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## All The Things I Kept

By Nike Sulway | 1 May 2019

1.

Grief is the feeling you have  
the process you pass through  
like a tunnel but more  
physiological / a response to losing  
some thing / some one  
you once loved.

So when they call to tell me you are dying  
to describe the room in which they have laid you down  
to tell me that my mother is there by your side  
and my sister is on her way and all the four horsemen  
of your personal apocalypse have gathered  
at the window to wait and watch you as you go /  
when they tell me that your breath is slowing / that your  
heart – that stubborn muscle –  
beats irregularly now, is falling still, is stopping  
    now stopping  
        now stopped

Grief is not what I feel

2.

Three days later I wake  
far from home in a dark town

We have lost two fathers now  
Mine and yours in quick succession and  
Although I have nothing to say  
I get up and lay out words on paper  
because I need them, because  
they are the only things that make sense in this  
insensible world.

I need them to hold me here  
on this side of whatever wall there is between us and our dead  
I write down my second father's name  
and the name of my first father  
and my own name  
and your name  
I write down the first words I knew and then the last  
each on a new sheet of paper / but there is  
something wrong

each time I lift the pen the words are gone

I do not know the names of things  
there are no words for this

I am  
far from home in a dark town and the words – all words  
all language – are draining from me like the blood  
they drained from you after you died.

We are empty now  
We are hollow

Soon, we might truly become  
what we first were.

3.

He keeps coming back  
old ticker, old fucker  
his hands reach around my throat and  
squeeze  
I can feel the heat of his  
burned skin  
the stink of his breath  
the grip he has on me

but then he is fading he is turning  
to smoke or, no, it is more like the air  
of the dark separates him from himself  
As if the death outside of him  
has collided with the death inside him

soon, they will meet on the surface of his  
disrupted skin

I am alive, he says.  
No, I tell him. you are dead.

We spend weeks, months, in this dance

We go around in circles.  
It is as if I am  
roadkill and he is waiting. He waits  
the way a vulture waits  
by the side of the road  
waiting for a break in the traffic  
to strike

4.

We don't bury our fathers / any more  
We don't lay their bodies in the earth.

There are no memorials for the dead white men  
who loved us / who hurt us  
whose fists broke and then mended  
our hearts / our bones.

We burn them like Vikings ...  
not really. There are no warships / flaming on open seas.

Only women in suits  
who sit us down in air-conditioned rooms  
serving tea and sandwiches  
while your bodies are cleaned and plasticised  
prepared for viewing

Days later, your body is delivered  
into a furnace that burns without flames  
And your ashes are vacuumed up  
by a certified technician who seals you  
into a baby-blue plastic box  
in a white cardboard box

you are heavy, now,  
your death has a material weight  
you sit in the corner of the room

one more thing  
to move around

5.  
My family cannot agree on where to spread your ashes  
and so you are divided  
one last time  
my mother's portion  
is weighed in the kitchen scales

A kilogram of your ashes for her  
and another for each  
of your children

It is a kind of joke / this last quibbling  
over where to throw the soft grey  
flakes – the divided portions that remain

I hear a rumour that my mother  
poured a cup of you into the toilet  
and shat on you one last time

I can't take any of this seriously without getting  
everything wrong

But how else are we to take ourselves, our lives,  
given the seriousness of our plight?

6.  
I wake in the night / choking again on  
your hands drifting down the channel of my throat

I hear you laughing in the next room  
telling stories in the last person.  
I hear you telling the moon  
that a story is not what's necessary / not what's needed  
there is no way to make any sense of things, no need  
for a story

only a life

7.

I wish we could message the dead  
I would write to tell you all the things  
I kept from you

I would make you listen  
to my heart keening like a curlew

I would make you feel the tendons / crack

I would make you feel the throb of that mended  
break in my arm and the dimple in my  
skull from where you  
slammed my head against the wall

I would make you vomit up my other, first, father  
give him back to me, goddamnit  
give him back

he was not yours to eat / to love  
to lose

8.

September. The season turns and you  
are still not here

I take it back, old man  
I take it all back  
I take it hard, I take it harder than I can explain  
We are here, far from home  
in a dark town

there are no words

there is no grieving for the ones  
we never loved  
the ones who never loved us in return

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**Nike Sulway** lives in rural NSW with her wife and a menagerie of beloveds. She is the award-winning author of a few novels, including her most recent 'Dying in the Firs Person', as well as poems and short stories published in literary and speculative fiction magazines, including Lightspeed, Verity La, and Strange Horizons.

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