

Eleanor Wilner

TOURIST IN HELL







ELEANOR WILNER

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*Tourist in Hell*

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

*Chicago & London*

ELEANOR WILNER is a former MacArthur Fellow and the author of seven collections of poetry, including *Otherwise* and *Sarah's Choice* (both published by the University of Chicago Press), and her most recent work, *The Girl with Bees in Her Hair* (2004).

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637

The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

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Printed in the United States of America

19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 1 2 3 4 5

isbn-13: 978-0-226-90032-2 (paper)

ISBN-10: 0-226-90032-0 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Wilner, Eleanor.

Tourist in hell / Eleanor Wilner.

p. cm.—(Phoenix poets)

Poems. Includes bibliographical references.

isbn-13: 978-0-226-90032-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

isbn-10: 0-226-90032-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Title. II. Series: Phoenix poets.

ps3573.145673r68 2010

811'.54—dc22

2010012099

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to RICHARD A. MACKSE

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*who opened the w*

Welcome. We're waiting for you, pretty lady.

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What do you think hell is if it isn't history?

Hayden Carruth, "Tartar"

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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With thanks to the editors of the following publications in which these poems first appeared, occasionally in slightly altered forms and under different titles:

*Boulevard*: “Harmony Bowl,” “Welcome to the dollar bin,” and “Winter Lambs”

*Cerise Press* (online): “Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD)” and “Headlong for That Fair Target”

*Cortland Review* (online): “Vermeer’s Girl, a Restoration,” “Minos,” “Ariadne,” and “The Minotaur”

*Front Porch*, Texas State University (online): “What It Hinges On”

*Kenyon Review*: “Establishment,” “An Ode to Asymmetry,” and “Larger to Those Who Stay”

*The Louisville Review*: “Of a Word”

*Maggid*: “The Raven’s Text”

*Meena*: “Postcard with Statue of Liberty, No Message”

*Nightsun*: “In a Time of War,” “After the Tsunami” (originally “Afterwards”), “*the palest flowers / ash, snow . . .*,” and “The Show Must Go On”

*nor* (*New Ohio Review*): “High Noon”

*The Pedestal Magazine* (online): “Of Such Stuff as Dreams Are Made On”

*Per Contra* (online): “The meteor”

*Poetry*: “History as Crescent Moon,” “Magnificat,” “*Wreck and rise above*,” “The Gyre,” “Thinking about Unamuno’s *San Manuel Bueno, Mártir*,” “To Think What We Might Have . . .,” “What love takes away,” “*Mine eyes have seen the glory of . . .*,” “Tracking,” and “Encounter in the Local Pub”

*Poetry International*: “*Like I really like that*” and “Restored to Blue”

*Poetry Northwest*: “Meditation on DNA with Gene Splices from Shakespeare’s Sonnets” and “Saturday Night”

*Runes*: “Back Then, We Called It ‘The War’” (originally “Distress Signals in a Time of War”) and “That Dawn” (originally “But oh, to be young then . . .”)

*Sirena*: “Four Flats, Getting Dark Soon, Nothing to Do but Walk”

*Weber / The Contemporary West*: “Geopolitics”

“Saturday Night” was reprinted in *Pushcart Prize XXXII: Best of the Small Presses 2008*, ed. Bill Henderson (Wainscott, NY: Pushcart Press, 2009); and in *Alhambra Poetry Calendar 2010*, ed. Shafiq Naz (Brussels: Alhambra Publishing, 2009).

“*Wreck and rise above*” was reprinted in *Alhambra Poetry Calendar 2008*.

“*Mine eyes have seen the glory of . . .*” was reprinted in *Alhambra Poetry Calendar 2007*.

“History as Crescent Moon” was written for and appeared in a limited edition book, *The Inconstant Moon*, by book artist Enid Mark (Philadelphia: Elm Press, 2007).



The four poems titled “Voices from the Labyrinth: Minos, Ariadne, Daedalus, The Minotaur” were written for *Out of the Labyrinth*, by Enid Mark, to be published posthumously by Elm Press in a limited edition.

To Sam Hamill, to whom not just this writer but American poetry owes a great debt. These poems owe thanks to all my friends, to the students and faculty at the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College for their inspired companionship, to my essential readers Marcia Pelletiere and Heidy Steidlmayer, endless gratitude to Denise Farran for the rescue, and to my amazing family: Bob, Trud, Mike, Noah, and Molly—without whom . . .

“Man learns from history that man  
learns nothing from history.”

—Hegel

# HISTORY AS CRESCENT MOON

---

The horns  
of a bull  
who was placed  
before a mirror at the beginning  
of human time;  
in his fury  
at the challenge of his double,  
he has, from  
that time to this,  
been throwing himself against  
the mirror, until  
by now it is  
shivered into millions of pieces—  
here an eye, there  
a hoof or a tuft  
of hair; here a small wet shard made  
entirely of tears.  
And up there, below the spilt milk of  
the stars, one  
silver splinter—  
parenthesis at the close of a long sentence,  
new crescent,  
beside it, red  
asterisk of  
Mars

\*

# OPENING THE EYES

---

The dust of chiseled stone spackled  
the concrete floor, the sculptor all but finished  
with his work. It stood, enormously, on a branch  
of darkly veined marble, its body cut  
from a smooth and gleaming chunk of white  
that caught the light with such intensity  
you felt a need to look away, as if to look  
too long would blind. Its feathers,  
cut in sharp relief, catch the shadows;  
you can feel the power in its talons  
as they grasp the sculpted branch. But  
the great eyes of the owl, black orbs  
of obsidian, refuse the gaze—their blank  
and obdurate sheen mirrors only  
what it does not see. The cooled  
volcanic glass gives back the sculptor's  
face, so its indifference seems his own.

The owl was to be his masterpiece—  
he who had torn for years the living forms  
from rock, exposed its veins,  
who found what granite hid or marble  
wore within; his owl would be  
freed from the burden of bad augur,  
released back to the wild from history,  
iconography, and from Athena—  
the armored, icy mind of war, what posed  
as wisdom, but was policy.

Something was wrong with the eyes,  
the great stone owl inanimate, inert,  
for all the care he'd lavished on its form,  
its tensing on the branch, the slight lift of its wings.

For hours he sat before it, unsatisfied, fury slowly  
growing at the failure of his hands.

Then all at once he burst from his chair,  
and chisel in hand, attacked the black  
uncaring empty gaze. And as he split  
the center of each eye, as if  
to make the pupil see the light,  
the owl cried out—heart-scalding shriek  
that tore the night: cried out  
for what it could not help  
but see.

# WRECK AND RISE ABOVE

---

Because of the first, the fear of wreck,  
which they taught us to fear (though we learned  
at once, and easily),

because of the wreck  
that was expected (and metal given velocity  
and heft to assure it)—

we became adepts in  
*rise above*: how many versions: the church  
steeple that took the eye straight up to  
heaven (though it seemed snagged on  
the cross-beam of that cross, torn blue  
at the top, where sense leaked out). And  
*rise above*, transcendence, on that higher  
plane, the vertical direction of virtue (a bony  
finger pointing up to where matter dissolves  
into distaste for it);

the space program, expensive  
tons of rocket (soon to be debris) fired off  
the planet's crust at anything out there, pocked  
moon, red rocky Mars, *ever the upward  
urge*, carved in the marble arch of the old library  
door under which generations passed,  
hoping to rise above it all—

like the woman the magician levitates  
over the table, her body floating an unlikely  
inch or two above the velvet-draped plateau . . .  
watch her hovering, weightless,

the crowd staring  
in wonder, the trick of the thing still hidden,  
and the magician doing something now  
with his hands, a flurry of brilliant  
silk in the air, as she floats  
in the endlessness of art,

the magician  
still waving his scarves, the air a bright  
shatter of wings, doves from a hat,  
our disbelief suspended,  
while below, the wrecks accumulate:  
scrapyard, broken concrete slabs, and  
all those bodies not exempt from gravity,  
beneath our notice as we ride  
above it all, like froth on a wave  
that will be water falling by the ton,  
soon, when the tide turns.

# THE GYRE

---

The world was a globe that sat on a table  
in a fire-lit study, the table covered  
with a rich, tooled leather; while  
the man who spun the globe—matching  
countries with the map spread out below  
on the desk from which he reached  
an arm to turn the little effigy of world—  
was shifting borders in his head, so that  
the spinning orb began to glow  
with his desire, his designs. As if his dreams  
had given off a smoke, a thick fog  
cloaked and altered everything he saw—

so even now, when all the corpses from that spin  
have long since rotted in the grave,  
the clouds have not dispersed, their swirling  
smoke obscures all but the twisted steel  
of a foregone conclusion, the world unmade,  
as centuries and cities fall, cascade  
into the landfill of history—worlds born  
on the waste of those that came before.  
As a glowing cloud of smoke will hang  
over a burning dump at night, and the bears  
and raccoons come out, eyes shining in the dark,  
to paw through the smoldering heaps—

just so the historian sits, sifting and sifting  
entrails, cornices, motives, bones—all  
that is left to be indexed and filed,  
rearranged, given syntax and sense;  
above him, stuffed birds—a condor, a gull,  
a carrion crow, moth-eaten by time,  
look down on his labors  
with a bright, glassy-eyed malice  
from their dusty cases, and,  
stirring a little on their perches, try  
with beaks their walls of glass:  
here and there now, hairline cracks,  
and as night falls, the sound of taps.

# GEOPOLITICS

---

Moon on the desert, a shimmer  
in the wash, nearby the pack rat is drawn  
to that pale, shifty light, his burrow  
and its hoard (they comfort him)  
left far below. But the glittering  
light eludes him as he darts  
off across the stony ground,  
small charcoal stroke in search  
of something bright; and the owl,  
unmoving as the cactus arm,  
has the greater need. Or, no,  
the wing span, and the speed.

Like a note of ponderous brass  
in a play of pipes and shadows,  
the armadillo, laminated soul,  
fresh from nature's cannery,  
scuttles into view, makes his way  
across the wash—a dry gully waiting  
for rain . . . close by, the dark grumbles,  
while further out, the planets burn  
like signal fires across the vacancy,  
their message our belittlement,  
far beyond the scrubby sky that  
mothers us, hovering, gray  
with its worry of clouds.

The armadillo covers his own  
back, and with long claws digs  
furiously his tunnel in the hard  
desert clay, fearing invasion,  
and disappears into his own  
armored dark, taking the stars  
with him, as the horizon lightens  
toward dawn, and the owl closes  
his eyes, his mind filled  
with the small, satisfactory  
cries of the rat, his stomach  
with the rat's debris.

# IN A TIME OF WAR

---

Flies, caught in the sap of the living  
tree, someday will be  
precious, dressed in amber—just so  
the past appears to the present, gem-  
like in its perfect preservation,  
the hardened gold of yesterday, a relic  
through which today's sun shines.

But those who are caught in the sticky  
sap of actual time, insects in the odds  
against them, who struggle in the ooze,  
slowly sink into the mass,  
the numberless, anonymous dead . . .  
till the atrocious becomes  
the mundane, our senses numb  
from the sheer litany of repetition.

Let us, then, just watch this one small  
desperate fly, stuck first by the feet,  
and then, in its struggles, entangled  
entirely in the glob of sap, its wings  
heavy as a brass angel's, until it is  
all at once still, a dark speck  
in a bubble of sap  
oozing from the felled tree  
in a forest marked for the mill.

How many millennia will pass  
before a tear-drop lavalier of amber  
carrying its cargo of loss  
will adorn the vanity of another  
creature, the fly a fossil of a species  
no longer present on the Earth,  
the Earth itself a speck in a cosmos where  
galaxies are carded like cotton on a comb  
and pulled out into a distance  
where some new fabric is being spun  
and shimmers in the firelight  
of countless burning suns.



# IN THAT DAWN

---

“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very Heaven!”

—Wordsworth

We thought if we brought the statue down, the bronze  
man on a horse, the tyrant-hero, if we held the old  
armor up to the light, till it faded to a ghostly  
scrim, then the sun would pour through, the doors  
swing open, the window shades fly up of their own accord,  
and all would be well in the public square, the buckets  
lifted from the central fountain would overflow  
with a clear water, the man on the cross would step down,  
put on his clothes, and—a feather in his jaunty hat  
and a walking stick for the mountains—wave goodbye,  
taking with him and away forever the bleeding ikon  
of tortured flesh as an object of veneration. And the bells,  
the bells would play Mozart in the towers, and a fresh breeze  
would set the wind chimes playing, and—of course—  
birds, not seen in decades, would nest again  
in the blossoming branches—oh, it was a good  
dream, really, though now it lies in a child’s book,  
and the library in which the book stood, on a low  
shelf that a child could reach, is burned to the ground,  
and the child with it; the city is under curfew, helmeted men  
patrol the ruined streets, where nothing stands but  
the bunkers—not the statues of the old founders,  
not the wall made entirely of mosaic tiles, not  
the firehouse with its great carved doors, nor the sandwich  
shop on the corner where, on his blanket, the little  
terrier slept, nose in his paws, and his dreams sweet.

# AFTER THE TSUNAMI

---

No point anymore in thinking  
about the big wave, a thought  
you once could ride to oblivion,  
a way out of a bad story, end time,  
the way the Peter Weir film pulled out  
the stops like hairpins, let down  
its big surprise—horizon gone, the sky  
falling . . .

white-out, the Last Wave  
that ended the film, solved everything  
in one final dissolve to a blank screen.

And it was all gone: conquest's white  
uneasy cast, the aboriginals who saw,  
drawing with sticks in the sand,  
how it would come, night vision  
enviable to the ones who invented light  
they could switch off, hold oceans  
on a strip of film, a trick of the lens,  
director's cut: the sea pulls out, and out,  
earth shifting its plates  
as if a giant turned in his sleep—  
and it all comes roaring back,  
oblivion's wet wall, ground zero in motion . . .  
but it wasn't like Weir's white-out,  
only the credits coming up—  
it wasn't like that at all.

Imagine those believers  
who think "the Rapture" is for them,  
who think of themselves virtually  
lifted above the multitudes,  
distanced from it all on the big screen  
in the blue sky of a cruel delusion—  
while below, the stinking beaches are littered  
with bodies, and searching among them,  
the desolate, like women gleaning the fields  
after the harvest is done.

As if Noah, when the waters of the flood drew back,  
when he saw what the waves had wrought,  
could have exulted. Or the dove, with its green  
meaning, returned to his trembling hand.

# WHAT IT HINGES ON

---

When everything is going  
just one way, and seems to be  
headed for a cul-de-sac  
or some stunning culmination . . .

all at once, a creak (as a rusty hinge  
warns of an intruder in the night) —  
the wind from another quarter  
takes the sail, the cage door opens  
or the lid slams shut: and all our  
plans are so much smoke, a handful  
of torn paper, confetti in the air  
that swirls—a letter here, a sentence  
there, years of work litter the field  
that lies outside the town that flood  
or fire took back, as the great tectonic  
plates grind out their harmonies  
below the sea, and the earth turns  
in its restless sleep, spun  
by what we cannot see, the hand  
that is no hand, but brings us calm  
to think it so, and think it ours  
to smite our enemies,  
forgetting  
as we turn it to a fist,  
it is ourselves curled, blind  
as newborn kittens, in the palm.

# THINKING ABOUT UNAMUNO'S

---

San Manuel the priest who kept  
his poor parish in the faith  
burnished their bright hope of heaven  
(*hope is the thing with feathers*)

it is best not to think these days  
about what what the newspapers report so reasonably  
(*I lived in the first century of world wars,  
most mornings I would be more or less insane*)  
today's weather an endless rain of feathers

when the passenger pigeon now extinct  
had not yet been converted  
to fashion slaughtered its plumage plucked  
for the elegant hats of America's women  
(*those catlike immaculate creatures  
for whom the world works*)  
when the migrating flocks still passed  
overhead a billion strong the farmers said  
bird lime turned the woods white  
the sky was dark for a week

And San Manuel? Late in the story we learn  
he did not believe in the hope  
he kept alive believing as he did  
(like his author) in the sustaining power  
of fiction.

# SITE VISIT

---

By then doctors and poets  
Would have found a cure for prayer

—Fady Joudah

A cure for prayer, and the long vigil at the gates,  
nostalgia's broken bubbles in the blood, aneurysm  
of a dream; the double helix like a winding

stair, a twisted vine on which the monkeys climb,  
(*the way up is the way down*); they live on captive  
air in the cages we construct—please think

of bleak confinement, steel walls; think of Virgil  
by the sinkhole at the mouth of Hell, beckoning;  
he points: above on His throne of clouds

sits Majesty in burnished robes, below  
the fires roast the burning flesh of those  
who must be guilty of what was done

to them, agonies it took genius to describe—  
didn't we understand that the punishment fits  
the crime?—though the damned were from a distant  
time: we had to search the footnotes for their names.  
Hell is the dungeon where God's shadow falls,  
cast by the monumental, obdurate cliff

that sits beside a restless sea, whose migrant waves  
keep eating at its face, pulling it slowly down,  
turning the intractable to sand, grain by grain,

motes in the burning eye of sun, while  
fish hawks prey along the changing shore;  
what breaks upon the broken rocks is spray.

# BACK THEN, WE CALLED IT “THE WAR”

---

And though, since that time, I have read many books,  
have followed the smoke trail of countless thoughts  
rising from the burning libraries;  
though I have inquired in the ruins of many cities,  
in the writing on the fallen walls,  
in the blank stares of skulls in the killing fields,  
in places hidden and open:  
nevertheless, I do not understand.

For though, when as a child, I watched the news unreel  
at the movies: the smoke and guns, the stirring symphonic music  
rousing the blood, the black-and-white legions marching  
on film, the flare of anti-aircraft guns, the little planes turning  
in a slow spiral as they went down in flames, the heavy-bellied  
bombers opening their doors, and the bombs falling,  
and where each one fell, a rising pillar of fire; and though  
the voice of the announcer was manly and confident, the news  
always good, we were winning, we were certainly winning, and  
everyone was so proud, and collected cans, and went without  
nylons and chewing gum and butter, and clustered around radios  
speaking in hushed tones as if in a holy place:  
nevertheless I did not understand.

And though, since that time, I have followed Freud’s trail, and Adler’s,  
tracked bad parents, bacteria, the rotting culture in the Petri dish,  
followed Nietzsche to the knife in Raskolnikov’s hand, with Pip  
have seen God’s foot on the treadle of the loom, watched goats lick  
the pillar of salt that is the whole history of grief; though  
I have followed Socrates into the bathhouses of Athens, observed  
how he drank the poison that certainty decrees to doubt;  
though I have watched 10,000 Iagos ply betrayal’s artful  
trade; though I have looked in my own heart,  
and knowing myself no better than most, and worse than many,  
nevertheless, I do not understand.

For, today, when I follow the signs of distress  
back to their source, I find only mourners  
weeping at the cemetery we have made  
of what was once their home.  
And playing in the rubble, a little girl  
who will never understand, who  
nevertheless  
is picking up stone after stone,  
trying to piece it together again.



# THE SHOW MUST GO ON

---

I just want to remember  
the dead piled high behind the curtain.

—Mahmoud Darwish

The play had been staged as long as we could remember,  
a sordid drama in which truth kept changing sides,  
the name of the enemy was never the same;

sometimes the players poured over the edge  
of the proscenium, spilling into the audience,  
who ran terrified from the house

that had become a scene of massacre; sometimes  
the drama played at a distance relaxingly remote,  
caught and burnished in the bright little

dollhouse screen, so far away it was no more  
than fireflies in a bottle, mere hiccups of light—  
the carpet bombing, the village, torched.

So that—unless the street were yours,  
and the terrible crying of the wounded  
your own—it was impossible

to tell what was real, so much was not  
what it seemed, was simply *not*:  
not at all, not anymore, not this, not that—

yet the music was upbeat, the messenger  
smiling, the voiceover a reassuring pour  
of syrup in the artificial light. Meanwhile,

though the labels changed, and the set  
was rearranged for every act—the plot  
remained unvarying, never veering off

from the foretold end. So, when the curtain falls,  
we know for certain what is going to be  
piled high behind it. Yet we wait, we go on

waiting, as if the bodies might still move,



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