

a bunch of different ways i'd like to die

Tim McDonough

2011, 2017

10.28.20

Planting cabbages

Where to begin? At the beginning. “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. ...

“And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

“And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. ...

“And the Lord God said unto Adam, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”

Where to end? In a garden, of course. “I want death to find me planting my cabbages.” That’s Michel de Montaigne, in an essay written in 1580, “To Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die,” in which he argued that we should have “nothing so frequent in our thoughts as death.” Knowing death will weaken its power over us, by disarming death of its novelty and strangeness. Meanwhile, we should keep ourselves busy to the very last – and

what better way than by pursuing Adam's profession, gardening.

I imagine Death knocking on my door. The days of door-to-door salesmen are long gone, and of course death is not an easy sell, so this knock is perhaps more like UPS or FedEx come to deliver death, which has been backordered since birth, and – insult to injury – Death wants me to sign for it.

Death knocks, in any case, and I do not answer, because I am out in the garden, planting my cabbages. Well, not cabbages, I've never planted cabbages, though I've planted lots of things, including homey items, which I take it to be Michel's point. He hopes he will die doing something useful, ordinary, humble, with dirt under his fingernails, and when he keels over he wants to return unto the ground, with its comforting scent making a last trip into the olfactory region of his good-and-evil-knowing brain, which will happily associate dying with digging, trimming the roots of a pot-bound plant, settling it into a hole, mulching, watering and fertilizing, waiting and watching and visiting, smiling as a parent might at a flourishing child.

I don't have children, but I have a large family of trees, shrubs, perennials, and vines that bloom March to October, and there are camellia, hellebores, and early bulbs that flower the other months. So there'll be something blossoming whenever Death arrives. Like Montaigne, I hope to be planting, so that when Death comes around the corner of the house to find me, I'm on my hands and knees, my eyes *open*, just as the serpent promised, the ground under me anything but cursed.

Death hands me my demise. One last shaky signature acknowledges delivery, and with that my tension eases, as I let go my lifelong compulsion to hold myself together. My systems slide into the slower rhythm of the roots below me. I'll gladly give myself to my garden, the moisture in me and the minerals, the chemicals I no longer need. The fluids we purge as we decompose are super fertilizers.

If I were left in peace, I'd soon enough be a mindless mound of nutrients, six feet of potting for seeds that fly to me, seeds shat on me by birds, seeds in the fur of herbivores who scurry up and down me as they graze. Yes, I'm surrounded by thorns and thistles, evils now safe from my weeding. But eventually I'm in bloom, and good for food, and pleasant to the eyes: my emerging skull is a grinning, mossy gargoyle, and I *am* returned to dust, crawling with new life.

A last trip to NYC

Or I take a last trip to New York City. I've been going there with a very particular excitement since I was a boy growing up in nowhere New Jersey. The Bronx Zoo, Radio City Music Hall, holiday window displays on Fifth Avenue, the Horn and Hardart Automat with zillions of little glass doors behind which were all the sandwiches ever invented and slices of every kind of pie. The noise, the buzz, the rush, the urgency, the anticipation, the inner glow that only out-of-towners know. Wherever I was living and whatever I was doing, New York has always been a city of release. So I go there for my last getaway, my final escape from life. New York! City of possibilities!

I could walk through Times Square at 5pm, as the winter dusk makes the neon come alive, with busy folk streaming by me, elbow to elbow. I might even die standing up, supported by an ensemble of New Yorkers - like a student actor in a trust exercise, who gives his body over to his classmates, his weight shifting this way and that, held up by many hands, hips, shoulders, backs, chests, until I no longer fear falling, no longer fear anything - until no longer is all I am, my remains buoyed up by a flood of New Yorkers in a hurry to get somewhere, all unaware that this old guy in their way has already gotten there.

Or it could happen on a subway, one of the longer lines that takes me on a multicultural journey to worlds I've never visited: passengers speaking languages I've never heard, spices on their breaths I haven't tasted, otherworldly music bleeding from buds in their ears. All the places I haven't been! I'll die still craving travel. To get out of New Jersey, out of provincial America, out of my head, *out*, to go places: it's insatiable, this hunger. Exhausting. Someone in the crowded subway car will offer me a seat. I gratefully accept, because I'm now tired of being on my feet, finally ready in this strenuous city to stop. Maybe my last wish, as the train pulls into a station,

somewhere I've never been, will be to wander off into a neighborhood for which I have no map. I will want to get up. My muscles will fire to get me up. I stare at the doors opening. I imagine walking through them. I watch them shut. Above my head a sign: Never try to hold closing doors open.

Or maybe I'll take in a show, something I really want to see, a performance that makes me proud of what I've done with my working life. I'll leave my wallet in the bag stored at the hotel, and I'll fold up a headshot into quarters so it fits into a pocket; on the back of it my life in the theater on a sheet of paper 8 by 10. The first thing they'll know about me is that I was an actor. My seat will be in the middle of a row - so people don't have to step over me when the show is over. After I read the cast bios - like so many incomplete obituaries - I close the *Playbill* as the lights dim and my anticipation brightens: that aching hope as the curtain rises for meaning and a shape that makes more sense than the shape of our lives. It doesn't really matter if I make it to the end of the show, or even to the second act. What matters is that I die engrossed, eager to know what happens next and how and why. I want to die alive because the performances are alive, as the program slips from my lap.

A final French feast

Or for my last meals my wife and I fly to France. Our dinners are leisurely. Slow food that makes my last days longer. But we decide that since I'm headed for the exit, the way for me to *quitter la scène*, "leave the stage" *en français*, is gourmet take-out. My wife brings her picnic backpack, with cheerful dishes, cloth napkins, and a colorful Provençal tablecloth that we spread out on a bench in a park, or on a bank by the River Seine, the Loire, the Mediterranean, wherever we happen to be. We *pique-nique*, as the French word suggests, by picking at small things. We digest till it is time to sleep.

I'd like to go with dinner scraps still in front of us. A broken baguette. A nearly empty bottle of wine. Our dishes daubed with several colorful sauces. A few bones, a mushroom, a couple of bites of beans and leeks and chard. What's left of the paté, the rind of a marbled cheese, half a pear. One bite of a flaky sweet left on a napkin. Like that: a still life of my last meal, what the French call a *nature morte*, and me dead too, part of the larger canvas, quite satisfied, and, naturally, quite still.

Trek

I started life in a city, on a block of tenement stoops and corner stores, hide-and-seek behind cars and garbage cans, stickball in the streets. I was *thirty*-something when I discovered the woods. When I first felt the tensions of the stupid way we live drain out of me on a narrow, rocky trail that made it important to watch my step, in-between child-like glances upward at the calming trees that made my worries silly.

What I've never done is walk into a wilderness. Maybe I should do that at the end. A one-way trek, destination unknown. After all my imaginings of where I might die, it's attractive to think that the place might be unknown - not random, not senseless, not any old where. But unknown. Which is not scary because I'm making it unknown. You know how elephants go off to die? Or, closer to home, a cat? Like that.

I won't need a map or compass, because I won't be going anywhere particular. In life, I've always pushed toward destinations. Now I can let myself get lost.

What will I pack in? A bag of peanut butter sandwiches, the end of a long, long line of lunches since the prehistory of my unremembered years. Some new stuff: a single-origin coffee I've never tasted, a couple of new high-gravity beers. One more bag of homemade trail mix. Including dried prunes, why go constipated?

When I know I'm ready, I'll set out on my last hike, very early, so I have all day long to die, somewhere out there - I'll know where when I get there. Maybe I'll make it to a ledge with a view and hunch forward so that at the end I fall into the panorama. Or I'm next to a lake, bugs skating, swallows swerving, as the day and I fade. Or I'm still trying to get wherever, leaning against a mossy fallen trunk, maybe, because I'm feeling tired. Could be I'll have a moment to look about for what we call a final resting place. Here?

There? Go back to that nice spot I passed earlier, or will something a little way ahead be just right? Decisions, decisions, to the very end. Unless I just lift a hiking boot to take my next step and it never comes down. The rest of me comes down instead.

My wife will know exactly where I am: out there somewhere. Really *there*. Were I alive, I'd be happy and at peace. But I'll just be dead.

For whom the bell tolls

Is this narcissistic or what! All these death scenes are about *him*.

Well: I was an only child who grew up without cousins or playmates, so I spent a lot of time with myself. A lot of time on the peripheries of life, observing. And staring at myself in mirrors and shop windows, and the occasional pool, not because I was in love with myself like Narcissus, but because I did not like what I saw.

Only children like me who grow up rather withdrawn and self-preoccupied - well, they might not score well on empathy tests, you would think. They might not tune in to people as easily as those who have siblings and multiple circles of friends. They might find it harder to escape their own pathways and to comprehend those taken by others. All that might be true, how would I know? But maybe *some* only people spend a whole lot of time imagining what it would be like to be other than only, maybe they get good at it, maybe it helps them to see that they are outsiders, maybe they become actors who put on others' shoes and walk in others' footsteps and learn to feel for them from the inside. Maybe that's their only way to be less only. One of the reasons I became an actor was to escape myself.

But I do know that death is always about *me*. Every death. The death of a celebrity, the obituary of a stranger, the victim of a random attack on the front page, road kill on the drive home, withered annuals on the front porch, an affecting death scene in a play or novel. All these speak to me of my mortality, and this connection seems so natural that I do not fault myself. When I cry at a funeral, I grieve not only for the deceased but also for myself, for all of us, for the fact of death. The brute fact. The brutal fact. So I have to believe that the fact of my own death - *imagined* right now, inevitably *real* sometime later - might mean something to you.

When the funeral bell tolls for me, it tolls for thee. I *am* in fact a

narcissist, but this monologue is not for me. Well, it is, but you know what I mean. Our lives are more connected than we admit.

We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep.

We're all in this together. My mortality is yours. Sure as Shakespeare.

Performing my death

A common actor nightmare: you're in the wings, you're about to go onstage – but you haven't rehearsed, or haven't bothered to learn your lines, or don't even know what the play is. The anxiety, the dread, the panic, the paralysis of not being prepared just as your cue to enter is spoken! Stage fright is not knowing what's next.

Another actor nightmare: you're rushing from your dressing room to get to the stage in time for your cue, which is fast approaching, and the route is impossibly complex: down several endless halls, turn right, turn left, up three steep flights, through a series of doors, more halls, more stairs, and now you're lost. Stage fright is not knowing how to get there.

I've learned as an actor that it's up to me to know what's next and how to get myself there, infallibly, in every show. That's an actor's craft, and his salvation: how to create a foolproof scenario. When I don't know what comes next and how to get there, that's the stuff of nightmares.

It has naturally occurred to me that stage fright is likely to grip me as I stand in the wings of death, waiting for my cue – not to enter but to exit. I really don't know what's going to happen. Well, I know: I die. But I don't know the plot: *where* I'll be dying, or when, or *how*. And much worse, I have no idea how I'll react. I haven't rehearsed, I haven't bothered to learn my lines. It's time for my last words – and I'm going to *improvise?*

I know, I know, real death is never scripted. We're always winging it. A falling limb, texting driver, snake on the trail, tumor in the colon, mutated gene, hospital infection, mysterious virus from the other side of the globe, plague from rat shit in a cereal box, making a really stupid choice in a dangerous situation, a stray bullet. The givens of death are often so absurdly random, how can we make sense of them? Unless we have a knack for putting silly circumstances together – like those improvisers who ask the audience for

a hobby, a relationship, and a vegetable. And then they create a scene. Can I have a place, please? A time of day? A body part that's in excruciating pain?

The fact is that I'm not very good at improv. That's why I'm not very good at life, and why I went into the theater, where I can live each moment without the anxiety of uncertainty, because I know for sure what's going to happen and how to get myself there. Only onstage have I had the safety and security, the sanctuary of a plot. Only in plays have I escaped improvisation. If I have a good game plan for my death, if I rehearse, then maybe when the time comes, I won't freak out. I'll perform my final scene well.

This aspiration may strike you as something peculiar – an actor's delusion, born of a compulsion to perform. Worse, it may seem dishonest to rehearse the end of my life as if it were a show: how terrible to *fake* my death, *pretend* my last moments, instead of being honest and real. Just die, you may be thinking. Stop playacting and simply *die*.

But, you see, I believe in performing. I believe that we all perform, all the time, that there's nothing *but* performance. We're all in the acting biz, just as surely as we're all in the mortality biz. It's the human condition. *I* am a performance; my *self* is a performance. I developed who I am in the rehearsal hall of life. I cannot be myself *without* performing myself. Not because I'm an actor, but because I'm human – and conscious. Consciousness is nothing if not an audience. And as soon as there's an audience, there's performance.

That I perform my life doesn't make me a faker. I *can* be genuine: I can give honest performances. I'd like to give an honest performance of my death. That means I must rehearse, so that I'm prepared, if I get the chance, to *live* my death – which is to say, perform it. Well. If I'm nothing else, I'm an actor. Why act badly at the very end?

Corpsing

It could even happen in performance. I'd *rather* die onstage than off.

Not because it would be more dramatic, but because I'd have more control of it.

I'm performing a monologue, let's say. Like this one. I notice a numbness creeping down my left arm. I look up, and you look back at me: there is a long pause. I know now that the dull pain in my back, the one I could feel driving here, is emanating not from a disk but from my heart, which has decided to break on stage, in a performance, so that I can go as I have lived, which will be fine by me - if I can remember what comes next. When an actor forgets a line, the British say he's corpsing. I really don't want to corpse while I'm corpsing.

You stare at me, concerned, of course, because you are now *convinced* that I am corpsing. Little do you know. I stare back. I watch, patiently, waiting for someone with the presence of mind to turn the damn cellphone back on and dial 911.

Firs

Or ten years from now, let's say, I'm in Portland. In Oregon, land of physician-assisted death with dignity. I've been booked by a theater to play – well, there aren't a whole lot of roles for me at this stage, let's say it's Firs, in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* – the old servant who comes on at the very end after everyone has gone and the mansion has been locked up. He's been carelessly left behind. He has a few things to say, not a proper speech, more like an old man muttering to himself as he putters about. We hear axes as workmen begin to cut down the cherry orchard. Firs has been quite ill and he needs to sit, then he lies down. He lets fly one last irritated epithet, aimed at himself. He stops moving. We hear for the second time in the play the mysterious sound of a string breaking, and we sense he's gone. Death as an image of – well, death. The curtain falls.

I've chosen this play because my death will be the very last event, so as to avoid the awkwardness of other actors traipsing on for the next scene only to discover: oops! Too unprofessional. And I wait till closing night, so as to spare my understudy.

While in Portland, I take advantage of the state's willingness to let me make a choice about my fatal condition and its nasty prognosis. I've quizzed the physician about how much time I will have after I drink the cocktail, and I carefully calculate when in the performance I should take it. I forego the palliatives, so as to keep my mind clear. The pain will be playable, and I'd like to end my career on a strong note. To exit this life on cue.

The heroine Ranevskaya and the rest of the company leave the stage, their voices still audible as they climb into carriages, and we hear the clip clop of horses as I enter. I'm a little light-headed, but I've rehearsed for weeks a path that keeps me close to the walls and furniture, and I've created moments

throughout the show which prepare the audience for the toxic symptoms described to me. To die carefully, as if it mattered, that's a good death.

The lights begin to fade.

I get myself center stage for the last image, my short breaths are counterpoint to the staccato chopping of trees, and as the lights slowly fade, I fade with them. In the creeping dark the audience stares at me. I stare back: these are the last faces I'll see. I recognize them, these familiar strangers, people I don't know with whom I'm intimate. I'm glad for their company as my gaze glazes over. I'm grateful for eyes on me as *my* eyes fail. The performer in me is live even as muscles and lungs, heart and brain go to black.

In the dark, dead Firs is barely visible.

And then, perhaps, nothing. No reflexive applause. The very best reward for actors is silence. The hush of the seriously engaged, their eyes wide and mouths slightly open, looking stunned, if one could see them. The audience sits quietly, introspectively, knowing we die alone, knowing we are *not* alone because we *all* die. In that communal silence that actors *live* for, I will be dead.

Lights bump up.

This will not be the first curtain call I have missed, but it will be my last. The bit players - party guests and unnamed servants - who notice everything because they have so little else to do, notice immediately as they come on to heartfelt applause that I am still there, still playing dead. As they retreat upstage to let the next group take their bow, it may occur to one of them to nudge me in passing, on the chance that the old guy has fallen asleep. I don't budge. When the group with whom I'm supposed take my bow lines up in the wings, they realize I'm missing, then spot me convincingly slumped on the set. They arrive downstage alarmed. Pairs of lovers bound on, traumatized; they embrace promiscuously to console each other. By now it has dawned on the

audience that this curtain call with Firs dead center is not some avant-garde inspiration, that the whole cast is not going to split after a company bow and gesture to me to pop up like Lazarus. When the grande-dame leading lady receives a closing night bouquet, she crosses to me, makes a deep curtsy, and graciously places the flowers on my corpse.

Just for a moment the theater's Managing Director imagines that my body might be given a public viewing on the set, that the city's critics might each write a human-interest story - *with a mention of upcoming shows*. But then it occurs to her that subscribers might be leery of taking their seats for the rest of the season, what with *King Lear*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Wit*, *Death of a Fucking Salesman*, and that creepy new musical about Tolstoy's last days.

Vanitas

Or I make my death into performance art. I'd need a space that could be booked for an indefinite time. In which I create an installation where visitors are free to walk about, as if they had entered one of those vanitas paintings filled with objects symbolic of the evanescence of life: an hour glass, a dying candle; and of the worthless futility of earthly riches and pursuits: gold coins and jewelry, musical instruments, books, other delights that disappear at death - food and drink, for example. Those who are mindful of the certainty of death should detach themselves from life's meaningless pleasures. In such paintings there is almost always a skull.

In my vanitas, *I* am the skull, swathed in robes and blankets up to my neck. Comfortably ensconced on my deathbed. Presumably the end is near and I really look like death. Here and there are bowls of overripe fruit, a smorgasbord of stale snacks, vases of wilting flowers. And everywhere the pleasures that distracted me all my life. My favorite music is playing, looped, or perhaps different pieces are playing in various areas of the space: Dvořák's Cello Concerto, Shubert's "Trout" Quintet, Jan Garbarek's otherworldly sax, my top forty pop songs, with a little dance floor for those so inclined. My favorite paintings are projected on a semi-circle of screens. Monitors play clips of movies I treasured that are barely known. Capacious tables on either side of me are stacked with books, each open to a particular page that once seemed important to me. Guests are encouraged to browse and read, though some of the older pages are as fragile as I am.

There are photos over my head, the sort that might be displayed at a memorial service, but they are hung like a mobile over a crib. Favorite snapshots of my wife are twirling there, a few good pictures of me in roles that really mattered, some landscapes from my happiest travels: memories twisting and turning, in motion from my breath.

Everywhere I glance I see vanities that I'm about to leave behind. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. But this swirl of all that I've enjoyed reminds me not of the vanity of life, not of its emptiness and futility and unbearable lightness, but of its weight, its import, its fullness. Everywhere in my vanitas there is meaning and pleasure. It's clear that I haven't escaped my attachments. I never will. Until I'm gone.

It is I who am ephemeral, I who am nearly empty, increasingly light, less and less substantial. *I* am the vanitas. It's me that's meaningless. Everything I loved lives on.

Members of the audience are welcome to approach to get a closer look at me. Some I recognize, some I *should* recognize, some are strangers I'll never properly meet. But I try to return every gaze.

Any nurse or doctor who chances to be there should feel free to check my vital signs and render an opinion.

When it is the consensus that I'm ready to depart, the stub of a candle is lit, and the rest of the space goes dark. The fluttering flame sputters as I take my last breaths. A bubble-blowing machine, calibrated to be very sensitive, is lowered close to my lips. Each exhale, however faint, produces a globe full of warm air that rises above me. Eventually the candle goes out. In the dark, a final bubble bursts.

It's hard to take it seriously: that we vanish into air, into thin air; that we breathe in only to breathe out.

Portrait of a dead man in a museum

In a museum. Resting on a bench, in the middle of a small gallery. My legs ache from the stone floors, from walking up to and backing away from what interests me. I'm staring right now at a portrait off to one side. It has stopped me in my tracks.

I'm especially fond of portraits. Of every period and style. It may be I've met more people on the walls of museums than in life - *really* met them, I mean. In a way that's impossible in the world, we can stare at each other in silence, calmly, without apprehension, because we know that the other is *interested*, I in the painting and the portrait in me, this stranger come to observe. We meet as if the subject were still being painted, still alive.

I don't know who that person in the portrait is, because I haven't looked at the label next to it. But I'm staring at him when my heart stops. I'm transfixed by some detail, the mood of an eye, the life experience of a lip, or simply the sense of someone who... who... And the thought will not come. But that's okay, because I'm not thinking, I'm looking. I'm in the painting, caught in a lock of hair or gripped by a hand, and as I start to slump and my eye spins round the gallery, I'm dancing with peasants, I'm chasing after nymphs, I'm running through trees in a landscape, I'm rushing down a rainy Parisian street, somehow I'm in each painter's eye, and at the very last I'm back with that stranger in the portrait. Off to one side.

An artist, there to copy a masterpiece, impulsively sketches me in oil: Portrait of a Dead Man in a Museum. My final resting place is canvas - well, a canvas paper pad. But I'm buried in color, line, and texture. One arm reaches toward someone past the viewer, off to one side. The gesture is welcoming, as if hungry for companionship, but there is an uncertainty. My gaze is enigmatic: both isolated and engaged. The artist's quick strokes capture me to the life: I am too many things at once, and blurry.

The old must exit

It's the first stirrings of spring that I've always loved. Buds just hinting at what they will reveal, the green haze before leaves unfurl, the aura around trees blooming so subtly that you see the flowers only when you look closely.

I'm looking closely when I die. At something nearly open but not yet. New energy is about to take center stage. The actor in me can understand being ushered out by what happens next. For the moment death makes sense: the old must exit so the young can enter, I must leave for the new scene to arrive, the story of life must go on, I must have faith that whatever comes next will advance the action.

Since it's spring, I should go on my feet: dead before I even start to fall. In my last moments I have between my fingers something about to open. I know that under my feet, under the mulch, life is waking, that the bluebell bulbs have already sprouted and sent roots down and shoots up, which have not yet surfaced, but they *are* coming, inching their way, lifting me, tilting me gently to one side. I'm about to fall in a direction that *life* causes, not death. I look up from the bud in my hand and I see, as my eyes lose focus, that the violets that took over the yard when I buried the lawn have turned their flowers toward me, they are nodding in my final breeze, telling me yes, it's time, we need the space, thank you for moving on. I'm dead on my feet in the early spring blur, suspended above the violets, gone with life in hand, life underfoot, life above and all around, the crowd of life, the crush of life. I'd like to die like that. Alive, and killed by life. On an afternoon in early spring, the air edgy, on that cusp between winter and warming, still standing, still happy about life, no matter whose it is.

The dark

Or it happens in [*Sings*] *Summertime, and the dyin' is easy*. On the screen porch. The cicadas have started up. Fireflies. The children have left the community pool behind our house, but their screeches are still in the air. I can hear the creaking of a couple of swings on the playground, but it's too dark now to glimpse the bright red slides through the honeysuckle on the anchor fence.

I look up: the sky is that last bit of blue when trunks and limbs turn charcoal - that's the best part of night. The rest is a black hole till it's time for bed, which is why I've spent so many sunny days rehearsing in windowless rooms. I gave up all that daylight so I'd have theater to get me through the night, to light the void: tiny moments on stage that were brilliant for just an instant, or big bright scenes like the spill from picture windows when you pass by on a night walk, feeling a Dickensian glow of families living happily ever after. Whereas, of course, inside most living rooms desperation lurks in the shadows, just as it does out in the dark, and no amount of incandescence and fluorescence, bright screens and blazing fireplaces, none of this artificial light can really dispel the night. It can only hold it at bay, a few hours, until we crawl under the covers and shut our eyes and give in to the dark.

So I sit there in the wicker chair, on an old cushion flattened by the weight of my slide into unconsciousness. Flickers of light on the periphery of my vision. A halo around the halogen glare of a streetlight in the pool parking lot. In childhood, play ended when the streetlights came on - liminal, luminous beacons of return home before dark.

My wife is holding my hand, as she has been the last few nights, as if she were walking me home, as if I had anywhere to go but around and around, circling the last days of life. How loud the cicadas are. How still the

warm air. The vague damp in my armpits, the several trickles of sweat a sign that certain systems are still a go, even as others fail.

Her thumb slowly rubs the back of my hand. Our wives are mothers at the end, that's how it is, just as in the final scene of *Peer Gynt*. Can I hide there, says Peer, just before he rests his head in the lap of the blind old woman he'd married many years before; can I hide there in your love? I sit there in the scary dark, the deepening night, and my wife hides me in her love, her thumb soothes me as if I were in a cradle and she were rocking me to sleep. I can still hear the cicadas as I slip off. I can still see the fireflies, the streetlight. The dark. I can still feel her thumb as I grow numb.

Without

So many heartwarming ways to go. But in death itself of course there is no warmth. There is nothing. Incomprehensibly nothing. And no *me* to experience the nothing, or the incomprehension. Does the silence that falls exist, if there is no one to hear it? For the dead there is no silence, no death. For the dead there is nothing.

Unless death is not really the end of existence. Unless death sends me to my reward, to the warm glow of the divine presence, adored everlastingly by that heavenly host of angels traditionally pictured in wide ascending rows like an impossibly well-funded choir. Everyone is jubilant: the saints and the saved are all smiling, if they have faces, and life after death, if this is indeed life, is nothing like life on earth. Since sustained, total happiness is something I have never experienced, I reserve judgment about whether I would like this situation. Whether I could stand all that happiness. For an eternity, no less.

I don't mean to make fun of those who pine to be reunited with their families. I *do* know that for many of us an eternal family visit in heaven would be hell. Unless family members have been transformed beyond all recognition, in which case of course they would not be familiar. They would be strangers, and I've never been that comfortable surrounded by strangers, so the prospect of being thrust into an afterlife with them makes me anxious - like arriving at a party where I don't know anybody. And I don't imagine heaven has a kitchen where I can quick grab a drink.

Of course, those who believe in heaven generally believe in another possibility. Depending on your theology, it is rare, possible, likely, pretty probable, or damn near certain that you deserve to be tossed into the fires. Forever. Like a log that never turns to ash.

Which brings up the prospect of purgatory, a transitional program for those like myself who would surely need some therapy before getting on with

their happy afterlives. Purgatory is eternity's antechamber. A kind of waiting room. Perhaps a thousand years in a plastic chair next to a pressboard end table piled with brochures I should've paid attention to and uplifting magazines that turn my stomach. Maybe for actors purgatory is years of actually reading the actors' union newspaper, every tedious item. Or purgatory might be more like thought reform, in which I learn to think as I should've, or behavior modification, in which I learn to behave myself, though this seems pointless now that life is past. Or perhaps purgatory is just punishment that's not quite hellish: little cigarette burns instead of being thrown in the fire, waterboarding instead of drowning.

I'd rather be dead. Really dead. Umpteen years of divine chastisement and I'm supposed to arrive in heaven grateful? Loving the guy? I've known those kind, the punishers: who can stand them?

In this light, I'm grateful to think I'll be *gone* when I'm gone: lifeless, mindless, selfless. No consciousness. For all that I fear dementia, perhaps it is mercy - toward the end - to slip into second childishness and mere oblivion, as Shakespeare's Jacques describes the last of the seven ages of man. It's a bleak scenario, of course: we end our days "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." We can forgive Jaques his affectation of "sans" instead of "without": it makes the line rhythmically possible and much more beautiful - even the relentlessness of our deprivations as we age sounds better in French. But Jaques would have been more honest to say that all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players, but when we exit for good, we are without a stage, without dramatic action, without passion or purpose, without scene partners or dialogue, without speeches or stories. No monologues! Not even *interior* monologues. Without teeth, vision, taste - that's nothing. Sans *everything* is the point. Without everything. *Without*.

In Samuel Beckett's universe, we are inescapably aware of our condition to the bitter end. We dwell obsessively on our losses: sans, sans, sans. There's something merciless in that. Beckett makes second childishness and mere oblivion sound pretty good.

An actuarial perspective

A 37-year-old composer had been fretting about how little he'd accomplished. "It's a sobering thought," he said at a concert, "that when Mozart was my age, he'd been dead for two years." For me, it's an even more sobering thought that when my father was my age, he'd been dead for five years.

My Irish New Jersey upbringing on meat and gravy and desserts, endless sweets, all manner of snackable cholesterol got me off to a bad start. I was 50 pounds heavier than I am now in eighth grade. I smoked for 25 years. It's a wonder I've made it this far.

Of course my much abused body has regularly replaced itself since I was born. Many of my cells are newly minting at the moment, no doubt, as I speak. Each of those cells being born right now has a life expectancy, on average, of seven years. I hope they all make it to a ripe old cellular age. But from an actuarial perspective, I myself will likely last *[A hand momentarily muffles his mouth as he speaks the number]* years, and *[Again]* months. Perhaps I'll get some time knocked off my death sentence for good behavior: all that broccoli, all that salmon, all those meatless Mediterranean meals, all that medicinal red wine I drank - for my heart. All the other alcohol I didn't drink, all the drugs I didn't need to escape or recreate. So who knows what the parole board will decide?

I will hold on as long as I can. I'll stay active: do my weights down in the cellar, keep my back in shape with sit-ups, try to stay flexible, work on improving my balance, walk faithfully around and around my neighborhood at an aerobic clip. I'll void my colon and let them poke around for polyps. I'll eat my broccoli and collards and kale, swallow one each from that little row of jars, and hydrate my spirits with positive thoughts. I won't give up on life. I will carry on as if there were always tomorrow. As if death did not exist.

And I'll keep some of my monologues to myself.

Not

There are of course ways I do *not* want to die.

Not: answering emails.

Not: doing anything in the bathroom.

Not: in a car, or a plane.

Not: on life support or in an ambulance or on the living room floor, dancing to the bouncy beat of a defibrillator.

Not: with a broken heart, surrounded by strangers, on a tile floor. My mother keeled over on the morning of her second day in a nursing home. It was her heart, which had not been a concern until then. Was her heart broken? I don't know, because she seemed herself, what was left of herself, the day before; I know *she* didn't know, because her dementia was too far gone for her to think clearly about her situation. Of course a heart can break without your knowing, without *anyone* knowing, without any of the attendants knowing, or any of the other inmates, mysteriously thrown together in some unplaceable, nowhere-in-particular common room, seeing Santa smile, hearing carols sung, on Christmas Eve. All my mother knew was that she needed to pee, so she was taken to the restroom, where she was dead on arrival on the tile floor, just a few minutes before my wife and I arrived with her presents.

Not like that.

That'll be the day

My least favorite scenario, which I really hate, is the usual one, the way a lot of us go. I get to not feeling well, or some test sends up a red flag. I get diagnosed. I get a prognosis. I do or don't get treatment, depending on percentages, probabilities, availabilities, all the variables. I go into decline. I stop getting about. Maybe I can stay home, but the likelihood is that I end up in a hospital, or a hospice facility, or (god help me) a nursing home. One day my wife gets a call, in the morning, in the evening, and she gets there as quickly as she can.

Well, that'll be the day. When she says goodbye. Yes. That'll be the day. When both of us cry. She'll say I'm gonna stay with her, she knows it's a lie. *(speaks)* 'Cause that'll be the day-ay-ay when I die.

(sings)

Well, that'll be the day when you say goodbye

Yes, that'll be the day when you make me cry

You say I'm gonna stay, you know it's a lie

'Cause that'll be the day when I die

Desiderata

There are a few desiderata for my death. I desire to die:

In the least upsetting way for my wife.

In the least frightening way for me. Calmly.

Before I *want* to die, that's for sure.

In touch more with life than with death.

In touch more with anything than with myself. Best of all, in some ecstasy, standing *outside* myself, which is what the word means. In a heightened awareness that makes me intensely conscious of anyone or anything but me. More with my wife than with myself, more with the music playing, more with the words read to me, the lines and colors in my field of vision: drawn out of myself into the world. I want to go like that: already gone. How easy it will be to let the door close behind me. I won't be afraid even if the door creaks. I won't be listening for the click of the latch, or the turn of the lock. I'll be outside all that.

If it can't be ecstatic, if that's too much to ask, at the very least let me be intent on taking something in. It's onstage that I learned to focus on my partners and on the story, because I discovered that acting is not about what *I* say and do. It's about the actions of *others* in the play, it's about events and circumstances, taking all that in, with eyes a bit wider, and nostrils flared, ears pricked, the lips parted: taking in. I want to die like that, all orifices open, as I take in something now.

Dreaming

If I go in my sleep, I hope I'm dreaming. Not an anxiety-inducing dream, not a humdrum weave of the day's events, certainly not a puzzler of the sort that takes days to decipher, since I won't be waking up. My last dream should be aspirational, but it needn't go into specifics, since I've no more time for specifics. It should be a dream of soaring, without any fear of crashing or doubt about where I'm going. No need for an explanation or a destination: I'm just flying. I want to die with my eyes moving rapidly and my penis erect, a last hard-on that has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with a life that was best when I was dreaming.

Delete

The bony index finger on my trackpad moves the cursor to a folder called “Productions,” all the theater I’ve done in the digital age. I drag it to Trash. Then my resume, short bios for programs, articles about acting, outlines for workshops: Trash. Other folders and documents hidden in “Miscellaneous” follow: updates from former students, remarks at memorial services, travels hither and yon. All the damn emails I’ve ever downloaded about appointments and meetings, purchases and parking citations, invitations and recommendations, jury duty, roof repairs, taxes, funding proposals, projects that never happened.

Periodically, I slide the cursor up to Finder, my thumb clicks to reveal the dropdown, and that bony finger scrolls down to Empty Trash. My thumb lets go. “Are you sure you want to remove the items in the Trash permanently?” my protective Mac asks me. “This action cannot be undone,” it warns me. I press return. There is a sound that escapes metaphor: not a flushing, not really a tear, but a sound that is unmistakably a digital destruction.

I go into iTunes and start dispensing with music. I highlight beloved albums, go to Song on the topbar and scroll down to Delete from Library. Delete, delete, delete.

Are you sure, my Mac asks me, are you sure, are you sure? I click OK, OK, OK.

And then albums of photos: family occasions, shots from shows, landscapes, art works. Highlight, drag to trash. Empty. Are you sure? OK. A favorite photo of my wife. This action cannot be undone.

I’m feeling more and more blank. As my hard disc lightens, it accelerates.

Next it's applications, all those icons in my dashboard, all the programs that have helped me organize my life, which is less and less in need of organizing. Empty Trash. This cannot be undone. OK, OK, OK.

I drag the script of this monologue, in a folder with all my current projects, to trash. Very meta. The text is deleted but for the moment the words are still in my head.

Then I go by force of habit to the little Apple up left and scroll down: Log Out Tim McDonough. Are you sure? OK. Last of all: Shut Down, a command which on a Mac is followed by an ellipsis: dot-dot-dot. "Are you sure you want to shut down your computer now? If you do nothing, your computer will shut down in 90 seconds." I do nothing. I wait. I wait, rather vacantly, for the dot-dot-dot.

Auto-dissolve

Thirty years after Vladimir Nabokov died, his son decided to publish the fragments of an unfinished novel, despite his perfectionist father's clear instructions that, upon his death, any such work was to be destroyed. In this incomplete sketch, handwritten on 138 index cards, the protagonist, himself a writer, ends his life with an act of will worthy of one of those strong-willed supermen envisioned by the philosopher Nietzsche. He erases himself, body part by body part, beginning with his toes. Auto-dissolution, the writer calls this, and he reports that it affords the greatest ecstasy known to man.

When the time comes, I set about re-reading Nietzsche. Well, some of Nietzsche, assuming time is short. I do willpower pushups, willpower jumping jacks, I lift willpower weights. When my will is sufficiently muscled up, I start, as Nabokov suggests, with my toes: they are the most remote part of me, and if for any reason I decide not to go on with auto-dissolution, toes (on my deathbed, anyway) are no great loss.

What next? Any actor familiar with relaxation techniques might simply proceed up the body, but there are parts of me that I might want to hold onto. Oh, the shins can go, if I'm prostrate, and the thighs - though I should hang on tight to my genitals: if nothing else, I might still enjoy the erotic make-believe of a good night's sleep. I can let go digestion, but I'd still like to salivate. Don't you hate it when you're so sick that you can't taste your food? Of course, I'm dying, or rather dissolving, so losing my taste goes with the territory, I suppose. And I can't be holding on if I'm letting go. Sans taste, then. Tasteless.

Which of the senses to dissolve next? For me, smell has never been acute, and it's quite bound up with taste, so: no more nose.

If I'm to proceed with Nietzschean bravado, I'll have to make harder choices. I'll silence hearing before I go blind: I take in more when life's on mute. But what sense to save for last? Touch or sight?

Touch I'll keep: so I can feel her hold my hand, so I can squeeze if I get scared. I'd rather fade to black before I lose touch. Who needs to be staring at the IV tubes - or the bedroom ceiling, if I'm lucky enough to be dying at home? And I don't want to see anything that would make me fight to stay alive, though it is time to go.

Can it really be ecstatic to *know* I'm dissolving? What if I will away awareness so that I die oblivious? That would take me back to Eden: I'd die innocent as Eve before the apple, as if I'd never bitten into the knowledge of good and evil, as if I'd never fallen, never been sentenced to death. I know, I know, I'm supposed to be dissolving myself, and that argues for keeping consciousness in play, but maybe toward the end my will can operate on its own, if medieval philosophers were right about will as a separate faculty. Suppose I *will* my final dissolution so forcefully that "I" can bail out - and let my nearly disembodied willpower operate on auto-pilot to erase all the rest.

But at the very end: what of me goes last?

My heart. My heart. I can be deaf, dumb and blind, mindless and unapproachable, but I want to die with my heart, passionately, if that is in fact where passion resides: I want to leave loving my wife and infatuated with whatever's left to me. I want to die wanting to live, for all my urge to will it away.

Crazy, huh? Well, Nietzsche went mad. And Nabokov was dead long before his fantasy of exerting complete control over the narrative of his life was published - against his will.

Not really

None of the above: I won't die any of the ways I've fantasized, not likely. I'm no Nietzsche, no superman who can will my death. I don't know if I'll even *be* there when I die. I might be comatose or senile or simply asleep. I might be caught off guard by some catastrophe, gone instantly. It might just happen: "it" - not me, *it*. It might be impersonal. My death might not be mine at all. *That's why* I am determined to die in my imagination, over and over, not in this world but in the theater of my mind.

Lying in the street, or face down on a restaurant plate, or strapped on a gurney, or on an operating table, or in ICU, wherever it is my death certificate will say I died, it will be wrong. I will be dying elsewhere. I will be dying otherwise. In another scenario, another life.

Who would want to die *here*? I don't want to die in reality: you know, *really*. Huh! Where to place the adverb? Really, I don't want to die. I really don't want to die. I don't really want to die. I don't want really to die. I don't want to die - really. All of the above. Reality is a dismal place to die. I want to die in my imagination. Imaginatively. One way or another I will make my death a figment. A fiction. Not just for myself. For my wife. For anybody else who cares, for example you, since fictions have audiences. You wouldn't want to watch me *really* die in a nursing home, a hospital, a hospice, an ambulance, a car crash on the way home from a show; or I'm dead "for real" in an email; a Facebook post; a tweet; a little notice paid for by the line, buried on the obituary page in a dying newspaper. Better you should see me die here, in my imagination, and in yours.

The voice of a dead king

It's occurred to several people that the second time you die is when somebody says your name for the last time.

In pre-history, I read years ago, the voice of a dead king lived on for a time in the mind's ear of his subjects. They could still hear his voice telling them what they must do, from the grave. That insured stability while the *new* king established his authority. Gradually, the voice of the dead king grew fainter, inaudible, silent.

Acting has taught me the sense and the beauty of a good long fade. For a few who have seen me perform, perhaps a memory of something I said on stage will linger in the mind and occasionally replay, so that my voice is still alive after I'm gone. Or some synapse may go off when a tall fellow with high square shoulders or shadowy deep-set eyes speaks in a low voice - and a little clip of me streams brightly in your brain.

Lights begin to fade.

Until gradually you forget, and I am extinct. Or if no memory really disappears, I sink into the depths where you are no longer conscious of me. Until *your* brain starts to fail, and in your last moments, as your life flashes by, I flicker for an instant like an old fluorescent, until that little pop when we both go black. You die, and I die with you. And then I die with somebody else - with *you*, and with *you*, and with *you*, until there is no one left who has heard me.

A fade like that. A long, long fade to oblivion.