

A Mirror

Sueyeun Juliette Lee

written for *Entropy*--curated by CA Conrad, August 2020

silentbroadcast.com

I don't have anything particularly wise to say about death aside from the fact that *it arrives*. Sometimes with a lot of unwelcome fanfare and preparation, and other times with the most violent jerk.

I've been intimately close when it arrived. Seeing someone take their last breath--the struggle of it and slow release. Feeling their heartbeat recede under my open palm pressed against their chest... these are not things that can be erased from the red text of my body. I've read it over in me, many times, and though the physical recollections have diminished, the mark remains.

I've also been far away when it appeared. The call first thing in the morning, the baffling inability to hear what is being said... then the cold calamity of how the body tells you what your mind can't admit. I remember that sensation more than the words that poured into my ear.

I have been indifferent to a death. Losing someone after a long illness while watching them disrespect the incredible sacrifices and care being poured into them, the utter selfishness they exhibited in their decline, the mess they left behind for everyone else to worry after...I did not mourn. My body simply refused.

Other times, I was numb for being baffled. My mother's friend was murdered in her deli in DC. In Korea, she had been a dancer. In the US, she wore vibrant makeup and taught my sister fan dances. Her murder was whispered--or I recall it as being whispered--everywhere throughout the household. I walked like I was admonished to walk whenever my father was home--quietly. I watched grief like a black soot descend and ink itself across her children's--my friends'--eyes, their faces.

Death has stunned me with its beauty. My first time fishing, I caught a heavy mackerel and struggled to drag it to the shore. "It's suffering," he handed me a thick stick to use as a cudgel. I looked down at the thrashing, silvery gray mystery I held down between my knees. I clubbed in its skull. The powerful muscle of its body relaxed, a slow trickle of thin bright blood pooling into its silent black eye. The flawless white rim.

What do we witness when we witness a death? I witnessed the "orderly" processes of the body as it shut itself down. The pallor that crept up into her face as the blood settled in the base of her head. The way her eyes sank back. How her lips relaxed, the pearlescent smallness of the teeth behind them. I witnessed how we all responded, the silence that devoured us. The sensation--

collectively--that we were being gently watched by something overhead which dissipated. At other times, I saw how we continued in our various ways. I watched babies grow, take steps, drop grapes from the kitchen table, the way they rolled across the floor.

I think I mostly watched myself.

The pain inside my chest--I observed it. The black bucket that was filled to the brim inside my throat--I struggled to keep it upright when I spoke or breathed. The concave collapse of my stomach--I tucked my chin against my chest to examine my newly emergent ribs. The insufferable ache I felt in grief while watching the shifting summer light drop through the leaves on a sycamore tree's trunk. I watched myself move through these various moments, I observed myself and my body try to integrate the reality of a death. I watched myself as my brain made sense of these things by imagining I had been dragged into the "wrong" universe, that I'd been split from the "right" one where the deceased continued to live. I observed this placid certainty in my body of being in the wrong world--my belief as simple as gravity.

I watched the way I watched others, and I watched myself saying the "right" things at the "right" times. I watched how my friend's bereaved husband reached for me one night when I was there to help with her children. I watched as I didn't turn him away. I watched the way I was quiet when I intuited I should be silent. I watched all these things. Perhaps I am now writing about grief, and not death. It's hard to disentangle these things.

without apology, I
wrote your name in the snow where strangers likewise disappeared

(no silver branches (stark sky

I admitted you without requisite dutifully
yet the earth its well of darkness such hungry hands cried out

I think "death arrives." Like rain. It simply falls on us. I keep thinking of this William James comment on consciousness, and it feels true of death.

*The first fact for us, then, as psychologists, is that thinking of some sort goes on. [...] If we could say in English 'it thinks,' as we say 'it rains' or 'it blows,' we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum of assumption. As we cannot, we must simply say that *thought goes on*.*

It arrives. Perhaps it's too unbearable to think, *death goes on*, as we think of it as a conclusion, not a transition or movement of its own. *It arrives*.

We participate.

And maybe because of this, I keep writing about what *we* do, not what *it* does. What death does is simple, I think. What we do is so extravagantly diverse and complex. I watched us. I watched myself.

Were you ready?

Never.

Is that your intention moving forward?

I don't want it to be.

How will you prepare?

I will always be a child before it.

*

2020 feels like a year for death. I'm writing this as a thick smog blankets Denver. After the pandemic emptied the streets, after protests against anti-blackness filled them, after the clouds of tear gas blanketed them with the endless twitchy roar of helicopters overhead hour after hour after hour. And now in the midst of massive statewide wildfires, mask-less couples drink beers at the restaurant patio down the street, masked joggers sprint past, and a greasy white smoke falls faintly on them all.

The sky has a pale yellow cast from the smog.

Death can be a clarion call. *Do something! This must never happen again!* And, perhaps even more fundamentally, *I never want to have to see that again!*

We are collectively such unwilling witnesses.

It's hard to write about death without acknowledging that not all deaths are marked the same.

Our society is remarkably comfortable with death when it happens to people who aren't white, cis-gender, or heterosexual. As a rule, our society is more accepting of death when it happens to sex workers, folks with criminal records, who are here without legal documentation, anyone who is struggling with addiction, mental illness, being unhoused or poor.

I know that our society doesn't value these deaths because it takes hundreds of them--of the most viciously violent and awful deaths--to raise public outcry. And by our society, I have to be even clearer and say, the white majority that continues to run this country. The heads of state, the CEOs, the celebrities with twitter accounts, the business owners, lawyers, news editors, administrators, bureaucrats, city councillors, heads of neighborhood associations, voters, people who make charitable donations to causes they care about, who shop at the grocery with you, etc. They don't respond to these deaths unless they are extravagant, perfectly documented, virally proliferated.

These deaths, in another light, are murders. The calculated executions by a white supremacist social system that does not value the broad array of human life.

I once tutored a white police officer. She showed up for one of our sessions laughing and showed me a picture of a corpse her coworkers had found that morning of an addict who was street homeless, frozen to death in an alley. As she laughed, she peered into my face. This death, this person's death, was a way for her to exert some power over me. There had been a subtext to our sessions, and I intuited suddenly what it was. She didn't like that I was so young, a person of color, studying *poetry* of all things, and she was coming to *me* for help. I kept my face placid. I didn't give her what she wanted, but I gave her what she already hadn't liked. I made my PhD student Asian face inscrutable--and handed the phone back to her. "That's what we do. We laugh."

Death is not "the great equalizer." Death in this broader social context demonstrates great inequity.

Death, the truest mirror. It shows us what we've wrought to one another. It shows us what we make of *life*, what attitudes and values we've allowed to dwell and take root inside of us.

I wonder, what can we do with death when *it arrives*, but witness it.

What are we willing to really see?