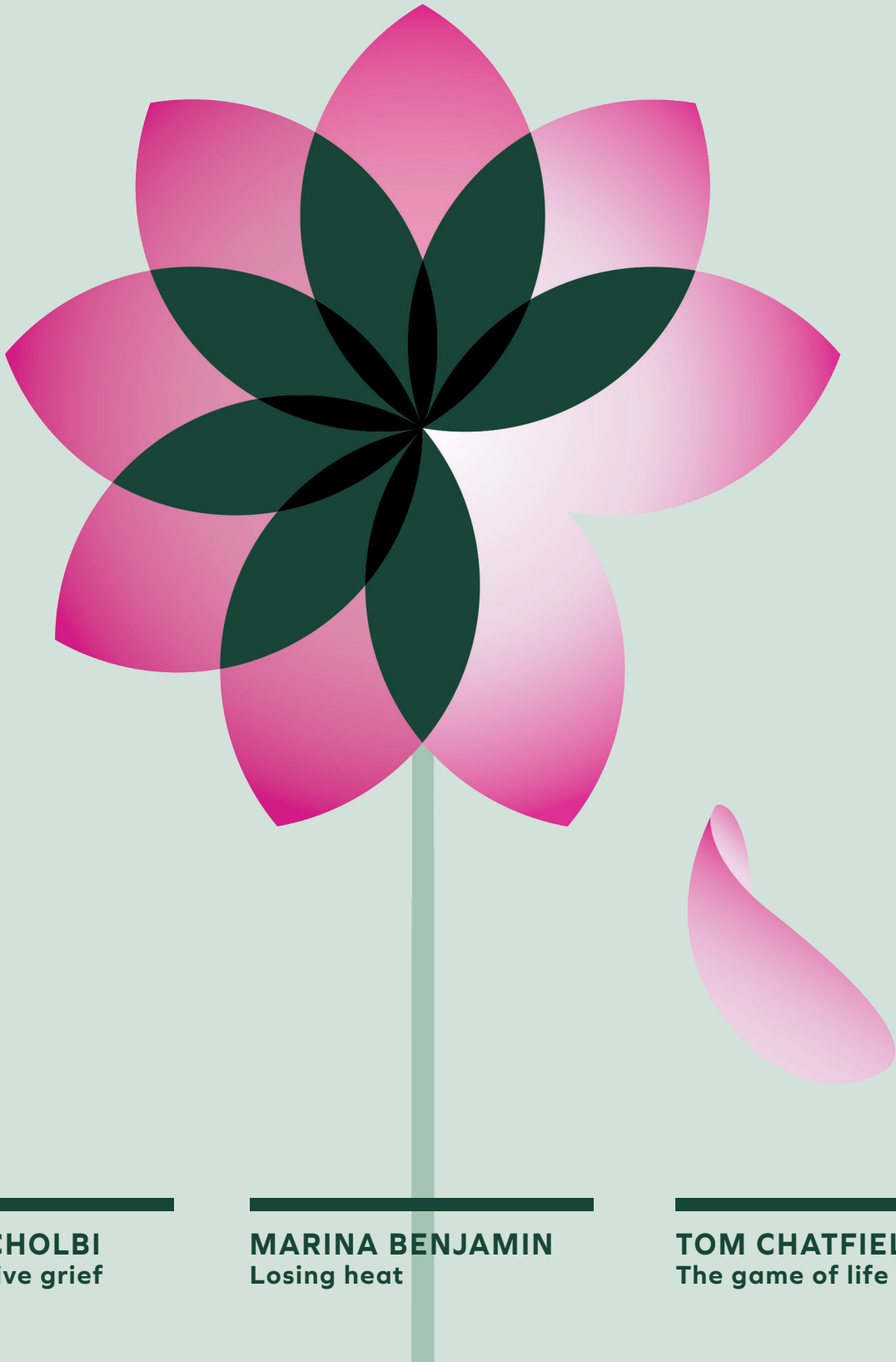


LOSING LIKE A STOIC

# NewPhilosopher



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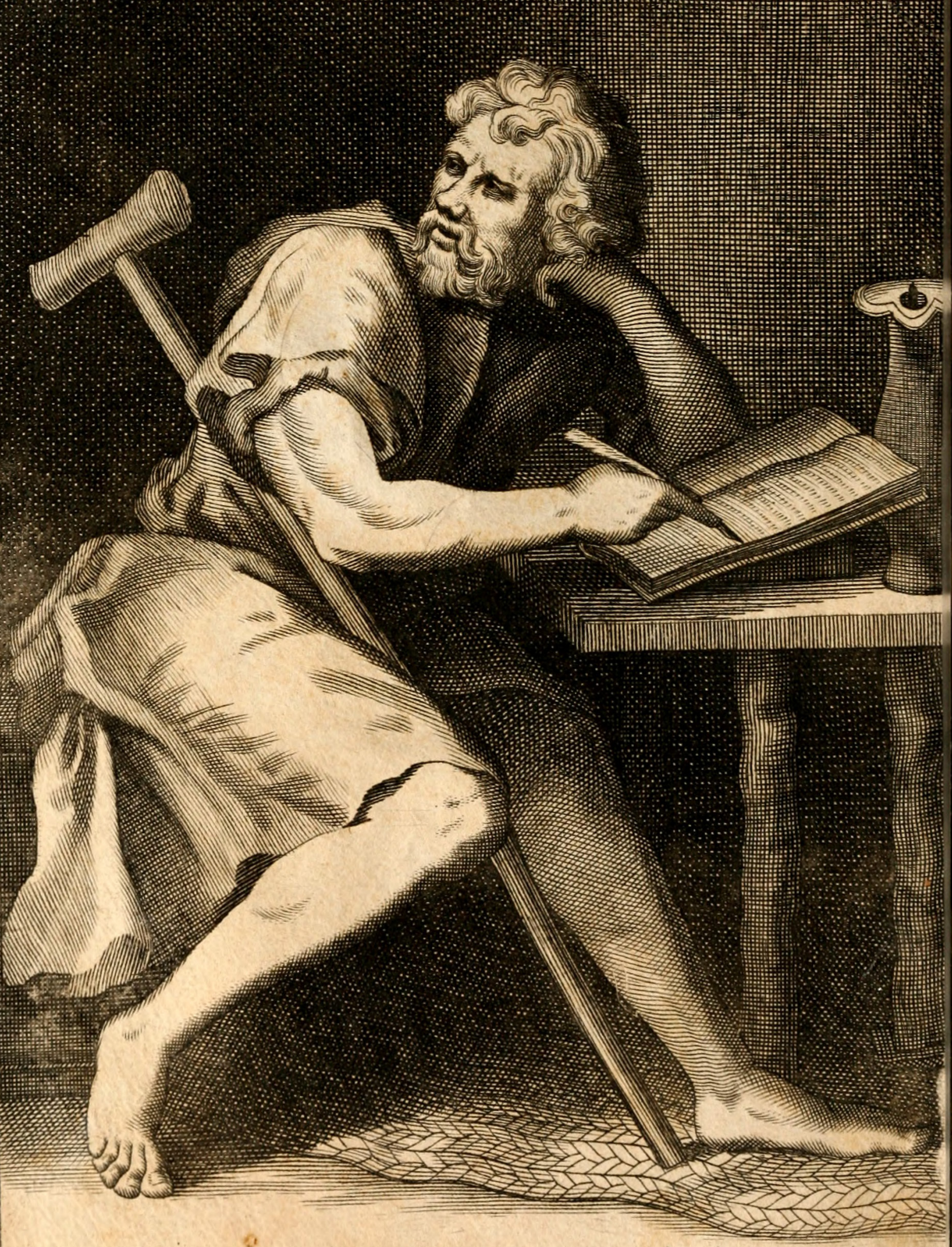
**MICHAEL CHOLBI**  
Transformative grief

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**MARINA BENJAMIN**  
Losing heat

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**TOM CHATFIELD**  
The game of life



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 by Mariana Alessandri

# Losing like a Stoic

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On the day my 84-year-old mother was told that her cancer had come back after six months of radiation and a year of chemo, she sent her eight children the same text: “Hospice.” Some of us countered with “No!” And since I was the only one in physical proximity to my mum, siblings texted me their hope that she would fight. In one ear I heard my mum making ‘the call’ to friends, who yelled at her: “You can’t give up!”

In my other ear I heard the Stoic philosopher Epictetus whispering, “You are foolish if you want your [mother] to live forever.” This is one of three phrases to live by if you plan to handle death stoically. Wanting our loved ones to live forever is an example of “wanting things to be up to you that are not

up to you, and things to be yours that are not yours”. My mother was Catholic in practice but Stoic in spirit, and she agreed with Epictetus that we’ve got to be realistic. In true New Yorker fashion, she scolded her friends: “I’ve been in pain for two months! Do you want me to keep going this way?” But they weren’t there last year: they didn’t drive her to the hospital every week for treatment, sometimes twice a week, sometimes five times. They didn’t see her grow smaller and frailer with each passing month. So, when the cancer returned, it wasn’t theirs to decide whether my mother should get permanently hooked up to ‘Peter’, her chemo bag. “I called to tell you I’m dying, not to ask your advice.” It was my mother’s

way of calling her friends foolish for wanting her to live forever.

Epictetus warned us not to forget what humans are made of: skin that rips, tumours that grow, organs that fail. He would say that the loss I feel today, five months after watching my mother die, stems from the fact that I didn’t treat her body as destined for the grave. “If you are fond of a jug,” Epictetus advises, “say ‘I am fond of a jug!’ For then when it is broken you will not be upset.” Closer to home, “If you kiss your child or your wife, say that you are kissing a human being; for when it dies you will not be upset.” By keeping our eyes cast on mortality, we can blunt the pain of grief. For ten years, I have been teaching this to my students, many

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of whom live in multi-generational homes alongside ageing *abuelos*. Epictetus’ advice is a good start: lose the wishful thinking. The person you love most dearly – whose death you cannot contemplate without shuddering – will surely, undeniably, 100 per cent die. Grief is among the most devastating effects of what Stoics call the “storm” of life, but if we correct our expectations, we can limit the damage to our ship.

My mother never said of life what Epictetus said we should never say: “I have lost it,” but instead, “I have given it back.” This is the third Stoic way to prevent outsized grieving. It was as true about her own life as it was about the life of her nine-year-old child, the brother who died in 1972 before I was born. “As long as he gives it,” Epictetus said and my mum agreed,

“take care of it as something that is not your own, just as travellers treat an inn.” My mother understood Epictetus’ logic: there is no loss. The feeling that we’ve lost someone comes from confusing ‘mine’ with ‘not mine’. My mother’s son was never hers, and my mother was never mine. Both briefly stayed at the inn that I am still checked into. Epictetus reasoned that if we acknowledge death as a fact of life – “the lot of a human being” – we won’t cry “Alas! Poor me!” My mother had no ‘poor me’ button.

But I do, and my prolonged grief is evidence that I am foolish and stupid, according to Epictetus. I would like to ask him something as a person who “gave it back”. What about those of us who kiss our loved ones like they are mortal? Does the tragedy of death really come down to unpreparedness? Is accepting that human life is out of our control, fragile, and on loan, sufficient to blunt the pain of grief?

My sense of loss does not come from surprise, confusion, or irrationality. I am not sad because I didn’t see it coming; I don’t cry because I mistook my categories. I obeyed Epictetus, who ordered me to “let death and exile and everything that is terrible appear before you every day, especially death”. But he didn’t keep his end of the bargain: “You will never have anything contemptible in your thoughts or crave anything excessively.” I “learn[ed] the will of nature,” and yet I crave my mother.

My sense of loss stems from the unrelenting fact that there is one less blunt person staying at my inn. One less small and subtle sharpshooter.

One less fireplace fire, burning to keep me warm and show me what I can’t see in other lights. One less haematologist who faced sexism and who quietly earned her corner office anyway. One less mother who gave a presentation in her hospital hours after giving birth to her seventh child. One less scientist who zoomed in on A1c3 and who saw AIDS in New York City when it was still the flu. One less champion of reason and reading. One less spiritual counselor to friends and strangers. One less grandmother who cross-stitched angels when she was not composing theological essays. One less woman who was “bad at math” but who made a monthly budget when her husband’s brain went loopy. One less daughter-in-law who knew how to make the family birthday cake. One less Chilean to make me *fricasé* and *pastel de choclo*. One less deferential wife who somehow maintained her dignity. One less *comadre* to talk through her diagnosis with. One less warm soul who slept beside me when I broke my arm at age nine.

Epictetus: I knew my mother was mortal. I knew she wasn’t mine. I rooted for her to die and congratulated her on her last breath. I am not upset because I’m foolish, but because death ejected a Very Important Person from my inn. So, while I have largely evaded the guilt that often accompanies a non-Stoic attitude toward death, I carry the weight of loss, of the world’s impoverishment, of my own void. I grieve because I know precisely who I have given back. ■