

I began working in a hospital when I was fourteen, a candy striper. By sixteen, I'd advanced to nurse's aide. One of the first tasks I'd performed as an aide—my very first afternoon on the orthopedic floor—was to close up all the doors of the patients' rooms. No one told me why, but I had a good idea. When the doors were closed, I helped an orderly roll a gurney with a corpse on it down the hall, past those closed doors, and into an elevator. By the time I was twenty-one, I'd gained, one might say, a certain "conditioning" to the morgue.

I can see the red LLB elevator button in my mind's eye. The Lower-Level-Basement could only be accessed by a staff elevator to which one needed a key.

By the time I was in college—in another city, at work in another hospital—I had such a key: on a bracelet chain with my dorm key and car key.

My hospital work involved long hours of tough hard physical labor. I waded into it like someone slogging into a cold dirty river. Another obligation I had then—which felt like a bit of a job too—was my love-slash-lust. The guy with whom I was infatuated was a pathologist, newly graduated, and working in the hospital's morgue. I can remember glancing at this key, which would take me down to see him, as I tried to write a term paper. I'd chosen the topic myself: *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, a.k.a. *The Papyrus of Ani*. The book shook me in a profound way. It seemed for several weeks to make itself the nucleus of my world. Even now, if I dip into it again, here comes my whole life from 1973, when I was twenty-one, writing the paper on hieroglyphs, working in a large urban hospital, and falling a little in love with a co-worker. When I turn the book's pages, memories flutter out like pressed gingko leaves, all the veins still crisp and clear. For the early Egyptians, the afterlife was a busy place, but then of course the dead had all the time in the world for cavorting, feasting, and conducting important administrative business concerning those left behind in the realm of the living. In that realm a nascent alphabet was developing—letters as characters, figures,

symbols. Clearly the letters' first and most important task was to transcribe the underworld's bidding, such directives as "Not Letting the Heart-case be Taken from a Man," "Lifting Up the Feet and Appearing on Earth," and "Changing into a Divine Hawk."

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, my college's location, as the elevator doors slid closed and I pressed LLB, my heart would race—half in dread and half in endorphin rush. Soon those doors would open, and at the end of a long frigid hallway, there'd be covert kisses—in varying degrees of passion and urgency (mostly mine) or of adventure and amusement (mostly his).

Part of my three to eleven job at the Milwaukee hospital was to man the switchboard. If a Code Blue were called, I was the one who'd calmly repeat a room number, all the while popping phone cords in and out as staff picked up their desk phones to find out who, where. But usually, after 9 p.m., when no more calls were allowed into the patient rooms, I worked on my paper. Well-outfitted and accessorized with to-die-for bling, the dead Egyptians strolled about luxuriously furnished tombs, and I took notes.

I was seven weeks into spring semester of my junior year, a pre-med major. I expected I'd go to medical school. But things change. Motorcycles crash. Lives alter. A boy named Calvin, a dairy farm kid from my hometown, was admitted to the Milwaukee hospital. I saw his name and went up to his room. If I hadn't known the doctor, and if the doctor hadn't been talking to a nurse outside Calvin's room, I wouldn't have been allowed in. The doctor touched my elbow. "He's bad off," he said. Days later a nurse told me that Calvin, poor thing, was down for the long count. I knew enough by then to know that meant skin grafts. Months of surgeries.

He'd cracked his skull and his head was being glued, literally, back together. Above each ear, clamps pressed in. Red sutures beside black ones. Burned legs that had to soak four times a day in a putrid-smelling antibiotic. Thick purple scabs on a black and blue

shoulder. I rubbed salve on them. After 11 p.m. I'd go up there from the switchboard. Calvin drifted in and out of consciousness those first few days. I remember his mother sobbing in my arms outside his room.

I watched Calvin come back—a little. The clamps came off his skull. With his jaw wired, it hurt him to talk. So I talked. I told him about the guy who worked “downstairs in a lab.” I told Calvin I knew I was nuts to be so taken with someone who clearly didn't care one iota for me. I told him how my term paper on hieroglyphs had grown long and unwieldy and was spinning out several other little odd side “writings:” possibly poems, who knew?

Calvin's mother was tired one day, impatient and pissy the next. Slowly, by barely discernable increments, something was draining away from her son. Although we didn't speak about this, I knew she sensed it too. He stared past me, past her. The doctor wanted to do another skin graft on one side of his face. He looked past the doctor. “Maybe next week,” he said.

But next week he was gone. I rode down to *LLB* with him. An aide and an orderly came too. I used my key. The orderly pushed the button. The elevator shook, the gurney rattled, and as we all stood silently listening to our loud descent, suddenly I didn't feel sure anymore that Calvin *was* dead. I pressed the sheet against his forehead.

My heart-case was like a loud echo chamber, full of a wild thumping. I couldn't stop myself from envisioning the flash of familiar green eyes when that elevator door opened. I wanted that door to open. And I prayed it wouldn't. My high school friend should not be going out there. Especially since he wasn't dead. Not dead. Only yesterday I'd held a ridiculous twisty straw inside a Coke can down to his lips! Not dead. I couldn't let the others wheel him out there.

In my paper I'd written about how the gods of the dead stayed keenly alive in the language: the glyphs of tiny half-humans and half-something-elses. I loved those something-elses. Going down that day, though, I felt overwhelmingly human. I was headed down there because I was one of *them*. Up to my eyeballs in human. The body of human was all around me. A menial among menials. But I was alive—throbbing, sad, confused, in love, in mourning. When the face of the past returns,

when it buoys up, the one I kiss is a dead boy; the one I salve is a kid who's just waded out of The Nile; the one I love is full of some mystery I keep trying to lick off his lips.

The gurney's wheels rattle. I can still hear the elevator lurch to an awful stop. The doors part. Dust clouds of diamonds. Amber lights glow in the dark green foyer.