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All the Way Home

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Five Poems · *Carol Potter*

ALL THE WAY HOME

We came up out of the woods, five children hanging
onto the running board, the train ten miles
behind us making its way towards Nehasane, Sabattis,
Montreal. We came up out of the woods
to see the lake lying out before us, no one
whispering in our ears, 'Take care, take care.'
There was the green dark of trees
we pulled around our shoulders at night, the light
from the lake on our faces.
There was the man who lived up the hill
above the lake before we were born.
There were his hands
at the edge of the clearing: swamp logs,
bracken, spruce thicket too tightly webbed
to walk through. We tapped messages
into those palms, 'Tell us what's out there,
tell us.' The story went like this.
It was before we were born.
We had nothing to do with it.
It was before we stood knee deep
in blueberries with our blue mouths
and our hands stained blue looking up to ask
what it was at the edge of the clearing, the tamaracks
closing around some sound so thick
a person could ride away on it. But the story
went like this, before we were born, before
anyone whispered in our ears, 'Take care, take care,'
before we suspected the space
between stars was open like a lid and anyone
could drift through it, before we came up
out of the woods to see the lake lying out
like a body we could all live inside.

It went like this. Before we were born, there was a man
lived in the woods: an escaped convict, six feet-eight
inches tall. We didn't know
why he'd gone to prison. We didn't know how he found
his way from cell to door to street to wilderness
disappearing as if there were some kind of rope
a person could grab hold of and then be gone.
I used to think there were invisible water-
skier ropes outside everybody's door and you could
just step out, take hold of the ropes, and be gone.
It could be a mistake.
It could be on purpose.
It could be just like that and then you were gone.
It was like there really never was any separation
between dream and waking. Maybe like my friend
Christine, the way she went through the halls
of school, locker by locker from door to door, her face
turned up as if she heard sounds
the rest of us couldn't hear, her white hands
like silver fish navigating a shore line, maybe
this is the way he moved.
I remember Christine's hands flicking
through the halls, the way she smiled
each time she found herself
in the right place
at just the right time.
I thought of that man pulling himself hand
over hand from cell to street to this
territory of tree, stone, sky, water.
It must have been like learning
some other kind of language, a new way
to speak, how to be the keeper and the one
who is kept. I thought of him
carrying himself in his own hands
from one spot to the next, the way we carried water
in our cupped hands
from spring to mouth to belly and

all the way home
never dropping
a drop.

But the story went like this. It was before
we were born, before we looked up startled
thinking we'd seen somebody's hands
at the edge of the clearing, the bracken
falling back on itself, some sound we couldn't tell.
It went like this. Ten, twelve, fifteen men
tracked him down. The clearing was a green
tent around him, diaphanous, and his skin
was black-dark-grey like the trunks of trees
after a rain . . . He pulled himself tall
and shouted: "Get the fuck out of my woods!"
They shot him. Everytime I hear this story
I can see him lying in the clearing
with the sky inside his chest,
air between his ribs, the way when winter comes
you see sky
everywhere.

I thought of him, the lid of his body
wide open, everything floating out, some new way
to breathe, some other word for
home.

No one knew the rest of the story, what they said
bending over him, how they carried him from the clearing
back to the boats, back to town. Were there two men
holding each limb? Was there a sheet of hands
everywhere up and down his body taking him
from that spot in the woods to lay him down leg,
arm, thigh at the bottom of the boat?

I wonder if someone shut his eyes or if he watched the sky
all the way back to town, the brown of his pupils
like two pools looking up
from the keel, ribs of the boat
tucked tight against his own.

I wonder if the men sat silent in their boats

or if they sang some song
rowing back across the lake at dusk, twenty,
twenty-four, thirty
hands
taking one man
home.

IT BEING A FREE COUNTRY

Yesterday, swimming with you
arm over arm straight
to the center of the lake, it occurred to me
that what I really wanted to do
was to swim up behind you,
run my hands across your back down around
to your belly.
I wanted to turn you around,
feel your mouth on mine.

The water was its own
free country, opening
smooth and clean
around my body,
but I did nothing. I turned over,
floated on my back, said a word
or two to the blank blue
above me.

Later in the day, I was out
in the field, bare-breasted,
on my knees, picking blueberries.
The heat from the hill kept rising steady
and constant into my body. I was distracted
watching my breasts extend their roses,
their promises, their don't you want to touch me
down to the berries