

Three Poems by John Grey

The Camper

The meal is done.
And the coals don't take kindly
to the subsequent dousing.
In fact, they hiss. Why shouldn't they?
No taste of grilled brook trout came their way.

I remember another time camping
but in childhood.
It was me and two dozen other Boy Scouts
in what seemed like wildness
but was really just a mile or two
off the highway.
The first day, I wandered off by myself and got lost
but I was found, trembling in my grass-stained khakis,
before nightfall.

I must admit
I made for a useless Boy Scout.
Even worse, I was given to attacks of asthma.
And a gift for shyness that hasn't, even today,
completely gone away.
I wanted to mix in.
And yet I was driven to seek solitude.
That's how I got lost -
in my own mind as much as any forest.

And now here we are,
the two of us, outdoors,
with a tent we somehow raised,
and sleeping bags
dragged down from the attic.

I'm no more woodsy than I was then
but I'm taller, stronger.
With every inch of height, pound of weight,
my limitations have shrunk a little.

I even caught a trout, cooked it on the flame.
You're more impressed than you're letting on.
And I've got GPS, maps, a sense of direction,
and most of all, you're with me.
That's the best part.
I'm found before I get a chance to lose myself.

Living Together

Our two lives evoke multiple desires.
A grand bargain - so adjust your
expectations accordingly.
For we each act in relation to the other.
Remember that when the air rubs raw,
the room feels flush with flames.

Men and women are tense by design.
We wouldn't have nerve ends otherwise.
We are active forces, mutually exclusive.
So we not only must live with who we are,
a unit must be accounted for.
It, in turn, has its own nervous system,
is hot-wired to the tautness
of a mother bear with cubs under threat.

Vitality, hostility, are simultaneously
evoked by these strains and stresses.
In close quarters such as these,
they both define and personify intimacy.
So let's just hug, shall we.
We'll call it absolution if anyone asks.

The Great Mystery

I was once at a family gathering
when two of my dad's old cronies stopped in,
men I knew by name but not by sight.
They shared stories about the trio's days together
on the railroad, fixing track,
wielding levers of carts like madmen
as they raced each other up and down hills.

That was before my father's family and associates
just drifted away, back to their own clan, of which
I was never a part. But then, there was room
and laughs enough for tales of dad making a pass at my
mother
as she served the hungry at a station cafe
or his nervy jitterbugging when he looked like
a mustachioed scarecrow jumping in a nest of bull ants.

These men paid respects to my mother
but I could tell, by the regret in their voices,
that they figured the life went out of him from wedding
day on.
I, of course, could only be part of that lifelessness.
Yes, he continued to drink with them,
as if he were still part of that Rogue's Gallery,
but he always cut his old self short,
trundled home early to the little woman.

At first, he was a legend, with a voice to match Caruso
and a smile that could have charmed a Kamikaze pilot
in the bloody smoke and fear of the Battle of the Coral
Sea.
Then they shook their heads at the string of children he
fathered,
as if each newborn was something stolen away from

them,
but they straightened those wrinkled sun-leathered faces
when it came to my birth and his death that oh so
quickly followed.
"If only you'd known him," they sighed.
But I didn't know him. Not as they knew him.
Not as he would have been for me.

It's a strange world when my deepest mystery
exists so easily, so clear, so detailed, in the heads of
others.
At the family gathering, they told me
the little they figured I was ready for.
I've added nothing to that since.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently
published in the *Tau*, *Studio One* and *Columbia Review*
with work upcoming in *Naugatuck River Review*,
Examined Life Journal and *Midwest Quarterly*.