

IN CONVERSATION WITH THE PERSONIFICATION OF DEATH

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PHILLIP What is your earliest memory?

DEATH To originate from many genealogies, theologies, visions, frenzies, sicknesses, is to have a fractured sense of first memory. Deaths exist everywhere, we are the only shared human experience.

PHILLIP What about light? And breath?

DEATH The blind prophet never sees light, although illuminated. Breath is like birth, sometimes it fails.

PHILLIP Hesiod said you were born from Night.

DEATH Night is the time that humans ascribe to the world of death. I find this odd. The time of death is dawn, a liminal space housing only one thread of pain in the greater tapestry of the soul.

PHILLIP Speaking of liminal spaces, I've always wondered how you negotiate grammatical gender. The Greeks call Thanatos masculine, the Romans call Mors feminine. The Romans also call you Letum, and this is neuter. Where does your truth lie buried?

DEATH Here is something I've observed about all of this, if you're interested?

PHILLIP *Nods.*

DEATH Let's begin with Thanatos. One of the most moving scenes in all of literature is that moment in *Iliad* when Thanatos escorts the dead hero Sarpedon away from the slaughterfields of Troy. Zeus weeps streams of overflowing blood, seeing this son of his conquered by the lot of mortality. What is more terrible than a parent witnessing the death of their child, this life-cut-short? But Thanatos becomes the compensation: he who personifies the "good death" that amounts to imperishable glory. On the other hand, Mors is harsh-hearted, arm-bearing, gaping with black jaws, and greedy beyond all, or at least in the poetry of Tibullus, Seneca, and Statius. And she shares much in common with those Greek spirits of destruction known as the Keres, who likewise haunt the minds of the world with their unpredictable jaws of death. It perhaps comes as no surprise that they are also depicted as female. Does this all map onto a wider Greco-Roman notion of women as insatiable vessels of perennial vengeance? Consider socio-linguistic complexities and ramifications: there is something grim in this gendered

dichotomy, and I think it says a lot more about you than it does about us.

PHILLIP And what about Letum?

DEATH Was coming to that. They're a kind of amorphous, terrible, blanketing being. An enshrouder. Your poets find Letum difficult to describe because they cannot grasp phenomena beyond what they do and what they know. Letum is the answer to the question of gender: gods don't cling to these kinds of things.

PHILLIP *Laughs.*
Not really helpful.

DEATH *Winks.*
Gods never are.

PHILLIP *Blushes.*
Among your musings on gender, you, perhaps predictably, cite language of the body. Gaping black jaws, corpse-attending, physical things. How does this map onto the divine experience?

DEATH Let me bring to light the staying words of Vernant, who says "the corporeal code permits one to think of the relations between man and god under the double figures of the same and the other, of the near and the far, of contact and separation." This process of anthropomorphism allows you to categorise us and understand us, but you don't understand us, really. Body is one part of some of our forms and all parts of

none of our forms. Think of the Chinese taxonomy that Foucault made mention of in his preface to *Les Mots et les Choses*: “animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.” It is a catalogue far closer to divine truth. You could learn something from all of this.

PHILLIP But how can we discuss the incomprehensibility of the gods without some kind of comprehensible vocabulary?

DEATH Create new codes. Dispose of a notion of body in the same way that some are already disposing of gender. Not to say that I don't enjoy bodies, if you know what I mean.

PHILLIP *Cheeks feeling hot.*
What is your favourite body of Death?

DEATH Oh, it has to be the one found in the poetry of Emily Dickinson:

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stoped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

How charming, seriously! You could imagine him with a top hat and a cane and a monocle and a moustache—

Death hangs their head, laughing.

All of those delectable nothings—

Their gaze returns softly.

Who is your favourite Death?

PHILLIP *Blushes, again.*

Too many to choose! In Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, Death is the ever-victorious chess player of this inescapable game called life. Death in Luca Guadagnino's adaptation of *Suspiria* is a figure of drenched hair and sinewy skin who casts head-splattering spells of steep destruction. And a drunken hedonist in Jack Underwood's *Holy Sonnets X*, who sips on the lives of mortals like cups of orange juice on a November morning or chilled glasses of Tanqueray. You're all—

DEATH All ugly in a beautiful way.

PHILLIP *Sighs and exhalations.*

Why is it so hard to be beautiful in this city?

DEATH To be blunt, beauty wasn't made for you and me. I take inspiration from the character of Sybil, found in Monica Dickens's *The Winds of Heaven*: "She was tall and dark, with smooth black hair parted like wings on either side of an olive-skinned, narrow face that might have been Italian. She was not beautiful, but she was arresting." Halting oddities are compelling.

You live in a timeline where being beautiful isn't enough anymore. Make that your own truth.

PHILLIP Holding these words like a lover's hands. Any footnotes?

DEATH We have spoken of the entrapment of Death and our many legions of pain. I want to redeem Death as release, two case studies in my mind. The first is Lavinia, whose dramatic presence in *Aeneid* is shrouded in a great fog of silence. That is to say, not a single spoken line for this wife of Aeneas in a song of nine-thousand, eight-hundred and ninety-six lines. An opportunity lost. When we first hear from Lavinia in our epic tradition, it is on the third terrace of suffering in Dante's *Purgatorio*. I quote Stanley Lombardo's translation, Canto seventeen, lines thirty-five to thirty-nine:

O Queen,
why through anger have you annulled yourself?
You have killed yourself so that you would not lose
Lavinia, now you have lost me, and I mourn
your ruin, Mother, before another's has happened.

A perennial scream, anguished by the suicide of her mother, Amata. But to toss off the veil of silence and mourn forever in the psyche of Dante seems a better deal than a living nothing. Alkestis knew this too. Sacrificed her life for her husband, Admetos, to ride the tracks *ad infinitum*. Then, after being unexpectedly brought back from the dead by the techniques of Herakles, she was drenched in Hades's miasma and couldn't speak for three days, so say the writings of

Euripides, but the play ends before we get Alkestis's side of the story, and we are left to wonder if she will ever speak again. Take it from me: she was the only person willing to die for Admetos for a reason. I think she saw the light in afterlife, forsaking the human frame, becoming an untethered will-o'-the-wisp. I think she saw the truth. There will always be this body of yours, this body braised by Death. It will conquer with or without you. Maybe your ashes will flit in the winds and travel through the seven seas, maybe your bones will sleep in a coffin of eternity, maybe your flesh will feed worms whose waste will feed soil whose nutrients will feed trees and life will grow from you again and again. And there will be you, a whole lot of you, in everything and everywhere. The corpse is the key to something greater, beyond the beyond. A source of triumph, forever.

