

# Just Being There

When my father—who quit school at eighth grade  
to work the farm with his mother—  
said to no one in particular  
“I never felt sixteen,”

it was like those instants of looking at nothing  
but seeing everything, so brief it’s lost  
at the moment it almost comes.

My mother tries to ignore  
these spells, his living in the past,  
part of diabetes and old age.

“I’ve worried about the weather all my life,” he says,  
and suddenly it seems that all those years  
when we could go nowhere unless the work was finished  
are still here . . . too much that won’t be done.



Sometimes not to feel is the greatest desire,  
so I clench my stomach muscles and try  
to think of times he seemed happy,

remember in a sepia haze his whistling  
through his teeth, bent over the repair of a harness,  
light slanting on dust particles  
through slats of the barn:  
moments of concentration and happiness . . .  
*perhaps they are the same.*

He remembers the names of all his horse teams,  
the exact years of greatest snowfall and drought,  
but describes funerals he didn’t attend, guests  
at my wedding who weren’t there.



I've just been forced at a family dinner  
to revise a vivid memory: my sister and I  
chasing his favorite horse from wet pasture,  
when suddenly it fell and would not get up.  
But my brother was with me instead, they both agree,  
who ran to get Father, who shot the mare.  
Now we are silent  
    in the different shades of guilt we've kept  
        at just being there.

The end of a story like this  
is that it doesn't end, only changes . . .  
leaving us to wonder at the slow  
kaleidoscope of memory's shadow  
remaking itself—tomorrow and next year—  
how truth holds all our versions.

—Dixie Partridge

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