The Grim Shepherd.

Jack Tobin

Death takes up next to no time in a person's life; they go about for decades, and at the most, it might take a few seconds for all the lights to turn off. Despite this, it is all I hear about as I walk the mortal world.

"Yeah, I heard she was struggling to afford the funeral." I crane my skeletal neck, the vertebrae clicking as I turn to the voice. A younger man who did as younger men do and spent his vitality on the most recent trends in hedonism: sugar and isolation. I have no doubt he will meet me soon, but today he is tired, not dead. I stood up from my seat, carefully avoiding the other passengers, for a brush with death is a most definitive end. I cast my hollow eyes upon the driver, a man still young but older than first. If eyes are windows to the soul, he has his windows tinted, barely a gloss upon the organs so typically expressive. Age is not what dictates death, no more than hair colour or good fortunes in any case. Age is, however, a good measurement of sorrow; the young die, and the world stands still; the old die, and they are found half-rotted by people they never knew. When I step through the door of the bus, I am met by a cold breeze. I know it to be cold, but my dry bones do not feel it. People have locked themselves in their cars to avoid trudging through the minuscule layer of frost glazing the asphalt. The city is strangely lifeless for a place so populous, the wildlife limited to the architects of the environment, scavengers leaching like parasites on the belly of this grand project and whatever species deemed appealing enough to be granted privileged entry to the Tower of Babel. As I walk the streets, I am unseen, for despite how much I am discussed, no one wishes to see me. I take a shortcut to my destination, cutting through an alley in which I

had expected to see no one, but I see one, beneath the awning of a building. A sign above them used to say something, but now it is a jagged Rorschach. They were old, not in age, but in spirit. Their pocked skin melted from the bone, and their eyes stared right at me like I was really there.

"Change?" It was a fair question for a person in that position, even if they sounded like they were elsewhere, speaking from the back of their throat with a gravelly gargle. I duck down with the ashen burlap of my cloak pooling at my feet and drop a long-aged golden obol into their lap. My hollow ribs can form no response beyond the noise of bone grinding on bone as I once more rise and continue on my way. It's remarkable how far from death that soul is.

I come upon a crowd too tightly packed to pass and thus wait; they scream about someone calling someone or doing something. I know the directionlessness; the panic is what has killed the man. At this very moment, his heart is flexing around a clump of coagulated blood, cutting off flow to the organ which produces his consciousness, for the moments he has left, he will be looking up at the sky, shivering and drooling. That man knows first aid, he's a nurse, and he knows exactly what would save him, but he can't save himself. He can say nothing as the people around him panic and flounder.

"Give him some space!" the voice comes from an older woman, near death herself. She has an aneurysm in her brain, but it will not burst for another month. The scent of nicotine clings to her and mangles her voice into a gravelly whisper. She thought to call an ambulance, but as a mob, they were too slow. The space she has cleared for him lets me safely approach, careful not to touch the gawkers who stand at whatever distance does not upset their moral compasses. I lean over with the support of my crook, the buloke wood older than the species it was carved from, and I brush my jagged digits across his eyes; they close, and my hand pulls his

soul free from the meat as it dies. He would have died no matter what I had done; this only saves him waiting for the rot to clear a path out of his body before he can even begin looking toward the beyond. The soul is a representation of someone's sense of self more than anything else; it is composed entirely of ego: no outside influence. The dead man's soul was somewhat translucent, like congealed mist leaning toward a twilight-blue hue. This soul did not go quietly, drifting in the empty air until it passed through the crowd, sending out a shiver in his wake, a cold that went deeper than a lack of heat. I take the long way around to catch the phantom before it can drift further afield, like clawing at cobwebs that stretch and snap but largely hold the shape of the phantom. He sees himself as bloated, fat in the jowls, and dead in the eyes. It is an inaccurate assessment, but it is what he believes, so it is the form he contorts his soul. I snap my finger with a sharp click of petrified bone, causing the spirit to flinch as it rouses. He chooses subconsciously to be subject to gravity and drowsiness. He fell to the floor, likely imagining some level of pain from the drop. The man screams at me as though I am uniquely horrifying when my form is, in fact, strangely humanoid.

"Jesus Christ!" the man beckons a god he does not believe in as he tries to strike me in the empty pit between my empty sockets. His hand passes through me as mist is want to do, seeping around the cracks and sockets in my body like an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. "What are you doing to me!" I parse out his words through the more incoherent screams. Without the means to make noises as he does, I am forced to wait for a reasonable question, one not so ignorant of the matter at hand, I hope. The man stares at his misty hands with the wide eyes of a stalked deer, fear entirely unfounded as death is, for most, a one-time affair. He looks up at me. He can stand, but he appears too weak-willed to realise this fact. "Who are you?" he stutters as though I might take offence. I can see some recognition in his eyes; mortal souls can be so prone to fearful arrogance, unshakeable but

oxymoronically enforcing an idea of weakness upon themselves. I turn to his corpse and gesture in response.

The dead man sprints to his corpse, slipping through gaps in the wall of gawking meat that surrounds him, and pretends to care for the purpose of sating curiosity. He seems understanding now, yet he still lingers. He spent a while staring into his own glassy eyes as a body without life thrashes beneath him with whatever electric charge remains. Someone sits over him performing chest compressions, but they are too shallow; the large man doing them is afraid to break something in the corpse, or perhaps he worries the veins bulging at every inch may finally burst as drug-addled geysers. The procedure is doing nothing but traumatising the dead and living alike. As the man watches, I slink back through the mob to stand over him.

"You're..." he looks to me, but the words he seeks are not to be found in the black pits of my skull any more than they are in the spittle drooling from his physical form. "death?" He asks. I nod as it is close enough to the truth to help him grasp what is happening. "Oh, God," he holds his head in his hands, but he can see right through the impromptu blindfold. He repeats the phrase as a hushed whisper, a mantra with no power behind it. I don't know if I will ever be desensitised to the horror in their eyes. When I thought I had grown callous, humanity came to be so much more complex in their fear, and I was reduced back to the silent mourner I have always been. All I can hope is that the place I send them is pleasant. "What happened?" His voice is clearer; he doesn't think ghosts can cry, so he doesn't do so himself. I stare at him. Not only is there no way for me to tell him, but he already knows. He fell silent, but considering he is still so confused, I imagine he is just composing a more revelatory query. "What am I supposed to do? Why am I still here?" He manages to ask as he tears his gaze from the corpse. I point at the spirit with a single gnarled digit. "Me? I'm not trying to be here!" he snaps at

me, protective over something I can't place. It is with remarkable ease that the human ego can contort itself into the most torturous shapes without realising it alone holds the strings. How I wish I could berate every soul I meet, tell them of their stupidity and hubris to think themselves anything but animals. Only a few hours ago, I was pulling the souls of pigeons out of their skin, and they easily went to the beyond. Humans never go quietly; they prove allergic to simplicity, and the dead man is one of many who sit by their corpse, shocked by mortality they would have at any living moment acknowledged as inevitable. A woman takes over chest compressions, perhaps not as strong as the steroid-infused alternative, but she puts in enough force to make an impact. On her fifth pump, one of the dead man's ribs breaks with a wet snap, only to continue with a grinding noise as it is jostled, the bone scratching against itself. Not a full break, although a living man would be howling by now. The woman has a genetic predisposition to brain cancer no one has told her about; she will find out soon enough, and then the light will leave her eyes. Her allies are abandoning her to die alone to protect themselves from the dread I bring to those I linger upon, waiting for the moment they pass to efficiently send them off. "Can I- do I still have a chance?" Humans are nothing but questions, even as the answers are before them. I slowly shake my head with the wind passing through my bones, imitating a shrill sigh, his breaths, while unnecessary, betray his fearful panic. "Come on! There must be something! What can I do?" I have no more power to breathe life than he, yet something of my position, my role in nature, deceives the species which sees itself as the great detective, prying open the world with rigorous and righteous logic. To be more than fair, they have done more than all predecessors on that front. "Do you want me to repent? Whatever I've done, I can make it right, I can change for Christ's sake." He falls to his phantasmal knees, spilling out in a pool of mist like a ballroom gown made of the stariest night sky.

"I..." they begin, but think better of it. We are left in silence,

which I can hardly lament, as I cannot engage the man; he may simply be tired of conversing with the hollow psychopomp. The dead man has shut down even more than before, locked inside his own head in a battle over whether or not he deserves this, on what is coming for him and similar questions of an existential nature. I do not probe as I have seen enough to understand I must simply let him metabolise all his Thanatotic thoughts. The street is as quiet as the human dens can be with the screeching of their foul machines, made to blare and cough as they burn through the streets, adding more to my tally than most intentionally deadly devices ever could. The weather has turned to rain and chews now at what little snow and frost had landed, even those hidden beneath shelter find the wind saturating them in a frigid wave of liquid ice. He begins to understand, looking into what must be to him an empty vessel, my hollow sockets staring back at him with nothing but pitch-black. It is at this point that humans tend to go, but this one is proving stubborn. His spectral form thins until he is but an impression in the air, but he remains. The wailing of a siren joins the collective sputter of city life, drawing my attention away from the dead man. It is an ambulance, but my attention does not linger on the steel wagon for long as I feel the air beneath me electrified with a short pulse. Conductive pads have been taped to the corpse's chest and supply him with sudden shocks. My vision blurs, and I cannot see how the man died, or, for that matter, how he is to die. He looks at me as I watch his body twitch and draw in breath so weakly it could be the innate reflex of a living creature or the wind cycling through his slack jaw. Humans must have some infectious quality, as I am curious. I point at the phantom and mimic speech, my jaw sliding up and down with all the grace of a megalithic block dragged downhill. In the place of a voice, I have an agonised grinding of fossilised bone scratching against itself like metal nails on a chalkboard. "I can't hear you..." He stated the obvious, so I repeated my charade despite the indignity. "Oh, me. I'm Joseph?" My patience and curiosity finally kill each other, and

I am left with frustration.

"Why?" I wheeze through the open gaps in my skull, the noise having no natural origin, curiosity made manifest.

"Why? I think they're trying to resuscitate me. I assume a body needs a soul, though." he watches me now. I am not used to the experience. I point at his corpse as its eyes flicker open, and it is pulled into the wailing, metal construct of an ambulance. He does not seem to understand, but time actually matters for this explanation, so I take him by the soul and dunk him into his own body on the passing stretcher like Achilles in the river Styx. His pulse returns with the final push of a stubborn soul. It is no longer any of my business how the dead man... Joseph chooses to live. I move on and feel the faintest emotion I cannot describe, something like confusion, but it is, in a way, hopeful. On the other side of the city, a young man has hugged a telephone pole with the aid of his car. I'll meet him at the hospital to save me the trip. He'll go through the same thing as Joseph, but he is not going to get back inside his mangled corpse; nonetheless, I am excited to hear him. I did not know the creatures could name themselves. I fear they near my own sentience a bit more with each generation, yet I have always been an optimist amongst my peers. A muddy rat flees from a sewer grate and impacts against my heel, dying on the spot for nothing, its pulse robbed without warning or rationale. I see some vestige of my own reflection in the carrion's soulless eyes. I will die for I have lived. When all the breaths are silent, when stars are dark, and oceans dry in every corner of the cosmos, and the thing that I am, the threads of myself woven into reality's tapestry will be burnt as the final loss of the great thing that was life. It is at that sorry end that I will see where I have sent all before me. I feel it again, curious, excited, saddened, and afraid.