

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

*William Ryan Hilary*  
**Pharmacy**

The hospital was sightless and in the wind. A museum for the headless. It was tall in the rain and accompanied a block as it swam. Chill, mute, inglorious—the sky shuffled in patternless, gazeless, thriftless aqua-thralls above a city of wet brown pavements and men with Spanish names who sounded confused when they spoke of the domino games they had played last week or last year. Won ten. Lost five. Forgave a few.

Everything was coming to an abominable halt beneath the eerie underpass. Vehicles of all kinds of descriptions ran to a stand still at all manner of angles. There was the pharmacy across the street from the donut shop, a deli, a printers, a stationary store, a man on the ground begging for change. And nurses. There were always nurses. They wore turquoise shawls, held themselves as they ran against the mounting wind. It was beginning to rain, first as a damp spray, then heavy plops of perspiration, muddying the vaguely gray pavement stones. The land seemed darker beneath the underpass.

Thaddeus, urgently existante, came out of the donut shop with a large cup of decaf, almost running. He was wearing a grubby trench coat, and seemed almost to be partner to one of the rich ladies before him. But alas. No such luck. He crossed the street. He waved at a hopping pigeon. He blew a kiss to a singing old man—an old man singing to himself next to the pharmacy entrance. Thad went into the neon pharmacy. He bittered beneath the sour light of the entrance, rubber mat beneath him, very soiled. As a matter of fact it was Thursday. And yes, he would shut the door if only the women in matching white lingerie outfits who were stocking the aisles would ask him politely. A woman with a pram cut him off as he was leaving the feminine hygiene aisle. He was already feeling late. Any more of a delay could prove quite disastrous. He passed candy-counter speculations of plastic fruit-stuffs and made for the pick-up counter. Everything was beige or off-white sperm colored. He stood patiently in line, licking his mustache.

At a Pharmacia in Mexico once, he had accosted a short Mayan woman on the roots of her language, and she had nothing but horrible laughter to return. He couldn't forget the laughter. cAckLe. In the hot streets, reeking of tequila, he had fornicated in the dust with dogs and pigs, until his belly hung low as a sow's and his beard was thick and black. Nonsense. He had been loved. The Mayan woman had fingers like short sausages and they tasted greasy and gristly in his mouth. But he had no idea why he should remember that today. It was not even Cinco De Mayo. Not until next month. In Mexico he had fallen and broken his crown. Why should he remember?

The lady with the pram was in front of him and she wielded the baby as if it were a pass to manipulate people how she pleased. Her child was a placid lump of lingering flesh, not yet sure of what role it would like to play on the pinball table of life. There was a long line ahead of him. One couldn't be sure exactly how many people were waiting, for there was so much milling about that the still perusing were indistinguishable from the

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ready to buy. Thaddeus shuffled impatiently. Although morning matured, the day darkened, wetter and wetter, like a pair of moldy pants in the rain, green and ewww.

This was the third pharmacy in a swift row. The two priors, both multi-national chain stores, had not stocked the drug he was looking for. He was very careful to check once, twice, thrice that their inventory was correct. Very important unnumbered doctors had told him that his medication—vital as it was—would be available anywhere. It would be ludicrous to think of a pharmacy not having it. Because if he didn't take it.

Burp.

But here we are. By looking in their computer database the very unhelpful pharmacy people could tell him certainly that none of their sister shops had the drug either. He would have to try the hospital pharmacy. It was likely to have things that the others wouldn't. Curious.

He had taken the last of his medication last night at one a.m. His doctor had told him that under no circumstances should he allow more than twelve hours to pass between dosages of the purple, oval-shaped lozenge, which he took two or three times a day. Doctors were usually impossibly placid creatures. Drawing emotion from them was a Sisyphean task. But in this case—the old man's eyes had widened behind rolls of fat. His bottom lip had trembled. "Now this is very important," he said. "You must not let more than twelve hours to pass. OR ELSE!"

Emphatic, drawing the words out in order to stress every syllable of importance and intent, the awkward message had come. And so he had followed the doctor's advice for months, years maybe? He couldn't precisely recall. Only that he had been able to get the prescription filled many times, in many cities. Yes, the doctors always came from a dark space, then somehow Thaddeus was behind a curtain, a sheet of light, bright and inviting, so, so desert white. He remembered the smell of cinnamon, coconut, the angle of a girl blurred in a photomontage, things that made life bearable. Passing images of utmost consequence, which shine brighter than the facades of passing cars stretched sequin across a, say, California wasteland.

Thad felt his skin begin to crawl beneath the fabric of his shawl. Draglets of dragon sweat poured from his pores, and slinked and shanked their way down his meaty arms. At times like these he became acutely aware of his deficiencies as a man. Cuticles of dirt had accumulated between his fingernails. His paunch was an unsightly sweaty swagger. His crevices made ringed rivulets with crusty cheesy discharges. He was a man who had not washed in a week, with small round glasses, a mop of savage ginger hair, a pair of frightened child's green eyes. "I cannot stress enough, Thaddeus," his doctor had warned. "That not one hour more than twelve passes between doses of this anti-depressant. The effects, I assure you, will be quite dire if you should do so."

In a well-worn notebook by his bedside table, Thaddeus Blunt kept a record of the medications he had tried throughout his life. He had the names of each drug, its dosage, and the dates on which he took them. In the fourth column of the table he made very brief notes such as—Works. Terrible. Trembles. Shits. Giggles. Chills. Etc. The record began on January

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15<sup>th</sup> 1990 when he was twenty-two. Hardly less than twenty years later, the thick book was filled, its pages yellowed and worn with smeared ink, fingerprints and coffee stains. In other books, he kept more detailed notes about his prescriptions. He read journals, found websites, talked to many different doctors, traveled the world, put every penny into his research. "Silly Thaddeus," he recalled a certain nurse saying. "You know they think you spend too much time writing in that notebook, don't you? But I suppose you can have it while you're with us, as long as its crayons you're writing with."

He was very agitated in the line, and the baby in the crib had started to cry, kicking its wee feet into the air and waving its pudgy little hands in futile gestures meant to express what no adult could ever understand. The line didn't seem to be moving. It was eleven a.m. The line was not moving.

"He's very sick," they said.

"Take this," they said.

"Usually such a placid fellow."

"This will calm him down. He should be right as rain in a little while."

"We would be so sorry to have to let him go."

"No. Nope. This will fix him up good. And when he comes around properly send him to Health and Safety on the Fifth floor and the doctors will explain exactly what he has to do."

"So sad."

"Has he family?"

"Now there's the thing, no I don't believe he has."

"Well some good old friendship won't harm him either. Just someone to make sure he takes his tablet every morning and evening. Then he should be fine."

"Yes, because we really wouldn't like to see him go. He is a fine editor. He trains all the new ones."

"Well this will fix him up."

"And there won't be anymore, you know..."

"What?"

"Episodes."

"Oh God no. Perfect behavior from here on in."

"It was an unfortunate spectacle."

"I can imagine."

"If he wasn't so valued..."

"Happens to the best of us now doesn't it?"

"The look on Maggie Priestley's face was priceless, though. I don't think she even knew such words existed."

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"Well he's proper now. A well-behaved old chump. Don't you worry. We take care of our own."

He'd had an episode at work and then in the hospital waiting room, calling out names of people he didn't know. "Come visit, please."

He was picking his nose, squinting across the rectal, neon habitat that was the hospital pharmacy. Ugliness was everywhere and a wretched baby was squirming. He picked a thick coat of snot from his nasal cavity and put it in his mouth. There were eight people ahead of him. At this rate it was taking twenty-minutes per person. If things continued this way, it would be well past one before he got his prescription filled. "Excuse me," he said to the lady with the baby. "Save my spot here for a moment, please." The lady held the now pacified infant to her chest and looked at him as if he were some sort of alien creature—as if the very fact of his existence was offensive to her.

Thaddeus went down the line. There were two old ladies, a man with a walker, another mother, a tall, emaciated boy in a leather jacket, and a nervous looking young woman who might have passed for pretty had she not chosen to wear so much make-up. A surly pharmacist's assistant gazed vacantly over the counter. She moved a prescription pillbox across the scanner several times, each pass with no success, back and forth.

He was not a confrontational man, Thaddeus, and so he tried to show rather than announce, his displeasure. He sighed and huffed and stretched his neck to see what he could see. But nobody was paying him any attention.

He walked back down the line and took his place, and the man who had come in behind him said, "you can't cut."

"She was holding my spot," Thaddeus said, motioning to mother goose, who looked at him with large blue eyes like he had said something in Polish. Her baby's head now flopped against her chest, a gesture of complete surrender, drool around the edges of its mouth.

"There's no saving spots here, mate."

"No you don't understand. It's very important that I get this prescription filled. I've been told that if I don't..."

"Hey, buddy. We all have our shit to deal with, okay? Okay pal?"

He was a big, red, bald man, like an ogre.

"A rule is a rule," he was saying.

"I'm ignoring you now, Thaddeus said.

"But rules are rules," the man was saying. "You know? You take care of yourself, get fit like me. Get muscles like me. Be okay. Do the right thing. Eat right. Do the right thing. Yeah? Wait in line."

"Certainly."

Thaddeus would not turn. He perceived, on the periphery of his vision, what he thought to be the man's rising irritation, but this might only have been his own anxiety projected onto an ether of recycled oxygen and

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scrope. At the other end of the line, the pharmacist's assistant was still trying to scan a filled prescription.

"Now look here," said the man. "I feel I've been disrespected."

He reached out and placed his hand on Thad's shoulder. "Rules or not. I feel I have been disrespected."

"I would advise you not to do that," Thaddeus said. "Please remove your hand from my shoulder."

In an asylum once, an indeterminable number of years ago, he had sat before a committee of bald-headed men, like this one, but smaller, less cartilage. A committee of baldheads chattering between each other, taking notes. Nobody addressed him directly, but he heard his name several times. Each day he had asked them why he was there, and each day they responded, "why don't you tell us that?"

"Well I don't know."

"You signed yourself in here didn't you?"

"If you say so. Does that mean I can sign myself out?"

"No."

He had the same conversation over and over, sometimes in committee rooms, sometimes in private sessions with clinicians, and sometimes with the nurses who came every few hours to draw blood or read his vital signs.

They always laughed, glanced at each other, or if there was nobody else to glance at, they just looked heavenwards and smiled. "Gracious, no," they said. "You aren't of sound mind to sign yourself out."

"But I was of sound enough mind to sign myself in."

"Very funny Mr. Blunt," they would say. "But having an attitude like that isn't going to get you out any sooner. This is very serious business."

"I'm sure, but I can't remember what exact business brought me here, and nobody can tell me."

"We think it's vital that you come to that realization yourself. It will do nobody any good if we put notions in your head."

"If I could remember I would tell you," Thaddeus had shouted.

"See there, evidence that you are still a very sick man. Raising your voice like that is not pleasant. We can all hear you well enough thank you kindly."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes, I'm sure you are. There was plenty of voice raising yesterday wasn't there Mr. Blunt, right before we admitted you? And gesticulating, in a very public place. I believe some children were very scared."

"Yesterday?"

"Yes."

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"But it's been more than a day, hasn't it?" Thaddeus said. "I wasn't just admitted yesterday, was I?"

"Were you Mr. Blunt? You tell us, now. We couldn't possibly know."

"I don't recall exactly, but it has been months, no?"

"It would help your case very much if you could just tell us."

"But—I don't know..."

"What color, Mr. Blunt?"

"Orange."

"What day is it?"

"Tuesday."

"What planet?"

"Earth."

Very good. Now how many times have you visited this place before?"

"Here?"

"Yes."

"This is my first, surely. I don't recall ever having been here before."

And yet even as these words crossed his lips, he was uncertain that he believed them. He could not tell whether a) he'd been in this same place for so long that it seemed like several different places, or b) he'd been in so many different places that looked so much the same, they'd all blurred into one. When this conundrum presented itself, he became very panicked.

"Look," he'd shout. "I just want a straight answer, okay? I'll tell you anything you want to know. I just want to know how I got here, how long I've been here and whether I've ever been here before. Please! Can't somebody just tell me these things?"

"Oh Mr. Blunt, if only we could. But that wouldn't get anyone anywhere would it. You need to figure these things out for yourself."

"Oh, Lord, but I can't. Please, please tell me."

"Try Thaddeus. Wrack your brains. The answer is in there, surely."

He closed his eyes and squinted, as if the flexing of these muscles had any effect on his ability to recall specific details. He tried to summarize his life. Thaddeus Blunt. Single child. Loving parents. Mother was the master at a day school. His father was a man of the law—not a police officer, but a judge or something. Mexico with a woman. Shy in school. Fine woman. One woman touches. Kisses. The smooth scraw of her back. The way she made up words like scraw. Her black liquid hair. Alabaster on the edge of velvet on the stage of a world he went to every time he dreamt...and they did such horrible things to her.....In

this

world

He felt himself shoved savagely. "Oi, Oi. Pervert." The muscled man stood with the lady and her pram, and two nurses. "Pervert wasn't he?"

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the muscled man said. "Looking at the baby." His smile was wide, like the final stroke of a waning moon. "See there, helping the community, eh? Helping myself. This old pervert alcoholic helping nobody. He reeks of vodka."

Thaddeus was on the floor, back against the glass door, sitting as a perfect reflection of the singing homeless man who sat outside. He was sitting there for a moment. Thaddeus never drank. He must have been staring at the infant inappropriately. He was only daydreaming. Now he'd been pushed by some dumb ogre.

"Don't look at babies you don't know! Insane man. Fucking cocked. Man I'm glad I'm not like that anymore. I used to. I was. I did! But they fixed me. One day at a time."

The nurses tittered. Thaddeus saw flashes of light. The blood rushed to his head and he stood and swung his fist, and his small knuckles met the delighted meat of the muscled man. He was thrown onto the street, onto the wet pavement with the underpass dripping above him. Cars whizzed by. Feet clitter-clattered. The homeless man sang his sad holiday song, despite the fact that the holidays were long over. "What you got? What you got? Huh? Huh? No meat. One day at a time. What are you going to use to beat me, your mind?"

Thaddeus stood, defeated. Commuters brushed by, while he attempted to shake the dirt from his coat. They were like products on an assembly line. They were like beef strips frozen and hung. But the blood kept rushing. He went back into the pharmacy. He smacked the big man again. Thaddeus received a roundhouse punch to the nose. This time it hurt. This was no shove. Cartilage caved. He felt a hot metallic substance amidst the fronds of his beard. But he stood, looked, charged again. "Someone call the police," the pharmacist said. The muscled man was still smiling, but the beauty of the moon did not belong to him. Thaddeus stood. He stood at the razor's edge. He stood upright. He stood clean. He was punched again, but got back up. "I need my medication," he said. He did not cry, or whimper. He was struck again. Now the faces were meaningless, a pretzel of dividing diameters in different colors and codes. Down. Up. Down. Up. His stomach swollen, his head hurting. "I must have my medication," he said. "They've told me that if I don't get my medication..."

What?

A drop of velvet on the horizon.

A pretty running girl.

Again.

He saw a reel of worn footage pass projected on a dirty cinema canvas. The image was of him running, his arms stretched out as if they were wings. He was running on a treadmill, smiling.

Again.

When you have been through the system so many times, he thought, you lose all sense of space and time. 1990. Mexico. Before. Whatever trauma had occurred in this jot of space hardly mattered. It could have

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been Waco. Bosnia. Germany circa 1939. What mattered was the wake of the trauma, and what the trauma awoke in its survivors; they were the only important part—the survivors.

Again.

He could hear laughter. He could feel bone crunch and break into little pieces, drifting down his blood stream. Bone crack. Clock tick. Again. Mesmerized by the shapes and patterns of the underpass, the different buildings that cut across one another, layer upon layer, the shifting perspectives made by standing then lying, then standing then lying. Again and again, with the bullet-shaped cars passing as different shades of different times of day, because Time definitely has a color. There was the fierce orange of sun-up, for example. There was the wasted, drained luminescence of a smoggy noon. Then the defeated tangerine of sundown. Again, everything breaking into dots and pastels.

He would not have his medication.

Not medicated.

Again.

There was a moment in the scuffle of police officers, ambulance workers, and irritating bystanders when Thaddeus realized this. No medication. He hadn't taken his medication. The slight shiver of the curtain before him betrayed the conceit. Unmedicated, the universe let loose a mute, but furious roar. Who were these petty people, so cruel, so indifferent to beauty? Thaddeus was once again being wheeled through yards and yards of sterilized space, staring at passing, lonely, flashing lights.

And there it was, all of a sudden, as the medication wore off he no longer felt lonely. The objects around him were no longer lonely, or the people, nurses, men, hoboes. The universe was pouring into them—life.

The shape of the hospital could not hold. Without loneliness the towers begged comfort from the wind. But the wind was stern. The wind was determined to meter out justice for the weak and discarded. It collapsed the walls of the hospital. The underpass faded, neon, halo, pastel, home. Now the world was acquiescing to some force inside him. Thaddeus was being wheeled into a beautiful nothing, a filled nothing, a nothing of alike integers, where they prayed in alabaster and prayed.

The agony of no longer being alone.