my father’s son

memories, poems and a poetic eulogy by hal cobb
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bag ladies-in-waiting

the picture in my mind shows
steve and I each dressed
in a deb or phyllis non-frilly frock
our dime-store half masks not quite
concealing our secret boy identities
the dad-barbered hollywood burrs
betraying our halloween garb

steve’s seven-year-old goofy grin
a sharp contrast to my straight forward
just-the-fact-ma’am five-year-old frown
i was probably hoping for more than
my older sisters’ hand-me-downs
for my trick-or-treat masquerade

posed and supposedly costumed in front
of the big TV cabinet in the living room
grasping giant shopping bags with built-in straps
empty sacks hopeful of halloween fulfillment
we were a couple of pre-adolescent
drag bag ladies-in-waiting

steve seems way too happy
to be in that plaid schoolgirl dress
perhaps his fit better than mine
lord knows, those white gloves
were way too big for me
the johnny 7OM8

the big christmas present that year
was the johnny seven-oh-em-eight
the ultimate macho boy toy that
santa brought for my brothers and me

it was a life sized, all plastic
army green, junior commando, combination
bazooka / grenade-launcher / machine-gun
with its own tripod and shoulder strap

the moment was captured
for posterity’s sake by dad’s
one-flash-per-bulb brownie
in snapshot black and white

but who is that fey little boy
in footed flannel pajamas
all apple-cheeked and twinkle-eyed
in front of the cardboard holiday hearth

proudly displaying the season’s
foremost and first place prize
while flying in the face of the
family policy: don’t ask — don’t tell

in a full presentational pose that
would make carol merrill proud
i’m on my knees with a slightly arched back
and all my freckles sparkling like stars

one hand is demonstrating
the real life trigger action
while the other arm is outstretched
palm up in full spokes-model sweep

and yet, despite this early and dramatic
frilly-edged photographic evidence
there are still those who hope and pray
that i’m just going through a phase
miracle whip

my father
picked me that day
to run an errand—
to go to the grocery store
all by myself—
my very first solo trip

it meant he thought
i was big enough
to walk three
blocks unescorted
cross the residential
streets and make
it safely to the
other side of busy
two-lane franklin road
without his watchful eye

it meant he thought
i was smart enough
to navigate the
grocery store
search the tall
overstuffed aisles
and find the
needle-in-a-haystack
prize he desired

it meant he thought
i was trustworthy enough
to handle paper money
and make sure
the cashier gave me
the correct change
to return to him

so, off i went
proud as a peacock
my first great adventure
with the ornately
written word
“mayonnaise” stuffed
in my shirt pocket
on a folded piece
of his fancy
letter-writing paper

pleased as punch
on my return
i approached
the kitchen table
clutching a
paper bag in one hand
correct change in the other
presenting the proud offering
my father required of me

i held my breath
lowered my eyes
placed the bag and
the change on the
table before him
anticipating the words
“well done, my son”

as he looked into the bag
there were no words —
rolling eyes and a tongue
clicking with disapproval
were almost drowned out
by the falling chair
as he grabbed the bag
and his car keys and
headed out the back —
the slam of the screen door
punctuated his departure
my father's son

he never admitted even
the slightest mistake
or saw eyes well up
or heard the crush
of a tender spirit

what he had to have
right then and there
what he really wanted
and all he ever used
was miracle whip
my father's roses

it was a treacherous, beautiful thing
to exit the backseat driver's side of the '57 Chevy Bel-Air
when dad would park it in the driveway next to
our crackerbox house on Schoen Drive

there was a twelve inch
strip of dirt between the foundation
and the concrete driveway alongside the house
carefully amended with fertilizer and planted
with half a dozen or so tea roses

he attended to them
in ways he never tended to us attentively
pruning, dusting, debugging and deadheading
coaxing from thorny branches fragrant blossoms of
bright whites and ivory to coral and rhodamine

we could never just throw the
door wide open and bound out of the car
like on the passenger side with its grassy knoll
between the driveway and the neighbor's house

you had to judiciously nudge
the door barely open and squeeze
through the slightest slit possible as not
to scratch the paint on the Chevy or, god forbid,
cause any damage to his precious, prized roses

if you forgot, you not only risked
scratches and gashes from the wicked, vicious thorns
but a smack upside the head or the miserable commission
to retrieve his famous skinny belt from his bedroom closet
or to harvest a switch from the forsythia bush
out back to wrap around the legs
of the bad boys of summer
mrs. sprinkler

i don't remember if i was in
general or the first grade
when the reading light initially
sparkled inside my little head
but when it did
there was no shutting it off
or turning back . . .
or so i thought

very soon, Dick and Jane
just weren't fun enough
or interesting enough anymore
Dr. Seuss and his sneetches
and star bellied creatures
as well as _The Cat in the Hat_
with his _Green Eggs and Ham_
only whetted my hunger
spurred on by my demands

i learned the Dewey Decimal System
and navigated the great sea of the
Lawrence Elementary School Library
my curiosity the constant North Star —
Pippi Longstocking, Sherlock Holmes
Tom Sawyer and the Brothers Grimm
became my private huckleberry friends

i loved the Disney records with
the illustrated read-along books
built right into the album covers
_Pinocchio, Peter Pan_, and _Alice in Wonderland_
all the animated features
we didn't get to go see —
you could check out headphones
and listen to the albums during study hall
if you'd earned a special library pass
reading along with the music and songs
was almost better than getting
to see the movie itself . . .
or so i told myself

i loved to read so much
(a voracious appetite one might say)
that at the end of each chapter of
assigned elementary textbook reading
i'd follow the suggestions under
"If You'd Like to Learn More" and
venture off on library treasure hunts
using the small drawer card catalog file
for clues to search the stacks and even
the periodical guide to send library helpers
for magazines stored in back to
unearth tremendous relics
and read, read, read

now, what was it
that i possible could have done
on that fateful third grade day
for you to publically humiliate me —
banish me from class by sending me
to the principal's office for the
very first (and only) time
in my tender young life

had you told me why then
it might have made some sense and
you wouldn't have made a wide-eyed
eight year old clip the wings of his spirit
and feel like an irredeemable piece of shit

did i ask too many questions?
did i offer too many answers?
did i interrupt too often
too eager to win your approval
with my new found child wisdom?
did i become a show-off
an unsolicited know-it-all?
just what did i do to
offend the likes of you?

you never took the time to explain it to me
but your stern silence convinced me
your baffling banishment convicted me
your sentencing me to the principal’s
office like a common criminal—
all the evidence pointed to
the facts that must be true:
i was a bad and worthless boy
i was evil, rotten to the core
all the things i’d been dad-told before
and that i’d never, ever amount to anything

what else could a frightened eight year old
conclude but reading gets you into trouble
knowing too much is not a good thing
knowledge expressed
is a threat to those in charge

that was the summation
used to irrevocably prove that
children are to seen and not heard, that
they should not answer unless called upon, that
they should not do more than they are asked, that
they should not excel
just learn to get by
do not get noticed
have a good alibi

you were probably totally unaware that
you violently and viciously ripped from
my curious and pliable young mind
the joy and excitement of reading
you pried from my vulnerable soul
the thrill and passion of discovery
you shackled my simpering spirit
to a prison wall of mediocrity and
chained to me to the belief that
it was a sin to think for oneself
it was wrong to follow one's heart
or wonder what it would be like
to float on a raft down a lazy river
or dream of pirate treasure adventures
and hope that there might actually be
a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow

but there were things
far more important to you
conformity was your desire
and conformity you got
it was order you demanded
and order was delivered

compliance completed your godhead
of correct and proper childhood behavior
and compliance would be had
no matter whose tender spirit had
to be shattered or splattered or
squelched along the way

i learned your lessons well, mrs. sprinkler
i learned to do just enough to get by
to get by and not get noticed
to be present in body, but not in mind
to live in my head, leave all else behind
to always stay seated and not rock the boat
to sink to the bottom and not earn to float
to never ask questions and never have hope
is that what you wanted to teach me, you dope?

it very well may not have been your intention
on that pivotal day in 1965, but that was
the life sentence you pronounced on me

it was well over twenty years later
after the rest of my compliant
and silent grade school years
after my wallflower junior high and
don't-raise-your-hand high school days
even after college semesters where i stayed
too busy with extracurricular activities to read
anything beyond skimmed knowledge

it was years after passage-of-time graduations
and under-earned diplomas and degrees
that a lover of books offered me
the possibility of parole
by enticing me to pick up
an unassigned volume again

he dared me to read again, just for fun
just for the sheer sensual delight of it
Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City*
was the delectable morsel
he tempted me with

one bite and the juice
ran down my trembling chin
to cure me from anorexic reading
then, my voracious appetite was shaken
from its cave of humiliation and hibernation

one miraculous mind-blowing book and
I was pardoned from a senseless sentence
I was set free from the joyless prison cell that
I had entered into with complete complicity and
the repressed memory of excited delight
was reawakened and rekindled in me and the
fear of your judgment placed in permanent exile

and now i read, mrs. sprinkler
just for the fun of it
and i ask questions
and express my opinions
and offend at times as i speak my mind
no one has to like what i read or what i say
for my tastes and ideas are my own

now listen carefully, mrs. sprinkler
my father's son

I will be heard
and more importantly
I will read

I will haunt libraries large and small
and giant corporate bookstores though
I prefer quaint independent booksellers
and tacky little strip mall book marts

I'll order from catalogues
and I will peruse newsstands
and dusty secondhand bookstores

I'll stop at yard sales and garage sales
and dig through boxes of books
and exchange prized volumes
with other crazed bibliophiles and
I might even pick up a book left behind
on a park bench or bus seat and
wonder who left it there –
on gift-treasure purpose
or forlorn neglect?

I've gone back to the classics
I should have read in high school
and college when instead I watched
old movies and skimmed Cliff Notes
The Old Man and the Sea is
no longer East of Eden for me
Of Mice and Men no longer
stirs up The Grapes of Wrath
I've experienced
The Agony and The Ecstasy
and ferociously fed my Lust for Life

because of Maya I Know
Why the Caged Bird Sings
a melody distinctly different
though hauntingly familiar to
Harper's To Kill a Mockingbird
and you know what happened
mrs. sprinkler, my desire
to read is no longer
Gone with the Wind

I find books by authors and poets I love
and read with complete abandon
from Shakespeare to Thomas Moore
and Barbara Kingsolver, Walt Whitman
to Leonard Cohen, and Billy Collins
Ed McClanahan and Frank X Walker
because of prison writing workshops
Fenton Johnson sings to my soul
and I contemplate the ruminations of
Marianne Williamson, Thomas Merton,
Gary Zukaz, Eckhardt Tolle and Kahlil Gibran

I'm not ashamed to admit
to the guilty pleasures of Anne Rice,
Tom Robbins, J.K. Rowling and Dan Brown
Charlaine Harris titillates my fancy
Kathy Reichs gets me to my Bones

my new literary friends and travel guides
help me explore brave new worlds through
words with wild, terrific and amazing imagination

they have introduced me to prodigious people
who are both like me and uniquely unlike me
and now I get to know the personalities
of people I'd never get to meet in
the halls of the usual suspects

they are my people now
and I will never, ever again –
thank you very much mrs. Sprinkler –
be trapped by small-mindedness, imposition
or spirit-killing conformity freaks

I will no longer limit myself
to what others consider safe
or live within the polite bounds
and politically correct borders
of someone else's comfort
for I have lived in the gray and
colorless hell of conformity
the tone-deaf and the colorblind
will never, ever take me back alive

I will not be chained
I will not be confined
I will not be limited and
I shall not be defined by the
stone-cold order of a sterile mind

and when it comes to reading
I will raise my fist high to
the west setting sun
the turnip of a
dog-eared paperback
clenched in my proud fingers
and with God as my witness —
thank you Margaret and Scarlet
and mrs. sprinkler too —
I shall never go
hungry again
The Back Seat Boys (formerly The Shadeland Drive-In)

On rare summer Friday nights Dad would use Mom’s not-so-secret recipe to pop corn in the big cast aluminum kettle, using bacon grease from the crock kept next to the stove instead of cooking oil. Once popped, it was poured into a large paper bag, drizzled with a stick of melted Fleishman’s Corn Oil Margarine, and sprinkled with a hearty smattering of salt right from the Morton’s “When It Rains, It Pours” canister. He’d place the shaken bag of popcorn, a carton of jumbo screw top Pepsi-Colas, and a Tupperware bowl of refrigerator ice cubes into the white ’65 Chevy Bel-Air with the three boys and head off to either the Pendleton Pike Drive-In close to home or the Shadeland Drive-In across the street from the Western Electric factory where Mom worked second shift, three to eleven, putting telephones together with surgically-taped and finger-cotted hands.

The three boys preferred the Pendleton Pike Drive-In. A mini-roller coaster was the highlight of the playground beneath the giant, imageless movie screen, endlessly circling the not-so-big hills and valleys of the not-so-long track until other kids demanded their turn. Dusk would shut down the playground as elongated El Greco images appeared on the colossal screen towering above. Previews of coming attractions, visions of dancing concession stand hot dogs and wax-cupped soft drinks with straws always seemed out of reach for boys with empty pockets, both on the screen and in the concession stand. We could only suffer our way through the tempting aromas of light-bulb roasted rotisserie wiener, fresh-popped movie-house popcorn, and the visual torture of candy-stuffed display cases and ice cream posters on our way to the stinky public restroom.

Upon return to the car and the inevitable brotherly wrangling for shotgun seat and prime viewing, Dad would divvy up ice cubes and Pepsi to parched, sweaty boys thrilled with the rare treat of a carbonated thirst quencher. Intimidating threats were hurled at the back seat boys not spill anything on the new, pristine turquoise upholstery of the recently purchased showroom demo. “Don’t let anything slide down behind the seat,” he’d say as he handed a large Tupperware bowl not-so-full of popcorn to the boys in back.

Technicolor cartoons were always sandwiched between the previews and the main feature, a sharp reminder that Saturday morning cartoons viewed while sprawled on the living room floor in front of our own entertainment center TV were still statically black and white, and would be for some time to come. The boys rarely made it through the first of the weekly double feature bill. The first to tire out or get bored would crawl up into the big back shelf of a window (a bunk with a view) staring up into the starry night over the endless rows of parked cars attentively paired up around drive-in extension speaker poles. The second to succumb to boredom or weariness would curl up in the big back seat, no longer concerned about the invisible border line that had divided back seat territory, rolling his face
down into the big deep back incline to secretly probe the crack of the banquette for lost toys or loose change. Then he’d fall asleep, bare legs chilled, jacket for a blanket.

The boy who managed to win shotgun seat had to try and stay awake the longest. Whatever prestige may have been gained by winning the prized pole position was lost in leg room. The ice bowl and Pepsi carton were kept on the floorboard passenger side front. And there was the implied responsibility to stay awake like an adult at least until intermission. If you couldn’t stay awake you only had half a seat to curl up in, and that only if you could convince Dad to put the greasy bag of popcorn and its protective layer of towels on the floorboard too. If not, you had to roll up your jacket like a pillow and wedge it between your shoulder and the door window to try and sleep upright. You didn’t lose face if you lasted longer the boys in back.

We rarely made it through a second feature because shortly before eleven o’clock Dad would return the extension speaker to its home cradle on the pole. He’d quietly start the car and slowly creep through the furrowed lanes between the mounded rows, parking lights only, until we reached the perimeter road that lead past the playground. The idle roller coaster would be dancing with aurora borealis light from the screen as we pulled around past the ticket booth to the late night and short drive to the sprawling factory on Shadeland Drive.

The apex of the night, better than the endless rounds on the roller coaster, better than the ice-cold tickle of Pepsi on a parched throat, better than any preview, Technicolor cartoon or dancing hot dog, and more beautiful than any Hollywood starlet — was the discovery of Mom exiting the formidable fortress of a factory, expectantly reviewing the line of cars curbed like limos at a premiere, and the light of recognition in her eyes when she spotted us. I’d lean out the window as far as humanly possible, waving my arms like a madman, to be the first to catch her weary gaze and see the warming of her Mona Lisa smile. As the shotgun boy conceded his spot by slipping over the front bench seat into the back, Mom would gracefully glide to the four-door family sedan, slide into the passenger-side door and politely give Dad a prim and proper kiss on the cheek — a rare public display of their private affection. The roller coaster adventurers who had earlier wrangled, tangled, and longed for more, were now happy, contended back seat boys safe and secure on the way back home.
the elm tree

zacheaus climbed a sycamore tree
"for the lord he wanted to see"
according to the song I learned in
mrs. giltners sunday school class
way back when I was just four or five

but when my dad climbed the elm tree
in our front yard on schoen drive
it was with far less pious intent

a blight had attacked the elm trees in the
cocooned environment of harrison park
hungry little worms found the elms in
our neighborhood irresistibly delicious
and turned lush leaves into brittle parchment
as they ate their way through
the boughs and branches

conventional methods of dusting and
spraying with industrial grade pesticides and
painting white stripes around the trunks did little
to impede the progress of the hungry little buggers

but my dad was not about to
concede his mighty shade tree
to an infestation of uninvited pests
and decided to take drastic measures

it was towards the end of a long
hot summer when the kids were banned
from the front yard except to come out
one by one when called to take their turn
steadying the ladder as dad would climb up
to the big branches with a hand saw
to take a stab at pruning

he began cutting and pruning
and hacking away at any branch
that had the slightest sign of infestation
he started low and he hacked and he cut
he went further up and he cut and he hacked
he went up as far as he possibly could
pruning away, sending diseased branches
crashing to the ground below to show
those damned worms just whose tree this was

he’d call out to the banished boys
when it was safe below to drag felled branches
teeming with pestilence, around
to the back yard and chop them
into smaller logs and pieces
for a sacrificial bonfire
sending those elm-eating worms to a fiery hell —
the little buggers didn’t stand a chance

the people in our neighborhood
thought my dad was crazy
as he butchered the tree
until there was nothing left but
a giant pitchfork in our front yard
as if picasso or salvador dali had taken a stab
at some sort of surreal tree surgery —
it’s just that post modern sculpture
wasn’t all that much appreciated
in our cookie-cutter subdivision

“just drive until you see the fork in the road”
we were the butt of the neighborhood joke
“that’s the cobb house” — snicker, snicker
but my father never flinched or batted an eye
he remained unusually quiet
and serenely confident —
he obviously knew something
the rest of us didn’t

dad didn’t help matters much
to dispel the question of his sanity
as he’d drive down schoen drive
slow down by a group of our friends and ask
if they knew where schoen drive was...
we'd duck down in the floorboard
of the back seat hoping not to be seen —
he thought he was being funny

and then, at church
he'd embarrass me half to death
by sitting behind a group of my friends and
rather than shushing us like a normal person
he'd lean over and whisper stuff like
"brother don is preaching so loud
i can't hear a word you're saying"

i could've just crawled up under
the pew and stayed there forever —
we learned to sit in the back row
so he couldn't sneak up on us

it was a long, long barren fall and winter
in the narrow shadow of
the tined telephone pole
that used to be our tree
grey skies and snowy banks against
our white clapboard house just made
the truncated trunk stand out even more

the school bus stop was right
in front of that stupid tree
and everybody got to see
the ever loving eye sore every day
and we had to hear about it every day
on the way to school
and every afternoon
as the bus would slowly round the bend
bringing the emaciated elm
into every bodies' view and the
whole thing would start all over again

but what seemed like an eternal winter
gave way to a vibrant renascent spring
and something miraculous began to happen
something only my smug long-suffering father
had silently and sagaciously expected all along

the pitchfork sprouted lovesprings
the lovesprings stretched into leafy twigs
the leafy twigs burgeoned
into beautiful branches
the beautiful branches
reached out in all directions
up and down and all around
lush and green until the tree
gloriously and magnificently filled out
reaching to the highest heavens
in tremendous triumph

by midsummer
the former elm of embarrassment
that had seemed more
like a sundial than a shade tree
was the most exquisite and
elegant tree for miles around and
there wasn’t a gosh-darned leaf-eating worm
to be seen of found in or on
my faithful and farsighted father’s flora

yes, zacheaus
climbed the sycamore tree
to get a better view —
but my father
climbed the elm tree
on schoen drive show the
whole damned neighborhood
just what an elm tree was
supposed to look like
my father's son

olan mills dad

i always thought your
hair was black when you
were young because the
frilly-edged monotone photos
of your youth made your
slied-ked-back hair seem so

it made me disbelieve
the family claim that I was
the spittin' image of you
since I started off a towhead
before turning mousy brown

memory ascribes only
one color for your hair —
you must have been
thirty-one when I was born
thirty-six by the time
of my vaguest recollection
and for me your hair has
always been hoary white

i never thought it made you look old
you always seemed so suave an debonair
a transplanted southern version of
David Niven or Peter Lawford
or Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes

there was that special bottle
of hair conditioner in the
bathroom shower caddy
that no one but you could use —
your cautionary rinse
against unsightly yellow

you were always superbly groomed
your hair neat and trim
a perfect wave combed to one side
my father's son

with Vitalis the high note
to your final splash of Old Spice

my favorite studio portrait of you
interred in the scrapbook of my mind
could've been a Hollywood publicity still
you, handsome as the day is long
your hair a sexy, salt-n-pepper gray
matched to perfection with a
subtly striped seersucker jacket

and your winsome grin upturned
to something or someone just
out of frame on the upper right
a playful, knowing twinkle in
the pale panes of your secret soul

the telling and nearly unseen clue
is a mystical wisp of smoke
(a genie sneaking out of a bottle?)
trailing languorously skyward
from the casually held cigarette
in the strategically posed hand
atop your conveniently placed knee

the question that rises in me
like that slow swirl of smoke:
just who, or what
makes you smile like that?
decades of you

i don’t know if it was your senior picture
or an eight by ten portrait
you had especially made for dad
when he lied about his age
to ship out as a navy cook
while you were both in high school

you looked like a nineteen-forty’s starlet
with your long pompadoured locks
dark honey eyes and ruby red lips
i don’t remember any other photograph
where your smile is so full
of hope and promise

your face has a rather timeless quality –
smooth porcelain, more texture than color
the photographic evidence shows
the same smoothness
in your childhood pictures
in photos as a young woman
and it’s the same today on the verge
of becoming a great grandmother
only the style and color of your hair
and the light in your eyes
indicate the slightest surface change

the earliest photograph i remember of you
i guess to be your first grade picture
your eyes seem full of terror
(you’ve never said why)
more than grade school jitters
a hint of auschwitz in the air

by the time your fifth child
was in the first grade
group portraits with you
as hub-of-the-family mom
the eyes that had gone from
my father's son

childhood terror to teenage promise
seemed overtaken by sadness
a lonely desperation
in your soul-weary gaze
despite the forced bemusement
of your Mona Lisa smile
the full lips of youth
gone tight and tense

now in candid shots captured of
doting grandmother with beloved grandchild
your hair is no longer dark and pompadoured
but strategically coiffed and wispy white
and once again there's a hint
of that hope and promise smile
not forced or posed
but genteel and natural

just a hint of the terrified little girl
and the wide-eyed teenager
on the brink of war and marriage
even the overwhelmed and isolated housewife
can be seen in the world-wise woman
you've become
an "I have survived" aura
exudes a calm assurance and
leads me to conclude that you are
a somewhat contented creature
of inexplicable experiences
i can only hope
(or cringe)
to imagine

the affectionate images
photographically preserved
are an amazing amalgamation
of all the delicate
delightful and difficult
decades of you
my father's son

whatever it was

i never knew you but i always hated whatever it was you did to her

whatever it was
your picture never graced our walls and your name was never, ever mention

and yet, i feel you deep within my bones and in her perpetual, unspoken sadness

i met you once
"don't believe a word he says"
she warned

you seemed more like an enigmatic relic
a cigar-store indian, a museum piece than someone who had been her daddy

i'd seen it in the buried photographs
at the bottom of her garage-banished chest (our halloween coffin) once filled with hope now full of off-season clothes
and secret memories

your proud proboscis, half-cherokee, far more pronounced than her quarter-blood nose but you shared the same distant, steely eyes

in person, that one time
you weren't nearly as imposing as your ominous absence had led me to believe

you were so small and silent
sitting in some stranger's kitchen at the alabama wake of her mother your ex-wife twice over and you were supposed to somehow fill the empty space of my grandfather
my father's son

whatever it was
(our father told us surreptitiously)
you weren't welcome in her house
unless you could sober up

i guess you never could
'cause you never, ever
darkened our doorstep
or for all we know
ever took the time to find out
where she was or who we were
or even how many of us
there were all together

yet still, you inhabited
every dark corner of our house
you were the skeleton in the closet
the chains clanging in the attic
the gloom in the air
the one we could ever mention
but never, ever quite forget

is that why she kept her house
sanitized and hospital clean?
an attempt to keep you at bay
cleanse away the memory
by bleaching the walls
scouring the bathroom
stripping the kitchen floor with ammonia
each week to apply a fresh coat of wax?

shaking loose the cobwebs
sweeping out the closets
dusting even the tops of doors
and the bottom of dressers
and inspecting our attempts at cleanliness
with little white gloves?

i have heard it rumored that she was once
her daddy's little girl, the apple of your eye —
what was it that plucked her
from that prime position of pride?
her perpetual silence makes me wonder
is she the one who fell from grace or
did grace have nothing to do with it at all?

imagine my surprise
years after i flew the coop
to get as far away as possible
from the silent misunderstanding
that seemed to be the glue for all the rest
to learn she left her indiana home
to retrieve you from your alabama trailer
when you could no longer care for yourself

she fetched you up north
and put you in a nursing home
nearby the home she worked hard
all her life to retire in
to keep a watchful eye on you
in your twilight time —
close, but not too close

and now that you are dead and gone
she admits she did it out of a sense of duty
because there was no one else to do it —
it was her job and it had to be done

i had hoped it had been out of love
that somehow she had reached
deep within herself —
moved through her silent pain to find a place
of forgiveness and reconciliation
for whatever it was you did to her

and that she would be able to help me
move through the pain and loneliness
and sense of disconnection
she unwittingly passed on to me
and hope against hope
she would someday be able to forgive me
for all the pain and suffering
i added to her already full plate

and still i wonder —
does she finally feel safe?
does she feel like she
protected us from
whatever it was
no one could protect her?

has she come
to any quiet resolution at all?
has the dark, unspoken secrets —
the unacknowledged fear
passed on through her genes
and her demeanor
to her children
and her grandchildren
and her great grandchildren?

will your haunting remain
until someone shines a light on it
and calls the demon out
proclaiming loudly that
you no longer have a hold on us
for whatever it was
you did to her?
the melting

one day I’ll make
a life mask of you
the wise and wizened
gentle grandmother

a sharp contrast to
the cold and distant
nazi cleaning woman
i recall as my mother

there’s that first grade photo
i remember as well –
auschwitz-terror in your eyes

from a mold of the mask
i’ll make a memory bust
filled with water and
that first grade picture

removed from the freezer
under warm lights i’ll
videotape the melting
still life with zenith

i bought a seventeen inch
black and white portable
zenith television set
with my paper route money
when we finally moved into a house
large enough for three boys
to have rooms of their own after
the older girls had flown the coop

it was the first time in
my twelve or thirteen years
that i didn’t have to share
a room with the foreigners
who were my kindred and kin —
i felt like an alien trying to fit in

the room became my womb
a warm and separate cocoon
which i papered with my artwork
on condition that i’d patch and paint
the walls when i grew up and moved out

watercolor portraits, macramé curtains
art class collages, decoupage and sketches
an egg-shaped papier maché hanging lamp
and a rickety pine parsons table
i made in eighth grade wood shop all
staked the claim to my personal space

i’d escape to the safety
of my sanctuary daily
when the requirement
of forced participation in
family, school, and church
had been dutifully fulfilled

the broadcast options of
three national networks and
my father's son

one regional station became
the white noise of my solace
and solo adolescent artscape
i'd sketch or paint or craft
through afternoons of Dark Shadows
Mike Douglas and Dinah Shore
at night Batman, Mac Davis and
Sonny and Cher were private patrons
in the small studio of my personal art

but one day of sketching
nearly came to a tragic end
when a crime of ignorance
was perpetrated on my turf

i had staged a simple still life
on the rickety table with
the propped up short leg
that served as my TV stand
a matte-black painted wine bottle
stuffed with dried gold star flowers
and an ice-sweating plastic tumbler

the central focus of the piece was
a converse high top tennis shoe —
the canvas crumpled into carefully
nuanced folds for delicate shading —
the shoelace carelessly cascading
off the edge of the tabletop

after hours of intricate observation
exquisite and eloquent execution
my not-so-innocent little brother
barged into my sacred space and
plopped down on the bed beside me

i can't work with you shaking the bed!
get out of my room! i screamed
i'm trying to draw, you moron!
my father's son

I'm trying to draw, he mocked
as he lurched off the bed and
landed in a chair next to the table

time slowed down to a dreamlike crawl as
he snatched the shoe from its featured spot
in the center of my still life with zenith
I can't see the TV, he blurted out
as a scream from the depths of my soul
rose up from the core of my very being
NO-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O!

what's going on up there? mom
tried to intervene from down stairs
i felt like a stranger in a strange land
speaking a language no one understands
as i tried to describe the egregious error
of my brother's wicked ways to her

those facile folds and shadows
are gone! gone forever!
a once in a lifetime occurrence
irretrievably lost for all eternity!
she and my brother just
stood there, dumbfounded
as if i were the crazy one

with families like this
no wonder van gogh went nuts
Who Was That Masked Man Anyway?

It was my turn, in the summer of my fifteenth year, in the footsteps of my sisters and a brother before me, to go to work with Dad, a food services manager at a pharmaceutical research farm -- king of the cafeteria lunch.

I didn’t recognize the debonair Fred Astaire in my father’s kitchen whites, sashaying and gliding through morning preparations leaving joy and laughter in his wake. Who was this masked man whistling and joking, flirting and cajoling with the women he called “his girls” who made up his crew?

He made sure I was taught the kitchen trade the right way (his way or the highway) by dad-trained salad girls, bakers, cook’s assistants, and even sometimes the master chef himself would impart his culinary knowledge. Presentation was the perfect complement to careful and meticulous preparation. A well place garnish proved his professional grace and élan.

Everything was right in his cafeteria kingdom unless, of course, someone strayed by omission or commission from his ordered culinary vision. Then, the genial Dr. Chefy, would give way to the hideous Mr. Hyde (whom I thought never left our house), humiliation his preferred tool. A drill sergeant’s fury mixed with a brain surgeon’s precision, he’d cut to the quick with his sharp tongue: complete and utter compliance his demand.

At 10:30 every morning he’d don his tall chef’s hat, masterfully placed with a slight tilt, and make the backstage transformation from kitchen song-and-dance man to serving line emcee / dining room maître d’ / dinner time diva with mock humility, always insisting the food was the real star while extracting compliments (if one were foolish enough to remain silent in his presence). He wasn’t really a master chef, but no one dared burst his bubble. He was just a good ol’ southern cook trained by his hard-knocks mama (while tied to her apron strings) and the navy’s cook school. He did raise the level of institutional food beyond common expectation and was well know his flavorful, good ol’ home cookin’ served hot and well portioned at reasonable prices.

The proof was in the pudding – or in his case the first carrot cake of the region. In the late 1960s his sister sent him the recipe from Alabama and when his delighted and satisfied customers notified a local food critic of the delectable new dessert treat, a feature story and photograph appeared in the Indianapolis Star-News. “Isn’t that just the moistest cake you ever sank your teeth into?” he’d ask eliciting compliments. “It just gets better with age.”

Thursdays there were always Rueben Sandwiches served on a crisp leaf of Bibb lettuce. Fridays you could always count on Deep Fried Catfish with French Fries or Oven-baked Cod
with a sprinkle of paprika, a thin twist of a lemon slice, and a fresh sprig of parsley with a side of Creamy Coleslaw. He was well known for his Meatloaf in Creole Sauce, Mama’s Fried Chicken with Mashed Potatoes and Gravy, and (because all the dieticians of the day insisted so) a once weekly offering of Liver and Onions. The Manhattan was a favorite featured dish – an open faced roast beef sandwich with mashed potatoes all generously smothered in a rich beef gravy; and for those nostalgic for another time, what he called the Po’ Boy platter – just potatoes, bread and gravy; no meat at all.

There were BLTs and Classic Club Sandwiches, each served with a crisp dill spear and a hearty smattering of wavy potato chips, and the freshest looking Chef’s Salad north of the Mason-Dixon Line. A wedge cut tomato stuffed with tuna salad or a dollop of cottage cheese served with canned peach halves on a bed of lettuce were available for those who just might be watching their waist lines.

As lunch time would come and go, the manager / chef / diva would work the lunch room stragglers for compliments (suggestions were not preferred) while the gals would break down the line careful to preserve leftover quantities for the big boss man’s verdict. The summer trainee was relegated to the dish room to empty conveyed cafeteria trays of paper napkins, spent cigarettes, and depleted condiment packets; rinsing away any uneaten morsels and served-there-purpose garnishes. The various size plates had to separated, glasses, cups and saucers, and silverware all place in their appropriate racks and run through the industrial strength dishwasher. Lipstick stains had to be pretreated. Then, while the dishes were still hot enough to cook your fingers, they were returned to their spring-loaded dispensers and wheeled back to their proper place behind the serving line for another cafeteria lunch time serving day.

The day would end by 2:30 in the afternoon with all the stainless steel gleaming bright, the white tile floors and walls sparkling and spotless (they’d better be or there’d be hell to pay) under the harsh fluorescent lights. The storeroom, icebox and freezer inventory reviewed by the taskmaster as his busy crew cleaned up the place and set up to start over in the morning. Menus planned, vendor orders placed, any private dining rooms arrangements coordinated, he would then usher the subjects of this ordered world out of his domain, turns off the lights, and with a last forlorn scan of his keen kitchen kingdom, close and lock the door behind him.

Without a word, we’d walk out to the parking lot shedding the roles of boss and summertime help to resume the usual act of reticent father and acquiescent son. The silence between us scratched only with the sounds of the highway and the afternoon AM radio.
brickwall

the confused manchild
thought no on really knew
or cared or understood
anything about him at all or
what he was going through or
his personal private pain —
the poor tormented thing

he attempted suicide
by swallowing half a bottle of
bayer aspirin from the bathroom closet
after returning from the
alabama funeral of the
grandmother he never really knew

his mama got up
in the middle of the night
when she heard him puking his guts out
not quite making it to the bathroom
before he hurled

the chalky-white refuse
of his stomach a stark contrast
to the plush green carpeting
of the upstairs landing

she dutifully gave him a cool, damp washcloth
while he huddled over the porcelain bowl —
she wiped his bangs from his sweaty brow
and returned to clean up
the putrid, bileful mess

she never, ever asked him
what it possibly could have been
that made him sick to his stomach
its expelled contents on the green carpet
he thought to be the telltale sign
but the family motto, "don't ask, don't tell"
took precedence over any possible curiosity
she may have had in the middle of the night
or the next morning
or the day after
for nothing was ever asked
and nothing ever told

in pitiful response
the teen of unspoken pain
turned to his grumbacher
opaque watercolor set to
express the confusion of life's silence

he traced his hand on a sheet of heavy paper
and bricked it with a mason's care using
a fine camel hair brush as a trowel

he inked her distant, weary eyes
her thin pursed lips and silent sadness
in the center of his outreached palm

little did he know at the time
the prophetic power of that particular portrait
as he discovered the same image staring back
from the mirror in a few decades time

Joyce Hancock Creative Writing Award 2006
my father's son

vincent

I don't recall if it was
don mclean or mr. doversberger
who first introduced me back in the '70's

was it radio waves wafting the words of
"starry, starry night" accompanied by a mournful guitar
or the dulcet narrative tones of a high school art class slide show

art history and pop culture converged in a sad, despondent song
and the reverential oration about a desperate man who could not, not paint
I listened to the stories but could not comprehend any more than adolescent angst allowed

an arthouse screening of "vincent and theo"
later informed me of brotherly love
the artist yet tossed between
obsession and depression
still I could not know

an unexpected trip to new york city —
a strategically planned excursion
to the museum of modern art

the minstrel and art historian had me insufficiently prepared
as my emotional knees were knocked out from under me
my soul never knew someone could sing out so clearly
on canvas with dynamic and fervid swaths of paint
so completely full of compassion and knowing

I at once felt awed and overwhelmed —
enormously empty and inadequate —
as insignificant a grain of sand —
measureless as drops in ocean

he drew me in, mesmerized by vibrant color
bright and alluring as blazing sunflowers
cool and serene as iridescent irises
seduced by the lurid dance of
night sky moon and stars
my father's son

his perpetual moment, his welcoming eye
the presence of his pure unbridled passion
captured, challenged and informed me

he understood all I longed to know
illuminated what otherwise
could not be expressed

he felled me with wonderment
he made me pensively ponder —
would I ever know passion so intoxicating?
could I ever understand the blessing and the curse
of being so completely and creatively obsessed?
The Prisoner Pant
(after The Secretary Chant by Marge Piercy)

My ribs are bars of regret.
From my heart hang
chains of regret.
Razor wire crowns my head.
My chest wells with sorrow.
My feet are lead weights.
Drag. Clank.
My head is a cacophony.
My head is a courtroom
jammed with judges and juries.
Hands pressed together
grasping at faith,
falling flat.
Crash. Burn.
My stomach distends.
From my mouth spew silent screams.
Hollowed, emptied out,
humanity drained.
Dreams die.
Hopes hie.
Find me an egg crate
for I have become
a shell of
a man.
hands

those are my hands
etched on her gravestone
one hand holding a thirsty cup
the other pouring a quenching pitcher
"serve on another with love" it says

designed by her hand for a
national church convention
she carefully posed my hand
holding a pyrex custard dish
as she sprawled and crawled
across the living room floor
shifting to find the right angle
hurling frustrated threats at me
to still my twitching hand
as my fingers cramped

at other times, her tiny hand
clapsed tightly in mine
felt small, but far from helpless
"baboon grip" she called it
I, secretly scared to let go
she was the one who
was going to save
me from myself

her hands caring, capable
mine nail-bitten and anxious
hers hands sure and fluid
mine tentative, choppy
always second guessing

her hands unsuspecting
mine desperate
hers trusting
mine hopeless

she filled my cup
my father's son

as I filled her tub
she always strived
to quench my thirst
I, in turn, squelched her
she offered me living waters
I gave her a watery grave

her hands always
served me with
nothing but love
my hands mistook
saving her from me
as the same

my hands are still
nail-bitten and anxious
she always saw
more in my hands
than I did
my father's son

legacy

it was my job
to provide her
a world of safety
instead, I filled her
world with fear

it was my job
to protect her
from monsters
and bogeymen
instead, I was
the channel

it was my job
to hold her tight
when she was scared
and dry her eyes when
fearful teardrops fell
instead, I brought
horror into her life
and clouded her eyes
with unspeakable terror
and left her to cry alone

it was my job
to be a soft
place for her to fall
to be a source
for lightness and joy
instead, I have become
a hard spot in her heart
bricked behind the shame
of a different name I secretly bore
and swore I'd never pass on

I've become a lump
a horrid heavy weight
secretly carried and carefully
my father's son

hidden not just from herself
but from her world

most fearful that she
might more than
sound like me
look like me
act like me
she might
be like
me
norma jean (ode to a former food visit)

she came
to visit me
in prison today
and brought
fried chicken
fried fish
fried potatoes
hush puppies
fried okra and
fried green tomatoes –
palpable proof of
a palatable passion

down-to-earth love
hot and crispy
juicy and tender
sown of warm
southern graciousness
and tilled with her
irreverent giggles
brought to fruition
with gospel heart
and soul

its genesis
the scattered seed
of a random kindness
unaware

her love was
seared in the fire
of trial and disappointment

her heartache and disbelief were
cured in salt-tears and prayer and somehow
she found her way to astounding understanding
and unexpected, undeserved forgiveness

today, she welcomes and accepts me
with her effervescent joy and
her never ending laughter

she spreads this friendly feast
heartily seasoned with her
god-given gifts while
extending to me
her no-holds-barred
absolutely no strings attached
complete and unconditional
southern fried love
salsa meditation

my hands will smell for days of onions, garlic
and jalapenos despite repeated washings after slicing, dicing
and mincing with my trusty lid-o-matic and plastic picnic knife
essential utensils of a prison prep chef in a concrete and steel cell-cum-kitchen

I love the feel of a ripe, juicy tomato
the fresh earthiness of chopped green pepper
the abundant aromas attack my olfactory senses
tempting and teasing my palate with anticipatory explosion of first taste

and in that moment I am awakened, enlivened, emboldened
transported from bland greyness of confinement to full sensory recall
of my essential humanity

Honorable Mention for Poetry, PEN American Center Prison Writing Awards 2010
lamentation

ey they stand tall across a hidden creek beyond not one
but two twelve foot chain-link fences strewn with scrolls of razor wire

ey they rise above the enclosure, a grove stretching wide along the hillside
scaling up a grassy meadow to a railing and cornfield above

I long to sit in their shade, feel rough bark against my back
strain to hear sap circulate as the breeze rustles through leafy boughs

I want to sidle up the trunks, hang from the branches
and sit cradled in the nurturing crook of nature’s limbs

a junior high choir teacher once coaxed
“I think that I shall never see a poem a lovely…” out of me

but today, words are my only solace
and a found leaf pressed between journal pages

is as close as I can tangibly get:
a prisoner pining for outlying trees
silence

I think I know silence
in the still of the night
when cells are locked
and convicts sink into
rare snoreless slumber

a mercury bulb perpetually
buzzes as a dayroom nightlight
and lowly blowing of forced air
drones the persistent distant hum
of an industrial sized chiller out back

this supposed silence is suddenly
breached by pelting rain on barred panes
claps of thunder cut the questionable quiet
with loud flash accompanied cracks of lightning

a sudden vacuum fills the air
as ever-lighted night goes black
the rain calms to a deadened drizzle
no gentle buzzing, no lowly blowing
no hum of persistence in the distance
I am surprised by a qualm of quietude

I feel it as palpable as sea fog
creeping up the crescent mountain
kissing Kealakekua Bay at midnight
rapidity engulfing everything in sight
including the waiting samurai house

shoji screens open as the thick moist mist
swallows banana, coffee, palm and papaya trees
to dance over tatami mats, wrap around rough hewn beams
and skim a water-cressed koi pond as it devours the island

I surrender to the quintessence of quietness
let it wrap its overwhelming midnight ocean mist
around and spoon me into a deep swoon of silent sleep
knowing full well my languorous lover will be gone by morning
fundamental query

anticipation unfulfilled
unspoken promise denied

bruised heart, wounded ego
bewildered soul craves understanding

does stone cold law
brittle parchment, crackled ink
usurp the power of the word made flesh?

is the word not love?

is not a lover’s tender touch
a passionate embrace, soul’s
response to spirit’s breath?

are not lovingkindness and compassion shared
the divine lifting, exalting the mundane?

self-named keeper’s of light
trace shadow on the ground
call it unadulterated truth

yesterday’s shades are not today’s
as sun transverses a revolving earth
its tilted axis ever changing the horizon
causing shadow to shift minute by minute
hour by hour, day by day, never the same

and yet you continue to heed
the clamoring of cloaked charlatans
tuning out your own intuitive intelligence
and the soft whispers of your still, small voice
and every cell crying out in your god-gifted,
divinely created and wholly-blessed body

to give vacant, vapid voices credence
and silence the supplications of your
suppressed body, harnessed heart
and repressed soul, as every
ounce of your beloved being pleads
for revelatory recognition, rescue and release

why are you still shrouded and sheathed in the shadows
sitting on your hands, when you were created to run
arms wide open, naked and joyous in the sun?

now tell me truly: is truth ever found with
back to the sun and downward gaze?
doubting thomas

spun gold hair
entreat fingers to weave
burnished copper silkiness

sun bleached eyebrows
seductively beg attention
cry for kisses to indulge
their long neglected beauty

cobalt eyes
tantalizingly blue
masqueradingly dark
sparkle as if on cue
a reassuring plea for trust

impishly smirked lips
thick and pouty
induce to be parted
the promise of passion
hot and sweet
reckless and complete

spontaneously rehearsed words
voluptuous and ripe
intuitively diagnose
too perfect a prescription
for this wary heart
bruised ego
skeptical soul
unworthy cynic
desperate for touch
persuasive embrace
a spark worth kindling
deserving of love
transcendence
redemption
release
depression

secret shame of my existence
weakness of my soul
failure of my faith

ex-lover refusing to
take no for an answer
never quite out of sight
the phantom of my periphery

I have packed his bags
and set them by the door
resolved time and time again
to rid him from my indwelling

but the blue paramour of my dysphoria
woos too well my weaknesses and
makes reluctant my resolve

stealthfully feigning absence
when I am most belligerent
he seemingly subsides
beneath the horizon
eyes scanning just
above the surface

I try to ignore
the clutter he left behind
the constant and incessant craving but
the rapacious ruins hold me spellbound
while eternal emptiness gnaws at my soul

at times I may even delude myself
and think I'm free at last, free at last
thank god almighty, I'm free, free at last

but my silent stalker lures me
his familiar embrace entrances me
I am too weak, too hopelessly flawed
my father's son

and soon it's as if he were never, ever gone

resignation is never the same as acceptance
giving up and drowning is not an invitation
shamefully I admit I should know better
but without him I'd have to sleep alone
resurrection

dearth valley has
become a blanket of blossoms
after decades of desert drought

roused by the
regularly reticent rain
wildflowers waft over a
once withered wasteland

california poppies
cavort with the kindly sun
brilliant in the balmy breeze

strewn crepe paper confetti
invite creatures great and small
to raucously celebrate resurrection

dusty death refreshed by
long absent, unexpected ablution
stirs the most cynical of dried up souls
Eulogy for Eugene

My father was 89 when he passed away Saturday night, September 27, 2014 – 6 months shy of his 90th birthday and 70th wedding anniversary. Survived by his wife, my mother, five children, 8 grandchildren and 8 great grandchildren, Edward Eugene Cobb was no angel, in fact he could be a real son-of-a-bitch at times. He was a complex, conflicted soul, but ultimately he was a good man, and family was the most important thing to him. Though I’m selfishly sad to see him go – sorry for the time we’ve lost because of my incarceration; sorry for the rift I’ve caused my family that has yet to heal; sorry I’ll never hear another of his stories; sorry I’ll never hear him tell an other joke; sorry I’ll never eat his fried chicken or cornbread again and sorry I never took the time to learn how to make them – I’m at peace with his passing. I’ve long since accepted his flaws, his humanity, and forgiven him of what I thought were his foibles, and he had forgiven me of the shame and pain I’ve caused him.
Oddly enough, it was only after he found out the worst things possible about me that I felt assured of his love and acceptance. The last time we hugged each other in parting, as we did at the end of every prison visit, we whispered “I love you” in each other’s ear.

opening excerpt from the spittin’ image

aunt lucille would say
why eugene, he’s just the spittin’ image of you

i never quite knew what that meant
made me burst my buttons on one hand
scared me half to death on the other

everybody always said i looked more
like you than the rest of the brood
but there was something far more ominous
in the tone of lucille’s inference
she, like you, never explained anything further

i had to find out on my own

55
that you were your mama’s boy
and everybody called your ‘sis’

i had to find out on my own
that when your daddy died and
your brother milton thought he
was head of the house
he’d beat the tar outta you
try to toughen you up
make a real man outta you

and that lucille would knock him down
whip the shit outta him to rescue you –
is that why she was your favorite sister?
and in return, every Saturday night you’d
give her the best damned pin-curls in the county

At age 10, I had a dissociative episode during a beating I received from my father. I was
literally beat out of my body and I’ve lived primarily in my head ever since. I’m still trying
to fully re-inhabit my body. I figured out well into adulthood Dad was trying to save me
from the struggles he faced as a boy and as a man in the only way he knew how.

Fishing Fall Creek (after Nighttime Fires by Regina Barreca)

When I was seven in Indianapolis
we drove to fish at Fall Creek. Rarely all seven of us,
usually the three boys and Dad. Sometimes Mom
would tag along. I hadn’t the patience to fish with
a cane pole and its red and white plastic bobber,
nightcrawlers dug from our garden as bait. I’d
take a sketchbook or hike the muddy trails
around the tributary of the White River.
It was my father’s favorite fishing spot. Once
We lined the trunk of his car to smuggle back
remnants of a sand bar to fill the box at the
bottom of our backyard swingset slide.

I made titillating discoveries on my solo hikes
that would make my young heart palpitate and
my innocent mind race: discarded underwear,
limp and slimy fat balloons, little square silver
wrappers littering the pathway. I'd also find lures
and bobbers dangling from trees, yards of fishing
line dotted with clamped on lead weights. I'd
liberate them from leafy limbs and place the
new found treasures in the family tackle box to
atone the guilty secret of the other furtive finds.

Those times Dad would arrive home later
than expected, he'd say he stopped by Fall Creek
for a little fishing. No one questioned him when
no blue gill or crappie accompanied him home. I was in
high school before I heard about Fall Creek, around the
same time I discovered a stash of magazines in the trunk
of my father's car with names like Blueboy, Honcho and
Mandate. One of the junior high English teachers
had been busted along Fall Creek. Something
called lewd behavior. Echoes of homos and queers
in the haunted halls of high school pricked up ears and
made my heart palpitate and my not-so-innocent mind race.
It took me years to admit that two and two do indeed
make four, to grasp my father's draw to the banks of
Fall Creek. Fishers of men cast for more than crappie.

Pendleton Pike (after Snapping Beans by Lisa Parker)

I snapped the seat belt into the silver buckle
of his car and noticed no pack of cigarettes
in the empty space between my father and me.
I was home for the weekend
from California, for my brother's wedding.
James Taylor sang, "You've Got a Friend"
as I pulled from Oaklondon Road down
Pendleton Pike towards town.
He'd been Chatty Cathy at the house,
proud papa with all his brood under his roof
for the first time in years, since my divorce,
since my coming out, chef and master of ceremonies
for the celebratory weekend,
coordinating catering for the reception,
he'd asked me to drive him to town to pick up last minute supplies.
The small talk died off
as the new development along the highway
gave way to the cornfields of my youth.
The silence between us grew, both of us staring at
the road, not daring to look the other's direction.
My mind was screaming as the silence roared,
ASK HIM NOW! CONFRONT HIM NOW!
All I could muster was a meek, How're you with me now?
He'd refused to come to the phone for months
when I’d call home, my mother taking her turn
as intercessor between prodigal son and wounded parent.
Part of me wanted to tell him
I understood why he beat me,
trying to beat it out of me like
Uncle Milton tried to beat it out of him;
that I knew he didn’t do it maliciously,
that he hadn’t purposely tried to traumatize me
and drive me out of my body, that I forgave him.
The other part of me wanted to pummel him
and make him suffer the way he’d made me suffer.
Part of me wanted to affirm the
best parts of me came directly from him,
from our affinity, and that I was
happier now than I’d ever been.
The rough hand that had earlier
crafted delicate roses out of
the creamiest icing in the world
for the towering wedding cake
seemed to search the empty space
for cigarettes he no longer smoked.
He said, You made your choice.
There was no accusation in his voice.
In between the lines I heard, And I made mine.
The choice my father made was for family. He had the talent, the skill, the disposition and drive to be a master chef. But in order to do that he would have had to sacrifice the kind of family life he wanted. He chose to work for an industrial food service where he could work regular weekday hours managing lunch room cafeterias rather than sacrifice evenings, weekends and holidays to run a restaurant.

*I’m a grown ass man*

  don’t talk to me like i’m a child
  he added from behind a mask of masculinity
  a caricature or machismo trying to convince himself
  as much as anyone else he knew what it was to be a man

  bragging of the baby-mommans left in his wake
  how he never held a real job ‘cause he could hustle —
  of the guns he had, the threats he made, the things he took

  i think of my undereducated, underpaid, underappreciated father
  who juggle three and four jobs at a time to keep a roof over our heads
  keep us well clothed, well fed and still send money to his widowed mama

  all the while caring for five kids, all by the same woman, his partner for life
  quietly paying for the doctors, dentists and optometrists of childhood
  tending to the yard, his garden, making cakes for our birthdays
  still finding time to take us fishing and teach us to cook

  and never once did he complain or have to defend his manhood
  to a bunch of inmates in a prison yard chow hall line

*Closing excerpt from The Spittin’ Image*

  aunt lucille was right
  as much as i fought it at times
  as much as i hated it
  as much as i tried to deny it
  i’ve accepted that being like you
  is more blessing than curse
  ‘cause come hell or high water
  you’re still my dad
my father's son

and like it or not
(more like than not)
i'll always be
the spittin' image of you

Goodbye, old man.

*the spittin' image* was originally written as a poem, then reformatted as a monologue, receiving an Honorable Mention in Drama in the 2004 PEN American Center Prison Writing Awards.
applause

my junior year of high school the music department
selected jerry herman’s “applause” as the spring musical
a rather risqué choice for a conservative suburban school
district in central indiana in the mid-1970’s

to appease the school board the gay bar scene was made straight
but the love story between unmarried leads remained intact
as did margo channing’s over-the-top gay hairdresser

of course, I wanted to play the romantic lead, bill
who got to belt out a love ballad as the tension
between he and the star came to a head

they gave me duane the hairdresser
after I threw every stereotypical homosexual
characterization a closeted gay boy could
think of in an attempt to throw the audition
surely, they wouldn’t go for something so outlandish

I knew I was in trouble when the director literally
fell out of his seat and rolled down the aisle in great
peals of laughter – too late to turn back now

there was no way to tone down duane’s scene-stealing repartee
with wonderfully bitchy lines like “Isn’t she a treasure?
I think I’ll bury her,” and a soaring solo falsetto
descant trilled in the show’s title song

the coup de grace in in act 2 was when I strutted on stage and
struck a pose decades before madonna taught us how to vogue
announcing to margo I’d just bought a fun fur –
a rabbit fur chubby borrowed from a big girl in the cast

as the audience burst into raucous laughter
my father, ashamed, sank down into his seat
as someone behind him declared
“no one can act that good”
my father’s son

decades later during intermission of an
all male prison production of the scottish play —
fifteen years into a life sentence for
the most shameful and heinous act of my life —
my dad overheard someone complimenting my lady Macbeth
and turned around to proudly proclaim, “that’s my son”