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FIRE AND CEREMONY

Sascha Feinstein

Like too many rituals and sacred ceremonies in Bali, cremations have become something of an industry. The large advertisements along Kuta Beach look as subtle as billboards for Kentucky barbeque. Now, I'm told, tour buses clot the narrow avenues during the proceedings, but in 1987, when I first visited the island, the cremation I witnessed in no way seemed like an event for tourists. I felt honored to share in such a remarkable occasion, and my slides verify that I have not over-romanticized my experience: even thrown on a wide wall, it's challenging to find Westerners among the crowds, a truth that still surprises me given the magnitude of this particular event. More than a year before my arrival, a high-caste member of the community had died, and, quite typical of Balinese culture, his family had postponed the service in order to prepare for the expensive, elaborate festivities. Other families had waited years to collect enough money and had very recently unburied their dead in order to share in this auspicious afternoon. Of the Brahman who died, one local said to me, "He was like king of the village. This will be big."

Those who have watched or read of a Balinese cremation will find my experience familiar, though probably no less extraordinary. The procession began in the village, with various family members carrying bones wrapped in white cotton and placing them within a pagoda-like tower (*badé* or *wadeh*). Then a boy, perhaps a grandson of the deceased, climbed onto the structure and received wooden cages with small local birds to be burned alive as escorts into the afterlife. And then he rose with the whole tower, which I suddenly realized had been built on a wide bamboo platform so as to be lifted, dramatically, by many men. With one hand, the boy gripped a colorful umbrella, steadying himself and laughing as they shimmied perilously down the road.

Almost everyone, in fact, laughs or smiles at Balinese cremations; so much time elapses between death and ritual that the locals very naturally transform grief into celebration. I walked in the center of a nearly-wild crowd until the thatched buildings thinned out and trees obscured any trace of a town. Deep in the woods, the boy on the tower helped retrieve the bones and offerings, and then the family replaced the remains within a finely decorated wooden bull (*lembu*), a magical coffin afforded only by the wealthiest members of society. (Nine elaborate *lembu* stood magnificently beneath a single canopy. Other families—and there were over two hundred—had purchased less developed wooden representations; the poorest simply made wooden pyres.) I stood for a couple of hours, waiting for the various families to prepare for the event, or perhaps simply for the priests' appointed moment. Some kids scurried through the crowd to sell coconut water and warm sodas. And then someone lit the bellies of the most decorated *lembu*, and within two or three minutes, every small area between the trees fogged and flickered like the actual ascension of two hundred souls.

Soon the crowd began to dissipate, except for those whose relatives had died recently and who therefore had to intensify the flames to burn away the flesh. Most others—even those bankrupted preparing for this burst of fire—had no reason to linger. “To the Balinese,” explains Miguel Covarrubias in *Island of Bali*, his famous study from 1937, “only the soul is really important, the body being simply an unclean object to be got rid of, about which there is no hysteria.” Half a century later, my experience eerily paralleled his descriptions, including this passage on the aftermath:

The men in charge poke the corpses unceremoniously with long poles, adding debris from the towers, all the while joking and talking to the corpse. The crowd is neither affected nor touched by the weird sight of corpses bursting out of the half-burned coffins, becoming anxious only when the body is slow to burn. Soon the cow's legs

give way and the coffin collapses, spilling burning flesh and calcinated bones over the fire until they are totally consumed. . . .

Some of the remaining ash gets covered with palm leaves; some gets collected and deposited in the sea. But the point of a Balinese cremation has much more to do with fire than ash.

How different from the Western world, where we expend so much energy on the burial of ash or flesh, and how unusual to remove grief from the realities of death. Standing as a witness in the flaming forest, I became so entranced by these unfamiliar rituals that I initially made no comparisons to my culture, or even my specific past. But later I thought about the ceremony for my mother, who wanted to be cremated and whose ashes we had spread seven summers earlier in Cape Cod Bay. That was 1980. I had just turned seventeen.

My mother was an artist of remarkable breadth and accomplishment. A painter, designer, and weaver, she also worked successfully in photography, film, and pottery. She was, in short, a woman of phenomenal vitality. So when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer at the age of forty-six, the reality of her illness seemed incomprehensible to those who knew her. A few months later, some literally did not believe that she had died. Some began a quest of profound soul searching, suddenly aware of their own mortality. Some questioned God.

For my mother's ceremony, my father waited until July, three months after her death. Perhaps he wanted warmer weather for the boat ride, or perhaps, like the Balinese, he knew only time would temper sadness. Whatever his reasoning, nature rewarded patience with glorious sunshine and low humidity.

The boat itself usually carried fishing expeditions and had more than enough room for the forty or fifty friends who boarded. The captain motored out just far enough so that the shore blended with the sky, and then my father began his eulogy, which, strangely, we have on tape, his voice steady and penetrating against the rhythms of wind and water. Those words, public

though they might have been, should remain in the private domain of husband and wife. But I can tell you how, after my father said goodbye, he tilted the urn into the wind, and then others threw flowers, much the way I described several years later:

Behind the large boat  
lulled waves of lilies, roses

from her garden sparkling the current,  
and when a seabird circled the cluster  
one close friend said she was with us.

I don't know if I believed her,  
but I watched the bird become a cloud  
while the petals withdrew.

The flowers had been unexpected. My father and I had only planned on his eulogy and the scattering of ashes. But shortly before our guests departed for the boat, several women cut a few handfuls of stems from my mother's gardens—a lovely final gift, I thought. In a similar gesture, another friend brought on board a bottle of Akvavit, which we poured into Dixie cups. Some tried sipping, but the strength of the alcohol burned through the cups' paraffin and spilled to the deck. It was almost as though my mother commanded from the heavens: "Oh, come on! Knock it back!"

What irritated and baffled me, though, were the two or three cigarettes that had been tossed overboard. The woman who threw them—a wonderful sculptor named Eleni—told my father, "At parties, Anita used to bum a smoke or two. I thought I'd give her a couple." Even now, the image of cigarettes floating with flowers repulses me: Marlboros unrolling in the current, the thin paper disintegrating even before, perhaps, it reached the sandy bed. But we all, I suppose, have to say goodbye in our own ways, and for Eleni, this had been her ceremony within a ceremony.

I threw nothing into the bay. I watched my father

momentarily, before he vanished amid groups of friends. When I looked back over the rail, I felt oddly stunned and embarrassed to realize I was weeping. I stared at my wet hands, wondering what I should do about this response that was no doubt expected by everyone else. Then someone placed a hand on my shoulder: “Hey there, handsome.” I quickly wiped my eyes, and she came into focus—an old friend who learned how to weave from my mother.

“Yeah,” I said. “I bet I’m really good looking right now.”

Then she pulled her fingers across my cheeks, drying whatever I’d missed, and smiled. “Don’t you know,” she said, “tears from brown eyes don’t streak.”



Like many children, I first experienced death with the loss of a pet, not a person. In my case, it was my cat Robin, named after Robin Hood. My father had discouraged getting a pet, but when I turned four, arguably the best age for begging, he agreed. So my mother and I pursued various ads in the local newspaper.

Although relatively young at the time, I remember a great deal of that afternoon, especially one dilapidated house with overflowing garbage cans. We knocked several times before an enormous woman shuffled to the screen door and let us in. Greasy sauces had dripped down the stove, and I held my nose—right in front of this ogreish woman—before announcing, “It stinks in here!” The woman laughed in a breathy, restrained way, and my mother nervously asked to see her cats. The woman slowly pivoted towards the living room and whistled, and suddenly twenty or maybe even thirty cats jettisoned from parts unseen and scrambled across the house, some hissing and others screeching.

We did not stay to inspect them. (I think we walked outside in a matter of seconds). But at the next property, clean and bucolic, the owners offered my mother coffee while I played with a litter of five or six orange tabbies. Seeing that they had

been cared for, if not pampered, my mother told me to take my time and choose any one that I liked. The kittens were chubby and playful—all except for one, who looked thin and languid, and of course that's the one I chose.

"Are you sure?" my mother asked, over and over. "You can choose any one."

"I want him," I said, stroking the top of his head.

"That one over there is nice and round. Look at—"

"No, this is the one I want."

She had promised earlier that morning that I could make the final decision, and after several minutes of failed persuasion, we collected the litter's runt and I held him on my lap for the ride home. My mother never asked me to explain why I selected the smallest and boniest of the bunch, but I could have told her: I thought his size meant he was the youngest, and that he would be the last to die.

Robin lived eight more years and in that time grew to be almost obscenely fat. He happily slept away most of the days and never developed any hunting capabilities. Other cats bullied him. Blue jays dive-bombed from the willow tree. Sometimes he miraculously landed on a mole and batted it around the lawn. In general, he had the nature of a big, gentle coward—and I couldn't imagine my life without him.

Although overweight and sluggish, he did not seem to be in any kind of mortal jeopardy, but when his body began to decline, it collapsed quickly and completely. Steadily and uncharacteristically, he began to meow in a high, awful pitch. We brought him to our vet and soon learned that his spleen and kidneys had begun to fail. My parents explained that we would have to "put him to sleep," a phrase and a reality that made no sense to me, though I knew I had no options. The next day, I stayed home while they picked up the body, wrapped in a black garbage bag.

We wanted to bury Robin on the property, and my father dug a hole near a tree that I had planted as a child. He made the hole extra deep so that raccoons wouldn't disturb the site. He

also thought it would better not to use the plastic bag but, rather, a cardboard box so that the decomposition would take place more rapidly. My mother agreed and, perhaps thinking of Egyptian burials or simply in an effort to make me feel more involved, suggested I paint the cardboard sides. So I shared my mother's acrylic paints and brushed landscapes, I think, while she worked on large canvases.

We brought the multi-colored box to the backyard and I placed it at the bottom of the hole. My father got on his knees and angled the plastic bag until Robin's body slipped to the cardboard base. Then my father stood and we all looked down. Not a sound. Finally, my mother said, "He looks like he's sleeping," and her voice cracked. That's when I turned my head and pressed it into her side. In my last memory of that day, my mother rubs my hair and says to my father, "He was trying so hard not to cry."



In the tiny universe of an individual Western family, birth and death tend to be celebrated only in the context of personal joy or grief. How many public holidays, for example, have retained the essence of their origins? Aren't we far more aware of dates that correspond with our selves? I was born on March 13, 1963, and, in a ridiculous and ridiculously American way, I used to scour jazz LPs to find a magnificent session recorded on the day of my birth. Blue Note records alone, after all, produced so many wonderful recordings from that year: Joe Henderson's *Page One* and *Our Thing*, Jackie McLean's *One Step Beyond* and *Destination Out*, Dexter Gordon's *Our Man in Paris*, Grant Green's *Idle Moments*, Grachan Moncur III's *Evolution*, Kenny Burrell's *Midnight Blue*, Lee Morgan's *The Sidewinder*, and so on. But no one recorded for Blue Note on my birthday.

The hunt was all ego, of course—jazz lover as Narcissus—but it's typical of human nature, I'd now like to believe, to self-aggrandize in that way (e.g., "I share a birthday with \_\_\_\_\_," or



“This house used to belong to \_\_\_\_\_,” or, even more common, “I once ran into \_\_\_\_\_”). Ironically, the most interesting historical context of my birth week took place half way around world. The Balinese had completed the first five months of Eka Dasa Rudra, a centennial rite intended to coax gods into restoring the world’s natural balance. The whole island makes sacrificial offerings, mostly concentrated at Besakih, their holiest temple located on the slope of their largest volcano, Gunung Agung. Although a significant part of Eka Dasa Rudra culminated on March 8<sup>th</sup>, the Balinese had much to do before the next major event in April. And then, on the 12<sup>th</sup>, Agung began to discharge mud and large stones

No one, from what I’ve read, anticipated the magnitude of this explosion, even though the smoke and the mud flows intensified over the next five days. Perhaps they felt protected by the intensity of Eka Dasa Rudra. Perhaps, with no witnesses living from Agung’s previous eruption in 1843, no one could imagine such a reality. But the explosion on March 17<sup>th</sup> killed over 1,500 Balinese. One young survivor named Sepek, who had been praying in a small village temple on the morning of the tragedy, described his experience to a translator for *National Geographic*:

There was no noise at first, but then the *duk-duk-duk-duk-duk* of falling stones. Some people in the temple seemed to be sleeping. I tried to wake them, but they would not answer—they were dead. There were children, too, but they could not cry. They made strange wailing noises, because they had ashes in their mouths.

Then the roof flamed and he ran for nine miles while ash speckled his body. “Fortunately,” the article explains, “his wife and child had left Sorga two hours before the glowing cloud had come, and thus had been saved.” Sepek saw this fortune as divine intervention—“The gods made them go”—but of the seventy worshipers who did not survive, did he claim the gods selected them to die?

Of the numerous temples on the island, the most celebrated has always been Besakih, the central location for the Eka Dasa Rudra, and had it not been for the volcano's topographical grooves—or had the gods intervened?—this stunning temple, with black thatched pagodas directed to the heavens, would have been consumed absolutely by lava. (Besakih did not escape thick layers of volcanic ash, and some of the architecture required substantive repair.) When I visited Besakih in 1987, my guide told me about the explosion from '63, but he never mentioned the 1,500 who perished. Instead, he spoke of the lava flow that spilled towards the temple and then split like a forked river in Hades, leaving the holy structure intact. "Besakih is our Mother Temple," he said to me, beaming. "She is a miracle."



I did not witness the men take my mother's body to the crematorium, and I was in school when my father picked up her ashes. I don't even know if I tried to imagine what the crematorium looked like, or how much anyone's allowed to see. Nor did I have any interest in the ashes themselves, though I remember my father describing the blandness of the vessel provided: he said it looked like a tin can that had washed up from the shore.

Maybe that's when he decided to make his own urn. He designed the shape and later asked his old friend, a potter, to reproduce it in clay. After the bisque, my father glazed the vase himself in what he hoped would suggest a night sky, and then, with brush strokes that streaked like shooting stars, inscribed the urn with her name. I know he spent time practicing the lettering because sometimes I'd find napkins or scraps of paper with my mother's name written again and again.

The art of a kiln fire, of course, requires both artistry and good fortune. A single glaze often provides a great range of hues, even in the same load. Sometimes a particular glaze—blood red, say, or Chinese bronze—can fail a potter for years. Individual

batches of clay also produce varied results. Our friends at Scargo Pottery were as expert as anyone in the country, but, after opening the heavy door to the kiln that held my mother's urn, they discovered that some pots had cracked and some glazes had crawled or discolored. But the urn had been perfectly fired and emanated deep, luminous blues. No one thanked the gods, but, at that moment, I believe we all felt blessed.

During the making of the urn, my father and I planted a memorial tree, a copper beech that has since grown as tall as our house. We took turns digging the hole. I dragged a bag of peat moss from the front of the house, and he pulled a hose across the lawn. I remember the planting took less time than I had imagined and I felt almost startled when, abruptly, we had nothing more to do except to turn off the water, return our shovels, and hope that the soil would sufficiently nourish the roots.

A couple of summers ago, during a visit with my wife and children, my son asked about the copper beech, because he knew we had planted the tree in memory of my mother and, at age six, had become more curious about death. We walked to the backyard when the afternoon sun charged the coppery sheen like the metallic iridescence of a *rakú* glaze. My son stared for a moment and then touched a hanging branch.

"Do you see your mother's face in every leaf?" he asked.

I loved his question and wanted to tell him that I did, though that would have been a lie, and so I explained how I thought about the tree as a whole rather than a collection of individual pieces.

"That's good," he said. "Otherwise you would be very sad when the leaves fall."