



DYING A LITTLE

BARRY DEMPSTER

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For Karen

and Cathy and Andrew

Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows.

William Shakespeare, *Richard II*

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SHRINE

You come to the vase of carnations, bury
your nose in the pink and white frills.
Your dead mother's favourite flower.
Still? Seven years of conversing
with silence, time enough for your
body to shed all its cells, for her to fall
in love with delphiniums, or plain old roses.

Mother's shrine takes up one corner
of your already crowded heart:
a reliquary of bananas and brown sugar,
a Billy Graham tract, a faith
in blouses that can be worn untucked.
And, of course, God, perched
on her left breast like a rhinestone brooch
(how she liked to fiddle with him, twist
his gleam). Apparently, seven years
of death haven't changed her a bit.

And so you pretend to stay the same,
despite your new cells, telling yourself,
mother is just around the corner,
people-watching as always, her hairdo
in place, her pink skirt matching
her pink sweater. On days when your
skin crawls with the thoughts of another
seven silences, you think of heaven
peeled from its flowery clouds
like the shock of a familiar face.

**HEADLINE: DYING WITHOUT A WILL CAN BE
DEVASTATING**

Innovate, is all he can think of
here in law land, sad-assed,
slumped in a wobbly chair.
Dreaming up his own death,
distributing his worldly mediocrities.
Not a masochist after all, in fact
a surprising love for himself.
Suddenly, the scratch of his signature
blossoms into an ornate tattoo.

The lawyer coughs then apologizes,
as if the two sounds were a dancing
brother act: St. Peter and his twin, Cerberus.
The assistant attached to her screen
by a mess of wires
types with the monotony of the undead.
There's no way he's dying
in such a drab, tasteless manner.
He thinks of leaving his fingers
to the secretarial pool, his eyes
to the back of someone's previously
unimportant head.

Imagine: *The Will, an Opera*,
Don Giovanni tussling with a paper devil,
libretto by Villon,
scrunched-up soul torn to shreds.
To his dead mother, he leaves
all childhood memories, the shape
of a sandcastle towering for a few hours
at the edge of the sea.
And to his imaginary brother, a loss
far greater than either can imagine.

To the stranger whose eye he caught
twenty years ago on a train,
he leaves all possibilities.
The rest goes to his reincarnation
fund, the first fresh face
who has the sense to ask,
What's in it for me?

THE LOVING KINGDOM OF TERMITES

Halfway to complete collapse,
porches sagging, septic tank
backed up, window screens taped
with band-aids. Family cottage
pissed at the great beyond
for not taking it along. Who knew
roofs and railings could suffer so?

And you, surviving son, gill-
green with grief, sicking hammers
and brooms on every crack.
The past will live again! Future
a slick new coat of paint.

The moment is crust,
a dust-cloak of grey
in the loving kingdom of termites.
Bury your sobs in a sneeze.
Disintegrating slowly
your only hope.

FLEETING

The white-on-its-way-to-yellow cat lies rolled like a Russian hat in a corner of the pet store. *Oh, kitty, you say, my heart is a mouse, a skitter of plucked nerves.* But the cat just lies there, rippleless, snoring, oblivious to the blue twitch in the long alley of your wrist.

You are also nothing but a squint to the clerk who sells you clip-ons, a mere symptom to the pharmacist who bundles your tube of secrets in a plain white bag. Akin to invisible; even the breeze of a page being flipped has more existence than this.

On the car radio, a litany of love songs, no mention of you. So why feel so overexposed, so stripped, bathed in a cheesy pink light that takes years off your lack of faith? You'd think everyone had succumbed to desire, all the roadside daisies ripped and bald.

You wheel into your driveway, finally alone with your omissions, engine ticking as it cools, mouse surrendering to a trap. The impatiens in the front flower bed wilting, words organizing themselves into Things to Do. It turns out your life doesn't love you after all, the voice on your answering machine apologizing for never being home.

MALE BONDING

Let's open up, he says,
arms hula hoop wide,
well on their way to a hug.
A blink later, we'll be
bonding, telling tales of
threesomes and guilty
pop culture pleasures,
things that chip away
at our hardy hearts
without cracking the shells.
Then we'll be brothers –
a photo op – men
who have gone beyond
the goalpost, the comb-over,
the homoerotic.
Let's open up and see
whose tears can dribble
fastest. Before we know it,
we'll be comparing fathers,
how well we learned to read
those moustache twitches,
how suavely we learned
to hate ourselves.
Of course, we'll swear
we're nothing like Roy or Ted,
and will love our own sons
even when they carry us
to our final beds.
Let's roll up our sleeves,
let's get our hands dirty,
let's put our balls
on the table. Let's open
a bottle that *pops*
instead of *whooshes*, and believe
in the possibility
of love without genes

or sex. When I enter the hug,
all is bone and leaking heat,
a familiar wall.
If I were to whisper in his ear,
would I finally hear
what I've been trying to say?
Let's sing, let's shrug our shoulders,
let's pull down our pants.
We can do this, we're heroes,
we're he-men. Here is
the sheer finale
where the truth finally
emerges like a rabbit
pulled from a baseball cap.
Am I holding on to him,
or is he holding on
to me, a chip
of heartwood protruding
from what used to be a fist?

MACABRE

“*A* is for Amy who trips on a crutch, *B* is for Barry who feels too much.”

Languishing on Edward Gorey’s Yarmouth Port couch,
a raccoon coat tucked around your cold ankles,
a coterie of ghostly cats doing their utmost
to look Egyptian. This is illness on a bristly
Thursday afternoon, immersed in the absurd, a house
full of beached stones and dead children. Are you in love
with death, or just deathly afraid? Strange how you can’t tell
the difference. A skinny boy’s legs stick out
of a smothering carpet and you laugh yourself silly.
A blonde fright wig of a girl crash-landing on a steep
stairwell, *hardy har*. The broken man inside you
suddenly beside himself. Shivering, you clamor
to your feet and do the proper tour, the bloodstained
calendars, the grisly stuffed toys. While just outside,
a gaping mouthful of tombstones bleach the grass.
It’s almost nightmare, some dream boundary
crossed after too much dessert. Until slowly,
it all starts to feel normal, even your own hideousness,
a limit tipped upside down, all the terrors
spilling out. One more shudder and you’re hobbling
for the exit where the huge rare magnolia
is so real it’s fake. Is that the Eastham Sea
you smell or just the scent of long life rotting?
A part of you will die today and you can’t stop giggling.

NUDES

1/

This is the body that shocked him with its nakedness,
page 267, no-one's lucky number; in a film catalogue,
a story about Mexico and politics, a picture of a young
woman, nude from mid-torso up, her skin the colour
of coffee with the milk still dissolving, her arms pressed
tightly, uncomfortably, to her sides, her breasts,
nipples shiny, uneven, the left one fuller, more enticing.
She is, of course, asleep and available, a combination
that tells him more about himself than he cares to decipher,
her dreadlocks splayed out on the pillowless sheets
like unlit torches. Her mouth is turned to the right,
beyond him, yet whispering, he swears, about middle-aged men,
how they mistake experience for wisdom, desire for truth.

2/

Mother took to her nightgown the minute he was born,
handing him the fast-fading warmth of a sterilized bottle.
It wasn't until he was ten and secretive as a folded cuff
that he saw her flesh again, in a forest thicket where she'd gone
to pee, squatting in a sea of vinca, her ass almost touching
the waxy green as if it too had grown there, a wild mushroom
so white it would have shrieked if someone had reached to pluck it.
When her eyes met his, animal eyes welled with misunderstanding,
she became a blur, a scramble of blue woollen slacks and dead leaves.

3/

The only part of his father's body he noticed as a child was his penis, thick and horsey, cosmically hairy. Otherwise he was armless, bellyless, toeless, a ghost stunt. Years later, rushing him to the hospital, the ambulance spinning with bleeds of brownish light, his knees and fingernails were much too bright. Were there hairs growing from that nose, he didn't know, or which teeth were false, or how many moles parading across those shoulders? All he recognized was the dangle of that old penis, like a muscle cut from a rippling thigh; bigger than his, the usual fatherly lack of generosity.

4/

For a time, he was disappointed, sex and its expectations of superhuman lusciousness, bodies shaped in butter, then dipped in gold. His first lover had muffins for breasts, the next was knobby kneecaps from the waist down. After months of simmering lust and a blowout of fantasies, a pimple gleamed from a rather scalded-looking bum. So much imperfection, a haze one shade away from a blotch. He had almost given up, but then he met her, flipped over her wrist to find a nakedness of tiny blue canals. He'd never thought to look beyond the obvious before, the secret of metaphor.

5/

He keeps looking, can't help himself, the word *nude* like a unicorn sighting. The way a new friend manages to achieve both lithesome and doughy in the same stark chest. Or ankle bones suddenly gone slinky on a perch of fuck-me shoes. Or that tan space between lifted T-shirt and faded jeans, where his hand could easily have an accident. Glimpses of intimacy: bits of colour, pinks and mauves, swirling in a tempest of freckles; a shadow pointing to a deeper shadow; a curve where bone suddenly becomes the soft curl of a stream.

6/

It ends with him stepping from the shower, slapped silly
by the steamy mirror that insists on seeing nothing
but a fence of ribs, tucks and blemishes galore, a pair
of sucked-in hips and an afterthought of legs that just go
on and on. More naked than nude, overexposed,
those sprung coils of useless intent. Wait until he gets his hands
on this. He wipes clean the mirror, a wide swathe
of self-abnegation. *We're still here*, the nerves
in his groin cry out in high-hoped voices.

SORROW, A REPRISE

Again last night it scratched on your door,
willing to wear away its flesh
for the honour of haunting you, of
sneaking in through your pores and filling you
with hopelessness, the kind of fumes
roses produce one moment before they die.

No way were you going to participate;
your masochistic days done.
You lay there, a pillow stuffed with
happiness between your knees, biting
the numbness from your tongue, refusing
to grip that doorknob, that ball of pain.

Wrapped in sweaty sheets,
you shoved your earplugs deeper.
The scratching continued – long,
lacquered fingernails.
And beneath the noise, a whisper
seeping through the cracks, promising

the sort of self-indulgence
men used to get arrested for.
You end up under the bed, holding
fast to a maze of screws and springs.
Scratch, scratch, scratch.
No way you're ever going vertical again,
tears pouring down your chin like movie rain.

Sorrow kept scraping
until you were splinters.
Come morning, you crawled for the door,
naked as a scrape. Nothing there
but nerve and muscle
face down in a hole of bones.

DYING A LITTLE

Sunset was a fireball that evening, obliterating the paddock, turning fences into spears of plunged light. It was all I could do not to burst into flames as I stretched for my wife's shadow. I was thinking a lot about my wife, talking as we were about another wife, sweetest Cathy, whose joy of a breast, burst into a homemade bomb of cancer cells, had now *metastasized*, a word tied in too many places with barbs and moans. We were sliding our tongues into cavities of hope, telling tales of minor miracles, toying with the light. And then we just sat there on the back deck, word junkies on a crash, dogs sniffing at our empty wineglasses. Down at the barn, the horses softly snorted, great black angels shaking their huge, insistent heads. Farther away, a thread of wolf lament led us towards grief. My wife's death is far more frightening than my own, let's face it, an abandonment. Then my friends' deaths, one by one, matches squeezed in fingertips, worm-like wraiths of ash. The world dying, orange and crimson, like those disaster films where body counts are beautiful, where death proves itself a genius of the inconsolable. There was much to be afraid of that sunset: Cathy with embers glowing in her chest, a wife who stood on the edge unable to tell the difference between a smolder and a hand. Slowly we brought the conversation back to life, lit candles against the steady stream of moths, refilled our glasses. But none of this could change the fact that we'd all died a little tonight, that our fingertips had leaked into pools of tinny light, trickling between the deck's gaps. Later, our high beams would slam into midnight as we spun the country driveway, trying to outrun those horses that were dying to ride us home.