

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

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THEOLOGY

God made us in his image they tell me which I think to myself is selfish but all the grown-ups I know are selfish so maybe it's true.

Except Mom who lets me stay home from Sunday school, her hand against my forehead where the fever pulse is like the neighbour's porch light, blinking on-off on-off. Or like the wide colorful drums they have in the garage, which they don't let me or my sister play with, not even if we promise to be careful, even when they haven't played with them in ages. I still remember the huge sound they made, like the heartbeat of a giant. Not like organ pipes or choir songs at all.

I ask if I will be in trouble.

No, Mom explains. God is everywhere.

She smiles, her hand warming, and I wonder if she is pulling the fever into herself.

Why go to church then, I ask but I fall asleep before she answers.

At dinner my sister pushes me down the last step. I trip on my untied shoe laces, making her laugh her new laugh which I don't like very much, a laugh she is borrowing from her friends and I don't really like them much either.

God what a loser, she says. But she means me.

I wipe my nose on my sleeve, my knees burning and eyes burning. Tears are always hot and they must be extra hot with the fever so I keep them on the inside where they can't hurt me too bad.

The neighbors come over for barbecue bringing two red coolers, one with soda,

but mom says I'm sick and can't have any. Dad hands me one anyway and winks but it feels wrong so I bury it in the garden when no one is looking.

Dad and his friends are talking real loud but it's a friendly kind of loud so I lie back in a

patch of sun to listen, the fever slurring words together sometimes—jesusfuckingchrist.

It has a nice ring to it. I try it out under my breath.

It gets dark real slow, little fireflies popping into existence, tiny sparks of stars glowing like the embers in the grill.

Dad waves me over, his teeth reflecting bits of light.

My son, he says, hasn't cried since he was six years old and all around the men nod to each other, humming deep in their throats like exotic birds.

Son, he says, get yourself a goddamn beer. Jesusfuckingchrist.

I walk over to the other cooler where my sister sits and rolls her eyes

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and pretends I don't exist all at the same time. But she is watching along with everybody else, even Mom, when I take a bottle. Holding it makes my palms feel sweaty, even though I know it's just melted ice on the glass.

I take a sip. It burns in my nose and eyes, like being pushed.

I don't like it very much but everyone cheers.

Dad pats me on the back but he is looking past me. I don't turn around, feeling dizzy, worried about falling, falling like my laces are untied going down the steps and my sister is in middle school and doesn't like me very much anymore.

Dad's friends let me stand inside their circle. I like it there even though my feet hurt standing still and I really want to lie back down where the grass is soft and cool against my skin. I keep taking sips so they don't tell me to go away. It feels like the fever is spreading from my forehead, like it has melted and is dripping down, like the time my sister cracked an egg in my hair, like yellow runny fever running all the way down into my toes.

But I don't want to leave yet.

The way Dad and his friends stand, leaning in and looking right and then left and then across and never behind them or outside them, it feels like everyone important is here. Inside this circle.

God is here too. He clinks his beer against mine. Well done, he tells me. I want to ask him what he's doing but he looks sort of lonely so instead I lead him over to the garden and uncover a corner of my soda.

That's a good secret, he agrees.

And he bends down to tie my laces for me.