

Poetry Porch: Poetry

Great Crested Grebe

by Jay Wickersham

That was the evening I locked myself out.
We'd gotten my step-sister's call, packed our bags;
Joan had gone to the Djurgården for a last drink
with friends. I went to see the grebes.

All May I'd watched them weave
a floating nest of broken-off reeds.
That evening they weren't there. Reedbeds
stiffened themselves against the channel,

but where were the grebes?
I kept looking for
the chisel beak, red eye,
spray of chestnut feathers exploding

from both sides of the head.
I put my hand in my pocket, realized
that these were the keys from home.
They wouldn't unlock a foreign door.

I was getting cold in my thin sweater.
The Stockholm evening took hours to drain away.
We knew less than our bags;
they were toughened for travel.

Next day, panicky flight path. Iceland stopover,
blurred city names, untranslatable magazines,
untasted smoked fish,
metallic wine in a plastic cup.

Florida morning. We found
my mother sleeping in the chair
next to Walter's bed, his skin
so tight over the bones

even the gentlest washing made him cry.
My step-sister and I took turns
decanting morphine into the IV,
hurt and release draining through the veins.

Was the nest gone, all that care wasted?
I remembered how before the light failed
I finally saw one grebe swimming
toward the other, felt the keys

in my pocket, saw a silver quiver
of fish dropped from a beak
onto a ball of feathers
nestled in the other parent's back.