

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

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In The Cloisters Museum, set alongside the Hudson River, is a unique piece of jewelry. It is an exquisite ivory rosary on a gilded silver chain; each of its six beads bears a vividly carved image of a person. Under the soft light in the museum, the ivory seemed to glow, and the figures on the beads appeared lost peacefully in their meditation. At the top and bottom of the chain were two round ivory beads resembling the shape of heads, only with their backs to me. On the other side of the rosary chain, I was surprised to see the images of the persons turned into skeletons. The façades of the two heads were divided into two parts, half living and half skull.

The rosary's juxtaposition of images of life and death is typical of much *memento mori* jewelry, the making of which became popular during the Renaissance in Europe. The Latin phrase "*memento mori*" means "remember death." When life and death are put together, we receive a strong message about the transience of human existence. The juxtaposition of life and death can also be seen in Virginia Woolf's essay "The Death of the Moth." She chooses to explore the relationship between life and death from the perspective of one of the weakest creatures—a moth. Looking out of the window on a pleasant September morning, Woolf is enchanted by the "vigor" of the fields outside (385). Everything is animated by the "energy" of nature, including the tiny moth in her windowpane. Gazing at the moth's zestful fluttering from one corner of the window to another, Woolf both pities and marvels at the "tiny bead of pure life" in his "frail and diminutive body" (385). It seems strange to see the powerful force of life in such a weak body; the moth's great tenacity against fate is striking. Approaching his inevitable doom, the moth succeeds in righting himself with his last effort. The moth then embraces his end "decently and uncomplainingly" (386).

The strangeness of life and death strikes me. To squeeze the infinite power of life into a fragile and limited body seems cruel. What is the point of

fighting against death if we cannot win? For what are the efforts in life worth if everything is doomed to be destroyed at the very end?

Death as a concept is mysterious and dreadful, both untouchable and irresistible. It holds our attention like the black widow in Gordon Grice's essay "Caught in the Widow's Web" that waits in "dark place[s] to ambush us" (34). Though Grice explains that his "fascination" with the widow is "rooted in fear," for he once witnessed his mother grinding a widow and its egg sac to death in his childhood, he also points out that even people who do not have such personal experiences with the spider often "hold the widow in awe" because they assume that a widow's bite is "always fatal," though, as he tells us, this is not true (33-34). We may think we fear the black widow because it is fetid, greedy, fatal, and evil, but what we fear the most is fear itself, its unpredictability and uncertainty. Death is the emblem of the ultimate fear of mankind. It represents the end of the world as well as the mystery after the end. Just as we fear the black widow, we mystify and apotheosize death because of our ignorance about it. How can death appear to be both as frightening as a black widow and as peaceful as a calmly and decently dying moth?

I was in hospital for two weeks for a minor illness two summers ago. It was my first time staying in a hospital ward; I shared a small room with two other patients, strangers I knew nothing about. Though I was warned, I was still struck by the quietness, whiteness, and emptiness of the ward. The pace of time seemed to have slowed down, and there was nothing for me to do, except wait.

One day, while I was watching the sunlight shift from one side of the room toward the other, a doctor came in and interrupted my meditation. He'd come to talk to the woman in the bed next to me, a middle-aged stranger who always was reading a huge book without making a single sound. The doctor informed her that her cancer had metastasized to such an extent that no medication would be helpful any longer. He thought she should go home. And she answered "okay," and then kept reading her book. Stunned, I looked at the back of her book and found that the title was *The Will of God*.

I was stunned in that moment because both the doctor and the woman treated his news quite nonchalantly. I had always thought the declaration of death a significant event in one's life. But how could the doctor tell his patient

to go home in such a flat tone, and how could the woman just accept the news of imminent death in such an ordinary, routine way? I lost the trail of time. I could hear the bird's warble outdoors. The coexisting quietness and melody of life confused me.

I think about another piece of memento mori jewelry I saw at The Cloisters. It was a ring, split into two identical parts that opened to reveal a hidden chamber. One part of the tiny chamber contained a carved infant. Nestled on the other side, however, was a similarly constructed skeleton. Again, the two figures represented the coexistence of the beginning of life and the end. The inscription on the underside of the ring read, "Whom God has joined together, let no man tear asunder," a message from a Medieval European reminding us of the inseparable nature of the two conditions.

Though in most cases death is not a surprise that, like Grice's black widow, waits in "dark place[s] to ambush us," but instead is an ending we can perceive approaching us slowly, it still often remains the "untidy web" in the corner of our minds that we do not want to touch or remember. Cuddling together in the secret chamber of that ring, the embodiments of life and death rest in harmony. Without death, there is no meaning of life, for a journey without an ending is not complete. Stepping forward, I try to remove the veil of fear that used to prevent me from perceiving the true colors of death. Maybe death is not being lost in emptiness but going back to the very beginning of life, for the power of creating a life and ending it come from the same source—a force, a universal, impersonal, and unstoppable force owned by nature that makes the world orderly, harmonious, and complete. This God-like force reminds me of the book I saw in the hospital: *The Will of God*. If death is the will of God, then so is life. Thus, what makes us fear death also makes us fear life, for our weakness can appear equally before the dualism of nature.

In Woolf's essay, the constants of life and death appear evident: the strangeness of both, the embracing moment of conversion from one to the other, and the relative grace of the single creature as it dies. After all, what appears in life does not necessarily disappear after death. For a moth, the energy of life that used to glow in his fragile body remains in the dignity of his dying with grace. We cannot choose when to die, but we can choose how to die. The moth, tenaciously struggling against death, chooses to die as a

warrior and fights to “retain what no one else valued or desired to keep” (386). The purpose of the moth’s fight, as Woolf suggests, after all, is not to win over death, which is an impossible task. The purpose of his fight is to earn his last dignity, having proved that his life once blazed with all its color during his transitory visit in this world, an honoring of the “energy” that he shared in and belonged to.

I think of the cuddling twin infants, the ultimate combination of beginning and end; I think of the little moth fighting and then walking to death to assume his repose in eternity. The strangeness of life and death, I guess, is that they are a unity that “no man” should “tear asunder.” We bear an inherent weakness. However, to accept the weakness of life is not to yield to the fear of death, but to acknowledge that what nature endows us with will be taken back one day. We embrace with gratitude both life and death, for they are both present in nature, introducing us to the world of wonder, which we can only experience if we accept the ephemerality of life itself.

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