

4000 WORDS ON DEATH*

& THE DISTRIBUTED SELF

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Where is the line between life and death? Did you question the use of “line” when reading this? The distressingly clinical definitions of “zero brain activity,” “loss of organ function,” and the like draw a sharp boundary between life and death, and none would perhaps raise eyebrows. These definitions may be useful for hospitals and legal proceedings. Yet *none* are sufficient on their own: zero brain activity with organ function intact is simply “brain death,” while maintenance of brain activity without help from the body does not constitute death either. Even with no visible life left in the body, its microbes are still happily at work – and without the appropriate microbes, no one can survive to begin with, so is the body still “alive” at that point? Instead of a sharp division, we have far too many sharp divisions; looking at death becomes like looking into a shattered mirror. What a mess.

How could we deal with the prospect of *ourselves* shattering like that?

The intent of this work is not to find a fundamental definition of death. I simply try to find a way we *could* define death that lets us clarify how it functions, and thus allows us to analyze the process of grieving and dying. The polar regions form an excellent laboratory for this. The land is less shaped by life than it would be in a tropical jungle, so plants & animals (including ourselves) stand out a little more clearly. Harsh conditions make it harder to survive, blowing snow and shifting ice can quickly inter an unwary traveler or ship, yet cold preserves remains for an unreasonably long time. Death is thus more present and perhaps more ambiguous.

This project is restricted to a close reading of five northern poems which speak to death in one way or another. There is a *vast* literature on death outside the pieces I have chosen, and my work here is necessarily far from comprehensive... but sometimes looking quite closely at a few objects in isolation yields insight. These poems speak of how we view death and how it affects us and the world

*I’m going by word count rather than page count, as I can’t stand 250-word-per-page 12-point double-spaced documents.

around us; melding their ideas together may create a new lens on death.

Tom Sexton's poem "October's Ghost" (Gramse and Kirk p. 23) reflects on the tangible marks of the dead. The poem chronicles the recollections and reflections on the drowning of a young girl by one of her elementary school classmates. Her absence is first marked by "missing footprints in the snow / at recess" (l. 4), not adults bearing news of tragic events. Those missing footprints make the loss real. The speaker tries to recall other marks she made – a crown of violets, perhaps. In focusing on physical marks, the poem notes how living beings make themselves known in the world, and how erasure of their marks is characteristic of death. "October's Ghost" also shows how quiet death can be: one fewer set of footprints in the snow would be hardly noticeable in a well-trodden schoolyard, and flower crowns politely fall to pieces after a short while. The absence of those marks gains significance through the speaker's memory of their existence.

The speaker has a mark on them, as well. They think of the girl under the ice every autumn, "when the leaves begin to fall" (l. 5): The girl's death, understandably, left a lasting memory. This poem may chronicle thoughts decades after the actual event – we have no way of knowing exactly how long after, but time has passed. The speaker also notes that the girl was "[their] first loss" (l. 4) implying further losses and perspective gained since. The actual recollection the speaker has is of the girl crying out in vain, underwater, "not understanding what it means to die" (l. 8). There are two implications here: that the girl was confused and terrified, far out of the depth of her understanding, and that there exists knowledge somewhere of what it *does* mean to die. Yet the poem does not elaborate on this knowledge. The speaker sounds scared, as well. The moon they see "seems as thin as ice" (l. 13) implying they realize their own survival is precarious as well, and they ask the ghost for comfort. Her death did not bring transparent understanding; it merely left marks.

Or did it? The marks on the world and the speaker were left by her *life*, not her death. Her presence made her absence meaningful, and the erasure of her footprints and flower crown made her absence understood. This suggests that what she left behind is key to understanding her death: the *marks* of her as an active being, such as footprints, or flower crowns, or memories of her skinning her knee, are the signposts by which the speaker knows her death. Exactly what constitutes a mark is an open question, as they include notably non-tangible memories and stories, but the speaker needs some sort of semi-physical mark to reckon with death, and by their

erasure mark death's progress.

What if that was the entire definition? What if your death simply meant the erasure of your marks?

Defining death as erasure means the state of death is a continuum. While alive, your marks are readily visible on the world, and more accumulate with each action. As your body becomes less and less active, you become less and less able to make marks on the world, and as those marks disappear, you asymptotically approach a state of complete death. This process of death and erasure notably takes longer than what is usually considered a human lifespan, and is far more continuous than the familiar concept of the "moment of death!" It also implies that death is not a unilateral decision but a distributed one: in order to be fully "dead," every piece of the world you left a mark on while alive must have erased (or otherwise obscured) that mark. You can only die by consensus.

This is not necessarily reading too far. Sexton's poetry deals with "what happens across boundaries" (Macdonald p. 115), melding the human, the natural, and the cosmic. Implying a view of death as externally defined is in bounds for him: such a view deliberately blurs the boundaries between ourselves and the world around us, as that world becomes integral to deciding whether we are in fact alive. The reliance on external markers also calls into question what little agency we might have over death. The agency of nature, another theme of Sexton's, over those marks often determines how long they last: footprints in snow disintegrate due mostly to wind and temperature. Defining death as the erasure of marks does not contradict¹ Sexton's broader perspective.

Sigður A. Magnússon's poem "A Child Lost" (Gramse and Kirk p. 29) examines death in the context of the same quiet erasure as Sexton does. The image of the eye closing "over five years' existence" (l. 13) suggests more a return to sleep than a terrible, deadly event. The scene is peaceful, almost wholesome – the "angel-white / snowbanks" (l. 1) do not imply danger in the least. The end of the poem is soft, as well: the sled tracks, blurred with the drifting snow, are the only trace of the event, and are described quite briefly and matter-of-factly. Although they signify fatality, the sled tracks become an innocuous part of the landscape.

The unassuming nature of the tracks is delightfully creepy. How does the land see death if it casually sweeps aside our marks and sees drowning as no more remarkable than sleep? We as a class noted that

¹At least, it does not *seem* to...

all places are indifferent to human suffering, but the tracks disappear so easily as to imply they are absolutely ordinary. Even while present, the sled tracks blend into the background: the only way to see their sinister nature would be to trace them to the edge of the lake. Signs of death (or predation, in the very last line) can lurk in the most peaceful landscapes.

That blending into the environment may be characteristic of death. The sled tracks on the slope and the portrayal of the lake as predatory mean that the deadly nature of the land is always present and intermingled with its peace and beauty. This may disturb the living, but perhaps comfort the dying: after death, you become a part of that peace and beauty forever after. There is no depiction of struggle in this poem, notably: the eye of the ice simply closes. We do not know whether the moment was truly *peaceful*, but it was not inherently violent.

The moments before the child reaches the lake are likewise not fearful, as the child does not see the lake coming. There are two eyes in this poem: the eyes of the child, blinded by snow, and the eye of the lake, deep-blue and seemingly clear. The lake, as a predator would, hides until its prey is too close to fight. But would it matter either way? The sled's rush toward the lake is portrayed as inexorable. If the child saw the lake coming, they might have been able to steer away... or their last moments would be filled with extra terror as they realized their fate. (Likely those last moments were terror-filled after they broke through the ice either way.) The sled is the one described as rushing for the lake, as well, not the child. There is a strangely passive air to the scene: all the action is taken by the inanimate entities (the lake, the sled), while the child is, literally, just along for the ride. The title contains a passive construction: "A Lost Child" is simply a noun and an adjective, but "A Child Lost" is a noun and a verb in the passive voice. The child had little to do with their death – the land and the sled saw to it.

Both "A Child Lost" and "October's Ghost" portray death as a quiet affair. Dying is a process of floating underwater or falling into sleep, and all that is left after the process completes are a few sled tracks or footprints. The dead did not have much agency over their own deaths – perhaps because they were children and did not have much agency anyway, but "A Child Lost" notes this passivity is partly due to the lake's predatory nature. "October's Ghost" is not as explicitly passive, but portrays the soon-to-be ghost crying out in vain for help while underwater, an act heartbreaking in its ultimate futility. A literal filling of the mouth could easily be interpreted as an

act of silencing, as well. The moment of death is a moment of quiet, and the snow, covering sled tracks and footprints, cleanses all traces of the dead.

In that cleansing, the northern land itself has serious influence over death. If death means the erasure of your marks on the world, the world is the one doing the erasing – thus, the more the land is able to erase (or not be marked to begin with), the more of a hand it will have in death. Making one’s mark on the Arctic requires a trained team and a great deal of funding and time; the Arctic making its mark on you requires a single fateful decision. The land itself then becomes the ultimate possessor and arbiter of the marks you made. Since natural processes are involved, those marks are *continuously* erased, meaning the process of dying runs concurrently with the process of living. To be alive is to leave marks on the world as quickly (or more so) than they decay.

The erasure definition of death and the hand of nature in that erasure leads to an unsettling conclusion: the self is a distributed entity.² If our life is only defined by external markers, and those markers are not under our direct control, then our personal growth and change proceeds in places *far* beyond our bodies. The complete destruction of the body is not sufficient to cause death, so why should it bring about the end of the self? A better definition of self might be “the collection of all marks traceable to you,” which naturally includes the body but also includes footprints, others’ memories, written records, artwork, etc. Understanding such a self requires both the erasure definition of death and knowledge of nature’s hand in our disappearance.

If the only way to characterize the self is as a collection of marks, which collections of marks constitute a “self?” Even a conservative answer would have to admit that human-, animal-, or even plant-like entities are not the only ones which could be formed in this manner. A distributed notion of self directly implies that there are beings (which we may not recognize) whose selves have no “centers” as ours do. How would such a self evolve? Deliberate changes would take far longer to propagate: the collection of marks defining a “self” are spread across gulfs of time and space. Even within our bodies, those marks are spread across gulfs of intent: our clinically frustrating microbes live in ways we cannot consciously experience, and yet are an integral part of us. A fully distributed self may also undergo erasure in different capacities than our more familiar centered self,

²Exactly where the boundaries of self lie is well examined in Buddhism, but those texts are a little out of scope (sadly).

and would potentially be more in flux.

“North” by Gerður Kristný (p. 5) deals directly with continuous erasure. It takes place on a heath in thick fog, through which the speaker is traveling along a road with a fence, whose posts are revealed when they draw near enough. Those posts are likened to “the little girl’s matches / in the fairytale” (l. 10) – likely a reference to Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Match Girl,” in which a poor girl freezes to death on New Year’s Eve after seeing wonderful visions in the light of her unsold matches.³ The poem thus forges a link between death and quick erasure, as the posts appear “for an instant” only; similarly to how death presents in the previous poems, the link to it lurks just under the surface.

This poem also links death to guidance. The little match girl’s visions lead her to her loving grandmother in heaven, which in Andersen’s fairy tale is a far better place to be than the girl’s cold drafty house with her abusive father – though admittedly she has to die to get there. There are a few implications in comparing her matches to one’s guidance. First, that the guidance itself is somewhat illusory: the girl’s visions are of debatable veracity, implying the speaker is not quite sure if the fence is really there. Second, despite being uncertain, the fence posts mark an end which is deeply desired. In this case, the end of the journey could be a warm hearth and a good night’s sleep, if all goes well. If all does *not* go well, the speaker and their fellow travelers could be led to their own icy demise while believing they are on their way to a wonderful place. The possibility of death hinges on the guidance of the fence, and that guidance is mediated by the gloom – the speaker is at the hands of their environment, like the child on the sled.

Death’s proximity does not seem to distress the speaker, though. “North” is quite matter of fact. The speaker’s feelings are nowhere described. The poem’s title, “North,” is nonspecific, suggesting that its themes are emblematic of the north as a whole. Death is close, straying too far into the matches’ visions is easy, you might run out of air before you come to the surface, and that is simply how life is. Death’s proximity in the north is intimately tied to living there.

In short, death lurks everywhere and is a continual process, which can be quite scary, especially since we do not have a lot of control over that process. How can a view of death as erasure *help* us deal with it?

Anne Caston, in “A Friend Urges Me to Write in Praise of the

³You likely know this story well, but I did not and was quite surprised!

Natural World" (p. 35), offers two responses to death. The speaker's friend, as the title says, tries to turn the speaker away from their focus on the drowning of a boy by encouraging them to "exalt the reeds and praise the river" (l. 1) – perhaps to focus the speaker on something beautiful and new for a change. The speaker, though knowing that "there's little music" (l. 9) in continually speaking of death, is still preoccupied with it. Though the subject is morbid and dark, it requires attention, which may bring about closure and thus allow the speaker to move on.

But why would the friend urge the speaker to write about the natural world? The natural world killed the boy: he "drowned *here* early May" (l. 6, emphasis mine) in the river next to the speaker and the friend, and the friend wants the speaker to write in praise of it. The friend's goal may not be to shift the speaker's attention to something unrelated; instead, the friend may want the speaker to see that, though death lurks under that river and those reeds, they can still be beautiful. You can tell of death, acknowledge it, and that does not have to mar your view of the world around you.

The speaker, however, is compelled to tell of the drowned boy. The first lines of the poem tell us that the speaker's sensibilities are not the friend's, and the last sentence gives insight as to why. The colon between the last two phrases of the poem implies that the first characterizes the second: the death of the boy showed the speaker who they (the speaker) are, that they are "wedded to the telling" (l. 18). Through this death, the speaker found out that they *must* tell such stories. They cannot tear themselves away at the urging of the friend. "The telling" is not described as "the telling of...", so the speaker's need for telling of the world as they see it may extend beyond the drowning. Because of those lines, the speaker seems to be writing from a perspective near that of the actual author: a particular sort of telling is what poets *do*.

Understanding death as the erasure of marks may yield insight into the necessity to tell of it. Telling someone's story is a way to lengthen the arc of death, as their memory (and thus their mark) will last longer. Conversely, writing in praise of the natural world may allow one to see the beauty and peace in erasure, as the world continually carries on that process. And there is: once all marks are erased, there is no pain in letting go of someone as no memories of them remain to cause woe.

If the need to remember the dead is tied to prolonging their arc of dying, one might practice letting go of memories while preserving physical evidence. Writing down those memories, creating a non-

ument to the dead (perhaps a gravestone), carrying out their last wishes, or simply realizing that while you still think of them their mark remains, are all acts which lengthen the arc. So long as the deceased still affect the lives of others, they are not quite lost.

Robert Service's poem "The Cremation of Sam McGee", while a supernatural tale glorifying the perceived magic of the Yukon, deals with the above themes of death in the Arctic.⁴ Sam McGee, a prospector from Tennessee, dies one day on the Dawson trail, and the protagonist, Sam's unnamed accomplice, is bound by a promise to cremate Sam's body. The task seems dreary and impossible, until after many days of searching he (the narrator) stumbles across a derelict ship in the ice and cremates Sam in the ship's firebox. The poem concludes with the narrator opening the door and finding Sam "looking cool and calm" (stanza 14, l. 1) in the middle of the roaring fire, warm again at long last.

Sam McGee himself exhibits qualities of someone not quite dead. Sam's "last request" is extraordinarily important to the narrator in light of his other difficulties: leaving Sam's body behind would be unthinkable, despite the obvious mental and physical strain of hauling that body across the Arctic. Yet no one would question the narrator's drive to honor Sam's wish, though the only reason to honor it is that Sam asked to be warm again! We know perfectly well his body will not experience that warmth. Sam's death wish carries weight because he still lives on in the narrator. The end of the poem, featuring Sam sitting happily in the heart of a roaring fire, is clearly fantastical, yet points directly to the non-fantastic possibility that Sam is still slightly alive: Sam *will* be warm again because part of his distributed self knows he is.

Death is so often thought of as a discrete event – you slip under the ice, your heart stops, your residual brain activity drains away. Death-by-consensus means that, instead, one's state of death is a continuum: your effect on the world slowly fades out over weeks, months, years, decades, or longer. Some marks will vanish quickly, like footprints in snow; others, not so much, like memories or grave-stones. In the moments immediately after death, one's influence may even increase (think of funerals). Right after death, someone could

⁴This perspective on Robert Service's work is subtly different from the one in the literature. Service was greatly responsible for the public's conception of the Yukon and the Gold Rush, and presents a narrow view of the history of the Yukon if read in isolation (Grace p.90); works I've reviewed analyze his writing and depictions of death and murder in this manner. I'm reading Service strictly for his depiction of the mechanics of death, not his historical or political merit, which (aside from murder) is not that well examined. At least, it does not seem to be.

become wonderfully, fantastically alive-by-consensus.

One would expect some comfort in knowing that someone is not dead so long as you remember them. However, since those memories are part of the selfhood of the deceased, remembrance is not a simple choice: our wishes to remember the dead are not wholly ours, but partially the dead still exerting an effect on the world. The marks they left are the measure of their self, and if those marks live on in us, we are by definition part of that self. We do not preserve people in memory; we *are* them. In part, then, the sorrow we feel at someone's death is their own sorrow, and as we move on, so do they.⁵

How could we approach death, then?

Accept that death lurks right under the surface. We may not have a trail as obviously fraught with danger and erasure as in "North," but whether we leave our marks in snow or stone, they are far from permanent. But note that those marks *are* a part of you, as they define your existence. Although any incarnation of them is not permanent, they have influence, and echoes of them will continue to propagate long after you die. Even when no one can trace your influence back to you, when your "self" has fully dissolved, it will still be present and active in many corners of the world. Startlingly, since echoes themselves create echoes, you may *never* fully die, just continue dying, until the end of time. Whether this is a problem (philosophical or otherwise) is left to the reader.

Works Cited

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See the following pages for the poems from *Ice Floe*.

⁵How one should gain comfort from this is an open question. "Remember me" seems both vaguely parasitic (on the part of the deceased) and nobly sacrificial (on the part of the living): in remembering, you allow the dead to take up residence in your own body. Hopefully it leans toward symbiosis.

October's Ghost

1 What was the name of my classmate who fell
2 through thin ice one night in late October
3 of the year we learned how to spell?
4 Our first loss, missing footprints in the snow
5 at recess. Now when the leaves begin to fall
6 I think of her caught under that ice,
7 her small mouth filling as she tries to call
8 out, not understanding what it means to die.
9 Was she the girl in white who placed
10 the crown of violets on the Virgin Mary's
11 head in the schoolyard on the 1st of May,
12 the girl who tripped and scraped a knee?
13 The moon overhead seems as thin as ice
14 tonight. Dear ghost, comfort me when I die.

TOM SEXTON
(Gramse and Kirk p. 23)

A Child Lost

1 White white angel-white
2 snowbanks on the slope
3 down to a frozen lake
4 and a lacuna
5 indiscernable to the child's eyes
6 blinded
7 by gusts and snowdrifts
8 as the sled rushes
9 automatically
10 inexorably
11 toward the deep-blue eye of the ice
12 which closes over
13 five years' existence

14 Sled tracks on the slope
15 covered by snowdrift
16 the ice-plated lake
17 keeps its prey

SIGÐUR A. MAGNÚSSON
(TRANSLATED FROM THE ICELANDIC)
(Gramse and Kirk p. 29)

North

1 Slow as sperm whales
2 we glide through the gloom
3 which is white
4 here on the heath

5 It holds fast to its own
6 conceding only
7 one post at a time

8 For an instant they flash
9 on the side of the road
10 like the little girl's matches
11 in the fairytale
12 lighting us
13 until we return
14 to the hole in the ice
15 to breathe

GERÐUR KRISTNÝ,
TRANSLATED BY VICTORIA CRIBB
(Gramse and Kirk p. 5)

A Friend Urges Me to Write in Praise of the Natural World

1 Exalt the reeds and praise the river
2 all you want; such exaltation
3 changes nothing; not the river
4 drifting by indifferently; not the reeds
5 bowing to water and wind; not the boy
6 who drowned here early May.

7 *Enough about death,*
8 *you say, enough.*

9 I know; there's little music in such
10 singing or, if there is, it's the music of totems
11 coming, finally, into the craftsman's hands:
12 that splintering at the end of things.
13 *Below, I say. Look there below,*
14 *where the god in the shadows rows.*

15 After all, by my hand no one dies
16 who is not dead already. And some things
17 show us who we are: I am
18 wedded to the telling.

ANNE CASTON
(Gramse and Kirk p. 35)