

**Still Life**

*Sheep in Snow*  
*Joseph Farquharson (1846-1935)*

It's still as sun sets,  
light snow in the pasture,  
we look west into orange sunset,  
scattered clouds in shades of pink,  
still enough light for long shadows  
from trees on a small rise,  
shades of orange in the snow.

Sheep graze for what grass they can find,  
nine of them waiting for sun to fall,  
when they'll return to whatever shelter  
lies outside the frame.  
Though it's brown and grey winter,  
their pasture is full of color,  
and peaceful as winter sun sets.

Do the sheep worry like we do,  
about what will come  
when night grows cold?  
Though shadows reach across the pasture,  
there's still color left,  
still life to a waning day.  
What more could we ask?

## Wedding Photo

In black and white the bride and her five bridesmaids  
pose on the stone portico of a white church in Vermont,  
in white gowns holding bouquets of roses,  
May, '47, all in their 20s,  
war over for two years,  
long lives ahead.

Today the bride's sister died,  
the last of six in the photo.  
Nobody knows the day they'll die,  
unless perhaps they're in a war,  
but war had ended,  
now at last they could live.  
There wouldn't be another war,  
at least they hoped,  
certainly not in this Vermont village,  
with its white clapboard church.  
All six lived near the church, some in the village,  
others on backroads where families farmed.

After the war they had to be optimistic,  
so many dead, so many—  
now it's been over 70 years—  
and that May they weren't thinking about war.  
They pose, six young women on the steps  
of a church in Vermont,  
sending off one of their own.  
Sugar maples shade the lawn,  
though it doesn't show in black and white,  
leaves are fresh green and there's a scent of lilacs.  
Maples, stone steps and church bell are still there,  
but the wedding party has gone.

**Lazarus and Six Horses**

*A sepia photograph circa 1891*

The horses' ears are perked and alert,  
they seem to watch the photographer,  
even in sepia tone we can see they're  
different shades of brown and grey,  
hitched together and used to pulling  
as a team to thresh winter wheat.

My great grandfather Lazarus Padgett  
stands to the left of his horses,  
barely holding the reins as his horses pose,  
overalls, hat in hand, probably the year  
my grandmother was born.

In the only other photo,  
his horses are hitched to threshers—  
wheat and horses now on what had been  
Kiowa, Ottawa, Ojibwa, and Pottawatomie  
land for a millennium and more,  
all forced onto reservations.

I can't know what Lazarus thought of this—  
some of his family were probably part Kiowa—  
or what he'd think of Kingman now,  
just a few large farms where there were dozens,  
wheat from his fields shipped across the globe,  
summer days almost always over a hundred degrees,  
a four lane highway to Wichita,  
his great grandchildren scattered  
across Kansas and all over the country—  
none of us farms and only one has horses.

Three generations apart,  
our lifetimes overlapped briefly,  
but we grew up in different worlds.  
I look at Lazarus and his six horses,  
and wish I could ask him their names.

### Swans Swim at Dawn

Four swans swim circles around the small pond  
of reeds and cattails across the road  
from my hotel room, drift back and forth,  
dipping their beaks to feed, not much water,  
but just four, not Yeats' *nine and fifty swans*.

Years ago when I was a thirteen,  
an amusement park—Pleasure Island—  
was built here on the edge of wetlands where  
now there are condos, offices, hotel,  
a short-lived attempt to imitate

Disneyland in a Massachusetts swamp.  
How much pleasure or amusement kids got,  
I'm not sure, but I saw Ricky Nelson  
play right over there not far from the pond  
where swans swim in low light just after dawn.

I wondered why the teen idol had to sing  
on stage near Goldpan Gulch and a white whale,  
in a small amusement park in a swamp,  
but it wasn't his swan song; he performed  
another 23 years before flying to his death.

Ricky Nelson just liked small stages where he  
could play for a few hundred screaming teens,  
his voice and guitar always pitch perfect,  
I can still hear him sing:  
*Unchained Melody, Hello Mary Lou, Someday.*

Someday I'd like to swim like a white swan,  
go back when there were songs like *Lonesome Town*,  
when we could be so moved by an idol,  
so easily amused—Pleasure Island.  
Swans still swim in low light just after dawn.

### **Ancestors in Winter**

When I walk the path up back in the woods,  
I like to think I could live like my ancestors  
more than fifty generations ago—  
I'd live closer to bears and coyotes,  
would know how to use medicinal herbs.

Of course it's winter, and I'd have no heat,  
or at least no thermostat or wood stove,  
no lights except torches of pine,  
no mattress and box spring,  
and I probably wouldn't live past thirty.

But I'd know all the stars and would have names  
for each of them, know how to follow  
constellations and watch their slow movement,  
as I walk silently in dark forests,  
and wait for the equinox.

Halfway between equator and north pole,  
winter nights are long,  
but I move with the seasons,  
hunt what I can,  
wait for sun to move north.

Fifty generations since our ancestors,  
hunted deer by starlight,  
a hundred billion homo sapiens,  
who have lived over time,  
all of us descended from common ancestors.

Maybe that's why I like to walk in the woods,  
though I know I couldn't survive  
like my fiftieth great grandparents,  
even though I share DNA,  
with ancestors who lived by sun and stars.

As much as I want to be with them,  
I'll hike down the trail and go home for lunch.