

For My Father

Tracey Rolfe

If I were to call this a love letter,
if I were to throw the L-word at you, demand it of you—an accounting of what you feel for
me—words we have boxed away, a physicality of touch we have shied from like skittish
horses on a windy day,
if I were even to breathe that L-word
you would balk, and your once great and towering frame would tremble. Instead, I touch
your hand, the age-kissed skin, love-letter thin now, with its tracery of veins, and say, *Hello,*
Dad.
You peer around, fix on me, ask who it is, and, when I tell you, you smile.
Today is a good day.

There are longstanding barriers against hugs—your European blood runs too cool for such
closeness, for the laying on of hands: remember
that first return to your homeland after decades away, a flat landscape where people hold the
sea in check—where waves butt against a sea wall—your favourite sister, the long-awaited
reuniting, the excited coming together—running closer, some imagined soundtrack
crescendoing, everyone's breath held and the greeting?
A shaking of hands.

Another trip, my brother's first to your homeland, his phone call across a hemisphere of
oceans. *I love you, Dad,* said my brother, across all of those k's. A heartbeat's pause, my
brother's breath drawn held and your reply: *I'm painting your room, son.*
But in those words, two hemispheres of meaning.

I understand the reticence, feel it myself—your Dutch blood runs cool in my veins—I dread and resent the close embraces of the huggers and the kissers.

We don't make small talk, you and I—what have we to talk about? Your life has contracted more than your body. That strong body—

I remember:

we were dressed in our best, ready to go out, and we kids were waiting, restless, and you took us—my brother and me—over the road 'for a quick kick', you in your suit, red leather poised, that big kick for goal, your legs sliding out—you in your best suit, flat on your back, in the mud. You hurt yourself, and my brother and I laughed so hard tears spilled down our cheeks.

Mum is going to kill you, we said.

You ask after your mother, your father, aunts and uncles, long-dead relatives I never knew, except for monotone grimaces in age-curled photos.

I want to go home, you say,

to *Meester van Coothstraat*. I don't know that house. It isn't the little house you always told me about—the house you talked about, on the wrong side of the dyke, was earlier still. A house that flooded in winter, a house where you rose from bed one morning, into calf-deep water, as icy as hell.

So many stories

wove in and out of my life—you inducted me into them, did the same with my daughter. And that one story, the one crowning story:

you, playing Cowboys and Indians, you

a cowboy, and the Indians loosing fiery arrows, arrows that arced into a farmer's field, torching his crop, and

how the farmer chased you,

how you rode his hog to your escape,

how it tried to rub you off against the fence,

how it dumped you, unceremoniously, into the pig swill.

There were other stories, too: tales of the war, of sitting in a small boat, fishing on a dyke near Nijmegen, and overhead the drone of Nazi planes on their way to bomb Arnhem.

Another day, a later day when the Nazis caught you and your older brother and told you to wait, and you skived off, your brother refusing. *You'll get shot*, he said, but you scarpered anyway. You told me:

how angry your mother was that you'd left your brother,

how your brother returned weeks later, shaking,

how he shook for the rest of his life, and

how he never spoke of what happened.

And your own army stories set in Indonesia: of the pet monkey you owned and had to kill because it caught rabies, how a group of sailors tricked you into eating their ship's cat. All those stories.

Now, in their place, a vast emptiness, a silence as sharp as stars.

My heart aches for you as we sit in a companionable silence that drives my mother mad. *He doesn't talk to me*, she says, and wonders why she visits. Silence is her foreign soil.

When I visit, I fish out Peer Gynt and put on 'Solveig's song', your favourite. Sometimes you sing along—you in German, accompanying the soloist's Norwegian. Kirsten Flagstad, you say. This is a good day. Other days, you say you don't know the song. This is music we will play one day to a moving montage of photos when you have gone. You with those grim-faced rellies. You in Indonesia with your army buddies. You with a motorbike I've never seen. By the time I was born, glaucoma was already drawing its veil across your eyes.

You peer around your room, perhaps trying to locate me. *How long have you lived here?* you ask, and five minutes later you ask it again. You are a balloon, and all the wind has whistled out, a sandcastle in the high-water mark. You are here, but this isn't you. You walk the halls, a slow shuffle, a slow, never-ending shuffle, in search of something—

an ending, perhaps.

Four weeks ago, my birthday and your last restaurant visit, pizza—*This food is shit*, you said, *and I'm not going to eat it*. Arms crossed against your chest, a determined shake of head. We tried to shush you, led you out, guiding your elbow: *Step up here, come around here, a small step down*. At home, you ate the pizza happily before wiping your face on the tablecloth.

The foundation that my life is built upon is cracked and crumbling, magnificent sandstone abraded, eroded by passing time, sandstone turning into sand. In my more-religious youth, I prayed to a God I wish I could still believe in. *Please don't let my parents die before me*. An armour to protect me from hurt. Now I have children, I see that selfishness limned against the brightness of my past, as I sit with you in the penumbral gloom.

These days, death is never far from my mind—this might be your last birthday, Christmas, Easter—my morbid fascination. You would hate what your life has become, a shell of a man, of a gentle man, a gentleman, still more father-of-pearl than periwinkle. Sometimes you voice it: *I wish the good Lord would just take me*. But even so, I cannot contemplate it: never hearing your voice again, never seeing those thick-knuckled hands—

my own hands,

large as my husband's, curl, and my fingers dig into your shoulders, trying to hold on, trying to hold on to you

forever.