Ashes

Henry Carlile
ASHES
Randall and Grace Carlile, In Memoriam

He lay asleep, mouth agape, a strand of drool like an I.V. connecting him to his pillow, his heartbeat ticking the monitor just hours away from death, my stepfather, sprawled like one already gone among the other geezers in the VA ward.

When the mortician phoned, my mother said, *That's dirt, not him, throw it in the bay.* No ceremony with relatives in black. Only a word or two at the local VFW, the Elks, the Eagles, maybe the Moose (my stepfather joined everything), fraternal wildlife facing their own extinction, the fishing boat crossing the bar, the deckhand holding the urn of ashes.

Released from the hospital two days before he died, my stepfather shook my hand: *Still strong as iron!* he said. Sometimes I wake to feel the pressure of that grip, the pain of it, like a trap of hurtful absence that won't let go, like the .22 he left me I could never shoot straight, and his compass pointing helplessly the way he went.

A ruddy little man, a grand liar, embarrassed when the townsfolk coerced him every Christmas into playing their Santa Claus, his *Ho Ho*'s frightened the children who had to be coaxed into his lap with bribes of candy. Christmas eves he came home quarrelsome, diagnosed a drunk by his doctor, a drunk, as if the doctor wanted company. His heart enlarged to embrace the world.
he was leaving, his last year hooked
to an oxygen hose, his daily company
a neighbor’s cat, a view from his lawncare
facing the driveway. My mother found him
at dawn, dead as a fish, released from his line,
away from the current that troubled him:
Why are we bombing civilians? he asked,
angering the other vets, patriots to the man.

And if he lied his way through life, always the hero
of his own fictions, who’s to say he was wrong?
In the browntone photos that outlive him
he appears the shortest and fattest, clearly
the loudest, of the lot among the dead animals
and hunting pals he managed to outlast.
That accident on the ranch became
an ammunition dump explosion at Fort Knox.
Antlers sprouted tines, fish stretched.
Lost fights become brave victories,
the managed history of his unmanageable life,
no weirder than my ex-wife’s eccentric aunt’s
whose tabby, trafficked flat beside the road,
became a sail cat propped in a crotch
of the cherry tree, a place-mat cat,
scenic from her kitchen window
in the rainfall of fermented fruit.

In my favorite photo my stepfather
and his three brothers
strut in a buggy behind the barn,
four bottles of whisky tilted in a toast
hidden from their mother in the pantry
frowned away from where they clown.
The horse droops in its traces,
as if bored or bemused.

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Each morning he brought my mother
a water glass half full of vodka topped
with orange juice, each morning
unscrewed the cap from a bottle
of bourbon and slugged it down. 
Now my mother wanders the rest home 
screaming about the Holocaust, 
waving important papers, 
delusional from alcohol and drugs.  
They find her at dawn, in a fetal position, 
her room torn apart, certain she’s survived  
a plane crash barely less catastrophic  
than her life: runaway at twelve, 
married at thirty, four husbands—one  
wife-beating brute, one child molester,  
two alcoholics—all dead.  
And a slew of shit jobs ending in ess.  
Sometimes she mistakes me  
for her husband. Randy? she calls.  
Randy? No, Mama, I tell her, It’s Henry.  
Randy’s gone. Of course, he is! she says,  
as if I’ve told her something wrong.

Nothing I say can make her life seem  
meaningful or right or bring to justice all  
the slights that stalk her, real or imagined, 
I nod my head and agree to her complaints,  
right or wrong. No relative or neighbor’s left  
unvilified, no trespass uncommitted  
in her diary of harm. The trouble is, she’s right  
half the time: her world is ugly,  
the people bad enough to make you hang 
your head for what the human race can be.  
I’m afraid of it, she says. Afraid of what? I ask.  
A stupid question she will not answer.

Now I’ve consigned her to my stepfather,  
gulls, flailing their wings, trouble  
the calm her ashes have fallen through.  
What coordinates of empty space her smoke  
inhabits are anybody’s guess. Those of us  
who still breathe inhale a part of her  
with every breath we take, the lonely molecules  
that were her oxygen before they became our fire.