she is my lover
snuggle up until the morning
i dream of dogs running wild
and i am one of them
she doesn't know i have other lovers

i wake up to the sound of the rain
make the coffee
she is sitting behind the fence
i wonder if i should bark at her
make our relationship visible

other times i hear a howl
a call of duty
so i jump out of bed
forget about the laundry cycle
and run to the backyard
to meet my friend
have coffee together
change the water in her bowl

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and then there's nights when she is dreadfully quiet
and i miss her nudge against my body
i fear she may be dead
her absence dooms me to repetitive patterns

those nights i lie awake waiting for a howl
that will summon my life
on to something wilder

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the crack in the ceiling

the crack in the ceiling keeps widening
it now goes all the way across
like it wants to leave the house
see the world outside
meet other cracked ceilings
or houses

at first i thought it was just a shadow
but there is little in these rooms
that can throw back a light
the house is going to fall in on me
on my children
and on the fucking furniture

when it rains the water drips in through
at night i hear
creepy creatures crawling in

i will fix it in the autumn
i said
but the autumn never comes on time
and so the paint keeps peeling off
children are hard to fix
and i set the furniture on fire

all the things i painted over
and tried to repair
have cracked
and now
i fear the ceiling will collapse
the snow will fall on my bed
like i am a child again
and this might be
the worthiest way to see the sky

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some nights i still wonder
what brought it down
like i really want to know
like i ever wanted to

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my neighbor thinks i am dead

my neighbor thinks i am dead
and has begun to sneak into
my apartment building
reciting prayers of rage and misery
and apparently
of us too back in our thirties

lately her prayers have taken on a darker tone
she speaks of evenings she imagines
days full of sex and conversations
says never mind the order

she picks the locks of my memory
and roams the neighborhood at night
knocking on doors and asking
questions in foreign languages
she doesn't know if i speak

last night she finally got to my room
climbed into my bed
and quietly undid her clothes
i wonder how she knew i was dead