

## “Portraits by the Piano, 1961”

by Linda Kennedy

Two photos in a leather travel frame at my grandparents' home.  
Both men in leather jackets, leather caps with sheepskin  
lining, same but different. I'm three or four and transfixed

by their handsomeness. I have to ask. Brothers.  
They fought in WWII, one an infantryman, the other  
a pilot. Heroes, my father, the youngest son, and

his oldest brother, Harold, the one, I'd learn: who taught Dad  
to box in the backyard, found him sleepwalking on the roof,  
rescued him, promised this brother a car

as long as a Remington block when he returned  
from the war, the one for whom people drove from  
another state—old classmates, teammates from Kannapolis,

from Duke—in buses to attend his reinternment at Arlington  
Cemetery after he was exhumed in Austria and flown  
home with four of his B-24 bomber crew, “his boys”

he called them, all identified only by dog tags six years  
after they were shot down, the one my mother saw  
at the foot of the bed, white shirt sleeves rolled up,

an arm across his chest supporting the other, holding  
his pipe to his mouth, staring at his youngest brother asleep,  
Harold's face full of sorrow, the mythical one,

not the middle brother I would know, who dropped rocks  
in bags of cotton before weighing, spent his Sunday tithes  
on candy, tried stabbing his youngest brother for wearing

his leather jacket, who with the encouragement of his wife,  
faked schizophrenia to get out of the army in 1943,  
who never lifted a hand to stop her

from drinking herself to death, and, smacking his lips,  
took her money, who laughed because his government  
pension paid for his house,

who ground his heel on the dash of my parents' new Chrysler,  
told my mother his brother didn't love her, only used her,  
drunk, stomped a skunk to death,

cussed his father, stole a gun from the wall above his head  
while he lay in bed, too weak, the one who raised a shovel against  
my oldest brother, the one I called a son-of-a-bitch to his face, the one

who meant to ruin my father and did split the family business and the family  
for his imagined due, who haunts us still through his sons, the one who  
fed on Osage Orange thorns, poisoned wells, and cursed life

above and below the ground, ground my father—the sniper who  
held a grenade ready to face enemy tanks—never had the guts to cross.