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Ashes

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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 lawnchair
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.

*

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.