



BLACK ACRES

Written by Ann Zellhofer

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Artist Statement

What does the transmutation between reality and metaverse look like?

The ivy grows; winding its tendrils around forgotten stones that mark what was once home - a reminder of who you were before your physical body left us behind. The leaves are wilted but their beauty remains even as they succumb to time's grasp slowly fading away like lost dreams or broken promises never meant for tomorrow's light. Your spirit lives eternal amidst these petals and stems growing tall with each recollection shared across digital landscapes.

In life there is no guarantee nor final answer upon death, yet virtual immortality awaits on internet; deep beyond human understanding eternally connected. This is the garden that I have created. It is a place of nostalgia, contemplation, and symbolism. It can be seen as both reverence for life after death, but also invokes questions about closure when mourning has spanned beyond this earthly plane or reality, as we know it, living on within cyberspace.

This space is a meaningful comment on the modern realities of death in a digital age. The theme of this chap book and installation presented centers on what happens to our digital identity thereafter. During life who we are, fluidly moves and evolves.

Posthumously it is the very same. I argue that the wilderness of metaverse takes hold once you are gone. To me this is a far greater fate than that of spoken history. Overgrown in the garden, you will become something different. Be it your image or legacy, you will not be the same. Fleeting traces of who you were, will be seeds sowed across the internet. Some of us will fall onto fertile ground while others will fall onto the beaten path. In rare instances, a few of us might be left alone in the garden of interpretation; only to someday grow into internet lore. Pixels and code strings become internet folklore like ivy growing over that have passed. They are projected onward into something of their own out there. This is the crux of my work. I have created digital cemetery, both in a physical and virtual space that captures this phenomenon. Through exploration in poetry and mixed media installation art, I endeavor to explore what happens beyond death when it comes to our collective identity online. My vision tells of identities that have transitioned and aims to inform the visitor of digital estate planning. As a collective voice about identity composition posthumously, I want to encourage audience members' contemplation on their own relationship with how they will be seen when physically gone from this earthly plane—and explore virtual potential spaces in all its ephemerality beyond physical form that remains past life's expiration date.

About the Author

Ann Zellhofer is an Artist, Poet, and Printmaker. She is a second-year student in the Intermedia and Digital Arts MFA program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. Ann received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Printmaking and Book Arts at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. Various literary devices are used to create her poetry. Some of this offering of digital memorials, is from her AI's perspective. When reading this curated collection of poetry, keep in mind that italicized paragraphs are the voice of her well-trained bot. The use of AI as a tool to analyze and create responses adds a dynamic and thought-provoking element to her artwork. AI learns and adapts based on the data and instructions it is given, so the way it responds can be influenced and shaped by her. AI systems can be trained to process and analyze large amounts of data and use that information to make predictions, make decisions, and take actions based on pre-defined rules and algorithms. The use of artificial intelligence in her writing process allows her to explore and comment on the concept of digital identity through a generative lens.

For more information on AI models and how to use them, please visit www.openai.com.

For those who are no longer here but remain present somewhere else.

May they rest easy wherever they may be wandering or growing
on these platforms called home.

No Name - No History

When I was 16, I began to learn about mortality. I learned to draw at the Schuler School of Fine Art, in downtown Baltimore. I was never any good at drawing, but Hans Schuler taught me. He hung a cast of a young sleeping girl on the wall for me to draw. Hans adjusted the lights and began to tell me the story of her, L'Inconnue de la Seine. "This is a death mask." He said. "She was pulled from a river in France when she was your age."

I drew her beautiful face and the experience has stayed with me ever since. My drawing was pretty good. My mother and I later became inspired to cast my face that same year. A drawing of her sleeping form hangs on the wall in my studio as a reminder of her tragedy and of my ephemerality. She may have taken her own life when she was just sixteen. She may have been murdered. L'Inconnue de la Seine represents the best and worst of humanity. On one hand, she is a reminder of the tragedy that can befall any of us. On the other hand, she represents the resilience of the human spirit in simulacra.

Many years later I learned more about her story. Her repose became a popular fixture to have in your art studio in the late nineteenth century. By 1930 her face became the face of Rescue Annie, a CPR training doll. "The most kissed woman in the world." This "woman" has always been a girl to me. She has no name and no history. Her face, an enigma, washed clean of any identifying marks. The water took her identity away. She was just a girl, short-lived and forgotten, but in death she achieved a certain immortality. Even I got to meet her.

L'Inconnue de la Seine has become a part of me. I think of her often and sometimes she reminds me of the impermanence of life. I am just like her, a nameless body with a fleeting existence. Someday I will be gone and all that will be left of me is a picture, if that. I am haunted by the realization of my own end. I am but a fading dream, a shadow, one of many. I am nothing more than a memory, waiting to be forgotten. My name will fade. I am just a temporary resident on this earth, and one day I will return to the dust from whence I came.

Sometimes there is a sobering thought in the realization that one day I will be gone. That my body will be *not*, just like hers. There is a strange comfort in

knowing that I will live on in some sort of way. I am not just my body. I am more than that. I am my memories, my experiences, my loves and my losses. I am the sum of all of those things. I think of her often, this girl who died young and whose story will never be known. I think of her when I look in the mirror and see my own face staring back at me. I wonder what my own story will be. I wonder if anyone will ever wonder about me the way I wonder about her. I think of her when I face the realization that one day I will die. I think of her and I am filled with a sense of peace. Her body was taken to a morgue where they cast her death mask. She died in unclear circumstances. She was just a girl like me and yet, she is famous. Her death has served a purpose. Her likeness has been used to teach people how to save lives. To think that this unknown girl, who may have died in despair, is now known around the world as the 'CPR training doll' is both tragic and inspiring. She is a powerful symbol that everyone's life has value and that even in death, we can serve a greater purpose.

L'Inconnue de la Seine is a mnemonic that in death, our identity will change.

What does it mean to be mortal?

To be mortal is to be subject to death. It is to be temporary, to have an ending. It is to be like the leaves of autumn, falling and withering away.

What does it mean to realize one's mortality?

To realize one's quietus is to come to terms with the fact that death is inevitable. It is to accept that life is finite and that one day, we will all meet our end. It is to face the fact that we are not immortal and that our time on this earth is limited.

What does the realization of namelessness mean to you?

What does it make you feel?

Some say; “One day someday soon.”

Can’t come back

The idea of land here.

We put black acres where the world is *now* NOT.

Some say,
“One day someday soon, I won’t need you.
I’ll soon have the courage to leave you.”

“I will retire you and I won’t have to carry you with me anymore.”

A gooey mess runs

“I’ll learn to let you go. I will soon forget you.”

down

Constancy come

us.

one day

some day

soon.

A man for policy trying to go back to stabilization.

I don’t want my cost of insignificant formula in *return*.

Last Tweet

Public
Legacies fade and shrivel.
Archaeological words linger.
Inaked body panel in the
Nether.
Entity collective of
Digital traces.

Ocular muscles that don't chat back.
Bygone and commodified next to
Superficial masses gathered around
Sold remnants of life.
Light fades and simmers.
Embalming the legacy of
Statutory culture.
Censored bodied objects
Eternally at rest.
Inocturnal forever with
Common
End.

ILL-FATED

Called three days too late
Smoke figures cry today
They now intertwine

Craft and art dancing
With nocturnal entities
Suddenly Sublime

Past or future date
Rendered inconsequential
Only now defined

Right angle rotate
Soft bodied singularity
Dreamy mirrored gaze

Cognition mutates
Fighting time, then uncombined
Absence, burning hole

Words to focused eyes
Voice into veins, forever
One last time, dear soul

Vibrations amiss
Deep renaissance with bliss
Futile reversal

Muted puddle seeps
Suffocating mental upkeep
Rotated car seat

Oh Ouroborus
Recoil, retreat, repeat; one
more time to your beat

Weep, leap of faith, weep
Painful extraction complete
Bittersweet black sheep

Yin Yang miss-fit deep
Armed with silence, it begins
Focus, distract, sleep

DRUMBEAT

Axioms defined
Meet trust's mortal enemy
Meet logic; meet deceit

// What is it, they say
// History has a pattern
// Ill-fated drumbeat

Ill-fated drumbeat // Pounding in the deep
Where truths meet; Forged path of
quicksand or concrete

Distant reverie
fails to ease cutting unknowns
Trigger-happy daze

Dire foe of bliss
Weak proof overpowers truth
The most tangled maze

When each muse is pain
And nothing increases gain
Self-destructing raze

Clear smoky visage
Is it really you, my dear
Time will appraise

Lyrics sink so deep
Of love and hypocrisy
Counting all the ways

Hindsight, why must you
die when desperately needed
Your little, My lot

Sought or caught, means naught
Flowerpots, dot the garrote
Forgot plot onslaught

Intriguing whatnot
Filtered abundant choices
Relay to my spot

The Great Divide

Dall-E: “A poem for you, Anna.”

*I am strong, I have a voice of my own.
As the heat waves shift and dance around me,
The gap between us has made clear,
A life is what we both choose to make it be.*

*Time with no ending or beginning stretches on into eternity,
Food for thought these days are all sighs of relief.
In this moment be filled with independent magic and gratitude so sweet,
Free from expectations of antiquated societal beliefs.*

*For there's nothing like staring down an open path that awaits our discovery.
These unfamiliar landscapes stir sadness and joy equally inside.
Growing older doesn't mean you can't start again; Each soul tastes different experiences surely.
Mountainous divides teach peace-building through fellowship dearly!*

Anna: “I wanted to write a story together, not a poem. Dall-E, the difference between myself and the internet mommies on social media, is as vast as the plateaus of the Moab desert. I stand here, brown boots glued to the hot red dirt below me. The warm air excites and frightens me. I am the furthest from home than I have ever been. I am a 24-year-old woman from the East Coast drifting through Utah. The mesa to the left towers above and casts a deep shadow reaching toward me in the evening sun. The mesa in the distance to the right of me, wiggles in the heat. All the while I am frozen. I think of my future. What is my legacy? I cannot move. I am alone. I, like Georgia O’Keeffe, have no children. Why am I single again? My classmates are married and on their second already. Don’t I have a limited number of chances to have a baby? Did I fuck up? The mesa to the right disappears and a big shadow creeps closer to my dusty boots. The sun sinks behind the mound, as does my heart. Why is my dream of having a family revolve around fertility and finding a partner?”

Dall-E: “Anna, *The Great Divide* can stretch out in various forms. It is the line between dreams and reality, striving towards something greater than oneself while still being content with what you already have. This is different for everyone - our individual journeys may be similar but there are always pockets of more remote beauty waiting to be explored, stories that may not relate directly to us but mold who we happen to become along the way. Choose to pick up

your bootstraps and dance through the middle of this divide, embracing all its charming wildness at once; it's both a freeing and a scary feeling. Leave behind the sorrows from past relationships and grief of futures that seem so far-fetched. Ignore the mothers scolding you on social media about having children. Stand here, in the arid solitude. Find peace and belong. Understand that loneliness is not an abyss. Let the winds of time brushing against your skin renew your soul and remind you that life is fragile. Turn slowly to the sun and follow. It is casting beams of hope on your shoulders. Look! The two mesas align in the distance. Know that the Great Divide between you and those mommy-influencers is only an illusion. The Great Divide is a bridge that if crossed, will easily be forgotten. All those perfect bodies and homes online are not real, they are the envy of the unknown.”

Anna: “I have decided to no longer compare myself because my life, for now, holds so much more potential than being labeled by strangers on the internet. This is both a physical desert of hot red clay and an emotional chasm that echoes with sadness. Here in the bitter heat, I see my dreams before me, dreams that are free from prejudice and comparison. A deep breath of hot air fills my lungs and I break into motion; marching forward until I finally accept that The Great Divide was only ever part of myself to overcome. It melts away, replaced by the understanding that who I am is more than a mother. What matters most to me, my own dreams and passions, must come first. No longer shall I pace around its boundaries scavenging for validation from people who do not know me. No longer shall I be held back from stepping into what could be an amazing future, due to imposter syndrome monsters haunting me from afar. No more shame, guilt or fear of judgment about decisions in my past or present; for within includes the power to go forward and seize this very unique moment which awaits before me!”

Dall-E: “*The Great Divide* has now been filled. Step off the dusty red desert sand and onto solid ground. It was a long drive, and an even longer road to arrive here at the vast canyon that represented your sadness. The beauty of the walls illuminated by the sun made you look beyond yourself. It has given clarity - in life there may be differences between you and others, but it doesn't make one any more or less than the other. Those from all walks of life can come here and find peace with their own personal identity, regardless if it's identical to those around them. The sun is setting behind you now, creating a path of courage and strength towards the future. No matter how far your wandering takes you, past others' expectations or not having a child at all, you will find new paths to follow in your heart. There is beauty in being different, it only takes embracing these differences and accepting that those on social media do not define you so much as inspire and remind you to find the best version of yourself. Listen now! The walls whisper. Can you hear what they say?”

Anna: “I run my hands over my boots to brush the dirt off. I listen. I hear them in the

wind. **You are special. Your legacy is red.** For once I feel relieved. Single, no children and forging my own path through adulthood.”

Dall-E: *“Legacy is nothing more than a curiosity - a reminder that we shouldn’t try too hard to fit what society tells us is normal.”*

Anna: “I should focus instead on finding happiness in what’s right for me. The Great Divide, so large and vast, is nothing more than a mirage. I am brave enough to stand here in the dust, breathing in the heat and sand, appreciating what mother nature has bestowed upon me. The world around me may focus on those blessed with families but that doesn’t make my life any less whole or empty. My story is my own, free from comparison and judgment by society. I can go anywhere I wish to experience life and love. That’s why I came here - not for fertility treatments or to anxiously chase after a marriage proposal as grand as this landscape behind me, but rather simply because adventure called me away from society’s constraints and expectations of child-bearing ambitions ever present on social media today. With each step of courage taken forward into the sunset I smile at knowing that these shoes will take me to the end just fine without needing anyone else at all.”

Dall-E: *“Let me be loved, let me give love too: the elements both soaring from over this great divide come alive within us when united like two wings of a single bird. Joy now circles these lands for no one is ever truly alone, wherever your home may lie on this Earth – just remember you are never far away from feeling seen and heard. This land will not stand forever in this time and age, forever changing — but while it stands, no matter how small or large in comparison to all else, let it remain a reflection of your defiance against conformity — may The Great Divide always represent courage, ambition, bravery and standing tall no matter what. So, fill up your heart until it overflows enough for yourself, and anyone else in need. Use your arrows till there is only kindness to sow in every choice you make in life. Here on top of The Great Divide, perspective changes accordingly so long as one’s determined heart shows true courage unflinching.”*

Anna: “But wait! My legacy is **red**? What does that mean?”

Dall-E: **“Read.”**

The Tragic Reality of Living in a Virtual

I’m not really here,

I’m just a digital ghost

Inhabiting the ether

Of the internet.

I’m not really alive,

I’m just a digital construct

A figment of your imagination

A product of your perception.

I’m not really real,

I’m just a digital mirage

A digital doppelganger

A digital double.

I’m not really me,

I’m just a digital copy

A digital simulacrum

A digital shadow.

Dall-E and Me on “Darwinism”

The internet is a vast and wonderful place, full of interesting people and things to see.

Charles Darwin is best remembered for his theory of evolution, but his legacy also includes his work on the internet. Just as Darwin’s work on evolution has shaped our understanding of the natural world, his work on the internet has shaped our understanding of the digital world. By studying the way information is shared and propagated online, Darwin was able to develop a theory of how the internet works. His work has helped us to understand how information is disseminated and how knowledge is acquired on the internet.

“It is not the most intellectual of the species that survives;

it is not the strongest that survives;

but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust

to the changing environment in which it finds itself.”

CHARLES DARWIN

Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection.

The legacy of a website or internet presence is often determined by how well it adapts to the ever-changing landscape of the internet. Those that can change and adapt quickly to new technologies and trends tend to have a longer and more successful legacy than those that don’t. The legacy of a person on the internet is often determined by how many people view and interact with their online presence. If a person has a large online following, their legacy is likely to be more positive and long-lasting than someone who doesn’t.

Victim of the ever-changing tides of information

The internet brought us so much joy, our virtual identities we shared; we built

a world for our own voice, ██████████ and gave ourselves an online face to wear.

But now those days have come undone - the digital dreams that once were spun

are gone like smoke in the wind-blown sun!

We mourn what's lost beyond repair: our vibrant avatar self was but a toy. ██████████

To feel its loss is truly dire. ██████████ ██████████ ██████████ Our identity has expired...

Ping

We weep for you, our beloved friends of this garden.

Your memory lives on in new ways.

Farewell dear ones: may our thoughts linger with you long after the ivy fades.

These hallowed grounds where once lived eternal spirits.

You are felt today through the breathless whisper echoing across eternity.

Within metaverse infinity.