

Boy and Father

Ernest Hemingway and his son Gregory,
Sun Valley, Idaho, October, 1941
—a photograph by Robert Capa

On a great log of cedar, bend of river,
they pause to rest, they dawdle, half-recline,
dreaming the afternoon away, part of it,
boy and father, having hiked here together
where water edges into sky and sky

drifts off beyond an Idaho imagined
as the state of utter boyhood enchantment
which, true to its mythology, it was,
it is, it can never quite hope to be,
the miles behind them, crossed, not calculated,

the direction they took, have still to take,
once they resume their trek, not yet disclosed.
See how the sun slants from the left, their feet,
Father's in stout protective gear, each layer
meant to ward off the damp, the chill, the boy's

naked from toe to just above the ankle
where tattered denim cuff begins, the sight
of those small limbs suddenly poignant, casting
shadows, tenuous, pale, on the dock's planks
as insubstantial as the haze, the glare,

which has settled on everything before it,
woods, water, bone, bare flesh, this day in autumn.
Not a ripple is seen to roll the water,
but the shadows which fall from them, boy, father,
seem about to turn ominous, or worse.

Father will tell the boy amazing stories,
 tales the boy thrills to, listens to transfixed,
 feeling the words rise, gain on him, take color,
 shape themselves, word by word, into a fable
 of who we are, become, what one might live for:

earth and its creatures, bravery in men,
 daybreak, twilight, some emblematic darkness
 as it is bound on these two soon to fall;
 summer snow at the steeper elevations,
 refractions much too blinding to peer into;

rivers turning into the unforeseen
 where, upstream, the bend is obscured by scrub,
 underbrush of the not-yet-to-be-known,
 and the current, unseen by them, veers off
 to its own encompassing, piercing strangeness,

utterly visionary, wholly dream-struck,
 the boy's eyes closed, half-closed, the stories coming
 at an even pace through the afternoon,
 Father's gaze, through the intricate narration,
 never leaving the prospect fixed before them —

(one cries out: look, it is the man's attention,
 that of itself, which is to be beheld,
 treasured, marveled at, what one takes away
 when night falls, or at last one quits the scene,
 closes one's eyes against the photograph

and is left by oneself to reconstruct
 what he feels for the boy, music the boy hears
 and is certain, far from here, to remember
 as he tells stories, equally amazing,
 to a boy, barefoot, who, in time, in time

(patience, I tell you, patience), calls him Father
 (the mind exists to piece the world together,
 to decorate, to complicate, make human) —,
 slouching in stained, bleached hunter's cap, in boots
 bound to take him as far as he must go,

even farther, one's guess is, right leg arched,
 the left fitting with ease tucked just beneath it,
 all of a piece, right wrist poised on the knee,
 calm with the calmness of the singleminded,
 his light the light that grips the self-possessed.

Ernest will wish the boy to see the world
 precisely as he sees it, clear-eyed, rapt,
 leaf for leaf, blade by blade, 'coon, 'gator, grizzly,
 deer at a clearing, mid-slope, 'possum, hoot owl,
 to know, know intimately, even love

(love, too, shall be possible: patience, patience),
 the weapons placed here on the log beside them
 (the boy cradles the one we know is his,
 a hand splayed gracefully across the barrel,
 an embrace seeming many things at once,

tender, intimate, pure, protective, caring)
 until, together, rising, they move on,
 resume that trek through woods to distant parts
 only to come out on some farther side
 it shall not be given this poem to name —

models of brisk efficiency, hard fact
 taking the form of two sleek hunting rifles,
 luminous with the sun aslant their sights,
 with which one knows, knows, there can be no quarrel,
 neither mediation nor compromise,

none then, that autumn, none now, as I write this,
 years having passed, twilights long fallen, none,
 when the angle from which one thought to view them
 might well have been subjected to revision,
 minor but telling, or the spare perspective,

adequate in its time, now unavailing,
 have opened, all at once, to complication,
 woods deepen, alter, sightlines dim, light falter,
 Sun Valley, too, transformed, not what it seemed
 if, in fact, it was ever what it seemed

(seize it, clutch it, warm to it, boy, regard
 the opulence, however spare, of line,
 the pleasures to be mined merely advancing
 a hand across its surface, down its spine —
 it breaks the heart even to contemplate it —,

the haunting, smoky maleness of its scent,
 the slow seduction of the parts, details
 plain but miraculous, the unrelenting
 purity of the thing one comes to do,
 October golden, far, the river depthless,

cheek to butt, neck taut, teeth clenched, breathing stopped,
 one eye clearing the sight, the other shut
 against the lure of infinite distraction,
 trigger cocked, squint, peer, discharge, impact, shudder:
 something, its name still hidden from us, dies).

The far shore of the river, hazy, blurred,
 its rise unprepossessing, gentle, slow,
 is placed to occupy the space behind them,
 after the eye accommodates wide water
 spanning the middle distance at their backs,

seared patchwork of undifferentiated
 clumps of low-lying scrub and motley grasses —
 domestic, nondescript, the mass of it,
 from this distance at least quite manageable
 were one to undertake, at last, to cross it,

map it, grasp it, hold in the mind, depict —
 one expects to meet in those tangled places
 water looms, weather, sky, and Idaho,
 our knowledge, thought extensive, partial, faulty,
 ranges beyond the limits of one's vision.

On the side opposite, this nearer shore
 which we come to identify as theirs,
 the coast of dreams, the unspeakably light-struck,
 their plot, their turf, their share of Idaho
 together, brief as it may prove to be,

their bank of autumn river as it is,
 as it could never possibly have been
 (the mind exists to reconstruct the world),
 woods are known to rage in a fevered soil,
 flourish, in fairness, to a depth of miles,

none of it measured, bridged, made peace with, stayed,
 aspects signifying the uncontained,
 the uncontainable, the very nature
 of wilderness here on the near shore, strangeness,
 defying us to map it, yield its name.

The war will be declared to have begun
 in little less than two months from today,
 rumor has it, thousands of miles from here
 (history, as we call it, not yet made,
 the texts yet to record, make judgment, weigh,

the longitude obscure, the time zone shrouded,
 half a hemisphere westward, clamor, flame,
 the great fleet shattered, foreign cruisers offshore
 lobbing shells to the canefields, conflagrations
 breaking out in the hills ringing the Harbor,

bright, fabled double Harbor, mythic Harbor
 (the day, they will have cried, the day on fire) —
 but, what with this expanse of soundless river,
 the current, mild, deceptive, at their backs,
 with the walls of this valley to provide them

sanctuary, however brief and false
 (the mind exists to breach what would enclose it),
 and, of course, with these woods massed here before them
 waiting to be traversed, quite as momentous
 as woods not shown, not seen, are bound to seem

(woods compelling, dramatic, indrawn, strange,
 filtering out all hint of sound, of light,
 woods we only assume loom as a presence
 these two, boy and father, are to be called on —
 all things in time, have patience — to contend with,

all evidence, all proof, denied, withheld —
 boyhood, manhood, fatherhood, shall it matter
 what name we attach to the miles ahead? — ;
 woods purported, as in the deepest tales,
 to be at once both factual and mythic,

to rise, stout-barked, astonished into leaves,
 where the imagination claims they rise),
 little, nothing, of that, one grants, seems destined
 to have reached them here where, tale unto tale,
 boy and father slouch on a huge, felled timber

marking the border between dock and water,
 its imperfections vivid in this light —
 festering cankers, fissures caked with rot:
 the mind exists to peer into the cracks — ,
 at the zenith of the sun's arc, an autumn

much like any other and yet unique
 since it is theirs, and here, here that we find them,
 dreamers and sprawlers, voiceless, stripped, however
 limited one's knowledge of how they breathe,
 what they suffer, what they are yet to suffer,

frail one's grasp of what they must undertake,
 all but unpronounceable, siteless, dark,
 once they rise from bare planks, each, make their way
 into the wholly nameless, what they stalk,
 where they walk when, one booted, one barefooted,

they enter these explicit, teeming woods
 which give no ground and ask no less of us;
 no matter the discrepancies which loom
 between imagined boy, imagined father,
 and the Ernest, the Gregory, who dawdle

so splendidly the afternoon away,
 languid beside their rifles, and no matter
 the desolation of whatever else
 (time, give it time: one need only be patient)
 awaits them, implicates them, does them harm.