

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

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Spirits Of The Land

Wherever you find yourself, the spirit of the land will speak to you if only you listen. Rarely does it shout, choosing instead to whisper. You see its reflection in the geography and people of the land, the feeling in your gut during the quiet moments you spend there. Different spirits animate different lands, moulding the ground they call home into an environment that suits their sensibilities, choosing how to engage with the life that shares their territory. The happiest places have a symbiotic relationship between life and land; a partnership where both parties act as stewards for each other. In other places the animating force of the land is powerful enough to be completely indifferent to the creatures that scurry over its surface. Some regions are an oasis for those kinds of life that live in harmony with the vital spark of the land, while making it abundantly clear to those men foolish enough to intrude that they are not welcome. Some areas are simply hostile to all life. The saddest cases are the places that have been poisoned, once healthy regions now inhabited by spirits corrupted and bitter; spirits that poison the very soul of those who settle the land.

I believe that the American continent has a dark undercurrent that runs beneath the surface of her immense natural beauty. Hers is the severe majesty of an apex predator. Though the American wilderness is a shadow of what it once was, it still echoes with the energy that frightened the first colonists to land on her shores. This is a land with space, something the old world had in short supply. Here there was, and still is, room for the supernatural to hide. Nor can American cities navigate around the force that animates the ground they were founded upon. One cannot draw a neat line between human habitat and "nature." Mankind's cities are a part of the environment as much as an acre of woodlands - and the spiritual residents don't disappear when you pave over them. Regardless of how much concrete you pour into the earth, how many hills you level or buildings you raise, the energy of the place will bubble up between the cracks.

It's easy to miss this side of travel. One gets wrapped up in a rush, distracted by companions or just looking to get a photo, and as a result they reduce the world to "just a landscape", "just a city", "just a neighborhood". Often times it's even beneficial to skim along the surface of places you visit. Open yourself up to Mount Rainier, open yourself up to the Painted Desert, and spend the rest of your time blissfully ignorant to what the land in-between wishes to say. If you can avoid feeling the crushing despair, the heart-breaking decay that surrounds you as you're pumping gas in a forgotten town somewhere in the Mississippi Delta, you probably should. Grow callouses on your heart before you bleed to death, as a statesman once said.

Unfortunately I find myself unable to guard my heart, so everywhere I go I find myself listening to landscapes that have no one else to converse with. The spirit of the place demands an audience wherever I wander. Some regions I love deeply, having my heart broken when circumstance dictated my departure. Some I have enjoyed in passing, like a conversation with a stranger in a bar or on an airplane. Some I pity. Others I have hated, and others have hated me.

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What makes travel in this country so magical is the fact that no two regions have the same personality; though many may feel malevolent, one cannot accuse them of being uniform. New England is a place where the Devil stalks the woodlands after dark; the Pacific Northwest a land of vampires. The spirit hangs heavy in Oklahoma, its soil soaked with the blood of natives and settlers, cracked open to harvest the energy of dinosaurs long dead. The desert, above all else, values silence. The wind is the only resident allowed to speak regularly; all others are allotted an occasional chirp, croak, or howl. Most choose to remain silent. Here it is not life that dominates the stage, but the stage itself. Everywhere you go, the land tells a different story.

Take Florida - from the outside it would appear that the residents feel compelled to turn as much of the state into a parking lot as possible. Despite the miles and miles of pavement, there is a vibrant, sometimes manic zest for life in the air. The swamps of Florida may be dangerous places filled with dangerous life, but they are not hostile to life itself. You may encounter venomous snakes, alligators, innumerable mosquitos - but there is no malevolence that creeps through the palms. There is no room for despair in a land filled with sunshine and teeming with life.

There is plenty of room for despair in the rest of the US. You sense it buying a bag of chips from a gas station attendant enclosed in bullet proof glass, before stepping outside to find yourself standing next to a luxury apartment development. You see it walking through a rural town where solvent businesses are islands dotting a sea of buildings for sale or lease. You feel it particularly in the innumerable acres of agricultural land. These former grasslands have turned sour, their purpose in life now to produce corn, cotton, wheat, rice. Here, hope has been drained from the land, the hills flattened and ditches filled, the soil poisoned via herbicide and pesticide, the unique flora and fauna erased and replaced with the numbing uniformity of staple crops. In return, the land drains hope from those who toil upon it, absorbing every drop of sweat that falls from their brow to feed a spirit starved of hope. The younger generations feel this and flee to areas with better economic prospects or into the depths of drug addiction. Those that work the land continue to labor until they die of old age or suicide. In these regions there is something deeply, deeply wrong with the fabric of life.

Some areas are simply hostile to life; an obvious example being Death Valley. Others welcome life, simply not the human kind. The Smoky Mountains are home to such an animating force. They tower over the mountains around them, deeming no man worthy of crossing. Travel is reserved for those prepared or foolish enough to attempt passage. My entrance ended up turning into a race against hypothermia, as a misting rain soaked through my gear leaving me vulnerable to the cold. My dreams, when I could sleep, were troubled, vivid, and intense. Each morning I pried on frozen shoes. The message was obvious - I was not welcome here. It felt as if a Lovecraftian monster dwelt beneath the mountains and wanted to kill me, an observation I recorded in my journal at the time. As I descended to humbler hills surrounding the Smokies, my sense of well being returned.

Every place you travel the land has a tale to tell. If you're willing, take

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the time to listen to those unique stories. Just because a place is without hope doesn't leave it without merit. Some regions may be hostile to you but will yield important lessons and secrets if you're brave enough to push through their resistance and continue exploring. As you continue to travel, you'll find the places that make it all worth it, the valleys where you find peace and the mountaintops that inspire awe. The spirits of the land will whisper to you, if only you're willing to listen.