

# Wild Roses

Poems by Jan Minich

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On every side we saw tokens of maturity and decay  
where all had before been fresh with opening life....  
many and powerful as were the attractions of the settlements,  
we looked back regretfully to the wilderness behind us.

—Francis Parkman, returning to the eastern settlements,  
*The Oregon Trail*

*For Nancy, Ian, Emma, and Vladimir*

**I.**

## **Losing Sight of Sarah**

# Sarah

Lost this afternoon, looking  
for our way back to Yellow River,  
we came across a homestead,  
then a cemetery, and read about Sarah.  
She married the reverend  
and died in childbirth at fourteen,

the blessed daughter of grainfields  
and coldcellars, of the river  
so clotted with stars and wood  
she must have known, that last night,  
there would be small fires  
like this one, burning on the banks.

## Southern Ohio

It is late evening and Sarah  
has just left her cabin in the woods  
to revisit the old couple,  
her nearest neighbors  
several miles down the road  
and through the covered bridge.  
On Fridays, she takes them eggs  
and if it isn't too warm tonight,  
a gallon of milk from her young Jersey  
that has just come fresh.

They remember her mother,  
used to see her walking alone  
late at night down by Poplar Springs  
where the old black man  
had built his house and barn  
three times to see it burnt.  
She used to take him eggs and milk  
and we all thought it was her  
that talked him into building again.  
But the third time he packed  
his tools in the wagon and rode out,  
and your mother wasn't seen for days.

Her actions were never scolded,  
the nights of wandering never forgiven.  
The women stayed away from her,  
afraid she'd start making sense  
and they would burn their *own* wedding dresses  
so their daughters could  
not wear what had no more meaning.

# Leaving Home

*Sarah*

It seems like I'm always far from home  
when someone I love dies.  
Abducted in the middle of the night,  
I was forced to get dressed and allowed  
only what I would need for the journey:  
a change of clothes, a hairbrush,  
the menstrual cloths to catch  
the flow of blood the reverend says  
must never be allowed to stain  
my clothes or our bed  
and bring him even greater shame,  
that the house smells like death then  
and the soiled earth tries his patience  
and inflames his passion  
when he needs to focus on sermon writing  
and not be tempted by the carnal  
pleasures that always get the best of him.

He locks me in a room  
with my bible and a tray of food.  
He lets me out twice a day  
and follows me into the woods,  
watching from behind as I relieve myself.  
I tell him I'll run away some night  
and he'll never find me,  
but he only laughs at how foolish I am  
to think I can ever get away.

When he's ready to move on,  
he hires a team of oxen  
and blesses our journey.  
I tear another page from the bible  
and leave it under a rock  
behind the cabin  
hoping someone will find it  
and know these stained words

as those from a god who has forsaken  
one of his own and sent her  
into the wilderness with the devil himself.

## Effigy Mounds

When the fires at the altar  
are put out, it isn't time for sleeping,  
but it isn't time for Sarah, thirteen,  
to find her bed with the reverend  
because she feels the sky  
pulling her into the fallen leaves.

If the settlements end here  
and the prairie seems to her unimagined,  
the distance surrounded by wolves,  
he'll have to understand  
her reluctance, tightening the girth

of her saddle, the kind of afternoon  
when everything stops  
and even the flies slow down.  
Something hurries across the burnt sky  
in the blue she holds in her hand.  
It enters like the sudden gray

in a rainstorm, the hail of an evening  
set in place by the careful  
pull of dark from light, a single  
cloud passing quickly from the west.  
She builds another fire in the kitchen.  
The sermon her husband is writing

tells of a god without mercy.  
She bares herself to His touch  
and the reverend begins looking  
over the new families for a new bride,  
one older perhaps, with no liking  
to wonder or want what she can't have.

# Following Rivers

*Sarah*

I imagine them high on the Missouri,  
the beaver returning and flourishing,  
or as a little girl, watching  
the traffic on the Ohio  
from my family's burying ground  
high on the hill looking south.

My great-grandfather  
died an old man,  
and never spoke about the war,  
just kept moving west  
until something in the woods  
told him to stop and claim his land,  
spend the rest of his days  
hauling firewood down to the docks.

I remember him sleeping in the chair  
by the window, Mama bringing  
him sassafras tea and biscuits,  
coaxing him to eat more,  
to try a little groundhog,  
some of her hogshead soup.

Never get this old, he told her  
as she bathed him before bed,  
but she said she'd like to get old enough  
to have the time to just sit  
and watch the dogwoods blossom,  
listen to the bullfrogs and spring peepers,  
a loving hand opening a palm of blackberries  
sweeter than she's tasted in years.

So I follow my own rivers now,  
the Platte in late spring,  
or coming down from Fish Lake  
along the Fremont in autumn  
when willows light up the sandy riverbanks