

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

Murray Dunlap

Across The Paddock

Miss Conklin's farm sits in a wedge of land on the outskirts of Mobile, Alabama. The manor house lies in the shade of a towering sweet gum. The summer is hot. Her horse, a Hanoverian named Shiloh, defended and lost his title at the 1889 Bit & Spur Races. He braked in front of the rails and the rider flipped out of the saddle. Shiloh snapped the man's spine with a hoof. It's been just over a year since the accident. Today, Shiloh trots across the paddock to see a maiden mare in the neighboring field. Miss Conklin won't race him again; she's put him out to stud.

Ben sits on the wide pine floor boards of the front porch with his hands gripped tight under skinny legs. He sits Indian style and rocks. Beside him, pages curl at the corners of a leather bound notebook. Most of the pages have been written on, top to bottom, with fine blue ink. The letters sit at a backward slant in careful print. A leather strap loops the notebook twice and ends with a secure knot.

Miss Conklin pats the bun of blonde hair pinned to her head. She faces the front pasture but sees nothing. Cataracts scar her eyes.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"You could go back and look again?"

"I've looked plenty."

"What about under the run-in shed?"

"Yes maam."

"And the water trough?"

"Yes maam, I've looked there too." Ben lifts his arm to show his sleeve is wet. Then he remembers and puts it down.

Gideon Lester waves from the paddock fence marking the property line.

"Mr. Lester is waving at you," he says.

"He knows I'm blind."

"Maybe he's waving to me?"

Ben darts across the yard, keeping his distance from Shiloh. He knows about the accident. He stands on the low beam of the fence.

"Have you seen my blue pen?"

"Sorry Ben. I ain't seen it."

"What about Mrs. Lester?"

"I reckon she'd a told me if she'd seen it." Gideon wipes his forehead with the hem of his dirty shirt. "How's Miss Conklin gettin' on?"

"She's fine. It's a blue pen with gold trim. I have a notebook too. They go together."

"Sounds like a humdinger, but I ain't seen it."

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"Yeah." He looks back to the house. "Goodbye, Mr. Lester."

"See ya, little man."

Ben runs back and sits down on the porch.

"Mr. Lester hasn't seen it either."

"How is Mr. Lester? How did he look?"

"He was sweating pretty good."

Miss Conklin smoothes her apron, smiles, then waves in the direction of the fence.

"He's got his back to us now."

She stops waving. A breeze moves through the sweet gum, rustling the leaves.

"Have you looked under Wrigley? You always sit under Wrigley when you write."

"Yes maam, I looked there first."

"Your Daddy gave it to you."

"Yes."

"When did you see him last?"

"Christmastime."

"Same as last year."

"Yes maam."

"Well, you'll have to get another."

"I don't have money. Momma says use a chunk of coal."

"Lord." She pauses. "I wish your Momma could find somebody."

Ben says nothing.

"Wait here."

Miss Conklin steps into the house. For the first time in years, she forgets to ease the screen door closed and it bangs against the frame. Shiloh throws his head over the fence and nuzzles the mare.

In the bedroom, Miss Conklin can still smell Mr. Lester among the twisted sheets. She makes the bed quickly, then sits at the vanity. From a drawer, she removes a change purse and feels out a number of coins. She replaces the purse. From the same drawer, she lifts a plaster face, the image of her dead son, and gently sets it down on the maple veneer. Usually, the Reverend imbeds the death masks directly into the gravestone with concrete. Erebus Cemetery is filled with them. For Miss Conklin, he made a duplicate in plaster. She glides her fingertips over the smooth white surface every night. Today she places her hands over the eyes, just for a moment. Then she palms the coins and leaves the room.

Ben feels a tear coming on and wipes it away with the back of his right hand. His left hand drums against the top of the notebook. Miss Conklin reemerges through the screen door and feels her way along the railing until sensing where he sits. The door bangs against the frame. She retrieves the coins from the pocket of her apron and holds them out. Ben does not

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stand. He lifts his hand to meet hers, brushing against thick, callused fingers. He takes the coins.

Miss Conklin faces the fence line as if she might see something. She smooths her apron.

“Well, go on.”

“Thank you, maam.”

He grabs the railing and pulls himself to his feet. He tucks the notebook under his left arm.

“Thank you, maam.”

“All right. Now go on.”

Ben jumps down the front steps all at once and runs straight out the drive. The rocks sting his bare feet, and when his hands begin to sweat, he worries he might drop the coins. He shoves them in his pocket.