1986

All the Way Home

Carol Potter
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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,
flotted 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