

## 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 possess 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

## 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

## GUILTY

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

## THE FEVER MONUMENT

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

## THE ART OF DROWNING

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