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71 499 words.

## SONGS TO SING TO THE DYING

by Lauren Roche

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## *Can Dead Dogs Eat Chocolate in the Underworld?*

Exegesis to accompany the thesis ***Songs to Sing to the Dying***.

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## Attestation of Authorship

"I declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning." Candidate's signature:

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to James George for his advice and encouragement. Without his help I would still be floundering in the darkness, and this thesis and exegesis might never have lived.

For Mum, whose death introduced me to Death, and Graham whose love introduced me to life.

I am grateful to Jan Leitch and Jane Cunningham, artist friends, who provided the illustrations for the thesis, and to my MCW 2020 critique group, especially Maria Gill, Rob Luisi, Kit Willett and Andrea Malcolm.

*'Seeing the end of your life is the birth of your ability to love being alive. It is the cradle of your love of life.'* (Jenkinson, 2015) <sup>i</sup>

*'... Live forever?' continued Phil the Raccoon. 'Are you shitting me? I can barely keep my alimony payments going as it is, let alone for all eternity.... You see, Death, we appreciate Life for what it is, in all its filthy glory. And we like having you around to tell us when it's over. You provide closure, you know?'* (Pendle, 2008). <sup>ii</sup>

## Intellectual Property Rights

1) All intellectual property, including copyright, is retained by Lauren Roche (the candidate) in the content of the candidate's exegesis. For the removal of doubt, publication by the candidate of this or any derivative work does not change the intellectual property rights of the candidate in relation to the exegesis.

2) Lauren Roche (the candidate) confirms that the exegesis does not contain plagiarised material or material for which the copyright or other intellectual property belongs to a third party.

## Ethics Approval

This research project did not involve human participants or any other potentially contentious elements, and as such did not require approval from the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Any passages that refer to dying are highly fictionalised and anonymised, but are true. I have spent many years sitting with the dying, each death being meaningful, and I am grateful to those who taught me my craft.

## Can Dead Dogs Eat Chocolate in the Underworld?

### Synopsis:

It's hard yakka, living eternally in the murky liminal zone betwixt Earthside and the Stygian waters. The incumbent Death and Charon have been on the job for two and a half thousand years. Their tenure has been blighted by extinctions, wars, pandemics, and climate change. Although it is but a peaceful terminus between Earthside and The Styx, the Underworld is becoming hellishly busy. Ruinous policies have changed Earth's climate, turning once fertile areas into deserts. As the polar ice caps melt, rising seas inundate coastal settlements. The increasing unnatural destruction of the planet is annihilating habitats; humans and animals are dying at devastating and escalating rates. Something has got to give. Poor Death is sick to the back teeth of death: there's just too much of it around these days. At the same time individuals are increasingly terrified of Death's claim on their own lives; personal death-avoidance is a growth industry.

*... the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in*



*some way that it is the final destiny for man. (Becker, quoted in Blanco and Vidal, 2005).<sup>iii</sup>*

Western society has forgotten that death is essential to life. Many no longer graciously surrender their souls; they fight and bargain and prolong their own dying while remaining blind to the premature death their lifestyle rains upon others.

*... today's medical technologies can maintain essential bodily functions, and all outward appearances of life, long after the brain's neurons have stopped firing. But does this prolong life or simply extend the dying process? Is the quality of life suffering because of our fixation on the quantity of life? (Blanco & Vidal, 2015).<sup>iv</sup>*

Citizens of the first world see Death as the thief of life, not its conjoined twin. They do not understand the myriad ways in which cellular level death enhances life. Every moment, Death remodels our cells, organs, and embryos to defragment and upgrade anatomical circuitry. Every day Death dons many thousands of guises to escort the dying to the near side of the Styx. Charon the ferryman rows the dying to the other side, his forearms aching, his back on fire, transporting every departee with compassion, tenderness, and the occasional chocolate biscuit. The deathly duo love all that lives, and they despair at human disregard for one another and the animals who share their once verdant planet.

*'I don't know how much longer I can do this,' says Death. '... I'm so tired. We haven't had a break in millennia and the new civilisations are no more civil than earlier ones, with their wars, man-made disasters, pandemics, and inequities. Mass deaths and extinctions are taking off and people are too apathetic to change.'*

*'It's been right hectic, as you say,' says the boatman. 'Far too darn busy.'*

*See these?’ He lifts his cloak to expose a pallid scrawny arm corded with muscle.*

*‘Ache like the buggery they do. Back and forth, back and forth, day and night, night and day.’*

*‘It’s the emotional heavy lifting does me in. I have to calm them, take their hands, lead them here. Then I must explain that the inevitable, the thing they’ve so dreaded, has come to pass. It’s exhausting. The shocked, the grateful, the pleading—I see them all. By the time they’re here, I’ve settled them down. You’ve got the easy job.’*  
*(Roche, 2020).<sup>v</sup>*

Completely fed up with Earthside misconceptions—and exhausted by the excess death they are encountering—Death appears to all living creatures in a dream, demanding a change. This is followed by a press conference where Death—dispirited and clearly exhausted—gives the world a message: ‘change your ways or I’ll go on strike’.

The first world populace—suspicious and anti-science—decries the academics and medics who declare that the loss of Death will be disastrous. After ample warning, bewitched by their deluded idea of immortality and possessed of a deadly fear of Death, many nations refuse to become greener and more peaceable. Sure of their own exceptionalism and certain they can cope with any consequences, the first world refuses to comply with Death’s requests. In their imaginings they see themselves suspended in a perpetual perfect summer, in robust good health. Somehow, they think that never dying is synonymous with never ageing. How wrong their imaginings will prove to be.

*... it’s hard to understand why no one saw at once that the disappearance of death, apparently the peak, the pinnacle, the supreme happiness, was not, after all, a good thing. (Saramago & Costa, 2008).<sup>vi</sup>*

In those lands which banish Death all living things—animal, vegetable, human and the cells which comprise them—become immortal. The strike begins with rejoicing. No Death! The nations of undying now have all the time in the world to start wars they can't lose; bear children they'll never bury. In places where Death and Charon suspend their operations, no creature can die, not even the ones bred to eat. Fly spray, flea collars, and antibiotics no longer kill their intended targets. Milk production drops when mastitis and parasitic diseases of cattle cannot be managed. Crops wither and bear only tiny bitter fruits which are barely eatable. Famine threatens. No one dies, but my, how they hunger. Immortality is far more complicated than its recipients had dreamed, and rather quickly loses its sheen.

*'You can't have living without dying. So you can't call it living, what we've got. We just are, we just be, like rocks beside the road.'* (Babbitt, 2007). <sup>vii</sup>

The young can no longer measure their courage by dicing with Death. Multiple medical treatments fail. All decidual reactions cease, cells senesce to the point of death, but no further. The first world is crammed with the desperate and despairing undying.

*Charity hospitals filled with the aged or decrepit. Many, in their despair, cried out for their kindly friend Death, but no answer came. Great wards and warehouses overflowed with undying who were so distressed they needed sedation. They lay, bed after bed, not all of them old. Suicides failed 100% of the time. Death Rows were full, and the authorities failed to kill a single prisoner, no matter how evil their deeds, and how lethal the solution. Decapitated people walked around with their heads under their arms, crying out for dear Death to return. The fear this caused among those who were trying to enjoy immortality meant the governments had to recruit new paramilitaries,*

*charged with keeping the streets clear of the homeless, the raving, the desperately ill and upsetting undead. (Roche, 2020).<sup>viii</sup>*

As in-utero programmed cell death no longer occurs, every baby in the affected nations is born damaged, their eyelids sealed and limbs ending in paddles rather than hands and feet. People keep ageing, sickening, and declining with no hope of a release or end. In an environment of suspicion and conspiracy, division and alternative truth, insight is not universal. Governments deny what their citizens can see, hear, smell, taste and feel. The leaders declare that it's all fake! News manufactured and twisted and spread by the envious outside world, dying for their own taste of immortality.

*In shops and homes, on the radio, on the television and in the newspapers, what one heard and read was, they're jealous of us, they're envious of the fact that no one here dies, and that's why they want to invade and occupy our territory so that they won't have to die either. (Saramago & Costa, 2008).<sup>ix</sup>*

Of course, as always, the rich and powerful are less affected—in the beginning. The strike will not end until the first world rejects eternal corporeal life and lets Death back into their hearts. How long will they insist that Death remain dead to them?

*'How will this come to pass?'*  
*He paused and lowered his voice. 'In the same way all change comes to pass. And I am sorry it is so. It will come to pass by violence and upheaval, by flame and by fury, for no change comes calmly over the world.'* (Miller, 1975).<sup>x</sup>

Death's strike does not touch those societies who revere death or accept it as integral to living. For them, life goes on, with its myriad messy endings. A small number protest when their loved ones continue to die while the

citizens of other nations are immortal. However, when the grim consequences of the new immortality ooze from the first world, the Death-embracers' beliefs are vindicated: death adds meaning and definition to life.

*'... our latest project was Death. It's one of the hard ones—one of the big ones, too, I suspect. Possibly it may even become the attribute that's going to define the Creation for the Created: if not for Death, they'd be content to simply exist, but with Death, well, their lives will have meaning—a boundary across which the living cannot cross.'*  
(Gaiman, 2020).<sup>xi</sup>

### **Key Characters:**

The character Death is a psychopomp<sup>1</sup> encompassing all genders who transports the souls of the dead to the Underworld and uses the pronouns they/them. Death sometimes sits with, reads to and counsels the dying. They work in the womb, in fields and forests, on battlegrounds, motorways, inside every living body: anywhere one might meet death—on both cellular and gross physical levels. The character is a green screen onto whom the dying project the persona that best fits their ideal companion to the far shore of life. Thus, Death may manifest as a grandmother, an angel, a comic book demon, a grey lady upon a grey horse or an ankh-wearing teen in gothic garb.<sup>2</sup> Death is kind, laconic, fond of shopping and full of love for all living things. Death is not scary and is quite indignant that they are oft seen as the robber of life, rather than the releaser and courier of souls.

*'We don't kill people, Mr. Asher. That's a misconception. We simply facilitate the ascendance of the soul.'* (Moore, 2006).<sup>xii</sup>

Death's ability to see and visit the future is shrouded when they develop burnout because of overwork. This means they cannot foresee how long the

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<sup>1</sup> A guide of souls to the Underworld.

<sup>2</sup> For fans of Neil Gaiman.

first world will tolerate their absence. The voices of the undying still follow Death everywhere, pleading for intervention and release. During a very dark night of the soul, Death assumes sole responsibility for the suffering of those souls still tethered to their undying bodies. It is impossible to recommence death-work in the first world, though; there is too much at stake. Those nations who still have a relationship with Death are doing so well; they are peaceable, kinder. Their skies are clearing, their environments greening. The rest of the world needs to make similar changes. The narrator helps Death reconstruct their own mythology: those nations who rejected Death are solely responsible for the suffering of their citizens.

Charon is the ferryman, recruited alongside his old friend Nico (now Death) as they lay dying during the second Peloponnesian War. During his apprenticeship, he transformed into a bewhiskered, kind animal lover with a penchant for Tim Tams. Rowing his red skiff across the Styx, Charon feeds treats—including chocolate—to animals and humans making the crossing. Earthside, he was in love with Nico's sister, Cora, and keeps a charcoal sketch of her next to his bed in the stone cottage under the yews. Charon's life in the liminal space has left him less exposed to the murderous, chaotic, Earthside world. His isolation proves protective, though he—like Death—is overworked and enjoys the relative rest brought by the strike.

The narrator opens the door and ushers us to the bedsides of the dying. Acts as scribe and assistant to Death in a meeting with the world press and counsels Death through a bout of burnout. At times acts as a proxy, ventriloquising the author.

David and Libby are a young couple whose longed-for daughter is stillborn. They appear in a triad of stories which examine complicated grief.<sup>3</sup> Their babe—unable to live—is born into a society where others soon cannot die.

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<sup>3</sup> Complicated grief is an ongoing, heightened state of mourning that keeps the bereaved from healing. It occurs in around 7% of bereavements. (Shear, 2012).

David's childhood friend Stephen—navigating a twist of time—becomes one of Death's apprentices.

The Lost Boys are a trio of ANZACs killed in Gallipoli who remain in the Underworld to farewell their dying colleagues. Their bravery is a rare form of sacrifice; they suspend their own deaths so they can greet and farewell those yet to die on the battlefields above. Two stay until Armistice is declared, teaching Death and Charon to read and write in English. They enjoy beer and barbeques on the near shore of the Styx and read war poetry aloud: avoiding any passages that might be offensive to Death. The Lost Boys bring companionship to the ferryman and teach us more about the Underworld geography. They symbolise a more formal, sacrificial death. Prescient Death spares them the knowledge that their 'war to end all wars' is not the last—by a long shot.

The Apprentices are four teens, each recruited while dying: three from an oncology ward, the fourth from a parking lot when a misjudged parkour move tumbled her to eternity. Recruited at the end of Death's strike, the apprentices—when fully trained—will become the new carers of the dying. All socially aware, they unionise the Underworld, ensuring that each of the two roles has backup. They bring a fresh perspective and the ideal of self-care into the Underworld, along with the understanding that caring for others is hard work, and can become dehumanising.

Compassion needs nurturing or burnout results. The graduates' first official task is to row their mentors—who have reincarnated the dead names Nico and Leo—across the Stygian waters.

Pamela Roche is the late mother of the author. I remember her more for the shock of her death than the life that preceded it. A surprise addition to the thesis, she insisted on a place, intruding on the writing until she was given a supporting role. Her character fully embodies the tension of opposites in the

Mother archetype—nurturing and loving, chaotic and destructive. (Relke, 2007).

*... it is curious how sometimes the memory of death lives on for so much longer than the memory of the life that it purloined. (Roy, 1998).*

*xiii*

### **The Personification and Gendering of Death:**

Humans are myth makers. We characterise concepts that are frightening or hard to define, creating classifications, anthropomorphisms, personifications and symbols to help us grasp the meaning of the ineffable, to make it less intimidating or more instructive.

*Symbols are an unconscious representation of something that cause anxiety and is therefore repressed. (Kang, 2019).<sup>xiv</sup>*

Stories, parables, allegories, myths and legends are mighty teaching tools. These powerful narratives offer deep poetic insights to explain the world and how to behave in it. Humans have personified Death for eons, sometimes symbolically as the terrifying thief of life, sometimes as a gentle and comforting release from pain and torment. There are cultural, epochal, gender, religious and societal differences in the way Death is depicted. (Bassett et al., 2008).

*'Death is alive,' they whispered. 'Death lives within life, as bones dance within the body. Yesterday is within today. Yesterday never dies.'*  
*(Urrea, 2006).<sup>xv</sup>*

*The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. The mask which concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that*



*the closest scrutiny must have difficulty in detecting the cheat. (Poe, 2020).*<sup>4 xvi</sup>

In a 1972 American study, Kastenbaum and Aisenberg's subjects personified Death into four subtypes: Macabre, Gentle Comforter, Gay Deceiver and Automaton, (cited in Kang, 2019). Kang revisited this research, asking a different group of subjects to ascribe aspects of the death experience to each of the four subtypes. According to this study, Macabre death most likely occurs outside the home, is sudden, lonely, horrifying, and violent; a 'bad' death, reminiscent of imagery common in 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe.<sup>5 xvii</sup> Gentle Comforter death is 'good', noble, occurring peacefully at home, the dying person old, ready for death, comfortable and surrounded by family. Gay Deceiver death is punitive: a payback for self-indulgent or libidinous behaviours.

Sexually acquired death—including HIV/AIDS—was attributed to the gay deceiver in the 80s and 90s; these days it is believed to kill through drug overdoses and heart attacks. Automaton deaths occur in hospital. Rather than family at the bedside, there are unemotional medical staff and shiny machines. Kang's subjects ascribed automaton death to cancer. I believe that COVID-19 is the contemporary exemplar; the isolated sufferer, hooked to machines, tended by dispassionate carers in protective garb; the wail of family or friends replaced by the regular beep and shush of technology.

Individuals who self-describe as having high anxiety around dying are more likely to imagine Death as a malign figure, male, in dark clothing. Subjects

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<sup>4</sup> When Poe wrote *The Masque of the Red Death* in 1842, his wife Virginia was dying of tuberculosis. He tried to ignore that her condition was terminal despite the earlier deaths of other close family members. His vivid descriptions of dying from the Red Death mimic the bleeding experienced by those with TB.

<sup>5</sup> During the 14<sup>th</sup> century, art commonly depicted the deathbed: a dying man or woman surrounded by a kind of social ceremony. In ... death scenes after the plague, the sick person is left alone (with) ... the presence of death, generally represented by an angel or a decomposing skeleton. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century ... the macabre *transi* of early 15<sup>th</sup> century is replaced by a clean and dry skeleton or *morte seca*.

who professed comfort at the thought of Death are more likely to choose sexless, gentle, comforting personifications. (Kang, 2019).

Some languages ascribe a grammatical gender to cultural concepts such as death. In Polish, the word for death—*śmierć*—is feminine; in German the noun *tot* (death) is masculine. (Drzazga, Grażyna & Stroińska (Hamilton), Magda, n. d.). The Grim Reaper (*der Senseman*)—a skeletal male with a cape and scythe—is a common personification of Death in German-speaking countries. (Guthke, 1991: 7-10). In Slavic mythology (Polish, Russian, Serbian, Czech) Death is female, associated with the goddess Morena. (Drzazga, Grażyna & Stroińska (Hamilton), Magda, n. d.).

The authors of the paper *Grammar and Art* (Segel & Boroditsky, 2011), asked whether the grammatical gender of nouns in an artist's native language predicted the gender of personifications in their art. Studying 1708 paintings, drawings and sculptures, they found that in 78% of the artworks, the grammatical gender in language correlated with the personified gender in art. Gendered language is, therefore, not the sole predictor of the gender of Death. Guthke hypothesized that the portrayal of Death as masculine or feminine also reflects the society's prevalent mode of dying. In martial and hunting nations where death is more likely to be violent, (hence penetrative), we would expect a male personification. In agricultural societies where death is more likely because of crop failure, starvation or disease—seen as a 'lack of maternal care'—images of Death would more likely be feminine. (Guthke, 1999). The only words in English which are gender-distinct are the pronouns: she, he, it: the concept of death has no inherent gender. Despite this, in recent English literature, authors have depicted Death in both male and female form. In *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2005), Death holds souls in his arms, Pendle's protagonist in *Death: A Life* (Pendle, 2008) is the son of Sin and Satan, and Pratchett's personification in *Mort* (Pratchett, 2019) uses male pronouns. Neil Gaiman's character Death in *The Sandman* graphic novel series (Gaiman et al., 2014), is a petite young woman, sister to Dream, who wears gothic

garb and has an ankh—the symbol of life—on a chain around her neck.<sup>6</sup> In Christopher Moore's *A Dirty Job* (Moore, 2006), Death merchants—psychopomps who retrieve soul vessels from the dying for reuse by others—can be male or female. I read the English translation of Jose Saramago's *Death at Intervals* (Saramago & Costa, 2008). The original was written in Portuguese, a language which assigns female gender to the concept of death. Saramago's Death is female.

My characterisation of Death is ungendered, using the pronouns they/them. This was not a political statement about gender roles or identity, but a pragmatic way to represent a being who can appear as anything the dying wants them to be. Off-duty in the Underworld, Death is androgynous in their cloak of shadows, beanie and mittens. Earthside, Death is a tabula rasa appearing to the dying in whichever form is most comforting. Their genderlessness becomes a blank outline, an absence to be filled by the perception of the dying. When Death becomes the psychopomp to their own mother, I reverted to the pronouns he/him as that is how she knew him in life. The iteration of Death prior to the one in my thesis is male, and those who come after have not been in their roles long enough for their working genders to emerge.

### **Landscape:**

Earthside is planet Earth, where those who will one day meet Death live and die. The once-green paradise is being inexorably ruined by human-driven climate change, deforestation, and pollution. These unnatural events are causing a glut of deaths, exhausting and demoralising the Underworld workers. There are unseen paths snaking all over Earthside, down which Death will lead each dying creature—from the place they fall to the Underworld of myth and dream. Death leads or carries each one down a twisting, stony trail that descends between fern-draped pounamu cliffs to a

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<sup>6</sup> Gaiman deliberately personified Death this way to challenge modern stereotypes (Drzazga, Grażyna & Stroińska (Hamilton), Magda, n.d.).

shingled beach. Just before the indigo water of the Styx, Ouroboros<sup>7</sup> eternally swallows his own tail. In the shadow of two great yews a fire flickers green and purple and blue in a pit before a stone cottage. Across the restless Stygian water is a mist-draped land, barely visible. Every traveller who arrives at the near, living shore, sees something different on the far side: a landscape that they yearn towards or fear—depending on the self-assessment each makes as they wander the downward path with Death. Charon waits just offshore, sculling the small red skiff in which he transports souls to the next life. His boat floats like a petal; there is a lamp hanging from the prow and several wooden benches. In the hull is usually a cuddle of kittens or puppies traversing the rainbow river. The ferryman sings songs to the dying as they cross to the far shore. Death and Charon have never set foot on the other side, and they each see something different there, so their replies to queries about what happens next are generic and reassuring.

#### **Cultural Signifiers:**

The Underworld of my thesis is based in Graeco-Roman mythology but there are intimations of other cultural iconography and text. Charon, the Styx, and Cerberus are all Grecian names. I did not include the characters Hades, Persephone or Nyx, or the other four Underworld rivers of Greek mythology, as I wished to simplify and universalise the text. I chose the moniker Death rather than Thanatos (son of Nyx, brother to Hypnos) to emphasise the nature of their personification and to encourage the use of the word. Death, death, death. Using Death as both a name and a concept necessitated more

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<sup>7</sup> Ouroboros—the Möbius strip snake which swallows its own tail—first arose in Egyptian lore around 1400 BCE. Discovered on a shrine containing the sarcophagus of Tutankhamun, it is thought to depict the entwined deities, Ra and Osiris, and symbolise the beginning and ending of time. The Greeks later adopted the symbol, then the Gnostics and alchemists used it in their writings to symbolise the unity of all, and infinity respectively. In my manuscript the snake is an escapee from the Garden of Eden, eternally tied to itself in punishment. I use it as a symbol of the life-death-rebirth cycle—aware that it has different meanings in other cultures' mythologies. (Ouroboros, 2020). entwined deities, Ra and Osiris, and symbolise the beginning and ending of time. The Greeks later adopted the symbol, then the Gnostics and alchemists used it in their writings to symbolise the unity of all, and infinity respectively. In my manuscript the snake is an escapee from the Garden of Eden, eternally tied to itself in punishment. I use it as a symbol of the life-death-rebirth cycle—aware that it has different meanings in other cultures' mythologies. (Ouroboros, 2020).

precise word-placement. Starting a sentence with the word ‘Death’ was potentially confusing—was I referring to the character or the concept of death? The Underworld landscape references the intersection of the Māori legends of Hinenui-te-pō and Māui.

*‘Hine-tītama was the eldest daughter of the atua Tāne-nui-a-Rangi and Hineahu-one. She had several children to her father, but on learning that her husband was her father she fled to te pō (the underworld) where she receives the souls of the dead and is known as Hine-nui-te-pō.’ (Māori Dictionary).<sup>xviii</sup>*

*‘Physically, she (Hine-nui-te-pō) is most often presented as a threatening, monstrous character: an old woman (ruahine, kuia) who lives at the edge of the world and whose genitals flash like lightning as her thighs open and close. Not to mention the four physical attributes which flesh her out: eyes of pounamu, hair of kelp (rimurehia), a mouth like that of a barracouta (mangā) and last but far from least, labia ridged with sharp obsidian (koi mata). Yep, folks, Hine-nuite-pō has a vagina dentata.’ (Simon Perris).<sup>xix</sup>*

The text is multimodal and multivocal—drawing upon the collective inheritance of mythology from various cultures and epochs. Mythology is eternal and ever evolving. The cottage under the yews contains the Underworld’s greatest treasure; a carved box filled with a susurrus of sound—the spoken tales, myths, legends, and genealogies of every person since the birth of spoken language. They whisper to one another and to the listener—who must be a psychopomp or ferryman of the dead to turn the key and hear them. The box explains—to those who would escort the dying—the death rituals and expectations of every person who passes through their care. The captured tales also ensure that no matter how many millennia have passed since they departed Earthside, every single human life and culture has been remembered.

*'In this chest is everything each of you needs to hear. There is a catch—the story chooses the listener. You speak your name, turn and take out the key, place your ear near the keyhole, and the story will tell itself to you. They have been waiting, stitching themselves together, marinating in their truths. Here you will find the recollections of the first people, those who gave name to the Earth and her creatures. Every language, every belief, every nation has its tales, and you will spend some of your training and much of your ongoing lives down here learning them... what you hear will challenge you. It will change some of your treasured beliefs... You must never open the chest fully, merely turn and remove the key. To open the lid would allow the words to escape, scatter to the ether and rob them of their power. That would be such a disservice to every dying thing that has passed and will pass through here.'* (Roche, 2020).<sup>xx</sup>

I have respectfully dipped into the world's mythological treasure chest to aim for a sense of universality to my depiction of the place through which we all must pass. My reading and retelling of the stories of indigenous peoples will always be filtered through my own patterning and conditioning. I made the common outsider mistake of believing that Día de Muertos (The Mexican Day of the Dead) was a celebration of Death, rather than the honouring of ancestors and deceased family members. It is a holy day where the spirits of the dead are welcomed to visit again (Sesma, 2020), and is to be met with respect, reverence, and a lightness of spirit. I had confused the colonised story with the traditional one and had to rewrite parts of my thesis to reflect my new knowledge.

While dying is universal, every culture has its own myths about the origin of death and the nature of the world/s beyond this. I have not dived deeply outside my own heritage and education, as I am aware of the risks of appropriation and my misinterpretation. It is important to acknowledge that my understandings are tiny and narrow when weighed against the enormous

wealth of the world's stories. My thesis includes subtle nods to honour other cultural and religious iconography and text as Death and the Underworld must reflect the richness of the Earthside world. I am aware that my light touch might seem superficial; that was not my intent. My wish was to recognise and honour other beliefs without appropriating them.

Myths and legends reveal and create what is meaningful and mysterious to a culture. They contain internal logic and truth. Their meaning can be distorted by colonisation, overlaid with other, foreign meanings, and muddled by time, but their veracity still exists to the keepers of the old stories: those who hold them in memory and speak them to the next generation. By changing a culture's stories, colonisers attempt to change the identity and self-belief of the indigenous people.<sup>8</sup>

*Legends are extremely accurate reflections of popular prejudices and assumptions about how things happen in an unpredictable world, and do not seem influenced by "objective" logic... Legends... are threads in the fabric of meaning which animates a culture. (Iwasaka et al., 1994).*

*xxi*

At the heart of myths and folk tales are timeless truths: in the world there are things that want to hurt you. Be prepared for them.

**Time:**

Time in the Underworld is fluid; things do not always occur linearly. A few years Earthside can be the equivalent of seconds in the Underworld. Time leaps and stretches back and forth, more like a bungee cord than a river. It does not bind Death to a single period, allowing them to bring chocolate biscuits from the twenty-first century to feed those making the crossing

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<sup>8</sup> The story 'Birdman' in the thesis looks at this, with reference to the Rapa Nui people.

before the common era. Death loses the ability to visit the future when depression makes even tomorrow appear bleak, uninviting, and indistinct.

**Structure:**

Undertaking a mentored master's degree gave me an excellent chance to play with style and write something outside of social realism—my preferred genre. To play safe with structure seemed like a wasted opportunity; I wanted to be adventurous, and leave nothing off-bounds, even if the finished result would prove unpublishable. *Songs to Sing to the Dying* is a melange of styles, voices, and genres. Memoir, auto fiction, traumatogenic narrative, metafiction, fairy-tale, post-modernism, elegy, poetry, and medical science all come to the table. I blur the boundaries between autobiographical lived experience and fiction; sometimes deliberately. I have mined my life experience as if it were a text, and have used myself as a reference point, even though the current thesis is not autobiographical. It has been instructive to revisit my memoir twenty years after it was first published. Now I review my mother's parenting style knowing that I, too, did not raise my children perfectly. I can look a long way back to forgive her, and less far to forgive myself. At the outset of *Songs to Sing to the Dying*, I did not intend to include any memoir—this happened organically as I mined life's lessons to illustrate or clarify points.

I originally envisaged the thesis as a short story cycle and read many examples of the genre. Over the course of the writing, the style morphed into speculative fiction with elements of postmodernism and metafiction. I have played with convention, mixing archaic or elevated language with vernacular; the mythic voice butts up against the documentary and the laconic with the spiritual. Pop art references pop up, as horror and hyperbole<sup>9</sup> tap dance with humour forming a bricolage. The pieces are arranged intuitively, by emotional tone, rather than subject or strict linearity. The shape of the manuscript is a story that swallows its own tale, ending near where it began,

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<sup>9</sup> The intention of the hyperbole is not to disgust, but to emphasise the enormity of the first world's decision to kill Death.



with a dead mother and three daughters, and an obsession with writing about them. It does not describe a true circle as the spokes (passages) have different weights, styles, and lengths. Death forms the axle; the outer rim comprises the figure of a dead mother grasping the ink-stained hands of her daughter. It is not possible to discern which of them is hanging on, which is trying to let go.

There are lyrics—borrowed from others—in selected songs to sing to the dying. Friends have illustrated two pieces; I have credited them.

There are passages in first, second and third person points of view.

One chapter contains only one word.

The through-line follows Death and Charon as they navigate their normality, their strike—with its myriad effects on life in affected nations—and subsequent recruitment of replacements. Their narrative truth is that Death is not a murderer, but an essential biological editor who sustains normal life, and is involved only peripherally in the ultimate demise of a creature—which happens through cellular death: apoptosis<sup>10</sup> or senescence<sup>11</sup>. David and Libby's stories form a second through-line and a few pieces of memoir comprise a third. Scattered through these are fictionalised stories about death and dying drawn from my twenty-seven years practising as a G.P.—seven of those working in hospice. There are auto fictional metalepses: what my parents left me, what I hope to leave my children, my wishes upon my death, and the recipes for my imagined last meal. I selected the foods when working in hospice, based on my knowledge of the changing appetites of the dying.

*A lack of interest in food is a normal biological response to long-term illness and imminent death. Elderly or ill animals often stop eating as a precursor to death, so why is it not medically permissible for humans to do likewise?... Dying of a progressive inability to eat is, probably,*

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<sup>10</sup> Programmed cell death in multicellular organisms.

<sup>11</sup> Gradual deterioration of function due to age, caused by irreversible cessation of cell division.

*one of the most natural and physiologically gentle ways to expire. In the context of advanced illness, hunger is rarely, if ever, a source of discomfort. (Blanco & Vidal, 2015).<sup>xxii</sup>*

There are appeals to the living to prepare to meet death, and suggestions on how they might do this. I wrote these in first person, to make them less obviously instructive. The tone of my thesis is hopeful. Dying is universal and mysterious, but Death makes every trip to the Underworld personal; every death is meaningful and noteworthy. This is, perhaps, why they are now burned out. Dying comes to us all—gutter rats and great eagles, princesses, tsars, beggars, and stars. The path to the Underworld is littered with treasure discarded along the way by those who have finally realised that they can't take it with them. Death collects the dropped items and passes furs, soft slippers and foods to people dying cold or hungry, to comfort them during their journey to the liminal space. In this imagined world, no one passes from life alone or unloved.

### **Motivators:**

I had two potent motivators to write about Death. The first was my mother, Pam, who committed suicide at thirty-two. I was fourteen when she died, and my sisters Tracey and Shelley were twelve and ten. For decades Mum's daughters marinated in the fallout of her death, all of us unaware we blamed ourselves. It was only when we each attained the age of thirty-three—a year older than Mum was at her death—that we realised we'd never expected to meet this milestone. Each of us later described that year as one where we felt as though we'd been holding our breath. The suicide echoed through our lives in a way we did not understand.

*When sober and straight, Pam was as good a mother as many. When drunk or high, she raged incandescently. There was no real pattern to*

*her behaviour—no clue how she would be from one day to the next. She had as many phases as the moon but lacked its cyclical predictability. Over the years, I have reimagined her as a lunar being. I look for her at night. Sometimes there’s less of her to see as she floats, wrapped in the soft shadow of the Earth. During this phase she casts less light, but on the darkest of nights she is no less real to me. My sleeping mother, my Mother Moon. I miss her still. (Roche, 2000).<sup>xxiii</sup>*

When I saw Mum’s body, I wanted to approach her, touch her, perhaps kiss her goodbye. A well-meaning uncle put his hand on my shoulder, inadvertently stopping my farewell. I regretted that for many years—I needed that touch, needed to feel her again, so much that I subsequently reinvented the encounter in my memoir.

*... I touch her ... reach for her, lift her from her casket and hold her tightly. I rock her and stroke her forehead and tell her that I’ll miss her. In my mind she has shrunk so I can hold her easily ... I sit, maybe three or four years old, in a child’s rocking chair, cradling my dead mother doll. I rock her and croon to her and brush her hair—shoulder length and coppery—back from her cool forehead. She is so fragile, cold and vulnerable, my dead mother doll. I hold her and rock her for a long time, my tears falling on her porcelain face, pooling in the sockets of her eyes. It is as if she cries with me. Then when I am ready, I kiss her forehead and lift her gently back into her coffin. I am once again fourteen and she is thirty-two. (Roche, 2000).<sup>xxiv</sup>*

The year Mum died I abandoned formal education for too much sex and other intoxicants: working as a stripper and prostitute from age seventeen. At twenty, a single mum, I woke in the intensive care unit after a suicide attempt. An epiphany revealed that my mother’s path to self-destruction and death was not a blueprint for me to follow. I needed education to help me find my own way through the world. Over the next three years I completed

high school as an adult student and single parent of two sons, then enrolled in medical school. Doctoring seemed the highest ambition to which I could strive: to use the rest of my life to heal, not harm. It might make up for the mess I had made of my teenage years. Besides, some men in the massage parlour told me I had healing hands... Ten years after working on the streets of Wellington, I qualified there as a doctor. On overnight shifts as a house surgeon,<sup>12</sup> I spent any spare time with those dying alone, my pager muted, but on vibrate. It felt wrong to me to allow someone's death to be unaccompanied or unseen. Later, qualified as a G.P., I worked in several hospices: learning the skills to best care for those nearing the end of life. The path I followed in my early life gave me a deep insight into the troubles of many of my patients.

When my mother killed herself, I was furious—with her, with God, with Death, and with myself. Mothers were supposed to be old and worn out when they died. They were supposed to be around to provide guidance, no matter how unhappy they were with their life. Mothers weren't meant to die young and alone. Fury and guilt replaced mourning. Nearing forty, with a tertiary education, a nice house and car—things my mother never achieved—I'd become every bit as broken and dysfunctional as she once was. I'd survived two suicide attempts, a bankruptcy, three marriages and a prescription pill addiction (while still working full time as a G.P.). Like her, my life—although outwardly successful—was spent with a finger on the self-destruct button. I wrote the memoirs *Bent Not Broken* (Roche) and *Life on the Line* to understand why I had somehow allowed much of my life to mirror Mum's. Complicated grief had stamped itself all over me, my choices, and actions. I had never allowed myself to openly mourn Mum, and the deeply buried sorrow had obvious consequences.

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<sup>12</sup> A junior hospital doctor in their first two years after graduation.

*Visible mourning reminds us of death, which is construed as unnatural, a failure to manage the situation. A single person is missing for you and the whole world feels empty. (Didion, 2009).<sup>xxv</sup>*

After publishing my memoirs, I turned my focus outwards again to write fiction. Everything I wrote still had the fingerprints of Death and my mother all over it. Clearly, grief still had the upper hand.

*Writers end up writing about their obsessions. Things that haunt them; things they can't forget; stories they carry in their bodies waiting to be released. (Goldberg, 1986).<sup>xxvi</sup>*

The grief connected to suicide is experienced differently to other griefs; there is a never-ending search for meaning. There needs to be healing, a new narrative, so *the deceased is able to become more than their death... and... memories of joy and love (of life itself)...* can become imbedded again. (McKay & Tighe, 2014). Suicide engenders guilt in the bereaved which can remain unrecognized and buried for decades. It robs families of the opportunity to prepare, to forgive and be forgiven, and increases the likelihood of complicated grief.

My medical knowledge of how to prepare for death provided my second motivation for this thesis. We live in a death-averse culture; made to feel that acknowledging our mortality and preparing for death while still hale is morbid. We should not fear death, nor prolong dying in a desperate last attempt to beat the reaper. The end of life is easier when we've packed our bags, prepared for the journey. One thing we need to pack is our myth about dying. (Jung, 1991)

*... for seen in correct psychological perspective, death is not an end but a goal, and life's inclination towards death begins as soon as the meridian is passed. (Jung, 1991).<sup>xxvii</sup>*

In my experience, the best deaths occur when the dying person has prepared; made peace with their family—or with their estrangements—and shared their wishes or fears with those who most love them. Preparations pave the way for those in and around the deathbed, clear a path for healthy mourning and grief.<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her seminal work *On Death and Dying* (Kübler-Ross, 2005) defined grieving as a series of steps, tackled sequentially. However, grief is not confined to a single-track, unidirectional pathway. Some steps are broken and need to be jumped over, others stick to our souls and must be lingered on. Sometimes we dance back and forth along the staircase of our grief, not ready to step off it. Grieving is an experiential, non-linear journey. There is no right way, no prescription, no common map. In contemporary Western culture, we view overt grief and mourning as obscene,<sup>14</sup> a kind of madness. Grief is supposed to be faced quietly, guiltily, alone, as if it were a form of self-abuse, akin to masturbation. (Maes, 2013).

*The point has been reached at which... the choking back of sorrow, the forbidding of its public manifestation, the obligation to suffer alone and secretly, has aggravated the trauma stemming from the loss of a dear one.*

(Ariès, 1974).<sup>xxviii</sup>

In my thesis I am once again approaching my mother, her suicide, and the grief of her death. Next year I turn sixty—nearly twice the age my mother attained—and I am finally learning how to heal myself after decades of helping

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<sup>13</sup> *Grief* is the psychobiological response to bereavement whose hallmark is a blend of yearning and sadness, along with thoughts, memories, and images of the deceased person. Insofar as we never stop feeling sad that loved ones are gone, or stop missing them, grief is permanent. However, the acute, all-consuming intensity usually moderates over time, as grief becomes deeper, less intrusive, and integrated into our lives. (Shear, 2012)

<sup>14</sup> Mourning is the array of psychological processes that are set in motion by bereavement in order to moderate and integrate grief by coming to terms with the loss and reorienting to a world without our loved one in it. (Shear, 2012)

others to heal. Having spent much time with people on the cusp of death, I understand how fleeting and precious life is. Death is coming, our lives are finite. We need to remember this to live fully. My manuscript depicts Death as gentle and empathic. Much the way my work with the dying revealed them to be. In my personal mythology, honed over many years as a medical practitioner, Death is both human and humane. I have no fear of Death or dying, even when alone with my thoughts, and I would like to demystify the concept of death for others.

*'We have on hand for every eventuality one or two suitable banalities... such as "everyone must die some time" ... But when one is alone... and sees nothing but... the wall of darkness which will eventually engulf everything you love, possess, wish, strive, and hope for—then all our profundities about life slink off to some undiscoverable hiding place.'*  
(Jung, 1991).<sup>xxix</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Traditional depictions of Death have only covered the macro effects of their work: the death of a visible, whole organism, be it cat or bat, rhinoceros, or grandmother. I could not find any fictional works that spoke of the microscopic, hidden death that occurs

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daily in every living organism, from nematodes to great apes, oaks to orca. Apoptosis—the programmed cell death that presents us to the world as 'normal'—happens invisibly. We only notice it when it is absent. Death happens in a cyclical pattern wherever there is decidua. Baby teeth fall out, and autumn leaves drift earthwards, menstrual periods arrive—whether wanted or not—until a woman's ovaries decide otherwise.

My depiction of Death as nongendered is also new. The English language lacks a gender for the concept of death. Why has the personification of Death usually been clearly male or female? In our death-averse binary-centred

Western society, ascribing an obvious gender feels comfortable. It is what many of us are used to. Humans cling to the known when faced with an unknowable situation or entity. A full discussion on gender and identity is beyond the scope of my thesis, but it is an area of interest which I may revisit.

In a future draft I will spend more time on the effects of human destruction of our environment. We speak of Earth as a dying planet—as though the extinction of humans means the end of everything. If our behaviour kills us as a species, the Earth will heal.<sup>xxx</sup> Humanity is in an abusive relationship with our Mother Earth and frankly, she'd be better off without us. When Death bemoans the way humans kill everything in their path, they are concerned about excess death; the unnecessary loss of life caused by our actions or inaction. Not the timely, kind death that should and must occur. I will rewrite some dialogue-heavy pieces as a screenplay to make the thesis more textured, and to learn a new skill.

This text has been an experiment in structure and style, but it has a truthful heart. Those anxious about dying imagine death will be frightening. Perhaps the converse might also be true; cleaving to a myth about a benign, loving and humane Death might bring peace to the deathbed. Death remains a friendly mystery to me. I hope that I have made their inevitable presence a little less strange and frightening to the reader.

There is no life without Death, no beginnings without ends.

We are but mortal mythmakers who will end in dust and memory.

*'The sick woman spent the last few months of her life hungering for death. Along the road of death she went, seeking, hungering. She personified the figure of death and made him now a strong black-haired youth running over hills, now a stern quiet man marked and scarred by the business of living. In the darkness of her room she put out her hand, thrusting it from under the covers of her bed, and she thought that death like a living thing put out his hand to her. "Be*



*patient, lover," she whispered. "Keep yourself young and beautiful and be patient."* (Anderson, 1992).<sup>xxxii</sup>

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- xxiv (Roche, 2000, p. 14)
- xxv (Didion, 2009, p. 188)
- xxvi (Goldberg, 1986, p. 38)
- xxvii (Jung, 1991, p. 68)
- xxviii (Ariès, 1974, p. 91)
- xxix (Jung, 1991)
- xxx (Shaw et al., 2020)
- xxxi (Anderson, 1992, p. 149)