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A Rite of Rebirth

Peter Dziedzic

In the deep bowels of the night, the lashing tendrils of wind had calmed their restless whispers and the dancing streams of snow had ceased their whirling numbers. The streets, empty wombs, wound their way through lines of brick and mortar tombs, and the memory of busy hours had settled into the chilled bones of the earth. The soft light of lamps lit the paths of solitary souls and offered light only to silhouettes of frozen footprints. A hallow peace had filled the hollow world.

The silence of the winter pastoral was tinged, faintly, sweetly, by far-off whimpers. They echoed from a country manor that hugged the bare, ancient forest at the edge of the hushed Midwestern town. The forests, dreamed children and old men alike, bore the ghosts of the world within the mazes of starved branches. A slanted veranda overlooked this obscure haunt, and through a large window, a woman paced back and forth.

The house was dark; the path of the woman was lit only by a faint sliver of light. Her rhythmic steps sent laughing creaks through the floorboards, and frequent tears, those not soaked by her damp sweater or drunk by the disheveled strands of confused hair, flew to the floor with greedy speed. Every few steps, she passed a grandfather clock – stoic, withered, and severe in its strikes and tolls. The laughing creeks, the cold pitter-patter, and the secondly churning of the clock that kept her pace all rang as defiant metronomes as the hours of the night passed in hushed flow. In her shaking hands she clenched a linen-clad bundle close to her chest. Her fingers stroked the strands of linen, and the occasional tear fell upon the hidden mass, a secret baptism, a quiet rite.

A curious eye peeked from the bedroom above, the resounding lamentations, soft though stark, tore through the young boy who looked down upon the scene. Each whimper, each cry and each choke caused him to grip the door handle tighter, firmer, as if out of this brass slab would pour sought answers, pain forgiven, a love forgotten. Tears streamed from the edges of his deep-green eyes, and his stringy brown hair swayed as he muffled his coughs. He stumbled over to the edge of his bed and, kneeling down, produced a small tin box from underneath his dresser. He opened it and recovered the peeling image of a young woman. Holding the picture lightly within his fingers, as if fearful of the revelations that this woman held silent and hidden from the damning rush of time, he trembled with a resounding emptiness. In the image, the woman propped her chin with her palm, and the boy ran his hand over the image of her fingers, as if, in her fleeting flesh, he found the distilled sweetness of some long-forgotten eternity.

Down the hall, a locked oak door sealed inside a man whose recent days were occupied only by foul breath and stagnant memories. Sullen and grizzly and consumed in a rush of hazed thought, he lay upon a small couch within the study. His left hand shielded his eyes from the blinding light convulsing in the waltz of fan blades above. His right hand clasped a half-empty bottle of bourbon. He stumbled to his feet and approached a window that overlooked the distant town. Hunching his body over his desk and resting his fists on the paper-littered obscuri-

ty that was his workspace, he peered through the glass, fighting his reflection and blazing eyes, to the quieted town in the distance. There was a thread of life that sustained this country commune in the midst of the frigid winter night, and whether it was the luminous lamps that scattered their glow on empty streets, the trees flirting with the wind, or the occasional phantom of pulsing snow drift, the man knew not, but the thread of life that bore this town left him envying the nameless stillness. The man focused on his reflection, distorted by the liquor-toned glass, and once more the forsaken man fled the sight.

The woman paused before the looming staircase, and seeking to rest her calloused feet, sat upon the first step. Peeling over the last patch of cloth of the bundle, she ran her fingers over the white face of the infant. Its body was rigid, its skin clammy, its heart quiet, and its lungs retired. The faint blue and purple tinges of his face had melted into a pale-gray stillness over the hours, the teasing memento of a life shortly fled. Racing thoughts plagued her mind, drowning out the churning clock. She blamed the blanket. She blamed herself. She blamed her husband and her husband's son and the vast gulf that had consumed the house over the months. She blamed for hours, and found that after such spiteful churnings, the baby was still no more than a frozen lump of flesh. With the baby's life had fled her warmth, and with long exposure to the flaccid face of the infant returned, louder, the stabbing moans.

The son wanted to return the peeling image to its cistern, but he clenched it tightly at the sound of his stepmother's cries. Blame scarred his heart, and isolation clouded his mind. At times, he hated his father for his willingness to let go of the past, but more so, he hated the woman for her intrusion. With her intrusion came the infant that had stolen the attention of his father. He had refused to name it "brother." Now, all hatred and childhood stubbornness fled with the sound of each sob. He opened his door an inch and peered at the woman sitting at the bottom of the stairs, her hands were caressing the dead infant, and her fingers were fluttering in the darkness, bearing a life that the boy once knew in his own mother's hands. He craved the stability of that warmth, the firmness of those wearied hands.

Pacing the room and casting occasional tempting glances at his distorted reflection in the glass, the man held back tears as he finished the last swig of bourbon. Opening the folding doors of his closet, the man retrieved another bottle and placed it upon his desk. Ready to open it and drown the cries and coughs, he paused. His eyes narrowed on the window pane once more, and this time, instead of focusing on his reflection, he looked past, and saw reflected a picture of his sons. With bourbon in hand, he approached the new, glossy, and blameless image. The piercing smile of his dead son and the quiet gaze of his older son had invited him to deep remorse, a grasping for a time now lost. The smiling faces of his children mocked his hidden stupor, and called to trial his trodden dignity. The man knew that all the blame and booze in the world would not erase the scars of mortal frailty. He knew some thread of life, some sacred salvation, must yet grace the torn home.

He let the bottle slide from his hand and roll to a darkened corner of the room as he stumbled to the door. He peered out into the darkness; the waltzing light of his study sent the darkness of the hall and foyer fleeing. The wife and boy

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continued their mournful rounds, and he stepped into the hallway, descended the stairs, and approached his wife. He bent his head, and sat down beside her, the stair creaking under his weight. She turned and looked upon his face with heavy eyes. His pained eyes offered a stillness beyond words and memory. She dropped her head to his shoulder. A simple caress of tear-stained cheeks and shaking hands had led them to breach an unknowable gulf.

Watching his father approach the woman and seeking a comfort not found in the peeling image, the son slowly descended the stairs and inched his way besides his father and the woman. He wound his tiny palm around theirs, and his father and stepmother squeezed the soft, shaking hand of the son. His coughs had escalated into a choking mourning, and the cries of three had joined, and in unison, ushered in a twilight song, a funeral rite.

The three held their attention on the silent infant. The ruffles of the snow-white linen cloth pulsed and danced like rattled branches in the whispered wind. Here, too, was a peace transcendent. Here, too, was a thread of life. Each pressed their forehead against the bundle, and the body had been warmed by their touch. The mother wrapped it once more, a rite of safe journey, a rite of absolution. Outside, the purple hinges of twilight had grazed the night sky.

They approached the window overlooking the veranda. The sun was painting its morning portrait at the edge of the world; the frigid forests were bent towards the rising lamp. Distant church bells ushered in the newfound dawn, and the grandfather clock continued its punctual march. Each offered praise of a cycle unknown, a destiny acknowledged, a power mysterious.

Looking out, they watched as the sun extended its rays over the forest horizon, dispelling the ghosts of the forest. Among the bold hand of death and daring grasp of darkness, a threaded stairway to heaven had been reclaimed. The three huddled closer in the frigid winter dawn and embraced the din of ringing bells and churning clock hands, a rite of rebirth.

Fade to Winter

Kristina Kroger

Splayed palms punching holes in Heaven
Our eyes crazed
Crow-feathers in our fingers.

Dancing around wildfires
weaving tattered wings of wood-smoke
we become ghost-flesh
My wind-in-the-trees brain
Decomposes with the leaves
Autumnal embers fading out of me

This elemental insanity
Has consumed me
I want to fly south with the geese