

IMPACT

by marci stillerman

His dad puts the gun in his hands. It's a small gun, no bigger than a mango, but in his ten year old hands it feels enormous. Heavy and gray and cold. Cruel. In the autumn forest, the fallen leaves glitter like gems in the benign Indian Summer sun. "Beautiful day, isn't it?" His father wants his son to appreciate nature as he does. But the boy is unaware of his surroundings. He clenches the gun until his sweaty hand aches. It feels good. Dangerous. For the first time it occurs to him he has the power to take a life. A feeling of excitement, half joy, half sickness, goes through him and he shivers. "Are you all right?" his father asks. He nods. "Just hold the gun. Get used to the heft." He pushes the boy behind him. Raises his own gun and fingers the trigger. Pivots left. The boy follows him. And then pivots again, and blasts the air. All at once, like in a dream, a bird goes limp and falls from the sky into the pond. In the continuing dream, the dripping dog, Clutter, runs up with the lifeless body of the woodcock in his mouth. The boy returns the gun to the father, memory of its heft imprinted on his hand. Another day, November now. Noon. The sun shines uncertainly in the darkening sky, creating a strange quivery twilight against which all objects take on exaggerated clarity. Fallen leaves glow florescent, veins strongly etched. Black iron sculptures of naked trees. A metallic sheen coats the pond. Jurassic Park, still and wild. Three male ducks, iridescent feathers vivid in the magical light, glide across the water toward shore. A fourth, a brown-feathered female, thrashes at the edge of the pond, one of her legs entangled in a reed. The boy stands at the water's edge, hands jammed in jeans pockets, entranced by the struggle. He sees how he could release the duck, imagines it winging low over the water to where the others have made their way ashore. Stooping, he reaches for the trapped duck, his fingers warming in its soft down. Under the middle finger of his left hand, he feels the pitiful pounding of its heart. With both hands, he pulls at the body, gently at first. It squawks. He cups one hand around its

head and twists. The squawking silences in a clap of thunder. The soft body twitches and becomes limp. He pulls the duck loose from the reed, leaving its leg behind. His heart lurches. He gulps down vomit. His hands, full of the dead body, tingle with the power of taking a life. He drops the body at the edge of the pond. In a corner of the garage, rain crashing against the roof, a mother kitten feeds her newborn. He pulls a kitten off a teat, its body hot in his hand, its eyes not yet open. The mother cat watches with slitted eyes. Mews. The remaining kittens continue to feed. The body, the size of his finger, is hotter than his cheek. One firm squeeze of his hand and it could be dead.

