

I don't know how old I was when I discovered I liked cemeteries, but do I know it was young enough to make my mom worried. At first, all cemeteries were for me were things to break up the monotony of long drives. Everybody knows you're supposed to hold your breath when you drive past a cemetery. Dead air's not good for ya, for one thing, but for another, you really don't want haints feeling the warmth of your breath and stalking the taunt of the living through the rest of your days. But I also remember my hillbilly family and their association with death. It wasn't until much later on I realized that the way hillbillies talk about the big sleep comes across as morbid to those that didn't grow up in the all-day shade of oak-lined hollers. See, my family talked about death like it was our next door neighbor. And in some ways, it kinda was. Death was as much a part of the rumor mill as what new horror Mrs. Collins decided to put in her tomato aspic. Death rose in nearly every conversation, attended every holiday dinner, visited on the most mundane of mornings. Death was a little like my great-grandpa: a welcome old friend on his best days and a holy terror on his worst. Death was family.

My grandmother used to talk about how Death would pop over and check in from time to time, and sometimes he came hand-in-bony hand with my long-deceased grandfather, the love of Grandma's life. They spoke a lot, especially in the final years before her memory started to go. Soon, she'd revert to a child in an old woman's body, sleeping in a long nightgown, with a frayed hair net and a teddy bear clutched tight. She still spoke to Grandpa and his dread escort, but less and less connected to our realm. She'd long ago left the holler and moved on top of a hill, and from that place, you could see almost 360 degrees of cattle fields and barely a neighbor's house in sight. From her porch, you'd regularly witness the drama of nature unfolding. A cow with hoof-and-mouth, an immobile snake drying into jerky on the picnic table, a bird teetering between this plane of existence and the next after flying into grandma's picture window. Death was all around, neither good nor bad, just there. Like rain or gravity or the pesky engine light in my uncle's pickup that just wouldn't turn off. And truth be told, we kinda liked it that way. The ever present haunt of Death gave life a little more meaning and certainly made campfire stories and dark basements more electric.

It was a regular thing that Grandma would couch all of her stories and memories in relation to her own death. "When I die," she'd say, "I know I'll see Bill again. He's been waiting for me, but we'll finally be together. And I can't wait to see those beautiful blue eyes again. And I'll see Momma and Daddy, and your Uncle Tommy, and Uncle Sherman, and while there's a few I'd rather not see again, I know it'll all be ok." Grandma also shared recipes with the urgency of her expiration date well in view. Biscuits, especially. She desperately needed us to know how to make her biscuits -- and so did we. One time, she finally wrote it down when it dawned on her that if she wasn't around next Thanksgiving, no one else would get 'em right, and that wasn't the sort of thing a person with one foot in the grave could stomach.

Grandma would stand on the porch and watch you drive off, never moving from her spot until the car was out of sight and the sound of the exhaust well out of earshot. Before you got in the car, though, she always said goodbye with a little more meaning heaped on, like I may never see you again. And while she was wrong about that a lot of times, eventually she was right. The last time I saw Grandma before she died, she didn't really know who I was. Brooks the Grandson did not exist, but this random fella must be a childhood friend whose name's lost to the ether. Nice enough, but no one special. That was tough, of course, but there was a beauty in the encounter. Even with Death standing in the corner, Grandma's kindness to strangers shown through. When I left that day, there was a tiny moment where maybe she did know me or at least recognized someone important enough to walk to the porch and wave into oblivion. Before I left, she said "The next time

you come back to these hills, it'll be when I'm going in one." And she was right. The next time I saw her, she breathed her last, and Death sighed a welcome relief into that little farmhouse on a hill.

I've spent a lot of my time strolling through cemeteries and graveyards and memorial gardens and mausoleums and crypts and what have you. There's something about being around the dead that puts me at home. Maybe it's the way the dead don't pretend to be anything else. Maybe it's that they're as comfortable with Death as my people. Maybe it's not your thing, but I swear to you, it's deeply healing for me to visit those morbid gardens. I get to know you a little better that way, too, but more than anything, it's almost like if I can visit the dead here, maybe word'll get back to my ancestors, like a mycelial network of haints and spirits keeping an eye on how things are going on this side of the veil. All that to say, I love cemeteries. My people went Remembering to all the family's graves every year, traipsing -- ok, trespassing -- to some backyard stones long since sold off in someone else's backyard. There were more traditional ones, too, those found in an actual graveyard attached to a church my great-great-aunt built with her own stubborn hands. She was buried back there, right next to a tree whose roots pushed her stone a little higher than its neighbors'. Grandpa with the blue eyes was buried nearby, and Grandma used to point to the empty place next to him and her own name already carved onto the stone, and say how much she longed to lay there beside him. She'd rub her knotted hand across her name and wonder out loud what day would fill in the fateful blanks.

In New Mexico, I found an ornate cemetery in the desert, white-washed and crumbling. In Thailand, I slept in the woods behind the open-air village crematorium, and stunned the locals when I told them I liked living in the woods with all their spirits. In Arkansas, Lord, I have no clue how many old burial places I orbited. Tennessee had one of the best places to commune with the dead, where drooping foliage and heavy fog felt like you could hop onto a gravemarker and climb all the way to the heavens. Up here, as a foreigner in a foreign land, there's something strange to me. The cemeteries here don't have as many people in them. Living people, I mean, there's not as many folks wandering around, strolling, visiting. I don't know what, if anything, that says about life and death up here, I've just noticed it. Knowing this place and knowing some of your stories, it's not a lack of concern or love or anything like that. It just doesn't feel as, I don't know, spooky? I don't think I'm the first to notice this. There's a reason Southern Gothic exists but Northern Gothic doesn't.

The cemeteries here feel a little more sterile, a little less alive. At least most of them. There's one I found the other day driving around somewhere south of Earlville. I was completely lost. I'd never be able to find this place again. Maybe it was a sort of Brigadoon for the Dead, but it was chock-full of the first graves I've seen up here that felt right. Pine needles made the whole ground squishy. Tree roots pushed gravestones as high off the ground as my kneecaps. Time wore names away and moss became a structural element welding cracks together. It even smelled right, a damp and musty scent of home and phantasmal rest. It was good for my bones to know that it's possible to find a place where they can rest, even way up here.

I guess I bring all this up because Death has come to visit with us for a while. That's not unusual. Normally when he's here, he sits unseen in the farthest pew back, tucked way back there with his hooded head resting against the back wall. I think he knows, when we say "All are welcome," we mean it, even when "all" includes riff raff like him. But once in a while, I've seen him sitting a little closer, sometimes next to one of you or squeezed in up here with me. And that's all well and good. This place has that old feel of churches full of life and well-accustomed to Death. It's his place as much as anyone's. But lately, he's wearing out his welcome. It's hard to hold the relief he can bring, the tragedy he's known for, the celebration of our own lives, and all our plans for the coming days, it's hard to hold all of that at once. And y'all, we've been holding all of that at once a lot. I much prefer when Death arrives for a long weekend. This month-long stay with even more on the horizon, it's too much. You know that. I know that. Truth be told, I'm sure Death knows that, too. But, as an old friend of mine likes to say, "Death is no respecter of persons." Put differently, we're all equal in death, no matter who

you were, what impact you had, how many touched souls you leave behind. It doesn't matter what kind of box houses your bones or which tradewind carries your ashes. Whatever Death initiates us into on the other side, we all get there.

These aren't just the ramblings of a Southern preacher that believes in ghosts. The parable of the landowner paying everyone the same wages no matter how long they worked, it's not about our stored up karma from good deeds. It's about the ultimate in fairness. No matter what, we all receive the same reward, the same gift of release from this world and the same grace of the next. There's hope tied in there, that even the stuff we feel the worst about won't keep Death at bay, and it won't keep the sweet gift of the other side at bay, either. Yes, it can be frightening. As much as I love the spirit-rich air of those hills of home, I'm also well-trained to avoid the woods at night and to head straight inside if there's whispers in the dark. The spiritual world is wondrous, but it is no tame lion. As frightening as this stuff can be, there's a gentleness, too. We talk of rest and sleep, even use words reserved for these moments: repose; passing, peace. It's reminiscent of a light and easy burden. The quiet of the grave is a song we'll all know well, universal and sacred and only the beginning of, well, I don't know of what, but I do know we won't be there on our own.

In the great Easter liturgies erupting in the Spring and peppering every other season in the church, we repeat a line from Paul. "Oh Death, where is your sting?" he boasts. It may be a dangerous thing to play with, but Paul is confident, as are we, that Death is not erased by our great story. Death remains, and Death remains a primary figure. But Death's dread duty is no longer bitter. Death's dread duty is the door we must walk through to reach our Promised Land. That can be a terrible first step, but it's a necessary one, and one we simply cannot avoid. But I don't want to give the impression it's all goodness and grace, celebration and joy when Death arrives. It can be, but much of the time, when Death comes, whatever sweetness the dying taste, the rest of us are left to deal in Death's wake. As our Prayer Book says, even Jesus wept at the grave of his friend. Death opens the door and walks us through to the hereafter while the rest of us are left standing on the porch waving as the last remnant of a beloved presence echoes out of earshot. And after too many of those visits, our collective grief piles up. Death brings all his baggage, and we wish he'd go on his merry way for a tour of somewhere else, anywhere else, until we catch our breath and find our feet again. But this is not our lot.

St. Thomas', we've been through a lot lately. Yes, we've been through a lot this month, but it goes further through all the scares of last year and the creeping disquiet of the pandemic. Even before that, St. Thomas' navigated another wave gracefully just before I arrived. I know there were times prior, too, more than we're likely to turn up in old records. Our grief goes back centuries, something in our bones tied to too many things we can't name or touch but certainly feel. And it's there I want to leave us, for now. We've done this before, which is no brag-worthy feat. But we've been here before, and we know what to do. It's just a reality that "what to do" means feeling those things we try so hard never to have to feel but always will. Cry your tears, shake your fist at the sky, maybe even cuss at God. There's plenty of books and passages of the Bible that do just that. I figure, if it's good enough for them, it's probably good enough for us. And I'm fairly certain God can handle it. And in time, our memories remain sweet and grief manages to turn what should break your heart all over again into a growing fondness.

Maybe it's enough to lay a welcome mat on the porch like my grandma did, wanting to make sure Death had a place to wipe his bony feet before coming in. She'd just swept up, you see, and could only imagine the kinds of places he'd been off to. Maybe there's some wisdom in those hollers yet. I know the next time I cram around a holiday table, there'll be a spot in some shadowy corner of my vision where that old, familiar friend smiles and speaks. "Not yet," he'll say. "Not yet, old friend. Your time will come. So for today and all your untold remaining days, love the life you have. Love your God. Love your neighbor. And Love the door I'll one day open for you."