The “sandwich generation” has become a term for people that are living in between the needs of their children and the needs of their aging parents. Some of us are watching our children get their drivers’ licenses while ensuring that one of our parents never drives again. Some of us are open-faced sandwiches, only attending to our parents while also supporting many friends and family members with little ones. Some of us have a parent that becomes unexpectedly ill and declines swiftly, others of us have a parent that leaves this world quietly over many years. Some of us are placed beside their parents as one of them becomes ill and the other launches into care-giving, forgetting that they need care themselves. This is a generation that lives in between a lot of needs, surely, and also a generation that is required to love generously.

I am a member of the sandwich generation and I walk alongside this group of beautiful and bewildered children of God in my ministry. I see parents who expected the ongoing support of grandparents feel robbed of so much when their mother or father take a turn in health. I see adult children trying to make sense of their own grief after losing a parent while attending to their children who are struggling with the biggest questions of life and death after encountering their first loss. This poetry collection is intended to speak to the people in the middle of this time in their lives. It is meant to speak to the experience of losing a parent and being a parent. When we step back and look at our parents from the perspective of our own adulthood, we see new things about these people that have shaped us. When we step back and look at our own experiences of parenting after our children have grown up, we learn new things about the kind of love that we offered at the time and perhaps what we can continue to offer now. The relationships with parents and children are some of our most formative and intimate expressions of love. The relationships, when delightful and whole, can help us call God a Father or a Mother with little to no hesitation. And when these relationships are painful, they forever shape how we see ourselves as children of God.

This kind of love is foundational and deserves to be explored through beautiful language just like these poets offer.

The collection begins with where I began, turned inside out one day in preaching class my first year of seminary. Dr. Carter Florence presented us with “Unsung” by Kei Miller, a poem that offers recognition to the kind of love a devoted partner gives to another at the end of a shared journey as well as the kind of unconditional love that a parent gives to a child, when at its best, is free of shame. In between, are poems that shed light on different parts of our experiences as children, as parents, as people who lose other people, and look back with a new perspective. We wonder about the things we should have said or the gratitude that we should have offered. We see the fullness of love in the ordinariness of the everyday. We also learn new things about ourselves and how we show up to the generation we parent, both literally and figuratively, trying our best to hold onto what is good and find our own way as parents, as adults, and as God’s messy people. I close this collection with “Loneliness” by Mary Oliver as a reminder to all, especially those who might have a more complicated relationship with familial love, that Creation herself offers us mothering. This poem also reminds those of us that are lonely without our mothers that these starting places of love are reflected back to us in all of God’s beauty.

I chose these poems to try and reflect the prismatic experiences of the sandwich generation, complete with mourning, celebration, humor, epiphany, and reverence. I have also learned that while there are some shared experiences of this time of life, there are some things that we must honor as uniquely ours. We are on this journey together and poets give voice to the twists and turns along the way. My prayer is that this collection offers those in the midst of intergenerational living and loss a glimpse of themselves, of the fullness of their own love, and of the possibilities for healing that come through seeing and being seen. Every family is their own poem.

Unsung by Kei Miller (b. 1978)

There should be a song for the man who does not sing
himself – who has lifted a woman from her bed to a wheelchair
each morning, and from a wheelchair to her bed each night;
a song for the man recognized by all the pharmacists, because
each day he has joined a line, inched forward with a prescription
for his ailing wife; there should be a song for this man
who has not sung himself; he is father to an unmarried son
and will one day witness the end of his name; still he has refused
to pass down shame to his boy. There should be a song
for the man whose life has not been the stuff of ballads
but has lived each day in incredible and untrumpeted ways.
There should be a song for my father.

Ending the Estrangement by Ross Gay (b. 1974)

from my mother's sadness, which was,
to me, unbearable, until,
it felt to me
not like what I thought it felt like
to her, and so felt inside myself—like death,
like dying, which I would almost
have rather done, though adding to her sadness
would rather die than do—
but, by sitting still, like what, in fact, it was—
a form of gratitude
which when last it came
drifted like a meadow lit by torches
of cardinal flower, one of whose crimson blooms,
when a hummingbird hovered nearby,
I slipped into my mouth
thereby coaxing the bird
to scrawl on my tongue
its heart's frenzy, its fleet
nectar-questing song,

with whom, with you, dear mother,
I now sing along.

Smell is the Last Memory to Go by Fatimah Asghar

on my block, a gate
on my block, a tree smelling

of citrus & jasmine that knocks
me back into the arms of my dead

mother. i ask Ross *how can a tree*
be both jasmine & orange, on my block

my neighbors put up gates & stare
don't like to share, on my block

a tree I can't see, but can smell
a tree that can't be both but is

on my block, my mother's skirt twirls
& all i smell is her ghost, perfume

on my block, a fallen orange
smashed into sidewalk

its blood pulped on asphalt on my
block, Jordan hands me a jasmine

by the time i get home
all its petals are gone

Those Winter Sundays by Robert Hayden (1913-1980)

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Thanking My Mother for Piano Lessons by Diane Wakoski (b. 1937)

The relief of putting your fingers on the keyboard,
as if you were walking on the beach
and found a diamond
as big as a shoe;

as if
you had just built a wooden table
and the smell of sawdust was in the air,
your hands dry and woody;

as if
you had eluded
the man in the dark hat who had been following you
all week;

the relief
of putting your fingers on the keyboard,
playing the chords of
Beethoven,
Bach,
Chopin
    in an afternoon when I had no one to talk to,
    when the magazine advertisement forms of soft sweaters
    and clean shining Republican middle-class hair
    walked into carpeted houses
    and left me alone
    with bare floors and a few books

I want to thank my mother
for working every day
in a drab office
in garages and water companies
cutting the cream out of her coffee at 40
to lose weight, her heavy body
writing its delicate bookkeeper's ledgers
alone, with no man to look at her face,
her body, her prematurely white hair
in love
    I want to thank
my mother for working and always paying for
my piano lessons
before she paid the Bank of America loan
or bought the groceries
or had our old rattling Ford repaired.

I was a quiet child,
afraid of walking into a store alone,
afraid of the water,
the sun,
the dirty weeds in back yards,

afraid of my mother's bad breath,
and afraid of my father's occasional visits home,
knowing he would leave again;
afraid of not having any money,
afraid of my clumsy body,
that I knew
        no one would ever love

But I played my way
on the old upright piano
obtained for $10,
played my way through fear,
through ugliness,
through growing up in a world of dime-store purchases,
and a desire to love
a loveless world.

I played my way through an ugly face
and lonely afternoons, days, evenings, nights,
mornings even, empty
as a rusty coffee can,
played my way through the rustles of spring
and wanted everything around me to shimmer like the narrow tide
on a flat beach at sunset in Southern California,
I played my way through
an empty father's hat in my mother's closet
and a bed she slept on only one side of,
never wrinkling an inch of
the other side,
waiting,
waiting,

I played my way through honors in school,
the only place I could
talk
  the classroom,

or at my piano lessons, Mrs. Hillhouse's canary always
singing the most for my talents,
as if I had thrown some part of my body away upon entering
her house
and was now searching every ivory case
of the keyboard, slipping my fingers over black
ridges and around smooth rocks,
wondering where I had lost my bloody organs,
or my mouth which sometimes opened
like a California poppy,
wide and with contrasts
beautiful in sweeping fields,
entirely closed morning and night,

I played my way from age to age,
but they all seemed ageless
or perhaps always
old and lonely,
wanting only one thing, surrounded by the dusty bitter-smelling
leaves of orange trees,
wanting only to be touched by a man who loved me,
who would be there every night
to put his large strong hand over my shoulder,
whose hips I would wake up against in the morning,
whose mustaches might brush a face asleep,
dreaming of pianos that made the sound of Mozart
and Schubert without demanding
that life suck everything
out of you each day,
without demanding the emptiness
of a timid little life.

I want to thank my mother
for letting me wake her up sometimes at 6 in the morning
when I practiced my lessons
and for making sure I had a piano
to lay my school books down on, every afternoon.
I haven't touched the piano in 10 years,
perhaps in fear that what little love I've been able to
pick, like lint, out of the corners of pockets,
will get lost,
slide away,
into the terribly empty cavern of me
if I ever open it all the way up again.
Love is a man
with a mustache
gently holding me every night,
always being there when I need to touch him;
he could not know the painfully loud
music from the past that
his loving stops from pounding, banging,
battering through my brain,
which does its best to destroy the precarious gray matter when I
am alone;
he does not hear Mrs. Hillhouse's canary singing for me,
liking the sound of my lesson this week,
telling me,
confirming what my teacher says,
that I have a gift for the piano
few of her other pupils had.
When I touch the man
I love,
I want to thank my mother for giving me
piano lessons
all those years,
keeping the memory of Beethoven,
a deaf tortured man,
in mind;

of the beauty that can come
from even an ugly
past.

The Relics by Sharon Olds (b. 1942)

1. BRETT RETURNS MY MOTHER TO THE WILDERNESS

I slipped them into my friend's palm —
the tiny crucifix, and dove,
from off my mother's pendant watch —
and I asked her to walk them up through the brush
toward timberline, and find a place
to hurl them, for safekeeping. Now,
she writes, "I walked up the canyon at dusk,
warm, with a touch of fall blowing down the canyon,
came to an outcrop, above a steep
drop — far below, a seasonal
creek, green willows. I stood on a boulder
and held out my hand. I wished your mother all the
love in the world, and I sent the talismans
flying off the cliff. They were so small,
and the wind was blowing, so I never saw or
heard them land." My mother is where
I cannot find her, she is gone beyond
recall, she lies in her sterling shapes
light as the most weightless bone in the body, her
stirrup bone, which was ground up
and sown into the sea. I do not know
what a soul is, I think of it
as the smallest, the core, civil right. And she
is wild now with it, she touches and is
touched by no one knows — down, or
droppings of a common nighthawk,
root of bird's foot fern, antenna of
Hairstreak or Echo Azure, or stepped on by the

huge translucent Jerusalem cricket. There was
something deeply right about
the physical elements — atoms, and cells,
and marrow — of my mother's body,
when I was young, and now her delicate
insignias receive the direct
touch of the sun, and scatter it,
unseen, all over her home.

2. CROSS AND DOVE

I had not wanted them, and I hadn't known
what to do with them, the minuscule
symbols of my mother's religion,
I looked for a crack in the stone floor of the
cathedral but could not find one. Then I thought
of the wilderness near Desolation,
and asked my friend to carry them up
to a peak of granite, and let the wind take them. Since
then, it has been as if my mother's
spirit matter has been returned
into the great bank of matter,
as her marrow had been sifted down into
the ocean. It doesn't matter, now, if I
ever wanted to disassemble
my mother. The sixteenth-of-an-inch-
across cross, and the silver line drawing
of a dove are cached, somewhere, that is nowhere
to be found. Now I think of the nature of metal, and how
long the soul-dolls of her trust will last in their
spider-egg-sac of roots, needles,
quartz, feathers, dust, snow, shed
claw. Her belief she would have an eternal
life was absolute, I think.
It would not be good to think of my mother
without her God — like a hermit howling in the

moonscape of a desert. Once, when she was old — like an
exquisite child playing a crone
in the school play — we talked about heaven.
She wasn't sure exactly how, but she
knew her father would be there, and her elder
brother, and her second husband —
maybe it was a heaven for four,
the three men and her. It was so
easy to make my mother happy
in her last years, to tell her that I
could just see her, as a kitten, in God's
lap, being petted. Her eyes sparkled with more
beams than any other eyes I have seen.
I have sent the tokens of her everlasting being
into the high altitude.
They will shine long after I can sing her — sing what I
perceived through the distorted prisms of my vision.
I don't know if I saw my mother
or did not see her. Day and night,
her charms will gleam in the brush or stream, will
reflect the mountain light in little
pieces of unreadable language.

A Practical Mom by Amy Uyematsu (1947-2023)

can go to Bible study every Sunday
and swear she's still not convinced,
but she likes to be around people who are.
We have the same conversation
every few years—I'll ask her if she stops
to admire the perfect leaves
of the Japanese maple
she waters in her backyard,
or tell her how I can gaze for hours
at a desert sky and know this
as divine. Nature, she says,

doesn't hold her interest. Not nearly
as much as the greens, pinks, and grays
of a Diebenkorn abstract, or the antique
Tiffany lamp she finds in San Francisco.
She spends hours with her vegetables,
tasting the tomatoes she's picked that morning
or checking to see which radishes are big enough to pull.
Lately everything she touches bears fruit,
from new-green string beans to winning
golf strokes, glamorous hats she designs and sews,
soaring stocks with their multiplying shares.
These are the things she can count in her hands,
the tangibles to feed and pass on to daughters
and grandchildren who can't keep up with all
the risky numbers she depends on, the blood-sugar counts
and daily insulin injections, the monthly tests
of precancerous cells in her liver and lungs.
She's a mathematical wonder with so many calculations
kept alive in her head, adding and subtracting
when everyone else is asleep.

Parents by William Meredith (1919-2007)

What it must be like to be an angel
or a squirrel, we can imagine sooner.

The last time we go to bed good,
they are there, lying about darkness.

They dandle us once too often,
these friends who become our enemies.

Suddenly one day, their juniors
are as old as we yearn to be.

They get wrinkles where it is better
smooth, odd coughs, and smells.

It is grotesque how they go on
loving us, we go on loving them

The effrontery, barely imaginable,
of having caused us. And of how.

Their lives: surely
we can do better than that.

This goes on for a long time. Everything
they do is wrong, and the worst thing,

they all do it, is to die,
taking with them the last explanation,

how we came out of the wet sea
or wherever they got us from,

taking the last link
of that chain with them.

Father, mother, we cry, wrinkling,
to our uncomprehending children and grandchildren.

The Lanyard by Billy Collins (b. 1941)

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly—
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

Maybe my most important identity is being a son
by Raymond Antrobus

my mother
asking how
to open a tab
on her laptop,
to email a photo,
calling to ask—
can you change
the lightbulb
at the top of the stairs?
my mother
spending hours
helping me find
a doctor's form,
a hearing aid battery,
anything
misplaced, my mother
who keeps leaving
her keys in the doors

or on the walls,
who keeps saying
I might have to change
the locks, mother
of self-sufficiency,
of beads and trolleys,
of handlebars,
short-tempered
spiteful mother,
mother of resistance,
licorice and seaweed
on the table,
lonely mother,
mother needs-no-man,
mother deserves my cooking,
deserves a long sleep,
a cuppa tea, a garden
of lavender mothers,
all her heads up,
mother's tooth
falls out, mother
dyes her hair,
don't say graying
say sea salt
and cream, remedy,
immortal mother.

What I Carried by Maggie Smith (b. 1977)

I carried my fear of the world
to my children, but they refused it.

I carried my fear of the world
on my chest, where I once carried
my children, where some nights it slept
as newborns sleep, where it purred

but mostly growled, where it licked
sweat from my clavicles.

I carried my fear of the world
and apprenticed myself to the fear.

I carried my fear of the world
and it became my teacher.
I carried it, and it repaid me
by teaching me how to carry it.

I carried my fear of the world
the way an animal carries a kill in its jaws
but in reverse: I was the kill, the gift.
Whose feet would I be left at?

I carried my fear of the world
as if it could protect me from the world.

I carried my fear of the world
and for my children modeled marveling
at its beauty but keeping my hands still—
keeping my eyes on its mouth, its teeth.

I carried my fear of the world.
I stroked it or I did not dare to stroke it.

I carried my fear of the world
and it became my teacher.
It taught me how to keep quiet and still

I carried my fear of the world
and my love for the world.
I carried my terrible awe.

I carried my fear of the world
without knowing how to set it down.

I carried my fear of the world
and let it nuzzle close to me,
and when it nipped, when it bit
down hard to taste me, part of me
shined: I had been right.

I carried my fear of the world
and it taught me I had been right.
I carried it and loved it
for making me right.

I carried my fear of the world
and it taught me how to carry it.

I carried my fear of the world
to my children and laid it down
at their feet, a kill, a gift.
Or I was laid at their feet.

Dressing My Daughters by Mark Jarman (b. 1952)

One girl a full head taller
Than the other—into their Sunday dresses.
First, the slip, hardly a piece of fabric,
Softly stitched and printed with a bud.
I'm not their mother, and tangle, then untangle
The whole cloth—on backwards, have to grab it
Round their necks. But they know how to pull
Arms in, a reflex of being dressed,
And also, a child's faith. The mass of stuff
That makes the Sunday frocks collapses
In my hands and finds its shape, only because
They understand the drape of it—

These skinny keys to intricate locks.
The buttons are a problem
For a surgeon. How would she connect
These bony valves and stubborn eyelets?
The filmy dress revolves in my blind fingers.
The slots work one by one.
And when they're put together,
Not like puppets or those doll-saints
That bring tears to true believers,
But living children, somebody's real daughters,
They do become more real.
They say, "Stop it!" and "Give it back!"
And "I don't want to!" They'll kiss
A doll's hard features, whispering,
"I'm sorry." I know just why my mother
Used to worry. Your clothes don't keep
You close—it's nakedness.
Clad in my boots and holster,
I would roam with my six-gun buddies.
We dealt fake death to one another,
Fell and rolled in filth and rose,
Grimy with wounds, then headed home.
But Sunday ... what was that tired explanation
Given for wearing clothes that
Scratched and shone and weighed like a slow hour?
That we should shine—in gratitude.
So, I give that explanation, undressing them,
And wait for the result.
After a day like Sunday, such a long one,
When they lie down, half-dead,
To be undone, they won't help me.
They cry, "It's not my fault."

The Hospital Window by James Dickey (b. 1923 in ATLANTA! - 1997)

I have just come down from my father.
Higher and higher he lies
Above me in a blue light
Shed by a tinted window.
I drop through six white floors
And then step out onto pavement.

Still feeling my father ascend,
I start to cross the firm street,
My shoulder blades shining with all
The glass the huge building can raise.
Now I must turn round and face it,
And know his one pane from the others.

Each window possesses the sun
As though it burned there on a wick.
I wave, like a man catching fire.
All the deep-dyed windowpanes flash,
And, behind them, all the white rooms
They turn to the color of Heaven.

Ceremoniously, gravely, and weakly,
Dozens of pale hands are waving
Back, from inside their flames.
Yet one pure pane among these
Is the bright, erased blankness of nothing.
I know that my father is there,

In the shape of his death still living.
The traffic increases around me
Like a madness called down on my head.
The horns blast at me like shotguns,
And drivers lean out, driven crazy—
But now my propped-up father

Lifts his arm out of stillness at last.
The light from the window strikes me
And I turn as blue as a soul,
As the moment when I was born.
I am not afraid for my father—
Look! He is grinning; he is not

Afraid for my life, either,
As the wild engines stand at my knees
Shredding their gears and roaring,
And I hold each car in its place
For miles, inciting its horn
To blow down the walls of the world

That the dying may float without fear
In the bold blue gaze of my father.
Slowly I move to the sidewalk
With my pin-tingling hand half dead
At the end of my bloodless arm.
I carry it off in amazement,

High, still higher, still waving,
My recognized face fully mortal,
Yet not; not at all, in the pale,
Drained, otherworldly, stricken,
Created hue of stained glass.
I have just come down from my father.

Landscape, Dense with Trees by Ellen Bryant Voigt (b. 1943)

When you move away, you see how much depends
on the pace of the days—how much
depended on the haze we waded through
each summer, visible heat, wavy and discursive
as the lazy track of the snake in the dusty road;
and on the habit in town of porches thatched in vines,
and in the country long dense promenades, the way
we sacrificed the yards to shade.
It was partly the heat that made my father
plant so many trees—two maples marking the site
for the house, two elms on either side when it was done;
mimosa by the fence, and as it failed, fast-growing chestnuts,
loblolly pines; and dogwood, redbud, ornamental crab.
On the farm, everything else he grew
something could eat, but this
would be a permanent mark of his industry,
a glade established in the open field. Or so it seemed.
Looking back at the empty house from across the hill,
I see how well the house is camouflaged, see how
that porous fence of saplings, their later
scrim of foliage, thickened around it,
and still he chinked and mortared, planting more.
Last summer, although he'd lost all tolerance for heat,
he backed the truck in at the family grave
and stood in the truckbed all afternoon, pruning
the landmark oak, repairing recent damage by a wind;
then he came home and hung a swing
in one of the horse-chestnuts for my visit.
The heat was a hand at his throat,
a fist to his weak heart. But it made a triumph
of the cooler air inside, in the bedroom,
in the maple bedstead where he slept,
in the brick house nearly swamped by leaves.

Loneliness by Mary Oliver (1935 - 2019)

I too have known loneliness.
I too have known what it is to feel
misunderstood,
rejected, and suddenly
not at all beautiful.
Oh, mother earth,
your comfort is great, your arms never withhold.
It has saved my life to know this.
Your rivers flowing, your roses opening in the morning.
Oh, motions of tenderness!