

**THE WALNUT TREE: on turning thirty***for Glenn***1**

The first thick-aired evening  
of April. Dusk  
in a low draft. In the backyard  
you ask if I'm scared  
of ageing. (The air  
starts, then stalls  
like a breath.) Sparrows  
fill the pause, their walnut tree  
taking darkness  
into the hard heart  
of its limbs. By the time  
I try to answer, the tree  
has gathered all the lost  
layers of day  
across its high girth.

**2**

Late afternoon, and my father  
fastened every button of our coats  
and folded down our hats, and  
led us onto the snowy road.  
We walked a mile for milk and food,  
a school day given  
over to head-high drifts  
and bad wind. The road  
dipped at the Pascack culvert.  
We stopped, and  
looked up the stiff stream  
into the forest. I

remember how the wind  
hurtled a raw thing through us,  
old and undone, how

that night  
my younger brother and I  
took it into bed.

3

Two dreams merge: my father  
on his side, the clear tubes  
tangled over the sheets

and flesh, blood-  
filled vials taped to the mortar  
wall. He looks  
at me. My mother nods,  
meaning *talk*, and  
when I open my mouth

he is two years dead. The family  
priest takes me  
to the plank cabin on parish property  
where Mrs. McCloud's son  
opened his father with a twelve-gauge.  
We have taken her back  
to the scene, she needs combs  
and underwear. When  
she pushes open the door  
a four-foot circle of blood  
clots the bed,  
the air. There

is the hell  
of never dreaming. But this other,  
to grow old,  
never waking from your dreams . . .

## 4

It happens in late spring,  
the grass rippling  
in sunlight, the ballplayers animate  
and glistening. A single thundercloud  
builds around the sun  
until the long field is fired

with shafts. I stand  
sweating and fit,  
watching the shirtless  
players, when  
like an old wind, something shifts,  
and I am thinking,  
*these too, all of them,*  
*soon.*

## 5

I climb the walnut tree.  
I am darkness, its deepest center.  
I am these stories. Look  
at me, each story  
laying itself down, heavy,  
like the autumn fruit  
of this tree. Mrs. McCloud  
lies in the asylum bed,  
smiling, drunk  
on forgetting. My father,  
drunk on glucose and nurses. They  
are as safe as these  
ballplayers laying themselves down  
on the grass, as safe

as my brother,  
eighteen years ago, pressed  
sleeping against my back  
in a darkness  
where black limbs fork from the heart.

**Kevin Clark**