

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

Dylan Hoover  
**The Silent Room**

**M**y transatlantic flight brought me to Manchester Airport three hours ago, and still I couldn't locate my taxi. I tried consulting a map, maybe the GPS on my phone. But no, that wouldn't work without wi-fi. There wasn't anyone to ask for directions either, not that I would have anyways without feeling embarrassed or shame. I squeezed my wrists together, twisted my thumbs beside the smoke-stained sliders. Wiggled my body like I was weightless or ZZ Top even. Jet lag, brain fog, jet lag, I said. Nothing magical happened. I was perfectly awake, and my suffering was in fact as real as the panic obscuring my concentration.

I had no idea how passports actually worked, if I had even legally entered the United Kingdom in the first place. Reluctance led to exhaustion, and eventually to me brazenly

confronting the British authorities. I flagged down a group of four passing neon-coated officers, all tough-looking, snickering amongst themselves, probably about lonely dwellers like me by airport convenience and cologne shops. They met my gaze, and that's when I inquired.

"Whereabouts did you enter?" asked one of the officers—the taller man, the one with a groomed brown beard and oversized rain jacket.

"London," I said; yes London, the big capital city. "London Heathrow."

"Did you place your passport on the scanner? I mean, you are here."

I pondered this dumbly before recalling the face recognition sensors in the expedited line back there. I must have forgotten while I was being herded through seas of metal and tile and flashing red lights and robot British voices. Convinced I was missing my last flight.

"Oh, yes. I just wanted to be certain," I bursted, "Thank you very much."

"You bet, mate. Welcome to the U.K.," he said, waving me on with the others.

I wheeled my luggage around, desperately in search of my arranged taxi. Sometimes I stayed on a straight path, but mostly I rebounded in circles. Rain saturated my clothes outside, stimulated layers of goosebumps, and raised hairs down my long neck. Every few meters or so, my black duffle bag and two wheel-operated bags tumbled to the ground. People laughed as they passed by. One middle-aged, slightly balding man, wearing a neon green vest muttered beneath his breath: *bloody wanker*. Exactly what I travelled 3,400 miles not to hear.

There were no taxis outside terminal two yet. Just a blonde haired woman. She appeared much older than I, wearing a beige coloured coat with charcoal-black leather boots, and a green beret. She just lingered beneath a metal structure, sat on a weather-beaten bench, admiring the airport entrance as if she's not already seen it many times before. Our eyes snapped to a synchronised beat.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

“Hey. Sorry to disturb you, but do you know where the taxi service is located? My university booked me with Street Cars . . . I can’t seem to find the company.”

She recognised my rough American accent. Smiled simply, pulled from her sharp overcoat pocket a packet of cigarettes. Loosening the plastic shrink wrap with her long pink fingernails, she peered deep into my eyes.

“Not sure. Wish I could help more,” she replied in a thick accent I could hardly decipher as a non-Brit. There are nearly forty different types after all. “Fancy one, darling?” she asked, raising a cigarette. Smoking had never been one of my pastimes. I rejected brashly. Maybe if I hadn’t, I could have run away with her, began that new life I hungered for.

I shot her a bidding expression before resuming. My taxi driver finally revealed himself to me by check-in, next street over. He was an Indian man who wore a navy blue rain jacket with dark washed jeans and had a tiny clip on white name tag. He noticed that I was struggling with my three bulky suitcases, darted to assist.

“Thank you so much.”

“Hey, no problem,” he responded, “I have your file. You’re a uni chap, yeah?”

I was elated he possessed the correct information, though to be fair no one else there looked young enough to attend uni.

“Yes,” I explained enthusiastically.

I nestled inside the back of his cab, relieved to ride in a car, let alone one in the Queen’s Kingdom; on the complete opposite side of the street, with elaborate roundabouts and no dodgy four-way intersections. I entertained about driving in Britain as a distraction mostly to relish views of the metropolis of Manchester and the rolling countryside. I was fixated by seas of grass and herds of bright white sheep uni students often slept with. Like got pissed and proper fucked kind of sleep.

“I’ve heard driving in England can be difficult,” I said to him.

“Well it depends, mate. I’m not familiar with how it works in America, but here we have speed monitors everywhere. You go over the limit and get served with just one ticket, it goes on your record and you’re done for good. That happened to me once at another company,” he confessed, “Never again, believe me.”

We would pass through several small villages I couldn’t name, up winding highways, and proceed up a large, grand hill until I met the university. I finally felt like a new person, in a different home. I could stay for eternity. I really wanted to.

\*\*\*

Shortly past 11 p.m., my body began shivering in the house flat, despite wearing multi layers of pajamas. I was frozen perhaps from the airbus voyage—one that had carried me to a room where I could not even operate the thermostat. Basic shit seemed alien to me.

I nearly finished pulling back my powder blue linen covers when I

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

heard three taps on my old cherry door. There are few reasons for anyone to knock at such an hour, even fewer things to obtain from some travel fatigued Yankee. I was, after all, living in the oldest campus accommodation. What I knew for certain, aside from who stood behind the door, was that it couldn't be family, or my ex, or DoorDash, or any other American.

I still guessed, wondering if it was the short brunette I met earlier in the courtyard outside Greggs—the pretty one that bumped into me and knocked my chocolate eclairs to the stone. She's returned, I dreamed wishfully, with fresh ones and that contagious gleam of hers.

I dropped my recently-purchased Blackwell's copy of *Northanger Abbey* on the bed, opening the door. Inside the hallway stood two girls. Both with dark hair and brown eyes, remarkably pretty. I recognised the taller one without specs. I met her during the previous day when I arrived. She sounded British, but had Russian ancestry. I confessed to her I was from America and that's when she asked me if I owned a gun. I detested, but knew deep down that everyone in my hometown did. I was sickened by the question, felt queasy. Was I keeping secrets? Had I been desensitised by shootings so commonplace in American media?

My left foot was sandwiched between the door and its paint peeling frame when I began studying the girl with shorter hair. They were both equally beaming with radiance, but I couldn't decide whether it was that or their arresting facial expressions that I fancied more. I was flattered to be so entertaining to them, told them my name.

"I'm Daisy," replied the girl with shorter hair, in an accent slightly different from the others I had since heard. "Right. I'm your flatmate. You're from America, yeah?"

I dreaded admitting so.

"Looks like it's just us. The other flatmate from Sweden dropped out last term. He left some things in the hallway should you need them."

I thanked her, explained how I did not have any clothing hangers or laundry detergent or toilet paper. Then Olivia and Daisy asked me if I wanted to sit with both of them in the kitchen. Yes, a kitchen: there are no dining halls in Britain. Cook for yourself is the etiquette. I declined, citing the Austen novel I had to finish reading for next day's class. I promised them another night. Daisy appeared especially disappointed. I didn't *really* know her then, but I could tell she wanted something from me—I would find out specifically eventually.

All night, I wouldn't stop dreaming about her, my flatmate. I pondered to myself: why should I care about Catherine Morland when there is a real girl right outside my door? All I had to do was open it. But I didn't that night. My stay was far too premature, and my will exceeded the lowliness of yet another failed love. I court-martialed my heart, trusted no one. Was it ever going to wake? I feared it might not.

I was busy thinking about battling the wall long-legged spiders above me, ordering those tasty iced fingers and sausage rolls the next morning at Greggs, romanticising Jane Austen, and of course Daisy. Especially Daisy.



## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

I accepted Daisy's bid to join her for kitchen conversation. I brought my grey mug with me—the one I received when I purchased an isolation pack from the uni. I fussed over the lengthy flight over the Atlantic as my opening anecdote. Daisy listened carefully as she mixed Nestle instant coffee with boiling water, watching the coffee grains disintegrate into a dark, sexy brew. She handed my mug back. I took a swig. "Gotta satisfy the addiction. Cheers for that."

She laughed uncontrollably.

"It's funny hearing an American say 'cheers'," Daisy said. I asked her then if it was really that terrible, but she just erupted into more laughter. "Did you have to do drills like when you was young?" she asked. "You know, active shooter drills? That's a thing in America, right? I heard you pay these insane fees for prescriptions and hospital visits. We still have private companies like you lot. But we have the choice to decide. If we need the NHS, it is there for us."

"Wouldn't know the feeling," I responded sarcastically.

"It's definitely not perfect here, to be fair. Still better though than what they have in America, which is nothing. We decided ages ago that it's better when *everyone* has access to healthcare."

I scorned this with haste, as if I could actually influence U.S. health legislation, as if I wanted to instead of just bailing entirely.

When we finally left the kitchen, Daisy asked me to adjourn to a pub with her in the coming week. I immediately agreed. Her advance brought immense pleasure to me that evening. It came particularly at a time of loneliness, while I choked on acid reflux, tormented by my homeland—that unbearable life before my arrival. Britain was special to me because it felt like an escape from a crude world, from the embarrassing nightmare of a society rooted in nationalism and guns that seemed a laughingstock overseas.

One of the few friends I had back home supported my disdain fully. She texted me in bed that night.

*'i'm so happy for u,'* was the final message I read before I crashed beneath the moonlight shard shining into my window, *'u deserve to be there, to be happy. wish i could come too.'*



My night out with Daisy began outside the entrance of our flat—Flat 10—where she stood waiting, wearing a black zip-up hoodie and dark washed jeans, her hair hanging low. She was lighting a cigarette she had rolled herself, making large puffing bursts of smoke through her lips. They were a mix of blue and red. Her cheeks pale, a bit rosy.

She spotted me step out, broke into an illuminating smile—a smile she was not ashamed to conceal from the other observing Brits, who were beginning to recognise me from around campus as the foreigner. She walked alongside me, through the campus grounds and courtyards, as if we were dating or something. Soon we would be.

A cool winter night in North West England really means a surge of

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

rain with heavy winds. Grass was covered in a blanket of moisture. A few peaking stars hovered above the grounds as we travelled campus side-walks. Daisy was already tipsy from the case of beer and a fire round of shots she confessed to drinking beforehand. Littered on the ground were Costa coffee cups and Strongbow Cider bottles, parchment wrappers for Greggs sausage rolls. Daisy dabbled in conversation along our journey, until we reached the pub at around ten. I was elated that she was elated at the sight of booze.

"You must have a proper Guinness," she said, causing the bartender to raise an eyebrow. "I'll pay for this one, you cover mine after." I hate beer, was always more of a hard liquor kind of guy. But I didn't let Daisy know that. I didn't let her know I just turned twenty-one and in America they don't let you drink until then without being carded.

I sat across from her, relaxed into the chair and studied her eyes, listening to 'Never Gonna Give You Up' by Rick Astley playing loudly on loop overhead, just beside the BBC News. The place smelled of grease and oil like that of a proper chippy. Not unusual for a college bar. Nothing but what Daisy blurted out of nowhere.

"I'm texting my boyfriend right now," Daisy explained, "I'm telling him that I'm out with an American lad."

I insisted on leaving, but she refused to let me. She explained how she wasn't necessarily in a 'full commitment' relationship, that just a few days ago she shagged our upstairs flatmate and that it's cool. She referred to him simply as the 'Irish guy.' Daisy never divulged the name of her boyfriend, or the Irish guy, or any of them.

"I was known as "The Slut" in the Sixth Form," she explained, "People always called me that, so I guess I became it." She cackled at the old peer abuse, which I found blatantly abhorrent. There was pain in her story, not from all the 'hard shagging' either. I wondered if Daisy wanted me to help her heal. It was a bit convenient how 'Don't You Want Me Baby' by The Human League began playing after Astley in the background of the cosy little pub.

"I can't take you to Cornwall," she explained, "I know it's my home, but it's no place for a Yankee. The people there properly loathe your kind. Well, that's not true. They hate me, too. Basically, anyone who is not posh and a long descendant from Cornwall."

The beer penetrated my mind and stomach. I felt nauseous. Then I grinned, which distracted from how I really felt about a town which rejects outsiders with vehemence.

"My papa is British but me mum is Scottish. Fun fact: I can do a really terrible Irish accent.'

I was fascinated by this, by her whimsical banter, by her signature playfulness. Let's hear it, I said. Afterwards, I finally had to ask her about her boyfriend—something that had been on my mind since her mentioning him.

"He's thirty-five," she revealed, a considerable difference from her age

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

of nineteen. "He works in a garage. Well, sort of. He mostly takes on side jobs from a friend. He's not properly employed, you see."

Awkward silence. She was ready for more beer. I fetched it for her, slipping the bartender a couple of quid. He handed me a few pence back. Daisy watched me during the exchange.

"England may not be as glorious as you think," she said to me when I returned proudly with her pint of lager, "We don't all live like the Queen you know. Snobbery is a real thing. In the Sixth Form, some of the students would show up to school in helicopters." Amazed by the toff world, I continued to listen to her, as she seduced me into foreplay.

"Would you fuck the Queen? Like when she was young?"

Daisy looked exactly like the Queen, which made this question cumbersome.

I did not anticipate it, so I boasted in a heartbeat. She stared at me naughtily, said: "Of course you would, because you're a posh boy. Obviously."

"I suppose so," I affirmed, moving in for my sweaty beer, trying to keep up with her pace yet regretting every sip that passed through my lips. Daisy glared intensely into my eyes, then at my mouth. She was running out of hints—I mirrored eye contact with Daisy because it felt right. We shared a laugh before she teased: "Weirdo."



The closer Daisy and I grew, I gradually forgot about America. My British professors admired my wit and diligence. I explored Liverpool and London in the spring. Then Daisy left university one day. She had had enough, and wanted to return home. We hugged beside the dumpster, as I helped her carry her belonging to her mum's car. We kissed under the grey sky, and I embraced her as tight as I could.

Weeks later, I read the first headline from the BBC breaking report, which made me dizzy and nauseous: 'Russia Invades Ukraine.' If Daisy's absence had not been enough of a punishment, the world was descending into peril.

Every morning that I had my traditional English breakfast at the uni diner, including beans on toast and blood sausage, I found myself glued to the telly beside the glass windows. Images of concerned faces and utter panic saddened me, reminded me of what I had lost. I didn't know if Covid-19 was worse or a maniac dictator lodging a war, and the threat to Western democracy, or Daisy's mental hiccups. One of my friends, an American history student from college back in America, remarked over our steak pie and carrot dinner one night:

"We all had that same feeling on January 6th in class," he said, "The room fell silent, leaving nothing but utter frustration. Who knows really what the future holds."