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Stepfather

by John Graves Morris

the fabled male equivalent
to the ogress in fairy tales,
a five-and-dime, bargain basement
parent, a left-handed compliment,

a third wheel, an extra seat
at the dinner table, practically,
at times, a virtual intruder
into the family circle, particularly

in times of crisis. The mother's
voice with her children is key,
and even if his is not excluded
he should maintain silence similar

to the ambulance-chaser attorney
who contributes a brick to the walk
of donors at his old law school,
appreciated not for his presence.

2.

the limbo for which the bar
moves only lower, not higher,
the square peg that enlarges
as the round hole shrinks.

His busy face ruddy with beer,
my stepfather on one occasion
admitted that he roared his way
into the dead center of our hearth

intent on righting smallest wrongs,
crashing over the biggest speed
bumps to true our alignment. Draining
his glass, he sighed that he couldn't

slow down, that his topographical
map of familial health, drawn by
faith and wishes, dazzled his eyes,
an oasis that only he could see.

3.
the pale negative of a photo
lost in the attic to time,
the punch line of the bad joke
that, the more one tries, jibes

less with the details rescued
from memory's ashes. I can see
my stepfather puttering around
the garden, joshing the neighbor boy

hired to mow the lawn after I moved.
My wife's children remain similarly polite,
respectful, deferential, distant,
teaching me that merely trying to blend

with their efforts, being the opposite
of my stepfather's hand over hand
pulling in his family's tug of war,
will not in mine keep me unmuddied.