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Adam Dorsheimer

The Dead Baby Tree

I took to sleeping in the nursery after Emily died. To this day, I'm still not quite sure why I started; I think I liked the feeling of closeness, the sense that if I could lay my head in just the right spot, right where hers once was, I might still hear her tiny heartbeat somewhere deep inside. Now, John didn't like that one bit, but he was subtle at first—as subtle as he could be, anyway. In those early days, when the sun went down, he'd come knocking at the door, asking if he could expect me in bed later. And he'd only betray the faintest disappointment when I'd say, "maybe tomorrow."

After a couple weeks of that, I found I could no longer leave the nursery at all. Slowly—so slowly I couldn't feel it happening—the room had become something larger than itself. A horrific, immovable prison had formed around me, and John's patience was wearing thin. His entreaties grew more bitter with each day I spent caged in our daughter's old room. It was all I could do to coil up in her crib and escape into an insomniac daze, desperately awaiting the day I'd be set free.

Then, one morning, a tree appeared outside the nursery window. I wondered at first if it was really there, so I called for John to come take a look. He said nothing, but his expression told me he saw exactly what I did: a great big oak tree, twisted and scarred and covered in moss—a tree that most certainly had not been there yesterday.

That night, I awoke to the sound of crying. My skin crawled. The voice was unmistakably hers. And yet, there was something beneath it, the sound of an unusual pain unlike anything I'd ever heard.

John burst in, pale-faced and silent, and headed straight to the window. I pulled myself out of the crib and followed.

It was a still night, no trace of wind in the muggy summer air, but the oak tree was moving all the same. With each dreadful bellow of Emily's voice, it shuddered and convulsed, and the fractured wood of its trunk opened and closed as though the screams were coming from inside.

Huddled around it in a semicircle that stretched nearly to the edge of the property, were our neighbors. Upon seeing movement in the nursery, they pointed at the window. They yelled for us to quiet down—they had work in the morning and our tree just wouldn't stop screaming. John went out to try and reason with them, and I returned to the crib, where I melted into a mass of bony abstraction and allowed the wailing to fade into restless nightmares.

Sometime later—and it must've been quite a bit later, for the sun was fixed in the sky—I became aware of some new, unfamiliar voices outside the window. Upon closer inspection, it seemed a handful of neighborhood children had taken to dancing around our garden. They ran around the tree, throwing their arms up and down, chanting in playful, sing-songy voices—dead baby tree, dead baby tree, please don't eat me, dead baby tree.

I watched them until John went out and chased them away. A cold sweat began to prickle at the back of my neck. I knew he was really angry now, and for all his loveliest qualities, he was known for the nastiness of his temper.

Once the last of the kids scampered away, he came into the nursery and folded his arms across his chest. His face was blank, but his body quivered with rage. “Are you ready to come out?”

When I attempted to answer, I realized I couldn’t speak anymore. Without my knowing, my voice had been taken, exiled outside of myself. I ran my fingers across my face. Once I was certain my lips hadn’t gone too, I shook my head and mouthed the word “no.”

He didn’t say anything else, but instead turned on his heels and stormed out of the room. I let out a long exhale and climbed into the crib, afflicted by a sudden bout of exhaustion. At dusk, there was a tapping on the window. I peeked out the corner of the curtain to find John standing in the garden. He gestured for me to pull the curtain aside, which I did. And it was then that I noticed all our neighbors gathered behind him, their faces colored sickly by the faint moonlight.

From beneath the windowsill, John produced an axe. He scrutinized the thing in his hands, allowing his eyes to run across every inch of it before holding it out for the crowd to do the same. They let out a blood-thirsty cheer in response. Seemingly satisfied with their reply, he buried the blade into the tree.

The trunk splintered and writhed, screaming as if Emily herself had been struck. A horrible pain ripped through my chest. And yet, confined as I was to my place in this room, to this body that could no longer speak or cry out, I could only watch as John swung the axe again and again, and listen as the night came alive with screams and cheers and the rhythmic thumping of steel on wood.

Alice Campbell Romano

Spiderwebs in the Back Yard, 5:00 a.m.

Vermillion bougainvillea drops a deep,
soft-misted swag down half the garden wall.
I've been away. Last night, I couldn't sleep.
It's barely light, and I'm outside—to call
on spiderwebs pearled in dew, to admire
the tension of spun gossamer, steel strings
racked against red bracts by diligent wives
I don't see. Swings upon purposeful swings,
they build webs to survive—and eat the mate.
I see a spider—she begins her snare,
dangles at the end of the first innate
filament, takes momentum from the air—
prepares to rise, to cast the next tense strand.
Does she know now how it can all unwind?

Alyssa Tilly

Inauthentic Bravery

Inhibitions lost in the spirits of the unspoken truth.
A coward gains the courage
he could never attain without his tonic.
When his liquid poison runs dry
he is forced to face the words
that were spilled at the hands of inauthentic bravery.
He does not possess the strength
to uphold his promises.

Amanda Thuy

House in My Head

there's a house that lives in my head,
inhabited by dreams tinged with dread.
its tomorrows always uncertain,
darkened rooms with half closed curtains.
lights flicker on and off for days,
as worry walks through dark hallways.
hope and glee there too reside,
but when worry is near, they two do hide.
dreams and worry rule over this home,
where tension brews havoc under dome.
worry oppresses, acts and words not uttered,
but 'tis dreams that keep the home a-flutter.
fight it must for light to shine more bright,
only then to quell this forever fight.

Ananya Anand

The Grounds of No Brethren

The sounds of long-departed bullets
Still drag their feet amongst these barren lands
Echoing years after they've claimed a million lives
On the holy Grounds of No Brethren

Often we find lost souls soaring high above us, mourning
Their days of peace and of silence that're long gone by
They speak of the eons that bore witness to these fields
Bearing flowers in bloom, and not those wilted on our wreaths.

Some of us get swayed by these lores, and wonder
"Could we ever go back to the way things once were?"
Only to be reminded before the stroke of every midnight hour
That we're cursed to stay forever as the Grounds of No Brethren

A land where we'd rather die with our nails dug deep
Into flesh of the women that we once called our mothers,
Than to perhaps even fathom the idea of freedom
Replacing the vengeance coursing through our blood

Each daylight, we arise drenched in despair
And our hearts beating akin to the drums of war
Fixing longing looks upon one another, wondering
The gateways of whose fate were to welcome their ruin today

Yet, before we crown another massacre as *"A sign of the times"*
Before another one of our children bids their last goodbye
Can we let these Grounds of No Brethren see just one sunrise
Where the only arms we hold are of those we love?

Annie Earnshaw

Phantom Brewing Company

When I think back to my death, the sensations feel fresh. Gravel grits against my cheek. Blood pools in my arteries and my last breath hisses out of my chest. My body crumbles in on itself like sheet metal. I can taste the iron and salt and gasoline smoke. Death is a shadow, following dutifully by my side.

The other inhabitants share this feeling. The woman in the billowing lace nightgown on the third floor twitches every now and then at the memory of her snapping neck and flailing limbs as she flung herself from the third-floor ledge. The Union soldier on the first-floor winces as the crack of opening beer cans, as if the Confederate who killed him has returned for a second shot at his throat. And when I hear the roar of a car speeding too fast down the thin cobblestone streets, I feel death in my phantom bones. I feel my body tumbling across the pavement outside.

They call our building The Grand. Formerly The Grand Charleston Hotel, built in 1806. Three stories and a basement. The original owner and his debutante wife keep to themselves in the second-floor bedroom-turned-half-storage-closet-half-bathroom. After the owner died in 1852, the owner's son chased sugarcane money down to the Caribbean and left the hotel for foreclosure.

Once the city of Charleston repossessed the property, the spacious building became a sick ward for kids dying of yellow fever, mostly the poor kids whose parents couldn't afford to send them to a lavish, sterile facility further inland. The yellow fever kids are hard to tell apart because they died so close to each other, sharing filth and sickness as they passed. The lady in lace and the Union soldier like the staircases. But most often, I see The Poet.

The first ghost tour of the day traipses through the first floor. They try to be quiet, so as not to wake the spirits that lurk in their midst, but their steps fall heavily on the aching floorboards.

"They take up so much space," I say to The Poet as we watch, sitting on the bar top. The air is suddenly thick and moist with their breath and sweat. One person looks in my direction, a girl about my age with a septum nose ring.

The Poet sighs noncommittally. I haven't asked him his name yet. I'm not sure names matter here, though the tourists call him The Artist.

"Ladies and gentleman, ghosts and ghouls," the tour guide bellows. They launch into a rehearsed monologue about the history of The Grand. I feel a collective shiver run through the room when they describe the Union soldier's bloody death.

"They always get this part wrong," The Poet says with a sly smile as the tour guide tells the story. "The second bullet hit him in the neck, not the chest. The yellow fever kids. They're on the second floor, not the third. That's why the guides think they're so hard to find."

I lift my focus to the ceiling and see a faint yellow aura oozing out between the cracks in the wood and around the nails that hold the materials in place.

He doesn't get a chance to finish before the lightbulbs go dark and a few of the tourists shriek. The Poet laughs under his breath and, I don't know how I know, but he has a beautiful, aching smile, even when he's smiling at someone else's expense. I find myself smiling, too.

The tour guide clicks on a flashlight under their chin, casting their features in bold highlights and deep shadows. "Are there any spirits in our midst tonight?" they ask ominously. The room falls oppressively silent as the group waits for a creaking floorboard, a scraping chair, a squeaking hinge.

"Should we do anything?" I ask, and a few of them shiver, including the girl who looked in my direction.

He looks at me, or what I assume he can see of me, and then stands. He walks over the air between the bar and the blackboard like a new floor rises under his feet. Then, his hand materializes into startling relief. For a moment, I could almost believe he is human. He rests his hand on the chalkboard and smears the beer names with his fingertips. After drawing an X in the chalk dust, he hops down on the floor and his feet fall like heavy boots.

Flashlights swing in our direction and discover The Poet's work. He smiles boyishly, then walks through the bar to lean against it next to me. "They like it when I do the X," he says.

The tourists crowd the bar, gazing at his handiwork. They press up the bar top, and we overlap them like highlighter over ink.

"My friends," the tour guide says as he examines the chalkboard. "The Artist is among us tonight."

Christopher Shields

Hopeless

Darkness, dread and despair await
After empty promises have lost their weight
The fraudulent have nothing more left to imitate
All of my hopes and dreams converted into a prisoner's fate.

Life shattered and spirit broken
With enough rage to defy gravity and motion
Can no longer hear or listen to any words spoken
Went to knock, but the devil's door was already open.

Expel me from the photographs and sentimental things,
The cock will still crow and the church bells will still
ring, The grass will still grow, and the birds will still sing,
Don't wait for me, I will not be returning in the Spring

Will the suffering ever expire?
How many men will it take to put out the next fire?
The warnings for apocalypse are abundant and dire
Will God save us or will Satan prove him to be a liar?

Claire Rubin

Unearned Grief

Almost fifty years later, I think of you
the one who wasn't
the one who couldn't
how can I grieve a child
whose life I chose to take
I think you were a girl
you would be forty-nine this month
the month of April where the earth
is reborn and crocuses flame yellow
in late spring snow
we would take your kids
to the beach, shrieking delight
as icy waves licked our toes
build fires and make s'mores
fingers sticky sweet
we would shop for clothes
almost the same size
(OK, me a little rounder)
laughing at a too tight skirt
a too revealing shirt
a ridiculous hat
then find the perfect shoes
and each buy a pair
we would share stories and recipes
the sweet and the sorrow
the almosts and the could have beens
my old eyes wet with memories
that I don't deserve

Colin Giroux
The Goodbyes

Fleshy, grotesque bodies surround me at all sides. I can't move, but there's hardly anywhere for me to go anyway. The walls that tightly press us all together are made of tin and, as I've tried, can't be penetrated, much unlike the heaps of hay and mud in our pen that some pigs will bury themselves into to sleep.

On most days, I don't even bother to get up; I just lie in place like some pink, swollen, misshapen blob. But today I owe it to the rest of the pigs to at least say goodbye. In a few hours, I'm to be slaughtered. I overheard the farmers talking a few days ago. Today, it'll be me, then tomorrow, it'll be Ginger, Peaches, and Blossom, and so on. By the end of the week, all of us will be dead. Surprisingly, I'm as content as someone on death row could be. In fact, I'd accepted the inevitability of my gruesome death months ago. I overheard the farmers talking—eavesdropping is, after all, how I've accumulated the majority of my knowledge (the daily announcements over the intercom system also helped). As a wee piglet especially, you can bet it was a horrifying revelation to learn that I was being raised and fattened for slaughter. For days after first learning the truth, I ran around the pen squealing my little lungs out, begging for someone to hear me, to save me. But the farmers ignored me, and the other pigs didn't react in the slightest. It isn't like the other pigs could've reacted anyway.

No one else in my litter is like me. I feel like I would've been able to see it in their eyes if they were also aware, but every time their bulging stare meets my own, I see only a blank, glassy nothing. I envy these other pigs and their ignorant existence. They just eat and sleep and that's it, while I'm stuck with these constant, every-firing thoughts.

I think it was the chemicals they injected us with that made me cognizant, sentient—whatever you want to call it. That's also probably why Hester has an extra tail, Cosmos and Juniper are conjoined, and all of us grew to be three times larger than we ever should've been. Looking around, I can't see why anybody would possibly want to eat *us*. I know what becomes of our bodies after our deaths, but I still can't believe it.

When I rise from my resting place around the middle of the pen, my stubby legs wobble. They can barely support the weight of my massive body. I take a few steps, pushing past and, at times, stepping on the bodies lying all around me. At one point, I accidentally crush Charlie's tail under my hoof, causing him to yelp and leap up into the air.

Sorry, I say. It comes out as a squeal, but he can't understand me anyway. He merely looks at me then crashes back to the floor, snoozing. Once I'm away from the cluster of sleeping pigs, I begin to make my rounds, squealing my goodbyes to any pig that's up. They all just blink to me stupidly in response. Still, it's nice to have this closure. I should be lucky, really; most never get the chance to say goodbye. I never got to say goodbye to my mother. My litter was her final one. A week after having us, she was slaughtered.

I check the time from the clock in its metal cage on the wall. I have an hour or so left before the farmers come for me. I pick up my pace, goodbye-ing my way through the pen.

Goodbye! Goodbye! *Goodbye!* I try to sound joyful because I don't want my final minutes of life to be sad ones. It's honestly more for the other pigs than my own wellbeing. I want to leave them with a happy image of myself, ending things on a positive note so to speak. I get how that's ironic—the other pigs probably don't have the capacity to tell if I'm happy or sad. At least, I believe *most* of the other pigs don't have the capacity.

I have a hunch. There's this one pig, okay? Last week, from across the troughs, I saw a flicker of something in her eyes. I still can't pinpoint exactly what it was, but I know for a fact that it was greater than the empty, glass nothing I see when I look in all the other pigs' eyes. For the first time, perhaps, in my entire existence, I had hope there was another like me. And hope is such a precious thing too. I haven't had the courage to go up to this pig in particular, fearing this hope will instantly be quashed. But now, in what I know are my final moments of life, I think: It's now or never. What do I have to lose?

I do want to make one thing clear first: This goes beyond just wanting to know whether this pig is cognizant or not. In this past week alone, my hope of her potential sentience has grown into something even greater and more pure... That means if our interaction doesn't go the way I pray it does, the fall's going to be even higher and hurt even more. But it's worth the risk. I know it is. *I know it is.*

Her name is Virginia. I find her sleeping in the very corner of the pen by herself. As I approach, her ear perks up and she lifts her head to me and sniffs.

My mouth goes dry. I can't find my voice. There's so much I know I want to say to her, but now, it's as if I've misplaced my jar of words. I imagine Virginia waiting for me to speak, but I simply stare at her, speechless.

Virginia's head drops back to the floor. Just as she's about to nod off once more, the words explode out of me. I tell Virginia how she graces my dreams. I tell her how I love the way her nose presses into her face when she snorts; the way the feed dribbles out of the side of her mouth when she eats; the way her body moves and twists, mesmerizing me as she rolls in the mud. Virginia, Virginia, Virginia. I wish we could be together. I wish I told you this sooner, but I was afraid—afraid that you won't feel the same way because you can't feel like that. But I'm not afraid anymore. Virginia, I've always loved you, and I'll keep loving you even when you and I are both gone. You'll be my final thought in this world, and my first thought in the next.

When I'm done speaking, my hooves are buzzing with adrenaline and my ears are flared pink (pinker than normal, that is). I stare at Virginia, waiting for a response, waiting to see if she can even *give* me a response. Please Virginia! Please be like me!

I keep waiting... and waiting. It's too painful for me to watch when her eyelids slide back shut, so I imagine Virginia sitting up and repeating back everything I said. In my head, she tells me she feels the same way, and I blink back tears.

Oh Virginia! I picture myself lying next to her and spending the final few minutes of my life, for the first time, happy.

But that fantasy quickly dematerializes. Fantasies rarely last that long after all. Reality returns to me once more, as if I've just exited out of a dark tunnel and have to be readjusted to

my surroundings. I see Virginia sleeping in the corner, oblivious to me. I've known all along that she doesn't have the capacity to understand me, but that doesn't make it hurt any less.

I slump on the floor at the opposite end of the pen and count down my final minutes alone until the farmers come to take me away. When they do, I feel a surge within me, a desire to plead, to beg to stay, to fight. I always imagined myself going willingly, but the truth is I don't want to die. *I don't want to die!* I become frantic as the farmers lasso a rope around my neck and begin to lead me away. I try to dig my hooves in and resist, but one of them smacks me from beyond with a long metal rod and I get shuffled out of the pen into a metal corridor.

I'm squealing, but not on my own accord. It's as if some bestial, instinctual cry is burning in my lungs. I'm going full animal, losing all the dignity of my sentience in an instance. I'm screaming and fighting and biting. Another smack from the metal rod shuts me up, and I reclaim back some of my awareness.

I need to show them. The thought rings in my head as we get closer and closer to my doom. I need to show them that I'm like *them*—and not like the other pigs. Not like Blossoms or Cherry or Charlie or... *Virginia*. No, I'm human. I suck in a shaky breath. *I'm human.*

I thrash my head in my noose to try and find the eyes of one of the farmers. If they could just see—see that there's more in my eyes than a glassy nothing, maybe they'll know too.

But the farmers are solemn. None of them look at me.

Dread sinks in, but I don't give up. I try to speak to them, but my words come out as squeals that the farmers can't decode.

I'm one of you! I try to say. *Please, I'm one of you!*

But almost as soon as I finish speaking (squealing), I immediately see the faults in my words. I'm *not* one of them. I'm not really a human—as if that wasn't evident from my four hooves, snout, tail, and obtuse pink form. If not a human—and if not a pig either—what am I?

We arrive at the slaughterhouse, where it finally dawns on me, leaving me with nothing left to mull over, nothing left to question or debate. It's an almost mocking thought—I'm meat.

David Desiderio

Origins

To some, she was an anthem sung by a thousand voices raised to epiphany. To others, she was a curse summoned from a thousand graves lost to time. To me, she was my wife and, in my dreams, I dreamed both one atop the other like the settled magma of two great cataclysms. This is the story of those dreams, one true the other a veneer to hide what lay beneath.

No age is dark to those inhabiting it, but their lived truth where in my sleep Chelsea sheltered deep in a tomb with the trembling survivors of the slaughter rained upon her people in a time before this time by a soulless machine scoring the sky in scythe-like precision. Taking courage, Chelsea stepped forward. Vibrant and fearless, with tangled black hair and penetrating green eyes, she refused surrender and urged all to keep hope alive for only as one could they vanquish so formidable an enemy. “Remember!” she exhorted. “This cave is the hallowed ground of our forebears. They will hear our pleas. They will not forsake us.”

So, I watched as she desperately scoured the remains for a portent, a talisman to infuse her with the power to defeat the evil terrorizing her people. The machines were thundering near, their disintegrating beams on the prowl. There was no place to run but deeper into the tomb. Was a blink of light caught her eye. A figment of smoke and ash rose from the bones. A large medallion hung from its neck. It drifted forward engulfing her. “I’ve been awaiting you.” Its voice crackled in her ears. Its fetid breath swelled her lungs. “This amulet is your only defense. Use it wisely and you will have the power to save your people. But beware its might for all blessings harbor evils hungering to be set free. If unleashed you will be bound to them for eternity, the progenitor of endless devastation.” Chelsea now commanded my dreamscape radiant in her triumph of a faith restored after a nether time of nightmare and irreconcilable despair. Behind her beatific image surged a thankful multitude celebrating the dawn of a new, hopeful age.

Then she was gone giving way to another strangely hesitant to present herself, whispering to abandon my pursuit. I was assaulted with flashing images lacerating my consciousness. These weren’t hopeful images craving to be seen but unbearable torments demanding to be acknowledged. And I felt the cut of each one as I gasped through noxious gas desperate for a last bit of air or felt my bones shatter from an exploding land mine or cried beneath the suffocating weight of rubble crushing my chest, or felt my skull burst from an assassin’s bullet, or lay bleeding in a heap after a suicide’s blast. So, so many. Brutal. Inescapable. I saw myself torn to pieces by a pack of rabid dogs. And as each bit of flesh ripped away that image grew clearer. It required my flesh to live; my pain to thrive. With the dogs gnawing at my heart, it was finally there to be seen. It was Chelsea! The medallion flashing around her neck, her black hair matted and filthy, her green eyes dancing with demented gloat, her bloody, cruel smile enthralled at the degradation she wreaked. Behind her sounded the haunted cries of the nameless multitudes in whose pain she took delight; whose pain sustained her; whose pain was never enough. And she was of this world, risen from the odious depths of the human soul no longer held in abeyance by

reason but aroused and rampaging, seeking ever new and insidious ways to succor her sadistic needs.

I awoke drenched in sweat, my heart pounding in my ears. “Only dreams,” I thought. Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling of evil and turned to Chelsea at my side. She lay sleeping peacefully, her breathing steady, her dreams serene. I thought back to my dreams, shuddering as I recalled them to life. I dared not share them with her.

Afraid to return to a fitful sleep, I hoped a brisk shower would settle my nerves. I turned as Chelsea entered the bathroom. It was the innocent Chelsea of the first dream flush from sleep, smiling demurely. “Finish your shave,” she cajoled. She put her arms around my waist and rested her chin on my shoulder. It’s when I turned back to the mirror her other image appeared. Glaring was the freed succubus of the second dream, her eyes gaping black chasms, her mouth dripping blood. “It would have been better if you’d let that second dream go, Vincent,” she scolded. “Now our child will never know his father.” Then all went dark. When next I woke, I was forsaken deep in the crypt of cries and figments with Chelsea’s fetid breath souring my nose, her crackling words ringing my ears. I then knew the truth of those dreams but like YOU are forever in a place where it will do no good.

Edward Ziegler

Heart Attack: An Old Man's Tears at Midnight

Ode to Robert Frost and Roads Not Taken

I knocked you down repeatedly,
I spit in your saintly face.
At times I exposed you
to the scorn of public disgrace.

Now you come to haunt me
In the darkness of this night.
Rattling these stillborn chains I wear
God dam it, you've come to fight.

I told you I don't want you.
Your pregnant with darkened suns.
Yet in winter's still cold nights
I'm sure that you will come.

You'll fight me to my death.
It's that you'll surely do,
As I struggle inside my shrinking brain
To rid myself of you.

Now my eyes begin to water
As I curl up in my bed,
Darkness circles through my veins
The pillow moistens by my head.

You know I have a weak heart
So be gone you motley fool.
Good lord I mustn't wrestle
With the misery of my soul.

Eliot Ku

Pumpkin Carving

I was hanging around the pumpkin patch on Saturday when a fight broke out between two varsity football players. I'm not sure what was said. Probably nothing important, and that wasn't my focus anyway. One of their girlfriends happens to be the girl of my dreams. Her name is Sofia. The funny thing is that Sofia doesn't know who I am. I never know what to say to her to break the ice, so I have remained at the sidelines. And truthfully, I know next to nothing about her either. She exists and she has the most sublime, glowing smile. No other detail really matters at my age.

At first, the fight that began was just between the two boys, but then their friends got involved and their girlfriends were screaming and trying to pull them all apart. No one had any idea how to contain it so the rest of us simply watched from a distance as the fight blossomed to involve the whole group of popular kids, dilating and contracting and moving like a massive caterpillar across the ribbed earth. At the center of it, Sofia's boyfriend was now on the ground, getting stomped on by several of the other boys. Some of the girls, including Sofia, were sucked into the churning center and they too were stomped on, as the boys were blinded by the testosterone and adrenaline pouring into their bloodstreams by the spoonful.

The police and several ambulances finally arrived after a spectator called for them. They lined up the battered kids and hauled them off to jail or the hospital. Sofia was in a bad way. It didn't look like there was much left of her glow for me to dream about. I couldn't reconcile the fact that the unconscious shape taken away on a stretcher was really her. No trace of her smile remained.

The spectators gradually dispersed. In place of the brawl was a flattened circle of earth within the small pumpkin patch, mud pressed with tangles of spiny leaves, blood spatter, and a few teeth, a scene that looked as disorganized and meaningless as a work of Dadaism. I loitered for a while because I had nothing to do. My parents were out of town and my friends nonexistent. I wandered through the corn maze. It had been designed for little kids, but I got lost anyway.

I decided to buy some pumpkins on the way out. Not one or two. More like sixty. I ignored the silent exchanges between the employees working the register. It took many trips back and forth with a wheelbarrow to load the pumpkins into my truck, which was meditative after what I had witnessed that afternoon.

By the time I had all the pumpkins in my bedroom, it was properly night. I dimmed the lights and began to carve the pumpkins. The process was freeing. I didn't give a thought to any mess I might have made, and I completed the task in that single evening. When it was done, the muscles in my hands were severely cramped and swollen. Chunks and strings of discarded pumpkin lay in piles around my bedroom floor like clown intestines. I placed lit candles into each of the pumpkins and then sat back to enjoy them.

Sixty jack-o'-lanterns now smiled back at me. I had tried to recreate Sofia's smile with the first and finally mastered it by the sixtieth. In my exhaustion, I was satisfied to discover true tenderness behind those hollow orange expressions. I revived the glow from within her that would light up rooms because in her current state she wouldn't be able to do it on her own.

It was still not dawn when I pulled out a pen and piece of paper. By jack-o'-lantern light I began to write a get-well-soon letter to Sofia, who was at that moment hooked up to monitors and devices in the hospital, recovering from a traumatic brain injury. She would be deeply sedated, and I had no idea where her mind could be. Although my own head felt empty, at least now there was some sense of companionship to that emptiness, and I knew exactly what to say to her.

Ellen Jacob

Spring Cleaning

I wish I could scrub the inside of my skull.
Scrape the plaque off the walls,
plunge my hand into a tub of hot, soapy water
and scour the bone like bathroom tiles.

While I'm at it, I'd wash my brain, too—

reach down into the crevices and
release the loose hair and stale air
that had long since made their home there.

Unclogged, I'd hose out each and every groove and grout,
water rushing down in tiny little streams,
carrying with it all the old dirt and debris.

I'd scale down to the sockets,
plant both feet just above the optic nerve and pop!
One ball then the other springs free.

I'd take the sleeve of my shirt and polish each orb 'til they gleamed
like plastic, empty dolls' eyes ready to see.

Clean! Clean!

Bye-bye to the gunk, the junk, the funk of years past
and the buzzing, the gnawing, the aching of those to come.

James Piatt

A Sonnet to Death

In darkness, what shall more hours bring
as the lonely night, dark and bleak
causes a demon's lethal voice to speak
of blood and death and the lethal sting,
to the old and guileless youth who sing
with no thoughts of death or things oblique
or the fearsome fiends with talons sleek,
who scratch and claw and fearfully bring
fear and dread to those who are naïve
the realities of life and death and pain
and whom ideas of essence they abstain,
while living life only to play and achieve
forgetting death arrives without restrain
and comes far too quickly as it deceives.

Jessie Laverton

Eddie's Choice

“It’ll be the second door on the left,” said the receptionist as she took the form that Eddie signed. She gestured to the corridor beyond her desk.

Eddie began to walk towards the door. He glanced back. The receptionist was scanning his form, with one hand on top of the printer and one scrolling on her phone.

He had been expecting a cleaner place; bright, white, and smelling of antiseptic like a hospital. Instead, the corridor was quite dim, the lower parts of the walls were scratched and dirty. Hundreds of overlapping footprints darkened the middle of the corridor, revealing the most commonly chosen path.

He pushed open the door the receptionist had indicated and entered a square, windowless room. The cinderblock walls were unpainted. About five rows of five gray plastic chairs stood facing another door on the opposite side of the room. Above it hung a small screen. It read “54” in red lights. He looked down at the small ticket in his hand: 67. Several other men were seated in the plastic chairs. Holding tickets. Waiting.

“May I?” he said to a man on the back row, indicating an empty chair. The man shrugged and Eddie sat down next to him.

“Eddie.” He extended his hand to his neighbor, introducing himself.

It had been several years since he had shaken anybody’s hand, it wasn’t really a thing people did anymore, but today, it seemed to happen without him really thinking about it. The man returned the gesture and put his hand in Eddie’s.

“Frank.” Frank’s hand was warm. His skin was soft. As his grip tightened, he looked straight at Eddie. His eyes were pale blue, and the creases around them deepened as he smiled. “Well, there’s a thing you don’t get to do every day no more,” said Frank.

Eddie smiled back. He looked down at their joined hands. Then he loosened his grip and put a hand on each of his thighs. He looked at the scratched gray plastic of the chair in front of him, silent for a moment.

He hadn’t expected to feel anything today, but this moment of contact with a stranger had taken him by surprise. It was an unforeseen complication.

He decided not to pursue the conversation any further. Frank however didn’t appear to notice Eddie’s changed disposition.

“So, what brought you here?” he asked.

Eddie glanced sideways at him quickly, then fixed his stare again on a particularly deep scratch.

“Oh, s’okay, you don’t hafta to say nothin’. I’m sorry to pry. You know, it might sound real shallow, but one of the things I missed the most was food. I remember goin’ to a steak house, so hungry I could eat the north end of a south-bound goat. If you had to wait twenty minutes, it felt slower than a Sunday afternoon, and the smells, the smells...” Frank paused for a

second. “And then, they finally brought you the juiciest, tenderest, most perfectly cooked steak, with fries like sticksa gold an’ all...”

Eddie was drawn into the conversation like a hungry man pulled off the sidewalk into the restaurant by the smell of grilled meat and fries. “Yeah. Sure, you don’t get hungry anymore with the pills, but I miss the flavors, and the smells, and the feeling of eating with an appetite.”

“An’ everythin’ that used to happen ’round a dinner table,” added Frank. “I took my girl to dinner once. She didn’t want no steak house though, it had to be fancy shmancy—wine an’ candles an’ white linen an’ all. She thanked me at the end, ’s if I’d been doin’ her some favor all along. I shoulda been thankin’ her. I’m tellin’ ya, she was beautiful. And we talked. Talked till there were chairs on all the other tables and the waiter moppin’ the floor.” His accent drawled, so unlike the formatted way most people spoke now.

“Sounds like my wife,” said Eddie. “God, I wish I knew where she went. But the worst thing was...” His eyes were wet. His voice had started to tremble. He exhaled slowly through his mouth. He was afraid to feel.

“Not here, not today,” he thought to himself, but a gate had been pushed open, and he couldn’t jam it shut again, no matter how hard he tried.

“What?” asked Frank quietly.

“The worst thing was...” Eddie tried to steady his voice. “The worst thing was my kid. I just don’t know where they took him. Thirty-two years have passed. I think about him like it was yesterday. If only I knew, maybe it would be easier... And he had this puppy. A beautiful long-haired little thing. I couldn’t look after her after that. I always think if he came back, he would ask after his puppy, and I wouldn’t know what to tell him.... I guess that’s the short answer to your question about what brought me here.”

Frank gripped Eddie’s shoulder for a moment, “I’m sorry.”

Eddie looked sideways at him, and there it was again. His eyes were a pale, crystal blue, but it was like looking into deep water.

“You feel that?” asked Eddie under his breath, turning to face Frank fully.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do. It’s like, like... somethin’ wakin’ up. Somethin’ human risin’ up.”

“We have to get out of here.”

The men in the rows in front of them were starting to fidget. A couple of them looked quickly at Eddie and Frank, uncomfortably.

Number 55 flashed up on the screen, accompanied by three short buzzing sounds to notify the men that the number had changed. Someone rose from the front row and went through the door.

Eddie glanced at Frank’s ticket, number sixty-five. There was still time.

An orderly in a white coat came through the door behind them.

“Excuse me,” Eddie beckoned to him, “we have changed our minds. We’d like to leave now, please.”

The orderly raised his eyebrows, “I’m afraid that is not allowed, sir. It was clearly indicated in the form you signed at the reception. As you can see there is an increasing demand for this service, it just wouldn’t be feasible to have people coming and going on a whim.”

“But we don’t want to do this anymore.” Eddie lowered his voice. “Please, show some humanity.”

“Oh, I’m not human,” replied the orderly. “They had humans working here before, but it wasn’t manageable. Too much emotion.”

Eddie swore the orderly’s lip curled slightly as he pronounced the word *emotion*. He looked at Frank. They made for the door.

“I had it bolted as soon as you started talking to me,” said the orderly holding up a remote control. “Besides, your replacement embryos have already been produced. There’s no room for you out there.”

He passed into the next room, leaving Eddie and Frank standing by the bolted door.

“We could wait till the next person comes in,” Frank said.

“Forget it,” came a flat voice from the front row. “It won’t open again now till this room is empty. Besides, how many doors did you come through to get in here?”

The speaker then resumed staring at the floor, like everyone else in the room.

Eddie and Frank went back to their seats. They had no hope, so their minds weren’t busy scheming. They waited. That was all that was left to do. Eddie stared at his ticket, 67. Tears flowed down his face till the number was blurred, but his breath was calm. He felt a warmth spread over his chest, then an intensity of feeling, like a physical pressure, pushing outwards from all over his body.

The buzzing sound came and went several times. Still his tears flowed, and he stared at his ticket. At one point, when the buzzer sounded, Frank rose. He laid a hand on Eddie’s shoulder, and said “Well, thank you.”

Eddie was aware that Frank was walking away towards the door, but he was unable to process what that meant.

Then, he didn’t know how many minutes or hours later, he felt another hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see the orderly leaning over him. “Did you not hear the buzzer? It’s your turn.”

Eddie had not heard the buzzer.

The orderly took his ticket and guided him towards the door.

Eddie walked, but he felt like he was watching someone else move through the room. He looked around. Only empty chairs remained, but again, he was unable to process what that meant, where everybody had gone. The walls, the chairs, the orderly... nothing felt real. All he knew was that he was breathing. It was a new sensation, to be so acutely aware of his chest rising and falling, of air entering and exiting his body. Every breath filled him with awe, ecstasy and despair fought for his attention, clouding his perception. Years’ worth of unfelt feelings washed over him in minutes.

On the other side of the door, the doctor greeted him. He felt he should reply to her, but all he could do was slowly and faintly smile, his lips parting and his head nodding very slightly. The nurse guided him towards a big lozenge-shaped red and black box, which seemed to be cut in half lengthways to make a lid.

“So, that must be the pod,” Eddie thought to himself dimly, without any further coherent thought, despite having read so much about it in the past. It was open, and inside was an almost bare mattress. Only a pillow lay on it.

“Please enter the pod, sir,” said the nurse.

Eddie did so without protesting. It felt like someone else was moving his limbs. As the nurse buckled his arms and legs to the mattress, Eddie looked at her tenderly, not caring or not remembering what the orderly had said about no humans working there.

The nurse stepped away and pushed a button. The top half of the pod closed over Eddie, and he inhaled the poisonous, perfumed gases with as much intensity as he had the odorless air of the waiting room.

Five minutes later, two orderlies entered and wheeled Eddie’s pod away through the door that led to the incinerator.

The doctor looked at the nurse. “Did you see the expression on his face?”

“Yes,” replied the nurse. “He seemed to be smiling. Just like that man yesterday.”

“Strange...” shrugged the doctor as she flicked a switch. The buzzer sounded in the waiting room.

John Kucera

Abysmal Plane

It's just me here and the deadening silence,
At times, is unbearable;
I bear it though, just like blood flowing
On the busy street.
Stars dance on the walls and I feel ocean currents
Swelling beneath the pillow.
One of doorways steps into darkness,
Into an abyssal plane.
How many times do I weep
Under the false ceiling?
Night is like a pill in a tiny cup—swallow and
Go to the land of dreams.
As it never finishes—and when it finishes,
There is nothing left to dream.

Jon Roth

I Used to Love Spring

I used to love the crisp mornings of early June in Northern California, when school is still in session and the kids can almost taste the summer break. I loved the way the cool air would rush into the garage as I sent Jaiya on her way to school. Coffee in hand, I'd stand on the driveway, wish her a good day, and tell her to be careful. She would respond with mumbled single-word replies. "Thanks. Okay."

And as I would watch her peddle down our quiet little street, I'd loudly proclaim my love for her, knowing it would embarrass her but hoping it also somehow, even secretly, made her happy. Sometimes, dads can't help themselves—at least, this dad can't.

I miss those mornings and seeing her off to school. It was always quite an ordeal, getting her backpack packed, her water bottle filled, her snack together, her shoes on and tied, the "Bye mom!" up the stairs to mom getting ready for work. I'd hold open the door from the house so she could see the two steps down into the dark garage and find the button to open the garage door.

I miss the creaking of the garage door opening, the click-click-click of her bike being wheeled out of the garage between her mom's and my cars and onto the driveway. This time of year, late spring, we would be greeted by the sound of the lawnmowers and leaf blowers of the landscapers working quickly before the California sun made work outside unbearable. I used to love spring.

Jaiya was old enough to ride to school by herself. "Daaad," she would say, stretching the word into two syllables, "I'm going to be in middle school this fall," as if I needed reminding that she was growing up faster than I wanted to let go. Many of the other sixth graders rode their bikes to Lakewood Elementary. Sometimes, on a nice spring morning, it looked like a veritable train of bikes, as they ran single file in the bike lane alongside the rush hour traffic on Jefferson. But if you're running late, as Jaiya often did, the bike lane would likely be empty.

Charlie, who lives across the street, would often drive his two kids to school. Lakewood was only three-quarters of a mile away, but Charlie's kids were younger. Seeing Charlie depart before she did always lit a fire under Jaiya, and she'd take off down the road following his big green truck, her braids bouncing from underneath her helmet.

This morning, I can hear the lawnmowers in my otherwise quiet house. I take my coffee and walk past the laundry room to the garage. I pull open the door, step down into the garage, and let the door shut firmly behind me. I am surrounded by darkness. The air is still and smells slightly musty, reminiscent of a mausoleum. I stand there for a moment, alone.

What am I doing here?

My hand finds and depresses the button to open the garage door. At the far end of the garage, the 2-bay door creaks open and sunlight floods the once-darkened tomb. Like a moth to a flame, I walk toward the light, past her bike lying in the space her mother used to park her car when she lived here. The crumpled bike frame and bent wheels remain where they were placed that June morning two years ago. The police said the SUV driver had been distracted, something

about a cell phone and typing. I have never been clear on whether the distraction was the reason the SUV was driving in the bike lane or the reason it was going 50 in a 30-mph zone.

I don't go out much anymore. But when I do, I can't bear to drive on Jefferson. The cars ignore the posted speed limit and rush through the stop signs. The 6-foot-long scar scraped into the bike lane's asphalt still forces kids to swerve to either side of it, even two years later.

I step out onto my driveway and into the bright morning sunlight. The air is crisp, but the sun is warm on my skin. My eyes are not used to the light, and so I squint. Then I see Jaiya riding her bike down the street, going to school. I shout "Jaiya, I love you!" knowing it will embarrass her.

But it is not Jaiya on the bike. My eyes have adjusted to the light, and I can now see it is Jade, Charlie's daughter. She is now 2 years older and in the fifth grade. Jade stops her bike and turns around to look at me. I can see the confused look on her face.

I wave. She stares at me. I retreat to the garage and close the door. I used to love spring.

Joshua Lenz

Matricidal

I hope you can understand—my mother thought there was something wrong with my humors.

She had good reason; I am short, softspoken, brainy, and, until a week ago, virtually asexual. I couldn't rouse myself to save my life—quite literally, since my mother once locked me in a room with one of the girls and said that she would snap my neck if I didn't "break the filly" by sundown. Luckily, a visitor stopped by and he and my mother grogged themselves into a blind fever. With help from the girl, who was scared witless like me, I unscrewed the window hinges and we escaped. By dawn, Ma had forgotten all about it, and we all acted like it didn't happen.

Ma never associated my eccentricities with the fact that she was a suspected murderer, a known thief, and an undeniable vixen who managed one of the worst brothels in the Boston slums. Most bawdy houses in our area cater to the seafaring Englishmen who come through the docks at North End and, because of this, they attempt some pretense of cleanliness and sophistication. My mother, though—good ol' Ma—catered to everyone who was too poor, too sick, or too dangerous for the other scarlets. In exchange for foodstuffs, liquor, store credit, and the occasional one-dollar coin, she would walk the paupers upstairs and palm them on whatever dredges they could afford. I don't say *dredges* to be offensive; I say that because my mother would hire nearly anyone—arthritic old hags, starving stowaways, Irishwomen without husbands or prospects, even girls with the clap (I think my ma would have employed anyone so long as they were the slightest bit female, and even that standard might have caved under exigency).

My ma was tough as a ramrod. If getting orphaned by the Great Famine and emigrating to America as an eleven-year-old scullion didn't make her a complete reptile, growing up unrooted and unwanted in Boston certainly polished off the metamorphosis. By the time I turned sixteen, nearly every gangster, patrolman, and beggar in North End knew her and owed her something. "Molly Misandrist" most men called her—a natural moniker for someone who has your testicles in her pincers.

Men disliked her the most, and she returned the sentiment a hundredfold. She clearly hated every man who stepped through our brothel door, excoriating them behind their backs or, with the feebler sort, straight to their blanched faces. The only two males who didn't make her blood curdle were the doorman, McLoughlin—who loved her in a depraved way—and me.

"Princeling," she would call me. "My little princeling."

She fawned over me and regularly insisted that I was perfect, though the many times she tried to fix my peculiar dispositions suggested it was a little more complicated than that. She tried medicine at first, but that was expensive and did me no immediate good. She quickly gave up on medicine and just nagged me every day until I cried, or screamed, or promised to change. Sometimes, she made me watch the wenches while they bathed in the room upstairs, studying me closely for any sign of titillation. One night, I was up late reading a book and Ma dragged our

oldest worker—a fifty-year-old Scottish lady with two streaks of snow in her hair—into my bedroom, where she beat her with a stoker until the three of us were weeping together like children. That worker died only a few months later, and I think the two events are related.

Knowing this, perhaps you can understand why she treated you so despicably. After all her doting on me, her fondling, her sleepless nights, and her gnashing of teeth, all I had for her was a glowering tumor of spite buried under a thick dermis of terror. You, though, I liked *gratis*. You were different. You were simple.

Of course, I was terrified of you, too—especially when you kissed me and made me flush for the first time, suddenly, like a John in heat. That is why I hit you and told you to never come back—though I didn't mean it! I swear on the Virgin Mother I didn't mean it. I hate myself for it. I hate the hand that hit you, I do, I do, and I almost hacked off its fingers with the cook's cleaver because I hated it so.

I didn't cut off my fingers, though. It wasn't for lack of loathing or for fear of pain; recall the scar on my left wrist? I did that myself. It was an impulse—a strong curiosity about the color of living bone—but that's beside the point. The point is, I had a kind of utilitarian epiphany... a sudden realization that there was a better, more useful option than cutting off my own fingers.

What I did—I had to do it. There was no other way for me. I drank a full pint for courage, and then I took a boning knife upstairs to the bathing room where my ma sat snoring in her rocking chair, slaughtered by the bottle of Old Overholt cradled in her arms. She stopped her snoring for an instant to ask, "Is that you, my little Princeling? Are you here?"

I came up from behind and jabbed her behind the windpipe, clean through from the right side to the left, and then grabbed her hair and pushed the knife forward until it popped free, and the air came in and out in crackles and sputters. She didn't scream—she couldn't—and she died quickly, so no one came into the upper room until I had arranged it how I wanted them to see it.

Anyway, this letter is nothing and everything—please do not despise me. Come see me again soon.

Yours,
XX

Justin Hawkins

Words Like Daggers

You never see pain behind the blade,
It takes a piece of you, and words don't fade.

Carving your heart into sections of fear,
If it will be the same remains unclear.

Shouting behind the mask for the daggers to stop,
You feel heavy and begin to drop.

No hope as fear sets in,
Sitting and waiting for the end to begin.

Your soul is shaking; How can this be?
Sitting vulnerable for the world to see.

The joy that was inside your heart,
No longer there and forever you part.

Pulling the blades out piece by piece,
When you rise, the pain will cease.

Finding the power to stand up again,
What is on your face is not a grin.

No one sees the word's destruction,
Other than lack of production.

Bloody and broken, you soldier on,
What the daggers took....dead and gone

LindaAnn LoSchiavo

Dracula Plans His Hallowe'en Soiree

Near Hallowe'en, routine tension sets in.

Expected entertainment, catering,
Décor: a bachelor like Dracula
Tries to outdo last year's event—though some
Attended by mistake and won't return.

Tradition dictates hospitality's
Essential to his kind. Longevity
Must be preserved. Drinks are but one concern.
His entourage deserves to be amused.

Instead of necks turned red as after-birth,
Refreshments can be served by a blood bank,
Thanks to a generous donation made.

Exquisite concentration on details
Is a tourniquet for his unquiet mind,
Obsessed with real estate, castle upkeep,
Demands imposed by vamphood's life-in-death.

His party plans completed, its checklist ticked,
The Transylvanian lord licked his lips,
Succumbed to tempting pleasure-crested pricks.

Marc Brimble

Driftwood

your oldness lost
floating
among white waves

the currents carried you away
toward the estuary
like driftwood

we stretched out for you
we could have been your rocks
your buoys

but

you turned your face
so you wouldn't see our tears
and the salt on our lips

I wished for a moment I was a fish
to swim with you for a while
through the billows

but all I could do
was stand on the shore
and watch you disappear.

Michael Riordan
Strawberry Jam

Many would be curious about why someone would marry Hugh—especially someone like Susan. Despite her big hands and deep-throated voice, men are intrigued by Susan’s arresting face and her energetic body. Anybody would expect Hugh to do something about his marriage, but Hugh pays no attention to whatever sinister circuits might be twisting at his feet, or in his house, or within himself.

“Not strawberry jam again, Hugh—you know the seeds get caught in my teeth, says Susan.”

“We’re out of grape jelly,” says Hugh.

Susan rolls her eyes and then quickly lassos her head with her stringed nurse’s lanyard before leaving for work.

Many would characterize Hugh’s drive to work as pleasant, even beautiful. Others would recognize the patina of pastoral charm. Hugh makes no judgments about his ritual: three or four traffic lights past century-old farmhouses and scattered cows. Anyone else might sigh: *Ah, it’s good to be alive.* Anyone else might start the day with fresh hope. Hope is not in Hugh’s internal vocabulary and he pays no attention to the cows.

Hugh sells computers at The Junction Box, a huge retail warehouse. He never reflects on why he’s never used his degree in electrical engineering to try something else. Hugh gets a commission on everything he sells, and his mechanical delivery convinces customers that they must be in the presence of an honest geek. His sales success frustrates his colleagues whose hard sell approaches often fail. For his efforts, Hugh scores regular bonuses, which—unknown to Susan—he keeps in a secondary bank account. This private knowledge is the most mysterious aspect of Hugh’s life. He doesn’t know why he has continued the secret; it is just something that became a habit. It is a smudge on his straight lines.

Dave Bonner sees Hugh drinking a cup of coffee at The Junction Box snack bar. Dave, assistant manager of software, gets a kick out of Hugh.

“Hey, Hugh!”

Hugh has heard this one since childhood. He knows it’s supposed to be a joke, but he never thinks it’s funny. He says nothing.

“Hugh, snap out of it, man.”

“Hello,” Hugh says as he quickly checks his watch and sits across from Dave.

“Hey, did you get a good look at that codger couple I had to deal with, Hugh? Knew nothing about nothing—I mean, they shouldn’t even be allowed to own a computer. I mean, stay away from electricity, guys—ha-ha. Listen, I wanted to talk to you about tonight. I’m having kind of a party—hope you and Susan can come.”

“Your birthday, Dave?”

“Nah, just a party. Friday, you know—need to shake things out.” Dave is grinning and his head is bobbing to music only he can hear.

“That’ll probably be okay. I think I’d better be getting back now, Dave.” Without looking at Dave, Hugh drums his fingers along his empty paper cup before dropping it in a white trash bin.

• • •

At 7:15 P.M., Dave’s apartment is all set: a suburban mousetrap with cheese and crackers, booze, and a naughty notion ready to spring down hard. All set.

Susan and Dave exchange whispers in the kitchen. Dave reaches over Susan for more glasses as her spidery fingers fill a large pewter bowl with potato chips. Susan shudders as Dave drapes over her.

On Monday, Dave Bonner calls in sick and then makes love to Susan. The big store survives without its assistant software manager, and Hugh sells a pricey computer system. A couple of weeks later, Dave Bonner transfers to the west side. This deception goes on for three months because Susan has waited to tell Hugh. It is Susan’s turn to dry the dishes. Hugh washes a plate and slots it into the drainage rack.

“Hugh, I’ve got something to tell you,” Susan says.

“Okay.”

“You know Dave Bonner?”

“Dave transferred to the west side store. He was getting sick a lot.”

“Well, that’s just it. He wasn’t getting sick, Hugh. He’s been coming over here and we’ve been, you know, together—and Saturdays when you thought I was getting my hair done. That’s when I go to his place. I’m going to go live with him, Hugh. He gives me what you can’t. He is, uh, what you aren’t. Sorry. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Your hair always looks the same,” Hugh mumbles.

Susan sheds a tear and places a bony hand on Hugh’s shoulder and says it’s probably all for the best, that someday he will look on this as a good thing. Hugh notices a tiny brown ant attempting its long journey across the Formica. Susan then talks about how she had been drowning, but Dave rescued her when Hugh couldn’t. Hugh hears all this and crushes the ant with his index finger.

“You understand, Hugh? What choice do I have? I mean, really?”

Susan tells Hugh she will need a few days to move her things out, that Dave has a cousin who is a lawyer, and that it would probably be okay for Hugh to use him, too.

Hugh registers none of this because suddenly he is convulsing. Some unfamiliar entity quakes within him. Hugh feels it take over, vibrating, pulsing. Hugh wouldn’t have a word for it, but it is almost lust. At first, there is a formless sense of chaos, but then Hugh finds that he can adjust—take control at will, so instantly. A sudden want expands within him and there is no mistaking his purpose. In his mind, Hugh shapes his desires and focuses close like a touchscreen. *Yes! Yes! I see it! So clear!* With this defibrillating surge, something has been freed, unclogged, and Hugh watches his own awful but glorious energy as it thrashes through the kitchen. His penetrating scream scourges language itself and slashes heavily like dull-bladed scissors.

It is not clear whether Susan is finally proud of Hugh for his initiative. It is the first and last time she would see such resolve in him. In the morning, Hugh steps over Susan's body and makes a cup of coffee. He envisions a newer world on some island—or maybe just some small town downstate near the water. He can imagine the sun rising over a glistening sea. He can picture himself with a boat, and he thinks he will change his name: He likes the sound of "Peter Jenkins." First, he needs to get to the bank. "Peter Jenkins," he says as he closes the door behind him.

Kitchen scissors can be dull, but they can be within easy reach. And sometimes, as if shiny and galvanized, they can cut through flesh in the path of purification or renewal. Meanwhile, Susan's sad face grows whiter, but her lips retain the color of strawberry jam.

Michelle Prodaniuk

The Scream

“Wow, so, he left you hanging for over 10 hours?” exclaimed Kendell.

“Yeah, should I even keep trying, Kendell?” asked Macy.

“No, don’t respond, and if he doesn’t ever reach out, then just move on. It was only one date, right?” Kendell responded.

“Yeah, it was only one date,” Macy answered, thinking to herself why she could never get a second date. *Is it me, is it them? It’s truly hard to say.*

“Anyway, should we start the slasher movie you came over to watch?” Kendell asked in a light tone, trying to brighten the mood.

“Yes, of course!” Macy didn’t want to think about her failed attempt to start dating again and the slasher movie seemed more comforting than continuing to think about what went wrong.

Macy and Kendell watched the movie in the comfort of Kendell’s apartment, which was nicely decorated with art on the wall that Kendell had drawn. The white couch they sat on was soft and comfy. Kendell and Macy lived in the same apartment building—Kendell was on floor 14 and Macy lived on 13, but Kendell’s apartment was where they always watched movies together because it was cooler and there was more room on the couch. After the movie ended, Macy felt much better, but also scared about something that she couldn’t pinpoint. Kendell felt the same but didn’t know why. The two friends decided to chat more before leaving each other’s company, when Kendell noticed that her dog, Peach, was shaking and staring into the darkness of the kitchen.

“Feel Peach—she won’t stop shaking,” Kendell said, looking nervous. “She keeps looking at the kitchen.” Both Kendell and Macy stared into the kitchen but saw nothing that would be scaring peach. At that moment, a beeping started coming from the hallway. Kendell and Macy sat listening to the beeping that happened every few minutes.

“Is that, like, a carbon dioxide warning?” asked Macy, looking worriedly at Kendell.

“I’m not sure,” replied Kendell. “Maybe it’s coming from someone else’s apartment. Probably nothing to worry about, right?”

“I think I’m going to head up to my room now before it gets too late and before I get too scared to leave,” said Macy, looking down at her phone to check the time: 2:55 a.m.

“Yeah, it’s getting late. I wish you weren’t leaving me alone! I’m scared now, too,” said Kendell. Macy gave Kendell a good-bye smile and wave and shut the door. She heard Kendell lock the door behind her as soon as the door shut.

Macy hesitated when she approached the door to the staircase. *It would be silly to take the elevator up for one flight of stairs,* Macy thought to herself. *I’ll make a run for it and be back in my room in no time.* Macy flung open the door to the staircase and began to run down the stairs to floor 13. She never made it and never left the staircase.

Kendell sat on her couch feeling anxious and afraid—she could have sworn that she heard a loud scream after Macy left, but she pushed the thought out of head. Thinking that she

just imagined it and that the terrible shrill of pain that she heard was nothing and that Macy had made it back to her apartment. Kendell started to clean her kitchen as she knew she wouldn't be getting any sleep until the sun came back up. Loading the dishwasher, Kendell heard a knock at her front door and looked towards her door.

"Hello? Macy, is that you?" Kendell said, approaching the door.

Kendell looked through the peephole to check if Macy had come back, but what Kendell saw was not Macy. Through the peephole, Kendell could see a woman with a white dress that was splattered with blood. The woman had long black hair and black eyes that looked straight through the peephole back at Kendell.

Kendell let out a loud, trembling scream and backed away from her door and the two dogs barked and whined. She looked through the peephole again, not knowing what else to do and saw that the woman was not there anymore. Kendell ran to her room and shut the door, getting on her bed with the two dogs. She lay down in exhaustion, her brain feeling fried and overloaded at the same time.

Kendell then felt her body being pulled down her bed and she tried to fight the invisible force pulling her. Her strength was not enough to save her from being pulled off the bed, and she hit the floor with a thunderous bang. Then she was pulled towards her closet that was pitch black. Kendell could see a hand on her ankle and looked upwards to see the woman that she saw through the peephole in her closet. Kendell was yanked all the way into the closet and the door slammed closed. All that anyone could hear that night was Kendell's scream. Even after the police came, they couldn't get into Kendell's apartment to help her. They used sledgehammers until the door finally collapsed, but Kendell's scream had long past by the time they got to the closet. The closet was filled with blood, but there was no sign of Kendell. Police also had found a large amount of blood on in the staircase starting at floor 14 down to the floor 13, but Macy's body was never recovered.

The apartment building now is almost empty with only 50 residents left that claim every night around 3 a.m. until 6 a.m., the building is filled with the two girls' screams.

Natasha Bredle

Sunday in a Seven-Day War

I lost the battle on Sunday in a seven-day war.
Woke up with frosted lips, gauging

how to outrun the horizon ahead of me.
Dying to the world didn't settle the score.

The other days faded away feverishly. I was stranded.
I stranded myself on Sunday in a seven-day war.

There was morning and evening. I reached out
my wrists for the ropes to be torn, stitches undone.

Skin captivates and is captured. But mine was freed,
fatefully released on Sunday in that seven-day war.

Walls fall down and are rebuilt. Violence sings a ballad,
but silence is the zenith. I wish I could be her,

in the aftermath, in the beginning, the sole
mediator on Sunday in a seven-day war.

She outgrows herself, goes too far, but retains
control, sounding her ghostly horn,

making a fool of me as I come so close to forgetting
everything I lost that Sunday in a seven-day war.

Nicholas Shields

The Weight of Unfeeling

a bullet for a bluebird
staring at the moon alone
with cuts and salt

drowned out with cigarette smoke
and burnt through whiskey
the glow does not reach anymore

do not stare for too long
for it does not belong to you
as your skin cannot be seen
covered in the idea of a man

death before death,
become unfeeling
as your forefathers did

unfurl at night,
with blood on the walls
madness is what the ceiling sees
as music plays to suffocate thought
my rot is not your fault

mother,
i'd like to die

like a bird in a cage,
unable to fly and
envious of their wings

i look to
the belt that hangs
it is better to be colored red than grey

Nicole Genova

Tsunami

The fear of a future
unknown to the world and me
as I overdrown myself,
cage myself in the tsunami of my mind
a mirror of thoughts
in the reflection of my fingers
pinching and pulling my skin
from underneath my feelings
to rip them apart from its core
to save me from drowning at last

Rae Toonery

Coming of Age

I always wondered what it would be like to do it. Long before true crime was in vogue, I was always a little in awe of the Geins and Gacies of this world. But I never thought I could go through with it. It was a fantasy; one that, for all I knew, everybody harbored somewhere deep inside themselves.

When I was looking after Mum, I came close a few times, I can tell you. And I defy any full-time career to deny it hasn't crossed their mind at some point.

But that opportunity was taken from me by dear old Natural Causes. You get to a point in life, don't you, where you must accept that certain things have passed you by. Then Covid came along. The way the papers talked you'd think I would have been quaking in my slippers. They had you believing everyone over seventy was flimsy as a single use face mask. But Covid was my accomplice, my cover, the only truly living thing among the walking-frame dead. I was never going to embrace armchair gymnastics or join the jigsaw jamboree.

The first time, I have to admit, was pretty amateur and absolutely nothing to write home about. She was sitting in her room, with the door wide open, choking on that that now familiar Covid cough. Music to my ears. She went down like a baby after a breastful of the white stuff. You're probably imagining the old pillow over the face routine, but that's just your squeamish sentiment. You don't want to look death in the face—I understand.

When you're young, you imagine the reaper slashing at you, with his scythe fresh off the whetstone. By my time of life, he's lost his edge; your fears age with you. Sometimes I catch him with his trousers down. Not a pretty sight. He forgot where he left his scythe years ago, now he's armed with a feeble butter knife. A butter knife will do the job, of course; you wouldn't leave one lying around a murderer's cell would you? Actually. I'd rather be scythed—get it over with in one quick slice.

At first, I tried to make it quick, but I learned to savor the moment. Like Frank Howell. They'd put the little cross on his door, so I knew they'd be giving him a wide berth. He was sat by the window, wheezing away, barely managing to mist the pane. He'd fallen forward, so his chin was almost on the ledge.

I don't know what came over me, but I was taken right back to the rugby scrums of my youth. I tucked his head under my right arm and stood upright, palm clamped over his wizened mush. I could feel him trying to force a desperate prayer through his gritted gums. While I held him there, I took his limp wrist in my left hand and placed my fingers on his weakening pulse. Even after the last faint tap, I counted to ten, just in case. There's no feeling like it. Empowering—there's a word that's overused these days.

But honestly, I had to stop myself tearing his bonce right off his scrawny little neck, running with it through the main corridor, and scoring a touch-down in the staff room. I had to keep checking the mirror to make sure I hadn't done a Benjamin Button.

Seventeen I managed. Before they stuck me in here by myself. I've made no demands, despite the lack of access to fresh air, limited literary choices, and menu, which is quite frankly in very poor taste.

All I've asked for is a cellmate. Hardly an unreasonable request, is it?

Renee Rivera

Double Damages of Death

One heart stopped forever,
Another could do nothing but sever.
Two lungs faced certain death,
Two more took their final clear breath.
One brain shut down for good,
Another would never again think like it should.
Two eyes saw their final view,
Two more would forever be plagued by the last image of you.

Robert Eugene

Hollow's Grove

Jo Habernath stopped in a rest stop town of Lakedge to fill up his car's gas tank, despite it being only three-fourths full. He leaned against his car, having heard the pump already clicked, shutting off the flow of gasoline, yet could not move. He should hardly care about what happened here and yet a few words from a bunch of loitering teens was enough to halt him in deep consideration to detour his trip.

This ear-prickling story included ghosts and sacrificial grounds for serial killers - all speculations to disappearances that happened in the forest around here. Strange sounds had been heard at night and some creepy shadows had been spotted hanging around town.

The teens joked and teased each other about going as they illicitly drank in the parking lot. They said it was a peculiar-looking place, under the curve of the mighty oak tree that stretched like a giant hand covering the sun. One teen said it gave her an uncomfortable feeling where the air felt cold, the sun looked gray, and a weird smell of blood filled the air. The place they described was a small woodland grove which they called Hollow's Grove.

One teen with long hair wiggled his fingers while blowing out a puff of smoke and telling the others that it was a portal to hell, where evil slithered out.

Jo held a sudden tempting idea as if everything felt like it was falling into place. This world, his mind, it all clicked together in the same way two magnets who are drawn too close together.

Ever since reaching this town, he felt something off-kilter. Driving down the highway, a tingle in his mind took attention away from his daydreaming mood during a long drive. He was making a weekend road trip to nowhere in particular. He chose to drive northeast and keep going until the highways ran out to near the east coast, then he would return home.

There had to be a reason.

After buying a pack of cigarettes from the convenience store, Jo walked over to the Lakedge Motel to ask about this grove, hoping to find some starting point to find it. Before he could enter, a one-legged homeless man, who called himself Bennie Ben, asked for change.

Having some spare dollars in his wallet, Jo relented, feeling guilty about not helping several highway beggars on the way here. It would be bad luck, he thought to not help someone out.

In exchange, a smiling Bennie provided a nice conversation while Jo decided he needed a smoke break. Favorably, they ended up on the destined topic of interest, where Jo asked about the grove. At that point, Bennie sat down against the wall of the Motel and clenched the nub of his missing leg.

"Never step foot where the ground echoes below. True emptiness is never empty," he gravely advised.

Jo found this warning to be gibberish and he completely ignored the advice, more enticed by other details.

“Why is it called Hollow’s Grove? Is there a cave there?” Jo asked, letting out a breath of smoke.

Bennie snorted and chuckled.

“You won’t find what you seek. That’s why. It’s a meaningless vain attempt,” he said to Jo harshly.

Jo frowned, extinguished his cigarette, and disposed of it in the sand of the stone ash urn, having heard enough for him to make a decision.

Jo pressed Bennie one last time for more details of where this grove was located, but he remained silent, unable to give him the right answer to his growing desire.

• • •

Jo took his time walking there, having to wade through the thick and itchy brush for hours. He dusted ticks off every so often while swatting away pesky swarms of gnats and avoided stepping on cottonmouths resting under the fallen branches. During this trek, he had become resilient to the unavoidable spider webs arching in every direction, and the humid climate that made it hard to even sweat.

The motel owner had given him a vague idea of where the grove was located, naming a trailhead that went by it, however, she stopped short giving more precise directions, held back by a nervous hesitation that was like Bennie’s.

The environment changed at the top of the plateau as Jo ascended the boulder-filled hill. At the top, the ground was now flat and had a distinctly different feeling from the woods.

It had to be the place.

Jo looked up and realized he had reached the grove when there was a slight humming coming from this all around. The clouds hung around almost unmoving, giving a somber sight to the trees. This was a place devoid of cell service despite being at a higher elevation.

Ahead of him was a single enormous oak tree. It was by far the best marker of this precarious spot, being tucked far into the mountainous woods. The massive tree rose above all the others and the many branches held its arms wide. It was a fearsome and daunting tree.

Jo noticed another odd thing.

It was lonely here.

There was a noticeable emptiness around him. The gnats which had eaten at him like a full course meal had disappeared without a trace. There was no sign of animals or even ants on the ground. All life, but the vegetation and the trees were evicted from this place.

It was as if the grove segmented itself off from the rest of the forest, cut out from some faraway place that had stitched itself unnaturally into the surrounding grounds. There were no signs that someone had trimmed the vegetation around. It was as if Hollow’s Grove knew not to overgrow, curtailing all but short patches of clovers and dandelions that bloomed in the middle of the open space.

An overwhelming feeling sank into his chest.

Jo stepped around a dirty boot that had sunk into the ground. Unnerved, yet undaunted, he stepped into the realm of the grove where he reached his hand out and touched a vine hanging down in his way. He turned it over in his hands, realizing it was kudzu. This plant grew abundantly all over the grove, masking the oak tree, and hiding the bark in a shaggy mess. The leaves rained down in the air like forest green hair.

The flora was enchanting and haunting at the same time.

Jo now recognized this feeling.

In this world, those types of feelings were born from a cold terror, a traumatic memory, where the existential drenched moments flood the brain. True fear is experienced right when a person sees destruction as an inevitable reality and realizes they can do nothing about it. They should soften the anxiety by looking away, closing their eyes, and wishing for something else other than pain, but they cannot look away.

This part of the forest felt the same: it was unwavering and uncaring.

Jo kept walking in the grove and sat on a rotten log that had fallen right below the oak tree. He rubbed his legs in a sudden ache of tiredness as his ears started to ring. With a pop of his jaw, it suddenly stopped, but Jo remained restless. The air was thicker than normal, retaining wetness that stuck to his skin and settled into his lungs as he looked at the ground. The yellow flowers gave a splash of color to an otherwise dreary place. And that was the only happiness around.

A rustled motion caught his eye.

Jo flung himself up at the realization a figure stood in front of him, some ten feet away.

“Wh-who are you!” Jo yelled, stumbling back over the log in fright.

Jo scuttled backward on all fours like a helpless animal.

The figure was hard to identify.

Several layers of clothes wrapped around the body from scuffed boots to several worn-out sweaters, ripped scarfs, and faded gloves. No normal person could feel comfortable wearing so many clothes on a hot day like today.

“I live here,” the person grumbled. The voice was deep, raspy, and slow, having a near-monotone quality. It was off-putting even when displaying a little tone of threat.

“Sorry. I don’t mean to disturb you. I was not aware of this being owned by anyone. I have no intentions of staying here long. I was just passing by,” Jo quickly said, dusting himself off, but not taking an eye off the guy in front of him.

“Stay here. It is all right.”

Jo’s body went rigid in fear.

That was not what he was expecting to hear and said in a way that was not right.

“I think I will get going. Leave you be. I have places to be,” Jo lied.

The figure did not move, but floated on vines beneath the muddy boots, rising into the air and casting a shadow on Jo, whose heart raced faster than any time before in his life.

“You came here to find something, and I know what it is,” the figure said, holding out arms that began to stretch, ripping the clothing as they extended.

In an unbelievable sight, the figure's arms were made of roots, growing out dozens of feet and falling to the ground.

Bursting out of the bundle of clothes came tree limbs that had come alive and moved around like snakes. The scraps of cloth fell to the ground relieving nothing, but a person-shaped knot of roots.

Jo twisted around and bolted, but before he could make it out of the edge of the grove, his legs were ripped from him. He tripped down, face-planting into the dirt.

"Ahhhhggg," Jo yelled after gasping for air.

He hit the ground hard. Leaves clung to his face as his eyes watered and he tried to get up.

A root had wrapped around his ankle.

"LET GOOO!" he screamed trying to get away.

Jo was flung up to the treetops and then back down into the groove, crashing right down into the earth, breaking his bones with the sound of crunching so loud he did not even hear his screams. Without giving him time to think about anything but the onslaught of pain, Jo was thrown against the wall of a cave and bound to hundreds of crisscrossing roots.

He became molded into the wall of earth and crushed further as the roots tighten against his body. Jo tried to scream for help, but the root that gagged his mouth prevented his voice from being heard.

In the end, Jo found out the grove was hollow.

All around him, he saw bodies, tied up by the same roots that had ensnared him. All of them were now skin-covered bones. They were not entirely dead, but hardly alive with no thoughts in their brains. They barely breathed, only existing to feed their life to the predator who trapped them.

Jo panicked and fought against the immovable roots with all his might. Unfortunately, nothing could be done. He had wasted all his energy and went limp. All he could do now was breathe.

Jo's eyes stretched wide open as he saw the base of the oak tree hidden beneath the earth. There was a grotesque face made from wrinkles of the trunk. It cracked in the shape of a moving mouth. The oak was alive, and the grove was its home.

"You will now find what you seek...and that is true peace," uttered the same voice.

Jo's lungs screamed for air and his mind screamed for something to free him.

And in the end, it did.

Somewhere back in town, Bennie laughed, while resting in the evening sun.

He knew full well all those who wander without a true purpose into a hollow grove will find something- not what they desire, but what the Hollow One desires.

Robert Kinerk

Young David Hume Throws a Tantrum

David Hume is the Scottish philosopher who argued that you cannot move from a descriptive world to a prescriptive one, from what is to what should or ought to be.

I cannot leap from is to should
Though father yells and mother cries.
I would not do it if I could.

I wallow in my babyhood.
No moral law from it derives,
No moral bridge from is to should.

My *is* on which I've always stood!
My earth. My sun. My seas. My skies.
I would not trade you if I could.

The grown-up people sing their good.
Their canticle's a path of lies
From generous is to stingy should.

Why would I buy their song of should
and trade away my paradise?
I would not do it if I could.

To save myself it's understood
I din my ears, I blind my eyes.
I cannot leap from is to should.
I would not do it if I could.

Ryan Tilley

The Year of the Rabbit

*“Words have no power to impress the mind without the exquisite horror of their reality.” —
Edgar Allan Poe*

While the media looks for the story in fear,
There’s another technique to try.
But the story repeats and repeats and repeats.
It’s the truth that this world is a lie.

While the murdered relinquish their blood on the floor
And the killer’s expression is wry,
He will learn in a flash that he’s totally wrong:
It’s the truth that this world is a lie.

As the lanterns display with a beautiful red
And the partners are left with a cry,
The recently deceased will begin to believe
It’s the truth that this world is a lie.

For the ghosts are transformed into ancestors now
As their screams are as soft as a sigh.
For the atheists finally stubbornly learn
It’s the truth that this world is a lie.

Since the killer is hiding his nerves are on fire
With his hope like a bird that can’t fly.
He had trusted the voices and pictured the dead.
It’s the truth that this world is a lie.

The survivors are left with the shock and the guilt
As they wonder and curse in reply.
So the coward will run like a drunken buffoon,
It’s the truth that this world is a lie.

The contracted community mourns and renews
With the phase of the moon in the sky
When the festival lanterns are taken away.
It’s the truth that this world is a lie.

Since the fear of The Year of the Rabbit was real,
There's a villain to sorely decry
As the man was disturbed and deficient in Ren.
It's the truth that this world is a lie.

Sean Robertson

Sea Breeze

The hollow vessel floats on the sand
Never again will it see blue horizon
Dormant, it lies, surrounded by land
Until us lads breathe in life again

We'll scrub the scum from the sides
Fit her with sails and rudder
We'll take her out to mighty tides
And sail, as brothers, forever

Ten years on she sits, still broken
The vast reaches left unexplored
Seabreeze remains a childhood token
Of promises we have ignored

Shannon Winestone

The Desolate City

My spirit drifts into a desolate city,
That is broken, having no walls.
No children play in its streets.
There is none left to pity,
And nothing more to feel.
The agora's immersed in gloom.
The homes are draped in solitude.
Dust and cobwebs adorn their rooms,
That no more resound with laughter's peals,
Or the sweet notes of a song.
Alas, all joy is gone!
It has sunk into an abyss of sorrow,
And into it, my soul has fallen.

Thijs Streefkerk

Autumn Sun

Robe of night to conquer,
shall rise anew the morrow.
By light of flame of ages,
to burn away the sorrow.

Vast, the oaken palaces,
and temples built from bone.
But they are not perpetual,
And neither is the throne.

In forest amidst autumn leaves,
that downed to kiss the dirt.
I saw the lush weep tears of dew,
as the wind sang songs of hurt.

As I, here, remain restless,
from afar the sirens call,
to all those with a doubt to spare,
before they bear their pall.

Many a cloud I have seen before,
and some I thought my last.
But the wind was there to steer them,
and one by one they passed.

Through distant shore, the mirage lures,
ever but once a reverie.
‘though Not there now, I’ve trod before,
in illusion, hope or memory.

Yasmin Hemmat

Funereal Waltz: Mourning the Words' Demise

In the hushed air, a waltz begins to unfold,
A solemn melody, mournful and cold.
The dancers step lightly, with heavy hearts,
As words lament the demise, their graceful parts.

In the ballroom of sorrow, where shadows sway,
The floor is adorned with petals of gray.
Each step echoes softly, a death knell's toll,
As the dancers mourn the loss of words' soul.

Their elegy resonates through the room,
For language once vibrant, now shrouded in gloom.
The verses weep gently, their meanings untold,
As the waltz carries on, a tale to behold.

The symphony of grief in each whispered breath,
As the dancers glide, embracing their death.
Their movements convey what words cannot say,
In the funereal waltz, they find solace and sway.

The rhythm of sorrow, a delicate embrace,
As the dancers twirl, draped in mourning lace.
With every spin and turn, they honor and dwell,
On the death knell's toll, where words bid farewell.

In this melancholic dance, a requiem's verse,
Words merge with the music, immersed in the hearse.
The funereal waltz weaves a tapestry of pain,
A tribute to the words lost, never to regain.

So, as the dancers dance and mourn, with each solemn refrain,
The death knell tolls, and their elegy remains.