

I see my father after his death

I caught a plane at about eleven in the morning, and we were at the funeral home at about two. My father had been dead about ten hours. We had chosen the mortician who had been my grandfather's old competitor, whose son, unlike my father, had stayed in the family business. I wanted to see my father before he was "ready," but the mortician didn't want to take me back. He talked about germs, about me washing my hands after. I didn't know if he was afraid of my emotions—that I would burst into uncontrollable tears?—or if there was something back there he didn't want me to see. Maybe it was dirty, or maybe it just wasn't the rule—so often people can't break the rules.

It was clean, like an old-fashioned kitchen, with tile and stainless steel sinks and counters. There was a huge blue bottle in the corner with a siphon in it, a black-and-white tile floor. It looked efficient, not spiffed up like his French provincial waiting room. Then I came upon my father, swaddled in a layer of linen, zipped in plastic and bound with tape, his face the only part of him free.

The color was pure, as if he had been drained of age and illness. That look of dark acceptance, that fixed stare that penetrated without hope or understanding, had been left behind. There was a softness I had never seen, his forehead, unlined and smooth. He had been given a second beauty as a death-gift. The monster had flown out on its hard dark wings, and left behind, not a shell, but one tortured a lifetime and released.

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Even when he had been in a coma—his legs inflexible, locked in fetal position, nurses turning his body every few hours like something basted over coals—I would take the covers back and look at him. It was under the pretext of seeing if he had bedsores, or if he was losing weight but, really, all I wanted to do was fix my eyes on his body—the

same big toe as mine, the same twisted little toe, his thick knees, each like the end of a club. I stared as long as I wanted, unashamed, unafraid of my great love, unafraid he would leave me.

My father had lost his sexual beauty in his sixties. But in the days of his illness his body became lustrous, so full of energy and brightness that it seemed too hot to put my hands on.

After his surgery he had said, “You’re not going to like what you see,” but when he lifted his shirt I kissed the long, raw cut, which looked like two slabs of butchered ribs stapled together, and said, “You’re still beautiful to me.” I had always loved what he could never love in himself—even his wounds.

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Though he had been dead for ten hours, someone told me it takes thirteen for the spirit to move on. So he had not gone yet; he was still partly there, seeping out in shallow expirations.

Certainly what one sees later, after the embalming, is an object made by the undertaker; it has nothing to do with the one dead. Though I hadn’t been with him at death, I was there to see him before the embalming and, for the rest of my life, to know that look of calm that had come.

My cruel father had looked forward, seen heaven, and sent back this sign of peace.

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That night I had a dream, but not a dream, for it was as real as this very moment, with all my feelings in it; and I didn’t have any idea of how or why or when. Suddenly, as if I had just been born and didn’t know anything before that, I didn’t feel fear. Nothing else had happened, just that fear had been sucked out of me, and I didn’t even remember

it happening but just felt gratitude for an absence that made my life—I swear I am not making a metaphor—feel like heaven.

But as the night went on—it didn't feel like night, it felt like a trueness that made everything different and new—a worry began to encroach, a sliver of gray: "What if this fearlessness were taken away?" When I woke I felt such joy; I shook my husband and said, "I'm free, I'm different." And then I began to put my feet over the side of the bed, slowly, the ground coming up to meet me and, at that moment, when my feet touched the floor, something in me said, "Your father is dead," and I knew why I had felt so happy.

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I had forgotten that moment until today, that happiness that had tarnished like silver, like an old old mirror in which I could no longer see my face. I don't know why I lost it, why that heaviness came back—for wasn't my father truly dead, didn't I no longer have to fear him?—but, in a few days, the wonder faded. My mind was not ready for such light. I had to dig my way out of darkness one weighty grain at a time, as if a memory of the future had visited.

My dad & sardines

my dad's going to give me a self
back.
i've made an altar called
The Altar for Healing the Father & Child,
& asked him what i could do
for him so he would
do nice for me. he said i should stop
saying bad things about him &, since
i've said just about everything bad
i can think of &, since . . . well,
no, i change my
mind, i can't promise
him that. but even healing is
negotiable, so, if he's in
heaven (or trying
to get in), it wouldn't hurt
to be in touch. the first thing i want is to be able to
enjoy the little things again—for example, to stop peeling
down the list of things i
have to do &
enjoy this poem, enjoy how, last night, scouring
the cupboards, i found a
can of sardines that
must be five
years old &, since i was home after a long
trip &, since it was 1 a.m. & i hadn't eaten
dinner &, since there was no other
protein in the house,
i cranked it open & remembered that
my dad loved
sardines—right before bed—with
onions & mustard. i can't get into
my dad's old heart, but i remember that look

on his face when he would
load mustard on a saltine cracker, lay a little
fish on top, & tip it with a juicy slice
of onion. then he'd look up from his soiled
fingers with one eyebrow
raised, a rakish
grin that said—*all*
for me!—as if he was
getting away
with murder.

On a picture of the Buddhist monk Pema Chödrön

do I want to look like this? women
with that playfulness in their faces not
childish but elfin as if they have learned
how to shift the world slightly & let it
slip down the ice of its own melting women
who have been lost but not
hidden clear-skinned
wide-awake their unmade selves
neither genderless nor fixed i don't know where
their genitals are if heart
is the center do they feel the tug
of longing there? what blossoms?
where?
from the brain?
belly button?
is the clitoris throbbing?

On the revolution of the Jersey cows

Half a mile past the road to Still Point,
I run into the Jersey cows,
robed in black & white like Old Dominicans.
With muddy boots
in clops of hoof-torn grass,
they eye me as I pass,
their sensitive ears turning
like fine-tuned telescopes.
“Hi, cow,” I call to one, respectfully,
for I think she likes that,
& she turns her head to me,
the thick muscles of her neck & shoulders
pulling like a heavy rug.
A few feet farther, twenty
with their heads stuck through clanking metal pipes
churn soft, flexible mouths, bony jaws—
& in their eyes that dimness
like a sprig of faint black stars.
Are they waiting for a leader,
or just to be steered up the thick-pounded slope
into the barn?
The one I spoke to has forgotten me.
She drops her nose into a muddy runnel
& laps from the cold, familiar, spicy pool.

The new pet

i don't want to worry about a fish yet
here i am when i am tired going down & up two
flights of stairs to bring him clean spring water
to fill up his bowl maybe he looked un-
happy because there was no current—the water was not
high enough to reach the motor—and he has grown used to
the big tank, the heater & water filter, for he began to flip
about & even leap up to my finger when he was hungry.
surely nothing will come to me for doing
good to a fish, & still i do it; though i often wish i had
a mean heart

The Telly Cycle

Joy is an act of resistance.

*Why would a black woman
need a fish
to love? Why did she need a*

*flash of red, living, in the
corner of her eye? As if she could love nothing
up close, but had to step*

*away from it, come
back to drop a few seeds
& let it grab*

*on to her, as if it caught
her
on some hook that couldn't*

*hurt. Why did she need a fish,
a red
thorn or, among the thorns, that*

*flower? What does her love have to do
with five hundred years of
sorrow, then joy coming up like a*

*small breath, a
bubble? What does it have to do
with the graveyards of the*

*Atlantic in her mother's
heart?*