

# 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