

"Both passionate and wry, both serious and witty. . . . [Lynch's] riffs on the quick and the dead are fast becoming indispensable to our language and the bookshelf."

—NICHOLAS DELBANCO

BODIES IN MOTION AND AT REST
ON METAPHOR AND MORTALITY

THOMAS LYNCH

Author of *THE UNDERTAKING*, National Book Award Finalist



BY THOMAS LYNCH

Poems

Skating with Heather Grace

Grimalkin & Other Poems

Still Life in Milford

Essays

The Undertaking—Life Studies from the Dismal Trade



▲ *Bodies in Motion*
AND AT REST ▼

essays by
Thomas Lynch

W. W. Norton & Company
New York / London

This book is for

Tom, Heather, Michael and Sean,

and for

Mary Tata.

Gentlemen, songsters, off on a spree

Doomed from here to eternity.

Lord, have mercy on such as we,

Baa! Baa! Baa!

—from “The Whiffenpoof Song” by MEADE MINNEGERODE,
as derived from RUDYARD KIPLING

*Sometimes I need love’s answer to the question
about the breathing creatures and their pain.*

I shouldn’t be comfortable with the easy one

that claims the very daylight is a sign

of transubstantial warmth among the stars—

though there was brightness over town and countryside.

—from “A Sign from Heaven” in *Love’s Answer*
by MICHAEL HEFFERNAN

E pur si muove!

(And yet it moves!)

—GALILEO GALILEI, after his recantation

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Credits

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Introduction

People sometimes ask me why I write. Because, I tell them, I don't golf. This gives me two or three days a week—five or six the way my brother was doing it before he had a midlife crisis and took up rollerblades. But a couple of days every week at least, with a few hours in them in which I can read or write. It's all the same thing to me, reading and writing, twins of the one conversation. We're either speaking or are spoken to. And I don't drink. I did, of course, and plenty of it, but had to quit for the usual reasons. It got to where I was spilling so much of it. This gave me two or three nights a week—five or six the way I was doing it at the end—with a few hours in them when things weren't blurry. With some of those hours I would read or write. And I am married to an Italian woman with some French sensibilities and five brothers, so I am home most nights, and when I'm not, I call. I sleep well, rise early, and since I don't do Tae Bo or day trading, I read or write a few hours each morning. Then I take a walk. Out there on Shank's mare, I think about what I'm reading or writing, which is one of the things I really like—it's portable. You don't need a caddy or a designated driver or a bag full of cameras. All you need's a little peace and quiet and the words will come to you—your own or the other's. Your own voice or the voice of God. Perspiration, inspiration. It feels like a gift.

Years ago I was watching a woman undress. The room was lit only by the light of the moon coming through an easterly window. Everything about this moment was careless and beautiful except for the sound of a sick boy in the next room coughing and croupy, unable to sleep. He had his medicine. The VapoRub and steam were bubbling away. I was drowsing with the sounds and darkening images, half-dreaming of Venice, the Lido and the Zattere, the tall windows of a room I stayed in once, awash in moonlight and shadows, longing for the woman I loved madly then. It was that sweet moment between wake and sleep when the dream has only a foot in the door that the day and its duties have left ajar. I wanted always to remember that sweetness, that moment, and knew I could not rise to write the details down—the sick child, the woman's beauty, the moonlight, the steam bubbling, the balance between the dream and duty, between the romance and the ordinary times—because the slumber was tightening around me. And I was searching for a word, one word that I could keep and remember till the morning; one word only: a key, a password by which I could return to this moment just long enough

make a poem, a purse made of words to keep the treasure of it in. And I was fading quickly, my eyes were closed, my last bit of consciousness was clinging to words then bits of words and finally on bits of noises, the woman beside me, the boy's labored but even breathing, the bubbling of the *vaporizer*, which became in my dream the *vaporetti* idling in the Grand Canal, because it was the key—*vaporetti*—the password, the outright gift of sound whose bubbling and whose syllables sound near enough the same as the *vaporizer* in the next room to let me traffic back and forth at will between the bedroom in Michigan and the bedroom in Venice and the moonlight and the beauty and the moment awash in ivory and shimmering images. I slept with the word. I woke with it. I rose and wrote the poem down. The women are gone. The boy is grown. The poem sits on the shelf in a book. I come and go to Venice as I please. The language is alive and well.

So this is why I write and read. Because I don't golf, and I don't drink, and I'm married to an Italian, and every day I sit down to it, there's the chance that I might get another *vaporetti*, another gift, another of what Hemingway calls the "one true word" that will make some sense out of what we're doing here. That part about Hemingway I heard on the radio. Keep your ears tuned. Words are everywhere.

Today, for example—it is September, the last late summer of the century. Planes have fallen from the sky. Trains are colliding. There's trouble in the Balkans. Farmers are worried about drought and prices. Earthquakes in Turkey. Hurricanes off the Carolinas. Death tolls are rising. Tax cuts and national debt are in the news. The political soap opera carries on. The day is already full of words. I'm listening.

What, as St. Paul asked famously, are we to say to these things? What is the one true word today? What is the word that becomes flesh? The gospel? The good word, the good news? The truth, the whole truth? The will of God? What's a man of my age and my times to make of it all on any given day if he doesn't golf or drink or gallivant? Is bearing a little witness the best I can do?

This morning I was reading the letters of Paul. The one to the Romans is about circumcision, about faith and works, about sin and the law. No wonder he seems to go in circles a bit.

He's telling the Romans that they don't have to become Jews to become Christians. The earliest Christians were Jews, of course, including, it is worth repeating, Jesus Himself or himself, depending on your particulars. Guilt and shame are ecumenical and have always worked for observant Christians and observant Jews.

Specifically, Paul is telling the Romans that they needn't be circumcised. This is good news on any given day, at least to the men of the congregation. There's a concept they can get behind. Then, and now, women were given to wonder about the things men worry about. The laws about diet and fashions and the keeping of feasts are easy enough and all in line with the rules of good living. B

circumcision is a deal breaker and Paul knows it. So he's trying to tell them it's not all that important after all. He's floating this option of "spiritual circumcision." It's a talking point and the numbers look good. Then, too, he doesn't want to offend the brethren back in the Promised Land, who are, it is well known, his kinsmen and the Chosen People. If he devalues the old deal made between God and Abraham, the Old Testament, that early covenant of blood, he's going to lose the very ones who have bought into his take on the Nazarene—the part about Him being the Son of God. Try telling some coreligionist who just had his foreskin removed that it really wasn't necessary and see what happens. This is where the faith and works come in, the part that is so important to Luther fifteen centuries later when the Reformation begins. By deconstructing that section of Genesis where God and Abraham cut their deal, Paul is able to coax both Gentile and Jew in the direction of his version of things. Here is a man who is able to make both those with foreskins and those without feel good about themselves. It's a bit like watching a game of Twister, but it is a deft little exercise in the use of language.

Language, some right thinker said, is a dialect with a navy. Much the same can be said for religion—whatever the word is, they need a navy or an army to spread it. Paul is Christianity's navy. He has some impressive character flaws—he's pompous, opinionated, opportunistic, misogynistic, vexed by sexuality in general and, like any true believer, a dangerous man. Before he came to his senses he was slaughtering Christians with enthusiasm. Still, no one can say he's not willing to travel, to "take it to them" in our latter-day parlance, to walk the walk that goes with the talk. No doubt he'll remind you of someone you know. Maybe your husband or father or brother-in-law. Today he'd be a radio talk show host or TV preacher, prime minister or lately retired Speaker of the House. Women would be uniformly offended by and attracted to him, each for reasons unique to themselves, none of which would have to do with circumcision. All the same it should be said that Time, such as we know it, would be nothing without the travels of Paul and his letters. We would not all be hovering over the changing of millennia, fretting about disasters and apocalypse and computer glitches. We would not have divided Time into B.C. and A.D., because whether C(hrist) was D(omine) was pretty much up for grabs until Paul got knocked off his horse and saw the light. But for that today would be just another day in the year of some pagan deity.

So today neither dialects nor religions need navies or armies or missionaries as much as they need Web sites and wideband space and a lobbyist. Maybe Paul looks a little obsolete, with his horse and epistles and his true belief. And if the business of foreskins isn't what it once was, still, the deals that are cut between blood and belief, tribe and creed, dialect and sect, color and kind, define every age before Paul and since. Then, as now, the haves and the have-nots are badly divided.

So maybe the word today isn't *circumcision*.

Maybe it's *faith* or *works*. Or *sin* and *the law*. Those chicken-and-egg games that Paul rolls out for

us to kick around the yard for the rest of history. Did God give Abraham a son in old age and make him the father of nations because of his faith or because of what he was willing to do to prove his faith? If there were no law, would there be no sin? Can ignorance be bliss if not a defense? Your man argues all sides of these and related issues in his letters. The true words are in there blinking, but I cannot find them. Not today. Today I'll have to get by on faith.

Maybe it's not the word today at all. Maybe it's a number. The language is full of them. You could start counting now and never finish. Like words, they've got us, well, outnumbered. All you can do is hunt and peck for the good word, the lucky number, the truth of the matter.

My father's lucky number was thirteen. He was born on the thirteenth and wore number thirteen on his jersey in high school and signed his best deals on the thirteenth of the month and died in a car crash that was number thirteen. He always said that thirteen was his number. Who could blame him? So I'm looking at the thirteenth verse of the thirteenth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans because my wife is Italian and I'm not drinking this morning and no one's coming to take me golfing and here's what it says there, word for word: "Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy." Now, that mightn't make the hairs stand on the back of your neck, but the Romans were done no harm when they heard it and for me it sounds like the voice of my father. Not that he talked like that, mind you, but still it's a concept he could get behind. Because he was the kind of guy who wasn't looking for all the answers. Just enough to get him through the day. Just one little something that rang true enough that he could hang his hat on it when he came home and find it still there in the morning. Unlike Abraham, he didn't want to be the father of a nation. Unlike Paul, he didn't want to save the world. He just wanted his children to outlive him, his wife to love him and everything to work out in the end. It did.

Same for me. Just enough good word to get through the day. It's liable to turn up anywhere—a good book, the Good Book, the bumper of a car, something on the radio, something your daughter says, something that comes to you in a dream, like "Eat more fruit, Adam," or "Say your prayers," which is what my sainted mother frequently says when I dream of her. Or maybe it is something your true love says, like the time mine said, "Everything is going to be all right." I believed her then, I believe her now. Or, let's say you're standing in the shower, counting syllables, when it comes to you that *ninethousand, nine hundred, ninety-nine* has exactly nine syllables in it and is exactly the number of dollars you can deposit in cash without the tax man getting involved, or line those nines up, all four in a row, and they look like the day and the month and the year you're thinking this. Who invented wonders like that? Or maybe it hits you like a bolt of lightning, like *preaching to bishops is like farting at skunks*. What disgruntled cleric first told me that? These are words to live by? I don't know. What if Paul had written them to the Romans? Maybe they'd have learned to lighten up. Maybe the

wouldn't have gotten so schismatic after all.

Or maybe you go looking for the one true word, like last fall in Barcelona when I climbed to the top of those towering spires in Gaudi's cathedral, La Sagrada Família. It's a hundred years in the making and not done yet. Maybe they should declare it a shopping mall and finish the thing. Maybe they just like it as a work in progress. Anyway, I'm climbing to the very top of the steeple, overlooking the city like any good pilgrim, and at the top I say "Here I am Lord" and the wind is howling in my ears like Moses on the mountain. "Give me the Good Word, God! I'll cut it in stone." And the city out before me and I'm whispering so that none of the other pilgrims will hear me, but I'm saying it out loud. "Show me a sign and I'll write it down!" And you know what the sign said, the one I first saw when I turned to make my way down from the heights? It said, WATCH YOUR STEP. In Catalan and in English and in Japanese, which is, I suppose, a sign that God speaks in all our tongues. Maybe next time I'll go looking in Venice. Maybe next time I'll take the gondola. Maybe I don't have to go looking at all. Maybe it will come to me. On its own. When I least expect it.

So what are we to make of these things?

You want to get some good words like these? I say don't golf, don't drink, marry an Italian—could happen to you.

But maybe you'll make a different deal with God. There's other things you want? Instead of words? A scratch game, a good Beaujolais, a date with a shepherd from the Hebrides? That's fine. God knows your heart. God knows you want your children to outlive you, your beloved to love you, everything to work out in the end.

Work hard. Have faith. It will.

One last thing. A word to the wise. Like with me and my father, like with Peter and Paul, like with Moses and Abraham—when dealing with God, or rabbis and bishops, any of that crowd—a thing we're worth knowing is where to cut.

—T

Milford, Michigan



Bodies in Motion

and at Rest

So I'm over at the Hortons' with my stretcher and minivan and my able apprentice, your Matt Sheffler, because they found old George, the cemetery sexton, dead in bed this Thursday morning in ordinary time. And the police have been in to rule out foul play and the EMS team to run a tape so some ER doctor wired to the world can declare him dead at a safe distance. And now it's our turn to do—Matt's and mine—to ease George from the bed to the stretcher, negotiate the sharp turn at the top of the stairs, and go out the front door to the dead wagon idling in the driveway and back to the funeral home from whence he'll take his leave—waked and well remembered—a Saturday service in the middle of April, his death observed, his taxes due.

We are bodies in motion and at rest—there in George's master bedroom, in the gray light of the midmorning, an hour or so after his daughter found him because he didn't answer when she called this morning, and he always answers, and she always calls, so she got in the car and drove over and found him exactly as we find him here: breathless, unfettered, perfectly still, manifestly indifferent to all this hubbub. And he is here, assembled on his bed as if nothing had happened, still propped on his left shoulder, his left ear buried in his pillow, his right leg hitched up over the left one, his right hand tucked up under the far pillow his ex-wife used to sleep on, before she left him twenty years ago, and under the former Mrs. Horton's pillow, I lift to show Matt, is a little pearl-handled .22 caliber the George always slept with since he has slept alone. "Security," he called it. He said it helped him sleep.

And really there is nothing out of order, no sign of panic or struggle or pain, and except for the cardiac-blue tinting around his ears, the faint odor of body heat and a little early rigor in his limbs which makes the moving of him easier, one'd never guess George wasn't just sleeping in this morning—catching the twenty extra winks—because maybe he'd been up late playing poker with the boys, maybe he'd had a late dinner with his woman friend, or maybe he was just a little tired from digging graves and filling them, and anyway, he hadn't a grave to open this morning for one of the locals who was really dead.

But this morning George Horton is really dead and he's really being removed from his premises by

Matt and me after we swaddle him in his own bed linens, sidle him on to the stretcher, tip the stretcher up to make the tight turn at the top of the stairs and carefully ease it down, trying to keep the wheels from thumping each time the heavier head end of the enterprise takes a step. And it's really a shame, all things considered, because here's George, more or less in his prime, just south of sixty, his kids raised, his house paid off, a girlfriend still in her thirties with whom he maintained twice-weekly relations—"catch as catch can," he liked to say. And he's a scratch golfer and a small business owner with reliable employees and frequent flier miles that he spends on trips to Vegas twice a year, where he lets himself get a little crazy with the crap tables and showgirls. And he has his money tucked in rental homes and mutual funds, and a host of friends who'd only say good things about him, and a daughter about to make him a grandfather for the first time, and really old George seemed to have made, and except for our moving him feet first down the stairs this morning, he has everything to live for, everything.

And it is there, on the landing of the first floor, only a few feet from the front door out, that his very pregnant daughter waits in her warmup suit to tender her good-byes to the grandfather of her baby, not yet born. And Matt's face is flushed with the lifting, the huffing and puffing, or the weight of it all, or the sad beauty of the woman as she runs her hand along her father's cheek, and she is catching her breath and her eyes are red and wet and she lifts her face to ask me, "Why?"

"His heart, Nancy . . ." is what I tell her. "It looks like he just slept away. He never felt a thing." These are all the well-tested comforts one learns after twenty-five years of doing these things.

"But *why*?" she asks me, and now it is clear that *how* it happened is not good enough. And here I'm thinking all the usual suspects: the cheeseburgers, the whiskey, the Lucky Strikes, the thirty extra pounds we, some of us, carry, the walks we didn't take, the preventive medicines we all ignore, the work and the worry and the tax man, the luck of the draw, the nature of the beast, the way of the world, the shit that happens because it happens.

But Nancy is not asking for particulars. She wants to know why in the much larger, Overwhelming Question sense: why we don't just live forever. Why are we all eventually orphaned and heartbroken? Why we human beings cease to be. Why our nature won't leave well enough alone. Why we are not immortal. Why this morning? Why George Horton? Why oh why oh why?

No few times in my life as a funeral director have I been asked this. Schoolchildren, the newly widowed, musing clergy, fellow pilgrims—maybe they think it was my idea. Maybe they just like to see me squirm contemplating a world in which folks wouldn't need caskets and hearses and the likes of me always ready and willing and at their service. Or maybe, like me, sometimes they really wonder.

"Do the math" is what George Horton would say. Or "Bottom line." Or "It's par for the course." Or "It's Biblical." If none of these wisdoms seemed to suit, then "Not my day to watch it" is what he

say. Pressed on the vast adverbials that come to mind whilst opening or closing graves, George could be counted for tidy answers. Self-schooled in the Ways of the World, he confined his reading to the King James Bible, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Golf Digest*, the *Victoria's Secret* catalog and the Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. He watched C-SPAN, The Home Shopping Network and The Weather Channel. Most afternoons he'd doze off watching Oprah, with whom he was, quite helplessly, in love. On quiet days he'd surf the Web or check his portfolio on-line. On Sundays he watched talking heads and went to dinner and the movies with his woman friend. Weekday mornings he had coffee with the guys at the Summit Café before making the rounds of the half dozen cemeteries he was in charge of. Wednesdays and Saturdays he'd mostly golf.

"Do the math" I heard him give out with once from the cab of his backhoe for no apparent reason. He was backfilling a grave in Milford Memorial. "You gonna make babies, you've gotta make some room; it's Biblical."

Or once, leaning on a shovel, waiting for the priest to finish: "Copulation, population, inspiration, expiration. It's all arithmetic—addition, multiplication, subtraction and long division. That's all we're doing here, just the math. Bottom line, we're buried a thousand per acre, or burned into two quarts of ashes, give or take."

There was no telling when such wisdoms would come to him.

BUT IT CAME TO ME, embalming George later that morning, that the comfort in numbers is that they add up. There is a balm in the known quantities, however finite. Any given year at this end of the millennium, 2.3 million Americans will die. Ten percent of pregnancies will be unintended. There'll be 60 million common colds. These are numbers you can take to the bank. Give or take, 3.9 million babies will be born. It's Biblical. They'll get a little more or a little less of their 76 years of life expectancy. The boys will grow to just over 69 inches, the girls to just under 64. Of them, 25 percent will be cremated, 35 percent will be overweight, 52 percent will drink. Every year 2 million will get divorced, 4 million will get married and there'll be 30,000 suicides. A few will win the lotto, a few will run for public office, a few will be struck by lightning. And any given day, par for the course, 6,300 of our fellow citizens, just like George, will get breathless and outstretched and spoken of in the past tense; and most will be dressed up the way I dress up George, in his good blue suit, and put him in a casket with Matt Sheffler's help, and assemble the 2 or 3 dozen floral tributes and the 100 or 200 family and friends and the 60 or 70 cars that will follow in the 15 mile per hour procession down through town to grave 4 of lot 17 of section C in Milford Memorial, which will become, in the parlance of our trade, his final resting place, over which a 24-by-12-by-4-inch Barre granite stone will be placed, into which we will have sandblasted his name and dates, one of which, subtracted from the

other, will amount, more or less, to his life and times. The corruptible, according to the officiating clergy, will have put on incorruption, the mortal will have put on immortality. "Not my day to watch it" will be among the things we'll never hear George Horton say again.

Nor can we see clearly now, looking into his daughter Nancy's eyes, the blue morning at the end of this coming May when she'll stand, upright as any walking wound, holding her newborn at the graveside of the man, her one and only father, for whom her baby will be named. Nor can we hear the promises she makes to keep him alive, to always remember, forever and ever, in her heart of hearts. Nor is there any math or bottom line or Bible verse that adds or subtracts or in any way accounts for the moment or the mystery she holds there.

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