



Still
Life
With
Dying
Flowers

Still Life With Dying Flowers.
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conversation with Prof. David Garneau. Many thanks.

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2019. Several pieces had previous lives in *Headlights Anthology*
and the project *I Was Uncategorical, and so, Defiant*, organized
by Lucas Regazzi for AKA Artist-Run Centre in Saskatoon,
Treaty Six.

Nic
Wilson

Frontispiece

There is a Jan Weenix painting at the AGO called “Still Life With Dead Hare” (1703) that I visit every time I am in Toronto. The picture is bisected by a dead hare hanging by one foot from a large stone urn. Its other foot hangs splayed to one side in a pose that is almost pornographic in its absurdity. With a small adjustment the hare’s asshole would certainly be visible. The corpse is flanked by a dead turkey, another small fowl, and a collection of fruit and flowers. One of the apples is rotting.

The painting makes me wonder why the hundreds, if not thousands of paintings that bear the name “Still Life With Flowers” are not called “Still Life With Dead Flowers,” or at least “Still Life With Dying Flowers.”



Flowers from a public garden in sunlight.

A Bouquet of Flowers

“the final moment — the flower burning in the Day
— and what comes after”

from *Kaddish*, by Allen Ginsberg, 1959

I think that white lilies are appropriate for all occasions because of their austere beauty. My mother told me they are only appropriate to express condolences. They are a flower marked by death and I suppose having such a flower makes sense. Saying anything to the bereaved is only eclipsed in its cruelty and futility by saying nothing. The Corpse Flower smells like rotting flesh. My mother grew Stargazer lilies in our back yard but also columbine; a flower also marked by death. I used to pass a lawn mower under our hydrangea tree while listening to Prince. All the flowers that you planted, Mamma, in the back yard all died

when you went away.

I hate the smell of peonies but love the look of the tight orbs before they bloom. Sally decapitated hollyhocks and dahlias; their heads float in a shallow bowl of water. My friend Sarah told me to place flower petals in a bowl of water and leave them in moonlight to activate their essence. The sap of the Giant Hogweed causes severe burns when it comes in contact with skin and is exposed to sunlight.

In supermarkets, flowers are kept in the produce section. While I am grocery shopping I often stop to look at the arrangements on display in refrigerated glass cabinets. There are hollow glass swans that hold single roses and sprigs of accent foliage. They are so gaudy I feel like they are made to mock flowers; a final humiliation. These arrangements are the imaginary union of taxidermy and floristry.

Some cacti take twenty to thirty years to bloom; others never bloom.

Bas Jan Ader was a Dutch conceptual artist who arranged flowers at a time when people were obsessed with elevating things to the status of art. Ader elevated art to the

status of flower arrangement. A girl I went to middle school with thought that the rose pedals falling on Mena Suvari in *American Beauty* were ketchup chips. I wish I could have joined her in this misreading.

Once I was late for an artist talk. I entered the gallery and the artist slapped a bouquet of carnations against my chest and glanced between the flowers and my face a couple of times. He snipped the head off of one of the flowers and pinned it to my flannel shirt. Years later he kissed me at an opening in a different city.

I have never bought flowers for myself. I have never bought flowers for a lover. I have never sent flowers and I have never received them. Audie Murray beaded flowers onto the soles of gym socks. Someone knocked on my studio door and offered me a bouquet of flowers that they had been using for a still life drawing. I said no thank you and I regret it. In the future I will accept all flowers. Ellsworth Kelly drew boundaries that describe everything that is the world, everything that is the flower, and nothing more. There is a thin line between a flower and

everything else, even other flowers. Outside a café, an elderly Scottish woman snatched a flower from a hanging basket and popped it into her mouth. She invited me to join her and I did. The flower was bitter—but I liked it.

Two Mountains

There is a length of ice, snow, and rock en route to the summit of Mount Everest that some mountaineers call the “rainbow valley.” Here, the Earth’s atmosphere thins to the width of a scratch on spider’s silk. This stretch, located in the mountain’s ‘death zone’, gets its name from the candy-coloured snow suits of corpses that dot the path to their original destination: the highest point on Earth above sea level. On Mount Everest, death piles up. Some estimate that there are over 200 bodies on the mountain. And those bodies beget more bodies. Sherpas and mountaineers double or triple the pressure of ascent in their attempt to retrieve the dead, and in the process they often add themselves to the pile.

Though Everest is regarded as the tallest

mountain on Earth, if one was truly trying to get as far away as possible from our planet without leaving it, they would have to go to Ecuador. The summit of Mount Chimborazo is the farthest point from the centre of the earth due to the equatorial bulge at the waist of our planet. This puts the summit further into space than any other; a place where one might stretch out their hand and add their own body to the mountain's height to find a different kind of distance, a membrane to be stroked at a more hospitable altitude, at least 8,000 feet below the death zone.

Cut Flowers

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself, and so I snapped two marigolds from their woody stems and placed them in a mason jar to catch the sun. They held its light in a billowing corona while quivering rays bounced across my desk in the hours before the day officially began.

In *The House of Sleeping Beauties*, Yasunari Kawabata says that camellias are bad luck because the flowers fall from their stems like severed heads. In *The Addams Family*, Anjelica Huston placed the naked stems of roses into a metal urn after decapitating them. Their heads roll onto the dusty floor of her greenhouse.

Rebecca Belmore pulled flowers through her clenched teeth after screaming the name of a murdered or missing Aboriginal woman in her 2002 performance *Vigil*. She stripped the

stalk bare and spat out the petals and leaves that had not already fallen from her lips. Sara, Helen, Andrea, Theresa, Brenda, Frances, Tanya. In the video of this performance, *The Named and the Unnamed*, the person documenting the action focuses for a moment on the stems, stripped and scattered at Belmore's bare feet.

Traditionally, men's boutonnieres are worn on the left lapel, creating a blossomy target over the heart. These arrangements usually consist of a single flower which has been pierced and wired to sit just-so on the chest.

Before it blooms, the breadseed poppy pod is sliced with a razor and milky rivulets of opium seep out along the gash. The poppy has had a long association with sleep and forgetting but also the commemoration of war's dead, who some say will never rest. There are days reserved for wearing plastic poppies, a symbol of memory, but also a way to vaporize death.

There is an electrical box that I see on my bus ride home that has several loosely painted roses on it along with the words "equal rights." Is this a call for equality between roses? All flowers? Humans and flowers? All humans?

All humans and all flowers? Agnes Martin claimed that trees possess innocence and I often wonder if flowers can be ashamed or disgraced. Do some flowers humiliate others with their beauty or their price? Are roses made self-conscious by orchids? Could a saffron crocus ever love a carnation?

Flowers open and close with the sun and some track its movement across the sky, the way I turn my cheek toward the heat of an early spring day. Marigolds, sunflowers, and poppies all follow the sun. They desire its light the way I desire to be out of sight. They may not be shy like me but a flower feels the pull of sunshine, the eye of the sun or other distant stars.

Guts

I don't think anyone has ever seen my guts. I've never had major surgery or broken a bone. I can't even think of any large cuts that would expose the muscles of my limbs or the slick pockets of fat on my torso. At this point I must have shown at least every centimetre of my body to one person or another. Doctors have looked in my ears and down my throat and up my nose, prodding slightly and always breathing at deafening volumes. I've shown my body to strangers and friends and other people for fun or because they asked or because I wanted to. But still no one has seen my guts: the soft bits in my stomach the colour of old oatmeal.

People have seen my guts in ultrasound but I think that is different. It's the Google Street View of my insides. My guts probably

won't come out until the end. During my autopsy, if I have one, my guts will be pulled out and examined thoroughly. They also might make an appearance in the event that I am eviscerated by some predator or torn in half by a chaotic act of violence involving machinery.

I once saw a deer with its guts ripped out on a walking trail when I was leaving high school during the middle of the day, just to tell my mum that I was skipping class. I thought she might stop worrying about me if she knew I was acting out. She could never comprehend my want to be alone. The head of the deer was propped up beside a black garbage bag that had split open pushing out the guts as the structure of the bag gave out. There were also three hooves on the other end of the bag. As I came upon them it was almost as if someone had recreated the body of the deer without the rib cage. Instead of using the body and skin they had shoved the guts into a garbage bag and placed the head at one end and the hooves at the other. It was a child's drawing of a deer made from the discarded bits.



Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip standing in an ocean of flowers outside Buckingham Palace, Sept. 1997.

One Mountain

When viewed from space, one could be forgiven for mistaking the island of Tristan da Cunha for a single bright green eye. The slopes of this volcanic island, located in the centre of the South Atlantic, are like the knotted green strands of the world's herbaceous, verdant iris. In Sami history, the stars are the shimmering eyes of reindeer stretching across the celestial sphere and they watch over Sápmi. Somewhere between the world's single eye and the distant eyes of reindeer, the gaze of Earth meets infinity.

There Are No Flowers In The Archive

Despite their future as compost, mulch, or ashes, archives are places where flowers cannot grow. Under ideal circumstances there are no bugs in archives. No sunlight, no rain, no moisture of any kind; no food or beverages. Everything that is good for flowers is bad for archives.

There is a myth that there are no queer people in archives, that our lives have been overlooked, ignored, or erased. I assure you, we are there. Check the court records. Archives are one of the places where queer people are marked by humiliation. Marked as cross-dressers, deviants, buggers, prostitutes, or diseased, decaying bodies. Of course there is nothing shameful about any of these marks but

it's not what you said, it's how you said it and how you wrote it down and put it in a bankers box and how you pay someone a living wage to make sure it stays there as long as it can, and how you keep saying "forever."

Archives are where things go to pretend that they can cheat death by becoming part of an official timeline. Archives often hold things that are too precious to be looked at or disposed of. They are both a prison and a palace. An archive is a place where people go to mourn the existence of time by attempting to stop it. The archive offers proof of life, after death has taken your loved ones hostage. The archive is not a window, it is a chunk of obsidian. The archive is a garden that will never bear fruit, let alone a flower.

Good Grief

When Mom dies I will do my best to bury her under a tree. When my mother dies I will wear an actual suit, no matter the weather, to her funeral. I will force my father to be at my mother's funeral. When my mother dies I will burn everything she owned including her house. When my mother dies I will fight with my sister about everything because that is what we know how to do. We will fight about her body and what is to be done with it. My sister and I will fight about food and her kids and the things that I chose or didn't choose, the things that she chose or didn't choose, and the things that just happened. We will scream and cry and argue and pace her house and call lawyers and call siblings and call friends and make arrangements and have meetings and tie up the last bits of our mother's phantom.

When my mother dies I will cash out her stock portfolio and make sure my niece and nephew do not spend it on something that would make my mother cringe. I will fight for my portion of her jewelry and I will keep it in a coffer and before I die I will figure out something to do with it so that it will remain between me and my mother forever. Options include: burial on a remote island, throwing it into the ocean, or shooting it into space. When my mother dies I will stand and stare and wonder where the line is between grief and the performance of grief. I will wonder if I am giving good enough grief to one of the most important person I have ever known. Who is grief for? It sickens me to think that I would grieve for anyone but my mother, but it makes it hard to imagine who would care besides me and her. She would most likely be more upset that I did not write “her and I.” When my mother dies I will give up filter coffee and I will drink hot water with lemon. I will meditate. I will leave town. I will stop making art. I will cut my arms and rub her ashes into the wounds. When my mother dies I will have all of my tattoos removed and go back to school.

When my mother dies I will stop believing in ghosts. When my mother dies I will stop trying to guess what other people are thinking about me. When she dies I will find a way to drink more water. When my mother dies I will talk less in art galleries. If my mother lives out her entire life expectancy I will be forty-eight when my mother dies and I don't want to think about this anymore. When my mother dies she will have been gone already for a very long time, just like her mother. When my mother dies I will stop the clocks and cover the mirrors. I will smash glasses and I will hit my head with my hands and hit my head with objects and hit my head against door jams. When my mother dies I will wonder how I should write her eulogy and I will look at the one I have prepared and decide that I never really knew her. When my mother dies I will go to a monastery and eat with monks. I will be silent with monks. When my mother dies I will leave the country and never come back. When my mother dies I will look back at any attempt to preempt my grief and feel disgusted.

A Brief Passage on Possession

Bodies with a significant claim to life are hard to control, though people continue to try. When someone moves into the realm of the dead, they become the property of the living or, at least, a custodial responsibility.

In horror movies, the dead return to possess the living. They take up their bodies like rental cars and drive them around wielding axes and perch ominously in trees. They take root like an infection. They push the spirit out of the body. They swell and squeeze to fit the space that was taken up by the now absent owner. In practice the opposite happens: the living take possession of the dead. The dead are: lost, gone, crossed over, unreal, supernatural. Their effect on the world is book-ended and shuffled

into history, and it is there that they can be hollowed out, strung up, and laid out. History and biography are the slab on which the dead are possessed by the living.

The Curator of Flowers

The Curator of Flowers is the first person in on Sunday mornings and she greets the overnight guard just as his shift is ending. She waits in the loading dock and sometimes smokes a cigarette after closing the heavy bay door. She is waiting for the refrigerated florist's truck that is bringing the components for this week's arrangement.

When the truck arrives she greets the driver, the florist, and his assistant. Each week she meets with a florist to discuss colour, tone, and the seasonality of the arrangement that is being proposed, and supervises its installation in the main hall as well as the four smaller complimentary arrangements. She has made it her mission to present tasteful and lush arrangements, ignoring several suggestions from friends and coworkers that the arrangement

should reflect some aspect of the collection, the sunflowers of van Gogh for instance, or mirror the colour palette of a Modigliani. She sees her job more as a service to the flowers than to the paintings.



Long distance flowers sent from Portugal.

Public Witness

One of my earliest memories is of the day that Kurt Cobain's death was announced. I have a vivid recollection of television news footage looking down through the leaves of a large tree as a body bag is wheeled out of the garage where Cobain shot himself. I remember asking my mother who this person was and she told me that he was "a musician who was important to a lot of young people." I remember thinking that I was a young person and that this should mean something to me but being unable to figure out what that something should be. I have spent hours on YouTube trying to find the footage that would verify this memory but it still eludes me.

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When I was nine, I witnessed the aftermath of Princess Diana's death in my grandmother's

basement. People who had never met this woman seemed to have had their lives torn open. They sobbed in front of a house she had never lived in and left whole gardens of flowers to rot on the sidewalk. They left candles in the rain and paid hundreds of dollars for a purple memorial Beanie Baby. My grandmother, my mother, and I all watched news reports from a sagging couch in New Brunswick. We saw Elton perform at the funeral and I remember the judgment of my family. The general feeling was that these people, in truth these women, were grieving for someone they had never known. They were making a ridiculous spectacle of themselves. They were grieving too much and for the wrong person and for the wrong reasons. They were performing a perversion of grief. They were using the death of Diana to get attention. This was bad mourning and bad grief.

I always thought that this callousness was about being Protestant or my grandmother's working-class stoicism but when I asked my mother about it she said that it probably had more to do with being a nurse than anything

else. Carol was a member of the Victorian Order of Nurses and often watched patients die painfully and slowly in their homes. To her, grief was a kind of property and it belonged to the family of her patients. It was not something that spilled out and proliferated. It was a finite substance and a special one. To her, the people mourning Diana were not pathetic because they were weak, they were deplorable because they were thieves.

I have to wonder now if they were simply giving themselves permission to feel. Exactly how and in just the amount they wanted to. What is grief when the subject seems so transitory, when it appears to be so arbitrary from the outside? What should it look like when it becomes mourning? When Lou Reed died my dad called me and said that he knew how much Lou had meant to me. I was definitely sad, but by no means broken. In truth I was more sad for Laurie Anderson, as she was the one left on Earth, trapped behind a chiron that said "Lou Reed's Wife." I was sad Lou was gone but I did not grieve for him. I felt more of a swell of grief when Leonard Cohen died

but Dad didn't call that day. He hates Leonard. He often calls him a poser and I ask what he thinks Leonard is posing as. I imagine that dad resents Cohen's capacity to feel in excess, and to be praised for it. That is certainly why I love Leonard and probably why I was so sad to see his collection of candles, this time spread out on a familiar street, in a familiar city.

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In May 2011, Osama bin Laden became the victim of an extrajudicial killing by the U.S. government. After months of surveillance, a group of American marines entered bin Laden's compound in North-East Pakistan and exacted an orderly, surgical revenge. He was "buried at sea," meaning that his body was weighed down with iron chains and dumped over the side of an aircraft carrier into the Arabian Sea. The official rationale for this action given by the U.S. was that no country would accept bin Laden's body but my father said that it was more likely that the U.S. didn't want his burial site to become a place of pilgrimage. The icy logic of American imperialism was moving to fend off the imagined power of grief by trying

to make bin Laden literally nothing; to erase his body and make him truly gone and make the whole of the world's ocean into his graveyard. Nine months after Operation Neptune Spear, Pakistan flattened the compound in Abbottabad for the same reason and began construction of a multi-million dollar amusement park.

Ten years earlier, on the afternoon of September 11, 2001, and during many of the subsequent afternoons, I did not allow myself to feel grief for the people who died in the towers, not even for the ones trapped above the gaping mouths spewing black smoke and jet fuel, the ones that jumped before the towers fell. I felt horror and I cried at my TV. I was numbed by the hours I spent trying to imagine the relief of cold wind on my skin after escaping the horrific heat and stinging smoke. I thought about flying. I thought about the sound of wind rushing around my body, of displacing a long thin strand of air as I rushed toward the ground. I thought about the moments before exiting the building—of being gone in the presence of yourself, both dead and alive. I thought about people who laugh uncontrollably at funerals

or cry when they are happy. I thought about emotions in the wrong place and wearing clothes backwards and how I have nothing to wear to anyone's funeral. I thought about the Buffalo Springfield song "Expecting to Fly" and the words that Neil Young sings:

There you stood
On the edge of your feather
Expecting to fly
While I laughed
I wondered whether
I could wave goodbye
Knowing that you'd gone