

## Birds on the Horizon

Megan Jones

### **Spring**

Vivaldi's Four Seasons begin with birds in the spring. They chirp happily, excited by youth. In summer, they slow down with the heat, and settle with families. In fall, a tension builds as they stress and prepare for the impending cold. Winter ends with a burst of energy as they use their wings for one last flight. It's a story about life- with each season representing a part of life and all the unique indulgences of each moment. But even more so, it describes living with an awareness of death.

I obsessed over these songs. Listening to them over and over by different orchestras, finding recordings where the lead violinist got the confidence or fear of the birds just right. This search for a recreation of what I feel but can't describe, I needed to recreate this for myself.

I work in quick breaths of energy. I start a project but move on when it doesn't feel right. Small phrases that pop into my head as I draw or paint and I'll jot them down. Sometimes I'll return to them and they grow into little stories, sometimes they remain untouched. I transcribe half- finished thoughts as paintings, drawings, a curation of photographs. They are behind me when I sit at my desk, watching over my work like memories watching the present. Currently, I'm working on a young man in a vast field, a strong wind unsettles his hair, and his scarf threatens to blow away. A hunched crow is superimposed on the composition to his left. Its intentionally hard to tell if the bird is asleep or dead, and though it appears set in a different plain, the man looks at it intuitively.

This painting of sleepy death is one of many, they are collecting on the floor by my bare feet below the desk. I can remember the first time I saw death with any real gravity. I must have been five or so, peddling a tagalong connected to Dad's bike. The front of his bike wheel parted puddles like a blade, and the water would splash onto the grass, plastering it to the muddy ground, and then a dead squirrel, likely hit by a car the day before. I'm sure I saw dead things before then, but it is not until you understand death that you can recognize the beauty of a body. I now realized that death could be unexpected and violent.

I think about this as I touch my brush to the blue on my pallet. I believe these paintings have been a long time coming, but I don't know where from. And so I think about the man who taught me what I know about death.

Dad would have been much younger when he first saw death, growing up on a farm seems to cultivate an acquaintance with mortality. He grew up in Jerome, Idaho, near the Snake River. He calls it Flat Country because you can see the pin-stripe horizon in any direction you turn, connecting the biggest sky anyone can imagine to the Earth; Heaven touching the soil.

When a train goes by at the intersection, my dad gets quiet. We watch the train go by from our car, and he tells me, always, of the neighbor-boy who raced trains on his motorcycle. They all had motorcycles because the land was so vast, but gas so expensive. You might think that in that wide, flat land where no one had much of anything that there wasn't anything to lose. The boy thought he could cross the intersection faster than the train, and usually, he won that bet. One day, the dice weren't in his favor, and that was the last bet he ever made. My dad finished the story the same every time - "There was nothing left of him". Even years later, I hear those words in the screech of the city train wheels as it stops in the underground station because not all we inherit is genetic.

When he was young, Dad slept in the unfinished basement and built a buzzer by his bed with a switch at the top of the stairs so his mom could wake him in the morning. He made a lot of things with his dad. Tractor sized machines crafted solely for farming beans or hay on their flat bit of Earth. He looks so sad when he tells me about Idaho, as though regretting it deeply enough it would change what happened there.

One day, he and his sister sat on the front porch step playing with their kittens. Their Pa was out in the field perhaps, their Ma in the garden out back. A green pickup could be seen in the distance, building speed on the long dirt road.

"Whose that you think?" He asked his sister.

"They were here earlier when you were helping Pa in the field. They asked if they could hunt out back. They didn't like it when Ma said no."

The truck got closer, and the engine grew louder. They could see the baseball cap the driver wore, and maybe they could see the rifle in the passenger's hand too. The truck pulled its

breaks and came to a reckless stop in front of the little house. The passenger pointed the gun. *BANG BANG!* He hit his targets and the kittens lay dead at the children's feet.

*Unexpected and violent*, I think to myself as I rub the blue pigment off the brush with a rag and dip it in water. *Not peaceful like sleep.*

## **Summer**

I don't know if hearing these stories are what led me to be so fixated on death, or if they stand out in my memory because I have a predetermined interest. It could be a little of both, but either way it became an undertone of my childhood. As I painted and drew, I thought back to these stories, with one standing out particularly.

My dad has a peculiar way of recording his thoughts. He keeps meticulous journals that he binds himself. With the hand of an engineer, they are precise, functional, and rather crude. They fit his shirt pocket with precision, but the thread and glue are rugged, and the see-through tape that waterproofs the cover gives them an unattractive, filmy sheen. He made dozens over the years.

Every so often, he would bring out the bins of his notes and re-categorize them, making sure he could reference everything with ease. I liked to hang around when he did this, in case he found a peculiar college essay or old photo to ogle over. One day, he brought out an old notebook from a few years prior and showed me a page of horizontal graphs- long lines across the page, like where the big heaven sky touches the Earth. He plotted the years 1800-2100 in twenty-year increments along the bottom where he plotted the life spans of family members from 100s of years ago. I saw my dad's parents; their lines ended with a question mark approximating the year 2020. I saw my dad's line. The starting point labeled Jerome ID, 1964, ending around 2032 with a question mark. I saw my own line, Silverspring MD, 1997, ending in 2075 and a question mark. My older sister's line, too ending in 2055, and her three children, their lines ending in the 2080s.

The diagram stunned me, but I couldn't describe why. I think we all consider these kinds of things, the death of loved ones, and our own, but only in abstract and mystical terms. His estimates were dark, morbid, and beautiful. I think I hated them. The time he spent thinking about when I will die. And yet, this was the most fatherly act of love I had ever seen for only he, as my father, could plan for things such as my life and death after he is gone. I asked that he let me look at the paper for a while longer while he continued to sort his things.

I thought about how each generation moved. His great, great grandparents crossed thousands of hard miles over the plains only for Dad to move to the East Coast after college—their transcontinental migration undone. Will my life follow a new migration, or will my headstone mark the undoing of another's? Whose thousand-mile walk will I overturn? Or are we just birds migrating back and forth?

## **Fall**

Ernest Becker posits that awareness of death is a central influence in decision making, whether we are conscious of it or not. As a species, we are very aware of our mortality and have developed strategies to avoid anxiety.<sup>1</sup> Our perception of death can lead us to build great legacies, take care of our families. Our understanding of death leads to negative behaviors too. We are weary of beliefs that are different than ours because they challenge the validity of our own, leading to prejudice. In his book *Denial of Death*, he argues that the facets of one's character are chiseled by the process of denying one's mortality, and this denial is necessary for the society to function as it does.<sup>2</sup> He also argued that much of the world's evil be traced back to this denial. In his book *Birth and Death of Meaning*, he explains the progression of humankind from a simple-minded creature to one of symbols and allusions to one that dissects those symbols to come to terms with death<sup>3</sup>

Jeff Greenburg and Sheldon Solomon expanded his theories with Terror Management Theory. They argued that fear of death leads to fear of those of other groups and those with opposing beliefs and draws people to “charismatic leaders”. Our views frame our life as

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<sup>1</sup> Bashir, Masooda Nassimi. “AN EXAMINATION OF TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY WITH OLDER ADULTS.” *Purdue University*, Proquest, 2008, pp. 2–10.

<sup>2</sup> BECKER, ERNEST. *DENIAL OF DEATH*. PROFILE BOOKS LTD, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Becker, Ernest. *Birth and Death of Meaning*. Free Press, 1971.

meaningful. When we come across someone with differing /opposing viewpoints, we are forced to confront the possibility that our beliefs are just that- beliefs. Historically this has lead people to belittle those with opposing ideas, try to convert others, or kill them. When the fear of death confronts trickles into daily life, people draw closer to the aspects of their identity that will outlive them: their religious group, country, and family; we push away those who oppose those beliefs.

From an economic standpoint, being confronted with death can increase consumer behavior. In the aftermath of 9-11, President Bush said, “we cannot let the terrorists achieve the objective of frightening our nation... Mrs. Bush and I want to encourage Americans to go out shopping. “Following his statements shopping in the US grew to an all-time high as reminders of death increase consumerism when material goods are a form of self-worth.<sup>4</sup>

Vivaldi’s Four Seasons illustrates birds in different seasons as stand-ins for people in various stages of life. It's his meditation on the events of life in the scope of death. It starts with Spring wherein youthful birds are both joyous with energy and anxious with the quick passing of time. It concludes with Winter and violent celebration of the last breaths of life. This interprets the anxiety of feeling that life is too short while encouraging one to experience all the full wonders of each stage of life in the face of death. Reflects a more western European anxiety towards death and striving to complete a perfect life before time runs out. The dramatic tensions are what make the piece beautiful. The fits of sadness, as time continues, the peaceful lulls. The bars stretch along like a timeline, a horizon, and the birds flutter up and down along it. This is what I wanted to capture in my drawings. I wanted to turn Vivaldi’s four seasons into paintings, drawings, words, to capture that death is what makes life meaningful.

Birds come up frequently in art as metaphors. Or maybe I just notice them more because they stand out to me. Rob Ryan hand cuts paper to create silhouetted illustrations that accompany his short poems. Many of these works portray birds. In an interview he spoke on this, saying,

“Birds are everywhere, but on the whole we humans don’t really have much interaction with them. Of all the animals (except for their unlucky cousin, the flightless chicken) they’ve managed most successfully to escape our

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<sup>4</sup> Ardnt, Jamie, et al. “The Urge to Splurge: A Terror Management Account of Materialism and Consumer Behavior.” *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 2004.

clutches. Their wings have saved them: they could fly and escape us, yet still they live in plain sight all around us every day. The fox, rat, and hedgehog hide from us... but birds are free and everywhere.”<sup>5</sup>



*‘Your job is to take this world apart and then put it back together again...But even better!!!’*

Paper size: 58cm x 64 cm

Cut paper

2012

Birds live beside us, watching, in a way, but always able to escape to something further. They can dance above and below the horizon line that traps us and we share the desperation that drives them to far off places.

In my own work I focus on birds and look at how different species can lead one to think of death in a different light. A duckling’s goal is to please its mother and seek safety, so the death of a duckling alludes to a lack of fulfillment. An owl’s goal is to hunt and death feels like more of a completion. Contemporary metaphors are interesting to explore too, the canary in the coal mine, *Silent Spring*[6], both can be metaphors for warnings of overconsumption.

In my studio, I have an illustrated copy of *Rain Won’t* was the last poem written by the prolific Japanese Poet Kenji Miyazawa as he watched illness chip away at his health. I originally found the book in an exhibit of picture books that spoke against war. In his writing, he has a more

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<sup>5</sup> Ryan, Rob. *I Thought about It in My Head and I Felt It in My Heart but I Made It with My Hands*. Rizzoli., 2018.

resigned attitude towards life and demonstrates comfort in leaving as little trace as possible and being grateful for the small, common things. He encourages the reader to find meaning in accepting death and to live a life of kindness. He emphasizes the importance in the balance of plant and animal life with humankind and tends to frame animals as either equal to or above people in intelligence and morality. <sup>6</sup>

It's interesting to look at the book through the lens of terror management theory. Anxiety of death leads people to become defensive of their beliefs and belittle others and to find meaning in the accumulation of material objects, because that's easier to explain than to find meaning in living life for life itself. Kenji's poem describes a man living to help strangers, use only what is necessary, and smile even when people disagree. This philosophy is his own way of confronting anxiety he was dying, but this philosophy goes against a number of the instinctive methods outlined in Terror Management Theory. This is the philosophy that influences the sense of peace in my work. With awareness of how death anxiety can negatively influence our actions, we can take back some of that control.

At times it seems like my thoughts are coming together. I make mind maps connecting all the notes I've gathered only to find that the center of the map I've drawn seems like it should be on the furthest point of the web, that the center is on the edge of each branch. I'll start a new map, and another. Some are large and sprawling, others are just a few points. I pin them to the wall but it seems like by the next day they are foreign and wrong and so I take them down and roll them up into the corner. Piles of books are growing around the studio, but I could never read them all. It's as though my mind is bleeding into the real world.

Though my immediate environment becomes more and more chaotic, the painting process remains meditative. My early sketches and paintings were in oil but the intense, rich color that is so addictive wasn't right for the subject matter. After finding inspiration in Andrew Wyeth's muted toned paintings of empty fields and saddened faces, I now use egg tempera for a similar voice. I'm using natural minerals which don't include a red pigment. This gives me a reserved but deep color pallet. The involved process of egg tempera adds steps before paint can be applied that aren't there in the oil paint process. Before any painting can happen, an egg is

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<sup>6</sup> Miyazawa, Kenji, et al. *Ame Nimo Makezu = Rain Won't*. Imajinsha, 2013.

cracked and the unbroken yolk is moved onto a paper towel. The egg white isn't needed. To remove any remaining egg white, the yolk is rolled on the paper towel. The yolk is then held over a small jar and the case is broke, letting the liquid drain. A spreadable solution is made by mixing one-part water for every part egg yolk.



Egg Tempera Process

To mix the paints, a pinch of raw, powdered pigment is taken to a mortar and pestle to grind for a smoother texture. Raw pigments are blended to the needed color before liquid is added because the paint will dry very quickly. A few drops of the egg mixture is added to the pigments and mixed with a pallet knife. This is repeated for every color, and little to no mixing or blending is done on the canvas. In seemingly endless layers use very thin pigments to get rich, complicated colors that appear to change with different angles of light. The meditative process ritualizes the creative practice and opens the space for more phrases and thoughts to slip onto the mind maps on the wall.



## Winter

My dad told me stories of his past so that I could learn to hope. I was meant to live the life that redeemed his suffering, but without an understanding of the consequences of death; what would there be to hope for? He told me his stories to entrust me with his sadness like a torch that must be carried on to a brighter future, wherever that may be.

The bird in my painting is done; eyes sweetly closed, in a deep and pensive rest, dreaming about something important. But I touch my brush to the white paint and with a few quick flutters I adjust the position of its back. The crow is dead, her hunch of her back demonstrating that her body is now only moved by gravity. The collection of memories pinned to the wall behind me look over my shoulder, watching as I rewrite them as paintings. So peaceful the crow looks, happy even, to be at rest. I smile just a little. Death was not unexpected or violent for this crow- unlike Dad's kittens, unlike the boy who raced the train, no turmoil or regret, no journey unfinished. I gave her the death I wish my dad could have seen instead of those painful, twisted versions, and I gave her the death that he wishes for me.

The man in the painting looks confused, but not repulsed. He is a personification of the curiosity my dad and I have in the role of death in life. He sits in a windy expansive field where the big sky lowers to touch the flat earth, and jagged rocks return the reach. The muted colors and small, meticulous, maddening brush strokes bring a sense of isolation and dread but the sheen of the egg tempera makes the tints and shades breath with a dream-like vibrance as one walks by.



Full Installation of *Birds on the Horizon*



Painting Detail

However, the final piece expands beyond the painting. Like a bird building a nest, I collected fragments of phrases, sketches, beginnings of stories, the ends of poems. In this endeavor to understand how death controls my actions, I've built an environment for resting and thinking. There's no conclusion, but there are the foundations to continue finding meaning in the unexpected relationships between things. In the end, it's an illustration of the search.

When you stand in Flat Country, the horizon looks first like a line, but as you turn to see where each end goes, the line becomes a circle; not undoing itself, but repeating. Time is like that too, and after winter comes spring.

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