

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

Mark Vogel
The book of light

We forget first the fragmented bits
that already drift, then the whole.
The book we imagine that spells out the colors,
the teachers, and what we have learned.
The creatures we have met, too,
the random goat and buffoonish donkey,
the sentient grandfather toad absorbing
neighborhood anecdotes before Beaudean
blew him up with a Black Cat firecracker.
So many dogs, come and gone. Alive,
but flowing beneath the surface, close enough,
whole esoteric libraries teaching (again)
the temporary truths we share—
that each creature we touch is the one
who might remain forever. Like my lover,
naked within her white robe, more aware
of me than I am myself. The pause every day,
the black kitten, all shadows and play,
arching to rub and touch, a paw kneading
at occult secrets on my chest. Mentors
who teach us to stall and make sense
of a day, the phrase that says everything
about what we could do. Mentors still with us,
like Charles Wright in his Blue Ridge backyard,
absorbing shifting layers of light, his comical
gestures to the buzzards circling like a dream.
How to see from a great distance/how to
move quiet around boundaries, breathing
in worded signs, surprised (again) how
much is new—remade, so much learned
only after-the-fact. How to laugh at
what took so long to see. How to activate
the great machine responsible for today's

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peace, grateful for mice and birds skittering
on the soiled map, alive to Kafka speaking
soft to readers, clouds racing after the storm,
the air clearing what was predictable.
Praise the guides teaching how to read
and feel/to accept that time isn't real, or stable.
Humor in the ephemeral, volumes on
oblivion thriving within our skin.
Holding out for the right vision

scenes cluster close like children craving
intimacy, half mature, not ready to stand alone,
or live quietly as finished art without needs.
No, for a-move in this chaotic present/
select animals and poultry,
a solitary far bumblebee,
performing morning salutations in new light.
Maybe because of this close attention
the tiresome details
that once nagged in the dark
have melted in the dawn murk.
So many childish texts,
the possibility of art maybe when
color breathes and the day is sufficiently mature.
Like gold finches reappearing in May, the message
looks forward, preparing for June
when ground hogs will scurry
close then stop to pause racing time.
What prompts this undeniable
wisp of freedom drifting from the West?
Only the promise of fat thoughts, live-birth,
a mantra repeating the unwritten law
saying what needs to fall will fall/
then merge with last year's compost,
time a collage that skips ahead,

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then back, half-taunting, with a gesture
saying nothing stays linear, except a row of
apple trees flush with fruit, limbs drooping
to the ground, too rich to be sustained.

The truth is even the slightest breeze could split
the trunks in half, leaving gaps in the line
of trees and a quiet that leaks out as-a-whole.

Ready to speak again, home stories still
dealing with last week's torrential rain,
how it eroded absurd ambitions.

Even now a windstorm swirls hair, bringing
the past when a Midwest saga
mature with startling new color was still
instrumental in defining this quivering present.

Once again what was then pared
to today's elemental text. Elegant,
and for the moment clear as day.

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One long swoon of platitudes

*"A poem must be better than its times
as a self must be—"*
Alice Notley in Mysteries of Small Houses, p. 49.

The swirl of birds in the breeze at the KC gateway
to the Great Plains, color sliding forth like a distinctly
Midwestern Hallmark card, just like those
we saw created this morning in the factory downtown,
all those cliches preparing us for this quiet
late afternoon pause on the Nelson-Atkins'
great green lawn before Henry Moore's stone sheep.
We are fifteen, and in love, aching to be close,
electricity in our clasped hands. Our desire permanent.
we are sure, though hardly tested, fresh as
our future—in these rolling inexhaustible Plains.
Flashing smiles so shy disappear then reappear,
as if congealed from a thousand paltry westerns.
Eyes lock on each other/we run like animals released/
snatching at a yellow swallowtail before falling breathless
on the grass as living sculpture, close as we can be.
No flyover country, this vast bottomland once
a great ocean stream bed. This is the center,
where little is hidden and all comes together.
Two hours later we are separated into waiting cars,
going home to entertainment rich rooms,
where distracted family members will dismiss
our excited eyes, like we aren't mature enough to count.
The next morning when Mother asks about our adventures,
a stammer comes out first— throat open, searching for
words to explain the magic, but no words can
explain our art. Tangled together a month later,
we recount those first pathetic attempts to speak
when words were still being collected from distant realms.
Like a donkey opening his throat, drawing air
in nose and throat, the deliberate working up

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to a brazen bray—until finally the essential cry
comes out. For us (forever) our eyes said it all.
Over-and-over, our necessary caress in slow motion
discarding the old wardrobe. No longer
mere children cursing at clouds, infectious laughs
built on delicious new maturity. As if
every move together stretched on all the way
to California. Like the first time,
the wild wide-open plunge into the wild.

The evidence we leave

In an afternoon nap a quivering childhood scene
running parallel to today's domestic loving script—
where Pumpkin, the prophetic calico cat,
leaves again on the porch mat a licked gift,
blood-free evidence of her hunting prowess.
A rabbit heart and liver so clean—
eternal proof she includes me with her kind,
wild creatures not at all tame.
Bizarre, how memory fixes on a stark scene
three decades old, and only now understands
the tortured truth of what was.
So that in today's immediacy Pumpkin
lives in this newly awake, anxious dream present/
as my driven wife stalks, acting in a tiresome
unmedicated drama laid out like a blueprint.
She turns on her stage, launches a brassy assault
on my teenage son's failings,
as outside, the Pacific fog drifts, an October
atmospheric river covering with a thick wet blanket.
We are trapped in this uglified domestic cartoon/
too little love evident/though somehow the scene
is deeply comic too, seeing a neutered
Elmer Fudd husband hiding in a soft recliner,
blinking to avoid his role in this aggressive scene.

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Later, as the family gathers for dinner
she vomits intimate secrets—
more proof the meek clustering close,
will again be violated. These secrets aren't
loving, like Pumpkin's front-porch gifts, and
the boy and I look away to avoid the demon's eyes.
The world can be tiresome, with its sordid patterns,
like this cowering like an abused dog,
even as outside the fog twists and reshapes,
and inside, a cruel mythic master is locked in
a strange ritual—crafting the snail-slow
lead-in to an inevitable explosion.
Yet, we pretend we are invisible, somehow
still actively nurturing an unstated love
running free at the edges. Close enough,
the living ocean, the sand in the gentle light,
a fresh birth, a story again fully formed.
That quick, we are together/eyes wide/aware (again)
that out in the expanse, more is unknown
than known, as we plot how to make her love again.