

Resurrection

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The death has already happened, the deceased already passed from this world. But for Antigone, the heroine of Sophocles's eponymous tragedy, a funeral for her brother Polyneices is worth her own life. She cannot "live and suffer in the knowledge that Polyneices [is] lying above ground insulted and defiled" (Heaney 21). Hence, under penalty of death, she breaks the edict of King Creon; she dresses and buries her brother, following the higher law of the gods. But her funeral rites are interrupted. In Seamus Heaney's interpretation, *The Burial at Thebes*, a guard describes the scene: "A whirlwind. Out of nowhere. Leaves whipped off trees. Flying sand and dust . . . like the sky was vomiting black air . . . But then it clears out and [Antigone's] standing, crying her eyes out" (19). A chain of deaths will follow, demonstrating that the "gods' law" of burial cannot be denied (6). Nature has turned to chaos; the forces of fate have marked Thebes for devastation. Antigone's imperative is no longer just personal. The gods won't permit a secret sorrow; rites must be performed.

The service had broken into uncontrollable fragments. The crowd erupted into wild, abandoned singing, the preacher called us all to rise, and the closed, dead eyes seemed to peer at me over the edge of the coffin. The grief rose up and down in waves, thundering toward me. It was the third funeral I'd ever been to, and I realized I didn't understand why I was there. I was shaken by the suddenness of death, utterly overwhelmed by the sensory overload. I surrendered. I did the only thing one could do at a funeral: I cried. But my tears seemed a waste. I thought that the funeral itself was worth nothing; I didn't recognize the demonstration of sorrow as something that was honoring a life. The uncontrollable display of emotion frightened me. If someone's death had the power to make people that sad, I thought, we should try to forget that she'd died. Instead, the mourners drank, laughed, wept, and reopened their wounds. I hid behind the living room sofa and waited for them to leave.

I was twelve; it was time to put my affairs in order. When I died, I decided, there would be no event in remembrance. People could cry for me, but only in secret. I sat down with a sheet of notebook paper and a mechanical pencil and wrote down the rules. "No one is allowed to look at me when I am dead." I drew a stick figure next to the rule with two "x" marks for eyes. It was tagged with a speech bubble: "Gross." I figured the mourners could just repress their pain; rejecting age-old funeral traditions seemed inconsequential. Just as Creon believed that Polyneices and his brother Eteocles could have different rites, I assumed that I could dictate people's affections, limiting all the grief for myself and allowing the rest of the world to be as mourned as they wished. I had no gods to cast a curse on me for my insolence; nothing was going to befall me if I rejected the whole idea of mourning. To me, it seemed there was nothing left to mourn. A dead body was as empty as its coffin.

Jessica Mitford's "Behind the Formaldehyde Curtain" follows a body from death to burial as it is "transformed from a common corpse into a Beautiful Memory Picture" (308). Mitford satirizes the ritual of preserving, presenting, and interring remains to emphasize the waste of the process. She emphasizes how ridiculous it seems to expect a dead person to be "presentable for viewing in an attitude of healthy repose," to demand that the "hands should be cupped slightly for a more lifelike, relaxed appearance" (312, 313). She doesn't fault mourning itself, only the wasteful practices of embalming and restoration. For Mitford, it is not a lack of rites, but an excess of rites that leaves a corpse "insulted and defiled," to use one of Heaney's phrases (21). She writes that the funeral director has "put on a well-oiled performance in which the concept of *death* play[s] no part whatsoever" (315). Mitford's conception of a funeral mirrors what I have always feared funerals to be: the perfunctory party for a dressed-up doll. But although her essay makes a compelling case against the idea of trying to "revive" a corpse through burial (312), she decides to close the casket without acknowledging the higher purpose of death rites: to preserve the spirit, to allow it to "[go] home to the dead" (Heaney 2). Even if the modern bereaved reject the idea of an afterlife, even if they are as disgusted by decorated corpses as Mitford, funerals persist. There is something in them that allows us to believe that we are sending the spirit off to another place, even if we doubt that the other place exists. Funerals hold power, significance, sacredness, even if we do our best to deny it.

I recently found my brainstorming sheet in one of the boxes in my closet. I had set out to design the least ostentatious tribute to my life as possible.

Instead, I had managed to fill the whole paper with potential places to scatter my ashes, possessions to be distributed among my friends, and an entire color spectrum of “secret” notebooks to be destroyed. Around the edges of the page, I had scrawled my modest epitaphs, each followed by “1991-2075.” Eighty-four years was what I had deemed an admirable, suitably long life. “Here lies Loretto King, an American author.” It never occurred to me at the time that when ashes scatter, they never re-form; without a grave, my name would not be engraved into history. It appeared that the very attempt to avoid ritual had led me right back to it, revealing my secret, selfish wish to be resurrected. I never considered that I would not be able to control my own ghost, that the aftermath of my death would not be mine to determine or experience.

The mourners are left to shape the memory of the deceased, provided they are willing to grieve. *The Queen*, a 2006 film directed by Stephen Frears, is a partially fictionalized account of Queen Elizabeth II’s struggle to guide Britain in its grief over the death of Princess Diana. Throughout the film, the director juxtaposes clips of real media footage from 1997 against shots of his own actors. Frears’s depiction of Diana’s funeral is one such collage: it begins with a panoramic view of thousands of people gathered to pay their respects, moves on to actual footage of Charles, 9th Earl Spencer performing the eulogy, and then settles on Frears’s version of the Royal Family huddled together in Westminster Abbey. The camera frames them upwards, marking their stoic faces, their immensity. They are pale, yet dressed severely in black. Heavy shadows trail them on the church floor. The eulogy ends; the colorful crowds explode in applause and emotion. The camera cuts back to the Royal Family, immovable in their somberness. The Queen lifts a long, black-gloved hand to touch her forehead, as though she is in pain. We realize that she is an actress, not a mourner.

The Queen claims to need to grieve privately—or to privately express a lack of grief. But the British people need her to indulge them by making a spectacle of Diana’s life and death. The funeral’s monumentality, legitimized by the royal presence, validates the public’s love for both the Princess and the monarchy. The Queen must show that she is capable of shedding tears for a woman she despised to prove that the monarchy represents the people it governs, or the whole thing will appear to be cardboard. But the funeral is a hollow ceremony to her; the ritual represents nothing. When the Queen refuses to respond to Diana’s death, some British citizens call for the abolition of the monarchy, echoing the Thebans’ demand of Creon: “You courted calamity. Resign yourself” (Heaney 56). In both texts, the staunch defense of a sacred

funeral escalates to the point of monarchical deposition. The British abhor the Queen's attempt to barricade herself in castles, to stand in the Abbey as a frigid block of black and white dignity. They abhor the way she has denied the humanity of a woman who has, like Antigone, made an emotional connection with her subjects, earning the title of "The People's Princess." Even more, they abhor the way the Queen, by not recognizing Diana's mortality, seems to be denying her own.

In his essay "Late Victorians," Richard Rodriguez grapples with his guilt over escaping death as the HIV epidemic envelops San Francisco's gay community. Rodriguez admires the organizations and support systems built into the city, reflected in the architectural restoration and urban renewal. Simultaneously he watches friends, neighbors, and eventually his own partner succumb to AIDS—a disease no amount of renewal can stave off. Life in San Francisco reminds Rodriguez that it will inevitably end: "You cannot forbid tragedy," he says (126). Yet he does not understand why he has endured, left to mourn those he has lost. His lover says that he is "spared," but he has an unmistakable sense that "spared" is "supposed to [be] chased with irony" (131). He likens watching his loved ones die of the disease to looking into his bedroom mirror, which once belonged to an AIDS victim: "Thus the mirror that now draws upon my room owns some bright curse, maybe—some memory not mine" (130). But he overlooks his own eventual mortality, refusing to acknowledge that he will someday become a memory as well. The people of the city, fast approaching their fate, mirror his eventual end—but he sees *them*, not himself. Loss surrounds him, reminding him of the finitude of his continued existence; even the banners in the annual pride parade "[bear] the acronyms of death" (124). Yet Rodriguez refuses to "embrace life" or acknowledge his certain end, precisely because he watches "figures disappearing from [his] landscape" without grieving for them (132, 130).

Part of Rodriguez's denial involves questioning the function of funerals, which cause him confusion rather than closure. Though he admits that there is "spectacle in the death of the young," the reality of AIDS victims' suffering leads him to dismiss that spectacle (132). Like Frears's Queen, he does not know how to share loss, or recognize why one must do so. He writes that he "stood aloof" at the memorial service for his lover, which had been described as "the kind of party [César] would enjoy" (132). He considers it little more than a performance, and a thin one at that: "And so for a time César lay improperly buried, unconvincingly resurrected in the conditional" (132). It is only when he attends a different kind of funeral that Rodriguez realizes what he has evaded, and what his evasion has not allowed him to accept. At a sup-

port group in a church, he watches a diverse collective of HIV and AIDS sufferers rise to commemorate those who have died. Sitting in the pew, he becomes a witness to death itself (133). He realizes that he lacks control over both his fate and his legacy. He realizes he has wasted his vitality and sees himself in the “powdered old pouf” one pew ahead—“in his seventies, frail, his iodine-colored hair combed forward and pasted upon his forehead” (133). The funeral rite forces him to meet his own eyes in the mirror.

As Rodriguez discovers, sometimes a funeral does not reveal itself for what it is. Sometimes there is no coffin or urn. Sometimes the deceased is not even yet dead. Antigone’s own funeral is a multi-functional sacrament. As she is taken to the cave where she will die, the Chorus mourns, “Antigone, you are a bride, being given away to death” (Heaney 37). Antigone recounts what she forgoes in being executed; ironically, traditional funerary rites comprise most of her losses. Separated by periods, each is delivered bluntly in Heaney’s translation: “No wake. No keens. No panegyric” (39). It is not a lamentation, but a list; she is documenting her cool intention to die. Creon, agitated by the sympathy she receives at this display of courage, tries to cut her off: “If people had the chance to keens themselves before they died, they’d weep and wail forever: That’s enough.” But Antigone has already declared, “No flinching then at fate,” asserting that this is inevitably a funeral; she is both the corpse and the eulogizer (39). Though she cannot control her fast-approaching death, she takes charge of her own rites, hoping to direct her soul to its rightful place with the gods. The Thebans do not comprehend her choice to accept her end. Like Rodriguez, they are frustrated witnesses, unsure how to interact with living death, unable to acknowledge their lack of control. Death seems Antigone’s fate alone, a memory not yet theirs. But the sacrifice she makes, fulfilling the two incomplete funerals that frame the play, will force them to remember.

Creon’s messenger tells him that “if your joy in life’s destroyed, you’re left with a mirage. Shadows and ash” (49). No matter what form it takes, your funeral will be a mirage. They will cleanse and dress your shell, sew your mouth into a smile, and prop you up alongside the living. It doesn’t matter how much your coffin or urn will cost, how many tears are shed, or how many casserole dishes will sit in your family’s freezer for too many months. You have no control over the waste, and it is no use trying to stop them. The funeral is for the survivors, for someday they, too, will die. And no matter how much they deny it, they hope that someone will remember them. They will sob over your permanently peaceful mirage, dressed-to-the-nines, rotting away underneath the makeup. They will sob because they think you’re there

and because they know you aren't. But most of all, they will sob for their own fading selves. They cry because they stare into a mirror, refusing to claim the memories as their own. Their tears are for the mirages to come.

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