

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

Mary Lewis

Fast Drydown

Doris leaned over the kitchen sink and pulled back the curtain to squint through the window that opened on the long space between the house and the equipment shed. A cone of light cast by the lamp on the utility pole made the gravel on the driveway, the metal siding on the shed, and even her hand, an unhealthy shade of orange. Nobody out there, just Bill's beat-up old pickup, and their Civic that needed new tires if it was ever going to make it to town on a snowy day. She let the curtain drop and turned on the tap until it got so hot it steamed up the window, then plunged the glasses from breakfast into the sudsy water and forced her hands inside their hard smooth curves.

She wouldn't look again. If Bill had work to do, that was that. You couldn't really have a schedule on a farm, she knew that. The land and the weather and the crops, they were in charge, not the humans lurking around them trying to sneak a bite here and there from their table, like stray dogs no one wanted. She pulled out the meatloaf and baked potatoes, no reason she couldn't eat by herself, though she'd never done more than a little taste before Bill came in. From one crusty end she cut a sliver and picked apart shreds of it to nibble at over the kitchen sink, the aroma as good, better, than the taste.



It wasn't long before the outer door creaked, and she heard Bill's feet clomp into the mudroom and the rustle of clothes as he shed his jacket and Carhartt's. At those sounds, something inside her let go, a kind of settling that happened when he came in, but, upset that she responded like some Pavlovian dog, she hurried to the table and opened a magazine, so she could look up from it when he came in.

The cold followed him in like an invisible cloud. There was a time she'd run to him to feel the chill drain from him, to shed the warmth of her arms to his outdoor face and hands, but they held back from each other now. When did that change? She felt her legs tense to get up, but she stayed seated.

Bill fluffed up his hair that always got plastered down with sweat under his seed cap even in cold weather, and he looked at her with that "sorry to be late but had to be" look he used at least three times a week. "Sorry Dor, had to readjust the header on the combine, wasn't right for the row spacings." He ambled to the table in that way he had, more side to side than necessary, like the football player he was in high school with girls trailing after him, but today he didn't have the usual swagger. It had been, like most of them, a long day.

Always something needing to be done, never enough time to do it. Why had she fallen for a farm boy instead of some corporate drone who left it all at the office? Well, he'd warned her, and she'd happily plunged into the vortex of Bill, the farm, this life of unending labor and worry, almost five years ago now.

"We've got to start Dor," he said, with a set of his shoulders that meant he'd made a decision.

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"Are we that close to harvest? Thought we'd get some more drying time." From her chair she looked up at his face, cast in shadow by the ceiling light that outlined his angular shoulders now rounded by weariness. The smell of gasoline and barn dust his evening perfume.

He tossed an ear of corn onto the table, where it slid to a stop, the hard kernels scraping along the table.

Doris picked it up and ran her fingers along the long rows of yellow kernels, Northrop King 4238, bred for making big ears that dry down fast. She pried out a kernel and bit on it with her molars, the waybill did to judge the dryness.

"I can't tell, maybe a little too much give, 35% moisture?" Doris said.

"My teeth say about 25%, and so does the tester." He grinned. A skill honed with his father since he was a boy, Bill was legendary for estimating moisture and sometimes neighbors came over with their corn to try it on him as a game. He usually came within a percentage or two of their electronic testers.

Even if conditions were good for fast drydown, corn in the field rarely got down to 15%, a level necessary for sale or storage, so farmers had to pay to get their crop dried at the granary in town, since only the big farmers had their own drying equipment.

Bill paced to the other side of the kitchen. "We've got rain for the next three days, so the fields could get too muddy for the combine, or a cold front could turn it into snow and shut us down till spring."

Not good. Three years ago they got caught with a big snowstorm and had to wait till spring to harvest, and lost 30% of their crop to stalks lodging under heavy snow and wind, leaving them on the ground where the combine couldn't get them.

Bill folded himself into the chair opposite Doris and reached with both hands to grasp one end of the ear and she, still holding the other end, felt a tug as he slid it back towards himself to the middle of the table. She stared at the corn, afraid to meet his eyes, because they might be looking at her in that sad way he had when things were rough between them. The bird clock on the wall hit eight o'clock, and the muffled electronic imitation of a chickadee chattered over their stillness.

She smiled, she couldn't help it. "That stupid clock ought to be put down." She looked up and their eyes met, but it was OK now, because of the chickadee.

Doris let go of the corn and pushed back her chair to stand up. "You must be starving, I've got dinner all ready." She brushed by him, letting her hand graze his shoulder, and when she got to the sink she turned around to see if he noticed.

He half turned, so she could see his profile but his eyes didn't quite make it far enough around to see her. "How was your day?"

It wasn't like he ever really listened to her answer, but she said, "Lyle forgot to re-order feed oats so we were cleaned out when Neal Gardner bought the last bag. Lyle's done that before too."

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Doris pulled the scarf off her head and shook her hair to free it. It fell in waves almost to her shoulders, light brown, maybe her best feature. But it always felt gritty after a day at the feed store from the fine dust that got into everything. Most days she showered as soon as she got home, but today was late so she had hurried to get dinner ready, and then waited for him, and got angry at herself for waiting, and her gritty scalp kept her that way. Still, Bill turned full around to watch her when her hair came down, as she knew he would. She leaned back against the sink, both hands holding the steel edges till they bit into her palms, waiting. But he didn't come, so she pushed herself hard away from the sink to the oven, to pull out dinner. She wasn't going to be one of those wives who bang things around instead of saying what was wrong, so she took care in placing the meatloaf on the stove and began making generous, even slices.

When Bill was really hungry he had no time for words and she let him be, let herself be, and for a time they simply shared this quiet space.

On his second slice of meatloaf he reached over to pat her hand. "I'm going to take a nap and then start harvest later on."

"You mean in the middle of the night?" Doris put her fork down.

"It would be foolish to wait till morning, drizzle is likely to start by then."

"But you're tired, that's when accidents happen."

"I'll be fine, I know when to stop."

"I'm not so sure, look at you now."

"Doris, you've got to understand, I've been doing this all my life."

"And I haven't," Doris said.

It was true, he was born to it, and she was the one taking it on.

"You just love problems like these, don't you," Doris said. She put her hands on her lap and struggled to keep them there.

Bill reached for the salt for the first time even though he was almost done, and shook it hard over everything. "I don't like the stress, but I can deal with it."

"Well, I'm not sure I can."

Bill put the shaker down and looked at her. "Look, Dor, you don't have to go to that job in town."

"Don't I? Have we ever done more than barely make ends meet with the farm?"

"We're paying off debts every year Dor, it's going in the right direction." Bill speared another forkful of meatloaf as though he needed to kill it.



Doris could never understand how he could keep on eating during an argument. She watched the muscles in his jaw work all the way to his temples.

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"Harvest will be done in a week and we can breathe a little easier then," he said.

"Sure, and then try to catch up with fencing, or machine repair, and make sure the cattle have good cover for the winter. We'll be worn out by the time we're in our forties." She didn't mean to take the conversation in this direction, but fell into it as easily as a tire follows the deepest rut in a muddy road.

Bill stuffed half a piece of bread into his mouth and worked on scooping out the last white of his potato. He never ate the skin.

"Bill, please look at me, we need to make some changes."

"I don't know what you want Dor, but just let me get through harvest first OK?"

Still chewing, he scraped his chair back, got up and moved towards the stairs, head down, blinders on. They used to kiss when one of them parted to go to the next room.

Doris carried the dishes to the sink and worked at them like enemies to be conquered. Instead of letting the meatloaf pan soak, she scrubbed the place where the sauce had baked on hard till her wrist got sore. When she couldn't find anything else to wash, she sat down and picked up the yellow ear of corn and turned it slowly around in her hands. She sat like that for a long time, until the hardness inside her began to flow out through her fingertips, and since that dissolving tension was the thing that was holding her up, she felt so weary she could barely stand up. But she climbed the stairs and crept into bed beside Bill where their bodies at least, shared warmth.

Doris dreamed of being pulled fast downhill in one of those red wagons kids use, and it woke her up so fast she tumbled out of bed onto the floor. She sat there with her back against the bed, while she figured out where she was. It was so quiet she could hear that soft rush of air that was always there.

Then she heard the distant sound of hundreds of stalks of dry corn shattering against the headers of the combine in a frantic rattle that nearly drowned out the low rumble of the engine. In the darkness she pictured it as it was when she rode with Bill last year on the combine, headlights illuminating cornstalks and nothing else, all standing rigid until the combine combed them into the V between the points. And when the stalks reached the bottom of the V, the machine cut them and pulled them into its guts, big as a room, where augers caught them and the threshing drum beat the ears till nothing was left but yellow kernels making mountains with their tiny bodies. You could go numb watching those armies of dry stalks falling between the points, vast numbers of them, with nothing beyond the headlights but darkness. Farmers needed their radios for the sense of other humans out there somewhere, talking weather or news, or the latest sale at Farm Fleet, to keep from going blind with vertigo.

Doris dragged herself up to sit on the edge of the bed, and then pushed rhythmically against the floor with her feet as though she was on a rocking chair, feeling the motion of the bed. The combine sound got closer, and through the window she could see the pinprick lights of the headlights.

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When the machine got close enough she could hear the radio, country KFYB, a male singer, nasal and thin at this distance, like a bit of tinsel on top of the throbbing bass. She got up to look out the window, pulling the drapes apart. As the combine neared the barnyard fence her heart beat hard, and when the giant turned around to prowl back towards the unseen horizon, she thought she would calm down, but she could feel her heartbeat in her ears.

She pressed her hands against her chest to keep the pounding down. How could she not have seen it before? It wasn't Bill or the money or the weather, or her gritty scalp, or her fear of being lonely. It was her heart thrashing around inside of her like it was trying to get out.

She turned on a lamp and put on the clothes she'd slipped out of last night. It didn't take long to throw some things from her drawers into an old suitcase she kept in the closet. No need to be quiet, she banged her way down the stairs and then out to the car. Bill wouldn't even miss it, or her, till after daybreak, and even then he'd think she'd just gone to her job in town.



Doris picked up the ear of yellow corn from the kitchen counter and walked to the apartment window, which overlooked the narrow backyard walled in weathered wooden fencing, exactly like all the other ones in view up and down the alley. That dry ear was last thing she'd grabbed on her way out the farmhouse door.

In that dark morning, two months ago now, she drove through Frankton, Sharon, Brownly, and then picked up the interstate and kept going till she got to Minneapolis, where she found a rooming house and then an apartment in a bleak northside neighborhood, and a job at Heavenly Grill. Good enough for now, a place she could perch, and lick her wounds. She'd met a few people but didn't want to confide in anyone just yet. If Bill had looked for her, he hadn't been successful. It was hardest at night, in bed alone, when she knew she missed him, and worried about how he would be taking this.

The gray light darkened behind the skeletons of scrawny elms and maples and the streetlights in the alley came on to cast an orange light on their branches. Doris sat down at the kitchen table, thinking how strange to be so high above the ground. Kitchens shouldn't be on the second floor, only bedrooms.

Her fingers wandered the length of the disciplined rows of kernels all exactly the same size and squareness, feeling the dents on their molar-like surfaces. One of the kernels fell loose and she watched it skitter across the cracked linoleum floor.

She lay the ear on her thigh and with the heels of both hands moved it like a rolling pin back and forth, pressing hard. The rough kernels dug into her skin through the thin fabric of her Heavenly Grill pants, till in singles and pairs they let loose from the cob and fell to the floor with a dry clatter. She did not stop till all that remained were the empty sockets of the dry denuded cob.