The Better of Him
By Jane Hillberry

A team of wasps moves in, not to be waved away
from my breezy lunch on the patio. They like cantaloupe,
but dig into the turkey, tugging off shreds to carry away.
Let them have it— I push the plate aside so I can read.
I am looking for poems of praise and find them
in my father's copy of George Herbert. The check marks
in the Table of Contents tell me it was his book
even before I see his elegant hand inside the cover,
delicate as a girl's, his name in blue fountain pen.
Herbert says the harbingers have come, marking his head
with white. They steal his sparkling notions.
And yet the poet declares, *Thou art still my God*. My father
repeats himself. Exercise class is Monday and Wednesday.
The teacher's name is Pat. He's happy, so who can argue?
Last visit, sorting his drafts in the laden file drawer,
his essays on Whitehead, I grieved for the man he isn't any more.
But when I cried, my sister said, "I like him better now."
Together they watch *The Call of the Wild Man,* leaning back
on her couch and laughing while Turtleman wrestles
a raccoon. He drinks wine freely, relishes the food
my sister sets before him: chicken with lime, potatoes hot
in the grease, cinnamon cake, ice cream. Our ascetic, our man
of no desires! His appetite has appeared, like a child
who played hide-and-seek eight decades ago, and no one
came looking, until now. I studied him for years,
tried to fashion myself after him, but I see now
I did not know him. In the hospital after surgery,
loosening the neck of his hospital gown, I found
his body is not slight, as I've always perceived—
he's not mere thought, not an idea arising,
but a man, with shoulders wide as anyone's. Today,
the wasps still pull at the meat, unweaving the threads
of the dead bird's flesh. They will do it indefinitely.
My praise today is for wasps, with whom I find
I can equably exist, and for fathers, for the intelligence
that once read each poem in Herbert's book
and inscribed checks by the finest, for the body
in the hospital and the father on the couch, helping himself
to popcorn, letting his large, startled laugh escape
when the raccoon swings around to bite the man, getting
the better of him.

(Appeared in Baltimore Review, April 2026)