

Psalter

Michael Larkin

They came slowly at first, tentative. Few want to be the first to arrive at church, even on a Wednesday.

They came: the usher of thirty years who didn't approve of the deceased, but would be damned if he didn't show up to guide people to their seats before taking one himself, and here, how about we put you in the second row? No? This fine? How 'bout this? Good. Enjoy the...he remembers the occasion, stops himself short of uttering his signature tag line. The hand releasing from the coat of his jacket, loose on his thinning arm, the lower sleeve threadbare from years of gentlemanly squiring into pews. Enjoy the show, he mouths, unable to help himself.

The corpse is no more. The dead man's body has been quickly rendered ashes to ashes.

They came: the older couple, riding in separate cars. She from their home just a few blocks away, dressed in a peach blouse the dead man had complimented once. He from his office downtown, glad for a break from work, for a change not having to resent the church for cutting into his Sunday morning football. Car is pinging its diesel. Knowing that they would have come in separate cars even if they'd both been at home because she likes to stay after services for fellowship, he does not.

They came: the younger woman, fortyish, contemporary of the deceased, already weeping before the first words have been spoken to her. Before the homily, before the first greeting, before being seated, before the electric chug of all four doors of her car unlocking as one. She sits in the parking lot, hands on the wheel, remembering how he'd forgiven her for confessing to lusting after a teenaged boy even though their religion is not one that requires confession. Her make-up is running, and when she goes to check in the mirror, she laughs at how she looks like Tammy Faye Bakker, thin black lines down her plump cheeks. Laughs because he would have found it amusing too. Because they knew each others' secrets.

He floats under the Golden Gate Bridge, out towards the Farallon Islands.

They came: the teenagers lank in bunches of three and four, unsure of their role. The dead man confirmed many of them in his short tenure as their youth minister. Saw himself in their pimpled faces, downcast eyes, shy silences, gawky bravado, off-beat herky jerks while dancing in the fellowship hall. The kid who pulls his pud too much and feels guilty stepping into the narthex, an onanist afeared of holy places: the body is my temple, I shall want. Shortly behind him comes the most intelligent among them, a budding biblical scholar perhaps, a girl who reads with a critical eye those texts others mouth thoughtlessly. "The Book of John" is anti-Semitic, she'd noted once in Sunday school. At a remove, another girl of womanly curves, the object of every boy's desire, a girl whom the dead man will not see grow pregnant and overweight. There the boy who smoked blunt after blunt, nothing as sacred as The Rolling Stones and The Who, telling the deceased he was "cool" that one time. He arrives to mourn clad in Army surplus greens. Bogus death, man. And still another: the rubber-boned boy who loved him best of all, who had the sharpest wit and an ear that was ten times more acute than his own, who happily sang "My Guy" with him on a long drive north to a youth retreat one sunseting Friday. They haven't seen death, don't recognize it as something they own. Death is bogus, man, just bogus.

The day is strange. Bright sunlight with intermittent, thick clouds that alternately block and reveal the rays' glow, as if the world were a small room and someone repeatedly flips the on/off switch. Ash mingles with bay silt, grains of bone and flesh invisible whether in light or in watery shrouds.

They came: no family, no outside friends, the congregants alone. Here, there are people who loved him and people who tolerated him. People who ignored him and people who saw to it that he didn't infect their children, didn't bring a suburb of Sodom into their golden valley. The youngest attendee, a boy wearing polyester pants for the first time, wondering why he has to go to this funeral of a person he never knew, why he has to wear these stupid rust-colored slacks his mother has chosen for him. Several pews away sits an elderly woman smelling of Ben-Gay who misses no funerals at her church, whoever the mourned, wanting a sense of how to best arrange her own, taking ideas and no-nos away from each like a younger woman might at weddings. Another woman nearby reeking of perfume, an expensive tincture leveled to cheap, applied to cover a chronic gastro-intestinal problem. Down the row from the farther sits a gently smiling man, an accountant who loved the deceased in an unthinking, beatific way -- without feeling or question, simply obeying God's law and loving all men because making judgments would be too taxing and judgment in any case is the Lord's job, the 1040 form is mine.

A Psalter for a Wednesday of ashes: Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord!

The Order for the Burial of the Dead: "In the event of cremation the service may be adapted at the discretion of the minister."

Carl loved nothing and no man so much as God the father, the Reverend Bushkill begins. We don't know God is a male, the teen Bible scholar thinks, stewing in her seat. Liar, the crying woman screams inside her head, now seated in a pew, the tears unabated since her initial downpour in the car, her fist strangling a tissue. Liar. Doo doo doo doo doo...doo doo doo doo doo doo...doo doo doooo, mouths the boy who loved him best to a radio memory of Motown. He loved men all right, thinks the man who's left his temperamental car idling to avoid engine stalls and to facilitate rapid exodus, the man who brings his arm up from its rest atop the pew and gives his nose a hard squeeze as he sniffs loudly, defiantly, then settles his arm back possessively around his wife's peach shoulders. He loved men all right.

A breeze blows into the Bay, idling the divided ashes. A thump thump of distant cars overhead on the bridge.

And God loves him back and has come to claim him, the Reverend Bushkill continues.

A bulge rises in the onanist's pants, fifth row, left side. Oman God, she's hot, what I could just do to that neck. Inside the neck, up the brain stem, the curvy girl, object of lust, wonders if God loves her as much as he does the ugly people. After all, Carl wasn't very handsome. She tells God whatever he decides is O.K. with her, then says a little prayer for herself anyway.

Hocus pocus, the teen scholar thinks a few rows away, we're finding comfort in voodoo. What is the Lord but a doll we stick pins into?

I should love the Reverend Bushkill, the accountant thinks, as I love all men. He is a good man; he speaks truth.

The ashes split again and again like a zygote beginning a new formation, a recapitulation of its beginnings. Some grains begin to sink, others hold fast to the mildly roiling surface.

We all think those thoughts, Sheila, they're perfectly natural, Carl had said to her. The memory soothes her, slows her crying as she rocks in her pew. It's all right, he'd reassured. You just can't act on them is all. Just because Roger is a handsome and friendly boy, you can't take advantage of that. He is still a *boy*, no matter what he looks like. And I tell you what Sheila, if you *do* feel yourself wanting to take advantage, if you find you *can't* help yourself, I want you to come to me right away before anything else, all right? Do not feel judged by me, Sheila.

I know greater men who have succumbed to less. But better to channel your temptations like I do. How do you think I got so big? Here, eat some banana bread.

Doo doo, lows the boy who loved him, doing a little finger swirl in his lap that has the scholar girl wondering from a few seats away.

Oh, man, the blunt smoker guffaws, anybody smell that? A fart wafting a scent of sulfur and grain alcohol seeps from two pews over, intestines of the poor gassy woman in a bind.

The woman in the peach blouse gives her husband a look: stop shifting so much, you're spoiling everything. What's to spoil, the man's dead isn't he? It's a funeral, show some respect. I'll respect a man doesn't give rim jobs. He doesn't voice this last thought, wonders instead what kind of damage he's doing to his gas mileage with the car humming and pinging in the parking lot.

My God, the usher gasps, the attendees all seated as he settles into the back row and glances down at his forearm, sees the hole that's opened up in the sleeve of his jacket.

Light strikes the back of the church, and the Reverend Bushkill is awash in dark, undulating stained glass colors as if he truly has been designated the intermediary between God and the laity. We must not succumb to the temptation to mourn the loss of Carl for too long, the Reverend says, the light playing out behind him and rendering him angelic and profound in his own mind. For his loss is not a loss if we see that he has entered the bosom of God.

A sea bass's mouth, moving *doop doop* reflexively, eats part of what's left of Carl.

The usher is horrified at the sight of his starched white dress shirt peeking through a hole in the dusky gray of his suit jacket at the forearm. He runs his opposite hand a few inches up the sleeve, pokes a liver-spotted finger through. The finger clears with plenty of room for a few more. He holds his arm up, elbow out and ushering an invisible woman, and thinks about where his charges' hands fall, the feminine hands that have worn this hole into his Sunday finest. Can he have missed this for weeks? Months? How many people whom he's seated have seen this and said nothing out of embarrassment for him?

Does a scattering of waterlogged ash still have a name like Carl?

The boy who loved Carl most tunes out Bushkill, remembers singing with Carl in the car, just the two of them in Carl's small coupe, the rest of the church kids piled into vans and sedans in groups of three or more. Doo doo doo doo doo...gonna take me away...Carl and he laughing so hard he wondered how Carl kept driving. I am a *fool* for Motown, Carl had wept. The boy had felt moved by

the music, by their shared love, to reach down to give Carl's bare knee a prolonged, affectionate squeeze as he laughed and continued singing. Let his hand linger. Thrilling at the touch, he'd yawned and laid his head on Carl's thigh, told Carl the song made him sad. Carl saying: No, it's a happy song. Sit up straight now, I can't drive with you on my leg. It's a happy song. Let Reverend Carl drive.

A maverick sailboat braving the eddies where the Bay meets the Pacific cuts his remains in two, dust from dust separating in the wake.

Sheila's sinuses are plugged with grief; she cannot hear a word coming from the Reverend Bushkill, target for her self-loathing. You hypocrite, you pseudo-Christian. Leviticus 18:22: You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; such a thing is an abomination.

After all, my temptations are the same as yours, Sheila. She remembers the look on Carl's face: how he drew in a gasp at himself, eyes darting from her to the banana bread she'd baked. This is delicious, he had said before the bread had ever touched his lips. Mmmmmm, he'd said as it made its way to his mouth before it could possibly have grazed taste buds. What he'd asked: Can I get the recipe? His mouth finally full, mumbling the words, his Adam's apple not yet swallowing the first bite. What she'd heard: My temptations are the same as yours.

The ashes sway in the waves, seem to want to hang together like a primordial soup with sentience. A sand shark crunches down on the bass holding its bellyful of ashes.

The smoker coughs, fans his hand in front of his nose, tastes the air. Oh man, somebody dropped a stink bomb. Cut the cheese. Wrought the reek. Stepped on a duck. Man, I gotta burn one.

The youngest boy scratches at the new polyester pants, pulls rubber from the gummy soles of his Wallabies, bored past all comprehending, fidgeting next to his mother who scowls at him until he is still. He is inconsolably bored and sorry he did not feign illness until he sees the hand of the onanist at the end of the row pressing a palm against his privates, the masturbator's shoulders hunched up so that the pads in his sport coat are pressed against each ear. The bored boy has never seen anything like this, even while crossing swords over the toilet with a playmate.

The onanist utterly in his own world: oman, look at that neck. The swirls of baby blond on the back of the curvy girl's neck, long hair piled high with a few shards adangle, conjure a virtual pubic. It is almost unbearable.

When do they honor Carl? the scholar girl wonders from several rows away. When do we stop acting as if God is the one who died and honor Carl instead?

A body floats beneath, slender and skeletal, carried along as if by submerged riptide: a sting ray.

He is free now, Bushkill says, in a better place than any we can imagine on this earth. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Amen, says the accountant who loves all men.

Oh brother, the scholar thinks, did he really say that? Did he really *say* that?

The usher begins to weep.

Bushkill speaks: But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. But God gives it a body as he has chosen. So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable....

Bushkill's hands rise, arms spread, palms upward, Let us each pray what is in our hearts, in our own words, in silent reverence. Oh, I like that, the serial funeral attendee notes, I must have a silent prayer of reverence at my funeral. The Bible scholar clenches her eyes shut, can think of nothing to pray, remembers only Carl looking at her, amazed, when she wondered aloud if Christ wasn't just a myth and the whole Sunday school class a bunch of suckers.

Is he in hell, Lord? Bushkill asks himself with his eyes closed, standing but supplicant. Is there a hell? Is what was sown in dishonor raised in glory? Is the image of the man of dust now the image of the man of heaven? I did what I had to do. I cannot be damned for protecting others from man's baser nature, from a man's dishonor. In Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down....

Trust can be built or earned over the banalities of banana bread: Carl recovering himself, becoming both minister and friend. I never, never would touch a young teenager, Sheila. Especially one under my ministry. But once they're eighteen and if they're not in my church, it's God's will if it's meant to be. Not that I'm partial to the young ones; I'm around innocence enough on the job, I don't need it in a lover. There's nothing wrong with love, sugar, even for ministers. But you can't touch those teenage boys anymore than I can, O.K.? He's fourteen, honey. That may be a man in some cultures, but it ain't here. She had smiled to acknowledge his joking intent, yet felt an untampable revulsion rise toward this man whose sense of humor and unflinching acceptance she had always enjoyed, the man who curled up on himself just slightly as the words he'd been aching to say to someone in his church, his spiritual solace, had slipped irrevocably out.

The blubbing is audible. The older man, car still at the ready outside in the parking lot, his arm still around his wife's shoulders, swivels uncomfortably in his

pew to see who is grieving so loudly. The usher. Didn't know old Jake cared. I got the idea he never liked that femme boy much.

Hymnals whir from their wooden housings. The congregation stands as one, a Marine drill team of coordinated mourning, ready to sing all six verses of the chosen hymn, wind to the bottom and eternally back to the top to begin again in halting cadence alongside the organist's renewed crescendo.

Dude, I can't handle this, man. She's letting it fly, she doesn't give a crap now. I gotta get outta here, there's too much toxic air shit floating, man. I've been napalmed. They're going to declare a fucking quarantine we don't get out of here.

The current shifts, pulls him outward and deeper, both away from and toward the land.

The flesh of the boy—Roger—had been elastic, taut, hairless, almost harsh in its wiry angles. He had mowed her lawn, each of the perfectly straight corn rows he carved into the grass articulating as a new muscle along his back. His movements through the grass lazy and lithe. It was easy enough to invite him in afterwards for lemonade, cutting her own with invisible vodka, as she eyed him sitting there shirtless in his ragged cutoffs. Asking him about himself—would he be taking trigonometry this year?—and finding a pretense in some scrapes along his rib cage as a means to inspect him more closely, to offer a kiss as a prayer for fast healing. The boy shifting his skinny side into the kiss, welcoming her healing, her own extra padding of flesh pressing against his, letting things roll off him as easily as their clothes onto the floor, the lesson she offered more than he could learn of himself in trigonometry, surely.

There was the sensation of Carl *being* there—of him watching, *knowing* what she'd done.

I'm a little concerned is all, Reverend Bushkill. I don't think anything drastic is called for, but I wanted you to be aware. I mean, he does work with children after all. Boys. Just a few words from you perhaps, or a watchful eye for a while might be even better. Just to make sure there's nothing below board. Nothing drastic needed. No cause for concern really. Shouldn't even have come. You won't tell him I came to you, you won't tell him? I love Carl.

On the bay, the wind falls silent. Not the barest dabbling of cat's paw atop the water.

No no no no no no. Goddammit, this was my best suit. I don't have the money to be buying new suits. Why for Christ's sake now? It's not *fair*. The usher feels like a helpless boy again, is surprised at himself crying as he hasn't since he put his dog down years ago. Catches a flash of green out the corner of his eye.

You son of a bitch kid, where do you think you're going? The fucking show's not even over yet....

The masturbator's tongue edges out a corner of his mouth in concentration, then he notes the young bored boy's gaping. The masturbator scowls back at the boy's staring, removes the pressure of the heel of his hand from his crotch, brings it up to his hymnal to continue mouthing the words of the interminable hymn. Remembers where he is, why he hates it. Wait till I get home, man. Just wait, oman oman.

The accountant who loves all others sings loudly, off key. He's forgotten why he is here, belts the words of the hymn as ordered. The organ wheezes, imploring the singing congregation not to speed through the lyrics, but to linger, to contemplate, to be counted.

Dude, I have no sense of smell anymore. I couldn't smell anything if you lit one right up my nostril...dude, no way! This car's still running. Oh ha ha. Maaaaan. Time for a test drive, bro. You think? You drive a stick? He looks around, realizes he is alone, has been talking to himself all along.

The ash sinks deeper, all noises muffled. A few molecules cling to a bubbling of foam at the surface.

The usher's crying has subsided, but Sheila's weeping has risen to a wail to replace him, odd syncopation above the hymn's drone. There's no need to worry, Sheila, I will see to it. Carl and I will discuss it, that's all. I thank you for your candor.

The Reverend has one palm in the air, the other holding the hymnal. Fault and guilt are the realm of the weak. I am a practical man, Lord, even as I am a religious man. He had to go.

The voices rise...*as it was in the beginning*...Sheila's crying is convulsive and guttural, punctuated by shrieks of agony. For some, this noise is embarrassing, a kind of speaking in tongues not suitable for such a buttoned-down church. For many others, her wails tap a reflexive neuron, bring to life a larger round of audible grief as the sanctuary's inhabitants rise to a collective, animalistic expression of sadness. The accountant shakes as the sobbing overtakes him; having known nothing like this before, he has no place to put the emotions he is feeling, follows Sheila's grieving lead as if following another's yawn. The woman tracking the progress of funerals is overcome as well, slumping into her seat, wondering if anyone will ever feel such profound emotion for her. The wails rise over the singing...*so it is and ever shall be*...into a group keen, the hymn become a dirge. The bored young boy is engaged by the emotion, frightened by the sound, clings to his mother, who stands stiffly alongside. The usher rips the marred jacket from his back, spins away from the congregants and into the narthex, throws the jacket, complete with his embossed usher's nameplate, into the trash, grabs his knees for breath. The husband rises, afraid of these people. I'm leaving, honey, my

car's been idling long enough. I'll see ya, no I'll see ya. You've got your own car. This is too much. The boy who loved him best smiles, feeling he's been proved right, it is a sad song...*world without end, ah-ah-men...aaaa-men.*

Can a civilized people divine a man's history from his ashes? Can a seer measure the level of his sin or those that have been committed against him? Can they know he died of brain cancer in a hospice, surrounded by strangers, no more than a year after he left the church? Or do the ashes blow like the whispers of congregants bearing false witness, mumbling rumored abbreviations with easy assurance: AIDS. HIV. A fitting end for a man of that kind.

In the sobbing aftermath of the concluding hymn, Bushkill looks out over his congregation, has seen nothing of a group response like this before. Unsure, speechless, he sees Sheila looking at him with eyes red-rimmed in confusion, betrayal. Sees others there—the scholar girl, the boy who loved Carl most, the pud puller, the abandoned wife in the peach blouse, the accountant—and realizes he knows little or nothing of them and that they look at him with their own versions of the same thing.

The car radio is cranked to The Who's "The Seeker." The diesel pings, running on smoke, stoned as its driver, as the car rumbles down the newly laid asphalt.

The scholarly girl has faith that she is alone in her skepticism.

The accountant feels isolated by his confusion, his inability to introspect, his tears drying.

The pud puller feels naked, his obsessions on display for all to see and mock.

The serial funeral attendee wonders if she were to die tomorrow whether anyone would come to her funeral.

The woman with the active digestive system sets those around her to whistling, leaning away, blowing at invisible fumes. She notices at last and is mortified.

The boy who loved Carl most wonders how long it will be before he'll find another who understands him, who gives him a sense of what his future might look like.

The knockout girl wonders why she came to this service. Wonders if anyone noticed her here, if anyone thinks highly of her for going through the motions of mourning a dead man she always thought was a little namby-pamby and gross.

The youngest boy holds fast to his mother's arm, not able to get a grip firm enough to make himself feel secure. He wants to crawl back into her womb. The mother pries his hand loose, tells him to stop, he's hurting her.

The usher sits by himself in the acolyte room wearing only his undershirt. He wonders if he can ever look another congregant in the eye, the way they let him make a fool of himself.

Where is my motherfucking car? The husband in the parking lot takes the Lord's name in vain five ways of Sunday, pleading with the Damn Bastard a series of "why me?" protestations, his wife in the church doing the same from her pew, identifying herself as a character from "The Book of Job."

Sheila bends over so that her head is between her knees, feeling as though she will be ill, blood vessels and visions of Roger's young sinew flooding her brain.

Bushkill is at a loss, pauses, breathes steadily the way he was taught years ago in seminary to calm and focus himself before troubled audiences. The practice has never failed him until now. Breaths come to him in rabbit heartbeats, show no signs of slowing, rising toward something like panic. He doesn't want the congregation to see him this way. He begins walking down the aisle as if he has said concluding words, flustered, his hand up, willing a stigmata to form there, leaving his flock to fend for themselves.

It is a few moments before people notice his departure.

Out of the depths, I cry to thee: I will be your roads, your oceans, the silt of your Bay, the soles of your shoes!