

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

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Burrow

I'm always in awe of writers who can take in the immediacy of a moment and compose a poem, a story or an essay within minutes, hours or days of having experienced that event.

That is not me. I'm a dweller. It takes me at least weeks, if not months or years (heck even some decades) to write about the world around me. Unlike my relationship with food, which calls to me and asks me to feast, a good image must be cultivated. If I was a wine drinker I'd say it was like aging, but perhaps my writing fermentation is a bit more like cheese.

My favorite cheese used to be those huge blocks of sharp cheddar that the corner store carried. You bought it by the wedge. They'd weigh it and wrap it in wax paper. I'd walk it home where my stepfather would use his pocket knife to slice off individual pieces that I'd savor as if I was a most elegant mouse.

I really hate mice, though.

When I was 12, my Mom and stepfather moved to a trailer on the other side of the county. It wasn't necessarily nicer than the one we had lived in before but it certainly wasn't worse. They were different but equal. The best part was that the owners, we were renters, had added two rooms onto the back of the trailer. There was no heat in the addition so during winter it was like sleeping in a refrigerator. Even with that, I still chose one of those rooms as my own. It was the first time I had a space to myself.

In my room, I'd curl up on the bed with as many blankets as I could find while I read and worked on my homework. On more than one occasion I'd hear a skittering and look down to see some version of a rodent running back and forth along the crack between the floor and the bottom of the door. I had the room set up for pest avoidance. I could jump from the bed to a dresser from which I could open the door without touching the floor. The rodent could easily be let out into the other room without me having to touch the ground. I'd then crack open the window just above the dresser that led to the kitchen to tell someone to *take care of the mouse* because I wasn't going anywhere near the creature.

Outside of my room, it wasn't any better. Once I was trying on a sweater from storage in the bathroom/laundry room when I felt something crawling across my back. Let's just say I never tried on a piece of clothing again without shaking it first. To this day I still look down when I open up the drawer below the stove to get a lid for a pot and I never reach into a cabinet without first turning on a light.

That trailer was twenty years ago. Why am I thinking of it now? What is it about that cheese, the mice, and that room that made me put fingers to keyboard today? Could I, at twelve, have spoken of them with any kind of reflection or did I need to save up the rinds of memory before I could cogently comment upon them?

At twelve, my essay would probably have been about how I spent time in that room; about how I would copy down the top 40 list on Sundays (or was it Saturday's) from Casey Kasem's countdown. I had week after

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week of lists showing which songs were moving up and down the charts. I hated to miss the show if we were kept too long for a visitation weekend with my father and stepmother. I've always liked to make lists, to find order in things.

I think the cheese stands as such a strong memory because it made me feel urban. Characters in books, on TV and in movies always seemed able to walk up the street to a deli, a flower shop or to a park. I liked that idea of independence and convenience. Besides the corner store and my school there was nothing I could walk to, well except other homes, rail road tracks and maybe a few abandoned buildings that I wasn't supposed to enter.

But what value is there in remembering the mice?

The room is of obvious importance. It was my own, even if only for a short time. A year later I would decide to live with my father where I'd no longer have my own room but I'd have better clothes. Rather, that is what I thought was going to happen when I moved.

What I didn't know, before I moved, is that new clothes were only for Christmas and they were pretty much all of Christmas. I'd find out that the closest store to my father's home was over a mile away and it was a truck stop. I was no longer able to walk down for a wheel of cheese and this newer and seemingly nicer house that was not on wheels had its own mouse problem. They were in the garage, then in the house around the stand alone freezer and sometimes in the mouth of a cat who probably thought he was doing us a favor. I had to look out for them when I went to the coat closet before going outside to hang clothes on the line in the middle of winter, hoping no one in the neighborhood would see me. Very few of our suburban neighbors had clotheslines and they certainly didn't use them during the winter.

I know the mice only wanted to stay warm, and to eat the scrapes that a five person household could provide but I couldn't stand how they were always hidden. They were always a surprise. Perhaps if they had just sat in the middle of the floor on their little hind legs, begging, I'd have just given them a processed cheese slice from the fridge instead of feeling the need to run whenever one peeked out under a table or from inside a boot.

As I type this I realize that when I lived in that trailer, there was always enough food and a plethora of blankets under which you could burrow for warmth. At the trailer, I had no problem finding someone to take me to the library for a new supply of books. At the trailer, we were always allowed to use the dryer during the winter months. I was never sent out into the cold.

JESSIE CARTY'S writing has appeared in publications such as The Main Street Rag, Iodine Poetry Journal and The Houston Literary Review. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks *At the A & P Meridiem* (Pudding House 2009) and *The Wait of Atom* (Folded Word 2009) as well as a full length poetry collection, *Paper House* (Folded Word 2010). Jessie is a freelance writer and writing coach. She is also the photographer and editor for Referential Magazine. She can be found around the web, especially at <http://jessiecarty.com> where she blogs about everything from housework to the act of blogging itself.