

Barry Dempster

Mary Lake Writing Retreat

Late afternoon, Mary Lake, islands
dipping their fall poses in glass.
Five of us on the dock, semi-circled
in green plastic chairs, rumouring
over loons and deer, wondering whether
something might happen we could write about.
See that leaf waving to the great below,
is it stop-sign red, no, lighter, rosé,
geez, can't one of us get it right?
How about Chinese red, like the robes
in a Zhang Yimou swordfest, yes,
as perfect as human beings
who can't whoosh across the sky can get.
Five poems in the making, five shades of
Chinese red, one over-observed leaf.

Are writers competitive? a friend asks.
Wishing I could describe how we all
reached for the leaf as one stretch, like
Michelangelo's Adam multiplied. How
just before it hit the ground, another followed,
and another, perfect copies of
the same intention. We headed off in all
five directions, leaves tucked behind our ears,
poems spilling out like breadcrumb trails,
follow me, no, me, echoing
into the richly-described woods.

Later that night, draped in moonlessness
and searching for more, we almost bumped
into a deer posed beside the boathouse.
You're real, we said in unison
as he sidled into the trees and we
followed with our nets of reverence.
Each one of us reached out and touched
the darkness to our own soft parts: *so this
is what wild feels like*. As close
to speechless as we could be without
sacrificing our communal tongue.
Holy as a deer, we all would have written
in the notebooks we seem suddenly
to have mislaid somewhere