

# Stump

Olin Dodson

Dad's stump had a trapezoidal shape and  
drooped a third of the way to  
where his knee would have been.

It was mottled and raw  
pinkish-grey  
like a ten-pound ham in a deli case  
which had lost its refrigeration.

Scar-tissued, lifeless  
it spent most of the time hidden  
in a woolen cap  
inserted in an imitation leg.

I knew the word amputated  
before I learned there was no Santa  
and I knew Stump Sock  
before I understood  
foxhole  
or German Land Mine  
or WW II.

You walked in slow motion,  
your gait never varied,  
rocking, leaning on your left leg  
rotating your right hip to move  
your prosthetic leg forward  
then leaning on it.

And repeat.

We walked ahead of you and waited  
or shuffled at your side.

Two steps. Pause. Wait.

And repeat.

It was training in patience  
and waiting.

Everyone learned it at

The School of Dad.

You taught us even more  
with your habit of leaving the house last  
while we sat in the car,  
swinging our legs in the back seat,  
wondering when you'd walk out the door  
as if you were saying, you want slow,

I'll show you slow.  
Try getting your leg blown off  
then you'll know slow.  
We learned resentment  
and impatience at  
The School of Dad.

I never heard you yearn for the long ago,  
running track or swimming.  
The you of my imagination was forever one-legged,  
hopping to the bathroom  
every morning of your life  
rattling every window in the house  
since childhood  
since childhood buying a pair of shoes  
and leaving one tied onto  
the manufactured leg each night.

I wanted more of you  
but you were a book of blank pages  
no plot  
no backstory  
no reveal.

You never spoke of the event  
which changed us forever.  
You told no stories to save us.  
No accounts of buddies carrying you off the battlefield  
flying home in a medical transport plane  
filled with wounded and dying  
multiple surgeries on your stump  
tended to by Mom.  
No truth, only clues like  
the smiling young recruit in an army cap  
in a sepia-toned photo,  
a stranger in a picture frame.  
The slightly older man I recognized--  
the one in mug shots from Walter Reed, post-op  
wounded eyes, shaken, as if you awoke  
trapped in a police lineup.  
Someone had ripped those photos in half and  
buried them in a safety deposit box  
in the hall closet waiting for me  
to crack the lock's code I can still recall:  
0-0-0.

Who tore the photos?

Why save them?

At the Father-Son Little League game,

you pitched from the mound,

nearly falling down

after every throw.

Maybe you did fall

but my eyes were closed tight

my face bent under my cap.

I scooted back

deep into the dugout.

What a thing

What a thing to feel my face burning

a traitor to my dad

one more casualty of

a war I never fought.

**Olin Dodson** (MA, Sonoma State University; MA, San Francisco Theological Seminary) is an avid grandfather, retired psychotherapist, and author of the memoir, *Melissa's Gift* (2012). His writing has appeared in *The Ravens Perch*, *Trickster Literary Journal* and the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. In 2014, he served as Consultant and Contributing Author for the *State of New Mexico's Adolescent Treatment Manual*. He has studied with poets Linda Hasselstrom, Demetria Martinez, and Emerald GoingSnake. He currently works as a free-lance editor and creative writing mentor for high-and middle-school students. His first chapbook, *Under the Sun*, will be published in 2025.