

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

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Gazpacho

Write what you know, the professor tells us. *Write what you have lived and learned*. I nod—though I'm not sure I agree—to acknowledge his wisdom, his right to teach this writing course that I'm taking because it's cheaper and likely more effective than sessions with a therapist.

My characters, he says, need more drama in their lives. *Tension, remember? Conflict*. Something they can face and overcome and from it, grow in human depth of experience. Or it can break them. If it does, there must be something discovered; that they do not measure up, or that some things in life are like ice crystals that gather up into an avalanche that no one, really no one, could survive. But they can't spend their lives in a cotton-candy world, or go through turbulence untouched, pain no more than a pebble in their path. That, the professor would tell me, is not reality. And even fiction must have the seed of truth.

We meet twice a week on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. An hour and twenty-four minutes spent reading and writing and discussing story. Sometimes it is to point out by the example of a master, one of the classics like "*The Overcoat*" from Gogol. Afterwards one of the students may read their own work. Tonight it's Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants*. I don't like it. The man and the woman are talking on different levels and are upset yet evasive. "Why," I ask the professor, "why doesn't she tell him what she wants or shut up about it? Why is he telling her something he doesn't mean?"

The other students turn to me and I retreat into the book, flipping pages in search of some proof of the silliness of their discussion. I am embarrassed by the attention from my sudden outburst and feel the warm blush on my face. Though I'd raised my hand and waited to be asked, the words spilled out with little control. The professor explains the subtleties of the conflict between the couple. Again I listen, frown as if in deep consideration of his explanation, and remain quiet.

The classroom is large, with thirty or more chairs facing green chalkboards that are seldom used. Instead, visuals are usually projected from a computer on a teacher's table. There are no desks with drawers to fill up with a tissue box, pencils, student essays, envelopes and stamps, or their favorite blue pen. These instructors are migrant workers, moving from room to room for their classes, facing a new crop of students in space they claim for an hour and a half. Then they move on, crossing borders, building new walls to scale, knocking them down and moving on again. I feel obligated to learn from them.

It is uncomfortably warm in the room, although it is less than half filled. But it is the summer session and the air conditioning is shut off before the late classes are over. My hair sticks in damp strands to the back of my neck. In every class I've taken at this small community college I sit front row, center. My vision is at that stage of changing; without my eye-glasses the large clock is a mystery. I push them up to the top of my head, squeeze my eyes tightly shut for a second, then look up at the disk on the

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wall. The numbers are blurry and indistinguishable from each other. Squinting helps a bit, but the clock hands are wispy as threads. What if the numbers have grown playful and switched places, like in musical chairs? Is time that is misunderstood still time? With my glasses back on my nose, the world falls back into place. One other student sits up front; the rest drift to the rear of the room as if a giant hand held it tipped backward. My fingers want to grip the front edge of my desk.

We're given an exercise to write for five minutes on character. Notebooks crank to angles on the small platform of each student's desk and we all shift in our seats, heads bent to the task. The room falls into a palpable hush. My pencil is poised on paper but I cannot think. I don't work this way. Stories come to my mind based on fleeting thoughts in full sentences of prose. I remember as a child that I could never perform on cue in public restrooms, like at the zoo, when my mother thought it was about time or it was convenient because we passed one on the way to see the scruffy great-maned lions or the polar bears, lazy in the concrete New York heat. Or the glass cases in the house of reptiles, filled with lizards and snakes clinging to a single branch or coiled in a back corner, hating the light that filled the restricting cube of space, hating the people.

Two minutes have gone by but I've written nothing down. I grab at memories, something that can be turned into an entertaining, interesting story. I draw a face, starting with the eyes, noticing that my rings don't twist around on my fingers as they usually do since I lost fifteen more pounds. But it is warm in here and my fingers feel tight and puffy in these summer days. The pencil is a box of spaghetti in my hand. Through the window blinds the last evening rays write in streaks on the floor about a dying sun.

I write: *She felt a sudden wave of reaction transform her face, lips drawn tight, cheekbones set hard in place. Her eyes grew larger, opened wider, not relaxed and taking in but rather, sending. Her teeth made little scratching sounds that maybe only she could hear. "I've been fine," she said and forced a smile.*

Zucchini, I scribble in the upper right hand corner of the page. He likes it in the soup I plan to make tonight for tomorrow's dinner. I have tomatoes, onions, garlic, all the rest, I think. It will take time to chop and dice. I can feel the knife in my hand, hear the click of blade against board. I add *Green Peppers* underneath *Zucchini*, then retrace the *Z*, embolden it and drag its tail beneath its body in a wave that curls up just beyond the final *i*. In the back row, a young man flips another page in his notebook. He writes so quickly. His face is all determination, focus, his eyebrows touching.

Papers rustle, some others in the room are laying down their pens, holding up their notes and reading. I write: *The man across the table would not look at her. "Good," he answered, "that's good. Me too."* The fingers of his right hand drew lines on the Formica table from the water circles left by the icy glass of soda gripped in his left. *She saw the empty place on his ring finger, her life with him now marked only by a whitened band once protected from the sun. Soon it would blend with the tan shades of the rest of him.*

The air is stifling, heavy and unmoving. I want to open a window and admit the night.

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"Okay, stop writing," the professor says. Pens and pencils race frantically across paper to get final thoughts written down. He moves a book on his desk and moves it back again. He won't glance up; likely weary of seeing his directive ignored. I want to write another line, something. If I could only think of what.

He calls upon Alycia, who wants to be a journalist. Even seated she bears the grace of her height. She reads her story in a voice that lilts like a faraway song through the still room. It is good. But it is action without character. Was this exercise for character? Scanning my own words quickly, I know I've missed the mark as well.

"Ms. Richmond," the professor says. It is an invitation and an order. I read carefully aloud, falter, distracted by the penciled face of a young woman with pouty lips and high-piled hair. She looks sad.

"So what are you showing the reader about your characters?" he asks. I hesitate, look up and tell him, "I don't know." They were just there. He waits, holding my attention like a wire stretched taut between us and I can't tell whether his stare is one of encouragement or challenge. Words gather on my tongue and I swallow them away, cut the connection that holds me with a blink of my eyes and glance down at the words scrawled on the white page. The face there now looks back at me with empty, uncaring eyes. She offers no answers. "They were just there," I say. His silent disappointment reaches out, its burden like a shawl dropping down on my shoulders. He turns, paces, and asks another student to describe the woman of my story. What she says surprises me. I try to clarify the image I have drawn.

"She's not angry, she's hurt. Evidently, she doesn't want to break up her marriage," I say.

"Nah, she's pissed." This, from a clean-cut young man who can't be twenty. "She's holding in a lot of resentment. He's tanned and happy, probably just met her at some diner because she's been bugging him about support or something." The young man is confident, direct.

I relent. I didn't write that but I see it now and make a note to refine character.

It's now eight forty-five and the long day begins to hit me with its weight. The oppressive air is warning of a coming headache. Pain teases the base of my skull, feeling its way out with tentacles that flicker at my temples. With both hands I reach back and press my fingers deep into the furrow along the back of my neck. Holding it still, smothering it so that it does not rise up and split my head in two. If I closed my eyes I think I could fall asleep. I float outside the discussion and they move on; another story is read. I wonder if there are any onions in the cabinet below the sink, then recall it doesn't matter; he doesn't like onions in the gazpacho. Even ground to near pulp he will try to pick them out.

My sister hated chick peas in the rolled stuffed cabbage my mother made. My father and I loved them. Every other time she would make them without the chick peas. When she put them in, my sister would scoop the little pile she'd picked out onto my plate.

"Ms. Richmond, do you have anything to add?" I jump, look up from

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the notebook on my desk to meet his stare. He knows I haven't been listening. It is only me whom he addresses in this formal manner, perhaps because of my age and married status among the youthful faces in our group.

"No," I answer. How could I, even if I'd listened carefully to what was read, judge anything at all? There had been a car crash, an angry confrontation; that much I'd heard. Conflict is something to be avoided, yet here we're being told it is a necessary part of story. Everything is story, no? Isn't a sunny day, tall hollyhocks blue against white pickets, and inside on the kitchen stove, a simmering pot filled with stuffed cabbage complete with chick peas, isn't that a pleasant, peaceful story? Why wouldn't one want to read such a tale, as much escape from reality as fiction needs to be.

My mother never made gazpacho. Her soups were well defined: mushrooms, chunks of meat, potatoes, celery, carrots, and sometimes lentils or barley. Everything was separate in the broth, so you could stir the ladle around and selectively avoid the carrots. With gazpacho all the vegetables are pulverized, blended together to form a thick base with some small pieces scattered on the surface like debris. That's more like real life, with very little left of identities. Impossible to pick and choose. Or to avoid.

I hastily write down the assignment, the stories we're to read. He reminds the class again about the deadline for submitting pieces for next week's workshop critique. I consider the words I've written and think again about *Hills Like White Elephants*. There's a taste of truth in each, I think, as much as there are lies. At last we're let out of the room and strangely I don't want to go. Books slam shut, backpacks are hauled up from the floor. I'm up and first out the door. I fairly run, cutting through the stagnant air as crisply as the bright lights of the buildings meet the dark wall of night at the lobby doors.

Driving home slowly, it still takes me only fifteen minutes to reach my door. The headache is now a dull and steady pain. The kitchen is the only room with light. He's gone to bed already. He gets up mornings before dawn, wakes me with a kiss goodbye. I always pretend to be sleeping, but hear him coming down the hall before the bedroom door opens and the hall light silhouettes his approach. It's sweet, this established display of affection. Funny, how this same kiss meant to wake me helps me to sleep-walk through the days. I wonder what he'd do if one morning I bit him instead.

I like the quiet of my kitchen at night, stirred only by the soft hum of the central air. The walls are the deep welcoming green of a forest, the cabinets a warm rosy cherry. My shoes sit on the rug just inside the door and I slide silently barefoot on the cool tiles. First I need to take aspirin and take two pills out of the bottle kept right next to the glasses. The water is cold, refreshing. The pain in my head retreats a bit. From the refrigerator I take out the vegetables and set them out on the counter where they roll into groups like soldiers spread out into battle. The brightly uniformed tomatoes outnumber the rest. "Don't trust the peppers," I whisper. For the next half hour I will precisely peel and dice tomatoes, celery, two green peppers and several pearls of garlic. There are also a couple young zucchini from my garden, slender and honest. But peppers can be

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liars. In a small home garden they can take on the traits of those around them aided by the winds and winding flight of bees. I've had sweet banana peppers tinged with the fire of habaneros and you'd never know by looking—only taste gives the deceit away.

There's a tiny discolored depression on the pepper. With the point of the knife, I cut out a circle around it and then find another. The holes look like eyes. I give it a nose and a wide slash of mouth, and the pepper leers up at me. For some reason, I can't cut into the newly formed face—like avoiding the name on a birthday cake. Face down on the board, he's quickly halved, sliced, chopped into bits.

The floor creaks overhead. Footsteps. I pause the knife halfway through an onion. Water gurgles down the pipes in the wall, another creak, and silence. I finish the cut.

I separate the mixture into two containers, saving more than the usual amount aside to add back for texture and scrape just a few of the pepper seeds left on the cutting board into this bowl. The single slice of onion goes in the other to be blended with the rest tomorrow. The processor is much too noisy to run now.

I want to write more tonight on the scene I'd started in class. My protagonist takes a breath, brings a cup of lukewarm coffee to her lips to stall what she is about to say. There is almost a need to write. I add cilantro, cumin, chili powder, and white pepper to the soup, hesitate, then pull out the onion slice and toss it in the sink. I cover the bowls, put them away and wash the cutting board, the peeler, and the knife.

What conflict will come into the lives of my actors, a man and woman in the middle of divorce? Their home which must be sold? The painting worth enough to be insured? There are no children to be torn apart, no mandatory excursions to the zoo. Harder to handle—the gradual loss of love. Or worse, the attempt to save it. Like the woman of *White Elephants*; her fear of losing the man hidden beneath a cool linen sarcasm in the desperate Spanish heat. The man, his suave reassurance masking resentment at his own seed that's growing inside her. Both wanting something that's threatened by change.

I feel a sudden numbness in my left hand and look down to see dark red blood swirling around the sink with the force of water from the faucet. Across my palm a thin line beads up with blood that runs in a slow streak down my hand. I drop the knife in the sink and shut off the water, fascinated by the red drops that splatter on the stainless steel in exploding patterns. The cut looks deep and my hand curls inward defensively to close the wound. It starts to throb, an oddly separating feeling as though it weren't a part of me that's bleeding.

A drop of blood, then another, falls on the onion slice in the sink. On its surface soap bubbles burst in pink sparks. Crimson lines run outward into each translucent ring to leave a grinning lipsticked mouth within its center. Set free, it changes. I grin back at it in smug satisfaction then ball a paper towel into my fist to stop the flow. In the sink, the onion is laughing.