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Two Poems

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On a Whim

On a whim, Friday evening, father and son agree
to head out and see the fall changing of leaves and light

But first they stop to grab food and six cans of beer,
it's a 40-minute drive to Ministik Lake,
knob and kettle, spruce and poplar

They walk two kilometres on the Waskahegan Trail,
sit on weathered wooden chairs beside a small lake,
crack open beers and talk of the many things
life brings, but pause often for the splashing of wings
and a rustling in the bush

Weak sunlight rests in the yellow tops of trees
above the lake, ducks everywhere whistling in,
taking off, stirring up water

It's like an airport humming with planes
landing chaotically—no, not like an airport at all

Maybe it's like a theatre: the houselights drop,
a coyote chorus begins the show;
Saturn in the southern sky is reflected
in the black water

The entire world rotates to better see
the rising floodlight moon in the east
propped up by poplars

Then a beaver crosses stage left,
eyes alert, swimming without sound.
It leaves a shimmering silver arc
on the dark water, a scimitar blade floating.
What will happen next?

Time in the Mountains

We're in the backcountry for days
when one evening a grizzly appears
unaware in the valley of our camp,
head down, ripping roots,
lifting its head to our commotion,
four happy-hour men, somewhat
drunk. Fear and wonder mingle—
its and ours—someone scrambles
for bear spray, the grizzly scrambles
for higher scree, stops to look again.
We get pretty talkative then.

Later, the red sun sits on the rim
of a high ridge to the west.
Light changes everything
we recognize, turns a mountain
into a glowing temple,
or maybe a postcard

In a vast green meadow, the next day
shadows and light chase each other
like marmots playing.
A massive boulder leans and
crumbles to the ways of water;
it has been bowing for ages
to the inexplicable pull of the planet

We sit to watch the wide scope
of time's tricks: today is a glacier lily,
and today is a waterfall,
a blue glacier melting
now with some long-ago era
in the span of an hour

We're learning things
by not speaking about them;
we become the eyes of the rocks
ears of the grasses

What do we bring?
And what do we take?

The marmot approaches,
the grizzly flees.

Ralph Witten teaches English at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology. He has an MA in creative writing from the University of Alberta. Recently, he had two poems published in *The Trumpeter*. He also has had short stories published, including two produced for CBC Radio.