

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

*Richard Spilman*  
**On the Edge**

It's too late to sign in. The day-trippers watch us duck-foot, shadows trailing, three penitents lugging the world's sin into a cold cathedral.

It's work against the chevrons of cross-country skis, a wet snowpack spotted by archipelagos of grass and shoals of ice cloudy as old eyes.

Even here winter vacillates, and rocks shatter in the ambivalence; great pines huddle in white coats over mats of needles dry as bone.

Farther in, clouds like old cotton gather above the rim of the valley and a numbing wind offers relief from our senses. As the sky turns

black, though we're short of our destination, we hunt a leeward bowl and dig to bare earth. Two hold the tent and one hammers.

Without heavy packs crammed with the world we came to escape, we feel buoyant, the lost weight like the ghost of a severed limb.

Out come the Jetboil stoves to melt snow for soup while clouds usher early and welcome night. We unzip the larval bags and sleep.

Until a squall snaps the tent cords. Then out again to cross-peg loops so the wind won't sail us into eternity, and to slap sidewalls

so the tent won't collapse. When the storm subsides, we feel our luck and, hyped by the adrenaline, talk ourselves to sleep.

We wake to a busy sun spreading fire on the swells of a frozen sea and crackling pines shuddering as they shed the weight of night.

A gorgeous tabula rasa tracked in cuneiform—deer and coyote, pika and squirrels, even a grizzly bullied from hibernation.

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Air as pristine as crystal, our voices quavering like struck glass.  
We step into it like explorers, marring what we savor.

At first, we are stunned, for none of us have been this much  
alone, in a silence so profound it creates its own wilderness.

Perhaps it is the way of beauty to be stumbled on in flagrante  
by those who, seeing neither emptiness nor cathedral,

put one duck foot in front of another blundering forth  
with a folly so profound it can only bring calamity or new sight.

We make snow angels, follow tracks as if they might lead  
somewhere, listen to the crackling trees unload their burdens

then shoe to the rim, to the exhilaration of sheer rock, a giddy  
fall to the Merced, where plows are writing the roads in cursive.

A waterfall hangs like God's hand raising Adam from the dust.  
We drink snow melt, eat cheese and crackers, and wait

for the sensible in their puffy coats to plow down, dragging  
their poles, shocked that someone beat them to the edge.

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### Signifying the Otter

You pick your way across the shingle  
and enter naked, slowly resigning warmth  
until the sea without meets the sea within.  
As the tide takes over, you sidestroke  
foam-tatted swells, swallow sunlight  
from their undulating darkness.

An otter watches the awkward scissoring  
as if to measure what's cut away.  
He (or is it she?) cracks urchins on his belly,  
plucks the meat, and lets the shell fall—  
then stands straight up like a meerkat  
from its desert hole. Curiosity, perhaps,

or a challenge: "Can you do this, punk?"  
You see yourself in that, you always do:  
one of the many bad habits of humanity.  
In an instant he's gone as if yanked  
from below, and you become a tourist,  
a skimmer of mysteries. You dive,

hoping to connect, but it doesn't help.  
Below, you're lost, the populace invisible.  
So you breach, and there he is, maybe  
ten feet away, chirping—the two of you  
eye to eye, drip beading light,  
as the tide draws you out from shore.

**Chinese Print**

A fisherman meditates  
the space where his line  
disappears into waves  
like a hasty signature.

The shore cedes here  
and there all definition.  
On what remains, men  
lift boxes from a boat

while others, bending  
like question marks  
beneath their loads, ply  
the shoreline path.

Halfway up, another  
man emerges from  
nothing, his left leg  
thrust out like "shi."

Clothes and tonsure  
suggest a priest,  
the pack on his back  
a poet or scholar.

Staff in hand he wends  
toward a bent peak  
and the simple shrine  
that shelters beneath.

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That the path appears  
and disappears in clouds  
does not slow his pace  
any more than it does

the others, bearing  
their loads or waiting  
over infinite stillness  
for a pull on the line.