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Burial of the Poor

There is nothing sadder than the burial of the poor. Because the poor begin to be buried in life. So said Antonio, a man sculpted from the clay of a humility older than he. A man who is ashamed even to speak, and when he speaks, is afraid of speaking too loud. And when he lifts his eyes, he's worried that the mere boldness of lifting them will offend his boss right in the face. So said Antonio Antunes. Who had just buried the casket of a son whose face he didn't know. A two-pound, one-ounce baby who died in its mother's belly. Antonio wanted a glimpse of his son's face, but the employee who went to fetch the child from the cooler wouldn't allow it. Antonio had purchased a little outfit for four dollars in downtown Porto Alegre so his son wouldn't be buried naked, like some critter's pup. But Antonio couldn't dress him. He was left with the small white casket that he cradled in his arms to grave number 2026 of Mercy Hospital's Holy Ground Cemetery.

When the dirt had covered his son's shallow grave, the father knew his own heart would remain unburied. Because at that instant, Antonio Antunes realized that a shallow grave and a donated coffin, sown in a hillside cemetery, would be the fate shared by him, his children who survived him, and his grandchildren yet to come. Just as it had been the lot of his parents and grandparents before him. And it was when he reached the foot of the hill at Holy Ground, after burying his nameless child, that Antonio pronounced his sentence, head lowered, the flame in his eyes smothered by tears, by a rosary of pain that might well predate the discovery of Brazil. Antonio Antunes said, "This is the path of the poor."

And he said it with such anguish, with so much despair, that the words slashed through the burial grounds of poverty. Because a sentence only exists when it is an extension in letters of the soul of whoever utters it. It is the sum of words, and the tragedy held within them. Otherwise, it is just a sham of vowels and consonants, a waste of sound and space. And Antonio pronounced it with such pain that even the thrush warbling on the other side of the wall fell silent, as if divining that this phrase of death was a man's life.

This account could end here, because everything has already been said. But sometimes a story has to be told more than one way if it is to be thoroughly understood.

There is nothing sadder than the burial of the poor because there is nothing worse than living and dying off others. There is nothing more brutal than having nothing of your own, not even a space for death. After a life without a place, not having any place to die. After a life owning nothing, not owning even six feet under. For the poor, the ultimate tragedy is that even in death they don't escape life.

This is what Antonio Antunes, feller of trees, had come to understand. And this is what had finally broken him. Because it was just the beginning, and because there was no end. Only more of the same. Because men like Antonio are born and die the same way. And in this sense, the baby who hadn't lived had merely saved time, relinquishing the interludes between all the forms of death reserved for him in life.

To understand the end, you have to understand the beginning. Antonio left the cemetery without any money for the bus fare back. Just as he hadn't any for the fare out. He was guided by his sister-in-law, who was putting him up in Porto Alegre because he had traveled to the city from a coal-mining town. He'd been peeling bark off a eucalyptus tree on a Friday when his wife felt the warmth of blood running down her legs. She watched over the health of her six-year-old daughter, a little girl who had never walked, and she told the young woman at the hospital what was happening in her belly. She was sent home with the explanation that it was nothing.

Saturday had barely dawned when Antonio carried his wife back to the clinic. Late that morning, after little had been done, Antonio overcame his atavistic meekness and threatened to call the cops. So the couple was dispatched to Porto Alegre, where they arrived too late. The mother was saved, but the baby was dead. For how long, nobody knows. On Sunday their five-year-old son, who, like his sister, had never walked, went from an ambulance to the ICU at a hospital in the capital city. They learned he was suffering from pneumonia, although he'd been under treatment for something else for days. And there he remained, with his father in the waiting room dueling with death.

Monday had hardly dawned when Antonio went off to see to the burial of one, throwing death off the scent of the other. He spent Monday between the hospital and the notary public office, back and forth more than once, because the hospital had forgotten to stamp the death certificate and have the doctor sign it. And all of this, miles on foot because there was no money for the bus. And all of this, on an empty stomach because there was no money for lunch. And all of this, with his sister-in-law, who fifteen days earlier, had lost her own baby, stillborn. With a sister-in-law who, fifteen days earlier, had buried her own son at Holy Ground. And from Monday to Tuesday, just one meal: rice and cabbage.

Nothing came to a close for Antonio Antunes when he reached the foot of the cemetery hill and uttered the phrase of his life. He had just buried a child who most likely would not have died if his father had not been poor. In a donated coffin, in a borrowed grave, on the hillside grounds of the only

cemetery in the entire state capital that takes in the poor. And for this reason alone deserves the eternal gratitude of all the Antonios.

Nothing came to a close for Antonio because he knows he'll be back shortly. And everything will remain as it is. As it always has been, in death as in life. He leaves behind his nameless child, buried in a shallow grave, no priest, no flowers. For the grave of the poor is less than six feet under, so it is easier to dispose of the body when the three-year limit is up. Then room must be made for another tiny child of the poor for another three years. And so it has gone for five hundred years.

Beneath each one of the more than two thousand crosses sown in the soft soil of Holy Ground Cemetery lies a fate like Antonio's. To comprehend the rest of the story, we must understand the death of the poor. We must understand that the biggest difference between a poor man's death and a rich man's is not the loneliness at one burial and the crowds at the other, the flowers missing at one and the pomp at the other, the plain wooden coffin at one and the cedar casket at the other. It's not even the swiftness of one and the slowness of the other.

The biggest difference is that the sadness at the burial of the poor lies less in their death and more in their life.

Translation by Diane Grosklaus Whitty