

COVERT CABIN, UNMAPPED ROAD TO SUN-UP

Twenty-odd years since I saw the place.
My triumphant shout jarred 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 glorious garden.
Just before escaping civilization, I bought bulbs,
certain this swatch of Saskatchewan sky
far from people never blued over daffodil ruffles.

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 with Michigan tags
half hidden under the shaggy spruce forest.

Third day shadows multiplied, magnified. Shadows
not matched with solids. Shapes not fathomed.
My mother would have chanted in three tones
for hours. Omens from old tribal tales appeared:
My hearth flared, a single orange tongue licked
high in the chimney. It hissed, fell back, died.
Sickly sun plunged wide shafts in 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
a window pane and 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 gathered
brittle bunches of wolfsbane. My other half gulped
the dose of drugstore sleep I never expected
to taste. Still dressed, 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
it someday would, 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;
loud involuntary friction made a spark.

Still sneezing, I felt matches in my pocket,
found and 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.