

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

David Pring-Mill
The Invisible Offering

Mick Henderson walked through the town of Mission - and it was a place in a state of decay. Even at its best, it was a town of workers caked in construction site dust, of men who stared at their grimy hands and the irremovable blackness at the base of their nails, of bodies which wore bright, open meshed reflective vests and worked alongside roads, of dutiful employees who all retreated into their showers at the end of the day, and sat in front of TVs. Now, neglect and numbness extended over everything, and the mere act of standing had become precarious as men whose minds were shot to hell with drugs and alcohol walked down the streets and stopped and tried to lean against imaginary supports. And orange cones were scattered everywhere from abandoned projects, and sons said what they thought of their fathers' world with a mist of aerosol paint.

As Mick proceeded through the darkness, he saw a boy kicking one of the orange cones along. He kicked it several times, until its rubber center seemed permanently dented, and then he left it there, by the curb. Mick walked up to the cone, straightened out its form, and propped it up. He then turned off of Main Street and headed alongside the highway, towards his little manufactured home on its modest plot of land.

Eighteen-wheeler trucks drove past Mick as he stopped to piss in a ditch. He knew that he had drunk too much. There was hardly any space between the edge of the asphalt and the tree line, and he felt a whoosh of air against his back from the passing traffic.

Half a mile later, he walked up a dark hill, tired and breathless. He thought about the President's speech. He thought about how society would stubbornly proceed down its wrong course, and how he would stubbornly suppress and occasionally issue out his infuriated judgments; and what was the point? The machinery of man, engineered towards the continuation of man, always persists in its functioning, oblivious to objection, populating the land with people - even if they're miserable people, repressed people, enslaved people, starved people. Man had built great factories aimed at making more people and maintaining them; these factories were disguised in institutions such as hospitals, schools, and colleges, and in processes such as marriages, mortgages, tuitions, and employment. Whatever we are, and whoever or whatever made us, we have our eyes directed always down this path of continuation - people making people, thought Mick, and then he spat on the ground.

He slept uncomfortably next to his wife that night. They both slept lightly, intermittently opening their eyes to stare up at the ceiling, as if they were taking turns in this state of observation, for their own mutual protection or benefit; as if there was something above their beige ceiling that could either tear them down or save them.

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The next morning, Mick stood in the shower and stared at the tile squares on the walls. He scrubbed himself. He got dressed, slipping into a pair of worn-out jeans and throwing on a plaid shirt. As he walked to-

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

wards town, heading into work, he received a call from his brother. His brother's sickness was more evident than usual, demonstrated by each muffled cough, directed away from the phone for dignity's sake, to present the illusion of recovery, until at last, the dying man conceded to the blatant reality and admitted, "I'm losing myself."

"You don't sound well at all," agreed Mick. "I thought you were doing better..."

Joe sighed and asked, "Am I really just this body? I can't be this body. It's too weak! I just... I don't know what any of this means anymore."

"You had a sweet wife, a loving wife," said Mick. "Damn it, Joe. She could've been your meaning."

"Yeah," said Joe, who was in Portland, sitting in his condo, dabbing at his eyes and nose with a tissue. He stared out the window at people on the sidewalk. They were opening up black umbrellas, hurrying away from little droplets of water. "Do you treat your wife better than I treated mine?" asked Joe.

"I don't know, I try. I try and fail," said Mick. "Hell, I never even gave Dana a proper wedding. But when she got preggers -- it's just, everything changed so quickly."

"A wedding matters to some women, but it shouldn't. A marriage is what matters," said Joe. "Too often, a wedding is about a couple declaring their love to the world, but it ought to be about them declaring their love for one another *to* one another. You can invite half the town to a wedding, but only two people are gonna be in the marriage."

Mick said, "Well, truth be told, my marriage is doomed. I'm numb, Joe. I didn't choose to be this way, but I'm numb."

"Feeling nothing is better than feeling pain," said Joe.

"I'm not so sure about that," said Mick.

"But you got a kid. That's gotta make you feel somethin', huh?" asked Joe.

"Fear," replied Mick.

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Mick said goodbye to his brother and put his cell phone back in his pocket. He shivered and then resumed his morning walk. There was a thick fog surrounding him. The orange sun had just cracked above the cones of trees off on the hills in the distance. It was a brisk morning - so cold that when Mick first awoke, the air slapped him on his chest and seemed to bite him, sinking its teeth into him, and, as he waddled over to the shower, it was a struggle as the cold tried to tear him down. But he had managed to make a routine out of this struggle, and he always walked in the morning, hoping that his feet might one day guide him to a worthwhile reason for the whole routine, to something brilliant and profound in the little decaying town.

Mick Henderson heard the rattling of a train on railroad tracks as a series of large metallic cars full of freight passed through Mission, and

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

his heart skipped a beat. He tried to dismiss his impulse to bolt down the road, run alongside the tracks, and hop onto one of those train cars, riding the rails to some better place, but his wife and kid kept his pace slow and caused him to instead stop and look at the birds in the trees. He then looked up at the sky. It was a light pink as it faded from the darkish blue that it had turned into after passing through its night-long stage of cold black.

The streets and sidewalks were slick and shiny from the night's rain. It was quiet. The town of Mission was nestled in an enviable valley. The hills were colored drably by bountiful dark green trees, so dark that they were almost not green at all. The buildings were short and quaint and made of red brick. Bedside lamps glowed warmly out through the square windows that contrasted the shapes of nature - the cones of trees and the curves of hills - for squares are distinctly in a shape of man. The shops were made of wood, but they were painted colors, particularly blue. In many ways, it looked like an old-fashioned small town with bright yellow banners that hung and sagged down over its streets to promote local events. But the occasional church garage sale or happy-go-lucky farmers' market wasn't enough to wipe away the recent crime wave, the meth labs, and the junkies that howled in the nighttime streets.

Mick often thought about other places. His mind scanned over the nation from above, over carefully planned and arranged suburbs with freshly cut and trimmed green yards, and the rooftops of houses white, light blue, navy blue, pink and gray, and ball fields surrounded by green trees, and agricultural fields that looked from above like patches on a quilt, and cities of cubed gray, and he knew that somewhere in there his brother would be buried in the land soon enough. And he would be buried in it, too -- sooner than he suspected.

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Mick Henderson sat down on a bus bench on Main Street. The bus was infrequent, but it happened to arrive a few minutes after Mick sat down. Its doors folded inwards and opened, but Mick waved the bus along and the driver closed the doors. He looked a little annoyed at Mick for having wasted his time, as if time was much of a commodity in a town in which there was little to do - not enough distractions for people to be entertained by, and not enough jobs for people to work at.

The bus rolled away noisily as Mick sat there, staring across the road, fumbling with his lighter, trying to get a flame to feed off the last remaining drops of lighter fluid. Mick had no such luck. He put the lighter away and as he did his fingers ran over the corner of his pack of cigarettes, and he stroked the coarseness of the paper, considering the texture of the little box containing what he could not have.

A memory crashed into his mind. It was from his teenage years in South Carolina. He'd gone into Columbia for the day. He went to see a movie. He wanted popcorn, but it cost too damn much. After the movie, as he stepped out of the dark theater, his eyes adjusted, squinting. Sunlight permeated through the clouds and landed upon him. He noticed a bus pulling up to a stop, and he impulsively decided to ride it to the end of the line to get to know the city better. He boarded and paid and found a seat.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

As he touched the back of the seat in front of him, he found that it was sticky, probably with gum, and his seat itself seemed grimy, as though gum had also been placed on it only to be badly scraped off. And then he noticed a woman with crazy eyes staring at him persistently, and he grew self-conscious. He began to sweat profusely. It looked like she was planning something mischievous. He pulled the cord to signal a stop. He exited through the rear doors. But the woman followed.

Mick stopped and pretended to tie his shoelaces, hoping that she would continue walking past. She tapped him on the shoulder and he rose and spun around. She thrust something into his hands. He looked down and saw that it was just air.

She said, "I want you to have this."

He asked, "What is it?"

She replied, "My sadness."

Then she walked away. And for a while, he just stood there, contemplating what he was holding - another person's imperceptible pain. He returned to the bus stop. He boarded the next bus. As he stood holding onto a hand railing, he examined the people around him, wondering whose hands he would force the sadness into - and he never did pass it on to anyone. To do so would mean that he was infected with this woman's peculiar delusion, he concluded, and he didn't want to participate in anyone else's insanity. There was enough of that in his childhood home.

And as he sat there on that bench in Mission, reflecting back on all of this, Mick Henderson wondered if he still had the mad woman's emotions with him. He tried again to produce a flame with his lighter, and after several attempts, he finally did, and he hastily fumbled for a cigarette and lit it.

Maybe the decline really had begun in that far removed moment, with the wide-eyed woman on the bus, burning her desperate presence into the memory of a youthful mind. Maybe causality was truly a mystery, and the problematic source of things extended beyond viruses and economic plight, tracing their true origins to the metaphysical. Mick thought something along these lines as he smoked for a while. Then, he reached into his chest pocket, and pulled out the air there, the air closest to his chest, cupping his hands around it, and then he held his cupped hands up towards the sky - and slowly, carefully pulled them apart, as if the woman's invisible offering would now fly away; as if all of human troubles would leave if given the slightest encouragement. He smiled.