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Between Death and Burial

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Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten

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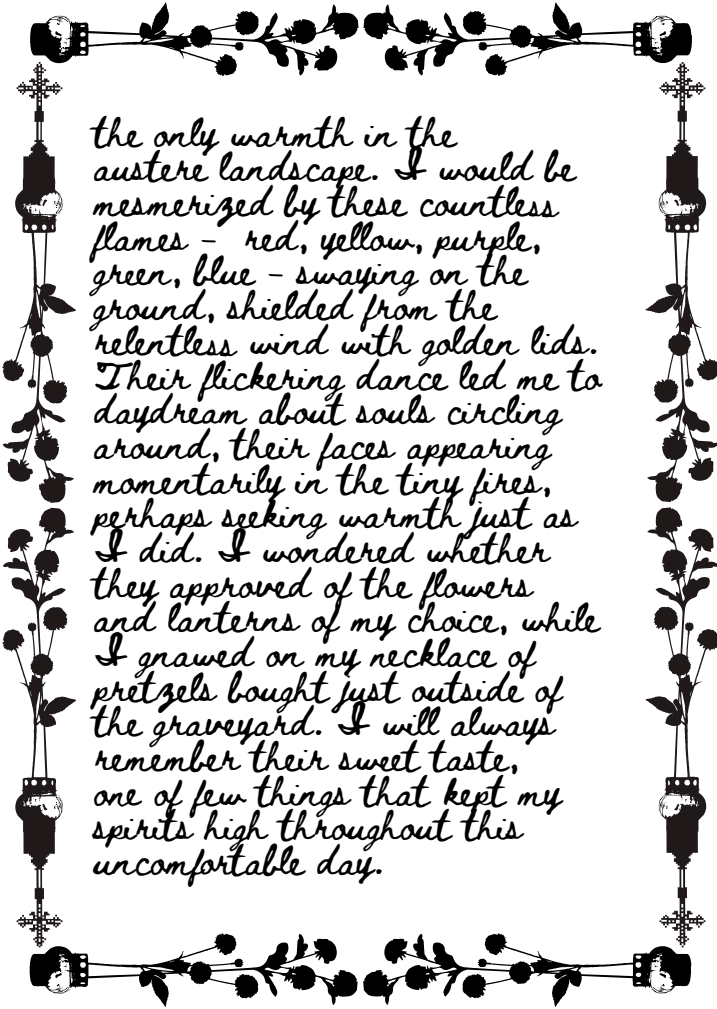
30 October 2024

As All Saints Day draws near, distant memories of my childhood flood back. Arrival of 1st of November year in and out meant wind howling through bare branches, a persistent drizzle somewhere between a fog and rain, and a smell of moist golden leaves rotting on the ground. The sharp scent of paraffin and hot wax completed this sweet, smokey and somehow intoxicating atmosphere. It set a perfectly somber scene for a day of visiting the family members who rest under blankets of earth and marble.

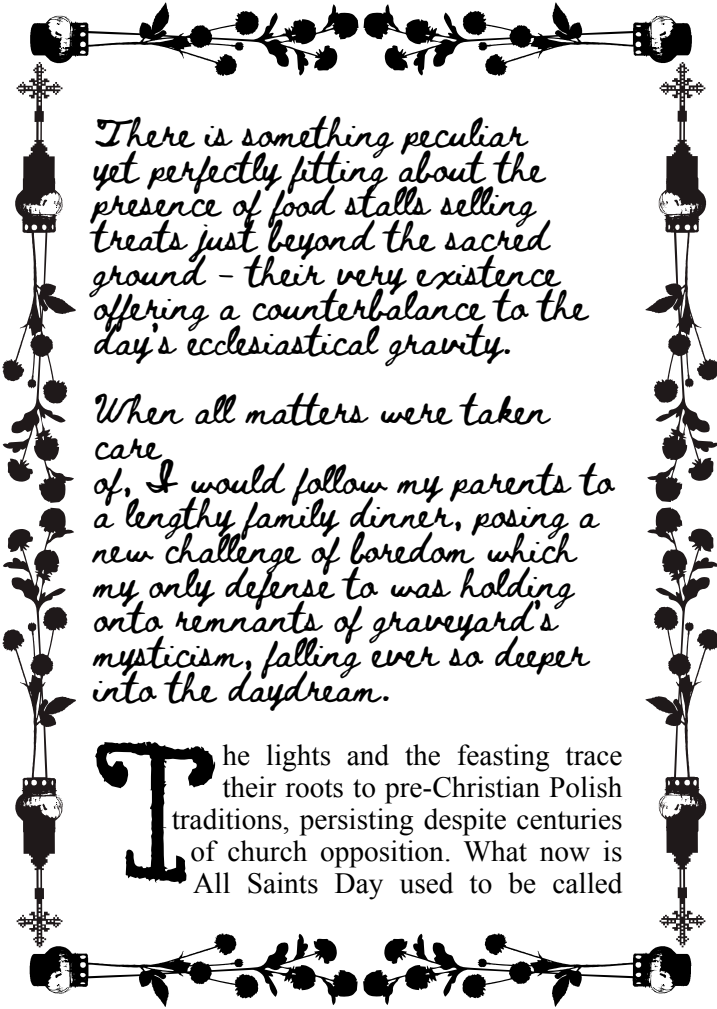
To my young self, All Saints Day represented an exercise in endurance: the tedious journey to far-off cemeteries, shivering

in the bitter cold while my parents tended to gravestones, and engaging in awkward conversations with relatives whose faces were unfamiliar to me. The dead who lay beneath my feet I knew just as well, being too young to feel a personal connection with any of them, or to seek their presence drifting between slabs of old stone. Yet a presence could be felt, in the falling dark when human silhouettes would blur in the distance, reminiscent of ghosts wandering around the headstones. Leaves were whirring in the corners and rustling with excitement.

Colorful glass lanterns which we lit for the departed provided



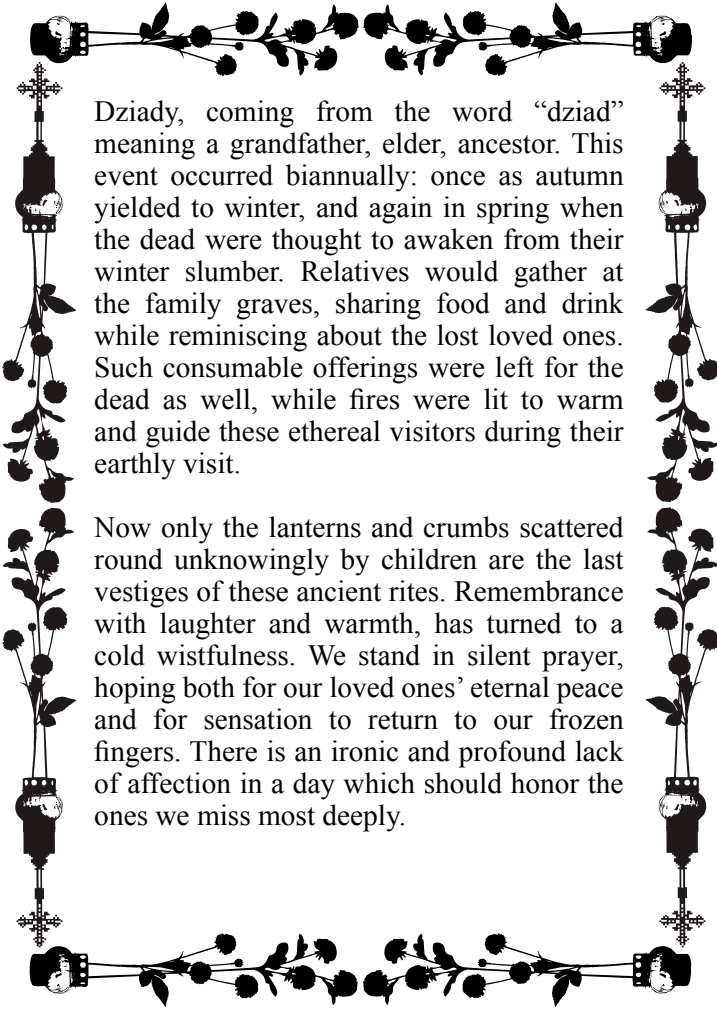
the only warmth in the austere landscape. I would be mesmerized by these countless flames - red, yellow, purple, green, blue - swaying on the ground, shielded from the relentless wind with golden lids. Their flickering dance led me to daydream about souls circling around, their faces appearing momentarily in the tiny fires, perhaps seeking warmth just as I did. I wondered whether they approved of the flowers and lanterns of my choice, while I gnawed on my necklace of pretzels bought just outside of the graveyard. I will always remember their sweet taste, one of few things that kept my spirits high throughout this uncomfortable day.



There is something peculiar yet perfectly fitting about the presence of food stalls selling treats just beyond the sacred ground - their very existence offering a counterbalance to the day's ecclesiastical gravity.

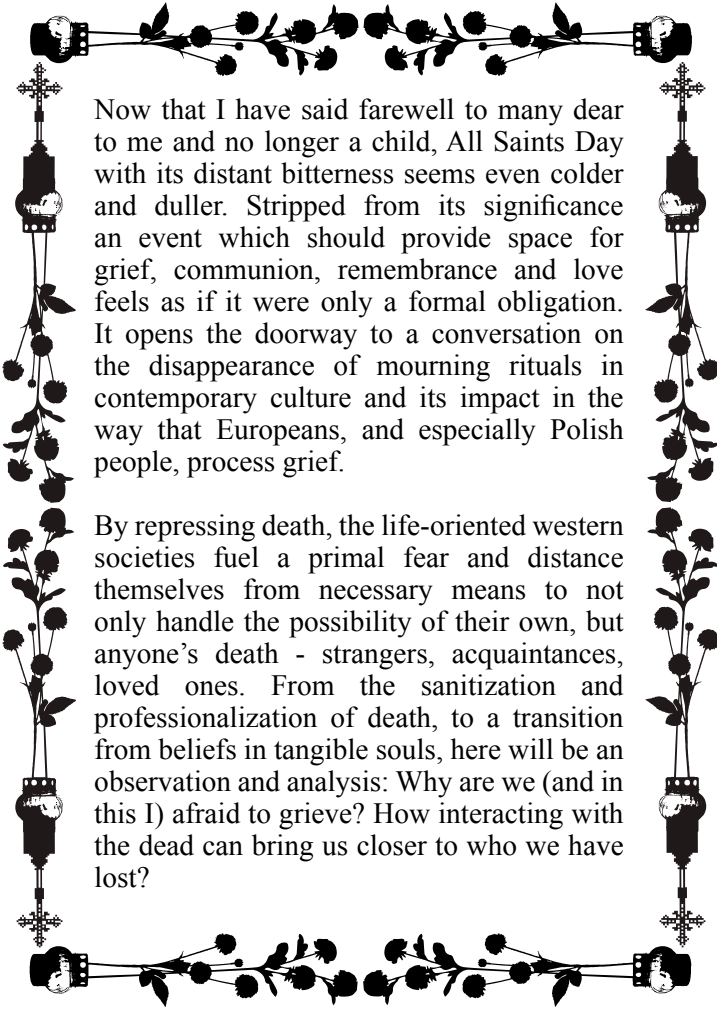
When all matters were taken care of, I would follow my parents to a lengthy family dinner, posing a new challenge of boredom which my only defense to was holding onto remnants of graveyard's mysticism, falling ever so deeper into the daydream.

The lights and the feasting trace their roots to pre-Christian Polish traditions, persisting despite centuries of church opposition. What now is All Saints Day used to be called



Dziady, coming from the word “dziad” meaning a grandfather, elder, ancestor. This event occurred biannually: once as autumn yielded to winter, and again in spring when the dead were thought to awaken from their winter slumber. Relatives would gather at the family graves, sharing food and drink while reminiscing about the lost loved ones. Such consumable offerings were left for the dead as well, while fires were lit to warm and guide these ethereal visitors during their earthly visit.

Now only the lanterns and crumbs scattered round unknowingly by children are the last vestiges of these ancient rites. Remembrance with laughter and warmth, has turned to a cold wistfulness. We stand in silent prayer, hoping both for our loved ones’ eternal peace and for sensation to return to our frozen fingers. There is an ironic and profound lack of affection in a day which should honor the ones we miss most deeply.



Now that I have said farewell to many dear to me and no longer a child, All Saints Day with its distant bitterness seems even colder and duller. Stripped from its significance an event which should provide space for grief, communion, remembrance and love feels as if it were only a formal obligation. It opens the doorway to a conversation on the disappearance of mourning rituals in contemporary culture and its impact in the way that Europeans, and especially Polish people, process grief.

By repressing death, the life-oriented western societies fuel a primal fear and distance themselves from necessary means to not only handle the possibility of their own, but anyone’s death - strangers, acquaintances, loved ones. From the sanitization and professionalization of death, to a transition from beliefs in tangible souls, here will be an observation and analysis: Why are we (and in this I) afraid to grieve? How interacting with the dead can bring us closer to who we have lost?

Through recounts of my own experiences, dressed up in story-like memories, I try to understand why I fear death so terribly much? How has this gradual disappearance of death related rites in the contemporary West (eurocentric, eurocultural) affected the common ability to process grief and maintain meaningful connections with the deceased?

Embrace death, understand grief, let myself - and yourself - mourn.

GNPTGG

What surprised me at first was overhead lamps. Their rows suspended from the hospital ceiling were slightly yellow. Not overpoweringly bright like in the ER, but dimly turned down as the oncology ward fell asleep. In these empty halls with linoleum floors and little wooden benches I could feel an almost comforting atmosphere. Countless doors led to patients in clean beds, dozing off on morphine and blessed with the nurses aware of their aching. I thought how curiously, it felt like stepping into someone's home.

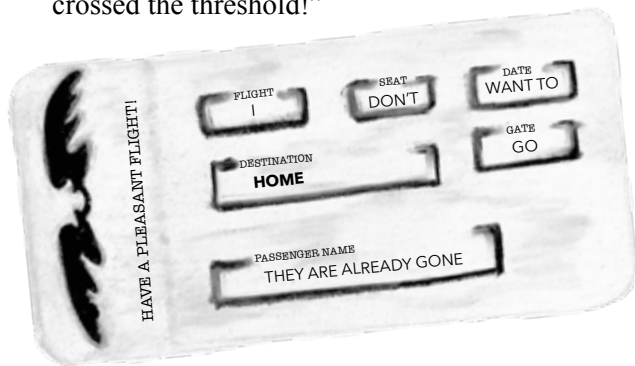
I walked fast and silent behind my father leading us to the single room not long ago occupied by my grandmother, where my mother was already waiting. I saw her sitting on a chair next to the bed

when we entered, and in bed lay a still body - deflated, seemingly heavy yet frail. What was left of my grandmother had the quality of a prop - a wax figure done by a skilled sculptor, but one lacking the capacity to make their art seem alive. I could not see my grandmother in that corpse and it frightened me. It took a delayed flight and a frantic car ride through a blizzard to get to her, but by the time I arrived she was already gone.

Death is apparently a very busy person who doesn't appreciate latecomers. Through the last age the respect people held towards Death has lowered significantly - we push away the possibility of it coming so soon, too soon as most believe, even if it gives us a call a week earlier through the


voices of others. "She is not doing very well, maybe you should come? But you're so busy, and the flights are so expensive, maybe later if she doesn't get better...". How does Death, the psychopomp, feel about being so blatantly ignored? To be the ultimate villain, a cataclysm to overcome, present and feared everywhere yet completely invisible?

I can imagine the resentment and morbid satisfaction it gets from people never making it in time to meet it, until it is their turn. The way that its bare skull, dark robed, scythe-in-hand image slips into my brain, makes me want to talk to it. "I deserve the comfort which it provides for the ones who have crossed the threshold!"



And so I chase it, hoping I can have a word when someone close to me passes away. Or perhaps just one glance at it would dispel the turmoil in my heart.

Or maybe me and Death are like the heroes of a romantic comedy, where we keep chasing one another, just missing each other by minutes in a pursuit, which makes the audience let out heartfelt laughs. As much as I would love a jumpy piano piece to play in the background while I lose my hat and everyone cheers, I sit at Gate 31 waiting calmly for boarding, knowing well I cannot do anything about yet another of my loved ones dying. I will not be there when they pass, and even though I have said my goodbye, I will never have done enough to make them feel loved. I cannot witness it. I want to bare it, but I cannot.





There is a Polish saying, actually a verse of a well known poem titled *Spieszmy się* by father Jan Twardowski¹. Translated, the first verses are:

Let us hurry to love people, they depart so quickly.

Quite overdone in Polish memorial services, the words leave a sense of banality. Only after losing someone the blandness of them does not bother me anymore, but brings simultaneously a sting of truth and a warm embrace of understanding. I find poetry, especially Polish poetry so close to my heart, a fine substitute for affection which should be coming from others in the time of mourning.


As the result of death transforming into a stranger - life expectancy extending on and on, fatality rates falling - most people are clueless as to how to approach a mourner. In a past not so distant, for a century ago, in the country of Poland which had just reclaimed its independence after 123 years of non-




existence, funeral rites and thanatocentric superstitions bore a prominent significance. They were an intrinsic part of a culture which survived not only thanks to a patriotic underground struggle, but the oppressors' familiarity with the importance of funeral customs.

In 1921 the ethnographer Adam Fisher wrote a comprehensive guide to death-related traditions across the Polish folk landscape, simultaneously comparing them to other Slavic and Balkan countries². Reading it has been a sad illustration of how much really has been lost throughout the 20th century.

These traditions surpassed borders, and while varying between nations, the need for them was engraved in the collective mind of Europe. Weakened by the powerful shifts of WW2, Soviet government and at last capitalist free market, Poland has lost a great part of its cultural identity. It reminds me of







the last patches of snow in April, melting rapidly. But nowadays there is no more snow in Poland at any time of year.

Some more cheerful traditions are being proudly upheld and revived - the celebrations. Weddings, name and birth days, Christmas or Easter, though changed and tinted by consumerism, hold strong as the core of festive ceremonies.

All Saints and All Souls day, while still prominent, appear like the distant cousins you see once a year at a family gathering - and usually avoid talking to. Their unfamiliarity brings discomfort and forced politeness, while wishing to go back home to your usual state of affairs. In Poland a funeral or a wake - being rather undesirable topics - are diminishing into an obsolete past.

I observe, that the widely accepted contemporary form of funerals makes the traditional one seem odd, perverse, unclean, and possibly even pagan - which in certain,




nationalist-christian groups in Poland would be considered a grave insult.

It is humorous how traditions have turned into superstitions, which now are treated as beliefs of uneducated people not to be taken seriously. Death as an event in a person's life happens more and more sporadically, and this lowered frequency makes it easy to manipulate its essence by whomever it may be profitable for.

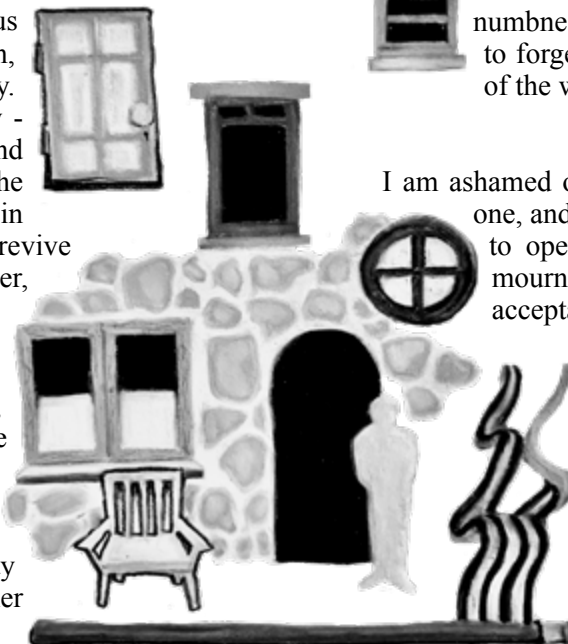
With the help of our - the Polish people, myself included - shame of traditions, and of death coming from our embarrassing lack of knowledge, we let the customs die out.

Condolences are forced, reminiscent of a gross duty needing to be fulfilled, cleaning a dirty sink filled with opaque cold water. Words are just words, but the ones coming from dusty pages of a poetry tome can be so much more sincere and kind, than the vocal cords of an unbothered living.



Somehow being Polish became synonymous with being lonesome and self-sufficient. Community reminds us of a village, and nobody wants to be village-folk anymore. The call of the big city, full of illusory opportunities, promises of individuality and success blinds us to the need for traditions, affection, support and by that community. While my own circle - my family - has been steadily shrinking, I found myself crying longingly for the traditions, which have gone up in smoke. I can still cultivate them, revive these simple things we did together, but I will be the only participant.

Unless I can imagine and feel the presence of the family I have lost, these rituals will be nothing more than a mockery of what they used to be - which turns my stomach. This spiritual, mystical presence which I seek and cannot find may be hidden in rituals which A. Fisher



catalogues. Most of them after all concern paying respect to the soul as it lingers on. Even with scepticism, acknowledging the possibility of a presence at the empty seat of the table changes my perception of death.



Instead of shutting all doors in a numbness, which comes with trying to forget, I could pass the threshold of the warmth of reminiscing.

I am ashamed of not knowing how to open one, and I am ashamed of ever trying to open it as well. Should I only mourn in private? Is it socially acceptable for me to share my pain and my love with the people around me?
Acquaintances?
Friends?
Loved ones?

How does one approach a mourner? A quick and comprehensive guide to not making people feel guilty over their own mourning!

Step one - try not making a face like you smelled something rotten.

Death is not a pleasant topic to talk about, not only for you. Most people who mourn do not particularly enjoy what they are going through either! Think about it, just a few days ago they were probably just like you: happy, clean, unbothered, living gracefully - and now? Well they look like death! Possibly because they have seen it... Death is contagious after all, no matter what they tell you in middle school biology class. Just think, the same thing could happen to you! Or even more embarrassingly, you could be the one who dies.

Imagine all the shame your loved ones would have to go through telling friends and family about YOUR death. So when you happen to be in this awkward situation where you and a mourner are stuck in an elevator together, do not frown. Instead fill yourself with a profound feeling of cold emptiness. Let your hollow insides slightly pull your face, so your smile and eyebrows droop slightly - but not so much to make a frown! - and feel the twinkle of socially demanded happiness flow out, leaving a little bit of misery. This will guarantee a 90% success rate of a look we call "Compassion". If you feel like this does not align with your personal mojo, you can try the active distress approach - let out a deep sigh followed by looking down and swearing, like a cool action film protagonist. Better yet if you have a lit cigarette you can toss to the ground. Though most elevators are no-smoke zones.

Step two - acknowledge the loss.

The least you can do is say "my condolences", "I am So sorry for your loss" if you are feeling more fancy and like acting it up a bit. You could add a "That is terrible!" though they already know that, so seriously why state the obvious. Have some deductive skills please. A comparison to your personal experience of when your great aunt who you did not really like died when you were five may not be the best approach either. You know, death is not real unless it makes you realise a sense of your own mortality! As I said before - it is contagious! All you need to do is acknowledge: someone has died, that someone made the mourner VERY very sad, and that brings us to the next part.

Step three - can you do something for them?

Seriously, it is the least in your power to offer them some kind of help. A shoulder to cry on and get their icky tears all over your new shirt? Maybe make them a cup of tea? Rather impossible when stuck in an elevator but hey, it is the thought that counts. Or perhaps just hold their shaking hand for a moment, if you are in the socially comfortable relation to do so of course. Most mourners will already feel guilty enough for spreading the feeling of death all around them, so humbly they will not ask for much or anything at all. Even though, just remind them that you are there for them in these hard times. Even if you are not, they are unable to tell. Probably. And even if they are, they will not call you out. Probably.

See - you do not have to be sincere at all! All you need are these three steps. Memorizing them will successfully shield you from ever having to contemplate the death of your loved ones or your own. Until it actually happens, naturally.

I give way into my anger again. Seeing in my mind people who took a step back or a sharp breath - a reflection of fear so similar to disgust - when tears rolled off of my face. What they mistook for a heartbreak, or work pressure, or some else relatable life issue was actually grief.

There are very few people who instead of taking a step back immediately take a step forward. Grab your arm, don't hesitate to pat you on the back, or even just sincerely say *I am so sorry* - not in a way that could be used when opening the door of an occupied toilet stall.

I am aware of different ways of processing grief or its canonical five stages³. For me it is the physical contact that brings comfort needed for letting the struggle be seen. Touch unlocks the tenderness of a defenseless child which I am in the face of death, and it lets me be that child, crying as I have scraped my knee seeing my own blood for the first time.

We sat in that single room, with my grandmother's body for an hour before people came in to take it down to the morgue. All this time I could not bring myself to properly look at the remains, alien and unfamiliar, so I looked out the window.

A perfect winter wonderland, snow falling steadily, gently covering everything in sight with a heavy white blanket, not so different from one surrounding the body which slowly lost its inner heat. I then remembered what I was told was one of the last things she said, just a few days earlier.

With significant help from my mother, my grandmother sat up in her bed for the last time and

looked out the same window, to see the same scene I did.

"Oh, it is so beautiful", she whispered faintly. I cannot stop the impression that this might have been the last time she felt something reminiscent of happiness, while the curtain was falling: unstoppable, laden and dark.

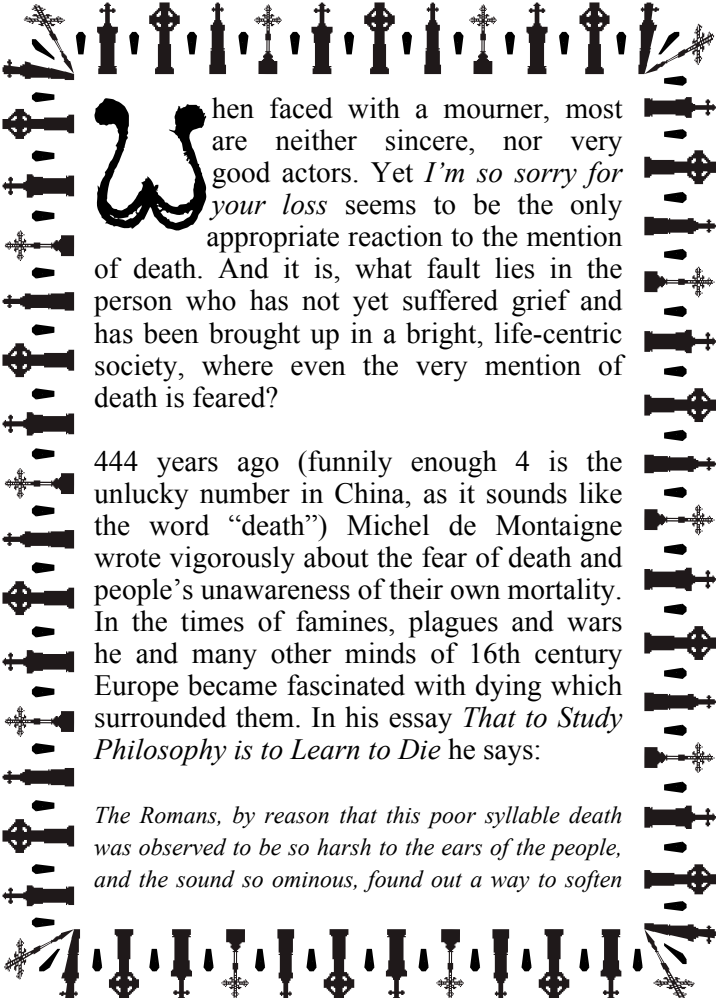
Even though I know they are not, I like to think of these words as her final. Now snow, among many other things, makes me think of her. Snow makes her live on as long as I remember.



Endnotes

1. Paweł Maciejewski, trans., “Ks. Jan Twardowski: ‘Śpieszmy Się’ (‘Let Us Hurry’),” ks. Jan Twardowski: “Śpieszmy się” (“Let us hurry”), accessed January 16, 2025, <http://projektpoezja.blogspot.com/2016/07/ks-jan-twardowski-spieszmy-sie-let-us.html>.
2. Adam (1889-1943) Fischer, *Zwyczajne Pogrzebowe Ludu Polskiego* (Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich Lwów, 1921).
3. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York, New York: Macmillan, 1970).

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When faced with a mourner, most are neither sincere, nor very good actors. Yet *I'm so sorry for your loss* seems to be the only appropriate reaction to the mention of death. And it is, what fault lies in the person who has not yet suffered grief and has been brought up in a bright, life-centric society, where even the very mention of death is feared?

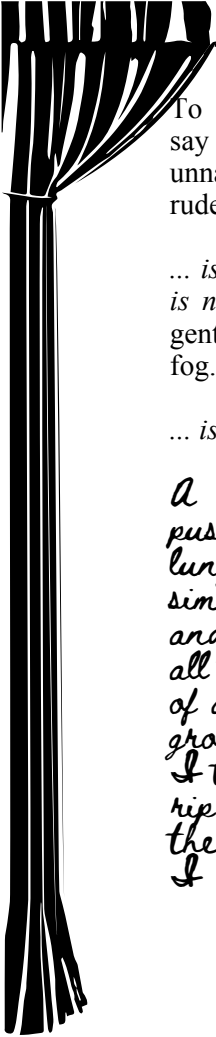
444 years ago (funnily enough 4 is the unlucky number in China, as it sounds like the word "death") Michel de Montaigne wrote vigorously about the fear of death and people's unawareness of their own mortality. In the times of famines, plagues and wars he and many other minds of 16th century Europe became fascinated with dying which surrounded them. In his essay *That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die* he says:

The Romans, by reason that this poor syllable death was observed to be so harsh to the ears of the people, and the sound so ominous, found out a way to soften

and spin it out by a periphrasis, and instead of pronouncing bluntly "such a one is dead," to say, "such a one has lived," or "such a one has ceased to live." For, provided there was any mention of life in the case, though 'twas past, it carried yet some sound of consolation. And from them it is that we have borrowed our expression of "the late Monsieur such a one"¹.

He references times both ancient to us and him, proving the centuries long grandness of a fear so deep that even factual verbalization of it causes a physical stress to the ones who hear and say it. When a person dies, and our grief is fresh, denial feels like closing the curtains to dull a migraine.

This softening Montaigne speaks of is ingrained into social politeness on a scale which makes the word "dead" only appropriate for assessment of tragedy or otherwise publicly acknowledged death. *At Least 21 Dead In Russian Missile Strikes In Ukraine's Odesa, Sumy*²; *Gaza civil defence says 30 dead after Israeli air strike*³; *5 dead after vehicle crashes into tree in Wisconsin*⁴.



To come up to a person in mourning and say *I am sorry that they are dead* not only is unnatural but at this point in time and culture rude as well.

... is not here anymore, ... has gone away, ... is not coming back are definitive, but soft, gentle - looking at a tragedy through a sweet fog.

... is dead

A very tactile ache reappears, pushing all the air out of my lungs as all muscles tense up simultaneously the moment I say and process the word "dead", and all that it implies. With the power of a storm, the fear of realization grows rapidly and endlessly, while I try to compress it so it does not rip me to shreds. Calmly accepting the incomprehensibility of death, I speculate, takes a tremendous

amount of strength, experience, and willingness to consciously travel through the pain it brings. I only feel like a dog on an airplane, in that moment absolutely unwilling to understand, barking frantically. A dog that will bite anyone who tries to calm it, distrustful of everything that moves in its peripheral.

Modern society is characterized by consumerism, hedonism and a youth orientation. This apparently powerful, but existentially anxious, society is psychologically immature and unprepared to confront the reality of life and death.⁵

Perhaps it is envy of blissful unawareness that fuels the rage felt at words of compassion. Are they truly compassionate, or is their sole purpose quieting the discomfort present by introducing death into the conversation? Yet, at some point in our lives we were all unaware of loss, words to be found at a funeral, how



to look at a cold cadaver which a spirit used to reside in.

Psychologically immature if not like the dog, then as the teenager, drunk with their vitality, their first love and first sip of alcohol, living out the glorified fantasy of The Youth sold in a Hollywood dream package, trying to live up to the expectations of their very own blueprints. Where is the space to think of death in this pop, color-filled, bubbling life?

Or perhaps *existentially anxious* as their mother, getting new lip filler to look five years younger and keep her job a while longer. Not having the possibility where her expertise and knowledge secures her a position but depending on her presentability warped out by what it means to *self care* in the 21st century. How can she ever let herself age? How can she ever die? How can she ever stop providing?

Or maybe her *apparently powerful* boss, who has had a happy life, a loving family



and satisfactory success. He is still drunk on life and like a vampire will drink it to the last drop, unsustainably, only to realize the dread he avoided his whole life at the very end. There is no escape, no matter how fully you have lived. Nothing makes up for the magnitude of death.

No escape can be seen on our screens just as well, yet somehow it does not bring people closer to grasping the possibility of their own end. War films, thrillers, horrors, news, video games. Corpses imagined and real can be seen all around in our daily visual stimuli. Gently they are leading to fiction and reality blurring, resulting in a desensitization of death - a comprehensive lack of its gravity.

It has never been so unreal as in the 21st century north-west, where wars and genocides only happen on-screen in places deemed oriental. Where tons of neatly packed slabs of meat lay in hipermarket freezers while tons of other meat wait in a factory, looking into the distance with warm brown eyes and



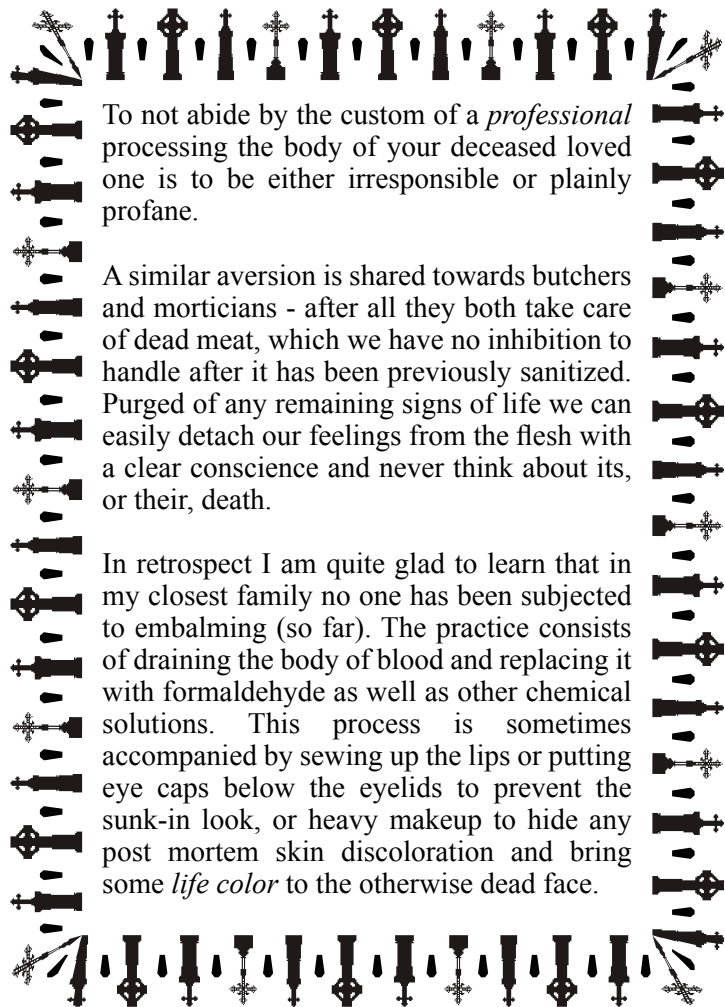
breathing slowly. The general public does not, maybe even should not think of how, when and where death happens for as long as feasible, as it is not beneficial to the world's economy. Many markets are powered by bloodshed and suffering, but for how many of them death itself is the source of profit?



The funerary homes as we know them are fairly young - popularization of the embalming practices in the 19th century called for professional embalmers to open up establishments, where they can prepare the dead for pre-burial viewings⁶. They have inherited the roles of undertakers and of the family in complete arrangement of the body and funeral.

Currently funeral homes often are made up of a team of specialists, some handling the embalming, others the make up (or rather characterization), while another handles communication with clients. The multifunctionality of funeral homes and the services they provide for monetary gain, among other qualities, qualifies them as a business in a capitalistic setting - among businesses of which death is a propeller.

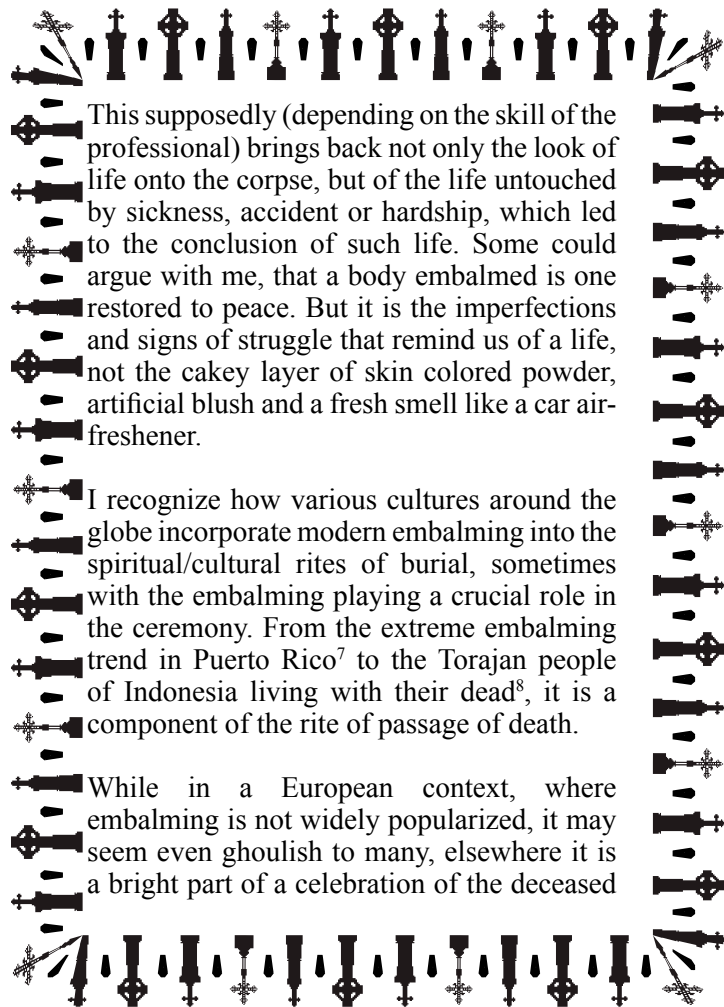
In the grand history of humanity they are so new, yet even to the Polish people they already feel like more than tradition - a necessity, with the weight comparable to law.



To not abide by the custom of a *professional* processing the body of your deceased loved one is to be either irresponsible or plainly profane.

A similar aversion is shared towards butchers and morticians - after all they both take care of dead meat, which we have no inhibition to handle after it has been previously sanitized. Purged of any remaining signs of life we can easily detach our feelings from the flesh with a clear conscience and never think about its, or their, death.

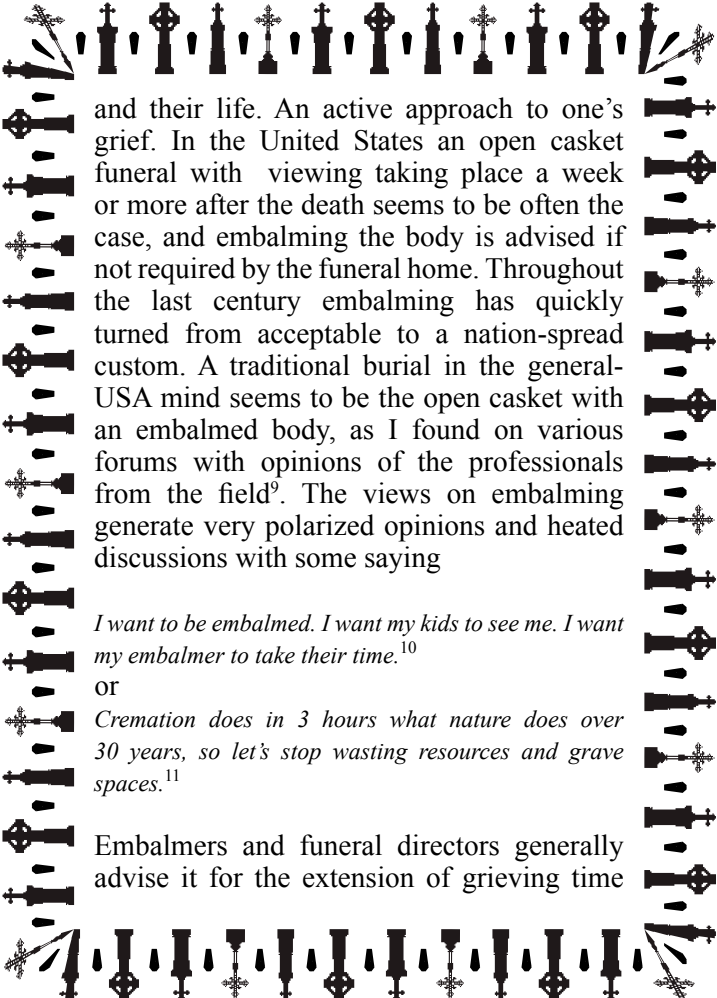
In retrospect I am quite glad to learn that in my closest family no one has been subjected to embalming (so far). The practice consists of draining the body of blood and replacing it with formaldehyde as well as other chemical solutions. This process is sometimes accompanied by sewing up the lips or putting eye caps below the eyelids to prevent the sunk-in look, or heavy makeup to hide any post mortem skin discoloration and bring some *life color* to the otherwise dead face.



This supposedly (depending on the skill of the professional) brings back not only the look of life onto the corpse, but of the life untouched by sickness, accident or hardship, which led to the conclusion of such life. Some could argue with me, that a body embalmed is one restored to peace. But it is the imperfections and signs of struggle that remind us of a life, not the cakey layer of skin colored powder, artificial blush and a fresh smell like a car air-freshener.

I recognize how various cultures around the globe incorporate modern embalming into the spiritual/cultural rites of burial, sometimes with the embalming playing a crucial role in the ceremony. From the extreme embalming trend in Puerto Rico⁷ to the Torajan people of Indonesia living with their dead⁸, it is a component of the rite of passage of death.

While in a European context, where embalming is not widely popularized, it may seem even ghoulish to many, elsewhere it is a bright part of a celebration of the deceased



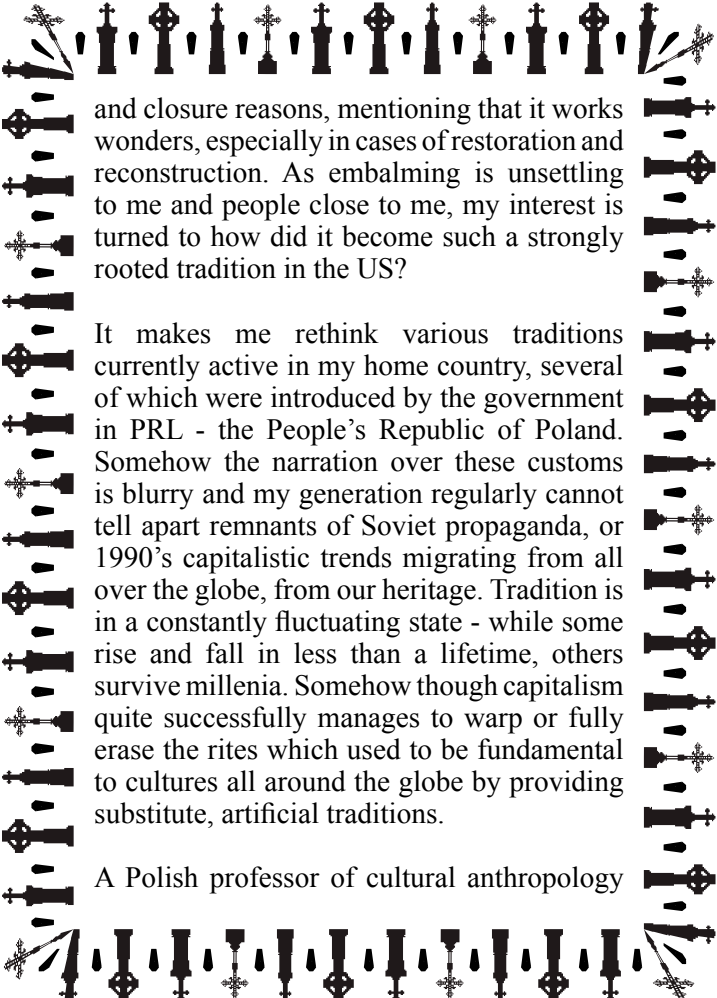
and their life. An active approach to one's grief. In the United States an open casket funeral with viewing taking place a week or more after the death seems to be often the case, and embalming the body is advised if not required by the funeral home. Throughout the last century embalming has quickly turned from acceptable to a nation-spread custom. A traditional burial in the general-USA mind seems to be the open casket with an embalmed body, as I found on various forums with opinions of the professionals from the field⁹. The views on embalming generate very polarized opinions and heated discussions with some saying

*I want to be embalmed. I want my kids to see me. I want my embalmer to take their time.*¹⁰

or

*Cremation does in 3 hours what nature does over 30 years, so let's stop wasting resources and grave spaces.*¹¹

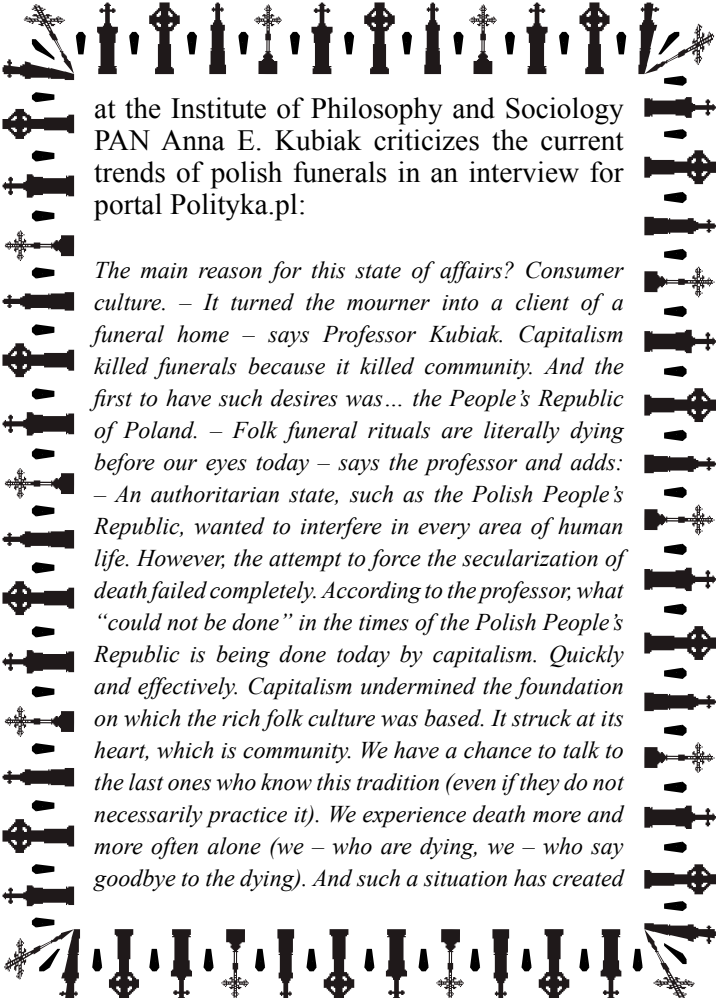
Embalmers and funeral directors generally advise it for the extension of grieving time



and closure reasons, mentioning that it works wonders, especially in cases of restoration and reconstruction. As embalming is unsettling to me and people close to me, my interest is turned to how did it become such a strongly rooted tradition in the US?

It makes me rethink various traditions currently active in my home country, several of which were introduced by the government in PRL - the People's Republic of Poland. Somehow the narration over these customs is blurry and my generation regularly cannot tell apart remnants of Soviet propaganda, or 1990's capitalistic trends migrating from all over the globe, from our heritage. Tradition is in a constantly fluctuating state - while some rise and fall in less than a lifetime, others survive millenia. Somehow though capitalism quite successfully manages to warp or fully erase the rites which used to be fundamental to cultures all around the globe by providing substitute, artificial traditions.

A Polish professor of cultural anthropology



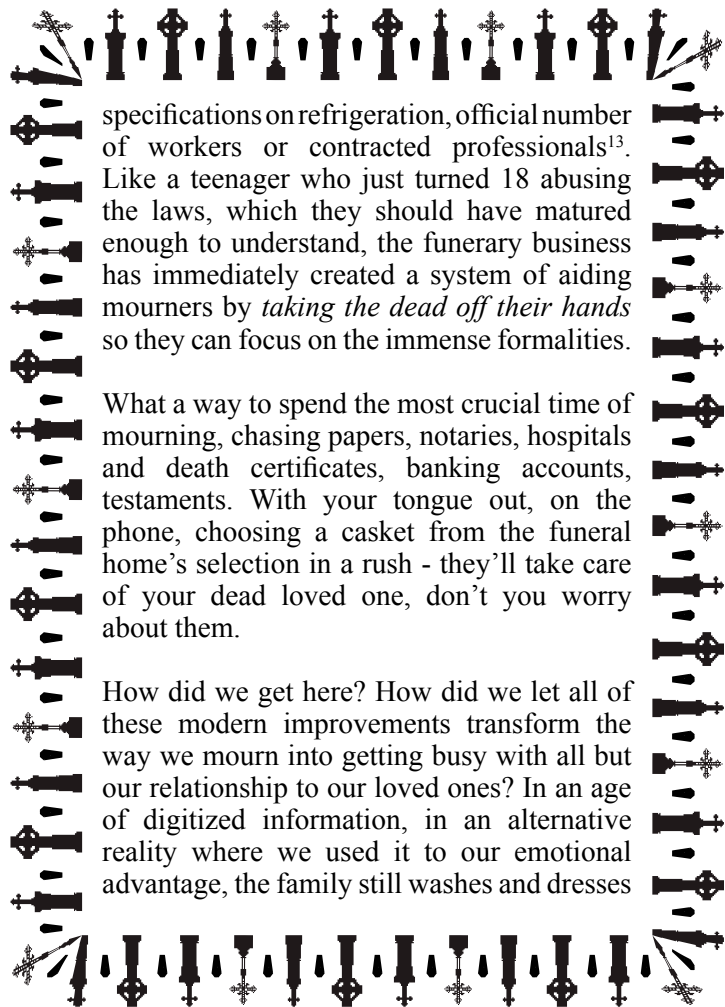
at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology PAN Anna E. Kubiak criticizes the current trends of polish funerals in an interview for portal Polityka.pl:

The main reason for this state of affairs? Consumer culture. – It turned the mourner into a client of a funeral home – says Professor Kubiak. Capitalism killed funerals because it killed community. And the first to have such desires was... the People's Republic of Poland. – Folk funeral rituals are literally dying before our eyes today – says the professor and adds: – An authoritarian state, such as the Polish People's Republic, wanted to interfere in every area of human life. However, the attempt to force the secularization of death failed completely. According to the professor, what "could not be done" in the times of the Polish People's Republic is being done today by capitalism. Quickly and effectively. Capitalism undermined the foundation on which the rich folk culture was based. It struck at its heart, which is community. We have a chance to talk to the last ones who know this tradition (even if they do not necessarily practice it). We experience death more and more often alone (we – who are dying, we – who say goodbye to the dying). And such a situation has created

opportunities for funeral homes and companies. And it is they (this is not a judgment, but a statement of fact) that dictate new traditions and customs.¹²

The second half of 1980's was a revolutionary time for Poland marked by the coming end of USSR, full polish independence, full disarray of the polish economy with mass disappearing of polish-owned businesses, an uncontrollable flood of american influences and chinese products. Every business sector has simultaneously perished and bloomed anew, stained by infinitely wider selection of goods, a possibility of choice, rampant corruption and a western freedom - as well when it comes to the ways we get buried. It was the time when funeral services were no longer provided by the communist state but could be neatly taken over by a multitude of private businesses, all legal yet uncontrollable.

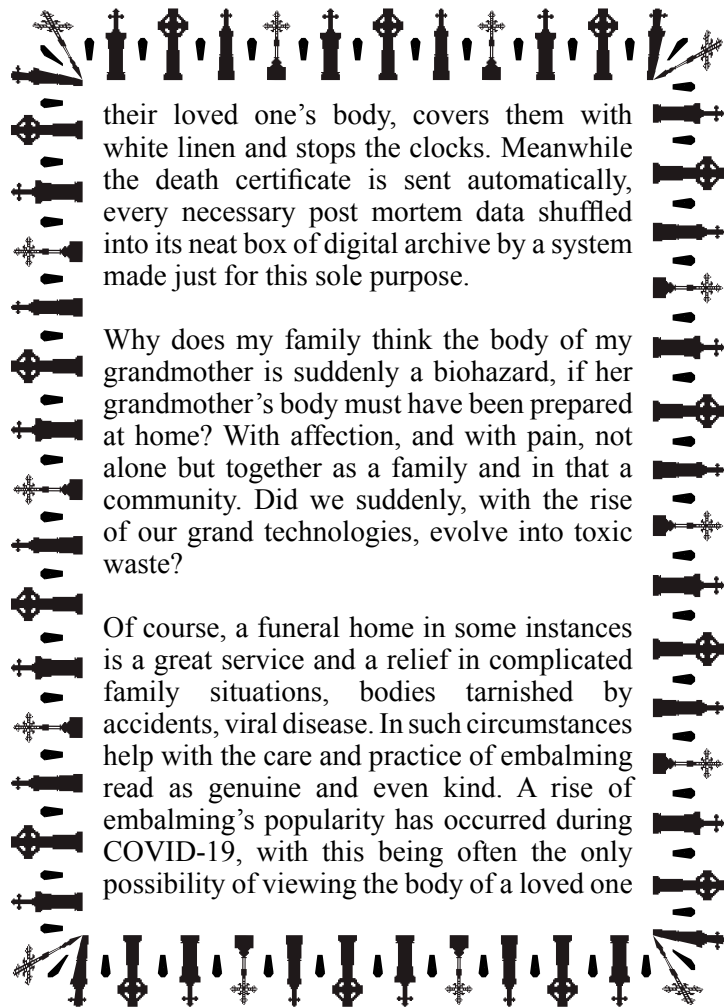
The latest funerary and burial regulations in the polish law come from the 1930's making it surprisingly easy to open a funeral home: no



specifications on refrigeration, official number of workers or contracted professionals¹³. Like a teenager who just turned 18 abusing the laws, which they should have matured enough to understand, the funerary business has immediately created a system of aiding mourners by *taking the dead off their hands* so they can focus on the immense formalities.

What a way to spend the most crucial time of mourning, chasing papers, notaries, hospitals and death certificates, banking accounts, testaments. With your tongue out, on the phone, choosing a casket from the funeral home's selection in a rush - they'll take care of your dead loved one, don't you worry about them.

How did we get here? How did we let all of these modern improvements transform the way we mourn into getting busy with all but our relationship to our loved ones? In an age of digitized information, in an alternative reality where we used it to our emotional advantage, the family still washes and dresses



their loved one's body, covers them with white linen and stops the clocks. Meanwhile the death certificate is sent automatically, every necessary post mortem data shuffled into its neat box of digital archive by a system made just for this sole purpose.

Why does my family think the body of my grandmother is suddenly a biohazard, if her grandmother's body must have been prepared at home? With affection, and with pain, not alone but together as a family and in that a community. Did we suddenly, with the rise of our grand technologies, evolve into toxic waste?

Of course, a funeral home in some instances is a great service and a relief in complicated family situations, bodies tarnished by accidents, viral disease. In such circumstances help with the care and practice of embalming read as genuine and even kind. A rise of embalming's popularity has occurred during COVID-19, with this being often the only possibility of viewing the body of a loved one

or preserving it for long enough to perform the burial. As death toll rose dramatically, refrigerated spaces for bodies quickly ran out, and funeral homes - as well as churches - found themselves overbooked for ceremonies, embalming provided the time and sanitation necessary to give everyone a more or less proper burial.



Many funeral home websites still mention embalming as a COVID-catered service, but with time more and more confidently advertise it as a great way to get this closure, so similar to the USA one, lost in the paperwork and in the post-death haze.

A fascination with the right, American, seemingly liberating culture has been blinding to the Polish, tasting fresh freedom and mimicking a western way of life - unaware of the nature of a purely capitalistic system and its effects on community and culture. As the East brought to mind contempt, the West was worshiped. When gaining freedom, instead of reclaiming our customs, even superstitions, we followed into the setting sun.

A paid service became the substitute for a ritual which I have mentioned earlier. A paid service will never be able to replace lost ages of traditions, formed around the feelings which bound families, friends, neighbors in love and grief with the naturally occurring, still present but denied mysticism of death.

While we believe it did, the long term consequences are brewing under a pot still closed but shaking slightly - almost ready to boil over.

A funeral director will mention how they give you time and space necessary to mourn. How can I mourn when I am sobbing alone in a corner of my room, feeling like the body and spirit of my loved one is simultaneously in someone else's hands and abandoned entirely? Their soul wandering around the cold walls of a foreign room with surgical tools and concrete floors. No open windows, no familiar face watching over them. Stripped of company and of a real tradition.



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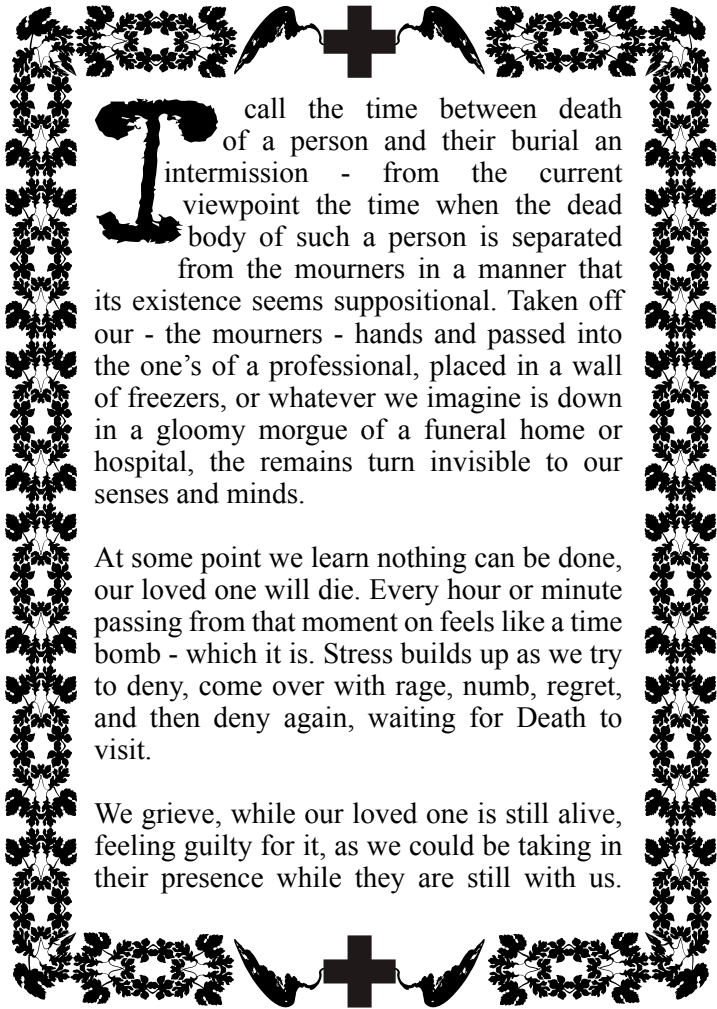
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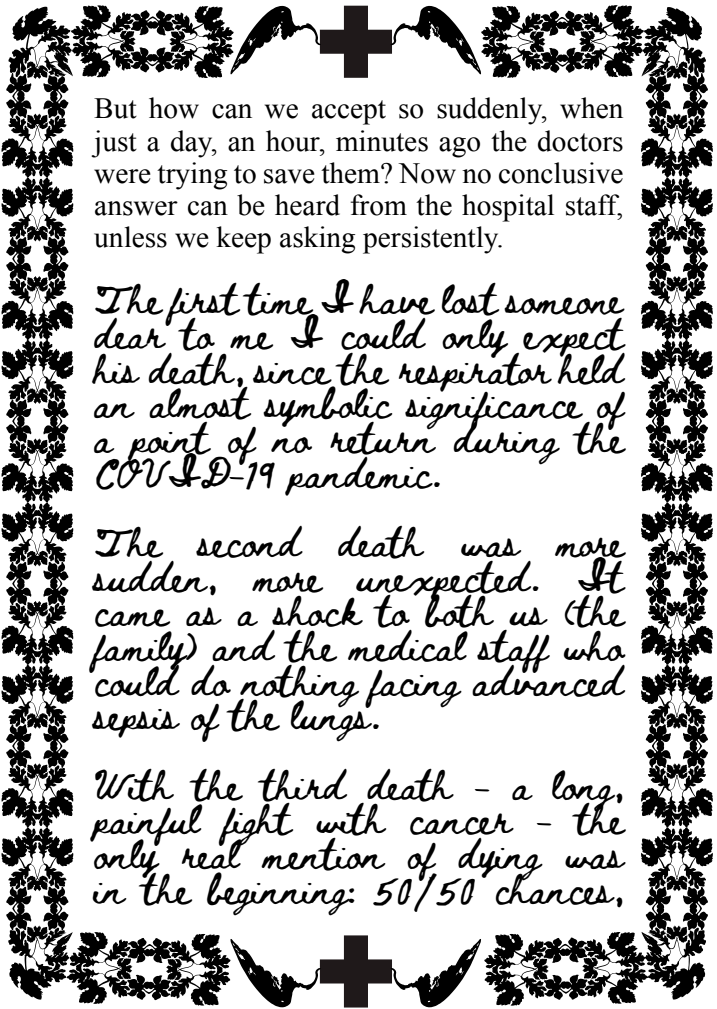
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I call the time between death of a person and their burial an intermission - from the current viewpoint the time when the dead body of such a person is separated from the mourners in a manner that its existence seems suppositional. Taken off our - the mourners - hands and passed into the one's of a professional, placed in a wall of freezers, or whatever we imagine is down in a gloomy morgue of a funeral home or hospital, the remains turn invisible to our senses and minds.

At some point we learn nothing can be done, our loved one will die. Every hour or minute passing from that moment on feels like a time bomb - which it is. Stress builds up as we try to deny, come over with rage, numb, regret, and then deny again, waiting for Death to visit.

We grieve, while our loved one is still alive, feeling guilty for it, as we could be taking in their presence while they are still with us.

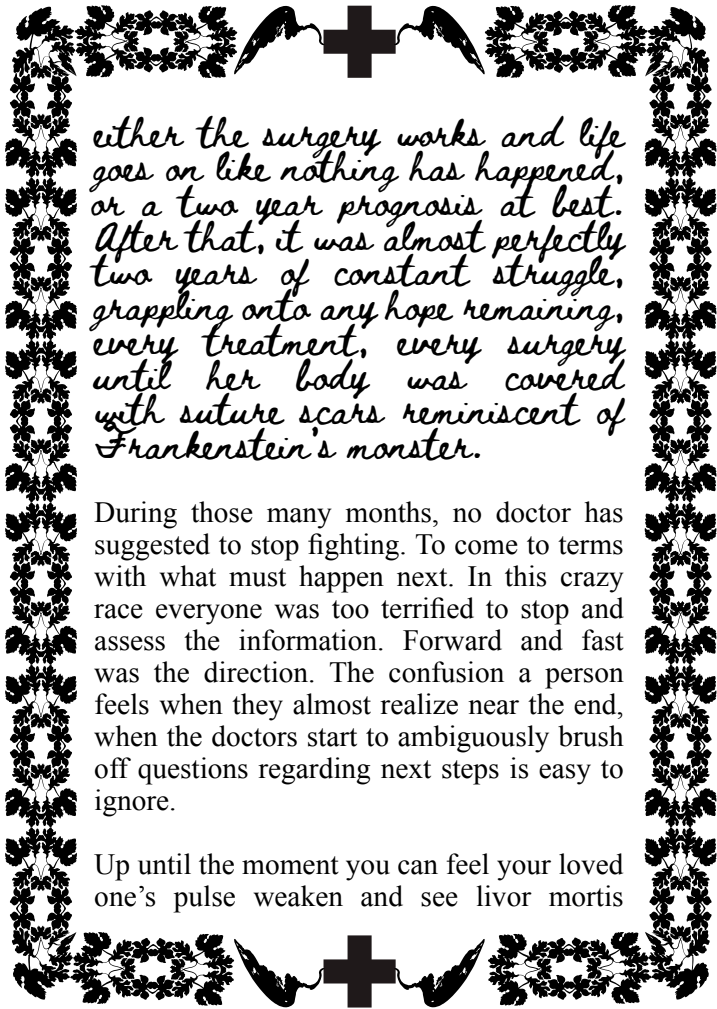


But how can we accept so suddenly, when just a day, an hour, minutes ago the doctors were trying to save them? Now no conclusive answer can be heard from the hospital staff, unless we keep asking persistently.

The first time I have lost someone dear to me I could only expect his death, since the respirator held an almost symbolic significance of a point of no return during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second death was more sudden, more unexpected. It came as a shock to both us (the family) and the medical staff who could do nothing facing advanced sepsis of the lungs.

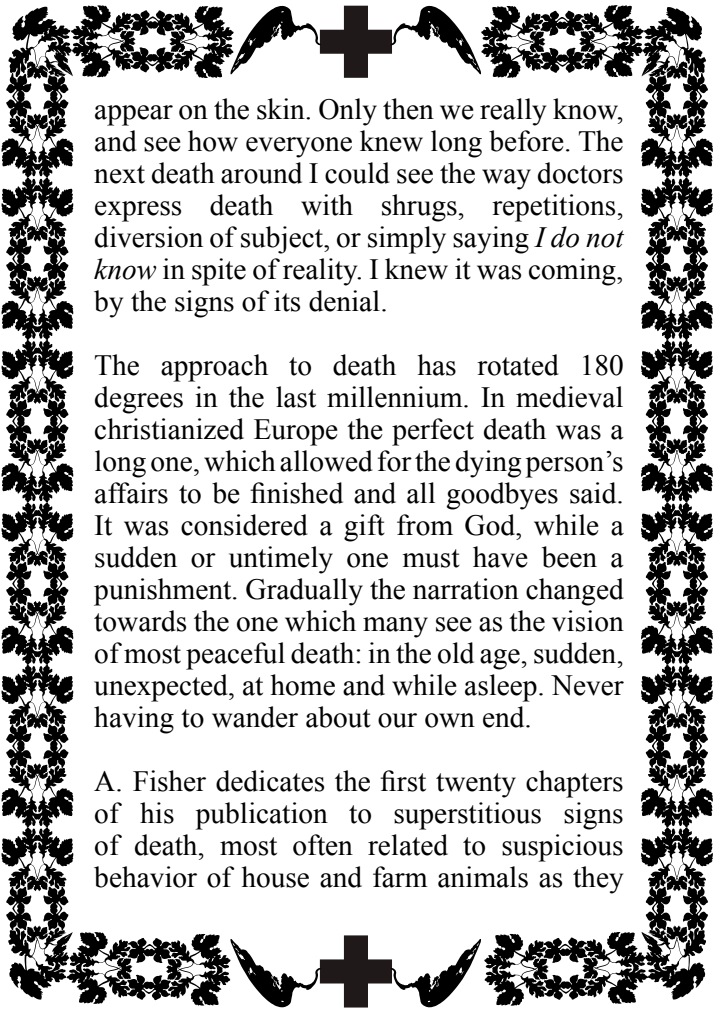
With the third death - a long, painful fight with cancer - the only real mention of dying was in the beginning: 50/50 chances,



either the surgery works and life goes on like nothing has happened, or a two year prognosis at best. After that, it was almost perfectly two years of constant struggle, grappling onto any hope remaining, every treatment, every surgery until her body was covered with suture scars reminiscent of Frankenstein's monster.

During those many months, no doctor has suggested to stop fighting. To come to terms with what must happen next. In this crazy race everyone was too terrified to stop and assess the information. Forward and fast was the direction. The confusion a person feels when they almost realize near the end, when the doctors start to ambiguously brush off questions regarding next steps is easy to ignore.

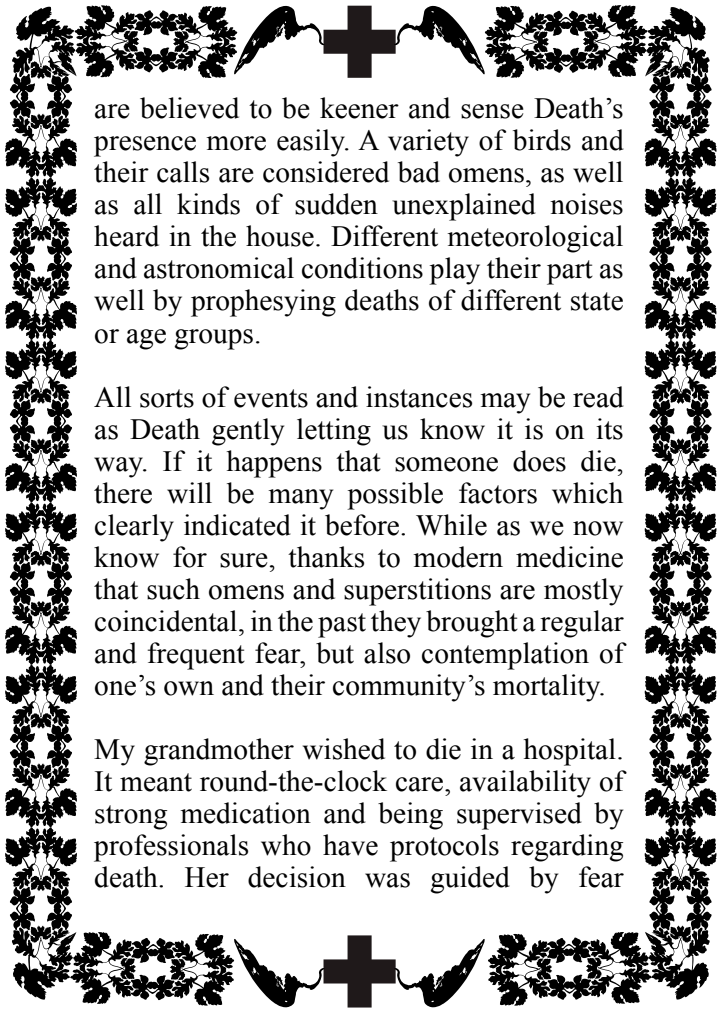
Up until the moment you can feel your loved one's pulse weaken and see livor mortis



appear on the skin. Only then we really know, and see how everyone knew long before. The next death around I could see the way doctors express death with shrugs, repetitions, diversion of subject, or simply saying *I do not know* in spite of reality. I knew it was coming, by the signs of its denial.

The approach to death has rotated 180 degrees in the last millennium. In medieval christianized Europe the perfect death was a long one, which allowed for the dying person's affairs to be finished and all goodbyes said. It was considered a gift from God, while a sudden or untimely one must have been a punishment. Gradually the narration changed towards the one which many see as the vision of most peaceful death: in the old age, sudden, unexpected, at home and while asleep. Never having to wander about our own end.

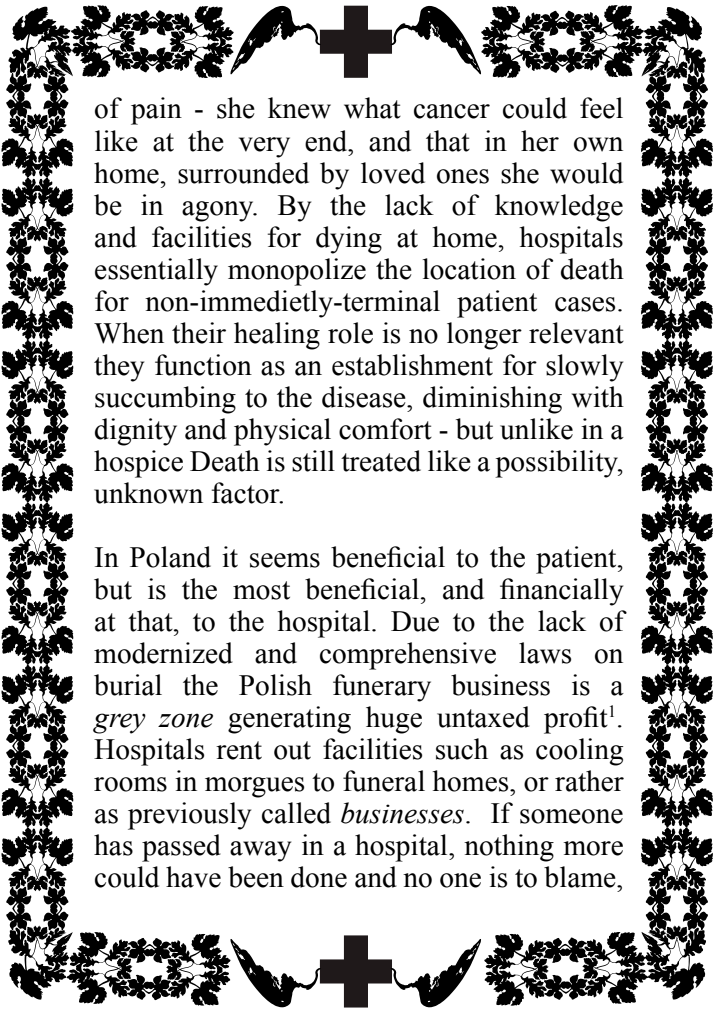
A. Fisher dedicates the first twenty chapters of his publication to superstitious signs of death, most often related to suspicious behavior of house and farm animals as they



are believed to be keener and sense Death's presence more easily. A variety of birds and their calls are considered bad omens, as well as all kinds of sudden unexplained noises heard in the house. Different meteorological and astronomical conditions play their part as well by prophesying deaths of different state or age groups.

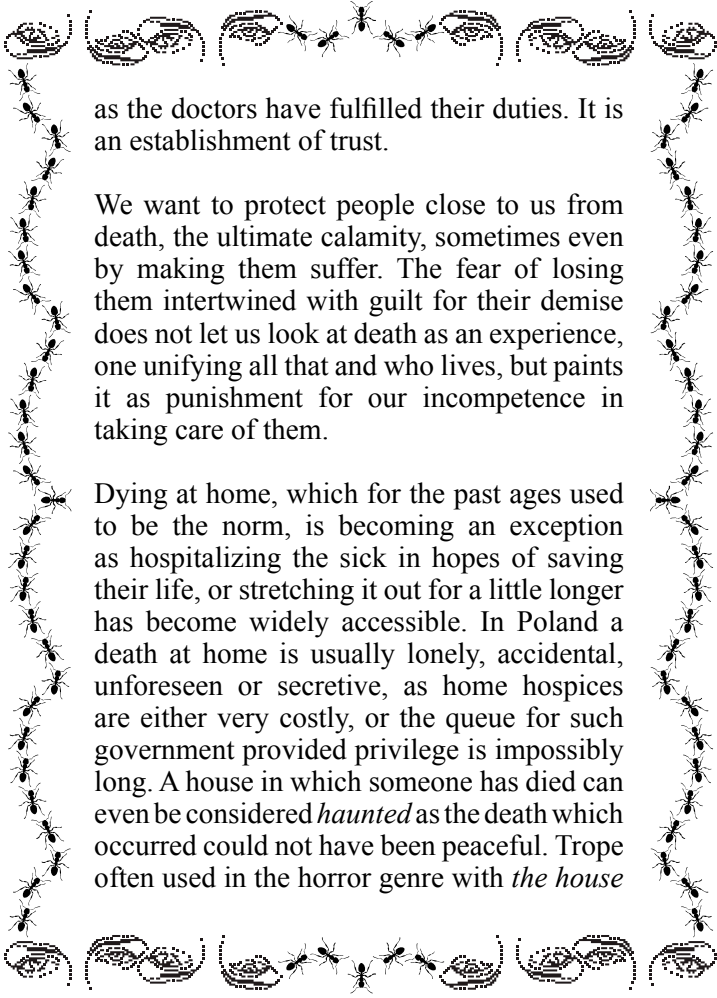
All sorts of events and instances may be read as Death gently letting us know it is on its way. If it happens that someone does die, there will be many possible factors which clearly indicated it before. While as we now know for sure, thanks to modern medicine that such omens and superstitions are mostly coincidental, in the past they brought a regular and frequent fear, but also contemplation of one's own and their community's mortality.

My grandmother wished to die in a hospital. It meant round-the-clock care, availability of strong medication and being supervised by professionals who have protocols regarding death. Her decision was guided by fear



of pain - she knew what cancer could feel like at the very end, and that in her own home, surrounded by loved ones she would be in agony. By the lack of knowledge and facilities for dying at home, hospitals essentially monopolize the location of death for non-immediately-terminal patient cases. When their healing role is no longer relevant they function as an establishment for slowly succumbing to the disease, diminishing with dignity and physical comfort - but unlike in a hospice Death is still treated like a possibility, unknown factor.

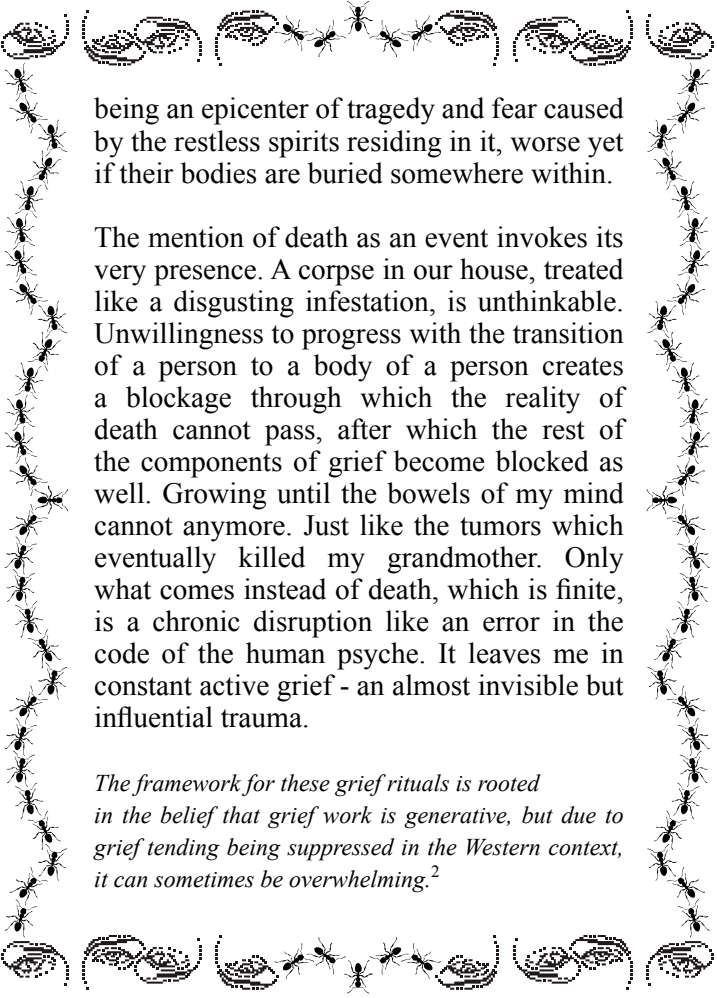
In Poland it seems beneficial to the patient, but is the most beneficial, and financially at that, to the hospital. Due to the lack of modernized and comprehensive laws on burial the Polish funerary business is a *grey zone* generating huge untaxed profit¹. Hospitals rent out facilities such as cooling rooms in morgues to funeral homes, or rather as previously called *businesses*. If someone has passed away in a hospital, nothing more could have been done and no one is to blame,



as the doctors have fulfilled their duties. It is an establishment of trust.

We want to protect people close to us from death, the ultimate calamity, sometimes even by making them suffer. The fear of losing them intertwined with guilt for their demise does not let us look at death as an experience, one unifying all that and who lives, but paints it as punishment for our incompetence in taking care of them.

Dying at home, which for the past ages used to be the norm, is becoming an exception as hospitalizing the sick in hopes of saving their life, or stretching it out for a little longer has become widely accessible. In Poland a death at home is usually lonely, accidental, unforeseen or secretive, as home hospices are either very costly, or the queue for such government provided privilege is impossibly long. A house in which someone has died can even be considered *haunted* as the death which occurred could not have been peaceful. Trope often used in the horror genre with *the house*



being an epicenter of tragedy and fear caused by the restless spirits residing in it, worse yet if their bodies are buried somewhere within.

The mention of death as an event invokes its very presence. A corpse in our house, treated like a disgusting infestation, is unthinkable. Unwillingness to progress with the transition of a person to a body of a person creates a blockage through which the reality of death cannot pass, after which the rest of the components of grief become blocked as well. Growing until the bowels of my mind cannot anymore. Just like the tumors which eventually killed my grandmother. Only what comes instead of death, which is finite, is a chronic disruption like an error in the code of the human psyche. It leaves me in constant active grief - an almost invisible but influential trauma.

The framework for these grief rituals is rooted in the belief that grief work is generative, but due to grief tending being suppressed in the Western context, it can sometimes be overwhelming.²



While reading *Tending Grief* I have noticed myself scuffing and frowning at some of the embodied grieving rituals proposed by the author. The ones which especially wake resent are the repetitive rituals based on redoing the same small activity over and over again, eg. burning a piece of paper in the *Grief Jar* or the *Stone Ritual*. It brings to my mind a rosary prayer, seen by the adolescent me as a pointless, time consuming boredom hellscape. One which I now so desperately need.

The Hail Maries, permanently engraved into my mind with the voice of my late grandfather like a warped vinyl, getting louder and quieter as the needle moves up and down while the record spins. A man more religious than a priest, whose soft deep voice would recite the bedtime prayer mixing in with his breathing effortlessly, repeated this mantra-like behavior twice a day with his eyes closed, lips barely moving. I wonder now what he felt, reciting this formula every day

for probably over seventy years. Closeness to salvation? Calm? Fulfilment of duty?

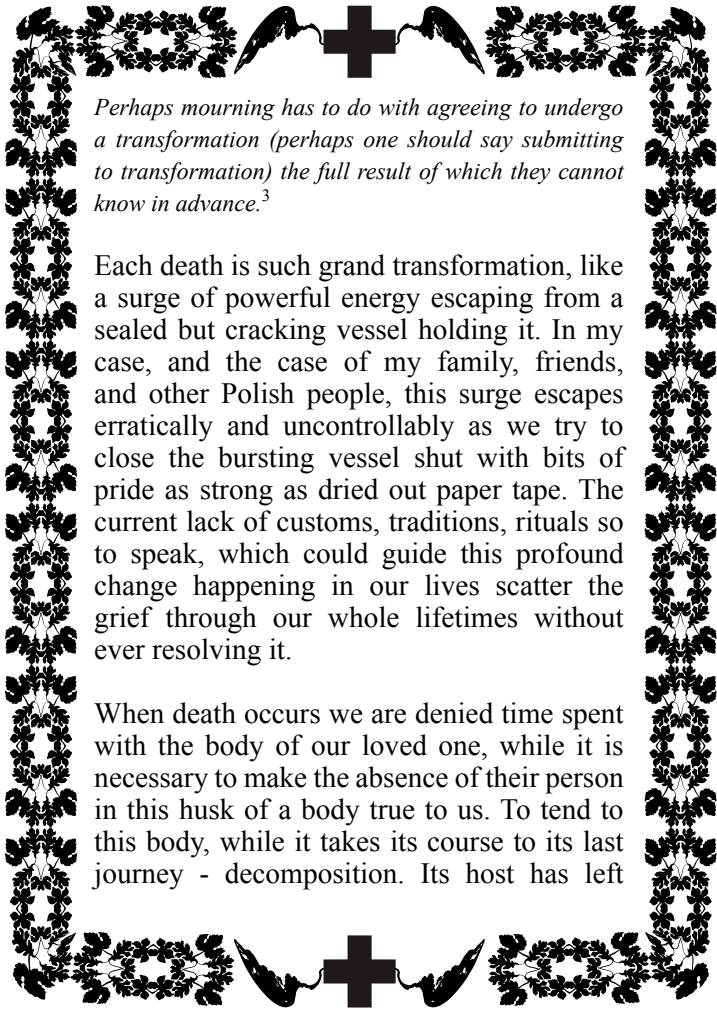
The Hail Mary fills up my thoughts letting only images flow. An old velvet couch, ticking clocks, leather cased binoculars, soft carpet with a bat motif. The standing clock strikes 11pm - "Bim Bam" it says in a low resonating tone... it is time to go to sleep and so grandfather makes me pray with him again.

I am tired but I do not protest, I let the current of the invocation take me and I flow with it. Even as the patience of a child - which I am - runs thin, I can tell Maria is gazing gently from the painting next to me, so I keep praying.

Repeating this orison in a cycle of a rosary,

letting it take the steer of my imagination and memory, is like a key turning in a lock with a satisfying click. Guided by this rhythm of my grandfather's voice I relive the scraps of memories. The way he walked in his slippers and the smell of apples he carried everywhere. Sound of peppermint candy wrap and the way he waved his hand when actively ignoring something. Asleep on the couch by the TV with our cat on the seat next to him.

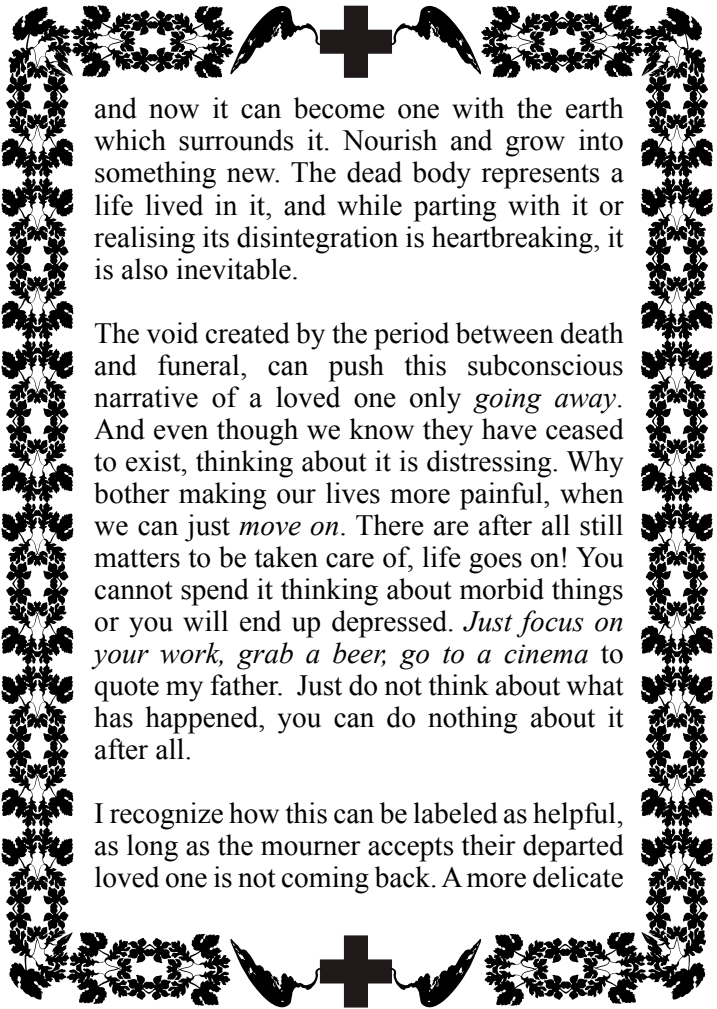
All in all his death is not as hard to accept. With his steady elderly decline of health, a sudden death of COVID-19 complications was almost like a mercy compared to the perspective of coming years struggling with progressive blindness, dementia and various other health issues. At least that is what I like to tell myself. It is the loss of a life with him that brings me true sorrow. His departure from this world marked a metamorphosis of my life, a first death Real to me, a loss of innocence.



Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to transformation) the full result of which they cannot know in advance.³

Each death is such grand transformation, like a surge of powerful energy escaping from a sealed but cracking vessel holding it. In my case, and the case of my family, friends, and other Polish people, this surge escapes erratically and uncontrollably as we try to close the bursting vessel shut with bits of pride as strong as dried out paper tape. The current lack of customs, traditions, rituals so to speak, which could guide this profound change happening in our lives scatter the grief through our whole lifetimes without ever resolving it.

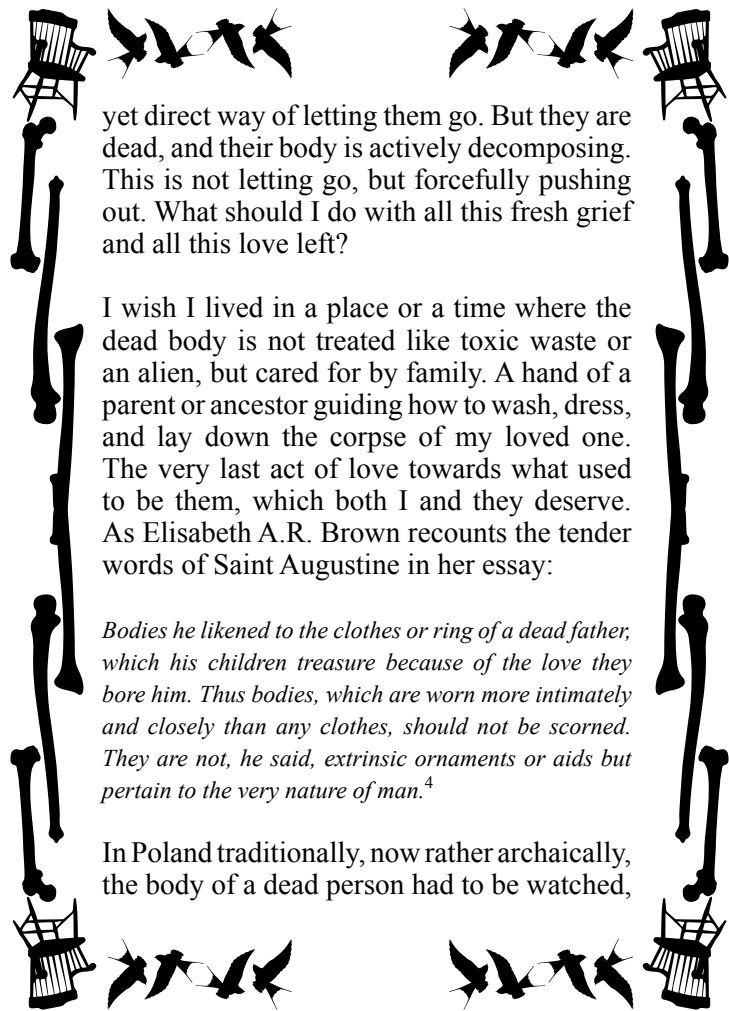
When death occurs we are denied time spent with the body of our loved one, while it is necessary to make the absence of their person in this husk of a body true to us. To tend to this body, while it takes its course to its last journey - decomposition. Its host has left



and now it can become one with the earth which surrounds it. Nourish and grow into something new. The dead body represents a life lived in it, and while parting with it or realising its disintegration is heartbreaking, it is also inevitable.

The void created by the period between death and funeral, can push this subconscious narrative of a loved one only *going away*. And even though we know they have ceased to exist, thinking about it is distressing. Why bother making our lives more painful, when we can just *move on*. There are after all still matters to be taken care of, life goes on! You cannot spend it thinking about morbid things or you will end up depressed. *Just focus on your work, grab a beer, go to a cinema* to quote my father. Just do not think about what has happened, you can do nothing about it after all.

I recognize how this can be labeled as helpful, as long as the mourner accepts their departed loved one is not coming back. A more delicate

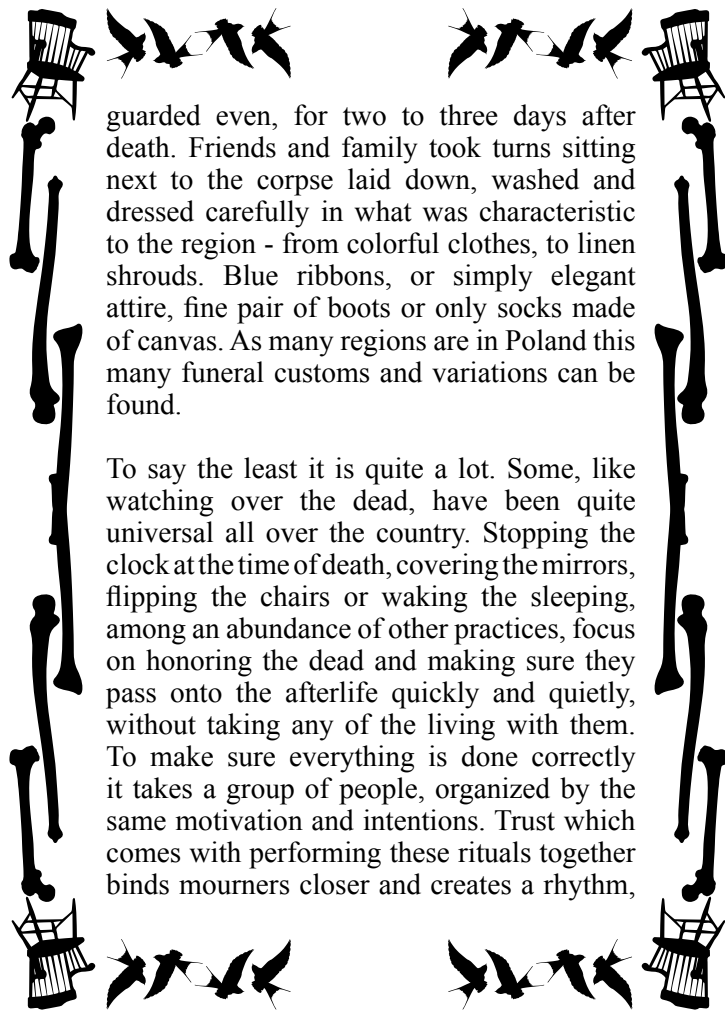


yet direct way of letting them go. But they are dead, and their body is actively decomposing. This is not letting go, but forcefully pushing out. What should I do with all this fresh grief and all this love left?

I wish I lived in a place or a time where the dead body is not treated like toxic waste or an alien, but cared for by family. A hand of a parent or ancestor guiding how to wash, dress, and lay down the corpse of my loved one. The very last act of love towards what used to be them, which both I and they deserve. As Elisabeth A.R. Brown recounts the tender words of Saint Augustine in her essay:

*Bodies he likened to the clothes or ring of a dead father, which his children treasure because of the love they bore him. Thus bodies, which are worn more intimately and closely than any clothes, should not be scorned. They are not, he said, extrinsic ornaments or aids but pertain to the very nature of man.*⁴

In Poland traditionally, now rather archaically, the body of a dead person had to be watched,



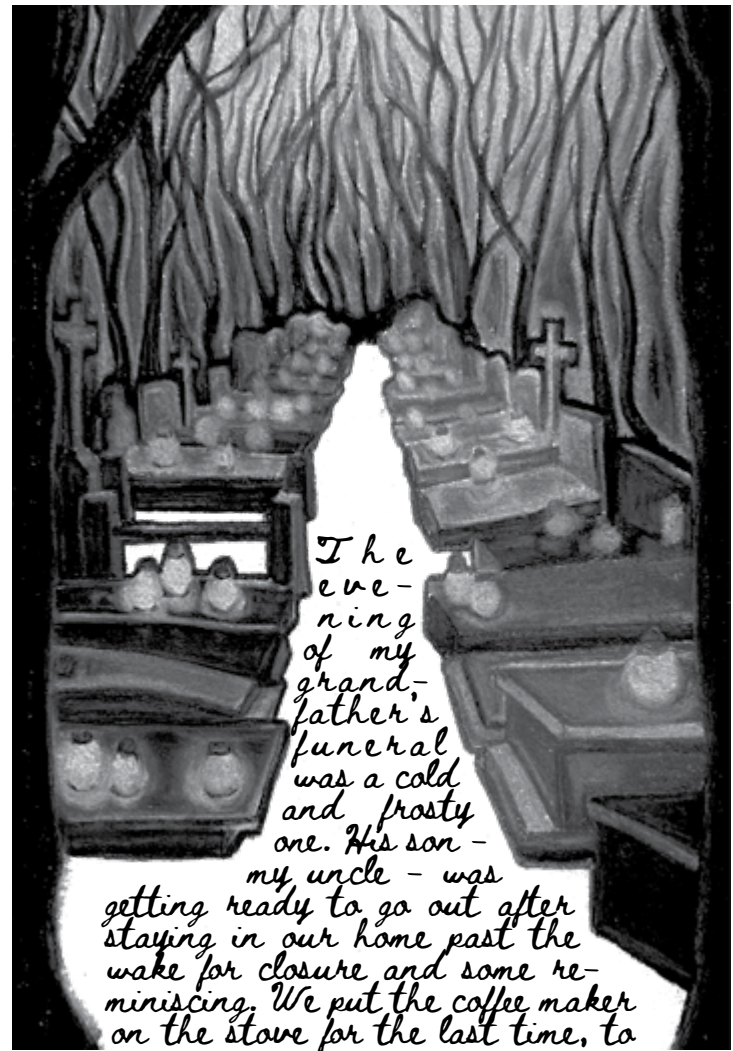
guarded even, for two to three days after death. Friends and family took turns sitting next to the corpse laid down, washed and dressed carefully in what was characteristic to the region - from colorful clothes, to linen shrouds. Blue ribbons, or simply elegant attire, fine pair of boots or only socks made of canvas. As many regions are in Poland this many funeral customs and variations can be found.

To say the least it is quite a lot. Some, like watching over the dead, have been quite universal all over the country. Stopping the clock at the time of death, covering the mirrors, flipping the chairs or waking the sleeping, among an abundance of other practices, focus on honoring the dead and making sure they pass onto the afterlife quickly and quietly, without taking any of the living with them. To make sure everything is done correctly it takes a group of people, organized by the same motivation and intentions. Trust which comes with performing these rituals together binds mourners closer and creates a rhythm,

almost like a composition in which they grieve all at once.

At first quiet: lamenting and crying is strictly prohibited as our loved one is dying as it will cause them additional suffering beyond the experience of death. Later by allowing the lamenting, crying and singing together as an expression of common ache - sometimes even hiring professional lamenters to add grandiosity to the sorrowful event.

Presence of the deceased's soul is palpable as their personality lingers on in the very rooms they used to reside in. As if they were going to appear in their usual spots, and all this pain a mourner has been going through has been merely a realistic nightmare.



wake him up before the long car ride to his home in the mountains.

We let it brew while chatting. It was hissing lightly, every a while so louder, but not out of the ordinary of a coffee express's language. My mother mentioned how perhaps it would be wise for my uncle to spend the night here, how their father never would have let him drive in such terrible weather and so late. He only waved his hand dismissively.

Almost at that exact moment the coffee maker exploded - hot dark liquid covering every pristine white wall with a torrential splatter. A terrifying moment in which miraculously no one got burned, read clear enough to all of us right then and there - my grandfather was voicing his protest, and so his

son stayed the night in the end.

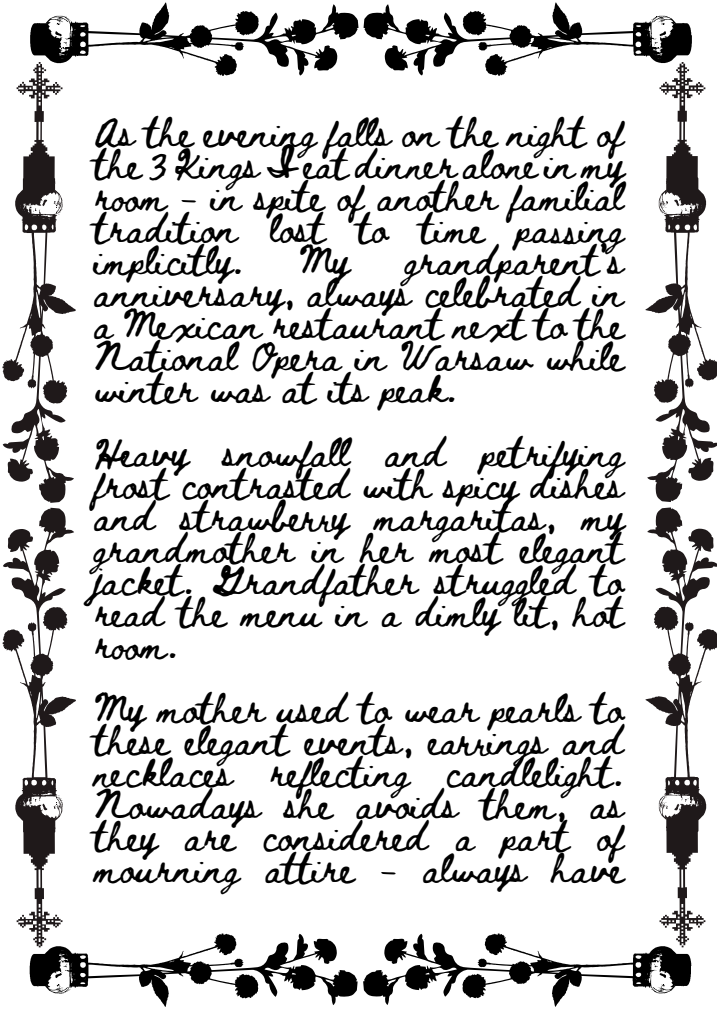
Later on I insisted on not repainting the walls, as it was the record of grandfather's last intentions, his last presence. Was it real or only a malfunction of a poorly designed coffee maker?

I did not care then, and now consciously choose to let myself believe that it was him. This way in the soft depth of my mind I can have a conversation with him each time I remember that evening.

Endnotes

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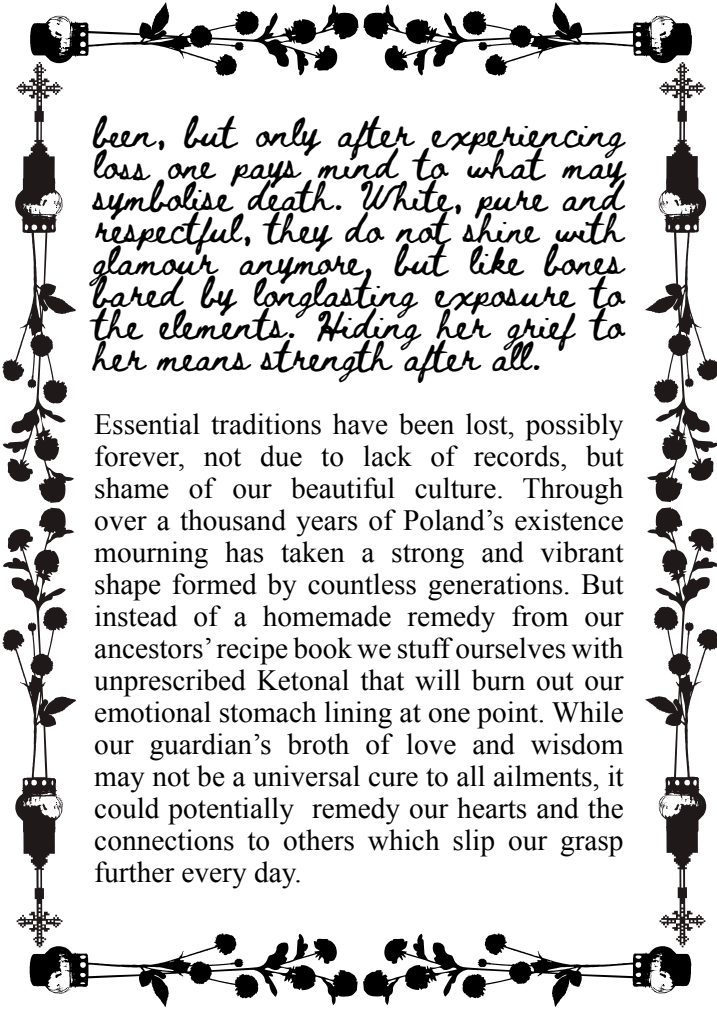
GOVERNMENT
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As the evening falls on the night of the 3 Kings I eat dinner alone in my room - in spite of another familial tradition lost to time passing implicitly. My grandparent's anniversary, always celebrated in a Mexican restaurant next to the National Opera in Warsaw while winter was at its peak.

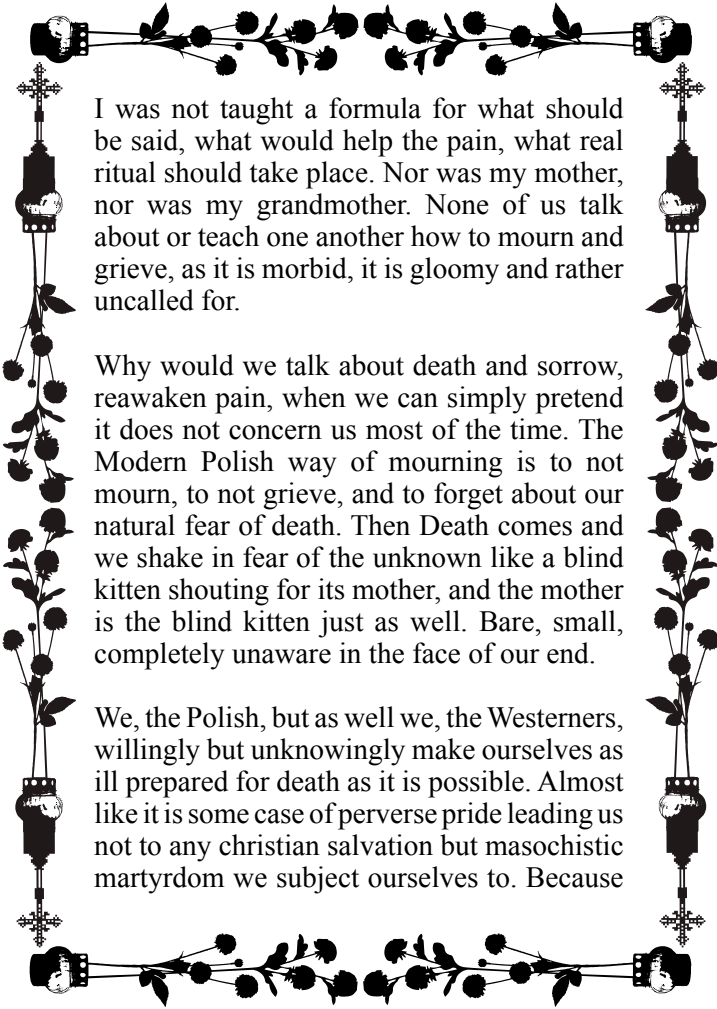
Heavy snowfall and petripping frost contrasted with spicy dishes and strawberry margaritas, my grandmother in her most elegant jacket. Grandfather struggled to read the menu in a dimly lit, hot room.

My mother used to wear pearls to these elegant events, earrings and necklaces reflecting candlelight. Nowadays she avoids them, as they are considered a part of mourning attire - always have



been, but only after experiencing loss one pays mind to what may symbolise death. White, pure and respectful, they do not shine with glamour anymore, but like bones bared by longlasting exposure to the elements. Hiding her grief to her means strength after all.

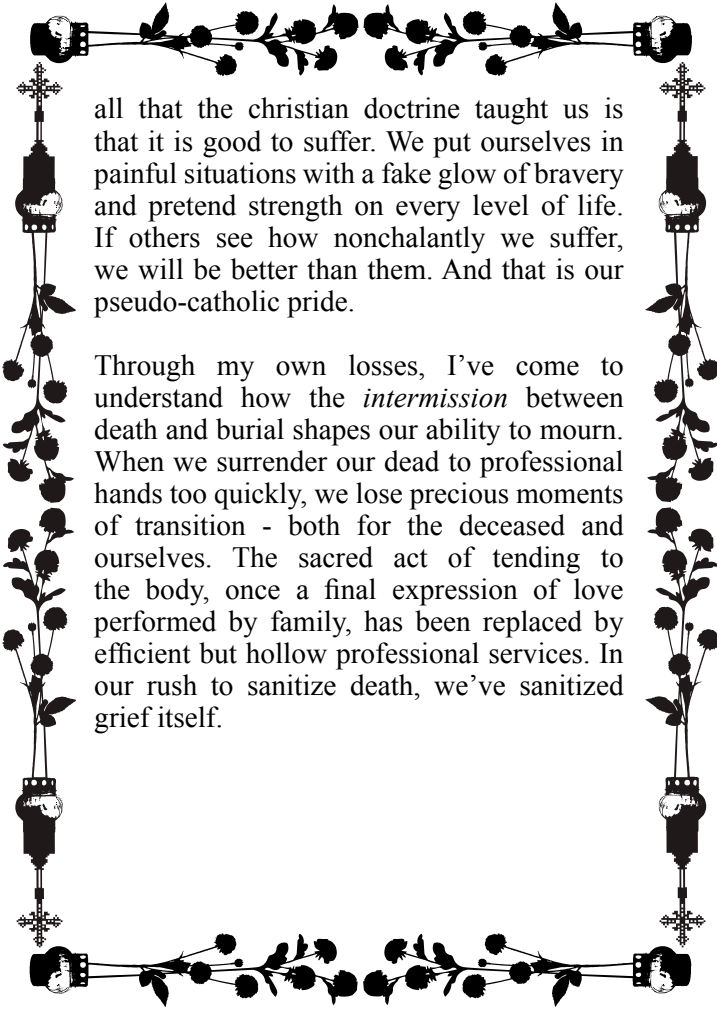
Essential traditions have been lost, possibly forever, not due to lack of records, but shame of our beautiful culture. Through over a thousand years of Poland's existence mourning has taken a strong and vibrant shape formed by countless generations. But instead of a homemade remedy from our ancestors' recipe book we stuff ourselves with unprescribed Ketonal that will burn out our emotional stomach lining at one point. While our guardian's broth of love and wisdom may not be a universal cure to all ailments, it could potentially remedy our hearts and the connections to others which slip our grasp further every day.



I was not taught a formula for what should be said, what would help the pain, what real ritual should take place. Nor was my mother, nor was my grandmother. None of us talk about or teach one another how to mourn and grieve, as it is morbid, it is gloomy and rather uncalled for.

Why would we talk about death and sorrow, reawaken pain, when we can simply pretend it does not concern us most of the time. The Modern Polish way of mourning is to not mourn, to not grieve, and to forget about our natural fear of death. Then Death comes and we shake in fear of the unknown like a blind kitten shouting for its mother, and the mother is the blind kitten just as well. Bare, small, completely unaware in the face of our end.

We, the Polish, but as well we, the Westerners, willingly but unknowingly make ourselves as ill prepared for death as it is possible. Almost like it is some case of perverse pride leading us not to any christian salvation but masochistic martyrdom we subject ourselves to. Because



all that the christian doctrine taught us is that it is good to suffer. We put ourselves in painful situations with a fake glow of bravery and pretend strength on every level of life. If others see how nonchalantly we suffer, we will be better than them. And that is our pseudo-catholic pride.

Through my own losses, I've come to understand how the *intermission* between death and burial shapes our ability to mourn. When we surrender our dead to professional hands too quickly, we lose precious moments of transition - both for the deceased and ourselves. The sacred act of tending to the body, once a final expression of love performed by family, has been replaced by efficient but hollow professional services. In our rush to sanitize death, we've sanitized grief itself.

All the strange events, restless dreams and my curiosity growing out of suffering have taught me that death refuses to be contained by modern procedures and paperwork. It demands to be felt, processed, honored. The old traditions my ancestors practiced - watching over the dead, sharing in communal lamentations, acknowledging death's omens - weren't mere superstitions.

They were sophisticated tools for processing grief, developed over centuries of human experience. These tools need yet to be acknowledged, learned about and accepted by the Polish society. The road to that noble goal is bumpy, long and winding. Sooner or later we all will see that the inescapable Death has already found its way into our lives. By ignoring it we have only been hurting ourselves - not heroically but pointlessly. And then we will all sit down and start talking.

At least I hope we will.

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For better or for worse,

*I would not be able to write this without my family,
the ones still present and the ones already gone.*

Thank you.

