

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

Stephanie Edwards

Gifts

Insatiable, I left you home
and traversed the Atlantic,
searching for a fix, a cure
for my restless soul syndrome.
I drank all the Trappistes dry
and ate each an every chocolate—
bartenders shook their heads,
Served Guinness instead of Rochefort.
Neuhaus and Leonidas boarded their windows—
I had to devour them all.
The flavors tasted richer than home,
filled with histories: of recipes, buildings,
and feuds burgeoning back
to before America was called America.
My skin burst with gifts for you.

I thought I could see the Manneken Pis
and send you all of his silliness.
And I sent you the finest chocolates and beers
to fill you with this history too,
but you said the chocolates
tasted like chocolates and the beers
tasted like beer, not battles
between Francophones and Flems.

I tried collecting more gifts for you,
but I lost most along the way.
One day I dropped my keys, drunk.
My landlord said she'd have my head,
but she settled for an arm and a leg.
I protested, *But Madame, they were only keys!*
These must come off, she said—
chop, chop and half my limbs were gone
with two hacks of the old surgeon's saw.

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I tried to run away from my butcher,
but crumpled under the weight
of my baggage full of gifts for you—
too much to carry
with just one arm and leg.
I thought we might enjoy
a lovely kidney pie,
but beer had bloated mine—
too heavy, I left them by the curb.
Because I knew the pangs
of loneliness, I left them friends,
swollen and diseased by my gluttony:
my liver, stomach, some intestines.
Hopefully some creature of the night
found some sustenance.

The airport guards seemed concerned
by my blood-stained clothes.
I tried to explain—I had gifts for you,
and was missing the Great Lakes and snow.
I craved ketchup, not mayo with my fries and your
warm breath breathing down my neck at night.
But they carried me out like a dirty diaper.
There was only one way to get these gifts to you.
Left, then right, then left then—
sinking, sinking fast, salt water
stinging my wounds.

Still too heavy to walk on water—
I took off my epidermis,
peeled off one strip at a time,
like old floral wallpaper.
Stretched out and over worked,
it was no real gift to give you.
A heap of bones, skeletal, I tread
over the great Atlantic, yearning
for you, for home, for English.
I saved a few good parts.

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I'll leave them on your doorstep:
my heart, two ovaries, tits.
I brought these gifts for you—
celebrate their loveliness.

On Settling in Lansing, Michigan

In eighteen thirty-five the Indians
knew better than to settle in this desolate
swamp land, but two con men came from Lansing,

New York, named this place Biddle City,
went home, and sold plots of land for false promises
of a city, of an Eldorado,

with a church, a school and a public square,
to sixteen men who traveled West to find
nothing. A floodplain swallowed in water.

Disheartened, the men settled here,
named it Lansing after their home, as if a name
could ever cloak the lies that broke their dreams.

My name is Stephanie L. Edwards.
I was born here, in Lansing, Michigan—a city
where our biggest crook, Terry Hanks, leader

of Sundance Chevrolet and a chop shop
and a cocaine ring, has commercials
on TV and wears a cowboy hat and says *Yeeshaw!*

We've settled for this ridiculous Criminal,
driven his shitty cars, bitched when they broke,
and grudgingly bought another.

I used to go to a Unity church
in downtown Lansing, where, for a couple miles,
it looks like it's not a shithole,

until you go down a side street, see old Victorian
homes, paint peeling off, windows boarded up—
lock all the doors. The reverend proclaimed

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that heaven is a state of mind, not a place,
and he done gone and broke my heart because
if there's no Jerusalem to crusade to—

to escape to—only a holy
state of mind that is wholly elusive
to me—to all of us Lansing folk—

then, I'm afraid we're stuck with this settling.
I can find no holiness here. I watched
a child genius turned nineteen-year-old

sofa cushion warmer plot his escape
from his mother's dank basement to New York
or Chicago or LA or maybe

Atlantis, while five cats crawled over him,
all unnamed, except for TC—*The Cat*,
who came first, back when he still almost cared.

Dad says it's cold, can't get warm this morning—
March is blundering. She's coming in
like a lion and going out like a bitch—

cold and bitter and fierce enough
to break through our peripheral. The snow
nags us. Brownd and dirtied to sludge, it hangs

tightly to the barren ground, where grass once
grew and an unsuspecting tulip sprouts,
frosts over and says its goodbyes to light

and life. Dad searches through job ads,
notices as I hover over his shoulders,
and underlines a job, trying to con me

into believing I'm not witnessing
the death of a salesman. I look away—

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stare down at my coffee mug. The grounds

settle down to the bottom of my cup.

I always dread the last gulp, so chewy
and so bitter. But I always take it.

Poem for a Fawn

Outside my window,
I see a lone fawn
with his spots still all on
trampling through the remains
of our summer vegetable garden.
I would like to go outside
and run my hand over his head,
scratch a little between the ears.
I wonder if his hairs are coarse
like a horse's. But I remember,
more humans are attacked each year
by deer than alligators.
I would not go pet a gator.
It's almost hunting season.
Lying in a Hammock at my Parents' House

Over my head, I see the black deer fly
hovering, waiting for me to look away,
so it can land on my forehead and bite me
right between the eyes. Behind the wood line,
through the golden cornfield, I hear
dirt bikes roaring between the rows of stalks.
To my right, baking in the sunlight, sits
a gopher carcass, mangled and covered in flies—
a gift the dog has proudly brought for me.
I lay back, as darkness begins to fall,
and the dog comes back to reclaim her ignored gift
I have wasted my life.