

STARS NEED COUNTING

ESSAYS ON SUICIDE

Concetta Principe



astoria pictures

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I Title It: Suicide Letter – Medical Assistance in Dying is a way out for an elderly man diagnosed with Alzheimer’s – or is it?

That Unexpected Turn to the Left – The suicide of a pilot (and simultaneous murder of his 239 passengers) over the Indian Ocean coincides in time with an Oshawa man’s disappearance and the discovery of his body on the shores of Lake Ontario.

Who Shot Meriwether Lewis – A nineteenth-century (possible) suicide by a former Secretary to the President of the United States and a national hero.

SUMMARY

We propose these three episodes towards a five-part mini-series à la *Cunk on Earth* reflecting on different understandings of suicide throughout recent history: each episode could illustrate ways in which suicide has functioned historically as a closed-door topic that today—with the convergence of advances in medicine, an aging baby Boomer generation, and the recent introduction of Medical Assistance in Dying—is finally beginning to open.

We move from an episode about Medical Assistance in Dying to a Malaysian Airline pilot suicide (taking hundreds with him in his descent), then back to a nineteenth-century suicide of an American national hero. Given interest in pursuing the adaptation of these critical and timely stories, we’re prepared to contribute to the development of two more focussed subjects relating to the topic.

I Title It: Suicide Letter

Summary

Medical Assistance in Suicide is a current topic, especially because Canada plans to make it accessible by March 17, 2024, for people suffering what we call “mental health” disorders. At this point, it is available for people facing imminent death because of illness; it is also available to people with Alzheimer’s, so long as they have given lucid consent. The story focuses on **an elderly man diagnosed with Alzheimer’s** and the question plaguing the writer: what makes a life worth living—and when does it cease to be?

Excerpt

“Last spring, at the walk-in clinic, my father asked for a suicide pill, thinking that since Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) had been made legal, it must be as accessible as a prescription. The reality is that Bill C:14 outlines strict criteria for being eligible for assistance and it is not easily accessible.

The dominant interpretation of “grievous irremediable medical condition” is imminent death. My father did not know the details of the law, but he did know that he needed to be able to consent and he wanted to document that in advance of the day he would not be able to consent. As if he knew he sounded too desperate to be taken seriously, my father assured the doctor that the pill was not meant for “today”, but for the legal day of his death: the day when he wouldn’t recognize his daughters anymore.

“For my father, not knowing us is his death.

“My father has been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and he approaches every medical professional he meets with a request for a pill, because he forgets he’s asked already. Or he makes the euphemistic statement, ‘When the day comes, I want out of here.’ And then he laughs. I’m advised by his doctor that dark humour is a sign of dementia ...” (pp. 133)

As Read by
Concetta Principe



Who Shot Meriwether Lewis

Summary

*This could be played as a kind of **whodunnit**: in the nineteenth century, Meriwether Lewis, of the notorious expedition team, Lewis and Clark, was considered **an American national hero** for opening up the country to the West Coast through the Northwest Passage; his suicide has basically disappeared him as a national hero. **The debate on whether or not he killed himself** continues until today. There is a lot of testimony that suggests he did and yet there are descendants today who still hold that he did not commit suicide and are trying to prove it by getting a court order to exhume his body.*

Excerpt

“On hearing of Lewis’s death, his closest friend, Clark, said “I fear, O! I fear the weight of his mind has overcome him.” This statement, among others, has always been used to confirm the suicide story. It was a story generated by the only witness, Priscilla Grinder, wife of the Innkeeper.

“From the other side of the door, Priscilla heard Lewis talking to himself, shoot twice, curse himself some more, after which he scratched at the door, begging for water which she refused to bring him. Apparently, she was afraid of his gum, being a lone woman at the Inn that night.

“In the historical record, her testimony had such massive holes in it, that historians have generated a competing theory that Lewis was murdered.” **(pp. 54)**

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The Unexpected Turn to the Left

Summary

*This is a contemporary suicide, specifically by the pilot who downed Malaysian Airlines flight 370: research has tried to find the missing plane that went down somewhere in the Indian Ocean and have not succeeded. **Around the same time that Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 disappeared, an Oshawa teacher had also made the news for having disappeared.** There were many theories about his disappearance, one of which was that he committed suicide. His body was found, but whether he committed suicide or not is unknown.*

Excerpt

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“When Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 disappeared into the Indian Ocean in early March, Boucher, who had disappeared in January, was still considered alive since they hadn’t found his body. In response to each event, efforts concentrated on finding the body because a dead body can speak.



“Authorities needed to find the plane to know what had happened that early morning. There was nothing untoward about the start of flight 370, take off at 12:40 am from Kuala Lumpur on its way to Beijing when the signal was lost some twenty minutes after departure. At first, no one paid much attention.

“The missing teacher and the missing plane. Without a body, there is only speculation.” (pp. 39)

COMPS

I Title It: Suicide Letter

Setting/Location

Toronto, doctor's offices, walk-in-clinic, old-age residence

Tonally Similar Films

Cunk on Earth (mokumentary) hosted by Philomena Cunk who carries out the most bizarre interviews, and then goes on location and dramatizes what is happening... a playful take on the documentary.

The Unexpected Turn to the Left

Setting/Location

Lake Ontario, Oshawa, Winter scene along Lake Ontario shore

Tonally Similar Films

Cunk on Earth (mokumentary) hosted by Philomena Cunk who carries out the most bizarre interviews, and then goes on location and dramatizes what is happening... a playful take on the documentary.

Who Shot Meriwether Lewis

Setting/Location

Old trail between Natchez, Mississippi and Nashville, Tennessee, Grinder's Inn, Lewis Memorial

Tonally Similar Films

Sherman's March Documentary (1985)

Cunk on Earth (mockumentary) hosted by Philomena Cunk who carries out the most bizarre interviews, and then goes on location and dramatizes what is happening... a playful take on the documentary.

In addition to **Concetta Principe**'s role as the author of this essay collection, Concetta has about ten years experience working in the documentary film industry as director, writer, researcher, chase producer and visual researcher for small independent producers Ap Associates and Barna Alper. She has worked on shows that have been aired on History Channel (The Naked Archaeologist), Discovery Channel (Frontiers of Construction), among others.

Concetta is also an award-winning poet, and writer of creative non-fiction, short fiction, as well as scholarship that focuses on trauma literature. *Discipline N.V.: A Lyric Dictionary*, has just come out with Palimpsest Press (2023.) Her next project, a collection of poems on the subject of Borderline Personality Disorder, titled *Disorder*, is coming out with Gordon Hill Press in spring, 2024. Her first poetry collection, *Interference* (1999) with Guernica Editions, won the Bressani Award for poetry in 2000. Her poetry collection, *This Real*, published by Pedlar Press, was long-listed for the Raymond Souster Award in 2017. She teaches at Trent University.

Gordon Hill Press is a publisher of poetry and stylistically innovative fiction, non-fiction, and literary criticism (especially concerning poetry). We strive to publish exemplary writing by a diversity of writers, particularly writers living with invisible disability.

Extraliterary Liaison Kevin Andrew Heslop is an up-and-coming Canadian filmmaker whose practice connects theatre, poetry, film, art criticism, journalism, and the visual arts. In 2021, he published *the correct fury of your why is a mountain* (Gordon Hill Press, 2021); in 2022, he founded Astoria Pictures, an independent film production and distribution company; and in 2023, he released his directorial debut, *mo(u)vements*. (Astoria Pictures, 2023). In addition to active practices in the visual, literary, and performing arts, Kevin works as a producer representing titles from award-winning publishing houses towards their adaptation to the stage and screen.

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