

# SCRAPS OF A DYING CHEF: A STORY OF PRINT, FOOD, AND TRAUMA

Bess Frimodig

'Where are the cats?' I asked Montse.

COVID-19 hit Barcelona and closed the city's borders. I drifted between libraries and a printing press. Early evening, a midwinter fog softened the stone corners. Suspended in silence, and free from the crowds that spilled out of cruise ships and cheap flights into the narrow streets of the Gothic quarters, the city lay waiting.

Montse answered, 'People are a bit squeamish about cats. They feel guilty. Cannot quite look cats in the eyes.' He added, 'Cats and dogs got eaten during the Spanish Civil War.'

Even after the Civil War, the threat to pets did not end. Spain starved acutely from 1936 to 1942, and then steadily until 1952. Franco's officially sanctioned famine, named 'the hunger years', ensured that starvation was weaponised to stamp out rebellion and exhaust the population. To lay their hands on any kind of flesh, the starving poor stole dogs and cats. Carmen, a survivor, said, 'Cats soon disappeared because they tasted like rabbits, and people just ate them. A donkey that belonged to a coal delivery company died, and it was cut up and sold for meat. Dogs were also passed off as lamb' (Fanjul, 2015). While cats were cooked for dinner, men lay discarded, like drifting scraps of paper on the streets, starved to death. Joy Davidman's poem, *Hic jacet* (1938), says that hunger 'make[s] a picture to forget.' She writes:

*Stiff in the frozen dark.*

*Hungry men in silhouette.*

*Make a picture to forget*

*Strewn like paper in the park*

*Flesh and bone and trouble lie here.*

*The night sky protects it.*

*May they be locked out forever.*

Not evident to tourists, Spain is a country with a traumatic past. Barcelona hides its Civil War scars well. Like myself, the city and I live with glazed-over wounds. At times, the etched lines of my prints act as sutures. To tell my own story, I make use of someone else's story. I bear witness to the men 'strewn like paper' whom I cannot remember. They are strangers, debris of history that I translate into prints that act on the past. I cannot not see.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and information

Figure 1: Print 1 Archie in Barcelona

Figure 2: Print 2 Boca a Boca (Mouth to Mouth)

The war within me that propelled me to wander the world and join battles that were not always mine becomes Archie's story, called *Scraps of a Dying Chef*. It draws on poets and writers, especially George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*; *How Dark the Heavens* by Holocaust survivor Sidney Iwens; Laurie Lee's *A Moment of War*; Joy Davidman's *Letters to a Comrade*; and an amalgamation of three famous Spanish chefs: Ignacio Domenech Puigcercos, Joan Vila i Gelpi, and Jose Guardiola y Ortiz. Driving my prints and the accompanying story, I make use of semi-fictional accounts alongside facts, to reconstruct history. Artists (and, in this case, chefs) often tell a more composite story by embroidering idiosyncrasies, ideals, and desires into a textured brocade. Etched by suffering and transcendence, confusions and truths jostle side by side to weave that complex, contradictory tapestry which is life. Ephemera from the hunger years, its ration cards and books, paper bags with buns dropped from the sky, and poorly published but imaginative cookbooks, make ordinary people's experiences tangible in print recanting day-to-day survival. A polyphonic past, stuffed in an imaginary suitcase, print embodies fractured memories. I pull out the prints altered by the auto-destruction's organic processes to see whether they stabilise to static scraps of paper. Others continue to rot. This is a post-memory print.

*Scraps of a Dying Chef* traces 16 years in print fragments and the cookbook of the British-born chef and Spanish Civil War volunteer Archie Boyd. He traveled to Barcelona in 1936 to join the Republicans and the International Brigade—the anarchists, artists, writers, photographers, and journalists who sought adventure but ended up fighting boredom, lack of leadership, and bad food (Lee, 1991). Archie gets to know Swedish Kajsa Rothman, one of the few women to fight for the Republic. Despite the horrors of the war, Kajsa and Archie do what they do best—dance, and write poems and recipes. When Hotel Oriental's pantry is bombed, they loot what they can, making a meal from crumbs and dregs, wrenching scraps of pleasures from chaos. They must remember to live, here and now, to bear incisive witness. Fromm (1968) wrote that 'Critical and radical thought will only bear fruit when it is blended with the most precious quality man is endowed with—the love of life.' Surviving the Civil War, Archie stays on throughout the hunger years, writing improbable recipes. His cookbook lays out Franco's dictatorship through dishes. In its mouth-watering way, it fights historical amnesia.

Lloyd (2015) wrote in *El Pais* that 'less attention, however, is paid to the way people ate during the war: this may be considered by some as a frivolous aspect, or one which is less politically important, but it had an enormous repercussion for the population, ranging from forced seizures of food to deaths from malnutrition, and, of course, a long period of rationing. Those sad ration books, for families or individuals, were used right up until 1952, so I dare anyone to tell me that 16 years of rumbling stomachs don't have a story to tell.'

*Scraps of a Dying Chef* addresses the silence around Franco's policy of food rations and hunger by adding print to the idea of post-memory.



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3: Print 3 Beginning Journal  
 Figure 4: Print 4 Time, passing  
 Figure 5: Print 5 Splashes Nr.1, Beetroot, Onion - First tests

Hirsch (2012) described the relationship that ‘the generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to the experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right’. Post-memory print interacts with the past as a form of activism that transcends trauma and invites a participatory re-imagination through the senses. Current depictions of the Spanish hunger years are scant, under-researched, or oversimplified, avoiding the layered social dynamics of a society grappling with institutionally motivated famines. Therefore, any work that addresses the hunger years also engages in the politics of historical and democratic memory, and printmaking can be used to construct a critical citizenry ‘aware of its traumatic past’ (Ruiz 2022).



Figure 6

Food seems benign but can reveal a brutal past. To tell the story... a suitcase found buried in an overgrown allotment reveals rotting prints of journal entries, recipes with food stains and coffee splashes, shadow portraits, and seeded images sprouting from the life of Archie Boyd. By constructing the suitcase, an emblem of exile and adventure, I fill it with moments of pleasure. I observe rituals around eating and drinking during the Spanish Civil War and hunger years on scraps of paper: used serviettes, wine-stained tablecloths, and crumpled café receipts. By auto-destruction, the buried print transforms like a traumatised person’s memories to resurface in new forms. Over time, only fragments of the truth remain. Print as post-memory work reframes my own childhood abuse, hunger, and later, occasional poverty that accompanied a gravely reduced diet in early adulthood. By eating, and by having hungered, I make the personal print universal. Growing up in the Bellevue neighbourhood in Malmo, I waited a year for dinner, living on bread and muesli. My mother abandoned the exquisite meals she knew how to cook. My father’s face froze into a muted stare. Becoming a ghost, he subsisted on Valium and cocktails. I was trapped in the trenches of my parents’ warring and violent marriage, where missiles of hatred imploded in shrapnel to leave behind depression. A charred fog of the unsaid hovered across the parquet floors. Just 14 years old, I sat at the kitchen table for a year waiting for dinner, alone, hungry, and confused. My eating was wholly theoretical. I read cookbooks, looked at pictures of hare in cream sauce, and ate crackers. Until I figured out how to fend for myself.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Six years earlier, I fought bullies—the students and teachers at a Norwegian school. Eventually, I went on a hunger strike until I was left alone to stay in bed and draw for three months. Hunger was my choice at that time, but it still tore at my guts. Prolonged starvation leads to the body consuming itself. Initially, ketones amass in the blood, which causes euphoria while serving as an anaesthetic. Protein is the first to vanish, and then the body scavenges its own muscles, including the heart. Convulsions and hallucinations follow. Then, it stops. Curing my hunger strike with crayons, I was surprised to hear my mother say I had a heart as black as ink. Making prints came naturally.

Figure 6: Print 6 Magic, Magico  
 Figure 7: Print 7 Heavenly Chickens  
 Figure 8: Print 8 Traces, First tests

Translating my own starvation into print gives me a method for processing collective trauma. Creative practices hold the important potential for shaping multidirectional memories of European famines that transcend national frontiers and enhance interactions between different 'histories of victimisation' (Ruiz, 2022). Post-memory print is therefore an artistic process closer to activism and less than the outcome of a psychological wound (O'Donoghue, 2018). In my other projects, such as Sprezzatura, Solidarity with Iris de Leeuw and Freedomhouse-Art, Crisis Box with the Catalonian residency Can Serrat, and the Lonely Aubergine working with the NHS, I used print, fire, and food, writing cookbooks, and staging public events making printmaking edible. When print transforms into food, it is not clear what is to be looked at and what is to be swallowed. Plates are silkscreened with vanishing images when touched by a fork. Dinner guests take down from the wall landscapes to eat, printed on oblate with vegetable inks. Mixing and drinking cocktails made from beetroot and vodka gives a tint that develops silhouetted images by time and light. A hallway decked with portraits of fallen fighters erupts into spices in fully scented prints when accidentally touched. By involving taste, smell, and touch, I viscerally address memories around food scarcity including the Dutch Hunger Winter of the Second World War, as well as the refugee crisis and continuing global poverty, to collectively re-sense and enter the experience of wanting to eat. Outside warfare, mass starvation is not always the outcome of natural catastrophes but is more often caused by humans and politics. Governments, institutions, rampant capitalism, and modern warfare drive the speculation and hoarding that orchestrate famines.



Figure 9

I seek phoenix prints to resurrect and transcend years. I wrote a list of print techniques, recipes that decompose images, as well as using time and light as the acid bath. Working with spices, wine, coffee, cheese, and soil on low-grade paper with splashes and grease marks leads the prints to consume themselves, just like hunger makes the body eat itself. I felt that tidy work could not convey the confusion around the hunger years. Talking with a Catalan chef, Jordi Herrera, and drawing from David Arteagoita Garcia's book on culinary serigraphy, I experimented, starting with a fire and blowtorch recipe by Herrera and Arteagoita Garcia's temporal serigraphy.

#### **Trinxat de Coles de Bruselas con Sardinias Ahumadas. (full recipe on request)**

Alternatively, hashed Brussels sprouts with pine nuts and smoked sardines.

#### ***Everyday cooking tips***

- Look for pine trees in your local park for urban foraging.

#### ***Tools***

- A blowtorch to burn pine needles and pinecones to ashes.
- Imagination

In *Cooking with a Few Resources*, Puigcercos (1941/2011) advised using imagination in a time 'when we lacked just about everything'. Puigcercos is closest to Archie. A sensualist, he despaired and reflected joyfully over food. Food, as it also evokes memories of the sensual and the shared, is not always a story of victimisation, but memories of good times and a hope for better still. Half-asleep, he smelled 'the delicate fragrance of a potato omelette, made with two recently laid eggs, roasted lamb or chicken, ham, grilled steak, and a thousand other delicacies'. Awake, he dreamt up eggless omelettes made with flour and water, orange peels for potato crisps, flower croquettes, coffee made from peanut shells, and onion rings masquerading as fried squid. Archie starves but writes recipes because he believes that the sensual and the beautiful must be pursued under any circumstances to defy nihilism. Fromm (1968) stated that 'beauty is not the opposite of ugly but of the false; it is the sensory statement of the suchness of a thing or a person'. If Archie insists on creating, he knows he lives. He, Iwens, and Puigcercos manifested a life force, a kind of radical humanism driven by what can seem to be trivial but arises out of a refusal to succumb to scarcity and terror. They wrote cookbooks and diaries, daydreaming their way through horror and out of the past. Iwens found discarded chicken bones and wrote, 'What luck! I crammed them into my pockets and slunk away fast. I was careful not to be noticed by anyone, as I chewed on the soft bone of a wing. I was in seventh heaven!' Much of his writing revolved around food, having it, not having it, and dreaming of it. He called starvation 'the terrible hunger'. 'And again, I began to daydream. These other people – did they daydream as much as I did? Perhaps some did, some did not.' He described moments of transcendence, seeing the daybreak in a new dawn, a new spring in pastel pink and light blue.

Franco's Nationalists and the Republicans used food shortages to fashion political and social control. Lentils were dubbed 'resistance pills'. Bread distribution became propaganda drives. Food, or what seemed like food, fell from the skies. Barcelona Bombings during the Spanish Civil War describes how Mussolini ordered bombs shaped like sweets called 'Chocollati' to fall on the city. British nurse Anne Murray described how 'we found a whole lot of children, dozens of them, with their hands off, completely off. The Italians had dropped anti-personnel bombs marked "Chocolatti". The children were picking up these things—they hadn't had chocolate for years—and they just blew their hands off' (Lloyd, 2015). While incendiary sugary bombs fell like satanic manna from heaven, Franco dropped bags with bread buns over Madrid. Loaves wrapped in Spanish flags proclaimed, 'In national Spain, united, great, and free, there is no home without a hearth or a family without bread'. The resistance told the population that the bread was poisoned and threw the bags down the drains.

Throughout villages, cities, and on the battlefield, people perished of hunger. Food was always on their minds. A woman in Gutierrez Rueda's (2003) cookbook *El Hambre en el Madrid de la Guerra Civil* cried that they were not afraid of dying. All they could think of was how to get

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rid of their constant hunger. In *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell wrote that to woe deserters during trench warfare, the battle must be fought by any means. Instead of revolutionary slogans, the Republicans told the Fascists 'how much better we were fed than they were. -His account of the government rations was apt to be a little imaginative. Buttered toast! '—you could hear his voice echoing across the lonely valley—' We're just sitting down to buttered toast over here! Lovely slices of buttered toast! I do not doubt that, like the rest of us, he had not seen butter for weeks or months past, but in the icy night, the news of buttered toast probably set many a Fascist mouth-watering.' During Franco's regime, scientists renamed the mass starvation 'self-sufficiency' or 'autarquia', blaming it on Spain being under embargo. Hunger became a tool of control. Over time, mental disorders, apathy, and loss of memory exacerbated passivity. Meanwhile, the rich went to the black market, where all kinds of food were abundant. It is not often spoken about how 'it suited Franco to have the population crippled by hunger and disease. Those who had fought for Franco received an extra 250 g of bread, and the military, guards, and priests were allowed 350 g of white bread. The elite ate paterissie' (Lamplugh, 2017). Franco deliberately denied protesters or their families rations to deactivate political mobilisation. Women trailed the hillsides for thistles and nettles. A friend of mine told me about her grandfather in the early 1950s caught rats by the Barcelona riverside to make stews. Now, the only men 'strewn like paper' on the streets are drunk tourists. Barcelona fizzles with cafes, bars, and restaurants. Few know much about the hunger years. Under the surface, stories remain that defy comprehension.

Conflicts that are not my own have been passed down and hold me captive until I translate my own memories of food into a broader story. When my grandmother—a professional caterer—showed up to shore up my crying mother, Granny served her own cognac-orange jelly on my breakfast Weetabix. At least the morning started well during days weighed down by my mother's culinary atrophy. Since then, I have disguised a private neurosis through loftier campaigns. Fighting other people's battles enabled me to mostly avoid my own haunted family history. Archie's life, a counter his-story, recreates a multitude of experiences around war and hunger, not through victimisation but also through play and sensuality. Hirsch (2012) argued that 'If the trauma inflicted by the Holocaust, the Second World War, and the Spanish Civil War is still felt today, three-quarters of a century on, then works of art that concern themselves with these historical moments can be justified as socially and psychologically beneficial.' Print structures 'post-memory' and describes, in *Scraps of a Dying Chef*, a yearning to reconnect with the past to transform its impact. Unlike trauma, the process Hirsch depicted is not a drive to avoid or an incapacity to face a debilitating experience, but rather the urge to embrace it (O'Donoghue, 2018). The post-memory print gave me—an indirect witness to the atrocities of a Spanish past—the opportunity to understand hunger as well as grow a hunger for stories and the love which food can express.

The past cannot be laid to rest when it trembles with conflicting stories. History leaves gaps and hanging threads that fray and weaken the

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present until truth by reconciliation tells alternative stories. Post-memory printmaking acts as activism when a person's (or a cat's, or a chef's) story makes hunger—a universal need—a tool to address the constant threat of manmade famines by political and economic coercion. Engraved lines trace witnesses speaking and freeing themselves from the tar of trauma. Memories of hunger translate into hunger for life.

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Presented at IMPACT 12 Conference, Bristol, The Printmakers' Voice, 21-25 September 2022 UK September 2022

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IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1: Print 1 Archie in Barcelona  
Figure 2: Print 2 Boca a Boca (Mouth to Mouth)



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Figure 3: Print 3 Beginning Journal  
Figure 4: Print 4 Time, passing



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Figure 5: Print 5 Splashes Nr.1, Beetroot, Onion - First tests  
Figure 6: Print 6 Magic, Magico



Figure 7: Print 7 Heavenly Chickens  
Figure 8: Print 8 Traces, First tests



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Figure 9: Print 9