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Just Being There

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Just Being There

When my father—who quit school at eighth grade
to work the farm with his mother—
said to no one in particular
“I never felt sixteen,”

it was like those instants of looking at nothing
but seeing everything, so brief it's lost
at the moment it almost comes.

My mother tries to ignore
these spells, his living in the past,
part of diabetes and old age.

“I've worried about the weather all my life,” he says,

and suddenly it seems that all those years
when we could go nowhere unless the work was finished
are still here . . . too much that won't be done.



Sometimes not to feel is the greatest desire,
so I clench my stomach muscles and try
to think of times he seemed happy,

remember in a sepia haze his whistling
through his teeth, bent over the repair of a harness,
light slanting on dust particles
through slats of the barn:
moments of concentration and happiness . . .
perhaps they are the same.

He remembers the names of all his horse teams,
the exact years of greatest snowfall and drought,
but describes funerals he didn't attend, guests
at my wedding who weren't there.



I've just been forced at a family dinner
to revise a vivid memory: my sister and I
chasing his favorite horse from wet pasture,
when suddenly it fell and would not get up.
But my brother was with me instead, they both agree,
who ran to get Father, who shot the mare.
Now we are silent
 in the different shades of guilt we've kept
 at just being there.

The end of a story like this
is that it doesn't end, only changes . . .
leaving us to wonder at the slow
kaleidoscope of memory's shadow
remaking itself—tomorrow and next year—
how truth holds all our versions.

—Dixie Partridge

This poem won third place in the BYU Studies 2013 poetry contest.