

The Young Questions



DEATH



The Young Questions is a series of publications
by brand development agency The Young.
In this particular edition, The Young questions Death.

www.theyoung.agency



Alongside this publication, we've made a playlist
with songs embodying the meaning of the chapters.
Scan the code and have a listen.

We made this book because death is not just an end.
It's a mirror, a portal, a question that keeps returning. In our work
and in our lives, we saw how rarely we're invited to sit with it,
talk about it, or learn from it. So we made a space.

This book is for anyone who's curious, scared, grieving,
remembering, preparing. It's not a manual. It's a companion.
If you're holding it, maybe you're ready. Ready to ask, to listen,
or just to feel a little less alone in the face of the inevitable.

SNIFFING OUT DEATH

Let's start up close: a dog's nose, wet and pressed to the ground, tail swishing like an antenna, the rapid in and out of excited breath. There's a story unfolding in the scents below; puzzle pieces coming together, hidden from us. Human's best friend, following invisible footprints, chasing the faintest chemical whispers left behind. And here's the twist: this nose leads us straight to death.



It may seem strange, starting our journey with a dog tracking what most of us spend our lives trying to avoid. But cadaver dogs trained to detect human remains show us that death is not a grim destination; it is part of the story; sometimes the final piece, sometimes the next clue. If death is a teacher we've been tiptoeing around, then these four-legged detectives might just be the guides we didn't know we needed. They don't shy away. They move forward. What if we did too?

A body's final journey?

When someone dies, especially from illness or old age. The process usually begins long before the final breath. The body softens. The heart slows. There's a gentle flickering, like a candle nearing its end. This is where we usually draw the curtain. But in truth, the body's story continues. After death, there is a transformation. Enzymes, bacteria, and nature's own caretakers step in. Cells break down. Molecules shift and move. And within hours, volatile organic compounds, like ketones, aldehydes, and sulfides, begin to rise.

This chemical dance is what cadaver dogs are attuned to. To them, scent is not decay. It's a language. And maybe that's the first lesson: death is not a full stop. It's a passage, a transformation, a continuation in another form.

Learning the language of scent

Smell may not be our most elegant way into the conversation, but it's among the most honest. A dog's nose is a marvel: millions more receptors than ours. They can smell through cement and water, pinpoint remains hidden under 15 feet of earth or below a lake's surface.

And here's something rarely said: humans can learn this too. Not to the same degree, but the capacity to follow a scent trail lives in us. Our attention just tends to drift elsewhere. But what if we tuned in? What if we learned to read the invisible?

Maybe that's what death is asking of us: to stop pretending we can't sense it, feel it, or name it. Like scent, death is always there in every goodbye, every grief, every change we didn't choose.

THEY DON'T
SHY AWAY.
THEY MOVE
FORWARD.
WHAT IF
WE DID TOO?

Curiosity to death is a kind of tenderness

Death can be terrifying. It can also be tender. This publication is an invitation to explore that tenderness. To recognize that grief, too, is a form of love. That silence doesn't always mean emptiness. That every ending contains a ripple of what came before and maybe what's to come after.

In many ways, *The Young Questions Death* is about giving shape to what feels formless. It is a gathering of voices: grief tenders, scientists, designers, artists, elders, children. Each brings their own way of approaching what we so often leave unspoken.

So here's to the cadaver dog, yes. But also to the quiet hands of the grief tender, like Guillaume, who meets people in their final days with presence and compassion. To those who sit with the dying, to those learning how to grieve, and to those who don't have answers but show up anyway.

This book is for them. And for you.

Welcome to *The Young Questions Death*.
Let's sniff it out, gently.

Poppies have long been symbols of death, remembrance, and the fragile beauty of life. Their vivid red petals evoke the blood spilled in war, especially after World War I, where they grew over battle-scarred fields. In death, poppies represent both mourning and peace – a quiet honoring of lives lost and a hope for rest beyond suffering. Their short-lived bloom is a poignant reminder of mortality, while their resilience in growing from disturbed ground speaks to memory enduring beyond death.

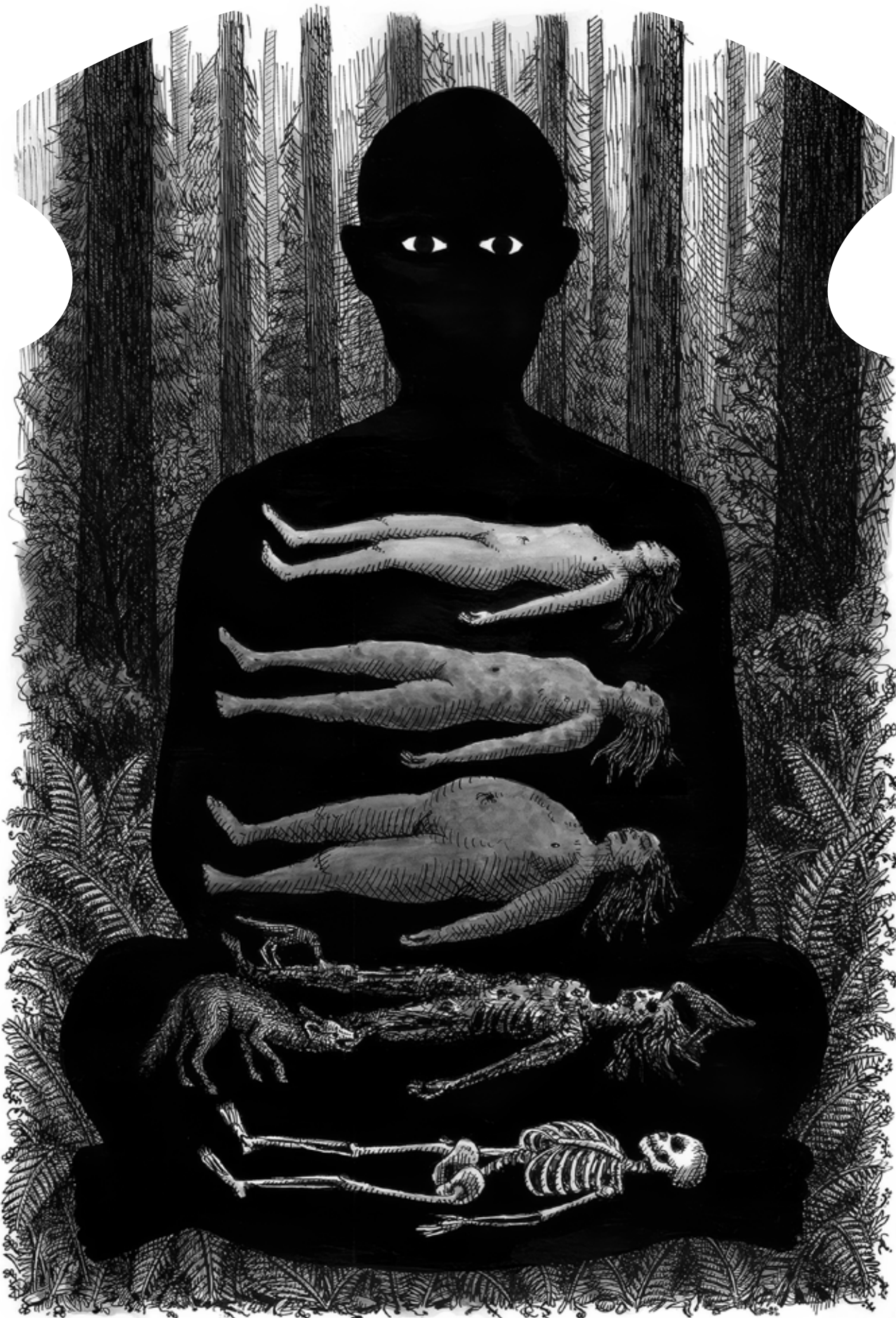


A watercolor illustration of a landscape. The top half of the image is dominated by a vibrant red sky, which transitions into a lighter, hazy blue at the horizon. Below the horizon, the water is depicted in various shades of blue, with a prominent white, misty or cloud-like band stretching across the middle. The overall style is soft and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and a textured appearance.

Act I
Speaking with Death
in Spirit

ANATOMY OF DEATH

Have you ever stopped to wonder what exactly happens when we die? Most of us don't. The question often lingers in the background, too heavy, too abstract, or just a bit too close for comfort. But let's dare to look together, gently. Because often, what we fear most hides the insight we need most. If we take a moment to observe death with curiosity rather than dread, we might find what awaits us is not chaos or darkness. Instead, it is a carefully choreographed biological process, a quiet passage governed by patterns as ancient as life itself.



What does it feel like to die?

Why do so many great artists have an obsession with death?

Chelsea Carmichael
Bone And Soil - Shabaka Hitchings Remix

Death is a dance, not a fall

Usually it starts slowly, almost tenderly. In the days or weeks before death, especially in cases of terminal illness or aging, the body begins preparing itself. Systems gently wind down. Metabolism shifts. Energy is conserved. You sleep more. Eat less. You may feel confusion or detachment. It's as if the body is quietly retreating, turning inward, gently closing up shop.

In the final moments, something strange happens to our breath. It becomes labored and uneven. This is *agonal breathing*, a series of gasps, pauses. This isn't suffering, though it may appear so; it's the body's last attempt to maintain function. At the same time, the brain, starved of oxygen, floods with neurotransmitters like dopamine, serotonin, and possibly even DMT, the powerful hallucinogen also released during dreaming and birth. In these final minutes, many people report seeing vivid memories, euphoric visions, tunnels of light. Could our last experience, biologically at least, be one of awe?

The heart stops. The lungs fall still. This is what we call *clinical death*, but it's not the hard line we once thought it was. Brain cells begin to die within minutes, yet in a 2019 study, Yale scientists were able to revive some cellular activity in pig brains hours after clinical death using synthetic blood. It doesn't mean we can bring the dead back, but it does raise profound questions: Where exactly does death begin and where does it end? And how final is it, really?

Life after life

After clinical death comes *biological death* – when the body irreversibly shifts into decomposition. But even then, something remarkable happens: life doesn't end, it transforms. Enzymes within our own cells begin digesting us from the inside out, a process called *autolysis*. Meanwhile, the bacteria that lived alongside us throughout life begin their work too. Releasing gases and breaking us down into simpler elements. What seems grotesque is, in fact, deeply ordered.

The body cools – *algor mortis*. Skin turns pale – *pallor mortis*. Blood, no longer circulating, settles with gravity – *livor mortis*. Muscles stiffen – *rigor mortis* – then soften again. This choreography of endings unfolds predictably, even beautifully, if you can bear to look. Decomposition, for all its reputation, is not decay in the emotional sense. It is nature's way of giving back. Death is efficient. Death recycles. Death returns everything to the system it came from.

To see this is to recognize that death isn't an erasure but a redistribution.

Every species does it differently. Animals succumb to disease, injury, age. Plants slip into senescence, closing their cycles with quiet dignity. Even bacteria have programmed cell death – *apoptosis*. Death is as biologically tailored as life itself. It's not an error in the system. It is the system.

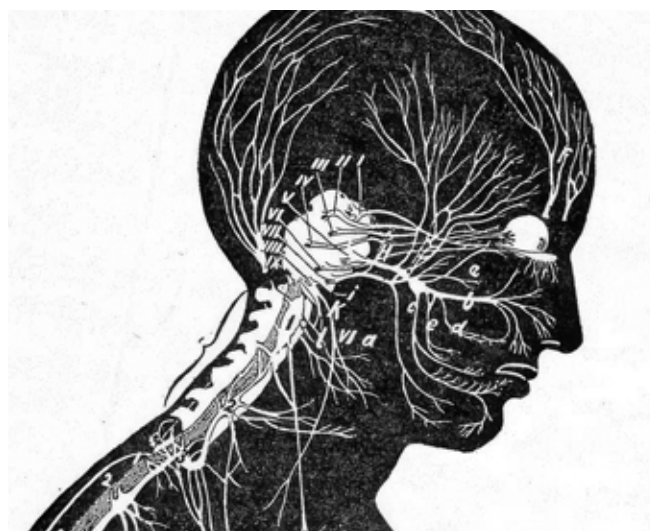
Nothingness or next?

And yet, biology only gets us so far. What happens to our awareness and sense of self when the lights go out? These are questions that belong to philosophy, spirituality, and personal belief.

For materialists like Epicurus, death is the end of perception, and therefore nothing to fear. "Where death is, we are not," he famously said. But dualists and mystics, from Plato to Tibetan Buddhists, argue that something immaterial may survive: the soul, the breath, the subtle consciousness. In many traditions, death is a crossing, not a collapse.

Perhaps it is not death we fear most, but the ambiguity that surrounds it. The question of what, if anything, waits beyond the veil. Psychologists categorize death-related anxiety into three main fears: fear of pain, fear of non-being, and fear of the unknown. But putting names to our fears doesn't necessarily soothe them. What does?

Perhaps not certainty, but intimacy. To look closer. To stay present with what's happening, even if we don't understand it fully.



5
Nervous System of a Human
Anatomy Medical Chart, 1920

Making friends with death

Understanding death doesn't mean explaining it away. It means becoming familiar with it. In that familiarity, fear shifts. Maybe not into comfort, but into curiosity.

Could death, like birth, be an initiation we don't fully comprehend until it arrives? Could knowing more about it allow us to live more honestly, more gently, more urgently?

That's the hope of this chapter and of this book. Not to conquer death, but to approach it. With respect. With questions. With open eyes.

So – shall we keep exploring?



6
Anatomical Studies, Persia, Qajar

Could death, like birth, be an initiation?
One we don't fully comprehend
until it comes?

Where do people go when they die?

Why do people love horror movies about death?

DEAD TALK?

Imagine you're at a dinner party. The conversation flows easily: travel, work, last night's dream. Then someone, without warning, says the word: death. A quiet falls over the table. Eyes shift, someone coughs, the subject quickly changes. It's not that we don't know death is real. We just prefer not to say it. Even in rooms full of adults, the word "death" holds weight. It can silence a space in seconds. So we wrap it in phrases: passed away, lost, resting. Why is that? Why do we soften something so inevitable?

This is an invitation to face that discomfort, not out of morbid fascination but from a desire to understand. The way we speak about death, what we say and avoid, reveals a great deal about how we live.

Euphemisms and
the Psychology of Avoidance

We say “she passed,” or “he left us.” In English, we avoid the blunt force of “died” with cushions of comfort. We say “I lost my grandmother,” as if she could be found again. Even humor sneaks in: “kicked the bucket,” “bit the dust,” “pushing up daisies.”

Why? Freud believed our fear of death wasn’t just about dying, but about facing the unknowable. Language helps us sidestep that. **Euphemisms can offer protection: softening, delaying, and giving us space to cope in the moment.**

But over time, do they also distance us from the truth? From grief? From the intimacy of death itself?

What Words Reveal

Japan: 物の哀れ **Mono no Aware** The concept of *mono no aware*, literally “an empathy toward things”, frames life and death as inherently intertwined. From cherry blossoms falling to farewells in literature, the Japanese language encourages a deep, poetic awareness of impermanence. Death isn’t resisted; it is honored.

Arabic: نَدْوَعَجْ كَر دِي كَلَا أَنَا وَهَلْ أَنَا **Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un** “To Allah we belong and to Him we return” speaks to a spiritual certainty. In Arabic, death is not the end but a divine return. The language gently reinforces belonging, faith, and continuity.

Cameroon: **Cry-Die Celebrations In Northwest Cameroon**, “cry-die” ceremonies transform mourning into communal celebration. Language here doesn’t hide death; it amplifies the connection between living and dead through festivity, ritual, and social engagement.

Toraja (Indonesia): **Ma’tunu & Rambu Solo’** Torajan death vocabulary includes phrases like *ma’tunu* (“extinguished”) and *tomembali puang* (“returned to the ancestors”). Funerals span weeks or years. The dead remain present, cared for, and part of family life until the soul is ready to transition.

Russia: Он умер **On umer** “He died.” No euphemism. No dance around the truth. Russian language calls death what it is. Directness reflects cultural attitudes: stoic, unsentimental, and rooted in endurance.

The Taboo That Binds Us

Different cultures avoid death-talk for different reasons. In the West, it’s often discomfort and denial. In Japan or India, silence may be about reverence. But the result is the same: we hesitate to name it. Language becomes a container for fear. Or a space to protect others. But if we keep death at a distance too long, does that silence truly help us mourn? Or does it only delay the grief we need to feel?

Sacred Speech: Religion and
the Language of Death

Buddhism: Death is transition. *Parinibbāna* describes the final passing of the enlightened. Known in English

Euphemisms are psychological
camouflage: they soften, delay,
and help us cope.

as the “Tibetan Book of the Dead,” the *Bardo Thödol* is meant to guide the soul through the in-between. Here, language offers maps, not closures.

Christianity: Terms like “fallen asleep in Christ” suggest rest before resurrection. The words are intended to comfort, reassure, and affirm beliefs in reunion and redemption.

Islam: Death is return. *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un* echoes at funerals, framing death within divine authorship. Final words are sacred acts.

Hinduism: Language invokes reincarnation. The phrase *Om shanti* is said to bring peace across realms. Death is a pause in the soul’s eternal journey.

Judaism: Phrases like “of blessed memory” or “may peace be upon them” keep the dead present in blessing and dialogue. Language becomes lineage.

Indigenous & Daoist Views: Words evoke return: to earth, to ancestors, to balance. Language resists finality. It names the cycles that carry us.

Naming the Unspeakable

Whether we soften death with poetry or call it by its name, language becomes our way of reaching for what we can’t control. Across cultures, we see the tension between comfort and confrontation.

The Torajans celebrate. The Russians confront. The West cushions. But in every tongue, in every phrase, death remains. The words shift. The truth doesn’t.

So what does our language reveal?
Perhaps this: in our attempts to name the end, we are also trying to understand life. Death may be unknowable, but how we speak of it is not. It is a mirror, a tool, a prayer.

And maybe, just maybe, naming it can help us live more clearly.

A Lexicon of Loss:
Death Vocabulary Across Cultures

LANGUAGE	PHRASE	LITERAL MEANING	CULTURAL CONTEXT	TO NE
English	Passed away	A gentle departure	Euphemism, Christian afterlife	Gentle, euphemistic
Mandarin	走了 (zou le)	Left	Politeness, Confucian harmony	Neutral, indirect
Japanese	物の哀れ (mono no aware)	Pathos of things	Impermanence, Shinto/Buddhism	Reflective, poetic
Hindi	स्वर्ग संधारना	Ascended to heaven	Rebirth, spiritual elevation	Uplifting
Spanish	Falleció	Fell	Religious, formal	Polite, somber
Arabic	نَدْوَعَجْ كَر دِي كَلَا أَنَا وَهَلْ أَنَا	To God we return	Islamic, cyclical life	Comforting
Swahili	Alale pema peponi	May s/he sleep peacefully	Sleep metaphor, East African mourning	Indirect, gentle
Russian	Он умер (on umer)	He died	Blunt, stoic	Direct, stark
French	Rendre l’âme	To return the soul	Catholic, poetic	Formal, softened
Tibetan	འགྲོ་བུ་ལྷ་ལ་ཕོང་པ་ (’chi)	To die	Impermanence, reincarnation	Neutral, spiritual
German	Von uns gegangen	Has gone from us	Euphemism of absence	Gentle, respectful
Latin	Memento mori	Remember you must die	Stoic, reflective	Solemn, mindful
Italian	È venuto a mancare	Came to be missing	Softened obituary phrasing	Poetic, respectful

IN SPIRIT

What comes to mind when you hear the word spirit? Spiritual jazz, a shiver down your spine, the unreachable, a flash of faith? Something you keep close? Or something that has little to do with you?

Spirit is hard to define. It sounds like belief, like something unprovable. But spirit can also mean what we sense without needing to explain, what we carry, how we stay connected, the meanings we build when facts no longer serve.

In this first act of *The Young Questions Death*, we speak with death not only through biology or language, but through spirit. Not to make claims. Not to prove anything. But to ask: how do we relate to what we cannot see? How do we make sense of the unseen, the felt, the lasting presence of those no longer here?



Death is universal, in plant, animal, and human life. And in its wake, we reach for meaning. We grieve, remember, invent rituals. We find comfort in silence, in prayer, in movement, in story. For many, spirituality is part of that process. Even if we rarely name it. Even if we are unsure what it means.

In many western societies, spirituality has become harder to locate in public life. Religion once gave form to these moments. It offered guidance, community, meaning. That role has faded. But the need hasn't. Nietzsche declared it in 1882: "God remains dead. And we have killed him." The questions remain. The rituals have changed. The words are different. The search continues.

According to a 2022 Eurobarometer survey, nearly 30% of Europeans now identify as having no religion at all. In countries like the Netherlands, Sweden, and the Czech Republic, the number is closer to 50%. Still, people light candles. They make art. They plant trees for loved ones. They make meaning, even without a map.

A WAY OF SEEING, SENSING, AND MOVING THROUGH THE WORLD.

We followed that thread. Because when we asked people about death, they didn't only speak in timelines or medical terms. They spoke about energy. About presence. About a dream, a scent, a feeling they couldn't ignore.

That's where this chapter begins: in the quiet, in the mystery, in the spirit of someone who lives with these questions every day. Not as answers, but as practice. It is unproven, unshaken, and integrated. Not a choice, but something that has always been there. A way of seeing, sensing, and moving through the world. So we begin with listening.

We met them through a teammate; they're the parent of a friend. From the moment we met, they created a calm and welcoming environment. It wasn't forced, just natural. They made space for honesty, for comfort, and for us to simply be there.

We met at the school where they now work. The space was a simple white room, but filled with personal touches such as drawings, small gifts, and notes from students. You could tell people felt safe around them.

They wore a plaid shirt, jeans, and rectangular glasses. Shaved head, some stubble, a tiredness from recent travel that didn't diminish their focus. They weren't very tall, but they had a grounded presence.

They're a person of colour, with a deep voice and a calm, steady way of speaking. They didn't talk over us or try to lead the conversation. They waited, shared when it felt right, and spoke with warmth and thoughtfulness.

They spoke about their daughter briefly, with pride. It was clear they're a thoughtful and caring parent. Their knowledge is wide. Not just academic, but lived, cultural, and emotional.

We will refer to this person as they/them to maintain their anonymity.

1. Listening to What We Cannot See

We begin not with an answer, but a sensation.

We met someone who did not introduce themselves with titles or credentials, but with presence. They refer to themselves as "a child of planet Earth," "a humanity revolutionist" and "social worker for the dead". Someone who's spent over 30 years in various

"TREES SHOW US DEATH AND LIFE WITH EVERY SEASON."

Spiritual worker

careers, the last 12 in education. Their stories opened our minds in ways we didn't anticipate.

They didn't ask us to believe anything. They simply told us what they felt. That they've lived multiple lives. One where they were part of the European gentry. One where they were betrayed and killed by a sibling. One where they were soldiers. One where they abused power. And now, in what they believe is their fourth life, they have arrived in this role with humility, awareness, and a sense of purpose shaped by the lives before. They don't claim to know this as fact. They simply feel it. And they invited us, gently, to consider what that might mean.

Spirituality, for them, isn't a belief system, it's a perceptive one. Some things feed them. Others burn. Their role is not to define what death is. It's to notice how it moves through us. Somatically, emotionally, environmentally.

2. Words for the Ground Where We Grieve

We all pass by them. Behind a gate, beneath a tree, or beyond a hill, these are quiet places where the living come to speak with the dead. We've given them many names, hoping language might soften what lies below. There is no truly neutral word for where the dead lie. *Graveyard. Cemetery. Burial site.* They all suggest rest. Peace. But they offer a correction:

"Some graveyards are not rest-in-peace places. They are sites of suffering."



One in Nijmegen. One in Rome. The earth still remembers. Their skin burns. Their vision flashes. These places are not tranquil. They are sites of unresolved energy. We do not always bury pain. Sometimes we plant it.

3. The Time of Trees

One symbol that returned again and again in our conversation was the tree. "Trees show us death and life with every season," they said. In spring, we see rebirth. In summer, growth. Autumn brings release. Winter, stillness. But none of it is ever final. "Even in death, a tree is not dead". It decomposes and returns to the earth. It becomes something else. And maybe that's why, for them, death is not feared. They see it as a transition, a continuation, a cycle. Not as an ending but as a shift: one that's not only inevitable but intentional. Drawing from philosophies found in texts like *Journey of Souls*, they shared how

spirits choose their lives, and how even the briefest, most tragic experiences may serve a deeper, soul-level purpose. "We are here to grow," they said.

*"So death isn't the opposite of life.
It's a part of it."*

We sat with that for a while.

*"I can get recharged sitting by a tree,
and I can be completely drained just
sitting next to a person."*

And you, what moves you? What drains you? What have you sensed but couldn't explain? When have you felt something without proof? Where do you locate spirit: in your body, in others, or in places? What are the things you trust, even when you can't name them?

4. Death as a Bridge?

There were lighter stories, too, filled with love. A hug that felt exactly like a late mother's embrace. A dog who returned in spirit to reassure their grieving owner they'd made the right decision. Lights flickered to announce a visit. Guardian spirits who show up through numbers and signs like 11:11. We've heard these things before, in movies or whispers. But hearing them here, so casually, so sincerely, made us pause and wonder.

We began to think of our own quiet moments: a dream that lingered too long. A place that felt off. A scent that came from nowhere. We used to brush those off. But now, we're not so sure. Perhaps we all carry these subtle encounters; some of us just learn to listen. That's why we included spirituality in this research. Not because it fits neatly into the scientific or cultural frameworks we've built but because it expands them. Because it reflects the way some people process death in all its mystery and messiness.

They don't fear death, or define it, either.
They speak of it as something active. Ongoing.

*"I don't fear death.
It's just the next thing to do."*

They see transitions, not endings.
Death is not a door, it's a bridge.

Their stories ask nothing of us, except to notice.
To soften. To listen.

Trees are always moving, even when they seem still.
So is grief. So is death.

**Nothing is lost.
Everything moves.**

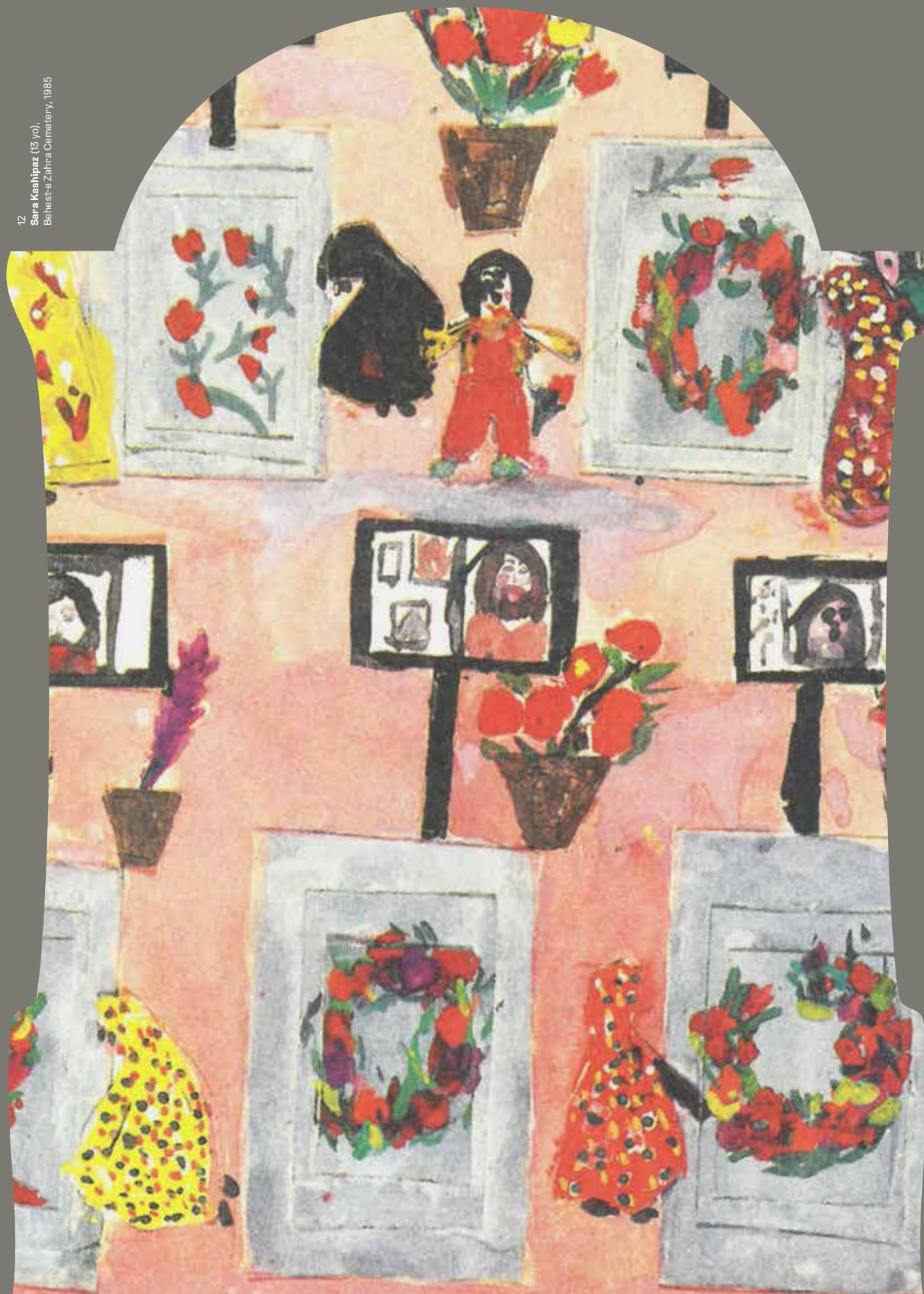
*Where do you locate spirit:
in your body, in others,
in places?*

P.S. You don't need to believe everything you've just read. You don't need to explain what you think or how it made you feel. Just hold the story. Let it sit.

If you find yourself pausing, needing time to process – know that we did too. For some, this may be an easy read; for others, it may stir discomfort or doubt. Either way, we think it's worth staying with. Because this isn't about certainty. It's about being open – to someone else's way of seeing, even if it's nothing like your own. Open to the idea that meaning takes many forms. That spirit might not be what you expect. And that listening, even when we're unsure, can still be an act of care.

As the tree silently records time in concentric circles, it reflects the soul's own journey – layered with experience, transformation, and resilience. Each ring marks a season of change: growth in the light, survival through the cold. When the tree dies, its rings remain, a quiet record of everything it lived through. There's something comforting in that – a sense that even after life ends, its shape and meaning endure. Like the tree, we leave traces behind, not just in memory but in the way we shaped the world. Death, then, isn't a disappearance, but a revealing of what was always there beneath the surface.

Act II
The Inner
Experience of Death



Act II
The Inner
Experience of Death

A DIALOGUE ABOUT DEATH ACROSS TIME

Death is one of the few experiences that unites us all, yet how we understand it shifts with age. Children, with their unfiltered curiosity, ask questions that adults often hesitate to face. Older voices, having lived through loss and reflection, carry perspectives shaped by time.

In this exchange, we gathered questions about death from children and passed them along to elders for their thoughts. By bridging these two perspectives, we hoped to uncover something rare: a conversation unburdened by expectation, where innocence meets experience, and where both the young and the old might surprise each other and us with what they see.

DEATH IS ONE OF THE FEW EXPERIENCES THAT UNITES US ALL, YET HOW WE UNDERSTAND IT SHIFTS WITH AGE.

(Our message to elders)

Dear Elder,

Below are questions asked by children, curious, honest, playful, sometimes blunt. We share them with you not to seek perfect answers, but to open a window into a rare dialogue between generations.

Children live close to mystery. Their questions remind us that death isn't only a fact, but a story we tell, a feeling we meet, a change we sense in our bones. Some of these questions are cosmic; others are sweet and strange. All are real.

We invite you to respond as you feel, not as an expert, but as someone who has lived. You might answer one question, or many. You might respond with a memory, an image, a feeling. All are welcome.

Thank you for your time.

With respect,
The Young



1. Opening the Door

Do you remember the elephant graveyard in The Lion King? (age 5 & 8)

"I do not know The Lion King. I know more movies like Rano Karno (comedy), but I don't really watch many movies so I am not aware of the movie The Lion King." (age 62)

"Omg, not at all, I don't know that movie at all." (age 75)

"Yes. Yes, I do. Michel obviously doesn't. I found it really moving when I watched the film for the first time, because there really are elephant graveyards. They really go there to die." (age 55)

What happens if you die with your clothes on? (age 5 & 8)

"You will be helped by the people who are going to shower you. As a Muslim, it is believed that the clothes you are wearing will be taken off and in exchange you will be showered thoroughly and get dressed with a cloth called kain kafan. However, if the cause of death is suicide then the clothes will not be taken off and helped. So it is also dependent on the cause of death." (age 62)

"Well, there is no problem if you die with your clothes on because someone will take responsibility in handling it." (age 75)

"A girl once actually asked me that in real life. Because her mom had cancer, and the girl was with me a lot. I'd often take her riding and so on. And then she asked me if, when you're buried, if you're wearing something. And I said, of course you can wear your nicest clothes, or whatever feels right. Normally, the way I've experienced it – you're usually undressed, washed, and then dressed in nice clothes again. That's how it was with my parents. You have to be quick, because the body stiffens." (age 55)

"So the question was: What happens if you're wearing something when you die? Or: What are you wearing when you die? Well, I'd say – you're always wearing something when you die." (age 60)

Who's the oldest person ever? (age 7)

"Of course my parents, I think they are the oldest person I know." (age 62)

"My mother's grandpa, who was 135 years old." (age 75)

"I have read about it lately. A woman around 112? Ah, the oldest one died last week. She wasn't Japanese this time. It was randomly in the newspaper last week – the world's oldest woman died, and a few days later, there's a new oldest woman. But generally, the oldest people live on a Japanese island." (age 60)

"And they're always women." (age 55)

Do you live longer if you eat healthy? (age 7)

"Inshallah (if God wills it). This is because I cannot decide such things and the only answer I can give is Inshallah." (age 62)

"Yes you shall! You should try to eat and have a healthy lifestyle." (age 75)

"Yes. Yes, if your genes cooperate and no illness comes beforehand." (age 55)

"Yes, no matter what genes you have. Being healthy makes you live longer. But it's been found that your lifespan mainly depends on your grandmother. Really – it's genetic." (age 60)

*Do you live longer if you eat healthy?
"Inshallah!"*
Age 7 & 62

2. The Big Wonderings

*What do you become when you're dead?
An animal? I hope a red panda.* (age 5 & 8)

"I want to become a heaven angel (*Bida dari surga*)."
(age 62)

"As a human you belong to earth so when you die you return and become soil because humans are made from soil."
(age 75)

"I hope that I just become earth again, so something new can grow from me. I don't want to be a panda. I don't want to be an animal at all. And I don't want to be reincarnated either."
(age 55)

Where do you go when you're dead? (age 5 & 8)

"To heaven (*surga jannah*)."
(age 62)

"You will go to Heaven (*surga*)."
(age 75)

"I think you just fell asleep and are gone."
(age 60)

"Ideally, I'd fall asleep at home, very old, and not wake up – because my heart just says: it's okay now."
(age 55)

Can you come back from the dead? (age 9)

"You cannot, you stay in heaven."
(age 62)

"No you cannot come back."
(age 75)

"No."
(age 55)

Is it possible that all souls came into existence at the birth of the Earth? And that we keep coming back in different entities, shapes, animals, humans? (age 9)

"Well, your soul can still be around your family and loved ones for the next 7 days, however, you as a spirit will not be seen through the human eye."
(age 62)

"No, that is not possible."
(age 75)

"I wouldn't deny it, because I can't know. So I can't say it's not true. But that's not my view. That's how spirituality comes about: humans looking for explanations. Some find them here and others there." how spirituality comes about: humans

looking for explanations. Some find them here and others there."
(age 55 & 60)

WHEN WE
WONDER
WHAT COMES
AFTER LIFE,
OUR ANSWERS
TAKE MANY
FORMS.

3. The Body and the Mystery

How do people die? (age 4)

"Cells can't regenerate, they stop working together, and you die."
(age 75)

"It is because it is destined from Allah."
(age 62)

"Every person dies because something in the body stops working for some reason. Something vital fails. Yeah, something stops functioning. That's how humans die. Otherwise, if something vital still works, then you don't die."
(age 55)

How does it feel to die or be dead? (age 5 & 8)

"I wouldn't know, but people who are very sick are scared."
(age 75)

"If you've done good, you won't feel pain. But if you've done wrong, it might feel like being pierced by fish bones. It all depends on the deeds you have done in your life."
(age 62)

"I don't know. I haven't been there. People have been asked this – you can read many books about what it feels like to die. Some say it's really okay, that they've lived a good life and they're ready. Others feel sad, wishing they'd done more. I think it's very individual – everyone experiences it differently."
(age 55)

"I think if you die of old age... yeah, if you're old, you just get tired. Physically, from what I saw with Pia-our dog-and from what I've read, it seems like your body just slows down. You drink less, eat less, your metabolism slows, and you get tired. You drift off. If it's old age-not an accident-nature just takes its course. You fall asleep."
(age 60)

What's the best way to die? Worst way?
(age 5 & 8)

"Best is doing good deeds. The worst is doing drugs or being in the club."
(age 62)

"Best is dying when you feel you've become a good person."
(age 75)

"Best is to fall asleep peacefully. The worst is drowning, or a long illness."
(age 55)

"Worst is prolonged suffering."
(age 60)

How do you know if someone's dead when they die in their sleep? I'm going to sleep all day when I'm old so I don't notice it when I die. (age 5 & 8)

"Everyone who is about to die has already been told when they were born the day they will die but also the position that they will die in. Of course you will not remember it because you were a baby. Once you pass away, an angel wakes you in the

grave, your soul will wake up and you will see the position you passed away in."
(age 62)

"No human will know; only Allah knows."
(age 75)

"You'd still notice - because you're not breathing."
(age 55)

"No pulse. No breath. The heart stops."
(age 60)

4. Spirit and the Divine

Can God also go through death? (age 4)

"No, Allah does not have human characteristics. Humans can give birth, cry, feel furious and many other characteristics that are human-like."
(age 62)

"God is not a human."
(age 75)

"No. If there's a God, then no. Because God has always existed and will always exist. That's how it's described."
(age 55)

"If there is one, no."
(age 60)

5. Love and Grief

I miss my uncle. Does he miss me? (age 5 & 8)

"Of course, your uncle misses you. Your uncle visits you and will always stay close to you."
(age 62)

“WHERE DO YOU GO
WHEN YOU’RE DEAD?”

Age 5 & 8

"I can't know for sure – it's God's secret – but I believe he misses you and is proud of you." (age 75)

There's no right answer.
Only the willingness to keep asking – together.

"I can't tell you, but he loved you so much when he was alive." (age 55)

6. Soft Landing

*But I don't like to think about it for long.
It makes me sad.* (age 9)

"I understand it is a difficult topic but it is something that people go through. Try to get closer to God and loved ones to prevent yourself from feeling sad." (age 62)

"It's not enjoyable. It's not something one looks forward to." (age 75)

"Yeah. I've come to that conclusion too. I read a lot about it – people around my age thinking about it, because it honestly scares me. But I've concluded that I can't change it, and I'm just making my life worse – the life I still have – if I think about it too much and fall into that fear." (age 55)

*Even with decades behind us,
death can remain tender, frightening,
unknownable.*

In this dialogue between generations, no single answer emerged. Only reflections, hopes, and truths shaped by time, belief, and personal experience. Some elders found certainty in faith. Others lived with questions. Some spoke gently of soil and seasons; others of angels and afterlives. What became clear is that age does not dissolve mystery. Even with decades behind us, death can remain tender, frightening, unknownable.

And yet, what children ask reminds us: death is not just a fact. It's a feeling, a curiosity, a story we keep trying to tell. Their questions are bold, funny, heartbreaking. They don't demand precision. They ask for presence.

Perhaps that's the real answer: not to explain death away, but to stay close to it. To let a child ask, and to respond not with certainty, but with care. "I don't know" can be enough. So can "What do you think?" or "Let's wonder together."

Because maybe the most loving thing we can offer, at any age, is not a perfect explanation – but a soft place to land. So before you turn the page, ask yourself:

What might your younger self have asked about death? How have your thoughts about it changed – or stayed the same? What would you say to a child who misses someone they love? Do you remember the elephant cemetery in *The Lion King*?



DEAD ART

Art is one of the few realms where death can be explored freely, without fear or finality. Artists engage with death as a muse, metaphor, and material, shaping its presence into something tangible. Whether through vanitas paintings, skeletal motifs, ephemeral performances, lyrics of mourning, or ghostly traces in film and photography. They give form to what is absent and translate the unspoken, moving beyond fear toward symbolism, ritual, and inquiry.

Through their eyes, death becomes more than an event; it becomes a language of memory, transformation, and the cycles of existence. To explore death through art is to approach it from many angles, allowing intuition and imagination to reveal what logic cannot. Here, death is not an end but a collaborator shaping what remains. This is a space where the departed speak, and the living listen.



17

The Falling Soldier, Robert Capa, 1936

Captured during the Spanish Civil War, this photograph is one of the most iconic – and controversial – images of wartime death. Robert Capa freezes the precise moment a soldier collapses, shot mid-action. Whether staged or spontaneous, it distills the terrifying immediacy of dying into a single frame, turning death into an act rather than a consequence.



16

Death of a Light Bulb / .30cal. Bullet, Harold Edgerton, 1936

Edgerton's pioneering stroboscopic photography renders the invisible visible. In this image, a bullet shatters a lightbulb mid-flight, capturing a split-second of destruction. Death, here, becomes a mechanical ballet – a symmetrical, silent collapse of form and function.

19

Death of the Historical Buddha (Nehan-zu), unknown, 14th century

This traditional Japanese scroll painting shows the Buddha on his deathbed, surrounded by weeping disciples, animals, and celestial beings. Unlike violent or tragic portrayals, this is a peaceful departure – death as transcendence, the soul's release into unity.



18

Wen Tianxiang's Death Poem Inscribed on his Belt, Tomioka Tessai, ca. 1870

Tomioka Tessai commemorates Wen Tianxiang, a Chinese scholar-general who wrote a poem before his execution, later discovered sewn into his clothing. The act of inscribing poetry onto one's body before death becomes a final gesture of autonomy – death as defiance, conviction, and continuity through word.

Translation of Death Poem:

"Confucius said: 'Become benevolent.'
Mencius said: 'Practice righteousness.'
Only by doing things righteously
Can one acquire benevolence.
So what have I gleaned
From these sages' writings?
From now on I truly hope
That I will have no regrets."

Why do we find beauty in decay?



20
The Mothers of Naples Lament Their Son's Death, Robert Capa, 1943
In war-torn Naples, Capa turned his lens toward those left behind. A chorus of grieving mothers wall over the body of a young soldier. The photograph doesn't just show grief – it embodies it, transforming private sorrow into collective outcry.

21
Pas pu saisir la mort, Sophie Calle, 2007

Sophie Calle set a camera to record the death of her mother. "Couldn't capture death," the title admits. The work is both deeply intimate and impossibly distant. Death is not fully visible – it slips past the lens, reminding us that even witnessing has limits.



Why are skulls such a common artistic symbol?



22
The Death of Munrow, unknown, 1820 – 30

This wooden sculpture portrays the dramatic moment when British soldier Hugh Munro was killed by a tiger in India in 1791. Rather than glorifying Munro's death, the artwork serves as a commentary on the perils of imperial ambition and the unpredictable forces encountered during colonial expansion.

Should we have the right to decide when we die?



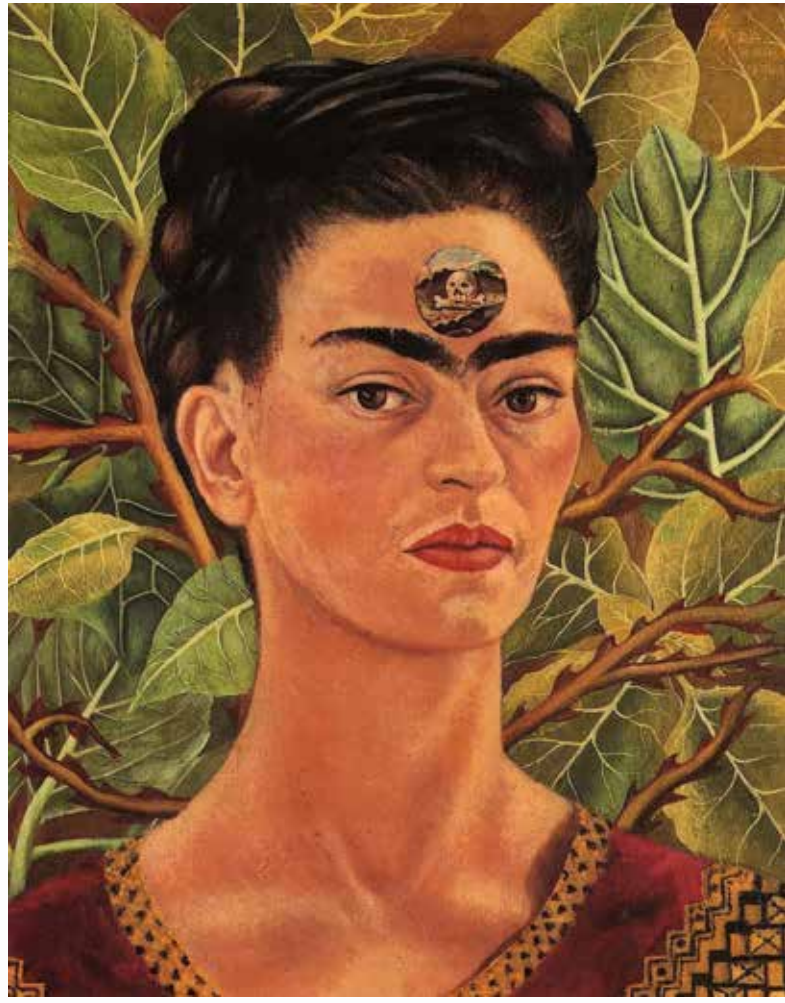
23
The Death of Socrates, Jacques Louis David, 1787
French neoclassical painter David immortalises the final moment of Socrates, who calmly accepts his sentence of death by the highly poisonous flowering plant, hemlock. Philosophy replaces fear. The body may die, but the mind – and message – remain resolute.

Would immortality be a curse or a blessing?

Do I have to die too?

What happens to a body when it dies?

How does brain death differ from clinical death?



24

Thinking about Death, Frida Kahlo, 1943

A small skull rests on Frida Kahlo's brow like a thought that refuses to leave. Known for her intimate portraits of pain, Kahlo stares directly at the viewer, death firmly nested in her consciousness. The image reflects not fear but familiarity.



25

Riding with Death, Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1988

In this haunting work completed just before his own overdose, Jean-Michel Basquiat paints a skeletal figure mounted by another. It's a raw meditation on mortality, power, and Black existence. Death is a passenger and a destination, always close.

Should we be able to choose when we die?

Why do people create memorials for the dead?



26

Altar for the Family, Angelica Vasquez Cruz, 1988

Oaxacan sculptor Angelica Vasquez Cruz builds altars from clay – colorful, abundant, full of symbols. This one honours the dead within a familial setting, where death is not disappearance but enduring presence, lovingly tended to.



27

Woman with Death on Her Mind, Kerry James Marshall, 1990

Kerry James Marshall Marshall, known for redefining representations of Black life, paints a contemplative woman, quiet but charged. Her direct gaze signals thoughtfulness, not fear. Death is not outside of her – it lives within her daily reflection.



29

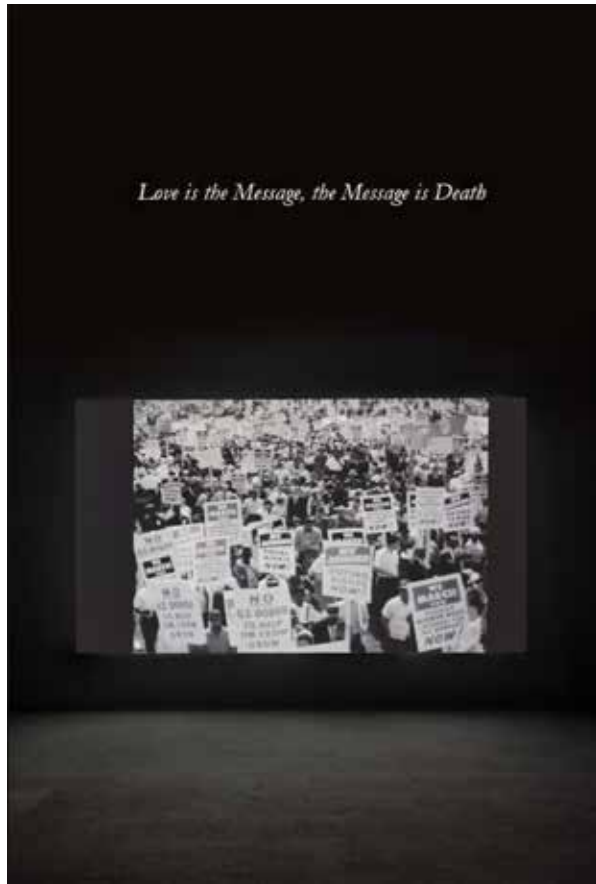
Vaporization, Teresa Margolles, 2001–2018

Teresa Margolles, trained in forensic science, collects residues from Mexican crime scenes – blood, water, dust – and turns them into art. In *Vaporization*, death becomes environmental: something breathed, absorbed, unspoken yet everywhere.

28

Love is the Message, The Message is Death, Arthur Jafa, 2016

Set to Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam," Arthur Jafa's found-footage video moves through Black history with poetic intensity. Beauty, trauma, joy, and grief collapse into one another. Death pulses like a rhythm through the archive – simultaneously brutal and sacred.



31

Personnes, Christian Boltanski, 2010

In a vast installation, Christian Boltanski piled thousands of used clothes into a chilling monument to absence. These garments stand in for bodies, memories, lives lost. Death here is unmarked, anonymous, and quietly monumental.



30

Mo(u)ning, Zanele Muholi, 2012

South African artist and activist Zanele Muholi uses self-portraiture to express both mourning and morning. Draped in black cloth, images are both memorial and metamorphosis – grief that does not collapse, but transforms.



32 *Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill, Pieter Claesz, 1628*

A classic vanitas composition: skull, quill, book, and timepiece. Pieter Claesz, a Dutch master of still life, paints decay with elegance. Writing and rotting share a table – death as reminder, muse, and mirror.



33 *Expression in Eyes, Yue Minjun, ca. 2003*

Minjun Yue's signature self-portraits often laugh in eerie unison. But here, the eyes betray the smile. In this postmodern death mask, emotion is aestheticised and evacuated – death not of body, but of authenticity.

Postscript

We turn to art not to escape death but to face it sideways, to see it reflected in glass, in pigment, in gesture. These works don't offer answers. They don't resolve loss or undo absence. But they do create space. A space to feel, to remember, to wonder.

If death is a language, artists are among its most fluent speakers. They remind us that mourning is not only sorrow, it is presence. That remembrance is not static, it moves. And that death is not the end of the story but part of its structure.

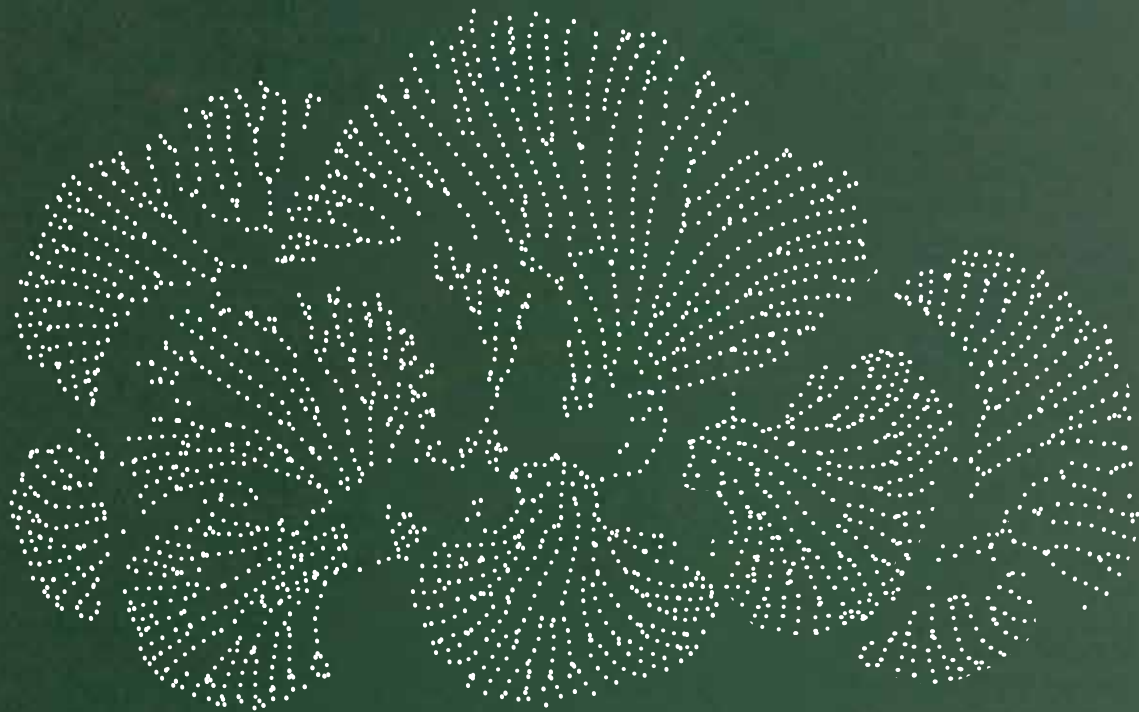
In this gallery of vanishing points, may you find not only grief, but beauty. Not only silence, but echo. Not only endings, but invitations to look again.

Artwork sources

- 16 Death of a Light Bulb / .30cal. Bullet, Harold Edgerton, 1936: MIT
- 17 The Falling Soldier, Robert Capa, 1936: International Center of Photography / Magnum Photos
- 18 Wen Tianxiang's Death Poem Inscribed on his Belt, Tomioka Tessai, ca. 1870: Mary and Cheney Cowles Collection
- 19 Death of the Historical Buddha (Nehan-zu), unknown, 14th century: Rogers Fund
- 20 The Mothers of Naples Lament Their Son's Death, Robert Capa, 1943: International Center of Photography / Magnum Photos
- 21 Pas pu saisir la mort, Sophie Calle, 2007: Sophie Calle
- 22 The Death of Munrow, unknown, 1820–30: The Charles E. Sampson Memorial Fund
- 23 The Death of Socrates, Jacques Louis David, 1787: Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund
- 24 Thinking about Death, Frida Kahlo, 1943: Frida Kahlo
- 25 Riding with Death, Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1988: Private Collection
- 26 Altar for the Family, Angelica Vasquez Cruz, 1988: 10 National Museum of Mexican Art
- 27 Woman with Death on Her Mind, Kerry James Marshall, 1990: Collection of Charles Sims and Nancy Adams-Sims
- 28 Love is The Message, The Message is Death, Arthur Jafa, 2016: Continental Group
- 29 Vaporization, Teresa Margolles, 2001–2018: MoMA
- 30 Mo(u)rning, Zanele Muholi, 2012: Zanele Muholi
- 31 Personnes, Christian Boltanski, 2010: Christian Boltanski
- 32 Still Life with a Skull and a Writing Quill, Pieter Claesz, 1628: Rogers Fund
- 33 Expression in Eyes, Yue Minjun, ca. 2003: Yang Gallery

*To investigate death through art is
to turn fear into language, ritual,
and transformation.*

Death & Design with Bob Hendrikx



In a world that struggles to face death, some dare to redesign it. Bob Hendrikx is an architect by training and co-founder of Loop Biotech, a Dutch company using mycelium – nature’s most efficient recycler – to create biodegradable coffins and urns. Alongside his partner in life and business, Lonneke Hendrikx-Westhoff, Bob works at the intersection of life, death, and design. As they prepare to welcome their first child into the world, they continue to reimagine how we leave it, transforming the funeral industry one mycelium cocoon at a time.

In this Interlude, we sit with Bob in the in-between: design and decay, business and care, innovation and tradition. He challenges dominant notions of legacy, value, and even the body itself, gently nudging us to see the potential of death as a return, a gift, a cycle. If we are to design futures worth living in, perhaps we also need to redesign how we die.

The Young: Hey Bob, thank you so much for making time to chat with us. Can you introduce yourself?

Bob: I'm Bob Hendriks, 31 years old, founder and CEO of Loop Biotech. I started the company four years ago with one mission: to create products that have a positive footprint. I've always looked to nature – how it builds, how it recycles, how it creates its own kind of architecture.

That's when I stumbled upon mushrooms. I was fascinated by their growth rate and how beautiful they are. As I dug deeper, I began to understand their ecological role. Mycelium, which lives underground, is nature's largest recycler. It improves soil quality and plays a vital role in the cycle of life.

I started wondering: how can I become part of that cycle again? And then it clicked. Mycelium wants to return to the soil. So what product do we put in the soil? A coffin.

TY: Did it scare you when you came to the conclusion that you might end up working around death?

Bob: It really did – especially in the beginning. When you graduate, you're young, fresh, ready to go. And the funeral world was not something I knew much about. Death isn't exactly what comes to mind when you're looking for something to devote your days to.

But I quickly learned that working with death makes you incredibly grateful to be alive. I hadn't realised how important death is in our society. Think about autumn – we rush to clean up all the fallen leaves. Dead things aren't allowed to stay. But if we can't live with death, can we really live with life? So yes, I've learned to be grateful for death – because it also means being grateful for life.

TY: Do you feel that you're in the business of death?

Bob: I don't feel that way. I think we're in the business of life – of being alive and bringing more life. What we do is grow organisms and return them to their natural habitats. So for me, it feels like we're part of a growth process. Of course, there's a dead person involved. But it feels more transformative than morbid – more focused on renewal, on adding value, on enriching life after death.

TY: Since this is a business, how do you balance care and commerce?

Bob: For us, it's mostly about the product – we don't usually deal directly with families. We sell our coffins to funeral directors, and they guide the families through the process.

But we do offer factory tours. Sometimes, people who know they're going to die soon visit us. We try to give them a positive, meaningful experience. We show them a different story: yes, dying sucks – but here's another way to look at it. You can actually do something good when you die. That shift can be comforting. Sometimes people come after their loved one has passed. Visiting the factory can become a kind of ritual closure.

We also have a voucher system. People – sometimes very healthy people – can pre-purchase a coffin so that everything is arranged in advance. That way, their families don't have to deal with it when the time comes. It gives them peace of mind. All of this came from people asking us: "Can I already buy one?" "Can I see your factory?" So we said yes.

"THEN IT CLICKED. MYCELIUM WANTS TO RETURN TO THE SOIL. SO WHAT PRODUCT DO WE PUT IN THE SOIL? A COFFIN."

Bob Hendriks

TY: You said earlier that this isn't really a death business – it's more of a living business. But how do you relate to death in this work? Do you feel like you're working with it? For it? What's the relationship between Loop and death?

Bob: I think we just have a different concept of death. In most places, it's still seen as a linear process – death is the end. After you die, that's it. There's pollution, CO₂ emissions, soil contamination, and a huge financial cost. And of course, you're never going to see your friends again. It's all painted very negatively.

In Western societies especially, death is something to be feared. But in other cultures, it's not. They see it as a cycle, or even a beginning. We've really embraced that mindset – of seeing nature at the center. And nature is all about renewal.

When something dies, it becomes nourishment for what comes next. That's the natural cycle. But the way we handle death today often looks more like waste management than part of the life cycle.

Of course, we have to deal with legal constraints. You can't just bury someone in a forest, even if that's the most natural thing to do. You'd end up in jail. So we try, within the boundaries of the law, to get as close as possible to the cycle of life.

TY: Do you ever feel like you're toeing the line with those laws? Like it's not illegal, but starting to feel... murky?

Bob: Yeah, in some cases. Our current product is actually illegal in some Southern European countries.

TY: Oh – why?

Bob: In those places, there are laws stating that a body shouldn't decay for a certain period of time. Some are rooted in religion, others in outdated regulations. For instance, in Italy, there's a law that coffins must be made from a specific type of wood, with a specific number of nails. These are really old laws. I don't think there's been much push for innovation – until now. But with growing awareness of environmental issues, change is slowly starting to come.

In Western European countries and the U.S., things are quite different. Thankfully, what we do is legal there. But even in more progressive places, some of the ideas we'd love to see aren't allowed – yet.

Take active composting, for example. Ideally, you'd keep a body above ground, where there's more oxygen. That speeds up the decomposition process significantly.

TY: I see. So in your ideal world, you'd have this pod just sitting on the grass?

Bob: Exactly.



TY: You mentioned earlier that you're getting interest from America, right?

Bob: Yeah, we've had interest from the U.S., and we're active in the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands. Our main customers are natural burial sites, but our product is also certified for cremation.

Of course, we prefer natural burials over cremation – why burn nutrients away? Ideally, we'd even love for people to go into the coffin naked. But in the end, that's not up to us.

TY: Mycelium is both incredibly ancient and futuristic. Do you feel like you're restoring something old or inventing something new?

Bob: Wow, that's a cool question. I'd say we're inventing – at least on the product level. We've developed a mushroom-based coffin that biodegrades and actively enriches nature. Unlike other biodegradable products, ours actually adds value.

So if you think about the footprint of a human, we've created a product with a positive footprint. That's pretty rare right now – most products still leave a negative impact. In that sense, we're definitely innovating. But if you zoom out and look at the bigger picture – decomposing organic matter – that's ancient. What we're doing is actually very old. The way we treat death today is, in many ways, unnatural.

It would make more sense to do what animals do – like a deer dying in the forest, simply becoming part of the ecosystem again.

TY: You've found a nice balance. What part of the burial process do you think should stay sacred? And which part should be completely renewed? I can guess from your business model which parts you'd like to change – but is there anything you believe should remain sacred?

Bob: What I really appreciated, for example, in the UK, is how the dead are treated with continued respect. In the Netherlands, once someone dies, they're no longer seen as a person – they become an object. They're stored, transported, almost like a package being shipped around.

But in the UK, even during transport, the language used still honors the person as if they were alive. I found that really beautiful.

I think ceremonies can be incredibly powerful. Of course, they're sad – but they can also be beautiful, meaningful, and offer real closure. I'd love to see more of that happening in natural environments.

To me, the more open and pure the ceremony is, the more it invites connection – with the deceased, and with the process of death itself. And honestly, I think the more people are exposed to death, the better they live.

If you constantly push death away, you end up – boldly put – living a pretty disconnected, even shitty life. But when you embrace it, life gets richer.

TY: Let's talk about Dutch culture a little. I'm a foreigner, living here for a couple of years.

Bob: You said Dutch culture or death culture?

TY: (laughs) Dutch, but actually, we're gonna talk about Dutch Death Culture.

Bob: (laughs) Nice.

TY: When I moved to the Netherlands, a few people told me it would be easy to do research here because people are very direct and open. There's a lot of pride in Dutch directness. As a researcher, I appreciate that – it means I can ask almost anything during fieldwork. But within this cultural context of directness and pragmatism, how do you think Dutch culture responds to death?

“LIKE A DEER DYING IN THE FOREST, WE SHOULD SIMPLY BECOME PART OF THE ECOSYSTEM AGAIN.”

Bob Hendrixx

Bob: I don't think we're especially open when it comes to death. In fact, I'd say Dutch culture – like much of the Western world – is quite afraid of it. I'm generalising, of course, but death isn't something we face very comfortably.

Western culture tends to idealise youth. What's young and blooming is celebrated. Anything that shows signs of decay – we don't want to see it. If the grass starts to die, we replace it. If weeds grow between the pavement stones, we pull them out. If there's moss on a building, we clean it. We're constantly controlling things, trying to maintain this polished, artificial version of nature.

And speaking of nature – in the Netherlands, we don't really have it. What we have are parks. Even most of our forests are production forests. They grow for 10 or 20 years, get cut down, and are used for timber. Ecologically speaking, that's not a forest – it's a crop.

That said, I do think we're also quite progressive and open to innovation. If you look at niche movements – like natural burial – we're actually leading the way globally, alongside the U.S. and the UK. There's a small but growing group here that's really saying: “We want something different. Let's bring death back into the forest.” They're incredibly open-minded, almost the opposite of mainstream culture. And that's hopeful.

TY: How do you feel Dutch society reacts to your work?

Bob: I think overall, the reaction is quite positive. The Dutch like innovation – especially sustainable innovation. One of the strengths of our product is that it's easy to understand. People get what a coffin is. And many already understand that traditional coffins have a negative impact – lots of wood, glue, and toxins going into the soil. So when they hear about a mushroom coffin, they think, “Hey, I know mushrooms. That makes sense. That sounds better.” Even people who don't usually engage with innovation seem to get it. It just clicks.

TY: So how do you explain what you do to a child?

Bob: We make coffins from mushrooms that dissolve into the soil. Honestly, that's the same language we use with funeral directors. If we start talking about mycelium and biological decomposition, most people are like, “What are you even saying?” At first, we focused on the technical benefits: it absorbs heavy metals, detoxifies the soil, boosts biodiversity. But people didn't really care. If it dissolves, that's enough. That already feels good to them.

And funnily enough, what also seems to matter a lot to people here is that the product is made in the Netherlands. We'll tell them, “You're helping save the planet,” and they'll say, “Wait – you're manufacturing here?”. That alone is a big selling point. Most coffins come from Asia or elsewhere. Ours are local. That counts for something.

TY: So how do you think about the body – not as waste, but as potential?

Bob: As huge potential. The body is basically nutrients – water and minerals. So it makes no sense to burn it. I mean, would you ever burn your compost bag? No one would burn soil. It just doesn't make sense.

TY: But you also offer an urn – a cremation product – right?

Bob: Yeah, that's true. And honestly, we only made it because people kept asking for it. It's one of those tricky things. Back in school, you always heard about the "people, planet, profit" triangle, and I used to think, "Yeah, yeah – whatever." But now I see how real it is. We're fully planet-driven, and we had to learn the hard way that you also need profit. Otherwise, the product doesn't survive. The mission doesn't survive. So when people started saying, "I love the mushroom coffin, but can you make a mushroom urn too?" – we heard it enough times that we eventually said, "Okay, let's do it." We're not in favor of cremation. But we have to look at the bigger picture. If someone's going to cremate a loved one anyway, better they use a mushroom urn than bury bioplastic or some other awful material. So that's where we draw the line: with cremation, we're trying to be less bad. But with the cocoon and natural burial, we're actually trying to be good.

TY: Do you think we've grown too afraid of physical decay? And what would change if we saw it as part of a living system?

Bob: Definitely and a lot would change. One of the most beautiful things I've learned personally is that when you embrace decay, you start to appreciate life more deeply. I really believe people would be happier if there were more visible decay around us – if we allowed it to be part of the environment instead of hiding it. I also think we're lucky here in the Netherlands to have seasons. It's easy to take that for granted, but many places don't. When you live with the seasons, you're constantly reminded of the cycle – growth, decay, rebirth.

Even something as simple as rain – it feeds the plants, and those plants feed us. When you understand that cycle, you feel more connected. And that connection brings perspective. In my view, if we really embraced that cycle, there would be a lot less frustration in daily life. Ironically, one of the top complaints in the Netherlands is: "Ugh, it rains so much." But if you understand what the rain gives us, you see it differently.

“WHEN YOU
EMBRACE
DECAY, YOU
START TO
APPRECIATE
LIFE MORE
DEEPLY.”

Bob Hendriks

TY: Now we'll close in and shift to time and legacy. You're expecting a child – your first?

Bob: Yeah. Literally, I think tomorrow or the day after. [laughs] My wife was already calling me like, "Where are you?"

TY: How does it shape your sense of becoming a dad? Does it shift anything in how you relate to your work?

Bob: Yeah, I do feel it's something special. We're working with death – and now we're also preparing for a birth. It's symbolic. There's something beautiful about it: we're giving birth to a future grandpa who's going to die someday. [laughs] It's the full cycle, and I feel like I can really see it all. In terms of work, I think that sense of responsibility just gets stronger when you're becoming a parent. You feel even more urgency – like, hey, we need to fix things. We need to do a good job. But that drive was already part of my values. I've always wanted to help create a better future. So working in a young, sustainable company already aligned with that. Still, it adds a layer. I think we're doing something good – but I'm also aware that what feels good now could be seen differently in 200 years. That awareness stays with me.

TY: Definitely. And to me, that's kind of the whack thing about sustainability – this idea that it should sustain ad vitam æternam, like forever. Which is actually one of the most unsustainable things you could imagine. A truly sustainable company would eventually end.

Bob: Exactly. And the more I've been in it – the more I've gone from fresh-out-of-school "let's save the world!" mode to working in the real world – you realise sustainability is often just the best option for this moment. But that doesn't automatically make it good. A lot of what we do is really about being less bad. And sometimes, we get to be good. In lectures, I'll joke – and not really joke – that the best thing we could do for the planet is die. People laugh, but I'm serious. From the planet's perspective, that's kind of true. For the human species? Not so much. [laughs] One time I gave a talk about how we should collaborate with nature, and someone said – completely seriously – "But we're not nature. We're above nature." And I thought he was joking. But he truly believed it. He said, "You can't compare us to nature. We're not animals." And I was like... you're literally made of biology. You're part of the animal kingdom!

TY: That's such a Western divide. This dichotomy between "us" and "nature." In ancient Greece, they conceptualised the idea of nature as something outside of us – something we observe from a distance.

Bob: No way. Can you send me something about it?

TY: If Loop Biotech is successful, what cultural shift would you most hope to see in how we approach death?

Bob: This is really at the core of it. When I started, I thought – how amazing would it be if people began to see themselves as compost, not waste? If we could understand that we're part of the cycle, not separate from it – that would be huge. At the beginning, I was scared. So I said to myself: just make one coffin. One. That's all I have to do. Maybe that one coffin could carry a message into the world. And maybe, if enough people see it – even just one person thinking, "I can become compost" – it might start a ripple effect. That was my motivation. And now, we've already made more than 2,000 coffins. So, hopefully, a few more wrinkles out there are compost-minded. [laughs] That's the dream.

TY: Last, how would you want to be buried?

Bob: (pointing at the Loop Biotech Living Cocoon) This guy. Ideally, a natural burial park in a U.S. National Park would be amazing. But I don't live there, so I don't know how my family's going to sort that out. [laughs] I'd love to have a tree planted on top of me – so I can continue living in the tree. Part of it is ego, maybe, but it's also comforting: your loved ones can still come visit your tree. You still

exist, in some form. And I like the idea that squirrels, insects, whatever – could be part of that. It feels warm. It feels alive.

TY: It gives the feeling that you're still part of the cycle.

Bob: Exactly. But yes – definitely in the soil.

TY: Thank you so much, Bob.

Bob: Thank you as well. Really fun conversation.

“I'D LOVE A TREE
PLANTED ON
ME – SO I CAN KEEP
LIVING. IT'S COMFORTING.
YOU STILL EXIST.
IT FEELS ALIVE.”

Bob Hendriks



Bob imagines a world where we see ourselves not as waste, but as compost – part of a regenerative cycle, contributing to life even in death. His work questions the laws, traditions, and business models that keep us removed from the earth. What if our bodies were not pollutants but nutrients? What if funerals weren't the end of something, but a return?

We're left wondering:

- *What would change if we treated decay with reverence instead of fear?*
- *Can design heal the breach between life and death?*
- *What legacy do we want to leave – in memory, in matter, in soil?*



Act III
Death in Common

POP CULTURE OF DEATH

Pop culture is our collective language, a space where ideas, emotions, and experiences converge and shape our shared consciousness. Drawing from forever-inspiring sociologist Stuart Hall's view of popular culture, we approach this realm neither as something dictated by a singular, elite agenda, nor as a static reflection of society. Instead, it's a dynamic, free space where the collective will of the people, in all its complexity, expresses itself.

When it comes to death, pop culture hands us the tools to talk, laugh, and cry often all at the same time. It lets us approach the unapproachable. It softens what's sharp, spins grief into something we can scroll past, laugh at, or quietly carry.



This chapter doesn't just catalogue media moments. It asks: how do these fragments reflect or shape how we mourn, remember, and move on? We'll delve into the ways in which pop culture allows us to confront, process, and sometimes trivialise death, offering both a form of release and a poignant reflection on the transient nature of life.

Death is temporary (if you have good writers)

Long before Hollywood figured out how to monetize mortality, real life was already making a show of it. Public executions drew crowds. Trials sold papers. Criminals became cover stars. And those uncanny post-mortem portraits? Not macabre but devotional, proof that someone was loved and is now missed.

Fast forward, and death has only gotten glossier. The days of staring at the hangman's work are over; we binge-watch true crime. We don't pose with the dead; we get memorial tattoos of celebrities we never met. Social media turned mourning into performance art. Funerals? Livestreamed. Condolences? Sent via retweets. Grief? Summed up in a 280-character tribute.

And, of course, Hollywood does what Hollywood does best: spins loss into content. Biopics of dead icons drop like seasonal collections, promising "the real untold story." True crime becomes binge material. Because nothing says "relaxing Friday night" like watching Ted Bundy explain himself. Real-life deaths are flattened into headlines, polished into plots, and sold back to us as streaming drama. We don't just accept it – we queue it, rate it, recommend it.

The Immortal Villain

In today's franchises, even death is reversible. Take Loki: the Marvel trickster who's died at least three times (even Thor stopped counting). "No resurrections this time," Thanos warned in *Infinity War* (2018). Cute. Cut to Loki headlining his own Disney+ series. Because in the multiverse of monetisation, death is just a plot device. The stakes? Paper-thin. The lesson? Death is never really the end; it's just a tease for the narrative.

Meme culture

You don't need a sainthood to be remembered. You just need to go viral. In meme culture, death doesn't mean absence. It means transformation. Gone in body, looped in pixels: reaction GIFs, tattoo flash, eternal TikTok audios.

Take Harambe, the 17-year-old gorilla shot in 2016 after a child wandered into his enclosure. Within hours, he had become an internet martyr. His name popped up on protest signs, T-shirts, and even U.S. presidential ballots. Was it grief? Irony? A strange mix of both? Harambe became a symbol, then a meme, then a shared cultural reference.

they call it gorilla glue because harambe was metaphorically the glue that held this nation together



37
Meme posted on X by @lunao

When *Fast & Furious* actor Paul Walker died in a car crash in 2013, the internet responded with real sorrow. His final appearance in *Furious 7* was rendered with CGI and wrapped in the emotional weight of "See You Again," a song written to mourn him. And the internet responded with its sharp edge. Not long after the tributes, the memes came. This is the paradox of the meme afterlife. One moment, someone is sainted. The next, they're a punchline. Reverence and irreverence side by side.

And sometimes, the internet lets sincerity stay. When Kabuso, the Shiba Inu behind the iconic "doge" meme, died in late 2024, there were no edgy jokes, no ironic detachment. The internet was flooded with love and

38
Meme posted on Facebook by Depressive Suicidal Meme Council



memories from fans everywhere. A wave of genuine affection for a dog whose sideways glance somehow became a shared language. Rest in peace, Kabuso, and all the other meme heroes who'll forever live on in our screens and hearts.



39
Photograph made by Atsuko Sato, owner of Kabuso

Merchandise Mortality: Death Sells, Literally

Ever walked into Forever 21 and wondered why Selena, Frida Kahlo, Amy Winehouse, Biggie Smalls, Tupac, and Aaliyah are staring at you from a \$15 t-shirt? It's almost poetic: icons who spent their careers dodging industry vultures are now immortalized on fast-fashion

polyester blends. Who profits? The estates? The brands? The corporations that bank on nostalgia? (Spoiler: probably not the fans.)

Beyond fashion, symbols of death are everywhere. Once counterculture, now commodified. Heavy metal's skulls and pentagrams moved from subculture to shopping cart. Jagged fonts, skulls, pentagrams – what once screamed rebellion now means you overpaid for a vintage Slayer tee. Spots like *The Great Frog* in London helped make these symbols a staple in culture. Their skull rings were a statement, a way of staring death in the face and saying, "Bring it on." Today, this design is everywhere, but it began with a subculture that turned mortality into a mindset: wear your risks, live on the edge, and make it count.

Death in Video Games: Try, Die, Repeat

Back in the day, video game death wasn't just a consequence but a business strategy. Ran out of time? Insert coin. Got blasted to bits? Insert coin.

But then home consoles came along and ruined the scam. Suddenly, death had to mean something more than a cash grab. Games like *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) softened the blow with extra lives, and save points eventually turned death into a minor inconvenience rather than a full-on tragedy. Die? No problem. Just hit restart and pretend it never happened. Immortality was now just a loading screen away.

And then came *The Sims*, the game that let us play God. Build dream homes, control tiny digital people, and (if you had a certain... creative streak) see just how many ways you could make them meet their ultimate end. At first, it felt wrong. But then curiosity kicked in. What happens if we remove the pool ladder? Can we trap them in a tiny doorless room? Can we start a house fire and just, you know, see what happens? The answer was yes. And it was hilarious. Death in *The Sims* became less of a tragedy and more of a sandbox for mischief, a virtual "what if" machine for those with a slightly twisted sense of humor.

But some games *lean all the way in...*

Take *Guacamelee!* (2013), a game drenched in Mexican folklore, where death is less of a punishment and more of a lifestyle choice. You play as Juan, a farmer-turned-luchador who hops between the worlds of the living and the dead like it's just another

The afterlife is weirdly fun – and honestly? The dead seem to be having a better time than the living.

Maybe one day, we'll be remembered not in stone, but in screenshots. As a GIF. Printed on a t-shirt. Or featured in someone else's slideshow of grief. Immortal, sort of.

Tuesday. The afterlife is weirdly fun, skeletons are partying, the music is fire, and honestly? The dead seem to be having a better time than the living.

Then there's *Severed* (2016), a game that said, "What if death wasn't just a game-over screen, but a mentor?" You play as Sasha, a one-armed warrior slashing her way through a nightmarish world to avenge her family. Death isn't the villain; it's the guide pushing her forward. Instead of something to fear, it's something to work with. How's that for a plot twist?

These days, video games aren't just using death as a setback. They're making it a theme, a tool, sometimes even a joke. Whether it's in adventures or simulated suburban torture chambers (*RIP to every Sim who ever crossed us*), death in games has evolved. It's no longer just "game over."

So, What Now?

Maybe this is just how we grieve now. Not quietly, but weirdly. Absurdly. Through memes, media, and a collective refusal to look away. We wear Nirvana shirts from thrift shops. We light candles under tweets. We stream funeral playlists. But that doesn't make it any less meaningful. We're not mocking death. We're metabolizing it, together, in the ways that make sense to us in this moment.

SIDETRACK

Heavy Threads: Death Metal T-Shirts

In death metal culture, merch isn't just an afterthought; it's sacred. T-shirts aren't just mementos from a gig; they're relics of sound, sweat, and allegiance. Worn like armor, these shirts communicate taste, subcultural affiliation, and intensity of fandom. Often the first entry point for new fans and the last thing to fade from a tour's memory, they are collectibles, heirlooms, and acts of wearable resistance.

Merch tables at shows feel like altars: small-scale, dimly lit, and holy. For underground bands, merch sales are often the financial backbone of a tour. But for fans, owning a band's shirt is almost devotional. It says: I was there. I survived the pit. I believe in noise.

Aesthetically, death metal tees are maximalist and unapologetic. Illegible logos. Anatomical grotesqueries. Obscure horror references. Gothic typography, inverted crosses, screaming skulls, plague monks, and decomposing angels. Colour palettes hover between black, blood, bile, and ash. The best ones are unreadable unless you're in the know. And that's precisely the point. These designs act as coded language, a barrier to entry, a flex, and a form of community-building all at once. Like the music, they are dense, layered, and designed to overwhelm.

In recent years, this aesthetic has migrated from crusty venues to high fashion, with brands borrowing from metal iconography for runway looks. But for collectors, there's a difference between a tee that survived a tour and one made for Instagram. Authenticity still matters. A well-worn shirt, cracked and faded, carries a history no reproduction can fake.

With over 600 shirts (he actually lost count), Geert-Jan is one such collector. His connection to death metal runs deep, but it didn't start there. "I have a strong connection to death metal, but it all started with Guns N' Roses and Metallica." His musical journey took side paths through thrash, black, doom, and hardcore. "All those areas and corners have value to me. It can't be boiled down to just death metal."

We asked him six questions to go deeper into the life of a t-shirt obsessive:

6 Questions to a Death Metal T-Shirt Collector

With Geert-Jan Baltus



40 Cryptopsy: None So Vile Longsleeve of Geert-Jan

TY: Has the aesthetic changed over time – or does a purist code still hold?

GJB: It has definitely developed. In the mid-80s to mid-90s, death metal was more uniform. Then came metal fragmentation – thrash, black, brutal slam – each with its own visual language. You can tell from afar. Cannibal Corpse even changed their logo once, and it caused backlash. Now, there's much more variety. A lot of newer bands didn't live through the peak years, but they pay tribute using the same aesthetics.

TY: What's one shirt you'll never let go of, and why?

GJB: I have whole boxes of shirts – some are rare and valuable in terms of money. But the ones I'll never let go of? That's about emotional significance. The album, the concert, the memory. My mother once

said I'd grow out of this "fetish." I'm almost 50 now. It's changed, sure – but the core is still the same as when I was 14.

TY: What does death metal teach you about death?

GJB: It brings death close while also keeping it at a distance. It makes it more familiar, less serious.

The Young: What was the first death metal t-shirt you ever owned – and what did it mean to you?

Geert-Jan: It was an Obituary shirt. They had split up for a while after their major success, and then reunited around 1996. I was at their reunion show at Paradiso, Amsterdam. I had followed them for such a long time. That t-shirt commemorates them re-uniting and me being in awe.

TY: What visual or design elements define a classic death metal tee?

GJB: Definitely the logo, and the t-shirt should be black. From a distance, you should be aware that it's a death metal t-shirt, it's a social signal. Symbolism matters too: anti-religion, gore, those are extra bonuses. Small trademarks count if you're into collecting. Original or bootleg – it all says something.

TY: What makes a shirt collectible to you?

GJB: For some hardliners, it's all about purity: old shirts, single-stitched, the right trademark, the original label, the perfect fade, the tiny holes. Some say it has to be pristine. For me, it's about where I got it – festival or concert – and what that moment meant. I'm comfortable with newer prints too if the album or the band means something to me. It's about attachment, memory.



41 Obituary: Back from the Dead T-Shirt of Geert-Jan

COLLECTIVE GRIEF

It's strange, sometimes, how close it all sits together. A fictional death goes viral. A villain returns from the grave. A meme gets shared, reshared, reinterpreted. And then, mid-scroll, something else: a real death. A real face.

In a single feed, we move from performance to reality, from punchline to horror. We grieve ironically, collectively, and then not at all. And it's hard to hold these different registers of death at once. To make sense of what we're allowed to feel, what we're asked to ignore, what we're expected to move past.

This next chapter doesn't offer resolution. It tries to name that dissonance. It asks what grief looks like when death isn't curated. When it isn't stylised, but sanctioned.



There are many kinds of death. Some are natural, tender, and expected. Others are systemic, denied, ongoing. When we speak of grief, it's often personal. But what about the losses we are asked to overlook? What about the deaths we're told are necessary? What happens when grief is communal? When it spills across borders, screens, headlines? Can we still feel it? Can we still name it? Can we respond without becoming numb?

This chapter is written during the war on Gaza. But it isn't only about Palestine. It's about the deaths we are meant to accept. The ones justified by power. It's about mourning in public. About clarity in a time of denial.

And maybe most of all, it's about the grief that should be collective. But isn't.

What follows isn't an elegy. It's a reckoning. An attempt to ask: what kind of grief can hold all this? Can we mourn the unaccepted death? How do we mourn together without giving in to paralysis?

It is also about the thinkers who lived through war, genocide, racial terror and still demanded we tell the truth: namely, James Baldwin, Hannah Arendt, Viktor Frankl, and Gandhi. Not as saints or moral authorities, but as people who sat with the unbearable and insisted on clarity over comfort.

Because if we're serious about death, and not just the soft kinds, then we have to be serious about the machinery that produces it.

Serious about children growing up under occupation, about families vaporised in airstrikes, about people scraping together life under siege. About the unbearable weight of knowing and the weight of not knowing what to do. It's about a nightmare that keeps repeating, while the world watches, sometimes with horror, sometimes with justifications, mostly with a protective numbness.

Again, it isn't only about Palestine. It is about what we do when faced with horror, again and again. How we speak. How we stay silent. How we grieve. How we act. It's about the people who suffer, and the people who can no longer look away. And how, even far from the rubble, many feel as though a part of them is breaking too.

One question keeps asking itself: How do you mend a broken heart? Not with numbness. Not with slogans.

Not by pretending it's someone else's problem. You begin with clarity:

James Baldwin knew this. The American author lived in a country that called itself free while placing its boot on the necks of Black people. He loved humanity enough to speak plainly:

"To be committed to the liberation of others is to be committed to your own."

Baldwin did not believe in peace as a polite silence. He believed in peace as a violent act of truth-telling – one that might rupture families, nations, illusions. Love, to Baldwin, was not sentimental, but ferocious responsibility.

"Love has never been a popular movement... the moment you love someone, you are responsible for them."

When we talk about peace, we cannot talk about waiting. We cannot talk about healing before we've stopped the bleeding. Peace, Baldwin would insist, begins when the lies stop.

Hannah Arendt, a Jewish political theorist who fled Nazi Germany, also knew that horror does not always arrive in jackboots. Sometimes it arrives in bureaucracy, in civility, in policies. In her coverage of the Eichmann trial in 1961, she wrote about the "banality of evil" – the idea that monstrous acts are often committed by humans who look disturbingly normal, because they obey rules without thinking.

Arendt did not believe memory alone could stop atrocity. In fact, she feared it might become a shield, a way to avoid reckoning with present violence. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she wrote:

"The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution."



James Baldwin
1924–1987



Hannah Arendt
1906–1975

Her warning was sharp: those who remember their own people's suffering must never use it to justify the suffering of others. If they do, they've betrayed the very memory they claim to honour.



Viktor Frankl
1905–1997

Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, saw that in extreme suffering, humans still have choice. Not the freedom to stop what is happening but the freedom to choose how to live inside the terror. He wrote:

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

But Frankl didn't mean retreating into oneself. He meant taking responsibility, not just for survival, but for meaning. He believed the survivors of horror had a duty to reshape the world. And that duty, he warned, is not neutral.

"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response."

That "space" must be occupied by action, not just intention.



Mahatma Gandhi
1869–1948

Then there is Gandhi, whose name is so often sanitised by textbooks that we forget how radical his philosophy truly was. Satyagraha – often translated as "truth-force" – was not passive resistance. It was a deliberate refusal to obey. A spiritual and political war against the empire.

Gandhi did not confuse peace with submission. He said:

"There is no road to peace. Peace is the road."

And also:

"Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good."

In Palestine, peace will not come by rewarding those who bomb homes and call it self-defence. It will come

when those with moral credibility refuse to cooperate with the machine. Even when it's inconvenient, especially when it costs something.

To say you are exhausted by war is not a weakness. It is the residue of care in a time that demands numbness. If we are serious about ending violence, then clarity must take precedence over comfort.

Clarity means naming systems: apartheid, settler colonialism, impunity, propaganda.

Clarity means rejecting false equivalence. Clarity means demanding more than memory, demanding justice. James Baldwin never promised comfort. He said:

**"YOU THINK
YOUR PAIN IS
UNIQUE IN THE
HISTORY OF THE
WORLD, BUT THEN
YOU READ."**

James Baldwin

So we read. We remember. We act.

But what does acting look like when missiles fly, when borders suffocate, when news cycles numb and fracture? There is no step-by-step, no 28-day peace challenge. But there are directions. Unfinished paths.



Hard questions:

What are you willing to lose to end war? Comfort? Status? Safety? If you are watching from a place of relative calm, what can't you un-know now? Where do your taxes go, your attention, your silence? Who are you listening to? Who do you believe? And who's been left out of the telling?

These aren't just moral riddles. They're coordinates. If you're lost, begin here:

Speak. Refuse. Boycott. Read. Organise. Mourn publicly. Defend the living. But perhaps more gently: What does your grief need in order to move? Who can contain it with you, so you don't have to carry it alone? Maybe the question isn't just how do we end this? Maybe it's also: What kind of world do we need, to make collective grief possible?

Grief Tender with Guillaume Dardenne



It felt right follow this chapter with our second ‘death worker’ Interlude with Guillaume, someone that can take us by the hand. A grief tender, trained in Buddhist hospice care and compassionate inquiry. He helps people meet death, grief, and the losses in between – not as a final punctuation, but as part of a dynamic process, something that moves with us.

This Interlude is not a full chapter. It’s a gentle pause, a breath, a moment to meet a person whose work touches death in quiet, transformative ways. Guillaume’s presence opens the door with softness. He doesn’t impose a framework. Instead, he meets people where they are, quite literally, in their homes, at their own pace, and in their own language.

Before our conversation, Guillaume told his 98-year-old grandmother Paulette about it. He likes to share these moments with her. There’s something in that gesture, a tenderness, that says a lot about the way he holds this work.

To speak with him, I returned to the comfort of my home in Rotterdam, and Guillaume spoke from his in the South of France. It felt intimate, appropriate. This project asks a lot – to think about death, to feel it – and Guillaume helps us ease into the conversation with care.

The Young: Do you refer to yourself as a Death Doula? What do you call your practice?

Guillaume: I don't refer to it as Death Doula. In Germany and France, this is referred to as 'accompagnant.' What I call myself is a grief tender. I help you tend and take care of your grief – for your mortality, for the death of somebody close, for the loss of something.

TY: And how did you come to it?

Guillaume: I got closer to the work of Francis Weller and his online community, meeting with people to make sure grieving stays a verb and not a state. There was a grief ritual, a leadership training where we explored together the important components of a grief ritual – for people to be able to summon the energy that is behind the sadness and to be able to metabolise it. Through that process, grief and loss and death became more and more dynamic than they used to be. Before, death was a final process, a dot at the end of a sentence. Now it is interwoven with what is moving and what is not moving. (laughs)

TY: How does grief tender differ from other end-of-life care professions, like hospice or palliative care?

Guillaume: First of all, we work from home, so we meet people where they are. We don't go to a unit or a hospital. I used to only meet people who wanted to die at home – people who didn't have enough support in their lives. Mental, physical, and spiritual support. So they asked the Buddhist hospice I was working for if we could visit them.

The second difference is: I was trained by a Buddhist hospice, but we never had to share any sort of beliefs that come with Buddhism – life after life, karma, etc. It was really free. We nevertheless very often talked about spirituality. I felt it was much easier to do this at home, where people live, rather than in a hospital, for many, many reasons.

TY: For this conversation, I came back home, and now you're in your bedroom. As a researcher, I always try to speak with people in their space or chosen space, because you're doing something vulnerable, so you need to feel as comfortable as you can in order to open up.

Guillaume: That speaks to that. Also, to offer them a place that they consider a refuge. The hospital is the place where you learn that you are about to die. The place where you try to fight the disease. The place where finally, they give up on you and say "you're going to die." This is no refuge. The hospital is a helpful place, but not a refuge that you can feel in your body.

TY: What are the most rewarding aspects of your work as a grief tender?

Guillaume: (laughs) I felt truly blessed when I made space for somebody to ask me the difficult questions that they couldn't ask anyone else. That's tough, but it is incredibly rewarding that people could let it off their chest, because we were cultivating this space together.

The quality of presence – you cannot fake it. When you're a therapist, you might be in your head, somewhere else than the physical space you're in with your patient. But when you're working with somebody at the end of life, they have no time for that. They can see through you very well. So this really forces you, in a gentle way, to understand whether you are present and authentic or not. That rawness is like an immediate reward.

TY: What challenges do you face in your daily practice?

Guillaume: (laughs) When the person is not accepting where they're at in the moment. When they are searching for answers or resolution that might not come. That creates a lot of energy and stress in their last days, trying to solve things. That's a challenge, because you want to honour their process and what they need to go through before they go. And at the same time, you wish them peace, and maybe for them to not expect something from somebody. Not expect their death to unfold a certain way. To let go of that too.

“MORE LIFE
IN YOUR DAYS,
NOT MORE
DAYS IN
YOUR LIFE.”

Guillaume Dardenne

TY: Death is something we don't want to think about, yet most of us have an image of how we'll die. Expecting things to somehow be in order before we die.

Guillaume: It's a hard one, holding onto those expectations. Perhaps there's also a deep knowing – that when there is nothing else to grasp, they will finally have the courage to let go of the resentment, of the anger. I don't know, but I also want to see it that way. **Perhaps there is this inner knowing that nothing else will be as important as this last process, and things will be resolved.**

TY: But isn't it bittersweet to think that if you go through that process – you feel it, you learn to let go, you surrender, let go of control and resentment – you could live such an exceptional life. But we often do this in the last minutes of it.

Guillaume: (laughs) Right. I will tell you when I'm there. I'm not past the holding and clinging and resentment. But I believe that letting go of all that comes with such a bliss – experiencing that bliss, even if only once in your life, and once at the end of it – is probably a very, very great way to end the cycle.

TY: What a joy, to know that no matter what, you'll get there.

Guillaume: I've seen it on the faces of people, heard it in their stories. At the end of it, they were so grateful. They didn't expect it because they hadn't experienced it before. It would have been amazing to have it earlier, but when you're a few days before dying, you can either spend your last days on 'what could have been,' or 'what can I do with what is left.' **That is the work of a grief tender: how can we put more life into your days, not more days into your life?** More joy, aliveness, connection, silence – purposeful silence, not just imposed silence.

TY: This is timeless. Hearing you, I'm remembering the short documentary about Ram Dass, towards the end of his life, when he's floating in the pool – this moment of bliss, there's no tension, there's no problem, this is timeless.

Guillaume: Exactly. Buddhist practices and wisdom – there's no such thing as a lifespan. There's no such thing as being alive or being a human being. Buddhist practices help you get out of binary thinking: 'I am human / they are not,' 'I am alive / they aren't.' It's more about what actually is.



“MY FRIEND IS MOVING THROUGH ME. HE’S STILL MAKING ME LAUGH.”

Guillaume Dardenne

One of my favourite teachers is Thich Nhat Hanh. He talks about interbeingness. None of my friends who have passed away – the people I’ve supported – I don’t think about them all the time, but all of them live inside of me. They continue. It’s impossible for me not to live with them.

TY: This is something you feel in your bones, so you deeply know it. It is not an end, but a cycle – and you are part of it. You are actively part of it.

Guillaume: This is why earlier, I did not say ‘alive or dead’ but ‘moving or not moving.’ Because at one point you will move, and at another point you will not move. But you will be moved. My friend is moving through me. Sometimes I’m laughing because I remember something he would say in a specific situation that I’m experiencing and I’m amazed – “you are still making me laugh.” (laughs)

TY: Apart from Thich Nhat Hanh, are there certain traditions or practices that influence your approach to end-of-life care?

Guillaume: I’m in a work group with people who trained like me in compassionate inquiry – that was started by Gabor Maté. For the last two years, we’ve been working on understanding how to apply compassionate inquiry to grief work, and how to apply the wisdom of grief to occidental therapies.

Phyllida Anam-Aire, who used to be a Catholic nun, eventually realised that the church wasn’t serving the people, nor God. She reconnected to her Irish Celtic roots and developed beautiful prayers and tools for the mind, body and soul – for the family, during, before, and after. A fierce, amazing human that I had the chance to work with a little bit.

TY: In your experience, how do people typically react to the idea of death?

Guillaume: There’s a shutdown, a narrowing down – in terms of expressivity, their body language, their tone of voice. The stories tend to always move in the same direction. People don’t allow themselves to tell a different story about death. It feels like we are all following a script regarding death, and nobody seems satisfied with it. Death is seen as a punishment from a Christian perspective. Even people who are

not religious – if you live in a Christian-majority society – death tends to be seen as a punishment. Being punished with death because we have sinned. It narrows down our perception and expression of death. The body becomes stiff. It becomes a wordless experience. Sometimes, it is good to be wordless – but not if you’re numb. If you’re wordless and numb, then it is not being processed. But sometimes, this is the only thing available to you.

TY: It can be a phase. You might need three days of numbness. When someone very close to me died, I could not tolerate the fact. For three months, I was totally disengaged. I have overall a very good memory, but those three months are a total blur. I do not remember anything at all.

Guillaume: Naturally. If you had people around you – a tribe – to take care of your survival, food, paperwork, that sort of thing, you could have focused, with the help of others, on processing this passing with your heart broken, but open.

TY: When it breaks, it closes. How do you help individuals and families move through the emotional, spiritual, and practical aspects of dying?

Guillaume: (laughs) Big question. The most important thing I could say right now is that even though they might not always have the energy for it, it has to be something that reflects who they are. Whether they are leading the process and I support them, or from our relationship I have a sense of what they would like to do – what kind of rituals they would like to do. When do they need to talk, when do they need silence. When do they need to be alone, or with people. It has to be

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Image Source Unknown



something that's dealt with in the present and without a script. Because they don't know what is happening. They are discovering it as it goes. We have no clue until we are there ourselves what's actually happening when you are dying. I can only guess from seeing people going through it. But the most essential part: it has to be without a script. It has to be authentic, honest, not shying away from the difficult questions, from the emotions that are rising.

I treat this the same way I treat people with trauma release. It is not about being done at the end of the session, about being perfect and fully released. It is about how you take care of yourself through the process. Do you force yourself to be okay with it? Do you force yourself to go faster, to do more? Or are you going to be a bit more compassionate? Understanding the limitations and the resources you have – and the people around you have. It has to be in the present, in time and space.

TY: And with compassion.

Guillaume: (laughs) That's helpful.

TY: If you think about rituals, which can feel scripted, how do rituals complement that moment? How do rituals play in your work?

Guillaume: I've offered different types of rituals. I ask about the framework of the person: are they Christian, Sufi? I first need to understand the spiritual availability of the person. I don't need to do rituals invoking a Celtic goddess if the person is just not into that. That would be my agenda over their experience. That's not good. So I ask them what they thought about, the way they would like the ceremony to go: music, flowers... It can be very down to earth. Is there anything you would like to do before – letting go of something? Do you want a little ceremony around it? Or do you want to throw it in the garbage and that's it? I remind them there are options they maybe never thought of. They are the ones to decide. So I explore a bit, I ask questions, and based on their answers, I'm working with them one step at a time. I'm not ahead of them – beside them, rather.

TY: What do you think are the most important things people should think about or plan for when it comes to their own death, aside from legal and financial matters?

Guillaume: What is important is that you make sure people around you have the resources to stay connected to themselves as you go through this. You can't spend any energy on the people around you. I would see this as a sad outcome – it doesn't mean they have to fake it, it means the preparation is a communal preparation. You need the people around you to understand and feel equipped to support you through this. It's important because sometimes at the end, people are putting on a face for their family members and friends, because they want them to feel better – and that might drain your energy. That's something that is not really spoken about.

TY: If we look at integrating death into life, how can we as a society begin to normalise conversations about death in a way that eases us rather than making us fearful?

Guillaume: I believe the most important point is to realise that death isn't something that happens once. It happens all the time – a breakup, your parents divorcing, losing the unity of the household, getting fired, going to therapy and realising your parents didn't share their love. It's also a loss you've been grieving without realising. So the easiest way to prepare for the 'big death' (laughs) is to realise that death is a dynamic process that you are experiencing every day.

Not just in a philosophical way – you are full of things dying inside of you and also being reborn. So realising all those little deaths and grieving them actively might integrate death into life.

TY: How do you grieve?

Guillaume: So many different ways depending on who is doing it. Grieving is something that needs a container, because without a container, you need to numb yourself. There's this fear that if you really go into sadness, you'll get lost in the ocean – in the vastness of it. If you start feeling the grief for your situation, for the children of Gaza, of Congo, for trans people in the US, for the Uyghurs – it's endless. You need to create a container to be able, today, to willfully and consciously spend some time with it. You are being contained by yourself, somebody else, or any tools that work for you – like music, a place, a candle. It can be writing it down. We need to get creative around that. Because grieving is not just the image of the Sicilian mother in black, wailing. Grieving is a very dynamic process – and maybe that's the most beneficial option.

TY: Do you have anything you would like to add?

Guillaume: Can I make a personal announcement?

TY: For sure.

Guillaume: I'm calling on queer grief tender to join me in a movement to create grief care for LGBTQA+ people in our cultures and everywhere in the world. I would love people to join me in that process. I know things are already happening in the US but it's just too few. I would love the queer community that have historically been very in touch with shamanic practices to be empowered to process grief and death and to offer that to everybody else.

TY: Much love, thank you.

Guillaume: Thank you.

“GRIEF NEEDS A CONTAINER, – WITHOUT ONE, WE NUMB OURSELVES.”

Guillaume Dardenne



Guillaume reminded us that grief is not a condition but a movement. It doesn't arrive all at once, nor does it follow a set path. It visits in waves, in silence, in laughter, in memory, in the way we touch or are touched. Perhaps this is what it means to grieve tenderly: not to fix grief, but to sit beside it. To let it change shape. To allow our grief to speak in our own language, and not the one inherited from scripts we never agreed to.

As you leave this Interlude, a few questions to hold:

- What is your relationship to grief today – not just for lives lost, but for selves shed?
- What containers have held you when words did not?
- If grieving is a way of loving what the eyes cannot touch, what or who are you loving in that way?



Lilies have long symbolized death and mourning, representing the soul's restored innocence after passing. In Western, especially Christian funerals, white lilies stand for purity, peace, and hope of resurrection. Their delicate presence honors the departed and comforts the grieving. The strong, sweet scent of lilies reflects how grief can both overwhelm and soften us, showing that beauty and loss often go hand in hand.

We made this publication to spend time with death – not as a threat or a puzzle, but as a presence. Through bodies, beliefs, words, rituals, and relationships, we traced the many ways death weaves through life. We listened to death workers who sit with the dying, to artists who make meaning from absence, to children who ask what adults won't. Some stories were heavy, others light. Some voices carried sorrow, others surprise. All of them offered us company in a place most people usually walk past.

If you've read this far, thank you for staying. We hope you feel less alone in your questions, more connected to the lives around you, and perhaps a little less afraid of your own ending. Wherever you are now, you're alive. And that's where this ends.



The Young Questions is a series of publications by brand development agency The Young.
This is edition 4. © 2025

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Baan 74
3011 CD Rotterdam
The Netherlands

Printing: Pantheon, Velsen-Noord
Typefaces: Graebenbach by Camelot, PS Times by Parker Studio, CMM Coda by Comma Type, Louise by Velvetyne, Hanol by Bouk Ra and Octave by Faire Type.
Paper: 100 g/m² Munken Polar & 240 g/m² Stardream 14

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The End?