

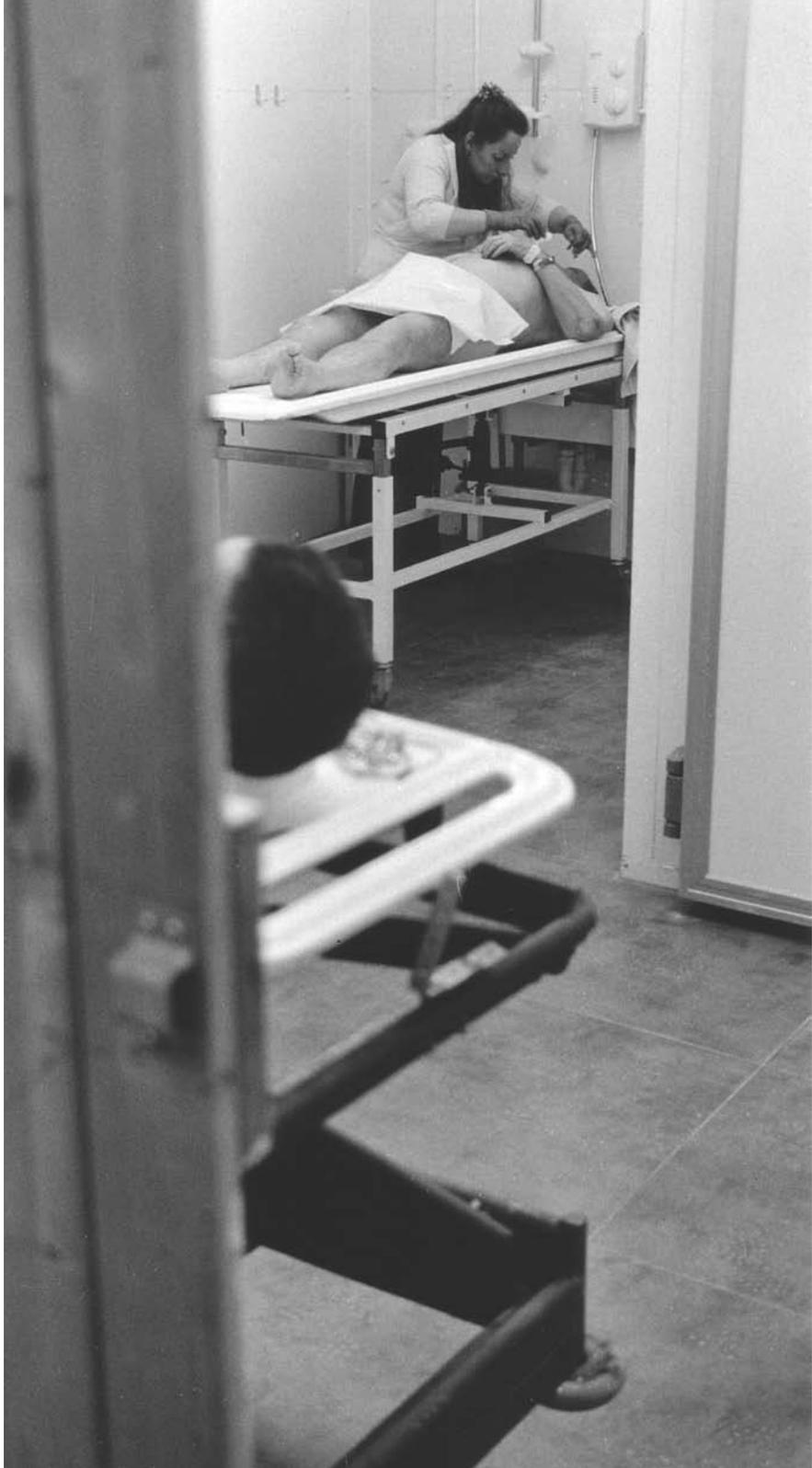


Death as everyday life

Cynthia Cockburn

In words and photographs Cynthia Cockburn explores our discomfort and anxiety around the lifeless body.





In house windows along certain streets in north London last winter there was a blooming of orange posters. 'Community not Death', they read, and 'No Morgue'. They were the response of a Tufnell Park residents' group to the request by a local business for planning permission to install a refrigerator, two metres high and wide, in an existing shed in a small industrial estate onto which their gardens backed. The fridge was designed to hold up to eight bodies of recently dead people. For Green Endings ('*Funerals of your choice*' - www.greenendings.co.uk), it would be helpful to have a fridge of their own, so they would no longer need to hire mortuary space, at some cost and inconvenience, from the large undertaking firms with whom they compete.

The flurry of rage and protest this planning proposal evoked died down after the council committee granted permission, and the fridge began to receive its intended cargo. But doorstep conversations during a period of canvassing before the decision was taken revealed an interesting polarisation of opinion. Some people felt strongly that 'in the community' was precisely the place an undertaking business ought to be - along with ante-natal classes, playgroups, doctors and dentists' surgeries, opticians shops and Help the Aged second-hand stores. Other people felt it to be somehow foul, unhygienic and even scary that deceased people should be permitted to linger around 'in the community'. Although some local home-owners actually felt and expressed this disgust and fear on their own account, it has to be said that in many cases they were projecting these feelings onto potential house-buyers. They were afraid the presence of the small mortuary would bring down the sale price of their homes. Either way, the negativity was expressed not only in posters and a fierce campaign in the local press, but in aggressive graffiti, verbal abuse and spitting in the street.

What came to light here was a pervasive fear of death. Not so much a fear of dying, which is perennial and explicit in most of us, but a submerged horror concerning *the* dead, corpses. They only remain in the world of the living long enough for the legal requirements to be satisfied and the mourners assembled, but those few days between the last breath and the moment the body can be passed into the grave or the big heat seem to cause anxiety. The disquiet is felt most among those who have little relation to the deceased, who are simply in their vicinity. The people closest to the dead, on the contrary, are often reluctant to let the body go from bedroom or hospice. Both reactions, though, express









doubts about exactly when and how death occurs.

There is a deep suspicion that life may not obey the ruling of the doctor who palpates the fading pulse and states ‘heartbeat and breathing have ceased - I pronounce this person dead’. The uncertainty may be, on the wholesome and humanist side, an understandable hunch that consciousness may not switch off like a light bulb but continue in some attenuated way as the body cools to the ambient temperature, the lively cells slow their dance, and putrefaction begins (36 hours in temperate conditions, estimate Green & Green in their excellent handbook *Dealing with Death*¹). On the uglier side, the uncertainty is whipped to a frenzy by zombie films and ghost stories, so that we fear these non-dead may yet stir and rise up from their mortuary gurneys when our back is turned.

One of the ambiguities inherent in deadness is ‘whose’ the body is. There are some wonderful manifestations of this in the Department of Health’s manual for mortuary staff, *Care and Respect in Death*.² Principle 6 states: ‘Patient care does not end with a person’s death. Mortuary services provided by NHS trusts are integral to the patient care pathway.’ But who exactly is it the Blairite NHS now sees, at the end of the pathway, where the light fades, as patient, as stakeholder? The dead, or the bereaved living? Principle 2 says ‘...policy and practice in the mortuary will demonstrate respect towards those who have died, towards bereaved relatives and in the way people’s bodies are cared for.’ People’s bodies? Am I the ‘people’ they have in mind, as in ‘my body when I’m dead’. Or will it then be mine no longer? Maybe the ‘people’ to whom the apostrophe ascribes ownership are my family and friends, who live on to take responsibility for the body in question. And what identity do they ascribe to the body? When do they stop saying, for instance, ‘who will move Mary’ and start saying ‘who will move Mary’s body’?. I think, by the time the ashes are stacked in the crematorium’s white plastic jars, they are, for most of us, Mary’s ashes, not Mary. But to reach that point, a transition has had to occur, an acknowledgment that our perception of the remains has changed. In changing, they have become less of a worry.

Thomas Lynch, US poet and undertaker, wrote about all this ambiguity. A lot

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1. Jennifer Green and Michael Green, *Dealing with Death: A Handbook of Practices, Procedures and Law* (2nd Edition), Jessica Kingsley 2006.
 2. Department of Health, *Care and Respect in Death: Good Practice Guidance for NHS Mortuary Staff*, Department of Health 2006.

of anxious thought goes into doing with the body what the dead person would have wanted - no autopsy for instance. But the central fact of his business he said, is that

there is nothing, once you are dead, that can be done *to you* or *for you* or *with you* or *about you* that will do you any good or any harm ... any damage or decency we do accrues to the living, to whom your death happens, if it really happens to anyone ... Which is not to say that the dead do not matter. They do. They do. Of course they do.³

If health services and undertakers dwell helpfully on appropriate behaviour towards dead bodies, reflecting Lynch's insistence that they 'matter', the materiality is seldom recognised in intellectual takes on death, which fix the gaze rather on lofty ontological questions concerning mortality and immortality, the fear not of the dead as 'other' but the self's fear of non-being.

Zygmunt Bauman is a man of many words, and reasoning is his trade. But reason, he finds, stalls at death. 'Death is the ultimate defeat of reason, since reason cannot "think" death - not what we know death to be like: the thought of death is - and is bound to remain - *a contradiction in terms*.'⁴ For him the Tufnell Park *fracas* might have been due less to apprehension about the way the too-local dead might smell, or block the drains, than to our lack of a language in which to talk about death at all. Modernity, he says, is geared only to the project of life. We know only a manipulating, instrumental language, geared to action.

In my recent exploration of writings on death, however, I stumbled on one marvellous piece of work, inserted exactly into this space where intellect addresses the body and its transitions without flinching, without seeking the escape hatch into metaphysics. In *Lost Bodies*, Laura Tanner explores death through texts, poetry, fiction, autobiography.⁵ But she stays with the material, with 'the impossibility of disentangling the living subject from a lost body'. She recognises how not just the loss of a personality, but

3. Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade*, Vintage 1998.

4. Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Polity 1992, p13.

5. Laura E. Tanner, *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death*, Cornell University Press 2006, p4.



the stillness and coldness of the body itself is a source of terrible grief. We mourn *with* our own bodies and *for* the body as it goes through the sequential processes of deadness. We long to touch, but fear to touch, this body. So - well-meant counselling that dwells on ‘happy memories’, mere images and representations, sells us short, betrays us. These counsellors should read Maurice Merleau-Ponty to understand how difficult it is to disentwine bodies, how intercorporeally we live and die.⁶

That *Lost Bodies* is written by a woman may be no accident. Quite often, though not always, death features a sexual division of labour. Women are the ones who do immanence for a living (washing bodies) and men those who do transcendence (inventing civilisation to assure immortality). That’s the way

6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (ed. Claude Lefort), *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press 1968.



Simone de Beauvoir saw things of course.⁷ Women stuck in immanence, up to the elbows in soap suds; men chasing the grail of transcendence, composing operas, climbing the mountain to speak to god, doing metaphysics. (Understandably angry at the way women are short-changed in this, aspiring to more transcendence for the second sex, de Beauvoir herself seems to belittle the kitchen and bathroom duties, flesh-care.)

In Christian cultures in the past, while women washed, clothed and kept watch over the body after death, male priests interceded for the soul. The undertaker who carried the body to the churchyard was likely to be another man, often a carpenter, for whom coffin-making was part of the family craft of joinery. In Victorian times the whole thing became rigidly formalised, a smooth performance enacted by po-faced men, a drama in black barathea, oak and brass. Today the

7. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Penguin Books 1972 (first published 1949).







traditional forms are being subverted by a movement of people who resent the domineering presence of church and undertaking cartel, overshadowing the relationship between people and their newly dead loved ones.

The movement, born in 1993 with the publication of *The Natural Death Handbook*,⁸ is concerned with both before- and after-death moments. It follows half a century after the ‘natural childbirth’ movement, and, like the latter, has been a recovery of control, letting non-professionals and particularly women, back into the field. Green Endings is characteristic of the new undertaking, a breakaway from the market grip of the big national companies that have branches in every city and suburb. They offer an environment-friendly service, avoid embalming, use no harmful chemicals, and offer biodegradable coffins - bamboo or willow ones you can weave with flowers, cardboard ones you can paint or write on. They reassure people that, with support, they can learn how to do the death thing for themselves. Death certificates, permissions to dispose of the body, Forms B, C and F, are demystified. Although provision is made for all kinds of religious belief, an undertaker such as this is most popular with people who want to evade institutionalised religion and express their spirituality in their own way.

8. *The Natural Death Handbook* (4th edition), published by the Natural Death Centre, London, www.naturaldeathcentre.co.uk.

Roslyn Cassidy, who set up Green Endings in 2000, is a chartered physiotherapist, used to bodies, their functioning, their feel. She has business skills, stretched to the full by the complex logistics of funeral planning and performance. And she's an experienced counsellor and knows the importance of good listening. Responding to a phone call from someone who's just experienced a death, she will make a home visit 'to get a feel' of how best to help them find, in this bad moment, some experience that will be of lasting value. She listens carefully to what they want, sets out the choices available to them.

Sympathetic contact is intrinsic to the job, whether it's with the living or the dead. Roslyn and her assistants Angela, Andrew and Ben are all able to perform what used to be called 'the last offices' or help family or friends to do so. Together they wash the body of the dead, shampoo hair, trim nails, dress in favourite clothes, stow them in that contested fridge. 'How *can* you do this work?' people sometimes ask. Andrew says, 'Bodies? It's not an issue for me. You see them everyday, *people in a state of death.*' Angela, who is mother to three school-age children and commutes an hour and a half to this job each day because she loves it, says 'I was a terminal-care nurse. Then, I held their hands as they died. Here, I've just followed them through the door. I'm tending them on the other side.'

The body may be carried back home to the family, for a night or a day, if that's what is wished. The team will help organise an event where you (in your brightest clothes, no black necessary) may bear the coffin at the crematorium or the burial site. They'll help you make the funeral an occasion to which you bring your own music and poetry, photographs and other precious things, and in which all family and friends, including children, are creatively involved. If a celebrant is wanted to take a lead in the event, she or he may be humanist (i.e. atheist) or Buddhist or just someone known and trusted. It might even, at a stretch, be a priest.

There is little that can be done to mitigate the shock of the final disposal. The solar temperatures of the furnace, the sight and sound of the sullen earth falling on a gaily painted coffin, in the end there is no avoiding these things. But at least a course has been steered between one kind of alienation and another, between offending the senses too long and sweeping the body out of sight too soon. Between holding on and sending away. Those few important days should have been a pause for the breathless and the still painfully breathing to keep

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company, for the affinities and differences between them to be felt. The body is not the person, no. But it isn't rubbish either.

Warm thanks to Roslyn Cassidy, Andrew Castle, Angela Berriman and Ben Weikinat of Green Endings who let me shadow their work; to Zoe Jones who welcomed me and my camera to the funeral of her brother Sunny; to Kelly Drake who let me join her when she and friends were painting the coffin of her mother, Margaret Drake; and to Paul Jennings who let me photograph him at work at Golders Green crematorium.