

Grandfathers

Grandpa Dees hauled explosives in World War Two until the accident. My mother taught me not to cheer when John Wayne saved the wagon train, Grandpa one of *them*. But I thought tall John Wayne was god, what the awesome white man in the sky would look like, if he shaved. I saved my dimes

and went to movies, anyway, silent in the crowd, slumped down and gobbling popcorn, believing every scene. My uncles swore by boots and Stetsons, sons of my other grandpa, who died before I was born. In town and family picnics they swaggered like the Duke, heads tilted down

and scowling from under dark eyebrows, wrists cocked at belt level, drawling, talking softly.

I saw how funny it all was at thirteen. Grandpa Dees wore sneakers and a baseball cap, hauled explosives in an eighteen-wheeler all through the war.

Back for a night, that old man tangled me in headlocks,

rubbed my flattop raw with flint-rock knuckles, dumped me on my back and raised a hatchet attached to a souvenir dog from Arkansas or California, giving me candy canes, an eagle's feather, then lifted and hugged me tight as a son until his truck pulled out.

Walter McDonald