

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Andrew Hubbard

Jokes and Rules

I haven't filed taxes in eight years
IRS come after me four years gone
And decided I just wasn't worth the trouble.

Funny.
Almost exactly the same words
My wife said when she left.

I live in Freehope, Ohio
Once a strong little steel town
Now the joke is that
The best job is selling plywood
To board up the storefronts.

Hope should be free
And I guess it is
But the other joke is:
"Hope's like money —
What we don't got much of."

I spend my days at Sandy's Bar,
And my check too,
I call it "social insecurity."
It comes about the eighteenth
And I make it a rule
Never to cash it until it arrives.
That's a joke.

Sandy's opens at 11:00
And I'm there freshly shaven
And in clean clothes:
That's two of my rules,
A man's got to have his rules.

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Sandy's has two pinball machines
(One works), a bowling game,
A pool table, and 14 stools.

It's been open for over 100 years
And it looks it:
The walls are aged black
And the floor is worn concave
Behind the stools
Where guys have walked to the bathroom
Since 1900, or thereabouts.

I have my own stool
At the end, with a cushion
Because of my back.
[Sandy's mother made it for me.
She's 94, and in better shape than me.]

By 68 a man gets to know
About every kind of pain there is
And I want to tell you
Ruptured discs is the worst.
Some mornings I sit
On the edge of the bed fifteen minutes
Getting the courage to try to stand.

I start my day
With a big Bud Lite Draft
(I won't touch the hard stuff before 3:00 PM).
A man's got to have his rules.

Sandy and I have a joke
That I have to make it last
Until the noon rush, and I do.

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The noon rush comes in at 12:00 sharp,
Both of them:
Elbert and Beverly—
Two biggish black guys
Gentle as doves
Both bald with huge, thick hands.

They could almost be twins.

Sandy sets up the beers
And the day gets going.

We may shoot some pool
We may talk about the women
And the jobs that have come and gone.
We may watch the weather
Out the windows; watch the light
Change from afternoon to evening to dark.

If nobody else comes in
Sandy says he'd like to close up early
And gives us a shot on the house.

I like him a lot
He gives me credit
Till my check comes in
And laughs like he means it
When we tell him
He needs us
As much as we need him.

Back home it's a rule:
Sitting on the toilet I always
Drink a glass of water and take two aspirin.
A man's got to have his rules.

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Into the Wind

The wind today
Is a force to be reckoned with.
The pines and oaks and hemlocks
Sway and toss and bow to each other.

I can't help thinking
They enjoy it
As much as I do.
It's December. The wind
Throws knives of cold.

I put on a heavy jacket.
The wife won't come with me.
Even the dogs show no interest.
That's ok. My own company is satisfactory.

I step out and the wind pulls my breath away
The cold keeps it from coming back
Until I turn downwind and pull in hard.

I head into the woods,
The trees break the wind
At my level, but up high
The treetops roar
With a sound like nothing else.

The deer don't like it:
They can't hear what's coming—
They flick their ears
And make their dainty way
To their safe place
Their secret place
That I have never found.

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The squirrels are in their huge, messy nests,
The birds have taken the day off,
I am alone like the wind.

Like the wind
I am a force to be reckoned with.

I move with deliberation
Certain that I am doing the right thing
In the right place at the right time.

Hours pass, the wind is constant
But the light changes, begins to dim
And I still seem to be the only moving thing
But that's all right, that's
The way it started out
The way it must end
Not a bad thing
Just the thing itself.

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Crow Song

These zero mornings
The dry snow
Squeaks beneath our boots
And the sun
Is a wan apology in the east

We share our simple abundance,
Putting out seed and cracked corn
For the neighborly birds

They twitter and peck
Grab and gulp
Fly off in a frenzy,
Fly back for more.

It's a party
Until the T-rex
Of local birds
Alights to take
His mighty and royal due:
A crow so huge,
So stately and severe
He scares my daughter.

I slip outside with a camera
But he senses me
And is off fast
And low and silently
Until he is out of sight,
And then he erupts—
Caw, cawing in derisive exaltation:

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I stole your seeds!
I stole your corn!
I stole them!
And you can't catch me!
Haaw!

He is so thrilled
With the theft,
Why tell him
It was a gift?