

## *Lot 29*

It snowed.

A heavy down comforter, typical of Cleveland in December, a pristine blanket that will resemble an oil spill on an old factory floor come February. The car found its way to the drive and pulled in automatically. We weaved around the Labyrinth of land with the same intensity with which we exhausted affection. The silent tension brooding over the vehicle was shattered by my wife's crisp, angled words:

"lot 29..."

She pointed to a piece of untouched earth that fought to stay virgin. Her mouth crooked, her eyes tired. I could see fragments of spirit leaking, separating from her as if a dormant scar opened and spilled shards of stained glass. Her ripening olive skin glared an un-natural blush and transparency that pulsated with colorless energy. I stared at the wheel as we came to a stop in front of a sign declaring our place on Earth. I dare not stare at her for fear of subtext. I force myself to a place where restraint becomes emotion.

My wife lets her breath out in a long deep trench and gets out of the car on shaky legs. I stare out over the expanse of the field. Crosses and holiday decorations are drizzled along the horizon like bleached coral; stone tomb markers make pits in the white mimicking miniature open graves. I have yet to see any footprints human or otherwise.

In my mind the focus of the holidays is birth. The birth of Christ, or the birth of a new year, a certain renewal that is plucked from the brain stem and placed like a newspaper clipping in a new scrapbook. When her Grandma passed those days before Thanksgiving with her family

gathered around her in an ironic and surreal Baptism, wanting to take away pain if it meant consuming bite-size morsels, likening her to Chernobyl and exposure time was crucial and our bodies were made of lead and we lifted her crinkled frame above the fallout parting the air in waves, our arms scaffolds as if giving heaven the Queen of radiation and mutating DNA ...

That focus in the air was as ever-present as the vertical tubes sticking from her cardboard cut-out shell...

Since this year death was the daily Holiday card and the repeated mantra in the house was the frantic speech of my wife: *"I have to be there before Christmas"* each time with helpings of emotion and guilt heaved on top of an already repressed guilt-filled version of the Marianas Trench...anxiety became a new chemical situating itself next to Boron in the Periodic Table.

We stole quick, short breaths in the cold anxiety and I waited

...and she waited. And her words stole the air:

"There is no grave stone."

And I remembered...before the snow, in the freshly tilled dirt, off-center of the plot what resembled a solid soda-pop can with a number driven into the nutrient rich ground. The blanket is now suffocating what little optimism was left.

And I remember my grandma...whose expensive dead, Catholic body lies somewhere in this sanitized land. She has a gravestone, I never visit.

My wife takes off down the road stopping every five feet or so to kick at a stranger's pit.

With every kick her frustration mounts, with every kick the tops of her feet turn a strange bright color as they are exposed to the cold as if she didn't wear the proper snow shoes on purpose, as if she wanted to go numb. She picks up speed; I hear her grunting at the ground, I feel her weeping in the air. I run the other way kicking and grunting and guilt, wishing I could feel the same way about a loved one's death, feel something in the cutting bite of snow. My feet are covered; my soul is brightly colored, exposed and numb. I try so hard to make my tears freeze.

The dead hear rhythmic footsteps above their underground castles and start the party.

We turn to each other 500 yards away tethered by a string of emptiness. I give it a little tug, and she pulls back telling me it's no good, it's too cold, it's too late, it will be dark soon...