

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

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Rabbit, Rabbit

HERE IS THE STILLNESS OF THE COURTYARD and its chalky concrete walls, the air muggy, the mid-day sun scorching the dark hair of the child in the corner, maybe four years old, squatting next to a wooden bench with rickety legs. She prods at a clod of dirt with a sharp stick, kicking up small clouds of dust. A group of elderly people sit beside her, their eyes glazed over by a fine, pale film, leaning against the grimy wall, a series of wrinkled dolls clothed in quilted floral. One holds out a paper cup of bitter-smelling tea to the child with shaking, knotted fingers, and she takes it. Flies are beginning to settle around her bare toes, basking in the day's humidity. Here is the man with the roughly-hewn sack who bursts in, swinging the metal gates open so the crimson paper taped to the silver bars flutters upwards before settling again.

Lunchtime? one of the elderly women inquires of him, and he nods briefly, politely, eyes skimming over the child before kneeling by the well. The child sips her tea, her nose wrinkling as the bitterness spreads across her tongue.

Not in front of her, another waves her hand at the child, who frowns. The man only shrugs.

The sack opens, the twine twisted and untwisted, and he, a magician with sun-darkened fingers and sun-carved grooves sculpted into his face, pulling the creature out of his hat by its ears

(and for my next trick)

Its fur is grey and white, painted in blotchy, uneven stripes across its face and torso, its eyes twitching as its limbs jerk in a confused, disembodied tempo. The man holds it up high, letting the sunlight reflect off the mammalian body in a distorted gesture of supplication before he in one dispassionate motion strikes it across the throat with the side of his hand and the thing goes still. The thing goes still with only a tremor in its chest and the child leans backwards in her seat, tightening her grip around the paper cup

(and the crowd stills in their chairs)

Here, the man says and waves his free hand in the air, the other clutching the prone body, the still body, the still-there body with the not-quite-there-now mind. Over by the wall, the elderly stir restlessly, barely-there bodies but with still-there minds, glancing with equal parts worry and indifference at the child. One offers another cup of tea; another rises to his feet and disappears through the darkened doorway of the kitchen.

Two women come forth, teetering under the weight of the metal basin, steam rising from the water to paint their faces in sweat. The basin is set down and the man nods in thanks.

(please welcome my assistants to the stage)

The rabbit whimpers, a single breath of sound that escaped its mouth and when the man moves it gently, almost reverently, into the boiling liquid it only struggles for a moment before collapsing in on itself. The child

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jerks back, startled, as the creature disappears quietly underwater, the flies dispersing rapidly from their perch on her toes. She has crushed her cup, lukewarm liquid dripping down her hand, eyes glued to the man as he slides the fur off the body in several swift movements.

(look! It becomes something else, it has shed its exterior, it has transformed)

They watch his face as his hands enter and leave the scorching water, but his expression remains unchanged, his brow unfurrowed by the heat, the skin of his palms already coarse and calloused. The rabbit comes out pink and shiny, and in its new-and-improved form it resembles the chickens that are roasted on New Year's, skin plucked free of feathers, a reborn child, a carcass.

Then the man brings the hatchet down on its pink skin and cuts it open so that blood splatters in minuscule droplets across the concrete floor. Flecks of it fall across the girl's small feet, painting her skin and the rubber strip of her sandal crimson, and she watches the end of the rabbit with her fingers no longer trembling. Perhaps it is the form, the rabbit cut up so it is indistinguishable from any other dead animal, the metamorphosis so complete it is as if it had never been there at all, but she can only stare in wonder before bringing her hands together again and again

(and the crowd erupts in applause)

just as the blurred figure of a woman comes from the stairs to shout, Hey! What are you doing out here? She clammers down the stone steps to grab the child's arm. The clapping ceases and the child shrieks, yanking back on the woman's grip, but the woman holds firm, jerking the girl from her place on the bench and propelling her towards the staircase. Then they are gone, the sounds of the woman's reprimands and the child's protests becoming fainter until they disappear altogether.

The man blinks once before returning to his work, unperturbed, overturning the basin onto the ground and rising slowly, the bowl of butchered meat clutched under his arm as he walks it back towards the kitchen. In the corner, the elderly men and women only sigh and shake their heads, one reaching down to recover the discarded remains of the child's paper cup.

There is calm again, steady breathing, dust and dirt floating through the blinding sunlight. A stifling heat in a now-motionless courtyard, unchanged but for the residual blood and the basin water, already blending together as it evaporates as a soundless steam back into the sky.