**Delight in the Dark: Prolegomena to a Ceremony for the Dead**

Christien Gholson

**1.**

Today, your death day,

I stood between pear trees,

listened to white blossoms,

bees. Tonight, a hot wind

scrapes the screen: white

petals shoot by, rattle

against the wall like teeth.

The bees sleep: one eye,

one wing, one antenna,

one mind, conjuring

tomorrow's path between

petal, sun, and the dead

who endlessly weave

shadows across stone

and grass. Shifting

patterns across sand.

Everything is alive, alive!

Both dream and reality.

**2.**

We crossed a continent

of lone porch lights

to sit at your table, talk

to you and Jack deep

into the night: Bosch,

nuclear waste trucked

to Yucca mountain,

stagnating wages, Chagall,

union organization, rage

at the wars. A safe base

in the dark, the only place

I ever called home.

Sold now. Maybe razed.

October moths

at the screen, frantic

to merge with porch light,

shining on the last cricket's

song in dry grass.

**3.**

"I'm talking to the dead

again," I say. You say:

"How can I be dead?

We're talking." We talk

in your dimly lit office,

a converted porch.

Tax files on the shelf

behind you, reflections

in dark glass. "Am I

really dead?" you say.

I say: "No, no, you

can't be…because I'm

talking to you." A

child's logic. You can't be:

because blossoms,

because bees,

because crows bank against

the wind.

**4.**

A red-brown spider

creates the pattern

of a lemniscate on

the bedroom wall,

symbol of the infinite,

framing the void

inside it all …I called

you from a phone booth

in Omaha, told you

I'd run out of cash,

might not have enough

gas to make it.

Hearing your voice –

a mix of mirth

and concern – got me

there. A small,

weird miracle inside

this small, weird life:

140 miles on empty,

under a vast night sky.

**5.**

We are smoking outside

a community theater

production of King Lear.

My first Shakespeare!

Your laugh on the empty

street: "That was terrible,

wasn't it?" Is this what

it's like to be an adult?

Because you thought I

knew good Shakespeare

from bad. It *was* terrible.

The actor leapt around,

desperate to embody

the words. Shouts

in place of meaning,

while someone shook tin

in the wings. *Sturm und*

*drang*. All the different

worlds inside us never

really leave us, do they?

Seventeen years old, forty-

eight, sixty-four, eighty-one,

it all spirals around us,

frail, ephemeral, looking

for a way out. Or in. I

hear your teen voice, 1941:

"That was terrible, wasn't it?"

Delight in the dark.

**6.**

Blossoms in moonlight

mimic snow. The first

spring cricket sings

beyond a stone wall.

What is home? I once

looked into your kitchen

window from outside,

at midnight, saw the reflection

of someone long dead,

nameless. "Who are you?"

A useless question, but

I knew - some ancestor,

unknown. Through you,

your house, all the people

who came and went,

there was the possibility

of connection – to a history,

to a lineage; and so,

to the earth, and so to the

silence of frost on grass

(frail, ephemeral, cold as

iron); and so, to the silence

that floats in and out of

all our stories, unnoticed;

and so, to the silence that

holds us so close at the end.

**7.**

Jack once played me *Le Mystere*

*des Voix Bulgares,* a lamenting

women's choir, dissonant, diachronic;

half-western, half-eastern,

and I said: "It sounds like sorrow.

Or joy. I can't tell which." Around

the corner, you sat in your office,

working, deep into the night,

and I eventually drifted in,

to talk, going on about choices

(young enough to believe I had

more control than is possible

in this life). You looked out

the window at the bare boxelders,

snow beyond, and said: "We didn't

have as many choices as you have

now…I think that might have

been a good thing." What is fate?

A red-brown spider creating

a lazy-eight on the wall? What is

fate? A story no one can fully

know until we're dead.

**8.**

It snowed on the blossoms

yesterday. Maybe no pears

this year. Blossoms and

pollen and bees spiral

through me: you hand me

cigarettes to deliver

to an old woman abandoned,

alone, in an old folk's home.

There's a story, there's

always a story: her daughter

rescued her from death

decades before. (You imply

it was an act of revenge

for a terrible childhood.)

The old woman had wanted

a swift death, but then

outlived everyone she knew.

Except you. I spend

the afternoon with her,

talking, smoking. All around:

twisted hands, wheelchairs

parked in the void, caught

between heaven and a

urine stench. Why did you

send me here? Because

cottonwood seed is on

the wing? Because the old

woman and I have both

become ghosts to ourselves,

need the touch of another

ghost to be able to touch

the earth again? Or was it

just another chore that

you couldn't do today?

Either way, we talk and

smoke and smoke and

talk in the shade. Blossoms

and pollen and bees

spiral through us. A crow

banks against the wind.

**9.**

Your last role:

Eleanor of Aquitaine

in *The Lion in Winter*.

Eleanor, Eleanor,

condemned to her

own castle, but still

wily, acerbic. Her

words the pin

that continually

picked all the king's

locks: "In a world

where carpenters

get resurrected,

anything is possible."

You were not

Eleanor. But you

could play Eleanor.

Darkness in delight.

**10.**

I see your house now the way

I saw Jack's painting of a circus

tent on a flat plain. What was

behind that flap? A chorus of

diachronic moths, lamenting joy?

Figures with Day-Glo wigs,

posing in the dark? The papier-

mâché detritus from a production

of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*? A lone

clown playing Satie on a lone

piano, lit by the moon? Or the

dawn wind, carrying the scent

of all the grass it's passed through –

Rockies to plains to prairie –

right past your porch. You step

out of your house, into a

boxelder tree, wrap yourself

in a cloak of bark…

**11.**

What is praise? The way

the thrasher's yellow eye,

earlier today, studied

something between two

stacked stones. What is

love? The way pear blossoms,

right now, light the dark

closest to the tree.

What is beauty? The shape

of the space you left behind

when you died – the space

between stars, the infinite

space between two stones.

Tonight, I'll go outside,

whisper your name into

the dark. I expect to find

silence, the silence that

holds us so close at the end.

I also expect that I'll hear

you whisper back.

What will you say?

*i.m. Marita Mastrofski*

*(1924-2016)*