FAMILY GATHERING
AT THE LAKE
STEVEN MINER

I need to tell you something.
Last night the family had a bonfire
and across from me sat my cousin,
whose pale young face the fire had plucked out
from the night, like the full moon,
and in his hands, next to his drunk father,
was a matchbox, and when an 8-year-old finds matches
a match will be struck, and so it was,
but since his father, my uncle, was on his way
to get a refill, he didn’t see the way
my cousin’s eyes lit up before the flame
like I did, but soon the flame died out,
and he flicked the charred-black body
into the fire, and while he did so I was watching
my uncle pour another beer, admiring his skill despite his state,
he held his mug at just an angle
so as not to spill the foam,
then as match #2 was to be struck, I said,
across the fire, “Abel, if you hold the match
upside-down but at an angle, it will burn for longer,”
and saw his blue eyes snap to mine, a nod,
then flick, and the flame climbed up
toward his little knuckles, closing in just as
his father sat back down, and he shook it out
and tossed the charred-black body in the fire,
and my uncle spilled some beer as he sat down,
and Abel lit another match, and this
is why I’m telling you this, because
I cannot get this image out,
the flame is climbing up and up,
again and time again it climbs
until Abel runs out of matches
and he sits there strange,
next to his drunk father,
feeling out of place and lost
without something burning in his hand.