IF WE CATCH YOU TALKING TO A STRAY DOG

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Portraits are usually flattering or at least self-deprecating enough to be charming and seemingly sincere. One hangs portraits of themselves and their families in the home as signifiers of a communal happiness and general satisfaction with life. Portraits are produced as a historical record of the vitality of the sitter, as evidence of them having ‘lived’.

There was in the early days of photography what we would think of now as a rather bizarre kind of image being commonly made: the post mortem photograph. Infant mortality rates were exceedingly high and photographing a dead child was often a way of preserving their cherished memory. More than often the deceased was placed within a highly composed family tableau, sitting idle as though asleep amongst other living family members. In one case an embalmed body was exhumed after two and half years to pose with the family ...

These works take inspiration from a deceptively simple question that Lascelles and Nyberg have been asking people for years, “How will you die?”. Answers range from the downright deranged to the absurdly comical, and naturally, the artists gathered together their favourite responses. Each person was then asked if they would be willing to enact their death scene as a constructed reality. What results then is a sort of negative portrait, an inversion of the natural order of the portrait as both an historical record and a signifier of happiness and a satisfied life of the sitter.

The image itself is a lie, the scene is a construction, it’s not ‘real’, the elements within the image have been painfully composed into an order, the lighting agonised over to cast the right shadow, create the most desired atmosphere.

As Picasso once stated ‘art is a lie that reveals the truth’. Yet these images are alarmingly honest, they uncover a psychology and give us a greater insight into the person portrayed than a typically commissioned portrait could ever hope to do. It reveals a certain desire, a certain awkward acceptance of a common fate. And that fate is often violent, tragic but always somehow comical and fascinating.

Death has never looked so good... and has never laughed so hard.
Shane
As an easy way to earn extra cash as a student, he took a part-time job delivering singing telegrams — in costume. His last call-out was to the stag night of a member of the mob, who mistook his animal magnetism as an ingenious disguise. His body was found bundled into the boot of a Mercedes in a suburban backyard, a single shot to the head.

Claire
She started the day the perfect wife: packed lunch and peck on the cheek for hubby at the door. She wore a pretty pinafore to protect her polka dots as she baked a jam tart: steaming, sticky from the oven, with a precise pastry lattice. Monday was washday. Just a few minutes to hang the linen: crisp-starch cotton and pristine pillowcases. The wind gushed, the washing line twirled, the worm turned. She pirouetted in the twist of a queen-sized sheet, her winged eyeliner immaculate.

Joanna
A fashion victim in the truest sense of the word, the only way she could indulge her obsession with sartorial sassiness was if she burgled the homes of the rich and fashionable. One enchanted evening her high heels ultimately got the better of her as she tripped down the stairs - her final break-in.

Clyde
An experienced member of a hard-core re-enactment group. The legend of William Tell was his favourite dress-up scenario: the apples, the arrows, and the heroism. Tell’s remarkable marksmanship was tested that day. The re-enactor in charge of the crossbow sneezed - and missed the core. Skewered to a tree, he detested the lack of authenticity but, with his last breath, pondered on his befittingly romantic end.

Tony
While the olds were doing premixes in the Gold Coast, he seized the moment. The cassette was set for a raging birthday celebration - mixed tapes, drinks and lamingtions at the ready. Our white boy wannabe hip-hop star met his fate while posing in the spa pool. A disgruntled partypgoer left him for dead after pushing the birthday cake in his face, suffocating him.

Fiona
Her hero was French fashion photographer Guy Bourdin. She loved his surrealist photographs of women, who met their makers through misfortune and accident - but always dressed with panache. Taking the chops out to the BBQ, she tripped and fell, knocking the painting which fell off the wall, hitting her on the head. The plate smashes, lamb chops scatter.

Natasha
Like falling asleep on a marshmallow cloud is how she thought of it. Sinking into those perfectly pressed sheets, the silver tray on the bedside table held all she might need. She adored her ‘friends’ - those little yellow pills in the bedside drawer were always there for her. Despite her beauty and irreproachable decency she had been defeated, her youthful dreams shattered on the rocks of wrecking crew male sexuality. The American dream, nothing more than a Broadway musical. Oh well, just one more marshmallow dream…

Erin
She attended her staff Christmas party dressed as child beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey. She fastidiously fashioned a ransom demand containing a quote taken from the real life killer’s letter left at the Ramsey home. The evening ended on a bum note. An upset co-worker followed her home and strangled her.

Scott
Playing alongside his sporting heroes was a dream come true, but 4 runs off 46 balls in the lead-up to the semi-final, turned him into an outsider. Desperate practise in the nets failed to improve his batting prowess on the field. Perhaps a generous gift of a dozen Fosters to his team mates would soften the blow? They drank his beer then beat him up.

Jonny
A passionate folk singer, he often went out busking to share the love. Midway through a cover of the Bob Dylan epic Masters of War, his song was cut short. A passer-by with a penchant for heavy metal took matters into his own hands. A blow from the guitar put an end to the earnest warbling.

Mary
Known for her accurate yet acerbic reviews, she was a well-respected literary critic. One night as she was nailing her next victim, and supping liberally from the plum-coloured cup, she was murdered by a poison dart. It was made from the pages of Kafka’s Metamorphosis. A damning review demanded a dramatic departure.
Photographer Tony Nyberg and art director Fiona Lascelles are both based in Auckland, New Zealand.

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