

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

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LOOKING BACK, IT'S EASY TO GIVE REASONS. The house we moved to was close to public woods. I could start exercising again. The clean air, the soothing views – all strong inducements to change my routine. But why am I searching for a reason behind something so mundane?

Put that way, the answer is obvious: reasons don't capture the truth. The truth is that something else draws me out in the morning. There's some remainder that tugs on my curiosity. I can't search for it, only encounter it while looping around.

Maybe I can describe it this way: I have always loved the beauty of forests as they unfurl around views and seasons, but I'm not here to capture it in a frame. If I were, I'd probably take the path to the right leading up to the top of the hill. I'd rest on the boulders, mossy and smooth, dangle my legs off the edge, and enjoy the vista. I might wave hello to the dog-walkers or the elderly couples who go this way for the gentle slope. But I'm still on my way out and have to be home for breakfast, a shower, and work. My company is a jogger I meet on his way back to the street. Our path follows the gradient about two-thirds of the way up the hill until it bends back on itself in a giant "S" and runs down the slope to the bottom. It's just before 8:00 in the morning when I reach this stretch. The sun hasn't yet cleared the houses behind the hill. The light, like the mind, is still dull from night. Just the right conditions for the eye to plunge from scene to scene.

There's a grove of beech trees below, trunks maybe a foot apart. During the summer the foliage grows so thick I can't see to the other side. In winter, the break in the cluster appears to reveal a gap in the middle. Occasionally my gaze will sink into imagination, and I can see myself stepping into those trees. There's an opening that narrows as I approach the center. The trees form a fence separating me and the rest of the forest. When I'm in the middle, I look around and follow the spindly trunks, retracing the course they take on their race for sunlight. The breeze scrapes branches and shuffles leaves.

When the wind stops it's finally silent. The silence of snowfall soaking up noise on its way to the ground. The silence of the woods behind my parents' house in Massachusetts as I stop in the middle of a grove of white pines no thicker than my pre-teen arms. I've rushed through my homework to be here. The moment I finish up I stride over the driveway imagining I'm Bashō come out to see the snow on the road to Nagoya. It covers the brushwork needles and accumulates in clumps around my boots. I wait until everything around the grove dissolves and I'm the only one left on earth (You can do things like this when you're a kid.). Then I leave the grove for the path. It starts on the other side of a hill further back and winds down to a clearing created for a power line easement. I don't come here often. Once, a few years back, I practiced batting with my uncle in the elementary school playground. It was late summer. Our route home took us through the power lines. I ran ahead of my uncle, splashing through puddles until I reached two enormous wooden poles. I stepped between them and looked up. Steel crossarms, curved into a wide inverted

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“U,” swung around and enveloped me. Enormous insulators radiated outwards like heat off a flame. I let out a yell, stumbled out of the wooden jaws, then looked up again. A monster of wood and steel towered over me with the sun behind it. I ran until I reached the street. Since then I’ve been afraid to come here, but today I want to see the storm. When I reach the clearing, a black and white film is playing. The screen of trees on the far side contrasts with snow pelting the ground in clumps that arc down and to the left. I hear the humming too. At first it’s low and droning, like a faraway airplane. It rises as I approach the clearing until it becomes a roar. Everywhere I turn it’s there, as if bees are swarming around my ears. I realize what it is: snowflakes sizzling as they melt on the wires. I turn and run back up the hill.

Back to the ledge, looking out.

Around the grove the trees are less dense. A few beeches, but mostly wide black oaks, trunks ringed with moss at the base. Except for a few weeks in summer when the sun bakes it or, even less frequently, when it’s covered with snow, it’s always muddy here. When it rains it turns into a bog and sunlight flashes off the stagnant water. Most often, though, it’s covered in mud so thick it’ll take your sneaker. In my mind I’m sloshing through it in hiking boots. Even then it’s hard going, though, as I need to wait for the mud to thicken enough to hold my foot coming down so I can find my balance and then pull my leg up again until it frees itself with a jerk and a gasp of air.

When I’m done, I’ll have to put washcloths in my boots to dry them off before tomorrow’s journey. Like the last time I trudged through a place like this. I’m looking around for where this mudhole ends. A few hikers and, by some miracle, someone on a mountain bike have made their way out. I stare at them for inspiration as I keep on, step after laboring step, after hours of hiking through steady rain. For most of the day we struggled over stairs cut into rocks overlooking Loch Lomond. Our destination was the village of Rowardennan, in actuality little more than an inn and a campground plopped down in the middle of the West Highland Way. At one point my father-in-law, an ex-marathon runner now a year or so from retirement, slipped and fell on his back. We didn’t know if he’d make it the rest of the day. But we cleared the loch and looked forward to dinner and a hot shower. Between that and us is this scab of mud picked open by the hikers who’d gotten here before us. My wife Jackie and I hold hands as we search for unearthed rocks or matted grass, any hint of stability. About halfway through we stop to catch our breath. Rain falls into our mouths each time we open them. Finally I turn to her and say, “I’d rather be working on my dissertation.”

Obviously I don’t mean it. I just want to say something grumpy. A day battling mud and rain is nothing next to the two months it took me to rewrite nearly every word of whatever it was I’d been working on for four years, most of that time spent just trying to understand the misfit philosophers I chose to write about. Erratic philosophers, whose questioning of the binaries between mind and body, thought, and vision, self and other, led them to sense the affinities between philosophy and art. Wayward philosophers, whose elliptical, spiraling writing pointed at truths inaccessible to reason and whose names – Ravaisson, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty

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– the tradition regards as curiosities as a result. Each chapter I sent to my advisors received the same reply: argument's not clear, too much summary and not enough analysis, runs off in too many directions. True, but missing the real problem. A thought was forming, but I hadn't finished rambling through the hints and errors and detours that would lead me to it. But completion deadlines approached and with them, the end of funding. I had to force my thought into the light.

So now I'm at my in-laws' house. Jackie's dad drags his old desk out of a closet and sets it up in her childhood bedroom. The heat isn't working and it's mid-February up in Albany. I'm in my winter jacket under blankets, scrawling notes on scraps of paper and setting them aside on warped particleboard for two days. Then, on the third day, the thought. Ravaisson, Bergson, and Merleau-Ponty unite art and philosophy because they want philosophy to be an art of living that does justice to the web of relationships called a human self. Their writing, seductive and impenetrable, resists defining a way of life for us to follow in favor of (does this make sense?) drawing a picture of a life built from dialogue between ideals, habits, and social obligations, leaning one way or another at times but striving to balance responsibility to oneself and to others. It all fits together, but something remains. The serpentine line or the "line of beauty," an imaginary S-curve within a figure that indicates movement. Ravaisson, Bergson, and Merleau-Ponty all refer to it, but I don't know what it means and time is up. I set that scrap of paper to the side with everything else that will end up in the recycling bin. I rush an abstract and a new introduction to my advisors, shutting away questions of whether all this work will mean anything to me after this is all over. That's not important. They just need to accept it.

And they do. I reshape each sprawling chapter until I complete an argument some 250 or so pages later. On May 5th I send them the manuscript and eat lunch. It's like I haven't seen sunlight for months. For me, the trip to Scotland is celebration for receiving my doctorate. Some party. Even when we get out of this mud, I know that more work is waiting for me at home, an article that had been accepted for publication. Maybe I understand, somewhere in my subconscious, that it will be the last academic work I can bring myself to do.

I close my eyes, open them again, lift up my foot, and keep going.

Further on, there's a flat bridge made of concrete and stone that spans a brook. It's wide enough for at least three people to cross side-by-side, maybe even a car. You have to look carefully because it's not well maintained, but there's a path branching off of the ledge that runs straight to the bridge. As you go down, you see that the water the bridge crosses feeds into a larger stream.

I'd love to lean over the far edge and watch the waters flow together, away from the highway. But it's winter now, too cold to linger. Bridges like this are best enjoyed in summer. An August day, when I'm off from college and have no one watching but myself. As I stand there and follow the rippling and swirling with my eye, I decide that this is as far as I want to go. At the beginning of vacation I ran for exercise. But then I decided I wanted to explore the corner where Lexington, Bedford, and Burlington meet up by my parents' house. My runs gradually became walks, and those grew

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longer and longer. I needed time to think. A lot had happened that past year. I'd fallen for two women, both named Amelia. With the first, things ended disastrously before they had even begun. Twice actually, once right at the beginning of Fall semester and then again after Winter break. Then I met Amelia at a party. We talked about dumb YouTube videos, whether House or Grey's Anatomy was the better show, and how to tell when pasta is al dente. It was fast and playful. There was tension, the latent expectation hidden between the s's of the word frisson, that had been missing before when conversations were serious, emotional, confessional. We graduated from throwing pasta at the wall to searing salmon and baking asparagus and chocolate chip cookies. It wasn't the first time I'd told a woman I loved her. It was the first time I'd heard it back.

Then one day she graduated and left to go abroad for a year. On its own, intensity dissipates as quickly as it appears. Work soon crowded out the memories. I planned to write a senior thesis on Plato and Dionysian mystery religion and had research to do. To write about Dionysus I had to understand Greek religion. I quickly built a routine. In the mornings I read: Homer, Hesiod, the lyric poets, tragedians, pre-Socratics, and Plato's early dialogues. In the afternoons I went out. I found protected forests and streets that weren't yet developed. Those were my favorites. Weeds and wildflowers sprouted from unfinished driveways. They led me deeper into Bedford, past the Burlington Landlocked Forest and the Reeves Road Conservation Area all the way to Route 3. That's where I find it, at the end of a gravel street on the far side of a pond. A ruined mill site. The building has long since vanished, but the stone and mortar foundation is still visible. The pond spills into a waterfall and flows out under the access road. I look around for information. Leaning over the stone bridge overlooking the falls, I glance to the right and find a brass plaque: "HISTORICAL SITE: HERE JOHN WILSON BUILT HIS CORNE MILL IN 1676." I watch the water tumble down and swirl away and enjoy the feeling of accomplishment.

Now there's another bridge. Not in Bedford, but back behind my parents' house on the path that leads down to the power lines. Two wooden planks set side by side over a brook we used to hop across when we were kids. I think they were part of an Eagle Scout project, but I'm not sure. I'm on the bridge with Jackie. She's come for the weekend to meet my family. A whole weekend – much braver than I was, only committing myself to a first lunch with her parents. It's November, the trees are barren, and the grasses and bushes have grayed. The sky is clear, though. I want to show her where I used to walk when I was a kid. We're almost off the bridge: I can see the fork in the path that leads to the power lines. She stops, reaches around my shoulder, and kisses me. It's a kiss that's relieved we're finally alone for the first time in days and don't want to be around anyone else in the world right now. It's thankful that we planned this weekend together, and that we're making other plans weeks, months, maybe years in advance.

And for a moment, it's as if I've left my body and am watching us from above, set motionless in that kiss, until I turn my head forward and watch my step as I go down the slope on the other side of the ledge.

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By the time I reach the hill on my way back the sun is up. Light cuts through the Nature Study Woods in New Rochelle. It's too bright to look around so my eyes turn downwards instead, to the rocks lying half-buried and the roots that break out of the dirt to form their own sort of staircase up the slope. Behind me, commuters on the Hutch shift and speed their way to work. I too have a day to prepare for. I've thought of focusing my attention on what's beneath me, of taking in each detail of the path as it sways back to Webster Ave. It's no use, though. I call it mindfulness, but the effort just brings me back to myself on my morning walk and I lose the connection. And besides, seeing the path is easy now: it's right in front of me, guiding me back to my house, my morning, my work, the pattern of days and weeks called middle age. Less easy is sensing how the path bends around the weight of moments that draw us back once more as if to remind us that we still don't know them because we haven't finished living them. That's the remainder: a sense for the past that lies dormant in hints and glances and makes the present vibrate with still unrealized possibilities. The "S" of a figure moving not just through space but through time. The best I can manage are glimpses when I'm still half-asleep and thoughts step into each other like rooms without walls. Good thing I'm not a morning person.