Approaching Lye Brook

A few miles in from the highway and looking much closer on the map is a tiny wilderness known as Lye Brook.

Its name conjures up memories of a time when farmers cut down these woods and turned them into ashes,

Leaching them and boiling their lye in big iron pots to make potash and reap a quick profit from the land.

As a nor’easter brought the sea to Vermont, I stepped through a door in the morning clouds into the soft green hills of youth.

Upslope the trail led me through a familiar forest of ash, maple, beech and red spruce.

The boundary of the wilderness lay just over the next ridge or maybe the next after that.

It did not matter. To hike toward wilderness is better than being there.

Eliot Porter portraits of leaves bleed their colors beneath me and shoot up into my veins.
With bony fingers, a sapling
clings to the crimson leaves
as if it must not lose them.

These are Robert Frost woods,
lovely, dark and deep—perhaps
deeper than I care to go.

The trail crosses a small ravine with
plunging brook that taunts me
to jump across its turbulence.

Uncertainly I leap.
I am not the same jumper of late,
but I make it, this time.

With adrenaline coursing,
I stride through the woods,
reliving all my connections.

These woods I carry with me—
I could hike here with eyes closed.
I come not for new vistas but to touch again:

The scaly skin of lichens on beech;
the softness of moss on boulders;
the furrowed faces in bark …

A forest of memories from
all my trips through these mountains
on the way to another reality.

I rekindle these images,
clutching them tightly as
tree roots to granite.
And in the sheltering darkness
I see my mother’s final journey
as not too different from my own.

Grasping at the fading canvases,
she stowed them away in crevasses
unknown, to feed her heart again.

What adventures she must have relived
until the figments fragmented
and her neurons flashed no more.

I see her walking the dawn streets of childhood,
feeling the touch of flesh and earth until
that last leap into the failing waters.

The clouds thicken and I must return.
The woods grow dimmer
And smell of ashes.

The wildness of Lye Brook
lies just over the next ridge—
but it can wait.
HOLY GHOST ON A WINDOW

A thump from outside invaded my melancholy this morning. I looked up in time to see the banded tail of a cooper’s hawk clutching its limp prize while taking wing from the patio.

Then I noticed a pale outline in one of the large windows. Drawn in whitish film were wings, head and one clawed foot clearly visible in stark detail.

I marveled at the fine traceries of imbrued feathers pressed into glass, like the silhouettes of lost souls imprinted on eternity by nuclear blast. There was even the bill and eye socket looking inward with vacuous stare.

The upturned wings called to mind stained glass images of God the Third Person of the Trinity, with tiny rays streaking out from where the impact splattered its body against the fatal mirror.
I knew it was a mourning dove
and not God that was dead.
But framed by a green juniper,
the shroud in the glass
made a fitting portrait
of all the cemeteries I’ve known,
with their empty promises
that scatter like feathers
blowing from the patio—
leaving no trace save
a thump that still echoes.
THE UNMERCIFUL LEG

In a crowded subway
it protruded into the aisle
like a battered sausage,
while the leg’s owner,
her gray curly head
bowed forward,
slumbered on.

Beneath a faded dress
her tattered trousers
teased the eyes to
feast upon the
bruised flesh of a
leg torn up by
too many streets.

I was headed downtown
for the trade center,
where from a magic window
I could soak in the vision of
skyscrapers rising from the
fertile money fields below.

Perhaps the subway woman
was headed there as well
to bask in the warmth of
some deep carpeted corner
until security came
to whisk her away.
That a woman lay sleeping
with her leg in the aisle
troubled no one but me—
tourist from an empty state
where locals prattle
endlessly of the evils
in crowded spaces.

I tried to resist this
complacency of the common.
I must react with something:
sadness, despair, rage—
anything but detachment.
But I fared no better
than my fellow travelers.

As I stared at her,
ground up by a life
incomprehensible,
I watched as the stony
wheels turned and
ground her once more
into grist for my mill.

As I got off the subway,
she did not take notice
it was the end of the line.
And she would not know
that she lives in my brain,
a clichéd image of what?
The packaged feelings
of feigned emotion?
The impotence of institutions?
The poverty of will?
Or just the failure of
one man’s vision?

Frankly, I don’t know
*what* to do with her,
no more than with memories
of the twin-legged towers
that I know should
mean something more
than just a sigh during
a pre-2001 movie.

But for now she and I ride
through the subdural subway,
she and that unmerciful leg,
kicking and screaming
until dementia wipes her clean—
a sleeping woman in a subway car.