The Lack of Forest

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To all that I lack

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The book consists of: my own narrative (laid out in a traditional way: black text on a white background); statements from other people presented in negative (white text on a dark-grey background); quotations from academic literature arranged as calligrams; visual materials, which are captioned in black type on a light-grey background.
The remaining design choices are purely aesthetic. The texts that are not my own statements have been deliberately treated as negatives, that is, as mirror images. In this way, we want to emphasize that they are the key material for obtaining the positive. For years I followed the stories of people who knew this area before the storm. It is precisely this material—their memory and their experiences—that forms the point of departure for my reflections and narrative.

I cannot imagine what it's like to be
in the middle of a hurricane.

Hurricanes were not part of the Polish imagination—they didn't belong among the dangers that tourists were warned about and that children were taught about in nature lessons. Downpours, storms—yes. But no one expected a hurricane.

No one expected it in August 2017, either. It was unimaginable, so no one was prepared. No one even thought that this could happen. Here? In Pomerania? It took just one night, a few hours, to shift that.

The hurricane came all of a sudden. It surprised not only the local residents, but also the scouts who had set up camp in the forest. That night, the children stood in the dark water of the lake, as far from the shore as they could. Hoping that the trees would not crush them, as they had crushed two of their friends.

The hurricane destroyed the roofs, uprooted the trees, broke the branches and scattered the seeds. It also marked the biographies, buried some dreams and broke many hearts. It generated a series of local stories. Within fifteen minutes, the forest disappeared, leaving a sudden void. None of the locals could talk about what had happened. They still don't talk about it today. Because of this silence, the hurricane continues. And the place, which still exists and yet is no longer there, awaits collective reintegration and acceptance.

I arrived there a few months later, not because of the forest, but because of my partner. It was our first meeting 'at his place'—back then, I didn't know we would end up living here. I slowly got to know the area and its inhabitants. With each of their stories, I delved deeper and deeper into the erstwhile forest. Into the wind of that night. I experienced that particular August hurricane only through traces—thanks to people's memories. It's thanks to their memories and shared attentiveness that I am getting to know a place I have never seen, but where I decided to build a home on the ruins of the past.

What remained after the hurricane marked this land with pain once again. I discovered the earlier pains gradually. We need relationships to re-familiarise ourselves with this place, to enter the landscape after the disaster. When we gave ourselves a chance to meet with a sense of loss, we opened ourselves up to the power of collective storytelling. Thanks to these bonds, the feeling of loss is slowly fading. Five years after the tempest, The Lack of the Forest is no longer a story of loneliness. It is a story of a new symbiosis emerging, of change taking shape. With each element of it, with every movement of the smallest slug, beetle or blade of grass, we are working together towards a shared future. We live in an era of multiple crises, but together we have solid tools to survive them.

A hurricane is a short-lived event, but being in a hurricane can last much longer. The state of devastation prolongs collective mourning. Nature and people regenerate slowly. They take their time to rebuild reality and regain a sense of security.

Hurricanes and the havoc they cause affect certain people, creatures, and ecosystems in specific areas, but they can also be understood as a metaphor for the contemporary condition of both humans and nature. Life in and after a hurricane corresponds to states of internal escape, a widespread sense of uprootedness, or being the object of systemic exploitation in the areas of work, politics, or ecology. They illustrate the permanence of uncertainty and fear.

Mindfulness of feelings, mutual care, saving what is dear to us or discovering it for the first time—all this constitutes intervention. Such an intervention, and at the same time a proposal to build a common story, constituted the years I spent in the forest and in the face of the Lack of Forest. This book is a testimony to that.

In order for reciprocity and community to arise, one must get closer, and in order to get closer, one must trust. I am not asking you not to be afraid—after all, we will be talking about pain and cataclysm. Please be afraid, but come closer. Lean in and open yourself to the story of the Lack of the Forest. Read it, giving credence that your story can also fill the void. Let it touch places within you that have not always been heard.

The wind speed that night reached 150–170 km per hour, which corresponds to a category 2 hurricane. It was not, of course, a meteorological hurricane formed over the ocean; however, like those involved in publicizing this local event on the global map of disasters, I deliberately use the word *hurricane* interchangeably with *tempest*, *storm*, or *gale*.

Photo taken on 6.03.2018

A wintery, yet snowless morning. I'm in Charzykowy, getting ready to leave for Warsaw. I'm setting off at dawn; the journey will take me five and a half hours. I don't yet know that I'll be travelling this route many times, as I will soon be living here. One day, this will be my world, but now I am going back. It is very remote here.

I arrived a few days ago, at night. When I entered from the opposite direction to the one I'm about to take, from Poznań, the road led through a forest. There, I found a frozen lake, I found coldness and darkness. We spent the next few days at the home of my future husband's grandparents—he's the reason for my visit here. We were accompanied by a feeling of love. After two days, with my heart filled with warmth, I set off back to Warsaw. I head towards Tuchola—and experience a shock. Ruins emerge from the fog. I stand by the road and watch. At first, I don't quite know what I'm seeing—I can't hear anything either. Slowly, a low sound and crackling begin to emerge from the ruins. Work is in full swing—I hear chainsaws and the whirring of engines. Although I'm in the middle of this event, I cannot decipher it. What's going on here? I wish for immersive integration, but it doesn't work; on the contrary, the state of this place sticks to me and squeezes me. A logging operation on a scale I have never seen before, a bloodthirsty sawmill with a shameful scale of processing, an exposed conflagration or an optical mirage that emerged from the night and only pretends to be a lunar landscape. It slowly pierces my body, all over its surface. It pinches me under my skin.

I take a photo and send it to a friend in Warsaw, adding 'A Shitpit' caption. 'Quite a battleground,' she replies.

Later, I find this photo, tagged as 'sawmill'. I remember that the road signs were glowing, and the headlights of cars pierced the landscape with bloody lines. They smudged like crayons rubbed with a finger, drawing a scene after a fight. An image of pain. And yet a promise of refuge. I encountered tragedy and love here—their combination rooted me deeply in this place and brought about my eagerness to commit to it.

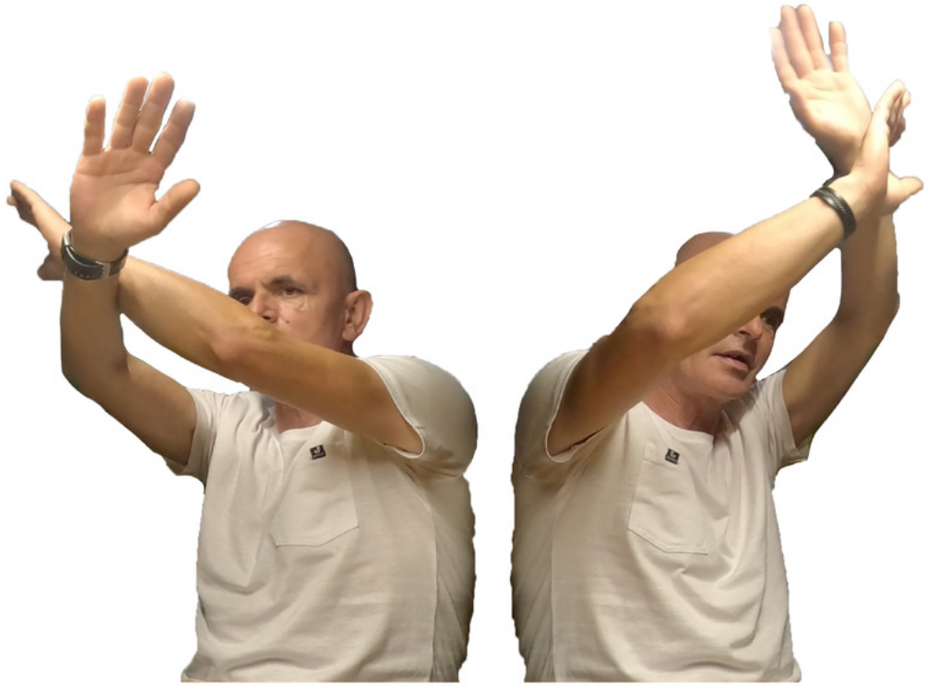
Two or three months earlier, I asked if they remembered how old the spruce trees that had fallen in front of our door were. One of the older residents told me that when they moved in fifty years ago, his uncle said that they had been planted in 1910, when the forester's lodge was built. They remembered it exactly.

That wind was pure power, I tell you. Two of us had to hold the window so it wouldn't blow out. We couldn't even hear the thunder, we could only see long flashes of lightning. They lit up the sky as if you had turned on floodlights on a football pitch. And with each flash, you could see that another two or three of those huge spruce trees were missing. When it was over, we got busy rescuing our flats and the stairwell because they were flooded. Each and every resident fought against the water. Finally, it got light, somewhere around four or five in the morning—I remember that fog was rising above this battleground, and you couldn't see a thing. Only when it cleared... Tragedy emerged. There was simply nothing, nothing, not a single tree. Not a single tree from those that grew near our blocks of flats. Everything was lying in a heap, one on top of the other: high-voltage wires, broken poles. Everything turned into nothing.

Rafał, Mylof, 2018

We were standing in the house and suddenly there came a flash, and I thought: something's wrong, something's wrong. Suddenly, I turned to my husband and said, 'Krzychu, look, we don't have any trees.' 'What are you talking about?' 'Look, there are no trees around us.' And indeed, as we stood at the window and watched the flashes, it became light. When there are trees, it's dark despite the flashes. And suddenly it became light instead, which meant there were no trees left. [...] In the morning, the rescued boy knocked on my door and told me to go and see the damage. [...] I gave him Krzyś's shoes and we went for a walk. It was shocking. What we saw was simply indescribable.

Alicja, Duża Klonia, 2024



Rafał shows how the trees lay scattered

I look at the landscape through the car window. From the perspective of a moving car, the landscape is a transforming form. A dynamic set of colours that claim the right to lost continuity. From a safe distance, I capture this scattered fragmentation, saturating myself with the randomness of the views I encounter, the piles and gaps I catch. The click of the camera and the image becomes static—it emerges from the machine as a surprise. I don't quite understand this surprising pause. I look at the photo, which is supposed to be consistent. What is outside the window is ripped apart. I feel relieved because I can safely remain behind the glass.

My partner takes me to all the post-hurricane places, as if hoping to discover or confirm something. He knows the places well—I follow him, losing myself in a cartography that is new to me. We are speechless at every place. He accepts their condition with a lump in his throat, tolerating my exaggerated and certainly irritating reactions. He hasn't visited these places for months; it's his first time here since the storm.

Excited, moving forward, I dissociate myself in the face of this unusual image. I try to capture it, but it is too big, as if it has burst open. I stop to take a photo, to document this unprecedented event. Yet photography loses its function. I stand helpless in the face of a disaster, with my own cognitive apparatus inadequate. The image comes closer, but I feel it rather than see it.

Escapism, returning home—the end of the forest marks the beginning for me.

Our joint trips, wandering through the erstwhile forest, are attempts to embrace the incomprehensible whole. We want to reach all the surrounding areas and create a map of places that once existed. Save them by visiting them. In a way, reclaim them for ourselves and add them to our repertoire of memories. These places no longer exist, but by travelling to them, we pretend they do—he remembers them, and thanks to him, I am getting to know them. Since I'm arriving after their non-existence began, these visits are a form of mapping and searching for a new reality.

Some places we reach after dark. It's difficult for me to see the forest hollows or losses. So I listen to the wind whistling. Individual roadside pines creak ominously. Their sounds, carried by the wind, form a melody of calls, persistent and unanswered. They are like giant, bodiless giraffes, making sounds similar to those of whales. I imagine the pines stretching out to the sides, searching for their lost sisters and brothers. Or perhaps these whistling crowns are the result of roots slipping into the soil juices, an infinitely extended aerial mycelium? Perhaps we hear the movement of underground growth because we're in a state as if deep underground? This would explain the difficulty in speaking and moving. Just like moles, we're digging a tunnel in a landscape we cannot see. We try to feel it. The disappearance of the forest has brought out the spirits of this place. Set free, they wander through the open space like ghosts.

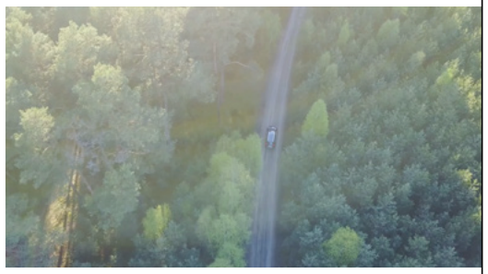
I will write about these places as unique, regardless of what they carried before. I will learn about some of the transformations years later; others, never. They will disappear before they allow themselves to be discovered. I find myself in the Lack of Forest, in the middle of this space, as if in the wake of a meteorite fall. Shaking with emotion, I synchronise myself with the trembling of the earth. We catch a common rhythm, synchronising our steps through the pseudo-emptiness.

The first year in the Lack of Forest is a year without touching.
It is a year of working with sight: mapping the landscape through glass.

Two post-tempest maples

You can't just drive through. When you're driving, you think about different things, about your work, about your problems. Or you listen to songs, or you sing. But not me. When I drive down this road, I don't think about anything else. I just replay images: what used to be in a given place because I remember. [...] Maybe people from outside, who were here once and don't remember, don't perceive it that way—but when I drive this way, I always feel sadness and nostalgia. And the memories: 'Look, we found five porcini mushrooms here.' 'No, not here, it was there'—and there goes an argument. We can't see it clearly anymore. It's disappearing.

Łukasz, Rytel, 2020



Drone footage taken in May and September 2017—
approach road to Łukasz's house near the village of Rytel

One window had the curtains open. [...] And my grandson, who was looking through it, said: 'Grandma, there's no forest at all at Uncle Romek's.' 'What are you talking about?'—I didn't believe him. Until it got light and I looked out of the window myself. Everything was lying down there, everything. Absolutely everything. We were in shock. It was incredible.

You had to have strength to get through. You had to lift up your legs. Sometimes it lay half a metre above the ground, and you had to climb over it, like in the jungle. Even worse! It was often knocked down, interlaced, not only lying on the ground, but torn into pieces. When there was a storm, the trees flew as if a whirlwind was directing them. With two, three, and sometimes five trees, one on top of the other.

I said that God protected us, because we could have been crushed by the trees that were falling behind us and to the side. And everywhere. [...] All my fruit trees were gone. I had cherry trees, pear trees, everything gone. Yes, all of it. And not far from me, a whole newly built house collapsed. Only a few walls of the basement remained; the rest of it was lying all on the ground. We were in shock that the new house had collapsed.

I was home alone. Our whole house was being flooded. I've got a new house, not some old ruin. And just like that, the new window was warped. Jesus, when I looked out the window, there was nothing but flash after flash. The squall was so bad that you couldn't see anything. There was so much water flowing down the street that everything was flooded. [...] And the cemetery, and all the places, where one would wish to go. No electricity to be found either; it was terrible. The fridges weren't working. You wanted to make a phone call—you couldn't. Nothing at all.

The wood lay there for a long time. It was a huge mess after all. Though our foresters got together and tidied up fairly quickly. Everyone helped—anyone who could, went. Everyone also had a lot of work to do at their homes, because everything had been knocked over. Those trees also had to be cut up. Everyone helped each other, from neighbour to neighbour. One neighbour had a saw, so he lent it to another.

Kalina, Teresa, and Renata—senior women from the "Autumn Rose" [Jesienna Róża] group in Rytel—talk over one another while recounting the night of the hurricane, Cultural Center in Rytel, 2024

For me, it was a night of terror. We were returning from a chanteys concert in Charzykowy via Krojanty when the storm caught us and we couldn't get to Berlinka. It was good that we stopped the car at the end of the road. That saved us. At first, we stopped in a lay-by and heard everything breaking around us. How good it was that my Henryk came with me! When he stopped at the end of Berlinka, I didn't even notice it—it felt like we were still moving. I said, "Henryk, don't drive!", and he said, "But I'm not driving". We were rocking and rolling, things were banging into us, pine cones were falling. The cove where we wanted to stop was completely blocked by trees, huge pines. There was no turning back. I looked at that cove as if it were a mirage. I didn't know if we were still there or if we were already gone, and it was just a ghost. And so we waited.

The A22 road, commonly called „Berlinka", 2017

Play

I never again found the place from the first photograph. To this day, I do not know where I took it. The post-storm reality is changing dynamically.

> I was there, in that real non-place, the temporary land of my dreams. The landscape opens up like a cavernous maw, unfolding like in a computer game, when a new level suddenly appears, completely unrelated to the previous one. The image sticks in your mind so firmly that you cannot shake it off. You have to cling to it, even though it seems impossible, illusory.

A hare sits on the road and looks at me. Its gaze pierces me. It doesn't run anywhere, although I wish to follow it. We remain motionless together until a sudden dash. When movement occurs, the space begins to unfold, as if from a roll. Like a dream, it swathes and caresses. There is now room for joy in these images.

I left Warsaw feeling very tired. Years of living on the road, in chaos, without order. Living from crisis to crisis, from process to process. The life of an outcast. The life of an artist, but one neither affiliated with any university nor permanently associated with any gallery. The life of a scholarship holder, a resident. Seemingly free, but so densely entangled. Subsequent commissions were dictated by the intensity of meetings and the effectiveness of persuasion. Seemingly conscious and emancipatory actions often turned out to be destructive. States of freedom and powerlessness mixed in an inseparable tar. All this took its dark toll. I waded through a muddy path that swayed with my tired body. Just as in this very landscape, reality was difficult to focus on, remaining shrouded in a shimmering fog. It was inaccessible and yet consuming. Many times I felt like a plant turning its cheek to the light, waiting for it to comfort me. I needed a base, a home, but I didn't know how to feel it. What I had, I carried on my back, like a turtle. My home was my arms. They carried so much that I couldn't hug myself with them. I didn't know how to bandage them either.

At that time, I was looking at ruins. They always attracted me. Boarding schools, vacant buildings and squats were the places where I stayed. Or an old rusty Ford, and sofas at the houses of temporary, or already-lost friends. Residency rooms, rehearsal rooms, studios.

The Masurian forests were green, wet and overgrown. Chaotic branches blocked the roads, and huge ferns and nettles made walking impossible. Fortifications and bunkers were covered with dark green lichen. I was born four kilometres from the Wolf's Lair, in the former East Prussia.

In 2018, I am taking my partner to my hometown. We are going to Mamerki, a place I often visited as a child. In the presence of the person to whom I revealed my world, I began to assume the poses of domestic hosts, as if from Zofia Rydet's ethnographic record. In a rather spontaneously arranged performance, I stood on the threshold of the bunker as if on the threshold of my own home, in a gesture of control and familiarisation. The photographs show a playful grimace, a form of flirting and an invitation to a world that contrasts with girlishness as much as it compulsively evokes it.

I grew up in forests seeded with bunkers (Mamerki area), and sought my identity in Sarajevo, Bosnia, where I studied. I spent my youth conjugating trauma in all its forms: collective, individual, environmental, cultural, war-related, social, sexual, educational, inscribed in the fabric of the city, in the space of nature. These themes were not concepts, but my everyday experience. Ruins seemed to be their safe outcome—present but dormant, removed from processes of use, deprived of function, exposing their past life in the form of dignified bankruptcy. I tried to convince others and myself that ruins are a metaphor for the condition of contemporary life. Especially us, the precarious workers and nomads, systemic outcasts and creators who, anticipating the future, perceive the whole world in terms of what is lost, aestheticising at most its successive subpages. I identified with this image of life, with the exposure of fragility, with the noise drowning out the lack of words, with the temporary community that turns the emptiness gnawing at the body into a soft cocoon.

Nomadic everyday life during the period of living in a car, 2010

Sarajevo, the social protests of 2014. The buildings went up in flames on the day of the premiere of my diploma performance at the Obala Open Stage of the Academy of Performing Arts

Sarajevo (2013–2015), stills from the film *The Dream of a Turtle*, 2018

I remember counting the trees growing by the roadside when I was a child. Behind them were fields or forests. Where I now live, the pine forest began right by the road and the trees were as thin as strings. They were planted so densely that one merged into the other. Driving through the national park, I had the impression of milky colours. My eyes, unaccustomed to this effect, behaved like a camera with a long exposure, which turns reality into a streak of vivid colours. The forest shimmered with a million of them.

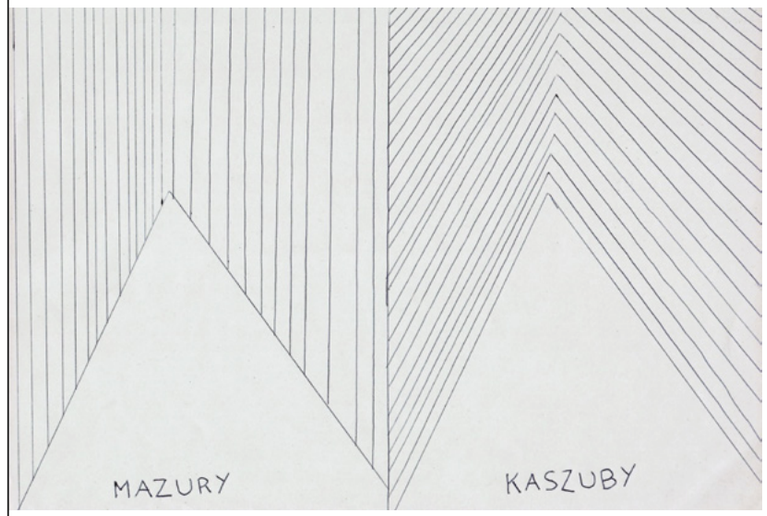
> "It must be hard for you here," Lucyna remarks on my origins. She reacts strongly to them—she perceives Masurians as open and cordial, while Kashubians as closed and distant. Regionalism is often emphasised here in Tuchola Forest.

People have lived on this land for generations. The permanence of one's place of residence is something unheard of in my region. There are no indigenous people there; only the effects of successive historical hurricanes remain. People were thrown into the whirlwind of events by external forces, often not knowing the answer to the question of where they came from and how they ended up here. A world of imagination and stories from which it is difficult to build a solid foundation. Those who ask questions will be met with tears or surprised and hostile looks; ignorance, shrugging shoulders, muttering under their breath, or even a punch in the face. In Charzykowy, or Charzykowo to use the local variant, we will live in the late grandparents' house. We will walk to the cemetery to visit them. We will eat ice cream in the same ice cream parlour they used to go to. A lot is changing here, but the changes are not accompanied by the storms of political history, but by stories of wildness and remoteness.

> The displaced persons found themselves in Masuria: workers arrived at the factory, as in the case of my paternal grandmother, or doctors transferred to work in re-Polonised areas, as in the case of my mother. This is agricultural and railway Masuria, Masuria where there are no lakes, where there is no hospital, where there is no secondary school. Where there is no tenderness. I left my family home out of absolute necessity—as quickly as possible. I left behind German inscriptions peeking out from under apricot-coloured plaster, forest areas riddled with bunkers and terrifying memories. I set off alone in search of a different life. For over fifteen years, I searched for a place where I could put down roots for the first time.

The blocks of flats where I grew up, on Wojska Polskiego Street [Polish Army Street] in Korsze

Mazuria of my youth

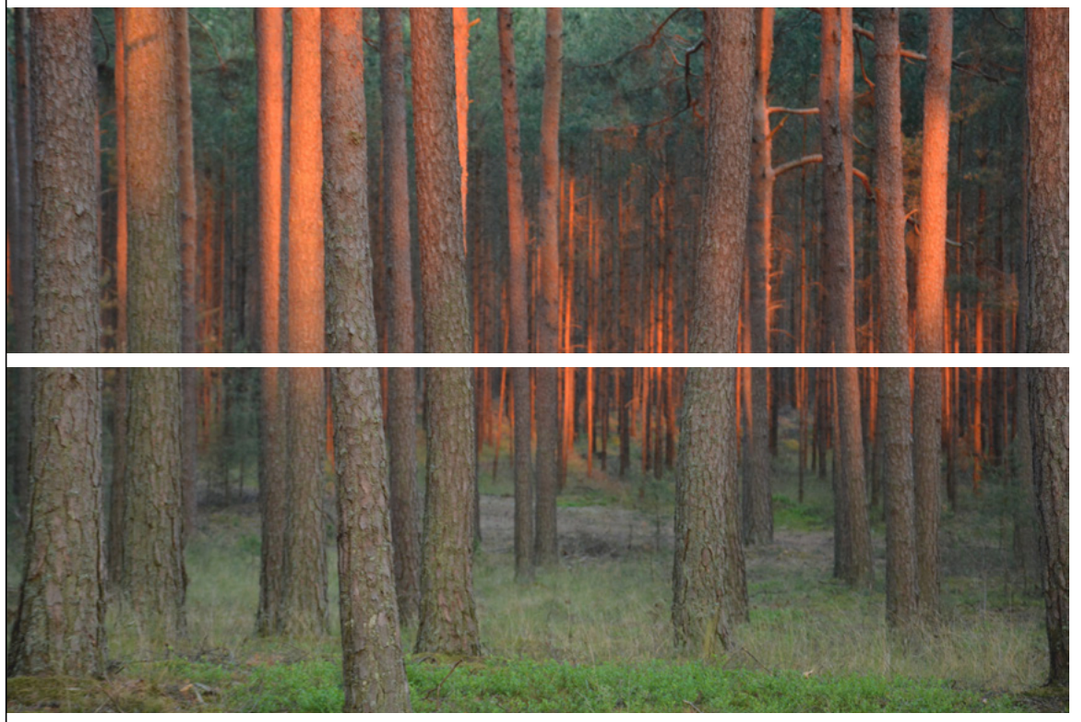


A drawing of *Kashubia/Masuria* made after my first visit to the Tuchola Forest, 2018

The Wolf's Lair, Gierłoż, Masuria, 2025

The woods by Lake Gardliczno, Tuchola Forest, 2018

The woods by Lake Płęsno, Tuchola Forest, 2018



On the second day after the storm, Lucyna goes for a walk with her dogs. She chooses a route she knows by heart. That is to say, she knew it, as of today, it is unrecognisable. She records an emotional testimony:

People who lived in the forests all their lives were known as Forest People. I encounter this term in every conversation. Knowledge, work, the ability to read nature, strong independence, and a character that does not succumb to fads or influences are traits respected among the Forest People. Only a few contemporary residents belong to the Forest People group. They are a special category of people who have practised living in the forest from birth until death. It was their forest, it was their identity. What will happen to the Forest People now that the forest is gone?

This used to be my forest. Now there are just trees lying on the ground. I am walking my dogs, feeling a bit lost. To say I feel a bit lost is an understatement. These are the remains of my forests, which will be cut down to the stump, and there will be no forest here for many years to come. I don't know if I will live to see the moment when it will be. Maybe Paulina and her children, my grandchildren, will live to see a forest here. The most beautiful areas, a beautiful part of the Tuchola Forest, 90% of which no longer exists. Where there used to be a huge forest, you can't go in now. My old road is inaccessible, there are trees lying across it. The dogs run around, looking for their old trails. That's all that's left. I walk towards the village, where I always used to go for walks. You can see the tops of broken trees that will be cut down. Here is a young forest, which is beautiful and gives hope. And there, in the distance, are tree stumps that will all be cut down. My beloved forests. My places on earth. What remains... I can't say for now. Everywhere I look, there are remnants of trees, and somewhere in the distance, birds. The only hope is in what is alive. There is so much deadness around. It's terrifying. But you know what? I have three chanterelles in my pocket. I found them a moment ago. Another hope. And another hope is this barrel that's left, which I've been visiting since I've lived here, that is, for seven years. This barrel, which wasn't taken by anything. [...] And our wonderful ślabra (eng. slush), which dogs always used to jump in and out of, and will continue to do so. There you go. Our smelly slush. Utterly beautiful.

Lucyna, Lotyń, 2025

Ślabra is the term that Lucyna and her daughter Paulina gave to a small river flowing through what used to be a forest. We found this recording while browsing through files on Lucyna's old computer, which collapsed after the storm. Lucyna looks away—the feelings return.

At the time of the storm, Lucyna had only been living in Lotyń for seven years. From the perspective of the Forest People and other residents, she was still a stranger. But her heart was already connected to the lifeblood of this area, so at that moment, it is bleeding profusely. Lucyna wants to do everything she can to weave the bonds back into this place, the existence of which, like that of the trees, is hanging by a thread.

From the first day after the storm, Lucyna's dwelling is serving as a temporary shelter. Loggers and residents gather here to spend time on long post-hurricane mornings and evenings, when there is no water, electricity, access to nearby towns, mobile phone coverage, or contact with the outside world. Losses are being counted, wounds are being licked. They're clearing up whatever they can. Gifts arrive at Lucyna's house and are distributed among the residents. Artur, the village administrator, decides where to redirect the services to help those in need. Every evening, Lucyna met with Artur to determine the logistics for the next day. There was a lot of work to be done in the forest and around the houses. After work, everyone sat around the fire for a simple meal—usually sausages from the fire and potatoes. People came from all over Poland. Not only foresters and emergency services, but also other people willing to join the rescue operation.

> Lucyna recalls that one day, someone from Bydgoszcz arrived, having bought a bucket of chanterelles from a roadside mushroom picker on the way, and prepared chanterelle sauce for everyone. How happy this made the loggers who worked hard from dawn to dusk! Chanterelle sauce! A delicacy! Such gestures mattered. Lucyna recalls both the intimacy and the unique sense of community that characterised it. They were short-lived: "When something bad happens, everyone suddenly unites. A moment later, the spell is broken and the old mess returns. People point fingers at each other, try to gain something for themselves, and conflicts arise. Who owes what to whom." People even argued over the boxes she prepared and accused her of embezzling washing-up liquid. They used the compensation for lost belongings to buy new cars, there were even those who destroyed their own belongings in order to apply for financial support. There is no end to the discussions about who got less and who got more.

But it was necessary to help. Everyone got involved as best they could, to a greater or lesser extent. If someone did not come to Lucyna's house to offer help, the post-storm community noticed. Such people exposed themselves to gossip and exclusion. This happened, among others, to a local dairy farmer and his wife. "It was useless to explain what it means to milk cows every day because the machines had broken down. Someone then spread rumours that they weren't doing anything. But they spent half the day milking those cows!"

> There were more situations like this—including those that "spoiled", as Lucyna says, old customs and affected relationships. But above all, there was a sense of intimacy and people spent time together. In everyday life, this isn't present at all. Neighbours don't talk to each other, people barely socialise; barely greet each other from their gardens. And they never do so from behind their car windows.

In the period after the storm, Lucyna was writing a book and collecting photographs. She established an association to nurture the sense of community that had been born. It was a special time for her, and she gave herself over to the people. For weeks, her home was open to hundreds of visitors each and every day. She fed every visitor and organised rest for workers and residents in need.

From the top: grass after the storm, bent towards the wind, guests of the dwelling holding down the tent in Lucyna's garden during strong winds.

Together with millions of beings, we work every day to restore peace and joy in this place. The system of human and non-human connections does not end, but grows stronger—whether we call it bonds or forms of survival.

Trees that have suddenly lost their ground—and their roots, a situatedness essential for life—create new, surprising shapes. A tree spreading horizontally rather than vertically clings to the ground. The branches that were supposed to reach the sky and the roots to be embedded in the ground now lie in a common line. This is not an image of peaceful rest, though. The fallen tree spreads its branches and roots wide, leaning on them, contracting, straining. Life slowly drains from it.

On the one hand, they are defenceless creatures stretching out their arms as if for an embrace; on the other, they are a terrifying force that is better not to be approached when unprepared or alone. One tree is so much matter that it takes an entire village to cut it up and haul it away. Lying side by side, the fallen giants still display their power.

A fallen, post-storm tree, is a tree vulnerable and in need of help, spreading its arms to be embraced.

Emilia's hands show the tangled trees

What we have accustomed to
calling 'the environment' might, then, be
better envisaged as a zone of entanglement. Within
this tangle of interlaced trails, continually ravelling here and
unravelling there, beings grow or 'issue forth' along the lines of
their relationships. This tangle is the texture of the world [...]. It has no
insides and outsides, only opening and 'ways through'. Scientists often stress
the importance of 'carving nature at the joints', as though the world were built
from solid blocks. The world we inhabit, however, is not carpentered but textured.
An ecology of life, therefore, must be about the weaving and binding of lines, not the
hammering of blocks. As an ecology of threads and traces, it must deal not with the re-
lations between organisms and their external environments but with the relations along
their severally enmeshed ways of life. Ecology, in short, is the study of the life of lines.

Tim Ingold, *Bindings against Boundaries: Entanglements of Life in an Open World*

The wind hit the wall of the Bory Tucholskie National Park. Parts of the forest covering a total area of 100 hectares were destroyed, but the hurricane mainly affected areas outside the National Park. The so-called commercial forests, intended for timber production—mainly monocultures of pine, spruce and birch—disappeared. Monoculture serves the timber industry and is created for large-scale timber extraction. In the long term, it creates a devastated landscape. It's not thought through for forest biodiversity, but for the efficiency of material extraction. It subordinates trees to the logic of growing them upwards for valuable, uniformly thick trunks, thereby weakening and limiting them (even seedlings in nurseries are prepared in a way that limits their free growth from the outset). It is not thought through for the long-term, sustainable development of the forest, but for the optimisation and monitoring of controlled profit. As a result, it depletes the soil, impoverishes the ecosystem and weakens natural defence strategies against external pressures such as pests or storms.

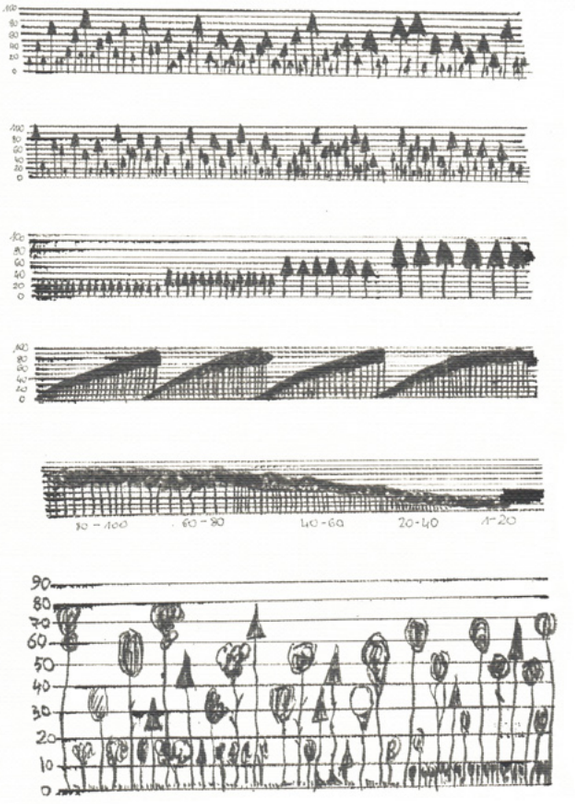
> Since the beginning of forestry, forests have been designed in a shelterwood manner, following the principles of closure. The idea is that in the event of strong winds, they are directed upwards—hence the first wall of the forest consists of low, densely growing shrubs, followed by slightly larger and wider trees, preferably deciduous and 'fire-resistant' trees (birch), and only at the very end resinous (and therefore flammable) and tall trees reaching up to the sky, such as pine, spruce or larch.

In the distant past, mixed forests dominated the Tuchola Forest. Beech, pine, hornbeam, linden, aspen and oak trees lived here. Predatory forest management, i.e. a model of forest use focused on rapid timber harvesting, had been intensifying since the 17th century. It was this practice that depleted the land and led to the creation of a pine monoculture.

> I've often heard from people outside the region—usually scientists, researchers, activists and environmentalists—that a forest laid down by the wind was not a 'real forest'. The commercial forest planted a hundred years ago was sometimes called a crop, a timber factory, a plantation. But no one here talks about it that way. For the residents, this forest was their living space. They found it beautiful as well. They marvelled at its qualities. To this day, they remember singular trees; they have a special relationship with them, and stories are connected with them. I grasp these narratives, imagining the shadow of a large spruce, squirrels on window sills, and morning mushroom picking. The forest was a point of reference, a definition of the world. It gave identity.

Map of the State Forests of the Republic of Poland, 1937

The remains of spruce trees felled by a storm in Duża Klonia, which we are walking towards



Dancing trees arranged in a stepped formation. The gale also stirred them into dance; the need for movement demanded to be noticed.

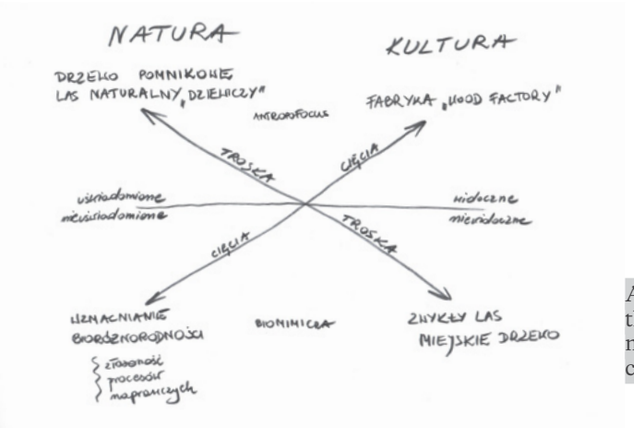
I am guided by the most general question that I have in my gut: what do we, as a society, value? How do we value it? What different protection regimes do we have and what value do we attach to them? Is it about the forest or about people? I am not questioning the rigid division between a timber factory and a real forest—I understand that there is a difference between a strict reserve and a monoculture. But at the same time, it seems to me that there is a similarity between the Tuchola Forest after the storm and those areas of the Białowieża Forest that were managed forests. When we think of them only as 'monocultures' or 'industrial forests' that no longer exist, and, well, too bad, there is no regime of care there. Perhaps there is something productive in thinking about areas transformed by humans as naturally valuable.

Reconstruction of a fragment of a conversation with Olga Cielemęcka that took place in the winter of 2023

After the storm, it was decided to break with monocultural extractivism and revive the old ecosystem in those habitats that carried soil of even slightly better quality. Deciduous trees were reintroduced—oaks, lindens, alders, hornbeams and even maples. Part of the forest was planted in a nursery, using knowledge about the mutual support of certain species through their roots and mycorrhiza. The planted trees are intended to support one another in the process of forest regeneration by forming root families. These are designed to guarantee stability and restore biodiversity. It's a forest planted with a view to a hundred years of growth—during this time, the trees will create such a strong root system that the only force threatening them will be the logger's chainsaw.

The categories of what is spontaneous or natural and what is planted and artificial have long been questioned—and continue to blur. The use of natural processes helps foresters in their work. This biomimicry offers hope that in a hundred years, part of the forest planted today will be a healthy, diverse ecosystem. If this comes, will we dare to call it unnatural and cut it down?

I want to weep over the forest that was a factory of planks and which the wind took away. May the system of care also embrace it.



A semiotic square attempting to define the relationship between what is valued more and less depending on the nature—culture classification.

The intense time took its toll—Lucyna visited the emergency room twice during the three weeks following the storm. For weeks, her body was in a state of constant agitation, exhausted by lack of rest and subjected to adrenaline overproduction. When the impulse disappeared, her body sank into illness: shortly after the storm, she was diagnosed with cancer.

> Since it happened, I've been trying to be tough. If I remain soft, just like I used to be, I will collapse. I have to be a little tougher, not all sentimental. [...] I really like these forests. I like to observe what's already there, observe with hope what's to one day be, perhaps even within my lifetime. [...] But I know that if I'm not tough, I will collapse. Tough, meaning that it doesn't cost me so much. This year, I already collapsed after losing my mother, and then my brother-in-law died....the things we get to experience. I must admit, I ransomed my time after the storm with stress [...]. I gave my heart, my time, my whole self to this action—and I would do it all over again. However, the emotions that were tearing me apart [...] were too strong. I don't know if it's because of that, but now I have cancer. [...] I've already had radiotherapy and surgery, and I'm still undergoing treatment. And these are things that may have resulted from such a 'blow' that knocks you off your feet. I must admit that I thought it didn't apply to me. [...] You know, when you have such an adrenaline rush that at some point your body can't keep up with it anymore, that's what happens.

The vastness and intensity of the activities exceeded the capabilities of local activists. They did not let others down, yet they overstepped themselves. Perhaps they took on too much, perhaps they felt they had no choice. It's no secret that the situation arose first from underestimating the scale of the threat, and then from a lack of systemic solutions: either the support from the authorities or the understanding of the needs of groups working in the field. In the early days, residents were left to fend for themselves. So they took up the work.

A lack of balance creates a straight line towards a crisis. Without rest, even the best motivations lead to awful consequences.

The storm revealed the critical condition of the local forest. It showed that the discussion about its economic role is not entirely grounded in economic goals, control, or power, but in safety, health, and relationships. It also exposed the boundaries we ought to set so that our management activities, whether those of care or profits, do not turn into (self-)exploitation and destruction.

The aim of this book is not to tell the story of the greatest storm known in the history of the Tuchola Forest. The Lack of Forest is an experiment that proposes using the very event of the hurricane as a model for testing solutions to the many past, present, and future disasters, which will only intensify in the era of climate crisis. The specific local context points to the need for discussions about ecology, social justice and responsibility. And about solutions that could allow us not so much to feel safe as to settle into an uncertain future. To understand the processes of change and to commonly agree on plans for sur/vivance. The hurricane exposes the dependence of our lives on the functioning of the entire ecosystem, exposing the complexity of regimes of care, commitment and value systems. These spaces require reflection and labour.

When I started working on the Lack of Forest, I thought that this event had marked these lands with violence. But violence was here before. The storm only revealed its layered nature.

Stills from a video recording by Łukasz, September 2017

Traveling the same route with Łukasz, 2025

The new forest will not be reborn in the same form as the one that disappeared. Along with it, certain practices are fading into oblivion. The residents feel that the storm has sealed certain processes. It has definitively closed a certain chapter. Farm animals are disappearing from the village, and people from the city are moving in. The disappearance of the forest has revealed the land's potential—no longer as a forest, but as a set of plots that can be transformed, sold, or built upon. The law states that forest areas should be rebuilt not built-over, but there are a number of rationales for subverting this rule.

We don't wander into the forest anymore. But we used to. Sundays were a walk. Besides, we used to walk through the forest to get to work. The forest wasn't that important, or perhaps it was, it was simply there. No one really paid attention to it. Like with a street in the city—you'd just walk through and you wouldn't notice it. Now, when you walk, you think a little differently. You wonder about how it used to be. Although, now everything has grown over a little, so there's not even a trace of what was "after". The perspective is different now, because it's been eight years. But you do remember that it once had been... The world has changed more than the forest. Because it all wasn't like that, and the forest too, wasn't...

(I want to ask what it was like, but the question sticks in my throat. 'Like that.' Important? Meaningful? Why can't I say it?)

[...] it was just a piece of road, that's all. And after the storm, the world transformed. Development continued and new plots were created. The village is now becoming some suburb, there are more people everywhere, everyone wants to have a house like those in the city, everyone has money and a car, and it doesn't really matter where they live. They can live wherever they want and destroy everything around them. A bloke is building a house here, where there used to be a forest. He bought about three hectares of land. I don't know how he got the permit, but he's building a house that... doesn't fit in with the environment at all. Most people build houses that don't fit in: they have to have porches, columns, verandas. Although no, there are no porches anymore, no verandas either—now there's concrete. Lots of concrete, corner windows—and it doesn't fit in. It's exactly like in the cities.

I've always liked it here. I first came here fifty years ago. I wanted to stay, and I did. But today, there are no villages left around. The potato mounds, the meadows for silage, are all ploughed, and there are fields everywhere you look. Villages are where farmers used to live, but now their children have gone to the city for work and everything has been sold off. The countryside is no longer ours.

Today, all the roads are paved. They were paved after the storm. There used to be a road here. It was not very busy and picturesque—now everything is paved and it has lost its charm.

The distances have also become smaller. Because when there was a forest, it was quite a distance: you walked and walked through it. And now you can see everything from everywhere. Unfortunately, a lot has changed—Łukasz is moved as he shows more photos—Everything is done on a large scale; the entire structure has changed. There used to be small farmers, and now there are businessmen who don't care about the forest. Why would they care about the trees—the crucial thing is to be able to plough easily.

Everything is changing here. Planting a forest means ploughing, sometimes very deeply. The effect will last for decades. It will not be a nice, smooth forest. Everyone wants more and more. The village that used to be is here is no longer. When we first moved here in 2000, cows used to graze in the meadows, but now it's a thing of the past.

Utterances by Łukasz and Krystyna,
Lotyń, 2025

Those who are here today are left with forms of remembrance. The landscape intrudes on reality with all its opacity. The forest is always something else, whether in a feeling, in a memory, in an image or in a story. The hurricane has exposed all its layers: historical, natural, social, personal, collective, financial, economic, political, familial, and emotional. Lives that had previously converged—people and trees, clinging like skin to bark—have scattered. It is no longer possible to designate a common place here. You ought to take any space that becomes free, a couple of centimeters away from what's known.

Remains of wooden fencing around a meadow used for grazing cattle.

The exploited land remained bare and in need. Sick and wounded, it accepts our bandages to begin the healing process. Its health determines the quality of our lives.

Nothing will unfold for
us unless we move toward what
looks to us like nothing (...).

Alice Fulton, *Powers of Congress: Poems.*

On the third day after the storm, they set about cutting down a spruce tree in the centre of the village.

When the crisis was over, people stopped going to the forest. Some still showed up in response to organised activities, like tree planting organised by the local forest district. But on a daily basis, it was difficult to find a living soul here.

> Many people who lived in the forest found it difficult to come to terms with the loss. At the same time, each of them believed that these mournful emotions should not be expressed—instead, it was necessary to show support, strength and readiness to act. Repair the damage as quickly as possible, and do not mention the sad things. The events of that night remained untold, and the loss—irreparable. People's hearts were broken, as they often repeat today. However, their first instinct is not to talk about this either. They stopped going to the forest so as not to confront the disappearance of what was dear to them and not reopen old wounds. Many Forest People find it challenging to look at the void left behind in the places they visited every day, to come to terms with their destruction. When the forest disappeared, the force of decay invaded the familiar space. It was frightening and encouraged repression. But by renouncing the forest, they also had to renounce a part of themselves.

The first people coming back to the forest was only possible once their emotions had subsided and the seedlings of new trees had turned green. A new reality had been constituted. Did the forest miss its people? Did it wait to receive the weight of their bodies, the tenderness of their touch, cosmetic treatments in the form of cutting the fruiting bodies of mushrooms, collecting herbs and roots, lying in the moss? Could it remain indifferent? For decades, the forest had become accustomed to people. Inscribed in the stories of their ancestors, it had become an effortless certainty, a space or a path that was taken for granted. In the face of this indifference, the storm forced a renewal of relations. The time has come to re-establish everything. There is little left, and nothing can be taken for granted anymore—each and every thing is important, and requires caution. We walk through the forest, in the mud, on tiptoes.

After the storm, the fallen trees still had green crowns. They formed a chaotic, sprawling composition. As they are arranged, stacked, cleaned and removed, a composition of woodpiles stretching to the horizon emerges; the music of chopping, the ballet of excavators driving across roads covered with stones. The forest rumbles with machinery.

New Cosmogonies

I was drawn to a forest I'd never known before, and which revealed its entrails to me. It was as defenceless as a huge naked body, on which I could be a bacterium, a cleaner fish or a mycorrhizal fungus.

This exposure of the scale of forest matter changes the parameters of time and space. The exposed myth ceases to apply, but the primordiality liberated from the land's insides refers to distant and imagined spaces. It is a time not only of recreating the forest and our relationship with it, but also of composing a new cosmogony. At The Lack of Forest, we are, in a sense, in the future, looking at the world after the catastrophe. This time is necessary now, even though it is yet to come.

I started a chronicle—a chronicle of the forest after the storm—and I released it, so to speak, into the village. There are four entries. There is no conversation. There is no memory. I am looking for the reason, and I think it is because I am an outsider. Just as you are from the outside, I have been living here for fourteen years, and I can see that they are not traumatised. They are very simple people. Their children—my age, younger—are already more open to the world. The others think: something happened, something is gone, the end. The end. And unfortunately, something did happen. The financial loss for everyone is enormous. But as soon as they managed to get or gain something in return, that's where they draw comfort from. Profit, compensation, whatever you want to call it.

> I wanted to get this group, or at least part of it, interested and integrated enough to commemorate the storm's anniversary. To remember. That's how history is made, after all. I wouldn't want someone to distort this story in twenty or thirty years, to format it, to strip it of our experiences. And it's not that we deserve some kind of reward. [...] But why can't we work and build on such a levée en masse?[1] In situations like this, people can unite. It was unique. [...] And now that life is over.

They [the villagers] don't want it. But I repeat—not because they're traumatised. Although I think it was certainly difficult for the older people from Lotyń. For people who saw the enormity of the losses, it was despair and crying. [...] But when I set up a local association after the storm, precisely to maintain this temporary community, I realised that they didn't want it. They live in the here and now. What was there yesterday and will be there tomorrow, everything disappears—just like this forest. I try to get them to somehow think about it. In response, I hear: "Why? Why talk about the tragedy?".

Lucyna, Lotyń, 2025

1 Lucyna consistently refers to social engagement after the storm as a "general levée en masse."

Similar to Lucyna, I believe that overcoming this form of collective mutism is essential for the functioning of our community. Pain transformed into taboo, shrouded in silence, causes a rupture—not the first in the history of this part of the world. The region has been steeped in suffering for decades. The unclear status of the Kashubian population, German influences, the 'bloody Pomeranian autumn'[2], the events at the beginning of the Second World War—these are stories whose traces are still visible in these lands[3]. It is hardly surprising that people who have been making an enormous effort to forget for decades are tired. It is difficult to turn towards current suffering when the history of eighty years ago has not yet been mourned. The land that was supposed to endure and help hide everything suddenly revealed its weakness and harm. The land, which was a point of reference and a solid foundation for intergenerational continuity, revealed its fragility and transience.

> I had seen the wind as a rousing force, capable of shaking people awake. I waited for flashes of their awareness, for a sign that the wind resonated. No such recognition ever came. There were no conversations, no events, no initiatives, no gatherings. The wind came and went; something disappeared and was simply gone.

At first, I understood the refusal to experience the catastrophe of the Lack of Forest as a capitulation, a sign of a lost relationship, the vanishing of a primal bond. It took me a long time to see in it a protective strategy: against the annihilation of the world, against the impossibility of helping it. Something that had been our foundation, a sign of permanence, something that exceeded the span of our own existence, connecting the distant past and future, turned out to be weaker than we were. Something that set the horizon yielded almost without a fight. Faced with catastrophe on this scale, one must admit that every life, the whole of life, is endangered.

> Though the houses are still standing, our trees lie fallen. We lack foundations. The weakness of this land is our weakness.

2 This refers to Intelligenzaktion in Pomerania. In Chojnice, in Raciąż and other nearby localities, there are places where executions were carried out at that time (including the Chojnice "Valley of Death").

3 About 2,000 people were executed in these areas in 1939.

In the age of climate catastrophe, the crisis is not being resolved, and it cannot be. Yet the answer to it is not to live in tension. Working with the Lack of Forest is an invitation to loosen up. To record the social history of this place and of this forest. To make the effort to remember—in a sense that means caring, returning value and tending. Remembering is the condition for this forest's survival. Thus, calling attention to it triggers processes of renewal.

Photographs from *The Lack of Forest* series, 2019

The Need for Visits

I did not experience the moment of solidarity that everyone here recalls. As a resident without the experience of that August night, I was not part of the collective pact of mourning. Yet the devastated landscape plucked at the strings of entropy dwelling in my soul. With each conversation, I began to understand that my presence at the Lack of Forest was needed. By documenting, by telling the story of disorder, I unwittingly became a mediator of relations, a catalyst for grief. Being an outsider, I carried no burden of that night's storm, no obligations toward other community members. The collective avoidance and freeze I sensed only deepened my need to move through the impasse. I was drawn to the forest's remnants, guided by an almost magnetic pull. I came to the Lack of Forest at a time when everyone else wanted to leave. Today I understand that I entered the forest in response to the absence of presence—in a way, on behalf of those who were forced to avoid it after the catastrophe. I became part of an exchange, a participant in a shared process. I was no longer alone but woven into mutual obligations and duties. That was my role in the life of our community. My form of taking root was movement.

When I realised this,
I began to listen to the stories.

I Cannot Look at the Lack of Forest

We were standing in the garden, doing small maintenance tasks. Rafał was telling his story. He's from Koszalin, where he started a family and worked hard to earn his dream: a house in the middle of the forest. He's withdrawn and unsure in interactions. He wears a tough-guy mask, but he's a sensitive person—one of the first with whom I had deep conversations about nature and art. Rafał moved to Mylof twenty years ago. He loved the old spruces in front of his house, the water, the dam, and the Brda River. The Forest People taught him to love his surroundings and to benefit from them. Together with his family, he lived in his dream place on Earth.

During the night of the storm, he didn't know what was happening. He only remembers that when he stepped outside to smoke a cigarette, he saw countless insects climbing up the walls of the buildings—hundreds of tiny beings migrating across the old plaster. Rafał recalls the moment when he and his wife froze, staring at this unusual sight. They didn't know they were witnessing a battle for survival.

People who lived in the forests said that a few hours before the storm, they saw the animals gathering on fields, in the middle of open land. [...] And then someone said that the animals sensed danger, and they were trying to hide somehow. Even the crickets were seeking shelter high up under the gutters. We didn't know what it meant; we thought, "They're here, alright"—maybe for the light, maybe for something else.

Rafał, Pawłówko, 2025

That night, there were more scenes like that: animals emerged onto fields and meadows, watching people driving by, as if trying to warn them. Yet people didn't understand the behaviour. On the night of the storm, fallow deer escaped from rural enclosures, including one albino. Rumour has it they live in the nearby forests, having assimilated with red deer. And that from time to time, albino deer can be spotted.

Krystyna, Lotyń, 2025

Dogs refused to go for walks. From six o'clock—four hours before the first thunder—they were signalling, whining. We didn't understand their warnings.

Lucyna, Lotyń 2025

When morning came and only the stumps of the trees remained, Rafał and his wife could not believe they were looking at a forest cemetery. They looked at a forest that suddenly no longer existed. He cannot reconcile himself with it. Since then, he has driven every day through places that once were dear to him and now are unrecognisable—dangerous, dark, sad. Once the trees—as if signs—pointed the way home. Today, every turn looks the same. We are travelling across a burnt field, searching for the way home. And for Rafał, there is no real home anymore; his home was the forest.

I simply cannot look at the Lack of Forest—Rafał confesses. I begin to understand the toil of experiencing a catastrophe. The storm lasted a moment. But what about those from whom it took something? For Rafał, the forest was not a point on a map, not an abstract idea or a form of property—it was part of his identity. After its loss, he found nothing that could bring relief. Relief came only from the forest.

A grasshopper climbs the block of flats where Rafał and his wife used to live, and in front of which they stood on the night of the storm

In 2024, nearly six years after our first conversation, I met with Rafał again. He tells me he had a breakdown. Shortly after our talk, he quit his job for health reasons—he had to change professions and his entire life. When he rebuilt his health, found a new job, and caught his breath, he decided to move away from the Lack of Forest. He could no longer bear the tension caused by the wound in the landscape.

He and his family moved to the village of Pawłówko, untouched by the storm. The ability to walk into a forest is a basic daily need for Rafał. Without it, the quality of his life deteriorates significantly. The forest, which he calls his closest companion, anchors him more deeply than social ties. The forest is his home.

Roe Deer Observing the Hurricane from a Safe Distance of a Former Meadow Turned into a Field, found object, wood from the Lack of Forest, 2020