A Sister by the Pond

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1.

An old photograph prints itself
on her mind: the German regular army
is hanging partisans on the Russian
front. Grandfather Wehrmacht
in his tight-collared greatcoat
adjusts the boy’s noose
as his elderly adjutant
watches. Beside the boy, his girl
companion has already strangled,
his gullet cinched
when a soldier kicked the box
from her feet. In the photograph,
taken near Minsk, blue sky
behind him the summer
of nineteen-forty-one, the boy smiles—
as if he understood that being hanged
is no great matter.

2.

In April the ice rots. Over
the pocked glaze, puddles of gray stain
spread at mid-day. Every year
an ice-fisherman waits one weekend
too many, and his shack
drowns among reeds and rowboats.
At this open winter’s end, in the wrack
and melt of early spring,
she walks on the shore by her August
swimming place and counts
the winter’s waste: mostly the beaver’s
work—stout
trees chewed through, stripped
of bark, trailing
twigs in the water. Come summer,
she will drag the trash away and loll on red
blossoms of moss.
3.

Where she walks on the shore today was "Sabine," the beach her young Aunts made, where they loafed, hot afternoons of the war. She caught minnows in a kitchen sieve, and built with labor a freshwater mussel collection; watched a mother-duck lead her column; lay on the moss and let herself loose from her body. Forty years later she returns to continuous water; when July's lilies open in the cove by the boggy place where bullfrogs bellow, they gather the sun as they did when she picked them for her grandfather Ben in his vigorous middle age.

4.

In October she came here last, strolling by pondside with her daughter, whose red hair brightened against black-green fir. She gazed at her daughter's pale watery profile, admiring the forehead, broad and clear like Ben's, without guile, and took pleasure in the affection of her silent company. By the shore a maple stood upright, casting red leaves, its trunk gnawed to a three-inch waist of centerwood that bore the branches' weight. Today when she looks for it, it is eaten down, new blonde splinters within the gray surface of the old chewing.
Two weeks ago she drove her daughter
to the Hematology Clinic
of the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital
and paced three hours
among bald young women and skeletal boys
until a resident spoke
the jargon of reassurance. By the felled
maple her frightened heart
sinks like the fisherman’s shack. She remembers
her son’s long body
twisted in the crushed Fiesta. A blue light
revolves at three o’clock
in the morning as white-coated attendants
lift him slowly onto a stretcher;
the pulverized windshield glitters
on the black macadam
and in the abrasions of his face.

In the smile of the hanged boy,
she glimpses an autumn of bodies swinging
like apples in the last orchards,
winter of skeleton
horses and electric snow; in the April
that follows, only the deep burrow-hiders
will emerge who slept
below breath and nightmare; blacksnake,
frog, and woodchuck
resume their customs among millet
that rises through bones
of combines. In summer when blackberries
twist from the cinders
of white houses, the confused bear
will eat them, who wastes
and grows thin, his fur
dropping off in patches from his pink skin.
Today at the pond's edge old
life warms from the suspense of winter.
Pickerel hover under
the corrupt surface of April ice
that frays at the muddy shoreline
where peepers sing summer evenings
and turtles hide their eggs.
She sways and trembles in the continuous
moment's skin and surge, desiring
only repose, which is the soul's
desire. Wishing to rise merely
as the fire wishes, or to fall with the wish
of stones, she lets loose from her body
to lift into sky
as a bird, to sink as a fish into water,
or as water itself,
or as weeds that waver in water.