

A Sister by the Pond · *Donald Hall*

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.

7.

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.