

Mass Graves Etc.

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Mass Graves Etc. is two things: a reflection and a confrontation. As the title suggests, these two elements are applied to death, violence, dejection, chaos, superficiality, modernity, longing, emptiness, and despair. The intensity of these things often provokes a need to reflect, to understand, to confront, and ultimately to live with them. If there could be a world without things like death, chaos, and dejection, I'd like to see it. But that's not the world we live in now. In fact, such a vision is quite the opposite of the reality we currently occupy, and it seems to only be continually worsened by apathy, cynicism, and escapism. This is where the "Etc." in the title comes from, as a reference to the "throwaway" nature of almost everything in our current time. There are implications of escapism throughout many of the poems featured, as well as specific references to modern consumerist pleasures. The poem titled "Northbrook Court" takes this escapism and apathy to its natural conclusion, in which the transcendent is made unremarkable and is commodified in the process. In some of these poems, readers also get the chance to reflect on the abandoned and decaying past, with poems like "Nearing It," which refers to a forsaken, dilapidated Sears. Such a brand was once at the pinnacle of retail. Now look at what it has become. In this way, *Mass Graves Etc.* is also a reminder of impermanence, entropy, and the inevitable fate that awaits all human beings.

Other than this zoomed-out meditation on metaphysical and societal forces, *Mass Graves Etc.* is also deeply personal. It wrestles with emotional questions that have been burdening me for my entire life, the first and most heavy of which being: *why?* Why do mass graves get dug? Why do graves get dug at all? Why must we die? Furthermore, the natural question following all of these arises: what is the purpose of this? Of life? Of me?

One of the first fully conscious memories that I have stored away in my brain is of my toes. Once, when I was a child, I stood staring down at the bare feet attached to my legs on the wooden bedroom floor. I questioned them. Are they mine? *Mine?* What made them mine? What fashioned them, and what bestowed them to *me*, to my control? Indeed, when I say that inquiries into the nature of my existence have followed me "for my entire life," I'm not exaggerating in the slightest.

I took up philosophy over the years to attempt to answer these questions, and I found a great deal of wonderful answers, theories, and many more important inquiries. Philosophy, however, can only answer these questions intellectually. In due time, I found that I needed *more*. When I ask the questions that I do, I don't pose them from a place of removed disinterest like a scientist might. Instead, I ask these questions *emotionally*. Because of this, I realized that I must attempt to answer these questions emotionally as well. Such a realization was my introduction to art and to creative writing in particular.

As I began the process of drafting and editing this project with my advisor Raza Ali Hasan in May of 2023, it was evident that the most important thing to be kept intact throughout everything would be the existential *emotions* of the work. Indeed, as I trimmed down and redrafted the poems featured here, I found that they became more emotionally and existentially resonant the more they were stripped to their core. In certain places, this meant simply making the poems shorter, but in other cases (such as "Calluses" and "Bibliography") this meant repeating certain words over and over so that there were fewer new words per line, giving those unrepeated words more emphasis. I was reminded of that old paradoxical cliché "less is more," which I kept in the back of mind as Ali and I continued to edit and redraft.

The learning process was really quite intimidating at first. Many of these poems had never been read (much less dissected) by *anyone* before I first delivered them to Ali's office. It was difficult at first to admit that the original drafts had many shortcomings, but once this obstacle was overcome, I found myself diving into the editing process completely. As a result, many of these

poems almost seem to declare their own transformation on the page. Throughout the journey of editing, dissecting, and redrafting, I learned a great deal of lessons, principles, and concepts about poetry, the craft of writing it, and the process of reexamining it.

I can't claim that my poems truly answer the most daunting questions of human existence, but I would indeed claim that they provide *something*. At the very least, I can say that these poems do not *shrink* from existence. Whether they reflect on it or confront it, they at the very least stare into it with an unflinching gaze. The words of *Mass Graves Etc.* are the phosphenes and after-images that glitter across one's vision from this act of unmitigated beholding.

Potter's Field

Lonely people get dumped into mass graves,
Thinking we can be alone together.
We lay side by side, in rows and planks,
Slowly devoured by the worms and the dirt.

There's nothing for us all to talk about:
Lonely souls have no interesting stories.
So as we lay there, swallowed up by the ground,
We remain looking at each other awkwardly.

Someone calls out into the stilted silence,
"Why do you think they threw us all in here?"
I say before sealing my lips again,
"We were nobody... and now we're nowhere."

Along with my lips, I close my eyes,
Alone in a crowd until the end of time.

Pedestrian

I saw an old man get hit by a car:
His body crumpled beneath it.
I saw it from a street corner—
Blurry and sonic-quick.

No one was driving the vehicle,
Like a phantom engine gone psychotic.
An Airbag exploded from the steer wheel
And the horn chimed steady and melodic.

I've become afraid of walking outside;
The death of him has stained my eyes.

Billiards

“Life is about having fun,” said the Fool
As he stood over the tacky wooden cue.
He smoked a cigarette as he played pool;
He was drunk, he’d already had a few.

He missed his shot, threw the stick at me,
And the cue ball even flew off the table.
The room had a hostile surreality
Like an old anthropomorphic fable.

The Fool’s wide grin was impossibly white
Even though he had no genuine teeth.
The world outside us had faded to night
And the moon and the sky were at full meet.

The Fool is a worse pool player than me
And yet I can’t manage to claim victory.

Losing

I may never regain what I lost there,
In the mountains beneath the pine trees.
Looking for it everywhere and anywhere,
I still return with my hands empty.

I searched through the titanic alpine woods
Under the light of the brightest summer sun.
I turned over every rock and log I could
And even dug a few holes in the ground.

It feels like my chest is missing something,
Like when your wallet's not in your pocket
Or when that one finger is lacking its ring
Or when... never mind. I can't explain it.

I return home broken, tired, and filthy,
Forever searching and forever empty.

Confrontation

I now return home for the seventh time
As my illness prepares to erase me.
When I turned off the highway at the sign,
The road itself seemed somehow consuming.

My old bedroom, shaded over with dust;
The kitchen table still holding a meal;
The backyard doghouse still holding a mut;
Empty liquor bottles in the trash pile.

If this is where I finally perish
Maybe I really did nothing at all;
The final punchline of nothingness
Guided by Death in his midnight shawl.

I asked the cloaked one “what will my life come to?”
And he replied, *I suppose that's still up to you.*

Hiding

To hear someone with a frog in their throat
Makes my chest rigid and my breath heavy.
Walking through a labyrinth of dense coats,
My eyes cut through the faces around me.

The snow is nice, but what comes with it?
Tissues and sounds.
Mouths muffled by bent elbows
And cloth.

Bubble Children

I read of “bubble children” somewhere:
They spend their lives in a plastic cage.
The thing that encases them is clear,
But they never get to *see* anything.

Surreal isolation:
A distorted lens to experience life.
The translucent sightlessness of seclusion:
Centerless and ghostlike.

Plastic hand holes through which life can be touched
Encase gloves that will never *feel* anything.
Eyes that will never see the sky when they look up:
A sanitized mind.

I don't feel so different, David Vetter:
We both have no chance at anything better.

Not a Tomb Yet

I contemplate the end of everything
As I stand here alone on this planet;
How it all was reduced to nothingness
And if there's anything to say about it.

I would claim "It was nice while it lasted,"
But I don't think I could state that truthfully.
People were enslaved and killed in masses,
So what was nice about it honestly?

There were a few moments scattered in time
Amidst explosions, bullets, and cut-short days.
I held onto them desperately in my mind
As humanity dug its own mass grave.

Standing here alone on this planet,
I bless the tomb and shovel dirt in it.

Conviction

The lamenting gavel sounds “Tap, tap, tap!”
Issuing a sentence I don’t deserve.
The handcuffs lock with a snap
As the audience observes.
The faceless judge issues his cold command.
My legs feel weak.
The bailiff with his pale, dead hands
Muzzles me.

Blindness

Even in moments of revelation,
We stumble with a small LED light,
Excavating the darkness bit by bit.

We are consumed by the vastness of it.

Even after all this time and “progress,”
We take to redoing our kitchens
And replacing our old Philips.

Northbrook Court

A crowded shopping mall, filled with people:
their bustling feet threw me off mine.
Their voices like sonic needles in my ears
made me obsessively check the time.

I looked for an unknown section of the mall
called *BEYOND*, where people wait for Godot,
apparently.

Glass

I've lived my life as a sliding glass door,
wondering why people cannot see me.
They hobble by with their shoulders
bent to the floor.

Sometimes people walk right into me.
I stand aside, motionless, fragmenting.

Sometimes I reflect people back at them
and they make their features mine: angry.

America

I have seen blood flow through and soak the streets
Like rainwater on the spring equinox.
I have felt nightmare sweats soak my bedsheets
Like the fever of a child with smallpox.

I have seen temples obliterated
And replaced with nightclubs and shopping malls.
I have heard screaming and shouts of hatred
Echo down dark and forsaken halls.

I have seen children taken from their cribs
Like apples plucked from an old orchard tree.
I have seen people, men, women, and kids,
Standing before mass graves, pale and shivering.

I have seen my teeth form the shape of lies;
I have seen death smile and look me in the eye.

Nearing It

People tell me I have a broken frown,
like a leaky faucet in a nursing home.

My skin, loose and frayed.
My face, a reflection of my soul:
the thinning continues.

An indescribable kinship:
shattered cabinets, rusted silverware,
an abandoned Sears with rats living in it.

The Grim Reaper, broken like me,
follows promising numbness.

Here is the Moon

Nowhere. Like an astronaut stranded.
Like there's *something* somewhere, anywhere.

I see a flag, footprints, and a mirror.
I see depression, mania, lunacy,
horizons of nothing and nowhere,
arrivals and departures, victories, an oasis:
a life in a lunar landscape.

Calluses

My hands have never seen rail work.
My hands have never felt a fire.
My hands have never forged metal.
My hands have never buttoned coats.
My hands have never made.
My hands have never been.
My hands have never gave.
My hands have never worked.
My hands have never toiled.
My hands have never felt the dirt.
My hands have never nurtured soil.
My hands have never bled.
My hands have never healed.
My hands have never.

The Chase

Novelty kills. Running toward, running away,
chasing sedation, entertainment, and thrills:
preference for pleasure, aversion to pain.

Why do we do, why do we do, why do...
Anything at all.... Anything... at all.

Wandering the labyrinth of motivation,
realize the Eternal Return:
Pleasure, pain without conclusion.

The Vultures Part I

Bitten by the cold, shivering alone,
Along some long-forgotten road somewhere,
There stands a boy, a million miles from home,
Wandering through the darkness to nowhere.

The fog blankets him in a blinding haze
And he can only hear his own breathing.
The road is winding, the asphalt a maze,
And all four of his limbs have lost feeling.

A gentle snow starts falling from the sky.
He stops, knowing what the snow means.
An exodus breath, a submissive closing of the eyes:
He falls.

Alone.
His corpse rotting in the humid cold.

Missing Ad

The advertisement reads: "Have you seen me?"
I've been wondering the same thing myself lately.

"Can you see me??" I scream at passersby,
In the fearful absence of vocalization.

In truth, I know that I'm invisible:
The fact is rather mundane.

I am a ghost, a specter, a shadow:
A being people cannot see or know.

The Vultures Part II

At the dawn of a new day lies a child.

Where snow stops,
The land's surface is freezing cold.
Vultures circle.
The corpse takes on the fresh scent of mold.

The vultures are eager to each get their piece:
Their faces have never looked happier.

Nothing recognizable remains.
The vultures laugh, their beaks blood-stained.

Endings Only

I have seen more sunsets than sunrises
And indeed more endings than beginnings.
I have seen more people die than baptized,
More dead birds on the ground than hatchlings.

They say that the end of every story
Is the beginning of another one.
This statement has been proven false lately,
As my *hope* was lost and never rewon.

If I could take every single ending
And somehow make something new out of it,
I would only be foolishly pretending,
Just remember the theme of *Ozymandias*.

Sometimes endings are just the end:
Something that happened that never will again.

Lie

Stop. Lie to me. Lie to me. *Lie* to me.
Grant me that gift and burden me with that curse.
Fill the air with gasp-filled, phony crying
Or lukewarm, half-hearted assurance.

Smiles disguising the utter falseness,
Like a grinning octopus encasing me.
Auditory tentacles: "I'm okay, I guess,"
"Casual sex makes me less lonely."

"True love will be with us all one day."
"I'm inclined to a life of moderation."
"The sky will listen to you if you pray."
"We now live in a strong and just nation."

Please, just one more. Tell me one more lie.
"A reward awaits you after you die."

Pristine

As I watch society eat itself,
I don't know whether my panic
Comes from outside or within myself:
This or that, that or this.

Humans devour each other outside
For the sake of survival and ice cream.
Phantoms devour me from the inside,
Creeping through memories and dreams.

Conflict out there and a warzone in here:
Humans were never destined for stillness.
With violence, power struggles, and beer,
We were those who made the world as it is.

The human world out there is dangerous,
But so is such pristine isolation like this.

The Balloon

I watched the balloon drift,
As I stood on the barren autumn dirt.
I observed it with my colorless eyes
As it grew farther away from the Earth.

I wondered
If it would end up anywhere at all.
Or if there was any limit
To its updrift.

I wondered if the balloon could see me
Looking at the darkening sky like a martyr,
If it could see the trees stripped of their leaves
And feel how much the world had grown colder.

I blinked once and lost sight of the balloon
As it disappeared beyond autumn's stiff refuse.

The Vultures Part III

The skull was the only human thing remaining.
None of the other bones were recognizable.
The stranger called the police,
“Where we live,” eyes tearing up, “children die.”

She called out, eyes blurring,
To the world,
Under steady, silent sky,
Nothing but... nothing.

The bones were removed to be identified.
The vultures watched, their faces grinning wide.

Radio Interference

The concrete danced. The airplane took off.
Below, the ground slowly disappeared.
You, traveling next to me, a case of unlocking identity,
Vulnerable as the plane against the sky.

I enjoy the steel plane's boldness,
But traveling is a rare occurrence:
The jetlag, the emptiness,
The bland trip home afterwards.

Memories serve only as radio interference,
Disrupting the radar that the plane surfs.
They serve only as an emotional temptress,
Distracting from the truthfulness of the moment.

Hold my hand against the droning engines.
Promise the sky: peace and eternal presence.

The Grave Part I

He stood above the freshly dug grave;
There was not sadness, but rage in his eyes.
He stood above the hole he had made
Amidst the stiffening, cracked autumn trees.

He was angry at his father for his suicide
And a little angry at himself, too.
The sun was long gone
And the Earth was scattered gray and blue.

There was then only one thing left to say
And it was said through lips shaking and cold.
The son then buried his father's remains
As the rage subsided and something else took hold.

Like the Christ: "Why have you forsaken me?"
"Why must I now face the future with nothing?"

Prescience

I see myself dying on the floor,
My blood filling the cracks between tiles.
I see myself standing at death's door,
Shivering, a fever-stricken child.

I see myself in a hospice bed,
My body emaciated and weak.
I see myself buried with the dead
In the barren ground of eternal sleep.

I see my apathetic funeral
And attendees masking their hurry.
I see my own hastened burial
And not a tear shed for me.

I see worms and insects eating my flesh,
Taking what they want and leaving the rest.

Penitence

His head tilted down,
His eyes on the concrete,
Something conceptual and discreet
Weighing on his mind.

As he walked by the entrance of the church,
His head and his steps were heavy.
The ground pulled him in with more than gravity.

The Grave Part II

He heard his father's voice as he walked,
He heard it as the wind rustled the leaves.
He heard it as the voice grew and refused to stop.

He walked on in the last light of day,
Hallucinating, questioning.
The voice spoke through a small bird.

When the boy woke up, his heart ached with grief,
But then he heard the birds sing.

Thrownness

I could have been a pair of golden wings
With talons and beak between my eyes,
Looking for rabbits and edible things
From a vantage point in the deep blue sky.

I could have been a cat with razor claws
Hunting tapir in the maze-like jungle,
The foliage beneath my padded paws,
Napping in branches with my stomach full.

I could have been an eight-legged creature
Stalking insects across a desert land
With fangs of venom, horrific features
And hairy legs the length of a human hand.

Could? Should? Not this. *Not* this.
Modify it. Could've? Should've? Non-existent.

Deathbed

Through the bedroom window,
He saw the grass and the trees,
Unknowing where death would take him.

Long gone were the days of giggled running,
Of endless afternoons in the summertime.
Long gone.

Over his bed, the Eternal Footman leered.

Object

Did we give it away for nothing?

Sometimes I think it was stolen
From our dressers in the middle of the night,
That our moonlit bedroom windows were broken
And the criminals fled before sunrise.

Sometimes I think it was taken
By bullies and alcoholic parents,
By weekends spent alone feeling forsaken
Or the white noise of modern entertainment.

Samsara

When the bars finally say “Closed for the Night”
And people meander back to their homes,
Beneath the pallid moonlight,
Each is utterly alone.

When the sunrise shines on a brand-new day
And people make their way back to the office,
Long then the sun sets, the cubicles empty,
And such returns the truest loneliness.

When midnight strikes, the open hours end,
And the Samsara commences again.

Fermentation

Yellow, dusty, and forgotten.

Half-true, downright fictionalized
Memories pulled out of my brain,
Small specimens distilled in time,
Subjects of a new kind of pain.

No more iron blood left to bleed,
No more musings to deliver,
No more objects left to see,
Nothing but my coffin cover.

A Brief Visitor

I hobble in and out of crowded rooms
Filled with people I'll never know.
Their faces blur together as I walk through,
Melting into themselves like April snow.

People that I recognize, but don't know,
Or those who I know, but don't recognize;
I watch them come and go, come and go,
Over and over and over a thousand times.

I wonder what they see as they pass by
Without bothering to say anything.
There they go again for the millionth time,
Absorbed in themselves, walking around me.

I walk in and out of limited space,
Surrounded by strangers, regrets, and mistakes.

Bibliography

All of the songs I only listened to once,
All of the unread books on my shelf,
All of the freezing, isolated months,
All of the beggars I chose not to help.

All of the poems I've never written,
All of the wax records I never played,
All of the relationships I've broken,
All of the people I never forgave.

All of the half-hearted confessions,
All of the moonless midnight skies,
All of the unnecessary possessions,
All of the days that never arrived.

All of the nights spent alone in my bed,
All of the gatherings I never went to,
All of the trauma I'll never forget,
All of the things I forgot about you.

All of the endings that never ended,
All of the dawns that never began,
All of the truths never recorded,
All of the things I'll never have.

All of the souvenirs and trinkets I've bought,
All of the love I've given, received, and lost.

Sources of Creative Influence

- Strand, Mark, and Eavan Boland. *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2005.

This anthology was where I *began* with poetry. The different forms that it describes, the analyses, and the poems inserted throughout all made this collection stand out to me as someone who has an intense appreciation for form and style. Poems in this collection that particularly inspired me include “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” by Oscar Wilde and “America” by Allen Ginsberg. The themes of Wilde’s ballad in particular made their way into my poems, with themes of death, execution, burial, and destruction becoming quite prevalent.

- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. Harcourt Brace, 1991.

T.S. Eliot, being one of my favorite poets, always entrances me with his subtle and brilliant understanding of form. Although he was a modernist writer who experimented a lot with different structures, there’s always a commitment to some kind of guiding principle in each of his poems. Ones in particular that I’ve poured over many times include “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “The Waste Land,” and “The Hollow Men.” Eliot’s conception of the Eternal Footman and his ideas surrounding life, death, meaning, and modernity all appeared in my poems, sometimes even as direct references.

- Auden, W. H. *Collected Poems*. Modern Library, 2007.

The element of Auden’s work that inspired me the most was his style. It’s not too flowery, and often has a simple, almost spartan presentation. As someone who enjoys writing prose fiction as well as poetry, I found myself gravitating towards this style, as I’ve always found it best to get to straight the point. Works that were especially influential from this collection included “If I Could Tell You,” “As I Walked Out One Evening,” and “Lullaby”.

- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Translated by Walter Arnold Kaufmann, Modern Library, 1992.

As an avid reader of philosophy, I was of course inspired by Nietzsche’s work as I drafted the poems in this collection. As one of the only philosophers that I would also consider a true poet, Nietzsche had a mastery of language that few ever attain, and I found myself particularly inspired by the *power* of his words. Walter Kaufmann did an excellent job of keeping Nietzsche’s poetics intact as he translated this compilation from the original German. The section titled “Seventy-Five Aphorisms” does an especially good job of giving the reader an overview of Nietzsche’s criticisms, his philosophy of the will to power, and his commitment to life affirmation in the face of suffering. This Kaufmann compilation is particularly good because it includes notes from Albert Camus and Martin Heidegger, both of whose ideas inspired many themes in my poems.

- Bukowski, Charles. *The Last Night of the Earth Poems*. Ecco, 2002.

Bukowski takes Auden's straightforward style even further. Although many of my poems were highly attuned to form and structure, Bukowski's work inspired me to let go a little bit and prevent form from getting in the way. Bukowski's work, above all else, acts as a reminder for me to be as *real* as I can, and to allow raw, unfiltered emotions to express themselves.

- Kaufmann, Walter. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. World Publ. Co. 1956.

As many of the poems in my thesis were inspired by existentialist philosophy, it only makes sense that I was informed by reading lots of it. The excerpts from Kierkegaard's works were especially inspirational, as his reflections on despair, alienation, and melancholy all informed what I expressed throughout poems like "Losing."

- Camus, Albert and Matthew Ward. *The Stranger*. 1st Vintage International ed. New York, Vintage International, 1989.

A classic, original reflection on the absurdity of existence, no list of my inspirations would be complete without *The Stranger*. The musings, questions, monologues, and events that are scattered throughout the book all informed the themes of despondence, hopelessness, dejection, and, of course, absurdity throughout poems like "Pedestrian."

- Percy, Walker. *The Moviegoer*. New York, The Noonday Press, 1967.

Much like the inspiration that I received from *The Stranger*, this novel was on my summer 2023 readings list, and helped me understand themes I'd been working on. The narrator, while not nearly as apathetic as Meursault, has a sense of dread, despair, and apathy that he carries with him wherever he goes. This novel also has a theme of consumerism, which made its way into poems like "Blindness" and "Northbrook Court."

- Dostoevsky, Fyodor, et al. *Notes from Underground*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2004.

After reading an excerpt of this work in Kaufmann's *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, I was so blown away by it that I just had to read the whole thing. I found it chaotic, fractured, and absolutely brilliant. The sentences came alive, and there was an almost poetic rhythm to everything, despite it being prose fiction (and translated from Russian to English). Crises of identity, ideology, and purpose all found their way into my poems as I was reading this.

- Camus, Albert and Justin O'Brien. *The Fall*. [1st American ed.] New York, Knopf, 1956.

This was another book that I read over the summer of 2023. Unlike *The Stranger*, I found that this work had a certain kind of intimacy. The narrator still kept the reader at a distance during many parts, but in due time I realized that *The Fall* was no *story*, it was a *confession*. It was with this work that I realized that the act of confessing was one of my true thematic interests. As I looked back, this pattern emerged, as I discovered that this same confessional nature was what drew me to the first section of *Notes from Underground*. Indeed, I heard once that Dostoevsky's novella was first

referred to as “A Confession” before being given its current title. Themes of secrecy, penitence, and regret all made significant appearances in my poems.

- Tolstoy, Leo, Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsky. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Vintage Classic, 2012.

Similar to *The Fall*, Tolstoy’s novella had a significant impact on me because of its intimacy. The reader gets the chance to die with Ivan, live with Ivan, and make mistakes with Ivan. In this book, I saw *myself* nearing death, and felt Ivan’s regret as I did so. Far from a one-dimensional morbid, depressing story, Ivan’s death is also an expression of beauty, as he comes to terms with himself before finally departing. The poems that were heavily influenced by this kind of deep reflection include “Confrontation” and “Death Bed.”