

Wild Radish



*"In the first of the moon,
All's a scattering,
A shining."
- Roethke*

She was noticing the dust, which covered her shoes. There was so much dust, and large rocks by the trail and the chaparral was orange in the late afternoon. Dust was kicked up by a breeze off the ocean, so that it stood to spin in little storms, which bore it up and over the houses perched like crusts of heaven on the side of the arid hill.

The ocean was dark blue and choppy, topped by little caps of white. There were sailboats, pretty to look at, and the gray outline of the islands. But the sea seemed annoyed by their coming, by what they intended to do. So she watched his shoulders and the back of his head, as he moved ahead of her down the trail. His shirt was red and black flannel, and she saw the cloth was beading and thinning where it was tightest over his bony scapulae.

Wild radish grew thick along the trail, bullied by the onshore breeze, its blossoms lavender and veined like pallid little hands. She thought they looked sad and frail; orphans, underfed, unloved. But she was in that kind of mood. Swept along by grim events and seeing sadness everywhere. She wanted to go home, make tea in her kitchen, sit and read.

They came to the edge of the bluffs, to a cut through the brush and heavy plants, where the trail dropped steeply down. He turned and began to walk crab-wise, testing each step carefully so as not to fall. Shifting the box he carried to one forearm, pinned against his torso like a football, he reached for her hand.

"Careful here now, watch your step."

Step by step and slowly I descend, looking for what I believe. Something more than this hand to hold on to, brighter than this slanted winter light. I dreamed about you last night, that you came for me in a white car, smiling, looking far into the distance, as though the house were built of canyons, quarries of slabbed and shattered rock. But we could go into the town where the people were gathered, where the sound was pooled into music, where the children in their houses were asleep. You disappeared as I woke up.

The tide was out, and the beach was empty, curved for half a mile like a crescent moon against the bluffs, and at the far end were the bones of the abandoned fishing pier. Great rusting ribs of iron stood in a line that led out a hundred feet beyond the waves, and gulls were perched on the tops of every one.

I dreamed this place before I came; I knew before you left that I would dream to bring you here. And how could the sea not accept this, welcome it? This is what she does.

In the soft sand, where it got harder to walk, he dropped her hand. They kicked off their shoes and he had the box in both hands again as they went on, through the piled kelp and drifted wood. She noticed how the sound of the waves boomed ahead of them and echoed from behind, from the cliffs, and rolled from ear to ear as waves broke down the beach. So they were caught inside the thunder, crash, and roll of it, and in the shushing ebb of every wave. Then there were pockets of quiet for the gulls to call, to cry.

I remember when I took you to play on the longer, happy public beach. You had a yellow plastic shovel and a pail, and said you'd make a castle big enough for God to come and live with us. I helped. You got distracted by a group of boys and played with them. I rested by the half-built castle, until God arrived.

He stopped on the damp and hard-packed sand, just above the margin of the waves. She stood beside him, her hand just lightly in the middle of his back, above his belt. The sun was just setting, turning the clouds the color of a saffron quilt.

“We have to wait.”

“I know,” she said.

“For the wind to turn.”

“Yes.”

The sea rose and fell in front of her, so it seemed to be at level with her eyes. The boats and the islands rising, falling with her in a floating world. She could not tell herself from them, or separate her feet from sand, her eyes and arms and mind from everything borne up and down and back and forth, foaming and sloshing and living and dead.

The wind turned. The sun had fallen finally away.

“This was his favorite place,” he said, opening the box.

“He loved it here.”

“He loved you too and me, and this is not really him, you know.”

“I know,” she said. She was weeping now.

“We didn't have him long enough, not nearly long enough, but it was all so hard for him. And now at least he has some ...”

“Peace.”

“Yes.”

