

BURIAL OF A WOMAN WITH THE BLACKENED SHELLS OF 86 TORTOISES

—*Southern Levant, 10,000 BCE*

What if 40 shells had been placed in her grave,
one for each of her years? I hope they held
a shelf for sorrow, eased her husband's grief
for her hair, her sighs, her voice. A ritual spell,
the leg of a boar on her shoulder to widen the way.
Could those pelts have kept her from the cold,
the two stone martens they spread across her body,
and liquefaction of her soul, that stole
that warmed her breasts? I hope she loved, and hard,
that the aurochs' tail steadied her spine.
and the eagle's wing was transport, carried her
past the uphill grass to outlast time.
Sprinkled like holy water, those tortoise shells,
with or without the need for heaven, for hell.

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With or without the need for heaven, for hell,
I clutched my bony rabbit's foot for luck—
the rabbit dead, the foot chopped off. Cruel,
that crisp, gold-capped clasp. No blood. No muck.
At night in bed I stroked the silky fur,
brown and white, slept with the chain so tight
around my finger it left a faithful ring.
The lore: kill the rabbit in the night,
a graveyard moon, the rabbit set down, crying
like a natural child. And I'm stuck
on why they placed a hacked-off human foot
inside the woman's grave—was that for luck?
Must we kill, need we sever,
to turn ourselves golden and forever?

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To turn ourselves golden and forever,
that's what we want, but I don't really know
what my mother wore for her burial,
her lavender Ultrasuede or did someone sew
a shroud? Was she sleeked in the full-length mink
my stepfather gave her? Did she crave a slub
of silk from her father's vest? Maybe she wanted
her easel, back brace, blue rubber brush to scrub
each apple with soap. Where were the lace-up Oxfords
she needed (her ankles, weak), where was our family
dog, or his leg bone, at least? And what did she say,
last visit in Maine, as she was vanishing
at 56? After brief remission.
I forget what she said (forgive me), I didn't listen.

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I forget what you said (forgive me), I didn't listen
until now, your voice in your letters, fifty years ago,
it's clear that something sharp had come between us—
barbs, worry, wishes and warnings and scolds.
Closing my eyes, I smell your geraniums, the ones
with leaves like tongues, their ruddy scent. Your knack
for tackling dandelions. You loved your hands
in dirt. To nurture growth meant pinching back
the blooms. All those years you circled my pool—
stay out of the deep end, stay out of the sun.
Too many be-sure-to's and shouldn'ts. The stains I'd left
on the counter. Unsure of myself and whatever I'd done.
How hard you were trying to love your daughter.
What trouble we had, what turbulent water.

What trouble we had, what turbulence,
you'd speak to me in code, in nuts and bolts—
how long to cook a roast, best to soak
an egg pan in cold water, don't burn the toast—
when what I needed was metaphor, to link the distant,
a bridge over churning water to carry me past
your house to Saturdays with my weekend father:
the drive-ins and car rides with him rushed by too fast.
Mother, remember we watched the "Sound of Music,"
the motherless children, their bright-eyed, breezy new start.
The fairytale-gloss: they never did cross
the Alps. The truth's like water, can't tease it apart.
It was myself I hadn't found.
A girl can easily run aground.

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A grasshopper phobia ran you aground
each time you saw one. Once in the car, you swerved
to the curb, undone. Had a schoolboy stuffed one
down your blouse when you were young, unnerved you?
I could have taught you to love them, to see their claws
as supple strength. Your shield, that thistle-green thorax.
Their mandibles as sturdy as your will
to live. Their antennae as your last chance.
The music of hearing them rub the pegs on their legs.
I was your bell, you rang me faint and feeble.
You were my church, you preached and preached and preached.
And you were the steeple. I tried to cling to the people
you thought I needed to know. When I lean down
I hear your silence working its way through the ground.

I hear your silence working its way through the ground
when I remember how I wanted to hurt you—
I'm never going to have children—so sure of myself,
my urge to dismantle my need for you, to refuse
what I knew you wanted. If I stitched you a quilt—
one patch for shame, one for sorrow, one
for when I wasn't there when you were dying.
One for my denying. I was undone.
I know you loved me hard. The way a mouse
licks and licks her babies, you licked me late
and long. I nearly drowned inside your spell.
Those licks. To keep me at bay or from harm's way?
I've only these 98 lines to soften, to save.
What if I'd placed 56 shells in your grave?

Details in Sonnets 1 and 2 come from Leore Grossman et al., 'A 12,000-Year-Old Shaman Burial from the Southern Levant (Israel)', *PNAS* 105:46 (2008), 17665–9, as referenced in *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* by Robert Macfarlane (New York: W. W Norton & Company), © 2019.

COMING UPON A YOUNG SCREECH OWL

Face down on the sidewalk, his head to one side.
I squatted, stroked his ear with two fingers—

not sleeping, then: a small wildness, frozen dead.
I ruffled the barred feathers of his neck,

which were as light as air, pleated brown and white.
Stared at the side of his face I could see—

flat as a dish—and the one eye, open, the iris
drained of yellow, the pupil dark-stunned

with unbecoming. I thought to pluck a feather,
then hated myself. I traced the softness down

to his legs: the talons deep in the neck
of a rabbit kit, smaller than my hand.

Was a rabbit too heavy for a young owl
to carry? The owl distracted by headlights?

As if knowing could save me. But never
mind. Owl and rabbit are equals now, the rabbit

tucked beneath the owl's feathered cape.
I'll soon forget about the rabbit. It's you, owl,

little urgent one, living and dying by your wits.
You haunt me: stubborn seizure, grip of talons

that refuse, even in death, to release
what is yours, by rights, to take.

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