

Everything is Mostly Nothing

Michael Pazen

First, death; then, life. Does that seem backwards? Every life-form on Earth depends on the existence of carbon, but carbon is only formed in the hearts of stars, expelled, when they die, into incomprehensible stretches of nothingness. Only through these fatal *bangs!* are the mere kernels of life scattered into dust. Only through brilliant demise may we know the comforts of primordial ooze and stalwart evolution. First, death; then, life.

When I was fifteen, I went to the first funeral that I can remember. In a small church nestled deep within pine-rich mountains and narrow dirt roads, we gathered. It was quiet—no one spoke or coughed or sneezed or sniffled. We were here to mourn; the needle's crunch underfoot, the calls of the birds, the sounds of the small, scampering creatures: these and more than these filled the silence.

Halfway through the funeral service, a young girl ran outside. She was my friend, so I followed her out. I watched as she emptied her stomach onto the soil, listened as her frail wails worked their way sky bound, heard her cries as they bounced off the bark and the branches. Her face, red and twisted, contorted with pain, seemed to burn, to radiate hurt out and out and out.

After the funeral, three of us are racing through the twisting mountain paths. It is dark, and we are screaming. The engine's roar cascades as our throats grow sore and we soar past 40, 50—at 60 mph we're outpacing our sorrow. We are standing as we holler, bare-chested and brazen, top-heavy car listing perilously over valleys, ditches, the wind's whip lashing our faces, our torsos, tearing tears from our eyes as they form and carrying the name of the departed into the night sky. We are reckless and in pain, ignited and on fire. We are remembering.

Do you think you've died before? A stopped heart is a no-brainer, but what of the living? The boy who bounded through those mountains is myself no longer; those who stood by my side have ceased to occupy the same form. The cells in the upper layers of our skin, the epidermis, are constantly replacing themselves. Our organs change size and we get taller and then shorter; food and waste take up space and move through us, blood is lost and re-made. We are transient.

I know we like to pretend. We like to pretend that things last, that they endure, that lives are not moments and worlds are not temporary. We climb on top of your roof, and with our backs laid gingerly upon the shingles, we gaze into the night. We speak of silly things, of futures known and imagined; we share dreams, comforted perhaps by the stars and their illusions of permanence, those flickers and their fictions of forever. It's nice to pretend.

The second funeral hanged from the highway for months. No one thought to cut her down.

Her suicide knocked the air right out, stole joy and hope and obscured them, kept them hidden away. That crippling blow rendered her best friend unrecoverable; when last we spoke, she told me that there was no one else. That the impact had forced her into a new mode of existence. The loss—and loss is so inadequate a word—made sure it would be felt for a lifetime, at least.

“We gotta stop meeting at funerals,” I say. You agree with me. You tell me how many you've been to this year, and the number's too high. I can't remember what it was, but it was too high. We were just kids, goddammit. We were just kids.

When we make the tentative shift from body to corpse, our cells, deprived of oxygen (due to a heart that won't beat and two lungs that won't inflate), start to digest themselves. Microbes in our gut invade our heart and brain and feed off acid that leaks through burst seams; the life within us, ravenous, consumes.

I thought of killing myself often when I was younger. When my will to live returned, my friend's gave him the slip. There is no panic, no fear, no impetus like the one felt when speeding to the home of a dying man. My fingers were threaded through his hair while he sobbed into my shoulder, and I told the police where to find us.

Nearly 8,000 people die in the United States alone every day. Hundreds to thousands more due to COVID-19, senseless deaths. With each goes a world entire. But an end is not the end, and the departed are never far from us. The moments when we are together do not change when we are not. You are there, waiting to meet me for the first time, just as you are there when we say our last goodbye. In every smile, every laugh, every shining moment, we are together; what we produced does not, has not, cannot disappear.

When my body is claimed by rot and fungi, my words will stay tucked in your lexicon, my habits in your routines; a slice of my very being in your memory, distorted and intact. And the tears that flee from your face shall fall upon the Earth and spur new growth. Everything changes; nothing is lost.

We are borne into the present, and we carry with us those that came before. My spine is not my spine; it is the composite act of survival and selection, bred and descended from countless ancestors and their mistakes; from the first creatures to leave the sea, from the stars that used their fuel to give us a chance. We inherit life beyond life before we take our first breaths; built upon millions of years, all those deaths stand solemnly by our side.

And they rejoice! Every sacred moment we are alive, they rejoice. When we quiet ourselves, we can hear their celebration; when we listen, we can hear their cheers, can hear the gentle pulses of life begetting life in a grand and futile attempt to grasp one moment more. We shall all go extinct, you and I, for our very universe is bounded and finite, yet before we end, our carbon, our atoms, shall disperse once more as they dispersed before, to where we cannot know, but can hope, can believe, to someplace that feels like home.