

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/3

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The Outside of a Dog

-There is an old adage; there is nothing so good for the inside of a man than the outside of a horse. Maybe so, but whoever said it, obviously never had a good dog...

"Damn it, Scarlett."

Pete's feet searched the dark floor in a clumsy, semi-circular motion. He clicked on the lamp on his bedside table and located his glasses. One house shoe lay beside the bed. A recalcitrant shock of thin grey hair shot skyward from his forehead.

"Where's my shoe?"

Scarlett lay on her dog bed a few feet away. Though she was now awake, she did not move. Her brow furrowed slightly as she rolled her eyes in his direction. It was early for her.

"Scarlett... You thief. Bring me that shoe."

Pete was never a fan of wood flooring in the bedroom. It felt bone chilling cold on his feet first thing in the morning. Dottie insisted. Carpet was too hard to clean with a dog and a kid in the house. He came in from the fields one day and it was all gone. The new wood floor was almost complete when he walked in. He felt a brief flash of anger but let it pass. He loved Dottie more than the carpet and truthfully, the wood looked nice. He resigned himself to just being more intentional about wearing house shoes. For the last 15 years he always knew where his house shoes were at any given time.

Scarlett moved her head a little in his direction. Her body language and facial expression conveyed an aura of annoyance at being disturbed to search for a missing house shoe - even if she was the one who swiped it during the night. She pushed her front feet out forward, dipped her chest to the floor and yawned. Big stretch. The slightly chewed house shoe, still moist with saliva at the toe, lay by the edge of her bed. She picked it up in her mouth and trotted over to where Pete sat on the edge of his bed. She dropped it at his feet and propped her chin on his knee. Her eyes seemed to say, "I'm sorry". Pete knew better. Repentance implies a desire to abstain from a particular act or behavior. It would just be a matter of days before this whole scenario would play out again. Pete knew it. Scarlett knew it. Pete cupped her head in his hands. He gently wadded up her ears and rubbed the sides of her face. Her thick tail thumped approvingly against the bedside table.

"Time to get up."

Nagging aches awakened in his back and knees, radiating up, down, out, and around, as he slowly straightened himself to full, somewhat stooped, height. He began to shuffle toward the bathroom, each step getting slightly longer and stronger than the last. Standing in front of the toilet, he fished around in the opening at the front of his pajama pants.

Come here you little bastard.

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His fingers located their quarry and aimed at the bowl between his toes. Seconds ticked by. Scarlett paced anxiously.

“Just a minute, damn it.”

Pete sighed, remembering a time when he had no trouble locating his normally turgid organ at this hour. He vaguely recalled the sensation of vigor and stamina that had gradually evaporated from his body over the last decade or so; his crippled man-hood a harsh metaphor for the immutable wrath of time. Urine began to trickle into the toilet bowl at a frustratingly slow rate. He tapped the last of the dribbles and stuffed his shriveled-up relic back into his pajamas. Scarlett led the way to the kitchen.

Pete flipped the switch on the coffee maker as he made his way to the back door. It hissed and gurgled and belched to life, extruding a thin, black stream filling the carafe below. Pete watched Scarlett investigate all the familiar spots around the house, do her business, find a stick to chew on, then return to the back door where she stood and pleaded with her eyes to be let in. Pete acquiesced. A few minutes later, dressed and coffee in hand, Pete opened the door to the garage.

“Come on girl. Time to go.”

The sun was just beginning to peep above the eastern horizon. Pete gently laid the fishing rods in the bottom of the boat and stowed his tackle box carefully in the bow. He opened the passenger side door of the truck and Scarlett lifted her front feet onto the doorsill. Years earlier she would have leapt gracefully onto the seat, but a lifetime of glorious wear and tear had left her hips stiff and sore. Pete fully understood how she felt, and he gently lifted her back feet up onto the passenger side floorboard. Scarlett climbed into her spot on the seat and sat down trembling with anticipation. Pete checked the boat trailer one final time, then climbed into the driver’s seat and pulled slowly out of the driveway.

Familiar sights paraded by the windows of the truck as they drove. A montage of snapshots, present moments hearkening to past experience that both illustrate and define the life they’ve shared. They passed the neighbor’s farm where the boy would often go play or read comic books with friends after school; where Dottie would spend days canning garden vegetables with the farmer’s wife in the summer and where Pete would while away countless hours in conversation with the farmer about the weather and commodity prices and politics and more about the weather. The gas station on the corner, where year after year Pete went to buy fuel for the truck and the farm equipment, sometimes on credit when crop prices or yields were disappointing and cash flow was tight. It smelled like cigarettes and diesel fuel and the display in the glass case at the register always contained the same collection of air fresheners, pocket knives, tobacco tins and lighter fluid for as long as anyone could remember. Pete and Scarlett rode in silence watching the world wake up around them through the bug speckled lens of the truck windshield.

Pete slowed and turned into the parking lot of the local diner. Several trucks already occupied their usual spots outside the front door. He stopped alongside the building where there was enough room for the boat without obstructing traffic.

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"You wait here girl. I'll be right back."

Scarlett turned her head to acknowledge him but did not budge from her spot. None of this routine was new to her. Years ago, sometimes the boy would wait with her. In those days she sat in the middle. She never complained, content to be between her people, but when afforded the opportunity to be by the window, she would stick her head into the wind and experience the torrent of smells that bombarded her senses. When the boy got older, he sometimes went into the diner with Pete leaving Scarlett by herself in the truck. At first, she seemed anxious, as if wondering whether they would return, but they always did. Looking back, it was both foreshadowing and preparation for when adulthood would claim him - physically, emotionally, intellectually - and leave her alone, the sole sentry of the automotive outpost, if only for the ten minutes it took Pete to get sausage biscuits and a coffee refill to go.

Scarlett eyed the shifter knob on the steering column. Pocked with tiny depressions from prior trips, she leaned over, sniffed, and tested the resiliency once more in her back teeth. Inside, Pete chatted with the cashier at the checkout counter while he waited on his order. Darlene emerged from the kitchen with a bag in hand while they were still deciding who had the most rain in their rain gauge last week. Pete smiled briefly and looked away. He felt himself suck in and straighten up. A lifetime ago the round little wrinkled woman had been supple and shapely. He vaguely remembered the smooth texture and resilient weight of her adolescent breast in his hand that clumsy, drunken night after the football game. Unconsciously, he swiped at his left earlobe with the tip of his index finger, as if wiping away the unwelcome memory of a long gone, ill-advised kiss. Small towns provide no safe harbor from the wake of the past and shame has a long half-life. The same twenty or thirty people cycle through your life experience, day after day, year after year, constant reminders of ancient regret. Pete paid the cashier and returned to the truck.

"Goddamn it, Scarlett!"

Pete shoved her violently to the passenger side.

"I just replaced that knob."

Scarlett cowered and looked away. Pete breathed deeply and felt a familiar upwelling of guilt in his chest, her defeated posture reminding him of the boy when he became the object of Pete's wrath during his youth. He was not a troublemaker, nor was he weak or lazy. He just had different ideas of what constituted work.

"Here..."

Pete unfolded the wrapper from her egg biscuit and parceled it out in bite-sized pieces, a peace offering. Scarlett gingerly accepted the morsels from his outstretched fingers and with a single deft chew/swallow motion she consumed each bite eagerly. The boy used to feed her the biscuit. His face would blossom into a wide smile when she ate from his hand. Pete soaked up the sound of his musical giggle as Scarlett licked the biscuit residue from his fingers. He was convinced feeding Scarlett the biscuit was more thrilling for the boy than catching fish. No matter, either way, they were together, and it was comfortable.

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Pete guided the truck and trailer out of the parking lot and onto the highway. The sun was visible on the eastern horizon casting long westward shadows. Its energy warmed the cool morning air creating an ethereal mist rising gracefully from the dew-moist vegetation carpeting the fields and fallow ground that bordered the roadway. It was his favorite time of day. For years he would rise before sunup - especially during planting and harvest season. Dottie was always up with him. They sipped coffee and pondered the weather, the growing conditions, the crops, the prices of fertilizer and herbicide, the price of corn, wheat and soybeans, the boy's future, their future. He ate a light breakfast and headed to the shop to ready equipment before heading to the fields to tend to whatever needing tending. Dottie inventoried the pantry and the icebox, planning the day's meals and the logistics of her to do list. Getting the boy off to school was always item number one.

Pete thought back to when Dottie first got sick. She became too weak and tired to make coffee in the morning. He took over that task, taking a cup to her bedside to seek her counsel before starting his day. The boy was old enough at that point to get himself ready for school. He seemed aloof, a little bewildered and profoundly sad during that time. It was only in retrospect that Pete realized how unmoored the experience had left him, the boy too. Pete knew the land, the equipment, the markets, the plants. The boy knew school, words, numbers, formulas, theories. Dottie knew them. She knew their likes, their dislikes, their favorite foods, their favorite activities, the comfort of their routines. She made the house a home. Pete didn't realize any of this of course until the cancer settled into her vital organs and took her away. He never realized how much of his ability to be a father depended on her ability to be a mother. He tried to be what the boy needed. The boy didn't know what he needed. He only knew he didn't have what he once had. They each sought comfort in what they knew - Pete in the land, the boy in his books. They gradually became more isolated from one another. The boy became a young man and moved away to the university, consumed and content with books and ideas. Pete stayed put and continued to turn the soil, year after year.

Scarlett watched it all unfold, confused and anxious. After the boy moved out, Pete would occasionally catch her pacing and whining, going from empty room to empty room, as if she were expecting him to suddenly reappear. Never allowed on the furniture, she began to nap in Dottie's chair. Pete turned a blind eye. One morning Pete found a worn-out sweatshirt wadded up, flattened, covered with hair in the corner of the chair cushion. It belonged to the boy. Scarlett had retrieved it off the shelf from his closet and added it to her shrine. She became Pete's shadow, as if attempting to fill the void with a constant presence. Their conversations became more frequent, one verbal participant and one non-verbal. The emptiness became a little less suffocating, and though the darkness never relented, life went on.

Pete slowed the truck and tapped the blinker lever downward. The road to the pond was unpaved and pocked with irregularities. He navigated cautiously. Scarlett sensed their destination was near and a nervous energy welled up inside her. Pete backed the boat to the water's edge and got out to ready the launch. He whistled to Scarlett.

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“Come on.”

Scarlett bounded off the seat and ran a lap around the truck and trailer before stopping by the bow. She looked anxiously at the boat and bounced up and down on her front feet wanting to jump up but knowing she would never make it.

“Settle down. I’ll have her in the water in just a second.”

Pete climbed back into the truck and eased the trailer down into the water. Scarlett heard the truck engine turn off and the ratchet of the emergency brake. Pete pushed the boat off the trailer then pulled it around onto the shore. Scarlett leapt onto the bow, forgetting about any stiffness in her hips that she may have been experiencing earlier. Pete climbed into the boat behind her.

The sun was above the eastern horizon now. Its rays glinted off the small ripples on the surface of the water like thousands of flickering lights. Soft morning winds waxed and waned effortlessly. A gauzy veil of shape-shifting fog hugged the surface of the pond. Whistles of wood ducks rising off the water drifted on the breeze. The smells of mud and water, fish and moss filled Pete with a familiar sense of belonging. A sense of calm gently washed over him. Scarlett settled into her spot on the bow. The angled rays of the morning sun illuminated her coat. She basked in its warmth.

Pete fumbled through the tackle box. His fingers brushed a silvery broken back minnow that he rarely used. The boy had given it to him for Father’s Day some years ago.

Not that one.

It was a fine lure but losing it would be unbearable. He located the white, top water jig he was seeking. As he tied it to his line, his eye was drawn to the empty seat at the front of the boat where the boy used to sit. For a second, he saw the memory of a thoughtful 12-year-old with curious eyes and windswept hair before him studying the flora and the fauna, more concerned with observing than obtaining, with understanding than consuming. He saw an innocent smile that all but disappeared after Dottie was gone. He saw the boy he thought he knew but never really did. He cast, and as his line sped gracefully toward the bank he was flooded simultaneously with peace and loneliness in this sacred space.

Scarlett heard the zing of the line leaving the reel and turned her head in Pete’s direction. She studied Pete’s face. She studied the empty seat in the bow. Pete studied her.

Does she know? Does she miss him, too? Does she know how much I miss him? She seems to...

As he slowly, carefully jigged the lure back to the boat, Pete found himself quieted and somehow hopeful. He glanced at Scarlett and softly uttered in her direction.

“I hope he’s happy.”

Part prayer, part declaration, the antecedent understood, the boy, the boy named Aaron, the boy named Aaron whose comfort came in the form of knowledge not nature. The boy named Aaron who desperately missed

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his mother and never understood his father. The boy named Aaron who sought solace in distance; distance from the suffocating pall that befell his unrecognizable household once his mother was gone.

He hoped Aaron was happy.

Scarlett studied his face and sighed, a voiceless witness to the invisible ache. Fully present. Fully engaged. Not capable of comprehending the complex range of human emotion, but finely attuned to its wavelength. Somehow perfectly equipped as healer, confidant, companion, yet blissfully unencumbered by the role. She lay her head between her front paws and listened attentively to the sounds - the sound of the wind stirring the leaves in the trees, ripples lapping the sides of the boat, the mechanical whir of rod and reel plying the water - the sounds of succor and solace, sustenance, and healing, seeping into the brokenness, content in the moment, oblivious, yet crucial.