How do you hug a man who fears his skin? A man who, more than most, throughout his life Stayed deep in need of reassuring touch To let him know that that he was was good...

... And yet, how could he otherwise have lived, This man, of whom a father might feel pride In his achievements, might feel gratitude For youthful tries at helping out at home, Might feel rewarded seeing him grow up A model of his precepts, fit to thrive Among the tumults of the changing times Neither had known, nor could anticipate? This man whose mother never had to think that “Junior didn’t care,” or “wonder where Her wandering boy” might be, for years on end? Not birthday calls and cards, but monthly visits, Year after year, third Sunday every month, No breaks or gaps? She knew that she was honored, No need to wheedle for a Hallmark card On Mother’s Day, or any other “Day,” From Junior, or indeed from little brother, Who also strove to please (but then, he pleased More easily from being youngest-born).

Harry Junior (how he wished he bore a name That was his own, that let him off the task Of family redemption, set him free To fail or triumph on the field he chose To fight, instead of in the path in which His father stumbled, hesitated, turned, And cast aside his promise) could not help Sensing the never-uttered scorn; he saw The smiles fade quick, the lips grow tight and thin, As parents put the starting chores of day Behind, and went to work their separate ways.

Early he learned it was his special task To help his brother learn to do without A mama’s hugs—what kind of man, indeed,
Justin Kidd

Would need such demonstrations, or admit
He wanted them? Another boy, one less
Discerning, less alert to facial signs,
Less wary of past pain, might let himself
Call for a mother as he woke in fear
From nightmare; he knew better. Such a cry
Brought punishment, not solace. After dark
Came bedtime for the house, and only quiet
From boys could be allowed. That there were whispers
Behind the parents’ doors was no excuse;
Those whispers might conceal specific content,
Never the tension, never the growing grief
And fear to which the rhythm of the hairbrush
Stroking at least a hundred times through more
Than fifty inches of unbraided hair
Kept time uncanny. When the whispers stopped
And lights went off, and no sound reached the boys
But far-off squeaks of rocker-arms in motion…

…Both boys knew not to appeal to Mama
For anything their father might be missing.