

# 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.

## Source

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 ashtray 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.*