

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

John Grey

TO NOT FORGET

Last night again –
her face in the quiet of sleep.
Ten years gone but my hand
finds her cheek
without grief -
just the weightless touch of a butterfly
alighting on a petal.

She moved – always –
like wind, like wings.
I stayed. My roots deep in place.

Still - the dream unearths me.
My feet itch. The scenery's no longer mine.

She lies in the hush
of a bed unmoved for years.
I arrive with dust, in my eyes,
mud on my boots, salt in my ears –
and all her miles, all her stories,
beat in my chest, ache in my bones,
throb in my head.

Her cheek is here more than ever.
To find a hand that stayed.
To find me home.

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TRASH-MAN

My father and I go to the city dump.
Amid the mountains of smell and scurrying rodents,
we're looking for the trash of others that we can take home and treasure.
This is all supposed to be one-way traffic
but my father knows a guy who knows a guy
who's blind in one eye when our truck rumbles by the exit-gate.

Sure, the flies and an occasional mouse come along for the ride.
And you never know where the point of a rusty nail could be lurking.
But that's a small risk compared to a lawn-mower that just needs a little
work.
Or a mattress that may yet spring back to life on a bunk bed.
My father's brains are in his hands.
If anyone can find a use for a dented hubcap, he can.

Whatever he can salvage from the garbage
is all that I can expect from life.
The fathers of the other kids have jobs.
I've learned not to be jealous of their possessions.
Besides, in their world, a bright new toy's future
is dull and old and broken into pieces.
Only my old man can start with the end of things
and work his way to the beginning.

I have soldiers with their heads glued back on shoulders.
Books with no covers but every word intact.
Half a globe - the northern hemisphere.
My father says I'm not missing much.
And there's this rocking horse, stuffed anew,
that has more miles in it I'm sure
than I could even have childhood.

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Yes, while other fathers and kids head for the store,
my father and I go to the city dump.

They come out clean. We're never less than greasy.

They pay with credit cards.

Our cost is the occasional scratch we hope will not turn septic.

When I'm the father, it will be different.

I'll accumulate new stuff,

toss what I no longer need.

It'll pile up in a heap in the dump somewhere,

for others to lead these lives we've led.

KEITH'S STORY

Love has a lot to answer for.
Just ask my friend, Keith.
He got clobbered like
a 98 pound weakling
caught up in a tag-team pro wrestling
shindig in a cage.
It may have looked like the same old Kevin
but he had more broken ribs
than he had ribs.

Keith was a cripple in a thousand places,
bruised all over the inside of his skin,
but, somehow, his face held together,
the mouth, the nose, the eyes,
tried to, but never could, swap places.

Keith, when he came to my door.
was in desperate need of a stiff bandage,
a sympathetic operation,
maybe some soothing reassurance
that other victims roamed the earth.

He'd been in a war apparently.
Conscripted himself most likely.

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MAKING A LIVING

At the corner of 7th avenue
and 10th street, dressed
in stained polyester print,
hands withered,
grin near-toothless,
she's selling paperbacks
from two over-stuffed shopping bags.

45 cents apiece they go for,
but no change for a buck,
and most of them are
Harlequin Romances,
cover pages adorned
with handsome men,
gorgeous women
in passionate embrace.

And the book's blurbs boast
passion and enchantment,
excitement and intrigue.
That she's not in there
goes without saying.