

The Deer Hunter

by Charles Semones

for Gary Keith Caton

After a day of assessments and numbers adding up at the office, he's eager to get away to a kingdom ruled over by raucous crows. It's that time of year when the blood-thrill of hunting—the lust for deer-kill—makes him head out of town to Deep Creek, just as the wintry November afternoon slides westward, dragging the sun to its setting. The paleness of five o'clock spreads its leftover rays for him as he puts on coveralls, boots, and cap, grabs his rifle, and sets out for the harsh, scraggly country I grew up in. As a boy there, I was gripped by anxiety early. I groped my way toward the long pondering of manhood. I could not have foreseen it then, but almost threescore years and ten, spent mostly alone, have made the young hunter my neighbor. I watch him as he goes near day's end to that jagged terrain where wind keens in the darkening thickets and in the dim hollows. I do not go there anymore. Long back, the slant of light late on certain afternoons became foreboding. It seems unlikely that as a boy growing up elsewhere he'd heard of the ridges and the creek bottoms where the glow of foxfire bloomed. But once he discovered that backcountry, he felt a kinship with it. Perhaps he thought that, in its silences, he might hear the long dead in the churchyard confiding in him, telling him something urgent. My remembrance of coming of age there is fragmented, diminishing, but in my eldering I will hold in my heart the place of my birth-cry. How then could I find it any less than a wonder the young hunter prowls the landscape I still call home in my heart, though town's where my life is now? Though I was never one to hunt, I try to understand his zeal, his moving on cautious tread into the woods, his rifle at the ready, until a deer-flash shows up in the crosshairs. A squeezed-off shot and he'll have stew for supper, the payoff for his skill at cookery. How can I, or anyone, know if the shapes and shades of ghost-deer vanish as they leap in tandem across the nightscape of his dreams?