



Alternate Obituaries

by Matt Blanchard
APRIL 26, 2011

Maybe someday every obituary will be as honest as Steve Almond's, but let's hope not.

In 24 inches of unblinking newsprint it is revealed that Almond was a middling writer with crippled dreams, that students in his writing course found him creepy in a sexual way, and that his death came "after a long battle with hope." Was Almond survived by an adoring family? Not exactly:

... He was a loving but distracted father who was eager to please his two children, but often felt he could not reach them. He depended on his wife for support and grew resentful toward her because of this dependence. She, in turn, retreated from his hostility.

This is not the form obituaries take in our culture, but it could be. Almond's is one of 44 alternative obituaries gathered from writers, comedians, sculptors and video artists for "Let It End Like This," a Tribeca gallery show reimagining a genre that traditionally conceals as much as it reveals.



Contributors include the writer Susan Orlean, the electronic musician Moby, feminist and Six Feet Under script writer Jill Soloway, and legendary Saturday Night Live comedy writer Alan Zweibel (creator of Roseanne Roseannadanna, among other sketches), who tacked up a simple paper headstone communicating a kind of posthumous Portnoy's complaint:

Alan Zweibel
Writer-Husband-Father
1950-2045

If you can read this, it means you are standing 6 ft. above my former penis

"Let It End Like This" runs to May 14th at Apexart in Tribeca, and is almost too diverse to characterize. The curatorial mind at work here is Todd Zuniga, a writer best known for founding Opium literary magazine and creating "[Literary Death Match](#)," a popular series of live events in which

emerging and established writers battle it out with their best material before a live audience and a panel of judges.

For the Apexart show, Zuniga approached a wide circle of writers, artists, musicians, directors, and "uncategorizable geniuses," (a few of whom begged off out of the superstitious fear that writing your own obituary beckons disaster). His only instructions consisted of three words: "Create your obituary." When artists asked for clarification, he sent four more: "Do whatever you want."

Even with those spare instructions, the essential spirit of Literary Death Match – that big ideas can be clever and fun, that lit-geeks throw good parties – seems to preside in these re-imagined obituaries as well. This lighter side comes out in works like Shawn Smith's "Self-Portrait as a Businessman, Artist and Ninja", a bearded, big-eyed doll in black holding a paint brush and a legal contract. It also shines through in Susan Orlean's contribution, a kind of last will and testament for the disposal of her pets:

Regarding the striped cat 'Gary': Must be permitted one (1) live kill of a) mouse b) bird c) unidentifiable gooey life form each week, give or take.

Regarding the ducks 'Donald' and 'Donald': They shall be permitted to choose names of their own liking.

Things get a little more frantic in the most arresting work of the show, Jill Soloway's video "All in the Waiting," in which viewers are seduced and confounded by a schizophrenic young beauty ranting through the streets of Los Angeles like the insane ghost of Hollywood itself, or of television, or of the entire droning mess of mediated life. This delightfully oblique obituary, if it is actually an obituary, leaves the viewer to sort out what exactly is being buried here.



The mood of quirky fun shifts again near the end, when attentive gallery-goers will realize that Zuniga's own mother, 71-year-old Ruth Nickens, actually died while he was assembling the show. Just as with the other artists, Zuniga had asked his mother to submit her own fake obituary for the show in late August, apparently unaware that her life was about to end. After her death, Zuniga's sister found just two sentences of what was to be her entry in the show:

After 71 years I have come to learn nothing past today is for certain. I remember being five and how happy I was my father got a dog. We moved to a house in a very nice part of St. Louis, Mo. Of course I did not realize that at the time, but now know how lucky I was.

Zuniga framed his mother's handwritten note and mounted it beside his own faux obituary, in which he cutely imagines himself hosting Literary Death Match for President Obama at the White House in 2013.

No doubt Ruth's humble and earnest words are included as a tribute. But that unseemly juxtaposition – the mother experiencing death while the son toys cleverly with the idea of it – may provide a twinkle of insight into why we cling to the staid and formulaic lines of the classic obituary, and what the rituals of this genre are meant to guard against.

"Let it End Like This" runs to May 14, 2011 at Apexart, 291 Church St., New York

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*First Image: Chris Bower
Ray's Tap Wall, Chicago
drywall, mixed media*

*Second Image: Ben Fountain
Box Obituary
mixed media*

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