

Bodies in limbo: Crematory scandal

by [Stephen Prothero](#) in the [March 13, 2002](#) issue

The scandal unfolding at the Tri-State Crematory in Noble, Georgia, has often been compared to events in a Stephen King novel, complete with decaying corpses and an upstanding citizen unmasked as a monster. Over 300 corpses thought to have been cremated have been discovered scattered across the 16-acre property of Ray Brent Marsh in rural Walker County. Ken Poston, an attorney defending Marsh on multiple counts of theft by deception, rejected the analogies to King's literature of terror. "No one has been killed," he told a judge in the case. "There is no suggestion of murder here."

True enough. Nonetheless, what Marsh is charged with is in some respects even more disturbing. Though prohibitions against murder are at least as old as the sixth commandment, murders occur at a rate of roughly 15,000 per year in the U.S. Violations of human remains are, by contrast, extremely rare.

In all societies, relations between the living and the dead are pocked with paradox. Corpses lurk in the border zone between life and death. Their chests no longer rise and fall, yet until they are buried or entombed or otherwise put out of sight they are not full citizens in the company of the dead. As anthropologists have long reminded us, transitional states are dangerous. It is for good reason, therefore, that the living both fear and revere the dead. As a symbol of human life, a corpse deserves our respect, even our reverence. Yet each corpse also symbolizes death itself, so whatever fear we have of our own demise is bound to hover around it like a fog.

Apparently Marsh neither feared nor revered the dead. Because we do, the corpses he is charged with abandoning haunt us. Like hungry ghosts in the popular mythology of China, they cry out for rest. We cry out too, knowing we have somehow failed them, and fearing that we deserve whatever punishments the angry dead can visit upon the anguished living.

Before this episode is set to rest, we will see a flurry of new cremation regulations. The National Funeral Directors Association has been lobbying for years to include oversight of crematories in the federal regulations governing funeral homes. That

may finally come to pass. In the meantime, states will no doubt pass laws mandating surprise inspections of all crematories.

Another probable outcome is a revival of crematory rituals. At the first cremation in modern America, held on December 6, 1876, in Washington, Pennsylvania, dozens of witnesses watched the corpse of Baron Joseph Henry Louis Charles De Palm go up in flames. For the remainder of the 19th century, cremations were public rites.

During the early 20th century, however, crematories were rapidly secularized. Families and friends committed the body to the dead not at the crematory but wherever the ashes were put to rest. Cremation became more a technology than a rite.

This trend has been reversing itself. Hindu immigrants in the U.S. have adapted their ancient customs, demanding that the family be present at the crematory and that the eldest son press the button that begins the incineration. American baby boomers have taken to the crematory too, going there to read a poem or sing a song to memorialize the loved one's passing. At least 300 U.S. crematories have responded to this trend by installing witnessing rooms, where families can pray or meditate or simply watch while the retort transforms bones into ashes.

The Tri-State case illustrates that there are practical reasons for witnessing cremation. New regulations merely shift the burden of crematory oversight from operators to inspectors. Mourners who want to be certain that a cremation is done properly and respectfully will need to see for themselves.

Even if such individual and legal responses prevent another Tri-State scandal, the horrors of this case will linger, and we will struggle to make sense of them. How could a churchgoer like Ray Brent Marsh simply leave bodies out in the woods to rot? And given costs of perhaps only about \$25 per case, why would he do so?

Faced with these questions, I find myself returning not to Stephen King but to the Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor. O'Connor hailed from rural Georgia, and this story might have sprung from her imagination. Although the media have made little of this fact, the Tri-State case is, like all of O'Connor's best work, inflected with the issue of race. Ray Brent Marsh is black, and Walker County is lily-white.

By all accounts, Marsh has been a pillar of his community. Yet this doting father and youth basketball coach is charged with stockpiling corpses, including the body of a

dead infant left to rot in the back of a rusting hearse. Apparently, Marsh's sins were also the sins of his father, Tommy Ray Marsh, since some of the corpses are reportedly at least 15 years old, and he didn't turn the family business over to his son until 1996.

When the Tri-State Crematory story first broke, a colleague of mine asked, "Is there no limit to sin?" The answer, in Noble, Georgia, as in O'Connor's fiction, seems to be no. In O'Connor's grotesque world, wooden legs are stolen from handicapped girls, and old women are gored by angry bulls. In a grotesque hell in Noble, Georgia, a defiler of the dead grimly goes about his father's business.

Still, grace may be operating even there, as surely as it infuses the ugliness and brutality of O'Connor's stories. O'Connor once described her work as "the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil." After September 11, Americans saw grace in action as a legion of volunteers clawed through mud and steel, searching for human remains. I see the same grace in the workers slogging through the stench of the Tri-State property, determined to find what has been lost. If the Marshes desecrated those bodies, the workers now combing the grounds are somehow making them sacred again. Instead of the chalice and the corporal, shovels and noses are their tools. Yet their work too is holy.