

Mike Walker's Wives Paint It Black
Lindsey Walker

[Queen of Cups]

My stepmother floats like driftwood
away from the front door in sweatpants
and crumpled face. My father is dying in the living room
and nobody knows what to do. Everyone looks at their hands;
they must have really interesting fingernails.

[Five of Cups]

The hospital bed lives where the couch used to, under the street-facing
window. The occasional headlights reach between slatted blinds.
Ivory sheets twist pillows over a prison-thin mattress, bent
up at the head. Chrome-plated rails glint in the lampshade light.

[Five of Swords]

Slits for eyes that won't close; open jaw, dry mouth, limp hair
hanging long like the Cryptkeeper. My father has no talent for dying;
he sits upright, jerks his legs, grabs the arms of wife, ex-wife, siblings, mothers.

[Nine of Swords]

He jerks because he hurts because he has no drugs. His nurse
left eighteen bottles of morphine but no syringes, no fentanyl sublinguals,
no way to flood his bloodstream. She also left him a camp toilet
with just a seat and no basin to catch the waste.

[Queen of Discs]

My mother dumps two full bottles of morphine
into a gas station orange slushie, and we feed him dollops
through a spoon straw. She gets the hospice nurse on the phone
and eviscerates her. My stepmother hugs my mother's shoulders

[The Tower]

and says "Lord," and "Mercy," and "Lord have mercy."
The morphine's not kicking in. He can't lie down; it hurts
to move him. He makes a noise like a stab victim, and his chest
sounds wet on the inside.

[Ten of Swords]

I keep thinking what a dick Dylan Thomas was,
demanding burns and raves and curses from wretched skin,
how there's no glory in raging, how it's better to go gentle,
to go asleep. Why can't he just go to sleep?

[The Moon]

Father's cats slip from room to room, press their bodies against the walls
the whole length of the hallway, and gawk from behind chair legs.
Outside, the dogs press wet noses against the sliding door.
It's late November, and brown leaves hook the deck railing.

[Seven of Discs]

His things: guitars and amps he built, some half-finished,
pickguards, pickups, bridges; his silver and chrome motorcycle,
leather boots, black helmet, polishing rags. Record collection:
Alice Cooper, Lynyrd Skynyrd, ZZ Top, Judas Priest.

[The Devil]

We finally get syringes. Mother pops Dilaudid into his deltoid,
and it burns going in. He says "Fuck you!" and even though it's the last sentence
he speaks, we won't carve it on his tombstone. Father hauls off and punches
mother in the gut. He's probably wanted to punch her for thirty years.

[Queen of Wands]

Night falls like pennies down a wishing well.
We can lay him down now. We stretch him out, prop pillows behind his head
and between his knees. He's finished howling; now he calls his grandmother,
"Nanny, Nanny." His own mother puts her hand on his head and he swats it away.

[Ace of Discs]

I put coffee on. Cheap black Folgers hides the stains
in mugs, but no matter how we cut it with sugar and milk, it still tastes
bitter. We joke about him, sure he can't hear us, about his motorcycle crashes,
home tattoos, rock gigs gone wrong, and now to die so domestically—

[Two of Swords]

and how Jaime says he talked out of his head those last few days.
How he told everyone I was coming home for Christmas.
How the last words he said to me on the phone came from nowhere:
"Sorry to waste your time."

[Princess of Discs]

I can't make words for him. I hold his hands. The tendons
and veins slide over each other. Dried out skin. Not handsome,
but they've always been musician's hands, hard-labor hands,
and mechanic hands. I don't know if he even recognizes me.
I'm here.

[Five of Discs]

Dawn greys the window, and I curl under blankets
all the way to my chin in the back bedroom on the puncture-wounded

waterbed, duct-taped against cat claws,
and sleep is just a hand over my eyes.

[Death]

My father waits but doesn't know he waits
until everyone retreats to their warm homes where things smell normal, not sick,
until it's quiet, just his wife. She whispers conjuration, prayer,
declaration, plea, but he's already gone.

[Three of Swords]

Stepsisters shake me awake, and I never knew how fast a body cools
until I touch my father's waxy brow and recoil.
And I call my father's mother and say.
And I call my aunts and say. And I call my brother and say.

[Eight of Swords]

My stepmother, not wanting to seem like she was giving up, never asked him.
No plot picked out, no funeral home, no notion of whether to bury or cremate;
The hospice nurse checks for pulse and confiscates leftover meds.
The hospital calls for their bed back, but he's still in it.

[Seven of Swords]

Daughters and sisters compare funeral rates like car insurance,
and I make too-hard biscuits and gravy out of bacon grease
and bleached flour, because everybody has to eat. The fan hums
over the stove and helps me think and not think.

[The Universe]

When two men in black slacks & white button-downs wheel in a gurney,
they tell us we shouldn't look while they lay out the black bag
and heave my father from the bed, but we all stand in the white
morning light and watch them zip him shut.