Stilled

Age three.
In my father's house, mortar and brick number
on Alden Rd., wrong side of the social divide, Larchmont, NY,
we received neither seconds at meals
nor forgiveness at end of day.
The former was taken. The latter ignored.
You might as well have asked for it in a foreign language.
Forgiveness has a vocabulary, not spoken there.
When Pop entered a room,
wild-eyed, head shaven, and blistering for a fight,
Mom gave bedside counsel:
Stay still!
Pretend to sleep. He will leave, eventually.

That "still" thing saved me then. Kills me now.
I could see intimations
of what was to come coloring Mom's eyes.
Blocking her iris, that contractile membrane
suspended between cornea and lens,
through which light enters,
was a shunt, not of Teflon
but something more complacent than that.
Even the sun was reflected with
false enthusiasm in my mother's eyes.

Things you had to do to survive back then:
Lie, hide, never cry,
and be STILL.
Anything else provoked Pop and gave him an opportunity
to hand out wallops, as my Grandfather, Medric, used to call them.
Since I have Mom's eyes, I was able to block some things out.
Until now.

Age fifty: swimming from under my father
in the distended sea.

Orange Juice and Milk

Born in April 1955 I was my parent's
one and only, junior through and through, son.
After my father had lunch at home six times,
which was not his usual habit,
between early 1956 and mid 1966
I became the oldest of seven kids.
When presented for High Tea at the Plaza Hotel
for my Great Aunts Corinne and Rose to behold,
we wore matching sky blue outfits with rounded collars
and were perfect for minutes at a time.

Then we returned home to Pop, a product of Morris Park Ave.,
tough Irish neighborhood in the Bronx, where his father,
the dead NYC Cop, and mother, the widow O'Keefe,
brought him and three older siblings into this world.
Pop had a quaint two-quart a day drinking habit that
reeked from the basement on Alden Rd.
to the community of Saints
Mom put her faith in daily.

For breakfast I preferred a large glass of orange juice
and Rice Krispies with loads of milk.
When the milk hit: cereal, like fire, crackling in a bowl.
My father preferred Pall Mall Reds and Kamchatka Vodka.
When that hit: whoosh, bang, boom, Jesus, that's GOOD.
We referred to the vodka as "Daddy's Juice" because
he had his, like us, at breakfast.

Eventually, I began to pour large glasses of O. J.
into my bowl of cereal and milk.
When Pop deigned to notice and mutter, "Why?"
I replied, "It's all going to get mixed up anyway Pop."
"Kids," my father would sigh heading back to the basement
to die, die, to die.

Campaign Plans

The night before Pop quit drinking for the final time
I was eleven years old. Two guys from A. A.,
Al D., the Postman and Ralph C., the local cop,
came over, peeled Pop, the professor,
off the ceramic tile on our bathroom floor,
and deposited him in the local Looney bin,
St. Vincent's Hospital for the Catholic and Insane.
It was there he celebrated his thirty-fifth birthday,
without the benefit of a doorknob on his side of the door.

In that padded room, wearing straightjacket
and confident smile he announced to the world at large,
which consisted of the black attendant, Roscoe Lee,
and several other restrained individuals,
that he was now thirty-five years old and eligible
to run for the office of President of the United States.
And why not, since he
taught constitutional law at Fordham University,
another fine Catholic institution.
No one questioned his credentials
but the location of his announcement
did cast a certain pall on the occasion.

Roscoe Lee, not without knowledge of local
and national politics, informed Pop
it would be best not to make
any campaign plans, as there were already
two incumbents on the lockdown ward.
"I shall hold my candidacy in abeyance
until I factor in your report, Roscoe.
You won't be forgotten when I begin
campaigning in earnest."

Ol' Roscoe smiled and returned to his task,
which was to mop the cheap linoleum floor and
send waves of ammonia to be lost in the heavens.

Put Up Your Dukes

The last time my father beat me
I was fifteen years old.
After instructing me to “mow the fucking lawn,”
to which I wittily replied, “No fucking way,”
he pinned me against the Chippendale wall
of the library in our new semi-colonial mansion
(Did I mention he was doing quite well since he quit drinking?)
and began working on me like
Sugar Ray Robinson worked on Jake La Motta
but with a distinct difference:
I didn’t fight back.
You don’t hit your father, I thought.

Earlier that year I’d acted the part of Peter Pan.
Capitalizing on my androgynous appearance,
and the deeper knowledge
that all the cute girls were into theater,
I landed my first leading role.
The night before we opened my brother made the mistake
of changing channels on the TV without asking my permission.
I beat him mercilessly.
His cries and screams only made me beat him more
because he simply wanted to see what else was on.
The next night, as one of the Lost Boys, he couldn’t be heard.
I stood in the wings waiting to enter knowing
he would never trust me again. He never has.

So, when Pop began the beating I didn’t fight back
and would never fight back again, at least not
with my hands and teeth, the way I used to.

That’s the way Peace begins: one beating at a time.

Nursing Him in the Home by the Sea

My father's tide is going out.
Seeing his cognitive abilities
in a puddle on the rocking chair porch
I am kicked in the head by time.
Jamming my neck in whiplash of "now!"
the future, an out of control eighteen-wheeler, drifts into my lane.
Next thing I know Pop is seventy-seven years old and I am fifty.

My father has lung disease, neuritis, bursitis,
arthritis of the spine, breathes through tubes in his nose,
and is unstuck in time and space due to transient ischemic attacks.
(Whatever the hell those are.)
To top that off he has contracted gangrene,
precipitating the hasty removal of his right leg.

When I enter he smiles and calls me
by my childhood nickname, Ray-Ray.
A Kennedy man through and through,
when JFK called John "John-John,"
Ray O'K called me "Ray-Ray".

"Hiya Pop. Whadda ya Know?"
"Ray-Ray, why am I here? And while we're at it
where the hell am I anyway?"
"They had to take off your leg Pop."
"Everybody?" he wants to know.
"No, the doctors."
"Oh."

He pulls back the covers and checks to make sure I'm not mistaken.
"I'm going to need that back. Aren't I?"
"They'll give you another Pop. It'll be fine," I lie.
"Why'd they take it again?"
"Gangrene Pop. You got it."
"Yeah? Whadda ya know about that?"
Not enough, I think and we are mercifully silent.

I stroke his forehead.
He doesn't object if I'm affectionate.
Conversation exhausted I take his hand.
We resort to that great American healer: TV.
There's a black and white movie

(cont.)

shining down on us now.
Our suspended disbelief tells us
we finally know who we are:
We are “Watching TV.”

“How about Hud, Pop?”
“Melvyn Douglas? Guy’s a genius.”
“Yeah. It’s a classic.
Martin Ritt directed this,” I say and Pop adds
“Guy got blacklisted. Commie bastard.”
“Jesus,” I mutter to no one in particular.

Melvyn Douglas, that tower of stoicism
so firm he can be leaned upon,
enters my father’s room.
Actors of Douglas’ level are not simply giving performances.
They pervade the space where their films are screened
then invade the viewer.
Their instrument is your body.

On the way to the movies with his grandson
he takes Pop with him.
Since the time is Texas, 1962
there’s a sing-a-long.
Douglas is undaunted and loved
in young Brandon de Wilde’s eyes.
That’s what grandsons are for: unconditional lives.

There’s animation, a bouncing ball, and lyrics to the song.
My father joins those folks in Texas singing:
“My darling Clementine.”
He’s swaying in time to the music
lost in song and Melvyn’s embrace.
“Ray-Ray,” he says.
“Yeah Pop?”
“I love that guy.”
“Me too Pop.”
“Am I going to die?”
“For sure Pop. Just not yet.”

Back at the Motel

A gang of four droopy-eyed, poker-playing dogs
cast bored looks down on me
from the faux paneled walls.
I can't get out from under the covers
into the air-conditioned sea.
I am bobbing up and down in
an unmoored bed.
Sounds of gulls and waves
ricochet around the room.
My father is just down the road
waiting to go on in the final scene
of the drama he's been acting
for seventy-seven years.

On a good day, before the onset of numerous diseases
and an assortment of other ailments
(a buffet of decay),
before his mind went from exquisite machine of law
to six year old petulant boy with learning disabilities,
I could stand to spend about three hours with him
before wanting to throw myself into oncoming traffic.
He put the fun in dysfunction.

Now, I can't leave his side and spend hours
inventing dialogue to ground him
in space and time. It's not that he forgets where he is.
He doesn't understand where he is.
John Donne was lying.
My father's an island.

Back in my untethered bed,
I am swallowing my tongue in an effort
to digest everything I want to say before he dies.
Dragging myself to my feet I am up to my waist
in good-byes. Propelling myself toward the door
they spread and bounce against the walls.

I leave my good-byes behind.
I have something to do.
Sea gulls call, waves break, my father is about to die.

Inevitability

Back in my father's room in the nursing home
the air, thicker than stale black bread, is broken
by our constant anchor: the television.
In what appears as a perpetual loop, Hud is on again.
Melvyn Douglas, graceful and dignified,
has just found out his cattle will have to die.
Tragedy demands they die at their owner's hand.
Promises made in Act One come due in Act Two.
Even my father recognizes grief when he sees it.
"Paul Newman's an ungrateful prick in this," Pop points out.
"Yeah, that's the role," I offer.

Pop's doctor and I confer in the hall.
He lists the myriad things
that are wrong with my father,
establishing a vocabulary
of dissipation and loss.
Besides the six or seven serious ailments he mentions
transient ischemic attacks. Pop's had several.
They are a temporary and focal loss of brain function
causing cerebral blood flow reduction.
It's a wonder what you can learn if you continue to read.
My father's life will now consist of infrequent sleep,
medication, and blistering frustration
due to his inability to decide
whether he should sit, stand, or send out for pizza.

We're all waiting for the drama to unfold
in a black and white world.
It's balancing itself against the intensity
of our beaten red hearts.

Melvyn Douglas finds out his cattle
have hoof and mouth disease
and will have to die.
He and his sons herd them into a deep pit
at the edge of town on a dreadful night.
After exchanging restrained looks
they fire until all the cattle are shot.
The pit is filled with a lifetime of death and regret.

Swimming from Under my Father

(La illah il Allah (Arabic): There is no God but God)

A light fog has descended.
My parent's home shrouded in mist.
I suggest Pop might like a field trip.
"Great," Mom says "get him out of my hair.
Last night he woke me up five or six times to ask,
'What should I do now?'
I finally lost control and said, 'Go back to sleep, you big jerk',"
which is the closest my mother has ever come to cursing.

"Pop, it's you and me pal. We're going to the beach."
"O. K." Pop says, "Let me ask you "The beach? What's that?"
"The beach Pop. Where the ocean is."
"Oh, the ocean. Got it."

Hazy doldrums of the day enfold us in the car.
The light bounces off the slick wet road.
A path opens through the mist.
The tires beneath us hiss.
A mantra of bumps on the street thud
below and hold us in our seats.

Aside from his shopping list of diseases
here's what's killing him and me:
No cognitive abilities. None.
His dependence on others
is exceeding my mother's grasp.

"Look Pop the ocean," I smile.
"What do you say? Let's get wet."
"Can we go in?" he wants to know.
"Sure can. It's America, isn't it?"
"Damn right. Let's do it."

It takes me half an hour
to get him from the car to the water.
"Hot," he says on the way there. "Jeez, it's hot."
Actually, it's not hot.
It's cool and the fog has not lifted.
"Once you're in you'll love it."
"Yeah," he agrees. "Let's get me in."

(cont.)

Up to our chests, ripples extending away,
my father and I float.
Mouth open at the water line
he draws the sea in,
swallows some, sprays the rest
in a salty arc through the air.
Spinning a slow circle, he’s a Sufi in the sea.
La illah ill Allah.

Ducking under the waves
I am an eel clear about its journey.
Intention shivers in me.
I reach my father.
His arms open in an embrace
I refuse to receive.
I pull him down.
I hold him under
and keep him there with me.

There is no God but...
La illah ill Allah