

**To my father, the mortician: a poem questioning how you slept so long.**

by Seth Pennington

Remember years we worked, out in the heat,  
setting grave markers in the diesel that leaked?  
Even as a man it took all of me on the pry bar  
to lift what only took one of your  
gloved hands.

It took me on the pry bar  
to see you, how you were  
a man yawning in the bored weather  
of marriage, the stove holding your cold dinner  
as you took death-calls,

as you stayed gone as could be.  
Every extra pound of you fell into a TV.  
Your recliner held your shape like a chassis wrecked.  
The house with you absent  
dulled with stress and gameshows.

You left in the old Ford you called  
Leo, named after my dead uncle.  
You drove that monument to a bed set  
in your parent's storm shelter.  
You took nothing:

a few funeral suits,  
another affair, your work—a substitute  
life lived giving back, embalming the dead:  
families holding their emptiness like it is, instead,  
a full thing, as if a conch shell

held the ocean and not simply, its soft roaring.  
The hours spent with blood coursing  
from body to urinal, every precise  
stitch, every lid glued to keep hid the eyes.  
My mother pulled the blinds to,

grew sick with seizures and hollow,  
sat shadowed under the piano  
in her den. For meals, she ate saltines  
and watched her savings  
disappear with her taste for God.

You married new— a woman who  
recognized the irony of having a wedding in a funeral home;  
blew off all superstition. Ozzy Osbourne sang  
*it's not too late to learn how to love* as your step kids carried her train  
and you walked her down the aisle.

A drifter's plans to feed off the coffee of a wake  
were surprised by your nuptials; they pocketed cupcakes,  
swallowed punch before your reception began,  
and cracked jokes about saving the coffin  
for tomorrow. They reminded me

I was quiet in my life for years, loving and living  
with men I hid, until my birthday: I was 25, it was snowing.  
Dad, I phoned you to say that I had eloped with a man, that I vowed to  
not let my happiness stay suppressed, that we withdrew  
from the blizzard in the night:

we walked the aisle of Old South Church  
as a string quartet gathered to rehearse  
Bach but warmed-up with Mendelssohn's "Wedding March."  
Dad, you and I both believe in music, much  
more than anything else,

so I don't question your understanding of that omen,  
how suddenly my shell *did* contain ocean.  
I didn't realize I needed that church, that tradition,  
that part of home, to affirm my decision  
to marry where I could, where it was legal.

When Black Sabbath played to everyone's laughter,  
everyone's ridicule, I was not a good actor.  
I didn't realize we were both re-defining marriage,  
each of us with songs that would have left us embarrassed,  
if not for love.