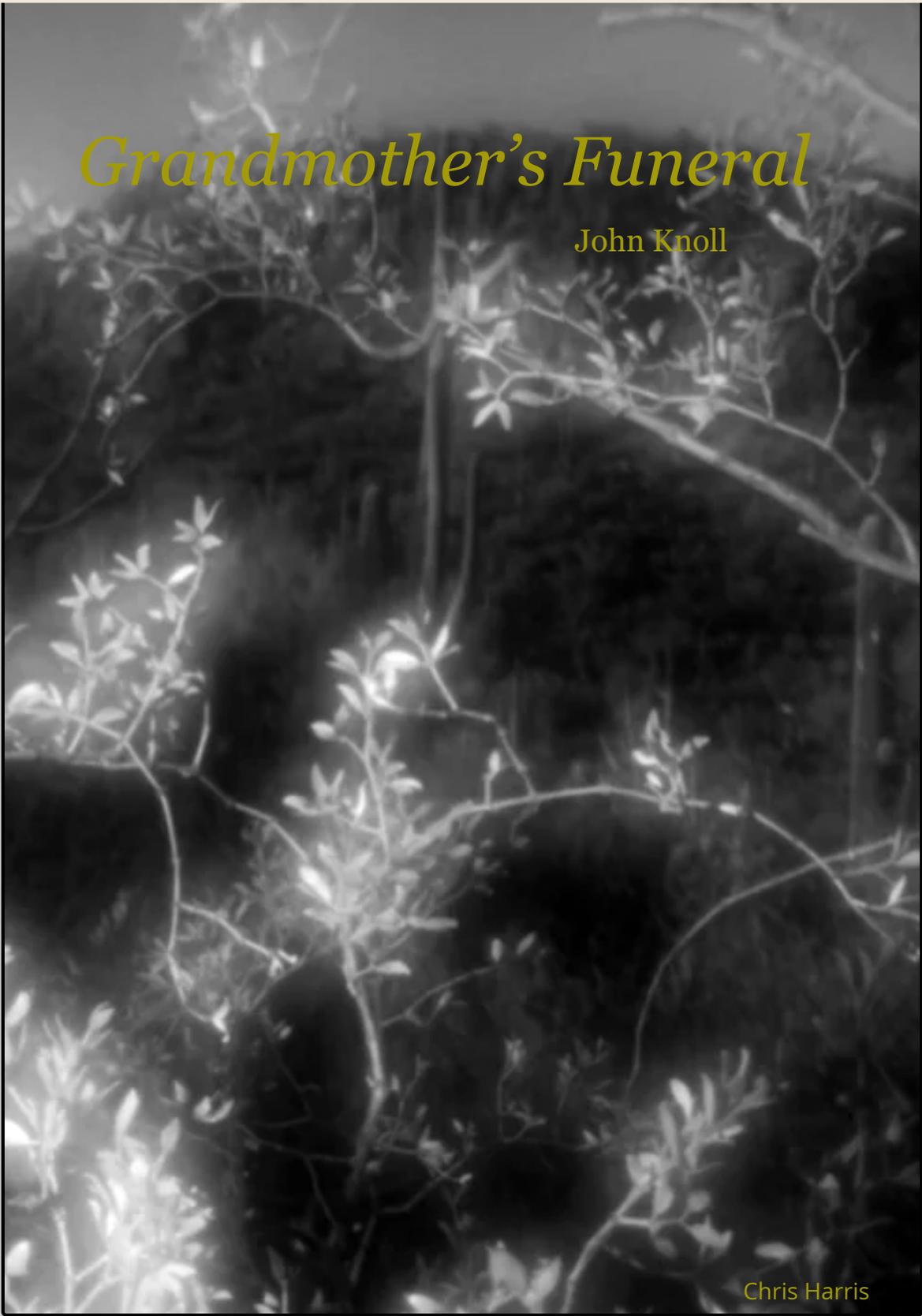


Grandmother's Funeral

John Knoll



Chris Harris

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I

Before my Grandmother's funeral, I felt like visiting the house where she lived for 60 years and I find the key where it's always been, under a red brick next to the back steps. As soon as I step inside I smell Grandmother's perfume. The sweet smell of death lingers. Night crawls in the kitchen window. I contemplate a framed picture of Jesus on the kitchen wall above the table where my coal-digging grandfather often sat and drank coffee, muscles bulging through a white wife-beater undershirt. Jesus opens and closes his eyes when I walk by his picture. And now grandfather walks in the door. He carries a gunnysack filled with fish: blue-gill, bass, crappie, and a bull-head catfish. In the window behind him, lightning flashes behind his head. I count: one, two, three, four, and thunder rumbles Grandmother's china. Grandmother now cooks on a wood-burning stove. She sweats Italian scorpions, cooks frog legs that twitch around the cast-iron skillet doing a sizzling death dance that turns Grandfather on. Grandfather walks to the center of the kitchen, empties the gunny-sack on the black and white checkered linoleum floor and fish flop like birds trying to fly. His white muscle-shirt drips black coal blood. Jesus opens and closes his eyes. I bend to pick up a fish. "Don't you touch that fish," Grandmother says. I don't but don't understand why. I count the wrinkles on Grandmother's face. One by one the fish begin to disappear. When catfish disappear there's a popping sound. When a bass goes it's a violin string being tuned. One by one all the fish dematerialize. The framed picture of Jesus disappears. Lightning flashes outside the window and illuminates Grandmother's face and the black island of her eyes. Then pop, Grandfather is no longer here. Another flash of lightning slithers across the kitchen floor like a white snake. A hand reaches out and touches my cheek "Listen, Dante. Listen," Grandmother says. A dark haunting melody screws itself up from the kitchen drain. Lightning illuminates a halo of butterflies around Grandmother's head. Then zap zap, Grandmother disappears, the white snake too. Out the window, I see a lilac bush burst into cloud. Thunder rattles the windows.

II

I sit in an adobe church two blocks from the Taos Plaza, attending Grandmother's funeral, her ashes in a blue vase between an American flag and a picture of Jesus petting a lamb whose neck is slit. I look out a window, lightning flickers, flashes and strobes the congregation. I'm wrong, it's not lightning. It's a herd of huge golden butterflies on wing strobing the morning light with telepathic florescent wings. In the church, no one seems to notice. A right-wing-Nazi-born-again ex-football-playing Christian minister holds up a black book with B-I-B-L-E inscribed on the cover. He quotes the Book of John, the Book of Matthew, The Book of Amos, and the Book of Andy. He says the black book says that Jesus is the one and only way into heaven. Outside the mutant butterflies begin to brush against the white church walls, creating a vibration, causing the huge crucifix next to the American flag to fall off the wall. The born again preacher keeps on preaching, says, "Thank God I'm a Christian because only Christians can be saved." On impulse, without thinking, I stand up and shout, "Metaphor. Metaphor." The preacher shouts back, "You, sir, are the anti-Christ." I'm about to retort but the golden butterflies are at the windows, butting their coal-black heads in a furious John Coltrane spiritual rhythm. I begin to chant, "A Love Supreme. A Love Supreme. A Love Supreme." The butterflies crash through the windows swoop in and carry the preacher, the crucifix, the flag

and the slaughtered lamb out the front door. A sudden silence like before a tornado follows their exit. No one speaks. The congregation sits in silence until nightfall, and then they file out single file into the night. I walk towards my pickup, chant: "A Love Supreme. A Love Supreme." A tiny flame flickers above the blue vase in the hands of my Grandfather as he walks towards the plaza and disappears into a snow storm.

III

The night after Grandmother's funeral, I left the rez and drove into Taos. I wanted to have a couple beers in my old hangout, The Last Resort. I took a seat at the bar. Mick Jagger and the Stones blossomed from speakers above the bar's back mirror: "You might not get what you want, but if you try sometime you just might find you get what you need." I thought, That's bullshit. The truth is you never get what you need but you might sometimes get what you want. I watched a couple cowboys arm wrestle in the mirror while I drank my beer. I arm wrestled a lot when I was in college. College was way gone but I felt the need to throw down with the young Anglo cowboys. A muscular red headed kid won the match, he turned on his chair and issued a loud challenge. "Anybody want a part of me?"

"Let's see what you've got my friend," I said.

The kid looked at me, laughed and said, "The old redskin is feeling his oats."

I sat at the table across from the kid. "Kid," I said, placing my foot against a wooden rail beneath the table for extra leverage, "I haven't arm wrestled for 17 years."

The kid gazed back into my eyes. "You about ready to go, Chief?"

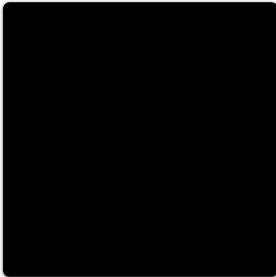
We locked hands. Someone said, "Go."

Rap music bounced off the walls of the Last Resort. Neither hand moved an inch. I began to fade. The Kid pulled my hand towards the table. Then magic happened. The spirits of the dead entered me, the killing fields, the weeping women and children at Sand Creek, Wounded Knee, Bear River, the Trail of Tears. I felt the crazy wisdom soul of Geronimo, Crazy Horse, Cochise, and Peltier. I felt buffalo in my blood, rumbling like thunder. I felt the strength of my dead Grandfather going down into the underground coal mines. Dark and criminal my eyes glazed over; I went into a trance, spirit power resurrected like an old god being reborn.

Hooked hand in hand with a red-neck cowboy, all that existed was the awareness of a breathing beast fighting for his life. I had the feeling I couldn't lose, that feeling, that indescribable feeling, my Grandfather used to say of knowing where the ball is going before its hit, knowing where the halfback will be before the halfback knows. I pulled the kid's arm through Afghanistan, down into Vietnam, the killing fields of the Arizona desert, through drunken nights with women whose names I can't remember.

Come on Kid, come on down with me to El Chapultepec Bar downtown Denver. Come listen to Lou Reed with me. Come on down and sleep in the alley with me. I pulled the Kid through Mexico City avenues past the bloated bellies of starving children. Let's go Kid, you're going down with me down to the roots of rain, to the place where the dead talk. I'm taking you down Kid. I'm taking you home. I pulled the Kid's hand to the table top, gently like a feather floating to the desert floor, kissing the hot sand. There was a moment of silence.

“Goddamn, you’re good old man,” the Kid said. “You Indians are stronger than you look.”



John Knoll lives in Pojoaque Valley, New Mexico. His poetry books include: *The Magic Vessel*, *Opera of Virus*, *Wrestling the Wheel*, *Ghosting America*, *Elevator Music for the Dead* and *Hummingbird Graffiti*. Knoll’s plays have been staged in Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Arcadia, Kansas, and Honolulu.

