

Glass Shards

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Glass Shards

Nonfiction • Olivia Corso

Leaves drop like cigarette ash, littering the ground in patches of smoldering orange and brown. I idle amid the debris of oaks, dragging the toe of my shoe across wet grass. I carry with me a paper cup, filled halfway with the sticky leftovers of an electric blue Slurpee. I find a butterfly, dead, lying on its side, gingerly pick it up by the wing with my fingernails, careful not to pinch. A bare patch of silky black skin is left unearthed where a wing used to be. The other wing is flailed out as if in flight. Colors blend like watercolor bleeding on a wet page—orange, black, white. When I hold it up against the sky, light shines through the wing, as beautiful as stained glass.

Colorful scenes play through my head, the remnants of Sundays, my mind constantly wandering in my mother's church. Jagged depictions of biblical stories travel down the glass walls like words on a page—Jesus amongst the saints, Jesus performing miracles in massive crowds, Jesus resurrecting the dead with a razor-sharp fingertip. His crystal blue eyes pierce mine from behind a tall, oak altar. I spend hours squirming in my seat next to my mother, who sits erect, her head bowed. She prays for her continued strength, peace for her father, decaying in cancerous Arkansas, clarity for her restless daughter. She sighs an amen, turns to look at me. She knows my mind strays, sees boredom in my posture, feels criticism in my heart. I struggle under the gaze of two pairs of iridescent blue eyes.

My eyes do not meet those of the butterfly—I picture them closed, lids pulled over dark orbs, nestled amongst fibers of hair-like follicles that cover its body. I cannot bear to place the thing in my palm. I pour the Slurpee from its

cup, dumping bright blue liquid amongst a patch of red and pink blooms. I lay the butterfly at the bottom of the funnel in a sticky heap of melted ice and dye. I hesitate to snap on the lid—the action seems unjust. I poke my finger through the top and tear out a small hole from the plastic, then place the lid over the lip of the cup. A beam of light floods through, the wing of the butterfly catching sunlight and illuminating the inside of the cup like morning Mass.

My mother sat with her parents in Arkansas in a dim lit bistro, solemn, the next day's treatment weighing down their shoulders and smiles. The ambience cast soft shadows across my grandfather's thinning face. My mother squinted through the dark across the room, recognized a short Korean man. She had seen the portrait of the national specialist hanging in the Halifax Hospital back in Florida, the same hospital in which my grandfather had been diagnosed with multiple myeloma. The oncologist had been dining with his family a few tables away. Fifteen hours later, he would stand poised above my grandfather's incised chest, scalpel between his fingers, and slide a port through his left pectoral muscle. My mother approached him as he stood to leave, tears culminating in her eyes. My grandparents trailed behind. Names and handshakes were exchanged.

"This is my father, W.L. He's beginning treatment with you tomorrow."

There was no small talk.

"Doctor, my father...this man is too important...this man is too kind to be suffering like this."

I imagine the tears that spilled from her eyes, the memories that filled her mind—my grandfather bearing my mother on his mountainous shoulders, deep into the ocean past the crashing waves, out to where the water settled in a sheet of glass. The ocean rolled and lapped against my mother's body, her head just barely bobbing above the water, as she clung to my grandfather with weak, wet arms. They glided like sea foam upon the surface, like plasma atop blood, with no fear of drowning. As my mother poured out her heart to the oncologist—amongst the chiming of glasses, clatter of silverware on china, the rushing of heavy laden waiters and idle chatter of diners—I imagine my grandfather stood there, silent in his humility. He placed a massive hand gently between my mother's shoulders as they heaved with the weight of her words.

"Ma'am," the doctor met my mother's eyes. "It is unacceptable that your father has this strain of cancer." He looked up at my grandfather's face. Perhaps they shared a slight nod or tilt of the head, a moment of recognition. "I will take care of him," he said.

Within the clean white innards of a cancer ward, my grandfather sat watching as his cells were scattered around the room in bags and vials and tubes. There was a port, a hole punctured through his chest, directly above his heart. A small plastic tube connected blood vessel to pump, dragging blood along clear plastic tubes that coiled in the air and into individual vials. The oncologist inserted the vials into a centrifuge like bullets in a gun, and the device spun with a mechanical whir, separating blood from plasma in a whip of red color, collected stem cells to be cryogenically frozen.

Perhaps the port in his chest tingled, pinched his skin. Perhaps my grandfather curled his toes in discomfort, ground his teeth, held on tight to my grandmother's bony hand, ran his fingers through my mother's hair. Perhaps he pictured me, only five years old, digging in the wet sand with a blue plastic shovel, flinging sand and shells in the air. Perhaps he pictured my sister, nearly three, sleeping under the shade of an umbrella in the arms of my mother. And perhaps he pictured himself, still fit and steady, grasping my small hand as we ambled to the ocean, how he would hoist me up by the arms, pulling me from the water's grip, my toes bombarded by the crash, how we would giggle, his laugh booming in his strong chest.

Back at home, that same port in my grandfather's chest would receive chemotherapy. Pale liquid streamed from three bags, hung from hooks like dead fish. He would drag the stand across the tiled floor, the wheels catching in the grout. He would stagger, regain his footing, look around to see if anyone had witnessed, and continue to fumble forward. In the bathroom mirror, he would run his fingers over his scalp, watching the hair fall and settle in the sink. Once, I naively told him he looked handsome without hair as I ran my own fingers over the top of his head. The corners of his mouth twitched into a sad smile.

I recall my ten-year-old self, perching on the edge of the bed as my grandmother leaned over my grandfather and removed the chamber from his chest, revealing the open wound. I remember it as a black hole, small but ominous, the surrounding skin irritated and red. Her fingers moved deftly as she cleaned his skin with a warm washcloth, swiped a gloved finger through the opening. I convinced myself I could see through the hole, to the inner mechanisms of my grandfather—his veins and vessels crisscrossing like roads on a map, his strong heart pulsing in the dark cavity, his lungs inflating with a sharp gasp as my grandmother replaced the chamber and attached the port with a blunt click, white liquid flowing once more.

I trace the flight pattern of another butterfly with my eyes as it swoops to rest on the arm of a bench, the bark of a tree, the curb of a sidewalk.

The butterfly lands delicately on a tall stem of grass and rests there, its wings fluttering softly in the breeze. Cup in hand, I tiptoe to the stalk and slowly reach out. I run my finger along the blade of grass from top to bottom until the butterfly clutches my nail with its legs, its wings splayed out in preparation for flight. Our eyes meet for a second—two bulging black holes and two blinking blue stars. I bring it closer to my eye. Its antennae kiss my lashes. The butterfly springs from my finger and returns to hopelessly fighting the breeze.

My grandfather died, not of cancer, but from a common cold. He slept away his final days in Halifax Hospital. The only indication of life, a beat on the heart monitor—a faint, brave tone that sang out like a whistle. On his deathbed, my grandfather never spoke. He solely opened his mouth to breathe, raspy, throaty noises escaping his chapped lips. He never opened his eyes. His thin lids lay heavy over his pale blue irises, betraying veins hidden under skin, poking through like mountains on a topographical map.

In my mind, this image is false, a lie. What I remember is the sound, that melody he whistled as my grandfather hauled loads of plants, dirt, and tools from his garage. He kneeled at the trunk of one of the great trees in his backyard, where a garden flourished. With massive yet gentle hands, he settled plantlets in loose earth, coaxing the stems to stand tall, smoothing out the dirt with his gloved fingertips. At night, we gathered on the concrete slab around a homemade fire pit, filled to the brim with damp logs. He sent me around the backyard to collect dead branches and armfuls of paper leaves that crumbled in my hands. We watched sparks scatter, joining the stars, then dim and fade in the overcast night sky. Rain floated down like fall leaves, and the fire hissed and spat. My grandfather whistled, a lullaby, perhaps, as I dozed with my head on his shoulder under the cover of oaks.

Late in the spring, my mother called me from Daytona. Over the speaker phone, she recounted the details of the hospital room—the sterilized white tiled floor, the white sheets tucked neatly around my grandfather, the opaque plastic curtain, hanging from the ceiling like the folds of a robe. She described the protection she wore—the thick plastic sheet that hung off her shoulders, the paper shoe covers snug around her boots, the hood pulled over her head, the face mask muffling her voice.

She must have been pacing. I could hear her dampened footsteps on the linoleum floor, the rustle of her crisp plastic smock. My mother wanted me to

talk to my grandfather, to tell him I loved him, even though she told me he would not respond. “Just in case,” she seemed to warn. “Why don’t you say a prayer, dear?”

Pressing my lips against the mouthpiece, I whispered my prayer across the state, along paved highways and dirt backroads, along the ridges of hills and the shores of beaches that separated us. I spoke of fond memories I shared with him: days spent reading on lawn chairs in the hot Florida sun, games we would play in the bed of his truck, pretending to be pirates, time spent in his orchard, sinking our teeth into lemons and grapefruits, trying not to make sour faces.

And what I remember now, what I remember most, the way his high, sweet whistle soared above the tops of trees and rustled the leaves like a wind, the way his melody sung out through the house, rattling the panes of the stained-glass window that hung on the back porch, the way his lullaby stuck in my head, in my teeth, on the tip on my tongue, on my lips, the times I found myself whistling in my head instead of out loud, for I knew my song was not as clear, nor as beautiful.

“Oh God,” I heard my mother gasp, “Oh God!”

“What? What did I do?”

I grasped the phone with sweaty palms, pressing the receiver to my ear.

“He...sweetheart, he just opened his eyes. And he’s...smiling.”

I could hear my mother weeping, alongside the pace of the heart monitor, droning on and on.

I saw my grandfather in that same hospital room weeks later. I pulled the white plastic sheet over my shoulder, the hood lifted over my head. I tightened the face mask over my mouth, slipped shoe covers over my small feet. My mother led me in by the hand up to the frame of the bed, barred me from straying too close with an arm across my chest.

He was pale even against the crisp white pillow and crisp white sheets and crisp white hospital gown tied loosely around his thin neck. His chin tilted slightly to the ceiling. A grim expression settled on his face—not the smile I had conjured over the phone, but a frown—his lips pressed in a tight arcing line. The straggling remains of his brows furrowed, drawing creases in his forehead.

I do not recall any words—perhaps I simply stood there in silence. I felt myself watching for something, a fluttering of the eyelids, a twitch of the fingers, a smile to spread across the white canvas of his face. I felt myself waiting for something—a procession of angels, a heavenly chorus, a ghostly hand on my shoulder or a whisper in my ear: “I will take care of him.”

Yet days later, I climbed into the passenger seat of the family van and my

mom handed me a Slurpee, neon blue and melted in the Florida heat. I took it warily in my hands and met her gaze. She had been crying, the whites of her eyes the color of wine, the blue of her irises drained of color.

“Olivia...,” my mother started.

“It’s okay, Mom. I understand.” I stared out the window. The sun shimmered on the hot pavement. Sweat dripped from my forehead like tears.

She laid her hand on my shoulder, curled a strand of hair behind my ear.

“He loved you so very much, Olivia.” She wiped her mascara away with a 7-11 napkin.

I did not cry that day, or night, or week; I shed no tears until the funeral. I remember the long walk down the aisle, the vaulted ceiling of the church rounded like the barrel of a gun. Vast windows lined the walls, and a tall, proud portrait of Jesus hovered over the altar. I remember the coffin, deep chocolate brown with thin gold trim lining the carved edges, like an ornate cigar box. I stood on tiptoes, craned my neck, clutched the brim of the coffin.

I remember the corpse, pale and stiff, a marble statue cut from an image of him. In life, my grandfather towered over me, able to perch me on his shoulders and place me amongst the tips of trees, where the birds sang along with his lullaby. But his corpse had shriveled to half its size, a tree, cut down and hacked apart. He was translucent, his long neck tailored in a dark tie and a rich brown suit, neatly creased like the folds of the hospital gown he had worn for so long. His long arms lay by his sides, settled in a bed of pale blooms. His lips curled upwards in peaceful smile, a dry pallid pink like the petals of a flower.

I stood, gazing into the coffin. I placed my fingers gently on the skin of his stony hand, tracing the veins along his wrist like braille. Tears spilled down my cheeks, wet my lips, dripped from my chin to my hand and seeped between the cracks of my grandfather’s cold fingers. A stained-glass window cast colorful, dancing shapes across his smiling face. His eyes were closed, but had he opened them, he would have seen Jesus’ stark blue daggers staring back.

The curtains are pulled back, wedged between the wall and a pillow. Dust motes float through rays of soft light. My hunched form casts a shadow across the pale wood desk. The dead butterfly, its damp body like a shriveled raisin, lies delicately in the shade. I poise the X-Acto Knife above the hairline fracture that joins wing to body, sever it. Flakes of skin and shards of transparent chitin jump up from the pressure of the blade, join the dust suspended in the air around me. The wing splits in half, fractured along one of the black eyespots. I lay the broken pieces on a sheet of paper, suture the wound with a strip of

clear tape. The wing rests like a painting behind a sheet of glass—the glare of the tape smudges color. I swipe the wingless corpse into the trashcan with the knife point.

My mother insisted he was in a better place, beyond suffering, at peace. She told me it was merciful of Jesus to take my grandfather when he had, that it was good and kind and just. The nights she found me crying myself to sleep, she would sit on the edge of my bed, consoling me with whispers. She implored me to reach out to Christ, to close my eyes and pray. But back in my mother's church, I could not picture Jesus—his eyes—apart from those cold, glass shards. Nor could I picture my grandfather amongst the saints, there on the vast stained-glass window, smiling as he had on the phone and in the coffin.

I more often find myself picturing my grandfather's expiring face, an array of angles and deep shadows. I picture the sharp edges and creases, the translucent, paper-like skin, the veins on his lids like a red and blue road-map of Arkansas. I picture his ghostly visage framed in his coffin, his tailored brown collar hiding his hollow neck, the slight smile that crept across his pale lips. I am haunted too by his whistle, his lullaby. Some days I cannot conjure the song, no matter how hard I might strain; other nights, the memory of him sings me to sleep.

It is strange we find such beauty in dead things. •