

My Mother's Hands

Annie Marhefka

When she died, they were buttery smooth and still, and buried under mine, palms pressed flat against dry, cotton hospital sheets. I suffocated them with my grief, pressing the fear of going on living without her into the skin, into the stiffness of the bed. When she entered the hospital just days before, they had been trembling, blue veins protruding, the rigid outline of her carpal bones visible through translucent skin, thin like rice paper.

We had her cremated, but the funeral home director still prepared her body in a coffin on display for us, and after we finished picking out our urns from the catalog and watched him jot down the SKU numbers, he led us to her without warning.

Her hands were crossed over her chest in a way she would never have naturally lain. They were pale and powdery, fleeting and velvety like the lining of the temporary coffin. I wanted to rail at the funeral home director, spit at him that we hadn't wanted to see her this way, that we were trying to block out the way her vessel had deteriorated after my brother died, the way her face had sunken in and the way the fingers splintered out like branches devoid of leaves in the winter. I wanted to thrash my flimsy hands at him, thin

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I had wanted to remember her hands not as bony extensions of a decaying corpse, but as those tender tendrils that had pressed against my forehead as a child, feeling around for fever. I had wanted to remember them as the delicate paint brushes that had swept pink polish over the tips of my nails, had gripped a plastic Bic razor and demonstrated how to smooth it over legs propped on the side of the bathroom tub. I had wanted to remember them as interweaving threads knitting my tangled hair into braids. I had wanted to remember them in the *before* times, the before-he-died, before-her-depression, before-her-giving-up.

Even in the *before* times, though, her hands were weathered with trauma. They had arthritis, from writing perhaps, or mothering, or clawing at ghosts from her childhood: a father gone missing, a dog decapitated by a train, a rapist.

I have this picture of her as a girl, and in it, her hands are like a doll's: poised and petite, perfect petals of porcelain.

Annie Marhefka is a writer in Baltimore, Maryland. Her creative nonfiction and poetry have been published by

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