

In the Vincent Price Room, Journey's End

"Undertakers to Meet"

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What do undertakers talk about
when they meet? Do they share the black
humour of anaesthetists, that exacting
routine punctuated by moments of sheer terror
when false teeth are lost or a spouse
glows with white-hot anger at a death-grimace
no art could remove or, at least, lacquer?
Do they practice those fastidious
make-overs on each other?
Rehearse those hushed voices, gently
touching their colleagues' elbows?

Or gather in sound-proofed convention
rooms and strike Chinese gongs, drink
Tequila sunrises and play
giddy rounds of paper, scissors, rock?
Perhaps they massage each other's delicate
hands, those manicured fingers blessed
by the angel of death, with the tact
and sure precision of surgeon and beautician.

I have come to believe they flirt and pair
off in their rooms and undress, a slow seductive
shedding of charcoal suits
and skirts, stiff white blouses and shirts,
underwear flimsy, sheer, vermillion,
never taking le petit morte lying down
but upright, defying gravity.

Though some never touch, only their eyes
ferrying back and forth across the river.

Walking past them down the hotel corridor
I hear one mention ashes on the Ganges.
Or is it managing their assets?
If I crashed their workshops, would I discover
them practising those soft, deep, compassionate
sounds, or training to suppress laughter?
In the session on "Understanding Grief"
do they meditate on photos of their late
fathers, ailing mothers, or tirelessly enact
the Monty Python dead parrot skit?



They must shop-talk about us,
the mourners. Rate our bereavement,
swap designations: weepers and wailers,
eye-dabbers, cinder-block-faced,
zipper-lipped, will hunters, morbid.
And surely they must complain
about music, how they hate
hearing "Nearer My God to Thee."
How they long to crank up "Sympathy
for the Devil" or "You ain't
nothing but a hound dog," or instruct
the organist to play "Stairway to Heaven"
backwards. Late in the evening,

in the hospitality suite, they drink
shooters they call embalmers,
and with a flushed, self-conscious thrill
play "Name the Immortals."
Then push each other over the brink
of remembrance: the devastated,
the forlorn they could not console.
That done, they make lists.
Hymns that permeate even the brass
and varnished wood of their hearts.
Handshakes that made them tremble.
Moments alone with the dead
when the room's air thins and parts,
the mind wavers, light-headed,
as if someone has drawn a boost
from the brain's electricity, recharged
and sped off, the lights briefly dimmed,
air quivering, then still.

—Richard Lemm