

## Poetry

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You were 88 when your cells failed you  
*What did I do wrong?*  
Pleading – because men in your line are owed more years  
My grandfather’s grandfathers stretched past 100  
And your father – the bastard – died a day shy of 99  
A family failure.  
For him, the alcohol.  
*But what did I do?*

You were a giant in this house  
Tall, with big rough hands  
Count the years picking watermelons in your wrinkles.  
Building a house, a stable, a shower  
Because nine children had to bathe – and you, last.  
Hands hardened, digging family out of holes  
You were born into.

You were a giant in this house  
Loud laughter booming across bedrooms  
Grabbing scruff of neck, stuck me to your side. Saying,  
“Girl. Let me tell you.  
If you ever go to Laos, don’t eat the fish sauce.”  
And I am hooked – like it or not.

I had needs you knew, had grown with – saw.  
Fathers who drink, who yell at dinner  
And birthday parties.  
I talk back  
And you squeeze my leg under the table  
*Keep fighting!*  
Later you tell me you were proud.  
And I was proud – but I did wonder  
Why you never did more  
Than squeeze my leg.

*How did we miss it?*

You were a giant in this house –  
But in the hospital, you are a thin wire,  
Head lolling like a watermelon.  
Maybe it was during one of your walks  
Or mowing the neighbor’s lawn –  
Something green and docile snuck up to you brain  
And sprouted.  
I want to squeeze your leg  
*Keep fighting!*  
But there is no table to hide such indecencies.  
I keep my hands to myself.

This is a foreign house now.  
Its lifeblood, humiliated.  
Legacy, standing useless in the kitchen.  
Too loud – clanging plates together,  
Asking stupid questions.

“What movie do you want to watch?”  
 You say nothing.  
 But what – do we pray?  
 The giant used to bring his prayers to me –  
*You’re saying grace* – an ambush.  
*Bendíganosal Señor porestosalimentosy bendicelas manos...*  
 And you left me – with frantic, hungry minutes  
 Consulting cousins – eating words for dinner.  
 I can’t remember the taste.

The weight of the seconds disgusts me.  
 My mother is angry – “He just won’t accept it.”  
 But I feel your grief in the silence.  
 Grieving – of a man who was never allowed to.  
 Grieving – of a man who does not know how.

“I love you.”

Silence.

The nurse comes soon  
 I will spare you the indignity.  
 Fingers on a ripped screen door –  
 Almost feels like  
 The home of a giant  
 I used to know.  
*Hey*, I turn.  
 A man – words falling out a toothless grin.

*Be good.*

I nod – leaving last words as last.

The road back from Fayetteville bends past sunset on Jordan Lake.  
 Sun pulls me to its shores – blue-black water christened gold.  
 Too big for its own good.  
 And in his soft glow, all at once,  
 I feel them –  
 Thousands of could-have-beens  
 Should-have-dones,  
 Comes-to-passes,  
 Adding to impossibilities –  
 To here. Here now, with me.  
 Somewhere, there must have been a place of peace.  
 Somewhere, your feet rubbed sand against wood grain of a dock  
 you built your family.  
 Somewhere, your finger traced a tree’s bark – just to feel it.  
 Noticed how the sun cut its branches  
 Just for you.  
 I close my eyes and reach hands across the universe  
 Hoping you can find it.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951523001980>.

**Acknowledgments.** To my grandfather, Tom – the giant who called me Lilliput, after the Lilliputians.