

Kay Butcher (Nottingham Trent University), “Lily”

I set the white lily—freshly picked, sweet of scent and still wet with morning rain—down on the grass beneath the stone that reads your name, your date of birth, of death. It’s been one year since you went away and I still can’t make sense of a thing; I’m all knots of pain and confusion and anger. I choke down a sob and wipe my eyes and lift myself back to full height.

A hand on my shoulder reminds me that I am not alone, but I shrug it off in instinctual mistrust, needing space in my distress. I regret it when I see the hurt on the face of its owner, my fiancée. She was only trying to show her love, her support. And though she knows I am not upset with her, my physical spurning tells of worse. She knows in this moment that she is not enough. Not to replace you, of course, but not even to cheer me up.

I tell her I’ll be okay in short words, lacking enunciation or oomph, then walk back the way we came, head down, hands in pockets, disengaged from the world. She calls out that we only just got here, that I don’t have to run away. Those final words feel pointed as daggers when they find my back. I stop and turn and quote them back. Run away? Is that what she thinks I’ve been doing these past twelve months?

I love you, she tells me, dodging the question. Look, let’s not talk about it now, I know today is not the right day. So I grunt, and shake my head, tell her that if you have something to say then you should say it, here, right above my mother’s grave.

You have the right to hear it.

It’s not lost on me that I am being unreasonable, but in the dull English grey I can’t bring myself to regret it, let alone to unclench my fists or ungrit my teeth. She hesitates, taking note of my anguish, before going on. She tells me that she knows it is a tragedy, that my feelings are valid, my grief warranted, but that it has been a year, and I have a real life to live, and people who depend on me. *She* depends on me. All she wants, she says, is to have her fiancé back.

If he’s gone, I say, then who am I? You’re a vacant lot, she says, sometimes I search and find nothing behind your eyes. Don’t let your mother’s death be doubled in you. You know she wouldn’t want that.

And I know you wouldn’t want that. You would tell me to smile and think of the good times and live a great life in your memory. But you’re dead. I don’t have to do what you want.

I am the lily on your grave: severed from life-giving roots, once full of vibrant promise, dying now in real time.