Poems

Abstract
THE LAKE, GIRL WITH A FUR-TRIMMED DRESS

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THE LAKE

Pale water, mountains almost black, clouds lifting from the lake – an old dock creaks at loose moorings, and from the summit, mountains until the horizon goes blind. What thousand do you count, walking a narrow bridge or bending as your canoe glides under it? This is a language we have written from always, though it bears its own fate – color of fern in shade, such a green it must tell the truth; a thatch of grass points to then obscures underground water; another tree dead across the path. Compare a sentence broken as you talk at a table, a gun in the pocket of a child, the survivor alone at her desk. She did not teach this – high heels, gray suit cinched at her waist, red lipstick, evident jaw. Tell me, how is it she comes back now? Nor did she teach this – to hear only one’s own voice in the quiet; or to think alone, out into the dark pardon of the night. She had no husband, her hair curled garishly. I can’t get back her voice, just her mouth gesticulating, and blond Peter who killed himself in London after we grew up. In the darkness, silent numbers etch themselves in red. I remember the pale disk traversed by hands, figures marking place along a circumference that lay in wait once, like the future. In the city night, a door closes – refrigerator, car, you can’t tell which. What does it mean, she asked us, to be good? I ask to understand the impulse toward murder. I ask to be loved. And quiet, my head between those wide hands, a river spreads north in autumn light, pale as a lake. I’ve seen the beginning of that river, narrow as a brook, nothing built at its edge. At the end of the path, a woman turns to look back, wearing white, holding roses.
GIRL WITH A FUR-TRIMMED DRESS

*Fille à la Fourrure,*
Toulouse-Lautrec, c. 1887

It's not a dress, and he hasn't got the lips right. I'm surprised you sat long enough

that he did you from behind – ostensibly prim, wearing that orange coat you lied about

losing, which I replaced for you as a gift and which you sent back to me without a note.

He knew you twenty years before I did – Oh how I fell for you, swooning beneath

those dizzying fingers, your green eyes wide with something I thought more than haste.

We met at a small supper outside Paris one late August. I wore black, you black

and white. By then your gold hair had gone off, but I could feel your body: They never

understand that, how a woman’s flesh holds a woman lover long past youth.

He never undressed you or your mouth would not be open, and you never

looked straight ahead – always your eyes darted, hungering toward the next enthusiasm.

But he got how you sit, those haunches holding you down, and clipped you at the hip

to please you, though I suspect those days you found yourself slim enough to welcome

mouth or finger, had we some brothel afternoon lain like those whores he's so famous for.
But what you lived long before
put you off any touch or so I now believe –

the darkened stair, footfalls, another woman.
Surely your hair has gone dead gray.

I like to think of you looking out windows.
He’s got the blue just right and the walls
like bleached fire, orange coat, and creamy
fur encircling your shoulder like meringue.

I am finally now as I was before you
except when I recall – not how you looked

in high middle age or the graze of your hand
but the pitch of your voice – which I turn from

seeking indifference, or a life
whose passions would not have been futile.