

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

*René Ostberg*  
**Australia**

This has been the wrong place for a hushing holiday  
for a 2-month break that was supposed to bring a bit of peace  
or an easy adventure after an especially disquieting year  
of leaking apartments and low-paying jobs  
and betrayals by men who were hard to leave  
even while hard to believe

What I'd had in mind on the way over  
while keeping myself entertained on a 3-transfer 23-hour flight  
was something like 8 weeks of  
lazy late-morning wakeups  
zany beer-buzzed beach romps and  
Kodak-captured kangaroo safaris through the Outback  
on air-conditioned comfortably cushioned backpacker buses

I hadn't planned for this...  
this country of bawling  
and blistered newly branded calves  
and screaming yellow-crested  
cockatoos  
whose cries at sunrise  
rouse you about as gently  
as a burst of fireworks  
or a blast of a grenade...  
this scorched land  
of sun-fried fields and  
desiccated trees too dead and bare  
to even clatter together  
a few desperately thirsty  
branches and leaves  
and bring a little aural relief  
to the deserted searing  
stretches of the midday

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Aussie bush...  
this place of poison waters  
where sharks and snakes  
crocs and rays  
lie in wait like underwater mines  
to sting you  
bite you  
eat you  
chase you out  
of the cooling waves  
back onto the parched land  
into the punishing heat

Oh and the flies  
have I mentioned the flies  
swarming round your ears  
like a false lover's lies  
flies up your nostrils  
flies in your eyes  
flies rudely resting on your lips  
as if they were just plums  
ripening on a ledge  
and the mosquitoes  
merciless  
malicious  
like the thorns  
on a dozen indignant roses  
plucked without invitation  
and plastic-trapped into a bouquet...

Yet I wouldn't say it's a place  
totally bereft of tranquility  
only that it selfishly  
or maybe wisely  
tucks away its reserves of calm

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in things fleeting and integral  
as the exact middle note  
of a magpie's morning song  
in things fleeting and arbitrary  
as the exact moment  
a pepper tree  
chooses to release a burst of its  
tang  
for anybody or nobody to inhale  
for any wind or no wind  
to pick up and pass along

This is a country where you'll learn  
to earn your sense of composure  
to concentrate on the hush  
among the clamor and discomfort  
to isolate it as you would  
the wingbeat of a bird  
and safeguard it like the echo of a hidden  
spring  
in a dried-up riverbed  
silenced by decades of drought  
and layers of red dust.

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### **The Fading of the Heart**

*(Thoughts on Not Returning to a Familiar Place)*

Love is a green place.  
Not green as in envy  
but green as in rain-lavished,  
mist-adored.  
Love's a stony place too,  
a place where stones cut through the green like teeth  
tearing at a crop of mint  
or a clutch of chives.  
They infest love, in fact,  
like land mines  
or soldiers on leave  
in the nightclubs of the conquered,  
blocking the girls' exodus home  
at the end of the night,  
pulling at each woman's hands, at her blouse,  
her hair, her conscience.

Love's green never changes. It just never changes.  
It will not allow a drop  
to color it yellow one way  
or brown another.  
And its stones can never be fully cleared  
for long.  
A man can spend his grandfather's life's wisdom battling the stones.  
The man loses, his father's father loses.  
His son's heart fills with hate  
for love  
and takes him away  
someplace ungreen and unstoned,  
someplace dusty or watery or sultry,  
someplace red or brown or blue.

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The heart, by contrast, is a changer.  
Its color changes, the shade and the heat of its red,  
the weight of its many blues,  
the knock of its heartbeat, its tides,  
rock-ridden and swollen by life,  
against the hours of a day  
and the beats, the shades, of other hearts.  
A woman can spend her life knocking on other hearts.  
The heart wins, the heart loses.  
It changes with the outcome, fills with hope  
or repair, aims to please.  
It mirrors the color of its love, if it has to.

The heart does what it has to.

From now on, love will be a spectrum.  
A rainbow, not rain-lavished.  
Red, orange, yellow...green?  
Green will do what it has to.  
Green will blush to blue,  
blanch to gray,  
pale away to a faded hue,  
to just a lime seed's shadow,  
to the blur before total erasure.  
Love will finally reflect the heart that adored it,  
that knocked and knocked,  
got blocked,  
that battled and changed  
and changed  
and tried to please and change.  
Stones will give way to seeds, to easy little lime-like beads.  
Green will just give way,  
will fade.  
The heart will flood with other colors  
and maybe even bloom with its own.