***Dead Blue by Ruth H.***

Since he’d been four, or maybe three, his mother’s love was given to this object rather than to him. [Though I find the sentiment compelling, I’m afraid this might be too abstract an opening line to really pull the reader into the narrative. Between the general pronoun “he” and the use of “this object,” we’re not giving much to latch onto here, and I don’t know that it creates a sufficiently tantalizing mystery to pull us into the text. Why not name both the character and the object and see if it has more “zing”? E.g., some variation on, “Jayson knew at four-years-old, or maybe three, that his mother loved this staircase more than she loved him.” Note, too, that I’ve eliminated the passive “was given to” construction to add a little potency as well.] Jayson now steeped in that knowledge like in old brown tea. He loved the staircase but he hated it too. [Good]

He had entered the house with the terrified exultation of a Christian soldier charging onto his first battlefield, firebrand raised. [Great] Now, when he had to leave, the staircase’s newel post wouldn’t let him, clinging like an old love despite his infidelity. [This feels a little metaphor heavy and mixes concepts—the soldier and then the lover. Might you just continue the metaphor you’re establishing in the first line instead? Or just express this more plainly, ending the sentence with “the staircase’s newel post wouldn’t let him go.”]

For the last time his fingers traced the twisted roots from their sprouting in the mosaic foyer floor upward to circle the trunk, the way he’d done it when he was five. [Did he only do this at age five or all through his childhood? Might be better to be less specific here, as you’re dropping a lot of different ages into this opening.] As ever, the wood was smooth against his palms and seemed warmer than was natural for something dead. [Powerful]

Long-ago voices telling him the post and the stained glass window above it were alive echoed through the empty house. “See,” they said, “Can you see the trees growing?” Now, as an adult, he held the post like a lover’s waist. But his circled hands brought him the same child-like sense of peace. [Strong]

Though the foyer air around him was still cool, the familiar temperature, he knew the fire’s heat was growing below his feet. Only a few seconds he promised. He’d only hold on for five or maybe ten seconds. It was a vow he needed to keep or he and the house would die together. [This is great, and in my view should come earlier. It feels to me that you need the idea of the fire brought in early, to buy the reader’s investment in Jayson’s internalizations.]

With a shock, his hands’ identical position around a living waist this very morning, the waist of the woman who had sent him back here, overlaid itself like a ghostly double. [I’m afraid this feels a bit muddy/unclear. Again, might express it more plainly for greater immediate clarity.] Could he

Thanks so much for sharing your page, Ruth. I think you set up a compelling set of circumstances here—Jayson setting fire to the house—and render it in lyrical, adept prose. You’ve woven some really powerful moments into this first page, so well done there!

Most of my concerns are outlined in the above, but generally speaking, I’d urge you to spend more time on the concrete plane here, making the fire overt as soon as possible, giving us a feeling of its encroachment, helping us experience Jayson’s relationship to the space in general, and the staircase in particular, in a bit more visceral and observable a way. You’ve got such compelling images here—the fire, the tree staircase. It feels as though they could be put to sharper, more immediate use.

I’d also love a stronger sense of Jayson’s feelings in this scene. We have his intellectualizations, his thoughts of not feeling as loved by his mother, etc., but I don’t really feel drilled down into a real flesh-and-blood person here, one who would feel, I’d think, equal parts nervous and giddy. Again, I’d love to feel closer to him, to have all these things register viscerally so they pack a real punch.

Hope that helps. Again, thanks so much for sharing your artful work.

Best,

Lorin