**Circling the Clearing**

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Once, when I was nine – or maybe eight –

At any rate while I could still move easily

in gameways under thickets, stealth in sneakers,

I came into a clearing half crouched to rise

to human height and met across the open space

eyes like sun-struck windows, singular four-footed grace.

I and bobcat snapped a moment

out of time; the fine hair rose,

ears and nose leaned hard against

the air, muscles stilled as if

one move on either part would end

some willing fall into an alien place –

and then each turned and fled.

I have carried all my life this talisman

against the ordinary: a world not mine touched mine

and I am made a stranger in my skin*. And yet –*

*I want to know the way a whisker measures wind,*

*the set of sinew tight to spring . . .* Tell me, what

was gained or lost, pausing before that leafed,

unbridgeable ground, and leaving it uncrossed?