

JEFFREY HARRISON

My Father's Sweater

I'd almost forgotten about
the Norwegian sweater
I "borrowed" from my father

when I was in college
and wore so often
that its intricate design

of grayish, creamy checks
inside a navy grid
flecked with a lighter blue

became so much a part of me
that even he began
reluctantly to think of it

as mine. Later, I sewed
patches made from socks
inside the fraying neck.

I never gave it back,
but over several decades—
as the patches came loose,

one of the elbows gave out,
and a cuff unraveled—
began to wear it less.

What a shock to find that sweater
in an old footlocker
at the bottom of his closet

the week after my father died,
its pattern as familiar
as it was unexpected.

When had he stolen it back—
 and why, since now it looked
 too threadbare to be worn?

It felt like a game
 he had won posthumously,
 and I didn't mind

that the joke was on me,
 only that the game was over.
 Now it would always be

my father's sweater.
 What could I do but,
 trying not to rip it further,

take it from the trunk,
 slip my arms through the sleeves,
 and pull it over my head?

The Cruelty of Metaphor

It was not because he was frightening or vicious that we called him “the shark” but because he always had to keep moving, always be doing something, like mowing through swells of tall grass on his tractor or sinking the hooked teeth of his chainsaw into a locust. We used the nickname mostly with affection, and he was proud of it.

So it felt all the more cruel when he got sick and spent each day on the glassed-in porch, listless on the sofa as if washed up onto a fake reef in a giant aquarium, vacantly eying, on the other side of the glass, the cardinals, finches, and red-winged blackbirds that darted around the feeder like tropical fish.

Departure

What we thought was his last breath
wasn't. His last breath came
maybe thirty seconds later.
Then my brother and I waited
for the doctor on duty
to come in and make it official.

It shouldn't have surprised me
that the doctor was a woman,
but it did—and even more
that she was young, and beautiful,
her big, kind, dark brown eyes
not yet hardened by her profession.

She said she was going to give our father
his “final exam,” which made it sound
like a test in school.
She busied herself around him,
then filled out some forms,
recording the time of death.

It was confusing to be
distracted by her beauty
just when we were crossing into
the vast Country of Fatherlessness,
as if we were abandoning him
as soon as he left us.

She lingered a moment to ask
if we needed anything else,
holding us once more
with those eyes, so deep and alive.
I finally said no,
thinking, *Don't go, don't go.*