

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

Annie Lampman
Finding Eden

The storm breathed inward—a sigh, then an exhalation. On the tent walls, tree-branch shadows quivered like crone’s fingers. Connie held his breath, but then the wind came again, whipping the tent into a fervor of slapping canvas. The lightning and thunder that followed were simultaneous, cracking overhead like gunshots, reverberating in the small crustacean bones of Connie ears—shell-echoes of the California ocean they’d yet to find. More flashes of pitched light, then the thundering crash of a lightning-struck tree somewhere close by—the shock of its impact translating through the ground into Connie’s bones. The smell of its torn and seared wood, its uprooted bareness. A taste like punk-rot in the back of his throat. He pawed the black air—a swimmer fighting for the surface.

Next to him, Rose covered her ears and cried out, heaving her knees as close to her chest as her swollen stomach would allow. “Oh Connie, make it stop. The baby doesn’t like it either,” she sobbed, her voice muffled wet and quavering.

Rose had always been afraid of storms—tucked tail and ran at the first sight of clouds bunching on the horizon—but Connie couldn’t blame her, not after the Oklahoma fields had taken to the air as if heaven bound, leaving the dust of their rapture behind. A world buried alive.

He tucked the blanket around her, stroked her hair. She smelled of smoke and fire ash, sour wool. He shushed, “Just you wait. It’ll be better soon. I got a plan, get us out of here.”

Darkness surged and banked against the tent sides so that he could barely make out the forms of Rose’s father, mother, brother, and uncle who all lay still, seemingly as immune to the tumult outside as they were to the hunger clawing their stomachs.

When they’d driven into California, the whole family had cheered as if they were crossing into Eden. But there had been nothing but sand and heat. No work, no food—nothing but camps full of hungry people growing hungrier by the day. Old folks sitting hollow eyed, waiting for the end. Stick-skinny kids who made your flesh crawl; they would eat you alive if they could. The drought was riding in their wake, following them like a starving dog as they tried to escape its slow, steady smothering. It sat, perched on its haunches, waiting for their fall.

They weren’t far from falling. Connie stomach was a sunken valley below his ribs, his body grown strangely distinct—bones and sinew, muscles wrapped twining tight to bone—like chokeweed grown desperate for water.

He’d dreamed again of the little white house surrounded by fields. Rows of fresh-churned dirt Rose walked, fat suckling pigs following her as she threw seeds like confetti which sprouted and grew into vines and bushes, grew into a jungle of fruit so ripe and tender the juice ran off her fingers like syrup.

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Next to Connie, Rose had fallen quiet but in a nearby tent, a woman's keening lifted up—a high thin wavering sound held aloft by the wind.

Before he'd left home, Connie's mother had given birth to another small lifeless gray baby, wrinkled and shrunken. She hadn't stopped keening for days. Connie had begged her to stop, promised anything to make her stop, but her guttural unrelenting moan became the air, a cloying overripe wavering he couldn't purge from his ears. When his father finally came home from the fields, he'd stumbled into the bedroom and slapped her until she quit. The children had cried and hid, but Connie understood. Someone had to stop her. Connie had buried the baby in the yard with the others. The grass grew tall and thick there, but nobody talked about it.

Connie thought Rose had fallen asleep until she moved against him. She nestled her body into his, her hipbones pressing against his side, their sharpness incongruous with her softly rounded belly that butterflied with life—knees and elbows bumping outward in a beautiful underwater dance. Their child there, just under the skin.

Rose reached under Connie's shirt and unbuttoned his pants, slid her hand against his skin, her movements stirring the dank mustiness of the blanket, the ripe sweet of her own body. "Tell me again," she said, her voice pleading, her cold hand insistent on rousing him, "tell me about that little white house we're going to have—all those oranges we're going to eat."

He didn't want to, but she kept touching him, kissing his face, licking his lips with her salty tongue. Her mouth was swollen and tender with crying, tasted like salt. He thought for a moment about biting down, her lips soft and meaty, like steak he'd had once, so tender he hadn't even had to chew. He tried to ignore the mounding of her stomach in between them, but when he entered her he could only think of the baby curled inside—the press of him against it.

Rose reached to the small of his back and pressed him deeper inside her. "Tell me how we're going eat all those oranges," she said, her breath a hitch in his ear, "all those grapes."

He started moving, Rose letting out little moans, then stopped himself. The thought of all that grayness. He felt a wave of nausea and tried to pull away but Rose put her face to his neck and started licking just below his ear, humming her lips against his skin until he couldn't help moving again. She moaned louder as his movements became urgent. He covered her mouth with his hand, the smooth slip of her teeth against his palm and finished quickly. He pulled away and buttoned his pants. Rose lay still. He could feel her eyes upon him. He got up and put his boots on, stooped through the tent flap. She said his name once but he didn't stop.

Outside, he tried to make sense of camp. In the black-blue storm glow, it looked like ship wreckage drifting on black swells. He followed the trail's dark outline to the creek. An elm lay broken in the path, split half-way down the middle, its splintered shock of wood white as bone in the blackness.

The creek trickled below camp, heading south, its rank mud banks teeming with insects. Connie bent to splash his face, his feet sinking deep

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into the silt bank, then walked down the path beaten wide from children and dogs.

A half-mile downstream, back in a tangle of brush, Connie spotted a child's hideout. He stooped in, toeing the piles of treasure someone had painstakingly collected—old bottles, a used tire, spools of string. Then, beneath a heap of dry grass, he saw pink skin. He held his breath as he uncovered it: a naked baby missing one arm, one blue eye askew, the other a black hole. A child's toy. For a moment, he'd thought it was real. He backed out of the brush fast, bile rising in his throat, and followed the trail until he couldn't hear anything but cicadas and crickets.

From a small rise he looked back at camp waking: women standing disheveled around smoky fires; thin, whip-tailed dogs circling in from where they'd been hiding in the brush, moving closer to the fires' ragged warmth, drawn in by the enticement of boiling bones and lard biscuits from the night before. The sky was pearling with dawn, everything soft in new light.

Outside their tent, Rose's mother stirred what was left in the pot, then stood, looked around. Looked toward the creek.

Connie ducked back, stumbled down the slope to water, following the creek away from camp, away from all that hunger. He thought he heard whispers of his name—*Connie, Connie, Connie*—but he wouldn't stop. Not this time. He would find a way through the desert; he had to.

By midday, the air had seared knife-hot. The sun baked hard into Connie's skin and his sweat ran like water. He spat the pooling in his mouth and thought of Rose, sitting with her mother in the sweltering shade of their tent. Rose's father had said they would move on, but they hadn't. Stayed for more rumors of a farmer hiring on a new crew, another pennies-for-hours job. Another way to starve.

Along the creek, the storm's wake had left a scattering of leaves and branches. Dust filmed the creek's surface, now only a trickle. Connie took his shirt off and wet it in the murky water of the last small pool. He tied it around his head, rivulets of water flowing down his sides. He drank despite the stagnant brownness of water sated with mineral wash and decompose. It left a tackish coating on the back of his throat and tongue, a taste like rotting leaves.

When he started walking again, the ground had turned scorching and soft. His boots sloped on his feet, blistering the soft skin below his ankle—the skin Rose said was as smooth as satin. Rose always talked about how she would have reels of satin when they got to California, how she would make everything out of it. He pictured their baby lying on a silken bed and ignored the rumble of his belly, as sonorous as the storm.

In the shade of an overhanging rock, he licked his dry lips and urinated a stream of dark yellow. He watched the wet of it sink into the dust at his feet. He walked on until dark and slept that night in the damp valley of sand—all that was left of the creek—the crawl of insects on his face and neck waking him with the insistence of their tracking. He stared at the blank expanse of sky thinking about Rose, the baby growing hungry in-

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side her. He felt its pain as his own—cramping pangs like jaws eating him from the inside out.

In the morning he scooped a hole in the darkest sand in the valley, but the seep never came. He sucked handfuls of sand as sweat ran down his face and neck. He overturned rocks to find locusts hiding in the shade. Their shells cut his inner cheeks, the sharp greenness of their insides leaving a bitterness he sucked against his teeth.

He walked through the day's heat, letting the shifting wind direct him forward. Little lizards scuttled away from his feet. At the base of a snarled thorn bush, Connie finally caught one. He wasn't sure what to do with it once he had it squirming in his hands, its urine brown and sticky between his fingers, its tail a bloody stump where it had let it loose. Finally, he pinched its neck and smashed its head with a small stone so it was at least still. He contemplated its small feet, its stick-like body, then put it on a flat hot rock and waited for it to dry while he sat under a bush's scant shade. He closed his eyes, dreaming of juicy chops, roasts running over with fat gravy. Fruit he rubbed into Rose's skin, into each other's mouths until they tasted nothing else.

He woke to crows cawing. At first he thought he was a child again hiding behind damp pinned shirts as his mother battled the crows in her hardpan garden, the smell of beaten cotton all around him. The lizard was gone, only a dark smear of blood left on the rock. The crows flew when he stood, a mocking *caw-caw-caw*. The flock multiplied into dozens as he watched, circling above his head, waves of heat radiating from their black bodies. He tried to ward them off but they were everywhere, a black swirling mist of birds. He cried out and fell to the ground, crawling away from the burning heat of their bodies.

When he woke, his face was blistered from the sun, his body sweated dry. He touched the smoothed bumps on his cheeks and forehead tenderly as he climbed the loose sand, his feet leaving divots that filled until all that was left of his passing were indentations in the sand.

As he walked on the skin split somewhere above his eyes and leaked a viscous liquid he wiped with his fingers and sucked, rubbed on his cracked lips. The sun dried the blisters and his forehead grew taut, as if someone were grasping handfuls of hair, pulling him backwards. He walked past one canyon and into the next, looking for the green orchards, the valleys of vining grapes, but all he could see was a blurred and indistinguishable horizon—the endless brown of sky and desert.

When the blisters ruptured again the oozing liquid was pink with blood. His lips bled too, the taste a sweet metallic, water grown warm in the well. He licked it, his swollen tongue rasping over his lips.

The desert stretched for miles in all directions, a featureless void. Heat waves like liquid air. Connie aimed for the distance, stumbling through the sand, concentrating on the movement of his feet lipping the sand, cascades of grains settling back, filling in on themselves.

In a low spot of tangled, thorny growth, he dug down a foot, then another until his fingertips were raw, but the dampness never came. He sucked on the cooler sand but he choked, coughing until he was weak,

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until he fell. He dreamed again of his mother's keening, another baby born dead. The sound carried forth and became Rose calling to him, clutching her swollen stomach. As he ran to her she burst open, blooming red, her flesh opening like a flower, and in its middle, the baby—its limbs like sticks, its head shriveled and grey.

He woke shaking and heard it again—a high, thin wail. He cried out as a dipping shadow fled the ground in front of him. A bird—wings outstretched—flying low, and clutched flailing in its talons, a pink suckling pig, squealing, tiny eyes rolling, cloven feet waving wildly. A fat, round market pig, pink and full and tender—no range-thin shoat grown too tough to eat.

Connie watched until he couldn't make them out against sky glare, then he ran, stumbling, grasping handfuls of sand as he clawed uphill following its path over this hill and the next. The ground wavered with heat until it seemed he wasn't running, but floating, gliding without effort, his own shadow leading the way.

He ran up a sharp rise, cresting it in light that transformed the desert, everything blowing. The wind hit him hard in the face—a hot blast peppering his skin like a swarm of bugs. He fell to his knees and from under his shielding arm he saw it—the hills transformed. Gently blowing the grass stretched ahead of him and climbed a soft-rolling rise where a white house sat, surrounded by fields of fruit, and Rose was there, just beyond, a child, plump and healthy, grasped in her arms. She held handfuls of grapes and their juice ran down her face, her arms, dripped off her elbows. She looked at him, waved, beckoned him come.

Connie closed his eyes and fell forward.

The wind was placid and warm now—the touch of lips against bare skin. The taste of sweet water, the taste of fruit warmed in the sun.

A sand swirl rose and gusted by in a long elegant pillar, traveling past Connie's prone form and over the desert behind him, the sun a round blot of light in its wake. Cacti barbs quivered in the wind, impaling bits of detritus.

Little lizards scuttled between pant cuffs and skin, into the dark cave of Connie's open mouth, sheltering in the cool dryness until the storm passed, until the sand settled, banking against denim like dust.