

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

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**The Chimeras Upstate**

THE CABIN IS ALL WOOD, like a giant splinter. You could prick your finger on it. You could strike a match and burn it down. Even now, as your eyes gloss over the fox-fur rug beside the fireplace and the dining room table fashioned from oak, you can feel the potential heat of all that kindling.

This is a place where families come to settle. Relax their aching bones and take in all the nature: the lopsided trees, the trampled leaves, the chorus of wolves, and the chewed-up, twisted carcasses of rabbits who were too adorable to die. Anyone could lose themselves in that maggot-induced stupor. Anyone could forget springtime amidst the greenlessness of that perpetual autumn.

Meanwhile, the band of parents in the kitchen are whipping up pancakes, sneaking teaspoons of rum into the batter because it's fun and the children will never know the difference, or perhaps because they are children themselves and breathe bad decisions like oxygen.

One of the three fathers is still drunk from the evening before. In a daze, he watches his wife pour coffee from the moka pot. The dark liquid steams as it makes contact with the cream in her mug, and he cannot help but remember the way her skin steamed last night, easing into the hot tub on the back porch, her ass as round as an apple in her black bathing suit. It had taken willpower to not descend upon her backside and take a bite.

The wife can sense his fervor, of course. On any other occasion, she would ward off his desire, but today she allows herself to indulge. She glides away from her husband's gaze, leans across the tiled countertop, arches her lower back slightly. In her imagination, he is coming up behind her. All young and sexy, he reaches his hand around her neck to squeeze, to feel the quickness of her pulse, to take her right there, in front of everyone. And in his imagination, they are alone.

After several minutes, the husband will invent some excuse to return to his bedroom. A headache, he'll say. Or a hangover. His wife, the worrywart that she is, will insist on monitoring him. But behind the closed door, there will be no caregiving. The pair will kneel on opposite sides of the bed, immersed in individual fantasies, and they will touch themselves through the safety of their clothes—because they know how agonizing it would be to touch each other.

The couples remaining in the kitchen are too busy flipping pancakes to notice their friends' disappearance. They are too preoccupied with their own desires. Scooping batter with the ladle, another father jokingly makes a pass at polygamy. He pours a perfect circle into the flying pan and throws an arm around the woman who is not his spouse. *What happens in the cabin stays in the cabin, if you catch my drift.*

The kids the parents cook for aren't even hungry. Through the sliding screen doors, they can smell the gas burner, the blackened butter, the fat sizzling off the bacon, but something about the surrounding wilderness

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stimulates starvation. They want to live off fables and off the land. They want to carve spaces between their rib cages and grind the earth between their teeth.

The eldest boy pretends he is a native. Member of a one-man tribe, he parades atop a boulder in his make-believe garb and falcon feathers. He doesn't know the history of these woods: the colonialism and enslavement, how his "ancestors" were traded amongst white hands for fifty shillings a piece. He only knows that, at this moment, the property belongs to him, and when he hurls his spear through the gilded sky, he is the master of soil. The unbridled tempter of fate.

The native's target narrowly dodges his weapon. The sharpened branch strikes the ground with a thud, and the target, whose eyes are so animal and so human, glares at the native as if to say, *watch it!* The native isn't sure what his friend pretends to be. Barreling through the bushes on all fours, the other boy could be a boar, or a fox, or a cheetah. There is a howl in his movements, a guttural cry in the way he sniffs the air and swipes his fingers through the moss like a mighty claw. Still, the two boys take themselves seriously. They rage against one another as if their entire existence depends on this war between man and beast, even though they understand that, deep down, they are neither.

And yet, further into the thicket hides a girl who is both. She is used to being isolated by the boys, who only appreciate her for pigtails and pinkness. They don't realize that she, too, likes pretending. That is she is pretending all the time. That right now, she has imagined herself into this sick amalgamation: part hawk, part snake, part girl. Her rust-colored wings glint like fall foliage. Her body fools predators with its mottled skin. She slithers in silence, tasting what it's like to be free, and it is only when her mother calls from inside that she is severed from her reverie.

"Breakfast is ready!"

Three stomachs erupt in a simultaneous rumble, and the children, against all odds, return to their original selves, having forgotten whatever power had inspired them to starve. It is so simple, like a sigh, or a death. They think only of the promise of pancakes as they dash away from their visions and toward the house where families come to settle.

This land is a graveyard of lives they once chose for themselves. Boys and girls, men and beasts, kids and chimeras. Hundreds of abandoned fantasies watch from their overgrown tombs as their creators—and their creators' creators—gather around the dining room table, around their but-tery cakes infused with rum and maple syrup, not realizing that each of them is their own wooden cabin: spontaneous and inhabited and always ready to burn.