Obituary

Josh Boardman

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I don’t know if I’ve ever seen a person die. On TV, maybe, but I mean in the flesh. I’ve only lost one person close to me—though close might be an overstatement—and that was my brother. I was young and he was always grouchy and all I remember from the day he died is that sterile hospital smell that makes me nauseous.

I’m working on a little mosaic. I bought a stiff sheet of poster board from Staples and every day when I’m wandering down the city streets I’ll hold a newspaper before my face, opened to the obituary. I look at the people’s faces. I’m not interested in their lives, their survivors, their cause of death; I’m interested in the little black dots that make up their faces. I hold the paper close, so that flat ink smell encircles my head, and I study the hues of their eyes, the dots sewn together into a face, darker or lighter, and I find those who tonally match my overarching image. A dark patch in the sky might be a little black girl, killed in a car accident (though this isn’t so important), or the meandering of a river might be the smiling teeth of a hundred or more old women.

I cut out the faces, or at least the pieces that I need, and I glue them onto the poster board. It’s hidden in my closet, and my newspaper scraps are buried under a pile of books on my bookshelf.

My mother might come into my room occasionally, but she’s never caught me. I need to shield her from myself, from the pieces she couldn’t believe. She opens my door, which scrapes over the unvacuumed carpet, and peeks her smiling face inside. Hi, she’ll say, and I’ll say it back.

What would you like for dinner? she asks.

I don’t know, I say. I’m reclining on my bed, my feet waving together in their socks. The reassuring smell of an old book hugs my nose.

Pizza?
I’m sort of sick of pizza.
Do you want to go out?
I’m alright. I’m not really that hungry.

So her eyes will glimmer and she’ll toss me a wry smile before scraping the door back closed behind her.

There is one piece of my mosaic which cannot come from the papers. I’m working out a landscape, with a sun roaring down upon a deep forest
stream. Never once have I seen an obituary where the faces could make up the sun. It is too radiant a thing for the blotchy black and white images. I need a picture in full color.

I think I was in the waiting room when my brother died. I might remember the red carpet in the little cubbies—the kind which scratches your palms and stings your throat with detergent. I might remember a TV murmuring in the background, and the doctor choosing his steps as he enters my cubby, the surge of relief or pain or whatever splashing across my chest when I hear the news.

Mother has an old girlfriend in the hospital. She goes to see her occasionally, but never more than that, because I can see the deeper shadows in mother’s cheekbones when she returns. I must see this woman. And my mother is more than willing to take me: it’ll be good for her to see a young face, she says. But she and I know that the woman won’t see me at all.

When we first enter the hospital room, my throat constricts. My stomach’s already been gurgling along white corridors, and when I’m confronted with the brown smell of old age, my head grows light. My father’s old Polaroid, dangling around my neck, weighs down my chest like a millstone. And the woman in the bed—the sharp beep beep beside her—her hands are set over the folded sheet and her skin is whiter than glowing. It’s dull. The pictures in the obituaries are always so lively, taken from the warmer days of the person’s youth, not while they’re lying like a corpse with an oxygen tube and an IV.

My mother puts her hand on my shoulder. She can’t see you, she says, but she can feel you. Touch her hand. Hold it.

I shuffle up to the side of the bed. Her wrinkles crease deeply into her face. She wasn’t so old, I’ve been told, but she’s almost decomposed. Green veins rise high off her hand. I reach out my own, and run my fingers along the backside. The skin is flimsy, and it flows around my touch, bunching up and then sinking down slowly after I remove my hand. I pick up her index finger, and slowly wrap my knuckles around her middle, then her ring, then her pinky. They’re sweaty and cold, but I still smell mostly sterilization and chemicals, so I know she’s still alive.

How do you know when a person dies? It’s not from the machines. It’s not when the doctor saunters into your cubby and lets you know. It’s because you’re there with them, the smell of the hospital disappears around them, and they’re left with the stink of sweat and you feel your mother’s hand in yours, sweaty, clammy, and you’re standing over your brother’s corpse again and your eyes let out all the warmth inside you.

I squeeze the woman’s hand then, and lugging the camera to my eyes with the other hand, I train the small black cross between my thumb and her
knuckle. Our hands are smaller behind the lens, and when the camera snaps and spits out the white frame, I think for a moment that it was too bright in the room, that the picture wouldn’t turn out, as if I had arched my sweating back into the sky and snapped a picture of the fullest noontime sun.