1983

A Sister by the Pond

Donald Hall
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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, her 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.
5.

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.

6.

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.