CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE LAST PHOTOGRAPH:

A MICROSCOPIC VIEW OF TRANSIENCE, MOURNING AND LOSS.

LUCY WILLOW

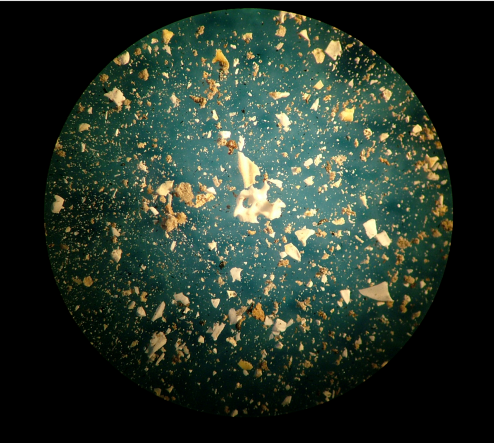


Fig.1

“All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, and mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.” (Sontag 1979, 15)

I am brought back into life through studying death, transported into the present moment, into the now. As an artist I have always been interested in dark transgressive imagery, inner melancholic landscapes, death and the awakened states of feeling that can accompany it. The lens of the camera has allowed me to examine the bloody carcasses of road kill and rotting birds brought in on the tide. The experience is one of great intensity, nothing existing beyond the direct relationship between the animal and myself. Recently these discovered deaths have been translated into drawn environments and animations, transcribing the imagined marks of mortality into a series of artworks. Through animation, I was able to breathe a soul back into a dead goldfinch that had flown into a window; to make it temporarily come to life; to watch its breath in silence. I was waiting, sensing; being present, reflecting on its passing and mine. Exploring loss, and the profound beauty that can be found in a transient moment such as death, brings with it an appreciation of life and all that passes through it.

The imagination can, at times, be catastrophic. It throws us into the realm of nightmares, the place of *what ifs*: the most monstrous of all these dark fantasies being death. As a mother, the imagined death of a child becomes the most catastrophic, deplorable and unspeakable reality, conjured up in the darkest depths of our imaginings. We are unable to comprehend the continuing of life, should such an event occur. Yet we know that these events do occur. The loss of children and young people occurs on a daily basis through accident, war, starvation, illness, murder and abuse. It appears to be something remarkably strange in the Western human psyche that each individual feels immune to tragedy until it happens. And, when it does, we are generally ill-equipped to deal with the aftermath.

Ninety five point one per cent of the total content of the universe is labelled ‘dark matter’, astronomy’s greatest mystery, unknown and unseen. Its shadowy uncertainty neither emits nor absorbs light, nor any other form of electromagnetic energy. It is simply felt. Its dark gravitational pull affects the things that we can see; affects what we know. Grief is like that: the dark matter of bereavement. Like most, I was unprepared when my son died in the summer of 2006, leaving behind a perfectly sized and proportioned hole in my universe. On 7th September 2006, his ashes were returned, hand delivered in a mauve plastic jar with a screw top lid. The label read: *Penmount Crematorium, crem. no. 106298, 1st September, Jack Justin Perry.*

Silence fell and settled on me with an immeasurable lethargy and weight. I stopped. People were moving around me, going about their day-to-day lives, while I remained motionless. I was balancing on a tightrope between breaths, where nothing made any sense. There was no right order, no fairness, no logic, no more day-to-day problems and no petty arguments. Emptiness replaced the life that was there before. In those early days of grief, there was no past, no future, no feeling. I was in a waking coma, a dream that had no correspondent reality.

I felt close to the Victorians and their intimate relationship with death. At the point of departure, I would have drawn the curtains, stopped the clocks, and turned the mirrors so that I could watch over his body night-and-day until his funeral, if I hadn’t been so numb with shock. The veil between life and death felt very thin, the slightest gust of wind able to blow it aside. In the years following Jack’s sudden death, the cult of mourning became a way of life. My house was filled with fetishist mementos from cultures that had a more direct relationship to death. Mexican ‘Day of the Dead’ brightly painted edible skull sweets and skeletons, formed shrines around the house. Through my art practice, I invented elaborate rituals, which enabled me to come to terms with loss.

For a number of years death has been present in my life and art practice. I have a freezer full of dead animals, mostly birds that have been given as gifts. Whilst out walking, I take a bag to collect dead animals, picking up whatever I find. I am used to the smell of dead seabirds, a pungent aroma mixed with the salty, fishy air. I am particularly fond of dead birds and the relationship human beings have to them through mythology. Birds feature strongly in superstition, bringing us luck or sorrow, depending on the species. In folk law they represent spirits or angels, supernatural aids, states of higher being. The human soul in mythology is often seen as a caged bird. In fairy tales, birds talk. Birds are universally recognised as intelligent collaborators with us in myth and folktales. Birds are seen as messengers, able to fly between worlds. Finding them dead or taxidermied, I can examine the narratives up close, subverting the mythologies and placing my own symbolic language over the top. Particular species: magpie, canary, crow, goldfinch, black swan, robin and the sparrow, are all used metaphorically to communicate a particular narrative within my artwork.

For a while, following his death, Jack took on the form of a canary: delicate and precious, with a hypersensitive heart, accompanying miners deep into the earth. As an early warning system for danger, the delicate bird would react to toxic gas, such as carbon monoxide, methane or carbon dioxide, and die before it affected the miners. The canary spoke to me of the tragedy, sadness and fragility present in the midst of life. Finding ways to live through bereavement, I took photographs of the death that was around me, submerging myself into a deep reflection on sorrow.

In 2009, I began a photographic series of work titled *Memento Mori* (‘remember that you are mortal and will die’) based on the melancholic symbolism of 17th Century Dutch Vanitas paintings. Appropriating the symbolic language found in these paintings, I was looking to draw attention to the parallel beauty found in both life and death. The images contained rotting fruit, decaying animals, bubbles, extinguished candles and jewellery to serve as a reminder of the transience of everything in life. The paintings held, within them, an understanding of a narrative from 17th Century culture, which warns against the vanities and temptations in life, such as wealth, knowledge, lust and earthly pleasure. The narrative emphasises how we ought not to be distracted by these, but remain focused on the spiritual, the afterlife. I borrowed the symbolism in order to examine mortality.

In the reflection of a sad and moth-eaten taxidermied magpie I saw my own grief, resting between its tatty feathers as I photographed its stuffed corpse. I bought a lamb’s heart and placed it in the centre of a still life, to signify young loss, vulnerability and sadness. I hid any outward signs of mourning amongst a symbolic visual language that found its expression in the photograph. What else could I do? Working into the surface of the photograph with water, I was able to bleed and merge the colours, giving the surface a visceral, opulent quality that made the image feel as though it was disappearing and rotting in the presence of the viewer. The colour was an externalisation of what was happening, on the inside of me: the feeling of dissolving. I was looking to understand death through the arrangements of objects I assembled and photographed. An event, once photographed, becomes more real. I photographed death looking to insulate myself against its devastating impact, feeling its omnipresence intimately in the midst of life. A photograph confirms reality. The scythe of death cuts through all the unnecessary in life, bringing us to stillness at the core of our being, where nothing else exists but a silent longing for the peace it brings.

Death, like birth, is an experience that cannot belong to us; we cannot be consciously present at either. We cannot hold our own death; we can only witness death in the ‘other’. The other is the one that can die. I was observing the otherness of death held in Jack’s ashes that day. If a tree falls in the forest, it makes no sound unless we are there to witness it. The sudden death of someone you love is as unbelievable as a tree falling and making no sound.

In hindsight, I wish I had felt able to photograph Jack at the time of his accident and in the days that followed. I wonder whether the act of photography enables you to stay witnessing an experience, to be present, to digest, to give shape to something that is too terrifying to bear with the naked eye? Perhaps it gives you agency in the face of such powerlessness and devastating loss. As an artist and a mother, my deepest instinct was to photograph Jack. I wanted to bear witness from behind the lens of the camera. I could observe, in silent communion, the bruises on his body. I could hold his wounded broken corpse in a photograph; heal the internal wounds opening up inside; touch the untouchable. Death however has become alien and frightening. The lens protects. It creates a screen, through which to observe the contours of the body from a distance, but the post mortem photograph has become a taboo, considered morbid and macabre. It felt wrong and secretive, as though I would be betraying the trust of my family and friends. They were used to my art practice, but not in this context. I behaved according to what I felt was socially, psychologically and emotionally acceptable. Death is no longer permitted to share a space with the living.

In the days following the arrival of Jack’s ashes I made arrangement to visit my father’s marine biological lab in Bath, to observe his remains. I wanted to take one last photograph.

*A team of young marine biologists greet me; my father leads the way to a free microscope with a digital SLR camera attached. He introduces me to his team as “my artist daughter” therefore giving me the right to do as I wish with Jack’s ashes, unhindered, unquestioned. I enter the lab. I take a little of his ash out of a purple silk bag, mindful not to lose a spec of the precious material, scraping any residue from under my fingernails. On September 26th 2006, Jack was looking back at me from under a laboratory microscope. I look to see if his ashes contain any information regarding his mysterious whereabouts. I have become a forensic scientist, looking for clues. Evidence has to be gathered. I make notes, take photographs; I am searching for answers to unbearable questions.*

Mourning, as described by Freud, involves a process of shuffling and rearranging; examining and re-examining; taking each memory and looking at it from as many different perspectives, from as many different angles, as it takes for the process to exhaust itself. We meet each memory, each hope, and face it without that person present. Our internal world is in the process of rewriting itself. Remembering prolongs the existence of the one lost.

Ash is not as I would have imagined it; it is dense and coarse, not at all like dust. I am familiar with dust. I have collections of it: Hoover bag dust collected and dated from 2001-07; marble dust; coal dust. Like stardust they have fallen containing the invisible histories of all that has moved through my life. Dust, I feel its silent presence in the air; the smell coating the inside of my nostrils; like a phantom gathering on my skin. It lines the sink and bath; a thin blanket of shattered moments; the debris of a discarded life. A visitor passing through, escaping through cracks in the wall, leaving behind a trace that gathers softly. A fine stratum of time, layered over books and shelves, keeping its ethereal mystery. The emptiness of life is embodied in dust.

Making drawings of dust, I hoped to glimpse at its secrets. With no endings and no beginnings, it offers up a liminal space, possibilities beyond boundaries. It escapes. I recognise all that I do not know, losing myself in its presence. It moves around the house on the lightness of air, like a daydream passing through and then forgotten; spiralling on shards of light, and then gone. The sadness comes with the voices it echoes, the voices of the abandoned. It whispers without sound, haunting the spaces it occupies. The daydream urges me into an unknown internal landscape of endless possibilities, where death does not exist, where the beauty and grandeur of dust settles on my inner thoughts like snow. A subterranean world of wounded joy; where sadness and loss occupy the same space as bliss. Working with dust urges me towards the irrational, a formless, fleeting state that is indefinable. It is the evidence of loss and impermanence present in life, untamed and lawless, existing in neither one state nor another. Exuded by death into the world of the living; awaiting us at the end.

Whilst travelling in Northern India in 2000, I saw a Tibetan sand mandala, beautiful and intricate. When presented to the Dali Lama, he made a mark across the surface with his finger and then discarded it, scattering it ritualistically. It fell as a blessing on all it touched, a profound reminder of the impermanence of everything in life. I use collections of dust in a similar way, to make ornate and patterned carpets (2003-7). Responding to a particular site or context (an empty house, a church, an abattoir or gallery space) I lay it directly onto the floor and etch intricate drawings with a fine paintbrush into the surface. *Marble Dust Rug* (2005) sat between four steel columns in Smithfield abattoir, appropriating imagery from Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights.* Everything was falling, the marble structures returning to dust. Freud believed that the more transient an experience, the more pleasure we derive from it. The fleeting observation of a dragonfly, appearing for a while with its translucent, iridescent colour, or a flock of starlings returning to roost, delight us with their momentary appearance. The carpets of dust exist for a short period of time before being swept away at the end of the exhibition period. Drawn to questions that confront society's attitudes towards death, the dust carpets seek to expose what lies hidden beneath the surface, the attitudes and emotions we wish to sweep under the carpet. Working with the poetry of transient materials reflects the belief that there is nothing lasting, immortal or permanent, within life or within us. Can the beauty and joy of life perhaps only be known subsequently to witnessing death and the transient nature of everything?

The lens of a microscope acted like that of a camera. I was able to confront the uncomfortable, to bare witness from a distance. I wanted to see into and beyond his death. I was looking to understand the ‘otherness’ of death. Looking at death through a microscope, I examined all that now remained, my eyes moved over his rocky surface. I was looking for something more in Jack’s ashes. I was not attempting to capture the transient moments in life or to capture what was disappearing. I was searching for answers, like a Victorian spiritualist, hoping for some kind of visual resurrection through the image. Perhaps a ghostly form would make itself known to me. Through the microscope, I was examining death to see if I could make any sense out of such profound loss. In the photograph, we are presented with an opportunity: to explore the power of the image to re-examine the past.

It is hard to give up the physical body. Precious and beautiful, I would have liked to treat it with reverence; bathed, dressed and cared for it at home. I wanted to keep it. I had visions of running away with it on the way to the crematorium; floating with it out to sea, finding a new place to live where I would put him in a freezer and stay with his body for eternity. As a mother, it was hard to give up the body, the body that came from my body. It is hard to surrender his ashes to one spot too. It was once considered a great honour to care for the dying. With tender loving care, the deceased would be dressed and laid out by family members, peacefully, as if frozen in eternal sleep. The metaphor of sleep was comforting to those in mourning. It was less frightening than imagining the dark matter of death, the great, unknown chasm of emptiness that opens up in the space the person has left. There, in the comfort of the home, the body would wait while relatives mourned and said goodbye. Does being raised in a post-religious culture - with few rituals surrounding death, where someone is paid to provide a funeral service, with no personal handling of the body and little open discussion around dying - make it difficult to know how to approach death when it comes?

I was unaware, at the time of Jack’s death, of cultural practices that embraced the desire to be remembered in death. I recall being stunned and profoundly moved to discover the Victorian cult of photographing children following death, a once widely accepted and popular practice. Children were dressed and laid out as if in a deep eternal sleep, waiting for the afterlife. They were captured in a sacred transition, at peace, as angels. Death in the Victorian era was not a taboo; it was photographed, discussed and talked about. Capturing a person’s soul and keeping it alive, forever in the hands of whoever held the image, enabled the bereaved to hold onto the young life that had been lost. With death follows the thought, “if only I could have one last conversation, one last photograph, one last time.” It is easy to imagine how convincing the spirit photographs would have been amongst those who wanted to believe. The ghostly presence of a lost relative could be seen in countless images: scenes of suspended animation, floating, hovering and visibly present.

As an artist, and through my personal experience, I seek to address the distance and alienation we have to the body after death. Following the mass deaths and uncountable numbers of bodies seen after WWI, profound changes were seen in the way communities mourned. Mourning began to be internalized; it saw the beginning of wearing grief on the inside*.* How do we collectively share grief, having lost the symbolic mourning codes and ritualistic practices that once allowed us to read the emotional lives of others? Shared grief is important. We pass each other, unaware of the internal grief and suffering we share. All human society needs mourning rituals involving a public display and recognition, a witnessing and validation of loss. Without mourning rites, death becomes meaningless. I found no spoken words adequate to communicate what was going on internally. The only way I knew how to address how I was feeling was through the process of making and opening up a wider debate relating to mourning and bereavement. Do the arts allow us access to grief and the possibility of tapping into our own private losses? Can they publicly demonstrate how creativity can emerge from turbulent, destructive, sorrowful and bereaved states?

I look at how artists photograph death, seeking permission to find a voice for what I am unable to say with words. My visual practice penetrates the tangled emotions felt when talking to others, removes the consideration I have for their sensibilities. It is hard to speak about what you have witnessed; the image has the power to give voice to what is unspeakable. We are used to images of bodies. Photographers, such as Don McCullin, have focused on dead bodies as a result of war, genocide, ethnic cleansing and violence.He is able to capture the immeasurable suffering of those starving or close to death.

As an artist and a mother, the most natural instinct I had was to turn the camera upon Jack. The camera, it seems, is a way to record the final moments with someone, a lingering goodbye. With a camera, I could have caressed each part of his body with great love and sensitivity, moving it gently over his feet, his hands, his face; remembering and communicating all that I felt unable to say in words. To give voice to a silent experience, one that is hard to discuss openly and freely, is perhaps a way to ward off depression and the haunting loneliness that illness and death can bring. As a way to share a universal experience not easily expressed in words, the image can pierce the wall of silence, opening up the possibility of connection to others. I want death, as it did in the Victorian era, to share a place with weddings, events, births and the everyday. Nan Golding believes that you couldn’t lose anybody if you photographed them enough. The photograph is a way to integrate the memory of the dead into the present, into on-going living, into the future.

I saw a future through the microscope that day. Following death, certain aspects of the other person’s life come sharply into focus. I wanted to know all the facts, examine them, and draw them up into my consciousness. All the last details, the last food that was eaten, the last conversation, the last clothes worn, the last objects touched, the last people seen, the last journey made, the last breaths taken. In the early days of grief, the details of the other’s life is scrutinised, drawn into microscopic focus, imagined and re-imagined. With microscopic vision, nothing else is allowed in. Alone with the microscope, all else can be shut out, avoided, in a private world where I could silently be present with all that remained. Words are not enough to communicate what is felt following death. A photograph can be passed on and witnessed by another, in silence. Empathy and shared experience pass between each other without words. The image speaks without words in a profound and intimate way, revealing what we sometimes close our eyes to.

I treated Jack’s ashes as the Victorians treated the body after death: adorned, worshipped, sacred and precious, all 8lbs of them. They have the texture of soft grey sand with shards of white within. You can see fragments of bone with the naked eye. Ash is surprisingly comforting. The scattering of ashes is not so much about letting go but an unspoken promise to keep the future, between us, alive. They can be scattered, a teaspoon at a time, to all corners of the earth, the wind carrying it continually on to new places. They are light and freeing. The inheritance of Jack’s life and memory is contained within his ashes. He has fallen from the leaning tower of Pisa, been scattered from a cruise liner off the shores of Iceland in the midnight sun, sat on the main stage at Glastonbury, floated in the canals of Venice and been carried on the wind at the top of Mont Blanc. He has been to New York, ridden in the back of a limo and been placed lovingly under the boardwalk at Coney Island. He has been in every ocean. He has seen 21 locations simultaneously on his 21st birthday, from Australia to Edinburgh. He was been bottled and set downstream in rivers. He has been carried in jewellery, placed in temples and left in cathedrals in Spain, Italy and Quebec. He has ridden on roller coasters; he has been tossed from Brighton Pier and Beachy Head. He has been held by children, friends, family and strangers. He has even been thrown on stage and caught by Nick Cave during a concert in Brighton in 2008. In death, he is everywhere.

The microscopic detail revealed within it something universal and unchanging, transformative and freeing. Suddenly I was not looking through the lens of a microscope but instead the lens of a telescope. The space between his bone galaxies was inflating and he was moving with it. I was looking up at the stars. Through the backlit Petri dish, I saw the individual particles opening out and moving away from one another. In death, he was expanding. He was getting bigger, everywhere, not confined to a body in time. I saw the unravelling of the universe. The series of microscopic post-mortem photographs taken that day have allowed me to live through his untimely death.

The photograph goes hand-in-hand with family life, constructing a narrative through the family album. We record all the significant events and achievements of our children’s lives, except death. Part of my album was missing. The image has the power to separate something important, from everything else. It allowed me to frame death differently. The last photograph has become a mediation that is confirmatory and life affirming. When I look at it, I am looking up at the stars; I am looking at the past, at Jack, at death, at all I do not know, in wonder.

When he shall die, take him and cut him out in little stars, and he will make the face of heaven so fine that all the world will be in love with night and pay no attention to the garish sun. (Shakespeare 1992, p82)

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*memory in Everyday Life.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

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**List of Illustrations**

**Fig. 1** Willow, Lucy. (2006) *The Last Photograph*C-type photograph