

## *Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

*Thomas Wauhob*

### **Al Dente**

#### **1**

There was something urgent about the way she said, "Get the fuck out of my apartment."

It was not a terribly bad idea. I hadn't taken my jacket off. At the stairs I walked into the crossfire of an older couple yelling at each other, she at the doorway, he at the base of the stairs. They were pretty old. I slowed momentarily to get another glimpse of her, not Samantha but this elderly woman. The sum of their ages was more than the number of minutes in a feature-length film about love at first sight.

So I drove down to the lake to feed some ducks. I was hoping Samantha would want to join me, but telling her I had slept with Ellie, her sister, thwarted me. There seemed to be nothing I could do. In that unfortunate instant I wanted to do as much as I could, like fix a sink, or give away a sum of money. In retrospect, I had done enough. The last thing I had told her was that it had only happened once, as if this would have mitigated anything.

The gravel cracked under my tires when I got there, like an immense bored person cracking his knuckles only to make the sound. It was overcast and getting chilly. A current from the north bit into my jacket as I spotted a car belonging to Ben, a fellow duck feeder. Ben was a particle physicist, weird and old. Samantha and I enjoyed him dearly even if he was not sympathetic to String Theory. I thought about getting back in the car and leaving, as I did not want him to ask me anything. Was it perfectly sane to feed good bread to waterfowl anyway? But I had to do it. I had to prove to myself that it could be done without Samantha. Then I would move on to bigger things.

There was no thought in my mind that Samantha would forgive me or be kindly disposed toward me, and not destroy the CDs, shirts and notebooks I had left at her place - it was Endgame. Whether or not I was trying for Endgame was a question I could gladly retire. Yet there is pain in the loss of habits. As I tottered down the hill, I thought about how her

*Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

arm had looped through mine in our confused old-fashioned way, akin to what I'd read about phantom limb.

"Where's Sam?" the sensitive old physicist inquired.

"She's not coming."

"No?"

"Sick." He nodded. "Real bad." I winced and began to toss bread.

At least ducks were loyal. They knew that Sam and I shelled out exclusively Mrs. Baird's, while Ben and the other park figures proffered generic bread, which may or may not have been from an outlet store. I heard you have to sign a waiver. Our ducks could recognize my Volvo when it pulled up on the hill. We were used to their going crazy by the time we got out of the vehicle. They succeeded where I failed; I rewarded them accordingly.

"Ben, I got to tell you something."

He said okay.

"Listen, Samantha's not here because I confessed to her today that I kissed another girl." I've always believed it's better to begin with the tip of the iceberg.

"Did she catch you?"

"No," I said. "I confessed to her. I told her myself."

After a beat, he said, "well, perhaps there's hope."

"No, Ben. There's not. I told her because she was going to catch me."

"But unless she actually caught you, there's hope," he offered, smiling, imparting wisdom I was not sure he had.

"No hope. No way, Ben."

*Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

"Skipper, if all you did was kiss - "

"Does that particularly matter?" I put forth very quickly, my hands flaying the air.

He said I should keep my chin up.

"My chin? You're deranged. Why do you *persist*? Look, there's just no way."

Ben looked uncomfortable, and seemed to break his bread up faster.

"These ducks are on a higher level than me. You understand what I'm saying? They can't do math or fix a computer, but at least they know how to go around and not kiss every other duck in the lake. My god, I'm a piece of junk. Less than a goddamn duck."

He couldn't have been more awkward if I had stepped out of the car wearing a Halloween costume. My throat was constricting and I could feel tears coming.

"Ben, I'm getting old, and I have nothing."

The fifty-five to sixty year old looked at me a bit askance.

"Even waterfowl can curb their animalistic impulses to kiss everything in sight."

"These ducks are, not that, that great," he said tiredly.

"But penguins, Ben." I was weeping. "Penguins mate for life, and my life is fucked."

As he backed away, Ben said "there, there." He said I was younger than I then thought, that surely I would find the right girl and not be compelled to kiss other girls. I told him I had done more than kiss this other girl, a lot more. He said that was okay, and I told him the other girl was related to the girl I was supposed to marry, and that we did such things to each other as belonged in *The Arabian Nights*. And on more than one occasion, sometimes more than one occasion on the same day.

## *Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

He said fine, still smiling, and left before distributing the rest of his bread.

The ducks are never sated, no matter what, but they at least loose interest in you several minutes after you've given them all you have. They withdrew and floated on the soundless surface of the lake, their eyes glassing over as if they could no longer see me, as if they could no longer see each other. I dried my face with the sleeve of my shirt and realized I had opened up to somebody who didn't even believe in String Theory.

I went home and killed five cockroaches. They were not in the same place, mind you. The most I saw in one place was three. It took an hour and a half for me to come to the final count, though it's been worse. It occurred to me on this particular maraud that my natural animosity toward vectors may one day abate. One day I might just let them do their thing, as long as they let me do mine. Perhaps I would feed them, as I do the ducks. Then where would I be?

At work I was fairly nervous. It was my first post-collegiate job, the first week of it, and the owner had already yelled at me for soldering a chip wrongly. The owner I speak of makes more than just myself jumpy. Alex, for instance, sleeps and reads the newspaper on the job until our owner, Mr. Crum, pays a visit. Then Alex is jumpy, all motion and movement. If you took a picture of Alex during one of Mr. Crum's visits, he would be a blur in the foreground of the photo. Whereas I will slow down under pressure, will congeal, and need to focus on simple tasks such as not dropping what's in my hands.

"What are you doing?" Mr. Crum had asked me as I picked up a circuit board.

It seemed to take a minute and a half to open my mouth. "Soldering," I said, remembering the word.

Mr. Crum leaned down and gently removed the board from my hands and tilted it this way and the other.

"Do you know what you're doing?" he asked me in such a way as

*Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

if I would have to answer. "You're going to have to do it again."

So he had not yelled, had not raised his voice. But his voice, his words, stayed with me. They hummed around my head while I drove my car, haunting me like an insoluble physics problem - how fast was the shadow of the tree changing with respect to the moving headlights? I moved slowly for three days, waiting for the solution to come. Eventually Alex and I went out for tacos. We were sitting on a bench, waiting for our large white bag to appear on the take-out counter, when he told me to forget about it, and I did.

2

I was at the grocery store and I ran into Ben. I had never seen Ben at the grocery store. I had never seen him anywhere but the lake, and always on cloudy days, interestingly. Once he said to feel free to say hi to him at his office, but I reasonably assume he meant feel free to say hi if I wanted to go back to school, and watch his vacuum pumps for a third of my current booty. The truth is, I considered it. There seemed to be something fulfilling about always solving a problem. Showing up late for wedding ceremonies and walking into exit doors - both of which Ben had done - somehow, sounded like fun. The rest of the thought is that Ben intimidated me. Someone told me there had not been another student to complete a thesis under Ben since he received his tenure, many years ago. He was a purist, a devout believer in solid particles. None of these strings of energy, none of that. He once told me that anyone who didn't believe the Standard Model would suffer in the end, after I believe I implied that Einstein was God. Samantha and I invoked him many times for our polite entertainment, but at bottom, I decided, Ben was a marm. I pictured him as one of the professors who clapped his hands together and looked forward to delaying someone's graduation.

If ever a man could be given away by the quality of his teeth, it was not Ben. Approaching me in the produce section, I did not know if his purpose was to invite me to celebrate a successful grant proposal, or mug me. Fortunately the former. He and a colleague had won a few hundred thousand dollars to play with more vacuum pumps. I was happy for him. As he was talking, I recalled our last conversation. He

*Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

seemed not to remember, or to have reconsidered his vaguely ecclesiastical position. I began an attempt to shrink, to physically decrease my size. Perhaps fade into the roma tomatoes. He told me the saloon and the time of merry-making and I politely asked him if he was buying. He said he was.

I went home and contemplated getting a cat. Did cats eat roaches? What ate roaches? I cooked something gross and began to pick out a shirt to get sauced in. Selection of clothing isn't normally an issue, but drinking inspires me. I was once drunk in a shirt with holes in it and it depressed me. I appraised myself in the mirror and changed my shirt two more times. The saloon took some finding, but when I found it, I realized it was a saloon. There were round tables and plush sitting chairs, wooden floor, daguerreotype photographs hanging. I thought one of the tables had a card game going. Then I located Ben at the bar.

There was a dolled-up middle-aged woman, who clearly didn't have a Ph.D., sitting next to Ben. Another middle-aged person walked up to her. I said hello to Ben, he flicked his brow in acknowledgment and sighed.

"Where's Dr. Clemb- "

"Not coming."

"Ah." I waited for him to say something. "Was there anyone else?"

He looked from side to side, and put forth with some vexation, "I was hoping."

Again I waited for him to speak, to explain, but he wanted to be interrogated. I ordered a scotch on the rocks and began. "So who is it? What's the deal?"

"There's a girl."

There's always a girl. So this is why there was no awkwardness at the grocery market. It was an eye for an eye.

*Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

"How did you meet her, Ben?"

"I was on My Space - "

"Ben? I'm sorry, but I don't believe it. How old are you, Ben?"

He signaled for me to keep my voice down.

"My sister's teenager was in town and she was going to stay at my house awhile, but I didn't know when. I lost her number so I got in touch with her on a social networking site."

"And voila, you were addicted."

He glanced balefully at me. "I used it to look up some of my old classmates."

"That's how it starts, then you were addicted."

"Then I was addicted."

I tried not to imagine the man in his torn boxers sifting through his students' MySpace screens. He went on, "There was someone whose page I found quite incidentally." He was concentrating on his drink, burning a hole through the bottom of the glass with his eyes. "It's so hard to find someone who truly appreciates infinite-dimensional Banach spaces." Ben cleared his throat and adjusted his collar. "Even Clemdareta - topological vector spaces are his specialty, and he has no regard for the beauty of a Cauchy sequence in  $V$  that has *a limit in V*. Really, there is only one person who understands, and I met her on the Internet, a veritable needle in the haystack."

I was greedy for the details. "What was the catch? There was a catch, let's have it."

"She," he sipped his beer carefully, "was living in Montana."

"Okay. That's not impossible, not against the laws of physics."

"She was also nineteen."

I winced for him. "Ben, I had no idea. So did you - did you break

*Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

it off, whatever it was? Did you drive to Montana?"

"Nothing like that," he sniffed. "I found out whose picture she was using for her profile and struck up a correspondence with her."

"What?"

"A great thirty-five year old blondie with high cheek bones and a hooked nose," (thirty-five was still underage), "and she turned up in Indianapolis."

"Good, same state, and this woman with the hooked nose - she happened to also be apprised of the nuances of Banach spaces?"

"Karen? No, she thought classical physics was a genre of music."

"I'm confused, then. Which unrequited affection are you sulking over in this dingy wooden bar, which is obviously unfit for any kind of celebration? The nineteen year old math whiz in Montana, or the uneducated barfly who's closer in age, as well as by car?"

"She's no barfly. She has many qualities."

"So the one with the hooked nose."

"Yes," he sighed, "the hooked nose."

"And you're afraid she's rejected you because she hasn't shown up this evening."

"You've got me. And she would have a perfectly defensible reason to reject me, as I haven't been totally honest with her. See, I didn't use a real picture of me for my profile."

"God, Ben..."

"It's not as bad as it sounds."

"It's not, is it? It goes on, let me guess. You used *my* picture for your profile and she could show up any minute now looking for me. And you have just a few things you want me to tell her when she gets



*Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

here. I knew it."

"No, Nigel. That's the most absurd thing I've ever heard you say. It's more absurd than String Theory."

I didn't think it was very absurd. That slightly hurt me.

"I used a clipping from the newspaper. This little girl in Montana got Karen's picture out of *The Chicago Sun*, after a detail on her award-winning pumpkin patch. I used a picture of the President of Albania. At least he's the same age."

"That doesn't pardon anything, Ben."

"So it doesn't," he said. "I didn't care. I was confused and broken down. It was easier for me to do it this way."

"How does Karen feel about this? Is she going to show up tonight looking for the President of Albania?"

"No, I don't think so. I mean I don't know."

"How could you be unsure of this?"

"I got her to agree to come tonight. Then I emailed her my picture earlier this afternoon. But I didn't offer an explanation. I just sent her the picture."

"Ben, this doesn't sound like it was well thought out. You basically have no options."

"No?"

"No. I mean, she's either not going to come, or she is, and you won't be able to introduce yourself without making her feel like she's in an Alfred Hitchcock movie."

Ben seemed grimly amused. "Two possibilities. Is or isn't, does or doesn't. Reminds one of Shroedinger's Cat."

This sounded familiar, but I wasn't going to say anything.

*Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

"We have a radioactive isotope in a box. If it decays, a phial of poison breaks and the cat dies. We have no idea whether it decayed until we look in the box to see the cat. So what is the state of the system?"

"Do cats eat roaches?"

"I don't think they go out of their way."

"Say we have a radioactive isotope in my apartment. It decays and breaks open a phial that lets out a small roach. Either the cat will eat the roach, or not."

"I don't think cats eat roaches."

Karen did not make an appearance that night. We made speculations, but the most likely thing was she rejected Ben. At my desk 12 hours later, with Alex snoring away, I thought about him. Ben seemed weaker to me, more fallible, given to Internet dating. When Samantha and I met him, he seemed quite tough. He was not even nice to us. We were concerned with getting bread to one of the ducks that was left out. Not that he was an ugly duckling. He possessed no deformities, this duck, his parents were probably of the same species. But he lagged behind, he lingered on the lake, spent too much time by himself. Many scraps of name brand bread were thrown in his direction, but the lonely duck only fled. Ben, unshaven, tall, in his black toboggan, told us it was futile. He believed the lonely duck was simply dumber than the rest, that he would probably not make it another winter.

I did a search for the *Sun* story featuring Karen's award-winning pumpkin patch. The photo helped me understand Ben's position. He had fallen in love with a face, and I was not one to feel pious. Karen was a perfectly angelic-looking older woman, a widow even. Her pumpkins had been prize-winners at a Thanksgiving festival a few years back, partly for size and partly for their quality. Our Karen was also keen to making money on the quality of her pumpkins. I found a link to a website she ran that offered a wide variety of homemade pumpkin products, from candles and cakes to bread and dry spices. I ordered a pie. To no one's surprise, the price was steep, but I wanted to taste what everyone was raving about.

## *Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

It took three days for me to forget about the pie, Ben, and the rest of it, but it all came rushing back when I signed the UPS electronic clipboard. I had never eaten a mail-order pie before. My expectations were low, thus easily surpassed. The flavor was full, with a strong buttery aftertaste. I could tell she used good ingredients. It occurred to me to look Ben up and thank him for the chain of events that had led me to this pumpkin pie, but at this point, it felt like none of my business.

### 3

Something went wrong at work. Almost precisely one year after the wonderful pie, a titanium gurney at the end of our manufacturing line split in half, causing two thousand dollars of shock absorbers to be defective. The gurney was replaced and it happened again. The parts provider was perplexed, as was my team. We needed a scientific opinion, and I threw Ben's name out. Using his My Space page, I found his number and gave him a ring at his office.

He had no idea what I was talking about, nor was he interested in consulting, but I got to talk to him anyway. We agreed to feed the ducks together, which seemed natural at the time. The rush of generosity that comes from renewed acquaintance affected us. For a moment, on the telephone, we were prepared to rob a bank together. But our day at the lake was very different. I was keenly out of place breaking up the expensive name brand bread that I no longer bought for myself. It still wasn't right without Samantha, whom I hadn't spoken with since the day she expunged me from her apartment. Trundling down the hill in a new car, the ducks had no way of recognizing me. I had trouble recognizing them. The lonely duckling on the lake was also gone. Perhaps he had perished, as Ben had grumpily projected. Only memory of him remained. The realization was fast - yet poignant - that I had no business with ducks any longer. The more I thought about it, as I froze, I had no business with Ben either.

When he arrived, he seemed perfectly at ease. This was still a routine for him. His steps to the edge of the water were typically absent-minded, spastic but measured, as if he were juggling at the same time. He took absolutely no notice of the scathing cold as he broke up his bread. I had still lacked the sense to wear something to cover my ears. I

*Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

wanted to go home, and resolved to do so - as soon as I found out what happened between him and his nubile pumpkin-grower.

He shrugged his shoulder when I asked him. "Nothing," he said.

"Nothing. You mean nothing whatsoever?"

"I never followed it up."

"You sent her a photo of your true self without a caption, and she didn't come to the get-together that night we drank at the saloon?"

"Neither did Clemderata."

"The bastard, I remember - and you didn't follow it up, nothing?"

"I stay busy."

I kicked at a pebble in the grass. "I ordered a pie from her."

"Did you?" He at least knew what I was talking about.

"It was delicious."

He nodded.

"Perhaps she was in love with the President of Albania."

He chuckled softly to himself.

I was inexplicably bothered by it all. I woke up two nights later obsessed with it. The digital clock on my nightstand said it was two p.m., but it was two a.m. Spending more time than I ever thought it would require, I corrected the time and flipped on a light. I lifted a copy of the *911 Commission Report* from my bedside to take my mind off the matter and simultaneously sedate myself. I couldn't believe it. Ben did nothing. Were his vacuum pumps so fruitful? What did they do that was so hypnotic, so aggrandizing that he never had to reach out to anyone except for half a second, then give up at the slightest difficulty.

Sure. Maybe it was more than a slight difficulty that he didn't have enough confidence to advertise an actual image of himself on

*Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

something as innocuous as the Internet. But he had accomplishments. For all I knew, he may have named a subatomic particle.

And what were these subatomic particles? Why were they so good, anyway? What did they do? Feed people, create jobs, allow tradesmen to move to different parts of the country? At least if they weren't solid there would be something to talk about. The more I thought about it the further my blood pressure exceeded the number of minutes in a feature-length film about one man's survival in the Alaskan wild. I got up for a glass of water. While up, I let my confused stomach guide me to a box of instant angel hair pasta in the pantry.

I heard a little something stirring in the pantry. My roach problem lived on.

"Motherfuck!" I roared out as I destroyed him on the transom with the *911 Commission Report*.

While waiting for the water to boil, I made a call to Cassandra, my girlfriend of six months or so.

"Cassandra."

She groaned something I didn't understand. Then, "What time is it?"

"It's late, I'm sorry."

"Nigel, damn it," she confirmed, "it's two-thirty in the morning."

"I'm sorry, Cassandra. I have to talk to you, though. This has to stop. I've been thinking about it a lot, constantly. It's been a good turn, but it has to end."

"A good turn? Nigel, please. Tell me these things tomorrow."

"Sure, I'll call you tomorrow," I said, as gently as circumstance allowed.

"Asshole." She hung up.

As I enfolded the chitin on the wooden frame with a paper towel,

*Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

another rattle came from a closed cabinet, which I angrily ignored. I was thinking of the lonely duck on the lake, whatever happened to him. No ripples spreading from his center. His wings would not move, motionless, soundless, him glaring back at me.

The water began to boil.

*Thomas Wauhob lives and works in Austin. He has an M.S. in Environmental Science from Texas A&M-Corpus Christi. His work has recently appeared in Pindeldyboz.*