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Vanity

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Vanity

Charlie Shifflett

I.

It's just before the trees become grizzly brooms, barren of leaves like mannequins, exposed and naked. Autumn reds and yellows, oranges and browns, warm the ice that is my heart, sullen, lost amid a world of urgent worries. Slowly the leaves divorce their lifelines and surrender to gravity. I am falling too, towards a fickle earth that will break me down, just another leaf in a compost pile. The streets of Yellow Springs have recently been re-paved—their dark smoothness broken only by the crunch and whir of fallen leaves near the curb. Scraps of red and yellow, orange and brown, flurry above, Fall's attempt at snow. And, suddenly, I'm cold, with no one to warm me.

II.

The woman on the Weather Channel distracts me, oddly so. I try to imagine her person, her face, outside the context of storm warnings and radar screens, without the layer of make-up and the business suit. Red tape runs along the bottom of the television screen and announces impending danger with the concise urgency of a wartime message, a sudden interruption to the airwaves announcing another victim of biological warfare, or that a plane has taken out another one of the world's largest buildings. Another window (next to the one that's rambling on about cold and warm fronts

colliding) relays the coming danger in real time—dark skies and bending trees that seem ever more dangerous from my second story vantage point: I feel the wind's invisible terror through double-paned glass as it snatches leaves from their perches like eggs from a nest, humans from a building.

III.

On impulse I visit a graveyard, its grass neatly lined with slanting stones, synthetic flower arrangements, and quaint trees more fitting for a suburban neighborhood. Indeed, I am reminded, this is a neighborhood of sorts. Will they mind if I trespass, not knowing or lamenting a single of the dead who claims such a sliver of real estate? The wind whips leaves across the path, and between insoluble headstones; they scamper like rodents do for cover, but all in one direction, all towards one end. An old couple wearing wind-breakers, unzipped and flowing with the wind, struggle the invisible force to place a large, synthetic flower arrangement on a tall, steeple-like gravestone. Their minivan idles ahead on the pebbled path, sliding-door open. The wind, though, seems too much for them to bear—both tucking their heads forward like children trying to cross a finish line. The gentleman almost falls, blown like a beachfront palm, held up only by his wife of seventy years. Suddenly, he gives up trying to secure

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the flowers, mumbles to his wife and begins trudging toward the van, as if into a blizzard of snow and ice. But it was only air, too much of it.

IV.

I hate driving at night on rural Ohio roads. I can't see well as it is, and without streetlights my sight problem is only compounded. Forced to drive slowly at these times, I feel like my grandfather—the one who lives in Florida and drives like it's his last chance to see the world, its gas stations, large stone cathedrals, and street-side vendors. Or, at least, he used to drive—until Grandma decided not to get a new car after the old one was totaled. Now Grandpa drives his Toro lawn tractor around the yard, chewing bits of grass and weed common to the area's sandy soil. The lawnmower is his last bit of property in a life that's he's slowly losing, thanks to the strokes that have usurped his memory and mind. And now, too, he cries—over the food he cannot taste, over people whose names he cannot remember. Like me, for example. On some days I'm Steve; on others I'm Kevin or Mark. He'll apologize, say he just doesn't understand, but that ever since the strokes he just can't do things like he used to, or remember things like he used to. Gusts of wind carry my car into the other lane, so I adjust and tighten my fingers around the padded steering wheel. The drive is quiet, as, I suppose, Grandpa's life is now, confined to the double-wide trailer and the acre of land on which it rests. Only when hurricane-force winds snatch the aluminum awnings from their anchors, or when a

neighbor's late night party draws the flashing lights of a late-night patrol—only then does life get interesting. Chopped cornstalks skitter end over end across the pavement in front of me, like rolling tumbleweed, and I wonder how long until I become old.

V.

I wonder if the three year-old boy next door—the one hunched over carefully on the edge of his home's shingled roof, flicking gobs of leaves out of the gutter and onto his mother below—I wonder if he wonders how the leaves got there. There are no trees that hang above his roof, at least that part of it. What does he see up there? The hangnails popping out from the weathered shingles, maybe. Or the wooden swing set that his father put together last spring—how little it is, how boring. Maybe his eyes are fixed on the beer cans that lay crunched and dented in the back of his father's red pickup. Or maybe he's just scared to look beyond his mother's eyes.

VI.

The loneliest times are when the leaves are gone and the limbs are bare. The wind is blowing, but you don't know which way. You just know that you're cold, that the skies are gray, and that you really don't want to go home by yourself. It's cold there too.