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Wasps' Nest

Bob De Smith
Dordt College, bob.desmith@dordt.edu

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Wasps' Nest

Robert J. De Smith

One day, in the late afternoon,
I head home around four,
Dress down, and
Find my son engaged in
Elaborate backyard swordplay.

We shoot some hoops,
Trying again our
Impossible shot through
A branch I keep threatening to trim.
Then we switch to golf,
Losing half our balls in the long
Fall grass in the field
Behind the house.

He's training for soccer,
So we jog around the field—
My left knee tightens up.

Then my youngest lopes out:
There's a wasps' nest in the neighbor's peak—
She's discovered it,
Where it hangs like an inverted sunflower whose seeds sting.

Do they know?
No, they're 80—
It's my job to exterminate.

The arming of the warrior:
Extension ladder,
Hornet spray,
A hose with the best spray end.
Oh, and a hat.

The ladder pronged above a window,
Kids and neighbors close enough to see
But far enough to be sure
I'll be the first target
Of counterattack,
I climb—warily.

With the first shot of thick white spray
The nest comes alive—
Two wasps buzz my head,
My neck hair obliges by rising in shiver.

I bounce down the ladder
(I'll have to remind my son never to do that).
More begin to drop like fat
Raindrops. This spray is good!

"It'll take another shot,"
Throws in my neighbor,
Not suggesting that I could have stayed up there.

He's an old machinist/farmer
Who holds the water hose:
He's used to calculating
these problems.

Up the ladder,
Emboldened,
I climb a rung higher
And hit them again with the spray,
which begins to find my nostrils.
The insect in me twitches, just once.

I recall newsreel footage
From Iwo Jima,
Tanks feeding jellied gasoline,
A shallow arc of fire,
Into bunkers.

What's left is clean-up.
Once more up the ladder,
This time with the hose.

The nest's well built,
And so takes the torrent for a while.

The thing about water is
It falls as well as flows,
So I get soaked;
Especially my trigger hand—
Water runs down my arm
Past my pit and down my side
To the knees.
It's cold.

Finally the nest is soaked
Apart and plops to the ground.

My daughter prods the thing for larvae
(She's studying insects)
While I help the old man recoil the hose.
We smile full smiles:
A job well done, my wet shorts,
The little tasks he's let me in on,
Thanks without noticing that
This man,
Who once painted grain elevators
From a much longer ladder set atop
A truck bed,
Has been stuck to the ground for many years.

Casually, he mentions there's probably
A nest on the opposite eave.

We walk over. Sure enough.
In the heat that's carried into September
We decide to let frost take care of that one.

On Your Birthday, Dave

(for David Schelhaas on the occasion of his 60th birthday)

Robert J. De Smith

On your birthday, Dave,
Hang a diatribe above the urinal,
Spin a few screws into deck wood,
Croon a bit,
Try on a new word;
Shoot some hoops, favoring that knee.
Wear that lived-in jacket and tie,
Pull over when the world gets too beautiful
And write something.
Hammer out a letter to the editor,
Help an old man to the john;
Then we'll know it's you.