

## Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

*Ryan Leack*

### **Replanting Perfection**

Funny how it ended up.  
I stand on the steps to your house,  
The grass once immaculate with  
Hedges sharp at each corner,  
With flowers perennially in bloom.  
They captured you, the perfectionist.  
But the hedges are now gone,  
And the flowers wither like  
dreams after waking.

I wish I would have known you,  
And sat on that old bench by the  
Front door to talk late in the night,  
To hear a voice of vulnerability  
And insecurity, to hear what  
Fear you harnessed inside.

I could have done it before the  
Cold steel of the barrel found its  
Home against the skin of your head,  
Before you let the element  
Destroy you and leave your family  
Wishing what I have wished,

For the cure to the desperation  
That haunts us in restless nights,  
When during all the nights you were  
Haunted we were sleeping soundly.

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Now we want the nights back,  
Want them to sit on the porch  
And speak from open hearts,  
But your heart has stopped and  
Found its place in the green hills  
Of the town where you grew up.

Forgive me for my absence,  
And I'll forgive you for the choice,  
But for leaving your own without  
A father, I lose my will and voice  
To see you as the man I knew.

So I stand on these steps  
While strangers lounge in your  
Old room. Now the hedges are  
Removed, and the lawn is filled with  
Weeds and dead spots. How will we  
replant the garden your life gave us?

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### Straw Hat Man

I see this homeless man sometimes  
With a straw hat who tucks his belongings  
Under his black tank top as he ventures  
Down my street.

Today, as I was driving to work,  
I caught a glance of him on the sidewalk  
With a shopping cart from the  
Local Chinese market that smells like  
Sweet and sour sauce and half-cooked pork.  
I could see the uneven lump of possessions  
Stashed snugly against his chunky belly.  
Sometimes I want to ask what he keeps  
So close to his skin, but the rank smell and  
My overall uneasiness keeps me  
A good fifty feet away.

Perhaps one day when I gather courage  
I'll tap him on his farmer tan and make  
All those inquiries that no one ever will.  
I'll ask him about his stash, but also about  
His family, his friends.

I'll take him someplace to eat and let  
Him shed his tears and spill his guts.  
How much he must hold on to, I know,  
A mute before the masses, a bug on the  
Sidewalk that makes everyone take  
A step over to avoid.

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On that day I'll write his story  
Word for word and share it with the world,  
The story of a man living from trash can  
To trash can in a city for the emasculated,  
A man who measures his life day by day  
And never wants, but only needs.

On that day, I'll calculate the subtle  
Movements of his small grey eyes  
As the world whirls hastily around  
In a frantic scuttle, but until then I'll  
Just keep wondering, and smelling.

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### Sugar Bear

The first ornament on the Christmas tree  
Will always sing that evocative song  
When I place it on its branch as I've done  
Since it came packed in my favorite box of cereal.

Each year my eager hands removed it  
From the scattered bulbs and lights inside  
Our holiday array as I hung it as high  
As my little fingers could manage.

And with the push of a button  
On his round red belly, he played us tunes  
While you looked into me with nostalgia  
That I've never understood till now.

You want to preserve things: my dependence  
On you, my presence in the room, my youth,  
Yet these moments are lingering in the past  
With a future calling me away from you,

And when all that remains is this ornament,  
I know he'll still be singing, even when I tell  
My children the tale of the sugar bear that came  
Inside my favorite cereal box mom got me.

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### Finite Reflections

A piece of me lay on the roads I travel,  
in the tar and gum and mud,

in the potholes, in the reflections  
of puddles where I see myself  
at stoplights by the universities,

manifested in stone and concrete  
and glass, soaring into the sky  
like temples.

And when my tires run  
through the puddles, the reflection  
is gone.

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### That Last Thought

I know I'll die first.  
At night when the tick of the clock  
Remains the only sound,  
I hear my heart beat tick for tick.  
But with my hand open  
Across her warm chest,  
I feel hers beat to a slower rhythm,  
And I wonder of my death.

Where will I be and what  
Will get me in the end?  
What will be that last thought  
That courses through my aged body  
When she holds my cooling hand as tears  
Swiftly run down her wrinkled face?

What will be that last thought  
As she stares at me just as when we  
First fell in love, that gaze that showed  
The lifetime we would have together?

Or will I think of my Uncle Tim,  
When he cooked my cousin Jonathan  
And me hamburgers to find only  
Moldy buns in the cabinet?

Will it be of my best friend Andrew  
And me when we were children,  
That time we climbed the rocky hill,  
Dug two holes in the dirt beneath  
The scorching sun and sat in them eating  
Potato chips and beef jerky till dark?

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Or will it be of her, that moment  
We sat in the Five and Diner drinking  
Each other's strawberry malts  
And sharing fries while discussing  
All the places we would travel  
With our time. All that time.

I suppose that whatever thought  
It may be, it will be a pleasant one,  
But the pleasantness of that thought  
will fail to erase the vision  
Of the empty house, the house  
She'll sit in day after day  
When I'm gone, the house  
Where she'll cook dinners for herself  
And sleep alone in the quiet dark.  
Everything quiet.

The clock will still be ticking,  
But my heart will have stopped long since,  
And when she wakes at 6:00am  
To come downstairs and eat her breakfast,  
She'll pull the wooden chair from  
The table as it screeches across the  
Wooden floorboards and eat  
In that quiet dark.

Afterwards, she'll bring out the old  
Photographs of when I was warm.  
She'll cry, but soon she'll lose her warmth  
As well, and our memories will die  
With her in the cold and arid ground.

It is because of that empty house  
That the fear of death and the joy of life  
Will remain one and the same in me.