

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

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DNA

MISSISSIPPI HAD CHANGED into an unforgettable gentleman flitting thin arms inside his frock coat, pointing out the sights with clock hands.

But when Jake and I entered the convenience store it did seem that the links between hot and cold, light and dark had become dysfunctional. Peanuts safely swallowed by bright wrappers. The shelves covered in words of all sizes, printed, scribbled, plump, vacant, groggily colored.

'OK. I want the cash—all of it right now.' Jake's movements were unbearably slow but steady. His determined but grieved tone pulling the pistol from under his shirttail while stamping one foot and gesturing at the cash register. Took forever. 'Come on.'

The clerk, a bromeliad, waved a few waxy leaves and split out two cockroaches and one small snake.

'Let's go. Godamit.' Jake strangled the last word.

I stuffed snacks into a plastic bag I'd brought in for that purpose. Rushed over and grabbed a twelve pack of beer. Listening to the gallons of liquid gurgling in my stomach and chest, I was careful not to open my mouth and flood the place.

He opened the register, removed the bills with fluttering fingers, held the money out to Jake who snatched and crammed it in his jeans pocket, the pistol jerkily expanding the circle it drew in the air. Then he hurried toward the door.

As I walked by the semi-caged counter, one of the clerk's free floating roots dripped into my sloshing reservoir.

'Y'all come back now,' I managed with a grin.

He grinned back.



Early autumn. Bare twig in the foreground.

Approaching the house I got a sudden urge to twist the wheel right while gunning the engine. Slammed through privet hedge zipping across the lawn barely avoiding a birdbath before grinding up pink begonias and chording the reluctant chassis up a dozen concrete steps to bump the front door.

I take her hand. We walk past the giant sunflowers where the bees buzz and dancers bump one another with abandon but careful not to disturb the spherical yellow petals. Each burnt orange flower middle has its flamenco artist, some sharp nosed, others doll-faced, all females. Her hand in mine is somewhat squiggly but willing enough.

'Is that your room with the pink curtains?'

She nods, looking straight ahead.

'Do you have a mirror?'

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'Yes.' Her glance at me no more than a flicker.

'A big one?'

Again the nod but she's looking at me, her eyes fronting a reservoir of interest.

Now men have joined the women. All the huge flower middles contain an orderly tangle of arms, legs, heads. The women's dresses flutter up. The men lose their pants. All of them twisting, turning stomping stretching—not kids, not adults.



Jake and I took turns driving. I counted the money: \$187.00. We put gas in the car twice, ate hamburgers and fries once, home cooking at Cracker Barrel once.

The last fifty miles or so all Jake could talk about was what he was going to do to Candace Murphy when we got there. Reaching the house we sat in the driveway while he called her. While they spoke I got out of the car and lit a cigarette, walked down a steepish slope toward the gym. No door. Past the abandoned trophy case. Panoramic tile, spacious confinement. World which had formed one day out of fuzzy confidence and deflating puerility. Steel frame. Brick sides. The air perpetually saturated : screams, sweat, popcorn, cursing, joy, pecking despondency.

'No fireworks. Crowdworks. Miredireworks. Refreshing smell of the past...'

They pass in a looming caravan, camels hung with musty tapestries: GO TIGERS, RIP 'EM UP, TEAR 'EM UP, BAT THE BUFOS; bugalooing hump to hump, smooth faces swelling, bleachers slipsliding—dusty window stuck just under the roof, gleaming nylon threads and transparent backboards folded back.

Up the hill the car was empty. I wandered to the side of the house, peeked in a window. Jake and Candace were laying on the bed. She was on her back, him licking one nipple and rubbing her between the legs. When she squirmed more or less steadily, Jake stood on his knees and flopped over, pulling her on top. I turned away while they fitted everything together, walked some more, smoking, churning like leaves caught in a whirlpool.

Time shrugged itself off through a somewhat despairing or just lonely old hymn until a vehicle traveling at breakneck speed barged down the road and pulled into the yard. I raced to the window, knocked, faded through trees and other brush toward our car. Door from the intruding conveyance slammed. Hooded illumination from the streetlight indicated a beatup Ford truck missing a smooth curve or two. Someone hurrying toward the door. Just as I reached the car the front door to the house slamming. Before I could slip inside and crank the engine, Jake was in the seat beside me, shirtless, breathing hard.

'Get the fuck outa town.'

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Digestible.

Back roads embalming slippery old fields, crabby old houses and barns. Holler out the window and the sound comes back a liquid punching bag, smearing any facial skepticism silly. Alabama woozy—woke to glued glaze by Mac's sausage/cheese biscuit and large coffee. South. Hills gradually sinking into flat retirement.

'I wanna get somewhere where this orneriness don't always feel like its growing all over all the time...just for a time.'

'You was born ornery.'

'Yeah. But its like I want the orneriness to come n' go like the harmonica on some song' Jake tried to improvise a harmonica which came out more like a freight train with a bad cold 'where you can enjoy it when its there but you don't have to feel the godam thing all the godam time.'

'Okdoky.'

The bottom of Alabama blended into Florida with you only half knowing it. Jake was driving. We were on I10 for a while before he turned south all the way to the Gulf where the land tapered away into an adoration of sun and water. We stopped, sat in sand, smoked, quiet. Then a bunch of balloons, the large kind with at least one person in them, floated overhead. Colors beautiful wisecracks. The throwaways of what your mind releases as too neat to stay on the ground.



The next holdup didn't go too good.

We'd drank beer late the night before. Slept at a little place across the street from the water. Heat had burst through rigid and intense by the time we got up and went out.

Jake continued kicking in the undercurrents—pretty damn sick of it as we strolled into a small gas/bait/eats/whatever joint off a county road overlooking some murky water shaded by profound oaks.

'Everybody freeze!'

The little boy thrust his hands high, the man beside him instinctively pulling the tike close to shelter his head against his thigh. A woman in a bright pink halter top emerged from the center aisle carrying a bag of Fritos which she dropped. But the gnarled old fart behind the boards and boxes makeshift counter just snarled and stared at Jake with bitter eyes. I'd tore open a Milky Way, lost my teeth in the caramel before hearing loose talk from the far aisle.'

'Check it out, man!' Jake waved the pistol in that direction.

There were three of them, probably fisherman, toting armloads of supplies, big guys.

'Hey—we're robbing ya'll.'

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'The hell you say' replied one. The other two just grinned.

'Well...not you but the store.'

They had continued walking up the aisle, turned the corner and spotted Jake.

'Ok then. Get on with it. Them fish ain't gonna wait all day waiting.' One snorted a laugh and all three walked toward the counter.

'I said FREEZE!' Jake stomped his foot, again.

Listless chocolate smothered my mouth. One by one the three unloaded their burdens, then faced Jake who waved the gun in a senseless pattern.

'Son, why don't you and your friend just back the hell outa here. I'm sure we'll all forget the whole manner.' His smile seemed genuine.

I even took two steps toward the door and Jake might have followed, but the old man behind the counter chimed in 'an don't come back.'

'Asshole!' Jake got off two rounds, one bullet hitting a fisherman, the other smashing into the dairy case. I was out the door and in the car before I realized that Jake wasn't with me. There had been an explosion, shouting, a scream. It was only when the old man shoved through the door holding a shotgun that I scampered out of the car and ran down the road a ways before taking to the underbrush.



Pop was blind by the time I remember him.

Somewhat wobbly. A tilting cylinder half full of numb shapes never able to find their way outside. I mean he had eyes in his head and didn't walk into walls and trees and shit—went to work and came home. But he couldn't not only see me and Mom and Ronnie who was named after him, he couldn't see himself. I don't know how he shaved in the morning, launched that razor down his face, zip, zip, zip, and when he rinsed off the soap, everything that was supposed to be there was there and the whiskers were gone.

But he was blind. Couldn't hear much either. Mom would flame up Tom Jones or Jerry Lee or somebody so loud the dog howled and the wall paint blistered, do confrontational conjoined hip thrusts, back blurts, butt altar-wipes, toward him in his chair counting the letters per line on the sports page. Him hushed, braille thin strings of silence careful not to let them touch one another.

Once at an amusement park me and Ron were riding one of those hashbash swinging pendulum things when karma pulled the plug. There we were stuck at a weird and soon uncomfortable angle 25 feet un-integrated from where common sense wants us to be. First I yelled because that seemed to be what my fellow captives had decided on including my brother who spit mites of popcorn with his yelling. Then I began watching the folks watching our hanging dilemma. Running. Hollering. Pointing. Everyone looking up except one man. Pop. Glued there like peanut brittle he looked down at the ground, his bald spot a posing bull's eye.

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Time was a shiny dime.

Bend to pick it up brushing aside frenzied ferns. Looking out a few feet away a wizened boot stood next to a thick and scarred wooden peg. Sharkskin pants, a frock coat with huge cuffs and lapels, a streak of bare, hair matted chest, the face of the devil or at least a close relation.

‘What you doing out ‘ere you spineless porcupine?’

One ear hung a ways down his neck which was grizzled with off-white beard popped from overripe pumpkin-colored skin. The eye socket on the other side of his face was covered by a patch—looking close, a mutant sea bean shell tied round his oblong head by string.

‘Porcupine?’

‘Ah...with all yer stickers shot n’ gone.’ When he laughed his nose blurted flame, rubbery belly spoofing dry wall holding back a chortling ocean.

‘Pop?’ Slip the dime in your pocket.

‘Why the hell not...’ The scar under one peep-hole eye reddening, nose smoking.

What he did next might be called a dance if you’re drawn to watching a one-legged pullet with the runs in slow motion: boot heel/toe, heel/toe in a circle devised by the sluggishly spinning peg leg. One arm up, hand squeezing a tit in manual service, the other dangling in a thrusting twitch. Then he stopped. Spit a long stream of sappy liquid.

‘Pop goes the weasel’ First the coat, then hopping on the peg the boot flew in a an unwieldy arc before buttons holding the pants together scatter-gunned from what threatened to be an exploding pirate. But when objects rested and the smoke cleared what remained could have made the weasel look like someone on a cereal box. Naked, the dude was two for one: the upper half a bald head, earless, eyeless, noseless with a dark slit for a mouth and tufts of hashy hair broken out here and there, flopping torso small rolls of fat between strips of bright chrome, armless, ready to plunge in a steaming bowl of Campbell’s condensed tomato soup; bottom part just a mannequin without any connecting joints, smooth as crashing cymbals.

Running through dense undergrowth can drain the tank quick plus when you trip the fall lasts longer than it ought to. Might as well be falling into a another world where when you look up there’s a snake wrapped around a stool telling jokes in French. I don’t know French but here I know the jokes are in French even though I don’t understand a goddamn word being said. All of a sudden Jake flits by straddling a huge bark beetle and singing about

‘how I take it back, shove it in a sack, give it a whack and bury it out back’

Putting your face in black water ain’t as bad as you’d think when you can’t think no more and probably never could so so what?

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The bird keeps chatting on past darkness, past sleep...inside, the bird bristles at any notion higher than two inches off the ground...hard rain on the back of your throat...



Sunburned, bugbit, dehydrated and three-fourths starved I woke up in the hospital.

It seems when escaping I'd stumbled into a full bore fucking hell. Got lost and wandered for however long before passing out and almost dying before two ol' boys ATVing came upon on me lying under a storm-spun pine. Too dry to drool. Left me with a beer I couldn't drink and a cigarette that burned my fingers. But God love 'em did send help back .

When I get out of the hospital I'll build 87 months in the slams before making parole. No body died cept Jake so they wasn't as pissed off as they could be. Get a job stacking things 8 hours a day, 5 ½ days a week, fuel the rig with a woman slightly lopsided face one eye just lower than the other a house always needs work 3 kids after awhile two week vacation in Florida Super Bowl Saturday nite softball pizza beer like the man said any dumb sonofabitch can to happy or not.