

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

Hugh Behm-Steinberg
Barry's Dogs

My neighbor Barry keeps his dogs in the house; we can hear him suffering. He keeps the windows open; the dogs calm him. He gets angry and the dogs make him less angry; they're good dogs and they suffer. He doesn't hit them; he just yells. He can't stop yelling; the dogs calm him and he stops. His mind is a circle; sometimes it's a very small one. Then he goes to sleep; his dogs sleep with him. He imagines his neighbors break into his house and he's angry his dogs won't guard him. When we're in our yard, working in the garden, we can see their pacing fragments through the fenceslats; often they stop and cry softly to us. Barry's house unravels beside our house; we share a fence and a loquat tree with bright green leaves on it in the spring and fruit and dead leaves below in the fall. Opossums at night, raccoons, feral cats, tree rats. The smell is terrible, the smell is intoxicating, and when the dogs escape they come into our yard; they get stuck, we let them go, we don't call animal control. Barry brings them back. We know, we hear and we know, we listen and we know. We don't understand and we know.

Study the Ant and Be Wise

Ants speckle the artichokes, tending the aphids which suckle there. They climb into the clothes drying outside; take them to bed and they bite. They bite us and we crush them, more come: you shouldn't take it personally. To them we are not even a string of chemicals, we're more a geography, a type of landscape that moves. You lift up the book and they come swarming; they speckle the lemon tree, they ignore the ant stakes we planted. They are so industrious, but why? There is no winter here, they taste terrible, nobody eats them; they prosper and prosper and prosper. All day they do what's encoded for them to do, they start and they continue, they keep doing whatever they're supposed to do. Don't be like them.

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Prayer

Maybe I should just give up and buy a car. Because so many people are working hard to manufacture my wantingness, more than the car itself. The factories of this manufacture remain hidden, but the evidence of their work isn't just everywhere: the evidence changes our idea of everywhere, there has never been an everywhere like this before. God is envious but he remains indifferent on the question of my car, or my desire to be on the road, in a city, during the day, driving as fast as I want, with no other cars around me, aspirational music telling me how good I am all the time. It's exhausting but it's logical that it has to be the end of theology/metaphysics, not because we have the answers but because we're so tired of the questions. But then the salesmen pray, and their bosses pray, and their shareholders, their lobbyists, they put their money into their prayers, and it's a lot of money, so their prayers *work*.

An Ethical Foundation During an Election Year

Starts with one rule: don't run over the mailman. If you run over the mailman, the mail will still come, but none of it will come addressed to you. You'll only get bills and junk mail, never checks, never postcards, never letters. You say that is all I get anyway, why shouldn't I run over the mailman, or anyone else in particular, but there is a kind of junk that multiplies once it enters your life, you'll wake up one day, you won't be able to come to the door, you'll be stranded. And don't think dogs will befriend you because they won't. It's ok to bark and it's fun to chase, but they know if you're so scummy you'll run over your own mailman what's to stop you from running over them? Where your friendliest underwear, they'll still smell it on you. You must not treat the community that contains you with violence, no matter what you get in the mail.