

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

Christian Fennell

Lizzy, Zander and the Monkey King

Lizzy is down by the stream by the big trees by the muddy bank, the leaves moving away and there comes a small breeze now. Buster Parker, gimme back my bear.

Lizzy. His hand is on a damp stump and there are bugs and it smells punky. He moves away, closer to Lizzy on the other side of the stream.

Can you feel that—oh, and there's mushrooms. Zander, look at the mushrooms.

There is blood on her white nightgown, high up between her legs.

Lizzy.

I hav'ta find my bear.

It's by the big rock, I saw ya do it.

All the little feet sinking in the ever-mossy ground.

Buster Parker, I can see ya there still, gimme back my bear.

And now a voice comes with the breeze, up from the downstream: And you, Lizzy, you are a child of God too.

In the silence by the woods, by the stream, she is there. Why Zander? Why do we hav'ta go now?

I told ya already, ya know why. C'mon now.

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His bare feet find the dirty sticky floor, his elbows his knees, his hands rubbing his face and moving through his hair. He grips the edge of the bed and exhales, his thin white chest and arms poxed with the markings of a man burning in the certainty of this place; of this heat. He reaches for his cigarettes and lights one. He puts his lighter back on the nightstand and takes a drag. His body is rank with destruction, and he knows it, but it won't always be, not always. He exhales a stream of blue smoke and it hangs in the dead warm air.

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They walk in the woods, little and lost, the Spanish moss their covering. By the stream. Always stay to the stream.

Where are we goin'?

I told ya already. I've told ya a hundred times.

Tell me again then.

California.

Oh, California. Is that far?

Yes it is, it's far.

But I'm tired now.

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They cross a dirt road and there's a thin man wearing a straw trilby hat riding a bike backwards. He looks and smiles and Lizzy does too.

They walk on, beneath a low heavy sky, the Spanish moss shaded, and it is weeping.

Can you hear that?

Shh.

These bushes are prickly.

Shh. Quiet, Lizzy. He whispers, look, it's a monkey.

Sitting on a stump he lowers his harp. If I'm a monkey, he says, a broad smile, a gold tooth, he turns and looks, he leans forward, then I'm the Monkey King. He laughs, a bigger than all the world laugh, in the wind, his harp music again, long and lonely and forever still, over the sounds of the streamy water.



He walks to the kitchen, there had better be some fuckin coffee. He picks up a small pot from the cluttered mess on the counter and looks inside. He puts it down and picks up another one and looks inside of it.

She comes, wrapping her arms around him, from the back of him, her sticky crisp blond hair in her face pressing to his back. Where the kids at?

How the fuck should I know? Outside. Make some damn coffee.



She sucks her breath in, this fear brought to her, such a man as this, a monkey man, and he stands, taller than us all.

Come along now. He turns and walks in the woods, his bare feet, his white cotton shirt opened at the neck, big baggy pants with a wide leather belt. He stops and looks back, ya mustn't be staying out here. Not here.

You can do it, Lizzy, go on, you can walk in these woods, like that, with this man. Come along, Zander, we can do it, we can walk in these woods, with this man, take my hand and don't let go. And don't you worry, Lizzy, don't you worry one bit, we'll keep your bear safe—right here, put it there.

They walk upon a path known only to the man before them. And why were they? Walking in these woods alone with a man like that and not a single friend there to walk with them even though it was daylight and these woods were the same woods. And where were they going—oh, California, and maybe this way is the right way and all the days of blue skies were just about upon them.

Zander puts his hand to Lizzy's shoulder, his recent markings on his arm, the blood there tried and dark, bright red around the etching: 18 88 14. Let's go back.

No, we mustn't.

The man stops and looks around, for what they wonder? They look too. For all the little lost children of the woods. And these woods were

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silent. He looks at Lizzy and Zander, his words to them as if not in need of the very air carrying them, we're almost there now, it's not far.

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He sits on the porch step, his coffee mug in his hand, his white and pink skin, his markings, his fear, not unlike all the others, there and for all the world to see, and he thinks—but no, he cannot. Not that.

Lizzy.

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His camp is at the crux of where a shallow stream cuts away from the Tidewater River, a wide hard-packed shoreline of smooth stones and sand. At the edge of the trees there's a shelter made of branches open to the southeast, filled with leaves and pine needles and covered in the skin of a black bear.

A hare cooks upright on a green willow branch.

He reaches to the edges of the coals and picks out a mud-packed ear of corn and Zander squints at the imagined pain of the hot coals.

They watch him blow dry baked mud embedded with orange embers away from the burnt husks of corn.

They eat their meal, not speaking, the sun falling.

He slides a piece of rabbit from his fingers with his mouth. Like the Mighty Z, he says, born of this world, and yet, is the world itself.

Who's the mighty Z? Lizzy asks.

It's just a theory.

What theory? says Zander.

The more you get to the end of everything, the end of your faith, your beliefs, your knowing, that is what is there.

Lizzy smiles. The Mighty Z.

That's right, Lizzy. Do you suppose this hare liked being a hare?

Yes, says Lizzy. He was a nice hare.

Yes he was, but its knowing it was a hare, or not a hare, did not change it from being this hare. It's like that little story someone will tell me far away from today.

What story?

Will you tell us?

Of course I will. He leans closer, his large head before them, his hands reaching to the distant sounds coming, and he shall tell me, says the Monkey King man, 'that two young fish are swimming when along comes an older fish swimming the other way. The older fish nods at the younger fish and says, morning boys. How's the water? The two young fish swim on for a bit until eventually one of them looks over at the other and says, what is water?'

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He looks at the children and they are silent. He leans back and laughs, his bigger than all the world laugh. We need music, and he plays on, the fire burning on, his eyes holding them, looking, and looking again, and beyond them, this man, the Monkey King man, playing his harp for all the little lost children, the fire burning louder and higher, twists of gray smoke and orange embers pushing up his notes, a warm southern breeze taking them away.



She steps from the porch, a light summer dress on, barefoot, and she walks across the short dead grass, stepping around discarded items of some past wanting. She stops at the end of their yard and looks at the shaded woods and the stream where she does not like to go.

Lizzy. Zander.

She crosses her arms as if she were cold in that dead flat heat.

Lizzy.

Her hands dig into her arms, squeezing.

Zander.

Not even a breeze to welcome her words.

Lizzy. Zander.

Just their names.

Standing at the stove cooking it off he turns and looks out the screen door and in the coming dark he can hear his wife again: Lizzy. Zander.



He puts the children to bed and covers them in the heaviness of the bearskin. He sits and watches them, Zander, sleeping, but not Lizzy, her eyes wide still, out-waiting the pain in the night, in the coming dark, and he puts his hand to her forehead—there there now—now now, and she squeezes her fists and she closes her eyes and she flees again, a little girl on the back of duskywings.



The sheriff's here.

Go on and talk to him, I'll be out in a minute.

She walks to the porch, the screen door slapping behind her, the evening heat coming to her.

The car stops.

She shades her eyes.

Kerry.

Sheriff.

He moves around the car.

She watches him.

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He leans against the hood. Where's Edward at?

She looks back at the house.

We checked the school, nobody's seen em.

No?

We talked to Alice, they never got on the bus.

Buttoning up his shirt, Edward walks out the door. Sheriff.

She looks at her husband. They never got on the bus. They never got to school.

They'll be hearing about this, that's for damn sure.

Any problems lately? Last night, say?

Nope, none. He looks at his wife.

She looks at her husband. She looks back at the sheriff. Nothin like that, no.

The sheriff looks behind him. You check in there?

Yup, nothin.

She looks too.

We'll talk to folks in town case they show up there. He pushes off the car. In the meantime, if you think of anything, or they show back here, let us know.

She watches him get back in the car, back it up and pull away. She looks at her husband, leaning past the broken porch railing and spitting to the dry dirt.

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He sits in the dark watching over them, Lizzy's tears tried and fallen, the rattling of her hollowing, fear chewing bones and soft tissue, coming to him and settling heavy upon him. He leans forward and whispers, never again, my dear, Lizzy. Never again.

She opens her eyes.

He smiles.

Lizzy, in the dark, looking off somewhere else.

It's me, Lizzy.

She looks at the Monkey King man.

We've known each other a long time. A real long time. We're friends.

Still looking at the Monkey King man, still wondering, her eyes widen—Buster! And she folds herself into the enormous size of him, the good covering of him, her head to his chest, his heart and his bones, and her tears come again.

My dear little Lizzy.

You came for me.

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Of course I did, I've never not been here. You know that. Time stretches all the way back to when we were the very same, and then before that, and again before that—it's a continuum, of course it is, and you can remember that too, if ya wanted to.

Zander awake in the dark, and whoever knows what is out there, waiting? Whaddaya mean we were the same?

He looks at Zander. The very same.

No we weren't.

Yes, he says, we were.

What color?

That original man and me, the one and the very same.

That's an outright lie, and you know it. We was never nigas, Zander.

The Monkey King leans closer to Zander, his eyes widening, the whites of them upon him, and he puts his hand to Zander's face. Zander squints at the touch, at the hum that comes. We're the same, Zander, despite what you think, or think it ought to be, or what you've been told. He looks at Zander's forearm, at the red-rimmed recent marking.

He didn't do that.

How come we ain't still then?

The Monkey King man looks to the dark and what he sees there. He looks back at Zander. Geography and a nomadic curiosity, I suppose. A need to survive. That and a happy ever-loving on-going resilience. Our bodies are such wonderful things and capable of such great change. Like the earth itself. He looks past Zander, at the river, at the moon reflecting upon a low rippling section. What do you say we cool down?

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In the night, from the porch, she calls again: Lizzy. Zander. And from the darkness, there is no answer.

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They're on their backs, under the moonlight, the clear cool water running over them, gripping and holding wet rocks. Close your eyes and let go. Let it take you. He stretches his arms behind him, his hands to the water. Do not be afraid. And they do. Can you feel it? They smile and he smiles, his gold tooth reflecting the moonlight, and they are quiet, only the sounds of the water running over them, the good feel of it—the endless room within it. Everything we know, or think we know, is going, it's changing, like the rocks beneath us. Our ability to do so is our freedom. And we must embrace it and never turn our backs to it. Never.

Lizzy closes her eyes and smiles again, she's never gonna move away from this spot, right here. Never.

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The children tucked in and sleeping, he walks in the woods, the moon

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and the quiet with him, the empty and the dark, and he reaches out to the undercurrent of restless stillness before him, the long reaching sounds of the South. He looks at the moon, his hands in his pockets, walking on, without thought, unconcerned, and he begins to hum.

At the edge of town he stops.

He walks up the last gravel road before the asphalt streets. He comes to a laneway and walks up it.

He stops and looks at the house.

The woman is passed out on the couch, the killing of endless maddening moments of time that cannot touch her now. He stops at an open bedroom door. Edward is there, still in his pants, asleep on top of the blankets.

He bends over the man and Edward wakes, his eyes widening at the sight of the Monkey King's large black face before him. The Monkey King wraps his massive hand around Edward's neck and squeezes. Edward kicks, he can't breathe, his hands coming to the Monkey King's hand.

He lifts the man and puts him over his shoulder and walks out of the house.

The man's not dead, riding lifeless on the Monkey King's shoulder.

He walks across the yard and opens the small wooden gate and crosses the creek. He comes to a tall pine tree with a broken branch and he lifts the man by his shoulders, holding him out before him, in my weakness lives the world; in my silence there is only love. And there is mercy. He presses the man to the sharp broken branch, the branch pushing out from the man's chest. He steps back and looks at the man hanging from the tree. Never again, my dear, Lizzy. Never again.

He moves barefoot, quiet, dark in the dark, through the woods. And now the water, the cold creek water, he's moving in it, and there's a mist, the water rising and coming faster. He stops and stands, the water breaking to him, rising and moving faster yet, the mist heavier, and like a hell-boy, the sky cracks, rolling in it's opening, the desire of lightening welcoming back to itself the source, the wind heavy in it's coming, cracking trees and breaking limbs, big birds flying, and he tilts his head back and opens his mouth and it comes furious, this fury, disastrous and beautiful in its origin, and there, and coming, and always coming harder, and faster, and he eats it all.

Upstream, the thin man in the straw trilby watches. All the little children sleeping.

And in the moving branches of the tress, in the quiet under the moonlight, his words drift, telling Lizzy once again: You are a child of God too.

*David Foster Wallace