

## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

*Ben Sloan*

### **The Color of Santa Claus's Eyes**

Stopping our car at the gate of a large estate,  
my father nods in my direction, indicating  
I need to take over and drive from here,  
so, opening and stepping around the door,  
making my way towards the front end  
as he comes from the opposite direction,  
I pass him at the leaping jaguar hood ornament,  
the two of us not making eye contact,  
businesslike, shy. Waking up, I realize that,  
as in this dream, we spent our lives avoiding  
one another, never looking into each other's eyes.  
One exception, however, was when I was six  
and he, the school janitor at the time,  
came into my class dressed as Santa Claus.  
Not recognizing him as my father, just another  
Santa handing out candy canes, I watched  
as he walked over to my desk, stopped, paused,  
and, causing me to feel a little confused, stared  
for an extra second or two, with unusual intensity,  
knowingly, into my eyes. His were hazel.

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**Dorothy Bell, Birmingham AL, April 4,1963**

Trademark pencil roosting above an ear,  
her back a wall of ice turned towards you,  
the waitress looks over her shoulder  
at a customer three seats down,  
as are you, looking, following the dialogue  
about the weather, how damn hot it's been.  
Their point, expressed by means of liling  
back and forth voices, is to highlight  
the not-to-be-crossed red line you crossed  
by sitting down at a white's only lunch counter.  
But despite it all, you are committed to trusting  
every once in a while it hits people  
they don't have to experience the world  
in the way they have been told to.

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### Two Points of Light

Turning a corner, seeing up ahead in my headlights  
a flipped pickup truck, crosswise, blocking one lane,  
noticing a man peeing in the middle of the road,  
I stop, get out, plead with him to please move over.  
Hearing from inside the truck muffled cries, *Ouch!*  
*Ouch! Ouch!* a seeming plea for help, I walk over  
and get to work unsticking the tight-stuck cab door,  
wondering as I do, *Is it wise for me to be doing this?*  
*How will this end?* Watching one Chihuahua chase  
a second out and over to the man zipping up his  
pants, it occurs to me I know more about the world  
than I once did, and at the same time, honestly,  
nothing. Leaning over, rubbing their ears, saying,  
*The biggest lies are the ones we tell ourselves,*  
he takes a step this way, zigzags two the other,  
then lies down in roadside gravel and goes to sleep.

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### Monday and Tuesday

1.

Monday a nurse uses a turkey baster  
to feed a pink paste to my father,  
pillows stacked and packed in all around him  
so he will not fall over. Looking like a sultan  
in the last days of his reign, he is eighty

and dying. Birdlike, she leans in and over, pries  
between his lips, and to his credit he cooperates,  
as best he can, his eyes two fogged-over windows.  
But when she finishes he promptly spits it all out.

2.

After a lifetime spent alternating between  
the social hey how's it going rooms, and the ones  
we occupy alone searching for the right question  
to ask ourselves, we slip out a back door  
that is always open and at the same time  
always closed, built into the very architecture  
of who and what we are. As to where it might lead?  
All rumors aside, none of us has a clue.

3.

On Tuesday afternoon when my sister arrives  
at the hospital and gets straight to the point,  
asking our mother, *How is he?* mom hesitates  
then comes out from where she has been hiding  
from herself all morning long, whispers, *He's dead.*

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**Enola Gay, August 6, 1945**

Radiant surround-around blue, and on one extreme tip end of an elongated rhombus of cloud, light warped and splintered by glass nose panels revealing the anticipated now coming into view interior coastline, its rolling hills merging into alternating low and tall buildings. In amongst them is a large city park where, sitting on a bench near a fountain clogged with leaves, an elderly woman, surprised by the sputtering high above her, rises, squints, and, hand at an angle visor-like to protect her eyes, looks up.