

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

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A Breakthrough

Excerpt from *Lily's Odyssey*, a novel, published with permission by All Things That Matter Press; its first chapter a Short List Finalist for the Eric Hoffer Award for Best New Writing

I'd been placing milk and food in the garage for a cat I'd seen around which I wasn't sure was a stray or just a male on the prowl. If it was still there in a few days I'd call the humane society (which a psychologist from Centerton encouraged me to start) and have it picked up.

When I was thirsty one morning I couldn't stop thinking about the cat being thirsty and suddenly realized I was projecting what I felt on the cat! The realization made me so shaky I fell the next day at work. I knew I was going down and put out my right hand to break the fall while the sidewalk rose to meet me in slow motion. When I got home my hand was such a swollen black and blue that I went to the hospital emergency room: when I was told that my right hand had been broken I remembered the warning the mother of Oedipus gave him about not pursuing the truth.

When I went to my next session, I told Dirk, "Don't bring up any new things--I'm feeling fragile right now," and told him about falling.

He looked at me closely, folded his arms and said, "If it gets too bad, you can go back to the obsessions." I stared at his shoes trying to absorb his presence and warmth because it was the only thing that lessened the panic. He was real; he existed and was there. I could see him breathe and I yearned to absorb his warmth to blot out the terror and feel a measure of safety. After a long pause he said, "Your hand will heal. You've made a big breakthrough." I wanted to move my foot closer to his to feel his warmth, his human comfort.

I made myself look up and ask, "Is what I project on strays what I feel?" even though I knew it was true because it was like other times when things had fallen into place: the punch-in-the-stomach wham of simple truth.

"Yes, it is." I stared at the arm of his long-sleeved plaid shirt and counted how many different shades of blue and brown were in it, tracing squares with my index finger on the arm of the chair. One of the shades of brown was almost the color of straw, the same width as the lightest shade of blue. The widest was a medium blue, the blue in the small box of Crayola Crayons. The thinnest, a mere thread, was navy; at his elbow it formed a "U" as if from blue ballpoint. My finger moved imperceptibly when I dipped in and out of the squares, forcing myself not to stay into one of those warm homes because I'd never want to leave. I strained to hear his pulse, saw his shirt rise and fall, compared where his tee shirt sleeves ended under his shirt on both arms, forbidding myself to imagine his naked arm because it made me swirl round and round—a sensation I didn't want to end. He smelled of clothes that'd been dried outside but I knew

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I could've made them smell even fresher. Doctor hadn't worn tee shirts under his shirts and left several buttons of his shirts unbuttoned revealing a gold chain.

I knew I had to end this pleasure before he could guess my thoughts, so I said, "It's awful finding out. But I don't know if I can understand and not be shattered," hearing glass splinter on cement very distinctly. I absorbed more of his presence by keeping his arm in view as I studied the nicked wainscoting behind him; the hot water register gurgled, chugged and hissed as I studied the shades of gray and pink in the faux wallpaper; a beeping horn below came from some world far away. I knew I must remember as much as I could of the room and him to stave off terror when I left. I heard myself say in a thankfully normal voice, "Having the kids around to look after and doing routine things like washing the dishes helps. I'm trying to understand but don't know if I want to or if I ever can."

"You're doing very well though. I want you to tell yourself that."

When I looked at him he was looking at me so closely that I sought the stained glass white dove with a black branch in its mouth at the top of the window hoping he hadn't seen my flush. Then I made myself look beyond the faux marble wallpapered walls out the window. I couldn't see the Nicolet River because of the buildings and trees across the street but I imagined it winding its way through town to join Lake Michigan. Main Street hugged the river as if it didn't trust it out of its sight. I never knew where Nicolet River started--it was somewhere miles south where water drained into streams formed by melting glaciers. The trees, roots, bending over the river and stumps near the banks added to the secret atmosphere--the water was dark even at noon. It seemed to have many secrets and it ran swiftly as if trying to hide the land it was always snatching. Before the land was formed, it must have been an awesome sight--thousands and thousands of miles of miles thick glaciers advancing and retreating over and over again, dragging whatever was in its way. And it happened a blink of an eye ago in the scheme of things.

A few miles to the south, the Nicolet widened where the Cloutier joined it. There was a house on the banks of this convergence that Cal and I had looked at when looking for houses—he'd wanted to leave Detroit after living there during the Race Riots. I was glad he thought the house needed too much work because the extra currents there constantly eating the banks didn't seem a safe place to raise children.

It wasn't hard to picture what Nicolet River must've looked just a hundred years ago jammed with branded logs from the interior further south. Just before one after another the mills had caught fire, taking acre after acre of dried stump land along with it. On one of the bends of the river there was a pyramid of sawdust covering several acres never free of ice even in July--and of skeletons of horses that'd fallen through. Various attempts to sell the sawdust for commercial purposes had failed throughout the years. On the opposite side of the river was a tall thin building with tiny windows—an old brewery that as a child I believed was a medieval tower. It was Nicolet City's oldest surviving building and the constant subject of controversy whether it should be torn down.

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I could hear the clip-clop of horses, see the long white dresses and large feathered hats, and smell pomanders of dried lavender, roses, and lemon verbena.

Coming back to Nicolet City had been like trying to fit into old clothes: Main Street still curved the way it always had; Roosevelt Park was still sprinkled with old men and teenage boys; the sawdust pile still guarded Nicolet River like the Great Pyramid on the Nile; patches of Main Street still had original red brick; buildings still retained old ads.

There wasn't any sun out. A sunny room would've revealed my stunned more clearly. When he said, "I can help you get a new coat to protect you instead of the obsessions," I looked at his brown shoes. They were plain shoes; he didn't wear wing tips or double tie their laces like Cal; he didn't wear suede shoe boots like Doctor. Dirk's shoes were the kind found in Sears and Penney's catalogs.

"Please God," I prayed, "don't let him be a fraud." To be put back in the hole another time would be terrible--not as bad as with Doctor but terrible enough. Dirk was the first (and only) counselor in Nicolet City with a degree; to see Doctor I'd driven sixty miles to Beaver Junction. I never wanted to love again like I'd loved Doctor--they say there's one time in your life when something happens and nothing afterwards can touch you as deeply again.

At the end of the session, I looked around the room to remember it when terror became too much: the stained glass white dove; the wicker basket with the frayed handle holding cat tails, heather, and baby's breath; the Sam's Small Engines calendar with its picture of Sam leaning over a green Lawn-Boy; the faux marble gray and pink wallpaper extending like ostrich feathers in a Victorian fan; the places where the wooden floor dipped and yellowed, the exact tan of Dirk's socks. I breathed deeply to take some of the air he'd breathed. When I left, the tips of my fingers free of the cast clung to the smooth security of the worn railing, and I didn't hear the heavy oak door close or the dry leaves scurrying around my feet.