

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

*James Robison*  
**DETOX**

**L**ike, in old days you go in for detox and it was a floor in a charity hospital, such as Ben Franklin in Columbus, Ohio on a February blizzard night.

I was young and confessing I was powerless over alcohol was redundant to anyone with eyes, who would say, "That kid's powerless over the curb."

Sick if I didn't drink, but I couldn't keep down the Scotch is the point so I check in, they give me hospital pajamas, paper scuffs and a cot. 1AM in a room with a man groaning. Slicing cold with cages on the windows, I'm dead scared, asking, "Is this it?" Long dark and finally the sick dawn makes ice diamonds on the glass.

The others on the floor were shaking too much to accomplish anything and they gave people going through withdrawal black coffee in this tub percolator with a spigot you'd tip to fill a Styrofoam cup, and aspirin which is just what a panicky person with the shakes needs: caffeine.

But everybody loved me because I wasn't trembling too much to use the Laredo machine. What was that? You rolled cigarettes on it. From a drawstring pouch you tapped out Laredo brand tobacco, filling the hamper and next fitted Laredo papers in the front and rolled a crank and the cigarettes would twist into cylinders and seal shut. So I did that all day and night mindlessly. And I handed out the cigarettes to the shakers who would blubber and snifle, "God bless you, man."

Many couldn't work the percolator so I would do it and give them half-full cups which a few wouldn't immediately spill and scald their foot or somebody else's foot.

No matches. You lit the cigarette by punching a disk on the wall which heated slowly to bright orange and then you touched the cigarette's end to the disk and you had smoke. Many detoxers missed the actual disk and blistered the tips of their noses or would miss wholly and suck at the wall until I got them and sat them down in vinyl chairs.

So the drawstring broke in my pajama bottoms and I was like in a movie comedy with my pants falling off a lot, for example when I was washing my hands and couldn't hold them up. Zero dignity. I didn't care.

They wheeled in a fat guy on a gurney. He was shrieking in pain. Also he was, "Give me a drink. Give me a drink. Give me a drink. Give me a drink."

His face was scabby and his belly mammoth. In comes a doctor and his wife, all dressed for the opera. They were sleek people. Wife's hair was gold and hung in the black fur so that you knew touching it would be luxurious: silk hair and satin fur and she smelled of spice and the snow outside in the free world. All we low men looking at how her caboose swooped, curving the fur, and thinking we would never even get close to such an expensive and clean female.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

"Better give me a drink," yells the fat guy. Doctor says, "You think it hurts now? You are going to die. You will die if you drink anything else."

"Good."

"Is that what you want?"

"I wanna drink first--"

"Your liver is bigger than a basketball."

We all felt better. *We* were damned souls, but quiet, unlike the dying guy. The snow just raged outside too. You couldn't shave and I didn't shower the whole week and a half.

I already had shoulder length hair and now a beard coming in and a bloated face with whale eyes.

That was detox, with no meetings or drugs or doctors, unless you were on the croak, and you stayed there free as long as you could stand it until you starting being able to want something else like watching a basketball game on TV or good soup.

Black coffee, aspirin, cigarettes. Guys reverberating around, shaking all over, looking like players on those vibrating tin fields in those vibration toy football games, zzz.

So after that you're good a good lion for a long time but then you go on a five year bender and wind up ghastly, inside again but this place is all more enlightened. This one is in the desert and I don't know how I got there, except it had to do with Las Vegas and a fiendish girl. You get an I.V. at first with drugs to make it hurt a little less. When you can get up and walk around, you get your clothes back minus anything to hang yourself with. There are meetings. I will say these are idiotic at first.

"My dad made me drink."

"Bob, do you really believe that?"

"I blame him 100% yes."

"Bob's an asshole. Why can't y'all just shut up."

"Fred, why do want us all to shut up?"

"Because I am seeing things crawling all over and one just went into my mouth!"

"Walt, what do you think?"

"Somebody better give Fred some meds, is what I think."

By now, I know not to drink coffee but still cigarettes. I mean, look, you are dying and you might kill someone in your car or just a maniacal rage so

Let's fix that and

Then worry about the cancer thing, the smoking thing.

I looked out the windows at stillness and heat and rocks and distant mountains that were stupid. I saw a tarantula in the sun atop its shadow. I saw its red fur, reflected pinpricks of light on its glassbead eyes

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

and I saw 30 or 40 wart-pimpled frogs grouped around in a perfectly geometrical concentric circle and I knew nothing was real in the little yard there and it was all in my brain.

DTs are scary. A paisley-scaly pattern decorated my bed duvet, so in part-sleep-mostly-hallucination, I perceived a python constricting on my left leg and then chest-crushing me in the semi dark my first dry dawn. I whined.

When I got checked in I think I said awful things.

Tip: Do not mention to admitting doctor or nurse that you want to die or kill people. You go to the psycho ward, which is different from just detox.

In this desert facility, watchers in pairs stood around with folded arms and just looked at me, which at first, sick as I was, I played with them a little until, oh Christ, you realize that popping or crossing your eyes and looking buggy is exactly what they are there to see, namely, "Is he dipso crazy?"

So just as in those snakepit shock corridor movies you start to fret because, after all, you do want out *sometime*. Thus even though you're a big mess you pretend to play solitaire at the card table with the waxy crappy cards but then you think, What if they notice I am not playing right? Also I am talking to myself. Also, I look like they just fished me out of a watery ditch, dead for weeks.

You see the doctor. "How we doing today?"

"Just fine and not insane."

"I see. Why are you here?"

"A sane, ordinary drunk. That's all."

"That's all?"

"As opposed to being, I dunno', schizoid."

"Why do you say schizoid? Has anyone ever mentioned this word to you?"

You cannot win.

Years later at an AA meeting a woman said her husband had wet brain and anybody who drinks a lot could get it *at any second* and it is permanent terror show DT-seething existence. You don't come back from wet brain.

I still think about that.

So I was good for a long time but finally, once again, I fucked up but had now insurance and went to this detox boutique like, in Laguna Beach, with Atavin and a private room and your I.V. has vitamins and potassium and vitamin B and sugars and it's pretty cool, relatively.

Here is the problem: They let in now all these others.

They let in people who are not at risk of wet brain or losing their souls. I say nothing less than your soul should be at stake in true detox.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

People go, "How do you know you have a soul? Isn't a soul just religious humbug?" Well, because when you don't have one it is gone and you are not a human, and your soul only over a long time comes back to you so you can relish again pears and trombones and blossoms and body-surfing and tea and matinees and girls. Before you even start getting it back, you must suffer detox.

That is the law. No bargaining out. No making deals. No parole.

I want only desperately sick people around me in detox. Junkies are okay. By Day Two, they are dishrags but they do vomit and have chills.

I like that more than small talk .

If you can talk go away.

Like chatty meth heads or coke heads, to them I say, go get your own circle of hell. I had one meth crystal guy rooming with me, 40, very bright, coarse red face, flaxen hair tied in a bandana, still on a jag, smoking, cranked, only stopping his rap to pluck flakes of tobacco off his tongue tip, and he's on String Theory and Absolute Zero and French literature –smart-but cannot stop talking which is fun for half an hour and then I want to rip off my ears.

And. One asshole said he's in recovery as a sex addict? Kick me senseless! Unless this guy starts seducing an ottoman or humping a fichus, I say Get him out now. He has one of those expresso-latte-grande-vente-slushee milkshakes he calls coffee.

The coffee at Ben Franklin I think of, remembering that old winter, and the nurse there who weighed 289 pounds, six seven with curving side-burns and how he'd break your fuckin nose. Never with his hand or fist, just his elbow, a forearm shiver.

Two men asked him to black them out with a punch to end their awfulness for a while.

Shoplifters, over eaters, sad people, compulsive shoppers-you know? In detox?

I'm talking about trouble beyond grief, pain, despair. You think I am ashamed of praying? At first I didn't pray for peace or to get well but to die, at first. Then I prayed for sleep. Just one untroubled hour of it.

Now, all the time, I just ask to stay sober.

\*