

# The Magnificence Of Life and Death

When sitting in the front seat of Patricia's car, I could only bring myself to think of how beautiful her brown hair would be if it were a dark red. Death was far away, a figure on the horizon that seemed awfully familiar but that I could not bring myself to recognize. There was no time for it. My thoughts were only focused on the movement of her index finger across my knuckles and the natural yellow color of her teeth. She would squeeze my hand and I would squeeze hers a little bit harder, passing the energy back and forth. I would tell her amusing stories about my neighbor's butterfly collection and my brother's karate tournaments and she would laugh. Her green eyes reassured me that everything was going to be ok, that this was where I belonged. That I was safe.

Then the blue Honda slammed into us from behind. I had never seen so much shattered glass except for when one of the branches from the oak tree in my yard darted through our door during the darkest thunderstorm of my youth. Glass and blood blanketed us. I quickly wiped it from my face and stepped out of the car. Calls for help, the siren from the ambulance and our heavy breathing blended together into one steady drone, a maelstrom of sounds that eventually grew numb to my ears. Everything seemed so wonderfully beautiful. The lights and the sounds, elements that I had grown accustomed to over the years, now seemed completely brand new to me. I led Patricia to the sidewalk, because of the gash on her left leg, which would later heal, but would leave a scar. The kiss she then gave me seemed sweeter and ultimately more meaningful than the one she gave me before. It was long and it was powerful. As we stood there waiting for the ambulance to arrive, I tried to match our patterns of breath, and we both knew that things would never be the same. This was a new beginning.

It is extremely narrow-minded to walk through life without considering the presence of death. Living as though you will live forever removes an extraordinary outlook on the structure of the world and the emotive qualities of life from one's perspective, because time stands still. The true concept of time can only emerge when one finally deems death to be a factor. Limited time forces the careful consideration of certain actions and the heightened sensual experience of all life has to offer. In the poems, "The Black Snake," "Chrome," and the essay, "The Limitless Heart," being confronted with death has significant effects on each narrator. Death is an intricate part of the human experience, and only when one is challenged with a near-death experience or starts to realize its significance, can the act of living truly begin.

The human experience is equally made up of both life and death. In the poem "The Black Snake" by Mary Oliver, the speaker comes upon a dead snake that is lying in the middle of the road. She leaves it under some leaves and travels on. This sparks her contemplation of death: "I leave him under the leaves / and drive on, thinking / about *death*: it's suddenness, / its terrible weight, / its certain coming" (12-16). At first, she sees death as only an exterior force that strikes without reason, but this soon sparks further investigation. Life does not just move along without cause; it must have a reason for its drive. She speaks of the will to live: "It is the light at the center of every cell. / It is what sent the snake coiling and flowing forward / happily all spring through the green leaves before / he came to the road" (21-24). The true reason for life lies in its opposition to death; life can only exist with something for it to resist. When death is given its proper role, the human experience is exhibited as a tug of war between life and death, both equals, and life can only function when the decision is made to participate in this struggle.

The choice to continue living, after staring death in the eye, is the central topic that is offered in Mark Rudman's "Chrome." The narrator reflects on the sensation of riding his motorcycle, which resulted in an out of body experience, and the ultimate decision he was forced to make because of this. He recalls, "I rose, the cliff's gravel / gleamed, radiant, it was all over; / I could feel my soul leave my body and see my body flung out / over the canyon rim" (55-58). The heightened physical capacity due to this experience extends the mental capacity as well. Unlike our daily actions, which we rarely reflect upon in the instant they happen, he is now able to understand what he is doing at that very moment. An out of body experience is stuck in limbo between life and death, and the stakes within every action eventually become evident. Every action he makes is a choice between life and death. In the moment where his soul leaves his body, he is able to have a full understanding of what is happening and what could happen; he is able to foreshadow his own death. He then chooses life:

So I let go of the throttle--threw up my hands--

and the bike went off the highway, keeled over

and died at the cliff's edge.

I owe my life to letting go. (65-69)

When confronted with death, the possibilities of life become more apparent. By letting go, he will now be able to start anew or have as many beginnings as he wants, because life is full of them. The choice to live can only happen when death is acknowledged. The presence of death makes life more meaningful.

Only when someone is gone forever do we ever start to notice things that happened when they were here. The end of your life can bring meaning to others, because it retrieves memories from long ago, memories that were buried under a million others. These recollections become beautiful and full of hope, because you are now gone. In the essay "The Limitless Heart" by Fenton Johnson, the narrator suffers the loss of his lover to AIDS. He goes to speak with his lover's father, and they both talk about the learning that should come after experience: the good that should emerge from the bad. Johnson writes, "Are we so dense that we can learn nothing from all this pain, all this death? Is it impossible to learn from experience?"(358). The death of his lover forces him to scrutinize the relations between human beings in a rational manner. He realizes that death is a devastating factor in our lives, which has the ability to make us encounter great pain, but it also has the ability to create a great desire to live, because of the memories of the deceased. It preserves our loved ones in our fondest memories of them: "As cars begin moving I am visited by two last ghosts--my companion and myself, sitting in the courtyard of the Hotel Sale, transfigured by the limitless heart"(359). Even after they are gone, your love for them does not diminish. It can only intensify. The narrator was reminded of the impact his lover had on him, and also that his lover has not really left him. He will carry this one memory with him always. Satisfying his desire to live with the need to experience more just like it, and the reassurance that life is thick with them. The death of others should remind you how beautiful and ultimately fulfilling relationships can be, and that there are so many to be had in this lifetime. That life is too short for hesitation.

When analyzing these works, the true nature of death becomes apparent. Its spirit and desire to succeed is equal to that of life, but it is also the essence of its counterpart. Life would never seem as sweet without the presence of death. Death should make the living realize the

magnificent emotions that shape their lives, and the limited amount of time they are to experience them in. Those who come directly close to death, may it be a near death experience or the loss of a loved one, should be the most inclined to really “live” life. Patricia and I are lucky. I understand the delicate nature of my own life; so therefore, life seems more precious. While welcoming death to breathe down my neck, I keep moving on, soaking in as much as I can in this lifetime. Every blue moon, I run my finger over the scar that now lies on the knuckle of my left hand, trying to remember, and hoping that she is doing the same.