Wild Roses

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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

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