

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

*Morgan Laidler*

### **The Woods Beyond the Fence**

**I**n the woods beyond the fence lay a grand castle, its towers stretching from oaken trunks towards blue sky as guards and watchmen tweeted and sang songs from above. A muddy moat held out claw-footed enemies and sheltered the three rulers from dangerous woods. One of them, a girl, sat with twigs and flowers crowning her hair, adjusting boulders and leaves to make her luxurious four-poster bed. Another, the only boy, made iron swords out of broken branches and sharpened them diligently, listening for the howls and growls of enemy kingdoms. The other girl, the most practical of the three monarchs, surveyed the land of her kingdom and sought out what she could do for her subjects. She collected acorns for the bushy-tailed folk, set out clumps of cat hair for the flying guardsmen to make their nests with, and checked upon the lower communities of small worming people that lived in the shelter of the kingdom's underground.

In the woods beyond the fence was the most extraordinary archeological find the world had ever seen. One archaeologist, a boy, turned over rocks in pursuit of fossils, finding small ones that rolled up in his fingers and larger ones with millions of legs that crawled into the rocks' history. Another scientist, a girl, analyzed his findings at her stone workstation. She peered at the hardened proof of a time before theirs and poked and prodded at the fossil's exoskeletons, growing frustrated that the fossils refused to stay still. The final archeologist rested her tired legs on a historic boulder and played a different game. She tossed small coins and shells from her mother's bathroom in the fallen leaves and shallower parts of the mud for the boy to find. Years of friendship and shared archeologic research led her to know he would soon lose interest in fossils of the insect variety, so she scattered new treasures for him to find.

In the woods beyond the fence was a small house with leaf-cushioned furniture, a set of stairs rising straight up from the bark to the expanse of leaves above, and a small cardboard television for which the family had saved all their pocket money. The two girls were a new family, flipping an abandoned coin found in the mud to see who would have to be the father, and the young boy volunteered himself to be their troublesome child. They rushed into the circular set they had built, humming entrance music softly to themselves, and delivered lines meant to be funny with long spaces of silence so they could listen to the laughs of the studio audience going about their business in their wooden homes. When they deemed it to be night, despite the sun only beginning to set on their tree-lined set, they watched cartoons and action movies on their boxy TV and found pleasure in resolving conflicts in the thirty minutes the network had given them.

In the woods beyond the fence was a small deer nest. A circle of flattened grass was a bed and nursery for a doe and her two babies, who were still not strong enough to move from their birthplace. The children stayed away for this week, knowing to fear any animal mother who had to protect their young.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

In the woods beyond the fence was a snow-covered battleground. The seasons had changed, and it was a harsh winter for the soldiers. All was quiet as the troops on either side prepared for the upcoming battle. The boy, wearing a helmet fashioned out of twigs and leaves and stuck together with chewing gum, peered past the embattlements to see the opposition. They were all white, rounded, and had orange carrot swords in their hands. He informed his troops, who were reluctant to be under his order, of the enemies' reinforcements. The three soldiers prepared their weapons, banging rocks into twigs to make sharp broadswords and molding cold cannon balls from the ice at their feet. One of the girls let out shallow coughs, earning glares from her comrades for almost giving away their position. They had cleared out the civilians of this place for their own safety, sending the ones who could fly south to escape the cold winter and those who couldn't leave into their homes to slumber through the battle. The three soldiers sent a silent, somber prayer to whatever gods would decide the fate of the battle and charged at their frozen foes. Several hours later, after many battles had been fought and won, the girl's mother called an end to the war, noting that she did not want her daughter's sickness to worsen in the cold.

In the woods beyond the fence was an elaborate nightclub. A carefully placed square of leaves set the boundaries of a light-up dance floor, and the three patrons downed glasses of Sprite and Coke out of cups their mothers did not know they had taken from their kitchens. With each sip of the intoxicating liquid, the children's moves became wilder, and by the end of the night, when an older sibling came to collect the boy, they stumbled across the dance floor as they saw adults do on TV. Their steps were shrouded in the twirling light of the disco ball, provided by the shadows the swaying leaves cast on the ground, and they lost themselves to the music of birds chirping and wind racing through the trees. Within the red glow of the setting sun, they all left clutching their heads and stomachs, suffering the aftermath of a night out.

In the woods beyond the fence was a family of squirrels. They lived in one of the trees, within a carved-out hole just above the height of the children's heads. The squirrels watched the children play for many moons and gladly took their offerings of nuts and warm fur to build into the nest during the winter. The squirrels did not know they took on their own roles in the children's acts, but they enjoyed the spectacle nonetheless.

In the woods beyond the fence, a coven of witches crowded around a red cauldron. This was their favorite cauldron, as it had wheels and handles for easy transportation to and from their lair; sometimes, they pushed the smallest witch in it when she got tired. They sought to make a poison and went around gathering the ingredients they would need. The boy witch collected the souls of terrifying insects to strike fear in their victim's heart. One girl piled deadly leaves and poisonous rocks to paralyze their victim's brain and body. The final girl poured handfuls of sweet-smelling wet mud to lure their victim to try a taste of their brew. They combined all the ingredients, stirred with their wooden stick spoons, and took turns practicing their witchy cackles. They wondered who their first victim would be and how delightfully their poison would work.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

In the woods beyond the fence was the first sign of real trouble. One of the girls, a grocery cashier, was placing home goods of rocks and leaves in an invisible bag for her patron when her stomach first began to be nauseous. She clutched it gently, not wanting to interrupt her friends' play. She took a seat on a mossy boulder and watched them take turns ringing up groceries, making beeping sounds as they pointed their scanner at each item. She imagined herself to be an older woman, waiting at the grocery store's pharmacy for a flu shot, and hoped the world would stop spinning soon.

In the woods beyond the fence was a paradise at sea. Two mermaids and a merman swam around through waves of leaves and fought off towering sea monsters made of bark. They discussed what color and shape their tails would be; the first girl wanted it to be pink and sparkly, the second girl, growing slowly paler, wanted hers to be midnight black with purple highlights, and the boy wanted his to look like one of his Hot Wheels, ignoring the girls' claims that mermen would not have flames on their tails. They used their sea powers to fight off foes and protect the watery lands of their kingdom until the mermaid with the midnight blue tail grew weary and had to retire to their underwater throne room at the base of a tree trunk. Other furrier mermaids and mermen kept her company, scurrying along the ocean floor and through the wooden waves above her head.

In the woods beyond the fence was an abandoned jacket. One of the children had taken it off during their adventures and forgotten about it when it was time to cross back over the fence. A father now stomped into the clearing, found the jacket upon a rock, silently lamented his son's recklessness, remembering the way he swore his friend's clearing was the first place he looked, and marched back over the fence to their house further down the street. The woods shuddered from the adult's intrusion.

In the woods beyond the fence was uncharted territory. Three explorers, destined to be the first of humankind to step into this place, held invisible maps and rocky compasses as they charted their course toward a legendary river. One of them, a girl, decided that they should head east, pointing directly through the clearing of trees. Another one, the boy, decided they should head north and pointed in the opposite direction. The final explorer pointed out that north was not the opposite of east, a clarification that was not appreciated by her companions. The three decided to march onward through the clearing towards the sound of the river, which grew louder with each step.

In the woods beyond the fence was a grand pirate ship. Winter jacket sails caught the sea's wind, and the boulder-covered deck rocked back and forth with each crash of the waves. A boy, the self-proclaimed captain, used the palm of his hand as a makeshift eyepatch, stood at the head of the ship, and pointed out onto the horizon. A girl, the self-proclaimed captain, steered the ship by pulling the rudder's branches to and fro and imagined what jewelry she would buy with her gold doubloons. The last crewmate, the only one not a captain, sat at the edge of the rocky deck and felt the spray of the ocean breeze. She tried to remember what the ocean smelled like and tried to forget that she may never see it again.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

In the woods beyond the fence was the finest medical institute in the country. The two doctors, a boy and a girl, both occupied themselves with their most important patient, a young woman. They banged her knees with sticks and held rocks to her chest to listen to her heart. She tried not to cough while they examined her. She wanted to imagine it was all pretend. The two doctors worked hard to come up with a treatment plan and deemed that the young woman would be healthy in no time. The young woman just smiled.

In the woods beyond the fence was a racing track. The three drivers took turns riding in the car the hospital had given them. The two strongest racers, a boy and a girl, pumped the two wheels with their arms until they crossed the finish line, not willing to admit to the other how exhausted their muscles were. The last girl sat in the muddy bleachers and timed them. They took turns pushing her around the track, letting the breeze blow in her thinning hair.

In the woods beyond the fence, the animals knew something was wrong. The bunnies could smell the familiar scent of sickness growing fainter with each day. The birds sang their songs a little quieter, listening for the familiar footsteps of the children coming to play. The deer and wolves and bears all avoided the place, as the stench of disease was ripe, and even nature knew to give the sick space to heal.

In the woods beyond the fence, two professors were giving opposing lectures. After asking permission from their missing companion's mother to use the woods as a site of academic excellence, they took turns standing in front of their furry students, giving their theses and creating evidence to support their claims. One argued that all hospitals were evil and should be outlawed, citing statistics about the millions of people who died in them every second. The other argued that hospitals were good, discussing the babies born there each year. In the end, the professors decided to agree to disagree.

In the woods beyond the fence, there was silence for a while. At least, the closest thing the woods could get to silence. The clearing was emptier than usual, with nothing left in it but shadows and remnants of forgotten worlds.

In the woods behind the fence was a family of sycamore trees circling a clearing moist with fallen leaves. Cardinals and Blue Jays called to each other from the top branches while squirrels' nests hid within the trunk's walls. Bees and wasps hung in the harmony of white noise from the lower branches, and caterpillars and roly-polys found oases underneath dark rocks. The river roared on, forgotten in a distant land less than a mile away. Deer and coyotes and otters and bears and rabbits would pass through but never stay long. They had seen the three sets of footprints left in the patches of mud in their past travels. They had smelled the bitter-sweet and unclean scent of childhood and felt the presence of the castles, the dig sites, the battlefields, the lairs, the nightclubs, and whatever the clearing would be tomorrow.

In the woods beyond the fence was a small mound marked with a name. The boy and girl, feeling less like children every day, would now only cross the fence to visit her. They would tell her about the lives they

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

led, about how they never became pirates or witches or explorers or mermaids because they did not want to do it without her. They would leave coins and trinkets for her, unaware of the ones she had buried in the mud years ago that still waited to be found. The woods beyond the fence held these souvenirs in the way they held her. The woods beyond the fence stayed woods for quite a while longer, waiting in the clearing around the mound for their children to return and change them into something new again.