

Campsite Insomnia (For Kate, Slightly Older Than The Hour)

*"The sedge has withered from the lake,
And no birds sing."*

—John Keats, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"

At two the god-damned loons, mockingbirds
from hell's aviary, flighted my sleep. Oh sure,
their anguished cries are lovely, to be treasured,
but only for the same reason we value tragedy
over comedy, and so love love's anguish acted out.
One really doesn't want high art in the dark night,
and thus I cursed their damn strutting and fretting
noisily signifying nothing upon my nocturnal stage.

At three I got up to piss, and caught the prickly stars
trying to climb stealthily down along their own rays
like the inverse of a poor beggar trying to lift
himself by his own bootstraps: it was sad-futile,
but perhaps the sight of it inspiring for those few
in heaven who must long like virgins for earth's aches.
But, hell, me, I just longed for the limbo of sleep.

By four the stars had slipped behind the torn curtain
of a mist-presaged dawn, and I gave up, got up
in the dim white light to walk with a dew cloak
and listen to sandpipers pipe their silly tunes while
whiskey-voiced red-wing blackbirds mocked them
from their cattail bleachers in the swamp beyond.

But then at five—my daughter crawled out of the tent
wrapped-up in youth's blanket disrespect for bird song
and adult angst, secure against the day's dawning chill,
and insisted with a grin we invent comical Zen haiku
as we watch water-striders slice transitory scars on the lake.

And as sudden
as daylight or death
no birds sang.
And I was glad.

Ken Stange

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