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Instructions for the Bereft

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Instructions for the Bereft

Abstract

Chapter VIII: a) Returning to Work b) In a Small Town

Cover Page Footnote

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Instructions for the Bereft

Chapter VIII: a) Returning to Work b) In a Small Town

Nonfiction by Jessica S. Baldanzi

Remember that people are more afraid of you than you are of them. They're afraid to see you cry. They're afraid you might break and they won't know how to put you back together. Most crucial, they're afraid you're contagious, that you might infect them with the possibility of catastrophe. All the things they've lost fill your skin and stare back at them through your eyes. Yours is the skin of a woman otherwise empty, slack in the belly that held the baby who died.

Consider how others perceive you, why they can't talk to you. You're an emergency light with legs. As you walk to work, everyone peeks around corners to make sure you're not coming. Really, though, they should just look toward the sky: You flash red, lighting a whole downtown block at a time. Those who have just passed you on the sidewalk walk away dazed, like they've seen roadkill too close. Or a ghost—maybe the devil.

Remember how powerful you are. Pity will diminish that power. You need the power of their fear to keep going. You need that power or you might just lie down right there on the sidewalk, curl up, and stay there for good while people step over and around you or just cross the street.

But this is a small town—they won't let you disappear—so be prepared. If you think you might cry in public, picture yourself like a woman on fire. Picture yourself a bomb in slow motion: You birth the orange and red bloom of fire, the transparent membrane of heat that stretches out, curls down to grab the ground, then retracts, slowly at first, gaining speed to crash back into itself, smaller, more compact than before. Picture each breath that vast, that destructive. If you make each breath that slow and huge, there's no way you can cry—your breath will smooth out each gathering sob, iron it into a blank, crisp sheet that you can fold into perfect squares and place way, way back in the closet next to those socks from the baby shower that you washed and paired, that remain unstretched by feet.

Or: Picture yourself massive, towering. Stomp on the ugliest buildings on your way to work. Lift the most condescending of the gawkers into your palm while she cowers, clinging to your ring finger (your wedding ring absent, your fingers still swollen from preeclampsia). Stare quizzically, intrigued by her lack of compassion. You will be tempted to pop her into your mouth for a snack. Not worth it. Tip her gently from your palm into the fountain on the green.

Avoid those who actively approach you. Walk away rapidly, with purpose. There are only two reasons people will approach you.

1) Your story has unearthed long-buried fears about the random nature of danger. They need to foist those fears back onto you. They want to talk through their version of your story—when they heard, how they felt, whom they talked to, how much sleep they lost. Knots of uncertainty have begun to tangle in their guts and need to be extracted, disposed of, before they get too big. Walk away, or each purported comforter will hand you, cradled in two palms, a small black organ more animal than human, still beating, surprisingly heavy. Then he or she will exit. You will not know where to put these so-called gifts, but you will not be able to throw them away. They will collect on top of your dresser. Their arrhythmic beating will keep you awake at night.

2) They want a scoop, a new tidbit to deliver to the herd, the pack, the gaggle thirsty for specifics. They will hover and stare and pretend sympathy until they extract a shiny, gleaming nugget that no one else has: when your labor began, when things started to go wrong, what your husband said, what the doctor said, how even the doctor wept. Do not give these details away, or you will have nothing.

A handful of people have been through this, or something like it. They will find you when you need them. You will recognize each other. You won't need to say anything at all.

Jessica S. Baldanzi is an Associate Professor of English at Goshen College, where she teaches writing, North American literature, gender studies, and popular culture, especially comics. Her most recent essay, "On Letting Go," was published in *Three Minus One: Stories of Parents' Love and Loss*. She also blogs about comics and graphic novels for the *Elkhart Truth*: <http://www.elkharttruth.com/Commons-Comics>.