

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

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Notes On A Literary Education

1.

FOR THE FIRST ONE I AM SEVEN YEARS OLD. Daddy is with me. His bad disks (how did he damage them at a relatively young age is a question I never asked myself)... His bad disks give him ferocious backaches sympathetically spreading into headaches. Headaches foster his nasty mood and they fire his tempers. Doctors always prescribe the same cure: waters.

Lacking the means for bringing the family to a thermal station (even of the cheapest kind) dad daily commutes to the closest available one. He drives over there, gets done with whatever ritual those sites dispatch then comes home at mid morning. What exactly occurs at "the waters" I never figured out. Probably I didn't try, my curiosity hindered by a feeling of reverence. What I noticed is that dad's mood didn't significantly improve throughout the cure.

Once, only once, dad allows me to accompany him. I remain in the gardens: immense and enchanting. I don't think I even see the building-palace-mansion where therapy takes place: a large tree whose branches fall to the ground as a gigantic canopy keeps my attention transfixed.

Yes: I'm falling in love with a Japanese Sophora (dad has proudly told me the name of the plant, since he knows them all). I like the sound of the word just as I'm enthralled by this fringed pavilion, dark green. I want to live inside it, if not immediately certainly as soon as possible. Then dad calls me. He wants to introduce me to a tall thin old man – a famous author, he says.

I can understand famous – the little lightheadedness brought around by the adjective, the impulse of giggling or at the opposite being shy, looking down... I could taste the full flavor of "famous" in fact, if the Japanese greenery hadn't won my heart for the moment.

As for author - that remains more vague. I certainly associate the qualification with books, a category of things I most value: not like trees, birds or flowers though. The connection between author and book is still loose... the man makes it sharper when he shakily bends from his highs and with a crooked smile (also partially toothless, I'm sure) he produces a pen. At daddy's request he signs his name somewhere. Where I can't remember. I dare guess dad just hands him his paper, maybe folded in four.

Now, though, comes the vivid detail that stuck in my memory – of course not overshadowing the Sophora Japonica... Years later I reconstructed the author's name. I won't give it out for privacy sake. I will approximate. Let's say he was called Irving Amberson. That comes very close. His pen name (he's tracing it boldly, large enough for me to decipher it) is I AM.

I truly appreciate the joke and I smile (in dad's presence I usually don't). I understand in a flash authors don't necessarily go by the rules – at least not those I am painstakingly learning in first grade. They can play with words, bending them at their wish. They can wink, take shortcuts and riddle around. Authorship grants that kind of freedom.

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It sounds like a decent plan, especially if paired with the idea of permanently settling under a canopy of twigs and verdure.

Are you really the girl who lives under the Sophora?

Yes, I AM.

2.

For the second one I was about three years older. It isn't chronology prompting me but an inner recollection of mood. I am more serious, composed, and with a tinge of sadness.

Something quite exceptional is going on: I'm travelling with dad - that probably never happened before. He has to go for work in a neighboring town, a beautiful one... One that tourists invade in all seasons, one I have dreamed about though with blurred expectations... Its flowery name on my lips makes me smile: I can't wait for the day when I'll set foot in such postcard paradise.

Only not with dad. Because he terrifies me, especially if I have to bear his company for a considerable lapse of time. His mood is a broken barometer stuck on stormy weather. If it swings at all, that is from very cranky to obnoxious. And I have a natural gift for pushing his buttons. Mother can't truly shield me from his thunderous bolts (she herself could be hit). But to know I'll later call on her for solace means something.

Later, not too late: the prospect of a whole day - framed by two long train rides - with dad scares the hell out of me. Still I have no choice other than being ostentatiously happy. I am bursting with gratitude: I don't know how I summon those acting skills... they pop out on command.

Of the day I have confused memories - not surprisingly since it must have been an ordeal of self-control, with me trying to be good at all costs. I recall a kind of stupor, a diffuse incredulity... apparently no major catastrophe occurred. Maybe a few minor ones due to my misconducts at a modest diner table (food consuming outside our comfy kitchen isn't a talent I have practiced).

This tremulous sense of "being spared" (the un-granted benevolence of fate, whose lasting we should systematically doubt) threads itself among the majesty of tall buildings and architectural wonders intimidating more than elating me.

Except for the garden - where once more dad has parked me for hours after ordering me to stay put. Vain precaution: I am scared stiff, I could go nowhere. I sit on a bench without even a book to entertain myself, not to talk of dolls, colored pencils, a ball or a kite... Dad has left me in the company of my imagination: he must have thought it sufficient. Well, it was. He must have thought it safe. That is disputable.

I sit, careful to be found where I was left, but oh God am I happy? For (as I remember) this garden is heaven. Before vanishing (swallowed by whatever building claimed his presence for incomprehensible reasons) dad has named the tree in whose shadow I'll patiently abide (in the dead hour of a burning summer day). It is a Magnolia Obovata.

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I watch it astonished, overwhelmed, enamored. Luscious leaves shine as if they were waxed. They look like leather, satin or bronze following the slant of the light (I keep blinking and twisting my neck, playing with a kaleidoscope of nuances). Flowers are like eggs of gigantic birds, candles, silent flames... their smell makes me drunk. The crows hiding all over tell tales, I believe...

When daddy comes back I have lost track of time, though I did nothing and didn't move half an inch. His voice startles me. I stiffen, especially for he isn't alone and an alien presence, I know, makes him more sensitive to my possible misbehaviors (or innate faults). He calls me. I get closer.

Again he introduces me to a "famous author", he says. Quite a *déjà vu*. I am confirmed literary celebrity is mostly acquired in gardens. Pointedly in the proximity of very majestic trees.

The author isn't young, yet not venerable like the first one I met. About dad's age, he impresses me by a general tone of darkness: black clothes, black bushy hair, black eyes contrasting with a very pale face, all wrinkled - clearly by an extenuating effort of concentration.

This isn't particularly encouraging: it suggests authorship is something you need to suffer, to ex-press out of yourself as if you were an orange - to keep in the botanical domain.

The author smiles and - again - at dad's request he signs something for me. It must be dad's newspaper... as I said I have nothing with me but my five senses. The author writes his name that dad stentoriously utters in the meanwhile - as if I should know it, as if it were common knowledge like the Holy Mary or the seven days of the week.

The author traces his name in a readable way: I am a bit jaded about this performance. It has lost some of its shine: I have seen it before. Now I am able to do it myself... I think I might have forgotten the lad (notwithstanding dad's pompous introduction and intimidating stare) if not for the name...

For you see his name (that I won't reveal) is not ordinary. I could say - being close to the truth - he's called Felix The Cat. That is a cartoon character! It is also his 'real name' - daddy winks - whatever that means. The author happily laughs.

Now the theorem is set in concrete... authors are not normal people. They don't just write things they make up: they belong to the realm of imagination. They don't only create fictions: they directly pop out of books, stories, tales - then it is just a question of getting back in, inventing the following chapters.

Now I won't be surprised should the next be introduced as Merlin or Snow White. I will shake their hand without blinking: it all makes perfect sense.

3.

My education is furthered in early teen age. Chance manages to complete it, working more accurately than you would expect by such a random agency. My next encounters mirror the first ones with perfect specularly: after dad introduced the two men, grandma finds out two women....

Once she announces a special gift... she knows a poet with whom I'll have the honor of visiting. First she gives me her poem: handwritten on a piece of paper. It is long: besides size I remember nothing. Not a clue about the subject matter, though I recall truly liking the handwriting... Such a curly calligraphy reveals a poetic soul even to my unpracticed eye. I am mostly impressed by the capital E: wave-shaped, a Greek epsilon. Artsy, fancy and illogical, I think it is absolutely striking. Sometimes in the intimacy of my journal I try it for fun.

After I read the poem I am admitted at the poet's house: a turn of the century villa, kind of falling apart or else exquisitely decadent. First I wander among fruit trees and flowerbeds, accordingly to my penchant toward the botanical side of authorial experiences. Soon the poet appears: tall and fair, of age indefinite, unmarried.

This last feature, quite rare in my narrow universe, strikes me as perfectly espousing (so to speak) the poetic profile. Singleness seems to provide the margin of freedom needed for a variety of creative endeavors that mother – for instance – could never pursue... To start with, the poet cooks elaborate dishes I promptly discover.

Her recipes aren't just savory: they are wonderful to the eye and she can explain how to make them... That same afternoon I produce tennis-ball-sized beignets (caramel brown) filled with a gamut of cold cuts and cheeses... Then pink jellies made with pureed watermelon enhanced with pistachios and suave as kisses.

The kitchen isn't the only domain where the poet expresses an inspiringly fanciful freedom... the same quality spreads through the rooms, all bearing an original touch. Here is a bouquet clearly not bought at the florist's - ingenuously mixing wild flowers, dry branches, herbs, even a piece of coral with roses. Here are jingles and other paraphernalia traditionally used on horse chariots: she sews them on her purse...

The insight strikes me suddenly: this is what poets do. They take licenses with things, manipulating their scope. They enlarge their finality, liberally composing them into unusual patterns... This creative dance knows no limits, contagiously imbibing all gestures. Such lifestyle conquers me: I enthusiastically adopt the poetic stance as I figure it during my enlightening visit.

About those words on paper grandma gave me to read: I confess they've vanished from mind. And it doesn't matter, I hope.

4.

Last but not least, a bit later, I meet one more woman poet. She is not tall or blond but short and black haired. Blue eyed too: a striking contrast. If the other was single, enjoying the artsy life in its fullness, this is married and has three children: a large traditional family.

The domestic burden doesn't stint her profuse creation that looks as fluent as unstoppable. She transforms whatever she touches with a magic wand: in her house walls change colors as couches change covers, gilded frames containing pious images turn fuchsia and embrace her teen daughters' smiles. Jeans becomes pillows while butterfly sprout on jeans' pockets, scarves become skirts while skirts become blouses. All is morphing in a constant spirit of festive surprise: I recognize poetry in action... yes, I've seen it before.

In the kitchen, poet two demonstrates the same attitude shown by poet one. Also her recipes add amazing aesthetics to excellent taste. At her side I concoct sparkly desserts spilling out of halved tangerines. Then I granulate orange jelly into pearly foam I sprinkle around like confetti. The result is a byzantine trophy.

Life is a nonstop party around poet two (soon a cherished friend notwithstanding our disparity of age). How is this possible if she's a mother of three? Money helps I discover. Still poetry is the core engine, I want to believe.

She has a book out. A small one and I find the size appropriate. I would not have expected a more imposing tome: isn't writing a tassel of the poetic mosaic, significant but not overwhelming? This I've gathered so far...

A thin book, the size of a memo pad. The title sounds like "shrill notes". Notes – light touches - but sharp in order to leave a mark, scratch the surface. I still remember something from the book: it must have been on the first page. A subject, a verb and an object. An image: red flowers against a white wall.

I knew those flowers well: they climbed the facades of our hometown. I could embrace the vision and commit it to memory – though not giving it much of a meaning. Later it would remind me of her... of the other poet and the previous authors. It would signify my discovery of the artistic life with its diverse incantations.

It would link the creative domain with nature. With the plant kingdom, where I always suspected it belonged.