

COVERT CABIN, UNMAPPED ROAD TO SUN-UP

Twenty-odd years since I saw the place.
My triumphant shout crazed the green-filtered afternoon
when I found it. First 48 hours a fast blur. Sawing
limbs, salting fish, chinking both windows. Proving
my survival skills to my long-secret self.
Even planted spring hopes next to mother's wolfsbane
(I call it winter aconite, little more than a weed)
now usurping the realm, her once oddly glorious garden.
Just before escaping civilization, I bought bulbs,
certain this swatch of Saskatchewan sky far from humans
never blued over daffodil ruffles before.

Diminishment set in the second day-- as if my being,
my body-- didn't displace the air, the essence of space
I occupied. My feet failed to leave tracks. "Surroundings"
imply you're among things life nature you exist.
I wasn't part of the verb "to be." Forget cogito ergo sum.
Nothing was stretched or hollowed out by my presence.
If anything barely altered the natural superior order,
it was my muddy Jeep half-hidden under spruces and shade.

Third day shadows multiplied, magnified. Shadows
not matched with solids. Shapes not fully fathomed.
My mother would have chanted in three tones for hours.
Omens from old tribal tales appeared early: my hearth
flared, a single orange tongue licked high in the chimney.
It hissed, fell back and died. Sickly sun
plunged wide shafts into the soft earth, sucking it dry,
giving no warmth, only taking, leaving a swath
of cold-parched earthworms and clay crumbs. Strange paws
signed the ground by my door. Day dimmed. A lone bolt
of lightning split a balsam trunk. My calendar
fell off the wall. A wolf wailed.

The first wind pried the shutters, crashed my lamp,
spilling precious oil. Alto afterwind mourned
between slaps of chill and the wavy scent
of wet animals. In a race with decaying light,
my mother's half of me snatched up brittle bunches
of wolfsbane. My other half swallowed a round
of drugstore sleep. I united under the blankets
she wove, each patterned with ancient symbols.

Awakened by blackness heavier than night, I tried
to surface, swim up through it like a cave fish
looking inside its head for its lost eyes. Night pushed
up from the world's old graves. A wolf night, howling.
A night to grow everything old. I lit a trembling candle.
Morpheus had fled, leaving an empty bottle.
I floated in vertigo. My frail flame flickered out.

The charred moon smoked, reversed itself,
revealing a death's head just as she always said,
withholding its downshine, dripping
ice sweat wolf sweat grave sweat.
Black stained the air. Trackless black
where the wolf walked, bearded, breath-stealing black,
silhouette of hills not there, of beasts
climbing moonward, necks fletched like arrows.

I said my mother's name, clutched fistfuls of wolfsbane,
scattered it across the bed. She rose in me like ether.
I groped for her incantations drummed into my childhood,
stumbled and skidded over forgotten roots
my father planted. A trailing tendril snagged and held.
Weed essence opened the flue; friction made a spark.

Still sneezing, I relit the candle, snatched up
the aconite for a funeral pyre
fueled with her hand-hewn cedar medicine chest.

Leftover dark
was stilt-legged shadows on a hearthlit stage,
the usual cast with known names.
Tomorrow, I announced to the sniggering flames,
I will move back among my kind.