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The Art of Dying

A lonely act of surrender on the streets of downtown Chicago

by Tom Montgomery-Fate

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I'M LYING ON MY BACK on the concrete in the heart of Chicago. Chaos whirs around me, so I try to focus, to let the warm light streaming down through the geometry of steel and glass become what it is, a prayer of forgiveness. But this only partly works. We need a *lot* of forgiveness these days. And I'm distracted—by the abrupt carbonic hiss of a bus pulling out into traffic and the sudden *rat-a-tat-tat* of a jackhammer breaking up a sidewalk somewhere. It sounds close.

My feet are a few inches away from the feet of the Flamingo, a four-story-high Alexander Calder sculpture in the middle of Federal Plaza. It has always looked like a big chicken to me, as if it should be titled *Big Red Chicken Stalks Inner City*. Since I have covered myself with a white sheet and am pretending to be dead, I can't see the red chicken. But I imagine it looming over me, coming to life, pecking at my soft flesh and at the other bodies lying around me. Given the tenor of the moment—pretending to be dead and all—I should be more serious, but the chicken keeps scratching around in my brain.

I dream of the president making an emergency announcement on nationwide television that the Calder chicken and the equally worrisome Picasso sculpture in the Daley Plaza are terrorist robots that are electronically connected to a Henry Moore sculpture in the Art Institute of Chicago. Reportedly planted long ago by a sleeper cell of starving artists, they can be simultaneously activated at any moment. "We are all vulnerable to such attacks," the president might say. "The enemy is everywhere. Even in modern art."

But here's the thing: this daydream is no more absurd than the war itself, or than I am, lying here wrapped in a sheet in the middle of a huge city on a busy workday, just a few feet from the honking congestion of Dearborn and Adams streets.

The die-in is an art installation. The organizers are artists.

I am a piece of art. Our forty bodies and forty white sheets and forty red carnations have been arranged on the cement canvas into a death grid, a graveyard. We symbolize the number of Iraqis who die every day from the war. We seek to create the antithesis of war—art—and through it a reverence for life.

Yet not everyone sees it that way. I lie in the darkness and wonder how many passersby are baffled by our method and motives. The pretty young woman who walked up to me as I approached the plaza and stuck her right middle finger in my face and smiled angrily might say that we do it because we want attention, because we want to be seen. She is right, in part. But I think it is more about learning how to see, about finding ourselves in the eyes of "the enemy," about understanding the fragile yet essential weave of our distant lives.

The point of our connection is not "freedom" or "democracy" or some vague ideology. We share a shrinking, polluted planet and a perilous dependence on oil. We share the need for food and sleep and clean water. We share the fear of death, and the need to love and be loved. We share the longing for beauty, and the truth of art against the lie of war—forty live bodies lying dead in the middle of Federal Plaza.

Several years ago, U.S. military leaders watched the destruction of Iraq's National Museum and National Library, but the soldiers on the ground were ordered not to see it—not to see the looting of history, the theft of memory, the bashing of ancient vases and paintings, the burning of sacred texts, the crushing of the cradle of someone else's civilization. But it is also ours, connected by a cross-cultural bridge that was either forgotten or never built—between religion and art, Islam and Christianity, Iraqis and Americans. Who, for example, would have known that the biblical patriarch Abraham was also a Muslim prophet who hailed from the Iraqi city of Ur? Or that Ninevah, where Jonah (also both a Christian and Muslim prophet) was to have preached after being swallowed by a whale, is part of modern-day Mosul? Or that the site of the mythic Garden of Eden is located in southern Iraq?

I'm not sure how U.S. history became so disconnected from the rest of the world's, nor why it keeps getting shorter, why it must always be new and improved. It began a couple of centuries ago with a bunch of angry colonists fighting for their freedom, which is supposedly what we are defending in Iraq, which is why I'm lying here, which points to the problem: our best and only defense seems to be an offense—the art of war, whose goal is to destroy rather than create. The works of MacArthur, Patton, and Schwarzkopf come to mind.

On September 12, 2001, after the skies were emptied of planes and we were assured the Sears Tower would not be hit, I had an urge to visit the Art

Institute of Chicago, to counter the tragedy in New York with O'Keeffe's voluptuous lilies, Hopper's gritty streetscapes, Pollack's wild spatters. But parts of the city were closed down, and so were some parts of myself—lost in the spiral of sadness—so I settled for a coffee-table book of Marc Chagall's paintings. As I leafed through the stunning images while the grainy towers fell over and over on TV, I wondered how Chagall would have depicted the absurdity of the planes-turned-missiles, of the people leaping into the flaming canyon. What would he have seen, and created, in the face of the destruction?

I HAVE ONLY BEEN DEAD for a few minutes when someone drops a long-stemmed carnation on my chest. It lands on top of my folded hands. The soft sudden weight of the flower is an epiphany, a moment of attention that connects me, reminds me that I belong to everything and everyone, that we are all related. I feel it deeply—the flower, the sun, the wind, their quiet resilience and forgiveness.

A gull screams. I imagine the feathered, flattened M coasting high above me, glowing in the sunlight, then veering to the east—a white silhouette pumping through a four-block corridor of skyscraping shadows, which finally opens onto the lake and sky, a watercolor painting that has no borders, no endings. Today it would be all shades of blue, broken only by a few intermittent clouds and whitecaps. From under the white sheet I imagine the lake at a great distance: a shimmering blue body whose fingers touch other lakes, whose branches feed into rivers, which empty into oceans, which reach around the world and touch the soil, the homes, the daily lives of every enemy we have ever appointed or imprisoned or shot or carpet-bombed in the name of freedom or God. Whether we call them collateral damage or terrorists or human beings, we are closely related. Closer all the time.

A woman with a cheap microphone and little beat-up amplifier begins to sing the names of the dead. She nurses vibrant and haunting tones out of the cracking, echoey sound system: *Rafid Naji Hasan, 9 years old; Jumma Ibrahim, 14 years old; Fadhel Mohammed al Dulaimi, 45 years old . . .*

The names go on and on.

I lie in the darkness and replay in my mind the AP radio story I heard this morning. "Today the U.S. military attacked a large compound in Sadr City where there were suspected insurgents. Forty-one al-Qaeda terrorists were killed." An hour later the Iraqi government announced that sixteen of the dead were confirmed civilians, including a 9 month old, a 3 year old, and a 7 year old, who was literally blown into pieces. I try to imagine the weeping father of the 7 year old collecting his son's severed arm and leg in a cardboard box.

What is an average citizen on the other side of the ocean to do with such horror? How are we to endure five years of "democratic" slaughter, of terrifying "freedom"? What do you do? Lie down on the cement in the middle of the city in the middle of the day and pretend you're dead?

I HAVE BEEN TEACHING Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" in my freshman composition classes. In it Thoreau critiques the U.S. government and military and all those who serve the state with their bodies and heads but not their conscience. "I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army."

I don't expect my students to take to the streets when they read this, enraged at Thoreau's startling relevance. Some couldn't care less. Some are offended by the "anti-American" sentiment. But a few are angry and frustrated. And even though they are overwhelmed—with full-time school, full-time jobs, and families—they wonder what they can do. They approach me after class. I tell them I too am bewildered. Here we are, watching Vietnam all over again. How can this be happening? "It's because there's no draft," says Mike, a student and soldier who just returned from Iraq, and who will probably be called back. "And because we are afraid to lose, to surrender."

Soon the class will read sections from Walden and learn that Thoreau's politics stem less from ideology than a deep reverence for life rooted in his love of the natural world. He knew the politics of the pine tree and the loon as well as that of the Mexican-American War. So while he sometimes kept runaway slaves in his cabin at the pond, it was perhaps less due to abolitionist politics than a growing recognition that the slaves' quest for freedom was also his own, that they belonged equally to Creation.

I HAVE BEEN DEAD FOR A LONG TIME when I finally catch the sweet, delicate scent of my carnation—just a trace, and only for a second. A pigeon coos as it struts along the edge of my sheet, snagging a claw in the fabric but managing to shake it free. Then a little girl—one of the children of the temporarily dead—starts giggling about something. Her clicking shoes skip through the odd labyrinth of flower-adorned bodies.

I think of my own kids and begin to wonder about the time, but I can't lift my arm to read my watch without disturbing the art. My wife has a conference today so I need to leave right at two o'clock to make it to Lincoln Elementary in Glen Ellyn by the first bell. Our son, Bennett, a first grader, gets scared if no one is there to meet him. And our daughter Abby has to be taken to soccer. Our other daughter Tessa needs a lift home from a cross-country meet. What the hell: I slowly turn my arm and raise it so I can see that I have been lying here for twenty minutes. It seems like an hour.

I'm not even sure why I came to this demonstration. I need to go grocery shopping and I have stacks of papers to grade. Was it guilt? Yes, partly. The belief I'm making a difference? No, I don't think so. The hope that this theater of the absurd will help alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people? Not really. My motivations are less noble, less clear. I'm just trying to learn how to believe in something, how to see in the dark.

. . . Ahmad Mahdey Jaleel, 23 years old; Tahad Saeed Abas, 9 months old; Thea Mhed Kder, 11 years old; Zina Ali Hirat, 3 years old; Abra Kata Albdwe, 70 years old . . .

It is Thea, the 11-year-old girl, whose name I cannot let go. My daughters are 11 and 14. Thea: I see her skipping rope in the red clay dust behind her home in Najaf, perhaps munching on a sour green mango with a friend. Thea: I see her exasperated face when her parents say her bombed-out school will not be reopened. Thea: I see her lithe body running wildly away from something. What is it? What is she running from? Thea: I see the name wheeling up toward the sun like a dove that has been released so it can return home. Thea. The enemy. A dead little girl. Her. Me. Us.

My mind wanders to a recent phone conversation. One of my students called at seven a.m. to tell me that he would miss class because his cousin was killed the previous day in Iraq. I found notice of the death and a picture of his cousin in the local paper the next day. He was twenty-four years old. According to the paper, he "died from wounds suffered in an attack in Anbar province, a hotbed of the Sunni insurgency." It was his second tour of duty. He had "three great loves in his life: his family, the outdoors and the Marines."

At some point I completely zone out and just ride the river of Iraqi names, the singing of the dead. And that's when it happens—a strong wind comes out of nowhere and pulls out the corners of my sheet, which begin to flap like little flags. Then, suddenly, the carnation is gone, abruptly lifted from my chest by a gust of wind. How odd and frustrating it is to imagine the flight of the flower into the sky rather than to see it. I want to pull back the sheet to confirm I am right. I want clarity, the comfort of a fact. I want to know. Seeing is believing. Instead, I fall back into the river of names.

I lie in the darkness and drift with the dead. I see my student's cousin in the river too, and a few thousand other dead Americans. Their faces float by in my nightmare: singed flesh, smoldering hair. But it is the eyes that haunt me. They never close, even at the end, but remain fixed in disbelief.

. . . Abaas Haloob Mataar, 19 years old; Karar Harmeed Abed Ali, 2 years old; Abas Hamza, 80 years old; Abas Zire Agel, 5 years old; Iman Zowaer Ohlaa, 7 years old; Wahaab Halmaan Monsor, 28 years

old . . .

When the singing of names stops, a new voice echoes over the scratchy PA. The speaker cites a new British study that reports 1.2 million Iraqis have died in the war, half of whom are civilians. He says the die-in is a reminder of the reality of war for those who cannot imagine that scale of suffering.

I imagine a literal scale, with the U.S. Congress and president lifted high above the gruesome wars they wage. In a shining gold hors d'oeuvres tray they sit in leather chairs, bloated with food, oblivious to the immense weight, the huge heap of bodies in the rusted barrel on the other side of the fulcrum. Safe and secure, they hover over the mangle of the battlefield. I like this metaphor, until I start to wonder if I would have to place myself in the golden tray too. Where else is there? The only answer I can think of is here, now, waiting in the darkness, trying to learn the art of dying.

The woman starts to sing the names again. Then someone gently lays the carnation back on my chest, on my folded hands. The startling weight and scent of the flower again pull me toward the heart of things, remind me what the artist knows: that all life is intimately connected. That we are all created and forgiven by the sun and wind and water. That in the shiny, wet eyes of the enemy is the clear reflection of ourselves. And that victory can begin with a lonely act of surrender.