

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

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No Whiteness Behind

In the soft and milky pre-dawn light the small deer stood on cold and stiff legs and sniffed the air and looked down into its bed it had made where the grass was brown and bent down and around it it had snowed in the night but it had fallen on the deer's back and had melted. Two crows on different hills of the same valley called back to one another in the shattering early winter morning and the deer pushed out its small neck and peered behind itself and preened its lower back once and stepped gingerly out the bed and began to wander down the hillside and make small and sharp angled hoof prints in the white. At the same time, in the very bottom of the valley, the hunter was unfolding his large frame from his truck. He took out a long and slender metal gun with a firm wooden stock and a scope and slid five cartridges in to the clip and clicked the clip in the gun and pulled open the bolt and quietly slid one more into the chamber. He surveyed the land like a new made king. He saw the young deer making her ginger and mincing way through the snow on the hillside. She stood out so starkly brown and newly spotless against the white of the last night's snow. He raised his gun and sighted her down the scope and watched her careful and perfect steps and sighed. He put his gun back up and checked this eastern hillside and then slung the gun over his shoulder and set off into the valley and deeper into the woods.

The hunter's steps through the woods were loud, they echoed where the small deer's had not and the hunter knew this and also knew there was nothing for it. His ancestors may have been able to creep through woods on soft-soled shoes and sneak up upon deer and destroy their worlds and take them upon their backs to their camps on the plains where they would stretch their hides taugt and grotesque upon hand hewn and pointed stakes where they would dry as they devoured the whole of the animal and blessed themselves and the deer before curling under other dried bodies to sleep through the cold winter night. Perhaps in another time they could, he had thought.

He stepped upon a rock and sloughed off a fine layer of cracked and hard snow and bent to look at it closer. Underneath, the stringy brightness of green moss shone out and looked like some lighthouse of brilliant color in the tinted whiteness of the land all around him. It reminded him of the sea, the color of some depthless green where all unnamed and countless creatures swim between yourself and the bottom of that green but you cannot name them nor see them and so you let them swim and they let you float and the two or the countless shall never meet. The hunter brushed his large and broad thumb across the spongy green so delicately he could have plucked it whole from the rock but he didn't. He stood again and walked on and knew that in few short hours the moss would be dead and surely by the week's end it would be lost.

By now the mighty brow of the sun had cracked the eastern sky wide and stood over the land like the true king and the hunter stood in its shadow and felt that mighty warmth he brought and pulled off his long brown scarf for only one moment and let the heat curl round his throat and set.

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Then he bundled himself again with new found modesty and began the long walk up the valley.

He noticed the leaves had now all fallen and lay unquivering on the ground. No squirrels yet chattered the trees to one another, nor furrowed long wounds in the snow, though he saw them sometimes running round the branch or looking down with watcher's eyes to mark his pass.

He pulled his eyes back down from tops of the trees and stopped in his tracks where they made two sharp snaps from the branches below and the back of one mighty deer was shading and blocking the whole of a small fox path the hunter had been following and behind this mighty deer stood the mighty sun which had made it so difficult for the hunter to see. The deer lifted a head heavy with two towers of white antler that branched off in the sun and shone with a like intensity of the moss on the rock from before and reminded the hunter of magnificent ancestral trees on worn and old ledgers marking the passage of lineage and kin. The deer swung his head from side to side and snorted once and the rut was done so the hunter knew it was for him and for where he was going. He raised his gun and quickly looked down the scope but saw only the massive hindquarters and underside of white tail of the deer and so adjusted his sight to lower magnification and felt himself flush for his foolishness at not having it low to begin with. The deer was unconcerned and stepped one large hoof forward and out of the trail and looked back directly at the hunter and the hunter thought how odd for he had never seen a deer behave like this and perhaps he was mad or suffered from some internal damage but he hoped not because it was proud and tall and the finest deer he had ever seen. The hunter looked through the sites again and still could not see the deer, only the bright and stark light from the sun above his back and the four spokes of his legs that were rooted into the white ground. He lowered his gun again and the deer blossomed before his eyes and this time he seemed to tower his full height as if he arched his back high and thrust his massive and dark brown chest with one bright white sash down the front forward where it brushed against the elderberries of the hillside. He looked down the site once more but again could only see the whiteness spread thin across his scope so he pulled his gun back and watched the deer for a moment more. The heaviness of it seemed not to matter as the deer stepped forward into the brush and disappeared into the small fox trail without a whisper or rasp. The sun stood full and just above the horizon and the last of the deer's back had moved away and it pierced through the hunter as he stood rooted.

After the hunter had waited crouched for several long hours in the exact same footfalls of where he had seen the deer, he unlimbed himself and stood up began forward and found the huge hoof prints in the snow. The sun now was getting on in the day and would melt most the tracks by high noon so he knew he must go on but he wanted to give the deer time to get in front of him without pushing him out through the valley and missing another chance. He thought of the fine deer again and its back and shoulders and the white antlers on its head thrust up like full elderberry bushes to the sky and smiled and crouched down to run his fingers

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into the deep "V" of the track the animal had left, its point pointing forward toward which way he had chosen.

The hunter began following the trail, only looking down occasionally to confirm he still stepped in the wake of the deer. The fox trail was wide and most likely traveled by other deer as well as many animals here so it was not difficult to follow. These other creatures had long since bent the grass underfoot and pushed back the vines to grow on the trees beside the path and had snapped off the branches that grew too low on those trees as well.

For two hours the old hunter followed this trail with his back bent in most places and shimming under thick branches that most wildlife would never touch but the hunter laid hands on them as he passed as if to mark at least for himself his simple passage among the wild things of this earth. The sun now directly above seeped forward and let drip large patches of sunlight that fell between leaves and branches and shrubs to land on white and strip the white of the land and pull forth the brown and orange and gold and sometimes very seldom the green like a minister raising up these colors from the dead and now the creatures of the forest woke as if from a fugue and danced among the branches of the forest and among the leaves of the ground. Small chickadees chirped and strutted and squirrels now called and ran to one another and found what they had hidden while crows in the tops looked down silently and above them the few hawks of this valley world wheeled magnanimous against the depthless blue of the sky and he thought of the green moss he had stood above before. He took very little time for these things unfolding around him. He had seen this all before and would see it again but right now the deer lay somewhere beyond him and forward and the trail it had made was harder now because large swathes of it had to be found in just the brown of the land but the hunter could do it because he had tracked many animals through this before but it was more difficult and would take longer and if this mighty animal decided not to bed today he would never find it and unless they chance encountered some other day he would not see him again and have only that time upon the trail together with the sun behind and would maybe regret not taking the white-blind shot like he could have.

The old hunter walked on and could now feel his age inside his limbs and that made him sad and he wondered if the old deer felt the same and knew it was getting long of day if he started thinking the thoughts of the animals. He knew them and knew why they did things but only in the contemplative evening before the black night did the hunter imagine what they thought and truly gave voice to their small frames in his mind.

Towards the evening darkness all snow had gone. The hunter had trailed the deer up the winding valley for many miles and it appeared he had slowed but not stopped because the tracks were deeper and still somewhat squishy in the ground from the melted snow but the sun was only a hands breadth from the western setting hilltop and full darkness would come sooner to this valley than to other places of the land so the old hunter quickened his pace though his knees had ached for these last two miles. The animals of the forest had once again gone silent and he could hear only the slurring of the wind in the treetops on the valley plateau and they sounded so foreign and distant and high.

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He walked on but looked more closely at his feet and the trail and the track of the deer. He thought he should be coming upon him soon so he made an effort to stop every so often and scan ahead and look to see if he could see the mighty deer standing again. The trail cut up half the side of the valley and the hunter knew he must climb up it but for a second considered ending here. He would still have to climb the valley side but he would go up and out and back towards where he had parked the truck and walk the hilltop and get the last minutes of the warm sun on his face among the fields of cut corn and alfalfa up there and perhaps see a deer come early to feed and he'd shoot it if it was big. But it wouldn't be this big deer and the old hunter wanted him because of what he had seen on the trail and didn't know how many more winters that old boy would take. He considered him close to the end and perhaps the deer knew that too and so had stopped and was giving the old man a shot but didn't know where the sun was, but that was foolish because the deer knows where the sun is and knows perspective of others too the old man had thought. He knew it was getting long in tooth for this day but he knew the deer knew things and so left it at that and didn't berate himself anymore.

He walked up the valley side and followed the path low to the ground and he was bent half over and craning his neck up every few steps to see beyond the path and suddenly half way up he saw the brown tuft of hock sticking out the trail, bisecting it, as if the deer now chose to branch off the trail and strike westward brazenly. The old hunter unslung his gun from his shoulder and peered down the sights of it but could only see the hock and even then only the bottom of it and the graceful curve of the last hind leg still tethered and speared through the fox trail. The thick brush and bramble obscured the rest of the deer but it looked to stay fixed there and perhaps it had caught wind of something up the valley, for the wind was coming down from the deer and blowing past and into the old hunter and he lifted his nose like the deer would and sniffed the air to see if he could match sense with the creature and he thought he could smell the wetness of hide like that of a dog but thought it could be his imagination too. After several moments the deer had not moved and the hunter was afraid if he went forward and tried to push the deer it would barrel off trail and deeper into the forest and he wouldn't get a shot and lose it to the night. He took his rifle and glassed where the body of the deer should be and found one small patch of brown standing between two twined elder branches. He shouldn't take the shot, he thought. He didn't know if this spot was its forefront right behind its front legs although he suspected it from the height it was and from what he had seen earlier. If he wounded him it would trail through the land but he'd only have a few minutes light and so the shot would have to be true but he had no way of knowing that from what he could see of the deer now. He was sure if the deer pushed deeper into the woods he'd be gone and the old hunter wouldn't get a chance like this again, so he made his decision and raised the rifle and pressed his cheek to the cold wood stock and scoped down it and onto the deer and put the crosshairs to the patch of brown between the twined branches and fired and saw the hole rip into the deer and blood gulp quickly out and a high mewl sound pierced both valley sides and ran up and down in the very bottom of it and he knew the sound had carried for a long distance here and he lowered the gun and heard thrashing in the high weeds be-

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hind the elder bush off the trail and quickly went forward to kill-shot the deer but even then he knew what he had done.

The young yearling lay on its side gasping and quivering, its mouth opening and closing in surprise and the old hunter hoped no agony while blood frothed round her nostrils and under the deer's brown side where the speckles of youth and summer were just disappearing and mixed with the speckles of red and the hole above her front leg near the ridge of her back flapped with loose skin with each shudder of her breath and a rivulet of red ran between the leaves on the spongy soil behind her. The old hunter sighed and looked up the trail she came, where her small and tiny hoof prints led beyond and to the east up from the valley bottom where they bisected the fox trail the old hunter had followed. He looked back at the yearling and her mewling continued and it echoed round him and he raised his gun to silence her and put her out of his misery and out of the corner of his eye, down the fox trail at the bottom of the valley, stood the old deer with his proud and heavy antlers and he looked up the hillside at the old man standing over the bleeding and crying young deer.

He turned his gun quick and fluid and put the scope to his eye but didn't feel the stock touch his shoulder nor his finger wrap round the trigger nor his hand cup the fore grip softly and didn't feel the shock and recoil or hear the report of the gun. He saw the cloud of gunpowder smoke from the barrel tinge and bloom out in the cold and wild winter evening and by the time it cleared the deer was gone and however good a shot the old man was he knew he hadn't hit him. He listened but couldn't even hear the old deer rushing through the brambles and branches and forestry of the land.

The old man turned and looked back down on the young deer who was still mewling loudly and her large brown eyes were looking forward and back, first to the man then the sky then the ground, until her breath quickened for two short moments and she spasmed and her small spoked legs gouged two deep furrows in the softened brown earth that made a V and pointed at the hunter and she coughed a ragged blotch of blood and went still and with her last breath the echo of her mewling faded from the hillside and the land grew quiet atop the old man standing above her cooling form. He looked heavenward and noticed the sky had clouded over with a great grey and the air stirred round him and it began to snow and where the white snow landed upon the red blood of the young deer it disappeared and left no whiteness behind.