

Seven Songs for a Dead Son

Janet Burroway

1. Monotone

But since we always said we shared this body—
blue eyes, lumbar glitch, thick, quick to heal—
I thought I'd let you know how far you've foiled
our DNA: the thinning hair, the bloody

high pressure, the arthritis that comes and goes,
the bone spurs in the joints, the hammer toe
on the right foot (your Uncle Stan has got it too),
not to mention the yet-to-come disease:

the cancer that felled my Granddad, or my Dad's
attacking heart, Aunt Jessie's broken hip—
all of it off your radar with one blip
or "brain laceration" as the record said,

from the one bullet (we'll always have to ask:
Did you just take that chance, or were you certain
you needed only one?)—how it careened
from your thick hair to the curtain, the breaking
glass,

which perhaps you heard, as perhaps your mind
changed its last will: *Let me have those, not this.*

2. Grapeshot

The scuppernong vine on the pergola
Reaches hand over hand from beam to beam.
turning its leafy lifeline to the sun,
fisting, and leaving behind a brassy bullet
to burst sweet, sour, and viscous on the tongue.

Death is no bigger than a scuppernong
in the mouth of its own making. Now, my palate
engorged, I eat your share: the tough skin
and the bitter seeds spat out time after time,
your mouth being full of the earth of Africa.

3. Post

Notwithstanding you are in your grave
these fifteen months
you are invited to apply
for a fixed-rate zero-percent American
Express. Your mortgage has been pre-approved
(some conditions may apply).
Your life assurance is inadequate.
Please fill in this form,
and are you interested
in long-term care?

Brown's Catalogue is the source
for all your survival needs.
Until it expires
this coupon entitles you to twenty percent
off at Bed, Bath & Beyond.
The GOP requests
asap the return of this questionnaire
on which significant issues of the day
you find most urgent,
and the NRA
needs your support to protect our citizens
against curtailment of their inalienable right
to bear arms.
Hello! The class of eighty-six
hopes you will join them for their twentieth,
and would you like the chicken or the fish?

4. Airport

I keep stepping on the ugly nap
of all our local comings and disappearings;
dingy—yellow, is it?—or I suppose
they call it "gold," with, surely, "garnet" flowers
or suns, whatever, and so do the tired arrivals
with their carry-ons, and the pickers-up
in their tanks and wrinkled shorts
and their carryings-on, the helium balloons
and welcome signs;
and us in our wrinkled shorts, already tired
to death of the, welcome, however, visitor—
he is not unwelcome, whoever he is, or she—
over the same carpet, from the same planes,
to the same luggage endlessly riding round
and round the creaking carousel.
And you,
arriving every time with him or her,
arriving every time
on your bouncing step
over the golden not-so-dingy-then,
and the luggage smelling leather-fresh,
and the carousel fresh-installed,
and your helium eyes
and your careless grin
into the wrinkled arms of my
welcome home.

5. Sixth Anniversary

The pix and the statistics have been buried
By now on page four of *The Democrat*:
The Iraqi father flung across the coffin lid,
Three of ours yesterday in a Blackhawk down,
Several dozen of theirs in the marketplace—
The usual: vest, detonator, shrapnel.

The only news,

Really, is interior: *The Morning Speculation*
That by now the bugs have retreated, your hunting hat
Consumed to the band, the lid fallen in,
The bones of your right hand light on your dry ribs,
Pledging allegiance to your vanished heart.

6. Roadkill

When I remember the call it is not the call
I think of, that after all
was a matter of fiber-optics and cochlea,
the drum, the hammer and all that
not much understood nor wondered at.
No. What I recall
is a night in Sussex several years before,
cutting it pretty close for the London train,
Dolly driving, chatting of antiques,
not a lot of traffic,
just the narrow road curve after curve,
hawthorn thicket dense hill after hill,
and dark;
when into the beam the badger leapt
from claw to claw as long as the car was wide,
haunch parallel to the road, the black eye slashed
underneath in black, turning with seeming purpose
to stare in mine,
the drum
beat
just before the jolt
to the underbelly
rising in my bowels;
the badger leaping, already surely dead,
out of the beam to the dark on the other side.
We were hammered hard
enough to skew us into oncoming traffic,
but there was no traffic,
only the country road
winding downhill toward the London train
already slowing into Lewes Station
that would take me shaking to Victoria
and parts unknown—
no option in the altered world
but to leave you where you had already
leapt with seeming purpose claw to claw
into the thorn-dark wood
on the other side.

7. Timeless

Ha. You don't know when
I am writing this poem,
not even what season or decade it is, because,
"You don't get over it, you get used to it,"
only means
it is all there, all the time, forever,
like the toad under the dry leaves in the drain,
mostly friendly, maybe; always startling.

"My job is to let go of you,
and if that doesn't work
to take care of you forever,"
says a character in a novel
on my bedside table
whose child is still alive, so she has not
considered the whole range of possibilities.
Still, she's right:

it is all there all the time forever;
not just the shock but the cute little sayings
("Don't mention pajamas in *front* of people!")
and the incessant adolescent hair-combing
and the whole range of possibilities,
right up to the strong hug
of the grown man whose suffering
you had to keep hidden according to your code.

It is all there: not guilt so much,
but nostalgia, memory,
sadness, the memory of shock, the fury,
and, okay, the guilt. "What did I do
wrong?!" my mother wailed when I got divorced.
She had no idea. *I* have no idea.
What did *I* do? No matter;

my job is to take care of you forever,
so, dutifully, still, in my mind's eye, I
carry your dissolving body. I do let go. I care
for you, I tuck you into the rocking grave
saying, "There, there. There, there,"
wherever *there* is, where *you*
don't get over it, but get used to it
all, there, all the time, forever.