

## Wilderness House Literary Review 15/3

*Jasper Miller-Patterson*  
**You Have Your Room**

YOU ARE ALIVE, SAID LINDA; YOU ARE SOBER, AND YOU ARE SANE. This already is more than certain others here can say ...

Leaning forward she touched his knee. He started, braced the limbs of the chair; he had begun to drift off.

These are things to be grateful for, she continued.

Yes, Isaac nodded, all attention now. That's true.



Now he's crouched in the corner. The rag in his hand is black with grime; his knees ache, his bicep is sore: he's been cleaning all day, and he's tired. But Henry will arrive within the hour, and Isaac wants to show that he's making an effort. He continues scrubbing.

In fact the whole room was somewhat dingy when he arrived, and though he supposes he should be grateful — after all, he has a room to himself — still, he has several complaints. For one, it's way out on the edge of the city, in an area not resembling any New York that he knows, so much as a project in the Soviet Bloc: a procession of brick tenements, no one distinguishable from the next. Second of all, this building is full of crazy people. He sees at least one every time he comes or goes, and hears them in the other rooms, talking, partying, or just banging on the walls. And finally, though the room contains all the necessities for living, it's so small that there is hardly space enough to do so: he can walk from bed to couch to table, to bathroom, to kitchenette, in five steps total. He complained to Linda, but she said there was nothing she could do. Everyone gets the same thing, more or less. He doesn't know how both he and Henry are going to sit here comfortably.

On the other hand, the room's size has made the task of cleaning that much easier. By now he's cleared the counter and the table and scrubbed both to a shine; dug crumbs out of the burners, and washed food stains from the fridge. He ran a vacuum over the sofa and shook out the cushions; washed the sheets; made the mattress.

Now he wets the rag, wrings it out, hides it under the sink. He looks around the room. Clean enough, he thinks. Then he pulls a cardboard box out from under his bed. He opens it, and begins shelving the books that are inside.



He is anxious to impress in part because, the last time they saw each other, Isaac was not in his best condition — this coming at the end of a weeks-long bender that found him lying in Central Park, in a clearing in the bushes, unable to move. He could hardly even speak, and the only signs of his living were the movement of his eyes and, straining his throat, a single grunt. The cops who discovered him mistook him for a corpse.

"I've never felt so vulnerable and yet so invincible," he said in the hospital the following morning. By then he could move his limbs, though

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he hadn't tried walking, and he wasn't quite sober. Henry listened with a to-go cup of coffee at his lips. He had arrived first thing; he was Isaac's emergency contact.

Or, no, not invincible, he went on. "But like, absent. Like they could do whatever they wanted to me, but it didn't even matter, because I wasn't even there." Henry seemed to give this some thought, while Isaac lay in the hospital bed, eating applesauce.

When the cops lifted him to his feet, he had fallen back over like a scarecrow. They had laughed. "Went a little too hard tonight, huh buddy?" The other pressed a boot into his side. Only when his limbs began to shake uncontrollably were they convinced he wasn't milking it, and called an ambulance. Then they waited on the path, watching Isaac from over the bushes in a way that struck him as conspiratorial. Every once in a while, one or both of them would chuckle.

"It was humiliating," Isaac added.

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When the last book is on the shelf, he crushes the box flat and opens the window. The placement of the dumpster in the alley, immediately below his room, has proved convenient. He drops the box. It lands, stirring fruit flies like dust from the trash.

Then he turns. He sits back on the windowsill. He looks at the room, holding onto the frame: he's trying to see if there's anything he missed.

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"Hey, thanks for this." Isaac peered into the bag on his lap.

"No problem," Henry said. He smiled. While Isaac was in the hospital he had bought some clothes, toiletries, whatever the program would allow, that Isaac didn't have. Now they sat in Henry's car, twenty miles into Connecticut. It was the longest drive Isaac had taken in years, and he was surprised to find he enjoyed it, despite the destination.

Then, as though to acknowledge the unspoken, they both looked at the building in the windshield. Three square stories of mustard yellow. A gridwork of windows. Nothing but straight lines. Only the name on the lawn—Turning Point—suggested it was anything but a budget hotel. There was a nursing home next-door.

"Well," Henry said. "Here you are."

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He hops to his feet and steps over to the kitchenette. He takes two clean glasses down from the cupboard. He fills each with ice water, and places one at either side of the table. Then he checks the time: Henry should be here any minute.

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During the intake assessment he stressed, as though it were a proof of self-control, that he had scarcely any experience with hard drugs. He could not even recall where he got the bath salts, he said; as though that, too, were a vindication. The man seemed to doubt him. He squinted and

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frowned, furrowing his brow. He had a small, round, hairless head; all scrunched up, he looked like a baby. "Are you sure?"

"Of course," Isaac said. He found the man condescending.

After all, Isaac was not a junkie; he was an alcoholic, he said. The night in the park was a symptom of that illness, just as his use of alcohol was the symptom of various psychological issues (themselves the result of many unresolved traumas and small tragedies in his life): low self-esteem, issues of attachment, a pathological fear of aloneness. Of course even this cursory understanding of his own psychology only came near the end of his enrollment, as he called it. At the time of his admittance he said simply, though perhaps no less accurately, that he was miserable. To this the man nodded, and made a note.

As though to prove himself right, Isaac woke the next morning in a crushing depression. He refused to leave his room, curled in the fetal position on his bed, face to the wall, and cried into the sheets. Whoever it was that came into his room and tried to speak to him—he wouldn't look at her, so he wasn't sure, but he thought he recognized Linda's voice later on—she didn't press him; such behavior was taken for granted, at the beginning. The only person he spoke to willingly was the eighteen year-old kid who shared the room. Isaac rolled over to find the kid watching him, a look of concern on his face. What, he said, and rolled back over.

He only emerged in the end because he was hungry. But then he didn't like what they served him. Like the food they had served in grade school: strange meats, rubbery vegetables. He didn't like the way the nurses spoke to him, like a child, and he saw through the strategies the counselors used—the exercises in group, the therapy-speak. Nor did he like the activities they tried to make him join. He didn't like watching TV with the other patients—they always insisted on football, or the news—and he hated board games. He received no visitors in all his months there; not even his brother came to see him. As he remembers it, the whole thing was demeaning as hell.

The only proofs he had of a life awaiting him were the notes Henry sent. Once or twice they filled a loose page or two, but most of them were brief, written on postcards—Thinking of you, Hope you're getting better, etc. Your friend, H. —with images of the city on the reverse side—the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, Times Square; a panorama of the skyline, with Greetings from New York emblazoned in script overhead.



Of course you have to be conscientious, Linda continued—don't get me wrong. She had removed her hand from his knee and leaned back in her chair.

Gratitude does not mean unconcern. Not yet. You still have to put your life back together, and in your condition, that's like building a house of cards. You have to move carefully—slowly, she said; or else the whole thing falls apart.

His bags were all packed; he was anxious to leave.

He nodded again: Yes, I know.



It's late. He washes the glasses in the sink, dries them with a paper towel, returns them to the cupboard. He wipes the crumbs from the table back into the take-out containers, and drops these into the trash. Then he begins to wash the utensils.

Henry looked good, he thinks; healthy. His jaw clean-shaved, hair trimmed around the ears. In fact he seemed to have given his appearance more than usual attention today—he wore a clean blue shirt, the sleeves neatly folded along the forearm; black slacks, and even a watch, whose strap he fiddled with—which betrayed a certain anxiety about the visit, Isaac thinks.

He brought the food with him and they made small talk as they ate, crammed at Isaac's table; mostly about Henry's life, his work, his relationship with Mae, and Isaac's impressions of the neighborhood. Isaac had assumed he would broach the obvious subject, yet Henry limited himself to variations on a question, How are you? How do you feel? You've been good? which seemed to Isaac rather easy to deflect. But he didn't mind; he didn't want to get into it. "Yup, I'm good," he answered, and Henry nodded each time, as though assured.

He puts the knives and the forks in their places. He shuts the drawer.

For the thousandth time that day he looks at the room—clean, hardly lived-in—though now he begins to feel a certain anxiety. A pit-in-the-stomach feeling. Before that feeling can take on the full clarity of a thought, however, he pulls another box out from under the bed and continues to unpack. An old sweater, padding a pair of ceramic mugs; a few more books, which he lays on the shelf; the set of Henry's postcards bound by a clip. You have your life, he thinks. He sets the postcards on top of the bookshelf. You have your sobriety. He places the sweater on the top shelf of his closet, the mugs up in the cupboard. And you have your health. Then he flops onto the mattress.



During the months that he lives here, he comes to think that winding up in the park was for the best, in the end: if he hadn't been stopped—literally, as it happened—if, say, he had chosen to simply abuse something like heroin, which might have easily become a longer-term commitment—or even continued his abuse of alcohol alone—he might have died. He even entertains the idea that he chose to collapse in the park that night, like that, intentionally—knowing he would be found, and helped.

Of course, he also knows that that was not the case. All he has to do is remember what it was like, coming to in the grass: his confusion, and the meaningless elation he felt. The strangeness of his immobility and, in spite of this, his lack of fear. And his heartbeat: resonant, frenetic; like the sound of knocking he sometimes hears, on the walls of the room next-door.