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Our Family Business

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OUR FAMILY BUSINESS

1.

Sundown on our family funeral parlor chills me with nostalgia, the meadow shadowed with headstones like dowager's humps.

Aunt Martha's got calla lilies and forget-me-nots, her vase of white hydrangeas on the table.

"God saw to it that you two met, the gravedigger and my sister's daughter! It's an awful shame you haven't joined our family trade."

2.

Jacob Arnold understood my dilemma. "See no evil, speak no evil," he said, as if a corpse's hair were tweaked, shivering on dolled-up mannequins in coffins of mahogany.

His shovel washed clean, Jacob Arnold dreams of those he buries: mammoth creatures in a field. He has a knack for seeing. At times, our conversations gave me the creeps.

"You're a shadowboxer for the ghosts," I said, one afternoon at the cemetery, but Jacob Arnold shook his head. "If a dragon smokes, it's only through a hole. Let it alone."

I admired him, watching over those procrustean beds.

3.

From the graveyard, walking home, I often watch the moon, an enamel-white jewel on blue cobalt, its shadow like the dream of an ocean.

Other nights, clouds are ghosts' eyeballs in dusty windows with curtains half-drawn—the scent of camphor, my Aunt Martha's touch, our tile floor swept clean under coffins of mahogany.

The dead are no more than found objects out here among the leaves.

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4.

No monster's lurking in the trees as I approach (the customary joke of Jacob Arnold). All is well; a barred owl whistles from our field.

Steadying her crystal vase, Aunt Martha's at the window arranging, her head tilted. I'm invisible, standing there. It's the twilight and it's not, a clarity almost diaphanous.

Leaves fall on the gravel. Dry seedpods rattle, the weedy fields overgrown. The owl repeats its whistle. Once a house, now a parlor, keeping itself to itself. On such an evening, every flower wants to bloom alone.