

Work Clothes

For forty years my father wore
the same, functional clothes to work,
a white, short-sleeve, button-down shirt
and khaki pants—a uniform
allowing him, although he owned
the packing plant, to move among
his employees like one of them—
his foremen, mostly hardscrabble
Southerners with heavy toolbelts
and steel-toed boots, and the poor Blacks
and Cubans under them, often
in bright yellow waders. He knew
their eighty names, and families;
many stayed with him for decades.

When the cannery finally
failed, equipment sold at auction—
the last small local plant to close—
he was 72, with no
intent or desire to retire.

But someone in the school system
looked the other way, offered him
(once the boss, now an applicant)
a new job, at a middle school
five days a week with the title
Occupational Specialist
(a fancy term for job counselor).
And now, really for the first time
he dressed like an executive:

and my mother relished the chance
to buy him smart new suits and ties
and each morning she'd see him off
impeccably turned out, looking
every inch the professional,
as if he might hire his students
before teaching them anything.
The neighborhood was dangerous,
and some would never see high school,
would be gone from those halls the day
they turned 16 or long before.
But others would try and he worked
to learn the talents that could best
equip them, diploma or not.

And he seemed to know where clothes fit
in holding someone's attention,
in earning respect and speaking
to a pride in appearances.
He was well-tailored for those kids
who might wear the same shirts and shorts
for weeks and shoes with holes but dream
of something more someday, more than
the one good suit or dress they owned
reserved for church and funerals.
When the last bell rang he would hang
his jacket in the back seat, wave
to the kids leaving, not loosen
his tie till he drove out of sight.