

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

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Love's Lexicon

Love always teaches you new vocabularies.
Now, your local, onboard dictionaries don't
count for much; you need to download
custom ones, to cover the new meanings
you've conned for archaisms such as
mouth and *breast* and *leg*. Or to replace the jaded
smirk of four-letter brush-offs that
used to adequately parse those nether
mysteries of which you're now an acolyte.

And when you happen to be in love
with a self-destroyer, you learn
the melodious Latinates of end-stage disease:
ascites—it's like swallowing a punching bag—
cholestastis—the liver shutting up its shop, for good—
encephalopathy—brain sickness, as unlovely
a thing as its name is purest music,
honeyed stream of round
vowel sounds
and breezy aspirates.

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Ghosts and Illegals

Driving in the suburbs and the exurbs
of Atlanta, I watch for them this April,
the ectoplasmic denizens of ancient burial grounds.

They festoon the sweet gums and loblollies,
trailing their purple winding sheets in the wind,
the ghostly evidence of past habitation.

Some clapboard farmhouse and barn sheltered
under those pines, when all of them were young,
from the baleful Cyclops eye of August. But April,

August, January, cycling through the many years,
have killed all evidence of place except the strangling vines,
the ghostly racemes of wisteria. Here and there

along the interstate, I see them haunting a white oak
in dangling clusters, sometimes mirrored upward
by the engorged nipples of an empress tree in bud,

erect with the purple urge of equinox: beautiful invasives
both, far from their Asian home, where memory
holds on to more than April ghosts among the oaks.

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Near-Death Sestina

At the hospital, the psychiatrist, a nice young intern, asked me to recall my near-death experience. A bothersome request, but it was for research, which I respect, so I took the bait: “Starting where?” “Well, can you describe,

for example, the time immediately prior to your loss of consciousness?” Notepad in hand, the enthusiastic kid seemed disappointed to hear that indignation over hospital mystery meat and puckered gravy occupied

my thoughts just prior to such time. The poor tray worker occupied with carrying away leftover slop found me unresponsive, tried to recall me from the grave (or from my gravy reverie), loud enough for Nurse to hear.

In she rushed and punched Code Blue. But it didn’t require too much research

to know a patient in for chronic hemorrhoids doesn’t normally lose consciousness,

turn cyanotic, blue as the proverbial berry. The literature doesn’t describe

a lot of such grim outcomes. . . . “Yes,” the kid agreed, “but please, describe

what you experienced while you were ‘under’—not what thoughts occupied

the hospital staff, but what *you* felt once you slipped out of consciousness.”

He tried to help: “Were you aware of anything or anyone? Can you recall any sounds or images? Just. . . *anything?*” Well, I’d read about the research of course and could almost guess the kind of things he’d like to hear

from me. What about the folks that worked to revive me? Did I hear their voices in my disembodied state? Maybe I could even describe the agitated calls for meds and the defibrillator? I haven’t researched it deeply, but the near-dead, once out of the “corpse” they’ve occupied, report hovering just below the ceiling, hearing everything, which they recall

with perfect accuracy. Or so I’ve read. Me? I have no consciousness

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of anything like that. My mind's a blank. My blank's a mind. *No* consciousness,
that's what I remember, if you call that remembering. What did I hear?
Or see? Well, *nada!* I mean, I certainly don't claim to have total recall,
but I remember being *born* in more detail than that. So how could I describe
the out-of-body experience I never had? The young guy seemed pre-occupied,
wondering how to politely end the interview, get on with his research.

But he looked so disappointed! and wanting to do my bit for research,
I thought fast and added, "Now that I recall. . . I had this sort of consciousness
that people were prodding and poking at the me that used to be. . . . The
room was occupied
to overflowing with these people all in white like angels, and I could hear
them saying things like 'epinephrine,' '1 mg,' and 'Clear!'. . ." And then
went on to describe
to my rapt audience the usual tunnel-and-white-light scenery — all I could
"recall."

A little more research, there might have been even more I could "recall."
But losing consciousness from some hunk of mystery meat stuck in the
craw? Describe
Nursie's rib-tickling Heimlich for my self-occupied young Freud? Think
he'd even *hear?*

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Good Fences

A 62-year-old woman was stabbed. . .as she walked to a grocery store in Darby, Pa., but she didn't notice the knife sticking out of her back until after she had gone shopping and returned home. . . . No one in the store said anything to her. . . .

—from a news story

Our mugger's of the nervous sort that feel
content to only *cut the bitch and split*.

No flies on him—he leaves behind his meal
ticket, insurance policy, the wit

and repartee his kind spars with. Four inches
of same stick in her back, which she's misread
as lingering effects of cuffs and cinches
received in the attack. She isn't dead,

and dinner calls. So off to market quick
as shaky legs can take her. Neighbors shop
beside her. Cashiers serve her. None seem sick,
or shocked, at sight of her spine's weird outcrop.

They don't look at her: seem to look right through.
In Philly and environs, that's *polite* to do!

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Turnabout

While in town, Denise said, she was staying at Massoud and Gloria's. Then she corrected herself, the cornflower chips of her eyes going quizzical, lips pursed. *But Gloria isn't with us anymore.*

The family curse: Like her mother's before her, Gloria's days are pretty much a sameness now, beginning and end. She does little herself, is mostly done for. Each morning, breakfast in bed

to the Classics—Puccini operas, Mozart anything. A nice sponge bath, then Massoud puts her makeup on. *She's still beautiful, and he dresses her and brushes her hair just like a little doll—aged 61.*

Fair play: When in their 30s, Massoud had this religious experience, wanted to return to his roots. And so she dutifully trailed along with him to Iran, her cloche-tight, Barbie-golden tresses veiled

for years. Until one day she respectfully submitted she couldn't take it any longer. And Jesus rent the Veil for her all over again. Soon, they were back in God's Country once more, the home

of Merle Norman and Clinique. Of Mary Kay and good Max Factor. So now, just as dutifully, Massoud waits daily on his silken prize. His Puccinian beauty. His Girl of the Golden West.