

Marvin Bell

FROM *THE BOOK OF THE DEAD MAN*

Live as if you were already dead.

—Zen admonition

1. ABOUT THE DEAD MAN AND BLOODLINES (#36)

The dead man thinks he is alive when he feels a pinprick of blood pooling on his earlobe.

Feeling blood pool on his earlobe, the dead man thinks he is alive.

He thinks himself alive because, what better evidence is there?

Blood runs thicker than water, and the dead man is like bread for gravy.

When Cupid's arrow struck, the dead man refused extraction, welcoming the disease, the condition, the predicament, like Edison on the track of the filament.

Like Edison's bit-string filament, the dead man burns brightly and briefly, feverish and electrified, sometimes himself, sometimes more than himself.

The dead man knows who made love under the rising cloud of Vesuvius.

The dead man was there when the Trojans fell for Helen.

2. MORE ABOUT THE DEAD MAN AND BLOODLINES

The dead man deprives the hemisphere of its ruby pity.

He drinks from a sooty goblet while a baritone sings among the candles.

When there is no sin, no vice, no turning back, no other way, no help, no consolation, no punishment, no reward, then okay there's no good reason, and the ragamuffin arrives with the royalty.

The dead man learned obliquity at the hands of mourners.

He studied the effects of camphor, the conclusions of science, the proliferation of insect life.

He knows that a stain on the ground may carry the genetic code for a lifetime of maladies and he flings himself—oof!—again and again on the ground to leave something to others.

The dead man is like a drop of iodine on a superficial cut.
The dead man is also the thin coating of wax that glistens after the sticky bandage has been peeled away.

1. ABOUT THE DEAD MAN AND THE CARDBOARD BOX (#50)

Low sounds roll over the dead man in his cardboard box.
Infernal steam hisses at the dead man in his refrigerator carton.
The dead man had a cardboard fort, a cardboard playhouse, a cardboard cutout, a paper doll, a boxful of shredded cardboard, now he makes a nest of excelsior.
Is the dead man the natural antecedent to homelessness?
Who else knows the fact, suspects the truth, surmises the outcome?
Who else can make change?
The dead man seeks no other shelter than this, the elements.
The dead man accepts no other refuge than this, this asylum, this retreat, this cloister.
Shall the dead man be buried alive—possibly.
Shall the dead man be left for dead—inevitably.
The dead man's cardboard box is a plaything next to the crates and cartons of the homeless, the car hulks, the infested comforters, the littered steam tunnels, the bins, the boards and the bags.
The dead man finds no trophy to the sublime in these ramshackle coffins.
The dead man refuses to go to his grave while people live like this.
He evacuates the heated halls of Congress for seats to sleep in.
He clears out office buildings, libraries, banks and post offices, and decrees that decrepit vagrancy shall find its home in government.
The dead man stifles deconstruction of the homeless.

2. MORE ABOUT THE DEAD MAN AND THE CARDBOARD BOX

The dead man goes home, he goes back to where he came from, he goes to hell, he goes to some trouble, he goes to pieces.

The dead man sees the homeless go without.
He sees the paper cups of soup carried into the dark hovels of the
down and out.
He sees the blankets and bedrolls in doorways and the newspaper
insulation left to curl on the steam grates.
He senses the relief in all-night subways, 24-hour waiting rooms, public
restrooms.
He feels the sun restoring life after a cold night on the sidewalk.
He knows what it means to take medicine from a bottle.
The dead man hears the siren when they come to take a body from the
street.
He goes to see but is shouldered aside by those who will take its place.
The dead man memorizes homeless math: one fewer means ten more
tomorrow.
He sweeps up the broken vessels and used needles, the emptied sandwich
wrappers, the paper and cardboard, the human waste.
He cleans up after those who have gone to make a living at the dumpster.
The dead man knows about salvage, scrap iron, scrap flesh.
The dead man is a homebody condemned to sleep in packing, fated to
live among the derelict in the lap of luxury.
Shut in, locked out, germane or alien, the dead man enumerates the
nomadic tribes of the cities—by box, blanket and bedbag.
The dead man finds out after the fact whether or not he has made the
rent.

1. ABOUT THE DEAD MAN AND TAXIDERMY (#73)

Out of a suitcase of discards there came dead lilacs and a dead Abe
Lincoln, and the dead man was there to see it.
From a posh trunk there spilled dead lilies and a dead Kennedy, and
the dead man was there to see it.
From the heavens there rained explosives, and from the hills came the
thud of mortars, and the Family of Man lay in pieces, and the dead
man was there to see it.
The dead man studies taxidermy to better preserve the bailiwick.
He rearranges museums according to the ideals of moderation and
proportion.

The dead man props a wax Plato by a cave on the road to town.
He puts a plaster-of-Paris bust of Aristotle by the gate.
He posts the heads of lions and elk on the top edge of the city wall.
He sends for the pickled brain of Einstein, the shreds of the dropped
brain of Whitman.
He asks for a kidney stone taken from Pablo Neruda.
He runs ads seeking dried gall bladders, lung tissue, vocal boxes,
eardrums and stringy veins.
He offers a reward for information leading to a heart.
He bribes the guard to better examine the Pharaoh.
He rehearses the torture of slaves, P.O.W.'s and prisoners of conscience
to see where the parts fell, that he might retrieve them.
The dead man will put the world back together, wait and see.

2. MORE ABOUT THE DEAD MAN AND TAXIDERMY

It is as if you were a roustabout in outer space, collecting the burnt-out hardware.
It is as if you had been given the last stick and nail and sent to the beaches to draw forth wrappers and tops.
It is as if you had been given a carton of cigarettes to strip, the papers to be buried, the tobacco to be scattered.
It is as if you were just body heat, just temporal resolutions, just a mold without walls.
It is as if you had asked for it, as if you had missed a chance to decline.
It is as if you were for a moment the eyes of a packed moose head, one wing tip of a stuffed eagle, the whole jaw of a bear rug.
It is as if you were some fractured persistence, some ancient belief in thought.
It is as if you were suddenly laughable, mournful and senseless.
It is as if you were one of a kind by default, who killed the Buddha, contrived a less-than-ideal Plato, and mixed up Aristotle the sentry with your comings and goings.
It is as if you were gone today and here tomorrow.
It is as if you were the last one, out looking for a tar pit so that later they will know.