

## James Matthew Wilson

### A Showing

The agent led them through the narrow house,  
Its stained floors scratched with use and blanched by sunlight.  
She held her binder close against her chest  
And let them judge themselves the tight-packed rooms,  
The creaking stairs, and sloping bedroom ceilings.  
The outside was a rich and creamy stucco,  
Peeling and cracked, as were the front porch columns.  
When she would turn to speak, the couple saw  
Beneath her coarse dyed hair its blackened roots,  
Her nose projecting long and wide and straight.  
And while they did not do much more than nod  
Or sigh, observing how the rooms were cramped,  
The closets deep but narrow, and the bath  
A block of garish tile and chipped-up porcelain,  
They sensed with disbelief and resignation  
That this was all their credit could afford.  
And so, they lingered on when others would  
Have left to set their sights on other places.  
They tried to praise the windows for their brilliance  
And wondered if the porch could be enclosed.

The listing said there was a finished basement,  
But what they found was one low-ceilinged room  
Floored with asbestos tile and, at the back,  
A great wood cupboard with cast-iron sink.  
Upon the agent's face a spot of joy  
Appeared, a silent gaze of recognition.  
She ran a hand along the smooth-worn sides,  
Turned on a tap, and listened to the sound  
Of water pouncing down upon the metal.  
It was, she told the pair, a canning kitchen,  
And looked back toward a wall of empty shelves  
That must, she said, have once been dense with jars  
Of stewed tomatoes, long thin frying peppers,  
Onions and artichokes in marinade.  
A hook descending from the shadows showed  
Where, wrapped in cloth, prosciutto once had cured.

So again, as they entered the back garden,  
Her face relaxed into an absent smile,  
Her eyes grew brighter, and she pointed out

Two ancient fig trees reared on crooked trunks,  
The boughs grown brittle, patched with moss and lichen,  
And weighted here and there with mottled fruit.  
They had two children in this house, she said.  
They planted these to celebrate the births.  
Like what they do in Sicily, she said.

The husband pinched a rough leaf with his fingers,  
Then tried to meet her eyes in understanding;  
He was impressed that she could know such things.  
His wife did much the same and sighed with warmth,  
If just to show that everyone must love  
The thought of babies. Then, they turned back down  
The gravel drive—but not just yet the agent,  
Who seemed at rest within the fig trees' shade.  
She looked into the canopy of leaves,  
The broad lobes curling in the heat. She felt  
The unmown grasses brushing on her ankles,  
And heard the droning of a bee that moved  
Among the branches till it found, at last,  
A hole within a scabbed and hard green fruit  
And disappeared in search of some lost sweetness.



### In the Woods

The woods that line the margin of the college  
 And separate it from the parish school,  
 Grow bright with autumn sun upon their hills  
 Where rolling slopes lie thick in gold and russet.  
 The students walk its paths between their classes,  
 Crossing the bridge that spans its shallow brook;  
 Its purl runs quiet by the clean-washed rocks,  
 And yet, when twilight comes, asserts itself  
 To fill the ear with echoes of pure movement.  
 For some it is a place of dark retreat,  
 Followed when evening plates are cleared away,  
 The final bit of humor spoken, and  
 The idle spell of plentitude undone.  
 And others still will find its shades in pairs  
 To lose themselves in one another's presence.

But for the young man on that afternoon,  
 It may have been no more than one green space  
 Among some hundred others he had found  
 Upon a map. It may have been no more  
 Than one last destination to seek out,  
 Following the highways course from far up north,  
 Each curve and exit sign brand new to him,  
 So that, in some sense, he did not know where  
 He meant to go or where he would wind up.

Once there, however, he hiked in and hopped  
 The leaning chain-link fence-work near the trail,  
 Then stumbled through the grasping sprays of thorn.  
 He mounted up one bank and then descended,  
 And knew no more than that the air grew quiet.  
 There, where the ground began to sink again,  
 He settled down against the grade, its bed  
 Of moldering leaves grown dry and brittle rising  
 Into the air to spread their heavy scent.  
 He braced his head against a fallen trunk  
 Whose mossy spine was finned with shelves of fungi  
 And felt bark crumbling on his hair and skull.  
 What was that place to him who shut his eyes?

The children at the school, out for their recess,  
 Heard the great noise bolt through the empty air.  
 One cried and others' eyes chased after sounds  
 That echoed and reechoed and were lost.  
 The teachers on their watch did just the same;

They searched each other out but could not speak.  
One blew a whistle, short and then sustained,  
Calling the children, hurried, back to school.  
And, though they tried to get them into line,  
To bring some sort of order to the panic,  
The children all were pushing now and crowding.  
Some of them could not hear a thing, but only  
Shoulder and press and press against each other,  
The threshold narrow and the steel door clumsy,  
One teacher struggling with a clutch of keys.  
And when they finally made their inward passage,  
The last boy, bruised and sweating with the crush,  
The neighborhood grew quiet and the brook  
Grew quiet too as if it lost its music,  
And waited as the sound that had gone out  
And vanished now returned in other form.  
A faint, unsteady wailing in the sky,  
High-toned and searing, far but drawing near,  
Revealed itself, at last, as sirens summoned  
Toward the autumnal stillness of the woods.

