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Let it End Like This

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Curator Todd Zuniga delivers a simultaneously poignant, giddy, and contemplative blow to the skull with forty-plus interpretations of death in *Let it End Like This*, a group show on view at apexart. Zuniga's vague directive to the show's participants, which was simply to "create your own obituary," yields a profusion of results that, when taken together, form a schizophrenic experience not unlike actually attending the funeral of a loved one. Bleakness and despair are interrupted by shock, only to be jostled by the sudden appearance of an errant goofy memory.



Shawn Smith, *Ninja Self-Portrait*. Plastic, felt, paper.
Image courtesy of apexart.

Each participant—writers, comedians, musicians, directors, artists, and the curator's mom—tackles the task of wrapping up a lifetime in a tidy package meant for public consumption, with varying degrees of blinding self-indulgence, pomp, and personal symbology. It is overwhelming to see what is usually mashed into a few black-and-white pages of a newspaper wrought so dynamic and disparate.

The dictionary definition of "obituary" narrows its potential—"a death notice"—but here the viewer is greeted by death videos, dolls, suitcases, doormats, and podcasts, ranging in timbre from solemn and dignified to frankly hilarious. Yes, of course, at first the concept of laughing at another person's obituary may seem somewhat callous, until one considers that this obituary is, in the case of Shawn Smith's "Self Portrait as Businessman, Artist, & Ninja," a petite, minimal felt figure with an epic ZZ Top-style beard, cheerily grasping an inordinately large paintbrush in one hand and a stack of wee paperwork in the other. One might question why Quenton Miller's obituary is a traditional headstone inscribed with "SHUT UP" in all caps, but the viewer is left to assume he took that explanation with him to his currently theoretical grave.

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In what could be considered his curatorial statement, Zuniga writes, "When Pancho Villa died, he reportedly said, 'Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something.' Well, end how, then? And say what?" In what may be the least understated example of "what to say," comedian Eugene Mirman's giddily self-aggrandizing "How Do I Want to Be Remembered?" supplies the viewer with a solid two minutes of nonstop theoretical epitaphs. One of the most memorable sentiments involves his condoning of any posthumous remembrances inadvertently comparing *his* life story to that of *X-Men* character Wolverine, or somehow implying that he was probably magical. While simply staring into the camera in a static shot, Mirman rattles off what sounds almost like a spontaneous listing of all the potential variations of awesomeness he'd like attached to his name once he's slipped the surly bonds of earth. Presumably, this will be to assume his rightful place as some kind of invisible, supernatural space lord.

Others take an equally wry, if less epic, approach toward their impending inexistence. Alan Zweibel's "The Last Laugh" at first appears to be a simple template for a headstone, stating his roles in life as parent, son, and husband, but ultimately it informs the reader that, if she can read this tribute, it means she is standing six feet directly above his "former penis." Abraham Smith's untitled installation deals not with the quiet aftermath of death (or with an awkward moment in a cemetery standing above someone's former genitals) but the circumstance leading to it, implying the artist met his demise by a falling icicle while fishing, scrawling his last words (a haiku) in the snow with "a used Cheeto." Sam Lipsyte avoids the heavy task of pondering his personal hereafter altogether by offering what he claims is not, in fact, a submission for the exhibition, but rather a typed apology for his inability to contribute any work, along with vague mention that the piece may as well lie on the ground, where people could readily stomp on it or otherwise destroy it. Carefully honoring the artist's stated "last" wishes, this piece is mounted on the floor, next to a paper shredder. All this effervescent, convoluted pageantry spanning all possible media amounts to the best sendoff possible, some kind of magically absurd legacy of hilarity.

Let it End Like This isn't all gloriously improbable death-while-waiting-for-an-Italian-beef-sandwich (as in Chris Bower's memorial wall) and posthumous self-aggrandizement, of course. Some of the most deceptively dry, uncomplicated works may resonate most deeply. Zuniga's "Epilogue," in many ways the cornerstone of the entire show, is a handwritten note on torn paper, explaining essentially that nothing is certain beyond this moment, and revealing two brief, sweet childhood anecdotes. This is revealed to be a note written by Zuniga's mother, on assignment to "Create her own obituary," for her son's nascent exhibit, discovered shortly after her death. Yes, Zuniga conceived of this exhibition, asked his mom to participate, and she died unexpectedly before she could witness her own inclusion. Ouch. Oh! But even more emotional punishment awaits: "Carlos," a single channel video by Elna Baker with Peter Burr, simply depicts footage of a small dog waiting with such patience by a window, offset by friendly pink text

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reading merely, “You didn’t come home.” At which point the viewer might plausibly find herself suddenly blinking back tears and rushing toward the videos playing in the back of the gallery, in the hope of catching Eugene Mirman describe his uncanny similarity to various superheroes; anything to staunch this awkward Hallmark™ moment.