

Matthew Goldberg
2nd Prize, 2006 Aging Well Writing Contest

Hands

Esther comes home from the hospital with her arm in a cast. “Wait in the car,” she tells Barbara. “He’s my husband. I’ll get him.” With a deep breath, she walks through the front door of the house, then circles the first floor, calling Morris’ name. There is no reply. His hearing has deteriorated with age. She pauses at the piano and runs the fingers of her unbroken arm along the aged mahogany. Morris had beautiful hands. The hands of a conjurer, she used to think. He played the piano brilliantly, his long, graceful fingers striding across the keys. Esther remembers those fingers tracing her belly before Barbara was born. She strikes a key and cringes as a flat, wobbly note hangs in the air. The piano has not been tuned for a long time.

Morris is in the upstairs bathroom, naked, his hands smeared with excrement. “I’m sorry,” he tells Esther, holding out his palms. But he apologizes for the wrong thing. This morning he had pushed Esther down the stairs. Falling on her arm hurt, but so did the surprise of the push. More and more he was waking up and not recognizing her. Esther takes Morris’ hands and runs them under the sink. She washes one finger at a time, then looks to his shamefully exposed body. She will bathe him, Esther decides, then dress him in his good suit—the one he had used for performances—before they join Barbara in the car. “I’m sorry,” Morris repeats. But it is too late. Her daughter has made the proper calls. A room is waiting. It is all worked out.

Evenness

Needing a glass of water from the kitchen, I duck behind the sofa in the living room so as not to be seen through the sliding glass door. My father is outside punishing the lawn. He is shirtless, his chest sagging and hairy. He crouches down, not quite sitting on his heels, and uses a pair of large, rusted clippers to level the grass around the edges of the backyard. The tool's dull teeth scrape the fence and my father rises to sit on an imaginary chair. His calves are muscular, a remnant of his days of lugging mattresses through South Boston tenements. He pauses to thumb the sweat from his glasses. There are two more sides of the yard to tend. Looking past my mother's cracked patio furniture and his small vegetable garden, he surveys the even pattern left from the lawnmower. Evenness is what he works for.

When we first moved to the suburbs, my father coached our little league team. We were awful, the kind of team the 15-0 mercy rule was invented for. If someone was lucky enough to lay bat on ball, they ran the wrong way around the bases. My father's theories on the double switch and suicide squeeze were lost on us. Now my old boombox sits on the patio table, broadcasting the Orioles game. Static fills the yard and creeps into the house. Eventually, my father will come inside for a beer and my mother will berate him for tracking dirt into the living room, on the new sofa. He will apologize, but not before setting down a monstrously large zucchini on the kitchen counter. "They're big this year," he'll say. "It must be all the rain."

Great Falls

I drive my father past the big houses. The sun banks against the gabled roofs and clay tennis courts. We pass families reading the Sunday paper and eating eggs. I take the car off the main road, further away from the traffic lights, where houses hide behind horse pastures. The car windows are down, our elbows dangling to the wind.

My father is calm, his head back, eyes behind dark glasses. This morning he called me home from the city to show me where he kept his life insurance policies. I stopped the pills, he told me. Life is getting too hard.

Houses disappear with the dip and curve of tall trees, and eventually we run out of road. This is Great Falls, where deep rocks separate Maryland and Virginia. We leave the car and walk the wooden boards to the overlook. I hold my father's arm and we both look down to where the water breaks and foams. It roars. It fills in what I don't know how to say. We lean back and I hold tight to his thick arm. There, on the other side of the gulf are two people. I see them there, one state away.