

Sixfold Poetry Prize, November 2021

Low Water

The river crept over the ford,
threading its way between rocks
now risen above the water's reflection.
It had not rained for weeks.
Cattle called on dusty banks
that sloped to pools
left by the last flood's eddies.
It was a wide ford,
and shallow,
but we still could not walk it
without cool water
sloshing into our shoes.

What had been small torrents in June
had become August trickles and rock draughts,
small, barely consequential zephyrs of water
running more slowly to the sea.

The heat of the day
invited splashing,
and we reveled in our river-gifts,
low waters
softly flowing, gently soothing.

The Storm Off North Mountain

We watched summer storms build,
scudding across North Mountain.
Old weather eyes knew
that bad storms came up through the gap,
down west of Marlboro.
Too full to pass higher over the mountains,
they held clouds heavy with rain,
low thunder and wind.
Those were the ones that warned us,
bring in chickens and horses,
cover the beans, young cukes, succulents,
gather tools, cushions, chaises,
and bring in the laundry, whether wet or dry.
We would watch the rain track
across open fields, outbuildings, roads,
waiting for the sudden the shock
of storm.

Just a Walk in the Woods

I left the car in my neighbors' yard,
near the old hay rake.
They knew my love of the mountain,
the ridge, the rockfall,
the fire tower overlooking the river.

The grass in the yard was dry,
sere in the September heat.
My jacket was in my small pack,
water, apples, bread, cheese.
I would be gone all day.

I cut across the meadow,
past the make-shift sluice that carried water
from the spring to the pond,
across the stone wall, and straight up the slope.
This grade was easy,
but I would need to tack as the land got steeper.
No need to risk a fall or a sprain.

Hand holds were easy,
small saplings, stray branches, occasional rocks.
I made sure to make noise,
alerting the small ones I was coming
with my staff striking stone and root.
Even at this low elevation
I could see signs of drought stress
among the smaller trees and ferns.

A thousand feet, and I would be at the wagon trail,
The sky, the birds, the treetops.
These old trees, with deep roots
penetrating the mountain
would find the water they needed.
And above all else,
the green life of the woods would surround me,
there, where the trees touched the sky.

Mourning Dove

Downy fluff
floated to the grass,
joining its sisters
plucked before their time.
The dove, limp and blooded,
hung crookedly across a branch,
secure in the talons of a red-tail.
His burning hunger abated,
the cleaving continued,
dissecting muscle from bone.
Leavings were left to the small ones,
the mice, voles, beetles who gleaned.
Grievings were left to her mate.
Mourning, now forever, the male became his name.