**My Guilt**

By Agnes Copithorne

When I was a child I walked two miles to school
accompanied by a neighbor boy two years younger.
Freddie was fat and freckle faced
with wheat-straw hair and a mean stepmother.
It was late fall and one day his father
bought him a new winter cap.
It was made of heavy brown tweed with ear flaps.
It cost one dollar and twenty cents.

The next morning when he joined me
on the way to school, he showed me his new cap.
Almost bursting with pride, he took it off
so I could see the rabbit fur lining the ear flaps.
Whether out of downright meanness or jealousy
because I didn’t have a new cap,
just last year’s old red knitted toque,
I snatched it out of his hand
tossing it in the air and catching it again.
This went on for about half a mile.

Screaming and pleading, he ran after me.
But his legs were shorter than mine,
he couldn’t catch me.
Winded, I stopped and thrust the cap down a badger hole.
He ran up sobbing and reached down into the earth.
But the hole was deep, his arm not long enough.
He sat back on his heels and cried bitterly.
Guiltily, I stretched my arm down,
But there was no bottom, or so it appeared.
“Come on,” I said, “We’ll be late for school,
we’ll get it on our way home tonight.”

All day I felt his troubled gaze upon me
and I had trouble focussing on the printed page.
When we trudged homeward after school,
we tried again to rescue the cap, with no success.
And since Freddie was not allowed to loiter,
nor was I, we gave up.
Freddie dragged his feet, dreading to face
his stepmother and I too cowardly
to confess my guilt.

Later that evening his father took a shovel
and dug, but the hole was deep, slanting off
in different directions underground.
He gave up too and Freddie cried himself to sleep.
After that he came to school bareheaded.
My heart was like a stone in my breast
when I looked at his ears red with cold.
But I had no money to buy him another cap.
even when I wanted to which I suppose I didn’t.

They moved away after that, not because of the cap,
but drought, poverty, and all that goes with it
drove them to another part of the country.
Through the many years since,
Freddie’s sad face haunts me accusingly
and rightly so, for the callous thing I had done,
when I was twelve and he was ten.