



Life Writing and Death: Dialogues of the Dead

Clare Brant, James Metcalf and Jane Wildgoose

Editors' Preface

It is an unhappy coincidence that this special issue on life writing and death should appear during a pandemic. The editors would like to preface it with a sombre and sympathetic acknowledgment of the deaths, pain and fear brought by coronavirus, the grief of survivors and the bereaved, and a new, distinct and forced awareness of our relationships with mortality. From its first appearance at the end of 2019 to the end of March 2020, Covid-19 has led to 75,000 deaths, with 1.3 million cases of infection—figures which are certainly not final. Death rates have dominated headlines internationally; behind impersonal numbers are very personal stories of loss and grief.

The pressure worldwide on national systems of healthcare and burial has led to disturbing measures like pop-up morgues and temporary graves; rituals of farewells, funerals and interment have been radically altered by government restrictions. The effects of these have been acutely felt across Europe and throughout the world, and proved especially visible in those countries where infection rates have been highest, for instance in Italy and Spain. Isolation necessary to prevent infection spreading has increased the loneliness of the dying, and the loneliness of the bereaved. As a distressed Italian undertaker put it, 'Our job is to honour the dead, not just bury them. But I don't think we succeed in our mission these days'.¹ The buckling of health care systems under extreme pressure changes perceptions and practices around death: in the words of one New York funeral director, 'When you overwhelm the health system you overwhelm the death system'.²

Coronavirus has infected everyday life: under the rules of social distancing, there is no side by side, no hand in hand; around a death, there is no kiss goodbye, no last handclasp, no consoling embrace, no sympathetic hand on shoulder or hug. Although some funerals have been live-streamed, rituals have had to be adapted or abandoned: for Muslims, ritual bathing will no longer have to be performed, and body bags can replace the kafan, or white burial shroud; in Jewish rites, stone-setting ceremonies have been suspended and those sitting shiva, the seven day mourning period, can have no visitors. Grief is forcibly reconfigured when consolation of physical contact is disallowed and many family and friends are forbidden to attend funerals. Grief splintered away from supporting frames is grief exacerbated.

Douglas Davies, director of the Centre for Death and Life Studies at Durham University, said loss of a physical community in times of grief would be viscerally felt across all religious and secular traditions.

‘There is a sense of loss in society at large, a loss of contact, a loss of human touch’, said Davies. ‘But this intuitive sense that the whole of society has lost something at this moment might make it easier for individuals who are bereaved to feel like they’re in the same boat as thousands of others.’³

Covid-19 has simultaneously created more isolation and roused ideas about collectivity. On 23 March 2020, António Guterres, the UN Secretary General, called for a global ceasefire: ‘Our world faces a common enemy: COVID-19. The virus does not care about nationality or ethnicity, faction or faith. It attacks all, relentlessly.’⁴ His message, that ‘The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war’, is echoed by a Dutch physician urging help for migrant camps in the Greek islands: ‘Coronavirus doesn’t respect borders or barbed wire’.⁵ Yet national governments have been the prime responders, and action against the virus has drawn heavily from a language of war. The universality of vulnerability, conveyed in the UK government’s wording in National Health Service publicity—‘Anyone can get it. Anyone can spread it.’—accompanies social disparities, especially class divides, in how people live through the pandemic. Lamenting the lack of care for vulnerable and sick old people in care homes, the mayor of Alcala del Valle in Spain concluded ‘The virus doesn’t kill people [...] what’s killing people is the system’.⁶ In the wake of Covid-19 and its phenomenal economic wreckage, there will be difficult questions for the living. Some precedents are discussed in our cluster of articles.

Life writing scholars will have much to work with in genres of the pandemic, new and old, including window posters, collective singing,

day-in-the-life-of stories, online and communal memorials which in different ways restore vitality to the living and honour to the dead. We had no idea when we started this special issue that it would appear in such dreadful and turbulent circumstances, so we make no claim for its relevance. But we hope it offers some useful comparisons with other grim moments of history, some reminders that humanity can survive mass death events, and some suggestions as to forms of consolation.

We wish you all well.

Clare Brant, James Metcalf and Jane Wildgoose
April 2020

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- 4 <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/fury-virus-illustrates-folly-war>.
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INTRODUCTION

One thing in life we can be certain of: death. But how we talk about death—its inevitability, its causes and its course, its effects, or its places—is susceptible to changing cultural conditions. Reviewing a history of death that begins in prehistory, the distinguished historian of death Thomas Laqueur doubts it is possible to comprehend (in both senses) the topic: ‘Our awareness of death and the dead stands at the edge of culture. As such they may not have a history in the usual sense but only more and more iterations, endless and infinitely varied, that we shape into an engagement with the past and the present.’¹ These recurrent interactions with death and the dead echo across local cultural conditions generally thought to have different responses to mortality, but which can be understood as differently shaping its universal presence. Elsewhere Laqueur writes of ‘the power of the dead in deep time to make communities, to do the work of culture’, but who were also ‘part of an idealised community in deep time’, itself a work of culture.² In pervasive and powerful iterations (such as medieval art’s *Danse Macabre*, Renaissance emblems, seventeenth-century Protestant consolation literature, the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, and evolving rites and rituals for the dead across religious, political, and cultural attitudes), death and the dead shadow all of human history.³

The Victorians—stereotypically represented as repressed—were effusive about death; this was by no means only a British phenomenon.⁴ The garden cemetery movement in the UK found its inspiration in Père Lachaise cemetery, which opened in Paris in 1804 and proved a model for ‘many people interested in the problem of burying the dead in a civilized fashion [...] throughout Europe and America’.⁵ An intense demand for mourning costume and interest in associated ritual, which accompanied the garden cemetery movement, was met in centres in Paris as well as London, and in major cities in America. Department stores dedicated to mourning (or ‘Maisons de Deuil’, as the more exclusive establishments in London were known from the time of their establishment in the 1840s) offered—and promoted—everything from black crape dresses and mourning accessories to booklets advising on mourning etiquette and funeral ritual. Some also supplied the services of undertakers providing coffins, hearses and horses, and advice on monumental masonry.⁶ Commerce was a central part of this phenomenon—which, while being embraced across society, also had many detractors including Charles Dickens, who lampooned the undertaking profession in his novels and condemned the prevailing ‘barbarous show and expense’ of the dismal trade in his wholesale criticism of the Duke of Wellington’s funeral in 1852.⁷

By the mid-twentieth century, in contrast, discussion about life's inexorable ending had largely been stifled. In 1955, Geoffrey Gorer equated squeamishness about discussing death with a kind of 'pornography', in which 'natural death became more and more smothered in prudery', while 'violent death played an ever growing part in the fantasies of mass audiences' in the form of 'thrillers, Westerns, war stories, spy stories, science fiction and [...] horror comics'.⁸ In a complex relationship to visible death in entertainment, actual death then became muffled in the West by a new euphemism—passing. Barbara Jones cites 'passed away' as the first example in her list of over twenty euphemisms for dying in common use by the 1960s. She comments that '[w]ords for death are getting softer: funerals are cushioned with euphemisms so well established that one hardly hears them sneaking by'.⁹ Responding to death becoming 'unmentionable in polite society', Gorer made a heartfelt plea: that 'we must give back to death—natural death—its parade and publicity, [and] re-admit grief and mourning' into general social discourse.¹⁰ This special issue contributes to that continuing work.

Many others agreed with Gorer's call, evidenced, for instance, in Jessica Mitford's revelations about the muffling (and over-priced) 'euphemisms' of the funeral industry in the USA, *The American Way of Death* (1963), which 'ignited national debate over funeral trade practices and the high cost of dying';¹¹ the establishment of the modern hospice movement by Cicely Saunders in 1967 in the UK—which would spread to New Haven, Connecticut, USA, and Winnipeg and Montreal in Canada in the 1970s and, in time, throughout the world;¹² the Swiss-born psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's work with terminally ill patients published in the USA in 1969 (which has to date been translated into 27 languages);¹³ French historian Philippe Ariès's comprehensive history of attitudes to death in Western society, *L'Homme devant la Mort* (1977, Trans. *The Hour of Our Death*, 1981); and the rise of the natural death movement founded by psychotherapist Josefine Speyer and her husband Nicholas Albery in 1991, followed by the Natural Burials organisation in New Zealand in 1999 and the Green Burial Council in the USA in 2005.¹⁴ There are nineteen natural burial grounds currently in use in the Netherlands, and increasing numbers of eco-burial companies in Germany, Spain and Italy. The re-admittance of grief and mourning into numerous fields of discourse (including the social sciences, medical humanities, history, literature, the visual arts and material culture) has now become so widespread and multidisciplinary that a call was recently made for closer examination of 'what is particular about doing research on the end of life and being a contemporary death researcher' in the twenty-first century.¹⁵ Particularity can be found, however, for instance in Julian Barnes's memoir *Nothing to*

be Frightened of (2008), which thinks about ‘death-awareness’, specifically his own mortality (*le réveil mortel*, in Charles du Bos’s phrase), against a specific background of religious decline and the instability of memory.¹⁶ Representative singularity is also particularised by Paulo Coelho in *Veronika Decides to Die* (*Veronika Decide Se Matar*, first published in Brazil in 1998 and translated into English the following year), in which the suicidal feelings of a young woman are reversed when she discovers she has only a few days to live. Others see dialogue between the medieval *Ars Moriendi*, or art of dying well, in relation to particular conditions attendant on dying at home or in hospital.

Death is also becoming a more visible subject for life writing. Besides established research communities focused on death and dying—ranging from the Centre for Death & Society at the University of Bath (from 2005) with its annual conferences dedicated to the social aspects of death, dying and disposal, to the annual international conference on Dying and Death in twenty-first century Europe (ABDD11, in Romania 2019)—there have been recent conferences and workshops (CLWR, London 2018; Histories of Death symposium, University of Turku, Finland, 2020) exploring ideas and practices around dying, death, bereavement and mourning from a life-writing point of view. Or rather, points of view: plurality is important. Just as death comes variously though to us all, cultural differences—of history, region, religion, age, temperament, circumstances—create considerable diversity around corpses, remains and remembering processes. This special issue contributes to new interest and engagement between life writing and death. Hence our title, used in the Centre for Life-Writing Research day of talks: Dialogues of the Dead. With two of this special issue’s editors having research lives as eighteenth-century literary critics, and the other taking as the starting point for her article the last work of the artist William Hogarth (1697–1764), one major resonance is with a genre popular in the eighteenth century but not much attended to now: that of dialogues. It had a sub-genre, as in a collection written by Lord George Lyttelton with Elizabeth Montagu: *Dialogues of the Dead* (1760). Departed spirits—famous, unknown—debate with each other and with the living. There’s a sort of modern equivalent in a common interview prompt: Who would you invite to your dream dinner party? Answers nearly always include famous figures, though without ever sketching possible conversations. In resurrecting the phrase, we borrow it not only to imagine the dead talking to each other, but also the dead talking to us. What we hear, how we hear, how we interpret and represent the dead, how we construct afterlives and silences for them, means also attending to our own words, sometimes a painful process.

Articles in this journal address ideas and issues of life writing and death across geographies: Britain, Italy, America, Australia, Canada, and Germany and the Netherlands, but also cyber-topographies of digital mourning and memorialisation. As the great universal, death and its place in life writing has a broader global reach than this special issue could contain. Eighteenth-century churchyard literature was, for instance, a pan-European phenomenon, despite its distinctively English origin. Edward Young's nine-book poem *Night Thoughts* (1742–45) proved popular in France and Germany;¹⁷ it was translated into 'every European language (including Magyar and Turkish)' and, according to James Stevens Curl, 'captured the European imagination' to the extent that it 'created a vogue for burial in gardens that was the single most powerful factor in the nascent movement to create garden cemeteries' in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) was translated into French, German, Greek, Italian, Latin, Portuguese and Welsh in the following 50 years, becoming available in Armenian, Dutch, Hebrew, Hungarian, Russian, Spanish and Japanese over the course of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Recent criticism shows that churchyard literature was a global concern, generating not only translations but also imitations in the Baltic nations, the Netherlands, Iran and among Afrikaans poets.²⁰ At the same time that churchyard literature—a genre promoting the idea 'that the humble dead have as much of a claim as do the great to live on in the imagination of posterity and in the ground of the churchyard'²¹—proved so popular in Western society, the burial grounds of the colonial world were violated to provide great quantities of human bones (and skulls in particular) to comparative anatomical collections, dedicated to researching the so-called 'races of mankind' in museums in the UK, France, Germany, the Netherlands and America. While the English country churchyard was celebrated as a tranquil space for private meditation on life, death and the ancestral past, the graves of the peoples whose lands were occupied by force proved fair game for desecration in the name of science.

Places of death and the dead continue to captivate the living throughout the world. The enduring customary spaces of burial sites, including churchyards and cemeteries, still exert an imaginative pull, with a long and continuing history of expression in poetry and prose. As Pierre Nora wrote of *lieux de mémoire* (or sites of memory), against a background collapse of environments of memory (*milieux de mémoire*), the rituals and beliefs of the living keep the dead alive in sacred spaces that thrive in 'their ability to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones'. As the 'external props and tangible reminders of that which no longer exists', *lieux de mémoire* (which include 'places of burial') 'inhibit forgetting,

[...] immortalise death, and [...] materialise the immaterial', becoming hybrid places 'compounded of life and death, of the temporal and the eternal'.²² This situated significance is particularised in times of war, colonisation, trauma and the tragedy of youthful death; it is also made specific and challenging in the contexts of celebrity, poverty and the complexities of end-of-life wishes. Where the dead are remembered and re-membered—memorialised and reconstituted by memory—can also be extra-geographical.²³ From epitaphs to obituaries, journals to poems, photographs and films to online forums and social media pages, the dead are variously brought to life through processes of space-making and dedication, creating locations that are visitable in a sense of more than bodily movement in (and to) place.

The situated significance of the places of the dead may be exploited too—for instance, in the case of the 'disappeared', individuals who are murdered (generally from some kind of political motive) and the whereabouts of their remains withheld from those who mourn them. Repressive regimes and terrorists know only too well the extra power they may wield when they not only destroy life, but also inhibit access to the remains of the dead. This power has at times been wielded by the state, for example: when executed criminals' bodies were made available for dissection. In Britain, the practice was officially transferred to the unclaimed bodies of the poor by the Anatomy Act of 1832, 'making poverty the sole criterion for dissection'. According to Gareth Jones, writing in the *New Scientist* as recently as 2014, 'the bodies of the [unclaimed] poor, the marginalised and the disadvantaged' continue to be pressed into service in this way, 'in countries including South Africa, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Brazil and India [...] the US and Canada'. As Jones argues, 'a profession that ignores the ethical dimensions of its practice has no way of preventing ethical atrocities when individuals or societies go awry'.²⁴ Such considerations, it follows, should also be taken into account when Indigenous peoples make claims for the repatriation of their ancestors' remains from museums.

The position of the dead body in relation to its revivification through art remains persistent and problematic. Whether conceptualised as a vessel for the returning soul at the Resurrection, as the only and therefore precious remains of an individual, or as abject decaying matter whose location may be familiar or unknown, the corpse still fascinates. As Diana Fuss writes, death-centred genres of writing such as the elegy ventriloquise and apostrophise the dead, creating a dialogue 'to help death be heard once more'. While this practice of 'reparation, resuscitation, and reclamation' may leave the cadaver behind in its re-voicing, it nonetheless begins with the dead body, uncannily aligning composition and decomposition.²⁵ What we do with the dead, how this accords with what they wish

done with themselves, and how this profound interaction is addressed by life writing form a set of compelling and recurring themes in this special issue.

Genres traditionally associated with death also provide context for several of the articles in this cluster, even as we locate death in the inclusive genre of life writing. Now under-read but still resonant areas of literature such as the printed funeral sermon, collections of epitaphs, the eulogy, and the *éloge* (an encomium given in honour of a deceased person) operate around the dead who continue to ‘work’—to do some service—for the living in their grief.²⁶ Often this work asserts similitude: the dead speak (through *prosopopoeia*) or are spoken to (through *apostrophe*) in order to show the living their own future state.²⁷ Death-bed literature and dialogues of the dead are also morally instructive, revealing that the dead still have important matters to communicate to the living. Traditions of elegy—from the Greek *elegos*, meaning a sung lament—originate at the grave-side as mourning songs performed over the body of the dead.²⁸ As critics have acknowledged, however, the elegy also circulates around the living, who find solace in the ‘accommodation between the mourning self on the one hand and the very words of grief and fictions of consolation on the other’; the ceremonial process and progress of elegy is ‘part of the crucial self-privileging of the survivors’.²⁹ As death intervenes, boundaries between genres—as between mortal states—blur and shift. Death ends first-person writing, though first-person writing can survive the death of its writer; death also occasions third-person writing about the deceased, in genres that give different shape and meaning to an ended life. Sometimes (as in elegies) that meaning is angled as much or more towards the living, who wish for memorial forms that give feeling to their relationship with the dead. If we call life writing by the dying end-of-life-writing, we might call post-mortem life writing life-in-death writing. We might also think of post-mortem life writing as a kind of afterlife writing.³⁰

This cluster of articles—a large one—offers long historical perspectives. It reaches three centuries back and beyond, to ancient authors whose ideas, especially about suicide, had longevity through the Enlightenment. The first of three essays which variously explore poetry as a way of placing death, James Morland’s article discusses how the poet Thomas Gray engaged with Lucretius to memorialise his dead friend Richard West. Eighteenth-century British literature had a rich culture of life writing for death and in many forms; epitaphs graced churches and tombstones, making poetry a material form of memorialising. Whether actually inscribed on stone or not, epitaphs acquired an inscriptive power, turning tributes of words into enduring form.³¹ Yet, as Samuel Johnson observed, ‘[a]n Epitaph is no easy thing’ (letter to David Garrick, 1771). Their personal

significance is explored by Lisa Gee through the figure and revealing biography of William Hayley—an exponent of the theory and practice of epitaphs, whose writings about death promote a rectitude often at odds with his own memorialising practices. Casting rectitude to the winds and storms of Romanticism, poet Charlotte Smith takes up the longstanding genre of churchyard literature to rewrite its conventions about the place of death as one of security and community, in a powerful sonnet powerfully analysed by James Metcalf. Fragility of monuments to the dead is still a concern: EJLW readers may be interested in *The Association of Significant Cemeteries in Europe* (ASCE), ‘a European network comprising those public and private organisations which care for cemeteries considered to be of historical or artistic importance’. It runs an annual Week of Discovering European Cemeteries.³²

The poor are rarely remembered in monuments, and their textual traces can be elusive. Historian Ruth Richardson, who has added significant new information to the biography of Charles Dickens based on scrupulous sleuthing about locations, establishes fresh connections between Dickens and the Poor Law by way of the history of the Cleveland Street workhouse. She investigates the terrible deathly outcomes for its destitute inhabitants, who faced the prospect of dissection at the hospital opposite, and charts the significance of this for understanding more about class in relation to the history of death. Another particularly nineteenth-century form of mortality was death from infectious diseases. Kiera Lindsey compares the deaths of John Keats and Adelaide Ironside, both of whom died from tuberculosis, a generation apart, and were buried in Rome. Using speculative biography to imaginatively fill some of the gaps in Ironside’s archive, she vividly recreates the particularity of tubercular dying and its inexorable suffering.

An unconventional fate for authorial bodies is the subject of two essays. Charles Lock considers the two funerals of Thomas Hardy—his ashes in Westminster Abbey, his heart in Stinsford Churchyard—in the light of the absence of a single resting place and the narrative demands of synchronicity in the telling of two funerals. Hardy’s Will is examined in relation to the outcome for its author’s body—a theme which reappears in an essay about the inhumation of another writer with a complicated relation to a resting place. In ‘An Oracle of Ashes’, Maria Cecilia Aguilar Holt gives an autobiographical account of the interment of James Purdy’s ashes. Reflecting on this convoluted and sometimes tortuous process, Holt combines sympathy for material remains with sensitivity to the different people associated with the dead author, and their different investments in seeing Purdy’s ashes interred where he requested—a long way from his native land, but in a place which can be seen as a literary home, even a spiritual home. Surreal, even bizarre turns in

these two stories may be compared to those in the case of Witkacy, the Polish writer, painter, philosopher and theorist of the absurd, who committed suicide a day after the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939. After the war, his coffin was exhumed from its Ukrainian cemetery and reburied, intact, in Poland. In 1994, the Polish Ministry of Culture and Art ordered another exhumation. Genetic tests on the remaining bones indicated the body was that of a woman—a final absurdist joke, 50 years after the publication of Witkacy's last novel.³³

War, a major cause of dead bodies being misplaced, and often lost far from home, is also the primary cause of great numbers of young lives cut short. The acclaimed poet Rupert Brooke died in Greece in 1915 (ironically from a blood-poisoned insect bite), and thereafter became an icon for patriots and a contested patriotism specific to the First World War. Alisa Miller analyses the making of his public reputation in tandem with new understanding of the restricted opportunities for his mother to mourn her son. Public and private forms of mourning and memorial can have difficult relationships: Brooke's burial on Skyros complicated further a tangle of celebrity, hagiography and the iconicity of youthful death. The Second World War produced new horrors of intentional, state-run murder, for which forms of mourning are ostensibly given outlets in Holocaust memorials around the world. Nazi death camps, usually included as prime sites of dark tourism or thanatourism,³⁴ have forceful afterlives. Roelof Bakker establishes an emotional autobiographical context to discuss the consequences of being forced as a child to look at a Nazi concentration camp photograph. Recuperating the full human potential of the subject through painstaking research and careful looking, he builds a compelling case for approaching war photographs with the utmost sensitivity to the people they represent.

Occasions of death invite reflection, often in writing. Two articles examine literary forms that do this, one first person, one third person. Alex Belsey tracks the life and work of artist Keith Vaughan through his lifelong relationship with his journal, which continued until his death—literally, since the last entry catches Vaughan's last moments. The shock of this fusion of body and text, life and death, is made meaningful by biographically understanding the autobiographical author. The intimacy of a journal can be challenging for critics. There is intimacy too in obituaries, a genre which traditionally sums up an individual's life for public readership. Clare Brant samples the genre to fillet out some of its conventions, surprises, comic forms and anthropocenic uses, and to examine models of reading. One advisor on writing an obituary reminds us 'an obituary can be a compelling story of a life'.³⁵ It may be helpful to compare its miniaturising to the subject of Brant's piece in *Creative Matters*, on Frances Glessner Lee's studies of death in 'Nutshells'.

The connectivity of digital and social media affects how people see and respond to and remember death. At one extreme, perhaps, is the intensity of connectivity itself as an all-consuming form of life. Sherry Turkle reports from interviews that, terrified of being cut off, people say the loss of a cell phone ‘feels like a death’.³⁶ Along the digital spectrum, new cultures of mourning and memorialisation are emerging. Two articles tackle digital forms of mourning. Korina Gioxoglou provides a valuable typology of hyper-mourning, as part of an emerging mode of death-writing of the moment which is often conveyed through small stories; especially useful to life writing is her identification of specific types of affective positioning. Her framework enables critical assessment of the ways networked audiences are connected and mobilised around death, mourning and memorialisation. Emma Newport’s case study of *IamtheZombie*’s posts on MumsnetHQ (an online forum for parents) also provides new theoretical tools for thinking about a tissue of posts—part self-memorialisation, part collective memorialisation—through cyto-architectural metaphors from a medical lexicon applied to message threads, and their processes of dismembering and remembering.

The ways in which a life may be remembered after its subject has died—which may be at variance with their opinion of themselves and their reputation at the end of their life—is investigated by Jane Wildgoose in her examination of William Hogarth’s last work, *The Bathos* (1764). Drawing on an abundance of afterlife writing published following Hogarth’s death, Wildgoose comments on the contrast between his last breath as an artist and the celebratory iconography of his tomb—noting Ken Worpole’s assessment that ‘the places of the dead are pivotal landscapes’ and ‘the cemetery exerts a moral power within wider culture [...] in which the beliefs and identities of past individuals and cultures are inscribed for future generations’.³⁷

The **Creative Matters** section continues explorations of life writing and death especially through artistic practice. Presenting her work in selected places of the dead (West Norwood Cemetery and the Crypt Gallery St. Pancras), Jane Wildgoose continues her exploration of the situation of graves. Raising questions about the archival nature of burial sites, the significance attached to knowing the location of a named individual’s remains, and its relationship with their life story, she reflects on how ‘humans bury [...] to humanize the ground on which they build their worlds and found their histories’.³⁸ In particular, Wildgoose asks that we remember these points when Indigenous peoples lay claim to their ancestors’ remains in museum collections.

Contributors were invited to consider how life writing might look different when considered in the light of death. That prompt fed obliquely

into responses, which suggests it may not have been a productive question. Nonetheless, contributors address some common themes. One is about dissolution and reconstitution, or how the absenting by death creates an emptiness which can be consolingly shaped. In the sculpting of memorial vessels, placing of and contemplative attachment to monuments, preservation of remains and relics, rituals of mourning and resources of language, the living attend to the dead through forms of presence. Another common theme is that of materiality and medium: ashes, paper, stone, clay, floral foam, photography, film, miniaturisation, silence, and tears appear as expressions of care, remembrance and attestation. The tending hand, the making hand, the writing hand, all gesture to the power of touch in memorialisation.

We are privileged to include material from Spring Hurlbut's extraordinary and extraordinarily moving 'Airborne' film and stills featuring ashes, grouped together as *Oriri ex cinere*, to rise from ashes. There are few verbs associated with cremains: scattering (of ashes) is one, here redirected into beautiful emergent patterns shaped differently for—or by—each subject, as if to express the unique nature of subjectivity whilst providing sensitive ritual for emotional movement through release. Purposeful repurposing appears too in Catherine Bell's photo essay of a project using Oasis® floral foam (ubiquitously used as the basis for funereal floral tributes) to model funeral urns and other death-related objects. The malleability of floral foam makes it a pliable medium for thinking about these vessels, and hence the emotions shaping them and stored in and through them; the finished articles become a stimulus for facilitating 'difficult' conversations about last wishes and last resting places. The vulnerability of memorials is discussed by Heather Scott in an account of the vanished traces of Laman Blanchard, a writer admired by Dickens, from West Norwood Cemetery. Conversely, the enduring pull of attraction to places of the dead is captured by James Metcalf's freewheeling account of his churchyard visits. Familiarity with such places of memory, and their significance to traditions of pastoral, landscape and contemplation, infuses the accompanying photographs too.

Forms of memorialising the dead—in churchyards, cemeteries, obituaries, posthumous impressions, photographs—present a rich topic, one to which artists and curators have much to contribute. <http://www.react-hub.org.uk/projects/heritage/future-cemetery/> shows how Arnos Vale in Bristol is using new technology and performance to rescript relationships between the living and the dead. New technology also features in Korina Giaxoglou's poem inspired by an exhibition exploring understanding of life-limiting conditions through film and photography. Awareness of mortality is sensitively explored by Kiera Lindsey in relation to the only

remaining photograph of Australian artist Adelaide Ironside, taken shortly before her death from tuberculosis in Rome in 1867.

At the heart of bereavement are feelings which we often describe as ‘raw’: James Morland’s first-person testament of pain expresses the immediacy of grief and its reactions of woundedness. The miniature models made by Frances Glessner Lee, ‘Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death’, were made to be ‘diagnostic’ in character, functioning as detached third-person analyses of murder scenes, yet, as Clare Brant discusses, neither biography nor aesthetics nor cultural history can quite interpret them dispassionately—or, one might say, lay them to rest.

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- 26 Laqueur, Thomas W., 2015, argues that 'the work of the dead' is profoundly social, providing definition to the lives of the living. His account is also punctuated by literary exhumation of the dead, from epitaphs to 'graveyard poetry'.
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- 28 Wordsworth, William. *Essays upon Epitaphs*. In: John O. Hayden (ed.), *The Selected Prose of William Wordsworth*. London: Penguin Books, 1988 (323), quotes John Weever's *Ancient Funerall Monuments Within the United Monarchie of Great Britaine* (1631) on the connection

- between epitaphs and elegies as grave-side genres 'first sung at burials, after engraved upon the sepulchres'.
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