

KERRY JAMES EVANS

An Empty House

1

Oak limbs sprawl into the window panes,
and the unpainted picket fence—

fallen over.

Soldiers washed under the sand.

No, there are rats crawling about —chasing squirrels,
wallpaper sagging

across the floor
like the necks of men in old age.

I own nothing but my teeth.

I will never learn it all.
I am better for it.

2

No children running about this house.
No ghosts. But the ghosts

of soldiers.

What of the air conditioning units stalled
for who knows how many years?

They rust like rabbit cages
holding shredded newspapers and hay.

The brick and mortar foundation gives way.

Outside the screened-in porch, across the yard,
this oak's roots sprawl —like

that wallpaper, like those necks
I have seen drooping from my jaw—

there,

a white dog with a brown spot for an eye
barks at the tails of the rats

—at me.

I trace the lines of his barking.

A soldier.

3

My neighbor told me of a poker bet.
He told me of how this home—

he told me how this house was bought.
No, he told me how it was won.

When I walk through this house, there is
no family sitting at the table.

There is no table.

Only the rats circling the unpainted
picket fence,
my eyes bloodied like maples turning—

and who lived here?

Who lived in this empty house?

I must live here, though I
have never owned a thing, but my teeth,
this winter with no snow—
locked out, this family.

KERRY JAMES EVANS

Are they walking down the sidewalk?

When I am hanged.

A soldier is buried beneath this house.
The floorboards creak his name. Mine.