

10/24/42

I'm not planning to die, ever, because I can't quite figure out what it means to die. What's the point of living if you're going to die?

Ned Rorem, at 95, interviewed in *The New York Times*, 10/27/18

Tim McDonough

10.2.20

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

One

Take one.

At age 40, the mere mention of death, any allusion to mortality, makes his eyes tear up. Involuntarily, in any circumstances, sometimes several times a day, as if he's just lost a parent and is mourning. As if an alarm has gone off on his biological clock.

He was born on October 24, 1942. 10/24/42. How many times has he written that sequence of numbers?

He gets in the car one morning – oh, in his early or mid-fifties – and, as the engine turns over, he notices the time on the dashboard is 10:24. When he gets to the theater for rehearsal, he wakes his MacBook Pro and the time on the top bar, just right of the battery charge, is 10:42.

That's how it starts. And that's how it recurs. On a regular basis, many more days than not, often twice a day, his eye catches that the time is 10:24 or 10:42. On the stove or the microwave, on the coffee-machine, on digital signs

outside banks. On his wrist. Wherever. Every clock has become an alarm clock. An alarming clock.

When Bose launches a new magazine campaign for its wave radio, the clock in their ad reads 10:24.

There is obviously a message in this. He's a materialist, so the message is not from the beyond. It must be from his subconscious. What is he trying to say to himself?

Well, it seems so obvious. The clock is ticking, or whatever it is that digital clocks silently do. Time, it's about time, its relentless advance, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeping in its petty pace from day to day, and if he were a murderously ambitious Scottish king in a bloody Shakespeare tragedy, he'd know he was getting close to dusty death. It's a role he never played or wanted to play.

At about the same time, another alarm goes off, or rather a ringtone that his brain downloads from an oldies station – a *really* oldies station, music of his parents' era. The tune plays relentlessly, an earworm he can't stop, on the way to the mailbox, in supermarket aisles, while he waits for a meeting to begin. "Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think. Enjoy yourself –" He can't remember the rest of the words. Something that rhymes with "think," like "over in a blink" or "ship about to sink" or "life's begun to stink" or "get yourself a drink." Over and over this simple tune, so irritatingly catchy, so *corny*. OK, it's also profound, but he can't *enjoy* himself, because – he doesn't know why. Maybe that's the point. If it's time to enjoy himself, have fun, do the things he never lets himself do – well, what is all that? What is it that he really wants? He should figure that out.

10:24, 10:42. There must be more to the message than the non-news of mortality. Maybe he's supposed to make *use* of the time left him. Maybe he's to work harder, insistently, even obsessively, damn everything and everyone else, dedicate himself to some major work. Something – big.

This feels absurdly like a Frank Capra movie. He *likes* Capra – who doesn't? Ordinary folk with good hearts doing great things. But to take these stories seriously, personally – he's just a hard-working actor of modest talents, not a Mr. Smith ready to go to Washington or a John Doe who becomes a national figure. He's not a role for Jimmy Stewart or Gary Cooper or Tom Hanks or any other everyman-stand-in megastar.

And yet clocks persist in signaling him: 10:24, 10:42, 10:24, 10:42. Maybe he *is* telling himself to change course and, quite miraculously, triumph as a messiah of (fill in the blank). What? *What is it* he's supposed to do with the time left to him?

He's on firmer ground when he considers quitting his present life. He's willing to admit that much of what he believes, thinks, hopes for, clings to, much of what he *does*, including a lot of theater, is bullshit. During the day his persistent awareness of 10:24, 10:42 makes him feel he's drowning in bullshit. We all are. He wakes up in the middle of the night and frets. About all kinds of crap.

Then another old song starts getting play on his inner jukebox: "What's it all about, Alfie? ... What's it all about? What's it all about, Alfie?" He has no idea who Alfie is, he never saw the movie. It's a stupid, sappy Bacharach song. But he knows he needs Alfie's advice: what's it all about?

His cat sleeps 15 hours a day. She doesn't worry about anything, except at mealtime, go-out time, come-in time, looking-for-something-to-pounce-on

time. He envies her. The clarity of her life irritates him. What's it all about, catty?

One morning he pauses at his desk and listens to excited voices on the neighborhood playground behind his backyard. He glances at the time on his laptop: it is 10:42. The children's squeals remind him of *Ikiru*, a Kurosawa film in which an old by-the-book bureaucrat whose work is meaningless is diagnosed with terminal cancer. This death sentence transforms his life. He goes back to work and he *does* something: he cuts through stupid procedural impediments to get a playground built in a poor neighborhood. It's there that we last see him, late at night, by himself, on a swing: back and forth in the frame. He's happy. He sings an old song in which every verse begins "Life is brief. Fall in love." Cut to his funeral. This film has always been on his top-ten list. "Ikiru" means "to live."

Underlying his angst is a conviction that life should be meaningful. This is in part vestigial religion; he was raised Catholic. Very Catholic. But now he's a "lapsed" Catholic. Very lapsed. A nonbeliever, in fact. Not an agnostic: he *knows*. There is no god. No afterlife. This is it. This is life. Which will end. "O death, where is thy sting?" The sting of death is not sin, as St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians. Death has no *meaning*: that is its sting.

He's enough of an existentialist to believe that he can *create* meaning out of nothingness. He's his own god, or he should be. This makes him feel hopeful. And hopelessly unqualified. He must re-create the universe. He must generate his own big bang. Does he have the guts to explode his present life and race at the speed of light toward whatever he's supposed to be?

He considers himself a rationalist. He has no traffic with new-age flimflam. He does not dabble in anything occult, such as numerology. But numbers now start to play on him. $10 + 24 + 42 = 76$. If that's how long he's supposed to live, death is now overdue.

He reads the obituaries daily, with special attention to those older than him. He calculates the difference between his age and that of the deceased. This subtraction becomes a reflex. He imagines that he has 3 more years left, 8, a dozen, 15, 20, even more, should he become a birdlike old geezer like Bertrand Russell, a Nobel Laureate philosopher and social activist who died at 97, still protesting, still inventing himself, still getting into trouble.

He's been healthy all his life. Upper percentile healthy. And his diet is straight out of the booklets in his doctor's waiting room. Where he goes only for annual check-ups. Health insurance is making a bundle on him.

He is tall – lower life expectancy – but he exercises faithfully. He smoked for 25 years, but he quit 35 years ago. It could go either way.

Because colon cancer metastasized to his father's liver, he's had 3 colonoscopies, and each time there were polyps. Not the worrisome variety, but they needed to be removed. As a precaution.

He does not fret about his health, he doesn't fantasize symptoms like Moliere's *Imaginary Invalid*, a role he once played. But at 10:24 and at 10:42, morning and night, he thinks about mortality.

Death is still impersonal, still "it." He's not yet been introduced to death, wouldn't know death if it walked up to him and offered a handful of bones to shake. Is death more or less threatening when it has no face? He does know that when death at long last calls to make his acquaintance, it might be any

season, any day of the week, am or pm. He wouldn't be surprised if it were 10:24 or 10:42.

That he is an actor by trade shapes how he thinks about mortality. Death will be his final exit, the end of a self he created and performed. That death is biologically inevitable and ecologically necessary makes dramaturgical sense because the stage would get awfully crowded without somebody getting the hook every few seconds. But he can't head for the wings simply because others are waiting to come on. "What's my motivation?" the actor in him asks. Only those in despair or suffering intolerable pain have a *motive* to die. So far, he has no reason to die. It's his reason to *live* that clocks seem to question – morning and night.

If he's to make sense of his life closing like a show, he'll have to follow the last instruction of acting-class improvisations: "Find a way to end." Surely there's no need to tie up all the loose threads of his life; he just has to figure out how to stop. He has plenty of experience with those climactic monologues that bring a play to its curtain.

Like the rest of us, he worries when someone launches into a monologue, because monologues do have the potential to go on and on, and he can always tell when one starts, because his early life *was* a monologue. He was an only child, and shy, and his worried parents kept him away from the ruffians who roamed the streets of his urban childhood, so he spent a lot of time talking to himself. It was really what actors call scene work that taught him how to interact, how to listen and respond. He's dialogued with his wife and with a very few friends, he's had artistic exchanges with collaborators, but the conversation in his head is still a monologue, he talks to himself all day long.

What could he possibly say that would bring that conversation with himself to a conclusion? What last words could justify eternal silence?

He decides he must think outside the actor box. Autumn leaves, winter, then new life every spring. Dead trees in the forest: saplings sprout in their rotting trunks. In his garden he imagines himself as compost. A large percentage of a vet's business is euthanasia: when a pet's pain is about to become unbearable, it's time to put it down.

He knows all this. It does not make his own demise meaningful.

The horror of living in a nursing home or in some vegetative state is a persuasive argument for death. He would rather go before that, before he *desires* to die. Better to keel over on stage or in rehearsal, on a walk in the woods, or chopping veggies for his wife – kaplonk. He's heard a lot of people affirm the mercy of going quickly. But escaping a protracted death is not meaning.

What would make death meaningful? If he's unaware of where and when he will die, in what circumstances, how can he endow the unknown with meaning? Even knowing what's going to kill him won't mean anything. There's no meaning in brute biological fact.

His father had a heart attack on the eve of exploratory surgery about his cancer, which the doctor hadn't told him about. No doubt he was stressed by the fact that no one was being honest with him, including his son. "They told you what's wrong with me?" That was the last thing his father asked him, and his answer was a lie. "No, that's why they need to operate, to find out." He'd learned to button up like that from his father, who'd been so silent: about leaving Ireland, the depression, the war, the onset of pains in his abdomen, the blood dripping from his ass into the toilet. No monologist, he. His father

slipped away on life support, in a monthlong coma, an aptly wordless, shapeless coda to his silence.

At age 70. That doesn't seem old anymore. 80 is old. 90. He imagines willing himself to a certain age in the same way as he wills himself to a number of repetitions with his weights. If he tells himself he's going to lift the bar 30 times, he often makes it, or gets close. I'll live to 98, he tells himself, as in 98.6. Keeps that in his head as he presses through each day, lifts each task, repeatedly flexes in response to circumstance. Maybe he'll make it to 98, maybe he won't. Maybe he'll fall short at 97, Bertrand Russell's age. Or 96, 95, 94, 93. 89, 88. 85, 84.

The goal of 98 keeps him pushing.

Two

take two

my date of birth is requested over and over

part of how I identity myself

10/24/42

my birthday appears in fragments

more days than not

often twice a day

as times

10:24

10:42

microwave wristwatch laptop

dashboard as the car starts up

clock radio morning and night

once upon a time

I went to sleep in Paris at 24:42

impossible time

something kablooeey with my travel alarm

it should have been 00:42

24:42 is terrifying

apocalyptic

Matthew: Chapter 24, Verse 42: ye know not what hour your Lord doth come

a song lyric sticks in my head

but who knows where or when

10:24

10:42

stopwatches make me nervous
any numbers about time
the time on that expensive little clock radio advertised everywhere was 10:24
creeps me out
1942 is a street address I would've passed on the way to work
except I took another route
for 24 years
they say people at a dinner party fall silent at twenty after or twenty of the hour
around me a group goes mute at 24 after
or 42 of
this lag doesn't surprise me
I was a late bloomer
I'm almost always a few minutes late
maybe I'll be late dying

10:24 10:42 every day
is this selective attention
paranoia
or a message
is there a difference
I'm mortal I'm going to die blah blah blah
blah blah *what*
I should treasure every moment and enjoy
what
I should make something of the time remaining
what

I shouldn't waste time, I should

what what what

Death is everywhere I look

not just the faces of clocks

acquaintances, colleagues – *their* faces

look at the jacket of an old friend's new book

she's gotten older

their aging is mine

I'm a loner but not an island

every funeral knell rings my bell too

enjoy yourself

apparently it's later than I think

and I think about death a lot

understated

I think about it all the time

more days than not

I sense that the slashes

between the numbers of my birth date

lean urgently forward

toward what's left of life

10/24/42

the twisting leap from 2-4 to 4-2 happens over a slash

in a flash

I was 24 then I was 42

as if by sleight of hand those digits had been switched
some three-card monte
10 of clubs 24 of hearts 42 of diamonds
in his hatband the dealer sports an ace of spades
the death card

I turned 40 and like clockwork
that whole damn year the d-word
had me in tears

but who knows where or when
no longer a love song

10/24/42 is euphonious
the 10 is a solemn toll
tennnn
n is a continuant consonant
you can hold onto it as long as you want
nnnn
unlike life
life's not continuant

24 is an abundant number:
two dozen (bagels, donuts)
and it's accusatory
the number of hours in a day
that can be wasted

and it's relentless 24/7
in math 24 has a number of strange properties I don't really understand
in numerology those born on the 24th are romantic dreamers
prone to focus on the dark side

in Japan the number 42 is unlucky
because the numerals sound like
“unto death”

Juliet's potion makes her appear dead
two-and-forty hours
in that time-obsessed headlong play
but in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*
42 is “The Answer
to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything”
no one really knows what the question is
so the answer is meaningless

laptop microwave radio wrist
my eye is addicted to time
at 10:24 in the morning I'm often already late
suddenly it's 10:42 at night
what's the rush?
yet the clock takes its time
creeps in this petty pace
from day to day
to the last syllable of recorded time
on the way to dusty death

until once again
it's 10:24 or 10:42
which *can't* be signifying nothing

does this mean I've had enough
that I'm no longer interested in tomorrow
and tomorrow and tomorrow
out out brief candle, is that it?
because I know as well as Macbeth
damn!

that the poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage
will soon exit and be heard no more –
quick as a superstitious actor can turn round and spit
if he's slipped and said aloud the cursèd name of the Scottish king

I'm directing that play whose name I cannot speak
for a Shakespeare company
the last sword fight has to start
the artistic director tells me
between 10:20 and 10:25
so that the curtain call begins at 10:40
give or take a minute or two
tragedies should be timely
so that the audience can get home at a decent hour
throughout rehearsals the stage manager checked her stopwatch
and reported to me how long the show was running
opening night Macduff re-entered

holding the villain's head aloft
squeezed the hidden blood bag
the neck spurted a red trail
someone in the audience gasped
I looked down at my watch

10:42

even with the slow fade of lights
the show came down just in time
give or take a minute or two

Three

Take three.

Clocks are everywhere, and I need not ask for whom they tick. They tick for me.

My face in the bathroom mirror is another clock, ticking as I shave or brush my teeth. When I haven't slept well, the bags under my eyes suggest that life has exhausted me. I could admire them as badges of my artistic and existential struggle if they were less generic, more distinctively mine. But they're like the bags that any young actor might draw on his face so as to age up a character, like the baggage time draws on all our faces. Mine shrink a little with a good night's sleep, as if rest bought me back some time.

What alarms me is how my face has slid off the cliff of my cheekbones. I take little comfort in the fact that incipient jowls have softened the absurdity of my long, narrow jawline. And I fretfully monitor the area under my chin where a dewlap might someday drop. Part of my pre-shave ritual is to stick my tongue out as if I were a yogi making the lion face, so that the cords of my neck stand out and the skin under my skull is momentarily taut. I avoid tilting my head sidewise, a move that drops a drooping cheek and makes me feel like I'm falling.

I'd like to believe it's the tensions of the young that keep their faces so firm – their anxiety about ambitions – whereas my hard-earned acceptance of my limits has calmed me down, allowed my features to relax. The settling of my face might then be wisdom more than calamity – something acquired, not cells collapsing and giving in to gravity, sinking toward the grave.

There's a painting of a deserted urban street by Edward Hopper called "Early Sunday Morning." Red brick buildings, two stories, apartments above

storefronts, one of them a barbershop. The brick is aglow with dawn light from the right of the painting, which makes a fire hydrant near the curb cast a shadow three times its height. Behind that, across the whole painting, right down the middle of the sidewalk, runs a soft-edged black band. It takes a while to realize it's the shadow of a telephone pole you don't see because it's outside the frame.

My unseen death now casts a long shadow across my life. Every morning it enters the picture, and then it shrinks as the day proceeds, until at sunset another unseen pole sheds an answering shadow from the other side of my life. That shadow is my birth. 10/24/42.

Almost every day my eye lands on a clock and notices that it is 10:24 or 10:42. Many days this happens more than once, since 10:24 and 10:42 occur twice daily, at times while I'm awake and active. I have never studied statistics, but I'm certain that the frequency with which I notice these times is way beyond the probabilities of chance. It cannot be an accident that every day my birthday is announced on the face of a clock – let's *say* it happens every day, because that is the felt experience. More than once a day. It cannot be coincidence. Those ubiquitous ads for the Bose wave radio, in which the time is 10:24: maybe *that's* coincidence. Maybe.

I'm hyper-aware of clocks in my biosphere. I still wear time on my wrist, though I've switched it from left to right, to remind me I'm on the other side of my life. At the beginning and end of every day there's the radio alarm, which is relentlessly there whenever I wake during the night. In the kitchen there's the wall clock, the oven clock, the microwave, even the coffee pot. On my desk a travel alarm waits expectantly for its next trip. Time lurks insistently in the upper right corner of my laptop screen, on the dashboard of my car and the

photocopier, the wall of the rehearsal hall, a bank sign at the strip mall, the Jiffy Lube waiting room every three thousand miles.

It's clear that I'm prompted by some subliminal awareness of time to notice when my birthday is clocked. Selective attention. Attention to what? That is the question. It's actually easy to answer.

There's not a day goes by when I do not think of death: so Ingmar Bergman was quoted in his obituary in the *Times*, which noted that his personality, though he obviously experienced the anxieties characteristic of his many dark films, was not glum or melancholy. On the contrary, Bergman delighted in his work. I've seen his gaiety as a director in a documentary about the making of one of his last films. He was somewhere in his eighties. Having a ball on the set. So the existential orientation that the philosopher Heidegger called "being-toward-death" is not morbid in spirit. Being-toward-death is about how to *live*.

My awareness of 10:24 and 10:42 has been going on like clockwork for decades. When I turned 40, for a calendar year my eyes moistened at any mention of mortality – or references to endings of any sort: careers, relationships, rock bands, eras, the closing of shows. As if a biological alarm clock had gone off and rung for 12 months. As if I sensed that the sun had passed its zenith and begun to set. A very long, slow sunset, with plenty of opportunities to peek at the clock, any clock, every clock.

Shortly after I turned 40, I discovered Philip Larkin, a poet of death – "the anaesthetic from which none come round," as he once called it. For Larkin, death is "what we know, / Have always known, know that we can't escape, / Yet can't accept." Around the same time, I got an offer to play King Lear, something I *had* to accept, because it's a great role, and because, though I didn't realize it at the time, I needed to get *inside* death. I'd died on stage before,

quite a few times – my first three roles in college! – but always prematurely. For all that he’s in spirit infantile, Lear dies at a ripe old age, and the opportunity to play him was a chance to mask my embarrassing midlife teariness and exploit my new raw relationship to death. So I died all that summer in Idaho, and again that fall in Boston, and I wept as I died, and the audience wept, and I understood nothing except the play’s insistence that we will one day come to nothing – a word that recurs and echoes in the play. In the opening scene, Lear asks his three daughters to declare their love in order to earn shares of his kingdom. Cordelia, the youngest, is too honest to b.s. her father as her sisters have, but Lear demands that she speak. “What can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters?” Cordelia hesitates, and then her answer launches the tragedy. “Nothing,” she says. “Nothing will come of nothing” – and he’s right: at the end of the play they will both be nothing: dead. At the climax of his final scene, Lear commands those on stage and in the audience to look at the body of Cordelia, who has been hanged. “Look at her! Look there, look there.” He thinks he can see her lips tremble with breath, but when we look it’s quite clear she’s dead. Which another part of Lear knows, of course: “I know when one is dead and when one lives. She’s dead as earth.” In my fortieth year, I got those monosyllables, how relentlessly they insisted on the fact of death.

Seeing 10:24 daily, or 10:42, or both, happens no matter how preoccupied I am. As I argue an important point at a meeting, as I rehearse a compelling moment, as I wait to go on for a final scene, there it is: 10:24. Or in the middle of memorizing a mesmerizing text, it’s 10:42. I guess I’ve learned to guess when it is one or another of those significant times. Times signifying that time is short, so get on with it, get it done, say it, write it, get to the end of the

sentence, the paragraph, the story, get to the *point*. Whatever the point may be. I suppose if I knew that, *really* knew that, I wouldn't need to look at the clock. My tragic flaw, if a commonplace life like mine can be a tragedy, is that I don't know what use it is to know that I am dying. For all I know that life is short, I don't get it done, I don't get on with it, because I don't know what "it" is.

Isn't that remarkable? To have lived this long and have no idea what the *point* of living is? To wonder still if there *is* a point?

A few years after I turned 40, I gave up what I was doing – gave up acting, my theater company, my whole career, my identity – and spent all the money I had on a ten-month trip around the world. Backpacking as an Aussie student might, something I'd never done in my youth, misspent on adult activities like working to support myself. I hadn't had the money for a middle-class youth, and I hadn't had the gumption or the savvy to be young on the cheap. I planned to make up for this with a vengeance. Hitting the road would be a chance to clear my head, gain perspective, ready myself to start over. France, Spain, Morocco, Vienna, Budapest, the Dalmatian coast, Greece and an island called Ikaria, Istanbul, Jerusalem, Cairo, New Delhi, Calcutta, Kashmir, Katmandu, Bangkok and Phuket, Hong Kong and Macao, Canton, Tokyo, Kyoto, Niigata, Hawaii, L.A. I did a kind of Zen meditation almost every day.

I learned precious little about my past or future, but I spend a lot of time living in what I thought was the present. I did learn (this is pre-iPod, pre-shuffle) that the songs popping into my head were not random. Strolling through a kasbah, trekking up a mountain, pressed against the dirty window of a packed third-class railcar, it often happened that a song would play on my inner radio. Whenever I didn't want to do something, for example, I'd hear an old novelty song from 1947: "Bingo, bango, bongo, I don't want to leave the Congo, oh no, no, no, no, no, no..." Others on my playlist were harder to

decipher, but if I was diligent about pursuing the lyrics (or the rhythmic or melodic message), I could usually decipher how the song was relevant to the moment: my mood, my circumstances, my sense of discovery – or, no matter where I was, my sense of being totally lost.

Years later, the recurrence of 10:24 and 10:42 came to me like the relentless refrain of a song I'm obsessing on, like one of those god-awful jingles that won't shut up. Or like a music cue in a show I'm working on, which plays over and over all day, which underscores conversations, meetings, walks, which gets louder as I'm falling asleep, which plays in my dreams and is on when I wake up.

For the sound score of a show she was directing, my wife listened to songs by great female stylists. One was Lena Horne, her solo Broadway show album. I was struck by Lena's hot rendition of a very un-torchy song from *Oklahoma*, "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top," in which she made the words very sexy. I woke up one night and the tune started playing in my head, over and over. I lay there trying to figure out why, but the lyrics would not come to me, only fragments and the opening lines.

Chicks and ducks and geese better scurry

When I take you out in the surrey,

When I take you out in the surrey with the fringe on top.

Dah dah dah dah dadadadada

... dashboard's genuine leather

Something something change in the weather

Why is my jukebox playing this over and over?

Two days later, the song starts up again while I'm on line, I google the lyrics and there it is on YouTube: a scene in which whatshisname imagines driving whatshername in the surrey, past a surrealist landscape of dancing cats

and dogs, harmonizing birds and frogs, and the wind and the river are both whispering, over and over:

Don't you wish you'd go on forever?

Don't you wish you'd go on forever?

Don't you wish you'd go on forever?

And you'd never stop

In that shiny little surrey with the fringe on the top!

10:24, 10:42: what does this recurrence really mean? I was born, I'm alive, I'm going to die. Especially, at certain times of the day, I'm reminded that I'm going to die. And that I should *do* something about this certainty. Make sense of it, as I might make sense of a song in my head. Death: what do I make of it? What do I *do* about it? That is the question. "To be or not to be, that is the question." It's a speech about taking action.

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them.

But, but, but. Action is a problem for Hamlet. The native hue of my resolution is as sickly as his, it seems. I don't *act* about death. Instead, my pale cast of thought dwells on the fact that I am fated not to be. In monologues like this. A different kind of action called acting. It's a pity I never played *Hamlet*.

Four

Take four.

I'm suited to Lear because when I decide to do something, my instinct is to do it right away. That's close enough to rashness to make the role a natural fit. I may not be suited to Hamlet. I'm certainly capable of paralysis – over certain casting decisions when I direct, for example, and I typically have one scapegoat bit of business on my agenda about which I procrastinate for an absurdly long period, even as I busily take care of everything else. But when it comes to killing an uncle who poisoned my father, I don't dawdle. Action is not my problem.

My gut reaction to anything that's nakedly a waste of time is negative. I have trouble idling. Those ads of people prostrate poolside are lost on me. I don't enjoy games. I am impatient with chatter, small talk. Something I hate about myself is that I endure so much of it, without making the effort, as fierce souls admirably do, to raise the conversation to a worthwhile level of discourse. Instead I go silent, and the clock ticks. The clock ticks. Why not come out with it and say, "Look, can we talk about something that matters – like, say, that we're both going to die? If not, let's just shut up." What, after all, can be said about death?

I know, I know, this is a *monologue* about death. Mortality blah blah blah. Why not just quietly wait it out?

Because silence is what we resort to when we don't want to talk about something. And because I worry about death – or rather, I worry what I should *tell* myself about death. And the only way to find that out, I suppose, is to keep talking.

I think about death every day not because I'm morbid, but because I don't want to die mindlessly. An unexamined death is not worth dying. I don't

want to ignore the fact that I'm going to die, or repress it, flee it, and then have it surprise me. I don't want to die not knowing what to make of it. I want to have some idea of what I'm doing when I die. I don't expect to be at peace with the fact of death – that will not do it justice. But I don't want to die foolishly, helplessly, passively. If I have some notion of what dying means, if I've figured out what I think and feel about nonexistence, I'll have that much control over my death. Even as it sneaks up on me.

I'm quite healthy. It's not as though I've been diagnosed with something fatal and decided to talk about it. I'm simply mortal. From a statistical point of view, I'm *more* mortal than those of you who are younger or shorter or women. Those of you who never smoked. Those of you who escaped the unhealthy diet of my youth. Those of you without the spontaneous gene mutation that will allow my cancer to flourish, or the immune system glitch that will kill me as it pulls out all stops to keep me alive.

Being mortal makes me feel a bit fragile at times – fragile the way we feel whenever a medical procedure reminds us that we are blood and guts and brain encased by bone and muscle and skin. Fragile the way we feel when we are almost hit by a car. Fragile when we learn that so-and-so is gone and really take it in. *Really*.

I will leave no children, no company, no building or town named after me. There'll be boxes of scripts and research, a few videos, some print photos and slides, and digital-age photos of shows on discs for a time. Some records in municipal archives. My doctor's computer files. All these traces of me will someday be purged as trash or exiled to a distant cloud. Even my web identity will fade: google me a century from now and you'll find lots of people with my

name, but you're not likely to have the patience to find me. How many times can you hit *Next? Gone* even in the ether.

Gone like a performance of something unrecorded will be gone after all those on stage and in the audience are dead.

I've thought about death (and read or heard or remembered or imagined something about death) every day since I turned 40. It was as if the alarm on my biological clock had gone off to wake me up. All that year my eyes glistened at the mention of death or dying or Kübler-Ross and her five stages of grief. That was the year I realized that life itself was terminal, and I began to mourn myself.

Any English derivative from *mors*, the Latin word for death, would get to me. This is not as pretentious as it sounds; I'd studied Latin four years in high school, four semesters in college. In my fortieth year I declined the noun *mors* for twelve months, as I parsed my connections to it. Nominative case: *mors*, when death is the subject, as it so often is. Genitive: *mortis*: of death, what we call the possessive case, to be used when thinking of some quality that belongs to death, like the rigor of *rigor mortis*, which sets in shortly after the hour of death, the *hora mortis* mentioned in the *Ave Maria*, the hour of all our lives that death will possess. *Morti* is the dative case, to be used if I wanted to do something *for* death, or *to* death, as if I possibly could. The accusative is *mortem*, when death is the object of a verb, for example, "I don't do death" or "don'tcha love death," I fear death, you singular fear death, he/she/it fears death, we, you plural, they fear death. Fill-in-the-action death, in other words, if you have any idea at all what to do. *Morte* is the ablative case, when death is linked to us by a preposition: I'm talking *about* death, nothing is certain *except* death, since the tax code occasionally changes. Prepositions also locate death in

time and space: *after* death there is nothing, death lies *before* us as we move *toward* it until it is *upon* us, and even *at the moment of* death, *during* death, when we are so to speak *inside* it, it may be metaphorically *beyond* us; yet none of this prepositional positioning gets me *into* death. And the ablative bonds us *with* death in other ways: *because of* death, *in spite of* death, and even possibilities beyond our ken: *instead of* death, for example, or I have nothing *against* death, I can't live *without* it.

Which is nonsense, because I find it hard to live *with* death. I *struggle* with death, disarmed by the knowledge that this is a war I cannot win. I'd like to believe there might be some way to resolve my conflict with mortality. Terms of surrender that I can live with. *Die* with.

Latin also has a vocative case, for direct address, as in "O Death, where is thy sting?" In the Latin of the Vulgate bible: "Ubi est, mors, acuteus tuus?" "Mors" is the vocative case here. And notice that "tuus" – "thy" – is the familiar second person pronoun: *thy* sting, because death is no stranger to us, and there's no need to be formal when we speak to it.

"Where is thy sting?" That's a question that makes no sense unless you believe that a Messiah has secured victory over death. Resurrection, immortality. I have no faith of that sort. Well, I do: I *believe* that when I go, I'll be gone. Period. Or exclamation point, ellipsis, dash: the punctuation doesn't matter, as long as you understand that for me, the punctuation of death is final.

Time gives us no choice but to spend it. 10/24/42 is the date when I started spending time. I've spent a long time spending time.

Every day now I open the paper and glance first at ages in obituaries: how much time did she have, how many years did he live? Every day I look at the clock, repeatedly, as we are inclined to do in our ticking world. And every

day, or nearly so, I see on a clock that the time is 10:24 or 10:42, and I am reminded that my youth is long gone.

Life is brief,

It shortly ends.

Life is brief,

It shortly ends.

Death comes quickly,

Grabs us cruelly,

And we all go, no one's spared.

And we all go, no one's spared.

That's the third verse of a centuries-old student drinking song, which begins, in its original Latin:

Gaudeamus igitur

Iuvenes dum sumus.

Let us party

while we're young

Back then I'd have been ancient. But these days, when 70 is the new 50, I'm late middle-aged. Or young old. Soon enough I'll be middle old, and maybe I'll make it to the new old old, if I stay in shape and don't get holes in my brain from mad cow disease or, more likely, tangles of plaque or the mini-strokes that robbed my mother of her short-term memory. In 2042 I would, on October 24, be 100. Old old old. Of course, long life means I'll probably get cancer, but who knows where or when, as the song goes.

I sound like a hypochondriac, but I'm not, I don't really worry about my health, I don't have time for that, because right here in my upper abdomen, in my hypochondrios, traditionally the seat of melancholy, I worry not about my health but about my death. What I should *tell* myself about dying. So I keep

talking. But mostly I keep it to myself. This monologue is a lot like my interior monologue nowadays.

Medieval Christianity encouraged believers to be mindful of the brevity of life and the inevitability of death. Earthly goods and pursuits are transient, and we should detach ourselves from them as we prepare for the afterlife. In the Renaissance, saints were sometimes pictured with skulls on their desks, as visual reminders of death, or *memento mori*. This Latin phrase is usually translated as “Remember that you will die,” or “Remember you must die,” although the literal translation, since “mori” is the infinitive form of the Latin verb, is simply “Remember to die.” As if I could possibly forget. 10:24, 10:42 has become my *memento mori*, my daily reminder of mortality. My skull is the face of any clock where I see a fragment of my birthday. Both 10:24 and 10:42 will occur tonight, as sure as death, and chances are I’ll spot one or another of them. Some death-mindful synapse prompts me to look. Some timer in my brain senses *when* I should look. Some part of me urges the rest of me to remember that I came into the world at a particular time – 10/24/42 – and that the time of my death will be just as particular.

My situation could be worse. Clocks could be broadcasting the time or date of my *death*. I’m not a numerologist – I don’t believe in numbers as mystical messages. But if I did, I suppose I’d be suspicious if I daily noticed clocks at 5:12 am and pm, let’s say, a time that halves 10:24. It might be an omen. Or I might speculate at 21 minutes after noon, 12:21, which halves the numbers 24 and 42, that if I am to die on December 21, I should open my Christmas presents early that year, unless the 21 is 2021, which means I’ll be silent as crowds round the globe cheer the arrival of 2022.

Do I sound obsessed? At the very least, greatly preoccupied? But that implies that I am *distracted* by death, distracted from more important things. What's more important than death? Life, yes, *life* is more important, but thinking about death *is* thinking about life. And the end of life. And, meanwhile, living well.

But all you've been talking about is death, you may be thinking. Get a life. Focus on the present moment, whatever you're doing right now.

This monologue is what I'm doing right now. This is more important than death? Talking to you? I don't even *know* most of you. And for all that my mortality's dead certain, can you relate to the *idea* of my death? It's too abstract – no backstory, no scenery, no soundtrack, none of the stuff of vicarious experience. Without knowing the precise circumstances, without a story about the very moment at which my clock stops forever and it no longer matters to me what time it is or isn't, can you possibly care?

You care about yourselves. That's not an accusation of self-centeredness. It's an affirmation of our connection. We're all in this together.

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent ...; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less ...; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

You may not feel mystically connected to me like John Donne. You may not hear me as a *memento mori*, a reminder of your own fate. But if you look at a clock anytime soon and it says 10:24 or 10:42, do not send to know for whom that time is a message. It's a message for thee. For all of us. All the time. Incessantly. As I speak. As I speak this monologue.