

BARRY DEMPSTER
THE LISTENER

He drifts along the boardwalk, listening
intently to her tales of nascent novels
and childhood traumas,
hardly noticing the lake,
whether the waves are tucking
into themselves, or the setting sun
is casting a flash of pink
on cool, damp stones.

He was taught early how to listen,
to leave his inner world behind.
He nods, keeping time, dropping
one sentence only to pick up another.
Later, he will rearrange, add
the gravity of wood beneath his feet,
perhaps a glimpse of grey-blue sky.
For now, he quietly repeats
everything she says.

It feels like a fit, this echo,
this abandonment of his own story.
He barely notices the two girls
in bikinis, wriggling their long arms
into sweaters. And the brown terrier
chewing sand is just a blink, hardly
there at all. His own body
pure momentum, every muscle
cocked like an ear. Her talk
has become a torrent, wind lifting
whole scarves of hair.

I hear you, he says, sifting, selecting.
This is what he does to stay alive,

his own grammar flimsy. He listens
until she peels a moon from the clouds,
until the shock of her eventual silence
sends him scattering across the sand.