

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

Mark Walsh

Getting Outside

It's impossible to look at a field of trees
and find stillness. Air rustles dry leaves
or thrusts a bough along a length of
trunk. Holding the forest canopy in
view, movement finds its way to you
in the distant sway of limbs separating
to reveal glimpses of bright cloudy sky.
It's easier to watch than it is to forget.

When the Blues hit, open all doors
and windows in your house. Listen
for the breeze and let it invite you
where a garden needs weeding or
birds need counting. Name the birds
you count. Learn a sparrow from a chickadee
from a woodpecker. Relax the eye along
the landscape until they show themselves in

quick hops and darting pecks.
Take in what is in front of you,
careful not to miss what needs to be
seen. Accomplish small tasks that
provide weird worth. The least amount
of action can flatten the greatest
heap of anxiety. Where the world is
broken is where the sparrow endures.

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Worry Hour

The back deck was hers for a moment's patrol as she landed light, feet splayed across the rail. She was proud, and sharp; forceful enough to disturb peripheral vision. Plump, round breast of blurred brown, beige and peach – soothing tones beneath supernova eyes and deathlock beak. All violence without being violent: head rotated round and again round, noticing everything we do not. Feathers hid secret sense, tuning her to what we cannot hear, homing in towards the heartbeat vibrations of her noon meal.

Or was it the skittish throb of her watchers? Flitting where she did not look, scrub jays alight on top branches of tall sumac, jabbing beaks as if pecking at stray bugs, alert with worry as huntress heaved herself from fence to tall chairback sitting near the tree line. The pivoting head narrowed its rotation like a well-tuned radar. Jays followed, settling on branches directly above, open surveillance a grim safeguard for the hidden home that brought them into defensive frenzy. Time tightened – hawk wings flared and flapped, raising her to the spiked top of a snapped pine then folded calmly, blending her like a clump of dead leaves that refused to fall. Natural tension of a natural course.

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At some undiscovered signal jays take
to air, swooping and swirling,
chasing each other like bored
squirrels. They dive and lift rapidly,
agitating the midlevel canopy just enough
to shake the air and disrupt listening.
The furry of false play continued until
out of dappled wood she came flying
low like some ancient reptile of air,
banked left and strafed the grass,
accelerating as she crossed the street
and vanished. The space where
scrub jays swarmed held only thin
pines, leafy ash, overgrown vines.
A mother's tragedy is another's
victory. What's left is a bearable
harshness revealing more of an
absent god than empty stomachs.

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A Guide to Happiness from an Unqualified Poet

To be happy in this life, don't look too deeply into the darkness.
the nothing that you find there will cause you to
fill it with your own dark thoughts.

Take comfort in the fact that, while Life's tragedies are vast,
Life's comedies outnumber them fifty-to-one,
but can be tiny and sometimes slip passed the noticing.

To be happy in this life you need tasty things to eat
you need beautiful things to look at
you need interesting things to read
you need sensational things to listen to,

But above all you need to have something to look forward to,
even if it's getting an ice-cream cone with a friend.

Speaking of friends – make them.
Find the people who share your interests
and spend as much time with them as time allows;
find the people who don't share your interests
and enjoy the arguing, because the arguments
can show you wisdom;
find the people with empathy and let that
be a bond between you.

Hold no one as an enemy.
If you find someone you cannot – in all good faith –
tolerate, simply wish them well, and go back to
cultivating your garden.

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Never hesitate to tell someone what you believe.

Most will appreciate your clarity,
and if they dislike it, or reject you –
that's on them. If you provide an unpleasant
someone room in your head,
be sure to charge them rent.

To be happy in life you need time to be alone,
to look at the world around you,
look deeply and for a good long time,
then ask:

"I wonder what comes next?"