

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

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THE MISPLACE

Dr. Cabot Mahler discovered a door deep in the bowels of Boston City Hospital while hunting for a spare bed to take a brief nap between shifts. He'd never noticed this particular door, so he stooped to pass through. On the other side was a room so vast it could easily have contained the entire hospital and ten more like it. Dazed by its enormity, Mahler drifted into one of its hundreds of brightly lit aisles. A horde of laughing children streamed ahead of him. Barking dogs pursued the children. Then, without any discernible signal, the chased became chasers, and they all tumbled back in the opposite direction.

One of the girls broke off from the rest. She was perhaps ten, but had a serious and superior air. She took Mahler's hand and offered to guide him.

"I have to get back to the hospital," he explained. "Just a quick nap on an empty bed. That's all. Got to get back. So much work. So many dying."

She clasped his hand more tightly and asked, "You know who I am?"

"You look familiar."

She seemed delighted to hear it. She summoned her friends, who circled Mahler. The dogs flopped to the floor panting. Mahler saw there were cats, too, with names like Mittens and Simba. Each also looked startlingly familiar.

"I'm a milk carton girl," she said brightly. She pointed at one of the boys. "He's a billboard boy."

The billboard boy pointed to the nearest dog. "He's a lamppost-poster mutt."

"We're all lost," the girl and the boy said in unison.

"Lost?"

"Gone missing," said the girl. "Come with me. You'll see what I mean."

Mahler allowed himself to be drawn down the aisle. The milk carton girl pointed at a shelf of lost motivation. Another of lost wallets. A third of lost earrings.

"Really any half of any pair has a place here," she said.

Behind them, the milk carton-and-billboard children resumed their play with the dogs and cats Mahler recognized from handwritten pages stapled to lampposts in city parks. They chased balls long since knocked into water traps or trapped in gutters or knocked over fences.

"Here's a bin of lost TV remotes," the milk carton girl said. "A pallet of lost life savings. Over there? Lost eyeglasses, other than the ones found on your forehead after you've been looking for them for an hour."

She didn't even bother to identify the mountains of socks lost in the dryer, which towered over them.

Of lost limbs there were many, stacked like an ambrotype of a Civil

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War field hospital, except that each was well-clad in dryer-lost socks, mittens and gloves, a sort of perfect macabre marriage where oneness wasn't despised.

Of minds thoroughly lost, there were also quite a few, and in many cases, delighted to be free of their bodies.

Lost Virginity? The place was awash in it.

Lost sleep? A great wall of Z's stretched far out of sight.

Mobile phone charging cords were wound in a yarn ball as high as a house. Moldering heaps of the lost arts of past ages--handwritten thank you notes, switch hitting, diagramming sentences, blacksmithing, pickling, and nomography--blocked the aisle.

Clean up, Mahler thought automatically, *in aisle six*.

The milk carton girl directed him to a different, unobstructed aisle, where the shelves glittered with hundreds of brass and silver keys. To Mahler, keys suggested treasure and secrets, but the girl explained that no one had ever lost a door lock, so keys had a name for uselessness in this room and not utility.

"So, where exactly are we?" Mahler asked. "What is this place?"

The milk carton girl frowned. She seemed never to have considered the question. She wasn't perhaps even conscious of being lost. She appeared neither panicked nor adrift. Not frantic. Not in search of a way back to some more familiar place. Indeed, this seemed to Mahler to be a critical distinction: she was missing, which was why her face had been put on the side of the milk carton, but she showed not the slightest sign of being lost. And yet, paradoxically, she couldn't say where she was.

Mahler felt compelled to broach the subject with his guide, but he realized it needed considerable delicacy. He didn't wish to alarm her or bring her attention to her plight.

On the other hand, recent experience prevented him from pussyfooting about. He'd spent these past weeks teetering between his bride's deathbed and the sick beds of those afflicted by the virus. He hugely resented the latter, and he'd therefore treated them with redoubled care, lest his resentment poison his judgment. He had volunteered for extra shifts. He had consoled himself with the efficient and sterile squeak of nursing shoes on linoleum, the whirr of machines, the audible IV drip, and the quiet certainty of the inevitable loss of everyone Mahler had ever treated or loved.

"Here," the girl said, "is lost patience."

Lost patience made Mahler think of lost patients. Like every physician, Mahler remembered the precise details of the day he lost his first patient. Killed him, actually. Not lost. A mistake with medication.

Skipping and tugging, the girl continued leading him toward the far end of the room, as if there were something there Mahler must see. Such was her patient urgency that Mahler's spirits rose. For the first time in weeks, he had something to look forward to.

And yet he couldn't stop thinking of his bride waking alone in her hos-

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pital bed without the comfort of his familiar touch, nor of the backlog of patients awaiting treatment on gurneys in the hospital's hallways. Mahler wished he had taken that giant ball of yarn that was in fact a knot of charger cords and played out the line as they moved away from the door by which he had entered, so he could find his way back.

"Come on," the girl said. "There's so much more to see."

Here were lost umbrellas, spread open like blue herons in flight. Here were log cabins composed entirely of tubes of lip balm. Reams of necessary but gone-missing paperwork. Lost teeth, both from hockey and those the tooth fairy never found. Crutches flung off by one commanded to walk and never recovered in all the fuss. Sex toys lost in hotel sheets for which no one ever came looking out of shame.

As his guide became increasingly more animated describing everything they saw without the least embarrassment, Mahler took it into his head that her excitement arose from relief at his having found her. No matter that Mahler hadn't been looking for her. No matter that it was she who had approached him. Inadvertent rescuers often stumbled upon people lost to others but unknown to them.

Examining his guide closely for the first time, Mahler decided that she had been crying, which seemed to support his surmise. Her cheeks were tear-stained, her eyes unnaturally bright. This evidence made him feel suddenly and inexplicably odious, as if by accepting her guidance, he was taking advantage of the girl's youth or predicament. He even questioned whether he ought to retain her sweaty little hand. Throughout his career, Mahler'd made a point of never allowing himself to be in a room with the door shut and only a female medical student or patient present. And that rule applied to adults. This was a child, and an abandoned or orphaned one at that. How much more important it was to avoid any appearance of impropriety.

"I have something to lose," Mahler remarked.

Oddly, though, his hospital life of just minutes before wasn't so much becoming lost as fleeing from him. He sensed time passing, the second hand moving, digits changing, events missed out on. Time he'd never make up. Patients who'd go untreated. The hospital's board of directors would afterward summon him to a somber meeting. The State Board of Medicine would commence a thorough investigation. He imagined the career he'd wanted since he was eight years old now in ashes, his hopes dashed, his mother crushed, his bride still dying.

His guide pulled on his hand playfully. She performed a little pirouette around him.

Lost tango, Mahler thought. No, last tango. Perhaps after the last one, it would become lost, an artifact of another era.

Here were the playing cards missing from the deck and replaced with a joker. Here was long lost treasure. Here was the one allen wrench missing from the set, which was always the very one needed.

But for the want of a nail, Mahler thought, and all the lost kingdoms came tumbling down on his head. He heard the knights put to the sword

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and the king beheaded and the women raped and their children's brains dashed out against the wall and the traitor's hands cut off from his arms, smoked over a fire, strung together with twine and looped over his head in a necklace to remind survivors not to take what wasn't theirs. Lost lives. Lost livelihoods. Lost souls.

Full of despair, Mahler felt adrift. The room, though brightly lit and antiseptic, seemed like an uncanny, sinister place, as if draped in Spanish moss and fog, perhaps without landmarks or street signs. Or, worse, with markers of place that were unreliable or ever changing. Mahler glanced over his shoulder, but he could no longer pick out the children and dogs at play, let alone the frame of the door through which he had passed.

Lost. Missing. Mislaced. These three words seemed to surge alongside Mahler and his guide and carry them like a tide toward the room's far end, if it even had an end. He imagined a deluge of things newly lost or newly missing, so that the room's far wall had ever to move and move to create space for all the terrible novelty.

Mahler, of course, had always been prone to absentmindedness. He lost keys, his stethoscope, his wedding ring, his temper. His bride used to complain that he'd have lost his head if it hadn't been attached. Mahler's customary response was that he'd rather lose his head than his deft fingertips, which told him far more in an examination than his eyes ever would.

Despite this tendency to lose anything not tied down, Mahler discovered none of his particular losses in the vast room--neither the first patient he killed, nor the companionship of his dying wife, nor the lost opportunity for children.

The latter--the children--made him wonder whether something could be missing that had never existed? He decided they could. Why not? How often had Mahler looked at a tableau--say, for example, a collection of presenting symptoms--and wondered, *What's missing here?* It was always harder to spot an absence of something that belonged than the presence of an anomaly. This was what made certain diagnoses so difficult. With respect to his wife, for example, Mahler had asked himself over and over, *What had he missed?* He couldn't bear the notion that there was no responsible party.

In the vast room, however, Mahler had no trouble picking out what was most glaringly absent--the person his wife had been before she took sick. A towering person. A goddess. A fierce fearless beauty who had stood on the sidewalk in scrubs and mask while bitter crowds marched with signs that said *Give me liberty or give me the virus*. People who shouted that Mahler's bride was no more than a stage actress hired to play nurse. People who filmed themselves on their own smartphones getting in her face and coughing on her, until he half-expected them to ask his bride if she minded doing a second take, because they had inadvertently put their thumb over the camera lens.

That woman. Who now lacked strength enough to pull the sheet over her own head.

Loss of mobility. Loss of the power of speech. Loss of consciousness. There was no sugarcoating it: Mahler was losing his wife bit by bit. So

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many categories of loss. Permanent and temporarily misplaced. Active and passive. He (actively) lost her, as an undercover spy might shake a tail on a busy street. Or, *she is lost* (through no fault or action of Mahler's). Which was it?

Mahler cried out his bride's name, but it came out hoarse. Even the milk carton girl barely noticed, and she pretended not to hear. Mahler had lost his voice. Perhaps he had also lost his way? He glanced back over his shoulder at the indistinguishable shelves, aisle on aisle, so that the room seemed to have no walls at all.

Am I lost, Mahler asked himself, temporarily or otherwise?

Back in the hospital world--he no longer thought of it as the *real* world--had he become a mystery to be solved? Had he hagiographers willing to posit an Assumption? Was he lost or missing or both?

Mahler was dying to pose these sorts of questions to his guide, but felt he had somehow lost his opportunity. He should have asked back at lost patience, which looked like storm clouds bubbling over in the kind of wire bin in which Walmart stored beach balls. He should have asked at lost sleep, a topic with which he was eminently familiar. What a pompous old fool he'd been (which, in his experience, was how most physicians ended up and many of them started as well) to think he had found the girl and that she was therefore relieved. Of course, he hadn't and she wasn't. To the contrary, she had found him. And he'd been wrong to have assumed her to be orphaned or abandoned. If she had lost her parents, would they not be here in the room, too? Was there not a chance of a happy reunion?

Eagerly, Mahler scanned shelf after shelf for lost loved ones, but he found almost none. Perhaps because they were rarely truly lost. Most times, Mahler reflected, the survivors know exactly where the bastards are, for better or worse, or have a strong suspicion. Heaven. Hell. Purgatory. Limbo. The cold, cold grave.

Mahler began to weep.

Lost dignity, he thought. Lost composure. Lost face. Here, they'll say, I lost myself. And if indeed he had, was it something that happened to him or something that he did to himself? Who was to blame?

When the virus had been but a rumor ten thousand miles away, Mahler had been trying to remember where he put his pager. By the time it became rooted in public consciousness, they had lost time to prepare.

Now, a fierce compulsion to put two and two together raced through his body. He wanted nothing more than to join things. To ball together every single one of those socks, whether they matched or not. To reunite the girl and her parents. He couldn't bear their solitariness any longer.

Was it to his bride's missing self, the person she had been, that the milk carton girl was guiding him? Mahler scarcely dared ask, as if to pose the question would itself make it not so. He stole a glance at her. The girl's radiant smile said as certainly as if she had spoken the words, *We aren't stranded, Doctor. Rather, those back in the world of Mahler's hospital are the stranded. My friends and I? We're the adventurers, the escapees from a small, ordered town.*

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And yet, Mahler thought, their freedom was no cause for joy, because though loss typically implied the possibility of recovery, this place gave rise to no such hope. Maybe there was a separate, more transitory place, to which things that retained the potential of being recovered made their way? A kind of way station, until potential waned, and then they came here, as a final resting place. Mahler imagined the way station to be loud and clamorous with comings and goings, in contrast to the vast room's stillness. He dared hope that at the way station he might find his bride.

If something is taken from you, Mahler thought, it is not lost. Not by you, at least. But it could still subsequently be lost or misplaced by the taker. It would in any event be missing. Creating a void. An emptiness. A nagging sense of incompleteness.

Mahler sensed now that he has been misplaced, which is to say, placed where he ought not (yet) to be. In this career. This hospital. This marriage. This room. He must go no further.

Mahler raised the girl's hand to his lips to kiss her goodbye, but found himself clutching just a single pink mitten. Without a moment to squander, he raced back to his bride's bed. Suddenly shy, head bowed and eyes closed, he loomed over her body while his deft fingers feverishly unraveled the knitter's work.