

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/4

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Featherwing

HE IS LIKE A SENTRY, unyielding, adept at blades and chopping, cupping minced onions and peppers in large virile hands, forming hillocks on the wood block.

"It's hot," he says.

"Maybe it's that." Her voice is faint, like gossamer. "It's a strange day."

He chops and chops, unflinchingly, and she knows it is too much for him to consider, her words, the murky underpinnings of her mind. He is averse to odd musings, she decides. She need only stand by his side, to be whole, to be considered. and that is enough. She does not blame him. She watches closely as if she can will him to notice her; but he is not dissuaded, not now, not ever; his eyes are sharp, fixed on cilantro, and now a clove of garlic, the knife's swift movement, up and down, up and down, and he never sees any part of her, how she shifts in her chair, arches her back, lifts her hair off her neck, puts her sweaty hand down on the table, flat down, fingers splayed to feel the cool rushing between. And the more aloof he is the more she feels the ache, the yearning for him at the base of her spine.

"Who are you?" she asks, cringing at her own words, craving the attention at any cost.

"What does that even mean, Robin?" he glances up at her, glares, as if she were an errant child.

"Nothing. I didn't mean it."

"Why do you do this?" His brows furrow, and she is convinced he is revolted by the sight of her.

"I don't know." Robin shrinks.

He resumes his chopping, yet, it is slower, with less finesse, and she feels a small sense of satisfaction knowing she's disrupted his rhythm. She knew him once, or so she thought. Now she knows the outline of his body, the way he positions himself, taunts, her insatiable desire, the parts he refuses to relinquish. He is a specter, translucent, and she feels a foreign disdain for his indifference, his easy dismissal of her.

"Why do you insist on making soup?" she rebukes. "You just made soup last weekend." She attempts vigor, but her voice quivers at the newness, a self she does not recognize.

"Daisy likes soup," he says. "She's sick, Robin, remember?"

Robin blushes at her name, flips her hair and lifts her arms up behind her head; her shirt lifts and it is enough to make him stop chopping and notice; and she sees it, the way he fixes his gaze on her stomach, desirously; and she feels a burning for him, his mouth on her naval; and it may have amounted to something, but the girl saunters in shirtless, makes her parents less important with her tiny bird-like bones, and her brother's underwear, shoulder blades jutting, a row of ribs, hair stringy, gnarled in the back like a bird's nest.

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"Can I make soup, Daddy?" Daisy chirps.

He stares at her, reprovably. "I don't see why she has to wear her brother's underwear. Daisy, honey, Daisy, look at Daddy. Do you like wearing your brother's underwear?" He goes at her with an unexpected urgency.

"Yes, Daddy. I want to. He lets me. Can I make the soup with you, Daddy?"

He nods, lips pursed, pulls the wooden spoon out of the drawer, the one with the long handle, the same one he used once to paddle Daisy's brother when he threw a rock and it hit Daisy in the head and she needed four stitches. He's a good boy, mostly, she tried to tell the father, each time he was harsh with the boy, knowing, as only mothers do, the spanking was wrong, discordant, ruining parts of him. She saw it in the boy's steel blue eyes, the way they watered, the way he fought it back.

Robin's eyes rest on the carcass, the turkey flesh clinging on, ghastly, and the way he sets the spoon down, lifts her, Daisy, under the arms, places her on the stool, next to the pot, puts the wooden spoon with the long handle in her tiny flushed hand.

"She is still feverish."

"I know that, Robin."

The girl glances up from the pot, licks her chapped lips, strands of hair wet, stiff, stuck there. "I did sleep, Mommy," she says, haughtily. "He let me sleep with him." She looks to her father, conspiratorially. He is smiling down at her, one hand entwined in her hair.

The mother imagines the girl, moments earlier, sidling up to her brother; the boy looking askance, cautious, immersed in *How to Tame a Fox*, feigning indifference, while secretly relishing her small bones, her heat. The boy stays away, mostly. He is lanky, silent like his father, as if he were less loved. One day he dyed his hair fox red, tacked posters of foxes on his walls; he stays in his bedroom as if it were a den, creeping out every so often for food. Daisy says she wants to be a boy and her brother a girl, maybe, although, he never admitted as much, to have a father love him more. Girls are easier, the father once said, she does not remember when, but the boy was present; and she felt it was a pivotal moment; but what does it matter now, those words, when he spends too many weekends away, and this is what preoccupies her mind; that and the boy's fixations, his furtive manner. She is leery of the father, but she will never leave him, because he is a good man, dependable, and she can count on him to do what needs to be done, to clean a gutter, change a tire, cook up a stew or a soup, bring home a trout or a bass and flop it on the counter, slap it, slice it open it, and his hands know just how to grip the knife, how to gut it, and where, exactly, and she imagines those times, herself pinned underneath that same precision, envying the fish, the way he squints at it, purses his lip, holds it down, artist's hands, flipping it about with a peculiar deference.

"More pepper, Daddy."

"Daisy wants more pepper?" He bends in, kisses her cheek, tousles

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her curls with his free hand. She forces a smile, then brushes him away. The girl does not know how her father crawls into their bed at dawn, helps himself to her mother, just to absolve his conscience. But the boy suspects, she decides, because he believes he is like a fox and his senses are heightened, and his bedroom is across the hall, and he rarely talks anymore, and she can see it in his scorn and aloofness. She thinks of him like her pet, making sure he is fed and bathed. And even that is not always possible as he darts away when she approaches him.

She watches the father watch the girl stir, move her hair to the side; my girl, he says, the same way he spoke to her, she recalls, before, but not so much now, not at all; and sweet Daisy, her little Daisy, looks like her daddy, in the mouth, especially, and they all say it, just like him, uncanny, daddy's girl, and she notices how her father can barely look away, gazing at his girl, now, bewitched, seeing himself, suspended, unaltered, and she knows, too, that he may never look at his wife that way again, may never see her any other way than having pushed his Daisy out for him, this small part of him; and before the brooding and the silence, before the kids, before all that, it was lust, and she believed he awakened her, and she was privy to some universal secret, primal and sacred, and, now it was subjugation, her place, here and there, roaming, hunched, phantom-like, in and out of rooms and closets, hanging clothes, opening and closing cabinets, moving items back and forth, and there was this time when she was willing, could be taken, magnanimous, reverent, and now she is corporeal, parts siphoned, parceled, waiting for turkey and bones, a week's worth of meals, he calls it, her hands spread out flat on the table, crooked, a flaw she had never anticipated; and the only reprieve, now, is a distraction, a recollection of herself, poised on rocks, in the middle of the brook, a time before, just beyond the woods, behind their house, when she was Daisy's age, unsullied, thinner, more somber, more pensive, hands sunk deep in the pockets of a navy blue winter jacket, unremarkable, except it was her older sister's, now hers, and she hugged it close, sizing it to herself, as if it might envelop her, suffuse her, make her taller, more than a plain pale face, and she remembers now, the way she balanced on the rock and turned slightly, maybe for the camera, intent on something, expectant.

"Daddy, pepper!"

"Give it to her, for God's sake!" she says, and the father pauses, but then gives the girl the shaker, and the girl beams, glances at her mother, smirks, hangs over the pot, shakes the pepper. Tips of her hair skim the top. Steaming bones rise up like a resurrection, and Robin envisions it in the broth, forming from marrow, leaching, assimilating, black pepper specs pooling in the center, before she was his girlfriend, his wife, a mother, before those things, on the rock, in the middle of the brook, a whole life encapsulated in an expression, and for years after, she realizes now, she had tried to emulate it, the poise, the gesture, retrieve some lost insight, as if she had an inkling of a self forming, a self that later peaked and settled like the frothy matter on the banks of the brook.

The smells of simmering bones waft out of the pot. She fixes on her husband, the way his muscles flex when he holds the girl's wrist and guides it, the soft utterances, in the same way he took her hand once, in that same manner.

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She hears footsteps, imagines him now, his small socked feet and limbs, featherwing she called him once, before he became sullen, silent and predatory, her featherwing landing on each step, fastidiously, and then down the hallway, positioning himself behind the wall leading into the kitchen, a sallow cheek pressed against the molding, pursuant, lurking, waiting to lunge.