Deep Science Publishing
https://doi.org/10.70593/978-93-49910-50-8_3

DeepScience
Open Access Books

Chapter 3: Death, humor, and honesty: Storytelling strategies in caitlin doughty's work

Section 1. Staging Death: The Power of Scenes

1. Scene-by-scene construction

In The Art of Fact, Lounsberry lists creative nonfiction features, and the scene is one of them. "Instead of merely 'reporting' or 'discussing' an object or event," she writes, "the artist of nonfiction recasts it in narrative form" (1990: xiv). How the scene is built matters because "the remarkable effect of such transformation is that the moment is reprised: it lives again, yet with the subtle lights and shadings of the author's vision" (xv). It acquires a "subtle reverberation" (xv) that echoes in the mind's eye.

Scenes, Gutkind agrees, make up "the creative nonfiction dance" (2012: 138), a block whose components follow a particular pattern within a frame. And because "creative nonfiction is an amalgam of style and substances, information and story" (138), we need such a visual scheme to understand the skeleton of a book or an essay that belongs to this genre. This dance aims to embed information within a scene so that "the movement between blocks is seamless. […] In the perfect world, information will also be embedded inside each scene" (138). Unfortunately, Gutkind's world does not exist. In reality, scenes are elastic, and sometimes the movement between them is dreary and maybe even hindered by some factors external to the story, such as footnotes.

About the structure of the story, Gutkind makes three points:

(a) The building blocks of creative nonfiction are scenes—little stories;

(b) Information is communicated through action as part of the scene or in between scenes;

(c) Story is the creative vehicle to present the nonfiction. It is a style and substance dance.

One scene should follow another progressively or in a logical pattern, called a frame, the bigger story (the main narrative), comprised of several scenes—like honeycombs in a beehive. In Keep It Real. Everything You Need to Know About Researching and Writing Creative Nonfiction (2008), edited by Gutkind and Fletcher, several authors contributed with chapters about ways to build a scene, immersion, truth, the memoir craze, and influencing readers using ethos, pathos, and logos. It is interesting to see that the existing chapters have not been attributed to certain authors, because the texts have been mixed and mingled by editors, perhaps trying to bring Gutkind's dance (and my honeycombs image) to life by refusing to hinder the movement from one scene to another. Rubie and Provost (1998) also compare the narrative to a skeleton to which the writer adds muscle and flesh—images and scenes. Hart (2011) discusses scenes too, this time by going backwards to the beginning of the modern era when newer media started incorporating scenes in its content. "The novel […] takes its shape from a series of scenes. A radio drama creates a succession of imagined scenes. The movie is always exclusively scenic" (89). New Journalism was inspired by this and started telling true stories using the same existing building block of scenes, with Wolfe calling it "scene-by-scene construction" (1973: 31).

Gérard Genette (1983) separates discours and histoire regarding scenes: the former represents the narrative or the text, and the latter contains the narrated world, with its characters and plot. In other words, when we deal with a narrator-character, they can burst through the bubble of the histoire from their discours world and comment upon what happens in the story, similar to breaking the fourth wall in film or theatre. In narratology, Genette introduced the concept of the scene to define the relation between how much time passes in the histoire (story time) and how much time is covered by the discours (narrated time): "scene, most often in dialogue, which, as we have already observed, realizes conventionally the equality of time between narrative and story" (94); however, the equality is "conventional […] between narrative time and story time" (87). Unfortunately, defining scenes only based on the feature of time lacks the emotional arc (Jockers 2015) and the spatial element that creates a scene. Trying to fill in all the particulars, Gius et al. (2019) define the scene as a segment of the presentation (discours) of a narrative which shows a fragment of the narrated world (histoire) where: (a) there is temporal equality between discours and histoire; (b) the place remains the same; (c) it revolves around one particular action; and (d) the same characters are involved.

The most commonly given advice to any writer of fiction and creative nonfiction is "Show, don't tell," whose first adept seems to be Aristotle, with his Poetics:

In constructing the plot and working it out with the proper diction, the poet should place the scene before his eyes as far as possible. In this way, seeing everything with the utmost vividness, as if he were a spectator of the action, he will discover what is in keeping with it, and be most unlikely to overlook inconsistencies. (19)

The same applies to creative nonfiction (and fiction) writers: unity is key. "Grasping the scene as a unit will orient you through your material in a way that nothing else can" (2013: 17), Stuart Horwitz advises writers in his Blueprint Your Bestseller. He also defines a scene as something that transports dramatic information to the readers: "A scene is where something happens, and because something happens, something changes in a way that propels the narrative" (5). We have already talked about scenes in creative nonfiction, specifically in the chapter about creative nonfiction, so I feel it is unnecessary to dwell further into this. We should look at examples to see precisely how Caitlin Doughty builds them. We will examine the opening scenes from her first two books: From Here to Eternity and Smoke Gets In Your Eyes. I will not add Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? here because I do not see it as a whole frame containing smaller scenes but as a collection of unrelated scenes—mainly information taken from professionals and trustworthy resources—in the form of answers to questions. (Smoke Gets In Your Eyes is primarily a memoir, and From Here to Eternity is a travelogue.)

2. From Here to Eternity

The book begins with the author's note: "From Here to Eternity is a work of nonfiction. I have changed a small number of names and descriptive details" (2017: xiii). It is clear that we are reading a nonfiction book, but what would Gutkind's opinion be on the author's statement that she modified names (we can understand that might happen because of privacy and security reasons) and some descriptive details? This is where we might ask ourselves: What descriptive details? Which of the descriptions I am reading has been changed? Gutkind wrote that "it is unethical, immoral, and downright unnecessary to make stuff up since truth is usually more evocative and certainly more convincing than fantasy" (2012: 35). Then again, Doughty did not say that she "made things up," but that she "changed a small number of details," so we might say that, for the sake of the way the story and the scenes flow, the changes are justified. However, if she had changed essential details from the parts containing historical reportage, cultural information, or scientific facts, I would doubt her credibility as a creative nonfiction writer.

The following three excerpts of From Here to Eternity: Travelling the World to Find the Good Death make up the book's first pages, so how I present them is precisely how the readers are introduced to them when they begin reading.

(a) The phone rang and my heart raced.

The first few months after I opened my funeral home, a ringing phone qualified as a thrilling event. We didn't have many calls. "What if... what if someone *died*?" I'd gasp. (Well yes, dear, it's a funeral home—that would be the point.)

The voice on the other end was a hospice nurse. She had declared Josephine dead ten minutes ago; the body was still warm to the touch. The nurse sat at the dead woman's bedside, having an argument with Josephine's daughter. The daughter had to chosen to call my funeral home because she didn't want her mother to be whisked away the second she took her final breath. She wanted to keep Mom's body at home.

"Can she do that?"

"Of course she can," I replied. "In fact, we encourage it."

"That's not illegal?" the nurse asked skeptically.

"It's not illegal."

"Usually we call the funeral home and they pick up the body within the hour."

"The daughter is in control of her body. Not the hospice, not the hospital or nursing home, definitely not the funeral home."

"Well, okay, if you're sure."

"I'm sure," I said. "Please tell Josephine's daughter she can call us back later this evening, or tomorrow morning if she'd prefer! Whenever she's ready."

We picked up Josephine at 8 p.m., six hours after her death. The next day her daughter sent us a video she shot on her cellphone. In the thirty-second clip, the dead woman lies in bed, dressed in her favorite sweater and scarf. Candles flicker on the dresser beside the bed, and the body is covered in flower petals.

Even in the grainy cellphone footage, you could tell that Josephine looked radiant her last night on Earth. Her daughter felt genuine pride in her accomplishment. Her mother had always taken care of her, and now she was taking care of her mother. (2017: 1-2)

This is the first thing we read in the book. We plunge right into the scene, and, as Gutkind points out, one want readers to "commit quickly so that there's no turning back" (2012: 215). Imagine a film started this way: we see the name of the actors and

the production companies that worked on that film (compare this with the cover of the book), and then the camera zooms in on a room where a woman is sitting down in a chair, next to a telephone, waiting to receive a call—*any* call. We enter the scene as if we interrupted something important, and our curiosity is immediately piqued.

The first phrase begins *in media res*. We plunge right into the scene. "The phone rang and my heart raced." We immediately ask ourselves, "Who is calling? Why is her heart racing? Will she pick up the phone?." Then, we're told the reason for this excitement: "a ringing phone qualified as a thrilling event" at her funeral home (only a few months old). We zoom in even more as we enter the mind of the narrator, who fears that someone might have died—a thought that might usually come up in one's anxious mind when the phone rings (the author wants to be relatable). At this point, the *now*-Caitlin interrupts the *then*-Caitlin (more about breaking the fourth wall in the following sections) by creating a crack into the scene—a fissure that takes us into the present, as if we were watching a movie together with the main actress (who happens to be the director too) and she were sitting next to us, pressing "pause" from time to time and commenting upon her work with humor: "Well yes, dear, it's a funeral home—that would be the point". What Doughty does when she breaks the fourth wall is perfectly described by Hart: "A disembodied voice jumps into the yarn, tells a joke, and drops in background information that seems to come from out of the blue (2011: 42).

Then we zoom out again, are back in Doughty's office at the funeral home, and finally find out who is calling and why. We read an account of the dialogue that is also the topic leading us to the second excerpt: a hospice nurse does not know whether Josephine's daughter is allowed to stay with the body and prepare it for the funeral herself. Doughty is understanding, and we get a glimpse of her philosophy concerning funerals: "In fact, we encourage it [keeping the mother's body at home]." The lines flow naturally, and we skip to a mini-scene showing us Doughty's team picking up Josephine's body that same evening. The scene changes again, and we see what the narrator sees: some "grainy cellphone footage" sent by Josephine's daughter showing us "the dead woman [...] dressed in her favorite sweater and scarf", surrounded by candles and covered in "flower petals". At the end of the scene, the author introduces a general statement ("Her mother had always taken care of her, and now she was taking care of her mother.") that—together with the dialogue—creates the bridge between this frame and the next one.

(b) Not everyone in my industry is supportive of the way I run my funeral home. Some believe a dead body must be embalmed to be safe (untrue) and that a body should be handled only by licensed professionals (also untrue). The dissenters imagine that younger, progressive morticians are "starting to make our profession look like a joke" and wonder if "circus is the right word for what funeral service is becoming." One

gentleman promised, “The day the funeral business turns into three-day visitations at the house of an unembalmed body, I’m done!”

In America, where I live, death has been big business since the turn of the twentieth century. A century has proven the perfect amount of time for its citizens to forget what funerals once were: family—and community-run affairs. In the nineteenth century, no one would have questioned Josephine’s daughter preparing her mother’s body—it would have seemed strange if she *didn’t*. No one would have questioned a wife washing and dressing the body of her husband or a father carrying his son to the grave in a homemade coffin. In an impressively short time, America’s funeral industry has become more expensive, more corporate, and more bureaucratic than any other funeral industry on Earth. If we can be called best at anything, it would be at keeping our grieving families separated from their dead. (2017: 2-3)

We arrive at the information box (similar to how Gutkind visually represented the structure of a frame). This part also represents a perfect example of the pendulum between personal and public: the first paragraph explains why people in the funeral industry do not always agree with Doughty’s way of handling her business. She writes these people’s arguments down without forgetting to also respond to them in parentheses: “(untrue)”, “(also untrue)”; however, she cannot get into the scientific details and explanations now, as we are barely on the second page of the book and that would bore the reader at this moment. Most probably, the quotes that follow are transcriptions of some audio interviews or conference speeches, as I could not find any written source.

The following paragraph takes us from the private side of the pendulum to the public sphere, as we find out more about the American funeral industry, which Doughty does not agree with: “In America, where I live, death has been big business since the turn of the twentieth century”. Citizens forgot “what funerals once were.” Two centuries ago, Americans would not have questioned what Josephine’s daughter wanted to do with her mother’s body—as you can see, we open a tiny window in the informational “box” leading us back to the scene from the first excerpt. These two paragraphs end with what I believe to be the starting point of Doughty’s fight for death positivity: “If we [Americans] can be called best at anything, it would be at keeping our grieving families separated from their dead.” All her books argue against this approach and for interacting with dead bodies without being afraid they might be dangerous (because this is not the case).

(c) Five years ago, when my funeral home (and this book) was still a gleam in my eye, I rented a hut on a rural lagoon in Belize. At that time I lived the glamorous life of a crematorium worker and body transport driver—the hut had to be *very* inexpensive. It had neither cellphone service nor Wi-Fi. The lagoon was nine miles from the nearest

town, reachable only by four-wheel drive. The driver was the caretaker of the property, a thirty-year-old Belizean man named Luciano.

To give you a sense of Luciano, he was shadowed everywhere by his pack of loyal, if somewhat emaciated, dogs. When the hut was unoccupied, he would head into the Belizean bush for days at a time, wearing flip-flops, carrying his machete, followed by the dogs. He hunted deer, tapir, and armadillo, and when he caught one he would kill it, flay it, and eat its heart out of its chest.

Luciano asked me what I did for a living. When I told him I worked with the dead, at a crematorium, he sat up in his hammock. "You burn them?" he asked. "You barbecue people?"

I considered this description. "Well, the machine is hotter than that. It gets over 1,800 degrees, so you blast right through the 'barbecue' stage. But pretty much, yes."

When someone died in Luciano's community, the family would bring the body home for a full-day wake. Belize has a diverse population, sandwiched between Caribbean and Latin American influencers, with English as the national language. Luciano identified as a mestizo—a descendant of the indigenous Maya and the Spanish colonizers. (2017: 3-4)

The scene following the informational part takes us back five years ago, way before the scene in the beginning (with the ringing phone and Josephine's body). We are introduced to a lagoon in Belize and the first living character—Luciano—apart from the narrator—who has a name. The first paragraph is a description of the place (wild and remote), and the second is a description of Luciano. The interesting part is that we are not offered a physical description of Luciano himself, but of what surrounds him, what he usually does, and what his activities are, so we can get a sense of him from a distance (as if we observed him from afar). The fact that his pack of dogs follow him everywhere, he goes hunting "for days at a time" with a machete, looking for "deer, tapir, and armadillo," and when he catches something, he "eats his heart out of its chest." This final information comes like a "bang!" and the reader is surprised. If his interest had started to leave him, now it is certainly back, and he is pulled back into the story.

Next, we also hear him talk, and we can imagine his coarse and deep voice (something that would match his adventurous personality). Still, Luciano also has a sense of humor: when Doughty tells him she is a cremation machine operator, he is stunned and asks whether they barbecued people in there. Her response follows the same style as Luciano's question, taking this cremation-barbecue comparison even further: she says the heat from the machine surpasses "the 'barbecue' stage," but "pretty much, yes." At this point, we have access to some embedded information about "Luciano's community" from Belize (remember Gutkind's visual representation for a frame; this would be the

third box following Scene and Information—Scene containing Embedded Information). This is our first contact with a different funeral ritual than the American one; the transition is smooth, and we are not offered much information because these are still the book's first pages, which must not be overflowing with information for the sake of the modern reader's attention span. Unlike what the hospice nurse from the first scene believed would be the norm, in Belize, people "bring the body home for a full-day wake." Next, we get information about the people in Luciano's community and his cultural background. Our excerpt ends here, but the author tells how Luciano stole his grandmother's body from the hospital to bring her home and how his grandfather would wash dead bodies and treat *rigor mortis* by talking to the body and massaging it. So, we exit the informational section and enter another scene.

As you can see, these three excerpts are proof of the validity of Gutkind's, Heart's, and Wolfe's descriptions of creative nonfiction. For instance, if we were to translate what we read into a visual representation of the frame structure (following Gutkind's model), we would have the following chain:

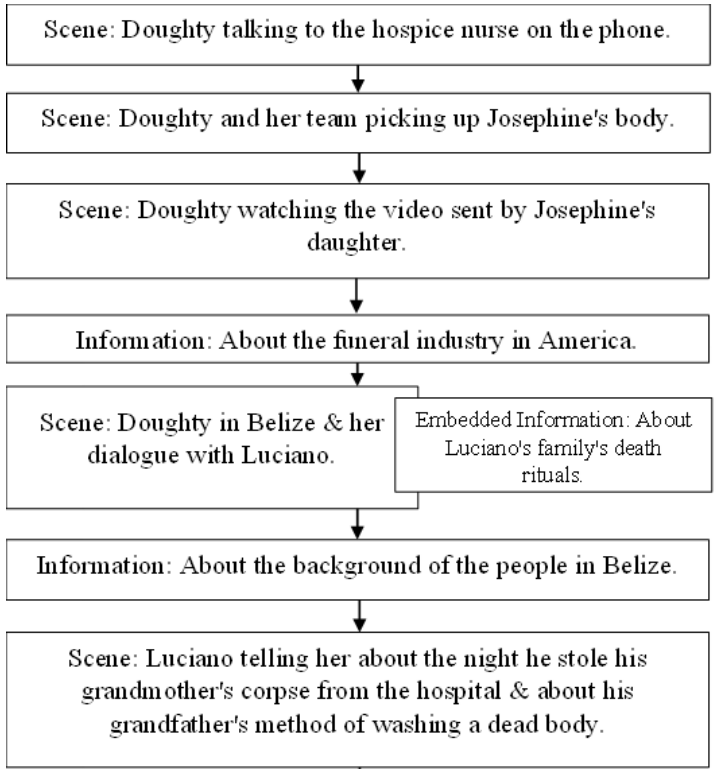

Fig. 9. Visual representation of scenes in the first few pages of Doughty's From Here to Eternity

In *From Here to Eternity*, there are ten chapters, including the introduction (1-15) and the epilogue (229-236). The eight remaining chapters—each one discussing one or two death rituals that Doughty attended during her voyage—are: Colorado: Crestone (16:41), Indonesia: South Sulawesi (42-76), Mexico: Michoacán (77-104), North Carolina: Cullowhee (105-136), Spain: Barcelona (137-151), Japan: Tokyo (152-188), Bolivia: La Paz (189-211), and California: Joshua Tree (212-228). Each chapter follows the same frame that we noticed for the excerpts above. They usually start *in media res* or with a piece of information that leads to the main scene of the chapter. Most of the chapters are generally split into smaller sections to make the transition from Scene to Information more quickly; they are scattered with references that are supposed to strengthen the author's arguments—some references include Herodotus, Desh Kapoor, Jessica Mitford, Ray Bradbury, and Paul Koudounaris. All sources are mentioned at the end of the book (239-248), so the reader can check their connection to the information and plunge deeper into the subject.

All the scenes in this particular book resemble the pattern shown above. There is an almost invisible rhythm that keeps us hooked and does not allow for boredom to appear. In *From Here to Eternity*, scenes are smaller, containing more embedded information, and the transition is done seamlessly—perhaps because this is the second book of the author and she gains more experience in writing creative nonfiction—as opposed to *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*, where scenes are larger, spreading over several pages and allowing the reader to observe a more obvious structure.

3. Smoke Gets In Your Eyes

Just like *From Here to Eternity*, this too starts with an Author's Note; beginning with a summarized account of Mata Hari's execution—and her refusing to wear a blindfold, accepting to look death straight in the eye—Doughty uses this eyewitness account to tie it to our fear of death:

Looking mortality straight in the eye is no easy feat. To avoid the exercise, we choose to stay blindfolded, in the dark as to the realities of death and dying. But ignorance is not bliss, only a deeper kind of terror. (2015: xi)

So, we immediately know what to expect from the book: blessed be uncomfortableness! Doughty also quotes Ernest Becker (1973), who writes that death hunts man like no other fear. We receive a trigger warning as to the raw descriptions in the book: "For those who do not want to read realistic depictions of death and dead bodies, you have stumbled onto the wrong book", and a promise that "the stories are true and the people are real" (xii). I see raw description as an unbeautified first-hand account or description of a scene the way the first-person narrator sees it for the first time.

Usually, its purpose is to shock the reader to prove a point that has already been made directly and, if not, guessed by the reader from the story. More about it in the next chapters.

And so, we are prepared to enter the frame and discover the seamless movement of the scenes. Just as I have shown in the previous section, I will follow the same pattern here to see how the initial scenes are built. Note that in this book, the scenes are a bit longer than in *From Here to Eternity*, so I will show the beginning and the end of a scene to show you its limits more clearly.

(a) A girl always remembers the first corpse she shaves. It is the only event in her life more awkward than her first kiss or the loss of her virginity. The hands of time will never move quite so slowly as when you are standing over the dead body of an elderly man with a pink plastic razor in your hand. (1)

This is the opening paragraph: the classic deep-voiced narrator sets up the scene as if in a children's film. (Alas, it is not exactly that!) While the voice might be soothing, easing us into the book that we have already been told is about death and dead bodies, the words we hear in our mind's ear (just as we have a mind's eye, why not a mind's ear) are not matching with the voice: "A girl always remembers the first corpse she shaves" is a sentence that would usually make us stop in our tracks. The funny question arises: "Why don't *I* remember the first corpse I shaved? *I*'m a girl!" And now, we are intrigued and want to go on with the story, hoping to find that raw description we were promised in the Author's Note. And here is where the imaginary camera zooms in through the roof of the building, and below, we see Doughty looking at a corpse on a cold table in the mortuary—the scene shifts.

(b) Under the glare of fluorescent lights, I looked down at poor, motionless Byron for what seemed like a solid ten minutes. That was his name, or so the toe tag hung around his foot informed me. I wasn't sure if Byron was a "he" (a person) or an "it" (a body), but it seemed like I should at least know his name for this most intimate of procedures. […] By the time I concluded this was not the job for me, it was too late. Refusing to shave Byron was no longer an option. I picked up my pink weapon, the tool of a dark trade. Screwing up my face and emitting a high-pitched sound only dogs could hear, I pressed blade to cheek and began my career as barber of the dead. (1-3)

This two-page scene is a back-and-forth between the inner monologue of the narrator, with questions and doubts such as: "Did Byron's family know a twenty-three-year-old with zero experience was holding a razor to their loved one's face?" (2) and "This is just a dead person, I told myself. Rotting meat, Caitlin. An animal carcass" (2) and the external scene where we also meet another person called Mike, the "new boss from the body-preparation room" (1), who tells her to be careful to not "slice open his face" (2). The scene also delivers a realistic depiction of Byron's body: he is almost

naked on the preparation table, "[h]is eyes, staring up into the abyss, had gone flat like deflated balloons. If a lover's eyes are a clear mountain lake, Byron's were a stagnant pond. His mouth twisted open in a silent scream" (1). Doughty attempts to close his eyes, "but his wrinkled eyelids popped back up like window shades," and also tries to close his gaping mouth, "but it would stay closed only a few seconds before falling open again" (2). The scene also references popular culture: when she starts putting shaving cream on his face, she compares the movement of her fingers to "a creepy toddler finger-painting in the *Twilight Zone*" (2). The purpose of these references is to make the author seem more relatable; she uses them copiously throughout her books to appeal to the general public, and somehow it works splendidly—especially when the readers stumble upon a popular culture reference they know personally. They suddenly jump up and think "Oh, I know this," similar to when you find things in common with someone you have just met. This way, an invisible connection appears between the author and the reader, leading to a bond of trust that no creative nonfiction author would ever refuse.

(c) When I woke up that morning, I hadn't expected to shave any corpses. Don't get me wrong, I expected the corpses, just not the shaving. It was my first day as a crematorium operator at Westwind Cremation & Burial, a family-owned mortuary. Or a family-owned *funeral home*. What you call your local death house depends entirely on what region of North America or the UK you live in. Mortuary, funeral home, po-tay-to, po-tah-to. Places for the dead. […] When I first moved to San Francisco, it had taken me three months to find an apartment. Finally, I met Zoe, a lesbian criminal-justice student offering a room. […] From the Mission Street stop, the BART train carried me under the Bay to Oakland and spat me out a few blocks from Westwind. The sight of my new workplace, after a ten-minute trudge from the BART station, was underwhelming. […] I had applied for jobs concealed by the glow of my laptop screen, guided by the search terms "cremation," "crematorium," "mortuary," and "funeral." […] It took six months and buckets of résumés and "Sorry, we found someone better qualified" before I was hired at Westwind Cremation & Burial. (3-6)

This scene is more complex because it contains two flashbacks. The narrator stops the previous scene—her preparing to shave her first corpse—to take us back in time that very same morning. And now, we are transported in the past through a short flashback when she first moved to San Francisco, struggling to find a place to stay. Back in the present (of the scene), we wake up and get dressed with her; we walk out of the building into the alleyway where there is a taqueria and a bar, one man shows us his genitals, and we reply that he could do better. We make our way to the funeral home by train, all the while thinking that everything is so "underwhelming," and we meet Mike, "a balding white man in his forties of normal height and weight, wearing a pair of khaki pants" (4). We enter the building, where we see the cremation machines, "two large, squat machines sitting proudly in the center like Tweedledum and Tweedledee of death"

(5)—yet another popular reference to secure a relationship Author-Reader based on trust. We have another inner monologue when we wonder why we are here wanting this job so much instead of being "a bank teller or kindergarten teacher" (5). And suddenly, a flashback: Doughty's struggle to find a job that suited her passions.

This scene is the perfect example of how flashbacks can seamlessly be interwoven with the main narrative frame: just by changing the tense to present perfect or by using adverbs that suggest anteriority to an event that is already in the past; we are involuntarily following the narrator's memory into the past (I always imagine the foggy flashback filter from the famously never-ending series *The Young And The Restless* whenever this happens.)

(d) My relationship with death had always been complicated. Ever since childhood, when I found out that the ultimate fate for all humans was death, sheer terror and morbid curiosity had been fighting for supremacy in my mind. […] Academic papers had provided a fix, but they weren't enough. I wanted the harder stuff: real bodies, real death.

(6) We change scenes yet again, this time to learn that Doughty's relationship with death was complicated during her childhood because terror and curiosity fought inside her. Still, in the end, curiosity was victorious. In college, she chose a major in medieval history and started to quench her thirst for macabre information. But that was insufficient, and she chose a hands-on approach by working in an actual funeral home. (e) Mike returned, pushing a squeaky-wheeled gurney bearing my first corpse.

"There's no time to learn the cremation machines today so that you can do me a favor. Give this guy a shave," he requested, nonchalant. […] When I wiped the last bits of shaving cream from Byron's face, he looked like a newborn babe, not a nick or razor burn in sight. (6-7)

We go back to scene (c), which chronologically happens before (a), but now Doughty connects the two dots, and the beginning is fluid to the end. The scene is very action-oriented: there are strong verbs that involve movement, such as: "pushing," "motioning," "wheeled," "walked," and "pulled;" there is no use of the passive voice; we notice the alternation of short and long sentences. This is the logical and chronological end of the scene that the book starts with, with everything coming full circle. The visual representation would be the following:

So, we notice that the construction of the scenes in this book differs from that in From Here to Eternity in the sense that the frame closes—is comes full circle—by the end of the chapter, the splitting in half of the action pushing us to read on and find the denouement. Moreover, while here we meet two flashbacks embedded within a bigger scene, in From Here to Eternity, we have embedded information about one of the

episodic characters (which might as well be interpreted as a flashback if not for the lack of action verbs or a storyline containing movement and change).

But why is it important to see beyond the written text into the visual representation of its construction? Because—and I risk falling into the trap of repetition here—readers need to understand that creative nonfiction writers have a process they religiously follow and that what we read is almost always carefully planned and arranged to create a narrative rollercoaster with flashbacks and flashforwards, speeding up the action or slowing it down, all to catch the reader's attention and not letting it go.

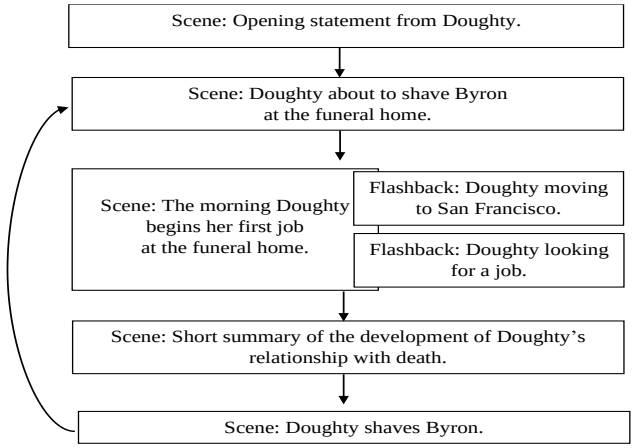

Fig. 10. Visual representation of scenes in the first few pages of Doughty's Smoke Gets In Your Eyes

4. Conclusions

Delving beyond the written text and into the visual representation of its construction lies in the need for readers to comprehend the meticulous process that creative nonfiction writers adhere to. It is imperative to acknowledge that the narrative presented is typically a result of careful planning and arrangement, aimed at creating a captivating experience for the reader. This is achieved through the incorporation of various literary techniques such as flashbacks, flashforwards, and pacing, which serve to intensify or decelerate the action, thereby captivating the reader's attention. It is therefore crucial to recognize the deliberate efforts made by writers to craft a compelling narrative that engages and captivates the reader. The significance of scenes as the fundamental components of creative nonfiction's allure and visual appeal is indisputable. Scholars such as Wolfe, Lounsberry, Gutkind, and Hart have endeavored to comprehend the essence of a scene and the means by which a creative nonfiction writer can transition between them seamlessly. In contrast, Doughty devised her own formula and adapted it to suit the objectives of her publication.

Because Smoke Gets In Your Eyes is a memoir, it is natural that we have more flashbacks or flashforwards, and because From Here to Eternity is a travelogue, it is only fair to find embedded information about the places and the cultures that she comes in contact with. Either way, the "fabric" is ripped, and the author allows other storyworlds to pop their heads in through the door and remind us that they exist and, at the same time, impact the main storyworld. The two books written by Doughty showcase an exceptional display of creativity in nonfiction writing. The author has masterfully arranged scenes and ensured that their lengths are appropriate, creating a seamless flow that captivates the reader. Doughty's talent lies in her ability to incorporate her beliefs into the story, all the while backed up by facts and research.

When it comes to the sensitive and anxiety-inducing topic of death positivity, it is imperative to carefully consider what to say and how to say it. The structure of creative nonfiction serves as the backbone of any piece, and Doughty's books prove this beyond doubt. The intricate weaving of embedded information, humorous remarks, and references to the world outside the text, all while creating rips in the fabric of time, is nothing short of brilliant. One mistake in the structure could potentially lead to the entire building collapsing, and the reader may never return to the story. The importance of planning and structuring creative nonfiction cannot be overstated. Doughty's books serve as a testament to this fact, delivering a thought-provoking and engaging story that leaves a lasting impression on the reader.

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Section 2. Naked Truth: Raw Descriptions and The Fight Against Fear

1. Introduction. Morbid Curiosity and Death Acceptance

Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy. Here are only three of the (one too) many serial killers that have sparked the interest of documentary makers in America. All online streaming services are now hosting murder docuseries. In a recent article, Amy Mackelden (2022) confidently admits: "It's official: We're obsessed with true crime". Far from suffering from the Bonnie and Clyde syndrome (also known as hybristophilia, or the attraction towards people who committed criminal acts), many people find true crime appealing because (a) they are curious about what makes people do unthinkable acts; (b) they want to believe in a functional justice system; (c) they are drawn to the adrenaline produced by fear; and (d) they are driven by their desire of survival (Scherman 2019).

However, some voices strongly disagree with the true crime documentary fever. In a recent article, Calum Russell (2022) writes that "the production line of mainstream true-crime content serves to simply glorify the titular killer and create a bizarre digital ode to their terrifying memory" while dehumanizing the victim. The consumption of gruesome podcasts, novels, and movies (he carries on) is a modern obsession that can harm both the viewer and the victim. However, why are they so popularly appealing to most of us? Two words: morbid curiosity.

Adventure stories are fun, romance novels give us the opportunity to dream, and comedy allows us to relieve stress and anxiety by laughing, but there is something about death and dying that makes us more curious than ever. Morbid curiosity "drives individuals to learn about aspects of life that are perceived to be dangerous" (Scrivner 2021: 8). The lure of danger can come in many forms: reading about other victims' stories, about our own mortality, about the impending process of decay that awaits us all, or about a local tragedy that happened "in our own backyard." Regardless of the content, the essence is the same: "In daily life people commonly *seek out* negative information" (Ooterwijk 2017: 2). Our innate morbid curiosity's role is to turn on the survival mode in our brains. Jack Morgan writes that the intellect has a hard time confronting the "elemental biological reality" (2002: 99) of our death, so we seek similar representations to try and grasp what might happen to us when we finally depart this life. One example of such a representation is gothic literature, where "war biological reality returns as taboo to hunt a too neatly rationalized world" (Morgan 2002: 109). There is no secret that modern man fears death more than anything—mostly because one of modernity's flaws is that it longs to shed light upon all dark corners of human existence, even if death will always be in permanent darkness—and perhaps one of the means of accepting it is to deal with it as directly as possible.

Loewenstein (1994) writes that people are curious about things where there is an information gap. One method of filling that up (sprouting from a type of *healthy* morbid curiosity) is exposure. Firestone and Catlett recommend as a solution to death phobia "remaining vulnerable and open to experience and feelings" (2009: 233), so exposing oneself to what makes one uncomfortable. In one of her books, Julia Kristeva admits the power that the human cadaver holds over her:

Without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement […] are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (1982: 2)

So, Kristeva admits to consciously fighting the thoughts and images of death to be able to live on. This is because any elements of death (descriptions of corpses, art showing decay, illustrations portraying people on their deathbeds) that we come across remind us firstly of life. As Burkeman (2012) writes in an article, "The lure of death may be all about feeling truly alive". We know death happens to everyone, but at the back of our minds, we also feed into the illusion that *we* are not everyone. And this is where morbid curiosity might also come from (Rakshit 2020): the paradox of knowing that death is the great equalizer but also childishly believing that we are at the bottom of its list. Morbid curiosity seems to make peace between the two parallel lines: it tells us the story of the Other while also planting the seed of mortality in our minds, making us ask the question: "Well, I know you died, but what if I die as well?". From this moment on, we start doubting our permanence in this world and begin considering the horrible truth of physical disappearance. But we quickly shake it off by anchoring ourselves into the immediate reality, into some object that surrounds us, or into a distraction that—we fool ourselves—can dissipate the oh-so-far-into-the-future thought of us dying.

Vulnerability and openness seem to be some of the tools we can use to face the impending death that we desperately desire to erase from our conscious minds. In an article about death anxiety, Maria Cohut writes that nowadays, "specialists tend to recommend cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to people who face severe death anxiety. CBT is based on discussions and exposure" (2017). The American Psychological Association defines cognitive behavioral therapy as "a form of psychological treatment" based on several core principles such as:

1. Psychological problems are based, in part, on faulty or unhelpful ways of thinking.

2. Psychological problems are based, in part, on learned patterns of unhelpful behavior.

3. People suffering from psychological problems can learn better ways of coping with them, thereby relieving their symptoms and becoming more effective in their lives. (APA 2017).

CBT treatment involves changing thinking and behavioral patterns with the help of strategies such as "facing one's fears instead of avoiding them," "using role playing to prepare for potentially problematic interactions with others," and "learning to calm one's mind and relax one's body" (APA 2017). In a manual for health practitioners, Furer, Walker, and Stein write that "[t]he role of avoidance in maintaining health anxiety and fear of death is a central one" (2007: 113). They recommend using a "form of in vivo exposure to illness and death-related situations" (113) as a form of treatment. On their list of common areas of death-related avoidance, there are stories with a character who is dying, thinking about death and dying, attending a funeral, visiting a cemetery, or reading obituaries. Their studies have shown that avoidance is our greatest enemy in the treatment of death phobia; one of the solutions is gradual and repeated exposure to stimuli that we might think could enhance our phobia, when, in time, they do the exact opposite.

The psychological and cognitive mechanisms involved in this process are much more complex than that, and this is not a psychology paper, so it would be enough to say that avoidance is dangerous and unhealthy. Specialists in the treatment of death phobia recommend exposure. However—and I cannot stress this enough—there is no general treatment for death phobia that works for everyone. We much each search for what gives us results in time, whether it is cognitive behavioral therapy (and exposure) or some other type of therapy available to us. Clinical therapist Brittney Chesworth (2021) recommends to her patients to write a detailed story about their imagined deaths and asks them to audio-record it and listen to it at least once a day. She admits what we all think: "My clients feel immense anxiety and/or sadness while writing out the detailed story. […] But soon after, they notice the anxiety and/or sadness around the imagined story start to fade." Exposure happens gradually and can come from many places, such as films, TV series, plays, paintings, or books.

2. Raw Description

In death acceptance creative nonfiction, death images are common findings, and more often than not, they depict realistic bodies, rituals, or deathbed scenes, all through raw description: an unsweetened account of what the eyes of the narrator (or the narrator-character) see and share with us without any second thoughts. The purpose of such descriptions is to shock us, spark conversation, and allow inner monologue and self-refection to occur within the reader, all to destroy death stereotypes and taboos.

"Effective description brings stories and novels to life," writes Paul Jenkins (2022) in a recent article. He argues that texture and detail make for a wonderfully vivid description that "adds to the mood of a piece." Also, using concise details enhances the readers' focus and allows them to connect with the images and the experiences being recreated. In creative nonfiction, immersive description is one of the most essential discourse tools because it triggers authenticity and validity in what the writer is describing. "Raw" and "immersive" go hand in hand, I believe, with the exception that raw description focuses more on the experience that the reader is supposed to have, while immersive description reflects the experience of the writer in much more detail with the help of (sometimes) figurative language that appeals to all senses. Raw description is employed to answer the question, "What do I want my readers to see with their mind's eye? And why?." There is always an exact purpose (in another context, I would have said "agenda," but I find that it has a negative connotation) that is usually disclosed somewhere in the discourse.

John Skelton admits in a psychiatry paper that death in the arts can blind us to "sentimental trash," which he exemplifies by asking us the following rhetorical questions: "Who has not cried at the death of Bambi's mother in the Walt Disney cartoon? Which girl—it seems only girls read it—has not wept over the demise of Beth in Louisa M. Alcott's Little Women?" (2003: 212). While I must timidly rectify the affirmation that only girls venture to read Little Women, I will loudly declare that no death scene or image is sentimental trash, no matter the context or the medium where it is found, even if the one who dies is Bambi's mother, a character in one of Dostoevsky's novels, or a bug in a cartoon. Naturally, the immensity of these deaths is different in their own contexts, but for the person who watches (children or adults), some effect is always better than none, especially when it can open the door to a more significant and more impactful conversation about death. However, it is he who concludes the paper by saying that "literature sometimes helps people to resolve the spiritual issues of death" and "reading how someone else did or did not cope with this, the ultimate life crisis, helps us to order our thoughts, refine our beliefs and decide for ourselves where we can place our trust for the future" (218). And this is true, mainly when literature provides us with factual information and realistic depictions of death.

In Death in Literature, Hakola and Kivistö talk about the metaphorical level of death in literature (that of marking social issues that need to be addressed), but also about the social aspect of death, which is marked by the rapid proliferation of images of death in the media, and by staging death as a spectacle. They write that even "individual death is not even a private experience; it affects us and resonates in the surrounding society in many ways" (2014: xv), like a ripple effect that will not stop. Surrounded by all these facets of death, people (especially young ones) have whether adapted to the idea of mortality, and death has become banal, or they categorically refuse its existence. Gail

Sidonie Sobat suggests that we can find significance in death again as long as we write stories about it for young people, offering them an opportunity to deinstitutionalize death and familiarize themselves with other forms of dying. As she does in her fictional novel Not With a Bang (2012).

3. Examples of Raw Description in Caitlin Doughty's Creative Nonfiction

3.1. Smoke Gets In Your Eyes

Example 1:

His eyes, staring up into the abyss, had gone flat like deflated balloons. If a lover's eyes are a clear mountain lake, Byron's were a stagnant pond. His mouth twisted open in a silent scream. (1)

Doughty's first chapter also accounts for her first time shaving a corpse's face; in her case, his name is Byron, a seventy-year-old man with stubble. As readers, we do not expect raw images on the first page, but here we are, picturing the foggy eyes and the agape mouth of the cadaver, trying to shake that image off as we go. However, Doughty helps us with this—as she always does, never letting us under the pressure of a strong image for too long—and interrupts the scene with a short dialogue between her and Mike, her employer. As opposed to the popular image of the corpse—as if the eyes close and the mouth shuts by themselves as soon as the death occurs—we are face to face with a small portion of what death naturally looks like the body enters rigor mortis, the eyes lose their color and are invaded by white fog, and the mouth is sometimes wide-open, often so grotesquely, that morticians have to sew it shut (Ask A Mortician 2016).

Something else worth mentioning is the unusual comparisons that Doughty uses throughout the book, the example above being one of the many more seemingly odd (but very vivid) comparisons that the author uses to describe realistic dead bodies. Comparing the appearance of someone's eyes with deflated balloons and a stagnant pond (as opposed to the clear blue eyes of one's lover) might be unusual. However, it works; it creates an image almost equal to the one Doughty witnesses as she stares at Byron's lifeless body.

Example 2:

As I scraped Byron's body out of the cremation machine, I saw that his skull was still fully intact. […] The skull was still warm, and I could feel its smooth, dusty texture through my industrial-grade gloves. Byron's lifeless eye sockets stared up at me

as I tried to remember what his face had looked like as he slid into the flames just two hours before. (8)

After two hours in the cremation machine, Doughty's job is to scrape the bone remains from its inside and turn them into a fine powder for the family to take home in an urn. This raw description is shocking because it might seem unexpectedly ruthless. You do not simply "scrape" someone's remains; the verb is widely used to describe the removal of dirt by dragging or pulling some implement across a surface. The image of the intact skull is nothing wonderous, but what triggers a reaction in the reader is Doughty's touching of the skull, which she describes as "still warm" and "smooth." Although she is wearing gloves when she picks it up, we know that Byron's remains used to be a whole body only some pages ago. We see images like this in films or TV series, but the skull is almost always old, and decomposition happened naturally, carried out by the natural elements it was exposed to in time. We never expect someone to share what a skull fresh out of the cremation machine feels like.

More than that, as Doughty stares at Byron's eye sockets, we stare at them too, and together with her, we try to remember what he looked like six or seven pages ago. (Some might flip the pages back and find clues about his physical appearance.) This short paragraph is meant to remind us of a crucial aspect of death positivity and death acceptance: the impermanence of the physical body.

Example 3:

Racially, Padma was Sri Lankan and North African. Her dark complexion, in combination with advanced decomposition, had turned her skin pitch-black. Her hair hung in long, matted clumps, splayed out in all directions. Thick, spidery white mould shot out of her nose, covering half her face, stretching over her eyes and yawning mouth. The left side of her chest was caved in, giving the impression that someone had removed her heart in some elaborated ritual. (11)

On Doughty's second day at work, she receives Padma's body, which she describes as "a creature from a horror film" (11). The explanation for her advanced decomposition is that Padma, a thirty-year-old woman, suffered from a rare genetic disease—but we unfortunately never learn what the disease is called—and was kept at the Stanford University Hospital so that the doctors can learn more about it. Doughty further describes the state of her body as "grotesque" and "surreal" (11), but these words do not contain any visual essence; what *does* have a visual impact is the description of her head and torso: her already dark skin is now even darker due to decomposition, her hair is clumpy, and—the most shocking visual element of all—there is white mould covering her face like a spider web. Again, we see the realistic image of the post-mortem open mouth. However, this time we move lower to the corpse's torso, which is caved in and whose sight brings to the author's mind another unusual comparison: the caving-in

is compared to the results of a possible ritual in which the victim's heart is removed. This is not done to enhance the already grotesque image but to offer another glimpse of the death spectrum. Doughty strengthens this by making a parallel between the reality of a dead body and Edgar Allan Poe's Annabel Lee, with her alabaster skin and rosy mouth, definitely not consumed by decomposition. Glamorous death is not part of the reality that we live in, and Padma's body painfully reminds us of this.

Example 4:

Bruce approached with a scalpel, bringing it down at the base of Cliff's throat. […] Bruce made an incision. I was expecting blood to come gushing out like in a slasher film, but the wound was dry. […] Bruce showed me how to mix the salmon-pink cocktail that would replace Cliff's blood: a blend of formaldehyde and alcohol splashed into a large glass tank. Bruce stuck his gloved fingers into the new hole in Cliff's throat and sliced open the carotid artery, then inserted a small metal tube. Bruce flipped a switch at the base of the tank and it began to vibrate and hum as the pink liquid burst through the tube, sending chemicals shooting through Cliff's circulatory system. As the liquid flowed into his artery, the displaced blood spurted forth from Cliff's jugular vein and slid down the table to the sink's drain. (74)

We witness the beginning of the embalming process for the corpse of a Vietnam War Veteran named Cliff. We watch together with Doughty as Bruce makes incisions in Cliff's throat, inserting a metal tube and replacing his blood with a newly-mixed formaldehyde cocktail, causing Cliff's blood to drip onto the table and into the drain. This image is disturbing enough as it is, but Doughty's description enhances the cinematographic style: I picture a close-up of Bruce's scalpel, followed by his focused gaze, and then the camera pans out a bit and follows the flowing of the blood outside the body, into the drain, returning in the end to the tube inserted in his carotid artery. (Bruce is using here the arterial method of embalming.) There are two main methods of embalming: arterial and cavity. Arterial embalming involves flushing out the blood from the veins and inserting embalming fluid in its place. Cavity embalming entails the removal of internal fluids with the help of aspirators and trocars (Schilling Funeral Home & Cremation 2021).

Doughty makes sure to use verbs that push the action forward: "to gush out", "to stick", "to insert", "to flip", "to spurt forth", "to burst", "to slide down", " to flow"; and images that trigger the mind's ear: "to vibrate" and "to hum", all this having an obvious purpose: to educate us about what embalming is really about. There are common misconceptions about embalming, and they all start from the confusion brought about by its history. Ancient Egyptians developed embalming to the greatest extent—but the South American people were the first to use it around 6,000 BCE—by removing the organs from the body, ridding it of moisture, and covering it with a naturally occurring

white substance called natron. Some people even believe that embalming involves covering the body in wax or resin, as a commenter admits on a forum page: "Woah, in all my years of being born (35 years old) I thought embalming was a wax they put on the deceased" (Tattle.life 2022).

This raw description feeds into our curiosity about what is taboo in death. Embalming seems like a secret only professionals know—and they are not allowed to share it with us—and we always want to catch a glimpse of what hides behind the curtain, to learn the secrets of the trade and use them to quench our thirst and educate ourselves in this matter. Our morbid curiosity is satisfied because embalming (just as any other post-mortem ritual, be it cremation or sky burial) has a secretive and somber air about it, and by allowing us to witness it, Doughty makes sure that we, as her readers, trust her facts more and more.

Example 5:

I loaded Mrs. Greyhound into the cold retort and went about my morning business. When I returned moments later, there was smoke pouring out the door. […] Mike and I came screeching around the corner back into the crematorium. At that same moment, from the chute where the bones are swept out, came a sluice of *gushing molten fat.* Mike pulled out the bone-collecting container, roughly the size of a large shoebox, to find a pool of what had to have been five liters of opaque slop. And it kept coming. And coming. The two of us replaced container after container at the bottom of the bone chute like we were bailing out a leaky boat. […] When at last the situation was under control, I looked down to find my dress stained with warm human fat. (123-124)

Doughty receives the corpse of an eighty-year-old woman with a larger body fat percentage than the usual corpse she would have to cremate. After she explains that, in the morning, when the cremation chamber is freezing, they handle the larger bodies, such as Mrs. Greyhound's, because this way, the flesh does not burn up too fast and does not give off dark smoke that would alert the fire department, she highlights the fact that she followed the protocol thoroughly and slid the body into the retort. However, after a short while, she noticed some unusual smoke coming out and the synesthetic "gushing molten fat"—you can imagine a *sloosh* sound and a low gurgle, as well as the tactile feeling of heated fat, plus an unpleasant smell, not to mention the visual image—will stay with us for a long time. Doughty and Mike try to collect it, but in the background, all we can hear is the same imagined gurgle brought about by the repetition, "And it kept coming. And coming."

The last three words from this excerpt prove how description becomes raw by adding an unexpected—though accurate—fact. "I looked down to find my dress stained with warm fat" sounds way more different when we add the human element to it: "warm human fat" is not something that any of us would come in contact with, and yet it is a

reality of what happens to plus-size people post-mortem and what their options are in terms of body preparation and disposal. Later, Doughty admits that this unexpected event changed the way she herself thought about death:

For me, Mrs. Greyhound blew the truth of the matter wide open. Death should be *known*. Known as a difficult mental, physical, and emotional process, respected, and feared for what it is. […] Rather than denying the truth, it was a revelation to embrace it, however disgusting it might sometimes be. (124-125)

"Disgusting" as it may seem, the image of Mrs. Greyhound's molten fat all over the floor and on Doughty's dress teaches us a valuable death-positive lesson: denial is never the answer to our thanatophobia. By slowly embracing the unknown and exposing ourselves to such authentic images and first-hand accounts of events that we might not have even thought of, we chip away at the fear and make room for information and opportunities to be educated on such sensitive—but necessary—matters.

Example 6:

For those of you who have not had the privilege of smelling Eau de Decomposition, the first note of a putrefying human body is of licorice with a strong citrus undertone. Not a fresh, summer citrus, mind you—more like a can of orange-scented industrial bathroom spray shot directly up your nose. Add to that a day-old glass of white wine that has begun to attract flies. Top it off with a bucket of fish left in the sun. That, my friends, is what human decomposition smells like. (158)

Doughty and Mike receive the body of a 450-pound man named Juan, who died from an overdose of cocaine and was only discovered after two days in his apartment. As Mike begins the embalming process in the preparation room, Doughty feels what she calls "the most ferocious smell my nostrils e'er had smell'd" (156) and describes the scene as a "swampy mire" (156): "It was more guts and blood and organs and fat I could ever have imagined a single human body containing" (156). As if she were deconstructing the smell of a perfume, Doughty details the odor of decay in a way that everyone can grasp: liquorice, citrus, old wine, and warm fish. She calls this "Eau de Decomposition" (a play upon words referring to the commercial names of some perfumes), and we can easily smell it ourselves: an acidulous and pungent smell, most definitely the subject of some of our secret bouts of curiosity about death. However, we most definitely display disgust at all things rotten or spoiled. Before her vivid description of what decomposition smells like, Doughty explains where our repulsion comes from: "Much of our negative reaction to a decomposing corpse like Juan's is raw instinct. We've evolved to be disgusted by things that would hurt us to eat, rotting meat being one of the top contenders in that category" (157).

Later in the chapter, she compares our contemporary Western society with the early days of Christianity, where decomposition did not awaken any aversion in people, partly due to other atrocities that happened—crucifixions, hangings, beheadings—, which turned death into a frequent and expected event, and partly because medieval Christians considered the body parts of martyrs as celebrities meant to be touched and kissed. "There were, without hyperbole, dead bodies everywhere" (161), Doughty writes, so people were forced to get used to them and accept their presence, no matter their decomposition state. Today, denial takes the place of acceptance, manifesting everywhere, from our obsession with youth to "the illusion that we have less in common with roadkill than with the sleek lines of a MacBook" (165). The fact that someone has to describe what decomposition smells like because we cannot even fathom voluntarily feeling that smell proves how far we are from healthily embracing our mortality.

Seeing an opportunity in this chapter about decomposition, Doughty supports free choice in body disposal methods, especially natural burials, without embalming. She carries this manifesto on in *From Here to Eternity*, where she admits: "There is a freedom found in decomposition, a body rendered messy, chaotic, and wild" (2017: 136), wishing this to be what happens to her future corpse. She writes:

Not only is natural burial by far the most ecologically sound way to perish, it doubles down on the fear of fragmentation and loss of control. Making the choice to be naturally buried says, "Not only am I aware that I'm a helpless, fragmented mass of organic matter, I celebrate it. Vive la decay!" (2015: 166)

In the second half of the book, Doughty admits that raw description does not only have its advantages for readers, but by using it to express facts to the families and friends who lost someone, she helped them feel grateful and satisfied: "I began to experiment with complete honesty. Everyone who asked these sorts of questions got brutally honest answers. […] The strange thing was, the more honest I was, the more satisfied and grateful people were" (171). Of course, honesty is not to be associated with coarseness or rudeness but with empathy, understanding, and care for others. Raw description does exactly this: the author cares so much about us that even the thought of hiding the truth from us would break our trust.

3.2. From Here to Eternity

Example 1:

The flames had made quick work of Laura's coral shroud. As mourners spoke, the flames jumped to her exposed flesh and the layers of soft tissue. The fire dehydrated the tissue, the majority of which was water, which shriveled and withered away. This exposed her internal organs, next to succumb to the flames. […] As the flames burned

on, they reached Laura's bones. The knees, heels, and facial bones were first. It took longer for the fire to reach her pelvis and arm and leg bones. The water evaporated from her skeleton, followed by the organic material. The color of her bones transformed from white, to grey, to black, and then back to white once more. The weight of the logs pressed Laura's bones through the metal grate to the ground below. One of the fire-tenders pulled out a long metal pole, sending it into the fire. The pole pushed through the space where Laura's head had been, but the skull had vanished. (31-32)

Doughty attends the outdoor cremation of a seventy-five-year-old woman called Laura. At the cremation—organized by Stephanie and Paul Kloppenberg's nonprofit called The Crestone End of Life Project in Colorado—some volunteers gather juniper and hand it to the people who are present there to deposit on the pyre (that she humorously refers to as a Porta Pyre (a play on words referring to the Porta Potty), which is already surrounded by pine and spruce logs. Her family waits, torches in their hands, to light Laura up. A compelling image is then presented by Doughty, an image filled with somberness and grief:

After a few minutes the whirlwinds dispersed, and glowing red flames danced in their place. The fire gathered strength, shooting up six feet high. The mourners, all 130 of them, ringed the pyre in silence. The only sound was the pop of flaming wood, as if one by one Laura's memories were diffusing into the ether. (18)

The readers' sadness is then replaced by curiosity and perhaps a sense of uncomfortableness as they reach the raw description of Laura's burning body disintegrating piece by piece. If in *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*, we read the detailed account of how embalming takes place; now we learn in what order fire attacks the human corpse, what goes first, and what stays behind. During a common cremation, we are sheltered from the view by the industrial machine that keeps all the details within. However, Doughty is now attending an outdoor cremation—something quite unusual today—where every gruesome detail is exposed to all the mourners who dare to watch. The tissue "shriveled and withered away," exposing her internal organs, which are in turn disintegrated by the flames; the bones are next, fire hitting the face, knees, and heels, followed by the pelvis, arms, and legs. When all that remains is the skeleton, we seem to approach a sigh of relief because we know the description is approaching an end. However, Doughty ends with a boom, imprinting in our minds the image of someone sticking a long metal pole in the fire and poking around to find Laura's skull. She admits to the shocking value of the event, stating that it might seem like "a macabre spectacle for the uninitiated", but as Stephanie explains to her, the mourners "imagine themselves lying on that pyre one day" (31), which might help them get closer to a state of acceptance or at least contemplation. Of course, reading about it does not even come close to experiencing it firsthand and being present at such an emotional event, but this

is when raw description plays its parts right, allowing us a glimpse of what the mourners (and Doughty) witnessed that day in Creston, Colorado.

Example 2:

Yesterday I had met the son of John Hans Tappi. Today I was going to meet John Hans himself. He was laid out, basking in the sun in plaid boxer shorts and a gold watch. His chest and abdominal cavity had been infused with formalin when he died, which explained why two years later his torso was flawlessly preserved, while his face had gone black and pockmarked, revealing bone below. When the family had to clean inside his boxers and brush around his mummified penis, they looked just as uncomfortable as you would expect. (72)

In accordance with the *ma'nene* tradition, the Torajan villagers uphold the practice of preserving the corpses of their deceased loved ones, coexisting with their remains for an extended period of time. The villagers engage in conversations with the deceased bodies as if they were still alive. Unlike the conventional practice of interring the deceased in a sealed casket entombed in a cement fortress beneath the earth, Torajan bodies remain in close proximity to the living. As recounted by Doughty, young children scurry from one mummified body to another, examining and prodding them before darting away. The excerpt above is a mere fragment of a larger scene, which includes additional depictions of individuals tending to the remains of their deceased loved ones, such as a mother unwrapping the body of her sixteen-year-old son, a son caressing the skin of his father, and families moving from one body to another, rewrapping them in quilts and blankets adorned with cartoon characters.

In the preceding paragraph, Doughty employs a rhetorical strategy that imbues the deceased John Hans with a sense of celebrity status, as evidenced by the statement, "I was going to meet John Hans himself." Subsequently, the author provides a vivid description of John's physical appearance, including his attire of plaid boxer shorts and a gold watch, while also juxtaposing this image with the graphic depiction of his preserved abdominal cavity and blackened, bony face. The final portion of the paragraph elicits discomfort in the reader, much like the family's experience of brushing dust off John's mummified genitalia. The overarching aim of this excerpt is to underscore the inescapable and irreversible nature of death and decomposition.

Example 3:

Amber and I stood on either side of her as we unzipped her bag. Mold had begun to grow under her eyes, and carried down her neck and onto her shoulders. Her stomach was collapsed, colored deep aquamarine (brought on by the decomposition of the red blood cells). The top layers of skin peeled free from her calves. The bag had been swamplike, bathing Mrs. Shepard in her own blood and bodily fluid. (213)

Upon her return to L.A., Doughty has to deal with the body of a woman who has been dead for six weeks and kept in a plastic bag in the coroner's refrigerator. Unzipping the bag where the body is, the sight is as new to the two women as it is to us—at least, this is the illusion of raw description: we receive a first-hand account of sensorial information experienced by the narrator (or by the narrator-character). The description is not static; we notice strong verbs (which express movement, change, and also have a visual impact: "peeled", "had begun to grow", "collapsed"), synesthesia ("swamplike"), and short sentences, which shows us that the narrator takes the information in piece by piece, again offering us the illusion that we see the same thing at the same time as her. Picture the above excerpt translated into a video sequence. How much of it could we film, and how many seconds can we show from this scene so that the general public is not grossed out or we are not fined for doing so? Not too much, unless we talk about a specific genre, such as the grotesque. But if we wanted to appeal (just as Doughty does) to a larger segment of the population, this would not be accepted. But when it is written down, the experience is different. A different film plays in our heads, different from everybody else's. And the response to it is different as well. And this is the point. To find what exactly bothers us and what we can do to fix it. Raw description is raw for a reason. It is painful and sore, and sometimes we forget it is there. However, it is a constant reminder that we are mortal, which is an excellent example of what clinical therapists call therapy by exposure or cognitive behavioral therapy.

3.3. Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?

This work diverges from the preceding two volumes in terms of its use of raw descriptions, owing to the nature of the discourse which aims to capture the inquisitive nature of children with respect to death and dying. Consequently, Doughty's responses are crafted in a manner that minimizes reader discomfort, thereby facilitating a more accessible and engaging reading experience. To appeal to the young, she uses non-standard English and odd phrasings, such as: "Alas, fake fake fakeity fake" (64), "cool as heck" (30), "Womp womp. Sorry, U.S." (142), and "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" (198) among many others. This is also proof of her use of orality, with examples such as: "oh geez" (10), "duh" (64), and "Sigh" (107). I think raw description is at the bottom of the list because of its scarce usage. However, I managed to find three examples that can satisfy our own morbid curiosity.

Example 1:

Here's how the cremation process works. When the door to the cremation machine opens, a whole human slides in. […] In the first ten minutes of the cremation, the flames attack the body's soft tissue—all the squishy parts, if you will. Muscles, skin, organs, and fat sizzle, shrink, and evaporate. The bones of the skull and ribs start to

emerge. The top of the skull pops off and the blackened brain gets zapped away by the flames. (44)

Answering the question "How does a whole adult fit into a tiny box after cremation?" (43-46), Doughty briefly explains how cremation occurs once the body enters the machine—similar to Example 1 in subsection 3.2. above—using visually powerful verbs, such as "to pop off" and "to slide in," and auditorily powerful ones, such as "to sizzle" and "to zap away." Fat sizzles and shrinks when we cook meat, not when we describe the effects of fire on the human body. The image of "the blackened brain" is also something difficult to picture because the norm is for its color to be pink, as is the case in most of its representations online and in the film industry, so we could hardly imagine what a black brain would look like. We also associate the term "squishy" with things like toys or foods such as jelly, but not with our body's soft tissue. In this excerpt, we understand how Doughty mirrors the questions she receives from children as inspiration for this book: she uses words and phrases that make sense to them (this is not to say that the book is not for adults as well) to create a world in which they can be freely curious about death and death-related topics, which is a thing that we, as adults, might also benefit from.

Example 2:

Oh, how to describe the smell of a decomposing human body—what poetry is needed! I get a sickly-sweet odor mixed with a strong rotting odor. Think: your grandma's heavy sweet perfume sprayed over a rotting fish. Put them together in a sealed plastic bag and leave them in the blazing sun for a few days. Then open the bag and put your nose in for a big whiff. (163)

In the short chapter called "Can you describe the smell of a dead body?" (161-164), Doughty dedicates four pages to capturing the complex odor that a decomposing body gives off. It is difficult enough to describe a smell, let alone one that most of your readers have never smelt, but Doughty captures its main gist. This is enough for someone to frown and grimace: the overwhelming sweetness of our grandmothers' perfume (which Doughty seems to believe is a common thing among all cultures), rotting fish (which is already bad enough without the sweetness of the perfume), and everything left out in the sun to marinate for a while. In her writing, Doughty goes beyond mere visual description and instead engages our olfactory senses. By vividly describing the scent emanating from the bag, she invites us to fully immerse ourselves in the experience and gain a deeper understanding of the subject at hand. This approach not only adds another layer of detail to the description but also helps to answer questions that readers may have had about the contents of the bag.

Example 3:

So, what are some of the ways funeral directors try to prevent leakage? First, you have to determine the source of the fluid. The most obvious places Grandma will leak are, not to be crass here, her preexisting holes. Her mouth, her nose, her vagina, and her rectum. Usually the first things to leak are liquids and other sticky things that the body was designed to excrete: urine, feces, saliva, phlegm, the delightful list goes on. […] Decomposition in Grandma's stomach might produce a substance called "purge," an unattractive liquid like coffee grounds that sometimes exits via the nose and mouth. (197-198)

Answering the question, "At my grandma's wake, she was wrapped in plastic under her blouse. Why would they do that?" (197-200), Doughty shortly explains that the main reason is leakage. However, the way she explains it might seem, as she puts it. (Not to mention that the word "grandma" and anything pertaining to genitalia do not belong in the same sentence and would definitely make one more than justifiably uncomfortable.) The word "leak" is firstly associated with a container. The first definition of the word in the Cambridge Dictionary is: "(of a liquid or gas) to escape from a hole or crack in a pipe or container; (of a container) to allow liquid or gas to escape." No one associates the word with a person, except when the body is seen as a container of liquids and gas—which is *precisely* how a mortician sees it after death and what this short raw description teaches us. However, because we keep referring to the body-as-container as "Grandma," there is still the image of the body-as-person in the equation, contributing to seeing the body as the remains of a human being and not just as an object to be managed.

4. Conclusions

In this chapter, I defined raw description in relation to death acceptance creative nonfiction, exemplifying it by using some excerpts from Caitlin Doughty's three books: *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* (2015), *From Here to Eternity* (2017), and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* (2019). And, even though we find different aspects of raw description in the three mainly similar books, this does not mean that its effect is not the same for the readers. It has been observed that delving into the many and varied depictions of death, be it through art, literature, or storytelling, can have a therapeutic effect on the human psyche. This exposure to uncomfortable subjects can help us confront and understand our fears, allowing us to break free from their hold without risking any physical harm. However, it must be noted that while exposure therapy can be a powerful tool, it is not a cure-all for thanatophobia. Engaging with death-related materials can be a valuable step in the journey towards overcoming our fears, but it is just one piece of a larger puzzle. Ultimately, it is up to us to continue seeking out new strategies and approaches to conquer our anxiety and reclaim our lives.

It is unfortunate that the media and film industry often fail to contribute positively towards our understanding and acceptance of death. Murder mysteries and dark tourism, which often glamorize famous deaths, only serve to perpetuate unrealistic expectations of what a corpse should look like and how decomposition is supposed to be perceived. The media represents death in a multitude of ways, with a spectrum that ranges from denying its existence to affirming it in various manners. This can include silencing, euphemizing, exhibiting, and exaggerating death, with a constant oscillation between these two extremes. The portrayal of death can be influenced by several factors, including the contrast between text and image, the profile of the deceased, and the nature of the medium. The semiotic variable plays a pivotal role in observing the contrast between relatively blunt discursive representations and euphemizing iconic representations. This can be seen in all of the articles whose corpora are based on traditional media, such as newspapers and television. These materials comprise both discursive and iconic content.

While death can be reported in a direct manner, sometimes including all of the sordid, gruesome details, it is generally not displayed as it truly is in the images. However, there are a few significant exceptions to this rule. It is a well-established fact that the media does not reflect reality but rather shapes it. Therefore, the media's representation of death has a considerable impact on public perception and understanding of death. It is crucial to break this cycle of denial and instead shine a light on the true aspects of death and dying. By using raw descriptions, we can gain a better understanding of the reality of death and move towards a healthier societal mourning norm that does not force conformity.

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Section Three. Laughing Into the Void: Macabre Humor

1. Introduction

The quality of having a sense of humor is often regarded as a desirable attribute, although it may vary depending on the particular situation, one's capacity to find amusement in specific scenarios, and their relationships with their peers. Conversely, laughter may be viewed unfavorably when it occurs in contexts that are deemed delicate, problematic, or melancholy, such as experiences of pain, distress, ageing, and even death. When somebody jokes about death, this person might be labelled as being a cynic, a coward, and permanently preoccupied with the fear of dying (Mikes 2016). Alternatively, there could be others who perceive them as brave, as people who use humor to rise above the condition they are in (Frankl 1985). Either way, death humor or "graveyard humor" (Thorson 204) is a reality and should be analyzed as such.

In Caitlin Doughty's From Here to Eternity (2017), the young mortician, also the head of a funeral home in Los Angeles, tells the story of travelling the world to learn about death rituals from various cultures, tackling contemporary problems such as cultural insensitivity, globalization, death phobia, and death acceptance, with a blend of humor and professionalism, each used wisely in her nonfictional travel journal to make for a unique experience of laughter and self-contemplation. This paper aims to look at how humor is carefully woven into a book that discusses death, dead bodies, and death rituals worldwide and at the effect it might have on the reader, more specifically, situational humor. Is it disrespectful and cynical to joke about death, or is it a way of coping with the inevitability of our limited physicality in this world?

2. Types of Humor

Although humor is seen as something that cannot be defined precisely (Thorson 1985), many writers and researchers tried to place it into a more realistic and defined frame: humor may reveal a fundamental attitude of the human being (Palmore 1971), it can be a weapon against political repression (Obrdlik 1942; Larsen 1980), it can have many different social functions, depending on whether it is expressed within or outside a group, to disparage it or to solidify the relations already existing (Martineau 1972), it can also be a means of sympathizing with the Other (Freud 1916) or of transcendence (Freud 1916; Vaillant 1977), or a coping mechanism that helps individuals during aversive life circumstances (Keltner and Bonanno 1997; Abel 2002). In Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious, Freud discusses grim humor or humor of the gallows (Galgenhumor). He gives the example of a man on his way to the gallows and requests a neckerchief to guard him against the cold. Freud writes: "We must say that there is

something like greatness of soul in this blague" (1916: 373). Pity is inhibited, resulting in a "humor that smiles under its tears" (378). It can also be a way of releasing tension and energy (Freud 1976) or responding to a situation that violates the life pattern we already know and are familiar with (Morreall 1982).

The exact definitions might also apply to death humor, which has not been thoroughly studied in the twentieth century. In 1972, Goldstein and McGhee provided 377 citations in a bibliography of humor research until 1971. Of course, more has been written in the twenty-first century, but it is worth mentioning that only seven of those entries had death content in their titles. This might have happened because death was seen as a taboo subject (Gorer 1955), and laughing about it was insensitive. However, by the end of the twentieth century, people witnessed "the apparent intensification of cruel humor" (Lewis 253), which provided a need to understand and acknowledge the phenomenon of death.

Laughter appears when we celebrate something or find ourselves in trouble (Glenn & Holt 2013: 2). The discussion surrounding death can lead both ways, depending on the culture you observe. However, the profile of the modern man nowadays shows us that death is a troubling perspective (Kübler-Ross 1986; Becker 1997), not only for our own self but also for the people we love and care about. Laughter is a soothing balm to ease the pain created by the sharp spear of mortal self-consciousness. Even if modern society struggles to minimize the effects of death somehow, it "intrudes into human thought in a myriad of ways" (Crouch & Hüppauf 1985: xi). Two of these ways are (a) humor and (b) fear, which can sometimes go hand in hand, but not to dismiss fear, nor to help the individual dig a deeper proverbial hole into which he can hide, but to build a bridge over the pit of anxiety that surrounds the taboo of death. In From Here to Eternity, humor elevates the readers above the situation they find themselves in deep within the text, alleviating some of the built-up anxiety and perhaps disturbing imagery that appears once some descriptions are read.

Firstly, we have to discuss the numerous categories that humor can fall into. Harlow finds eight classes of humor: brutality, physical degradation, verbal degradation, vulgar or sexual jokes, social-group jokes, children's jokes, transitional abstract wit, and the ideal or the abstract comic (1969: 229-239). However, when sensitive topics come into play, humor is an "ego protecting and elevating device" (227), "born as we bare our teeth in laughter to ease the accumulating burdens we bear" (239). These burdens create tension, which brings us to the classification created by Freud in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, in which he distinguished three types of laughter: jokes, the comic, and humor. The basis of his theory is that in situations where we laugh, there is a certain quantity of energy that comes from the psyche, usually used for a well-established purpose, which is now not needed. So, in joking, we save energy that is usually needed to stifle forbidden feelings. When we react to the comic, we avoid the

consumption of energy in thought, and in humor, we avoid the same consumption, but emotionally. However, this might be seen as "unsuitable as a general theory of laughter" (Morreall 1982: 246) because claiming that all laughter is release of energy might be far-fetched.

John Morreall proposes two general features of laughter:

(a) "the change of psychological state involved in laughter situations" (248), from a serious to a non-serious state, seen as a cognitive change in our usual patterns, or as an affective change (as a relief, as a boost of positive feelings, or as a cessation of negative ones);

(b) "the psychological shift is felt as pleasant" (248); usually, an unpleasant shift would not lead to laughter, though this can be the case in instances of laughter as counteracting embarrassment. The author arrives at the conclusion that the manifestation of laughter is a direct consequence of a positive psychological transformation (249).

And we can notice this in Doughty's nonfiction books: when certain aspects of the text naturally sadden us or throw us into a proverbial pit of death awareness—causing us feelings of denial, anger, and depression—humor comes as an elevator that takes the reader to a higher floor, even if that happens for a short moment. The entire reading experience should create an up-and-down affective change, permanently shifting the readers from a serious to a non-serious state, preventing them from spending too much time on a 'lower floor.' Morreall classifies laughter into three categories: (a) laughter as an expression of somebody's feelings of superiority over others (243); (b) laughter as a response to an experience that violates our expectations or the patterns that we are used to, also called the incongruity theory (244-245); (c) laughter as relief of our nervous system, also called the relief theory (245), which has very much in common with the catharsis of comedy.

Another classification was made by Jennifer Hay in 2000. She discusses conversational humor in terms of functions, thus finding that it can be used to show : (a) solidarity, for sharing, highlighting similarities of shared experiences, clarifying boundaries, and maintaining them, and teasing; (b) power, for fostering conflicts, controlling, challenging boundaries, and teasing; (c) psychological functions, for defending, coping with contextual and non-contextual problems, like sickness and death. This last category is prominent in Doughty's books, as we will notice in the examples below. If we think about the text in terms of conversation between the narrator and the reader, conversational humor can very well apply to the written text, especially when it is written in the first person, and the narrator creates an intimacy of confession between the two parts that engage in this (what seems at first to be a) one-way exchange.

Specifically with regards to death humor, James Thorson classified it into two large categories: humor associated with the body and humor associated with the personality. Body humor includes undertakers, funerals, burial, necrophilia, and cannibalism, whilst personality humor consists of deathbed scenes and last words, memories of the departed and grief, suicide and homicide, executions, and the personification of death. We can find examples of these types of death humor in many memoirs about experiences in internment and concentration camps (Frankl 1985; Ierunca 1990; Steinhardt 2016). Viktor Frankl, the father of logotherapy, whose father, mother, and brother died in concentration camps, writes Man's Search for Meaning, in which he admits that there were times when prisoners would be overcome by "a grim sense of humor" (34), mainly because they knew they had nothing to lose, "except our so ridiculously naked lives" (34). Can this be seen as an acceptance of death or as giving up hope for life? Frankl elucidates that humor constitutes one of the soul's formidable mechanisms in its relentless struggle for preservation. It is a widely acknowledged fact that humor possesses the capacity to bestow upon an individual a sense of detachment and the capacity to transcend any given circumstance, albeit momentarily, even if only for a brief interlude (63). We are going to notice the same effect of humor in Doughty's book: the upliftingly bitter-sweet feeling that death is the final stop, and yet there is relief because we are all on the same ride. Even in police work, humor is seen as one of the many "distancing techniques" and "cultural strategies peculiar to this social milieu" (Young 1995: 165), helping officers keep their emotional distance from their cases and acquire objectivity during work.

At the other end of the spectrum, some may see death humor as a tendency of the cynical person who wants to showcase their toughness, when in fact, joking about death is a sign of cowardice and obsessiveness. Cynics may try to befriend what scares them in an attempt to tame what makes them uncomfortable, but not by truthfully communicating and interacting with it, but by pretending to side with it falsely, as they would in a friendship with another mortal body (Mikes 2016). However, we are not all alike, and saying that by joking about death, our minds can only think of this one obsessive thing would mean condemning those who find peace in humor. On the contrary, it takes strength and willingness to take the first step on the bridge toward death; humor itself does not ease the first contact with death, but it is a valid coping mechanism that some find extremely helpful.

Joking about death phobia is a sign of toughness and partial or total acceptance of our mortality. It is not reserved only for those who work in professions where death is a permanent co-worker (McDonald 2021) but also for those who experience relief from the anxiety surrounding the idea of death and dying. Also, "dark humor entreats people to engage, at least momentarily, with the experience of loss" (Murray 2016: 55),

and not in a troubling manner, at least not in that moment, but in a way that can temporarily ease the fear of death.

In a study conducted by Thorson and Powell from the University of Nebraska, the authors started from the premise that humor is a survival skill when it comes to death and ageing. Thus, those who lack humor might experience higher levels of death anxiety. To help with their study, they developed a Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale (MSHS) based on a 24-question questionnaire. Their study showed that the respondents who used coping humor less were experiencing death anxiety more than those who frequently used it. Their conclusion was that "we all will certainly die, but at least some of us can laugh about it" (1993: 1366).

Bergson, in his famous Laughter, perfectly explains that the comic draws its powers from what is human, so—by extension—to all things that humans experience, including those sad and grim experiences that we all go through sooner or later, and that it "must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social signification" (1911: 5b). Bergson's assertion posits that the phenomenon of the comic finds its existence exclusively within the realm of what is distinctly human. A natural vista, irrespective of its aesthetic qualities, may evoke emotions of beauty, charm, sublimity, insignificance, or ugliness, but it shall never elicit laughter. When one does find amusement in an animal, it is predicated upon the identification of some human-like disposition or expression therein. Similarly, when laughter is directed towards an article of attire such as a hat, the object of jest is not the material composition, be it felt or straw, but rather the form it has assumed—a form shaped by human capriciousness (4a).

Bergson contends that laughter is incited, among other factors, by an element of involuntariness inherent in a sudden alteration of circumstances. To illustrate this point, he offers the following example: When a man is traversing a street and, quite unexpectedly, loses his balance, stumbling and ultimately collapsing onto the pavement, the onlookers invariably erupt into laughter. It is reasonable to assume that their mirth would be absent had they perceived that the individual had deliberately chosen to recline upon the ground as a whimsical act (5b).

You will notice that, in Caitlin Doughty's books, humor is often based on a sudden and unexpected shift, whether in style or subject matter. Bergson also explains some other tools of the comic in discourse: the lapse of attention in the language (such as a play upon words); repetitions, in which Bergson says, "We generally have two terms: a repressed feeling which goes off like a spring, and an idea that delights in repressing the feeling anew" (24b); the manner outdoing the matter, such as an incident where a public speaker sneezes right when the speech becomes more pathetic, where our

attention is called to the physicality of a person when in fact we were supposed to pay attention to the moral or emotional side of the scene.

But how does this happen? How do we know when humor can be used as a tool to fight death phobia and when it is just a protective shield that we hide behind when we are faced with the inevitability of dying? The line is very thin between the two realms. When we get stuck into the humor zone, I believe we are not ready to cross that border between avoidance and acceptance. When we use humor to sweeten the first impact with the thought of mortality, then we can begin to think about it from a different perspective, from a place of acceptance and welcomed grief for the self. Take humor as the first few steps on that bridge between denial and acceptance. It will not lead us straight to the other side, but it will be a helpful tool when anxiety becomes too much to handle. This is corroborated by health professionals all over the world, as they are one of the very few who witness death on a daily basis and must find a coping mechanism that would not drive them to the brink of madness or desperation.

Ellie Daubney recounts her initial encounter with the pervasive use of dark humor within the ambulance service, which gradually led to her changing perspective. Initially, she struggled to grasp the rationale behind its incorporation into paramedic culture, questioning its authenticity as a coping mechanism for managing the emotionally taxing nature of the profession. She harbored doubts about whether it served as a mere pretext to uphold traditional practices within the ambulance service. The notion of employing humor to mitigate the gravity of trauma and fatalities seemed incongruous to her, and she contemplated the potential shock it could elicit from the perspective of patients' family members. However, it was not until she participated in her first assignment that necessitated a debriefing led by a team leader that she began to recognize the utility and necessity of dark humor as a mechanism for processing and managing the emotional toll of their demanding work (2019: 128).

Naturally, our case is slightly different, but when we hear the explanation straight from the horse's mouth, we tend to associate factuality and reality with it. Daubney's first impression was to feel that comedy diminishes "the seriousness of trauma" when in fact, all it did was to offer a "genuine coping mechanism for dealing with emotionally challenging jobs." In reality, it is something positive as long as the intention of the person who uses it is not to mock or minimize someone else's pain or suffering. However, we will see precisely how this is accomplished in the following subsection.

3. Types of Humor in From Here to Eternity, Smoke Gets in Your Eyes, And Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?

Taking into consideration the topic at hand, it would be beneficial to delve into the ways in which humor is utilized in Caitlin Doughty's three literary works. Upon review, there appear to be three distinct types of humor that are prevalent throughout her writing. By analyzing these various forms of humor, we can gain a deeper understanding of how they assert their power and influence the reader's interpretation of the text:

(a) humor related to the body-corpse: the author lightens the mood of an anxiety-inducing raw description by cracking a joke about the appearance of a body. They also create an unexpected comparison between a corpse (or a part of it) and something that does not usually have any relation to it;

(b) humor of relatability: a humorous remark, comparison, or example referencing something outside the text that would appeal to a particular group of people (whether in terms of generation, geographical location, or personal experience); these remarks might be extracted from social media, popular culture, youth culture, internet trends, or common knowledge;

(c) situational humor: authors have the ability to utilize the various elements presented within the text to elicit a sense of humor, either directed towards themselves or their surroundings in that particular moment. This approach can serve to disrupt the established tone of the writing, which may have previously been bleak, despondent, or fraught with tension. In doing so, the author is able to provide respite for the reader, allowing them to release any built-up stress or anxiety they may have been experiencing.

In the subsequent segment, we shall delve into several extracts and scrutinize how the humorous moment is brought about, in addition to the plausible impact it could have on the audience. It is worth noting that some instances may fall under more than one classification.

3.1. Smoke Gets In Your Eyes

3.1.1. Humor Related to The Body-Corpse

Example 1: This particular morning, the first cremation permit was for a Mr. Martinez. In a perfect world, Mr. Martinez would have been right on top, waiting for me to roll him directly onto my hydraulic gurney. To my great annoyance I found him

stacked below Mr. Willard, Mrs. Nagasaki, *and* Mr. Shelton. That meant stacking and restacking the cardboard boxes like a game of body-fridge Tetris. (13-14)

In the second chapter, "Puppy Surprise," Doughty recounts a challenging moment when she had to load the body of a certain Mr. Martinez into the retort, but she finds him at the bottle of the "stack" under three more bodies. She compares the rearranging of the corpses in the fridge with a game of Tetris (which could easily fit into the category of humor of relatability, but because the image is mainly built around the bodies, we will leave it here). The humor comes from the unexpected comparison between the attentive movement of the mortician and the four-decade-old game of Tetris. Later on, when Mike (her colleague) sees her struggle to pass over some thick strips of plastic on the floor that would always hinder the rolling of the gurney toward the cremation chamber, he asks her whether she needs help, and Doughty admits the following:

I made sure my response was *always* "Nope, got it!" Did I need help watering the plants in the front courtyard? "Nope, got it!" Did I need further instructions on lathering a man's hand to slip a wedding ring over his bloated knuckle? "Nope, got it!" (14)

Again, the unexpected joining of two different elements (here: watering the plants and massaging a dead man's hand to remove his wedding ring) provides the humorous element. We can explain it using Bergson's transition from one medium to another—from material to human—or simply by imagining the conversation Doughty willingly creates by adding quotation marks.

Example 2:

The cruel fact was that Elena Ionescu, a ninety-year-old Romanian woman, had been in the hospital for over two months prior to her death. The combination of being bedridden for eight weeks and hooked up on IV drips and machines had caused Elena's body to slide into full-blown oedema, a post-mortem condition in which fluid swells beneath the skin. She was puffed up like the Michelin man […]. (117)

Doughty has to handle the body of an old Romanian woman who suffered from oedema on her arms, legs, and back and whose skin was leaking fluid, which hastened decomposition (skin slippage). When Mrs. Ionescu's daughter comes to see her mother one last time and finds out the price for the preparation of the body, Doughty explains to us what she would look like unprepared: "horrific, at least by our very narrow cultural expectations" (116). The punchline is, as usual, at the end of the paragraph, where Doughty compares Mrs. Ionescu's physical appearance with the Michelin man, which we all know as the mascot of the Michelin tire company, human-like, made of stacked white tires. Now, we suddenly shift from the human medium to the material one, again

as per how Bergson describes some forms of humor. However, This time, Doughty seems to be laughing at the corpse rather than the situation around it, which might stir up some controversy. However, later on, she laughs at herself again to balance it out: "As a general rule, if anyone asks you to put stockings on a ninety-year-old deceased Romanian woman with oedema, your answer should be no" (120). In this case, humor comes from impossibility: Doughty provides us with such a specific scenario—never bound to happen to almost any of us this lifetime—and her tone is so serious that the only possible reaction is a cackle or a at least a slight smile.

Example 3:

> If at first you don't succeed, slice, slice again. (204)

In the chapter "Deth Skool"—intentionally misspelled. The Urban Dictionary explains to us that "skool" is "a different way to spell school. This spelling is for the idiots that dropped out" (Urban Dictionary 2003). Doughty is probably using self-deprecating humor here—, Doughty recounts her time at the Cypress College of Mortuary Science. After she compares her and her colleagues' outfits with "the student Smurf brigade" (204) because of their blue color, she mocks the habitual mistakes of the students who had to learn the exact placement of the arteries and veins in the human body. For this, they had to slice open bodies donated for this exact purpose.

She writes that "someone would slice open the upper thigh in the incorrect place" only to let out a "D'oh!" (204) and look for the femoral artery in some other place on the body. The phrase above is humorous because it is a combination of the very common proverb, "If at first, you don't succeed, try again", which means that the reason why some people do not succeed in their affairs is because they cease trying after they fail, and the apparently morbid situation in the story. The thought of cutting a corpse in the wrong place, stopping and reacting as if you were cutting fabric for a dress is relatively uncommon and perhaps might seem slightly heartless to some of the readers, but this is the reality of what happens to the bodies donated to science and medicine—another characteristic of death we are not used to discussing plainly. Ideally, they should be treated with the dignity and respect a human being deserves, but some professionals might fall into the trap of desensitization and forget that they are not handling an object, even though what they have in front of them is a mere carcass.

3.1.2. Humor of Relatability

Example 1:

It is easy for someone in the twenty-first century to be dismissive and declare, "Dang, those medieval folk are so crazy with their flying demonic minions and sex pacts!" (86)

One can emit judgements without knowing the context when a particular event happened. The morally right behavior would be to learn more through conversation. However, no one says we cannot poke fun at how we see and judge the past. Doughty's especially informal exclamation "dang" implies that the continuation is at least sarcastic, if not downright funny. The Medieval Ages are popularly known for their miniature illustrations portraying oversized genitalia, odd-looking cats, and dark deathbed scenes, and judging the folk of those times for their beliefs is uncalled for, as per Doughty's opinion. More about this in Medieval Bodies: Life and Death in the Middle Ages (2019) and The Very Secret Sex Lives of Medieval Women: An Inside Look at Women and Sex in Medieval Times (2020).

Example 2:

"Home is where the corpse is," they would say. (They didn't say that, I made it up, but they might as well have said it.) (172)

This is a variation of the famous saying, "Home is where the heart is," representing relatability in this specific example. The humorous aspect of this is, however, in the parentheses that follow: we do not expect the author to admit to a white lie that immediately, and the fact that she does so in parentheses (which are mainly used in Doughty's books to address the reader directly and build rapport) makes it even more unexpected.

Example 3:

Q: In approximately 300 words explain why you are interested in working at a mortuary.

A: I love death.

Q: Are you aware of, or have you participated in any religious/spiritual rituals surrounding death? Please describe these events.

A: I play with the wigy [sic] board once.

Q: Are you able to be empathetic to people without becoming personally involved? Describe a situation where you were able to do this.

A: I kill a bunch of people once.

Q: Are you able to be flexible with regards to your job duties and description?

A: Oh hell yeah. (186-187)

In the chapter "Solo Witness," Doughty recalls the days before she left her job and moved to L.A. when she and her colleagues had to post an opening for her job online and wait for people to apply. However, because they were so many of them, they had to create a questionnaire "to separate the wheat from the chaff" (186). Whether Doughty added one of the real responses to the questionnaire or not—she briefly mentions that "the real gems came in" when they asked the remaining people to answer some questions—but there is no doubt the answers are funny because (a) the three-word answer that clearly does not follow the 300-word request; (b) the Ouija board is misspelled as "wigy"; (c) the misuse of the present simple in "I kill a bunch of people once"; (d) the unsuitably informal exclamation "Oh hell yeah" as an answer to the formal question about job flexibility and description.

3.1.3. Situational Humor

Example 1:

I found myself setting goals: "All right, Caitlin, it's what? Three fifteen p.m.? I bet you can do five babies before five o'clock. C'mon, girl, five before five. You get after that goal!" (92)

First question: is this inappropriate humor? Why do we feel like humor when discussing the death of babies is disrespectful? Caitlin realizes this and adds: "Appalling? Absolutely. But if I let myself be sucked into the sorrow surrounding each fetus–each wanted but wasted tiny life—I'd go crazy" (92). To compensate for this uncomfortably humorous remark, Doughty does two things. First, she explains how infant cremations happen and that they do not differ much from adult cremations, except concerning time: "Adults could take hours to cremate, including the cremation itself and the cool-down process. Babies cremated in twenty minutes, tops" (92). The purpose of this explanation is to desensitize and create space between the reader and the painful imagery that arises.

Second, the emotional rollercoaster that the readers are already used to leads us to a scene that we might not expect: Doughty weeping over the body of an eleven-month-old girl whose head she had to shave and whose body she had to wrap in a blanket. This

comes as a surprise not only for us but for herself too; she reckons that her emotional outburst is a natural response to all that she has seen and done, that the baby girl "acted as a symbol for every other baby I didn't cry for Those I didn't have time to cry for if I wanted to do my job and cremate five before five" (95). Thus, we come full circle to the humorous "five before five" from the beginning, this time in a different emotional context, which does not cancel the initial joke, but by comparing it to its exact opposite, we see it even more clearly.

Example 2:

I practiced what I would say if the worst occurred: Oh, yes, that conveyor always stops right there. This is the part where I take a sprint across the crematorium and slam myself into the box containing your mother and shoot her into the flames. Common procedure, sir; worry not. (180)

In this particular instance, Caitlin Doughty envisions a rather unfortunate scenario wherein the conveyor belt of the cremation apparatus malfunctions during a funeral service, with the bereaved family still in attendance. The response she conjures up is humorous in nature, owing to its unpredictability, culminating in the employment of the highly formal phrase "worry not."

As we delve into Doughty's witty retort, a comical scene unfolds in our minds. We envision the mortician, with her usual professionalism and poise, quickly springing into action. She deftly maneuvers the casket towards the furnace with a flourish as if it were a performance, all while reassuring the crowd with a smile. The absurdity of the situation is not lost on us, and we cannot help but chuckle at the sheer hilarity of it all. This moment of levity is a welcome respite from the weighty emotions that come with death, and we relish in the light-heartedness of the moment.

Example 3:

I would find myself hoping to be stopped, if only as a break from the monotony. In my mind, this is how the scene would go:

"You don't got any *immigrantes* back there, do ya, missy?"

"No *immigrantes*, Officer. Just eleven people," I'd reply, and, whipping off my sunglasses, "former US citizens."

"Former?"

"Oh, they're dead, Officer. Real dead." (217)

The author envisions a hypothetical scenario where she is transporting deceased bodies. In this scenario, she imagines being stopped by a police officer who enquires

about the presence of any undocumented immigrants in the vehicle. To respond, she dramatically removes her sunglasses, embodying the protagonist of an action movie, and informs the officer that the individuals in the vehicle are indeed US citizens, albeit "former" ones. Eager to elaborate, the author adds that the individuals are, in fact, "real dead," punctuating the statement with a dramatic pause to heighten the tension in the exchange. The humor in this scene lies in its ability to break the monotony of the ongoing conversation surrounding the finality of death.

3.2. From Here to Eternity

3.2.1. Humor Related to The Body-Corpse

Example 1:

The next morning began with the sound of a plaintive gong rolling along the village road. This announced the official start of the *ma'nene.* The first mummy I saw wore eighties' style aviator sunglasses with yellow-tinted frames.

"Damn," I thought, "that guy looks like my middle school algebra teacher."

[…]

An eight-by-ten-inch framed portrait photo, taken during his life, sat propped next to his body. Alive, he had looked far less like my math teacher than he did today, eight years into mummification. (63-64)

Doughty arrives in Toraja and witnesses the ritual of *ma'nene* (or the Torajan funeral). After she spends a night in a *tongkonan* house (a house-grave on slits), she sees the first mummy being cleaned and dressed up again. We hear her thought and her remark: she compares the mummy to her algebra teacher, a comparison that returns a page later to remind us of the previous joke.

By expressing her surprise using the somewhat profane word "damn" and referring to the mummy as "that guy" (thus turning it from a body-as-object into a body-as-being), the reader encounters a break in the pattern of the text, which turns his of her attention to the body-corpse itself, rather than to the situation. However, we can also call this situational humor because the author uses her surroundings to create a humorous and unexpected comparison.

Example 2:

The seventy-year-old woman was emaciated by disease at the time of her death. Her mound consisted of pure woodchips and was at the bottom of the hill, uncovered, in the shade. […] Then I hit June's femur, covered in a thick white leftover of decomposed fat, the consistency of Greek yogurt (apologies, Greek yogurt fans). (134)

At the Forensic Osteology Research Centre (see example number one of humor of relatability), the narrator digs up the body of a woman buried solely under woodchips to check the stage of the decomposition process. The description, although short, might stir a reaction of disgust in the readers. The text in brackets comes as a rescuing tool, as a humorous relief after a sample of Doughty's raw description. Addressing the readers directly and apologizing for her odd and unexpected comparison, she creates a humorous relief that alleviates some of the effects of her describing June's decomposed dead body.

Example 3:

After convincing the body to loosen up, his grandfather would flip it over on its stomach and press out any purge or gas from decomposition. Kind of like burping a baby—burp *it* before it burps *on you.* (5)

When she visits Belize, a diverse community of Latin American and Caribbean influences, she talks to a local man named Luciano, who tells her about his grandfather and how he used to wash the corpses out of *rigor mortis* by also talking to them and "convincing" them to loosen up. Her comparison is unexpected and breaks the story's rhythm, especially by italicizing in writing what she would have otherwise accentuated with her intonation in speaking. While the comparison between burping a baby and burping a dead body would bother some readers, it releases some of the tension created by the detailed description of what a community death attendant would do.

3.2.2. Humor of Relatability

Example 1:

We rolled Frank over on his right side and gently wiggled the bag free, so it was man on woodchip, no turning back. Frank had a white goatee and shoulder-length hair, and his left arm was draped almost elegantly behind his head, "draw me like one of your French girls" style. (121)

At the facility that handles body recomposition in North Carolina, Doughty partakes in burying a man named Frank directly into the soil at the top of a hill. She helps the undergraduates lower him into the ground and cover him with green alfalfa—that would release nitrogen faster—and woodchips. This time, Doughty's humor is strongly connected to popular internet culture. An expression from the 1997 movie Titanic,

"Draw me like one of your French girls", became an internet meme, often used as a text accompanying illustrations or photographs of people or animals lying down on one side, similar to Rose in the original film. Doughty will also appeal to a younger readership by using this type of humor. This can also be categorized as humor related to the body-corpse.

Example 2:

The skulls, on the other hand, wore identical cotton beanies, light blue in color, with their individual names embroidered on the front, like babies in a nursery: Ramiro, Carlota, Jose, Waldo (found him!). These weren't their names originally; the names were bestowed by Doña Ely when the skulls became ñatitas. (190-191)

The seemingly macabre image of the ñatitas aligned in the woman's living room is interrupted by a joke referencing popular culture, specifically answering the famous question, "Where's Waldo?." These are skulls that belonged to real people, believed to have divine powers. In La Paz, Bolivia, the skulls are preserved and kept by women, who usually decorate them with candy, hats, cigarettes, and other accessories. People come and ask for favors, and the skulls are said to be able to grant their wishes (see Koudounaris 2015). This type of humor can also be placed under the umbrella of humor of suddenness (it breaks the pattern that the reader expects) or humor of sharing similar knowledge, making it the perfect example of humor of relatability. The narrator makes a reference that only a particular group of people can relate to; only the generations that grew up 'reading' the series of books can know what she is talking about, and if we think of the fact that the book has been banned on and off (Muns 2005), the group that can relate to it becomes even smaller. Fortunately, through social media, Where's Waldo? became a title that many people recognize nowadays, although they are not part of the generation of reference.

Example 3:

At the center of his altar was Jorge's favorite white T-shirt illustrated with a sad clown and "Joker" written in script. A bottle of Pepsi awaited his return (the appeal of which I understood—gross as it sounds, I'd come back from the dead for a Diet Coke). (93)

When she visits Santa Fe de la Laguna, a small city in Michoacán, to learn more about their death rituals and the people's relationship to their dead, she enters a house where she sees a colorful altar that honors Jorge, a young man who passed away that same year. After she describes all the offerings placed on the altar by the boy's family—a scene bound to sadden the readers and make them sympathize with the family, a scene of grief and longing for a lost son—Doughty breaks the expected pattern yet again. This can also be categorized as relief humor. There is pain in reading about the death of a

young person, but the author does not let us spend much time surrounded by it because she pulls us right back up, somehow breaking the fourth wall, interrupting the descriptive flow by joking about an imagined scenario that involves the brand of a drink that everybody is familiar with and can relate to.

3.2.3. Situational Humor

Example 1:

The phone rang and my heart raced.

The first few months after I opened my funeral home, a ringing phone qualified as a thrilling event. We didn't get many calls. "What if… what if someone *died*?" I'd gasp. (Well yes, dear, it's a funeral home—that would be the point.) (1)

The first instinct she has when she hears the phone ringing is to presume that some tragic event happened and someone died, not in the way in which a funeral home director would, but as someone who does not work in the death industry. Then, the author interrupts the narrator-character—who are one and the same person—and draws her attention to the fact that this is normal for a funeral home. Here, the humor consists of more than one element: we can see it as self-deprecating humor (Doughty from the future corrects Doughty from the past, or they can both be inside the text, one as the voice of reason and the other as the voice of instinct), or as humor that results from something breaking the pattern already imagined: the repetition of "what if" and the stress on the word "died", when the reader clearly knows that the scene is happening at a funeral home, so there would be no point in someone working there and panicking about someone else dying.

This is situational humor because Doughty uses the elements that the text offers in that specific situation (the scene, the phone ringing, the sudden thought that someone died, the self-correction remark) and turns the pattern around at the very end in an unexpected interruption that seems to come from an experienced Doughty who addresses herself using the word "dear" in a grandmotherly fashion.

Example 2:

My cellphone, my only source of light, was at 2 percent battery life, so I powered it down and sat in the dark among the skulls. Minutes went by, maybe five, maybe twenty, when a lantern broke through the darkness. It was a family: a mother and several teenagers, Indonesian tourists from Jakarta. From their perspective, I must have looked like a possum trapped by car headlights against a garage wall. In gracious, elevated English, a young man positioned himself at my elbow and said, "Excuse me, miss. If

you will direct your attention to the camera, we will create an Instagram." Flashes started going off, sending my image to #LondaCaves. (48)

Visiting the Londa burial caves with Paul Koudounaris, she remains in the dark all by herself, with no flashlight. When a family discovers the "six-foot-tall white girl in a polka-dot dress" (48), their first instinct is to take a photograph with her. Humor is created here not only by the formal and slightly odd way in which the young man asks her for a photo (you cannot *create* an Instagram; you can create an Instagram post or post something on Instagram) but also by the comparison between her and a possum trapped by the lights of a car. The narrator's situation and surroundings allow her to build a humorous moment that might allow the readers to chuckle and temporarily forget that they are in a dark cave filled with bones and skulls, together with the lost narrator-character.

Example 3:

Frank's woodchip pile now rose three and a half feet. It looked like a Viking burial mound. The strapping blond undergraduate hammered in a wire fence around the mound's lower half to prevent the mulch mixture (or, God forbid, Frank) from escaping and rolling down the hill. (125)

In North Carolina, where there is a facility that specializes in body recomposition, a man named Frank is laid to rest at the top of a hill, buried directly into the soil. Caitlin Doughty, a participant in this process, assisted the undergraduates as they lowered Frank into the ground and covered him with green alfalfa and woodchips. Interestingly, Doughty incorporated a form of humor that utilized the situation to create an imaginary scenario. She added her own fear of seeing Frank rolling down the hill between parentheses, which can be categorized as body humor or humor associated with the body.

This type of humor plays on the mental image created by the situation at hand. Using parentheses, Doughty takes a break from the main frame of the story to express her fear at that time. As readers, we have to take that break *with* her, allowing ourselves a smile or a cackle as a relief from what we have just noticed (a man being buried and left to decompose on his own in a controlled environment).

3.3. Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?

3.3.1. Humor Related to The Body-Corpse

Example 1:

In human cemeteries unlawful exhumation, or digging up bodies without a permit, is considered grave desecration. I don't want to hear you claiming, "Caitlin said to check on how Grandma is coming along." (25)

In the chapter "We buried my dog in the backyard, what would happen if we dug him up now?", Doughty answers a question about the usual decomposition of the body of an animal, now and then referring to cultural rituals around the world, such as the fate of cats in Egypt and in the forever-scared-of-witchcraft Europe. Doughty underlines that, unlike human exhumation, digging up your family dog is not illegal (whether you are moving and wish to take your deceased pet with you or are just curious about how decomposition is coming along). To ensure that young readers understand this, she adds extra information in parenthesis and humorously advises us not to blame her for breaking the law. Of course, she does not laugh at the gra ndmother's body in her example but at the unlawful deed, one might commit out of curiosity. The goal is to break the taboo around decomposition by using expressions that might not otherwise be chosen to talk about the sacredness of death: "to come along" is used chiefly to describe progress or development, but not in the circumstances of death and dying.

Example 2:

After they've cooled down, the bone fragments are swept out of the cremation machine. Any big pieces of metal are removed. (Did Grandma have a hip implant? We'll find out when we cremate her!) (45)

In the chapter called "How does a whole adult fit into a tiny box after cremation?," Doughty explains how cremation takes place in various circumstances: people who are heavier, taller, people with metal implants, and so on. Here—similar to the previous example—humor is contained within parentheses: Doughty imagines what the readers might ask themselves in a similar scenario, and I cannot help but feel that the second sentence, ending with an exclamation mark, takes the emotional rollercoaster in an upward direction, almost to a smile translating to "We can't wait to find out if Grandma had a hip implant!". The purpose of this is to continue what the previous example showed: that decomposition is a natural process, and it is normal to be curious about it.

3.3.2. Humor of Relatability

Example 1:

If that's what you (*and* your parents!) want, I hope it can happen for you. If all else fails, cremate them and press their ashes into a diamond or a vinyl record. Kids, a vinyl record is… never mind. (17)

In the chapter "Can I keep my parents' skulls after they die?," the author tells us that she is asked this question quite often. However, before any humorous remark, she must remind us that "real skulls aren't kitschy Halloween decorations; they belonged to a human being" (12), so beyond her joyful tone, there is always a mortician who respects and honors the human being before and especially *after* death. In the excerpt I extracted from the text, the humor lies in her failed attempt to explain to the "kids" what a vinyl record is, even though Doughty is part of the millennial generation (or Gen Y). She assumes that because vinyl records are a thing of the past—more precisely, of the twentieth century—young people who might be reading her book are unfamiliar with it. Curiously enough, vinyl records revenues surpassed those of CDs in 2020 for the first time since the twentieth century (Yoo 2020). The fact that she gives up before even trying to explain it to her readers makes it even funnier. Similarly, in the chapter called "What would happen to an astronaut body in space?," Doughty assumes the same lack of information from her younger readers, but this time she explains the reference with the help of a footnote. Talking about the Body Back, a 2005 NASA prototype of a system that would contain the corpses of people dying in space, she adds in parentheses: "I'm bringing body back, returning corpses but they're not intact" (8), then in the footnote, there comes the explanation for—again—the "kids": "Kids, this is a Justin Timberlake reference, you're fine not knowing who that is" (8). This time, the humor is not directed at a corpse or a situation, but it underlines the age gap between Doughty and her young and eager readers.

Example 2:

On another note: our highest-grossing movies seem to involve a lot of sophisticated body preservation technology. Coincidence? I don't think so. The public loves fancy corpse tech. (*Frozen* never really went there, but I have a feeling Elsa has some good cryopreservation techniques up her sleeve.) (34)

Using again a piece of information that her younger readers are bound to know, Doughty answers the question, "Can I preserve my dead body in amber like a prehistoric insect?" in a chapter dedicated to it. Starting by praising the question with the words, "You, young person, are a pint-sized death revolutionary" (30), she explains how insects get stuck in resin and are fossilized over the years. Moving on, she mentions other preservation techniques, such as cryopreservation, and brings the 2013 blockbuster

animation *Frozen* into discussion, something that would definitely appeal to children and teenagers.

3.3.3. Situational Humor

Example 1:

Two words, many problems: Space. Corpse. […] But we don't know what would happen if an astronaut had a sudden heart attack, or an accident during a space walk, or chocked on some of that freeze-dried ice cream on the way to Mars.

"Umm, Houston, should we float him over to the maintenance closet or…?" (5)

Within the pages of her book, Caitlin Doughty delves into what would happen to a deceased individual in the vast expanse of space. She thoughtfully examines the current possibilities and future solutions to this complex issue. Doughty uses a clever approach to introduce the topic, beginning with a humorous anecdote about the potential hazard of choking on freeze-dried ice cream in space. She highlights the stark differences between the food options available to space travelers versus those on Earth. This amusing tale leads to a playful reimagining of the famous phrase "Houston, we have a problem," coined by the Apollo 13 mission team to communicate with their Texas crew and report any issues. Doughty ponders the possibility of a strange and unusual scenario, such as a freeze-dried ice cream accident occurring "on the way to Mars." With wit and whimsy, she suggests that the ground crew in Houston could "float" the deceased individual to the maintenance closet for preservation until the crew can safely land.

Example 2:

Tell you what's not going to work: marching on over to your local funeral home and saying, "Greetings! That's my mom's corpse over there. Could you just pop off her head and deflesh her skull? That would be great. Thanks!" (12)

Here, the humor lies in the impossible nature of the dialogue between a grieving child who would like their mother's skull for posterity and the confused employer of a funeral home. In the chapter "Can I keep my parents' skulls after they die?," Doughty explains the laws in the USA and the UK and gives us all hope that they can change in time. The scene in which the son or the daughter of a woman whose corpse is in the care of a mortician goes to the funeral home to cheerfully tell the employee to "pop off" the head of their mother—as if she were a Barbie doll—and melt the flesh off her skull, is not something short of comic relief. This aims to open the horizons for new ideas and wonderings regarding future body preservation or reuse techniques that would help mourners grieve and remember.

4. Conclusions

These examples demonstrate the different contexts where we can find humorous elements in Caitlin Doughty's *From Here to Eternity*. The three categories of death humor that we can find in her book (humor related to the body-corpse, humor of relatability, and situational humor) are not the only ones. As we learnt above, even *they* do not have perfectly traced borders to separate them from one another, and sometimes we can find an instance of humor having the traits of all the categories discussed.

Doughty is not laughing at the dead person, nor does she make fun of grieving people. She only uses the situation to create a sense of relief in the reader by stopping the narrative thread and joking about the situational elements around her. This is neither disrespectful nor heartless, as some of us might be inclined to think (and even if we think so, we are entitled to our own opinions); humor is a coping mechanism, and when used responsibly and wisely, it has therapeutic and healing effects on our psyche. Far from getting into a Freudian analysis, I will only say that a sense of humor and know-how of when to laugh and what to laugh about are two things that might save us from modern man's seemingly irreversible death phobia.

Death humor can be regarded in many different ways, depending on its effect on the readers. It "may indeed be a way of avoiding the reality of the event" (McDonald 89), or it might be a valid and personal interpretation of the text. Some might even call it "sick," and others might argue that it only raises us above anxiety and fear (Frankl 1985). Either way, in *From Here to Eternity*, Caitlin Doughty seems to know perfectly where to place the bits and pieces of humor so that the tension of the moment and the anxiety created by a sense of too much talk about death can be dissipated. The reader can start all over again, as if on a rollercoaster of ups and downs, where "up" is represented by humor and "down" is the self-awareness of death and mortality, exemplified by detailed descriptions of dead bodies, cultural and historical data about death practices and rituals all over the world, but especially in the West, scientific facts about decomposition, *rigor mortis, livor mortis,* and many more curiosities about death and dying.

Is humor helping us get closer to a state of death acceptance and positivity? This depends on the reader and his or her mindset when it comes to humor and death. As we saw in the short survey above, people are willing to accept this unusual combination used almost therapeutically, if not as a treatment for death phobia. Laughing about death is not proof of pusillanimity but of courageousness displayed by people who already have an awareness of the mortal self but need a "push" to step onto the bridge that leads from denial to acceptance.

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Section 4. Death Gets Personal: Breaking The Fourth Wall in Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?

1. Introduction

In this section, I will discuss the fourth major characteristic of Caitlin Doughty's discourse: addressing the reader directly by breaking the fourth wall. We have already tackled scene-by-scene construction, raw description, and macabre humor as the other three "walls" that build Doughty's creative nonfiction house, but breaking the fourth wall is the one which creates the best rapport with the reader to ensure that the latter trusts the former (an essential aspect of creative nonfiction). In Doughty's writing, this is done with the help of parentheses, footnotes, and the rich use of the pronoun "you." In death acceptance nonfiction, it is essential to offer the readers a particular strategy of offering uncomfortable information and raw description. One cannot just plop a harsh truth on the page; it must be done graciously and sensibly with creative tools which not only reinforce the strong relationship between the author and the reader but also open the gates to another narrative. This secondary, more intimate world allows for emotional exchanges between the creator of the discourse and its receiver. So, this section will discuss metatextuality or breaking the fourth wall not only in the written text but also in its extension: the digital world created by Doughty's YouTube videos.

2. Metatextuality and Breaking the Fourth Wall: Addressing the Reader

A notion usually used in theatre, the fourth wall implies the existence of an imaginary barrier between actors and the audience. The public enters a state of "public solitude," as admitted by Konstantin Stanislavski (Bentsen 2023), so why can we not talk about the readers' solitude in literature? The feeling that the authors are high up an unreachable peak of mighty ideas, and we—as mere mortals—are allowed an occasional glimpse into their world. Tamika Carlton (2018) offers some advice in an article regarding the use of breaking the fourth wall:

1. Be bold: Dare to take bold steps for heightened emotional response.

2. Use it to create maximum comic relief.

3. Be consistent: Break the fourth wall correctly so it neither feels overwhelming nor underwhelming you with its lack of consistency.

If we have learnt anything so far, it is that creative nonfiction is built on the readers' interest in the facts told by the narrator, using various storytelling techniques to engage their attention and keep them focused on what they are reading. Carlton's three

pieces of advice can easily be included in the list of rules that Gutkind and Hart propose for the genre: the writer dares to tell the truth as it is, using creativity as the primary tool (sometimes this involves the use of humor) and changing scenes with consistency lest the reader be overwhelmed or underwhelmed. In children's books, when authors break the fourth wall, it is to engage the readers and involve them directly in the story that is being told (Taylor 2020). However, regardless of the intended readership, its effects are the following: (a) it creates a connection between the author and the reader; (b) it elevates the storytelling; (c) it builds trust between the author and the reader; (d) it adds a sense of urgency to whatever scene it is employed in; (e) the readers feel included and enjoy personal conversations with and secrets of the author. So, breaking the fourth wall, similar to creative nonfiction, is all for the reader's sake.

In The Architext, Genette addresses the issue of transtextuality, of which metatextuality is a vital part and which he defines as "the transtextual relationship that links a commentary to the text it comments on" (1930: 82). In another one of his books, Macksey synthesizes Genette's concept of transtextuality and what it involves in the foreword: (a) intertextuality: "a relation of co-presence between two or more texts" (1997: xviii) visually present by the use of quotation marks; (b) paratextuality: all the framing elements such as "titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles, notes, epilogues, and afterwords" (xviii); (c) metatextuality (already defined above); (d) hypertextuality: "the superimposition of a later text on an earlier one that includes all forms of imitation, pastiche and parody" (xix); (e) architextuality or architexture: "the relationship of inclusion linking each text to the various kinds of discourse of which it is a representative" (xix). I reckon that Genette sees beyond the text and into all its dimensions, helping us move outside and observe all of its cracks and crevices.

In Doughty's books, I have also noticed that footnotes do not play the same role as we would usually see in other nonfiction books. Here, they represent direct communication between the writer and the reader: they contain explanations that the in-text narrator did not have the chance to give us or perhaps instances of relief humor that were not added to the text at the time. In The Devil's Details, Zerby writes that footnotes are believed to be "unsightly, costly, forbidding" (2002: 2) by the publishers, who tried to make this process as strenuous as possible:

The game goes like this: First you must fix in your mind the number of the footnote, say 27, then you have to remember the page number on which footnote 27 appears, say page 85. Then you must turn to the back of the book, trying to keep your place with an inserted finger, and scan page after page until you discover one headed "Footnotes for Pages 81-107." By this time you have forgotten the footnote number so you must scramble back to the original page and seek it out again, sitting small and sulkily, in the text. (2)

Luckily, the old arrangement of footnotes does not apply to all books nowadays, which have the footnotes close to the text, so one only has to lower their sight and go back to the text immediately without losing time or attention. They might disrupt the flow of the primary narrative, but at the same time, they make room for a secondary one closely related to the text. In Smoke Gets in Your Eyes there are none, in From Here to Eternity there are six; and in Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? there are five. In the second, they primarily include extra information, and in the third, they are used for humorous purposes. For instance, in the chapter "We eat dead chickens, why not dead people?" in Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?, Doughty writes: "It is my sincere belief that you are never too young to ask hard questions about cannibalism. So, let's dig in [footnote number] to the topic of eating human flesh!" (133). The footnote simply says "Wink" (133). It has no informational substance, and it offers no extra explanations. However, a wink represents complicity, which makes the readers feel like they are part of an inside joke, which builds that rapport I mentioned earlier.

In her 2001 work, Patricia Waugh delves into the concept of metatextuality and its impact on contemporary fiction. This literary technique, also known as breaking the fourth wall, has allowed authors to create self-conscious works that engage readers on a deeper level. Waugh cites works by Laurence Sterne and Donald Barthelme as examples of self-conscious fiction and draws parallels between them to solidify the concept further. Overall, metatextuality has proven to be a valuable tool for modern authors seeking to push the boundaries of literary convention and engage their audience in new and exciting ways. It can be characterized as an ode to the potency of the creative imagination, coupled with an inherent ambivalence concerning the authenticity of its portrayals. It embodies a heightened self-awareness pertaining to the nuances of language, the structure of literary composition, and the very act of crafting fictional narratives. Moreover, it instills a prevailing sense of doubt concerning the interplay between fiction and reality. In its essence, metatextuality adopts a parodic, playful, often extravagant, or deceptively ingenuous manner of expression in the realm of written discourse (2).

Naturally, this description can surpass the level of fiction and move on to the realm of nonfiction, more precisely creative nonfiction, which combines artful storytelling—this is the "creative" part—and actual events/facts—the "nonfiction" part. The meta levels of any discourse are present regardless of its fictional or nonfictional origins. In a sense, meta terms help us explore the link between the world of fiction/creative nonfiction (the storyworld, if you will) and the world outside it. However, can this be found only in the written medium? In audio-visual form, breaking the fourth usually means that an actor stops the scene and looks right into the camera (at the viewer), indirectly telling us that they are aware of the existence of a world outside the film. However, what happens in the case of video essays, commentary videos, or

reaction videos, where the creator is supposed to interact with the audience by looking into the camera the entire time and addressing us directly? In this case, the fourth wall might be broken by changing the shot (see the following subsection).

We should now see how this is done in the written text, more precisely in the case of Caitlin Doughty's creative nonfiction. I will focus on the book Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?, where there are roughly nine hundred uses of the word "you" in more than two hundred pages. We can grasp the importance of addressing the reader in this book and not in the other two because Smoke Gets In Your Eyes (around 600 cases) and From Here to Eternity (around 300 cases) follow a specific storyline, which Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? does not do, and because there are many cases of dialogue, the uses of "you" naturally multiplicate in the latter two and might confuse us in our quest for an answer.

In the written text, things seem clear enough. Doughty wants to build rapport with her readers, help them live the many stories she has to tell and offer them her shoes to walk in for a little while. Some writers differentiate between the use of singular "you" and plural "you," opting for the former (Luke 2014); others disagree with any use of "you" because they might remind readers of blog posts, children's fiction, or self-help books (Gladden 2020). However, there is no denying that a subconscious and covert liaison appears between the two main forces—the author and the reader—contributing to a relationship of trust; the readers have the feeling they are talking to someone who knows them and whom they, in turn, are getting to know through the stories.

Some pertinent examples from Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? are the following:

Example 1:

Oh, hey. It's me, Caitlin. You know, the mortician from the internet. Or that death expert from NPR. Or the weird aunt who gave you a box of cereal and a framed photo of Prince for your birthday. I'm many things to many people. (xiii)

In the "Before We Begin" section, Doughty sets a friendly and intimate tone for the rest of the book, addressing the reader from the very beginning with an informal greeting as if we caught her by surprise. The first time I read it, I pictured her standing up in front of a window, her back turned to us or the imaginary camera we hold up, and she feels our presence and quickly turns toward us with a smile, offering us a greeting and starting her story—the epitome of breaking the fourth wall and acknowledging the presence of the reader. She introduces herself as though we did not already know who she was, allowing us to choose from her many facets: the professional mortician, the cooky friend with odd interests, and the voice leading us through the book.

Example 2:

Here's the scene: you've just watched some internet videos, eaten a delicious slice of pizza, had a heart attack, and keeled over dead. In some ways, the pica is already on its way to digestion. When you chewed the slice, you not only mechanically mashed up the pizza, you also mixed in digestive enzymes from your spit, which start to break down that sauce, crust and cheese. Then you swallowed, your esophagus contracting, which sent that yummy ball of enzyme cheese into your stomach. (115)

In the chapter called "If someone is eating something when they die, does their body digest that food?", Doughty's answer starts with a hypothetical situation—one of many in this book—in which the reader takes the role of a dead person who has just eaten a slice of pizza before a fatal heart attack. She takes us through the entire journey of the food along the digestive system, even if our body is technically dead. There is no other purpose for this other than to help us get used to the idea that we do not only represent the body-as-person but also the body-as-object. The continuous use of "you" dictates the ongoing dialogue between the author and the reader. A covert connection is building up with each page turned, characterized by trust and emotional exchange.

The concept of breaking the fourth wall in storytelling is a fascinating one, as it opens up a new level of meta-awareness for the reader. Acknowledging the narrative's existence and directly addressing the reader creates a sense of interactivity that can be highly engaging. This technique is particularly effective in creative nonfiction, which aims to keep the reader interested and invested in the story. Introducing secondary discourses through the break in the narrative adds depth and complexity to the overall experience, making it all the more satisfying for the reader.

3. Metatextuality Between the Written Text and the Visual Creation

As I mentioned in the previous section, breaking the fourth wall is also a characteristic of visual creations apart from films. On YouTube, for instance, commentary channel creators are always looking into the camera to establish a connection with the viewer—therefore, more subscribers, more traction, and more paid partnerships. However, beyond the financial reason, content creators seek connection, feedback, and appreciation/validation from their viewers. Sometimes, when metatextuality escapes one medium and enters another, it leaves behind traces that can be usually observed if we are familiar with the creator's work in more than one medium. Caitlin Doughty is one example; her written texts and YouTube videos have this in common: reaching out to the reader/viewer.

To understand this better, let us look at the following excerpts from Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? and compare them with some excerpts from her YouTube video

discussing breaking the fourth wall and addressing the reader directly. For the video part, I will try to "translate" in written format what I see and hear in her video.

Example 1:

Written text:

(1a) Don't worry, Snickers McMuffin hadn't been biding his time, glaring at you from behind the couch, waiting for you to take your last breath to be all "Spartans! Tonight, we dine in hell!" (1)

(1b) "Why would my beloved do that?" you ask. Let's keep in mind that, as much as you adore your domesticated meowkins, that sucker is an opportunistic killer that shares 95.6 percent of its DNA with lions. (2)

(1c) Mr. Cuddlesworth is a sweetheart, you say? "He watches TV with me!" No, ma'am, Mr. Cuddlesworth is a predator. (2)

Video and audio transcription:

(1d) 00:00-00:40. [I can see Caitlin Doughty holding a bored cat in her arms. The video is edited using a soft whitish filter. I can hear the song "Warm Kitty, Soft Kitty" sung by a man with a high-pitched voice and a British accent. Suddenly, there is a close-up photo of an angry cat showing its teeth and screeching. I see Doughty again, this time in her office, and she finally speaks.] Have you ever seen your cat staring at you from across the room, perhaps even licking her chops, and wondered, "Would you eat me if you could?." Have you ever gazed at the sweet, smiling pooch at your feet and thought… [Here, the camera angle changes and suddenly, I see her from the perspective of her cat. She looks at the viewer, shakes her head playfully and in a high-pitched tone, she goes on.] Not you, Wishbone; you wouldn't eat Mommy, would you? Would you? [Now the camera returns to Caitlin, who has a serious face.] The answer to both of these questions is yes, yes, they would. [There is a pause and a change of frame (a close-up of her face). She carries on.] If you were dead.

(1e) 04:15-04:21. But wait! [She looks to the left side of the screen; she places her hand near her ear] Did you say something about hamsters, Caitlin? [The shot changes; she looks to the right side of the screen and goes on, in a lower tone]. I didn't, but do you wanna [want to] hear a super creepy hamster story? [A sign showing "Hell, yes" quickly floats on the screen with a whooshing sound and then floats away.]

Addressing the reader is a great way to ensure they are still paying attention to your discourse, similar to a professor "waking up" one of their students in class with a question. We go right back to the text because—in our heads—the author knows we are straying far from what they are saying. And in creative nonfiction, that hardly happens.

Their tone can be reassuring, as in 1a and 1d (when she is holding a cat and stares right into the camera), or sarcastic, as in 1c, calling us "ma'am" and warning us against the dangers of having a carnivorous pet. In discourse, addressing the reader can happen with the help of direct questions or the use of the second person pronoun. In visual format, however, this is obvious. During her videos, she hardly looks anywhere else but at the camera, so directly at the viewer. Even in 1d, when she stares at a tiny version of ourselves (pretending that the viewers are her pet), she continues to look at the camera, still using the second person: "You wouldn't eat mommy, would you?". This pulls us right into the storyworld, and then we find it hard to escape it, especially when our curiosity is met with humor, various visual and sound effects, and sudden changes in the camera angle.

Addressing the reader/viewer directly can also be seen as a way of breaking the fourth wall, which can be described in terms of a plot that "often takes the form of numerous small narratives rather than one overarching one" (Landow 2009: 442). In our case, Doughty seems to split herself in half: one Doughty sticks to the script or the main plot of the text (written or visual), and the other Doughty seems to be alongside us, stopping the first one from time to time to explain something, to react to something she herself says or writes, or to reassure herself of our presence by directly addressing us.

Example 2:

Written text:

(2a) Forensic case studies—did you know that 'forensic veterinarian' is a job?—tend to focus on the destruction patterns of larger dogs. (3)

(2b) Take the story of Rumpelstiltskin the chihuahua. His new owner posted a picture on a message board to show him off, and added some "bonus info" which was that "his [old] owner was dead for a considerable time before anyone noticed and he did eat his human to stay alive." Rumpelstiltskin sounds like a bold little survivalist to me. […] Viva Rumpelstiltskin! (3)

Video and audio transcription:

(2c) 01:07-01:26. Tibetan sky burial has cultural significance and ritual aspects. But beyond that, is your cat or dog eating your dead body [she makes a disgusted grimace] really all that different? [Her grimace turns into a slight smile, and we can expect the answer to be no. Suddenly, there is a change of shot, and we get a close-up of Doughty, who, on a serious note, goes on in a monotonous tone.] California Living Room Burial. Me, eaten by my cats. [Her tone becomes excited. The shot changes again, and we see a photoshopped Caitlin lying on the floor, dead, in a black-and-white photo, one cat seemingly chewing on her nose, another on her leg. A disgusting sound of chewing can be heard in the background. The camera pulls closer and closer to her face.

Then the shot changes again, and we see Doughty in her office, ready to resume her speech.]

(2d) 01:50-02:05. New evidence shows that dogs may be just as likely to eat you [another grimace], not only because they're larger and need more food, but also due to their anxiety. [Doughty pauses.] That's right! [In a serious tone.] Your dog eating your dead body may be similar to you stress-eating a tub of ice cream.

(2e) 02:32-02:39. Upon tasting that blood, instinct kicks in. And they [the dogs] may not be able to control themselves. [There is a change of shot; we get a close-up of Doughty's face on the left and a poster with an angry dog, on which the word "Cujo" is written. Doughty seems slightly disturbed by the information and goes on.] That's very Cujo! [The shot changes again, and we return to her speech.]

(2f) 04:06-04:13. So, while your cat may not eat you right away… [The shot changes. Doughty appears on the left side of the screen, looking to the right. Again, the white filter we notice in the beginning is used.] How sweet! [We go back to the previous shot. She carries on.] The reason they're waiting could just be not caring.

How does metatextuality occur here? In 2a, quite overtly, especially since we also have visual clues about the extra information offered. It looks as if that belonged in a footnote because its content is made up of a personal remark that, in some cases, would have been placed at the bottom of the page, if at all. Here, however, she chooses not to. The reason for this is to check that the connection between her and the readers is still here. By asking us directly, "Did you know that forensic veterinarian is a job?" she tells us that she herself has discovered it quite recently. She also gives us "food for thought" by calling attention to the text again. The linearity of the narrative is broken, but only to have us return to the text again. In excerpt 2b, however, this technique is not so easily spotted. After the short presentation of Rumpelstiltskin's story, one might expect this communication mode to continue. The tone suddenly shifts when Doughty gives her opinion on the chihuahua, calling it a "bold little survivalist," only to show her admiration later on in the form of "Viva Rumpelstiltskin!." Again, this is an interruption in the narrative line. If we were to adopt Landow's theory, we could say that the author halts the flow of the main narrative to open the door to a secondary, smaller narrative. The visual representation would look like this:

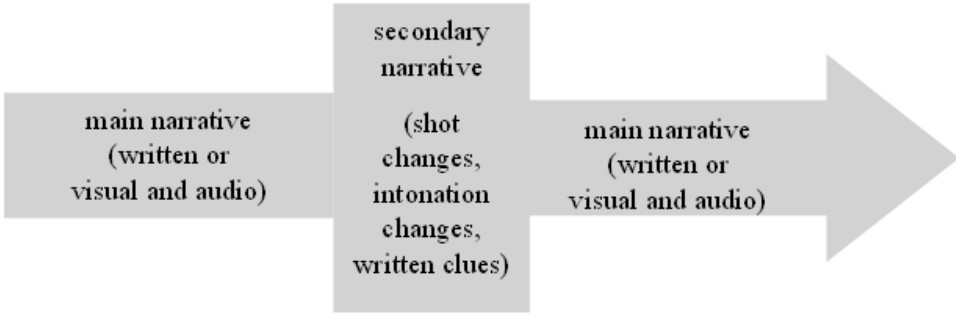

Fig. 11. Visual representation of breaking the fourth wall in Caitlin Doughty's case

In 2c-2f, breaking the fourth wall becomes a little more complicated because it requires a change in both visual and audio elements. The linearity of her speech is broken four times with the use of shot changes, sound effects, and intonation. In 2c, we glimpse her imagining herself being eaten by cats. However, this is done on a humorous note, and because of the poorly photoshopped image and the sound of chewing in the background, the viewer perceives the self-awareness of the "presenter."

Another example comes from one of her videos from 2015 about Body Worlds (the video is called „Body Worlds (& Other Forever Corpses)"; URL in the reference section), an exhibition that uses real donated bodies that are plastinated to be exposed to people in various poses for educational purposes. We will compare a short portion of her video to some fragments from her book Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?, which contains a chapter that specifically discusses Body Worlds. After that, we will see how the two interact and what happens at the junction of these two mediums.

Example 3

Video and audio transcription:

00:00-00:51 [The video begins with a wide shot of Doughty sitting down in front of a bookshelf. You can see a Singer sewing machine and a small white skull in the background, among the books.] If you're a death person… [we suddenly zoom in while suspense instrumental music starts playing in the background. Her voice rapidly changes from friendly to ominous; she raises her eyebrows, and her eyes widen] And if you're not, welcome! We've been waiting. [We zoom out again, and the music stops]. You've heard about the travelling show of preserved plastinated corpses that is Body Worlds. [The shot changes, and we see a photograph of a Body Worlds exhibit portraying a skinless man playing soccer. Three more such examples appear on screen while her voice becomes playful, and every time the shot changes, she says in a sing-song manner: "Body Worlds! Body Worlds! Party time! Excellent!" The shot changes again, and we are back to the wider shot from the very beginning.] Chances are you've even been to see it. Over 40 million people have. In fact, it's the world's most popular touring

attraction, despite op-eds and religious leaders in every country asking: [we zoom in again, the same ominous instrumental music starts playing in the background] What is going to see a disgusting flayed open corpse saying about us as a society? [We zoom out, and the music stops. Doughty starts talking with a friendly voice, in an as-a-matter-of-fact way] What it says about us as a society is that we made a bunch of dead bodies the most popular touring attraction in the world; it says that we're really interested in death and want to see corpses. [She pauses. She looks to the right side of the screen.] That's what it says.

In the book, the chapter we are interested in is called "I went to see the show where dead bodies with no skin play soccer. Can we do that with my body?" (2019: 109-112). The beginning of the chapter is as follows:

Say no more. If it's a fleshless cadaver playing soccer, you're definitely talking about the exhibition Body Worlds. The original Body Worlds, which is a traveling show, opened in Tokyo in 1995, and began touring the United States in 2004. (Keep an eye out, the merry band of corpses may be on their way to your town!) Millions of people have seen these exhibits. Some people absolutely love them and think the exhibits teach us about science, anatomy, and death. Other people call them 'a gruesome Brechtian parody of capitalist excess.' (Yeah, I don't know what that means either, but it sounds bad.) Either way, once you see the pregnant woman complete with cross-section fetus, or a man and woman having sex, or the flayed corpse playing soccer, it's hard to stop wondering about these strange, plastic bodies. (109)

As you noticed in my short transcription above, Doughty uses shot changes when she typically uses parentheses in writing to break the frame. In her creative nonfiction novels, I like picturing a second Doughty in miniature on my shoulder, who stops the "main" Doughty occasionally to make a humorous remark or to clarify something that the "main" one might not have explained that well. After all, this is what metatextuality does (both in writing and multimedia form): it places the reader/viewer between two versions of the same creator; one version must always stick to the script and carry on with the frame or the scene, and one version (who is always aware of the "what" and the "how") seeks to escape the constraints of that frame by reaching out to the individual who happens to be interacting with their creation.

Melissa Bowersock (2015), an award-winning author from Arizona who writes fiction and nonfiction, believes that a single word can catapult the reader out of the scene: "you". Breaking the fourth wall, she writes, works better in nonfiction—and in comedy—than in fiction because the fourth wall is "sacrosanct and generally not to be breached." However, there are exceptions: it can be effective when the narrator is also a character, and they help move the story along, or in comedy when the character breaks the scene to wink at us and make us accomplices to their plan. In creative nonfiction—a

combination between the tools of fiction and the facts of nonfiction—breaking the fourth wall might be seen as something that interrupts the story, but in fact, both Jack Hart (2012) and Lee Gutkind (1997, 2008, 2012), two of the great representatives of creative nonfiction (though sometimes they call it narrative or literary nonfiction), talk about the importance of scenes and the embedded information within; one of the golden rules of creative nonfiction is not to let the reader get bored, and this can be accomplished by creating cracks in the scene and letting some other information seep in.

In the fragment I extracted from the beginning of the chapter about Body Worlds, we have proof of breaking the fourth wall from the beginning: the chapter title is a question that a child asked Doughty after one of her public talks. Her reply is, "Say no more." (We are that child.) The continuous use of the word "you" shows us that Doughty does the equivalent of looking into the camera when filming a video for YouTube. Then, the parentheses create a break, both visually and in our own inner voice—the one we hear in our head when we silently read something—showing us that the author can express a second manifestation, trying to come closer to the reader in an attempt to create a personal connection. The second parentheses act as a reply to an implied question: Doughty supposes that we ask her (or ourselves) what "a gruesome Brechtian parody of capitalist excess" means, and we get the feeling that she is reading our minds and answers a question we never outspokenly asked. To not let this question unanswered, here is a short explanation. Bertolt Brecht was a theatre practitioner in twentieth-century Germany. He believed that an actor ought to present a character in a way that narrates the actions of the said character, only to make the audience aware that they are watching a play, not reality. The term "Brechtian" describes works that are purely made using entertaining devices rather than ones that engage with politics, society, and their mechanism. The effect of this "trick" is brilliant: an intimate connection between the author and the reader who believes to be the only interlocutor in this imagined and friendly conversation.

In the audio-visual extension, this intimate connection is maintained with the help of sustained visual contact. Doughty never looks away from the camera except when she rolls her eyes or looks to one side or the other while changing her tone of voice for comedic effect. Here, breaking the fourth wall is done through the senses of seeing and hearing: the shot changes each time the atmosphere is slightly altered, immediately followed by a sound effect or a change in music. For instance, at the beginning of the video, the shot is wider, and Doughty says, "If you're a death person", then the shot changes (similar to parentheses in written discourse), ominous music starts playing, we zoom in to Doughty's face, her eyes widen, and she continues, "And if you're not, welcome! We've been waiting," then the shot goes back to its initial frame, and the music stops. This small break in the discourse is meant to make all viewers feel included, and those who are already interested in death feel like they are part of a well-defined online

community. At the end of the excerpt that I transcribed, the changing of the shot has a different meaning: in lack of another "character" in the video, Doughty must create the voice of the people disagreeing with Body Worlds, so the music changes and we zoom in once more, while Doughty puts on an affected look and wonders, almost appalled, what kind of society we are if we willingly go to see flayed corpses at an exhibition. The shot changes again, and Doughty answers the question herself, taking advantage of this moment to showcase her death-positive attitude and to make a stand against judgmental people.

4. Conclusions

To break the fourth wall means to reach out from the storyworld into the world of the readers and ask them to trust you as the creator of a story whose truth value they do not know unless you reassure them of it. Breaking the fourth wall is the perfect tool for creative nonfiction writers because it establishes rapport and trust between the two parties. How is it different from metatextuality? I cannot help but involve Schleiermacher in this with his translation theory stating that, as a translator, you can either move the text toward the author or the reader. Similar to this relationship triangle, metatextuality slowly moves toward the author, making sure the text comments upon itself for its own sake, while breaking the fourth wall moves the text toward the readers to assure that they trust the world created by the author by reaching out. Other than that, the two are very similar in the sense that they both go inside in order to look outside. In writing, this can be done with dashes, parentheses, or footnotes. In audio-visual format, this is done by direct eye contact with the camera, by zooming into the face of the speaker, or by a change of tone (sometimes, all three at the same time or a combination of any of them). Sometimes, it might not be done consciously or openly, but the readers always catch glimpses of it and record them with their mind's eyes and ears.

In literature that deals with death acceptance, one of the most crucial aspects is the ability to establish a meaningful connection with the reader. This is particularly true because the subject matter is often one that strikes fear and anxiety in the hearts of many. Caitlin Doughty's writing is a prime example of the power of such a connection. People are much more likely to listen to a friend than a stranger when it comes to matters as sensitive as death and dying. This is because the fear of death is not just a mere obstacle but a profoundly ingrained anxiety that is difficult to overcome. A cold, analytical approach is unlikely to help someone struggling with this fear, but a warm and friendly voice can go a long way in providing comfort and support. That is precisely what breaking the fourth wall achieves in creative nonfiction that deals with death acceptance. Whether the author deliberately uses this technique to advance their agenda or simply

wants to help readers navigate their anxieties, the importance of establishing a connection with readers cannot be overstated.

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