from *Aethlon: the Journal of Sport Literature* 22.2 (Spring 2004): 53-62

Freezing

Henry Hughes

The wind shifted and the sound of the outboard vanished, but I could see he was taking it slow, bumping loose ice that drifted out with the tide. The boat was about a hundred yards off and I waved. Herb just sat in the stern, his left arm squared back on the outboard's throttle, his head tucked under a wool hat woven through with grass. About thirty feet from shore, the bow pitched in a burst of speed, then sighed, growling smoothly into the soft gravel.

"It's freezing out here," I said.

"Oh for God's sake." Herbie had his head down in the hull and his voice echoed up the gunnels. "Boy like you hollerin 'bout the cold." He swung up a stained burlap bag from under the middle seat and handed it to me.

"Great," I said, feeling the weight. He had a pair of mallards and a black duck.

"I should've had some broadbill. They came right in and I missed them."

"You did alright."

"A day like today, there should've been a million birds out here. I don't know, Peter."

I tossed the bird bag up on the shore, and Herb handed me the anchor. I walked it up the beach and pushed the flukes into the stiff sand. We squeaked along in our hip boots for about ten minutes, then he started breathing heavy.

"Dammit," he said, setting his gun on a bleached log.

"You okay, Herb?"

"I'm retiring next year, you know."

"'Bout time," I said. "I haven't even *started* working."

Herb's breathing relaxed. He lit a cigarette and picked-up his gun. "Life's pretty damn long. Don't do the shit I did."

The pickup was parked at the top of the hill. We threw the gear in the back, got in the cab and sat with the heater on, watching the trees reappear through the melting glaze of the windshield.

"Yeah. She's gonna freeze tonight," Herb said.

"You think the harbor will freeze?"

"That's what I said. Let's see. Low is four, so high." Herbie counted the hours on his fingers. "High is ten. If the wind drops down that water'll lay flat and freeze like cement."

"It's been a while since I've seen the harbor freeze."

"The whole damn sound froze in the twenties. Solid, from Port Jeff to Connecticut. My Uncle Richie walked to Bridgeport. Says it changed his life."

Herbie bent forward and looked up through the windshield. "Yeah, them ducks'll be coming tonight."

"Saw a lot of birds this morning."

"This ain't nothing, Peter. My old man and his brothers use to kill 'em by the hundreds—black duck, mallard, bufflehead, canvasback. You never seen nothin' like it. Richie'd shoot a pair of ten gauges. He killed a lot ducks before them ice walking days."

I left Herb in the truck and walked back down to his boat. I had warmed up enough to take the cold again, and the boat had to be pushed off with the ebb or it would beach high. It slid off easy, and I was on my way back when something dark flashed on the frosty hill. It turned like a leaf. Then I saw it was a small woodpecker with dark wings checkered in white, and a white back that shined brighter than the thin snow. The bird had struggled from the base of an oak and I could see its marks in the snow. It lay on its breast, wings out, hardly moving now. Its eyes opened and closed slowly.

When I got back to the truck, Herb was asleep. I jumped in, put it in gear, and crunched over the frozen lot onto the road.

"Go to McEwen's." He rubbed his face. "Gotta get some wire."

I drove to the village and pulled in behind McEwen's Hardware. Herb took off his grassy hat, put on his muskrat schapska, and left the truck. *Look at this guy,* I said to myself, turning on the radio and leaning back. Herbie would be sixty-five this spring. I'd known him about twelve years, and was just about twelve when my father introduced us. It was October and I wanted to go hunting. My father hadn't fired a gun in years, but he knew Herbie Clark, so we went over to his dirty white house one Saturday around lunchtime. There were a couple of beagles howling from the dilapidated kennel of old fence and wire, and brown chickens sat up on the porch like children tired of playing. But there were no kids. "Herbie hates kids," my father told me on the way over.

The bell was torn out and no one answered the knocking. My father opened the door and yelled in. I heard wooden noises, then Herbie appeared in stained khaki pants and a white tee-shirt stretched over his belly.

"Jesus, Charlie. What the hell you doing?" He shook my father's hand and coughed. His eyebrows arched, he bent and shook my hand stiffly. Herb was short and thick. A laborer all his life, he could lift enough of every morning to get by, but there wasn't much left over.

"You know Alice Vega, Charlie."

"Oh, yes." My father said.

"Well she was all over the bar. I don't want no part of that shit. Last summer she had me driving her to the city every week. Then she comes over here at three in the morning screaming about something. I'm getting too old, Charlie." The men suddenly looked at me and stopped talking. Herbie walked us into the yellow kitchen and we sat around the red, formica table. My father asked if he still trapped muskrats and Herbie said the season hadn't started yet. Finally, my father asked about hunting. Herbie slid a stack of coffee stained magazines in front of me, scratched his nose, and asked my father for a cigarette.

"Well yeah. I'm gonna do some. Got them beagles out there." He slapped the top of his head. "Shit I gotta get 'em some water!" Herbie stood up and went to the sink.

"So you'll take him hunting then?" my father asked. Herbie ran the tap water into a small bucket and looked back at me. "Well, hell-yeah. I'll take 'im."

The *Hardware Parking Only* sign vibrated in the wind. Herbie stepped from the back door then looked over to his left and walked away from the truck. I noticed an older woman sitting in a new white Buick. She rolled down the window when Herb approached. I turned off the truck and cracked the vent. She explained that her car wouldn't start. Herbie opened the hood and asked her to try it again. It was the battery. He waved me over for the jump.

"You don't know how much I appreciate this," she said to Herb.

"For a lady like you, it's our extreme pleasure." Herbie smiled and continued talking with her as I clipped on the cables. The car turned over and the woman touched Herbie's arm. I thought she might be offering him some money, but they spoke in a way that was familiar and easy. I put the cables away and when he got back in the truck he was smiling.

"What a nice woman."

"Do you know her?" I asked.

"I used to," he said and kept smiling.

I drove up to my father's house where I was staying for the Christmas holiday. Pulling into the driveway, Herbie shook his head, "Looks like Lillian's home." I opened the garage door and saw Herb walking around back behind the fence to take a piss.

The door was locked, but I could see my Aunt Lil stirring something over the stove. She always locked the doors when she was home. I would step in the

garage to get a screwdriver, and by the time I got back the door would be locked. This morning I had my key.

The kitchen smelled like goulash, and Lil's eyes never left the silver pot. "Well. Hello," she said. "Catch anything?"

"Herbie got some. I got up late and met him down at the water."

"Oh," she said, frowning a little. "Are you eating here tonight?"

"I don't know, Lil. Probably not."

"A girl called. Jennifer."

"Oh yeah?" I pulled off my boots and walked behind her, rubbing her shoulders. She straightened up, and stared out the window. "Have some tea with me," she said.

The door opened slowly and Herb eased his head in. "Hi," he said and smiled. I let go of Lil.

"What do 'ya need?" I asked. "Coffee, tea? How about some juice?" Herb moved into the room, measured an inch with his two fingers and mouthed the word Scotch.

"How are you, Lillian?" he asked.

"Fine. And you?" She put the butter in the fridge and walked out of the kitchen.

I poured the Scotch and Herbie sat in the family room rocking chair.

"Don't worry about her, Herb," I said softly. Herbie grimaced and I laughed. I opened a beer for myself and sat in the chair next to him. He lit a cigarette.

"Get me an ashtray, will ya?" Herb looked around the room. "Boy, she's a cold woman."

"Yeah. Well. She's got her problems with you."

Herb tilted his drink toward the glass doors. A light snow was falling and it settled on the faded grass. His thick eyebrows arched. "Now this is duck killin' weather."

"You think so?" I sipped my beer and rested the bottle on my knee.

"We could make an evening run."

"But man, it's going to be freezing," I said.

"Oh, shit." Herbie smirked and finished his drink. "A boy your age." He walked over to the kitchen counter and set his glass down. "Let me use your phone," he said.

"Okay," I said. "I'm game. Let's go tonight."

"Sure, sure. Let me at the phone. I gotta make a call."

I left Herb and went into the basement to get my hunting clothes from the cedar cabinet. Aunt Lil was at the washing machine in a wool Jets hat.

"Nice hat, Lil."

"It's freezing down here. I don't know how you stand it on the water."

"I'll be home later."

Lil turned and looked at me. "That Herbie Clark is a pain in my ass."

"Gimme a break, Lil. He's great out there."

"He belongs in the woods. He's an animal."

"Get over it. Lil. He said one thing to you, and you freak out."

"He's disgusting." She held a pair of my brother's pants with an oily stain on the thigh. "Now how am I gonna get this out? He doesn't care. No one cares what I do." I got dressed and met Herb in the garage.

I was putting batteries in my flashlight when my father pulled in the driveway. Dressed in heavy Carhartts and workboots, he slid out of the old station wagon. The *Daily News* was under one arm, and he carried his thermos and lunch box with the other.

"What are you doing home?"

"They closed down the yard. So cold, the fuel oil's gellin' up. Ground's too hard to dig anyway. What're you guys up to? Get any ducks?"

"Herb got a few this morning."

"Ah, Charlie. It ain't nothing like it should be."

My father set his stuff on the steps and grabbed a beer from the refrigerator in the corner of the garage.

"Almost too cold for beer. Well, I'm getting a fire going. Come on inside."

"We're going out for the evening run," I said.

"Oh, are you? Okay. Be careful. You going on the boat?"

"Just gonna run off the shore a bit," Herb reassured him.

My father stared at Herb and me for a moment. "Alright," he said, unlocking the side door.

The roads were getting a little slick and I took my time going down Black Hollow. Herb was counting something on his hands. He looked at me and asked, "How long's your mother been dead now?"

"About 12 years."

"And your father has to come home to that bitch every day. God, she's cold." Herb reached behind the seat for his gloves.

"Don't worry about her, Herb. She doesn't understand sexuality."

"She understands. She understands I wanted in her pants." I tried to laugh and took the corner a little wide.

"She doesn't know anything about men. Not a thing. She's never had a man. She's threatened."

"It's sad," Herb nodded. "A good looking woman like her."

I thought about Lil as a young woman in the home movies my grandfather shot at Coney Island in the forties. Lil and her baby sister, the child who'd be my mother. They stood on the crackling beach—Lil in her light one-piece, her body curved beautifully. She pulled off her swimming cap and thick dark hair fell, then blew across her shoulder as the silent voice of the child drew her down. That child grew up, had children of her own, then died. And Lil could not, for all her love, become her.

"She's a cold woman," Herb said again, lighting a smoke.

It was three o'clock by the time we got down to the boat. The outboard turned over on the fourth pull and we plowed through the setting slush. Then I heard a wooden thump and Herbie threw it in neutral. "What the hell was that?" he said. I looked behind us but saw only some broken ice. Herbie shrugged and turned his wrist to accelerate. The wind was out of the northwest and the snow blew hard across our port side. My back to the bow, cold air licked my neck. I curled up my legs and hid my gloved hands in my pockets. But Herbie was taking it straight on. First he bent low in the seat and kept his face down, then had to stand up and watch the channel and scattered moorings. He finally ordered me to look for shallow water and big ice.

A couple miles out, we ran along some exposed islands. Herb veered into a dent in the bank and cut the motor. I stepped on the deck, then into the water and pulled us up on the mud. We knew this part pretty well. Herb started unwrapping the decoys and I set them out. We threw some loose grass over the engine and hunkered down in the wooden hull.

"Damnit," I said, feeling inside my pockets. "I forgot the calls."

"Won't need them today," Herb said. "Look at those birds moving. Listen."

The distant sky was spotted with ducks. White old squaws buzzed low over the water, their musical *owl-omelet* echoing off the hills; and large flocks of black duck and widgeon circled lower and lower. We heard the hen mallard's long, repeated call from the reeds.

"When I retire, I'm gonna build a blind out here," Herb said.

"Why don't you find some rich old gal and move in up there?" I pointed to the huge houses of Harbor Hills, smoke rising from their chimneys. I saw a silver car curve up the road and pull into the driveway. "Just imagine some woman coming home to cook you some veal parmesan. You could hunt 'till dark and just walk those steps to bliss." I smiled and laughed as Herb shook his head.

"Yeah, she can order pizza as long as she lays a little on me."

"Oh yea?"

"You see that house there? The brick one. There. I made love to a beautiful girl in that house. Brenda. Big tits like this." Herb cupped his hands in front of his chest. "I was working for her father, settin' stone in the garden. Me and Brenda started meetin' at night. We'd go out to the old man's sloop and drink his Scotch. But she never let me touch her 'till one night we talked and talked and in the morning she was all mine."

"Sounds great," I said. For a second, I thought of Jennifer, the girl who called. We slept together before break, but hadn't spoken since. She had a beautiful voice and I remember her askings.

"Doc James lived there. In that white one," Herb pointed. "I used to row for him and his doctor friends in Wildwood Lake. Get out at sunrise and be done by ten. I'd take 'em around the lilies and he'd nail bass as big as my arm."

"Dr. James still alive?"

"Died last fall. Heart attack. His young sister still lives there. I believe you met her today."

"Don't move," I said. A pair of black duck flew in front of us and circled behind. "Get ready." Herbie's eyes followed them over my shoulder, and I could hear their whistling wings. Our trigger hands moved slowly from our pockets, and Herbie whispered, "Okay. Here they come." I picked them up with my right eye as they cupped their wings. They were about a foot off the water, and I swung up my muzzle and put the bead on the near bird, squeezing the trigger. The bird folded. I pumped and fired at the second, and it, too, tumbled into the water, but still flapped, swimming in circles. I aimed at it. "No. Don't shoot!" Herb said. "Bill's down. When the head's down, he's gone." I waded out and retrieved the two birds. The moment I got back, a small flock of broadbill turned into our decoys. We waited until they flared in front of the boat then jumped up and fired. I hadn't reloaded, and had a single shell in my gun. I dropped one bird to my right. Herbie fired three rounds, but missed. "What the hell is wrong with me?" he said.

"I feel good, old man. Three for three—that's the best I've ever shot. Your eyes okay?"

"My eyes are fine. Get your damn bird." When I brought the bird back, Herb pulled off his gloves and massaged the steamy white down. It was a beautiful drake with a blue bill and a domed crest glossed in dull purple. Herb stroked the ruffled feathers back in place.

Snow filled the grass weave of our skiff and the creases in our hats and coats, making us invisible on the dusted marsh. I broke through the thin ice to our decoys and knocked snow from their plastic bills. Although there was hardly any open water, the birds kept coming, and we'd nearly shot our limit. By twenty after four, I could no longer feel my feet, and my ungloved right hand couldn't bare the touch of steel.

"Yeah. Let's get outta here."

"De windze droppin. It'll be 'ize, ice."

Word's slurred, my mouth stiff at the jaws. It was 4:30, sunset, and I pumped the first shell out of my chamber. Herb stood up and started unloading when a drake pintail dropped in twenty feet over his shoulder. I pumped in my second shell, pulled up and fired. The bird flashed a white streak against sky, but flew for sixty yards down channel before splashing in a spring hole.

"Why the hell did ya do that?" Herbie said. He caught me off guard. In the past, we had both shot a little after or before legal hours. It was no big deal.

"That was a drake pintail! I never see pintails around here."

"A pintail! You never seen a pintail? So what? It's crippled. What the fuck you gonna do? That was stupid. Look where it landed."

"I'll get it." I stepped out of the boat and broke toward the channel. Large sheets of ice rafted back up, chopping at my booted shins. I walked into deep-

ening water and got across with only about an inch to spare on my hip boots. I headed to where the bird landed. It wasn't there. The spring hole looked different and there were countless burrows, ruts, and streams cut far into the musseled bank. A live bird could have gone anywhere. I looked for ten minutes, wanting badly to find it. "Find 'em?" Herb yelled from the boat. "No!" I answered and started back across the slushy channel; but the tide was flooding, the water was too deep. I followed the shore on the other side until a narrow cross-stream cut me off. I didn't think I could jump it, so I stood at the corner of water and called to Herb.

"Oh, for Christ's sake." His low voice carried over the water. A dim heat rose from my collar, but I felt a little sick. I sat on the frozen bank and brushed my hand through the snow like those dying flutters of the woodpecker, scratching its own epitaph at the tree line. The snow had almost stopped with the wind, but the cold closed me up. Herb pulled on the outboard, seven or eight times, and it finally roared to life.

When he got close, I yelled "Watch out. Not much water here." He nodded and kept looking over the side, trying to sound the irregular channel with his eyes. He motored ten feet past me up current, then swung the bow around. A terrible grinding shook the gravel under my feet. The whole boat jumped and rattled with the sound of a drowned saw, and the engine jerked violently, whining out in a high pitch. Then there was silence.

"God-dammit!" Herbie pounded the engine cover.

"What happened?" I walked out and grabbed the frosty bow with my right hand. Herbie tilted the engine and looked back at me.

"The fuckin' prop. I hit something. The pin's gone."

"You have another?"

"They're in my tool box."

"Where's your tool box?"

"In my garage."

"In your fucking garage? Jesus Christ, Herb!"

"Easy boy."

"Don't easy boy me. I'm freezing, damnit. I'm losing my hands out here."

Herbie turned around and looked at me. "I'm freezing, too. Is there anything else you want to say?" The snow had stopped, and the white boat glowed above the gray water. He pulled off his straw knitted cap and took the fur schapska from his bag. He dropped the schapska's flaps over his ears and tied them under his chin. "Pull me in," he said.

Herb was very calm. He stepped onto the gravel, fumbled into his coat and managed to light a smoke. "It's this kind of shit that gets me thinking about women. And it's not the screwing," he said. I didn't say a word. Standing in a foot of freezing water, I examined the chipped propeller. The cotter pin was torn up, and the sheer pin had sheered, just like it was supposed to. But unless we had another, the engine would never turn those blades.

"We're fucked unless we can find a pin or walk out of here," I told him.

"You got a girlfriend now at college?" Herbie asked. I just looked at him like he was crazy.

"Well?" he said.

The harbor was nearly frozen. No one could hear or see us and no one knew for certain where we were. I looked at Herb.

"Well?"

"Girlfriend? No, not really. I go out with girls." I was beginning to shiver.

"Whadda ya mean, 'go out with girls'? Stringing 'em on a wire. You'll end up like me. You gotta get to know a woman. You spend some time together, talk. Then who knows."

"It's hard."

"What?"

"I mean at school. I don't have the time."

"No time, hah? What's her name?"

"Who?"

"The girl you last saw."

"Jennifer."

"What's Jennifer like?"

"Are we going to get this engine going or what?"

"What?" he said. And I was scared that something had gone wrong with Herb, that something had froze in him. I looked into his eyes and they were very clear.

"I don't know. She's got a great voice."

"A great voice?" he smiled. At that moment, I could hear Jen talking. We were drinking wine under the warm blankets of her tiny bed. She was telling me about the finches her mother raised. She described each bird's personality and we laughed.

"Her voice?" he asked again.

"Herb, listen to me. Can we wire that prop on? We gotta get this going."

"No. Some things you can't wire. Her voice? That's what you think of?" He tested a flashlight in my face. "Let me check the boat for a pin." Then from inside the wooden hollow: "Are you going to talk with her again?"

"I don't know. She lives in Bridgeport."

I climbed in the boat and we turned out four brass screws and pulled up a corner of the floorboard. "Whatta you see?" Herb asked. Frozen along the wooden ribs were a few rusted flounder hooks, bottle caps, and a sheer pin. I pried the pin loose with the screwdriver but couldn't pick it up. When I pulled off my gloves, my fingers were dead numb. I warmed them in my mouth. They hurt so badly a tear ran down my face. Herbie bent over in a strange ache, coughed, then put his hand on my back. "It's alright."

The engine started grudgingly, but it started.

We headed out into what remained of the black channel. Birds were flying in from everywhere and I could hear their whistling wings. It was dark, and yet the hills and high flats shone blue in the veiled light of the emerging moon. These are things I still feel when it's very cold. A woman watching for headlights, a man stoking an iron stove, closing the screen and turning his back to the flames. And there should be voices. Herbie's maybe, in the lucid serenity of his last winter. Or Jennifer, asking me under those covers beside her warm stories. But it's just the sound of a stalling outboard and the cold pulls that would not revive. The shots we fired into the night, and nothing answering but the moan of blue ice around our hull. Herb's fall into sleep. The last birds leaving the hard water, the quiet moments before my first step.