

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

*Morgan Boyer*

### **It does not hurt**

*(Pliny the Younger. Letters. 3.16.2. Fannia, a Roman noblewoman and granddaughter of a Roman officer named Arria, is dying by her own blade after her son died. She is being comforted by her husband, Paetus, in her dying moments.)*

Paetus, my husband, do not ever fear, for it does not hurt;  
the dagger is sheep-soft in piercing a lying woman's skin;  
filled with the August-ripe hemlock of a mourning heart;  
the eyes of my son forever shall be my dying breath's sin

Arria once asked a woman with a husband in her arms how she bared to  
live;  
when could words that passed through a mortal's chapped lips be more  
true?  
Death in honor, the knife sheds my sinful skin so I may finally feel alive;  
preparing for the Ferryman to carry me--his voice harsh yet sheepskin  
smooth

If you choose for the rigid, kind dagger to pass into your body;  
ending a short, forgetful life as you reenter the ground;  
Our villas sold as well as every meaningless commodity;  
as the blood-river forming beneath your arm is the final sound

Paetus, it does not hurt to take the dagger into an already inevitable death;  
for in death, all are of the same gender, health, nation, status and wealth

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### Reflections on Vesuvius

*(The Roman writer Pliny the younger is reflecting on the death of his uncle and mentor, Pliny the Elder, who died of a heart attack during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. He is addressing a letter to the Roman historian and longtime friend, Tacitus)*

Tacitus, yes, days go by when I wonder about the other side of the bay,  
Roaring from the depths of the Hell to the crashing flame-laced shore,  
How could a man of his age display such courage while I, a youth, only  
stay?

My uncle even though, himself a patrician, cared for something more

Tacitus, yes, I would certainly would have perished had I gone,  
Though to sit calmly in my study while his throat filled with ash,  
when my uncle gave me a renewed father's immortal bonds  
The guilt that torments me is more painful than a lion-claw's slash

Tacitus, I sometimes in my Como villa I glance at the night sky,  
remembering my uncle's love for all wild beings that breathed,  
to Jupiter I scream at the celestial bodies for a some reply,  
but for years the message from the gods' I have yet to receive

For days I pray to Janus to transport me back,  
but I know quite well that answering they lack

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### **My hand traces your writing**

Like a mouse's paws across a kitchen table,  
each syllable I see the eyes surpassed the lake's  
glistening crests in the midsts of June; how you  
touched my neck when my heart felt as if it were a  
stringed instrument being plucked, whispering to me  
that my braided hair resembled a fresco of Sappho;  
and yet your heart and soul must labor on aqueducts  
for the good of the people of Bithynia, and for Rome;  
your fingers not tracing the sun-kissed olive-branches,  
but watching sweat-drenched men cut and lay bricks