

The Unmentionable Odor of Death on a September Night

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My wife –but let me be honest, we are not married, I have no interest in marriage and the discontents it brings, and so I call her my wife because the English language, in all its vast array, has yet to give us a word for those we love without claim (in fact I suspect the English language cannot talk about love at all) –my wife, three nights ago, watched the beheading of James Foley.

She had sought out the video, like so many of us have, out of a guilty curiosity for horror and because we have lived so long with the headlines of savagery and terror that we are numb to the words that describe it. And I would like to believe, much to my wife's credit, that the shame she felt for her curiosity was not as intense as the shame she felt for her numbness.

By that time the beheading of James Foley, more than a month past, had been removed from most websites and social media, but, eventually, my wife found a site that continued to host the video. The site hosted other videos of beheadings as well: the British Army soldier Lee Rigby, the Japanese tourist Shosei Koda, the British humanitarian worker David Haines, the British civil engineer Kenneth Bigley, the American radio-tower repairman Nicholas Berg, the American helicopter engineer Paul Marshall Johnson, Jr., the half-brother of Saddam Hussein Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, the South Korean Christian missionary Kim Sunil, and the American-Israeli journalists Steven Sotloff and Daniel Pearl.

When I came home with our son that evening – we had been at the circus, a red balloon sailed in behind my son, a clown’s face printed on it, tied by a white ribbon around his wrist, and we both smelled of popcorn and the slightly sour odor of animals that have spent time in cramped cages – I found my wife on the bed in our bedroom. She had the shutters drawn, and she was swaddled in a white blanket like a child or like the embalmed body of a mummy.

That night I read to my son from a children’s abridged version of Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, in which Sydney Carton and a young seamstress are put to death by public execution – a quick, painless death, Carton assures the girl – beneath the beveled

blade of the guillotine. My son is only six years old; he does not know the word guillotine and that night I do not explain it to him. He merely peered his head over the page of an illustration that showed blue sky, seagulls soaring, and Carton climbing the steps of the platform, his hands bound behind his back, toward the hooded executioner and toward the blade, heaved high again to the crossbars and smeared with the seamstresses' blood.

I lay for a while with my son, and each time I closed my eyes I saw the two white seagulls in the illustration, their wings spread, soaring in that blue sky above the guillotine; and then my mind drifted to a memory of me and my wife, in the late afternoon, ambling along the Cours Saleya market stalls in Nice. We had suddenly heard the sound of raucous cackling, loud and frantic, and, curious, we followed it to an alley away from the market. There we saw three fishmongers, in black, high-gauntleted gloves, reaching into five-gallon buckets and tossing the bloody innards of fish to a dozen seagulls. The seagulls' beaks mechanically opened and shut in anticipation. I heard the upstairs neighbors let the roller shutters clap down. The entrails hit the cobblestones with a wet slap. A shiver ran through my body.

Later that night, as my wife and I lay in bed, she told me about one of the beheadings she had seen. It wasn't the blood, she said, but the hand. The sawing motion. She fell silent. We stared at the shuttered

windows and the ghostly reflection in the glass of the pendant lamp and the feeble halo of light it cast on the ceiling. After a while I searched out her hand beneath the blanket and held it in mine, but it lay limp and unresponsive. It took more than seven minutes, she said.

A cat mewling outside the security door to our apartment building woke me up. The room was dark, though I could not remember the lamp being switched off. My wife lay on her side, her back exposed to me, with the blanket kicked away from her body in her sleep and –I must have been breathing heavily that night – a second pillow pulled over her head. And for a moment I lay bewildered, unable to reconcile the darkness and the mewling and the body next to me, immobile, headless, like a statue that has been toppled after the city has fallen to the siege.