

MEMENTO MORI

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

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## ABSTRACT

MEMENTO MORI

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George Mason University, 2013

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Memento Mori is a phrase from Latin, roughly translating as “remember you are mortal”.

What follows is a collection of original poetry, concerning the themes of mortality, family, and funerary ritual.

## Making This World

Colva remembers the dead world.  
She alone was there to see it die,  
and tend to its burning.  
She watched the ashes carried  
to the sky: these became the birds.  
She watched the ashes that fell  
on the stilled water: these became  
the continents of this world.

The pyre smoldered, and from it  
was born Colva's twin:  
bright-hearted Cluvo,  
whose fur was snow at mid-day.  
Together they broke open  
the charred bones of the world  
and from their marrow crafted  
the other beasts—the deer,  
the rabbits, the fish.

We were the last—  
built of the blood  
lovingly harvested  
from the bones of a sixth finger,  
and it would be our people  
who later broke the bond  
between the twins  
with thunder in their eyes.

Colva alone remembers,  
and sings the song  
of the dead world in the night.  
Her people join her—  
they have learned the song  
but do not know what it means.

Colva is patient. She outlasts all things.  
She will one day preside over  
the burning of this world as well,  
and sing our song when we are no more.

## Carrion

Something holy about ravens,  
a corpse in a meadow.

The doe had been shot, I think,  
and staggered here to die,  
blood rusted to her fur.  
It had not been long,  
her bones still held meat  
untouched by the congregation.

They clung to her like God,  
talons tore the sacrament  
from her in zealous gluttony,  
heads bobbed to heaven,  
swallowing her down.

I went to touch the cold, flapping flesh,  
probe the gaping socket with a finger  
expecting who knows what—  
some revelation, perhaps  
an electric shudder.

They flew away when I approached,  
a flapping, cawing exodus on night dark wings,  
a glistening eye clenched in one beak,  
the nerves still dangling out the back.

## Eschatology of Love

The last known living specimen  
of species *diligo amor*  
best known by the common name Love,  
was found dead in its cage last night  
by keepers during normal rounds.  
The animal—a male—had been  
refusing food for several days  
according to officials at  
the Berlin zoo. While some suspect  
the zoo of gross neglect, as yet  
no legal action has been filed.

Efforts to breed Love in captivity  
were attempted for nearly six decades,  
but proved frustratingly unsuccessful.  
Outcompeted by larger predators,  
pushed into ever-shrinking habitat,  
and hunted for use in folk medicine,  
Love had all but disappeared in the wild  
by the turn of the new millennium.  
No new sightings have been reported  
in its native environment for years.

The murderer's muse

is the old man's  
blue vulture eye,  
the insurance  
policy waiting  
to be collected,  
the unpaid debt,  
betrayal,  
the rifle  
unexpectedly loaded.

## Colvex: Trees

I want to wade through the dark,  
rich loam of my fellow man.  
Feel grass grow on my skin,  
and the trees drink from my veins  
to color their October leaves.  
To view, as if for the first time,  
my body in wide-eyed wonder  
of my own skin, still able to feel God.  
See Him moving through the leaves,  
touching the gnarled bodies  
that have dwelled so long in the  
warm dark of the Mother, the first Woman.

Every last one of us leaves  
behind our body.  
We must each face the dark  
alone. I would not do so as a man,  
but would rather shed my skin,  
face the end with God and sap  
filling my bones, craggy bark for flesh,  
slow, thick, sweetness crawling through capillaries,  
and birdsong dwelling in my branches.

I need an oaken body  
to push itself from under this skin—  
know I hold out hope in vain,  
think if only I had leaves,  
a knotted, ancient body,  
arms like Briareus, spreading dark  
dappled shadows where a man  
could sit, cooled by my shade.

*Then, oh, then* this body  
could shine out in the dark!  
But I remain a man,  
must live in this soft, pink shell  
with nothing but blood in its veins.  
I cower in the dark, must live and die.  
I claw at my skin, open the arteries  
to be rid of this body, so it may feed the leaves.

## First Wolf

Deep in the heart of the woods there stood a single chestnut tree, awkward among the pines and spruce. Its arms twisted low over the forest floor, stroking the ground when weighted with fruit; its trunk gnarled and scarred from centuries of bucks rubbing velvet off their antlers.

I would go there on crisp autumn afternoons as a child to pluck nuts off the tree for roasting in the icy nights of winter. It was one such occasion, just after my birthday, when I first met the wolf beneath the tree. I noticed as I walked the well-worn path that my breath hung visible in the air. I saw him as I came around the bend in the path that marked where the chestnut stood. His gray fur was streaked with black along his flank and legs, and fresh blood stained his lips. A dead rabbit lay pinned beneath one dark paw. His golden eyes tore into me like the sharp teeth of midnight.

“You must tell them why I am here,” he said in my father’s voice.

The chestnut tree withered and died that January.

The murderer's muse

occupies your  
lizard brain:  
instinctual  
barbaric  
beautiful.

Inmate #460908

knowing this meal would be his last,  
awaiting the lethal release,  
ordered, for his final repast  
*Justice, Equality, World Peace.*  
By all accounts, a strange request:  
how do you cook a meal like that?  
Was this some form of weird protest?  
How did equality taste flat  
on his tongue—bitter and cold  
as fingers of gin? Is justice  
like barbecue—smoky and bold  
home cooked, fall-off-the-bone bliss?  
Why would a man who rapes and steals  
want a final dinner of ideals?

The murderer's muse

dresses however she likes.  
She enjoys turning heads  
when she cares to be seen.  
She often wearing her  
victim's fashion;  
a pair of jeans from  
a teenage hit-and-run,  
the stolen pearls  
of a socialite out for  
a walk in the wrong  
neighborhood, or  
if she's feeling retro,  
Caesar's blood-stained toga.  
She is always barefoot.

Colvex: Family

You must sew up the eyes of the dead so souls will move on,  
and not try to re-enter. Weighing them down with coins  
will make the job easier, hold them shut while you prepare  
the black thread pulled from the burial shroud  
and a needle carved from the bone of the corpse's little finger.

A needle has only one eye, but it is hungrier than all others.

Sew the lids together carefully without piercing  
the eyes themselves; if you do, you must  
feed the needle yourself, seal your blood  
beneath the lids as penance.  
You must do this within three days, or the dead will never know rest.

The murderer's muse

was thrown out of the house  
at seventeen because  
she scared her family  
shitless and refused  
to follow their rules.  
but she never held a grudge,  
knew she would see them all  
again some day  
when it was their turn  
to take a knife  
between the ribs.

## Toward Death

I.

I dreamt again  
last night  
of taking my life  
in my own  
scarred hands.

Such a tiny thing:  
a mere liquid bead,  
luminous blue,  
easily lost  
in the furrows  
etched into  
my palm.

II.

Death builds her wings  
from peacock feathers,  
iridescent greens and blues,  
unblinking eyes of white  
flame that drink you in,  
hold you, break you down  
with a love so universal  
it borders on apathy.  
All things are one to her;  
an amoeba, an oak tree,  
a king or a cockroach.

III.

Comfort me  
toward the grave,  
dissipation in dirt,  
rot among roots, worms.  
Knowing she  
carries us off  
on silent owl wings,  
embraces us all,  
loves us  
completely,  
as we

were.

IV.

I will take  
my final breath  
breaking against a  
marbled shore.

The wearied,  
weather-beaten  
splinter,  
freed at last  
from ebb and swell,  
I will force my lips  
to the fine,  
black sand.

Ghost Bride

*Taiwan*

It begins with a red envelope left in the road  
as bait. There is money inside, of course  
as much as the family can afford.

Their daughter has died unmarried—  
her ghost wanders alone in the afterlife  
with no ancestors to show her the way  
and no paper sacrifices to make her comfortable.

Thus the money and red envelope:  
the family lies in wait beside the road  
for a young man to notice and pick it up.

This is when they strike.  
He has unwittingly agreed  
to take the corpse's hand  
in holy union.

He will accept out of fear of her haunting,  
pity for her ghost, or perhaps because  
the offer of a dowry incites his greed.

He will stand at the altar next to her  
wooden spirit token, leaned against  
the newspaper-stuffed doll that  
wears her smiling face

and the three layers of burial garb  
in the white and red of marriage.  
But it is that smile that makes

the groom uneasy. No woman  
should be that happy at the prospect  
of leaving her family.

He will take the wooden tile  
home to his family shrine,  
and burn offerings when needed,  
and marry the living if he chooses.

Her family will burn the bride-doll;  
their daughter is not alone.

The murderer's muse

was once mistaken  
for Kali by a  
Korean housewife  
planning to  
poison her  
husband's coffee.

## Zebra

My family hit one,  
with a Land Rover in Kenya.  
He just materialized  
out of the plains,  
hurdled in front of us  
over the roadside bushes,  
bounced off the grill,  
and into the dusty ditch.

We couldn't have been going  
more than twenty:  
the road was packed dirt,  
deeply grooved from tires and rain.  
But it was enough.

He lay there, twisted and dead  
as we all got out to inspect the damage.  
The grill was bent, hood buckled,  
one headlight smashed to bits.

He was lucky his spine shattered—  
he died instantly, eyes rolled back  
inside his skull, blood slowly staining his coat  
black with pink stripes;  
otherwise we'd have to back over him  
to finish the job.

The murderer's muse

has had her failures:  
Capote, Hitchcock,  
Hieronymus Bosch,  
Van Gogh. They all  
heard her whispers  
and mistook her  
for her sisters.

Colvex: Book

Burn me when I am dead.  
Gather up the charred  
remains, mix them with  
sawdust, fallen leaves, water,  
and your own blood.

From this paste  
spread thin pages,  
pressed and dried—  
paper from my ashes.

Use the paper to make a book  
bound and covered with  
the clothes I leave behind.  
Upon my pages write your  
memories of me.

When the book is full,  
set flame to it.  
Gather the ashes  
and begin again.

The murderer's muse

loves Raymond Chandler  
but knows her Art  
is anything but Simple.

Lodhi Gardens

*New Delhi*

Leaves fall in shimmering heat  
around the Tombs,  
dry as the kings they house.  
Among bottle palms,  
laughing yogis  
each outdoing the last,  
and amorous couples  
hidden beneath  
overgrown hedgerows.

The tombs are bare now,  
stripped of their marble  
and glazed cobalt tiles,  
carried off by tourists  
eager for a piece of India.

Bats live among the dead,  
hanging asleep in the twilight  
of the onion domes,  
a whisper of fleshy wings.

The murderer's muse

will not tell you  
her real name.  
You would mangle it  
with your modern  
tongue that is too  
accustomed to  
a mongrel language,  
the bloody  
stump of an arm  
devoured by  
hungry machinery.

## Disassembly

### *This Kit Includes:*

Straight-edge razor blade  
Metal stake  
Bone saw  
Rope, 25ft  
Plastic tarp  
Assorted boxes, labeled by contents

### *You Will Need:*

10oz claw hammer  
Chisel or large slotted screwdriver  
15 gallon bucket or other container  
A strong stomach

### *Preparing your space:*

Locate a strong crossbeam or tree branch, approximately 8ft off the ground and free of obstructions.

Lay down the plastic tarp beneath this (It is important to keep your work area clean).

Toss one end of the rope over the beam, using an underhand throw

Secure rope to stake, which should be driven into the floor approx. 8 feet away. Use a bowline knot.

Test the rope and crossbeam by hanging onto the free end of the rope.

Secure one end of the rope around the body's ankles with a double half-hitch knot.

Adjust the bowline knot to lift the body until it hangs approx. 2ft above the floor.

Allow the arms to hang free, below the head.

Place bucket directly below suspended body.

### *Step 1—draining the body:*

Use razor blade to slice open jugular veins. Cut across throat with a single, clean movement.

Slice along length of forearm, **not across wrists**.

Move bucket to catch as much blood as possible.

While the body is draining, assemble storage boxes according to directions printed on their lids.

Arrange these in order according to the numbers printed next to their name labels.

### *Step 2—removing the organs:*

When the blood has stopped flowing (this will vary with factors such as: air temperature, length of time since death, body weight), move the bucket and gently lower the body to the ground.

Lay the body out on its back.

Using the razor blade (rinse with soap and water if needed), slice in a 'V' shape below the collarbones, with the point of the 'V' just above the solar plexus.  
Slice down a line from the point of this 'V' to the belly button.  
Peel back the layers of flesh, fat and muscle.  
Locate the stomach. Separate it from the large intestine. Use the razor if needed.  
Pull **gently** on the intestines. Squeeze the contents into the bucket.  
Empty the bucket as necessary.  
Wrap the intestines into the appropriate box. Begin in the middle, working out in spiral toward the edges of the box. Cut the intestine, and begin a second layer.  
Remember to empty the intestines.  
Continue in this manner until the intestines are completely removed and emptied. Rest as needed.  
Close the lid and seal the box.  
Use the bone saw to separate the sternum.  
Crack open the ribcage.  
Remove the stomach. Empty any contents into the bucket.  
Place the stomach into the appropriate box.  
Close the lid and seal the box.  
Empty the bucket as necessary.  
Repeat for the liver, kidneys, bladder, spleen.  
Empty the bucket as necessary.  
Remove the heart.  
Place it in the box labeled 'HEART'.  
Remove the lungs. gently press down on them to force out any air.  
Place them in the box marked 'LUNGS'.

*Step 3—flesh:*

Shave the head.  
Use the razor blade to cut around the circumference of the skull.  
Peel the flesh from the bone.  
Locate the seams on the skull where the bones fused.  
Use the hammer and chisel to split the skull along the seams.  
Remove the brain. Cut the ocular nerves if needed.  
Place the brain in the appropriate box.  
Push the eyes out of the skull using your thumbs.  
Place them in the box with the brain.  
Close and seal the box.  
Make incisions around the left shoulder joint and left wrist.  
Make an incision along the length of the inner arm, meeting the one made in Step 1.  
Peel away the flesh.  
Repeat for the right arm.  
Place the flesh into the box marked 'FLESH'  
Locate the incision made across the throat in Step 1.

Continue this incision around the circumference of the neck.  
Roll the body over so it is facedown. The ribs should spread out open on either side.  
Position the head so the new neck incision is accessible.  
Insert the chisel into this incision. Try to find the space between the first and second vertebra.  
Strike the chisel with the hammer to separate the skull from the spinal column.  
Remove the skull from the rest of the body. This may require twisting to sever the connection.  
Peel the remaining flesh from the skull. Add it to the box.  
Make an incision along the length of the spine.  
Make an incision perpendicular to this one along the waistline that meets the one made in Step 2.  
Remove the flesh from the back and ribs. Use the razor when needed.  
Turn the body onto its right side.  
Slice down the outside length of the leg along the thigh. Slice around the knee.  
Slice around the ankle and down the length of the back of the calf.  
Remove the flesh from the lower leg.  
Place it in the box.  
Roll the body onto its left side and repeat.  
Separate the flesh from the pelvic girdle.  
This part can be tricky. Be patient.  
Place this in the box as well.  
Close and seal the box.

*Step 4—the bones:*

Place any fragments of the skull into the box marked 'SKULL'.  
Place the rest of the skull into this box as well.  
Close and seal the box.  
Separate the ribs from their cage. Use the saw as needed.  
Place them in the box marked 'RIBS'.  
Close and seal the box.  
Separate the humerus from the scapula on both sides. Use the chisel.  
Separate the clavicles from the manubrium.  
Separate the final lumbar vertebrae from the sacrum using the chisel.  
Place the spinal column in the box marked 'SPINE'.  
Lay the clavicles and scapulae in the box with it.  
Close and seal the box.  
Separate the femurs from the pelvic girdle.  
If the pelvic girdle separates, do not worry. This is normal.  
Lay the arms out in the box marked 'ARMS'.  
Lay the legs and pelvic girdle in the box marked 'LEGS'.  
Close and seal the boxes.

*Step 5—disposal and clean-up:*

Place all the labeled boxes inside the largest box according to the diagram on the lid.

Clean your tools using soapy water. Scrub them well.

Rinse off the tarp using a hose or a bucket full of soapy water.

Fold up the tarp and place it in the largest box as well.

Close and seal this box.

Fill out the enclosed form. Use blue or black ink.

Insert this form into the plastic sleeve on the front of the box.

Call the number listed on the form or go online to schedule a pick-up.

The murderer's muse

will tell you her sisters  
are all dead, and you  
will not believe her.  
But she would know,  
and when was the last  
time you heard of a new  
epic poem anyway?

## Mouse

My father, in the 5 a.m. darkness  
puts his hand into the kitchen sink  
still filled with water and dirty dishes.

floating among the bubbles and cold grease  
his hand closes on the water-logged corpse  
of a drowned mouse.

To his credit, he kept a level head  
carried the body into the yard  
and threw it from the porch into the snow.

What he was trying to find that morning  
or why he was even awake so early  
I never thought to ask.

Colvex: Enemies

Eat the eyes of your enemies;  
you will absorb secret wisdom  
etched in the corneas  
by unconscious nerve-pulses,  
lightning reflected  
by the brain  
back out into the world.

The murderer's muse

was the snake in  
Heracles' crib,  
the scorpion at  
Orion's heel,  
the arrow in  
Achilles' tendon.  
She made a mansion  
in Medea's heart.

Greendale Cemetery

*Meadville, PA*

The creek changes course over decades  
eating into the bank where they were buried.

The stones are faded from wind, acid rain,  
drifting snow: they hide in the tall grass.

They shift, fall askew, are pushed up by roots,  
the annual cycle of freeze and thaw.

The bodies will fall into the creek  
if nothing is done. This is how the dead

can die again, lost in the depths  
of a cemetery where I look for them

only when I need the comforting  
assurance of my own mortality.

The murderer's muse

has a special  
pair of eyes  
that she wears  
for suicides.

## On Death and Dying

I.

Looking back at this, I am  
exalted—oh, it was wonderful,  
this brief show of needs.

Many happy years disturbed by  
evening to make night more cheerful;  
newborn babies to old dying men.

Only through this I found myself  
tempted to turn around and go home:  
precious time cannot be helped.

Rough luck you might call it  
and then you come to your senses.  
Yes, I'm beginning to understand

that nobody knows how long they can live.  
One is wise to remember these facts,  
but does it make dying any easier?

Every day is agony.  
Such changes make us alert.

*hope for a cure in the face of impending death  
evokes all the emotions.*

Love is allowed to terminate—  
that must have been in March.

Especially at times like this it is difficult to  
really talk about things like that.

Even though I'm about to  
disappear into darkness, this is the time  
for temporary but needed denial.

Raise up anything:  
our opera required surgery  
my role was Nobody—

disheveled, desperately lonely,  
and half-hearted. The possibility—  
No. Not at all.

God, I thought I was  
emotional. Are you supposed to  
refer to the operation as

“Sunday school”  
because she gets peppier  
unless I connect it with being abandoned?

There are times I need to be alone,  
then I need people, and they don't come.  
Oh, you did—

but there are lots of people.  
Every time was the first time I was alone.  
Family is a good

experience during such  
a valuable activity.  
Relax, live, enjoy things.

Lonely is hard to take.  
Enough to know one kind:  
silent withdrawal and isolation.

Some good moments toward the end;  
I suppose we all could improve.

Night was terrible. I found peace,  
found daily strength to meet it.

*After death, itself a denial of mortality, we  
cannot anticipate life, Have to consider  
immunity from death.*

No sense in all this  
guilt, further bargaining,  
thus adding to the burden.

How do you share this?  
Euphemism, simple language,  
money; the theme of our lives.

II.

Little private moment:  
eyes forever reassure him.

There are a few who fight to the end  
movements on the verge of crying,

endurance tested to the point where  
need could spend your life.

One: knew we could stand the cold.  
Two: guess everybody else did.

But we awaken in glass  
everything frozen solid.

Getting Christian, I think  
faith plays a part in this.

Order her small children  
relative to us. They organize

this with a sense of anger,  
have functioned as readers

error-finding the hard way.  
She is usually concerned.

Those too handicapped to open a book—  
it was a fruitless search.

Learned she went all over the city.  
Looks good to keep leaving.

It bothers her to shave her legs,  
now I'm waiting for them to grow.

God, I thought I was  
often the forgotten one.

Fantasies of the deceased,  
many are preoccupied by memories.

Yes, many families will  
pray for a miracle.

A family lie this can be helped  
if barbed wire can bloom.

No matter what we call it,  
believe in taking responsibility.

Until you find out,  
that is not luck.

Face the removal with shock  
our initial reaction is

reorganization—especially children.  
The second one, a preparatory depression.

Home in spite of  
everybody he loves.

Happily, in the garden  
everybody is allowed.

A result of loss is taking.

Religious crisis—  
there is no question.

This shows the need to examine  
our own reactions.

Covered with the next day, I began  
older in the same room.

No longer the dead  
quarrel and say “I hope this

unresolved grief is frightening.”

Experience may help them grow and mature  
relief of awakening anguish.

It is equally unwise to tell a child  
that God took little Johnny to heaven.

### III.

Luck is knowing something  
enough to listen to  
the psychosis of dying.  
Meaning, we know better than you.  
Everything will be done  
next time to prolong life.  
Other, less fortunate ones:  
the husband, wife  
long replaced by rage  
or shame, avoids discomfort  
of her present age; he  
knows it would hurt.  
Found her absent in the hallway  
one simple Friday.

Reason why I was  
admitted to hospital:  
large and painful,  
less flexible;  
is this a stroke?

Enough of these days  
so lovely my body aches.  
I have to tell you.

Nobody had talked with you;  
long ago, I tried to explain.

I think we should finish,  
feel abandoned. The moment  
expressed: “it is this.”

Source of inspiration: spite  
bit some devout Christian nurse.

About this I left  
treatment very, very ill.  
Then it seemed so fast.

Like our doctors told us  
everything that could, be done.

Five-thirty to six  
I think we have talked about  
every minute.

Last Thursday the doctor said  
“do you talk to your children?”

Because we never  
understand the rest:  
terminal illness.

That I was always helping  
often the forgotten one.

Many happy years  
you have been a healthy man.  
Oh no, not at all...

We know practically nothing  
not much to hold it inside.

So I was living  
then I went back, went over there  
relative to us.

Experience allowed time  
necessary agony.

Go and sleep, sleep, sleep.  
The children may hold inside  
hope in the face of death.

#### IV.

Lifespan beyond  
equated with  
the last one,  
must concern  
experience  
now in time.  
One never knows  
the only one.  
Can your health  
reach my age?  
About the same,  
vice isn't as good  
evening to make  
it with feelings.  
Needed to be  
around everything,  
needed an  
X-ray.  
Is that good  
or angry?  
Uh-huh.  
Sure.  
Family came over;  
enjoyed that.  
And I've just  
rough luck.  
This life was  
off—you can't  
bring home night.  
Everyone wants to  
stay right there,  
are told the facts:  
viewing dying patients  
every minute.  
Doctors told us  
before surgery  
understand:  
the psychosis  
had bad news.  
On Friday,  
presence is needed.

Exclude all other  
financial affairs.  
Or not.  
Ready when you are.  
That's right—  
he was a Boy Scout.  
Even though I  
pray, I don't feel well.  
And then  
there are times  
it's torture.  
Edge of sound  
need comes and goes  
clearly psychotic.  
End approached  
that glimpse of hope  
obviously satisfied.  
What did this mean?  
It wasn't so terrible.  
No matter what  
miracle or extra time,  
you are doing this.  
For example:  
restricted function  
every week  
equated with dying.  
Detach from this world  
on her back,  
meaning life.

V.

God's hands  
reassured. As much  
a result of past loss.

Need for words—  
There may be added loss,  
make many dreams come true.

Every time I walk out the door  
this is something hard to avoid.

*How do you take it?*

Actually, attended a seminar  
to understand the specific problems;  
impotence in the face of death,  
meetings to discuss  
a book on the care of the terminally ill  
young person facing such a crisis.

*No defensiveness, no evasiveness  
older than his age.  
The day before, he made the statement  
“because we can learn  
even during those brief moments.”  
And healthy detachment  
confronted sad reality  
of fighting spirit  
with someone who could listen,  
and seemed eager.  
Ready to enter the final stage  
dying rather than expressing hope.*

Fact: I had no knowledge,  
everybody is allowed his sorrow  
expressed with a touch of a hand.

*Lonely old people  
impending death.*

Not at this time.  
God’s hands—  
You question  
our denial of death.

*Until we have looked at  
research in this field,  
make your rounds and talk  
enough before  
revealing the true nature of the tumor.*

Can you know?  
Yes, because it is true.

I think everyone wants to live as long as they can,

make many dreams come true.

*Your father died of  
something serious.  
Understand the rest of your family  
confronted with sad reality,  
can you know?*

Everything was frozen solid  
so I was living  
silent to a wild mourning  
angry, in despair.  
Looked down upon.

One doesn't think of these things  
now. Is this happening now?  
*Every four hours  
because we know  
unresolved grief is frightening.*

This grief, shame and guilt—  
looking back, I am sure  
everybody is allowed his sorrow.

There are times to be alone  
meaning we have decided,  
explicitly been written off.  
For others, temporary denial:  
“I want to fly  
no matter what.”  
Desperately clung to hope.

The conflict arose—  
*How did you tell him, and when?*  
Everyone want to know when he is coming back.

Getting Christian, I think  
“relax, live, enjoy things  
and something may happen to us.”  
Sure, there are nights I don't sleep well.

*Possibilities shrink as the illness progresses.  
On the verge of crying,*

*feel like a failure.*

Yes, because it is true  
our denial of death  
unless I can connect it with being abandoned,  
reveal the true nature of  
home in spite of  
all the love objects.

No, actually, it's been better—  
death means a cessation;  
I understand these things.

No, I know the scriptures  
much stronger: "I am  
you" or something.

Facing death, I did such and such,  
acceptance should not be mistaken.  
It takes just a little time.

*Luck is something  
until we have looked.*

Ready to enter the final stage,  
every day is agony.

The murderer's muse

tells Lizzie Borden:  
“find the axe, dear;  
see how pretty it is?”

The Bone Chapel  
*Sedlec Ossuary, Prague*

Because the abbot  
carried dirt back from  
Jerusalem to mix with  
his cemetery, Sedlec  
became the Holy Land,  
a spot where everyone  
wants to spend eternity.

They were everywhere,  
the dead. The Plague  
made more corpses  
daily—thirty thousand  
in all. They had to make  
room. There were always  
more to be buried.

the old bodies—  
moved from the yard  
into the chapel itself:  
Six towering pyramids  
of age-stained bones.

Centuries later,  
the Schwarzenbergs  
hired a woodcarver—  
A chalice is built  
from pelvic girdles

that spray out into a  
stem of fingers, vertebrae,  
shoulder blades and femurs.  
They say the chandelier  
uses a dozen of every  
bone in the human body.

The family crest—  
an arthritic hand,  
the joints fused,  
forms a raven's wing  
as it pulls an eye from  
a plumed Turkish skull.

## Hyena

It lay in the dirt road  
rasping for breath,  
tongue dark with blood,  
black-clotted dust  
seeping from its gut.

I don't know what  
stuck it in the ribs—  
some farmer,  
afraid for his meager goats  
may have drilled it  
with cheap bullets.

Or maybe it  
miscalculated, picked  
the wrong day  
to tease a water buffalo.  
It doesn't matter, really.

Either way it lay there,  
panting and alone,  
oblivious of me,  
the awkward spectator.

I longed to touch  
its bristling back,  
clean it with my tongue,  
and curl up there  
in the African dust,  
to assist in its dying.

The murderer's muse

The murderer's muse  
carries a knife  
perpetually sharp,  
the blade blackened  
so it doesn't catch the light.  
That is something that only  
looks cool in the movies.

### Colvex: the Hunted

Before you begin be sure  
the thunderstorm is over,  
lightning faded from eyes,  
wind of lungs gone quiet.  
Drain the red river,  
anoint your face and chest  
with its sacred water.

Uproot the white teeth  
from the skull and keep them safe  
in a wooden bowl  
for luck while you prepare  
the rest of the body.

Remove and drain the organs.  
fill the stomach with  
bladder, heart, spleen  
and tongue. Tie this with a rope  
of intestine and skin,  
hang it from a tree  
near the river.

Take a sharp knife, make an incision  
around both arms below the shoulder.  
Carefully peel the flesh from the muscle.  
Do the same with the legs.  
They are a good pair of boots  
and gloves, waiting to be made.

Carve meat from bones,  
hang it for drying.  
Boil the rest until the bones are soft—  
at least a full day.

Break open the bones;  
the marrow is fertile  
and delicious.  
Let nothing go to waste.

The murderer's muse

appreciates the S&M  
overtones of bedbug  
mating behavior:  
the violent insertion  
through the female's  
exoskeleton and into  
her the thoracic cavity  
by the male's pointed  
member.

A Dead Fox

The fractured body  
lies in the ditch  
three feet from the road,  
limp and decaying,  
a fire extinguished  
by drifting snow.  
Only the pointed  
grin remains,  
ghastly white  
against the pale  
cheek of winter.

### My Grandfather's Shoes

At midnight, my father  
made pancakes shaped like our grief,  
coated in Mrs. Butterworth's  
I'd bought from the 7-11  
I passed on my way over.  
There were no words between us.

Later, after the funeral,  
Nana cleared out the basement  
and gave me his last pair  
of hiking shoes, barely worn  
since he'd given up  
the Appalachian Trail.

To think they would fit was sacrilege,  
but they did. He had always been  
a weathered mountain of a man,  
even after the cancer;  
stubborn as a rusted door-hinge,  
though never as loud.

I wore his shoes, hoping  
they would grant me his strength,  
but now they fray at the seams,  
the soles wear out,  
the laces unravel.

Angel Aire<sup>tm</sup>

They make a machine now  
that will scatter the ashes for you.  
A simple box of lacquered wood,  
like a large birdhouse  
painted in any one of several  
acceptable colors.

Pull the knob,  
and a burst of air  
pushes your loved one out,  
drifting, gentle as cigar smoke  
over the landscape of your choice.

It's small enough to carry  
anywhere, available for rent  
from a local franchisee.

The murderer's muse

has never liked guns—  
any idiot  
can pull a trigger.

## Second Wolf

There was a wolf in the house when we returned from a month away—  
black coat streaked with silver, eyes the color of thunder. The doors were locked  
the windows sealed, nothing was missing or out of place.

We stood there, a frozen trinity in the living room: my father, struck dumb with shock  
or rage, myself with the first pangs of something verging on religious awe  
as the wolf turned to meet our twinned gaze.

He loped past us to stand on the lawn as my father took down the rifle  
and ran after the wolf. Finding him sitting calmly by the rosebushes,  
my father murdered him in the twilight.

The terrible, lonely echo of the gun, the collapse of fur against grass,  
my father's boots on the gravel driveway. These were the sounds  
that drowned out my quickening heart.

Now, days later, I have taken the rifle down from its hanging place by the back door  
and followed my father on his walk through the woods, silent as possible,  
careful to keep my distance from the unnatural orange of his hunting jacket.

He has stopped to inspect something, fresh tracks in the mud after last night's  
rain, or the droppings of a ten-point buck (he says he can tell from their scat).  
I rest the barrel in the crook of a tree, take aim at the wide orange field of his back,  
breathe in to steady the rifle, and calmly pull the trigger.

Air Burial

*Tibet*

The old man finally  
died last night.  
I got the call this morning  
from one of his disciples.

The ground is too hard for digging,  
wood too precious  
to waste in a pyre.  
They will bury him in sky.

The monks burn incense and offer  
prayers as I set out my knives  
and tie my leather apron.  
The birds jockey for position

their monstrous wings  
beating the air and each other,  
their beaks and screams  
mingling with the prayers.

Red-bearded lammergeiers  
and cruel-taloned griffon vultures  
have gathered already,  
waiting for the feast to come.

I lift the cleaver and begin  
my work. It is unpleasant  
and I am glad for the whiskey  
I drank before I started.

I remove the limbs first,  
split at the elbows and knees.  
The blood is thick and  
already clotting.

The head comes next—  
It is easier now, to work with  
just a torso—I can trick myself  
into believing it is a pig.

I slice the belly,  
remove the entrails, liver, kidneys  
and offer them to the greedy birds,  
their beaks already caked

from picking at the old man's  
arms, legs, and face.  
The eyes are always the first to go.  
The fingers swallowed bones and all.

A squabble breaks out over the liver,  
drowning out the monks.  
It is torn in two and shared  
as I pry open the rib cage.

When they have eaten their fill,  
I will take what is left  
and grind it mixed with barley,  
to feed the smaller birds.

After this, there will be  
only three things  
that remain of the old man:

memories of him,  
which will one day  
be carried to the sky  
with those who hold them;

pride in a job well done,  
the carrion-eaters fed,  
a vigil completed,  
good karma for us all;

and the third thing—  
a stain on the rocks,  
to be washed away  
with the rain.

The murderer's muse

rises from beside  
the shorefront bonfire  
where she had sat unnoticed  
for hours. No one  
recognizes her—  
no one ever does.  
She strips to dance  
in the twitching firelight:  
stained white t-shirt first  
then her tattered jeans,  
white cotton panties  
and throws them all on the fire.

Colvex: the Elements

Bury my skull where  
the oaknuts fall  
that from my eyes  
a tree may grow.

Hang my guts from  
the pines, high in  
their branches  
to feed the eagles.

Burn what is left  
on a bed of leaves  
and pinecones until  
there is nothing but ash.

Gather the ashes in  
a clay jar and take it  
to the river, spread them  
across the water's surface.

## REFERENCES

“Eschatology of Love” originally appeared, in a different form, in the *Willows Wept Review*, issue 9, Fall 2010

The poem “On Death and Dying” is a procedural poem, working with the text of Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’ 1969 book of the same name. The poem is an acrostic of the text she used as an epigraph to her first chapter, itself a section from the long poem “Fruit Gathering” by Indian poet Rabindrinath Tagore. Each line of my poem is drawn from a line within Kübler-Ross’ book that had the appropriate letter along the left-hand page margin.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Benjamin Bever graduated from the American Embassy School in New Delhi, India in 2006. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from Allegheny College in 2006.