



Roger Jones
Goodbye



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Goodbye

Old Man

Dad had taken me to have my hair cut short. “He keeps trying to look like a Beatle,” he told the chuckling barber.

Afterwards, in the car, I hid my head under a baseball cap.

Backing out of the slot, Dad slammed his brakes. My cap flew off. A long-haired teenager wheeling past behind him on a bike screamed, “Watch where you’re goin’, old man!”

“Old man?”—I’d never thought of my father as old.

Forty years ago, and Dad a decade younger than I am now.

day after day
wheeling by—
this same blue sky

Alzheimer's

I'm starting to understand: the mother I grew up with isn't here now—only the stranger who stands by the ringing phone and cannot remember what she is supposed to do with it.

clinging to the pine bough
but gone as well—
cicada

Early Memory: Davenport, Iowa, 1961

Reddish squirrel on Brady Street, next to the park, lying on its stomach in the near lane, front legs outstretched as if in flight, a pool of drying blood around its mouth. Traffic passes; no one runs over it a second time. The calm purr of cars passing back and forth. People going home late from work.

follows me home
on the north wind
a red leaf

ICU

A warm light and the night nurse in the hall padding by. I'm hooked to machines with changing green numbers, tubes in both hands. Heartbeat and blood pressure steady. Drifting into the harbor of sleep.

schoolyard dream
laughter echoing
through fog

Leaving Paradise

We're moving to Oklahoma after years on the West Coast. Fifteen, I can't fathom my father's motives for the transfer. I'm having a hard time forgiving him for ripping me loose from friends, cousins, a good life. As he drives, I sleep away most of the valley until we cross the Tehachapis and stop for a fill-up and a snack in Daggett, California (pop. 200). Grieving alone, I chew dry pineapple strudel and look out at the vast red sunset.

shaking the earth—
big semis on the freeway
at the edge of the desert

Signals

The first night I get to know my future wife, I ask about her fiancée, whom I've heard about from others. She looks down at the carpet. "He's really into his work these days." For a moment, we're both quiet.

on and off
behind the venetian blind
a firefly

Garden Haibun

I like the feed store—racks of garden seeds, rows of tools and implements, the oiled wooden floor creaking and thrumping underfoot.

I love the slightly acrid whiff of nitrogen fertilizer, the hummingbird feeders and martin houses along a back aisle.

Once in awhile, an old friend there. We talk and catch up.

I try never to leave empty-handed. Today, departing, I stop halfway down the concrete front steps, lean over the side, and lop a weed with the shiny hoe I just bought.

summer shower
hoisting the melon
onto my shoulder

Interstate 10

Filling stations, cafes, fruit stands, or roadside stops, miles apart, hulk along the breezy freeway. Abandoned, ramshackled, collapsing, burned to the ground. No one bothers to tear them down or clear them away. Two decades we've been passing, to and from visits to family. One day our tire goes flat; we pull to a stop along the shoulder.

weeds thrust
through flattened signs—
try some of our . . .

Goodbye

Asleep with my arm under my pillow and stretched so that my hand hangs loose off the bed, palm upward, I dream that someone's hand enters mine a moment. It's soft, warm, smooth, small. My mother's hand. As I close my hand to squeeze, her hand slips out and off my fingertips, as if in goodbye. I dream I'm waking up. The hand is not my mother's but my wife's—an affectionate touch before she leaves for work. But then I wake up for real: she's been gone for hours.

autumn morning
patches of light and shadow
on a stone floor

September Haze

In the months before retiring, my father drafted and redrafted blueprints for his dream house, which eventually he built. For me, retirement is still a decade away, but some days, stuck in traffic on the interstate, I daydream—what will I do when I retire? Fish? Hike? Read books I never had time for? Converse more with my wife? Maybe I'll go with her on a second honeymoon. Perhaps learn to play the harmonica.

suspended high
above the freeway
a hot air balloon

The Good Life

Getting started this fall morning: kids almost late to school; a chore to find their clothes, backpacks, to get them dressed; schedules for me to make, appointments to remember. I step outside, with books and folders under one arm, keys and coffee cup in my other hand, coffee sloshing to the ground, the cell phone ringing in my pocket. I remember at twenty-five telling myself that no matter what happened, I'd never end up living like this.

stormy day—
a sycamore leaf
pasted to the windshield

Working Man

Driving, today, a hundred fifty miles north to my best friend Jay's father's funeral.

Jay died years ago in an accident; his father was best man at my wedding.

It's early January. I go through many familiar small towns, but mostly the journey's farmland, quiet sunlit yellow grass, and soon, tall southern pines. I get absorbed in the landscape, reminiscing all the way. I recall how Mr. Lonn believed in physical labor, the old-time work ethic. He considered my college studies a waste of time—wouldn't even stay in the room when I talked about them—but he liked me anyhow.

Arriving twenty minutes late, I straighten my tie as I walk through parked cars toward the chapel, hearing from inside the laughter of someone's shared anecdote.

open coffin
a face the color
of old coffee

Global Warming

July 29. 4 pm. Temperature: 104.

Katydid loud in the treetops. A hint of breeze.

The sky blue, relatively cloudless (occasional wisps), reflects my laggard imagination and lack of ideas. I'm content to let the world go on today unremarked.

tap tap tap
woodpecker waits—
no response

Everything looks withered, dry, heat-stressed, droopy. As the climate heats up, experts warn of more radical droughts, higher heat, stormier storms to come . . .

butterfly
leaving its shadow
on a sunlit wall

Late August, City Pool

Almost summer's end. The light different—lower—on the pool, though the joy-squeals of children and flash of bodies remain for a little longer.

They all move as if preserved in the Long Ago.

Soon the park staff will furl up the long heavy canvas slide down which thousands of children all summer have skittered down a thin skin of water and shot off limbs akimbo into the green river.

The tree rope's already still. The pool will be covered with leaves. The lifeguard will be off at college, writing a thousand words, "What I Did On Vacation."

October night
moonspark
off a windy lake

Late Night Fireplace

Mom and Dad died about a month apart—first him, then her.

It was like so many nights when I was growing up, when they'd sit up late talking. Then, having exhausted a topic, he'd get up and head off to bed. Then, a little later, almost in afterthought, she'd get up yawning and go in to join him.

shifting log—
two sparks tangle
up the chimney flue

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