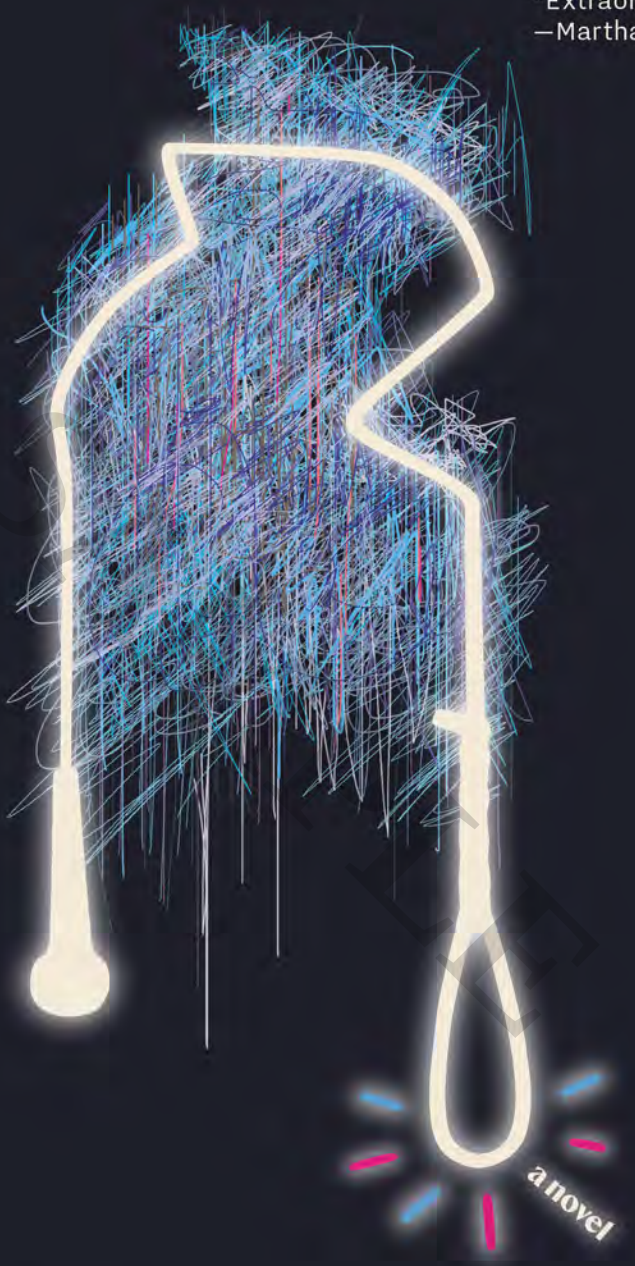
"Extraordinary."
—Martha Baillie



The Comedian's Book of the Dead

Gary Barwin

The Comedian's Book of the Dead

a novel

Gary Barwin

SAMPLE

BOOK*HUG PRESS
TORONTO 2026

FIRST EDITION
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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: The comedian's book of the dead / Gary Barwin.
Names: Barwin, Gary, author.
Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20260203556 | Canadiana (ebook) 20260203564
ISBN 9781771669887 (softcover)
ISBN 9781771669894 (EPUB)
Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.
Classification: LCC PS8553.A783 C66 2026 | DDC C813/.54—dc23

The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Book*hug Press also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.

Book*hug Press acknowledges that the land on which we operate is the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabe, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. We recognize the enduring presence of many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, and are grateful for the opportunity to meet and work on this territory.

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I was sure he was going to die. Long ago when I was a young husband and father. My boy in a tree. My boy at the top of a tree. The tree, higher than the rooftops, swaying back and forth because of my boy. The top of the tree skinny like the boy, the branches broken during his climb. The boy: my six-year-old. My Grigory. My sweet boy. I was just back from performing out of town and we couldn't find our son.

Betty and I, we were used to our son hiding. Under the bed. In the yard. In the cupboard beneath the sink. Because he was angry. Because he was sad. Because he wanted to worry us. And it worked. He ran away when he was five, and we were frantic. Betty, you take the car, I'll bike around the neighbourhood, get the neighbours looking. I searched every backyard, every bush and hedge. I crossed the big road to the park. After hours, we finally found him under the coats in the dark of the front-hall closet. Grinning that we didn't discover him, that he'd won. His smile enough to forgive the stake that fear of losing him had driven into our hearts. Parenthood a big game of hide-and-seek. Seek—trying to understand our son when he was bored, frustrated, sad, doing dangerous things. Hide—the fear even from ourselves.

On the day of the climb, I was searching the yard, and something made me look up. Our little boy was at the top of the tree. I was too filled with dread to be scared. I found a rope and did what I had to do. I began climbing as he had

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done. I hadn't been up a tree since childhood, when I had to be rescued by my dad. But I'd never climbed sixty feet up to the finger-thin part of the tree. The part that might snap and our boy would fall, a nestling tumbling, breaking, twisted on the lawn, and me his father, falling, breaking, twisted, too. My poor sweet boy. But I climbed branch to branch until I was just below him, saw the entire neighbourhood from above as if in a dream, and I swung the rope over the branch where he stood, holding on, not able to go either up or down, and only then, discovering himself terrified. Using the loop of the rope as a foothold, I was able to lower him down to me; then, together, my arm around him, we climbed down almost to the bottom of the tree, where Betty and I and little Grigory would hold on to each other on the solid ground and shake with both relief and fear. But before we were all the way down, he squirmed out of my hold. And he fell. And he hit the edge of the sandbox and went limp. Betty and I driving like fiends to the emergency room, where finally, finally, he woke and they wrapped his arm in a cast and sent us home.

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I have done things that made me shudder. Thousands—millions—of them. But I was not always Death. I was a husband, a father, a comedian, chosen to replace the previous Death. It was the ultimate joke.

Millions of souls transported Beneath, past the end of everything.

Even with all flesh gone from my bones, my heart only gristle, I felt nothing but shame.

A place. A time. And usually a name. I'd arrive and say what I was told to say. These were the worst assignments. Weeping. Negotiation. Anger. Desperation. I preferred a silent death. As if in neutral, the body unmoving but thrumming with spirit. Waiting. I'd reach through the flesh, touch the incorporeal hand. Here I am. Come with me. I'd pull out the shadow, lift the fragile wings of spirit from its now-spent cocoon.

This time, I was told a place, a time—the day and hour—but no name. *You'll know*, they said. *You really will*. And I did. I cursed that knowing. *No*, *not this*, I said when I arrived. Surely not this. I fell to the floor, looking up at the scrawny body. This body, its soul ready to go, pushed against the flesh, almost bursting, an animal straining against its cage. A former living thing, now limp. Hanging. Tied to a beam. A noose around its bloodless neck. I had seen such things before. Such basements. Such corpses. But not this. Never this. I could never have imag-

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ined this. My own son. From the beam. A slack corpse. How could this have happened?

But I'd talk him back, back into his body again. By force of will, I'd join each part of him back to each of his body's cells, infuse each atom of his mortal body with life again. How could he die? And so young—in his twenties. And surely because of me.

I was Death. His father was Death.

I'd beg to take his place. How could I do what I was supposed to do: lead him to the Beneath while I remained alive? As Death. Not dead but not quite alive either. Blind with agony.

How often had I reached for him, lifted him, led him, walked with him? Saved his life.

Now this body, turning slightly, a leaf in a breath of wind. Speckled. His arms. Face. His horrendous open eyes. His sticking-out tongue. But he was beautiful. Always. Even when terrible.

How could my chest burn like this? How was it possible that eyes could be stabbed by such pain?

I was supposed to leave the body, walk his spirit to the Beneath. A guide. But how could I leave him—what had been Grigory, what had been infused with Grigory, had been that place where Grigory was in the world, was alive in the world. Had grown. Lived. How could I leave this universe that had been my boy and take the insubstantial wisp of my dead son away?

I cut him down; no one had seen him. I lowered him with care, rested his body on the ground. Like carrying a sleeping child from the car to the bed. My insides hissing with agony and love. I covered his body.

I'd stumped through all these years, compelled to this role, this corrosive half-life. I'd been compliant. I'd done everything

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they'd asked. War. Murders. Children. Partners of sixty years. And despite this, they took my son. How did this help the world? What part of the plan was this? How could they inflict this on me? I'd been loyal. Steadfast. Strong.

I would beg them to reverse this horror.

I sat beside him for hours as I had so many times before. This time it was my own nightmare I was attempting to wait out. My own tears.

I went into the garage for a spade. I couldn't tell anyone what had happened. It would be as if I had somehow failed. Grim shuffle of dirt as I dug his grave. A not-bed for his blanket of earth. My son put to rest as I had done so many nights before. Grigory in his bed. Death his father singing this final lullaby. Grigory. You're safe.

But he hadn't been. The Fates had allowed it. Had planned it. Made it so. And to die in such pain. This is how you will be in the Beneath. For all time. No recovery from this hurt.

I'll plead with them, implore them to relent. To resurrect.

Grigory, I'll ask them to send you back. I've covered your long, sweet body with earth; for now I'll leave this part of you here while I bring the rest Beneath.

How could you choose this? How could they think you would choose this?

As I led spirits below, there were occasions, many of them, when memory of breath and blood still remained, when they would ask what I knew of life and its end, of fate and its decisions, questions of why and when.

But Grigory said nothing, was silent. His spirit was only grim vibration, a sullen shadow. He had made the decision to close himself off from the world, from feeling, from me. From the rage and pain over the death of his mother, Betty. We walked Beneath, my arm around him, protective, gathering

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him to me, as one would some old, unsteady grandfather. *Come, son*, I said. *Let me show you the way, protect you as you travel.*

And so we crossed the river, arrived at the gates, and there I left him, watched him walk into the Beneath. He would not allow himself to be led further now that he had arrived. *Let me do this myself,* he said. As he had said when I'd taken him to kindergarten and wanted to walk him in, take off his coat, boots, mittens, take out his lunch, kiss him. And I had to stand glumly outside in the playground, between the bright yellow slide and the sad bouncy pony.

And here, too, at the gates, I wished to do this last thing for my son before I had to leave him. I would go into the Beneath and I would do what in the history of the world had often been longed for but never done. I would beg the committee, and they would change everything. They would let me take him home.

I had never travelled into the Beneath. I was not allowed beyond the gates. My job was to bring souls below but go no further. I could enter the gates only when it was my time. I could enter only as a human. Only when I was Death no longer, when I was only merely dead.

Walking Grigory to these gates, I had never felt more human. Or less human. And as I stood watching Grigory shuffle away, I decided just then that I would enter the Beneath. What consequence could I possibly face that was worse than losing Grigory, that was worse than death—or Death?

I took a step, then tried another. I would step through the gates and follow my Grigory. But as I stood at the threshold, my bones were the bright hot of lightning, a flash, and then it felt like they were gone. The surface of my skin shook as if with thunder and my mind roared. It was not that I was

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paralyzed but that I had slammed into a solid boundary, another dimension, transparent but unyielding, as if I had smashed into plate glass without seeing. I felt my centre to be stone or ice or vacancy.

This was proof then. I could not enter the Beneath as Death, just as I'd thought. Passing through the gates was not possible for me. Though Death, I was alive. If, as the old joke goes, you call this living. Going through the gates meant a change of state. I would have to revivify, to revive, to find again that fluid, protean, volatile human experience from within the voracious black hole that Death had made me, that force that pulled everything into its darkness to become petrified, frozen, lost. I could no longer, not truly, remember how it felt to be human. What I had done, had had to do, what I had been compelled to see. Both grief and love had been stretched beyond recognition by the ravenous dark. I was alive because I wasn't dead. But I'd have to learn to be alive again, to be truly, painfully, vulnerably alive.

I fell to my knees and did that which I was forbidden. I despaired. How could this world be so? How could my son have found it so? How could I not have known, not done anything? To be plain, how could I again feel what a human feels and feel it without shattering into infinity? It was as if I were at the beginning of the simplest story, the most elemental narrative arc. If I were to enter the Beneath, if I were to travel through it, I would have to learn.

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Betty and me and little baby Grigory sitting in a tree. N-O-T-D-E-A-D. We were a family. A normal family. Mother, father, son.

Father was a small-time comedian. Touring little comedy clubs and bars, corporate events for the rye-and-coke crowd. Take my life. Please. But really, I loved it. My boy, my beautiful and thoughtful wife.

Mother was a baker, had her own bakery. Bread crunchy as bone, insides soft as cloud. Little Grigory in his basket on the counter. Nothing as comforting as being raised with the scent of bread. Such safety in the world.

And for a time—a long time—Betty and I were, as she liked to say, close as flour and water.

Tell me, Betty, I said. *I dropped a slice of your bread last night and the buttered side landed on the floor. What misfortune—is there no justice in the world*?

What can I do? *You buttered the wrong side.*

And little Grigory had risen like bread inside of Betty. I'd touch her belly, feeling for life. Those happy times when we anticipated the future, thinking of looking back together when old. Our children. The multitude of our children and their children. A tribe, a people originating from our intimacy. Our love.

Betty and me. Hand-holding, walking with a stroller. Gazing together at our shared life, sleeping in his little bed.

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Singing. Helping him with airplaning spoons, toddling, with *Mama* and *Dada* and the potty.

Even though I was Death.

Years before, when Betty had started the bakery, I'd been there helping. Proud. Excited. We were young, I was fresh-faced, even plump.

And I was often honest, frank about what I must do. When the committee had chosen me to be Death—I was only twenty-five—I accepted it with the resolution I knew I had to, like a day on which it storms. What could I do? No point trying to throw lightning back into the sky. What the Fates decreed was fated. That's how it works.

I found Betty in the little office at the back of the bakery, looking over accounts, and I explained: "Something has happened, something I don't want, something I can't control. Something I don't understand the reason for, but something I have to tell you. Something we're going to have to manage together. It's happened not just to me but to both of us. It's hard to believe, and I don't know why, but the Fates have decided that I am to be Death."

Of course, there was disbelief. What did we know of such things? Could it even be real? We'd thought we knew the world, our world. Betty and me. Sure, you only know what is true when it becomes true to you. But could this be true? I knew it was.

There was anger. Crying. Betty's tears blurring the accounts before her. Blurring everything. First she believed it was a cruel joke—my cruel joke, for of course it was cruel, though I could not control it. Then she thought it was my way of saying I was leaving her. Then, as if it were cancer, we held each other, would live out this thing together, whatever it may bring.

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No one had come to me. Neither the Fates nor a messenger. Neither a past Death nor an angel. One day, things changed and I knew. The walls inside me, between one cell and another, between one thought and another, had fallen. I had been chosen. It was as certain as the need for breath.

Why was it me and not someone else? What was it about me? What made me the right choice? Did the fact of my being chosen have something to do with Grigory's subsequent death? With Betty's? But, I thought, why anything? Why dogs, or toast, or love or bitterness or equilateral triangles? Why had I been born in the first place? Why had any of us? Did I need to know? What to do about what was lost?

We didn't know what it would be to become Death, how everything would be different. But we had each other and our life together. We were young and electricity hummed through each of our cells. We were vibrant with life and possibility. In each of our cells, we felt the instinct of our bodies, the call of our beings toward living. We would have a child. A child was the answer to death. To becoming Death.

We conceived Grigory, and then Grigory was born.

But by the time Grigory could read and began to go to school, before I even understood it myself, I had changed. I would float in, like a shadow of a shadow, and take him to the park to swing or play in the sandbox or listen to birds. I was a hundred miles away. And I had become less. Eroded by death and all that was death, by all I must do as Death. Knowing that I would be arriving for countless lives, each day, whether wanted or not. That this was the world.

I understood that one couldn't just keep being Death—keep bringing death—without any consequences. I brought endings, darkness, made couples and presidents weep, caused soldiers and parents to fall sobbing onto the blood-thick

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ground. I felt it even when death was wanted, longed for, was begged for relief.

Did Grigory know? Children, at least at first, know their parents as the world. But he came to know that something was different about his dad. Even around my son, I could not keep the darkness beneath the surface, the abyss within. I tried to hold on to the father I wanted to be, but being Death erodes.

And so eventually, Betty had to tell him. Had to tell Grigory about his father. About how I was before everything changed. About my duties. About my new edgelessness. Harvester of endings, reaper of lives. Fixer. Finisher. Fisher.

Fissure.

And then Betty, because she had had to speak it out loud, saw what was lost, saw what I had become. What I wasn't and could not be again.

In the beginning, Betty had helped me. Though I wasn't able to describe and explain everything, she could understand without understanding. I was not Death when I was with her—until, increasingly, I was. I felt washed out to sea, Betty on the shore reaching for me. But I was gone.

Eventually there was talk of separation, then there was separation. There was talk of divorce and then there was divorce. And Betty, of course, got custody. I wasn't to see my Grigory. What kind of a father could I be, despite jigsaw puzzles, baseball, and ice cream? No one knew I was Death, Betty didn't say, but she painted a picture, described the gist. The excoriated hollowness. And I was so often gone from my son, had so little to show for my ostensible work. For a while I continued working as a comedian, but my shows became sadder and sadder, more and more pathetic. When life gives you lemons and no sugar, you make bitter lemonade.

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In truth, I was there but not there. I was Death and then I was myself. And soon, though I walked through life, I felt only Death. A loving father, but that part of me like the weak splash of a stone dropped down a mine shaft.

A wraith, I became capable of anything. So Grigory and Betty remained at the bakery, and I established myself in a basement, like almost every new divorcé. But I paid child support and planned for a home, planned for eventual weekends with Grigory. Planned many bitter things.

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