

My Uncle's Last Day in Hospice

by Jodi Barnes

In and out of morphine dreams, he flies through the unfinished roof of Illinois sky. Below, matchbox-sized farm machines. A silo becomes his father's thermos, the silver-capped tower from which he stole sips at ten, his first secret. Back then he was golden-haired, a benevolent boy counting sheep and cows from a Dodge Wayfarer's back seat on Sundays, when he thought God counted him in the fold.

This was before he realized that sky and heaven were different things, before he recognized another kind of nature lived inside, before Pastor Wynn said he'd take up a collection to send the boy to seminary, but lied. This was before the boy's hair turned fire, years before the Navy and hiding places conspired in his own hull.

Again he flies. Lands under Chicago's drop ceiling. He's caged here, but can't remember why. He reassures himself the sky is everywhere. Back home, three hours south, it is February. The toy harvesters are rusting. The silos empty but for frozen tears. The sheep and cows breathe out small clouds under the open roof.

A nurse interrupts to fill a paper cup.

He has grown up and old again. He won't open his mouth until he can drink from the silver thermos perched on a fencepost, long since rotted. The coffee will be warm and sweet, unlike his father's lips once the boy was man enough to confess his second secret.

The nurse is now a priest, chanting. He hears the word *forgive* and tells the father he's ready.

