

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

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THE UNWITTING ART CRITIC

Ian Wilfred sat in the police department interrogation room sobbing with his head in his hands. A detective leaned against a wall as far away from him as she could get. She looked like she was afraid of him. *Understandable*, he thought, *considering what I've done*. Then he looked up in the one-way mirror and saw the real reason she was so far away. He was covered in pigeon shit.



It had been late in the evening, pouring rain, and Ian had had trouble finding the hotel in downtown Lenore Heights. After circling the block several times, he saw the sign—The Lanier - Founded 1921—and pulled into the half circle in front of the hotel. He slung his backpack over his shoulder, yanked his carry-on out of the trunk, and ran through the rain to a Hobbit-sized revolving door entrance. Cramped inside with his luggage, he was eventually ejected through the door into a larger than expected lobby.

“Welcome to the Lanier,” said a woman at the front desk.

While she checked him in, Ian looked around the lobby. To his right was an elevator hall with a large crystal chandelier and bright blue carpet. There were three polished brass elevator doors with old-style half circles above each one showing the floor numbers. On the other side of the lobby there was an identical elevator hall—except—the chandelier was dark, the carpet was worn, and the elevator doors were dull. It looked foreboding, like that dark stairway that goes to a basement, or that God-awful access door in the back of your bedroom closet—the one you covered with boxes.

“Mr. Wilfred,” said the desk clerk, “Mr. Wilfred, sir?”

“Oh, sorry. I was just looking at the elevator halls. That one looks brand new, and the other looks the same ... except abandoned.”

“That’s the old wing of the hotel. We built a new wing right beside it, then we locked up the old one, and no one’s been in there since. You’re in room 430. Turn right off the elevator and the room is at the end of the hall. It will be nice and quiet since it backs up to the old wing.

“Thank you,” said Ian as he headed to the elevator.



Ian woke up suddenly. Uncertain where he was, he grabbed his phone—3:31 am—and remembered he was in a hotel room. *What woke me?* He shined the phone-flashlight around the room. He didn’t see anything and was about to go back to sleep when he heard about a dozen sharp, metallic clacks. They came from the other side of wall behind him. He jumped up, turned on the light by the bed and stared at the wall. He knelt there listening until his legs became numb, then he unfolded them and sat down. Eventually, hearing nothing else, he laid down and fell back to sleep.

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When his alarm went off, Ian sat up and studied the wall. Minutes passed—he didn't hear anything, so he showered and got dressed. He stopped in the restaurant for coffee to go and texted the valet for his car. As he passed through the lobby, he looked over at the dark elevator hall and a chill passed through him.

Outside, he was number six in line waiting for his car. He was running late for his meeting and asked the valet for the key so he could get his own car. He wandered the parking garage—under the abandoned wing—pressing the buttons on the rental car key fob. Eventually, he set off the car alarm and raced toward the flashing taillights.

His car was parked close to an exit door from the abandoned wing of the hotel, and he noticed that the door wasn't completely shut. Curious, he gripped the edge of the door with his fingertips and pulled. The door groaned open and breathed an earthy, pungent odor. He let go and it shut—but not all the way. He clawed it open again and noticed a screw had been installed in the threshold to keep it from closing completely. Running late, with no desire to go in that creepy place anyway, he quickly got in his car.



That afternoon, while driving back to the hotel, Ian joined the weekly departmental conference call. He was still on the call when he got back, so he self-parked in the garage as the call droned on. He slumped back in his seat, glanced up at the rearview mirror and could see the exit door from the abandoned wing. It gave him the willies, so he reached to tilt the mirror—but saw an older woman walk toward the door. She had long gray hair and was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. When she got to the door, she looked around the garage but didn't notice Ian since his car was parked facing the other direction. She pulled a screwdriver from her pocket, pried the door open and went inside.

Funny how perspectives change. A minute ago, Ian wanted nothing to do with the creepy abandoned wing. Then someone's grandmother slinked in through the exit-only fire door . . . and now he wanted to go find out why.

When the call ended, he walked to the door, pulled it open and stepped inside. A stairway layered in dust led to a door with First Floor painted on it. He let go of the exit door, gripped the handrail and climbed the steps in near darkness. When he reached the landing, he felt for the doorknob and stepped into a hallway. The afternoon sunlight shone through the open guest room doors to his right; dust floated through the air and the sun spotlighted the filthy hallway carpet. It was hot as hell, and that earthy odor had blossomed into the smell of a chicken coop.

"Hello," he called out. "Is anyone in here?"

He walked the length of the hallway looking in each room, finding them all empty. At the end of the hall, he took the stairway to the second floor. Hot, soaked with sweat and having second thoughts about what he was doing, his fear grew that Grandma was going to jump out and stab him with her screwdriver.

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“Hello Ma’am, can you hear me?” he called out when he got to the third floor . . . no reply and all the rooms on the floor were empty.

But when he got to the fourth floor, “Holy shit” was all he could manage. The walls in the first room were covered with paintings . . . rows of amazing paintings hung from the floor to the ceiling. All were paintings of the skyline of Lenore Heights—many of the same scene painted at different times of the day and in different seasons. But there was one thing all the paintings had in common . . . pigeons. Forefront in every painting was a pigeon or several of them. There were groups of the birds gathered on rooftops, or clustered together on window ledges. The birds dominated every painting; the cityscapes were merely the backdrops.

Ian, like many people, thought pigeons were flying rats that shit everywhere and were dull gray in color. But when sunlight hits pigeons in a certain way, the iridescent feathers around their necks glimmer and shine . . . green, blue and purple. The artist had captured these lustrous colors perfectly, as well as the bird’s soulful, piercing eyes. The pigeons in these paintings would cause anyone to feel differently about the birds.

Ian studied each of the paintings and then went to the next room, where there were another fifty or sixty. He moved down the hall, finding the walls in each room covered with more. Then he came to the last room at the end of the hall—the artist’s studio—but no one was there. Two easels held paintings in progress next to a table covered with tubes of paint, rags and jars filled with paint brushes. A roll of canvas leaned against the table with a staple gun on the floor beside it. *That’s what made those clacking noises that woke me. She was stapling canvas onto wooden frames.*

Then he heard pigeons cooing and followed the sound to a door at the end of the hall that said Roof. He climbed the stairs, stepped out and was assaulted by the smell of pigeon shit . . . reminded of the stark reality that these birds could stink up a place.

A three-foot brick wall ran around the edge of the roof. There was a long metal building in its center that looked like a carwash. It was open on the end near Ian and inside he could see big air-conditioning compressors like those found on rooftops—except these no longer worked. There was no sign of the gray-haired woman, but the pigeon cooing was coming from the other end of the building—the end he couldn’t see. Maybe she had coops there for her birds. Ian walked around the corner at the end of the building and there she was. She stood in front of a wooden easel with her back to him—palette and brush in hand—studying the skyline.

“Hello,” he called out.

Instantly . . . there was an explosive outburst behind him as a frantic torrent of pigeons stormed out of the air-conditioning building. They flapped and slapped—soaring in all directions. Assaulted by wings, beaks, claws—peppered by straw, sticks, feathers and shit—he covered his head with his arms. Pigeons raced out of the building around and above him, blocking out the sun. Ian fell to his knees and covered his head with his arms to protect his eyes and face from the God-awful shit-cans. They continued soaring out, crashing into each other, desperate to reach the sky. He was horrified that there were still more pigeons inside the building—and their frenzied evacuation was gaining intensity. He needed to

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get out of their path, so he jumped up to run . . . and slammed into the gray-haired woman.

She staggered backward, trying desperately to regain her balance. Pigeons flew into her; one got tangled in her hair, and she grabbed at it trying to tear it loose. Then she stepped on top of a pigeon, lost her balance and stumbled into the brick wall at the building's edge. She flailed with her arms, grasping to find something—anything to keep from falling—but there was nothing. Ian watched as she fell backward over the wall.

Minutes later the storm of pigeons lifted.