BY SMALL AND SMALL; MIDNIGHT TO FOUR A.M.

For eleven years I have regretted it,
regretted that I did not do what
I wanted to do as I sat there those
four hours watching her die. I wanted
to crawl in among the machinery
and hold her in my arms, knowing
the elementary, leftover bit of her
mind would dimly recognize it was me
carrying her to where she was going.

JACK GILBERT

IT NEVER GOES AWAY

I will try to know your death exactly
As you do. The moon has shown up tonight,
Coin in the palm of one we wait for, sunset
Long gone. So hard this practice to wake
Into no more light, not even in the place
You left it. Then each morning comes
And you are followed by the rise
Of landscape everywhere. We never know
How much it takes, this business
Of departure; you stare into ocean
Outdone by all you want. Enough
Of what continues. Here it comes again,
The turning of dark and dirt, unable to stop;
Love, even with everything to be sad about.

SOPHIE CABOT BLACK
LAS RUINAS DEL CORAZON

Juana the Mad married the handsomest man in Spain
and that was the end of it, because when you marry a man
more beautiful than you, they said you pretty much lose control
of the situation. Did she ever listen? No. When he was away
annexing more kingdoms, she had horrible dreams
of him being cut and blown apart, or spread on the rack,
or sleeping with exotic women. She prayed to the twin guardians
of the Alhambra, Saint Ursula and Saint Susana, to send him home
and make him stay forever. And they answered her prayers
and killed Philip the Handsome at twenty-eight.

Juana the Mad was beside herself with grief, and she wrapped
his body in oil and lavender, and laid him out in a casket of lead,
and built a marble effigy of the young monarch in sleep,
and beside it her own dead figure, so he would never think
he was alone. And she kept his body beside her, and every day
for the next twenty years, as pungent potions filled the rooms,
she peeked into his coffin like a chef peeks into his pot,
and memories of his young body woke her adamant desire.

She wanted to posses him entirely, and since not even death
may oppose the queen, she found a way to merge death and life
by eating a piece of him, slowly, lovingly, until he was entirely
in her being. She cut a finger and chewed the fragrant skin,
then sliced a thick portion of his once ruddy cheeks. Then she ate
an ear, the side of a thigh, the solid of muscles of chest,
then lunged for an eye, a kidney, part of the large intestine.
Then she diced his penis and his pebble-like testicles
and washed everything down with sweet jerez.
Then she decided she was ready to die.

But before she did, she asked the poets to record these moments
in song, and the architects to carve the song in marble,
and the marble to be selected from the most secret veins
of the earth and placed where no man could see it,
because that is the nature of love, because one walks alone
through the ruins of the heart, because the young must sleep
with their eyes open, because the angels tremble
from so much beauty, because memory moves in orbits
of absence, because she holds her hands out in the rain,
and rain remembers nothing, not even how it became itself.

ERIC GAMALINDA

INDIAN BOY LOVE SONG #1

Everyone I have lost
in the closing of a door
the click of the lock

is not forgotten, they
do not die but remain
within the soft edges
of the earth, the ash

of house fires and cancer
in sin and forgiveness
huddled under old blankets

dreaming their way into
my hands, my heart
closing tight like fists.

SHERMAN ALEXIE

DEATH COMES TO ME AGAIN, A GIRL

Death comes to me again, a girl
in a cotton slip, barefoot, giggling.
It’s not so terrible, she tells me,
not like you think, all darkness
and silence. There are windchimes
and the smell of lemons, some days
it rains, but more often the air is dry
and sweet. I sit beneath the staircase
built from hair and bone and listen
to the voices of the living. I like it,
she says, shaking the dust from her hair,
especially when they fight, and when they sing.

DORIANNE LAUX
GRIEF

When grief comes to you as a purple gorilla
you must count yourself lucky.
You must offer her what's left
of your dinner, the book you were trying to finish
you must put aside
and make her a place to sit at the foot of your bed,
her eyes moving from the clock
to the television and back again.
I am not afraid. She has been here before
and now I can recognize her gait
as she approaches the house.
Some nights, when I know she's coming,
I unlock the door, lie down on my back,
and count her steps
from the street to the porch.
Tonight she brings a pencil and a ream of paper,
tells me to write down
everyone I have ever known
and we separate them between the living and the dead
so she can pick each name at random.
I play her favorite Willie Nelson album
because she misses Texas
but I don't ask why.
She hums a little,
the way my brother does when he gardens.
We sit for an hour
while she tells me how unreasonable I've been,
taking down the pictures of my family,
not writing, refusing to shower,
staring too hard at girls younger than my sister.
Eventually she puts one of her heavy
purple arms around me, leans
her head against mine,
and all of a sudden things are feeling romantic.
So I tell her,
things are feeling romantic.
She pulls another name, this time
from the dead
and turns to me in that way that parents do
so you feel embarrassed or ashamed of something.
Romantic? She says,
reading the name out loud, slowly
so I am aware of each syllable,
each consonant resembling a swollen arm, the collapsed ear,
a mouth full of teeth, each vowel
wrapping around the bones like new muscle,
the sound of that person's body
and how reckless it is,
how careless that his name is in one pile and not the other.

MATTHEW DICKMAN
WHAT THE DEAD FEAR

On winter nights, the dead
see their photographs slipped
from the windows of wallets,
their letters stuffed in a box
with the clothes for Goodwill.
No one remembers their jokes,
their nervous habits, their dread
of enclosed places.
In these nightmares, the dead feel
the soft nub of the eraser
lightening their bones. They wake up
in a panic, go for a glass of milk
and see the moon, the fresh snow,
the stripped trees.
Maybe they fix a turkey sandwich,
or watch the patterns on the TV.
It's all a dream anyway.
In a few months
they'll turn the clocks ahead,
and when they sleep they'll know the living
are grieving for them, unbearably lonely
and indifferent to beauty. On these nights
the dead feel better. They rise
in the morning, and when the cut
flowers are laid before their names
they smile like shy brides. Thank you,
thank you, they say. You shouldn't have,
they say, but very softly, so it sounds
like the wind, like nothing human.

KIM ADDONIZIO

AFTER

The dead do
sing in us, in
us and through
us, and to themselves
under their mounds of earth
swelling in the sun, or in their
ashes that shine
as they depart on the wind.

See how the grass
sways to the sound
of their voices
under, singing
the beautiful
eternal sadness
of before
relieved of the
resolve of after.

BRIAN TURNER
MY SISTER, WHO DIED YOUNG, TAKES UP THE TASK

A basket of apples brown in our kitchen,
their warm scent is the scent of ripening,
and my sister, entering the room quietly,
takes a seat at the table, takes up the task

of peeling slowly away the blemished skins,
even half-rotten ones are salvaged carefully.

She makes sure to carve out the mealy flesh.
For this, I am grateful. I explain, this elegy

would love to save everything. She smiles at me,
and before long, the empty bowl she uses fills,
domed with thin slices she brushes into
the mouth of a steaming pot on the stove.

What can I do? I ask finally. Nothing,
she says, let me finish this one thing alone.

JON PINEDA

DISTRESSED HAIKU

In a week or ten days
the snow and ice
will melt from Cemetery Road.

I'm coming! Don't move!

Once again it is April.
Today is the day
we would have been married
twenty-six years.

I finished with April
halfway through March.

You think that their
dying is the worst
thing that could happen.

Then they stay dead.

Will Hall ever write
lines that do anything
but whine and complain?

In April the blue
mountain revises
from white to green.

The Boston Red Sox win
a hundred straight games.
The mouse rips
the throat of the lion

and the dead return.

DONALD HALL
THE DEATH OF MARILYN MONROE

The ambulance men touched her cold body, lifted it, heavy as iron, onto the stretcher, tried to close the mouth, closed the eyes, tied the arms to the sides, moved a caught strand of hair, as if it mattered, saw the shape of her breasts, flattened by gravity, under the sheet carried her, as if it were she, down the steps.

These men were never the same. They went out afterwards, as they always did, for a drink or two, but they could not meet each other's eyes.

Their lives took a turn – one had nightmares, strange pains, impotence, depression. One did not like his work, his wife looked different, his kids. Even death seemed different to him – a place where she would be waiting,

and one found himself standing at night in the doorway to a room of sleep, listening to a woman breathing, just an ordinary woman breathing.

SHARON OLDS

MAYBE VERY HAPPY

After she died he was seized by a great curiosity about what it was like for her. Not that he doubted how much she loved him. But he knew there must have been some things she had not liked. So he went to her closest friend and asked what she complained of. "It's all right," he had to keep saying, "I really won't mind." Until the friend finally gave in. "She said sometimes you made a noise drinking your tea if it was very hot."

JACK GILBERT
DIRGE WITHOUT MUSIC

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind:
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely.
Crowned with lilies and with laurel they go: but I am not resigned.

Lovers and thinkers, into the earth with you.
Be one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust.
A fragment of what you felt, of what you knew,
A formula, a phrase remains – but the best is lost.

The answers quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter, the love, –
They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses. Elegant and curled
Is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom. I know. But I do not approve.
More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world.

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

PRAYER

Sometimes, when we’re lying after love,
I look at you and see your body’s future
of lying beneath the earth; putting the heel
of my hand against your rib I feel how faint
and far away the heartbeat is. I rest
my cheek against your left nipple and listen
to the surge of blood, seeing your life splashed out,
filmy water hurled from a pot
onto dry grass. And I want to be pressed
deep into the bed and covered over;
the way a seed is pressed into a hole,
the dirt tamped down with a trowel.
I want to be a failed seed, the kind
that doesn’t grow, that doesn’t know it’s meant to.
I want to lie here without moving, lifeless
as an animal that’s slaughtered, its blood smeared
on a doorpost, I want death to take me if it
has to, to spare you, I want it to pass over.

KIM ADDONIZIO
GRIEF CALLS US TO THE THINGS OF THIS WORLD

The morning air is all awash with angels …
- Richard Wilbur

The eyes open to a blue telephone
In the bathroom of this five-star hotel.

I wonder whom I should call? A plumber,
Proctologist, urologist, or priest?

Who is most among us and most deserves
The first call? I choose my father because

He’s astounded by bathroom telephones.
I dial home. My mother answers. "Hey, Ma,

I say, "Can I talk to Poppa?" She gasps,
And then I remember that my father

Has been dead for nearly a year. "Shit, Mom,"
I say. "I forgot he’s dead. I’m sorry—

How did I forget?" "It’s okay," she says.
"I made him a cup of instant coffee

This morning and left it on the table—
Like I have for, what, twenty-seven years—

And I didn’t realize my mistake
Until this afternoon." My mother laughs

At the angels who wait for us to pause
During the most ordinary of days

And sing our praise to forgetfulness
Before they slap our souls with their cold wings.

Those angels burden and unbalance us.
Those fucking angels ride us piggyback.

Those angels, forever falling, snare us
And haul us, prey and praying, into dust.

SHERMAN ALEXIE

BURIAL RITES

Everyone comes back here to die
as I will soon. The place feels right
since it’s half dead to begin with.
Even on a rare morning of rain,
like this morning, with the low sky
hoarding its riches except for
a few mock tears, the hard ground
accepts nothing. Six years ago
I buried my mother’s ashes
beside a young lilac that’s now
taller than I, and stuck the stub
of a rosebush into her dirt,
where like everything else not
human it thrives. The small blossoms
never unfurl; whatever they know
they keep to themselves until
a morning rain or a night wind
pares the petals down to nothing.
Even the neighbor cat who shits
daily on the paths and then hides
deep in the jungle of the weeds
refuses to purr. Whatever’s here
is just here, and nowhere else,
so it’s right to end up beside
the woman who bore me, to shovel
into the dirt whatever’s left
and leave only a name for some-one
who wants it. Think of it,
my name, no longer a portion
of me, no longer inflated
or bruised, no longer stewing
in a rich compost of memory
or the simpler one of bone shards,
dirt, kitty litter, wood ashes,
the roots of the eucalyptus
I planted in ’73,
a tiny me taking nothing,
giving nothing, and free at last.

PHILIP LEVINE
**THE TRUTH THE DEAD KNOW**

_For my mother, born March 1902, died March 1959  
and my father, born February 1900, died June 1959_

Gone, I say and walk from church,  
refusing the stiff procession to the grave,  
letting the dead tide alone in the hearse.  
It is June. I am tired of being brave.

We drive to the Cape. I cultivate  
myself where the sun gutters from the sky,  
where the sea swings in like an iron gate  
and we touch. In another country people die.

My darling, the wind falls in like stones  
from the whitehearted water and when we touch  
we enter touch entirely. No one’s alone.  
Men kill for this, or for as much.

And what of the dead? They lie without shoes  
in their stone boats. They are more like stone  
than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse  
to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

**ANNE Sexton**

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**ONE ART**

The art of losing isn't hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent  
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:  
places, and names, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or  
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.  
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

— Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

**ELIZABETH BISHOP**
The man certainly looked guilty. 
Ugly, ragged, and not clean. Not to mention their finding him there in the woods with her body. Neighbors told how he was always playing with dead squirrels, mangled dogs, even snakes. He said those were the only things that would allow him to get close. “Look at me,” the old man said with uncomplaining simplicity, “I’m already one of the dead among the dead. It’s hard to watch things humiliated the way death does it. Possums smeared on the road, birds with ants eating out their eyes. Even dying rats want privacy for their disgrace. It’s true I washed the dirt from her face and the blood off the body. Combed her hair. I slept beside her, at her feet for two days, the way my dog used to. I got the dress on the best I could. She looked so neglected. Like garbage thrown in the weeds. Like nobody cared because he had done that to her. I kept thinking about how long she is going to be alone now. I knew the police would take pictures and put them in the papers naked and open so people eating breakfast could look at her. I wanted to give her spirit enough time to get ready.”

JACK GILBERT

I walked across the park to the fever monument. It was in the center of a glass square surrounded by red flowers and fountains. The monument was in the shape of a sea horse and the plaque read We got hot and died.

RICHARD BRAUTIGAN
PORTAGE

We carry the dead in our hands.
There is no other way.

The dead are not carried in our memories. They died in another age, long before this moment.
We shape them from the wounds they left on the inanimate, ourselves, as falling water will turn stone into a bowl.

There is no room in our hearts for the dead, though we often imagine that there is, or wish it to be so, to preserve them in our warmth, our sweet darkness, where their fists might beat at the soft contours of our love.
And though we might like to think that they would call out to us, they could never do so, being there. They would never dare to speak, lest their mouths, our names, fill quietly with blood.

We carry the dead in our hands as we might carry water - with a careful, reverential tread.
There is no other way.

How easily, how easily their faces spill.

JOHN GLENDAY

DEATH

Going to sleep, I sleep my hands on my chest. They will place my hands like this. It will look as though I am flying into myself.

BILL KNOTT
AN ARUNDEL TOMB

Side by side, their faces blurred,
The earl and countess lie in stone,
Their proper habits vaguely shown
As jointed armour, stiffened pleat,
And that faint hint of the absurd—
The little dogs under their feet.

Such plainness of the pre-baroque
Hardly involves the eye, until
It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still
Clasped empty in the other; and
One sees, with a sharp tender shock,
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

They would not think to lie so long.
Such faithfulness in effigy
Was just a detail friends would see:
A sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace
Thrown off in helping to prolong
The Latin names around the base.

They would not guess how early in
Their supine stationary voyage
The air would change to soundless damage,
Turn the old tenantry away;
How soon succeeding eyes begin
To look, not read. Rigidly they
Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths
Of time. Snow fell, undated. Light
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same
Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths
The endless altered people came,

Washing at their identity.
Now, helpless in the hollow of
An unarmorial age, a trough
Of smoke in slow suspended skeins
Above their scrap of history,
Only an attitude remains:

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.

PHILIP LARKIN

EMBALMING

You’ll need a corpse, your own or someone else’s.
You’ll need a certain distance; the less you care about
your corpse the better. Light should be
unforgiving, so as to lend a literal
aspect to your project. Flesh should be putty,
each hair of the brows, each lash, a pencil mark.

If the skeleton is intact, its shape may
suggest beginnings of a structure, though even here
modification might occur; heavier
tools are waiting in the drawer, as well as wire,
varied lengths and thicknesses of doweling.
Odd hollows may be filled with bundled towel.

As for the fluids, arrange them on the cart
in a pleasing manner. I prefer we speak
of ointments. This notion of one’s anointing
will help distract you from a simpler story
of your handiwork. Those people in the parlor
made requests, remember? Don’t be concerned.

Whatever this was to them, it is all yours now.
The clay of your creation lies before you,
invites your hand. Becoming anxious? That’s good.
You should be a little anxious. You’re ready.
Hold the knife as you would a quill, hardly at all.
See that first line before you cross it, and draw.

SCOTT CAIRNS
I wonder how it all got started, this business
about seeing your life flash before your eyes
while you drown, as if panic, or the act of submergence,
could startle time into such compression, crushing
decades in the vice of your desperate, final seconds.

After falling off a steamship or being swept away
in a rush of floodwaters, wouldn't you hope
for a more leisurely review, an invisible hand
turning the pages of an album of photographs—
you up on a pony or blowing out candles in a conic hat.

How about a short animated film, a slide presentation?
Your life expressed in an essay, or in one model photograph?
Wouldn't any form be better than this sudden flash?
Your whole existence going off in your face
in an eyebrow-singeing explosion of biography—
nothing like the three large volumes you envisioned.

Survivors would have us believe in a brilliance
here, some bolt of truth forking across the water,
an ultimate Light before all the lights go out,
dawning on you with all its megalithic tonnage.
But if something does flash before your eyes
as you go under, it will probably be a fish,
a quick blur of curved silver darting away,
having nothing to do with your life or your death.
The tide will take you, or the lake will accept it all
as you sink toward the weedy disarray of the bottom,
leaving behind what you have already forgotten,
the surface, now overrun with the high travel of clouds.

BILLY COLLINS