

Pilgrimage

*Lewis River Drainage, Cascade Mountains, Washington*

We turn our backs on the last lingering light  
head east into the dark.

At first the trail is easy to follow, hard-packed, wide,  
the trees young and evenly spaced.

The bright milky arc of stars lights our way.

We laugh and talk about our lives below.

The path narrows when we enter the old growth,  
western red cedar and Douglas fir,  
five hundred, a thousand year-old trees,  
the fallen have been rotting longer than that.

As we pass slowly among them  
giant trunks congeal out of the surrounding darkness  
and then dissolve: blacker black out of black, back into black.

Conversation drops away.

We listen now for the night voices:

a distant creek cascading over boulders,

a pair of owls overhead,

faint skitter of a mouse through needle duff,

the chirping of a cricket beside the trail,

sudden silence when a twig snaps,

and then from the ridge beyond the ridge beyond the ridge above us,  
a cougar screams, or is it something, someone else?

We catch our breath at the crest of a ridge  
and then descend into the next drainage.

We feel our way with our hands, crawl over fallen trees,  
crash through brush, slip on the mossy stones of a seep.

We lose the trail, find it again in the canyon below.

At first light we stop to rest, each slumped wearily against a tree.

The sun clears the ridge, shines on a damp spot of soil,  
lights up the wings of three Tiger Swallowtails.

They drink there, then lift off,

fly up into the canopy, the light.

We watch them

until the brightness makes us look away.