terms such as "finance" and "commerce" with street addresses in New York's Financial District. (Zuccotti Park will surely gain new currency as a locus of dissent in an updated map; Osman's book predates the Occupy movement.) Her history begins with Henry Hudson's discovery of Manhattan in 1609 and ends with the explosion of dynamite—the so-called Wall Street bombing—outside the J. P. Morgan Bank at 23 Wall Street in 1920. Osman declares that at this precise moment, 12:01 p.m. on September 16, 1920, "Wall Street and the financial markets become a patriotic symbol; questioning the economic system becomes anti-American." Capital's wounding and embattlement fuses it with the American conscience. Like our words, our patriotic values are prone to sudden shifts. That moment is a singular pivot in an economic system that runs by cycles of crisis. Osman links the word "commerce" to "mercurial" and "quicksilver." The way to map a changing thing, she argues by example, is by means as changeable as the thing mapped. The book's final section, "Mercury Rising (A Visualization)" tells the indubitably weird story—if it is indeed only *one* story—of a journey through a futuristic dreamscape in which the body is rendered mercurial. As if it were ever otherwise.

Kate McIntyre

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Joshua Baldwin, *The Wilshire Sun*. New York: Turtle Point Press, 2011. 104pp. $10.50

Halfway through *The Wilshire Sun*, Jacob, the novella's lazy and deluded narrator, stands outside a grand hotel in Santa Monica and imagines a hackneyed plot arc for himself. A literary young man, he has already come to Los Angeles from New York at the behest of his friend Jerry to collaborate on "making easy money setting down screenplays both dumb and brilliant." Looking at the hotel, he first envisions it as the backdrop for gaining and losing glamor, then concludes that it might be easier to just skip ahead to the final humbling he predicts for himself:

> I…considered blowing what remains of my inheritance by staying in one of their suites. Eating breakfast in the lobby while staring at the sea, meeting an actress, marrying her, going into severe debt; then she leaves me, so I become a bellhop at the Ross.
>
> I spent the night at a motel on Main Street, thinking over this plan, and right now it doesn't sound like such a terrible way to proceed. Better yet, I can skip those preliminary steps and cross straight over to the bellhop stage.

This moment of fantasy and unambitious resolution occupies only a few brief lines, but it's characteristic of Jacob's diffident, often hilarious efforts to make something of himself in Los Angeles. Despite the absurd enthusiasm of Jerry—who snorts cocaine, claims "they" give away cars "like soup" to aspiring screenwriters in Los Angeles, and attempts to scale the walls of Paramount with his screenplay—Jacob accomplishes little. Instead, his blithe laziness inclines him toward the gradual abdication of aspiration. Initially, Baldwin mines that inclination only for comedy, such as when Jacob observes, "Dreaming is good for writers—it's the same as writing, really," before rolling back to sleep in the morning. Eventually, however, Jacob's circumstances begin to take on more menacing tones as we begin to realize the extreme ends of his willingness to settle for a comfortable existence. In the novella's biggest twist and best, bleakest joke, Jacob happily accepts the comfort of a poolside existence instead of facing up to the disquieting implications of how it is offered to him.

Jacob, in other words, is a parodic reflection of one of the American novel's favorite types: the young man out to make his fortune. Similarly, the Los Angeles of *The Wilshire Sun* is a parodic version not of the actual city, but of its imaginary existence in national fantasy and cultural memory. Baldwin's Los Angeles bears little resemblance to its modern polyglot reality, but is instead a surreal pastiche constructed of the cultural tropes and consumer products of mid-twentieth-century, WASP-dominated Los Angeles society. Jacob reads Dick Tracy comics, listens to baseball and Pacific Jazz on the radio, and communicates by telephone and letter. (No one owns a computer or a cellphone.) Characters make constant reference to a kind of retro-50s diner diet of sour cream and cottage cheese, fruit salad and hamburger pepper loaf, peanuts and milkshakes.

Baldwin's prose, with its repertory of late-night diner foods and its tendency to dwell on Jacob's first-person solitude, is in part a pastiche of the literary style most often associated with mid-century Los Angeles—noir. Jacob recounts his listless wanderings with the kind of attention to the movement-by-movement physical coordinates and mundane details of urban life once reserved in LA fiction for the procedurals of a PI plying his trade:

> After another hour or so in the courtyard, I got up and walked over to the Fairfax Farmers Market. I followed the instructions given to me by the girl in the box office and took Highland south to Melrose, then Melrose west to Fairfax, and finally Fairfax south to 3rd. Now I'm sitting in one of the dining patios, imitating the hero of *Brass Rain*—eating a doughnut, drinking coffee from a Styrofoam cup, and taking notes.... I hear the gentlemen hawking turkey burgers

> and pizza bread and frosted cinnamon rolls all around me. The smell of freshly pressed waffle cones keeps me on my toes.

Similar passages comprise much of the book. One ambition of this prose is to mimic noir's concern for rendering urban life in concrete, spatial detail. Baldwin's use of noir's straightforward language has a deadpan effect that supplies the novella's most consistent humor. This minimalist hardboiled style becomes a kind of egg-salad sandwich prose delighting in the comically flat language used to name America's consumer products: "doughnut," "Styrofoam," "turkey burgers," "pizza bread," etc. The absurdity of this mock plain style renders Jacob's experience of Los Angeles amusingly deluded and off-kilter, even when (or especially when) nothing much is happening to him.

The narrative's pastiche of outmoded consumer products and literary tropes, however, is not merely comedy, but a more serious meditation on the tropes and dreams still lingering in American consciousness from the moment of the nation's rise to wealth and power. The book's dated dreamscape doesn't describe actual history—we hear reports of a series of bizarre fires that lay waste to New York, placing the story in a parallel universe—but instead presents the fantasy Jacob inhabits as an artifact of some long-vanished era in American history. "God almighty, this is the place," Jacob announces to himself upon his arrival in Los Angeles, echoing the aspirations of countless migrants hoping to find the good life in California. He then walks through endless city blocks devoid of human beings, sits for a moment and observes that "a bunch of palm trees were drooping over my head, filling me with a new desire—like for a new pair of shoes or a chocolate milkshake." That's a pretty funny rendering of the image of middle-class consumerism and sun-drenched easy living once used to attract home-buyers to the sprawling communities through which Jacob has just been walking. Jacob's wanderings through the city, often surreal yet mapped with precise geographical coordinates, double as a journey through the cultural imaginary created by the emergence of that middle-class society, and bequeathed to Baldwin's generation.

Distrust of the sunny myth of Los Angeles is itself a longstanding staple of commentary on the city. The image of easy, middle-class Southern California living and Hollywood glamor has been so aggressively demythologized that dystopian renderings of the city have long constituted a mythos in their own right. From the novels of Nathanael West to the later films of David Lynch, Los Angeles is often portrayed as a sunny hell populated by the corrupt, the lonely, the deluded, and the deranged—and *The Wilshire Sun*'s troubled conclusion makes it clear that it belongs to that tradition. Jacob's eventual acceptance of his hell precludes either the apocalyptic frenzy that occurs at the end of *Day of the Locust* or the wounded solitude that characterizes Marlowe

in *The Long Goodbye*. In that sense, *The Wilshire Sun* presents a considerably bleaker image of the Los Angeles myth than these more obviously venomous predecessors. Because Jacob never really struggles, and because he never feels a desperation that disrupts the comedy of his experiences, his entrapment is all the more complete. If occasionally, in reading *The Wilshire Sun*, one wishes for a more original treatment of Los Angeles, a treatment that goes beyond the accreted representations of the city and dissolves the clichéd attempt to grasp the city's mood or meaning—well, then, Jacob's struggles suggest that Baldwin himself might desire a better, fresher set of cultural fantasies.

Quentin Ring

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Helen DeWitt, *Lightning Rods*. New York: New Directions, 2011. 273pp. $24.95

Who speaks? For Roland Barthes it was the premiere question of narrative itself, and it is posed in remarkable ways by Helen DeWitt's second published novel, *Lightning Rods*. The story repackages the quintessential American myth of the plucky entrepreneur who overcomes all obstacles in a rise from obscurity to wealth and fame, a personal success that brings with it—according to the myth, at least—social progress. So it is with Joe, inventor and salesman of the novel's titular "lightning rods": in the process of transforming a humble sexual fantasy into a service commodity designed to disarm the threat of sexual harassment in the workplace, our hero profitably resolves a host of issues—around equal opportunity in the workplace, national security, faith—that beset American society in the latter half of the previous century.

One needn't go far with such a description before it becomes obvious that the book is a satire. The "lightning rod" service itself consists of nothing more, as the narrator confesses to himself at one point, than getting a woman "to stick her fanny through a hole in a wall." These holes connect the men's and women's disability stalls in office toilets; women are hired by Joe's agency to perform routine office tasks as secretaries or assistants, as well as secretly to service male "high performers" in conditions of guaranteed anonymity. The novel charts a series of refinements in the engineering of this service and the sales strategies that attend its eventual widespread acceptance, but this comically grotesque image remains at its center. By the time the women's fannies are sheathed in PVC plastic, the "lightning rod" service has come to suggest nothing more than a quotidian wall socket. The office lingo for plugging into it is "going to the disability." It is a reductio ad absurdum of the instrumentalization of sexuality, one that was often implied anyway in