

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