A Glimpse Beyond the Veil

In the fall of twelfth grade I entered a classroom on the third floor of Bulfinch Hall and was greeted by a Lichtenstein poster and a man wearing a leather jacket. He had ruddy cheeks and floppy, parted hair, and it was from him I formally learned about art that pertains to death, on small scales and large. Concerned with last acts — of writers, actors, photographers — our course was a survey in Dr. Kane's doctoral work, on a topic he dubbed "automortography." We learned of the *unheimlech*, of Keats' "negative capability," of Bruce Lee's (un)timely death, and of Robert Mapplethorpe's last self portrait. I did not understand everything that was said in that room that trimester, yet it was my first foray into a world beyond the barriers of traditional genre, and for that, I loved him. Since then, I've been primed to seek for work that begs to be interpreted through the lens of death, be it of the author or a social group.

In his *Theory of the Novel*, George Lukacs writes of the novel's "bad infinity," of the way novels can contain endless quotidian details. The collection too has an uncomfortable infinity. Barring — though not dismissively — those that are simply a corpus, collections impose a container on otherwise open subjects. The anxiety of composing this collection is that it was never meant to be such; it like much automortographical literature, has problems of intentionality inscribed all over it. In retroactively labelling my books, I admit to my morbid streak; I too admit to the project I've undertaken, and how little progress I've made toward the undertaking.

This collection is radial. Its order is intentional but incomplete. In constructing this list it feels inadequate to communicate this list in the form of an array. The connections between them are not linear, and I will attempt to indicate where proximity in the list is insufficient to convey connectivity.

1. The Pale King, David Foster Wallace

I acquired this book during my senior year of boarding school. Angsty and depressed as most students at Andover were, I'm not sure what I was hoping to get from it, commiseration perhaps? I would be omitting truth if I didn't say I wanted validation of my intellect for having completed The Most Boring, Complicated Tome on EarthTM. The Pale King is Wallace's posthumous novel. About taxes and boredom, it reads like a suicide note and the IRS employee handbook had a child. It is not a good novel, yet for a trimester I took a directed reading in it with a professor who specialized in the literature of death.

2. The Castle, Franz Kafka

The circumstances of the The Castle's production are eerily similar to that of The Pale King's. It's for this reason I read The Castle. Also posthumously published without the author's intent, the novel reads as an autobiographical description of trying to survive in the face of bureaucracy. When coupled, these two novels are uncanny and heavily incite speculation about Wallace's suicide. Of course The Castle, like everything Kafka wrote, is interesting in its own right. But I was drawn to it because it reads like the missing element to David Foster Wallace's last will and testament.

3. The Opposite of Loneliness, Marina Keegan

My fascination with last acts continued beyond Dr. Kane's class and beyond high school. Months before matriculating to Swarthmore, I found a copy of this book in The Strand. There is something inviting about the book's marketing: who doesn't want to know of the opposite of loneliness? Turns out, Marina Keegan died in a car accident a few days after graduating from Yale. The texts contained within this book were sacred for me that summer. For them to be otherwise felt disrespectful to the photogenic woman unknowingly brimming with hope on the cover. Read through the lens of her death, each essay, story, poem felt urgent. How could I go to college without understanding I might not leave?

4. Japanese Death Poems

This collection, which I acquired during a particularly morbid stint, is of poems composed by Japanese monks before their death. It contains writing both in Japanese and in translation. Some poems would seem pleasant if they were taken in isolation, though in this collection they read as melancholy and wistful. Others of course are grim. The rest of the works in my collection, with the exception of Woodbine's Black Gods of the Asphalt, discuss death from a western perspective.

5. The King, Donald Barthelme

A retelling of King Arthur jammed into World War II with Barthelme's iconic wit, this is a last act. I read this book in the class in which I was introduced to the genre of automortography, but before I had my mind wrapped around how to understand and talk about literature. That is to say, I don't remember much from this book aside from a few fuzzy concepts and a distinct, fabricated impression of Ezra Pound's radio voice. *The King* exists, for me, in the realm of that which I want to re-view and re-understand.

6. The Death of King Arthur, Sir Thomas Mallory, a Retelling by Peter Ackroyd

I have yet to finish this. I acquired it to better understand the source material of Barthelme's *The King,* and the two are a couplet in this collection, like the Kafka and the Wallace. As (a/the) foundational work of English mythology and state construction, it functions as a referent that is fascinating to distort for political satire. As a work that itself is titularly centered around death, it tucks in nicely on this shelf.

7. Austerlitz, WG Sebald
Austerlitz is the Max Sebald's last novel. Published a month before Sebald's untimely death in a car accident at age 56, it reads like the rest of Sebald's work: haunting, autofictional, and like it should not fit the bounds of text but magically does. I acquired my copy for Dr. Kane's automortography course, and have since used it as the basis of a creative writing project. Its primary subject is a character named Austerlitz, who fled the Nazis by way of the kindertransport, and spends much of his life retracing his roots. *Austerlitz* is a last act and a novel about mass death. Like much of Sebald's work it's about specters, and when reading it, one can almost feel his.

8. The Complete Works of Primo Levi

I have never read this. I purchased it — like an uncomfortable portion of my book collection — during a manic episode in the summer of 2016. I include it because, like *Austerlitz*, the writings of Primo Levi have been hailed as some of the prime testaments of the Holocaust. And to understand death at all, its factory is an important target for our gaze.

9. Angels in America

I had the fortune to encounter *Angels* early in life, in 11th grade, and in an English course with Dr. Tricia Har. In addition to having us read the play, she assigned to us the HBO miniseries. I did not catch last year's Broadway revival, much to my dismay. Nevertheless, *Angels in America*, as a political flashpoint that deals with the indescribable human and cultural experience of the AIDS crisis represents social and political death with a jouissance that cannot be matched.

10. Black Gods of the Asphalt, Onaje Woodbine

Onaje Woodbine also teaches at the academy I attended, and this book, which was published a little after my senior year, was borne out of his thesis for divinity school. Deeply enmeshed in the culture in which Woodbine grew up — the streets of black masculinity — *Black Gods* explores the religious dimension of basketball in a nation filled with death. It is lyric criticism of the finest sort, and in making clear the practice of worship and survival embedded in street ball it offers an image of radical hope amidst mass death.

11. The Denial of Death, Ernest Becker

Becker's Pulitzer Prize winning work of popular philosophy, published decades before *Black Gods,* proposes (and I'm being reductive) the thesis that human cultural production is driven from our collective understanding that we will perish; the need to produce a legacy, creates all, for Becker. In my early-teens I read about this book on a blog and was intrigued enough to order it. In some ways it is the origin of my collection, the start of my search.

12. Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Jonathan Safran Foer
&
13. The History of Love, Nicole Krauss

This book and the following are a couple, as were their authors. Both combined read as though spurred by the same writing prompt and the same formal constraints, or lack thereof, rather. Neither are automortographical, but both deal with spectacles of death. Both works follow subjects who have lost their fathers. *Extremely Loud*'s most interesting segment is the ending, which turns into a flip book of a Windows on the World employee falling out of the Twin Towers on 9/11, an image we know as Falling Man. As *Extremely Loud* is concerned with 9/11, *History of Love* is concerned with translation, a lost book, and the holocaust.

14. Fun Home, Alison Bechdel

Fun Home is a fun graphic novel about a funeral home that Dr. Har assigned my 11th grade English class. Actually, it's not fun at all. It's morbid and deeply personal. Tracing the life Bechdel had with her closeted, cheating father (who runs a funeral home), before and after his suicide, it like *Austerlitz*, traces space in an effort to understand death, to mourn and to heal. The drawings of the funeral home from the vantages of young and old Alison jams the viewer into reading and re-reading the figure of her father around the crisis of his suicide.

15. Speaker for the Dead, Orson Scott Card

The second of Card's "Ender" series and perhaps the most thoughtful (if such a compliment could ever really be given to Orson Scott Card), *Speaker* traces the life of Ender Wiggin, pre-

emptive “savior” of Earth and inadvertently-xenocidal teenager (see children’s classic *Ender’s Game* for the full recap) as he travels the universe delivering eulogies. In penance for having exterminated all but one remaining reproductive member of an alien race, Ender seeks to find a new home to repopulate the species and begins a cultural practice of communities having a designated eulogist. I encountered this novel when I underwent my science fiction phase as a teenager, and intend to revisit it, though worry Card’s philosophy of death will feel too simplistic, too overdetermined.

16. The Inferno of Dante, Robert Pinsky

Dante’s *Inferno* marks the last of the 16 books in this collection that are in my possession. Dr. Har, in what this collection is making realize was an ingenious syllabus for a generic high-school literature course, assigned Pinsky’s translation. It keeps the *terza rima* of Dante’s original and like all translations is beautiful in its own rite. Guided by Virgil, Dante courses through the rings of hell, understanding the sins and punishments of its sufferers; like Aeneas and Odysseus, Dante glimpses beyond the veil. I haven’t followed him through the rest of the *Comedia*, but he, and Pinsky, and Dr. Har, and Dr. Kane have made me a map, one to follow when I find myself in dark woods, the right roads lost.

Wishlist:

17. The Autobiography of Anthony Trollope

Anthony Trollope was an intensely-prolific Victorian novelist, and was also a bit of weirdo. The stipulation of his autobiography was that it be published posthumously, but, as I learned from a friend who had read large portions of it for our class, he talks about himself as though he’s dead! Talk about authorial intention — this book must be a delight!

18. The Year of Magical Thinking, Joan Didion

A loved one suggested this text to me, a fact into which I’m trying not to read too much. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion writes about the year after the death of her husband, and the grief and psychosis she experienced. How should one mourn? How does one mourn? I do not relish the thought of finding out.

19. When Breathe Becomes Air, Paul Kalanithi

This is posthumous memoir about a doctor battling cancer, and a friend loves it. It is of the classic sort of automortography. And yet. It is not by a celebrity, but by a professional, one in whose shoes I could imagine living. I probably won’t read it.

20. Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America, James Allen et al.

Maggie Nelson references this book in *The Art of Cruelty* in a discussion of representations of violence. It seems, too, that this photography collection would merit inclusion in my collection, though without disregarding Nelson's commentary. The book's contents are what the title suggests: a series of photos of lynchings in America (taken from 1882-1968). Coupled with *Black Gods* it pushes the collection toward addressing the social death of slavery, for though my personal collection of books includes a fair few on race theory, none seemed to fit. *Without Sanctuary* also, like *Fun Home* and *Extremely Loud,* necessitates visual engagement. The inclusion of this book points to an unbridgeable chasm in this collection: the nature of slavery and death at large may not be encapsulated. Problematic infinity, indeed!