

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

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Wilt

With the early gray light she walks down the drive. Silent except for her steps kicking rocks ahead of her, the rubber of her shoes against the dirt road. The air carries the moisture of the previous day's rain and her breath materializes in the cold. Blazing colors of autumn give way to brown as the turn of the season tears leaves from their stems, beneath her steps their rot gives off a damp and sweet smell. To her these are mornings of a rare mercy. Amber fields of dried overgrown grass and the lone trees standing within. An altar of her own where all there is to be worshiped is the silence.

She sees the form of two deer through the dim light. They're under the bare canopy of a fig tree, heads lowered to the ground as if to graze, though they remain still. She picked the last of the fruit weeks ago, green and shaped like droplets nearly the size of her palm. They gradually ripened where the final summer days blended into the fall. Days with which she spent the mornings collecting them into jars to leave on neighbor's porches. Some she set aside, tearing them open before eating to see their red interior, fibrous where small seedlings lay scattered and pale like the stars. Perfect.

With her approach the deer lift their heads.

Don't let me bother you, she whispers.

They're gone as soon as she's said it. They shrink into the distance running above the golden autumn grass before breaking into the woods that line the far end of the field where each of their strides is a crash against the fallen limbs and leaves that blanket the forest floor. She walks towards the tree. Over the weeks she watched the green of its leaves fade into a pale yellow and become spotted, first with gray, then black like a kind of mold. They're corpses of themselves now, brown and shriveled lining the ground where untouched figs, hollowed by gnats, flies and wasps, broke from their branches and rot.

She sees a fawn beneath the tree. It's curled into itself so that it appears limbless, as one mass of fur, its head tucked against a hind leg. She crouches down and its eyes turn upwards. In them she sees a look of fear betrayed by illness. If it could, it would surely run.

She reaches out and feels it lightly shiver from the cold. Its head lifts and turns to her hand resting on its back. Short, shallow breaths cause her hand to rise and fall against weakened ribs that speak of a deep and lasting hunger. White spots against a brown coat adorn starved limbs.

She thought that she should move it somewhere warm but had no idea what would happen after. Whether it grew comfortable with her towering presence or its neck grew tired she didn't know, but the fawn rested its head back against its hind leg. In its eyes she saw a fading light burn against this colorless morning. Clouds continue to roll over the hills and silence the landscape. She bowed her head as if to pray. A feeling of approaching defeat, helplessness. She closed her eyes and for a moment understood the raw truth of this land and her insulated existence within it.

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At night she can hear coyotes baying from across the fields, almost laughter. She lies awake, listening she gets a sense that teeth and speed are the imposing forces of these woods. Kneeling here now she looks at the fawn and sees that life unseen, microscopic bodies are just another means of destruction. One that can't tear you to shreds, but will destroy you all the same.

Looking up she sees a distant light glowing through the window of the house up the hill. What little sun they got this morning rose against it and she noted the dark features of its metal roofing and faded chimney against the muted horizon. She knows the occupant and recalls a scene of him driving past her over the dirt road, his truck sending dust into the air with a slain deer in its bed. She looked into its eyes for a moment, still open from the kill, and vowed to avoid them if he ever drove past after a hunt again. On numerous occasions he'd given them meat from these animals, back straps and flanks that she prodded at with her fork trying to think of something else while chewing.

If there was any help it might as well lie within that house. She got up and turned her back to the fawn as she walked the distance to his front door. Her knuckles were red and chapped as she knocked against it. A dog started barking in the far end of the house..

"Good morning."

"Morning." He was still in the clothes he slept in. The dog paced behind him, trying to nose through the small space where its owners legs blocked it from view.

"There's a deer." She says

"A deer?"

"Yeah."

"There's lots of deer." He says.

"No. No, a sick one. I think it's sick."

"What's it doing?"

"Nothing."

"Well, best to just leave it be, something will come for it." He stood for a moment watching her. A look to her told him this conversation wasn't over. He wrapped a hand around the doorknob but didn't yet close it.

"Can't you come take a look?" She asked.

"What for?"

"To see if you can help it." She said. He sighed and looked at his feet.

"Okay. Let me get dressed." He left her at his porch for a few minutes before returning in different clothes. Loose jeans and a stained work coat.

"Coffee?" He asked.

"No." With this he called for his dog and stepped out onto the porch.

"I don't think the dog should come." She said. He looked at her.

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"Right." Before the dog made it to the door he closed it and stepped off the porch. Walking from the property they could hear it whining and scratching at the door.

"You're a hunter?" She asked him.

"I hunt."

"So you know about deer?"

"Some," He said, "most of what I know begins once they're already dead." He turned to her with a smile. She stared down at the road watching it pass beneath her feet and did not respond.

"I've lived here long enough. I suppose I've watched enough deer pass through my yard to understand something about them." He said.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I guess animals, you notice, communicate through the movements of their bodies. We're the same way, I suppose, though a lot of us pretend like we aren't." He looked at her and smiled, "Eyebrows and language do a lot for us, but there's more to it than just that. There always is." He took a sip from his mug. "I wonder if they realize that they're communicating with us just as much as they are with each other. I wonder how many people realize that, probably not too many. But they are, you just need to know what to look for."

They approached the fawn as he was talking. She looked down at it and as far as she could tell it hadn't moved. He set his coffee down in the grass by his side and stood for a few silent minutes, studying the fawn with his hands on his hips. A cold wind blew and in it she got a sense for an approaching winter. Bare ground where the soil is frozen to the point of being stone, small patches of snow and frost that melt away in the late morning sun. The smell of distant fires burning.

"I don't know what to tell you." He said. She was silent for a moment.

"There's nothing you can do?"

"I don't think so." He turned to look at her, "Maybe if we found it a while ago, but no. No, I don't know." They stood for a moment longer.

"What if we took it to a vet?" She asked. He sighed and shook his head.

"We're half an hour from town. Who knows what kind of pain it's in. No sense in dragging it up for a car ride just for a doctor to tell us what we already know."

"What do we already know?" She asked. He looked at her and in his eyes she saw a frustrating look of pity that she's become familiar with. After a moment he bent over and carefully ran his hands beneath the fawn.

He picked it up, cradling it like a child. Its head rolled over and its eyes ran wild with fear scanning the landscape before settling into hers. He began walking away from the tree, through the grass and towards the woods. She followed, catching up and putting her hand on his shoulder bringing him to a stop. He turned around. The deer, neck limp, looking onward.

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"What are you," she began to ask, speech failing her.

"Stay here." He said. A sharp feeling of ruin set over her, electric down her spine settling in her gut. She started to speak but found she couldn't do so easily.

"Okay." She relented, stopped where she was and waited in perfect stillness. His footsteps brushed against the grass as he walked further, drops of morning dew spilling onto the toe of his boots and soaking into the cuffs of his jeans. She tracked the sound of his movement as she watched the shrinking brown mass in his arms, the deer, disappearing further into the brush until nothing of the two existed at all in her line of sight. She kept her eyes fixed on the wall of trees to the horizon.

From the woods she thought she could hear three beats, dull pulses she could have mistaken for the beating of her heart which found itself in her ears while fervently jumping against the thin skin of her hands and neck. Minutes passed before she saw him again, walking from the edge of the forest alone.

When he walked back to her they shared a look and he nodded. Terrible silence. He knew it was one he held a responsibility to break, but he struggled to come up with anything to say.

"Are you okay?" He asked.

"I'm okay." She said. He looked at her a little longer and she stayed still with her eyes to the ground. She could feel him staring at her.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. I just," he stopped, "nothing." For a moment longer the pair stood in the cold.

"How have you been holding up?" He asked.

"I'm okay." She said.

"I've been meaning to drop by with some food for you, to see how you were doing." He said, "I guess it's been a few weeks now." She looked up to meet his gaze and he stopped speaking. Her eyes dropped back down and he knew that she was beginning to cry.

"Alright. Alright, I'll let you go."

"Thank you." She managed to say.

The two walked in opposite directions. After taking a few steps he turned to see if she did the same but she kept moving, looking forward. Standing at the step of her front door she struggled to get a hold of the knob. Her fingers had frozen over making her movements stiff. She sniffed and wiped a tear from her cheek before getting inside.

Moving in they still felt like children living in a house not much older than their marriage. In this countryside he'd promised her a simple life without much thought as to what that meant. She watched from the kitchen window as he moved boxes from the bed of a truck, the grass behind him moving wildly with the wind. You could walk that stretch of field for

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an hour before hitting someone else's land.

She'd follow him into the woods and listen as he named the species of birds by their calls. In these hikes she pointed out flora that they would soon recognize as their own. In this new house they'd spend their evenings on the porch facing East to watch the day's final color dance across the hills. She'd fall asleep with her head in his lap, listening to his breathing and the beating of his heart as if it whispered his plans for their life to her alone.

Months ago this house wasn't so quiet. She takes notice of this stillness as she slips off her boots and drops them onto the floor. The sound of their rubber heels hitting the ground runs through the halls with no one to receive it. Furniture and art fill a space, but a home is made full by the sounds of its occupants. Running sinks, bare feet brushing against the hardwood floor.

There's always company and there is time, but there is no simple peace. Grief is a process of the individual. For now, there is only her.

She walks to the bedroom, dropping her coat on the floor and lying back in bed. She balances herself on the edge of its right side until she's almost fallen off. The sheets and opposite pillowcase, like his t-shirt hanging from the edge of the hamper, haven't been washed in weeks. There's a scent to them that brings him back home, back into her arms, as long as she can still smell it.

Months ago the fig tree was sprouting in the sun of the early months. Young leaves, soft and bright, blooming bound together like the petals of a rose.