

MEMORIES OF THE LAKE

Ed Shacklee

It has been many seasons since last I nested in my native land. The wind has called to me and, borne on soft wings, I have answered her wild voice in the way of my kind. But still I remember the lake, that cool, green place on whose borders grew the reeds: And, even still, I have not forgotten the young boy.

I was . . . was ugly as a child, horribly ugly. My neck was like a snake, my throat so barren that words could never grow in its field of silence. No one spoke to me. When I was very young I did not mind this, since my mother never left me alone with unhappy thoughts. But one day a truck veered to one side of the road, and I was alone.

Ugly legs waddling through the mud, ugly beak scavenging among the weeds for sustenance, such was the being I saw through the eyes of the other creatures. And over the months, as if to emphasize, to magnify my misfortune, I grew, solidifying at last into a lifeless, ghostly whiteness. The lake was too clear to free me of this, the crows were too unkind to let me forget. How dark, how black was the voice of their malice! Listening as I did, I was covered with despair.

The trees do not whisper their softness to one who is alone.

Then, almost suddenly, the boy found me. "Oh," he cried, "How beautiful are you! And how soft, how white your wings!" I was afraid at first, and hid among the reeds.

But each day the boy came to visit me, and soon each day signaled only his coming. No longer was I alone.

No longer would I skitter away like a pestilence trying to hide, no longer would my neck crane itself like a snake fleeing to its den. Instead I sailed quietly across the lake, hoping that I would not frighten him if I aspired to no sudden movements.

Once, as I swam in this manner, I noticed my image in the reflections on the lake. Could this be me, the one who was so ugly, the snake-neck? I was amazed.

For the first time in my life I knew the power of my wings, felt the grace with which my feet could cleave the surface of the lake. I saw the feathers, so long a source of hidden shame, and no

longer called them strips of gauze. For, to the boy, they were made of purest snow.

The other animals saw this change, this majesty which was mine through love, and no longer ran from me. But my muteness remained with me, and they called me haughty.

So long as he came, however, I did not mind. In the evening the boy would bring me bread, and because it was so stale I knew that he was poor. But I ate what he shared with me so as to please him, and I never left a crumb.

Then one day the boy did not come. I was afraid for him, and I was afraid of the trucks which sped along the road. They did not care, those trucks. And so my hope lessened with each day, and the boy did not come.

Oh, little one! What road did you cross?

The days passed and the boy did not come, and the wind grew chill. When the last leaf fell, I left. But wherever I have gone I have looked for him, and wherever I go, he is not there. My wings, what good are they? For I have lost the boy, and nothing else remains.

Alas! Who are they, who make the trucks? What was the reason for my egg? I am but a swan, and do not know. I am mute, and cannot say.

