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MY BROTHER WITH UNDERPANTS ON HIS HEAD

for Russell Grice Ruhlen, 1942-2011

When I heard they found you naked
with your underpants on your head,
brain discombobulated from the toxins
your liver could no longer wash from your blood

(Hepatitis C), I thought of the three of us kids
the few times we were left alone in that household
of three watchful adults, including Nana, how sometimes
we'd strip, put our undies on our heads and romp
through the house in unholy and ludicrous riot.

Our older brother, the sly instigator,
Lord of Misrule, egging us on and snickering;
myself high on self-horror and fear of getting caught;
and you, our little brother, you were the gleeful imp,
prancing and spinning and cavorting,
leaping from chair to sofa to chair
like an uncaged monkey; pushing me aside in line
to slide our bottoms down our father's regal
red leather armchair, letting out a whoop of delight.

Though I shielded my eyes from the mirrors
that in those days hung on every wall, opening
spaces in the dim rooms, multiplying the light,
multiplying ourselves; you did the hootchy-cootch,
a skinny-legged kid in time's looking glass.

You with your reckless independence, always,
you laughed and said I could write this poem
after I saw you myself one morning in your last December,
trying to cram your underpants on your head.

Neither you nor I could say what it meant to you
to don those plaid boxers; perhaps you thought
their legs sleeves, or perhaps they were divinely
inspired—a jester's cap with which you could mock
the powers of darkness awaiting you and us all.