

From The Dying Eye

Summer is over and the man down the hall is dead.
I watched him die.

I watched him die	because I had to.
I watched him die	because I could.
I watched him die	because nobody else would.
I watched him die	because it frightened me.
I watched him die	to feel sure I am alive.
I watched him die	because he was like my father.
I watched him die	because he was my father.
I watched him die	because I was paid to.
I watched him die	while holding his hand
	because that's what I was told to do.
I watched him die	without crying
	because I was supposed to.
I watched him die	because I could not save him.
I watched him die	<i>because I would not save him.</i>

Her belly swelled with each breath
Like the body of god
Before he breathed out our earth,
She, a whole world unto herself.

I imagined how far I'd have to dig
To reach her heart.

Could I have bore her out?
Hollowed her too-big body,
Made a nest of her blown apart rib cage,
Climbed inside and thrashed about
In her weak, wet chest,
Surrounded by ivory twigs,
Her mouth, bloody and brimming,
Torn nightgown scattered about everywhere.

She doesn't look at me;
The blind artist
On the top floor,
Rather she looks
At my voice in the air.
She follows it as if I spoke birds.
She watches it float,
Hang,
 Fall,
 Dive,
She follows its swooping,
Its curving.

I cannot lie.
That's how I imagine it;
Her eyes see my voice too clearly.
No hesitation, pitch, swallow,
Goes unseen in the air.

I'd never thought about the way a voice
Could seem like the flap of a wing,
The way breathing
Can sound like feathers.

My grandmother hugs me harder than she used to;
Both of us scared of shattering the reality of each other.

There are 48 nerve-branches in each of her hands, 96 in total,
Her cutaneous mechanoreceptors will deteriorate in the pads of her
fingers,

(Symptoms: Loss of sensitivity to touch)

Loss of motor neurons,

*(Symptoms: loss of dexterity, hand writing degrades,
hand speed and vibration sense decline)*

I hug my grandmother gentler than I used to;
She's eighty-four, I'm twenty-two.

We are hollow glass,
Bones of air.
Human shaped shards,
We are the shattering
Reflection of each other.

Break, *heart*, break.

When he arrived it took him three days to say a word.
So we gave him the bird.

*We require devotion to something
Other than ourselves for life to be enduring,*
says the Harvard philosopher, Josiah Royce.

We gave quiet Mr Stroud in S1 the bird.

The first words he spoke to me:

He's called Jerry, he said, pointing at the bird,

That's a lovely name, I replied.

He started to sit in his chair instead of in bed,

To be closer to Jerry.

He didn't speak often with us, but he spoke to Jerry.

He fed him, watered him, even cleaned his cage.

I started thinking of him as *The Birdman*,

I thought about bringing hundreds of tiny Jerrys

Into the home,

Letting them loose in the atrium of the lounge,

A pandemonium of life and feathers,

Little yellow Jerrys, glowing like doubloons,

Making nests in the bookshelves,

In the strings of the grand piano,

The cupboards,

The bread bin,

The teapots,

A Jerry for everyone!

The care home transformed,
A menagerie of tropical birds;
 Resplendent Quetzals, like flittering emeralds,
 With velvet rouge chests, and black bead eyes.

Andean Cock-of-the-walks, whose orange heads
Glow like nurses in dark corridors,

Lines of Scarlet Ibis, dropping cabaret red feathers,

The hum of hundreds of Purple-throated Sun Birds,
Frothing their tiny luminescent throats, miniature sunsets.

 The matrons would be beside themselves,

But the residents would swell and puff
With loyalty,
Led by *The Quiet Birdman* himself.

Mr Maynard stays on the top floor
Because his dementia makes him aggressive.

On my lunch break once, he asked me:

Where's this ship going?

Excuse me? I replied.

When will it arrive? He asked.

We're not/on a boat ...

What?!

We're in the/care home.

My hearing is not good! / When are we getting to France?

He was swaying slightly from left to right;
He felt the boat beneath his feet.

I'd seen him hit one of the other carers last week.

It doesn't help to encourage a delusion,
But,
It doesn't help to aggravate him either.

So I let myself find the swell of the corridor,
We tipped and nearly toppled
From left to right,
The riptide carrying us to France,
To war.
The corridor rocking on its axis,

Swilling us and undulating
Our hearts in our chests.
This ship, our reich,
Our alloy motherland,
Populated by men
Whose most substantial part
Is their lurching shadow.
Our breaths mimicked
By the soft slop of wave on metal.

He said I should put sugar under my tongue
To cure seasickness,
 To which I replied: *Aye Aye Captain.*

I put pennies
Under the pillows

Of the people
In the care home.

Bribes, for the Boatman,
Because I do not have doubloons.

The same way I used to exchange,
Teeth, white, small,

Like chips of glass,
For zinc.

A small metal gift,
Slipped under their pillow,

As they sleep.
The coin, warm

From my hands,
Cools, seems to ring –

Out,
The corridors.

Tooth fairy, Death Angel –
Penny for a breath.

Summer is over and the man down the hall disappears,
Leaving me stupid in the morning light,
To wonder how he vanished,
Like the other men and women –
Unsolved cases, the unresolved empty
Beds, where I should be getting them up,
Instead, only space and lingering.
Surprising, like the lurch
Of a top step
You only imagine is there.
The vanishing people
Settle in my marrow –
Their empty rooms
Look
So
Ordinary.