

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

*William Walsh*

### **The Snake Handler's Faith**

Beyond the valley of darkness in the holy mountain temple  
of clapboard churches where fog settles over a small lake,  
the preacher proclaimed, *This serpent won't never strike--*  
dangling the rattlesnake away from his body--  
*long as I believe in Jesus Christ, my Savior.*

It's only a job, lying to people,  
convincing them of a truth, something  
as tasty as the choices at a steakhouse buffet.

The preacher wanted nothing more than commitment  
as he rose with a message for the bed-ridden,  
the hungry, stories of near death experiences.  
They choose to believe. I choose to concealed three guns:  
a Glock Gen4 ankle strapped, a Walther PPK in the low curve  
of my back, and a Bulldog .44 in a rucksack nook, ready  
for some hillbilly with an off-beam smile  
wanting to go collar and elbow.

What I believe is the truth  
is never what I imagine, I thought  
as the preacher pressed his warm hand upon my forehead  
to cleanse my soul in a land of sin  
where a body is born of disbelief.

I am Cotton Mather of the under cover  
gumshoe, truth-seeker,  
liar, a man who must be  
what he is to become  
as I investigate the money trail.

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The heavy thumping floor toms, the snare,  
deep bass palpitations of the house drummer  
roused the congregation into a frenzied circle-dance  
and garbled chanting tongues. The hat was passed.

After sipping strychnine from a Mason jar, he paused  
before his flock, raised a hand to peaceful silence, *cast down  
the burning pit of hell, like stones,  
into a lake of fire. Jesus died to redeem.  
Can ya understand that  
Jesus was so hungry for each soul?\**

As one snake wrapped around an arm, another stepped on  
in bare feet, a thick one slung over a shoulder like a flagellate,  
my job was done, emissary of dark business.  
Then a rattler, molting, spit it's last fire  
through the preacher's neck. Such a deceiver.  
It took until Tuesday for the doctor's stethoscope  
to cold-circle his heart one last time.

\* Lines borrowed from the film, *Wise Blood*, as preached by John Huston's character.

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### In a City that Never Sleeps

There's no sultry set of legs in fishnet stockings  
shadowing the milk-glass window of my office door,  
no thug named Rocko telling me to scam  
when I order three fingers of Dewar's and smart off  
about his boxer's neck, no brown envelope  
of mysterious photographs in my mail slot,  
just frantic spouses calling with trepidation  
because things are not going well.

They tell me everything.  
It's a 50/50 wager, men to women,  
who's cheating. Inevitably,  
it rounds down to property--the children,  
house, banks accounts, what'll be divided  
like a kingdom against itself. Deceit, infidelity,  
their voices cracking as they parlay  
the naughty facts into a narrative  
I can wash down like cold beer on a sticky night.

By the time my phone rings, it's forgone.  
They know the answer. My job: to observe  
and document, maybe testify. Sometimes,  
it's a vacation trip to Vegas, The Big Island,  
a business conference in Chicago, Miami,  
following them wherever there's a sense of freedom,  
where a girlfriend giggles freely at dinner or has nothing on  
except the stereo.

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It's the ordinary life they run from: a humdrum wife  
whose ass drags like a gunny sack  
full of hammers, or a husband  
buzzed out on reality t.v., stupid friends  
she can't stand, and every night a six-pack  
of Budweiser popped open like a spummy dream.

I don't own a fedora,  
which if I did, maybe I'd pull it low  
over my forehead, talk rough  
to women in a way I think they fantasize:  
trench coat, Sam Spade lisp, cold blue steel  
of a revolver pressing into her pelvic bone  
as we embrace in a partially lit alley.

But that's not my style.  
I'm more apt to read her the 43rd Sonnet  
from the *Portuguese* while sipping a *Red Rambo*  
from Willow Creek and stand on a balcony  
over looking midtown traffic.  
Everyone has a fantasy that pays the bills,  
'cause at the end of a day,  
it's just a job, a tough showing.

There's a warning sign  
about emotions, how you never bleed  
for them, like the time a stewardess handed her hotel key  
to the pilot, lied at least thirty times on the stand,  
and how during a recess she walked over to the water cooler  
to where I stood sucking on a Marlboro--those days  
when I smoked--"I've messed up," she said. *Yeah*, I knew  
she was about to lose her kids.

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It was the video of her head going up  
and down in a blue Volvo 740  
in the underground parking lot of Phipps Plaza  
on Peachtree Street. She got the piano.

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### Erie, PA 1969: The Night My Father was Pick-Pocketed

My grandfather knew everything a man should know  
who single-handedly defeated the Japs  
by sinking all their ships at Guadalcanal.

He never walked away from a barroom brawl,  
taking on all comers.

With a cock-walk, there was something in his stride  
whereby he earned a free pass  
to say whatever he wanted or double park  
without care or forethought,  
to tell some punks how it was in his day.

It was the city-county rivalry on a grid-iron palace  
and we had free tickets from the cashier at the Piggly Wiggly.  
As we entered Veteran's Stadium, a wafting tang  
of boiled peanuts and polish sausage snarled my nose.  
It was the day before my eighth birthday  
and I was amazed so many people cared about football  
as though Nixon and Humphrey were stumping in a boxing ring.

Standing room only, my father somehow found a seat for me  
next to some pickled strangers.

It was, as someone said, "loneliness  
with noise," as my shoulders scrunched  
between these onion-smelling men.

Near the end, I looked back to where my father stood  
cheering, and saw my grandfather, unmoved,  
stoic, a man who had done it all, had seen it all,  
and never hesitated to tell me how he could do it again  
with one arm tied behind his back  
or how everyone else was doing it wrong.

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*Jon, Age Eleven*

My wife and I took turns at the hospital, day shift,  
night shift, watching our son fade  
in and out of the bacteria fever  
swirling through his blood  
as the infection settled in his left ankle.  
Two days before, a boy at Paideia died  
from the same thing though the doctors tried keeping this from us.

Between sleep and hunger binges, we watched movies,  
played cards, laughed, and then  
the doctor drove the needle through the bone  
like a miner setting a dynamite charge  
to blow the side off a mountain.

Word got out,  
and when the famous soccer player visited  
it was like a movie scene where the sick boy smiles  
because his hero has shown up. Then he dies happy.  
But my son did not die and the virus was contained.  
On the way home, we stopped off at the Game Stop  
then Starbucks, while across town, a mother  
and father were standing over a casket being lowered down.