

## One Lake Day

If I have ten years or less left,  
I will keep this shining sliver of memory.

My father rowed his three young sons  
across the calm Jersey lake named Cedar.  
Strong biceps pulled the oars at trolling speed.  
Waterlogged floorboards held decades-old caulk.

It was that moment, my grey plastic lure  
with the red bill, silver back  
and a black dot of an eye  
was taken.  
That pickerel,  
only slightly older in pickerel years  
than we in the years of boys,  
rose in the writhing whiplash  
of his head above water,  
splashing white as you see  
in mighty marlin movies.

That fish shook the lure loose  
and launched it in the air,  
to catch a hook  
in the left pocket  
of my soft madras shirt.  
It was the closest thing  
to a catch that day.

Yet, it was a moment  
in all our world  
made perfect.  
Nature lured us  
into a love of life,  
our father's creation.

He gave us his childhood boat  
and placid lake  
and pickerel fish.  
It was the closest  
he would come to us  
in all his moments.

Can we call it love?

There was never another  
with him  
before or since,  
so perfect.

## **Last Lesson**

At two, you had your water wings  
and learned to splash into my arms.  
In time, you launched wingless  
across the gap to the pool's far side.

Four years later, I showed you how  
the row of pawns lines up in front  
of the castle to the queen on her color.  
Now others teach you classic openings  
beyond my chess horizon.

If I must also be the one to teach you  
a last lesson,

about death,

I will not do it gladly.  
I would never choose to leave you.

I hope to keep my wits as I slip away,  
to leave you my appreciation  
for who you are.

If we have time, I will teach you to visit coral  
and white tip reef sharks, to breathe bubbles  
while we listen to whales' melodic greetings.

If I must be that teacher, I ask to be  
a good example, show courage,  
keep fear from between us  
as I depart.

My loss will be over in that last moment.  
I hope your loss will be softened  
by the love left to linger with you.

I am only required  
to stop  
living.

### **Autumn Warmth**

As the shadows of fall leaves flutter in the  
late morning light sensed through my night crew fog,

a slow warmth awakens my awareness  
of softness against my skin.

I absorb her breath on my neck  
breast at my back, soft fur at my hip.

A gesture of desire, unlooked-for in our newness,  
I am moved by her uninvited arrival,

No longer only her first,  
I have become her familiar lover.

I think of her drive here, journey up the stairs,  
gauntlet of housemates to enter my room's soft light.

I imagine clothes falling to the floor, her gentle slide  
under my pale blue comforter to reach for my still form.

She closed the distance between us as leaf danced light  
played on the gifts our bodies offer.

Through all these years, she rests against me  
in that leaf-drenched sunlit moment.

### **Carry On Caretaker**

The man she has loved  
for the last 43 years  
fades into the wallpaper  
of their Manhattan co-op.  
Patches of darkness deepen  
to accent the shafts of sun,  
the direct or reflected arrows  
from the frames of city glass,  
the eyes of buildings watching.

This petite caretaker carries their cares  
moving about her constant business.  
He is leaving her, going nowhere.  
She manages the daunting tasks  
as best she can, fights a battle  
for another day, month or year,  
for a margin of safety, to stay the loss,  
preserve an hour of partnership,  
add a codicil to life's contract.

Moats of dust in the light beams  
tell their story, parts of their bodies  
have already left this life.  
She stumbles over memories  
as that light too fades into night.

Decisions must be made.

Carry on caretaker, with the words  
of doctors who come and go.  
Stay or go, home or hospital.  
She navigates the rocky shoals  
of medicine and prayer.

Carry on, give your care.  
Respite will come soon enough.  
Give your gifts while he remains.

### **Last Walk to the Canine Orchard**

The apple trees are past bloom, young fruit growing;  
Not yet the right size for boys to fit into their throwing hands.  
My throwing days are past, but today's job has always been mine.  
As the oldest, I have carried each canine friend to earth.

My father can no longer stand to make the trip.  
He can still walk it; He just can't take it.  
I proceed to the traditional tree, last before the field,  
passing the McIntosh whose branches once held our fort.

And there is the Red Delicious, where the hammock hung  
and wrapped me under summer and winter night skies. Here,  
I gazed through those ancient limbs to the stars of my future,  
trying to divine a path to adulthood.

In reverie and reverence, I arrive at the unmarked plots.  
This tree's surviving two trunks split to reach a hand wide  
toward heaven. Over four decades, I made resting places  
under the canopy of this elderly Winesap. I dig now.

This white-furred shepherd, my father's last, is wrapped  
in another old green army blanket. I did not know her well.  
I lift the body, returned to puppy suppleness,  
lay her gently to rest, and replace the earth and grass clogs.

The occasion calls for a father's words, but none come to me,  
and he waits alone in the remains of the house.  
There sounds a witnessing breeze through the tree's leaves  
releasing me to walk back up the hill

through this summer afternoon,  
a little less spring in my step.