

SLATE & ARROW
By Aika Aion

*You don't have a soul.
You are a soul.
You have a body.*
—C.S. Lewis

Death Sentences

She goes to Enola Park after school to spy. Or cry. Whichever comes first.

A half-broken tree branch teeters above the road on the path to the park.

She pulls up on her bike and finds herself alone (no surprise there) so she settles on a smooth, flat boulder and looks out to the bay. But just as her throat clenches and she gets ready to release the sorrows of the day—or, let's face it, the sorrows of the last few years—she catches a spark, a gem twinkling in the water. Caught between the rocks in a miniature tide pool is a corked bottle.

Curious.

She crouches, easing it over, and then—*snatch!*

Something is inside. A secret message just for her. She pops off the cork and releases the scent of salt water and, oddly, a trace of kerosene. She shakes the bottle, and out comes a crinkled piece of torn newsprint. It says:

RETURN
DEAD FINDS YOU
DIE SOON
LIVE NOWHERE

With all the mentioning of death, her heart beats wildly. She'd always wanted to receive a message in a bottle, but now she's not so sure.

The newsprint reminds her of the one and only obituary she'd ever read. It was for her neighbor Jane, who'd jumped off the Glorietta Bridge last year.

She turns the message over in her hands and looks around. No one—nothing. The sun, spreading its gold all over, is just starting to dip. And she knows, within the core of her being, this bottle was planted for her to find. Maybe not by a person, but by some cosmic forces at play. The same ones that gave her a sinking feeling when reading that obituary. Not because she was so saddened (she hardly knew Jane), but because she felt connected to the event. Like she could be next.

Isn't it enough that she has to endure her unrequited love for Pascual? That it's already Halloween of her senior year and she's still a friendless loser? That she's too poor to pay for college and will probably end up as a gas-station cashier? Now she has a foreboding message in a bottle to deal with?

She looks at the paper again. It's torn all around the edges and weathered badly. Seems fitting, given its message. Sure, the wording is a little awkward, but really, it's four sentences:

Return (to the land of the dead). + Dead finds you. (It's inevitable.) + Die soon. (In case there was any question.) + Live nowhere. (Duh.)

All mean essentially the same thing. A redundant four-for-one death-sentence special.

A light breeze tickles the center of her forehead as the last drop of sunlight catches one of the mirrored skyscrapers from across the bay, igniting the water and sparking any gleam of metal or glass passing by, stabbing her eyes.

Of course she would be the one to find this message. Not a love letter. Not a note of hope. Only she would find a memorandum of doom.

Ow. Something pierces her heart. A sharp sting to snap her out of her train of thought.

With the sun losing its power and the moon rising, the air cools, making her shiver. She should be getting home soon. She might not have any friends or a smartphone, but at least her house is warm.

She looks down, still holding the bottle in her lap.

A few years ago, she might've tossed such a message aside without thinking too hard about it. Lately, though, her heart has opened to all possibilities. She just never thought an untimely demise would be one of them.

But what bothers her more than the thought of her death, what creeps up her shoulders and the sides of her neck and bores through her skull and into the tangle of gray matter, is the idea that she might not fight it. What has she done that warrants continuing? What does she hope to do that is so noble and worthy of taking up more space on the planet? If a magic message in a bottle is giving her a heads-up that she could croak soon, who is she to refuse?

There it is again, a sting in her chest. Maybe it's some rare disease. Or maybe you really *can* die from a broken heart. Maybe they'll find her in the park, keeled over from "heart failure," and they'll say things about her young life being cut short. But they'll never know the truth. That her life could only go so far before asking for a do-over. That her heart decided it was easier to tap out now and start over in a fresh body than to continue in this sad sack of a girl.

Another sting.

A jab.

A nudge in her ribcage.

Around her neck hangs a smooth black stone in the shape of a raindrop. It vibrates in time with her heartbeat. It beckons her to answer. But she's too busy wallowing to hear its call.

As the black stone swings against her chest, she grabs hold of it and says out loud:

“Return, dead finds you, die soon, live nowhere!”

Then: a flame on the back of her hand, a cherry ember smoldering on the ground beside her, a series of nearby giggles.

She turns to find Lexy and Roxy snuffing out the last of their cigarettes and tramping back toward their convertible. Both are wearing some kind of skin-tight Halloween costume—or maybe this is their normal Friday-night attire.

There’s no lasting mark from the flicked cig butt, but she feels wounded nonetheless.

Her throat tightens again and she lunges for her bike to ride home fast and let the wind blow away the droopy cloud surrounding her head, but she’s too late. The constriction in her throat makes its way up to her eyes and she’s back on the boulder teetering on the edge of land and sea, pouring tears straight into the water below, silently wondering if she should follow them.

Cosmic Egg

I am an arrow through her heart.

Yes, I mean literally. And yes, I mean figuratively. Sometimes they are the same.

Isn't she beautiful? If only she thought so with her physical mind. But look: her heart center is opening. She's inviting us in.

Come closer.

Take my hand.

I will show you all you need to know about her.

Glide with me through the vermilion layers all the way to the rose-gold core. See my inscription? An arrow, through and through.

There: feel the heart pulsing, shimmering and new? It throbs with the vitality of the moment.

I can see you are confused. Let me offer some clarity.

First, we need to create a landscape.

Of course, you create everything—didn't you know?

Close your eyes, squeeze them tightly, and on the count of three, open.

One . . .

Two . . .

Three . . .

What do you see?

Ah, beautiful! I see it too. You're influenced by the Southern Californian suburban terrain. A place to rest your space/time machines and recharge. Oh, right. You call them gas stations. Of course. You don't know why you chose this place? You think it's dirty? Ugly?

Oh!

You must borrow my eyes. Take my heart. There you go. Now you will begin to feel with more understanding. Notice the oil on the ground—the remnants from ancient creatures, their bodies' gift to you so that you may travel faster through this space/time. So that you may experience more and expand at a greater velocity. Oh, isn't it all so lovely the way it's orchestrated?

There's the—what do you call it? Convenience store? Let's go inside, shall we?

Ah, all this gorgeous pre-packaged food! You've thought of everything, haven't you! What brilliant minds you and your species have!

What are these? Little morsels of sweetness. Salty crunchiness. Cold bottles of liquid hydration. Hot cups of liquid energy. Numbered scraps of paper that surprise and delight you, give you hope, add a bit of fun to your day, spark your imagination.

This place is a gold mine! Thank you so much for bringing me here!

There is more?

A machine that spits out representations of physical value.

A private closet in which to relieve your body of its waste.

More bottles and cans to bring a different kind of relief. Relief from what? How could you ever need relief from such a wonderful place as this?

Yes, I know. I'm not human. I've heard of your so-called hardships, even if I don't completely understand them. I'm aware of these lower-dimension woes you speak about. But tell me, why would you choose to focus on the things that tear you away from all of this?

Ah, you feel it now!

You feel the mystery, the wonder, the intrigue of the unknown, the untapped potential. Isn't it glorious? Isn't it riveting? Don't you want to follow it through?

Feel the heat of skin on skin, the chill of an autumn wind, the fragrance of a new pair of shoes, the sour of a lime, the sticky pop of a soap bubble, the aroma of dried bergamot tea leaves, the crash of a cymbal vibrating through your eardrums—it's endless and bottomless and forever more and more and more, always more to want, more to expand upon, more to live.

And here we are in this microcosm you created. Don't laugh. It's gorgeous. All these rectangular packets and cylindrical containers of glucose and sodium and nicotine and caffeine and alcohol sparkle in vibrant hyper-reality. They're all part of this scheme. Yes, even your so-called dust bunnies and cigarettes butts. Look how the metal and virtual coins move in and out of hands lickety-split. Fuel courses through veins and engines and minds, lighting them up like galaxies.

And this is just the beginning. These things pale in comparison to what's ahead.

Yes, the girl.

There she is now.

Come.

See it there above? An eye—a black sphere. What do you call it? A security camera. It records everything and reflects all it sees. We call it the Cosmic Egg. Let's go inside.

Ah, here's where the view shifts. Enjoy the sensation of the velvet darkness. On the inside looking outward, I see you, her, me. Always knowing and forever recording. Taking it all in.

Go ahead, laugh at her pet rock, Slate. But the black stone, like her body, is a device through which to speak. I'll take whatever she offers and I'll give her whatever she's willing to accept. She can come home whenever she chooses. Until then, I will be here, as always, waiting and watching and pointing.

If only she will listen.

Scrying

It's getting dark in more ways than one.

The clouds overhead mimic her thoughts as the sun descends deep into the edge of the world.

“LIVE NOWHERE.”

She always figured, since Glorietta is near a military base, that the park is named after the *Enola Gay* bomber plane. Usually the place is so desolate and quiet she can't help but read “Enola” backwards. Besides, she's used to being alone.

Enola Park. Alone Krap.

Her mind flashes to Pascual making eyes at Pony. On Mom busting into her room. On the bat hoodie crumpled up in her pack. On the hollow yet tight feeling in her chest.

“DIE SOON.”

Maybe it would be a good thing, she thinks.

And immediately she feels a stab to the heart.

I can't even deal with this.

She sticks the message and bottle in her pack and hops on her bike to go home. But then Slate beats against her chest.

Not now, she thinks. The last time I did that, you showed me that freaky man.

As soon as she thinks it, her heart softens. She's being harsh. He wasn't freaky. Just surprising.

“Fine,” she says out loud.

It's not as if she's itching to get back home. Being with her family on a Friday night would just be a reminder of her pitiful social life. At least here she has the sparkle of the bay, the flutter of leaves in the wind, the hope of something different, something new.

"And me!" Slate calls to her.

She rolls her eyes, but with a smile. As pathetic as it is to talk to a rock, it makes her feel special—though of course she'd never admit this to anyone. For a while, she did it out of desperation. But then something happened.

The rock talked back.

Only "talk" isn't exactly right. There are no voices, but she hears something. No words, but she feels something. She thinks it could be her own overactive imagination making things up. Whatever the case, it makes her feel good, this talking to Slate. And since she's the only one that knows, what's the harm?

A flash to the message in the bottle: "DEAD FINDS YOU."

Oh, yeah. That.

She shakes her head to rid herself of the unsettling thoughts. *Deep breath in, deep breath out.* Sitting back down on the boulder, she tugs the leather cord around her neck, sliding the pendant between her fingers. She calls it Slate: the black raindrop, the scrying stone, the smooth and sleek piece of onyx (or is it tourmaline?) that she found in her family's garage.

Slate rests in her palm and she stares into the inky void. She smiles at the idea that "scrying" seems to be a combination of "spying" and "crying," two of her regular activities. But she'd once looked up the etymology of the word and it was apparently derived from "descry," or "describe." She attempts to do so now.

At first the glare pierces her eyes. But after some slow and steady breathing, her eyes glaze over the stone and her mind begins to clear. She sits for ten or twenty or thirty minutes, who can tell. Time is warped and space is altered. She is here and there and everywhere. Her eyes blur and Slate turns to fog.

At first it's just a feeling of something coming.

Then the fog lifts.

A face appears.

Maybe it's not a man, after all. She mostly notices the eyes. When she stares into them, it's as if she's traveling through the outer reaches of the universe.

"Hello again, Sable," the eyes say wordlessly to her.

"Who are you?"

The eyes laugh, but not in a mean way. It seems nothing about them could ever be mean-spirited.

"Why don't you ask yourself that question?"

She glances toward the water and nearly loses focus. When she looks back at the stone, the eyes are bigger, brighter.

"You can call me Arrow," he says.

Chills run up her neck and scalp and she swallows hard. There's a familiar feeling that she knew his name in the past. It's as if she's known him her entire life.

"Okay, Arrow, I have some questions for you. Why did I find that message? Am I really going to die soon? Or is this all a big joke?"

Her throat clenches and she gets another pierce in her heart. Again she wants to cry and again she's pulled away by a flash. This one shows her bike.

"Go," Arrow says.

"You're trying to get rid of me?"

She sees herself riding her bike toward the other side of town.

"Where are you taking me?"

"You'll see," the eyes tell her. But she doesn't need to ask anymore. She already knows.

"No, no. I can't. I wasn't invited."

The eyes smile the way eyes can do: with feeling. Then they disappear.

She's left staring at the blank stone, then out to the water turning amber-gray in the setting sun.

Her bike itches for a ride.

It's true, she hasn't been invited, but she's a bat, not a vampire. She doesn't need an invitation to creep in. And even though she's not exactly sure who Arrow is or where he comes from, she has a sense that he's on her side. In the distance, a muffled car radio plays a song about partying. It's like the universe is begging her to go. And who is she to refuse the universe?

"Okay, okay," she says and climbs on her bike.

She rides under the broken tree branch and along the bumpy road. A few blocks later in the near dark she pedals with part hesitation, part excitement, and part fury. She stops home to change and grab a bite, then heads back out without breaking the momentum of the spell.

Riding past glowing jack-o'-lanterns, she whispers to Slate, tucked under her shirt: "Oh my god. I'm about to crash my first party. And it's at Pascual's house on Halloween night. What the actual smeg."