

Your Loved One

In the span of a few years, my father died, then the two dogs, one after the other, and the home that used to house us all was sold. Death made me dream. I dreamed my father lay beardless in the morgue. I had never seen my father without a beard. He had worn one every day of my life, and died with it on. He donated his body to medical science, and it was, at the time I dreamed of him, most likely in a drawer somewhere on the campus of the Loma Linda Medical School in California. Could they have shaved his beard off to prepare him for some kind of procedure, I wondered? It was possible, though unlikely. More likely, a medical student had replaced his knees. That would be better, I thought. It did not seem right that the faces of the dead should be allowed to change.

The dreams that followed the sale of the house were full of the sharp and living desert light that drew fine white lines around the edges of things and poured color in to the brim. The house was located in the high Mojave in Southern California. It was a desert, fringed with mountains, and there was rain and wind, sometimes snow. Mostly, there was sun. The landscape stretched out in it like a big brindled cat, its sides shifting with slow, steady breathing. In the dreams it made a sound like the bees that hovered over the rosemary brush out front in spring. The buzz of a thousand tiny saws.

The loss of the house was the most difficult, because it made the others permanent. For a while a person was gone, but the place they'd made remained. Now, if they did come back, my father, the dogs, there would be no place left even to haunt.

One afternoon, when I was helping my mother pack up the house, we received a letter from the Loma Linda Medical Center. Your Loved One, it assured us, has been laid to rest. The body had been cremated and interred in a special garden onsite for donor remains. A small ceremony had been carried out. I did not keep the letter, though I wish I had. That was the great difficulty, knowing what to leave behind and what to keep. It was a form letter, generic, and did not refer to my father by name. Your Loved One. That made a kind of sense to me. That they did not take their names with them, the dead.

I still dream of the dogs sometimes, though they are not the same dogs, not really. Our dogs – I never saw them again.

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