

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

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On Hearing a String Quartet the Day the Government Announces Logging in the Shawnee National Forest

The players sit in a tight half-circle, the distance
between each of their knees and elbows
as precise as if they had measured it.

They hold instruments as familiar as their own bodies
violins, viola, and cello that began as spruce and maple
trees grown amid the melodies of a forest
the diurnal program of woodpeckers marking out
staccato rhythms, whistle-throated thrushes
and trilling warblers, followed by toads, crickets
and the huffing of deer—the many-timbred notes
of the animal kingdom resonating through
bark and sapwood, heartwood and pith.

Certain trees were selected for felling, then chosen again
for curing and carving, but they did not die
when severed from their roots. They rose to another resonance
when shaped by hands that carved away all
but what is absolutely required to speak to the back
of a concert hall.

The players raise their bows and the first violin
gestures to begin. For an hour they act as four limbs
of the same body, themes started by one player are finished
by another, sequences pass between them
like marbles through a perpetual motion machine.
I am reminded that human beings do more than destroy living things.

With each note, maple backs and spruce tops grow wiser
as sound waves etch infinitely small paths for more notes
of the same frequency. Matter never rests, it simply shifts
between valencies. The players lower their bows and after
the applause, what remains is a chorus of birds shimmering

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beside the trills and staccato of Haydn, the primeval resonance of a forest quietly ricocheting between them.

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Silver Jubilee

My wedding dress, professionally packed,
marks time in the basement though
I'll never be that bride again. Our college photographs
smile in their album sleeves. The old pepper mill
from my grandparents holds court on the dining table
we bought secondhand, and the oak chairs we used
for years have scattered to various corners
of the house. Bookcases we hefted
in and out of apartments are still doing their job
alongside the third generation of a living room sofa.
Dust sugars everything, old and new.

Were we supposed to give each other silver today?
We have no silver spoons or serving trays in this house.
Silver tarnishes. But the catalog
of ways we've disappointed each other
is as durable as our wedding rings.
I'd like to get rid of his filing cabinets
and he wonders why I keep using the same
few knives. The linen closet is overfull.
We don't need these thin flannel sheets
whose pillowcases got dragged along the sidewalk
on Halloween, but it seems we keep
everything in order to keep the best of things.

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ode to the atheist in me

after Ross Gay

the atheist in me has no doubt
that near-death experiences are delusions
and humans made god not the other way around
never mind that science can't prove
a negative the atheist's logic is flawless as a diamond
she rolls her eyes at thoughts and prayers
sends money instead
the atheist in me still loves Christmas carols
but she knows they're only art
the atheist never wastes time imagining god
on the other side of a wooden door waiting for her to knock
there is no door
the atheist in me seems smug like Lucy from Peanuts
because she is smarter than other people
because she has given up looking for absolutes
she is unwavering in her disbelief
like Schroeder's devotion to Beethoven
she is hard-edged
like a Lego left on the floor like
the stone-topped coffee table people whack
their shins against
the atheist in me is in a hurry because life is short
and she's got something to prove
she will be ready for the audience of theists thumbing
their Bibles in a lecture hall waiting
for her final presentation
the one with her data organized in tidy tables and charts
each one neater than the next
her final lecture delivered when there can be
no doubts and no further arguments
because everyone in the room including
her has already uttered their final word