

My Grandmother's House

Anne Wolfe

I remember my grandmother's parlor in greens and grays,
A sketch begging colors to come till I see
The torquoise necklace she often wore, the brick fireplace,
And the schooner struggling to stay afloat above the mantel,
And I hear the bonging of the grandfather's clock five minutes fast.
The air smells of burnt coffee and silver polish,
And I feel her determination like oven heat.

I remember painted clowns
with their eyes gazing sadly
From broken easels on the cellar walls,
How she couldn't get them right;
Her portraits smirking in the halls,
And her moth-eaten cardigan sweaters
Waiting in the sewing room,
On the same table where
I made the mosaic ash trays
She threw away.

I remember the small cardboard box
Living now among my fallen clothes and shoes,
Its lid wrapped in white paper with blue ducks,
The jewelry nobody wanted still inside.
I take off the lid and release her scent,
The too-sweet lilacs,
Lift out the torquoise necklace
With the white hair clinging to its clasp;
I hold it to the light
And breathe.

Last Act
Anne Wolfe

I wonder when this disappearing act began, the one
in which I walk the earth unnoticed
at dusk, dimmed footlights, barely there enough
to feel the pain of being overlooked, my aging house
relieved of paint, its gaping hallways filled with empty chairs.
Below the nighttime's tour de force,
I see my name erased by years, I hear the curtain calls, encores
for younger actors meant to shine me off the stage.

I wonder if this act commenced the day my breasts deferred
to swelling hips and thighs, the day
my black hair died and mourned a ghastly gray,
the day I cut it short and saw my mother's face in mine,
an understudy on the bathroom wall, an actress scared
beyond despair. And now this silent, dull mirage
becomes my face, the wiry hairs upon my chin lit up
like chorus lines. My scripts cast out their winning words.

In stammering speech
my useless craft
evaporates
till I go flickering
in the shadows.
Do you see me?
Soon you won't.

An Honorable Release from the Arena

Anne Wolfe

You don't fight lions. You fight yourself instead.
Hard luck knocks you down, that trampling horse
that leaves its hoofprints on your bleeding head
when you refuse to wear a helmet on the course.
Eyes full of pain, you miss the rising up
and beg for death, a sword against your neck,
no mercy plea. Just drink the bitter cup
and stand condemned, your armor in a wreck.
A father who abandoned you at birth
and left you in these games to blame yourself.
Your martyrdom crusade of little worth
to purge the scars that mark long years in hell.
Deny your dreams before they leave.
When Mercury descends I will not grieve.

Marital Plane

Anne Wolfe

Our flight has taken eighteen years,
the lift and drag and thrust of turbulence
behind us now, and all is gravity, a quiet roll,
its yaw and pitch under control;
and even when we float deceitful skies, I only launch white lies
to keep our plane aloft.

Man of Steel

Anne Wolfe

You are a man of steel, rigid
for fifty years, unmatched in toughness,
stainlessness. Dissolving in old age to
slag and rust, death's open hearth
consumes your heart, burns through
your broken down machine
and pours you out.

When there is no one left to love,
no processes to run, you talk about
the man you used to be, a heated chamber
jammed with iron, water, oxygen, and
dreams so bright you have to block them out
to save your sight.

When cancers break like thieves into your lungs,
and other parts not easily replaced,
you never know which organ might give up
the struggle next, which cog might cool inside.
On scotch and pills, you take in
the poisonous factory fumes,
emitting smoke, three packs a day,
and raise a pitted cup to toast the fears
that drive your work.

In these last days, your skin amass with bedsores,
the blood of anode, cathode,
drains your fevered sleep.
Stalls the engine driving your machine
crammed tight with pills. With nothing
more of you to die,
Come get me, death, you say.
I'm done.

A Most Civilized Adventure?

Anne Wolfe

The Cunard catalog lies open
on my desk beside my coffee thick and cold
as waves; small islands rise outside my window,
billowed sails, and I see tiny people waving hats.

Awash in cables, wires, plugs around my feet
I feel the pull of open sea, the shuddering ship
within my cup, short blasts of fog horns, tender bells
to warn the captain there is land beneath the bow.

Rising up on red and black, from spreadsheet columns,
printed pages in a book, to dotted lines of sky unrolling sea,
I'm running with you up the gangway toward the cheery plinks of glasses
set on tables that are anchored to the floor.