

The Death of Donald

Christopher Yohmei Blasdel

I find I just cannot stop writing, even now. I suppose the desire to observe and document, which guided and informed my life for so many years, is just too strong to be extinguished by the detail of my death.

Yet death was the very thing that inspired much of my later writing, at least before a stroke rendered useless any connection between my thoughts and action and stole from me even the desire to write, along with the mental ability to do so.

The last few years of illness were not pleasant. My devoted young friends (all those my age or older having already long passed) took turns caring for me. My attempts at convalescence were difficult for me, but I also witnessed the toll it took on them. On my good days, I tried to entertain with witty stories, tales of former sexual conquests or discussions about movies. I used to do this very well and knew how to keep a sympathetic audience enthralled and entertained. But after my stroke, when I tried to mouth familiar words, such as “doctor,” or “reservation,” an entirely different word came out. In my mind, the right word was always there, as it always had been, but once in my mouth it lost its identity and turned alien and unknown. I only knew this by observing the puzzled looks on my friends’ faces as they tried to figure out my intent. After a while, I quit trying to find these words, so great was my frustration.

But back to death, a topic that fascinated me for a good two decades before it actually occurred. Death is always a companion to life, and as soon as we are old enough to comprehend things, we learn about its inevitability. But it doesn’t become personal until it stares you in the face.

This first happened to me on the morning of March 3, 1983, at age fifty-nine. I was whisked to the hospital after severe chest pains. The diagnosis was angina pectoris, and I was told to change my lifestyle or the next attack may be my last.

First task: quit smoking, I was told. The doctor offered various patches and aids, but preferring the methodical and above all self-reliant path, I decided to quit cold

turkey, as it is called. This I achieved by putting myself in a situation where it would be impossible to smoke: the movie theater. I stayed there from morning until night, engrossed in the films, trying not to think about smoking. I left only for the toilet or snacks. At night I went straight home, knowing that if I tarried in the park and made conversation with a stranger, the need to smoke would return, too strong to control. This self-imposed prohibition lasted three days, after which I finally felt liberated from desire's grip. It was not as difficult as I thought; little by little I was able to control the urge to smoke, though I had no real intention to control my other, more primal urges.

But by that point, the damage was already done. Over the years my angina flared up, again and again, sometimes with emphysema (that disease that killed my father), pneumonia, gout or diabetes. If you live long enough, diseases one after another pile on and you eventually collapse.

After the first angina attack, I became more interested in death, or more to the point, how I might control death. In this case, controlling didn't mean avoiding, but taking it on my own terms; suicide.

I purchased a copy of *Final Exit*, a primer outlining the best ways to end one's life. My friends were scandalized, and I must admit I enjoyed shocking them with my nonchalant discussion of the methodology. But I was strangely comforted by this book and its detached discussion on how to end one's life, even though I wondered if I could ever summon up the courage to actually put it into practice. (According to the recipes in *Final Exit*, sleeping medicine and carbon monoxide—though not together—are the least messy, though nonetheless the body will put up quite a fight).

Through my seventies and eighties my health continued to decline. Stopping smoking did not foil the emphysema: its coils were too long. At times I pondered how much better to walk out now rather than to wait until the end, when I would no longer be in control.

But that is precisely what happened. I lost control. It happened on the evening of Sept. 21, 2009, soon after I returned from the Venice Film festival. This festival celebrated the 100th-year anniversary of Kurosawa's birth, and I was one of the invit-

ed guests. I usually love the watery city of Venice, with its circuitous canals that weave through the byways and lap the ancient stones. But this time I strangely felt no attraction to my surroundings. Venice meant little to me. Maybe it was because I had been there a bit too often to come under the spell of its magic. Furthermore, I was not feeling well throughout the trip, and upon return I had difficulty remembering any of it.

I spent the evening of the 21st with a friend strolling around my beloved Shinobazu Pond, where the fingers of fall had already marked the leaves—a deep yellow and beneath it a dark blue, like a bruise. After he departed, I walked back home and, exhausted, went to bed early. Around midnight I awoke, unable to breathe and suffering heavy chest pains. I immediately suspected another angina attack, and so I called the ambulance, made my way to my *genkan* and waited for its arrival. I did have the wherewithal to leave a note attached to the front door that would alert my friends to my situation.

That's all I remembered until regaining consciousness in the hospital's intensive care unit, days later. I stayed there for a week, with acute pneumonia, I was told, but I do not remember much that happened there. I do know that Fumio and other friends came to visit and that Dae-Yung came immediately from Korea to be with me.

I came to myself, more or less, after I was discharged from intensive care and placed in a regular hospital room. One morning, however, I awoke and, strangely, I found I could not speak or think like I did before. A stroke had snuck up and taken me unaware. None of the doctors realized it. The only clue was my inability to speak proper words; aphasia (a word I certainly couldn't remember then, though it is clear to me now).

After several long months, I recovered enough to leave the hospital and finally returned to my apartment in Ueno. As soon as I entered my apartment and its familiar surroundings, I burst into tears; so happy and relieved I was. The long hospital stay robbed me of what I hold most dear: the routine and recognizable.

Most importantly, Dae-Yung was there. He always promised to take care of me when I became infirm and to this end thought of many contingency plans. At one

point he was going to carry me up to some mountaintop and bang drums until my demise. But he soon gave up on that idea. We also considered going to Korea, but I realized that in death, like in life, I did not want to be separated from Japan.

At the time, I imagined his enthusiasm to provide care in my final days as flattery or an expression of his own need for a father, but he made good his word and saw to my every need.

My old friend Fumio took care of the issues, mostly bureaucratic and language related, that Dae-Yung couldn't handle. The two of them (along with a close circle of friends) were my saviors.

Illness takes much away, but in return it gives time to ponder and reflect. I realized that at this point, there was nothing to stop me from taking matters into my own hands. I may be too infirm to go out and buy medicine or tools to end my life, but living on the eight floor of a building does present various possibilities.

But, whom am I kidding? I did not wish to burden my friends with this, especially Dae-Yung or Fumio, who put their lives on hold for three years to be by my side. Or the others who tirelessly took care of my hospital or financial matters, who took me out for walks, day trips or meals. No matter how insufferable my burden, I could not impose this on them. Even at my worst, I am not that selfish.

A long-time friend appeared at my apartment one evening, (Dae-Yung was off in Korea to renew his visa) and casually asked, how did you spend your time today? "Just waiting," I answered, in a hushed voice. That's all I seem to do these days.

He immediately sensed the deeper meaning of my answer and grew serious. He sat down next to me and took my hand.

"Richie-san, why do you think you have to go through this suffering?"

It was a fair question, but one I did not like to think about. I wanted it over. My control, my sense of independence and order—all of that had been overturned. I was the epitome of what I vowed to never to become—an invalid that had to rely on the care and schedule of others.

It was this very same friend with whom I strolled around Ikenobazu Pond in the autumnal splendor, on the eve of my sickness, talking about death. The conversation that evening had turned to my friend Ed Seidensticker. He fell on the steps

leading from Ikenobazu Pond and suffered a concussion. He lived on for several months in a coma, his consciousness separated from this world but his body still living through medical machines. I remember telling my friend that I would do anything to escape the same fate.

He interrupted my thoughts: "We know how difficult this is for you, but think of it this way. You have given us so much of yourself throughout the years. You have looked after our well-being and shared your time, wisdom and experience so generously. Taking care of you is a way we can pay you back. This extra time you have on earth is as much for us as it is for you, so allow us to return the love."

I recalled something that the inimitable French writer, Marguerite Yourcenar once told me concerning death. She thought of it often, both in her personal life and in the life of her characters. Indeed, the last time I saw her in Tokyo she, at age 80, was already well aware of her own impending demise.

"Donald," she frankly stated, "One must earn their death."

Are these days of cloudy convalescence the wages I must pay?

I also thought back on a conversation I had a few years back with this same friend. We were talking about the subject of life after death and how various philosophers approach it. His idea was basically that of Rudolf Steiner's—that the physical body vanishes but the others—the ethereal and astral bodies—linger. The astral body lasts about as long as flowers and decays at the same rate: which is why flowers are ubiquitous at funerals. The ethereal body lasts somewhat longer, but eventually, like the physical body, it too repairs to the stockpile and gets recycled.

Personally, I don't believe there is any kind of consciousness after death: it is like a sudden turning off of the lights. We make for ourselves heaven and hell on earth. I think even the most superstitious Japanese would agree with me here. Death is just instant non-existence. For many, that may be a frightening thought, but I find it reassuring.

The winters were especially hard on me. After my long hospitalization, I made it through three of them, barely. But by the third winter, early 2013, I really felt sapped of energy. My body continually went into a crisis mode and I spent most of

the time hospitalized. Up to now my strong constitution had allowed me to bounce back from infirmity, and indeed, this is how I survived my previous heart attacks. The second week in February, however, I went to a hospital near my home, and I knew the end was near. A few friends came to visit, but even though I was aware of their presence, it took more energy than I could muster to interact with them.

I did not want to die in the hospital. It was too sterile, too demeaning and simply not my style. Fumio and the others knew this, so as soon as I was nominally stable they brought me home.

Death occurred in the morning of the 19th, after a long night of drifting in and out of consciousness. It wasn't like sleep—which I've always regarded as death's little brother; rather it was the slow drawing of the curtains across the stage after a long, quiet finale.

I was aware of holding hands with the people around me. Gradually, however, the everyday things in my room—the clock, the windows, the desk, the touch and the sounds—faded, and I was left alone with my own breath. After a while even that weakened and grew labored. At this point I recalled one of my favorite pieces, “The Death of Aase,” from the *Peer Gynt Suite*.

The opening chords slowly ascend, then a few minutes later they are repeated a triumphant fifth higher. Near the end of this piece, however, the chords are reversed and begin their descent. The tempo lengthens, and the tones finally dissipate into nothingness.

Yes, nothingness: that was exactly what was overtaking me as my body ceased its reality.

Journal entry: Feb. 23, 2013

Donald's cremation took place before noon on this frigid day at the Toda Sôсайô, a mega-crematorium complex located under the high banks of the Arakawa River that separates Tokyo from neighboring Saitama prefecture.

To get there, I had to navigate a series of narrow streets lined with small factories, warehouses and the occasional store. Intensely local and old fashioned, the area reminded me of *shitamachi*, but it had none of the old-world warmth or charm of the *shitamachi* of Ueno, Akaskusa or Nihonbashi that Donald so loved.

The crematorium was set up to handle numerous cremations, and Donald's was just one in a series scheduled for the day. At the entrance, I met a handful of his close friends and associates who were around him in his last days and who had hastily convened to attend the cremation.

The place was busy as both staff and mourners, all dressed in black, scurried back and forth to various rooms. We, a group of mostly non-Japanese, must have stood out among the crowds, especially since we were confused and not sure where to go. Fumio had arranged everything but had not yet arrived.

At last Fumio arrived with a woman, also in black, carrying a large clipboard. She directed us to a small, unfurnished and un-heated room off to the side of the parking lot. This room was one of about five identical rectangular-shaped rooms lined up in a row, looking something like an old motel. The room, we were told, was where we would say our final goodbye to Donald. We were instructed to wait there for his coffin.

As we waited the staff moved caskets, one by one, into the adjacent rooms, where the other mourners paid their respects. This process repeated itself several times as we watched and waited for Donald.

The efficiency of the funeral home staff was remarkable. Not only did they have to get everything just right, they had to do it with a solemn and appropriately sad-looking mien. Like any other large Japanese institution, the staff went about their work with a high degree of cool, bureaucratic effectiveness. It occurred to me that it was also the kind of impersonal and formal situation that Donald avoided whenever possible.

The lady with the clipboard reappeared. Donald's coffin was brought in and we gathered around. As is customary in Japanese funerals, the coffin was opened to allow for a final viewing. We placed small token offerings inside, surrounding Donald with flowers, copies of the *Japan Times* and some of his favorite chocolates.

Although the undertaker had dabbed makeup on Donald's face and tried to arrange the mouth and eyes into a semblance of sleep, the corpse laid out in front of us had no resemblance to Donald, and for this I felt a kind of relief. I didn't want it to look like him. When I last saw Donald in the hospital about ten days ago, he was weakened and obviously near death, but his skin felt silky and warm to my parting kiss, and that was the image I wanted to remember. At the urging of the clipboard lady, I reluctantly reached out to touch his forehead. It was inert, cold and foreign.

She pointed to the hearse that had pulled up to the room and instructed the men in the room to help bear Donald's casket to the waiting car. It was much heavier than I expected.

In what seemed like a symbolic gesture of the journey across the River Styx, the car blared its horn and drove once around the parking lot and then pulled up to the main building, just a few meters away. We re-joined the coffin as it was wheeled toward the crematory hall, where it was inserted into a huge bank of ovens.

We waited in a separate room for about an hour for the fire to do its work. Once more we were escorted back to the ovens. In front of the oven door lay Donald's remains on a stainless steel platter. A grey pile of brittle bones was all that was left: no body, no flesh, no organs. The clipboard lady told us that his bones were *gorippa*, magnificent, rare for such an elderly person.

In pairs we picked up the remains with chopsticks and inserted them into the urn. I felt the heat of the fires still emanating from his remains. It was the first warmth I felt since arriving at the crematory.

The bones were all placed into the urn and the service was ended. It was time to part and go home. Fumio, however, announced that he would like to address the group. He began by expressing his thanks to those of us who came to the cremation. He then described the final moments of Donald's life. He, Dae Yung, and two

others stood around his bed, holding Donald's hands while he took his last breaths. In an age where so many old people have to endure the indignity of a solitary death, Donald was lucky to have four of his close friends around him at the end.

It was a difficult speech to make, and Fumio fought back his tears and mustered his long years of theater training to deliver a touching description of Donald's last moments. I was moved by his eloquence and the perfect closing remarks. Watching Fumio, now in his early sixties, I thought back on the chapter describing him as a twenty-something year old in Donald's masterpiece, *Different People*.

The two are drinking together in Ueno, and Fumio suddenly runs out, uncertain, alone and upset. Donald follows to find his friend near the Benten Shrine in the middle of Shinobazu Pond, sobbing uncontrollably. Donald describes the scene:

‘I just wanted to know,’ he said between sobs: ‘I just wanted to find out. I just wanted there to be something.’

I stood and looked at the stars over the black roof of the shrine and thought of many things: of gods and goddesses and sacred rocks, of young men with no fathers, of the consuming thirst for authenticity, and of being lost in a world in which only the body seems to have any reality.

Donald Richie (1924-2013) was a long term resident of Japan, writer, film critic and an extraordinary observer of the Japanese society. I first met him in 1982 and he remained, until his death, a constant in my life as a friend and mentor. Parts of this essay contain quotes and paraphrases from *The Japan Journals* and *Different People*, as well as private correspondence and conversations with him.