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My Pink Lake and Other Digressions

FROM *Cimarron Review*

AH, THE SWEET relief of digression. You slip into it with a sense of recognition and release, as if entering the pond where you first learned to swim, or putting on your frayed purple velour bathrobe at the end of the longest workweek in the world. This is how your mind always works best, sliding sideways from one subject to another, moving associatively, like a butterfly flitting from one flower to the next, dipping and sipping deeply, an invisible trail of scent stretched behind you. One minute you hear your husband's voice in the kitchen, cajoling the collie, who is grieving, like you, for his sister dog, Annabelle, buried on the back hill two days ago. "Eat something, Togo," he says. "Please eat." And the next minute you hear your father's voice, fifty years ago, offering the family dog half a buttered bagel and saying, "That's my boy, that's my boy."

Your father and his red wool work shirt. The kitchen with his watercolor paintings of Revolutionary War soldiers, old copper pans from France shining on the wall beside the brick oven, and the battered round table where you and your sister drank endless ironstone china cups of Tetley tea after school, gossiping about the day. Her eyes were so much like your mother's—dead when you were only little girls—you sometimes told her so. But when you did she'd turn snotty, scathing, mean, saying "You're so *sensitive*." As if sensitivity were a crime. And meanwhile, Daylily Creek babbled along outside through the lower meadow, its surface catching the light, reflecting it in rippling panels like moiré silk on the ceiling.

You follow the long, looping lassos of thought that is not

thought exactly, but something looser, something liquid that rises and falls, like waves or currents of air. "Everything is connected to everything else," your mentor and creative mother, Holly Prado, said once, explaining what she thought you were trying to do in the wild, breath-driven rushes of words you read shyly from your journal each week in her writing workshop. "Have you seen the film Jeanne Moreau directed called *Lumière*?" she asked. "Moreau does visually what you're trying to do with words. You've got to go see *Lumière*." You never did see the movie, but felt obscurely pleased, as if you'd been seen, which you had. Around the same time you read Virginia Woolf's diary, thrilled at what she wrote about proceeding at a "random, haphazard gallop, . . . sweeping up accidentally stray matters which I should exclude if I hesitated, but which are the diamonds in the dust heap." You were looking for diamonds too.

Holly, with her blond hair backlit by sun streaming through the window from her round walled garden with the little witch's gate, talking about what she called "a sense of possibility" in poetry. How many Tuesday mornings did you spend in her workshop? How many long drives from Claremont into L.A. did you make, the San Gabriel Mountains so sharp against the blue you could cut your hand on them if you touched them? Where would you be if you had not had those mountains? Where would you be if you had not met Holly? As lost, you think, as the tiny sugar ant that skitters across your page as you write this seems to be, though perhaps it knows exactly where it is going.

Holly validated something in you, simply by believing, by intimating that there was and is another way of understanding the world than what you'd learned in school. You'd forced yourself to be analytical there, though it felt like being locked in a cage, your mind a wild mustang that had never known a bridle, the bit cold and sharp in your soft mouth. And meanwhile on the other side of the fence lay a landscape filled with all the surprises that happen if you loose the strictures linear reasoning places on the mind, shucking them off like a too-tight dress, peeling the green husk of life back from the pearly kernels of sweet corn underneath.

Even in your grief, even in your sadness over losing Annabelle, your beautiful female collie, all wind-rush and fur-silk and jingling tags you think you hear down the hall at night, your mind moves in its reliable motions, and this is comforting. Out and out and out.

your mind swims into the surf, riding the waves back in, the way you did one afternoon at San Onofre beach, your body aligned so perfectly with the music of the earth you could have died then, water spangled on your skin, your bikini top off because the beach was so empty. Waves and mountains—they are your favorite forms of prayer—the scent of salt air and California bay laurel steeped in sunny canyons just two of your many homes.

Digressions, tangents, intuitive through-lines, spines. When you were a teacher, you drove your students crazy, making them laugh, making them say, "Oh, no. Here we go again. Danger, danger, Will Robinson! We're going *off* topic!" One minute you'd be talking about James Baldwin's magnificent and heartbreaking story "Sonny's Blues." Then you'd say, "Okay, chickadees. Let's look at how many times windows occur in the story." And you were off, hopscotching from Baldwin's windows to the hundreds of windows Andrew Wyeth painted (looking in and looking out), to the intrinsic nature and purpose of windows, to "Let's get out pen and paper and write for five minutes about what you see from the window you look out of most, and then five more on what characters in the story see."

And then it was time to hear some of their words, halting and shy, and then back to the story again, diving into its beautiful and terrible complications of race and art. There was one passage you always read aloud, voice shaking at the loveliness of Baldwin's words, remembering how one of your own professors cried once when reading, her pearl earrings trembling. Then you had the students read it too, word by word, the circle you'd required them to sit in suddenly magic, a ring of light held together by sound of their voices: "Then Creole stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues . . . and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it must always be heard. There isn't any tale to tell, it's the only light we have in all this darkness."

"I thought we were talking about windows," one husky boy said as you left class that afternoon. "But we were really talking about

race, weren't we?" You remember him still, a young man who perhaps traveled farther than any student you ever had, from his conservative upbringing in northern Wisconsin to your English class. Where he found himself in a small discussion group with two feisty African American girls from Milwaukee. By the end of the year they were housemates. "College really opened my eyes," he said once, during a conference over a paper. "What if I hadn't come here? What if I hadn't changed?"

You wanted to weep at what can happen, at what the human heart can open and hold. There are miracles everywhere. Even at a land-grant school in what felt to you like the middle of nowhere but was of course a place like any other, beloved to your students because it was theirs. You cared about your students so fiercely it hurt, learned more from them than they ever did from you. You were there unwillingly, through circumstances of love and work, but determined to do your best by them. The Midwest was never a place where you ever planned to land, the yearning for somewhere else a permanent lump in your throat, an irritation, an itch you can't scratch, a question you can't ever answer.

But you've made a home here, on the north side of drumlin, haven't you, learning the flowers, trees, animals, the mineral scent of snow in winter, the scent of sweet earth turned over in spring? Last night you sat on the deck with your husband, eating artichokes and arborio rice in the soft May air, the oaks just opening their tiny fists of green leaves, May apple parasols shining beneath them, and Island Lake shimmering in the distance, its waters a mirror lit pink by setting sun. So many evenings you've sat out there with the collies, both dogs rushing out, excited, barking like wild things the instant you opened the door. Now there is just one who lies quietly at your feet, head on his paws, looking out toward the hill where Annabelle is buried beneath the mulberry tree.

It's almost your birthday. Your husband asks if you remember the year when he inquired what you wanted and you said, "All I want is the pink lake." And he gave it to you, in a photo that hangs in your bathroom, and in so many other ways, the two of you sitting on this deck more evenings than you can remember, dogs at your feet, Annabelle's ears always perked, alert triangles of black velvet you loved to stroke. The pink lake was all you needed, then and now. Pink lake and a pink sky. In summer you will sit here, sip-

ping rosé, remembering the vat your father made when you were a child, and the essay he wrote about it called "Pink Wine."

And even as you answer your husband, you remember more. Your mind slides to your first kitchen at Wild Run Farm. Your mother says, "I'm in the pink," explains what it means, and then waltzes around on the old-fashioned rose-patterned linoleum, singing, "Brown paper packages tied up with string, these are a few of my favorite things." She holds in her arms a puppy with orange eyebrows like those on the dog you just buried. The puppy will be dead in a few weeks, hit by a car as you walk together down the road to Perkiomen Creek. Your mother will die of cancer two years later. Your beautiful collie is dead now, her suffering over, heaven for dogs an endless green field where they can run and run. "Dog years," another of your teachers, Mark Doty, calls them in a book remembering Arden and Beau. These have been your years, the animals who companion us a measure of our time on the planet.

The next morning your throat constricts at the sight of Togo lying near Annabelle's favorite spot beside the front door. A half wall by the door makes the area denlike; it was always, indisputably, hers. The last month of Annabelle's life the dogs often lay there together, Togo watching her, gazing into her eyes when she woke, the two of them communing about something you are not privileged to know. There's a mark on the wall where she'd brush it with her fur, turning in her dog-circle before lying down. You will never wash it away. How to go on without her?

And yet somehow we all do go on, don't we, the ever-present question of what to make for dinner and where to go next sometimes one and the same. Life keeps opening up before you, like all those blue-gray highways you have traveled, moving from one place to another in this big country. The names of states pile up inside you, like the drawer in your grandfather's mahogany secretary desk, crammed with a life's worth of photos you've never had time to arrange. Every instant is a sandalwood-scented mala bead you run through your fingers to remember. Woolf called them "moments of being." How to string them together, how to hold joy and sadness cradled in your palm at the same time? You wrote a line about this once, published it in a book of poems. But when you look you cannot find it. Does this mean you are meant to learn it all again?

"I meant to write about death," Woolf writes in her diary, "only life came breaking in as usual."

And all those moves, what do they mean? You always intended to stay in one place, didn't you? A friend who was born here laughs and says your sensibility is bicoastal, not midwestern at all. You wonder how a sensibility can be shaped by a place and what that means. Is there a way to map it, and if so, what would it look like? Would it be like nineteenth-century ribbon maps, unfolding in long, interconnected scenes, or the spiral-bound TripTiks you used to get from AAA before driving cross-country? You loved how the agent would print the TripTik maps out, highlighting the trail of your journey with a fluorescent orange Magic Marker.

You think you understand the mystery of place for a moment as you lie on the ground beside your dog's grave, letting earth hold you as it holds her. Always, no matter where you have been, you have known to do this. The scent of the herb called sweet Annie floats all around you, rising from its dried boughs you piled upon her grave. You've grown sweet Annie for years but just learned just the other day that its proper name is artemisia. It is beautiful, from the name of one of your favorite Greek goddesses, patroness of animals. But you like common names best for the folklore they reveal. Sweet Annie is perfect for your Annabelle, and you are glad you never got around to making all the fragrant wreaths you planned on as gifts at Christmas, glad the boughs are here, spilling their green seeds into her black fur.

Sitting up, you notice that the cat's grave beside your dog's new one has, in just two years, been covered by violets. You remember a pet cemetery you saw once on an estate in Wales, and then a line from a poem you wrote your sister years ago. "At home, violets open their blue lamps," you said. And then: "In the spring rain, even the cut branch blooms." You were talking about boughs pruned from the apricot tree in your California yard, which bloomed even after they were cut. The sight of those pale pink stars was so startling you felt something ripple inside you, like the first faint inklings of the child you would later lose. You were shocked that the severed limb persisted in blooming, nature profligate and elemental. It hurt to look, though you did. You made jam from the tree's fruit that year as you did every summer, stirring up great vats of the sweet gold on your Western-Holly stove, ladling it into Kerr's canning jars. That apartment over a carriage house was like the inside

of a roll-top desk. The first home of your adulthood, you lived there for ten years. You loved it so much you paid rent on it when you and your first husband went to Texas for a year. You wanted to be sure it was there to come back to.

The real wonder is that we can (and do) go on living, even when we lose what we love most, even as you pick your way carefully around the slippery, tar-pit edges of clinical depression, afraid you'll be pulled in again, tugged under into the black slick of it, forgetting the way home to joy, that undervalued commodity you forget so easily because happiness takes care of itself.

Woolf again, in *To the Lighthouse*: "What is the meaning of life? . . . The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were only little daily miracles, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one."

Tonight your miracle is a window cranked open on the May evening, cool air moving over you in waves as you lie down beside your man, wearing a summer nightgown for the first time this season, its worn cotton batiste delicious against line-dried sheets that smell of wind and sun and new beginnings. All night the window stays open on the garden that smells of rain and possibility, that thing Holly taught you to look for in poems. All night, when you wake, so sad about Annabelle you cannot sleep, still listening for the sound of her breathing, you pick the stars out as they hang in the still mostly bare branches of the oaks like lanterns guiding the way. Years ago your father read a story to you with the line "When you love someone who lives on a star it is lovely to look at the sky at night." Is your dog a star now, like your father and mother?

You count your stars. You "count your blessings instead of sheep," the way Bing Crosby advises Rosemary Clooney to do in *White Christmas*. The bed is a boat that carries you through darkness, everyone you love aboard ("It's the ark of us," you said to your husband), even if you can't see them on Earth anymore. Your beloved dog lies down in the den of your heart, her brother curled on the green braided rug beside your bed. The window is open on frog-song and Canada goose-murmur, crane-call and coyote-yip, their voices stitching the air together in an invisible quilt of sound you pull over your shoulders, everything connected to everything else—as it always has been, as it will still be, come tomorrow, come morning.