

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

*Steve Wheat*

### **A Question of Faith**

When a drunk turns his key  
and the engine doesn't turn over,  
I wonder if souls traveling back  
always land in a body. Or are they  
pulled like asteroids to the earth?

Are they round? Would they skip  
across the ponds to the old willow,  
that drinks a fat baron's share  
of the water, and provides shadows  
for summer love-making?

Would they compress, flatten  
onto the arteries of highways, varicose  
across Nevada deserts, stick  
like road kill to the tires of passing trucks?  
Again doomed to the same  
endless circles.

Maybe it doesn't matter. If so  
why bother coming back at all?  
Unless getting lost again was the sane option.  
The ultimate answers could be nothing  
but unsatisfying.  
So do they still land in the vast fields

of tobacco, or hops, or marijuana perhaps?  
Do we take them in, writing off brilliance  
to the buzz? Are those drunken revelries  
simply that, or have we ingested the wrong  
turns and failures of meteoric souls?

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They light the fires of lust under our bellies  
or the sense of injustice from a life  
tragically snuffed, a rock that flares,  
hurls itself toward the blue waters  
and breaks against the atmosphere.  
Like the electric sweat of the sparkplug,  
as a drunk drifts harmlessly into sleep.

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### Empty Dictionaries

A man comes home a few hours before sunrise.  
He undresses and gets into bed, leaning over  
to look at his sleeping wife. The impulse  
to kiss her cheek no longer stirs. After dinner

he had gone out with his allowance. Walking  
to a bar where Elvis drones from the speakers.  
He liked the music once, as he liked the sound  
of his wife's voice, and the smell of her cooking.

Habits are the veneer with which we coat ourselves  
to protect us from the novelty of wonder. At two  
the hostesses have finished pouring drinks  
for businessmen and remove their plastic smiles.

They surge into the bar. The owner begins to strum  
songs on his guitar from an America 50 years distant,  
These women are done smiling, but they seem happy.  
The man pays his tab and goes to a Pachinko parlor.

He knows he will lose the rest of his money,  
but he doesn't care, he adjusts the small knobs  
between puffs of a Marlboro Light, and watches  
steel balls tumble, some disappear into the holes

like unspoken words between husband and wife,  
cherry blossom petals caught between the sunlight  
and the wind that knocks them soundlessly to the ground.  
Numbers scroll across the screen. He never glances

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at the people trundling behind him. Bells ring,  
coins fall, buttons are mashed. He doesn't hear  
anything, the silence is unbearable. And each flash  
of silver seems farther away than the last,

vanishing into a labyrinth of machine parts.

There are days he forgets the sound  
of his own voice, and on Tuesdays  
during the mandatory English class

he remains quiet. A bright eyed American  
tries to explain his culture to him, and he thinks  
of a million words he wants to say. He knows  
it would take ten lifetimes to translate the things  
he wants to tell a happy young man, but his thoughts  
meander, and lose themselves in that invisible place  
between languages. They collect in a pool  
where he imagines his future, in a place  
where colors no longer tread

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### Wait Staff

I've always wanted to pull the tablecloth  
from under a load of stemware and plates.  
An urban matador deftly avoiding the irate  
bus boy, or simply the aproned philosopher  
speaking in the vaguest possible terms,  
that the cloth was never there in the first place.

For the sweaty spectrums of service,  
there is no magic left in the world,  
just spite and paychecks. The real trick  
would be to make the obnoxious patrons  
disappear, while the heat rises in white vapor  
from their dinner plates.

One day it did happen though,  
It happened to all the stockbrokers,  
all the politicians, the titans of industry,  
the lawyers, surgeons, golf-pros, models,  
and actors, musicians, bankers, they all  
had the carpet of sanity pulled from underneath them.

The obscurity of their efforts came like a solar flare,  
a great wave swept across them, some ran  
into walls, or traffic, some burst into flames,  
others just fell down, and crouched in a ball,  
but the vast majority climbed

all day and all night, the rose through the office  
buildings, bridges, monuments, statues, houses,  
anything they could find really. We left the steaming  
plates on the tables, the wine in the glasses. When we finished  
cleaning the kitchen, and vacuuming the restaurant

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we saw them falling, silently screaming  
from the rooftops, and the bridges  
Doing flips and corkscrews, or straight  
As airborne rigor mortis, the world had  
become a wedding flipped upside down,  
So many suits and dresses flapping toward  
the ground.

So we, all of us, did exactly what we could  
With the magic granted us, we grabbed every  
tablecloth, and without so much as the spilling  
of a drop of wine, removed them from the full  
tables. We tied these stained capes around our necks,  
and flew out the door to save the day.

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### Adrift

I

I am boarding, gathering my things, shuffling  
pleasant memories, disassembling the strength of arms  
that so recently wrapped around me, like roots, mining  
the last acre of skin for the strength to move on.

I am walking through hallways with muffled footsteps,  
like tiny meteors burying themselves in snow.  
A new country will not approach timidly,  
it will pull memory like riptide. I wonder if airports  
all look the same, or if we need them to.

At every destination I find people who look like people I knew.

In such ways do I build a past on the lost present  
of jet lag, on hours stolen by time zones. In such ways  
do I organize jettisoned thoughts, circling  
my like the corkscrews of inbound planes

waiting for their runways. Touch too succumbs  
to nostalgia. When I rub my necklace I can feel  
her skin through the medallion, when I hold  
his notebook, I can feel the leathery grip  
of his handshake. New friends are measured

against the high water marks, shifting  
in the mercury of mood. Friends remembered  
shed their flaws in the negative space  
of old photographs. Love remembered grows  
in the emptiness between introductions.

And every new country, is a new life.

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### II

To be born again, do not forget anything.  
To be born again, make fossils of your memory,  
chisel away the debris and set the bones  
in the shape of a creature so terrifying  
the mind is forced to extinguish it, and place  
its skeleton behind the velvet ropes of language.

The storytellers are reborn with each audience.  
The story folds the air like origami, the words  
weave themselves into the almost colors  
of dreams. All stories travel, they move in the telling  
and the remembering. They collect themselves

in the same instant that a small rock descends  
into the snows of a quiet world, and that rock,  
a shard from our dead world, in a holding  
pattern of heartbeats will unfold  
this story in the palm of a strange hand

Just as our sun had expanded until it consumed  
us all, these words untangle themselves  
from the Earth's debris, a stranger  
will approach them, and in the darkness  
of their mind's eye we will drift in.

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### Jet Lag

I

*If people were meant to fly  
God would have given us wings*

Mom hates flying,  
and saying goodbye.

But if we were cursed in our creation,  
grounded by gravity, this longing  
wouldn't follow us into our dreams.

You know the one  
that starts innocently  
in the back yard  
or that empty field,  
and you look up,  
blinded for a moment,  
lost in the glare,  
and the sky grows.  
Somehow it gets bigger  
until looking down  
you finally realize  
you are a part of it.

Sometimes you have wings,  
sometimes you float slowly,  
like rising in an old elevator.  
and sometimes we come up  
only to better feel the fall.

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### II

At night the cities below  
resemble white pins  
in the black cushion of the Earth.  
Random at first, in swarms  
of nameless constellations  
in the warped mirror of the sky  
but soon white lines form  
in the dark descent  
pilots are sewing by candlelight.

And these assemblies  
too quickly become the artifice  
of airports. Filling out forms and waiting  
in winding, crawling lines, passport stamps,  
tired badges and labyrinths of polished stone

Even my luggage struggles  
to catch up. The sun rises  
at awkward moments and sleep  
comes slowly, in small spells,  
like courage to a wallflower

### III

*Jet lag, a businessman breathes  
into his coffee, is a lost soul  
trying to find its body again*

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### IV

And my mother's words return  
with a price tag, as I hit  
cruising speed, my soul unraveling  
like a ball of string rolling  
across the empty sky  
its faint vibrations fluttering  
the wings of migrating birds.

As these chords are pulled taut  
what sounds do they make?  
What twangs escape from the jet stream,  
and which lingering melodies  
remind those of us in coach  
of a mother's lullaby?

It's been said a note played high  
enough becomes a beam of light,  
but few know that it works in reverse

And so I unrolled myself  
willingly to find you, here  
on a lawn chair. All blankets  
and hair, atop this mountain  
with the airport below  
spitting and swallowing  
its metal insects as we wait  
for the rays of sun to greet us  
with the days first burst of song.