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Alexander Scott Pearce Baker

First Loss, Final Silence

What was this veil that time withdrew?
Life's claws revealed beneath the skin,
A mask once bright, now torn askew,
Where shadows stir and shape within.
The first rebuff—a whispered chill,
Soft laughter lost beyond the door,
A heart that faltered, cold and still,
And found the world less than before.

Then came the silence sharp and deep,
When one beloved slipped away,
A hollow left no voice could keep,
A shadow stole the sun from day.
The grave, a secret held too close,
Unseen but felt like winter's breath,
A specter none could dare oppose,
That wove the fabric fine as death.

And with that weight the soul unspooled,
Existence cracked, its edges blurred,
A vastness cold, impersonal, ruled,
By silent voids without a word.
No tether strong enough to bind,
No light to hold against the gloom,
But still the ghost aroused would find
Its place within the empty room.

Andrew Otto Psenicka

Epigram of Contrast

You sit and whine, and expect, and complain
Believing that life narely more than pain,
And if, in mind, you believe this is true,
Describe to blind men the color of blue.

B. Archie Buchan

Confession

Juntaro's breath is shallow. The hope that courses through his body is almost tangible, expanding and restricting his lungs as moonlight catches on the autumn cedar leaves and lights up the dirt path. Seven pairs of *geta*-clad feet scuffle in single file like monks on a pilgrimage, wearing the wooden sandals and *yukata* being one of the conditions to join this historic occasion—the final act of Satoshi Kanazawa, the greatest *Rakugo* storyteller of his generation, missing for ten years after disappearing on the day Juntaro turned fifteen, and still the strongest link he has to his late mother. Juntaro promised himself he would retain his cynicism, not be set up for disappointment, but twilight's promise knocks incessantly on his resolve and whispers that the legend is really back.

Juntaro had meant to see the show that day, so long ago now, for his birthday present, after his mother had lined up for hours to guarantee their place in the front row. With Kanazawa fiercely loyal to all things traditional, the tickets were written out using thin calligraphy brushes and sold at one stall in Ningyocho.

And then he vanished. His wife, his muse, as well. Just gone, and of course, the performance gone with them. Everyone had been refunded, but no amount of bowing and apologies could soften the disappointment. After years of watching from the back, finally deciding to pay the exorbitant fees to see him up close, just once, to savor every subtle gesture as he sat and told his stories, masterfully portraying every character himself. To have it so strangely and sadly taken from them felt much heavier than just missing a play. It marked the end of a childhood spent in laughter and ease, with the two of them watching Kanazawa's comedies together, the most prominent and painful memory that Juntaro had left.

The mystery had remained unsolved for a decade, rumors of murder, stories of suicide, but nothing confirmed, and Juntaro had never given up on his return. This, though, was too much. An invitation from his friend, on the anniversary of the date they'd missed, to a secret, final performance and a reveal of what really happened all that time ago. It was nothing short of miraculous, and from the moment his mother's spirit had left her body, frail with sickness, even as he held her and begged it not to go, Juntaro had stopped believing in magic.

And yet, how hard to doubt now, walking in a mysterious procession in silence to where they will wait in the clearing for the show to begin. The first man in line stops suddenly, and everyone bumps into the person in front of them, a slapstick moment that seems like a mistake until he begins to laugh in the darkness—a deep-throated guffaw that brings Juntaro back to his childhood and his mother, a one-of-a-kind sound that could only belong to the man himself. Kanazawa has been leading the party since they entered the forest, and the performance has already begun.

In a gap in the trees, a tiny stage is set, lit up on either side by tall, orange lanterns that glow onto the cushion where Kanazawa will sit and perform his final play. Around it, he can make out six seats with *sake* bottles and cups placed next to each one.

Shuffling into their places, the other audience members are as awestruck by the situation as Juntaro, features half-lost in the dark but all smiling wide. His host is already seated and facing them, looking down with the majesty of a monarch upon his subjects.

"This, as you know, will be my final act. The truth. I will call it *Confession*. Welcome." His face is set, eyes closed, countenance as far as imaginable from the bawdy, physical comedian that Juntaro and his mother had loved. Even the insects around seem to silence themselves in reverence as he speaks.

"Let me begin with what you already know. My wife, Katsuko. From the moment I saw her, I knew she was the one. I knew that if she didn't want me back, I would choose to be alone rather than with anyone else. The world outside her ceased to exist, and I grasped at every moment in her presence." Appearing to rise up in the air, Kanazawa's expression softens, and his shoulders slump as he assumes the role of his wife, humming and brushing long, invisible hair with an ivory comb. His eyes flick to the right, and he scowls playfully, voice hitting a feminine tone.

"Satoshi, why are you watching me now? Let me get ready in peace for once, you foolish man."

He drops down to his knees and looks up, deepening his pitch but speaking in a whimper. "Never. You'll never look just like this again, and I won't miss a single stroke of your brushing."

Juntaro waits for the fart joke, the lowbrow moment that had made Kanazawa such a divisive performer, dismissed by theater purists as trite humor made for idiots by a fellow moron. It doesn't come, as the actor goes through familiar scenes, his self-deprecating worship for Katsuko something that had always bordered on humiliation. He watches her sleep, follows her, and spies on her in the bath, all the while showing her awareness of his obsession with mock annoyance and mischievous, teasing glances. From so close, Juntaro cannot understand how anyone could fail to see the man's talent, as if it's really two people taking turns to use the body on the stage, every micro-expression hit so perfectly that a raised eyebrow or a shrug of the hand can switch him between characters in the one-man play.

A third one joins the tale, as Kanazawa's demeanor stiffens to rock-solid stoicism. He speaks in monotone. "Brother, I'm sorry. I hate to be the bearer of this news, but I must be straight. Your wife is laughing at you. Whenever you are gone, she brings other men here, to your own house."

His distinctive laugh shows him return to playing himself, and he stares forward with a challenge in his eyes. "I will not hear it."

Kanazawa goes back and forth—his brother is poker-faced and insistent, quoting friends and gossip, finally making an appeal that betrays his inner desperation to bring Katsuko's behavior into the open. "Give her a chance to prove her fidelity. Tell her you have to stay with

me tonight. Return unannounced at midnight, and you will catch her in the act, I am sure of it. If I'm wrong, I will gift you my entire life savings and leave your life in apology for my accusation."

Kanazawa centers his entire confidence and duty to his wife into one lucent expression of dismissal. "Okay, okay. But I believe that you're acting in good faith. You will remain as my brother, and I will ask Katsuko herself if she wants your money when we are making fun of your stupidity."

As the night gets darker, the lantern light is brighter around Kanazawa, and he throws off his gown to announce the beginning of the second act, exposing plain, black garments underneath. He mimes crawling along the ground, chest down, chin up, every movement slow and secretive. Rising like a snake under a charmer's hypnosis, he peeks in through a window, showing with a lack of reaction that he sees nothing. Moving along to the next window, he spies in once again.

This time, his eyes narrow, his face drops, and all the life seems to leave his body as he crumples down to the ground. When he finally raises his head, it's as if all of the man's prior effervescence has drained away, replaced by a blank, deathly grimace with all the portent and menace of a thousand black clouds.

This is not who Juntaro remembers, the lewd comedian whose performances were the only thing that truly made his mother's mask slip. His heart pounds so heavily he wonders if the others around can hear it.

The relationship between Katsuko and Kanazawa continues as before in the next scenes, only now there is a barely concealed fury every time he speaks. She is oblivious to what he knows, coquettish one moment, outwardly tormenting him the next, and while his words of deference are unchanged, whenever he plays the part of himself, his face catches the shadows and distorts over and again until eventually his nose, eyes, and mouth bulge and gurn in a demonic caricature.

Juntaro steals a look around at the audience, wondering if they have the same creeping fear as he does when he remembers the title of the play. He sees no smiles, but no outward concern. One picks up his drink, and the others follow, and he remembers his own bottle of *sake*. He gulps half down, enjoying the crisp rice-wine flavor as he swallows greedily, happy for the distraction from the discomfort of the play. As soon as he returns his attention, though, his whole body sinks with horror.

Kanazawa kneels in Seiza position, posture upright, giggling, oblivious, and unmistakably Katsuko, holding the same white sake bottle to her lips, one hand lifting the bottom in a clear representation of her husband's encouragement to drink.

Again, that ghastly expression falls across his features, and Kanazawa speaks from his own point of view. His words are meant for Katsuko, but they are addressed loudly, voice shaking, to the viewers.

"I gave you everything, and it wasn't enough. Do you feel anything changing inside your body? This is my confession to you, my love. I saw you last night with Shimamura. Yes,

Shimamura, his royal highbrow-ness, stuck-up poet who has looked down on me for years, the worst possible man for you to see behind my back. I heard your moans of pleasure and understood that he gave you something I never did. You could never shudder and weep like that for a trite comedian like me, and now everything I ever did is worthless, a lifelong mistake."

Twisted hate bleeds into the air around them, and Juntaro can barely watch as he feels his own insides begin to churn and constrict. Trying to stand, he doubles over, a sharp pain gouging into his stomach. Kanazawa continues.

"Thank you. This, then, was my final act. In my time away, I realized the truth—that it was you who was to blame. Your veneration for my frivolity, the way I pissed away any talent I had to keep your basest level amused, is what took my wife away from me."

This half-monologue, half-lecture thunders around Juntaro's head as he falls into a feverish dream state, stomach now burning, sweat pouring down his forehead and neck. Is this how he is going to die?

"But I forgive you. The only life I'm going to take today is my own. The poison I just drank is the same one I gave to Katsuko all that time ago, knowing as she faded before me that I killed myself along with her. But you, you will live on. Since you love toilet humor so much, I gave you a weaker medicine to go with my pathetic tale of guilt and jealousy." With his last words, that booming voice dwindles into a croak, cracking under the weight of loss and self-loathing.

Backed by a cacophony of flatulence that echoes through the trees, Juntaro's bowels loosen, and his underwear fills with an avalanche of heat before the pungent stink rises and hits him, all of the guests groaning as steaming shit streams down their legs.

Later, he will report to the police. Later, Kanazawa's confession will be confirmed as the truth, and his legacy, overnight, will become that of a madman. Now, though, lying caked in warm, soft feces, Juntaro just thinks how lucky it is that his mother couldn't be there to hear the final, unhinged laughter of their hero.

Charlee Olson

Where is My Moon?

A quick walk—a little quicker,
Steps turn to a shuffle.
A night wind chill, lighting flicker,
Not electric, shock muffled.

These eyes on the shine provided,
Steps follow its outline.
My throat closes, a breath baited,
These feet no longer mine.

I feel the glow from a distance,
Hands outstretched for its warmth.
Darkness creeping with persistence,
My sight was now deformed.

And in one ill-fated motion,
All given light was gone.
The Heavens a purple potion,
Eyes won't adjust till dawn.

Chelsea Jackson

Self-Portrait as Carrion: A Duplex

Where do you lay a head filled with blowflies—
hum-buzz on pillow stained with the meat of dreams.

My dreams hunt a flesh I can never slip into.
I am chased by a self I can never escape.

When escaping yourself make sure others know
you're gone. Make sure you leave burnt breadcrumbs.

Leave breadcrumbs by the head of your bed
to leach-lick the violence behind your closed eyes.

Close your eyes and wish violence on the violent
if only to stop the hemorrhaging.

Does a new cut divert the hemorrhage? When
the blood forgets to pool you know you're asleep.

No matter the hour, I can never sleep.
Where do you lay a head filled with blowflies?

C.R. Barnett

The Deep One Beckons

As tendrils tighten around my neck,
like a noose strangling every breath.

A cosmic silence echoes despair,
my brain in madness—an endless stare.

In depths and darkness my home stripped bare,
empty, callous, like rotting air.

The walls beside me, cold and cramped,
bring demons out from this maddening lamp.

My mind, a cult—its altar damp,
with prayers to Gods on knees and hand.

No answer but silence, just chaos inside,
living in death while being alive.

No fathom, no thought—just tighten the knot,
sinking further, alone and distraught.

Acceptance of torture, dismembering fears,
like crippling gears—the end is near.

The Deep One beckons.

Cristina Bryan

On Mullens Creek Farm

When Mamaw died on the farm outside Mullens, we were afraid the ground was too hard for us to dig a grave the normal way, so we called Picky Pickins. He didn't tell us any stuff, like why we don't use Jennings Funeral Parlor for the embalming and such, or don't you need a license to bury a dead body on your own property. He just agreed to bring his John Deere baby backhoe all the way from Springs to do the job. It cost my husband a hundred dollars, but that was our only real expense.

As soon as this heavy rain stopped, we wanted to plant her out in the western meadow, on the high ground right near that fork of Mullens Creek, next to where Papaw was already waiting. We'd get around to registering her death at the courthouse sometime soon. My husband would get the coffin made, and we'd prepare her body for a decent Christian burial and say a few words, and that would be that.

The very morning we found her dead, which was Saturday, I called my cousin Nettie, and she came over to give me a hand. The only real job we had to do was wash her body and shroud her with a big piece of clean linen sheet. Washing a dead person's body is a sacred task, and Nettie thanked me for letting her have the privilege to do it with me. We filled two basins with warm water and used these soft sponges I had, and clean bath towels. We did her head to toe, and I really mean head to toe, she may never have been so clean in her life. I could imagine Mamaw saying, even in her grumpy voice, "Thank you, girls." I suppose she sometimes appreciated what folks did for her.

I should tell you her death was kind of mysterious. Her sheets were all messed up, and her pillow was next to her face. We didn't care for any of the neighbors or the people in town to hear about. It was none of their business. Besides, it might have been a natural death.

But if not, why did it happen? We could figure maybe why.

For a long time, there'd been rumors of how Papaw had left Mamaw ten solid gold American Liberty coins, mint, value $100 each in the twenties, but each worth much more now. Where did he get them? From his uncle, who was a pretty well-to-do coin dealer in Parkersburg during the Depression, when people with money could buy up just about anything that desperate folks were selling. Now they were Mamaw's, though they were to come to my husband as his inheritance when she passed.

The story was practically a local legend, including the fact that she had them squirrelled away somewhere. The funny thing is that the legend was true, though we told everybody it wasn't. Was gold like that worth killing her for? Well, at that place and in those times, sure. It was miraculous it hadn't already happened. I might say we scoured her room the next day but didn't find the gold coin one.

But there was a big new complication that week. You probably know the West Virginia State Hospital for the Criminally Insane is in Beckley, less than ten miles away. Hospital escapes

had happened before. This time, everybody was saying, it was this guy we'd all read about—somebody from Charleston who was not right in the head. I thought he could have heard about Mamaw and her valuable coins; she was right there in the neighborhood of his loony bin. Maybe he snuffed her out with her pillow, then searched till he found her stuff. Who couldn't use the money, especially if you need to make a getaway?

Her death wasn't the only misfortune to happen. Saturday was the three farmhands' day off. They never got back from living it up in Beckley till after midnight. Early the next morning, after Mamaw's death, my husband went down to the bunk cabin to tell them she'd died. He wanted their help making the coffin, and otherwise, he was going to give them another day off.

He could see right away that two of the men were gone, and the third, named Franklin Burroughs, was still in bed. He was dead, actually, with bloodshot pop-eyes wide open. From the bruises on his throat, it looked like he might have been strangled.

"I have to get the sheriff," he said as soon as he got back to the house. "I guess I need to tell him about Mamaw after all. And now Franklin has got himself murdered, and the other two have run away. Keep the doors locked, and don't let anybody in till I get back."

I might as well tell you that two days later, the authorities caught the nutcase over in Harper's Ferry, with no gold. When they heard about Mamaw, too, they decided that Franklin must have smothered Mamaw late at night and stolen her famous coins. After Franklin killed her and found the coins, they figured that Boyd and Arthur robbed him and then killed him. Then they naturally skedaddled. They were all pretty low-type people. The authorities began a statewide search and broadcast the news that we should all be on the lookout for anybody with big gold US coins in their possession.

On that day, though, after my husband had gone into town to fetch the sheriff, I went back upstairs with some clean bed linens, a fresh towel, and a wet rag. I unwrapped Mamaw, then changed her bottom sheet, the rolling way hospital nurses do with immobilized patients. I toweled off her damp hair till it was mostly dry. Then I lay another big towel near the lower end of the bed and took my time washing away the dried mud from the bottoms of her feet.

Dan Thompson

Sonnets from Hell

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita...

So here I am: the middle part of life—
the time when generation tests its power.
I'd like more time to spend with children and wife,
but work lays claim to most of my waking hours.
I'm quite well paid for what I do at work;
I've been promoted twice these last three years.
I started many years ago as clerk,
but worked and made the most of my career
and here I am: Department Head of Sales.
I fear my kids don't realize what it takes.
It takes hard work to win, and he who fails
can never have security. The stakes
are high. They need to stay in school.
(I wish they'd not rebel and act like fools.)

The time is passing faster every year.
My life's accelerated pace leaves not
a spare moment, but things cannot be bought
with looks, and friends (however close and dear),
I've noticed, tend to turn an empty ear
in your direction when you're not so hot.
You start to slip, and soon your life is caught
in failure's claws: the end of your career.
But I've done well, and now my oldest son
desires a job that's very much like mine.
My daughter, though, says she's in love with one
who has no job, no plans. His artwork's fine,
but painting's no career. (It may be fun,
but when you're old, the world is not benign.)

My marriage has, of late, become absurd—
my wife and I just going through the motions.
We sometimes try to talk. Beyond the words
there's nothing, but I still cling to notions

that we should try to love each other. That
makes it worse. (In the end, who really cares?)
Besides, we've changed a lot. (She's getting fat,
I'm going bald; I soon will have no hair.)
I feel that time is catching up with me.
I feel a need to turn my life around.
I mostly feel a need for something new—
but what? Dissatisfaction cannot be
forever. "Mid-life crisis" has the sound
of something passing...
Will it soon be through?

David Radavich

Proximate

We're getting near the sun.
I've fallen and been down
but I am here. Getting near.
Leaves echo to the ground,
and when I look around
the world is emptying tears,
but flowers are blooming
in our vase, and below
the kitchen window
there's a faint trace
of sunlight that our eyes
follow to the home
where all truth lies.

Edward Garvey

What Night Leaves Within

Let me speak to you as if in a dream—
I wake with the sun, your hair on my face.
You are turned, as I turn from this stream
bent by thick glass though filtered through lace.
I make sure my skin touches your skin
before I retrieve what night leaves within.
I am in a field, burnt by a drought.
A crow stands before me, large as the moon.
It says, “All of this will be turned all about.”
I fear the crow’s beak. I dwell on its ruin.
When you stir from sleep, you move the covers.
Before we can speak, we speak as lovers.
What night leaves within his fading abyss,
the softest of dawns forgets with her kiss.

Eliza Morgan

Ancient Ghost

I am haunted by a memory,
A ghost who walked those halls.
And though I didn't know it long,
I am where the ghoul belongs.
It buries itself inside my skin,
And dormant does it lay
Until, emerging in a dream,
It sees the light of day.
It's all-consuming, gnawing at me.
I know this isn't right,
But part of me needs the ghost,
Though I won't sleep at night.
The haunt is exhilarating,
and not the life I've built so well.
I tread one step from insanity
Maybe I just need the thrill.
Or could it be possible
That once I loved a ghost,
Or knew that feeling possible
Until it vanished with its host?
Now the host has left me empty,
A hole I long to fill
With ghostly memories of a man.
We pretend he knows me still.
That just as much as I do him,
He thinks about the times
When we were driving, hand in hand,
When he pulled me in so tight.
It's been one and half a decade!
Why can't time dissolve
This constant nagging in my gut,
Some mystery to solve?
Why can't I be nonchalant?
Why can't I move along?
Why can't I meet my life where it is?
I'm tired of feeling wrong.

For every step I gladly take,
And every great reprieve,
It lies in wait to take me back
To red-tinted memories.
So, Ghost, please tell me, what's the answer?
What do I need from you
To free me from this cursèd haunt?
Let no more time accrue!
Do I need you to think of me,
Or is that dangerous to know?
What if nothing is enough?
What if reason I forgo?
What if I loved you and you loved me back?
Then, where would we be?
Stuck more than a life apart,
Farther than we conceive.
What if you think I'm crazy,
Or don't think of me at all?
I really don't want to know
What other problem that might cause.
So, maybe I just sit here,
In a limbo of my own design,
Stuck with the ghost of your memory,
Haunting me through mine.

Hannah Dilday

Walking on Eggshells

Inspired by the nursery rhyme, "Humpty Dumpty"

Miss Humpty Dumpty broke herself
because she had become a shell
of what she was, too scared to make a sound.
Look who has to walk on her eggshells now.

Haylee Buscay

Death, Delivered in Silence

All the best poisons come with a thrill—
a dark-crimson room, seduction,
the velvet curtain of the puppeteer theater.
An elation to be someone else,
if only temporarily.
Addiction doesn't ask for a name.
A rolled-up dollar bill, gliding heavenward.
Chasing ghosts across white dust.
Liquid powder, slick and bitter,
trailing down the throat.
Burnt lungs—an escape, disguised as warmth.
The smell of cat piss on crinkled foil,
chasing the dragon in zigzags.
Frantic, searching for a viable vein,
hunting flesh for a willing line,
a piercing jab dissolving into pleasure,
ecstasy flirting with fear.
The loneliness doesn't hurt,
just hover, sorrow waiting for its cue
in the hush between scenes.

• • •

Stuck in a funhouse full of mirrors,
eyes too empty, grin too wide.
Sharp bones, a fading frame.
The man has left the room,
but the body has stayed,
an echoed reflection.
Taunting that violated face,
the glass begins to shatter.
Why reach out to stop it
when the pieces won't fit anymore?
Deeper in the carnival of chaos—
a hall full of masks.
Which ones have yet to be tried on?

Surely not the ones
made of porcelain skin,
with no room for scars?
The masks didn't lie—
they just said nothing at all.

• • •

In this basement with no clocks
time is lost, hours erased.
Forgetting is a sort of ritual here
where guilt doesn't follow.
Family photos gather dust,
empty chair, long abandoned.
while chasing oblivion—
Particles shine where the light hits,
glittery specks, each mote a memory,
—now a sanctuary of ash.
Some debts are written in years
behind a beautiful mahogany desk,
calculating a toll to pay.
What is the price of a life?
Redemption needs time,
but time doesn't unravel in reverse.
When dancing with demons,
it's easier to overdose on escape.

Holly Lamond

Haiku #1

I lie on the shore
A poem begins to form
Written by the waves

John Peter Beck

Maybe One More for the Road

He dreamt only of bed
and her, long gone.
The scotch doubles,

the hour transformed
the road's shoulder
into her shoulder, soft, cozy

in winter flannel, held
by a thin silk strap in summer,
hidden within the feather lightness

of the pillow, gesturing,
inviting him to move closer
and into its caress.

Ignoring the alarm,
he rolled over
and drifted back to sleep.

Kaelyn Jake

Butter Knife

They don’t warn you about waking after
When you never planned to wake up at all.
They tear down the rope hung from the rafter
And distract you with crafts and a stress ball.
Of course, you did not consider before
The constant surveillance that's worse than death.
Twenty years old, sleeping on your mom’s floor,
Silent crying masked by her serene breath.
They lock all your drawers, steal your privacy,
Giving you a butter knife for your steak.
You can’t be trusted with your own car key,
Going to the store feels like a jailbreak.
They promise life will get better with time,
For now, you suffer the weight of your crime.

Kira Rosemarie

Triolet for a Murder

See me counting all the murder.
Minerva, can you hear them sing?
Corvid cries, a dense, strong warder
See me counting all the murder?
In the trees, a dense, safe harbor
By me perched thousands of black wings
Signs for those of goddess, daughter
Minerva, can you hear them sing?

Kyle Garrison

Decadence

I am in love with a dead woman. She's there, lying in the middle of the room, flies buzzing around her decomposing body. I can't remember how long it's been. I kind of like it, the comfort she offers, or rather, the lack thereof. It's addictive.

I step over her tangled mess of hair as I make my way to the kitchen. The coffee maker gurgles, and I pour a cup for myself and one for her. I know she won't drink it, but it feels wrong not to offer, especially since the deep, bitter aroma now dominates the house. As I turn back, I notice her bony fingers have moved slightly, reaching towards me. I tell myself it's just the natural processes of decay, but deep down, I know better.

"Here, have a cup," I say, setting down the mug on the side table near her body. "Yeah, I know. But it's not really a gift as much as a nice gesture. No strings attached."

I sit down on my black leather couch and take a sip out of my own mug, beginning to scroll through my social feeds. We used to do this together for hours. We still do, but now I relay my findings aloud rather than forwarding them to her DMs. I like it better this way—I guess she does, too.

I sigh and take another sip before looking back up at my love. The warming sensation of the coffee reminds me of the feelings she used to conjure within me. Not everyone is lucky enough to be in love. It might not be ideal, but at least I have that.

Our cozy moment is interrupted by a ping that cuts through the silence—my sister, again. I can't tell her exactly what's going on, but she should take the hint that I won't be responding anytime soon; the 12 unanswered messages from her nag at me, filling my already overloaded guilty conscience. No, I didn't kill the woman lying in the middle of my room if that's what you're thinking.

I toss my phone across the couch. Out of sight, out of mind—that's how I've been dealing with a lot of things lately. I look back at *her*, sprawled across my living room floor. She hasn't moved, not really, but somehow, she seems closer. Always closer, no matter how much distance I try to put between us.

I stand up, carefully stepping around her outstretched arm, bloated and bruised. Maybe I'll go for a walk, clear my head. But even as I reach for my coat, I know she'll be there when I get back. She always is. I look out the window, the Sun warm on my face, forcing me to squint to view the tree branches swaying gently in the wind. Pointless.

So, I sit back down, the couch squeaking with apparent support.

"Stop," I say to no one in particular. I might have said it to her, maybe to myself, maybe to the kids outside riding their bikes. Doesn't matter; we stopped all the same.

I lean back, staring at the ceiling. The paint is peeling in the corner where the roof leaked last winter. I should fix that. I should do a lot of things. But every task, every decision feels monumental with her watching. Judging.

I glance at her face—or what's left of it. Her eyes are sunken now, but I swear I can still feel them fixated on me. "What do you want from me?" I ask. No response.

She's beautiful. Even still, with her unkempt appearance. I can't tell anybody. They'd say, "Her? You're insane." And I know they'd be right. That's why I can't tell anybody.

She wasn't always like this. Her laugh, her smile, the way her eyes lit up when she talked about music. Now those same eyes stare blankly. Accusing.

I want to look away, but I can't. I'm drawn to her, even now. Especially now. Because, well, now she can't leave. She's mine forever, in all her decaying glory. And isn't that what love is? Decadence?

I reach for my guitar, propped against the wall where I left it months ago. A thin layer of dust coats the strings. She loved when I played for her. Now, as I strum a discordant chord, I wait for a reaction that never comes. The music feels hollow, echoing in the silence of the room. I used to think we'd create a new, meaningful series of notes; I mean, I always knew we'd never create a symphony. But now I realize it's just the same few notes. It was always those same, unforgiving notes. But I keep playing, even if she can't. What else is there to do? I am in love with a dead woman, after all.

I set the grimy guitar back in its place and lay down on my couch, facing her, of course. I smile. Tears begin to form in the corners of my eyes, and I quickly wipe them away with the backs of my hands, still smiling. "I hate you, you know that? You're the only person capable of this." She continued her blank stare.

The white rug on which she lay was soaked in fluids oozing from her insides. It's obvious she's not coming back. I should clean that up. I've been saying that for… how long now?

The stain will never come out. I know that. Just like I know she's gone. Really gone. Not just emotionally unavailable or mentally checked out like before. This is different. Final. Yet here I am, still talking to her, still expecting...what? A miracle? A sign? I laugh, the sound harsh in the quiet room. Who am I kidding? The only sign I'm going to get is when the neighbors start complaining about the smell. But they won't, will they? Because there is no smell. There never has been. I know that. Just like I know she's not really there, lying in my living room.

"Are you finished?" I say. I snap my head in her direction. I can't feel my face. "Why'd you do this to me? To us?" Her empty gaze answers with indifference.

I laugh and scramble to start my playlist. That's all I listen to now. We used to listen to more, but I've distilled it down to the essentials.

"Sorry," I apologize with the click of the speakers sounding the first track. "You didn't like my tastes anyways." The music vibrates the speakers, then the floor. I still can't feel my face.

I lean forward, elbows on my knees, and press my palms against my eyes until I see stars. When I look up, she's still there. Of course, she is. I won't let her leave. Except she is leaving, isn't she? The rot spreads a little more each day, claiming another inch of what used to be her. I wonder, absently, how long it will take before there's nothing left but bones. Will I love her

then? Will I still make her coffee and play her songs? I snort, a sound that scrapes against my throat. Who am I kidding? I'll probably polish her bones, arrange them just so, and call it art. My masterpiece of decay. I stand up, my legs unsteady and walk over to her. Kneeling beside what remains of her face, I whisper, "I love you. Always will." Her perfume smells like a musty cave.

I stand up, my knees creaking in protest. The room spins for a moment, and I steady myself against the wall. "Shall I make you a sandwich, too?"

I shuffle to the kitchen, my feet scratching the dirty floor. The fridge opens with a sickly gasp. Empty, save for a carton of milk weeks past its expiration date and a withered apple. I shrug and grab the apple, wiping it half-heartedly on my shirt before taking a bite. It's dry, tasteless. Just like everything else these days.

Returning to the living room, I pause in the doorway. From this angle, in the fading afternoon light, I can almost pretend she's just sleeping. Almost.

"Sorry, it's not a sandwich. We should go shopping," I say, kneeling beside her again. I place the half-eaten apple in her outstretched hand.

I make my way back and sink into the couch, watching her. The shadows lengthen, casting strange patterns across her body. In this light, I swear I see her chest rise and fall.

Just a trick of the light. It has to be. And yet, I can't look away. What if she moves again? What if this time, she opens her eyes, sits up, tells me she loves me?

"Did you see that?" I whisper, leaning forward. "You moved, didn't you?" Silence.

A soft thud breaks the stillness. The apple has rolled off her hand, leaving a trail of brown rot on her mottled skin.

I slide off the couch and crawl towards her. The carpet is damp beneath my hands. I pretend not to notice.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, retrieving the apple. "I should have cut it for you."

My fingers brush against her arm as I place the apple back in her hand. Her skin is cold, waxy.

"We should celebrate," I say suddenly, the idea blossoming in my mind like a fever dream. We didn't have an anniversary, so might as well start a new tradition.

I struggle to my feet, swaying slightly. The kitchen seems miles away, but I make it, fumbling through drawers until I find what I'm looking for. A single, slightly bent birthday candle and a book of matches. I grab the half-empty bottle of whiskey from the counter.

Back in the living room, I carefully push the candle into the apple's flesh. It takes three tries to light the match with my shaking hands.

"Make a wish," I whisper as the tiny flame sparks to life. In its glow, the shadows dance across her face. For a moment, just a moment, I see her smile.

The candle burns down quickly, wax dripping onto the apple, onto her hand. I should move it. I don't.

"What did you wish for?" I ask, knowing there will be no answer. "I wished for this to never end. For us to be together, always." I feel my insides fill with that warming feeling again.

The flame flickers out, plunging the room back into twilight. I feel a shift in the air. A presence. Movement.

"Darling?" I breathe, hardly daring to hope. "Is that you?"

"Yes."

I perk up, seeing now that her wish was to come back to me. The liquor bottle lay empty next to my feet; she must have been thirsty.

"Can I get you anything else?"

"No." Her voice is low, scratchier than I remember. I move to light another match.

She interrupts, "Don't. You'll regret it." I pause.

"How do you know what I'll regret?"

"It's not the first time." She wheezes.

"I know. But I've changed." The air grows colder, and I feel a damp hand caress my cheek. I close my eyes, lean in. "I missed you. Will you stay?"

"I can't. You know that."

"But I've changed. Don't you see?" The cold hand slides down my face and across my neck. Another hand brushes my chest and grasps the other side of my neck, pulling me forward. Ice-cold air stings my face, her breath.

She chokes on her words, "I need you."

Lisa Kuzma

The Open Door

Emma is soaring. She's gliding under an infinite blue sky, the sun warming her feathered back as she rides a wild current of wind.

Below her, a patchwork quilt of amber, sage, and copper. A crimson barn. Treetops. Housetops. A narrow ribbon of highway. Tiny vehicles carry tiny people through their tiny lives. She dips low, skims along a field to get a closer look.

In a red convertible, a young raven-haired woman smiles into the rear-view mirror. Her three-year old son—blonde curls and blue eyes shining in the morning sunlight—sings his ABC's. Pitch perfect. They reach the city's suburbs. Emma follows, dipping and swerving, rising and turning, dodging trees, power lines, and houses in her flight path. When they stop at a park, she watches them from the branches of a newly planted elm.

Singing gives way to silence, blue sky and sunlight to darkness. Emma tries to take flight, but her wings are pinned to her ribs. She is heavy. Weighted. She struggles to hold on to the branch, to the young woman, to the boy, as the dream evaporates into reality.

She opens her eyes to the usual dim shadows—a dresser, a table, an old wooden chair. As she sits up, a spring pops in the lumpy mattress beneath her, and the heavy wool blanket scratches against her skin as it slides down her body.

Footsteps cross the floor above her. The distant sound of running water. It's morning.

Emma feels her way across the cold cement and finds the switch. A single bulb hangs from the ceiling; her only significant light source. There's a small window, but little light filters through. It's covered with bars and a fine coat of dust. A black and white cat jumps down into the window well. He stares at Emma through the murky glass, tracking her movements.

A key grates in the lock, followed by the familiar groan of hinges as the door swings open. The man she knows only as Frank enters, carrying a tray—toast and juice—which he places on the table along with his key.

He doesn't touch her anymore. He has grown old and tired; his eyes dull and his gait heavy. A small mercy.

"Good morning, Frank," she says.

He grunts in response, not bothering to make eye contact.

She longs for conversation. Will even settle for 'the good old days' when he'd complain about what a 'burdensome bitch' she was.

He leaves. Emma watches as he shuffles up the steps. It takes a moment to process...

The door. It's open.

She listens for Frank's returning footsteps. Instead, she hears the low murmur of the TV in the living room above and the grumble of aging coils as Frank settles into his favorite chair. Minutes pass. From where she stands in the doorway, she can see up the stairs to the screen door.

Beyond that, the blessed blue sky, bird song, and, in the distance, the whir of a lawn mower, the wail of a siren.

Moving quickly, Emma finds her shoes. She grabs her sweater from the back of the chair, sliding her arms through the sleeves.

The sweater is old and worn. Her shoes, too, are old, but not worn.

Before walking through the open door, she checks her pocket for her only true treasure. A stone in the shape of a heart

She takes a deep breath and creeps up the stairs on shaky legs, pausing to listen on the top step.

No sound but the TV, and Frank, already snoring in his chair. She pushes on the screen door, cringes as it squeals open. Closes it behind her, mindful not to let it slam.

She walks. Away from the house. The harsh blaze of the sun burns her eyes. Vivid details—red car, blue sky, yellow leaves—an assault of primary colors, so garish after her gloomy, monochromatic world. A van rumbles by, music thumping through open windows, matching the manic beat of her heart. She shivers and pulls her sweater tight around her. The crisp autumn air is replete with familiar odors. Wood smoke, car exhaust, decaying autumn leaves. The scent of freshly cut grass awakens a distant memory. Emma, a child of nature, self-possessed, lying in the back yard watching ordinary clouds transform themselves into angels, doves, and teddy bears. A magical time, when she fearlessly inhabited her own skin.

She continues on. Moves past houses, parked cars, mailboxes, and trash cans. A car creeps up behind her. As it draws closer, she dares to look. Not Frank. Just a small, elderly woman peering at her over the steering wheel.

Emma comes to a busy intersection. Vehicles speed by in both directions. A truck backfires, sending a voltaic jolt through her body. She turns away and catches her reflection in a plate-glass window. Her hair, no longer the glossy black of a raven's wing, is long and matted, gun-metal grey. Her face, drawn and sallow. Eyes, dark-circled and hollow. Old, tattered clothing hangs loosely from a thin frame. She looks past the unpleasant image to a smartly dressed, faceless mannequin.

She turns away, crosses the sidewalk, and steps onto the street. The piercing shriek of tires, a car bucks to a stop just inches from her knees. The driver, a young man with fierce eyes.

"Get off the fuckin' road, ya crazy old hag!"

She stumbles back to the curb. The kid tears away, tires screeching.

A bus pulls to a stop in front of her. Passengers emerge, jostle past. Most are dressed in business attire. They all move quickly and appear distracted. Some hold small devices to their ears and speak even as they walk. Somebody bumps hard into her shoulder. A teenage girl, with fuchsia hair and a ring stabbed through her bottom lip, staring down at the same type of device in her hand, fingers working intently. She looks at Emma vacantly, without apologizing.

Further up the street and around the corner, she finds herself standing before a wrought-iron fence. She walks through the open gate into a different world. Tall, graceful elms. Neat,

manicured lawns. Winding pathways. A light breeze stirs up the leaves on the ground. They swirl about her feet. She is standing before a familiar statue. A concrete angel bearing concrete wings.

She follows a path she knows will lead to a playground. The slide is new. But the swing set is still there. Its swings have been replaced. Several layers of paint on the frame. She can almost hear his sweet little voice as he runs to her, hand outstretched.

"For you, Mommy!"

She rubs her fingers over the stone in her pocket.

He'd be a grown man now.

A falling leaf scrapes her tear-dampened cheek.

Perhaps married, children of his own. Happy. Completely unaware that he was snatched from his mother and sold to the highest bidder.

She reaches out and pushes an empty swing.

Emma finds a patch of grass. She lies on her back and stares up at the sky. No clouds, but a massive murmuration of starlings appears, wheeling and turning in unison. Many years ago, a naïve, young, teenage version of Emma wrote a poem. She closes her eyes, searches her memory for the words.

I wish
to see the world thru the eyes of the wing-ed ones
to liberate my body from the burden of gravity
to rise high above the cat's sinister watch
and sing myself into the crimson light of the setting sun.

A shadow falls over Emma. A heavy-set patrolman with a baton.

"No squatters in the park! Move along!"

As she struggles to her feet, he jabs her in the ribs and leans in close enough for her to smell his fetid breath.

"This is a family park. Get your vagrant ass outta here."

She walks. Past the empty swing set. Past the angel made of stone. In the distance, a child's laughter. But she doesn't look back.

• • •

Frank is sitting at the kitchen table, hands cupped around a coffee mug, staring at the swallows feeding outside the window. His shoulders tense as she opens the screen door and steps inside, but he doesn't look at her.

She climbs down the stairs. The key is still on the table. She puts it in the lock and pulls the door shut behind her.

She slips off her shoes, crawls into bed, draws the blanket to her chin, and closes her eyes.

Outside the window, a black and white cat claws at the glass.

Maria Corcoran

Melancholia

How many lifetimes has it been
Since the sun sank into sleep?
How long have I warred within
This mind with ravines abyss-deep?

There is an end to everything
But will my will be first to die?
Would I even care for spring
If all my rivers have run dry?
It only makes the truth hurt worse
When your strength is born in lies
So, I know better than to hope
For better things and better times

(Yet when hope fills my head
Only then do I know deep inside
Though my heart is cold and dead
It still yearns to feel alive)

Mark Lilley

Sick Day

When I entered you for the first time,
you said *there's no going back,*

and I repeated *there's no going back,*
and the sex that followed was not raw

like we imagined, and left us with an ache
that lingered beyond the last thrust

as my forehead rested on yours,
and beyond the spooning

when you handed me my belt
as we dressed under fluorescent lights,

and beyond the motel curtains into rush hour
when every honked horn was muted,

and beyond the bedtime routine
when we assured our spouses

it was just another day at the office,
and into the morning when I overheard you

tell our boss that you were feeling better,
and that your migraine had passed.

Melany Urena

Grief

That old dog sits at my ankle,
small and yappy, with a bite
sinking dull pain into the bone.

The wretched thing looks up at me
with bulging eyes and yellowed fangs,
a rib cage pressed beneath a sack of skin.

But in the night, grief no longer
bares its teeth.

It whimpers, and I know
it is starving for love
that won't return.

Nathan Perrin

Numb

Jeremiah woke up at 3:51 AM. He remembered the plans he made with his favorite sex worker, Stacie.

Shit.

He checked his phone: "*Babe, sorry. I got distracted. I haven't seen you in a few weeks. I hope life is treating you well. Xoxoxo."*

His back cracked as he stood up and walked to the bathroom.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

He turned on the light.

His eyes immediately fell on the coffee mug with two toothbrushes: one pink, one green. His finger traced the pink toothbrush.

Lindsey.

Jeremiah splashed water on his face and stared into the mirror.

"Fucking hell," he whispered.

No answer.

It was usually that way.

Jeremiah sighed, turned off the light, and tried to go back to sleep.

• • •

A few hours later, Jeremiah brushed his hair and put on green scrubs. Another night, another dollar.

He went downstairs and opened up a lockbox full of prescription narcotics. He smiled. A good load tonight.

He walked out of his apartment building. Another cold Chicago morning, Christmas lights everywhere. He still wasn't used to it after moving there for school. California was different. Brighter. Warmer.

• • •

The clients that night were the usual: depressed stay-at-home moms needing a little oxy, anxious college students needing benzos. He wasn't working the emergency room until the next shift, but his signature style was a nurse's uniform. Clients always knew him by his scrubs, and to meet him in an alley near Dearborn Street.

"Is it busy tonight?" asked a regular speedo client.

"You know the same shit," Jeremiah sighed. "You got the stuff?"

"Yeah."

"The speedo client gave the cash to Jeremiah. He took the wad of cash and started to count it.

"C'mon, man… You know I'm good for it."

"This is the deal, friend. I gotta keep safe in this business, too."

"No one here is a saint."

Jeremiah nodded, "Okay, here's your Adderall."

"Thanks for not being a fuckin' weirdo. Last Addie guy was off his rocker."

Jeremiah forced a smile. "Not a problem. It's what I'm here for."

As the client walked away, Jeremiah nodded, looked at the ground: No one here is a saint.

• • •

Jeremiah drank gin at the bar. Next to him was a familiar face, a sex worker named Shelly.

"I don't got enough in the budget for you tonight," Jeremiah answered preemptively. Shelly and he were used to starting business there.

"Are you feeling down, hon?" Shelly brushed her blonde hair back.

"I don't feel much."

"How about one on the house?"

"You'd do that for me?"

"Of course, I would. You're one of my regulars. Why wouldn't I give you a piece here or there?"

Brief thoughts of Lindsey entered Jeremiah's mind, dissipated.

"That's sure sweet of you, Shelly," Jeremiah brushed her hair back.

• • •

Ten minutes later, Jeremiah slipped on his bottoms as Shelly adjusted her makeup in the mirror. Flatulent sounds and smells rose from the stalls behind them.

"What's your story, honey?" Shelly asked.

"Why do you care?" Jeremiah splashed water on his face.

"You're my saddest John, and that's sayin' something."

"I told you I don't feel much."

"Bullshit. There's somethin' under that outside—that professional hairdo, that halfway decent smile. You could be doing well for yourself. But you're not. Why's that?"

"Look, I'm not exactly the world-class expert in Sex Work 101, but isn't it frowned on to get your clients' identity?"

"I get curious! Can't blame a girl. I notice the tan line on your ring finger. How long have you been divorced?"

Jeremiah shook his head, “I’m not going to talk about that. You need benzos or prescriptions; you know where to find me.”

“Alright, hon. It’s fun doing business with you.”

“Same to you.”

• • •

Jeremiah put out his cigarette as soon as he saw someone enter the alley.

“Got any benzos?” the voice asked.

“Yessir,” Jeremiah replied as he reached into his pocket.

“Do I know you from somewhere?”

“I don’t fucking know. That’ll be $150 for thirty.”

“Shit… Jeremiah? From NA?”

Jeremiah’s heart skipped a beat, “Yeah?”

“You still sober?”

“Unfortunately. I’m going to guess you’re not…?”

“Yeah, it’s Ben. Remember me?”

“Vaguely.”

“Shit, man… How’d you end up here? Weren’t you in seminary—married?”

“We’re not here to talk about my personal life, man. Do you want to get fucked up or not?”

“Yeah, yeah… But don’t you feel weird pushing these things, knowing the harm they do? You’re an addict and a nurse.”

Jeremiah bit his lip. “I don’t feel much anymore, man.”

Ben sighed, took out some cash, and handed it to Jeremiah.

“I’m sorry that shit’s not looking up for you.”

“Same to you.”

“We’re all just trying to survive the night, you know? Life is so fucking hard. They didn’t warn us of anything. You’re born one minute and expected to know how to maintain all this bullshit. It’s not fair. None of it is.”

Jeremiah nodded slowly.

• • •

Christmas carols played around Jeremiah as he walked towards the hospital.

Just get through the night. It’ll all be over soon.

He entered the hospital and went to the billing department.

The receptionist recognized him.

“Here to pay your bill for Lindsey?” she asked.

“Yes, miss.” Jeremiah nodded as he took out a thick wad of cash.

• • •

Jeremiah held Lindsey's hand in silence, sometimes brushing it gently with his finger. Coma for a few months ever since their car wreck. Around her bed were cards and stuffed animals.

He kissed her forehead, held her close as the machines next to her beeped.

"Jeremiah?" a doctor asked behind him.

Jeremiah stood up, "Yeah?"

"There's something you should see."

• • •

"These brain scans are showing promising activity," the doctor said as he pointed to regions of the brain that lit up.

"What does that mean?" Jeremiah asked.

"It means she's coming out of it slowly. We don't have a timeframe for it yet, but it's certain. Your prayers have been working."

Jeremiah chuckled.

"What? I thought you were in seminary to become some kind of priest?"

"I was."

"So you haven't been praying?"

"Not since the night we had the car accident. God and I aren't on speaking terms right now."

"Gotcha. Well, keep showing up for her. We'll see what happens next. I haven't seen anything like this. Thank God you agreed with her last wishes to keep fighting. Must've been hard on you, financially and emotionally,"

"Thanks, doctor."

"Are you doing okay?"

Jeremiah shrugged. "I'm doing how I'm doing. That's all I can tell you."

• • •

A few minutes later, Jeremiah held Lindsey's hand.

"Honey… I don't know if you can hear me, but you might be out of this soon. I didn't think I was ever going to see you again. It's been a dark few months. I've done things I'm not proud of. I'm just… surviving. I guess. But you lit up my whole life, and that light hasn't come back yet.

"I hope you can forgive me for what I had to do to make it… to make sure you got the care you needed. I hope we can go back to the way it used to be, before all this shit happened. Before the numbness and the grief."

Lindsey's right index finger brushed up briefly against Jeremiah's thumb.

He lay his head on her chest, listened to her breathe.

• • •

Morning. Another hard night's work. He had a hospital shift in a few hours.

He came into his apartment, undressed. Showered.

Afterwards, he sat on his bed and looked at Lindsey's side. Her Bible was still on the nightstand. He grabbed it, traced the cross on top with his fingertips.

No one is a saint… We're all just trying to survive the night.

A single tear fell down his face, onto the Bible cover.

He opened his nightstand, took out his wedding ring, looked at it.

As he put it back on, a warmth inside briefly flickered. A promise of better days.

Sara Hoerl

Oh, Blanche

I walked through white woods
where boulders lay cloaked by the blizzard,
posing as pillows, frigid air strangles my throat,
and I noticed bloody footprints in the snow
tracing back to your tune of tragedies.

Spells you cast swift through the trees;
escorting you on the road to belonging,
elusive thoughts of a home cross your mind.
You would poison the sunlit sky to relish in darkness,
gleaming beneath a paper moon that's kept its promise.

Oh, but how this illusion collapsed,
stumbling down the mountain as an avalanche.
Piecing your youth back—the mosaic mask
conceals years of age, and cosmic cement holds its place.
Only in the light can I see the cracks in your portrait.

Now, they've run you out of town.
When you're desired by none, where do you go?

Rex Brooke

The Walkers

It had been over three months since Emmet had come home from the hospital, where the doctors had reset the clock to his heartbeat. Against the advice of everyone except his bar buddies at Dick's at the Bridge, where Emmett was a regular patron, Emmet went right back to drinking and losing money in a myriad of online gambling venues. He was tired all the time, and his heart would frequently thump like a tuba, and he spent his days sitting in his recliner doing crossword puzzles, thumbing through the internet, and planning his return to his acting career, which, truth be told, had never been much of a career.

Then spring arrived. The days were warm enough for the sun to transform the snow drifts into small blue tendrils of water, which snaked down the sidewalks. Trash that had been buried in the long winter's snow emerged like deformed tulips. The elms began to leaf out, and the songbirds returned, and Emmet felt for the first time since his operation the urge to try and get into some sort of physical shape. He was beginning to look like a water balloon. He thought about joining a gym but decided there would be too many self-absorbed people. Yoga classes were out of the question. Emmet could barely cross his legs. He finally settled on the idea of starting a regimen of going on walks. He would start slowly and work his way back up, running a 10K. The best part is that it wouldn't cost a dime. Maybe exercise would help with his lack of energy and with his constant headaches.

On the first Monday in April, he got up from his afternoon nap, put on a clean T-shirt, pulled on a pair of blue jogging pants with a white stripe down the side, and laced up a pair of blue jogging shoes. Finally, he donned a black, zip-up hoodie, topped it all with a grey knit beanie that an old girlfriend had given him, took the elevator down to the parking garage, got into his 22-year-old Cadillac, and drove to the All-Saints Cemetery. This would be the first installment on his promise to walk, every day, on the sidewalk around the perimeter of the cemetery.

The cemetery was nestled on a hump of earth and was girded by an eight-foot-high chain link fence embedded with vines of ivy, which, once they had leafed out, would provide privacy for the dead and for the various groups of mourners who cued up daily to witness the postscript to the final act.

The chain link fence also deterred the teenagers and other romantics who liked to sneak in at night and make love on the graves.

Emmet parked near the front gate, where a uniformed bulldog of a guard, who looked like Cerberus himself, was sitting in a small kiosk, watching an array of live cameras on a computer screen. Emmet sat in his car waiting for a break in the steady stream of pedestrians flowing past: there was a group of four joggers followed by a woman trotting behind a rather aerodynamic pram, who was followed by a middle aged couple with walking sticks, who were followed by two skate boarders doing all variety of tricks which were being videoed on a third

youth's cellphone. Finally, Emmet got out of his car, retied his shoelaces, and began to walk slowly down the sidewalk, counterclockwise to the odd parade.

The four joggers and the pram lady passed by twice before he had completed one lap. He was exhausted. Panting, with his back aching, he was approaching the entrance gate again when he noted a woman coming toward him. He glanced at her ever so briefly. She was tall, full of right angles, and was wearing a beige, full-length, down coat. Her black hair was pulled back into a short ponytail under her blue visor, showing her small ears, in which were embedded a pair of noise-cancelling earbuds. She was wearing dark glasses and black leather gloves and was swinging her arms like a drum major as she glided past, almost as if she were on wheels. She did not seem to look at him.

Emmet continued to his car and opened the door, but before he got in, he looked in the direction in which she was walking and watched until she had gone around the corner.

That night, Emmet lay in bed thinking about her. She reminded him of a girl he had once dated, 15 years before. The one who gave him the beanie. There was something in the way she moved. He began to hum an old Beatles song: "attracts me like no other lover."

Every day, for the rest of the week, at 3:00, Emmet would put on his blue jogging pants and blue jogging shoes, drive to the cemetery, and park as close to the gate as possible. He would then walk in a counterclockwise fashion, one time around the cemetery, silently counting his steps. By the fourth day, the walk was not any easier. Every day, he looked for the woman in the long coat. But she was not there.

The following Monday, however, as he ended his lap and was leaning on the trunk of his car, he saw her, coming toward him, wearing the same outfit: an ankle-length down jacket, blue visor, red shoes, dark glasses, black gloves. This time, Emmet did not lower his gaze as she approached, noting her angular shoulders, her clavicle, thin as a birthday candle, and that walk, which reminded him of a square-masted sailing ship. She strode by, looking straight ahead, pumping her arms, hands swinging like a seal's flippers, counterbalancing her stride while she sang off-key in a low voice what sounded like an aria from La Traviata. Once again, Emmet stood with his car door open and watched her disappear around the corner. "She has a very unusual stride," he thought. He got in and started the car.

That night, as he lay in bed, he replayed her image in his mind—the way she swung her arms, her conscious gait, her red shoes. And he rehearsed how the next time he saw her, he would say something—exactly what, he couldn't decide upon. He didn't want to seem like a sleazy pick-up artist. "Do you mind if I ask you a question? What is your name?" No, that was too aggressive. Something more non-committal. A simple "good afternoon." With a smile. Without a smile. But what if she wasn't looking at him? He couldn't just interrupt whatever she was concentrating on. Maybe he would just nod if she looked his way. No smile. Definitely no smile.

It was raining the following Monday. Not hard, but enough to require windshield wipers when he drove to the cemetery. There were very few people out. Emmet parked in his usual spot, got out, and commenced on his walk. The sidewalk was wet, but the light rain had stopped. As

he turned the final corner to his lap, he saw her in the distance, striding toward him. It seemed like she was looking at him, but he couldn't tell, and by the time she passed, she was definitely looking straight ahead. "Wow! Deja Vu," he said as she passed, but she either ignored him or couldn't hear him through her noise-cancelling ear buds, because she did not acknowledge his comment.

"Don't try to be ironic, idiot," he said to himself.

He continued with his exercise routine for the remainder of the week but never encountered her. Monday must be the only day she walked, he concluded.

The next Monday was the third day of a gradual warming trend. The snowbanks lining the street had now completely melted, and the vines on the chain link fence were beginning to obscure the view of the graveyard. All morning, Emmet sat thinking again of how to approach her. Because of the way in which she walked, he had thought about asking her if she was a dancer. Maybe she had injured herself, which caused her gait to be so deliberate. He tried a few lines. "Are you a dancer?" Or "You move like you were a dancer." Or "You move so gracefully. Were you a dancer?" Better to ask in the present tense. They can be so sensitive. Not *were*. *Are*. "Are you a dancer?" All his questions seemed to be so obnoxious. "Don't intrude," he said to himself. "It will just irritate her when she is obviously concentrating on her exercise routine." Still, what was it about her that was so intriguing?

That afternoon, Emmet dressed for the first time without his hoodie and beanie and waited by his front door until it was time to drive to the cemetery. Finding his regular parking spot taken, he had to park two blocks away from the entrance. He hurried back to the gate and, already out of breath, began his walk, fearful that being 10 minutes late would ruin his chances of an encounter.

However, as regular as a utility bill, when he came around the final corner, there she was, at the other end of the block, wearing the same uniform—the long coat, the gloves, the Jacqueline Kennedy dark glasses, moving toward him, on red shoes, arms swinging counterpoint to her stride. As they approached each other from opposite sides of the entrance gate, they had to stop and wait for the river of cars that was entering the cemetery. Between the vehicles flashed the stroboscopic image of her on the other side. She was walking in place. And she was looking right at him. Finally, the last of the funeral procession entered the gate, and Emmet and the woman resumed walking toward each other. "Must have been a big shot," Emmet blurted out as she passed.

She smiled over her shoulder as she continued on her way. "Not anymore."

Dark humor, he thought. A good sign. And what a smile! Surely it was some sort of invitation. Right then, Emmet decided that the following Monday, if they crossed paths, he would ask her name. How hard could that be? He would start with something clever. "I can set my watch by you, but I don't know your name." Or "We can't keep not meeting like this. I'm Emmet." At night, he practiced these lines, over and over, and wound up admonishing himself not to try to be clever or witty and to just be straightforward. Whatever that was.

The next Monday arrived. The spring day was fluffy and promising. In spite of not feeling well, Emmet started his usual walk at precisely the right time, stopping only once to watch a flock of ravens tumbling across the sky. Turning the last corner, he scanned to the end of the block and felt his feet get very heavy. There she was, standing still, looking through an opening in the ivied fence. He adjusted his gait and pressed forward. As he got closer, he could see that she was watching a group of mourners gathering around an open grave. As Emmet passed her, he stopped and, rather too loudly, said, "Hello!"

"Hello," she replied, glancing quickly at him before continuing to watch the internment.

"Nice day for a funeral," Emmet said, and immediately regretted it.

"Yes, it is," she answered.

"Yes," was all Emmet could think of saying.

"I'm Angela, by the way," she said suddenly.

"Perfect. Of course. Angela. Emmet here," he said, pointing to his head.

"I know, Emmet."

"That's me."

They stood looking at the burial ceremony for a few awkward moments. Suddenly, she looked at Emmet. "If you could, would you want to know exactly when you were going to die?"

"No." He laughed. "No way."

"That's what most people say, Emmet."

That was it. She looked away, put her earbuds back on, and resumed her walk.

That night, lying in bed, he wondered how she knew his name. Maybe it was just something she said. "I know, Emmet," meant to say, "I know someone named Emmet." But maybe she was really interested in him, and had somehow looked up his name, from his car license plate, probably. You could find anything on the internet. He said her name. "Angela." She had pronounced it *Aun-hel-la*, with a foreign emphasis. So, they were on a first-name basis. Great. Finally. He then began to think of all sorts of answers he should have had for her question about knowing when he was going to die. "It is why capital punishment is so wrong." Not a very intimate topic. How about "I wonder what my last thought will be." Better. He decided he would use that as an opening the next time he saw her. He would then invite her to coffee.

The following Monday, Emmet arrived early at the cemetery and waited nervously in his car until it was 3:15 exactly. He leaned forward and looked in his rear-view mirror. He arranged his hair several times and then got out and proceeded on his walk. There was a tingling in his left arm, and it was harder than usual to breathe. He looked at his watch. It had stopped. He shook it, hoping to jar it to life, but it was still frozen at 3:23 p.m. He started walking again. He was dizzy. He thought about turning around and going home to bed, but he had to see her. He continued, with difficulty, down the sidewalk. Before he reached the first corner, there she was, coming toward him. She was walking with her characteristic stride. Her long coat was unzipped and was fluttering like a pair of wings. He stopped, held his arms out wide, his feet suddenly light, his heart beating rapidly. He was going to embrace her. She slowed to a stop before him. She took her earbuds out. "I am so glad to see you."

She peeled her gloves off and stuffed them into her coat pocket. Her hands were the color of uncooked bacon, with talon-like fingers. She looked at the silver watch on her wrist. “3:23,” she said. “On the dot.” She removed her dark glasses. She had dark purple bruises under her eyes.

“Oh, shit,” thought Emmet as he let his arms fall to his side.

Angela reached forward and, with a long fingernail, touched him lightly on his shoulder. “Emmet,” she said with a slight smile. “It’s now.”

As she dragged her fingernail from his shoulder to his neck, Emmet felt his heart bang against his sternum. “Deja vu,” he said out loud. His eyes rolled back, his legs gave way, and he fell forward. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Angela stepped around the body, zipped her coat back up, pulled her gloves and dark glasses back on, and, swinging her arms, strode to a long, black sedan that was parked near the entrance to the cemetery. The back door swung open. She folded herself into the back seat, pulled the door shut, and without looking back, pushed the button that rolled up the tinted window. The car slowly pulled out of the parking space, merged with the traffic, and disappeared down the road.

Ryan Nienaber

Sepulchral Toll

The moment of the sepulchral toll
Power and prayer, both lose control
Holy men and Kings laid low
No matter—into the ground we go

Plagued or well, the short or tall
Home or abroad, the Bell will call
[Bell toll, Bell toll, Bell toll]
Necropolis silence swallowed whole
The echo from this sepulchral toll

Faith unravels thread by thread
Madness hums where reason fled
Each reflection creates a hole
Another self, another role

Men and women, babes and old
Broken hearts, their stories sold
Masks of virtue, a painted show
No matter—into the ground we go

Bell of mourning breaking wide
Ringing inside a hollowed mind
Each chime without control
The summoning of its sepulchral toll

Eyes in glass begin to weep
Dreams grow teeth, gnaw so deep

Every prayer a web-spun lie
Each breath a slow goodbye

Accidents strike and cancers spread
Weak and strong join the dead
By knife or gun, we may not know
No matter—into the ground we go

Unkempt stones of guided rows
Pride or pity, none dare oppose
Hearing the Bell let sorrow roll
It sings evermore, the sepulchral toll

Now darkness covers every face
Memory fades without a trace
Sanity devoured by fears untold
Eager to feed on vagrant souls

Dressed in silk or dust and ash
Rich or poor, regardless of class
Poured in urn or sunk down below
No matter—into the ground we go

Every stripe of man, reap and sow
Consigned to the cold, tag on toe
Closer it comes, the sepulchral toll
No matter—into the ground we go

Left in silence, none to console
Dust to dust—the inescapable woe
[Bell toll, Bell toll, Bell toll]
With the Bell to deliver the blow
No matter—into the ground we go

The death knell of its sepulchral toll