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Ode to Death

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Author Bio
Alexander Englert is a deeply spiritual cynic from the mountains of Colorado without any answers. Over the summer he searched for meaning on a bluff near Omaha, Nebraska. He found nothing. Next year, he will be departing to search in Germany, which will hopefully bring another tier of enlightenment within his reach. He predicts that it will bring him right back to where he started.

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Ode to Death

I have examined four dead mammals closely, which I can remember: a squirrel, a pigeon, a skunk, my Aunt Virginia, and my Grandma (on my Dad’s side). Before tossing this seemingly frigid piece away, continue reading to the end so that I can redeem myself for categorizing my dead relatives as “mammals” rather than people. Cynical I am, but callous I am not.

* * * *

The squirrel stood at the apex of my grandparents’ garage. Its tail rolled back and forth over the gravel coated shingles and it made a chattering when it noticed my Grandpa aiming an antique pellet rifle in its direction. It must have lacked the wisdom born from close encounters with lead pellets because it sat still and continued to move whatever was in its mouth from cheek to cheek.

My head only came up to my Grandpa’s armpit and I was avidly (almost thirstily) awaiting the shot. My Grandpa was still as a tree with one branch stiffly pointing, aimed at the sky, unmovable by even the wind.

SPACK!
The squirrel kicked itself straight into the air. It fell away from us down the slant roof: thunk-tap-thunk-tap-thunk-thunk…and then the hissing sound of it falling in leaves coating the alley between our yard and the neighbor’s.

We walked around to see the animal. It was splayed out in a pose that would have been pornographic if it were a smooth-skinned and breathing woman. Its legs were spread-eagled away from its abdomen, which was perfectly erect and flat against the neighbor’s splintered wood fence. Both arms shot straight out on each side of its body, as if there were tiny tacks crucifying it. Every other second, it would spasm.

I assumed that this spasm meant that it was still alive, so I asked, “Grandpa, can I put it out of its misery?” Of course, the real reason was a curiosity and a deep rooted desire to end the life of a living thing.

My Grandpa handed me the gun. I opened the bolt-action to reveal an empty chamber, loaded a gum-drop shaped pellet, slid shut the action, pumped air into it, aimed for the squirrel’s head, and pulled the trigger from about a yard away.

* * * *

My Aunt Virginia went next. She had dementia and for the last couple of months that she was alive talked to her own reflection. Possibly from a distant corner of her brain she heard a reply.

When we would visit her, I would peruse the pictures placed on every flat surface in the painfully-pale blue room and see a smiling woman with no resemblance at all to the gray-haired, wrinkled, bone-skinny specter that was presently shaking my Father by his shoulders yelling, “Don’t you see her there?” She was pointing at herself in the mirror with walnut sized knuckles. I remember these visits vividly. My Great Aunt, I remember faintly in a mental album of snapshots and ten second voice bits.

For some reason it was decided that there should be a viewing after she died. The reason for viewings, I assume, is to get one final look at your loved one before
burying them forever. For me, with the mortuary's pinkish-red, over flowered room, with elevator quality classical music in the background, and surrounded by family members who have never given a shit about me before, I see the viewing as an opportunity for everyone to perform in front of her corpse.

* * * *

My Great Aunt’s hair was a bright, reddish brown that looked like deteriorating wire brush. It sat on her head in a style that was different from the one she used when she was alive, so that it looked like a wig. Her jaw was clenched shut so tightly that her mouth looked twisted, as if she were seeing something that repulsed her. Rouge had been caked over both cheeks and mascara had been painted over her eyelashes.

As I stared at her, I kept thinking: Her eyes are going to open suddenly and she will stair at me. Stiff with rigor mortis, she sat like a frozen meal in her finished oak casket.

* * * *

Years and years later, after my Grandma made the slow, but steady deterioration due to FTD (Frontal Temporal-lobe Dementia), I was three feet taller with a semester of college under my belt.

She had died on New Year’s Eve 2005. There was a viewing scheduled and despite my best, most diplomatic, arguments, I was forced to go and see the corpse that once was filled with my dementia-stricken, cackling, broken-record Grandma, who was once nothing like that at all.

The casket, the room, the flowers, the unknown relatives, and the soft muffled sniffing were all familiar. New was a desire for coffee in me, which led me to try the mortuary’s brew. After a sip, I wondered if something dead had been slipped into the pot. I decided it would be bad form to remove the lid and have a look.

Coffee-less and sick of small talk, I walked over next to my cousin Greg, who was standing a few feet away from the corpse.

* * * *

“She looks frightening,” I said.

Greg agreed quietly. Her face looked like a cheap rubber Halloween mask stretched over the head of a department store manikin. Both of her hands were neatly folded over her chest and her fingers looked inflated. The make-up clashed with her skin tone and it looked like it had been applied as a spray paint.

I stared at her face and hands for a period that was, and still is, timeless.

* * * *

Three months later, I was at the Outer Banks in North Carolina with all of my Mom’s family. We were staying at Win-Eden, the same stilted cottage that we had rented since I was in diapers.

* * * *

It was night and the ocean was a hundred yards away as I walked next to a great cousin and my brother, both of their names happening to be Philip. Old Phil had asked Young Phil, my brother, after dinner, “Do you want to shoot a pigeon for me, Philip?” With his floating and musical southern accent still floating in my head, my brother wasted no time in proclaiming to all in the room, “Yes!”

Under Phil’s cottage, tip-toeing and whispering, I stood next to my brother as he loaded the pellet rifle. He wasn’t pulling hard enough down on the action, so I took away the gun to do it myself. Old Phil monitored us while shining a flashlight.
When I was finished, he snatched it back and aimed up at the gray cooing mass in the rafters, motionless, asleep, in the yellow circle of light from my cousin’s flashlight beam.

CRACK! THWACK!
The pigeon scurried along the rafter away from its nest. The circle of light steadily and slowly followed after. I grabbed the gun away from my brother while rationalizing it to myself: If I let my brother continue to try and blow its head off, then the animal will die painfully slow.

I grabbed another gum-drop shaped pellet, broke open the action, and rammed it back shut. I aimed the rifle at the pigeon’s wing-pit, where I assumed the heart was and…

* * * *
…pulled the trigger for the fourth time. Holes speckled the squirrel's tiny brown body, but there was little blood. The only red I could see oozed from the corner of its mouth, which hung open now in a gaping black hole. Its eyes seemed swollen and the twitching continued.

My Grandpa put his hand…

* * * *
…on my shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze. He held a white handkerchief in his hand and his eyes were red from crying.

He choked out, “It was…

* * * *
…time for her to go,” I said turning to Greg, who was crying softly. He nodded and walked away from me and the corpse.

I scanned the room and spotted my Grandpa in the over-stuffed, flower-print furniture of the room with a fat relative, who was talking about herself. My Grandpa was nodding softly with a white handkerchief clenched in his hand and his eyes were red from crying.

My fat relative was in hysterics, moaning and smashing her face into her husband’s shoulder. She is a weasel and would be at my Grandpa’s throat as soon as no one was watching. I quietly wished that he would have a gun so that he could have aimed it at her foot and…

* * * *
…pulled the trigger.
The pigeon flapped its wings and hobbled a couple of inches forward. Ten seconds later, it fell and smacked onto the concrete under my cousin’s cottage. Blood was spilling from somewhere in its feathers and it was stretching its wings. I stood over it, watched it give three more stretches, and then with a pang in my heart, watched its black eyes shut.

Old Phil quickly picked it up…

* * * *
…and threw the tiny body by its tail into the trash can. He looked at me and said, “Let’s go see what Grandma is cooking.”

I ran ahead of him, kicking a pile of raked leaves into the air on my way to the front door. Behind me my Grandpa slowly…

* * * *
…walked away from us towards the woods. It was about the size of a small dog and had its long black tail dragging behind. The warning white stripes ran from
front to back like racing stripes and its head was barely visible as it wobbled forward from paw to paw.

I kept a wary eye on it and followed it away from the cabins. It disappeared into some tall Nebraska grass. I went back to my counseling duties; the next time I saw it, its skull was eaten dry and its fur was covering its fleshless bones like a blanket in the shelter of a rotting tree trunk.

* * * *

Burying the skunk so that entire camp would stop stinking from it took me twenty minutes. The hair came up in clumps and the bones were still connected by thin fibers. The smell of the skunk and its body rotting combined so that even the hygienic mask I was wearing seemed to fill with the eye-crossing odor.

The sun was burning bright and the 90° weather was garnished with a muggy humidity. Once I transported all of the pieces to the hold, I quickly buried it, stamping the dirt down, packing the skunk into its new home.

* * * *

Burying my Grandma took five years, so that when she finally died I was able to give one last cry and move on with my life. Death allowed me to move away from the zombie-like effigy of my Grandma. Faded memory by faded memory, I came to know her again as the woman that would always be ready to spoil me.

Death halted the deterioration and burned away the old and infested stalks that had been originally harvested by love. No longer was my Grandma a piece of animated meat with a vanishing brain. She was then and is now alive within my mind.

* * * *

My cousin Greg slipped the DVD into the player and in a few seconds I was watching myself as a toddler in a teal jump suit. Grandma was thin and smiling as she hoisted me onto a bouncy castle. I would take three steps and topple face-first onto the tough material.

Laughing, I pushed myself back up. I laughed as my cousin Amy tore towards me to knock me over again. I choked up as my Grandma descended on my cousin like a mother bear putting herself between a predator and her cub and then giving me a helping hand to stand.

* * * *

Aunt Virginia is laughing in the kitchen. Her voice sounds like she is talking into a fan. Dinner is almost ready at her small, cozy home and I am watching TV with my cousins.

I smell her Lipton’s Chicken Noodle soup, which she always over-salted perfectly; just the way that every stinking one of us liked it.

* * * *

I regret shooting the squirrel so many times after its death sentence for eating my Grandpa’s tomatoes.

I regret shooting the pigeon as it sat on its nest, about to raise its young.

I regret that my Aunt Virginia and my Grandma are no longer here to laugh with the family.

It hurts to remember the squirrel spasm against the fence, crooked as a branch.

It hurts to remember the pigeon reach and kick to try and fly back to the rafters.
It hurts to remember seeing two corpses painted and injected with chemicals so that they could be displayed as continuations of the people that I know would have laid their own lives down for me.

* * * *

Death cannot be blamed. We alone have the ability to misshape our loved one’s in our minds.

Through her death, my Grandma finally broke free of the dementia that had contorted her into a foreigner in my family’s midst. She and my Aunt Virginia were revived through death, so that when shown their corpses, all I could think to myself was, “What a fucked up world.”

* * * *

Death, though natural and in its own way beautiful, is a sneaky culprit.

One day, I am watching a skunk waddle into the woods; a week later, the skunk is curled up dead in a trunk of a tree. Its nutrients and atoms have begun to recycle into the Earth, but the skunk that waddled is now only existent in my memory. Alive one day and dead the next without reason and without company. The skunk, the squirrel, the pigeon, my Great Aunt Virginia, and my Grandma all swim to the surface of my mind. Their expressions, their eyes closing, and their last panting breaths. But I also have the ability to compare these grim images to those newly invigorated memories and realize that death has brought me to rekindle love’s flame for them in every instance. Even a memory of being scolded by my Grandma or hearing her say, “Shit!” makes me smile and know that they all were zealously appreciative of life. I remember them breathing and I feel myself breathe knowing that we are still connected.

The only painful mystery that still lingers is the wondering of why my family wanted to turn my relatives’ corpses into Barbie-doll shrines. Now, there will always be this blemish on the memory of my dead family members, caked on and weighted down with layer after layer of blush.

Despite the lack of ceremony around the dead squirrel, pigeon, and skunk, they are lucky that they were allowed to keep their dignity. Natural to the very end, they disappeared with the setting down of a trash can lid or a few shovel-full scoops of dirt.

LAUREN BARRETT

Untrue to Form

Consistency,
Form,
Perfection,
Precision,
Meaning…

(That there is no meaning -
Other than meaning is irrelevant
Because of what you taste
When you run your mind

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