

# My Father Comes to Me

*Brent Pace*

My father comes to me  
his hand scrapes on the door  
that he opens to this bedroom where I am still,  
not sleeping but waiting for his hair oil scent to reach me.  
And he half expects to find me three years old  
blue cotton shorts and a blazer with a coat of arms  
standing on a beach not far from Palo Alto,  
guarding eyes from the water's glare  
in my best John John salute.  
He bears a gift, clothing in a bag with handles,  
stands near me in his Sunday best, thin lipped,  
unmoving but for a finger brushing the seam  
of polyester pants.

He comes to dress me, leans over my legs;  
stiff as birch limbs, knows that each passing hour  
they lose the kinesthetic memory of his favorite scene:  
Monday nights he held tiny naked feet in farmer's hands,  
lifted his children in a playful bench press above his face,  
sat them on the bottoms of his Wing Tips  
bounced them as on a John Deere tractor  
a giggling choir of voices screaming,  
"I'm next, me too!"

He pulls white pants up to my waist,  
fixes socks around cold toes, holds the collared shirt  
three minutes while he strokes his fleshy throat.  
Days have piled up since we last spoke,  
like dressings from a wound that would not heal,  
couldn't close, a pile of puss-stained cotton gauze  
on Mother's evening carpet.

He makes a double windsor with an off-white tie,  
the knot he taught me—arms around me from the back  
his face as serious as a lawyer—, removes an earring

"Why must he do that?" he asked  
the Christmas Eve as I returned from Cambridge  
with three new holes.  
Not the jewelry but what that surely meant,  
like the act of drinking alcohol  
being only a symptom of the deeper illness.  
He counted the illnesses: obesity, manic depression  
and they feared the one unspeakable,  
yes that was part of it.  
"He wouldn't be like this if he loved us."

Now the hat, the elastic and gathered cotton  
around the forehead,  
robe on one shoulder and apron,  
a splash of color  
appealing to my fashion sensibilities,  
and tying that around my waist,  
he thanks Father for the pocket made naturally  
in the small of the human back,  
wonders if he ever imagined  
that this would be our last embrace.

His chin reaching almost to my chest,  
he whispers a prayer aloud,  
hoping I will stir,  
hoping frozen lips would move in forgiveness  
for all that was left unspoken,  
apologize for making him come so near  
to what he said he loathed,  
what he never came close enough  
to know or give a blessing to:  
the living warmth of the living half  
of this unnatural union,  
the lover who covered my nakedness  
in so many sleepy deaths,

my brown skin savior  
whose voice alone  
knew how to call me out of dreams  
into one hundred quiet  
and uncelebrated resurrections.