

## Aftermath

*Derek Des Anges*

Untangling the remains of a life ended takes time, effort, and invariably a wet cloth. No matter how much time you earmark, there's always more that needs doing than there are hours to do it in.

We take the weekend; light streams in through garret skylights down onto the untrodden carpet and the borrowed key fits the lock like a palm in a palm. *Welcome to my home.*

The walls are plastered with cuttings from shows that never got more than a handful of reviews, whose audiences would comfortably have fitted, shoulder-to-shoulder, into this little room which is both bedroom and entertaining space. No one who wrote up his work seemed to understand what he was trying to do.

'I feel bad I didn't go to more of them,' you say, as you start to detach yellowing newsprint from ossified Blu-Tack. 'There just never seemed to be the time.'

Every flat surface that the sun touches is filled with cacti.

'It's a good thing they're hardy,' I point out, as you pick one up, and sneeze. 'It's been nearly a month.'

Neither of us really think he'd mind, of course, if a few plants died when he was gone, but it feels better to keep some continuity, to have something living in this empty place. It's a good thing they persevere, under the dust.

'Nearly a month...' since the funeral, since the cremation. The insincere tears from his family. *We weren't invited, of course. The Wrong Sort. They attribute it to us, in a sense: if not the need for the funeral, then at least the life lived up until that point. The type of obituaries that get filed under 'Other Lives': avant-garde performer and 'difficult' musician...*

You brought a box file. Prepared for the legal documents, but you're filling it up with notices. For the archives, for history. It's the most tender thing I've ever seen you do, lay out his life for autopsy by some future student.

I soak a dishcloth under the kitchen tap. There's a final demand for gas bills in the armload of documents you picked off the stairs, but water rates are quarterly. Maybe by the time it rolls around his family will bother to tell them he can't pay any longer.

The cacti come out green and shiny, fresh as scars under the burn blister, when the dust is dabbed off them. There is so much to pack away: his own costumes, carefully-darned. His David Bowie vinyl collection. The battered old Barbara Cartland novels he always claimed were for research. The cacti seem inconsequential in comparison, but they're the only living things in here, and we weren't allowed to prepare his corpse. Weren't allowed to put on his final face of make-up. Weren't allowed to give him the send-off he asked for, the one with footlights and greasepaint and stupid pretty boys dressed as Party City Cupids.

They didn't even play 'Ashes to Ashes' at the cremation like he asked. It was in the note. He said *promise me you won't forget me. Promise me you'll play it. At least recite it.*

You stop me in the middle of my tender plant-dabbing to say, 'Why are you doing that? Don't you know how much of dust is human skin?'

I lay down the cloth that contains all that's left to us of him, and, instead, begin to strip the bed in which he died.

**Derek Des Anges** is an emerging queer/trans author living in London. His work is most recently published by *Non-Binary Review* and *long con magazine*.