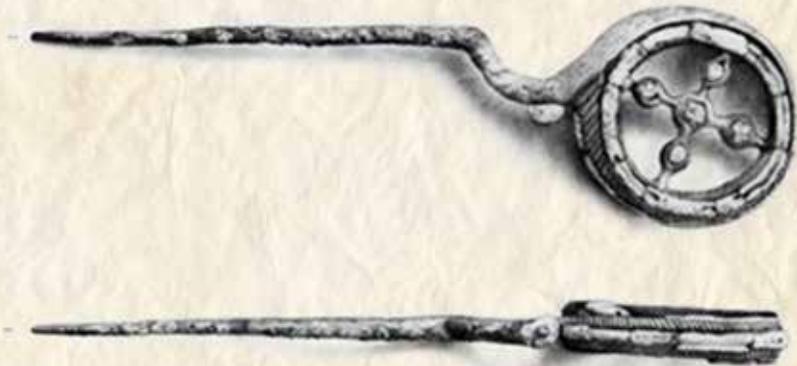


The Living and the Dead

Creative Conversations between
Past and Present



Edited by Dr. Karina Croucher,
Dr. Jennifer Dayes, Dr. Melanie Giles
and Dr. Andrew Holland

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Contents

Foreword	3
19.1 Grams. <i>Abigail Flint</i>	10
Wings. <i>Nell Farrell</i>	11
Beads. <i>Ansar Jawed</i>	12
The Danes Graves Hair-Pin (Burial DG11). <i>Melanie Giles</i>	13
Grave Goods. <i>Jim Caruth</i>	14
Tending. <i>Lorna Faye Dunsire</i>	16
The Isolated Church. <i>Linda Tugwell</i>	18
Ring. <i>Victoria Gatehouse</i>	20
Watch Me. <i>Isabel Black</i>	21
Wake. <i>Genevieve Carver</i>	24
The Grief Mask. <i>Martin Truelove</i>	25
The Stratigraphy of Loss. <i>Vic Wellock</i>	28
Just Keep Walking. <i>Beverley Thornton</i>	30
The Last Hurrah. <i>Carl Douglas</i>	32
Undelivered. <i>Celia Forbes</i>	34
Last Rites. <i>Helen Williams</i>	35
Transit Lounge. <i>Manju Ray</i>	36
Take Care. <i>Frangipani</i>	39
Cry Now Child. <i>Ehis Osifo</i>	42
Daguerreotype. <i>Jennifer Dayes</i>	43
Embroidered Memories. <i>Jan Berry</i>	47
Empty Space. <i>Beverley Thomas</i>	48
Pearl. <i>Sally Baker</i>	49

When Goodluck Dies. <i>Annie Forester</i>	50
Thiepvall Pier and Face 10C 10D and 11A. <i>Richard Ward</i>	53
Denise Chalk: No Rose Tinted Specs Required. <i>Emily Chalk McKay</i>	54
Escape. <i>Debjani Chatterjee</i>	55
The Mother Box. <i>Sarah Mosedale</i>	57
Sons of Peerless Faith. <i>Jo Manby</i>	59
School Uniform. <i>Victoria Brandon</i>	63
The End of Things. <i>Patricia Henny</i>	64
Fields of Glory. <i>Brian G. D'Arcy</i>	65
East of the Sun and West of the Moon. <i>Pamela Jackson</i>	67
Who Me? <i>Billy Dulay</i>	71
Fable of the Gorgon Gem. <i>Polina Ganeva</i>	72
Timeline. <i>Sister Star</i>	75
Through the Wall. <i>Stephen Sawyer</i>	76
Flashes. <i>Dave Kirby</i>	78
Grave Goods. <i>Liz Coatman</i>	82
My Strike-A-Light. <i>John Birtwhistle</i>	83
Inspired by the Past. <i>Karina Croucher</i>	84
Much Like Death... <i>James Dann</i>	85

The Living and the Dead: Creative Conversations between Past and Present: Foreword

What do we do when a loved one dies? How do we grieve? We might have a set of beliefs or traditions to guide us, but increasingly in the West, and particularly in Britain, formal religious or cultural funerary rites have fallen away, and we often find ourselves improvising around death. Do we sit in vigil, hold a wake, organise the funeral? Should this be traditional or novel: unique as the person we want to remember? Do we cry, laugh, raise a toast, or mourn in silence? Do we inherit and wear things belonging to the dead, or recycle them, throw them away? What would feel 'right' and what would you want yourself: do you know? Or are these questions you have not talked about with others? If so, you wouldn't be alone.

Although death is universal, it remains a problematic topic of conversation. Using the past, archaeology can open discussion about death and dying, helping us to build resilience to loss and normalise what can be a difficult subject. This was the premise of a unique collaboration between researchers and practitioners in health/social care and archaeology. Entitled *Continuing Bonds: Exploring the meaning and legacy of death through past and contemporary practice*, the two-year study (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council) explored the value of archaeology for understanding death, dying and bereavement. In a series of workshops, health and social care professionals and students were shown some of the ways that people have dealt with death from across the world and throughout time. The case studies demonstrated the variety of responses to death, and challenged what we think of as 'normal', 'respectful' or 'right': enabling greater acceptance of different practices today, while also providing an easy route into talking about death and bereavement.

Inspired by the success of the Continuing Bonds project, we (Croucher, Giles and Dayes) developed the *Continuing Bonds: Creative Dissemination* project (also funded by the AHRC), which used archaeology, along with experiences and accounts from our original project participants, to normalise talk of death, through the medium of creative writing. Karina Croucher and Melanie Giles, both archaeology lecturers, have been previously inspired to combine archaeology with creative writing, through the *Dig: Creative Interpretations* project, and through Giles' work with poet Michel Rosen as part of the *Grave Goods* project, alongside Croucher's work with the *Crossing Over* project. Jennifer Dayes, researcher on the original Continuing Bonds project and a practicing counselling psychologist, also writes fiction. One of our original workshop participants, Peter Wakefield, shared a poem he wrote after attending one of our Continuing Bonds workshops, demonstrating the creative value of the ideas we were discussing. These motivations and experiences brought the team together to use the past as inspiration for writing on the topic of death, aimed at normalising experiences of grief and developing personal and social resilience.

In the *Continuing Bonds: Creative Dissemination* project, members of the public were invited to participate in creative writing workshops. No previous writing experience was required, and we attracted a mix from published authors to total beginners, the results of which are compiled in this anthology. The project gives voice to loss, finding ways of both mourning and celebrating relationships, through creative and inspiring pieces of literary art.

We ran the series of workshops three times, in three northern cities: Bradford, Manchester and Sheffield. The first meeting introduced writers to the project with a 'hands-on' workshop that unfolded stories around objects that people buried with the dead in the past. Participants were able to handle and discuss a range of real and replica artefacts, such as pottery, beads, broaches, bracelets, oil lamps and ornaments. A series of 'laminates' (printed images of archaeological/ethnographic mortuary

practices, used in the original Continuing Bonds workshops) were also used as prompts. These objects and laminates show how people have continued their bonds with deceased loved ones in years gone by, keeping them close both physically and emotionally. They also demonstrate the variety of ways that death has been handled through time and across the world.

Contemporary experiences were also showcased, considering the objects we keep in modern-day death and how this ‘stuff’ can be contentious and difficult. Attendees spent time free-writing on the question, ‘what object would you have as your legacy?’. The second workshop provided more time for creative writing and gave attendees the option to talk about more difficult themes such as infant death, and untimely and violent deaths. The final workshop divided people into groups based on their chosen medium – poetry versus flash fiction and prose, with authors encouraged to read out their work for others to engage with and comment upon. The spirit throughout was one of peer-support, creative and positive critique and the sharing of responses to the work by both participants and the project team.

Each city’s workshops had a slightly different feel to it, shaped very much we found, by our venues. In Manchester we had chosen a busy, vibrant upstairs room of the ‘Kro Bar’ on Oxford Road. These workshops were rich and diverse, producing some of the most innovative prose and poetry from many walks of life, but the venue could be noisy and we lost a few participants on the way. In Sheffield we were located in the quiet, evening light of ‘The Silver Plate’ café at The Sheffield College. The first workshop took place in a gale, and we felt almost marooned and battered by the elements. Yet the following workshops were well-attended, with an almost studious and secluded feel, supported by the quietude of the after-hours campus. These workshops were notable for the number of archaeologists or people with existing poetic expertise who attended: producing poems that moved with ease between past and present. Finally, in Bradford, we were high-up in a well-lit room with a view of the city and its hills. These sessions drew in a larger number of people from the care,

counselling and health disciplines, and their discussions encouraged raw, moving reflections on loss and grief.

The atmosphere and responses from each workshop were shaped by both the expertise and the creative interests of the participants. As archaeologists and psychologists, we found ourselves challenged by their reception of our own material: moved by the life-stories people brought to the workshops and inspired by their own ‘take’ on ideas about death from the past. The workshops themselves, based on the ‘Death Café’ initiative (and complete with coffee and cake!), gave us all a new forum to ‘talk more’ of loss, bereavement and memory. Overall, they more than fulfilled our basic aim to make this a more common, beneficial part of the conversations we have, not just about life but our fears and hopes around death.

The title of our collection is itself inspired by a poem by Danni Abse. As a doctor, his poetry is full of a compassionate humanism which moves unerringly, deftly, between the themes of life and death. When we set out, we hoped our archaeological examples would bring a sense of communality between past and present – that sense of a hand from other times reaching out in understanding to us. Yet as you will see from the poems, prose, flash fiction and creative memoir stories that follow, these pasts inspired people in very different ways. Some were directly taken with the archaeological objects and the interpretations discussed, picking up on a burial or a find. For example, Abigail Flint’s poem was inspired by a Roman child’s bracelet whilst Nell Farrell imagined a family gathered around an infant buried on a swan’s wing: a poem that crosses time in its emotion. Such poems crafted for these ancient people – a final poetic elegy. Other authors moved with ease between their own past and the present: negotiating a place for themselves within the legacies of objects, traditions and stories of their own families, as in Jim Caruth’s work. Yet other pieces created imaginary objects and allowed these to inspire pieces of fiction which ranged from the frightening (as in Isabel Black’s *Watch Me*) to the wonder of a ‘creation myth’ (like Polina Ganeva’s *Fable of the Gorgon Gem*).

In contrast, a strong group of pieces placed us firmly within the grieving process itself: what loss feels like – these are visceral, unflinching: reflecting on the way death can stunt and cripple the lives of those left behind. They speak of grief from multiple perspectives; Ehis Osifo’s *Cry Now Child* encouraging expression of grief emotions, Manju Ray’s *Transit Lounge* an ode to love in the final days of her husband’s life, and Frangipanni’s *Take Care* detailing both the magic of and being lost within a Buddhist funeral. These are difficult, raw pieces: vital to our anthology, giving a space and a presence to grief itself, and the reminder that this is what ultimately connects humanity across time. Inspired by deep-time perspectives, some of our participants were prompted to write about the consolation, or reassurance, that can be sought when bereaved: giving readers a licence to grieve and to feel the difficult emotions of mourning. These authors wrote movingly of how we do not need to completely ‘move on’ or let go of these ‘continuing bonds’ with the dead, but we can allow loss to be reshaped by the life we then follow.

Some writers gave us very memorable pieces about people, whether real or fictional: crafting a story of death around life... doing justice to the full meaning of the events, desires and relationships which make a person, and make us mourn them. These were not always easy memories: we encountered pieces about indifference, resentment, guilt – not always wanting the burden of both the emotional and physical inheritances that we are sometimes shouldered with. Death can cause conflict – the micro-politics of relationships are often brought into very sharp focus at such times. These very personal insights were complemented by those writing about larger themes: the war-dead in particular continue to cast their shadow, reminding us of the cost across the generations, and the ongoing search for those who are lost *in* time, through mass, violent or sudden death. Even archaeology itself, the unearthing of the dead, is not an unproblematic endeavour, as one of our authors humorously reminded us:

Hands Off!

One person's archaeology
is another's grave robbery.
Both, I say, are skullduggery.

Debjani Chatterjee

Finally, these reflections on mortality took some people to more metaphysical realms. We received stories and poems which delved into beliefs, spirituality, and our place within the cosmos. In *Flashes*, Dave Kirby considers the 'parallel' lives which could have been lived between birth and death, whilst Stephen Sawyer's *Through the Wall* moved between the themes of human transience and the connections which bind us together. We end the collection on what we hope is a slightly humorous and uplifting note... the voice of young man tasked (by us and our project!) to dwell on his own mortality yet swept along by the day-to-day business of being alive. We felt James Dann's prose poem *Much Like Death*... which reads like a diary entry... perfectly captures the spirit of our project: fleeting but deeply moving moments that come back to nudge us, to query us, to haunt us and yes, to console.

Unexpectedly then, having intended to champion the worth of the past in the present and to normalise our talk of the dead, we found ourselves returning to our archaeological fragments and finds, with new ideas about the past drawn *from* the present. To all of participants, we owe this debt of thanks, not just for the conversations we have enjoyed but for this collection, which continues to inspire.

*Karina Croucher, Jennifer Dayes and Melanie Giles,
September 2019*



Bronze Romano-British child's bracelet,
Colchester, England. c.100 AD.

19.1 Grams

Not quite the weight of a soul,
this ringlet of copper

smaller than my palm, twisted tight
as though you might grow into it.

Did they slip it from your bird-bones?
Tiny flutes of radius, ulna,

the blank dice of your wrist -
scaphoid, lunate.

Lichened with verdigris bloom
save for two smoothed spots

where someone rubbed
the single bead

of your unknown life
and death, listening

to this unbodied object.
Do you sleep still, cupped

in a hollow of moss and twigs
cut deep into a grassed bank

and lined with fine black hair,
or laid out on a beam of oak,

mud and straw in your ribs?
I think of you

with the lightness of a robin,
a swallow flying close to earth.

Abigail Flint

Wings

The bird was on the forest floor -
some lad with a sling and no respect.
I carried it home, spread across my arms
and cleaned it out. I wanted something
for my helmet, something to drive out fear.

I trace it to the baby. To be expected
but not so long or deep. They washed her
body in water warmed with honey
floating with petals, then laid her
on the outstretched wing of a swan.

We'd feasted on it to celebrate her birth.
There was still meat left but no-one had the stomach.
I feared my wife would join her but the women
knocked her to the ground and held her
till the howling ceased and she slept.

I stood and said the necessary words
but my heart was a swan's egg made of rock.
Around her were the things I'd made
a bowl, some play stones, her sleeping board
rubbed for splinters and waxed for warmth.

I put my best flint knife beside her.
She will be so small in the next world
and will not have me to protect her.
The raven I found was not a dead child.
It was a dark and sharp thing, no weeping in it.

I worked on it all through the winter, tying knots
by the fire for my wife could bear no light.
In battle, when I pull the strings
a great black bird will fly above my head
and my enemies will flee.

Nell Farrell

Beads

Curvatures curing creatures
Rounding humps and bumps in beads
In a slow rolling grinding motion
Smoothing discomforts away

Slow silent nudging
Warmly turning, rolling like eggs
Hatching around in time, moving on
Staying closely linked, beads in a bond

Drop by drop we all drip and fall
In a circle upon the face of time
Diving in an oceanic deep dark space
We all tumble in, one by one

Touching habit, taking its toll
Massaging our worn out pores
We keep the warmth close together
From our own immeasurable depths

Ansar Jawed

This poem was inspired by a necklace from Arras buried with an Iron Age woman, composed of around 100 glass beads.

The Danes Graves Hair-Pin (Burial DG11)

she was their linch-pin,
slender and strong:
bearing the broad beam
of strife, bringing new life.

and when she left to take
her place amongst the dead,
the chariot-drawn sun
blazed.

they bound up her hair
with a bronze pin, bowed
as the swan's neck: set with coral
from far seas, to heal the scar;

its round head cross-quartered
with spokes; its ribbed rim
spinning: an ever-circling
wheel of life.

Melanie Giles

This poem was inspired by the coral and bronze pin illustrated on the front cover of this volume. The pin was found during excavations in 1911 of the Iron Age burial of Danes Graves on the Yorkshire Wolds.

Grave Goods

I

I am invited to examine some small pots,
a handful of amber beads, a cloak pin,
the delicate intricacies of a bone comb.
Necessities for whatever after-life there is,
slipped in with the bones.

There's no theatre in these deaths,
just a sense of preparation,
like packing a case for a week-end away.

These are the practicalities,
the implements required
for the journey on. Enough
for us to read a life, to clothe
the bones, to tell a story.

II

I come from a place that is comfortable
with the dead. The candles and prayers,
the washing and the laying out.

Where men are banished to the edges,
to uncap bottles of stout, share cigarettes,
measure out two fingers of Bushmills,

while the women shepherd the silences.
White linen, best china, Holy water, beads.
The dead will not be left alone.

III

For three days she lay in the front parlour,
her polished wooden boat run aground.
Cigarette smoke like a sea-fret as I picked
a way through a wake of faces to see
my grandmother nesting in cream silk,

a sheen on her face like a candle melting.
Then a hand at my back and bending my head
the scent of blown roses, as my lips kissed stone.

Jim Caruth

Tending

We Google these snippets -
growing the knowledge
gleaned from deeds.
The vines grow up; threaten
to cut off our contact with the world
if we don't intervene, shear,
cut back.

There's a skeleton of china in the yard,
shards of blue and white, floral,
unfamiliar. Perhaps this was treasured
and shattered in a trip – left behind,
as lingering echoes of your lives here.

I wonder what mementos I might discard,
for future owners to learn about my life,
as the house creaks and sings
for its past inhabitants.

And you, who had this house built,
should know we are thankful for our time here,
sheltered within these walls –
loving the way the light banks
through the sunny windows.

We visit your graves:
over one hundred and thirty years
after you left –
lay flowers,
grown from the soil
you tended.

Lorna Faye Dunsire

The Isolated Church

The church of St John's stands proud
on the hill: courses of blackened ashlar
built by Rowstone of Bradford.
The heart of a mill parish,
Sanctuary for its workers.

Its thin slate roof looms
Over lancet windows.
Arched, blind arcading under eaves.
An embattled tower with clasping pilasters
Rises into octagonal turrets.
Homage to the deity, who oversaw
Weddings, funerals, baptisms.

All life was here, within these walls.

I come to find my past. Can I see them?
Christmas Eve 1904. After heavy snow,
And unsettled weather, December has been mild.
Yet the winter's night here is cold, and smog
Has cloaked the church in evening gloom.
Four figures drift into sight,
At the south door: chatter and laughter muffled.

The heavy door creaks open, to the voice
Of Reverend James Hubbard: here
To marry Arthur Stevenson (bachelor of this parish)
and Sarah Fowler (spinster of the same).
I imagine her dress: a cream lace top
And skirt flounced at the hem, for
The bride is blooming with child;
Her chestnut hair pulled back and coiled.
The groom is in borrowed black,
A suit with white, buttoned shirt.

They take their vows, and voices echo:
Who will witness this betrothal?
Willie Fowler: brother,
John Thorne: good friend.
And once it is done, they walk
Hand-in-hand: blessed,
Smiling, brushing a tear.
Out from this place, into Christ's day,
Into the past. My past.

I open my eyes, and they are gone.
I want to say, turn back, and look – for here I am:
The great-grandchild of their imagining.

Linda Tugwell



Photograph of Victoria Gatehouse's grandfather's Jewellery tools and grandmother's ring. Victoria's grandfather was a Jeweller with a shop in Woodhouse Lane, Leeds.

Watch Me

Before I started uni my parents bought an old house and converted it. Better than paying for student accommodation, they said. I helped them clear it out. Me and Elisa did, that is. Best friends since school, we have a long history.

That's when I find the watch. I don't tell Elisa at first, don't know why. I think I have to get it fixed first. But then she catches me wearing it. She's sharp.

She takes my wrist. "Where did you get that?"

"I found it when we cleared out the house." I touch the edge of the watch. "Upstairs. In the attic."

"And you're wearing it? It's... not really *you*."

It really isn't. I don't know why I like it, but I do. The face is small and blocky, and even if it's real gold it is pretty scuffed. The strap is leather, dyed red, and it doesn't seem to match. I put my fingers on it, goose-bumps on my skin.

Elisa wrinkles her nose. "It must be old, right?"

"All the rest of the stuff was Victorian, so yeah, I guess so." I pull my sleeve down to cover the face. It's ugly. I don't know why I picked it out when there were so many other, prettier things. And weirder things. All those pendants full of real human hair. Ugh. A watch, though, what could be creepy about a watch?

Elisa's room is in the attic, I'm on the floor below. Two others on my floor, Ali and Sam, all of us pre-med, working hard. At night, I hear Elisa pacing up and down, the click of her keyboard. I lie awake, staring at the ceiling as it creaks.

At breakfast, her eyes are sunken and she slugs extra coffee.

"You pull an all-nighter?"

She glares. "Didn't you hear the neighbours? I'm amazed you guys got any sleep at all. I don't think they stopped talking till, like, 5am."

We all shrug. We don't think anything of it. Not yet. A week on, and Elisa complains about the neighbours every morning, her eyes sinking deeper and deeper into her face.

"Go see the doctor." That's Ali's suggestion. Sam agrees.

“You have no idea.” Elisa shakes her head. “They’re just talking, talking, all night long.”

Sam, Ali, and I all exchange looks. We still don’t get it.

Mum sent money for my birthday, so I get the watch polished. Elisa shudders at the sight of it.

“It’s just made it worse.” She shuts herself in her room during the day, but the neighbours are still talking, she says.

And now Ali hears it too. “I can’t believe you guys can’t hear it,” she says at breakfast. She’s as pale as Elisa now. “We should go around there and say something.”

“I need to get to class. Maybe after?” I’m ready to head out the door.

Elisa wraps herself in her bathrobe, shivers when she sees the watch, swallows. Sweat plucks on her skin. Everything she wears looks like she hasn’t washed it in at least a week.

“Sorry.” I cover up my wrist.

Ali and Elisa make a plan while we’re out. They go to visit the neighbours. An elderly couple. Ali and Elisa come back confused, but the talking doesn’t stop. It gets louder.

At night, I listen out for the neighbours. But all I hear is the watch, ticking loud and steady.

Elisa moves out. We stop speaking. A few people come to check out the room, but it’s nearly summer. Ali goes too. She was going to stay through vacation, but she keeps getting sick. Now it’s just me and Sam.

Sam doesn’t hear the neighbours. She says there’s somebody upstairs, at night, pacing up and down.

“But Elisa moved out.” I wrap my hand around the watch, arms against my chest. “She hasn’t been back, has she?”

“I wish she had. Then at least some of this would make sense.”

“Did you go upstairs and check?”

Sam swallows. “There’s no way I’m going up there at night. I’ve seen horror movies.”

We don’t go upstairs. We slide through the house like ghosts, waiting for exams. The watch ticks, and the sound follows me around like footsteps.

At night I stare at the ceiling, listening in case I hear what Sam hears. At 2am, she knocks on my door. Her eyes are hollow sores and she twitches as she speaks. "I've had enough. Let's go look."

We turn on all the lights because we're not like those girls in horror movies. We go upstairs, stand outside the door. All I can hear is the watch, ticking loudly.

A noise, on the other side of the door. Like a thump, maybe. Something falling down.

Sam gulps, stares at me.

"Open the door," I mouth. The fear takes my voice.

She shakes her head. She stares at the white wood in front of us, and we listen till we can hear the air screaming in our ears.

Nothing.

Sam kicks open the door. The room is bare.

"See? There's nothing here." I can't hear what she says, over the banging of my heart and the ticking of the watch.

The next day, Sam moves out. Says she'll sleep on a friend's couch till she can get another room.

So now it's just me.

You think I'd be nervous, but I'm fine. Do my work, head to bed around midnight.

I lie awake, listening to the watch ticking. It's reassuring, that subtle ticking heartbeat. And then I hear them, upstairs. I can definitely hear them. I sit up, press my hand against the watch. Go to the bedroom door, rest my hand on the handle. I take a breath, hesitate. But I'm fine, I've got the watch, that will keep me safe. I open the door, and there they are. Waiting, just for me.

Isabel Black

Wake

It's all the cups of tea I can't handle
the delicate china quaking in saucers

eyes unsteady in sockets
and everyone surviving on caffeine

wearing their shadows proudly
as if sleep were a dirty word

the school hall is brimful with orchids
and cheekbones that are just like mine

I imagine plucking one uncanny mandible
hanging it above the door

offering brandy to guests as I swig
from great-great uncle Andy's skull

canapés arranged neatly on the dog's scapula
chess played with three generations of vertebrae

my skin cells are replenishing with alarming speed
and I'm certain to be someone new in no time

yet some incubus pins me here
drawn in like a moth to a pyre.

Genevieve Carver

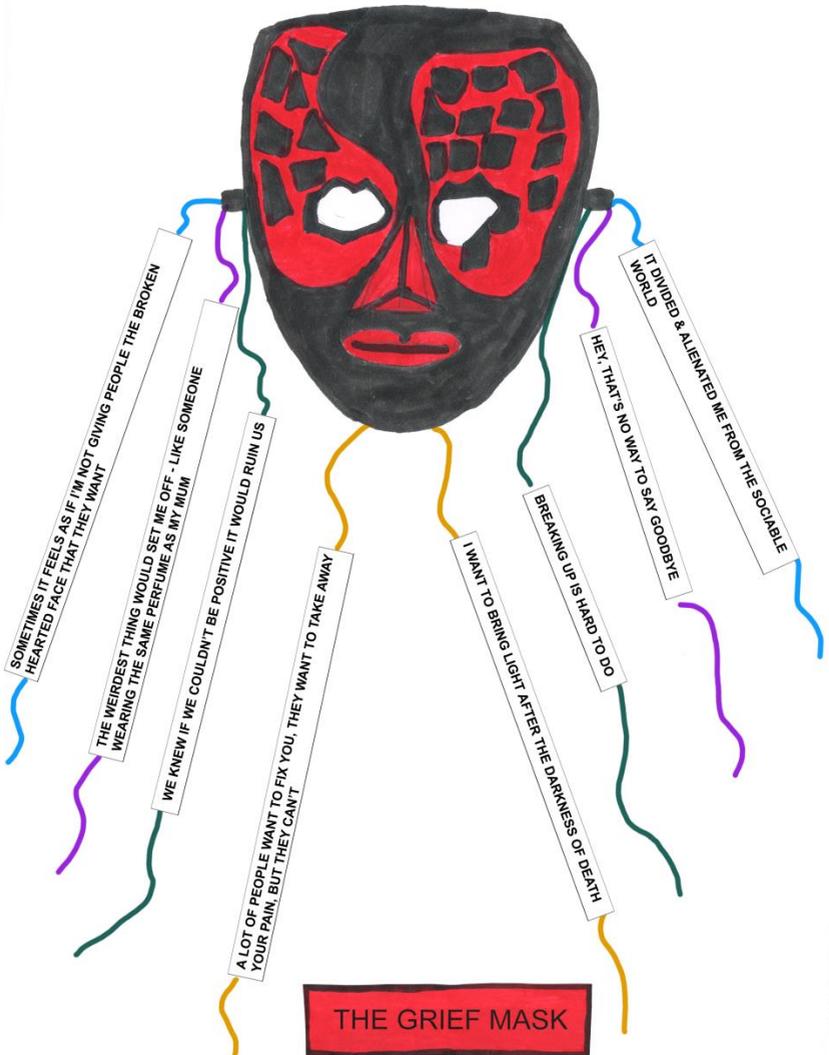
The Grief Mask

Commentary

“During the 24th of May 2019 I gathered direct quotes on grief gleaned from newspapers and songs that came into view, recording those that chimed in with my experience as a bereavement counsellor on strips of paper.

This found material gave a flavour of this personal *Day of the Dead*, and I gave it an archaeological and fearful shock by the addition of a vivid grief mask.

The ribbons/strips represent the thoughts and feelings of those thinking about death and loss.”



Martin Truelove



“Death of Venus” by Vic Wellock. Figurine representing the loss of the artist’s creative energy following loss and grief.

The Stratigraphy of Loss

I can feel the sadness, just under the surface. I haven't 'lived' enough to properly air the grief. My life has been stunted since 'that period'. 'That period' being three years in which about 11 people died. Some very close, some distant friends, all loved... The first two deaths were the hardest. They felt like physical assaults that knocked the air from me and brought me to my knees, where I'd been. Grasping at my heart, trying to breathe them back to life with denial and tears, in between great gulps of breath. Fighting for air, fighting against death. Of course, there is no coming back from death. We can argue about that later.

As an Archaeologist and Secular Buddhist, I'm steeped in death. It's always surrounded me. I've never been frightened of getting old, I've never thought age is something that you can catch, and I've always had an irreverent respect for it. Contradiction? Perhaps. But there it is. I know that when you feel closest to death, you do some of your hardest living, and that's one of life's mysteries. And you grieve, and you live, and you move on - eventually.

But they never leave you. And one of the cruellest parts of living in this time, in this culture, is how death is somehow equated with amnesia. The long slow grief after the mourning is repressed remembering. Where you might talk about a memory off the cuff, you're scowled into silence. The time for talking about the dead is gone. They have been erased, as if they never were. Their memories are replaced like their photographs, their things are dispersed. And the family archivists are the only ones allowed to hold them - remember them.

Contemplating death does not make you immune to it. It will make you feel its presence one way or another. And if you try and remain stalwart in the face of death, it will get you eventually. Death will do that. Your seams will burst and the pain you have been holding will flood your life and drench you with all the uncried tears. You can try. And you will fail. And it will twist you

up until you are unrecognisable to yourself. What might have been will be relics covered in ivy, buried underneath the ruins of the life that you could have had.

Eventually, when you realise that you are not marking time, or sending up prayers or lighting candles or otherwise celebrating your loved ones' life (wouldn't it be great if we did that?)... Eventually, you realise that grief is not the bedrock of your life. The loam has formed, the plants are growing, the saplings are taking hold, even the slowest paced life is forward moving... Eventually, you feel like there is an absence... something missing. Sometimes you fill the void, and sometimes you're forced to live with it. And so, locked out of life, I sit with it every day. Bank on people being surface. Avoid well-wishing prods. Re-stitch the seams, water the ruins, speak my loss in whispers and wait for my turn.

Vic Wellock

Just Keep Walking

It's a spiral path, when someone dies, so suddenly. Their death, a central event: that shocking still point. The sag of knees, the bending double, the lurch and the lunge as the ground shifts beneath... the seismic, sickening stumble into a future where all certainty is gone. I'm shredded, see-sawing between stunned numbness and searing hurt, simply circling with the mad gravity of this sad singularity. Where else to go, but round and round, with time taking me on and out from the centre, that moment I wish I could run back to, the place where I would change the day, hours, minutes and seconds. Trying to undo what cannot be undone.

With every sweeping arm of the spiral, a new (dis)location, a new perspective. (Can't I turn around? Look back?) My path set: defined by *since then*...

Kind people tell me how far I've come, and how well I'm doing, praise me for that unwilling push against the pull of the centre. Knowing they mean well, I try to follow their gaze: see the milestones, the tiring hurdle-track of firsts;

the first time out of the house
the first day back at work
that first party with friends where
I heard myself laugh
and couldn't quite place myself

Each repetition, each daily routine, each dragging, kicking, spitting, despairing, disheartening, raging, ridiculous day, each raw anniversary, has come to this. It's still out there, it's going to bite, beckoning and dreadful. A cruel snake to step on just when I thought the win might be in sight, after so many ladders climbed. The day of the death itself, one turn of the spiral, to snap a small life-line that's brought me this far. This time last year all was still well. Love and comfort, and even God, could exist in this world.

There's a new 'normal' now, twisted from without: no longer,
remember when, and what if.

He wouldn't have wanted... You're far too young to... You owe it
to him.... You owe it to yourself...

Such kind people. Such sound advice.

Why not just keep walking.

Beverley Thornton

The Last Hurrah

With applause they have waved you off:

You have crossed the line, and are returning to the place where innocence has slept, and here your vows were spoken.

Our arrows are withdrawn, they too have left their mark, yours are now displayed and laid to rest upon your heart.

Then, with arms and shoulders touching, we absorb the weight – lift you aloft.

The curtains close.

And you, whose star outshone Orion's Belt, now fall to earth...

and your departure, played out here, begins a narrative for those you love, and those now brought to mind.

Our troubles will remain... unsettled while you sleep on, fleshed-out by tributes to leave a legacy of sorts; meaning less to some but for others so much more.

The long sleep now becomes a wake, our flights of triumph are recalled, some with success – others falling short, and now beyond the oche, no one's keeping score.

And we are lost.

But then the closing bell brings us to our senses and we become anonymous once more, tumbling as children to utter, some incoherent verse... or some brave declaration of intent; and watch as reputations die or live without us.

Perhaps the time has come to bury ghosts - and move on.

Where do we find the words unless within our heart? Such
dressed up feelings are betrayed by tears, and noble gestures
wane, to quickly fall apart.

The distance closes, there is a clarity of thought, as time brings
closure to us all.

We stand around... hear one final story, I buy the last traditional
jar, bid you 'Farewell' my father: this was the last hurrah.

Carl Douglas

Undelivered

FROM:

TO:

I am thinking of emailing to ask if you are still alive.

I could write on your Facebook or send a WhatsApp, wait for the ticks to appear.

What if I got a reply? What would you say? Was it your heart or something else? Did they find the instructions in the brown envelope that you kept displayed on the kitchen side?

We all had the same birthday: November 29th. At 38, Amanda was 9 years older than me and you were 9 years older than her.

The creative writing workshop where we met was held on our birthday. We were instantly united; the kind of people who treated themselves to a solo expedition to a writing course for their birthday.

I remember you warning us that we might be able to hear your heart beating during a quiet moment in the Victorian library. You had a new valve made of titanium.

The following year on our birthday, we decided to attend a writing retreat on Shetland. The sea was rough and we couldn't afford a cabin so we tried to sleep on the floor of the on board cinema.

We saw puffins and a whale. A seal managed to escape and made it to the car park of big Tesco's.

We went for a curry to escape the communal meals at the retreat. They were all very wholesome and you weren't allowed spinach or kale as they thicken the blood. The fruit machine paid out as soon as we walked into the village pub and a man bought us all a round of drinks before returning to dropping all the pound coins back into the slot.

I never remember birthdays. I only sent the email because it was the same as mine. It said:

Happy Birthday to us (and Amanda)!!!

xx

I didn't get a reply

Celia Forbes

Last Rites

Nothing more they could do
those few fragile days
cannulas
 drips
 oxygen.

She helped you show that you loved her,
let you cook,
set the timer with precision
for lightly boiled eggs,
place a slice of bread in the worn-out toaster
watching fearfully the wires glowing red
hitting the eject button early.
You found an old iron pan, half-filled it with water
for poaching salmon
kept the burner low;
scrubbed the skins of Jersey Royals
until they shone like bone
boiled them with mint from her forgotten garden.

She knew it was the right thing to do
her small girl's smile
a reward
for all the patient years against the odds
waiting for you
knowing what you needed.

Helen Williams

Transit Lounge

Anxiously we were waiting from last night in acute care unit, where my husband was admitted on August 4th for persistent high temperature. The ambulance came at 9am next morning, to take him to Palliative care unit in another hospital.

My husband worked at this hospital for many years before retiring, as a Heart Surgeon, from cardiothoracic department.

Medical treatment discontinued by the decision of the medical team as no improvement found. They said it was overall deterioration of general health condition at his age of 73 years.

Two options were offered to us, either to get home and be cared for among family and friends, until his last breath, or to be in Palliative care unit and getting care by hospital staff.

Being Indian and so-called Hindu, we prefer to take our last breath at home and among family and friends. But he chose to be in hospital, as it was the second home to him and hospital staff were like family members.

Moreover, he thought it would be convenient for his ex-colleagues and friends to visit him on foot, after finishing their busy shift.

#

En-suite single room with attached garden in Palliative care unit was arranged for him. Though he was bed bound, he liked this room as a transit lounge for remaining last few days of his life.

He watched garden, birds and sky, which he loved all his life. He told me he imagined his mind is freely floating now, like slow moving white clouds in the blue sky above the garden, outside.

Here he is waiting for the journey to a body-less state, and to his next life as Indian and so-called Hindu believe. I had a folding bed next to him for spiritual and mental support as part of Palliative care plan.

A wall fitted TV in this room, for watching from his bed. History, Travel, Natural world, Music, Film and Quiz, Gardening and Cooking are the channels of his choice. On his request, a small wall clock placed within his vicinity as he used to have while operating his patients. Like progress of an operation is

assessed in every second, he wanted to assess his progression towards the last breath.

#

We both were born and brought up in the same city of Calcutta, now Kolkata the capital of British India. He was born before independence of India in 1947. I was born after independence in so-called Bengali Hindu family.

We have many brothers and sisters, cousins and their children in India, in both of our families. His mother is 98 years old, clear thinking and good memory, fairly mobile. They all wished to speak to my husband over phone from India.

But they were unable to hear his feeble voice, which saddened them. Gradually becoming too unwell to speak, he managed to communicate in writing, until he was not able to hold the pen even.

#

Many deaths he had seen in his working life in more than 41 years in India and Britain. Many countries he travelled for professional conferences and for pleasure.

His last trip was in Australia and New Zealand in Christmas time 2015. His plan for Alaska trip remain unfulfilled.

Possibly in next life, he said.

His imagination started towards that very special journey without body towards a destination, not known to him yet. He kept communicating his thoughts from time to time with the language of Rajyoga we both practiced in India as well as in 'Brahma Kumaris Centre Sheffield'.

While taking account of this material life, his thought goes back and forth from Birth, Death and Rebirth as an Indian philosophy of life. Especially the thought that leaving this material body through natural death, which is unable to work anymore, get promoted to another life through higher birth. Once he did mention about his choice of life in next birth would be in England. He loved this country and the culture. He wished to be a Doctor again alleviate the suffering from diseases and enjoy life at fullest.

He continued to think about, and questioned me, when and how he would leave this body for a journey to another dimension

of his consciousness? All these loving relations, the world he lived and loved all, how to travel to the next destination leaving everything behind him?

#

Our daughter and son-in-law visited us with four grandchildren travelling long distances from Bedfordshire. He enjoyed silently, last visit from friends and family before the last voyage in an infinite ocean. Sometimes he move his eyelids to respond to our questions.

#

An Anaesthetist junior colleague, friend for many years, regularly visited him in care unit. He had invited him to work in Sheffield, to join his Research Work, leaving London in 2000. His friend and anaesthetist wife both worked in Mission hospital in South part of India. They enjoyed sharing memories of their experiences, in various hospitals in the UK and in India.

#

At 5pm, on 15th September year 2017, he wished to watch TV. One of his favourite quiz channels 'Egghead' was not started yet. The Nurse sat him up with back rest and opened another channel, a documentary on a 'Mountain village in India and its Culture'.

Curry lamb and rice, one of his favourite dishes, arrived. I was adjusting the table to feed him.

In TV documentary it was told, 'A 72 years old man died in this village. His body will be taken to mountain top to feed the birds. This body is an empty shell now'. I quickly turned my face from table to him with a low sound from his throat. I found his eyes are wide open, fixed and unresponsive to my question, 'Are you OK?'

It was 5.15 pm in wall clock.

Manju Ray

Take Care

Ahead the house was in near darkness. It hadn't occurred to me that it would be a Buddhist funeral. Children peered from rooms. I took a deep breath and stepped forward. My two friends followed. An ornate wooden-dresser housed Peranakan plates, bowls and tea caddies decorated with peonies and phoenix. I let out a dry cough and wiped away perspiration from my face. Lit by candlelight Sarah lay in an open casket lined with white-satin. Had there been flowers, she would've looked like her Chinese Ophelia painting on the easel next to her. The embalmer's artistry masked her cancer-wizened face framed by coifed ornamented hair. She was dressed, as always, in traditional Nyonya sarong and lacy kebaya blouse. I touched the brooch that she'd given me at an exhibition in Thailand. We'd sat together sipping spicy tom yam soup. Her bright eyes laughed as I'd choked on the chilli. Once I'd recovered she'd said: 'You must try my hometown Penang Laska!' How I wished we could do just that right now.

Curls of scented incense wafted around us. Black-framed photographs of her Peranakan grandparents, her father a Baba and her mother a Nyonya hung high on white-washed walls. Some stern, some serene their faces began to move and merge as if mouthing words to us. Transfixed I began to sway with the movement of the spiralling vapours. My friend caught me:

'You need water?' I shook my head and attempted to stand up straighter. At that moment a black-dressed Buddhist priest arrived banging a drum. Sarah's ancestors' mouths closed.

Like ravens the attendants arrived to move her into the garden. We bumped into each other, making way. They raised her up as if she was no heavier than a lightweight mattress. Outside the white-suited family stood next to the funeral box. In front of me Sarah's photo surrounded by candles, sunbursts of flowers and fruit, adorned an altar. The hot smell of the pineapple, bananas and oranges mixed with glowing five-foot incense poles that exuded clouds of pungent smoke around us. I could hardly breathe-I wished I hadn't worn a scarf. Although light, the gossamer fine silk printed with Sarah's painting was sticking to my neck.

The priest began to chant shaking bells. He turned to the three of us. I was in the centre. He gave me a tray of drinks. I gave one each to my friends, and took one myself. We were about to drink them when the attendants grabbed them from us and placed them back on the tray I was holding. My two friends looked down, their arms firm by their sides. My hands shook rattling the tiny glasses. I wanted to apologise and let everyone know that I'd never been to a funeral like this before. The chanting Priest's helpers lifted my arms so that I held tray in the air. At last I understood this was an offering, not a toast to be consumed.

Worst of all, amongst the chanting and shaking of percussion instruments, a jumping-jack photographer captured each moment. He had probably photographed us attempting to drink from the sacred cups. My black dress clung to me. My friends' arms were wrapped around my back for comfort but made me even hotter. At least this way we would be safe from making any other errors.

The crowd prompted us into a funeral march along the local streets. We followed, tripping occasionally as the pace quickened, and the wheeled-coffin precariously bumped over stones and ruts in the road. The Priest and his assistants seemed unperturbed. Their chanting loudened the more people came out to watch the procession. It was as if they were sending out a warning. People stood outside their houses. Some wistful, some alarmed, some touching their hearts in respect, and others to protect themselves from the bony hand of the afterlife.

Everyone stopped. The casket was raised into a glass-sided car. I took in a deep breath. She really was going to leave us now. Her glass chariot negotiated the gravel on the road with grace until it was a speck of glistening sunlight on the horizon. My friends and me stood together. We waved goodbye.

A coach drew up. The crowd pushed us forward to board it. Surprised we looked at one another. The driver assisted us in climbing onto the high set of steps. It was reminiscent of the many coach outings Sarah had organised for us women artists to visit inspiring sites and exhibitions. Having always lived in an Asian climate dominated by men she'd never referred to competition with them, but urged us to support each other.

On the coach, bottles of water were handed round as loud chatter broke out. Sarah's sister came to sit next to me: 'Don't like all this ritual stuff', she said as she touched up her makeup looking into a handbag mirror.

I looked at her aghast. She continued: 'Sarah arrived a Buddhist, died one. I'm born again.'

'Where are we going?' I said.

'Her final farewell.' She turned to me: 'You saw her Chinese Ophelia painting?' she put her hand on my arm, 'she told me the bright floating flowers around her are all international women artists'.

My tears welled. I sobbed hard. She held on to my arm, and tears rolled down her face too.

The journey ended high on a hill. We climbed down the coach-steps into the blistering heat. I wiped sweat from my brow. In the congregation we watched two men digging an emerging tomb space. The coffin was lowered in. We grabbed onto one another to prevent slipping into the grave as we said thanks and prayers throwing earth onto the coffin. The Priest sounded out like a cockerel letting everyone know the dawn of her next life.

The sky changed and winds blew across the treetops.

I remembered the last time I saw her in Mongolia:

'Take Care', she'd said.

I'd stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her. It was as if I was holding air. My eyes darted to hers and she feigned a smile.

Like she had in Mongolia, Sarah slipped from me and floated away, this time amongst the music of the Mongolian shanz instruments and the deep throat singing of a robust bearded man in royal blue silk.

Frangipanni

Cry Now Child

Cry now child
It is right to cry
In the dead of night, I sneak away
It rains tonight
The world is crying
This pain will ease when you are all cried out

Cry now child
For one;
who lies in the warm embrace of mother earth
Beneath the sky's unclouded veil
The twinkle in her eyes (are) like a million stars

Cry now child.
For one;
without oil for light to find their way
They beg the moon to light their path
and guide their steps to another dawn

Cry now child
The sun has set
The night shall give her solemn light
She too must sleep before the morning
And then the sun shall smile upon you

Cry now child.
Cry! cry, I say!
Tonight is mine, you may have tomorrow
When it is time to own your night
I hope your days were full of living

Ehis Osifo

Daguerreotype

Maman would not watch yesterday when the maids tidied the knitted booties, white gowns and the spinning top into a packing case and took them to the vicarage. Papa says we should try and help the poor where we can and I believe this helped Maman too for the rest of the afternoon, even though she sat on the windowseat in the nursery in silence, she did not cry.

It has rained for three weeks now, the droplets on the glass mirroring those on Maman's face. She sits looking out towards the river and weeps, whilst Governess Isabelle and I try to study quietly in the parlour. I am working hard at my lessons, especially my French. In the past, when Isabelle has reported this to Maman it has brought her joy. Yet Isabelle tells me Maman is still *cœur brisé*. When I say I do not understand she says it means *désolée*, which does not make sense. The moors which surround Papa's land are desolate and Maman is nothing like the moors.

Maman refuses the comforts the maids try to give her. She holds only little Geor-, I mean *Petit George's* likeness. They call it a 'daguerreotype', which makes my tongue feel fat in my mouth to say. A gentleman made it with a wooden box the day after Petit George died. Maman fussed over his wispy hair and dressed him in a clean nightshift and bonnet. She tilted his cradle so the man with the box could see his rouged cheeks. I wanted to have my likeness taken but father - *Papa* - I mean, said this was special to Maman and Petit George.

'Am I not special?' I asked Papa.

'Of course you are special, my clever girl', he said and smiled, but there were no crinkles by his eyes. He summoned the trap and we rode to town and bought a new pair of gloves. I wanted white but Papa preferred I have black, like the ones Isabelle has taken to wearing. Still, they have buttons on the side and a frill of lace at the cuff.

The empty packing case was still under the seat of the trap and on the way back, Papa's heels pushed against its leather handle.

'Papa?' I asked.

‘Oui’, he said, taking the reins in one hand and twisting his moustache with the other, as he likes to do when I speak to him in French.

‘Will I see Petit George in Heaven?’

He stopped twisting his moustache.

‘Yes, Josephine.’

‘And will he be happy there?’

‘Yes.’ Papa’s voice had become croaky. He coughed and fixed his eyes on the road, his face suddenly looking like Maman’s.

When we returned home, I peeked round the door to the nursery and Maman was on the windowseat. Her face was wet with tears.

‘Maman?’

Although she did not turn, she must have heard me because she said,

‘Leave me alone, Josephine. I’m tired’.

The same happened the next day, and the day after that.

#

Isabelle and I are in the parlour. She stretches and moves from the table to one of the large armchairs by the fire.

‘Josephine, come here.’

‘I’m going to check on Maman.’

‘Is that a good idea?’

‘I want to see she is alright.’

Isabelle lets me go. After all, I have been checking on Maman for three weeks and nothing troublesome has happened.

As usual, I peer round the nursery door to see Maman on the windowseat, the daguerreotype in her hand.

‘Maman?’

She doesn’t respond. After a moment, I step through the door and close it behind me. Even though I am careful to be quiet, she flinches at the click. I step towards her until I am in the middle of the room.

‘J’ai bien travaillé pendant mes cours.’ I am working hard at my lessons.

In the past she would say, ‘you will be a very refined lady, Josephine’, but again there is no response.

‘Mother? Little George will be happy in Heaven.’
She does look at me then, but her face is frightening.
‘ISABELLE!’

Mother and I stare at each other as Isabelle’s slippers rap against the wooden floor of the hall, then the carpet of the stairs. The air around us feels prickly. Haunted. The door opens behind me and Isabelle takes a firm hold of my arm and pulls.

#

We retreat to the parlour. Isabelle sits again on the armchair and I at her feet. I look down at my gloves, squeezing my fingers together to stop them from shaking. Perhaps she will scold me.

‘Stand up, Josephine.’

I do as I am told.

‘Your mother is grieving. It hurts her inside and it may take her some time to get back to normal. I know it is hard for you to understand, but...’

We’re interrupted by Harriet, one of the maids. She bustles through the door carrying a small-handled shovel and a scuttle full of coal.

‘The mistress has gone to her bed’, she says, heaving the scuttle onto the hearth and jamming the shovel in the top.

The scuttle is the one that was set aside for the nursery. It will not be needed now. In-fact, the nursery is quite bare; even the crib was given to the poor. I think back to yesterday when the clothes were taken, and mother’s tears stopped. There is only one thing left to remind her of her pain.

‘I wish to go to my bed, too.’

‘Are you ill?’ Harriet says.

I nod my head and fix my eyes on the floor. A heat creeps up my cheeks from the lie.

Placing her cool fingers on my forehead, Isabelle says, ‘shall I call for the doctor?’

‘No.’ My stomach flutters in panic. I think about what mother says, ‘I simply need to rest’.

Isabelle and Harriet exchange a look and Isabelle sighs.

‘Very well. I will check on you at noon.’

I feel their eyes on my back as I leave the parlour and walk across the hall to the stairs. At the top I choose not to turn right to my room but left towards mother and father's.

The door is ajar.

Mother lies with her back to me, her unwashed hair loose across the pillow. I hold my breath and creep to the bottom of the bed. Her eyes are closed and her arm is outstretched, her hand nearing the edge of the mattress, still holding the daguerreotype.

Gently, I ease it from her fingers. It is heavier than I expected and my fingers make little mists on the glass. Mother does not stir.

Once out the room, I run for the maid's passage. It takes me down the back stairs, past the maid's parlour, past the kitchen, and out the back door.

I race towards the river which is swollen and raging from the rain. Though I throw it hard on the pebbles at the water's edge the daguerreotype does not smash so I press on it with my boot. The surface cracks. I stamp on it again and again, closing my eyes as the shards scratch little George's face. It is okay - little George is happy in Heaven.

Underneath my gloves my fingers throb as I pick up the remains and throw them as far as I can into the centre of the current. The glass sinks and the froth catches the metal. It is swept away and disappears. Downstream, a lighter patch of sky has broken through the clouds.

Now the daguerreotype is gone, everything will be alright.

Jennifer Dayes

Embroidered Memories

A white cotton sheet:
worn bobbly with age,
butterflies stitched on the hem
their bright blues and yellows faded.

My mother embroidered it
more than forty years ago;
her love, rarely spoken,
sewn into the fabric.

She used to make our dresses:
two sisters clothed in floral patterns,
her sewing a practical chore
saving money with time and skill.

The embroidery came later -
more time for creativity,
a side of her I never saw
through childhood eyes.

Now I'm de-cluttering
moving to a smaller space.
Duvet covers with printed patterns
replace this embroidered sheet.

I never use it now.
But I can't let it go.

Jan Berry

Empty Space

The grave was freshly dug, smoothly occupied:
I knew he was physically gone.
I had seen him in the shiny coffin
Like he was sleeping, yet he looked different
Drained, robbed of his essence.

Weeks become months
And the space seems to deepen:
I call out his name, silently.
Yet he does not respond.
I think his spirit is around and yet...
I delete his number resignedly.

He has gone on, yet the yearning continues
To make one more call.
Bitter-sweet memories floor me
Tears flow at the mention of his name.
Over our meals, no-one speaks
The knowledge just hangs in mid-air.

We are trapped in silence,
Left with the empty space.

Beverley Thomas

Pearl

*Nacre forms the inner lining of the shell.
Aragonite, conchiolin. Concentric layers
produced within the mantle
of soft tissue, layer on layer.*

Her box was lined with white silk.
I chose the clothes to dress her in –
a cardigan with pearl buttons, a purple skirt.

My cousin did her hair and make-up,
though she never wore much,
just a smudge of pink lipstick.

They gave me her false teeth in a bag.
Whether freshwater or salt,
she wasn't the type to wear pearls.

A good swimmer who never swam,
a good singer who never sang.
The scholarship girl who never went,

never painted again, though
she worked in the brush factory for years.
All the nevers were there that day

in the room with her pearl buttons
and rouged cheeks, her bitten nails grown.
I thought of her birthday when I was young,

the cake covered with plastic violets. Afterwards
we knelt together, pushed their stems
into hard earth, believing something might grow.

Sally Baker

When Goodluck Dies

This scene played out unexpectedly, like others in Goodluck's life. Fate, but with a difference. He had just been to Ngaruma Lutheran church; the early service was quiet but it would be busy later with all the families. Being the black sheep and a loner, he was keen to leave.

Just then, the sound of a foot striking a rock?

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a familiar figure he hadn't laid eyes on in years; fifteen to be precise. The lithe limbs and swagger couldn't be anyone else, not even from this distance. He was leaving by the far gate. Baraka had gotten into an old white taxi which then weaved over the hardened mud track and headed downhill. Perhaps he'd visited a grave. Was he back in Marangu for good?

Who had Baraka lost?

With that thought, came an insatiable urge. It was time to talk face to face; to forget what the past had heaped on them, mostly led by himself with Baraka following like a mindless sheep, seeing the patch of grass in front of him and moving on to the next.

Below the surface of this urge was his need to pursue meaning. He knew what he must do: he must be reconciled with his best friend. He ran like he was a teenager again, like when Baraka had raced him home from school. The wind was cool but he worked up a slight sweat. Despite everything that had happened over the last fifteen years, and maybe because of them, he was determined. He reached the far gate at the edge of the field.

He hesitated, crossed the road, walked uphill and surveyed the scene: the road bent in a hairpin before going down. If he ran down the slope he could race ahead of the taxi and his friend and stop him. With a brief spurt of unusual energy, he set off. Baraka would arrive by his side in a matter of minutes in the taxi, so he tried to slow his pace. He tripped over something, then lunged headlong down the incline. The momentum carried him head over heels. He landed heavily onto a loose rock which gave way

immediately, then onto slippery gravel. Helpless to stop, he slid onto the road, head first.

He saw the taxi, a Toyota Corona, just as it was bearing down on him. It had picked up speed on the straight stretch. Goodluck tried to turn his head, having heard the sound of screeching brakes. He didn't even have the time to put his hands up to shield his head from the impact.

Thud!

Crack!

The heavy bumper was a jack-hammer on his skull and neck. Blackness fell like a curtain on his life.

#

He came to. A tearful Baraka was bent over him, cradling his head by the roadside. Goodluck's first impulse was to warn him that he had HIV but then remembered that Baraka already knew. Precautions had been taken with plastic under and around his head. Baraka was kneeling and cradling him beside the road. Goodluck felt no pain, only a light 'out of body' feeling. All sounds were accentuated. The taxi driver - a frail young figure wearing a white kofia - was standing, maybe ten feet away. He was shaking.

Baraka shouted out to the taxi driver, 'Any reply?'

The driver stared at his phone, apparently awaiting an emergency response. He shook his head.

Goodluck began urgently, 'Baraka, can you forgive me?'

A pause. 'I've not been a friend to you...it's me who needs forgiveness.'

'Baraka...not...much time...my son, Musa, and Aisha...' a determined gasp, aauughh, 'my wife...care for them'.

Baraka bent closer. He must have been struggling to hear what was now no more than a rasping whisper, interspersed with grunts.

'Please...God will help you as he has me...'

A mammoth effort: 'Aauughh...I don't deserve it. If you support them, as I know you can, He will help you'.

'Yes Goodluck, I'll do my best.'

'And my letters and writing...they are for Musa...'

Tears ran down Baraka's slender cheeks. He took gulps of air and sniffed periodically, then wiped his nose with the back of a sleeve. The driver too was crying.

With that, Goodluck felt life ebb from him. He let go. A peace descended: he saw the bright light he'd dreamed of and had even written of. It was in the collection to be shared...

The Grave

Imagine the process

First, pale, like a bloodless brown face

Almost white

Then shrivelled and veiny like wood

Then red and green and slushy

Then maggoty

Then clean and ivory white

Is this final, or is there more?

Will my spirit rise above and watch the drama below?

Will I see the bright light like so many have?

Will I cry earnestly,

Be enveloped and transported

To eternal life

Or separation?

Goodluck

Annie Forester

Thiepvall Pier and Face 10C 10D and 11A

For some there is no final resting place
Except in unquiet memories.
Their absence persists
In the space where conversation falters,
And the sepia mystery of a stranger
Perched on a grandmother's mantelpiece;
A youth, quietly surveying the possibilities
Of an unlived life, unnamed.

No church bells and bride, for him.
No babies crying in the night.
No wonder years.
No carriage clock.
No rest in peace.

Now, curiosity gently slips the leash,
And I search the contemporary ether
To draw the tree of our lives.
Degrees of separation fall away,
And a fading memorial card, silk-ribboned,
Unveils the stranger's gaze:
Corporal Harry, cast in amber at twenty-one:
'Interred within the British Lines'.

Not yet forgotten.

Richard Ward

Denise Chalk: No Rose Tinted Specs Required

I am the niece
Of the great Denise
I loved absolutely everything about her
For she was strong, kind, brave and her heart was pure
She was always there for me from ballet recitals to Birthday parties
Remaining the greatest inspiration and mother figure 'til the eve of my 40s
She did so much for the community, cared for so many & did it with such style & grace
Always giving the best hugs, showing such warmth & interest forever putting a smile on my face
She was the perfect soul mate for my Uncle Trevor
Sipping from the same wine glass I thought they'd last forever
Until a massive stroke under a heart shaped tree
Rushed from Carlisle to Newcastle it wasn't to be
Her living will ensured she died as she had lived
Her selflessness saving others for all her organs she did give
When I heard the news I said not Trevor or Denise
Now we all cry together - may she rest in peace
My Uncle asked if I wanted anything to remember her by
But she gave so much, the imprint of her love means she's always nearby
Tomorrow is the first time I don't want to go to Houghton-le-Spring
I stumble towards the funeral like a bird with a broken wing
We will be honoured to wear her T-shirts
Hugs with my Cousins and Uncles salving the hurt
A truly special lady there was nothing wishy washy about her
She walked on fire with me to the internal tune of the Archers
A fierce protector of her 3 younger brothers, a working class hero
Impossible to list all the good she did but Denise we salute you
I am the niece
Of the late great Denise

Emily Chalk-McKay

Escape

We played Hangman as children, but not much else,
for then our eight years gap gaped wide.
As your elder cousin, I was high and mighty.
I judged you boisterous, spoilt and naughty.
How you troubled me! And yet, little sister,
you were named after a lovely goddess with all-seeing eyes,
Meenakshi the tall-crowned warrior
whose benign gaze is life-giving;
and your singing lifted up our spirits.

The years seemed bridged as you entered your teens.
You often spoke of running away. Such silliness!
I never told you that I nearly ran off too at nine
to be a hermit in a Himalayan cave.
But my dreams were doused by practicality,
so I merely escaped daily in daydreams during lessons.
Your adolescent ambition to run away to Bollywood
and be a singer-actress-star seemed far removed.
How immature you were! How you troubled me!

When I went to university, you gave me a gift:
an image of Goddess Durga you had made with scraps
of coloured felt and card, fastened to polystyrene
and decorated with bits of mirror and black painted eyes,
a red bead for a polished ruby on a lofty crown
and pearl-white for an elegant nose-ring.
A powerful goddess for my protection.
Her bright face was stained; did you introduce the flaw
in keeping with tradition? No art can contain perfection.

I was abroad when news of your marriage broke.
You had wed outside our community and class.
It was in keeping with your adventurous spirit.
I wished you every happiness from afar. We all did.
But why the need to elope? How would we meet your man?
When would the hands of elders bless you both?

Was it Bollywood and a movie hero you hoped to find?
Was this your reaching out to take control of life?
It was no doubt your destiny. Yet, little sister, how you
troubled me!

Your mother found you, and she lost her mind.
You were gone beyond recall. You left us all
with so many questions, so much heartache.
Little sister, though you troubled me, I see how
you had effected your great escape.
No botched dream of Bollywood or Himalayan heights,
you strangled life with both your hands.
It was summer in Delhi, but no blades revolved;
cold eyes blankly staring from a still ceiling fan.

Debjani Chatterjee

The Mother Box

It was moving day. Elise pulled the box down from the top shelf where it had lain undisturbed for several years. What power this nondescript cardboard container had once held. She had few memories from early childhood but she would never forget the first time she encountered the mother box.

Elise let her mind drift back to that day. The box squatting in front of her, a malevolent frog, its lid flip flopping like a loose amphibian mouth. At any moment a long tongue might dart out like a strip of flypaper covered with half-digested flies.

Her mum smiling at her, smiling too much, looking too happy to be real. When Elise had opened the box the first thing she saw were two books. Already a keen reader, she pulled them out. But the marks on these thin pages made no sense and there were no pictures. Avoiding her mum's eye she put them carefully aside. The next thing looked like some red and yellow cloth. Elise had looked up at her mum. What was she supposed to do? What was she supposed to feel?

Her mum had picked up the thin cotton fabric and shaken it out gently. Now Elise could see it was a lady's dress. It had a pattern of elephants on it and little zig zag shapes running along the hem and down the sleeves. The elephants were nice and Elise reached out to touch them. But then the faint musty smell of the dress reached her and she drew back. She hadn't wanted to touch the next two items in the box, a pair of well-worn green rubber flip flops that made her feel slightly sick. Her mum had picked up another object, a thin yellowish bangle, and held it out to her. Elise had looked at it; it wasn't horrible but it wasn't interesting either. She still remembered slipping it on and off her arm a few times and noticing she could stop it slipping off if she spread her fingers wide. The last thing in the box was a small zip up cloth purse containing some coins, a few greasy looking hair grips and a piece of printed paper that her mum had told her was a bus ticket.

Elise had felt a sticky heat rising up to her face. Looking at the floor she had twisted a strand of hair round her finger. She had been told the box contained memories of her mother, a mythical

being about whom Elise knew little except that she had died giving birth to her. But Elise had found no memories in the box.

This failure stayed with her for years, a bad feeling in her stomach that faded over time but never completely went away. She got better at justifying her reaction - *I was only six, I never knew my mother, how could they have thought this stuff would mean anything to me?* - but deep down she knew that if she had been a better person these objects would have spoken to her, would have brought her mother to her, would have made her much-loved foster mum happy.

At some stage the box had reappeared in her bedroom, though she could never remember this happening, and over the years she occasionally looked inside and thought about its contents. By the time she reached her teens it had lost much of its danger. She'd forgiven her mum for her clumsy intervention, her well-meaning attempt at generosity. They'd talked. She'd learned that her mother had arrived at the South London hospital alone that hot summer day, undocumented, with very little English and already in labour. Her identity had never been discovered.

The stories the box told were still hard to digest but Elise had found shreds of comfort there too. Her mother had shared her love of reading. Her mother had still owned at least one gold bangle. She had been able to catch a bus when she desperately needed to. She had not died alone; she had been looked after by doctors and nurses. By people who had cared enough to gather up the few things she had with her and make sure they accompanied her baby daughter as she began her own journey out into the world. A daughter who was now heading to university to study the language of her birth mother.

Sarah Mosedale

Sons of Peerless Faith

A couple of days ago, Michael's dad rang him. The assistant vergier at the local church in the village where Michael grew up had died. His dad thought he should show his face at the funeral. Michael laughed.

'Frank?' he said.

'He was a good man', his dad said.

'But a bit daft.'

'I wouldn't say that exactly. Frank was *Frank* for all that. He was your Mum's cousin. She'd have wanted you to go.'

Michael arrived on the Friday at the station of the small town. He wore his great coat, bought from the Army and Navy Stores, and a black tie and armband borrowed from his landlord. He paced around waiting for his dad to pick him up from the train. Buddleia and nettles grew either side of the track. *The beleaguered plants of a derelict outpost*. He had got into the habit of mentally composing prosodic snippets and then writing them down in notebooks when he could remember them.

The stench of a dead creature rose up from the undergrowth behind him. *Death is all around us. Even in the heat of the day*. He was hungover, and a little superior. 'Yes, Dad', he would say, 'I'm ok thanks – but I had a bit of a skinfull in the pub last night'. But when his dad appeared, looking a little flustered, he said,

'Do I look the part, then?'

'You'll do. This is one of the inevitabilities and duties in life that a man must get used to.'

'Or a woman.'

'Yes, or a woman.'

As they drove to the funeral they exchanged some remarks about Frank, who had been helping out at the local church for a decade or so, maintaining the grounds and interior, handing out hymn books, polishing silver.

'He was, indeed, a simple soul. But a good man all the same.'

'I never knew what to say to him, so we never spoke really', said Michael.

They parked up on the gravel where moss grew in thick patches and the trees threw down dappled light. They walked

slowly through the lych-gate, past the gravestones, mentioning people they knew or knew of who had died and were buried there. *A repository of charnel bones; a garden of lost souls.*

From the back of the churchyard a woman's wild sobs pierced the air.

'That'll be Amy', said Michael's dad.

'Remind me, who's Amy?'

'One of Frank's volunteering friends.'

Amy was frantic. Her family tried to calm her down. *The bereft wailing of a dying animal.* Michael's dad looked unsettled. He suggested they walk round the other side of the church to smoke. They both rolled their own and it gave them something to do.

Michael's dad said that they had to give up smoking at some point.

'Though not now, of course', he added, rubbing the back of his head with his palms. 'I don't know if this is the best time, Michael, but it's only right you should know. A little late in the day perhaps.'

'Know what?'

'He was your dad.'

'Who was my dad - Frank?' said Michael.

'Yes, Frank - who else?'

'Well, you, at a guess, since I've been calling you Dad ever since I can remember. What do you mean, Frank was my dad? So was Mum my mum or not?'

'Not. She took you as her own when Frank got a girl pregnant. And Amy was the girl. They were the types who can't - who couldn't - people didn't think they could cope with bringing kids up in those days.'

'So you waited all this time to tell me, and now he's dead?' Michael's voice cracked with hurt. His Dad wasn't his Dad. Amy was his Mum. Michael pictured Frank's shy grin, the embarrassed way he would look at the ground. Nothing. What should he feel?

#

The funeral was short and there was no eulogy. The only hymn was *The Lord is My Shepherd*, throughout which, although originally he had every intention of singing, Michael was incapable of uttering a sound. Tears fell from his eyes and splashed onto the order of service. Amy sobbed in front of the altar.

He and his dad – the one he'd taken to be his dad all these years – drove to the wake, at a pub outside the village.

A cold buffet had been laid out along three bar tables pushed together. Amy had been taken home and there were hardly any women. Mainly men, mainly forty or over, most way over forty. Double that in fact. Not long for some of them. *Faces creased and folded like the windswept moors.*

He surveyed the room. Some of the older ones were looking at him with pity in their eyes. He decided to get drunk. They all seemed into buying him pints, so he kept drinking. The day wore on. Dust gleamed in the sunbeams that slanted across the room. *The gilded – no, the powdered gold of a lost afternoon.* Voices rose and fell, generally subdued.

When the sun was low in the sky and Michael was downing his sixth pint, he realised the men had begun to sing folk songs, and he let the words wash over him like lullabies. Their voices were hushed to begin with, just a murmur, one or two of them singing John Peel. Then others joined in, until they were a full chorus:

'Do ye ken that hound whose voice is death? / Do ye ken her sons of peerless faith?

Do ye ken that a fox with his last breath / Cursed them all as he died in the morning?'

As he leaned on the bar, in the company of the men who all knew the truth about who his father and mother actually were, he realised several things. That Frank - and Amy - would have known all along that they were his real parents. That they had made a huge sacrifice for him. That he had thought badly of them, when they were only human. He was their son. That there had been nothing any of them - these assembled men and women of the locality - could have done differently or better, given the circumstances.

As the singing grew louder, an ache formed in Michael's chest. His attempts at poetic composition fell away. A man from another village murmured that John Peel was Frank's favourite song. Michael drained his pint, wiped his face on his sleeve, and joined in with the refrain.

Jo Manby

School Uniform

Remember the time we went shopping for my first school uniform?

For years I was longing to see my mother, Joan.

I was convinced I might catch sight of her outside Kendals.

It seemed to me the pavement could work like a sliding door.

There, I might see her, or nearly see her, even though she might not see me.

I moved back to Manchester as an adult.

Walking on Deansgate, I would wait at the crossing for a few seconds too long,

just in case I might catch her in the corner of my eye.

Joan has been dead for decades

and time plays tricks with our memory.

Now I'm not sure whether I was hoping to see her,

or hoping to see a younger me:

her and me hand in hand, shopping for school uniform.

Victoria Brandon

The End of Things

It was a heart attack,
you took six weeks to die.
Six long uncertain
will he, won't he, weeks.

Your scar was in the middle
where it wouldn't heal
because of the continuing beats
of the heart it had damaged...

it felt like suicide.
Of all the places for a scar
why in the centre,
the heartbeat of your life?

If it had been slightly to the side
I might have had you longer.
Would I have come home then?
Maybe, but not encumbered.

I would have come alone.
You would not have asked for me,
but she would, and rightly.
It was my place,
my role, shifting my destiny

slightly to the side.
I came home anyway.
I became the centre,
the place where the scar was,

the focus of her life.
an axis around which she could pivot.
and the continual motion
scarred me in the middle.

Patricia Henny

Fields of Glory

And there they lay - colder than cold,
beyond the counting; laid to rest
and promised 'they will not grow old'.
Now here they lie beneath my gaze,
so still and silent, newly blest
to meet the ending of their days.

Now others too, on other days
will feel their pain, but not the cold
ice grip of death, so newly blest,
on those that destiny will rest
in graves, while others come to gaze
and memories grow – as they grow old.

In times long past they grew not old
those heroes who gave up their days.
They sacrificed their chance to gaze
on loved ones sheltered from the cold
dark earth in which such heroes rest,
and curse the day that they were blest.

For what reward is 'being blest'
for those who now will not grow old?
What comfort can it give to rest
in solitude for endless days?
What comfort from the icy cold?
What comfort for a sightless gaze?

Much better far a lifelong gaze
without the curse of being blest.
And farewell too to all the cold
deception of not growing old.
Much better are the busy days
of life instead of such a rest.

Much better to defer that rest
and stay content within the gaze
of loved ones in together days.
Together, knowing we are blest
when, as together we grow old
and have each other when it's cold.

So let them rest, these falsely blest,
beneath our gaze - for all their days
forever cold, and never old.

Brian G. D'Arcy

East of the Sun and West of the Moon

Bernice Walters - Malta 1941: The song *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* had been playing on the wireless as Bernice was dressing and now as she cycles along the coastal path to the airbase the tune is stuck in her head. The mauve sky is cloudless and the splash of orange denoting the rising sun is vivid compared to the pale moon and single morning star, known locally as Venus. It's then that she spots the lone plane. A pinprick at first, it soon becomes the unmistakable silhouette of a Spitfire. It's flying directly at her. Two more aircraft appear on the horizon and the familiar throbbing of their Messerschmitt 109 engines sends a chill down her spine. She should abandon her bicycle and dive for cover but she's frozen in the memory of another Spitfire, another pilot, swallowed up by the same ocean.

Had she and David been in love? Perhaps they had, everyone thought so. He was six years her junior yet looked a decade older. The Battle of Britain had seen to that. An ace flyer at only twenty, he was probably too battle-weary to shake off the Messerschmitt which hounded him to his death.

Standing now, watching this Spitfire being chased above the sea, her head reverberates with the memory of David's calm words coming through her earphones in the plotting room, 'Looks like I've bought it, chaps'. Moments later she'd heard his screams as his plane burst into flames and plummeted into the sea. The sound still haunted her dreams. There'd been no memorial. It didn't do to dwell on death; it was bad for the flyer's morale, apparently. As if the terror of dying in an air battle didn't already fill their minds, awake or asleep.

Watching the aerobatics going on overhead as the Spitfire weaves and rolls dodging the tracers from the enemy planes, she has no time to dwell on the past. The Spitfire swoops low attempting to outfly the Messerschmitts and Bernice throws herself to the ground with her arms over her head bracing herself for the explosion. She knows the Messerschmitt planes will be unable to recover from such a steep dive. She hears the Spitfire's engine scream as the pilot forces his plane to climb. Then the

sound of the Messerschmitts' engines begins to fade and she knows they've turned for home.

Dazed but unhurt, Bernice picks up her bicycle and peddles furiously. She prides herself on never being late for work, even in the heaviest of raids.

Her footsteps break the silence as she clatters down the stairs deep into the bowels of fighter command. It seems that the Spitfire has vanished from the radar and only the two Messerschmitts are picked up as they depart. The atmosphere is heavy. No one speaks but everyone believes the Spit has bought it.

Thirty minutes later, Bernice turns from the plotting table to see a man, who appears to have stepped right out of the pages of *Biggles*, stride into the room. He's wearing a battered flying jacket over khaki shorts and an RAF dress cap over his flying helmet.

'Harry Jameson!'

Bernice looks on in disbelief as the orderly workforce erupts into chaotic excitement.

'We really thought you'd copped one this time', the usually austere CO says, slapping Harry on the back and pumping his hand vigorously.

'Sorry to put the wind up you. I had to fly under the radar to shake off those 109s. Too ruddy close for comfort, I can tell you. Got some clear photographs though. I'm on my way to debriefing, but thought I'd better let you chaps see that I haven't checked out yet. My lucky cap came through for me again', he laughs, lifting it high and removing his flying helmet. The light catches his fair hair and Bernice finds she is as captivated by this merry handsome man as everyone else.

#

Carolyn Walters - Malta 2003: I'm on holiday in Malta, after finding a letter addressed to me while sorting through my late parents' effects. The letter was from an aunt Bernice inviting me to visit her on the island. I hadn't known of her existence, and disappointingly, I discover she is already dead when I search for her. This afternoon I'm supposed to be taking flowers to her grave. Instead, some macabre impulse has compelled me to attend

the belated funeral of a World War Two Pilot. It's being conducted in the church grounds with full military honours, as one would expect for a man twice awarded the Distinguished Service Order and the Distinguished Flying Cross. As the service progresses, I learn that Harold (Harry) Jameson had been a risk-taker, famous for his aerobatic skills in evading enemy fire while capturing vital photographic images. Yet one day, the 26-year old Wing Commander's luck had run out. His remains had lain trapped inside his Spitfire undiscovered for 59 years. Of course I'd known how the ceremony would proceed. My pilot husband had been killed flying a plane in another war and in another decade. But I find that although unknown to me, I'm captivated by this young war hero and his escapades.

As the coffin is lowered into the grave, an elderly man bearing the insignia of an RAF Commanding Officer, steps forward and drops a single red rose onto the coffin lid. 'This is from Bernice', he says, blowing a kiss. Then after giving a smart salute he steps back from the graveside. The ceremony reaches its conclusion with the Last Post, and as a lone piper plays Lament, tears trickle unashamedly down the man's face. He stands proud and erect, yet his watery eyes are glazed staring perhaps into a time long ago but not forgotten. I follow his gaze and can just make out a young couple standing apart from all the pomp and ceremony beneath the shade of a tree. They're holding hands. He's wearing a battered flying jacket over Khaki shorts and an RAF dress cap over his flying helmet. She is wearing a rather glamorous crêpe de chine dress, and her hair is styled in a sleek, once fashionable pageboy. I blink, trying to focus in the dimming light, but when I look again, they're gone.

Malta is a small island and as we leave the graveside, I'm curious to know if the rose is from my aunt Bernice, so I introduce myself to the man who threw it into the grave.

'Yes, the rose was from Bernice Walters, I didn't know she had a niece.'

'I didn't know I had an aunt until last week', I tell him, and explain the reason for my visit and how disappointed I am by my untimely arrival.

‘During the war I was CO at the airbase where Harry and Bernice were stationed. She was a very beautiful woman, your aunt, and Harry was besotted with her. She never married, you know, even after Harry was gone. You see he’d been posted missing many times before and always turned up. She never lost hope. Towards the end of her life, Bernice asked me to give Harry a rose should he ever show up after her death. Today I carried out her request.’

Suddenly we hear the unmistakable whine of a Merlin engine. Moments later, a Spitfire swoops low scattering the congregation. As the plane flies off between the setting sun and the trace of a moon, it dips one wing in farewell.

‘East of the Sun and West of the Moon,’ the man whispers. ‘It was their favourite song and I’ll bet money on that being Bernice with Harry up to his old flying tricks in a world beyond.’

Somehow, I don’t doubt it.

Pamela Jackson

Who Me?

This rock that I live on.
This rock that I call my home,
spins & turns, spins & turns, spins & turns.

This rock creates life: makes life, takes life, holds life.
All the while it spins & turns, spins & turns.

On this rock I am not a reflection or a shining star.
I am but a spec of dust, a pebble, a stone; I get kicked, I tumble, I
roll.

I know I am lost but I am not alone.

For a billion hearts that thump out hollow beats surround me.
Quick quick slow; quick quick slow.

They ache, they whisper, they scream to be heard;
to be noticed, to be remembered, to be loved.

Unlike this rock that spins & turns, spins & turns,
heart beats stop.

Soon, mine will too.

Billy Dulay

Fable of the Gorgon Gem

A long time ago, there was an old man called Nolo. He shared a hut in the mountains with his son Olaf and two snakes he hadn't had the heart to kill. Every night, Nolo and Olaf would sit outside the hut and hope for the moon to shine. When it didn't, they stared at the Entencian sky, counting the flickering stars.

One day, as Nolo was walking his sheep, he heard a scream. He followed the sound, stepping deep into the brushes, off the beaten path. A part of the woods was on fire. A lizard was sprawled on a stump, wailing.

'Shepherd', the lizard croaked. 'Please help me out of this fire!'

Nolo pointed his crook down. The lizard jumped on it and was pulled to safety.

'I want to thank you for your kindness', it said after it calmed down. 'I am from a beautiful city in the sky. Every star you see above? That's a gem. I can get you one, so you can have light at night.'

The old man agreed, happy to receive a useful gift. The lizard told him to wait as it scuttled away.

The sun hid behind the mountains and night fell over the hills. As Nolo was about to head home, the lizard came back with a tiny gem in its mouth.

'This will shine as brightly as you want it to', the lizard said. 'But if you choose to sacrifice something, it will turn into a gem that can grant any wish.'

A dull light spread in Nolo's palm as he held it. It wasn't light that he wanted, but a better life for his ageing son - a life with a more obedient herd, a bigger house, a horse so he could go and meet a girl, create a young family.

'What is the price?' he asked. The gem shone brighter, resonating with his resolve.

'A life', the lizard said. 'It will charge the stone with the strength of your wishes.'

Nolo took a moment to think.

'Take my life', he said. 'Give the gem to my son, Olaf. Tell him nothing about my sacrifice.'

The lizard nodded. Nolo's body disappeared, a sigh the only memory of him left. The gemstone fell in the grass, full of light. The clearing was illuminated so brightly, the sleeping birds spread their wings and sang, thinking it was dawn again.

'Papa!' A distant voice cut through the birdsong. 'Papa!'

The lizard took the gem into its mouth and followed the cries until it met a middle-aged man with the same eyes as Nolo.

It gave him the gem, explained its properties and left. Before Olaf could ask if the lizard had seen his father, it was gone.

Olaf looked at the gem with disbelief. He tucked it in his pocket, covering some of its brightness, and headed home. He wished he could share the treasure with his father.

To silence his worrying heart, Olaf decided to test the gem's mysterious power. He tapped the stone three times and whispered, 'Make me a palace'.

The ground shook as he uttered the words. In the blink of an eye, the hut disappeared, replaced by a magnificent palace. The walls were mirrors; the old pots and plates were now golden; the table was made of pure black onyx.

Before he had had enough time to marvel, there was a knock on the door. Olaf opened it to his neighbour Kalo's surprised face.

'Friend, what is all this?'

Olaf invited Kalo for dinner and told him the story of the lizard and the gem. He asked Kalo to help him look for Nolo in the morning and offered a bed for the night.

Kalo agreed with a wicked smile. When Olaf fell asleep, Kalo took the gem and wished for the palace to be transported to another mountain with everything in it, leaving only Olaf and his bed behind.

In the morning, Olaf woke with wind in his hair and raindrops on his face. Without his father, the snakes and the hut, he cried bitter tears of regret. Barefoot, only in his nightshirt, he went to look for his Papa, cursing Kalo for his greed.

Miles away, the two snakes woke up in the palace. The air was strange, unknown. They slithered around to explore the vast space but found no Nolo, no Olaf. The stranger from the night before was there instead, sleeping in a bed of gold and feathers. The

snakes nodded to one another as they formed a plan. They too missed their family.

Crawling next to Kalo's bed, they saw the tiny gem on a chain around his neck. Sneaking up to his face, they reached under the necklace and pried the gem away. Kalo huffed in his sleep but did not wake.

Tapping the gem three times on the marble floor, one of the snakes wished for Nolo to come back to them. Nothing happened so the other wished for Olaf.

Seconds later, two muddy, bleeding feet appeared before them. Olaf looked around and picked up the gem.

'I want the hut back to where it was before; Kalo to have snakes instead of hair, hissing in his ears day and night so he can get no rest until he gives up his greed; and my Papa to come back to me.'

The world swirled. Not long after, Olaf was sitting in a familiar wooden chair, its cuffs and marks telling the story of a life well-lived. The snakes were nowhere to be found - he trusted they had taken their place on Kalo's head. But his father was not there either.

He tapped the stone on the stained table again and again but nothing happened. Yet it shone brighter as if to tell him it wasn't broken. Olaf wished for his father every night, to no avail.

One day, he went fishing in the nearby lake. He pulled out the gem, deciding to try to make a wish one last time before tossing it in the water.

'I wish to be reunited with my Papa', he whispered. This time, the gem shone like a small sun and granted his wish. In the grass, a lizard watched a star fall from the sky before scuttling back to a world hidden from humans.

Years later, the waters of that lake move in slow, lazy waves, unaware of the two gems lost within its depths. The sky is reflected in each ripple in the day but during moonless nights, one can see a faint glow from below. For that, the young Gorgons call it, 'The Lake with the hidden sky', believing there are stars concealed in its waters.

Polina Ganeva

Timeline

I

School History wasn't too grim. Westerns on the silver screen.
Its story, cast, the cinematic technique. Unreal.

It meant more
To stand, silent on Remembrance Day, as veterans marched by.
Those young cadets, so smart, at each corner.
The nation stops but these events are never overcome.
War still goes on.

II

My gran was loaned for 'visit day' releases,
Then driven away. Where did she go?
When she died, her funeral was full
Of strange people, who meant nothing to me
And mumbled at the graveside. I was bored
until the wake when everyone argued.
I daydreamed of a fairy godmother
To whisk me away.

III

Give me a bridge over the river,
(That '*Simon and Garfunkel*' song),
And I will lay me down by the Lowry,
Or the circled dome of the Central Library,
In Roman Castlefield I find new pastures, a new life.
The water paints a path: I have
Emigrated like a leaping salmon
To Oxford Street, to the Palace Theatre.
No suitcase, no plane ticket needed.

IV

I look to see a caring sign, through sky, through sea.
Dazzling refracted rays, above the Milky Way,
And over Manchester, a dove
Flies, to the higher sphere of wonderment.
My special place.

Sister Star

Through the Wall

Human as a wheel, heat shrunk,
a moment of risk when the work
of carpenter or smith could be spoilt.
Human as a voice at the edge
of a smoke-drunk woodland,
out of body travel, the desire of light
to become something else,
blue-glass bead seniority
or serenity, an alphabet, a linen shirt,
awareness unaware, skin.
I can tell you this because you, like I,
are poised between birth pain
and grave goods, half-oblivion
half memory, stampeding ghosts
and conflicted Persephone.

Why do we believe they can help us?
The dead and the living, eyes that blink
on both sides of time's aquarium.
Trilobites and sponges,
elephant nose fish and Anglo-Saxons,
amateur gods leading double lives,
walking on water and land.
I can tell you this because you, like I,
dance the tumbling horse
through the membrane
hooves over muzzle in the vortex,
chant that poem of the road
to the six-lane highway with no exit,
the dead and the sleeping, so alike.

You and I. Human as hand prints
sealed on the wall in haematite red -
that crooked little finger -
sometimes they won't let us through.
Human as the aged white mare's halter

encrusted with salt of sweat and foam,
hanging behind the stable door.
Human as a bare-foot duchess's first
jaunt out with butterfly net
and the raffish lepidopterist.
That night the dog flew into a frenzy
clamping his jaws on pyjama legs,
dragging blankets off the bed, minutes
before the bomb hit the street
behind our street. I can tell you this
because you, like I, are finite,
made of the same calcite as bone flutes
and subways, the inner ear,
poised between noise and music,
human as a harpsichord of footsteps,
human as souls who travel in relics.
Have you spoken to Headless Hazel?
*"What do you know about life
and death?"* Now residing in the chest
o' drawers lined with a Liverpool
v Swansea Daily Mirror match report.

One day I will become what I want,
a stonechat, a stone chair, a shaman
with a dry mouth in a battered canoe
passing through the wall, one animal,
returning grey suited, a consultant
of dysfunction with a horse's head,
anything to draw an audience, jump
clean hoofed into the listening dark,
landing in the canter of the poem,
human as your and my stranger-self,
the untold truths of the dead,
and the living who dig for light.

Stephen Sawyer

Flashes

He is in the euphemistically entitled short stay ward. It stands for
“short stay on this earth”.

He lays in bed because he is capable of doing nothing else, the pain makes him a prisoner. He has pancreatic cancer and has lost count of how many people have told him it is the most painful of all.

Painkillers have no effect and in recent weeks surgeons have cut his spinal cord which has at least given him some respite even if it has left him unable to stand.

But pain always finds a way and if it is not the screaming agony, it is a discomfort that will not allow him the release of sleep.

Then, strangely, the pain is gone. It is one of those moments of complete remission that are infrequent but oh so welcome.

He begins to doze and his mind begins to wander, escaping into his past

He has wanted to play for the school team for months but he is still to go through his growth spurt and is short yet gangly. Then, Stephen Hobbs swore at the teacher from the other school who was acting as referee and suddenly there is a vacancy. He is aware that he is trying too hard, but he shoots from range.
And scores...

At this moment, he doesn't know her name is Angel, in fact he doesn't know her at all. What he does know of her he doesn't like. She is standing at the bar, holding court and preventing him from getting served. She is also holding a cigarette and

He does not know who his father is so he loves his mother instead. He is told his father left to find work after the pit shut, but many men did. His mother works in the oldest profession and when she has a client, she locks him in the cellar. Sometimes when she is stoned she forgets about him. Last time he only survived by drinking the rain water that came in through a man-hole cover he cannot reach. Her current suitor is Mr Green and he always brings Brown.
He hopes it rains.

He is locked in the shed again. He does not know why he smashed the toy car but he knows he did it wilfully. He knows he will not be able to play with it again and it

turning to blow smoke in his direction. He very pointedly says "Excuse me," and she turns. She turns and they really see each other for the first time.

And he buys her a drink...

He feels uncomfortable in the monkey suit, especially the shoes. He doesn't wear shoes.

He wears boots at work and trainers in the outside world.

Although family and friends are gathered around him, he is oblivious to his circumstances.

Angel nudges him. Hard

And the vicar says, "We are gathered here today..."

He wasn't supposed to be here, he had said so from the start.

Rebecca was supposed to be the birth partner but in the early hours of Friday morning she wasn't available and after he'd driven Angel to the hospital only physical violence would have prevented him from being in the room.

She says that this is his fault and deep down he knows it is.

It is a burden he is willing to bear. There is a sudden flurry of activity and a baby cries.

And everything changes.

makes him cry. He sees a spider sitting on the work bench and knows that it could be the only living thing he sees for some time. He knows

his foster parents mean well and he is grateful for a home but knows they should not lock him in the shed. Sadly, he has no-one to tell.

He picks up a plant pot and crushes the spider.

People brought up on 70's cop shows know that heroin is white but he who has never seen such shows knows it is brown.

Sarah was just another junkie customer when she walked into the flat but after a few short hours he is in love, although he doesn't know why. He knows she loves the Brown more than she loves him but does not care.

She fills the syringe and offers it to him and although he has never used his own product before he takes it from her willingly.

He has seen many lost souls apply the tourniquet so he knows exactly what to do. He easily locates a vein and pushes the plunger.

And pukes.

He knows he has done wrong but this time part of him wonders why. He has seen Brian and Sarah together on a number of occasions

He was never what you would call academic at school, but nor were any of his family. His handful of CSE grade fours was more than any of his kith and kin had to show for twelve years in education.

But not so Gabrielle.

She knows her art, she loves her art and she has real talent.

She is there on the stage in gown and mortarboard. He watches as she accepts the scroll from some Lord High Muck-a-muck then she turns and looks straight at him.

He is so proud he thinks he might explode

He is sitting in a cluttered office with his beloved Angel, looking at jars that appears to contain giant cotton buds and small condoms. A nurse has brought them a cup of tea in plain blue cups with matching saucers. He can't remember ever holding a saucer. The nurse re-enters, this time with a man in a white coat. The doctor is sensitive but does not pull his punches. He tells him he has Pancreatic Cancer, there is no cure and death will be slow and painful.

Angel looks at him

and has weathered their mockery, but this time they have ignored him and perhaps it is this ignorance that made him want to hurt them. He knows it is wrong and that he must be punished.

In court he has offered no defence but shown no remorse. On the journey to jail in the prison minibus he has realised he does not want to be with this type of people.

Then, in a moment of clarity, he realises he *is* this type of person.

He stands in front of the 6'x 8' cell that will be his prison for the next three months

The door closes behind him.

He is locked in an empty consulting room. The warden is sitting on a chair outside. By the treatment table there a jar that appears to contain giant cotton buds. He takes one out and sticks it in his ear. A nurse has brought him a cup of tea in a plain blue cup with a matching saucer. He does not understand why he has been brought tea or why he is left alone. The nurse re-enters, this time with a man in a white coat. The doctor is sensitive but does not pull his punches. He tells him he has Pancreatic Cancer, there is no cure and death will be slow and painful. The nurse holds his

Grave Goods

What to give
when it's too late?

I will not bury you
with amber beads,
a bronze hair pin,
a quern stone.

I will keep your blue t-shirt
warm against my skin.
I will mend the worn down heels
of your favourite purple boots
for when you return.

Liz Coatman

My Strike-A-Light

On the Isle of Whithorn on the Solway coast of Galloway the excavation of graves from the early mediaeval period turned up a smooth white quartzite pebble about the size of a hen's egg. Scratches across it show that it had been used as a 'strike-a-light' for tinder.

The pebble had been buried in the grave of a child.

My little light
My strike-a-light
My spark struck off
A sharp old age

O bright and likely
Shining girl
O true, O white
Most lively stone

Here is stone
My only lightling
My stricken mite
So sparky one.

John Birtwhistle

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Inspired by the Past

Real people, real stories

Real lives, real deaths

Touching, bringing and remembering

Things: grave goods, heirlooms
gifts, belongings

From hairpin to bracelet, wrist-watch to bead
Powerful tokens of memory, experience, loss.

Ceremonies, graduations, wakes, processions:
Journeying through, getting by
Mediated by goddesses, shamans, priests and friends.

Some spoke of animals
Lions, butterflies, snakes, the wing of a swan

Others of music, time, flowers and song
Skin, bone, touch, sound

Heartfelt coming-togethers
In humour, grief and hope

Stories to be remembered, told, shared
Continuing our bonds across time and place
In our Northern cities and beyond.

Karina Croucher

This poem was written as a reflection on the diverse perspectives of our project's authors and the public readings of their work during the three celebration events in Manchester, Sheffield and Bradford at the culmination of the project.

Much Like Death...

...I have left this until the last minute.

New relationships, old friends and familiar situations have kept me in a socially isolated mess. I feel as if I've been spinning plates for an audience that will only notice if one falls and smashes to the floor.

My mind has become like a damaged 8 ball. Continuously being shaken in the hope that a prediction may soon fall out of my ear. But nothing happens, all that comes out is the wax of uncertainty which continues to clog the passage between clear, coherent thought and ecstatic longing for roaring success and tranquillity.

Much like death, I rely on myself to get the job done.

Upon reflection, these are probably the best days of my life. I'm in a nirvana limbo. On one hand I have an invisible motion lifting me up towards my future, on the other, an unimaginable force which keeps me grounded to my past.

What makes this situation a blessing, is the realisation that being caught in my own world has momentarily relieved me from my destiny. How far away the end can seem, when every day feels like a new start. The echoed promise of a better day, the tantalising bait of self improvement - that's what has been driving and terrifying me for these last few months. Not in a depressing way, but more an intrigue, peeking my head around the corner of adulthood and snapping it back in case anyone sees me, questions why I'm here.

Much like death, I am tired of having to explain myself.

I'm 28 and have a co-working space now. No one here seems to fear death. Although I haven't asked (due to the general conduct of society, and the fact that it would be a bit of a downer).

The Living and the Dead: Creative Conversations between Past and Present is a collection of creative voices brought together by the Continuing Bonds: Creative Dissemination project. With the aim of normalising death, dying, bereavement and grief, both novices and experienced writers offer poems, flash fiction, short stories and creative memoir. The result is a collection of heartfelt pieces which are sometimes raw, sometimes humorous, and often moving. Some works are complete fiction and others intimate portrayals of real life. Some pieces draw closely from archaeological materials which were used as inspiration during the project and others move between the past and present. Writers have considered what it is to grieve and created strong characters and voices to explore their topic. Some reflect on the politics of death. Together, the collection encourages us to consider aspects of life we often find ‘taboo’ to talk about, and in doing so inspires us to explore our own experiences, our own lives, and ultimately, our own mortality.

“This anthology invites the reader to confront the implacable fact that death, dying and bereavement will touch us all. Beautifully written; it both informs us about the intricacies of human experience and is lyrically moving.”

*Caroline Lloyd, author of Grief Demystified,
Jessica Kingsley Publishers*

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