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IN LOVING MEMORY:

BEGINNING THE CONVERSATION ON GRIEF AND LOSS

by

S. A. Bitz

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
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The member of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed
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ABSTRACT

In Loving Memory: Beginning the Conversation on Grief and Loss

S. A. Bitz

Director: Amber Hansen

My series *In Loving Memory* focus on societal grief constructs and culture through presenting my experience with my father's death in 2012. The current culture of grief in society needs to be reformed. Through my own personal vulnerability, I create an atmosphere to begin the uncomfortable conversation that allows for grief to have an existence. I aim not to show a correct way to grieve, just my way of grieving. Grief is universal because death is universal—but my work shows the deeply personal aspect of mourning and loss. I am, perhaps, not asking you to feel emotions as I feel them, but just know that your own grief process is perfectly natural and welcome. I explore the way that the conversation around grief stands today, and offer a sense of reform. I aim to start a healthier conversation—I do not know, nor can I provide the best answer, but I can provide how I dealt with grief and loss. And by being vulnerable in my own work, may the viewer feel just as safe to be vulnerable, so we can start a cycle of healing, rather than continuing the silence.

KEYWORDS: Visual Art, Grief, Loss, Death

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And finally, thank you to my mother. I cannot put words how much I love and appreciate you.

DEDICATION

To my father, Shannon Jake Bitz.
It was on your shoulders that I learned how to fly.

“Do this in remembrance of me.”

Luke 22:19

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Here is the issue: we, as a society, do not talk about things that make us uncomfortable. Hard discussions around sensitive topics are rarely had to begin with, much less to the extent in which to begin addressing and healing large wounds. And one of those topics is death.

Death happens to, and affects, every being on this planet. There is a universal fear of death—that watching another’s last breath makes us contemplate our own.¹ So why are we not talking about it? Perhaps one reason that grief is not talked about is that there is no language to express this sensation. The problem with pain, with grief, is that we lack the tools to express and understand it.² To further complicate the point is when we do find the language, we do not speak. Society views death as too taboo or morbid of a topic to discuss in length.³ By not expressing or talking about death, society continues to perpetuate the cycle and strays further from regularity and familiarizing death.

The purpose of this project is to undertake an analysis of what grief looks like—to find a visual language of my own experience, to begin the conversation. The subject matter of this paper and the accompanying paintings are personal in nature, and are not intended to be taken as universal experiences. The goal is to allow a space for my own experience in the hope of allowing others to be comfortable—and vulnerable—enough to share their own.

Artistic Precedence

Death is not an uncommon subject matter in the art world. Perhaps death is the one subject every artist (and every person, rather) that deals with at some point. Humans often put attention to their own mortality—whether that is addressing it or ignoring it. Verbal conversations in society around grief, loss, and death are just becoming. However, there can be (and have been) multiple visual languages created to understand this facet of life. While medicine traces pain through what is expressed verbally, visual arts trace pain through sight.⁴

One prominent example of how to visually show pain and loss is the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). Kahlo put her pain into a visual language that could be communicated to others. While her paintings mostly center on her bodily pain rather than death explicitly, there is a connection to be had here. She is best known for her self-portraits, often portraying her life after a bus accident in 1925 when she was eighteen. The results of the accident resulted in the loss of mobility and immune deficits, and led to complications in conceiving and carrying pregnancies to term. Zarzycka notes, “Rather than an *allegory* of pain, Kahlo presented instead a bodily *experience* of it”.⁵ One example is the painting *Henry Ford Hospital (The Flying Bed)* (fig. 1.1) done in 1932 after Kahlo’s miscarriage that was directly related to the complications from her accident. The umbilical cords that stretch from her bloodied body reach out to a fetus, a pelvis, and other objects and organs. Kahlo was connected to her pain in many ways, drawing connections from the body to the things she lost and mourned.

Another prolific artist that dealt with grief and loss is the German artist Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945). The loss of both her son in World War I and her grandson in

World War II, deeply impacted Kollwitz and their deaths were prominent themes in her work. Her woodcut print series *Der Krieg (The War)*, executed between 1921-1922 and published in 1923, shows the tragedy of great loss from a variety of perspectives. In particular, *The Parents (Die Eltern)* is perhaps her most recognizable work, features two figures collapsed in loss and grief (fig.1.2). The stark contrast of the white paper and the black in showcases the tremendous sorrow. In a diary entry from December 13, 1922 Kollwitz writes, “Reworking the “parents” plate. At the moment it seems to me very bad. Much too bright and harsh and distinct. Sorrow is all darkness”.⁶ Kollwitz understood the darkness of grief, and the emotiveness in her work is what makes it so resounding with the audience.

CHAPTER TWO

Foundations of Grief

In her work *On Death and Dying* (1969), Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross published what would become the popular model of grief known in five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. This publication actually focuses most on terminally ill patients and their own emotional progression, and while it is applicable to the surrounding people, I feel it is important to mention that it began with talking to the dying themselves, and not the affected parties.⁷ Nevertheless, *On Death and Dying* laid the groundwork for professionals to build a “healthy” way to grieve for those who have lost a loved one.⁸

While the stages of grief commonly accepted today provide a framework for how someone in mourning experiences emotions, it feels more like a cage. Fernando states that the stage-like nature of grief suggests a particular time, space, and situation in which emotions occur.⁹ And this rather confined sense of when and how to respond creates a doubt of whether or not this response is right or wrong.¹⁰ To imply that there are levels in grief is to assume a temporality to some emotions and to the loss itself—it proposes that grief is an illness. This view of grief as something to be recovered from, rather than something to be felt and processed, is unhealthy.¹¹ Society views grief as messy, something to be cleaned up and moved on from as soon as possible.¹² However, those views are outdated.¹³

Kubler-Ross has since come to rescind the way she wrote the stages—people mistook them to be linear and universal.¹⁴ What was meant to be comforting in understanding one’s grief became a box-like system of when and how to feel.¹⁵ Judith Butler puts it rather poetically, “What is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some”.¹⁶ Grief is universal; everyone will feel loss at some point in their lives. But in just as many ways as grief is universal, it is also individual. To regulate and structure something so amorphous and abstractly unique such as grief can be detrimental to one’s ability to not only cope with the loss, but with themselves.

Humor

One emotion often neglected in the process of losing a loved one is humor. The old adage says “Laughter is the best medicine”, but it is not one readily prescribed and

administered to hurting families in times of grief. There is a seeming taboo surrounding humor as a way of coping with grief especially, as it can appear almost insulting to the departed and their memory, as if to say that death is not a time for jokes. As Derrida states in his eulogy of Sarah Koffman, “Art and laughter, when they go together, do not run counter to suffering, they do not ransom or redeem it, but live off it...”.¹⁷ When used appropriately, humor can pair well with grief and mourning, a way to be a little bit more feeling and human in a time when numbness and autopilot are the norm.

There is something to be said about the sentiment of reserving laughter in dark times. Humor, laughter, and lightheartedness can be seen as an emotion that displaces and ignores larger, more serious emotions. As Gilligan notes:

There is so much to be said for humor, especially when it breaks through denial; millions of Americans [watch] Jon Stewart and *The Colbert Report*. But when humor is used to camouflage reality, it reinforces our penchant for turning away from what we know or making light of what we find discomforting.¹⁸

Gilligan’s argument falters partly with this analysis. Grief is indeed discomforting to many people, and humor should not be used as an escape from confronting the serious sensitivity of grief. However, there is something to be said for when humor enriches the grieving process.

That night, when my family returned from the hospital newly burdened with a harsh reality, my mom and I went downstairs. We watched Jon Stewart. Not to mask painful emotions, but for the fact we did not want to be alone quite yet. And the next day, as the household began to heal and tell others the news, as a broken family, we

laughed. We laughed not at the face of death, or the terrible circumstances. We laughed because it felt good in a whole world of bad. We laughed because we were healing, and we needed medicine that allowed us to continue to be human.

Headline News (fig. 1.3) demonstrates this concept of humor having a place in mourning loss, but without hiding its painful reality. Comedian and former host of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Jon Stewart is placed in the studio environment. His expression is not one that is laughing, but rather pensive. The still on the left side of the painting shows a casket with flowers, “DEATH” written in dark block font. Anyone familiar with this show know that Stewart is talking about death as a segment on his show. And given the show’s satirical and humorous nature, we can assume that maybe some rather dark punches are pulled. When combined with the CNN formatted headline that reads “SHANNON J. BITZ, 50, DIES”, there is an understanding of the immense gravity of this situation. Despite being juxtaposed by a lighthearted figure, the audience is still confronted with the earth-shattering fact that someone has passed, and his loss is deeply felt and has impacted his surviving loved ones.

The heavy weight of death is made lighter often in popular culture. The cult classics from the *Monty Python* franchise are best exemplified here. I use imagery from the films *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* that poke fun at death. The goal is to welcome the serious aspect of death with something a little lighter in the terms of humor. The British comedian, actor, screenwriter, author, and co-founder of *Monty Python*, John Cleese said, “I [am] struck with how laughter connects with you people”.¹⁹ Laughter as a tool for empathy and allows for you to truly share a moment with others. The following paintings seek not only to honor the connection through

laughter that I had with my father, but also seeks a connection between me and the viewer through the avenue of laughter.

The painting *Always Look on the Bright Side* (fig. 1.4) is taken from the scene in *Monty Python's Life Of Brian* (1979) of the crucified main character Brian, who is in a comedic plot of being in the wrong place at the wrong time and is mistaken for the Christian figure Jesus. As death approaches Brian, he belts out a tune titled “Always Look On The Bright Side of Life”, encouraging listeners to always find the silver lining.²⁰ This song specifically was featured at my father’s funeral, as not only did my father enjoy the movie and the actor troupe, but he enjoyed comedy. There was not, and is not, a better sendoff I could give him than honoring that aspect for him. At the time and still today, listeners are rather taken aback to hear my family decided to play such a song at a funeral.

Taken from a still from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), the painting *Bring Out Yer Dead* (fig. 1.5) features the character of the body collector from historic plague outbreaks. While quite literally darker than its companion, this piece is light in its essence. The whole scene is rather comical, recalling how plague was rampant in medieval times, and the disposal of the bodies, even those who will be “stone dead in a minute”.²¹ Overall, the treatment of death is humorous and it is not morbid to laugh—that is the entire intent of the bit. What is life if we cannot have a laugh about more serious aspects of it?

These latter works helps to normalize laughter and joy to truly *celebrate life* rather than *mourn death*. And that is really a key aspect of death and loss. We need to have space to appreciate the time we got to spend with the departed—and while we still

need to feel a full range of emotions in grief, it is perfectly acceptable to laugh. Enjoying the memories and adding this dimension of humor to this series was one of the greatest ways I could connect with my father. And while not every viewer may understand the references, those that do can appreciate the comedy, and perhaps remember their own losses in a new light.

Anger

Something has gotten lost in translation in terms of anger and grief. In *On Death and Dying*, Kubler-Ross spent a large portion mentioning the availability and the necessity of expressing all emotions—including anger.²² But the societal norm of suppressing grief overall has metamorphosized into not expressing emotional states in the process. This is further complicated in gender-identifying females and young girls.

The problem with anger in what has become the accepted Kubler-Ross model of grief, especially for women, is this: what happens when, compounded with loss, you are not only told to not be angry, but you are told to be silent? *Suppression//Impasse* (fig. 1.6) details this dichotomy of my experience faced in the time of grief when anger was both unfeminine and necessary. The likeness of myself is frozen in a scream of rage on the canvas, but is literally caged in by cooking racks nailed to the frame. The gendered symbol of female is in pink behind the cage. Society has caged feminine anger within its own gender that there becomes an impasse in times of loss and grief. I became imprisoned by the toxicity of societal assumptions and the stage system. There is no win-win situation for a female in grief. We can either be angry and heal at the expense of our

societal relationships, or be silent and never move forward in grief. The disparity of the situation is one that needs to be addressed and fixed.

The idea of talking about pain is suppressed in Western culture, as it is structured to be an obstacle to overcome, without any healing properties.²³ Then the approach to grief in stages hits a large hiccup when it comes to the inability to complete the process. And as Silverman notes, grief is gendered. Bereavement, while universal, affects men and women differently.²⁴ Further, women tend to blame themselves for this difference “instead of blaming society for denying her the right to mourn openly, she begins to blame herself for not being able to behave the way those around her would prefer”.²⁵ This is all due to the fact that society has constantly invalidated women’s feelings and experiences.²⁶ How can one even go through this stage when there is a systematic suppression of such an emotion in society, especially in women?

Most therapists consider a woman to be ‘healthy’ if they are submissive, uncompetitive, dependent, and unaggressive.²⁷ Women cannot be angry—it is not feminine to be angry. Furthermore, Bernardez notes that, “If women openly express anger, they are threatened with the loss of their sexual identity, attractiveness and one of their most valued characteristics—their loving regard for mankind”.²⁸ For a woman to be angry, it would be considered against the grain of what it mean to be a woman, and therefore ‘unhealthy’. And this potentially comes from the encouragement of society to silence girls and women in speaking their mind. Gilligan notes how crucial this silencing is, especially at adolescence:

... the tendency in girls’ lives at adolescence for a resistance that is inherently political—an insistence on knowing what one knows and a

willingness to be outspoken—turn into a psychological resistance, a reluctance to know what ones knows and *a fear that one's knowledge, if spoken, will endanger relationships and threaten survival.*²⁹ (emphasis added)

A large reason for the silencing of voices and anger is the idea of relationships. Women and girls will bite their tongue in fear of endangering their associations and connections with other people. Girls learn early that their honest voices are the sacrifice of honor and advancement in patriarchal society.³⁰ In return, girls and women lose the relationships with themselves.

With this silence comes an external directive on how to feel and when. The conversation takes an ugly twist when one is told to be silent yet that they are grieving incorrectly, that their internal compass of being okay is suddenly wrong. One may lose structures of identity in losing someone, but one does not lose the inner voice and guide of themselves. And so when confronted with the questions of “Are you okay?” and “How are you holding up?”, we shrug, and say: “I don’t know”. Gilligan rather poetically notes the detrimental effects of this phrase:

In the phrase “I don’t know”, the word “don’t” jumped out as an injunction standing between “I” and “know”. Whose word was that?
Wherever it came from, it resided inside, *becoming an inner voice mandating dissociation: don’t say this, don’t think this, don’t feel this...*
Listen instead to the voices that tell you what is happening and what you should feel and think and say. *Don’t listen to yourself.*³¹ (emphasis added)

So the impacts of loss at the adolescent stage come with a backhandedness of what to understand. We are told to feel and mourn, but... not like that. And the external directives of emotion are ineffective—it is not as simple as just saying “no this is wrong”.³²

The inexpressibility of anger, especially from women, are faced with the consequence of self-betrayal, self-depreciation, and self-destructiveness, among other things.³³ Women are encouraged to stand up for others and those more vulnerable, however they are dissuaded from taking up their own cause.³⁴ Confining and suppressing angry energy does not allow for the ability to turn introspectively into oneself, suspends the possibility of growth, and stifles creativity.³⁵ Suddenly, there is a hiccup, a glitch in the system—the ever-evolving nature of grief does not allow for silence and suppression, and it certainly does not wait until girls are out of adolescent stages.

Society finds anger discomforting as well—something to be moved through and with as little noise as possible.³⁶ And this negative societal image of anger comes from the years and decades of anger that was not allowed to exist.³⁷ Somehow, the stage of anger and the acceptance of it in Kubler-Ross’ model has been manipulated into suppression by society and the accepted psychological canon. Anger is a response to a perceived injustice, and—contrary to the medical model and gendered psychology—is perfectly healthy and necessary.³⁸

Anger deserves a voice.

CHAPTER THREE

Best Intentions

When one is grieving, there is a sense that there is no help available. No one can comprehend these emotions, perhaps despite having felt similar emotions themselves, because society has not talked about grief. And this is harmful more than helpful, because not only do we as a grieving person not know what to do with unprecedented emotions, society does not know how to *help* those in mourning make heads or tails of this new reality.

The simple fact is this: society is uncomfortable with the fact that other people die.³⁹ Because we as a society do not talk about grief, our ways of responding to those that are grieving are just as unhealthy. This lack of language is detrimental. Without language to share, without direct representations of pain, there can be no conveyance and no empathy.⁴⁰

And even those around us have the greatest intention of helping, but in many ways harm those mourning the loss. *Sorry for Your Loss* (fig. 1.7) is a multi-media piece of sympathy cards and oil paint. The cards are blank, suggesting how exactly meaningless they are to the recipient. And every card is cut in half and placed juxtaposed to the half of another card, displaying the almost factory-like quality of the sentiment inside: that a half of two sympathy cards can be put together and still read the same message. The placement and design text is suggestive of a dictionary entry of the word “Condolence”, but the definition has been changed to read “1. cliché platitudes best

expressed on a seven-dollar sympathy card”. The words combined with the empty cards show just how worthless sentiments in mourning can be received.

The inexpressibility and the silencing of this difficult thing that is death and loss in society means that we are unable to properly console, understand, and help those that are grieving. In *Writing Death*, Fernando notes:

“Pick yourself up”—which usually comes in the form of encouragement, from people that call themselves your friends. The question it brings with it—from what fall? And more importantly, why is mourning associated with a falling, a lowering, as if one is no longer fully human, an incomplete person, when one is mourning?⁴¹

Fernando makes a good point here to question the previous models of grief as something to complete. The falsity of finality is more detrimental to the expression of voices than it is a comfort to the bereaved.

Even clinicians are trained to view grief as a disorder—an illness—rather than a natural response to loss.⁴² As Devine notes, “...most people—and many professionals—think of grief and loss as aberrations, detours from a normal happy life. We believe the goal of grief support... is to get out of grief, to stop feeling pain. Grief is something to get through as quickly as possible”.⁴³ And Devine suggests perhaps why these well-meaning peoples’ support is received so terribly with the idea that there is an unspoken second half the sentence.⁴⁴ The implication of “stop feeling how you feel” at the end of well-intentioned wishes is something felt by those in mourning.⁴⁵ For example: “At least you knew your father (*so stop feeling bad*)”. It is not a matter of being grateful that the

deceased was *even alive at all*—it is a matter of the fact that the deceased is *no longer alive*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Identity Crisis

Grief is complex and the ways we understand it are completely selfish. In grief, we primarily suffer from the fact that the deceased is no longer in our lives to play an active role.⁴⁶ We see the loss of someone in relation to *us*: our expectations, our dreams, our goals, our future. All of the things we plan on goes up in flames in a single, fateful second as a breath is drawn in one last time. But we experience this loss selfishly because it affects our self-understanding.⁴⁷ We are always in relation to the one we are mourning in some capacity.⁴⁸ It is the concept of “I” that is shaken. It is not that “I” become incomplete as a person. The “I” remains the same from birth to childhood to adulthood to old age to death.⁴⁹ But it is this idea that “I” do not understand who “I” am anymore — “I” know that “I” have lost you, but “I” do not know what “I” have lost in myself in losing you.

Butler understands this identity theft that death presents to the affected persons. As she notes in *Precarious Life*:

...it is not as if an “I” exists independently over here and the simply loses “you” over there, especially if the attachment to “you” is part of what composes who “I” am. If I lose you, under those conditions then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself.⁵⁰

Greif and loss comes with an identity crisis. And when one part of that construction is no longer there, we now have to re-evaluate who we are as a self. Then the problem of grief becomes more than losing someone else, it becomes a fear of losing ourselves.⁵¹

And the gendered notion of grief comes up again in concepts of identity. Women are more likely to build their identity around their roles and relationships with others. When women are affected by loss, it is a loss of this role that they have in relationship with the now deceased that is the impact.⁵² In many ways with the death of my father, I could no longer play the role of daughter in the same sense as I could before—as I am now the daughter to only one person, rather than two. Furthermore, my identity in social situations transformed dramatically.

Self-Issued ID (fig. 1.8) is a large South Dakota driver's license that was posted to one named The Girl With the Dead Dad, which was an identity I strived not to have as I returned to school and back into society. My adversity to this character rather subscribed me to it and its role in my life. The logic held that if I gave myself the status of the girl with the dead dad, no one could give it to me, and the harsh pity would be avoided. I could not become something if I already am that something. In many ways, the circumscribed selfhood I distinguished was something that took many years to overcome. In many ways, I did not know who I was or what identity I had. All I knew was that I was irrevocably broken. The shattered mirror attached not only stands to show how irrevocably broken I was, but also invites the viewer to see themselves as me in this position. In many ways, I invite them to see my grief in themselves.

There is a transformation that comes with grief—and it is not something that is necessarily required, but rather inevitable. As Devine notes:

Grief is not an enlightenment program for a select few. No one needs intense, life-changing loss to become who they are “meant” to be. The universe is not casual in that way: you need to become something, so life gives you this horrible experience in order to make it happen. On the contrary, life is call-and-response.... The path forward is integration, not betterment.⁵³

No one needs grief to unlock some inner version of their true, better self, and to imply that is rather demeaning and opposes the entire goal of this thesis. But change is inevitable in life—and whether we are conscious or not of the change, it happens nevertheless. Change is not the required nature of grief, *but the required nature of life*.

The piece *Life Cycle* (fig. 1.9) displays this idea of transformation through the common metaphor of the butterfly. The wings extending from the figures back also are in the same grayscale as the caterpillar, suggesting that the figure is what the small creature will become. The caterpillar does not look back at the figure, and the figure does not stop the caterpillar’s journey. There is an understanding between the figure and the caterpillar: the only way forward is through. The butterfly lights are set to a timer to insinuate motion, drawing the cyclical nature of life through the painting, connecting the figure with the caterpillar. Along with the caterpillar metamorphosing into the figure, the grief changes too, becoming an integral part of the figure, but not all-consuming.

The idea of identity goes through many stages in grief until one reaches an accepted existence of themselves, transforming to feature the ongoing life of the surviving person in relation to the departed. *Sydney Anne Bitz, Surviving Daughter of Shannon Jake Bitz* (fig. 1.10) is merely a self-portrait. Painted in reference from the

mirror that was shattered and attached to the panel, the idea of who I am, and who the viewer is after grief, is reflected back. This portrait is lighter and more positive than *Self-Issued ID* (fig. 1.8) because I have moved to an identity of being defined by myself and carrying the death of my father, rather than being defined by his loss. And the pieces of the mirror do not stand for a broken state, but serve the purpose of truth in identity.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Falsity of Finality

Here is the last nail in the coffin for the Kubler-Ross model of the five stages: just because acceptance happens, does not mean that the pain is gone. We can accept that someone just is not coming back, that they were dead yesterday, they are dead today, and they will still be dead tomorrow. No amount of time can change the fact that life will not return to the deceased. And we can accept that fact, but there is still a mourning that happens when we are reminded that they are not and will not be here.

Devine notes how someone asked if her stepson, in the wake of losing his father, was processing or continued to affect him, “How can it not continue to affect him? His dad is still dead”.⁵⁴ There is a sense of finality when it comes to grief, however the fact remains: *dad is still dead*.

The piece *Dancing on My Own* (fig. 1.11) details a rather poignant moment that requires a physical presence that cannot be there. Upon losing my father, my peripheral vision narrowed—I was just trying to survive each day. However, there become

moments, milestones, that are forever changed. One of the biggest for me was this naïve dream of fairytale weddings that many little girls plan out, down to the last details of a father-daughter dance. Traditional receptions for American weddings feature two events that emphasize the bond between a bride and her father: the giving away ceremony and the dance. And now, I have neither of those. Inspired by Francis Bacon and his ghostly figures, this painting allows myself to honor the connection between my father and I in ways that are not possible anymore.

Additionally, there is the remembrance of the night my father passed. October 27th is a day that comes around every year, and for twelve years of my life was a normal day. For the last eight years and forevermore this date is anything but normal. *The Night the Stars Stood Still* (fig. 1.12) displays this concept on a grand scale and is more than just a portrait of my father. Following in the steps of On Kawara's (1932-2014) *Today* series, which feature sans serif text on a monochrome background featuring nothing but the date on which it was painted, spanning between 1966 to 2013.⁵⁵ I have mimicked Kawara's style and formatting for the block text OCT. 27, 2012 at the top of the composition. Just like Kawara chooses his dates at random, so too does fate. And this specific date is no longer random to me—it is now, and forever will be, the day my father passed. The background is the stars and their approximate positioning on the night he passed away. My father was inspired by celestial space, and it was only fitting to put him amongst the stars.

It would not do this argument justice to leave out the prevalence of social media. The painting *Memories* (fig. 1.11) shows a format of a Facebook “memory” as it pertains to my father. The text of the painting mentions how bittersweet it is to see pictures of the

departed from years before and how that all changes. There is also the idea of sharing these moments with others as if the picture does not affect or bring emotions up that are not entirely positive. The text “This post is private until you share it” presents a dichotomy, as this painting is a private memory, a notification only a select few receive, but I am sharing it publicly with viewers. It is these moments that truly make finality seem like a wild dream of the optimistic.

This idea that when one reaches acceptance that grief is over is not only toxic and harmful, but it is straight up just not true. As Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida* (1980), “For what I have lost is not a Figure... but a being... not the indispensable, but the irreplaceable”.⁵⁶ Death reveals that there is both a finite and an infinite. And in loss, we understand the ending of both the life and our concept of the finite, as infinity of what becomes the rest of our lives without this person stretches before us.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

We as a society must change the conversation. We must have the ability to be vulnerable and open about grief and loss. In this way, I look to start the healthier openness about death and losing loved ones. Through my own experience and my portrayal of it, the viewer is invited to share their own nature of grief and loss. In busting myself wide open, hopefully other people can take courage and open up themselves.

In analyzing what has made society so adverse to talking about death and loss, it boils down to two factors: discomfort and miscommunication. Over the many years since Kubler-Ross published *On Death and Dying*, things have mightily changed. Professionals are seeking to prescribe the five stages of grief as a medicine rather than a rollercoaster of human emotions. In reality, grief demands to be felt. And we must have no choice but to surrender.

Artists have not shied away from the discomforts of life. There have been numerous bruises that visual arts have poked and prodded in the span of history. Frida Kahlo and Kathe Kollwitz have redefined what it means to be vulnerable, personal, and relatable. In their own ways, these two women artists speak to their losses and tragedies in their work (fig.1.1-1.2). In their light, and in this influence, there is a courage for myself to reach for the same kind of vulnerability.

One large part of this vulnerability is the ability to laugh. The addition of humor and comedy in death is something that I explore in *Headline News*, *Always Look on the Bright Side*, and *Bring Out Yer Dead* (fig. 1.3-1.5). Laughter and comedy become the life raft in the ocean of grief that makes the choppy waves of emotion a little more bearable. And in many ways, more relatable. As we bridge and connect with each other, we share our experiences. Through these works I invite the viewer to take the step of connecting with me through a shared experience.

Another aspect of my experience is my relationship with anger, societal norms, and gender assumptions. *Suppression/Impasse* (fig. 1.6) explores this cage, both literally and metaphorically, of what it means to be female and angry. It is due to this societal view that femininity is associated with being docile and calm that perpetuates a toxic

cycle of what is an acceptable emotion for women to feel—and anger is not one of them. In contorting myself to a rather ugly likeness, I open up to my own anger and insert it into the conversation.

There is also a confrontation in how we comfort the bereaved. *Sorry For Your Loss* (fig. 1.7) looks at how society boils grief down to a piece of cardstock marked for capitalistic gain at seven dollars. And yet, these sympathy cards are completely worthless to those that receive them. And this is not to say that we should not be consoling those that are dealing with loss and grief. Simply put, sympathy cards are not the most sincerest forms of comfort. There is the unsaid, but truly heard, second half of condolences received this way. We can be better and do better as human beings to those dealing with grief and loss.

It is a rather surprising thing to note how our own identity changes as we move through grief. In terms of my own experience, *Self-Issued ID* (fig. 1.8) speaks to how I gave myself a title to avoid pity and what I perceived myself to look like to others. Inviting others to see themselves as broken as I felt at the time is a large aspect of this painting. In growing and aging, I changed my relationship with myself and with my grief, as *Life Cycle* (fig. 1.9) displays and I learned how to carry my grief and the beauty of it. This transformation was not necessary for me to get to where I am now, but it was the inevitable metamorphosis of what I became. Today, I am simply *Sydney Anne Bitz, Surviving Daughter of Shannon Jake Bitz* (fig. 1.10), reflecting who I really am, and who the viewer is, right back as the most sincere form of truth and identity.

However, despite all this growth, the grief and loss is still something I have to deal with. In confronting the falsity of acceptance, I show the lasting effect of grief and

loss in *Dancing on My Own*, *The Night the Stars Stood Still*, and *Memories* (figs. 1.11-1.13). In not discussing grief, I never knew what to expect when I reached milestones, or every year on October 27th, or the prevalence and impact of social media. And in this honest and open way, I look to connect with those that have experienced loss.

Through all of this, I hope the conversation changes. In my openness and vulnerability, I look to be a guide for viewers experiencing their own grief and loss. And I hope to create a space that is open, inviting, and safe for those that want to come forward and speak to their own experience. Grief is universal because death is universal—and by being personal and open we can achieve a normalcy that makes it more bearable and healthier.

¹ Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 5.

² Marta Zarzycka, “‘Now I Live on a Painful Planet’: Frida Kahlo Revisited”, *Third Text*, 20, no. 1. (Routledge, January 2006), 75.

³ Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 6-7.

⁴ Zarzycka, “‘Now I Live on a Painful Planet’: Frida Kahlo Revisited”, 76.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶ Kaethe Kollwitz and Hans Kollwitz, *The Diary and Letters of Kaethe Kollwitz*, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 105.

⁷ Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*.

⁸ Megan Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*, (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2017), 30.

⁹ Jeremy Fernando, *Writing Death*, (Uitgeverij: Creative Commons, 2011), 82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Phyllis R. Silverman, *Helping Women Cope With Grief*, Sage Human Services Guide, no.25, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1981). 25

¹² Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK*, xvii.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 173.

¹⁸ Carol Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 60.

¹⁹ Parcast, *Daily Quote: May 10, 2020: John Cleese, Comedian*, read by Kate Leonard, (Spotify, 2019), podcast, 3 min.

²⁰ *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, directed by Terry Jones, (1979; USA), Netflix.

²¹ *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, (1975; USA), Netflix.

²² Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 169, 179-180.

²³ Zarzycka, “‘Now I Live on a Painful Planet’”, 76.

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- ²⁴ Silverman, *Helping Women Cope With Grief*, 9
- ²⁵ Ibid., 18.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 21.
- ²⁷ Teresa Bernardez-Bonesatti, "Women and Anger", *The Sciences*, 18, no. 9, (New York: 1978), 21.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, 115.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 105.
- ³¹ Ibid., 64
- ³² Ibid., 66
- ³³ Bernardez, "Women and Anger", 22.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 32.
- ³⁶ Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK*, 82
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Silverman, *Helping Women Cope With Grief*, 16.
- ⁴⁰ Zarzycka, "Now I Live on a Painful Planet", 76.
- ⁴¹ Fernando, *Writing Death*, 76.
- ⁴² Devine, *It's OK That You're Not OK*, xvii.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 5.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 21.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Christiane Pohl, "Is Grief Self-Regarding?", *Philosophy Now*, no. 17, (1997), https://philosophynow.org/issues/17/Is_Grief_Self-Regarding .
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Fernando, *Writing Death*, 76.
- ⁴⁹ Pohl, "Is Grief Self-Regarding?".
- ⁵⁰ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, quoted in *Writing Death*, 76.
- ⁵¹ Fernando, *Writing Death*, 77.
- ⁵² Silverman, *Helping Women Cope With Grief*, 18, 22.
- ⁵³ Devine, *It's OK That You're Not Okay*, 23.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 78.
- ⁵⁵ Jeffery S. Weiss, et. al, *On Kawara—Silence*, (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, 2015), 75.
- ⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, quoted in *The Work of Mourning*, 47.



Figure 1.1: Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital (The Flying Bed)*, Oil on Metal, 30.5 x 38 cm, 1932. Dolores Olmedo Collection, Mexico City, Mexico.



Figure 1.2: Kathe Kollwitz, *The Parents (Die Eltern)*, Woodcut, 35 x 42.5 cm, 1921-22, published in 1923. Gift of the Arnhold Family in memory of Sigrid Edwards, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, New York.



Figure 1.3: Sydney Bitz, *Headline News*, Oil, 2.5' x 3', 2020

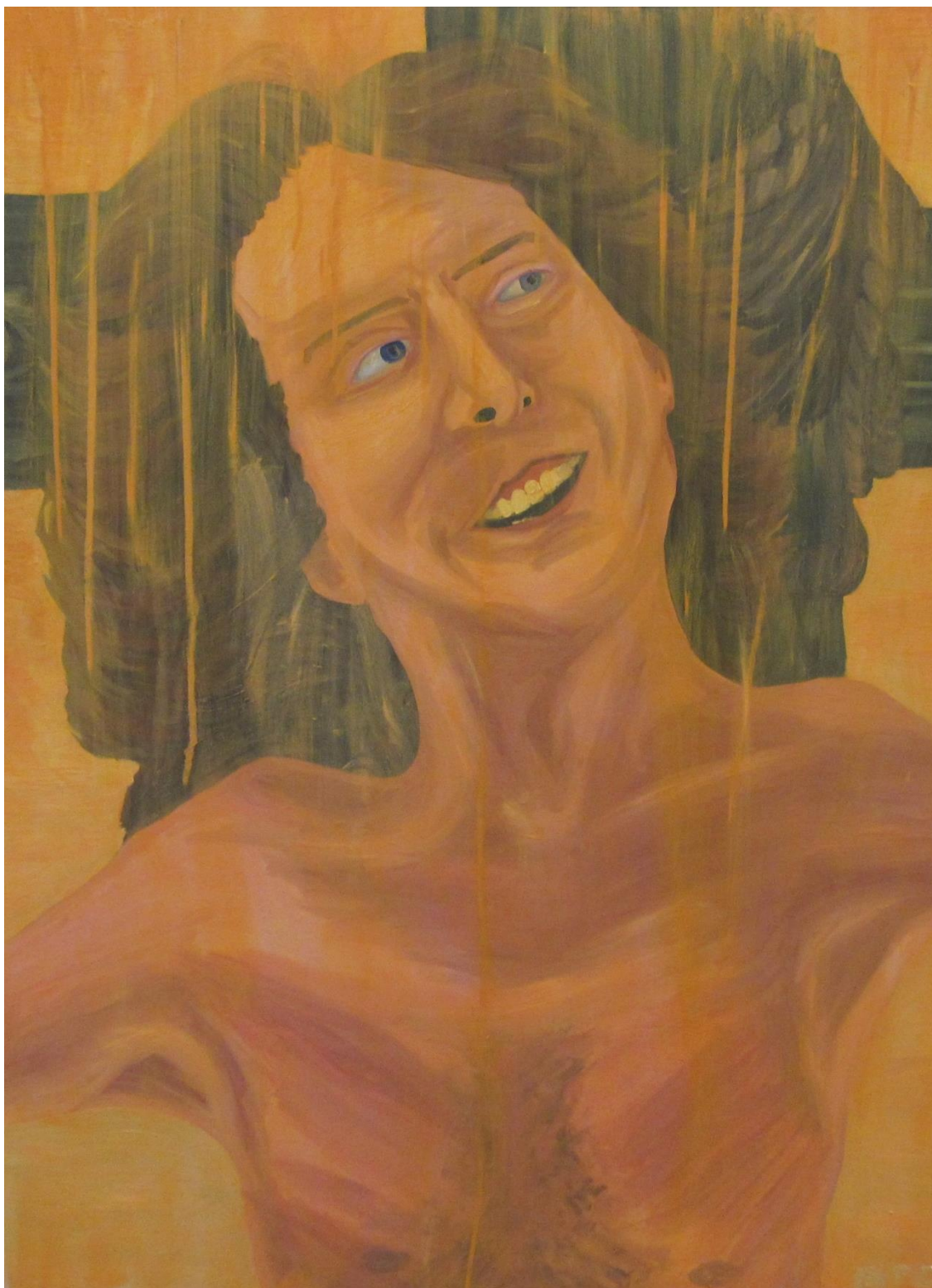


Figure 1.4: Sydney Bitz, *Always Look on the Bright Side*, Oil, 3' x 4', 2020.



Figure 1.5: Sydney Bitz, *Bring Out Yer Dead*, Oil, 3' x 4', 2021.

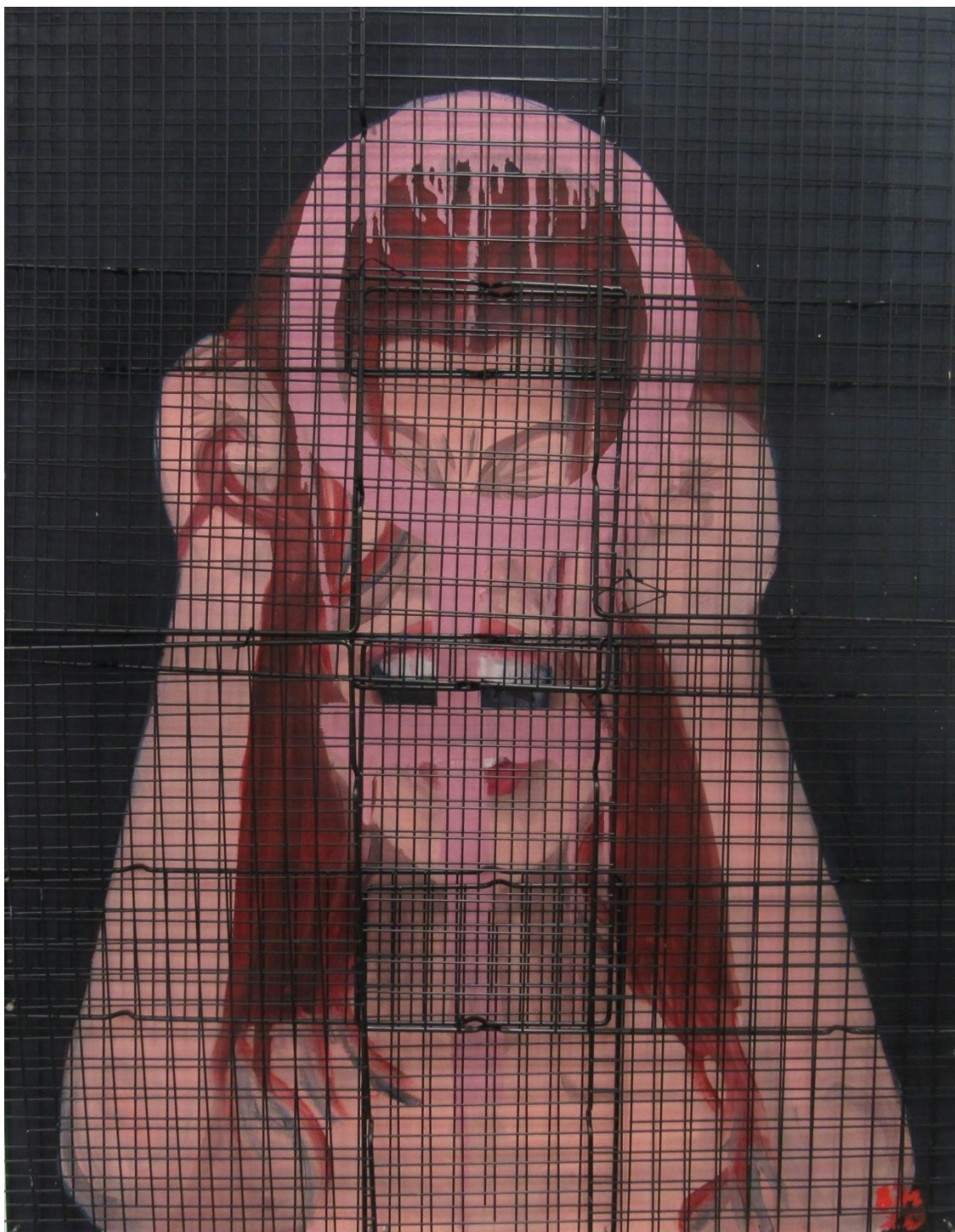


Figure 1.6: Sydney Bitz, *Suppression//Impasse*, Oil and Cooking Racks, 2.5' x 3', 2020.



Figure 1.7: Sydney Bitz, *Sorry for Your Loss*, Oil and Sympathy Cards, 3' x 4', 2020.

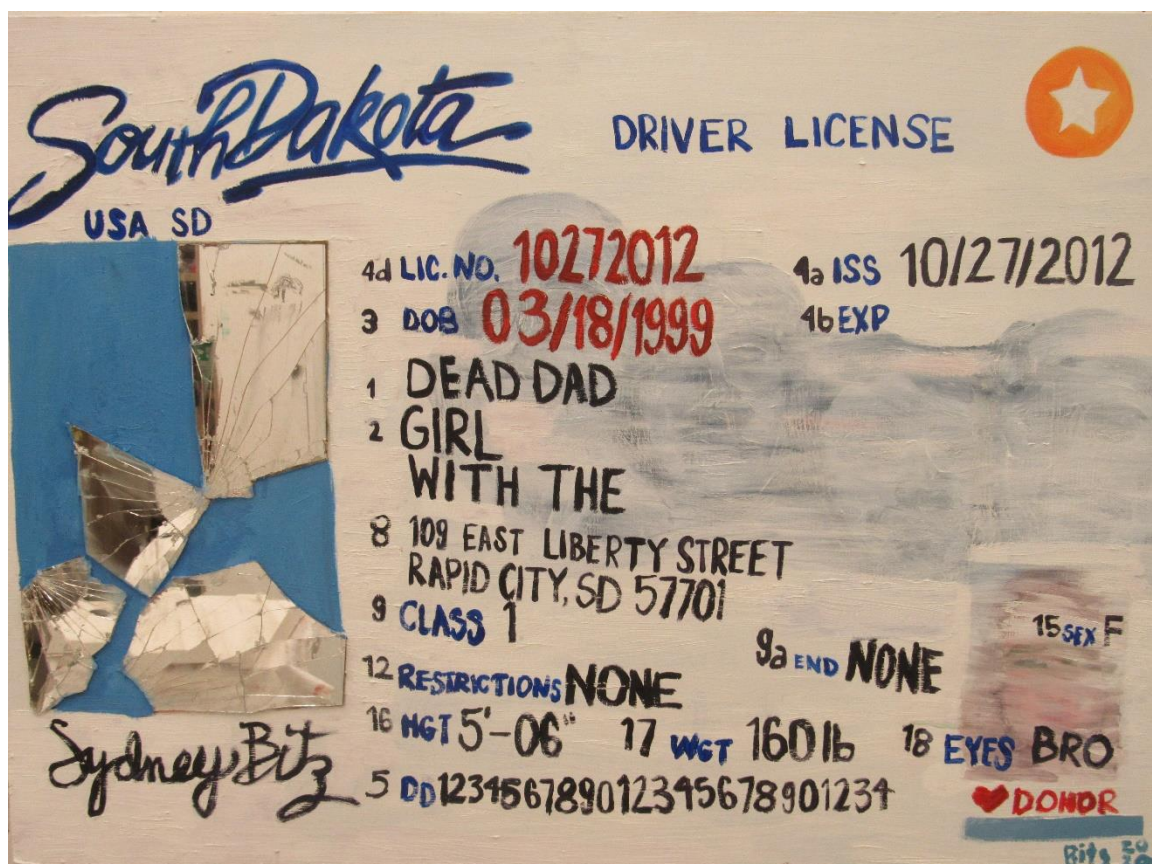


Figure 1.8: Sydney Bitz, *Self-Issued ID*, Oil and Shattered Mirror, 3' x 2', 2020-2021.



Figure 1.9: Sydney Bitz, *Life Cycle*, Oil and Butterfly Lights, 3' x 4', 2020.



Figure 1.10: Sydney Bitz, *Sydney Anne Bitz, Surviving Daughter of Shannon Jake Bitz*, Oil and Broken Mirror, 1.5' x 3', 2021.



Figure 1.11: Sydney Bitz, *Dancing on My Own*, 2' x 3', 2020.



Figure 1.12: Sydney Bitz, *The Night the Stars Stood Still*, Oil, 6' x 4', 2020.

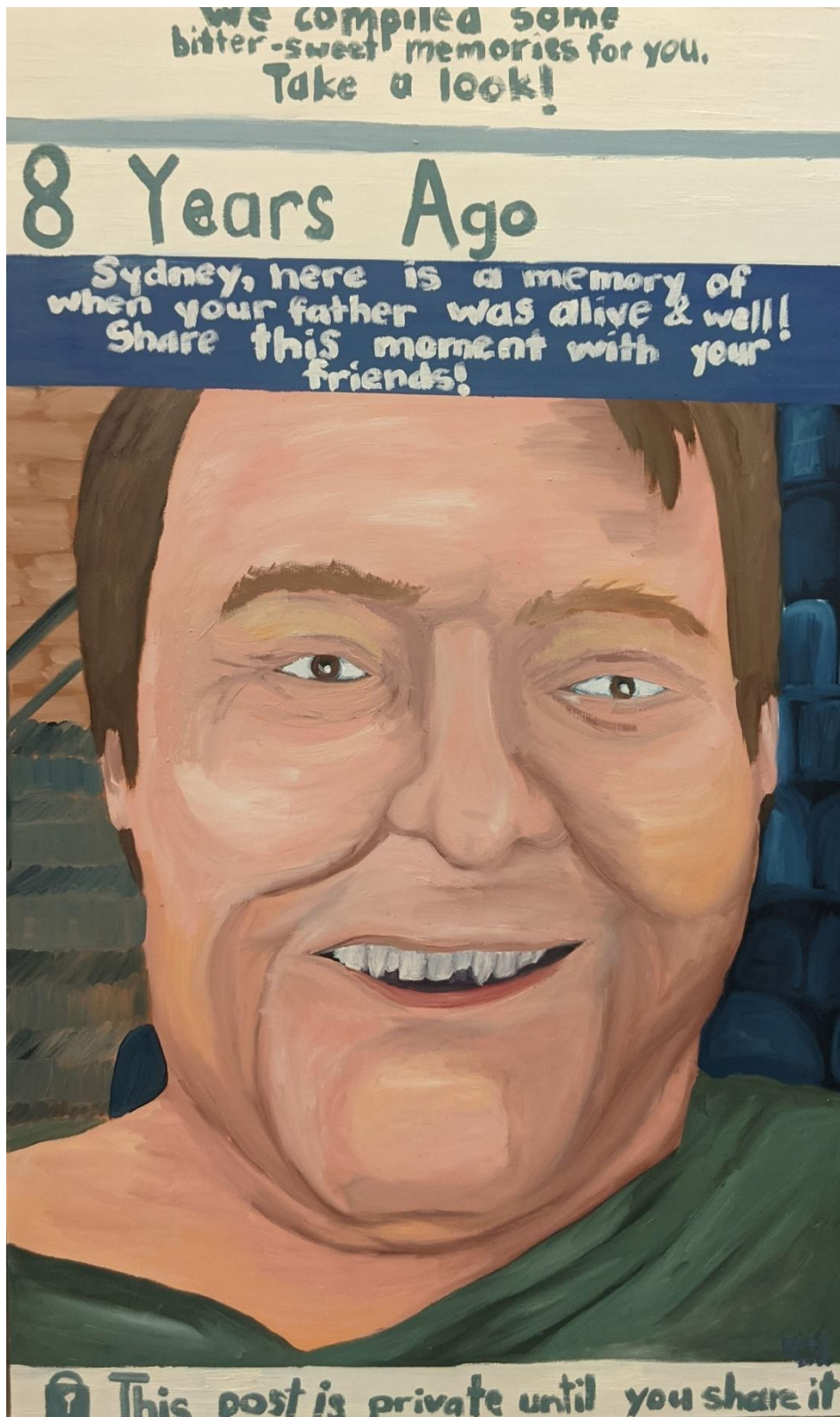


Figure 1.13: Sydney Bitz, *Memories*, Oil, 2' x 5', 2020.

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