

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

*Gene Twaronite*

### **Approaching Lye Brook**

A few miles in from the highway  
and looking much closer on the map  
is a tiny wilderness known as Lye Brook.

Its name conjures up memories of a time  
when farmers cut down these woods  
and turned them into ashes,

Leaching them and boiling their lye  
in big iron pots to make potash and  
reap a quick profit from the land.

As a nor'easter brought the sea to Vermont,  
I stepped through a door in the morning clouds  
into the soft green hills of youth.

Upslope the trail led me through  
a familiar forest of ash, maple,  
beech and red spruce.

The boundary of the wilderness  
lay just over the next ridge  
or maybe the next after that.

It did not matter.  
To hike toward wilderness  
is better than being there.

Eliot Porter portraits of leaves  
bleed their colors beneath me  
and shoot up into my veins.

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With bony fingers, a sapling  
clings to the crimson leaves  
as if it must not lose them.

These are Robert Frost woods,  
lovely, dark and deep—perhaps  
deeper than I care to go.

The trail crosses a small ravine with  
plunging brook that taunts me  
to jump across its turbulence.

Uncertainly I leap.  
I am not the same jumper of late,  
but I make it, this time.

With adrenaline coursing,  
I stride through the woods,  
reliving all my connections.

These woods I carry with me—  
I could hike here with eyes closed.  
I come not for new vistas but to touch again:

The scaly skin of lichens on beech;  
the softness of moss on boulders;  
the furrowed faces in bark ...

A forest of memories from  
all my trips through these mountains  
on the way to another reality.

I rekindle these images,  
clutching them tightly as  
tree roots to granite.

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And in the sheltering darkness  
I see my mother's final journey  
as not too different from my own.

Grasping at the fading canvases,  
she stowed them away in crevasses  
unknown, to feed her heart again.

What adventures she must have relived  
until the figments fragmented  
and her neurons flashed no more.

I see her walking the dawn streets of childhood,  
feeling the touch of flesh and earth until  
that last leap into the failing waters.

The clouds thicken and I must return.  
The woods grow dimmer  
And smell of ashes.

The wildness of Lye Brook  
lies just over the next ridge—  
but it can wait.

HOLY GHOST ON A WINDOW

A thump from outside invaded  
my melancholy this morning.  
I looked up in time to see the  
banded tail of a cooper's hawk  
clutching its limp prize while  
taking wing from the patio.

Then I noticed a pale outline  
in one of the large windows.  
Drawn in whitish film were  
wings, head and one clawed foot  
clearly visible in stark detail.

I marveled at the fine trceries of  
imbrued feathers pressed into glass,  
like the silhouettes of lost souls  
imprinted on eternity by nuclear blast.  
There was even the bill and eye socket  
looking inward with vacuous stare.

The upturned wings called to mind  
stained glass images of God  
the Third Person of the Trinity,  
with tiny rays streaking out  
from where the impact splattered  
its body against the fatal mirror.

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I knew it was a mourning dove  
and not God that was dead.  
But framed by a green juniper,  
the shroud in the glass  
made a fitting portrait  
of all the cemeteries I've known,  
with their empty promises  
that scatter like feathers  
blowing from the patio—  
leaving no trace save  
a thump that still echoes.

THE UNMERCIFUL LEG

In a crowded subway  
it protruded into the aisle  
like a battered sausage,  
while the leg's owner,  
her gray curly head  
bowed forward,  
slumbered on.

Beneath a faded dress  
her tattered trousers  
teased the eyes to  
feast upon the  
bruised flesh of a  
leg torn up by  
too many streets.

I was headed downtown  
for the trade center,  
where from a magic window  
I could soak in the vision of  
skyscrapers rising from the  
fertile money fields below.

Perhaps the subway woman  
was headed there as well  
to bask in the warmth of  
some deep carpeted corner  
until security came  
to whisk her away.

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That a woman lay sleeping  
with her leg in the aisle  
troubled no one but me—  
tourist from an empty state  
where locals prattle  
endlessly of the evils  
in crowded spaces.

I tried to resist this  
complacency of the common.  
I must react with *something*:  
sadness, despair, rage—  
anything but detachment.  
But I fared no better  
than my fellow travelers.

As I stared at her,  
ground up by a life  
incomprehensible,  
I watched as the stony  
wheels turned and  
ground her once more  
into grist for my mill.

As I got off the subway,  
she did not take notice  
it was the end of the line.  
And she would not know  
that she lives in my brain,  
a clichéd image of what?

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The packaged feelings  
of feigned emotion?  
The impotence of institutions?  
The poverty of will?  
Or just the failure of  
one man's vision?

Frankly, I don't know  
*what* to do with her,  
no more than with memories  
of the twin-legged towers  
that I know should  
mean something more  
than just a sigh during  
a pre-2001 movie.

But for now she and I ride  
through the subdural subway,  
she and that unmerciful leg,  
kicking and screaming  
until dementia wipes her clean—  
a sleeping woman in a subway car.