

Headstone III

by Jane Hammons

Looks like a dead dog on the highway. Our father's voice as near a scream as a growl can get. This is his way of saying *Johnny's dying get here quick.*

The ebb and flow of dialysis hollowed out sockets your eyes still warm and golden even now. My only brother. Frantic flesh clings to bone. Your wife and children our mother father step-mother step-father sisters friends from work and faraway childhood. Some cousins aunts and uncles. All here. Oxygen blood and drugs measured doses of life. Mainlining the good stuff. Your joke.

Everyone waiting waiting rooms overflow in palliative care where the end so near nurses shrug off requests to clean the bathroom change the sheets open a window give us some air.

Our children some barely crawling cross your lap tangled in tubes and wires. Onto their heads and arms you Dutch rub and Indian burn painful red tattoos initiating them before you go into a family that mistakes pain for affection. Wide-eyed surprise and hurt they look for explanation. Your daughter sweet teen whispers *Daddy don't mean harm* into their tiny seashell ears.

Outside the window the Trinity flows. Drunk aunt takes older children to ride the little train near the Ft. Worth Zoo. Then for a hotel swim. Late at night you shush our nervous chat. Listen. Elephant roar and monkey scream. My husband glassy-eyed addict says *I hear it* claiming your hallucinations as his own.

You live too long unexpectedly and weeks later die at home. The howling quiets the Trinity flows. Your daughter carries your ashes

everywhere she goes.

