

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

*Jennifer Barton*  
**Home Health**

"Don't throw that hair out in the yard," Mart says. "The birds'll peck it and I'll get a headache."

"I know, I know," Teresa says. She sweeps the curly gray clippings into a metal dustpan and heads to the bathroom at the rear of the trailer. The hair starts catching on the wind as she walks, so she puts her hand over it to hold it down. It feels soft and fluffy, like feathers. In the toilet, the locks separate to form a knitted skim on the water. Like always, she feels sorry as she flushes them. Like she's discarding something valuable. The birds could use it to build a nest, had Mart ever thought of that?

"All gone," she says as she re-enters the kitchen.

Mart is taking off the plastic cape that smells like permanent solution and wiping loose prickles from her neck. "Thank you," she says. She shakes her dress and runs her long, bony fingers over her shorn head. "Feels nice. How do I look?"

She looks old. Disturbingly so. Even older than she did a month ago. Her eyes now have a sort of glaze over them that makes Teresa wonder if she's still all there. She hasn't said anything crazy yet, though. Nothing to report to the home health agency.

"You look like a new woman," Teresa says. Mart picks up her glasses from the kitchen table and Teresa gives her the handheld mirror out of her basket of supplies.

"Sure is short."

"It'll be easier to take care of that way. And it'll last you a month or more."

"You might not believe this, but I used to have beautiful long hair," she says, testing Teresa with a sidelong glance.

"I believe you."

"That's what made Big Buck fall in love with me. Or that's what he used to say, anyway."

Teresa folds up the cape and gathers her combs and scissors. She can tell Mart wants her to ask about him, but it's already three and she has another client to get to on the other side of the county. An old man who needs his feet soaked in Epsom Salts so she can cut his thick yellow toenails. Besides, she knows all the stories backwards and forwards by now. The moonshine-running, the stock car trophies, the crash. The way Mart holds onto Big Buck's memory, it's hard to believe she ever left him. Frames of crumbly newspaper articles line the plywood paneling of her living room in case she was ever to forget. Sometimes Teresa thinks forgetting would be the best thing for her.

"Does Little Buck still come to take you to church on Sundays?" Teresa asks.

"If he don't have a race on Saturday night, he does," Mart says.

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"It's gettin' to be the season, though, so he don't make it too often no more."

Teresa thinks about her plan to take Joey to the racetrack tonight for his ninth birthday and wonders what Little Buck will have to say when he sees them. He hasn't been picking Joey up for a good many weekends now. If not for the occasional phone call, he wouldn't have any contact with his son. Teresa starts getting angry when she remembers the big show Little Buck put up at the custody trial. Just think what would've happened if you'd gotten Joey full time, she imagines telling him.

Mart pulls a jar of mixed pickles that she canned some years back out of a cabinet. Teresa can tell it's old from the layers of dust on the lid. She likes mixed pickles and appreciates the tip, but she's always afraid to eat what Mart gives her. It's probably okay, but how can you tell if mixed pickles go bad? She thanks her and gives her a hug at the door. Mart's shoulder blades pop sharp tents in the back of her thin satiny dress. Now that she looks closely, Teresa thinks it isn't a dress, but a long-sleeve nightgown. Maybe she should report that to the agency.

"You take care or yourself, now," Teresa says as she gently closes the screen door behind her, keeping it from banging.

"You do the same, honey. And tell Joey his mawmaw loves him."

Teresa nods. Getting in her car, she sees Mart close the front door, sealing her trailer up again. Teresa rolls her own window down and lets a cool, early May breeze blow through her hair and clear the fuzz out of her brain. She always gets drowsy at Mart's because she keeps the heat on and the windows closed no matter what the season. Now she's awake and alive. Joey will be home from school already, she realizes as she backs out of the driveway. He'll be playing with the dog out in the yard and getting muddy from this morning's rain. The babysitter will probably let him track it inside when it's time for his cartoon. Teresa will pretend to be annoyed about the mess, but really she kind of likes the smell of fresh mud and the way small footprints look on white linoleum.

She reaches the mouth of the holler, where the mountains step aside for open passage, and yields to a fleet of logging trucks. Hundreds of birds fly out of the budding trees around her, startled by the noise. She hangs her head out the window to watch. Loud and busy, they return to their work as soon as the rumbling begins to fade into the distance. Soon Joey and I will be able to hunt the yard together for halves of dainty blue eggshells, she thinks. We'll make a wind chime out of them. She takes in a good lungful of what the birds are having and pulls onto the main road.

Jennifer Barton is originally from the Appalachian region of Southwestern Virginia and currently resides in Knoxville, Tennessee.