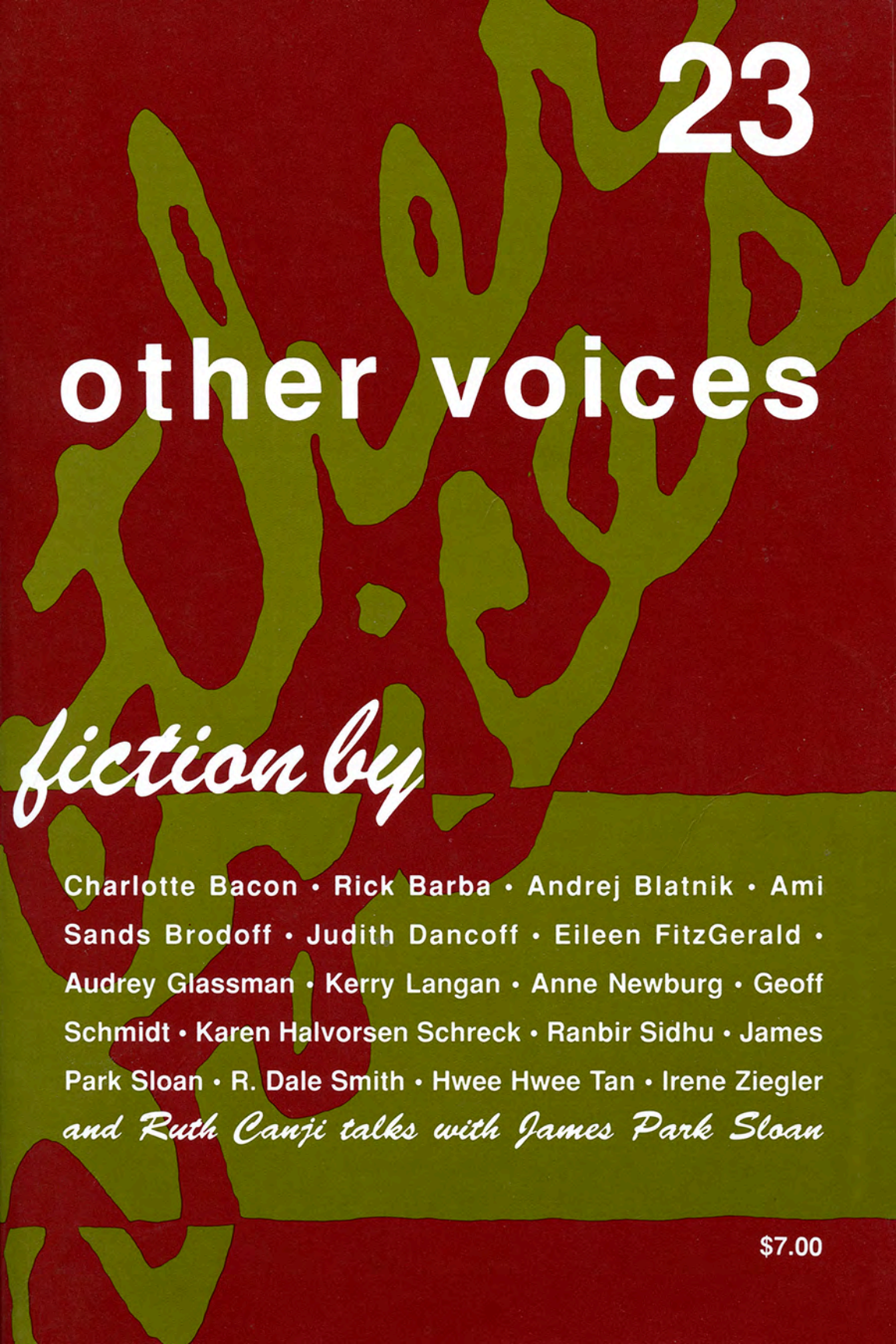
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Father's Day

Judith Dancoff

Father's Day is a holiday I've always tried to ignore. My father died when I was too young to celebrate it, and over the years I've tried to forgot it. The date helps. It comes at the start of summer vacation, so I did not have to sit through years of art classes, making cards for a father who was never at home—'Father, I love you,' 'Happy Father's Day,' 'To the Best Father in the World': two stick figures against a blue and gold background, running across a rainbow sky. Besides, in the fifties people didn't pay much attention to Father's Day, and my mother, not wanting me to suffer, encouraged this. It was a holiday created by department stores, she said. What did I know about venturing alone into the cool leather of a men's store—hands clasped in awe—to buy a tie or undershirt for a father who was never at home.

Instead, my first memory of early June centers around his death. On a clear morning in June, 1951, my mother left me and my older sister with a relative, so she could take our father away to die. I was three and a half, my sister Trudy six. He had lymphosarcoma, a rare form of cancer he got working on nuclear submarines. He wanted to go for experimental treatments, and my mother agreed. She has always felt guilty about this, saying she shouldn't have left her girls at such a crucial moment, that the doctors told her it was useless, but at the time she complied. We drove half a day to my aunt's house in Pittsburgh, and then we said good-bye. I can still recall my mother hugging Trudy and me for a long time, and then, as my aunt held the door open to welcome us, mother sped away from the curb. Trudy and I started to cry, but my aunt fed us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and showed us her hummingbird feeder in the backyard. As children do, we left the past behind us, and became immersed in the present.

My sister and I were to share a makeshift bedroom with my cousin Eric who was five. For the purpose, two extra cots had been pushed into the room around his bed. That night Eric and I stood on the small black cots and pulled each other's pants down, shrieking in glee at our daring. He was my special friend immediately. The next day I saw him going to the bathroom, standing up and pointing into the porcelain bowl. I told my aunt he was going to the bathroom the wrong way and everyone laughed.

"C'mon Cynthia!" my sister yelled. Behind their house was a small forest, and before I could feel bad, the older children began running toward it: Eric, his sister Alyse who was twelve, and Trudy. It seemed mysterious and wonderful. I chased in after them, on a great adventure, and saw the small green leaves shinning down from above. I twirled and twirled and twirled, until I crashed into a bed of summer leaves.

We stayed at my aunt's three weeks, then returned to Urbana. That last afternoon at my aunt's house was filled with sunlight, the yellow path from her house to the curb a ribbon of light. When I climbed into our old Packard I cried, but my aunt waved at me and sang a song:

"So, Long, it's been good to know you," she began, singing the Woody Guthrie song that soon became one of my favorites, *"So long, it's been good to know you/This dusty old dust is a gettin me down/And I've gotta be driftin' along."*

I am a mother myself now, divorced, supporting my son alone, so I know how it feels to want to make your children's lives better. I am a lawyer; we do not suffer. I am good at my work, but my own life seems less in control. Whenever my mother shares her guilt with me—tells me she handled the death wrong—I answer that the two weeks weren't all that important, that it was my father's not being there that hurt me, but she refuses to believe this. My mother is eighty now, a little rumpled and frail in the pastel dresses she sews herself, and when she tells me this over the telephone, I can see the staunch line of her jaw, unwavering in its protection of her children.

The truth is, though, that it was his death—the years growing up without him, of not being able to remember what he looked like, and the years after that, of pretending that everything was fine, while at the same time everything in my life was going wrong. I imagine him when I look at my six year old Timmy—the color of Timmy's hair, his eyes—black and straight, so like his grandfather's. I think about him when Timmy cries for his own father, an unemployed artist who left Timmy and me a year ago to move in with his gay lover. Sometimes Frank is supposed to pick Timmy up for Little League but doesn't, doesn't even call. Every time a car drives by, Timmy runs to the window, cranes his neck like a small bird to peer up the street. This goes on all afternoon. By dinnertime Timmy is exhausted from crying, and I just hold him in my arms.

Father's Day is no big deal, kid's stuff, capitalism, I tell Timmy—squeezing orange juice, dropping a load in the washing machine, making a mental list of every grocery item I need to buy today, before I leave for the office. I am planning for our yearly vacation to Baja. Timmy and I will swim in clear blue waters, loll on white sand beaches. I never manage to find the time, but still we dream.

Father's Day, I tell him, is sponsored by the department stores, for consumption only. I am approaching this intellectually, as though he is an adult. We're too smart for all that, aren't we? I am preparing Timmy for the fact that his father is once again not going to show, once again going to fly the coop, catch a fast one, but Timmy isn't listening. He is dreaming over a bowl of wilted corn flakes, tipping his spoon up and down in his milk, his little chin propped up on his wrist. He is thinking, I am sure, about the gift he made Frank at camp—a desk blotter. For days, all of the children have been painting pictures for their fathers, sprinkling them with glitter, macaroni, bits of confetti: little rainbows under messages of love. Yesterday they chose their favorites, then the counselors got out the ironing boards, and pressed on sheets of vinyl. The sound of crunching macaroni could be heard for blocks. Timmy chose his prized masterpiece, a scene all in muted blues and greens, that shows father and son spaghetti figures holding hands under a sparkling sky. It is wrapped in newspaper, now, by his elbow, carefully protected against his faithless mother. The morning light shines in on the down at the nape of his neck, and I think it is very early today, only eight-thirty, to be feeling the inevitable disappointment at the pit of my stomach.

"Get him up and dressed by seven," Frank had said the night before in a hurried telephone conversation. Even through the phone, I could hear his voice echoing across his empty loft. Marty would be at the stove making Japanese rice. He is a nice man, too good for Frank really, who teaches kindergarten at Timmy's school. At times like this I think about getting Frank's visitation rights revoked, know that I could, but Timmy would never forgive me.

"What for—you won't show."

Frank was silent. He is a large man with thick, curly hair and a soft face. He looks like he could be a philosophy professor, or an actor in a French movie.

"Where are you taking him?"

"Fishing."

I imagined Frank moving his hand across his forehead the way he did whenever we argued. His hands are large, and since he left they've also gotten softer, as though something inside him were finally giving way.

"Please . .."

"Why don't you ever take me seriously, Cynthia?"

"That's the problem, I do."

I had a crazy vision of father and son standing on the shores of the muddy Mississippi, casting into those famous waters, but I knew Frank would only rent some videos, and order out for pizza. (Once he did take him fishing—up to Lake Tahoe on a camping trip. He kept Timmy a day longer than he said he would, didn't even call. It is a weekend I try to forget).

"I'll get him up," I said, "when he wakes up."

But it is nine, now, and Frank is nowhere in sight. I put on television, letting Timmy doze on a pillow in front of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood: *Boys and girls, what shall we do today? Wait for our fathers who never come? Skin them alive?* At ten he wakes and begins the window vigil, the silent prayer to a pane of glass. I think of my own vigils over the years—for parents, friends, lovers. He holds tight to his desk blotter, now warm and a little wrinkled under his small sweaty arm.

"When will he come, mommy?"

"I'm not sure, honey. I can put on a movie?"

"No, I don't think so," he says, curling up in a corner of the sofa.

When I can't stand it anymore, I call my own mother.

"Not there yet?"

"No."

"I'm sure he'll come soon," she says illogically. Now that I hear her voice, I'm not sure if I've called for reassurance, or to argue against it. I can see her in her comfortable kitchen, the receiver cradled in the crook of her neck as she opens and closes cupboards. She talks to my sister this way too, as though she were leading an orchestra.

"How can you be sure?"

"Well, he's always come in the past, hasn't he?"

"Of course he hasn't!"

"No need to yell. I'm sure it will be fine, though, whatever happens."

"Why?"

"I have a feeling." She talks as though her words could alter fate. I try to argue that people can't predict the future, but the subject is closed.

"Well," I say, "if he doesn't come soon, I'm calling him."

She disagrees: this would anger Frank, make him feel pressured and change his mind. My position is that we would know for sure. Timmy could begin his tantrum early, and be done with it by one or two, in time to catch a film.

"Why are you so sarcastic? I know it will turn out all right."

I am preparing an early lunch of grilled cheese and chicken noodle soup, when Frank's car appears—an old beat-up Jeep we used to take on camping trips. Eleven in the morning is early for Frank by any standard, so my mother was right. There has been only one crying jag so far, and that one very brief. The only real damage is that I have had to call in sick for work, which is no real damage at all, since I now have the day off.

As soon as Timmy hears the Jeep he drops everything, and dashes madly out of the house, flying into Frank's arms: *Oh father, oh father, light of my life, protector of my soul.* Frank opens his arms to him, lets Timmy wrap his legs around his waist, nestle into him. (Timmy's cheek touches his jacket, and for a moment I can remember my own cheek on another jacket—the harsh brush of tweed above a solid, rising chest. How I loved to nestle there, to rest against my father's firm, white shirt, attached to him and safe). Out of Frank's

side window are two fishing rods—gleaming, metallic—but I don't see them until they drive away.

There is a theory of consciousness which says that the strongest events of our past are the ones not remembered, since the purpose of consciousness is to shield us from what would otherwise destroy us. In this theory, the consciousness is a pocket of cells blown out by previous stimuli, a kind of safety zone to buffer our true selves from the world. The worse the explosion, the less is remembered. This must be true, since I remember almost nothing of my father—what he looked like, how he acted, everything gone.

I think about this as I clean Timmy's room, sweep the dust from under his bed. I am glad for Timmy. Of course, I am angry, jealous, sad, but I am also glad for him. He will be back eventually—hungry, tired, happy to see me. Frank drinks his dinner, and only feeds him cold pizza and rice. I don't think about the fishing rods.

I'm about to leave the room when I notice a pair of Frank's old socks wedged into the space between Timmy's pillow and headboard. They are wound into a tight ball, dirty from nights of holding and sweat.

'What will Timmy remember of his childhood?' I wonder. 'What do any of us remember?' The night Frank left, Timmy cried uncontrollably. A friend and I had to hold him for hours—until the sound of Frank's car, of all the cars on the street, had dissolved into darkness.

I begin to dress, then realize it isn't necessary, and lie down in front of television. I feel almost relaxed. I can do anything today: go shopping, take a nap, play tennis, cook dinner, enjoying the luxury of a day alone. There are times alone now, when I actually feel contented, happy to be approaching middle age, still relatively sane. For my last birthday, someone gave me an old cinnabar ring, with the Chinese character for single happiness carved into the red lacquered wood. For the first few days I was very proud of the ring, showing it off to all the secretaries. Then a young lawyer who had lived in China explained the character to me. It was very unusual, he said. Usually you only saw the double happiness character, never the single alone. At first I was insulted, but then I thought, 'No, that's O.K. . . . that's appropriate, that's who I am.'

Because it is daylight savings, I am lulled into a sense of false security, and don't start worrying until way past nine. Anyway, the sky is pearly, light. There is blackness underneath, the kind that can stretch out into nothing, but I hold it at bay—drink gin, vacuum the living room, play rock-n-roll. I don't hear the telephone until the fifth ring, until my answering machine has come on. The ring slices into my gin haze, shrill, demanding.

"Yes?"

"This is Marty," the voice answers, pauses, opens up a gulf between us that you could fall into and be lost forever. "There's been an accident."

The word 'accident' tumbles over me, quick details floating above: they went fishing, out in a boat, rough seas, radioed for help. Then their signal was lost.

"I'll pick you up," he says. "We should go together."

What do people look like when they receive the news of a tragedy? What did my mother look like, for example, when the doctor told her of my father's cancer? Once, on a news report after an airline crash, they had coverage on the victims' families, and they showed a woman approaching an airline counter, with no idea of what had happened. She was an innocent, you could say, or a person moving from one universe into another on a mere word. When she was finally up to the counter, someone told her, and she fell flat on her back and screamed. And I thought to myself, sitting safe in my living room, 'Yes, that's what someone looks like when they receive the news of tragedy; that's what tragedy looks like.'

When we get to the beach the night ocean is cold. There is pounding surf. Marty looks smaller than I remember him, a man who comes barely to my shoulders, his face thin. On the drive over he clutched the steering wheel till his knuckles turned white, talking incessantly about nothing: what he would do for the holidays; his class at school. Now, walking across the cold sand to the lifeguard station, he clutches my hand, as though he's my little brother, and tells me about Frank—how deep down he's really a good person, the first man he has ever been able to trust.

The sky looks black, though, grainy, everything in pieces. As we draw closer, I can see searchlights from helicopters hovering over the surf, all kinds of commotion. I want to tell them to stop the commotion, everything will be fine, but it is out of my hands. A man in charge comes and explains that we must wait, nothing is definite, they could find them in five minutes. Since they've lost the radio signal, though, they could be anywhere: in the surf, out by the breakwater, no one knows. The black ocean is moving out into nothing. We stand there and stare at it, the sound of the waves getting very loud. After a while, I move away from Marty, from all of them. I take off my shoes, neatly setting them on the dry sand, and walk into the water. It feels soft and comforting, not cold at all. When it is up to my calves, I sit down in it, letting the wavelets lap around me.

My father, a nuclear physicist, studied the elemental forces. He wanted to understand the essence of everything—gravity, time; how things work. I think about that now, about how time is an ocean and we could be going forward or backward in it and no one would know. The water around me is thick, like ink.

"You shouldn't be sitting alone," Marty says. He comes and sits down next to me, taking my hand.

"You'll get wet."

"It doesn't matter."

"A small boat was spotted out at the breakwater," someone yells. "It could be the one. They're bringing it in."

"Are they in it?" a lifeguard asks.

"They're not sure."

Marty and I look into the ocean as though we might see something. "What do you think about when you look out at the water?" Marty asks.

"I don't know. I was thinking about my father."

"I think about everything—life, God. How we're all in this together." His hand flutters in front of his face. "I never told you this, but I feel terrible Frank is such a bad father. We fight about it a lot. I think it comes from his experience with his own father."

The water is cool, comforting. I slide back in it until I am lying down, only my face visible, and look up at the sky. I'm not religious, but I try to make a prayer. 'I'm not religious, God,' I whisper, 'but please don't let this be happening.' I see some stars, but they look very far away.

Marty lies down next to me.

"Frank says that your father was a scientist," he says. "He says that he helped make nuclear submarines."

"That's right. I don't remember him, though. I don't remember anything about him."

What I don't say is that I feel most of the time that I never had a father, that I have sprung from nothing. What he looked liked, how he acted, the time we spent together—everything gone.

"We should go in now," Marty says.

He is right; the tide is coming in. The water feels briny, harsh, like something is rolling at us from below. Still, I don't want to move.

"No—not yet."

He takes my hand, so firm and strong for such a small man. This thing is moving at us from below, a great blackness rolling at us like a cloud.

"What if it happens, Marty?"

I turn to look at him and see his tears rolling into the sand. He doesn't answer, but lets the words hang in front of us—*'What if it happens? What if it happens?'*— as though the words actually exist, and we are waiting for them to disappear. In back of us I can hear renewed commotion on the beach, yelling, like a house is being torn apart and people are throwing away old pieces of wood, hurling them into the air. I feel tiny. I am here on the sand, but I am also distant and far away. The darkness has arrived now and we are in it, a cloud from the ocean covering everything. It is a bucking bronco of emptiness, roiling and broiling, and all you can do is hold on.

"If it happens then we have to somehow live with it," he says, and I start crying, too.

In the Tarot deck, the star card represents hope—the last forces of the spirit struggling against the forces of night: a beautiful naked girl kneels

beside a pool, pouring life-giving liquid into still waters, and in the sky above her, is a single bright star.

When you get the card, it means the uniting of spirit with matter, the intercommunication between worlds. Frank and Timmy were found at midnight, spotted in the surf by a lifeguard and pulled onto the pier, but when I think of their rescue, I mostly think of a star—the way it can triangulate down to earth, find a boat and lead it to safety, without any doing by man.

This was how Timmy's boat was found, I am sure—not the work of the Coast Guard, or the young lifeguard who spotted them, but of a distant galaxy—silent as mathematics—that threw down a line to them and guided them home.

"So?" Marty says. We are standing on my front lawn. He says this as a statement, a resolution. There is nothing to add.

Inside, Frank is drinking from a can of beer, the refrigerator door open, the way I always got angry at him for doing when we were married. The back of him looks sad, his pants wet and falling down a little around his hips. He reaches for a piece of cake, hurriedly stuffing it in his mouth, before he hears me and quickly closes the door. In the harsh light of the kitchen, I can see that his cheeks are stained with tears. It occurs to me that with what has happened, I *could* get his visitation rights revoked, but I know now that I won't, that I will never think about this again. I suddenly remember the two of us when we met—both so young and afraid of love—and decide we did at least one thing right.

Without saying anything, I take Frank's hand and lead him to Timmy's room. All the lights are on and Timmy is curled up on his bed, still dressed, his forehead burning with sunburn. But he is all right. He sleeps with his mouth open, his breath traveling in and out in a regular, solid stream.

"Happy Father's Day," I whisper.

That night I have a dream. In the dream, I am walking through a large, subterranean aquarium, looking at fish. They are mostly dolphins, whales, porpoises—all the mammals that inhabit the sea—and they are swimming silently at the bottom of the aquarium, like submarines, in a silvery blue haze that shines out on all the people watching them. The porpoises seem to me especially fine, so large and sleek, the most trustworthy of all the sea creatures.

I stop in front of one of the porpoises and notice a ladder that runs the height of the aquarium. The next thing I know, I am inside the aquarium, swimming with the porpoise. He takes me on his back, and dives to the bottom of the pool. I want to tell him that I can't hold my breath as long as he can, that I will be dead by the time he resurfaces, but there's no time. When I get to the bottom of the pool, I find my father, lying in seaweed, but alive. We hug each other a long time, and he tells me that he loves me. I ask him why he

lives at the bottom of the sea, and he says he has to, to make submarines. Then he says he has to go. I hold onto him as long as I can and then I let him go.

The memory is a living thing—it, too, is in transit. But during its moment, all that is remembered joins and lives—the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead.

Eudora Welty