

## Of Youth and War

I used to dream about my father's death – a long, harsh death.  
I would lie awake at night, breathing pain and watch  
movies my spinning brain created in the darkness, wicked stories  
each ending with his demise, though I was never the killer, despite being tired –  
so tired of the constant anger – sick and sore from living as a reel-to-reel punching bag.  
I wanted to breathe easily and stop cowering, timid and afraid.

I doodled a comic that showed me powerful and unafraid.  
It was a fantasy, but also my solace until I was of an age to escape. I packed a small, red bag  
and hid it under my bed, needing money and maturity, wishing I owned a watch  
to mark the exact time of my exit from this worn-out, tired  
family whose bloody fighting delighted our bastard cousin, Death,  
an ugly relative who reveled in the non-stop screaming and drama-filled stories

my parents created just by inhaling. The TV news blared nightly stories  
of broken bodies and falling bombs that painted a bright red, muggy death  
across a canvas called Vietnam. I didn't know the politics, but watched  
as lives were shredded, stunned by the violence, horrified by the body bags  
carrying home soldiers I knew had been young and terrified, afraid  
to die before they had the chance to live long enough to be wrinkled and tired.

In the background, my mother would shatter whatever she could grab, tired  
of a loveless marriage, her eyes puffy from yelling and crying, heavy bags  
and dark circles the first signs of a slow, rotting death  
eating her brain, little by little. I would sit in shadows and watch  
her become incoherent, knowing she was also afraid  
and empty of everything but hate. I would wince when she told stories,

jagged with lunacy, to neighbors and church folk, worried that these stories  
would somehow cast me as the villain and then no one would know how afraid  
I truly was – no one would recognize my mute cries for help. I'd watch  
her animate into the perfect martyr, waiting for the death  
scene – wondering if anyone thought her sane – worried I was too tired  
to keep on going – thinking I should probably just bag

it in, not plan on becoming a future runaway, heart pounding, red bag  
in hand, skidding into an uncertain future. I was still young enough to be as afraid  
of the unknown as a harsh home. So I lulled myself into calmness singing stories,  
played with poetry, grew older – heartbeat by heartbeat – wore my scars, danced with early death  
in a black-and-white film that ended with me alive, searching, still torn, tired,  
and aching, but ready. I waited, exhaling intermittently, and watched

ready for my starring scene, in which I would cheat death for good and leave, afraid of nothing,  
no longer tired, carrying a bag of stories and wounds that had molded me strong  
but would keep me kind and always wide awake on my new-found watch.

Ellen Black, 2016