Speargrass

*E. H. Bishop*

 Papaw points to the dirt that will be his grave, next to the spot that will be Momaw’s, next to what will be mother’s, what will be father’s, all shielded from the golden zig-zag rays of the ever-invasive sun by a mighty cedar tree, twisted and dank dark-brown like licorice. I sneeze. I am allergic.

 “Yessir, this here’s the spot,” Papaw sighs. “Though ya know, boy, if it’s too much trouble to bury me, just toss me in that creek over yonder. Don’t matter too much to me. I’ll be dead. My body ‘ll be here, but I’ll be gone. Poof. No more worries. No more memories. I’ll be gone, gone. I won’t be needin’ it.”

 I nod. I will bury him.

 I am sixteen. Toria and I stand in the meadow that borders the cemetery to the east, where long blades of rape weed are tied up like ponytails by the nurturing winding of false dayflowers around their perverted stalks. The lemon petals of the rape weed and violet lips of the dayflowers rest quietly atop the golden broomsedge that obscures the ground and the treasures beneath; when the wind blows, their petals kiss. The sun kneels above the horizon, but it is difficult to feel anything other than darkness in a graveyard. Toria and I talk. I push her a bit. She pushes me. She giggles. Calls me a name. Yet there is something about a boneyard, the overwhelming cemetery silence, which conquers all sound.

 I suddenly feel a pinch between my shoulder blades like a wasp sting and turn to find my grizzled father, a man who is not himself unless he has a hammer in his hand and a task in his mind, throwing the tiny stalks of a plant as white as my sister’s skin. He laughs like a child.

 My beautiful sister, pale as the flickering edges of a roaring fire, embracing her youth, gently pulls a few stalky spears from their earthen sheaths and begins to toss them towards our father, made childish by the thought of death. Being born an old man, I simply watch for a moment, smiling. In this moment I know that I will never love anyone more than I do my little sister. I pull a few of my own weapons and fling them at my father in defense of my sister; they cling to his boot black jacket. He grunts as we overpower him with our superior numbers. When we run out of javelins, our father’s entire body is covered in white feathers; he is a wet chicken.

 Toria giggles. I giggle. Father giggles.

 The dirty sky sighs and the sun pops a squat as quaint drops of rain fall and plop golden before the cascading rays of my pale sister and the luxurious sun.

 “Devil must be beating his wife.” I say.

 Under the shade of the mighty cedar, Momaw and mother discuss death with pierced lips and gloomy eyes while Papaw gazes longingly towards the creek.

 “Well, all’s left is groceries,” Momaw sighs.

 “Then Chinese food?” Toria asks.

 “Then Chinese food!” Momaw affirms.

 Momaw has a tiny to-do list scribbled on the back of a pale blue sticky note. She finds the appropriate box.

 “X.”

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 Papaw points to the graves on the shoddy old side of the graveyard, next to the gravel path that separates the bourgeois from the proletariat, next to the irreverent tombs that are marked by rocks just oh-so-big, next to the new ivory pickup truck against which he leans, next to my red leg, bloody and swollen from a fire ant offensive. I wobble. I am allergic.

 “What we need to do is survey this whole graveyard,” Papaw explains. “We’ll make a map of this here historical side, then the new side where all us young people are buried, and that way people will know where to go to see who they want to see. Lots of Confederate soldiers and runaway slaves buried here. History-lovers like you eat the stuff up.”

 I nod. I will uncover them.

 I am eighteen. Papaw sinks down on a bench and begins sipping on a cup of mud-colored coffee, the strong stuff, at noon – in Texas – in the middle of July. He does not drink water. I venture towards the library of concrete license plates and kneel down to get a better look at their serial numbers.

 There are many infants buried here like forgotten stamps. There are many men and their nameless wives, unaddressed letters.

 “John ------.” His last name is lost to time.

 “---- Sumpter’s Wife.” Never mind. It’s just his wife’s name that meant nothing.

 The blue bowl above my head is without blemish, a moonless ocean without cloud or movement. Even the almighty could not have willed that the blubbery treadmill resume its trek; today would be a lazy day for all those not perusing cemeteries.

 Some of the headstones seem to be written in different languages. Perhaps it is just the heat, the kind of heat that you can see wriggling in the air like epileptics, weighing down on me as if Atlas and the load he carries sit politely between my shoulders. I draw thick black X’s on my map where the forgotten and erroneous sleep.

 After around four hours of such work, I place my map in the dirt and stand tall over the headstones, allowing the soft southern breeze, smelling of laundry detergent, death, and cedar sap, to caress my sticky, boiling skin. The quaint gusts of Texas air guide me away from the aisles of the dead and towards a rolling green hill just to the south of the cemetery, which looks out on the thick, unkempt forest, now turning hay tan and mushroom brown in the heat of the summer.

 As I look down into the valley beneath the billowing hill, I see two figures wrestling on the fringe of the forest. One is lying on the ground, a trim, hourglass woman in tattered overalls. The other is a stout, barrel-chested man, hands weathered and wide as prickly pear cactus, wearing a dusty old trench coat and a matching felt hat with a wilted bluebonnet pinned to the side. He is built like a medicine cabinet. The man sits astride the hour glass. As I edge closer, he wraps his hearty baseboard fingers around her slim swan neck, his picked pink fingernails are conflict pearls on the necklace of knuckles that encompass her throat like a coffin does a corpse. She gasps in awe of this luxurious display, the lucky girl, the belle of the ball of his clenched fist. Her blonde hair frames her face like the edges of a broken bathroom mirror. She sighs and sighs. Her face becomes as blue as the sky and then as violently violet as death.

 I pull the six-inch buck knife from its sheath on my belt and flip the blade.

 “Cut that out, mister!” I shout as I limp down the hill, kicking aside speargrass as I trudge forward.

 He does not respond. The lady’s legs stop kicking – they lie still. Her pretty crystal face turns black.

 “Don’t make me do this, mister!” I warn, now only a few feet away.

 When I reach the edge of the forest, I blink my eyes three times and stare at the nothingness before me. There is no broad-shouldered man. There is no hourglass woman. There is nothing before me which could remotely be considered to look like human beings; just twigs and roots and dirt and dead leaves and a scared boy with a big knife.

*I think back to that time and wonder if those two people were really real, if there really was a woman getting the life choked out of her by a significantly stronger man at the edge of the forest, would I have been right to stop him? What if she had done him wrong? What if she poisoned him, stole from him, hurt him or his family? Should she be saved just because she’s being punished? I didn’t know the situation, but I pulled my knife and was ready to use it. Maybe she had it coming.*

 Papaw calls my name from behind the hill. I clamber back up through the speargrass and back into the cemetery, where the war hero waits with a concerned look and a cup of coffee under the shade of his cedar tree.

 “You should really let me pay ya for this,” he says, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

 “I don’t care too much for cemeteries,” I reply. “I figure once I do this, you’ll be willin’ to share the creek with me.”

 The war hero smiles but his eyes express something different. He offers me his wooden coffee mug. I take a sip. Cold coffee never tasted so good.

 “That goodness of yours, it’s gonna get you one day,” he says. “You should be chargin’ me like nobody’s business for this boring work. Makes a man crazy.”

 I place the mug back in his wrinkled hands and return to the stone catalogue of the dead.

 The next headstone is cracked.

 “X.”

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 Papaw calls me on the community telephone in the psych ward and I can feel him pointing through me to her, she who left me a walking grave marked with not so much as an oh-so-big stone, next to the bottles of medication that climbed into my drinks, next to the cherry lime Lexapronades, the Coca-Colas with vanilla and Vicodin, next to the detoxing heroin addict coughing up blood beside me, next to the cocaine addict who thinks she is Christ and Beelzebub in one, praying for my damnation, next to the scrubbed nurse who laughs as I spasm without the medication in his hand, next to the homeless ponytailed man who is my only friend in the world who tried to kill himself whose name I cannot recall, next to the pious Christian woman who sits in a full split in the center of the room, peeing graciously onto the tile as she sings “Oh precious is the flow that makes me as white as snow,” next to the sinister-looking man with slicked-back hair who might have . . . I don’t want to say – but I can’t be sure – the poison has taken my memory and my body. I seizure. I am allergic.

 I am nineteen. There are worse things than death. I cannot separate the nightmares from reality. Happiness is the exception not the standard.

 “We love you, boy.” He says. “She lied. She never loved you boy. She screwed you over. We know now. We wish we had known sooner. She’s done this before. You’re just too damn good. I told you that goodness would screw you. It ain’t your fault. We know you don’t wanna kill yourself. Those drugs were heavy. You didn’t know where you was. You wasn’t you. I mean, you ain’t never had seizures before. Somethin’s obviously wrong here. Poor boy. And you just wanted to help – you’re a good boy. Once them drugs get out of your system, those poisons, they’ll let you out and I’ll hold you in my arms and nothing will ever hurt you again. I love you, boy. I swear.”

 I nod. He will bury me.

 I want to be back in the cemetery.

 Months later, when I recover from the poison and the psych ward, when I can walk and have shoelaces and pretend to feel again, when I can shave and cut onions and eat steak again, when I begin to gulp down hard liquor far too often because it is stronger than the medication, when I turn to cigarettes despite my asthma because they are healthier than panic attacks and flashbacks, when I begin to *seem* instead of *be*, when I am finally cleared to sit behind the wheel, I cruise up towards Papaw’s house and stop at that cemetery where we used to toss speargrass.

 I toss a smoldering cigarette on the patch of dirt that will be my grave.

 I stand on that same crest of the billowing hill, protruding like the green giant’s flexed bicep, and look down into the nearby woods, half-expecting to see an armoire strangling an hourglass. Yet the forest is devoid of humanity. When I turn back to the field where Papaw would be buried, I notice a stout man hovering above a patch of dirt on the poor side of the cemetery near the hill, a spot that Papaw and I had long debated as to whether or not it was a grave. The man has familiar fingers, broad, fence slat fingers. He kicks the dirt and turns decisively, refusing to acknowledge me. His trench coat billows behind him in the wind.

 As he disappears beyond the gate, I cross the gravel boundary and drag my feet until my toes strike the base of that godly cedar. Bathed in the warmth of the hot Texas sun, I remove my shirt and hang it over one of the low-hanging branches of my elder. As the sugar sweet smell of Indian paintbrush and humid southern air kiss my bare shoulder blades, I yank a handful of spears from the Earth and begin hurling them into my shirt, waving in the breeze.

 Hours pass and I run out of spears.

 The white shafts of the blades lie humorlessly from the black cloth of my shirt. It looks like a jumble of piano keys levitating in the air.

 “I thought about it all too often,” Papaw would later say. “I was gonna sit outside and wait for her. Ya know. When we knew what she was doin’ to ya but couldn’t get you to see. When we couldn’t stop it *legally.* I’m a good shot, boy. I got a rifle. I was gonna solve your problem. You’d ‘ve hated me at first, but I think after a while you’d understand. I’d go to jail for a few years. Then they’d throw me in the creek. Wouldn’t matter none to me.”

 *I saw the creek in his eyes. He meant it.*

 “I stayed home from work for three weeks,” Father would later say. “As we called and called the police. But they couldn’t do a thing. Or maybe they wouldn’t.”

 *I would later meet the police officers that had helped my parents through this tough time. Mother bought them each a bamboo plant for their desks.*

 “You are a very flawed man,” Mother would later add. “Unquestioning empathy is your hamartia – and it nearly killed you.

 *Luckily I can’t feel anything anymore. Now I can only be undone by myself.*

 “How could our quiet little family have been ruined in just a few months?” Momaw would later ask. “It was that horrible girl.”

 *But she doesn’t blame the girl. She blames me for bringing her into the family and ruining it. Yet somehow she still loves me.*

 “Please don’t leave me. Please don’t let her take you. I’ll die if she takes you,” my angel of a sister would later say, crumpling like aluminum foil in my arms. “When she had you, when you were gone, you never called me once. It was like you didn’t think about me at all. It was like you forgot that you ever loved me.”

 *She hurt my sister. I hurt my sister. There is no redemption.*

“Coming into the semester I thought we could be friends but I realized that the things that happened last semester still hurt me. In the last month or so that we haven’t talked I’ve felt better,” my best friend would bravely text me. “So I think it’s best for me for us not to be friends.”

 *She was the only person on campus who knew about my condition after everything. The PTSD, the panic attacks, the catatonia, the daily nightmares – she asked. I told her. I trusted her. Yet as I told her every gory detail I could feel her pulling away. I cannot blame her. She was the only person. I will never tell anyone again. I have learned my lesson. People tend to be better off without me.*

I have hurt everyone who I ever truly loved. I am so sorry.

 Knowing not what else to do, I calmly drop to my knees and sink into the rectangle of dirt which would house Papaw and cry.

They still have my knife. My sheath is empty at my waist. My tired fingers clutch the empty air. I’ve done so much wrong. All for someone I barely knew. She said she was sick – she said she was suffering. Who would lie about that? I just wanted to do right. But there is no right. The only safety is in death, in isolation.

 *God is The Comparative, but Death is The Superlative*

 I heard someone say somewhere once. Maybe in the psych ward. Maybe in the graveyard. Maybe she said it.

 I will never be the same. Forever broken. I don’t feel like a human being.

As I cry in my grandfather’s grave, Death, the most regal protector of humanity, the most accomplished peltast in the history of existence, watches from the forest, with a spear but no shield.

Praise be unto Death.

From Death we came and to Death we shall return. Death is the only gift that we receive in this life.

Yet Death is like a Christmas present. It is an unsightly and unseemly thing to open a Christmas gift in June. You can’t pre-order Death. She comes when She comes.

I am content without my knife.

 She sees my shirt, dripping with spears, the space between every individual thread accounted for, the welts and scars on my body, every inch of flesh occupied. Yet, in Her wisdom, She sees room for one more.

 Who am I to question the whims of Death?

 “X.”

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