# DESCENT DOWN THE AVENUE OF DREAMS

*Victoria Armour-Hileman, award winner*

That first year I was always trying to save you.
There was the beating they gave you
before you came to live with us.
Perfect miniature of a derelict,

careless in your bones, a stick and twig starveling,
slumped in hideous baby postures,
wrinkling your third eye—that blue bulge
where you'd been hit. You were long,

thin, and colorful as a stained glass window.
*Love starved* the doctor called it.
*Babies know*, he said. Then the asthma.
Throwing on robes at midnight, Mother

and I would rush you to the shower,
one of us holding you up like a banner,
the other turning on the steam
until the room was filled with hot towels

of vapor, suffocating us, choking up
the mirror. You kicked, your hands beating
the air—frogs leaping at the sides
of a glass cage. I held my breath with you

as long as I could. And when you were better
I worried you with tenderness, kissing
your baby cheeks, burrowing my face in the clean
smell of your warm, powdery shirts. At eleven

must have been ridiculous, pushing away all
hands, bossing anyone who would listen. I carted
you around on one hip like the purses worn
by high school girls. Ugly, I shoved my hair

behind my ears, stringy as wet dental floss.
I chewed gum with tense, serious arrogance.
I think I mixed us up, thought somehow I
was the wizened starveling, suffocating,

wounded. Can you forgive me
for loving only what I saw of myself
in you? I know it is more terrible
than that. Though sometimes even now

I startle out of sleep, and run down
the hall, hearing that blue-faced silence
only to remember we both moved out years ago.
And when they told me what you had done

I followed you in my dreams, down the dark
rich avenue of parked cars. And the hand
was mine, raising the thick pipe, mine the first
shattering breath, as the glass began to fly.