

## Wilderness House Literary Review 14/1

*John Middlebrook*  
**CALLUSES**

Hustling home each day in the midst of my career  
I saw the same man lying atop cardboard on the sidewalk.  
As I passed, he'd glare as if he knew me,  
though all we had in common were calluses  
that began in tender places, then hardened from wear.  
That was our start and stop,  
and I would tuck in my scarf and bustle on.

But when he was gone, his absence slowed my gait  
more than his presence ever did,  
peeling back memories—that look of despair:

I recalled a classmate  
who'd ask me to wait with him  
after school each day. And I did,  
but his ride never came.  
And there was a girl who didn't smile,  
whose hair was unkempt and limp,  
who wore the same dirty dress  
with safety pins instead of thread  
to close the holes and tears.  
I remembered how she crouched against  
a fence, terrified by a pack of kids  
who were pelting her with fists of snow,  
until instinctively I stepped in,  
not because of the superhero comic books  
I sometimes read, but because  
her hurt made me hurt,  
and I wanted it to end.

**Wilderness House Literary Review 14/1**

Long before I put wax on words  
and honed the conditions of my charity,  
I watched how wrens

flash about bushes  
raking for landings,  
soft and safe,  
down in the thicket—  
where seeing them is harder  
and takes more care.

HOMETOWN DEPARTURE

I have boarded my train  
and selected my seat.

After all these years,  
our good-byes should be easy,  
without the need to stall  
over faded photos and threadbare stories,  
without the porter reminding us  
the train will wait no more.

But there you stand trembling,  
your face expectant and exposed,  
both hands reddened by the cold  
shaking as they clutch your cane  
and it secures you to the floor.

You are consumed by the moment  
as if this one were final,  
as if I am heading off to battle,  
or abandoning you to randomness  
like a wave with no shore.

You survey the steam  
to see where I am seated.  
Your eyes pace and fret  
like a mother cat counting  
her litter again,  
her attention relentless  
no matter the number  
as each has its place  
and each is cared for.

**Wilderness House Literary Review 14/1**

And then the train lurches,  
and suddenly you see me.  
Frantically, you wave  
  
and smile with relief,  
as if now we're less parted  
and your long drive home  
will be easier  
than it would have been before.