

2007

Coming to Life

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Recommended Citation

Hicok, Bob. "Coming to Life." *The Iowa Review* 37.3 (2007): 131-131. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6294>

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BOB HICOK

Coming to life

He was made to touch a corpse as a child. His aunt's. Mother's side. When he was very young, he'd hear that phrase—she's from your mother's side—and imagine his aunt's head growing from his mother's ribs, tiny like Barbie's head. It was not exactly a vision, more of a thought he had, usually late at night. He wondered if his mother had done his aunt's hair like his sister did Barbie's, and asked her one morning, and she laughed and soon he was older. His mother was crying in the front row. The tan folding chairs creaked when he sat down. A group of men, ties loose, stood near a back door, stepping out now and then for cigarettes. Smoke was alive in the sunlight, curling and twisting up like the woman he saw dance on TV a few nights before, her dress nearly one long scarf. When he put his head against his mother's shoulder, she slid it around to her chest. He was almost too old for this, but no one said anything when he rested his hand on her breast. They sat for quite awhile. People came and spoke of his aunt and Heaven and God. He closed his eyes and thought the light he saw inside might be Heaven. It formed a circle and faded, formed a circle and faded, as his mother hushed rosary beads through her hands. He opened his eyes. They stood. His mother kissed his aunt on each cheek and said something in her ear. Where do the words go in a dead person, he decided to ask his mother later, but never did. When she drew his hand toward his aunt's face, he didn't resist. He was like water being led to water. Drink this, feel. She felt like nothing, he would tell a woman in college, their backs to the wall as they sat in bed. She'd asked what he meant by nothing. It was just that, as if in the silence of her skin, all possibilities had been taken away. But they had just made love and he didn't want to bruise their warmth. The opposite of this, he said, putting a finger to the mole on her knee. The rest of the afternoon, it was as if someone had said to them, here are the brand new bodies. Open them.