



KOUD EN WIT EN BLEEK

"I MIGHT ONLY MOVE DURING THE DAWN.
I COULD FOR ALL THAT MATTER, BE
SOLELY SURROUNDED BY VAST DARKNESS.
BUT I CANNOT - AND WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO
- ALTER ANY DREAMS. I CANNOT CHANGE THE
MEMORIES. I CAN ONLY MAKE THEM MORE
MEANINGFUL."

How to
perceive
time
in times
of grief.

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MADLIEF VAN DE BEEK

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Master Thesis

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Koud en wit en bleek: how to perceive time in times of grief

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FOREWORD

‘Dan zie ik blije foto’s van taart en champagne om het leven te vieren en dan wil ik zo graag meedoen. Ik wil niets liever dan de slingers ophangen, maar ik kan ze maar niet gevonden krijgen. Waar is mijn optimisme gebleven, mijn levensvreugde, mijn vermogen om onbezorgd plezier te maken en vrolijk te zijn, zonder steeds het gevoel te hebben dat ik aan de rand van de afgrond sta en me schrap moet zetten om niet naar beneden te vallen?’

Marjolein Hurkmans (2022)

‘I see happy pictures of cake and champagne to celebrate life and then I want to participate so badly. I want nothing more than to hang the garlands (‘have a ball’). But I can’t seem to find them myself. Where has my optimism gone to? My joie de vivre? My ability to have fun without any worry. Without having this constant feeling of standing on the edge of the abyss; bracing myself to not fall down.’

I see a girl leaning into a ladder, overlooking herself stumbling over her own words at the funeral of her mother. It is the image of a her holding a mirror that breaks the beam of the theatrical spotlight that causes it to shine to a different spot in the space. Not on herself, but instead on the nothingness of an empty stage behind her. I see a woman, turning her mother's dress inside out while the image of her, beamed onto the wall behind her, shows how she embroidered 'mama' in the seams of that same dress'.

This thesis will be a collection of personal thoughts I wrote about losing my mother in the winter of 2022. But this thesis, is also a literary search of the description of grief by others. In the chapters that will follow, I will try to establish a common ground between the experiences of mourners and the working methods of a scenographer. My aim is to show an understanding of utilising scenographic methods that have the potential to uncover a perception of time by those who grief. This thesis could provide a building-ground for scenographers in the field, who want to connect the (very) personal to the practical. For example, designing a dramaturgical take on sharing a personal narrative on the phenomenology of grief.

STRUCTURE OF THE DOCUMENT

In the chapter: 'Leaving a Mark', I will lay-out the methods of creative writing and, (auto)ethnographical research. This mode of writing (creative writing), will serve as the basis of my research document. In the chapter: 'Theatre of The Real Mourner', I will begin to investigate the right scenographic methods to use in times of grief. This chapter includes the technique of 'documentary theatre' and 'Staging the Real'.

In the chapter: 'Good Grief', you get introduced to the participants of the co-creation part of this research. This chapter also includes the experiences by theatre maker Alexander Devriendt, autonomous artist Roos van Geffen, and my own consensus of "good" or "bad" grief.

The chapter 'Above and Beyond', is a deep-dive into the understanding of (somatic) scenography and the placing of a theatrical frame. This chapter will introduce the chapter: 'The Theatrical Frame' which is divided in two parts.

This two-part chapter: 'The Theatrical Frame', will be a description of the days in the theatre in which I tested the methods mentioned above and, experimented with co-creation. The chapter: 'Observing Trauma', investigates the psychological side of grieving. This chapters includes the physical health and the effects of trauma, experienced during a period of mourning.

The chapter: 'Death Becomes Her', will be a condensed introduction on death culture. The chapter: 'In Limbo', describes a work which included a medical explanation of death. This chapter will be followed by a conclusion of the thesis, chapter: 'To Conclude' and, a bibliography.

The chapter: 'The Time And Place To Say Goodbye', includes field notes of my visitation to graveyards and crematoria in the year before my mother's passing. The next chapters will include a letter written to death, a description of my mother's deathbed and, a letter written from death to me.



A MOMENT IN TIME

My mind has left my body a few hours before when being struck by the first sunny day of the year. The welcoming of the new season: spring, with its bulbs, sprouting grass en weak rays of sunshine. The beginning of a new chapter.

I lost my mom in the winter of last year. Today, I was reminded again of how time does pass and, that I am still “not okay” (this day also happened to mark the first year after my mom was diagnosed with brain metastasis: tumors in the brain). Even in times of grief, I find myself failing. Not hurt enough, not sad enough, not brave enough, not appreciating life enough, not loving enough, not crying enough, not being angry enough, not denying enough and, certainly not being true to myself enough. I have doubt if the content of what I am planning to write in this document will show enough “research”. I have to keep in mind that the thesis should also become a document that showcases my abilities as a scenographer. These abilities I feel myself certainly lacking since my life became less about me as a maker and, more about me as a survivor of immense tragedy. My mom died, my fucking mom died.

(14th of February 2023)

GRIEF & SCENOGRAPHY

I feel a political drive to showcase grief as a permanent stage of life, and not an uncomfortable hurdle society wants you to quickly overcome and come out of as a “better person”. We as a society have a deep-rooted fear of the dying and the dead. But I believe that should not come at the cost of those who have lost a loved one. Or worse, at the cost of those who are currently trying to find meaning while being in hospice or hospital bed. Death is a natural phenomenon, our anxiety and hush-mentality are not. Moreover, I believe the act of mourning is not inherently a bad thing; to mourn, is also to be nostalgic about moments past. The act of grieving might as well be another form of loving.

A noticeable cultural shift has taken place when it comes to the ways in which we discuss and, showcase grief in the current years.

Documentaries such as ‘Ik rouw van jou’ (2020) and ‘Grief is love in a heavy coat’ (2022) and theatre plays such as ‘Funeral’ by Ontroerend Goed (2021) and ‘ROUW’ by Marte Boneschansker (2021), come to mind. It appears in most of the source material I gathered for the writing of this thesis. It also comes across in the ways some of my friends, those who have also lost a parent at a young age, seem to seek comfort in sharing their stories.



PRESENTING GRIEF

Making a performance lecture in December 2022, four weeks after losing my mother, helped me in some ways to cope with the horror. It gave me a purpose in the weeks after, in which any trace of reality was absent. The absurdity of loss. Creating theatrical representations of my grief gave me something to hold on to. I was in control of my narrative; in what I showed, and, didn't show. In how poetic or, raw, I wanted my representations to come across to the audience. It made me feel better. I felt proud to be able to perform under these circumstances, it felt good to be able to make other people cry because my life - at that moment in time - was worse than theirs. Like Peter Handke (1972) writes in his book 'A Sorrow Beyond Dream': *'The worst thing right now would be sympathy, expressed in a word or even a glance. I would turn away or cut the sympathiser short, because I need the feeling that what I am going through is incomprehensible and incommunicable; only then does the horror seem meaningful and real'*.

I presented my grief to the Scenography master, a mere month after first experiencing it, but I remember almost nothing of those weeks. It is hard to reflect on yourself while experiencing a loss of memory and, without having any perception of time. My psychologist calls it 'rouwroes'*.

AFTER SOME THOUGHTS AND REFLECTION...

I am the girl leaning into a ladder, overlooking herself stumbling over her own words at the funeral of her mother. It is the image of me holding a mirror that breaks the beam of the theatrical spotlight that causes it to shine to a different spot in the space. Not on me, but instead on the nothingness of an empty stage behind me. I was turning my mother's dress inside out while the image of me - beamed onto the wall behind me - shows how I embroidered 'mama' in the seams of that same dress.

* *The fogginess one experiences in times of grief.*

ARTISTIC RESEARCH

In light of the sensitivity of my research topic, it is essential to end this introduction by stating the following: Methods of scenography are used in this research to uncover and further develop different modes of knowledge. Methods of scenography are tools to transmit artistic knowledge to the spectators. Artistic Research prides itself on not being conducted on a primarily scientific base. Furthermore, Artistic Research declares itself on the premises of being a more embodied and, creative way to gain knowledge. Therefore, one should consider the research participants as valuable co-creators and not 'subjects' controlled by certain valuables. My gratitude goes towards them and those who have confided me with their deepest hurt and sorrow.

'Dus waar zeuren we nog over? Samen zijn we minder alleen. En we kunnen zomaar nog 30 jaar verder leven. Zou toch zonde zijn als we die verspillen met blijven zoeken naar die slingers. Misschien kunnen we ze niet vinden omdat ze allang zijn opgehangen. We hoeven ze alleen nog maar te zien.'

Marjolein Hurkmans (2022)

So what are we whining about? Together we are less alone. And who knows, we could just as well live another 30 years. Wouldn't it be a shame if we wasted that time by looking for those garlands? perhaps we can't find them because someone else already hung them up for us. We need to open our eyes and see them.



Thank you, Jesse van de Beek and Valentijn van de Beek, my brothers, for not only participating in my research, but also proof reading and editing the final version of the document. Thank you, Guido de Zeeuw, for helping me to format the academic parts of this research in the right way. And, for being an overall, amazing boyfriend. Thank you, Kees van de Beek, my father, for bringing me snacks and glasses of wine during the nights spent writing this thesis.

Thank you, senior lecturer Henny Dörr and Professor Nirav Christophe, for guiding and advising me in the writing of this thesis.

LEAVING A MARK



THE ACT OF WRITING

The act of writing is often, wrongfully so, strictly seen as a mode to mediate one's thoughts. Writing becomes the final product, a piece of paper that communicates a result. 'For whom do you write?' was posed as a question, at the beginning of writing this thesis. Which raises another question: is it possible to write for the sake of writing?

The act of 'creating' correlates perfectly to the act of writing. Writing can be a method to come to a consciousness of (meaning) making. The term 'scenographic writing' is referred to as one of the cornerstones of scenographic research*. Scenographers in the field seem to be in continuous consideration of a new language and, the many different modes of documentation.

Performative or metonymic writing can signify a process of materialisation and imagination. Prof. Della Pollock (Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina) puts forward an interesting idea in the text 'Performing Writing' she states that '*performative writing is subjective*' and stipulates the dynamic between '*the performative self and, its relation between the writer and his/her subject(s), subject-selves, and/or reader(s)*' (Pollock, 1998).

When writing about the process of grieving, subjectivity seems to be obscured by a need for objectivity. There seems to be a desire to contextualise oneself and, construct a coherent linear story of real-life events. Noticeable are the 'This is based on a real story...', disclaimers at the beginnings of a text, movie or theatre play about grief. Even though, real life does not unfold itself as an easy to follow narrative of cause-and-effect, as Gijs van Sanden puts it in his book 'De dingen die je vergeet'. We do seem to cling on the unpoetic and raw reality of (the aftermath of) death. That may already be a sufficient conclusion to why mourners seem to be so attentive of materiality, space, and detail. It is because they realise that without any poetic gestures, someone is 'gone for good' and that it happened in an 'ordinary instant'.

* This refers to the chapter 'Research Methods in Scenography', written by Joslin McKinney and Helen Iball and published in the book *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*.

FROM REALITY TO LITERATURE

From reality to literature or, from autobiographical to the autoethnographical. '*Writing is a way of knowing, a method of inquiry*' (Richardson, 2000). 'Biographical' is a term that stems from literature and, signifies a text written out of real-life experiences. 'Ethnographical' is a term often used in the study of anthropology and is a mode of research that captures real-life experiences. Putting 'auto-' before these terms changes the written words and research, to be perceived out of a first-person narrative.

In 'The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing', David Morley (Associate Professor in English at the University of Warwick) lays bare the conflict of writing autobiographically: writing that is derived out of own experiences has the possibility to obscure one's own objectivity. When you write from the self or, conduct autoethnographic research, you should keep in mind that '*you are many influences. You are many points of view. There are many versions of you. And you change over time*' (Morley, 2007). Thus, by trying to tell one clear-to-follow narrative of yourself, in one distinctive writing style, you tell just one version of the truth. One could argue that it is precisely for this reason, that a more creative writing style, which is both biographical and ethnographical*, could help deepen the multiple versions of the self to conduct a (more) honest version of the truth.

* I refer back to the notion that ethnographical is a systematically mode of research which includes more analysing writing styles: f.e. field notes and interviews. Thus, it differs from the classical format of an autobiography which often follows one experience with a clear motive and end result. I do acknowledge that not all autobiographical literature follow this same pattern and, that most will have very clear grounding in both the biographical as, ethnographical methods.

It is important to approach the subject matter from multiple perspectives to make sure that facts and details are not obscured by one's own imagination, memories, and familiarity with a subject. Falseness in the memories of a real-life event should be distinguished from objective witness reports: which show a more attentive approach to describing the space and materiality in which an event occurred. But a first-person perspective should not be diminished since both tell a version of the actual event. These multiple perspectives should coexist, so they become multifaceted components into researching the actuality of a human experience: an experience that is not easily captured in words.

I WRITE BECAUSE I CAN

*I wake up every day feeling broken. Is that coping? Is speaking about being hurt a trigger for me? Reliving trauma. My mom wrote when she could not find the right words to say. Much like the article says: 'thoughts emerged while writing'. She constructed both eulogies for her parents out of her own diary entries. She tried 'sitting down for it' to write them. However, she could not do it. It had to come to her in writing, when she was in fact not thinking about sharing what she had written. Coping like Peter Handke said: 'I have become a memory and expression machine. I feel lost in thinking only about my mother'**

* I wrote this text January 10, 2023. The article I am referring to is about the method of 'Freewriting'. The quote of Peter Handke comes from the book *A Sorrow Beyond Dream*. The quote is translated by Ralph Manheim as followed: *As usual when engaged in literary work, I am alienated from myself and transformed into an object, a remembering and formulating machine* (p.5).

Pollock puts forward five characteristics of performative writing, in which the writing becomes meaningful because of the act (of the writing itself) and not, the written words as a conclusive thought. Pollock comes to a consensus that writing is a method in and of itself; a way to think rather than a method to only pin down previous thoughts. Pollock states that performative writing should be evocative, metonymic, nervous, citational, and consequential. "Evocative" means that the writing should 'evoke worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect, and insight', "metonymic" means that the text should be 'self-consciously partial, a material signifying process that invites laughter and transformation' (Fitzpatrick, Longley, 2020).

By stating that the writing should be nervous, Pollock suggests that the text should be open to change; it should reveal an ongoing process and not, a finished result. Pollocks states that the writing should be grounded in (con)textualization: the text should be "citational". And lastly, she suggests that the 'act of performative writing' should signify the start of a new discourse, the text should be "consequential". It should provoke you to new thoughts and actions.

*We did not hesitate. We did not question ourselves. We ran towards the gate and opened it. We spent the time waiting for our mom to 'do or don't die', by playing like little children in the playground. It felt liberating to focus on swinging back and forth on the swing. To only think of keeping my balance. I laughed and made jokes to my brothers about how we grown-ups playing at such a crucial moment in time, would make for a great arthouse-movie scene. My mom survived that day in June. Yet here we are again. Again in the same hospital where nothing seems to have changed. Again overlooking this playground with his soft black tiles and bright-coloured climbing frame. Again there is you, reading this text and being suffocated by my sob stories. Since nothing seems to heal me as much as writing does. Does this place look different to you now?**

Writing grounds us in reality. Even when we question how real this reality truly is, it does make us attentive to our presence in the here-and-now. Writing has the possibility to reveal certain structures, realities, and methods, that were not realised by the author before the writing occurred. Writing leaves a mark in space and time.

TIMESTAMP

De maan was prachtig: groot, rond, hij leek wel van goud. En er ging ook al zo'n mooie zonsondergang aan vooraf. Er lag rijp op de velden, het water van de rivier die boven en beneden Nederland van elkaar scheidt, kleurde in alle tinten rood en oranje. De dag dat ik naar Brabant reed om afscheid te nemen van mijn moeder, was een van de mooiste winterse dagen die ik ooit meemaakte. [...] Onderweg haal ik mijn dochter op die in Utrecht studeert. Ze had vandaag de presentatie van een theaterstuk dat ze schreef. Over haar oma, die binnenkort sterft. Ook een gekke apotheose: ik belde haar dat het einde nu echt naderde, precies tijdens het beoordelingsgesprek. Alsof we het erom deden; de grootse slotscène. Toeval bestaat niet. [...] Ik heb een klein kerstboompje naast [oma] haar bed gezet. 'In 2022 koop ik weer een grote voor je', zeg ik. We weten allebei dat ik zowel haar als mezelf voor de gek houd. Er komt geen kerstmis 2022, niet voor haar.

Ze is magerder dan een paar dagen geleden. Alsof ze langzaam oplost. 'Ik ga dood', fluistert ze. 'Ik wil niet opgebaard worden. En laat me maar cremieren. Zou dat pijn doen?' 'Nee', zeg ik, 'pijn is een signaal van de hersenen. Als je dood bent, werken je hersenen niet meer. Dan kunnen ze dus ook geen pijn meer registreren.' Ik vind het prettig om dingen uit te leggen, beter dan huilen. Dat doe ik later wel. De arts komt om alle voorbereidingen te treffen voor het definitieve einde. Ik ga een nieuw jaar in zonder moeder. [...] Als ik terugrijd naar het Noorden, staat de maan een stuk hoger. Niet meer goud, maar klein en wit. Het is de kortste dag van het jaar. En dan denk ik aan Brabant, want daar wordt het donkerder.

Marjolein Hurkmans (2022)

* *This text is part of a written performance I wrote two days before my mom would start to die: October 31, 2022. The text referred back to June 1, 2022, when our mother almost died because of massive internal bleeding caused by her cancer treatment. The doctors were able to save her, only for her to almost die again a few days later. She was again "saved". The doctors did not expect her to die in the first week of November. There were no signs of septic shock. I wrote this text because I was not able to physically present my 'experiment' at the end of the 'private/public' project week on November 1. I promised to visit my mother that day. On November 2 at 6 am, I got the call to rush to the hospital. My mother was already unconscious by the time we walked through the doors of the hospital.*

The moon was beautiful: big, and round, it had the colour of gold. And it was preceded by a beautiful sunset. There was frost on the fields, and on the water of the river that separates the Netherlands from the North to the South. The river was coloured in shades of red and orange. It was the day on which I drove to Brabant to say goodbye to my mother. It was one of the most beautiful winter days I have ever experienced. [...] On the way, I pick up my daughter who is studying in Utrecht. Today she had the presentation of a play she wrote. About her grandmother, who will soon die. A crazy apotheosis: I called her that grandmother's end was really approaching, right during the feedback of that assessment. As if I did so on purpose; the grand final scene. [...] I put a small Christmas tree next to [grandma's] bed. 'In 2022 I will buy you another big one,' I say. We both know that I am fooling both her and myself. There will be no Christmas 2022, not for her.

She is thinner than a few days ago. Like she is slowly dissolving. 'I'm dying,' she whispers. 'I don't want people looking at my dead body. And I want to be cremated. Would that hurt?' 'No', I say, 'pain is a signal from the brain. When you're dead, your brain stops working. It can no longer register pain.' I like to explain things. It is better than crying. I'll do that later. The doctor comes in for the final preparations. I'm going into a new year without a mother. [...] The moon looks a lot higher in the sky when I drive back to the North of Holland. No longer gold, but small and pale white. It's the shortest day of the year. And then I think of Brabant because it gets darker there.*

Marjolein Hurkman (2022)

During my mother's funeral, her niece gave me a shoebox filled to the brim with the old letters of my mother as a teenager. When I scroll through my old WhatsApp messages, I can trace back precisely when a brief message was sent by my late mother: date, time, and place.

My mother was a journalist for a national newspaper and author of (mostly autobiographical) books. Which made her better at writing what she felt than, telling me in person what was going on in her mind.

This research aims to 'think' and 'make', by performing writing. The modus operandi should be performative, ethnographical, and polyvocal. 'The writing' is a collection that includes field notes, interviews, letters, reflections, and conclusions in which the truth is interwoven with multiple accounts of reality and its subjectivity. My own voice; my mother's voice; the voice of death; the voice of others. All speaking a different version of the truth.

* *My mother refers back to a song from the Dutch singer Guus Meeuwis, his original lyric translates as: 'And I think of Brabant, because there is still a light shining there' (Meeuwis, Guus. 'Brabant')*

THEATRE OF THE REAL MOURNER



THEATRE OF THE REAL

The act of grieving perceived through the methods of a scenographer, by means of design, helps to frame the extreme emotions of loss. I would argue that a focus on design distances the scenographer from the reality they want to stage. However, 'Staging the real' is already an inherently difficult method to decipher. As we established in the previous chapter: reality is multifaceted and layered. Adding 'dramaturgy', 'theatricality', and 'scenography' to the mix makes it all the more blurry. What is real and, what is staged? What weighs more in the construction of a theatrical experience of reality: the first-hand experience or, the translation by a theatre maker? Derived from a real-life account, made by the people who first-hand experienced it, created by someone who has been through the same, staged at the place the real event occurred and so on and so forth. How layered does reality need to be before it can be transformed into a sequence of visual stimulants that mediates a version of the truth or a multiverse of truths?

STAGING REALITY IN DOCUMENTARY THEATRE

When considering a documentary technique fitting for highlighting a multiplicity of perspectives, we have to take in account the ongoing diversification of the form* and, the vast complexity of 'staging reality'. This staging often goes at the expense of the multi-dimensional facet of the 'real truth'. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson pose in their book 'Get Real', the consensus that by propounding a mono-dimensional truth, one should realise it is constructed '*... by means of selective editing and tendentious narrative construction*'.

In this same book, Janelle Reinelt (Professor of Theatre and Performance at the University of Warwick) states three claims for the beginning of a work that has its grounds in 'documentary theatre'**. These are relevant to not get obscured by one's own perception of 'the truth'. Or in my case: my own experience of grief.

1. *The value of the document is predicated on a realist epistemology, but the experience of documentary is dependent on phenomenological engagement.*

This claim takes into consideration the spectator experience, which will always be the focus when working in a 'documentary' format. Considering that the 'documentary form' will always be based on political epistemology (especially at the start of said project, it is fair to conclude that the initial thought was driven out of social impotence). Thus, the aim is to actively engage the spectator with the subject matter posed.

* Including the wide range of documentary reports such as: witness accounts, testimonials, diary entries, interviews and, anecdotes. As known documentary techniques such as verbatim, reenactments, method acting and, utilising the (historical) archive.

** All claims are directly quoted out of the chapter 'The promise of Documentary', written by Janelle Reinelt in the book *Get Real: Documentary theatre past and present*. (2009)



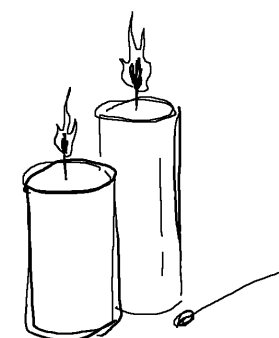
2. The documentary is not in the object but in the relationship between object, its mediators (artists, historians, authors) and its audiences.

This claim again focuses on the spectator experience, but with the addition of not only relating the spectator experience with the subject matter posed. But, by highlighting the relation between spectator and the creator. While working in the theatre to experiment with ‘creating a visual and poetic language for grief’, together with my co-creators. I noticed a rapid shift between ‘being a creator’ and ‘becoming the audience’ of the work. This same feeling was put forward by my co-creators. I think it is possible to conclude the following: when working with theatrical representations of real-life experiences by the people that actually experienced them, becoming polyvocal in viewing the narrative is inevitable.

3. The experience of documentary is connected to reality but is not transparent, and is in fact constitutive on the reality it seeks.

It is fair to say that by conducting this research, I cannot undermine my personal and political agenda. As a young person in grief, I feel the need to showcase how little room is reserved to share these experiences. I feel silenced and unwelcome, in the creative working field, in which topics surrounding death, are looked upon as being grotesque and morbid. Moreover, deriving inspiration from such prolific life experiences is often considered “not objective enough” to be valued (or to be put through the grading system) by educational institutions like the art academy.

GOOD GRIEF



IS THERE REALLY A “GOOD” GRIEF?

By no means am I an expert in grief. One could suggest I am because I have experienced multiple ways of ‘grieving’: I have been to funerals in which I barely knew the family member that was being buried. I have spent weeks crying over animals that passed away. As a child I buried the rodents our cats dragged in, under the magnolia tree in the garden. To this day I cannot listen to the song ‘lost’ by Anouk. Because it invokes a vivid memory of the passing of our family dog who started to die on the staircase of our home, while my mom held him in his arms singing that exact song. I have lost both my grandparents in the span of a year. I lost my mother the year after.

I fought multiple times with my father and brothers after our mom’s passing. We still lose ourselves, from time to time, in polarising discussions. I get emotional and easily provoked, by seeing how differently we all respond in the face of the dead and dying. It confuses me, how we as a family cannot find one consciousness in the collective memory of our mother’s passing. It would be so much easier if we could all find one mode of ‘grieving’. If someone could draw out a plan of what the next steps and stages, will look like: ‘How to overcome, accept or, become the grief’.

This would, of course, undermine how rich and layered the experience of mourning is. We could consider that ‘all grief’ is ‘good grief’*. Even if we lack the right words to say to each other. Even if the objectivity of our statements becomes very unclear when describing the inevitable.

* *I do realize that ‘good grief’ is also an expression of utter surprise and, or, shock. This expression is also often used with ‘heavens’, instead of ‘grief’ (Cambridge Dictionary). This feeling of shock may be quite right in describing an expression of grieving*

JOERI OVERDIJK

Joeri Overdijk* tells me about the week before her mother’s death. She tells me how she sometimes denied how ill her mother was. We discuss the moment in which you get ‘the call’ from the hospital. Joeri tells me her mother found a way to die in dignity. She tells me her mother was euthanised. She takes me with her to the last night of her mother’s life and, how they danced together. Joeri also tells me she had to keep repeating the sentence ‘this is so beautiful’ in her mind, the morning after.

We tell each other, how we wished our mother’s deathbed would not become a trauma. She tells me how her mother would hide her sick body from her. We discuss seeing your mother as a corpse. She tells me about the spirituality that fitted her mother well but did not suit her. I tell her how her mother’s corpse, was my first experience with seeing a dead body. Joeri tells me about the connection that remains after someone dies.

We talk about accepting death and how strange it is to realise you will surpass your mother’s age. We believe they have been ‘dead for long enough now’ and, how we think it was pointless for them to die in the first place. Joeri tells me she looks at life from a different perspective. She tells me about a letter her mom wrote to her. Joeri tells me she has felt tremendous anger. That she suffered from a depression. How she wanted to be left alone by everyone and, how she wished she could escape the grief from time to time. She tells me that she is sad all the time.

We discuss being confronted by the parents of others, that are still alive. We discuss the things you should not say to someone who is mourning. We tell each other about the flow of adrenaline, after losing a loved one, that functions for you during the funeral. We talk about feeling guilty. Joeri tells me she decorates the Christmas tree to feel closer to her mother who always loved to do it, despite Joeri loathing to do so. She tells me she inherited her mother’s Christmas ornaments.

* *I recorded our conversation for the podcast ‘Doodzonde’ my unofficial and unpublished podcast to collect stories of grief and, to find a thread in our experience of mourning. We spoke to each other in her home in Haarlem on November 28, 2022.*

Joeri tells me how she practiced ‘feeling her mother’s hand’ holding hers again. We talk about embodied memories. Joeri tells me how her mother was already in the hospital, before Joeri could call her to tell her, that her granddaughter was born. She explains to me how relieved she felt that her mom was already waiting for her in the waiting room of the hospital. How Joeri needed her there in the moment in which she became a mother herself.

THIJS HUIJBENS

Thijs Huijbens* tells me about the covid-19 virus and, how his dad got infected. We talk about his dad being induced in a coma. How Thijs, his brother and mother had to decide if they wanted to ‘pull the plug’, or not. Thijs tells me about his dad’s last consciousness. How he was able to feel his father’s fading heartbeat in the palm of his hand.

We talk about the moments thereafter; we discuss contemplating the ‘what ifs’. We wonder if you could prepare yourself to lose someone. Thijs confides to me how he sometimes compares ‘the hurt’ to establish who ‘had it worse’. We talk about comparing grief to others. Thijs tells me his experiences of mourning while in lockdown.

We talk about our friends who also lost a parent at a young age. How we feel part of this sad and secret club. Thijs explains to me how it felt walking the hallway that would bring him to his father’s hospital room. How the hallway seemed to keep on stretching, making him lose all sense of time.

* *I recorded our conversation for the podcast ‘Doodzonde’ my unofficial and unpublished podcast to collect stories of grief and, to find a thread in our experience of mourning. We spoke to each other in my home in Haarlem on January 26, 2023.*

We talk about suddenly becoming more grown-up. We discuss having to take on more responsibilities in the family. We agree on having to become stronger and wiser. Thijs tells me he felt lonely. We discuss our worries for the parent that is still with us. How we realised by losing a parent that ‘parents are just normal people’ like us. Parents can be just as scared as us. Parents do cry. Parents die.

We discuss Thijs’ view on death and mourning. Thijs tells me about ‘all the first times without a dad’. He warns me for the first birthday of that parent. He tells me about the moment in which the hurt becomes very visceral. He also explains to me how you will seek those moments after some time has passed, because in those moment, the dead parent is suddenly very alive in your mind.

Thijs tells me about the song ‘De zevende hemel’ by the Dutch band De Dijk. We agree that ‘crying’ relates eerily close to ‘laughing’. He tells me how proud his father was of him and his little brother. We agree we should become 120 years old at the very least.

ALEXANDER DEVRIENDT

Alexander Devriendt* asks me to tell, about my mom and her death. He tells me, he has lost his father a few years ago. We talk about being consoled, about life after death and, the possibility of afterlife in which we both do not believe in.

We talk about Alexander his timeline. About the experience of grief in combination with making theatre. We talk about his performance ‘Loopstation’. We discuss the funeral and its customs, the funeral as a theatrical piece. We talk about the theatre performance ‘Funeral’ and the need for creating the place in which we can say goodbye.

* *I spoke with Alexander Devriendt on February 1, 2023 on zoom. I told him beforehand that I research the representation of grief in the theatre and, that I have seen his piece ‘Funeral’ in theatre De Brakke Grond a week after the funeral of my mother.*



Alexander tells me his preferred audience and, the disruption of ‘the natural order’. We discuss the difference between us and ‘the normal people’. He tells me about the book ‘Levels of Life’ by Julian Barnes. He tells me that he is a changed man.

We say that we do not want the feeling of grief to end. But we do not want to dwell in it either. We tell each other about the dreams in which our parents are still alive. Alexander tells me about his search for a place of ‘healing’ and I, in my turn, tell him about my own experiences during his work: ‘Funeral’. We contemplate how predictable and soothing a ritual can be. We say to each other that it is okay to ‘stand still’.

Alexander talks about his doubts and how he did not want to force his hurt upon others. We talk about not being able to speak, to stumble and being unable to say what you really want to say. We discuss the banality of objects. Alexander tells me that he uses his personal life as the drive for his making. He tells me about the third eye and, how he creates “distance” in order to feel and heal. He has changed as a maker and, he warns me how exhausting it can be to talk about your sorrow all the time. That it is okay to sometimes take a break when someone asks you how you feel.

I ask Alexander some specific questions about ‘Funeral’: I ask about the confetti, chairs, and names. I ask about the sequence of the scenes and, he tells me that he tried to make his audience be the scenography of his work. We talk about interactive theatre. Alexander confides to me, that the basis of every theatre performance is showing the audience their own connection with the subject-matter.

MY BROTHERS

My brothers* tell me about our mother’s last weeks before her death. Jesse tells me how he did not expect the worst when he got the news that she was admitted to the hospital. He tells me that the week before our mother’s death, he planned to honour his young colleague who died a year before her. That was his focus. Valentijn tells me how he was not afraid of her death but afraid of her ‘barely surviving’ again. He experienced her going from bad to worse. He did not want to see how far it could go. We talk about getting ‘the call’. We share, how we experienced a loss of ‘perception of time’ in the weeks before her death. We do all remember specific details, and the emotions we felt during the two days of her death and, the aftermath. Jesse tells about the endless waiting, sitting next to her deathbed. How time stood still.

We contemplate how much you can prepare yourself for the death of a loved one. I tell about my fear of death which resulted in my need to research the phenomenon of dying. I tell them that I was only able to do so, in the months in which she was very sick but not ‘on the brim of dying’. Jesse says that he thinks fear of death is inherently human. Valentijn and I remember how our mother used to not fear death before her illness. But that changed when she got her diagnosis. We ask each other how we experienced her deathbed. Jesse tells us how he wished he could forget certain details. But how he still believes it was worth it. We discuss how seeing someone die, does help us accept the ineffability of death.

I ask my brothers if the death of our mother made them think differently about death. Valentijn tells us he is very afraid of dying. That he experiences certain actions of remembrance, differently now: when he lights a candle in a church, he wishes that there would be a place for our mother after death. Even though he still does not believe in such a place, he hopes he is wrong. Jesse wonders if it is not ‘the nothingness of death’ that gives the most peace to the deceased. I wonder if it is the bond we still have with our mother after passing, that makes her ‘immortal’.

* *I recorded our conversation for the podcast ‘Doodzonde’ my unofficial and unpublished podcast to collect stories of grief and, to find a thread in our experience of mourning. We spoke to each other in our family home in Haarlem on February 28, 2023.*

We talk about a change of dynamics in our household after our mother's first diagnosis. We contemplate how our sibling's role did not change but, the role between parent and child did change drastically. Valentijn tells us how he became the caregiver of our mother instead of her son. How he became colleagues with our father, instead of his son. I tell my brothers that we learned to be brutally honest with each other, and only then were we able to cope with our mother's sickness. I and Valentijn share a hyper-focus on our dad since our mother's death. We all have a caregiver-hangover.

We wonder if you are ever 'done with grief'? We all agree that this will not happen, since it is hard to even explain where the grief begins and ends. We talk about the physical aspects of grief. About "rauwe rouw". I ask my brothers if they ever feel guilty about being able to function in society, despite grieving. We talk about comparing ourselves to others in grief. Jesse tells me how he sometimes wakes up feeling sad, he explains to me and Valentijn, how he tries to be gentler to himself during those days. Valentijn tells us, that he is experiencing an irrational fear of losing more people. That he keeps thinking to himself: What if our dad also dies, what if one of us dies? What is the purpose of this all if we end up dying?

We talk about the objects that are left behind when someone dies. We talk about the banality of mortality. We say to each other that objects lack meaning when their previous owner dies. That person is not here anymore to explain the memories and emotions connected to the object. We do all acknowledge that our feeling towards this will probably change over time.

We talk about our mother's funeral. How it was more emotional for the people that were not as close to our mother. We planned the funeral, so we knew what was coming. The hardest part was over by the time the funeral started. My brothers tell me, they both do not feel the need to look back to the footage made of the funeral.

Jesse tells me about our vacations in France when we were younger. We tell each other, how our mother would read us 'Harry Potter' and 'Winnie the Pooh' books. How she made-up voices for each character. Valentijn shares with us the memory of his last shopping spree with our mother in her wheelchair. How she looked at him when they got back home and told him how 'they should do this more often'. How she really felt like his mom again in that moment of time.

ROOS VAN GEFFEN

Roos van Geffen* tells me how she does not tell the audience the (very personal) source of her work. She tells me that her material needs some incubation time before she can transform it into something universal. How she tries to deepen the subject-matter and, discovers layers in her work, after some time has passed.

Roos tells me how she contemplated her own life after her father's death. How he asked her 'how should I die?' which made her question: 'but how should I live?' She talks about cleaning his house after he had passed. How she spread out all his picture books in front of her, trying to make an 'inventory of mortality', like Susan Songtag wrote in one of his books: 'On Photography**'.

We talk about the deathbed of our parents. She tells me how sacral and stilled the days before felt. She talks about filming his hands against new, black, linen bed covers. She tells me how she took almost 150 videos of his hands to document his last moments. That she had to wait a year and a half, to be able to look back at the videos. That she wanted to create a choreography of the images to make it read-able to someone else. She shows me the works of Nan Goldin and Berlinde De Bruyckere.

* *I spoke with Roos van Geffen in her house in Amsterdam on march 2, 2023.*

** *The resulted in the work Media Vita (2019), and installation existing out of seventy-six photo books and, whispers of audio hidden in-between the pages.*



'Per Benedetto' by De Bruyckere // FIGURE IV

Roos tells me, how the wife of her father did not wake her up when her dad drew out his last breath. How she really wanted to be there.

How her father told her what an honour it was that he saw his own father die. I tell Roos how I saw my mother die. I tell Roos that I could as well have missed it, since it was not as dramatic and clear to see, as people make it out to be. She simply stopped breathing.

Roos tells me how the wife of her father did not want her to film his hands anymore once he was dead. She did it anyways. She told his wife, that this was her way to grief. That she needed the camera to be able to process what has happened. Roos tells me how she helped cleaning her father's corpse after death. How she was not afraid anymore.

She tells me how she creates work to help her cope with the things that she is struggling with. How the work helps her process, in small sections at the time, how she aims for the work to be poetic and not, sentimental. How she investigates what it means to be 'living' and, what the spectator needs to feel 'being touched' by the work.



'Media Vita' by Van Geffen // FIGURE III

IS THERE A "BAD" GRIEF?

During a family gathering of my in-laws, I mentioned the topic of this research document. Someone mentioned to me that there is something that he considers 'bad grief'. He noted that people who refrain from moving past their grief, suffocate those who are simply trying to 'get on with their lives'. He even emphasised, that by stating so, he does not mean the next of kin. He meant the people who stand further away from the first-hand experience of the tragedy.

I felt stunned by his observation which felt unfair to those who need to share their trauma, and those who want to keep the memory of the person who passed alive. But he touched on a consensus that is very prominent in Dutch society. People take pride in not 'dwelling on grief'. They convince themselves of surpassing the hurt quickly and, claim to come out of trauma as stronger human beings. And as much as I want to deny these claims. I also understand where they are coming from.

His argument fell flat since he lost his mother in his fifties, while I lost mine in my twenties. His loss felt natural and my loss changed 'the natural order of life', as Alexander put it in our interview. But that notion would put my grief above his... And even though our differences in age, does change the need we have for a mother in our current life. Our difference in age, does not change the fact that they were still both our mothers, and we are both a mother's child that grieves a life lost.

We should consider 'all grief' as 'good grief'. Even if we lack the right words to say to each other. Even if the objectivity of our statements becomes very unclear when describing the ineffable. Contemplating grief is an inherently human experience.

ABOVE AND BEYOND



QUESTIONS

Many meta-questions could be asked, equally undermining and enriching this thesis. Is the thesis meant as a capsule of grief, perceived through a lens of scenography? Is it a scenographic take on a personal event? Could it be a spatial look at places of grief? Does it research the mourner's perception of time? Does it research the notion of time experienced by the audience as a theatrical experience, that talks about a loss of time? What is scenography? What is the difference between scenography and dramaturgy? Can scenography be a piece of writing? Is this another 'introduction' or, a different chapter? Will this thesis answer any of the questions posed above?

Or could the conclusion already be that the thesis is indeed a capsule of grief? That the thesis is perceived through a lens of scenography. That the thesis is to be considered a scenographic take on a personal event and, a spatial look at places of grief. That the research is about the twisted perception of time experienced by the mourner and their audience. This document is a scenography. This research is a dramaturgy. This work is a piece of writing. The whole thesis is an introduction and, none of its questions will be answered.

ABOVE AND BEYOND SCENOGRAPHY

Scenography is a spatial approach to phenomenology* during a theatre experience. Once derived from traditional theatre design that focused on decorating a stage, scenography is a more visual take on dramaturgy, even though the distinction between the two became blurrier in later years.

Scenography is a practice, strategy, method, and contemporary mode of research. We could say this inquiry of the research is to 'suggest the need for methodologies which address the spatial and material nature of the stage' (McKinney, Iball, 2011). Moreover, this kind of research as put forward in the book 'Research Methods in Theatre and Performance', aims to investigate 'the interaction between scenography, text, site and performers' bodies, the signifying capabilities of scenography, the nature of the audience experience and its potential effects' (McKinney, Iball, 2011).

So, scenography is about much more than set design and theatre decor. Scenography focuses on audience dynamics and experience as well. Hence, why scenographers often refer to 'phenomenology'. Scenography is about making the spectators feel transported to a certain space, time, and feeling. That does simply not happen to be easily captured in just decor pieces and light design.

* *Phenomenology is the [philosophical] study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Published by The Metaphysics Research Lab, Philosophy Department of Stanford University, Stanford).*

SOMATIC SCENOGRAPHY

‘The Somatic is understood to carry our perceptions of space through touch, seeing but also the memories we carry in our body actions, emotions and awareness residing in systems of belief and decision-making, remembrance, and evaluation.’ (Tilley, 1997)

When we consider ‘scenography’ a spatial approach to phenomenology, ‘somatic scenography’ directs the phenomenological focus on the relationship between our bodies in correlation with the space. Meaning, that we experience spatial qualities through a sensorial perception of our bodies. When moving our bodies through space, for example: when walking through a building, we cannot only visually understand the scenography of that space, but, we might understand it from a somatic state as well (Tilley, 1997).

During a somatic approach to scenography, we might understand a dramaturgical aspect of the space through the perception of the senses, which could prove more perceptive than focussing solely on the design of the space.

Somatic is about embodied and, tacit knowledge. The experience of the spectator is key to this approach and could vary drastically from person to person. We should not undermine how ‘somatic scenography’ might result in the creation of a more isolated scenographic experience. Since the experience could heighten an inner sensorial experience of space, instead of making the spectator being perceptive of outside influences and group dynamics.

THE THEATRICAL FRAME OF BEING

Experiencing a multiplicity of perspectives is not uncommon for those who have been through traumatic events. This ‘metaphysical state of being’ in which the spectator perceives itself from not just the embodied perspective of the self but from outside as well, provides some sense of clarity during life-altering moments. It is closely related to the physical state of our bodies during the fight-or-flight response. Like C.S. Lewis writes in his novel ‘A Grief Observed’: *‘No one even told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid’.*

Scenography can stage a notion of time by transforming and changing the space. The spatial choices made by the scenographer, often perceived to create an illusion of time and spatial presence, may also be meant to actually emphasise the current time and the space itself. Creating an awareness of the physical positioning of the spectator’s body has the potential to make the spectator aware of its presence in real time. Scenography initiates a focus on the reality of the given situation because it provides a theatrical framing to the here-and-now**. This theatrical framing has the potential to make the spectator perceive the (very real) situation from multiple perspectives.

** *This refers to the concept of Iconic identity (elements from reality used within a theatrical frame) as described in “The space of the Theatre. A study into the effects of the theatre space on the theatrical experience of the spectator”. Eversmann, Peter. PhD, summary, 1996.*

THE THEATRICAL FRAME I

**DESCRIBING THE WORKING
SESSION IN THE THEATRE
ON MARCH 15 AND 20.**

CONTEXT

The aim and focus of this research has always been co-creation. One cannot research the multiplicity of perspectives, without being able to change positions within the making of one's own artistic work. I felt the need to distance myself from my own artistic process, by means of guiding others in conducting a similar 'mode of creating' inside a theatrical space. For me, this opened the possibility of becoming fully immersed in the creative process. Yet, it also provided me a way out, so I could become more observant and reflective of what methods are used, which objects the participants gravitated towards, and how we aimed to capture the ineffable of life and death.

To be able to grasp something so personal yet deeply universal on a metaphysical level (grasping what we become after 'being human', outside any known experience and knowledge), I had to take into consideration the polyvocality of my subject matter. Working with the experiences of 'grief' and 'dying', relates closely to the study of 'phenomenology'. To my understanding, the methods of scenography provide me with the best tools to unveil some of the structures posed in this philosophy. Providing a theatrical frame already created a certain distance to the phenomenology experienced by the audience. By using aesthetic and sensorial elements such as light, sound, decor, smell, and touch, I could further develop a tangible perception of space and time.

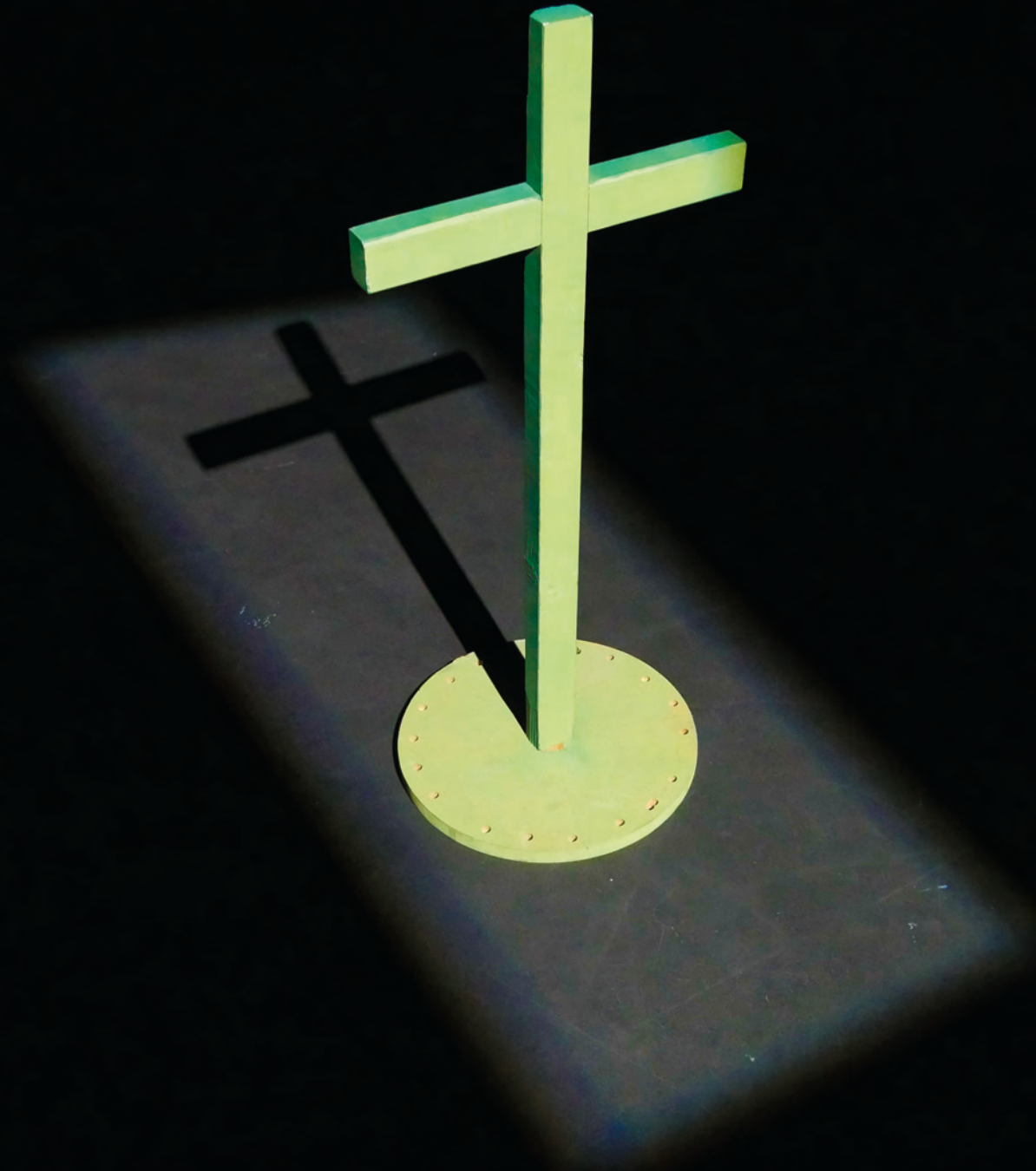
WORKING CONDITIONS

For each session in the theatre, I started with the same conditions: an empty black ballet floor, the theatre curtains partly opened on the side with some of the windows open, so sunlight lights the room. I also repeat the same introduction, with some variations if I noticed that someone is a bit more nervous to start.

"Today we are going to find a visual and poetic language about grief that fits you. It can be about your mom/dad, but it doesn't have to be. It can also be about 'death' in general or, about a more universal feeling of loss. You do not have to have a finished product at the end of this session. That is not the aim of these three hours. What we are doing today is more about play and choosing elements on instinct. I am here to show you what we can do in this theatre. How the lights work, how far the curtains go, where we can hang stuff on the ceiling and where the music comes from. Moreover, I will show you the decor basement of this theatre so we have some starting points that are very tangible and moveable. But if you want to stick with 'just light' or 'sound', that is okay with me".

For every participant, I tried leaving them alone for some moment during the session. For me, it was important to be very careful in when I would fully co-create by guiding the participants and, when I would give the participants some time to gather their thoughts on their own. It should feel empowering for them to work with me in the theatre and, not overpowering.

In the following pages a description of their outcome will be intertwined with personal remarks of why and, how they made certain choices. The next chapter will conclude an overall reflection of these days in the theatre.





BOB WIEBES (31, M)

[Scene 1] Concierto music fades in. The audience is seated where the technicians are seated. Spots in blue and orange fade in and out, showing the audience two guitars on stage, that are leaning against two fake piles of wood on the fire. One guitar misses all its strings.

Bob: 'I feel in a constant battle against 'what I really feel' and 'think I should feel'. The initial sadness was so enormous and, it felt so unfair to lose my father. But if I am being honest with myself, my dad lost his strings a long time ago already. He was in very poor health. His fire didn't burn as strongly as it used to'.

[Scene 2] All theatre lights go into a blackout. The light of the fake fire remains on.

Bob: 'I think it is funny how the real wood of the guitar is resting against a light that imitates an open fire. In 20 years, those guitars will have perished. Only fire remains. It does not matter if it was 'real', it matters that it felt real and, it was beautiful'.

[Scene 3] Complete black-out. Concierto music fades out. Both guitars are being removed from the stage by stagehands. 'Spain' by Chick Corea fades in.

Bob: 'My dad gave me his guitar before his death. I was stupid enough to lend it to a friend that moved countries. He left it in the house he stayed in and gave me the number of his housemates, but I forgot to get it back. I don't play guitar myself and, I had other things to worry about. Now I keep thinking to myself how I should find the guitar back. But I have yet to pick up my phone and call'.

[Scene 4] The spots go on again. The same goes for fake piles of wood. The horizon lights go on. The lights are multicoloured. Suddenly the fake fire goes out, and at that moment the music and theatre light fade out again.

Bob: 'I prefer the distance we create by standing in the technical booth and, not being on stage or in the auditorium. It feels serene. The distance feels right. He divorced my mother when I was little and, I do not have any brothers or sisters. I was alone in organising a funeral and, choosing what to do with his remains. I scattered his ashes in the wind on a beach in Italy. My dad and I both liked this music. We listened to it together.'

[End scene] One rectangular spot fades in, showing a wooden, green cross. Very carefully a new spot fades in, showcasing the guitar without its strings laying on his back on the front right of the stage. Ends with a complete blackout.

Bob: 'The image of the cross under a bright pale spot is harsh and, feels cold. But that is reality. The end comes abruptly and does not need any poetic gestures. The symbolism of the cross is very clear to read. It stays with you.'



VALENTIJN VAN DE BEEK (24, M)

Valentijn: 'The scenes should represent four phases of my mother her life. The focus is on the candles.'

[Beginning] The audience is seated in the auditorium under green lights. The lights start to flicker and, the sound of thunder and rain fills the room. The light in the auditorium goes out and, the horizon lights go on in the colour red. Valentijn walks on stage to light the candles in a candelabrum that is standing in the middle of the stage.

Valentijn: 'You cannot see life as a sequence of scenes. It is one big scene. To show someone's life is to show all the scenes all at once. You must show the whole stage.'

[Phase 1] In the front right of the stage; a little suitcase is lit by spot 12 and represents his mother's childhood. She moved many times due to her parents troubled divorce. She never really felt grounded. The light should feel cold and, should come from the back, so the front of the suitcase is in shadows. The song 'Mr. Tambourine Man' from Bob Dylan plays.

Valentijn: 'I see these sets as still lives. It should come across as a memento mori. I already have a finished product in mind. I did not think of it beforehand. I saw the many chairs in the attic and, saw this hand full of wheelchairs cramped in the corner. That is when the image appeared in my mind. I suddenly got a vision of how I wanted to decorate the stage.'

[Phase 2] Front left of the stage; a bar stool with records is lit by spot 9, and a warm yellow light is coming from the back. This represents the moment his mom met his dad in the bar they both worked at in their twenties. He was not alive at this moment, so this as well should be in the shadows. The song that plays is 'Ziggy Stardust' by David Bowie.



[Phase 3] Back left of the stage; an office chair is lit with spot 15. This light comes from the front since, Valentijn, remembers this phase. During this phase, a podcast episode of his mother is playing. She was a journalist and, had a podcast.

[Phase 4] Back right of the stage; a wheelchair is lit with strobing pale, purple light. The song: 'Beautiful Day' by Gare Du Nord is playing but is overpowered by sounds recorded in a hospital. They grow louder and louder until you cannot hear the song anymore. This should represent the last year of her life.

Valentijn: 'This phase is the most prominent and, important to me. It is the phase of my mother I remember the most clearly. It was a phase that lasted three years. We grew close together in these years. We did many things together. There was an undercurrent of tremendous sadness in the moments we spent together. We knew she would die eventually. But it felt good to be there for her during these times. To push her wheelchair across Haarlem to buy bath bombs at Lush and drink iced coffee. She needed to feel normal again. And I needed to feel helpful.'

[Ending] Valentijn walks on stage again and, blows out the candles. Only the light in phase 4 is still on, it fades into a blackout. A harsh rectangular spot appears in the middle of the stage that shows a fallen candelabrum.

Valentijn: 'The still life should break into pieces. The people in the audience should slowly realise that they did not have any agency in how this piece would end. It started vague and, hidden behind shadows. It ended bright and, abruptly. We remain, but she (our mother) is gone.'





JESSE VAN DE BEEK (29,M)

[beginning] The audience is greeted before going inside by a host who tells them that this piece is an experience and, that they are allowed to walk on stage and touch what they see. They are not allowed to move any of the decors.

[Scene 1] The audience walks in and is in complete darkness. Only the candles of a candelabrum are lit. The song 'Landslide' by Fleetwood Mac starts to play. Slowly the lights on the stage fade in: pink and purple lights. People can walk around the stage and, see the scene that is set.

Jesse: 'The decor pieces represent my mother. Every object reminds me of my mother. However, I did add some pieces that are solely mine. That is not something the audience needs to know. It is between me and my late mother. They are objects like my phone, e-cigarette, laptop, and coat'.



[Scene 2] At the end of the song, a door is closed very loud behind the back curtains of the stage. The person that walks in wears black from head to toe and, blows out all the candles. All the lights fade to a blackout.

[Scene 3] After a moment of silence and, complete darkness, the song 'Helter Skelter' by The Beatles is played at full volume. A dim light shows a small suitcase on the front left of the stage. Out of nowhere, an actor bursts through the back curtains with a vacuum cleaner. It is plugged in and turned on. The stage is suddenly flooded with actors dressed as cleaners who start demolishing the stage and cleaning the ground. They do so very hard-handed and loud.





Jesse: 'I do realise that the performance should be a bit kitsch to make it light-hearted. The cleaners should really look like stereotypical cleaners, adorned in complete attire with bright-coloured cleaning tools. I want to make it surreal. It should create a shock effect so that the audience really questions the reality of the (theatre)space.'

[End] The fluorescent lights of the stage go on, the cleaners take a bow at the front of the stage, they get a bouquet of flowers, bow one more time and, leave. The light in the auditorium goes on and, the audience sees that it is empty. Now they are the actors. The audience is asked to leave after some time has passed. They do not get an after-talk.

Jesse: 'No one prepares you for death. It is over before you even realised it ever started. I could not imagine a life after my mother's passing, no one can. But it happened regardless. I must live with it. So, no, people do not get an after-talk. I want people to realise the harsh reality of mortality and the aftermath of someone passing; a life that vaporised in seconds and, suddenly ceased to exist.'

THIJS HUIJBENS (28, M)

[Image] An old and dented musical instrument is hung in the air with a thick blue coloured rope. A ladder stands in the middle of the stage to see the image from a higher point of view. It is important to provide multiple perspectives. The theatre curtains are drawn back at the left back of the stage, to reveal a door that is slightly opened.

Thijs: 'The image is sedate, still, and serene. The rope is silencing the instrument, it suffocates it. My father died because of Covid-19. His lungs started to fail while he was induced into a coma. My father used to play the trombone. He was not sick, no sign pointed to his nearing end in the week before he got infected by the virus. It has been traumatic, but I guess all death is.'







[Music] The song is 'Bye Bye Bloomingdale' by Chris Abelen. The father of a friend of ours. Thijs edited this song by enforcing the bass and killing the high notes of the song. He also put an effect on top of the original song: ping-pong delay and reverb.

Thijs: 'It fits that the music is eerie. It should make you feel uneasy. The lights however should do the opposite. Also, the movement of the instrument suspended in the air should be slow and calm. Time should feel stilled'.

JOERI OVERDIJK (34, F)

[Scene A] Two red carpets are rolled out on the stage. One is completely rolled out and has an 'Amsterdammertje' standing on top of it. The other carpet is rolled out halfway. A candelabrum is standing on top of this one. None of the candles are lit.

Joeri: 'My mother will never be able to live a fully lived life. She passed away when she was 60 years old. She represents the carpet that is partly rolled up. The other carpet represents the city she lived in and loved dearly: Amsterdam'.

[Scene B] The situation of scene A, only now hard spots from the side in blue and orange are illuminating the space. Making the person walking on the carpet, have two distinctive shadows on either side of them. The person on the carpet walks towards the end of the carpet, stops halfway, and lights the candles.





Joeri: 'I want the shadows to represent the people standing next to you on the path of life. I do not want to create something that is exclusively about the bond I had with my mother. I am more interested to showcase a universal feeling of death. Also, death could be the one walking next to you. The shadows are up for interpretation by the viewer and, the one being viewed. I also wondered what would happen if we let the spectator be the one that walks on the carpet.'

[Scene C] The situation of scene B, but with just the carpet that is rolled halfway. Also, the carpet is rolled up completely at the beginning of this scene. The actor comes on stage and rolls the carpet until it touched the candelabrum that is standing in the middle of the stage. Upon arriving the actor blows out the candles. The song that is playing throughout the scene is 'Fun in the Sun' by Eric Vloeimans and Jörg Brinkman.

Joeri: 'I do not want to get rid of the classical theatre setting. Because it reminds me of when I was younger, and my mother worked at the theatre 'Brakke Grond' in Amsterdam. The most important part of her job was to cook for the theatre companies before their show. I would join her as a little child so we could watch the shows afterward if they had some seats to spare. That was a really good time in our lives.'

[Scene D] The situation of scene C, with the addition of having the carpet being rolled out with a kick from a boot. The actor hides behind the theatre curtains on the side and, you can just see their foot kicking the carpet. The actor reveals themselves and continues the scene as they do in scene C.

[Scene E] The scene is without any action. It is solely the image of the carpet rolled halfway on the stage until it touches a candelabrum from which the candles are lit. Spots from the side in blue and orange are illuminating the space, making the candelabrum have two distinctive shadows on either side. The song that is playing is 'Girl from the North Country' by Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash.

[Scene F] The image of scene E with the addition of fading in horizon lights on the left back of the stage. The rest of the lights slowly fade out. This should signify an ending.

[Scene G] The situation of scene F with the addition of having the actor walk to the candelabrum once the red light comes on. The actor blows out the candles and moves the candelabrum to the side. The actor returns to the middle of the stage and, tries rolling out the carpet further. They will succeed. However, once removing themselves away from the carpet. The carpet will slowly roll back to the middle. The lights will go into a blackout and the song 'Perfect Day' by Lou Reed starts to play. The scene ends with a bright halogen spot on the technical booth above the audience. Both Joeri and I are sitting there. We invite the audience to walk through the technical booth instead of the doors at either side of the auditorium.

Joeri: 'We welcome them to the flip side. The piece should signify both the end and, the beginning of a journey. The audience needs to realise that they are not alone. We were there all along waiting for them to spot us at the end. Grief is a universal custom. Death happens to us all. We should create a space that visually represents this.'

THE THEATRICAL FRAME II

**OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS
OF THE WORKING SESSION
IN THE THEATRE.**

LIGHT

A very promising outcome of these research days is the role 'light' plays. All participants gravitated the most towards the making of a light design to continue their experimentation. I argue that this has to do with the following possible qualities 'the light' provides:

Light has the potential of making the invisible, visible. There was a strong urge with most participants to create strong shadows and, very particular spots in the space. Moreover, there was a prominent use of 'blackouts' to signify abrupt moments in time. This was also mediated using bright lights in the auditorium and horizon (lighting on the backdrop of the stage). This made the constant shifting of time, become very tangible for the possible audience.

Light has the potential to become a representation of life. None of the participants felt the need to welcome an actor on stage (the exception being Jesse and Joeri at the end of their piece). To me, it seemed like 'the light' became the possible actor instead. The best example of this is seen in the work of Joeri, in which the shadows created by light, became 'travellers on the same journey'. Furthermore, one may argue that on three separate occasions, the candelabrum became the representation of a mother figure. But I wonder if it was not the candles that made the representation truly 'come alive'. The fire moved and wavered. The fire was manipulated by the participants and created smoke to circle around the stage.

The use of real candles creates tension: you cannot truly control fire and, the candle will eventually burn up its wax. There is a reason why the lighting of a candle, has such a prominent role in many religions and ritualistic customs. (Diaconu, 2023)

OBJECTS

The use of 'representative objects' on stage as possible signifiers of a *memento mori**, serves for me, as a possible prospect in researching the banality of objects left after a person dies. Objects that suddenly lack meaning or vice versa: objects which become more meaning full in the eyes of the next of kin. This use of objects asks for a more in-depth study of materiality. For example: how many signs of usage does an object need to have for it to become meaningful for the participants?

Joanna Wojtkowiak explains in her paper on 'The post-self and notions of immortality in contemporary Dutch society', how objects have a prominent role in the representation of the deceased at a possible home memorial (34 % of the Dutch population has, or had, a home memorial, according to Wojtkowiak). She distinguishes two groups of objects: personal and ritual objects. A 'personal object' is an object that used to be from the deceased. This object shares a biography and, history of being in possession by the person gone: *'The idea of objects having a social life of their own is relevant to the personal objects used in home memorials. These personal belongings tell the story of the deceased'* (Wojtkowiak, 2012). They are irreplaceable and, are often a direct representation of the person gone. For example, the jewellery someone wore, or a picture of the deceased themselves.

During the sessions in the theatre, none of the participants seemed bothered about the use of objects that had no direct connection to the deceased person. Even if the object was meant as a distinctive representation of a person, for example: the use of a musical instrument to represent Thijs' his late father. there seemed to be no real connotations placed for the use of a 'fake' instead of real object.

* *Memento mori*, is a phrase in latin that freely translates to: 'remember that you have to die'. This phrase became popular as an artistic genre in the middle ages that heavily relies on iconographic symbolism to signify the inevitable of death. This was mostly being popularised by the catholic church to suppress vanity. It is important to note though, that 'memento mori' can also be intended as a reminder of life: 'memento vitae'. Moreover, the phrase should not be confused with the fear of death: 'timor mortis'. (Koudounaris, 2015)

A 'ritualistic object', as defined in the paper of Wojtkowiak, has a different purpose and, does not need to be a 'belonging of the person gone'. It should be noted that, *'objects have the potential [as] a more ritualistic role in the remembering of the deceased'* (Wojtkowiak, 2012). She further explains how the use of candles and flowers at home memorials, are examples of objects with ritualistic gestures. These objects often possess a certain fragility which makes them 'fugitive in use', they do not last: *'Candles and flowers must be replaced and do not last indefinitely unless the candle is left unlit or the flower is dried'* (Wojtkowiak, 2012). These objects have the potential to make the passing of time tangible.

After these sessions in the theatre, I wonder in which category the objects used by the participant might be placed. These objects often represented the real objects that may have been in possession by the person gone, however, the objects were clearly framed as being staged. Moreover, the participants knew they were using a 'fake' and, they were asked to make poetic gestures on stage, and not a direct visual representation of their biographical stories about grief.

It may be interesting to further develop this research in materiality. Different test groups - from different cultural backgrounds and social/age classes - may gravitate to different objects (or, object groups as pointed out by Wojtkowiak). Furthermore, this research lacks a neutral testing group of non-grievors, to provide a solid hypothesis. Further research and, the right resources, may provide insight to deepen the questions and answers posed in this document.

TECHNICAL BOOTH

A clear pattern was seen during the sessions in the theatre. Most of the participants started on the floor but quickly moved to the technical booth to stay there. I deliberately asked at the end of each session, how and where each participant wanted their work to be viewed at. And most of them preferred to view the work from inside the technical booth. I may consider, that this stems from a need for distancing themselves from the (very personal) representations of grief on the floor and the visual reminder to themselves that the work is 'placed inside a theatrical frame'.



However, I think it is fair to say, that the choice of viewing could have more to do with the practicality of finishing the work. I reserved 3 hours per candidate. In hindsight, I think this was too little time to fully utilise the different viewing opportunities in the space. It was only possible during the session with Thijs, to really try out different ways of viewing. This had to do with the less complicated setup of his work.

UNIVERSALITY & COMMUNITY

I knew all participants beforehand. Some of them knew each other as well. Since I am in the same vulnerable group of 'recent young grievors', I felt it was necessary to keep the group close to my heart. I aimed to find some answers in the potential visual language of grief. It was never meant as a therapeutic session to grow closer to each other and, to form a community.

But it feels wrong to keep the outcome to myself and this thesis. These days in the theatre showed me how resilient we (young grievors) can be. And, how important it is to share the experiences of grief with one another. With almost every participant, except for Bob, I have spoken beforehand in the podcast 'Doodzonde'. By sharing the outcome of those podcast episodes, I got positive reactions. Thijs, for example, asked me if he could share his episode with his mother, who in her turn, send me a message in appreciation. Moreover, Joeri commented afterwards how relieved she felt of how much fun we had in the recorded conversation, even though the subject was so grim.

I plan to create an online platform in which I can share the podcast episodes and, the material of the theatre days with all the participants at once. It is important to continue having these open conversations about death and grief. Seeing all these different experiences of grief consoled me tremendously and, I want to give this feeling back to the participants.

REFLECTIONS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Bob: 'I was able to create a scene that beautifully depicts how I look back on my father's life. But in such a way that I was also able to look ahead and give some direction to my grief. By playing with light and various props, I got more and more grip on my own feelings: the source of my pain and hurt. I feel great gratitude for the session: it felt therapeutic, but also meditative. I was cut off from the world during those hours in the theatre. It was just me dealing with my grief. But it was also me experiencing my hopes and love again.'

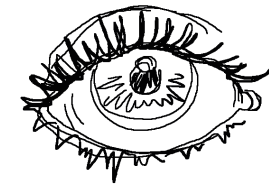
Valentijn: 'My grief has not changed and, I do not think I will experience any long-term effects of this session. However, working in the theatre did make me contemplate my view on death. I did not realise beforehand how much I perceive the act of dying as an ongoing cycle. By laying down a sequence of scenes, I realised how much I think back of my mother's life as 'one phase following up the next'. There was a phase before I was born; before she became ill; after she became ill.'

Jesse: 'When we had planned the session in the theatre, I was not really looking forward to it. It seemed too heavy of a topic to capture and I really had no idea what to expect. However, it turns out I had a lot of fun with the topic. I told my partner and friends about the experience afterwards and was proud of the things I came up with. I expected to feel sad and emotional afterwards, but instead I became enthusiastic and energised about my concept.'

Thijs: 'I kept thinking of our session in the days after. It really did something to me, in a positive way. The session felt too short. Not, because it felt unfinished. But because I did not want to leave the space we created behind. I showed the pictures you took from our session to my mother. She started crying.'

Joeri: 'I told a lot of people about this experience. The thought of changing the image we have of death, keeps me wondering and, questioning how we treat death in our society. I already noticed how creating moments of active grief, like we did during the session is a good thing. It is not always best to wait for grief to suddenly overwhelm you. We should perhaps 'search' for grief more often, so we can really contemplate what it does to us.'

OBSERVING TRAUMA



*I (mis)use grief to provide insight of scenographic methods used in times of mourning. I aim to create a sense of meaning by placing my subject inside a theatrical frame. Nonetheless, I wonder if the act of sharing experiences of grief, could create even more distance between maker and spectator? I am a person in grief. But I also act 'grief' out of social discomfort and construct. I miss my mom, but I also must keep remembering myself to 'miss her'. Psychological speaking, the writing of this thesis is an attempt to not distance or dissociate any further from my trauma. But something can be said about the dangers of emerging myself in the places where it hurts the most. Am I writing about grief too soon?**

FACING DEATH

The aspects of life that remain hidden from us, become visible when we are forced to face the possible ending of a life. This clarity could provide a sudden change of perspective. It gives the spectator of tragedy, the chance to take on a more active role in encountering those aspects. It has the possibility to render visible, what has been invisible from our day-to-day life**. Time becomes tangible when the people you love start running out of time.

However, as a bystander of death, it will become increasingly difficult to mediate a changed perspective on death, upon the person dying. Death is a phenomenon that is just as universal, as it is personal. Its experience varies from person to person.

* *Written in January 2023, two months after my mother's passing. The aim was to write a conclusion of this thesis before I started the research and, writing proces.*

** *Rendering 'the invisible' in this case refers back to the description of 'the politics of perception' by Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink in "Jan Wolkers, or the woolly blanket. An Introduction in which the author places the role of theatre audience in a historical perspective and makes a plea for a 'Wolkerian Gaze'". Published in Domein voor de Kunstcritiek, 2008.*

The person actively dying is just as well the spectator of "the end of life", as they are the dramatic work of art viewed by bystanders. As Fuchs puts it in 'Die Revolution des Theatres': *'[the work of art] is born at the time it is experienced, and it is differently experienced by every member of the audience'* (Fuchs, 1959). The work did not exist before the action happened in front of its audience. To put it more bluntly: we cannot experience a real notion of grief before someone starts to die.

Grief itself, is not solely about 'missing' the person who is gone either. Tatjana Almulic writes about this in her novel: 'Ik zal je nooit meer', a book in which she partly reconstructs her mother's life before her passing. In the search for her mother's past, Almulic starts investigating her own grief:

'Rouw gaat verder dan de aanwezigheid van iemand missen, besef ik hier [in de stilte en uitgestrektheid van de natuur], het gaat vooral over de diepe eenzaamheid die zo ontreddert' (Almulic, 2022).

* *I would translate this quote as followed: '[I realised while standing in nature with all its stilled and ongoing glory], that grief goes beyond the feeling of missing someone. Grief derives out of a deeper understanding of loneliness that unhinges you completely'.*

THE LENSE OF PSYCHOLOGY

'It was not that the keen-eyed archeress sought me out in our home and killed me with her gentle darts. Nor was I attacked by any of the malignant diseases that so often make the body waste away and die. No, it was my heartache for you, my glorious Odysseus, and for your wise and gentle ways that brought my life and all its sweetness to an end' (The Odyssey, Book XI, 'The Book of the Dead').

Even though 'Griefe' was listed as a possible reason for dying in the mortality statistics of the 16th century, we do not believe in modern science, that grieving can actually cause acute death (Strobe, 1987). The heightened risk of experiencing heart failure during a time of loss is perceived as coincidental and not, influenced by the initial mourning period. It is noted that most people experience devastating loss later in life when they themselves, are of older age (and thus prone to cardiac distress).

However, there is some proof of declining health after the loss of a loved one. Suffering mentally, influences our somatic, and physical state. Erich Lindemann (psychiatrist) describes the symptoms of grief as both psychological and somatic, in his seminal paper: 'Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief' (1944). He sums up the most striking features of grief such as suffering from 'somatic distress'. Which is described as experiencing waves of discomfort, that includes: abnormal respiration, a sudden lack of strength, and digestive problems. The mental distress Lindemann describes as *'having self-deprecated thoughts which inflict negligence, guilt, and hostility towards one's own being'* (Lindemann, 1944).

Mourners experience a preoccupation with the image of the deceased, which could cause a noticeable loss of 'pattern of activities' during acute grief; people are described as being restless, having concentration problems, experiencing insomnia, and having problems continuing their social life. (Lindemann, 1944)

OBSERVING EMBODIED AND TACTILE EMOTIONS

*I try to swallow the lump in my throat. I look in the mirror and try not to see my mom staring back at me. I brace myself for feeling my sinking stomach. The lingering taste of iron in my mouth. My younger brother says he misses her hands. I miss her smell. The way only mothers smell... I look down at my own hands. But they do not look like hers. Mine are younger. Mine feel wrong today.**

We cannot investigate grief without feeling physically unwell. We cannot look at someone dying without feeling the strong urge to look away. We cannot speak when we have a lump in our throat. We cannot stay calm when our heart is pounding. We cannot cry uncontrollably without shaking our bodies as well. We cannot drive past the hospital in which our mother died, without having sweaty hands. We cannot talk about grief without acknowledging the trauma that comes with it. We cannot talk about trauma without realising how tangible the hurt becomes.

*I feel the sadness like I can touch it this week. Like it's walking beside me. The sadness pushes me forward, even if it is only small steps. It's the sheer powerlessness you feel when someone you love slowly fades before your very eyes. I miss my mom. I miss the idea of her being immortal. Warm en sterk en zacht.***

* Describing a moment I experienced. Written on January 2023, two months after the passing of my mother.

** This is an excerpt of the text I wrote to contextualise the article 'Seeing touch and touching sight: a reflection of the tactility of vision' by Jenni Laurens. Written on February 2022, in the same month my mom was diagnosed as a 'palliative cancer patient'.



KAHRAMANMARAŞ / FIGURE V

Merleau-Ponty suggests that you cannot grasp the totality of a subject without mediating the bodily experience in connection to the various positions one can take in to get ‘the bigger picture’. Or in his case, the map of his flat seen from above, as written in his book ‘Phenomenology of Perception’. In order to get a better overview of the situation, it comes in handy to investigate all perspectives of the space. I would argue that all aspects can have the potential to become essential details in the reconstruction of a tragedy. This is clearly seen in eyewitness reports of traumatic events in the news*. It is also noticeable in recounts of loss in non-fiction books.

‘I recognize now that there was nothing unusual in this: confronted with sudden disaster we all focus on how unremarkable the circumstances were in which the unthinkable occurred, the clear blue sky from which the plane fell, the routine errand that ended on the shoulder with the car in flames, the swings where the children were playing as usual when the rattlesnake struck from the ivy’ (Didion, 2006).

Joan Didion, American writer and journalist, acknowledges this need for remembering all (specific) detail in the face of tragedy, as a way to capture ‘the ordinary instant’ in which the unthinkable occurred. She herself recalls a heightened awareness of detail in the moments after losing her husband and daughter. However, also a very prominent loss of memory. This is not uncommon to happen simultaneously.

* *I think a good example of this phenomenon is how the news emphasised the story of a father holding the hand of his deceased daughter buried under the wrecks of what used to be the city Kahramanmaraş, during the aftermath of the earthquakes in Turkey in the beginning of this year (2023).*

DAMOCLES AND HIS SWORD*

We cannot separate our physical health from our mental health. We cannot talk about grief without acknowledging the effects it has on our bodily functions. Grievers experience melancholia, a loss of concentration, and perception of time (De Keijser, 2020). But they also feel the fruit of their sadness and stress represented in their bodies. Those who are in mourning, suffer an imbalance of hormones, (specifically the hormone cortisol, which regulates stress and causes our muscles to tense up), a quicker activation of the amygdala (part of the human brain that regulates the senses and connects them to our emotions, this causes a heightened state of bodily awareness) and, a release of the CFR (Corticotropin-Releasing Factor, which makes the nerve system respond in “the fight or flight” mode, which can cause a multitude of bodily dysfunction such as digestive problems)**.

* *According to legend, Damocles experienced tragedy looming: a sword suspended in air above his head. He knew, the single thread of horse-hair has to break at some point. ‘Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown’ (Shakespeare’s Henry IV). Damocles is described in Cicero’s Tusculanae disputationes, Book V, ca. 45 BC)*

** *These explanations are based on the interview in De Correspondent: “Hoofd, schouders, knie en teen – je hele lijf rouwt”, with journalist Lisanne van Sandelhoff and psychologist Jos de Keijser (both experts in grief). The article was published on the 17th of April 2020.*

DEATH BECOMES HER



LET'S TALK ABOUT DEATH, BABY

Let's talk about you and me. Death happens to us all and somehow we try to maintain a facade of immortality. Apart from the period leading up to Halloween and on the day itself, people seem to avoid the topic. Death happens to villains in Disney movies. The dead are Victorian ghosts that haunt old mansions. Even our image of a corpse is clouded by the spectacular green versions you see in zombie movies and shows. Not even a skeleton is safe next to its bright white plastic counterpart that sits in the corner of a biology room, completely ripped off its natural colour and probably adorned with a white lab coat and sunglasses. At least ours was at my secondary school.

Death is a phenomenon society only deals with at certain times. Taking care of the deceased became a job outside of the family, thanks to the rise of funeral homes and its directors in the 20th century*. When someone dies, we remove the body as quickly as possible away from the family. 'Let the professionals deal with it'. However, are we not losing an essential part of grief by disregarding the body so rapidly? Are we not lying to ourselves by pretending death only happens to a few, and that it can be handled in an afternoon and a lot of paperwork? That grief is a custom behind closed doors.

* This conclusion is based on the many resources provided by *The Order of the Good death*, a non-profit organisation of funeral industry professionals, academics, and artists that are the forefront of 'the death positivity movement'. <https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com>

DEATH CULTURE

Not every culture is as squeamish as we westerners are. Unfortunately, we consider those customs often wildly disturbing. But perhaps, opening our eyes to other death cultures could make us feel more in touch with our own deaths. Author and mortician: Caitlin Doughty, did such a thing by traveling the world to find 'the good death'*.

What do the people of Tana Toraja (Indonesia) gain by performing 'ma'nene' a tradition that exhumes their loved ones from the grave each year to re-dress and clean them? A mother unwrapping the mummified remains of her son to hug and talk to him again seems gruesome to us. But, they may feel the same about us when they realise we just leave the bodies to rot in the ground.

Or for example, in Japan after the cremation, the family will go to the room behind the oven to pick up the shards of bones that did not turn to dust after cremation. Bones mean more than the dust in the tradition of 'kotsuage'. The family spends a good amount of time collecting the bones with chopsticks to store in an urn. However, as an American family in the book 'People Who Eat Darkness' tells about their experience during 'kotsuage', opening up to the custom could provide a relief that they perhaps would not have found in their own custom:

'Rob [her boyfriend] couldn't handle it at all,' Nigel [her father] said. "He thought we were monsters, even to think of it. But, perhaps it's because we were the parents, and she was our daughter... It sounds macabre, as I tell you about it now, but it didn't feel that way at the time. It was something emotional. It almost made me feel calmer. I felt as if we were looking after Carita' (Parry, 2012).

* Caitlin Doughty writes about this search in her book: 'From Here to Eternity'.



In Mexico, they celebrate their death during the festivities of ‘Día de Los Muertos’ at the beginning of November. A day when it is believed the dead will return to the land of the living to see if they are still remembered. On the day itself, dinner is cooked, headstones are adorned with flowers and sugary skulls, paper skeletons are cut out of paper and hung around the house, private shrines are installed and, the graveyard gets turned into a place of festivities with fireworks and lavishly picnics.

DANSE MACABRE

In The Netherlands (and most parts of western Europe) we have a holiday with similar background: ‘Allerheiligen’, though it is way lesser known and celebrated. On November the second, the Roman Catholic Church will pray for the dead who are still not in heaven*. The day is less about the return of the dead, and more about helping the dead ‘go on in the afterlife’. In America, they know the day as ‘All Saint’s Day’.

Though coming from the Catholic Church, the custom of Allerheiligen did deviate around the late Middle Ages to not fear but romanticise the act of dying. Allerheiligen became connected to the allegory of the ‘Danse Macabre’ (translated as ‘the dance of the dead’), often an artistic depiction of dancing skeletons, who celebrate the universality of death. In other words: no matter who you are in life, death equalises us all. (Oosterwijk, Knöll, 2011)

* *It was also November the second when the doctor told us our mother was actively dying of septic shock. She died the day after on November the third, 2022.*

RITUALS

Theatre and art can act as mirrors in which we can see ourselves from a new perspective. Re-enacting strong emotions and past traumatic events on a platform, can help the spectator process and cope with what they are dealing with themselves. It makes them and the makers feel seen. These tactics expand beyond the stage. Rituals and celebrations, for example, can be seen as dramaturgical events that are embedded in our culture. Not to suggest that religion or funeral customs are only make-believe. However, they do show how carefully curated symbolism and scenography translates into meaning and making sense of our life and, by that, our deaths.

IN LIMBO

**EXHIBITION SUMMER 2022
FIRST YEAR, MA SCENOGRAPHY**

IN A SECOND

'In a Second' is a work/performance for the site-specific exhibition: 'In Limbo'. An exhibition made during my first year in the master Scenography program. The exhibition was about a building 'waiting to be demolished'.

IN LIMBO:

The Gans Studio will be demolished after our exhibition. But instead of going carte blanche, we took the route of highlighting the history and aesthetic of the building in its current stage. Limbo is a temporal state of being in between places. This place could be the one in between the world of the living and world of the death. The past and the present or, the future and the here-and-now.

Limbo is amidst the known and unknowing. Between Gans Studio and us'.

ABOUT THE WORK

The work started at the entrance of the exhibition. The audience was seated on green chairs and asked to listen to a pre-recorded audio about 'what happens to us when we die'. This audio talks about the stage in between: the few seconds after being declared 'clinically death', but before being considered as 'brain death'. During the duration of the audio, I slowly walked in front of the audience and carefully passed through a little door, hidden in the middle of the big garage doors. After the audio is finished, the garage doors slide up and reveal the exhibition space.

TEXT 'IN A SECOND', PART I

Right before we die, after already being declared as clinically death, but not yet brain death. Our body will release such a big amount of DMT: a natural hallucinated compound, that we will experience the trip of a lifetime. Our brains will be flooded by vivid dreams and memories. This is not speculation. This is a scientifically proven fact. Yet, the thought of such a dream... Feels to me like the bridge between my pragmatic atheistic beliefs and, the spiritual and tautologic beliefs of an afterlife. A normal dream can feel as if it has lasted for hours, even if it crossed only seconds in real life. Time bends and alters in our sub-consciousness during sleep. Imagine how long the dream 'to end all dreams' would feel like. Could it be, that in that one second before being declared brain death, we dream for what feels like it lasts for years? A lifetime even. Maybe multiple lifetimes. An afterlife after all.*

The Gansstraat 143, will be demolished after this exhibition. Its last seconds are happening now. The last phase is in motion and, the DMT silos are being dumped. And all its memories, all the people it has housed, every renovation, tool, and story is seeping and spilling through the cracks. Even the roof seems as if it is falling. This building had been many things: the barn of a gardener, a gasoline station in the fifties, and, the backdrop of a lifetime spent on the opposite side of the road behind garage doors.

* Recent studies have proven the overlap between the experiences of those who suffered near death experiences and, those who have taken certain amounts of the drug DMT: Timmermann, Christopher, et al. "DMT Models the Near-Death Experience." More speculative has been the book DMT: The Spirit Molecule, by clinical psychiatrist Dr. Rick Strassman, who was the first to link the drug DMT with the neurochemical function of the pineal gland that produces serotonin in the brain.



UITRIT
LATEN
EER

Nooduitgang
vrijhouden



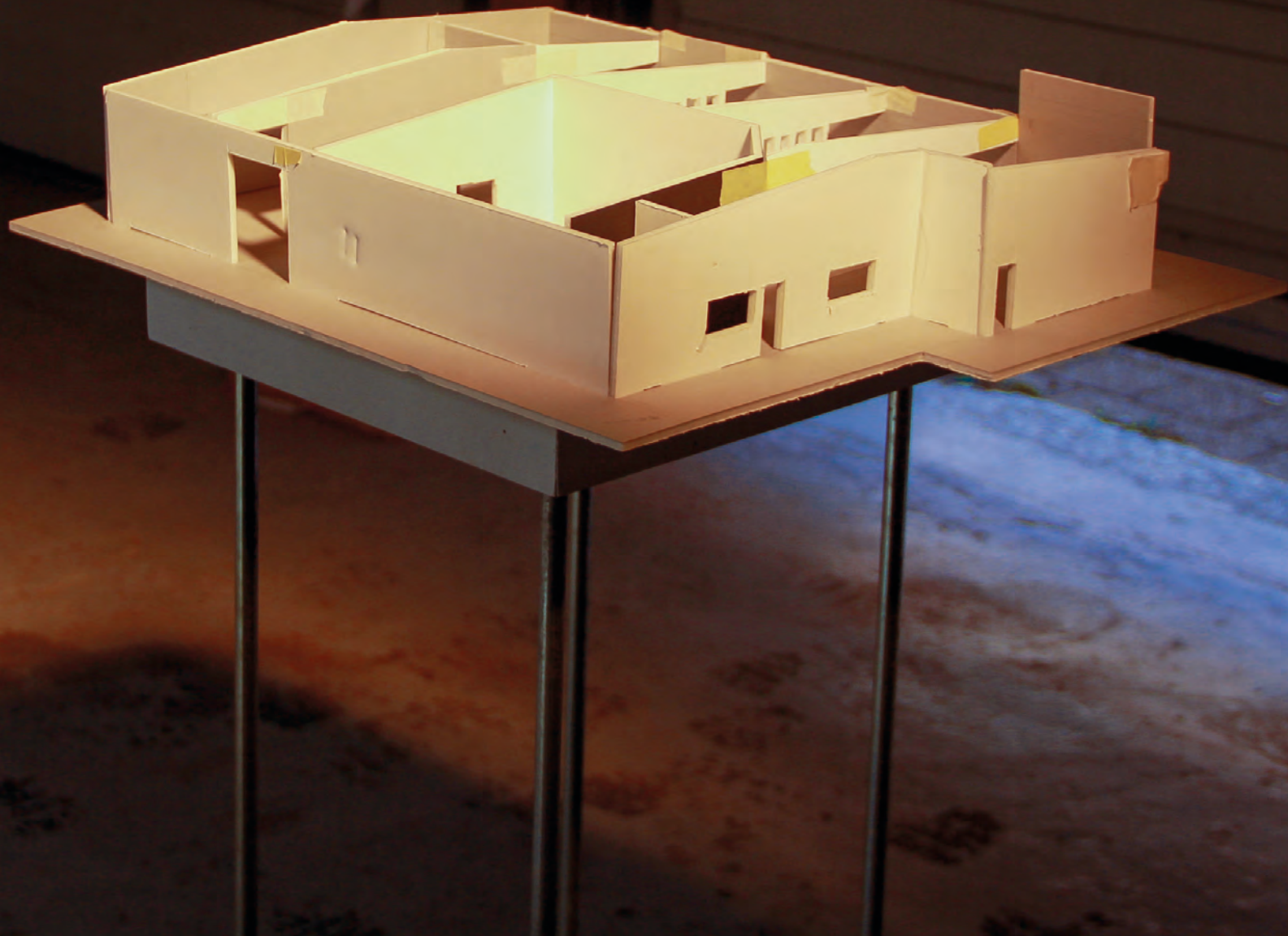
In the second part, the audience was guided by Thijs Baselmans (also a Master Scenography student), and asked to lie down on a stretcher while being pushed inside a sculptured little room. In this room, another audio played. This audio was accompanied by the light coming from the side, that highlighted a maquette version of the exhibition space, above your head. The shadows in the maquette showed how light passes through the building. This part was in collaboration with Thijs Baselmans and, coincide with his work: '31,536,000'.

TEXT 'IN A SECOND', PART II

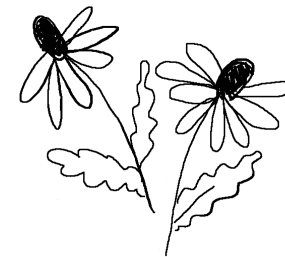
I can only speculate what happens in our minds right before or, after we die. But researching death does comfort me. I guess it frightens me less when I treat 'the act of dying' as a phase or, natural occurrence; instead of it being a mystery and taboo subject. Because let us be honest: what makes a good story if it is not without an extraordinary ending? So, to end this story... I would like to say goodbye to this building: to its beams, wood, glass, and structure. To all that holds it together.

I want to say goodbye to you and, to the people that are now walking around you. Goodbye. And I hope you will spend your last second on earth with a lifetime of dreaming.





TO CONCLUDE



How to conclude an autoethnographic research document that aims to be polyvocal, showcases multiple perspectives of grief and focusses on the philosophy of phenomenology? How to summarise an autobiographical take on uncovering the hidden structures of a spatial presence, a somatic scenography, a documentary theatre method, and the meta-physical state of ‘the dead and dying’? Especially, when we keep in mind the intent for this document to be conducted in a creative writing style so, it creates possibilities to reveal certain realities and methods for ‘making and thinking’

THE PERCEIVING OF TIME

It started with one question: How to perceive time in times of grief? To begin answering this question, we must understand the reason why it was posed in the first place. A perception of time is always influenced by our bodily presence in space (Tilley, 1997). We acknowledge time because we acknowledge a notion of being. Our brain connects our (sub)consciousness, to our physical existence on the bases of reason: you think, therefore you must exist. You exist, therefore you must think.

In the face of trauma - such as the experience of acute and direct grief our brain does not function as it should. Our consciousness cannot process the emotions that are flooding our brain. Our body goes into ‘survival mode’. Therefore, we experience a heightened somatic state (the result of hormone imbalance) which results in a disturbed perception of space and time in which the tragedy occurred (Lindemann, 1944). However, this survival mode could also result in a certain clarity in which the moment in time can be perceived out of a multitude of perspectives (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). When we conclude that there is no such thing as a mono-dimensional truth (Morley, 2007), this phenomenon in grief, could hypothesise that this viewing out of different perspectives could result in an acknowledgment of the ‘real’ reality, by the mourner themselves (Didion, 2006).

Scenography is method which could initiate a focus on the reality of the given situation, because scenography provides a theatrical framing to the here-and-now (by showing and staging a multitude of perspectives). The scenographic research focuses on the phenomenology of the spatial and natural aspects of the space and stage. The design aspect provides a certain distance between subject matter and spectator, while the dramaturgical aspect mediates the possible connection between spectator and maker, spectator and spectator, and spectator and subject-matter. (McKinney, Iball, 2011)

THE TIMES OF GRIEF

I am still very much a person in acute grief. And, during the writing of these thesis, I came to the consensus that I will never get ‘out of grief’. Because the deceased will never be back in my life again. Grief is also about more than solely missing the person gone (Almuli, 2022). Grief to my understanding, completely unhinges you as person: how ineffable and imminent the vast nothingness of a post self truly is. Grief does not provide you any answers on life. It provides hurt. The worst possible thing that could happen, happened. But here you are. Here I am. I have seen what happens after the curtain falls. So did you. And it had to fall at some point.

Writing about my grief, is a highly personal and political subject. This theme could be perceived as being in direct contrast with the study of scenography and, the ‘designing of a theatre play’. With this thesis I hoped to have uncovered methods that connects the personal with the practical. By utilising making strategies in search of possible answers on grief. I aimed for finding a way to mediate these new-found revelations and experiences, with the spectators (and co-creators). As Alexander Devriendt from ‘Ontroerend Goed’, confided to me, during our interview: The basis of every theatre performance is showing the audience that they have a connection with the subject-matter after all (Devriendt, 2023)

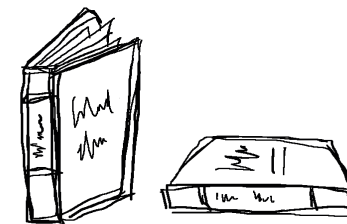
Grief is trying to pick up the pieces and, mending them with the pieces of others like you. Together we make what has been broken, somewhat whole again.

THEREFORE I AM

Wojtkowiak wrote: *'I'm dead, therefore I am'*. With this title of her doctorate, she undoubtedly hinted toward the famous words of philosopher Descartes: *'I think, therefore I am (cogito, ergo sum)'*. I could in this sense, conclude how: 'I wrote, therefore time has passed'. Or, that I had grieved, 'therefore I must have loved'. René Descartes (1596-1650) was a French philosopher who wrote on the bases of reason: he was thinking, therefore he must have existed, since he was the one doubting himself in the first place.

I was researching, therefore I must have concluded, since I am the one who started this research in the first place.

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FIGURES

Figure I: De Kleermaeker, A. (2022). 'Funeral Marjolein Hurkmans' [Photograph]. Unpublished.

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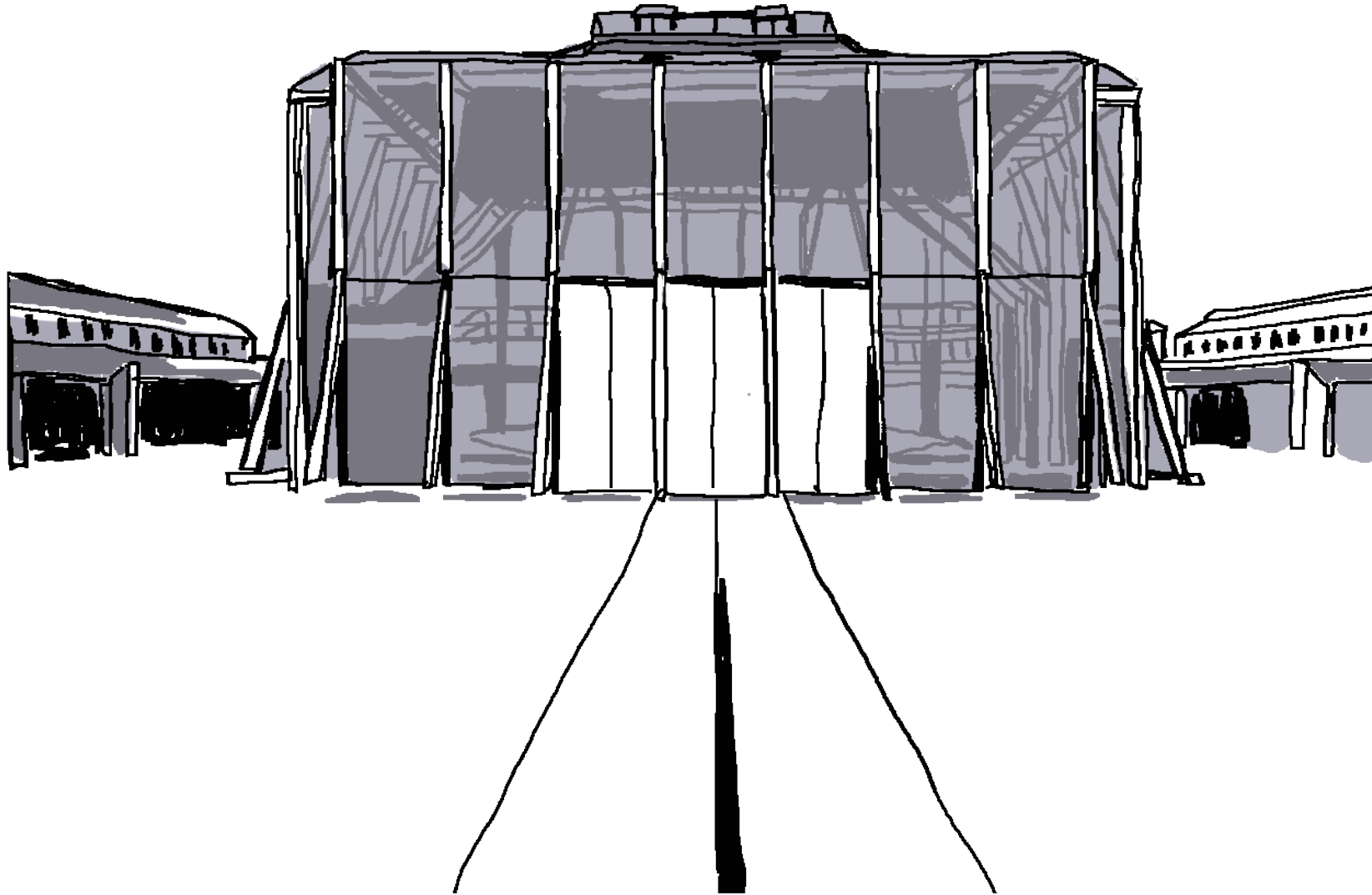
Figure III: Van Rooij, G. J. (2019). 'Exhibition Roos van Effen' [Photograph] *Roos van Effen*. <https://roosvangeffen.com/onscherpe-dagen-2/>.

Figure IV: Schilten, Sas. (2021). 'Detail van 'Per Benedetto', een van De Bruyckeres vroegere wassculpturen, uit 2009' [Photograph]. *De Volkskrant*. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/de-sculpturen-vol-dood-en-erotiek-van-berlinde-de-bruyckere-grijpen-je-bij-de-keel~b93ae887/>.

Figure V: Adem Atlan, A. (2023). 'Eartquakes Turkey' [Photograph]. *Getty Pictures*.

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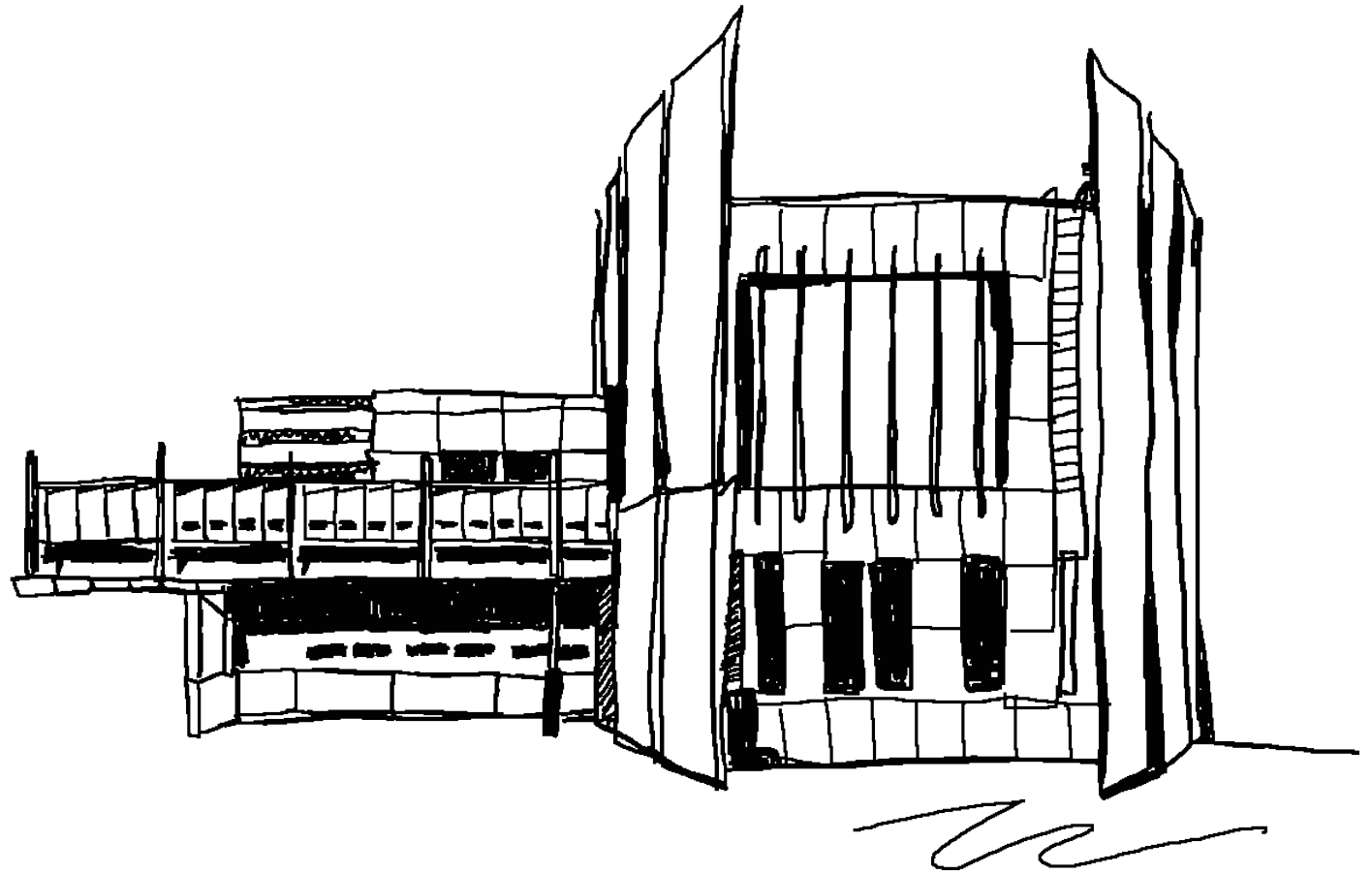
y a r d e n h a a r l e m



S i n t b a r b a r a



meerbloemhof



**THE TIME
AND PLACE
TO SAY
GOODBYE**

THE TIME

In the spring of 2022, I started to visit crematoria and graveyards, to discover why I had this underlying desire to research these places of death. My mother got diagnosed as terminally ill, during this same period. Death suddenly became something very visceral and real in my family home. I tried breaking the taboo that obscured my openness in dealing with the situation at hand. I was in search of a way to accept my own mortality. Only then, could I possibly face the high probability that my mother would die that same year.

When you do not believe in a higher power and life after death, only reality seems to provide acceptance for the passing of someone you love. Or at least, that is my understanding. Investigating death made me realise what a natural occurrence it truly is. By trying to understand 'what happens when we die', it became less scary to me. I rather know the scientific facets of 'dying' than let my imagination run wild. I figured, I would rather visit these places beforehand when I was someone in pain but, not yet in grief.

THE PLACE

*The sun warms with its rays the ceramic urns stalled on stone scaffolding, placed at the right side of the building I wonder if the architecture is designed in such a way, that the sun always goes under behind the urns. Everything seems to move at a slower pace. They are hidden. Covered under a blanket in a soft yellow colour.**

*I see a man finding his way through the lane of graves, holding a green-coloured water can. When I look above me, the dark branches of the trees seem to reach all the way to heaven. I do not hear the crow from before anymore. I do hear the other birds chirping. The birds sing in melody with the sound of a shovel digging. They seem to have started delving into a new grave behind me. I do not look back, today I keep myself from seeing that man.***

* Notes I took during my visit to the crematorium 'Yarden' in Haarlem on February 14, 2022. The day before my mother's devastating diagnosis.

** A note I took during my visit to the graveyard 'Sint Barbara' in Utrecht on March 1, 2022.

*A little girl in a black dress runs through the hallway, past the cremation ovens. Her mother follows. We watch them go before entering the room they have just left. The room is covered in rust-coloured tiles that look brown due to the dim, artificial lighting. After a few moments of standing there, the oven suddenly starts to get heated. It sounds like a wild mechanical beast is coming to life. The smell of burning wood fills every little nook and cranny in no time at all. The smell is overwhelming. The mortician standing next to me says that I am still in luck: 'It can smell way worse in here'.**

*These graveyards and crematoriums became the places where I felt consoled. They feel like 'coming home'. Everyone visiting these places has lost someone. Everyone that I will encounter, has been thinking about their own mortality in one way or another. All of us acknowledge death. Seeing the cremation ovens feels to me like getting a sneak preview of what happens after death. It is the bridge between me and the corpse in his carton box, waiting to be burned into a pile of ashes with red glowing shards of bone.***

* *A note I took during my visit to the crematorium 'Meerbloemhof' in Zoetermeer on March 17, 2022. The day after my mother's birthday.*

** *A note I took during my visit to the graveyard and crematorium 'Westerveld' in Driehuizen on March 28, 2022.*

Perhaps the reason why society is so afraid of death is our refusal to know what remains of the body after a person dies. We deny the bacteria that live on our skin. How the bacteria will slowly start breaking down our tissue after death. We cannot wrap our heads around the notion, that all moisture in our bodies will vaporise. That all our muscles will relax in an instant. Our skin will turn all kinds of bright-coloured colours.

*When I die, I want my body to go all out, in its decaying glory. Let my corpse give life to all the organisms that have lived on top and next to me. Let my remains return to the earth beneath and above me. When I die, I want my body to burst into a million stars that fill the cosmos. I want the same for my mother. But I also, want to retain the image I have of her now that she is still alive. A woman with warm, glowing skin and a kind, beating heart.**

*The wind ruffles through the leaves of the trees surrounding me. I scribble some remarks in my notebook. This place reminds me of France. My parents have a holiday home in a rural village in Brittany. Every holiday we would visit the house and I would take the same shortcut year after year. I knew that if I walked across the graveyard nearby our home, I would easily skip three minutes of walking time to get to the bakery on the opposite side of the main road. The ground of that graveyard was scattered with white pebbles that would make a satisfying crunching sound when I stepped on them with my red boots. Part of the Graveyard in Maarssen is covered with those same stones. They sound the same to me as they did back then.***

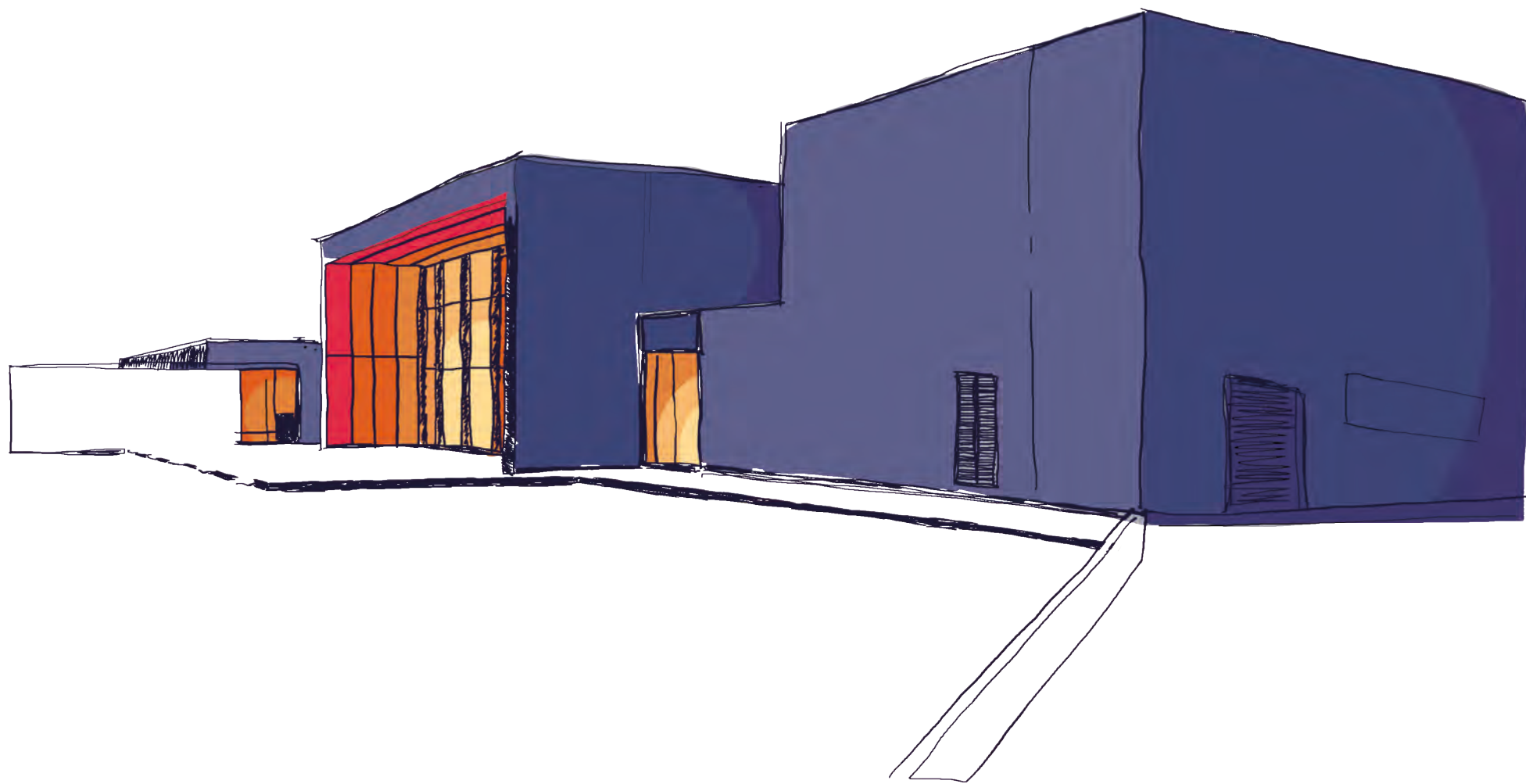
* *Notes and revelations after visiting the crematorium 'Duin- en bollenstreek' in Lisse on April 7, 2022.*

** *A note I wrote during my visit to the public graveyard of Maarssen on April 22, 2022. The day before my birthday.*

W e s t e r v e l d



Duin- en
bollenstreek



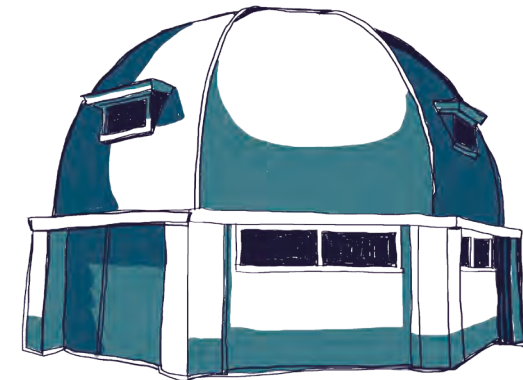
THE GOODBYE

After spending many hours in crematoria in these first months of the year 2022. I have seen nature taking shape before my eyes. Often overlooking a man-made pond, garden, or forest, I have seen seasons change while peering through the big glass windows, that are often to be found in places of cremation. I assume these big windows are in attempt of connecting us (the visitor) to nature outside. Everything that moves outside of this building lives in a cycle: it will be born and decays, just as we humans do. Graveyards on the other end, I regard more as time capsules of society in which you see the funeral trends come and go. I have seen glass headstones with bright-coloured pictures. Simple headstones made of grey stone with in simple lettering just a name and, date. I have walked past adorned statues, gothic mausolea and, even a little graveyard inside a much bigger one*.

I assume that what brings us comfort it times of grief, is seeing the living human being present surround their dead. The traces of someone who used to be there, gives us the feeling we are not alone in dealing with grief. Tending to a grave and, creating little traditions like leaving hand-written notes, lighting up a candle or, arranging a bouquet of flowers. Gives us the feeling we are still connected to the person long gone. At the same time, it mediates the possible connection we have to the person walking around the graveyard after us. Could it be that it is the notion of a possible spectator, that provides us with comfort in times of grief? Even if the spectator is a duck swimming by, or a bird whistling in a tree? Perhaps what makes time feel more valid is precisely the act of 'being seen' by others. Being seen and, actively looking for recognition, situates us in the 'here-and-now'. And 'having time' gives us the most comfort of all.

* During my visit to 'Westerveld' I was shown the grave of the Family Vissering. It was commissioned to be a small private graveyard, hidden behind stone walls, to give the family their privacy in times of mourning. How elitist as that may sound... It was actually quite endearing to see a small table and chair prompted next to the graves, when I peeked through a slit in the wall. They do use their plot to drink coffee and read the newspaper, next to their deceased loved ones. Or at least, that is what the undertaker of 'Westerveld' told me.

afgemene
Begraafplaats
markssen



**A
LETTER
TO
DEATH**

February 7th 2023

Hello Death,

Normally I would have introduced myself. But we have met before. Not so long ago. Although my mind sometimes likes to make me think differently. Though I do not need to tell you how obscure time can become when it is bent by tragedy and grief. You are a void. An endless cloud of nothingness. You do not perceive time. At least not time by my human standards.

I do not envision you as a skeleton in a big black cape. A sickle in your right hand... Although that depiction is scary, it would have made death easier for me to comprehend. If you were so simple to envision, I could have hated you. Blamed you for taking my mother too soon. Perhaps, I could even find comfort in the thought of you guiding her. Envisioning you lifting my mother's lifeless and sick body out of her hospital bed. Carrying her in your arm to a world unknown to me. A realm beyond pain and hurt. Beyond being human.

But I believe you are nothing. And thus, nothing is what my mother has become. Not a star in the night sky flickering sweet words to me. Not a butterfly resting on my finger to touch me one last time. Not a ghost in a Victorian dress seeing my life pass before her eyes while floating in the background. Not a vision of myself, I see in the mirror. My mom is not an angel standing behind a god I do not call my own. My mom is not a speck of dust, so to dust she shall not return.

Death, you are all but dubious. It is me who has changed. I used to not think of you. Later I started fearing you. During my mom's deathbed, I started cheering for you, to make an end to all the suffering. And now? Now I feel like I finally started to get to know you. How definitive you can be. Almost reassuring me of how imminent you are.

*Memento mori.
Gedenk te sterven.
Remember that you must die.*

Death, if you are not a person, are you a state? And if you are a state, what do we become after? And if you know, would you tell me? Do you loathe me for wondering? Not merely accepting? I wished I would be as assured with not knowing 'what we become after we die' as I am with wondering where we were before our birth.

I wished you could have stayed for a while so I would have gotten to know you. Perhaps you already tried to do so by making my mom die in two days instead of one. I wonder, for how long you had to linger, for me to look up from my own sorrow, and look straight at yours. How much time would have to pass before I could feel anything but my grief? Anything but the heartbreak, and my deep-rooted fear of forgetting who my mom was before you took her. Would you have said anything back? Those who want to forget will remember, and those who want to remember will forget.

*Memento sentire.
Gedenk te voelen.
Remember that you must feel.*

*For if I will not die, death, would I ever have lived?
Have you?*

*Liefs,
Madelief*

[04:32, 1-11-'22] Marjolein: *Het is een nacht die je normaal alleen in films ziet...*

[04:36, 1-11-'22] Valentijn: *Alles goed?*

[04:37, 1-11-'22] Marjolein: *Ga eens slapen! Tis half 5... Nee, sonde-gerochel, koude voeten en kramp in mn been. Met jou?*

[04:39, 1-11-'22] Valentijn: *Experimenten duren lang om te draaien en ik wil het niet morgen doen. Mijn huiswerk wil ik af hebben voor de presentatie.*

[04:40, 1-11-'22] Marjolein: *Heb je die morgen?*

[04:40, 1-11-'22] Valentijn: *ja, het is woensdagochtend ergens.*

[04:41, 1-11-'22] Marjolein: *Maar dan ben ik er niet bij.*

[04:42, 1-11-'22] Valentijn: *Moeten we wollen sokken voor je kopen morgen?*

[04:42, 1-11-'22] Marjolein: *Nou doorwerken dan xxx*

[12:29, 1-11-'22] Marjolein: *Dokter net weer geweest. Geen goed nieuws: te kortademig om naar huis te gaan.*

[12:29, 1-11-'22] Madelief: *Balen!! Zal ik vanavond langskomen?*

[17:48, 1-11-'22] Marjolein: *Als je zin hebt, vind het wel gezellig.*

[18:11, 1-11-'22] Madelief: *Ik kom zo met papa*

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Opeens is mijn moeder een lijk. Een leeg omhulsel in een oude versleten pyjama. Alles van haar is weg. Opslag. Ze ademt niet meer in. Ik leun met mijn hoofd op haar benen en wilde dat ze ging. Maar nu het gebeurd is, wil ik weer terug naar een paar seconde terug. Ze is voor altijd weg. Mijn moeder is voor mijn ogen verdwenen. Ze is koud en wit en bleek. Ze is stil gevallen en het kleur is uit haar gezicht weggeschoten. Mijn vader komt binnen met mijn broers en slaat een jammerkreet. Hij huilt. Hij kan haar niet aankijken. Na een paar secondes daar snikkend te hebben gestaan loopt hij naar de stoel naast haar en gaat zitten. 'Wat doe je nou, wat heb je nou gedaan', jammert hij zachtjes terwijl hij haar hand aait. Ze is volledig in elkaar gezakt. Ik probeer mezelf eraan te herinneren dat deze versie van mijn moeder, een andere versie is. Niet mijn echte moeder, maar een lijk. Mijn broers willen niet in de kamer zijn. Mijn vader blijft ook niet lang nadat ik hem verzeker dat ik het aankan om alleen in de kamer achter te blijven tot de aanschouwende arts er is.

Ik neem in stilte elk detail van mijn moeder in me op. Het besef dringt tot me door dat dit de laatste keer is dat ik haar ga zien. Ze is nog warm, ze heeft nog haar geur. Haar huid voelt nog hetzelfde aan. Haar borsten liggen slap en vallen langs haar opgeblazen-medicatie-buik. Voorzichtig trek ik de deken omhoog tot op haar kin. Ze had dat gewild toen ze nog leefde. Ze is altijd een beetje preuts geweest. De dokter komt binnen en zegt gelijk datgene wat al een tijdje als waarheid in de lucht hangt: Marjolein is overleden om 10:20. Zelfs oog-in-oog met haar lijk, heb ik die woorden nodig om het definitieve te beseffen. Ik huil geluidloos en voel de tranen over mijn heet geworden wangen rollen. Ik wil tegen haar schreeuwen. 'Sta op, mama. Sta op. Ik heb je nodig. Je zou er verdomme altijd voor me zijn'.

Ik huiver als ik denk aan de nacht ervoor. Haar bleke blauwe ogen, de pure paniek daarin. Mijn moeder wilde niet dood. Ik schaam me dat ik die nacht, mijn voorhoofd tegen haar voorhoofd heb gedrukt en zachtjes zei: 'het komt goed mama, iedereen doet doodgaan ooit, Je bent de beste moeder die je ooit had kunnen zijn'. Ik schaam met dat ik het hardop tegen haar zei. Haar gebod op te moeten geven.

Ik wil nooit meer een voet in de kamer zetten waar ze stierf. Maar ik wil ook terug, terug naar de laatste dagen van mijn moeder. Terug naar haar warme, doodzieke lijf. Het rochelende geluid dat haar keel maakte. Het gefluister van haar stem omdat ze te moe was, hard op te kunnen spreken. Ik zou willen dat ik toen had gedurfd om op het bed te zitten en tegen haar aan te kruipen. Voor een laatste keer. Dat ik me niet zo aan haar had geïrriteerd. Dat ik haar had kunnen zeggen dat ik haar nooit zou vergeten en dat ze altijd een onderdeel van mij zou zijn. Dat ze dat al is.

Mijn moeder is het beste wat mij ooit is overkomen.

Suddenly my mother became a corpse. An empty shell of a human, wearing old worn-out pyjamas. She was gone in an instant. She was not breathing anymore. I leaned my head against her legs and begged her to go. But now that it is done, I want to reverse time and go back to the seconds before. She is gone forever, perished before my very eyes. She is cold, and white, and pale (koud en wit en bleek). She is stilled and, all the colour has left her face. My father enters the room with my brothers, he wails. He cries. He cannot look at her. After standing there for a few seconds sobbing, he walks to the chair next to her and sits down. “What are you doing, look what you have done,” he whispers while carefully holding her hand. Her body has completely collapsed inwards. I actively try to remind myself that this is not the real version of my mother. This is her corpse. My brothers both do not want to stay in the room any longer. My dad asks me if he can join them. I assure him that I will be fine staying in the room alone, waiting for the doctor to arrive.

I take in every little detail of my mother in silence. I get the realisation, that this will be the last time, that I will see my mother. Her skin still feels warm. Her scent has not yet faded. Holding her hand still feels the same. Her breasts look saggy and lay flat against her bloated, medication belly. I gently pull the blanket up to her chin. That’s what she would have wanted me to do if she would still be alive. She was always a bit of a prude. The doctor walks in and says what has been hanging in the air for quite some time now: Marjolein died at 10:20. Even face to face with her corpse. I needed those words to finally realise the inevitable. I cry without making any sound, I feel the tears rolling down my scorching red cheeks. I feel the urge to scream at her: “Get up, mom. Get up. I need you. You said that you would always fucking be there for me.”

I shudder when I think back to the night before. Her pale blue eyes peered through the room in a state of utter panic. My mother did not want to die. I feel ashamed that I pressed my forehead against hers last night and uttered the words: ‘It’s going to be okay mommy, everyone dies someday, you are the best mom I could ever wished for’. I am ashamed to have said those things out loud. That I almost begged her to give up the fight.

I will never set foot in this room again. But I also desperately long back to my mother’s last days in this hospital. Back to her warm, sick body. Hearing the rattling sound her throat made. The whispers of her voice because she was too tired to speak out loud. I wish I had dared to sit on the hospital bed and cuddle her. For that one last time. I wished I had not felt so annoyed by her. That I would have told her how I will never forget her. How she will always be an integral part of me. That she already is so.

My mom was the best thing to ever happen to me.

Written February 3, 2023.

In loving memory of my late mother

Marjolein Hurkmans

16 - 03 - 1965

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03 - 11 - 2022

In remembrance of her parents

Jo Hurkmans (1935 - 2021)

Will van de Laar (1937 - 2021)

**A
LETTER
FROM
DEATH**

April 4th 2023

Madelief,

Never have I written a letter back before. Never did I answer any 'why' or 'how'. I might be a nothing, a no-one, a void that is incapable of answering. But I do know for certain, that no answer of mine will ever be sufficient enough for you. No matter the state I am in. How could it ever be? I can only take, Madelief, not bring them back. Even if I would have wanted to do so. I could not. That is not how it works. That is not what you - or anyone else for that matter - can ask of me. I am a nothing, a no-one, a void that is incapable of listening. I come and I go. I will take with me what had to go eventually; a life sprung, wavered, and perished.

And she was too beautiful to resist. Too perfectly arranged in a loving, curated life. Her color was fading on the edges. She blossomed into the smell of spring passed and the odour was sweet and lingering.

I almost had her before. On a blistering, hot summer's day. I brushed my hand against her cheek and suddenly realised I had arrived too soon. Her head was not bent down enough. Her body had not fallen down on the ground beneath her. I could not take her. Not yet. I never take those who do not want to go. Because I know you all want to leave on your own eventually.

The earth will suddenly look like a comfortable bed you can rest in. You will start to worry less. You will want to fade into loving obscurity, knowing that you will be remembered. You will always remember, everyone remembers. I can take any body of flesh, but I can not take away the memories. No one can. No one will. I might live in the shadows. I might only move during the dawn. I could for all that matter, be solely surrounded by vast darkness. But I can not - and will never be able to - alter any dreams. I can not change the memories. I can only make them more meaningful.

She was too beautiful to resist but her color was fading on the edges. She blossomed into the smell of summer passed and the odour was sweet and lingering. I had to pluck her. It was her time. I never take those who do not want to go. I know you all want to leave on your own eventually. I am a bystander of lives lived. I am an admirer of life itself. But, life can not go on forever. It never does. You never want to live on forever. It is beautiful because it can not last. You start to perish the moment you started living.

Your mother was too beautiful to resist until her color was fading on the edges. She blossomed into the smell of autumn passed, and the odour was overwhelmingly sweet. So, when the sky turned into a lavender color with hues of blush pink, we both knew it was a beautiful day to die.

*And it truly was, Madelief.
It always is.*

*Yours,
Death*

*This thesis is in dedication of those who had to leave us too soon
and in admiration of the ones left behind.*