

Burial

In winter, when we buried him, the earth was cold and unyielding, and seemed resistant of accepting his vanishing body. There was not much time. We had waited too long, spurred on by our vain hopes of resurrecting him, or rather our belief that his resurrection was sure to come. We remembered his words, spoken always very sparingly and delivered at never the wrong time. The consolation in his voice was living proof of his immortality. Or so we indulgently believed, and also reviewed in our minds how he had said he would live again after death, had he not? Were those not his exact words or were we bending other statements into the one we wanted to hear? It was terrible to confess that possibility.

We avoided it to the last possible minute. As my shovel deflected strongly off the stubborn earth, I vainly clung to my wild hopes, and pretended the ground too was confirming them. "Look here," I said keenly, as if wrenched reluctantly from common sense by facts I no longer yearned. "The Earth doesn't want him," I said, "It's not his time. I might as well bury myself. I'll be dead from exhaustion by the time I get this hole ready." The clouds wandered directionlessly above me. I felt the wind deliberate and rearrange its course several times.

"I agree," Monty said. He was looking at his watch, and he looked totally confused. "This thing doesn't work," he said angrily, as if somehow time mattered crucially suddenly. After repeatedly tapping the face of the watch with his fingertip, he finally loosened the band and pulled the watch from his wrist, motioning his intention to add it to the grave when it was deep enough to

accommodate. "I didn't mean you," he said as a belated explanation. "I agree that the earth doesn't want this burial, not that you should substitute your own body."

I looked Monty up and down a few times, and had a strange thought about body substitutions as the real meaning of immortality, and how the notion of resurrection is misleading for suggesting the resumption of the same body by the same individual spirit. That was not how it worked at all, and I finally knew it. I dropped the shovel and experienced a violent inner sensation of possession and growth.

"What's the matter with you?" Monty questioned with mild alarm. I could feel his emotion as if it were my own.

"He's still with us," I said quietly. In fact, I did not say it, but thought it, and experienced the thought like speech. I heard Monty's question again suddenly, but it was the first time he asked it. "I'm still with us," I said, "and I know everyone is worried."

"What everyone?" Monty asked angrily, extending his arms to gesture our solitude. Fear always cost him his patience. I was inside his mind and I saw the fear take over.

"Everyone is afraid," I suggested. "I'm sure of it. The earth is afraid too. It's winter."

"What are you afraid of?" Monty asked, as if a disclosure from me was the only legitimate proof that I was right. I folded my gloved hands before my abdomen and reflected, leaning my head back.

"I'm afraid of isolation," I admitted. "So much that I inadvertently create it from my fear of it."

"He's really dead," Marty suddenly sobbed, bowing his head and shaking with tears. I stepped up from the shallow grave and walked over to him to comfort him by putting an arm around his shoulder. Marty did not look up at me as I approached him; nor did he stop crying. All the same, he reached out to hug me as I arrived by his side. I accepted the embrace eagerly, and soon shed tears also.

"I remember that he loved us," Marty eventually said calmly into my bundled shoulder. "I remember that he loved." As I slowly let Marty go, I saw that his eyes were glowing with a new determination. He returned his watch to his wrist and grabbed me by the shoulders, staring into my eyes, but saying nothing. As he let go of me, he sighed deeply, and then walked to the grave and began to dig, as if alone.