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Biographical note

Between 2016 and 2024, Victoria participated in numerous theatre festivals, residencies, and fellowships, including Schloss Solitude (Stuttgart, Germany), Pontica Magna Fellowship (Bucharest, Romania), and the Gaude Polonia Scholarship (Poland). Her work explores participatory theatre practices, sensory dramaturgy, and the reconstruction of ritual frameworks, with an emphasis on fostering intimacy, trust, and collective storytelling. Victoria continues to engage with participatory and inclusive practices, combining theatrical innovation with social reflection in her artistic research.

THE MEMORIAL DINNER

Victoria Myronyuk

Abstract

“The Memorial Dinner” is a speculative essay that deals with the search for alternative ways of remembering and (re)imagining the past, especially (close) people, events, and relationships. After an unsuccessful attempt to find documentary evidence in archives about the life of her great-grandmother Agatha, the author finally arrives at a spiritual gathering dedicated to the rituals of ancestral knowledge. The ceremonial gathering takes the form of an eclectic commemorative dinner, bringing together participants from different contexts and creating an atmosphere of connection. Quasi-ritual actions experienced during the dinner result in the fusion of the participants’ memories of the deceased and trigger Victoria’s involuntary memories. This brings her closer to recognizing performative power as a productive tool for fusing imagination and memory and for creating sensory images of the past. Finally, the narratives and thoughts that emerge in the relational setting become fragile monuments of our past (or/and deceased), facilitating the liberation of feelings such as rebellion, acceptance, forgiveness, or affection, and building the potential for inner transformation and therefore - relief.

Keywords: memorial dinner, ritualistic performance, involuntary memories, method of remembering

On All Saints’ Day I go to a village in the Belgian mountains, the Ardennes. On my way, the hills begin to roll. Everything is studded with gold, but the vision is not susceptible to the sweet autumn spleen. I have the feeling that the landscapes are hiding something. American flags over the fields remind us of the blood of the soldiers, but there are no cemeteries or memorials to be seen. The horizons are densely covered with green and yellow veils, as if they had been intact since prehistoric times. But have the wounds of past battles been sealed and healed by the nets of subterranean mycelium?

Bored with observing the landscapes, I dive back into my Instagram stories from the visit to Creutzwald, the town where my great-grandmother Agatha was probably born.

- The view of the city of Metz from the roof of the Pompidou Museum.
- I walk down the street with my Berber friend and he plays a Hutsul bird-shaped pipe that I gave him for his birthday. He says he is calling the spirit of my ancestor to help me make peace with her.
- The lighted candle in memory of Agatha in the cathedral of Metz.
- Flickering trees outside the car window with my writing on it: "Going to Creutzwald".
- Selfie at the Creutzwald administration before my request for information about Agatha's birth.
- I share my disappointment in a video after the officials found no evidence of her birth in the Centennial Metrical Books.
- Beautiful modernist floral ornaments on a house in Creutzwald.
- An overgrown path in the forest with growing honeysuckle. There is my writing on it: "The path to the former coal mine where Agatha's parents worked."
- A red brick factory building with no windows. There are huge rusty gates with a banner "La Houve".
- A stained-glass of the local church with Saint Mary holding Christ.
- I tell in a video that this image made me think that maybe Agatha was not officially registered as a newborn in this town because her parents considered themselves temporary workers and did not plan to stay. So, they might have thought it wasn't important.
- I stand on the bridge and watch huge fish in the spring. They swim over each other, forming black crosses.

Suddenly I remembered that I had read somewhere about the name Creutzwald - it comes from German and means "cross in the forest". I ask my Blablacar driver if he has heard anything about this cross. He replies that there are only legends about it and that no one has ever seen it.

"You know, the story of this cross is like my futile search for my great-grandmother's life story: lots of legends and no facts," I sigh. "I came to Creutzwald to see if I could find any proof of her birth here... And it was the last hope to get a real brick in the sand fortress of her life that I have been building for several years... And it fell."

"Why?" the driver asks, looking at me through the mirror.

“Because I didn’t find anything... And, you see, I don’t know how to explain it, but I have this strong inner feeling that the fate of my great-grandmother Agatha, full of constant displacements, and my precarious wanderings as an artist have common roots. When I consider the fates of other women in my family who were constantly looking for a safe home... It seems that we are all repeating a pattern... So, by finding and visiting Agatha’s birthplace, I hoped to symbolically honor her and thus complete this endless transgenerational journey.”

“I see. I can’t say anything about your family’s history, but getting back to the cross... I just remembered that my mother once told me that there was a small group of older women in Creutzwald who used to dress up nicely once a year and ‘go to the cross’ with flowers. People say that they actually found some nice places in the woods, made some cross-like flower decorations, and talked to each other. Nothing extraordinary. Now, according to my mother, there is only one woman left in that group, and once she even invited her to go to the cross because she was too old to do it alone and had no one to communicate with. But my mother refused to go because she thought it was too esoteric.

Several cars were already parked near the stone house, and I noticed several other people standing in front of the entrance. As I approached them, I tried to guess how many of them had come the same way: seeing the announcement on Facebook about “The Circle of Rituals. Ancestral Knowledge.” Everyone looks confused and probably quite hungry, since we were asked to abstain from food, sex, and fighting for twelve hours before coming here. However, I cheated and ate a huge kebab on the way.

The door opens and a smiling hostess greets everyone with a hug and shows us the bathroom to wash our hands. The hostess asks us to call her nun Ella.

I am happy to see Ella because we know each other quite well but have not had the opportunity to communicate over the past few years. When I was a student at an institution associated with artistic research, Ella was its co-founder and my tutor. We always had a warm connection and I suspected that we would keep in touch after I graduated, but I couldn’t foresee any of the possible scenarios of this meeting. Now, seeing her as a spiritual guide, I realize that this evolution into a nun has become a kind of continuation of her work in the field of performative rituals, but on a deeper level of self-consciousness, I suppose.

After we wash our hands, Ella invites us into the salon, which is furnished with DIY furniture. In the center is a table covered with a black tablecloth with images of various human bones. Ribs, shins, collarbones, shoulder blades, hands, and feet look scattered across the fabric, while in the center of the composition are huge crown-like pelvic bones. In its hole, five tall candles dimly light the salon, emitting a pleasant smell of beeswax. On the table are also eight large glasses and two jars with a red substance. Ella, dressed in a beautiful white vintage blouse, sits at the piano in the corner of the room and begins to play a melancholy tune. The participants slowly gather around her in deadly silence.

“Welcome to the memorial dinner!” The host announces solemnly while playing the piano. “I am very happy to open my home and my heart to you. Tonight, we will work on feelings of loss and/or the need to let go of certain things/people for the sake of our personal growth and transformation.”

Ella stops playing and walks to the seat at the top of the table, gesturing for us to stand around it.

“We will intend to create an environment of connection with the deceased: loved ones, enemies, ancestors, focusing your attention on healing generational wounds and getting in tune with the world around you. And there is an important message! This empty seat next to me is left for the person who has passed away. Tonight, I would like you to invite someone from your ancestors to this place, someone you would like to thank, someone you would like to say goodbye to, or someone you’d like to give the finger to, because I know that not all of our relatives were the nicest people. If you didn’t know this person personally, try to imagine him or her in detail, draw a portrait, describe his or her qualities. After all, we will also call them “The One Who Sits There” or, for short, “TOWST. Deal?”

Everyone nods.

“First, let’s close our eyes for a moment and focus on this empty chair. Who would you like to invite to this memorial dinner?” Ella begins to play the singing bowl.

“Who needs the light of your memory to appear at this table?

Who needs the engine of your word to appear at this table?

Who needs the fire of your heart to appear at this table?

Let the TOWST arise from the warmth of men thinking of their loved ones,

Let the TOWST absorb the truth of these walls covered with the attentive ears,

Let the TOWST bring the wisdom of the ancestors accumulated over the years.

North, South, East, West,

Let peace nest among us, and one, two, and three, let our TOWSTs appear.

Now you can slowly open your eyes.”

I open my eyes and notice that the faces of the people around me have softened after this ritual introduction. Ella slowly reaches a hand toward the empty chair with a Thomas the Apostle motion, as if to touch the transparent entities to verify their presence, but abruptly pulls the hand away.

“Just kidding! No need for verification.” The guide smiles sarcastically and immediately changes the subject. “Would any of you like to share your reasons for coming here?”

Everyone hesitates. After a long pause, an older woman, Jane, with beautiful gray hair, spoke briefly about the loss of her husband. She wants to talk about it because grief has become the main meaning of her life and it devastates her. Another woman with a sharp look and a shiny T-shirt wants to bury a relationship with her ex-lover.

“It drowns me,” she continues.

The middle-aged man who introduced himself as Steven wants to get rid of the fear of death that periodically comes over him.

“As soon as I leave the apartment, it immediately begins to follow me,” the man complains. “I go to work, she is at my back, I go to a bar for a beer, she is waiting for me. She’s dressed traditionally, in a long black dress, but she’s also wearing a baseball cap with a buffalo on it. And she says nothing, just looks at me with her dark eyes, sometimes blinking strangely.

The voices of the participants are muffled, as if the TOWSTs sitting at the table could hear their requests and be offended. I also whisper something about Agatha and my destiny: “My great-grandmother was born 200 km from here, or so the legend goes... I wanted to make a certain pilgrimage there... to honor this place and... to complete the cycle through this trip... but I found no proof of her birth there... so I thought I would come here to get some help... because I feel I am repeating a certain pattern in my family...”.

It’s hard for me to continue because of the lack of words and air. *No one asks me for details... What kind of cycle do I mean? Maybe everyone is guessing?* I continue the sentence in my mind. *For some reason, I feel*

that I am going through another circle, carrying other people's bones in my pockets. And every time I try to get rid of the burden, I put my hands in the pockets and feel their weight, their rough texture and sharp shapes... but I can do nothing with the burden of their black emptiness that complicates my pace... I want to bury the bones in the ground and plant my own flowers on them.

We sit in silence for a while, while the other two participants, a young guy who looks like a young John Malkovich and a punk girl named Elke, don't feel like sharing anymore.

Ella takes a small velvet bag out of her pocket and shakes its contents, producing a deaf sound of grains.

"I propose to hold a lottery, the results of which will make you all winners." The guide unties the bag and hands it to Elke. "Please take a bean and remember the number on it."

Elke takes out the large black bean with one written on it in Roman style with golden paint. She passes the bag around the table so that everyone can draw their lot. I take the bean with the number five and give it to Steven, who tosses the beans in the bag one more time before picking one. He gets number seven.

"As I said, all of you are lucky people who will get the chance to embrace destiny for the moment and get a little message from your TOWST, so you'll be able to get a hint on how to deal with your problem... how to make peace with whoever you've invited to this table."

1

"So, let's announce the first lucky winner of the Memorial Dinner lottery, and it will be number... one! Please unfold the little message from your TOWST that is in your cup and tell us the news!

Elke doesn't seem excited to be the first, but she takes the piece of paper out of her glass, unfolds it slowly and reads it in her lively Flemish accent:

**"Give me a sip of the drink and pour my land,
and you will be freed from the dead hand."**

"Hm. Interesting." Ella says. "How do you understand it? Keep in mind that 'the dead hand' means the unwanted, lingering influence of the past."

The girl shrugs and reads the message again, trying to decipher the meaning.

"It sounds like blackmail, LOL."

“Do you have any idea why your TOWST is asking you that?”, Ella seems to be quite persistent in getting the interpretation out of Elke.

“No.”

A tense pause hangs in the air. Everyone waits in silence, for it’s clear that there is some meaning in this message for Elke, but she is reluctant to reveal it.

“If you wish, we can leave you out of the lottery,” the guide decides, using a radical instrument.

Elke lowers her eyes and sighs.

“Ok, if you want to hear it so much... Let’s say I was... angry with my grandfather, my TOWST... When he was dying... I didn’t come to say goodbye... even though I loved him so much... I can’t forgive him... even though he regretted it...”

“Does he affect you in any way now?” asks Ella quietly after a minute, trying to embrace the girl with her voice.

“I dream about him quite often. Actually, it’s the same dream..., a nightmare..., where his corpse follows me..., puts his fingers into my wound somewhere here...”, Elke points to her chest. “Do you know what I mean?”

“If you can’t forgive him yet, what would you do as a first step to free yourself from his dead hand?”

“I have no idea... Maybe I would pour everyone here a drink... and my TOWST... and drink together?”, Elke’s voice becomes almost inaudible and I notice that she is crumpling the received paper message in her hands.

“So, I announce Elke as the sommelier for tonight!”, Ella exclaims happily. “You are a person who will irrigate our thirsty land with alcoholic or non-alcoholic rain. Here you have two choices, stewed fruit and wine. Meanwhile, I invite all of you to remember the most intense moment with your TOWST, that is, the moment when its essence would become sensible in your mind and could sprout through the blackness of oblivion.”

Moving from observing Elke’s dance with wine on the table to the fire of candles, I begin to remember April 2016. I arrived in the small Polish village of Vinsko, in the house of Agatha, which I had inherited in a very strange way, almost by lottery. The walls of Agatha’s house were completely covered with mold. It grew from the base of the walls to the ceiling, creating surrealistic patterns. One afternoon, I walked into one of the rooms as the sunlight fell on this beautiful greenish moldy wall, and suddenly I saw my great-grandmother’s face on it. At least, I thought it

was her. Anyway, I got so scared that I ran out into the garden, climbed up the cherry tree, and watched the house for a while to make sure the mold wasn't following me. What if this mold has already gotten into my brain? OMG! What if it has made me isolate myself on that tree? And what if it is growing out of my brain like a fungus, like those zombie ants on the Discovery Channel?

While sitting on that tree, those thoughts, the cherries in my stomach, and the inhaled mold fermented in my body, so for the first time in my life, I decided to make wine. I took the large glass bottles I found around the house, took a bucket of cherries, added some sugar, and buried the future wine in the clay floor of the basement of the house, leaving only a small glass tube on the surface for air to pass through. I don't know why, but I had the feeling that this wine had to stay in the ground. Maybe because it was done in the Caucasus, my grandfather's homeland and the homeland of winemaking. Or maybe because of the origin of the village's name, "Vinsko," which dates back to the Middle Ages, when the place was surrounded by many vineyards. All in all, this wine-making ritual seemed to be quite fruitful for producing wine with extraordinary healing properties against family amnesia, capable of healing transgenerational wounds.

So, I left the house for several months, and when I returned, I discovered something unexpected. It turned out that my need for symbolic anti-amnesic healing had been superseded by the more urgent needs of several of my alcoholic neighbors. I was told that one of the intruders who drank the wine died soon after, and I hoped it was not because of the "extraordinary properties" of my wine. But what if it really worked and I could have brought back the story of Agatha? What if her figure had become more real in my mind than the moldy portrait on the wall? I try to drown this thought in the cup of wine Elke has just poured for me. Anyway, both wines were fermented by the same mushrooms, right? Will this wine have a similar effect?

My thoughts are continued by the words of Ella.

"The first toast is to our TOWSTs as the culprits of this memorial dinner. May their invisible presence become a container with a favorable microclimate in which the seeds of our memory and imagination will germinate into beautiful trees or mushroom through our brains!"

The participants smile and take a sip of wine, looking at the empty chair.

"How is the wine, by the way?" asks Ella.

"It's okay, I hope it has some healing properties too," I express my thoughts publicly.

“What do you mean?”

“I hope it heals my ignorance about my TOWST... You see, I feel that the more I try to develop the past into something tangible, the more it becomes porous and elusive.”

“I understand.” Ella gives me a very comprehensive look. “Let’s see what your message from the TOWST has to say about this.”

5

“Let me consult where your message from the TOWST might be?” The guide closes her eyes and turns to the empty chair as if listening for some clues. “Try looking in your left pocket?”

“Really?” I search my left pocket skeptically and take out some small receipts I have been carrying for months.

“I’m afraid the message from the TOWST must have gotten lost in my trash,” I reply sarcastically, but Ella keeps her eyes closed and frowns.

“What about the right one?”

I politely look in my right pocket, but there is nothing there either.

“It must have fallen out,” the guide says before I can answer.

I look around, and on the floor and to the right of me, I notice the small paper folded into a small origami bird.

“Read it out loud, please?” asks Ella with some satisfaction in her voice.

**“Grant me a good word from the grains
of your spiritual wealth and pain.”**

I read the message seriously, as if it were my personal constitution.

“It looks like your TOWST wants a good speech about her? Do you have a good story to tell?” asks Ella, looking at me with her olive eyes.

“I’m not sure it will contain any intellectual riches, but these are, shall we say, my first memories of my TOWST, great-grandmother Agatha.” I pause for a moment to gather the various images in my head into a clear narrative. “I remember the early 1990s in Ukraine, a very difficult time after the collapse of the Soviet Union... My parents used to drive from the small Ukrainian village where we lived to my great-grandmother Agatha’s village in Poland with a car full of goods that could be sold at the local market. Even though I was able to spend the whole summer there, I couldn’t remember Agatha’s face... It was kind of blurry... Instead, I remember her legs very well, they smelled very tasty, or rather... the kitchen where she used to cook smelled very good... It was the smell of fresh bread and... soup... with cabbage... and potatoes...”

"Then there is the next fragment of memory in my head... I am eight years old. I remember clearly the moment when I was at my neighbor's house and my mother called to tell me that Agatha had died. I took a bicycle and, on the way home, I tried hard to squeeze out some kind of regret, but instead I just felt... hunger. But when I got home, my mother was cooking something in the kitchen that felt very familiar to me. I started to eat, and my tears somehow automatically came out of my eyes, because I realized that it was the same dish from Agatha's kitchen..."

I look at one of the ribs on the tablecloth and don't know if I should continue.

"You know, there is a popular saying in the Bible: Jesus turned water into wine, but then Chuck Norris came in and turned that wine into beer," Ella says in an unexpected turn of phrase, and some people appreciate her joke with a heartfelt laugh. "I'm far from being Chuck Norris, but I was also wondering why on earth we have to bring red wine to memorial dinners and not beer? Or cider, for God's sake!"

I start to get angry because the guide who is supposed to facilitate our connection is now doing the opposite, interrupting my sincere story with a stupid joke about Chuck Norris and abandoning me on the way she brought me.

"So, I did some serious scientific research on Google and found out that our ancestors decided that their ancestors liked to drink blood. No kidding! For many centuries they killed people and animals to please their dead relatives. Later, however, this became economically unreasonable, so someone wise decided to trick the deceased by replacing blood with drinks that resembled blood. And it seemed to work! So here is an important ethical question: Do you think that replacing wine with beer will defame us? And what if instead of being sophisticated about our TOWSTs, because only good things are said about dead people, we try to say something... ordinary about them?"

Some people agree with the TOWST suggestion by nodding.

"I brought a bottle of Belgian dark beer, my favorite." Ella grabs a bottle of Leffe from under the table. "And I will give it to the person who dares to tell the cheesy story about his or her TOWST. For the sake of balance, let's bring some common sense into the conversation about the dead!"

"Sorry, but first of all, I didn't bubble my story... and secondly, I haven't finished it yet," I try to bring some justice into this game with the changing rules. "I'm sure my great-grandmother Agatha would not mind beer! And not even for drinking... She used it in her parenting methods.

For example, when she had to take care of me, she would soak my pacifier in beer and I would sleep for hours. My mother was quite amazed by Agatha's superpower for a long time, until one day she revealed that special hangover smell from my mouth..."

"Oh my God..." Leila, a middle-aged woman with piercing eyes, expresses her shock.

"Yes, but then I found out that it was quite a common practice back then," I smile. "But Agatha herself preferred something stronger to drink, vodka or hooch... And I have to tell you the truth, at the end of her life she used it too much... One of the reasons for that was apparently that she was able to make it out of anything: beetroot, rye, wheat, any kind of fruit that grew in the garden... I am sure that in time she would have invented a way to make hooch out of urine and become even greater than Chuck Norris."

The people around me start to giggle. Ella smiles, too, and hands me a bottle of Leffe.

"I drink to you, Agatha! To your pluses and minuses, and to finding my balance between them in remembering you." I take a sip of the dark beer and the pleasant caramel taste fills me with pleasure. I feel how the amorphous face of Agatha, sitting in the empty chair, has slowly blurred into a smile.

3

"And now there is a message for the next winner under the number three." Ella looks at Steven, the man who came to get rid of the fear of death, and shows him two clenched fists. He shudders. "Which hand did your TOWST choose for delivery? Left or right?"

He looks at Ella, pleading for advice, but her face remains cold.

"I think it's the right hand..."

"Are you sure?"

"Well..."

She unclenches her right fist and there is nothing. The man looks confused, as if he has just lost something enormously important.

"It's no big deal, but remember that such messages will always be in the left hand, as it is closer to the heart. Look."

She shows a small piece of paper on her left palm and suggests that he read it.

**“The smell and taste will crack the mundane.
Fill the empty body with the source of life again.”**

“What’s on your mind?” The guide tries to break the man’s stupor with her voice, but he doesn’t seem to respond. “May I try to help you interpret this with a story? It will help to bring some thoughts to the table.”

“Remember in Proust’s ‘Remembrance of Things Past’ there were madeleine cakes? They made the narrator remember a particular situation from his childhood. That is what happened to you, Vicky, when you ate your great-grandmother’s soup.”

I nod in agreement with her statement.

“There is an interesting legend about the origin of the Madeleine cake. People say it comes from Lorraine, in eastern France. In the 1700s, a woman named Madeleine made these cakes from her grandmother’s recipe at a reception given by the Duke of Lorraine, Stanislaw Leszczynski. He liked the cake so much that he began to order it for his other aristocratic parties. Thus, it spread to the tables of the rich in other countries. For today’s commemorative dinner, I thought about the prototype of Madeleine cakes that would help to revive our memories, but of course this dish can’t be universal for everyone. So, like Madeleine, I’ve decided to cook something from my grandmother’s culinary arsenal. Firstly, I want to remember her with this dish, and secondly, I want to spread this dish among people. I hope you like it and include it in your future receptions,” Ella smiles.

“Do you think this story somehow triggered some associations with the message?”

Steven doesn’t look very convinced by Ella’s introduction.

“My TOWST is that this woman with the gray hair in the baseball cap is Buffalo. And I can feel her smelly presence here beside you, Ella.”

“Are you sure it’s her, Steven? Maybe it’s me that stinks!”

He smiles. “Maybe she’s not sitting on the chair next to you, but somewhere in this room, for sure. I think her message made me realize that I should fill my life with more meaning..., more interests, more tastes and smells..., everyday things..., because lately it has been all about her! I’m not living my life because I’m too obsessed with this lady. And the more I see her, the more transparent I become. I suspect that this is also somehow related to my COVID experience... My senses were blocked for some time, and this deepened my feelings of frustration and invisibility. I guess my sticky TOWST wants to help me by giving me a hint on how to avoid becoming another zombie-like creature like her”.

Steven looks around as if waiting for agreement on his interpretations. No one answers, but there is empathy in the air.

"That makes sense," Ella says after a pause, "I propose that you become a medium between the realm of the TOWSTs and our table for this evening, serving us the first dish and thus filling our empty stomachs with life energy. Does that sound like a task for your first day's work?"

"I don't mind. If only the Buffalo Lady would stay here with you."

"She will, but gradually," Ella answers calmly.

0

While Steven serves a soup that looks like blood, Ella wants to show us a trick.

First, she demonstrates her empty arms, then with some quick manipulations a white bean suddenly appears in her open palm, looking like the one from our lottery. Ella covers it again with her fingers and in a second it slides out of her mouth.

"Wow!" exclaims Elke. She hadn't expected such entertaining moments in the evening program.

"So, I want you to show the bean I won in the lottery, and it's the number 0, which is not the message from the TOAST, but an exercise. I will announce it a little bit later. Now I would like to hear some of the culinary memories associated with your TOWSTs. Are there any particular types of food that you associate with him/her?"

Jane, who had been silent most of the evening, suddenly announces: "I can't stand pizza! Especially the 'four cheese' kind. Just the smell of it makes me sick, and then I start crying. You see, we used to order that pizza on Friday nights with my husband, and I used to cover the table with the shiny tablecloth that we bought almost thirty-five years ago on our honeymoon in Italy. And since my husband died... I can't walk past an Italian restaurant on my street without feeling sick to my stomach... I've also given away the tablecloth and redecorated the room... But can you imagine, sometimes the pizza delivery guys ring at my door and get the floor wrong... and I yell at them, "Fuck off!"

"My TOWST is my relationship with my girlfriend..., ex-girlfriend," Leila, dressed in a denim costume, corrected herself. "We broke up last month...actually she left me...and that left a huge black hole in my heart that I try to fill with coffee...tons of coffee. I used to watch my beloved in the morning while she was making this coffee and walking around the apartment in her black silk kimono. She would slowly take milk and butter

out of the refrigerator, then put a beautiful Turkish jezve on the stove and make the best coffee ever out of an ordinary supermarket package. I still can't remember the exact recipe for that morning's coffee, but it was the most delicious experience of my life. Now, when I am alone, I make that coffee every day with the same ingredients, trying to get the same smell and taste, but I fail. I don't know why, but I am sure that once I discover the secret of this recipe, it will call me again.

The stories of Jane and Leila triggered a situation in my memory that highlights another strange connection between me, Agatha, and food. Once I was working in the garden near her old house and a man walked by on the street. Suddenly he stopped in front of me and started talking about Agatha and other members of the circle of village housewives in which Agatha was a leader. As a child, the man had often attended the culinary workshops held at Agatha's house, as his mother was also a member. So he decided to share his memories of the amazingly delicious food the Circle used to prepare for weddings. He also assured me that these women were the best cooks in the region and that I should be proud to have such an ancestor. Then he began to describe each dish in detail, as if I had a duty to carry on the tradition of cooking and also of gathering people around a table, because according to him, today everyone suffers from extreme loneliness. He also told me that Agatha used to have a bunch of pumpkins in her house and would often give them to the neighbors as a symbol of good relations. I took his words to heart and planted some pumpkins. And when I got the first harvest, I decided to bake them with herbs and honey and invite some elderly neighbors for a cup of vodka. Establishing my intimate ritual dedicated to Agatha's circle, her community work, and also the habit of sharing felt joyful. But after the stories of the women at the memorial dinner, I began to doubt whether I should follow Agatha's pattern. Should I bury the performative habits of the past in the ground along with the invisible bones I still carry?

"Before we start eating, I offer you a little cannibalistic exercise," Ella says with a mischievous smile, "and I promise no one will get hurt. You may know that some anthropological studies suggest that in prehistoric times there was a ritual of eating the flesh of the defeated enemy... It was said to give the victors qualities such as wisdom and power. What happens when we try to eat this dish with the idea of our TOWST? I don't mean imagining that we're eating his body specifically, because that might end badly, but I'm suggesting that we consume some kind of his trait with this liquid that would benefit your life today."

“What feature would you eat to alleviate your suffering and internal protest?

What strength would you eat to heal your wounds and become stronger?

What ability would you eat to step over the abyss and land on stable ground?”

“I also ask all of you, except Steven, to move away from the European focus on the smell and taste of the food and instead pay attention to the sensation you get after eating the food. What does it do to your body and mind? How do you feel inside?”

“Finally, I also ask you to eat this dish in silence so that you can concentrate on the process of eating.

The red liquid tastes unpleasant. It’s sweet and sour at the same time, as if someone decided to mix cherries and mushrooms in a soup. I try not to focus on the taste. I swallow the warm substance and feel it gently enter my body, bringing me back to the garden near Agatha’s house. I sit on the cherry tree and spit the stones onto the ground, trying to anticipate where they will fall in the grass. I realize that the question of their survival is also a lottery and will only succeed if many other elements of the ecosystem are involved in the process. If a cherry pit falls into the perfect spot in the grass with the perfect microclimate, if it is not swallowed by the squirrels, if the rain provides it with enough moisture, if the blind living wires of the mycelium in the soil locate it and saturate it with nutrients, it will eventually sprout.

Strangely, this single cherry pit is connected to everything around it, and its fate depends on the synchronization of many sources. For example, the roots of this cherry tree that I am sitting on are somehow connecting with the mold spores from the wall of Agatha’s house through the fungal rhizomes..., the spores that I inhaled with the air.... ... these micro-compounds will settle in my intestines and perhaps become the first fungi to decompose my body when I die, turning my flesh into soil... Then, in turn, the endless network of mycelium will connect my remains to the bodies of other living and non-living creatures through its endings: The saliva of a neighbor who spat out a cherry pit, the bones of my great-grandmother from the local cemetery and with greenish mold on the walls of her house. In the end, all our remains, wrapped in mycelium, will shine underground like a starry sky..., like neurons in our

brain..., communicating, announcing danger, uniting in alliances with the microorganisms, plants, trees, thus connecting everything to everything....

The last spoonful of soup melts in my mouth, provoking the thought that our memories are like this cherry pit. They can also win the lottery, the potential to sprout, but they need the whole bunch of synchronizations, and probably the most important one is the connection with the underground mycelium wires that supply the nutrients and help the cherry pit to take root. What are these nutrients? How do you make it germinate?

2

"It's said that 90 percent of the world's conflicts happen because people are hungry!" Ella starts the next round with the internet meme. "So what do you feel now that you have eaten your ancestor? Have you gained any new feelings, sensations, perhaps abilities?"

The people around the table look at each other skeptically. Only one young man, who looks like a young John Malkovich, keeps his eyes closed and remains a concentrated face, as if he's examining the inner change.

"Let's try this on our winner number two. Have you received a message from the TOWST, Joshua?" Ella raises her voice to be heard. "Do you feel any changes?"

Joshua nods, but makes no further movement. Ella approaches him and whistles in his ear. Eventually, he gets up as well and they both move towards the bedroom, leaving us frustrated.

Maybe Ella decided to help John Malkovich decipher the symbols of the message on her bed, LOL? I start to visualize the possible pictures of this process in my head, but suddenly he comes back with the golden wireless microphone for karaoke. Has he acquired a singing talent from his TOWST and we're going to have a party now? However, he announces that he gained a new ability right after eating the dish, and now he can talk to the dead. He will demonstrate this by interviewing himself in a past life.

"I should say that this person will only come here if you applaud well," Joshua's voice becomes almost alien through the cheap microphone, and I feel the goose skin covering my body.

Everyone begins to applaud uncertainly, looking at Joshua like a newborn freak. He continues, "No, that's not a proper welcome for the deceased! Come on, don't keep the precious guest waiting!" He turns on a cheerful melody of Balkan turbo-folk and begins to move artistically. This relaxes us a bit and we decide to support Now-Joshua and Then-Joshua with some loud applause.

Suddenly a crouching figure with an ugly face and old-fashioned clothes enters the salon from the bedroom. As this figure slowly approaches the astonished people at the table, I realize that this is Ella in a mask, dressed in a woman's clothing. The mask has a long, crooked nose, an elongated chin, and dark lips, looking like a cross between an old woman and death. The figure slowly walks over to the table and takes the place of the TOWSTs, leaving everyone guessing whether this was planned or improvised.

Staring at Joshua, the woman drinks a glass of wine in one gulp. He seems hesitant to answer the first question.

"Who are you?" he finally asks the woman into the microphone. Then he hands it to the woman-death, which makes the whole thing even more ridiculous. Through the tiny hole in the mask, I can see Ella's lips moving. She lifts her head to the ceiling and squeezes out some strange sounds from her larynx that resemble the scream of the dying beast. It takes several minutes before her voice begins to wheeze and crack.

**"Fulfill my empty holes in the wall of sense,
do not take my paths, they are all insane,"**

Joshua recites the lines into the microphone as if translating Ella's sounds. She slowly puts her arm on his shoulder and he closes his eyes again, concentrating on the transmission of information. There is an electric pause in the room as everyone watches the miracle of mind reading.

"I killed someone," Joshua shocks us with the news, "I lived in the Caucasus and had to flee my home because of the "blood revenge". The man I knew insulted my sister, meaning he didn't want to marry her, and I had to do it. I knew that after this "family duty" I would have to leave my home and change my name, but I had no choice. The hardest thing was when I went to his house to kill him, he greeted me saying, 'Don't worry, I will always live with you, brother...' Sorry, I feel pain in my chest."

Joshua opens his eyes and swallows his cup of red wine. His face looks terrified, acknowledging the "truth" about his past life, while everyone around him becomes more and more confused by the whole performative situation. Joshua walks away from the table and Ella, in the role of Woman Death, slowly follows.

The people at the table remain silent, realizing that it will take some time to digest this mini-performance. Elke and I sneak out into the yard

to have a cigarette, suspecting that smoking isn't welcome during the memorial dinner. We inhale the first puff with orgasmic faces and stand for a while looking at the dark shapes of the autumn forest.

"It is not comparable to Joshua's pain, but I also feel this burden in my chest... as if I were repeating the 'crazy paths' of my ancestor," I try to improve the atmosphere with my "lighter" story. "I know it sounds very esoteric, but it's very real... You know, I'm busy with performing art projects and I'm always in the way..., jumping from residency to residency..., being a typical representative of a new precarious social class..."

"I feel your pain," Elke says. "I'm a graphic designer."

"Sister!" I continue. "So when I started discovering Agatha's life, I realized that my nomadic lifestyle in the arts and my great-grandmother's constant relocations have similar patterns, even though she lived most of her life under socialism and I am forced to move by the capitalist system of artistic consumption..."

I inhale more smoke to make it easier for myself to verbalize the "truth".

"How do you know she was an artist?"

"Well, a kind of interdisciplinary one, as we would call her now... When I started collecting some legends about her life, I got a valuable piece of the puzzle from a 94-year-old neighbor. She told me a story about how Agatha built a wooden cart with her own hands, without any nails. Then, together with other women from her circle, they drove it to a neighboring town to present a singing program for the festival. They also dressed in traditional costumes and baked huge festival breads decorated with long wheat patterns. In the end, they won the grand prize and a trip to a resort. This old woman even showed me the photo from her collection of a group of women sitting on the sheaves of hay in front of the big wagon. They were drinking lemonade and talking... And there was only one woman with a piercing look staring at the camera... I understood just by that look that it was Agatha."

"Do you have that photo somewhere?"

"Yes, it's on my Instagram."

"I'd love to see it!"

I pull out my phone and search for the photo I took that day among the hundreds of other everyday things.

"She looks really stiff... But her face also expresses a little joy, don't you think?"

"Maybe. At that moment, I knew almost nothing about her to understand her mood... Just some random stories that I could not put together. After

that story, I became interested in Agatha's carpentry skills, but everyone in the village kept repeating that it was an ordinary skill of a person from 'the East'. Then my grandmother Emilia, Agatha's daughter, suggested that she might have learned it in Siberia, since she had been sent there in 1947 for... What is the English word for "wasting public money"?

"Defalcation."

"Defalcation? A strange word. I must confess that I didn't expect it. In those days, exile to Siberia for nationalism was a common thing for some, but the discovery that your ancestor was not a victim of political repression, but possibly an ordinary thief, destroyed the romantic elements in Agatha's story."

"I can somehow understand what you felt," Elke says, as if continuing my story by lowering her eyes. "I got a knife in my heart when I discovered that my loving and best grandfather in the world was a Nazi who wrote letters praising the number of dead Jews in the Dachau concentration camp."

"I am sorry to hear that, Elke," I say almost inaudibly, not expecting to hear such a confession. I hug her and feel her tears fall on my chest.

"What's going on here?" Ella's voice suddenly makes us shudder.

"Well, we're just exchanging some information about our TOWSTs," I answer.

"How is Joshua?", Elke asks, wiping away her tears.

"He will need some time to process the knowledge he has received, but at least now he has recognized the source of his burden and is on his way to relief. So, would you like to join us for the rest of the memorial dinner?" asks Ella politely.

"Yeah, sure. I just need a moment to finish a story," I answer.

Ella leaves and Elke and I sit looking at the raindrops on the roses.

"So what was the result of your search for Agatha?"

"The result was the realization of failure." I laugh. "I started to look for some facts about her exile in Siberia, wrote various requests to archives in Ukraine to learn more details of this story. No luck. All the institutions said that they had no information about Agata Kowalewska's case. Then I tried to find any evidence of her forced labor in Germany during the Second World War, since I also found out that she was taken as an Osterbeiter, the worker from the East... and again the German Red Cross simply sent me Agata's letter from 1991, in which she asked for proof of her three and a half years of work there... and said that the search hadn't progressed since then and they couldn't provide any additional information. Finally,

when I came to her probable place of birth, which is 200 km from here, there were no records of her birth there either..."

"Now I understand why you came here. I think you will find her here... but in a different way". Elke nods enigmatically and invites us back into the salon.

**"Fulfill my empty holes in the wall of sense,
Do not take my paths, they are all insane".**

We enter the salon just as Leila is reading her message from her TOWST. Her reaction is skeptical.

"I already fill the holes of sense with the tons of coffee that make sense to me. But I don't understand whose paths I shouldn't take."

"Maybe you shouldn't follow the path you made for yourself to get your relationships back?", Steven suddenly interjects with his interpretation. "Coffee won't bring them back to life, it might just make you crazier."

"That's bold!", Leila seems shocked by this interference in her private relationship with her ex by a stranger she has known for two hours.

"Sorry if it sounds presumptuous on my part."

"Well, it does."

"I apologize again. I just thought that sometimes it is good to give another perspective to something that is already defined by you, it can open up more options..."

"I'm with you on this, Steven," Ella says. "I understand this message from your TOWST as a clear appeal to bury your relationship and thus bring new senses into building your foundation, which is now filled only with liters of coffee... You would need something solid. What do you think of this scenario?"

"I came here with that scenario! But I'm afraid that if I don't bury these relationships properly, I might exchange coffee for something more serious... which will ruin my life... I'm good at that, you know."

"We'll try to do our best," Ella takes Leila's hand and squeezes it. "But the most important task is yours. Do you promise me that you will work hard to help yourself?"

"I do."

"Elke, as tonight's sommelier, could you make a cup of coffee? And for you, Steven, I have a small task: could you light two candles and put them in the corner of the small table? Jane, please, could you bring a bouquet of pink roses and rosemary from the garden? And you, Vicky, come here and comb Leila's hair."

"Eee..." I look at Leila in astonishment.

"Don't worry, it's not difficult," Ella hands me a golden plastic comb. "Just make her feel relaxed with your movements and try to think of something positive."

I stand up and awkwardly approach Leila, who is getting ready on the chair. For a moment I watch Ella as she instructs everyone to make a quick altar and slowly dip my comb into Leila's short but thick hair, trying to focus on something positive. The more I comb her, the more her dark hair reveals some gray strands that sparkle beautifully in the candlelight.

I remembered one of the funny dialogues I had with a similarly short-haired old woman when we were talking about Agatha, sitting in the village bank. The woman first stared at me for some time, as if I were a ghost, and then asked in a low voice:

"Are you the one who works in the house on Mickiewicz Street?"

"Yes, ma'am. How do you know?"

"Everybody knows! Is it true that you are related to Agatha?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm her great-granddaughter..."

"I know, I was just checking."

"Oh, I see."

"Agatha was a great woman... You know she taught me how to drink vodka?"

"Wow, that's really... cool."

"Don't get me wrong. She was the leader of the women's organization called the 'Circle of Village Housewives' and she used to organize various cooking classes at her house..."

"On how to drink vodka?"

"I see you're funny, aren't you?"

"No idea, ma'am."

"I'll be watching you! So, Agatha's wise advice was not to drink just one cup of alcohol! Do you know why?"

"No idea, ma'am. Why?"

"Because one cup of vodka goes all the way down your leg and you start to feel dizzy and stumble. You always have to drink an even number of cups to balance both legs... And you know what? It really works."

I smile to myself as I remember this dialog and notice how Leila tilts her head towards me and actually leaves it in my palm. Meanwhile, Ella has already taken out a large green silk shawl from the handmade wooden wardrobe and instructed the others to build an improvised altar in the

corner with flowers, herbs, candles and a cup of coffee in the middle. She called Leila and arranged everyone around the altar in a kind of circle of witnesses. Finally, the leader kneels down in front of the altar and pulls Leila next to her, covering herself with this green cloth. We can only hear some of Ella's whispers as she performs over Leila.

"What could be the ritual to fill Agatha's holes in the wall of sense, so that she would not have drunk so much at the end of her life?", the question suddenly arises in my mind. "Would it have worked?"

6

The whole ritual took about thirty minutes and reminded me visually of the confessions I used to make to an Orthodox priest in a village church. And the memory made me shudder. The women finally get up and run out into the yard to stand in the heavy rain for a while. When they come back soaking wet, Ella asks Steven to serve the dessert and Elke to make some herbal tea while they change in the other room. Suddenly Joshua appears in the salon, he starts to help Elke to make the tea with a calm look of "nothing happened".

I go up to Jane for a little chat, since it's obviously her turn to get the last message for tonight from her TOWST, and I notice that she's a little nervous.

"How are you, Jane?"

"A little confused by all this... I'm not sure this is my way, you know..."

"I know. I would also say that it's an experiment for me too... But I think that the miracle of these rituals happens somewhere in the middle between Ella's action and our performance, between memory and imagination..., in the moment of our belief in them..."

Jane smiles sadly, signaling that there is a problem with the last and most important question.

Steven brings a large bowl of chocolate fondue to the table and places it in the middle among the bones. Then he also brings pieces of various fruits and cheeses in strange abstract shapes, as if an inept sculptor had carved them by hand. Tea is served and everyone gathers around the table to wait for Ella, who remains in the kitchen. She enters carrying a black plate with several chocolate eggs, similar to "Kinder Surprise," and places them in front of Jane.

"Take your message," the guide instructs. "It's inside the egg, so you have to break it." "Can I choose anything?"

"Yes, you will choose the right one, don't be afraid."

She makes a concentrated pause before making a choice. Then she takes the one in the middle and breaks it with one hand.

**"Let the sweet melt your bitter knot,
Drain your pain through the globetrotter action."**

Jane recites the message and nods thoughtfully to herself.

"I got the message. It's quite clear..."

"Is it? That's great then. I just want to warn you that this bitter knot will have to be loosened in order to implement the plan, otherwise it will prevent you from doing so."

"Could be."

Strangely enough, nothing happens after this conversation. We calmly string the fruits with the wooden sticks and dip them into the chocolate fondue, exchanging some jokes about the shapes they take after dipping into the thick brown substance. I got a long, swirling piece of coconut that, after being covered in chocolate, resembled a chain of DNA.

"Does it look like a DNA strand to you, too, or is that just my projection?" I ask Elke, who is trying to pull her crooked cheese flower out of the hot chocolate.

"Yes, definitely!" she replies, grabbing a spoon to help a drowning cheese in the bowl.

It is a strange synchronization. I remember the moment when I was completely disappointed to learn anything more about Agatha and decided to take a DNA test. This test was supposed to show me where my ancestors came from, the paths of their migration, and I thought it might somehow reveal the secret of my own permanent nomadic lifestyle. So I sent my DNA sample to Texas, USA, and just a few days ago I finally received an apology from the National Post for losing it... and an offer of compensation. I imagined for a moment how my saliva had been wandering for months through the piles of letters and parcels from unknown senders, without a final destination, and I thought... Wow, it resembles all my efforts in this endless search for Agatha... But what is the appearance of this DNA chain on this table? Should I eat it and symbolically consume the failure of Agatha's research? Does it mean burying the bitter knot of her story in my body? Will it finally close the circle of paths apparently defined by DNA?

"Fuuuuuuuuccck!" exclaims Elke as she places a melted swastika-shaped cheese flower on her plate. It has lost several petals in the hot chocolate and turned into the brown ideological symbol.

"Beautiful sun sign," Ella interjects.

"It's not!" replies Elke, almost screaming. "Should I eat it? What the fuck?!"

"You don't have to eat anything," the guide tries to calm her down. "It's just a dessert, and if you don't want to eat it, just don't."

"I also have something in the shape of a knife," Joshua complains. But all I see is a melon stick with a chocolate covered tip. "What is this message about?"

"Well, I just got a shape of Ireland," Jane adds sarcastically about her torn apple slice. "Does that mean I have to start my journey from there?"

Leila and Steven look at their chocolate fruits in confusion, trying to unravel the mystery of the hidden message.

"Ok... I see that we have arrived at the end," Ella continues quickly. "But to end the memorial dinner, I would like to use this last drink to thank our TOWSTs for being with us tonight. I feel it was important to invite them to our tables to remember their stories. I also feel that their figures have become more convex with each word of our participants, and I hope that the messages from your TOWSTs will bring you on the righteous path to inner peace..."

"And to the TOWSTs: Sorry if there was no scandal or blood as you might have wished for this memorial dinner, not everything was as you wished or remembered, but we reserve the right to rethink the past for a better future".

"So, to your past and our present, in glory for the future."

Ella takes a sip of wine and leaves the salon. In a minute, however, she reappears with several thin mattresses with four long black straps sewn to the sides, which she scatters on the floor. Then she asks each of us to choose a suitable place and lie down, closing our eyes. First, we do a tantric meditation that makes us imagine a golden shining sieve coming down from above, entering our body, gently melting its boundaries, cleansing the dirt on its way, breaking the dark knots that cause discomfort and pain. The sieve moves slowly through our brain, leaving it bright, then it enters our chest, taking away the burden and loosening the tension in our stomach. Finally, it goes down to the pelvis, filling it with warmth. It also relaxes our endings and makes them float. The golden sieve leaves our body and cleanses it down to the last cell. Our body becomes shiny, clean and full of warmth.

I feel how my body is covered with a thick blanket and I am tightened by the straps of the mattress, which immobilize me and create a kind of cocoon that must be reborn in a new creature. Then a kind of mask is placed over my face, blocking my nose from breathing. I start to panic.

“Don’t worry, we will try to go deep now. Trust me.” Ella whispers in my ear. “Try to breathe through your mouth.”

She puts a thin wooden straw in my mouth, which makes breathing more concentrated. I take a deep, slow breath and exhale, repeating the same words in my head:

I am the world, the world is in me,

I am the world, the world is in me,

I am the world, the world is in me...

I listen to the silence, trying to hear any sounds from the neighbors. Instead, there is only dense emptiness and thick time, like chewing gum that stretches endlessly. Darkness begins to materialize in the walls of the abyss that I am sliding down... and I feel the ground melting from the heat of my flesh... I am sinking gently, trying to reach the treasure that sparkles in its blackness and attracts me like a magnet. I can see it from afar and know that it will be able to ignite the spark in my cavity of meaning. It will fill my inner wall of meaning. It’s the intense smell of the coal that guides me, which is extracted from the millennial rocks and hidden from me down there. It is impossible to get there in the usual way: all the tunnels are closed, filled with the impassable layers of tears, sweat, blood and bones. The locks on the entrances are rusted, the names of the workers erased, the documents burned. The deeper I drown towards the largest coal deposit, the more its solid materiality becomes liquid. It begins to float, soaking my body with the black substance through my veins, making it heavier. It pulls me down to the bottom, to the treasure that is now poured into an underground black spring that seeps out in different directions. An unbearable weight pulls me down to the black water that swallows me with its tongues. They speak with the fragments of voices, juggling words in languages unknown to me. One voice cries out in despair while others chant prayers. I start screaming too, trying to get out, reaching my hands for the exit, but instead I can’t move a finger. I start cursing, trying to scare the voices around me, don’t let them take me to the river that will float me to the invisible underground streams and disappear forever. It seems like there is an eternity between me and them and there is nothing that could help.

Suddenly I hear an approaching purr that brings me from the bottom of the abyss to my dark and tight coffin. The purr embraces me with care and love and begins to float with me over the living room where we are lying, over this house, over Belgium. I laugh to myself because I have managed to saddle a purr to fly over the European cities and villages, becoming even cooler than "Alice in Wonderland". This flight makes me feel calm and safe, I can see several lights below, reflecting the continuation of life. In a moment I find myself flying over Agatha's house in Vinsko, and I see an old woman sitting near the entrance. I try to stop, to touch the ground, to hold the past in my hands. But my purring didn't stop, it continued its rhythm, as if in unison with my heartbeat. I take one last look at the house from above, trying my best to imprint the image in my mind and store it somewhere in my chest.

As Ella unties me, I see the first rays of sunlight, which seem to be especially bright this morning. She asks us to do a little meditation together and to keep silence until the end. So when we leave, we all hug each other and I feel, just by touch, how everyone spent the funeral. When Elke comes to me to say goodbye, she asks me with a look if it worked for me. I don't know what to say, I just point my arm to my chest.