

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

*Paul Brucker*

### **The Great War**

*When you're young, they tell you all sorts of things ...*

A transitive must take an object,  
regardless of shifts  
in tense, person, voice and mood.

A person's penmanship reveals  
what he feels about himself,  
how he organizes life,  
plus his vulnerability to evil.  
Perfect the loops on your y's and g's  
and you improve your odds  
of obtaining happiness, if not success.

And nothing can stop you  
from becoming the man who knows  
all there is to know  
about the six sons of Louis the Pious.

But, then, as you get older,  
you learn ...

Fate only changes,  
if at all, slightly --  
after you alter the variables  
significantly.

Plus, all your insights,  
efforts and concerns are insufficient --  
there will always be something missing,  
something essential  
that you must try to have or try to be.

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And people like me and, maybe, like you,  
are always denied a place  
in the conservatory.

But what does it matter now?  
What does it matter?

Father never let illness detain him from work,  
nor let precaution detain him from fear.  
He never fathomed money --  
which doors to leave open, which to leave shut.

He set his chair against the wall  
so he would never have to see it again,  
so he could continue, day after day,  
drop by drop, to die of a disease  
no one was brave enough to call by its true name:  
misery.

The priests urged me not to cry  
for at least three hours after his death --  
or his legacy would be left,  
at best, a matter  
of personal significance only.

But what does it matter now?  
What does it matter?

You wore a light hat,  
a bold, short, tightly laced dress.  
You were agile, swift and difficult to catch.

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At our picnic, hidden within the thickets,  
I admired the imperial mark  
between your nose and lip.  
I observed how your eyes vary  
from greenish to pale brown,  
based on the available light.

As we sipped our tea, I stared at our spoons.  
If one dropped, our differences would multiply.  
If both settled in the same saucer,  
our wedding would ensue.

I persuaded you to hike several miles  
further through the forest  
to see the elegant house on Harm's Hill.  
I asked you to imagine it was mine  
and we lived there.

The rooms were curious and delightful,  
ending in a garden where you taught  
a peach tree to grow a fan against a trellis.

You tended the fire, fetched fresh water  
and took up embroidery.  
I, depending on my mood,  
took up my newspaper, book or diary.  
Our children played with building blocks,  
little trumpets and trains.  
Our best friends shot billiards  
and felt safe enough to talk freely.

Your hands, large but shapely,  
trembled when you kissed me.  
I felt how great my body is,  
how great is its capacity for pleasure.

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But what does it matter now?

What does it matter?

One night, you met the night bear  
sallying forth, dressed in his best,  
bearing gifts of flowers and candy.

With him, you shared  
your sorrows, annoyances and hesitations.  
With him, you were free  
to mutter meaninglessly in low volumes  
or discuss the world's deepest problems.

I'm told you met often in the hayloft,  
the thickets or secret rooms  
and that he kept a weekly account  
of your lovemaking.

Everyone said you were the brilliant, perfect couple.  
I promised myself to be the polite and refined guest,  
to send out only goodwill and tenderness.

But, inside, a tense, little voice continued to cry,  
"Look at me! Look at me!  
Who will ever care for me?"

Ah, what does it matter now?  
What does it matter?

The communities along our river grew  
into a great nation.  
Flat, anvil clouds passed,  
leaving blank skies.  
Blossoms veiled the slime  
that spread gently through the silky grain.

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Ironic and ambiguous elements  
were applied to architecture,  
as stylistic importance waned.

Our women chattered  
gossip, indiscretion and discontent.

Our men roared  
relief, recovery and reform.

An end to intolerance and bigotry!  
Cheap land! Safe drinking water!  
Stores that sell essential items  
at reasonable prices!

But, various provisions and riders were vetoed,  
obscuring the necessary uniqueness  
that belongs to every object and being.

The nation demanded obedience,  
interchangeable parts and central assembly,  
gunpowder, plus lead pipes  
that could be melted into cartridges.

I was summoned to sentry duty  
to snuff out firebombs, protect scarce resources  
and pursue small raids in quiet sectors.

Between trenches and cannon,  
within the nooks of the conservatory,  
the stink of the dead was unbearable.

But what does it matter now?  
What does it matter?

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Today, the great bell only tolls  
when a saint walks by  
or a crime has been committed.

The pious knell in front  
and stare for hours at the statue  
of Christ who points a finger  
at his gaping wounds,  
sorry he can no longer spare a blessing  
for all are spoken for.

Under the shade of birch trees,  
the blue birds and not-so-blue birds cry  
while their young are devoured in their nests.

Flies circle the rot.  
Many are left with two pairs of wings  
attached to their thorax;  
some with only a pair; a few with none.

But what does it matter now?  
What does it matter?

They tell you all sorts of things ...  
that the food will appeal to you,  
that the nursing staff will appeal to you.

They tell you to go to dressing area "B,"  
take a gown and pants (if available),  
take off everything except shoes and underpants,  
and hand the instruction card  
to the technologist who will do your exam.

He says I will have several sutures,  
but hardly know they're there.

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This implies I will survive,  
I will be cared for  
and I am entitled to a sense of hope.

But, I know death stares at me  
as I stared at the teacups.

I know I will never become a man  
who knows all there is to know,  
a man who feels  
calm, brilliant and strong.

I know I must struggle, day after day,  
drop by drop, to stay awake  
for as long as I can,  
to evade the deep sleep  
that lasts, at best, until time is no longer.

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### Cashier girl

I've got to place the purchases  
in the sack  
and smile – but not too long  
or too suggestively –  
as I give back the plastic  
or the correct change.  
I've got to give a sincere “thank you”  
and then make sure my machine  
has enough paper  
to record the next transaction.

After all, I've got to give them a reason  
to come back.  
Because, though the store has cut-rate prices,  
it doesn't have a decent selection –  
just products like pills that don't work  
even if they contain the maximum strength allowed  
without a prescription.

Remember: they could try the other place  
across Northwest Highway  
or our new store two miles down Rand Road.

So, I've got to provide them a reason.  
After all, my performance review is coming up.  
And Corporate said we've got to reduce  
headcount by 10,  
and I don't want to be one of the 10 –  
not with the car needing a carburetor or something,  
dental bills past due  
and Christmas just around the corner.



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At lunch, there's only one place to sit –  
next to down syndrome boy,  
the only soul who looks happy  
and says hello  
when I show up in the morning.

I had a friend once,  
but she stole my money, gobbled up my M&Ms  
and repeated bad things about me  
to Mr. Simons.  
She now earns more money  
at our new store down Rand Road.

Today, I have just enough left over  
for a magazine  
and a second cup of coffee  
from the vending machine.

So I read and wonder  
what will William say to get Jennifer back?  
Despite their busy schedules,  
they were seen at a romantic restaurant on the bay,  
sharing lobster and chardonnay.  
I know, deep in his heart, William still cares for her  
and only together can they truly be happy  
and make the cutest babies.

Please Jennifer, give William one more chance!  
He likes you even more  
since you've lost five more pounds!  
And yesterday the cute guy in the parking lot  
said I'd look a little like you  
if I lost 30 pounds.

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As I read, I keep an eye on the clock  
so I can punch in five minutes early.  
After all, Mr. Simons says the jury is still out  
and he doesn't need another reason to dislike me.

So, I return to my station  
and fight the thoughts:  
I'm not bright.  
I'm not good looking  
and my shoes, once fashionable,  
are long past their prime.

They say that the worst is always behind you  
or yet to come,  
that being satisfied in the moment is the most holy  
form of courage.

So, I wash behind my ears,  
attend Church  
and try to say the right things  
at the right times,  
try to smile pleasantly  
when the security camera swivels my way.

And when that fails,  
I try to believe  
that the Corporation is lucky  
to have me.  
And I tell myself that I can be content  
because, in two months, I will have saved enough  
to buy the cute tilt-top table,  
which enables you to eat popcorn,  
do crosswords and watch TV --  
all in the warmth of your own bed.