

My Father Was a Poet

I did not know my father was a poet
who wrote in Braille after he lost his sight.
He was a man of secrets.
The usual ones I knew: alcohol
and women. Poetry was his alone.
After his death I found them carefully
packed in the closet of his nursing home.
Page after page of tactile patterns lured
my fingertips. I had them translated,
if that's the term, from darkness into light.
There were no letters only poetry.
He wrote an ordered formal verse,
four beats always four beats per line.
It was a powerful uncompromising
line for a man who did not compromise.
He knew I wrote and never asked to hear.
I read each poem of his, placing the Braille
next to the flattened text. The pair revealed
verse maps of constellations from the star
atlas a son would follow to find his father.

The Father – Part 7 *King*

King's call to history was clear.
Washington's march demanded all:
colored and white, father and son.
My wife feared liquored Negro mobs
would rise to torch the capitol
like Harlem back in forty-two.

That was a time when I could see
the storefronts fated to be fuel.
I walked those streets to lower heat

dodging the misfired Molotovs
when young men became hooligans
and crowds gave speech to buildings' flames.

D. C. was not those Harlem nights.
This pressing heat pressed for King's voice.
Church folk had bused to Bethlehem.
My son will not forget he heard
a man who in a better world
would stand to speak as President.

The Son – Part 7 *Mr. President*

Bethesda Baptist Church chartered two buses.
We made our only father and son journey.
My mother's caution did not caution him.
He grabbed my arm and off we went to see
a sea neither of us had ever seen.
Loudly, as always, he was asking questions:

"Are there more colored folks than white?" "Yes, daddy."
"Are black and white prayer birds flying with us?"
(That's what he called the priests and nuns.) "They are."
"You say more than two football fields to the stage
and packed?" "Yes, and a lot more behind us."
He smiled. "I told your mother, King knows Negroes."

The heat kept wringing out its entrance fees.
Mahalia's song built expectation's hum.
The rabbi's speech closed. King began his sermon.
He built each word to verse, each verse to chapter
lifting the crowd to choir of memory,
the day transfixed in history, its echoes

spangling the ice-lined Mall five decades later,
the summer's sweat now frost in winter's bite,
as masses form one congregation hearing
the gospel-steepened alto of Aretha
preparing for the man who walks on votes
from dream into undreamed reality.

Bundled in willing layers I give witness.
A blind man slips on ice. He's near my age,
my father's age, when I stood next to him

sharing the future's call we would not share.
I think of how he'd smile when we first hear
a colored man called Mr. President.