

LITURGY

*Ana Renee Moore*

If you ask my father, he'll tell it different every time. He'll tell you about how my mother couldn't stand the light of the West Coast sunlight, the ground shaking fear. He'll tell you it just wasn't the time, or that he was afraid of the desert's age old truths. He'll tell you a hundred different ways, but they're all just words on a photograph. His eyes always speak the loudest.

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I hear my neighbors fighting next door. Their anger comes through my wall uninvited. I look out the window, see my mother in her car. Her emotions sync with the muted flashes of the living room TV. I don't need to ask who she's talking to, and as the first tear streaks down her face I sense the screen go blank. My interest has moved elsewhere and I begin to stir.

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The past returns as an alibi in my grandfather's photo-album. Innocent: the verdict on this lineup. Truth: developed underneath a red light, free from exposure. I flip through the album until my eyes rest on his face, the face of the California Man. I absorb every detail, soaking up his features and comparing them to mine. I leave him tucked between the murky pages of the past, his impression already fading from the canvas of my eyelids.

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My grandfather sits in the quiet of his haunted house heavy with memories and plagued with lost opportunities. He makes me listen, teaches me how pride is the ignorance of shame. He tells of his time spent in the Marines, says "once a Marine, always a Marine," says it like a curse.

He shakes his head at the state of things, and I can hear his lungs forget to move. He sees himself and sighs, baffled at how he ever served powers he hates so willingly. When I ask if he's ever killed it sits densely in the room. His silence wrings in my eardrums, drilling its message into my brain waves. He pulls out the dictionary, looks up "liturgy." He hands it over, says "this is the only death I know."

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I wake in the early hours of dawn to visit the cats beneath the stairs and unfold my discoveries in private. California Man. His smile told me what to call him, not a name but an identity, seen squirming beneath his rigid teeth. Absentee fit him just as well. I become my mother in a matter of seconds, hasten back to those "simpler times." The cat, the black one, paws at my hand and meets my eyes. I can only admit to a stifled silence as I rejoin the present.

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My mother says it looks like rain, draws me in with the promise of coming clean. All I see are the clouds.

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My grandmother lifts her hands off the steering wheel in a moment of condemned trust, does the *signum crucis* over her body, a blessing of all that she has lived through, one which she covets even when the truancy of her peace is looming above her doorstep, a sign that tells the angels to pass her over in the night, for there is work that must be done.

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Walking into the psychiatrist's office I'm asked about what I see in the smudges. A cross in one, a house in the other. They take notes all around me, speak in whispers and hushed tones

about what they call a condition. They've forgotten that I can read lips, and that all the lips say just let me know what they haven't begun to say.

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I watch my grandfather's eyes fold in on themselves like soggy receipts, disperse into fettered pieces fuzzy, confused. His eyes dissolve and become his skin, splitting at well-worn creases. He is ashen, and the only color comes from the red in his veins swirls, the creeping blue in his skin so frail it I am afraid to acknowledge it. His iron hands quaver as he raises the pistol to his temple, releases his memory to the desert. This reverse alchemy makes me doubt the sanctity of this God. The trigger pulls: and I am thrust forth into the daylight.

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After watching the daylight dim and rest behind the mountain, I wander down the street as if to slowly follow. On the way to the hospital I try to remember how to pray, the words heavy and foreign on my tongue. Drifting to the hum of the engine, I feel my better half guide my journey home.