

## 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