

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

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### Between Glances

Sometimes it's hard to look in the mirror. To see the parts of my body that were touched by someone who ultimately caused so much hurt. To know that he was the only person I've ever trusted to see me. To think he saw who I was and determined he didn't want me anymore. As I undress before my shower each night, I often have to look away. Guilt swarms through and around me as I wonder: *why did I put myself through this?*

The question has plagued me for months. The thrills and woes of being in my first relationship kept me stuck in it longer than I should have been. My own small voice whispered "*you deserve more*" throughout our year together, but I pushed it away. Although I wasn't at my happiest, I was happy enough. I told myself that his mood swings, self-centeredness, and dwindling effort were part of normal relationship troubles. It became an internal process of balancing out the sporadic good with the reliable bad. He had a convoluted way of showing love, but it was the most that he could give and I accepted it. My people-pleasing self couldn't let the relationship go; I often thought *how could I hurt someone when I committed to this?* Unfortunately (fortunately) I was the only one in the relationship who held that sentiment, resulting in our end and the start of a new cycle.

As I settle into a different era of my life, I revolve in a state of catharsis. This consists of crying when I remember how he casually brought up that he missed his ex and was going to pursue something with her instead. And when he asked me if I wanted to know how his conversation with her goes. It's tearing up when a breakup song comes on and describes my exact situation. It's feeling far away from the girl I used to be. It's looking at old photos and remembering how sweet he used to be. It's hitting the steering wheel on my drive home as his words creep up again to haunt me.

Then the initial hurt turns into a need to understand. It's questioning why he used to tell me I was the only reason he believed in love and why he ever involved me if it was always going to be his ex in the end. It's looking at old photos and feeling nothing—detached from the semblance of us that's in them. It's ruminating over why he didn't value me enough. It's feeling confusion as to why he baked me cookies as a parting gift.

Although I waver between these messy emotions, more recently there has been a sense of progress. It's feeling like myself again but stronger and more sure this time. It's celebrating when I don't think of him until 2 p.m. on any given day. It's feeling sad again because why did this have to be the version of love that I experienced? It's feeling nostalgic for the beginning. It's feeling complete without him and knowing he wouldn't fit into my current life. It's forgiving myself for not knowing what I know now and giving into the experience.

Enduring such pain from someone who you weren't sure you loved and whose love was confusing is perplexing in and of itself. My mind reruns through past memories where something felt off though I couldn't pinpoint it at the time. Even the first time he told me he loved me was under the guise of a qualification: allowing me to drive his car, he claimed

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to love me but it was imperative that I did not make a mistake behind the wheel. I find myself desperate to know how I could feel so damaged by him when he wasn't what I truly wanted for myself. Nonetheless, he meant so much at the time and realizing he is completely out of my life now is a paralyzing thought. Reflections of who he was, who I was, and what I deserve flood my mind. Sometimes I wish to quiet the thoughts. However, now I understand that I didn't put myself through anything; I allowed myself to learn and grow.

In the midst of healing, I seek outlets of peace and genuine happiness. I cling to my best friends who make me feel loved no matter what. The challenges and satisfaction of learning in graduate school keep me holding on. I fulfill my passions by baking on free evenings and playing my favorite songs on guitar. Occasionally I contemplate the deeper meaning of life and my future, beyond love. As I slowly connect to myself again, I find that my gaze has been lingering longer in the mirror. And it feels bittersweet to navigate this new pattern of life.