

## STALACTITES

In the cave, my friend J.C.,  
Whose father wouldn't claim him,  
Broke stalactites with his fingers.

He caught a white cavefish, carried it  
In cupped hands until clear water ran out,  
Then bashed it bloody with a rock.

He pulled out the pack of Marlboros I'd lost.  
He denied they were mine.  
I said something about doing him like the fish.

He offered me food stamps, stolen from his mother.  
She was at home, turning tricks for nothing.  
She used the divorce money to buy a Monte Carlo.

She went to the honky-tonks—not city honky-tonks,  
But roadhouses, where you find real trouble.  
She brought men to the backseat of the car.

We lived in a trailer park.  
Nothing is different there from anywhere else.  
We knew what we were and we could laugh about it.

J.C. got a sleeveless pink t-shirt from Wal-Mart.  
The screen-print said "Innocent Man."  
He was guilty as hell.

Michael Hoerman 2003

## **WILD STRAWBERRIES IN OZARK COUNTY**

We once saw lightning take twenty feet  
Off the top of a tree on a sunny day.  
We saw a spring reverse flow,  
Sucking water back into the ground.  
We saw a bullet slow to a crawl,  
Turned from the target by a bully June-bug.  
We saw fireflies gather into a clump so bright  
They illumed the spirit of a dead boy  
Right where he fell, trampled by a bull,  
Grew weak, gangrenous and fought the coyotes.

That hilltop was like a raw nerve.  
No kind of place to hatch a plan.  
A handshake means nothing in a place like that.  
Something to be broken, severed  
Like the brutal tearing of the buzzard  
Into the flesh of the not-quite-dead rabbit  
Knocked to the roadside, still twitching  
While an old woman with blue hair tunes the radio,  
Humming a song about Jesus,  
Her heart fluttering like a gentle dove's,  
Certain that nothing standing in the way  
Of a heart so touched as hers  
Could be of the Kingdom.

Which of us was which?  
I used to have an answer.  
In bitterness we author a rebuttal.  
We play each part once or twice.  
Then time tells us a truer story.  
In the end, Cain and Abel were brothers.

Michael Hoerman 2001

## FLOOD SEASON

The farmer gave up and swam around on his back in the corn-tops,  
Water whistling from tobacco-stained lips, fishes swimming in his eyes.  
He saw me walking on his levee and he turned mean.  
He swam at me with a single long stroke and grabbed me by the ankle.  
The farmer opened his mouth and out came a roar—  
No words per se, but it was clear he was Billy Goat Gruff-ing me.  
I kicked him in the teeth then, and knocked his one gold tooth into the water.  
I watched it sink down where the blades of the corn grass  
Pirouetted like dancers in the floodwater; the gold tooth sank to the muddy bottom.  
The farmer looked down, his mouth agape, like a prospector with a gold pan.  
I kicked him again. One button popped off his overall straps.  
I saw he had tits, with a hairy baby hanging in his chest hair, suckling  
Tobacco juice. The baby looked up at me, a brown trickle on his chin.  
I saw fish swimming in his eyes, so I kicked him, too.  
The baby dropped down into the water, sinking like a rock, then spotted the gold tooth,  
Gobbled it up like it was a worm wriggled off a hook,  
Kicked his legs and shot away through the cornstalks, shimmering like a bluegill.  
Then I looked and the farmer was floating back out into the water,  
Laughing like mad as the corn-tops tickled his uncovered breast.  
Then the farmer thought about that baby having his gold tooth.  
He reached down into the mud, pulled up a mussel and threw it,  
Knocking out my last baby tooth.  
He lifted his arms to swim at me again, but this time I ran.  
My feet skipped like stones across the water.  
I ran up the hill, through the pasture, across the train tracks and jumped a fence  
Into the yard of the Methodist Church, where seven men sat in the shade  
Eating a picnic lunch, on break from the railroad.  
I saw they had the gold tooth on a stump, and the baby,  
With river-bottom mud in its hair, clutching at it beside the Holy Bible.  
One man said Hallelujah, are you an independent?  
I didn't know what he was getting at, so I said Hell no. I'm a Methodist.  
Praise the Lord, he said, my granddaddy was a Methodist, too.  
Then I picked up the Holy Bible and I picked up the gold tooth.  
I jumped onto the stump and pushed the gold tooth into my empty socket.  
I read scripture out loud. The blood from my mouth ran onto the pages of the book,  
While down in the cornfield the farmer swam  
With sunfish in his moon-white eyes.

Michael Hoerman 2003