

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

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Brown

"The Blue Ridge Area Health District is allocating COVID-19 vaccinations specifically to Black and Brown people who live in the district." When a Facebook friend posted the notice on her page, my eyes slid past it. It was for real Black and Brown people. Still, every time I was on social media I read it again.

"This isn't meant for me, right?" I showed the sign-up to my husband Jackson one night after dinner. He had already gotten his vaccine because of his job.

"Why not you?"

"It's probably intended for people who are poor or can't speak English."

"Where does it say that?"

I looked at the wording again. It didn't say that. But I knew it wasn't meant for me. I didn't belong with this group. Everyone would know it.

"Look at the next paragraph," Jackson said. "It says: 'People interested in receiving a vaccine should get on as many vaccine lists as possible and take advantage of the first opportunity they are given. This is only one list.'"

"So?"

"So, if you have the chance to get the vaccine, you should take it," Jackson said. "I worry about you. I wish you could have gotten the vaccine before me."



At a recent checkup, my doctor said he was concerned about my blood pressure.

"But I've always had low blood pressure," I said. "Just like my mother."

"What about your father?"

"His might be a little high. But I always assumed I inherited my mother's medical profile, because we're both females."

"It doesn't work that way," the doctor said. "Since your father has high blood pressure, we need to keep an eye on yours from now on."

When I got home, I called my parents in New Jersey and got them both on speaker phone.

"My doctor said I might have high blood pressure. Yours isn't that high, is it, Dad?"

My mother launched into Tagalog, every phrase an exclamation.

"Ano ba?! May sakit ka ba?! Hay nako!"

"Mom. I'm fine. I'm not sick."

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"But your blood pressure is high?"

"Yeah, it's a little high."

"Susmaryosep!"

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. She was complaining to the holy family now.

"Anyway, Dad. How's your blood pressure?"

"High, *anak*. My doctor just put me on a new medication to try to get it down." He spoke with relish as if he had found bananas on sale at the supermarket.

"Please take care of yourself, Dad. Not so much ice cream, okay?" He loved his evening ice cream and the crumb cake from Shop Rite with inches of streusel on top.

"I'll be okay, *anak*. At least we have our vaccine now. *You* take care of yourself."

When my mother doesn't want to hear something, she asks the same question over and over. "You have high blood pressure?"

"Maybe."

"You have high blood pressure?"

"The doctor thinks I might."

"You have high blood pressure?"

"I'll call you in a few days. Love you!"

Ten minutes later, I got a text from her.

"*Anak*, you have to take care. Eat lots of ginger and garlic. I heard it's good for blood pressure. You want me to send you some? Love you and God bless. p.s. Please be careful driving."



In the end, I registered on the Black and Brown sign-up. They were randomly selecting people on the list. What were the chances I'd get chosen anyway?

That Saturday, I got a phone call from the Blue Ridge Health District asking if I could get to the local rec center by four o'clock.

"Yes, but I'm not African American," I said.

"Are you Brown?"

"Yes?" I sounded like a kid not sure if they gave the teacher the right answer.

"That works. See you before four." She hung up.

For a moment I stared at my phone like it would disappear. Then I went to find Jackson in the front yard; he was filling up the bird feeder.

"Guess what?" I said. "I got a phone call to go to the rec center before four to get the vaccine."

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"Let's go." Jackson grabbed his keys. He started the car and barely waited for me to shut my door before heading down the driveway.

When Jackson and I first started dating, I loved going on car rides with him, the longer the better. They were opportunities for us to talk, just the two of us. I would look over from my seat and see this guy who was like a newly discovered country still waiting to be explored.

More than two decades later, the only thing we were exploring was a possible speeding ticket.

"They're not closing until four. We'll get there in time," I said.

"I just want to make sure," he said and continued to drive ten miles over the speed limit.

"What if they don't let me in?" I said.

"Why wouldn't they let you in? They just called you."

"What if they see that I'm not Brown enough? What if I'm not the Brown they mean?"

Jackson stopped the car at an intersection and turned to look at me. "Rowena. You are Brown."



He wasn't supposed to say that.

Didn't everyone in my world think of me as White? In fact, most of my friends had forgotten all about my skin, even including me in the collective "we" when referring to themselves as a racial group. Then there was the friend who likened me to her disabled neighbor.

"When I got to know her better, I didn't notice her legs at all," she said. "It's like I don't see that there's anything wrong anymore."

The neighbor and I were superheroes. We were shape-shifters, rearranging our images at will, disappearing so all that this friend could see was a mouth talking in a void. And like any superhero, I was the one who decided what form to take; I was the one who decided what was right or wrong; I was the one who could feel hurt about the unseen human underneath.

Last week, Jackson and I finished watching a short television series called WandaVision, derived from the Avengers movie franchise. The main character Wanda was a woman who used her superhero powers to create a Hollywood-perfect, suburban life with her husband and children. She cast a spell so that any catastrophe or outlier that threatened her happiness was snapped away with a blink of her powerful eyes.

Had I done that? Had I created a delusion, a White Rowena to live the perfect all-American life that I had read about in books and seen on TV? Had I relegated my parents to a gag reel, or even worse, the cutting room floor? I looked over at my White husband with his Southern family and boarding school education. Hadn't he been playing along with me? But now, he'd just gone off script.

"I'm Brown?" I said.

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I started to hear myself. My reality started shifting inside of me, all over me, like I was a Wonder Twin activating. For Wanda, too many things out of her control started happening at once, and in the end, she had to let go of her carefully designed life in order to save herself and those around her. In doing so, she transformed into someone unsettling and scary: Scarlet Witch, a being with untapped powers.

Pulling up my sleeve, I gazed at my arm. It was brown.

"I'm Brown," I said.

"You're Brown," Jackson said.

And then I laughed, like I had just heard the funniest joke of all. Like I was the bird who sang outside my window every morning at dawn.



"I'm gonna go to Reid's for some milk while you're in there. We're running low," Jackson said when we drove up to the rec center. "Call me when you're done, okay?"

On my way to the building, I walked past a blond woman who was packing some boxes at a table on the sidewalk. An African American man greeted me outside of the rec center entrance, his eyes smiling above his mask. "Welcome!" he said. "Just go over to that lady over there, and she'll help you out." He pointed to the open door. A woman with a red shirt was standing inside, beckoning.

"Hi, darlin'!" the woman said. "You're here for your Covid shot, right?"

"Yes." Everyone was being so friendly. What had I been expecting?

A 40-ish Asian-American woman administered my vaccine. "My name is Nora Chen," she said. "I'm a nurse practitioner. We're giving the Moderna vaccine today." She wore a yellow sweater with pale blue flowers around the collar. "Is that okay?"

"Of course," I said.

After she gave me my shot and scheduled my second dose, she gestured toward the middle of the room, where folding chairs had been arranged six feet apart. "Now you just need to sit in one of those chairs for 15 minutes so we can make sure you feel all right, and then you'll be good to go."

I thanked her and sat down.

On my right, a Black couple had pushed their chairs together and held hands. They were dressed like they were going to church or a special dinner out. On my left, a young Black woman in yoga pants was typing on her iPhone, the newest model. Behind her sat an Asian man who was probably in his early 70s. He leaned forward like he was ready to bolt the moment his waiting period was over.

In the seat near him was an Indian woman around my age. She was wearing a sari and reading a dog-eared book. I wondered what the title was. A pregnant woman with curly brown hair the same color as her skin sat down at Nora Chen's table. She took off her cardigan.

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For the next 15 minutes, I just sat. And for reasons I was just beginning to understand, I felt completely at ease, like I was an alien who had finally found my own people. For most of my life, I had surrounded myself with White people, as if I was a chameleon who could turn White at their touch. White Rowena.

But these people around me today understood. They knew what it was like to feel uncomfortable and different because of their skin. They understood what it felt like to be dismissed and stereotyped. Maybe some of them had been called “exotic” and “foreign.” Maybe some of them when they were kids tried to scrub their skin with soap to see if it would get lighter. And maybe some of them had run away from that identity, just as I had.

My 15 minutes were up. “Do you want one of these?” an elderly man asked me when I stood. He held out a roll of stickers with “I got my Covid-19 vaccine!” printed on them.

“Yes, please.” I took a sticker and placed it on my shirt for everyone to see.

As I headed down the sidewalk outside, the woman I’d seen earlier approached me. “Do you want a box?” She held it in her hands, ready to place it in my arms.

“What’s in it?”

“Canned goods and other packaged food. There’s also a little bottle of dish soap. Really useful.”

Oh. “No, thank you.”

She looked disappointed. There were still a lot of boxes on the table. “You sure? There’s some good stuff in here.”

“Thanks anyway,” I said, and walked away.

The thing with Wanda was, once she turned into Scarlet Witch she couldn’t turn back again. Was Brown Rowena here to stay? If so, what would her powers be?



A green Subaru was idling by the curb.

“I thought you were going to Reid’s. I was just about to text you,” I said as I opened the door.

“I wanted to make sure you’d be okay, so I stuck around a few more minutes,” Jackson said.

“No Reid’s?”

“Nah.” He smiled at me. “You were quick. Let’s see that arm.”

I showed him my Band-Aid.

“Do you feel okay?” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, I do.”

“Then let’s go get some milk,” he said, and reached over and held my hand.

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At the end of WandaVision, we discover that Wanda had conjured up her fantasy husband through memories and thin air, and ultimately had to say goodbye to him once her spell dissolved. I drove off in our old Subaru, not with a simulated hero, but with a man who sang Little Feat songs off key and who filled my birdfeeder because I liked to watch the chickadees.

Jackson hadn't been cosplaying with White Rowena all these years. Deep down, I knew that. Our marriage wasn't a fantasy; a blink of an eye didn't clean up all of our messes or solve all of our problems. Our moments of laughter and happiness weren't accompanied by laugh tracks. Our life was more than two dimensions. And I realized, there was no White Rowena or Brown Rowena. There was just Rowena.



The next morning, I woke up and looked at my sleeping husband. After a few minutes, his eyes opened partway.

"Did you marry me because you didn't think you could do any better?" I said.

"What?" He yawned and stretched his arms.

"Did you marry me because you couldn't do any better?"

"Huh? No."

"Did you marry me despite the color of my skin? Did you settle?"

He was awake now.

"I married you because you are the person I fell in love with. Your skin is part of you."

"But did you—" I was doing that thing my mother does.

"There was no settling involved. I married you because I love you."



They say that high blood pressure can limit your life. A vaccine can prolong it.

What about love?

Outside our window, the bird began to sing.

"Believe him. Believe him. Believe him."