*A Memory and reflection for Father’s Day 2019*

*(This poem originally appeared in* North Georgia Living)

 **Fire on Water**

by

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*My father was many things: son of an aristocratic family down on its luck because of the Depression, self-taught engineer and artist. He was courageous, reckless and fiercely ambitious. He was also handsome enough to entice Miss Burke County of 1938 to marry him. He was at times a careless father.*

His idols were the engineers

of dams and skyscrapers

and, engineer he was,

self-taught, he looked the part:

John Wayne in boots and army khaki pants,

tweed coat and fedora in cold weather,

shirt with flap pockets for his cigarettes.

Some days when disappointment covered him,

he drank too much and he took me fishing,

sometimes far off in the salt marshes and bays

where redfish congregated

over oyster beds at high tide.

When they were biting it was arm-numbing fun,

reeling them into the old rented wooden boat

with its hand-crank gas engine.

On a September Saturday outing

a storm came on fast across the marshes

and fishermen hurriedly retrieved their lines

 and stowed their rods to leave. We did too.

A hard pull on the rope failed to crank the engine.

Dad tossed his cigarette and checked the gas.

Empty. He grabbed the gas can

And, with an unsteady deliberateness,

He filled the tank, spilling enough to top off the bay.

The gas cap back on, he coiled and pulled the starter line.

the engine sprang to life without a hitch.

 Pleased with himself, he lit a cigarette in celebration

and tossed the match into the oily film that surrounded the boat.

Nearby fisherman stopped their escape preparations

and watched as four-foot flames leapt around our boat.

Standing at the stern seat, dad grabbed the tiller,

disdainful (or maybe mindful) of his audience,

 and with easy grace,

like Washington crossing the Delaware,

 he powered the leaky boat through the inferno

 while I sat paralyzed in the bow.

Not even Moses had parted a sea on fire.

Dad said little on the way home-

Except “Do not tell your mother.

It would only make her worry when we go fishing.”

Concealment, he thought, inoculated

Him against all future troubles.