THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

A Symposium on the Dead
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A Symposium on the Dead

Editor's note: As with all our symposia, the contributions to this one were written simultaneously and independently in response to the topic given in the title. We purposely used the phrase "on the dead" rather than the more abstract "on death" so that people would feel free to write about their own particular dead, or someone else's, or the dead in general. Even the generalized, pluralized dead are more specific than death itself, and we wanted that specificity.

WHEN WITTGENSTEIN said that death is not an experience in life, he was saying that death is something that happens to other people. Because dying is so much an experience in life—whether or not, as some philosophers and some biologists tell us, it is what the experience of life is, what it effectively amounts to—it is easy to forget that death itself may not be. There are many things in life, and more now than ever before, that we experience only as spectators, and very few of them will inevitably happen to us; nor does it occur to us that they will. Death, and the dying that will go into it, we can anticipate with a certainty, but anticipate it is all we can do. There is no experience so universally vicarious, so infinitely virtual for the secular-minded, as death itself. For the secular we are the afterlife. There is death, but not for us.

And yet, living in a continual aftermath, we are more than capable of saying that we know we are going to die, with all the rhetorical gravity or glibness this seems to bring with it, but less than capable of living as if the people we love are going to die. All deaths are inevitable, but some deaths mustn't happen. As we divide our lives into what we can anticipate and what we can't, deaths, sometimes our own, are always in the worst possible category: the inevitable that we can't bear to anticipate. The precariousness of life has never been news; the prevalence of accident, illness, and malevolence, not to mention aging, is our most certain surprise. And yet we spend much of our lives discovering what can be taken out of the world that won't stop us wanting to live in it. In the anguish and dismay that is grief, we find out what we can afford to lose. The world without the people who matter to us is not the same world, and so not the world at all. Life becomes progressively stranger as we get older—and we become increasingly frantic to keep it familiar, to keep it in order—because people keep changing the world for us by dying out (mourning is better described as orientation, the painful wondering whether it is worth re-placing oneself). There is something about the nature of our attachments that is unrealistic: unrealistic in that we live as if certain people must not die, and so we must live with the strain of willing what cannot be willed. It is obvious why it is comforting to believe that everyone dies at the right time; and why, by the same token, as it were, it is reassuring for some people that they can't be late for their own death.

But the exemption Wittgenstein referred to points both ways. Conception and indeed pre-conception are not experiences in life either. And our deaths are inevitable, and to be anticipated, in a way that our conceptions were not. If the fact that we are going to die has been taken by the great religions and their secular counterparts as the most salient fact about us, perhaps we should note the more improbable fact that we were conceived at all (that, in Empson's words, we came out of the nowhere into the somewhere). We are probably over-impressed by anticipation and inevitability—have, in a sense, organized our lives around them—because we have grossly overrated the significance of our own deaths.

To the unborn such things could not have occurred. We are what did occur to them, but we have done too much looking forward with a future in mind. The fact of death has made us addicted to prophecy, and to its secular equivalent, predictability; the fact of conception could make us more wedded to randomness and accident. Surprise could replace mourning as our preferred depth-charge.

The death of others should be the only deaths that matter to us, not because we are altruistic, but because they are the only deaths available to us (death in the abstract, i.e. one's own, always makes people portentous and pretentious, i.e. sentimental). We can't forget about our own death, because there is nothing to remember; but we can resist being lured into the larger profundities of taking our own deaths at all seriously (my death should only be a "problem," or whatever, for others, and so it goes on). Grief, even at its most desolate, is at least full of surprises, in a way that people's talk of their own "finitude" tends not to be. When people are alive, for example, they can be a barrier to what we feel about them (my being alive cannot be said to be a barrier to what I feel about myself). When they cannot reply, we find, occasionally, that we can speak to them; when we know there can be no answers, we can ask our questions. Indeed, death often reveals most shockingly not only whether people have mattered to us, and the unexpected ways in which they did and didn't; it also reveals how we shied away from them, how we kept to ourselves. It is easy not to notice people when one is in their presence, and far more difficult to hide from them when they are no longer there.

We suffer more from the promises we could never make than from the promises we could never meet. And the one thing the dead (or the lost) always leave us with is what we might have given them, what we might have been. We are always more puzzled than we want to be by things left unsaid, by inclinations unnoticed. And in this sense the dead leave us stranded with our potential as it once was, intact. It would be terrible if we could only be reminded of what we wanted once we could no longer have it. But the dead can only answer us in our own words. And that too is an experience in life. And should be a surprising one.

—*Adam Phillips*

*

THIS MAY perhaps be indiscreet of me, but my sole desire is to honor a friend who recently died, whom I never managed to see. Our friendship was epistolary and very brief. It was begun by Professor Francis Haskell with his first letter, of April 15th, 1999; the last was of December 19th of that same year. Eight months in all, or rather, nine, since he left time behind on January 18th, 2000, aged seventy-one, less than one month after he had told me about his incurable illness. He was eminent in his field, the history of art, and in Spanish you could read some of his magnificent books until quite recently, including the first and perhaps most famous of them, *Patrons and Painters* of 1963, his indispensable study of the relations between art and society in the Baroque period. I say "you could," because in May of 1999 he told me, with sorrow and resignation, that the publishers who had had this and other titles of his translated intended to get rid of (shred, I dare say) all the remaining copies, given the relatively poor sales there had been following their respective dates of publication.

But it is not my task to speak of the brilliant and generous Oxford professor or of the outstanding scholar, always amusing, intelligent, and clear, but of the ephemeral friend I never saw. And if I dare to do this and perhaps seem indiscreet, it is because I never before felt such admiration towards a man condemned as I did for him in the course of the month between his last letter to me and the news of his death that eventually reached me, first by way of the sad voice of another friend and then in print, by way of the eulogistic obituary notice in the London *Times*, where I finally saw his face in an old photograph from 1975—the man that used to write to me will probably have changed a lot.

Those of us who write tend to forget that among those who read there is great variety, and that behind each reader there is a personal history that carries on after the rapid perusal of our insubstantial columns, and that many of these histories are dominated by despair or grief. And if knowing of Francis Haskell's serene, good-humored, elegant and moving attitude might provide someone with encouragement or support, then my possible indiscretion will be justified all the more.

Months earlier, I had proposed naming him "Duke" of the literary and legendary realm of Redonda that a few years ago I came into as a strange inheritance (but that is unimportant today, it is of no account, and more will be heard of it another time), and he with the appropriate humor had accepted the title of "Duke of Sommariva," after a nineteenth-century art collector he had written about. And so, in that last letter he addressed me as "Dear Javier" for the first time, apologizing for it and saying that he would at once explain why he was "so suddenly speeding up the pace of our hitherto leisurely, and still invisible, friendship." A few lines later, he said he felt obliged to communicate "some difficult news," as he called it with great delicacy: his illness had just been diagnosed, and was so far advanced that no operation was possible. "Not something I had anticipated, or am enjoying..." was how he put it. And immediately after, he wrote, "I hope that your realm does not abide by the laws of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, in which, as you will remember, it was the ill and not the wicked who are punished (but perhaps I am both)." And then he added, "No date of survival guaranteed—but I hope that you will allow me to die a duke under such a benevolent sovereign."

His peer, Pérez-Reverte, "Duke of Corso," often reproaches me for my weakness for England. And he is sometimes right, since there is a good deal I do not like about that country. Even so, it would be difficult for a citizen of any other place to show such fortitude and retain such a capacity for lightheartedness and playfulness as Professor Haskell did in that letter. It was not easy to reply to it: one fears in such cases that one's every word might wound the one who reads. But "No," I told him, "both I (and therefore my realm) have the utmost respect for those who are ill, as well as for the dead." And I also said, "You see, so many of my loved ones are dead by now (or I see them as too many already) that sometimes I think that joining them can't be too bad. But please understand me. I am no believer. What I mean to say is that if these loved ones are now 'past,' it is not so bad to become 'past' myself." And now that Francis Haskell has in fact become so, this cannot but, to some small degree, diminish any fears one might have, since it will perhaps be there that we shall see one another in the end.

—*Javier Marías*
(translated by Eric Southworth)

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LENNY MICHAELS was the kind of Jew I particularly like: a "throwback" to an earlier era is how he was described in his *New York Times* obituary. He was a *k'nocker*, a big shot, a wise guy, but a *k'nocker* who delivered. There's a big difference there. He was a *where's the action/I'm up to it* sort of yid. Lenny was the anti–Woody Allen.

Lenny talked; you listened: that's how it was with Lenny. Which would ordinarily be annoying or boring, but not with Lenny. It was fun to be ranted at by Lenny. Even if he was talking shit, it never seemed like shit at the time. It was all about plans, schemes, bloody battles to be waged for art, or glory, or money, usually all three. And, of course, it was about Lenny.

I first met Leonard Michaels—or, rather, was assaulted by him—at a poetry reading I gave at UC Berkeley

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twenty years ago. How, you ask, is one assaulted at a poetry reading? A fair question. Well, I gave the reading. Lenny liked it. But Lenny didn't simply like, he *extravagated*. He was beside himself, poking his finger in my chest, telling me what I was, what I had done—in this instance, a writer, a poet, who had pleased him inordinately.

What's this skinny old guy with outrageous sideburns poking me for? Who the fuck is he? He didn't look like a professor. He didn't act like a professor. A pretty young woman, my age at the time, stood two paces behind Lenny, presumably his consort. She was smiling politely, mildly embarrassed by Lenny, but clearly not for the first time, and certainly not the last.

I was probably coming directly from the lock shop that evening. I don't think I even had an opportunity to change. Maybe Caroline threw a sports jacket in the back of her car. It would have had to have been Thom Gunn who invited me. No one else would have thought to, not before or since. There would have been another reader, probably some pill of a graduate student much valued by his instructors for licking ass and writing in the manner of his instructors, but less distinctively or well.

I do remember that Lenny absolutely *loved* the idea I worked in a lock shop. In fact, he borrowed a book of mine about locksmithing and never returned it. That's okay. I wasn't optimistic about getting it back. I understood at the time that Lenny would have been wanting a locksmith or some locksmithing arcana for a future tale. He, like countless story writers, was always on the prowl for goodies, unusual kernels rarely to be found elsewhere.

Lenny was mad keen to get together. We met a couple of weeks later at Brennan's, a barn of a place just off the University exit to 580. It was a steam-table and bar affair, the sort of place working men and bachelors go: impersonal, functional, but not unpleasant. Its most distinguishing feature was that it was very un-Berkeley, always a plus so far as I was concerned.

Lenny was already there, waiting for me, agitated by some internal drama, as, I would learn, was his normal condition. He confided to me, *sotto voce*, that this was a special place he would come to so as not to be recognized. He gave the initial impression that we were involved in something vaguely illicit, an intrigue.

But that was Lenny: he dwelt in an atmosphere of theatric vexation. It was part of his appeal. That evening, I remember well, I found him endlessly stimulating and entertaining, which is good because he talked, I drank bourbon. What flowed from him was a monologue about his adventures, frustrations, amours, ailments, basketball career at NYU, the condition of the Jew in the universe, mambo lessons, vendettas, movie scripts, movies, movie directors, movie producers, movie dolls—he was gone on the idea of movies and the notion of his being a sort of super-duper, intellectual Robert Towne.

Lenny was a good talker, very expressive. But then, he was one of America's master narrators, observers, wordsmiths. Not all good writers are good talkers, but Lenny brought his literary gifts to the realm of conversation. His method was to give the impression that he was taking you into his confidence, sharing urgent insights and intimacies for no other reason than he trusted your unique intelligence, insight, and judgment. He would interrupt his stream of talk periodically and look around furtively, lest someone else might be listening in.

Of course, by this stage I had read his two story collections and knew what he was worth as a writer. He is the kind of prose writer a poet, who puts sentences together syllable by syllable, can read with special pleasure. When you handle language that closely, I find you can tell about a writer's prose before you're three sentences into the first paragraph. Of course, I was very flattered, and excited, still quite a young and unsuccessful writer myself, to be sharing an evening with this brilliant, engaging *meshuggeneh*.

And that was it. We'd bump into one another over the years; he'd be smoking up a storm, kvetching about a film script or some imaginary ailment. "Hey, I've got to get that book back to you, the one about locks," he'd say. We were always glad to see one another. I think once we had a rather awkward lunch at the UC Berkeley faculty club. But we were different in the world. Of course, he was twenty years my senior, but Lenny was infatuated with glamour, clout, Hollywood. He wanted to be the intellectual who broke through into the larger culture. He had already gotten plenty, but there was no end to how much more lay out there for him, if only those *stupid fucking bastards would come to their senses*. He had me figured, I think, as an amiable, dreamy sort of schlep. But he liked my poetry, and I liked his stories, which is as good a bond as most.

The years went by and one Friday night I received a frantic call from Lenny. I had to help him. It was urgent, a huge favor. I had to read something of his. Only I would really know. Only I could be trusted to tell him the truth. He was as full of intrigue and melodrama as ever. He was already in San Francisco, not far. I told him to come by.

I was at the tail-end of a dinner party when Lenny arrived in great agitation, ignoring the rest of those present, including the young woman who would eventually become the fiction editor of *The New Yorker*, a friend and editor of Lenny's, and thirteen years later would be quoted about Lenny in his *Times* obituary. But Lenny was oblivious. He wasn't rude; he was Lenny. I had to read his new book in manuscript over the next thirty-six hours and report to him at lunch that Sunday, like I had nothing better to do. Only I could help him. *Me*. Of course, I didn't really believe him and assumed he'd already shown the thing to a dozen others, but was very flattered, regardless. Also, reading anything of Lenny's, no matter how ephemeral, gave me pleasure. Ordinary readers, even the most experienced and alert, cannot know the pleasure another writer gets from writing of the highest order, the real stuff, just as even the most trained listener will never appreciate, say, an inspired, brilliant saxophone solo as much as a professional saxophonist.

I hadn't, nor have, any special knowledge of prose fiction, but I could tell straightaway that Lenny was rushing a book into print when it wasn't nearly ready. To this day I don't know why. The collection included his most brilliant story, "Sylvia," about a crazy former wife and the Greenwich Village of the early Sixties. It sat among the rest of the collection like a huge, incandescent meteorite in a field of boulders. What was I to say to him, this brilliant older writer with an enormous reputation, his soft leather boots, his sports car, his beautiful wives, his *tsoures* with Hollywood producers, those "stupid schmucks"? What was I to tell Lenny: "Lenny, you don't have a book here"?

Lenny was very grateful, and anxious to take me to any restaurant I wanted for lunch, my reward. Me, I'm a schlep; I liked the ginger salad at a Burmese restaurant over on California Street in the Richmond district. Lenny took me for ginger salad.

"So?" he said.

"Lenny," I said, "you're a brilliant writer. You know better than anyone what should go in, what should go where, what shouldn't. *You*, in your heart, *you*, Lenny, *you* know best."

Lenny looked at me with incredulity. I cringed.

"That's the most amazing piece of advice anyone has ever given me, ever!" I had never seen Lenny so delighted or triumphant.

The book was savaged in the *New York Times Book Review* by Anatole Broyard, two whole pages. I've never read such a review. Lenny must have screwed one of his girlfriends. Broyard was so exercised by Lenny in general that he didn't even get to Lenny's book until the last paragraph, he was so busy shitting from a great height on Lenny.

I have an inscribed copy of the book:

To August,

Who did more than he knows to shape this book. With gratitude.

Lenny 1991

—*August Kleinzahler*

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WHEN, ABOUT TEN years ago, a friend of ours died, much too much too soon, I chose to read at the ceremony that honored her a poem by William Barnes. Barnes, the Dorset poet honored by Thomas Hardy, moved Philip Larkin to testify in a letter: "My own kind of literature gets realler & realler," instancing Hardy and Barnes. "The rest gets further away." Barnes is real and close.

The Hill-Shade

At such a time, of year and day,
In ages gone, that steep hill-brow
Cast down an evening shade, that lay
In shape the same as lies there now:
Though then no shadows wheel'd around
The things that now are on the ground.

The hill's high shape may long outstand
The house, of slowly-wasting stone;
The house may longer shade the land
Than man's on-gliding shade is shown;
The man himself may longer stay
Than stands the summer's rick of hay.

The trees that rise, with boughs o'er boughs,
To me for trees long-fall'n may pass;
And I could take these red hair'd cows
For those that pull'd my first-known grass;
Our flow'rs seem yet on ground and spray,
But oh, our people; where are they?

Larkin, protesting against an "oaf" who had called Barnes clumsy, praised him as "one of the most scrupulous metrists, vowel & consonant balancers, in our tongue." There they are, these more than skills, in their acts of precise realization. So the word *shade* is there in the title, "The Hill-Shade," and is in the first verse and the second verse, but not, in the end, in the final verse. And yet this verse too is silently shaded, shadowed, by what has come to pass. The first rhyme of the poem, *day* into *lay*, gravitates (Barnes has such a depth of gravity) to the ends of the stanzas that ensue. In the second verse, this is the couplet that brings "The man himself may longer stay" (even as the rhyme's sound has shown its staying power) to completion in the thought, "Than stands the summer's rick of hay." And in the final verse, it is the rhyme that turns at once upon, turns into, the tragedy of "But oh":

Our flow'rs seem yet on ground and spray,
But oh, our people; where are they?

The final verse, with its *boughs* and its *cows*, summons the lasting sound of the first verse (*hill-brow* into *now*), a verse that had balanced vowels and consonants by plaiting rhymes with assonances: *brow / now*, *around / ground*, and this with the word *ground* still there in the final verse, though no longer with the obduracy of rhyme. The poem is the evocation of a terrible termination, itself alive to the difference between the open sounds that decline to terminate the first four lines (*day / brow / lay / now*—no clipped endings there) as against the conclusive severity that comes to an end in the d of such a word as end: *shade / around / ground / outstand / land*. This sense of an ending is itself so different from the grassy sounds that sibilate in the final verse, there at the line-endings (*boughs / pass / cows / grass*), before the poem circles back to the open rhyme-sound with which it had broached all its thinking about human feelings. That final couplet—

Our flow'rs seem yet on ground and spray,
But oh, our people; where are they?

—is the stronger for balancing what might be many people's sense of hopelessness (Where are they? Gone for ever, irrecoverably) against Barnes's own faith, hope, and charity. His humane devotion is not only to his religion. And the pattern of his poem is poignant, without ostentation, while his art, which has proved that it can long outstand time's rescindings, is itself the realization of a principle urged by T. S. Eliot. (Eliot was moved to admiration of Barnes by the advocacy of his friend, William Turner Levy, a scholar of the Dorset poet.) The principle: "a recognition of the truth that not our feelings, but the pattern which we may make of our feelings, is the centre of value."

—*Christopher Ricks*

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EVEN ON the first trip home, as I stroked his adorable head, I could feel the skull beneath the fur. A reminder of a way in which dogs compare unfavorably to children: it is a tragic surprise if you outlive your child, but a fairly safe bet that you will survive your puppy. The thought penetrated, like an arrow through armor, so I painstakingly removed it and cast it aside. Over the twelve years that Chester lived, I would occasionally be visited by a fleeting vision of his death in a vet's office. What do you do with such thoughts? Banish them as quickly as they make themselves known.

Once Chester was older, on our usual afternoon walk we would pass (the last fifty yards or so at an increasingly accelerated pace) a video production office, whose owner, Bill, kept a box of biscuits for the neighborhood dogs. One day Bill mentioned that he would like to have a dog himself, but he couldn't take the...I didn't catch his last word. The "time"? No, he corrected me. The dying.

I had never had a dog before, so these premonitions of canine mortality were merely waking nightmares, clouds that occasionally reflected on a tranquil surface. I know better now. The day in the vet's office came. It was finally here: he was too sick to save. When they brought him out, the catheter in place for the death serum, he licked my hand. I knew that was a submissive gesture, what a wolf does when caught in a trap. Not that it stanched my tears, as I placed my lips on his nose.

Whenever I pare a cheese, walk in the woods, hear a thunderclap, slam the rear door of the station wagon, send a weekend guest after dinner to her bedroom, pack for an out-of-town trip, fry bacon, get up in the night to pee, or pass by the neighborhood production office, I see his face watching mine. Somewhere or other, perhaps on a greeting card, I have read that this means he lives within me. For me, unfortunately, as I discard the useless cheese rinds, it is simply a sharp reminder that he is dead.

—Arthur Lubow

*

WHEN MY THERAPIST, Dr. S. Joseph Nemetz, suddenly died at the end of May in 1994, I felt lonelier than ever in my life. I turned for comfort to the same places I've turned all my life: to people and to books. The first were wholly satisfactory, the second only partly so.

The safety net provided by friends and family was strong, flexible, and reliable. So too was the professional net: Nemetz's colleagues and friends offered themselves immediately and generously, and at every point they proceeded wisely, all in the face of their own confusion and grief.

I can't say the same for the comfort I got from reading. In turning to books, I also had two accustomed directions to take: first, I could go to literature, which has cushioned and buoyed me since I was small; second, I could go to psychoanalytic theory, an interest only nine years old, though an avid one.

In literature I found what I needed. In psychoanalytic theory, not only did I not find what I needed, but what I did find outraged and discomfited me. In the body of papers on the illness and death of the therapist, instead of comfort or insight, I found avoidance, confusion, condescension, self-delusion, and dissimulation. The subject of the therapist's mortality itself seemed to inspire avoidance and disarray. But perhaps most remarkably, nowhere did I find the voice or perspective of the patient.

Joseph Nemetz's professional conduct, in retrospect, serves as an implicit critique of the inadequate professional literature regarding the central matter of the therapist's mortality. When he suddenly died, I had been working with him in an intensive psychotherapy for almost four years. I had asked several weeks earlier, in April, if we could talk about my beginning analysis.

Nemetz was surprised by my request, and I by his surprise; I thought I had made many less-than-subtle hints about analysis. I told him I thought I had been reasonably clear; he replied that he had not understood me. Possibly, both of us were right. I came to wonder later whether I had in fact been quite clear but that his usually exquisite capacity to hear me had in this particular matter broken down: conceivably, he wished *not* to hear me. I have wondered whether his deafness to my hints came from his intuitive understanding that, if I were to ask, he would have to say "No"—the answer he would be compelled, as I now understand, to give. With the refusal, I would, if I wanted analysis enough, move to another therapist. I believe that he cared very much about me, enjoyed his work with me, and preferred that I not leave him.

He did not answer my request right away. He told me that, because of his age, he was cautious about beginning new analyses; when I asked if our nearly four years of work together made no difference, he answered that of course it did, and that he would need some time to think about it. Over the next ten days I argued my case, growing more excited and hopeful as the days passed and he did not refuse.

Several minutes into our fifth meeting after I had first asked to begin analysis, I was speaking with an animation every minute moving closer to pleased assumption: I *would* have my wish. I remember that he lifted his hand lightly, several inches off his knee, in a gesture that stopped me dead—a "Whoa!" to a racing horse. The very long silence lasted perhaps five seconds, and then he spoke quietly:

"*There's more than one person in this room to be considered,*" he said.

I was speechless. At that moment and in that pause, I caught a clear glimpse of him, perhaps for the first time in ten days, so hard had I been working to obliterate him in order to have what I wanted. I saw something then about what he might feel, what he might wish, and what this decision might mean for him. I was able then to say, calmly and with tremendous sadness, "This must be hard for you too." He nodded very slightly and said, "In many ways."

Although he didn't give me his answer until the next time we met, I knew then what he would likely say and began to prepare myself for it. I

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think I had really known the answer from the beginning, maybe even before he did, and my wish not to hear what I already knew explained my impetuous rush to fill with words any space for an honest exchange with him. My unconscious hope was to keep both of us from reflecting; but he didn't give up that responsibility.

Near the start of our next meeting, he said that, given the nature of my own losses, and the power of analysis, and given the good possibility that he might die before the work was done, analysis with him was not a good idea; he said that, if I wanted analysis, he would help me arrange it. I knew that, given his love for the work, and especially for that work from behind the couch, his decision was not easy. But I also knew in a hazy way that it was his commitment to the work, and to me, that led to the decision.

I asked him if he had ever changed his mind about anything, and he replied, quickly and very gently, "I once decided not to be a cowboy." As was often true in my time with him, my laughter was part of the power of the moment: few people have ever looked *less* like a cowboy. My tears and rage followed.

But I didn't fully understand his words for a long time. Many months after his death, I did understand that Dr. Nemetz was telling me far more than "No, I can't be your analyst." He was telling me that, however much he might wish to give me what I wanted, he could not change his mind because any other decision would be wild and incautious; his refusal was clearly dictated from the start—although it was not easy for him to accept it—by his understanding of and respect for the power of the analytic process, for his own human limitations, and for me. With that decision he looked squarely at the ending of his life-work, and of his life. Holding to the highest ideals of his profession, he was guarding my safety. He had the capacity to bear the responsibility of "No," and with it, to bear responsibility for the pain he caused me and, I believe, caused himself. At the moment he spoke, it was to remind me that there are always two individual, mortal people in the consulting room, and in that quiet reminder is located the most essential principle guarding the patient's safety.

A few weeks later, on a Wednesday in mid-May, the hour came to a close. I remained angry at him. He was going away for the weekend to a conference in Philadelphia. He often ended an hour with something intended to leave me thinking. This time it was a question; his last words to me were "What have I done to make you think I don't understand how disappointed you are?"

I paused and said, "I'll think about it, and I'll let you know Monday morning." I stood up and left him with my usual tag line when he went away to meetings: "Have a good time, learn something, and cross the street very carefully." He collapsed without warning on Sunday in the airport in Philadelphia, and he died six days later, apparently never regaining consciousness.

—*Ellen Pinsky*

*

My mother rehearsed her death constantly. For as long as I can remember, she had "palpitations" which made her turn ghastly pale. She would suddenly stand still or sit down to catch her breath, her eyes full of fear, and we would all stop whatever we were doing and hope that the shadow of death would drift away from her. In a few moments she would look at us with a look whose significance I understood, even when I was six or seven: I will not be with you for long, the look said; the handwriting is on the wall; hold onto me, cherish me, love me as much as you can, now before it is too late. Every time I said goodbye to her, there was something ominous and charged about the farewell. My heart is fragile; you may not ever see me again; you will think back upon this moment, the last glimpse you ever had of me. It went on like this for years.

Her "palpitations" were real enough, whatever we mean by "real." We could sometimes even see a vein throbbing in my mother's neck, and she took an impressive array of pills, some for the purpose of calming her down and giving her some sleep. For she was "nervous," as it was called in my family, and a terrible insomniac, since she was afraid that she would slip away from us all in the middle of the night. Her condition made it impossible for her to learn how to drive—how could you drive if at any moment you might keel over?—or to work or to get any strenuous exercise. She was refined and delicate, like the glass flowers that she loved in the museum in Cambridge that we would sometimes visit. She walked very slowly, a small faded beauty who wore gloves whenever she ventured to take the T into Boston to meet my father for lunch.

Finally—inevitably—the rehearsals gave way to the thing itself. But it did not happen the way she had imagined, and led us to imagine, that it would. It was her heart all right, but there was no precipitous farewell, no sudden heart attack of the kind that snatched away my father. Instead, halfway through her eighty-ninth year, she phoned me in California and told me that I had to come home at once. "What has happened?" I asked her. "You promised me that you would help me," she cried. "You promised; you promised; you promised. I need you to save me. Come quickly." I rushed back. Her dementia had eased somewhat, and its cause had been discovered: she was in the early stages of congestive heart failure. She would die slowly, the cardiologist said; it might take months or even years, a long, gradual drowning.

There was an alternative: heart surgery. It seemed implausible to operate on anyone so old, but my brother and I heard of a distinguished surgeon who specialized in geriatric patients and took my mother to see him. He was brisk, confident, and matter-of-fact. He could, he said with calm detachment, certainly repair the defective valves in my mother's heart. If she recovered from the operation—her chances were hard to gauge, because

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the surgery would require breaking her ribs and other assaults—she might have "four or five" good years, perhaps even more. Without the operation, in any case, she was without question only going to worsen and die.

We could see my mother trying to take it in—she who never gambled, who hated risks, who had always carried herself as a fragile, delicate flower. I sensed that she was, this one time in her life, inclined to venture everything in order to seize the small hope that had been offered to her. But, quite understandably, she was hesitating. As she often did, she stalled for time by pretending that she didn't quite hear and needed to have everything repeated. "Is there really no hope of remission from the congestive heart failure?" she asked. "None whatsoever," came the implacable reply. "Can you really repair my heart? At my age?" "Absolutely." "But I don't really understand," she repeated, "What is the matter with my heart?"

The surgeon was clearly losing patience. He leaned over his desk and said in a very loud voice, "Think of yourself, Mrs. Greenblatt, as a toilet." "What?" my mother asked. "Think of yourself as a toilet; you need a new valve."

That was it. My mother left the office and never returned. She refused to talk about the surgery. It took the congestive heart failure a year and a half to kill her, slowly stripping away her dignity the way, when she got home from an afternoon in Boston, she would slowly pull off her gloves.

—Stephen Greenblatt

*

Even at the time I was puzzled and not a little embarrassed by the fact that I scarcely noticed my father's death. Around 11:00 on that Sunday morning in August 1984, I returned home from a longish bike ride through the coastal hills of Northern California. I was greeted with the news that my mother had called while I was away. My father, she said, had suffered a lung hemorrhage the evening before; my Uncle Otto, who was there on his annual visit, had helped drive him to hospital in Radford, a small town in the New River Valley of Virginia fifteen miles from where we had been spending summers for most of the thirty-five years we had been in America. There was nothing to be done for him. He died peacefully during the night. There was to be an autopsy.

I was sweaty from exercise; we were expecting friends; a shower was in order; we had to decide whether to call off brunch. I rang my mother first. She was calm and confirmed the details I already knew. My father was to be cremated, she said, and we could talk about having a memorial service sometime in the fall. No, she did not think I should come to our cabin on the lake because, after all, I had just been there a month before and in any case her brother and sister-in-law were there and she did not need me. There was not much more to say.

I showered, and our friends came. I told them that my father had just died —I am not sure why. In retrospect it could only have made them feel intrusive and generally discomforted. I felt no need for sympathy. I think I told them to make myself feel the reality of the event. The day was magically beautiful, with the operatic light one has so often along San Francisco Bay. I felt good from exercise. My father bleeding to death somewhere in rural Virginia seemed very far off.

Much of our relationship was based on talk about medicine. In any case, it was based on talk about something and not, so it seemed, on unspoken ties of the heart. An implicit stoicism governed our relations: he never spoke about pain or unhappiness; I talked about my feelings only in highly abstracted ways. *Nim dich zusammen*—pull yourself together—was his usual response to adversity or emotional excess. When I had seen him last in late June, he had not been his usual clearheaded self. His answer to a question about ovarian histology—he was a pathologist, and I was working on a book about historical understanding of the biology of sexual difference—was muddled. His cancer had affected his brain. He also complained about itching and slept a great deal. This was so unlike my father that in a sense he seemed gone for at least two months before he died. I never quite understood that in fact my father was a man of powerful emotions who was deeply disappointed by the life that Hitler and immigration had dealt him.

But the reasons I took so little notice of my father's death are more extensively bound up in our relationship. Death itself—in any case the pathophysiology and anatomical pathology of death—was the center of his life and my earliest experiences of him. I watched him every Sunday morning between when I was six and when I was nine prepare specimens taken at autopsies for study. I loved the smell of formaldehyde and other odors of the place, and I admired greatly the dexterity with which my father cut tissues and with tweezers put them in little jars to be imbedded in wax, cut in thin slices, stained, and put on slides for observations. I also liked the quiet time together. The detritus of death was the normal stuff of Sundays, and I have vivid memories of the various stages of slide preparations: the wax blocks, the gossamer thin slices of flesh produced by the microtome, the carousel machine that took little baskets of stuff from one bath or dye, fixing and coloring them before they were mounted on a slide. Many evenings in his study my father would read the resulting patterns in purple and red and dictate his finding. I think of him often intoning the names of diseases and cell types. I heard him give instructions on what to do with bodies when he was called away from the dinner table to be told that he had a "post" awaiting him: a post mortem. In short, dead bodies and their parts dominated my father's life and my relationship to him. I have his copy of the 1983 *Yearbook of Anatomical Pathology*; in an unsteady hand, but with his accustomed prognostic clarity, he has written in it "Werner A. Laqueur, M.D. 1983. The last."

My father and I were estranged for much of my adult life; we spoke and saw each other regularly, but the old

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intensity was gone. It was rekindled through the dead. I had something of a crisis about my work as a historian after I got tenure at Berkeley in 1979 and thought that perhaps I should have been a doctor after all. Under the sponsorship of a grant that encouraged cross-disciplinary learning, I took off fifteen months to study medicine. I took three semesters of pathology and developed a great passion for gross anatomy. We talked about what I was learning every week; he helped me with problem sets. I marveled at how much he remembered of what he had learned in medical school.

My newly acquired expertise meant that when he started to feel out of sorts, in the summer of 1980, we could talk about his problems professionally. Of course, his difficulty swallowing could not be esophageal cancer as the idiots in Beckley, West Virginia, suggested; he would be dead by now. He reminisced about cases he had seen. (In fact, he had what I learned was called presbyesophagus—literally, "old esophagus" —which, along with old everything else, I am now getting as well.)

My father came to Berkeley for some tests that proved little. Finally, even the doctors in Beckley could palpate a mass in his belly. He went to Johns Hopkins Medical School, where he was diagnosed with a hypernephroma that had metastasized.

I could not deal with his manifest depression about the finality of his diagnosis and neither could he. We focused on particulars. He developed diabetes and on one visit to Berkeley he saw my doctor, who was an expert on this disease, a teacher in the medical program at Berkeley and a brilliant clinician. So, I asked him, what did he say about the fainting spells; are they due to high blood sugar? No, he shot back, they are the result of the brain metastasis. What brain metastasis? I asked, much alarmed. What do you mean, what brain metastasis, he replied, irritated at my ignorance. Where do you think a hypernephroma would metastasize? (With stupidity the gods themselves fight in vain, he was fond of quoting in German: lines from Schiller.) We went on some errands; I forgot where I parked the car and we hunted for some time around Berkeley until I found it. Clearly we were both determined not to think about his death; I could evidently not think or remember much of anything.

The result of all this was that when he finally died of the lung hemorrhage, it seemed like so much more pathophysiology. What had I expected? As I child I had learned a lot from him about exactly how people die, and here was a clear demonstration.

I took me years to feel that he was dead and to mourn his loss. There was a hint of emotional recognition as I sat at his desk late one night in October of 1984, smoking one of his cigars, playing with the letter opener he had had since I was a boy, and trying to write a eulogy. Mostly the recognition came through little things: when I shaved I often thought of him because watching him shave had been one of the rituals of my boyhood; playing with the paper ring from a cigar was another moment; trying and failing to blow smoke rings for a child; sipping scotch. He came to me in a dream one night, a handsome man in his late twenties. I thought you were dead, I said. I am, he said, and walked away into a field, happy in a melancholy way.

Three years ago my wife and I visited Hamburg, where he had grown up. We saw the grand house on Hoch Allee where he lived; I knew its façade from a picture of my grandfather, a perfect German bourgeois, standing with one foot planted higher than the other on the building's steps, a cane in one hand, a Doberman on leash in the other. We walked to his gymnasium—the Johanneum—along the route he would have taken. The headmaster showed us the hall where the four hundredth anniversary celebrations of its founding—really confiscation from the monastery of St. John—had been held in 1928; my father had been proud of the Latin oration he gave on that occasion. We were given tea and shown photocopies of his entry documents by the headmaster.

Later that day we took a little bit of dirt from the flower-bed in rural Virginia, where my father's ashes had been scattered, to the magnificent Friedhof Ohlsdorf, where my grandfather was buried. We placed the dirt on his grave. It looked just as it did in the picture my father's mother had kept with her in the Diaspora, the tombstone with its Jugendstil script—*Walter Laqueur, M.D.*—still in good repair. This is not the sort of ritual I would usually find attractive. How much of his ashes could there be in some random sample of dirt from a flowerbed? What kind of rank superstition is this, my father would have thought. I was coming to know that he was gone.

—*Thomas Laqueur*

*

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, when I was making a documentary film about dying patients in an intensive care unit at a Boston hospital, I wanted to shoot some sequences in the hospital morgue and was introduced to the man in charge of the morgue. He was responsible for the autopsy rooms and the refrigerators where bodies were kept prior to their retrieval by an undertaker. He was a pleasant, straightforward man who had been the administrator of the morgue for many years. I explained to him that I wanted to follow the procedure of the nurses who came to the dead patient's room, loaded the body on a gurney, and transported it to the morgue. I was particularly interested in how the corpse was concealed from visitors and patients on the trip. I needed his permission to shoot in the morgue and he quickly agreed. A few days later I happened to be in a patient's room when she died. After the nurses lifted the body onto the gurney and artfully concealed the corpse with sheets hanging over the side, I followed the three nurses from the eleventh-floor intensive care unit to the basement morgue, where they placed the cadaver in a refrigerator unit. I followed this procedure several times and was present on occasion when an undertaker came to claim a body.

One day I was invited to a "death conference." This was a regular meeting where the attending doctors would compare a diagnosis made when a patient was alive with the cause of death as determined by the autopsy. This conference was a regular part of the teaching program of the hospital. By the time I was invited to this conference my hypochondria was pretty much under control, since we had already been working at the hospital for several weeks. However, I was still slightly dismayed to see the liver, heart, kidneys, and pancreas on exhibit as I struggled to understand the technical scientific debate among the doctors as to the actual cause of death. I was also aware of the ease with which I accepted the routines surrounding death and how quickly I became accustomed to seeing dead people and their displayed body parts.

After six weeks at the hospital, the shooting of the film was over and I made the rounds to say goodbye to the staff physicians, nurses, administrators, and others who had assisted me and offered suggestions during the filming. I went down to the morgue to look for the man who had been so helpful and could not find him. I decided to write to him and went up to the hospital cafeteria for a farewell lunch with some members of the staff. Toward the end of lunch I saw the man from the morgue at another table and walked over and thanked him for his help. He smiled, shook my hand and said, "See you soon."

—*Frederick Wiseman*

Romain Clerou

When I asked if she was in pain he said
No but that she had in her final minutes showed that panic

he had often seen the faces of the dying show facing the void.

He said this matter-of-factly, as if because he was
a doctor his experience mattered, as if he had known

her and her son long enough not to varnish or lie.

They had gone to high school together and now
because he had become a doctor and then become

her doctor he watched Martha face the void.

Twenty-eight years later, I can hear the way he said
Martha. His name was Clerou: Dr. Romain Clerou.

—*Frank Bidart*

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