

University of Glasgow

# Death Writes

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**Angie Spoto**

**Carrie Foulkes**

**Elizabeth Reeder**

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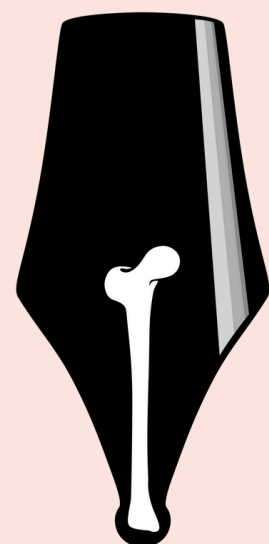
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**Naomi Richards**

**Niall Sellar**

**Niamh Gordon**

**Sean Wai Keung**



## About DeathWrites

The DeathWrites Network runs from 2022-2024 and is dedicated to developing and supporting Scotland-based writers from across disciplines and genres to write and publish powerful, accessible creative work.

The work produced by the project will serve as resources for other individuals, communities and writers to expand thinking, understandings and activism around dying, death, grief and loss.

Led by Dr Elizabeth Reeder, Dr Naomi Richards and Dr Amy Shea, DeathWrites started as a project at the University of Glasgow in 2017 with a series of reading and writing workshops.

Since then, the team have held a number of symposia funded by Arts Lab and have established the Royal Society of Edinburgh funded Network, administrated by Research Assistants Carrie Foulkes and Niamh Gordon.

*For more information about the Network and our authors, please visit:*

**<https://deathwrites.org.uk/>**

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Amy Shea

## To Be Prepared

“Smells like donuts,” she said. The three of us sniffed the air, and I nodded. My dad and I were standing with the Senior Deputy Coroner in the Fresno County morgue’s cold storage room. This is where they kept the fresh bodies. Unlike the sleek, dimly-lit sets of CSI or Law & Order, there were no actual lockers. The room was an open box. Two of the walls had large stainless-steel shelves lined from ceiling to floor: each able to hold about three adult bodies. Other deceased were on individual gurneys that were strewn about the floor at varying angles; there was no order, no bodies neatly lined up side by side. Some were covered with sheets, some partly covered, others not at all. Many were still in their hospital gowns. Some had cannulas still taped to their hands. Some were lying with their knees bent and their arms flung across their bellies. Some had saliva or vomit or some unknown dried substance coming from their mouths, strewn across their cheeks. I replied, “yes, smelled a bit like standing in the bread aisle at the grocery store,” as we stared into our futures.

Later that year, my mom was going to have surgery for a hiatal hernia and being in her late sixties there was of course inherent risk in procedures that required anesthesia. My parents called to inform me that they’d finalized their death care plans in advance of this surgery. My mom had decided on cremation and that her cremains would be taken out to sea. I already knew my dad wanted to be cremated. We had previously agreed I’d be in charge of surreptitiously spreading bits of his cremains in places that had been special to us (such as places we’d hiked together), for which he was keeping a list of. But when they called he seemed excited to tell me that the funeral home would take care of all the arrangements and would email me when his cremains were ready to be picked up.

“You act like I won’t have known you were dead or dying.” I responded when he told me this. My dad was fine talking about other people dying and he was more than fine talking about himself as dead. But there seemed to be this gaping hole of conversation about how we would deal with things when he and my mom were in decline and dying, and needing care. He’d previously made comments like “I’ll just throw myself in the canal.” Or “You don’t need to worry about taking care of us, I’ve set aside enough money if that’s needed.”

During that phone call I tried to push him again to acknowledge, and accept, that I planned to be fully present to help them age well and die well. It was one of the reasons I had decided it was finally time to move back to California. He seemed to acquiesce a little control and accept that I would be involved, but with the stipulation, “that you’re never going to wipe my ass.”

To which I happily agreed.

Angela Cran

## The Lead Consultant Paediatric Cardiologist Physician discusses art

At the end of October 2020, during an about-to-end reduction in COVID travel restrictions in Scotland, I escape for a couple of days with my dog to my cousin's empty cottage in rural Fife. A chance to write.

I'm editing this short piece about my younger son Keir's last trip to Great Ormond Street Hospital in July 2012:

The consultant came to Bear Ward to say goodbye the day we were taking you home. Dressed as always in black polo shirt and trousers, he perched himself on the arm of the purple sofa in front of the dazzling floor-to-ceiling sixth-floor window of your cubicle.

"I see you understand about colour," the consultant said, as he pointed out the clever contrasts and blends in your felt-pen drawings of superhero 'guys' that we'd made into fundraising charity cards. You'd given him the packet he held as a present the day we arrived.

I gripped you on my knee as you looked up at this big man you liked over your oxygen mask, its strap cutting a blue furrow through your thick hair. I studied the consultant's melancholy face over your head while your dad on a hard chair opposite viewed us all.

Time stopped as we listened to the consultant tell you how he loved painting too, and how you could experiment with mixing colours, tinily, bit by bit, to change the tones. He told you how when he was a boy his mother had been kind and let him and his friends use an inside wall of their house as a canvas.

Forty-eight hours earlier he'd been with you when they put you under and managed to reinsert your escaping Hickman line into your heart without killing you.

Inappropriate with relief, I'd hugged him at the theatre door when your dad and I birlled down out of the lift to reclaim you the instant his text with its smiley emoji – Please come 😊! – pinged in.

I stop editing and google the consultant's name to confirm his job title then. See his name near the top, followed by the word "obituary".

No. I speak aloud, confused, a rushing in my head. No.

I click on the link, dissociating as I find myself reading a warm professional obituary from his colleagues. It was true. He had died, suddenly and unexpectedly, a few months earlier, aged 60.

There's a link to a recording of him playing 'The Swan' by Camille Saint-Saëns on the cello, accompanied on piano by a friend. The tune is familiar, melancholic, makes me think of ballet. Photos of the consultant fade in and out as his confident bowing occasionally wavers on a high note, then steadies. In the most recent photos he looks so much older, heavier, grey. Unsurprising, as it's more than eight years since I last saw him, but it's impossible to take in that he's no longer alive.

I stop the video and sit with the stound of grief I feel for this man I knew so little of, but who for the almost three years that Keir was in his care felt like the person who held all our lives in his hands. This compassionate man who'd urged me to become a 'mini doctor' to be able to monitor the knife-edge of Keir's condition and look after him at home.

'Humanitarian' is one of the words used in the tribute. It feels appropriate. How much of himself the consultant must have given to his hundreds of young patients and their families, to his pioneering and never-ending research. I picture him striding across the outreach clinic in Yorkhill, black jacket flapping. His news was never good, though he tried his best to deliver it with care.



Angela Cran



Two of Keir's guys

Andy Manders

## Half-hour Grief-sick Recipe for Blaeberry Wine

*Thirty minutes*, it says on the steriliser for the bottles, *unless particularly soiled*. I examine my bottles: they look OK - maybe ten will do?

I've been making blaeberry wine for the last twenty years; this year it's different. It's the way things are. It's the downhill straits we're on - bear to look, you can see what's coming; do the ground-work, you might be ready, though it's unlikely to be enough. I'm looking at 17 gallons.

*The lines that separate the living and the dead have thinned much like all the lines that separate and join us. Covid saw to that*, my blaeberry wine-making friend says, *loosening ties, unnerving categories, stretching and collapsing distance and difference both - but it didn't come alone*, she adds, the mood darkening.

*It would be wrong to say we welcomed it, but it was no surprise. It's the movement of the Universe*, she says, it's in our genes and bones that we feel it - the beginning of the end that always was, manifesting. Do you think it's maybe just an age thing? I want to ask.

- Would you like another glass?

*War isn't heralded with trumpets*, she snaps, *a clan cry or with tanks FFS but a pulse of the heart, the thickening of blood*. This is more interesting. *The end of the species is priced-in as much as that of our individual lives*, she explains like I'm thick. I tell her:

- This is where the blaeberry comes in.

The MacLeans had it as their badge, the cockade fixed on their bonnets. In Gaelic *clann* means *children*. I look to ours, stick a sprig in the memory of them. Now's the hour we muster all that we might to make it worth extending as long as we can. Get us through the Winter at least.

The death you say we've harboured, the call to arms that lies at the heart of the living - now's not the time. Immortality's long gone, if we don't meet it half-way, death will find us out.

*You can't move for fucking ghosts*, she announces to the coming dusk, largely ignoring me I think, *can't bury, can't burn, however much they long for dust and ash themselves, we have only soil and fire*. Hence the daundering about bothering each other in death every bit as much as we did with our lives - I get it. All that "I was a shop-worker, I was a trapeze-artist" standing about on freezing door-steps clapping nonsense.

- Do you want another glass or not?

Because that's all that's left. This is the last of the last. There's no more hid away. We can share it with whatever ghosts you like, but there's no more after. For a while anyway.

Nine months ago, six days running I paddled the river, filling buckets as I went. Sorted, cleaned, crushed (lifting whatever bairn was to hand into the tub to dance). I should have done more. Better. Rack, wait, hope x 3; Bottling it'll keep. Stick it in yer bunnet.

- Life.

- Life.

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Angie Spoto

## The Bones

On the Italian island of Sicily, in a town where lemons hung above terracotta walls, a girl scattered jacks across the ground. She tossed a ball into the air, and although it was small, it momentarily obscured the sun. She stretched out her arm and scooped the jacks into her palm. When she looked up, her mother stood there with a man. Nose like a crooked house. Jenni, do you want to marry this man? The ball bounced once, twice. Well, he has nice eyes. On the boat to America, Jenni carried a precious wax effigy of baby Jesus. She hugged him so hard his fingers crumbled. My parents kept that doll in a cabinet beside a child's violin and the good china.

When the house and the mahogany cabinet were gone, I took baby Jesus home with me. He was fingerless, and the wax had turned gray. TSA officers called me into a room and unwrapped the baby, unswaddled him like a Christmas scene on rewind. Ma'am, what is this? Jesus had a metal skeleton. I didn't know. They checked for gun residue and asked questions. I wrapped him up, placed him in my purse, and left.

Carrie Foulkes

## The Volcano and the Bird

I was in a large house with several floors,  
many rooms and windows.

A volcano flaming on the horizon.

Molten streams flowed swiftly  
down the slopes.

I raced around closing shutters and blinds,  
locking doors, barricading them, as if the  
house could withstand the smouldering tide.

Liquid fire seeped in through the floorboards.

There was nowhere to go.

When I first woke up, reeling with fright, I thought  
of the volcano as sickness, death, and the house as  
my life, my body, everyone and everything I love.

I saw my frantic attempts at defence as a  
futile fight against mortality, impermanence.

What if I chose to view the volcano as a symbol of  
transformation instead.

Subterranean currents brought to the surface.

The creation, via destruction, of conditions  
for renewed life.

Fertile ground in the wake of eruptions, strong  
igneous rock formed by cooling lava.

You can plant in it, build with it.

The last time I heard Mark sing, he played a  
rendition of 'Who knows where the time goes?'  
by Fairport Convention.

He knew many songs by heart.

Across the evening sky  
All the birds are leaving  
But how can they know  
It's time for them to go?

As his funeral service was beginning, there was a  
loud *thunk*. I saw his partner's expression change  
from composure to alarm as she looked over at the  
window. Not long after, she rushed out of the hall.

A goldcrest had flown into the glass  
and was lying on the grass.

I followed behind her, took the still, soft form from  
her hands and held it in mine. I stroked the tender  
feathers, no sign of life in the limp being.

My friend's once exuberant body, now cold in his  
woven banana leaf casket, soon to be lowered  
into the ground.

The end of joy, the end of flight and freedom.

Someone came over with a napkin, I gently placed  
the bird on the cloth. Without warning, it leaped  
up, eyes wide and shining. Not dead, only stunned.  
Relieved, I returned to the ceremony.

I later heard that he had flown away.



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Niall Sellar

## Tiree Summer

Cricket. I had no concept of the game when we arrived in Tiree for two weeks in the summer of 1991. By the end of that fortnight, however, I was hooked.

That year, it was my mum, my dad, my brothers and our Hungarian nanny, who was helping out during the holidays. We rented a small artist's studio beside Balephuill Bay. I don't remember much about the sleeping arrangements, only that for some reason my eldest brother was stationed outside in a tent. It wasn't the first or the last time we holidayed on Tiree, where my mum had spent part of her childhood, but it's the year I remember most clearly.

Maybe things have changed in the interim, but for a city boy in the early nineties it felt like a world apart. One-track roads, sheep on golf courses, endless, white beaches - and, of course, no television. The only thing you could guarantee was access to Radio Four longwave.

I know now that the first game I listened to was the Oval Test Match against the West Indies. Morris opened the batting, Tufnell took six wickets; Botham, whoever he was, was back. My dad tried to explain but couldn't. "Beefy", by that stage, was hardly setting the world alight.

After listening, I would venture from the house down a little slope to an expanse of grass from which you could access the beach. Usually my dad or one of my brothers would follow and we would play. Did we have stumps? And what did we use for a bat? I don't remember, only that I spent the early evenings trying to emulate my new heroes. My dad would underarm the ball and I would swing to leg, convincing myself, just for a moment, that I was one of the men whose feats had so thrilled me on the airwaves.

'Cricket.' The last thing I remember my dad saying to me. We were in what had been his study before he fell ill. He had been a great champion of my career but somehow arrived too late to witness my only century. That day, my eldest daughter must have had a premonition, and refused to go in and say hello. Less than 48 hours later he was gone.

In the years since, almost too many to count now, I have often thought about that final meeting. He was asking me to turn on the radio, I know he was - England were playing the West Indies - but I like to think that, maybe, he hoped my daughter would hear.

He was saying this didn't have to be the end. Only the start of another innings.

Elizabeth Reeder

## Taking Note II: anchoring

When Naomi, Amy and I thought about what we wanted the DeathWrites RSE Network to be and to do, it was simple: be a resource for writers of all styles, from all areas and disciplines, writing about dying, death and grief. We would bring writers together to form a kind and generous community where discussing death and dying and grief was the norm and we'd support others to make their best work.

We decided to focus on Covid and diaries because keeping a journal is a way to integrate the practice of writing with the practice of remembering, as well as the practice of navigating and making sense of times full of illness, death and loss. Families are often global and there was such precarity in those days.

Recording is a way of anchoring ourselves. It can take many forms: a diary; photos, or recording voice notes (or sending voice messages to close family/friends); seeking out and learning from (and sharing) pertinent articles and resources; taking a daily walk and noting a few things you see; it can be the raw emotions set onto the page, which you then destroy. Noting things down with immediacy, taking a photo as a record, and creating systems, charts and forms that we can come back to, either the next day (what was that nurse's name) or a few years later (what month did that hospitalisation occur?). It is a way to remember and gives us 'data' and narrative to reflect on.

The DeathWrites network had been underway for a year when I got Covid that transmorphed into Long Covid, which is still disrupting everything. I've always kept a diary but then it took on a different significance, when an occupational health doctor suggested recording my symptoms to figure out what causes crashes. I took notes and read a lot into Long Covid and fatigue and chronic illness and learned about the importance of rest, types of rest and energy and compassion. I looked at energy activity charts and eventually crafted a form of my own liking, which I've modified over the interceding months. I use a voice to text app too, so I am literally recording my records.

My A4 diaries, although daily, were messy and inconsistent, varying wildly in what I recorded. So, a few months in, in an act of trying to exercise my brain and to titrate up the amount of time I could sit in a chair, I transcribed my A4 notebooks into A5 journals. I have an internal coded system using different punctuation ( . \* ; ! | / ) and midway through the year I started keeping track of my energy outputs and my fatigue levels as I try to understand what leads to the severe fatigue that presses me into the earth so brutally. (I am editing this in snatched clear minutes within a /// 7 crash).

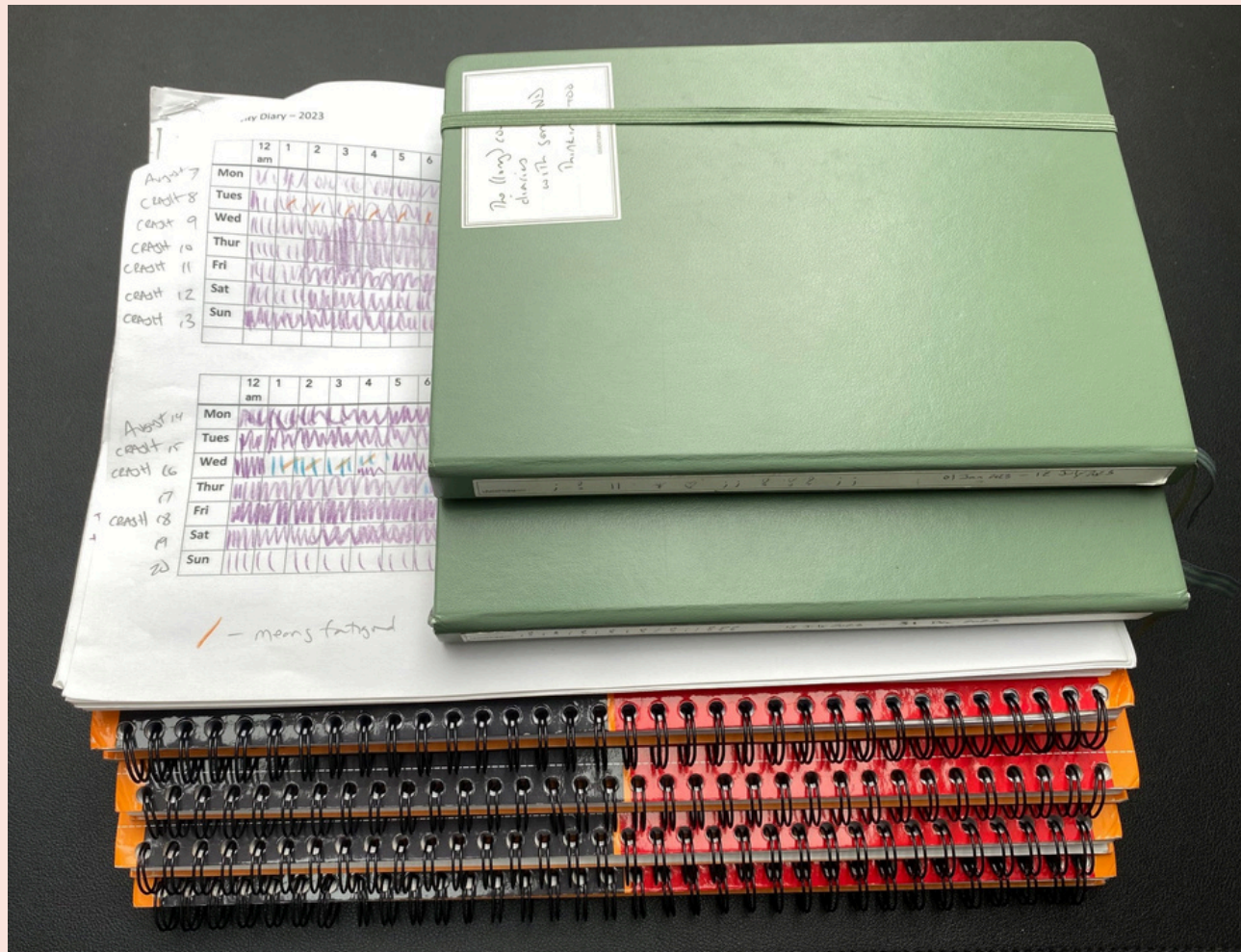
Long Covid has an uneven recovery profile, while navigating terminal illness with someone you love is impossible to predict. It takes stamina to keep going with all types of uncertainty, when stress or crisis or overwhelm or fatigue strip energy from you. There is a slow time (chronic time; spiral time\*; end times) to keeping records and there is then an energy-demanding commitment needed to do something with them.

This is what the DeathWrites Network supports: both the slow time (and quick jolts forward) and the commitment. Life is messy and the longevity of the project is a strength (after the RSE funding is up, we hope to continue to be an ArtsLab lab). You can't magic up this work, this processing, this wild connecting of threads, the creating of new forms, or the crafting of beautiful and impactful work, without having time and support.

And so we build a network that encourages the gathering of notes and of writers, and one that understands what we don't have the words for, what is too hard to note down but is remembered in a body and that there will be times we're too busy to attend to this work; we honour this creative process that is an active, attentive thing itself. We don't necessarily need to know what these notes will become (and they may remain private markers), but as a writer and maker, the act of recording, the act of keeping a diary, of collecting scraps of papers, and screenshots, is a way of making a gift to your future self, the writer you are.



Elizabeth Reeder



	... 5 01/05/08 0658	4 01/06/08 0805	3 01/06/08 0807	2 01/07/08 0612	1 01/07/08 0621
<b>GENERAL CHEMISTRY</b>					
GLUCOSE	89		130	▲	114
SODIUM	148	▲	145	▲	145
POTASSIUM	3.1	▼	3.4	▼	3.2
CHLORIDE	109	▲	109	▲	108
CO2	30		28	▲	29
BUN	27	▲	29	▲	33
CREATININE	1.4		1.5	▲	1.6
CALCIUM	9.4		9.2	▲	9.2
TOTAL PROTEIN			5.7	▼	5.8
ALBUMIN			3.3	▼	3.4
BILIRUBIN TOTAL			1.9	▲	1.9
ALK PHOSPHATASE			80		80
SGOT			21		21
SGPT			23		24
MAGNESIUM	2.1				2.0
CORTISOL SERUM	26*				75
AMMONIA	88	68		83	<35

→ kidney  
3.5 is normal

8-23  
1.6-1.2

1.7-1.8

} liver enzymes

direct 0.4 (normal) → processed through liver

Tuesday ammonia = 64

Tues creatinine 1.4

(48) May 2009

37  
LVR 1.5

Thursday 18th  
12:30 Haloperidol  
1:30 Haloperidol  
2:30 Haloperidol + Atropine  
3:30 Haloperidol + Hydro morphine  
4:30 Hydro morphine  
6:00 Lorazepam  
6:30 Atropine  
7:15 Haloperidol + Hydro morphine  
9:00 Haloperidol + Hydro morphine  
12:30 Haloperidol + Hydro morphine  
11:30 Ativan (0.5) Hydro morphine (0.25ml)  
3:30 Ativan (0.5) Hydro morphine (0.25ml)  
5:30 Lorazepam / Hydro morphine  
7:30 Lorazepam / Hydro morphine  
9:30 Lorazepam / Hydro morphine (25ml)  
Friday 19th Am  
1:30 Haloperidol  
Towards Bathroom  
3:30 Haloperidol / Lorazepam  
Towards window

\* 'spiral time' comes from @divergent\_design\_studies (Instagram) Marta Rose

Niamh Gordon

## Behind Some of the Scenes at the Museum

1. There are thirteen chapters in Kate Atkinson's debut novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*.
2. There are also twelve footnotes.
3. Each chapter is followed by a footnote, except the final chapter: chapter thirteen.
4. Clearly, the ending needs no further explication.
5. Though each footnote follows a chapter, the content is not chronologically consecutive (i.e. time is not linear, things do not happen in order, it is quite possible to move backwards towards a narrative conclusion).
6. In fiction, things happen in an order to the reader. This does not have to be the order in which they happen to the characters. Hence, we know about the limits on Gillian's lifespan long before she gets to the point of enacting the 'pantomime' of her death.
7. 'Gillian's last day,' is how Ruby describes it, ahead of time. Gillian does not know this. 'Some good will come out of Gillian's death,' is something else Ruby says. Gillian cannot know this.
8. There are 'a conspiracy of coincidences that kill Gillian'. This is something they continue to do, in the present tense. They are active. Gillian, as object, continues to be killed.
9. This is similar to in real life, when we say that someone 'is' dead.
10. At the heart of the novel there is a hole, something which cannot be looked at or seen. Although Ruby, the narrator, has a level of omniscience usually reserved for a third-person narrative voice, there is one key thing she does not (cannot) know. We find out about it together, reader and character hand in hand.
11. For a while after I finished reading, I was envious of Ruby: the fact that she spends most of the text not knowing about the hole at the heart of things. I was envious because at that time, I couldn't see past what was at the heart of the text of my life. I wanted it to become a hole. I wanted it to disappear.
12. This is not to say I thought that it could disappear. I know we can't change the order in which things happen in real life. Once they've happened, they've happened: no distinction between character and reader, no dramatic irony. Once someone is dead, that is what they continue to be. Still. I wished, most days, that I didn't have to know about it.
13. I first read this novel long before I was bereaved. It took on a different quality when I read it again afterwards. This envy that I mentioned, it's not real envy: it's a symptom of what happens to the newly bereaved, the solipsistic quality of that pain. I was not truly envious of a fictional bereaved child, but perhaps I craved the narrative resolution that is offered within this text. Ruby spends a long time ignorant of a truth. Once she is able to comprehend it, she accesses some kind of closure. And we as the readers are offered a reveal, which helps us make sense of things too. In real life, there is no reveal. There is no sense-making. Only time, moving forwards, and life growing around the grief which remains there: the hole at the heart of things.

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Sean Wai Keung

## The Chicken Has to be Whole

A-yi tells us to eat only vegetables for a week since consuming flesh after a death is downright disrespectful, yet the small altar in front of 婆婆's casket has a whole plucked chicken with head and feet still attached. I almost dare to ask why this is but if there's one thing you learn quickly growing up Chinese in the UK it's to not ask questions. A-yi tells Mum to take a joss-paper blanket up to the casket and tuck 婆婆 in for one last sleep. Mum never asks questions either, always does as she's told. As she moves I see her hands shake and the eyes of the chicken feel to me like they blink, although I know that really they didn't. I suddenly remember years before, after a different funeral, when 婆婆 brought the obligatory whole chicken home with her and over a period of days slowly ate it in soups, even though the rest of us had to eat only vegetables. I don't know why that was allowed. Meanwhile a few years from now Mum will tell me that we should leave a packet of choccy biscuits in front of 婆婆's grave-site as the gruff yorkshire groundskeeper doesn't like us leaving cooked food there since it attracts squirrels. The groundskeeper also won't like us leaving lit incense sticks unattended, but there will be limits to the rules we're willing to bend. Anyway like I was saying, after the funeral A-yi tells us to only eat vegetables for a week, but Mum can't bear the thought of a wasted whole chicken so she secretly vows to me that she will do *something* with it when she can, even if A-yi says it's wrong - a promise I've never dared ask if she kept.



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Emilia Beatriz

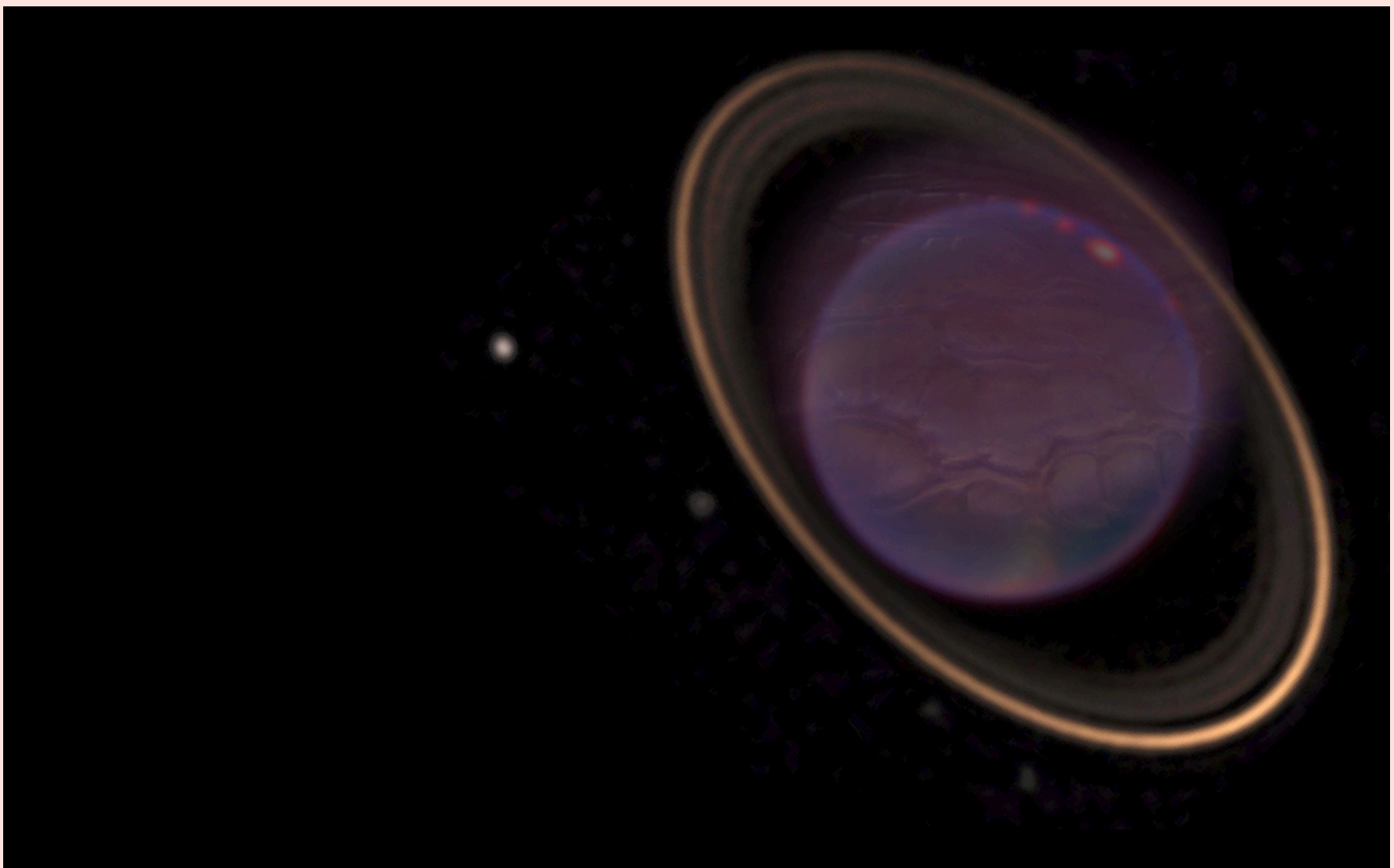
## DISTURBANCE / DREAMING

Queride Urano,

Sometimes we look in your direction  
feel the certainty of your presence  
without ever giving name to it

towards the edges of the visible  
turns another future of the past

calling toward not-yet-ancestors  
that's when we feel your pull



Emilia Beatriz

**TURNING POINT  
DOUNREAY NUCLEAR POWER STATION  
NORTH ATLANTIC COAST**

(clic)

We follow the coast to the remains of the station

conservation efforts on prominent display  
Great Yellow Bumblebee and all.

Dounreay had no smoke stacks  
only a big round globe  
like an observatory or radar array.

(clic-clic)

atoms bounce decay  
as much on the ground  
as near phones in our pockets

The sky came to meet us  
here, where there's no stable boundary  
between soil and sea

We dream uranium  
becomes that distant planet  
heavy body of the sky himself

(uran(i)o murmurs & squirms)

whose furies fall down like rain  
who we extract  
exhaust  
and lay to rest

so much closer to the core than when xi came

(clic) (clic-clic)  
(clic) (clic)

xir tiny particles would level cities  
seep back into the earth  
until finally devoured by Time





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Emilia Beatriz

## COMPOST

Dear Uranium  
or should we call you Uranus?

flickering the border of our senses

shimmering  
as if you come before time

uran(i)o,  
in the dream you cross the boundary layer  
between common and occupied land

SUDDENLY STICKY MATTER  
pulses unstable states

memory  
rushes unrested  
gathers entropy in faultlines

The smell of bog lilies stirs



---

Emilia Beatriz

## URANIUM'S WAKE/RETURN TO EARTH AN GARBH-EILEAN, BIEKE

uran(i)o amor  
farthest sky, sister of deepest earth

What will tend  
the wounds of your extracted matter?

How can we facilitate your death  
so long it will outlast all our lives?

Breathe deep  
into an atmosphere full of mourning and repair

Let the tense edges of awareness soften

Let your body adjust to the light  
/ come home to the darkness

(uran(i)o joyously seeps)

URAN(i)O'S WAKE – text excerpts from BARRUNTO (2020-2024) script

Film stills:

Image 1 - digital collage Nasa Voyager 1983 Uranus flyby + calendula seed in microscope

Image 2 - uran(i)o gloop, digital animation - Sharif Elsabagh

Image 3 - common grazing land / military occupied land in Cape Wrath, Scotland, camera - Robbie Thomson





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Naomi Richards

## “At Least She’s Safe”

I lost count of the number of times people said to me “at least she’s safe”. There is an indelible assumption that safety trumps all other concerns such as, I don’t know, deprivation of liberty, enforced medication, constant surveillance. The assurance of “safety” was supposed to bring me comfort, a single point of relief in an otherwise bleak picture. But the word had the opposite effect on me, emphasising only the futility of trying to see anything good at all about my mother’s admission to a locked dementia unit.

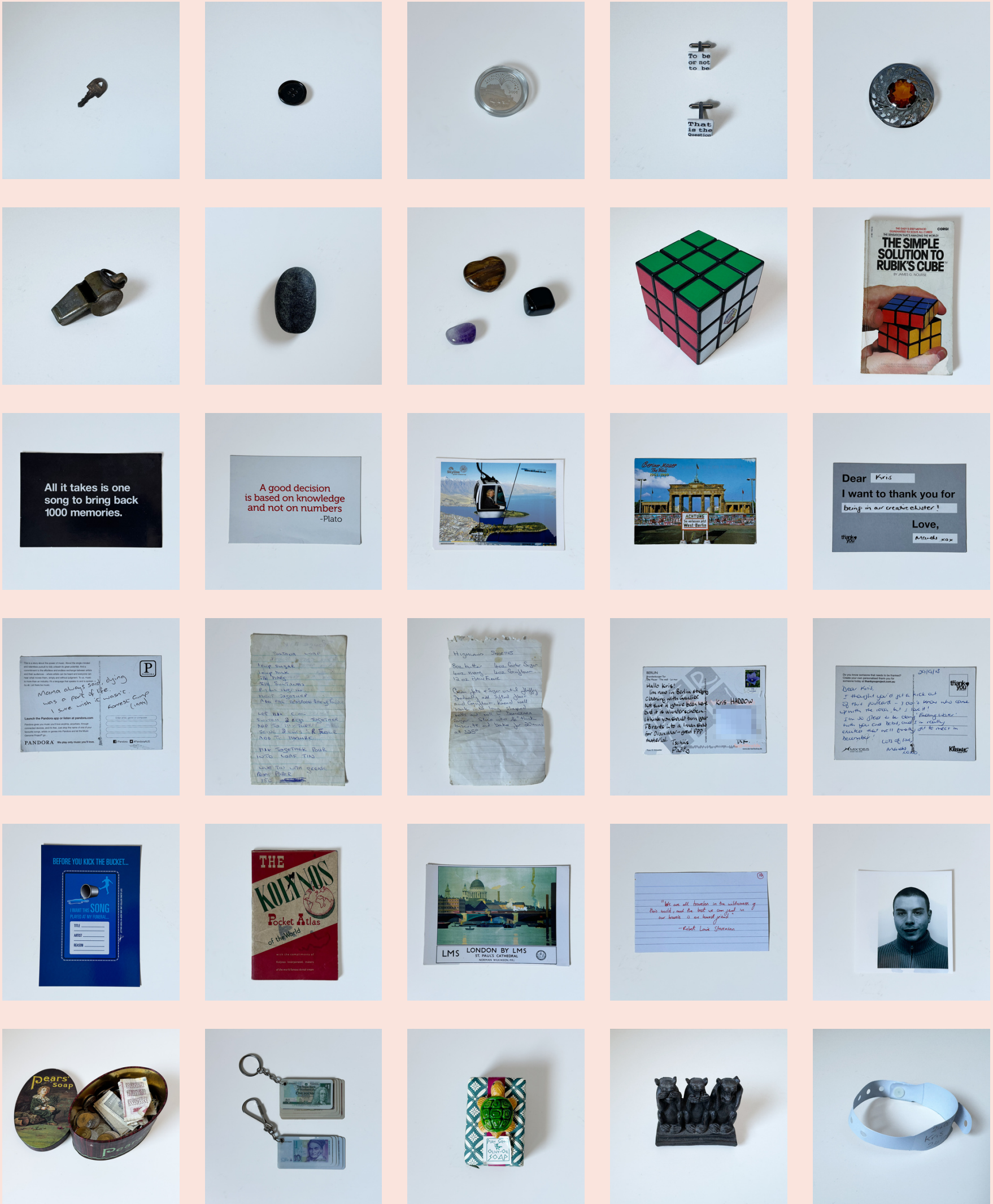
I discovered that safety narratives are ubiquitous in dementia care. The safety which professional care and confinement offers is intended to bring relief, comfort, and to make the intolerable tolerable. Safety makes good. In the months before her admission to hospital my mum had taken to waving her walking stick at passing cars and expressing her displeasure - in disproportionately irate terms - at people ‘making too much noise’. She had also started turning on those closest to her as she struggled to make sense of things. Perhaps it would be more truthful to state “at least we’re safe.”

The deeply unsettling nature of dementia makes us reach for any expressions of comfort that have even a vague semblance of truth. I’m sure the safety narrative works for a great many people forced to watch those they love receive care they never thought they would need, and in mum’s case, never would have wanted. Why, then, do I feel no sense of reassurance? Worse, the repeated utterance of the platitude starts to make me feel resentful.

And then a vague memory surfaces - of something the French theorist Jean Baudrillard said. Baudrillard wrote about how excessive security dispossesses people of their own death by robbing them of the risk of dying while at the same time smothering them with the idea that they are at risk of death. He wrote:

“Like a steak under cellophane: to surround yourself with a sarcophagus in order to prevent you from dying.”

And here it is, why I itch to put two fingers up to “at least she’s safe”. Institutionalised safety wraps a cellophane wrapper around my nonconforming mother, who is experiencing agitation, confusion and immense sadness as a result of a devastating illness. That cellophane wrapper prevents her from getting physically hurt and potentially even from dying. It prevents it all from coming to an end more quickly. In order to *keep others safe*, she is dispossessed of her residual agency, of all that is familiar to her, and even of her determination to die. And there’s no comfort whatsoever I can find in that.



Kris Haddow

A Curation of Curios

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Kris Haddow

## Infinity and Other Impermanences

I rummage through my archive, my appendix of grief. I make a lucky dip and find a book, a battered mini paperback encyclopaedia, one of those slim volumes tucked inside cereal boxes (possibly Weetabix?) in the eighties. A chunk of my childhood general knowledge was gleaned from these pages. Countries of the world, their capitals, flags, languages. I am impressed how many currencies I remember when many vanished twenty-five years ago with Eurofication. It is a time capsule. Evidence 'facts' are, in fact, transitory. Unfixed. Like life.

Three of the countries I skim haven't existed for decades; though technically, I visited them eighteen months ago.

The centre spread is a diagram of the solar system, unsuspecting Pluto a proud planetary member, relegation to dwarf status still off in its future.

I am reminded of a 3D animation that does the rounds on Twitter (which is no longer Twitter, for nothing lasts) showing not just the planets orbiting the sun, but our star itself careening full steam ahead on its infinite journey through the cosmos. I feel giddy when I watch it. Small. Insignificant.

As I curate the appendix, this archive of objects and curios of those I've loved and lost, I reflect on how easy it is to forget we're on a rock hurtling through space, mere mortals in our brief moment in time, all of us drifting relentlessly away from each other into the vast gulf of the universe.

I scribble the infinity symbol  $\infty$  in my journal, and note the contradiction: it may go on forever, but nothing within it lasts.

I return to the book. It is inscribed "For Kris, Love Ida May," and below, in childish imprint: "Kris, Age 7½. I wan to be a astronaut."

I smile. I had forgotten this. I lament the innocence of child me, this lost dream.

And I take a moment to think of Ida May, who died of cancer on 10th October 2010. 10/10/10, a numerologically perfect date. She was my aunty in the Scottish sense, by which I mean totally unrelated, but a dear friend of my mother's, and therefore closer than blood. I bake her banana loaf recipe all these years later, now veganised for my dietary needs; Mum follows it too, but she prefers her sultana version.

My archive does not contain her memoriam or order of service. I try to recall what led me to miss the funeral of someone I cared deeply for. Google Calendar surfaces half the answer; an old text message confirms the rest: a callous boss, a refusal of time off, a reminder of the 'importance' of work. Ironically, a job that ended a few years later, for nothing is ever permanent; the moment unforgotten by my tech, enshrined within my digital legacy.

I put the book away, record some resolutions in my journal. To honour loss. To miss a day, regardless of consequences. And to keep chasing dreams: to infinity, and beyond.



Lynnda Wardle

## Museum of Love & Loss

### Tanglewires

*Miscellaneous collection of technology stored in a plastic bag found at the bottom of a filing cabinet, including: 2 BT landline handsets, phone cradle and set-up guide; 1 x yellow ethernet cable; 1x Crucial 525GB MX300 2.5 inch SSD storage device; 2 x Sony desktop speakers; 1 x BT WiFi plug in unit.*



What shall I do with this fankle of cables, wires, sockets, plugs, most of which have outlived their original purpose? In another cupboard I find computer manuals for computers you no longer owned, and floppy disks with no means of extracting their information. This technology, so essential then, is now mostly defunct, and taking up space in a dusty filing cabinet. I'm sure many people have a box or drawer like this, filled with old tech that we can't bring ourselves to throw away, as though it may someday become useful again. We may just need that wire, that old plug ... let's keep it.

Or perhaps we imagine the traces of our desires, hopes and thoughts may still be caught in copper; small pulses of sound. Once, I went to a huge open air market where sellers displayed boxes brimming with dead technology, the air above their tables electric with ghostly traces, whispered conversation trapped in wires held by PVC, an ancient code forgotten, but not erased.

I can't even recall your landline number, a number that was once so important in connecting us, facilitating our secret affair. In your blue address book I find myself pencilled in as LW 01360 771654. I used to be that number. And the dead handsets, two phones in their cold cradles, unplugged and wires hanging free. I put my ear to one – silence.

I keep the handsets. As though they are hard evidence that we were once together, connected.

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**Lynnda Wardle****Best Before**

*Bread tie: Plastic strip 35mm x 10mm, sticky on the underside, used for tying the end of shop bought bread bags to maintain freshness.*

*Contains text: BEST BEFORE 23/08/2021*



As it turns out, there is not much in your fridge to clear when I return the day after you die in September 2021. I find the bread tie in the empty bread container, curled, poised, like a question mark. Or – my breath stops in my throat – like a miniature hospital wristband. I'm about to drop it in the bin when I see the date: 23 August, the day of your transplant operation.

Determining the value of things left behind turns out to be an impossible task. What to keep? Every object in your flat seems shiny with meaning, but the meaning is obscure. I have no sensible way of making a judgement about what might be useful and what can be discarded. My biggest anxiety is that I could throw something out that I might want (or need) at a later stage.

I can be found rooting through the outside bins to retrieve items in a flurry of panic: a handwritten shopping list, a clutch of jacket buttons, a cracked blue jug.

Certainly this bread tie is a message from the world of objects, or perhaps even directly from you? If I keep the tie, it might reveal its significance, answer its own question about its place in my new story of loss, speak its meaning in a way I might eventually understand.



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