

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

*Rebecca Shepard*  
**The Lady of the Lake**  
1984

**T**he woman is drinking cider by the lake. The mountains around her are wispy at their peaks, but plunge into the fjords quick and fierce as hawks. It is a sharpened-pencil blue October and she wears multiple scarves wrapped in various ways around her wrinkled neck. The colors conflict. The cider, which is kept in a jar in a small brown paper bag, is lukewarm. When she arrived it was so hot that steam plumed from the curled lips of the bag like she was carrying a small infant. She drinks slowly. There are rings on every one of the fingers on her left hand and none on the right. The gems are large and worthless; quartz, mica, amber. She collected them over the years from miscellaneous boxes in charity shops, flea markets, a young girl's backpack that was left at the local pool. Discard of tourists—British probably—who all came to Norway for the same reason: the extremity of the incline, the seductiveness of sheer drops.

Across the lake two willow warblers take off and zig-zag towards the woman. The mustard yellow at their necks stands out against the bruised sky. One lands at the end of the bench. The wood is wet from recent rain, and the bird lifts both of its hairpin legs, one after the other, as if to shake the water from them. Its beak is thin and poised as tweezers, the eyes small black interruptions in the flow of feathers. It does not seem to ever be caught in the middle of motion but rather always at the end. The woman dips her finger into the cider and holds it out to the bird. It regards her with cocked neck and then flutters away. As she watches it is already gone.

He walks the terrier east around the lake in the suit he wore to class. It is a navy so dark it could be mistaken for black. His shoulders do not quite fill it.

He thinks the students might be starting to like him. It is always this way; at first one or two peel away from the pack and begin to raise their hands, to stay after class and ask questions. Soon a pretty girl is telling the boys to hush and then, overnight, everyone tries to become his favorite.

He takes a clove cigarette from his breast pocket and lights it. The dog pulls at the leash and the match misses the tip and drops into a puddle. He lights another and pauses for a moment, puffing and checking the end is lit. He peers out into the dimness. He can make out her huddled form, four hundred, five hundred, meters away. She is sitting on the same bench as always. He checks his wristwatch—a bulky, brown remnant from his first, and only, marriage. If he walks at this pace he will get there by five.

There are only the dregs of cider left. Slimy strings of pulp, grainy against her teeth. She runs a hand through her silver-blonde hair. The lake is entirely still. When she was a girl she would go swimming at night in the summer, when the light would not let up and she couldn't sleep. Her father, who led tourists along the fjords, alone and weary, could not say

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no. He would join her, both stripped bare, flapping in the white, three am shallows like eels. He did not think it strange to be naked in front of his daughter. A man whose love for her dead mother muted him over the years, turned his hands to paws, his desire crawling from him like a wet cat to land. He died in his sleep one winter afternoon on the sofa, leaving no will behind. The lawyers scratched their heads. She stayed on in the house, a place silently agreed upon on the island as hers, though legally she could not sell it. She stopped going to school. No one knew how old she was exactly, but she seemed old enough. Old enough for no one to bother looking into a matter they didn't want to get tangled up in. She filled her father's off-white van with used books, silver spoons, broken clocks—anything she could find for free. She took long drives along back roads searching for abandoned objects. On Saturdays she would drive to the market in Bergen and trade her wares for potatoes, onions, leeks, tea bags. On Sundays she would fish.

The sky is a plum-blue, sinking into grey. Lights are starting to go on in the little houses around the lake. A mother sets a table, a little boy stands in a window and thinks about guns and girls who like his mother and how he is sure of how great he will be, how far-reaching his life. He fiddles with his waistband. How erotic the future is to the young, the woman thinks. She swirls the dregs of her cider. A dribble has left a sticky mark on the glass, which her thumb has brushed and now her skin is sticky too.

When she was young her father took her to the farmer's market in Bergen every Saturday morning and she would steal black currents from the wicker baskets when no one was watching. She remembers large, flour-covered loaves of bread, fish in tins, whale steaks they would eat that night, cooked in chunks of margarine and onion. The sound of old men gossiping through thin cigarettes, and her fingers always stained purple and sticking to one another in the pocket of her trousers. She thinks, I have felt a little bit guilty for as long as I can remember, even before the black currents.

When they got home, and the whale meat was sitting in the glass bowl on the counter, salted and peppered, her father always ran her a bath and washed her, scrubbing every inch of her, down to the blood-like stains on her fingertips. She cannot remember how old she was when this stopped or if it ever did, for it seems to have continued on, even after his death.

The man's dog sees a willow warbler and attempts to chase it. The leash makes a white band in the man's fleshy palm. He imagines that when he was a young man his hands were much different; hands poised and efficient as divers, but now the hair seems curled sadly, the freckles stark against the paleness of his skin. Two hundred meters now, no more than three. It is growing cold and dark and he is afraid she will leave before he gets there. He cannot remember the first time he imagined her naked, nor, further still in the low-ceilinged cellar of his memory, when his desire for the tight flesh of young women slid into a craving for the wide-hipped, sun-worn body of females his own age. It seems to him only yesterday that he was fourteen and touching himself beneath the duvet while his parents moved about the kitchen below, the evening news a soft hum on the radio. And at once it seems a memory belonging to someone

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else; as if childhood was a character he once read about in a book. He never became the man with one elbow leaning on the bar, a drink in one hand and a girl's face tipped towards him. He married once—a friend of a friend, a quiet affair that ended without argument, after which he spent his holidays alone. Christmas in Cairo one year, Prague the next. But cities too felt like women he did not have the courage to talk to. His dog, matted and old, is ugly with dependence. He has worn the same shoes for fifteen years, taught the same books, smoked the same cigarettes he makes a trip to Denmark twice a year to buy duty-free. But still, somewhere, the hope that she expects him, the twinge of possibility.

His approaching figure is familiar to her, though she is not positive exactly from where. There is something both paternal and lonely in the slope of his shoulders, the slightly crooked nose. She has always believed she can sense the goodness of a man just by looking at him, and it is true she has never been hassled, though this could be mere coincidence. But there have been times when she has longed for it, would welcome even the groping hand of a twisted stranger over the undisturbed stillness of her days. He looks like a man of knowledge, she thinks, a man who would make love to her with his eyes closed. She feels the hot soapy water of baths and her father's hands, the brush against her feet, her calves, her thighs, and higher still. She cannot look at the darkening lake in front of her without seeing him as well—his pale thighs, the bald patch on his head accentuated by smoothed wet hair as he swam out towards the middle, just far enough to scare her, left in the shallows. She always felt betrayed when he swam that far, as though he were going to converse with someone else, a woman who lived in the center of the lake. A beautiful woman, with long red hair and translucent skin. A woman who is constructed only of touch; the figure that leaves at the moment they are loved, whose existence depends on it. The bird whose broken leg heals the moment fingertips reach towards it.

He is twenty meters away, fifteen, ten. He can smell the lavender in the frizz of her hair, feel the bulge of her hip cupped in his hand, rain on the roof, a burning in the kitchen, the dog scratching at the front door, waiting for her in bed as she sits on the toilet, large pink salt crystals in a jar on a scrubbed wood table, freckles, sea-stones, decay, the secret she will tell him in years to come that will taste of citrus peels and rotting oil—they will still have years together, so much time left—and how he will love her all the more for the dirtiness of this confession. And then he is level with the bench and his knees keep bending forward and the dog keeps pulling on the leash towards the bird flitting out of reach and he will follow, he follows, he has followed.