

The Cellar Well

by Steven R. Cope

You see there was this thing,
 hooked in the pond and set
 loose in our cellar well,
 finely squared, six feet across,
 the dark bottom unfathomed,
 and while I slept through three winters,
 growing outward and downward,
 mouth gaping upward, wide,
 finely squared, six feet across,
 there was forever this thing,
 this thing growing
 in the cellar well,
 this believe it or not thing
 that I could never once
 forget or leave behind,
 this thing I took with me
 to scout meetings and ballgames,
 to back rows of movie houses,
 to Sunday Schools and funerals,
 this growing unfed thing,
 ravenous and waiting,
 the shaft of its gullet
 hung halfway to China.

And I drew up at the cellar door
 to listen for it breathing,
 my little ear stone flat against the earth,
 one, then the other one,
 my little feet stone stupid and keening
 for any muffled rumbling,
 my little heart flumping.
 And inside the door, meekly,
 I towed-up the thrashings
 of dark water from the walls,
 the slimy wet cobwebs,
 the cold grimy gray light bulb,
 cold mucky mud floor,
 cold dank sheen settling on the jars
 of red beets and sausage balls,
 turnips and beans.

And more than once on the edge
 I peered over and down
 that long, oozing skidway,
 my gut heaving and spinning,

my little boy life pulled
 as duly and as tautly
 down from a height
 as some tired old vagabond
 from his bridge,
 deep calling unto deep,
 and if not for the string
 of that grimy gray light bulb
 would have plunged
 down and through
 that long cold dark corridor
 to the dead center of the earth,
 with nothing below my feet
 and no way to right myself,
 no bearings, no air,
 turned to gill and scale
 while I lashed out and clawed,
 and then nothing to nothing,
 even the thought of me dissolved.

And when I grew to write poems,
 grew to stand like some dandy
 with fine verses in my mouth,
 or just words, or rantings,
 with professors and technocrats
 strung with cellphones and Ipods,
 hands soft as play dough,
 with guitar strummers, rappers,
 occupiers and pollsters,
 with a mole on my left eyebrow,
 with a great love for God
 but a hatred of all allegory,
 I who still fished for lunkers
 while this great gulf
 still loomed, both in my mind
 and out of it, how deep now
 and how wide, how hungry, how mad,
 hung halfway to China,
 I dared never tell of it.

Or dared never tell
 that when the dozers and trucks came
 to plow the thing under
 I chained my heart to a log,
 mouth bound and gagged
 to keep from spilling over
 on the ground,
 boots laced together
 lest I run out to tell,

lest I break down
and confess every sin
in the world, every longing,
every secret fear,
every dark evil thing
that I'd lived with so long
I could hardly say, or recall,
or even imagine
what was real and what was not.