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Paper Caskets

by

Emilia Danielewska

A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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Paper Caskets  
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### Author's Declaration of Originality

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### Abstract

“Paper Caskets” is a collection of prose poetry that reveals and exposes the dead. The manuscript, made up for four parts, proposes a poetics of the box – as coffin, as prose parameters of the page, as photograph, as state of mind and body in the face of death. The poetry partially draws inspiration from postmortem photographs of children, recounting how the bodies come to have their pictures taken and how those who work and mourn affect the process. The poetry also locates death in the everyday: in the garden, on the beach, at a dance recital. Between artistry and absurdity, “Paper Caskets” looks beyond grief to see the dead as dynamic places where memory and body collide, where flesh rots and fluid seeps and we de/compose poetry.

*for B.G., E.A., W.G., & H.L.*

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My sister, for being only one wall away.

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# PAPER CASKETS

Emilia Danielewska

## Part 1 – Tintype Children

## Laverna

Laverna, born and thrust into her mother's arms, umbilical noose still around her neck, her lips bruised blue. At the funeral the pallbearers, two uncles from her mother's side, balance the coffin on their fingertips. Petite Laverna buried inside the depths of a pink fleece blanket, only her face peeking through, a garland of wildflowers arranged around her body. The wind blows, the coffin rocks.



Alfred

He is already quite stiff when his parents bring him in. His mother had clothed him in a dress shirt and pants rolled at his ankles. Leather booties laced to his feet, the most difficult part of the whole ordeal, she confesses, but she wants him in his Sunday best. This will be his last photograph, after all. He passed yesterday, at two in the afternoon. Sick with pneumonia for the past few weeks. We grease back his hair, shiny, healthy. On the photograph I'll paint his eyelids white, add two blue pupils. We prop him up using a wooden stand I have in the studio, drape a little arm over a chair for extra support. Then we stage him with some flowers, like he's delivering them. The camera takes a few seconds to draw the portrait. Most kids I find difficult to keep still for so long. Not Alfred. They place him in a coffin directly after the shoot and pallbear him out the door.

## Gloria

Gloria was a house call. I brought my equipment in the evening and the parents set me up in Gloria's bed for the night. A spacious room on the second floor, high ceiling, a vague vinegar scent lingering from the floorboards. The wardrobe filled with folded cotton dresses. A shelf of porcelain faces with glass eyes hanging above my head. I slept well. In the morning two servants dressed in matching grey suits cart Gloria from the cellar to the drawing room, dress, undress, redress, her hair in rollers. Prop her in the stuffed lilac armchair, then the navy floral. I coordinate her limbs, reposition her arms, cross her ankles, loosen a piece of hair and let it fall across her shoulder, angelic. Scuttling servants bring tall vases from the foyer and rearrange them, from foreground to background. I situate myself behind the camera; wait for the sun to rise just above the second muntin, illuminate her linen skin and clothes.

## Violet

I'm not allowed near Violet. Her body, posed and propped on two praline cookie tins, greets me when I walk in through the door. Her parents dictate how far away my camera can be, at what angle I can stand, the set-up, her posture, the way her exposed hands drape across the front of her dress. She had recently taken a pair of scissors to her head and cut off too much hair to salvage her look. Those perpetually furrowed eyebrows, her tense lips, *what made you so unhappy Violet?* The small puncture wound above her forehead, I keep picturing the scissors, tips first, sharp enough to slice her youthful skin, *but you can't die from a bad haircut, can you?* Her mother unclasps the pearls around Violet's neck and secures them to her own. Her father pays me extra to remove the "forehead thing" from the final photograph. As he opens his suit jacket I glimpse a leather holster hugging the side of his dress shirt. They leave before the winter sun rises. Violet, dressed in polka dots.

Aaron

This year, an unusually hot summer. Aaron leans on a cushioned armchair in the living room, his body bends easily and the neighbour from B6 tells me his bones shattered in several places. All the apartment windows closed mid-July. The parents, the grandparents, aunt Joanna, Lida from C2, Kasia from B5, all crammed into the kitchen, bent over the table, whispering "...grated flesh..." I set up the camera, "...stained pavement." His entire head bandaged, a white gauze wrapped around and around until nothing peeks through. Nobody can tell me why they want a picture of a cloth ball with limbs. He learned to climb, first, by pulling himself up onto the couch. His next climb was onto a chair, which he used to reach a shelf, and then onto a windowsill. His head peered through the open eighth story window, he stretched out his arms, laughed at the air against his cheek, his face met cement. For the photograph they layer a grey suit overtop the clothes he wore when he fell, unwilling to peel the fabric from the skin.

## Charlotte

Her mother let her play in the park across the street from her house alone, watching through the window while she washed the dishes. Charlotte sat on the swings for hours, kicking her legs out into the sky, folding in her knees, again and again, a lacy pendulum. When we get to the park, me with my Brownie folding camera and Charlotte in her white coffin, three children play... Charlotte wears a full pink skirt and white lacquer shoes. Her father hoists her up onto the swing, crouches behind her, his right hand on her back, left holding her head upright. Hands unable to grasp the chains, so we tie them with cooking twine, run it through her sleeves and up the back of her jacket. I wait for the wind to die down before taking the photograph.



Tessa

Apples were Tessa's favourite. She ate them sprinkled with cinnamon, sometimes in the mornings, sometimes as a treat before bed. Two-year-old Tessa, constantly chasing her brothers in the backyard, digging holes with spoons she slipped from the dinner table, the bottoms of her dresses needing re-hemming every half week. Cinnamon sprinkled apple, the only enticing object to lure her inside. Quarter past twelve the grocer delivers a bushel of apples to the studio, marked as market's best – Grimes Golden & McIntosh – *for Tessa, love always, dad*. A selection for her coffin, props for her photo shoot, I sneak myself a York Imperial for lunch, slowly twist the stem, a... b... c... d... e... f it snaps. F. Frederica... Fanny... Fever. Tessa's ran scarlet, pretty common in my work. The bell above the studio door rings, "...an apple will rot, how could you even suggest..." The door swings closed behind the couple, her mother pushes a doll into my hands, pristine and porcelain, "this, I want this in the photograph." I don't mention the apples, or the picture I already took.

## Margot&Margret

Her mother, first seeing the doll during a shopping trip, and thinking Margret had somehow crawled onto the shop's counter, turned around so frantically that her heel caught a groove in the hardwood. The hurried rotation of her hips knocked little Margret to the floor. Margot was her consolation; the two became inseparable. Two weeks later, when Margret burned her hand on the kettle, so did Margot. Seven months later, when Margret contracted the fever, so did Margot. Sore throat and soaring temperature, the rash first spreading up Margret's neck, creeping onto her cheeks, and then on to Margot's, or possibly the other way around. All over in a week and two days. Those porcelain cheeks, painted with Margret's mother's rouge, still staining Margot's face when I take the picture. Margret, pale and waxy.

Nicole

Spread out on the dining table when I walk in. Her arms flat at her sides, dressed in pants and a white dress shirt. Her blonde, curly, shoulder-length hair spread out on the table, stray strands stuck between her eyelashes, tucked between her lips and two plates. Her mother greets me at the door with a fistful of cutlery, three Yorkshire terriers winding in and out of her legs. "You've made it in time for dinner," she ushers me inside, arranges the silverware, brings out bowls with pork chops and potatoes, piles them onto my plate. The dogs rest their snouts against my toes and cry quietly for leftovers. I sit in front of Nicole's nose, a metre away from my own, shoulder to shoulder with her mother and we eat. To my left, the curtain rises and falls with each gust of wind and outside the window a bird whistles, a neighbour shuts the door. Under the table a dog's nails tap against the hardwood, and my jaw clicks when I chew on the right side of my mouth. I pile potatoes onto my fork, my knife scraping against the plate; the tines accidentally tap my teeth. Her mother eats with one hand, the other resting on top of her daughter's. After dinner she clears the table and I set up my new, imported Butchers Carbine.

## Lucy&Buddy

Her father wouldn't let me take Lucy right away. I advised her parents that every minute coaxed the body further into putrescence and decay, that in a day, two days, a delicate body like Lucy's would dissolve and be unmanageable. "We're not ready. Buddy *isn't* ready," her mother's lips quivered. So they kept her, face up, in a sty filled with ice. Buddy didn't come home from the taxidermist for four days, and it took another to set up the shot. The blood beginning to pool on Lucy's arms, a deep purple bruise under her chin, her feet and back completely livid. Buddy, however, a piece of art – the open mouth, curious eyes – about to lick his mistress's hand, one paw raised as if he was tugging on her dress, *come play*. Lucy, liquefied limbs and extinction scented, surrounded by her ball, flowers, best friend. Before leaving I make sure to ask for the taxidermist's name and city.

## Grace&Nancy

I make Grace&Nancy hold up Grace&Nancy for the shot. I don't remember which is which, but my subject's the one on the right. Their father brings them in one September morning, surging through the swinging door, nonchalantly slipping a bill to my current appointment before herding his daughters – one hand on his live daughter's neck, the dead daughter squeezed between his chest and forearm – in front of my current backdrop, pale blue with a tinge of apricot. The family's been meaning to take this picture for a while, but then Grace&Nancy got sick, so better late. "Actually, I told their mother I left the photo at the office," he lets slip, "she doesn't know I'm here." At first we have trouble keeping Grace&Nancy's head up, her neck slouches to her chin and Grace&Nancy's arms tire. We decide to use a stand, secured behind and around Grace&Nancy's neck, and I paint on her eyes, which I later carefully dissolve with some olive oil before her father slips her into the backseat of the carriage like a plank of wood.

Jesse&Jonah

Their mother leaves the room while I take the photograph. Jesse&Jonah, three months and two days, joined from the breastbone to the bellybutton, two distinct cries, but only one heartbeat. I hear the oven door open, slam shut. A squirrel scabbles across the roof. Their twin older brothers play with blocks in the pantry. Jesse&Jonah rest their heads against each other's, strands of thin brown hair intertwined. A wooden bowl clatters onto the floor, the swish of a broom. Posed on their parents' bed, their body the same size as the crushed velvet throw pillows that pad them on either end. Four cramped scraggly arms and two feet peeking through a satin gown, twenty fingers and ten toes. I slip out the back door in the kitchen; no mother baking pies, no children plotting in the corner.

Meta&Mida&Minta

Their aunt floats around them, delicately lifting up their arms with her thumb and forefinger. She arranges their hands, first straight at their sides, then gently across their bellies. She tilts their heads, Meta to the right, Minta to the left, and takes care to balance Mida's head so it doesn't lean too much to either shoulder. She combs her fingers through the organza, blending their gowns together, tucking the fabrics underneath each other until they merge into one cohesive sheet. Their mother watching from her bed on the other side of the room, her own body buried in blankets up to her neck, four fingertips hanging off the side of the mattress facing the triplets, faintly trembling. Throughout my shoot, I can hear her mumbling...

mine            mine    mine

## Timoty&Eliza

Two bodies, one bed. Timothy&Eliza wear matching cream coloured gowns, small pleats across their chest. I shoot them from the waist up. Tim, a year old when he contracted the chicken pox. Quarantined too late, they spread to his sister, eleven-year-old Eliza, destroying her life, too. I position Eliza's arms; arrange her left fingers across her right hand. Timothy's arms still too short to cross comfortably so I rest his wrists parallel. The wall behind them covered in ornate wallpaper, tea coloured with green and purple flourishes. Their mother holds out an embossed copper photo mat, asks if she can order a picture that "fits this" since it "matches the wallpaper." Sixth-plate tintype, I nod and make a note.



Renée

The family gathers into the living room: mother, father, a boy of about ten, and his four younger sisters. The smallest, Renée, born and died two months premature, is laid out on a table in her baptismal gown, the only dress that was ever exclusively her own. Like her sisters, she would wear hand-me-downs. White netting hangs from a raised stand, drapes over her body and around the bouquets of carnations surrounding her, some carnations larger than Renée's head. The family sits, three on each side. Two large prints of both sets of grandparents hang framed on the purple and gold patterned wallpaper. Just as I take the picture, the youngest living daughter squirms out of her father's lap, disturbing the symmetry. Her face blurred in the photograph.

Lily

The garden bursts and blooms, the air smells like nectar and flesh. Guests eat biscuits and sip tea around the lawn, women in woven floppy hats, flowers pinned to their rims, men in light linen shirts. Rows of roses and gardenias line the fence and in the north corner grows a small orchard of apples. One of her sisters and two of her brothers chuck fallen apples back and forth, use each other's backs as step stools and pick the fresh ones, sink their teeth into sour peels. Strings lined with small paper ornaments strung across the yard, from the roof to the back fence near Lily, laid out in a sundress, white with red polka dots. The afternoon hot and sweat pools underneath my necktie, soaks through my tunic. Lily, outside since before I arrived. Her white painted coffin rests in a trough of ice underneath an oversized parasol. A crown of silver cosmos around her head.

Victoria

They sit, stoic. The father runs his fingers through his hair, adjusts his bowtie. His overcoat dark chestnut, same as the coffin wood. He carried it himself, cradled it for blocks, resting his cheek against the lid, up two streets and down three to my studio. The bones rattling inside the body rattling inside the box, all shaking to his step, his palms. Two streams of tears down his beard. I set up some upholstered chairs and he props the coffin forty-five degrees to the camera, slips off the lid and hands it to me. I rest it against the coffin's right side, to add a dark line to the right edge the shot, but I don't tell the father that. He sags down onto a chair as I ruffle the blanket around the baby, pull its hands out and position them centre. He holds a handkerchief in one hand; his other hand rests defeated, his knuckles bumping against the casket, his fingernails tapping the chair's edge.

Kacper

I take the photo while on the road. A funeral procession into a small church, a pinebox half the size of the men carrying it, I slip inside the door, “photograph?” Two men carry the boy towards me. His body slides loosely inside the coffin, a soft *thunk* when his head taps the upper panel. The coffin just a few inches too big, or maybe his body too dehydrated. A few days decay has flattened his fingers. I borrow a cloth tarp from the church basement and the men prop him up on a shipping container – FOR ALL COOKING SNOWDRIFT PERFECT SHORTENING – they wedge a hammer between the two boxes, angle the boy for my shot. His body skates down, his feet sink into the corners, his ankles curl. Socks cover his legs above the knees, which must be black with blood pooled against the surface.

Harold

I take a photograph of Harold's miniature casket interior upholstered with white satin, adorned with ruches and bows. Harold lies on a flattened pillow lined with scallops of snowy organza. He blends in: a white gown, thick cotton tights, and a delicate silver cross upon his chest. His grandmother kept a can under the stove to catch the leaking coal oil. Since learning to crawl, he opened all the floor cupboards; pulled the pots and steel frying pans onto the floor, knocked them against each other. He crawled across the kitchen tiles, laughing, giggling, baby talking. And then he was quiet. Harold quiet. His grandmother, preparing dinner at the counter, noticed the silence right away too late. Enough time to hear the faint squeak of the rolling pin as it scraped across the dough. She found him sitting in front of the stove, the tin can between his palms, the kerosene dribbling down from the corners of his mouth and onto his chin. The black fluid already deep in his system, coating his esophagus, lining his stomach walls, absorbing into his blood stream.

Reese

From the cottage we walk in procession. Reese's mother and father pallbear her pinebox through the front door, and I follow with my camera. Between the trees grass and foliage, a worn, narrow path leads us to a private beach and a fishing dock. Reese spent hours on the dock with her father; catching sunfish with rods he made for her out of tree branches and twine. Damp sand finds its way into my loafers. Her parents march the coffin to the end of the dock, set it down and lift the lid. Reese wears a simple violet dress with a black satin sash. A mosquito lands under my eye, takes a drink. Two days ago Reese wandered out alone, long after midnight, hung her feet off the edge of the dock, counted the shadows of fish swimming by, leaned in too close. Her mother found her floating face down, her body bumping the canoe with each wave, *thump thump*.



Vanya

Vanya comes into the studio the afternoon after his christening, his hair still damp. His mother brought him a week earlier, but each time I focused the camera Vanya would scream, his neck twist, and I'd hesitate over the capture button, sure the photo would produce a demon not a baby. I told his mother and she left, only to come back "while the devil's out and the holy spirit's fresh." She lifts him out of his stroller, bounces him in her arms, "Vanya will behave today, he's wearing the same baptismal robe all my children wore..." I sit his mother in a chair, drape her with a sheet of black satin, arrange Vayna on her lap, her voice muffled, "...I've seen your pictures, you make children look divine..." Dead children. Who don't blink or cry. Don't complain that their noses are cold or their arms stiff. "And make sure you get the entire robe, especially the crochet detail at the bottom," dead babies don't have bad photos, "... I'm sending this picture to my sister back in the Ukraine..." no re-dos, "...Vanya's such an angel..." at least today he looks dead enough.

## Part 2 – Obituaries



Eugene

Eugene will be right in. His wife Clara flicks the light switch on her way inside the house and his next step triggers a deluge of light from atop the rising garage door. He shuffles into a dirty lawn chair, coated in car exhaust, at the mouth of their driveway. Ash, dust, the garage air a blend of oil, wood, and soil. Forty years of machinery hang against the walls, garden tools tucked atop the rafters. This summer Clara will find the crumpled LCBO bags he hid behind the cupboards, secret insulation, more stashed atop the basement's ceiling tiles. Last summer they sat out here, dragging their chairs between the shade and sunshine, a pitcher of water resting on the car trunk. The garage light barely spreads past the edge of the house, greyscaling across the pavement until it reaches blackness just past the corner of orange bricks. The driveway extends for a couple metres more, up ahead it crosses the sidewalk and blends out into the road, but he can't see that far. November nuzzles up against his skin, stiffens his joints, his neck tenses against the cold plastic. The house to his right, Clara inside slipping into her nightgown, folding the bed cover into a neat rectangle and stacking it on the dresser with the embroidered pillows; the same routine every night. On the left, his neighbours' house, a shrub and flower garden running between the wall and his driveway. In two years the neighbours will sell the house and the new owner will rip out the flowers and vines and bushes, even the roses because they look like weeds. She will bleach the grass with pesticide

on both sides of the chain-link fence to kill off all the roots and cover the remaining soil with smooth, grey garden stones. He inhales November. Chicha the cat pokes her head into the light of the driveway. In four years she'll find herself on this driveway for the last time, her stomach flat, spilling out, the pavement damp with blood and intestinal fluid, dragged up from the road; she won't make it to the front door. Clara will make sure to bury Chicha in the backyard, by the old tomato garden. He sinks lower into his lawn chair, outside just over five minutes. Twenty minutes ago leaving his sister-in-law's house. In three minutes Clara will step outside in her nightgown, ask him what he thinks he's still doing, tell him to get inside and go to sleep. The garage light will go on as she opens the back door. In ten minutes the ambulance will leave the driveway without turning on the sirens.

four years from now your  
neighbours' neighbour's  
house catches fire twice,  
once by accident, once  
because he didn't know  
what to do with the body  
dragging from the bed to  
the kitchen to the fire  
hydrant across your  
driveway

Helena

Helena's been in bed for seven weeks, a skeleton. Hedwig tries to make her eat, at least drink something. Someone is always in her room, watching her, watching her watch the *Bold and the Beautiful*. Hedwig, Stan, Karoline, Hedwig, Stan, sometimes Marcin her grandson, sometimes Marcin her grandson in-law. Two summers ago she watched Karoline get married in the new church they built on the edge of town, skipped going to the reception, the wedding the last time she stepped out the front gate. A week ago Hedwig gave her a sponge bath before the priest came over to administer her last rites. Helena, ready then, but still here, her bed sheets smell of holy water. Every physical she's had tells her she's in great shape, but every few months it's a new joint or a new muscle – still great for 93 Hedwig tells her, as great as 93 can be. At night she's awake and waiting. Dear Lord, why haven't you taken me yet? I'm ready Lord, just take me already. Tomorrow Karoline will brush her hair; they'll watch the *Bold and the Beautiful*. She'll ask Stan to read her a passage from one of his romance novels. He'll read her a passage about the protagonist missing her lover. Two days from now she'll look around at her parlor bedroom, a couch, glass coffee table, bed, TV, she'll say goodbye for the – undreth time. She'll say goodbye to the quilt Hedwig bought her at the new shopping complex, to the curtains that have been greeting her every morning for the last 10 of the 30 years she's lived with Hedwig and Stan. She'll find a new scratch on the wall next to her nose to say goodbye to. She'll ask Karoline to

leave the closet door open so she can say goodbye to the little pink granny sweater her grandson Marc sent her from London, Canada, hope they don't bury her in that. Goodbye to the tie-at-the-neck secretary blouses she wore in the 70s, trendy again 33 years later, good thing she kept them. Three days from now she'll eat two spoons of Hedwig's chicken noodle soup, the tin can taste both repulsive and nostalgic. Stan will read her the new garden pruning article he wrote for the town newspaper. Talib the dog will run in the room and she'll scowl at him in her head. The cat will bat her tail from the window in the evening. Midnight, Hedwig, Stan, Karoline, Marcin & Marcin will be in her room. False alarm, back in bed by 1. Back around her bed at 3, Hedwig with her under the sheets.

when the *bold and the beautiful* first aired, 1994  
poland, seven years after  
the usa, at least 6000  
episodes deep now so  
entwined with the day-to-  
day behind the glass  
screen the show will go on  
even when your contract  
expires

Walter

Walter stands up, four in the morning, he can barely make himself out in the vanity mirror. Stella opens her eyes, always acutely aware of him in relation to her, what angle, how many metres. The bedroom feels foreign, like waking up in a hotel half way across the ocean. The bed, the vanity, television static behind every eyelid hovers around him. The room lit pale navy. A decade ago his daughter held sleepovers in a tent she set up in the backyard. The girls would sneak out after midnight. Sometimes he'd stand behind the curtain until he heard the gate click shut, the tent zip closed. That's why he's awake now? May and his daughter in her twenties, she hasn't sneaked out in years. "Are you okay?" "I'm fine," he says and collapses. Maybe it's 210 pounds hitting the floor in the room next door, or maybe it's her mother's shriek, his daughter jolts out of her dream and runs. No fire, no wire, obviously not, but 13 years of swimming floods into her mind, soaks her skull, clogs her ear canals. Hands over his chest, 30 compressions. Her mother stumbling into her slippers to call an ambulance. No fire, no wire, no gas, no glass. Chin up, plug nose, two breaths. Fire, wire, gas, glass, pump, pump, pump, breathe, breathe. Fire, wire, wireless. Internet. Dad didn't let her have the Internet in the house until high school; she spent her afternoons in the library trying to catch up with the world for a maximum two hours at the terminal per day. The year was 2004. Fire, pump, pump, wire, breath, breath. Gas. Glass. Dad stores his extensive

collection of bottles in the basement bar. Glass cat bottles of wine, sampled sized glass bottles of liquor. For her birthday parties he mixed mock cocktails until she was 17. Pump, breathe. She holds her breath while she pumps. Pump, breathe, mustache in her mouth. Pump, pump, jump on one leg and shake her head in the opposite direction to get the water out. Pump.



her butterfly stroke from  
the bleachers, chlorine  
lungs & orange swim caps,  
scallop through the water  
faster faster faster her  
bedroom walls ribbon  
lined - first place! - here  
and for you

## Talib

Talib's the king of the neighbourhood. He knows this because he never has to wear a leash when Stan takes him out for a walk. He roams where he wants to roam, but mostly they tread down the block, up 4th street, around the fishing pond at Green park. Sometimes he'll get a few stick throws into the water. He makes sure to mark the trees on the way, and the fence post, and the garbage bins. He saves his pee all day for these evening walks, rationing out enough to cover all his territory, he is king. Sometimes it's not enough, but he'll still do the hind leg raise on all the usual spots, for show to other dogs, local or visiting. Sometimes he'll break away from Stan, refuse to walk back home, stay a day at the park, in the forest, maybe go down to town, chase the lady dogs. Stan will go home, watch the evening news, leave the gate open and stay up just a bit later to open the door when Talib shows up barking after dark. Tonight he doesn't bark, but he's managed to drag himself up the stairs onto the porch, smearing blood on the yellow steps, Stan already asleep. It'll be a dry burgundy when Stan finds him in the morning, clumped in the fur around his neck where his flesh separates from the muscle underneath. Four years ago, in the summer, Stan's son Paul thought it would be funny to tie a baby bib around Talib's neck, it was their daughter's, Stan's first granddaughter, and he'd kept it all these years in a drawer with his own children's mementos. They laughed until Talib escaped from the front gate and came back two hours later sans bib. No luck with his neck. Five months from now, Stan

will adopt a new dog, Maya, a short-legged Corgi who won't run as fast as Talib but will have to wear a leash on walks. In two years she'll escape her leash for less than two hours and return pregnant. They'll name one of the puppies Talib, but they'll give it away and who knows what doggie name the new owners will choose: Rufus? Buddy? King?

you crank your neck when  
you hear *na spacer*, ready  
to run, feed ticks with your  
blood, paws against  
pavement, grass, dirt, a  
branch to throw catch  
throw keep away mutt  
smell in the air makes you  
wild chase

Ella

It started with her ear, just a bump, an itch. She scratched until it scabbed over. When her daughter was seven a colony of bees moved into the walls of their basement living room. For several months they went unnoticed, pollinating her garden, laying eggs and hatching in-between the plywood. First she started finding dead bees on the carpet, in her laundry, and then the humming of thousands of wings beating against the wooden panels, first a low vibration – she told herself was just in her head – escalated to a consistent murmur and then: Bees started to burst out, pushing their way out of the drop ceiling tiles, falling on the coffee table while she smoked, pulsing in the bathroom vanity. She called her brother and a beekeeper and the three of them removed the panels, the bees crawling from the walls, expanding like out of a clown car. The beekeeper gassed them, plucked out the queen, and drove them to his honey farm. She changes the gauze around her ear twice daily, cleaning the pus and blood. Two summers ago, when her daughter left for university, a woodpecker took a liking to the decorative cedar panels outside the house, continuously pecking at the same hole every morning, *peck, peck*, her alarm clock. Radiation seemingly killed the bump, but as soon as her hair grew back two inches she felt a familiar itch underneath her skin. Her daughter took a semester off from school. Last autumn a squirrel found a hole in the roof and squeezed its way inside to build a nest. As the spring approached she could hear the patter of scurrying across the ceiling overtop

the living room. She sits in her armchair and follows the noise with her neck. The bump consumes her, eats her from the inside, nestled inside her body, sucking her skin tight against her bones.

cat paws swat your face  
early morning birds  
warble when the sun rises  
go outside car alarm down  
the street, neighbour's dog  
howls through the fence,  
each footstep slaps ground  
vibrate through your spine  
ear scratch listen scratch  
scratch

Bogdan

Saturday night and the kids are out. Bogdan's at home with the three boys, because that's what grandpas do. Sebastian and Nick, upstairs playing computer games in their bedrooms, one hand cemented to their mice, the other hand swapping between a can of coke and the keyboard. Grandpa downstairs with Jacob, watching X-Men on pay-per-view. Jake dressed as a cross between Indiana Jones – whip – and Rambo – knife and headband. Toys litter the floor, mostly army men and dinosaurs engaged in a full-on war, monster versus machine. Two weeks from now Bogdan leaves on the annual fishing trip he takes with his son in-law. He'll have to organize his fishing tackle this week. The cabbage rolls his wife made tucked away in the basement freezer. He won't get a taste. The movie background noise against the lake water of Northern Ontario, the smell of gutted fish. He fed the boys some Hawaiian pizza before the movie, Nick and Sebastian disappearing up the stairs with their plates. The way the dragonflies swoop around the dock in the evening, his beer and his fishing rod. Four months from now his prediction will come true, his first grand-daughter born on a Tuesday afternoon. He'll never get to meet her, but she'll wear his crooked nose. The noise of the boat smacking the water when it comes up against a wave. In two days his brother in-law's brother motionless and cold in his bed, two funerals in two days, and all that paperwork. Hooking a fat worm through the head, then looping it



around and hooking it in the middle for extra hold. When the movie ends Jake runs up stairs to tell his brothers that grandpa, “won’t wake up to change the channel.”

retired from the foundry  
since the first heart attack  
babysitting you as much as  
you babysit them the kid's  
kids grow up so seven  
years from now there's  
nine, three you'll never  
meet

Sasha

Since the knee surgery Sasha prefers to shower downstairs. Seated on a taupe perforated bench, which arrived with his mother-in-law, he adjusts the heat, lets the water flow over his head, dribble onto his lap. Ramona applies foundation in front of her vanity, smoothing out her skin, smoothing out her skin, upstairs in the real house. The real house, a nickname from when they first moved in. The plan was to section off the downstairs and rent it out to young couples that, like them, had moved to the city to work in the automotive field. But this was before illness hit Ramona's mother particularly hard one winter and she moved in downstairs. Two years later her cat went blind and she reasoned that to move away would disorient him. When the cat wandered a bit too far from the sidewalk she wept loudly, Sasha and Ramona could hear her at night with their door closed, and by then she didn't have many years left either, though, in line with her stubborn nature, she held on for another fourteen. He thinks about her every time he showers in her shower. He leans forward; the water slides down his back. He leans back, lifting one leg at a time, letting the stream dribble down around his ankles. He continues to move his body under the stream like this, fighting his stiff tendons, trying to spread the heat evenly across himself, his body cooling faster than the water can warm him. Ramona putting on her perfume – Estee Lauder Youth Dew – the scent the same one she's worn for thirty-one years. He forgets what her skin smelled like when they were still young. Estee now

penetrates the bed sheets, the living room furniture; he smells her when he opens the garage door. Tonight, dinner at his sister-in-law's. An hour later the water still runs, completely cold, creeping up against the edges of the shower, sloshing gently onto the tile floor, a narrow stream trickling through the door into the basement drain. Ramona upstairs asleep in the living room armchair, the morning news muted on the television. The decaf coffee she made him lukewarm on the counter.

down six and eight stairs  
to get to her domain even  
though she's been gone  
eleven years her reading  
glasses rest on the table  
top magazines tucked  
under the coffee you  
recycle sears fliers with  
her name every three  
months

Derrick

He starts and ends his day on the porch. A Heineken before noon. He gets up at 9:15 to weed the lawn. By brunch he's watched two new dandelion buds spread out their petals and face the sun. He retired from the Chrysler assembly line seven years ago. Clears his throat and gulps. He makes a list of the unfinished things: painting the drywall in the attic, putting doors on the cabinets, opening the pool, those goddamn half cars. He starts in the backyard, rests his elbows on the edge of the above-ground pool. A cherry falls from the tree behind him and he picks it up, pops it inside his mouth, spits out the pit. Drains the pool of black water and algae that's gathered over the winter. The memory of a timid voice behind him asks, "When can we swim?" His wife used to babysit. He'll run a hose down the driveway so the water flows against the curb and into the sewer. He used to show the kids how to make folded paper boats to race down the stream. The backyard littered with half cars covered with tarps. One day he will Frankenstein them into something that runs. But by the afternoon, four beers deep, picks a dandelion puff, makes a wish and in one breath blows the seeds across his neighbour's driveway. In the kitchen the cabinets sit door-less, his wife could only take two years of exposed plates and mugs before she left. He opens the fridge and grabs a beer. A steak in the freezer for tonight's dinner, he'll have to clean the grill, adds it to his list of unfinished things, and microwaves yesterday's spaghetti. Maybe sell the house? Back on the porch by five, when his neighbours

come home from work, waving at them as the remote control locks on their cars *beepbeep* and they duck into their houses. As the sun sets he settles into his bed in the attic, turns on the television. The sound of the comedy channel echoes against the unpainted drywall and into his dreams. It plays throughout the next morning, the whole week. The front lawn a jungle of gold and green. The unpainted attic, the un-doored cabinets, the undrained pool, the uncovered cars, the unscrapped barbecue.

pile firewood from your  
trunk to front lawn your  
neighbours' backyards bring  
drinks your lonely porch  
talk global weather talk city  
politics relish the last few  
weeks of temperate breeze  
retreat to your living room  
desolate winter in the un-  
house



Vivian

The blood pressure machine's constant *beep beep beeping*, a barely noticeable rhythm as Vivian checks her blood pressure once, twice at least four times in a row. Pulls up a chart on her computer screen where she tracks her progress, writes today's average, one-oh-eight over seventy-two. There's a small lump growing on the side of her tongue that she diagnoses as not a canker sore so she rinses her mouth with dentist prescribed Peridex every night. Sits at the computer, typing in her symptoms – sweating, itchy forearms, veiny eyes – grouping and combining them until something emergency worthy peaks her interest. She has her doctor's secretary on speed dial, number 4 after her husband and two daughters. She's drafted a catalogue of safety rules: before her daughters get in the driver's seat she repeats, "drive slowly, check your blind spots, pay attention to other drivers." When they go dancing on the weekend, "never put your drink down, go to the bathroom in twos." Before sleepovers when they were young, "don't burn candles." Before leaving them home alone, "don't forget to turn the stove off. Don't open the door for strangers. If someone calls and you don't recognize the voice, tell him or her I'm busy... And don't jump, don't ever jump." When her daughters were in primary school she drove past the playground in the winter to make sure the kids weren't outside for recess when the wind-chill was too high. So afraid of accidents, so afraid of dying. She has come close twice, once when she lost her footing in the shallow end of a public pool before

learning to swim, and once in a car accident. She was driving, her daughter, three years old in the back seat, when the car behind them collided into their back bumper and sandwiched them between a semi. When she was nine her mother almost died during childbirth, forty-six years she lives twenty houses down the street and comes over on weekends for orange pekoe.

*beep beep* your blood  
pressure and check check  
the wall outlets unplug  
unnecessary electronics  
and check check that the  
lights are off get in the car  
get out of the car to double  
check check that the door  
is locked check

## Part 3 – Skin Graft

## 7 Stages

1. colours abandon your face
2. chill until room temperature
3. rigor mortis
4. blood rush pulls your bruises to the surface pools beneath your thin skin  
mauve
5. organs boil, churn paste from your abscess acidic delicious you swell up and  
ooze from the orifices
6. unwrite your history and wilt into simple matter, feed plants with your  
nutrients destroy, confine, position, erase any semblance of your face and  
leave behind your scaffolding
7. find you at a dig site, brush the dust from your bones, fine frail, piece you like  
a puzzle, build you from your toes to your skull, speculate about the colour of  
your hair, how many sugars you like in your tea

Gossamer

Post mortem pale. She taught herself how to swim when she was thirteen so she wouldn't have to wear lifejackets in Michelle's backyard pool. They would float away the afternoon, eat dinner, swim until the sunset. In the water, the colour of her lips faded from a neutral pink to bruised blue, matching the pool liner. That same blue, now the colour of her apartment throw cushions, the mug she drinks her morning hot chocolate from, the box holding her eyeglasses, and the highlighter ink throughout her notes. All the adults commented on her lips, the onset of hypothermia, and how she needed to get out of the water right this moment. When she turned sixteen she started wearing Vegas Volt lipstick, a bright creamy orange in a sleek black bullet tube. Her complexion always the lightest shade of foundation available. Pale peach, ballet pink, eggshell, transparent. Michelle used to tease that her face was transparent – the layers of skin underneath her eyes so thin her veins showed. "Are you feeling okay?" Her mother could always tell when a migraine loomed. Her face drained after tap class, she couldn't take the noise of the shuffle hops, ball changes, the metal against wood of twenty other feet. Her head pulsing in tune to the recital music. She had to drop tap lessons and only danced in soft shoes, ballet and jazz. Her face never cooperates. The slightest blush flushes her cheekbones scarlet, stress from upcoming exams breaks out her chin and forehead. She's tried a few brands of foundation, learned to mix it with a heavy duty concealer, it's hard to erase the dead girl look from her face, her sunken eyes, the way her hands always radiate cold.

## The Whale

Pieces of blue whale rain from the sky. Blood and fat and digested krill scatter the beach, chunks fly far above the sand dunes, land on parked cars and break windshields. Brine and burnt skin, slightly fishy. Technicians, reporters, and city officials dart beneath the fleshy hail, throw their arms above their heads, shield their eyes, their jackets smeared with drops of liquefied whale, meat in their hair.

The whale washed up on shore early Sunday morning. Its body stretched across the beach, 26 metres long and two people tall. Died out in the ocean, the waves gently rocking it from the depths to the sand. The sun rose and the salt water beat against its back until the whale had lodged itself securely on the shore. By Monday, families filled the usually empty November parking lots. Parents posed their children with the creature. By Tuesday the city had blocked off the beach. They stuffed the whale with dynamite, confident that the blast would disintegrate the giant, dissolve its decomposing body, clean it from the shore. Cheap and easy.

## Gooseflesh

Mid January, many degrees below zero, dry air, high winds, pajama pants. Locked out of her house, not the first time, but never in this weather and in this outfit. She heard the crash, slipped on some shoes, her jacket, grabbed her camera. Neighbours already outside, rushing to the mangled car with blankets, calling 911, neighbours she's never seen before accumulating in the middle of the road. She stands on the edge of her porch, takes a few pictures to show her parents, one of the glass scattered on the road, a close-up of the dented SUV and the broken fence, she walks back to the door... No hat, no gloves. The wind ignoring the fabric of her pajama pants, slapping her legs dry. The sirens getting closer. Her hands still holding the camera, red and dry, she takes another picture of emergency vehicles. Her neighbours excitedly chatting in the street, taking long drags from their cigarettes, drinking coffee from ceramic mugs. Her ears numb. A man removed from the front seat of the first vehicle, declines the stretcher, limps towards the ambulance. The other car already empty, the owner speaking to the police. A trembling snapshot.



## Archeology

Bones beneath damp sand, and soil that when squeezed between her palms, falls apart when she reopens. Stray grains of sand lodged in the crumbling skeleton pores. Bones, just large enough for a small child. Two ribs, a femur. A day of rain and heavy wind unearths the sandbox cellar, over in the far corner of the park, near the benches where the parents sit, where children won't play in case their parents call "we're going home." She's a 4-year-old archeologist, digging to the other side of the earth. She finds a dinosaur. Keeps a bone, slips it into her pocket to bring home and stash in a shoebox below her bed.

## Cremation

On the mantle a miniature vessel, a jar, created with cheap ceramic and acrylic paint. A teardrop-shaped bowl, a lid with a knob. No cookies inside, just crumbs. More fine than crumbly. Ashy powder. Twirl a fingertip inside, the ashes coat your prints, snuggle under your nails. Taste what remains. Smear across your forehead. From ash you were born, to cookies you will return. Two and a half cups of flowers by the grave. Pinch of salt, tons of butter. Chocolate chips.

## Bruises

Her first ones she doesn't remember, she only remembers the kisses. Then there was the bruise from standing at the bottom of the hill while the boy on the bike rode down. They tumbled; bike, boy, her, boy, bike, grass. Her arm bruised from her elbow up to her shoulder. Multiple bruises from hitting herself off corners of doorways, doorknobs, end tables. She inherited clumsiness from her mother. The completely inexplicable bruises: the bruise on her pinky finger, the bruise above her eyebrow, the bruise behind her ear, the bruise on the side of her neck – or was that one a hickey? The bruise in the shape of an elephant on her left thigh. With a trunk, tusks, one big floppy ear. She used a pen to fill in the smaller details – an eye, long eyelashes – she wore dresses, lifted up their hems, performed the bruise until it faded. Then the bruise she got in the bar on Hallowe'en from tripping when her wizard cape caught underneath the stool. That bruise gripped her leg well into the Christmas season, gravity pulling the blood in her body, drooping from mid-calf to below her ankle, a tapestry of purple and rust and week-old banana. The winter also brought annual bruised butt cheeks, miscalculating the placement of the ice on the sidewalk on her walk to the bus stop in the morning. Heat, rising through the apartment floor, colliding with her puddled blood.

## Taxidermy

Start with hind legs. Route a blade up the calf where muscle meets skin. Cut a seam up belly, fur and fat. Peel. Hook hoof to a lever on the ceiling; hoist carcass off the ground. Smoke a cigarette. Strip cadaver skin, pull south, from rump, the chest, front legs, undress the neck, smoothly. At the chin saw drop the body. Dispose. Hang the head by antlers, detach pelt from bone muscle, slit away the gums, round the eye sockets, tug with tender fingertips, don't rip. Saw off skull cap horns. Clean the coat, salt dry. Eat a tuna salad sandwich. Drill the antlers to the mount, bone to plastic with two screws. Drape hide over fake face, tuck and glue, sew shut the seam and hang above the fireplace.

## Motion Sickness

She's in a bathroom in Burgundy France, kneeled over the toilet, completely letting go of lunch. She can taste quiche and quinoa, backwards from the order she ingested breakfast this morning, scratching her esophagus on the way up. Every summer her parents took road trips, driving across western Ontario, her motion sickness dictating where they stopped. She always traveled with plastic bags.

The bottle of Dramamine unopened inside her suitcase back at the hotel, and even if she brought it, she's far too gone. She's made this mistake before. Once on a car ride from Southern California to Vegas for her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, where she sipped tea all night because she couldn't keep the food in her stomach *before* alcohol. Once on an airplane when she was eleven, during a turbulent landing that made her so sick she actually used the plane provided barf bag from the seat pocket. Once in Disneyland on the virtual reality Star Wars ride, watching a 3D movie in a small moving room, jolting her forward, left right back, sitting with her palms closed and eyes sweating.

She fights her stomach muscles, but they beat harder and it all comes up in waves. Gags until only clear bile exits her mouth. But she still heaves and heaves, so hard, she's sure her stomach will force itself out through her mouth and land inside out on the pastel tiles, a splash of sour quinoa seeds on her chin.

## Composting

Playing in the dirt while her mother gardened, one of her earliest memories. She scratched the soil with a handheld rake and searched for worms inside chunks of mud. Her mother planted rows of tomatoes. Then cucumbers and beets, radishes and turnips, dill and chives and sorrel. Raspberry, blueberry, gooseberry, and currant bushes lined the back fence. Her mother took her to the garden shops and street-side greenhouses that popped up in spring. Together they walked the narrow rows of potted flowers, bought trays of sprouts and seed pouches. They'd load the car with fertilizer, soil, and red decorative wood chips for the front yard. The woodchips still there, a wine tinge underneath layers of decaying maple leaves and helicopters. The driveway empty, so she slips through the gate and into the backyard. The grass cut neat, the vegetable patch only dirt. She sits in a white plastic yard chair. In the corner, the black compost barrel. Only six when they installed it and that summer she routinely opened the lid expecting the leaves and grass to magically transform. She loved finding roly polies, poking them so they'd curl into tight balls, she'd roll them around her palm. Pill bugs reminded her mother of cemeteries, always crawling out from underneath the gravestones, snacking on the dead.

Her first boyfriend gave her two roses and a poem; one pink and the other he spray-painted black. The roses from her second boyfriend she hung upside down to dry, turned the petals into potpourri sprayed with his cologne, kept them on her desk until she moved out of her parents' house. Every weekend her chores included

dusting the potted palm, gently running a wet terry cloth over each leaf careful not to cut herself on the paper-sharp foliage. For her first apartment she bought a ball cactus. Her third boyfriend never bought her flowers. Every Tuesday she buys fresh tulips at the grocery store, like her mother used to.

At her mother's grave she planted marigolds and chives.

## Insect suicide

A cicada repeatedly slamming into the window, its wings vibrating against the glass with each impact.

The smell of a moth that lands on a light bulb and burns off its feet.

When a hornet gets greedy for fruit juice and drowns in the watermelon punch.

Ants that march in tight rows from one end of the bicycle path to the other.

Worms that squirm out of the soil on a rainy day only to drown in puddles on the pavement.

Worms that survive the puddles only to fry in the sun.

Spiders that spin their webs in doorframes.

Fruit flies that fly into spider webs in doorframes.

Mantis that are cannibalized for sex.

Mosquitos that drink long enough to get swatted.

Midges, just because they look like mosquitos.

Botfly larva that burrow themselves into wealthy tourists.

Slugs that squeeze under kitchen doorframes into lines of salt.

Fireflies that fly into bonfires looking for a mate in the sparks.

Caterpillars that snack on leaves sprayed with pesticide.

Fleas that choose to jump to the fur of well-groomed pets.

Butterflies that fly too close to summer camp kids with bug catching nets.

Houseflies lured by the refrigerator's light bulbs in the night, frozen in the morning.

Mayflies gathered under streetlamps; the crunch of several carcasses when a car drives by.



Warta

She takes a great gulp of cold sandy water as the river almost swallows her. She had just stood here an hour earlier; waist deep in the water and now the sand beneath her feet collapses. She runs in place, up the slope of tumbling sand, pumping her boney legs and arms through the water, five seconds that feel like five minutes and she's on the beach wet to her ears. She joins her grandfather by their towels; he's reading a romance novel.

In high school her father had pulled his best friend out of the same river, his arms and legs limp. He dived in head first, the river floor shallow where it used to be deep.

They come here every summer.

Her mother warned her about the currents. The swell had taken her cousin, only about four, twirling a branch in the water, poking it deep under the surface, the sudden hard flow of the water yanking the branch and the girl off the shore. The river rushing her away, her wool coat pulling her deeper as her head bobbed up and down above the waves, her small body fighting to float.

## Mixed Drinks

Basement storage, floor-to-ceiling shelving, rows and rows of glass jars. A bar stacked with alcohol preserved specimens. Jars with fish – black bass and minnows – turtles and birds and mice in ethanol. You sit back in an armchair, reach for a crystal decanter and pour a drink. Gin and tonic and fetus. Cockatiel cocktails. Vodka and canary. Shrewdriver. Take a long sip, chew. Two cubes of ice.

## Rigor Mortis

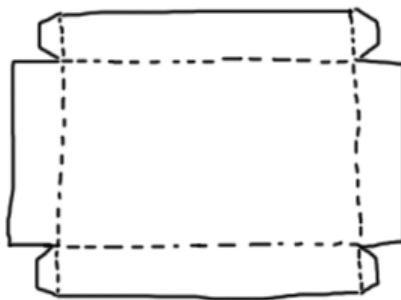
Her legs, second position. Arms above her head, curved at the elbows, confined to the floor of her apartment. The music starts. Her first time in front of an audience. Blue, sparkly tutu, ballet slippers, she follows the girl in front of her onto the stage. Lights hit her eyes and she scans the audience for her mother, somewhere among the ghosted faces. First position, heels together, plié. The floor of her apartment as cold as her skin, skin stiff, stiff muscles. Her muscles stiff rubber from the hours of practicing her plié. Another girl pulls her hand, pulls towards stage left, wades through the lights, the music heavy against her temples, her knees shake, the room pirouettes. Her heartbeat echoes throughout the hardwood.

## Origami

At four, she conducted funerals. Started in the front yard when she found a dead squirrel lying with its back against the curb. Her father wrapped the body in a dishcloth and dug a foot-deep hole in the garden. She stood over the mound of dirt, waved her hands in sharp staccato like she'd seen at the orchestra, placed a dandelion on the grave, bowed her head.

All summer she sat on the edge of her driveway, giving funerals to ants and beetles and earwigs, worms she found dead on the sidewalk and flies from her windowsill. She buried them under a brick she decorated with fresh yellow dandelions, her secret cemetery. At eight, she learned to fold boxes out of construction paper, made them in different colours and sizes. Boxes with lids and boxes without lids, a small dab of glue to hold the sides together. Lined up her creations on a table by the sidewalk, asked her mother to write a sign for "bug coffins." Her mother wrote "origami boxes" and she sold them to her neighbours for twenty-five cents.

When she was 15 her beta fish died so she folded a paper container to fit his figure, buried him on top of the squirrel.



## Part 4 – Carbon Copy

## Carbon Copy

I've worked with gold. Melted scraps into bricks and then bricks into chains and bracelets, rings and brooches. I've placed hundreds of coloured crystals into pendants to find their way around the necks of celebrities and into magazine spreads. I've set delicate diamonds and engraved the tiniest phrases into thin metal strands. Inanimate objects that, depending on the weight and colour, spell out *I adore you* (a necklace), *forgive me* (a bracelet). I made your mother's engagement ring out of platinum and princess cut. Out of all the things I've created, I somehow managed to get you wrong; my brilliant cut with the brittle bones.

Two weeks ago a man come into my shop and commissioned a ring made with "the biggest blood diamond I can buy" – his words. I thought he was kidding, but he explained how his wife's skin flushed and shivered from knowing her jewellery carried the price of bodies. He pulled out a cheque book and I told him to get out. I'd faster turn him into a diamond for his wife to wear.

When you got sick one of the neighbours came over with some brochures. She knew I was a jeweller and along with her grief counselling pamphlets she had one advertising a service that turned your loved one's cremated ashes into a diamond. A "memorial to their unique life." Your mother and I told her it wasn't necessary, and fatal wasn't in our vocabulary, but she left the leaflets in a neat pile on the kitchen table, rubbed her palm against my shoulder and said, "I know it must be hard, but it's better to prepare."

You're in the hospital two cities away and they're killing your cancer (and your carbon coloured hair) with heavy radiation. I've been matched as a donor, great news, but the transplant means the doctor's desperate. Still, when you play with the other children the nurses overhear you whisper, "my daddy is my medicine." I told you I would fill your bones with titanium if it were possible; titanium the strongest metal. You told me you liked silver better because it came from the stars.

And there are days when I think why not, why not cook you into a flawless diamond your mother can wear around her finger? It's not any more ludicrous than sitting you on a mantle in a ceramic jar your mother made at pottery class or burying you underground where we'll visit a rectangular piece of earth four times a year. Instead of a wooden coffin I'll buy a velvet ring box. *A memorial to your unique life*, indistinguishable from the billions of diamonds stock-piled in De Beers warehouses, only a handful released each year. Dear Cecil, when you began buying up all the small diamond mines in Africa did you ever stop and think about daughters? An exclusive conference room and men with suits and magnifying glasses buying diamond-packaged daughters. And Cecil, what about those advertising campaigns? Deceiving daughters into believing that love could be mined from the earth, and without carats there can be no "I dos" because a diamond is and a diamond is. And Cecil? How did you feel when you learned a chemist could recreate a diamond from scratch? It's debatable whether an experienced jeweler can

tell apart a real versus synthetic diamond, and most people can't tell apart zirconia. Laboratory built jewels with faultlessly polished faces. Carbon, pressure, semen: can you cook a daughter the same way you cook a diamond? A diamond with no blemishes the ultimate symbol of perfection. Object daughter. If I make you into a diamond will the cancer be a microscopic fleck etched underneath your surface? A woman at the doctor's office told me, "you're still young, you'll have better luck with the next one." My fist a rock I wanted to plunge into the magazine rack. I always drive the long way, avoid the cemetery.

After your diagnoses I couldn't make watches anymore. Crafting a gold band with a large hole in it felt cruel, just a big empty space where time was supposed to be. Yours the first I've made in 17 months. Silver, of course, with little white crystals all around the band. Among the crystals I hid one diamond.

I don't even know if you'll ever learn how to tell the time.

Hold you on my knee,  
twist wrap arms around  
you, press against chest,  
lock you up warehouse  
limited release, you  
in&exhale, squirm &  
squirm, I loosen, you slip  
away, jeté the hospital  
room floor



## Paper Caskets: boxing up the dead

*“A container with four sides perpendicular to the base, usually with a lid, a box can take various forms and have many different functions. At its most rudimentary, a box can store, conceal, and ultimately reveal something. It is in the act of revelation that a box can provide an emotional experience, potentially revealing objects never seen before or objects that have been forgotten [...]” (Fabijancic 233)*

Much like an open casket displays a dead body to the public, my prose poetry manuscript reveals and exposes the dead. The casket, the photograph, the prose poem – these are all physical and metaphorical boxes that exist synonymously with one another. In my thesis, the box serves as both paratext and context as I look to negotiate spaces of death and mourning, challenging the idea of looking at, handling, (and reading) the dead. In “Secret Places,” an essay about the history of photographers depicting the dead, Val Williams writes, “as living people, we have a certain privacy. Death obviates this as the dead body becomes a public object” (10). About the photographers that depict the dead, Williams writes: “More often than not, [photographers] have produced photographs which are documents rather than constructs and this presence of ‘the real’ is undoubtedly disturbing. Rather than reflecting on the nature of death in a metaphysical way, they have looked unflinchingly on its physicality, in the mortuary at the end of the street, at the hospital round the corner” (17). Similarly, the body and the processes surrounding death become public in my thesis, “Paper Caskets,” as readers contemplate the numerous deaths, acting as witnesses, confronted with bodies preparing to die and bodies being prepared after death, all while posing for a poem.

Margret Atwood’s poem “This is a Photograph of Me” starts by first describing the scenery – “in the background there is a lake, / and beyond that, some low hills” – only

to later state that “the photograph was taken / the day after I drowned” insisting that “if you look long enough, / eventually / you will be able to see me” (3). The poem suggests that one must look below the surface to locate the (dead) poet. Instead of a simple ekphrasis, Atwood presents a narrative *fait accompli*, perhaps implying that there is a narrative, a truth, about the poet under the lake, one that the reader must actively search for. In a similar way, “Paper Caskets” asks readers to look beyond grief, to see the dead as dynamic places where memory and body collide, where flesh rots and fluid seeps and we de/compose poetry. But unlike Atwood’s poem, my narrators cannot control their stories post-death; rather, their lives up until death, along with those who mourn, handle, and read the dead command their remembrances. More than an exercise in ekphrasis, my poems propose a poetics of the box – as coffin, as prose parameters of the page, as photograph, as state of mind and body in the face of death.

Structurally, “Paper Caskets” consists of four sides (or parts), each part presenting its subjects at various stages of death. In part one, “Tintype Children,” I begin with the photograph: a four-sided box that captures a discreet moment in time. This section, a collection of prose poetry inspired by postmortem photographs of children, examines the notion of artistry, absurdity, and sentiment in looking at and “preserving” the dead body. Part two, “Obituaries,” moves backwards to the moment of death of a character, examining the boundaries placed on the stories of those who are dying by structurally evoking the shape of the coffin. Part three, “Skin Graft,” continues with a collection of prose poems overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, about an unnamed woman. While no longer about a dead subject, the poems in “Skin Graft” explore the dead through the notion of nostalgia and the processes that surround death and the funeral. I call “Paper

Caskets” a photographic text, not only because it presents the reader with photographs of the deceased, but also because the prose poems throughout the manuscript focus on giving a poetic portrait of their subjects. Lastly, part four, “Carbon Copy,” a “snapshot” short story about a father dealing with his daughter’s terminal illness, boxes together the themes of the preceding three sections while “boxing” his emotions.

### **Photographs**

To scholars such as Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes, an inherent relationship exists between death and the photograph, independent of the picture’s content. For Sontag, “photographs actively promote nostalgia. Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. [...] All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s mortality, vulnerability, mutability” (15). [...] Photography is the inventory of mortality” (70). Barthes considers himself as a subject being photographed: as he freezes in a pose he observes himself being turned into an image, the subject becomes object, an experience Barthes describes as “a micro-version of death” and as “becoming a specter” (13-14). To Sontag and Barthes, the photograph functions similarly to a coffin. Since a photograph freezes only a precise moment, the information presented in a photograph must fall under scrutiny because although a photograph has the ability to reveal, it also has the ability to conceal, distort, and manipulate – to contain a moment, as if a type of “still-life” portrait. This is especially the case in many memorial and post-mortem photographs, which present the subject as merely “sleeping,” or to a further extent, in photographs that paint open eyes in postproduction<sup>1</sup>. A photographic narrative, then, must

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<sup>1</sup> Evi Zemanek describes two types of postmortem photographic portraits: the *mortuary* portrait, depicting the dead corpse and the *mourning* portrait, portraying the dead as if still alive (84).

also fall under scrutiny. Early portrait photographs required subjects to pose for several seconds, staying as still as possible, often resulting in straight, stern gazes and empty, ghostly stares, their faces coming across to contemporary viewers as “death-like.” Curiously enough, the subjects in “Tintype Children” do not need to stay still for photographs – they are already dead – however, several of the people in charge of their bodies experience an awkward reversal, sitting their children upright, tilting their heads and lacing their fingers, trying to imitate “life.”

In “Homage to Nadar” the poet Richard Howard presents a collection of poems inspired by photographic portraits. Critic Evi Zemanek says the photographs and poetic portraits exist “side by side on an equal footing. The pictures do not merely function as illustrations, but form the point of origin for the poems. Although the poems comment on the photographs, they can be read as verbal portraits in their own right” (80).

Additionally, Howard’s collection includes a poem based on the deathbed photograph of Victor Hugo, which Zemanek describes as, “striking for the contemporary reader because of the feeling of embarrassment caused by this unaccustomed view: the close-up of a dead man presented in a context that transforms it into an object of art” (80). To look at that photo acknowledges that a dead body, typically viewed as revolting, untouchable, or undesirable, demands artistic consideration, not only for whom the body belonged to, but as an object in itself. “Tintype Children” employs a similar technique; a collection of prose poems based on a series of photographs, all of young children, taken by a post-mortem photographer, who also functions as persona/narrator. In “Paper Caskets,” the photographs act as a “point of origin” for the poems in that each poem is inspired by the moment(s) the photograph was taken; however, what the pictures depict or even what the

photographer knows or experiences does not limit the poems. Although the photographer's perspective focuses heavily on the visual – describing the scenes where the photographs take place, minute details about the dead body, or the clothing his subjects wear – in many instances the photographer also provides knowledge that he cannot possibly know. For example, when recounting Reese's last moments, he imagines that she "counted the shadows of fish swimming by" (22) and when he imagines Tessa at play time, he describes her as "digging holes with spoons she slipped from the dinner table, the bottoms of her dresses needing to be re-hemmed every half-week" (9). Unlike "Homage to Nadar," a reference photo does not accompany all the prose poems in "Tintype Children." This omission problematizes the photographer-narrator, leaving the reader to question the authenticity of the pictures taken – of Nicole "spread out on the dining table" (11) or Charlotte, hands tied to the park swing with cooking twine (22) – and to guess at the degree to which these prose poems play with poetic license. Such "over-stepping" by the person hired to record the child-subject's termination, signifies a shift from the private to the public body. In "Tintype Children" the subject becomes object in two ways: dying (Williams) and by being photographed (Barthes) – a delicate territory for those who wish to hold on to the living memory of the deceased and to the photographer who must operate in both realms as he, "[rests the lid] against the coffin's right side, to add a dark line to the right edge of the shot, but [he doesn't] tell the father that" (19). The photographer figure in these poems is both employee and artist. His words and actions dually negotiate the embarrassment of touching and spectating a dead body for both the characters and the contemporary reader.

In “Tintype Children,” the photographer-narrator exposes the process and preservation of death memorabilia, sometimes absurd or extravagant, through his interactions with the dead and those close to the dead. Readers of “Tintype Children” are put in a paradoxical position: while intimate details bring readers closer, allowing them to connect with the subjects, the mostly unsentimental and curatorial voice of the photographer also encourages readers’ skepticism. While the photographs detail the subject contained, the accompanying prose-poetry documents the absence from the frame of the photograph, projecting the future absence for these subjects. Similarly, in *Camera Lucida*, a photograph of two little girls looking at a primitive airplane above their village affects Roland Barthes. He recognizes that “they have their whole lives before them; but also they are dead (today), they were dead (yesterday),” acknowledging that all photographs of the living will, in the future, be photographs of the dead (96). For Victorian parents, the photographs provide memory of their beloved child, no longer living; ironically, the children who do grow into adults do so rarely with photographic evidence of their childhood. The narrative of the poems in the first section works to illustrate the tension between the real, now dead, character and how relatives and those who work to preserve the body negotiate memory. In my poem “Aaron,” for example, the photographer openly questions why the relatives want him to take a picture of a “cloth ball with limbs” (7), as Aaron’s face is so bandaged as to appear unrecognizable in the photograph. In “Tessa” tension arises from the question of what inanimate object would best preserve Tessa’s memory in her photograph—an apple or a porcelain doll (9). In “Lily,” the reader may question the motivations behind displaying the girl’s body at the garden wake where the “air smells like nectar and flesh” (18). By providing such pungent

details, my narrator puts the reader in a position that both questions and sympathizes with the actions taken by those who handle the deceased bodies.

These poems occupy a peculiar space, being both about the children and about the photographer. Besides the beloved child's body, what goes into the box is the parents' grief, and the photographer's artistic will. As parents and relatives cope with mourning the deceased, the photographs lead readers to negotiate the photographer's role in the mourning process: he oscillates, in these poems, between his role as hired staff, as photographer, as neutral observer, and as photographer as artist. Comparably, in his personal essay "Embalming Father," poet and funeral director Thomas Lynch reflects on his experience embalming his father's body. He describes both the personal and the professional, from how he and his brother (also a funeral director), "hugged each other, wept with each other" to how his father's "circulatory system made the embalming easy," and in the end discovering that, by "embalming [his] father [he] was reminded of how we bury our dead and then become them" (86-87). In "Tintype Children," the photographer does his best to accommodate his customers. In Violet's case "her parents dictate how far away [the photographer's] camera can be, at what angle [he] can stand, the setup, her posture, the way her exposed hands drape across the front of her dress" (6). He advises Lucy's parents "that every minute coaxed the body further into putrescence and decay, that in a day, two days, a delicate body like Lucy's would dissolve and be unmanageable" (12). He comes across as professional, sensitive, and also practical. However, in many cases the photographer's treatment of the bodies suggests artistry in the handling of the dead: in "Gloria" the photographer states, "I coordinate her limbs, reposition her arms, cross her ankles, loosen a piece of hair and let it fall across her shoulder, angelic" (5).

Such lines indicate his ability to negotiate the function of both servant and witness, adapting to the situations at hand, and revealing his own engagement with (and poignant reactions to) this custom of recording the dead. In doing so, perhaps, these moments of artistry reveal the photographer's own mortality.

Furthermore, as the manuscript progresses, readers themselves become the stand-ins for "the photographer" as the perspective switches from a first-person narrator in "Tintype Children" to a (predominantly<sup>2</sup>) third-person narrator in "Obituaries" and "Skin Graft" to a second-person narrator in "Carbon Copy." This shift allows readers to interact with the text (or the dead) on a more intimate level, pulling from "photography's powerful potential to define mortality" and using it to, as Greg Hobson says in his essay detailing the history of representations of death in photography, "explore the nature of dying, death, grief and mourning" (20).

### **Frames**

In *The Truth in Painting* Derrida considers the frame beyond a boxy enclosure, but more generically as a species of *paragon* (Derrida 61). The *paragon* is that which is "outside" the *ergon* or work<sup>3</sup>. For Schwenger, "one must put into quotation marks the idea that all these are 'outside' the work, since they are paradoxically also 'inside' it as well. The frame [...] literally shapes the painting within it, determines its composition, while separating it from the outside: from wall, public space..." (101). Structurally, the prose in "Obituaries" visually resembles the form of a box: the text justified so each edge creates

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<sup>2</sup> The boxes attached at the end of each prose poem in "Obituaries" and a few poems in "Skin Graft" are written in second person.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida borrows this term from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Kant's examples include the draperies on statues, the colonnades on buildings—and frames.



a straight line, with a blank rectangle within each prose poem. These narrative sections present a reversal of the visual art frame as the text or *ergon* acts as a frame around a blank space, an empty box where (in the case of a painting or photograph) the main body of work would appear. By inserting empty spaces into each paragraph, I physically create tension between the said and the unsaid, especially concerning the topic of death. Similar to what poet Tina Darragh does with the dictionary in *A(gain)2st the Odds*, pulling lines from one source and superimposing them onto another text, my poems physically push words to the side, creating empty spaces that suggest an inherent yet unseen fullness. But whereas Darragh creates disjunction on the page, in “Obituaries” I evoke the poetics of the box and its dual ability to reveal and isolate. Each narrative in “Obituaries” acts partially as an (actual) obituary, detailing the characters’ last moments before they die. These characters have come into adulthood, and thus contrast the children in the photographs in “Tintype Children” by their lived experiences as well as their perceived preparedness for death. Moreover, the limited-omniscient narrator is very close to each character, often conveying last thoughts or concerns. In contrast to the dead children characters from “Tintype Children,” these dying voices do, in some ways, get a voice, get to tell their own stories. Even though each prose poem still comes to readers via a separate narrator, readers will have a sense that they are “inside” the head of each character, unlike the voyeuristic sense in “Tintype Children,” where the only voice communicating with the reader is the witness/artist/photographer. Much like the photographer figure in Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter*, the narrator in “Obituaries” writes beyond the subjects’ immediate circumstances. Ondaatje’s Bellocq photographs the prostitutes of New Orleans’s Storyville district; his photographs do much

more than detail their profession, capturing their vulnerability. He values the women, first, as objects of art instead of objects of sex, a situation they are not used to:

She now offering grotesque poses for an extra dollar and Bellocq grim and quiet saying No, just stand there against the wall there that one, no keep the petticoat on this time. One snap to quickly catch her scorning him and then waiting, waiting for minutes so she would become self conscious towards him and the camera and her status, embarrassed at just her naked arms and neck and remembers for the first time in a long while the roads she imagined she could take as a child. And he photographed that. (54)

Comparably, the dead bodies in “Paper Caskets” are artistic vessels, containers for stories, and places for invention, not depressing and distasteful subjects. Additionally, the prose poems in “Obituaries” allow readers to contemplate the mortality of the characters beyond just the cause of their eventual death. For example, in “Ella” the “bump” that infests Ella’s body contrasts the animals that invade her home (37). Her disinclination to deal with the invasions speaks to Ella’s recognition of her own body and illness. As Schwenger might say, Ella is “boxed” in by the house as both physical paragon – the box that contains Ella – and metaphorical paragon – the infestations that mirror Ella’s illness.

In the opening pages of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Michael Ondaatje includes a blank frame with a caption, suggesting that the framed white space is “a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked” (5). W.F. Garrett-Petts and Donald Lawrence argue that when it comes to Ondaatje’s blank space inside a rectangular frame, most literary critics or English teachers “ignore the visual dimension altogether” or try to “domesticate it by treating the visual vernacular as simply

one more textual referent” (157). To Garrett-Petts and Lawrence, “the white space is both emblem of absence and an invitation to consider the material presence of the page (or canvas) as object.” They believe that Ondaatje “presents us with his version of a literacy narrative, [...] a composition that speaks of an authentic engagement with the material world and argues for an appropriate rhetorical response” (157). In “Obituaries,” while the prose details the last moments of the characters’ lives, there arises a tension concerning the textually empty space. The blocks of absent prose evoke both the physical and the metaphorical. On one hand, there is the coffin or the hole dug to fit it, and the coffin’s paradoxical fullness and emptiness. Perhaps this blank space holds a photograph? The space where the reader turns photographer? Or perhaps the empty box metaphorically fits everything about the characters’ lives that the prose omits? The shape and size, repeated throughout all the pieces in “Obituaries,” creates a narrative anxiety: no matter the life, everyone ends up in the box. After examining photographs from artists who were inspired by what happens during and after the moment of death, Hobson concludes that, “the moment of death is not sudden, but somehow suspended, giving us time for reflection” (22). Annet van der Voort, for example, takes portraits of preserved heads from medical museums, attempting to visualize the border between life and death. For Hobson these portraits have a “diabolical glamour, appearing as if in cryogenic suspension, or as lost souls, searching for a way out of limbo into whatever awaits us after death (25). The moment of death in “Obituaries,” although the characters’ last moment, still shapes or “frames” their life, just as much as their life frames their final moment. For example, in “Walter”:

Fire, pump, pump, wire, breath, breath. Gas. Glass. Dad has an extensive collection of bottles in the basement bar. Glass cat bottles of wine, sample sized glass bottles of liquor. For her birthday parties he mixed mock cocktails until she was 19. Pump, breathe. She holds her breath while she pumps. Pump, breathe, mustache in her mouth. Pump, pump, jump on one leg and shake her head in the opposite direction to get the water out. (32)

Walter's dying moment causes a sensory overload in his daughter who works to save his life with her poolside CPR training, while at the same time negotiating a random memory of him.

The prose poems in "Obituaries" conclude with a series of pages that contain one square poem per page. This boxed poem appears in the same location on the page as the empty space in its companion prose piece, except these text-squares appear alone on the page, framed by the blank paper. At first glance, these poems may look like a "key" to the prose they accompany: because they fit the blank site physically, perhaps they also provide information to unlocking some greater meaning in the piece? They follow the same order as their companion pieces, and one could piece together to which prose poem they belong by content. However, the disjunctive sentence structure suggests that these box poems do not provide a straightforward resolution for the reader. For example, the box in "Bogdan" reads:

retired from the foundry  
 since the first heart attack  
 babysitting you as much as  
 you babysit them the kid's  
 kids grow up so seven  
 years from now there's  
 nine, three you'll never  
 meet

(42)

The text appears to be another snapshot, a different kind of textual photograph from the life of the character, this time written in second person. The Bogdan box reveals the heart attacks, but leaves the details ambiguous. The compact structure of the box poem evokes the coffin, this time its fullness, the disjunctive language suggesting that there is more to be said, refusing to be contained by both the walls of the box and by death. When Sontag says that to photograph a person is to violate that person, she means that “capturing” someone inside such an artistic “box” gives the photographer knowledge of people that they do not themselves have, turning them to objects that can be symbolically possessed (10). These “extra” boxes at the end of “Obituaries” provide readers with an excess of information about the characters, but in many ways, underline the gaps in knowledge that those characters possess about themselves. These “snapshots” violate the character’s minds, picking and choosing from fleeting memories, thoughts, and fears, making those a focal point for the reader.

### **Cadavers**

The poems in “Skin Graft” act as poetic snapshots that both capture and challenge mortality and the character’s notion of nostalgia. Throughout “Paper Caskets” a majority

of the prose poems act as stand-alone pieces, making it difficult for readers to linger – or “mourn” on any one single death. However, the majority of “Skin Graft” focuses on one unnamed, living woman. The woman is left unnamed partly so readers can more intimately focus of the “death” that surrounds her and partly to contrast the several named characters who only appear in one (possibly two) poems. In several poems in “Skin Graft” the character’s memories reflect on her mortality. Similarly to Frank Davey’s matter-of-fact tone in his novel *How Linda Died*<sup>4</sup>, I take a curatorial role as the poet, documenting moments in the character’s everyday tinged with fascination for objects and processes of death and immortalizing dead bodies. “Gossamer” describes this character’s appearance, “the layers of skin underneath her eyes so thin the veins showed” (54). “Origami” describes the first time she buries a dead animal, innocently conflating the idea of a funeral and an orchestra (68). Living moments juxtapose with moments of mortality. For example, “Composting” lists flowers:

Her first boyfriend gave her two roses and a poem; one pink and the other he spray-painted black. The roses from her second boyfriend she hung upside down to dry, turned the petals into potpourri sprayed with his cologne, kept them on her desk until she moved out of her parents’ house. Every weekend her chores included dusting the potted palm, gently running a wet terry cloth over each leaf careful not to cut herself on the paper-sharp foliage. For her first apartment she bought a ball cactus. Her

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<sup>4</sup> In *How Linda Died* Davey documents his wife’s demise from an inoperable brain tumor. Throughout the book he maintains a matter-of-fact tone, recording moment-by-moment realizations without elaborating them with metaphorical language, recording the events as they happened and not romanticizing Linda’s life and death.

third boyfriend never bought her flowers. Every Tuesday she buys fresh tulips at the grocery store, like her mother used to. (62-63)

Upon close inspection, this passage presents more than an inventory of flowers and implies several deaths in the text: the death of the mother, the death of flowers (by spray-painting or drying), death of several relationships (at least three boyfriends), and perhaps the death of youth as the character grows up and moves out on her own. Flowers that represent love and hope and spring, also (as poets such as Robert Burns and Walter Raleigh have suggested) hint at death and decay. In this poem, the character relates gardening to the memories she has of her deceased mother, ultimately planting “marigolds and chives” at her grave (63). Thus, the character’s way of negotiating her mother’s memory comes through via her linking traditional flowers and untraditional chives, suggesting a fragmentation when faced with the reality of the dead.

Moreover, a handful of poems in “Skin Graft” (“7 Stages,” “The Whale,” “Cremation,” “Taxidermy,” “Insect Suicide,” and “Mixed Drinks”) do not use the “she” pronoun, instead opting for a second-person “you.” The tone of these 2<sup>nd</sup>-person prose poems is unsentimental, and dispersed between the “she” poems they create room for readers to negotiate their own emotions when examining death and their attitudes towards processes and objects of bereavement. For example, “Taxidermy” depicts the process of mounting a deer head – “Saw off skull cap horns. Clean the coat, salt dry. Eat a tuna salad sandwich” (60) – juxtaposing the dead with the everyday while also reminding readers of the presence of an “artist” who works in the territory between the living and the dead. The emotional divide between the gritty work needed to gut, clean, and preserve fauna and the idea that such work can generate art, makes for an anxious

narrative gap that my poems attempt to highlight without over-sentimentalizing. Thus, “Taxidermy” and the other second-person poems in “Skin Graft” carry a serious, yet slightly humorous tone.

### **Diamonds**

“Carbon Copy” serves as the “fourth side of the box” in that it connects and concludes the previous three sections of “Paper Caskets,” cumulating and further mediating the manuscript’s themes. “Carbon Copy” takes the form of a poetic short story that details a jeweller father dealing with the possibly terminal cancer of his young daughter; the poetic address in this section works at a dual level: as second-person address to the narrator’s daughter, but also partially to Cecil Rhodes, founder of De Beers diamond cartel. Much of the monologue muses on the notion of death transforming the private into the public. At first, the father-narrator takes offense at his neighbour’s proposal that he turn his daughter’s ashes into a diamond; however, his private grief conflicts with his nostalgic longing for memory and the preservation of death memorabilia. In part, my entire thesis addresses the discomfort with the dead: the accumulation of the photographs in “Tintype Children,” the empty spaces in “Obituaries,” and the mixing of the everyday with the dead in “Skin Graft” situate death and the everyday together on a level plane. The poem “Cremation” conflates baking cookies with preserving ashes in an urn: “Twirl a fingertip inside, the ashes coat your prints, snuggle under your nails. Taste what remains” (58). Such wordplay forces readers to confront death in the everyday. The build-up of “Carbon Copy” eventually leads the father-narrator to vocalize his feelings about the absurdity of



contemporary material commodification of death, as well as nostalgia taken to absurd extremes of fetishization:

And there are days when I think why not, why not cook you into a flawless diamond your mother can wear around her finger? It's not any more ridiculous than sitting you on a mantle in a ceramic jar your mother made at pottery class or burying you underground where we'll visit a rectangular piece of earth four times a year. Instead of a wooden coffin I'll buy a velvet ring box. (71)

Furthermore, the jeweller father negotiates the space between his art and mortality, stating that, “crafting a gold band [for a watch] with a large hole in it felt cruel; just a big empty space where time was supposed to be” (72). Much like the photographer from “Tintype Children,” this narrator acts as witness and intermediary for readers, but this time one who is intimately connected to the child, rather than outsider. He is grieving the death of a daughter still alive, he is making a textual box for her, boxing his current memory for nostalgia and longing. Whether daguerreotypes of dead children posed as if still alive, blank textual spaces of characters alive moments ago, urns filled with ashes, or jewellery boxes with carbon remains, the poems investigate how very different characters negotiate the space between death and mourning, between story and empty box. “Carbon Copy” (and, indeed, “Paper Caskets”) concludes with a boxed poem at the end – similar to the “extra” poems found in “Obituaries,” but without a discernably physical gap in the previous prose narrative. In this way, the textual addition – rather than representing a physical absence, serves as a bleak reminder that the coffin is already built, that this “snapshot” will soon be one of the dead, an unavoidable piece of mourning photo-poetry inescapable of human anxiety regarding death. The father narrator is busy boxing up

moments with his daughter, trying to negotiate her memory while she is still alive. The box – the photograph, the coffin, the poem – a place to store memories both pleasant and unthinkable.

### **Coffins**

In *Thresholds of Interpretation*, Gerard Genette refers to paratext as the liminal devices – such as front and back covers, jacket blurbs, indexes, footnotes, and table of contents – that control how a reader perceives a text (2). But paratexts, according to Finkelstein and McCleery, become zones of transaction that serve for a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading of it (14). After death, the photograph, the coffin, the headstone, these all become “zones of transaction” for grief, memory, and reflection; they become paratext. These physical places inspire the paratext throughout “Paper Caskets”: the interplay between the prose poem and photograph duos in “Tintype Children” or the box shape of the prose in “Obituaries.” When considering Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Garrett-Petts and Lawrence speak of an “invitation to consider the material presence of the page (or canvas) as object” (157). Consider this manuscript: confined in your hands as a paper casket. You hold a stack of four-sided pieces of paper containing a “completed” text (unless, of course, you’re reading it on a computer, or a tablet, in which case the box is still there but perhaps not as tangible). The paper holds and displays the text much like a coffin holds a body during memorial viewings, the font imaginably a new suit, the margins comfortable satin bedding. The text itself “dead,” unchanging except for the meaning(s) your reading imports. By reading, you participate, look at, publicize, and remember the dead.

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