

# INHERITING THE LAKE

by Katherine Hauswirth

**I** BELLOWED INTO MOM'S NEARLY COMPLETELY DEAF EAR THAT I WAS coming here, that my husband and son would keep an eye on her. She only speaks under certain, increasingly rare conditions, including when she is intensely curious. These situations can temporarily hotwire her dementia-riddled brain. Her mind and her mouth worked to push the question out: "What's happening in Tennessee?"

Here is what's happening. I've embarked on a writing residency in tiny Speedwell, fourteen hours from my Connecticut home. The host is a poet who

makes himself scarce. I've read his poems, so I know he is a trustworthy neighbor, just across the driveway from where I am staying.

The restored mobile home holds literary and photographic leavings from prior artists in residence. I have a narrow bed and a large table already piled with papers and books. My little porch has a rocking chair and a gray cat visitor named Dorrie. I can rest easy and write and walk alongside the pastures.

As I greet the cows roaming the hill, I think about my father's deep love for the

land, and this love was surely his defining characteristic since he died when I was six and I am still hearing about it. I am like him in this way. I peer into the scrub to find the tufted titmouse singing from within. I wonder about a trap, perhaps for muskrats, that I see in the stream. I touch a curled brown circle of gone-to-seed Queen Anne's lace and think about how the seed will make its way into the world. I inventory the varieties of vine drawing circles on the landscape.

The immediate land I walk here in Tennessee doesn't boast sizable lakes and streams, but

there's something about walking Back Valley Road that brings a lake back to me. Maybe it's the shades of green in the roadside brush, or the specific mix of birdsong that nags at me like a paved-over memory. More likely, it's walking the road's narrow shoulder between macadam and meadow flowers that rings the bell for Lake Bomoseen.

At some point during our regular family vacations to a run-down Vermont cabin when I was young, Mom established the tradition of walking to Lake Bomoseen for sunset. If my Dad had been alive, I suspect this habit would still have emerged but with the instructional tone of a guided nature tour. As we walked down Pencil Mill Road and rounded the bend to Route 30, we would have learned how beavers build dams or how dew forms during the night. Dad would have been eager to tell us these things, to hear us respond in sheer amazement.

But this wasn't Mom's way. I remember walking the gravel and turning the hairpin onto asphalt as a family with just the occasional phrase between us. Once the

hairpin was behind us, we'd cross the road. We walked single file, like a duck family, anticipating our first good glimpse of the water and the burgeoning color show. Occasionally, Mom would call out warnings to watch for cars, but not much else was said.

We surely must have exchanged some words about the mesmerizing mix of oranges and reds that expanded and morphed with evening's onset. But mostly, I remember the silence and stillness as the four of us—Mom; my sister, Linda; my brother, John; and I— took it in: the watercolor prelude to the night, the little island out there covered in brush, the dog from the meadow house barking incessantly in the distance. The water rippled in its inviting way, catching the last light. We were each in our own reverie, at the same time in reverie together. Really, what words could have done it justice? The walk home in deepening dusk was subdued and meditative.

I am in that meditative state today as I walk the Tennessee roads. I can't fully step away from the excruciating goodbye with

Mom that's nearing a decade-long run. I think about her thin existence, right down to the pale, soft foods—banana, mashed potatoes, scrambled eggs—that she pokes at on her tray. But, as I ponder this, my eyes take in the cows navigating the limbs of a fallen oak, the better to graze it. Around the curve I sniff the air, puzzling over the source of a strong cucumber smell in the pasture. I watch the shallow stream that's come alive after two nights of torrential rain. Tiny minnows swim like shadows, their skin matching the sand below. The water runs under a tangle of weeds and broken branches, reemerges with a burst and continues on.

Thoughts of Lake Bomoseen continue to nudge me and lead to other thoughts of family waterside moments, like the uncountable trips to Jones Beach at home in New York, where we all lolled about hearing the surf through our sun-induced naps. Mom took us there in autumn and winter too. We viewed the wind-whipped landscape from the boardwalk and rested our backs against a sun-warmed wall, enlivened by the brisk air

and distant, blue glimmer. We scattered her father's ashes there years later, sending him off into the rolling tide.

I didn't see it then, but now I recognize the gift that came with these treks to watch the water. I was helped to understand "what peace there may be in silence," to quote the framed *Desiderata* poem next to Mom's bed.

During our visits at the nursing home, my occasional words are bookended by long pauses. I so rarely get words in return. Mom searches my face. She mimes her love in rare nods and gestures, returns a hug when it's time for me to go. There is sorrow for me in this silence, but alongside it there is unexpected peace.

As Mom's world narrows, my memories of her widen and shimmer, like the waning sun spreading its color above the waiting lake. I see what she led me to then, and words can only begin to hint at it. In my mind's eye I look at Lake Bomoseen again as the light fades. I see holy water marked with the ceaseless wandering of the wind. I walk on, enfolded in the hush of the evening. ❀