

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

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Lansha's Progress

She sees the horizon as a stretch mark along the belly of the sky. Waves darken in thin strips. Soon, they'll release their foam. Her focus snaps to a smudge on the windscreen. It could pass for a cloud. Two plaited pigtailed arc from her temple, tied together at the back of her skull. Is it the Native American in her blood that has brought her here?

Her head drops to suck up a line of cocaine. She sits up sharply, wrinkles her nose.

"Ohhh, *fuck*, yeah."

She puts the car in gear, revs it, lifting like a simmering pot lid. Her hand slides into a plastic bag. A tangle of bean sprouts drop into her mouth, crumpling like scrap metal between her jaws. Her thumb caresses the handbrake, presses the button down firmly.

This is it.

The handbrake slams down hard. Spinning tyres shave strips off the grass. She jerks forward, pulls from first to third. The roar of the engine incites her as much as a Coliseum crowd. The cliff edge is twenty metres away. No need to reach for fourth.

Just as it did a year before, sweat oozes out in a cold instant. Has she thought it through? Is she even herself now? She stamps the brake. The car slides much further than she expects, slowing to a stop on the cliff edge, its nose sniffing the salt of the sea. The water's higher than she imagined. The drop, it could only be ten metres. The fragility of the ground is apparent. She feels it slide away, and thinks how it reminds her of a cartoon, an *old* cartoon. The windscreen pans downward, momentarily the camera lens in an action film. Zoom in on water...

Her forearms shield her from the hardness of the steering wheel, but it catches the butt of her rib. The car rights itself on the surface, dropping slowly. Strange as it seems, the strength of the sea offers comfort. But only for a moment. She sees it rushing in over the bonnet, hears it all around her. A strange sensation at her feet. She pulls at the door handle, knowing it's her versus nature, that it'll be easier when the car fills with water, the pressure equal on both sides of the glass.

Wet to her waist, the coldness of the water knocks the breath out of her. The vehicle rolls to the right. She leans to the passenger side, populating the thin pocket of air with her pulsing nostrils. In a matter of seconds, her pigtailed rise. Her last breath is a long one.

The car drifts to the sand, but the door won't open. She presses her hands against the glass and looks up, thinking how she'll die with air available just a few feet above her head. The sun quivers through the water, a circle of melting butter. She finds some give in the door, shoves it out with her shoulder, and pushes her way out, springing off the back door frame to strive for the surface.

That first breath, it's the most wonderful feeling she can remember. She

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swims away, stumbles out of the surf, water dripping from her arms and legs, her nose, hair and chin. She could have been enveloped in a huge cobweb, collapsing on the soft sand. A man approaches, further down the beach. She knows he's there. Almost breathing sand into her cheeks, she pictures the envelope she propped against a chair in the TV room. "Carrie", it's addressed to. What will follow its discovery? she wonders. It could be hospitalisation, or even suicide.

She gouges two fistfuls of sand, and pushes herself up, springing away at a fierce speed as the man nears, shouting. He follows, but she's much too fit for him.

I'm sorry baby. I didn't want to put you through this again

In front of a long, white house, a man with pinkish skin sits in a deck chair, wearing sunglasses. There's a cane by his side. He raises it as she passes, much like a giant insect raising its leg. A sudden swerve takes her up a driveway, to the back of the next house, the well-kept front garden suggesting a high level of domesticity. Clothes hang crucified from the line. A small boy watches her, smiling through a glass door. Behind, his mother cuts shapes out of dough. Lansha puts her finger to her lips, then sucks it, all the while edging toward the clothes. The boy smiles, pressing his faint eyebrows against the glass, but doesn't move as Lansha takes the clothes to the side of the house.

She pulls her wet clothes over her head, straining a muscle in her back as they adhere stubbornly to her body. Her legs are muscular, her thighs smooth as bronze submarines. She puts the dry bra to her chest, but finds it's too small. The blue shorts are a little tight, but they'll do. Over her breasts, she buttons a stylish purple shirt, designed to fit tightly to a man's chest.

She looks down at her cast-off garments, and wonders what triggered this latest episode.

Strange as it seems, I meant this as an act of love

Miles away, a young girl aged eleven sits on a swing in a bright garden. Her eyes are closed, her hands pressed together. She hums loudly, at first a monotone, then a rambling tune. She doesn't notice the light shining through the daffodil heads, illuminating the petals like a boulevard of street lamps, nor the last flower, dull and ragged, vandalised by the shade. She is thin, with unremarkable, fair hair. Her name is Carrie.

She hops off the swing, and walks slowly, her eyes still closed. In the centre of the garden, she drops suddenly. She presses her lips to the grass, bending its blades to the ground. Rolling over, she smothers a cluster of daisies. She plucks one, and cuts the base of the flower with her nail so the stem can be fashioned into a loop. It looks perfect on her finger. There are buttercups at the far end of the garden. She fancies they'll make a pretty

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bouquet. Gathering many, she stands and adjusts her stance to a photogenic pose. She flings the buttercups over her head, deciding it would be unlucky to watch them as they fall.

What time is it? she wonders. Her mother is always home when she returns from school. She wanders around the garden with her hand across her cheek. Copybooks lie open on the ground. She steps on them, leaving fossils of dirt on the pages. There are words such as “excellent” and “great work” in red ink, a gold star in the corner. She scratches at it, determined to prise it off. It slides away and carries in the breeze, landing by the roots of a tree emerging from mossy ground.

Carrie notices a sod of grass is slightly uneven by the tree. She knows this is where her mother hides her drugs, following the arrival of the police to search her house. She pulls the sod away. It has an odd kind of weight, flopping to the ground. In the hollow, she finds a metal container, empty. There are traces of cocaine along the edges. She presses some onto the tip of her finger, brings it toward her face.



Lansha stops at a traffic light. She sees a truck progress slowly, throws a leg out to pre-empt it. The sudden halt gives her the opportunity to run across, oblivious to the shouts and horns. She takes a corner blindly, catches the thin face of her mother among the crowd across the street. She continues at speed, her mother watching her pass. Around the next corner, she slows unintentionally, thinking of the woman she hasn't spoken to in three years. She and her mother are very different species, she observes. The same is true of Lansha and her own daughter.

I wrote you a letter coz this time I really mean it.

I know you'll have some questions to ask

If she finds the letter, will she alert the police and have Lansha committed to a psychiatric hospital? She's a clever girl, Lansha muses, unpredictable.

A longer, wider street beams with three sets of simultaneous green lights. Lansha streaks past frustrated drivers in side streets, held at the mercy of red lights. She notices a bike outside a fruit shop bustling with colour. The bar is scabbed with dark brown rust. She throws her leg over it, pedals down the footpath. Its mechanism is loose. A man in a shapeless, off-white T-shirt shouts, running after her with a bag of grapes in his hand. She presses frantically at the gears. People lunge out of her way. She turns into a narrow alley, but the man with the grapes is faster. He pulls her to the ground, ripping a button off her shirt. She feels the wet touch of squashed grapes on her back, pinned under him. He raises his fist. They both breathe heavily. Lansha eyes the jagged silhouette of his knuckles, half relishes the impact. He asks her:

“Why did you take my bike?”

“I just saw it.”

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"So, it's right to just steal someone else's property?"

"It's not a case of right and wrong. It's a case of *need*."

He looks her in the eye.

"You're lucky you didn't do it to somebody else."

He eases off her, and stands up. Lansha can still smell him as she wobbles to her feet, a sweet scent mixed with his sweat. She limps away to the far end of the alley, quickly achieving a normal stride. She rolls around the corner, pressing her back to the wall. A great pain in her chest makes her wonder what will follow. Her friend, Simone, was only thirty when she died of heart failure.

Please don't hate me. And please don't do anything rash

She moves away at a slow jog, trying to decipher the beat of her heart. By the time she reaches the university campus, she forgets about bodily organs. Sprinting past grey buildings bearded with red ivy, between lines of ambling students, she almost collides with a tall man in a long leather coat.

"Lansha!" he exclaims. She looks up.

"Oh, Professor." Her voice is breathy, deep.

"I told you, call me Mike." His left hand is malformed, but still able to clasp his folder.

"Sorry, yeah."

"How have you been?" A smile forms as he takes in Lansha's odd attire.

"Good. Fine."

"Any chance of you coming back to us? An unfinished PhD isn't any good to anyone."

"I know."

"It was shaping up nicely. Really, I see big things for it."

"Thanks."

"Hey, I won't push it, but you know you could always come back and teach some classes – undergrads – see how it goes."

"I'll think about it. I have to—"

"Have you been doing much over the past year?"

"No, not really."

"Then you've no excuse," he smiles.

"I'm thinking of going back to Germany."

"That's right, you spent a year there, a few years back, didn't you?"

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"Yeah." She doesn't inform him of how that year away from her daughter damaged their relationship, in some barely tangible way she has never quite understood. Raindrops tap at her scalp. "I really need to go, okay? I'm sorry. My daughter's at home, on her own."

I was never a good mother. I know that. I just wasn't born that way

Carrie dabs the cocaine on her tongue, spits it out. The garden feels colder now. She drops the metal container, noticing a thumb-sized portion of the drug wrapped in cling film on the ground. She throws it at the fence. It catches on an ivy twig and tears open violently, releasing a fine, white cloud.

Rain comes suddenly. She hadn't even noticed a cloud. Picking up her copybooks, she runs to the kitchen. Up on the window sill, she sees past the raindrops on the glass. There's something very wrong, she feels. She sees her mother's phone on top of the microwave, stares at it, soaking in its significance. Her mother never forgets her phone.

Carrie's chest heaves. Tears pulse from her eyes.

"I don't want to go through this again!" she shouts, smacking the glass repeatedly. Dirty pans occupy the sink. She flings them onto the floor. Looking down, she feels she might faint. But she considers the possibility that there might be a valid reason for her mother's absence. Perhaps she felt the need to get away from people altogether, just for a few hours. If she returns, Carrie will be firm with her:

"What was I supposed to think? After what happened before! And I know what you have hidden in the garden. I should go and live with Grandma and Grandpa!"

"Don't tell them, please."

"I'll tell them if I like! Do you ever think of other people?"

Anger usurps her fear. She waits anxiously for another ten minutes, then walks to the TV room. Her mother's collection of vinyl records is stacked along the ground. Bending down to comb through the covers, Lansha's letter sits on a chair not far behind Carrie. She pulls out the record, and sets it spinning. Van Morrison's 'Brown Eyed Girl' resonates through the house. She knows it'll make her happy.



Lansha runs past the college fountain. Myriad raindrops pull its water into the shape of highly raised goosebumps. *I'd love to have a hot bath*, she thinks. Powerful cramps clutch her abdomen. She bends over, falling to her knees, crawls to the bathroom in the nearest building.

The light in the cubicle is dim. She doesn't like to sit touching the seat, but the pain forces her down. There are girls talking at the sink, stressing over an upcoming presentation. Lansha sheds tears silently as tissue passes from her body. This is much tougher than her last period. There's a lot of blood in the toilet bowl, and down her legs. She wipes frantically.

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Without warning, a slimy placenta slithers out of her. She stands up in fright, looks back.

It's all a dark red mess, dripping onto the floor and down her legs. She can't make out any body parts, just lumps of dark tissue. She hears a low scream emanating from the toilet bowl, until she slams the lid down.

She considers whether to flush, knows she can't leave it for someone else to find. It feels such a cold act, but she flushes, and pulls up her shorts, rubbing frantically at her bloody legs.

The rain has thinned. As she moves deep into the suburbs, she knows it's best that she lost the child. Even Carrie would be better off in the care of someone else. Motherhood is just another aspect of life she has failed.

The sun reveals itself. Tears flow back toward Lansha's ears, catching the light, like the arms of barely perceptible glasses. *Nearly home*, she tells herself, as her legs weaken.

I see you blossoming into a fine young woman some day

The front door is open. Van Morrison sings about midnight. Lansha calls Carrie, but there's no reply. She walks to the TV room, takes the needle off the groove. She calls Carrie again. No reply. The toilet flushes.

Carrie comes out, her eyes red.

"Hey. Are you okay?" Lansha greets her.

"Uh, yeah. I was in the garden, and, um, the hay fever."

"Oh, that's starting up again. We'll have to get you something for it. Sorry I'm late."

"That's okay. So, uh, why are you wearing those clothes?"

Lansha looks down, throws out her arms, as if to admit she has no answer, or can't remember. She reads Carrie's eyes. The letter doesn't appear to have been moved. Carrie unsheathes a banana from her pocket, and sucks it.

"I did a lot of reading today," she tells her mother.

"Oh, what did you read?"

"Different things." She bites the tip off the banana, mashes it against the roof of her mouth. "I read an article about gypsies in the paper. I'd like to live like that, travelling around." She sucks the banana again, poking it deep into her mouth.

"Don't do that; it's not right," Lansha tells her.

Carrie looks at her sternly, then continues.

"Your pupils, they're a bit odd," she comments.

"Have you done your homework?"

"Yes. And I got test results from yesterday."

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"What—"

"Two A's."

"Well done. Did you do gym today?"

"No."

"It's important to be active, too, you know."

"I sat on the swing," Carrie smiles. She raises her finger, displaying the daisy ring. "Look, I'm married to the garden!"

Lansha senses there's something strange about the way Carrie looks at her. She asks if she's hungry.

"Sure," she replies.

"Why don't you start the dinner?"

"Okay."

"There's mushrooms, peppers and onions in the basket. Are fajitas okay?"

"I wish we could have *chicken* fajitas, like Jane's mom makes."

"Carrie, you know I can't be near raw meat. And you don't need it. Go and start the dinner, and I'll be there in a minute."

Carrie looks back as she leaves, her mother still standing in the centre of the room. Lansha picks up the envelope. There are no smudges, no obvious signs of disturbance. She puts it in her shorts, and walks slowly to the kitchen. Carrie peels a carrot with the measured strokes of a butcher sharpening a knife.

"You're putting in carrot?"

"I like carrots."

"We'll have to fry them well."

Carrie cuts thin, round slices, which roll away.

"So, where did you go?" she asks.

"Just here and there."

"Here and there," Carrie mutters.

"You didn't mind being on your own, did you?"

Carrie looks out the window. The streaked raindrops have almost faded. She turns to her mother.

"Where's your car?" she asks.