



Image from Freepik

Steven Hill

Father's father's father's Son

“We know what we know,” you said,
“from the sacrifice of Forefathers
 who have bred successfully their line,”
centuries of paternity
stored deep in the DNA of our bones.
Buried for observances in a charnel house by the sea,
phantoms murmur over the family wounds,
 as white gulls circle against a brittle gray sky,
wailing to the windblown sea.

Yet there were times, Father, I remember them well,
when your Great Face darkened
and the lines sagged beneath

your wrinkled craggy crust,
and could see not its revered mythology
or its hand-me-down legacy,
from whence it came;
or the direction it was now to go.

And we huddled with
 ourselves in our square rooms, afraid,
 and shushed each other's
 shrill voices quiet saying,
 "Leave him, leave him be
 he is not well. Shhh!

Let us cloister in our rooms and play a quiet game. Shhh!"

Downstairs we could hear, like thunder squalls
your rage,
separate you from us,
tear up page upon page,
shut up in our rooms we withdrew
like shorelines
before a tsunami,
heard dishes smash and
the charging waves crash,
hurtling frustration at the rocky shore,
like a tantrumming child whose
parents are gone,
have been gone,

 were they ever really there?

And us shushed in our rooms
playing quiet silly games,
passing the universal thump 'round
 from shoulder blade to shoulder blade:

 "Cheater!" "I am not!"

 "You are too...!" "I am not!" "Shhhhh!"

And then...we carried on
Waves rocking, white caps breaking
Shorestones clacking, 'round and 'round
Gull faces squinting into the wind
Break, break
Carry on.

Far out to sea
where the mainsail tops lingered
for a young sailor's eyes before
disappearing over the briny edge,
steel-gray clouds circled and darkened,
and pure white gulls
screamed to shore bearing
an urgent message
 of whiteness swallowed by gray,
that made the gray more white
and the white more gray,
 which confounds us every day.

And you coaxed me when I was unsure,
when my apprentice feet crossed, toe over toe,
log-jammed streams,
arms extended like an eagle's span,
when hot August rains pounded on metallic drains,
and the sky thundered
and flickered in the distance.
First the flash! Then the boom!
Shaking my whole bedroom,
closer, closer,
rattling our grand ancestors framed on my leaning walls;

And after work, as the sun set,
you tossed me the obligatory ball:
 the little white hard ball, or the large, bouncing orange one,
or the double-pointed, white-striped-at-the-ends
brown one,
made out of pigskin, or
horsehide and cow,
how odd it is to me now
 that you never told me this,
 that I never knew,
I was never sat down and made to understand:
 that this was a possible fate for a pig,
 to be tossed through the air at sunset
 by a tired father and his son;
 or to be convoyed across a goal line

on burly, mercenary shoulders,
like an Aztec god, stuck pig,
delighting the press of the stadium throng.

In the bath: you straddled me
between your hairy legs,
such pillars, such trees
matted brown with mossy hair,
and so much hair!
Like a jungle grass
I wanted to knead them, to pull at
your curls
but I did not dare!
How large your feet, how thick your clamshell toenails,
when I close my eyes, I can still see them
in the tub, one leg
on either side of me
rising up out of the foamy sea, like two Gibaltars,
like the legs of the ancient Colossus,
that could toss me aside and walk away
at any moment, without cause or courtesy.

And sitting beside my bed: you rubbed
my aching legs,
“Just growing pains” you said
and I did not understand then how
growth could be so painful;
I imagined my ligaments lying in wait,
my tendons and bones groaning under the stretch of the rack,
could all of nature be loosing a silent moan, I worried,
a universal groan
like a slave bent under her heavy bag?

And in the tunnels of the night as I lay awake, blinking,
I heard the wail of the wind
bending around silent brick corners,
and the vacant inquiry of the Owl silhouette,
Who? Who? Who?
two Moon Eyes:

And the silly coyote, laughing with abandon

between the hollow hills
at she knows not what,
breast-laughing at the Moon perhaps,
for practice,
at the madness of it all,
at those poor, dumb bastards who allowed themselves
to be reincarnated as Palestinians,
“What a fix *they* are in,” Coyote giggles,
as the hunter looses the dogs, slides two
shells into the 12-gauge saying:
“I hate that stupid mad laugh of the coyote,
it keeps me
awake at night.”

Once, I saw some photographs of you:
one, standing with your three sisters
(one sister I never met, two others, my aunts, who have since
rejoined their sister),
there was New England snowflake
on the frozen ground,
and woolen caps and family
smiles and cold breath passed all around;
and there was promise there,
there was the possibility of many possibilities,
a softness to your smile,
a willingness to triumph,
as if your momma had just scratched your back.

It was a white, working-class United States of America smile,
of bright youth and light hope,
of scientific optimism that knew nothing of
the war you would soon be sent to fight;

The second photograph: your shoulders sharp and tall,
erect like rows of summer corn,
the neighborhood’s son
in military array,
how the sun shone down on your hair
then fine and blonde,
a hero-in-waiting,
immortal until the impending trial by fire;

still another, only a tintype in a pile now:

your casual smile, a conqueror's whiskey in one hand,
seated in the Haufbrau surrounded by Berlin frauleins and PFC buddies,
the things they made you do for them, perform
in your uniform, brass-flashing, square-shouldered:

hit the beach sprinting,
dodging,
bullets screeching
by the fire bombs' red glare,
praying
bawling
shitting your pants
clutching
their answer in your hands

"Momma, where are you Momma?" (huff) (huff)
"Why did you let me come here?"
"What do I do when I reach that log, Momma (huff) (huff)"
"Holy Mother, I trust you..."
"Where... what happened to Hank? Hank? Haaannnk....."

And then... you carried on
Normandy rocking, white caps breaking
Gunshells clacking, 'round and 'round
Grimy faces squinting into the winds of Normandy
Calling, wailing
Carry on.

Were you surprised when you saw legs blown off?
Heads smashed like hollow pumpkins, oozing cerebral spaghetti?
Did you blank stare at the tanks rolling across the jigsaw plains,
the air reeking of casualties scattered like ants, belly-up?
Did the black smoke hang in noose-like shapes, choking the sun from the pale blue sky?

*This is the time-honored, historic role of men,
to be the soldiers and uniformed protectors...*

Did you prop up your buddy against the bombed-out brick? Hear his
Last Confession gurgling through mucused breath?

Was your helmet used to collect his personal belongings,
his Rosary splattered with cranberry blood?

*To be the predator, to be the bloody bloodied ones, as the
women wave sweet Adieus...*

Did you write home that you were doing fine, and that you hoped you could
come home soon?

*Rows of medals, motivation,
for dignity shamed into sacrifice...*

Could you tell whether the smile of a smooth-skinned child hid a flower
or a deadly grenade?

Did you aim your pistol at the emaciated German youth, just because
he stole your precious chocolate bar?

To take a life... a begging hostage...or have yours taken...

Did they strap you in a chlorine hospital, pin a medal on your chest as your
Poppa beamed?

Did you tear off the medal with your remaining arm, and fling it in the
face of the shiny colonel?

The stories you brought back with you, the heroics of your club,
the tales of victory and the conquering male hero.

"Stars and Stripes forever, My country right or wrong"

Odyssean yarns thousands of years long,
the stirring march of the victory parade,

the hup-hup of the boots tapping the rhythm of the saints,
now stored in boxes under cobwebs in musty attics,
until pulled out at holidays to entertain
chip-off-the-block grandsons,

the universal thump gets passed 'round and 'round,
shoulder blade to shoulder blade,
at the Thanksgiving meal with the cranberry and dressing and
TV football gladiators,

and the blessings of the women, matriarchs and girls,
who "Adieu" their protectors off "to God."

They said you cut quite a dashing pair, you and my mother,
walking along the boardwalk together:

you, those famous veteran's shoulders,
she, her dress and dark hair blowing beachward,
the warmth of the climbing sun gurgling in your veins on
the day that you proposed;
and you never told us how it happened, Father
was it dramatic, romantic,
silly be-bop-a-lula, unexpected,
were you proud, or scared,
was she alarmed? Already pregnant?
Did you cheat on her? Or she on you? Do you even know?

Standing at the altar in front of the solemn priest, trying so
hard to look like the statuettes atop the wedding cake,
did she suddenly appear
in a moment transmogrified
as a stranger hidden behind a veil?
Did you wonder if you were in the right place?
Did you want to run and grab your gun?
Did her lipsticked face seem a surreal pancake mask?
Did you question the basis for your animal attraction?
Was it predatory? Opportunistic? Hormonal?
Capitalistic?
Did you tell her your doubts and fears,
your hopes for a career,
to build a foundation against the surging tide,
against the fear of the black grave swallowing
the light of the living--
or did you remain silent and tall like
the top of the cake?
Always at attention, a soldier?

And remember that glittering Xmas morning,
14 years later, 18 years ago?
Your six kids filed down the stairs holding our breaths,
blinded by home-movie floodlights that
filmed our spoiled crankiness,
the icicles sparkled brilliantly, dripping from the eaves,
as a whole nation held its breath
and exhaled in wide-eyed jubilation:
the Holiday season had been a boom
as consumers like hungry pilgrims consumed,

jobs had been preserved Thank God,
the economy was in full throttle,
post-war employment in a post-war boom,
 and you, Father, a salesman of cigarettes
 to grocery stores and maternity waiting rooms.

Under the crucified tinsel trees in millions of living rooms were
brightly wrapped boxes:
How perfectly square and rectangular they were,
 how precise, how neatly stacked
 ‘round the guillotined tree,
we tore into those packages like cubs at the teat,
 like Green Bay linebackers on a Super Bowl blitz,
I know how the two of you must have scraped and saved,
through the floor of my bedroom, late at night
I heard the gist of your tired conversations:
 “It’s awfully expensive, isn’t it...”
 “Yes it is... still...”
 “He really does want it, doesn’t he?”
 “Yes, he does...”
 “Perhaps I can get more hours
 driving the cab after work...”

Money comes in, money goes out,
bills are paid for services rendered,
careful record of balances are kept,
but that is no matter on Xmas morning;
“Silent night, holy night
All is calm...”
carry on,
Snowflakes flailing, driving wind
Break, break
Carry on.

The Christmas snows turned to equinox slush,
the whiteness never lasted long,
How oddly human
these “Peace on Earth” benedictions,
stored away with the stockings and ornaments
 ‘til the sound of next year’s gong.
It’s that same old riddle, of whiteness

swallowed by gray, which turns the gray more white
and the white more gray, which confronts
us every day.

Berries in winter, shriveled black on the vine,
unpicked but not discarded,
plucked at last by March winds,
and fed back to the earth, uncounted.
Rotating earth, time of mine for rebirth,
in spring muds
and lengthening skies,
the gracious sun melted the permafrost,
the ground became softer, wider,
and the tree roots sipped more easily as
the landscape began to exhale.

And the two of you, Father and Mother,
He and She
got along in years;
 like two yoked oxen pulling in opposite directions,
ripping blindly through the stubborn mud
as the sweat screamed like trapped steam
 through your exhausted pores;
fodder for carnivores,
you tore up triangles of turf as
you dragged someone's heavy load the required distance:
 they were harsh task-masters, the Joneses,
 whip in one hand, the Good Book in the other,
 always insisting that you keep on persisting
 and drag your load over the line.

Blue-ribbon oxen, brutish beasts,
you were meant for a more gentle pasture
lying serenely in the cool grass,
legs folded under the spreading tree,
if only the standards were not so dear.

The things I could not tell you Father,
 and you did not bother to ask,
telling you my fears always a formidable task,
for the Strong are like the Forefathers, you said, and
ancestors are mute,

phantoms of the fading past,
 towering and tight-lipped,
 following orders quite well it seems,
 bound to the fine print of an indentured contract,
 standing without complaining,
 like a good soldier, holding the line.

And so the years churned with the passing of the leaves,
 a butterfly's wings flapped and a brisk wind
 renewed all willing souls,
 proud soldier boy quivering at your roots,
 tear off your armor that has, of necessity, served you well.
 Throw down your weapon, pointed at the world,
 those closest to you are not your enemy!
 Your childhood pal lies in the hospital, triple bypassed,
 go to him and hold his fear.
 Your second oldest son leaves on the next bullet train,
 why so afraid of your tears?
 Promises of your wedding day float by, unplucked,
 your wife, my mother, awaits your recognition and--

“Some...someday *you'll* be a Father...*then* you'll know...
then you'll understand... How *dare* you judge me!”

It is my experience in my body that judges you, Father. And consider:
 Not judging is also a judgement.

“I raised you, you *owe* me. You are my son...I am not on trial!”

Yes, I owe you. For this life that you gave me, I owe you--
 but *what* I owe you is unclear. It will have to be
 worked out, over time,
 through negotiation,
 And yes, you *are* on trial!

“I...I'm sawed through the heart, proof that the child
 remains. Wandering in our dreams, laughing, playing, sawed
 through the heart, the child remains. You cannot try the child,
 one day you shall see. I refuse to plead!”

All fathers must one day stand trial,
 so prepare yourself, Father -- I have no choice.
 And listen well: for I

have important things to tell.

Break, break
Breakers crashing,
Seaweed slapping, 'round and 'round
Grim-faced gulls lean into the rolling surf
Calling, wailing
Carry on.

Steven Hill is a *Caveat Lector* principal and contributing writer. He is a journalist and the author of seven books of political non-fiction. His essays, articles and media interviews have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Wired*, *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Die Zeit*, NPR, PBS, BBC, C-SPAN, Democracy Now, and many others. He is the chief editor and contributor to the online publication DemocracySOS. He has published short fiction and poems in a number of publications, including *Columbia Journal*, *Minnesota Review*, *San Fernando Poetry Journal*, *Struggle*, *Prophetic Voices*, and the anthologies *Sparkle and Blink*, *Grasp the Rainbow*, and *Poets for a Livable Planet*. His plays have been produced in New York City (Off-Off Broadway), Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. His website can be found at www.Steven-Hill.com.