

**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 70M8**

the big christmas present that year  
was the johnny seven-oh-ern-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

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  
kindergarten or the first grade  
when the reading light initially  
sparked 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 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 wall flower 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

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 wieners, 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.

*Joyce Hancock Creative Writing Award 2005*

## **the elm tree**

zacheaus climbed a sycamore tree  
"for the lord he wanted to see"  
according to the song I learned in  
mrs. giltner's 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

## **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  
slicked-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

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

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 terse

now in candid shots captured of  
doting grandmother with beloved grandchild  
your hair is no longer dark and pompadoured  
but strategically coifed 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

**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-choke, 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

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  
cleansing 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

one regional station became  
the white noise of my solace  
and solo adolescent artspace  
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!*

*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!*

*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 placed 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. Chefyl 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 be separated, glasses, cups and saucers, and silverware all placed 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, turn 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 one 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*

**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

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  
clasped 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

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

## **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

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

## **lamentation**

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

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  
raptly 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

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**

death 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 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and 70<sup>th</sup> 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

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 Oaklandon 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-mommas 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

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"

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”