

Melissa Ashley

FATHER POEM

Face creased against the glass
I watch an injured sparrow
make its track across the lawn;

mum unpegs the last load of
dad's washing from the line.

Mum slips mothballs like coolmints
in the breast pockets of his jackets;

I press the dead weight
of his absence to the bottom of
a cluttered pile of living.

In summer I choose the flavour,
push down the lever of the great
greasy cordial bottle,

redde the beads of ice,
Slush puppy, fruit tingles,
a rollerskating rink—

sinking exhausted into bed
forgetting places
the older boys had touched—

in corners near the toilets,
the sharp edges of the enamel table
printing bruises on my hip,

hot black guilt the day after
shocking as a sting.

The sparrow recovers—
departing for the sky
with a thin, triumphant shriek.

The window pane cuts
a permanent furrow in my brow.

I tuck dad away
in coral folds of brain like a brave sailor
in a coffin sunk at sea.

His fingers, feet and face
sloughed of warts and small depressions,

turned and sucked—smooth
pebble for the dryness of my mouth.

I did not like to think what
he's traded us in for—

old man, his left hand in the glove box
wrestling schubert and the beatles.

Old man, staring down the endless
orange rind of open road
unpeeling in the windscreen,

his sand shoes without laces,
his beard filthy as a sheep.

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