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It's late at night now, and a chill has ascended to my second-floor office, disturbing my writing efforts, so I descend to find its cause. The cold wind outside is causing the TV aerial wire to tap in a spooky fashion against the wall of the house. Looking into the remnant of the fire in the stove which is the only illumination in the living room, I am reminded of E.A. Poe: "and each dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor..." Outside the window, a pale blanket of snow stretches out under black branches in the freezing darkness. Thoughts of Robert Frost chase Poe's shadow. Tonight, unless I fetch more wood, the world will end in ice.

It is a truth I face reluctantly. Midnight approaches, and the woodshed, an old corn shack, is some twenty yards or so from the fading warmth of the old farmhouse. Nevertheless, I pull on my heavy wool poncho, a cap and gloves; grab a flashlight and the canvas fuel sling, and step out into the cold, shutting the door behind me. A cruel world seizes me: a vault of icy air, moonlight, softly crunching snow. Moving rapidly across the drive to the corn shed, I run my light along the stacks.

Here is a small forest dismembered and stacked: stray windfalls, ant-chewed cherry, blighted oak, the limbs of a disembodied canopy stacked crotch to elbow, knotty knee to moldy hollow -- high as my head with spaces "big enough for a mouse to crawl through, but not a cat to follow." I think of writing archives, the fragments of stories and old articles in my hard drive, the filing cabinets and old trunks full of clippings and manuscripts. I think also of what has been weeded out: stories still greening in the forest of the imagination, old logs, past their prime, left to rot.

I remember too, the long, hot hours spent in summer gathering this winter fuel -- to erect this fortress of hickory and oak against the cold. How I would pass in and out the valve of the screen door a dozen times, returning to my computer smelling of trees, with burrs attached to my sleeve. Of the thoughts I carried back with me to unload among the wild gooseberries, loosesrife, and ferns. And what must the woodchuck, deep in the shade, have thought of the bad poetry I sometimes muttered to myself, as I stood for a moment among the trees, watching the sun in the leaves overhead, the axe handle forgotten in my hands?

There is a skitter among the logs, and I find myself once again shivering in this tunnel of firewood that leads I know not where, freezing my butt off, thinking about things that will not make me warm. Quickly I select three pieces of dry, firm oak and two of hickory. Bone-dry limb wood, mostly box elder, goes on top of that in the canvas sling, topped with a few handfuls of twigs. In a few moments it is done, and I race back to the warm house. A second or two after the door is closed, I am fumbling with newspaper and kindling by the dim hearth, opening the stove door to fan the coals with my breath. Quickly, I start a fire, and the flames ladder up the dry limbs. Soon the stove roars, warmth floods the room. In the darkness I grope in the cabinet for a glass, and -- ah yes -- the drop of single malt scotch I have been saving for just such an occasion. No need to go back upstairs quite yet, I tell myself. This is work. Really. Sitting here on the couch, sipping this marvelous distillation, and watching this small sun revived from the embers of August, blazing on the hearth, I convince myself that a literary experience is about to take place. Any minute now.

Rod Clark, Editor