

REQUIEM

JASON M. JONES

1.

The youngest girl is only four years old when her brother suggests they hold a *séance* for their father. He'd gone into the hospital three weeks before with flu-like symptoms and had never come out. The mother doesn't explain this too clearly. She just says their father's with God now. Her brother is older by ten years. She trusts he knows how to contact God if anyone does, and if they can reach God, they might reach their father. She touches her sister's fingers and clasps her brother's and closes her eyes as instructed. Her heart races when her brother calls to their father, but nothing happens. She sits until she has to pee and then pees herself. She hides it from her siblings and hopes her father can't see.

2.

Her brother plays the organ, and the music is morbid, but the girl thinks it's nice. She lies on the floor with her head resting on the backs of her folded hands, listening, thinking the thoughts a four year old has. Will she see her father again? Will she talk to him? Her brother assures her she will, but he doesn't say when. In the meantime, he rocks back and forth on the rickety wooden stool. Her sister, who's six, sits outside in the back yard, pulling at the grass while her mother sips tea at the dining room table, reading the newspaper, plumes of smoke

rising into the yellowed ceiling. She doesn't speak often, and when she does, it's in short, terse sentences: "Dinner's ready" or "Time for bed." Her mother hasn't washed her in days, but the girl doesn't mind. She doesn't like to take a bath anyway.

3.

The girl has another brother who's ten, but he stays outside most days. When he's home, he hits her and her sister, but he won't hit the eldest. Not that the eldest is tough, but he's strange and silent and fixates on things. He's started collecting dead insects, dipping their bodies in liquid and pinning them to boards. It doesn't make sense to the younger boy, who plays basketball and baseball and runs 'til he's out of breath and runs some more. When he comes home at dusk, he's so tired he falls right asleep, and if the sisters bother him, he pushes them. He doesn't want to hurt them. He just wants them out of his way, and he thinks it's his right.

4.

None of the children are taking it well, but their mother takes it the hardest. She'd never wanted children, though she'd wanted his. She'd always thought he'd make a good father and she'd handle her end, but now she's stuck with these kids and no one to raise them with. There are four children, four strangers. He'd always had the deft touch with strangers. He'd invite people from work for parties and mix the drinks. He'd tell jokes and smile, and she'd smile at his smiling. He made life better and now he's gone and she doesn't know what to do. She resents the children, thinks they're too young to suffer like she does. She resents him his death. She wishes she were dead too.

5.

The eldest buys a Ouija board with money he's saved from his paper route. His father taught him to save, and he plans on using his savings to get in touch. He thinks he might someday become an undertaker. He finds the rituals soothing, the methodical care of the dead and their bodies. He has his insects

and he cares for them. Some boys want to be ballplayers, but he's found his calling and doesn't mind that it's unusual. He takes a shovel on his route and collects the roadkill. He goes to the store and steals, not shoes but their boxes. He buries the rabbits and squirrels and one time he buries a fox, but he doesn't involve his younger siblings yet. These ceremonies are sacred. He has to practice, perfect them. He has to get it right.

6.

The youngest girl misses her father's hugs and scratchy beard, but she doesn't tell her siblings this. She doesn't tell herself either, as she doesn't realize it. She just knows it's not there and she doesn't like it. There was warmth and now none, him and now gone. She likes the eldest though he's strange and keeps to himself. She likes the other, though he's strange and he hits her. She likes her sister most and clings near whenever she can. The rest go to school but she stays home, and whenever she's home, there's no TV or games. Just her mother, and her mother clears her throat, and then it's quiet and still, and the clock keeps ticking.

7.

Her eldest brother plays the game and he's got the rest of them involved, even the hitter. Somehow the hitter doesn't mind sitting and moving the slanted piece. They all want to hear. They all move the piece, and it spells things the youngest can't spell. The others interpret. They read. They go to school. It's all letters, but they interpret the letters. They make sounds and the sounds make meaning. Yes and no, she gets. They're spelled plain on the board. There's repetition, back and forth. She interprets yes and no, but the rest require assistance. "He's here," the eldest says. "He wants to speak..." Though much as the young girl tries, she can't hear her father's voice.

8.

The girl tries to contact her father on her own. She takes the board from under her brother's bed while he's at school, but the slanted piece just sits there underneath her hands. It

doesn't move as it moved when they moved it together. She looks at the ceiling. She knows that the sky sits beyond and heaven's beyond that. She moves the piece herself and knows it's cheating, but she's good at make-believe. And even though she can't spell, she makes up the things she wants him to tell her. "I'm okay," he says. "I miss you. I love you." The girl smiles. She wants to tell someone he's okay, but she's worried she'll get in trouble for sneaking into her brother's room and playing with magic.

9.

The eldest invites his siblings to the viewings. He convinces the hitter to come by, letting him dig the graves, and the girls don the blouses and skirts they wore for their father's service. They hold these ceremonies on Sunday afternoons when their mother does the shopping. The boxes are lined with black tissue paper, each animal laid lovingly inside. The eldest says the blessing and spreads a handful of dirt on the lid. The hitter fills it in, and the girls bow their heads in prayer and place the roses they've picked from the neighbor's rosebush on the plot. When they go inside, the eldest plays the organ and it's always solemn music. The youngest listens while the other two drift off, disappear. They don't like the sound. It's too much like the music at church, though that's why the youngest enjoys it. Her father's in that music.

10.

Their mother watches them come and go and doesn't do much about it. She doesn't reassure them or quell their fears. Mostly she watches the youngest cut through their parlor, stocking feet paddling upstairs to the boys' room. She's seen the Ouija board. She's found her daughter's pee-soaked pants hidden underneath her bed. She's noticed the fresh patches of tilled earth in the yard. She wonders if their grief's as deep as hers. She thinks she should intervene but isn't sure what she'd say. She's out of her depth. She's never dealt with a dead husband or father, and she's never dealt with children dealing

with it either. For all she knows, this is how everyone copes. She's been tempted to try some strange things herself. She can't recall the last time she showered.

11.

One afternoon, the girl's sister comes home from school with her bag unusually full and rushes into their room. "Look what I have," her sister says, unzipping the bag, and when she opens the flap, the girl can see bright fur, white and orange, sticking out from the opening. "It's the Mortimers' cat," she says, and they huddle, half-in/half-out of the closet, holding it up. The girl remembers the living cat, and it's hard to match this inanimate animal with the pet who'd come bounding across their lawn whenever she'd gone out to play. She's never seen death this close. During her father's service, an aunt had kept her away. "It's not something children should see," she'd said, though they'd let the boys see. She knows it's not sleeping and feels a peculiar pinch in her heart at recognizing the difference. Her aunt had tried comparing sleep with death, but she knows there's nothing of sleep in it. She knows the cat's dead, and she knows there's nothing they can do to change it.

12.

By the time they show the eldest, the girl has examined the cat from every angle. She's touched it and the fur feels like fur, but its body's grown rigid. "It won't keep 'til Sunday," the hitter says, and the eldest nods. It's not often the two boys agree, and the girl nods along with them. The car hasn't done much damage and the body's intact, but there's blood crusting around its mouth, and the girl thinks there's something that's not cat in this cat and it won't be a cat much longer. She reaches out to touch it again, but the boys block her path. If the eldest hadn't coaxed her from the room, she'd have held vigil beside his bed, guarding the cat beneath. The others leave it be, but their thoughts are closely drawn to the space where they've decided to store it overnight, already decomposing.

13.

Each child somehow equates the cat with their father, though only the eldest, as he lay wakeful in bed, makes the conscious connection. Of the animals he's consecrated to the earth, this is the first with which their family held some intimacy, some affection. Even the hitter, sleepless like the rest, feels it, though he's least likely to put it into words. The youngest shares the eldest's sensitivity, and that evening, they'd prepared the casket together. More special than a shoebox, the eldest decides to sacrifice a wooden crate he keeps his records in, lining its lid with velvet they've appropriated from a pair of pillows their grandmother gave the girl and her sister for presents. "We'll make it nice," the sister says, and both girls give consent as the eldest works without a word, tearing the stitching with a small pair of scissors he took from their mother.

14.

When the eldest wakes the girl, it's dark outside. They'd planned this the day before, but she's still surprised, and he has to shush her to keep her from calling out. He leaves the girl and her sister to dress, and they fumble about, but soon enough they're creeping downstairs, the eldest and hitter bearing the cat's casket. They skip the organ music, aware their mother's asleep upstairs, and tread toward the spot where the hitter snuck out and dug the grave. The shadows of trees fall across the girl's silhouette. In the distance the sun starts to rise. She feels a sense of importance, feels their daddy's with them and their acts have consequences. The boys set the casket down, and the eldest asks them to pray. The morning birds sing, and she likes the singing. She won't tell the eldest, but it's nicer than the organ music.

15.

As the rising sun illuminates her children on the lawn, the mother watches from her bedroom window. She hasn't slept well since her bed became a half-size too large, and she woke to the girls stumbling around. With her husband's death, she

stopped attending church, and she's left the children to form their own, this tiny congregation gathered to cherish the dead. She's recognized they need answers that aren't there, solutions to questions they'll ask all their lives: why God's indifferent, why those they love have to die. She's been searching herself these past months, and she's no further along than she'd been at their age. The eldest with a practiced manner opens his book, hoping to find them there. The youngest hovers at the edge of the grave, staring into the sky, as if they're up there, and the mother mourns their youth, their innocence, their forms a trick of light and shade she captures in silhouette before the image fades; as well she knows, the image always fades; as well she knows this too will eventually fade.