

The
LOST ART
of
DYING

REVIVING FORGOTTEN WISDOM



L. S. DUGDALE

Artwork by Michael W. Dugger

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Names and identifying characteristics of some individuals have been changed to preserve their privacy.

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This is a book on the *art* of dying. By this point, you've read narrative, essay, poetry, philosophy, and theology. You've read about music. You've read about the Isenheim altarpiece. And you've read that one of the earliest versions of the *Ars moriendi* was illustrated, enabling all who encountered it—not least the illiterate and uneducated—to reflect on their finitude and prepare for death.

There is a way in which art stirs us to moral action. Beauty provokes desire, to be sure, but art can also prompt other responses. In the case of the *ars moriendi*, the art of human finitude provokes anticipation and preparation for an inevitable end.

Early on in the writing of this book, a colleague challenged me to consider whether it would be possible to reclaim a visual practice to accompany my narrative. Could text alone do justice to the *art* of dying? My colleague argued that the book would be more engaging if each chapter were paired with an image.

To this end, I commissioned the artist Michael W. Dugger—whose own work engages with fundamentally existential questions—to create ink renderings in response to the original *ars moriendi* woodcuts. The goal was to design a modern image that could also develop the themes of each chapter. In what follows, you will find the fruits of this labor: an image for each chapter paired with its description.

ONE

DEATH

This is Mr. W. J. Turner, the elderly African American gentleman whom I describe at the book's outset. As a *moriens*, or dying man, this is also the image that most closely approximates the original *ars moriendi* woodcuts reproduced in Chapter Two.

Several elements make this image distinct from those of the fifteenth century. One is Mr. Turner's African ancestry. Another is the presence of modern hospital equipment in a modern hospital room. What's more, the image lacks any sort of intrinsic morality. If the *ars moriendi* illustrations paired temptations with consolations for the dying, this image tells the story of a death that occurs in a hospital, devoid of any larger narrative. This is precisely the story that this book seeks to disrupt.



TWO

FINITUDE

Flowers represent the idea of the temporal and the temporary. By their very nature, cut flowers endure only briefly.

Chapter Two describes *vanitas* paintings—art that served as a deliberate reminder of human finitude. These paintings often incorporated flowers into their compositions. For this book’s representation of the finite, the artist chose the lily. The flower illustrated here remains attached to its bulb, suggesting the “life journey” of a plant from roots to flowers. A perennial evokes more enduring patterns of time. Furthermore, the lily is a common funeral flower: its scent possesses the strength to mask the stench of decay. It is also an Easter flower, hinting at new life following death.



THREE

COMMUNITY

This chapter opens with two juxtaposed stories of lonely dying—in America and Japan.

This image evokes the *danchi*, the stacked Japanese apartment complexes where many older Japanese are experiencing lonely deaths. The top frame of this two-part image shows Mrs. Ito, the isolated elderly woman in her apartment. Her open paper screen, relic of an older way of living, suggests that she is still alive. The bottom frame shows the screen mostly closed. The text is the Japanese for “lonely death.”

The art of dying is best understood as a community affair.



FOUR

CONTEXT

This chapter explores why the majority of Americans die in institutions, such as hospitals, nursing homes, and hospices.

A gentleman in a wheelchair provides a visual representation of the many people who grow increasingly dependent on the mechanisms of health-care institutions. This rising reliance on doctors and hospitals—both individually and societally—is partly responsible for the fact that only a minority of people die at home, contradicting their own strongly expressed wishes.



FIVE

F E A R

For a chapter on fear, this image was designed to represent—as well as to induce—its subject.

This is a disturbing piece of art, and over the course of its many renditions the artist toned it down significantly. A young woman, eyes wide open in terror, lies in a hospital bed that bears a striking resemblance to an open coffin. It is not exactly clear whether the oxygen mask is helping or smothering her. Her arms are hidden, which prompts the viewer to ask whether she has the ability to escape from the encroaching darkness.



SIX

BODY

This image is also disquieting. If we reject the idea of contemplating our finitude, we must also reject the idea that our bodies will, one day, fail.

The figure is an erect, humanized form of the hybrid creature from the Isenheim Altarpiece described in the chapter's text—as Huysmans puts it, his “legs spread wide, bloated belly pushing against the surrounding darkness. His skin is littered with the haloed lesions of St. Anthony’s Fire.” If compared to the creature in the altarpiece painting, the viewer will soon observe the similarities. The aim is to prompt a visual reckoning with bodily finitude while also noting that disease can transfigure even as it transforms.



SEVEN

SPIRIT

For a discussion of spirit, it seemed appropriate to present stained glass as another art form closely related to an art of dying. Stained glass can be found in churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship, as well as in cemeteries and funeral parlors.

This image links the notion of *shalom* (written in Hebrew) to what is described in the chapter as “vandalized shalom.” The glass is composed of fragments, more clearly shattered in the bottom half. The dove, which represents peace or *shalom*, is itself fragmented and inverted. Preparation for death helps to rescue us from vandalized *shalom*.

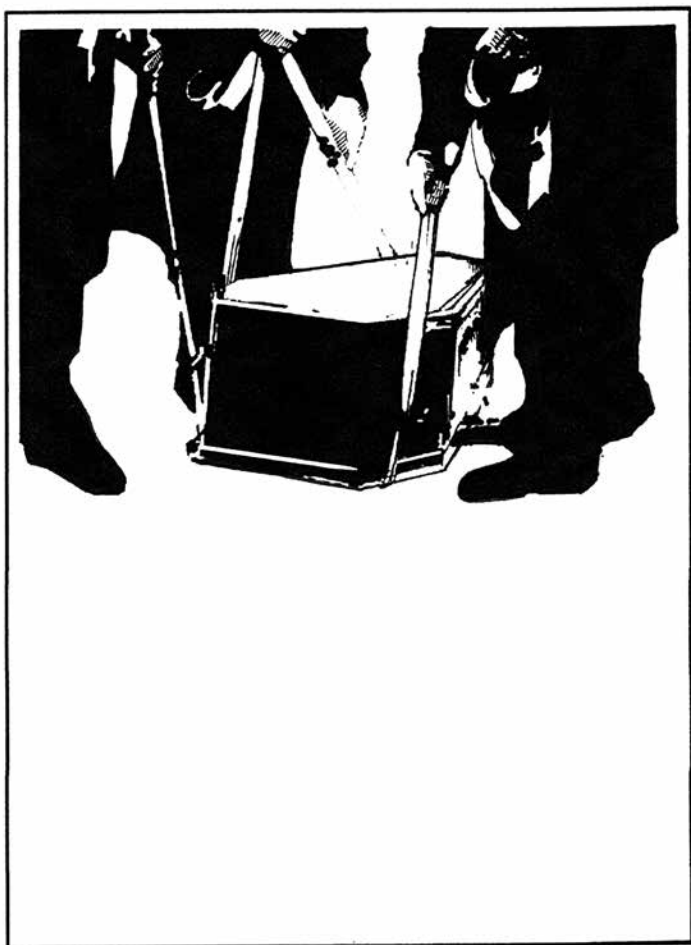


EIGHT

RITUAL

The image of a burial draws together many Western death-related rituals, including those performed in the hospital prior to death, preparing a body for burial, and funerary rituals.

In this image, a group of men lowers a coffin into the ground; but the space where the hole should be is empty. The suspension of the coffin in space—indeed the realization that the men themselves are suspended—underscores the existential and emotional chaos brought about by death. Ritual creates order in the midst of such chaos.



NINE

L I F E

The themes of the book coalesce in this final chapter, which addresses questions about what ultimately matters for each of us.

This image of a young boy with his grandmother exemplifies the answer that most people give when asked what brings meaning to their lives. For a chapter titled “Life,” the representation of family suggests that the threat of our finitude should drive us toward those we love. But it also highlights how life continues despite death’s shadow. To die well requires that we live well, and we live best in the company of communities that help us make sense of our finitude and find beauty in decay.

