

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/1

*Joan Colby*

### MOTHER'S HELPERS

Sweet Polish Anna, young,  
Good looking. Harold next door  
Claims she lets men in at night.  
We scoff. She turns up  
Pregnant though, so Harold was on to something.  
Anna shuns the purported father  
A Muslim named Ali.  
Won't take his calls. But Mother does,  
Counsels "Be patient, pray. Hail Mary  
Full of Grace." Anna runs  
Back to Warsaw, large with child.

Fun loving Polish Maggie, back home, a husband, a son,  
Leaves Mother alone while she  
Supposedly takes ESL classes. Turns out Mother  
Is covering for Maggie's romance  
With a butcher. "He has his own shop"  
She flies to Cracow, set on divorce  
But her husband reports her overstayed visa  
And now she's trapped.  
Writes Mother "Sorry, sorry. Hope to  
See you soon."

Nella from West Virginia, snake-eyed,  
A waiting look. Serves Mother  
Southern Comfort at 10 a.m. Takes her for  
Thirty thousand dollars, handing the checkbook  
To Mother, half-blind and trusting, who signs  
Then refuses to press charges. "I'd look  
A fool."

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Queenie from Jamaica  
Makes carrot shakes and dumplings.  
Runs up the bill long-distance.  
"Checking on my farms."  
Eyes our pet goat Hector.  
His big fish-faced profile.  
"From his head I will make soup."  
Her friends come and go  
Carrying large bags  
Containing, it turns out,  
Mother's sheets and towels.

Linda from the church  
Arriving every Sunday  
With her prayer book, her beads, her missal.  
She and Mother retreat to Mother's room  
Their chanting voices as we page through  
The Sunday Trib and drink our coffee.  
Leaves with the stuffed envelope.

Finally, Gabriella. Always knitting  
Or walking the dog in order to smoke.  
Her competency is chilling. She says  
Mother won't last so she must look  
For another position. I bribe her to stay.  
Turns out, she's right when Mother  
Seizes like a car with a cracked block  
And I am trying CPR. Gabriella says Stop.  
This morning, Mother spoke  
Of joining her late husband.  
That's always a sign, says Gabriella.  
Asks for the bonus that I promised.

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### THE THRESHING BEE AND STEAM SHOW

Clam shell seats have bent them,  
Sloped the shoulders shaping a posture:  
Old farmer. Short sleeves, striped or plaid,  
Pressed dungarees or dark workpants.  
Scrawny, arms ropey  
With lean muscle, burnt with a thousand suns.  
White haired or grey, clean shaven.  
John Deere or Seed caps, Red Wing work shoes.

Average age of seventy-plus. Still farming,  
Beans or corn. Winter wheat,  
Milk cows or custom hay. How many seasons  
In the fields astride the tractors  
To pull disc, plow, picker, mower, spreader.  
Gripping the wheel, shifting gears  
Down the long rows sunup to sundown  
Cornering at the verge.

In winter barns, they restore  
The ancient tractors. The 1940 Allis Chalmers,  
The '31 Fordson, the '50 Harvester  
To a pristine condition

Today, the old tractors shine  
In glossy paint, scrubbed tires, they parade.  
The old farmers slumped at the wheels  
Steering into applause, waving,  
Some faintly smiling, others proudly stern  
As if they were still young and tough and upright.

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### HABITATION

Impromptu admonitions. The gladiolus  
Of nativity. Regarding the lurch  
Of oblivion, decorate the altars  
Until light exhales beleaguered  
Through fragmented panes. Ingénue  
Of adventure, that's who you presumed.  
Mayan legends, the sacred wells. Tabulae  
Untranslated. To know by heart  
Is how music learns to inhabit  
The fingers or the ear. Dark of moon.  
A flight of geese reassembling  
Its arch. The territory you claimed  
Gunslinger. Take a chance. Believe  
In ribbons or ceremony. Take an oath.  
Take anything. Inhabit it.

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**UPDATING THE ADDRESS BOOK**

I cross out your name,  
Remembering Mother's address book  
With all the x-ed out entries  
Like a desultory game of tic-tac-toe.

Sometimes, she jotted *deceased*  
And I have thought of  
Sketching delicate skulls  
Like the sugared ones of the  
Day of the Dead.

Yet, that's not how I want  
To think of you, reduced to bone,  
Eyeless, tongueless, the sweet flesh  
Gone like your scribbled address,  
Your silent cell phone.

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### UP NORTH

The door to his truck is hanging open  
So we know he came home drunk.  
The husky raises an alarm  
To rouse him, shirtless, hungover,  
But glad to see us.

The cabin, a barrel stove, a cot,  
Table and a chair. He puts a  
Pot of coffee on. We sit outdoors  
Waiting for the day to warm.

The outhouse is spic and span  
As you might expect. A two-holer,  
Calendar on a tack.

We go for a boat ride, 250 horse  
Churns the waters of Devil Track.  
The husky in the prow, blue eyed and alert.  
This lake allows for speed that's what he likes.

His dad drowned in Superior  
When a storm blew up and overturned  
The canoe. Canoes are all you can use  
Farther up in the BWCA.

Those Sierra Clubbers outlawed  
What a man needs. The snow machines.  
Made it a no-flyover. His big hand slams  
The wheel with disgust. Granola eaters.

The sun is high. The sky a blue  
I would describe as sapphire. It lifts his mood.  
He's happy. Once he's got his deer,

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He can skid logs all winter  
Enough for beer and a woman  
When he wants one.

His brother down to the Twin Cities  
Working in a factory, that's what comes  
Of getting a wife.  
He shakes his head. Time for a cold one.

We're headed up the Trail.  
He waves goodbye from the log bench.  
The husky watches as we drive away  
To see how the fires last year  
Turned the forest ghostly.