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Old Man Facing Death

by David Schelhaas

I remember how you shook your head
as we drove by pens of fattening cattle,
a thousand or more packed together knee-deep in muck.
“That’s no way to treat an animal,” you fumed.

And I have seen your face light up
when our old cat chooses your old lap
from all those spread around the room
and purrs some secret only you can hear.

But farther back I see you
in your working days on the windswept farm
each autumn butchering hogs and steers. Rabbits
you have shot, hang, stripped and gutted,
frozen kewpie dolls along the attic rafters.
And I wonder what gentled you that you
became the lover of all helpless living things.

Last Saturday as I trimmed the lower branches of the maple,
you stood by leaning on your cane, heard me exclaim
how glad I was to have those limbs removed, and answered
back, “How do you think the tree feels?”

What could I say?

“What do *you* know of trees and cows and cats?”
I want to ask.
Instead I’ll wait and see if I can learn
by watching as you watch the fox kits
frolic in your yard, the crickets
in the stairwell of the cellar, and listen to
the trees, the leafless trees
all crying in the wind.