

Creative
Non-fiction

(death,
fear of)

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THANATOPHOBIA

by Dan Melling

I woke up this morning to a text from my dad. Something along the lines of, *Well done on kicking the anti-depressants. On a sad note, your uncle Geoff died.* Geoff was 84. Not a bad run. Having just reached 30, I wouldn't be at all sad if 84 turned out to be my time. I'm able to say that because it's 54 years away. The time between now and then is so thick that it's impossible to see through. I wonder if I'd say the same on the 4th of September, 2072. The day before I'm due to be 84. I wonder if I'll make it that far. Or even to the end of this essay. I hope I don't die before I finish writing it. It being the essay. Mostly because of how prophetic that would make this act of writing. There's a Buddhist meditation practice called *Maraṇasati* that asks practitioners to focus on their death, including the decomposition process their body will go through, once it's bereft of life. Do I spend enough time thinking about my corpse? Or too much? What's a healthy amount? I worry that thinking about it could bring it about sooner. It being my corpse. Should I spend more time thinking about how my bones will look when they're still red, before they get bleached white? Or when my face will become all blue and bloated? When GG Allin overdosed for the final time— naked, covered in blood and shit, in the home of a man named Johnny Puke— punk folklore has it that people thought he was just unconscious and continued the party around him, posing for photos with his corpse. This might not

have happened. It depends on who you believe. Allin's corpse, in keeping with his wishes, was left unwashed and unpreserved at his open-casket funeral. People stuffed its mouth full of drugs and whiskey. The smell of shit and heroin from it must have been nauseating. It being Allin's corpse. Does a body become an *it* when it becomes a corpse or does it remain a she/he/they? Most people who refer to corpses as she/he/they were intimately connected with the consciousness that formerly inhabited that corpse. I'd never refer to a corpse as an *it* in front of its grieving mother. But I'd certainly think *it*. I wonder if I'd think similarly if it were my own child? Seeing as my own child is still only an idea, and not a material reality, perhaps. Is there a specification of life in the definition of pronouns? Is this a question for a linguist or an ontologist? Is there such thing as an ontologist? I'm jealous of linguists for their ability to pick up languages so quickly. I'm not jealous of ontologists. If they exist. I can only speak English. I cycle between wanting to learn Welsh, for how it sounds; Spanish, for utility; and Russian, in order to read untranslated Dostoyevsky. I lack the patience. I hope I don't die before I learn at least one. I don't make progress in any before moving on to the next. Languages, I mean. Above my desk, I have a calendar of old Russian advertising posters. Mostly films. I can't read any of the text. Beneath each poster there's an English translation. The picture

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for September is a propaganda poster featuring a man facing the viewer, offering a lantern. The caption is translated as *Here is your lamp, Comrade Engineer*. I've had this phrase floating in my head since the 1st of September. Every time I pass something to someone— money to a cashier, a dropped pen to a student, etc.— I have the barely-suppressible urge to say *Here is your _____, Comrade Engineer*. Most of my students major in engineering, so it might not be too inappropriate. Maybe if I had a calendar reminding me of the various stages of decomposition, that would be in my head instead. *Here is your death, Comrade Engineer. Here is your corpse, Comrade Engineer. Here is your anti-depressant, Comrade Engineer*. Since I've quit Lexapro, I'm finding it difficult to sleep. There's a skunk that frequents my garden most nights and it leaves me more time to watch him. *It* being the insomnia. When I look back on my life, it will include eras demarcated by which animal I spent my nights watching. *It* being my life. Foxes in the UK. Skunks in the US. Badgers in Portugal. Badgers in the UK, too. No skunks in the UK, though. There's a joke, in Portugal, that the four best Portuguese poets were Fernando Pessoa. It requires ignoring de Camões. *It* being the joke. Pessoa wrote as himself as well as three main heteronyms; Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos. He did this either because he wanted to write from different viewpoints— naïve writer of free-verse, formalist, futurist— or because he really believed he was several different people. No one can be certain. Pessoa probably died of alcoholism. Officially cirrhosis but possibly pancreatitis. One of Pessoa's earliest heteronyms was Dr. Pancrácio (in English: pancreatic), which could be disquietingly prophetic. I worry that meditating too much on death could bring it closer. *It* being my own death. My Grandmother outlived all predictions for bone-marrow cancer, possibly because she had Alzheimer's— she kept forgetting she was dying. She further deteriorated every time the cancer nurses visited. The medieval Christian theory of *Memento Mori* asked believers to always consider

death, as a way of reminding them of the transience of possessions and life and to discourage earthly vanity. It's a good way of convincing people to give their possessions to the church. It also produced some good art. *It* being Memento Mori. On his deathbed, René of Chalon asked for there to be a statue on his tomb, depicting his corpse as it would be three years after death. The sculpture shows his skinless skeleton standing of its own volition, holding its heart. *It* being the flayed skeleton. Who does this serve to remind of death? René's already dead. Is it an egoless act of *Memento Mori*, or the opposite? I ask for my corpse to be left rotting in a town centre, after I die. A few years ago, a friend's brother killed himself. The night we heard, a different friend and I sat in a ditch and talked about how sad it would be if one of our brothers were to die. A couple of weeks after that, his did. Is that prophetic or just coincidence? My friend's brother's corpse was the first I ever saw. Embalmed and dressed up. I spoke to my friend's brother's corpse as a *he*, not an *it*. I quit Lexapro because the world is designed to make me scared and sad, so what's the good in medicating against it? And because it made me gain half a stone. And because it made me anxious. I've been thinking about the psychedelic nature of anxiety. The feeling that total loss of ego and control is just around the corner. That if you let yourself, you'll drop and there's no coming back. That if you try to stop it, it'll be worse. *It* being the panic. A disconnection from self, but a sensitivity to everything. Goose-pimples on someone else's arm. A feeling of existing outside time. The feeling that everything is so different it can never ever be the same as before. *It* being existence. Like being a child lost on a crowded street, or a different planet. A strange reflection in the mirror. The effort to appear normal. Garbled. Personal space. Whose face is that? Whose eyes are these? Is it possible to enter panic in the same way as a trip? With the intention to learn something? I don't want to learn whatever panic has to teach me. It's like how members of various aristocracies have access to the best education available, but what they

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learn has to be limited, else they'll find their own existence to be an abhorrence. That's not what I want. Edvard Munch's painting, *Anxiety*, seems to get it. Whatever *it* is in the case of Munch's painting. The terrifying, expressionist sky, and the crowd of people with alien faces. It's set on the same jetty as *The Scream*, but at least the screamer in *The Scream* didn't have to be watched by a crowd. Is the anxiety of isolation worse than collective anxiety? No one can be certain. When Munch died, the Nazis gave him a state funeral to claim him as their own. Earlier, they'd labelled his work *degenerate art* and desposed of nearly 100 of his paintings. Better to be unpreserved and full of whiskey than used as Nazi propaganda. I'd prefer Munch's back-catalogue to Allin's, however. Munch spent a lot of time thinking about death and lived into his eighties. He survived Spanish Flu. Egon Schiele died of it. *It* being Spanish Flu. A judge once burnt one of Schiele's drawings over a candle in a court room, decrying it pornographic. Schiele's wife died three days before him and he spent the interim drawing pictures of her. He'd probably have died anyway. Schiele's mentor, Gustav Klimt, died three years after his mother. From pneumonia,

caused by Spanish Flu. Richard Gerstl once refused to appear in exhibition—that likely would have given him the mainstream success he never achieved—because it was alongside Klimt, whom he considered to be a bourgeois member of the establishment. Gerstl stabbed and hung himself in his studio, aged 25. Partially due to his lack of mainstream success. He did it after his friend, the composer Arnold Schönberg, discovered Gerstl's affair with his wife. *It* being killed himself. Committed suicide. *Committed* because it's a crime. Schönberg wrote the opera *Die glückliche Hand* about it. *It* being Gerstl's affair with his wife. Gerstl's final painting was of a post-coital Mathilde Schönberg sitting beside a mirror in his studio. He hung himself in front of it a few days later. *It* being the mirror. Mathilde died 19 years later of adrenal cancer. Schönberg was sure he'd die in a year that was a multiple of 13. He didn't. He died on Friday 13th, July, 1950, after an astronomer pointed out that the sum of his age— 76— was 13. It would seem either the astronomer predicted his death or caused it. Schönberg died of a heart attack or triskaidekaphobia. No one can be certain. He spent his last day in bed, worrying about it. *It* being death.

Dan
Melling

Dan Melling is a poet and prose-writer from the UK. His work has appeared in *X-R-A-Y*, *Fanzine*, *Juked*, and others. He holds an MFA in poetry from Virginia Tech and teaches creative writing at John Moores University, Liverpool.

He edits *Damnation* literary journal and sometimes tweets at @melling_dan.