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THE EMPEROR OF ICE CREAM – Granta.

[Rebecca Tamás](#)

I was woken up early by a phone call from my mother. My grandmother was dead. I pictured her sheltering me and my brother under her raincoat when there was a sudden hailstorm. I pictured her making coffee and eggs, I pictured her rubbing my feet. I cried, surprised at my own soft, limp body.

She was still in the nursing home where she had died, and if I wanted to see her before the funeral directors picked her up, I had to go now. My partner offered to go with me, and it was tempting, but there was a kernel of deep privacy within me, telling me that if I wanted a proper farewell, then I needed to be alone. I needed no-one to be watching me, comforting me, reacting to me, but for my confrontation with this loss to be unfiltered. I don't think that I fully understood then anything beyond the impulse for privacy, or that I knew the size of the experience I seemed to be preparing for. At the age of twenty-nine, it would be the first time I'd seen a dead person up close.

Arriving at the nursing home I was thinking about the fact that my grandmother was gone, wondering whether she'd suffered, considering our past together and that I wouldn't see her again. I was nervous, of course, but my mind was not paying a huge amount of attention to the fact that my gentle grandmother was now a dead body.

When I entered the room, I immediately understood that this would not be as I expected. I really was innocent enough to think she'd look pale and sleeping, an impossibly still version of the figure I recognised. Instead, her mouth was horribly open, her hand up to her chest like a fragile claw. Rather than still, she looked *frozen* – she looked like a corpse. Her face was not a peaceful thing without conscious life – a stone, a brick – but something from which life had been sucked with force, a tree smashed by a hurricane.

Though I closed the door, I couldn't take another step. I stood in the doorway, bowed over with weeping. I found that the words coming out of my mouth were 'I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry,' over and over again. I was also absolutely terrified. I could barely bring myself to look at her for an entire second, let alone go closer. In my terror I also felt embarrassed and pathetic. I was crouched in a corner, unable to even turn the lamp on. Death was massive, I was small.

I stood there for a long time watching afternoon light move over her body. A line of poetry, unbidden, went round and round and round in my head – 'Let be be finale of seem. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.' The line kept circling, and I slowly managed to take a few steps closer to her.

The shock subsided, and I felt the strangeness of having a mind that is able to meet death, witness its reality, and yet persist despite this shattering. What had seemed wholly unacceptable shifted, and like a Magic Eye picture, suddenly came into view in a completely different shape, as something that could be borne.

I also felt a fascination. This was my dead grandmother, really dead, really here. I managed to walk closer to the bed, and eventually sat down in the armchair next to her. The line kept going round, 'Let be be finale of seem. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.' I leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. I stroked her hair, remarkably still a deep black, with silver round the temples, and told her I loved her. At the same time, I was able to look at the hard and jagged thing she had become, and understand that she was nowhere in the room. 'Let be be finale of seem. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream' kept going round my head when I left, and for days afterwards. On the bus, following the hum of the engine, eating with friends, underneath the

clanking of wine glasses, vibrating with the thrum of my partner's heart as I lay my head on their chest – 'Let be be the finale of seem. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.' The line permeated those foggy days of grief with a strange ecstatic lightness, and an odd hysteria of the kind that makes you want to laugh out loud in a silent lecture theatre. A weird new understanding of the world was filtering through into my consciousness.

The line comes from the Wallace Stevens poem, ['The Emperor of Ice-Cream'](#).

When I first read the poem, I had absolutely no idea what it was about. It seemed like a nonsense poem, a surreal word game. But rereading it, the simple narrative of the poem emerged: An old woman, seemingly poor, has died. At her funeral or wake, actions take place which seem to undermine the solemnity of the occasion – men whip ice cream for the guests, women dawdle in informal dress, and even the funeral flowers come in the humble casings of 'last month's newspapers'. The narrator asks that the old woman be covered by a sheet from her shabby dresser, one which her 'horny feet' poke out of.

The poem is about an old dead woman, but I wouldn't say that's why the line came to me.

The poem is a forceful, even violent, representation of the gory, impossible victory of *life* over death. Death is terrifying and impossibly big, but life is even bigger – vulgar, relentless, ruthless. The old woman's protruding feet seem cruel, but it doesn't matter because she is 'cold and dumb'; she has fallen by the wayside and growling, virulent life quickly fills in the gap. The sexuality and materiality of the 'muscular one' making ice cream and the 'wenches' dawdling are both jarring images in the place of death. But it seems that this jarring quality is also the source of life – that nothing can stop it, that it never can stop. The eating and fucking and making of everything that lives will keep breaking over us like waves crushing a dam.

'Let be be finale of seem.'

No illusions, no seeming, no fakery. The old woman's death in the poem is not treated with tenderness, but nor is it without meaning. From it comes a 'finale of seem', an end to the shushing rule of the dead, the bowing and scraping to ancestor and tradition and history. The dead are unfrozen from their position as overweening watchers who make demands on the actions of the living. They are liberated from being symbols or warnings and able to revert to being bodies who were once alive, and now are not. At the same time, the fashionable standards the poor old woman aspired to, with her 'dresser of deal' and 'embroidered' sheet, fall away. The need to impress is gone, and the rules of class, status and position are shown to be flimsy fantasies in the yawning jaw of ferocious life.

What lived was part of life and it is that force which remains. Their death is not them, and is not *of* them. Her death matters because it tells us about her life.

Reading the poem, we feel an urge to locate morality in the emperor of ice cream. But however we prod him, he refuses to be good or bad, to fit into the strictures of our human version of reality. We want to find the morality in the poem, in the same way that we're desperate to find the morality in the natural world; wondering if a fox gorging on chickens is cruel, or instinctual; trying to see ourselves in ravens circling round a corpse. But there are no straightforward moral dimensions here, only the terrifying force of onwardness, of life perpetuating life, trees growing vulgarly over old graveyards, insects making homes in the cavities of fallen deer. The Emperor of Ice Cream's power is ruthless because it is absolute. It is a nonhuman power, and it is not of us, though it passes through us. I thought of the times my grandmother had undone fear for me, pulling at the knotted skein of

wool before my eyes. I was a nervous, sensitive child, prone to terror. Once, when something on the television got too much she said, 'Don't worry, they're just actors, and then they finished their scene, they all went for a nice cup of tea afterwards!' Or, at the haunted house, where I had a full-blown, hyperventilating panic attack. Seeing my terror, she immediately turned to the nearest vampire (actually a taciturn staff member named Joe) and made him take us out the back, past the mass of wires that controlled the flickering lights within, now raw and naked as they hung on the innocuous plastered walls. She had shown me that the truth can undo terror, that what is real may be awful, but it can be, must be faced. When I left the nursing home I was no longer scared. My grandmother's deadness, which had made me stiff with fear, was not a thing hiding in the shadows, death as a black hooded figure waiting to take us somewhere terrifying, but an absence. Once, she had been very alive. She had a long, strange, imperfect, troubled, joyful life – perhaps even too long for her liking. She had had two marriages, children, worked as a journalist, seen the world, suffered and been happy. She had been old, then very old, then sick, then very sick, then dead. We were alive.

I had promised her, years ago, that I would sing at her funeral. So now I had to actually get up there, with no accompaniment, and sing a folk song without crying? Actually, in the end, it was easy. It was so easy. Her coffin was cardboard, as she'd wanted, scribbled with messages and pictures from all the living people who had loved her. I felt no need to cry. Once, she had been alive.