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Self-Portrait

Ethan Paquin

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Self-Portrait

This was the last poem I ever wrote.
It came to me under the blue sky,
under the bluest sky. Do you know
blue? Have you ever seen a blue settle
against the rest of the universe so
starkly, or bury itself so deeply into
you that it made you think of a spring
cutting through the ancient gray rock
of your favourite childhood hillside?
Do you remember childhood? The
rabbits in your grandfather's coop,
the sway of your uncle's boat atop
the cool Atlantic inlet, the long brown
hair of your mother in a photo you
didn't quite fathom upon glancing it
at age six, the first your father shaved
off his moustache, the first taste of berry
from your grandmother's pie, the calm in
your aunt's eyes as she led you onward
through a gallery of American paintings,
the sadness in your brother's young eyes
as he awaited some unknown in the attic
as he played with a fragile china tea set,
the first time you noticed a flag flutter
and realized the wind is older than all,
the first time you cared to notice the sun
setting over the former pastures, once
fertile cow pastures and thence plots
for the dull lives of condominium dwellers,
the trails cut in the woods and the poison
ivy and oak, the nail clean through the foot

and the first knowledge of damage? Do you?
Do you think anything is as awful as purple
after the rains? I remember the first thunder-
storm—I was there, and I wasn't afraid, but
I felt it was terrible, I felt punishment, I felt
chased, as on the high mountaintop in the west
of the central region of my home state when,
after summiting, the clamour and fearful crack
descended atop me. I remember words coming
in much the same way, and now after years of
plying them, I feel no better or better off than
I ever was before, and perhaps even sadder.
I remember saying *je t'aime* to a young girl
I'd go on to marry, and upon whom my fear
and irrationality and hate would be heaped,
I remember the first time she took me in
her mouth, I remember a smile she hasn't had
in many years. I remember my son the second
he was born, for I was the first to hold him and
he looked at me as if he had known me forever,
that he had known me before and would always.
I was told to not write a poem about this moment
for the moment was the poem, but here, eight years
later, I feel I must write it for I see him get taller
and I see my hair thinning and every day, though
surrounded by friends, I sense what a shoal far out
in the Atlantic must sense when it is countenanced
by the vilest black that the hurricane-swept eastern
sky can offer up. I see the kindest black in the eyes
of my daughter, who frolics as if she has already
danced in some far-off France or Greece, happy
as the glint of sun in the dry hills of her ancestry.
I look at the clutter on my desk, worthless clutter,
and then to the books upon my shelves I never
thought I'd actually read, and now they are all

mostly read. I miss the mountains, I miss the ocean, and sometimes both places seem to compete for me so that I feel as if I'm being unfaithful to one or the other. I miss the sleeping on a February slope high atop Mount Flume, going to bed at 3 p.m. for the sun was already dying out, and huddling against even the snow neath my sleeping bag for comfort. Do you remember things like these? If I speak of such things, you know. You have as many moments as I—they are numerous, like the branches or cones of the northern forest. In the deep recesses of such, one will find creatures if one tries hard enough, and sometimes the looks on their faces are tragic. Do you want to make amends with them, as I do, for leveling their homes, or for writing so insipidly about them? Do you wish you'd catalogued every berry you'd picked, from the very first at age three in a rural orchard whose wind-socks flittered in a light June, or every autumn apple you'd seen fallen into decay? When the dawn is imminent, do you find yourself counting the thousands of hours you've got left? The dozens of hours a loved one has left? The unknowable length of time has left a marriage, one so strip-mined and soured you lose all hope in forgiveness of self? The great distance between where a shell washes upon the beach and where it might have wanted to land? And all this while, the questions keep getting posed and the slow descent makes our baskets unsteady and eyes affix upon some point of arrival that makes this last poem and its writing superfluous and trite, not nearly as permanent