

what my father taught me

by John Cole

just the way he cut up his breakfast eggs
fork & knife slashing strident Xs on his plate
(the exact way I cut my eggs today)
annoyed me to averted eyerolls as a boy
stifling sighs that would provoke his ire
seated vulnerably in my tidy whities.

a confounding amalgam of cruelty & kindness
of wisdom & ignorance
of fatal fixations
“a place for everything and everything in its place”
a fine friend to those whose bloodline he did not share
a profoundly flawed but faithful spouse
a failed father
a working alcoholic, as they say.

he could tape a cardinal's broken wing in such a way
it healed just fine
the bird motionless & trusting in his callused palms
then backhand his children in a fit of bourboned pique
or whip exposed buttocks with a leather belt
until they bled
wrathful as some old testament patriarch
for the mildest of boyhood crimes
his onyx masonic ring once chipping a tooth
the taste of blood, the sting of bitter tears
as bedtime lullabies.

I hated him so and loved him
as one loves what one cannot escape—
this highly imperfect patriarch.
of all the lessons my father taught me
the most important and indelible
is that you can destroy your life

all on your own

and die bitter and sad and abandoned.

There is not a day I do not think of this.