

2024 ADULT ESSAY CONTEST – HONORABLE MENTION

The Marble Egg

By Charlotte Clymer – Washington, D.C.

I was 19 when I held an urn for the first time.

Two months prior, I had graduated from Army basic training and got assigned to the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), the unit based in Washington, D.C., that carries out the military funerals in Arlington National Cemetery.

You ever see soldiers carry a flag-draped casket in Arlington? That was my unit.

But I was the new soldier, which meant I'd have to earn my way on to a casket team, which meant, in the meantime, I was put on detail at The Columbarium, tasked with handling the cremated remains of service members and their loved ones.

The Columbarium detail is simple compared to casket funerals. As the lone private on these details, I was tasked with ceremoniously transporting the urn with all respect and military bearing.

I was not supposed to stand out. If the family never remembered me after the ceremony, I had completed the mission to perfection.

Be forgettable, and don't drop the urn.

The supervising sergeant said that to me on the first day. He was on this detail because he got bumped off a casket team. He got bumped off a casket team because he wasn't very good at it. He wasn't very good at it because he would constantly forget things.

For example, he forgot to tell me to wet my gloves. We wore cotton white gloves, which need to be held under a faucet prior to a funeral, so that they have a better grip. Somehow, no one had told me this, and the sergeant didn't bother to check.

The first two funerals at The Columbarium were completed to perfection. Both times, I carried small wooden boxes and marched crisply (but forgettable) to the inurnment location. My role was no more than 60 seconds.

My confidence was beginning to replace my anxiety. I had been way too nervous, I realized. I began to let my nerves settle a bit.

The third funeral came in the late afternoon. I got the requisite head nod from the sergeant and ceremoniously walked up to the car that was transporting the urn. I stopped at the open door of the passenger seat and bent down.

But I didn't see a wooden box.

It was a marble egg. There's no other way to describe it. A beautiful marble egg. It was certainly fitting and appropriate to transport remains, but still: a smooth and heavy marble egg.

My gloves were not wet. Cotton slides easily on marble. This was, I would guess, a 30-pound marble egg. No edges. No real grip. So heavy. So slippery.

That was the longest walk I'll ever take. I was gripping this egg for dear life, certain it was going to slip out of my cotton gloves at any second.

But I eventually made it. I handed off the urn. I walked away. I sat in a car, a bundle of nerves.

I was completely forgettable.