

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

*Po Bhattacharyya*

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

*Notes from a summer on the road*

#### **Day 1 / Why am I leaving?**

It is summer in the high country, and the air is charged with dandelions and smoke. Snow lingers on the highest peaks. Horseflies gather to drink my blood. I am moving quickly, too quickly, away from a life that was perfectly good. Perhaps I am escaping tedium, predictability. I tell myself there is a flight to catch, an apartment to fill with new essentials. The mockingbird outside my window in Oakland learns new songs each year. Perhaps I want to learn new songs too.

#### **Day 2 / What lies between sky and earth?**

Sometimes, a lake. The crust yawns open, a whale jumps out, teacups spill their scalding fluid. Later, cold clear water pools in the basin and invasive fish circle their young. A long-dead president declares the lake a National Park, and here we are, my brother and I, picnicking at the precipice.

#### **Day 4 / How do I sleep at night?**

Each night, I seek shelter in a fresh forest. I do not pay for my patch of earth. My nest is fabric pulled taut between poles. In the half-blindness of evening, I trample on ferns, then apologize. Darkness falls, spiders spin their webs about me. I lie there and wonder what it's like to grow roots.

#### **Day 5 / Are there mountains in my closet?**

On the road, it becomes clear that I have concealed too much for too long. I am a volcano chained down by ski lifts. Am I keeping secrets for your benefit or mine? If you don't yet know that some mountains are queerer than others, perhaps you never will. It is about time we all sneezed freely, don't you think don't you think don't you?

*Mount Hood, Oregon*

#### **Day 7 / Is there a mouse in my car?**

It seems my Honda is more than metal and paint. I wake up each morning to yet more evidence (pellets, nibbling) of a surprise companion. One day, I find a roll of toilet paper chewed to its core. Irrefutable proof, some may say, that I am transporting vermin cross-country. But there is a different story too: here is another being trying to build a home.

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### *Somewhere in Washington State*

#### **Day 10 / How do I say goodbye to the ocean?**

In Washington, on an island ruled by squirrels, I step off the hiking trail and sample a salmonberry. I try to find the salt in it, the waves. That afternoon, a juvenile bald eagle follows our boat to shore. When I look back at the sea, I can see dolphins breaching. Ahead, old-growth forests of Doug fir. Louise points out Mount Baker through the clouds. I stick out my tongue and taste the sun. I know I'll be back.

#### **Day 12 / Where has all the ice gone?**

All around me, snow burns off slopes. Glaciers turn mottled and gray. The mountains are lifting their skirts ever higher. It feels like the end of something. In the world of my tropical childhood, cold is fleeting, distant, diaphanous. I long to grasp it in my hand, comfort it, command it to endure. But I am a human being who pumps carbon into the air for fun. Maybe the best I can do is stay away.

#### **Day 14 / Are goats smarter than pigs that are smarter than dogs?**

A little after sunset, a mountain goat hoists its front hooves onto the wooden railing. Light is falling, and the alpine lake is throwing up mist like a petulant child. I can smell the pines rustle. The scientist between my ears whispers something about sweat and salt, a factoid about herbivores' needs. For the moment, I pay it no attention. There is a goat on two legs looking out over a cliff. A fucking goat.

### *Glacier National Park, Montana*

#### **Day 15 / Should I drive or walk?**

There is more than one way to explore the wilderness. The choice is a cocktail of questions. Do I want to see people? No. Do I want to hear car engines or stereos? No. Where are all the bears? There where the roads are not. What will I eat for dinner? Whatever the heck I can carry on my back. How will I sleep? A pebble against my clavicle, splendidly.

#### **Day 18 / Why am I at a table full of Republicans?**

I'm at a brewery in rural Wyoming. Sitting is better than standing, because there is beer in my aorta and a flimsy plate of pulled pork leaking sauce onto my palm. The Republicans at the table are people too. I wish to find common ground. I think of Harleys, guns, and, for some reason, shepherd's pie. My stereotypes are imperfect. Into my ear, Chelsea whispers something she dare not say out loud: "I don't sleep with men anymore, but I still like carrots."

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### Day 19 / Should I skip the Badlands?

Absolutely not. It is best to go at sunset, around the time that old men set up tripods on top of crumbling hills. There are bighorn sheep on a slope, the memory of a stream in mud cracks. I see dust plumes kicked up by tires. Regina Spektor is playing in the space above me. When my eyes close, a ladder appears. I push it away because I am in the middle of my life.

### *Badlands National Park, South Dakota*

### Day 21 / What do lakes like to drink?

Dropstones from icebergs past, leadwood carved by rot, carcasses of fish and frogs and freshwater seals. In the middle of Lake Superior lies an island forty miles long. It is covered in forest and roamed by moose and wolves. Every winter, when the lake freezes over, animals from the mainland wander in to forage and frolic. But the wispy ice of recent winters has starved the island of love. There are only two wolves left on Isle Royale, a father and daughter marching steadily toward oblivion.

### Day 23 / Can I find beauty in the post-industrial?

In Maumee Bay State Park, on an artificial mound ("Big Hill") overlooking Lake Erie, Souf and I talk about love. The grass has stretched the length of summer; the golden blades move drowsily. A ship in the distance mounts its horn. "You should allow yourself to be angry," I tell Souf. Then I lose my train of thought to a button of light at my feet. A firefly!

I look up. It is evening now, and there are hundreds of buttons, rising from the grass, emerging from the stand of trees in the distance. The fireflies are blinking, wafting, diving, all manner of lovely verbs in the twilight by a lake. On the walk back, I wonder if I could ever grow anesthetized to their beauty.

### Day 25 / What next?

This journey ends with home. I park my car on a street peopled by self-made immigrants. Then I board a flight to India. I pause in Delhi for a ukulele lesson with Shayan. The easiest words to sing are these: "I'm yours."

When I arrive in Kolkata, it is hot and rainy and full of mangoes. I deliver my mother a present daily. My father and I pick the choicest eggplants, the plumpest chickens at the market. I take Ben to the High Court, and when they refuse to let us in, I hustle for passage. I visit my grandmother. She greets me with pickles and photographs. She reminds me that I am not so old yet; there's still time to become a doctor.

Later in the week, I sit diverse members of my family down and give them the news: I have emerged from my cocoon, and I am not a butterfly but a moth. A grotesque creature with hairy appendages, dirt-brown

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wings, and the power to love and dream. Spectacularly, even in that moment of shock, the planet keeps turning. That night, the rain pounds at my window. I am reading a good book, and I am content.