

# Poets on Death: Introduction

written by CA Conrad | April 12, 2021



*I wrestled with death as a  
threshold, an aporia, a bandit,  
a part of life*

– Akilah Oliver

In the 1980s and 90s, when half of everyone I loved died of AIDS in Philadelphia, heterosexual poets were the only heterosexuals I could actually talk with about this suffering. Oh yeah, it needs to be said, so everyone stops forgetting how horrible most straight people were to queers in the early years of AIDS. When the gay-life-of-the-party begins coughing and showing up with sores, the gay-life-of-the-party is no longer invited. This story played out so often, one friend after the other, to the point it was shocking when there were kind and loving straight people around some of my friends. *But the poets!* I still remember going to a poetry reading after a funeral, and the poet [Ketan Ben Caesar](#) who was much older than me, said, “You have seen more people die than I have. How are you handling it, CA?” He was a big burly teddy bear of a man, and he grabbed me and hugged me, and I burst into tears. He held me tighter and said, “That’s it, THAT’S IT, POETS KNOW TEARS MUST FLOW TO CLEANSE! FLOW TO CLEANSE CA, FLOW FLOW FLOW TO CLEANSE!” *Ketan was the best!*

Most poets I read, or am lucky enough to both know and read, are attempting to grapple with all the multifarious kinds of death in our lives, which feels healthy. As Freud said, “Everywhere I go, I find a poet has been there before me.” *Ars Moriendi* is the original 15th-century Latin title for *The Art of Dying*. During the bubonic plague, there was so much death that a guidebook for dying well became part of European culture. After friends died of AIDS, I would often dream of dancing with them. Every single night I would dance with the living, then later dream-dance with the dead. AIDS made us need dance in a new way, and we pounded out our anger at the violence of the disease and further inflictions from the dominant straight culture. Arms reaching and reaching with the rhythm, taking in whatever supernatural force we could conjure to get us through to the next day. It made me wonder if survivors of the bubonic plague danced with their dead? Is anyone dream-dancing now with

loved ones who died of Covid-19?

I feel fortunate when I look back at those harrowing years and think of poets like [Etheridge Knight](#) and [Gil Ott](#) encouraging my enraged anti-Reagan poems; there is a [photo of me](#) reading from one of those early notebooks, and I am certain at least one of them was in the audience. I am happy never to need a copy of *Ars Moriendi* because I have so many brilliant poets all around me, straight and queer! When I first met Eileen Myles, we were in a coffee shop near their home in New York City, and I was trying to conceal the horrors of the night before with a dying friend. Finally, Eileen asked, “Hey, what’s up with you?” I had been so fidgety and difficult; then I burst into tears. It was an embarrassing mess, but they were so profoundly okay with it that it gives me pause even today when thinking about it. At the time, Eileen also had many friends dying of AIDS, and we then talked about our experiences. It is doubtful that death is something I will ever look forward to, mainly because I absolutely love being alive. Still, at the same time, it is not something I fear as much as others, thanks to the incredible generosity of trusted poets like Eileen and others.

[Akilah Oliver](#) is someone I wish could join us today on this subject; she is another poet I spent a lot of time talking about grieving with, dying, burial, cremation, anything related to the topic. We first met in the 1990s when she taught a workshop at the queer bookstore where I worked in Philadelphia. Her sudden, unexpected death in 2011 made me think about those conversations, wondering if she had a better time leaving the body than others because of her hard work [in her poems](#)? I invited some of the remarkable poets alive with us today to please share some of their thoughts on death. I kept it open, asking them to approach the topic however they want. Many thanks to all of them for their words. Many thanks also to [Janice Lee](#) and *Entropy Magazine* for publishing our responses.

– [CAConrad](#)

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