

anthologia

#3 Death Edition



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The Death Edition
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The Death Edition

My history lecturer once said to me that people often think the Ancient Egyptians were obsessed with death when in fact what they were actually obsessed with was life. They were so strong in their love and passion for life that they wanted to ensure it carried on to the same standard in the next world.

“I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it.” Mark Twain.

If we are honest, once death has occurred (to the best of our knowledge) the only ones that continue to suffer are those that have been left behind. People find it uncomfortable to talk about death with someone who has recently lost a loved one. They watch their words, they mind what is said and can tend to tiptoe around subjects in fear of upsetting further. I doubt very much you can upset anyone further when they have lost a family member or close friend. It seems in recent years that people have begun to open up more about death and discuss the subject more freely. The emergence of Death Cafes has been one of these notable occurrences.

This edition is themed around the subject of death and what I have learnt from reading all the various poetic, fictional, non-fiction and sociological writings is that people really do want to talk about how they feel, their experiences, or their viewpoints on the subject.

Pain needs to be expressed. Death needs to be defined.

In this edition I think you will find pain being expressed and death being defined through the personal experiences, observations and studying undertaken by the contributing writers.

- **Thom**

(Thom Boulton, Editor-in-chief of The Anthologia)



Funeral Faces

by Lesley Lees

I thought I saw the memory
Of your face, at your funeral,
But it was not you
Though the smile was true
And its manner was yours.

In the time that's passed between
My memory and this funeral,
You haven't aged at all,
Beside your open grave

Tears slid down the youthful
Face of your beautiful daughter,
So like you that my mind's recall
Switched back some four decades,

When you and I and others here today
Hung out together, through
Our teenage days, the time before
We took different directions
Along the pathways of life.

Today, sad faces, tear filled eyes,
Only memories can bring a smile
To our faces now.

Elegy, Losing My Neighbour.

by Lesley Lees

I was there when you said
you were going,
and this time I replied, I know,
instead of no, not now.

Your laboured breathing
lessened, less, then life's
final breath left
you full of peaceful repose,
there in your own bed .

Close by, those
who loved you
released their tears.

I could not cry,
my mind full of relief,
your struggle against illness
had come to an end and
your death had dignity.

My mourning has begun,
every day I shall miss you,
every night special thoughts of
You, alongside those I have of
My mum;
Your life a treasure
That has enriched mine.

Empty House

by Thom Boulton (Blaidh Nemorlith)

In the garage
there is a flat rugby ball,
a car with no battery,
a guitar leant against a stone wall,
missing all its strings.

In the lounge
there is a single knitting needle without its yarn,
a pair of bowls shoes tucked away
under an electric piano that isn't plugged in,
a slice of apple pie dressed in Neapolitan ice-cream
going cold in a bowl on the side.

In the conservatory
there is a vase with a rose,
the petals have fallen off,
each one landing on a dust covered woollen hat
sat in situ next to the vase,
on an old thatched straw table top.

There is a spare room,
awaiting other items.

It's where they'll end up
when the time comes,
and they too no longer work.





Playgrounds

by Chris Parsons

There's a playground up in Heaven
for all the girls and boys.
It has some swings and slidey things
and lots of other toys.
Its nice to go there every day
and have a little play.
The way we did with our parents
after lunch on sunny days.
There's only two things missing
at this playground in the sky.
One is the laughter that we shared
the other is your hand in mine.
But I'm being a good boy Mummy
and I ate all my lunch for you Dad.
So please when you think of me daily
do not be so sad.
I know you are always crying
but I was crying too.
Till God gave me a star up in the sky
so I could look after you.
So please dear Mummy and Daddy
when you think of me each night.
Look up in the sky and wave to me.
I'm the brightest star on the right.

Untitled

by Chris Parsons

Rainbows of balloons
travel smooth as leather across the
powder blue sky
only to bite, gnash and tear
at the memories that I treasure.
Refreshing fields
that form the landscape of your
body,
hills and valleys
that my fingertips and tongue caress
in some dark corner of my mind.
I swagger through my days,
melt into my nights
and still I long for your whisper-soft
kiss
to pull me from the horror
of this nightmare.
And then,
out of the darkness,
a star breaks through the curtain of
cloud
lighting the day.
I look
with a steeled glance,
eyes blinking back the rain of tears
that water the flowers
upon your earthly bed.
Knowing
that there is absolutely no way
that I can hold you
in my arms
again.

Narcissus

by Benjamin T. Serpell

A Lament
Wilting beauty bows before my eye,
No more do the golden flutes of pleasure blow,
But tuneless trumpets sulk and sigh,
The dying daffodil; Narcissus has my eye.
His primrose petals withered,
Weighted down by woe,
His silken skin shuns its lustre,
Its youthful glow,
And I lament;
For in his image my fading muse I see,
Those passing graces that once triumphed over me,
Now crisp and furrowed, that that was so fair,
That that once shimmered and shone before my glare,
O Narcissus, had I known; that death was in my stare!



Heaven is a State of Mind

by Louisa Owen

Heaven or Hell is a state of mind,
not a realm in the sky;
Nor found in burning bowels.
And when I die...
my body now ashes and earth,
my love all that remains
I will be at peace at last
no more to roam or harm.
My spirit and Soul can fly.

No Man's Land (5 pages)

by P. J. Richards

A shell tore overhead, I felt the blast of air when it exploded, but the edges of the crater saved me from the worst of the shrapnel as the earth, stones and metal pelted down. I covered my face with my arms. When I opened my eyes I was no longer alone.

He stared straight at me, his slate grey cap and blue eyes the only colour in the filthy, flooded shell hole.

'Bonjour mon brave.' I'd always considered my accent pretty fair but he didn't respond. Maybe the noise of the explosion had deafened him. Maybe he thought I was mocking him. So I stood up and saluted, solemnly and precisely, whereupon he nodded his head in acknowledgment.

I settled back down in my corner, the driest spot to sit, although my feet still squelched in the rank water. I patted a space on the ridge next to me, 'asseye vous?'

He remained where he was. I shrugged and took my unfinished dinner from my pocket, hoping that the splatters of mud hadn't fouled it. I scooped cold corned beef from the tin, poking my knife into all the corners. When I looked up his eyes were fixed on the movement of the blade.

'It's alright, only eating - haven't got a spoon.' I offered the lump of soggy pink meat on the knife, handle first. 'Want some?'

The soldier shook his head in obvious disgust and shifted back a pace.

'Not good enough for you Froggy? I muttered. He blinked slowly like he was shutting me out - at which I suspected he knew more English than he was letting on. I closed my lips around the rusty blade and let the salty mush fill my mouth, reminding me of better days, better meals. He watched intently as I licked the knife clean and then put it away. He looked relieved that both the meat and the knife were gone. I dropped the empty tin into the mud beside me; I would've thrown it further away because of the rats and flies, but I didn't want him to think I was trying to drive him off, the poor sod was flighty enough already.



I ferreted around in my breast pocket, and my fingers closed around my baccy tin, I drew it out and flipped it open with one hand. I didn't bother with my schoolboy French this time as I leaned towards him. 'Smoke?'

Nothing.

Another shell flew over and we both hunched down, it landed further away this time. Blinding flash first, then the noise. I heard frantic yelling and a long drawn out scream, like a siren. It wavered on and on until a single shot cut it off.

That's the kind of friend you need.

A windblown shower of dirt from the last explosion pattered onto my helmet, I pulled the rim down over my eyes till it stopped. The dust set me coughing too hard to want to light up anymore, so I slipped the tin back into my pocket and brushed grit from the shoulders and front of my greatcoat as my chest cleared. I spat a gob of brown phlegm into the water, then wished I hadn't; out of the corner of my eye I noticed the soldier abruptly stop shaking out his own coat and cap, as if offended. *Faux pa!* By way of apology I peeled off my gloves, wiped my right hand over my chest then extended it across our personal no-man's-land in the middle of the crater. 'Welcome to my grubby little fiefdom chum. Comment vous s'appelle?'

'Jacques D'or.'

His answer caught me off-guard, I wasn't really expecting a reply after the start we'd had. His voice was sharp and bright, loud in the dim shelter of the earth, two gunshot syllables.

His blue eyes held my gaze; confident and levelling. He reached towards me, but instead of a handshake I felt something placed into my outstretched palm.

I looked down - it was a bullet.

As I stared, frowning in confusion, he tapped my hand and the shiny brass cylinder rolled over. Scratched along its length in a straight rune-like script was my name.

I brought it close to my face, examining the letters by the feeble grey cloudlight. 'How the hell do you know my name?' My shock ignited into anger. 'Is this some kind of joke you bastard?' I looked around almost expecting to see the rest of his battalion ranged around the edges of my defile, laughing, but all I saw was the soldier scrabbling up the wall of earth, dislodging clods that rolled and fell into the black pool with an oily splash.

When he reached the top, he stood perched for a moment on the rim, turned to me and bowed, then launched into oblivion.

'My God, no! Wait!' Despite my bewildered rage I waded through the mire and hauled myself up the slope to see where he'd gone - I hated him, but I didn't want him dead.

I could feel the sickening thunder of the howitzers through my chest and stomach as I lay flat on the broken edge of the crater, concealed - I hoped - by the charred and splintered stump of a tree destroyed by the shell that had gouged out my refuge.

Frantically I scanned the battlefield but I couldn't see him anywhere, my hands were clenched, and in my fist I still held the bullet, colder than my cold hand.

What did it mean? What did he want? The chill of the metal seeped into me, I shivered and abruptly all my defences failed: I was prey to the roaring smoky bloody mess of it all, to the eye and lung-burning gas, to the endless miles of mud ploughed by machine guns and tanks, to the black spirals of barbed wire hung with hollow, scarecrow bodies. To the end of hope.

Then I heard him laugh.

I spotted him right out in the middle of No Man's Land, picking his way over the ridged ground, but I wasn't the only one who'd seen him: sniper bullets cracked and rattled, I wanted to call out to him but couldn't risk drawing their fire. He must have gone mad, I'd seen it happen before, you can't pull them back - if they've decided to die that way you can't hold them.

I didn't want to watch him go down and yet I couldn't tear my eyes away; he moved with exaggerated, strutting steps then leaped a yard, then another, before resuming his suicidal walk.

Suddenly he appeared to grab something from the air, and as if that action had somehow brought him to his senses he turned and bounded back through the gunfire.

I shouted, urging him on. He made his way in a straight line towards me and soon, in utter astonishment, I was dragging him from the battered edge of our shell hole and back down into its protection. 'You bloody fool!' He pulled out of my grip, flapping me away, apparently more flustered by my touch than the guns.

There we were, face to face, out of breath, with the whine of the last shots passing overhead and my boots filling with foul freezing water, when he cocked his head to one side, fixed me with his wild eyes, and dropped something into my hand.

I didn't have to look at it, I knew what it was.

I knew what would be cut into it.

'Merci.' My voice was hoarse. I could barely whisper.

Jacques laughed; a rat-tat-tat of defiant glee, louder than the bosche guns. And then, before I realised what he intended, before I could made a grab for him, he turned, climbed up the mud slope and disappeared over the top.

I followed him, churning through the pool, scrambling up using the exposed tree-roots, until I was high enough to see where he'd gone. I tucked the bullets deep into my breast pocket, carefully doing up the button.

Jacques was already far out, stepping around the barbed wire, stooping and circling, ignoring the machine guns. I could see dirt spitting up all around him from the near misses.

He jumped and twisted, snatching more bullets from the air.

My bullets.

I found that I was smiling - I thought I'd forgotten how.

At last I was free to stand up, I didn't have to crawl on my belly or hide in stinking ditches anymore. Death snapped all around me, metal flying thick as flies, but I stretched out of my perpetual stoop, breathed deeply and waved both arms above my head signalling my understanding. Jacques saw me and nodded before going back to his work. Laughing ecstatically, I strode toward him across the wrecked land, with my shoulders back and head high.

He stopped still when I finally reached him, halting in mid step with his back to me. I carried on up to him at a trot, breathless with exhilaration, ready to clap him on the shoulder, but he seemed to sense my intention and span around, backing off. I held up my hands palm first, surrendering to his reticence, 'I'm sorry,' and then offered to shake instead. 'I... just want to say thank you for... for being a friend.' The word didn't seem big enough but it was all I had. His blue eyes, beneath the grey cap, shone for a moment, radiant with a light that didn't come from the overcast sky or the flashes from the gun barrels and explosions. 'Ami?'

'Yes! That's right!' I took a step towards him. delighted with this sudden breakthrough. I had to restrain myself from grabbing him in an embrace.

Staring at me, Jacques took both my hands and pushed them together until they formed a cup. I held them in that pose, trembling in anticipation. He spread his coat like wings, picked through it, and from every pocket and fold he produced bullets; shining, tumbling, clinking, revealing my name as they were rolled into my palms: John Gold. John Gold. John Gold. Over and over.

A sickening cry from No Man's Land blew open our secluded world and the bullets fell through my fingers. It was piercing and high - too young - faltering into agonised sobs. A pitiful, pitiless rallying call.

Jacques D'or tilted his head, watching me. Waiting.

'Ami?'

I nodded.

'Friend.'

A chill ran through me, a cold wind from the battlefield. And then I knew what kind of friend I was.

Borrowed Time

by Zoe Maynard

Smog smothered the freshly cut grass, crawling through the soil and up the roots of life—the poor souls could not breathe.

The sky threw pellets of rain down to the ground, an attempt to rescue them, a chance to buy some borrowed time, though, the time was being borrowed elsewhere.

Their arms opened wide, trying to catch one last breath—instead, bruises covered their faces, and the force of the rain was too strong for them to swallow.

No resuscitation, no dignified death, no vibrance, no last breath.



Gabi Marcellus-Temple
Artist

Metamorphoses
(work in progress)

The drawing, shown in development, was part of a series reflecting the artist's relationship with her body during a period of severely deteriorating mental health. She suffers from anorexia, bulimia and body dysmorphia, which is the inspiration for these drawings.

See more of Gabi's work at...
facebook.com/GabiMarcellusTempleArt



Tollund man

This drawing formed part of an installation based on ancient funerary rites, which was displayed as part of 'Open 4' in 2014. The detailed drawings entailed a meditational process focusing on the ancestral position of the artist.



Disassociation

by Vanessa Uren (For Kelly)

An ordinary day, nothing strange
Everything changed by its end
An impact, unequivocal in outcome
Where now
Machines beeping,
tubes, drains
Strangers coming and
going
Kind words that fail to penetrate
Familiar faces, known
voices
Eyes swollen, voices
hoarse, crying
Floating, spinning,
thoughts dulled
Hope given, taken away
A rollercoaster but nobody thrilled
How long must we wait
Life is suspended, hangs in the air
No movement, response missing
Decisions to be made, by whom?
Everyone in turmoil
Advice given, no choices
The final flick of a switch
Silence, its over.

Me Before You Went

by Vanessa Uren

A time ago I was a
completely different person
Can't put my finger on
when it all changed
Was it when I noticed you
start to struggle
No I think it was at a later stage
Nothing obvious seemed to be
happening
Just the normal slowing down of age
Then BANG
Abnormalities
Can't be serious
It was
After that first diagnosis
Could not feel the ground beneath my
feet
Thoughts would no
longer join to make sense
How could I possibly get you through
this?
My whole being screaming at the cruelty
Have to find a way forward - for you
And I did
Gave you my all for as long as was
needed
Nurtured you, cried with you, held you
Eased your pain, prayed with you,
protected you
But most of all loved you, so much
You went
For a long long time I felt like an
empty shell
Exhausted, not me any more
Emotionally destitute to all around me
I'm getting there now, healing
Will I ever be me again? Who knows...
Question
Would I do it all again for you?
Answer
In a heartbeat

Zoya (3 pages)

by Swaroopa Lahiri

Rap on the door.

The seven year old no longer had to be told what to do- she was now well-trained. She raced up to the terrace, carrying Zoya.

The terrace was uncommon – it had an enormous crater in the middle, caused by an object thrown from hovering helicopters.



It happened during monsoon because the very next day, she had released paper boats in the hollow rain pool and watched them float, alongside an orderly queue of dead ants. On a stormy night, the concrete forming the base of the crater gave way, presenting their house with a natural skylight. Storms were children's delight, especially mango loving children. The same storm, which had crushed the crater, had enabled her to collect eight, ripe mangoes from the ground. The ferocious gale had wrenched those delectable fruits from their sprawling branches. She had pestered her mother to let her plant a mango seed right under the skylight. Someday, her mango tree would have fruits within easy reach from the terrace. She didn't know whether they would still be in this house that day.

It was her favorite spot in this new house. It allowed her to spy on unsuspecting passersby and eavesdrop. Many of their conversations seemed gibberish but that only added to the mystery and charm. Her eyes could scan the faraway horizon and on clear days, spot the rice fields. Those days were exciting and adventurous for a while. Absconding from the house at the crack of dawn and spending the rest of the day half immersed in the rice fields got boring and tedious after the initial novelty had worn off.

The daily diet of *sheddho bhaat* (rice, vegetables, egg and lentil all cooked together - *kedgeree's* Asian cousin) further dampened the spirit. Some days were better than others; the days when the rice leaf blades didn't tickle or poke her as much, when the water was cooler and less muddy and the micro crustaceans didn't fancy attacking her calves.

Well, at least she still had Zoya. Zoya was an unusual doll; she didn't have blue eyes or golden locks. She was neither pretty nor ugly, neither fat nor thin, neither fair nor dark. Her nanny, Nafisa, had presented Zoya to her, three years back, when they lived in their old house. The house which was home. The house where Grandma sung lullabies and had bottles of dried gooseberries as treats. The house where Zoya's clothes were stitched with utmost care. Two days back, their boat had been anchored to a tree trunk on the bank and her father and uncle had carried her still, sleeping grandmother to the banks. She had patiently waited in the boat, putting up with buzzing mosquitoes. She had played blind man's bluff with them in the pitch darkness and had succeeded in smacking three of them. The only glimmer of light came from the banks; a flickering orange glow, accompanied by the chanting of mantras and the crash of a clay pot. They had left with an urn of ashes. It took 47 minutes for her grandmother's plump body to be converted into a tiny jar of ashes.

She crouched at the rim of the crater and watched sheepishly. She started plaiting Zoya's hair simultaneously. Two men had come. The same men who came every week. The men who never refused when offered tea but who left by the time the tea was strained into the faded blue cups. The men who cursorily surveyed the house, with eyes lingering on the prayer rug.

She noticed one of the house lizards shed its tail as soon as the men were seated. The newly tailless lizard had just caught its prized prey: the moth, after a long and tiring chase. The moth was stuck on its projectile tongue, waiting to be swallowed. The lizard, like her, instead chose to focus its eyeballs on the newcomers. The moth awaited its fate in trepidation. Her father was uncharacteristically loquacious and had a smile plastered on his face. The smile didn't reach his eyes.

Zoya's hair was yanked out and a few strands came off. Her palms got clammy and beads of perspiration sprouted on her forehead. Her fists stiffened and clenched.

Her mother's communication was garbled and she thankfully retreated to the kitchen to make tea. Once in the kitchen, she nervously peered out, stifling a cough and twiddling her thumbs in apprehension. The water boiled merrily and splattered across the stove – her mother didn't seem to care.

Zoya's hair was now being frantically tugged at the roots by trembling, icy cold hands and her typical placid countenance erupted into wrinkles and distortions as she winced in pain. The terrace floor had a good amount of mossy brown hair.

Pin drop silence.

Pin drop silence, tampered by shuffling feet and a sharp rip.

Zoya's armpits and shoulders displayed smatterings of cotton wool. Her left eye was missing and her legs were dangling loosely, precariously hanging onto the rest of her frame.

The front door creaked and banged, shuddering the rickety walls of the house.

The lizard devoured the moth.

Her father slumped over the chair.

Her mother began a coughing fit, prompted by the cloud of smoke that rose from the stovetop.

The hissing sound was brusquely stamped out and the blackened saucepan was flung into the sink. Her stomach churned and a spasm contorted her face.

It was nearly dusk. The last rays of the sun shone over a mass of cotton wool, adorned by specks of brown hair and a tattered frock, scattered on the terrace. With a gleam in her barren eyes, the seven year old didn't turn back even once while leaving her treasured spot.

Death Becomes Us *(5 pages)* article written by Deborah Davidson

This contribution to *Anthologia* is based on years of research on grief, bereavement, and commemorative tattoos.

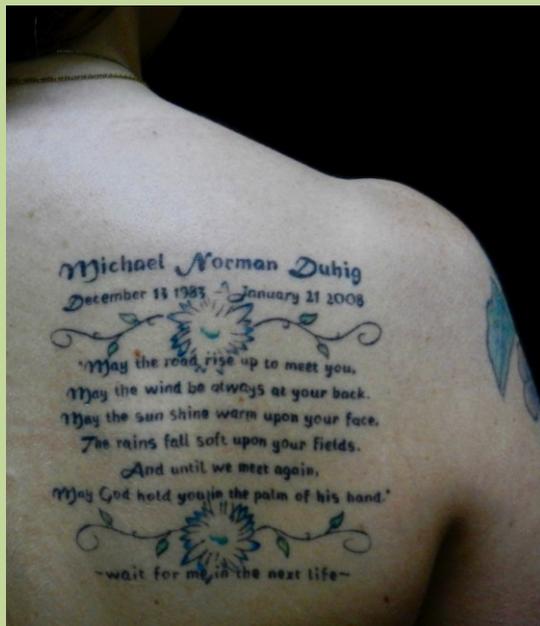
Death Becomes Us: Tattoos as Living Memorials

Tattooing is a form of public storytelling. Memorial tattoos tell stories of love and loss, as well as of bonds with the deceased that are continued and shared. Memorial tattoos embody grief and become a tangible part of the self – of one’s living flesh. They serve as a translator of experience into a language readable by others – a language comforting to the griever, and more comfortable for others; memorial tattoos expose the elephant in the room that is death. Dying, death, and bereavement remain taboo subjects. And yet, they are all qualities, essential properties, of life. The grief that results from dying, death, and bereavement is a normal response to loss – an outcome of love.



My research has shown that memorial tattoos serve five key functions. First is the ability of tattoos to continue bonds with the deceased and share those bonds with others.

Angie’s tattoo is in memory of her brother Michael. She says: “The text is a poem that describes the process of loss paired with the belief that this bond will continue and reshape in some other form and place.”

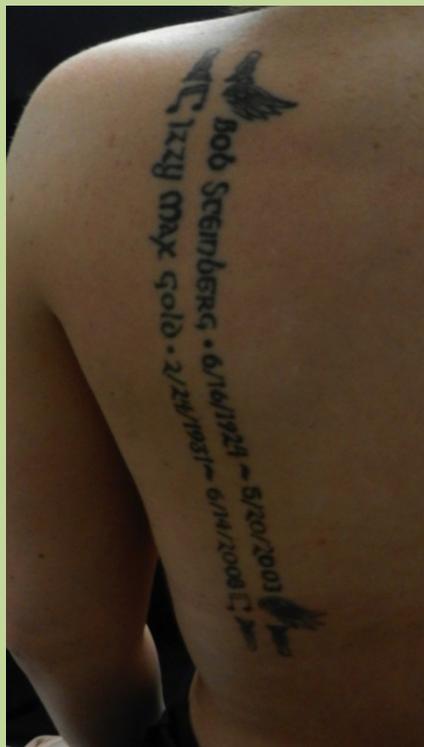


My deceased babies, represented here by butterflies, are integrated into my family portrait establishing and continuing a family bond. (top right).

Second, tattoos are important as permanent markings that serve to carry their bearer's loved one *with them* to their own death. From Jillian: "This is for both of my grandfathers. Before this I just could never find something that was important enough to put permanently on my body." (bottom right)

Third, tattoos embody their bearer's grief and help them adjust to loss.

"My older brother John was my protector.... This piece and continues to bring a sense of his "presence" that was not there before." *Bill (see below)*



Fourth, tattoos open dialogue about death, normalizing a taboo subject.

Helena says: “A parent’s biggest fear is that their child will be forgotten, not by the parents but by other people.... Now Donna lives on by our talking about her.”



If death is a taboo subject, death by suicide is even more so. Tattoos bring awareness to death, suicide, and more.

Jason’s tattoo memorializes his daughter Hailee Joy. He says: “My daughter Hailee died by suicide just two days after her 13th birthday. She faced severe and pervasive bullying at school. I have advocated for suicide prevention since her passing. In June of 2015 Nevada passed *Hailee’s Law*, strengthening our bullying laws, empowering teachers to deal with bullies, and providing for almost \$18 million in grants for social workers in schools.”





And from Mel, whose son Shane completed suicide:

“We ... have been very open about Shayne’s suicide wanting to fight the stigma associated with mental health. I use his portrait as a remembrance of his short life, and now when strangers on the street ask me about my tattoo I can start a conversation ...”

And fifth, tattoos are visual representations of change in their bearer’s personal identity. From Eva, after the death of her son Dan: “[P]eople were forgetting what I had been through and how my life had changed forever.... Even though my outside looked the same as they always known it to look, my inside had been scrambled and reassembled in a very different way.”



As living memorials, used to commemorate, tattoos become us, and the dead remain among us.

My interest in memorial tattoos derived from my PhD dissertation which examined why and how hospital protocols in the event of the death of a baby around the time of birth saw a profound change in the later twentieth century. What I found was the major contributing factor to the development of hospital protocols that acknowledged and worked to assuage grief at the death of a baby was ‘griefwork’ as the labour shared and negotiated between grieving persons and compassionate others.

As a bereaved person myself, and as a researcher in this area, I have done volunteer work for Bereaved Families of Ontario, where I met persons with memorial tattoos, and my research on memorial tattoos grew from there. Currently I am working with others to develop a digital archive for commemorative tattoos (a broader category, which includes memorials). I have recently edited *The Tattoo Project: Commemorative Tattoos, Visual Culture, and the Digital Archive*.

My latest tattoo, which is also on the cover of the book, is of an elephant; her name is Ellie – the name my dad called my mom. The elephant in the room is exposed and her memory survives. Elephants are also highly intelligent, sentient creatures who care for their living and grieve their dead. Elephants exhibit griefwork. Let us learn from them.



SPOTLIGHT

This is the first edition of Anthologia to feature our spotlight section. It is a chance for readers to get to know some of our contributors and an opportunity to highlight some of the great writers we have featured. The first writer in the spotlight is Gayle Letherby. Below is the interview and following that is Gayle's contribution to the Death Edition. - Thom



The Big Three

What fostered your love for writing?

My dad was a writer. Although he worked in blue-collar jobs for all of this life he wrote memoir and fiction, having some success in the 1960/1970s in publishing his short stories. I loved story writing at school, learnt to write for an academic audience as a student and a researcher and lately have begun to write memoir and fiction myself.

What influences your writing?

I read a lot; fiction and non-fiction (although of course I appreciate that there is often an overlap between the two). Reading the work of others – those I admire and sometimes those I do not – influences me in terms of subject and style. My academic and other writings are often both autobiographical and political in content engaging with, for example, in/equality; difference and diversity and other issues related to personal and party politics.

What are you working on at the moment?

My current academic work includes a book proposal focusing on feminism and social science research approaches and several articles intended for academic journals. In addition I always have a couple of short pieces – memoir, fiction, political opinion - on the go and publish on my blog arwenackcerebrals.blogspot.com and on [ABCtales](http://ABCtales.com) (<https://www.abctales.com/user/gletherby>) and elsewhere each month.

The Scenario

The lift you are travelling in breaks down. Other than blind panic you fill your time by reading a book you've been desperate to read for ages.

What are you reading?

Hard question. There's too much on the list – but here are two:
George Orwell (2004) *Why I Write* (and other writings) Penguin
Liane Moriarty (2017) *Truly, Madly, Guilty* Penguin



Losses and Legacies: some creative reflections on death and loss (5 pages)
by Gayle Letherby

It was an experience of loss - my miscarriage - that led me to sociology. I went along to the local Further Education College to see what was on offer, unable as I was to work at my previous job of nursery nursing while I was grieving. The A Level I studied led on to an undergraduate degree, a PhD, 21 years full-time work in the academy and a continued part-time involvement with various universities.

Throughout my career I have researched and written (alongside other things) about death and loss, initially with reference to reproductive loss and disruption (to my knowledge I have never been pregnant again) and more recently, following the deaths in the last seven years of my husband and my mother about loss and bereavement more broadly. Although much of my academic work draws on research with others I have always reflected on my autobiographical connection to the data I have collected and reported on. With this in mind I suggest that not only was grief significant to my sociological awakening but also in turn sociology has affected the way that I think about death and 'do grief'. Nowhere is this clearer than in my writing as the following three pieces show.

First a short extract from an academic piece of mine that was published in 2015:

I was about eight when I first began to think about death. I was in the bath and cried noisily, until my parents managed to convince me that it would be 'a long, long time' before either of them died. They were lying of course. My dad – Ronald Thornton, or Ron as he was known - left us a short 12 years later in 1979 when I still felt like his little girl and although my mum and I were 80 and 53 respectively in 2012 when she died it was far too soon a parting for both of us. 'I'm going to miss you so much' she said to me a few days before her death. At the same time true to her optimistic approach and stoical nature she was telling others that she was 'not too bad at all' when asked how she was. There's a Christy Moore song that refers to family life as a voyage on stormy seas 'Life is an ocean, love is a boat. In troubled waters it keeps us afloat' it goes. Sentimental it may be but every time I hear it I think of my family of origin. With such amazing and loving parents as I have had I could not have anything but a (most of the time) positive, confident outlook on life and a happy heart full of joyful memories. (Letherby, G. (2015) Bathwater, babies and other losses: a personal and academic story' *Mortality: Promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying* 20(2): 128-144



To listen to The Voyage go to:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYZXbU_d_7c

Second a short piece of memoir, previously published on ABCtales.com

Holding Hands with Number 1

One of the things I miss most is having no one to hold hands with. When I first met my (second, now late) husband John I remember being surprised and a little upset when he said; ‘You’re very touchy aren’t you? I like to walk independently’. It seems I won him round though for without it being discussed much he soon became as keen as I to walk along hand-in-hand. Up until her death four years ago my mum and I often held hands or walked with arms linked when out together. My parents were physically affectionate with me and with each other on a daily basis and consequently a touch, kiss, embrace or a snuggle-up on the sofa with partner, parent or close friend feels natural to me. I have many memories (and the photographs to prove it) of physical contact with my dad. When I was very young he would waltz around our small living room with my feet on top of his and after a memorable trip to the cinema to see Scrooge the Musical he grabbed by hand insisting that we dance home down the middle of the street just as Albert Finney and the cast had done in the film. Given his far-too-early death I’m grateful that during my teenage years I didn’t shun the company of my parents as adolescents sometimes do. Fast forward a few years and I’m sitting on a train with my mum after a hard day’s shopping. She’s leaning against me with her head on my shoulder and dozing a little. ‘What a sweet couple,’ I hear a woman a few seats behind say. ‘It’s two women I think,’ replies her friend. I’m reminded of this when a long (but not long enough) time later the palliative care team come to my flat to discuss how they can support us, in this, my mum’s last illness. We are sitting on the sofa together and she has her legs up with her feet in my lap and I’m rubbing her legs absentmindedly whilst we talk to our visitors. ‘You seemed so comfortable together, so physically at ease,’ the social worker said to me following mum’s death. Her obvious surprise was surprising to me.



Recently a close friend said that the saddest part for her of being a widow was no longer feeling that she was anyone's 'number one'. Although prior to our chat I had not articulated my own loss in quite this way this speaks to my experience too. Don't misunderstand me my life is full of significant others and I spent much of my time happily with loving friends with whom I share physical, as well as emotional, affection. I enjoy my own company too and although I miss the loved ones I have 'lost' I do not, or at least not very often, feel lonely when alone. That said I'll end where I began. . . One of the things I miss most is having no one to hold hands with.

Gayle Letherby (nee Thornton)

Finally, some fiction, also published on ABCtales.

In/Convenience

I didn't expect to end my life sat on a toilet.

As I drift in and out of consciousness I'm vaguely aware of Shaking Stevens' Merry Christmas Everyone playing in the background. What little attention span I have is focussed on the graffiti adorning the stall door. The inevitable declarations of lust and love – KELLY FOR BRETT; ALI + PETE 4EVA 2GETHA – and a number of acclaims for and attacks on the sexual prowess of others - GREG WILLS HAS A BIG ONE; KELLY IS A SLUT (the same Kelly I wonder) take precedence. There are also adverts for sexual health services (definitely needed around here if the suggested activities in front of me are anything to go by) and a helpline number for those experiencing domestic violence which I find particularly upsetting. I enjoy the scribblings aimed purely to entertain those in for the long haul; my favourite is down near the bottom of the door with an arrow pointing to the gap – BEWARE OF LIMBO DANCERS.

I feel cheated.

At the end of a life aren't the best bits of it supposed to flash through one's mind? Somehow all I can focus on is the low level vandalism in front of me. But wait. . . Now I've put my mind to it I'm remembering my own loves and losses. Ben was my first; tall, blond and sexy. I didn't scrawl any declarations on a toilet door but he carved our names on a bench after one particularly heavy petting session. We ran when the park-keeper saw us. Next was Michael; 'the one'. We were married for 57 years until he died three years ago. Our life together wasn't perfect, whose is, but he was always fun to be with.



As generous with his love and his time as with his money he often surprised and delighted me so although I've never tried limbo dancing there is on my mantelpiece at home a display of trophies that we won together at regional amateur competitions. Ballroom I bet you're thinking. No, rock and roll was our speciality. Michael even sang along sometimes. (Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear always made me smile and Love Me Tender brought a tear to my eyes.

There is significant activity outside of my small cubical now. A male paramedic and a fireman both introduce themselves: Bobby and Malc respectively. Strong voices both of them. I'm hoping they have the stereotypical good looks of emergency service personnel, to go with their husky, hunky tones. The music has changed to the Band Aid Christmas hit, Do They Know It's Christmas? I'm distressed again. Someone else is talking now. It's my daughter struggling through tears. A lovely girl whose blue eyes and twinkly smile remind me of her father every time I see her. Busy as I've been with my own memories, and the lives of those represented through the toilet wall writings, I've not been concentrating on her or her needs.

'Paula, darling, I'm ok. Don't worry. I love you'.

'Oh, mum, I love you too.'

'Plenty of time for that later, girls', one of the men, Malc I think, says. 'Let's get you out first, Clare'.

There is some fiddling with the lock.

It's too late.

I know it.

I don't say anything. I'm sorry to be causing so much trouble. The least I can do is to let them all believe they are being useful. I feel better now; content even. As promised there's been some remembering, some vivid pictures of past adventures and it's all ending on a good day. Paula and I had a lovely lunch at my favourite Italian restaurant and we spent the next couple of hours shopping for things for the boys; my great grandchildren would you believe. I'm glad they'll have presents from me to open on Christmas morning. I'm thinking about the funeral now. Who will give the eulogy?



Probably Chris, Paula's husband, a calm and clever man who tells a great story. My daughter and granddaughters will be too upset but they'll help with the script. Cathy the youngest, the joker in the family, will make sure that there's some reference to my final resting place and I'm glad. I've attended my fair share of funerals lately and the ones I've been most moved by and thought about the longest where those that felt like a real celebration of the life concerned, including reference to the warts as well as the roses in the life of the deceased.

And, despite, or maybe because of, a little loss of dignity, this dying on a toilet has all the makings of a jolly good yarn. After all, it was good enough for Elvis. And here he is; 'I'll have a blue Christmas without you . . . '

For more from this writer see: <https://www.abctales.com/user/gletherby>
<http://arwenackcerebrals.blogspot.co.uk/>



Cancer

by Kenny Knight

My mother's dead
she's been dead
for eleven years.

She wasn't a beatnik
or anything like that.

In the last few weeks
of her life
she stopped watching
Coronation Street.

and switched channels
to morphine.

D[e]ad

by Fiona MacLachlan-Morris

I was shocked
by your Auschwitz mouth.
It stuck in my mind;
wouldn't fade the way
the chocolate of your voice
melted.

I could only conjure up
a thin brown imitation.
Your open mouth:
my surprise and yours;
a word left unsaid,
a breath left untaken.



A Peace of Mourning
by Laura Reinbach

I should've felt some kind of emotion coming to this place, but all I felt was peace. Peace at the solitude wrapped in a white noise of bird song and the dull colourless rush of traffic. Peace beneath the blinding cold midwinter sun. Peace at the satisfying sound of my steps scraping and clicking against the stone underfoot.



Dewy grass muted those steps as I turned aside towards a small tree which appeared to be bursting from the very lungs of the grave's occupant. In tarnished metal letters I'd find their name, how old they'd been, and who might miss them, but that didn't matter to me as I'd cast my eyes over more personal stones enough to know what I'd see. Instead I gazed upwards towards a trunk and boughs twice as dense as expected due to a choking burden of glossy prickling holly and matt club-leaved ivy, their ropy tendons clinging with lethal tenacity to the bark. With another nip of earth-scented breeze, those boughs also became twice as vocal, their collective leaves susurrating smoothly against one another. I'd often heard such a sound in every other graveyard I had visited. Breath of the dead, perhaps?

A shiver of colour induced me to look down again to a carpet of damp fleshy leaves which had all but reburied the dead, gravestones and all, leaving just the coarse and weathered tips to protrude. I wondered whose relative had had the bright idea to sow such rampant plants. Their only charm was their tiny stems from which burst a small star of fine purplish-white petals, but even then the winter air had already robbed some of their colour, leaving them to shake their faded and downturned heads. Their act seemed as much in self-pity as in reverence of the stately crows perched atop the stones, a feeling mirrored in myself.

continued...

I felt that birds, with their free-roaming wings, were the embodiment of each individual soul interred beneath the ground, at liberty to go where they wanted but always return to this exact same place. The silhouettes of gulls ghosting and laughing overhead was rippled and reflected in the water pooled in a fallen gravestone. The distant twitter of small birds had formed a fabric of natural sound which vied for supremacy over the modern roar. By this point, the clouds were drawing nearer, trailing rain like soft grey feathers, compelling me to leave. As I did, the sound of children shouting and a dog barking somewhere echoed around me so they were shouting and barking everywhere. They were unafraid of the rain.

END OF FEATURE