

## ROSES IN THE WOODS

It was where the map ended;  
 The place was half swamp, full of deadness, never owned.  
 Kudzu borrowed skeletons of pine and wild berry bush,  
 Snapped off canes for its stalking  
 Of the few swatches of good ground fleeing ahead.

An out of season quail broke cover, crazed silence;  
 I reacted like an overdrawn wire. Fallen branches  
 Split underfoot. Sudden pointed pain  
 In my ankle—two small punctures—thought went off  
 Like unaimed shots: Snake! Poisonous snake!  
 But the skin was claw-tracked and blood-beaded and  
 All around was the cause. Beyond,  
 Magenta spurted up like open arteries between  
 Birch bones.

It was no man's land, anti-personnel entanglements,  
 Tightrope-walking boughs over redoubts of wood spikes,  
 Caltrops on hidden runners conspiring  
 With limbs to make trip-nooses. At last  
 I touched layers of battle-dyed satin  
 With hesitant fingers, and funeral fragrance  
 With wide nostrils, perched amid exploding life  
 Like a parasite. All blooming concentrated in a six

Foot radius. Upright tufts of petals hid their stamens  
Till they dropped. Untame, but never wild.

I prodded languorous green mimics  
For a rusty plow, chimney bricks, foundation parts—  
Things that outlast ramblers—  
But under the leaf-locked shapes  
Only more plantlife and death, a pair  
Of ten point antlers and a piece of crumbling carnelian.  
My long stick struck another something hard. The vines  
Quivered, veins darkened. The rose defended  
Like a many-headed Medusa until, cursing,  
I hacked it with a hunting knife.

Thorn-crude carving on the stone read: Jebel Caleb Jones,  
Orphan & Bachelor, 1845—1864. This was his wish—  
To be buried where he fell.

I don't know why my eyes were wet and flaming  
Or why all roses flamed out and shed,  
Red blown shrapnel for an instant, then  
Soft panoply for the breached woven shield.  
Such quail cover! But I never went back to hunt  
There where the map makers quit.