

Eleanor Wilner

TOURIST IN HELL





ELEANOR WILNER

Tourist in Hell

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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).

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to RICHARD A. MACKSE

who opened the w

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

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

Hayden Carruth, "Tartar"

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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”

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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 . . .”)

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“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,

sample content of Tourist In Hell (Phoenix Poets)

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