Dancing with Death: And Writing with it Too

XXXVIII

THE END OF MANKIND
From the Editor | Amy Shea

The concept of the Dance with Death images, as explained by the University of Glasgow library, is a, “grisly motif typically featuring decaying corpses or skeletons who lead the living in a dance to their demise. The dance represents all members of society, from the wealthy and powerful to the innocent and humble, meeting their end at the hands of Death.” There were 41 original woodcuts done by Hans Lutzelburger in Lyon, France from drawings done by Hans Holbein. The Gemmell collection spans about 500 years with the original Dance with Death images created in the 1500s, plus subsequent reproductions, iterations, and additional images created well into the 1900s.

The goal of my Hunterian Associates project, “Dancing with Death: Reading, Writing, and Talking with it Too” has been to encourage public engagement with Dance with Death images through the practice of creative writing. Much of this writing was done on the spot in a creative writing workshop – it’s great to see the likes of poetry and short prose being utilized to engage with mortality. I hope these images and writing will inspire and encourage engaging thoughts and discussions on the topic of death and dying.
Coke arrives lite at the point of cutlery
with everything gleaming as it was
what you take back with a knife, by which
I daily imbibe the air. Boneless of sound
and sugary, we drink straight to the label;
we are not particular / it tastes like lyric.
When you died, I remembered a marriage proposal,
a selection of breathless cheesecakes.
We cried all we could over silicone messages.
Never to get on the bus again
or to hold that thought
of you bringing her crisps and dripping milk
or blood, depending on the day of the week.
The more that I think, it isn’t a future
returning full-colour like football strips
so this snow on my phone is cliché.
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THE PHYSICIAN
**Dancing with Death** | *Julie Lang*

*The Soldier*
The description identifies ‘another Death’ on a different part of the battlefield, so there is more than one, indeed many personifications. Although terminal illness and dying are often described with a battle metaphor, this image depicts not simply reluctance to comply with Death’s summons, but aggressive resistance. It is the soldier’s instinct to resist any foe, even one as inescapable as Death.

*The End of Mankind*
Some scholars have seen the ‘danse macabre’ as a way of domesticating death, situating the end in a familiar, homely environment could be a way of mitigating fear. This image reminded me more of a joyous end and the aria from Handel’s ‘Messiah’

‘The trumpet shall sound,
and the dead shall be raised, incorruptible.’

*The Nun*
The only image I have seen so far that depicts sinfulness. The nun will have taken a vow of chastity, but her lover is in her bedroom, the curtain is drawn aside, so perhaps Death has disturbed them in *flagrante delicto*? The woman is more distracted by ‘the lascivious pleasing of the lute’ (Richard III) than by her broken hour-glass. Has Death come in disguise with a scarf around the head and an apron; perhaps a maid?

*The Physician*
Who is the victim here? Clearly the old man is in Death’s power, but is the physician so familiar with Death’s presences that he greets him like a colleague or a collaborator? The dog is not troubled by Death’s arrival, a possible reminder that only we humankind know that we will die. A cat would be up on the bookshelf!

*The Outcast*
Impoverished, naked, crippled and begging. How ghastly that we could walk ten minutes away from this room and see a similar picture on our city streets! Not only of the outcast, but of the society that has cast him out. Some are looking at him but other are turning away. Death, for which he longs, is absent from the image. He is Christ-like in his supplication and the cruciform configuration of his crutches suggests that his suffering could bring a higher reward.

*The Rich Man*
Far from enjoying the goods that his riches might bring him, he is locked within barred windows, counting his clearly worthless wealth. Death has not come for his money, it is worthless to him/her too. This image is about the infliction of torture, the worst thing that the wealthy man can envisage is losing what he has worked – in every sense – too hard to accumulate. He doesn’t see that his life is the next thing he must forfeit.
Shrouded Dog | Katherine Lee

Have you ever heard of blind man’s bluff
Amidst all your wanderings here?
The dead march on to the beating drum
And the living follow near.
Tick-Tock. Tick-Tock.
Death tugs hard at the blind man’s wooden tether.
Best keep the pace.
Our company awaits.
We cannot dally here.
In living years grappling through the darkness at
Fragmented straws of tainted memories and dreams.
Why should we fear the darkness of death’s final sleep?
Death does not bring the dark with its rest.
It brings the light.
It lifts the fold from the blind man’s face.
Its fire douses the cloudy fog from his dilated eyes.
His groping limbs are steadied.
The eternal soldier journeys along, his tumbling friend in tow.
The master sets the pace to the hour, and casting a caring glance behind him, his loyal dog must follow.
“I don’t want to see him,” wailed William.

The sharp slap across his face left him silent and gasping. Martha had never struck him before. She said he was gentle as well as a gentleman, and she was always so careful with him. It was hard to believe she would try to hurt him, but his cheek stung, so the unbelievable must have been real. It was surprising and painful, and he knew he should cry more, but the nerve of his nursemaid to slap a prince left him stunned. His mother stood by, so lovely in her mourning black, and more distant than usual with her red-rimmed grey eyes staring at the heavy cracked door that leaked its sour stench, staring through it. She must have seen what Martha did, must have heard, but she did not reprimand the woman who seemed more hurt by her action than William, and William almost wanted to apologize to her.

“You have to see him,” she said, and now that he was not wailing, he had no choice but to listen. “He’s your father. And he’s dying.”

His shock from the slap made him pliant, shock and guilt over being the reason a kind woman felt like she had to be harsh, and he let Martha take his hand, protected in a dainty black velvet glove that matched his tunic and tights. He did not protest as she lead him to the doorway.

It was not like the doorway to the cellar. That door was in the ground, and the wood was warped, and it was covered with the dirt from all the boots that came in and out of the kitchen. The same dirt would cover his soft red-and-yellow satin britches as he sat beneath Martha’s seat by the hearth, playing with the corn-dolls she made him (he would have preferred the porcelain dolls his mother procured for his baby sister, but his father insisted that boys did not need dolls, so he had to settle for the ones Martha made). That door could not be left cracked open, it had to be held up by the strong arms of straining, handsome though brutish men who carried crate after crate of preserves and dried meat up and down, up and down.

But it was like the door to the cellar, because he was afraid of it. The cellar was dark, and William had been in his father’s room before, and he could see the light illuminating the interior through the crack, but it was dark in the way the cellar’s darkness chilled his heart. It was dark in the spirit of secrets more than a lack of light. And it smelled the same, not the sweet smell of marmalade from a cracked jar that Martha let him lick clean as long as he did not tell anyone. It was the sweet rotting smell of that dead mouse that tucked itself behind the crates from last winter, the one that they could not find for months, that even the kitchen cat refused to fetch out. Even just cracked open, he could smell his father dying, and William dug his heels into the thick hall rug.

“William,” Martha began, and then she stopped short, her eyes growing big as she looked above his head.

Two hands rested on his shoulders, elegant hands that he always ached for, hoping they would hold him, and they never did.

“You will say goodbye to your father,” said his mother.
Her voice seemed to come to him from very far away, on a wind that whistled out of the deepest pit of her sorrow, and that wind propelled him forward more than the gentle pressure she placed on his shoulders.

William did not want to say goodbye to his father. His father rarely wanted to speak to him, unless it was to tell him what he was doing wrong, how he could be better, instructing him how to act. Telling him to be cruel to look powerful. Keeping his sister away so he could not hold her so close against his chest. Sending his friends away so he was left with only the bullies, the ones who hit each other with sticks and laughed. He preferred his sister’s company, loved the little girl more than he ever loved his father, hated his father more than he ever hated the boys who hit him over, and over, and over again.

Martha opened the door, and William entered his father’s bedroom.

He had only been inside once, when his father had come back from a successful hunting trip and called for his son to present him with the knife that he used to slit the throat of the fallen deer. William had cried, and his father never invited him back. Now the knife hung in a small scabbard by his side, like the sword of a grown prince, instead of a gift for a little boy. There was a figure in the room, wearing a black cloak and strange, elongated mask. It was leaning over the bed, but straightened up and walked past the entering party to give them room. As it walked by, William could smell something coming from inside the mask. It smelled so beautiful, he wanted to cry all over again. It smelled like a doe that still ran through the forest, throat intact, and blood safe inside of her. It smelled so much better than the man who lay in the bed, more decayed than any rotten mouse corpse.

Most of his body was covered by the heavy blue and white blankets, and William wanted to pull them off, because his father looked so hot. His face was red, and William could not believe that all that red was blisters, so he chose to believe that his father was hot. His baby sister had a fever once, and her face was so red then, too. But this was not like that at all, because everyone said his sister would get better, and now everyone said his father was going to die.

“Let me speak to the boy,” said the voice that came out of his father’s lips, a voice William did not recognize.

But his mother and Martha did not seem to notice, or they did not care, and he felt the hands leave his shoulders, and he heard the door close behind him, as solid and heavy as the cellar door.

“Come near me, boy,” rasped the voice, and William stepped back. He took another step back, and another, as his father’s lips curled into a smile.

“Closer, closer,” the voice continued, and William’s steps became faster until he bumped into something soft behind him.

A shadow came over him, and the masked face was next to his own now, that long beak curving over his shoulder towards his chest. And that smell made him dizzy, and happy, and it was like a hug he almost forgot his mother gave him, on that day Martha helped him make the scabbard out of scrap leather, and she said he looked like a prince. It smelled like the earthy husks of his doll, that he hid in the toy chest his mother did not bother to check. Martha knew where they were hid, and she told no one.

“Remember boy,” said the voice, and his father’s lips moved, and the creature all in black gripped William’s arm and his waist. “Remember how hard I have fallen. Remember the blood that is on my hands.”
An image of a deer crossed William’s vision, so vivid he thought it was in the room with them, and he pressed back into the creature while his father’s voice chuckled, but it was the creature’s chest that shook.

William could not see his father’s hands. He did not know how he was supposed to remember blood that he could not see.

The grip on his arm and waist gently turned him, until his father was behind him, and the creature was in front of him. It kept its grip on his arm, but its other hand rose up and began to remove the mask. William knew he should have expected to see the face of a man, a doctor, that was what Martha called it when William caught the creature roaming through the halls at night, staring out the windows to the forest that surrounded the castle. But he expected to see a skull, expected the creature of be a skeleton, like the image of death on small print Martha’s husband kept in his pocket, the one he made after their only son died, the boy William missed more than he would ever miss his father (they would not let him see the boy’s body, though he begged and begged, but Martha said there was no body, there was no trace of him, and she seemed so sad he stopped asking). He could remember the boy more than he could remember his father, could remember his smiling face, that dimple in his cheek, more than any imaginary blood that his father hid on covered hands. He was still remembering the boy when the creature pulled off its mask, and William gasped at the face of a doe that stared down at him, with soft brown eyes crying tears that matted the fur on its snout.

“Remember to be happy,” said the voice behind him, the voice of the doe. “Remember that there is so little time we have to be happy.”

The creature put its mask back on, and his father began coughing, and those rough hacks sounded more like his father, more like his voice. William ran to the door, pulling it open, and Martha and his mother were waiting outside. His mother rushed in at the sound of the hacking, but Martha opened her arms and William ran into her embrace.

“What did your father say?” asked Martha.

William could not remember all the instructions. There were too many, and they blended together, until the words just sounded like that rasping cough. When he buried his head into the nursemaid’s shoulder, he did not see bloody hands. He saw a quick brown streak leaping between the forest trees, and he saw a small boy running with it, lost and free. And that deer and that boy were not nearly as frightening as the darkness inside his father, as the hate in his angry red face and black eyes, so much less welcoming than the kind eyes of the doe.

_The End_
Dance with Death - Death’s Break-Dance | Mirjam Murphy

Not Thy ugly,
  but Thy gentle face I see,
    O Death,
cressing my mother’s brow
  smooth
from fear and worry
Sleepless I may wander
  but she
in Thy arms
  sleeps deep
  and ever free;
Will I not thank Thee, Death
  and pronounce the blessing
of Job, the man of sorrows
who wished to have never been born
rather than go through the valley of shadow of
death;
the valley is deep, the valley is dark;
Death itself dances on primroses on
  summer’s meadows,
along with the fairies feathered.

Kuolema | Mirjam Murphy

Siella, mista mina olen kotoisin
  meilla huolehditaan vieraista hyvin;
Kun tulevat, meilla puhdistetaan porstua
  Ja lakaistaan lattiat, suudellaan ne puhtaaksi,
Ja ikkuna verhot toimistellaan raikkaassa ilmassa
Ja matot piiskataan matto-piiskalla raskaasti.
Ja sitten meilla leivotaan pullat ja piirakat,
pistetaan hirvenliha kuohumaan keittopannuun
Ja lammin leipa kohoamaan pyyhkeen alle, siina
risti ja siunaus sanottu sen yli, niin kuin aikanaan
mummo meita opetti.

Kun vieraat tulevat, heidat kutsutaan lampimasti sisalle,
  heille on katettu poyta kauniisti, kukin,
ja kahvien kanssa kestitetaan ja ruokitaan ja juhlitaan
yhteista iloa olemisesta.

Ja niin, kun kuolema tuli talooni, kaikki oli valmis…
  Kay sisaan kuolema;
siella, mista mina olen kotoisin,
  meilla huolehditaan vieraista hyvin!
Guest | Mirjam Murphy

From where I come from, we look after our guests well; when they are on their way, we clean our houses, brush our wooden floors, mop them shiny, we dust the curtains in the fresh spring air and take all the rugs out to beat them with a carpet-beater. And then, we bake the best delicacies, sweet buns and savoury pies, we take the moose meat out of the freezer and prepare it in the pot for a nourishing soup and the bread dough is left to rise underneath a clean towel; onto it the sign of the cross pressed with our fingers and a blessing pronounced, just like our grandmothers taught us.

Upon arrival, we welcome our guests warmly, invite them in, the table is laid ready with flowers and coffee is boiling over the fire, releasing its aroma into the air; then we dine together and celebrate the joy of being together.

And so, when death came into my house, everything was ready… Come in, Death; from where I come from, we look after our guests well!
The Countess (aka The Young Maiden) | Sally Gales

They rearrange the flowers, noosed
stems sticking her neck
conceal her pallor,
warm it up,
hide the scars, they never
meant to leave.

She reaches for the gown
taffeta too light, they nudge
her towards the rich jewel
tones, a distraction from
the dark circles blooming
along slender limbs, bloating.

Time is up, stripped from their
bones, they hurry
a slap to the cheek for color
a poke in the eyes for sparkle
they feign knowledge lost.

The door knocks, they hide
the Count stares at his future bride
fooled, he takes her
to the alter, his young maiden
spoilt by Death’s blessed caress.
Nothing can be heard across No-Man's Land.

The wind spreads the snow, laying a slow, freezing blanket across the world.

All that can be seen through my scope is the rising breath of the men in the opposite trench. After last night's festivities, I can't see them simply as The Bosche – we shared stories of our families back home, traded presents, even played football.

Now we're back to killing each other again.

The world goes to hell, but the snow still falls, and nature will always claim what's due to it.

Standing on the fire step, I can't feel my bare fingers on the rifle barrel as I make one last sweep of the field. I stop, just around my one o'clock. The swirling snow backlights the black figure slowly walking between the two sets of trenches. I can't tell if it's the climate or something else that is making me shiver. I can never get used to doing stand-to.

The smell of death clings to the air like a child clings to its parent, yet the figure seems unperturbed by its surroundings. The wind has raised its voice now, turned into a shrill, piercing whine, but nothing can make this shadow deviate from its path.

It moves as if carried by the wind itself, until coming to a halt beside a fallen Tommy. I taste the distinct iron of blood as I realise I have been biting my tongue as I observe this peculiar creature. It beholds the body, before slowly raising its head. A gust of icy wind draws back the hood of the figure, exposing a hideous, pale, gaunt woman. My heart pounds, and my breath catches in my throat as I realise this ghoulish woman is looking directly at me, with a look both piteous and malevolent. I lower my rifle and try to focus through the gradually worsening snow – nothing. I rub my tired eyes and squint into the inky darkness, and find she has vanished.
I shake my head – the cold and exhaustion can do funny things to a mind. I start one final check before being relieved. I blink a couple of times before placing my eye to the scope. The snow has grown heavier, the wind hurling it over the scarred, destroyed landscape – this is certainly not a Christmas card the Royal Mail would wish to deliver. The few trees still standing – fading memories of happier times in this godforsaken field – offer little sanctuary to the birds sat in their bare branches. In winter, death is never far from the mind, and yet, looking at these scenes, I can see why some can find inspiration for poems and stories.

Snow begins to pile upon bodies. The thought of layer upon layer of bitter, suffocating, snow makes me uncomfortable, but I can’t seem to stop thinking about it. My mind wanders back to when I was part of that shambles at Langemarck, near Wipers. We were all over the place, and Kaiser Bill’s lot were closing in. I only got out of there alive by hiding under a pile of corpses. I managed to get myself under the nightmarish pile just as I heard a couple of trucks roll by. The smell of death was inescapable, and it crept into my throat – a smell all soldiers have to get used to quickly. There was the odd defiant pot-shot, but nothing much. Something big, probably a tank, rumbled close to my hiding place, and the tremble it made as it passed caused the pile to vibrate, and I was pinned under a few bodies as they shifted.

I tried to stay in control, even though I could barely breathe. The empty stare of one of my old mates was just inches from my own nose – and I started to feel the panic rise in my chest. I forced myself to stay exactly where I was, even though I was having the life squeezed out of me, choked by the stench of the slowly rotting bodies, human filth, and smoke. My chest grew unbearably tight; even small breaths were a ton weight upon my lungs. To make matters worse, I felt like I was being teased by my dead compatriots, whose bodies had moved just enough to let me see the sunlight. I thought that was going to be the last thing I saw – the faces of my friends in their final agony, and a narrow circle of light, beckoning to me. Despite the intense heat in that mound, my body is now shivering, and I consider continuing with the reverie, if just for another minute, to imagine myself away from this icy Purgatory.

As I climb down the final step of the trench ladder, a presence is at my back – even in these conditions, it makes me feel especially cold, causing the hairs on my neck to stand on end. I look
down the length of the trench, but there’s nothing there. My mind playing tricks. I make my way to the dug-out, silently wishing luck to the poor bugger who takes my place on watch. I stop, dead in my tracks, as an inhuman scream whips through the frozen air towards me, the shriek shaking me to my very bones. It seems like a creature from the depths of Hell has visited our sorry band to terrorise us. I look around the trench, but no else seems to have heard it – they just sit, smoking, playing cards, and sharing jokes. Unnerved, I hurry to the dug-out, eager to escape the strange goings-on.

In the dug-out, I sit at the table and, in perhaps a vain attempt at distraction, I pick up *Around the World in Eighty Days*. I try to relax in the dim, flickering light, joining Phileas Fogg on his travails circumnavigating the globe, imagining all of the wonderful, exotic places he and Mr Passepartout visited. No matter how hard I imagine the sun-kissed destinations of Verne’s tale, I find it difficult to escape the bitter cold sweeping in through the doorway. I angle my chair to avoid the worst of the icy breeze, and the dull heartbeat of shells landing further down the line loses my attention. I want to be a stowaway on the trains, steamers and even elephants that the heroes take on their adventure, wishing more than anything to escape this desolate, frozen wasteland. As I lose myself in the story, I feel a strange prickle on the back of my right hand and, no matter how much I scratch it, the feeling always returns. Soon, it starts travelling over my cold skin, towards my fingers, and then slowly, deliberately over the knuckles of my left hand, itchy and sharp. I freeze as I see the cause: two jet black legs, thick as darning needles, unhurriedly curl over the edge of the dog-eared page, in no rush to reveal their coy owner. Swiftly, I jump to my feet, dropping the book to the floor, fiercely waving my hand to remove the unwelcome visitor. I stumble about in the half-light, but lose sight of the spider almost instantly, hoping he won’t appear later in my bed.

As I scan the light wooden floor, I notice a wetness, a deep red, glistening in the candlelight. My gaze follows the dark stream up the wall, and my breath catches in my throat as I behold two boys strung up from the wooden support above me. Darkness envelops me as the candles are blown out by a sharp breeze. I scramble around the desk for matches, and as I relight the candles, I find the blood on the floor has gone. Looking above, I discover that the previous macabre sight of my comrades in arms has been replaced with the corrugated iron sheets of the ceiling. Vanished.
The shriek returns to assault my ears and causes my heart to flutter. The wooden floorboards groan, yet nothing is moving. There may be thousands of men outside, yet I feel profoundly alone. I may have faced countless horrors during the course of this War, but nothing has made me feel more frightened than I am at this moment. I grip my rifle, with knuckles as white as the swirling snow outside, and I feel the same suffocating sensation from back in Langemarck creeping into me. The ceiling could open and drop several feet of snow upon my head right now, and I’d welcome that over this dread, flooding through my body in waves. The shriek rings in the depths of my brain, tears form in my eyes, thoughts flash through my mind – home, family, life, death, war – and, dropping my rifle, my hands shaking, fighting with the buttoned strap of the holster, I draw my service revolver and place it at my temple, determined to silence the banshee and grant myself peace.

I close my eyes, breathe in, breathe out.

My arm falls to my side, and I drop back into the chair, the novel lying face-down at my feet, pages splayed wide. My tears darken the wood between my boots. The frozen world outside stops, I can hear only my own heartbeat, and something else I can’t put my finger on, something outside the dug-out, or inside the dark recesses of my mind. I finally realise what it is. The scream of an incoming shell. It’s headed my way. I force myself to look up. There she is. I know it's time.

I take a deep breath. I take her outstretched hand. The bomb will lay waste to the wooden structure, steel and flame triumphs over flesh and bone.

But, long after the fire is put out, the ringing in the ears of those nearby stops, and the cursory respect to the dead is paid, the snow will continue to fall, burying everything in its chilly embrace.

Nature will always claim what's due to it.
The Old Man | Ruth Fletcher

“Thank you, kind sir
All I needed was a little help to take this step.
Soon I’ll be free of aches and pains
Play a while after I’m gone.”

The Old Woman | Ruth Fletcher

“Away and gie me peace!
Ah’m too busy for ye noo.
Whit a racket wi yer batterin’ and clangin’
Away oot ma road!
Ah’m awa’ home.”

The Drinker | Ruth Fletcher

Regret
But the wine helped me forget
Regret
But we had merry times
Regret
My family needed me
Regret
I failed them.
Death.
On Death | Danai Gabre

Turn on the news and Death fills the screen:
Famine, Earthquakes, Explosions, Shootings, Disease.
And while on the screen they seem far away,
Sometimes Death has names attached:
Cancer – Grandma; Miscarriage – Little Bump; Stillbirth – Linnea.
I know Death can come for anyone on any day.
And Death will try to - and will eventually succeed in - roping me in.
People stress about Death thinking about all they wish they had done.
But Death is a reminder that life is a gift:
Friendship, Laughter, Love.
Life is about the people who will hurt the most once you leave them for that other place.
Some call Death Peace, Release, or Nothing.
To me, Death is seeing my Beloved face to face.
“Does he know you are already dead?”

The young woman placed the last carnation into her bouquet, tying it together with a red tartan sash. “No,” she said, watching as a reflection appeared in the window – hollow sockets raged from underneath a large black hood, hiding the fractured bones of a pearly white skull.

“You should have married me,” the skeleton said.

“There is no life amongst the dead,” she replied, feeling the bile rise in her stomach as she realised Death had come to claim her.

She placed a hand across her chest, where her heart rested, frozen in time. Beneath the white, satin dress, maggots feasted upon the grey, putrid remains of her flesh. She dipped her finger into the goblet of red wine and ran it along her bloodless lips, staining them with the deep, cherry liquid.

“Did you think you could hide from me?”

Staring down at the yellow petals, as they wilted and crumbled into dust – she remembered. The screams. The stench of rotten flesh and brimstone. The sinners and saints trapped, side by side, damned for all eternity.

Until she, the most savage of souls, bartered, ravaged, and fornicated her way out of the Underworld.

The woman said nothing and wrapped a lace choker around the open wound across her neck.

Behind her, the floorboards creaked as the sound of a scythe tapping against the wood drew closer. Outside the window, the churchyard was alive with colour – blue bonnets, lavender parasols, and green top hats, all awaited her arrival.

“There is nothing more that can be done,” Death said, wrapping an arm around her waist.

“I’ve come to take you home.”

Amongst the graves walked a young man. He adjusted his cravat and placed a wreath on a graveside. The woman smiled as she watched him.

“He will forget you soon,” whispered Death, tightening his grip.

The woman gathered the black ringlets of her hair and entwined each one into the white sprigs of her garland.
“The living are only the dead in waiting,” Death added, turning the woman to face him.
“Do you know the troubles to which I have gone to ensure he never discovers what I am?” the woman replied. “Lavender can only mask the scent of death for so long.”
“I am familiar with your talents,” Death said, baring into her face. “Did he try to lie with you?”
The woman narrowed her eyes and sighed. “No, he prefers his women ‘virtuous’.”
Death growled, unable to hide his satisfaction.
“I suppose it made it easier to hide this,” the woman replied, lifting her dress to reveal a gangrenous foot, bulging with blisters and thick, black sores, tracking up her leg.
“Not even a kiss?”
The woman removed a handful of leaves from her bouquet, and placed each one in her mouth. As she chewed, she drew closer to the skeleton, and blew a mint-scented kiss into his chiselled grin.
“It appears you thought of everything,” Death replied.
“Bring him with us,” the woman said, running her hand along his skull.
He tutted and took her hand in his. “I will come for him soon enough,”
“Why wait?” the women replied, leaning her head against his chest.
Death grabbed her neck and prised her away. As she winced, his sharp, bony fingers dug further into her throat. “You would have him die just so you can keep him?”
“Yes,” she answered, lowering her eyes to stare at the sapphire ring resting upon her cold, pale wedding finger.
Death pushed her away and paced up and down, keeping a watchful eye on the woman.
“Be certain of this… He would be going to a much happier place than you.”
As he swiped his scythe towards her head, the woman pressed herself against the wall with fear.
“Take him instead,” she pleaded, collapsing to her knees.
Death shook his head, twirling the blade between his hands. Standing before the woman, he crouched down and helped her to her feet.
“You don’t need me,” the women replied, brushing past him to stand in front of the window. “I was nothing.”
“You were everything.”
The women laughed and pressed the bouquet against her lips. As the flowers’ sweet scent filled the air, she opened a small wooden box sitting on the window sill, and took a pinch of the white substance inside. She turned towards Death and smiled.

A shrill cry echoed through the room, onto the streets below, as the salt landed upon him. “You taught me well,” she said. “Salt to purify death.”

As the woman ran through the room, she turned back to see the floor splinter and crack, until the wooden boards rose and engulfed the remains of the skeleton. His hands reached out and crawled between the broken panels, in search of the woman. The fingers latched on to her ankle – gouging one of the few last pieces of flesh, uncovering the crusty shell of a cockroach, entombed beneath a creamy veneer of pus.

A rumble reverberated from the bowels of a black cavern as it consumed all that surrounded it. One by one, the tapestries, bed linen, and furniture succumbed to the hunger of the Underworld as it devoured them. The room trembled as the foundations shrieked in a last ditch attempt to survive.

The woman clung to the bedpost, feeling the agony of her ankle snapping as she struggled against Death’s grip. With one final desperate kick, she broke free and, despite the pain surging up her leg, ran through the house, as the walls collapsed around her.

Descending the staircase, she lost her footing, and collided with the front door. With a turn of the handle, she fell, and landed onto the soft, damp grass of her garden. The daisies and daffodils shivered in the slight breeze and watched as the corpse in front of them dusted off the dirt from her mud-stained wedding gown. The smell of rain clung to the air, masking the musty stench of death upon her lips as she screamed in frustration. She looked up towards the house, expecting to find wreckage – instead, the little country cottage, with its quaint, overgrown hanging baskets and terracotta plant pots, stood proud and upright as a glimmer of sunlight beamed through the arch windows.

The woman rose to her feet and walked towards the churchyard, leaving behind a trail of trampled daisies in her wake. As she readjusted the lace choker around her neck, an owl hooted in the distance and the gravel beneath her feet crunched as she reached the church door. Turning the brass handle, she stepped inside, and was greeted by a mass of smiling, rosy-cheeked faces. The door closed behind her with an almighty bang, as the organ pipes let out a resounding boom, and the deafening sound of music filled the sanctuary. The woman dropped her veil over her
face, and walked down the aisle. Step by step, the sounds of gasps and muttering followed her as she reached the man ill-fated to be her groom.

“My love?” the woman said.
No reply.
Looking closely at the groom’s face, she noticed a single tear trickling down his cheek. He removed a handkerchief from his pocket, and dabbed it across his eyes, but still the sorrow remained.

“What is wrong, my dear?” the woman asked.
Again, she was met with silence.
Only the music could be heard – a mournful song. One she remembered from long ago, when she buried her mother.
The woman turned around, and saw the sea of brightly-coloured bonnets turn to black, and the smiles turn to weeping. Her sister, great-aunt, and cousin bowed their heads and hid their solemn faces under black veils.

“We are joined together to remember the life of Rosalind March,” came a voice from the pulpit.

Out the corner of her eye, the woman spotted a coffin sitting by the altar and approached.

“Won’t somebody explain?” she shouted.
No reply.
Looking into the coffin, she saw a familiar face – black ringlets cascading over a slit throat, and a hand resting over her chest, with a sapphire ring upon her wedding finger.

An arm grabbed the woman, and a scythe sliced across her stomach. Death leaned down and whispered into her ear, “You should have married me.”
what is it to take Death’s hand in your own? to give it a squeeze? to put on your best dress? to thread flowers through your hair?

someone always cries at weddings.

I chose this when entering the small nucleus of the womb; I have chosen this every day since.

so why not have a dance, my dear? I can learn to love you without swallowing you. I can rest my chin on your drying shoulder and still breathe clean air.
Death may be the great equalizer, but not all deaths are created equal.

On the day he dies, a lot will happen around him, but not necessarily be about him.

Maybe someone will notice, maybe not. Maybe someone will claim him, maybe not. Maybe he will be given a proper burial with family and mourners and his name will be felt on people’s tongues and heard in people’s hearts, but maybe not. Perhaps his body will languish on the streets for a few hours or days, or he’ll get lucky and be picked up right away by the coroner. He might walk into an emergency room and never walk back out. He might walk into an emergency room and be sent back out. Maybe he’ll die on a park bench. Maybe he’ll die on the edge of a heating grate on the street having warmed up briefly in winter only to roll off in his sleep and freeze to death. Maybe he’ll develop a cancer he doesn’t know he has and doesn’t treat because he’s too busy standing at line at the social security office, waiting in the shelter for food, begging on the streets for money, until the symptoms finally can no longer be ignored and they scream terminal. He may have the fortune of being sent to a medical respite unit and provided hospice care, compassion, and dignity. He may also end up hooked to machines in an ICU with no voice, no agency in how he dies.

After death, his body might be collected and paid for by someone who knew him and loved him, still loves him, even if they don’t know him anymore. Or he might languish in cold storage at the county morgue until the requisite time is up and he’s buried unceremoniously in a two-deep grave with only a number as a marker. Or cremated, boxed and stored for a future mass indigent burial.

He’s an outcast, a beggar, indigent, destitute, poor, needy, broke and broken. Maybe those around him don’t see him: have forgotten him. But not death: death sees him, and will never forget.
• **The End of Mankind** | Gemmell Special Collection #50 – Edited by Dr. F. Lipman, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1886.

• **The Idiot Fool** | He is mocking Death, by putting his finger in his mouth, and at the same time endeavouring to strike him with his bladder-bauble. Death smiling, and amused at his efforts, leads him away in a dancing attitude, playing at the same time on a bag-pipe.
  - Gemmell Special Collection #50 – Edited by Dr. F. Lipman, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1886.
  - Gemmell Special Collection #34 (text descriptions from this text) – *Dance of Death*. Douce, Francis (1757 – 1834). Includes reprints of Holbein’s 49 woodcuts from the Lyons edition. 1833.

• **The Soldier** | On a field of battle, covered with dead carcasses, Death, armed with a buckler and a huge dart, attacks the warrior, in the bosom of victory, escaped alone from the carnage of the day, and is giving him some terrible blows. It is in vain that this brave Soldier, whose courage seems invincible, is obstinately attempting to dispute the victory with an irresistible adversary. In the background appears another Death, running, and beating on a drum, who is followed by several soldiers.
  - Gemmell Special Collection #50 – Edited by Dr. F. Lipman, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1886.

• **The Physician** | Death is leading to him a sick old man, whose urine he is presenting to him in a phial, and appears saying, in a jeering manner, Dost thou think thou art able to save a man who I already have in my power?
  - Gemmell Special Collection #50 – Edited by Dr. F. Lipman, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1886.

• **The Blind Man** | The poor Blind Man is following, with an air of chagrin, his new conductor, who, without pity, is leading him through wretched roads. In vain does he attempt, by groping his way, to avoid the obstacles that oppose his reluctant march; he will not avoid that fatal goal to which Death is conducting him, and which will be the only termination of his evils.
  - Gemmell Special Collection #50 – Edited by Dr. F. Lipman, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1886.

• **The King** | He is seen, eating in state, under a canopy, and served by the officers of the court. Death is come to put himself in the number, and is at this instant performing the office of cupbearer. He is pouring out drink to the Monarch, who holds out to him his great cup, which he is now probably to empty for the last time. The Prince holds in his left hand a paper, without a doubt a petition, that has just been presented to him.
• **The Countess** | She is wholly taken up with the care of her dress, and is receiving with eagerness, from the hands of one of her maids, a very rich robe with a gold chain. Death comes to derange her toilet, and has already, without being perceived, slipped around her neck a collar made of small bones.
  
  o **Gemmell Special Collection #50** – Edited by Dr. F. Lipman, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1886.

• **The Drinker** | Debauchery, and, above all, excess in drinking, undoubtedly furnish Death with powerful arms for committing his ravages. Here he appears pouring the wine in great abundance into the throat of one of these Drunkards, and the most beastly drunkenness reigns in these disgusting orgies.
  
  o **Gemmell Special Collection #50** – Edited by Dr. F. Lipman, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1886.

• **The Old Woman** | The grim countenance of this good old Dame does not indicate the same resignation as appears in the former [the old man] subject. Wholly occupied in mumbling her rosary, she pays no attention to the sound of a dulcimer, on which one of her conductors is playing. The other skeleton, impatient of the slowness of the Old Woman’s march, is employing menaces and blows to make her advance.
  
  o **Gemmell Special Collection #50** – Edited by Dr. F. Lipman, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1886.

• **The Old Man** | Here we see Death leading away, playing on a psaltery, an Old Man to the brink of the grave, bent under the load of years, and verging to the last degree of frailty. The Old Man allows himself to be carried off, with that calmness and tranquility, which are the effects of wisdom, and the fruits of a good conscience.
  
  o **Gemmell Special Collection #50** – Edited by Dr. F. Lipman, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1886.
• **The Bride** | She is accompanied by her husband, who endeavours to divert her attention from death, who is insidiously dancing before them...
  - Gemmell Special Collection #50 – Edited by Dr. F. Lipman, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1886.
  - Gemmell Special Collection #34 (text descriptions from this text) – *Dance of Death*. Douce, Francis (1757 – 1834). Includes reprints of Holbein’s 49 woodcuts from the Lyons edition. 1833.

• **The Outcast/The Beggar** | In the most deplorable situation, lame, and exposed almost naked to the injuries of the weather, he is set down before a rich man’s house, into which he has the mortification to see several enter, who look at him without ever thinking of relieving his distress. Death, not less cruel than capricious, whose aid alone he implores, and in whose power it is to make him happy, deaf to his prayers, allows him to groan under the load of evils which overwhelm him, whilst he delights to tear from this life those who think themselves happy, or are attached to it by the strongest ties.
  - Gemmell Special Collection #50 – Edited by Dr. F. Lipman, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1886.