Learning to Die

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A mom and pop jewelry store with terribly out-of-date walnut paneling Is closed, a note of appreciation penned for all their loyal customers Pinned behind the door decorations—cast iron bars and tangled chains.

The owners retired, too old to belong in that place anymore. Next door, I am too new to belong in the Twin Scissors Barber Shop. A bell greets me anyway, and jazz meanders toward me from a wooden stereo set.

Two barbers nod to me behind spectacles and the gray heads that have half their attention. Fox News is showing a broadcast about tax cuts, and the scissor-wielding men keep it on Just to cuss about the six figure salaries of the politicians who laud the new plan.

There’s never a new plan. They’re old enough to know this, even if I am not, Old enough to know that the fade they shave beside my temples Is the same as the last haircut given to their old brothers before they faced the draft board in ‘69.

The eclectic book of women’s poetry in my hand suddenly seems out of place. Too contemporary to belong, though these men have known more of both women and poetry Than I will know until I age into a relic for a young poet to appreciate.

That said, the hands that hover by my head belong to a man Who muses on the merits of having a wife or a dog— “If you lock both in the trunk of your car for fifteen minutes, which one will be happy to see you?”

He’s never been married. His fingernails and mouth are much too dirty for that. The hands in my hair are not especially clean either, but I don’t mind. Dexterous hands, thick-fingered mitts molded by years of construction.

He’s always liked manipulating material. Less concrete now, more keratin. Less money than he used to make. He listens to jazz, watches TV, and works with his hands. He’s happier, going to buy a condo next year.

I read once that we all experience a bit of heaven, hell, and purgatory, depending on the day. Among the worn wood, the wafts of hair tonic and warm jazz, I feel not quite anywhere— Like we could whisper the world away, take a deep breath, and be home.