

The Failure of Photography



Leah Mueller

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Cover art, *The Failure of Photography* by Christina Ortiz

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Printing & Binding by *Astringent Press*

IG: @astringent.press

astringentpress.com

2023 Garden Party Chapbook Contest

Free Online Edition

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To Russ, who gave me the closest thing to
unconditional love.

Merry Widow

Last Halloween, we dressed as Death,
walked to an abandoned neighborhood,
took photos. You stood on the steps

of an empty police station and leered
for the camera.

Two nights ago, I built an ofrenda
from cardboard boxes, and covered it
with strips of multicolored tapestries.

To honor the dead, offer them beverages
and their favorite treats. Arrange sugar skulls
along the perimeter to remind them
of the sweetness of life.

Don't forget pictures: you in a forest,
leaning against a picket fence,
or huddled over your first guitar, fierce
concentration on your unblemished face.

This year, I dressed as a merry widow.
I swayed in a bar amongst strangers.

I shouldn't survive with so little effort,
when you tried your hardest but failed.

Each morning, my eyes glimpse the same outlines.
Lungs inhale, release. Everything still
in working order. Another random pile of paper
strewn across the coffee table,
dishes left over from last night's meal.

Nothing to do except live.
Forgive me. I am not yet Death,
but my turn will come. Today,

I removed your altar, returned the offerings
to their original places. Somebody
needs to eat the chocolate.

13 Ways of Looking At Death

1. I drive down Highway 80 and gaze at the landmarks you enjoyed when you were still alive.

2. The farm outside of St David, with grazing, tufted llamas behind a chain-link fence.

3. The roadside yucca tree that declined with each passing. It began lopsided, as if slightly drunk, but slumped more each month, until it bent in half and collapsed. Brown leaves splay in the wind like brittle knives.

4. One afternoon, you said the tree was you.

5. Your tree is barely alive now, but you died mid-spring. I watched a cat wander across the edge of the roof next door. Your body in the narrow bed and a cat outside the window. Both oblivious to each other, and to me.

6. I fiddle with the radio, find the song “Take the Long Way Home” by Supertramp, and start to cry. God, my nerves are shot.

7. Every time we went to Tombstone, drunk cowboys embraced you in bars without knowing why. They sensed you were dying and needed a goddamned hug, so to hell with contagion. You didn’t tell them. They could see it in your face and the curve of your spine.

8. Every day I remember to look at the box of your ashes on top of the bookcase. I haven’t touched it in months. The invisible weight stares down at me

without reproach. Just the dust of bones. You are somewhere else.

9. I think about you when I brew coffee and notice how slowly the beans disappear. I make one overflowing cup, savor it the entire morning. A pound lasts almost a month. You don't need coffee when you're dead.

10. While reading through some of our instant messages last week, I accidentally pressed the video chat function and tried to contact you. After I hung up, a timestamp appeared: 7:51 PM, September 27, 2021.

11. I wonder if your emails accumulate like unwashed laundry. Hundreds, then thousands of missives you will never read. And whether one day they'll stop, once everyone figures out you won't answer.

12. I wonder if I must feel this way for the rest of my life. If I should explain to you why I don't want to always live alone. Why I still love sex and food and music. Why entire days go by without me shedding a tear.

13. One day I will drive down the highway without seeing everything your eyes touched. The landscape will fade and become anonymous. You once said the brain was like a computer that could delete data it no longer found useful. I don't know what you were trying to forget. I hope it wasn't me.

No Hero's Journey

The card told me to forge ahead,
and you agreed, turned back, and said,

“I think you need to get into that chariot and drive.”

I stood alone, flanked by sphinx-lions,
enclosed on all sides like a convict

set free to explore worlds without you,
their empty lands and unforeseen eruptions.

Too much time spent in postponement,
hands glued to reins, punishing myself for not moving.
I doubt you noticed. The chariot was mine

and not yours. Or perhaps it belonged to both,
yet neither of us could steer.

So we remained: polished wheels primed
for a journey deferred to another time
that always arrives late, or not at all.

Shelter in a Temporary Place

Wooden eye with heavy cataracts
opens and closes. I step outside
like Dorothy, hand on knob,
pale face exposed to color.

The sound of rain deafens me:
static crunch of gravel as cars
turn the corner towards the alley.

The insistence of it. News
wafts inside like a bad stench.

A woman passes, face mask snug
across her nostrils: vinyl leash taut
as her dog still strains for the park.

My flimsy door won't
hold back this tide much longer.
I flee towards another, more
sturdy than the one I borrowed.

Invaders always enter portals.
Locks beg to be broken,
wood splintered until the
hinges no longer hold.

I search for an opening
to a wide, undamaged street
and a room no one can enter
without my permission.

If I drive all night without stopping
I will outrun the bandits

and the law: the whole damn posse,
trying its best to take me alive.

Tumbleweed

Deep inhale, full exhale.
Front door opened wide,
as the dervish breeze
relentlessly chases itself.

So much life glimpsed
through dusty metal squares.

Now: mid-afternoon
sprawls in child's pose,
waits for the blackout curtain.

Rust-red mountains, painted
with a dirty brush, their jagged
fangs exposed. My home rests

on the hillside, front door screen
secured with a flimsy hook,
grip tenuous yet obstinate.

Sip coffee from a yellow cup,
watch as summer unrolls its drapery.
Perhaps I've always been here
and never meant to leave.

The wind returns me to my room
so I have given up resisting.

Pluto Line

Two miles west
on Highway 80,
buried in the epicenter
of concrete and tar.

I cross the line twice
each day: steep ascent,
followed by gradual

lowering of body
into pit. Copper stairs
lead down and down,

like Inca paths.
I crane my neck,
but still can't see the bottom.

Tourists snap photos
of themselves, long teeth
bared for the lens.

Parked minivans perch
watchful beside the abyss,
like greedy raptors.

Even the bushes
want my flesh,
and they will get it,
sooner or later.

Some part will always
be exposed, no matter
how many layers I wear.

Motel Heart

Someone always wants to live inside me,
though I can't imagine why. A folded
part of them lies tucked within my body

like a glove compartment map.
Unfold the sections, smooth the creases,
search for the lines where cities intersect
somewhere between the rest area and the next exit,
beyond the sign that reads "food, gas, lodging."

I never learned how to stay empty, never
could bear the sight of cars passing by
without stopping. My light shines for others,

extinguished only when there is no longer room
for one more exhausted traveler,
searching for a snug place to sleep.

chocolate every day

pools on my tongue
like the sex
I no longer have.

those hot late nights,
those hours of thrashing,
replaced by creamy
brown swirl, each gulp

like an orgasm.
outstretched fingers
hold dark gifts,
offer Venusian alms.

I always say yes.
no reason for coyness
in the face of
such advancing age.

my swelling belly.
each swallow's warmth,
secure as a bank deposit.

multiple squares,
one by one, until
I fear I might never stop.

let me rest a few minutes,
then begin again.

In my dreams you are still dying,

but I leave the room, miss the moment
of your departure. You shuffle about,

reluctant. Eyes downcast,
you cling to chairs and walls,
then stumble. I am unable to catch you:
your frail body runs through
my fingers like water.

I scatter your ashes
along the Pacific, at the edge
of your savage homeland
that spit you out like a seed.

You never felt good enough to be anywhere.
Each house was too small, each workplace
untenable. Now, indifferent waves
accept your fragments without question,
turning what's left of you into sand.

I am doomed to a body: that familiar bulk
with its animal vexations. I tow its weight
and pay for its maintenance.

The void has swallowed your remains,
like you always knew it would.

Each star holds one of your molecules.
The ocean will wash away the rest.

On the Border

One photograph together
in 14 years: you and I propped
against a ruined doorway frame
in downtown Naco, Arizona.

The Wall looms behind us,
brown spikes gleaming like
talons of predatory birds.

Scrawled signs outside the coffeeshop
advertise hearty tourist breakfasts, but
no one ever comes. No room for detention,

this border offers an aperture,
a pinhole to dimensions
not so different from the rest.

Next week, you will board a plane
and fly across seven states.
Three time zones borrowed, then returned.

But now, a stranger
captures us inside my phone—
you, posing with one leg extended,
and me, smiling like I haven't lost everything.

A Stranger's Bones

Under the overpass, a Ziploc bag
beckoned from cracked earth:
discarded receptacle, dusty
and still in the stagnant air.

When I pushed it with my shoe,
powder oozed from the top:
the zipped barrier had come loose.

Grainy, light gray substance,
ground into fine powder. At first,
I thought cocaine, then bulk flour,

but a woman's name and date
had been scrawled into the plastic
with a black Magic Marker.

Someone had thrown cremated remains
from the overpass and driven away,
free from the burden of death.

Thirteen years passed until
they saw fit to discard the package.
Now it lay in purgatorial mud,
twitching and oozing dust.

I picked up the bag, poured
its contents into the San Pedro River,
watched cremains drift away
in the sluggish current.

I've scattered the remnants
of my brothers, my sister, my mother,
my first and second husbands,

but I've never released a stranger's ashes.

I held in my cupped hands a substance
that was once a person's body:
a woman who ate, slept, made love,

perhaps gave birth to a child
who later threw her ashes from a car,
right before Mother's Day.

What impulse prompted such an act?
I'll never know: still, I am glad
I set the bones free to drift downstream
in search of a better incarnation.

110 Degrees and No Relief in Sight

My mother was a widow in the desert.
I will be next, but I don't know when.

I fool myself as I look in the mirror,
note my cheek bloom
and determined clench.

Though I outlast everyone,
one day I will lie down
in the same gully, surrender
to the third shift gatekeepers.

All of us crouched
together in scrub brush,
waiting for my number to appear.

The forest no longer wants me,
spits its poison into my lungs,
comes with a price tag I can't afford.

My ancestors wore dark boots
with laces, and that was enough.
Predators dispatched with clubs and guns.
Acres of trees, sacrificed for shelter.

I am too bloated to fight.
Too fond of comfort.
You were too, until the invaders
crept inside your body as you slept.

The lesson is you can never sleep.
Your eyes must always be open,
to spot all the mistakes
others will make at your expense.

My desert homework: trust no one.
My mother taught me early.

Lost in Space
(for Jeff)

In space, no one
can hear you ask,

“Do you have
a Prime account?”
at Whole Foods.

Nor can they offer
free shipping with
a thirty-day trial membership.

The Washington Post,
with its endless chatter
of neoliberal propaganda,
fades into distant memory.

Just you with your
fishbowl helmet, framing
your baldness
like a translucent crown.

Fly into the outer reaches
of the galaxy, colonize Mars
into an enormous warehouse.

No one will clock in
late for their graveyard shift.

You won't need
to count the days
before your dividends
arrive: that final billion
dollar deposit before

you explode into

a magnificent supernova,
molecules scattering
their alms to a plundered
and impoverished cosmos.

Somewhere, a woman
orders underwear
from a small online company.

Somewhere, a programmer
finds discount software
at the last Radio Shack.

You are oblivious space dust,
particles floating like
dollar bills through the galaxies,
one for each remaining star.

Feast of Love

The kindness of your eyes
above your plate. So many
meals shared over nineteen years.

No one holds the divination leaves—
how many swallows remain?

Behind you, window panes press
against the darkening mountain.

The server knows our beverages.
Mine's always the same,
served in a salt-rimmed tumbler,

yours in a martini glass
with a submerged brown cherry.

These simple hours, swallowed
in tiny sips to make them last.

Ten of Wands

This load is heavier
than last year's.

First you carried
one burden,
then five, but

before you knew,
the weight crushed
your narrow shoulders
into fragments, fine
but sharp as cinders.

Still, you lift the bundle,
hoist its misshapen branches
against your face.

Your eyes can't detect
the invisible road, as
it unwinds its endless loop.

Stay the course until
either the trail vanishes,
or you no longer exist.

The cargo will remain
long after you are gone.

Purgatory

Your body in a
single hospital bed,
tilted forward at dawn,

then backwards
in dusk's half-light.

I am still waiting
for your own light
to extinguish Itself.

Your halting breaths.
Inhale, expand.
Exhale, contract.

Days become weeks;
legs relinquish movement,
eyes lose focus
and turn inward.

In our spare room,
a plastic commode, and
two unused oxygen tanks.

Your bed stand holds
a pile of useless medicines,
chemicals, love tokens,
prayers of distant friends.

It all goes away
eventually—just a
matter of time and luck.

Not much remains

of either, but
enough for you to enter

the portal for one more day,
pupils awash
with stubborn hope.

The Failure of Photography

You and I spilled
chemicals in the darkroom;
the wall gave us electric shocks.

1970's hippie school: two
12-year-olds of opposite genders
with unsupervised lab access.

We poured stop bath into plastic tubs,
watched the images
bloom in black and white,
their buds opening wide.

Usually, we handled chemicals
like responsible adults:
disposed of toxic waste
through the sink drain,
washed our hands afterwards.

One day, in a hurry,
we spilled tub after tub
onto the cement floor:

chemicals sloshed against
dangling wires,
created a series of shocks
that reverberated through our bodies.

We did our best to clean up
before the teachers could find us
and revoke our darkroom privileges.

You and I made it back to class,
the teachers hadn't even

noticed we were gone.

They gave us unlimited freedom
while they sat in the corner,
chain-smoked filtered cigarettes
they told us never to start
or we'd end up just like them.

After the end of the school year,
we both moved to different towns
and never saw each other again.

I hope it wasn't you, but
someone else with your name:
that young man on the internet

framed for murder, found
not guilty due to insanity,
confined to the state hospital,

exonerated 20 years later
on the basis of new evidence,
but Google doesn't lie, and besides,
who else could it possibly be?

Ghoul's Demise

And so your wan face peers at last:
obituary in the hometown paper.
Your daughter calls you a hero;
she can't believe you're gone.

The man who drove you to the bus station
after you littered my apartment
with shards of broken glassware
warned you that musicians die young.

He became famous, threw himself
into the river ten years later.
You did not achieve fame:
settled into a life of unionized plumbing,

made a good salary, married a woman
who could securely cap your rage
and store it on the kitchen counter like flour.

The obituary mentioned your chef skills.
I remember you made good omelets,
worked in upscale restaurants,
drank in corners of the kitchen.

So many nights sneaking into our apartments
in Chicago, Iowa City, New Orleans, Madison,
after stealing a few hours with friends.

You always heard me: lunged from behind
closet doors, demanded to know who I was fucking.

Always the shock of breakage—
stereos, windows, half-empty plates.

You pissed on me in the bathroom and laughed,
kicked me with the toes of your boots,
so hard that bruises covered my shins.

Bruises were normal. I grew up with them:
spent my time dodging projectiles,
beaten with belts, told to kill myself.

I knew what love looked like:
faces contorted, but later contrite.
You, apologizing again. Your hands
on my body, knowing I never refuse.
Perhaps the lotus will cure us
this time, if eaten in fast, guilty clumps,

like forbidden chocolate. Perhaps
I can dive low enough to repair
everything that lies shattered on the bottom.

Reluctant Vagabond

Where would you be
if you hadn't decided to come
all this distance? Hiding inside

with your face turned away,
barely recalling your lines.

Instead, you soldier through
reinvention, lean into the weight.
You stumble, start again.

If not for me, you'd stand
under those too-bright lights,
but no one would recognize

your body, wedged
inside the same crevice,
season after endless season.

Imagine the distance from
one room to another,
crossed thousands of times:
the destination you never

quite reached. I stand on the
opposite side of the freeway.
You have nowhere left to go.

Tucumcari Satori

Toad hopped away
from the gas campfire,
made its way in my direction.
A purposeful beast,

Toad had watched the flames
from a safe distance, and
determined it was free from threat.

It paused for a moment
like a stray cat and
allowed me to stroke its back.

Toad was in no hurry to leave.
I worried it might be stunned
by a second story balcony drop
from the nearby Roadrunner Motel.

The owners pumped
60s commercials nonstop
through vintage radio speakers

and monitored their ice dispenser
for scofflaws. Toad
was zen. Toad had been
around the parking lot before.

It took off, finally,
hopping through the uneven gravel
towards the office,
in full view of predators.

Amphibian on a mission.
There could be moisture

behind the washing machine,
or some discarded vegetable matter.

You take what you can find
in the desert, especially
if you're born without

spikes and claws. Toad
hops. That is its only defense.

Meanwhile, I can barely climb
the wrought iron staircase
to my hundred-dollar mattress.

Once there, it will take hours
for me to get comfortable.

I imagine Toad's sleep
will be deeper than mine.

How to be Happy Again

1. Forget everything you know. The sum of your resentments. Your sour, arms-crossed intransigence. The way your fangs gleam in the dark when you frighten yourself.
2. Go somewhere different. Stay in the nicest hotel. Order hot fudge sundaes from room service and swim naked in the pool.
3. Rearrange your emotional furniture. Throw away that roll of film you've kept in the bottom drawer of your unconscious for two decades. You will never get around to developing it.
4. Don't look at your Blocked List on Facebook. Chances are good that you can't even remember those people, let alone the reasons for your resentment. Their once-familiar names are stacked in a row like downed trees after a storm. Beyond the clouds, a flash of sun.
5. Watch Gene Kelly in a deluge, kicking water at the camera. A cop arrives, and Kelly apologizes, wanders sheepishly in the direction of home. Seconds later, he's dancing again.
6. Cook your favorite meal. Light several candles. Wear your fanciest outfit. Sit beside yourself and profess undying devotion. Don't forget dessert.
7. When Misery shows up (and he will), be polite. Give him a comfortable chair and a cup of coffee. Listen to his sob story and nod. Then, slip out your back door and walk as fast as you can in the

opposite direction. He'll catch up with you later, but at least you can enjoy the trees in the meantime.

Acknowledgements

“Merry Widow” was previously published online by the *Post Grad Journal*.

“13 Ways of Looking at Death” and “On the Border” appear online in *Swim Meet Magazine*.

“No Hero’s Journey” was previously published online by *Evoke magazine*.

“Shelter in a Temporary Place” and “Purgatory” were published online by *Silver Birch Press*.

“Tumbleweed” and “Tucumcari Satori” appear online in *Impspired Magazine*.

“Pluto Line” was first published online by *Mollusk magazine*.

“Motel Heart” was previously published online by *The Whisky Blot*.

“chocolate every day” appears in issue #6 of *Porkbelly Press’s* “Love Me, Love My Belly.”

“In My Dreams, You Are Still Dying” was previously published online by *Lead and Pulp*.

“A Stranger’s Bones” was previously published online by *Variety Pack* (nominated for 2023 Pushcart award)

“110 Degrees and No Relief in Sight” was previously published online by *Miracle Monocle*.

“Lost in Space” appears online in *Rattle Magazine*’s
“Poets Respond.”

“Feast of Love” and “Ten of Wands” were previously
published online by *Derailleur Press*.

“The Failure of Photography” appears online in *Inklette
Magazine*.

“Ghoul’s Demise” was first published online by *Anxiety
Press*.

“How to Be Happy Again” appears online on
city.river.tree.

“Reluctant Vagabond” appears online on *Across the
Margin*.



Leah Mueller is the author of ten prose and poetry books. Her work appears in *Rattle*, *NonBinary Review*, *Midway Journal*, *Citron Review*, *The Spectacle*, *Miracle Monocle*, *Outlook Springs*, *Atticus Review*, *Your Impossible Voice*, etc. She is a 2023 nominee for both Pushcart and Best of the Net. Her flash piece, “Land of Eternal Thirst” appears in the 2022 edition of *Sonder Press’s* “Best Small Fictions” anthology. Website: www.leahmueller.org.

*But now, a stranger
captures us inside my phone—
you, posing with one leg extended,
and me, smiling like I haven't lost everything.*

“Dedicated to her late husband, Russ Van Rooy, Leah Mueller’s new collection is deeply introspective. Mueller takes the long view of our short time on this planet, and without being morbid or overly sentimental grieves for her lost partner.”

- Charles Rammelkamp, *Mortal Coil and Transcendence*

“Leah Mueller’s poems in *The Failure of Photography* create an alchemy akin to the magic of the dark room, shapes and images emerging and following the reader. These vivid poems have the feel of black and white photos with flashes of color revealed as a window sash flaps up in the wind.”

- Kelly Riggle Hower, *Winner of the Richard Hugo House Poetry of Place Prize*

