

Vanitas: An Unstil and Moving Life

Dedicated to

Lloyd Edward Bishop. My uncle Eddie died after a long illness on September 12, 2007.

Robert Claude Bishop, Jr. My cousin Robby committed suicide on October 15, 2008

Sing to the tune of "The Alabama Song"

Well, show me the way to the next little boy
Oh, don't ask why
Oh, don't ask why

Show me the way to the next little girl
Oh, don't ask why
Oh, don't ask why

For if I don't find the next little boy
I tell you we must die,
I tell you we must die
I tell you,
I tell you,
I tell you we must die.

We must die. To quote Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright, now dead, as adapted by Jim Morrison, a member of the American rock band The Doors, now dead. Jim Morrison, dead. The Boors, I mean the Doors, dead. To quote Brecht and Morrison. (*sing*) We must die.

We must die.

This, whatever this is, is a reminder that life is fleeting and death is certain. This is a memento mori. As you parade in triumph down your life's streets, I creep along behind you and whisper, "Memento Mori. Remember you die. *Sic transit Gloria mundi*. Thus passes the glory of the world. Passing into dust and ashes."

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

He will die. She will die. They will die. You will die. Y'all will die. We will die. I will die. Every person you know will die. Every single person in this room will die. Some of us will die in our beds of old age, some of us will get sick before our time, some of us will get hit, some of us will get swept up in a storm, some of us will have our hearts stop, some of us will drown, some of us will be murdered, some of us will kill ourselves. Some of us will die sooner versus later. Someone in this room (on this patio) may die this year, perhaps this month, maybe even this week, possibly later tonight on the way home. Doesn't that warm the cockles of your heart? The thought that one of us could very well be dead in just a few hours.

If I were a kind playwright, I put the thought that we all are bound to die, that some of us may die soon, in the slightly distancing, less discomfoting mouths of a character. Like Tom Stoppard's Guildenstern:

Where we went wrong was getting on the boat. We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and the current.

Or I could borrow from Shakespeare and place the unsettling notion that we all die, some of us by our own hands, in the hands of an inept actor in bad drag, so you could discharge your anxieties in laughter. Thus a scene in a Midsummer's Nights Dream, comically echoing Romeo and Juliet, where Francis Flute, a man, plays the part of Thisby, a woman, who finds her self-slaughtered lover.

Comic delivery.

Asleep, my love?
What, dead, my dove?
O Pyramus, arise!
Speak, speak, quite dumb?
Dead, dead? A tomb
Must cover thy sweet eyes.
These lily lips,
This cherry nose,
These yellow cowslip cheeks
Are gone, are gone.
Lovers, make moan.
His eyes were green as leeks.
O Sisters Three,
Come, come to me
With hands as pale as milk;
Lay them in gore
Since you have shore
With shears his thread of silk.
Tongue, not a word
Come, trusty sword
Come, blade, my breast imbrue!

And, farewell, friends.
Thus Thisbey ends.
Adieu, adieu, adieu.

Back to "normal" voice.

I am not that kind of a playwright. I am not a kind playwright. I am a sadistic bitch who enjoys making you squirm in your seats. I don't want you to project your anxieties about death onto

some hapless character. I want you to remember that you, yes you, will die. That you might die much sooner than you'd druther.

This is a memento mori, a forced march of a meditation on death. We march because I am mad. Angry that every time I lose someone, and I have lost many recently, mixed in with the wonderful, loving support is way too much denial. People avert their eyes from my losses, they are uncomfortable when I reveal that I still grieve five months after the last close death in my life. Not in every moment, but often enough. I lost someone I dearly love not that long ago. The fact that he shot himself in the head makes it even harder for people to handle. Many want deaths like his to be hidden away. Those of us who mourn suicides are asked to grieve privately, so others can pretend that people do not take their own lives.

Next time someone dies I will wear sack cloth and ashes. We should be marked by death. Others should witness that marking.

Buddhism has a meditation practice in which sitters contemplate their own death and decay. For minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, they imagine their own debilitation, dying, death and decay. Some sit in graveyards or charnel houses.

Imagine you are a corpse thrown onto a charnel ground. Your dead body lies there, blue or yellowed like a bruise or ashy brown, bloated, festering. Your limbs stiff. Flies lay eggs in your soft, squishy bits. Crows peck out your eyes. Scavengers tear apart your limbs.

Did you know that when family gathers around the body of a loved who just has died in the hospital staff put a tray of coffee grounds under the bed? This absorbs some, but not all, of death's odor. We all know the smell of a rotting corpse, but the fresh corpse of someone who has been ill has a unique fragrance that blends sickness and shit and death into an unforgettable perfume.

We're down in the catacombs, where bleached bones are stacked high as the sky, where skulls rest in rows mocking us with leering grins. We sit on bones.

Here death waits for us.

Death waits for you. Can you hear the slight rasp of death's bony knuckles resting on your door-waiting to knock? Then the sudden silence as it draws back its hand.

Knock "Shave and a haircut, two bits."

Death is a funny fellow.

Did Death knock on your door? Or was the knock on the door next door. The door of someone you love. Maybe the knock was two doors down on a friend of a friend's door, on the door of a person you only sort of know. Perhaps Death knocked four doors down, on the door of someone you've never met but someone you know knows. Sometimes, the knock sounds from the other

end of the block, but the knock is so loud, a banging bass boom, that it echoes all the way down the block, vibrating all our doors, shaking our thresholds, making us take note.

There is no escaping Death's knock, the cant of Futurists with visions of downloadable consciousness dancing in their heads, notwithstanding. They never talk about irreversible hard drive crashes. They believe in the future where nothing ever breaks. I can't put much faith in that. In my experience, everything fails, everything eventually breaks down. They never mention natural disasters destroying equipment. They don't speak of sabotage.

Would it be murder to erase all traces of someone from the hardware and the networks? If they could recover only parts of your personality and history, how much would they have to recover for you to remain you? How much data would have to be restored for us to say that you had been brought back from the dead? Would we program a long tunnel of white light so that when you were booted back up, you had a comforting way to explain the lost time? Would we nickname such a person a Lazarus. Or in a more mean-spirited mode, Zombie.

Acts and speaks a like a parody of a Zombie.

Data. 'ungry for data.

Back to "normal" voice.

There is no escaping Death's knock. There's Death at your door- waiting, not breathing, waiting for you not breathing- but your door keeps Death out until that knock sounds. Oh, your door shakes and quakes when Death knocks on nearby doors, but your door stays closed. Death does not yet step over your threshold. But your door doesn't keep out Death with a capital D's canine friends. Little doggie deaths run in and out of the pet door in your life all the time. They get their fur on everything and leave chewed up bones in your bed and paw prints on floors you hoped would stay clean. They demand you pet them; they shove their noses into your hands, into your crotch while your trying to talk to someone about something important. They make you pay attention.

These little doggie deaths, they are all the things that break down. The favorite shirt that you've worn until it has become indecent shreds that you finally, reluctantly retire to the rag bag. The plate that slips from your hand, falling into the sink just wrong smashing into bits. Suddenly finding yourself mourning a friendship that has passed away and you're not quite sure how or why it ended. The email or letter that rejects you, telling you that you didn't get the job or into grad school or into the show or some other something you very much wanted. The morning reflection in the mirror that shows that your youthful bloom has faded. The twinge in your knee that keeps you from going out dancing. The receding hairline that mocks the former, envied beauty of your hair. The headless corpse of the rat that you cat left as a gift on your bathroom floor.

We get worn down by cleaning up behind all the little doggie deaths in our lives. Death with a capital D, waiting to knock on our doors, is like the sky- huge, immense, always present and thus ignorable. We can take it, like the sky, for granted.

But those little, irritating doggie deaths breathing on you with their hot, smelly little panting breaths, they constantly remind you that nothing lasts, that some things never get to live or grow, that some things remain stunted, that you often have to let go, that everything ends, that everything fails, that everything breaks. Their noses jammed into the crack of your ass remind you that death is with you every moment of your lives. They are the memento mori sent by a ridiculous trickster god.

Sing to tune of "Time is winding up."

Time, Time
Time is winding up
Time, time
Time is winding up
Time, Time
Time is winding up

Your time is winding up

Your time is winding up. Unstrung string slowly-quickly, quickly-slowly is wound back onto your ball. This ball of string is lumpy. There are knots and snarls. When the string was first unwound . . . how do you describe the way string looks when its first loops are unwrapped off the coil? That's what the beginning of our lives were like- the first unwound loops of twine. We never will get our balls of string back to the way they were. Being unstrung changes us.

Sings, moves from mocking to mournful.

Sister, you better be praying
For your time is winding up.
Brother, you better be praying
For your time is winding up
Mother, you better be praying
For your time is winding up

Your time is winding up.

Why doesn't the song say winding down? Like a clock work mechanism? The song, when sung well, I can't claim that I sang it well,

There's another little doggie death wagging its little tail at me, the death of my childhood dream of dancing and singing on Broadway. I am a Broad, not a Broadway, star.

The song, when sung well, builds in intensity. The up at the end is echoed by the up of the singers' voices suggesting the up where gospel singers hope to ascend.

It appeals to me because I perversely like the idea of trying to wind up my time. It is impossible to wind up my life's timeline with all its events. I will be wound back up, but you'd never be able to unwind me again. Once wound up, my mortal coil disappears. All that will be left of me and my time are the frayed bits worn off my string as it rubbed against the world.

Sings.

Father, you better be praying
For your time is winding up

My family's time is winding up. Every fall for the past three years at least one biologically and often emotionally close family member has died. In December of 2006, my maternal grandfather and step-grandmother died. In September of 2007, an uncle, my father's youngest brother, and my maternal grandmother died. In October of 2008, a first cousin on my father's side killed himself. It is enough to make me a bit suspicious, even superstitious. Who will die this fall? Who will fall next?

Someone in my family will fall, perhaps not this fall, but someone will fall soon enough. We all fall down.

Sings.

Ring around the rosies, pocket full of posies. Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.

We all fall down. We all die.

But we do not just wait for our time to wind up. We are not only victims trying to keep those damnable little doggie deaths from slobbering all over our newest, nicest, most favorite clothing. We sometimes invite them in. Sometimes we wind up some little time in our lives. Sometimes we wield the knives that cut and kill parts of our lives.

I'll break my wand
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.

Propero, Act V, Scene I, *The Tempest*

Besides the fact that everything in my past is in some senses dead and buried, certain chapters of my life, particularly overwrought, overwritten rough drafts of my book, need to be drowned, tied up in stack, like mewling kittens, weighted with a stone and sunk in the nearest, deepest body of water. There are times to break our wands, to bury our former selves, to drown that which no longer serves us.

Thinking about death is a way to fully live.

But look, you feast and celebrate, you slaughter oxen and butcher sheep. You eat meat and drink wine. Eat and drink. For tomorrow we die.

Isaiah 22:13

Eat and drink. For tomorrow we die.

“The only thing you have to do is live until you die.” So sez Daddy.

How will you live until you die?

Sings.

Time, time
Time is winding up.

Time, Time
Time is winding up

Time, time
Time is winding up.

Our time is wound up.