

The Mummy Meets Hot-Headed Naked Ice-Borers

Djedmaatesankh—temple musician, wife of Paankhntof, daughter of Shedtaope—died childless, aged thirty-five, in the tenth century BC, of blood poisoning from an abscessed incisor. CAT scans of her mummy show how the abscess chewed a walnut-sized hole in her upper jaw, gnawing

bone the way the creatures called “hot-headed naked ice-borers” gnaw tunnels through Antarctic ice. Six inches long, hairless and pink, they look in pictures like sea lions with tumors on their foreheads, and saber-teeth. The teeth chew tunnels; the “tumors” are lumps of bone,

the skin of which writhes with blood vessels radiating heat. Their normal temperature is 110 degrees. Djedmaatesankh’s fever may have reached 104. One shot of penicillin could have saved her, but it was 3000 years away. Knowing about ice-borers might have saved French

explorer Philippe Poisson, who disappeared in 1837. Five foot six, he could have been a large penguin: the ice-borers’ favorite food. A pack collects under a penguin and, with their foreheads, melt the ice it’s standing on. The penguin sinks as in quicksand; the borers attack like piranha,

leaving behind only beak, feathers, and feet—as if the bird has taken them off before bed. Think

of Poisson, torn into fragments by their fangs.
Think of Djedmaatesankh in the three weeks the abscess
took to kill her. How did her husband feel,
hearing her groan? Watching her corpse carried

to the embalmers? Seeing the molded likeness
of her face rise from her pupal coffin? Did he weep
to lose his only love? Was he relieved
that he could remarry, and possibly have sons?
Or had mistresses provided those?
Did his wife's death make him curse, thank, cease

believing in his gods? Did Poisson's wife in Paris
dream of penguin beaks, feathers, feet encased
in ice? Did she see pink squirming things
with Philippe's face? The first night Djedmaatesankh
went to bed with a toothache, did she dream
she was in a room crowded with people in strange clothes,

and while a white-skinned boy stared down at her
and, through a transparent wall like frozen air, made
noises that sounded like "Eooo, gross," his sister screamed,
and had to be carried outside, and that night
dreamed of Djedmaatesankh walking toward her,
gauze dripping from her shriveled, childless hands?

The Death of Santa Claus

He's had chest pains for weeks,
but doctors don't make house
calls to the North Pole,

he's let his Blue Cross lapse,
blood tests make him faint,
hospital gowns always flap

open, waiting rooms upset
his stomach, and it's only
indigestion anyway, he thinks,

until, feeding the reindeer,
he feels as if a monster fist
has grabbed his heart and won't

stop squeezing. He can't
breathe, and the beautiful white
world he loves goes black,

and he drops on his jelly belly
in the snow and Mrs. Claus
tears out of the toy factory

wailing, and the elves wring
their little hands, and Rudolph's
nose blinks like a sad ambulance

light, and in a tract house
in Houston, Texas, I'm eight,
telling my mom that stupid

kids at school say Santa's a big
fake, and she sits with me
on our purple-flowered couch,

and takes my hand, tears
in her throat, the terrible
news rising in her eyes.

Prayer for the Man Who Mugged My Father, 72

May there be an afterlife.

May you meet him there, the same age as you.

May the meeting take place in a small, locked room.

May the bushes where you hid be there again, leaves tipped with razor-blades and acid.

May the rifle butt you bashed him with be in his hands.

May the glass in his car window, which you smashed as he sat stopped at a red light, spike the rifle butt, and the concrete on which you'll fall.

May the needles the doctors used to close his eye, stab your pupils every time you hit the wall and then the floor, which will be often.

May my father let you cower for a while, whimpering, "Please don't shoot me. Please."

May he laugh, unload your gun, toss it away;

Then may he take you with bare hands.

May those hands, which taught his son to throw a curve and drive a nail and hold a frog, feel like cannonballs against your jaw.

May his arms, which powered handstands and made their muscles jump to please me, wrap your head and grind your face like stone.

May his chest, thick and hairy as a bear's, feel like a bear's snapping your bones.

May his feet, which showed me the flutter kick and carried me miles through the woods, feel like axes crushing your one claim to manhood as he chops you down.

And when you are down, and he's done with you, which will be soon, since, even one-eyed, with brain damage, he's a merciful man,

May the door to the room open and let him stride away to the Valhalla
he deserves.

May you—bleeding, broken—drag yourself upright.

May you think the worst is over;
You've survived, and may still win.

Then may the door open once more, and let me in.

Spiders

They drift through darkness, eight-fingered
hands grasping for your eyes.

In daylight they occur like accidents,
suddenly *there*. They are fear's footprint

on the shower floor, its rune stamped
on the wall. Small, hopping nightmares,

scuttling aliens, they charge at you
with scabbly legs, jaws dripping pain.

Masters of treachery, they leap from hiding,
paralyze their prey, then suck it dry.

Creeping out from dusty corners, cracks in walls,
they are your landlords when the lights die.

Fuzzy succubae, they sleep with you,
leave itchy kisses where they've been.

Walking to the bathroom, 2 a.m., your feet tickle.
Don't hit the light switch. Don't look down.

It's not enough to spray them with Black Flag;
they must be drowned in it.

It's not enough to crush one gently.
Grind it underfoot until it disappears.

Yet they are beautiful: furry as buffalo,
long-limbed as ballerinas.

Tiny illusionists, they rise and fall
on invisible sky-wires.

Millions of years after crawling from the sea,
they throw out nets to harvest the breeze.

They weave blankets for the ground's feet,
shawls for the quivering shoulders of the trees.

Their webs, transparent fielders' gloves,
pluck flies out of midair.

In this world they helped create, I am the newcomer
threatening, "Get out of town by dawn."

Yet—elfin bodyguards—they clear a path for me
through the constant crush of bugs;

they cordon off a spot—my private tuffet—
and they run away when I sit down.

The Crane Boy

*Extreme isolation in early childhood causes
children to have little or no speech
and severely limited mental abilities.*

From *Psychology*, by Lester A. Lefton

He was not named for the bird—slow-flying,
legs like jointed straws—but for the long-necked
monsters, squeaky-tongued, that tear tenements down.
Reek! Reek! he cries, and slams his head against
the clinic door. He wants some moldy bread,

a cracked soap dish, sky blue. (Who knows
if this is true? The party guest who said his name—
I forget hers—forgot what else she knew
about him, brother to the Teheran Ape-Child,
Lithuanian Bear-Child, Irish Sheep-Child,

Salzburg Sow-Girl—all those abandoned
by their kind, who, as another kind, survived.)
I see him chained to a commode
in a brownstone condemned and left standing.
Red jelly from his father's head spreads

on the street after a crack deal goes bust.
His mother clamps a charm between her thighs
to restore virginity. Rain rubs its cheek
against his window as he watches the cranes
batter buildings down. No one speaks to him,

but Wernicke's area, Broca's area
spark and sputter in the stinking dark.
Reek! Reek!—far back in his throat,

as if the sounds have fluttered over city blocks
or dropped from clouds like spiders on silk strands.

Maybe he means, *Don't bit me*. Who knows
what he means: shit-glazed, back hunched, arms flapping,
head battering the wall. Maybe it isn't
what I think: pain of a man strapped down waiting
for cyanide; a woman paralyzed,

her thoughts strobe-flashing as her body calcifies.
Rescued, his eyes search for the cranes—squealing,
framed in soap-dish blue. When he says *Reek!*
maybe he means *Spider, kiss me*. Maybe
he means *I miss you, Mother Sky*.