

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

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Kingdom of Night

Snow is falling outside my window or inside my dream, maybe both. Numbers are spinning down thru my head and piling up on the floor. Those numbers have dollar signs on them. Gives them a lot more emotional power than mere weather reports or miles per gallon. They're telling me I'm \$12,000 short at the bank, making me hyperventilate. More dreams standing in line, waiting their turns. Will I get to see the chief teller before the bank closes, before the flag falls announcing the end of the world? The dice are rattled in the box and tossed out on the table, changing the rules again. One-eyed jacks are wild, aces high. The queen of spades is the spider lady sinking her fangs into my jugular, or is she the angel of mercy offering succor to the weary? It's hard to tell in the winter darkness if the day has begun or it's still the middle of the night when the phantoms of dreams hold sway from their high thrones and legions of orcs and zombies run wild in the streets. The kingdom of night melts away with the dawn and reason once more takes tight rein on the gibbering mind. I pull on my pants, strap on my wristwatch, grab my wallet and appointment calendar. Shlurp coffee to steady the nerves. TV voices offer jolly commentary. Good morning, Hannah, got your head on straight? Your nighttime fears all tucked away till the bloody sun goes down? The market dropped sharply this morning on rumors of world peace. The talks in Brussels are still deadlocked, but a watered-down non-binding agreement is expected to be endorsed, leaving the situation unchanged, if it doesn't take a backward step. A word from our sponsors, the makers of Fukitol, the world's leading brand of tranquilizers. What, me worry? While the sun shines the world grinds on. Newborns leave the hospital by the front door, the dead are taken out the back, jujubes come roaring down the chutes as usual. It's only after the fall of night, when I've got to remove my trousers and crawl into bed again that my mind dissolves in the acid indigestion of insomnia and finally I swim in rivers of sleep, tumbling down the shark infested streams of nightmare alley. The lords of madness plunge my brain in the swirling sewers of dreams where nothing makes sense and morning is a mythical country where my passport is not recognized.

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Faster

Fifteen minutes of fame is now down to three microseconds. Only the young, raised on video games, can keep up with this ever shifting post-postmodern world, and they'll oh so soon be watching TV in nursing homes. By the time you get your college degree all your skills are out of date. Sorry, young fella, we don't need no silicon chip engineers. It's all memristors now. The days and nights flicker past in a thrumming gray blur. Came back from vacation to a hundred story condo where my house used to stand. A thousand strangers living there who were born this morning. My wife's a blond now and I've got a mohawk or maybe she's someone else altogether and the same goes for me. The kids grow up overnight and fill these condos while they're still under construction. The wolves are running for their lives. The rabbits are all in experimental labs or Disney petting zoos. We're eating Soylent Green certified organic, makes you sick, but we all have health insurance now. Only way to opt out is to fake illness and kick back at one of the gigantic hospitals till you're done and they flush you down the disposal. Land's too valuable for cemeteries. Buildings so tall you get thirty seconds of giddy weightlessness as the elevator rockets you down to the dimly lit street level where the sunlight struggles to find its way. But then only impoverished losers live down there. The high livers step out of their lofty eyries into their flitters, fly off to the latest rooftop disco, hand the keys to the valet parking attendant, and dance away the night thru the color-coordinated kaleidoscope of the newest designer drugs.

Long Dead Poets Come to Visit

A party of ancient Chinese poets arrived in a junk to visit the 21st century. They wrote poems of their impressions of our world, noting how so many are tied to schedules, enslaved by their wristwatches, and strangest of all, the emperor had not proclaimed a law that required one to wear a watch. It seemed that everybody wanted one. Even the old Chinese poets took to wearing them, smiling as they showed each other their watches, admiring the ever moving hands, and especially tickled with the slowly rotating arms of Mickey Mouse as the little fellow pointed to the numbers, his white-gloved hands spinning out the hours, minutes, even seconds. The Chinese poets were joined by three 19th century French poets, who renamed themselves Capo, Strabo and Ariago, names they felt were better suited for romantic poets than the bourgeois names their parents had given them. Strabo's poetry consisted entirely of egotistical self display. She was forever looking in her mirror. The two male poets vied with each other for Strabo's affection by writing extravagant poems praising her beauty. Meanwhile Strabo fell madly in love with Wang Ho, who was gratified to learn that the wondrous modern world still embraced this familiar pastime. They rented a rubber raft and went floating down the river wrapped in each other's arms. Capo and Ariago stole a canoe and pursued the love-besotted couple, waving their swords and shouting insults in French. They would have caught the lovers easily if they only knew how to paddle a canoe while brandishing a sword. Oh that Wang Ho, said his friend, Yang Po. He's always been lucky. He got the beauty and the best watch too.