Remains to Be Seen

By Theodore Dalrymple

If the Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa had not been hanged on charges trumped up by the brutal military and kleptocratic regime of General Sani Abacha, in 1995, himself to die in mysterious circumstances three years later, he would have been 83 years old. It astonishes me to remember now that it was about a third of a century ago that he was driving me through Port Harcourt when we saw the naked body of a man, bloated like a dirigible in the noonday sun, by the side of the road, while an announcer on the car radio appealed to the "owner" of the body to come forward and take it away.

Interest in its provenance—how and why it got there—did not seem otherwise obsessive in the radio message, and Saro-Wiwa laughed. He said, not without a certain patriotic pride, "Only in Nigeria!"

I had never thought of the "ownership" of corpses before. The very idea of ownership seemed to me incongruous or inapplicable in this context. Be that as it may, I read a third of a century later that, as of 2020, there were in Japan 60,000 unclaimed bodies in municipal safekeeping. The article in *The Japan Times* did not say over how long a period they had

accumulated, or how long they were kept as lost property, so to speak, but it seems a pretty large figure to me. In 2020, apparently there were 643 such bodies in the United Kingdom, and 147 “partial remains.” (This reminded me of a story that a pharmacist told me about his time working in Zambia. A man came to the hospital carrying a human leg and asked for a death certificate for it, or him.)

The explanation of the large number of unclaimed corpses in Japan was the high proportion of old people who live alone there. But an even larger proportion of the old in England live alone, and the general age structure of the population is not so very different. The explanation must lie elsewhere, then. Perhaps the Japanese keep their “unclaimed” bodies longer than the English, and thereby allow them to accumulate. Perhaps the English are more generous when it comes to bearing the funeral, or at least postmortem, costs of their not-so-dear departed. Apparently in Japan, relatives of the unclaimed bodies sometimes or often refuse to pay any expenses arising from it.

If my wife dies before me, I can’t think of anyone who would claim my mortal remains, though any costs arising might easily be met out of my estate, assuming that nursing-home costs have not entirely consumed my economic substance antemortem. The question that then occurs to me is whether I should mind how I am disposed of after my death. The rational answer for someone like me who does not believe in life after death, not even in the ghostliest of forms, should surely be “No.” There will, after all, be no me in existence to mind.

Yet I would not be entirely honest if I said that I do not mind now, while I am still alive, how I will be disposed of after my death, or that it is a matter of complete indifference to me. If it really doesn’t matter, then the possibility or prospect of the utmost profanation should not upset me. If I cease to exist, I will not exist even if someone decided to use my skull for a football, say, or as an

ashtray.

I have not made any inquiries into the matter, but I suspect that my feelings would be shared by most people, even the stoutest proponent of assisted suicide, euthanasia, or cremation. Moreover, they would be even more upset if someone treated the mortal remains of those they had loved disrespectfully. The only person I ever knew (slightly) who was not of this mind was a distinguished and aged American dermatologist who reiterated to me more than once that he wouldn't care in the least, indeed he thought it would be a good idea, if he were rendered down after death and used as fertilizer. Then, at least, he would continue to be of some use to those who were once his fellow creatures.

I knew him only by correspondence, not in person, and people often say things through bravado, but in this man's case I thought that he was saying what he really thought and felt. At one point he told me, by letter, that he wouldn't object even were he to be thrown into a trough to be eaten by pigs. I found this disturbing, though I had great respect for the intelligence and cultivation of my correspondent, with whom I was in substantial agreement on other matters. He wrote a letter to be sent to me posthumously in which he reiterated his views on the disposal of his remains.

Respect for human remains after death, and the opposite, that is to say mutilation of them, has long been of great symbolic significance. Mutilation signifies hatred or contempt for enemies, and though the practice is not now widespread, we remain horrified whenever it occurs. To see a body dragged through the streets, often with a rejoicing crowd in attendance, is peculiarly shocking. We do not expect those who behave in this way to show much respect for the living. We do not say, "Well, the person dragged through the streets is no more, so it does not matter because there is no one there to be harmed by it."

An older relative of mine used to say to me that death, being entirely natural, is nothing to worry about. We don't fret about not having existed in the eons before our birth, so why should we fret about not existing in the eons after our death? It might be very egotistical of me, but I can't help feeling that, having once existed, I cannot think of the eons before me in quite the same light as those that come after me, despite my awareness of my unimportance in the great scheme of things. I hope in due course I shall be stoical—I would like my epitaph to be, "He caused no inconvenience"—but I suspect that, whatever my outward behavior, I shall sorrow and even rage within. True equability is rare.

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