

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

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**the workshop**

**T**he devil came to see me. "You look like shit," said the devil. It was a dark room. It was so humid you could not see. I was very thin in those days. The heat did nothing good for me. The devil bought me a drink with no ice. We went out to the back because it was getting crowded in the bar. The heat had come down. The air was heavy. It was dusk and the sky was gray. The devil and I sat in folding chairs. Someone had burned a star into the seat of mine.

I had not seen the devil in a long time. I wished he had asked for ice in the drink he had bought for me, which was whiskey ginger. The devil drank whiskey ginger because he said it was good for your throat. I did not drink whiskey ginger. The devil liked to pretend he knew me very well. I asked him for a cigarette.

"I don't smoke anymore."

"You're the devil."

"The significance of that is tangential at best. When it comes to smoking." The devil looked me up and down. "Why are you so thin."

"I'm sick."

"What's wrong with you."

"Nobody knows." I wanted to say, shouldn't you know. Probably you could tell me. "Do you want to play pool or something?"

"You keep changing the subject. You don't have to be so defensive with me. You should have said you were sick and that it was a sensitive area, why you were sick, and I wouldn't have probed further." He looked in my eyes for a minute. The devil had strange eyes. They were deep and black and calm. "I don't want to play pool, Cole," he said.

"Too bad."

We did not speak for a while. It was awkward between the devil and I. Finally he said "How do you like Austin."

"Don't small-talk me."

"I would have thought I had the right - "

"Christ," I said, "you're the devil. The devil doesn't small-talk. Does the devil small-talk? What's the use of the devil small-talking?"

"My being the devil doesn't have anything to do with anything," said the devil. "Neither does the concept of usefulness. I'm trying to talk to you friend-to-friend, because we're friends." We were not friends. "As your friend I want to know how you like Austin."

The devil and I left the bar and he walked with me down East 12th Street to find somewhere to buy cigarettes. I said "I like Austin enough." We walked all the way down East 12th Street to a bodega and I bought a pack of American Spirits and then we kept walking. The devil told me I

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should stop smoking. I laughed at the sheer ridiculousness of the whole thing. It was dark now and the highway was very loud. "Do you ever wonder where those people are going?" I asked the devil.

"No," he said.

"Do you know where they're going?"

"Those people don't even know where they're going," said the devil. "Do you know where you're going, Cole?" I hated when the devil would break out these deep and existential questions and then punctuate them with my name so I felt like I had to answer. The devil liked my name. It was my last name but he liked it better. He said it was a good mix of smooth sounds and sharp sounds. It was like me in that I felt like broken glass usually but there were moments I had sweet doe eyes. People told me this often in the summer when I was sick. I did not really understand what it meant to be doe-eyed.

I said "No." I put my hands in my pockets. They were full of paper. I didn't remember why I had saved any of it. I said "Why do you like me so much?"

"Why did you ask me if I wondered where those people were going? There is no *where*. Context is all. *Why* they're going is more interesting. Do you know why they are going?"

The devil would often answer my questions pertaining to our relationship with statements that seemed like questions, which served to stress to me or other listeners his partial omnipotence. The devil did not know everything. He knew most things but not everything. It humbled him to a point he found unsatisfying.

"Entropy," I said, "is why everything does everything it does. The natural state of everything is entropy. It is not why you like me so much. I was a very stable person until things. I had steady hands."

"You had the potential," said the devil, "and now you possess it, utterly." Something very loud went by on the highway. I could not light another cigarette because I was shaking. "Is that because you're sick," said the devil, "or cold, or what." He took the lighter from my hands and lit the cigarette for me. I did not say thank you. I did not answer the question. We were waiting at a crosswalk to go into the west side of town. The devil said to me "You're not answering because you felt it when I said it. You felt that you possessed it utterly and it scared you. Which is fine because you're human. Your weaknesses are understandable."

"I'm leaving Austin," I told the devil. "I'm going away."

"Nice to go see a new place for a while," said the devil absently. He was watching the cars on the freeway. He liked to see them abstract themselves. They were there and then they went away. They went into the desert, over the low hills.

"I'm not gonna come back though," I said. "I'm going away forever."

"Where?"

"I can't tell you."

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"If you think you can get away from me, I regret to tell you that's not so."

"Then it shouldn't matter."

The devil was quiet for a while. He looked at me piteously. I was embarrassed and couldn't look at him. It was awful to be looked at like that. People always thought they should look at me like that, like that was the right way. Like oh, Reedy, oh, let me take care of you, let me wrap you up, baby, poor baby, you just need someone to hold you. It made me feel like running. I wanted to run into the desert until the heat melted my skin off and then I would keep running. Finally the devil said "Okay." Then he said "I'll miss you, Cole."

I was too tired to be angry, to be really angry enough to do anything. I said "That's so kind of you to say."

"Don't be saucy with me," said the devil. "You'll miss me too after a little while." It was hot and the street was wide. The highway thundered. It was a thick kind of night. We walked and I didn't not know where we were walking to. The devil preferred randomness. "You're a terrible person, Cole," said the devil. "You don't care about anything. You let the wind take you." There was a mariachi band in the first restaurant we passed. The sound was tinny through the glass. "Isn't it beautiful?"