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Reclaiming a public space for grief, mourning and the dead

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1. Introduction

This chapter presents the aim of the project and its research questions, the context in which it is situated, and the approach taken during the discovery phase. Together these set up what follows, which begins with a literature review into the history and current situation of the topic.

1.1 Aim of the project

This project began from a personal observation: that many of the ways we currently meet death and grief place expectations on people, while leaving too little space for mourning to be experienced in a way that feels meaningful on a personal level. It is also a subject still relatively underexplored within design, despite touching nearly every life.

What began as a personal observation found wider grounding through an initial literature exploration. It became clear that, in contemporary Western society, processes of medicalisation, privatisation, and commercialisation have not only reorganised how death is handled practically, but transformed the ways in which meaning is made around loss. This leaves both individuals and communities with fewer shared spaces and practices in which grief can be expressed and held collectively. Elsewhere in the world these processes take very different forms, a difference this project returns to later. This formed the starting point for the project's design goal:

> *Design goal: a design that reclaims space for death, grief and mourning to be expressed in meaningful ways, and shared by bereaved individuals and their communities in public space.*

Pursuing this goal means treating design not as a solution imposed on the bereaved, but as a facilitator: creating open-ended conditions in which meaning can emerge collectively, while leaving room for what is uniquely personal, and without prescribing what grief should look like or how it should be resolved.

The project draws on interviews with practitioners, bereaved individuals, field research, and cross-cultural and transdisciplinary perspectives to understand how grief is currently experienced and what conditions allow it to be shared.

The outcome should be a design that supports both individual and collective forms of expression around loss in public space. It will contribute to an emerging understanding of how design can engage with grief, while recognising its complexity and relationality rather than denying it. Alongside the design goal the following research questions evolved:

> *How has death, dying, and grief been pushed out of public space in contemporary Western society, and what alternative practices have emerged in response?*
>
> *How does meaningful personal grief and collective mourning relate to each other, and what conditions allow them to evolve and meet?*
>
> *How can design create space for grief to be expressed without reducing or prescribing what it should look like?*

1.2 Context

Death and dying are universal human experiences, yet they have largely disappeared from everyday and communal life in the Netherlands. Where death was once part of shared life, cared for at home and mourned together, it has gradually moved into professional and private spaces. The range of social, cultural and institutional phenomena behind this shift is examined in the literature review, how death left shared life, and what pushes back, that follows, alongside how it has transformed not only how death is handled practically, but how communities relate to loss and to one another.

The field of actors is deeply interconnected and has become complex. Bereaved individuals and their communities, healthcare professionals, the funeral industry, grief facilitators, artists, and many more all shape how death and mourning are understood and experienced. Academic fields including sociology, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy each contribute relevant perspectives and shape how we perceive and handle the subject.

Counter-movements and alternative practices are emerging in response, from hospice care and grief facilitation to artistic and community initiatives. This project also looks deliberately beyond the Netherlands: cross-cultural perspectives, drawn from the literature and expert interviews, are used to question the Western framing and show that its current arrangements around death are neither universal nor inevitable, and that other ways of living with loss remain possible.

This project positions itself as a design inquiry within this landscape, not within healthcare, therapy, or the funeral industry, but at their intersection in public space. It asks where design might create conditions for grief to be shared collectively, rather than provide a service, treatment, or solution.

1.3 Approach

The scope

The discovery phase of this project followed a layered and iterative process, kept deliberately open and adaptive given the complexity and emotional sensitivity of the subject. The approach was ethnographically informed, using open-ended qualitative methods to build a contextual understanding that could inform the design process, without claiming to be a full ethnography (Segelström & Holmlid, 2014). The literature review and expert interviews were both divergent, gathering as many perspectives as possible rather than narrowing in early. This was important because grief and death are shaped by many overlapping fields, and only by drawing across them can a genuine understanding of grief be built. This broader grounding was also essential for engaging carefully with people who have experienced loss themselves. It meant entering these conversations informed, with enough prior understanding to avoid harmful assumptions or insensitive questions, and considered, with attention to the emotional weight of what was being shared.

The section above sets out how the discovery phase was carried out. The design phase brought methods of its own: a sensitizing booklet and a co-design session with family members, an exposition run with fifteen participants across several sessions, and a follow-up test in which AI-generated images were returned to those participants. Since in research through design the setup of these studies cannot be separated from what they produced, each is described where it is reported rather than here.

The report is written in the third person, except where the position of the researcher within the material is itself the subject. Those passages are in the first person, since writing them impersonally would obscure exactly what they are meant to make visible.

Interview Approach

Interviews were semi-structured. This did not mean approaching them neutrally: the research already carried an orientation of its own, a handful of guiding themes and a direction the project was already leaning toward, and acknowledging that is part of taking the approach seriously. Questions were used mainly to sensitise the researcher and to develop a general orientation toward what was being explored, but they were not followed as a fixed sequence during the conversations. Interview questions were treated as part of the interaction rather than as neutral prompts, since their construction and the categories they introduced could shape the account that followed (Potter et al., 2005).

With a sensitive subject like grief, even subtle framings, such as referring to a loved one in the past tense, could be hurtful. This is distinct from overtly leading or suggestive questions, which were avoided as a matter of course. The point is that even ordinary, well-meant phrasing requires careful attention. This attentiveness to language was central to how interviews with bereaved individuals were approached.

With experts, the priority was to create as much space as possible for them to speak about what made their work meaningful, allowing stories to surface. These narratives were important research material because they revealed how personal and professional experiences shaped each expert's understanding of their field, often in ways that differed from contemporary mainstream practices.

Careful Engagement

Throughout, careful attention was paid to signs of distress. Emotion, however, is not something that is always treated properly. Expressing emotion is part of being human, and treating emotional moments as automatic signals to stop reduces emotion to something problematic. What was needed instead was ongoing attention to whether continuing could actually be harmful, or whether someone was moved but still wished to go on. That question was not decided for participants: when a conversation became heavy, it was put to them, and the choice to continue, to pause, or to stop was theirs. Cutting someone off in the latter case risks doing exactly the kind of reduction this project seeks to challenge.

Ethics and data handling

A data management plan was drawn up for this project and reviewed by a faculty data steward, whose feedback was used to revise it. All participants gave informed consent before taking part; separate consent forms were used for the interviews, the tests, and the co-creation sessions, each adapted to what participation involved in that setting. The informal conversations in Appendix D were held with spoken permission only, and are therefore used as paraphrase and background rather than quoted. Participants could withdraw their contribution afterwards without giving a reason. Everyone appears anonymously, under a pseudonym or, for the three family members, by their relation to the deceased. Recordings were transcribed and anonymised with TU Delft's enterprise tools under its data protection agreement, and checked by hand for remaining identifying details. Transcripts are not reproduced in this report and are deleted after graduation, together with the recordings and the key linking pseudonyms to participants; what the appendices hold is the material the project actually works with, alongside the insights drawn from each source. The exposition and the image test in the design part brought their own consent questions, which are described where those studies are reported.

Observing

Alongside the interviews, field trips to museum exhibitions and a symposium offered encounters with how artists, practitioners, and visitors engage with grief and creative expression around loss. These activities brought in perspectives from a more observing role rather than talking, which builds on different ways of engaging than just language.

Synthesis

Insights from across these sources were then brought together through contextual clustering, inspired by Social Implication Design (SID), which builds on the Vision in Product design (ViP) framework (Tromp & Hekkert, 2014). Observations were grouped into interconnected clusters representing the underlying patterns and driving forces shaping how grief and death are currently experienced. This grouping is itself an interpretive act; another researcher might have drawn the lines differently. This matters for how the results should be read: the clusters are not a neutral or complete map of the field, but one interpretation intended to guide the design process. From there, attention shifted to what runs across the clusters: the tensions a design would need to hold rather than resolve, and the qualities present when people, practices, or spaces make room for grief without reducing or rushing it. Rather than pointing to gaps for design to fill, these shaped a set of design stances carried into the design directions that follow.

Reading this report

The report is in two parts. Discovery works toward a stance and four grounds a design might stand on; Design works from those grounds toward a room. Two short chapters, *A way of looking* and *A way of designing*, sit at the turn of each part and set out how the project stands toward its subject.

The three questions are not answered in one place. The first is answered in the literature review and sharpened by the practitioners that follow. The second runs through the clustering, changes the design goal in Chapter 5, and is answered in the final concept. The third is what the whole design part works on, and Chapter 11 returns to all three.

1.4 Executive summary

In contemporary Western society, death has been pushed out of communal life. Dying has moved into professional settings, care for the deceased has been handed to specialists, funerals have been standardised and commercialised, and grief is increasingly framed as an individual condition with an expected endpoint. Together, these form one movement: a reduction of dying to a medical event, of the farewell to a service, of grief to a condition. What this displaces is not only a set of practices but a way of making meaning together: fewer shared spaces remain in which loss can be expressed and held collectively.

To build an understanding of what has been lost and what remains, the research drew on a literature review across sociology, psychology, anthropology and philosophy, on interviews with practitioners working around dying, farewell and grief, on conversations with people carrying losses of their own, and on field trips. The field was entered with an orientation taken from the philosopher Vinciane Despret. It sets aside the question of whether the felt presence of someone who has died is real, and asks instead what that presence does and what it makes the living do. The fact of a death and the felt presence of the dead may then stand side by side rather than cancel each other out. What these sources brought was then clustered into patterns in how loss is lived, read across all of these accounts.

The practitioners each refused that reduction. What each of them restores is not death itself, but the relationships around it. The bereaved showed the same from the inside. People make their way through loss by keeping things in relation: with the dead, with those around them, and with what they do themselves. Bonds do not end but change shape and are actively kept, through a ring worn on family occasions, a mother's perfume, or a near-daily conversation with a mother who died when her son was a child. Participants described these acts with joy, but almost in the same breath called them vague, woolly, or slightly strange.

That gap, between what is fully real from the inside and barely legible from the outside, is what the design came to be aimed at. The goal set at the start asked for public space in which the bereaved and their communities could share grief. The goal stays public, but its object shifts: not a community brought in to share the grief, but the bond itself, and what around it decides whether it may appear. Sharpened, it became: to create conditions in which grief can be expressed, shared, and lived with, in relation to the dead and to those around the bereaved, without that relation having to be explained, resolved, or fitted to a recognised form of mourning. Of four directions set out, two carried the most weight into the design phase: loosening the line between what counts as a normal way of relating to the dead and what is dismissed as strange, and showing that what counts as proper mourning is shaped by what surrounds it rather than given. Both leave the verdict with whoever meets them, which is the stance the design phase works from: standing beside rather than prescribing. That changes what designing is here. The question is not what the design is, but what it makes possible. A design cannot do the grieving; it can only make room for it.

Out of the design phase came the rouwdier, a word that joins rouw (grief) to dier (animal): a particular and changing way someone continues to live with a loss, with them, through them, or between people. It may appear as a habit, an object, a place, a shared moment, or as something that never settles into a form at all. An exposition built around it was walked by fifteen students, who gave shape to nineteen rouwdieren. What a rouwdier was differed widely, and ran wider than the bond with the dead. What it did recurred across that difference: it returns at unexpected moments, comes in waves, shrinks without leaving, asks for some care, and gathers people. The exposition also showed where such a design needs a shape and where it must stay open: form on the side of the norm it criticises, openness on the side of the bond, since what someone's grief looks like is not the designer's to define.

The final concept is a travelling exposition. A visitor passes an entrance text and a row of cages, each opened in its own way, into a veiled room where the rouwdieren of earlier visitors stand, each in the medium its maker chose, and ends in a space for giving shape to one of their own, by hand or through a website on their own phone. What is made may stay, and how far from its maker it may travel is theirs to decide. Nothing in the room was made for or about anyone: each rouwdier is made by its maker or with them, and what is left behind travels on to the next place, so no placement starts empty. The exposition moves because one placement reaches one public, and the same rouwdieren mean something different in a museum, a company, a funeral, or at a war memorial. It is a proposal grounded in what the exposition showed rather than an evaluated design.

It does less than the project first set out to do, and does so by choice: it does not gather a community around a loss. What it offers is recognition rather than participation: the quiet, mostly hidden ways in which people go on living with someone who has died, set beside one another where they can be met. The design does not teach anyone how to grieve. Rather, it puts forward that people have long found their own ways of living with loss, in forms they made their own, and that where these can be met, the strangeness has a chance to move from the bereaved to the norm that judges them. It does not ask what a rouwdier is, how many someone has, or when it should be over. It stands somewhere and leaves room.

Discovery

The phase moves outward before it draws in. It begins with the literature, which concludes on a task rather than a gap, and from there takes up a way of looking: a stance toward death, the dead and grief, adopted before the field is entered. It then turns to field trips, to six practitioners working around dying, farewell and grief, and to nine people carrying losses of their own, before reading across all of it for the patterns underneath. What that brings is not a brief but four perspectives, a design goal, and four grounds a design might stand on, of which two carry the most weight going into the design phase. Figure 1.1 traces that route.

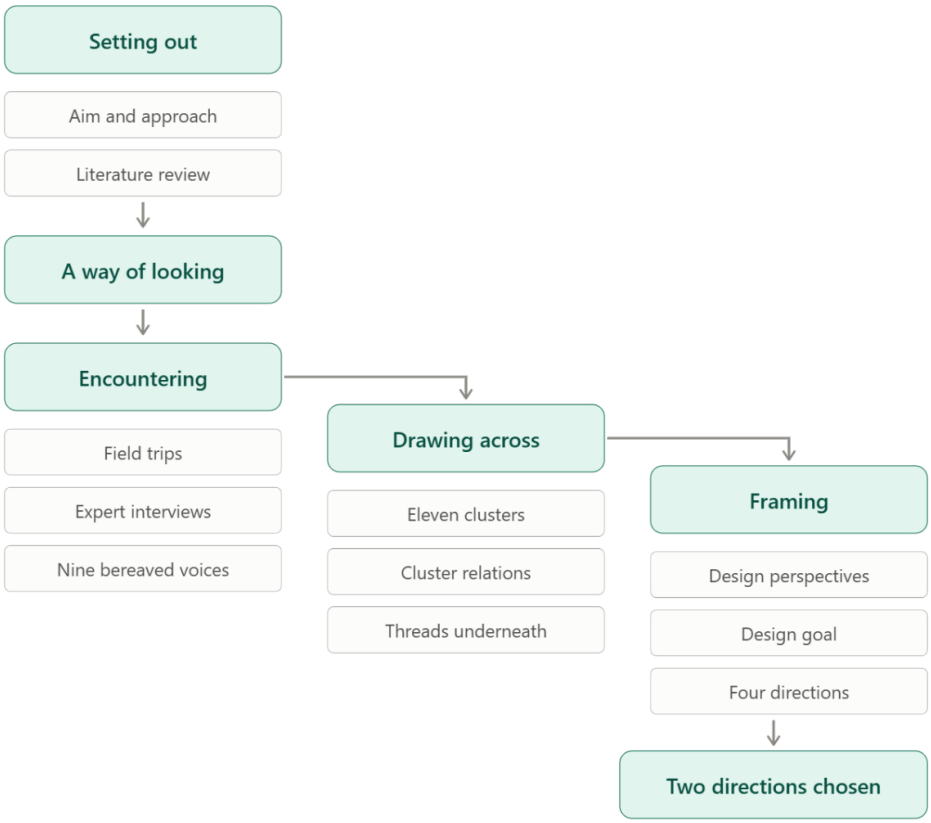


Figure 1.1. The route of the discovery phase, with each step's parts beneath it.

2. How death left shared life, and what pushes back

This literature review asks how death, dying, mourning and grief have been displaced from everyday and public life in contemporary Western societies, and what alternative ways of engaging with loss are emerging in response. It takes a broad, interdisciplinary approach, drawing on literature from sociology, psychology, anthropology and philosophy, because the ways in which societies live with death cannot be understood through a single field alone.

Technological, medical and economic developments have increasingly repositioned death and dying as matters to be managed and organised. Dying has largely moved into professional settings, mourning practices have become more standardised, and grief is increasingly framed as an individual condition to be treated. Together, these shifts have pushed death and bereavement away from communal life and into the private sphere, making collective and meaningful ways of saying goodbye more difficult (Raad Volksgezondheid & Samenleving, 2021; Mellor & Shilling, 1993; Mallon & Towers, 2024).

Throughout this review, **mourning** refers to the social and cultural practices and rituals surrounding loss, **bereavement** to the state of having lost someone significant, and **grief** to the intrapersonal and relational experience of loss. Although grief is often approached as an individual psychological process, it is also shaped through relations with others and broader social and cultural frameworks of meaning (Lund, 2020).

The review develops this argument in three sections. The first examines how death and dying have moved out of public and communal life. The second considers the individualisation and medicalisation of grief. The third turns to practical and conceptual responses, from death literacy, community-based care and sustainable practices to embodied, non-linguistic and more-than-human understandings of loss.

2.1 How death disappeared from public life

Over the past decades Dutch society has made significant technological advances, particularly in medical care. This offers possibilities to postpone the inevitable and extend life, which could create an illusory sense of control. Although these practical advancements can be beneficial, they also shape our perception of death and ways of dealing with it. As a result, the subject of death and bereavement has gradually disappeared from the public sphere (Raad Volksgezondheid & Samenleving, 2021). This section discusses a range of social, cultural, and institutional phenomena that have contributed to this shift and shaped contemporary practices of mourning.

The evasion of death

Several everyday attitudes and practices keep death at a distance. Three forms stand out. First, a cultural preoccupation with youth can frame ageing as something to resist and death as an unwelcome disruption rather than an ordinary part of life (Botîlcă, 2021).

Second, death is kept at a distance through everyday language. Parents may struggle to explain death to children and use euphemisms that create confusion. Telling a child that someone “went to sleep,” for example, may lead to a fear of sleeping (Schonfeld & Nasir, 2024).

Lastly, similar distancing occurs in public media. Although death is frequently reported, images of dead bodies are restricted by norms of taste and acceptability. Death can therefore be highly present in the news while remaining visually distant from everyday experience (Hanusch, 2008).

Medicalisation of Dying

This cultural evasion is mirrored at an institutional level. Dying has increasingly moved from homes and communities into healthcare settings and the care of professionals. As a result, skills, traditions, and knowledge once held by relatives and communities have gradually been lost. Because caring for the dying was once more closely woven into everyday life, this shift also changes how people live with those who are dying. It may leave them less familiar with dying and less prepared for bereavement (Sallnow et al., 2022).

There is also a demographic dimension to this shift. In the Netherlands, life expectancy at birth rose from 71.4 years in 1950 to 82.1 years in 2025, while the average age at death rose from 61.2 to 79.2 years (CBS, 2026). Death therefore occurs, on average, considerably later in life. This may make dying less common in the immediate surroundings of younger people, further reducing everyday familiarity with it.

Professionalisation of Mourning

This institutional shift extends beyond dying itself to the treatment of the body after death. After the loss of someone, family members and the bereaved used to take care of and prepare the body, for instance by washing it and dressing it in a personally meaningful way. This care for the deceased is now handled by professionals. In this way, the process of mourning is increasingly pushed out of communal life into the private sphere (Mellor & Shilling, 1993). This also estranges people from the full experience of saying goodbye and providing last acts of care for the deceased, something that can be very valuable to the grieving process (Pearce & Komaromy, 2020).

Commercialisation and standardisation of rituals

Rituals such as funerals and condolences have been increasingly commercialised and positioned as consumer goods, becoming standardised and expected within society. Economic value is extracted from mourning, which not only reorganises rituals but also constructs a sense of closure by marking a kind of endpoint (Mallon & Towers, 2024). In practice, these commercial logics shape how funerals are organised: time pressures and efficiency demands can compress mourning into a tightly scheduled event, leaving limited room for personally

meaningful ritual and for taking the time that grief needs (Verhoeven et al., 2025). The same dynamic can leave the bereaved exposed: unfamiliar with their options and vulnerable in the midst of loss, they can be subject to extractive commercial practices that take advantage of that lack of knowledge (Crown, 2018).

This does not make standardised rituals inherently problematic. For some, funerals hold strong intrinsic value and are experienced as deeply meaningful; for others they function more as a social expectation with less personal significance. What matters is the possibility of expressing mourning in a personally suited and meaningful way, which may go beyond what is currently considered standard (Burrell & Selman, 2020).

Across these three shifts a single movement can be traced. Dying, the care of the body and the farewell were once carried out in the same place and largely by the same people. Each has since moved into a setting of its own, with its own professionals, its own timetable and its own threshold to cross. Figure 2.1, sets the two arrangements beside each other. What has changed is not only who does the work, but where the bereaved stand in relation to it: present throughout, or arriving and leaving again at each stage. Little of this was arranged deliberately, and none of it is undone by finding a given funeral meaningful. What it leaves is a narrower set of occasions on which mourning is done in company, which is where the next section begins.

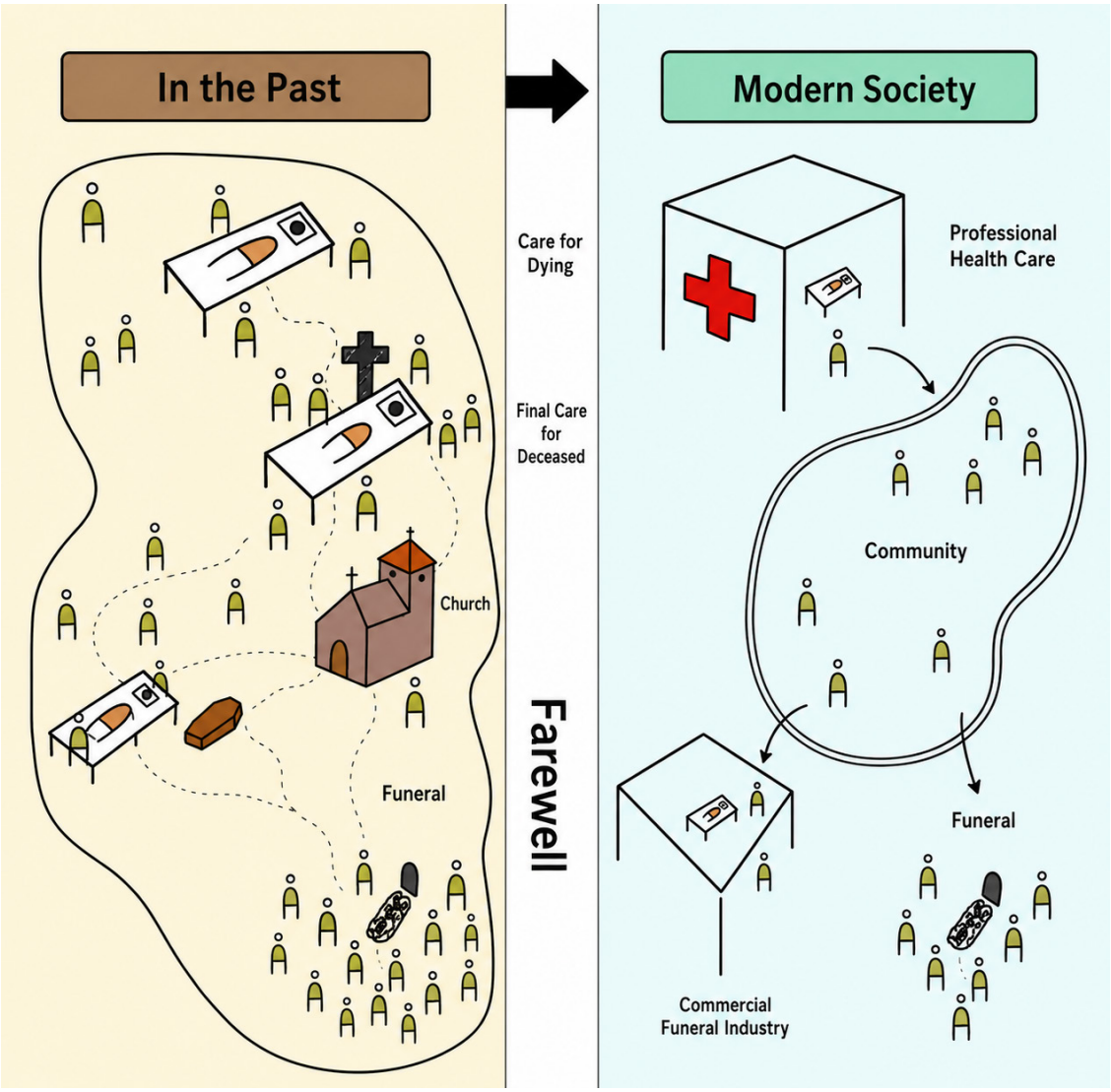


Figure 2.1. The stages of dying and farewell held within one community, and distributed across separate institutions. A schematic reading of the shifts described in this section rather than an account of a particular historical period.

2.2 Grief made individual

Where the previous section looked at death and mourning as public and collective matters, this section turns inward, to grief as an intrapersonal, relational and existential experience. The two are connected: how a society handles death in public shapes how individuals are left to grieve in private. That connection is the thread this section follows.

Shift in meaning making

As dying and mourning move into the private sphere, public mourning practices are transformed, and bereavement and grief become increasingly individualised. Grief is fundamentally relational because it arises from the loss of a relationship and affects the bereaved person's sense of self and relationships with others (Lund, 2020; Neimeyer, 2019). Yet it is increasingly framed as an individual responsibility, to be managed privately rather than held within shared social and cultural frameworks (Mallon & Towers, 2024).

This is part of a broader cultural shift away from religious or communal frameworks of meaning towards secular, individualised, and achievement-oriented beliefs. In modern culture, self-identity has become a central source of meaning, expressed through what one does and achieves in life (Mellor & Shilling, 1993). When meaning is primarily grounded in the self and there is no belief in meaning beyond life, death may increasingly be understood as absolute non-existence (Testoni et al., 2015).

Death as annihilation and its consequences

This ontological framing of death has important consequences for grief. When death is understood as absolute non-existence, both personal meaning and the perceived significance of the deceased become fragile. A deceased person often formed part of one's future understanding of the self, and their death disrupts this. Research shows that representing death as complete annihilation, in contrast to beliefs in passage, transformation or other meaning-making frameworks, is associated with increased hopelessness and reduced resilience, which can negatively affect the process of bereavement (Testoni et al., 2015).

Grief as a medical condition

When death is framed as absolute non-existence and meaning is grounded primarily in the self, grief itself becomes harder to situate within shared cultural frameworks. Against this background, perspectives on bereavement increasingly question how grief is perceived and managed in contemporary society. Neimeyer (2019) argues that grief is not simply an individual psychological state but an active process of meaning reconstruction that is shaped through family, social, and cultural discourses, and is central to how the bereaved rebuild their sense of self and their relationships with others. However, as death and bereavement have become more individualised and removed from communal contexts, dominant frameworks within psychology and medicine tend to approach grief as a condition that requires treatment. The diagnostic classification of Prolonged Grief Disorder can therefore be understood as part of a broader process of medicalisation, in which grief is reframed as a problem to be managed rather than recognised as a dynamic and culturally shaped aspect of human and social life (Mallon & Towers, 2024).

The Linear Model

Alongside the medicalisation of grief, the bereaved are also expected to conform to certain social norms. Although linear models of grief have largely been discredited in academic literature, expectations of closure and recovery remain present in many aspects of society, shaping how loss is understood and managed. When the bereaved differ from these expectations, for example, through prolonged grieving or a refusal to seek closure, they may face social sanctions such as disapproval, lessened support, or exclusion from peers and colleagues. This is particularly significant given that social support is a strong predictor of healthy adjustment to loss. As a result, some grievers may feel pressured to perform their grief in socially acceptable ways, or even seek professional help simply to appear as though they are "working through" their loss appropriately. Grief that does not conform to social expectations is therefore problematised not only as a medical condition but also within everyday social settings (McLean et al., 2021).

2.3 What is pushing back

Against this background, several movements, practices, and perspectives are bringing death, dying, and grief back into shared life. Rather than treating them only as private or professional matters, they seek to strengthen people's knowledge, agency, capacity to care, and ability to make meaning together. This section examines death literacy and death positivity, palliative and community-based approaches to care, sustainable funeral practices, and embodied, relational, and more-than-human understandings of loss. It also considers the tensions within these alternatives, since they remain shaped by the institutions and cultural conditions to which they respond.

Death literacy and the limits of speaking

One response is death literacy: the practical, experiential, and community knowledge people need to understand and act around death, dying, care, and bereavement. It reaches beyond being able to talk about death, and can strengthen people's confidence to support someone who is dying, make informed choices, and care for one another through loss (Leonard et al., 2021).

The Death Positivity Movement similarly encourages more open conversations about death and greater involvement in decisions surrounding dying and funerals (The Order of the Good Death, n.d.). However, openness should not become another expectation that everyone must meet. Some people cannot or do not wish to speak directly about their death, and silence does not necessarily indicate denial or a failure to prepare. In some cases, the time may not yet be right, and this does not have to be treated as a problem (Raad Volksgezondheid & Samenleving, 2021).

The podcast *Stervelingen* explores this tension in the episode "Mag je ook zwijgen over je dood?", featuring someone who avoids discussing their own death and trusts their loved ones to shape the goodbye. Rather than presenting this as a problem, the episode asks whose death it is and whether remaining silent can also be a meaningful choice (Cukier Eva & Van Amelsvoort, 2021).

Care as a counter-movement

Palliative and hospice care also offer a different orientation towards dying. Rather than focusing only on treating disease, palliative care addresses the quality of life of the dying person and their family, including physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs. It therefore recognises dying as more than a medical event, even though it continues to operate partly within healthcare systems (WHO, 2020).

Compassionate Communities extend this approach beyond professional services by treating serious illness, dying, death, and grief as shared social experiences. They seek to strengthen existing networks of family, friends, neighbours, volunteers, and local organisations, allowing communities to participate more actively in care rather than leaving it entirely to professionals (Sallnow et al., 2022).

There is nevertheless a tension within these approaches. As hospice and palliative care have become more integrated into formal healthcare, they have also become vulnerable to institutional routines, protocols, and forms of professional control that may weaken their original attention to the wishes and wider needs of the dying person (Floriani & Schramm, 2012).

Sustainable practices and alternatives

Alternative practices are also emerging around the ecological impact of death care. Mainstream funeral practices raise significant environmental concerns: coffins require large amounts of virgin wood, burial takes up considerable space, and preservation chemicals such as formaldehyde pose risks to both environmental and human health. Bodies that are not embalmed typically need continuous cooling, while cremation is energy intensive and produces harmful emissions (Slominski, 2023).

More sustainable, and often cheaper, alternatives exist. Solid coffins can be replaced by biodegradable shrouds and natural carriers made from hemp, wool, bamboo, or willow, as the only legal requirement is that the body be covered and carryable (Wijnands, 2019). Cooling and embalming can also be avoided through methods such as active-carbon bags, which absorb the gases produced during decomposition and allow the body to be laid out without refrigeration (Bio SAC 200 – Buitengewoon Afscheid, 2023).

These responses primarily transform the practices surrounding death and dying. Other perspectives shift the question itself, asking how death and grief are understood in the first place.

Beyond language

This begins with death literacy's own premise. If it is partly about being able to talk about death, it also raises a harder question: how far does language reach? Some scholars give language an even more fundamental role, with Botîlcă (2021) arguing that without language, death may not emerge, develop, or linger as a meaningful human experience. Yet a language-centred view cannot account for every way loss is experienced. Death may be discussed and interpreted through words, but grief is also felt and enacted through bodies, relationships, objects, and environments.

Embodied grief

This is felt first of all in the body. Pearce and Komaromy (2020) argue that embodiment remains undertheorised in Western bereavement research, and that grief is not merely something that affects the body but something felt and enacted through it. Participants in their study described grief as physical pain, sickness, sleeplessness, and a restless need to keep moving, and managed it through bodily routines such as walking and household tasks that gave structure and distraction.

They also experienced the continuing presence of the deceased through voices, sensations, routines, and familiar spaces, often in ways difficult to put into words. Grief, in other words, is not only processed in the mind but felt and enacted through bodies, objects, and continuing relationships (Pearce & Komaromy, 2020).

Grief beyond the human

Grief is not necessarily limited to humans. Elephants show particular interest in the remains of other elephants, while cetaceans have been observed remaining close to and carrying dead calves (McComb et al., 2006; Bearzi et al., 2018). Although some argue that grief requires language, abstract thought, and awareness of time, others consider these criteria too human-centred and argue that animals also engage with loss in embodied and relational ways (Millar, 2024).

Relational death

Recent more-than-human and relational approaches further challenge the understanding of death as an isolated human endpoint. Hayama and Harb's (2025) concept of More-Than-Death reframes death not as failure or absence, but as a relational, ecological, and generative condition. It situates death within the interdependent relationships between humans, non-human beings, technologies, materials, and environments, while questioning strict divisions between life and death and between the living and the dead.

If meaning around loss is not made individually or in words alone, but emerges through relationships, bodies, objects, and shared practice, including continuing bonds between the living and the dead, then grief is not adequately described as an individual psychological process at all. What these perspectives share is that they locate grief outside the single mourner: in what is done, with whom, and among what.

2.4 Conclusion: What the literature brings the design project

This literature review has explored how technological, medical, and economic developments have reshaped engagement with death, dying, mourning, and grief in Western society. Through processes of medicalisation, privatisation, and commercialisation, death has increasingly been removed from communal life and repositioned as a practical matter to be organised, contributing to its transition to a difficult subject or even a taboo. Mourning rituals have become more standardised and shaped by economic logics, while grief is increasingly individualised and framed as a condition to be managed within dominant psychological and medical frameworks. What runs through all of these is a reduction: of dying to a medical event, of the farewell to a scheduled service, of grief to a private condition with an expected end.

Against these developments, the review identified both practical and conceptual alternatives. Death literacy, palliative care and Compassionate Communities seek to return knowledge, agency and care to families and communities, though they remain partly shaped by the systems they respond to, while sustainable funeral practices extend responsibility to the ecological consequences of death care. Yet openness and conversation alone do not reach every way loss is lived, and where speaking openly becomes the measure of doing it well, it risks becoming a standard of its own. Embodied, relational and more-than-human perspectives show that grief is not only an individual or linguistic process, but is enacted through bodies, relationships, objects, places and continuing bonds with the dead.

Together these leave a task rather than a gap. Not to make death more visible or more discussable, but to make room for loss to be cared for and given meaning collectively, in ways that do not all have to look the same.

A way of looking

The literature closes on a task. Before turning to the field, it asks for a way of standing toward it. One that resists the impulse to explain, resolve, or settle. Following Vinciane Despret (2021), death and the dead are approached with what she calls *ontological tact*: the capacity to remain in contradiction and not-knowing, without problem-solving and without constantly grasping for explanations.

Central to this is how Despret reframes the dead themselves. She sees them neither as static memories nor as present actors in the lived world, but as active forces within lived reality: they have the power to make the living do things, and so to make memories in shared practice with those who remain. This shifts the question away from "*does this exist?*", which Despret describes as a weapon of disqualification, and toward "*in what mode does this exist, and what does it make us do?*". The first question forces a verdict: the felt presence of someone who has died is either real or it is not, and anything that cannot prove itself as objective fact is ruled out. The second sets that verdict aside. It asks not whether the dead persist, but how they are present and what they prompt in the living: the visit to a grave, the meal cooked their way, the choice made with them in mind. Presence is judged not by whether it can be verified, but by what it does.

Practically, this means loosening the sorting of experience into either "real" or "imagined." Despret offers instead a mindset of *and, and, and*, in which contradictory versions are allowed to coexist. The biological fact of death and the felt presence of someone who is gone do not need to cancel each other out.

This aligns with what De La Cadena and Escobar (2023) describe in *Notes on Excess*: a move away from representation and toward relationality, an attention to how humans and more-than-human forces shape one another. Existence is not simply there; it is *instaurated**, built through mutual effort. For the designer, this means stepping back from prescribing meaning and instead facilitating a space where shared meaning can emerge. It also means that the designer stays willing to be instructed by what emerges, rather than staying in charge of it. This orientation, being with loss rather than resolving it, is what the fieldwork and interviews that follow set out to explore in practice.

* ***Instauration****: the act of bringing something into existence through mutual, creative effort, not fabricated from nothing, not already given, but established through shared practice, with any entity, living, dead or more-than-human.*

3. In the field - what already refuses reduction

A way of looking asked for an orientation; this chapter puts it to work. It moves outward before it draws in: two field trips where the role was to observe rather than ask, six practitioners working at different points between dying, farewell and grief, and nine people carrying losses of their own.

The order is deliberate. The practitioners are read alongside the literature and drawn together before the bereaved are introduced, because what they share is an argument: each works against a reduction of something that was, in its fuller form, relational. The bereaved are not brought into that argument here. They are given room first and taken up only in the clustering that follows, so that lived grief is not turned too quickly into material. What the chapter leaves behind is not yet a finding, but a refusal the field keeps making, and the voices the next chapter works from.

3.1 Field Trips - eager to listen, reluctant to express

Alongside the interviews, two field trips offered a chance to observe rather than talk: to see how artists, practitioners, and visitors engage with grief and creative expression around loss. Two settings are discussed, the exhibitions at Stedelijk Museum Schiedam and a symposium on art, dying, and grief. Full notes and photographs from both visits are in Appendix A. What surfaced here returns later in the clustering.

Stedelijk Museum Schiedam

Talking to plants and listening to stories

The first artwork in the exposition is a table of plants you can read poems to Figure 3.1. Two healing principles seem combined here: externalising thoughts and feelings as a positive outlet (Cohen, 2025), and the nurturing act of feeding plants with your CO2, a nice touch from artist Oscar Abraham. Yet during the visit, no one actually read to the plants. This contrasted sharply with an interactive piece in *Tales of the Past* Figure 3.2, where placing something in the water triggered a story about the artist and Cambodia's past. This was something nearly every passerby did. Early on, this suggested people are eager to listen but reluctant to express.



Figure 3.1. The table of plants visitors are invited to read poems to in Stedelijk Museum Schiedam.



Figure 3.2. The interactive piece in which placing something in the water triggered a story.

Small creative remembrance

The final exposition touched on this too. Slightly stepping away from art at the centre, it focused on personal stories of varied losses with small accompanying art pieces showing that every loss is unique, and not limited to other humans. Visitors could also create something for a loved one, which can be seen in Figure 3.3. However, almost all the little expressions of love seem to be made by children as it was often for grandma or pa. It raises the question: do people lose the urge to express creatively as they age, or is something holding them back? The next field trip will elaborate on this difficulty.



Figure 3.3. The wall of small pieces made for a loved one.

Ongoingness

Continuity surfaced repeatedly. Hanne Hagenaars describes making clothes, that can be seen in Figure 3.4, for her mother as a simple ritual, not necessarily beautiful, that brought her closer to her: *"the time you spend making something is essentially time spent with the person you're making it for."* The relationship does not cease at death. Arnoud Holleman went further. Though his father was a quiet, ghost-like presence in the home, processing the loss reshaped Holleman's whole family. Both his understanding of his father and the bond with his mother, which grew more intimate: *"In processing the loss, I gained a father I never really had. I began to look at our family differently — with a greater sense of reality."*

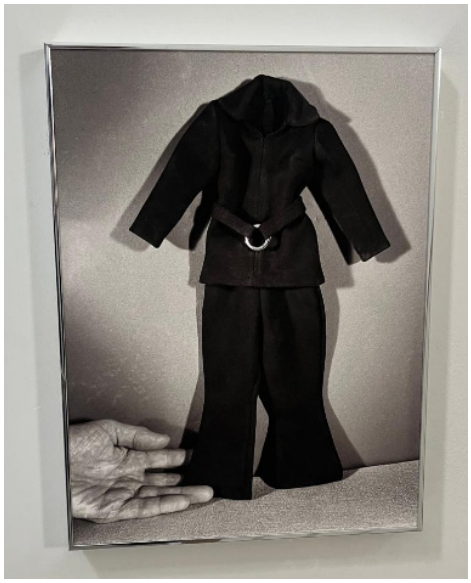


Figure 3.4. The clothes Hanne Hagenaars made for her mother.

Symposium

The symposium opened with a speaker from Australia's Death Literacy movement, who described how dying at home is even harder there than in the Netherlands. Having connections within the industry becomes essential just to make it possible. The movement has used art in beautifully simple ways, like mugs and pins: not grand gestures, but quiet ways of connecting people. Even in a hospital room, art can let someone remain a connected human being rather than be reduced from person to patient.

Another speaker said that presence is an active art, an art of being. Wisdom appears at the end of life as the creation of meaning, and each stage of dying carries its own kind. The project seems aimed at giving "love" in the last part of life, and being able to give that is itself a kind of wisdom. Though it makes you wonder if this isn't something we've always carried within us but have become estranged from.

The third lecture discussed grief: not efficient or linear, but a circle, returning when we expect it to leave. Western culture doesn't talk about it properly; sorrow has to be recognisable, controlled. Design thinks in problems and solutions, but grief is not a problem to be solved. A daughter expressed how valuable it was to wear her father's shoes and sweater, left objects becoming nostalgic, then meaningful. Space for both grief and wonder, like children have. Abstract art as an opening for shared experience: shared not because we feel the same, but because each of us brings our own. When creating this art later, it was noticeable that people had difficulty with the expression and needed quite some probing to get there.

The people exhibiting art around their loss made very personal pieces. When asking what inspired them and how they got there, the most interesting thread was that they had either started by simply doing something, like writing texts to their passed loved one in Figure 3.5, or had taken things their loved one cared about and translated them into something more abstract, intertwined with personal elements of their own in Figure 3.6. Making it deeply personal for both themselves and the one they had lost.





Figure 3.5. (left) Work shown at the symposium by someone writing texts on a typewritet to the person they had lost.
Figure 3.6. (right) Work in which things the deceased cared about were translated into something more abstract, intertwined with the maker's own elements.

Across both visits a few things kept returning. People were far more willing to listen than to express: the interactive pieces drew nearly everyone in, while the invitations to create were mostly taken up by children, and at the symposium expression needed some probing before it came. Where it did happen, it was tied to continuity, the sense that a relationship does not end at death but can be carried on through making, wearing, and doing. And grief itself surfaced as something circular rather than linear, resistant to being solved. These observations return in the clustering, where they sit alongside what the interviews brought.

3.2 Expert interviews: a refusal of reduction

Where the field trips offered a chance to watch, the interviews that follow are conversations with people who work around dying, farewell and grief every day. Six experts were interviewed in the discovery phase, each working at a different stage between dying, funeral care, and grief. They were found mostly online, and selected less by a fixed method than by a feeling: in different ways, their work seemed to resist the reduction of people to cases, patients, or procedures. What connected them was the deep care they brought to their work and the space they made for people as whole persons. Their openness, generosity, and insight went far beyond what was expected, and the interviews became one of the most meaningful and enriching parts of the project. Each conversation is read alongside literature, not to verify what was said but to see where practice and theory sharpen one another.

The participants were Christina, an anthropologist specialising in Eastern cultures; Carmen, a hospice worker; Hans, a psychologist and transcultural medical anthropologist; Liza, a pastor who conducts municipal funerals and collects life stories; Sofie, a funeral guidance practitioner; and Nathalie, a grief facilitator. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the conversations to develop naturally. Their positions and fields are mapped below in Figure 3.7, and the used insights for clustering of each interview can be found in Appendix B.

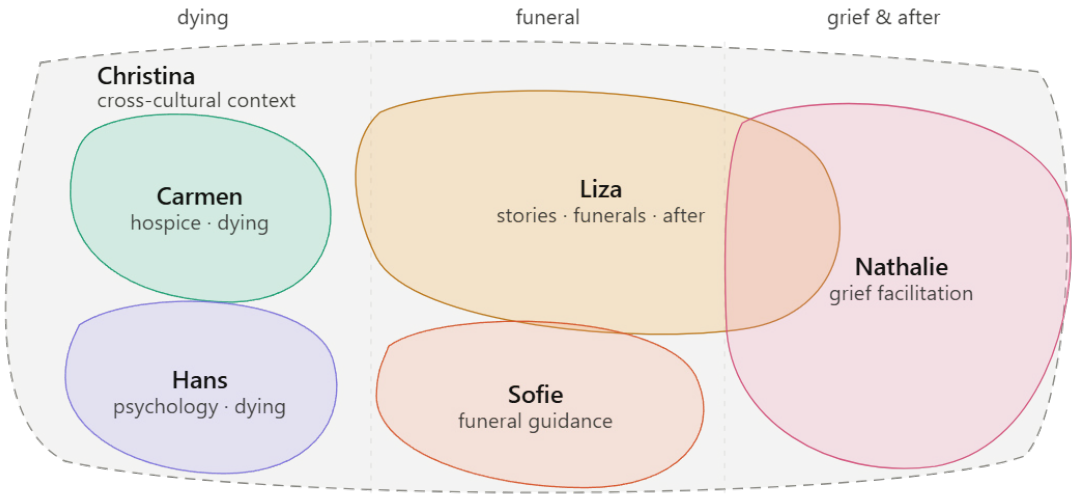


Figure 3.7. Where the six experts stand across dying, funeral, and grief.

Christina - On keeping death present

This section draws on a conversation with Christina, an anthropologist specialising in Korean and East Asian studies, who also specifically taught on death and grief in this context. Her perspective opens a way into traditions in which relationships between the living and the dead remain part of communal life, contrasting with dominant Western approaches to death. The summarised interview is in Appendix B.1.

Disrupted by coloniality and Western thinking, these ways of being have been pushed to the margins of Western societies, though elsewhere they remain more present and alive (Nikora et al., 2010). Having lived in Korea and other Asian countries for much of her life, Christina offers insight into how this continued presence becomes visible through everyday rituals and communal practices.

Annual days

In Korea and other eastern societies there are recurring rituals built around the dead. In South Korea, on the anniversary of someone's passing, family members gather to set out a table with a dish the deceased particularly enjoyed and other rituals. On national days, such as the Lunar New Year (Seollal) and the autumn harvest festival, these ceremonies extend to visiting memorial halls or graves, sometimes followed by a picnic at the graveside, making the occasion a collective activity that is festive and joyful rather than mournful (Gallois, 2025). Such rituals around grave visits and annual food offerings go beyond ceremonial formality, becoming moments of shared mourning that strengthen familial bonds and reduce the isolating effects of grief (Phan et al., 2025).

As Christina observed, these shared days make it easier to talk about those who have passed, noting that in the West, "because there isn't usually any kind of actual ritual to do for it, then maybe it feels a little bit less real". The absence in Western societies not only lets death slip quietly into the background of shared life, but also leaves the bereaved to carry it alone "isolating the mourner who in daily life is surrounded by non-mourners" (Walter, 2007).

Hindu traditions

A separate participant from a Newar Hindu background in Nepal offered another perspective on how death can remain visible in communal life. When someone dies, cremation takes place as soon as possible, publicly and openly at a sacred temple site, as visible in Figure 3.8 This might seem confronting from the outside, but as the participant noted, when death is a normal and recurring part of communal life rather than something hidden away, it simply becomes easier to speak about it (Appendix D).



Figure 3.8. Newar temple with public cremation altars (Lovato, 2025).

Medicalisation in the East

Although the subject of death has been pushed less to the background in Korea, there are ongoing shifts that could be changing this. Traditionally, the ideal was to pass at home surrounded by family and community, a "*good death*", in contrast to sudden or untimely deaths, such as before marriage (Choi & Choi, 2026). Christina echoed this, describing bad deaths as those "that are not deaths by someone at the end of their life." The communal and often festive nature of the funeral reflected this distinction, serving as a moment to guide the deceased properly into the community's memory.

However, this is shifting. Green (2009) argues that modern end-of-life experiences have been fundamentally reshaped by medicalisation, and Choi and Choi (2026) show this clearly in Korea: since the 1990s, dying has moved from the home to the hospital, reducing death to a "medical event" processed within institutional space. As Christina observed, funerals became "more official and more subdued" slowly losing their old festive and transformative nature.

What these practices show, whether Korean ancestor rituals or annual days around the dead, is that death has remained woven into daily and communal life rather than removed from it. Where Western societies have increasingly isolated death (Walter, 2007), these traditions suggest that keeping death present and visible is precisely what allows the living to remain in relationship with it. Yet as Choi and Choi (2026) show in Korea, and Nikora et al. (2010) signal more broadly, these ways of being with death are not untouched by the same forces that reshape mourning in the West. Among them, the medicalisation of dying, which has increasingly moved death from communal life into institutional space.

Carmen - On Dying as a Process of Becoming

As discussed in the literature review and visible in the shifts occurring in Korea and other Eastern societies, the medicalisation of dying has profoundly altered our being and ability to deal with death and dying. Yet medicalisation is far from without value. For people in the final stages of life, the need for medical support is real, and to ignore this would be romanticising dying (Sallnow et al., 2022). What becomes problematic here is not professional care itself, but when it detracts from what Carmen, who worked in a hospice, describes as "about love and warmth." The summarised interview is in Appendix B.2.

The problem around dying

The question of who provides care at the end of life is not a simple one. Receiving care from loved ones carries complications. Research shows that between 19 and 65 percent of terminally ill patients report experiencing a significant sense of self-perceived burden, a worry that they are becoming too much for the people they love, something that is associated with loss of dignity and a harder death (McPherson et al., 2007). Yet when care is organised primarily around medical tasks (Sallnow et al., 2022), something else can get lost, the love and accompaniment that dying also asks for. Carmen described how people were placed in corridors, put in hospital bathrooms, not properly accompanied "They were not embraced in a caring way that they would have wanted".

A different approach - Hospices

What makes hospice care different is the orientation toward the dying person's own process. "We create the conditions that allow the dying person to go through their own process" Carmen explains. You do not tell someone how to die; you look for what they need and give them the space for this. The motto, as Carmen describes it, was simple: "everything is possible". More than once, people told Carmen they felt they had already arrived in heaven.

Loving care

What makes this kind of care valuable, Carmen suggests, is less about what is done and more about the quality of presence brought to it. Guité-Verret et al. (2023) describe this presence in end-of-life care as a way of being present to oneself and the other, of being in the present moment, and of receiving and giving a presence as a gift. This, they argue, restores the relational and dialogical nature of human beings. Working in a hospice asks something particular of the people who do it: the ability to look at the whole person, without the usual filters. At the end of life, Carmen observes, there is often a great honesty which works both ways. "The openness of the other opens you as well," she says, describing it as a reciprocal process, resonating with the dynamic of receiving and giving that Guité-Verret et al. (2023) describe. It is this quality of mutual openness that makes the contact a deep, inner encounter that could leave you going home feeling joyful even if people had died.

Care without reduction

This also resonates with how the compassionate communities movement understands dying: not as a medical event to be managed, but as a social and deeply relational process. One involving connection, meaning, intimacy, love, and loss, with relationships at its core (J. Cohen et al., 2022) . Where professional care is essential, it is not the whole picture. What Carmen describes in the hospice is something close to what this movement calls for: a community of people, professionals and volunteers alike, who hold the dying person and their family with love and presence rather than reducing them to a procedure.

Hans - Reduction and the Right to One's Own Death

What Carmen describes, allowing someone their own process of dying, without reduction, raises a sharp question in the context of euthanasia and assisted suicide. Where care for people dying risks reducing the dying to patients to be managed, the domain of someone's wish to die also risks something fundamental: reducing someone's wish to something that needs correcting. Whether those around someone need to *understand* that wish is worth considering. Understanding may simply not be possible. What matters more, perhaps, is presence over comprehension and support over agreement. This is what Hans points out, a psychologist and transcultural medical anthropologist who works with people whose wish to die falls outside what is legally permitted. The summarised interview is in Appendix B.3.

Suicide in the Netherlands

The dominant Dutch response to suicidal thoughts, embodied in the crisis line 113, makes space for the fact of having them, but the moment a conversation moves toward an actual plan, the response is intervention, sometimes compulsory admission. As Hans describes it: *"You may only talk about the fact that you have those thoughts, and about how to get rid of them."*

Relational Autonomy

Hans frames his own work as an attempt *"to make autonomy relational"* which is realised not through approval but through conversations someone has with the people they love. He told the story of a nineteen-year-old who no longer wished to live. Over nearly a year, through conversations not just with Hans but gradually with the boy's family and friends, something was carefully built. His parents could not agree with his decision, but his mother told him: *"If I really cannot convince you that it can be otherwise, then I will stand beside you."* When the day came, both parents were there. Their grief would not have been easy, but it was profoundly different from the shock and unresolved trauma that follows a sudden, violent suicide like the kind of bad death Christina describes (Choi & Choi, 2026). His death had a narrative, and it was not written alone.

For many people, this is a story they are never permitted to tell, and that prohibition is a loss not only for them but for everyone they leave behind.

Sarco

A product like the Sarco in Figure 3.9 is worth considering in this light. Designed as a capsule in which someone ends their life with a single button press, it is presented as the ultimate autonomy. But autonomy, as this story shows, is deeply relational, and the Sarco narrows dying into a private, technical act. We should not forget that we don't only design things; things also design us. As Wizinsky argues, designed objects are distributed into the world "where they create subjects whenever and wherever they are used" (Wizinsky, 2022). Sarco's clinical, futuristic aesthetic frames dying as a consumer choice, something to order and resolve. Hans thinks we should remain very critical of what that does to our understanding of death, autonomy, and the relationships that surround both.



Figure 3.9. Suicide Pod Sarco (Wakefield, 2021).

Ghosts and Questions

Hans offers a further reframing, in a different field. Asking whether someone believes in ghosts, he suggests, is no more useful than "asking someone if they believe in the treatment of an ingrown toenail. Whether the treatment works is the only thing that matters, not what one believes." The question is not whether ghosts exist but what they mean to the person living with them. This resonates with Despret (2021), for whom the ontological question, *are they really there?* denies what matters most: what the dead do, how they act within the lives of those who remain. Belief is beside the point; effect and relation are what count.

Liza - On Lives Reduced to Nothing, and Remaining Stories

What Hans describes, reducing someone's deepest wish to a pathology, points to something broader: how lives themselves can be reduced, not only at the end but across an entire existence, and most completely in death. Walk of Life works against this by collecting the stories of people who have died with little or no personal network. Liza's work similarly centres on recovering what remains of a person's story and using it to shape a meaningful farewell when little other information is available. The summarised interview is in Appendix B.4.

Lives reduced to nothing

This is important as Liza mentions that through the stories they tell, one can sympathize with them, as their stories are often quite tragic. Sometimes she asks herself: "Why did this man live, if he has only known suffering?" This specific reflection was about a man with a learning disability who was constantly taken advantage of; she notes that while he made mistakes and became an addict, knowing his story helps you understand why his life took that path. The funerals she hosts, in a way, honor these individuals one last time, addressing, and maybe even to some extent righting, the injustice done to them.

What should have been

A specific story Liza tells illustrates this beautifully. A woman addicted to drugs was approached by a man offering a large sum of money in exchange for a child. Desperately, she accepted. The child was born into deeply unhealthy circumstances, and the woman was never truly a mother to her. After her death, however, the daughter who was poor and struggling herself, wanted to do something. She bought new clothes to dress her mother for the funeral, and asked her own child to draw something for the woman who was supposed to be her grandmother. In this gesture, she was reaching for something: a bond that never existed in life, but perhaps could be formed after it. She gave meaning to both their lives and restored something of the injustice they both endured, creating a new story, one that wasn't, but could have been, and perhaps should have been.

Transforming relationships

This act of mourning resonates deeply with what Despret describes as "the art of metamorphosis." Through the deliberate gestures of new clothes and a grandchild's drawing, the daughter refuses to remain paralysed by the weight of their shared history. As Despret notes, this kind of action "reconstructs history in a way that it now 'holds,'" bringing forth "possible pasts that have gone unnoticed or that have remained muted" not retrospectively, but retroactively, fabricating what the past can still mean. She acted on Despret's proposition that "what could not be done can still be done" in death (Despret (2021), p. 105). In psychology, the same act is recognised within narrative therapy as re-authoring. Where bereaved people move away from problem-saturated versions of their history toward desired storylines, transforming the pain of loss into what Lordello and Silva (2025) call "sustaining meanings".

New richer stories that emerge

But it is not only the bereaved who actively reshape a story. The stories themselves shift almost immediately after someone dies. When relatives gather, memories rise to the surface that others never heard, sides of a person emerge that were never discussed. When these intertwine, something new is born. A collective story often richer than any told separately. As Despret (2021) calls this "the art of versions" that coexist rather than oppose and become "more complete, more important, denser... unified in the heterogeneity of the versions of the self" which will be illustrated with two encountered stories below.

Silently repaying for injustice

Liza encountered this directly at the funeral of a man who had been a far-right fanatic and had committed antisemitic acts. She laid a Belgian far-right flag on his coffin. Afterwards, a man approached her and told her that the deceased had worked for him for nearly fifteen years, giving everything he had "As a sort of atonement, since I'm Jewish." No one knew. He did not want it to be known; he had simply, silently, tried to make things right. Liza still thinks about it: "What is being said about you after life has to be right." The flag no longer told the full truth of who he had become but the truer story did emerge.

A caring Mother

Another shift in narrative occurred for Belle. During lunch after the cremation, a small notebook surfaced, filled with notes written by her mother. Including entries about Belle herself, who had struggled heavily with her health. Her mother had never spoken of this, not with her husband, not with Belle. Most likely she had simply found it too difficult to put into words. Yet the notebook revealed that she had been preoccupied with it, deeply concerned about her daughter, all along. Throughout her life, Belle had often felt unacknowledged, as if her struggles had not registered in her mother's eyes. Only now did it come to light that they very much had, giving a profound realisation in that moment. Just as in the stories uncovered at Liza's funerals, a painful part of history was reshaped into something beautiful (Appendix C.1).

What these stories share is that death does not simply end a narrative but also opens it. Lives that were reduced, misread, or never fully seen can become, after death, something more complete. The injustice of a life that should have been different cannot always be corrected. But the story around it can still be rewritten in different ways, and in that rewriting, something is restored. As Despret (2021) frames it not only for the dead, but also for the living who carry them.

Sofie - On Saying Goodbye as an Act of Love

Liza's work shows how meaning can be recovered even for those who died without anyone to grieve for them and how stories can still be rewritten. Sofie's practice addresses a different but related shortcoming: the way that even relatives can be reduced in the chance to express their love. As discussed in the literature review, the commercialisation and professionalisation of death have gradually removed the bereaved from active participation in saying goodbye (Verhoeven et al., 2025). What was once a communal act of care has largely become a packaged service. Sofie's work, however, offers a different kind of evidence: that meaningful farewell remains possible, but it requires reclaiming space, imagination, and above all, time. A summary of the conversation is in Appendix B.5.

The McDrive funeral package

Sofie describes the dominant funeral industry with a critical analogy: choosing from a standard package, she says, is like ordering from a McDrive: efficient, predictable, and misses creativity. What the funeral industry rarely explains is that many assumed necessities are neither legal requirements nor genuinely necessary. Both Sofie and Crown (2018) see people's unawareness of this as something the industry has little incentive to correct as they are far cheaper. Simple or self made things can do the same or even better. For example, with old bedlinen and a willow basket that are in Sofie's experience often more personal than their commercial equivalents, as she puts it for the old bedlinen: "it has already lived alongside the person".

Letting chaos in

Sofie's method, involves open questions, attentive listening, and a deliberate tolerance for disorder. "I just try to let a little bit more chaos in" she explains, "so more will pop up" because it is in that unstructured space that the personal and creative surfaces. A sweet tin, a particular song, a thing two people always did together: these rather small and simple but strongly connected things don't appear when working through a catalogue. They surface, Sofie observes, when the process is left unstructured enough for them to.

Care as ritual, and as love

One of the most striking distinctions Sofie draws concerns the body itself. Where Carmen and Guité-Verret et al. (2023) observed that professional care can be deeply loving when a person is still alive to receive it, after death something changes. Sofie is precise about this: "every action can be a ritual but if the final care is performed by professionals, then it is no longer a ritual. Then it is simply a professional act." When a loved one does it, something else arises, not a procedure, but a continuation of the relationship through a final gesture. It is a final act of care that is also an acknowledgement, one that nourishes the person giving it.

The funeral as expression of love

For Sofie, a funeral succeeds "if someone was felt" when the deceased is not only remembered but genuinely experienced, when the funeral "de eigenheid ademt" (breathes the true essence) of the person it is for. The most meaningful funerals she has accompanied share a particular quality: intimacy. Someone lying in their own living room, children drawing on the floor, the deceased "just there in the middle, so we can all sit close by." Not because these things were crafted to be meaningful, but because they were honest and close to the deceased, and the people living with their death. What these moments share is what Sofie calls the feeling of carrying something together as a collective: "*We got this.*" It is precisely this, she notes, that disappears when the work of saying goodbye is taken out of people's hands.

Sofie's work shows that the impersonality around modern death is not inevitable, but the result of handing over tasks that were never only practical. A funeral becomes meaningful when people are given the time and space to shape it together and when saying goodbye is something carried as a group rather than delivered as a service. The small, unplanned gestures matter most, because they are what allow love to be expressed and the person to be truly felt. In this sense, meaning is not bought but made together.

Nathalie - Space and collective making

Where Sofie works at the threshold of farewell, Nathalie works in what comes after. She situates her practice around loss deliberately broader than grief over death alone. “You can also experience loss when a relationship ends, or when an expectation about the future doesn’t come true,” she notes. All of that is also loss. And for all of it, she has noticed that our society offers surprisingly little space. Nathalie is both an artist in expression around loss and hosts collective mourning groups. The summarised interview is in Appendix B.6.

Grief is not a disorder

What runs through everything Nathalie does is a single conviction: “everything you experience is a completely normal human reaction to the sad thing you have been through.” Grief is not a disorder to be fixed. People grieving do not, ultimately, want to be cured of their pain: “the pain is inextricably bound to the loss.” To no longer feel the absence would be, in a way, to lose the person again. What she offers is not treatment but space. “Grief is not something that stops,” she says simply. It accompanies you for life. This is something Lotte also describes as the pain felt for a loss is a reflection of the love felt (Appendix C.3).

Starting from the body

What distinguishes her approach most is where it begins. After a short meditation they start not with talking, but with your hands. “When you work with your hands, or with something that has no words, you arrive at a completely different layer of your consciousness.” Making something changes breathing, lowers energy, creates what she calls dropping in. Magsamen (2024) shows that a few minutes of hands-on creative activity already alters you, calming the body before the mind has registered why. Grief, Nathalie also suggests, is something the body understands long before the mind catches up. This connects to what was discussed in the literature review around Pearce and Komaromy’s (2020) on embodied grief where they point out that grief is lived physically as well, which is heavily undertheorised in the West.

The exercises are deliberately simple. The word creativity is avoided where possible as it triggers too much, fear of not being good enough, pressure to produce something beautiful. Torn magazine images put into a collage, a stone wrapped in wool, a broken tealight holder: the threshold must be low enough that people can enter without performance. What matters is not the result but what the process does to the person doing it. In Figure 3.10 the principles Nathalie uses are visualised.



Figure 3.10. The five conditions Nathalie's creative sessions rest on.

What making does

Making brings everyone into the altered state described earlier, that “dropping in” where the body shifts before the mind catches up (Magsamen, 2024). After creating, people first reflect on their own work already connected with their embodied grief. This can continue long after the session, sometimes surfacing half a year later when looking at your creation again. What each person makes and expresses is unique, and so are their interpretations. Yet “although the difference, recognition is there” with that recognition connection among people is built. Figure 3.11 traces that movement: something felt is put into an object, reflected on, and then shared, and it is in the encounter between expressions that stay unlike each other that the connection forms.

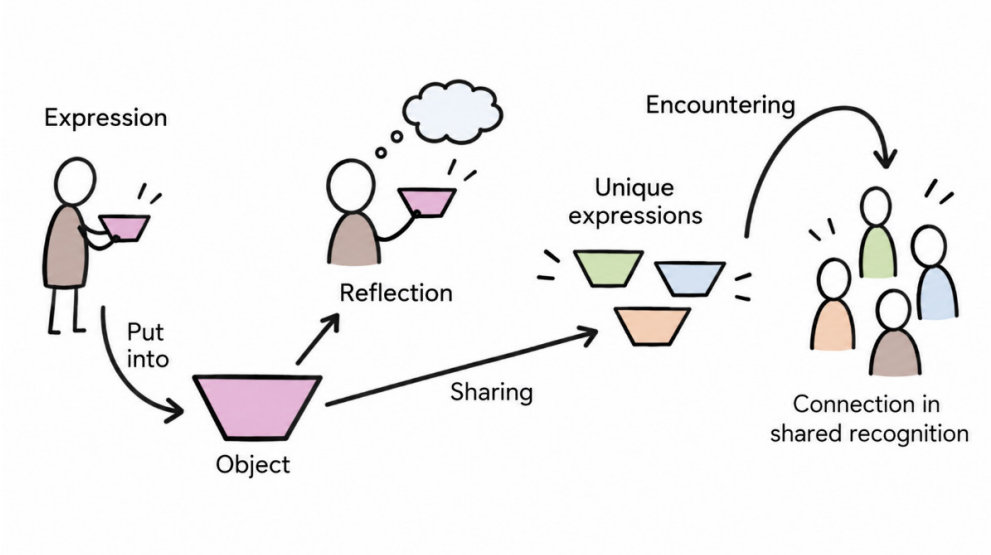


Figure 3.11. From expression to shared recognition: what is put into an object returns through reflection and sharing, and the unique expressions meet without being reconciled.

Kintsugi

One exercise returns most clearly to the broken and the mended. Participants break a small tealight holder deliberately and piece it back together with golden glue, the fractured lines highlighted rather than hidden. “Die delen staan symbool voor je gebrokenheid, en je kunt ze dan weer aan elkaar lijmen, maar op een manier dat je het blijft zien, dat je de breuklijnen niet wegpoetst.” Inside, some people draw something that can be private as grief can also be very intimate and does not always have to be shown, enclosed but not erased (Figure 3.12). It is, she notes, like a scar: not hidden, not celebrated as damage, but recognised as something that happened, that changed the shape of things, and that the person survived.



Figure 3.12. Two mended tealight holders, the break lines kept visible in gold and things drawn and written on the inside.

3.3 Voices of the bereaved: diversity alongside loss

The previous section drew on people who work around dying, farewell, and grief. This section turns to people carrying losses of their own. Nine were spoken with, reached through personal networks and their network, with an emphasis on people who felt comfortable talking about their loss. The loss should not be too recent. This was not a rule about how grief should look or how long it should take, but a way of lowering the chance that a conversation would ask more of someone than they had expected to give. Within that, the nine were chosen with an eye to variety rather than representativeness: their losses differ in time elapsed, relationship, suddenness, cultural framing, religion, and how publicly they are carried. From the recent passing of a grandparent to a parent lost in childhood; from the sudden death of a sister to grief over an estranged part of the family; and, in some cases, from supporting someone else through a recent loss. Some are still close to a death, others looking back across many years. Together they form not a category but a diverse set of voices, each held in its uniqueness, from which patterns will later, and only partly, be drawn.

Each person is therefore first introduced through a short portrait that tries to hold something of who they are and what they shared, rather than being brought straight into an argument. What these voices open up is carried forward into the design rather than fully resolved here. The insights drawn from each conversation, with a short description, are in Appendix C.

Belle

A woman in mid-life, lost her mother to a terminal illness. She approaches grief as something to move toward rather than wait out, through acupuncture, qigong, yoga, and making floral memory pieces, and by choosing to dwell on beautiful memories rather than only on sadness. The moment that holds her most is a notebook of her mother's, found during a family lunch: it revealed that her mother had quietly, deeply worried about Belle's own earlier health struggles, worries she had never spoken aloud. For years Belle had felt those struggles went unseen; the notebook rewrote that into a story of a mother who had been closely, silently worried all along. Belle keeps wearing her mother's clothes and perfume, so that it still feels like doing things alongside her.

Billie

A young working adult, reflected on the recent, anticipated passing of a grandparent who had been a daily, caretaking presence in his childhood. The grandparent died at home, which felt warmer than a hospital, and their ashes were scattered in nature in a way that felt wholesomely in keeping with who they had been. Since then Billie carries a small ritual of his own: lighting a candle in churches whenever he travels, a portable, private moment of remembrance he takes with him wherever he goes.

Lotte

A student, was supporting a new partner through the sudden loss of a close friend while also looking back on her own delayed grief, from a period when several family losses arrived almost at once, while she was living abroad and after she just got home. She is easily affected by how others behave and careful in her thinking about what helps. With someone in shock she offers concrete choices rather than open questions, and quietly takes over practical things. The line of hers that recurs across this research reframes the pain itself: "The intensity of the pain we're feeling now reflects just how much love we experienced at the time."

Jeroen

A young adult, spoke about losses that arrived without clear scripts: an estranged grandfather, contact with whom had been shaped by earlier trauma, and the sudden suicide of a friend's roommate that pulled him into a "second-layer" supporting role. The first left a muted feeling tangled in unanswered questions. What he returned to most was music, and how its meaning can shift. A song played at a funeral never quite returns to its old life; "Piano Man" on New Year's Eve will now always carry something else, a moment of connection with the person he lost folded into it.

Tygo

A self-reliant young adult, was eight when his mother died. He keeps an ongoing inner conversation with her, sharing the good as much as the hard, so that she does not become somewhere he only offloads misfortune. He describes it less as memory than as something they "do together": his actual memories are few, but what he holds onto is a sense of mutual presence rather than a one-way address. He knows it can sound strange from the outside, yet it has become a natural part of his life, carried alongside a deep silence around death in his family that he has slowly grown into.

Josephine

A young professional who moves between Lebanese and Dutch ways of life, lost her sister suddenly. She notices how the first more readily allows people to pause their lives for the bereaved, while the second often hesitates, held back by a fear of saying the wrong thing. She speaks of grief and joy as coexisting rather than alternating, of grief moving in waves, and of a bond with her sister that keeps evolving, kept tangible through small acts: a ring worn on family occasions, gathering around her sister's favourite snacks or food. What she names most clearly runs throughout this thesis: that loss is inherently relational, reaching past the person who died into every surrounding bond, so that the world afterwards has to be rebuilt.

Alexander

A working adult, lost a grandfather who had been a big part of his childhood: fishing trips, camping, living on the same street, everyday help. The week his grandfather lay at home was carried together, the family washing and dressing the body, and in a small closing ceremony a ribbon placed in his grandfather's hands was cut so that each person could keep a piece. Writing a speech felt impossible until he sat beside his grandfather and spoke to him directly; then the words came. Now, in quiet moments, he feels his grandfather not watching over him but enjoying things alongside him.

Hidde

A young adult whose faith frames death as a transition rather than an end, lost his grandmother after a chaotic period that swung between hope and setback. The week she lay at home shifted from initially uncomfortable to quiet and peaceful, the living room becoming a space for goodbye that was both still and alive. His belief that she had passed to a better place softened the loss into something closer to a peaceful progression, and he felt held both by his community, including a pastor who had known his grandmother personally, and by his faith.

Rosanne

A young adult, spoke from a more reflective distance rather than a recent close loss. She finds a quiet peace walking through a cemetery, though she rarely goes, feeling its heaviness too. She shared a family tradition that continued until recently: travelling abroad with her

extended family to visit her grandparents' graves, holding a memorial together, and sharing a meal afterwards. The togetherness, she said, mattered more than the formal moment, and the shared remembrance had a way of closing distances between relatives who do not always get along.

Further conversations

Alongside these nine, a number of shorter, informal conversations took place with others who had experienced loss (Appendix D). These were held with permission to use what was shared, but not as formal, recorded interviews, so they are not named or quoted directly. They are drawn on more lightly, as paraphrase and background, so that their voices inform the analysis without coming to dominate it. Even so, they added threads that recur later: a wish for meaningful rituals for those without a religious framework, the sense that grief is more often met with attempts to fix it than with simple acknowledgement, the ease that comes when death is kept visible rather than hidden away, and the comfort of allowing room for what cannot be explained.

3.4 Conclusion: against reduction

This chapter brought together two kinds of voices: practitioners who work around dying, farewell and grief, and nine people carrying losses of their own. What runs through the practitioners, across these very different practices, is a quiet refusal of reduction. Death reduced to a medical event, dying to a procedure, a wish to die to a pathology, a life to nothing, a farewell to a service, grief to a disorder, each is a reduction of something that was, in its fuller form, relational. And what each of them, working in their own field, tries to restore is precisely that. Not death itself, but the relationships around it.

The nine bereaved are not read in the same way here. They speak from lived loss rather than from practice, and what they carry differs in almost every respect: how long ago, which relationship, how sudden, how openly it is held, within which cultural or religious frame. Those differences are not resolved into a shared account, because doing so would perform exactly the reduction described above. They are taken up in the clustering that follows, read alongside one another without being made into one.

Across the practitioners this takes different forms. Christina shows death kept visible in everyday life; Carmen the loving presence that does not instruct dying but accompanies it; Hans an autonomy realised not in solitude but in the conversations one has with those one loves; Liza the stories that can still be told after death, and the bond that can still be formed; Sofie the small, unplanned gestures through which meaning is made at the final goodbye; Nathalie the making that holds grief in the body and lets it be recognised collectively. None of these are corrections. They are ways of staying with, with death, the dying, the dead, the bereaved and grief itself, long enough for something else to emerge.

What they describe, almost without exception, is that this work moves both ways. The presence given to the dying returns to those who give it; the stories told for the dead reshape the bereaved who tell them; the recognition built around grief holds everyone who shares in it. To refuse reduction is not only to honour the dying and the dead. It is also to nourish the living and keep them in relation, with them and with one another.

Held together, these voices are not yet findings. They are the material the next chapter works from. Read across one another, they begin to show the tensions and shared movements that the clustering draws out.

4. Clustering - eleven patterns in living with loss

The chapter now makes an analytic and somewhat methodological shift. Where the previous section held each voice in its uniqueness, the analysis that follows looks across them for patterns. This is a deliberate but somewhat uneasy move. Bringing the voices into proximity is what makes the patterns underneath them visible, but it also flattens the nuance and situatedness that gave them their weight. The chapter is built to give that back: the clusters below compress the voices furthest, the relations between them restore their movement, and what remains of the tension is carried into the framing that follows.

The analysis follows the clustering step from Vision in Product design (ViP), the method that Social Implication Design (SID) builds on (Hekkert & Van Dijk, 2011; Tromp & Hekkert, 2014). Where ViP clusters context factors, the material here is the fragments gathered across the whole discovery phase: the expert interviews, the nine conversations with bereaved individuals, the informal talks, and the field trips. From these, 243 fragments were collected, each a short statement, a part of a quote, or a noted observation. Working with them as physical cards, fragments that spoke to the same underlying force were drawn together and regrouped repeatedly as the patterns shifted, until eleven clusters held (Figure 4.1). They were sorted not by who said them but by what they pointed to, and each cluster was named afterwards, for the force it carries. The result is not a categorisation of grievers but a set of forces in which each story sits in different proportions. It is not the only possible reading of what was gathered, but one reading, offered as a way of looking rather than the way.



Figure 4.1. The eleven clusters, grouped from the insights on post-its.

The full set of clustered fragments is documented in Appendix E, photographed as the physical cards used during analysis. These were working notes, written in shorthand for the researchers own use during clustering, and are included to show the material and process rather than as a polished dataset.

Before the clusters themselves, it helps to see where they sit. Three layers emerged: a core of meaning-making, a middle layer of inner experience and relationships, and an outer layer of structural conditions (Figure 4.2). The two clusters in the outer ring, How space shapes and Being unintentionally reduced, are of a different kind than the others. They describe less what the bereaved do or experience than the conditions under which all of it takes place, which is why they are held apart at the end of the list below, and return at the close of this chapter rather than in the relations traced next.

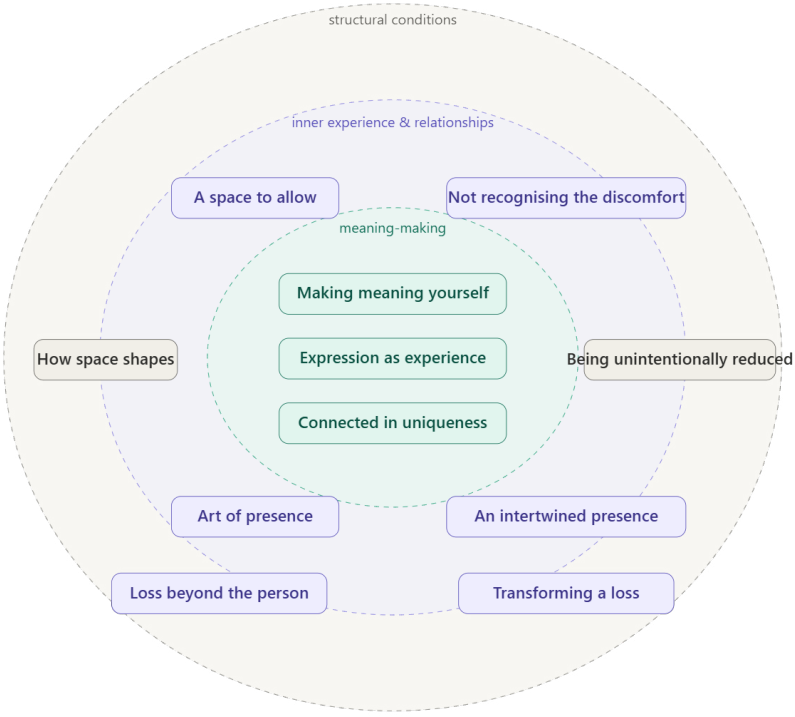


Figure 4.2. The eleven clusters in three layers, from meaning-making at the core to the conditions around it.

4.1 The eleven clusters

A Space to Allow

About creating room without expectation, where grief and dying can take their own form. The cluster holds together a wish to be seen and a wish for privacy, a need for freedom from pressure and a need for a small push to begin. Emotions only surface where it feels safe, and what the cluster shows is the value of allowing itself, of a space that does not demand. (Appendix E.1)

Avoiding the Discomfort

About the misconceptions around grief that distance people in society and leave the bereaved isolated. People avoid talking about death and grief to avoid emotions and awkward situations, yet it is the avoidance itself that becomes the painful thing, not the awkwardness of saying something wrong. The cluster shows how isolation grows out of well-meant silence, and how a relationship that feels intimate from the inside can look woolly from the outside. (Appendix E.2)

Art of Presence

About the quality of being-with as the form of support that carries. What people need is described as simple, sitting together, a text message, simple gestures, taking over practical things, yet presence is also active: people feel exactly your attitude toward them. The cluster holds the two sides together, that being there is simple but not passive, and that intention matters more than the right words. (Appendix E.3)

Making Meaning Yourself

About how people make meaning around loss through gestures they have chosen, shaped, or assembled. A found object, a played song, washing the body, returning to a place of death. For some, inherited rituals carry deep weight; for others, they mean almost nothing. What runs through the cluster is the move between received form and personal making, and what holds it together is that the value lies in the investment, not the form. (Appendix E.4)

An Intertwined Presence

About the deceased becoming a natural part of life, not held as memory but lived alongside, woven into rituals and small enjoyments. The bond is not one-directional, and is actively kept rather than passively carried. The cluster holds an internal struggle: people describe these acts with joy, yet sometimes add that they sound vague or woolly, a continuing bond that feels natural from the inside but slightly abnormal from the outside. (Appendix E.5)

Expression as Experience

About how grief externalises through doing, making, speech, physical activity, where the act itself releases emotion and brings people into contact with feelings words cannot reach. The cluster holds two sides of expression: it can release emotion, but loss can also block the ability to express, and overwhelming grief can make people passive. Sometimes a small push, or a simple task, is all that is needed. (Appendix E.6)

Transforming a Loss

About how grief and the relationship with the deceased keep moving rather than resolving. Memories shift from pain toward joy, stories grow richer, and the bond keeps evolving. What runs through the cluster is closer to waves rather than progress, grief pulling in, life pulling out, grief returning in different shapes, alongside sometimes difficulties of accepting happiness in sad times. (Appendix E.7)

Connected in Uniqueness

About how shared meaning-making deepens connection while leaving room for individual interpretation. Co-creating a funeral, telling stories, mourning together, the collective doing can carry more meaning than what it produces. The cluster name holds its paradox: people can have the same experience and entirely different interpretations of it, yet unique expressions can embody similar ones. (Appendix E.8)

Loss Beyond the Person

About how loss is inherently relational, reaching past the deceased into every surrounding relationship and into the bereaved's own life. Loss exposes how connected people are while also causing indirect losses, and the network around it has to be rediscovered and reconstructed. Even autonomy, the cluster suggests, is relational. (Appendix E.9)

The nine clusters above describe what the bereaved do, experience, and keep in relation. The two that follow sit at a different level. They say less about grief itself than about the conditions under which all of it takes place, and for that reason they are not taken up in the relations traced next but return at the close of this chapter.

How Space Shapes

About how your environment shapes the experience of death and what feeling is carried forward from it. Space here is not only physical but cultural and ritual: a homely hospice, a Korean cemetery as social space, a public cremation, a home wake. The cluster moves between heaviness and joyfulness, and shows how spaces being lived-in around death are what allow it to be talked about openly. (Appendix E.10)

Being Unintentionally Reduced

About how grief and dying are quietly flattened by phenomena that are not malicious but structural. Care becomes treatment, ritual becomes medical action, language misses nuance, society's pace does not match grief's pace. The cluster carries a particular sting: helping can have the opposite effect, and forgetting the pain can mean forgetting the love. (Appendix E.11).

4.2 How the clusters move together

The layered view says where the clusters sit, not yet how they move together. Figure 4.3 traces the relations found between them, grouped into the three that the following sections walk through: Relationships in Motion, Presence, acts and words, and From personal to collective meaning making. The two outer clusters are drawn as the conditions around them, putting a question to each group rather than sitting inside one. The labels along the arrows name the

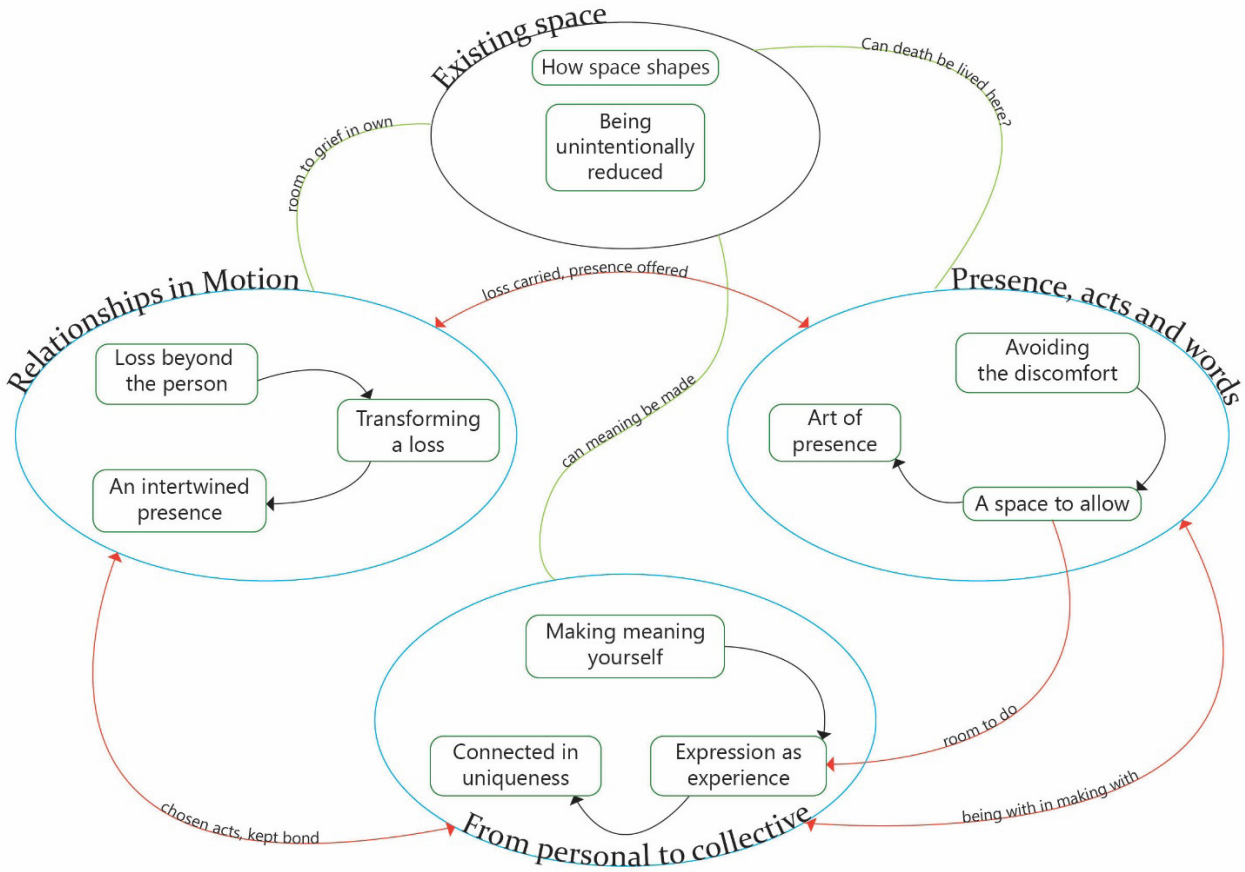


Figure 4.3. The relations traced between the clusters, grouped into three, with the outer two as the space around them.

Relationships in Motion

Three clusters structure this section. *Loss beyond the person* describes how bereavement reaches other relationships, showing how interwoven people's lives are. *Transforming a loss* describes how grief is carried over time not disappearing, but moving alongside other things. *An intertwined presence* describes how the bond with the deceased remains a dynamic part of life.

What death and grief reshape

The *Loss beyond the person* cluster extends past the person who has died. For several participants, the bereavement did not stay contained to the relationship with the deceased; it touched every relationship around it. Josephine said this most directly: losing her sister was also losing a piece of her parents, and surrounding relationships had to be reorganised because the death made the old story impossible to continue. While Alexander's grandfather's death pulled him closer to his grandmother, they became more connected through their shared loss.

This is what Neimeyer (2019) means when he describes 'meaning reconstruction' as relational rather than purely personal. A death not only disrupts one's beliefs about the world but also the network of relationships that shape someone. In Stroebe and Schut's (1999) dual process model, which distinguishes between loss-oriented coping (the work of grieving itself) and restoration-oriented coping (adjusting to a changed life), this kind of reorganisation falls within the last one. They do not limit to secondary losses in relationships, but also the broader work of life changes. Such as taking on new tasks, and adjusting to altered roles and identities (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

The other side of the model comes forward in *Transforming a loss*. What participants describe is not a steady working-through but an alternation: grief pulling them in, then everyday life pulling them out, then grief returning in a different shape. Lotte and Josephine both describe grief moving in waves, the emotional weight not disappearing but slowly becoming more carriable alongside other things, with moments of joy threaded through. Stroebe and Schut (1999) call this oscillation, and argue that it is not unhealthy avoidance of grief but a necessary process as taking time off from grieving is part of adaptive coping rather than a retreat from it.

Lasting bonds

Across nearly every conversation, the bereaved described a relationship with the deceased that did not end at the death but changed shape, as captured in *An intertwined presence*. Klass et al. (1996) named this continuing bonds: an ongoing, evolving inner relationship with the deceased that should not be read as unresolved grief but as a normal part of bereavement. A recent systematic review across seventy-nine studies confirms that picture, showing that such bonds bring comfort, support meaning reconstruction, and contribute to identity transformation (Hewson et al., 2023).

Tygo, who lost his mother as a child, maintains the relationship through internal conversations, sharing both beautiful and tough things in life as he does not just want to burden her. Several participants described a sense of someone looking over their shoulder, enjoying things together like a sunset or mowing the grass (Appendix C.7 Alexander; Appendix D). The bond is not just visited occasionally or held as a static memory but lived alongside, actively sustained through small, deliberate acts: Josephine keeps her sister near through careful gestures, a ring for family occasions, buying her favourite soap; Belle wears her mother's clothes and perfume so she still feels like doing things with her. These are not symbolic performances but acts of relationship-keeping, the simple doing of things that holds the bond in place.

When discussing these things, however, participants often added that it might sound vague or woolly or people see it as slightly weird (Appendix C.5 Tygo, C.6 Josephine). They do them with joy, and yet feel they are doing something somewhat abnormal. This could be a leftover of the older view that treated continuing bonds as such (Klass et al., 1996). What these acts make possible is, as argued in the Ghosts and Questions and Transforming Relationships sections above, precisely Despret's (2021) point: the question is not whether the presence is real but what it does and this is as with Liza's metamorphosis, keeping the bond in place.

Presence, acts and words

Building on how loss reaches beyond the person who has died, this section turns to what the bereaved encounter from those around them. Three clusters converge here: *Avoiding the discomfort* names the obstacle, *A space to allow* describes what the bereaved need, and *Art of presence* is the response that meets both.

What helps and what doesn't

When people described what had not helped, it was rarely a wrong word. It was avoidance, the well-meaning attempt to fix, or the silent retreat of those who did not know what to do. What helped was almost never about words. It was about people being there. Manu Keirse (2023) names this directly: the discomfort lies not with the bereaved but with the surrounding society, which prefers to avoid pain. Those who do not know what posture to take often turn to giving space in a sense of keeping distance, which the bereaved can experience as abandonment. Words are eventually forgotten; felt presence remains (Keirse, 2023). Carmen described a similar dynamic in her section but from the side of dying: "it is about love and warmth." What people need at the end of life is closely related here to what people who have lost someone need.

Holding the ambivalence

The interviews bring this forward. For Josephine, the most useful early support was small, practical, and largely wordless: “all practical things take up energy, so all the small bits help” (Appendix C.6). Alexander and Hidde recall the week their grandfather lay at home in similar terms, it was the being together and not any single acts, that carried the family. Lotte, supporting someone close, catches her own impulse to fix and steps back. Good support holds open the ambivalence Keirse (2023) names, that the bereaved often want both to be alone and not to be alone, and what is needed is not a choice between these but room in which both can coexist.

From personal to collective meaning making

Three clusters surfaced when participants spoke about making sense of loss. The first concerns what people assemble for themselves; the second, what the act of doing does to them. Lastly, what happens when that doing is shared. Each opens onto the next, and the final section draws them together.

Chosen meaning

The cluster *Making meaning yourself* is assembled out of specific, often small things. An object found in a place, a song played at a cremation, washing and dressing the body, returning to a place of death (Appendix B.6 Nathalie; Appendix C.1 Belle, C.7 Alexander). Running through the cluster is a tension between inherited ritual and personal making. Christian rituals carry deep meaning for some (Appendix C.8), while for others they are fully absent (Appendix D). What matters is that the bereaved have chosen, shaped, or assembled the gesture themselves. Sociologist Timothy Stacey echoes this: contemporary meaning arises “on the street” through action rather than being imposed from above. Ultimately, value lies not in the form, but in the personal investment. A chosen object carries as much weight as an inherited rite if the bereaved has made it their own (Brand, 2025).

The ways of doing

If *Making meaning yourself* describes what people assemble, *Expression as experience* asks what the act of doing actually does to them. Across the interviews, expression is often embodied and transformative in the moment of its happening. A speech is “very emotional to give but also releases these emotions” (Appendix C.7); physical activity, making, and creative work bring people into contact with feelings that words cannot reach. The internal tension here is between expression as release and expression as obstacle: loss can block the ability to express, and overwhelming grief can make people passive. However, a little push could help (Appendix B.5 Sofie; Appendix A) or simply providing easy tasks could already help. The act of doing makes grief reachable in a way that thinking or talking about it sometimes cannot, which is what Pearce and Komaromy (2020) point to with embodied grief, discussed earlier in the section with Nathalie.

When doing is shared

If *Expression as experience* asks what doing does to the person, *Connected in uniqueness* asks what happens when that doing is shared. Co-creating a funeral, sharing memories, and building a new story together are often described as more meaningful than the events they produce: “organising the funeral together is perhaps more meaningful than the day itself” (Appendix C.6). Shared mourning deepens connection, and collectively talking about beautiful memories gives comfort. The cluster name holds the productive paradox: people can have the same experience and entirely different interpretations of it, yet unique expressions can embody similar experiences. Shared rituals work because they leave room for individual meaning, not because they impose a common one. The doing-together is itself the bond that Collins describes as the way collective focus and shared rhythm in a ritual generate the emotional energy that binds a group, independent of what the ritual produces (Marquez, 2013).

Across these three clusters, meaning around loss is consistently made rather than received: assembled in personal acts, accessed through embodied expression, and bound together in collective doing. What holds everything together is not any single ritual form but the act of investment itself.

4.3 Threads underneath several clusters

What runs across the clusters is not only continuity but tension. Some threads belong to no single cluster but run underneath several at once, and Figure 4.4 traces four of them as bands passing through the groups rather than sitting inside any one of them. The gap between inside and outside, where an experience is fully real to the person living it but barely visible or slightly strange to others. Ambivalence, the wanting of opposites at once: to be alone and not alone, to show and to keep inward, joy and grief together. What doing does, where sustained and chosen doing is itself what gives meaning, more than what it produces. And waves, not progress: grief that stays, bonds that evolve, a pace that society's pace ignores. Of the two outer clusters, only *Being unintentionally reduced* is reached by a thread, through that same question of pace. *How space shapes* is not, and appears in this material less as a tension than as a condition that makes the others liveable or not. These are the tensions of the field in distilled form; the fuller set, with the inspiring qualities that surfaced alongside them, is gathered in Appendix F.

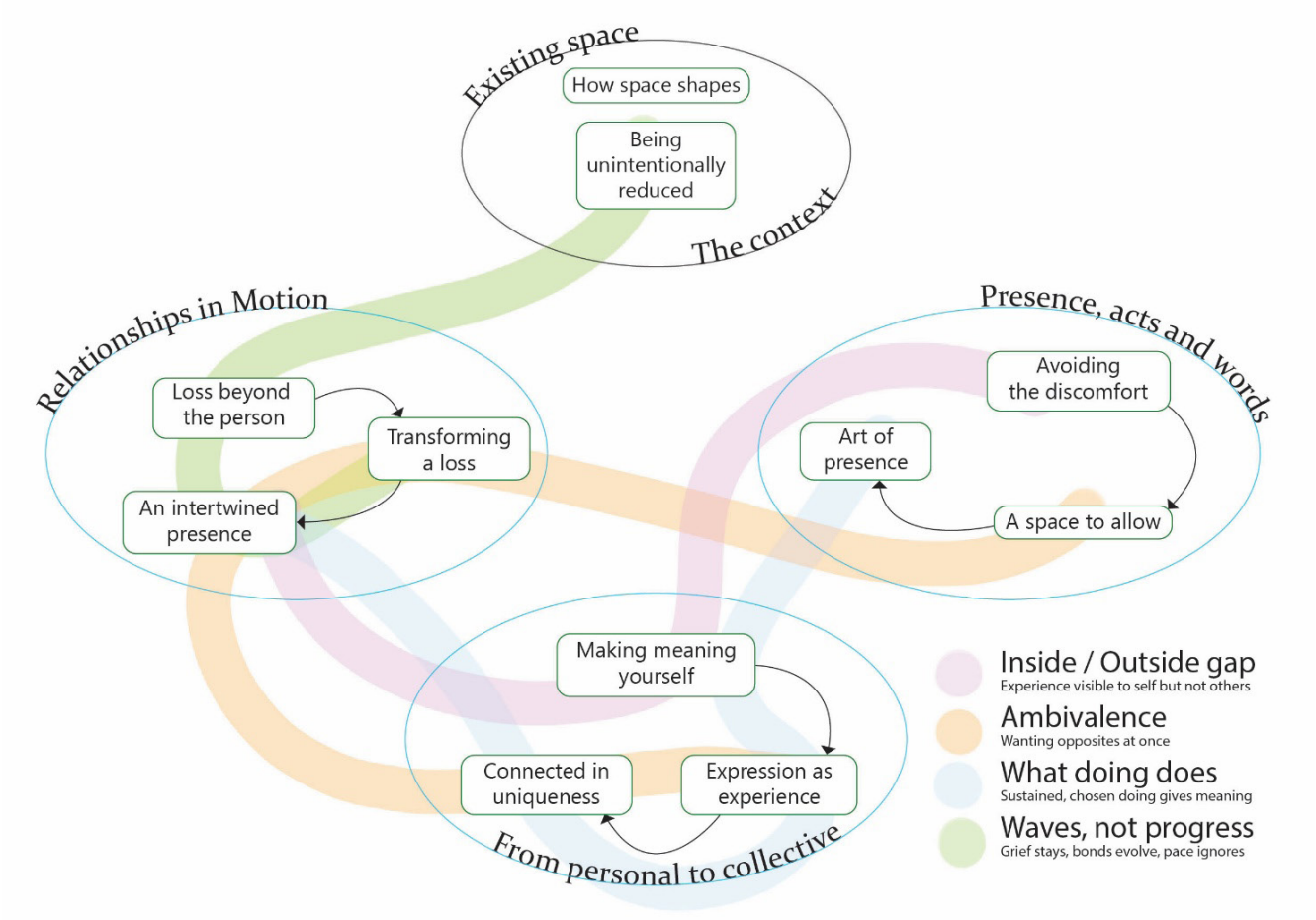


Figure 4.4. Four threads running underneath several clusters at once, drawn as bands passing through the groups rather than sitting inside any one of them.

4.4 Conclusion: from patterns to a position

At first, this chapter compressed the voices into eleven clusters, which flattened much of what gave them their weight, and then traced the relations between them to give some of that movement back.

Read this way, the nine inner clusters describe grief as something carried in motion rather than worked through: bonds that change shape rather than end, support that holds room rather than fills it, meaning held in personal acts and created together in collective ones. What surfaces across the three sections is not a single answer but a way of moving: the bereaved make their way through loss by keeping things in relation. With the deceased, with those around them, with what they do themselves. The two clusters on the outer layer, *How space shapes* and *Being unintentionally reduced*, describe the conditions under which this relational work takes place.

What this leaves is not yet something to design. The clusters, the relations and the threads underneath them each hold tensions the field keeps producing and qualities that surfaced alongside them, gathered in Appendix F. The next chapter reads the threads for what they leave behind: not a brief, but a way of standing toward those tensions, and four grounds a design might stand on.

5. Framing - Design perspectives, goal and directions

The clustering ended in tension rather than in conclusions. This chapter turns what it left behind into a position to design from, in three steps that are easily mistaken for one another. The threads at the close of the previous chapter are tensions in the field: what the material keeps doing. The design perspectives that follow are ways of standing toward those tensions rather than resolving them. The directions after that are grounds a design might stand on, each left open in form.

None of the three is a brief. What narrows here is the field of possible designs, not the question, and the narrowing is a choice rather than something the analysis produced: two grounds are carried forward and two set aside, not as wrong but as things a design can arrive at along the way rather than depart from. The chapter closes on that weighting, which is where the design phase begins.

5.1 Design perspectives: how to stand toward the bereaved and their dead

From the fuller set of tensions and inspiring qualities gathered in Appendix F, what follows names what seemed most valuable for the coming directions: not the lists themselves, but four perspectives they left behind, concerning how to stand toward the bereaved and their dead. Each is taken up in turn below.

Keep the relation open

This is something Liza's work made visible. After death, a story does not just close, it also opens. A daughter buys new clothes to dress a mother who was never really a mother to her, and asks her own child to draw something for the grandmother she was supposed to be. A small notebook surfaces at lunch after the cremation, and a mother who had seemed not to see her daughter's struggles turns out to have been preoccupied with them all along. A flag laid on a coffin tells one version of a life, and a man walks up afterwards to tell another side of fifteen years of silent atonement no one had known about. None of these undo what happened in life. They join it. The ending is real, and the opening is also real, and both stay true. Whether this is called metamorphosis or re-authoring matters less than what it shows: the dead remain available to be in relation with, and the bereaved remain able to shape what that relation can still mean.

Attend to what a presence does

Alongside this sits something Despret names most clearly. The question of whether the felt presence of someone gone is really there is the wrong question. As Hans put it, no more useful than asking someone whether they believe in the treatment of an ingrown toenail. What matters is what the presence does, what mode it lives in, what it makes the bereaved do. Tygo's conversations with his mother, Alexander's grandfather over his shoulder, Belle still doing things with her mother through the perfume and the clothes. All of it real from the inside. All of it slightly woolly from the outside.

Let versions coexist

Refusing the question of which side wins is part of the work. And, and, and. The fact of absence and the felt presence. The joy and the grief. The wish to be alone and the wish not to be lonely. The visible and the held inward. None of these need to be resolved. They need to be given room. This is what Despret calls the art of versions, and it holds for the stories that surface after a death as much as for the contradictions the bereaved carry: versions do not compete but make the story denser.

The same holds, in a smaller way, for this chapter itself. The clustering, the figures, the threads drawn through them: these are one telling among the tellings this material allows. This account is a version in that sense. Made denser by the voices in it, but not unifying them into one, and best read as such.

Stand beside rather than prescribe

What ties these together, and what the design phase carries forward, is a small handful of sentences that keep returning. Carmen's motto in the hospice: everything is possible. Sofie's measure of whether a funeral worked: if someone was felt. The boy's mother, when her son told her he no longer wished to live and she could not change his mind: if I really cannot convince you that it can be otherwise, then I will stand beside you. None of these is a method. All of them are perspectives to design from. Towards death and dying, the dead, the bereaved, and the people who stand near them, and together they name the kind of designing the next phase asks for.

5.2 Design goal

Design perspectives say how to stand, not yet what for. The goal in 1.1 asked for public space in which the bereaved and their communities could share grief. The field kept pointing underneath that, to the bond itself, fully real from the inside and barely legible from the outside. The goal stays public, but its object shifts: not a community brought in to share the grief, but the bond itself, and what around it decides whether it may appear. Stated plainly:

> *To create conditions in which grief can be expressed, shared, and lived with, in relation to the dead and to those around the bereaved, without that relation having to be explained, resolved, or fitted to a recognised form of mourning.*

Conditions, because what counts as recognised is not fixed. It is made by the language, the spaces, the care and the timetables that surround grief. Those conditions are therefore as much a ground for design as the acts they hold. The four directions that follow are grounds on which such a design might stand.

5.3 Four design directions

The directions below grow from the clusters, the relations traced between them, and the design perspectives above. Each names a ground a design might stand on rather than a problem to solve, and each deliberately leaves its form open. The clusters each direction grows from are named underneath it; the tensions it holds and the qualities it draws on are mapped in Appendix F, where the full set is held with its origins.

Direction 1: Carrying loss through everyday life

A design that supports the bereaved in carrying their loss into ordinary life, through small acts or things that hold meaning, leaving room for it to stay quiet. What makes such an act hold is not its form but that it has been made one's own: assembled from scratch, or an inherited form appropriated rather than followed. Nothing is ruled out by where a gesture comes from, only by whether it stays someone else's. Much of this happens in the texture of everyday public life, which itself becomes a quiet refusal of the privatisation of grief. Something slightly nudging or guiding might evolve here, since loss can block the entry into making or doing (Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1. A design that does not give a form but opens someone up to finding or shaping something of their own, which then stays.

Grows from the clusters *A space to allow, An intertwined presence, Making meaning yourself* and *Expression as experience*.

Direction 2: A speculative shift in what counts as strange

A design that loosens the cultural line between what is recognised as a normal way of grieving or relating to the dead and what is dismissed as strange or vague when someone has died. A line that runs along the gap between inside and outside: fully real to the person living it, barely legible to those around them. The aim is not to argue but to make such relations encounterable, so that the strangeness shifts from the act of the bereaved to the norm that judges it (Figure 5.2). The form this takes is open; what matters is that the strangeness is relocated rather than explained away.



Figure 5.2. The shift traced in a bystander: from finding something odd, to questioning why it seems odd, to asking about it with interest.

Grows from the clusters *An intertwined presence* and *Avoiding the discomfort*.

Direction 3: Reshaping the story together

A design that works on the story of the dead as something held between people rather than by one person alone, plural and unfinished. It supports the bereaved in doing something together with others around the person who has died, in which the story is added to, contradicted and thickened by more than one person, and what was unseen can surface (Figure 5.3). It works because it leaves room for each person's own reading rather than settling on a shared one, and it returns the experience of being held in shared work rather than left alone with the loss. The doing-together itself could carry more than what it produces.

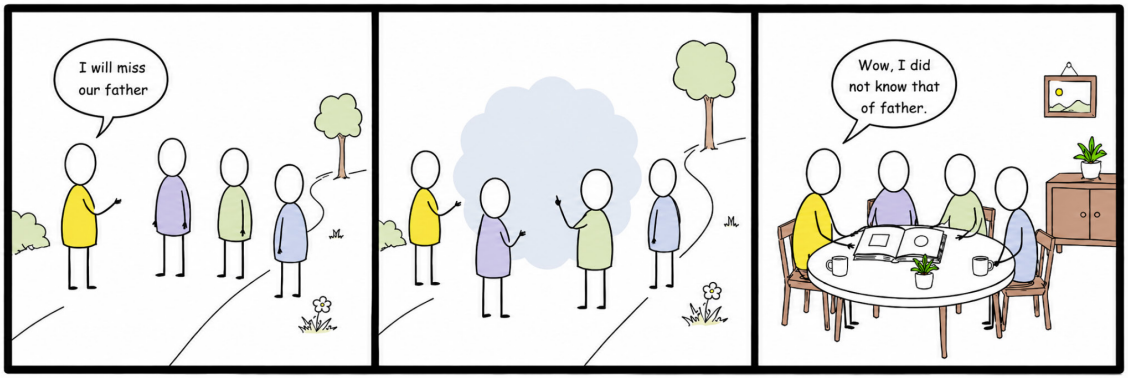


Figure 5.3. The design is not what is done together, but what makes room for it: a space in which the story of the dead can collectively evolve.

Grows from the clusters *Connected in uniqueness*, *Loss beyond the person* and *Transforming a loss*.

Direction 4: A speculative work on what shapes meaningful mourning

A design that makes tangible how much of what we recognise as a “right” or “good” way of mourning is shaped by what surrounds it: the spaces, rituals, language, care systems and timetables in which grief takes place. None of this is done on purpose, which is what makes it hard to see. The aim is not to propose a better set of conditions but to let the ones we have appear as conditions rather than as how things simply are, and so as one possibility among others rather than the only one (Figure 5.4). What that opens can be room for what else could be. The form this takes is open, as long as what it surfaces is felt rather than argued.



Figure 5.4. The same room, first with one way of mourning and then with several, so that what looked like simply how it is done becomes visible as an option among others.

Grows from the clusters *How space shapes* and *Being unintentionally reduced*, and from the reductions traced in the literature and expert chapters.

5.4 Where the weight falls: directions 2 and 4

Discussing the four with fellow graduating students, and with several of the people spoken with during the research, 2 and 4 were where the energy sat. The objection to 1 and 3 was not that their ground is wrong but that it is more familiar: memorial objects, personal rituals and collective remembrance have been covered more already, and a design standing there risks arriving as something already recognisable. Neither is ruled out, and both may still return. The difference is at the level. 1 and 3 work through making and doing and might already surface naturally; 2 and 4 work on an upper level, on what counts as an acceptable way of relating in the first place. 2 works from the inside out, taking the felt reality of a bond and asking what dismisses it, 4 from the outside in, showing how the conditions around grief shape which forms of mourning are recognised.

Neither of the two proposes a better way of mourning, and both leave the verdict with whoever meets them: 2 aims not to argue but to make such relations encounterable, 4 asks that what it surfaces be felt rather than argued. That keeps them within the last of the perspectives above, standing beside rather than prescribing. What 1 and 3 stand on does not disappear with it. So the chapter closes with how to stand, what that standing is for, and four grounds to stand on, two of which the design work sets out from.

Design

The perspectives and the four grounds say how to stand and on what, not yet what to make. This phase works by making rather than by asking. It begins close by, with a family and a loss already present, moves out to forty-six ideas and the shapes underneath them, narrows to two concepts and the questions they could not answer themselves, and opens again in an exposition that fifteen visitors walked. What comes back from them is what a rouwdier turned out to be, and a travelling exposition built around it (Figure 6.1). What that yields is not a solution but a room. How to stand on these grounds is a question of its own; the chapter that follows turns to it.

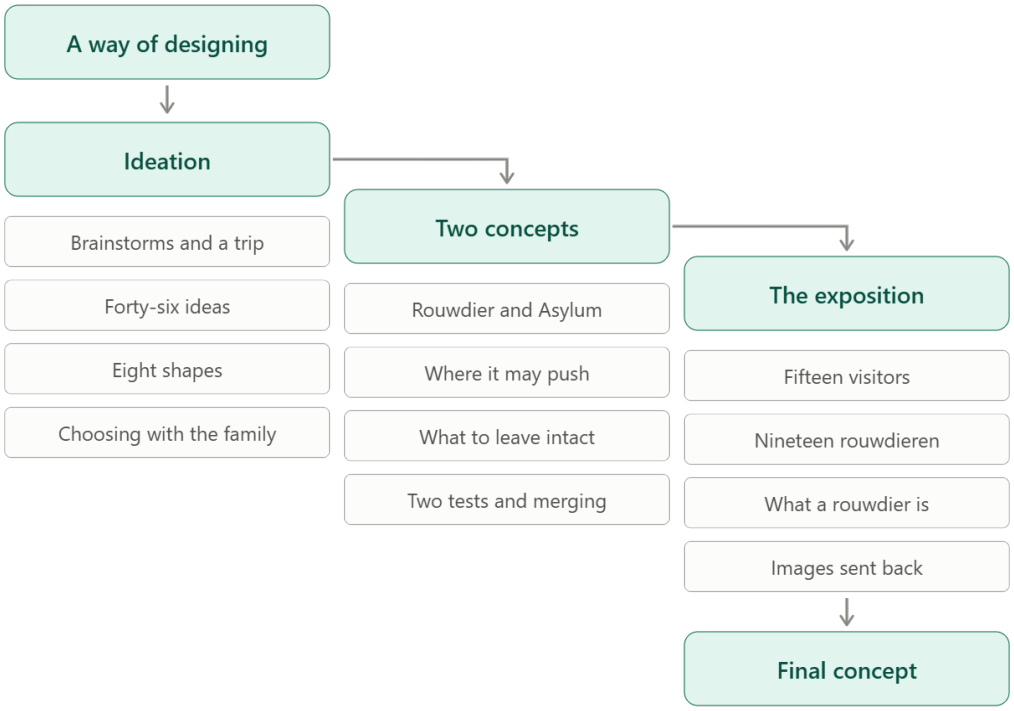


Figure 6.1. The route through the design phase, from a way of designing to the final concept.

A way of designing

A way of looking set out a stance for the discovery phase. This chapter develops one for the design phase: more a posture than a method, accompanied by a practical shift in what the designing is for.

The design phase asks what it would mean to design in the mode of instauration discussed earlier. The term carries a responsibility: to welcome a request without inventing what answers it (Despret, 2021). A designer cannot perform the instauration. A design can only make space for it, wherever it stands: already underway, still to come, or never arriving.

Much of what supported the bereaved during this research was already there: small chosen acts, the daughter buying new clothes, the notebook found at lunch. A design should not try to mourn on their behalf, or assume that anyone wants it to.

The shift is not in what a designer makes, but in what the making is for. De la Cadena and Escobar describe a movement from a project of things to a project of relations (De la Cadena & Escobar, 2023, p. 42): away from representation and towards what holds together in a particular place. In mourning, a design could sustain relations rather than produce things. Its value lies in what it holds together, not in what it is.

This shifts the question that guides the work. Rather than asking “What is the design?”, the work asks “What does it make possible?” The design becomes inviting rather than instructive, a milieu for the and, and, and of Despret (2021), and Haraway’s (2015) refusal of clean stories belongs here too: it does not bring clarity where clarity does not belong.

Besides, it must be admitted that to design like this is to design without fully knowing what one is making. The concepts that follow are built in that spirit: not as answers, but as instruments through which the eventual design can surface. What arrives may not match what was first imagined. That, too, can be part of the design. And this account of it remains, like the stories it drew on, a version: coexisting with other readings rather than replacing them, as Despret’s (2021) art of versions also allows.

6. Ideation - a family trip and choosing among ideas

A way of designing set out a posture without saying what it asks of a designer in practice. This chapter works it out with the designer's own family, for whom a loss was recent and present. Figure 6.2 sets out the steps taken.

Two brainstorms, one by the designer and one with a mother and daughter who had experienced a similar loss, explored what could be designed for a five-day family trip to the German countryside. From these came a booklet. Alongside all of this, ideas had been collected in a sketchbook since the start of the project and the trip added to this.

The first part is closer to a test than to generation: something small was made for a trip, to see what the research does once it becomes a design rather than an argument. The second generates, and then tests again through the choosing.

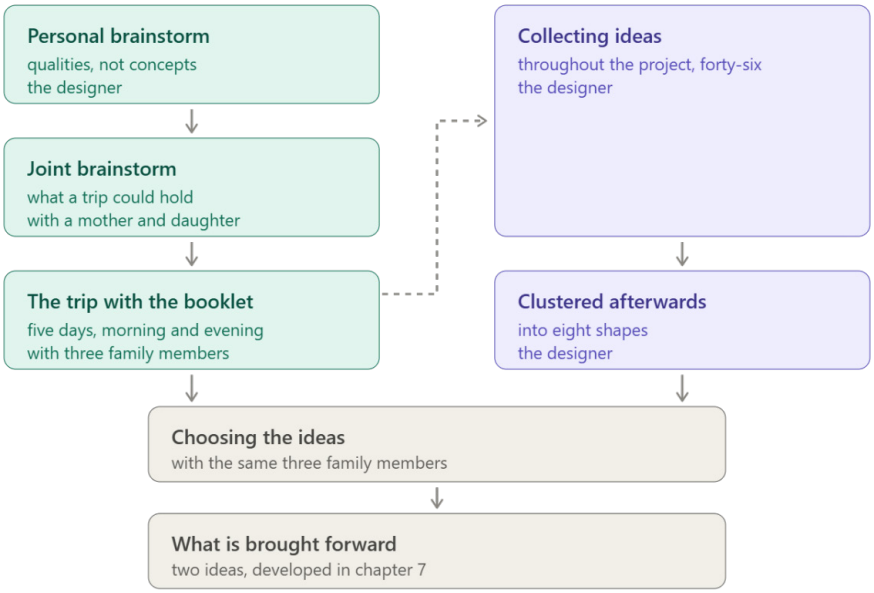


Figure 6.2. The two tracks of this chapter. The brainstorms and the trip follow one another, while the ideas were collected throughout the project, the trip included, and clustered only afterwards; both meet in the session with the family.

6.1 Preparing the family trip

Grandma had died about six months before the trip, so it already carried her presence, and it took the family to a place surrounded by nature, which she loved. She is called grandma throughout this report, which is what the family calls her. Three family members took part in what follows, here and in the co-design session after it. Where the other participants in this research carry a pseudonym, these three are named by their relation to grandma, as the son in law, the daughter and the husband, since it is that relation the material is about. What this closeness gives and what it costs is taken up in the Discussion.

Goal

The trip was not an evaluation of a concept. What it set out to explore was whether a small, deliberately designed occasion could make room for something around the loss without shaping what that would be, and what the research does once it becomes a design rather than an argument.

The role of the designer

As discussed in A way of designing, the designer should not be too influential on the outcome. The holiday itself therefore took priority, and anything designed for it should not be too intrusive. The design aimed to create space, and perhaps a fertile ground, for things to unfold naturally. That space had to be carefully constructed to feel natural. Given the recent loss, it also had to feel personal and loving, not like a research instrument or a way of gathering data.

This carries over to how a researcher behaves during the trip. It would not be suitable to go into a research mode, or even to observe too much. Participating is closer to what is needed. In experiencing, and reflecting afterwards, the most influential things might surface that remain closest to what is actually there.

Personal brainstorm

A personal brainstorm was done to map what would be possible (Appendix G.1). Rather than producing concepts, it produced qualities an intervention could have, set out as pairs in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1. Qualities an intervention could have, as pairs.

Direction	Pole A	Pole B
Individual vs. collective	Personal, private experience, intimate	Shared, together, inspirational
Passive vs. active	Receiving, witnessing	Doing, making
Subtle vs. intensive	Light touch, barely there	Immersive, demanding attention
Structured vs. emergent	Nudges, exercises, frameworks	Leaving room for what comes back
Making vs. witnessing	Producing something together	Simply being in the experience
In the moment vs. afterwards	During the experience	Reflecting after
Directed inward vs. outward	Toward the self, own thoughts	Toward each other, the environment

The pairs were not used to generate anything, and were not put in front of anyone while ideas were being made. They were kept as something to think with, to critically evaluate what effect an idea might have and whether that effect is desirable in this setting. Not all of them turned out to be usable, which became clear later.

Joint brainstorm

To get past the researcher's own perspective, a joint brainstorm was done with a mother and daughter who experienced a similar loss as the family so they would come close to the setting of the holiday (Appendix G.2). They were sensitized beforehand and asked to think as if they would go on a trip themselves, and what they would enjoy and be comfortable with. With a small co-creation session like this it is mostly important that people feel the space to express any idea that comes to mind, which was stressed throughout, in the spirit of Sanders and Stappers' convivial toolbox (2013). The session was done while painting, with the researcher writing down on sticky notes what came up. Afterwards, the ideas were clustered and named (Figure 6.3).



Figure 6.3. Image of the ideas being clustered.

Once the ideas were there and clustered, the pairs in Table 6.1 were brought in and discussed with the participants. Only at this point did they see them, and from that discussion two were picked as axes to map the clusters on. Subtle vs. intensive was picked first, as this is most decisive for the nature of the experience for the participants. Structured vs. emergent initially seemed most important, as it lies closest to the core of the project. But the project set out not to be too determinative and to let things evolve more naturally, so very structured activities would risk steering toward a predetermined result. On reflection, structured vs. emergent describes primarily the designer's role rather than the family's experience. Flipping the perspective toward the participants themselves made passive vs. active more relevant: it captures whether the family would be receiving something or actively doing something, which seemed closer to what matters here. The pairs in Table 6.1, in other words, do not all sit on the same side. Some describe what the designer does, and some describe what the family lives through, which was seen as more important.

What stood out

With the ideas mapped on these axes, the participants marked the ones that seemed most valuable to them separately, and then discussed them collectively (Appendix G.2). Two directions came out of this and the discussion afterwards.

The first is that during a trip there are always collective activities, and around the topic these can easily be intertwined in ways that become invasive. Some things would likely surface on their own. The design for the trip could then be very simple things that, perhaps with grandma, would have surfaced anyway, adding a nuanced layer to an activity that would already take place.

The second is what would not surface. There are intimate moments people experience but do not really express, and these are not reached by adding a layer to something that is already happening. Designing something that would allow this to happen, without steering it, and let it be captured in some form, could be very valuable. Both participants also stressed that the output should not be limited to writing, and that the possibility to express in different ways would matter.

The two directions are not equally demanding. The first asks for almost nothing, since the activity is already there. The second asks for a small design that could hold space for intimate moments without shaping them. It is from this second direction that the booklet emerged, while the other subtle elements were carried along in the background of the trip. What the booklet is and how it took shape is explained in the next section.

6.2 The booklet

The second direction asked for a small design that could hold space for intimate moments without shaping them. Leaving the booklet fully open would likely be too big a step for people to express themselves. An empty page fits the stance in A way of designing, but it also asks people to decide what is worth writing down. The first idea was a question to reflect on during the day, but that risks turning the day into a search for an answer rather than something that simply happens.

Instead, the morning offers a statement rather than a question. It asks nothing and sets a tone for noticing. The statements work as sensitizers in the sense Sanders and Stappers (2013) use the term, preparing people to notice before anything larger is asked. Only in the evening does the booklet ask a question. This makes the booklet more directive than the other element of the trip, though beyond these prompts it stays private. It asks nothing back, pages can remain empty, and what the family experiences together remains their own.

The statements and questions do different things. The statements describe what she was, in the past tense, grounded in what is remembered. The questions ask what she would. This is the as if that Despret (2021) describes, relating to the deceased not only through memory but as someone who can still be addressed. The booklet never explains this. It simply asks questions that make sense only if she is still somehow present. What moves across the five days is how far the evening question reaches, building to day four and then turning back to the speaker on the last day. The morning statements stay where they are, so the two registers sit alongside each other within each day rather than replacing one another across the week.

The questions are shown below in Table 6.2, translated from the original Dutch, which can be found alongside the answers in Appendix H.1. The last column briefly describes what each step does. The booklet is shown in Figure 6.4.



Figure 6.4. Rendered image of the booklet as it was carried on the trip.

Table 6.2. The morning statements and evening questions, translated from Dutch, with an explanation of what each day does.

Day	Morning — statement	Evening — question	What the step does
1 *arriving*	Sometimes the people we have lost surface in the smallest things in a smell, a song, the way someone sits. You don't even have to look.	Was there a moment today when she came near?	Opens noticing in the present. The lowest threshold of the week: external, optional, nothing asked but attention.
2 *small joys*	Grandma could take much pleasure in small things like birds, butterflies or just simply being together.	What would grandma have enjoyed most today?	Still present and sensory, but leans toward her: the day is read through her enjoyment. The as if begins, gently.
3 *her voice*	The things grandma was and did can rise up at any moment.	What is something grandma would say about a day like today?	Turns from the present to the remembered. The first full as if: speaking in her voice rather than about her.
4 *from her side*	Grandma let the day come as it came and always enjoyed it.	If grandma were here today, where would she most have wanted to be?	The as if at full strength: imagining from her side, her preference. The deepest projection of the week.
5 *departing*	Everything passes, but that does not mean it goes away.	What is one thing from this trip you would tell her?	The subject shifts back to the speaker, now addressing her directly. A closing that is also an opening: the bond kept active.

What else was there

The first direction asked for almost nothing, since the activity was already there. Binoculars went along for the walks, because she liked watching birds; Boggle, because she liked the game; a tea she used to drink was in the kitchen. All three came out of the cluster the participants marked as activities she liked, and are the kind of thing that could have been there anyway, with her. Sticky notes, markers and a jar came along too, for what does not go into words at all, since the participants from the earlier session had stressed that writing should not be the only way to express something.

What the booklet made possible

Three people carried the booklet for five days, which produced fifteen written answers. What follows reads those answers and the conversations that took place around them. The answers and the researcher's trip notes, written during and immediately after the trip, are in Appendix H.1 and H.2. In keeping with A way of designing, this asks what the prompts made possible, rather than what they prove.

She was more than one

The same five prompts produced three consistent but clearly distinct voices. The son in law answered in compressed, associative fragments, often through a named likeness rather than a direct statement. The husband wrote longer, scenic sentences, named her directly, and stayed close to specific shared acts, drafting his answers first. The daughter worked across multiple channels: the booklet, a WhatsApp photo, a collage card, a found object. The booklet did not determine how people answered. It opened a space, and each person filled it from their own relation to the loss.

Beneath the different voices was something more. In the talk around the cards, on the terrace, over food, on the walks, it became clear that each person was calling up a different grandma. The son in law jokes about her narrigheid, especially towards grandpa, a kind of fretfulness, how she could grow nervous in the car over small things and suddenly want to turn back when not following the track on a walk. The husband names the mild and soft things and barely mentions how critical she could be with him, and when it does surface it comes gently, with a laugh, not the way she actually did it. The daughter speaks the small and loving, but will also push back when the husband softens her too much: “Yes Dad, if you did that, you should have heard her.” These are not three angles on one figure. They are three versions living beside each other, none asking the others to yield: what Despret (2021) calls the art of versions. The plurality was not visible in the writing. It emerged only in the talk around the cards.

And each one did something

And the versions were not only remembered. They did things. The husband’s day three answer is spoken fully in grandma’s voice, including a directive to a grandson about drinking a lot, something he did not say from his own position. The daughter did not write down what her mother was like when things grew difficult. She brought a pinecone, that can be seen on the right in Figure 6.5, with the note that “pinecones close themselves, as my mother did.” Drawn from a habit that was already hers, since her mother collected small things from nature. It enacts a movement of hers rather than labelling a quality, a small instauration in Despret’s (2021) sense. In both cases something was routed through grandma that had no other easy route between the living. The bond was shared, a figure in common through whom otherwise unsayable things could pass. Her absence seems part of why this worked, not the obstacle it worked around: she could carry what no one in the room could, precisely because she was not there to be embarrassed, defended or contradicted.



Figure 6.5. The pinecone the daughter brought back from the trip: pinecones close themselves, as her mother did when things get tough.

The bond also ran the other way. The husband seems to do less of some of the things grandma used to be sharp about. That could be age, or that some of it was teasing and there is no one left to tease, but it could also be that, with her gone, he holds himself to her line more than before. Read with Despret (2021), the last possibility is a live one: the dead are not only remembered, but still shaping how the living behave. Grandma is then a force, not a memory. In a way, her dying made him do what in life she could not make him do. On a walk he made alone, the husband wrote grandma's name in the ground and sat with it for a while. Nobody asked for it. He mentioned it privately after the walk.

The as if as a passage, not a destination

The questions were built to move from present noticing toward the as if, and the most direct grief did surface on day five rather than day one. But the peak was not the designed as if of day four. It was day five's direct address. The husband lets go of the frame and writes the only line that names his own missing. The daughter answers her mother rather than addressing her: "you're right mum, don't worry." The days in her voice seem to have cleared the ground, and direct speech became possible after the borrowed speech had done its work. The as if, then, is not what the design produces. It is one of the passages through which someone reaches something else.

Not every prompt was taken up. The son in law skipped the questions that asked him to project from her side. He engaged when a prompt invited association, not when it asked him to inhabit her viewpoint. The skip can be read as an answer rather than a gap.

What this carries forward

Two findings carry forward into the idea generation. First, grief was already different from day to day and from person to person, regardless of what was asked. The plurality did not need to be designed in; it needed room. This becomes a guiding direction in the design work, which explores what form such a plural bond might take. Second, the booklet suggests that a light, deliberately designed occasion can let a bond do work that had no other easy route. The design did not create the bond or the grief. It created an occasion in which the bond could act. The concepts that will follow stay with that role.

6.3 Shapes an idea could take

From the beginning of the project a sketchbook was used to collect ideas that came up during the research or while talking to people, and during the trip more were added, often sparked by something said or done there: forty-six in total. At the end they were all brought together on a window, as can be seen in Figure 6.6, to converge into larger clusters. The clustering was done alone, as in the discovery phase, and the same caution holds: this is just one way of ordering them.

What is looked for is different, though. The earlier clusters traced what already happens around grief: how it gets flattened, but also how people make meaning, stay present and keep relations going. The directions turned that into grounds a design might stand on. These ideas ask something else again: what might be opened up. They were not grouped by medium, function or problem solved, but by the move underneath them and the relation to grief they might invite.

As set out in A way of designing, the aim is a space or condition rather than an object, so these are better seen as shapes an idea could take: they try to let people feel, rather than be told, what grief is allowed to be. Three levels then run through this and the next chapter: the forty-six ideas, the eight shapes they were grouped into, and the two concepts that later grew out of one of them. The directions sit alongside these rather than above them: 2 and 4 are what the shapes were held against, not what the shapes grew into.

What each shape builds on, and the ideas within each cluster, are gathered in Appendix I.3, photographed as they stood on the window and per cluster in Figure 6.6 below.



Figure 6.6. The forty-six ideas brought together on a window, grouped by the move underneath them.

The eight shapes follow below. They are not separate categories: several overlap, and some ideas could have sat in more than one. What holds each together is the move underneath it, not the form the ideas take.

Different versions hand in hand

This shape is about the many different versions and ways of looking at grief, and at a person. These do not have to cancel each other out or get in each other's way, but can sit next to each other or even inspire one another. The ideas here place versions beside one another without reconciling them: what they share is that they do not decide which one is most complete or true, but try to make their coexistence felt as something beautiful rather than as a problem.

The in between

This is closely related, but looks at it from the side of relations rather than versions. A person is not one version but a multitude of relations they stood in with different people. When someone dies the physical connection might stop, but those relations do not have to. The ideas here work by surfacing what sits between people rather than what sits in one of them, stepping slightly away from a person as a single entity, and showing something richer than what might seem to be in one place.

Turn it around

What happens if death is placed alongside other taboos, or if the small things people have woven into their lives and enjoy are mirrored back? The research showed people could feel like their own ways of dealing with grief are vague or abnormal; this shape turns that around, since plenty of what we see as normal would look just as strange from another angle.

A new skin

Where *turn it around* questions the line between normal and strange, this one crosses it, taking death into everyday and popular culture. What if grief were carried in the things people already wear and use, on the surfaces of everyday and online life rather than in a place set apart for it?

Everything changes

Everything in life changes constantly, though change is often ignored. A death disturbs everything at once, while many smaller changes and things that stop existing go unnoticed. The ideas here place death among those wider processes of change, and test whether looking at it from that side opens something beyond an ending, without settling what that change should come to mean.

Letting things be

This is the stance underneath the previous shape. When things change, people want to do something about it, as if change does not happen by itself, and we are flooded by things that try to fix or reach something. The ideas here do not withdraw from grief, but resist deciding in advance how it should develop or what it should lead to. Whatever they set down stays there without steering what comes of it.

Vlechten met verhalen

This shape gathers ideas that intertwine things that seem different. A story is often seen as the version of what happened, but it is built from many things, and a web of those differences could be brought to life. Where the first shape leaves versions beside each other, the ideas here actively bring fragments together, so that whole new stories or relations can emerge. Intertwining them does not make an experience fake: what is felt differs between people.

Traveling without a compass

Not-knowing is often seen as something negative: people look for answers, or want to know whether something is right or wrong, real or unreal. But when those expectations are dropped, what might meeting the unknown actually do? How much uncertainty can people bear, and could dwelling in not-knowing even become something beautiful? It sits close to the previous shape, since weaving things together also asks for a willingness not to know in advance what they will become.

6.4 Choosing with the family

The session involved the three family members who had completed the booklet during the trip: the daughter, the husband and the son in law. They approached the ideas already primed by their loss and five days of writing about it. After discussing the ideas and clusters, they selected ideas in three rounds, each inviting a slightly different perspective (Sanders & Stappers, 2013). First, they silently marked three ideas that immediately resonated with them using pink stickers. Only afterwards did they discuss their choices, so the choosing would not be steered or oriented towards justifying them. Next, they heard a short story about a world in which grief was no longer bound by existing norms and used blue stickers to mark ideas that seemed unusual yet meaningful. Stories, whether true or imagined, can trigger ideas about the future (Sanders & Stappers, 2013, p. 48), and the rounds progressively narrowed the scope towards a focus (p. 157). Finally, each participant placed one yellow sticker on the idea or cluster that spoke to them most. The full procedure, story and sticker distribution are provided in Appendix I.1 to I.3.

What was chosen

All three yellow stickers landed on cluster labels rather than individual ideas: Everything changes, Turn it around and Letting things be. Choosing a cluster was newly opened as an option at the last and most committing round, and the labels and their wording had been written beforehand. The booklet may also have played a part: for five days it had asked them to take up a position rather than point at something, and where a thing did come up it came up as something carrying a relation rather than as a thing in itself. That reading is not equally strong for all three, since the son in law had skipped a prompt that asked him to speak from her side. Even within these conditions, the level they chose at stands out. Each selected a way of holding grief rather than a concrete thing to use, and these are the three least object-like shapes of the eight.

Each participant gravitated to a different shape, and their reasons landed on threads the project already carries. They were reading the designer's labels and primed by his story, so the echo is not surprising, but what they said is worth recording. The son in law chose Letting things be: plenty of things already try to help, he said, but in the end you have to figure it out yourself. That comes closest of the three to grief as a condition to sit in rather than something to fix, though the phrasing is the designer's. The daughter chose Everything changes, explaining her choices through whether they felt right rather than whether they were right. The husband chose Turn it around: he will always miss his wife, but that does not have to stand in the way of still doing everything they loved. How each of them chose is described in Appendix I.4.

6.5 Discussion and what is brought forward

Discussion

What this chapter reads is an interpretation rather than a set of empirical claims: a booklet with fifteen written answers, and one session with the same three people. Both are too small to look for patterns, and neither was meant to find them. Other readings of the same material are possible.

The material came from people who already shared a history and a loss. The versions living beside each other, the pinecone, the name written in the ground: these depended on the participants knowing each other and knowing grandma. Whether a larger or less familiar group would have produced answers like these cannot be said from here. The small number is a condition of these specific answers rather than a limit on them. What the trip shows is not that bonds work this way, but that, given the occasion, the bond in this case could.

The same closeness holds for the session, where their loss, five days with the booklet, the designer's cluster labels and his story all shaped how they met the ideas.

What is brought forward

Two things come out of the trip. Grief was already plural, from day to day and between people, and what that needed was room rather than design. And a light, deliberately designed occasion could let a bond do work that had no other easy route.

In the blue round, two ideas seemed strange yet held something: the rouwdier, and what was then called the Asylum of Stories. Both work mainly from Turn it around, the shape the husband chose. The next chapter develops them into first concepts and follows what they raise. The other ideas that fed the design, and those that were set aside, are picked up there as well.

7. From two concepts to an exposition

Two of the ideas the three family members marked as strange but promising were developed into first concepts: the rouwdier and the Asylum of Acts. Together they leave two questions behind. Where may a design like this push against how grief is normally seen, and where does pushing become harm? And what should it leave intact rather than smooth away?

The first question is put to Marjolein, a funeral photographer who also makes teddy bears from the clothes of people who have died, and who works with the bereaved in the days around a death. The second is followed through three things that kept surfacing around these bonds during the research.

With those answers the rouwdier goes through two small tests and changes shape along the way, with the Asylum folding into it. Figure 7.1 maps that route. What the two become together is the exposition, which the next chapter walks.

What a rouwdier is does not stay the same through this chapter. It began as a creature and became something wider, and it was left open on purpose, so that whoever met it had room to fill it in. The definition it settles on is set out in Chapter 9, where it becomes leading for the final concept.

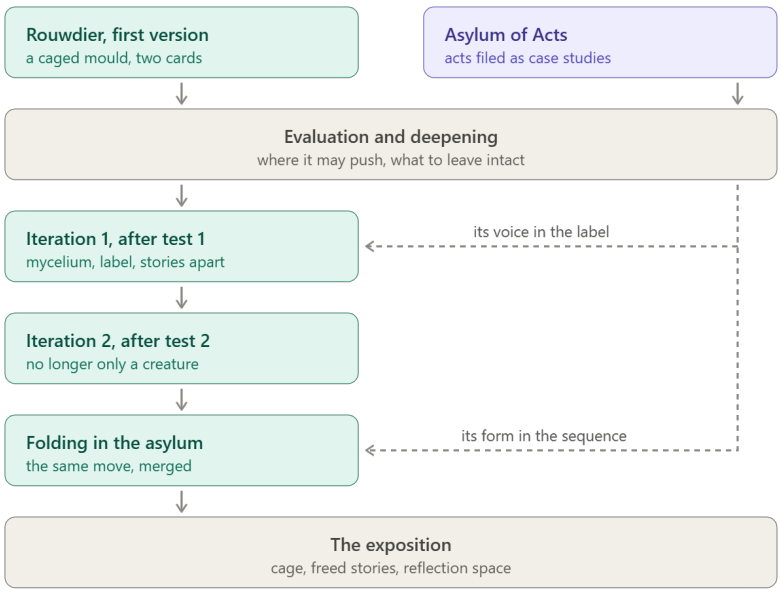


Figure 7.1. The route the two concepts took: the rouwdier changing shape after each test, the Asylum of Acts folding into it in two steps, and the exposition they became together.

7.1 Two first concepts: the rouwdier and the Asylum of Acts

Two of the ideas marked in the blue round were developed into first concepts, each with its own storyboard. That round asked for what seemed unusual but held something, and both concepts work mainly from turn it around, each turning a different question. Other shapes run through them as well, but it is that move they share, and it is what pairs them here.

They also stand on the two directions carried forward from Chapter 5. The rouwdier works from direction 2, loosening the line between what counts as a normal way of relating to the dead and what is dismissed as strange. The Asylum works from direction 4, making visible how much of what we recognise as proper mourning is shaped by the language and systems around it. Both approach the design goal from behind: rather than opening conditions in which a bond can be lived without explanation, they show what happens when it is explained, classified and filed.

Rouwdier

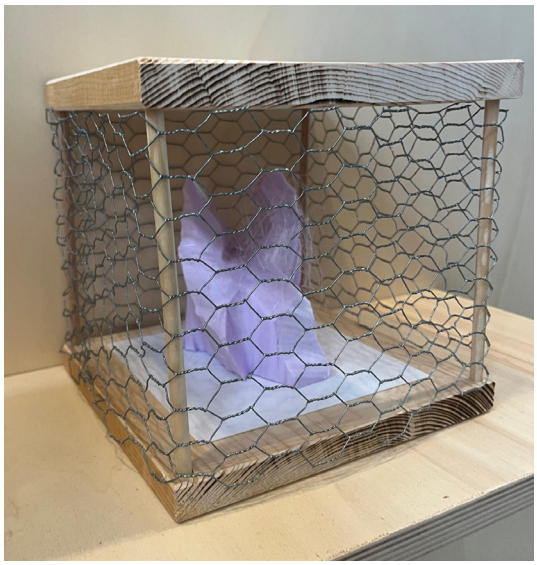


Figure 7.2. The first version of the rouwdier: a mould in a cage.

The first version of the Rouwdier contains two parts. On one side is a mould in a cage (Figure 7.2). It is not pretty and you would rather not touch it. It is deliberately not a nice creature. A small description card accompanies it. The mould asks to be kept alive every day but gives nothing back except the caring itself. On the other side is an identical card describing an ongoing bond with someone who has died, based on a true story from Tygo. Both cards are included in Appendix J.

The mould is tangible and alive. Even something this unpleasant is easier to accept as real than talking daily to a deceased loved one. That contrast is meant to feel uncomfortable, because when you consider what each actually does, the comparison reverses. The mould gives back only the care you put into it, while the bond comforts, steadies, and continues. And the only thing it needs is that it can be, in line with *letting things be*.

That mismatch is why they are placed together. The shift is the point: away from Is it real? and towards What does it do?, the move Despret (2021) makes and A way of looking set out. Asking whether the bond is real can itself be harmful, and it is not a question we ask of many other bonds. The design does not answer it, but suggests it may be the wrong question, in line with *turn it around*.

The storyboard in Figure 7.3 follows a visitor through the interaction with the design. This version introduces something it does not yet explore. Tygo's story already said the bond can seem strange, and that strangeness may not only come from how others judge it but also from what the act asks of the person doing it. If that is so, then not all of the discomfort is a norm to push against, and some of it may be part of the bond itself.

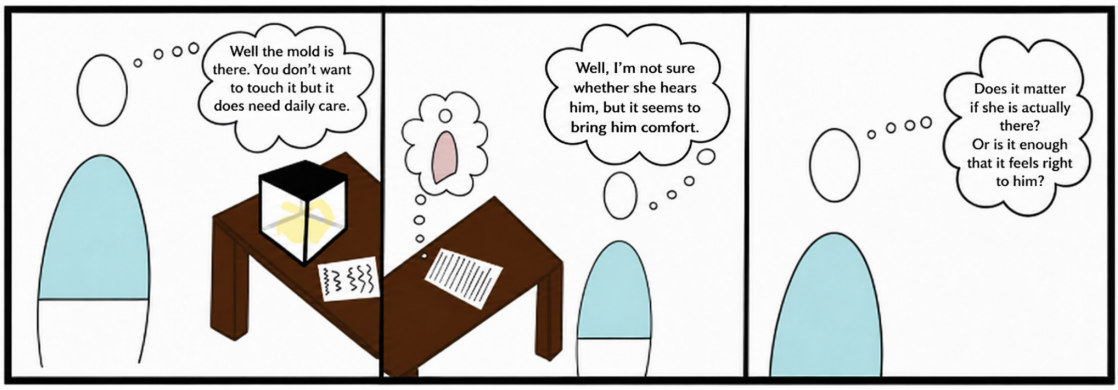


Figure 7.3. A visitor meets the caged creature and its card first, then the identical card describing the bond, at which point the comparison reverses.

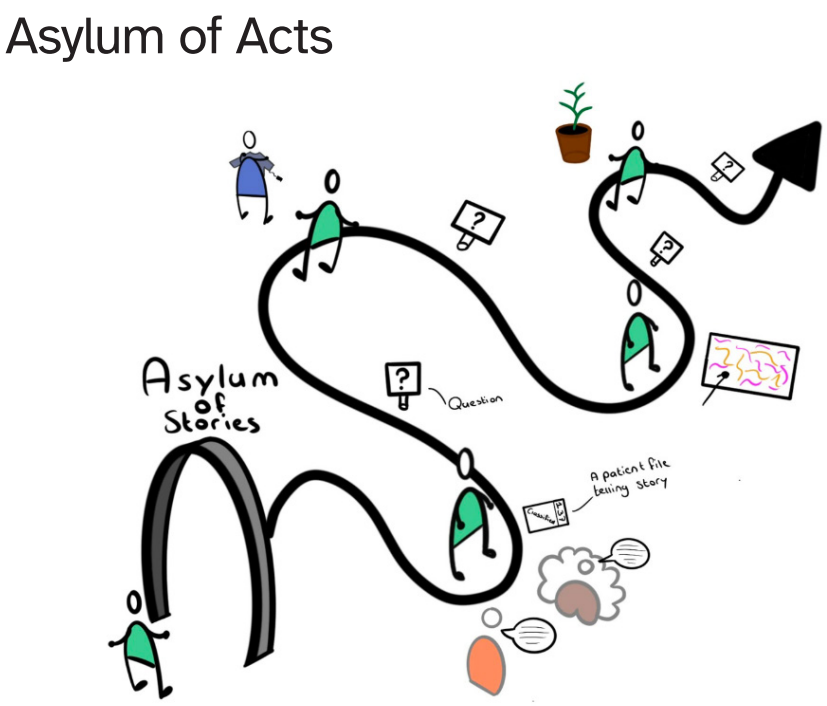


Figure 7.4. Sketch of the Asylum of Acts: a route past real acts of love towards the dead, each presented as a case file within an institution.

The second concept is a space, sketched in Figure 7.4. It was initially called the Asylum of Stories, but the stories themselves are not what is judged. The acts within them are, so the name changed. An asylum is both a sanctuary and an institution where people are confined, and the double meaning is the point: a place that claims to protect these acts is also where they are kept out of sight. Real acts of love towards the dead, gathered during the research, are presented within such an institution. Each act is documented as a case study, complete with a patient file, clinical label, and classification number.

The storyboard in Figure 7.5 follows a visitor through the installation. Apart from their presentation, the cases are shown without comment. The statements placed between them do the work. Written in a flat, clinical, institutional tone, they point not at the cases but at the norms beside them, in line with *turn it around*. The recognition that follows is the visitor's own.

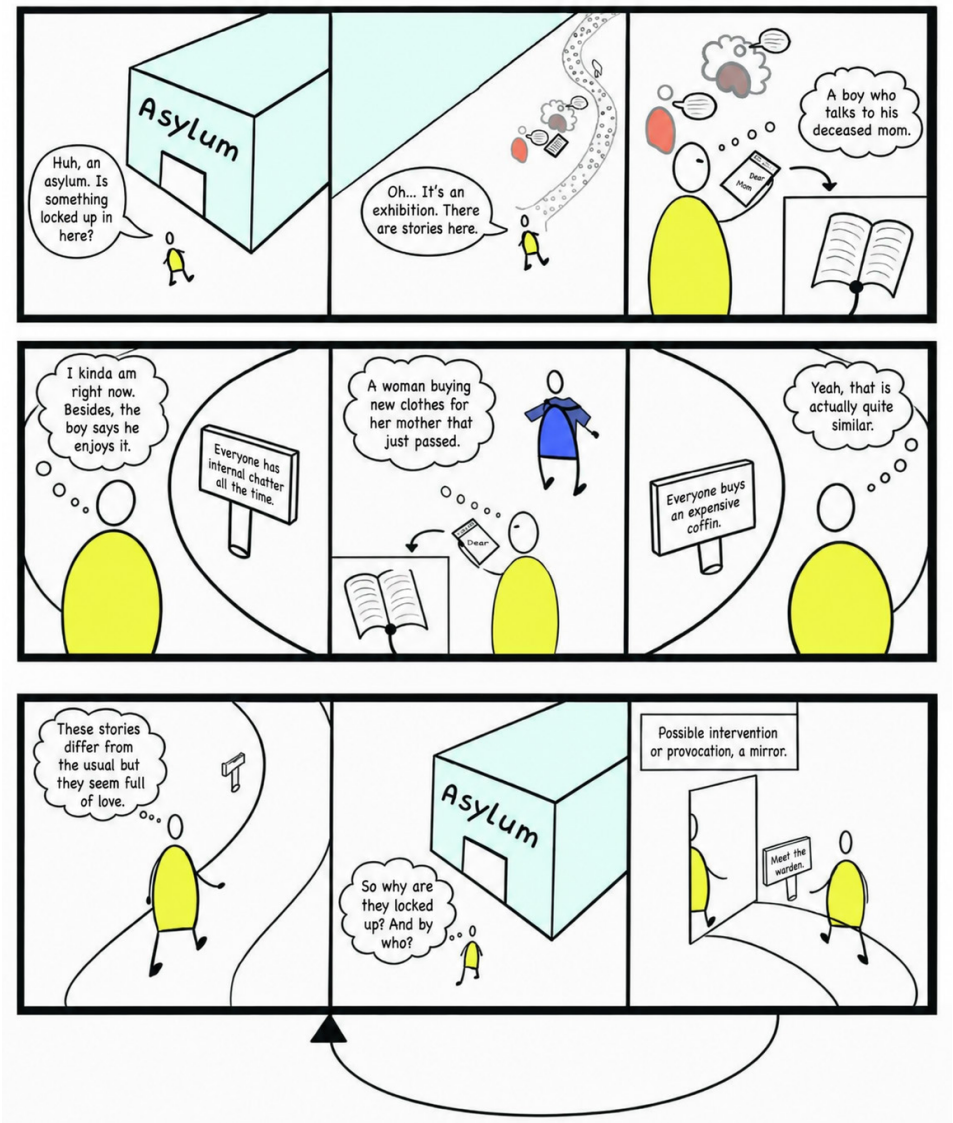


Figure 7.5. A visitor moves through the Asylum of Acts, from the entrance past three cases to the optional mirror.

The mirror at the end is deliberately optional, and came from a different idea, one marked in the pink round rather than the blue. In the asylum the critique is aimed at the system of classification, the labels placed on these acts, and the expensive coffin that nobody questions. But a mirror points back at the visitor, and for some this might be too sensitive. The intention is for the mirror to reflect the norm they carry, not their personal grief. Whether that distinction holds for someone who carries a loss cannot be determined from a storyboard.

What was not built

What the pink stickers measured was appeal rather than usefulness, though the two do not have to oppose each other. Two shapes pulled without being built: Traveling without a compass and Vlechten met verhalen return in the next section as textures the design has to leave intact rather than resolve.

Four ideas from within the clustering were explored further and are gathered in Appendix K. Two left a trace: An object with labels arrives as a reflection space later on, and De verhalen in gen z taal relates its move to that of the Asylum. Eating a memory was explored but not taken further, since transforming an actual memory into something edible turned out to be too abstract. The fourth, Compost, is worth naming here. The only idea marked twice in the pink round, it reformulates death as regenerative, a condition that feeds instead of only ends, close to the more than human thinking in the literature review. It is a beautiful meaning, and that is also why it is not built: it hands people a reading of death rather than opening room for one to form.

What the concepts leave open

The two concepts leave two questions behind, one each. The Asylum, and the mirror in particular, asks where a design like this may push: where can the criticism land, and where does pushing stop being useful and start to become harmful? The rouwdier asks the opposite question. If some of the discomfort around these bonds is not a norm but part of the reaching itself, what should the design leave intact rather than smooth away? The next section takes the first question to a practitioner and follows the second through what kept surfacing during the research.

7.2 Where the design may push, and what it should leave intact

The first question, where a design may push, was put to a practitioner who meets it in her own work every day. The second, what the design should leave intact, could not be answered that way, since it is about what the bonds themselves are like; it is followed here through three things that kept surfacing around them during the research.

Marjolein: evaluating with a practitioner

Marjolein, reached through personal networks, is a funeral photographer who also makes teddy bears out of the clothes of people who have died. Two practices that seem unrelated, until you see they do the same thing from opposite sides. Both began with a loss of her own: she took a course in funeral photography after her father died, when she realised how little of that day she could still recall, and the bears started after her mother died, when clothes that would have been thrown out became something to keep.

She was asked because she stands in both positions this chapter needs. She works with people in the days around a death, so she knows from practice what can and cannot be asked of them. And her own work already does what this project is trying to do: it makes something possible without settling what it means. She does not call them the bereaved (nabestaanden) but the people that continue (voortbestaanden), and what she gives them is a version of the day they could not hold for themselves, narrowed by survival on the day and by memory afterwards. Nothing in it says what the day meant. How her practice works, and how it relates to Despret, is set out in Appendix L.1.

Where a design may push

Asked where a project like this could provoke, Marjolein draws a line worth keeping. Toward the trade, and the norm it enforces, she is sharp. Too much has simply become standard, held onto out of fear of what others think, and she is critical of undertakers who do not ask whether people want their farewell photographed at all: that choice is made for the voortbestaanden, while afterwards they are almost always glad it was recorded. There she thinks provocation is fair.

Toward the grieving she is careful: “You can trigger them a little, with possibilities. But no, not provoking, of course.” She frames it as an indirect approach: not arguing against how things are done, but showing that other possibilities exist alongside it.

That line is what the design carries forward. It can push against the norms that standardise grief, and stay gentle toward those who carry it. The friction that remains should sit in the challenge to convention, not in the encounter itself.

Deepening: three things not to tidy away

The second question is what the design should leave intact. Three things kept surfacing around these bonds during the research, and each is held here to what it does rather than to what it is. The theory behind them is set out in Appendix L.2 to L.4.

Awkwardness

The first is cultural. Josephine explains her acts before she tells anyone about them, because ongoing bonds get heard as woolly or too spiritual (Appendix C.6). Marjolein meets the same thing: a man once stood in front of her camera until she told him she was not there for herself but for the woman who wanted the photographs. Beforehand people often think it is unfitting; afterwards they think it is beautiful. This is a set of norms you can feel but never quite follow (Kotsko, 2010), and a design has every reason to push against it.

Underneath sits a second discomfort that is not a fault. The first rouwdier raised it without exploring it, which is why Tygo and Hidde were approached again, informally as before. Tygo says that sensitive things stay sensitive, also when nobody else is there to hear them. Hidde was asked about prayer, where the addressing itself is culturally accepted, and something of the same friction is there when what is said is a confession. If the discomfort turns up where nothing is judged as strange, it is not only the norm producing it. It is the sensitivity of opening to someone, and it does not go away when the someone has died. An address that carried no friction at all might mean the gap had not registered. That is not the bond going wrong, and the reaching does not become less real because no answer comes.

Uncertainty

The second texture is not knowing. The question people actually carry is not whether the bond is real but whether someone is somewhere, and the two are tangled together. Belle put it in her own words: you have to allow yourself the things that feel good, even when others find them a little strange, and allowing is something you have to learn, sometimes just doing the thing without knowing whether it does anything at all. Here uncertainty is not a gap on the way to an answer but a place you can stay.

Complexity

The third texture is the one the other two grow out of. Marjolein said it in a line: it is the same and it is completely different. A person was never a single thing, but many relations and many versions, more than could ever be fully grasped. What that leaves is the harder third thing: to go on living with the dead as dead, and to let the loss change who you are. That is close to what verweven (intertwining) has meant all along.

What is taken along

The two questions meet in the first of the three textures. Awkwardness falls on both sides of Marjolein's line, depending on where it comes from. Where it is cultural, where a bond is dismissed as woolly or a farewell goes unphotographed because nobody asked, it is exactly what the design may push against. Where it is the friction of opening to someone who cannot answer, it is not a norm at all, and pushing there would be pushing at the bond itself. The same discomfort, and the design has to tell them apart.

Uncertainty and complexity sit on the second side only. Not knowing is not a gap on the way to an answer but a place someone can stay, and a person was never a single thing to begin with. Both were already in the room before the theory arrived: the not-knowing is what Traveling without a compass reached for, and the interweaving is what Vlechten met verhalen gathered. The awkwardness was not. It surfaced in the first rouwdier, where Tygo's story sat beside the caged creature, and it is what sent the conversation back to him and to Hidde.

So the design can be sharp toward the norms that standardise grief and gentle toward the people carrying it, and it should leave the three textures as they are. To allow them is not a failure to resolve them. It is what lets the relation stay as it actually is.

7.3 Two tests, and the two concepts merging

The rouwdier was explored first. This section follows it through two small, informal tests, the first with three people reached through personal networks, the second with two colleagues, and through what those tests changed. The Asylum of Acts folds into it in two steps along the way, and only at the end do the two together form the exposition. The more elaborate test reports are in Appendix M.1 and M.2. What follows is only what the tests changed along the way, gathered in Table 7.1.

From mould to mycelium

The concept rested on a contrast. A mould is tangible and alive; even something this unpleasant is easier to grant existence than a daily conversation with someone who has died. That contrast reverses as soon as the question shifts from whether something exists to what it does: in Tygo's account the bond comforts and steadies him, while a mould returns nothing beyond the care put into it. The wager was that meeting the strange thing first would make the second harder to dismiss.

The first test challenged that assumption. The mould did not make the bond easier to accept; participants found it stranger than the bond itself: talking to the dead was recognisable, keeping a mould was not (Appendix M.1). Recognisable is not the same as comfortable, the bond remains something people keep quiet about, yet the comparison still ran the wrong way. The mould was read as dirty rather than pointless, and disgust settles what something does before the question is asked. Its strangeness drew attention to itself instead of to the social rules surrounding the bond.

The mould became a mycelium, a name one participant had already used. The change carries the central point of the concept. A mycelium is genuinely complex, a living web of relations with trees, soil, and other species, yet it is easily reduced to something simpler, an organism, a single thing (Tsing, 2012). That reduction is what this project has been tracing all along: grief compressed into a process with phases and an endpoint, a bond that is plural and constantly changing turned into something to be concluded.

The cage and its label

The cage is where that reduction becomes physical. It holds something interconnected as if it were a single thing moving along one timeline, and in doing so it wrongs both sides. It cuts the mycelium off from the relations that sustain it, and it stands in for the social rules that cut the bond loose from the life it was woven into, in the name of processing.

The friction was already in the first card, and participants felt it: the care felt needy, guilt came with forgetting, and the fixed times rang false, because grief does not come on schedule (Appendix M.1). The iteration did not smooth that away but made it the point. The card was rewritten and a clinical label was added, its voice borrowed from the Asylum of Acts patient files. The label does not describe the rouwdier; it is the cage speaking, presuming to know how the thing inside should be kept, how long it may live, and when normal life may resume. The satire sits there, aimed at whoever set those terms, while the person in the story stays sincere. They follow instructions they half feel are wrong, holding on to a step-by-step plan because it says when this will be over. Story and label rub against each other, and the person feels the cage from the inside before anyone else has said a word. That division, sharp toward the norm and careful toward the person, is the line Marjolein drew, brought into shape. The full text of both rewritten cards is in Appendix M.2; the cards and the label as they were shown are in Figure 7.6 below.



Figure 7.6. The setup of the second test: the caged mycelium with its label, and the rewritten card on the wall beside it.

This version was tried with colleagues, laid out as a small route rather than on one table: the caged mycelium with its label, the rewritten card on the wall beside it, and the boy's story around a corner, out of sight from where the mycelium stood as can be seen in Figure 7.7 below. Separating those two stories was a response to the first test, where the mycelium's story and the boy's story could be read as describing one and the same rouwdier. The label and the card had the opposite problem: they belong together, and the order decides what the label is. Here it was read second, after the card, and that is what the test showed. Read first, the label is the institution speaking and the card that follows is someone living under it. Read second, it becomes a caption to the story just read, and the instructions land as a description of that person's grief rather than of what is being done to it.



Figure 7.7. The second story stood around a corner, out of sight from where the mycelium was, so that the two stories would read as separate.

Even after a short explanation that a rouwdier could be anything, including a way of relating, the connection between the two stories stayed vague: one participant concluded that the boy would still have to form his rouwdier. That is where the rouwdier stopped being a creature: what the second story shows is a way of relating, and if that counts as a rouwdier, the concept is wider than the form it had been given. What was missing was not the placing but a sign that the rouwdier in the second story is in fact broken free, and it had to be concrete without giving the bond itself a shape. The broken-open cages beside the freed stories in the exposition come from there: they mark the freeing, and leave the freed form open. Table 7.1 sets out what each test changed and where that change lands in the exposition.

Table 7.1. What each test changed, and where those changes land in the exposition.

Test	Finding	Change	Where it lands
1	The mould read as stranger than the bond, and as dirty rather than pointless	Mould became a mycelium (Tsing, 2012)	The creature, and the cage as wronging both sides
1	Fixed times of care rang false, grief does not come on schedule	A light that asks for care at unexpected moments	The rewritten card
1	The care already felt needy and guilt-laden	Friction made the subject: clinical label added, satire in label and cage, person stays sincere	The rewritten card and label
1	The mycelium's story and the boy's story read as one rouwdier	Stories set clearly apart, more exhibition-like	The arrangement of test 2
1	The confinement read as too soft, bars were suggested rather than mesh	Mesh replaced by bars, after the second test and for appearance rather than argument	The cage in the exposition
2	The label was read after the card beside it, so it read as a description of the person's grief	Label placed to be read first	Exposition design
2	The connection between the two stories stayed vague, even after explanation	The rouwdier opened up as a way of relating, not only a creature	The freed stories
2	The freeing itself was invisible	A visible, non-textual mark of the change	The broken-open cages in the exposition

Folding in the asylum

The asylum had already lent its voice. What it lent after the second test was its form: real acts of care, gathered as case files and presented one after another, the acts themselves left uninterpreted while the filing around them does the criticising. Once the rouwdier opened up from a creature into a way of relating, those filed acts were recognisable as what a rouwdier is when it is let out. Nothing had to be added for the two to fit. The asylum supplied the voice of the cage and the shape of a sequence; the rouwdier supplied what the filed acts become once released, a living thing that asks to be tended. Figure 7.8 shows the route the two make together.

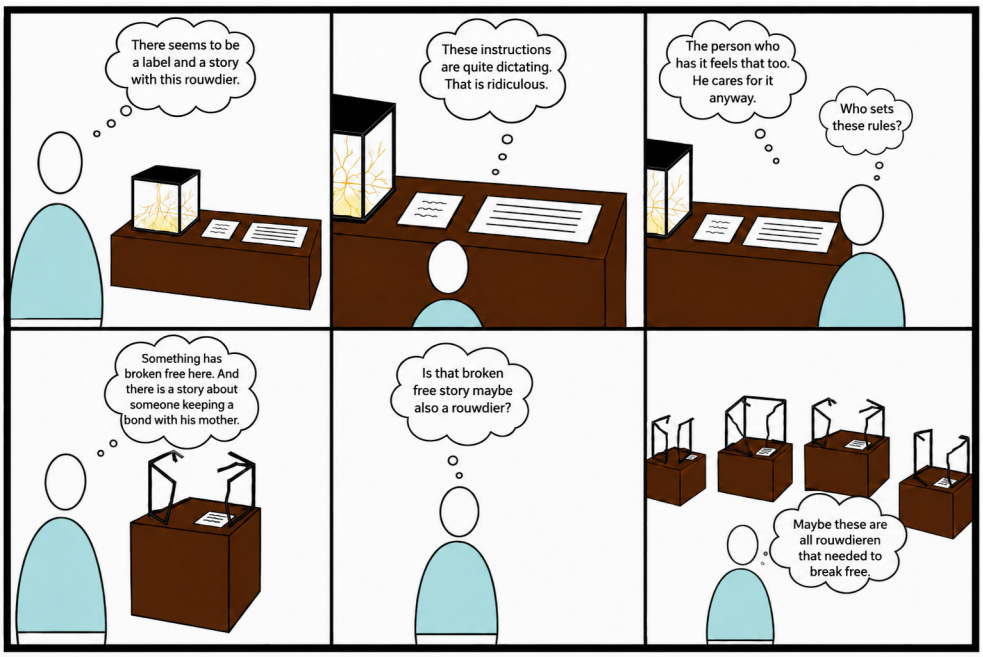


Figure 7.8. Folding in the asylum: the filed acts become recognisable as what a rouwdier is once it is let out, which is where the broken-open cages come from.

7.4 Conclusion: what the two concepts became

The two questions the concepts left behind are answered before the exposition takes shape. Where a design may push was answered by Marjolein: sharp toward the norms that standardise grief, gentle toward the people carrying it. What it should leave intact was answered by the three textures, the awkwardness, the not-knowing and the complexity, none of which is a problem to be resolved.

Together this forms the exposition concept: a visitor enters past a caged rouwdier with its clinical label, meets freed stories each beside a broken-open cage, and ends at a reflection space that hands the question over, as illustrated in the storyboard in Figure 7.8. The two directions meet here. The cage and its label make the conditions around grief visible as conditions (direction 4), and the freed stories loosen the line between what counts as a normal way of relating to the dead and what is dismissed as strange (direction 2). What neither concept could do alone, the two do together: the cage gives the norm a shape, and the stories that follow show what lives outside it.

8. The exposition - what visitors made of it

Chapter 7 ended with the shape of an exposition. This chapter walks through it and reads what fifteen visitors did with it. It closes with a follow-up a month later, in which AI-generated images made from what visitors had left behind were sent back to them.

The exposition is a generative instrument rather than a final design, and at the same time a first embodiment of the design that follows. It invites visitors to recognise or give shape to a rouwdier of their own, and through that making it aims to let the plurality of continuing bonds become experienceable: bonds already take countless forms, but most of them stay barely visible. The aim is not to help anyone grieve, nor to hand them something that does the grieving for them. People already carry their own ways of living with grief, and what those ask for is room to take shape rather than a meaning decided on their behalf. What visitors make feeds the concept that follows, which the exposition already resembles in outline, and which is built to keep feeding on what it gathers.

The previous chapter asked what a design should leave intact and answered with three textures. The exposition is where they are put to work rather than resolved: the awkwardness sits in stories that are told to almost no one, the not-knowing in what the design leaves open, and the complexity in three rouwdieren instead of one.

8.1 What the exposition asks, and how it was built

The principle underneath it

One principle runs through the design choices here, and it is worth stating once. Form sits on the side of the norm, openness on the side of the bond. The cage, the clinical label, and the satire have a definite shape, because criticising a norm means first giving it a shape. The freed stories sit in between. What they tell is true, given to this research by the people who carry these bonds, but the shape they take here is the designer's. Where the visitor's own bond begins, the design stops: the broken-open cages mark a freeing without defining what is freed, since what someone's grief looks like is not the designer's to define. In that sense the exposition is this project's most direct attempt at the question the Aim opened with: how design can create space for grief without reducing or prescribing what it should look like.

What this test asks

The exposition does not set out to prove that grief needs room rather than fixing; the research already argued that. It asks something narrower, two questions held as openings rather than hypotheses:

> What do visitors recognise or give shape to when they are invited to imagine a rouwdier of their own, and what does the shape of that invitation do?
>
> Where does the exposition's openness invite visitors' own projection, and where does it tip into confusion?

The second builds on Gaver, Beaver and Benford (2003), who treat ambiguity as a resource that obliges people to take part in making meaning, the design becoming a psychological mirror. The iteration tests already showed one side of this: the vagueness of the second test was confusion, and was solved. Whether the openness of the reflection space stays on the other side of that line is what this asks.

Setup

The exposition was built in three days and tested over three days in a closed room at the IDE faculty. Fifteen students walked it in sessions of fifteen to thirty minutes under different conditions. Details of the procedure and conditions are in Appendix N.1.

8.2 Walking the exposition

The room was arranged as a one-way route (Figure 8.1): the caged rouwdier, then three freed stories, and finally the reflection space, which opens with a coat rack of earlier visitors' rouwdieren.

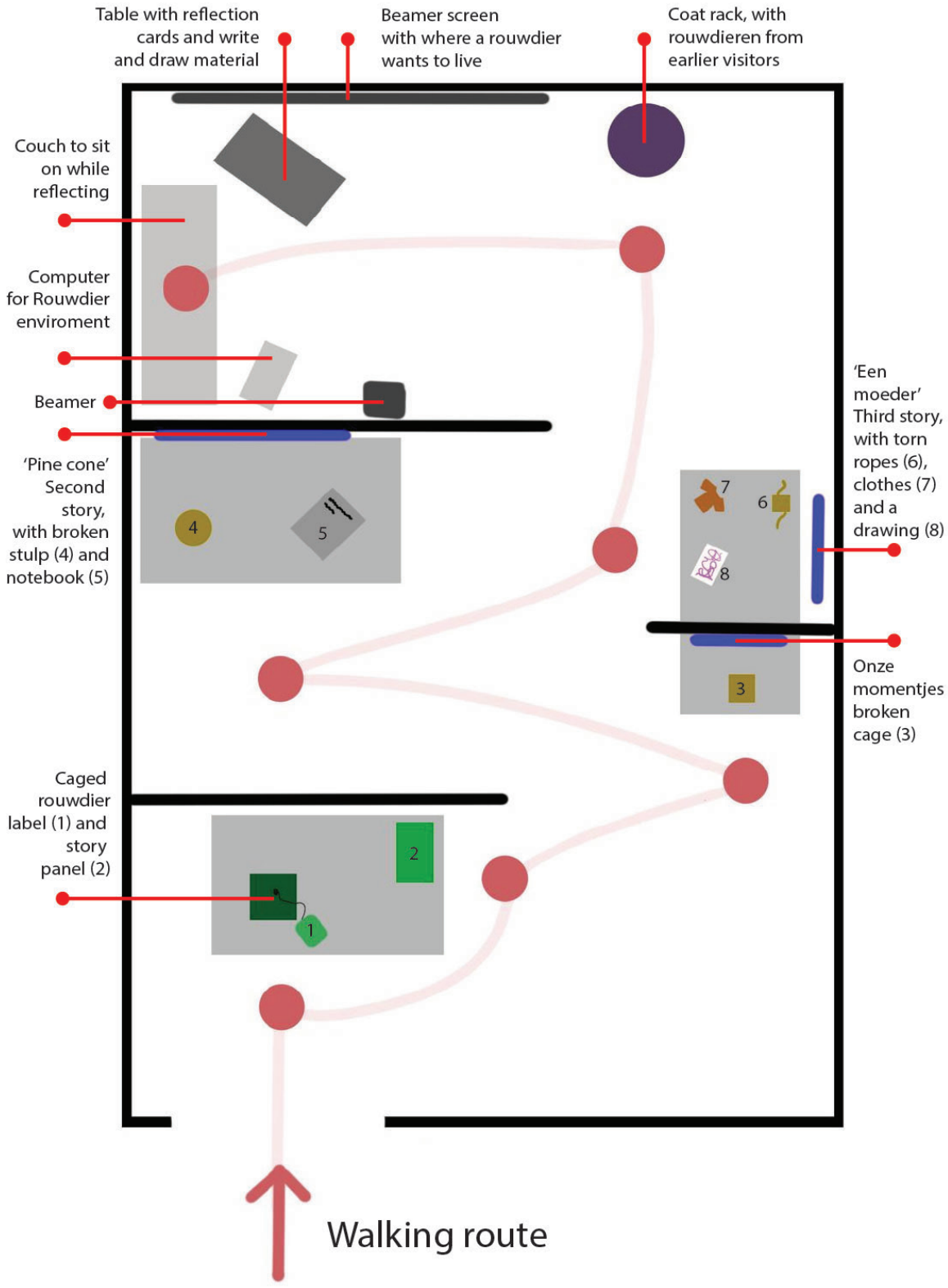


Figure 8.1. Floor plan of the exposition and its one-way route. The numbered items are the objects described in this section.

The caged rouwdier

The visitor enters past a caged mycelium. What changed since the iteration is how it is read. The clinical label, in the flat institutional voice borrowed from the Asylum of Acts, now carries the satire alone; its full text is in Appendix N.2. The story panel, shown in Figure 8.2, is turned ninety degrees, so it is read second, and stays sincere: someone who follows the label's instructions, half feels that it does not quite fit, and still finds grip in knowing when normal life may resume. Satire in the label, sincerity in the person, which is the division Marjolein drew. The card marked "read me!" opens to a single question, how should grief look, and who says so? It was added partway through the sessions, after two visitors read the label after the story or not at all. It is the first of several openings along the route.



Figure 8.2. The caged mycelium with its clinical label, the story panel turned ninety degrees, and the card marked "read me!".

Three freed stories

Then three rouwdieren that are no longer caged. They are not the caged creature in later stages but different rouwdieren, because every bond takes its own form, and because a person was never a single thing to be in relation with. That is the complexity, arriving here rather than at the cage: the cage holds a way of grieving, these stories hold someone. All three are versions composed by the designer from stories this research was given, loosely following Despret's (2021) movements, and each is deliberately told in a different medium, so that even the telling refuses a single form. They come from across the research: an interview with someone bereaved, an expert's practice, and the same participant returning through the trip in Chapter 6.

Onze momentjes

This carries the earlier told story of Tygo's bond displayed in Figure 8.3. The text stays honest about the strangeness: he tells almost no one, and whether she hears him he does not know. This is a continuation, the bond simply going on. Beside the story stands a wired cage, broken open.

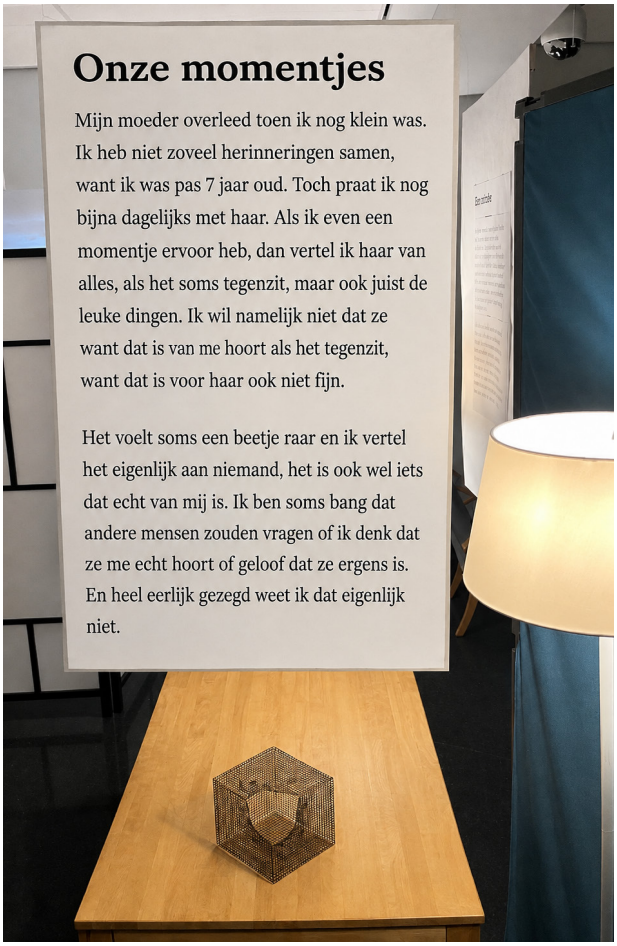


Figure 8.3. Onze momentjes: Tygo's story, with the wired cage broken open beside it.

The pinecone

This story is told in sound. A spoken text plays when a visitor stands before it: a daughter whose pain seemed not to exist for her mother, until a notebook surfaced after the death and showed that her mother had seen it all along, but had found it too difficult to speak of. The voice closes on the pinecone: when it gets too rough outside, a pinecone can shut itself quickly, as her mother could. On the table stands a glass dome, burst open with its shards lying outside it, and the notebook; on a screen a pinecone breathes in a loop, opening slowly, the way opening sometimes goes, and snapping shut when things become too much (Figure 8.4). Both come from Belle: the notebook that surfaced after her mother's death, and the pinecone she brought back from the trip in Chapter 6 for what she could not put into words. The full spoken text is in Appendix N.2. This story embodies metamorphosis: a history retroactively reshaped by what the notebook surfaced, and a form that closes and opens without being finished.

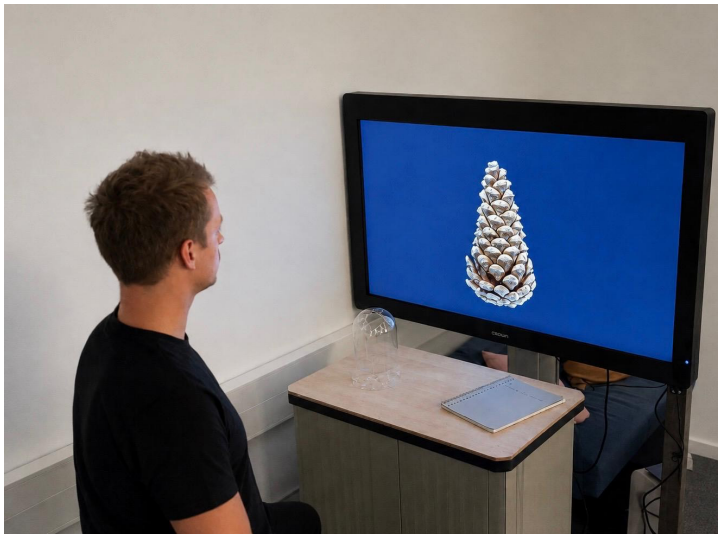


Figure 8.4. The pinecone is told in sound; on a screen a pinecone breathes in a loop, opening slowly and snapping shut.

Een moeder

Here Liza's story is told of the daughter and her mother who never was. She bought new clothes and her own daughter made a drawing for her. On the table lie clothes, a drawing (not the originals), and two severed cords (Figure 8.5). The cords are the cage here: they constrain the rouwdier as the cages bind the others, but there are two of them, because the grief here is layered. There is grief for the bond that never was, and alongside the somewhat grief that she had died, sorrow for someone with whom there was never a loving bond. This is instauration: a bond neither given nor invented from nothing, but established through effort, after death, in the moment it perhaps came closer to being than it ever did in life.



Figure 8.5. Een moeder: the newly bought clothes, the drawing, and the two severed cords that are the cage here, beside the story panel.

The reflection space

It starts with the rack. After the third story the visitor steps into the last part of the room and meets a coat rack hung with the filled-in labels of earlier visitors, in their own handwriting and drawings (Figure 8.6). The collection grows as visitors add rouwdieren. This is where the earlier concept of an object hung with many labels arrives (see Appendix K.1), with the word rouwdier as the thing being named: kept open by the many voices naming it, none of them the caption. By this point the route has shown a prescribed rouwdier and three freed ones; the rack shows a growing collection, before the question is turned toward the visitor.



Figure 8.6. The coat rack in the reflection space, which grows as visitors add their rouwdieren.

The cards and the habitats

The route ends further into the same space, at a table with blank labels and markers, near a bench, a laptop and a projection (Figure 8.7). The table came first in the layout, though visitors could reach the AI question before or after writing. Each label carried a prompt and a closing line handing over the last choice: does it live alongside the others, or stay with you? The prompt changed partway through the sessions, after a conversation with a coach about whether the first pushed hard enough toward making something. Ten visitors were asked whether something already lives along with them; the last five were asked what a rouwdier of theirs might look like.

The laptop on the table asks where a rouwdier would want to live. Typing an answer calls up an AI-generated image of that place within seconds, projected large on the wall beside the bench, which becomes the environment the visitor sits in. The station and how it worked are described in Appendix N.5. The earlier answers keep rotating, deliberately not blended into one landscape, because they are versions side by side rather than fragments of a whole. This is the softer successor of the mirror from the two-concepts chapter, and it works the other way around. The mirror turned the visitor's own norm back at them; this turns toward what they carry, and what protects it is that it asks rather than shows, and leaves them the last word on what to give and whether to hang it. Where the entrance label prescribed a type, a lifespan, and a schedule, here anything can evolve, or nothing. The AI carries an honest tension, taken up in the discussion: an open answer comes back as one particular image.

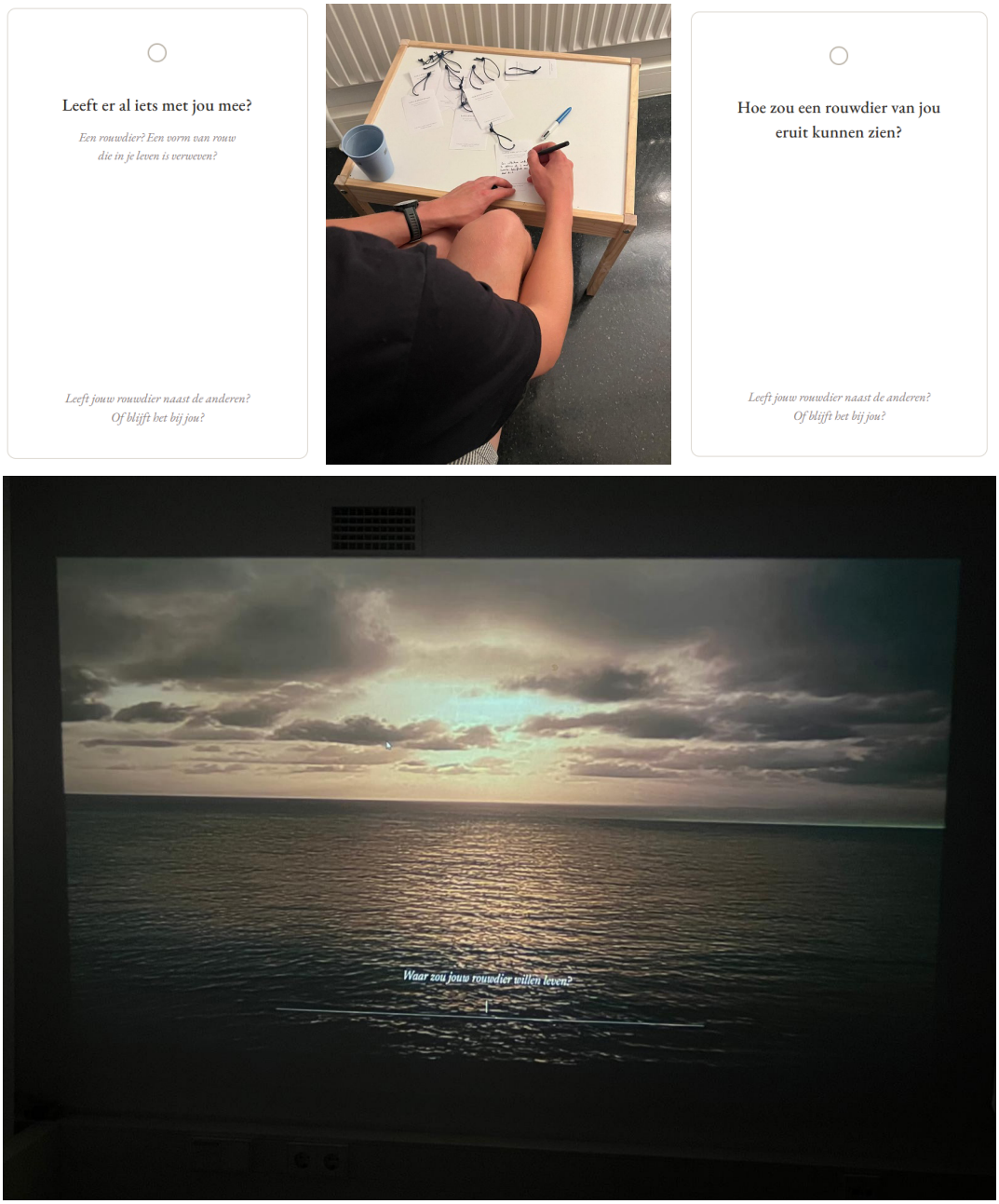
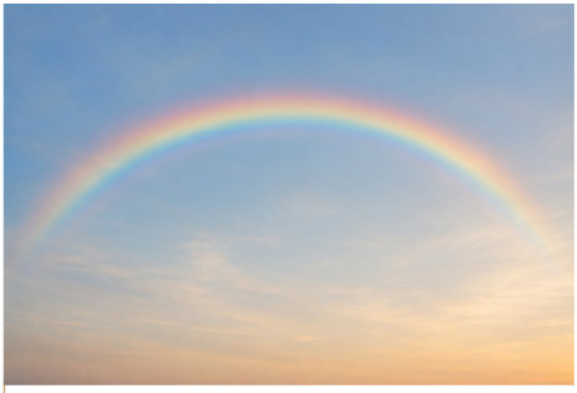


Figure 8.7. The reflection space: the two cards, the table where they were filled in, and the projection asking where a rouwdier would want to live.

8.3 What visitors gave shape to

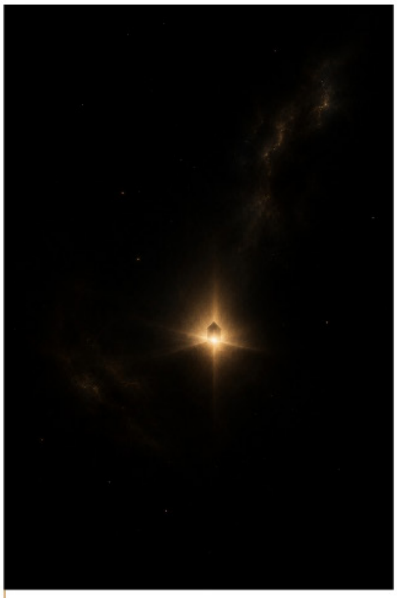
Fifteen participants gave shape to nineteen rouwdieren, four of them naming two. What counts as a rouwdier is read broadly here, since deciding in advance which readings fit would close what the exposition was built to leave open. Eighteen are displayed here in Figure 8.8.



SANNE

Rainbow

At the funeral a song about a rainbow was played. The rainbow has kept coming back ever since, and now it is one with the person.



SANNE

House on a star

In my head my niece lives in a little house on a star. That is where my *rouwdier* would want to live.



ANDREA

Speck

My *rouwdier* does not flood me any more. It has become small and far away, a speck in the sea beyond the dunes, but it is always there and still needs to be looked after sometimes.



HIDDE

Psalm 23

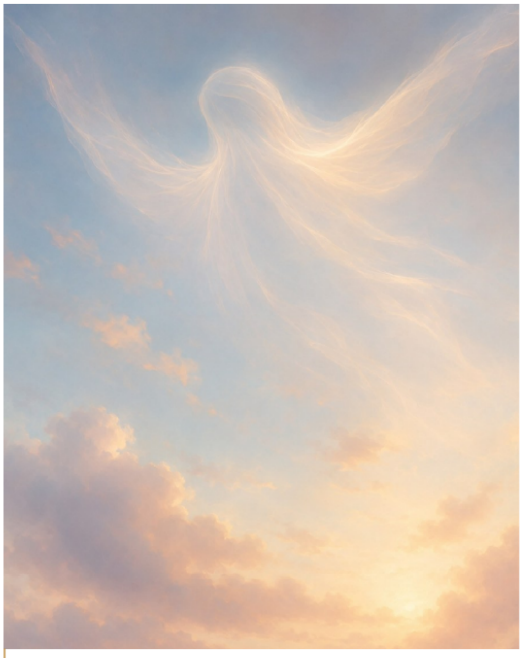
When I hear or read this psalm, I feel my grandmother. The love for her comes back in those words, and after it the peace that she is in a good place now.



HIDDE

Collective peace

When I am with my family and thinks about death, there is a peace that belongs to all of them together. It was okey this way, although it was sad, but those also belong with each other.



DESIREE

Guardian angel

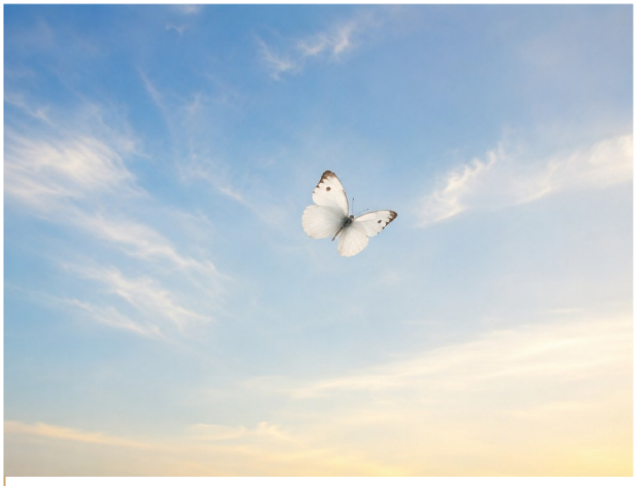
I was twelve when my grandmother died, and my father said that grandma was my guardian angel now. Sometimes it still crosses my mind: maybe she can see me. In the beginning the *rouwdier* was almost everything, and after that it slowly became less present.



MADELIEF

Little mouse

Little mouse is what my grandfather used to call me. This stayed with me: it squeaks up now and then, small but good.



LOTTE

White butterfly

There was a white butterfly, during my grandmother's funeral. Now it often appears around her things, free and beyond reach, and still close to the people she loves.



STIJN

Wounded bird

A wounded bird that is allowed to fly again after a while, but keeping the scar. The wound troubles him less and less, he has to land at an odd moment sometimes, but can stay up in the air longer every time.



STIJN

My own rouwdier

I am my own *rouwdier*, floating between acceptance and helplessness, because in the end I am the one who experiences the grief. Accompanied by many feeling such as: guilt, sorrow, comfort, love and melancholy.



KARS

Grandmother's bed

The bed in Vietnam I played on as a child with my cousins. It still stands at the centre of her old house, and the small children who never knew her play on it now.



TIJN

Wat een stunt

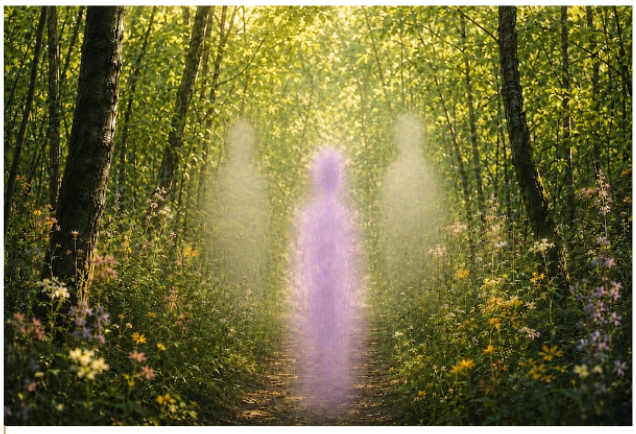
My *pake* always said it, what a stunt. Me and my mother still say it to each other, with it being reminded of him.



TIJN

The parakeet

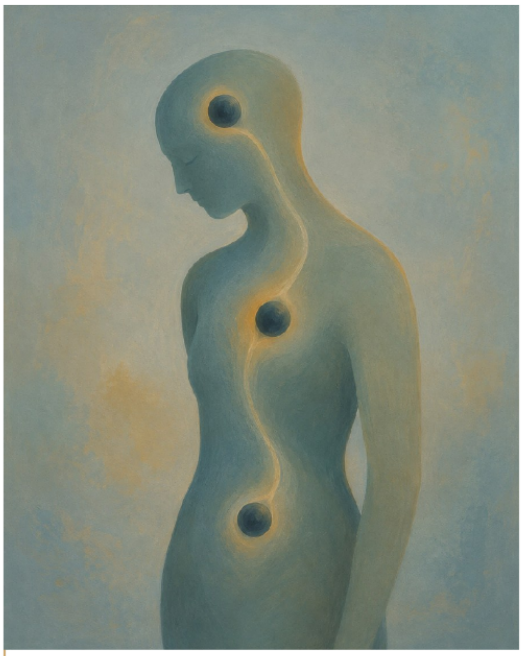
After my great grandfather's funeral a budgie landed on my grandfather's shoulder. The bird stayed, became their parakeet, and has remained a sign of him.



ROOS

Two sisters

When she is having a good time with someone's brother or sister, she thinks of the two sisters she could have had. They weren't allowed to live, and that absence will remain in her life.



BENTE

Marble

Grief feels like a marble rolling through my body. Sometimes it sits in your stomach, in your head, in your hands or you don't feel it at all. It could also be on your tongue, accompanied by a need to talk about it.



BENTE

Photo frame

My grandfather was very old and had dementia, and that is how I partly remember him, asking where he was. In the photo frame he still comes across as strong, and that is where he lives: in my memory, caught by a frame.



KASPER

Everywhere I am

Wherever I am, my *rouwdier* is as well. In his mother's people celebrated things too early for him. Maybe the *rouwdier* is allowed to be in mourning for a while too.



TOBI

Forest creature

Half in life and half outside it, floating. When it touches the ground with two feet I know I have to follow it, towards quiet, coolness and nature, and when it has had enough attention it sinks back into the background.

Figure 8.8. The eighteen forms visitors gave to a rouwdier, with the words in which they described them.

Read afterwards along two axes, what a rouwdier is and what it does, two things stand out, and they mirror each other. On the axis of what a rouwdier is, responses ranged widely, across the cards and the talk around them: grief itself given a body, someone living on in a thing or a place, a habit or saying kept alive, collective moments in which the rouwdier only comes alive together, and once the self as its own rouwdier. On the axis of what it does, patterns recur across all this difference: it calls you back at unexpected moments, comes in waves, shrinks without leaving, asks for some care, and gathers people. Two of those echo the entrance card, which asks for care at unexpected moments. The other three were not shown anywhere on the route.

Diversity on the is-axis with recognisable patterns on the does-axis is the outcome this chapter rests on, and the diversity ran past what the route modelled: neither of the last two on the is-axis has a counterpart in Tygo, the pinecone, or Een moeder.

The invitation to recognise or give shape mattered, though it also asked for it. Ten visitors were asked whether something already lives along with them, and most did not invent creatures but recognised something already there. What the last five did is the more telling case, since their card asked about appearance: four of them still named something already in their life, a bed, a drawing, a saying, a butterfly at a funeral, rather than inventing a creature to match the question. The metaphor's own shape showed in two opposite ways. Some read the rouwdier as grief itself given a body, so the creature form pulled toward personification even where the concept had opened it up to ways of relating. Bente pulled the other way, cautioning that the word rouwdier captures less than the word grief and perhaps does not have to be an animal at all. For many the metaphor worked as an entrance, and the entrance was not neutral: it had a shape.

What visitors were shown left traces, though what it caused cannot be claimed: participants borrowed the route's language of breaking free, and two connected directly to Een moeder, Roos with the two sisters she could have had, Kars with his grandmother's bed in Vietnam, still played on by children who never knew her, and the beauty of a relation being given meaning after the fact.

8.4 What the openness did

Read along the second question, the material splits three ways, and together they explain much of what the final concept keeps and what it drops. The open elements worked as the psychological mirror Gaver describes: the broken-open cages were read as escaped, burst out, released, run wild, or consciously opened. The readings differ in more than wording. What stands in someone's way is not the same for everyone, and neither is the way out: some read force into the breaking, some anger, some a cage that was simply opened. Each reading says something about the reader's own relation to what constrains them, which is what the cages were left open enough to allow. One participant questioned the violence of the breaking against grief that changes gradually, and found himself questioning his own idea of grief, which is the ambiguity doing its work. A second category was confusion, solvable: the dome was not always legible as a freeing, and the relation between the caged creature and the storied middle wobbled for some (the full set of legibility remarks is in Appendix N.4). The third sits between and matters most: satire that is not read as satire stops protecting. One participant was mildly irritated by the eight-to-ten-week lifespan without registering the exaggeration, while several others read it as satire straight away. Another missed it in the opposite direction and found a fixed endpoint almost reasonable, which is the harder case: the prescription is not resisted but agreed with. One read the label after the story rather than before, the ordering problem test 2 had already shown, and these cases came before the read-me fold was added. When the satire lands, the label hits the norm; when it is missed, it reads as an actual prescription and lands on the person, exactly the line Marjolein drew.

This last finding is why the caged rouwdier does not survive into the final concept, though the decision is a precaution rather than a conclusion. Two missed readings out of fifteen is a thin basis for dropping a central element, and the reason to drop it anyway is the asymmetry: a satire that is missed lands on a grieving person, while removing it costs the critique a form it can do without. What remains is a row of cages at the entrance, each opened in its own way, with a text beside them: the freeing kept, the prescription that could misfire let go.

The conditions these responses came from

The exposition set out to surface responses, not to validate against a scale, and the diversity of the rouwdieren is not noise around a finding; it is the finding. Two things bound what it can show. Fifteen students walked the route in my own faculty, most of them knowing me and a few of them some details on the project, and I was in the room throughout, which is the position the reflection space itself was meant to hold. What people said about a design in front of its designer is coloured by that. And several participants noted themselves that they had not experienced grief of that weight, which tilts these results toward milder and more distant losses. How the route lands with someone closer to a heavy loss travels into the final concept rather than being answerable here.

8.5 Returning the rouwdieren

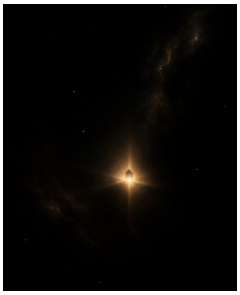
The AI reflection holds its tension rather than resolving it. The image is of a habitat, not of the rouwdier, but it still turns an open answer into one particular visual interpretation, and for some visitors the two collapsed: the habitat answer simply was their rouwdier statement, the bed in Vietnam, everywhere I am. What the exposition could not test is how much that interpretation constrains. The generated images were abstract, mostly landscapes, and of modest quality (Appendix N.5), which likely kept them closer to a suggestion than to a depiction, so what happened here says little about a version that renders better. Building on the mechanism would raise the stakes on both counts: a sharper image, and the rouwdier itself as its subject rather than the place it lives. The carousel of unblended habitats softened this at the collective level, every image visibly one version among others, but it does not remove it for the person watching their own answer appear. Whether the mechanism holds when the image is of the rouwdier itself is what this test asks, and the answer decides how large a role it can be given.

The final concept could not be built on that mechanism without running it once on real input. Each of the fifteen exposition participants had left a label and an answer to the habitat question, and the rouwdieren that return here are the ones collected in *What visitors gave shape to*, sent back to the people they were made for. Those images were sent over WhatsApp with five questions, roughly a month after their visit. Fourteen participants were contacted. One was left out: her rouwdier was her cat, who had died and of whom photographs already exist. Generating a version of something that can still be shown as it was is a different proposition from generating one for a rouwdier that has no image of its own. The full procedure, message and a summary of the responses per participant are in Appendix O.1 to O.3.

Eight of the fourteen participants contacted responded within the timeframe of this research displayed in Table 8.1. Two of them, Hidde and Lotte, also appear earlier in this report among the bereaved who were interviewed. What participants recognised largely followed one line: something of their own had to remain recognisable after the generation. Three responses mark its limits. Hidde had given a line of text, and recognised what came back only as the kind of religious imagery already circulating online, which says less about keeping input than about what happens when it is rendered. Sanne recognised her own story at once and had to swallow, but not the picture, which was dark where the one she has carried for years is light and coloured. Recognising the story and recognising the picture are not the same thing, and the mechanism can do the first while missing the second. Tijn points the same way from the other end: the saying rendered as text was the only part he felt anything for. If what carries is the story rather than the depiction, a rouwdier may not need an image to be shown at all.

Table 8.1. Responses of eight participants to the AI-generated image of their rouwdier. Four received two images. Stijn, Hidde and Sanne were sent both at once and each answered on one. Roos was sent a revision after her response; both of hers are included here.

Image	Participant	Given input	Returned by AI	What it did, and what was recognised
	Roos	Two sisters she never had; a dark, dense forest with flowers	A light forest with three figures on a path, the two at the sides standing in for the sisters. A second version was sent after her response, with those two faded and with lighter colours.	Ominous and calming at once. Recognised the forest, and knew the two shadowy figures stood for her sisters, but first found them frightening and preferred the lighter second version.
	Lotte	A white butterfly at her grandmother's funeral; the open sky	A white butterfly in an empty sky	The image made her smile. Recognised the butterfly immediately, and was grateful, it was more specific than the abstract way she pictures such things herself.
	Stijn	A wounded bird that flies again with a scar; himself, adrift between acceptance and helplessness	His sketched floating figure in a surrealistic space with his chosen colours	Went looking for symbolism, trying to attach his feeling to something tangible. A second image was sent alongside it, which he did not take up. Recognised the duality between remembering well and the loss and guilt beside it.
	Kasper	His own drawing; his rouwdier lives wherever he is	The drawing set in a room with a lit doorway, which was not in what he had given	Calm, reading as the end of a darker period. Recognised a light at the end of the tunnel, which was not in what he had given.
	Tijn	His grandfather's saying, wat een stunt, now shared with his mother	Two figures seen from behind, the saying set between them as text, the right-hand figure standing in for his mother	Felt something at the text and little at the rest. Recognised himself in the figure on the left, but not the one on the right.

	Hidde	Psalm 23; a collective peace felt with family	The psalm as clouds and sky, and two hands around a warm light	Not much. Recognised only religious imagery he had seen online, and the AI medium itself, which left him dissociated.
	Tobi	A half ethereal forest creature, half in life and half outside it	The creature, forelegs on the ground, hindquarters dissolving into mist	Beautiful and frightening at once. Close to how he had pictured it while describing it, and he called it a render of something he had explained.
	Sanne	A little house on a star, where her cousin lives in her and her family's minds	A small house on a star, lit against a dark sky	Had to swallow when it loaded. Recognised the story but not the picture, since hers is light and coloured and has been there for years.

All eight described the image as made for them rather than as theirs, though the question may have set a bar nothing made by another party could clear. What the mechanism does is closer to a composite sketch: not something that is yours, but something drawn from what you said, which you can then recognise or refuse, as Roos did when a version with the frightening figures faded landed better than the first. What a sketch artist would not do is add. The doorway in Kasper's image was not his, he had no way of seeing it arrive, and he took the light it gave off as the meaning of his own rouwdier. Sanne declined to have hers shown at a public exposition, not over the image but because the rouwdier is her whole family's, formed around a cousin who died young, which shows that a single consent is not always the right instrument.

The responses do not establish what the image left participants with over time. Where they did name something that mattered, they named the exposition or the shaping of a rouwdier rather than the rendering itself. Sanne said it most fully. She had her rouwdier before she walked the route, and what the exposition did was show how much it can help to have something like that to hold on to: recognition for someone who already carries one, and perhaps an inspiration for someone who does not. Hidde separates the two most sharply. He called the idea that everyone carries a rouwdier genuinely interesting, saying it gives grief hands and feet, and the AI rendering of it precisely the part he could not connect with. His objection is to the medium rather than to the concept, and no better output answers it. Stijn, unprompted, pushed the same way from the other side, suggesting sound instead of image, letting people choose, or having them paint while the AI supplies music. The question, then, is not only whether an image can be recognised, but whether receiving an AI image is the right form at all.

What the test settles is narrow: a returned image can be recognised, it cannot be handed over as someone's own, and it could add a direction of its own that nobody asked for. It cannot separate what the model added from what the designer steered, since the images were made in conversation with the model rather than from a shared template, and that limitation, with the others, is set out in Appendix O.4. Neither of the alternatives that surfaced was tested: a version in which someone chooses the medium, and one in which the image is built in conversation rather than received. One thing came close, unplanned: a revision sent after Roos' response landed better than the first, which is the only point in the test where saying what was wrong changed what came back. Both travel into the design rather than being answered here.

8.6 Conclusion: What the exposition passes on

What visitors recognised or gave shape to differed widely in what a rouwdier was, while a few things came back in what it did. That range went further than the three stories on the route.

The openness invited projection where it was meant to: the broken-open cages were read as escaped, burst out, released, or consciously opened, and each reading said something about the reader. It caused confusion where things were not clear enough, as with the glass dome. The hardest case was the satire. Two visitors missed it, and a satire that is missed lands on the person instead of on the norm.

The exposition was built as a test, but it already looks like the design it feeds. Stories can be swapped or added, labels pile up, the scene can be reset, and the whole thing can be rebuilt somewhere else.

Before that design can be taken up, what the word rouwdier stands for has to be settled.

9. What a Rouwdier turned out to be

Only now, with nineteen rouwdieren on the table and the responses to what came back from them, does it become possible to say what the word had been holding open. Caged, the rouwdier had to have a shape, since the norm it stood against needed one. Once it broke free, the shape stopped being the point.

> A rouwdier is a particular and changing way someone continues to live with a loss, with them, through them, or between people. It may appear as a habit, an object, a place, a shared moment, or as something that never settles into a form at all. It may ask for attention, distance, care, company or expression, and it may only surface at certain moments or among certain people.

The animal in the word is not a claim about form. What it carries is a relation: something that asks to be looked after and gives something back. What it asks for is not always love, and what it gives back is not always pleasant. Care is used here in the sense Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) keeps ambivalent, as labour and obligation as much as affect. A rouwdier that is angry, or that messes up the house like Sander's cat (Appendix N.3), asks first for room to be that, and anger is among the things people leave least room for, in themselves and in others. What it is can remain partly unclear to the one who lives with it, as feelings do more generally.

A rouwdier is therefore not a way of grieving well, and there are no better or worse ones. Sadness at a death and anger at an injustice are not failures of grieving, and one that is difficult to be around is not one that went wrong. Nothing here fixes how many a person has either: fifteen visitors gave shape to nineteen and decided the count themselves. Any rule that decided it for them would be the label speaking, a figure given from outside. Eight to ten weeks is such a figure, and so is one rouwdier per loss.

Set beside one another, rouwdieren make that plurality perceptible. The image, story or object through which one appears is never its final form, but one version, made visible at one moment, alongside others: made by other people, or carried by the same person about the same loss.

What follows is built around this rather than around the exposition. If a rouwdier is particular, changing, plural and not the designer's to settle, then a design cannot hand one over, cannot ask what it is, and cannot decide when there are enough of them. What it can do is stand somewhere and leave room.

10. Final concept - A place where rouwdieren live

Here the final design is presented: a travelling exposition. It does not put forward a way of grieving, but a room in which the ones people already found stand side by side. The project set out to reclaim a space for grief in public, and this is the form it took: not a shared ritual or a service, but an occasion to meet what other people found for themselves. What the design is and where it could stand are discussed first, and the route through it after that.

10.1 What the design is

The design is a travelling exposition. A visitor walks in past a row of opened cages with a text beside them, and steps into a veiled room where the rouwdieren of earlier visitors stand, each in the medium its maker chose. There is no route inside that room. Beyond it lies a space for giving shape to a rouwdier of their own, with material to work with by hand and a website on the visitor's own phone, in which AI is one option among several. At the end the visitor decides whether what they made stays in the room as well, and how far from them it may travel. What people leave behind may join what is already there, so the exposition leaves something in each place it stands and carries something on: the room holds only so much and is therefore ever-changing, while the website keeps growing. Figure 10.1 shows the whole standing together, as an impression rather than as a plan.



Figure 10.1. An impression of the design, made with AI. The two panels beside the cages are the entrance text in Dutch and in English; inside the room stand the rouwdieren of earlier visitors, and on the table the material for giving shape.

What the exposition puts forward is that these ways of grieving already exist, in numbers and in forms nobody handed to them. Visitors meet what other people found for themselves, which can be recognised or borrowed, and they are asked to leave something only if they want to. Nothing has to be invented on the spot: something that already lives along with someone counts as much as something made there.

Two things carry over from chapter 8: the caged rouwdier is let go, and the returned image becomes one way of giving shape among several. A third follows from the placements set out in Appendix P: where the exposition stands becomes part of the design.

The three textures the design set out not to tidy away are held here rather than resolved. What is rarely told to anyone stands where a stranger can meet it, but nothing asks that a rouwdier be shown, and the last thing the design asks is how far from its maker it may travel. Nothing here asks what a rouwdier is or whether it is really there. And the complexity sits in the room itself: a collection that is never resolved into a single form, in which one loss can stand in several versions and one rouwdier can belong to more than one person.

10.2 Where it stands

The exposition travels because one placement reaches one public. What this project set out to do is give grief, mourning and the dead a place in public space again, and where that space was lost is not a single location. An exposition that moves can mean something in more than one place, which makes the place part of the design rather than a container for it.

Four speculative placements

Figure 10.2 sets out four placements and what could travel on from each: a museum, a company, a funeral and a war memorial. These four were chosen from a wider field of possible placements, which is set out in Appendix P. Each brings its own relation to grief, and they differ in how much the design has to do. At a funeral this is at its clearest: the versions arrive of their own accord, which is Despret's (2021) art of versions happening on its own. Standing there, the exposition is somewhere those versions can be left behind.

Which visitors are there

What changes across them is the balance between two kinds of visitor. Sanne carries a rouwdier with her whole family, formed around a cousin who died young, and what the exposition did for her was show how much it can help to have something like that to hold on to. She named the two herself: recognition for someone who already carries one, and inspiration for someone who does not. A company, a funeral and a museum each bring a different mix of those two, and the design works without knowing which visitor is standing there. The design does not ask about the weight of the loss someone brings, and cannot know it.

The placements also differ in who is standing there together. Among strangers the plurality becomes visible, since what stands there comes from people the visitor will not meet. Among people who know each other, at a funeral or at a company after a death among them, it is the same dead carried differently.

A family setting is the far end of that scale: everyone shares the same dead and keeps sharing them afterwards, so the versions are of one person, as they were in the booklet with the three versions. It is not worked out here, since this project set out to give grief a place in public space, and a family setting is not a smaller version of that but a question of its own. Much of what happens here rests on meeting what strangers found, and some of it would have to be turned around, since anonymity protects a stranger while people who share the same dead might prefer to know whose rouwdier they are looking at, and make something together. The funeral part of Figure 10.2 comes closest to such a setting.



Museum

UNKNOWN PEOPLE · AMONG OTHER COLLECTIONS · BUILT FOR VISITORS

A place people already go to meet subjects that sit outside the frames they move in daily, which makes it the most open and experimental of these placements. It is also where the design is most likely to be read as a work made for visitors, rather than as something carrying the stories of visitors who came before them.

WHAT CAN COME ALONG?

Everything can come along. Nobody at the next stop knows anybody at this one.

Company

KNOWN FACES · PRODUCTIVITY · PRIVATE AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

A place where grief is routinely overruled. Leave after a death is measured in a handful of days, and after that everyone is expected to function again. Standing here, the design lets death take back some room in a space where it is often kept out, and gives colleagues something to recognise in each other. When the death is one they all knew, that recognition is of the same person carried in different ways. There could be friction here: grief costs time, and time is money in professional life.

WHAT CAN COME ALONG?

When the loss in the room is recent, work-shaped grief from strangers may sit badly, or it may give someone a form they had not thought of. What arrives is selected, and by someone who belongs to the place rather than by the design.

Funeral

STILL IN SHOCK · EVERYONE IS IN A ROLE · CONDOLENCE ETIQUETTE · FOR ONE SPECIFIC PERSON

The design stands in the room beside the chapel, where people gather afterwards. For the first half hour nobody comes near it. What happens in the space might already be the thing it asks for. Some versions of the dead are told in the programme, in speeches or through the music that is played. Afterwards the others surface: the colleague who knew a different man, a friend from before marriage, a neighbour with a story nobody in the family had heard. It is where people grieving the same person see how differently the others carry them, which the day itself does not always make room for. That lasts as long as the afternoon does. What is left behind here does not.

WHAT CAN COME ALONG?

Grief for one specific person, arriving beside grief for the possibly unknown many.

War memorial

OUTDOORS · COLLECTIVE GRIEF · FIXED FORM · MANY HERE DON'T KNOW THE DEAD

Grief here is written out in advance: a fixed day, a form, and a group that is remembered. That definition could include one group and leave another out, and who is named and who is not is often questioned. It is also a place where very different people are brought together around the same loss, which is collective grief in its clearest form. A rouwdier is close to the opposite of that. It belongs to one person and takes the shape it is given at a certain time, and standing here it sits beside a way of mourning that asks everyone to take the same shape.

WHAT CAN COME ALONG?

Not known in advance, which is the condition the exposition travels under. What arrives can rub against a place like this, and that friction is not always a problem: it is what lets a rouwdier be seen beside a fixed form. It becomes one when what arrives is misplaced, hurtful, or more confronting than someone standing here came for.

The object continues; the context changes.

Figure 10.2. Four placements the exposition could travel to, with what could come along from each.

What travels along and what stays behind

The material follows from travelling: cage and veiled room demountable, rouwdieren replaceable and extendable, the scene resettable. What travels on and what stays behind is weighed for each placement, since neither extremes work: without anything already standing there is no plurality to recognise, and with everything travelling along nothing becomes of the place. What arrives from elsewhere can clash with the place it lands in, and that is not by itself a problem. It becomes one when a difference in scale is read as a judgement: a rouwdier for one person, standing among hundreds of thousands of dead, can seem to shrink to nothing. The design cannot weigh that, since it does not ask what someone brings.

How large the room is and how the two zones sit in it follows from the place. Where there is room enough, giving shape can happen inside the veiled room rather than past it: the visitor still meets the rouwdieren first, but then works among them instead of behind them, which puts what someone is making beside what others left. Where there is not, the two stay separate, as they do at the graduation exposition.

10.3 Walking it

The entrance

The opened cages stand at the entrance, and since the clinical label is gone the text beside them carries the criticism alone. The cages are walked past rather than entered or left. Asking the visitor to step out of one would presume they were in a cage, and nothing gives ground for that: the cages in the exposition were read as, burst out, released, run wild or consciously opened, all describing something that already happened to what was inside. The text therefore points at what is behind it rather than at the visitor.

The visitor meets the word here for the first time, so this is where it has to be explained: a rouwdier is a particular and changing way someone continues to live with a loss, and it may appear as a habit, an object, a place or a shared moment. Explaining it should not close what the definition leaves open.

> Rouw is iets waar iedereen ooit mee in aanraking komt. Of er goede of slechte manieren zijn om ermee om te gaan, is een vraag die vaak gesteld wordt, en die mensen zichzelf misschien nog vaker stellen. Mag ik blij zijn, verdrietig, boos? Hoe doen anderen dit? Hoelang mag ik rouwen? En wat telt eigenlijk als rouw?
>
> Verlies brengt al genoeg pijn met zich mee. Daar hoeven niet ook nog verwachtingen bovenop te komen, of een gevoel dat je iets raars doet.
>
> Wie stelt die vragen eigenlijk, en waarom gaan ze over wat rouw is en wat mag, en niet over wat rouw doet? Mag rouw niet alles zijn, zolang het iets voor jou betekent, of wat jouw behoefte ook is? Misschien begint het bij de ruimte om te mogen zijn wat het is.
>
> Een rouwdier is een eigen en veranderende manier waarop iemand verder leeft met een verlies, met diegene, door diegene heen, of tussen mensen in. Het kan een gewoonte zijn, een voorwerp, een plek, een gedeeld moment, of iets dat nooit een vorm aanneemt. Het kan om aandacht vragen, om afstand, om zorg, om gezelschap of om uiting, en het laat zich soms alleen op bepaalde momenten zien, of alleen bij bepaalde mensen.
>
> Deze kooien houden niets meer vast. Erachter leven de rouwdieren van anderen. Hoe ze eruit kwamen verschilt: de een is opengebroken, de ander met beleid opengedaan. Waaraan ze zijn ontsnapt verschilt ook. Het ene is zacht, het andere niet. Maak kennis met wat mensen zelf gevonden hebben.

The veiled room

The room is enclosed by net curtains that can be seen through without being seen into clearly. From the outside there is something there without seeing clearly what, and inside it feels softer and closer than an open space would be. What stands here is a version of something living elsewhere, in the person or people who carry it: a rouwdier that is shown had to become something, and becoming something simplifies it, which is what makes it possible for anyone else to meet it. It lives here as a guest, which is as close as a room can come to holding something that is not its own. The veil says that without words. It is not an enclosure, since what is behind it is not separate from ordinary life.

Inside there is no route. The exposition was one-way and its ordering caused no confusion, while the vagueness in the second iteration test did, so the ordering between zones is kept and the ordering within the room is not. A path that imposes an order also imposes a reading of what stands along it.

What stands there are rouwdieren of real people, each in the medium its maker chose. In the exposition different media were chosen so that the telling would refuse a single form; here that plurality arrives with the contributions. An object that stands for something, a sound or a song to listen to, a photograph someone took, a drawing, a saying. What cannot be brought into the room, a place for instance, can stand in the words with which it was named, in a recording, or in an image, whether photographed or made with AI, if that is what its maker chose. Beside each stands the story of the person it belongs to, in their own words, at most rewritten with them and read back before it stands there. What that looks like differs: sometimes the story alone, sometimes a small sign beside the thing itself.

How many stand there follows from the room, since a fixed number would impose something again and the room fills up while the online landscape does not. Someone therefore selects what stands there, and does more than select: what arrives is a story and whatever it lives in, and turning that into something that can stand in a room means making something. The role asks for knowing enough of what is carried in that place to choose, and being able to build what someone hands over. In this project it was the designer, and it could also be someone belonging to the place where the exposition stands. Most of that happens before a placement opens rather than in the room. Either way the collection is fed by the place rather than assembled for it, and the website says as much, since offering a contribution is not a guarantee that it will be shown.

10.4 Giving shape

What is offered

Past the veiled room, two things are offered: material to work with by hand, and a website that opens on the visitor's own phone through a QR code. What is asked for there does not have to be new. Of the last five visitors to the exposition, whose card asked what a rouwdier of theirs might look like, four named something already in their life rather than inventing something to match the question. Recognising, pointing and making all count here. What already lives along with someone is as much a contribution as what is made on the spot. What is made by hand can be both photographed into the website and left behind as it is.

None of this asks anyone to turn a loss into something, and nothing has to come of it. What lies there is material and ways to begin rather than a blank sheet. What that material is does not follow from the design: the forms a rouwdier can take are not fixed, and what suits a company is not what suits a funeral. Some of it works in the hands rather than in words, which is where Nathalie starts her sessions, since working with something that has no words reaches a layer that speaking does not. Much of it will be left untouched, which is the same freedom as leaving without contributing.

What the website does

The website does one part of that. It gives a form to something that may already live along with someone, a form other people can meet. It does not decide whether what someone brings is a rouwdier, and nothing has to be finished before it can be left. For someone who carries nothing yet it works the other way round: the questions can make it noticeable that something is already there, or leave room to think about what would fit.

Something else can happen here as well. Someone can write, draw or record because they need to at that moment, and that may be grieving. That is not what the design sets out to arrange, and it is not something it could ask for, but where it happens of its own accord there is room for it.

The route through the website

The screens are set out in Appendix Q, and a working version of the prototype can be opened through the link there or through the QR code in Figure 10.3. The website asks five things in order, shown in Figure 10.4. An earlier version of the route was walked through with a web developer and tested with people less used to phones, which is where several of the choices below come from; what came out of those tests is set out in Appendix R.

Figure 10.3. QR code to the working version of the prototype, as tested in September 2026. The same link is in Appendix Q.



Figure 10.4. The route through the website. Five steps in order: what a rouwdier of theirs could consist of, what role AI may have, what it does to them and asks of them, what goes on the card they take with them, and where the contribution may live.

The first step groups its entrances into capturing something and shaping something, so that what already lives along does not have to be turned into something new. Pointing is there for what already exists, and can carry a link so that whoever later holds the card can find it. A recording can stay a recording, and what was made by hand can be photographed in.

Making sound came out of the responses to the returned rouwdieren, where Stijn mentioned that people had found symbolism in a soundscape of his that had nothing to do with what he meant, and that was actually the good part of it. He suggested generating sound with AI. Here a drawing becomes a sound instead, without AI. Something can be made through movement and listening rather than with words, without the skill needed to play an instrument. What comes out may not be the sound someone had in mind, but perhaps it does not have to be.

That AI is one option rather than the mechanism follows from the rouwdieren themselves, most of which were already there before anything was made. The second step therefore asks what role it may have rather than whether to use it. Continuing alone hands over nothing. Working together keeps the visitor's own image as the thing being edited and asks what may change, so nothing else is added. Translating lets the model make something new from it, and the visitor then decides whether what they started from stays visible beside it.

What comes back is seen privately first, since what it does differs per person. All eight who responded in 8.5 described the image as made for them rather than as theirs, and some found something in it anyway: it can be more specific than how someone pictures such a thing themselves, and it can be recognised without being what was in mind. For a translation the comparison with a composite sketch holds: drawn from what someone said, to be recognised or refused, though unlike a sketch artist it can add something nobody asked for, as it did for Kasper. Seeing it before deciding leaves room to say what does not fit, as Roos did.

The third step asks what this does to someone and what their rouwdier asks of them. It can be passed by. It moves the attention from what something is to what it does, where chapter 9 arrived, and it is asked whether or not AI was used. What someone writes there is offered back at the next step, where it can be changed or removed, since what is written for oneself does not have to be the same as what is given to others.

The fourth step is the card, shown in Figure 10.5. A name and a few words may be given and both may be left empty. The card can be saved before anything is shared, so the whole route can be walked and kept.

The last step asks not whether a contribution is visible but how far from its maker it may go. Sanne declined to have hers shown, not over the image but because the rouwdier is her family's, which showed that a single consent is not the right instrument. The design cannot know when a rouwdier belongs to more people than the one standing there, so that distance is the visitor's to set. The two choices that allow it to be placed physically open a second question, since agreeing that something may be shown is not agreeing that it may be made into something: the visitor can shape it further with the designer, see a proposal first, or leave it to them.

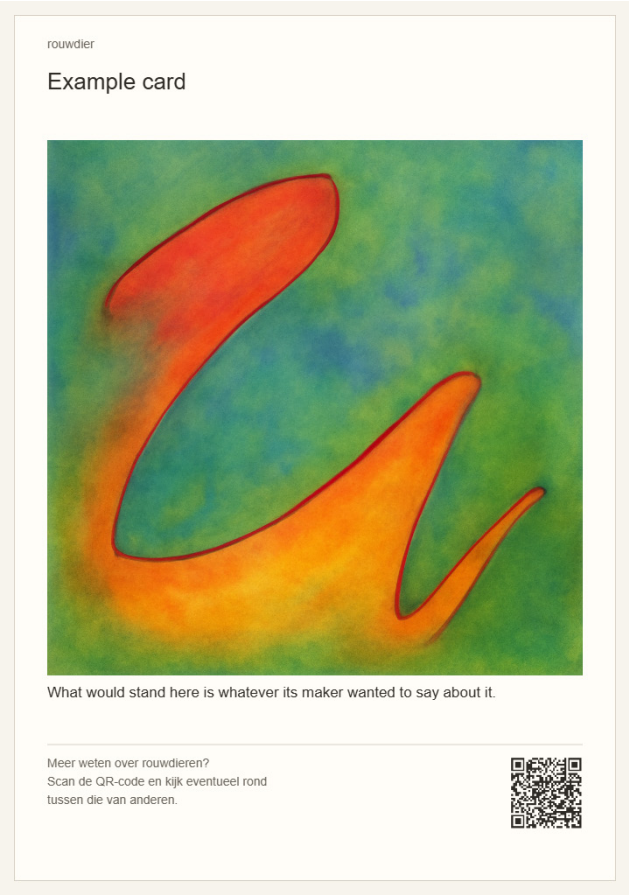


Figure 10.5. The card a visitor leaves with, filled in as an example. The code opens the explanation of the project before the landscape can be visited.

What happens around it

A contribution is a story and whatever it lives in, and making that stand in a room is something else. The website records how much of that the maker wants to do themselves and stops there; the making and the talking happen outside it. Leaving no way to be reached is also a choice, and its consequence is that an anonymous contribution is translated as well as the designer can manage without the maker. What this version does not do is let someone return to what they left and change it. A rouwdier changes, and so does what someone wants shown of it, so that only happens through whoever holds the collection.

Something the exposition produced without being designed for it is kept as an opening rather than a step. Visitors who walked the route together helped each other give shape to what they carried, or pointed out that something just mentioned might already be a rouwdier. A rouwdier can live in more than one person, which is one of the things the cage cut off. What it would take to design for shared making is left open, since that differs between a company and a family. The phone carries the choices; the conversation is better had with the people in the room.

The online landscape

What is made can join what is already there, which blurs the line between what is shown and what was left behind. Only what may live there appears, so taking something back leaves nothing behind. Contributions stay bound to the landscape they were left in, so a placement builds its own collection rather than dissolving into one general whole.

Each appears there as a small moving spark, shown in Figure 10.6, that opens only when a visitor chooses it, without a name, and nothing is counted or ranked. The sparks were made smaller and softer in successive versions, so that they would read as an entrance to something rather than as stars or decoration. In this version of the website contributions appear straight away and can be hidden or removed afterwards; filtering before they appear is a step for further use rather than something this version does.

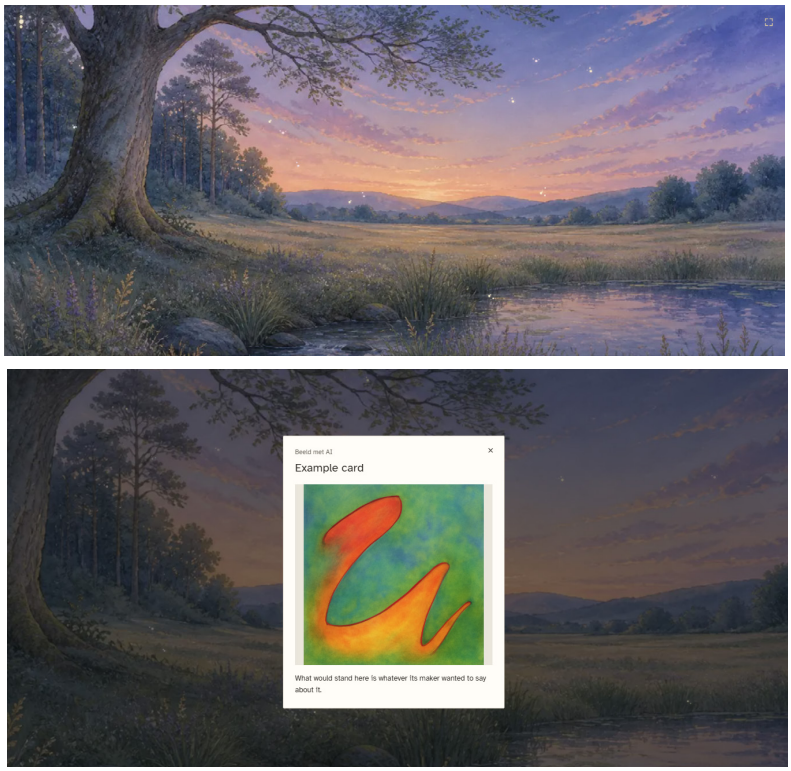


Figure 10.6. The online landscape. Above, contributions as small moving sparks. Below, one opened, over the landscape.

The card is the one part that reaches people who never stood there. It carries a code that opens the explanation of the project first and then the landscape the contribution belongs to, so it arrives with something around it rather than on its own. The landscape that opens from a card shows what is there without offering a way to add to it.

The card is not announced anywhere on the way in, and nothing about it is offered as a reason to make something. A visitor meets it once there is something to put on it. What is made may be beautiful, and it may be a small tribute to someone, but nothing here asks for that. What the card does once it leaves is not something this project can say, since it has not been tested.

10.5 Graduation: a first placement

The exposition's first placement is at the designer's graduation presentation, which is not one of the four set out in 10.2. It is a placement rather than a demonstration, as people can experience it themselves. It consists of the opened cages and the entrance text at the way in, the veiled room behind them, the making space and the website past that.

What is offered

Twelve rouwdieren of eleven people. They were chosen to stand as far apart as possible, so that the plurality can be met rather than described. Tygo's two stand beside each other, since a person can carry more than one, or one rouwdier can have more than one component (Figure 10.7). Five of the eleven were met in interviews and six at the exposition, where a card asked what a rouwdier of theirs might look like. What came along that second route was mostly not made for the question: Lotte's butterfly had appeared at her grandmother's funeral, Tijn's saying is his pake's (grandfather's), and Kasper's was already wherever he was. Capturing something and shaping something, the two entrances the website offers in 10.4, come to life here not as two kinds of visitor but as two things the same person can do.

Nothing here was made about someone. Each text is either written by its maker or written from their words and then returned to them, to be changed, added to or approved before it stands anywhere; how each one came about is set out in Appendix S. The medium was settled the same way, in the same exchange. What stands in the room is therefore made by its maker or made with them, and that back and forth is part of what the curator role in 10.3 turns out to ask for.

The media differ because their makers do. Marjolein recognises her father in the smell of his tobacco, so hers is a tin that can be smelled without being seen into (Figure 10.7). Tygo talks to his mother almost daily and called it a message in a bottle, so a bottle stands beside his text with a letter inside it. Belle's mother could close herself off when too much came at her, the way a pine cone closes when it gets rough outside, and the pine cone stands there. Remy's is what one song did in a room where it meant something different to everyone in it, which arrives as a recording with a photograph of his instrument beside it. Tijn's is a saying, printed large, chosen over the image returned to him. Tobi, Stijn and Kasper kept the images made with AI, hung apart from each other rather than as a group. Fabian's is the relief after his father's long illness, and nothing stands beside it. Roos misses two sisters who were never born, which is most painful when she is with friends and their siblings. What the designer does varies as much: Lotte makes her butterfly herself, the bottle was built here from what Tygo described, and for Marjolein there was nothing to build.

How many stand there follows from the room rather than from a number decided beforehand, as 10.3 sets out. Nine square metres is not enough for the making space to sit inside the veiled room, so the two zones stay separate, which is the arrangement 10.2 describes for where there is not room enough. Which of the twelve end up in the room is settled during the build.

Nothing here was carried in from an earlier placement, since there is no earlier one. The collection is brought rather than fed by the place, and what stays behind is what visitors leave. The exposition stands at the presentation as the design describes it. What it does there is not evaluated within this project, and that is where the recommendations begin.



Figure 10.7. The set up for the first placement edited with AI at the graduation presentation. Above, the entrance text and the opened cages in front of the veiled room. Below, two rouwdieren inside it: left, Zware shag's tin beside its text; right, Tygo's bottle with the letter inside, beside Onze momentjes.

11. Concluding

This chapter closes the project. It answers the three research questions, discusses what the project contributes and where it falls short, sets out what is left to do, and ends with a personal reflection.

11.1 Conclusion

This chapter answers the three questions set out in 1.1 and closes the project. The discussion, recommendations and reflection that follow take up what it leaves open.

How death left public space, and what pushes back

Death did not disappear by decision. Dying, the care of the body and the farewell each moved into a setting of its own, with its own professionals and its own timetable, and grief followed, into a private condition with an expected end. What pushes back runs along two lines: practices that return knowledge and care to families and communities, and perspectives that locate grief outside the single mourner, in bodies, relations and continuing bonds. The practitioners sharpened this into one refusal: what each of them restores is not death itself, but the relationships around it. The bereaved showed the same thing more quietly, in the acts through which they keep their dead close, acts that are rarely visible to anyone else.

How personal grief and collective mourning relate, and what allows them to meet

This is the question that changed shape along the way, and the design goal changed with it. The goal set in 1.1 asked for public space in which the bereaved and their communities could share grief. What the field kept pointing to sat underneath that: the bond itself, fully real from the inside and barely legible from the outside. In 5.2 the goal was sharpened toward it. The goal stays public, but its object shifts: not a community brought in to share the grief, but the bond itself, and what around it decides whether it may appear. Stated plainly: to create conditions in which grief can be expressed, shared, and lived with, in relation to the dead and to those around the bereaved, without that relation having to be explained, resolved, or fitted to a recognised form of mourning.

Personal grief and collective mourning therefore do not meet by being brought into one form. The clustering showed that shared practice works because it leaves room for each person's own reading (4.2). The exposition showed that meeting begins in recognition: visitors connected their own loss to a story told by a stranger, borrowed its language, and at times helped each other give shape to what they carried (10.4). The design does not arrange collective mourning, and by the choice made in 5.2 it does not gather a community around a loss. It puts what people found for themselves beside what others found, and lets sharing begin there. What can grow from that between people is left open, and taken up in the recommendations.

How design can make space for grief without reducing or prescribing it

Design can make that space, but not completely. A rouwdier that is shown has to become something, and becoming something simplifies it. That is the condition of being met at all. What the project found is where the two sides belong. Form sits on the side of the norm, since criticising a norm means first giving it a shape. Openness sits on the side of the bond: what someone's grief looks like is not the designer's to define.

Underneath this lies the shift taken from Despret and carried through the whole project: not asking whether a bond with the dead is real, but what it does. The rouwdier is that shift given a name. A rouwdier is a particular and changing way someone continues to live with a loss, with them, through them, or between people; it may appear as a habit, an object, a place, a shared moment, or as something that never settles into a form at all. It is not a way of grieving well, and there are no better or worse ones: it can be anything that does something for the one who carries it, the missing itself included. That is a stance the design takes rather than a finding it proves. What the exposition did show is that what a rouwdier was differed widely, while what it did recurred.

The two directions the design set out from, loosening the line between what counts as a normal way of relating to the dead and what is dismissed as strange (2), and letting the conditions around grief appear as conditions rather than as how things simply are (4), began as two concepts and became one exposition (7.3). In the final design they can no longer be separated: the plurality of the room does both at once, and the entrance text names the conditions as questions rather than answers. What was let go is the satirical form, not the direction. The design does not ask what a rouwdier is, how many someone has, or when it should be over. The medium, what comes back, and how far it travels are the maker's to decide.

What the project ends with

The outcome is a travelling exposition: an entrance text and a row of opened cages, a veiled room in which the rouwdieren of others stand, each in the medium its maker chose, and a space for giving shape to one's own, by hand or through a website. It is a proposal grounded in what the exposition showed, tested in parts and not yet as a whole. It does not reclaim public space for grief by bringing a community together, as the project first set out to do. It reclaims it by putting the ways people already live with loss where they can be met, and by leaving room for the next one to be added.

11.2 Discussion

What the project contributes

Much of what surrounds grief thinks in categories and in phases with an endpoint, in problems to be solved, and in deciding what grief should mean or helping people through it. This project tried to step away from that, and to make tangible what stays abstract in Despret's (2021) philosophy. Instauration, bringing something into existence that was neither given nor invented from nothing, took place in the exposition where visitors gave a form to something that had none before, with the one they lost or with each other (8.3, 10.4), and it is what the making space leaves room for. The shift from what a rouwdier is to what it does became something visitors could meet rather than an argument. In this way the project works with a frame drawn from Despret and more-than-human thinking in the context of design for death and grief. How far it stepped away from what it criticises is a question the rest of this discussion takes up.

Where the design meets its own critique

The interviews looked for ways in which the reduction traced in the literature is opposed. The practitioners were then also chosen because their work already seemed to resist it, so the picture this project draws of the field is partly a picture of who was chosen for it.

What the project turned out to be is also something it critiques. A rouwdier is itself a reduction, since it has to become something that can be communicated. The project also remains rather individual. The goal it began with asked for grief to be shared by the bereaved and their communities in public space (1.1); the goal it sharpened toward in 5.2 asks for less than that, and the design meets the second more fully than the first. What people encounter is a simplified fragment of an ever-shifting web of ways of being with grief and death, carried personally and collectively, and the question remains whether meeting such fragments makes that web more visible, or whether people mistake the fragment for the whole. The weighting in Chapter 5 shifted in the making as well: directions 1 and 3, set aside as familiar, returned in what visitors did with the making space and in what they made together. That is not a failure of the weighting, but what happens when a ground is chosen by argument and a design is made by hand.

Almost everyone this project spoke with was critical of something: the funeral package, the protocol, the pace, the question of when grief should be over. The project began there as well, with a cage and a clinical label, but over time turned toward plurality. It pushed well on the loving, internal and personal side, but could have been more critical toward the industry and the systems around grief. That was partly a choice, since satire that is missed lands on the grieving person. Direction 4 did survive: the entrance text still names the conditions around grief, and the plurality of the room shows them as one possibility among others. What was lost is its critical edge toward the industry and the systems that hold those conditions in place. Harm is being done in this field. The people causing it are likely not doing so for its own sake, but that does not mean things cannot change. The current situation is not wrong in itself, but it has become so dominant that it leaves little room for anything else, and that could have been confronted far more directly.

The exposition has deliberately become something people can take with them as much as leave behind, ending with a card that could even feel like a souvenir. That is a risk, since it should not become about making something beautiful to take home, which is why the card is not announced anywhere on the way in. What is made may well be beautiful, and it may be a small tribute, but that cannot be the reason for making it. Along the way the critique also moved to the background, and having seen that grief can take many forms, visitors might still meet their next loss inside the same arrangements.

The curator

Designing for grief asks for a careful balance: pressing on the bereaved as little as possible, without leaving them entirely to themselves. At times people may be given some direction, as Nathalie does in her groups, where making something physical asks for help to cross a threshold. But what is meaningful cannot be steered too much or imposed on them.

For the curator, this line has to be guarded most sharply. Someone selects what stands in the room and turns a story into something that can be shown, and the risk remains large that what that person finds beautiful or impressive decides what visitors meet. In the exposition, the designer deliberately chose what carried friction. That was his own agenda, but it was also his project. Still, it means the room imposes something. Against that, the designer is not essential: someone else can take the role, or better, the room can be composed together. The maker decides the medium, how much of the making is theirs, and how far a rouwdier may travel; the curator decides whether it stands in the room at all. Stories are read back to their makers, though this version does not let anyone return to a contribution later, so what changes only reaches the room through whoever holds the collection. Even so, the line between making possible and filling in is fragile and will sometimes be crossed. What matters is to stay aware of it, and not become blind to what actually happens.

Designing close by

The booklet and the co-design session were done with the designer's own family, which will certainly have influenced the outcomes. What the booklet asked was very personal, and written by someone connected to the loss as well. That closeness made sure the questions resonated with the people they were made for, which would be difficult to reach elsewhere. On the other hand, the family knew they were doing this for someone close to them, and for a graduation project. They likely approached it with far more care and attention than they otherwise would have, so that part of the meaning may have been made for the occasion rather than found in it.

The same closeness runs through the exposition. It stood in the designer's own faculty, most visitors knew him, and he was in the room throughout. The exposition itself showed heavy stories, while several visitors said themselves that what they carried was not of that weight. How the route lands with someone standing closer to a loss remains open.

What the final concept rests on

The final concept was tested only in part. A first placement is built for the graduation presentation (10.5). It stands there as the design describes, but its effect is not evaluated within this project. The rouwdier as an open and plural idea and the opened cages come from the exposition, and the website was tested on its own, though not within it. The veiled room, the rouwdieren in the media their makers chose, the curator, the card and the placements have not been tried. Neither has the shift the design is built around: whether meeting the rouwdieren of others makes a way of grieving that seemed strange one way among others (5.3). That remains untested. The final concept is a proposal grounded in what the exposition showed, not an evaluated design, and what that leaves open is where the recommendations begin.

11.3 Recommendations

The recommendations below follow from what the discussion leaves open. They concern testing the design in practice, what happens when ways of grieving meet, the website, the role of whoever holds the room, what can be made outside it and where the critique could go.

Testing in practice

The final concept has not yet been tested in practice, nor together with the website. It is best tested first in a lighter setting, where the risk of something hurtful or painful happening is lowest, since the context remains very sensitive. Later tests should include people who carry a recent loss, and the website should be tried with older people as well. A test should show whether people find recognition or inspiration, and whether it brings them something to reflect on. It should also show whether it has any negative impact, since that too remains to be seen. What is hardest to see in a single visit is whether meeting these rouwdieren leaves someone more open to a way of grieving that is not their own, which would ask for following people over a longer time.

In the exposition test, the designer was familiar to most visitors, and the room was rather intimate, with ambient light. Whether the subtler route and the veiled room have a similar effect still has to be seen. What matters is that people feel safe in the space, and that it is open without becoming too heavy. The exposition room was somewhat dark, where the veiled room may be lighter, and that lightness could be beautiful here, since death is often associated with the darker. Without explanation, visitors may also walk through it as they would through an art piece. It has to be clear that what stands there comes from people themselves, and that what visitors make can come to live there too.

When ways of grieving meet

The room shows very personal ways of living with loss side by side, and these can clash. How visitors respond to that has not been tested. Some may disagree completely, find something disrespectful, or feel that their own way falls short beside the others. Someone who understands the other way may find it beautiful to see another side. It can also hurt, or make someone angry, and anger is not always a bad thing. How this works in practice, in a context this complex and sensitive, is still unknown, and it is one of the most important questions this design leaves behind.

The website

The website was walked through with a web developer and tested with people less used to phones (Appendix R), but so far in an isolated setting. How people interact with it in a real setting is unsure, and so is whether they find its functions appropriate at all, which can only be tested in the context itself. Before it can be used in public, it needs hosting and a database with a separate provider, and security against uploads of malware or harmful material. It also needs a formal privacy set-up meeting all legal requirements, a way for visitors to request removal, and agreements on copyright.

Monitoring and censorship

The installation works on its own, but in the background someone has to monitor for misuse or inappropriate content, and someone has to translate contributions into something physical. The person holding this role can come from the place where the exposition stands, but that brings its own risk. If the exposition stands in a church, for example, and someone with a strong conviction monitors it, contributions that depart from that view may be filtered out, and the design is then, in a way, censored. That is a real risk, and one to be guarded against. The question is when monitoring becomes censorship. Composing the room together rather than alone may help, but how that would work, and with whom, still needs exploring.

Making outside the website

What happens outside the website needs far more attention. The offline way to take part needs to be expanded; working with children, for example, would ask for many more creative outlets and outputs: clay, crafts, drawing. Making together needs further research as well, and will mostly have to happen outside the website, since making a drawing or a sound recording together online is not ideal. The website lets a maker limit how far a rouwdier travels, but not ask the others it belongs to; how consent should work when a rouwdier is shared, as Sanne's was, is still unknown. The family setting, set aside in 10.2 as a question of its own, would be picked up along this thread.

Where the critique can go

The critique of the industry and the systems around grief moved to the background of this design. Much weight was placed on not letting it land on the grieving person, and rightly so, though that may have left more room than was used. Someone's own way of grieving, however rigid, is theirs to have. Two targets remain fair. Where someone expects others to grieve the same way, that can be criticised, and it lands on a person without landing on their grief. And the industry and the systems that hold the current arrangements in place can be confronted more directly than this design did: not for what they offer, which is fine for whoever values it, but for offering it as if there were no other choice. Either will still be uncomfortable for whoever it touches, and whether it can be done without harm is exactly what would have to be tested.

11.4 Reflection

A few months before this project started I lost my grandmother. We had been close since I was a child, as she often looked after me and my younger brother when our parents were at work. After her death I was mostly overwhelmed by sadness and grief, but I also noticed things that did not feel entirely right to me. Some of it felt rushed, we had to choose between options of which none seemed right, and we said goodbye in a place that felt like it neither suited us nor my grandmother.

Before that the subject had already left its mark on me. For a while I volunteered at a hospice for young people, where a nurse said something that stayed with me. I don't remember her exact words, but it came down to her noticing that I did things with a bit more love and attention than she often saw, and that she saw the guests felt it and were touched by it. I was glad and thankful to hear it, and at the same time it made me sad, because apparently it was something to notice rather than something normal. Treatment keeps getting better, and there is every reason for that, but care has become something technical and professional, sometimes maybe too much aimed at prolonging life. The love and attention that something this relational asks for do not always fit in how it is arranged, and the people sometimes no longer have the room or time to give that. Alongside that I have always been drawn to subjects that are somewhat pushed towards the corners of society, because I believe a lot of pain and suffering could hide in what cannot be discussed.

The conversations are what I am most grateful for. Very open and loving people were involved and willing to help me, and I feel and hope their knowledge was given proper space here, with their love interwoven into the project. What they showed me above all is that it can be done differently, and how beautiful the things are that people already make possible. What I learned from them is how much a conversation gives back when you stop steering it, which also asks you to tolerate not knowing where it is going. That continued afterwards, because straight after an interview I often looked at my notes and wondered what any of this was supposed to do for the project, and it was usually only over the following days that I saw that what had been told to me could mean something here. Something similar runs through the writing, where the line often blurred between what I found beautiful and what was useful. I sometimes kept too much of both in, so the report became hard to read, and some of its beauty drowns in the rest.

A certain awkwardness can come with these conversations. Silences fall, words fall short, and it is tempting to smooth that away, though that does not take the feeling itself away. Not giving in to it and letting it be is something I developed here and tried to carry into the project. It is something that can be beautiful too, and with it I came to realise that you are allowed to say that something touches you, and that you sometimes do not know what to say, and that is fine.

Part of the research was done with my own family, six months after my grandmother's death. Being grandson, son and researcher at once was not always easy. There were moments when I wanted to ask something for the project and did not, because I did not want to give the feeling that I was analysing or collecting. What surprised me is that it also worked the other way, since working on this opened me to smaller and subtler things around grief that I might otherwise have missed. It is how I came to see how heavy it is for my grandfather. For me she was my grandmother, but for him she was the person he had been with almost all the time for over forty years, and I saw more clearly what the loss meant and did to him.

Towards people I generally remain positive and optimistic, but I can be quite critical of what certain phenomena and societal arrangements do to our ways of living together. Around death this project found quite some things that are harmful, and towards those the critique stayed rather gentle, mostly with the norms around grief and less with the industry that holds them in place. That gentleness is not something I want to change about myself, but it did cost this project something, and being careful with people is not the same as being careful with what might harm them.

This project leaned heavily on Despret's Our Grateful Dead, for how she looks at death and the dead, but just as much for how she researches it, following what people told her instead of deciding beforehand what was worth studying. At the same time, simply put, this still is my project, and my choices are in it everywhere. That was not always easy, since I find making decisions hard and am always afraid to close doors on things that could really add something. But when you keep piling up everything that seems beautiful or carries meaning, the important things start to blur and the work becomes hard to follow. Involving others earlier, and writing things down as they happened, could have helped a lot.

During the project a friend also died, a loss that was nothing like my grandmother's. She was young, and her death came with a whole different set of feelings, in me and in the people left behind. She has become part of this project as well, and below I left a rouwdier of my own (Figure 11.1), one that evolved a while ago but changed meaning since her death.



Figure 11.1. My own rouwdier, left in the design.

It has been over half a year that I have worked on this project. Around the loss itself it sometimes got more difficult to work on this, but the talking to others, the writing and the working on the design in a way became rouwwerk (grief work) of its own. Looking back, I think this project has become a rouwdier of its own. It started from a loss, it asked for care over a long time, it changed shape more than once, and it is ending without the loss and its shape being finished. The design does not try to fix or resolve grief. None of the people I spoke with seem to be looking for that or claim to be able to, and neither am I. I hope it also embodies some of that for others to experience.

AI Statement & Bibliography

AI tools were used throughout this project as assistive instruments. The text of this report was written by the researcher; AI was used to review and improve what was already written, not to produce it. The research questions, the analysis, the design decisions and the argument are the researcher's own, and responsibility for the content rests with him.

Writing and structure

Claude was used to review drafts written by the researcher: to check spelling and grammar, improve flow, and clarify passages that were not yet doing what they should. It was also used to test the argument, by locating gaps in reasoning and checking consistency between chapters and appendices.

Analysis

NotebookLM was used to a limited extent to work through academic papers and deepen understanding of the literature. The clustering, the interpretation of interviews and the reading of test results were done by the researcher.

Transcription and anonymisation

Microsoft Teams and Word were used to transcribe audio recordings. Transcripts were anonymised by hand and then checked with Microsoft Copilot under TU Delft's Enterprise Data Protection agreement for remaining personally identifiable information and data risks.

Summaries

Claude and Gemini were used to produce the interview summaries in Appendices B, C and D from anonymised transcripts. These summaries were checked against the transcripts by the researcher.

Image generation

ChatGPT was used to generate images in two distinct roles. As a tool, it produced renders and visualisations for this report, including the booklet and the illustrations of the ideas in Appendix K, and was used to improve existing images. As part of the design itself, it generated the habitat images shown during the exposition and the rouwdier images returned to participants in the test described in Appendix O. In that test the images were not produced from a fixed prompt but developed in conversation with the model, which makes them the product of two authors. What this means for the results is in the limitations of Appendix O.

Development

ChatGPT was used to vibecode the website prototype for the making space.

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