

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/2

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The Set on the Hill

STOP. HE WILLED TIME TO STOP. In the complete silence, he held his breath and managed to ignore the sickening cadence of his heartbeat. Yet, in that dark, subcranial stretch of space, infinite and without centre, that damned time still ticked on like a formless clock, its passing infuriatingly palpable.

The man gave up and opened his eyes.

The gaudy yellow wallpaper stared back accusingly, challenging his presence. The drawing room was spartan, consisting of only a motionless grandfather clock, with its hands fixed at half-past nine, and the ponderous sofa on which he is sitting. He became aware of the obtruding spring underneath him, and shifted his weight. A sheen of sweat clung to his shirt, though he had no recollection of any physical activity, or come to think of it, any recollection at all.

He struggled hopelessly against the murky oblivion of his mind, declared that he has no memory whatsoever (he could not seem to remember his own name), and proceeded to scrutinise the room in the hope of finding any semblance of familiarity.

One thing he was certain though – this was not his room. If it were, he would be sorry for himself for having such bad taste.

As he craned his neck back to survey the entirety of the room, he realised to his growing horror that there was a conspicuous absence of any doors or windows. It was as if a most depraved prankster had built an entire room around him while he was unconscious on the sofa, trapping him like a hapless crab underneath an urn. The only source of lighting in the room was an artificially bright fluorescent tube glaring angrily down at him.

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He made a panicked attempt to get up from the sofa, but stopped when he caught something from the corner of his eye. Turning his head slowly and deliberately, at an angle to his right, he found himself staring into the raven-black eye of a lady, still and severe as the windless surface of a dark lagoon in the dead of night. And what a deep lagoon it is, a bottomless pit drawing him uninvited into its watery depths, despite his valiant thrashing and spluttering to keep afloat. Dark brown hair the shade of damp earth cascaded like a great cataract over high cheekbones and pooled on the gentle slope of her shoulder. Swathed in an unadorned wrap dress, of soft hues of white and malibu blue, she sat on a low stool across from him, drowning him in her impossibly black eye.

Too stricken for words, he froze in his seat stupidly, and the man with no memory and the woman who has lately materialised sat staring at each other for a while.

After some time, he realised he has been staring at the right half of her face – her unflinching right eye, half her shapely nose, half her quivering lips. Slowly, he turned his head an inch to the right, but her half-face

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stubbornly occupied the same position in sight, as though his head never moved.

Another inch to the right, and still the left half refused to come into view.

It was as if she was moving herself at precisely the same time as he was turning his head in frighteningly perfect coordination, adamant that her other side not be seen. Or perhaps during those moments, someone has etched that ghastly image of the half-face onto the underside of his cornea.

He blinked a few times. He turned even more to the right, through a span of space more than the width of a face, and the face promptly disappeared.

He held his breath and rotated his head ever so slightly in the other direction. The right side of her face loomed abruptly into view. It remained so as his gaze reached what he supposed was her midline, before beginning to recede slowly and vanishing, thankfully, as he turned completely to his left.

At this point, the man was assaulted with a conglomeration of horror, confusion, disgust, longing and helplessness, so much so that his addled mind simply gave up deciding a measured emotional response and settled into a state of bemused resignation.

Turning rapidly in unexpected trajectories, shaking his head vigorously, or contorting his neck in every possible direction, did not seem to help the situation. He resigned to the fate that the left face of the lady, like the dark side of the moon, could never be seen. He forced himself to accept this as an undeniable fact of this world. If not, either she was an apparition (or a psychic with lightning reflexes), or he has gone quite mad – possibilities that for now, he would rather not ponder over.

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It was after a long and uncomfortable silence that the man attempted to strike a conversation with his unfortunate cellmate.

What is your name?

There was no reply. He thought he saw her lips part and meet, but the air in front of them remained heavy with deathly stillness.

That's alright I don't know who I am too, you see...

His awkward laughter fell flailing and squelching like a fish out of water onto the linoleum floor.

Pardon my rudeness, but may I take the liberty to call you by a name, Ms... err... Missing Half? Yeah, Miss..ing Half. MH. Do you mind if I call you MH?

Suddenly, her hand shot out and grasped his stiffly. It was frigid. He looked up to see the dark lagoon overflowing, glassy beads rippling across the porcelain half-face writhing with a most pained expression. The inky depth seemed to tell of unspeakable sorrow, and her every lineament carved from anguish and suffering.

Taken aback, he prised his hand off hers, with some difficulty. As he

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beheld the figure before him weeping silently, there was a pang of tenderness, of wanting to soothe and cradle the pitiful creature in his arms. But exhausted with the inexplicable whirlwind of events during his first few moments of consciousness, he looked away, rested his head on the arm of the sofa, and closed his eyes against this absurd world.



Sleep did not come. The eternal hellfire which was that cursed fluorescent light burnt into the back of his eyes, while the broken clock told no time. It was as if he has been unconscious for so long that his mind concluded there was no need for him to sleep ever again. Yet he resolved never to open his eyes. Time passed silently without rhythm or form, its inexorable march keenly felt but frustratingly ungraspable. Minutes, hours, days, or aeons might have passed, till he felt that he has closed his eyes till the end of time, and could bear it no longer. He begrudgingly opened them hoping to be greeted by darkness, but instead found himself staring at the sickening yellow ceiling of the room, and at half of her tear-dappled face blocking out the light.



She had placed her hand so gently upon his that he has not noticed it in his mock slumber. He pushed her away blindly, sitting up and breathing heavily. He was careful not to look in her direction. Seething with a kind of listless, idle rage at this whole farce, he raised himself up swiftly and walked purposefully to the end of the room. However, he seemed to have misjudged the distance, and the room was much smaller than he thought, as his toe stubbed violently against the mantelpiece.

He cursed under his breath, then turned around and surveys the room in a triumphant flourish. With the entire room within his sight, surely he could now see the whole of this mysterious woman? There was the hulking frame of the sofa. The blank wall. The stool. There was no woman. He groaned, with a sinking premonition of what to come. To his right, the right half of MH stood wordlessly, her doleful eye boring into him.

This time, he did not flinch when her cold digits wrapped around his wrist. Aware of her gaze, he suddenly realised he had no idea how he himself looked like. There was not a single surface in the room that reflected his appearance. The brass of the clock was aged and dull, the glass cloudy and almost opaque. He chanced a peek into her eye, but light was drawn into that black hole without any chance of escape, let alone being reflected off it. He carefully ran his hand over his forehead, his brow ridges, the bridge of his nose, his philtrum, his lips, his chin – but had little idea what to make of it.

He glanced down to the tips of his loafers. He became intensely aware of the texture of her fingers, her unwavering gaze that ensnared him in its relentless grip... Suddenly, he was seized by a terrible revelation.

That's it. That's what it's about. It's all a big practical joke. Like the poor guy in The Truman Show. They are watching now, aren't they? God knows what I have done to deserve ending up on this set. They are watching my every move in front of their screens, those perverse voyeurs, clapping and laughing and stamping their feet at this miserable fool losing his marbles,

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like a bird smashing repeatedly, resolutely against a glass panel.

And the question about MH and her enigmatic half-face. That's it. They must have embedded some kind of lens implant for their sick delight. He dug furiously underneath his eyelids, clawing at his eyes. As short bursts of unnameable colours erupted inside his eyelids, a sudden conviction struck him. He must have had a wife. He was prompted to look down at the ring on his finger which had escaped his notice till now, and was certain beyond doubt. Never mind who he was before he was drawn into this quagmire – he is a man of dignity. And that is all that is to life, isn't it? Even when you have lost all sense of who you are, you know at least that you are an honest man, and that is enough. He will not be tempted by the mysterious seductress with the sad eye and half a beguiling face. He will not give in to their expectations, he refuses to satisfy the base desires of the sordid masses.

He roughly pushed her hand away. He looked at MH, and the other side of her face still refused to come into sight. Beneath his rage, he felt a contemptuous pity towards her. Did they put you here too? What miserable existence we live, existing only to placate those we shall never see. Do you even grasp this simple truth?

Staring bitterly into the corners of the ceiling, he gave the finger to an invisible audience.



The frenzy of knowledge and rage kept him from sitting still. He is getting out, no matter what it takes. Anger has the ability to liberate hitherto unknown reserves of brawn from the yoke of reason. He tackled the grandfather clock determinedly. Barely able to lift it above the floor with both arms, he let loose a hoarse battle cry and slammed the makeshift battering ram into the wall. Amidst the cloud of plaster dust, wooden splinters, twisted metal, and loose cogs and springs, he backed up, growled, and continued his offensive again. And again. He could imagine with glee the studio producers panicking and the viewers gawking at the unexpected turn of events. Just when he thought every burning sinew in his arms was surely going to yield, he managed one last charge. Bricks came tumbling down in a glorious din against the busted head of the clock.

He dropped the clock, panting heavily and laughing between breaths. He has done it. He shall make his escape. He gave a mocking curtsy around the room to his captors, and motioned the way out for the lady. MH, undisturbed by the commotion, stood woodenly. She resumed her routine of weeping silently, seemingly unaware that freedom lay a few steps ahead. He gave up, managed a polite nod in her direction, and stepped out into the real world.



Outside, it was drizzling. It was a cold, unfriendly night. He found himself besieged and impaled by icy bullets, each packet of cold worming its way deeper into his core. The frigid wind whipped the drops into oblique sheets, tearing at him in myriad directions. He was standing in a clearing in the forest. Above, inlaid into the night sky, a full moon, pale and languid, hanged limply like a tired, drooping eye. Rain ran off the

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smooth surface of the orb, dripped onto the black overhanging leaves, and trickled down into his eye. He gripped the wet earth beneath his feet. He felt more alive than ever.

He started his way through the forest, down a steep slope. He looked back under the shade of an oak, and there it was, the ugly little house at the top of the hill, with its whitewashed brick walls. He was determined never to look back. Down he went, stumbling over gnarled roots, slipping over sodden leaves, blundering about amongst the play of shadows.

Through gaps in the leaves, he could see the wandering stars blinking lazily, burnished by rain. They appeared as countless eyes drilling into him, wordlessly judging, coldly discerning his every move. It was as though he has never left the room. Glaring at those eyes, the feeling of injustice at his predicament swelled. He cursed God for being a second-rate writer, who derived gratification by subjecting his creation to the worst possible kind of suffering, and depriving him of any moral of the story.

He – this proud mortal – knew he was going to escape the chains of his fate. The woods were thinning, and he has reached the foot of the hill. At the edge of the forest lay a small winding road, disappearing in a sharp bend behind the hill. A sense of euphoria at his impending freedom washed over him in waves, as he stood in the rain, excitedly stretching his arm to thumb a lift. The only sound was the fierce ticking of the rain like a metronome gone awry. He noticed a curious track of tyre marks vanishing beyond the bend. Seeing that there was no vehicle forthcoming, he walked onto the road to follow the watery trail left by the striped yaw marks.

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The first thing he saw beyond the bend is a flickering red light askew to the right of the road, a curious one-eyed creature in the darkness. The light belonged to the rear of a car, which was plunged headfirst into a drainage ditch by the woods. The rear wheels were hanging forlornly in the air. He rushed over hurriedly, skidding on the glistening road.

It was a tragic carnage. The hood of the car was a mangled, unrecognisable mess, like a flimsy tin can squashed between monstrous hands. Smoke, misty in the rain, poured out from the busted engine. He hurried towards the people in the front seats, and stopped short. Rain was pouring silently against his eardrums, hard.

He was looking at himself slumped over the driver seat, wearing the identical, rain-drenched clothes as he was now. The windscreen, dislodged, has caved in towards the centre, forming two huge, dreadful glass daggers. One of the daggers has ripped the right half of his body in an ugly gash, and a glass shard has created a gaping chasm from his scalp to his right eye. The last expression on his lacerated face was one frozen with horror, his eye uncomprehending, his mouth agape. And his last action on the surface of this earth has been to turn the steering hard to the left, while turning his head to look to the right.

He knew in a glance, in a rapidly freefalling rush of sickening awareness, that the lady sitting in the passenger seat to his right, in a blue and white wrap dress, was his wife, staring dead at him with impossibly black eyes.

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The other dagger has slashed clean through the left half of her body, down her midline, a fragment slicing messily through her larynx. The last valiant attempt of that mutilated body has been to turn to the left to face her husband, taking him in for one last time, while clasping her hands tightly around his right hand resting on the console.

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He looked up into the night, into the eyes of the stars. There were dozens of pairs of eyes, reflecting his growing realisation, his disbelief, his nausea, back at him. Some pairs stared back in petrified terror; some looking away, pained; some narrowing and peering coldly down from the bridge of their noses; some seeming to tut knowingly. Yet, all the stars, the dozens of pairs of eyes, were at the same time a single pair of eyes, present since the room with no doors, watching silently high behind the thick, glassy plane of the sky, but able to proffer no heavenly instruction for the wretched man below.

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Oh, what a poor, pitiful, pathetic man. Look at him go – stumbling, slipping, blundering back where he has come from. Look at him heaving and panting uphill like a bedraggled mongrel. Hear him let out a deep animal howl, howling such depths of misery into the unmoved woods, dissipating into the sound of the rain. Look at him tripping over himself running to the house at the top of the hill with a look of such inane hope on his face. Laugh, laugh at his futile clamouring. Oh, this poor, poor man. Doesn't he know that his story will never come to a full