

FIVE poems by Finn Wilcox, from *Too Late to Turn Back Now* (Empty Bowl, 2018)

LA PUSH

Walking the flats—
through brushed huckleberry
and tall, tough salal—
I find the place
we spread my mother's ashes
nearly a decade ago.

You can hear the rolling ocean
just beyond this sandy hump
that rises in the silvered-light
of drift-logs,
luminous,
in thin coastal fog.

I hope she's happy here.
She was more than just a good woman.
Always that glitter of faith rendered
from a heart
big as these old-growth spruce.

Before I leave,
I make her a headstone

of the perfect blue sky,
 above a perfect blue sea

with all its deliberate beauty.

LESSON LEARNED

Stunning –
the heart's capacity
to endure
the ragged beat
of unclaimed love.
It's only then that
the soul goes feral –
the mind
wild & weedy.
The heart has its limits though,
even the coyote has enough sense
to chew off a leg
to escape the iron trap.

NINE FLOWER MOUNTAIN

Perched on the edge of
A cloud-torn ridge
High in the mountains
Of Chiuhuashan
A shaved-head nun
Sweeps alone the entrance
To her vine covered cave

A few tufts of
Wind-blown bamboo
The persistent pine
Growing straight out of stone

A place so graceful
So tough and real
Even the Immortals
Feel a shiver up the spine

She spots us ascending
The narrow path
Sets aside the broom
Pours water for tea

Afterward
We burn a stick of incense Leave a twenty
On the smokey
Lamp lit altar

Then follow her
Up a rain-polished trail
To Moon Viewing Peak
Where the whole of China
Is spread at our feet

I watch her point out waterfalls
That drape like silk
From old granite cliffs
And wonder what brought her here

So many years ago
A poorly arranged marriage

Some magnificent
Loss of face
Or the simple pleasures
Of living alone
In the profound silence

Of mountains
In the afternoon
Black clouds swirl
Slowly up the valley floor
A signal
We must make our way back
To buses
And dust
And a billion scattered souls

But before we go
Our nun gives us
Mooncake
Gingered plums
And a walk through
The garden

Where we leave her Grinning
At tiger tracks in the sand.

HOW TO WRITE A POEM

My dog Walt
steps onto his bed
fourteen and deaf as a stone
paws at it thoughtfully
turns in a circle
once
twice
three times
before setting
his boney ass down
happy as a two-peckered toad.

OUTDOOR WORK

The one time
I experienced what my Buddhist friends
call enlightenment,
that recognition, sharp and clear
as a shot of cheap whiskey,
was packing my tree bag
on a landing pooled in drained skidder oil
in a clear-cut
big as the town I lived in, understanding
finally and fully,
the rotting extravagance of greed.