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John Hart Ely: Fathers and Sons

ANTHONY V. ALFIERI*

I don't want to sound like your father, but here's what you should do. The Ely refrain. Heard afternoons over lunch. Heard across the hand-carved Stanford Dean Desk, his feet propped up, argyle socks and sneakers. *When are we going to see you and Ellen? Bring the kids!*

I don't want to sound like your father, but here's what you should do. The house on Poinciana, diving, and the sailboat. Learning to play Stride piano. *Some kid at the Music School teaching me.* Always music: jazz, guess the composer, can you hear me back there? Everywhere a collage of photographs and posters. The Totem Pole, the Mustang, and the pipe. *Don't stand on the piano!* In the hall outside, Art Kane's "Jazz Portrait Harlem 1958." *Damn pipe won't light.*

I don't want to sound like your father, but here's what you should do. Animal rights, Portland, Clark and animal rights, relenting to eat fish and chicken, for the protein. Ice cream, the rules of ice cream, after dinner only, once scoop or two? New Haven, Cambridge, Palo Alto, Washington, D.C., and back. *We had the same rules in our house.*

I don't want to sound like your father, but here's what you should do. John and his mother, West Hampton, the almost sub-four-minute mile in high school, the band and glee club at Princeton, Fulbright evenings at the London ballet. Famous law school classmates, Abe Fortas and *Gideon*, clerking for the Chief Justice, MP duty, hitching on to the Warren Commission. *Oswald didn't have the guts to shoot him in the face.*

I don't want to sound like your father, but here's what you should do. San Diego and Defenders, Inc. *I liked being a public defender.* New Haven, pizza and the Black Panthers. *I lived in an Italian neighborhood you know.* The Yale tenure wars and the disappointment in old

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friends. Dissent and the move to Cambridge. Harvard and the hiring deals. *Just sitting in my office and Stanford calls.* The art of fund-raising. *Now I'm going to give you a number.* Competing with Harvard and Yale. *Never called a faculty meeting.* The diaspora to come. *I don't want you guys to leave.* The books, chapter by chapter. *Write the book first, you'll never get back to it.*

I don't want to sound like your father, but here's what you should do. The Ely women: brilliant and handsome. Finding Gisela and late love. Sons Bob and John, leading the NCAA in goals, graduate Marxism and going abroad. John in Albania. Bob and MJ in the New York walk-up. *I don't know how they do it.* Bemused by cherished granddaughters Elizabeth and Katherine. Dear friends Lee, Denny, Henry, and Harold, so many, the Ely Fan Club. Generations of students, reaching around for the AALS directory on the bookshelf. *I think I may have taught him.*

I don't want to sound like your father, but here's what you should do. The summer my father died John gave me Alan Dugan's *Poems Seven*, a birthday gift. He wrote: *I won't tell if you won't.* We didn't talk about my father's six months of dying. His decision, not mine. *How old is he? I'll take that, ten years.* We pretended. I forgave him. He was right. Watching his own dying was enough. The two Johns: father and mentoring friend. Both gone. No *come up and visit!* No *what's going on?* Thanks for the moment. "Thanks for the moment before dreams."¹

1. *On Being Easy in the Ritual of Separation*, in Alan Dugan, *Poems Seven: New and Complete Poetry* 216 (2001).