

Selection from

***Light From An Eclipse*, by Nancy Lagomarsino**

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Founded in 1996 by Robert Alexander, the Marie Alexander Poetry Series is dedicated to promoting the appreciation, enjoyment, and understanding of American prose poetry. An imprint of White Pine Press since 2001, the Series publishes one to two books annually. It is our mission to publish the very best contemporary prose poetry and to carry the rich tradition of this hybrid form on into the 21st century.

Alzheimer's disease, the country my father approaches, has its own sky and shore. We watch helplessly, as he drifts away in a rowboat without oars. How is his new country different? The same kitchen, the same backyard, yet untethered. I have become a walking memory, waiting to be forgotten. The other day, when I called to say that I'd be coming for a visit, Mother put him on the phone, and he boomed, "Nancy! I recognize your voice!"

Watching a video we made of her fiftieth wedding anniversary party last year, I realize how little he participates, though we didn't notice then. Instead of listening to people, he waits for them to stop talking so that he can contribute his next remark, masking his mild disorientation with jovial laughter. He's never been the kind of man who would sit around with his wife and daughters just chatting or arguing about abortion. In order to spend time with Dad, you need to do something with him, like swimming, a walk, or getting the hibachi ready for a cookout. When we were kids, our family moved a lot. He'd put up a swing on a good tree, build a standing sandbox, install a basketball hoop, croquet course, badminton net, climbing bar. I asked Mother when she first realized something serious was wrong. She said it was when they took the car to get the brakes fixed, and the next day he had no memory of doing that.

I'm not even tempted to try to sort out the moments in search of a significant one. Maybe it was the time he started to drive the car away, while I was still climbing into the back seat, or the time he insisted on steering the canoe under the bridge at high tide, nearly knocking off my head. With so many stones on the beach, how can I choose the one that came first?

Worries about Mother and Dad pursue me through a crowd of goldenrod and into pinewoods, where the sound of the brook relaxes my eyes, allowing me to gaze outward. I come here often, seeking the silence water imposes when it takes on a voice. Across the ravine, lichen-covered boulders hold themselves still, as though departing glaciers told them to wait. It feels strange to be so involved with my parents again, after decades of comfortable distance.

When I woke from the dream that is childhood and went into the world, I carried the dream with me—you might say I've treated my childhood like a favorite shirt worn every day. How could I leave my childhood in a drawer? For so long, it was my only garment. Photographs show me gliding along with my family, but inwardly I was reliving one of those vivid dreams we remember more easily than the day and night that surround it. Today, I balance on a stone that rises above the brook, close to my parents, yet removed. Caught in the current, a small branch hurtles past like a child on a bicycle.

October leaves are falling, and Dad rakes one part of the front lawn over and over. Two years ago this month, our old dog Max died of cancer. The grayer his muzzle, the more I treasured him. He was put to sleep in his own bed, head erect, radiating dignity as the needle entered his leg. When his neck relaxed, David caught his head.

The day before, I'd been seized with grave-digging fever. I chose a protected spot on the edge of the back lawn, visible from the kitchen window. Following the vet's instructions, I dug down three feet, measuring with my yardstick, clipping roots, carving perfect corners in the clay. Next morning, I lined the bottom with pine needles. The rain held off. After the vet had driven away, we wrapped Max in a white sheet, carried him to his grave, and lowered him while he was still warm. We were careful with his tail. We put in his water dish, his collar and his toys, shoveled in a thick blanket of dirt, and laid a piece of slate on top. Later, when it started to rain, I rushed out with a tarp.

This was a dog I'd sometimes treated roughly, impatiently, a terrier mix of unknown lineage I'd walked with, caressed, and complained about for nearly fifteen years. We gave one another an understandable life. I was proud of his body, his feet and penis rather big for a thirty-five-pound dog, his bedroom eyes, his whiskers that hid pills, his tail that wagged in circles instead of back and forth. He could be a black and white blur, or as slow as a local train. I held his face in my hands, kissed his nose, and said good-bye. For so long, I looked into the future to study his death. Now, still unprepared, I must look into the past.

The paths Max wore away in his years of guarding us are grown over, though I keep thinking I see him limping toward me. The lawn raked bare will grow again. The leaves will accumulate, and no one will try to remove every single one. The days will drift down, the day my father dies among them, a fragile veil similar to the others, as if all from the same tree.

Mother and Dad are up with the light. As in most marriages, one walks slightly ahead, and with their two sets of eyes they enter the outside world, drive to the mall, and find racks of clothing on sale. Dad admires a pair of lightweight outdoor shoes. Mother puts them back, saying that he can have them when it's warmer. She buys me a bathrobe the color of moss. Vigilant, a couple patrols its territory.

In the afternoon, Dad comes downstairs and says, "Katherine, there are no clothes in my closet." Mother goes up to the bedroom, and, sure enough, only two or three things dangle on hangers. She searches high and low and finally finds his clothes in the eaves. In an unremembered moment, he had opened the Alice in Wonderland door and draped them in there. What was going through his head? He loves his clothes so much, he returns to them many times each day. Perhaps he thought they were in danger, and, like a mother cat, moved them to a safer spot.

“How was your Christmas?” I ask Mother on the phone.

“We didn’t have a very good start,” she says. “Your father paid no attention to the gifts I’d arranged in the living room. All he wanted to do was go outside and shovel a path for the mailman.”

“Could he open his presents himself?”

“Pretty much. He thought the apron you gave him was to wear bowling.” Mother had said he needed a new apron, so I’d ordered an apron for each of them, embroidered with their names and a little design—for her, a white rose, for him, a red bowling ball knocking over white pins.

“Have you had a chance to listen to the Perry Como tapes?”

“Yes! I’ve played the religious one several times.”

Before wrapping the Perry Como tapes, I’d listened to them both, one his top hits, like “Hot Diggity Dog” and “Catch a Falling Star,” and the other a mix ranging from “I Believe” and “Scarlet Ribbons” to “When You Come to the End of the Day.” On his weekly TV show, Perry projected the image of a family man, relaxed and a bit melancholy. Forty years later, his music still resonates, though muted, as if each song had hatched like a butterfly, fluttered about, and been stuffed back in its cocoon. Bombarded by dreams, we basked in the black and white light of the *1950s*, unaware that a smile is a vessel curved to hold sorrow.