

Sestina on Limb-Lengthening Surgery

John's father was a famous novelist,
his mom a musical sensation. In short,
John was born with two silver spoons in mouth.
A bright boy, he sailed through Harvard, then
demonstrated
valor in the Horn of Africa. A great
career in politics awaited; the only
obstacle was John's stature: he was only
five-foot-two, puny as a sapling that lists
whichever way the wind blows. For a great
price, John secured the services of a short-
spoken but skilled cosmetic surgeon, who operated
on John's bones to make him taller, so his mouth
could speechify from a loftier place. The mouth
of conventional wisdom says that only
females are vain, preening in front of crenellated
mirror frames, making lengthy shopping lists
of perfumes, lipsticks, skirts, and shorts;
but masculine vanity is no less great.

My friend Millie, whose voice is apt to grate,
but who has pretty eyes and a sweet mouth,
helped me see why this is the long-and-short
of the matter. She tells me that she only
dates boys who are at least five-foot-ten, lest
their offspring's height be too modest, too understated.

Where prejudices of this kind are indurated,
it's no surprise that male vanity is great.
The man I date, the man who tops the list
of men in my life, with his honest mouth
says that his brothers tower over him only
because he is a twin: he has been short

ever since he, together with his short
sister, inhabited their mom's trabeculated
womb. He regrets his shortness, saying, "If only
I were taller . . .," while the fire in the grate
backlights the beauty of his face; his mouth,
nose, eyes all vie for which is loveliest

to me. My stammering mouth replies at last,
"My patient, John, could have been great if only
a complicated surgery hadn't cut his life short."

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