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A Brief Examination of Mortality

The worm was already half-pasted to the ground when I found it, its other half free to wiggle and wave as if I could save it, as if I would try. Its lower body blended with the asphalt, fused there by a poorly placed foot and sealed by the drifting rain. Its side that was not stuck to the earth moved back and forth in a lazy dance, although it probably required immense effort to carry out the subtle movement. It must have felt like a final, futile effort to live, to move in the open air. It resembled a front-porch flag flapping slowly in the passing breeze, a calm sea lapping at tidepools.

I leaned over to study the worm for a moment, and then I walked away. It was easy to brush past death, because I was so large and the worm was so small. Perhaps the devastation of death is proportional to the size of the creature: a dying worm is nothing; a dying dog brings tears; a dying human can devastate.



In my sixth-grade science class, we observed earthworms in petri dishes for an entire week. We each caught a worm, and then our teacher instructed us to turn the lids of our petri dishes upside down and gently press the plastic against the worm's skin. When I did so, I could see my worm's hearts—five of them—and watched them push waves of blood through its linear body. It was an exercise in anatomy, but it was also an exercise in control: we held the worms' lives in our plastic dishes. I think we gained a false sense of power, as if we could manipulate our own circumstances just as we governed the worms' fates.



On the rainy day after I saw the squished earthworm, I tromped through shallow puddles until I reached my university's library. I couldn't stop thinking about the suffering worm; I saw myself in the creature. I was thirsty for a metaphor, desperate for a being that understood me. I hypothesized that the worms crawled onto the pavement to transcend their ordinary lives in the dirt. (The real reason for their exodus was that the rain filled their tunnels, and they needed oxygen.) I applauded the worm for risking the venture to an unknown land rather than dying in the place it knew.

There is not a corner of my bed that I haven't rolled to as I envisioned a more adventurous life for myself. I am studying finance, but I am hesitant to admit to friends that I would rather take rainy walks and ponder the demise of an earthworm than sit behind a desk and modify spreadsheets. I don't want to tell them that I long to be a full-time author because I know it is not what they want to hear. I am very good at telling others what they want to hear.

It is easy to crave a different life, and difficult to build the life I dream of. There is a myth that a worm cut in half will become two living worms, but the truth is that one half can grow again and survive while the other half dies. Sometimes I feel that I am caught between spending time on my creative endeavors and progressing in my analytical career, and I must

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choose which half will be reborn and which will die. Sometimes I feel like I can do both, and balance all the world.



Two years ago, I read an essay by Virginia Woolf about a moth's death. I found it dull, and I didn't understand her obsession. A moth died on her windowsill, and then what? Time glanced at the dying creature and pressed on, never minding. Time doesn't stop for dying insects (or dying humans, for that matter). However, when I examined the squished worm on the sidewalk, I think a deep, empathetic cord within me reached out to Virginia Woolf. I became her for a fleeting moment, studying that struggling creature, although I didn't realize it until much later, after I had already written pages of tribute to an inconsequential earthworm. For just a moment, that worm embodied mortality itself. I became Woolf's protégé in the study of death.

I did not realize it at the time, but I was very lonely when I spotted the worms on that rainy day. I craved a deep unity that would reach far beyond my surface-level friendships. Perhaps that is why I constructed an entire personality around the worm in order to empathize with feelings it never knew.

Virginia Woolf wrote about the connection between loneliness and creativity. In a journal entry penned just days before she published *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf wrote, "These October days are to me a little strained and surrounded with silence. What I mean by this last word I don't quite know, since I have never stopped 'seeing' people... No, it's not physical silence; it's some inner loneliness."¹ Maybe her loneliness drove her to compose her piece about the moth on her windowsill. I know what it means to sit alone at my writing desk and yearn for somebody else to understand my mind's wanderings. Even more poignant is the loneliness I feel when I rejoin my friends, unable to share the wrestle with language that I just experienced.

I feel a kinship with Woolf, but maybe it is only because I am projecting my emotions yet again, this time onto a dead woman. I now have the clarity to understand that I am doing this because I am lonely as a writer. Although there is a worldwide community of writers, I think many of us are slated to feel the "inner loneliness" that Woolf did at some point—it can drive our work and our relationships to depths that would not be possible without it.

I was once told by a friend that writing is a dying art. This might be true, but aren't we all dying people? I think that art tries to live just as we do: evolving, flourishing then retreating, revising and then rising again. And I think that even as I spin towards death for the next sixty years, I want to wrangle words into sentences and then paragraphs and then pages that mean something to someone else, or at least to myself.



I cannot explain my fascination with the dying worm without acknowledging that we are all fascinated by death. It is not a blatant enthrallment; we do not point and exclaim at dying things as we would for a rainbow along the side of the road. It manifests itself in the quiet mo-

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ments of the night, when my body is buried among blankets and I wonder if my coffin will be as comfortable as my bed is, or how long it will take the insects to break through the wood that will encase me and eat my remains. The worms looked pitiful on that rainy day, all spread across the pavement, but when I am in my most pitiful state—death—my body will belong to the creatures who dwell in the dirt. Our existences are not so separate as they appear.

Virginia Woolf certainly examined death in her work, and she ultimately took her own life. She struggled with her mental health for decades, likely due to the abuse and tragedy that she endured in her youth. When she was fifty-nine years old, she walked into the River Ouse with rocks in the pockets of her fur jacket. She left a suicide note to her husband, one last composition of the words that she mastered and loved throughout her life. Part of the note said, "If anybody could have saved me it would have been you... I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been."² I couldn't understand the contradiction between love and death when I first read that note. Now, I do.

Mental health research was still undeveloped during Woolf's time, so she was unable to receive the help she needed to combat her depression. She even had several teeth extracted at one point as an ineffective treatment for the supposed link between mental health and dental infection.³ I am blessed to live in a world with open discussion, therapy, and medication, but it is still difficult to bear mental burdens.

This is the part of the essay that I dread writing. If I am to discuss death, I must examine my own. If I am to cite Woolf, I cannot deny my own mental illness. There are no more hiding places; no more holes in the dirt where I can burrow.

A few months ago, I wanted to end my life. I do not say this lightly, or for drama—it is just a fact about me, another characteristic to shape who I am. I've suffered from depression and anxiety for years, but a few months ago I went through the worst of it. I have no simple explanation or justification for the way I felt. It might have been hormones or brain chemicals or situational factors. It might have been the misalignment between my passion and profession, between who I am and what I do.

I felt like I was missing something as I walked through campus, just one speck in a swirling sea of students who seemed to know how to live, how to want to live. That drive to stay alive was natural for everyone else, but I had to practice it. I was lost in the crowd, defective, passed over, broken.

In those moments when I couldn't get out of bed, when I couldn't be alone, when I contemplated the damage I could do, there were two thoughts that saved me: my husband and family, and my writing. The art form that I'd denied for years, turned my back on even when I felt the pull of purpose in my chest, saved my life. The idea that just maybe, I could help somebody else with a story. The hope that I could turn the struggle I went through into something beautiful. The feeling that there were more words inside me that needed to be written, and if I ended everything too early, they would be lost.

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I rededicated myself to my writing. I survived when I couldn't be grateful or productive or joyful. And now, a year later, I can honestly say that I'm happy — something that I wasn't sure I'd ever feel again.



When I was younger, I had an idea of how I wanted to feel when I die. I wanted to know that I had experienced the entire Earth, that the planet knew me, and that I did everything I set out to do. Now, I am beginning to understand that I am more of a squatter here in this world: I carve out a corner of it as mine, I bring in the people who I want to exist with, and I hold out until it's time to move on to the next location. Still, there are rooted within me desires to create, to build friendships, to live by the sea. It is these hopes, along with many others, that drive me forward each day.

Death is easy to grapple with in small doses (the yellowjackets that filled my father's traps in the backyard, the lemon tree that never survived the frost), but when I hypothesize about my own end, it is difficult — especially now that I have a renewed reverence for life, that same old hope that I'll never die bursting from my chest again. I hope I am old when I pass away, and that I've turned all the words I can from my mind to the page. I hope I am no longer afraid.

We, as a species, expend enormous effort to avoid death. On a biological level, we constantly exert energy to maintain homeostasis. We create children in order to preserve our genetics and to send a piece of ourselves into the world, to live on even after we die. This is not to say that we should reduce every act to its evolutionary bones — surely we find more meaning in life than just survival — but we must recognize the great desire to live that drives our most instinctual actions.

No matter what we do, we all die. Perhaps it is only when we think about, or even reach, our last moments that we see what we wanted all along. It was only when I wanted to leave this life that I recognized the people and passions that keep me tethered. I want to wonder what Woolf saw as she walked into her river, but there are parts of her story that I can never know. I leave her death as it happened and make no attempt to twist it into something peaceful or artistic.



Later on the rainy day when I watched the worms, the sun shone through the window as I worked on homework in the library. It came gradually: the first few rays slipped through the clouds, and then all of it spilled through at once. I thought the worms might be glad. I imagined the flattened worm's wiggling body sinking down in the sunlight, lowering towards the earth from which it crawled. It is a simple joy to lie in the sun, to let bare skin absorb heat, and maybe the worm rested in the warmth for a minute.

This is where the story turns: the worm could have survived its escape onto the walkway if it managed to wriggle free from its flattened parts and find a place to regrow. I know that it probably didn't, and even if it did, it probably died soon thereafter, but it *could* have. And if it did, it created a new version of itself, which was likely much the same as the prior version, only with new cells formed by those five beating hearts. The

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worm would have been half old and half new, forged by a conscious decision to leave the dying part behind, like a communion between Woolf's work and my own, a breath of new life into a so-called dying art, or a turn of my feet towards the path I was almost too afraid to follow.

Endnotes

1 Popova, Maria. "Virginia Woolf on the Relationship Between Loneliness and Creativity." Brain Pickings, 30 July 2016, www.brainpickings.org/2016/06/16/virginia-woolf-loneliness/.

2 Popova, Maria. "March 28, 1941: Virginia Woolf's Suicide Letter and Its Cruel Misinterpretation in the Media." Brain Pickings, 25 Feb. 2019, www.brainpickings.org/2014/03/28/virginia-woolf-suicide-letter/.

3 McKennett, Hannah. "'I Am Going Mad Again': The Tragic Tale Of Virginia Woolf's Suicide." All That's Interesting, 21 May 2019, allthatsinteresting.com/virginia-woolf-suicide-note-death.