Elegy

By

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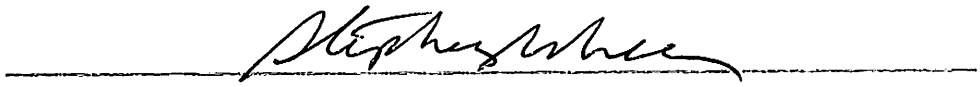

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Date

Elegy

In 1927, the poet Countee Cullen wrote, "We need elegies" (Ramazani ix). The elegy is one of the oldest literary customs in practice to show grief and reverence for the dead and possibly needed in society now than ever. In *Le Genie du Christianisme,* Cheautbriand wrote about the folklore of dying, "Death, so poetic because it touches on the immortal, so mysterious because of its silence, had a thousand ways of making its presence known" (Aries 8). In today's society, doctors, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists have taken the mystery away. Death and grieving is broken into facts and figures. While, technology and science can explain the circumstances, they cannot stop death, reverse the loss or cure tribulation associated with loss.

For me, the facts are easy to deal with; the day my father died, how he died, the last words he said. The concrete facts are the easy part, the parts I can even make fun of. When my father passed away, the modern day rituals, condolence cards and pop songs were all inadequate expressions for the complexities of grief. While psychology told me how I should be grieving, I was left wanting a more subtle and vivid way to describe my mourning, making my own visual elegy.

Time is a just as significant of a factor in grieving as the first year of a child's life. The grief-stricken count the days, turning into weeks, to months and finally a year. I marked the first year of my grief with anniversaries of things I had done with my father when he was alive: "One year ago he was alive, and I was at home with him because I had tonsillitis." Maybe it is no coincidence that according to Jewish custom, the gravestone is unveiled by or at the first

Yahrzeit.[1] The act is significant in revealing the headstone as one hopes to become closer with the deceased through knowing and remembering, yet all that is received are the facts: name, birth, death. It is at that moment upon first viewing, the grave that the bereaved relearns what has happened. The numbers and dates speak of the end. They are final.

After the first year passed and upon entering graduate school, I had no internal clock, no concept of time. I had been counting down the year before in terms of my father's life and now I did not know how to tell time in terms of his death. *Microwave* (fig. 1) is the first photograph I made was about this timelessness. The photograph itself is a long exposure causing the digital clock on the microwave to be unperceivable. The viewer literally is unable to tell time. The objects on top of the microwave are markers of events in the past and the microwave clock should, without the manipulation of photography, move forward. A greeting card on the left, intended to be given to my father on father's day, the day he died, acts as the grave. It is a commemoration of the day he died with the words inside the card generically indicating the person he was. In the middle is the snow globe I gave him in the hospital when I was five with the inscription, "My Heart Belongs to You." The idea of a snow globe suggests looking at another world, in this case, a time of naivety and innocence. To the left is a sweet potato wrapped in plastic with a small root sprouting from the end: the need for growth while being held back by the invisible. As T. S. Elliot said in *Burnt Norton (No. 1 of Four Quartets)*,

> *Time present and time past*
> *Are both perhaps present in time future*
> *And time future contained in time past.* (Gilbert 17)

The space where time is suspended in the grief process, where the reliving of the death is the present and the past also becomes an acknowledgement of ones own mortality. Wanting to be

[1] Yahrzeit literally meaning "time of [one] year." Traditionally, the headstone or plaque is revealed one year after the death according to the Hebrew calendar. In the first year the Jewish custom states that the mourning may visit the grave thirty days after the death, shloshim, and at yahrzeit. The headstone does not have to be revealed at the first yahrzeit but has become customary in the 19th and 20th century. A yahrzeit candle is lit in remembrance and prayers are recited. The yahrzeit is recognized every year.

with that person is the knowledge that death is the only chance for reuniting. Grief then becomes reciprocal, not only the agony of losing, but also that you will one day be lost. This self-reflection is a characteristic of the tombstone. Polished granite reflects the mourner while the engraved is permanent. Maya Ying Lin's Vietnam Memorial, in Washington, D.C, is an example of modern art meant for public mourning. The memorial rises slowly from the ground (fig. 2), shiny and black, luring the viewer to walk slowly beside the wall of names. Built into a hill, covered with names as if their ashes could be behind the wall, it mimics a resting place and requires the viewers to experience the memorial in much the same way as a columbarium wall or mausoleum. As the viewer passes they are confronted with name after name as well as their own reflection (fig. 3). The meeting of the viewer's reflection, as well as visitors standing nearby, with the list of names force the viewer to reconcile his or her own image with those faceless dead. We will all become the unknowns at some point. The metaphoric use of reflection to show the internal/external and the deceased/mourner connection is seen with the photograph *21and a Half* (fig. 4). There is one entrance but two doorways leading to two rooms of different colors, the left room blue and the right room off-white. The doorways mimic each other to the point that they look as if they enter into the same room behind these doors. The viewer stands on the outside of the entrance, in the dark, as if watching someone look at himself or herself in the mirror. This is emphasized by the reflection of light from the windows reaching towards the foreground of the picture.

In psychological terms, *21 and a Half* begins to talk about introjection, a term Sigmund Freud wrote about in his essay "Mourning and Melancholy."[2] Positive introjections can help with the mourning process through absorbing attributes of the person lost. This is common, especially

[2] Introjections occur when a subject takes on the behaviors or attributes of other people. This can be a defense mechanism where one takes on attributes of a strong other person who is able to cope with a current situation. Much of psychoanalysis is concerned with the interaction between the outer world inner worlds: how we take in and make sense of external events and how we put our inner thoughts and understandings back out into the outer world.

in children being compared to their deceased parents and extremely pertinent to my own experience. I have, since a child, been compared to my grandfather and my father, not only in appearance but also in mannerism. Before Sigmund Freud wrote "Mourning and Melancholy," D. H. Lawrence described introjections in a more intuitive and emotional way after the loss of his mother in *Everlasting Flowers.*

> *I know you here in the darkness.*
> *How you sit in the throne of my eyes*
> *At peace, and look out of the windows*
> *In glad surprise.* (Gilbert 17)

Lawrence points out the interaction between the inner and outer world. He also merges with his mother for her to see and live through him. This merging of life and death is addressed metaphorically through the mirroring of some of my photographs but also in the use of light. In *Untitled* (fig. 5), light streams through an octagonal window in the left of the frame, making the outside indiscernible. It is the world we cannot know while the viewer/the mourner is left in the dark with only the physical objects graced with the memory of the deceased's light, his life. The light hits and eats away at dried funeral flowers I have saved over the years, in remembrance of the day and the person, but memory can never manifest into the physicality of a person. That is when the objects fail the mourner. The curtained window on the right of the photograph remains draped with a floral design to mimic not only the tradition of drawing the curtains after a death but to reference the idea of the dead being behind the veil.[3] Less literally, light is also the veil by not allowing us to see what is behind it.

In *Untitled* (fig. 6), the light from the window closes the viewer off from the outside world and forces the viewer to confront the space as a metaphorical self, and actual evidence of the decaying mental state of the bereaved. The internalization of the dead and their state opens a

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[3] Lord Alfred Tennyson was the first to use the words, "Behind the Veil" in his poem, *In Memoriam* (Gilbert 47).

door for the bereaved to acknowledge and sometimes even want their own death. Freud explain it as being, "carried through bit by bit, under great expense of time and cathetic energy, while all the time the existence of the lost object is continued in the mind" (Gilbert 16). The experience is surreal as one understands reality but denies the laws of reality. Joan Didion notes her inability to think rationally after her husband's death in *A Year of Magical Thinking.*

> There had been for example the matter of obituaries. I could not read them. This continued from December 31, when the first obituaries appeared until February 29, the night of the 2004 Academy Awards, when I saw a photograph of John in the Academy's "In Memoriam" montage. When I saw the photograph I realized for the first time why the obituaries had disturbed me,
>
> I had allowed other people to think he was dead.
> I had allowed him to be buried alive. (35)

This inability to deal with reality is seen in *Untitled* (fig. 6) with the ceiling paint peeling, the yellowing of the wallpaper and the window latch pulled halfway up but unable to open the window or lock it.

With loss, the inability to function in reality can be seen on the family level as well. Families that share in a loss have to relearn how to work as a unit. This can be destructive and complicated because people grieve in different ways and when multiple people have to interact with one another, each having their own idea of who the deceased was, clashes can happen. *Screened In* (fig. 7) was a reaction to how my own family was torn apart after losing my father. The room located in my mother's house, now torn apart, was at one time her pride and joy. She meticulously chose the white wicker furniture with blue and white-stripped cushions. After my father's death, I cut communication with my mother. It was not until two years later that I was able to go back and see the physicality of her inability to address the death. In the photograph, the room has lost all resemblance of comfort and spectacle: the blue and white cushions gone, the white wicker chewed away, and the cold slate strewn with debris.

This same lack of function inspires a kind of dark humor in my work. When the realization of the reality becomes apparent, it sometimes feels like a funny moment. Today's technologies and modern society's attitude toward death have aided in distancing the self from death allowing humor. People no longer die in the home but at hospitals with monitors and tubes. They are scientific experiments, treatments, and disease before death takes them. The folklore of dying has been taken away and been replaced with facts. In Margaret Edison's play, *Wit*, the main character; Vivian, becomes reduced to an object by her doctors.

> Yes, it is mildly uncomfortable to have an electrocardiogram, but the (agony) of a proctosigmoidoscopy sweeps it from my memory. Yes, it was embarrassing to have to wear a nightgown all day long – two nightgowns! – But that seemed like a positive privilege compared to watching myself go bald. Yes, having a former student give me a pelvic exam was thoroughly degrading – and I use the term deliberately – but I could not have imagined the depths of humiliation that –
>
> Oh, God (VIVIAN runs across the stage to her hospital room, dives onto the bed, and throws up into a large plastic washbasin)…
>
> Now, watch this. I have to ring a bell...to hey someone to come and measure this emesis, and record the amount on a chart of my intake and output. This counts as output. (Gilbert 196)

My own father spoke of the same feelings. He met with his doctor once when he was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. The doctor placed my father in his clinical trial and never saw the doctor again. He was a human guinea pig and was shuffled around the hospital from waiting room to waiting room. The residents and nurses only asked only about pain level, bowel movements, eating habits, and white blood cell counts. The concreteness of his condition and the technical talk about the cancer gave us a distance from the emotion.

On his last birthday, we went to the Cheesecake Factory. They serve a low carbohydrate cheesecake my father could have since the cancer had made him diabetic. The next day he had to receive another chemotherapy treatment, but at this point he never really recovered from the last treatment. His body had grown thin, his walk slower with a slight limp as if he might just topple

over. He had also started putting his head down on tables like a child in elementary school playing heads up seven up. This trip, he was in good spirits but tired. He got up from the table and announced he was going to the bathroom. A long while passed and we began to worry. Not but a moment later my brother, Roderique, received a phone call and left the table. He came back with my father, who seemed agitated and excited. Shaking his head he began to tell us what happened.

It was all normal, no weird medical episode had happened in the bathroom. He had come out of the stall, washed and dried his hands. Clasped his hand on the door and pulled. Nothing, the door wouldn't budge. Again he pulled and nothing. He began to look around trying to figure out how he was going to get out and he started to panic. Remembering he had his cell phone on him, he called my brother telling him he was locked in the bathroom. When my brother entered the bathroom, my father had his back to him. Upon turning around and seeing him standing there in the bathroom he was locked in he exclaimed, "OH NO! Now you're locked in here too!" Roderique looked at him slightly confused at first and then smirked, realizing what had happened. My father had been trying desperately to get into the linen closet never seeing the door he had entered in.

As he told the story, laughing at himself, tears welled up in his eyes. The humiliation of the situation was demeaning for him but understandably funny. It is somewhat of a pathetic humor I address in *Untitled* (fig. 8). The photograph was taken in the library of a mental hospital in the process of moving to a new location. The myriad of odd placed objects is what makes the photograph humorous. The balloons hang on the fire extinguisher rendering it useless but the balloons are deflated and useless, residue of some happy occasion. Above the fire extinguisher is a poster saying, "To solve a problem…You have to see things from different points of view." Of

course, this being in a mental institution, the poster is meant to encourage the mentally ill to try and perceive a somewhat truth in reality while the surroundings don't seem to function in the proper manner. The introjections make sense. To add to the strange juxtapositions of objects, the bookcase is full of romance novels to the right of the flaccid balloons.

The story of my father's last birthday, is my memory of it, how I remember *him* telling it. I was not even there for half of the story. Memory becomes transformed as time passes and as the healing process continues becoming more and more the individual's idea of the dead. C. S. Lewis honestly wrote about his own grief of his wife and his memory of her,

> Thinking about the H. facts – real words, looks, laughs, and actions of hers. But it is my own mind that selects and groups them, Already, less than a month after her death, I can feel the slow, insidious beginning of process that will make the H. I think of into a more and more imaginary woman. Founded on fact, no doubt. I shall put in nothing fictitious (or I hope I shan't). But won't the composition inevitably become more and more my own? (18)

The fear that you will forget the facts of someone is a reason to grasp onto every solid thing about them and the place I started photographing. *Shoes* (fig. 9) is a later photograph of my father's shoes, new in the original box, the shoetree keeping them in perfect shape, and covered with dust. His things were extremely important to me; the object he had last touched could not be moved again because he could not move it back. How was he to find it if it was moved? It is the dichotomy of mourning that makes us grasp at preserving the facts and also letting them slip into ourselves becoming a diluted by our own perceptions. The viewer can imagine the dead despite the specificity of the object - being contained in a box, lid open and the rigid ness of the shoes references the coffin and corpse, preserved for viewing.

Christian Boltanski uses memory to affect the viewer on a personal level even though the people he depicts are anonymous. In *Storehouse* (fig. 10), Boltanski has presented seven faces of young girls in black and white photographs, enlarged and out of focus. Their eyes become

quarters of black holes, a nose, and a mouth but specifics cannot be made out even though the face is how we identify people. The fuzziness speaks to how the memory forgets the physicality of the person and the girls become every girl. Below are 192 rusted metal boxes filled with cloth fragments, alluding to funerary urns and reliquary boxes. Lights hang in front of the faces creating a halo like feel with the lamp's wires hanging down in plain site. The wires being shown reference the technology that has become our religion, the lights. The installation is meant to remember the Holocaust but neither the girls in the pictures were not killed in the Holocaust, nor the boxes old. Boltanski did not even experience the Holocaust. Mimicking the specificity of relics, and the language of photography to be as specific and unspecific at the same time, he creates a space evoking memory of those lost whether they are from the Holocaust, genocide, or personal loss.

Freud actually defines a difference between normal mourning and what he calls melancholic mourning. Both begin with a basic denial of their loss and an unwillingness to recognize it. Soon enough though, the normal mourner answers to the call of reality, and lets go of what is lost. The melancholic mourner, however, remains stricken by the loss, unable to acknowledge and accept the need to split and in a self-destructive loyalty to the lost, internalizes it. The dead continues to exist internally, as part of the bereaved, no longer having the ability to clearly define the borders between subjectivity and the deceased. Elegy, metaphorically addresses the complications of the internal and external realities of the bereaved.

Modern elegies have changed with our thoughts about mourning and grief while addressing the more melancholic mourner. Susan Sontag said, "Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art" (15). The basic technologies of the camera and representation of the image are what make it an elegiac art. The photograph suggests, even if manipulated, that something was and

was and exists/existed in reality while also allowing the viewer to understand the interpretation of the experience. The Elegy series is not about consolation. It is not to provide comfort or to serve as art therapy but to convey the experience of living through the loss. In a society where answers and technologies dominate, elegies are needed to understand, humanly, the impact and intricacy of life.

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figure 1 - *Microwave*

figure 2 - Maya Lin, Vietnam Memorial

figure 3 - Maya Lin, Vietnam Memorial


figure 4 - *21 and a Half*

figure 5 - *Untitled*

figure 6 - *Untitled*

figure 7 - *Screened In*

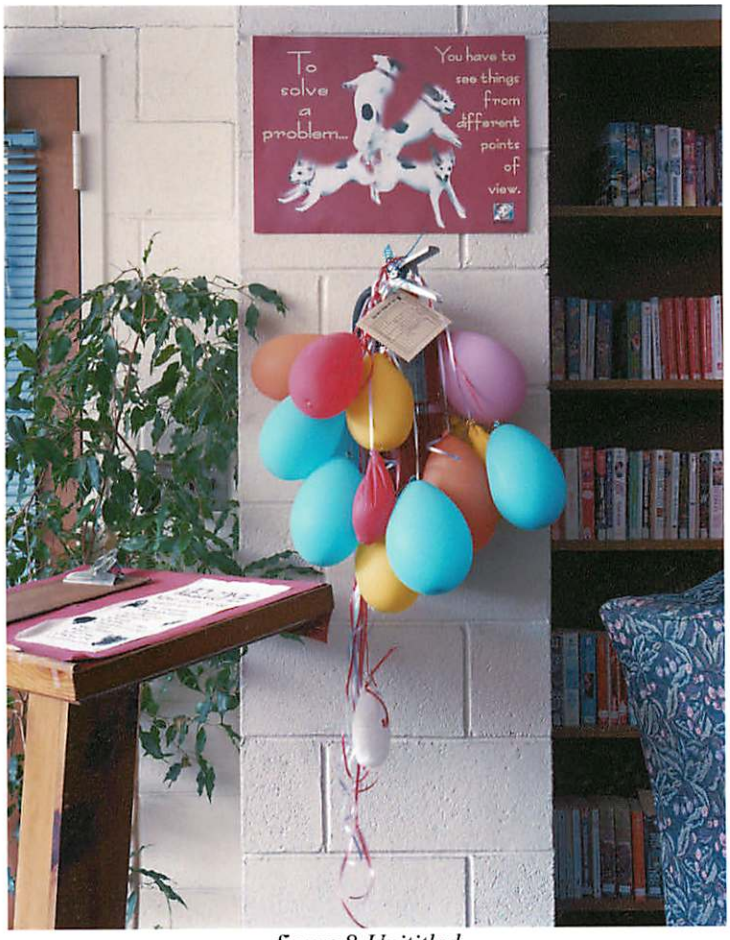

figure 8 *Unititled*

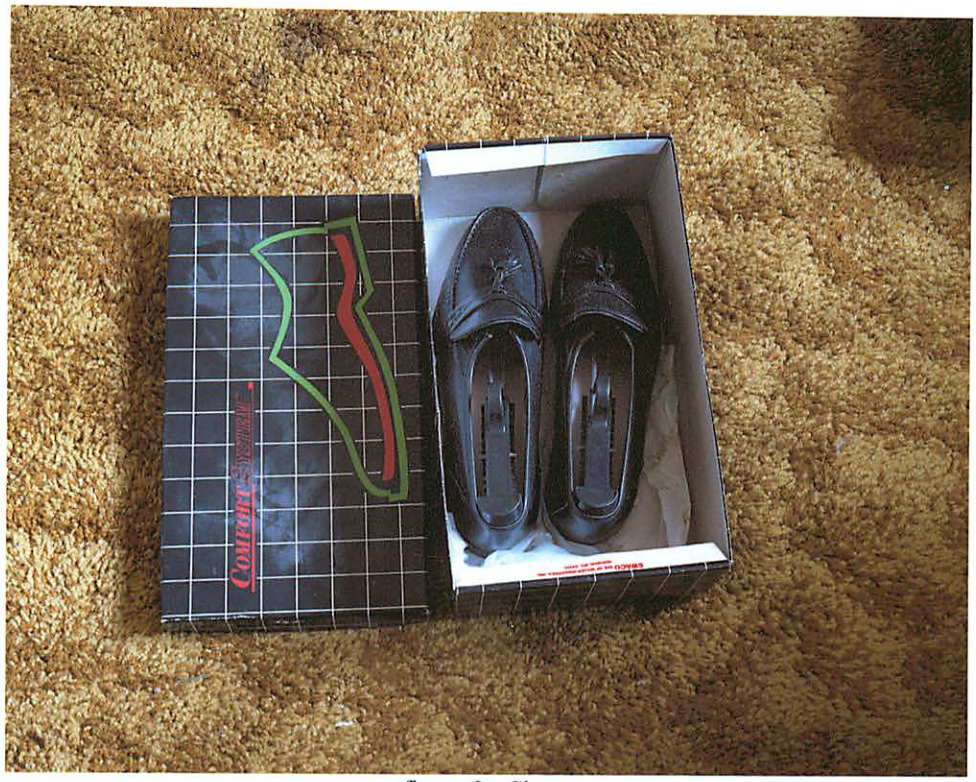

figure 9 - *Shoes*

figure 10 - Christain Boltanski, *The Storehouse*