

### **The Way Through the Woods**

They shut the road through the woods  
    Seventy years ago.  
Weather and rain have undone it again,  
    And now you would never know  
There was once a road through the woods  
    Before they planted the trees.  
It is underneath the coppice and heath,  
    And the thin anemones.  
    Only the keeper sees  
That, where the ring-dove broods,  
    And the badgers roll at ease,  
There was once a road through the woods.

Yet, if you enter the woods  
    Of a summer evening late,  
When the night-air cools on the trout-ringed pools  
    Where the otter whistles his mate,  
(They fear not men in the woods,  
    Because they see so few.)  
You will hear the beat of a horse's feet,  
    And the swish of a skirt in the dew,  
    Steadily cantering through  
The misty solitudes,  
    As though they perfectly knew  
    The old lost road through the woods.  
But there is no road through the woods.

—Rudyard Kipling

### **Selva Oscura**

A house can be haunted by those who were never there  
If there was where they were missed. Returning to such  
Is it worse if you miss the same or another or none?  
The haunting anyway is too much.  
You have to leave the house to clear the air.

A life can be haunted by what it never was  
If that were merely glimpsed. Lost in the maze  
That means yourself and never out of the wood  
These days, though lost, will be all your days;  
Life, if you leave it, must be left for good.

And yet for good can be also where I am,  
Stumbling among dark tree-trunks, should I meet  
One sudden shaft of light from the hidden sky  
Or, finding bluebells bathe my feet,  
Know that the world, though more, is also I.

Perhaps suddenly too I strike a clearing and see  
Some unknown house—or was it mine?—but now  
It welcomes whom I miss in welcoming me;  
The door swings open and a hand  
Beckons to all the life my days allow.

—Louis MacNeice

## KIND SIR: THESE WOODS

*For a man needs only to be turned around once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost....  
Not till we are lost... do we begin to find ourselves. —Thoreau, Walden*

KIND SIR: This is an old game  
that we played when we were eight and ten.  
Sometimes on The Island, in *down Maine*,  
in late August, when the cold fog blew in  
off the ocean, the forest between Dingley Dell  
and grandfather's cottage grew white and strange.  
It was as if every pine tree were a brown pole  
we did not know; as if day had rearranged  
into night and bats flew in sun. It was a trick  
to turn around once and know you were lost;  
knowing the crow's horn was crying in the dark,  
knowing that supper would never come, that the coast's  
cry of doom from that far away bell buoy's bell  
said *your nursemaid is gone*. O Mademoiselle,  
the row boat rocked over. Then you were dead.  
Turn around once, eyes tight, the thought in your head.

Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind  
I have turned around twice with my eyes sealed  
and the woods were white and my night mind  
saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.  
And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course  
to look—this inward look that society scorns—  
Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse  
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.

—Anne Sexton

## **The Woods in New Jersey**

Where there was only grey, and brownish grey,  
and greyish brown against the white  
of fallen snow at twilight in the winter woods,

Now an uncanny flamelike thing, black  
and sulphur-yellow, as if it were dreamed by Audubon,  
is turned upside down in a delicate cascade

of new green leaves, feeding on whatever mites  
or small white spiders haunt underleafs at stem end.  
A magnolia warbler, to give the thing a name.

The other name we give this overmuch of appetite  
and beauty unconscious of itself is life.  
And that that kept the mind becalmed all winter?—

The more austere and abstract rhythm of the trunks,  
vertical music the cold makes visible,  
that holds the whole thing up and gives it form,

or strength—call that the law. It's made,  
whatever we like to think, more of interests  
than of reasons, trees reaching each their own way

for the light, to make the sort of order that there is.  
And what of those deer threading through the woods  
in a late snowfall and silent as the snow?

Look: they move among the winter trees, so much  
the color of the trees, they hardly seem to move.

—Robert Hass

**Woods etc.**

footfall, which is a means so steady  
and in small sections wanders through the mind  
unnoticed, because it beats constantly,  
sweeping together the loose tacks of sound

I remember walking once into increasing  
woods, my hearing like a widening wound.  
first your voice and then the rustling ceasing.  
the last glow of rain dead in the ground

that my feet kept time with the sun's imaginary  
changing position, hoping it would rise  
suddenly from scattered parts of my body  
into the upturned apses of my eyes.

no clearing in that quiet, no change at all.  
in my throat the little mercury line  
that regulates my speech began to fall  
rapidly the endless length of my spine

—Alice Oswald