

## Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

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SNOW

An overnight storm had left several inches of snow on the ground, and the temperature was still below freezing. I shoveled the steps and walkway and, for more exercise, went hiking up the road. At the intersection with the main road, I saw old Andy Barnes standing there with his usual sign. Traffic was sparse, but standing in the snow, he surely inspired greater-than-usual sympathy. No—his sign didn't say, "I will work for food." Andy would never display such a banality. He hated working—even for food. His sign read: "I am out of work and homeless." And that was all true enough. I had to admire his persistence. He endured heat, cold, rain, and even snow to remain at leisure and afford a drink now and then. He greeted me with a "Happy New Year," and I returned the wish and handed him five dollars. He thanked me and said, "God Bless You." I thanked him for the blessing and waved good-bye.

I turned down the side road that led to the woods. Snow was uncommon in Brighttown, North Carolina, and owning no boots, I was trudging along in my running shoes—not all that waterproof, but they did massage my feet. When I reached the woods, I found the snow so thick on the trees, it was hard to fathom what kept it there. Along the margins, flocks of slate-colored juncos roamed the ground. Near them, just off the road, a few cars were parked—there were other visitors to the snowy woods.

I began hiking one of the trails and paused on a bridge over a stream. The ribbon of dark water meandered through the frozen landscape. There were patches of ice floating on the surface and bubbles rising from the bottom. What sort of creature was sending those signals?

Stopping had made my feet grow numb, and I jogged long enough to revive them. A Chinese couple strolled by, gloved hand in gloved hand—somehow conjuring the American Fifties. Then came a Great Dane, dragging a small man down the trail, and then a corpulent woman in a sweat suit, bouncing along with a toy poodle.

Stone cisterns and culverts were imbedded along either side of the trail. Farmers put them there a century ago to keep water off their road to market. And before the cisterns, there were the oak trees. Both tree and artifact were links to the past, for those who cared about the past—though such people were growing fewer. The trees were reminders of the vast system of life, death, and rebirth that has gone on, will go on.

Laughter came from over the next rise. As I reached the top, I beheld a father pulling his two sons on a sled and the mother walking beside them with the family Airedale. The scene made me think of my own family. Where were they?—the son who fled college for Africa, the wife who fled Brighttown with a drug dealer. For me, things weren't all that bad. Now I could do what I always wanted to do—nothing in particular. And yet, seeking the quiet life and finding it were, as they say, two different things.

As I left the happy family behind, a deer dashed across the trail and disappeared among the trees. It was a fully grown doe, galloping with picturesque grace and bearing. Near the end of the trail, a local drug dealer came round a bend with his son and their German shepherd. The dog had

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been drugged—I could tell by its myotic eyes and lack of response. The drug dealer’s face was long, bony, and obdurate. The son’s sneer came naturally—the result of having a drug-dealing father.

From somewhere beyond the Bright County Line came the blast of a shotgun—then another. In these woods, shootists were seldom heard in the daytime. More often, they came out at night to pepper a road sign or wound a tree. Along the road running the length of the woods, I had seen evidence of their nighttime patrols—arrays of punctures and dents on the metal signs, bark and wood torn away from tree trunks.

I reached the end of the trail and headed back toward the main road. Dark clouds had formed in the west and were advancing. Once again, snow flakes danced in the wind. An SUV passed by, and the driver slowed down to keep from splashing me with slush. I waved a thank you. A red-tailed hawk flew near and perched on a road sign. As I approached the sign, the hawk flew away to a treetop.

I came upon a dead deer lying in a ditch near the tree line. The buzzards had been at work on its eyes and backside. Its ribs and legs were damaged—it must have been struck by a car or truck. Even in the cold, it stank. More signs of civilization appeared along the road and its shoulders—jettisoned beer bottles, whiskey bottles, fast food detritus, even bags of household trash.

I heard a siren—then another. Two police cars, with red and blue lights flashing, arrived at the intersection up ahead. Then came an ambulance that soon departed with its own siren blaring. When I reached the intersection, I noticed red stains in the snow. One police officer was directing traffic past the scene. The other was addressing a driver standing beside a Toyota Prius. The car had a dent in the right fender. I stopped to speak with the officer directing traffic.

“What happened?”

Standing in the slush, waving at vehicles, he was annoyed by my question, but replied anyway. “Panhandler got hit by a car. Driver skidded right into him.”

“Is the panhandler all right?”

“I don’t know his exact condition. But no—he’s not all right.”

I turned away quickly and walked toward home. There was a doughnut shop along the way, and I suddenly wanted to be in a warm place. I went to the shop and bought donuts and coffee, grateful for that small enterprise. I wanted the snow to melt and the streets to be clear and dry—I was fed up with the snow, fed up with the cold.