

My Great-Aunt's Cemetery

In woods tangled with briars, she finds the path
That leads us into what was once a clearing—
The cemetery they used before the War.
She cuts the high grass back with her hand scythe,
And we disturb the vines to find the blacksmith
Who sired her grandfather; though only hearing
About him, she is well versed in our family lore.
His sunken grave is smothered in the leaves of second growth.
What's left of the headstone says someone named Seth
Died of malaria. Grey as an old, gnawed bone
A nearby marker says his bride Marie
At the age of seventeen died in childbirth. . . .
My aunt informs me that Seth Hartfield's strength
Was a legend in her childhood: how he'd thrown
His anvil at thieves, and once uprooted a tree
To bridge a flooded creek. He had an enormous girth. . . .
She stoops to touch the intricate carved wreaths
On monuments to kin she has not known.
Try as I might, I am unable to see
Them living. My mind's eye cannot call them forth.
Only the markers confirm their deaths and births.
But wind and rain have labored hard on the stones
To return them to the anonymity
They had before they were dug out of the earth.
And they have become more the substance of myth
Than anything lingeringly human;
Through all my aunt's lively embellishments,
Their stories have not held tightly to the truth.
They are beyond imagining, lying beneath
My feet, though I am the son of their great-great-grandson
And my own days disappear in the strange sense
Of the unreality of what is over with.
As we come out of the woods, the midday warmth
Glares in my face; a sudden flutter of wings
Startles me out of my dark dreaming, the way
A diver surfaces from a great depth,
Breaks through to the air, catches his first breath.
Grateful, I walk beside her, listening
To my living aunt's tales of the family tree,
Her voice, rough as bark, rasping for all it's worth.

—John P. Freeman