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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “or at least a memorably fierce good-bye.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact [media@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:media@poetryfoundation.org) for the correct version.)

### MEET THE BEETLES

Linda Pastan’s poem “The Deathwatch Beetle” echoes Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.”

by Aimee Nezhukumatathil

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Growing up on the grounds of a mental institution in rural western New York (my mother was a psychiatrist there), I did what any insouciant preteen with a penchant for reading would do when told she could not go trick-or-treating with her friends: I sequestered myself in my bedroom on Halloween night and read Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” This short but terrifying story, in which a murderer insists on his sanity, fascinated me. But I remember being mesmerized not by the grisly deeds themselves, but by the strange description of the ticking sounds Poe describes in the story. I kept coming back to the mention of the bizarre little insects, or “death watches,” that the narrator says he has heard tapping within the walls of his own bedroom, as he describes the rapt attention with which the old man himself now listens in the night:

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in bed, crying out—“Who’s there?” I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed, listening;—just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall.

Linda Pastan’s poem “The Deathwatch Beetle” explores the trappings of another impending death. This one, however, is spoken of with reverence and lamentation by a speaker who bitterly notes, “My whole childhood is coming apart . . . and I will be left—ridiculous, / to write / condolence letters / to myself.” The poem is divided into four crots, or fragments that move quickly between points of view. Even though these crots are

numbered, there is no clear sense of chronology. In a poem about the imminent death of a loved one, the form itself is a subtle metaphor for the speaker's desire to make time stand still or, at the very least, delay it just a bit longer.

As a result, "The Deathwatch Beetle" reads slowly, often maddeningly so. It's as if the speaker can hear the beetle's clicking sounds throughout each sequence and, much like the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart," starts to go crazy with grief and anguish in the looming presence of death. Pastan sets this tone in the first suite, when a bird appears to go mad:

A cardinal hurls itself  
at my window all morning long,  
trying so hard to penetrate  
its own reflection  
I almost let it in myself,  
though once I saw  
another red bird, crazed  
by the walls of a room,  
spatter its feathers  
all over the house.

To slow the poem's pace, Pastan uses short and clipped lines throughout, often breaking them on brutal verbs: penetrate, ripped out, and escape. Her staccato style echoes the deathwatch beetle's tapping. Second only to the termite in its ability to damage wood, the deathwatch beetle is about as long as a single grain of basmati rice, and its clicking noise was once rumored to be the very sound of the grim reaper himself. Legend says that the tapping sound was his vigil in the quiet rooms of the dying—his thin fingers impatiently tapping the walls or doorway of the house, expectantly waiting for his newest charge.

Pastan's poem concludes with supposition, posing delicate questions of mortality and spirituality:

When your spirit  
perfects itself,  
will it escape  
out of a nostril,  
or through the spiral  
passage of an ear?  
Or is it even now battering  
against your thin skull, wild  
to get through, blood brother  
to this crimson bird?

The entire sequence itself shows a sort of fragmentation of the body; for example, the cardinal's feathers are scattered throughout the poem. The speaker seems to gain some semblance of control and perhaps even consolation over the beloved's impending death

by shifting the focus to individual pieces of the body that rend forth: blood, skull, ear, nostril. It's as if these parts of the body harbor a certain power over the speaker in ways that even the whole body does not.

Entomologists now know that the creepy sound heard in "The Tell-Tale Heart" (like a "low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton") is similar to the sound that a deathwatch beetle makes when it knocks the front of its head against the wooden floor of its tunnel to attract a mate—hardly the harbinger of death. In Pastan's poem, that sound is also the speaker's farewell to the body. The tapping sound that echoes throughout is created by the head and, tellingly so, not the heart. The "spirit" that is perfecting itself might be planning a most elegant departure from the body, or at least a memorably fierce good-bye.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil is the author of two books of poetry, most recently *At the Drive-In Volcano* (Tupelo, 2007), and is a professor of English at SUNY-Fredonia. This article originally appeared on [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org). Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Linda Pastan, and her poetry, at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

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