

Michael Spence

Advice Before His Blood Pressure Is Taken

The nurse says: *Go to your happy place.*
 Since his happy place is not so sunny,
 Her advice strikes him as strangely funny:
 As if by forcing a smile on his face,

He'll give himself a reason to smile
 And not just look like an idiot.
 They're in some sort of New Age skit
 Requiring a grinning guile

To prove they're sane and well balanced
 In a world that rewards neither virtue.
 She tells him: *Don't let things upset you.*
 Something about the way she glances

At him makes him see the same look
 His mother used to use to make
 Him regret some trivial mistake—
 Like thumbing through her favorite book

That day right after eating chocolate.
 His fingerprint became a bookmark;
 His mother's face creased with dark
 Seams as she grabbed his hand and put

It under the scalding tap. The pain
 Became the secret he kept from Dad
 Who would've hit her. He smiles, glad
 He keeps the pounding in his veins.



The Pages Between Us

—for my sister Rosemarie, September 11, 2015

Five years ago today you died. I find
On a shelf a creased and beat-up paperback—
50 Great American Short Stories. The kind
Of book we could pick up from the wire racks

And creaking turnstiles in drugstores when Hemingway
And Faulkner stood among Harlequin romances,
Adventures of Conan, westerns by Zane Grey.
Idly opening it, I happen to glance

At the inside of the front cover: a sheet
Glued in and labeled *Highline Public Schools*
Says fines will be levied against those who mistreat
This library property. Your name unspools

As the only signature. You who got A's
So easily and never got called out
For talking in class like me--there was no way
You'd "violate school policy." But doubt

Now stares straight up at me: I realize
You stole this book. You'd never have forgotten
To return it; like me, you grew the eyes
To see other lives pressed into the lines

That ran like roads across paper. To escape
The world's limits, we'd traveled every page
Of these stories to find more foreign lands. What shape
Did silent snow take on? What kind of rage

Destroyed the world to leave a fallen ruin
That turned dead leaders to imagined gods?
In our heads we heard the deeper tunes
The words rang there—a secret song of lauds

As if from bells in a chapel few attend.
I still open its doors, but you don't kneel
Beside me now; the music seems to descend
And glide away like that blue-winged teal.

Time, the thief of all our volumes, shifted
The wall surrounding and protecting us
To a barrier between us. It can't be lifted
By anything I do. I ask, Was it just

For you to die before me, four years older?
So many others should be gone instead.
The snow that whirls inside is always colder.
Or is that only something I once read?



My Confession to Saint Augustine

I have to confess I never read your *Confessions*
Until today—this agnostic felt no need
To heed your words. But you must have had fun
Stealing pears with your friends, a childish deed

That makes me smile. Climbing the road away
From the orchards of this life, you later sought
Some resolve. I have to laugh when you say,
Give me chastity and continence, but not

Just yet. I see you human as I am, admitting
The world is hard to cast off. Before you embraced
The simple bowl of astringent soup, you clung
To the desire for just another taste

Of salty stew, before you let your skin
Wrap you in its chrysalis, its coffin.

