

Jesus and the Cherries

Since 1993, when her German mother bought a house in northwest Poland, Jessica Backhaus has formed an intimate acquaintance with the village of Netno and its inhabitants. As she was welcomed, cautiously at first, into people's homes, Backhaus was captivated by the colourful interiors and slightly old-fashioned charm within, confounding her expectations of post-Communist murk





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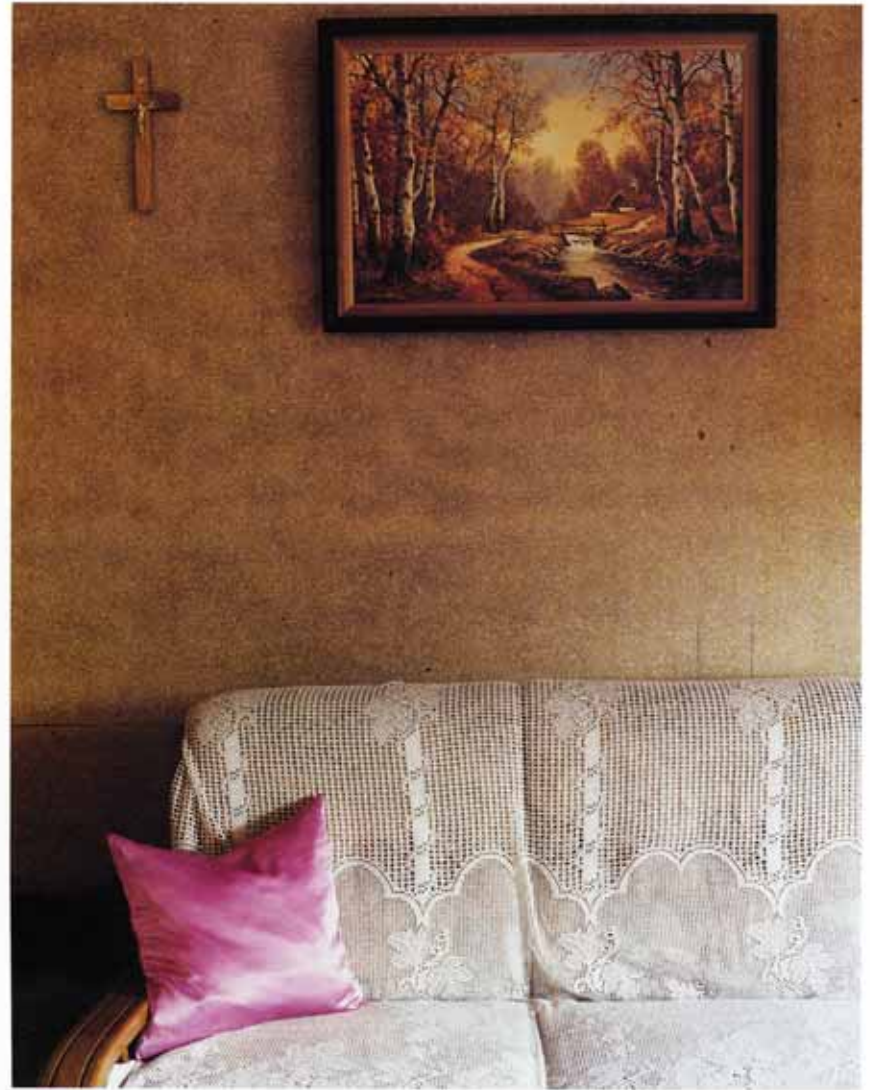
Newcomers are welcomed to Netno with baskets of blueberries. Breakfasting on coffee and apples peeled in one go, to leave a single, long, unbroken coil, or taking tea, poured into the best china, with a square of chocolate, the rituals of neighbourliness are undertaken with a quiet solemnity. The table is always immaculately laid.

Summer sees the children playing in the lakes that embrace the village to the east and to the south. While many local grandmothers have never left the village, pursuing the traditional life of raising a family, the younger generation harbours desires to see beyond. A few trades can be undertaken for the good of the community – the florist and the shopkeeper will thrive – but there is not enough work to go round, and many a young man has turned to drink to while the days away. Like any rural, deeply religious village, funerals and weddings are each year's significant markers, uniting the wider community in sorrow or joy. The village is still grieving over the untimely death of two young Netno boys after a night's heavy drinking.

If you are invited into a Netno home, and you look closely at the prettily patterned walls, you will see intricate hand-stencilling, every design unique. Two things, however, are ubiquitous in the homes of nearly all villagers: Jesus and the cherries. The fruit is preserved in glass jars for the coming winter, red as rubies, a glistening sweet memento of summer. The religious icon keeps watch **8**



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