

There in the Wet Autumn Leaves

October's last apples  
warp slender limbs, bending

them like an old man's back  
when my son, looking down,

spies a rotting Braeburn  
lurking in wet red leaves.

I fling it toward heaven.  
We hear it carom off

the metal stable roof  
then noiseless it descends

into nettle groves where  
cats hunt fat compost rats

while moles burrow beneath  
pastures that masquerade

as playgrounds for children  
who appeared like April

blossoms on fragile stems  
never suspecting we

were simply fruit meant to  
nourish the dark earth.

## At Night the Borders Disappear

From here I dream flat earth bends  
toward river bluffs where four lanes of  
cracked asphalt stretch ghostly  
past all the places we once haunted –  
the dry cleaner, the meat locker,  
the seminary, your garden store.

Recession summer steals in as I breeze  
past half-stocked Belgian grocery store  
shelves until settling at last on bulk sumac  
plentiful as memory and blazing red  
like your father's final wish and at once  
I am on the little street that led to

a window's worth of slim branches  
dancing over shattered barn roof tiles  
where heavy trucks lay abandoned  
to riotous green shocks of saw-toothed  
stinging nettles and the gazes of  
two immigrants unclenching our fists

to sigh together toward the past.  
Even as it inched toward ruin, you asked  
how can I not love the place where  
I learned to love? When you turned to ash,  
when slate gray sky dawned and I woke,  
I said, too late, of course I love what's broken.

Mushroom Hunting, Jackson County, Kansas

I blunder through  
root and thistle, lost  
in the implication  
of rotting wood,  
withered ivy,  
abandoned dens and  
bleached bones  
when it appears –  
an April morel,  
substantial like prey,  
pulling me  
earthward  
to see what majesty  
springs from decay.

Four Trips to the National Forest, November 2016

1.

Pine needles, billions deep, covered soft earth.  
When elk were near, I could smell them  
and they could smell me,  
a stranger driven by helplessness into groves  
where cows and calves stalked valleys and ridges,  
ears alert, skittish and tense.  
But the bull, in mid-November, at dusk,  
in the thick of the rut, a forest king with a king's power,  
glared at me from one hard charge away.  
He snorted a warning, and I looked about wildly.  
A climbing tree towered to the right.  
My only ally.

2.

Two coyotes lolled in golden grass.  
A male, the larger of the two, sprang to his feet when he saw me,  
ears raised, long jaw beautiful and deadly,  
eyes betraying nothing,  
unaware that I was there to fling myself against the wilderness  
because it was the only thing capable of swallowing my sorrow.  
The female rose a few seconds later,  
uncaring that her presence as a predator  
banished humans from my mind  
for the first time since that night  
forced me, weeping, to the floor.  
I clapped my hands to remind them  
I was a creature who had hands to clap.  
They glanced toward a thicket of scrub brush,  
an invisible pack unimpressed  
with opposable thumbs that could make noise.  
I strode quickly away,  
looking back every chance I got.

3.

I had long since abandoned the footpath  
when I stumbled across traces of humans –  
a fence, a blue plastic water barrel,  
a brown house hewn from logs,  
murky windows, rectangles and frames  
and a dirt lane rutted by fuel-burning metal machines  
with crushing black tires.  
In the presence of people,  
neighbors but still strangers,

ancient fear spiked the base of my neck.  
Despite sharp hooves and killing teeth,  
the beasts of the forest  
do not own pistols.

4.

I brought them with me at last,  
their small dirty sneakers stamping faint imprints  
as we wound deep into the darkening wild.  
We dropped from the smooth skeleton of  
a long-dead pine giant, ducking hardened roots  
torn whole from shallow soil before  
pausing to press our hands  
against the ruggedness of living alligator juniper.  
Singsong voices,  
incapable of betrayal,  
chirped wonder at the crescent moon  
chasing sun to darkness, softening  
the edges of everything made jagged.

## Punching Permanent Ink

With a thick black marker our gloved hands scrawled pain  
on red canvas – the Polish boy who broke your heart,

my aching knees, your cancelled trip to Paris.  
We corralled phantoms and named them like fugitives

on wanted posters: fear of making mistakes,  
fear of disappointing others, faithless friends, dying.

I first taught you to throw a punch during the age of living  
room dances, horse rides and long blonde ponytails.

Nothing seemed unmendable then, but now here we are  
in this frigid garage, fists balled, taking aim, on an edge –

no, I warn, arms up, don't ever let them hit your face,  
head back, eyes forward. The heavy bag hangs still

as you step into warmth and light, where glad voices  
welcome you. You ask me if I'll be okay remaining

in the cold darkness, where the floor needs to be swept  
and the jump rope stowed. Yes, yes, I murmur: always.