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Skin and Bone

Mixed media, fashion design

Death had always been a concept to both elude and terrify me to my very core. The concept of nothing, or worse, something, for all of eternity had always left me confused and lost in my own mind. I had always just shaken off the thought whenever it arose, but during this project, I decided to finally embrace it and ask myself how thoughts of death and the afterlife affect me and the way I live my life. I then expanded the question to the whole of the human race. Growing up in a Hindu household with a few atheist family members, I had always been a little closer to the idea of reincarnation. My first ideas had centered around the idea of rebirth and nirvana until I decided that my closeness to the topic made it a little less challenging than I wanted it to be. I decided to go with another concept I had grown up close to, the idea of nothingness, the idea that death is death and that's all. I wanted my piece to be close to the idea of rot, human decay, and mortality as a concept, as that's what has always frightened me the most. I had experience in fashion design before and thought it might be an effective way to convey my message. I first made a backless dress with an exposed thigh window, then used chain, clay, and spray paint to create the bones that hang off the dress. Many, like me, are afraid of the idea of death and mortality, and I wanted to show that it is not something to be afraid of, it is simply a fact of life. This informed the decision to make the bones gold. The dress is meant to be elegant, beautiful, shocking. A physical manifestation of death itself.

Till Death



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The Oxbow School

OS46

This paper addresses a human relationship with death and the afterlife as well as the fear that comes with the thought of something so unknown. Throughout this paper, the focus is primarily on the moments directly before and after death rather than death itself. I've written a fictional story, as well as a debrief to address the question: How does one's perception of death and the afterlife affect their way of living?

I. Till Death

There was no respite from the steady flow of thoughts in his mind. Hundreds of overlapping voices, ideas, anything that kept his head overflowing and overwhelmed no matter the time of day. At night, he would often grow restless after his self-imposed bedtime of ten p.m. He would resort to begging his thoughts to slow and studying the ceiling as if it was the Sistine Chapel, committing every inch to memory before his eyes grew heavy. Tonight, though, the familiar bumps and dimples of the smoky grey plane provided no reprieve to the pins and needles under his eyelids. He rubs his eyes, exasperated. This was not his first sleepless night, and it would not be his last. Hours had passed from the time he had laid down, and the bed had long since turned to cardboard. He glances at the sleeping figure beside him, taking care not to wake her as he swings his legs off the bed and stands. He drifts through the kitchen into the living room dragging his hand along the wall, instinctually hitting the button on the kettle as he walks past. He settles on the armrest of the couch, legs crossed, staring out into the dark sky and finally allowing his thoughts to drift. The distant noise of the city wafts in through the open windows, interrupted only by the boiling of the kettle and the buzzing of a fan stuck on oscillate. Its cool air rhythmically cuts through the dense humidity, caressing his face, creating a soft and predictable comfort to break the heavy atmosphere of the night. It was a clear night, yet the sky was barren. Every star had been washed out by the

light pollution of the city, and the full moon hung wearily in the sky, looking almost as tired as he was.

He thinks of the days he had spent camping, years ago. He had slept outside his tent, though the ground was much too hard and the air was much too cold, just to spend hours staring up at the sky littered with stars. He had always wanted to take a picture, hoping to remember the sky for cloudy nights and grey days, though he knew his camera would erase every point in lieu of the bright blue tones in the dark expanse. So, instead, he would stare at the sky, placing every pinprick on a map in his head that he would pull up only on the worst of days to help him find a way back to his reality.

The click of the kettle interrupts his thoughts, retrieving him from his mind. He blinks, shifting his focus back outside the window. His eyes trace the soft crescent of the moon, wondering for a second if it had been full just a moment earlier. He yawns, boiling water forgotten as he loses himself to thought once again.

He blinks awake, throwing his arm over his face as bright white light filters through his eyelashes. He groans at no one in particular, blindly groping at the side table for his glasses. He pushes them onto his face, squeezing his eyes shut again once met with the cluttered scene around him. The blanket had fallen to the floor, landing on the half-empty mug of tea that had been abandoned the previous night, though he could have sworn he hadn't made himself one. His head is immediately flooded with an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. Of course, this situation was not new, in fact, it was all too familiar. He sits up on his bed and tries to remember how he had gotten there before deciding he must have walked there at some point in the night and simply forgotten. He sighs to himself, mentally scolding himself for the things he knew would never change.

On nights that he couldn't sleep, nights like tonight, he often resorted to begging his thoughts to slow and studying the ceiling as if it was the Sistine Chapel, committing every inch to memory before his eyes grew heavy. As of late, the familiar bumps and dimples of the smoky grey plane provided no reprieve to the pins and needles under his eyelids. This wasn't his first sleepless night, and it wouldn't be his last. Hours had passed from the time he had laid down, and the bed had long since turned to cardboard. He glances at the sleeping figure beside him, taking care not to wake her again as he swings his legs off the bed and stood. He drifts through the kitchen into the living room dragging his hand along the wall and instinctively hitting the button on the kettle as he walks past. The distant noise of the city wafts in through the open windows, interrupted only by the boiling of the kettle and the buzzing of a fan stuck on oscillate. Its cool air rhythmically cut through the dense humidity, caressing his face, creating a soft and predictable comfort in the heavy atmosphere of the night.

He wakes much too late in the day to be as tired as he is. His head feels full of cotton and he can't bring himself to move any more than to rub his eyes. He looks around blearily, pleasantly surprised at the peacefulness in the room. The cold air from the open windows makes him shiver and reach for the blankets and pull them over his head. He exhales, letting the warmth take him as he slowly drifts back off into sleep.

He drifts through the kitchen into the living room dragging his hand along the wall and instinctively hitting the button on the kettle as he walks past. He settles on the armrest of the couch, legs crossed, staring out into the dark sky and finally allowing his thoughts to drift. The distant noise of the city wafts in through the open windows, interrupted only by the boiling of the kettle and the buzzing of a fan stuck on oscillate. Its cool air rhythmically cut through the dense humidity, caressing his face, creating a soft and predictable comfort in the heavy atmosphere of the night. A sound breaks through the soft silence. He looks up, met with the exasperated, sleep-ridden eyes of his girlfriend. He looks at her, smiling apologetically, knowing that this was not the first time she had awoken wondering where he was. She sighs and shakes her head, more at herself than at him. She stands, neither one of them daring to move as she once again meets his eyes.

“What are you doing?” He opens his mouth and closes it, knowing no answer would be satisfactory to the real question she was asking.

“I’m sorry, Addie,” She shook her head again, tired and upset, and he stood. Strange. He didn’t remember giving his body permission to do that. He opens his mouth, urging himself to give her a proper apology.

‘If you’re that upset, leave,’ he says, louder than he intends to. He stops. That’s not what he had wanted to say at all. He knew her exasperation would often hurt him, like she thought of him as a responsibility. But their relationship had its ups and downs. He lied often, he could be hostile and his unsteady sleeping habits were the icing on the cake for Addie. He knew she often awoke tired, confused, and scared when he wasn’t in bed next to her. He was far from perfect and she had every right to be tired of him. This is why it was all the more shocking when he found himself picking a fight. He distantly felt himself move, walking angrily to the door only stopping

to grab his keys as he storms out. He slammed the car door, hitting the steering wheel with a fist a few times though he felt no real anger. He felt like a stranger in his body as he watches himself pull out of his parking spot and continue down the road.

He follows the glowing streetlights, both hands gripping the wheel. His knuckles were white. He tries to loosen his grip, but his hands would not comply with his orders.

He thinks of Sunday mornings as a child, the sleep in his eyes and the acceptance of the annoyance he felt when his father would wake him for their weekly family drives. The idea itself was honorable, though they almost always ended in disaster. His parents could barely stand each other, and the drives would often end when his father would start to put his aggression into his driving, often going almost double the limit. He had feared and hated his father for putting his family in danger. He remembered watching his knuckles go white with the force that he was gripping the steering wheel with, watching his teeth clench in the rearview mirror. He had never been able to understand him, though now, at this moment, he could see from his father's point of view just a little bit clearer.

He weaves from residential roads to major streets, all eerily void of cars at this time of night. He unconsciously places more pressure on the pedal, going fifty, now sixty, without fully meaning to. He watches himself, foot placed firmly on the gas pedal as he approaches a red light, understanding with horror that in some cruel twist of fate, he had fallen asleep. He watches himself outside of his body, both unable to see and seeing everything. The realization rushes through him like a river creating a canyon, He screams, or tries to, realizing soon that he couldn't and likely never would be able to again.

It didn't hurt. It wasn't like everyone said it would be. He was not cold, there was no light at the end of a tunnel. He was simply there, among his thoughts, like he had been every day during life. What he didn't understand was how much time had gone by since his life had left him. Thirteen minutes had passed since the comfort of his steady heartbeat and rising lungs had gone. He understood nothing and everything all at once. He was already dead, he was still alive. He had expected it to be different, he assumed his life flashing before his eyes would be just that, a flash. He had relived it, every moment, every heartbeat. He tries to sob, soon realizing that he didn't have the breath. His mind races.

At night, he would often grow restless after his self-imposed bedtime of ten p.m. and would resort to begging his thoughts to slow and studying the ceiling as if it was the Sistine Chapel, committing every inch to memory before his eyes grew heavy. Tonight, though, the familiar bumps and dimples of the smokey grey plane provided no reprieve to the pins and needles under his eyelids. He thought of his ceiling then, wishing to himself that he had stared at it just a minute or even a second longer. He rubbed his eyes, exasperated. This was not his first sleepless night, and it would not be his last. Hours had passed from the time he had laid down, and the bed had long since turned to cardboard. He glances at the sleeping figure beside him, taking care not to wake her as he swings his legs off the bed and stands. He longs to see her again. He drifts through the kitchen into the living room dragging his hand along the wall and instinctively hitting the button on the kettle as he walks past. He settles on the armrest of the couch, legs crossed, staring out into

the dark sky and finally allowing his thoughts to drift. The distant noise of the city wafts in through the open windows. He wonders now if anyone else had been perched by their windows, if anyone had heard the crash, if anyone was coming to help. The white noise was interrupted only by the boiling of the kettle and the buzzing of a fan stuck on oscillate. Its cool air rhythmically cuts through the dense humidity, caressing his face, creating a soft and predictable comfort in the heavy atmosphere of the night. It was a clear night, yet the sky was barren. Every star had been washed out by the light pollution of the city, and the full moon hung wearily in the sky, looking almost as tired as he was.

He wishes now more than anything that he could see the moon from where he lay on the street, ten feet away from his wrecked car. The soft light would have given him comfort, it would have allowed him peace in his final moments. Were these his final moments? Would he soon succumb to death, or would he remain this way forever, in this limbo, stuck between two worlds? The click of the kettle interrupts his thoughts, retrieving him from his mind. He blinks, shifting his focus back outside the window. He yawns, boiling water forgotten as he loses himself to thought for the final time.

II. Author's Note

This story was inspired by science fiction and the question of what happens after death. In my research, I read studies covering topics concerning death, brains after heartbeats and breathing stops, and medical ethics related to brain activity. The main inspiration behind the paper was the idea of LRE, or Life Review experience, something that is commonly described as life flashing before your eyes during a near-death experience (Katz et al., 2016), and the theory that your brain plays back memories in its last moments of consciousness before death (Tuarez, 2021). I wanted to encapsulate the confusion and fear that often comes with the idea of death and the unknown element of the afterlife. Around 17% of adults do not believe in any afterlife at all (Pew Research Center, 2021), and I wanted the character to have the same belief. The structure of the paper itself was circular, as it continued to loop back to the same night, the night of the character's demise. The character experiences the same disorientation as the reader as the story becomes more and more confusing, eventually reaching a point of clarity for both parties at the end. The loss of control is mirrored by the frustration felt by the reader at the character, signifying the character's regrets and desire for a second chance, as well as communicating that his reality is a memory. Though the story is about death, the actual loss of life plays only a small role. The focus is mainly on the circumstances leading up to death and the emotional turmoil caused by the regrets of the main character. The goal of the story was to portray how deeply death can really change your life.

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