

Listening to the Song of Coal and Metal:
Poems at Dan's Cabin 2012

By Francis E. Kazemek

Arrival

Stepping out
At 4 A.M.
Rain's quit
Clouds uncover
The starry floor
Wind ruffles the leaves
Sprinkling me as I pee

**

The hemlocks I see in the morning
Hold blue in their high branches
And quiet below at their base
They understand that heaven
Is rooted in the commonplace

Morning Song

Morning and I've got a fire
Going in the wood burning stove
It's taking the chill off the cabin
So I've pulled the rocker in front
With a cup of coffee and slice
Of my wife's rye bread spread with butter
And with the damper half-open
I listen to the flames dancing
And crackling on the flesh of dead trees

With eyes closed I hear a different
Music coming from Grandpa's coal
Stove and see myself as a child
In front of it after serving
Early morning Mass with a cup
Of coffee and slice of rye bread
Layered with Grandpa's cold butter—
My second Communion of the day—
Bathing in the warmth with eyes closed
Listening to the song of coal and metal

At the Kitchen Table

*Our loved ones inhabit us even more
when they are dead.*

--Jean Sullivan

When I saw my mother the other day
She had grown young again smiling
And pretty as she looked in her wedding picture
She was baking bread and I couldn't wait
For a thick warm slice with melting butter
My father walked into the kitchen full of his prime
The smell of coal smoke from a railroad engine
Still on him and the left knee of his dungarees
Torn from a boxcar swung into too carelessly
He stole a hug and a kiss while her strong hands
Were busy kneading on the breadboard
I sat at the table drinking coffee with half-and-half
And laughed telling them how young they looked
My father grinned and winked at me
While my mother reached across with her floured hand
And touched my forehead with two fingers

Wastrel

I dreamed of an Irish wastrel
Poet scholar husband drunk
Locked out of their second story flat
By his wife who shouts "No more!"
He wanders around town cadging drinks
In a long gray canvas raincoat
Asking to be let in but no one wants him
He stands outside his home watching
A grandchild carry in a mechanical wooden
Toy of a man riding a bicycle up and down
Up and down it was his as a child
And he cries out "Don't harm it!"
But the child and his wife at the window
Ignore him as the dream fades with morning

Visitation

Six women stop outside my cabin door
Dressed for the weather in rain slickers
Floppy canvas hats all carrying sticks
Not the commercial kind but wooden ones
Carefully carved by them or someone else
They're on their annual trip to the woods

The women are in their mid-sixties
Or early-seventies and tell me
How they'd like to write their stories for future
Generations and I urge them to do so

The tallest one asks if I could write
A poem from a single word she gave me
I tell her sure but it might take some time
We laugh and I say a little poem
By Emily Dickinson to send them
Six joyful old friends down the path in the rain

Haiku at Dan's Cabin

No bird song
But the music of rain
Dropping from the leaves
**

The Superior surf rising
To break white
On the shore
Inland it haunts me
**

The fern covered
Forest floor still
Waiting for dark
**

Only the water
Falling over rocks
Fills the forest
**

A red maple leaf
Stopped me on the path
To watch another fall
**

A slender aspen
Bending in the breeze
But its leaves won't hold

At Lake of the Clouds

High on the escarpment
Looking down on Lake of the Clouds
Dark sky cold rain
Moving across from Superior
An old man in a wheelchair
Pushed up the winding
Wooden rampway by his
Tall angular wife
Stares out over the endless green
Turning yellow and russet
Clasps his wife's hand and exclaims
"Ain't it something, Honey!"

Walt

His dad worked the CCCs
And fell in love with the country,
So when he got back home
To Wisconsin he packed up the family
In '35 and moved to Ontonagon.

"I was raised here," Walt said
Over his hot beef and mashed potatoes.
"Too much food but I'm a bachelor now
After my wife passed and eat only
Out in restaurants where I stock up.
I don't like eating alone at home."

A thin man in his eighties, neatly dressed
In work pants and checkered shirt,
Bright eyes and open to conversation.

Two men were talking with the waitress
About baiting bears and she said
That they used donuts to bring them to killing.

I asked Walt about bear hunting and he said,
"Yes, I think they're doing that now.
I don't keep track of those things anymore."
Uninvited, he offered, "I shot my first deer
At twenty, the only animal I killed in my life."

He was still eating alone as I said goodbye,
And the trio was still talking about bears.
Walking to my car I carried an unaccountable sadness.

Autumn

The world is turning around me
Popple leaves drifting to the ground
Thistle and milkweed seeds taking flight
Maples finally revealing their proletariats leanings
Pink red russet scarlet leaves
Oak trees tired of it all longing for sleep
Shedding all that isn't necessary
Acorns litter the ground
Ancient hemlocks have seen it all
Looking down from their lofty heights
Laughing as the wind ruffles through their branches
They remember too when they were young
And so full of expectations

Wake Up

Walking under a gathering
Of old hemlocks
They begin to drop
Their green cones on me
Two bouncing off my head
They seem to be shouting
Wake up! Look up!
See us now!

Manido Falls

The Ojibwa people called it “ghost,”
Or “spirit” in their native language.
Nowadays it beckons a host
Of hikers and people of all age

Whose brief photographs try to hold
The river leaping over stone:
The human urge to stop and mold
All natural forces not their own.

The copper miners scoured the land;
Loggers came and cleared the forest.
Their names and dreams now lie in sand
Where at its mouth the river rests.

Water falling over shalely bed,
Your singing spirit ignores the dead!

Lily Pond

A beaver dam at Lily Pond
Built tight woven with branches
And gnawed limbs of tender popple
Holds water for a home reaches
Far beyond its narrow span
Welcoming lilies that bloom
In summer and the webby-feet
Of geese and ducks that leave too soon
A beaver dam is a selfish
And selfless thing that browsing deer
Enjoy along the marshy shore
And where dragonflies shimmer in the mere

Mirror Lake

Mirror Lake in the chill fall air holding
Sugar maple and aspen leaves going
Away in their array of beet-blood reds
Pale rose shocking yellows that turn heads

Stare into it and it will hold you too
Your watery reflection rising anew
Then rippling across to the other shore
Like leaves drifting away for evermore

Union Spring

It doesn't stop
Bubbling like a fumerole
From an active volcano
It spreads rings of sand
Across the spring bottom
It only knows how to give
Not receive

No Sadness

A strong wind blowing
Steadily bursting into gusts
Of forty miles an hour or more
All is sere and fading
Greens turning into yellows
Umber pale reds leaves
Departing from trees

I come upon the last flowers
Of summer on Escarpment Trail
Low holding tight to the ground
Shielded against the wind
They too are dying soon to be gone
But I smile knowing like the rest
Of their forest fellows they'll
Be back again to bloom in spring

Hunting Agates

At the river mouth as it flows
Into Lake Superior I hunted
With eight other people for agates
They knew what they were looking for
But I didn't so I picked up stones
Of all colors and shapes that caught my eye
White speckled eggs smooth skipping stone shale
A chunk of red rhyolite born deep
In the belly of a volcano
Pebbles of quartz that must have been here
At the beginning of the planet
I threw them all back into the lake
Except for two I kept for no reason
Other than they felt good in my hand
And they had picked me out from countless others

End of Summer

Lavender asters at the end of summer
Mark the paths and open places in the woods
Brightening the dark green floor with a glimmer
Of what will fade and come again as they should

So long as humans protect the wild places
With a reverence for what they have not made
And do not turn all into cash oases
Of clear-cut trees strip-mined hills and trucking grades

The black-winged butterfly soon going away
To death flutters from leaf to leaf on ground
Alights upon my proffered hand and slowly sways
Goodbye to the bounty of the world it found

Stars the Same

In the small clearing
Beneath a ring of hemlocks
A clear star-covered sky
The same one I saw once
Above a fire pit in Idaho
And at a mountain lake in Montana
Though I've grown old
Stars glitter a kind of hope
For something I can't imagine

Shade

The forest has a somber mien
Hemlocks large maples evergreens shading
The floor damp with fallen and decaying
Branches leaves fern-covered
When the sun shines it's through slender
Aspen birches and little hemlock sprites
But even with their filigree of light
The cold creek water over its stony bed
Seems to be chiding—be serious

Sabbath

Sitting on the swing above the creek
Rippling over the smooth stone fall
Into a still pool where it rests
Before moving down through the forest
I listen to squirrels chattering
And the wind whistling through the trees
Dressed against the morning chill air
I hold a book of poems by a man
Who chose the fields and woods to honor
The Sabbath with his outdoor prayer
He believed he took a better part
I too celebrate with a joyous heart

Early Evening Walk in the Forest

Sounds
In the distance
Lake Superior washing
Onto the shore
I imagine the whisper
Of an aspen leaf
Falling to the forest floor
Little Union River rippling
Tumbling over its shalely bed
Its music doesn't stop
My breathing
That someday will

Belief

Sitting in the dark on the deck
Surrounded by hemlocks maples popples
All is still but for my breathing
An owl in the distance calling “Who – who whowho”
And the murmur of the creek beyond the woodpile
The full moon rising above the canopy
Shines a glimmer of silver light
On the log railing by my right shoulder
And I find myself wanting to believe

Warning

Aspen leaves turning gold
Maples turning scarlet
Gather them to hold
On a desk or closet

Where your books and pages
Press dried summer flowers
Leaves crumble like sages
Cautioning the fading hours

Last Night at the Cabin

Smoke from the cabin wood-burning stove
Hangs beyond in the darkening forest
The pale blue-gray sky as yet moonless
And starless hovers over hemlock
Sugar maple and birch tree tops
The trickle of the creek weaves the dark
I used to imagine nights like this
Now alone one is here and I try
To hold it close with heart and hope
Before morning's brightening air

Partings

*Anticipate every goodbye.
--Jean Sullivan*

Say goodbye to what you cannot hold
Days unfold seasons turn to red
Years bring the loss of those you love
Friends that once caught your laughter drift away
Dreams always just beyond the horizon
You now know you'll never reach at last
Say goodbye to the books that you treasure
The poems and stories will still breathe between
Pages when you no longer read them
Redwing blackbirds will still be singing
In reeds along the bay but you won't hear them
Say goodbye while you are still able
While a smile catches you by surprise
A poem catches your heart a bird your joy
A loved one your blessing as you say
Goodbye goodbye goodbye goodbye goodbye