



No One Knows Us There

Poems

Jessica Bebenek

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CRÉATIF

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Hospice

Here is what happened: I took a walk.
In the sense that I walked out of the room
to the kitchen, got a coffee. Talked to a man
who made small cakes, had daughters my age,
liked to shop at a store on Queen. He volunteered
to reduce my pain, to populate a house
of appropriate sorrow.

I took another walk. I walked to a secondary
room housing relatives. We discussed the affairs
of the day: initials, legalities, beneficiaries, moving dates,
whether a body is burned with or without clothes on.
A newspaper sat on a glass coffee table. It housed
an image of a man swinging a long, smooth
piece of wood.

The third and final walk took place outside.
In it, I carried the coffee, looked at the sky,
considered the feeling of floating over the edge
of existence while one of us takes their time falling.
The garden was beautiful. Well cared for. The sun was rising.
When a father opened a window, leaned out,
it was with a cinematic quality. It was life.
There descended a condition of calm urgency
revealed to me in the bareness of its clatter.

I lied. There was a fourth walk, but it confused itself
with heartbeat, the brain instructing the lungs to pump
within a vacuum. The feet finding sheets of stone beneath
themselves and these stones leading

around the side of the house, through several doors,
an accommodating hallway,
back into the room of the poem's origin.
It was a room containing all the bodies I knew
in varying states of decomposition.

SAMPLE

Forestalled Decomposition for Public Display

Under the basement ceiling
the embalmer works his trade.
He keeps in mind: sanitation,
preservation, presentation.
He removes the clothing,
the underthings, discreetly
reveals the bodies, turgid
and angular. From behind
the surgical mask, he aspirates
fluids and gases from the torso,
relieves pressure. He tends
to outstanding blemishes,
potential points of leakage
stuffed with cotton.
He reunites cranial fragments,
unfurling the scalp in a single sheet.

The embalmer moves
through the throaty pumping
backdrop of chemicals:
formaldehyde, methanol, etc.
Disinfectants and antiseptics
enter via the jugular.
The slow, downward
growth of a tree.
He massages the fluids
through clenched veins,
grasps flesh, works shaggy
skin around its bone,

thick wrists and bare thighs.
He pinches the thin
wrinkles of infant fingers,
furrowed as a question.

The embalmer applies
scented oils to the skin
and runs his fingers through hair.
He paints the lips neutral
with a fine, squirrel hair brush.
He sets the lids of the eyes
to sleep—denarii, crossed
stitches, adhesive gels.
He blows on them
with concentrated breath.
Imagine the ventilation
system sucking souls
through the silkscreen.

Above, beating wings
enact an invisible, perpetual
motion: they force air to the ground.
Down here, there are no lies.
The sky is no longer a place.

*This Is the Morning of a Meaningless Sparrow
at the Window*

This is not you.

This is wincing,

a shrunken man, flesh

loosed from the bone.

This is a body letting go.

This is the stench

of lungs rotting and exiting

spore by spore through the mouth.

This is existence

loosening its ties.

These are quiet nurses,

these are shaken breaths, gasps, all of us

measuring voids between your choked inhalations.

The blunt necessity of dry mouth serum. These are

comatose moans, these are comforted cries.

The manipulation of your limp limbs after they change your palliative
adult diaper.

This is the curl of the toes, their grey-blueing.

My attempt to grip the ground,

your thin calves, your slack thighs.

This is my hand placed on the skin covering your ribs, your chest
in the dark, indigo walls, opening

this body, the night cracking. This is silent

crying through a room filled with bodies

snores this is the closing of a door these illuminated faces

heads buried in phones your body

buried at the centre of it all

This is the morning
of a meaningless sparrow at the window.
The men are crying. They are holding each other.
Here is the attempt to close your mouth. We were lied to.
This was not a slow slip. There was pain.

SAMPLE

04:05

I remember
words and their coming uncomplicated

Winter oozing clouds on the afternoon
pastel walls lecture of passing hours I remember

happiness People said goodnight to me
before they went to sleep Our choices:

foreign languages rumbling through a clumsy mouth
Remember

when it all just worked
We hadn't conceived of

the breakdown no consolation no plot just
stop This is the end and I didn't know it would be

not missing you not happy just a dark
room with a mouth in it just my own

inability
Remember when we were so

Remember That's it.

On the Night of the Morning My Grandfather Died

we got shit-faced. Crawled through the pubs of that town
with its illusion of smallness. The moon and its illusion of light. On that oh
so symbolically bitter October night, my father and I drank
like mourning and drinking are what we'd been born to do.
Everything about us
dragged itself home long before we could.

His soul nestled somewhere deep
in his hanging mouth.
His body naked, maybe
already burning.

We forgot
finances, bartenders' names, basic geography,
all immediate and inherent dangers.

Tumbling out the long way
home, we followed train tracks over water.
The streets' orange fading to deep blue deluge
beneath, that drop—
he tried to dare me to be afraid.
There was no approaching whistle, no distant light,
no hole big enough to lose anything.
Only this silly business of time
opening its coat to us, bloated
with existence, each time a body's rocked
against mine, our limitless love, reckless grasp on life, my foot
plunging between boards, because I am full, heavier than the train
with the single light of my approach, heavy with empties rattling through me

that pull my whole body through the spaces between splintered grains,
push my whole body to the water, to the rocks,
and stop. Hold me while I fall. My small
body in a warm lap. With infinite tenderness,
prepare my breakfast. Recall my name.

But there is no fall.

We went home.

Chose one board
and then another,
one street and walked down it,
screeching with the thing
that made us.