

ALLEN MENDENHALL

UNMASKING

There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.

—*Qoheleth 1 : 11*

Southerners are particular about the way they preserve their loved ones; they encourage embalming, for instance, although at one time they shunned it as unconsented-to tampering with the body. Eventually someone decided, rather wisely, that the deceased, had they a choice, would like a genteel display of their “shell.” This meant more than sanitization: it meant dressing the dead like ladies or gentlemen on their way to church. Which is precisely where they were going—just before they were buried in the ground. For the most part, Southerners don’t cremate. (A preacher once told me that the Bible discourages cremation.)

In the South—more than in other regions—funerals are hierarchical affairs: one’s nearness to the deceased signifies one’s importance to the family. This holds for the church and burial service and is especially true if the departed was popular in life. Being *closest* to the deceased, pallbearers shoulder the weightiest burden.

Nowhere is decorum more important than at a funeral procession. It’s unseemly for one who’s not party to the procession to fail to bow his head and arrange a grave face as the procession passes. If you’re in a vehicle, you pull over to the curb and, so long as it isn’t dangerous to do so, take up the sidewalk as if on foot. Quitting the vehicle is, in general, inadvisable if by the time you encounter the procession the hearse is no longer in sight. Or if, alternatively, the weather doesn’t permit. If you’re *in* line, the *modus operandi* is ecclesiastic—ordered from clergy, to immediate kin, to next-of-kin, to distant family, to friends, to the rest. Losing your place in line is, accordingly, like losing your intimacy with the family, for whom these rituals are carried out.

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I was eight when Great-Granddaddy died. Mom piloted me before his open-casket and whispered, “That’s not Great-Granddaddy. That’s just a shell. Great-Granddaddy’s gone to heaven.”

I looked down at the *thing*, the shell, the facsimile that seemed uncannily human, and said to myself—perhaps out loud—“Damn right: that’s *not* Great-Granddaddy. That’s something else.” But the thing appeared real, strange, so nearly alive that it repulsed me. Its eyes, thank God, were closed, but its mannequin face, vacant and plastic, nauseated me.

Mom prodded me away, hollering at my cousin to take me outside. My first brush with death, while necessary, had not imparted a healthy understanding of mortality.

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My grandmother, Nina, tried to familiarize me with the inescapable while I was still a boy. Instead of taking me to playgrounds, she took me to cemeteries for what she called “Southern preparations.” These outings usually occurred on warm spring afternoons, when azaleas bloomed bright white and pink, when yellow Jessamine vines crawled up walls and fences, when dogwoods yawned inflorescent, and when tulips, still un-beheaded, stretched with impeccable posture. When, in short, nature was doing *anything* but dying.

Nina shared facts about various grave plots, giving the lowdown on so-and-so’s passing—“he died in Korea,” “he of aids,” “she during pregnancy,” and so forth. When she finished, we fed the swans.

Which attacked me once. I was standing on the riverbank, feeding the once-ugly ducklings by hand just as Nina had taught me, when, like Leda, I was enveloped by a feathered glory of beating white wings. Traumatized, I no longer stood on shore but sat on the roof of the car. To make me feel less sissy, Nina sat on the hood and pretended that she, too, was afraid. It wasn’t their size exactly. Nor the way they tussled with graceful wrath. Maybe it was the mask about their swan eyes. I’m *sure* it was that: the concealment, secret identity, veiled feelings.

Just before I got married, my fiancée, Giuliana, flew in from São Paulo to meet my family. After supper, Nina insisted that I drive her through the cemetery. I hadn’t been in years but instantly recognized the rod-iron gates that once seemed so colossal. There was the river. The ducks. The swans. In the distance, a family, their heads bowed, stood under a high green tent.

Giuliana was not disturbed by this detour. Quite the contrary: she felt in some way moved. It was as if Nina had invited her into a private, intimate space: one that contradicted this modern world of medical science in which everyone tries to postpone or avert death. In a cemetery one couldn’t help but think of decomposition, permanence, the soul. One couldn’t help but track the beat of one’s heart, measure the inhales and exhales of one’s breathing. One couldn’t help, that is, but cherish the fact that one’s alive.

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My cell phone buzzed. An unknown number flashed across the screen. I answered, “Hello?”

“Mr. Mendenhall?”

“Yes.”

“Are you in the car?”

“No.”

“This is the cancer center at St. Joseph’s Hospital. We need you to come in.”

I was twenty-four, and about to hear, “You have cancer.”

Nothing—not even a Southern upbringing—can prepare you for those three words.

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The odd thing about preachers is that, depending on time and place, their company is either most welcome or most unwelcome. When I got the call, the cancer call, my uncle, a preacher, was beside me, and I was, to that end, glad. He made me feel the power of presence, to say nothing of companionship: I was *not* alone.

My uncle—Uncle Steve—preaches in the only Southern Baptist church in Chicago. Unlike most Southern Baptist preachers down South, he eschews the noisy and spectacular, preferring, instead, politesse and restraint. Bookish and professorial, his voice nasal, his nose suitably sloped to hold up his saucer-sized spectacles, he loves theology and will tell you as much at the drop of a hat. What with his general softness, he might, with a bit more age, have been mistaken for Truman Capote, with whom, incidentally, his father—my grandfather—had grown up in Monroeville, Alabama.

A man of custom, a student of Latin and Greek, fluent in Russian and French, a former lawyer and journalist, Uncle Steve is uncommonly qualified to carry on the sanctifying traditions of Western Civilization. He is, in short, a gentleman and a scholar. And he was in Atlanta that day, standing, as it were, in the Varsity parking lot, his belly stuffed full of chili dogs, his ketchup-smudged face like an advertisement for this, the world’s largest drive-in restaurant.

I could feel his gaze moving over me and spared him the discomfort of asking what was the matter.

“I have cancer,” I said.

As the words issued from my mouth, my chest felt as though someone were driving a stake into it. *Cancer*. That thing *other* people got. *Old* people. Not young and healthy people. Not *me*.

I tried to act normal, but in doing so betrayed what I really felt—terror.

Uncle Steve put his arm around me. “Come on. Let’s get to the hospital.”

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Every hour on the hour, the employees of St. Joseph’s Hospital pray together. These moments, though heavily orchestrated, bring peace to the ill and dying, the sick and suffering. The nurses and doctors who wander the hallways pause while a disembodied, female voice recites the Lord’s Prayer, first in English, then in Spanish. “*Our Father, who art in heaven...*”—the words echo off the cold, linoleum tiles—“*hallowed be thy name.*”

This was happening when I walked into the waiting room. A nurse, a heavyset black woman with the softest eyes I'd ever seen, was behind the counter, her necklace, weighed down by a tiny crucified Jesus, dangling at her pillow-like breasts. She whispered, again and again, *amen, amen*, and then, looking up, took me in with those deep knowing eyes, spoke without speaking. Sunlight streamed through the cool, trapezoid panes of glass in the ceiling, falling across her face and hair at a low angle.

At last the prayer ended. She unfolded her hands and smiled formally. "Good afternoon, how may I help you?"

Responding with "I have cancer" didn't feel right, so I said, "I'm here to see Dr. Danaker."

That was all she needed to know.

"Bless your heart, child," she said. And, for the first time, I got emotional. She hugged me, calling me child again; then, right then, I wanted to *be* a child, wanted her to scoop me into her arms and cradle me, wanted her thick, strong body wrapped around me; but there, too, was Uncle Steve, dignified and collected. I couldn't break down in front of him.

The nurse ushered me into a white, windowless room with expansive tile walls and sat me on a tissue-papered chair, which swished and crackled whenever I readjusted my derrière.

There I was. Conscious. Being, yet trying to fathom *not* being. I imagined myself in a coffin, like that horrid shell, Great-Granddaddy. Which only made things worse, for I knew that, once *in* the coffin, I would have no notion of being there. The problem was *thinking itself*. I couldn't imagine *being* dead because I couldn't imagine *not* imagining.

†

On Sunday mornings, before church, dad had always made my siblings and me read from the obituaries. This, he said, would acquaint us with the fragility of life. He also thought the best way to learn was from experience. But he'd known only one person who'd experienced death and, almost impossibly, lived to tell about it—Martin, a friend of the family, who'd apparently died three times and, on the operating table, been revived. Martin loved cigarettes, which he called the backbone of Southern economy and which, he readily admitted, had brought about his three near-fatalities.

Except Martin didn't put it in those terms. To him, cigarettes had *allowed* him to float outside his body for a while, to see what death was like. For better or worse, Martin didn't tease a tunnel of light, greet a golden angel, or feel a fluffy cloud: he simply "left" himself and, in a state of utter weightlessness, peered down on his body as would an outside observer. Maybe that's why dad didn't like us talking to Martin about death: Dad wanted us to hear about St. Peter and heaven and departed relatives.

The trouble with Martin was that one never knew when to believe him. Heck, we barely knew who he was. Ephemeral at least, he'd been my aunt's boyfriend; then, when she dumped him, he'd never gone away: he moved in with my other aunt, a single mother, and helped care

for my young cousin. Martin was present every Thanksgiving and Christmas, but neither got nor gave gifts. A transplant from North Carolina, he had daughters somewhere—either the Carolinas or Virginia—and had graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, an achievement he was quite proud of. He didn't work. Didn't own a car. And didn't seem to have money. His singular ability to access death could've been, for all we knew, lifted from a sci-fi novel. Nevertheless, I believed him.

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Ten. That's how old I was when I saw a dead body I wasn't *supposed* to see. A right turn on I-85, heading north, highway stretching to where sky and land sandwiched together. I was in my school outfit, backpack in my lap. Mom was in her tennis getup, checking the rearview mirror. Traffic was slowing and stopping. To my left was a vast gray sheet held up by blank-faced men. Behind it, a woman. Or what was left of a woman. Arms and legs bent at impossible angles; head sagging, possibly unattached; a bloodied skirt lifted by the breeze. Someone's mom. Or sister. Or wife. Or girlfriend. Or daughter. Here one minute, gone the next. This wasn't dignity. This was mean and messy.

†

Death, they say, is not only universal but also the great leveler: it befalls kings and paupers, rich and poor, wise and foolish. Solomon, Caesar, Constantine, Charlemagne, Napoleon: all died despite their glory in life. What I never understood, and, frankly, still don't, is why folks pretend death doesn't happen. The person who ignores death is delusional at best, narcissistic at worst. Death is our sole commonality, the thing in this world we all await, about which we may commiserate. It's what makes us human. I daresay one can't fully love a person without knowing that person is temporary.

Francis Bacon once declared, "The contemplation of death, as the wages of sin, and passage to another world, is holy and religious; but the fear of it, as a tribute due unto nature, is weak." Weak it may be to the healthy and fit, but to the ill and ailing it seems only natural. The person who claims he doesn't fear death is either a liar or an incorrigible maniac—or else a coward, too faint-of-heart to face the facts. Bacon himself had the good fortune of dying in two to three days, having contracted pneumonia while conducting an experiment in the snow. Willfully blind to his fate, lying on his deathbed, he penned a letter to his friend, Thomas Howard, expressing relief that he hadn't suffered the fortune of Caius Plinius, "who lost his life by trying an experiment about the burning of Mount Vesuvius."

After surgery, I, like Bacon, was bedridden. Soon a phone call would tell me one of two things: that I was okay, my cancer hadn't metathesized, or else I wasn't okay, I needed chemotherapy and my chances of living another two years were below fifteen percent. A glued-together wound, resembling fat, blue, puckered-up lips, took up the length of my chest. Visitors asked to see it and then regretted their request when I rolled up my shirt, revealing a moon-shaped, smurfy smile. When the visitors left, and I was alone again, alone and quiet, I imagined what the malignancy would look like as it spread through my body, which I conceived of as a mini mine field: tunneled with small explosive cancer clusters about to be

detonated. How could this shell—which once ran a mile in under four-and-a-half minutes—expire?

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I'm not in my brain but somewhere lower: near the chest, maybe, or the gut. I couldn't, for instance, stop a dream even if I wanted to. Which is odd, because it's *my* brain that's dreaming—not someone else's. The brain works independently of me, or, to be precise, of what I *perceive* to be me: it's like an unmanned motor boat zipping on the water. Occasionally one of my siblings, or an old friend, will recall some long-ago event, which I'd otherwise forgotten, and then, suddenly, I'll remember. The brain has stored this memory somewhere—somewhere not readily accessible—but I, *wherever* I am in this shell, never felt compelled to find it. The thought just exists up there, waiting.

It's the soul, I suppose, that's me. When I lie awake at night and contemplate this interim body, which I inhabit the way a renter inhabits an apartment, I locate my self—that subjective knowing ego—whole and center, as though the brain, convenient as it is, has a mind of its own. To be sure, I can borrow this organ when I study or otherwise require deep reflection; but when I tire of thinking, when I want a break, when I lean back from my desk, I'm very aware that *I*, my *self*, am moving from the head to just above the torso, where I *belong*. And when I experience joy, compassion, anguish, despair—when, that is, I *feel*—it's never with my head but with something deep within my bosom. How does one explain this? Perhaps we're all antecedent to the body: little floating things confined to this definite, corporate form we didn't choose, waiting, like thoughts, to be accessed—or released.

†

Opossums, more commonly known, in the South, as “possums,” are, I'm told, a delicacy. Nina's got a cookbook that says so, though she claims she's never cooked or eaten one. I have my doubts, since my dad grew up eating squirrel, which, I think, is more revolting because squirrels are cute and handsome, whereas possums have that eerie look I associate with demons and devils—and masks.

At seven, I persuaded my brother to take a life. A possum's life. It was a horrible affair, really. One that, even today, is difficult to own up to. Brett, being the gullible little brother he was—I convinced him once that the shadow-puppet giant who lived on the ceiling would kill him in his sleep—stomped on a squeaking pile of pine-straw while I looked on, presumably to punish him if he disobeyed. Of course, the squeaking didn't belong to the pine-straw, but to a tiny nest of baby possums underneath.

For some reason, I was initially proud of what I'd done, and, hours later, said as much to my mom. Horrified, she made me show her the nest, since I'd “cried-wolf” before. Sure enough, there, in the pine-straw, lay a bloody baby possum, whimpering, dying.

My first defense was I hadn't *done* anything. Brett had. I'd simply stood by and watched. Mom was smarter than that. I don't remember what she said—only that, once she said it, I began to cry. And couldn't stop.

It was this event, this murder of an innocent, that brought about my general appreciation for original sin, or least for the idea of innate human depravity. Humans, you might say, are *born* rotten—so much so that most of us, in our youth, could stomp infant possums to death without understanding the wrongness of our action. No doubt I regretted this behavior—this *actus rea*—but not because I felt guilty: it was, in effect, because I feared punishment—some combination of mom’s wrath and her spank-happiness. A parent’s role is, among other things, to tame a child’s destructive impulses. That’s what mom did—without succumbing to *her own* elemental aggressions.

She called the Chattahoochee Nature Center, a local environmental organization, and a worker there explained how to save the baby possum. This, then, became my task, my agonizing punishment: to keep the possum alive. Being intimate with death is one thing; being intimate with suffering quite another. When I scooped the trembling creature up to my palm, it emitted a sad, pitiable squeak. “Everything’s okay,” I whispered, “I’m not here to hurt you”—a funny assurance coming from the kid who’d just ordered its murder.

If truth be told, I wished I’d just destroyed the thing. Better dead than in this wretched condition. Still, the way it looked at me—its beady, searching eyes perusing my face—reminded me of how Ansley, my little sister, then only a year old, looked up at mom when she wanted to be fed.

I placed the creature in a shoe box, which I tucked beneath a shelf in my parents’ closet, the darkest place in the house. More than anything, the possum needed darkness and silence. I dug a hole in the backyard, tied two twigs together in the shape of a cross, and arranged a constellation of stones around what would’ve been a grave. But the thing didn’t die. It healed so well that, the next morning, it was squirming and scurrying and dad needed a net to contain it. Even after the possum was free in the backyard, I left the grave untouched, a reminder that all things, even possums, eventually come to an end.

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My Southern upbringing was all about learning how to die. Like the Greek Stoics, Southerners believe in cultivating virtue, improving life, and, above all, accepting mortality. Liberated from urban distractions, tied to land and home, they regard humans as custodians of the past; they keep gardens, preserve antiques, record lineage, mark battlefields, and salvage the efforts of planters, carpenters, raconteurs, and architects; they ensure, in short, the availability of history. This can lead to nostalgia for times they never knew, bad times, ugly times, which is to say that this can cause Southerners to overlook—or, worse yet, revise—the inconveniences of history: slavery, for instance, or civil rights. All the same, the Southern tradition, burdened as it is by various conflicts, retains virtues worth sustaining: community, family, religion, husbandry, stewardship. These customs, however vulnerable, hardly need guardians. They will, I suspect, persist, in some form or another, as long as humanity itself; for they are practical, permanent ideals—tested by generations—which people fall back on during disorienting times. In a region haunted by racial brutality, these principles are, and have been, a unifying reference point, a contact zone where cultures—black, white, and Hispanic—share something spiritual despite their differences.

Living history, not just studying it, but consciously *living* it, is neither wicked nor wrong; the chronic, urgent awareness that everything you know and love will come undone, is not, I think, misguided, but utterly essential. There's something beautiful about facing the insurmountable. When the world's fleeting, death becomes a liberating, albeit terrifying, reality. It throbs and pulsates and beats beneath the skin, inside of which we're all raw skeleton.

For all this, however, I wasn't ready. Didn't want to die. Couldn't even conceive of it. The twenty-something years my family had been teaching me about death amounted to, not nothing, but not much, either. Death, I suppose, is a hard thing to accept, and an even harder thing to fight, since fighting seems so pointless: deep down, you know you can't win. You might prevail once. Maybe even twice. But ultimately it'll beat you. It almost did me.

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Friends ask how it feels to “beat” cancer. I never can answer—not satisfactorily—for the experience is more like submission than competition: it's a manifold process of coming to terms with the body, a thing doomed to decay. When the doctor—Dr. Danaker—called to say the lymph nodes were benign, that the cancer hadn't spread, I shocked him with a tired reply: “Oh, good.”

“This is *great* news,” he assured me, as if I needed reminding, as if I hadn't appreciated—indeed, hadn't *understood*—how lucky I was.

“I know,” I said.

At this, the good doctor seemed annoyed. “Ungrateful kid,” his tone implied. But I wasn't ungrateful. Nor ecstatic. I was, simply put, unbound—by life, by people, by things. *His* take was that I had another chance, a fresh start, that I could put this nonsense behind me and move on. *My* take was that, having embraced impermanence, I was done protecting myself from suffering, done seeking security through delusion, done dislocating from fate, destiny, providence, what have you.

Done: this, it is true, is weary resignation. Yet it's more than that: it's a sweet but unhappy release, a deliverance, an unmasking. Almost paradoxically, it's freedom within—and despite—limitation.

What's more exhilarating than that one should die? What's more mysterious, more horribly electrifying? As one writer, Paul Theroux, has put it, “Death is an endless night so awful to contemplate that it can make us love life and value it with such passion that it may be the ultimate cause of all joy and all art.” That is how you cope with this chilling, daunting, stupefying phenomenon: you do it every day until it's serviceable and aesthetic, until at last you won't know, can't know, when it happens, until it's pleasurable, a masterpiece, sublime in its regularity. You keep it close, so close it becomes part of you, so close it's at your disposal, so close that without it, you're nothing, nothing if not boringly, thoughtlessly, mechanically alive, which is just another way of being dead. You train and train and then it comes.

