

EX NIHILO

ORIGINAL PROSE AND POETRY

GIFTS

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It was just a small thing that fell from the sky. But it was dead, and in its deadness it was his. The bird made no sound as it landed on the pavement, its crumpled body glaring a brilliant white in the grey space before the man's feet. His hands moved as if automatically, seizing the bird and forcing it into the pocket of his coat with unwonted eagerness. *Before someone sees*, he thought as his hand closed searchingly around the unfamiliar shape in the dark of the pocket. His fingers felt no clammy stickiness identifying a wound that had slain the bird; neither did they discover any suspicious bumps or broken bones that would offer an explanation for its curious fate. *A heart attack*, he mused. The idea entranced him. He felt his own heart throbbing in sympathy, imagined it pushing against his ribcage as if beating at the very wall of death.

The bird's deadness clung to him like the scent of a lover, encircling him and accompanying him on his long walk through the emptiness of night. The streetlights colluded with the screaming colors of the shopfront neons to send endless waves of sensation to assault him; moments earlier, they had oppressed him to the point of despair, but now the deadness that surrounded him kept such invaders at bay, making him feel unaccountably light and free.

He continued his walk almost merrily, playing aimlessly with the corpse in his pocket as he gazed at the grey-blue mess into which



HOLY SPIRIT WINDOW AT ST. PETER'S BASILICA

the pavement, the streetlights, the taxicabs, and the sky too bright for stars collapsed at the end of the street. The bitter trepidation that normally marked his close circle of thoughts seemed to have vanished without a trace, leaving in their stead a refreshing feeling of power and confidence.

I own death. Death owns me, he thought with a wan smile that grew into a true grin. Here it is, he said aloud, pretending to speak to himself in reference to the corpse, but actually addressing and meaning the cloud of death around him. His roving eyes scanned the street for anyone to whom he could reveal his newfound secret, but came up frustratingly empty. The frustration built rapidly into

outrage. *Here is an answer to the nothing. Where are they to see?* The bird was heavy and cold in his pocket.

Lost in ruminations and recriminations, he almost did not notice that his feet had carried him to more populated regions. He almost missed the woman.

She stepped out of a taxi-cab in a rush, clapping the door shut with an efficient noise and hurrying down the street as if to flee the lateness of the hour. The man stared at her as she crossed his field of vision, too distracted by the deadness to notice her precisely formed lips or the indelicate half-shuffle her right foot made as she completed each step. Stop, he said. *You have to know.* Please.

The sounds leapt at the woman with a force belying their hesitancy and she whirled around as if physically struck. The hand caught her eye first, jammed uncomfortably into a small coat pocket that bulged strangely and maliciously with the portent of danger. The man followed her gaze and slowly began to realize the gravity and wrongness of her thoughts about the object his hand was closed upon. *Life*, he thought. *Death.* *Not a gun.* The last word aloud.

The woman looked at him, eyes widening for a moment before she could stop herself. In control once more, she went through a weary mental checklist of the contents of her purse, more bored than afraid; satisfied, she threw it at his feet and ran desultorily across the street to the half-shelter of a group smoking outside a fluorescent bar, her flight made halting and unattractive by her not-quite-lameness. Crying, she was already lighting a proffered cigarette before one of the men thought to retrieve the purse. But by then everything was over.

Gun. The corpse was a blinding white in the darkness of his pocket as the woman sent her purse skittering toward him. His mind reeled from the deadness and the blindness, but his hand would not release the body. The woman's purse was a red blotch on the pavement, its delicate hoops coursing away only to return

in shame to a spot adjacent to where they began, as if nailed to an eternal circuit. The red pierced effortlessly through the white, and the man gasped as if winded; reeling backwards, he stumbled into the street and the waiting embrace of a passing car.

The purse had disappeared, transformed into great pools of red welling around his supine form. A car was stopped strangely askew in the road right next to him, yet the desperate glare of its headlights seemed dim as fireflies in comparison to the white blazing from the bird in his pocket. His hand tightened on the white as if in desperate entreaty as his heart ground to a stop. Motionless, his heart throbbed with life as death drained from his body. The sky was full of stars.

Gabriel Torretta entered the Order of Preachers in 2008.