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The aesthetics of ash

Madeline Bailey

For a job, Mr Anubis burnt art.

This is how he felt about it:

Days detached from wire hangers and wall hooks, they slid off with his suit and bowler hat. These items sketched him in their black felt; on the early walk from drab doorstep to museum, they prised his silhouette from other urban figures. His destination was marked by marble stairs. It was a building elaborate enough to contradict itself, thickly delicate, invitingly intimidating. The sun rose behind it, so only prismic tangents of colour split the angle at which Mr Anubis saw morning. When he entered it, he was enveloped.

Inside, the floors fell in circular white layers. It was an infinite wedding cake, stacked by curled banisters, the ceilings embossed like architectural icing. Each room was full again.

Some of the frames were thin, others intricate. Inside their bronze borders were thick landscapes, or pencilled lovers. The spaces between these walls grew misshapen ceramics on pedestals; strange metallic structures of modernity; marble people. Some of the statues claimed to be classical gods, though Mr Anubis forgot which. They seemed to him too similar.

In his line of work, like in most, professionalism offered a film of neutrality. As always, it failed to eradicate favouritism. He knew little about art, in all honesty, but was alongside it so often that critique of it became innate. This happened in much the same way that we live with colour: one can be wholly ignorant of how

the world came to be drenched in it, but still have a certain fondness for a particular shade of purple.

Some artworks, Mr Anubis thought unoriginal or lacking in taste. Some, he believed to be beautiful. Today there was an acrylic river smudged across canvas panels, the sun pressed into its horizon. Through some third-party imagination, he could look into a space that his own isolation had closed around.

However inclined he was to contemplate certain pieces, the irrelevance of understanding insulated his career. Opinion orbited his job like weather, but could not infiltrate its workings. He was paid to take each artwork downstairs, where an industrial furnace burned in an underground pit. By the end of the shift, all of the museum's contents were to have been incinerated or melted inside it. Appreciation was to have no influence.

Every thought fragment tumbled to extinguished existence. Mr Anubis shuffled down the stairwells with paintings and small cabinets, saving the elevator for trips with sarcophagi. Felted drawers poured from cupboards; as they fell, revealing collections of satin insects impaled by pins. Flames inhaled people traced in oils on linen, and ancient ones still wrapped in it. Wooden panels of pale hieroglyphs lit up first, dissolving the deities drawn in hopes so fresh they could have been marker pen. Sometimes, a flake of ash would float back upwards, and the last wisp of an anonymous idea would singe him.

Mr Anubis lived alone, and in the times that he saw others, he talked little of work. This was part confidentiality, part discretion: people tended to be uncomfortable discussing the topic. He would sever conversations where it arose by saying, 'Everything finishes, right? If nothing ended, they'd be no room left.'

Then he would segue into weather, or politics. Both of which are more agreeable than death.

This was also what he whispered when guilt settled in his throat like soot, or smoke curled from memory to infiltrate thoughts that were wholly unrelated.

Everything ends. On the whole, he did not mind being the one to ignite the very things that most intrigued him. It is often the unrealised loves that last the longest.

This is how he watched creations turn to charcoal fragments that shattered like glass ink. When the tiered museum held mere whiteness, he went home. The air was already the shade of his bowler hat, and the world's colours had been folded up away from him one final time.

This is how it really was:

The mornings were damp and pale. Mr Anubis watched the city slide through a murky windscreen, peeling buildings threaded together by the course of rooftop pigeons. His hulking workplace was incised by cylindrical chimneys. While no one else could have made marble of the off-white exterior, it became the palette on which he mixed imaginings, fashioning a more appropriate casing for the intrigue of his job.

He coughed up darkness when he went inside; windowless rooms were liquefied by lack of light. One could drown in them. Intermittent spluttering saw daytime twisted, existence thin, outside life idealised.

The coffins were heaved in, and Mr Anubis would oversee their cremation.

He collected knowledge of people from families conversing, obituaries, job details, names, and rare photographs. As with newspaper cuttings, it was the interest itself that made the snippets of story worth savouring.

Mr Anubis was decidedly not as fond of those who were decorative in death as he was of the understated and innovative. He was unsure what made a good existence, but some intrigued him.

Sheets of smoke soaked the air, and in the furnace, bodies dissolved like paper under water, leaving ashes like powdered graphite.

Was it difficult to watch? Everything ends anyway. He could disintegrate lives, but never the ordeal the living make of memory: pointing out new parts of old recollections, like gallery-goers who clutch at the things left behind as pamphlets to help them understand. He knew little about what it was to be human, but he saw it so often that it became innate.

Mr Anubis himself had little colour. Light deprived, he missed the day's successive shades of sky: violet openings, fierce orange warmth, pale blue repose.

So he saw them in the ashes.

This is how it felt, and how it was. He burnt life; he burnt art.



Madeline Bailey wrote this in 2014 when she was in Year 12 at Hobart College in Tasmania.