

If We Learn from Our Targets

I have a target on my back. So do you. Mine is the tumor at the base of my brain. Maybe yours is drinking too much and too often and too urgently. Or perhaps you also have a tumor at the base of your brain that they have, or haven't yet, discovered in an MRI. Or maybe yours is a darkness you don't tell anyone about, even though you wear it like a cape over your shoulders, then pulled across your breastbone and, at times, over your eyes. Maybe your target is on that cape, the heavy cloth sweeping around you, the swish of it as you rush through office hallways into meetings, then slide through galley kitchens towards dinner tables. Or maybe your target is old age, or befallen tragedy, or a genetic arc you already foresee. It could be a stray bullet. It could be a straight bullet.

Most people I have met seek to see others only from the front. We are walking with it marked, though, like a backwards bib of an organized race, minus the safety pins and crowded company. No one runs beside you. No one runs beside me. No clear route, yet no dropping out or veering off. It is like fate, but more worrisome. It is the first half of the *is survived by* structure.

I cry sometimes about my target. You can, about yours, too. It's okay. I promise. But am I the only one who feels that the crying can get a little weird? Sometimes I cry because it feels very clear, its drapery over my shoulder blades down to my tailbone. But other times, its weight disappears several vertebrae down. What a blurry feeling, the target. A shifty shape. And its weight can get even blurrier. Just the vague knowing it is there: that information, important and upsetting. A target can be lonely-making when no one else admits the fabrics on their own backs. Their only posture is to stand facing into the circle, their torsos all inwards, never spinning out. I am interested in what we find if we turn to the outer edge of this living. What happens if you flip, if you take that peek? Oh—I can see that you have tried. I see them now,

your tears.

You and I are not so different. The targets, yes. I am not you, and you are not me; mine is not yours, and yours—well, you know. You are a quick study. We have to be, to know what's coming before the coming arrives, before the mark gets made, before we're hit, we're down, we're out. There is a library that stays open all night to the willing student. Fear of death, the oldest force of erudition. What hours I have spent. You don't even need to bring your medical files or your catalogue of risky penchants or your surprises survived or the rolled maps of dark places you go. They have it all in the library, already and ready.

But you must know this. You seem like you're a student, like you sense it too: the urgency of study. The light is always on, and other lights are always off, and a sun goes up and down, making shapes and shadows on the stretched tables and high ceilings. I take my seat. I take my pen. There is a coldness on my back no matter the fabric covering it. This is what I'll learn tonight: the certainty the target is there, across lengths of my body I can never see directly, that I perceive only through other mediums like mirrors or medical charts or glimpses through futures. But tonight I feel too shy and unlearned to look up from my books and ask you what you see.

The library's books are reference only. You cannot check them out, and you certainly cannot rack up late fines. Sometimes, after upending events, the seats fill from morning through night to morning again. Disasters, or a beloved one's target is hit, or a scary piece of worldwide news. Jitters. A slip-and-fall that's saved by the banister. True positives and false positives. A very long season of sadness and grief. But other times, we are out in the sunshine, alive in that circle, or asleep in a bed. The library empties, its learnings lost to easy distraction. That is okay too. We do not need to know everything all the time. But we need to know it's part of our time. There are people I never see in here, though. It's not just the young who don't want to study. Even some elders flunk out when it's their turn to depart.

I have seen you in the fields and on lawns, in the circles of alive. I often feel so elsewhere in those rings, but it's easier to stay when I catch the eye of someone studious. I have waved at you. You've waved back. I am glad that we are kind to each other when we aren't studying death. And I am also glad to see you here, again, tonight. An open seat beside you. I keep my voice at a whisper; I didn't arrive this late to distract, but can I borrow a pen? I need to note all that I'm learning. Our chests curled down, our backs hunched over, that outer skin stretching long under the materials marking us. A nod of thanks, then back to the books. Here we stay, turning pages into the night, into the morning and its other side.