

In My Father's Garden – Fairfield, Idaho

My father is in Boise, 100 miles from home, for a hernia operation, So my son and I have driven to Fairfield in July to water his garden: Corn, cantaloupe, beans, asparagus, Swiss Fucking Chard, spinach. The onions, Dad told me, will do fine until he comes home Tuesday, five days from now.

My son Jeff is 4. He's dressed, as usual, in his homemade Batman getup: black cape, borrowed black lynx-eared costume hat Safetypinned below his chin. My son *is* Batman. He tells me so. His longing to be Batman wears me out sometimes. Should we be Doing something about it? Seeing a counselor, maybe? Who knows?

Anyhow, a midget Batman and a shirtless guy squirt water, this July evening after work, on a small garden in a small town in Idaho. Harold Lee, the Camas County Sheriff, lives down the block. Now Harold crackles slowly by on the graveled alley in his flashertopped Blazer. He checks us out. I wave: he waves back.

Dad ordered me to help myself to spinach, so I thumbcrush, pull off And wad the springy darkgreen leaves into a wrinkled paper bag I found stuffed inside a big greasy bag beneath Dad's sink. Meanwhile, Batman, entrusted with the hose, is gouging out dirt Around cornstalks with a festive guttering of hose-spray. Mudgobs fly.

Collecting spinach, I think about my father. My memory offers up Memories not of time he and I spent together deliberately not Quality Time, they call it now but times when we were together Because it just worked out that way, when I tagged along when he Surveyed, fished, drove wild on dirt roads in dusty Fords to oil-well

Locations, peed off a bridge, grew corn. I have an old snapshot Of my father holding his 2-year-old son aloft, a laugh Roaring across his face. Will Jeff remember this day when He thinks of me someday? A day when we were stuck with one Another, working in a garden 50 miles from home, for spinach?



My father, 78, was scared when he left here: scared of operations, of Boise, scared of the very place a hospital named for a saint where 11 years ago his wife, my mother, died desperate, terrified, crazy, In some shitty pain we never, any of us, pained ourselves enough To understand. Dad, still in love today with someone 11 years dead

Who died there, now willingly has gone there again:
To lie down. To be robed, drugged, cut, patched with Dacron
And drawnsewn tight in the crotch that no longer holds him in.
Two years ago, I saw him visibly go breathless with fear of
Hospitals. But now, he's accustomed himself enough

Through two cataract operations and now this, to lie down and
Take the businesslike attentions of businessfolk who carve and
Staple up the carcasses of the living, and then go home
From work to do things with their kids, squirt water, work
In gardens of their own until it gets too dark.



It seems, tonight in Fairfield, like the evening of the world itself:
Air breathless, birds still, the light hefty with some mortal lesson.
My son, however, plays on with the garden hose, firing splats
Of tawny light into the sundown air against the golden
Cloudstained clapboards of the Catholic Church next door.

His turn will come. Standing dumbstruck in tall corn, beneath a sky
Rising endless out past the soundless boundary of the galaxy
Where the only corn in the universe grows, I see the three of us
Shot along the ancient trajectory of love and succession, fired in
Sequence through bright air.

Watching my son and thinking of my father, I lamely ask
The universe, I guess, for some kind of ordinary blessing on us
Who ride a watered flying rock no wider than a minor world.
On my loved son: bat-masked, bright, lost in play, alive,
And while I can see and hold him up and smell him, mine. ■