The five year old boy knew he was young and small. But, running without slowing and looking only at his tight legs, he pretended to be about thirty and six feet tall—men's and children's jeans looked about the same. This March day shone only two weeks after winter had gone, and still it was warm, blue, and big and his mind could not come to winter now. He watched his own red shoes slap down a hill until they ran into a marsh.

He soon would forget wet socks, however, for he left behind his yard and would try, again, to go past the western hills. His family had no neighbors in that direction, making it a mysterious country where maybe no man would live. Always warned and threatened by his parents and Cousin Jennifer, the boy feared that place on dark days but now could only run toward it. Something in this blue-backgrounded air, one which at ten a.m. attacked his throat in a nice way, made him feel no fear of distance. A long time before, he had tried to go up and over the first western hill. He had stopped and sat two-thirds the way up and noticed suddenly that his father was coming. His Dad spanked him that day and made him mad, but afterward described the dangers of going away and scared the boy to where he wanted another spanking. Now, the boy ran and thought of how they had laughed at his want, and this memory made him embarrassed. He did not slow, the air keeping his throat wet for longer than usual.

His toe kicked a mound and he fell. Still feeling good, he slapped dirt off his pants and looked back suddenly. He could almost picture his father—he too in jeans—long-legging it after him. For several minutes, he thought about that picture, held his hands clapped, and almost started back homeward. Then, however, he looked to the hilltop and realized he was no farther along than at age four. I'm older and taller, he thought. I should get a couple steps higher this year.

And the boy made the hilltop easily, ran up and over another; he discovered how many big green and brown hills were in the west. After
more than an hour of counting proudly the distance behind him, moving some more, looking back again, he realized that the air had lost its watery taste. It had been fun going so far. Very satisfied, he escaped homeward excitedly—not really escaped, but pretend so—and the feeling thrilled him. Just as abruptly, however, he stopped atop the first hill eastward. He hadn’t done that very last western hill, discouragingly one of the tallest. God, he had gone way, way past last year’s Going Away. Go up the last one, and then run home, he thought.

“I’m glad I came up this one too,” the boy mouthed when he gazed westward from the final hilltop. He saw a giant lake, brown at its near rocky levee, blue fifty feet out and beyond, then flaming white before the sky dropped into it. Land—hills, houses, and trees—surrounded the giant body out to the horizon.

But, the boy could not get to it. The eastern levee had pointed rocks bigger than he, and thin, spidery trees with no leaves but something extra dark about their tops. He needed to get closer to that big water, however, plus find out why the trees seemed different. Cautiously, he jogged to where the levee’s shorter brush pushed out visitors. To reach the lake’s shallow edge then, he would have had to either step through this foot brush or jump over it, then inch down the bank. But, he heard little noises, cracklings and perhaps live things giving off air, inside and they seemed ot aggressive but defensive. To the boy, in fact, this entire eastern rim did not want his visit, and it worried him that trees and rocks could give him a human thought. Like people, this small wood could hurt his feelings.

Up in those treetops, the dark stuff he had spotted was alive; a reptilian clump that hypnotized him and hurried him through several moments of panicked thought. At last he saw that the black bundle was many, many snakes sleeping in the great sunlight. Another bundle waved in a treetop nearby. Suddenly, the boy felt as if he could make snakes by just looking at a new rock, a new plant. They slithered all around below; he now learned a rising rattling sound and its source. He stepped well back from the brush, for he knew not how fast these snakes could be, and, not once looking from their jerky animation nor closing his mouth, he trotted northward and hoped he could pass around them.
As he ran that way he noticed a meeting point at the northern foot of the last western hill and the levee. There was no grass, but soft amber mud at this lowest point, and a noisy branch of water crossed the mud and ducked beneath a grassy mound. He discovered: the stream covered over the mud at just this one spot and that the mud stretched all the way to the lake. He looked back along the great hill’s north side and found a main body to this stream. The thaw had built it to a leaping white, but clear, stampede that somehow tapered, drenching the earth at its sides, took one last trickling turn across the mud, and burrowed underground. The small wild flow back upstream stole him from the almost still lake, for now.

Beside its widest rush, the stream had sprouted little mud volcanos that echoed a tiny plopping noise in each when the boy ran near. Further upstream, where the body twisted and seemed troubled in its aim, knee- and ankle-high fountains billowed. He had spotted more of these in the distant east and they had looked like fluttering gray claws. He ran to them now and watched for a moment, for it was the comparatively lifeless and dirty mud bumps he wanted most.

He knelt beside one six-inch high mound for several minutes when, just as he had made snakes be on rocks, he looked and looked until something did work its way into the tubular mouth. It was dark, dark, moving up and down. It clicked. And when it began to rise, its body with the color and motion of an army tank, the boy saw that it was longer than the mound itself. He had seen one of these before, when his Dad had fished. But, that thing’s pincers were soft and flimsy and, in fact, the whole creature was much smaller. Lifting from the volcano, today’s creature looked almost metallic, its bumps however resembling those on plastic dinosaurs.

The boy kept three feet away and watched it crawl fast and slow, backward and forward, then around the mound. Between its long stretches of dark green, very slight stains of turquoise fascinated the child. At times he could not quite tell if this special color was really even there. Now, the creature seemed to be showing off as it worked to the limit its segmented tail and all its feelers. Then, it tried to scare him away, facing him squarely, rising and aiming its claws like big guns, and opening them. The boy, however, was five feet away and too much bigger, anyway—and he had to laugh at its threat. Then, it turned away, leaning forward, and its eight legs drove it speedily into the most furious
torrent. The five year old was laughing and sorry for it at once.

At the lake’s shore, he thought little more of the crawfish and soon remembered nothing; he took in only what was happening then. Flashes and flickers continued atop the water, going off by their own power. The one way out where the sky passed behind the lake were much bigger and brighter than the few that turned within the boy’s reach. He looked around and felt the giantism of the basin. he could see, barely, the snake-balls in the distant trees and he felt safe and knew he would be warned by their hisses before they could quite get to him. Looking back out to sea, he noticed that he had seen no life in this lake—only in trees and the skinny stream. Now the crawfish came back to his mind, and he wondered if there were great big ones in these greater waters. This thought pushed him, with a hand not urgent but of wisdom, a step and a half backward. He did not need to see life from this water, anyway. Its blue field of jumping and smooth swirls threw out what seemed almost too much beauty, but he did not know why he felt this happy guilt, a thrilling worry.

An hour later a wind fluttered the shore waves and the seated boy’s short-sleeves. It could not quite chill him, however. Dust rose amid bush gardens, against trees, and up the levee, catching and lifting his attention to the snake trees, now only half as dark as before. They might have been coming. He watched the ground within the levee, saw no snakes, and decided to stand ready in case they were sneaking up on him. He glanced about until his attention had to stop at an especially dark place in the near water. As the snakes’ approach seemed suddenly unimportant, and for a reason unknown to him, he watched this forest green hole, unoccupied in the water ... until it filled gradually with golden, bigness, taking shape as a great hump—a golden fish his size. He saw no eyes or mouth to it but knew the fish was facing him. For an absorbing ten minutes, it floated still, letting slip bubbles the size of quarters and dimes and tiny pearls; they came apart atop the surface.

When the pretty visitor had dropped without animation into a place below the dark spot, had become an outline with dark contour, and had vanished, the five year-old felt excited suddenly and spoke aloud: “I gotta leave now.” Another thought of the snakes tingled his stomach and hurried him along the stream. And there it was ahead, his armored friend with claws, legging moundward, and neither friend would break stride. “You’re pretty neat,” the boy let it know as he jumped over it.
He found it fun to run back up the far west hill but then slowed down the rest of the way: looking back westward after each new hill, he saw that blue sea grow smaller until it was like a great toy. Soon, he was back from the place he had never been to the home where he had always lived and started worrying suddenly of his old life. He could have been in trouble. He thought hurriedly of both Cousin Jenny—left to care for him this Saturday—and all the things he had just seen. What was the neatest thing? He remembered the motionless fish that had sunk with the slowness of time. And, it looked like a giant one of Jenny's goldfish, but hers were a little orange, not just golden. There was Jenny, upset at him, standing beside the house. He ran to her so he would look happy to see her, and this final burst burned him from nostrils to chest.

"Stay in bed now until your parents get back," the blonde instructed him. Often, the boy liked his cousin's prettiness, even though her hips were not quite as wide as movie stars'. Her face was to the feature as sexy and smart as any he had seen. But he did not like her angry. Then, she would frighten him and might as well have had any face.

After she had chided him and put him away to his first nap in a year, she stalked tensely from his bedroom and he plotted escape. Ten minutes later he knelt before his parents bedroom TV and, just as the picture swelled and shrunk back to correct size, a hand from behind squeezed him under each armpit, and he began to come off the floor. Jenny cradled him degradingly, tilting her head as she glared at his face, returned him to his room, and stood him back by the bed.

"Okay. This time give me your clothes, everything."

He frowned for a moment then walked, almost crying from confusion, to his dresser drawer. To sweep out his jumbled jeans, shorts, socks, and undershirts, he had to put almost his entire upper body inside the big drawer and squeeze together his arms like a claw of his crawfish friend. Spilling socks and little shirts, he toted the bundle toward her.

"Now, Billy. What the hell are you doing?"
"Here."
"I want the clothes you're wearing."

He had been looking no higher than her waist, but now glanced up twice at her sharp eyes and her half-smile. She turned a little red and rubbed her hand across her eyelids, then laughed through her nose.

"I don't want to," he whispered, looking down again.

She gave an intentional and impatient smack of her lips and said,
“C’mon. Get naked.”

He glared into her eyes and tilted his head, as if to say, “What are you trying to do!” Still, he almost cried.

“I’m not trying to embarrass you; Billy, but this will keep you from running all over the house when I say you have to be in bed.”

“But . . . I won’t go out of the yard anymore.”

“It’s too late for that now.”

He could not see why. “But—I think that—you are trying to embarrass me cause you saw me in the bathtub last night, and—”

“That was an accident. I popped in and popped right back out.”

“. . . Well then, turn around and cover your eyes.”

Again she smirked. She spun away, waited a couple minutes, heard “Okay,” turned and saw him—still in his jeans. “Is that all your clothes!” They went through it again and when she turned he was wrapped in a yellow blanket.

“Climb up on the bed and try to go to sleep.” Jennifer gathered his fallen clothes, began to drape them over a chair, but chose first to count them. “Your underpants are missing. Were you wearing underpants—”

And he was already twisting impatiently beneath the covers; his right hand then presented his shorts like the flag of surrender and he heaved them toward her. They hit her on the forehead.

The boy could stand Jennifer’s red streaked glaring for only an instant before he turned away quickly, bouncing and pinning the cover’s satin lining against his face.

Even if he wanted to sleep, he knew, his heart pounded too hard—from constant worry of how she could treat him—for him even to shut his eyes. But, she did nothing. Even as he had turned twice to see her doings, she remained seated and her quieted stare fixed upon him. This was the way things would stay for awhile, and he worked out his most comfortable waking position, facing away still, his tiny cool body flatly huddled and relaxing slowly.

In a moment he heard giggling, maybe a distant girl or just the quiet snickering of Jenny. Remaining flat, he chose not and cared not to see. Then, he heard footsteps at his bedside and, his gaze darting suddenly among wall cracks and holes, braced for his cousin’s action. However, she tugged gently the blanket at his rear and secured its satin edge beneath his right hip. Laughing loudly, as if embarrassed, Jenny sat back down and had to announce, “Oh, Billy. Sometimes you do show your ass, don’t you?”
It took him a minute to get her remark, and his mouth fell open. His butt really had been showing! He was so embarrassed that he could hardly control a hundred tremors of his face, eyes, and eyebrows. He kind of said, "Shut up," held his position as tightly and stiffly as if he hung on a cliff's edge, and made damned sure he felt that blanket hem beneath his hip—that his butt was not showing again! . . . God, in front of Jenny.

This tense position worked him, tired him, made breathing hard. At times he would rest much of his weight upon his right shoulder. But that shifting would leave less weight holding down that hem. Pressing down hard with his hip, the boy clenched his teeth and prayed Cousin Jenny would leave and that he could get a new position.

He kept thinking about how it had looked to her, and whether she still liked him or was still proud of him, and he stayed embarrassed, and he kept worrying, and he kept pressing. And there were the snakes. Without control, he flew down the hill toward them and screamed faintly, his feet beating the earth and whipping his legs about. The sun cast silver upon the snakes, which worked across the grass like slender waves. They would pop up and land like little explosives, going off by their own power.

Somehow, he had stopped short of them. But his feet seemed to want to skitter their way still. Suddenly, he chose to bound southward of them, and he could leap, but not run, in long-lasting jumps of fifteen feet. These snakes stopped to watch him, and could have gotten to him before he landed had they wanted to. Next, he was atop the levee and looking down the slopes. The lake was the same as earlier, but not only were the snakes gone, but the trees had disappeared, too. The snakes must take them down, he thought. He watched again the silver and black reptiles, which climbed toward him only partway and chose instead to swim within the foot grass once again. When he turned from them again, the boy discovered himself at the lakeside. And in seconds, as he had someway expected, a giant Something began to rise out in the lake's northern half. A golden rounded awesome thing as large as the far west hill broke water and poured splashing streams down its sides until it buoyed. It had a fish face, but behind it a giant segmented tail of golden also lifted the surface and broke clear, trailing and dropping spiralling waterfalls from its feelers. The thing rested, bobbing, facing the boy. From its eyes, the boy saw now, hung two lifeless, useless golden claws,
soft and wet. His heart pounded in suffocating awe as this monster imposed a fresh, fishy smell throughout the lakeside.

He remembered the stream, but wished he hadn’t; the thought made him run accidentally in its direction and disallowed him to see the giant fish. At streamside, however, he saw a little golden fish of the same propositions legging about a green mound. Its claws were slender hard weapons and its eight legs tireless.

The boy knelt and dared touch it. Cleverly it reached up one claw without looking and squeezed his finger. It almost hurt, but... no, not quite. It squeezed him firmly, and in someway the boy got a human message from its small claw. It seemed to pump an extra life into him and this scared him.

He ran back toward the levee and Jenny lay there, waiting. Seeing her pulled a faint gasp from him. She was mad again and would punish him, but she was very, very beautiful now; without redness, she waited softly and quietly in white—the beautiful gown he had once seen her wearing? However, just as soon as he tried to recognize this white fabric beauty, it was gone, and Jenny had no clothes... maybe underwear, yes no... She stretched her first finger toward him and drew him to her with its movement. The snakes danced up to within inches of her toes, left, came back, and left again. The boy feared them but made not effort to pass around them, but instead ran straight to her and felt her hands tight upon his upper arms. Giving new heat, she pulled him upward along her slender limbs and body.

The punishment she gave the boy was unclear to him, but it made him tired and embarrassed and sleepy. Throughout his hazy work, he thought once or twice of the snakes, the giant fish that could come over the levee at any time, and even the little pincers of the stream fish, and he felt scared. However, they did not threaten Jenny, who must have been protecting him while she punished him.

When he awoke, Billy saw that three people hovered at his bedside, and while he knew that two were his parents, he looked only at Jenny. He looked up and down her body, tired to remember, tried to remember—what had she made him do?—and considered her scary, but magic. Unlike after most of his dreams, that strongest thought and
feeling faded very little as his thinking snapped clearer.

“You went away, didn’t you?” his Dad said, his tall forehead giving off light.

“Yeh, but I already got in trouble for it.” Billy pointed to Jenny, who smiled.

Not quite as pretty as Jenny, his Mom folded her arms and stepped to his pillow-side. “No more of that, okay?” she said.

He nodded, turned on his side to face them all, and felt great relief that he had gotten back from the second going away. For now, that trip was too much.

End

When I Am Gone

Nathan Harter

When in the breeze of autumn’s sleepless evening
    You listen for the sound of something gone,
The whistling echo of a spirit winging
    Shall haunt you ’till the break of day and on.
Remember then the soft and subtle breathing,
    The sighs from long-sequestered passions drawn;
Recall the voice, the laughing and the singing;
    Remember me in vanguards of the dawn.

Then weep for what is past, for ghosts unwept,
    And catch the fleeting flourish of my wings,
For I shall be as one dead—mourned at best
Though by the winds of destiny unswept.
    Who cares what faith in resurrection brings.
If I could die forever at your breast?