

Mortuary Science

When I met Bob, he told me I'd make a great funeral home director;
though I pressed, he couldn't say why. I said—
Thank you. There is a solace to being told who you are.

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My first funeral was for an old lady I never met. I was seven.
It was spring. The priest read from the Bible. I huddled close
to my aunt's side as they hovered her over the open pit in the ground.
What must have been the breeze moved the clothes around her belly.
I repeated, "But she's alive! Look—she's breathing!"

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Lesson 1: Define "Mortuary." Abstractly, it is a debt or a gift.
It is easier to see death
as a science. So—call it a room:
a temporary reception for a corpse.

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My third funeral was when I was 25, for a friend who died young.
The funeral: Greek Orthodox. When his mother approached his coffin—
before they closed it for the last time, she clung to his body.
A few men had to pull her off. Like all mothers, I imagined my own son.

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Lesson 2: To become a funeral director, you must apprentice. An undertaker
is another word for mortician. An undertaker is one who
embarks on, or takes part in, some business enterprise.

It can also be one who undertakes
the preparation of a literary work
(though that is rare).

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Lesson 6: Push the Urns. Historically, an urn can be a source of a stream, a bottle or vase for holding tears, the constellation of Aquarius, the spore-case or capsule of urn-mosses,

to cause pain or anguish to (a person);
to pain, irritate.