F. P.

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A FRIEND DIED and asked in her will that her ashes be divided between two places. She was French, so one place is in France, under a tree in the field behind a house in a village of the Charente-Maritime. The other is in the U.S.: a cemetery up a dirt road in Vermont. We who were to do this two-part burial asked the undertaker to give us her ashes in two urns but he said he was not allowed to divide bodies: "le corps," he said, "est indivisible." We wondered at this; that a corpse can be divided harmlessly is, after all, one of its defining traits. But the undertaker was adamant, so we said one urn was fine, and to one another said we would do the dividing ourselves.

I looked up the law the undertaker had invoked, which turned out to be a ruling by the court of the city of Lille which, in 1997, added a provision about ashes to a regulation it already had about bones. The occasion was a suit brought against a widow who had removed her husband's ashes from the cemetery to her house, making it very hard for his sister, who didn't get along with the widow, to visit his tomb. The sister claimed the widow had violated the law against removing bodies from their burial places. The judge, observing that an urn wasn't, like a tomb, a permanent refuge, but a container for ashes whose vocation, as he put it, is to be scattered, ruled the widow could move the urn wherever she wanted. The undertaker had it wrong, or hadn't kept up with recent rulings: it's not ashes but bones that you can't divide. I hadn't thought before about the opposition between burying a body and burning it: by the first, you fix it forever in place, or mean to. But by the second, you transform it into something that flies off with every breeze. The urn is a way to temporize between the two, I suppose. I know several people who have the ashes of their fathers or of their mothers in closets, unsure whether to bury or scatter them. Parents being where you leave from, it's hard to imagine them more adrift than you. My friend, who had been born on the left bank of the Seine and

never considered living anywhere else, imagined herself dead becoming part of places that alive she would only consider visiting; as if in her life she'd rehearsed leaving and then in death gone and done it.

The cremation was at the Père-Lachaise cemetery, which has the only crematorium in Paris. One crematorium is not enough, and there is a crush. Each burying party gets a half hour in an underground room beyond which, visible through a window, is the place where the coffin will be set on rails to carry it into the furnace. The cemetery personnel call the furnace, the device (*l'appareil*). But before it goes into the device, there is a ceremonial half hour during which the coffin is in the room with the mourners. It's laid on a wheeled cart in the middle of the room and surrounded by eight chairs. The chief mourners or the oldest sit, and everyone else stands because the room is too small to accommodate the average party sitting down. At the head of the room, the end with the window on the rails, there is a platform on which people who want to speak or have been designated to speak stand up facing the coffin.

There were four people speaking at my friend's funeral, representing stages of her life. She was just coming of age in 1968 and for the next decade she did sixties things. One of these she carried over into the eighties, when she ran her own very small publishing house, which was not an unlikely occupation though fairly heroic. Actually she was not herself heroic, only ironic, but she kept her house going and proved to be commercially shrewd about writings most people thought commercially impossible. When eventually she moved on to a larger publishing house, she turned out to be remarkably good at navigating the mainstream too. Personally, she held steady where she'd always stood, a yard to the side of everything. The four people spoke well, became interested in their arguments, almost forgot she was dead. We listened carefully.

We had already asked that the speeches be short, but, to move things along just in case, the Père-Lachaise provides a master of ceremonies, a young man who keeps his head reverently bent even when speaking directly to you. I'm not sure whether we could have refused his services, but anyway, at the moment, we didn't have the presence

of mind to send him away. Apparently not remembering the last names of the speakers, he called them Michel, Françoise, Geneviève, and Boris, like in California. At the beginning and again at the end, he urged us to mourn our dead friend and wish her well. Then two young cemetery attendants (all the attendants were in their twenties) wheeled the coffin out of the room through a side door and the master of ceremonies told us to stand and face the window for the dispatch into the fire, the *mise à la flamme*. Some people did, most didn't; it was confusing because a shade had been dropped over the window while the coffin was lifted onto the rails and the shade stuck, so that the coffin had begun to move forward by the time it became visible again. It disappeared and the attendants were guiding us out. Another party was already coming down the stairs and there was some of the awkwardness of rush hour on the subway. The social services in big cities are always overburdened.

The next day we went to collect the urn, which was to be delivered to a local branch of the funeral parlor. (We hadn't waited because a cremation takes one and a half to two hours.) The urn hadn't arrived due to the heavy traffic. In Paris the traffic is called *la circulation*. The circulation was bad that day and they asked us to return in a half hour. I would be coming back alone and the man recommended I bring a bag, possibly the one I used for shopping. When I arrived, he insisted I sit down and told me that, amazingly, the urn had gotten there not ten minutes after we'd left. Then he went into a back room and came back with a blue satinate sack tied around the neck with a cord in a darker blue. The outline of a box was visible through the sack. Inside, the man said, was a certificate of cremation. I know, he said, that these ashes will be traveling. I wondered how he knew but then remembered we had told him about our friend's wish. When you travel with the ashes, he urged, be sure to bring the certificate with you. If you are stopped by the police, they will consider that you are transporting a body and you must be able to show them everything is legal.

I was surprised by how heavy the urn was. I had to keep changing hands as I carried it home. By the weight, I could well believe my friend's body was all in that box. I thought how much I would have

liked to tell her the story of trundling her ashes along the rue St. Jacques, and how as we, she and I, passed the church of the Val de Grâce, the bells were ringing and I looked in the courtyard and saw a hearse. My friend was neither Christian nor religious, nor am I, and I didn't go in. When I arrived home, I put the ashes in the corner of the living room, next to a ficus she'd raised from a cutting, and sat down to think what to do next.

This was self-evident: next was the will. She had left a will written in ballpoint on two sides of a page of French graph paper. It was eloquent and elegant, and it conducted masterfully for the last time the ensemble of a complicated life. It was also a sad will, written in a moment of despair. Legally, however, it was not much. Fortunately it was handwritten, dated and signed, so it was valid. In the U.S., a will has to be witnessed to be valid. In this matter, France seems to value vows over contracts, so a will is valid so long as it clearly denotes personal wishes. My friend's will, being in her handwriting, met this requirement, but it was lacking in other ways. She'd written it logically, thinking of her possessions singly and giving them away singly. There weren't many: she left her apartment to one, to another some furniture and a few paintings, and a third was to choose an object or two. But the notary said she wished my friend had called her so she could have told her a will should never be a series of gifts, but a universal donation; you should designate a single person to distribute this to that one and that to this. Otherwise, anything not named in the will goes to a default heir, a blood relative who also becomes the executor. My friend had forgotten that she had two small bank accounts, as well as death benefits from her job, odds and ends, *des poussières* in French, dust. Her only relatives were a nephew and a niece, children of a brother now dead and long estranged, and she had written in the will that they were not to inherit. They therefore wouldn't, but their small children could, which came to the same thing. It wouldn't be much of an inheritance by an accountant's reckoning, and it would be still less minus the French sixty percent inheritance tax, but symbolically who inherited mattered very much.

Henceforth she was all symbols, and these of the will had meanings she had assigned herself. It was essential that her symbols not be revoked by her relatives. Between us, we referred to them generically: *the* nephew, *the* niece. They were *the* children of *the* brother. She had loved her mother wholly, her father not so much, and her brother, after a bad time, not at all. Now that she was dead these distinctions vanished: mother, father, brother. . .her family. In addition, they were all dead, mother, father, brother; but still they were an official family more powerful than any relations her life had bred: the nephew and the niece, banished from her life, could now become the crux of who she remained. The family, I thought, gets a lot of its meaning, most of it maybe, from death.

She had written her will as if a child, in drawing a fence around her picture of a house, had forgotten to extend the line all the way round. She hadn't said the nephew and the niece mustn't inherit her bank balance, the miles on her American Express card, the security deposit on her rented apartment. So they would. I imagined the stuff of the law flowing in over the place in the world where she no longer was, like water closing, cloth knitting, a hole filling, erasing the perturbations of her ways of living. Strange, no? that a person's absence should restore wholeness? Yet she wasn't a disruptive person, not difficult to work or live with and no more critical than comes with a sense of humor. Maybe not quite a member in good standing, a pillar of society. I thought that it happens like this: willy-nilly the dead become pillars of society.

We knew what she would have felt about the nephew and the niece transforming her into their aunt and decided that we couldn't let them. We said we'd get a lawyer, we swore we wouldn't let them. Then, in the midst of swearing, I lost the thread of fierceness. All this about the will was crucial to our keeping faith with our friend, I thought, but it was also beside the point. A few months before she died, I saw a child born. The hours it took were incandescent with consciousness, concentration, fear, hope, work, curiosity. In the room, everyone was supremely present. Except the child: at the center of all the sounds of

his coming into life, there was a great silence. He made no sound, and for all that his presence was overwhelmingly impending, I could only sense his absence. When I thought that keeping faith with our friend's will was perhaps necessary but also irrelevant, I remembered the silence of the unborn child cutting it off categorically from the world of our anticipation. While we were swearing we'd not let the nephew and the niece get away with it, our friend was silent the way the unborn child had been. So, in the middle of it, I fell silent because I saw my swearing on her behalf was nonsense. Literally without sense which is another word for connection, when there's no connection, no continuity or relevance, between life and death. There's nothing to understand about death, not even that it exists. Epicurus said death was nothing to us, since, as he put it, where we are, death is not and where death is, we are not. It's well to remember that birth bursts in on a long silence, so as to be prepared for the bursting into silence of death. It's not a diminuendo, it's the absence of all sound.

At first, I wanted burying my friend to be a diminuendo. I was glad she'd asked us to divide her ashes because it was a way for us to continue the story of her life, to add another episode, under her direction. Then I lost my train of thought and, instead of what she had asked us to do, I heard mostly her silence and I found this silence intolerable, and excessive. It was what they call in French English, "too much," by which they mean not a relative but an absolute muchness.

I find myself objecting to the excess of her death. At insignificant moments, crossing the boulevard, putting the milk back in the refrigerator, spraying the cactus, I've spoken to her aloud. The last time I spoke so strangely that I heard myself: I was saying all right, that's enough now, *ça suffit*, it's time you came back, really it's time. I said before that I'm not religious. I don't think there is an afterlife, and certainly not that the dead walk the earth. Yet I meant it when I told her it was time she returned, and I was annoyed that she stayed away. I'd not have been surprised if she'd appeared and I'm disappointed that she hasn't. I'd have told her that this thing she asked us to do with her ashes was more complicated than she'd realized; she'd have said forget it; I'd have said, no, it was turning out to be very interesting and we

wanted to do it, now that she'd mentioned it. I can imagine this conversation very easily. What I can't imagine is that she's dead.

I don't blame my imagination. Death is not a subject for the imagination. Literature, painting, and music only talk around it. Two weeks after my friend's death, I went to hear Haydn's *Orfeo ed Euridice* about a man penetrating alive into death. Orpheus just will not accept that he can't have Eurydice. She's taken from him once alive, and he gets her back by dint of his music. Then, the fool, he leaves her unguarded and she's taken from him again. This time, fleeing her abductor, she's killed. The question is whether Orpheus's music can bring her back to life. Most people would say no. At the funeral, we played Chopin études to acknowledge my friend's death, not to dispute it. Once death has happened, there is nothing to say. All the living can do is show the flag, make a show of force the way a nation might march its army up to the border of an enemy state. The force of the living is in nonetheless giving shape to the world they don't transcend. So when they see death rising up at their borders, they go out and demonstrate this power to give shape. Hence ceremony, and music, the most formal of the arts. A funeral ought to be the most formal of ceremonies, for, there being nothing to see in death but dissolution, a funeral has nothing in view but form.

Orpheus, however, mistook a flexing of muscles meant to keep up your spirit in the knowledge of ultimate defeat, for having a fighting chance. He was misled by his music's wondrous power over nature and man into thinking it transcendent. Haydn's librettist Badini invented the character Genius who tries to explain to Orpheus that the best answer to death is philosophy, which, having walked the metes and bounds of life, accepts the limits of the estate in return for getting to furnish it. But Orpheus will have none of such trades and, for a little while, he seems to be right, since Genius now tells him that after all he can regain Eurydice, on one not very difficult condition. Which he can't fulfill: the great puzzle of the story of Orpheus is why he turns back to look at Eurydice knowing he'll lose her for it. I thought, watching the opera after my friend's death, that Orpheus had a greater ambition than reviving Eurydice, which was to breach the underworld. He

had to see Eurydice while she was still on the ground of death for, if he saw her again only after her return to life, his invasion of death wouldn't be realized as such. It would have had consequences but no reality of its own. Persuading Pluto to annul Eurydice's death is not enough for Orpheus. What he really wants, what the living want, what I want, is to see with my living eyes the world of death; and, by seeing it, to overcome its discontinuity, to make it another condition of life, so I can go on, or can imagine going on, even though dead. Sight is the most important sense. Emerson insisted that what you see you possess. Orpheus, for his glimpse of the world of the dead, for thinking he could make the dead Eurydice his, was torn apart by the forces that rule that world, the forces of disorder and the antithesis of the force with which he makes his music. Pluto's prohibition is simple and absolute: you can't with your living mind know death.

Eurydice just faded away from Orpheus's sight, but in real life the way it becomes evident that death is a closed matter feels like mockery. We were in the other room, talking, when my friend died. I went in to check on her and couldn't see her breathing. The doctor came and said she was dead. Then quickly there were other people. The doctor recommended a funeral parlor and they said they'd come in two hours. This seemed too fast but, it being Friday, it was then or not until after the weekend. They said to choose clothes in which they would "prepare" her. I thought, having had to die, she shouldn't have to undergo being prepared and said I would dress her, not knowing how difficult it is to dress a dead person. To begin with, I couldn't pull out the intravenous tube that still connected her to a morphine drip. The tube had been inserted into a catheter through which she had been undergoing a chemotherapy. When I tried to pull out the tube, blood seeped from the opening of the catheter. So instead I cut the tube and so doing saw that she was dead. I had wanted her to wear a favorite gray cashmere turtleneck, but I couldn't put it on her. She was too heavy, although she weighed less than eighty pounds, and too stiff, so I dressed her in a shirt and pants. She looked terrible, yet fully and definitively herself. You're never so wholly incarnate as in death.

When I was dressing my friend, I expected her to help. The utter stillness of her arms and legs filled me with hopelessness. In French, there are two words that look like despair but the second means hopelessness: *désespoir* and *désesperance*. It's useful to have despair and hopelessness look alike; they correct one another, so that *désespoir* is less sentimental than despair and *désesperance* less childish than hopelessness. The feeling I had when my friend didn't raise her arm even a little so I could slip on her sweater was *désesperance*: there was nothing anymore to hope for in relation to her.

This feeling had an unwonted finality. I wasn't used to despair. She had been sick a long time and I knew she would probably, nearly inevitably, die of the disease. But such an eventuality never seemed immediately relevant. Ten days before she died, we went to Nantes where she had been invited to visit in a course on book editing. She didn't seem strong enough to go alone, so I went with her. We took the TGV and arrived in the rain. I walked with her to the place where she was to talk, stopping on the way to get her some coffee and a raisin bun for strength. Later, the talk having gone very well, we ate at a fish brasserie from the turn of the century, and shared a big platter of shellfish. We were to return to Paris the next morning but instead we stayed over one more day. It was no longer raining, and we turned the trip into a holiday. We rented a car and, because my friend had passed the summers of her childhood on the Atlantic coast, she knew a place she wanted to go, near Pornic. We drove, in fact she drove, and it all started to come out right. After a while, on the left was a long driveway down to a parking lot on a beach. We parked and walked down to the water. The sky was mostly gray but a bright gray, an ocean gray with white seagulls. It wasn't cold, not cold enough to make the mist uncomfortable. We walked down to the water. The tide was coming in and, to go all the way to the water, you had to be ready to jump back. She stayed farther up the beach and I went down to the water. A perfect seashell floated in on a small roller and was left behind still cupped upright, the only one on the beach (I checked) that was hollow side up. I told her it was definitely bringing something. Superstitious only to

the degree that connotes a proper sense of your own understanding's limits and the infinitude of possibility, still, we took it as a sign. So to drink to the sign, we entered the beach cafe, which was called Bahia and decorated with plastic parrots two feet tall hanging from the ceiling on round swings. The African owner made us impeccable hot chocolates.

I'm stuck in that day. And I'm simultaneously stuck in the night before she died. She wasn't conscious. I didn't have a view about her unconsciousness. For the moment, I only thought of the night. I lay down beside her. I talked to her and told her she should rest tranquilly, we were there and were taking care of her. I said, *On te soigne*. Sleep. It's all right. I'm stuck in the day on the beach and in that night. Being stuck I suppose is a way of dying with the dead by stopping when they do. Yet the mother of the child I saw being born, in whose silence I had sensed a universe outside of life, said, when I told her I was stuck in the night of my friend's death, that she was stuck in the night of her child's birth. You get stuck, then, when you meet up with something that makes the limit of your perpetual motion just too obvious.

Stuck, you turn back. My friend didn't appear to me, so I made her appear: one night, I dreamed she had come back to life, or rather that she hadn't died. At first, in my dream, she was as she was in the moments before she died. But, in the dream, as I bent over to see how she was, she grew better and better, until, in the dream, I called out to the doctor to do something, since something could be done.