

**Hallowed Be Thy Grave**

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When I experience my body's decomposition, there are elements I can only tell you about. I can tell you about floating away from this mortal plane and watching myself from the ceiling, unable to move from my bed sheet grave and riddled with senseless paranoia. I can tell you about the walls of a foreign home falling apart and exposing fragile foundations. I can tell you about the enamel in my mouth rotting away while I'm still alive, sharp corners of enamel cutting my tongue up against every word. Other elements of decomposing are in your nature. I can't teach your flesh to feed the maggots and worms. I can't teach your bones to succumb to the earth beneath you. That is promised to you, that one day you will return to the earth from whence you came.

My cousin Patrick told me about plant growth in places where major battles have taken place. These decomposing bodies nourish the earth with their nutrients. I began to think about how beautiful this process really was, even the most macabre vision of wet, sticky flesh and bug-filled mud could provide sweet flowers and fresh-smelling grass. I reflected this cycle back onto myself and my own feelings of decaying while alive. Throughout my life, dog-eared with death anniversaries, doctor's appointments, and weeks spent in bed, I have tried to imagine that there could also be something uniquely beautiful about this living decay.

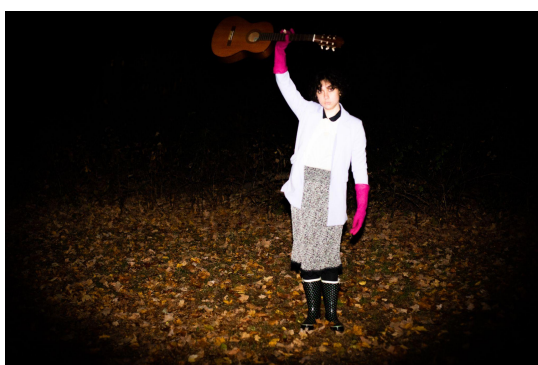
There is a secret third element to the decay that I have decided for myself: making peace with the unreality. These are the flora and fauna that come from my active grave, the hallucinations and cognitive dissonance that schizoaffective disorder has brought into my nights of not falling but ascending into sleep. I chose to explore this relationship photographically, to use images to express what is real, concrete, and bound to reality and what is unreal but still true. The tactile and concrete truths are expressed with decomposition in nature, the body, depictions

of family. The fleeting and untouchable unreality is expressed through Religion and my belief in Saints and Angels.



This photographic practice has been a votive one. Photographs, for me, provide an opportunity to create a transportable facsimile of the textures and motions I experience in the world, but from the unique perspective I can wield with my lens. I began by at first noticing what parts of the world I observe with a different level of appreciation from the people around me. At the beginning of this endeavor, the work largely consisted of insects I found in kitchen crevices, decomposing animals nestled in the woods, and a lot of mud. As I built this work, I noticed images I was creating without the same focus were exploring a dust-filled approach to religious imagery. I was subconsciously applying the same treatment of rot to the decor in my grandmother's home and the statues outside the churches I sheltered in at night.

Combining these two subjects became the key to the story I was weaving about two contrasting realities. A bone uncovered from the dirt, a reality of death, stands next to an image of a personal in an unreal dream state. Set against each other, the photos were able to interact with a shared visual language, but express two different approaches to viewing life and death.



One of the images that I feel best expresses my feelings about the beauty of this process is of a rotted towel, left behind for days, that I found nestled along the bottom of reeds in a swampy bed. The towel appears to me like a small lamb or bunny that has succumbed to decomposition. The cattails above it, though, are idyllic and heavenly. They also hold a left behind jacket, which alludes to human existence without the existence present. Life will go on after death and regenerate into new forms of life, and this phenomenon can be represented beautifully in photography.



I photographed with love and affection for even the disturbing and saddening parts of life, with respect and admiration for aspects of my musings of life-after-rot, the potential for heaven, and to become food for worms. I want to find beauty in everything, even the things I'm sick with, as I found in the story Patrick once told me. Each truth has a relative truth, and I have chosen to believe they can exist harmoniously.

