

Death in the Age of Instagram (Jeremy Atherton Lin)

We were raised on bulldozed orchards. The Silicon Valley once yielded apricots, apples, walnuts, almonds, prunes and cherries. In the 1990s, we were teenagers cruising along Cherry Avenue, south of Walnut Creek, to The Pruneyard for tall cups of burnt coffee. We passed a modest white office building: the headquarters of Apple Computers.

Many of our fathers were programming engineers, laying the foundations that would eventually enable us to transfer our social lives online. In the meantime, in parking lots and bedrooms, we conceived our own code language: a lingo purloined from pop culture and squeezed like a zit. The ensuing vernacular relied heavily on internal rhymes. T. coined *gnarls in charge*, inserting a diminutive of gnarly into *Charles in Charge*, the name of a banal sitcom. A modification based on a lager brand: *gnarlsberg lite*. Ben cribbed from infomercials, French clichés, the prolix titles of Morrissey songs, dialogue from *Seven Minutes in Heaven* and *Depeche Mode 101*. From the latter: *I said El-vis! I said bo-ring!* We clung to the awkward: anti-catchphrases. We occasionally described the sensibility as kitsch, only because we'd acquired the term. We traded not in irony but nonsense.

We salvaged the malapropisms of minor celebrities. Their slips became our neologisms, held in our mouths like Gobstoppers making our tongues

coated and harshly sugary. We were the inheritors of misquotes and mondegreens. We milked the moment Whitney Houston cooed in an interview: *Mmmmm, pumps. I have a fetish for pumps...* Always being extra, Whitney demonstrated by slipping off her shoe and squeezing it. *Mmmmm, pumps* became an idiom for anything. Like other teenagers, we referred to crushes and adversaries via metonymy: hairstyle, shop where they worked, mode of transport. Initialisms and acronyms abounded, and especially puns. Abbreviation, of course. *Abbreves*. Ours was not a lexicon of high camp; rather, it was as if collaged together with blunt scissors and looped scotch tape. This peculiar suburban cant was sexually repressed but culturally promiscuous, and sporadically literate. I'm still not sure what a *moon pie monger* is, though we said it regularly. I'd venture something akin to lunatic.

We dispersed to attend university – except Ben, who was two years younger than the rest of us. T. moved to San Francisco; I went to L.A. We reconvened in one place or the other, or back home in-between. There was always another slumber party, in which Ben was generally wound up and refusing to sleep. He wrought couture from a sleeping bag. The rest of us would be laying around, trading tales of cringeworthy encounters and flipping through magazines. Ben would emerge from

an adjoining room voluminously.

Past midnight on the floor of T.'s apartment, Ben and I exchanged the ugliest faces we could muster. *Look at me*, I'd say. *Look at THIS*, he'd counter. *Oh my GOD...*, cried A., desperate to sleep. From her position on the futon, she hadn't discerned our grotesque distortions. *You two are so VAIN*. Ben and I dissolved in gales at her misconception.

The first Christmas we returned from university, Whitney Houston's melismatic cover of 'I Will Always Love You' was lodged atop the charts. In cars merging onto expressways, Ben flipped the radio dial, assuring us he'd find the song – *I can feel it* – and when he invariably did, we'd shriek at his psychic powers and belt along, the key change barely managed yet transcendent. The closest we felt to nationhood was in a sedan of quickly fogging windows.

As with the steamy car, our borders were easily adapted; we could pump up the defrost, roll down the windows. The cool air collided with the gush from the heater and we thrilled on the edge of their synthesis. As individuals, we were expanding, each headed somewhere else. Ben still had time to serve in suburban San Jose – *the 'ho's*. He would take part-time work downtown at Cafe Leviticus – *cafe look-at-us* – and volunteer for the AIDS Walk. He'd eventually be crowned homecoming king of our high school.

I'd never considered our slang a potential export, but why wouldn't Ben take it with him when he finally moved to New York City?

It was New York press, mostly, that covered Ben's death in June, 2017: *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *American Vogue*. T. had informed me by private message on Instagram. She had something to tell me. A heartbreak emoticon. I grimaced during the:

Typing...

Bad news is usually not what I was expecting. For a moment T. and I were isolated from the world, but that sensation was quickly lost to an eddy. There was an outpouring on Instagram, a strange place to situate grief. My chats with T. proliferated, grew frantic, began to feel like a huddle backstage. Private notes from others arrived:

I'm pretty torn up about this. can't imagine how you're feeling.

...knowing him made life better... and of course, I thought of you.

I've been taking this news hard. How are you?

C. wrote:

YOU knew him best.

The caps were akin to poking me teasingly or pointing a finger on the dance floor. In the following days, C. was quoted in *Vogue* and *The New York Times*, where she stated, 'He made me believe that an alternative path was possible.' The reporter postulated: 'With him vanishes another sliver of the vision of an earlier New York, and the possibilities it held for its young, underfunded, ambitious arrivals.' *The New Yorker* obituary headline read: 'Ben Cho, a New York Icon Who Gave Me a Sense of What's Possible.'

On Instagram, I was tagged in photos of Ben, implying his personhood was a composite of many. I wondered if certain mutual acquaintances would reach out but they remained aloof. Ben's mother joined and followed me, and I followed back with tenderness and inexplicable embarrassment. Everything seemed unreal except Instagram. In a private account begun by Ben's sister, songs suggested for the funeral after-party were being compiled. It was like a VIP room in

purgatory. Titles accrued likes, marked by tiny red hearts. Soon enough, T. and I had the most going. *Moon pie mongers*. They were pouring out of us: 'Blue Savannah', 'Freedom', 'Kiss Them for Me', 'I Touch Roses'. My little sister added 'Too Close' by Next, recalling how Ben asked the taxi driver to turn it up on the ride into Manhattan when she arrived to attend summer school at Barnard. I hadn't realised Ben had gone to the effort of collecting her at the airport. I could easily imagine them in the backseat, giddy over the raunchy lyrics. T. messaged that she couldn't help but think 'Deadbeat Club' spoke to something about us. I concurred. *And if you're embarrassed*, I added, *I'll suggest it*. Then I worried I'd added too many. *No shame in our game*, T. replied. We agreed Ben's sister nailed it with '7' by Prince. And how, T. marvelled, did whoever suggested 'Heart and Soul' by T'Pau know it captured Ben's very essence?

The song, with its interwoven chug and soar, manages to sound like his clothes look. Nobody was talking much about the clothes. Ben's designs were purposely (or not) unfinished. Trousers were tailored with svelte grace. Zippers and braids were everywhere, dangling or providing structural integrity. A dress became a canopy. Heels were covered in sand. Writing in an American design magazine in the early noughties, I dubbed it 'garage atelier' – this tiny enterprise, reliant on friends, with lavish results. Deep into the night before one runway show, my sis sat on his apartment floor separating human hair, which Ben would then braid into garments, the strangeness of the task making her delirious to the brink of repulsion.

From what I gleaned – I couldn't yet bring myself to read articles in full – the media emphasised his magnetism, DJ sets, stick and poke tattoos, as well as speculated on the cause of his self-medication. It was as if he were being posthumously moulded into a more mainstream celebrity based on the factors of his demise. Or as if he were a case study, the embodiment of a passing era. The pattern emerged of newspapers and magazines reprinting in-jokes from social media – everywhere a flickering, fragmented eulogy, blurring contemplation and quip. The report in *Vogue* began, 'Terrible news was delivered via Instagram yesterday...' *W* published a selection of posts from illustrious friends. Therein I detected broken pieces of our teenage cipher, which Ben had disseminated over the

years in East Village dive bars and photo sessions and store openings: our puerile, fiendish, indelicate terminology. Those phrases we'd coined on notebook paper, jagged where torn from the spiral binding, now exposed as if by a teacher who had intercepted and read aloud to the class.

I recoiled; an argot is meant somewhat to exclude. Other people might miss the point, as when Ben and I made faces at each other on the floor. The way I saw it, we had buffered ourselves with obscure jargon, shrouded original thought in verse from the Smiths. But Ben himself wouldn't have minded. He was evangelical about that band at a notorious weekly party, and published private doodles in a zine. He'd been pleased to report that *gnarls in charge* gained an entry in the Urban Dictionary, claiming a connection to the contributor, *so it definitely came from us*. Also, Ben's deployment of inside jokes was not just creative expression but social strategy. He made you feel like the centre of his world and this was often through absorbing your idiolect and spitting it back, both weaponised and infused with admiration. An index finger pointing at you on the dance floor.

Still, I couldn't conceive our parlance would be of interest outside our network of friends. I think of Joan Didion: 'We are not talking here about the kind of notebook that is patently for public consumption... we are talking about something private, about bits of the mind's string too short to use, an indiscriminate and erratic assemblage with meaning only for its maker.' Or amongst a select few of us, exchanging those creased, frayed sheets.

When I brought myself to read *The New Yorker* obituary, I was met with another aftershock. 'I remember peering across the row in French class at his notebook and admiring his handwriting.' Reading this line, I was sharply taken aback. Apparently the author, Hua Hsu, attended our high school a year behind Ben. What he glimpsed may have been irregular verb conjugations, but also feasibly a ribald double entendre Ben was scribbling to one of us in the clique.

I messaged T.:

Can you remember this guy?

By that point our communications had reverted to all-hours frenziness. We processed each turn of events. The *Times* article: *bizarre*. Cat Power to sing at the funeral: *crazy*. The back channel of DM on Instagram provided a new location from which to gawk together as if at the edge of a dance floor. T. couldn't remember the author either. It seemed that a consequence of Ben's death was the collapse of the world into a claustrophobic smallness. The *Times* began: 'Benjamin Cho's best friends want to make it clear, one after the other, that everyone was Benjamin Cho's best friend.' The article summons expressions from past my time in Ben's circle, each using his surname in portmanteau: *Cho.C.D.* denoted his obsessiveness, *chobation* was the liminal banishment endured as a result of confronting him about his addiction. I was never rebuffed because I never went there. I sent pleas to mutual friends but everything had been tried before. Just the other day I realised one of my white shirts is still stained with red wine from a fierce argument with M. – held on the edge of a dance floor – in which I'd irrationally accused him of callousness in the face of Ben's impending death.

In his *New Yorker* piece, Hua Hsu – who are you? – positions himself at a distance, gazing from across the room. He offers insight into the hagiography of deceased artists: 'All the bad stuff – personal sins, flaws, nasty tempers – gets folded into the messiness of genius; genius becomes someone's sole reason for having been. It's harder to think of people you knew in these terms, to pinpoint the arc and trajectory of their lives, because to you they are ordinary people whose imperfections didn't feed into some grander narrative of struggle.'

The article culminates in Hsu's being crowned by Ben, as he was voted homecoming king the following year. It draws something poignant from their tenuous connection and Ben's effect on him. But I was beginning to find the competing narratives a burden and distraction. The quotations and hashtags were delaying my grief. On social media, the tributes continued, often declaring close proximity or positioning Ben within a given point in one's own career. We were each bidding for ownership. It's not a phenomenon that originated with the advent of Instagram. Siri Hustvedt has described how Emily Dickinson wrote after the death of George Eliot: 'Now, my George Eliot.' Hustvedt states her intent of 'continuing this tradition of ownership by using the first-person possessive pronoun

to claim another great artist, Louise Bourgeois, as *mine*. She is, of course, also *your* Louise Bourgeois. But that is my point. My L.B. and yours may well be relatives, but it is unlikely they are identical twins.'

Eventually, J. alerted me to an Instagram caption written by some fashion kid:

I wish I'd known him.

An endearing sentiment, but I was unnerved as I took stock of my complicated friendship with *him*. We shared a bloodline of music and language, now rendered inarticulate. I knew then I was going to have to distance the public event from my own process.

I conceived this essay's title soon after. A year later, Frank Bruni wrote a *New York Times* piece called 'Death in the Age of Narcissism', describing eulogies that shift 'from the celebrated to the celebrator'. Ostensible tributes to Aretha Franklin by both Trump and Madonna only foregrounded the speaker. 'The rest of us have neither the megaphones nor megalomania of Trump and Madonna, but we have some of the same impulses when weighing in on famous people's deaths. We find the one point where we intersected with them. We wedge in our own biographies. We flaunt our own résumés.' Bruni continues: 'I blame social media, which can make some kind of immediate response seem almost compulsory, like a homework assignment.' He also blames journalism, 'which is in a phase that encourages its practitioners to treat big developments as branding opportunities, carve our own niches in others' narratives and become characters as well as guides.'

In high school, our vocabulary was rooted in alertness to one another's insecurities and predilections. Ben knew each of us far better than any of us knew him. He was a prism – transparent but constantly refracting. The rest of us began to attempt to figure him out. Why didn't he sleep. He'd stay up playing Solitaire long after ending his final phone conversation. Once when I was feeling antisocial, Ben giddily offered to pay me ten dollars to hang out. With socialising, with an inside joke, why was so much never enough. Who knew we'd live to see *The New York Times* summarise: 'He was allergic to calling it a night.'

He never fully revealed his pain, but we glimpsed tragicomic side effects. I think of Ben confiding his father had developed purple marks

across his back. He initially suspected, with horror and a little pride, that they evidenced sadomasochistic assignments. There was a distance between them, and questioning his father's proclivities widened this gap; Ben seemed truly disturbed. The bruises turned out to be the innocuous result of his dad's early adoption of cupping. Ben cackled. The stuff that was not as easily explained away was swallowed or dismissed. We reasoned if we could get him to open up more, to unravel a bit, like his ragtag hems, he would find some kind of peace. He shined brighter than anyone in the room, but its source seemed entropic. As we grew older, we just accepted it, let him do what a prism does: take the world in and cast rainbows across the room.

Ben used to say you've truly made it when you've dropped out, by which he meant leaving the city for some rustic idyll. Then he drifted away instead through narcotics. He was never on Instagram, having almost totally withdrawn by the time of its launch in 2010. His presence on the app is not that of a phantom, like those deceased whose accounts linger. Rather, it is chimerical. I sense a Ben there not of dimension but myth. He probably wouldn't mind that either. He could be slippery or blithe. Ben once designed a butterfly bordered in zippers: a futile puzzle, the zips reveal nothing, nor do they close. He also crafted a t-shirt with a hollow, zip-around heart. As with the butterfly, it's a folly. The zipper is more metaphor than utility. And paradoxical: since it cannot close, it is perhaps not actually open – just an edge. For all the rhetoric of 'possibility' surrounding Ben's death, his visual language often spoke to the impossible.

The heart was one of his most impactful designs. Perfect for Instagram, I find myself thinking – its punchline immediately legible. In a portrait of Ben wearing the garment from 2006, his arms are visible through the heart; he'd wriggled from the sleeves and is holding his torso beneath. I am looking at it now, squinting at a low-res image through wet eyes. I wrote *punchline* – but it begins to seem more complicated. Like the language we used, it is circular and enclosed, yet unfixed – or empty. Ben's cagey vulnerability was a particular survival mechanism. My most private friend was also the first to say *I love you*. What a big yet ambivalent heart he had. And how at odds with social media, wherein self-branding requires a procession of absolutes.