

an extra place at the table

*reclaiming the table as a physical
and metaphorical place to break
bread and boundaries with regard
to our relationship with dying,
death, and grief*

Ashley Rudolph & Nicola Salkeld – July 24, 2026

• anthropology • critical design • design • immersive • discursive design • thanatology • funeral feast • bereavement • memorialization • grief
• death • empathy • repast

An Extra Place at the Table is a practice-based research project that explores the funeral feast as both method and metaphor. Positioned at the intersection of graphic design and death studies (thanatology), it uses the shared meal as a site of commemoration and communion—one that can also hold moments of celebration. The project asks how personal experiences of loss sit within collective rituals of mourning, connecting the living and the dead through practices of remembrance. Food plays a central role in these processes: it “affirms identity, strengthens kinship bonds, and provides comfortable and familiar emotional support during periods of stress,” while familiar dishes evoke memories and gestures toward the continuation of life (Thursby 2015).

Drawing on discursive design, the project uses the dinner table as a structured encounter that both expresses and elicits meaning. Discursive design foregrounds reflection rather than resolution, using artefacts and prompts to open questions rather than close them (Tharp and Tharp 2018). Guests gather around a table set with specifically designed textiles, symbolic objects, speculative questions, and curated images that help bring reflections on death, grief, and end-of-life decisions to the surface. These elements act as subtle provocations that shift the dinner from everyday commensality into a more symbolic, ritualized experience. A menu of questions choreographs the evening, allowing conversations often avoided in daily life, to emerge within a familiar domestic setting.

The gesture of laying an “extra place” acknowledges absence while keeping memory active in the present. Continuing Bonds Theory suggests that grief persists, that ongoing relationships with the dead are sustained through shared stories and practice (Walter 1996). Here, the table becomes a site for biographical work, where the presence of the absent is created through ritual, dialogue, and material cues.

The project forms part of Moth, an initiative exploring the roles graphic designers can play in shaping end-of-life experiences. Predicated on the idea that confidently expressing “negative” emotions helps us navigate grief and sadness and communicate empathy and loss.

Moth’s methodology combines visual and material culture, phenomenology, semiotics, and iterative testing through curated events, designed artefacts, and audience feedback. It examines how creative practice can expand the cultural and emotional language around dying, grief, and remembrance, and how design methods might open space for conversations typically avoided in public life.

For this *story.able* edition, *An Extra Place at the Table* is reimaged as a visual narrative composed of curated images from the Moth archive. These photographs act as a conceptual time-lapse, capturing fragmentary moments from previous dinners while forming a new, hybrid composition that mirrors the layered, looping ways grief is felt and revisited. A hand-embroidered tablecloth anchors many of the images, its motifs drawn from sets

of religious, historical, and domestic symbols associated with death. Stitched in cobalt blue, the imagery references traditions of blue-and-white tableware—such as Staffordshire Willow Pattern—placing the cloth within a familiar visual language of shared meals.

Although all of the motifs relate to death, their meanings are not fixed. Signs acquire meaning through shared agreements within a community (Crow 2010), so guests bring their own interpretations to the cloth. The tablecloth becomes a semiotic field: a material prompt that encourages meaning-making rather than prescribing it. Through this quiet, tactile surface, death becomes a welcome presence at the table.

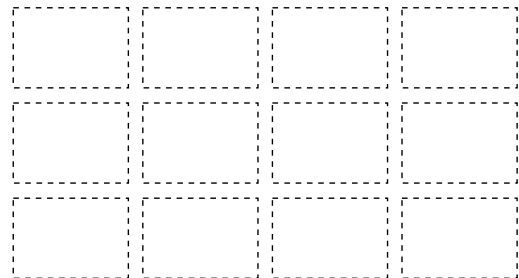
After the feast, the table becomes a disordered landscape—its crumbs, stains, and displaced objects offering traces of the conversations and relationships that unfolded there. This unsettled surface mirrors how death is experienced not as a single event but as a series of emotional, social, and temporal fragments.

Guests are invited to question the macro; the collective vastness of the universality of death, alongside the micro; the intimate uniqueness of a single life, that is lived and lost. A place to learn from others, engage with personal values, and develop a death-positive attitude, for when the inevitable event that we plan for least comes to visit us.

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Images are displayed inline in a grid. Optional text can be added beneath each image.



credits

authors:

Nicola Salkeld, co-founder of MOTH: Design for Life & Death, a research project at Falmouth University (UK)

Ashley Rudolph, co-founder of MOTH: Design for Life & Death, a research project at Falmouth University (UK).

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Elsa Richardson, Cultural Historian, Chancellor's Fellow in the History of Health and Wellbeing at the University of Strathclyde

Clare Hearn, Experience Design Lecturer, Cultural Management & Production at Falmouth University

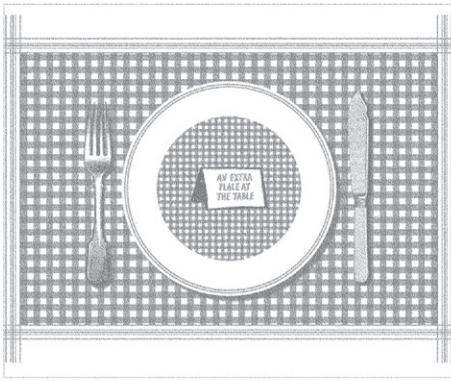
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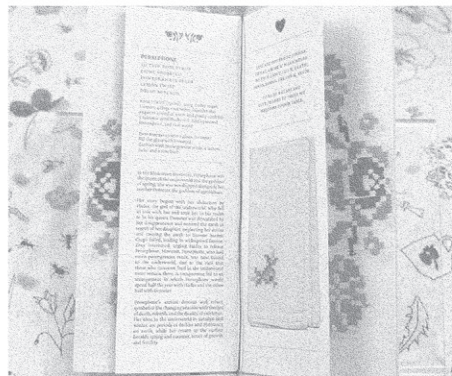
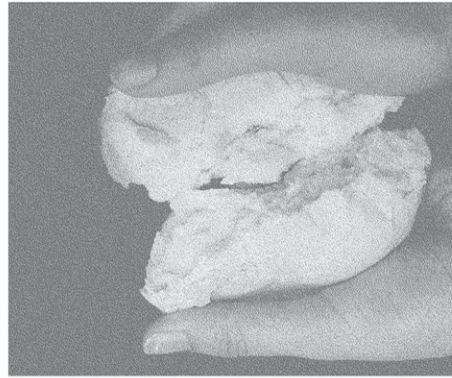
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copy editing: Bronwyn Mahoney



Who would you
like to set an
extra place at
the table for?

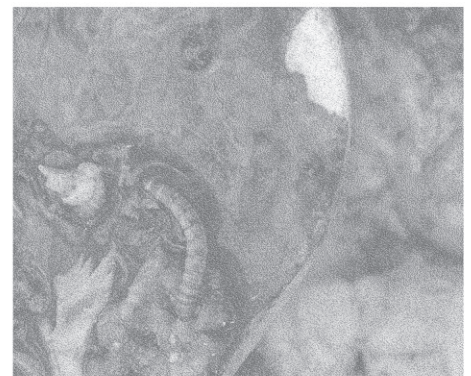
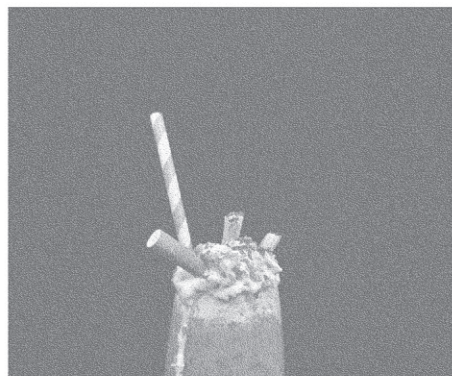
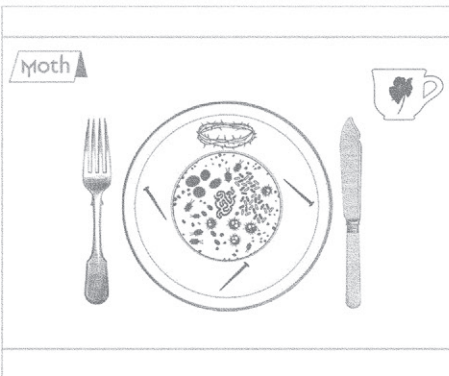
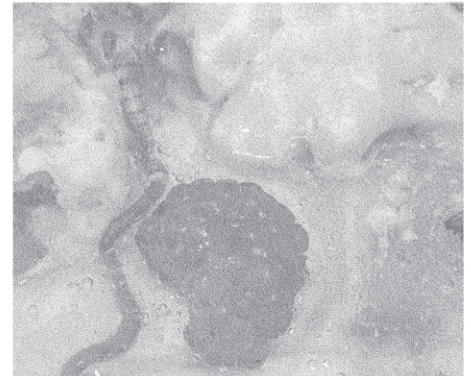
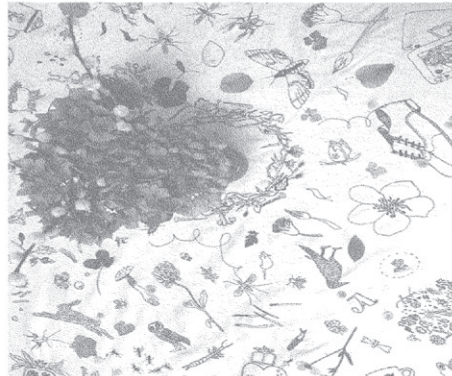
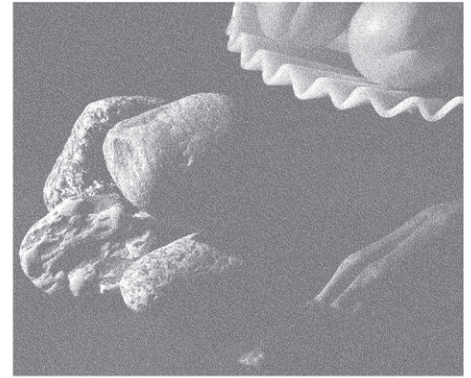
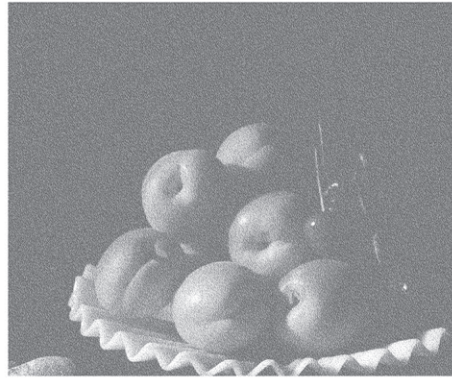
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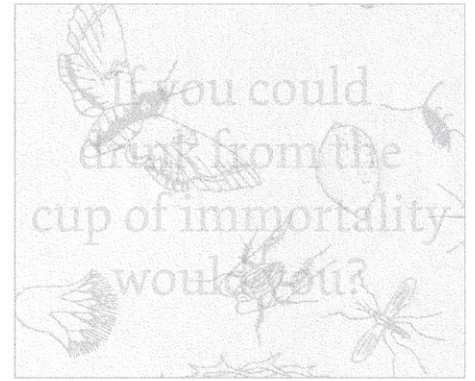




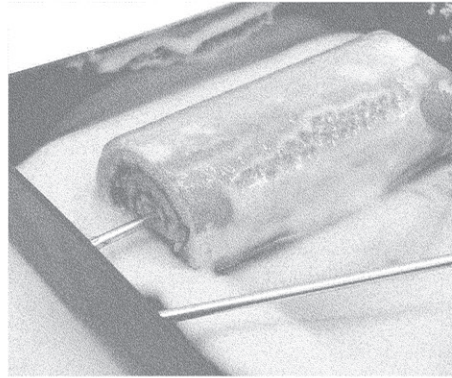
What happens to
us when we die?
The soul remains?
Resurrection?
Nothingness?

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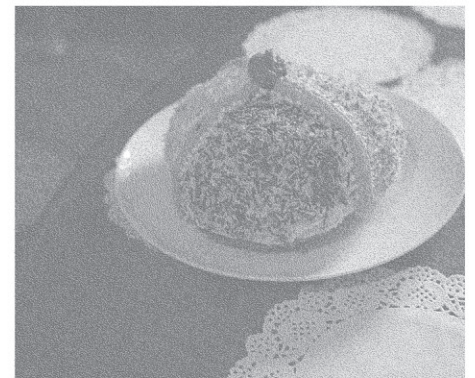
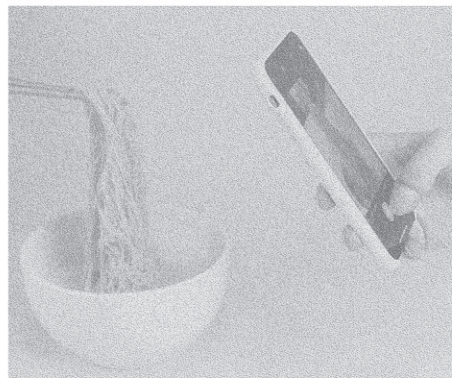
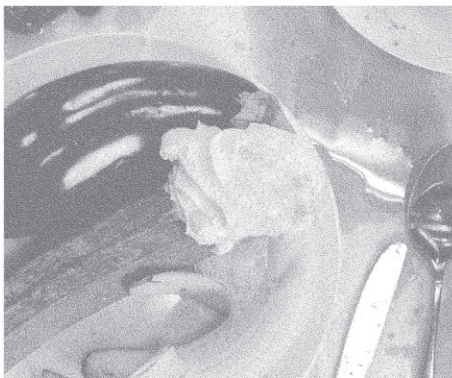


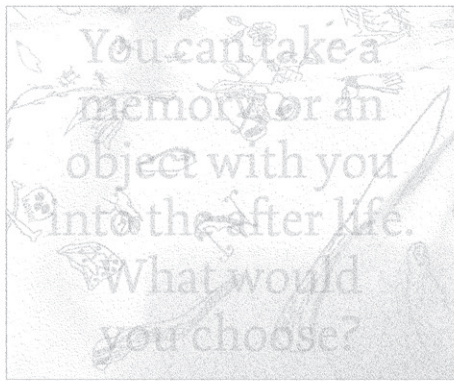
If you could
drink from the
cup of immortality
would you?



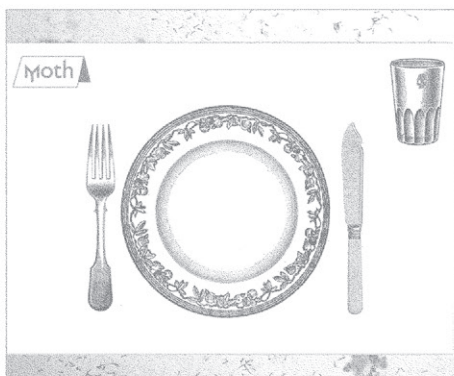
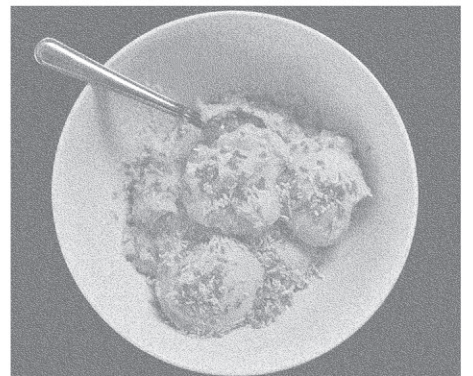
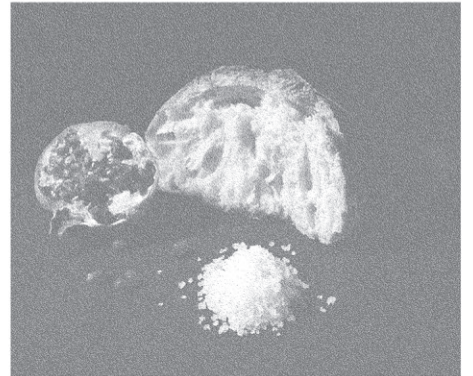
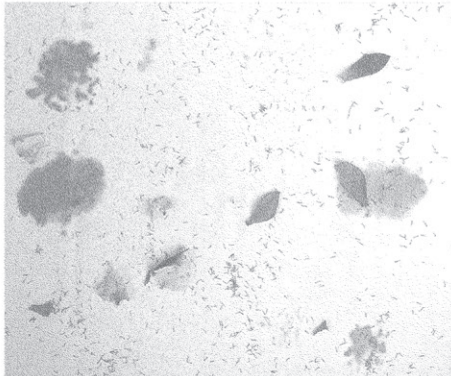
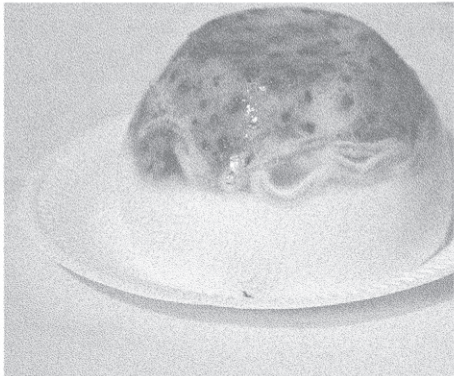
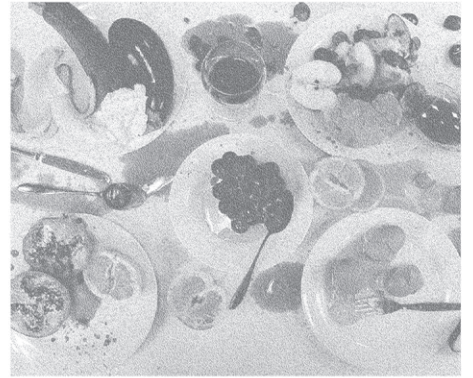
Is there such
a thing as a
good death?

Is there such
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good death?





You can take a memory, or an object with you into the after life. What would you choose?



Raise a glass. And give thanks to those we welcome to our table.

about the authors

Nicola Salkeld is a graphic designer and educator, with an MA in Communication Design from the Royal College of Art, London. Nicola cofounded Moth: Design for Life & Death in 2012, an exploration of the intersection of graphic design and death studies.

Ashley Rudolph is a graphic designer and educator with an MA in Craft and Material Practices from Arts University Plymouth. Ashley cofounded Moth: Design for Life & Death in 2012, an exploration of the intersection of graphic design and death studies.

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