

DAVID GROFF
FIRST PLACE

Disbelieving These Deaths, I Go to Sit by Lake Hebron

A thunderstorm has spun from a near-blue sky,
then faded like a tantrum, the child sunny and unharmed.
Warmth like a human's breath shrugs off the fall wind.
The lake is only mildly disturbed; it didn't know
the deceased, so its sympathies don't extend to empathy
and it is a lake, not a pathetic fallacy, though I try.
I work to stay here, not to be netted
to various keenings. Hard to do even on a good day.
In the shallows are the slabs of slate
like coffins fallen off a truck, each one
not containing a body I knew, although slate caskets
irretrievable in water speak to me. They inform me
that if I were really here I would notice the cloud
very like a whale until it blossoms like a poppy, fast.
A chorus of dead from a chorus of caskets
ought to open their lids and shoulder out their slabs
to walk on water.
My dead father would eye the lake for plops of fish
he could catch and feel guilty for eating, eye to eye,
though he was dubious of lakes, preferring currents,
local water strung to seas, which lets me see
him as a river, bodies of water as bodies,
as metaphors, including the Babylon waters of weeping.
My mother, city born, should
stride to me across the tidelessness,
the wind revealing her girlish nape,
and George, my most recent dead guy, cleared
of the thunder behind his brow and now,
rising right here, part of the democracy of day,
along with Daniel Crisman, 25, dead on 9/11,
eighteen years ago today, a man I know from a poster

gladly diving at 43 into this crisp water,
warmer than dying young. All my loves
with AIDS, the guys who I drag everywhere,
Ron, Len, Craig, Jay, Paul, Mark, John,
Tom, Richard, the armada ghosting the cove,
their wakes cut short, should land on the island I am.
Hebron, the first city, arid, blazes from across the ocean
its millennia of murders, histories bleeding into each other,
torches and missiles and rifles like lake lightning.
Children killed in cars or cages—they should splash.
All of these once knew the word for *lake*,
said *lake*, swam in a lake of genuine water,
fell through the frosty metaphor of lake,
their lips too blue and sewn ever to say *lake* again.
Here they are none of them at all,
evaporated out of time until I become
a lake nobody swims in. Again the trees tremble,
the clouds lower their cliché of brow,
the water snaps like a shroud.
It is a day in September, more thunder to come.
The lake is alive with togue, perch, and bass.