

The two poems in this issue of FSH encourage us to reflect on families, what they leave us, what they withhold, what they model, and how they control us. In "What It Takes," Ted McMahon remembers a gift from his Navy family: proper manners, etiquette, "what it took to fit in." The title of the poem suggests the importance for this family of conforming to such societal norms. "What[ever] it takes" implies, perhaps, that no price is too high, no effort too great, to achieve.... what? The poem overflows with details of elegance and decorum, formal dancing, fancy dining. The tone is ambiguous, both admiring and vaguely angry. Two little boys quietly observe, behave, conform, "digest." Is this really, as they conclude, what life is all about? Is this sparkling yet banal legacy the totality of what the family bestows? We ponder this question, and our own legacies, received and given.

Howard Stein's poem touches on a similar theme: what mastery of life, that evanescent and, as we age, increasingly elusive goal, is all about. Stein describes an aging matriarch who "despite her years," has only recently become "old." Through parsimonious metaphor, we first see this woman as "a seasoned trail boss" herding her fractious family like "cattle across a stream." Then, through stroke, through Parkinson's, through life itself (the poem does not enlighten us), she is diminished, struggling to bring a spoonful of ice to her lips. Yet while the reader may feel sorrow, or pity, this matriarch remains "pleased" with herself and her accomplishment. It is, in the words of the poem's title, "A Small Triumph." Perhaps it is the (increasingly) small triumphs that "please," define, and even give our lives meaning.

In different ways, both of these poems cause us to ask questions: Do the wounds from our families perhaps contain buried treasure? Or only emptiness and more pain? Is surviving and accepting pain in itself a way of transcending suffering, limitation, and mortality? Or is it only another step toward the grave because we have no other way to walk? Good poems provide no answers, but the overlapping images of two little boys at the start of life carefully "spooning soup" and the old woman near the end of life sucking ice from another spoon linger in our minds, symbols of all that we lose and all that we gain in a lifetime.