Memento Mori

Landin Swift Chesne

English, Creative Writing Departmental Honors Thesis

University of Colorado at Boulder

10/29/20

*Thesis Advisor*

Noah Eli Gordon – English

*Committee Members*

Khadijah Queen – English

Andrew Chapman – Philosophy

Memento Mori

Landin Swift Chesne

*Memento Mori* is a warning to those who hear it. On the surface, it is simply a reminder of mortality—literally it means “be mindful of dying,” but when we are reminded of mortality, we do not think of death, but life. The importance of this warning isn’t in the wanton platitude, “Hey! You’ll die!” but in the fact that for the moment we are still here to be reminded of it—we are alive!

The poems here deal with life, and with death, in this sense of mindfulness. Interspersed throughout the collection are poems I call “little death poems”—poems which directly challenge the reader to be mindful of death, not with the intention of being cruel, but as a reminder not to overlook life in the present. There is some merit, I think, to the idea that we are incapable of appreciating life without also holding reverence for death. Art, then, is most fruitful when it raises some anxiety in the viewer, pleading them to be mindful of death and value life.

Where life is, death is never, and what is dead never lives again. Still, the two only make sense next to each other. We wouldn’t have any concept of life if it didn’t end, nor any reason to value it. Life is valuable purely because it is so rare, brief, and unguaranteed. The project of many philosophers and poets is to conceptualize life and define it; they want analysis of the virtues of being alive, and in doing so, relegate life to a single way of being. Yet, much of life is indefinable. It turns out, where these philosophers and poets are most successful is exactly where they lose the ability to articulate life and are left to dumbly gesture at it and gawk, slack-jawed.

As soon as we say, “Life is the playing out of subatomic particles. Life is an emergent property of carbon. Life is motion and collision,” we obfuscate everything else life is. Life that is purely mechanical, as the physicist might claim, is robbed of the ethereal beauties we live. Try asking a physicist what love is, and nine out of ten will laugh. They’ll say “love” is a precise balance of chemicals in the brain, itself composed of chemicals, produced by specific neurological firings conditioned to occur in the presence of particular stimuli, yada, yada, math. But this explanation doesn’t root out what love is, not in the slightest. In fact, the physicist kills love. Love isn’t a chemical any more than light. Love is that inexplicable itch and worry and I CAN’T STOP THINKING ABOUT HIM you sweat and can’t stop sweating.

What I want to say is life is complex, as are all things in it, and I have no intention to simplify them.

A friend recently asked me how I would define poetry. All I could come up with then was to say, “Well... it usually uses language.” I knew, and he knew, that there is no single definition of what poetry is—you just know it when you see it. Love and life (by which I could equally say “death”), the things I feature centrally in this bundle of poems, are much the same: it’s easier just to see them and know than to restrain them to any conceptual bed.

All this seems to make poetry an unlikely candidate to portray life. Poetry is based in language, exactly that stuff that conceptualizes things and kills them. But, somehow, it turns out that poetry—art—is one of the only things that comes close to representing life authentically. Because poetry is working with language, and because we are so entrenched in language already, with all our preconception and expectation of language’s functions, when poetry ducks those expectations, it bypasses the autopilot-unthinking we usually regard life with. In a way, it opens us and reorients us to the direction of the innate, interior truth of life and love. We all know what life is, but we blind ourselves to it thinking about it, putting language to it. Good poetry, using language, skirts language, and directly prods the sleeping beast of life we know.

My greatest influences here and throughout this collection come from three traditions: French Existentialism, Buddhism, and American modernist poetry. Each of the three seek a truth they know is already achieved; all three acknowledge the confounding absurdity of life—its meekness and bravado—and all three are left to dumbly gesture at life gawking, slack-jawed.

Of the Existentialists, the most prominent ideas I carry forward are those of freedom and choice: the ability and responsibility of every individual to determine themselves moment by moment, and the infinitude of possibilities that individual can take. Nothing is ever settled, and no thing is just what it is. Everything is at the same time what it is, and what it can be—persons, I don’t want to say most of all, most of all.

Buddhism has had possibly the greatest impact in the ways I try to enact this freedom (though, it is an uncomfortable contradiction that Buddhism is largely deterministic…). The main ideas I take from Buddhist thought are emptiness and impermanence. Emptiness is much like the Existentialist’s freedom, and attempting anything more definite here would be an irresponsible ignis fatuus. Its operation for me here is just, again, the idea that conceptualization and definition kill the most interesting parts of nature. Impermanence, however, leads any discussion of life and death. It is inevitable that all things impermanent turn to something else, and slip away. And, as all things are impermanent in a Buddhist cosmology, all things risen fade. Many of the poems in this collection are my dealing with the loss and universal replacement of things, mainly people. “Everything old becomes new,” for instance, came from a conversation with my dad about a number of friends who’d graduated and moved away. Everything found is lost, and everything held, dropped, but quickly new things abound in their place. Everything alive dies, fertilizing the garden for new roses.

What I take most significantly from the modernist poets are their linguistic expression of spontaneity and process within the poem. EE Cummings always makes my list of favorite poets, always because he inspires me to allow interruption into the poem in the way that thoughts while writing are interrupted and——excuse me, I got up for a moment to get a snack.

 I want language, instead of working in coherent, intellectual ways, to follow more truthfully the ways we actually think and apply language inside our own heads.

The poems here are my hopeful strides at enacting these principles.

**This poem reminds you**

**you are dying.**

**How**

lives split

& converge

a little

worn

different

earthy erosion

buffeted

by winds

one’s

path

held shelter

from

&

the other

slightly more

ragged

against

uneven

terrain

**Convergence**

It is

the new scars

long time friends

reappear

with

we notice first

before

their distanced

gaze

reflects upon us

the new deep grooves

warping

our own shone surface

**Everything old becomes new.**

In the scene of faces:

fronds change

as friends leave.

a new ocean cleanses—

filling craters of the last—

headstones give, unmarked;

saplings arise of rich soil.

**The Life of a Spider**

Can you imagine

seeing maybe a human

overshadow the sun?

Or an analogy

you might understand:

Goliath approaching,

looming over,

& watching: teeth the size

of dump trucks.

Thank God we killed everything

bigger than us.

I’d feel less fine

in a world still full of giants.

**On display, in latched glass**

Pent scream

in an ice cave

shatters stalactites,

cracks thousand-year

permafrost walls, dislodged

fossils.

War cry

tundric scatter after rubble

mounds new mountains:

better giants grown of bones

of old; animalistic,

uncornered wail crowned

ruler atop

landslides of collaged memory.

New ravines excavate

arctic sky expanse overhead.

**Mediation Beneath Clouds**

Not soft dampener

passed over any bulb,

but the trees

themselves dim

and brighten

Not invisible whim

tussling between bough,

but the leaves themselves

shivering & shimmering,

& moving together

**Folly**

on the cusp

of the brink

of the edge

of the precipice

of your smirk

ascending into a smile

and the moon

beaming in your eyes

**Some cruel, sick fuck littering the shoulder**

The most horrifying

lay torqued

with skin and fur

scruffed above its collar

in a loosely worn scarf.

I don’t get a good look at the second.

It wasn’t mutilated—

honestly, could have been asleep—

just, the side of the road doesn’t

seem very soothing.

Anyway, it certainly set a pattern:

comedy comes in threes.

The last came as I imagined.

Obviously dead, but peaceful.

Curled up, I guess

dead dogs don’t make good poetry.

**You may be obliterated**

**no sense**

**fretting**

**the future**

**will always never**

**come.**

**Prairie dogs**

Birds of prey circle

decapitated roadkill.

Are they like the koala

who doesn’t recognize eucalyptus leaves

other than alive

on the branch?

When context is gored across freeways

in red splotches, is it unappetizing?

**There is no answer in the poem**

If

I were to,

I wouldn’t

slit my wrist

or suck a barrel in my mouth.

No.

Something disguisable...

A thin incision

of my femoral artery.

Or too many pills could work,

to die sleeping.

Someone would find me

while I still look alive.

I want an open casket

and people’s condolences

to wear the same

thin smile

they cut me,

my wounds dressed

in tuxedos,

my hands folded,

smiling.

**Political Poem (at an Inn)**

Barged the police officer:

“Put ‘em up!”

“Oh—uhh...” choked

the concierge, “Yes—

“Let me show you to your rooms.”

**Unsettled**

I am but one

platform

     whisper through

hair you toss lightly:

your closing eyes

wax moons against cosmic field of

satellites, perpetually orbiting

one hastily constructed

cut-out

silhouette

**How much trust we put in steel**

I sit in the last seat of hundreds of this large airplane, the one Mother claims most dangerous—"sit just behind the right wing, always” she says, and on this flight I hear stories from my father of a woman who died when the engine of her plane exploded, sending shrapnel through her window-seat window and I have the window-seat and she was pulled halfway out the plane. She died—called it “blunt force trauma,” a fancy way of saying She was pulled halfway out of an airplane window; Halfway because these windows are small and some part of her must not have fit, so she flapped halfway out her window-seat window on an airplane on her flight while I sit now on an airplane on my flight halfway through reading *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse and Siddhartha can't find any meaning in his life.

That it should be this long

and not longer.

**God spent a while graciously**

instructing me on the world. Patiently

listing every sparse phenomenon,

every frog, waveform, and structure, and

when done,

I asked,

“What more?”

**Thus, and so**

The conversation followed suit:

A sharp jeer

of laughter;

marble demeanor.

Switchback.

One topic

so fraught—

we ran it in

three circles:

One of those

Agree-to-disagree fallacies.

Still amenable spirit

flushed through us—ah, Wu Wei—

and yogi miracles like

mind reading explained simply

in a Jungian psyche—

The theorists we all read

but mistook—Lacan,

all the while, perched the fence line,

a knowing smile in his look.

**No copula (Pathetic fallacy)**

No hand makes

marigold, pencil-grip vine—

nothing wise “becomes” into

dancers

(Cassiopeia

Pirouetting

or

No)

**You’re dying,**

**You better get some sleep.**

**Sleepiness**

molasses-sweet

round brown-sugar spoonful

caramelize

behind eyes

peaceful death

ideal

dark

**Start with one line—**

A blade of grass—

a single hair in place

or a smile thinly revealed

on a half-hidden face:

Pull back the curtain:

stencil hair from eye

how one moon waxes fully(one

motion enumerates an ocean)

Emerges new wonder;

Tussled into poetry, full lips,

green sea, a priestess moon—

whole souls of a born scratch—

**Evaporation**

Those battering endless rays of sun

Strip, in desert

and unbound, open-blued sky

statuesque, aged, weathered

surface like cratered

carbon and a silhouette

last stroke

of shadow

indisputably

the fruit

pit

of

a

c

o

r

e

is

**Further investigation**

a poem

a subtitle

babble

not a tower, like a baby

untenable silence

humorous leaning

tension

release

dwindle

momentary bliss

bright red

fleeted memory

an elder proposal

tip of the tongue

hypnagogic drifting

expectantly waiting

**Histories**

Recounting them now—it is quiet out:

Living ponders, one moment at a time.

Snow has padded a mutable architecture.

**A wounded animal**

(Jackal stands on hind

paw. stoops over clutching

left. staggers. only

makes a couple steps.

makes them. falls. falls

to sleep. stains

Wife's thin sheets. She

sleeps well with her new

she's fine

No she's)

gnawing at its own leg

**Silver lining, if I do say so**

Not skyfulls

of reckoning

or burnt-anger—

no heavenly

regurgitation

on underlying promise;—

         —And here I expected a companion—

Never once worldly

acknowledgment of any sort.

In fact nothing

whatsoever remarkable

is illuminated

under this sunset—

omit one guise, two:

First:

this sprawl

precisely endless

tantalizing, under blood-stung

ombré, sun-spectrum blur

mountain to cloud;

vaporous daylight

serenading

children by slow dance of fire.

All the horizon ablaze:

embers reminisce grass blade:

life surrendered

unto dazzlence.

And too: wee gawkers amused to record.

**Etymology in motion**

  lifts

she         he rallies eagerly drooling

her legs

     only toes higher crammed

straddling shoulders

         one now

in his mouth       wet darting licks

        his lips

cascading effigies of fire

his is one face hers are ten thousand and counting

Etymology in motion (sex)

teehee her toes curl outwardly!oh!

oh!his gaze hers glazes

Yes!Yes!

Yes!as Mt. Vesuvius

tempers pangs

of two hearts

to one steel        mute

in colorless crops mulled over

blissful fallout ash separation

**Horror Vacui**

You in mind, I want nothing more

than ocean turmoil

deep enough, wide enough, staunch

which might suffice

this God

 -Forsaken

pit of malice in my chest

(hostile arid no

extremophile crawls out.)

This taunting colorless flame:

      laps marrow from bone,

     or would,

     but incinerates

every gift—contrivances, now I call them—

Blush of warm cheek.

     Fresh berries.

       Sunlit silhouette—

           eyes

      you give me—contrivance, that’s it,

      and distraction:

      valueless, meaningless obstacles

delaying before the ever-sought, mythicized

effervescent, unrealistic quench!

You in mind, you in mind.

**Accumulation can mean loss.**

**A polished stone is one with edges**

**smoothed away.**

**Night belay: light**

raising midnight stone gyre

from blacked nothing

mountains streams gullies inlaid

on summoned stone’s surface

cyclops third eye blazes

patterns projecting in glass sky

headlamp harness grigri chalk

80m rope anchored to

black boulder bulge

fatal blur of black night

six blind stars traverse

pitch height

**Radical Freedom—**

Swimming hand outside

to 40 MPH    Fingers

together dive bottlenosed;

     hammerhead

spread

parachute

curve outward—

The car window is iotic possibility;

This is the transitory joint in the poem.

Sartre invented car windows

and petitioned when manufacturers

introduced new models

without them in ‘86—

The only known picture of Sartre

He’s standing from riding

a convertible

top down.

Sure, he’d be proud

arm hung out

while driving,

but Simone de Beauvoir

would say he’s an Artist.

**The world is as large as my apartment and the moon**

You’re the kind of guy I’d like

       to do nothing with

indefinitely—

  laze days in johns,

  track late-rising

moon phases in our apartment window.

On nights after rain, before snow,

We’ll sneak the car

up the mountain, to cloud level,

      where fog blurs

lights of the city

into one glow

like smudged glass,

      and there find

    serenity,

the palm of a hand. Silently—

breath flown in ribbons;

ash cigarettes on pillowcases

Influential Works

* Cummings, E. E. *E.E. Cummings: Complete Poems 1904-1962*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, a Division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.

Cummings was the poet that first spoke to me, and for a long time was the only poet I read. His play with form, his spontaneity, his philosophy—it all captivated me. I don’t think I really knew what poetry was before finding Cummings. For the first ~year and a half of my starting to write poetry, I wrote exclusively to imitate Cummings… by which I mean I wedged as many parentheses into a poem as would fit on the page. Thankfully I’ve discovered my own aesthetic a little more, though I still can trace much of my writing back to some simulation of Cummings.

* Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. Pantheon Books, 2000.

My favorite book I’ve ever read. If Cummings opened my eyes to the possibilities of form, Danielewski tore my head off. The layered narrative and metaanalysis of the book also inspired much of my fiction/narrative writing style.

* Barrett, William. *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*. Anchor, 1990.

Comprehensive overview of the Existentialist movement, and the key figures in Existentialist philosophy. Also the source of much of my understanding of Existentialism, though I am due for a re-read.

* Pessoa, Fernando, and Richard Zenith. *A Little Larger than the Entire Universe: Selected Poems*. Penguin Books, 2006.

Though not typically counted among the Existentialist writers, and coming some decades before their time, Pessoa articulates much the same thought in his poetry. Replace Sartre’s “anxiety” with “tedium” and you basically have Pessoa, albeit with less metaphysical backing. Pessoa’s poetry usually centers around his philosophy, and he frequently enacts a sort of counter-poetry where he refuses the poetic image of a symbol and instead only allows it the existence it already has, as is seen in this poem:

The moonlight seen through the tall branches

Is more, say all the poets,

Than the moonlight seen through the tall branches.

But for me, oblivious to what I think,

The moonlight through the tall branches,

Besides its being

The moonlight seen through the tall branches,

Is its not being more

Than the moonlight seen through the tall branches.

* Souders, Grant. *Service*. Tupelo Press, 2017.

Not particularly an influential work, per se, but I owe a lot of my progress with poetry thus far to Grant. He was one of the first to give me confidence in my own work and in my voice.

* Ehrmann, Max, et al. *The Desiderata of Happiness: a Collection of Philosophical Poems*. Blue Mountain, 1979.

Ehrmann’s *Desiderata of Happiness* is more a manifesto of ethics than a poem. It outlines the peaceful life, the life lived “going placidly amid the noise and the haste, and remembering what peace there may be in silence.” To me it echoes the Buddhist demeanor of non-attachment and transcendence of the material world and desire.

* Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha*. Transworld Publishers Ltd, 1982.

I don’t know what to say about *Siddhartha* exactly. I don’t know if it is just one of those books I read exactly when I needed to, or if it is really just so tuned to the human spirit that it raises inspiration all on its own, but this book planted the seeds of acceptance and mindfulness that existentialism and Buddhism have continued nurturing.

* Warner, Brad. *Sit down and Shut up: Punk Rock Commentaries on Buddha, God, Truth, Sex, Death, and Dogen's "Treasury of the Right Dharma Eye"*. New World Library, 2007.

For one, this is the book that taught me how to meditate, which laid the groundwork for a good few of the poems here. Mindfulness was often the first step for me writing a poem, and poetry may be considered a meditative practice in some regards, too. Second, Warner just writes with a very optimistic attitude and reassures the reader that they are in the right place. I read this book right around the start of Covid, and the personal narrative Warner weaves through the discussion of Zen statutes had a way of calming me and reminding me to be present, and that there is no knowing where you’ll be in five years.

* Hạnh, N. (2015). *The heart of the Buddha's teaching: Transforming suffering into peace, joy & liberation: The four noble truths, the noble eightfold path, and other basic Buddhist teachings*. New York: Harmony Books.

My initiation into Buddhist philosophy was through the philosophy department at CU, in a Buddhist metaphysics class. I came away with a pretty good understanding of Buddhism through an analytical viewpoint. However, Buddhism, as much of Eastern philosophy isn’t meant to be analytic, and loses some of sense of its truth. These are concepts not meant to be understood conceptually.

Hanh does an excellent job of keeping his writing true to the Buddhist nature of it, acknowledging the difficulties and contradictions of it, while framing it all for a Western audience.

* Hoover, Paul. *Postmodern American Poetry: a Norton Anthology*. Norton, 2013.

Pretty comprehensive anthology of postmodern poetry. This was my introduction to a lot of the poets I’m reading now, including Jack Spicer, Gary Snyder, Kenneth Koch, Barbara Guest, John Ashbery, and Michael Palmer.

* Ramazani, Jahan, et al. *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*. Norton, 2003.

Similar to the anthology of postmodern poetry, this book facilitated my first meeting of the modernist poets in a class I took on modern poetry. This was my first foray into Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Stevens, Williams, Pound, and a bunch of other guys I’d only refer to by their last names. As I said in the author statement, I am fascinated by the attention modernism brought to the process of poetry itself, mentally, and the allowance of sporadic——sorry, had to get some water.

* Bradbury, R., & Gaiman, N. (2013). *Fahrenheit 451: Fahrenheit 451 - The temperature at which book paper catches fire and burns ...* New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

Not the most important listing on here, but in a lull Bradbury did reignite (HA!) my love of spontaneity of language. Even though it isn’t poetry, Bradbury utilizes the stream-of-consciousness ramblings of the modernist movement. Primarily when giving descriptions, Bradbury will often list detail after detail, compound image upon image to paint a clearer representation of his subject, mimicking the way the mind would catalogue these things.

* Bukowski, C., & Debritto, A. (2017). *On love*. New York: Ecco.

No one delivers a line like Bukowski. In an interview, Bukowski said “most poets write ‘da-diddy-diddy-da-diddy-da-diddy-da.’ Poetry should be quicker. Every line should be ‘Pip. Pip. Pip. Pip. Pip.’” I don’t know how many times Noah and I met to look at my poems, and his feedback was always “just say the thing.” Bukowski gives me a model for how to say the thing.

* Nature

Who was it that said it is all our duties to learn from the natural world? William Carlos Williams? Lorca?

* Cathcart, T., & Klein, D. M. (2011). *Heidegger and a hippo walk through those pearly gates: Using philosophy (and jokes!) to explain life, death, the afterlife, and everything in between*. New York: Penguin Books.

A good cursory examination of different philosophies of death. Definitely a 1000-level-class kind of book though—it doesn’t get as in depth with any one philosophy as I would have liked. It did start me thinking about death more, and gave me some good quotes by the Existentialists it discusses.

“Death is the moment at which the for-itself slips into an in-itself lost forever to the past.”

-Sartre

* Laozi, Laozi, & Johnston, C. (2016). *The Tao Te Ching: Lao Tzu's book of the way and of righteousness*. Place of publication not identified: Kshetra Books.

Prior to delving into Buddhism, I first briefly explored Taoism. This was my initiation to namelessness and non-conceptual experience, though I don’t think I really understood at the time.

* Jung, C. G., & Campbell, J. (1985). *The portable Jung*. Penguin Books.

Over the summer I read about 10 essays and segments of essays by Jung. I relate a lot of his thoughts to Buddhism, as I think he does, and his concepts of the collective unconscious and archetypes were inspirational to some of my writing process. He discusses art and archetypal narrative as a means of universalizing experience in a way that all persons with a similarly constructed psyche will relate to them the same.

As an example of this, he discusses the symbol, the archetype, of the moon. In narrative, no matter of its origin, the moon is always portrayed as the female caregiver, the lover, the wife. Jung explains this as a function of shared evolutionary development of humanity and society. Before civilization, before even agriculture, humans hunted and foraged throughout the day, and would return to the tribe at night. Copulation. This gave rise to a strong association between women and comfort, and the moon risen at night. Thus, Jung argues, the moon was experienced as woman; the two were ontologically identical in evolutionary history. That identity became biologically ingrained in us, and has been passed on through the evolution of man to the common day.

Since reading this, I try to intentionally enact this in the poems I write. If there is a situation or an event I want to include in a poem, I try to analyze what other experiences are necessarily linked to it, and write it through them.

* Leitch, V. B. (2018). *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Norton & Company Limited, W.W.

Being both a Philosophy major as well as a Creative Writing student, my favorite instances of either are where they intersect. Literary theory is my second love, especially the theories of Jung, Lacan, Derrida, Marx, Freud, Heidegger, Baudrillard, and Saussure.

* Linklater, R. (Director). (n.d.). *Waking life* [Video]. Retrieved from Physical copy

Really an activist movie masquerading as philosophy, though still both. *Waking Life* grazes across a number of Existential thoughts, all with the message of living life to the fullest while one is alive. We may well be living in a dream already, we should marvel at the dream-landscapes and dream-people, and all our dream-experiences.