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ED, BRAGGING
Francine M. Tolf

Hunched over his computer keys, Ed coughs hard
into his handkerchief, catches his breath, wheezing,
goes on. *I can kill just about anything*, he says.
Ducks, rabbits, squirrels. It don't bother me. Hell,
I shot my own dog once. A Doberman I picked up from the pound.
Come home with some meat from the butcher
and he lunges at me. I says to myself, oh no you don't.
Got my shotgun and nailed that dog right between the eyes.
He takes a bite of the Danish
he brought for the office.

Ed's son walked away from his three teenaged boys
who live with Ed now in his trailer.
That much I know.
I know that he owned a tavern outside Little Rock,
hasn't talked to his brother in years,
believes all vegetarians are kooks
but calls me "dear" even so.
Also, that he was operated on for cancer
two months ago and is losing weight fast.

That much I know, and what he told me today,
how his father taught him to be a man
one morning when he was twelve, how he handed Ed a knife
and told him to brace that lamb who'd been following him around
like a pet, brace that animal between his thighs
and slit his throat *like this, he said,*
and, Jesus, I couldn't do it. That lamb looked me in the eyes and baaaed
and I couldn't do it. My father beat the crap outta me
in our yard. You're a man now, he said,
you do what you hafta do. After that
I could kill anything.
It didn't bother me at all.