

Old Poets, Old Mills, Old Women

by Sydney Lea

Despite my academic degrees and my forty-plus years on college faculties, I've never considered myself a scholar. I've always found it too hard to communicate the crucial effects on me of the literature I love, found them always beyond explanation.

That's the case, for example, with my favorite Wordsworth poem, "Resolution and Independence." I've immersed myself in it so often—along with assorted poems by many other poets—that I can almost recite it. I mention all this because I re-read it a few evenings ago, then went about such minor chores as still fall to me. Or I thought I did. As it turns out, the poem's spirit would soon reassert itself in ways I'd never have foreseen.

The speaker of "Resolution and Independence," out walking the moors and brimming with youthful enthusiasm, sinks abruptly into despondency:

... fears and fancies thick upon me came;
Dim sadness—and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could name.

In this bleak frame of mind, he notices a figure in the distance. In a passage that has always gripped me, he describes that figure:

Motionless as a cloud the old man stood,
That heareth not the loud winds when they call,
And moveth all together, if it move at all.

So puzzled is the young wanderer by this almost phantasmagorical person that he twice asks him what he does, and the old man patiently explains each time that he's a gatherer of leeches. "Once I could meet with them on every side," he attests,

"... But they have dwindled long by slow decay;
Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may."

Later along, the poet tells us that:

The old Man still stood talking by my side;
But now his voice to me was like a stream
Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;
And the whole body of the Man did seem
Like one whom I had met with in a dream;

I've always been put in mind here of Daniel's Ancient of Days, who "spoke with the voice of many waters," but whether or not the allusion applies, there does seem something mythical about this old person.

Last evening, for no reason I can specify, I fell into a state akin to Wordsworth's before his meeting with the leech-gatherer. I came out of my moperly quickly enough, and although what I say may suggest a retrospective tidying up, the poem's energies may have had something to do with all this.

In any case, I leapt to glad anticipation. We'd soon be making our annual pilgrimage to our north-country cabin and a reunion with our whole three-generation family. I can't explain why that prospect made me think of a town we pass along the way. We used to roll our windows tight as we drove through it because of the stench of its paper mill. There's no need to worry about that anymore: the mill shut down a decade back, its plant demolished and its administrative offices carved into low-rent apartments, whose residents, almost all of them elderly, barely get by on Social Security.

As if overnight, the town's population dwindled. The school is part of a district union now. Students once went from kindergarten through 12th grade in a single schoolhouse, which became too expensive to maintain without enough youngsters left to fill it. At certain times of year, we see a drab van, a make-do strobe light strapped to its roof, transporting what few kids still live there.

The building was also badly damaged by a fire after two years of vacancy. People imagined arson, but no suspect was ever found. It may only have been some careless drifter squatting there. Bats used to squat in the schoolhouse too. We'd notice them flitting in and out of the charred bell tower if we drove by toward evening; but something called white-nose fungus has even decimated the bats.

For several years, it was rumored that the fire department would set the ruined school on fire again for training purposes, but this never happened. The firemen are all aged now, and few young volunteers are coming forth to replenish their ranks. So the sad structure still stands.

A pharmacy did business down the street, operated by the same family for three generations. It closed shortly after the mill did—and not for that reason alone. The store kept being looted for drugs. The single town cop was all but completely retired, and no one seemed eager to take over his underpaid job. The state police were always notified of the lootings, but that never amounted to anything. The officers were accountable for hundreds of square miles in surrounding territory.

So most firefighting and law enforcement now comes from elsewhere, like the pharmaceuticals and groceries that require a half-hour's travel. That's a sadly familiar modern narrative all over the rural northeast (and indeed in small communities all over the nation). Members of the moribund Congregational church have done their best to run errands for medication and food, but these Christian souls are dying off themselves—or belatedly joining the emigration.

The town pond holds what loftier anglers call trash fish: pumpkinseeds, mud chub, suckers. So even the trout are gone, though neighborhood myth suggests that a few survivors—grown King Salmon-sized with the years—patrol the deep holes. That's unlikely, but if they do, they're safe. No one sits on the bank with a baited line in the water these days, let alone casting a fly or lure.

How do I know all this? I never really met any of the town's inhabitants—none, that is, with one exception, who's the source of all I've reported. In days gone by, if I was traveling alone and the wind was right, I often stopped at "Jane's," the local diner. I can't quite remember how I struck up a sufficient relationship with its eponymous owner that, even after her business folded, I'd briefly visit her on trips to camp. Her husband long dead, she lived alone in a tiny cape at the edge of town, its clapboard yellowed by smoke from the mill's active era.

Jane's been gone quite a while, and her absence surely left a gap: for one thing, she was among those good-hearted church members who took their neighbors to the

market or drugstore. I just drive past her house nowadays, and yet these details about her occurred to me this morning.

I reflected on my last stopover at her house. Jane fixed me a cup of coffee; then we sat in her kitchen. The usual slightly awkward spell passed as I strained to think of something else to say than “How are you?” I knew the answer to that one. Her breath was labored, her ankles and calves swollen under compression stockings.

At the end of her deal table, Jane had one of those flip calendars you can use year after year. The date was not right. I’d stopped by on April 15th, I’m certain, because I’d dropped my tax return in the mailbox as I began my trip, but the calendar showed April 12th. In the page’s margins, Jane had recorded the annual return of certain birds. But even the year was wrong: 2016, not 2018. Given the circumstances of Jane’s life in retirement, I was headed in a glum direction, suspecting that the migrations had so declined that her notes didn’t seem worth taking anymore. I didn’t ask, determined not to mire us, or myself at least, in mournful reflection.

This morning, remembering that calendar with its old notes about titmouse and brown creeper, purple finch and nuthatch, I pictured myself on the town pond’s bank. Years before that day with Jane, the reek of the paper mill pushed away from me by a brisk wind. I marveled at a flock of cedar waxwings above the water, preying on hatching insects. It was about noon, and the sun dazzled the birds. I beheld a great wash of gold. I’ve never forgotten it.

This is the sort of recollection I should call up from before and after that little town took its sad turn, Jane passed on, and I grew old. Far too often, my recourse is to some banal variation of *tempus fugit*, but everything’s changed and will go on changing no matter our longings: We accept that or go mad.

I recall Jane’s acceptance. She never commented either on her own degeneration or her town’s. Whenever I want to talk myself out of depression, I should remember a spectacular moment on that last visit. It had rained all morning, but now the rain turned to drizzle, almost to mist. After a hug, which I couldn’t know was our last, I opened Jane’s door and was dazzled by an arc so luminous that it might have begun in her dooryard. I’ve never seen so splendid a rainbow.

Jane beamed and blurted, “Now doesn’t *that* make a perfect day all on its own?”

My subconscious may have tended toward the depressive aspect of “Resolution and Independence” a few mornings back. Today I remembered Jane’s response to the rainbow, both delighted and—like the leech-gatherer’s—sturdy.

I could have laughed myself to scorn to find
In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.
“God,” said I, “be my help and stay secure;
I’ll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!”

I’d do well to think of Jane’s joy that morning. It’s bound to work. At least it should.



Sydney Lea is a Pulitzer finalist, Vermont Poet Laureate, founding editor of *New England Review*, and recipient of his state’s highest artistic distinction, The Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts. *Now Look* is his latest novel, *Such Dancing as We Can* his most recent volume of personal essays, and *What Shines* his sixteenth and most recent poetry collection. A volume of new and selected poems is due in 2027.