Red Pines

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Spring fed. When I was young, my father told me it was why the lake’s water was so clear and cold. Limited the weeds too, he would go on, when compared to lakes in the southern part of the state which became green and fetid from late summer algae blooms.

The bottom is shallow and rocky with a gradual slope into deeper water, so much a man can wade out a few hundred feet and still only be up to his waist. That’s why the weathered dock extends so far out. I step onto it and tread lightly, but it sways under my weight, the planks and pylons creaking in protest. My steps create a rhythm down the pier and soon metallic clangs ring out from the lifts further down, burdened with boats slung over the water. As a child, I would sprint the distance, relishing the din, the sun warm on my face, and entire summers of freedom laid bare before me. With each step, the cadence is slower now—hesitant, and the pitch lower than I remember the last time I was here, which was years ago. No longer filled with promise and joy, the song is a dirge, calling to bear witness.

The end of the dock is empty. Deck chairs are put away, and the flag is furled and stowed out of sight in one of the boats. There is a stillness at this time of year. The dying violet sky of twilight hangs about, and a chill slides
across the water, hinting at autumn’s impending arrival. The lake is a mirror, so calm, that pine trees seemingly
point in opposite directions, creating the illusion of dueling skies, each vying for which one is real.

I shed my soiled clothes, stained with rust-colored blotches, and slip into the water, trying to avoid disrupting
the surface’s delicate tension. I fail and oscillating rings ripple in all directions. The water is only up to my
thighs so the temperature is tolerable. I don’t wait to acclimate and wade far out until standing at full height
leaves only my nostrils exposed. Here, the water is cold, but I don’t feel it. Heat radiates from my core,
combating the thermal differential in the liquid around me.

My ears are submerged and the world is muffled, save my heartbeat thundering in my head. There are no
waves and my eyes are level with the water. With this view, my father would say, one could appreciate the
curvature of the earth. Trees, a mile away on the distant shoreline, fall below the horizon, and lake and sky
merge. Now, the light is fading and everything is a muted wash of gray. I sink below the surface and open
myself to the water, asking it to cradle or consume me if my transgressions merit its judgment.

When I emerge, darkness is fast approaching. The chill of the water has seeped in so I wrap my arms around
my body. It is time to return. I exit the water and gooseflesh stands proud, but I resist the shiver. My clothes
stick and tug at my flesh. A solitary loon calls somewhere on the lake. Its forlorn cry, a howl in the darkness,
pursues as I return to the house, empty now.

Reed Kuehn is a combat veteran who recently began his creative writing journey with a focus on short prose.
While he has called Wisconsin, Maryland, Washington DC, North Carolina, and Colorado home, he currently
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