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The Year John Cage Was Born

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The Year John Cage Was Born · *Patrick Lawler*

The year John Cage was born, his father
Set a trap. For thirteen days, in a submarine
Of his own design, John Cage's father
Stayed submerged—for thirteen days,
With thirteen men, on Friday.
And when John Cage's father came up, he said,
"Well, John, top that." So a precedent was
Set that fathers and sons were expected
To follow. The challenge would be passed on.
Records in '48 were not so easily established.
My father's submarine was borrowed
And in need of paint. I'm not making
Excuses. The sunlight danced over the dent
On the bow. They came to the docks to see him
Off: a man carrying a sketch of the mayor,
A woman in a floppy hat. The picture
Of my mother shows her head slightly bent
As if she were listening to the bumble
Of a motor car speeding out of sight. The white
Ribbon in her hair sags like a cripple's
Shoelace. The conversation centers on how cold
It will be, on how hot. The one thing
For certain is that there will be discomfort.
There will be times when breathing
Will have to wait. They barely look at one
Another, my father on the deck, my mother on the
Dock, straightening the ribbon in her brown hair, as
Everything around them, for one moment, stays afloat.