

A VALEDICTION OF MOURNING

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I was about nineteen when my best friend drowned. A squall got him. He disappeared at sea. Other bodies were found, but not his. The Coast Guard searched the New Hampshire seacoast and then, on the winter solstice they gave up. I walked out in the early darkness and shoveled snow as the lights came on in the impossibly gray houses. I saw that I would not remember my friend. Human memory is simply a way of mining our private lives. Funny how the first large death we experience takes our faith in memory away. Where my friend was concerned, from that moment onward, I would always be at the edge of a winter field.

The spirited flesh and blood of the boy was gone even in my mind. My friend had been replaced by nostalgia. He was standing in the sunlight and waving his arms at a juniper that was filled with starlings; he was waving them away like ideas, the ragged sleeves of his green homemade sweater flapping loosely along the length of his long arms.

I saw that nostalgia is at the heart of fiction. Fiction is the heart of memory. I was nineteen and cold and neurasthenic and I sipped bourbon from a flask and I saw that I would live my life addicted to dizzying stories about the dead. I saw that there would be no way out of this. And the real boy's face was gone, replaced by the guarded face of Phideas's Zeus, a face at once bronze and mathematical. I could see that by trying to imagine his face I would make him anew. And so that month I took up reading philosophy. I walked each night across the snowy sidewalks to read alone in the library. I read the Germans: Fichte, Schopenhauer then Nietzsche. I worked backward through the blizzards of deaths, read Proclus, Minturno, read backward through Aristotle. And my friend's face appeared from within a hedgerow, calm there like the face of a sacred animal. I saw that I had no friend in memory. I carried books piled high in my arms through the dark and narrow stacks of the library.

When Jesus came again the disciples did not recognize him. Even three days is too much for mortal memory.

Plato notes we do not see things as they really are. If this is so, then how can we hold any pictures in mind of the dead?

I read in the drafty library long into the night. Outside there was fresh snow. In a few days it would be Christmas. I walked the deserted campus with statues of the dead gleaming in the mind's eye. I walked past the empty gymnasium, its windows dark, snow gathering in my boots. I wore a rucksack on my back that was heavy with books.

In the Finnish *Kalevala* I found an odd script. The poet Vainamoinen who is half Moses and half Creator — who first creates the world and lives in his own forests, who suffers like the rest of humanity from the capriciousness of dull matter, this literary character, a poet from the Iron Age, decides to build a boat that will take him to the land of the dead. His boat is going to be made entirely of words. He will climb aboard his word raft and cross the lake of Tuonela on an ordinary day, a day of late autumn bees and wind from the south. But he needs one word to complete his boat. It's a small word. It isn't even nautical. It's a single word that conveys "trusting face," "dark smoke," and a "single clean place" all at once. He will have to get that word from old Vipunen who has been dead a long time: long enough for full-grown birch trees to have risen from his stomach; for a meadow to have spread its roots deep beneath his face.

Because Vainamoinen must enter Vipunen's subterranean body, he turns himself into a yellow bird and flies under the grass. He enters the horizontal and earthy corpse of the shaman. He asks Vipunen for the gift of a word. But Vipunen resents being awakened and refuses to divulge anything.

Vipunen is the librarian in death's archives.

In those days I could read with one eye by holding a book close to my nose. I sat up all night in a circle of lamplight and followed the argument between the live shaman and the dead one.

The live shaman wants one word from the dead one.

The dead one perceives the live one inside his mossy bowels as in-

digestion.

The live one builds a forge among the tangled roots of old Vipunen's guts.

"Ow! Ow!" cries the dead one. "What are you doing there?"

And the live one says he's forging some tools.

The live one, inside the dead one, creates a shovel.

The dead one groans, swells like a fallen horse, shakes, stirs the summer birches. . .

And in this way they argue.

Neither one can see the other.

They are not perplexed.

Only their words provide features — as if a human face is merely a composite of sounds.

That was the winter I began talking to myself in earnest, and always under my breath.

Outside I made circles in the snow but my route was less and less a matter of visual fact.

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The live ones and the dead ones have no faces at all.