

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

Cole Kilhoffer
A Long Walk

The air was damp, and the sun had left as I carried Max, our thirteen-year-old dalmatian through the woods. My father's rifle slung across my shoulder. Max can no longer walk, I do not have trouble carrying him, he has been losing weight for months. Too weak to eat and too weak to continue. There is a path on my grandfather's farm, the same path my father has taken all of our past dogs. At the end of the path, there are four stones, Toby, Midnight, Benji, Scout. There is and always has been a shovel leaning against one of the stones. The path is long, and Max is staring at me. I look back down at him and wonder what he is thinking. Maybe he thinks we are going to play fetch like we have all these years, or maybe he thinks I am taking him to the vet. I hope he doesn't think it's the vet, he always hated that place. I hope he thinks nothing, I hope that he does not have the capacity to think critically. This is what I hope because how could I explain this?

"Max, you are sick and suffering." I might say,

"Let me go peacefully, do not let that bullet tear my skull." Might be his response, I would have no rebuttal.

He is too weak to fight me, and I have the feeling that he knows this is the last walk we will take together. He has been a good dog, someone left him in front of the mill when he was a pup and I brought him home to my wife, a week after we lost the baby. We were happy to have something to take care of. We never did have a child, but we always had Max. She died last year, liver cancer. I will be alone after tonight; my house will be empty. Maybe I will finally open that bottle we got for the wedding.

The wind blows through the trees, and I can almost hear a hymn. She never missed a Sunday, her favorite was "Joy to the World". I am not a religious man but if there is a heaven, I hope it is only for animals, they act on instinct. Animals are incapable of evil. If Max is capable of complex thought, I hope he will forgive me, or at least understand.

When I get to the stones, I lay Max on the damp grass and begin to dig. I finish the hole at around four feet. I sit on the edge next to his head and begin to stroke his fur.

"I'm sorry buddy"

He let out a whine and looked at me with his sad brown eyes. I began to cry, and he made his best effort to move his head to lick my hand. I picked him up and set him gently into the grave. My face was so contorted that I was having trouble looking through the scope, I put the barrel behind his ear and shot.

The hole doesn't take long to fill in. I find a stone and roll it to the head. It's a big piece of limestone so light it almost looks like marble. I put the gun back on my shoulder, without ejecting the case. I walk away from the grave with my arms laid bare. That's the thing about a gunshot wound, no one has been able to describe it with great depth. I think to myself as I walk away,

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"Maybe after the bullet left his head there are a few moments of consciousness left. A few moments of staring at me while dopamine and all the other death chemicals come shooting out from different areas of the body until reality is no longer visible and everything comes like a dream. Like a wave gliding up and down the sand, there is no motive, no reason, or grand plan. The water is just moved by the moon, so too is our mind moved by these chemicals to understand infinity. Infinite nothingness."

That is what I think of when I walk away from my dog's grave, "infinite nothingness".

As I drive home, I turn on the radio, the local football team is playing. I gather that the home team is down by 30 in the fourth quarter.

"Just a beat-down," The announcer says

I listen to the game the whole drive home and sit in the driveway until it is over.

"Ya know, you have to give it to these kids. Down 30 and they're still running."

They lost and I walked into an empty house. That night I dreamed of my wife, it was the summer after college, and I was stuck in my hometown.

She had the thickest Alabama accent I had ever heard. You could warm your hands with the color of her hair, bright red. I don't know where she was or what she was before I knew her, I never asked. In little towns like the one I grew up in there is not much to do, so we drink. In middle school they sneak their father's brandy into secret basements, in high school they drive their trucks, drunk through the woods, and once 21 the only bar in town is the place to be. It used to be a fire station, it has football helmets from the local high school team, one in the center is from '82 the team that won state, my father's name is on it. I am the only man to attend college from my class, when I come home, I always feel like the butt of the joke. We talk about high school and the football games which we shared or all the poor women that sleep with them.

They hadn't banned smoking when I met her, I read somewhere in college that Kerouac smoked Lucky Strikes. Most of my time I spent my "crazy" nights in this bar watching the local news and chain-smoking. The same woman was predicting the weather now, as well as when I was in high school, she was older now and her makeup was brighter. It was December and the prediction was 30 degrees the rest of the week, no snow. I sighed and thought about the brown grass that wasn't going anywhere. After the weather segment, there was a special story about the new bypass being built, from the bank to the wood-yard, hugging the side of the valley. Because of this, there were a thousand construction workers in town, raising the town population from 1,000 to 2,000. It was the most alive the town has been in my lifetime. Men from Kentucky, Alabama, Louisiana, and Georgia. The 1,000 square foot bar was flooded every night after sundown, most of the 1,000 would be there, filling the bar and parking lot. It was impossible to hear anything in the bar other than the drunk workers and Hank Williams. The subtitles were on the television, and wrong half the time.

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Every few minutes a bearded man would bump into me, sometimes causing me to spill my drink, and buy me a new one while he asked what I did through slurred words. I told all that asked,

“I’m an artist”

Then each one would proceed to look back to their buddies, laugh, slap me on the back, and wish me luck.

“Good thing it’s not deer season” my old man once joked at the bar with these workers. The southern laborers hadn’t prepared for the cold winter and the local sportsman shop was sold out of brown Carhartt jackets.

These were good nights, even if my childhood friends didn’t meet much. Even if the town rejected me, I stayed. The temperature of the cooler in the bar was perfect, I still have yet to drink a better beer. Sometimes when everyone was tired of Hank Williams and Johnny Cash someone would queue “The Killers” on the jukebox. That is what was playing the first time I saw her.

It was the beginning of a Friday night and the story about the by-pass just ended when the doors opened, usually, the entering of new people didn’t catch my attention. What did catch my attention is that an unusual number of drunken workers went silent. I turned my eyes away from the television for the first time all night and fixed them to the door.

I don’t believe that moments themselves are poetic, I believe that we look back on our lives and the details of those moments, then they become poetic. I read somewhere once that,

“This blood wasn’t always beautiful, once it was just red.”

When I think back to that moment in the bar the first thing, I remember is her hair, it was so light under the door lamp, it reminded me of rosé.

She stood five feet six inches tall. She wore tight blue jeans, flat bottom shoes, and a big Carhartt jacket that I would come to find out was her fiancé’s. She had never come in the bar before and following closely behind her was a tall man in a button-up with the sleeves rolled. I quickly grabbed the nearest worker and inquired about her and the man in the suit. He laughed and said,

“That’s the CEO’s fiancée, best piece of ass I’d ever seen”

I was surprised with myself in this moment, there was no feeling of disappointment. I could not turn my eyes away from her almost translucent skin. I thought I could see the outline of her heart and it looked the same as mine.

The CEO was a big man, he had a pinup girl tattooed on his forearm. They never touched, nor did they speak, but there was a tension in the room every time she started a conversation with another man. Whoever the unlucky man was would quickly make an excuse saying,

“I need to piss” or

“Beer’s empty”

I could see the half-full bottle as he walked away. Every time this

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would happen the corners of her mouth would turn down slightly. I recognized her sadness, I felt it too. Her eyes were green, and the pupils were always small when she was anxious. That was the best part of our wedding day, her open pupils, so big I could see the words forming in her mind before she said,

“I do”

The dream continued past that first night, to all the Friday nights during that winter and the eye contact that became more frequent. Then the conversations in the bar, she spoke French and preferred absinthe. That same spring when the snow had gone away the run-ins started. First at the grocery store, then outside of my house while she was “walking her dog” on the opposite end of town. It was the summer solstice when she kissed me for the first time, at dusk, when I finally got the nerve to take her away from the town. The dam was the best sunset around and I drove fast to get there, she smiled the whole time. We stood at the end of the dock while an orchestra of baritone frogs played for us. The sun sunk slowly down the mountain, trying to catch every moment of our lips.

That summer there were fights, guns pulled, and love made. She left her fiancé for me, and he left town. I didn’t pay for another drink that whole summer. It was the best summer of my life; a smile never left her lips. When fall came around I asked her where she wanted to go, and she told me she wanted to stay right where we were. I agreed and we were married for 10 years before she got sick. In those 10 years both my parents died, and I inherited the house. She died 2 months after the diagnosis.

I dreamt this all, all 10 years in one night. I woke up with the morning sun on my face turning my tears to honey. I heard the morning birds singing and laid, with my eyes open. In the light I saw dust particles floating, I watched them move helplessly through the air. I did not try to understand, I didn’t want to. It doesn’t have to be meaningful. Right now, it can just be dust.