

specter dust

excerpt of poetry collection
by nat raum

digging

the first thing i
found looking for
the garnet pinky ring
my grandfather gave
my mother was the
necklace you got me
in cabo san lucas,

the silver and opal
trevally, and the first thing
i wondered was how of all
of the things you
ruined for me,
you never ruined
opals.

specter dust

when you're young, you learn object permanence once something disappears from view but you know it still exists. it stops feeling like a blade through wraithly ribs when something goes away and you no longer howl to heaven when you open your eyes in the morning and find yourself missing something vital. this could be because you'll eventually lose people far more often than things and it won't seem like such a tragedy of cosmic proportion when you've misplaced anything you can replace. moreover, one day you may find you've reached a point where there are things you once held dear that you'd rather see turn to dust before your eyes. you'd rather forget what you learned and loved in tandem, rather toss relics of heartbreak in a thrifted cigar box to quietly decompose, but even though you can't see it, the void you run from is sure as hell still there. so why not offer up the artifacts that tie you endlessly to the ghost of a goodbye that wouldn't have possibly happened how you wanted anyway? why not sift the specter dust through loose and skeletal fingers and watch it fall to earth without you?

fever

i don't remember a single word
you sang while strumming your
miniature guitar, only the way
a plague wormed its way
into me through eardrums—if

only i were maiden enough
for its charm. even beckoned,
i can't convince rats to circle
my ankles or follow me into thick
brume. and i still don't know

if it's me that brought the pox
here after all or if it simply tugs me
toward it so naturally that i no longer
know what is me or you, what is
the way i bury my head in sallow

flesh or the way it's somehow been
enough to sustain me, coupled
with how you cry out when i leave you
but flee when i fall asleep. ever since
you stopped singing, i feverishly

savor your wails instead.

loose threads

no one taught me to embroider &
i don't think my grandmother even knew
how, so i didn't know at first that the floss

was made of strands you were supposed
to pull apart sometimes. maybe she could
but i never got to ask & i never found out

the ratio of butter to salt to crispy to soft
in her breakfast potatoes either & i never
learned where she got the jewelry box

that sits on my vanity now. we pulled
her life apart like floss-strands & i claimed
it before anything else, so sacred

it almost belonged on my windowsill altar
filled with pebbles or coins or plastic toys & i
remembered costume jewelry might lay better

on red velvet. how is it that i have this core
fiber of hers now that she is ash & the irony
is that she's the one who would probably tell me

what it's really like over there, in the beyond
she'd said was a place where the cars
drive slowly & the trash cans are always full.

of sweat and blood

around me hangs
a red veil between me

and the gossamer gazes
of flaneurs, between my

icicle fingers and flesh
that still flushes, follicles

that still pass coily strands
of irish hair which grow

half a meter until they break
and split into sevenths.

i couldn't stand stress fractures
more than i absolutely had to—

frenzied, i took fabric scissors
to my hair until it just grazed

my shoulders, lifting
the veil as each metallic

strike of sharp shear sent swaths
of ruby floss tumbling downward.

ill omen

when the sun looms
black in the sky,
does it watch and follow
like vultures perched

atop a highway street lamp—
or maybe buzzards? i never
can tell unless it's a crow,
sharp beak pricking out

of plump inkfeather body.
does it look down at me
like god would, in apathy
that could never match

my own hatred, its own curse,
rooted so deeply you can't
even hold my bones anymore
or else i'll kill us both.

nag's head

there is still so much sway
in the ocean for how many swells
i've already heard crash &
there is still so much pull
to wear this ring for how soon i
know i'll be taking it off &
there is still so much fear despite
how far i've come & there is still
so much soft for how much i
weep & there are still so few
fresh flowers in my room for how
much i love them, how much i want
to keep looking at supermarket roses
every day long after they've husked &
dried standing upright.

tallow candles

1. “all is quiet, all is gloom; what creatures in the darkness loom?”
2. i am not actually afraid of the dark. the creep of overcast midnights does not bring with it the same terror as it did in grade school, when i’d leap into my twin-size bed and tuck in all my limbs after turning my glittery lava lamp off. i’d start to doze off and remember last fall, when i had pneumonia and slept in the living room at the old house. the plaster of the walls, brickred in the daylight, dulled to claret after midnight in the spillover light from the bathroom door’s crack. i was coughing and coughing and coughing and my throat and temples softened to delirium. i couldn’t open my eyes; even when i looked away from the light, pop-colored soap bubbles floated in the air, a mutant mosquito hawk enclosed in each. i didn’t sleep that night.
3. when we moved to the valley and i thought the new house was haunted, i asked my parents if anyone had ever died there. they told me no, but that the previous owner of the anneslie house had died quietly on the concrete stairs leading to the side door. i’d once fallen down them, shattering the orange hard candy i’d just eaten with my baby molars. until i lived in poe’s old building decades later and started to actually believe in ghosts, i never thought i might have disrupted her, but now i think maybe i did? maybe there was even a bit of truth to the hallucinations?
- 3.5. it is possible i am just saying this to rationalize having hallucinations in the first grade.
4. but there is a legend—slavic, likely polish—about a ritual called forefathers’ eve. apparently in your typical war-pillaged marsh, it is not hard for the average peasant to leave this world with

unfinished business, in which case their restless spirit requires help to find the peace it seeks after death. i am certain i would become one of these peasants, as i am absolutely unlucky enough to die accidentally while roaming the war-torn countryside, and i definitely have plenty of unfinished business. anyway, forefather's eve is the ritual for these restless spirits, said to bring them the harmony that allows them to depart this realm peacefully.

5. i love ritual far more than i've ever cared for faith. even then, i still hate anything i have to perform for. the only thing that has ever stopped me in my tracks inside a church was the architecture or the tragedy at hand, and often the former to occupy my mind while it ran far away from the latter. i can believe that which i cannot see, but i cannot believe in anything benevolent out there after weeping at the sight of two child-size coffins. sermons have always been empty.

6. and what of the repeat performances i've finally convinced myself are not actually rituals? as i grew up, and my towhead dirtied to mouse-brown and doubled in volume any time i went outside between april and september, my best friend and i shared baths and she showed me how she washed her silky hair. i did everything right and she still had to console me by naming everyone else in our grade whose hair couldn't be silky no matter how hard they tried. the same year, my trust-fund princess friend's mom talked me gently out of painting my nails black at her nail salon birthday party and i chose sheer pink instead.

7. what i am saying is that every time i have failed to perform *woman*, i have convinced myself i was the problem, that there should be something innately embedded in me that made me proud to stand here in this skin suit, and i was unable to access it within myself.

8. it was easy to forget i was failing for a while, in all honesty, because nobody told me outright. nobody ever really told me outright, but after i went to college, i often had the advantage of being blackout drunk or stoned or both and it was a lot easier to forget anything, including the stale raisin that was my self-esteem. but all it took to remind me was the first man i wanted to marry telling me i wasn't as feminine as he usually liked.

9. from where i sit, gender is the same kind of void as faith. they're not the kind of voids where something feels missing. they are simply somewhere i have never been, a chasm into which i routinely stare and wonder what lies within this vastness i have never known even a minute of. there is nothing innate about *woman*, and there never has been. i don't know to miss it, as much as everyone else seems to want me to.

9.5. and please don't try to tell me that it's 2022 and i can be whoever i want, or that you're surprised it's still so hard for some people to accept.

10. i am closest to myself when i have found a new private ritual. this is why i continue to tire of companionship, especially romantic, after a while—i cannot play video games in my underwear or sit in the bathtub with my bong when i am responsible for entertaining someone else. eventually, i reach a point where i've made myself so small in that performance that i realize i've long since surrendered to it. i find a new ritual that is sometimes destructive.

11. is it irony that i don't remember who first told me *nothing good ever happens after 1am*, or just alanis morissette irony?

12. i celebrated five years without self harm around the same time i discovered dating apps. i started running pushpins along my arms when i was 14 and my boyfriend wanted to tell everyone about his real-life pornstar girlfriend and he kept telling me he loved me so he could keep winning the game of social chutes and ladders at my expense. i am not sure about that five-year milestone anymore because i always knew i could count on company if i shared a bed with someone else. much later, someone talked about meaningless sex as a form of self harm and my throat started to close up.

14. i am not actually afraid of the dark but i also believed love was a foreign void until recently, and i can still only write love beautifully when i think of one person; thinking of anyone else i've loved comes out fractured every time.

15. when psychiatrists check in about my medication during appointments, they ask a variety of diagnostic questions i've always answered with no. *no, i have not been hearing or seeing things that aren't there*, at least not in the hallucinatory sense. i have heard a lot of words and seen a lot of people that never made it to the *reality* stage, but i don't think that's what my psychiatrist is talking about. the only word i have for that particular delusion is the same one my exes probably all use to describe me: *crazy*. what other explanation could there be for the fact that i have somehow always been the problem and never been able to see it?

15.5. is it really such a hallucination if *my* mind isn't the one doing the convincing?

16. i have a lot of forgiving to do. really, i just already do a lot of forgiving out of habit and take it away out of spite. when my spirit is summoned, what if its outline just stands in the ritual fire like a disappointed parent and a scorned lover put together? i can't promise i wouldn't appear just to spit

on everyone's face one more time and keep haunting them anyway. i can't be summoned to forgive horrors. i can't promise i would be ready.

17. does superstition count as a ritual, by the way? can i tell myself that and find myself at peace despite the way i will never tell someone i love them first and i will never call them my partner until they've said they are, in those words exactly? can i call paranoia superstition and absolve myself of that, too?

18. i remember in sixth grade, i worked on an earth science project with the future president of the young republicans club. it was a board game adventure through atmospheric layers, and she was insufferable and domineering, but i got to keep the game board at the end. before my dad's best friend and his wife had their first baby, we lit bonfires every autumn sunday and i threw the posterboard into the firepit. feeling vindicated, i grabbed two naked and mud-caked barbie dolls and tossed them in too. their figures melted and the air smelled of burning hair. their ashes journeyed into the atmosphere. i decided i would also like to journey into the atmosphere. i made a habit of burning things.

19. it really is not so much that i want to die as it is that i am so desperate for an existence that knows no part of this, that doesn't mistake me for a woman or cast me as a victim. i want to melt and reform like a plastic doll over flame. i convince myself that i can drive out these parts of myself in writing. somewhere in the writing of exorcisms, i have managed to begin severing the strings that continue to bind me in states of anger and fear. there is not so much a wave of forgiveness for my past as there is a quiet unspooling of my fingers that allows the paranoid glances and nightmares to leave me be for a while. even in my memory, i can only let go if i cannot go back.

20. i am not actually afraid of the dark; i am afraid of the lights that beckon me closer to forgiving. i fear that particular kind of peace, as i have only ever known it as the passing eye of a hurricane, lasting just long enough to be blindsided by the return of the eyewall. i remain unconvinced that forgiveness is a permanent step to anything.

21. “light the tallow candles to lead them through the dark, call them by name, appease their regrets—only then may they depart in peace.”

