

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

How to Cite: Edelson, M. (2021) Developing with Death. *Gothic Nature*. 2, pp. 299-304. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

Published: March 2021

Peer Review:

All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a fully anonymised process.

Copyright:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access: *Gothic Nature* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

COVER CREDIT:

Model IV, 2017

Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

WEB DESIGNER:

Michael Belcher

Developing with Death

Micaela Edelson

Two dead bugs. One on the wall, the other on the floor. Concealed by a stack of old newspaper and a single Birkenstock. They lay as trophies of my triumph; strong enough to do the deed but too weak-stomached to dispose of the refuse. Brave enough to make the attack but too cowardly to confront the consequences. Their remains haunt my half-developed independence, while the spill of blood anchors an aura of mortality that seeps under my skin, aging my blood like an old Pinot. Legs splayed and bodies flat. Brownish goo spreads in the final trail of its existence. Their souls leave behind battered bodies exposing life in its physicality. The one certainty. How many simple beings have been lost to a shoe or cleaning spray? How many bug families wait for their loved ones to never return? How many come across the corpses of their brethren on their own journey towards the promises of prosperity? How many can face their fears?

When I was a child, I wanted to be an orthodontist receptionist, then an optometrist. My early desires to make the most money with the perceived least amount of work carried me through the first part of life. As I grew older, my will to have a positive impact on the world transitioned my preferred profession to an environmental lawyer or corporate sustainability executive. My Marxist self now smiles at my past dreams with affection as my new aspiration lays in stewarding the land on an organic farm in the countryside. My transitory desires parallel my changing being, my knowledge acquisition, my perspective shifts, and my openness to the other.

At 25 years of age with a determined path ahead and the knowledge and experience to get there, I stand at the peak of my convictions in my being and an openness to more, yet I face a hardened world of obstinance and exclusivity. Although I no longer have to question who I am and how I'll be, I observe a society teetering onto the edge of social and ecological collapse. I now question how and if the world will be, whether I can be certain that the ground won't give way between my feet.

As I transition into adulthood, taking the reins in my own life and the responsibility to murder my own bugs, I am faced with a generationally unique torment: a palpable precipice of ecological and societal ruin. At the peak of my blossoming, I witness a global pandemic claiming over two million globally, a climate catastrophe indifferent in its attack on whole species and ecosystems, and a deep, deep political polarisation threatening the stability of my country's survival. I've seen my fellow bugs venture into the unknown along the paths their predecessors set, I see the newspaper of unrestrained corporate oligarchy and the Birkenstock of ecological doom narrowing in to attack with apathy and custom.

A Dying World, A Divided Country

I observe as our environmental indifference at best, exploitation at worst, convene on the edge of humanity's cause and effect. Deforestation accelerating the emergence of zoonotic diseases, while our globalised and delicately dependent system accelerates its spread. Wildfires ravage the forests of the West and penetrate the lungs of its residents, displacing millions, and claiming 35 this past year. Unlike the pandemic, this is annual.

Our atmosphere has rebelled against our anthropogenic emissions subtly over the years through warmer summers and colder winters. But, like the Black Lives Matter movement, whose National Anthem-kneeling could not peacefully bring about change, our climate revolted. Mega wildfires erupted on the West Coast and central United States, flattening towns and countless trees, animals, and insects. I watched from Salem, Oregon as the apocalyptic orange of the sky and raining ash permeated an atmosphere of mortality, while the silence of humanity's causality coloured the losses with denialism and random misfortune—a fate not too unlike the splayed bugs in my apartment.

The colonial victories of the Western want for wealth and power surpassed our balance with the natural world long ago. They have stretched for a new dominion—a declaration of supremacy even over our fellow beings.

Our societal indifference towards the lives that are and will be lost from the pandemic or climate change parallels our repudiation towards death—if we cannot value life, there is no consciousness to embracing death’s deliverance. Our individualist, societal disregard for quarantine and protecting the vulnerable and elderly complements the impact that our present climate inaction will bear on our vulnerable and young into the future. Black and Brown people lay at the intersections of both global disasters, systematically more vulnerable because of environmental health inequities and differences in employment type.

We have forgotten ‘indivisible, with liberty and justice for all’ despite the urgency to unite and resist against a changing climate and a corrupt system. The polarisation of our country is being pushed to the brink of total separation with each side blaming the other for societal tensions or political and economic disenfranchisement. Democrats vs. Republicans, Degree-holders vs. Degree-less, Millennials vs. Boomers, Vaxxers vs. Anti-Vaxxers, Urban vs. Rural, and most recently, Maskers vs. Anti-Maskers—all pointing fingers, shaking heads, and tsking teeth instead of working together to resolve the issues presented.

The social unrest has been disquieting. The rhetoric on either side marking the ‘other’ as violent and anti-human does little but marginalise our species further. Approximately 30 people have been killed across the political protests this past year. Murderers stand on all sides. I fear that regardless of the outcome of the past election and the eventual resolution of COVID, the tension between sides will regress into the Civil War that never saw closure.

As dry grass and overgrown underbrush fuel wildfires, polarisation and hate fuel the media in their broadcasting of us vs. them. Their profiteering and side-blaming for COVID inaction or economic disruption, climate change or poor forest management practices, racial equality or violent looters—tears at the fabric of our society in a time where close-knitted kinship is needed more than ever.

Accepting Death

As I enter the plateau of my lifespan, I look at the paradigmatic emergence of death's frequency as a forewarning, as a precursor to the blight in our eco- and social system. The ecological balance has been disrupted and we have defied the natural order by imposing supremacy over the Earth and over our fellow beings. Anthropogenic carbon emissions, deforestation, soil degradation, soil, air, and water pollution, all accumulate in an assault against the home that brings us sustenance and life. In a planet that promotes equilibrium and mutual dependence, our domination has built on top of our planet and each other like a single-block Lego tower—higher and higher, until the base can no longer support the ambitions of the top. I fear we are toppling.

Instead of slowly withering to a ripe age on my organic farm, I fear my life might be cut short from one of the many external fates that humanity has inflicted upon ourselves. I would love to die after a valiant life of fully living and loving, but the future looms as the Earth stands over us with a Birkenstock in one hand, and a rolled-up newspaper in the other, ready to strike with a vengeful fervor for the exploitation and abuse we have inflicted. My adult life has just begun, but I question its viability to reach fruition. The uncertainty of our future coalesces in my stomach as an indigestible pit. How can I grow into full bloom when the soil below me gapes? I listen to my biological imperative and its affinity to steward new life. How could I bring another life into a world filled with so much death?

Death is not an easy topic to digest in our Western world. Our trepidation towards taboo topics of defecation, menstruation, and death in itself reveals our desire to separate ourselves from the primitive beings of the natural world. Rather than acknowledge our sameness, we deny the cyclical nature of life in digestion, reproduction, and death and push ourselves further towards a linear way of being—upward and onward to climb the corporate ladder of success, to accumulate more material goods than thy neighbor, to reach a zenith of paradise promised by our religious leaders when our eternal rest comes. Rather than accept our return to Earth's soil when our final breath gives, we hope for life beyond life, a place of promises to ease our fear of cessation and insignificance. Our smallness only prophesied when we live and breathe by our transcendence from our core. If we are not a part of the natural world, what is our purpose?

Until recently, we allowed ourselves to live without regular reminders of our mortality. We grieved for loved ones lost and gave condolences when others grieved, but beyond formalities, death was and is offensive. Even the ritual embalming of bodies divulge our denialism of the rawness of decay. The conflict between our reservation towards acknowledging our one true certainty and the ubiquity of death that has suddenly and logically descended on our system does not allow the mind to comprehend, it does not allow the heart to process. The untimely and unjust deaths of hundreds of thousands this year frame the end as an evil rather than as a universal. Instead of embracing death as an integral part of life's cycle to be celebrated with as much reverence as birth, it is difficult to celebrate lost lives when their fate fell too soon.

As underprepared as I feel venturing into adulthood, I add the compulsion to comprehend death to my list of developmental milestones to pass. With the increasing incidences of disruption-fuelled fatalities, I feel presented with a choice: to go through life with intentional indifference towards passing and loss, shielding my heart from primal sorrow; or to embrace and grieve for every and all death and final breath, every sentient departure. Will loss become easier with experience?

Death Will Come Regardless

The future is bleak, filled with uncertainty and despair, transition and hardship. But only when we mark our existence as more significant and exceptional than any other do we allow nature's finality to push our suffering. I might not be able to halt the expansion of death, but my mind can thank the soils for their regeneration and the trees for their oxygenation. I can thank the stars for their matter and be certain that their light will shine regardless of the fate of our country and our climate.

As Autumn came and went, leaves shriveled to a dying brown, regenerating the soil and giving way to Spring's blossoms. I wonder if the eternity of time will fix our transgressions. As the river flows here, there, and now, so too has our energy existed in the past, the present, and will sustain into the future, regardless of the future of our physicality.

This past year, I also lost my Aunt to cancer and my childhood dog at the ripe age of 14 years. I said a final farewell to my grandmother after bearing witness to a painful, dementia-ridden decline. I witnessed a squirrel get run over by a Honda; I watched as she took her last breath. I saw a crow take away a baby blue jay; the mother jay was in hysterics. I observed as a cluster of ants surrounded a worm and made their claim.

Death will come regardless of our societal polarisation, regardless of the vengeful atmosphere, and regardless of a global pandemic murdering a million and disrupting the entire planet. My turn will come too.

BIOGRAPHY

Hailing from Salem, Oregon, **Micaela Edelson** is a passionate writer of prose and poetry that aims to shed light on humanity's prioritisation of profit over people and our constructed relationship with the natural world. Her work has been featured in Wild Roof Journal, the Write Launch, The Showbear Family Circus, and Route 7 Review among other literary journals and platforms. Website: www.micaelaedelson.com.