

William Girdali
from *The Physics of Speed*

If I hadn't been so unhinged by my father's death, if someone had asked me to participate in the laying to rest of his body, I would have insisted that he be buried in his frayed work clothes, in a pine coffin that my grandfather and uncles had constructed with their own hands, using my father's own tools. I would have vetoed the unspeakable business of embalming. Those sick clowns sewed a smile on his face. They want to honor death with all that prettification, but really they mock it, turn it into a minstrel show, a spooky carnival there is no ticket to.

What did they do with my father's blood after they drained it from him? And what did they discuss as they pumped the fuming ethanol into him? Descartes' laughable proofs for the existence of God, or the universe as conceived by Leibnitz, the harmonious result of a divinity's will? Desperate families like my own are to blame for the bewildering work of the mortician. They would rather have seen my father painted up like a life-size doll than confront the inevitability of our flesh.

My father's viewing: A line from the casket, through the room, out the double doors, down the hall, out the front door, around the building, and into the parking lot, which wasn't large enough to fit all the Buicks, Fords, and Cadillacs. I sat in a stupor with my girlfriend and my entire family at the casket, the oxygen in that room altered in a way I could not apprehend. Physics were an enigma to me.

Earlier in the day my brother and I had asked my grandfather if we could display a large photograph of my father and his bike, a red and white Yamaha YZF R-1, one of the fastest superbikes in production. That was the first thing you saw upon entering the room: this photo of my father smiling behind the machine that killed him. My brother and I needed it there; we

William Giraldi

needed to boast of that machine. For years, as we were growing up, my father hadn't been able to afford such a bike. When he was finally able, he kept it under a special blanket in the garage, shined it lovingly with new socks. When he and his pals went on riding trips, he brought the bike inside the motel room with him. He modified it with top-end accessories. In his black and red pro's racing suit and gleaming black Shoei helmet, he looked like a demon, a quick flash from Dante's feral imagination.

At the casket before the hundreds of viewers arrived: my family in a semi-circle, overcome with moans, trying to hold each other up—trying to hold—gaping at my father and that sinister smile sewn on his face. The rouge and lipstick were perverse, even though the mortician, in her trained voice, had told us before entering that “he looks great.” The texture of his skin was what I had expected: plastic—a Halloween mask. His fingers were sewn together, his eyelids sewn shut. The hideous scent of flowers moved in the air like toxic gas.

I remembered my grandmother telling me as a teenager that she had never, in all her years of being married to him, seen my grandfather cry. Many of us thought he was incapable of it. But now his giant frame shook with sobs when we left him alone at the casket, and I could only guess what he was thinking: that this mess was his fault because he had passed along his obsession with motorcycles to my father, had taught him to ride, and was the one person who had had the power dissuade him from that obsession, to convince him that the dangers outweighed the pleasures. He never did because he knew he didn't have the right. No one had the right to ask him to stop riding, to forfeit his passion for speed.

And so we couldn't save him.