Father Face in the Dark

Dallas Saylor

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Father Face in the Dark

POEMS

DALLAS SAYLOR
For Adeline, who understands and believes in all my artistic endeavors,
and for Christine, without whom I would not have been able to put together this manuscript.
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On the cusp of graduation from his undergraduate career at Messiah College, Dallas Saylor (2016; English, Mathematics) releases this collection as his senior honors project. After graduation, Dallas will continue his artistic career in an M.F.A. program at the University of Houston.
This collection is my meditation on parenthood from the perspective of a young man who is certainly not yet a father but wants to be one someday. Inevitably, a meditation on parenthood is also a meditation on childhood, for you can’t have a parental structure without a child being involved. As I tried to characterize childhood, hope became a prominent theme—it seems all children share a gift for hope. And perhaps, as some of my poems query, parenthood thus brings with it a fundamental hope too.

As I worked through these poems of growth, I thought about many of the people who have contributed to my own growth in some way or another. As an act of gratitude, I began to dedicate several of my poems to the people who inspired them. I had seen poems dedicated before, but the idea really stuck with me when I read John Burnside’s *Gift Songs* last summer. A review of the book begins, “To the Shakers, a good song was a gift; indeed the test of a song’s goodness was how much of a gift it was.” I began to consider some of my own poems as “gift songs,” and I knew they wouldn't be complete unless I actually “gave” them (through dedication and through an actual presentation) to the people who inspired them. So I hope this collection bears witness to the influence of just a few of the many people who have made me who I am. I hope these poems are gift songs for them, but I also hope they are universal, that they bear enough truth to be gift songs for all my readers.
I. Polished Poems

“Each spirit, be it infant, bird or flower,
Comes to the world perfected and complete,
And only time proves its unravelling.”
—Dana Gioia
MAKING OUR OWN PASTA

I’d learned young how to doctor up a jar of sauce: basil, oregano, and thyme dosed into palm and crushed to fuel the flavors seeping into the mix; garlic salt, onion powder tickling the nose, dusting the surface white; a bay leaf cracked down its seam and speared into the middle; meat, broken or balled, soaking for hours.

But in college, all things had to be new, so we sliced four serranos—each triple the spice of one jalapeño—sautéed them and stirred them into the sauce. Each bite was a punishment, but we laughed as we choked it down to keep from quitting, refilling our tall milk glasses every few bites.

The pasta haunted the fridge that week, drying out in its own furious sauce, and our only hope was another frontal assault—spirits high, we forked the hell-brew down our raw throats into the churning reflux of our stomachs. Days passed, we kept assuring ourselves the big bowl was almost empty, but the work of our hands would not be undone so soon. At last we tossed it and quietly returned to sandwiches and regular bowels, grateful for the old seasonings until we could stomach another taste of our own volition.

for Jonathan Barry Wolf
In the garden, mud-caked trowels rest now,
sprouting from the ground, blue and white
in the night beside the peonies whose roots
they licked like scissors snipping stringy wicks.

The stars whisper on steel, and you look down
to see up, the source now soft, metallic, making you
doubt gravity, or the natural order, or even
the very word star, a little bite of syllable

pricking your tongue like pineapple licked from a knife.
You look to the light, you see Sagittarius take aim
to root out the spades, turn up tubers, burst berries
like skin. In the night breeze, young brambles bend.

Must the starlight stop when it hits the ground?
The little shovels split seams for stars to seep into.
Beneath the earth, do the dead recall the cosmos?
Or just bright nebulae? Or perhaps the light

in the mind still blinks in the soft dirt, waiting
for the gardener with her trowels, or the centaur
with his arrows, or you, reader, incidental tonight
but near, wrapped in shadow beneath my maple.
Whenever I lost some toy or trinket near at hand, my mom would quip: “If it were a snake it would’ve bitten you.” I’d smile because it supposed my checkers, say, sandwiched between Monopoly and Uno on the middle shelf, were just as likely a snake poised to strike in my own closet. You overlook memories this way that hide in plain sight until their time to bite, like today—I was plating scones by the window in the kitchen, the sunlight hot on my neck and hands, and, recalling my intent to put on tea, I searched the cabinets, pantry, top of the fridge for the teapot I must’ve misplaced, when a high whistling startled me and there—there was the kettle I’d just put on. How do they camouflage so well, those memories, those answered questions you call up anyway, those begging questions you chase off: fleshy snakes that slithered into the woods yesterday or years ago, their soft bodies carving trenches into the past? They steal back, green against green and all you see is green until one day you trip on the hose which isn’t a hose, and suddenly think of a lover you still love, or your father, likely a kiosk salesman. Lidless eye to your iris, twin slits to your nose, they return, those things you tried to scoop up into a trash bag or slice with the back of a rake, soon to slither off bloody-toothed toward the trees, leaving you in the yard, bare, knowing good and evil. Enlightenment is green on green, and we are field mice bumping through a maze of parted grass. If only we say while we scamper. If only—
THERMODYNAMICS: SECOND LAW

On the beach, a child leaves his sandcastle, eyeing his parents lying together nearby; he slips a cookie from the basket—his hand a gull spoiling the picnic, then swooping away—while a wave slips around the castle’s parapet, its base now dark like the storm fronting the sky.
SEEDS

The act is demanding, yet the reward is incremental. My father taught me the squirrel-like hoarding in the cheek, moving one shell at a time into the opposing jaw, holding the shell upright in the molars’ ravines, then the crack which, if you do it right, you hear. He got me started young: my tongue practiced the deft extraction of seed from shell, the storage of the halved shell in the upper lip, the delicate chewing of the single seed, a rhythm which disturbs neither stock nor shell, and then the spit—defiant ejection of both halves at once. My father got me started young. He’d stick a handful into his mouth between innings of his softball game, then take the field with the other men from church—I can’t remember which, sure as hell not the Catholics seeing as softball involves neither drinking nor fundraising—to compete for a trophy of brass and plastic. I’d sit in the dugout and spit the shells through the chain-link fence. Or we’d eat them at the driving range, him hauling a bag so large, me with a few dinky clubs and no objective besides an hour of hitting. I thought I could never grow into a man. And when he left, the scene didn’t change—I still watched him play when he took me in the summer, still spit seeds while we threw a ball around after the game or hit balls after he got off work. That was how we talked—through the cracking and spitting. I still eat them, still revel in the challenge to preserve the nut, to keep it intact until the moment it must break. Though now I can’t open the plastic seal on a bag of David seeds without recalling the intimacy of the stitched ball in my leather glove, and it takes a deftness to crack through the image of my father’s face, plump with aging, short gray hair, beaming an utterly pointless smile.
I would see his smile at the end of the gray table
spanning the lunchroom—it was his resting face.
We were all preteens, and the desperation of fitting
had sprung up like a weed whose jagged joints jutted
above the grass. But the dark clouds that hung above
had little interest in him. And then I saw his smile
two years after I’d moved: an obituary, an accident.
In the picture, he wore a football jersey and genuflected,
a gesture earnest in its contrivance, and he smiled,
which I’d never seen a posed football player do.
In those seconds just before his fall—his generous belly
  gliding down the roof of the golf cart, his head
soon to strike a rock below—I like to think he felt pure
weightlessness. Don’t all youth long for this in vain,
then carry the thought into their twenties, thirties, middle life?
I think of Icarus with glue in hand, and a pile of feathers
between himself and his prudent father who shows him
how to position pinions. Daedalus wills up the far shore,
but it is the sun that swells in the boy’s mind;
he sees seagulls laugh down at the fish they hunt,
  hears the burst of a summer rainstorm, feels
the shameless lust of sea for stars. He pictures his feet
pushing off the old stone sill—all the hours he spent
staring out this window tumble like rocks down his legs.
  And already he does not hear his father’s warnings
to tie an extra knot, to use two nails in the joint.
When the day comes, his joints twine-bound tightly
to the wings, he gives his weight to their generous span,
boasting a gesture earnest in its longing, its hope:
  the pose of a youth who will spend his present hours
smiling instead of dreaming away the decades to come.
What’s left and what lies beyond are fictions
against the blue backdrop of sea and sky, and he—
at last unbounded—soars off from father, higher
than birds and ship-masts, chasing a current of wind,
determined against odds and the gods to touch the sun,
that perfect golden sphere which cannot be.

for Thomas Messina, 1995-2010
THE CALL

She shuffles through the murky surf, splashing after her ball bobbing among the rocks in the breezy bay. The waves spill the ball’s red stripes which tumble the sun, trapping its glare in translucent facets—

its task to compress the heavens into two cupped hands. Clutching the ball like her father’s chest, she gives her weight to its great span, to the held breath of its lung, and dunks her head under to stare

through the cool water’s warm shades of blue-green where something greater than gravity gives lift to the shadowy shapes below, where the tide’s rhythm pulls her mind back to its midnight light, to her dreams

where minnows swim the spiraling night current through sea-grass fanning around bottom-feeders, where oysters scuttle across the moony sediment, and far off in the blue-black, comb jellies phosphoresce.

She comes up for air and squints against the water alive with light. She slips through the rim again, embracing the swell of music, safe in the folds of darkness—she sinks to call up the forms of the deep.
THE PHYSICIST, TEACHING HIS SON TENNIS

He taps his son a ball, and the boy—nine, wearing neon yellow—clenches his jaw and whiffs the air. He bumps his son another, but gravity hangs it too high or pulls it too low, and soon he hypothesizes a fundamental force repelling ball from racket as he watches the boy’s brow compress with frustration, a tension force, potential energy building as balls bounce by in soft parabolas, clinking on the chain-link fence. He calls the boy close to demonstrate the stroke, the smooth curve of radial arm through racket arc, the firm friction of feet on concrete. They try again.

He taps his son a ball, another addend of grace in a series summing to love, to paternal patience.

On some ball, call it c for contact, the boy whacks a fat shot from his racket tip: by a seeming miracle, momentum’s conservation slings the ball into the net. But he sees belief in order return to his son’s eyes— when two objects collide, they give off great energy, shouts of joy, arms lifting rackets high in triumph.

The tension in the boy’s brow rushes to heat flushing his cheeks, and a big bang echoes over the cosmos as his son’s hand soars over the net into his own.
Tossing Coals

Perhaps it was the hilarity of Halloween—some goosebumps that made me brave—or maybe the Holy 
Ghost Himself moved me into the center of the circle where my professor stood, lit by the bonfire he’d 
built himself, propping up its peak with an unlucky chair before setting the heap ablaze with a flaming 
arrow. He explained the thermodynamic rules of the game: just keep the coal bouncing from hand to 
hand, person to person, and no one gets burned. Just like summer camp, he said, except I’d never been: 
my young summers were all Nintendo and sleeping in—until the divorce, which brought afternoons of 
sitting around a tiny townhouse, waiting for my father to get home. Forking coals from the fire, he shook 
them atop the steel prongs like eggs in a frying pan, then plucked one from the bunch to begin the game. 
In the dark, the coal sparked left to right, left to right, and I squatted a little to prepare for my turn. The 
coal was in the air: rising, hanging, falling—I hit it with my hand, once, twice, then dropped it, picked it 
up with two fingers and tried again. I’d get a couple taps, then miss and whack it into the grass, then scoop 
it up and pop it back to him. He’d roll the coal in his hands like a great die in this game of chicken, then 
resume the juggle. Once a girl shrieked when it flew her way. I should have shrieked when the coal lodged 
between my vest and shirt, but I was possessed by the light, so I knocked it out and played on. When we 
lost sight of its dim glow in the grass, he pulled new coals from the fire and started again. Here was one 
last shot at summer, though I could not see his father face in the dark. Every time I dropped the coal, all I 
wanted was one more chance.

for Daniel Finch
MYTH

Never the sweat- and blood-stained sheets, the squirming babe wiped clean and placed into her feeble arms; no nights holy in their sleeplessness, her rocking a head of curls against her breast and singing softly as she, too, nods off; not a prophecy of miracle, though she spins her beads nightly, promising the boy would grow up holy, the girl would grow up pure; still, not the angel ablaze in incense, messenger of God’s attention at last; nothing but a shy smile for the girlfriends at lunch—she runs along the shoulder of the wooded two-lane road in neon violet sweats, pushing an empty jogging stroller toward the young sun, pale and thin against the new ice that stiffens the crisp leaves and sharpens the grass. Beneath a nearby tree, a doe and her young perk up, twitch their ears at the rattling roll, glare at the gliding thing black as their eyes, then scatter.

To push, to sweat—to drown out God’s awful silence. She has exchanged stories she calls up—Hannah kneeling, moving her lips; Elizabeth still waiting for her husband to come home—for a new myth: Sisyphus on the hated hill, Sisyphus who is nothing but a silly king in hell if not for his rock, but who now can stop dwelling on punishment and focus his strength instead on the restless boulder looming, demanding a hero to push it up.
PORTRAIT

My grandfather finally has a deity. At night I hear his tired voice in rhythmic invocation behind the closed doors of his bedroom where half the bed lies suddenly empty, harsh like the third-day tomb. Her soul released, he is now high priest within this Holy of Holies.

She has become a goddess, all plastic and rubied. Her image hangs above his dresser, now an altar, the goddess higher than the woman. She smiles down from a wooden frame painted gold, her body sharp against a brown background, hazy like cheap watercolors or heaven.

Nightly he offers tears to prove to the goddess his love for the woman, to appease her memory, cold as the night oak. The ritual complete, he comes out to the table, to peanut butter, a western novel, and quiet in the kitchen lit by the tiny chandelier, stark and yellow like purgatory.

He barely speaks, though he just gave me his old watch—gold with a ruby crown, my inheritance; a little early, or perhaps right on time from a man who dreams each night he is a horse galloping into a river, jealous and fiery in the sunset, his mistress somehow on the far shore.
These evenings are wet with skin, the dusk a fat peach sliced across maples where gnats pepper the still air. A train unseams the treeline, its dark rhythm quieting us, the water’s trickle rising when it passes. The day’s heat has leached into twilight, and in the muddy cool, the light spreads thin across this stream whose chill has drawn young fathers to fish with their toddlers. They wade with little nets of bright orange and blue while the older boys cannonball and race the tide and a girl on the bench worries a candy wrapper. These evenings form that river border of dreams whose memories slip away on nights I find myself at once awake, hushed by my heartbeat, knowing I’d been moving steadily, riding the silent tide, yet now—eyes open beneath the black—I am still.
Because I was scared, he grabbed us each a soda
and we drank to the raw absurdity of life.
While the bubbles lasted, laughter lifted my load.

The voices in my head had begun to explode—
I couldn’t calm down, and each sharp breath was a knife—
because I was scared, he grabbed us each a soda.

Think of the currents of wind that paved the road
before Icarus, fear flooding his child eyes.
He listens to seagulls’ laughter to lift the load,

but his spirit falters far from the aging hope
of his careworn father. He looks to his own might,
but how I wish he’d had a friend and a soda.

The drink was mango-flavored, sweet and cold,
and I chose to flap my own wings, to trust my weight
as the laughter bubbled, lifting off my load.

Between young men, a drink is a sort of code
for the joy of being alive, despite the strife.
Because I was scared, he loved me with a soda;
I knew I was not alone beneath my load.

for Bryan Leong
Blue and blue they go, Turtle and Guppy, racing down the rapids with big smiles and sun. Her father stirs her hair sprouts and reads the part where great Birnam uproots, rumbles to high Dunsinane hill in the paperback Macbeth he holds open with his other hand. She coos, the king cries at the Lady’s death, a breeze stirs the curtains beside the sunlit couch where his baby nests in his arms. Turtle has lost this race—and started and lost as many times as the book has returned to its cover—learning over and over his lesson, to be nicer to little people, by the time Macbeth learns not to trust witches, not to play God. So all lessons come at last with a change of clothes—a towel for soggy Turtle, blood stains for Macbeth’s soggy gut, several wipes and a new diaper for the little princess whose digestive system can’t do much with carrots. Then both go back to work—he flips through notes he took, she flips onto her stomach, then onto her back, and he notes that she has already read more than most of his own students. So prophecy comes true in the end, the events poised at the river’s mouth rushing down despite the hero’s want or knowledge or action, an end which takes the whole point out of prediction, and all he or any father can do is watch the pages blow forward in the breeze. She starts to spit up, so he hoists her onto his chest, dabbing her cheeks because if anything is certain, it is her little vomit quickly seeping down into the carpet, and if there’s anything he can do to give her a future, it is no more than what he can do right now.

for Lucas and Lucy Sheaffer
II. Works in Progress

“I would beg you, dear sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved, to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

—Rilke
But how restore everything fallen
between us, set it all at rest
long enough to come to a close?
We are properly at home wandering.
The air is crisp, tense with whatever
passing remark we haven’t said.
I shuffle twigs strewn on the path,
you warm my ungloved hand in yours.
The brittle grass is still green,
though the leafless trees splinter
the early sunset, and soon we must go
back—you’ll scavenge the fridge,
I the pantry, for something to reheat.
If I asked you, Anything interesting
at work? you’d shake your head
and tell me that people are negative,
work is a drag. If I asked, Want to watch
a movie later? you’d pick a romance,
you’d see me as the lonely guy
drying out on the commuter train,
yourself as the girl who can’t find God
in the clouds. You’d lean on my shoulder
when he first spots her, nestle your nose
into my neck when they finally make love.
Instead we name the trees we pass,
poplar, maple, pear; we point to birds
heading to their homes, perhaps,
or doing their own food scavenging;
we pick up crinkled leaves, sloughed
feathers, stones shaped like an arrow,
a heart. If I said, I love you, you’d stop
and lean me against this paper birch
to kiss me, nestling my sore back
in its three long fingers of trunk.
Somewhere along our winding walks,
we used up all our words clambering
around each other’s lives, and now
we find a peace in our steady gait.
Beloved, your almond eyes are red
with cold, and your nose is running
down to the tip, round and smooth
as the head of a mourning dove—
let’s head back now and get you warm.
A MEMOIR: FRANKIE’S MARKET CAFÉ

The last of the dozens of times we ate there during our three years in Birmingham, our house packed into boxes we got for free from liquor stores, my mom and sister and I ready to get as far away from my father as possible—that day Frankie’s wife came and sat at our table. I was cutting up fried green tomatoes into congruent pieces so nothing would stop my bliss when I put them into my mouth. These tomatoes were thick-sliced, their soft, stout innards encased in a thin, cracker-crips crust of breadcrumbs. They were just on the cusp of ripeness, barely bitter, mildly sweet. I would’ve taken a plate of Frankie’s tomatoes over bacon-wrapped steak or black-forest cake. Frankie’s wife talked with my mom about the divorce and the nearing move. I kept to my tomatoes. Then they prayed together, right there at the table, before Frankie’s wife rung us up herself at the register—except she didn’t: our last meal was on the house. She wished us the best of luck. Perhaps this was consolation or charity, but I see it as a toast: her sending off a faithful family into the void of a “new life” which we all knew would not come with two sides and a drink, and our gratitude was our departure, stamped with remembrance of Frankie’s family and their café: those lunch deals, and those fried green tomatoes.
HOW TO MAKE A 6-OZ. CAPPUCCINO

Start with a doppio—a double-shot—of espresso. Grind the beans fine, much finer than table salt. Use a burr grinder for consistency. You want the coffee to clump and show your fingerprint when you pinch a sample between thumb and index finger. Weigh it into the filter: seven to nine ounces per shot. Make sure you dose it evenly, tamp it with resolve, a full thirty pounds of pressure. Lean into the tamp as you might lean in to a kiss, and feel for the soft compression of grounds beneath tamp. You want a smooth, dense puck.

Now pull the shot. You want the coffee to drip slowly—shoot for thirty seconds per shot. Think back to the kiss: think of the anguish of your tongues’ exchange of fluid, how watery and feeble it gets if you go too fast, how clotted the senses grow if you go too slow. You want your shot’s flow to make you doubt its arrival, but not so gradual you give in to despair. Pull the mug out when the coffee starts to blonde—a little crema is soft and elegant, but excess is oily.

Next you must steam the milk. This is the hardest part—do it wrong and you’ll spray the counter white, the batch reeking like eggs and looking like a bubble bath. Start with two ounces of cold, cold milk in a small steel pitcher equipped with thermometer. You might even leave the pitcher in the fridge beforehand, chilling the vessel down to its metal bone. If your steam wand comes with a plastic cover, remove it. You won’t need it. Think of the freedom the penis feels bare, uncondomed. Tilt the pitcher just off its vertical axis and go in, keeping the tip of the wand barely below the milk’s surface.

Now turn on the wand, full force. You must find the w-spot: w for whirlpool, as this is what must form in the milk. Keep moving the tip until you find it, and be patient; like its nominal analogue, the g-spot, the w-spot is elusive, but when you hit it, you’ll know. Stay there. Let the volume double as the milk spins; this happens around 100º Fahrenheit. Now sink the wand deeper, align the angle of pitcher with wand, and move the wand toward the vessel’s edge. You want a wave to rush up to the lip as the milk churns fiercely, barely held by the bounds of the steel. Shut it off at once at 120º, allowing all remaining steam to pour forth, such that the liquid shudders and quiets at 140º: your target for best taste, raw sweetness of milk. The substance should resemble latex paint.

Now pour the milk into the doppio. For those confident with their hands, you might try forming a tree or a heart on the surface. Mine never works, but always comes out a white blob against an earthy backdrop: wild, forceful, and pure.
**MY SISTER’S CHRISTMAS BUSINESS**

Each night they lined the counter with sheets of wax, and everything stayed hot—the pizzelle iron passed down three generations, the mixer’s motor, the oven at 350, the dipping chocolate.

Christmas had made my little sister rich rich, selling sweets to all her teachers and friends. My mom was management and marketing, my sister the entrepreneur, the darling, the dreamer.

My mom had taught her how Christmas works: you spend, you give your family everything they ask for. The presents spilled out from the tree, so they set up a second present-laden tree, a third—

it took three days for us to open gifts, three nights for the house to soak up anise whiffs.
THE ROAD TO THE OLD TEMPLE

—So You’re thankless at last,

like this fat-bellied pig
running by in the furious rain,
and here, beneath another tree
freshly split, I ask myself,
Who first taught me to pray?
Black against the runny earth,
a snake slithers past in search
of dry ground.

—We were after You,
but now You are upon us, red
and elemental.

Too late,
the dust-burned sky pokes through—
we’re too far along to see
our names in the headlines,
our faces black in the paper.
We tried to kick the horses through
the thick of it, kick like a man
whose wife is bursting with child,
like a jockey fallen behind,
like a youth who has just stolen
his first horse. But the earth opened
its sloppy mouth and sunk us
in the deep mud. So it seems
a pilgrimage brings the divine
even out to the road.

—Here I am

before You, a little thing
with muddy feet and shaky legs,
with fear-swamped eyes, absent
and blank, looking more like
the goat kid than Your priest
who raises the knife high
above the feeble, fuzzy neck.
I.

The cat circled my picnic table in the windy night, staring me down one moment, the next pretending it hadn’t seen me, creeping closer, then darting back if I moved.

When I fetched it cheese,

it turned toward my open hand, but stopped instead to lick a chip from last week’s picnic, now soggy in the moist mulch, and to eat a rotting hot dog, bite by bite.

I waited, but its suspicion loomed between us, so we played on—me: a stargazer lost in thought, the cat: an extension of the night.

Perhaps my cheese was an insult like a check in the mailbox from Dad when the rent is due—and here I was, hoping to pet this cat, to feel generous, to love a little thing, then let it go.

I stood up at once and the cat slipped off into the tangled shadows of the oaks.

II.

The black dog sniffed the trash can, nosed under the lid, and you whistled through the alley, called it, here boy, hi doggie, tried names like Rover, Rex, Digger, as if, could you name it, you could save it. It came out of the can
and looked toward your voice, its eyes
milky, grotesque in the lamplight,

and its upper lip did not seem to fit
its face—it hung crooked like a curtain

which a cat has played with for too long,
and a few of its teeth lay exposed.

The dog was still. I thought of the man
who carries a gun at his side for safety,

though it is not loaded. You beckoned,
patted your legs, clicked your tongue

and it crossed my mind that it could be rabid.
I said maybe we ought to leave it be,

and you chided me for heartlessness:
the dog was already utterly unwanted.

You stepped in to fetch a leftover burger
(which I had planned to eat for lunch

the next day), and I was left alone
to stare back at the haunt.

It was my mom who warned me of strays,
who pulled my collar back from anything

with dangling teeth; or maybe it was God
who made me think first of myself.

What a scabbed-up outlook—
I almost wanted the dog to bite me,

to make me feel defenseless,
to make me the one spurned.

Or maybe I just wanted an excuse
to chase it off and be right. You returned

with the meat, and the dog came, tiptoed
as if to make a minimal intrusion

into our sterile life, and it ate,
eyes downcast, then scampered.
We must first take stock of gender—neutral: the Mediterranean, or India, met by casual references to “abroad,” “out there,” *Heart of Darkness*, West African Rubber Company. And already, critics marking the outer limits of “Antigua”: “Antigua” held in a precise place, sugar on a mighty sea, famous parties, celebrated old system of quick treasure.
PORTRAIT, PT. II

Last night I dreamed my grandfather dead. I’d dropped into breakfast like it were a crime scene, a shaft of sunlight at my back and his half-eaten plate to my right, a bite still poised on the prone fork. His chair was just ajar, and I deduced his exit sudden, premature. Despite my untouched fritada I cried because the river had come at last in this hold ‘em poker game of our love, and I’d lost most everything I’d ever won from him: belief in paternal strength, memories of walnuts and cards at the glass table lit by the glass chandelier, even the gold watch he gave me last year because it meant nothing to him, which has since slipped off like an animate talisman. In the dream, he never knew it was gone. So these three remain: fear of his terrible gravity, anger at all the dignity he stole, and a Remington statue bequeathed to me in the will: entitled “Coming Thru the Rye,” four cowboys howling on horseback, guns blazing into the blue.