

# Poetry from Westley Smith: “Homecoming,” “On Not Dying,” “Nocturne”



THE SHOTGUN, BREATHES / *image by Amalie Flynn*  
**Homecoming**

He doesn't feel quite right, being there—  
same house, a little run down, dirtier  
than he remembers. They smile and shake his hand,

escort him to his room—with everything  
just where he left it.

Then, they surprise him—  
they leave. He hasn't been alone in years.  
When night arrives with no boots to shine,  
no weapon to clean or letters to write,  
he listens for threats that never come.  
He's up and moving before everyone  
to stalk the house, lock and relock each door,  
his family asleep in separate rooms.

\*

Days later, he finds a retail job at Sears,  
takes orders from some stateside twit named Greg.  
When he's had enough, he slams Greg into a wall—  
Then, no more job.

He starts to drain his savings.  
His family adjusts to him being home.  
They start ignoring him, which he prefers.

\*

Deer season now. He packs his rucksack, grabs  
the shotgun, leaves the family a note  
and hikes out to the deep woods of Ohio.  
First time he's felt himself: carrying  
and wearing his BDU's, scarfing MRE's.

He sets up camp near where he tracked a deer-  
swatches of scraped oak-bark and tramped ground  
mark its territory. On the cold, hard ground,  
he sleeps the best he has in months.

\*

He wakes, packs up his gear and climbs the oak.  
Wandering back to friends, to when he knew  
what was expected, back to when he had

a purpose, when he knew his life mattered.

In the tree stand, he sees the shotgun's dirty—  
a stick jammed in the slide and around the chamber.  
He pulls it out, unloads the shells, and wipes  
the weapon down with the pre-oiled rag

he carries in his pack. He does a functions check,  
reloads, then sees a deer, a five-point buck  
breaks cover and stands, looking him in the eye.  
He aims the shotgun, breathes. The deer just stares.

### **On Not Dying**

I'm glad I didn't pull the trigger  
on the .44 magnum while

the barrel was in my mouth.  
Oh, I've done crazier shit—

Walking at night along  
the handrails of bridges, backwards,

to entertain laughing friends.  
Drinking rotgut whiskey

on top of abandoned buildings, hoping  
never to wake, but always waking again.

After the war, during a protracted  
divorce, unable to see my kids,

I'd wake from a nightmare to grab  
my gun and patrol the perimeter

of my ranch-style in Richmond,  
Indiana, to make sure everything's

secure, everyone's safe.

Finding no threats, I'd sit  
on the couch, in the dark, feeling  
stupid, still fighting—  
for what? I didn't die there  
and I refuse to let it kill me now.

## Nocturne

I'm awake-the bed shakes  
as I bleed out, alone, a blade still  
buried in my thigh.

I feel the warm wet  
on my legs but it isn't blood.  
I throw the sheets in the washer,

retreat to my favorite chair.  
Flipping through reruns,  
I settle on a comedy I've seen.

It's dark. I hear his breath  
wheezing slow. The odor  
of cigarettes as he drives the blade

deeper. I scream—my dog barks.  
The windows blush:  
I'm on the floor, the TV  
flickering the news of a new day.