The Age of Death, An Account
My first month back from the dead and Aunt Marjorie starts touring cities, puts me on a ball and chain next to her podium for shows—THE AMAZING DEAD BOY REVEALS SECRETS OF HEAVEN!!! She prints these flyers and books food courts until we get national press, which happens after Leo calls in a favor from his friend in Los Angeles. Leo is promoted. His friend plus two staffers are hired full-time to manage my newly dead, hungry for brains persona.

The camp psychiatrist thinks I’m kidding about exploitation and when I tell her fame has fried Marjorie’s brains, she ups my tranquilizers. Doping me keeps me from moaning about it. I pose for Suicide Girls, appear in pop videos. Meanwhile I stop eating with the crew, hide in my trailer.

I get a tutor who teaches me algebra—I’m hosting Jeff Foxworthy’s Are You Smarter Than a Dead Person? pilot—and my famous aunt, in an interview with Oprah, consents to a televised check-up proving once and for all I have no heartbeat, that my skin is extra clammy. I eat my tutor.

Marjorie won’t visit before tapings, gives Leo the keys to my restraints; I try to kill Leo five or six times, clawing at his face, but he finally screams the keys are fake when no one jumps in.

The thing is, I don’t get paid for my jokes. I sit in writer’s meetings, suggest scripts that broadly appeal to key demographics, where Leo pulls down salary plus benefits for wearing decoys. I almost gore him again out of spite. My not gutting him illustrates how death puts things in perspective.

Leo gets a book deal, leaves camp. The book never hits market and nobody hears from him again.

My aunt and her cronies scheme to hold me captive, ride out my miracle for all it’s worth. I start to lock my trailer door; they unbolt it from the frame. I make it as far as the high school; they move me into stocks. I feel the restraints are reactionary, waste-
ful, but no one suggests how to boost the efficiency of their own torture.

The first thing to know about stocks is the drawn out feeling of time. But you knew that already. The second thing is the crew will stop to take photos beside your spectacle. Then the photos become Internet memes. Don’t cry because it’s over. Smile because you’re not a walking stiff. Cowboys, no spittin’ on scourge. Use spittoons. Cronies taunt me with them, direct orders from Marjorie.

Child Protective Services is tipped off anonymously but, on arrival, declares me legally dead. My aunt suspects Leo but says nothing more about it.

I am dead but not numb. Parts of me return to dust. News outlets publish leaked cease and desist letters from the state. They do not know what to do with me. Pundits ask viewers, Is this a failure of our representatives to act? Two interchangeable experts, pioneers in their respective fields, feud boyishly across different networks.

Some nights, I wonder about that word, scourge. It is the cronies’ favorite slur to use on me. I don’t fear it, though. I wear it like a festive sweater, laugh as their hokey insults come to depend more and more on the word.

I heard very little about my family word-for-word in camp. Only what my aunt told me. In the stockades, I filled in the gaps with what I could beat out of Leo. When my aunt found me she was living alone at my family’s house. My dad had stopped responding and she was cleaning out the estate, putting his affairs in order as his power of attorney.

My dad drunk-drove me and mom into a ditch. He sleeps off his guilt, comatose.

I know my aunt favored Leo but his betrayal did not shake her opinion of him. Watching her run around camp, I wonder what she thinks about him. I’m afraid of what she’ll say when I ask. We owe everything to Leo. Leo is our saving grace. Without Leo, where would we be?

My aunt says I showed up, out of nowhere, risen plain and simple, pounding on the door. I can’t remember anything before she made me the soup.

Marjorie charges admissions for tours of the camp. Buzzards visit the camp like a dark bruise. We have a strong opening week, but
no social media presence. We cannot survive on word of mouth alone. I tell my aunt this, “We cannot survive on word of mouth alone” and she says “That’s a good point.” She pays for an ad in the classifieds online. The copy describes Leo down to his pretty eyelashes. No one applies.

Advocacy groups for death rights picket the entrance and leak dramatic photos of me in the stockades. My aunt hires a security firm to keep them out.

Are You Smarter Than a Dead Person? is canceled after one season.

Leo’s L.A. friend—his name, evidently, is Marcus—hears a more substantial offer from an advertising firm in New York, which he accepts without another thought. His staffers ditch us when he offers them competitive salaries with the firm. More and more volunteers abandon the camp. All of a sudden, my aunt is in charge of a sinking ship. She burns through her savings to feed the security firm that keeps the advocates at bay.

No one in television, radio, or other media wants to touch us, calls us a gimmick of death. Death is so passé. It has been done and done and done and done. What else is there? What’s our angle? My aunt is not a visionary. The miracle has run its course.

Plus, my perpetually rotting face is hard to maintain on top of this. The makeup artists fled last night, and my aunt’s bad work has repulsed focus groups on more than occasion, if not because of the smell, a kind of burning plastic, then because it looks really gross.

I want to reason with my aunt. Leo is out of the picture. Why am I kept prisoner? I need out of the stocks. Someone sets up AV so we can watch the ball drop, runs extension cords plugged into a trailer so it reaches me. We are staying up for the New Year, and the mood is set, everything is primed for it, she even laughs at my dead boy jokes—I will suggest a few hours each day without restraints, you know, for good behavior—but then my aunt’s friend Earl calls, screaming.

Earl says Stanley, the tutor, has risen in the city—biting strangers in the act. It’s breaking news, have we turned on the set? We hadn’t; Earl called before we sat down. Aunt Marjorie winces, holds the receiver away from her ear, feeling trapped or tired. I hear Earl’s infrequent screams jump out of the phone.
—he screams here because a crow smashes into the patio sliding door, drops dead: Earl says the victims declined medical treatment, being uninsured or worse, unemployed, and now there is an epidemic extending to the valley, where we made camp—we are disconnected for at least another day.

Earl calls back, surprised he has service, a person’s silhouette is standing on the lawn, looks lost, so Earl screams. Unable to tell whether or not someone is rabid—he calls them this, rabid—Earl has locked his door, turned out the lights. He says she is okay. He has ordered a new home security system with same-day installation. There was a special. Then the doorbell—Earl screams but it is probably just the technician. He hangs up.

I wonder why he chooses rabid to describe us. We are decidedly not living. There is something empowering about my kind rising up, taking vengeance. I’m not aroused, though, can’t become erect, rotting. Instead: Earl stationed in front of his cameras, around the clock, sleeping there, sometimes trading posts with the technician, who saw some shit on the way over. I imagine Earl watching for any sign of death lurking in the brush, hilariously armed with a broom handle, a sharpened fire poker, and unafraid of strange dogs. Ricky, the technician whose name I have made up, has pepper spray—and a pistol in his glove box if things call for it, though he hasn’t quite figured out how they’ll flank someone to reach it in time. Neither plans to leave the house to find out. They aren’t romantically linked, but circumstances are rife with a kind of productive tension.

This last time, Aunt Marjorie catches me eavesdropping. She looks at me sternly, mouths Are you listening to this, then pulls the phone back, and, walking away, mumbles a few consoling words into the phone, vague advice that pacifies no one, hangs up.

The next day Marjorie grills me about Stanely. Did I eat him? Of course I remember him. Don’t I? S-T-A-N-E-L-Y. She spells it out, forwards and backwards, emphasis on each vowel. Her southern drawl flares when she is angry. I don’t tell her she is spelling it incorrectly. I was frustrated, and Stanely provided an opening. I let out some steam. But I don’t say that. I want out of the stocks. Instead I say, “Who is Stanely?”

The next day Aunt Marjorie says, “You remember the tutor, don’t you?” I say nothing. She makes a face, another. She says, “When you ate the tutor, did you desire flesh? You wanted to wear around his thick tanned hide all hours like a coat.” This one isn’t even a question. “Did you wish to consume his essence, his soul? Tell
me.” I say, “That’s ridiculous.”

Another day Marjorie tells me I’m lying. Her eyes seem to narrow on me, scrutinizing my dead, unmoving face. She says, “Did the Devil compel you to bite Stanley?” I say, “I didn’t bite him.” I’m lying. It doesn’t matter. Marjorie moves into her RV, drives it across camp and parks it behind another useless structure.

Later, shouting starts outside the camp, where the poor advocates have stayed in tents or their cars. A guard sprints frantically past Marjorie’s door. He is pursued by a rabid advocate. Scourge, as others would have it. Behind them, a pack has formed. They are loud, crass people not used to death. Marjorie’s RV starts up, speeds off, deserts me in the center of camp, charges a few advocates slow to reanimate. This is the truth: My aunt flees camp, leaves me in the stocks.

I wonder what you do to keep yourself occupied during the apocalypse. I don’t have any answers. A buzzard descends, pecks at my face rot, but I can’t feel it. I died when I was nine. I don’t know anything, really.

After a couple hours, the buzzard has a voice, suddenly, baritone and imbued with song. He sings to me, songs of despair, murder ballads, country songs I can’t listen to, not because I don’t want the entertainment, a temporary friendship, just that the songs, I know for a fact, are poor imitations of something else. I haven’t even heard “Busch Baby” in its original form and I know he is butchering it.

The buzzard has a greenish beak and its feathers are reddish, or the sun casts an eerie hue upon it. I ask it its name. The bird looks at me, sideways, perhaps annoyed that I cut him off mid-verse. It is snowing, or the buzzard punctures my cornea. His name, he says, is Simon.