BY JOHN TRISKA

SECOND CHANCE

A clear glass and red plastic hummingbird feeder hangs from the eaves outside my kitchen window. Late afternoons, my ten-year-old daughter and I watch the hummingbirds flit across the yard, perch on our feeder, and take long drinks of the nectar we've prepared. Like most of the birds we know, the males are the showy ones—iridescent red head and throat, with a green back and sides giving way to a white chest and belly. The females have just a dainty scarlet bib beneath their chins and are otherwise light and dark shades of olive green. This summer we think we have a nest nearby—two immature birds, the new babies, have also begun feeding. On our side of the glass, we freeze, whispering, watching the family on the feeder. Finally, they fly away. Iris laughs. She says I always cry for two things: mushy scenes in movies and hummingbirds. I tell her I cry whenever I know something beautiful is true. She shakes her head. I think, what does she know? She's ten.

When I was ten, my friends and I played war. There was a perfect slope of grass in our front yard where you could take a hit in the chest and feel the bullet exploding the flesh right out of your back; in slow motion you were lifted up and blown backwards. Hitting the dirt, you'd exhale in an agonized groan, then flop down the hill to lie twitching in some grotesque, contorted position. "Cool," someone would say, and you'd muster enough strength to lift your weapon and pull the trigger in his direction. But those guns and their bullets were made of air, and their damage was always reversible.

My dad kept a gold-triggered Browning automatic shotgun hanging above the entrance to his study. Turns out he bought it when my brother was ten. They used to go hunting in the farm fields near Ithaca. Now and then Dad asks if I remember coming along in the stroller. Of course, I don't. Apparently, he shot at a couple of rabbits, a pheasant or two. But he never hit anything.

On my tenth Christmas there was a pellet gun under the tree for my brother and me. Cooler than a Daisy BB, pellet guns were twice as powerful. It shot one pellet at a time—you pumped it by cracking the barrel when you loaded it. We were supposed to use it under supervision.

Alone after school, I'd pull it out of the closet, unzip the plastic, red flannel-padded case, and go out back, the yellow box of pellets in my hip pocket kachinking like maracas. I'd crack the rifle over my knee, load it, snap it back, and take a position under the old corner oak. Up in the branches, Steller's jays, mourning doves, robins, and squirrels made targets of themselves. I'd aim, take a breath, then let it out slowly and pull the trigger. I got awfully close. But it was some time before I scored my first kill.

The tiny hummer zipped down from above the house, rocketing to a sudden stop at the pomegranate tree. With her delicate black beak and tongue, she probed a large flower, her red-speckled chin floating in and out of the trumpet. Suddenly she backed out, turned, and slid off like a brush stroke for the opposite end of the yard.

I shouldered my weapon, led her generously, then pulled the trigger. She dropped. Incredulous, I ran to where the bird had fallen into my mother's flowers.

The tiny trembling creature revealed an incongruous contusion where the lead pellet had lumped its back out of alignment. A wing buzzed with intensity, then folded. The hummer eyed me from