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Death at the Library

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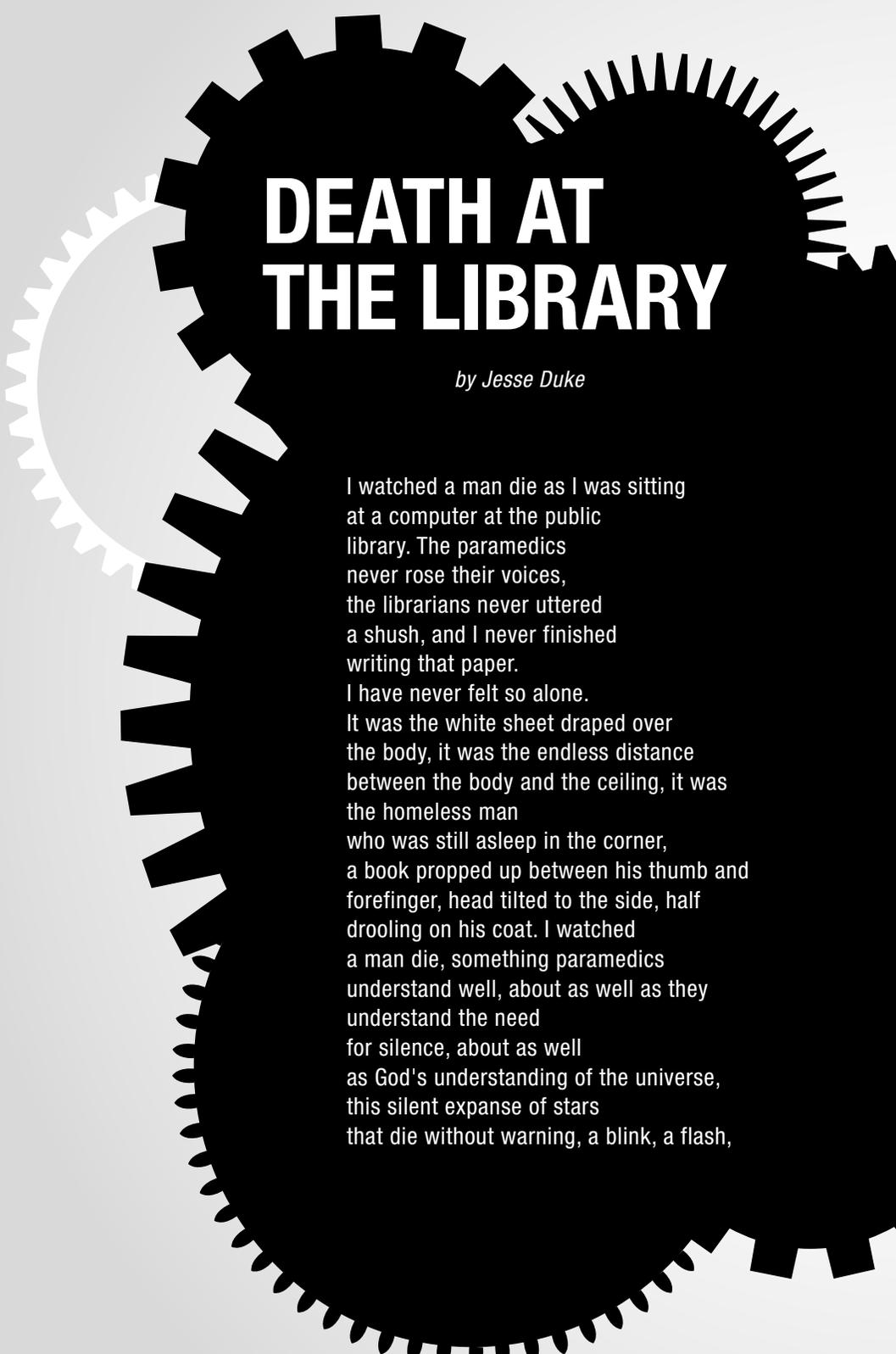
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DEATH AT THE LIBRARY

by Jesse Duke

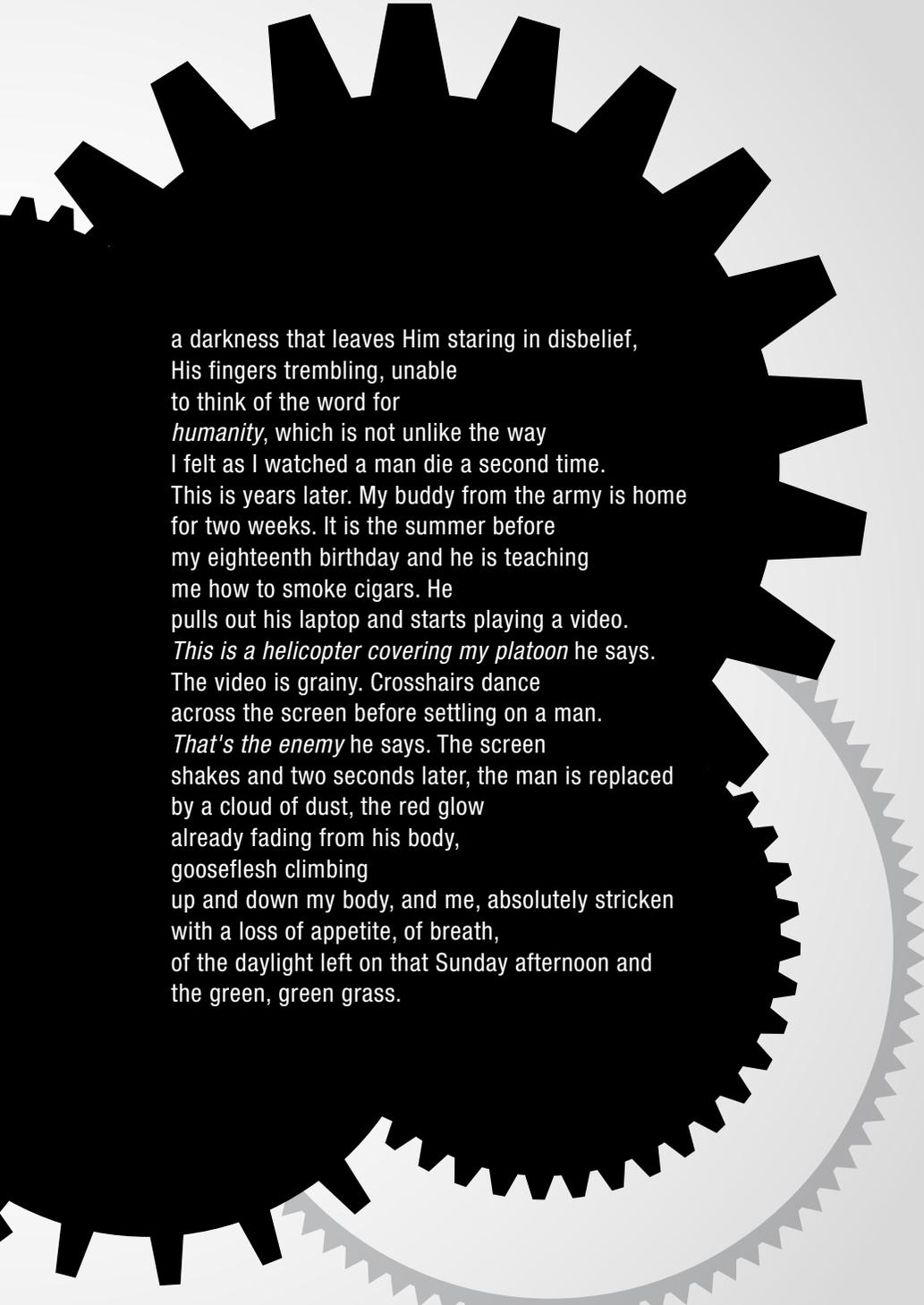
I watched a man die as I was sitting
at a computer at the public
library. The paramedics
never rose their voices,
the librarians never uttered
a shush, and I never finished
writing that paper.

I have never felt so alone.

It was the white sheet draped over
the body, it was the endless distance
between the body and the ceiling, it was
the homeless man

who was still asleep in the corner,
a book propped up between his thumb and
forefinger, head tilted to the side, half
drooling on his coat. I watched
a man die, something paramedics
understand well, about as well as they
understand the need

for silence, about as well
as God's understanding of the universe,
this silent expanse of stars
that die without warning, a blink, a flash,



a darkness that leaves Him staring in disbelief,
His fingers trembling, unable
to think of the word for
humanity, which is not unlike the way
I felt as I watched a man die a second time.
This is years later. My buddy from the army is home
for two weeks. It is the summer before
my eighteenth birthday and he is teaching
me how to smoke cigars. He
pulls out his laptop and starts playing a video.
This is a helicopter covering my platoon he says.
The video is grainy. Crosshairs dance
across the screen before settling on a man.
That's the enemy he says. The screen
shakes and two seconds later, the man is replaced
by a cloud of dust, the red glow
already fading from his body,
gooseflesh climbing
up and down my body, and me, absolutely stricken
with a loss of appetite, of breath,
of the daylight left on that Sunday afternoon and
the green, green grass.