

The October wind slices through the gaping holes found between the buttons on my collared shirt. I've misplaced my jacket, and my cigarette keeps burning out. *Christ, not tonight!* My demented mentor clamours in my mind. The woolen clouds have dissipated, and the ink night sky has been abandoned by the moon. *Step into the freezer!* Might as well be schlepping around on Pluto's nitrogen ice plains with aching fingers and a meat locker brain begging for words. *Words! HA!*

There it is again. That cruel captain. I pull the lighter from my pocket and painstakingly relight my cigarette. *Misery!*

A black and white pied cat scurries across my path and up toward 19th Street. Darting into the shadows, it disappears. I steady myself on the Poe Museum marker's frigid green metal post. The pause reveals a dead House Finch on the sidewalk. Its beady, obsidian eyes exhale any last glimmer of life. I take a giant drag from my cigarette and stare blankly at the bird.

*Idiot, ouch!* The knuckles on my index and middle fingers are on fire. My cigarette has burned down to the bit, snapping me out of this malaise. A thin veil of milky film has covered the finch's eyes. Its slick, rotting walnut colored beak glistens in the museum lamp post's light. Lying on its left side, its ash-feathered right wing has fallen open. Like it was pining for one more escape, or perhaps, a last clasp of comfort from its flock. *Sweet relief!*

The scarlet coloring on its breast vaguely camouflages slender puncture wounds. A tiny pool of blood forms around its body, resembling spilled red wine. That mischievous feline had had its fun, no doubt. *Kill or be killed!* Hardly, but perhaps the cat was curious to see eternal slumber unfold before its very paws. Porcelain claws ready to carve death's epitaph onto the unwilling House Finch's chest. Unleashing its animalistic energy to snuff out a life and transport this whimsical socialite of the sky into a twenty-gram feathered sack.

I fumble for my lighter and spark another cigarette. *Dead. Lines. Deadlines!*

My intolerable task master reminds me. It's late, and I need to ignite some ideas if I'm going to make this morning's deadline. I hustle past Main Street Station's clock tower. *Tick, tock.* After 12th, I cut over to Bank Street to catch a glimpse of the state capitol building. The colossal colonial columns loom in the night's stillness. *Tick, tock.* It's just over a mile as the crow flies to Hotel Greene. My shoes slap the sidewalk. Their hollow echo is carried by the wind off the walls of the tall buildings and funneled into the nests of other House Finches sleeping on the ledges. *Tick, tock!*

Sequestering deep in the recesses of my brain, I run through a rack of ideas that hang there like moth-balled dresses and jackets. *Where'd you leave yours, dummy?* Please, not now, I need to produce.

I'm concentrating.

*You're walking!*

I'm brainstorming.

*You're walking!*

I'm thinking.

*You're walking!*

Tires screech, followed by a sullen thud on the chilled pavement. The pedestrian signal's open palm casts a rotten pumpkin glow on my still body. Silence swaddles 6th and Franklin.

An intoxicated couple vaping outside the Moxy meander up to my body. Their eyes are starry and full of nauseous wonder.

The car's driver frantically phones 9-1-1.

*Ring, ring.*