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Death, My Funny Valentine

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Panel: Writing as Recovery

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WRITING AS RECOVERY

Death, My Funny Valentine

By Yeow Kai Chai (Singapore)

Picture this. A blonde dude decked out in shimmering mail sitting on a stone outcrop. He's playing a game of chess. His sparring partner? A tall, lean aesthete, face powdered white, and body suited with a Yohji Yamamoto-esque combo of black cape and kaftan. The backdrop is a calm sea. Above, billowing tufts of clouds back-lit by a glint of sun. This scene, of course, is taken from Swedish director Ingmar Bergman's 1957 classic *The Seventh Seal*; the chain mail guy is a mediaeval knight (Max von Sydow) and his opponent, The Grim Reaper (Bengt Ekerot).

Many critics belabor the somber portent of the scene – granted, it's a serious game of life and death – but I've always detected a twinkle of Bergman's macabre humor in there, too. There's levity even in its seriousness, as the two play a mind game. (In fact, the scene's been spoofed in pop culture, with the Grim Reaper appearing in films such as Woody Allen's 1975 comedy *Love and Death* and the 1991 sci-fi comedy *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey*.)

The idea that Death comes in the form of a genteel fashionista tickles me to no end. I'm intrigued, too, by the scene's bucolic atmosphere: Nothing is hurried. It's as if it's just another day.

I start thinking about how disarmingly affable death can be; and that it doesn't have to be a taboo to be spoken about in hush-hush tones. I think of this whenever death hits close to home. The trigger was the drowning of my friend's mother more than 10 years ago. My friend's family had just moved into a new condominium. They were happy. A few weeks after, Auntie drowned in the swimming pool in a freak accident.

The drowning was so sudden, so terrible, I did not know what to say to my friend. Not long after, my maternal grandmother died of old age. And my father a few years after that, from septic shock.

As one ages, one realizes one cannot escape this mortal coil. The death of a loved one remains a deeply traumatic one, and each death changes you irrevocably. The more death haunts, the more I realize I *have* to take it on. If we can't run away from it, we must deal with it. Writing is my way of coping with it, making sense of it and reassessing one's existence.

I began writing a series of poems called *Memento Mori*, named after a Latin phrase meaning "Remember that you will die." These are obituaries, celebrations of lives lived and lost, and portraits of deaths in various representations.

I have at the back of my mind a series of pictures by a Mexican photographer (whose name, unfortunately, I can't remember) who had propped up the bodies of dead children in bed, so as to make them look like they were sleeping. They looked so startlingly serene.

I revel in the fine etchings of Mexican engraver Jose Guadalupe Posada who had an affinity for skeletons. I was alternately repelled by, and drawn towards, the image of Hamlet holding

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the exhumed skull of court jester Yorick, as he expounds on the vile ravages of death. I soak in, too, the festivals surrounding death. I think of all the spirits of ancestors unleashed during the seventh month of the lunar calendar in Singapore and other Asian countries; as well as its equivalent, Day of the Dead, which is celebrated throughout Latin America. What color! What noise! So, the more I write about death, the more I marvel at its richness.

It is dark, it is mysterious, it is alive, it keeps me awake.

My poem 'Memento Mori II', for example, alludes to German anatomist Gunther von Hagens who is notorious for his Body Worlds exhibitions where human bodies are "plastinated" for posterity.

I remember being stunned by the sight of these naked bodies in various positions. Stripped of skin, viscera externalized. These people are dead, and yet, permanently immortalized. So, is that it? We're just offal? Is death the end of everything? Yes, no, maybe. All answers are true, and contingent on your faith, or lack thereof.

As a writer, here's one thing I know: Writing about death is a small triumph over death. It's literary exorcism. You address the ghosts of inchoate emotions.

The actual act of writing (or typing each letter onto your computer) becomes a testament. Each word is a tombstone, a *memento mori*, to remind us we once mattered. In doing so, we recover lost souls. We write ourselves and others to existence, even if bodies expire.

Ultimately, not knowing what death has in store for all of us means we are all condemned, or rather blessed, to speculate. For centuries, we've made jokes of it, we've scared each other over it, and we've made up quaint holidays like Halloween.

Thus goes the eternal fandango – flirting with death, winking at it, playing a game of chess with it, dancing with it.

The question remains, and here I quote William Butler Yeats, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

**The Iowa City Book Festival (www.iowacitybookfestival.org) and the
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