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Entertaining Your Father in the Netherlands

The lies your father and I tell pile up,
and yet the little cruelties of the past

are not useful to anyone. He says
he is happy, and I let him. A friend

of my mother's implores me to admit
that getting involved with you was a mistake

and I say fiercely I would do it again.
Six years after you died I sit with him

on a bench by a canal in Utrecht, eating
Italian *broodjes*, with little to say. We watch

a barge clean the canal for spring, dragging
its claws across the bottom for bicycles tossed

from the bridge by drunken thieves that year. Pinching
frame after rusted frame, adding each

to the tangle of wheels and handlebars on deck.
I tell him that in Amsterdam two cars

go in each year, and that a Viking ship
was found, intact, at the bottom of the Vecht

after it sank one thousand years ago
on its way to trade on this very canal.

The ship's in the museum because it's rare;
the bicycles are junk because they aren't,

though they will be rare too if they remain
unfound long enough. Some students pump

their bikes past us with their strong legs—I'm sure
he thinks of you, his youngest son, dead

by twenty-five. I just knew you for five years,
when we were barely grownups, which is why

I'm out of stories your father wants to hear.
What's left are tales of meanness, mistakes, wild foolish

ways you might have outgrown if you lived.
The tales I start, changing their endings when

his smile falters. If you were here, I'd never tell.
But since you're not—speaking of you as pure

and wise is not like we've forgotten you
as much as worried your best face, wearing

it down like a good-luck piece. Listen,
I'm about to tell one that will shock you

back to life, gloriously imperfect and raw.
I've waited until now to bring it up.