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Death

In facing the deformity of death, in their last exequies, the  
Greek devotion seems the most pathetically ceremonious.  
Sir Thomas Browne

Last night, eighteen hours ago, he had eaten and drunk, a great deal too much, they said, and then he had died. He was brought to Panagia in an ancient white hearse with imitation candles on the inside, and preceded by the firemen's band playing the Beethoven and Chopin funeral marches. The coffin lid was propped up on the church porch along with the floral tributes. At the end of the service, the mourners walked around the casket, touching his hands, patting his cheeks, kissing him goodbye. Then the coffin was put back into the hearse, the lid put on lopsided, and the fat, exhausted, swollen-faced widow, surrounded by people with bottles of ammonia and cologne was crammed into a car.

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Theodoris died yesterday. He was severely ill from lung cancer when we met him at Evangelitsa's for Easter lunch. We went to his funeral, the largest crowd I had seen in Nauplion for a funeral, and the saddest. I was particularly sad for his lover, ignored by the family, left out of the arrangements, who stood on the porch of the church. The coffin was closed. We walked behind the hearse to the cemetery, his sister and immediate relatives leading the mourners. She was tall and had the same memorable profile as he. As we began walking, she cried out, hearbreakingly, "*Theodori mou,*" and then, faintly, five times, "Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!" The utter despair was somewhat mitigated when she then turned to the man on her left and began berating him mercilessly.

Along the funeral route, at each cafe and shop and gas station, men came out and stood quietly holding their hats over their hearts, women crossed themselves. At

the cemetery, the sexton had cleaned out the family plot and put the bones of Theodoris's parents into a pillowcase. The priest said the last prayers, then the men nearest the grave each threw a handful of dirt onto the coffin. The sexton dropped the pillowcase of bones into the space at the end of the coffin. The bones made a clear, dispassionate rattle. The men began shoveling the dry reddish earth back into the grave. Each man threw in one shovel of dirt and then passed the shovel to the man beside him. It was late in the afternoon, the sun shone in glittering horizontal rays through the clouds of red dust. As we left the cemetery, we were each handed a crust of dried bread to soften with our tears.

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Vicky phoned for us to come to Tolo to see their funeral. The forty-four year old seaman-father of the family next door had died of peritonitis off the coast of Portugal, and his body had just arrived home. The little house below Vicky's balcony was crammed with people. The men remained outside on the porch; some of them leaned on the dead man's fishing boat which was in the small front yard, up on blocks. Women in black, a hundred of them, all the women from Tolo and many more, were crammed into the house and on the porch; more kept squeezing their way in.

There was a steady drone from the house. They were chanting the traditional *moirologia* -- this is how the *Iliad* ends -- more or less improvised as they went along, and we listened for three hours. We could hear the voices change from one person to the next as each woman took her turn at grieving or performing. "Where are you, my husband, my love -- Why you die, my sweet son? -- My brother, come back." And at times, the poetic would move into the pragmatic, "How could you die, how could you leave your wife and three children unprotected? -- How do you expect me to live without you?"

Later we walked in procession to church for the funeral, through Tolo and up the hill, his brothers carrying the coffin on their shoulders. The cantor had a magnificent voice; it seemed that if you were riddled with grief, the warmth and generosity of the voice would envelop and comfort you. As a counterpoint to the tenor, some of the women kept up a steady soft keening. One woman -- we couldn't determine the relationship -- kept saying with monotonous fury, "Why did you do this, why? Come back. Where are you now, Costa, what do you think you are doing, going off and leaving your

wife and children like this?"

When the mourners filed past the casket, several among the men were raging and shaking their fists. It was magnificent. I should add that though the casket was closed, it had glass windows all around. It was not long enough for Costa, and his head was kinked up to one side. It was unfortunate that moisture had condensed on the inside of the glass. He was blanketed with red and pink carnations. It was dusk when we stood in the cemetery, mourners had put candles on all the graves, and we heard the last prayers in candlelight. When his brothers began to shovel in the dirt, clods of red clay and reddish earth broke through the glass panels and fell across the body, in the dusk indistinguishable from the pink and red carnations.