

26 LITTLE DEATHS

After Edward Gorey's iconic alphabet book: *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*

"If you're doing nonsense it has to be rather awful, because there'd be no point. I'm trying to think if there's sunny nonsense. Sunny, funny nonsense for children—oh, how boring, boring, boring. As Schubert said, there is no happy music. And that's true, there really isn't. And there's probably no happy nonsense, either."

.....

"I really think I write about everyday life. I don't think I'm quite as odd as others say I am. Life is intrinsically, well, boring and dangerous at the same time. At any given moment the floor may open up. Of course, it almost never does; that's what makes it so boring."

— Edward Gorey (1925-2000)

AS I FINISHED WRITING THE LAST NOTES OF THIS PIECE, the country was reeling from yet another massacre at yet another elementary school, this time in Uvalde, Texas. The irony has not been lost on me. But despite outward signs to the contrary, this piece is not about death, nor is the iconic book on which it's based — Edward Gorey's *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, or *After the Outing*. While Gorey's slim volume depicts twenty-six unfortunate ways to die, it is more a meditation than a mourning. As is true of Gorey's book, this music is made for dancing between the banality of life and the bottomless oddness of the human imagination.

EDWARD GOREY & THE DARK

Edward Gorey (1925-2000) was an American writer, illustrator, and designer (costumes, puppets, sets, etc) most famous for his pen-and-ink drawings of surreal Edwardian scenes that pit our circuitous inner workings against the inanity of daily life. We all know that imagination thrives in the dark. That is why, when we tell stories to our children, we head straight for the middle of the perilous night forest where the most fearsome creatures, witches, demons and goblins live. Most nursery rhymes are dark parables set to innocuously sing-songy melodies and underscored by blithely innocent harmonies. Go head – finish these sweet little nursery rhymes:

"It's raining, it's pouring, the old man is snoring..."

"Hush-a-bye baby on the tree top. When the wind blows, the cradle will rock..."

"Ring-around-a-roses, pocket full of posies..."

What sets the *Gashlycrumb Tinies* apart in the context of this tradition is that Gorey's drawings show us the penultimate moments of each character's short life, while his words forecast their impending ends. And that's it. There's no backstory, no setup, no character development, no context, no explanation. Our familiarity of the alphabet anchors us through Gorey's abecedarium. From the start, we know where we're headed: to Z, of course. We know exactly how many steps the journey will take: 26, of course. The gentle predictability of a couplet rhyme scheme draws us forward through this little book of imagined horrors, while it charms us with the utterly quotidian nature of their inception.

THE PROCESS

While a scant few of the movements in *26 Little Deaths* are simply sonic translations of the drawings (Amy falls down the stairs), with most, I stepped into the pictures to look around beyond their frame and find the story beyond the absurdist barbarism. Like Gorey with his *Gashlycrumb* drawings, in most of the pieces I leave the moment of

mortality up to you to imagine, or not. In some cases, it's entirely beside the point — a footnote at most. Hector, for example, stands in the town square imagining all of the terrible things that could befall him. In his song, "H – Waiting," the hands of the lurking thug are just a part of his larger paranoid delusions. They may or may not even be real. In "V – Train of Thought," Victor stands on the train tracks on the outskirts of his small town wondering where the train came from, where it might be going, pondering the smallness of his own life and the vastness of all he doesn't know. The song is about his sense of wonder, more than it is about his doom. And in "M – Frisson," Maud, who is swept out to sea on a piece of driftwood, finds her spiritual awakening in the breathtaking expansiveness of the ocean.

FRIENDS & FAMILY

I can't imagine a world or a creative project without collaboration. While these are my own compositions and words, so much brilliance from my friends and colleagues has worked its way in, creating some of my favorite moments in the suite. Henry McNulty, Roger Zahab, Hankus Netsky and Jeremy Flower each arranged a movement. Longtime Portland resident Mark Orton — one of my oldest friends and collaborators (Tin Hat/Tin Hat Trio)— took on 5 of them, including the finale. One story that relies on a variety of compositional voices is Neville who dies of ennui. Neville sits inside looking out his window at a square of world that seems never to change. For this one, I wrote a vocal theme sung by Neville about how boring the world is and sent it to 5 different colleagues/composers — Jeremy Flower, Andy Jaffe, Ben Goldberg, Aruán Ortiz and Ari Chais — to harmonize however they liked. And so Neville dies of boredom, oblivious to the ever-changing world as it careens around him. The words and melody of "S – Stupid Fort" in which Susan perishes of fits, is a direct transcription of an actual fit my son Viggo threw many years ago. It went on for such an extraordinarily long time that I knew no one would believe me without evidence. So I quietly grabbed my phone and recorded a few minutes of his epic performance. (Yes, I got permission from the composer to repurpose his words and melody.)

OUTSIZED GRATITUDE

Thank you to the dedicated and tenacious people at Present Music in Milwaukee, WI for commissioning *26 Little Deaths* as a part of their 40th anniversary celebration. Everything about this piece has been far more involved than any of us knew it would be. In a way, it was like having 26 children of our own: We love them all; They have caused us all headaches and indescribable joy; It has taken a village to manifest them; We are so proud of this gaggle of Tinies.

Thank you also to Clement So, Gabriel Kahane and Willow Larson who have schemed and plotted to bring *26 Little Deaths* to Oregon. Last, but hardly least, I offer a most sincere thanks to Deanna Tham and to the fabulous musicians who brought their imaginations and artistry to making the Tinies come alive.

THE END

It's the nature of humans of all ages to make both sense and nonsense of the world around and within us. I hope you come to love these 26 unfortunates as much as we do. They will surely outlast us all.

Long live the Gashlycrumb Tinies!

26 Little Deaths

1. A - Girl Descending a Staircase
2. B - Childhood Friends
3. C - Wasted
4. D - One-Horse Open Sleigh
5. E - Death by Peach
6. F - Sucker
7. G - Hide 'n Seek
8. H - Waiting (arr. Henry McNulty)
9. I - Ida and the Undines
10. J - The Cabinet
11. K - New Moon (arr. Mark Orton)
12. L - Pica 1:16
13. M - Frisson (arr. Jeremy Flower) 2:52
14. N - Ennui (arr. CK,, Jeremy Flower, Andy Jaffe, Ben Goldberg, Aruàn Ortiz, Ari Chais)
15. O - Awl and Nothing (arr. Roger Zahab)
16. P - Knock, Knock! (arr. Hankus Netsky)
17. Q - Quagmire
18. R - In Flagante
19. S - Stupid Fort*
20. T - Wooden Boxes
21. U - I Don't Mean Gurgle**
22. V - Train of Thought (arr. Mark Orton)
23. W - Ice Cathedral
24. X - Gnaw (arr. Mark Orton)
25. Y - The Problem of the Tower and the Clouds (arr. Mark Orton)
26. Z - Love Song for Dolly (arr. Mark Orton)

* S - words and melody by Viggo Bossi, used with permission.

** U - words and melody: camp song (public domain)

LYRICS

A - Girl Descending a Staircase

(instrumental)

B - Childhood Friends

So soft your fur, so gentle your purr.

You are smiling at me.

You're my friend, I can see, aren't you?

How wide your paws, how drooly your jaws.

Are you smiling at me?

You're my friend, I can see... aren't you?

C - Wasted

Wasted my day, I wasted my day...

Now I am wasting away.

D - One Horse Open Sleigh

(instrumental)

E - Death by Peach

There's never too much of a good thing,

o, there's never too much for me.

It all trickles down to the inside ground,

but it's never too much for me.

There's never enough of a good thing,
o, there's never enough for me.
It all rains down, floods the inside ground,
but it's never enough for me.

F - Sucker

Suck me dry where I stand.
Whisper soft, take my hand.
Suck me dry through my skin,
whisper soft, paper thin.

Turn me out, outside in.
Feed by doubt, drink my sin.
O, turn me in, inside out,
I've no doubt you're gonna win.

G - Hide 'n Seek

One, two, three, four, five...

Where can I hide?

Oh, where can I hide?

I've already hidden in the cupboard,
behind the curtains, on top of the closet.

...nine, ten, eleven, twelve...

Where can I hide?

Oh, where can I hide?

I know! *Shhh!!*

I know where I'll hide.

Oh, I know where I'll hide.

Here under the rug, the rug,
the rug will hide me like an ocean

...eighteen, nineteen...

(it's so dark...)

...twenty! HERE I COME!!

It's so dark, so dark,
so very dark...

H - Waiting

I'm waiting...

waiting for the bus to come and
lose control and hit me as soon as I
least expect it to, so I'm
always expecting it hoping I'll always be
wrong. I'm waiting...

I'm waiting...

waiting for the thugs to come and
take me out. I'll put up a fight, I'll
scream and shout and kick and bite but it
won't be enough! My

little old life will grind right to a permanent
halt. It'll all be your fault
cuz you left me... waiting.

Waiting for a piano to fall from the sky,
I know if I look it'll be there an inch from my face
and I won't even have time to run
and the race of my life will be done in a flash.
Will it hurt? Will the crash leave a dent in the earth?
Will the force of it push us clear out of our orbit
and send us careening through space?
Will there not be a trace of us left for the aliens?
I was hoping to find them.
I wanted to find them myself.
I was waiting to find them.
I was waiting...waiting...

I - Ida and the Undines

It looks so inviting.
The shimmer must be fairies!
They're calling, they're calling me,
I hear them calling me...
Ida, Ida, Ida...

J - Cabinet of Curiosity

This one's for nerves and this is for flu.
This is for when you don't know what to do.
This one will show you how it would be
to float up above the world.
DRINK IT, YOU'LL SEE!

This one tastes like a sock from the sea.
This one smells a little like... pee.
This one, I really don't know what it does.
The only way to tell is to
DRINK IT, I'LL SEE!!

K - New Moon

The moon, the moon is a sliver tonight
and the trees, I have never seen them
looking so grand, looking so grand
as now.

L - Pica

I couldn't... I couldn't help...
I couldn't help it.
I knew it... I really knew it...
I really, really knew it.
I blew it... I really, really blew it.
I knew it but I blew it.

I shouldn't have... I shouldn't have done it...

I shouldn't have done it but I...

I couldn't help it... I couldn't help...

I could... not... help...

I couldn't help myself!

M - Frisson

I am standing on water.

I am buoyant and free!

Look at me! Look at me!

I'm standing on water!

I am away from everyone!

I am away from everything!

I am just a way for the light

to bounce back to the sky!

I am the winding, I am the unwinding!

I am just the winding and the unwinding...

N - Ennui

Everything is the same, I look out my window.

It's the same as it was yesterday:

Same tree, same fence, same sky, same window, same me.

Everything is the same again, I look out my window.

It's the same as it was yesterday and the day before:

Same tree, same fence, same sky, same window, same me.

Everything is the same again, again, I look out my window.

It's the same as it was yesterday and the day before, and the day before:

Same tree, same fence, same sky, same window, same me.

Etc.

O - Awl and Nothing

(instrumental)

P - Knock, Knock!

Knock, knock, everybody just let me in!

Stand back, I'm coming.

I don't care what you say,

I'm just not going away.

Knock, knock, come on now, open the door!

It's not my fault I'm still too close to the floor!

Knock, knock, open up please,

Daddy, just open the door.

Knock, knock, can you hear me over the din?

I'm begging please, just let me join in the fun,
and I won't bother no one.

Knock, knock, come on, now, open the door.
It's not that late, and anyway, sleep's such a bore.
Knock, knock... Knock, knock, open up!
Is everything okay? Knock, knock?
Knock, knock, open up!
Please, Mama, just open the door!

Q - Quagmire

Quentin! Quentin!?

No, no, no, no, no....

Everything's bringing me down.

All I want is running and sky,
and maybe a butterfly.

Quentin!

Stop! Stop calling me back!

Everything is bringing me down.

All I want is music and playing and time.

MORE TIME! Uninterrupted time!

Quentin!

WHAT?! What is it now?

Is it dinner or dishes or practicing, washing up,

I don't care! Leave me be!

Everything is bringing me down.

R - In Flagrante

(instrumental)

S - Stupid Fort

(words by Viggo Bossi)

Mom! You need to let me watch a show!

No! We are not building that fort! We are not!

Mom? No, NO! We are NOT building that fort!

You need to let me watch a show!

So WHERE ARE THE REMOTES?!

No! NO!! You need ot let me watch a show.

You need to let me.

Mom, you need to let me watch a show.

You know you are not building that stupid fort!

You can not! NO! We are not building it.

We're not building it.

What are you thinking? We're not building it!

No! NO!! Why did I even make that idea?

You're not building a fort.

You're not even building that fort.

Do not even think about it! No!

Mom. Mom? Hi...

You let me watch a show today. You need to.

Where are the remotes?!

Where are they? Where are the remotes?

No! I'm watching a show!

Mom? I'm trying to convince you to watch a show.

Mom? Mom! Mom.

Mom...

T - Wooden Boxes

(instrumental/foley)

U - I Don't Mean Gurgle

Una, where are you going?

Upstairs to take a bath?

Una, with legs like toothpicks

and a neck like a giraffe.

Una filled up the bathtub,

Una pulled out the plug.

O my gracious, O my soul,

there goes Una down the hole!

Glub, glub, glub, I don't mean gurgle,

glub, glub, glub.

V - Train of Thought

Of all the wonders of the world,
Mine's the greatest one of all.
It glows brighter than the Taj Mahal,
reaches farther than the Great Wall,
this little wonder bright and small.

Of all the wonders of the world,
Mine, it has me on a roll.
It's deeper than the Great Blue Hole,
but it begins to take its toll,
this silly wonder, dumb and droll.

Standing on the track,
is this train ever coming back?
I wonder who it carries where?
I wonder why they're going there?
Is this an endless loop?
Am I a figurine all dressed in green
to make the holiday display more real?
I feel their giant eyes on me.

I wonder what is happiness?
I wonder what is life?
I wonder if this town will swallow me

and if I'll ever have a wife?

I don't know what that means.

I'm not the author of my dreams.

I wonder why... I wonder why?

W - Ice Cathedral

(instrumental)

X - Gnaw

(instrumental)

Y - The Problem of the Tower and the Clouds

Are the clouds moving?

Or is the tower falling...

Falling slowly over me?

I feel so small.

Look at the ground to make sure it's still there.

Hello, little ant!

To you, I'm the tower.

To the tower, I'm the ant.

To the mountain, I'm just a speck

and the tower, a mere crayon

balanced precariously.

But from space, the mountain is only

the Braille of the earth and I am just a mote...

not even... not even...

not even

Z - Love Song for Dolly

Well, it's you and me,

and Dolly makes three.

We've been here and there,

we've gone from A to Z.

It's been a harrowing day,

a doozy, don't you say?

I know what you're thinking—

Let's cut straight to the drinking.

'Cuz even if you're not really real,

I know how you feel.

You're alive inside me.

Sometimes I can't tell us apart.

And even though your head's full of fluff,

I just can't get enough of your take on the day.

With you, I can take on the world.

Here's to us! Fill 'er up!

Pour another drop into your little tea cup.

When I'm with you, nothing could be wrong
and we always get along so well,
I don't even know
which one of us is singing this song.

If it weren't for you, I'd surely sink.
You've pulled us back again from the brink.
But now that we're safe again,
let's pour another drink again!

Even though we're not really real,
you know how I feel.
I'm alive inside you.
I can't even tell us apart.

And even though my head's full of fluff,
I just can't get enough of your take on the day.
With you, I can take on the world! Here's to us!
Fill 'er up! Pour another drop into my little tea cup.
Fill 'er up, pour a drop in your little tea cup.

Illustrations by Edward Gorey from his book *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* used by permission ©1963 Renewed 1991 The Edward Gorey Charitable Trust.

26 *Little Deaths* was inspired by *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, written and illustrated by Edward Gorey ©1963 Renewed 1991 The Edward Gorey Charitable Trust.

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Carla Kihlstedt

Carla Kihlstedt is a vocalist/violinist/violist, writer/lyricist, composer/improviser and educator. Her music comes from her deep engagement with friends, ideas, and often books, and is nourished by many different musical languages and traditions. Like many modern music-makers and music-lovers, she has omnivorous tendencies. A graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and a long-time instigator of composer's collectives and bands of all sorts, she fuses her classical technique and ear for nuance with her DIY maker-space musical ethos.

Carla loves working with song because of its economy, its familiarity and its unapologetic directness. Her larger pieces tend to grow around a simple idea that allows her to explore facets of a complex world through many different lenses. A collaborator at heart, she has co-founded many bands, including Tin Hat (Trio), Rabbit Rabbit Radio, Sleepytime Gorilla Museum, 2 Foot Yard, Minamo, The Book of Knots, Fred Frith's Cosa Brava and Causing a Tiger, and has written for International Contemporary Ensemble, San Francisco Girls Chorus, Brooklyn Youth Chorus, Johnny Gandelsmann, Variant 6, ROVA Saxophone Quartet and Dither Big Band.

Carla is on the faculty of the Contemporary Musical Arts Department of the New England Conservatory and the MFA in Music Composition program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts at CalArts. She has co-facilitated the Creative Gesture Lab for composers and choreographers at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity and is currently incubating an ongoing educational, environmentally-minded youth chorus project called *Long for This World*. You can explore more at carlakihlstedt.com. Carla lives in Woods Hole, MA with her partner/band-mate, Matthias Bossi, and their 2 kids.