My Wilderness

I tried to grow what others grew, eggplants and zinnias, tomatoes, dahlias, even corn. But there were too many trees, the darkness beneath them growing mushrooms, fawn lilies, and trillium as the years I longed for sun passed and I learned to love the trees. This winter the day the ice storm came branches cracked and fell all morning taking others with them, and in the afternoon a maple and a cherry fell across the roof. At dusk, when it was over, the owls, two and three and maybe four, more than I’d ever heard, echoed the day’s losses. But because I live among the trees, my worst dream is of the bulldozers which will come some day after this hillside has been logged. They’ll come the way they did to the old cherry orchard where every spring someone raked the earth around the still leafless trees, the tine lines visible from the road, and then one day I’d round the corner and come upon them, their endless clouds of blossom. It takes so much work to turn an orchard into a bare field ready for a subdivision, trunks split, stumps chained, wrenched and dragged away, all of it worse than any storm because, branches gathered for kindling, trees cut and chopped, spring does recover what a month ago seemed broken, the big leaf maples filling in the gaps. If I have to leave here, I’ll never leave in spring. I won’t leave the wisteria dangling outside my window, the globes of rhododendrons out under the firs suspended like red lanterns in the rain. It takes a long time to learn
how to live anywhere. The irises last a season or two, then dwindle. The daylilies lasted twenty years before their roots gave way to rot, but the wisteria, the rhododendrons, the maples, firs and wild cherries reseed themselves, even the difficult oak keeps growing. And the roses, if I could say what a life is, I’d say roses, how they taught me early of desire in the way a man bent laying pipe on a Sunday to make a rose garden for his wife because he couldn’t love her any other way, and when the marriage fell to ruin it was the roses that survived, each bud unfurling through dog and drought. I’d tell how I planted the Abraham Lincoln for my mother because it was her favorite, though as it turned out I planted it too close to the path and so she brushed against it every morning as it stood wet with dew. And when she fell and had to leave her home forever, I cut her deep red roses and brought them to her in her hospital bed, and then she did not cry,

but those were hybrids, vulnerable to bug and mildew. My roses are old roses. They love the shade. They sprawl over trellises that barely bear their weight. They twine among the trees blossoming in clusters, tiny and uncuttable, bright beacons in the twilight world under a sky I cannot see for green. They smell of musk and when I try to train them they won’t mind. Fierce with thorns they snag my arms, draw blood. And yet I scrape the moss off the flat blue stones that lead to them, as if I were scrubbing the steps of a church or shrine so I can stand
beneath them when they bloom. If I leave here, it will be because I cannot tend what I barely tend now. If I leave, I’ll leave in autumn, the rose canes dead, leaves turning yellow. I’ll leave the way my mother did, never looking back.
Unlike the black locust, dead ten years but still standing in the field, home to the osprey, its nest and six turkey vultures who roost in its branches every morning, when I’m dead I won’t be here on a summer afternoon, doe crossing the field, horse neighing, another answering back, as, drifting in and out of sleep behind a screen of jasmine, I stand on either side of the river facing myself along with those not me, not here, who tell me it’s not death I fear but being left behind. Now Viola/Cesario says “I am not who I seem,” or is it “what I seem,” and nothing is, but something lingers asking to be told. This time the horse’s hooves sink through snow, thud against the frozen planking of a bridge, this time painting after painting of flowering orchards, “Van Gogh liked orchards,” the caption says, and so he painted not one tree, not an entire tree but seemed to dwell inside the idea of a tree whose roots were endless.
Eternity or Infinity?

I’ve thought them interchangeable, they even sound alike, but today tells me one has more light and is like looking out at the sea and finding I have to look away because the blue, the froth of the waves, the white variations of tidal sands and whiter birds gathered to search for tiny shrimp and worms in the outgoing tide are too bright to look at. And though the sea seems infinite, this view with people and dogs strolling, everyone remarkably cordial, even the dogs, could be the eternity anyone would be happy to have here on a late February day on the Oregon Coast where the temperature will reach sixty degrees when Boston is still under three feet of snow after weeks of endless storms. I know infinity isn’t this bright. I think it has an ominous sense of the undertow, less what we imagine than something so big we can’t. I don’t think my mother

thought about infinity each morning when she set off for the bus stop on her way to work. She thought about how time lived in the number of steps to the bus stop and how many minutes it took to walk them, and doesn’t infinity have to do with the time we don’t have, never had, with why it will be sixty degrees here today when it’s still snowing in Boston keeping kids home from school and parents from going to work and eventually not paying their bills? My mother
lived that way too, paycheck to paycheck, yet she knew someday eternity would be her reward. And it occurs to me that if you believe in eternity, maybe infinity doesn’t matter, even as it threatens to spin us back into where we came from which does make eternity a lot more appealing and infinity what we’d like to forget. Because isn’t it true that mostly all we want to do is make a story about how we got here and why we’re good enough to stay?
Lament

Some mornings now
I roll right out of bed and into my boots
and find myself halfway up the hill, sky
growing lighter with each step,
before I see that in the dream
all the lights were turned out and so far
my father did not know behind which door we hid.

Some years I’ve said *lament*, as if the word
was a box whose lid I’d lift, or a letter
I’d slit open letting what it felt like
fly away—a box because the house was a box,
a letter because there were no letters
because everyone pretended not to know.
Sometimes I think of the man whose job
it was to tell the deaf what they could not hear.
He saw the sky filling with angels
even as he kept gesturing, trying to tell them
what he heard without telling them
what he saw. But maybe

it’s more like the wild child
who keeps making appearance after appearance
in the novels I’m reading, who knows
nothing about a lament and everything about hiding
and listening. As long as she is unfound, we imagine
her life among the wolves, and found,
once she’s had her hair cut, her bath, she looks
like any other child though she has imagined us
as nothing more than harm.
I don’t mean I’m the wild child. I do mean
each of us would like to find a perfect vessel
to hold what we don’t know how to say,
and at least it’s clear by now what I want
is not a lament, unless
it’s for the time wasted thinking
something is still on the other side of that door.
Theme Park

Camas Swale, swale of sorrows
on the way to the funeral, any day of junked
lawnmowers sorted carefully into piles of five,
horses standing week after week in the frigid field
before someone asks if they should be there
among the spikes of hoarfrost. And when
a man lies face up in the snow, do we believe he’s there
because he chooses to be? And when
the soldiers capture and hold on to their hilltop,
some die, some are wounded, some finish
their tour and return home unable to return.
Meanwhile the hilltop, new orders issued,
is abandoned. As for eternity,
it’s cracked, all the many moons of Saturn
lined up on the stage of a Cornell box, world
no longer as whole as Adventureland,
land of no beginning and no end, where nothing dies
as the boat’s prow divides the river, the giraffe’s neck
rises on cue above the trees, the elephant bellows
and the real danger is what we don’t see,
our eyes distracted by the hippo as the crocodile
launches itself from the reeds and our guide
raises his rifle to fire.
The Family

The flying shards of metal entered his body and the fire burned him in the flaming sea where he was flung among the living and the dead. Months then when his wounds were healing, or so it seemed, his arms splotchy, fading as the years passed, but the shrapnel stayed, in his hands, his back, little boats forever sailing in the sea of him. And the plane heading for the ship, the explosion, the blood all happened again and again. He loved to hurt, to be hurt, as if to make his almost drowning visible. And though he said he’d never hit a woman, he’d hurl an ashray or a plate, and then he’d ask for it, right up in her face he’d say the words she hated over and over until she slapped his face again and again, his glasses falling, or she cracked a glass over his head, him yelling for a towel, get me a towel he pleaded, then wrapping it around his head. Hours later he returned bandaged, almost pleased. Having stopped for a drink, he brought gifts. She’d already mopped the blood by then. He was wounded. He was a casualty of war. He was the plane heading for the house each night. He was the explosion. His fist made a hole in the bedroom wall above my brother’s head. His fist shattered the window. He fell sodden then and slept. Years later a woman said he was not tragic, and I knew that was because he was not a man who fell from great heights, only a truck driver falling from his own height. My brother left first, but not before he learned to knock our father down. My mother tried never to be in the same room, stayed in the kitchen ironing after she came home from work. And then, though she feared he’d kill her,
she told him he had to leave, and because even he knew they could not go on, he did. After he was gone, she forgot because that was her way, her one foot in front of the other. I am the daughter.
I am the one who watched, who saw the blood spreading over the broken glass or puddled by the wash pan with its dent the shape of his head, the stringy mop swirling through its thickness, my mother’s hands wringing it into the bucket, the water turning red as the sea, how it colored everything.
Monuments

On dark winter mornings my mother emerges from the grainy light as if hewn from the rock until she is striding ahead of me. How hard it was to climb the hill of palms and broken glass and up the steep stone steps into the grime of my grandparents’ house. Years later, I knew she was teaching me to rent a crummy apartment so I could watch, invisible as I thought I was, the man across the way get dressed and undressed each day. She was teaching me to drop out of school and quit my job and go to the mountains, then move back in with her to finish school and get another job, because what was the point of another apartment or a river four states away where winter came on so bitterly? And then one night I knew she thought I might stay because that’s the way it was in our family—one child always stayed and, if she didn’t, she took three buses on Sundays to sit in the musty shadows of her parents’ house as she and I had done. I saw the two of us sitting at the dinner table with the jets screaming overhead and the years passing and me having gone to work for the city like she’d told me to do, which is, I guess, how we’re led
toward what we don’t yet know how to name
until we can. And, when I did see my way out, even
though everyone was afraid to pick up hitchhikers
because Manson hadn’t yet been caught, I did

so I could tell them I’d be leaving soon, and every day
until I left I worked at the Queen Mary, that vast boat
of going nowhere turned into a museum. I ripped
my tickets at the end of the gangplank

as the oily water thudded against the hull. I hummed,
I’m never coming back.