Untitled

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This work of creative non-fiction explores belonging as a concept that binds two narrators, a mother and daughter—both on journeys, both torn—though what each wants to belong to becomes part of their individual exploration. The daughter's narrative hungers for her mother's sense of home, and in the process, her own. The mother's narrative actualizes rupture. It begins in Poland with an impressionable memory that destabilizes her childhood when she learns her mother is not her biological mother, but rather her aunt. To be in between mothers and later in between countries is not a coincidence or some great metaphor, but the reality of many families fleeing the residual effects of World War II and the oppression of the Eastern Block. The mother, not only speaks of the past, but embodies history. She is Poland.

According to Avtar Brah, who wrote *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities,* "All diasporic journeys are composite." It is a conflation of personal narratives, memories and re-memories with the historical circumstances of the economic, political and cultural specificities within the diasporic experience. The immigrant, therefore, lives in two worlds. The first is imbued in the materiality of the everyday, a locality more than a "home." The second is in the imagination and the dense layers of dreams, the place where the "home" resides.

This book-length project thrives on the tension between connection and disruption since that is the space of the immigrant experience. To emphasize the in-between, the book vacillates between two first-person point-of-views. The voices are meant to impress and bleed into one another, to destabilize the concept of *personal* narratives and bring attention to the gossamer space in identity formation, language learning and historical constructs, which are created both for ourselves and others.

for my family

Contents

"'Home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination.
In this sense it is a place of no return."

Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*

"A Pole is a man born with a sword in his right hand, a brick in his left.
When the battle is over, he starts to rebuild."

Bukowo Phrase, *Poland*, James A. Michener

Flying over Toronto with the sun hovering on the horizon. Summer is near. On this day the sun sets at 8:32 in Toronto and at 8:36 in Poznan. Toronto is not home; it's a stop over, but already the sun feels familiar. Lake Ontario radiates dusk, glows next to a circuit board of liminal lights, where dispersed sunlight has softened the effect of electricity.

Security has had to escort a man onto the plane. This is new. Escorting a drunk in rather than out. The old man stepped with sleep, staggering between dreams, between two airport guards. The extremes of exile collide within Lot Airlines. A couple sits in front with Dolce and Gabbana glasses, Hermés silk scarves. The wife wants a better seat. She leans out for attention. The flight attendants listen but don't seem to care. Blue scarves with blue skirts or pants for uniforms, depending on the woman and they're all women. All around Polish sings its sibilant tongue.

While waiting for takeoff, an erratic discoloring formed in the sky—strokes of black calligraphy that disappeared as quickly as they appeared. A rapidly shape shifting cloud. Only when the plane got closer did the image clarify itself into a swarm of starlings. Watching, mesmerized by their nervous unison, never colliding. No bird left isolated for easy attack. Hundreds of thousands of them—all together.

Later, the cart rattles up the aisles and the drinking begins. The man next to me orders two beers and three double shots of vodka. Asks me what I want. I say no thank you, but he insists, so one

vodka for company it is. Ivan has done this for twenty years, flying back and forth to his wife and three children who no longer are children, but rather have children of their own. He's a butcher outside of Toronto. His Polish is of the East, of Russian influence. Even I can pick up on his accent. He smells of aftershave, wears a beige leather coat with polished shoes and pressed slacks. He looks at the flight attendants and tells me they get uglier every year.

Do cows eat corn in Canada? I ask.

He tells me he's seen the feedlots. He shakes his head, in English says I know, I know, like he's forgotten something. He repeats the refrain throughout our conversation, always in English. He tells me a joke about Yashiu and Stasiu sitting in a bar, watching the waitresses. Yashiu orders the first round; Stasiu comments on the ugly women. Stasiu orders the next round; Yashiu comments on the ugly women. They do this two more times and then in the fourth round, Stasiu says, We better get out of here. The waitresses are starting to turn me on.

Ivan points to one of the flight attendants and says, She's not so bad. A man stumbles through the aisle to the bathroom. Ivan keeps talking. Tells me the older he gets the more he wants to return, but he can't. He'll still miss things here. He's tired, but keeps talking, almost afraid to close his eyes. A few rows ahead of us, the escorted old man starts sneezing convulsively. The flight attendants move the man next to him, pity in their eyes, not for the escorted man—here, they laugh, we all laugh—but pity for the man next to him. Another man comes to the flight attendants' station, orders more drinks. All these men are in their sixties. All these men drink with conviction. Not like the young ones who toast to the future with beer, and then sleep. These men of their sixties know a different history. It's not a simple matter of generations.

My cousin Michal, only a year younger than me, tells me he remembers minor details of communism, but he says the up and coming generation knows nothing. He says, Still we all carry the guilt of time. We got lucky. Our parents didn't.

A flight attendant chitchats with Ivan while he orders two more vodkas. She looks me up and down and tells Ivan to be on his best behavior because he's sitting with a lady. I blush because I just laughed about the size of her ass.

Ivan can't believe I came to the US when I was six. Your speech is refined, sophisticated, he says. I grow aware of our class difference. But I have been raised to understand class beyond its economic implications. I have learned about the simple gestures of history. Like with the Russians during WWII and beyond. When they divided intellectuals from workers by a simple display of hands: coarse to the right, smooth to the left. The gulags for the intelligentsia. To dig coal and gold. To make room for farmers and workers, who in turn occupied those vacant homes in the cities. Livestock roaming streets, feeding on spurts of green between cracked concrete. I can't get an image out of my mind. It's from a book I once read about General Anders and how he walked the Polish Army out of Russia to assist the allies first in the Middle East, then Northern Africa and finally Italy. Most never returned to Poland. Exiled or dead. But the image I can't get out of my mind is from the northern reaches of Siberia in those gold mines, where frost erased limbs, leaving stubs of legless, armless men to slither in the snow.

I don't know why we left Poland.

My mother tells me it was a matter of napkins. On a visit to a half-sister in Sweden two hours vanished in an aisle in a grocery store, her mind spinning from abundance. She pattern-played with prints and color as a child locked into possibilities. It was the seventies. Swedish drunks didn't look drunk wearing suits—so clean shaven and fresh. Highways had more than two lanes. Houses came in colors. Concrete didn't crack. She fell in love with turquois polka dots.

My father tells me a joke.

A man dies and goes to heaven, but quickly gets bored of all the praying, chaste men and women, so he tells Peter heaven's boring. Peter decides its time to show the other side and schedules a visit to hell. There, men and women drink, play cards, act glutinous, fuck, have fun. A week later, after returning to heaven, the man tells Peter he wants to move to hell. Are you sure? Peter asks. Yes, yes. When the man gets to hell, Satan greets him and orders him to enter a pit of billowing flames. Wait, wait, the man yells. Just a week ago I was here and everyone was partying, having a great time. Satan shakes his head and says, A vacation is vacation; immigration is immigration.

When I ask my parents about our first years in the US, they tell me they don't remember anything. They tell me to look at the photographs or watch the videos. My mother says to me, Your father was connected to filming like a cancer patient is to chemo. There should be plenty to watch.

It took my father two years to send me twelve videocassettes. He said he had much more, but those twelve were from before the divorce.

You probably don't want to see the rest. They're mostly of my time with Grace.

He was right. I didn't want to see them. Hollywood had shown me enough of "the other woman." I didn't need more. My father took two years because he'd filled another women's attic with his belongings. He no longer knew what was where.

You know Grace and I were together for eleven years? She wanted to have children with me.
I didn't know she still could.
She was much younger than your mother.

He paused, waiting for my reaction, but I wouldn't offer him one. He continued:

I told her I already had children.

He said it like it was supposed to make me feel better, like he had been considerate of my brother and me. Still a part of me wanted to say thank you.

My need to return to Poland now differs from earlier visits. At thirteen and traveling in trains and Grandpa's Fiat around the country, just to relearn family and place; after high school, backpacking Europe with a friend, a short visit to Grandpa, so short regret lingers; a year later burying Grandpa; after college, making a documentary about my grandfather with my brother; twice more visiting family with my mother. Never alone. Always shadowed.

Now I need to be alone, to give room to the senses. I need to smell spring. To see the streets my parents walked, where I teetered. I need to pay attention to details. To take responsibility for my voice, to wander and speak my first tongue, to announce my Polish with its American accent.

I wake to Ivan eating rye with ham. He's drinking coffee. I vaguely recall the images in my dream, but know I have dreamt in Polish. Before sleep, I read Fanny Howe: "To return to past voluntarily, to suffer remorse—signals spiritual progression. Ivan and I look at one another and he says, I know, I know."

I ask my father why we left and he says, to give you and Tomas a better life.

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My face became my mother's at thirty. It happened suddenly. Maybe while I was sleeping or walking the dogs, and though I didn't feel it happen, it did. My cheekbones became more pronounced while my eyes dimmed to a lead grey, wanting to hide. My lips collapsed to paper-thin. My hair thickened and kinked. Though blessed with my grandmother's complexion, so smooth at eighty-one, when my face became my mother's, a wrinkle left its mark between my brows.

I can no longer look into a mirror without feeling loss. The transformation came as no surprise to my mother who said, It's about time you looked like me. I asked what she meant by this. She said: If you don't understand me now, you never will. Then she added, You know I had you at thirty.

There's a photograph of my mother in the kitchen of our home in Poland. With one arm she leans on a chair, a heart carved out of its back. An embroidered paisley tablecloth covers the

table. It's a black and white photograph extenuating the darkness beneath her eyes. Her stare is vacant. The other arm holds newborn me.

> Most babies when born cry dry, not you. You cried the hurt out of me. You shed real tears. You shocked the doctors. They watched you cry for hours.

Before we arrived in the States, we had first been fed Germany. October of 1984. We had our passports and visas ready, my mother tells me. How is a matter of debate. Ask your father. Maybe he'll tell *you* the truth.

We were all to leave on a train, but my mother's half sister Kristina offered to drive us through the border of a divided Germany. She was on her way back to Sweden, back to life in exile, a life she started at eighteen. Driving was a way to save money. But there wasn't room for my father. He was to meet us a week later. I was five. My brother eleven. We took only enough to appear to be going on a vacation. We left a house and garden and Grandpa in the house with the garden.

> Your father was all too happy to wait to leave. Maybe he had some unfinished business. I don't remember, but when he arrived in Germany, he arrived with some blond whore.

My mother got it wrong. We didn't all have our passports. We weren't all supposed to leave on the train together. My father got his passport later and still had to wait for his visa. The second he got his passport, though, he told the three of us to go. Kristina wasn't part of the plan, but she insisted it would be no problem. She had a way of making something simple complicated.

My grandfather stood at the front door to our house, Haba, our basset hound, at the gate, pawing beneath its links. A blue and white blanket of kittens covered me in the back seat. Woolen blanket is one word in Polish. I may have imagined this goodbye, but I remember screaming in Germany.

My mother left for only a minute. That's how she put it. Alone in a hotel, a makeshift refugee camp for Poles and others behind the Iron Curtain. Five years old and swaddled into childhood's misperceptions of a sprawling mattress, a desert of duvets. Waking to no one in the room. An eddy of cool air from the balcony, hills snapshot into view, shutter-like behind unfurling curtains. My mother says she heard me scream. She ran, the bag of milk bruising her thigh. I don't know where my brother was.

I call my father. I ask him how he got to Germany.

> I took a ride with a woman. She was visiting her husband in Hamburg.
> What was her name?
> Ela.
> Did you do anything with her?
> What are you asking me? He chuckles. I can imagine the smirk, the half curled lip. Are you using this for your book? I remain quiet. Some things will have to remain hidden, he adds.

We stayed in West Germany for two years. It left its residue. It offered my mother a vision of an easier, prettier world, feeding her aesthetic sensibilities: colorful sponges, shoes that fit, translucent hosiery, manicured parks, town squares with life and color. Produce without queues. No coupons for coffee and meat. No need to barter, to exchange cigarettes coupons for chocolate—neither my mother or father smoked, but that did not matter. Equal distribution had to appear consistent, though the populace had no illusions of classlessness. Cigarettes to non-smokers, sugar to diabetics, meat to vegetarians—equality to all.

Your mother went crazy in Germany, my father tells me. She bought a pair of leather boots the second she crossed the border. 400 Marks. I was trying to find a way to help us survive and she went shopping.

My mother said they were as soft as butter. They lasted a decade. They made her feel beautiful.

But my father got it wrong. My mother bought a pair of boots, but not for 400 Marks. The 400 went to her half-sister Krystyna, who went wild in Berlin and had no way of returning to Sweden. She had a way with words, pressed my mother to feel indebted for her "help" across.

Germany was where I went to kindergarten and became best friends with an autistic girl whom I thought normal. Where German families lavished us exiled kids with presents during our first, sad Christmas. Where my brother's swimming coach shoved him into a pool because he didn't believe an eleven-year old couldn't swim. My brother nearly drowned. Grandpa visited us twice. Once when the landlord accused my brother and me of pissing in the stairwell, and then accusing us of stomping our feet too loudly. Grandpa said to tell that German we had to live five years with their feet stomping on our soil.

When we arrived in the States, my mother shut down. We had seen America on TV, watched cities of glass and steel rise higher than our imaginations. I touched the screen of Manhattan and said, We will live there, before we had been offered green cards. America. Beyond the image of abundance and comforts, America was a land of freedom, peace, justice and equality. It was all that communism was not. In the year and a half of Germany, the Polish refugee families envisioned Buicks, ranch homes, Harvard and fresh starts. No one underestimated the challenge of a foreign language and culture, but it was all for the sake of a future.

We landed in JFK airport at night. The sky smoked like a distant firework display, no sparks, just a pollution of light and shock from life in rural Germany, where stars scintillated like the luster of

anthracitic coal. Mama sat between the sets of revolving doors on one of our four suitcases, tense and quiet, unsure which direction to face: into the airport or into the street. She turned sluggishly like a fat kid on a merry-go-round. She refused to help my father find out where to go though she was the only one who spoke some English. She sat, turned, waited, turned. Our sponsors were nowhere to be found. Tata took my hand. It felt rough, textured and dry like raw wood. His scars jutted out, smoothed by fresh layers of skin. We stepped into a grey night. In German, I asked my father if the sun ever set in New York. My father didn't seem to hear me.

When I ask my father about this night, he doesn't hesitate; he says, I'm not good at remembering details. That's your mother's expertise. But I remember thinking I had made a mistake the second we stepped off that plane. I wanted to get back on board and return to Germany, but that wasn't an option. Germany did not want us. We were left with a lot of pretending those days. It was all we had.

My mother has never known my father's thoughts. It must have been easier to say nothing than confirm each other's doubts. My parents didn't apply to any other countries for residency. America was the best and why not strive for the best? Its anti-Russian agendas won over Polish patriots. Its political system offered hope, a solution against the burdens of communism. And though Germany remained a historical sore spot, after a year-and-a-half of living off of its welfare system, surrounded by unimagined splendor and riches, Germany presented an alternative as well. Maybe things would have been different if we hadn't lived in Germany. There was too much to compare too once we landed in the United States.

JFK airport smelled damp and lived in. Night was deceiving us. Streetlights lit us up as if we were on stage, and I suppose we were though we did not yet know how to act. My father said to my mother, You move forward and you can't look back. He said this as much for her as for himself. My mother stared blankly at the scuffed up floor, the plastic wrappers whirling in the drafts along the walls.

My father says immigration is hell.

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With six-and-a-half years age difference, my brother and I grew up with two mothers. His, withdrawn, quiet and anxious. Mine, candid and volatile. Only her sadness unified her. I asked my brother if the double life of our mother was real. He said, I think so. I think the divorce triggered it all.

> Why don't you ever tell me stories? I ask him.
> I don't trust my memory. I'd rather not say anything, then get it wrong.

He did more. He learned how to erase memories. Said he did it all the time. I was thirteen when he confided this to me. I asked him how, not needing to ask why.

> You just take an eraser to a memory until it's gone.

I imagined the end of a pencil erasing him before me. I was skeptical. The things I have lost have left their imprints. My brother failed to mention that in order to erase something, it is first necessary to see it clearly.

To Those Who Left Without Notice—

We hide in cupboards made of Russian Pine, so soft fingers leave marks within. Schoolteachers teach only one wrong, one enemy to boast, but school children know to pour brine into porcelain teacups. Their parents say, Sip, sip and grow. We walk for miles. A young boy runs on by, eager to reach the wall of light. He imprints his fingers into a melt pool, collapses a candle's rim and whispers, Burn, burn. We are always in need of martyrs, reads an engraving on the sidewalk, lit by a Coca-Cola sign. Between black and white lies a disinterested grey. The boy, now a pale pearl color, turns and says, The only way to wander is to leave one's home out of sight.

We landed in JFK on February 1986 and not long after our arrival, the diseases followed. We were all infected one way or another. All of us—except your father—got sick. But he always had his forms of comfort while for the rest of us—you, your brother and me—our bodies started rejecting our surroundings.

You puked up pizza. You yellowed like the plastic floor of the rectory where we lived. I worried someone was poisoning you because my mind began rationalizing the irrational. We felt so unwanted and when I saw where we were to live, I started doubting everything I had once been told about America. We had anticipated a rich country because rich and America were synonymous growing up in Poland. We were not naïve enough to think the streets would be paved in gold, but the poverty reaffirmed itself everywhere we turned—children walking around in plastic shoes and eating plastic cheeses, trash bag dunes separating streets from sidewalks, vandalism, boarded up broken windows, parks full of cement, lawns brushed by gliding trash. This looked all too familiar. We left one form of poverty to bear witness to another poverty—from empty shelves to empty opportunities. And the abundance, the tease of accessibility, took on the form of empty promises. All fluff, no heart. No quality. And then can you blame me that poison took on purpose? Poison seemed rational? But your puking was just the beginning.

A glittering and glowing world embraced us. New York City was a sea in a sea with its own source of light for navigation, rendering stars superfluous. The noise, the metal and smell of dirt

and waste alerted my senses, an adrenaline rushing toward exhaustion. My flight instinct kicked in but I had nowhere to run. We were the only Polish family in a van of refugees transported into Manhattan. The world turned upside down when city lights reflected in the river like the sky we had just left behind in Germany. And into the canyons we went. Shooting lights trailed behind our speeding van—fissures of jittering neon and fluorescence. We arrived at our night's rest on 32nd Street—our Ellis Island. A city is not a city until it is walked, until bodies feel the clench of buildings. I knew cities. I had lived in them. I knew to expect the dirt and grime sticking in the corners of city life, but this felt other. Nothing familiar, nothing tender. We stood unloaded unto a sidewalk like a piece of luggage. Staring up imitated the sensation of staring down, feeling the butterflies flutter—a fear of heights without the height. And only four suitcases to carry us along. You remember the room, don't you?

Caritas sponsored our immigration. A Catholic organization that placed us within the rectory of St. Anthony's Parish in Jersey City. Here we met Wojtek for the first time. We lived with priests and ate dinner in a room with fake wood for walls, but everything I put into my mouth tasted of cigarettes and the chemicals used to clean up after cigarettes. The rector was fat and impatient. I refused to be a charity case. We all slept in a yellow stained room, a smoked dungeon, for six months, and each additional month we stayed, the rector grew fatter. I cleaned and cooked for payment and the privilege of letting us live there, though I didn't need to feel that way because we had been placed there as part of the refugee program. My own expectations of what I was to cook and clean at the rectory began to burden my dreams, so I would wake thinking the shopping had already been done, the tub already scrubbed, but when I walked down into the basement kitchen, the one with bunker windows, the fridge was always empty. I refused to be indebted, but time proved I needn't worry since little was offered in return.

Six months is all we were given to find work and a place to live, after that the assistance given to immigrants would end. Within the first month your father found work in a paper factory. I cleaned the rectory and other people's toilets on the side. You children walked less than a block to a school with uniforms and uniform thinking. The school was only a few steps away, but still you would run home to me, crying. Your brother said he grew stupider everyday he stayed there, but what options did we have? You came home with colored-in coloring books to show me the lessons of that day and your brother had no coloring books, so instead he sketched into the margins of his notebooks. I think this is where his roots for art took. Your father and I started attending evening classes for English in Jersey City Square. We kept searching for our place to live, but without a car and with basic English, we couldn't go far. Every afternoon I took my tea to my room and sat at the window, staring at a wall twenty or thirty feet high, which not only blocked the view, but kept me second-guessing our decision to settle here. The wall, after all, was much higher than the Berlin wall. We had moved thousands of miles, six time zones, to stare at a literal wall.

Initially the rector drove us around, but as time went on and we continued living under each other's breaths, his willingness grew slower to react even though he never denied us. The fridge became a battle zone. Us versus them. Labeling this, separating that. When something disappeared—a yogurt, a sponge, a plate or book—you children were the first to be blamed, and then it was on us. I begged to move as quickly as possible, but with your father being as cheap as he was, everything took longer.

On the weekends we went looking to sift through apartment after apartment. What fit into your father's budget did not fit into my aesthetic—and probably not his either, but he would not admit it. We all moved forward because we had no option but to move forward, but your father sprinted and left me behind with dirty carpets, low-lit dungeons, strange chemical smells and strange windows. Lift to open, someone told me. One side slide over the other and all I thought was my hand could not fit between as if something was wrong with my hand and not the design of the window. So for years, almost two decades, all the windows I ever cleaned had dirty strips where my hand could not slide in to wash the other side. Dirty little reminders of what I had left behind.

Finally, an apartment faced a park and with more green than I had seen in months, I became hopeful, even pleased. A lightness entered into me and for a moment I had forgotten the daily burdens, but when we walked into the basement apartment of this brownstone, the weight set in again. Window ledges painted thick. Dry paint dripping from door hinges and light switches. If the apartment were an image on a canvas, it would appear as though one brushstroke of paint colored in every detail. Except for the glass on the windows, beige coats on top of coats of unknown colors. Some windows were painted shut. One bedroom had bunk beds where the lower mattress was covered in layered splotches of urine. The molding of the entry door endured a steady rhythm of glistening roaches—a jittery rush-hour crowd. Your father, blind and impatient, said, We'll take it. I grabbed him by the arm and pointed to doorframe. You can sleep here; I'll sleep on the bench in the park.

When we eventually found a home to settle into, the skin on my bunions and heels had rubbed raw and bled, staining through the leather of my white shoes. I found the advertisement on the

community bulletin at St. Joseph's Church. A Polish name. A sigh of hope. Our prides grew too large to swallow and we refused to ask the rector for anything. We didn't know the transit system and even if we said, "Where is this street?" or "How do I get here?" we could not understand the American English spoken outside of classroom. The consonants muddled, the vowels elongated and endings drifted undetectably. And so we walked two and a half miles.

When Florence, the landlady, saw shoes spotted in pink, she soaked my feet in a bucket of lukewarm water. She patted my soars dry. She cradled my feet to bandage them. So that even before I saw the apartment, I wanted it—if only because of Florence, because someone had finally been kind.

The apartment had linoleum floors, those idiotic windows, a layout where one room opened up to another—a ball rolling from one end of the apartment could bounce off the wall at the other end. But it had a window over the kitchen sink and it had Florence. She understood Polish, but didn't speak it well. The building belonged to her family. She grew up in the neighborhood and watched it change from immigrant white families to the collage of colors it had became. That's why she was happy to have us even with two kids. She wasn't about to let the building go to a bunch of black tenants. Our first lesson of racism.

Grant Avenue is where we lived for five years. Puerto Rican, Dominican, Haitian, African American—we could barely tell them apart. That's how white our world had been. But music navigated the differences and you and your brother taught us how to listen and what to listen for. You knew the nuances better than your parents. You had become our teachers. You said, boom boxes blared Latin music on one side of the street, rap on the other. I just said, Grant Avenue is

loud. Our thin walls bounced TV murmurs from apartments below and beside, while neighbors yelled their greetings and gossip. Babies cried. Cars honked into the night. Some mornings I could not hear the alarm clock because my ears had been trained to tolerate noise.

Boys stepped to an unheard rhythm, heads cocked with bodies slanted, one leg dragging behind the halfway bound of their stride. You said this was a culture. I said I knew about culture and to me they bobbled like drunks and I knew drunks, but these boys were too predictable to be drunk. Pants drooped and sagged. Your father called them shit-filled diaper pants. Again you told me it was a style, but I knew style and if this was style, I didn't know where to begin feeling sorry. Children used the streets like playgrounds and I feared for them all, holding my breath when cars rolled down Grant Avenue's hill.

With our remedial English we had to fill in gaps. We watched and mimicked and pretended to understand. Usually the body signals were enough, but some signs seemed stupid and absurd like the pointed middle fingers, which we interrupted as gestures of hello. The world moved in symbols and we waited for reactions to instruct us. We examined Grant Avenue through a strip of dirt on the windows, through smudges and water stains while indenting knees on the plaid of the welfare coffee-brown sofa. Grant Avenue of compressed homes with plastic sidings, ornate metal gates on windows, concrete porches with concrete steps and strange umbrellas over windows. We witnessed the laws of thermodynamics unfold before us, theory turned to practice as heat and energy moved along a string of consequences much like watching disturbed pebbles slip down a hill, increasing their speed and immobilizing our imaginations to try and make sense of these gestures. We watched the street below like a family at the silent movies. Grant Avenue flickered.

A stocky white guy popped his middle finger and yelled, I'll sue you motherfucker, and then for days we greeted one another by popping our middle fingers and saying, I see you, I see you. A tender gesture. Neighbors sat on webbed plastic chairs looking at the street the way we lined the Baltic Sea. Barbeque grills were strange and new, but with the summer heat, we began to understand the appeal of cooking outside.

The black woman across the street stomped her curdled thighs, screaming at her man with a baseball bat. The black woman caught another black woman. She flailed her arms, searching her out the way we used to play *babajaga*, blinding one—the witch—to chase and catch the other children. When the other women fell victim, scratching and pulling ensued and only stopped when the man pried them apart. We called her *babajaga.* We laughed.

You children were hooked up like electric cords to the television. I could no longer tell which was feeding which. I blamed myself for allowing it, but the trance of one stupid show after another kept you occupied. Your father too. We were used to two or three channels—two on overcast days—and when we moved to the United States and your father somehow contrived cable TV, the gluttony could not be suppressed. Cues of laughter manipulated a response, training us how to react though humor is one of the most nuanced of languages and I rarely laughed. I still don't know how to laugh at American cinema.

You laughed when instructed to; you cried when the music intensified—little marionettes of American culture, a manipulative, pacifying manual as controlling as the Soviets. But Freedom has many faces.

We all got sick. When your brother sneezed and blew his nose, I thought he had a cold, but the cold persisted for months, then years to the point where a box of tissues became a permanent component of the shopping list. I didn't know what was wrong with him and worst still I didn't know where to go. Doctors were reserved for emergencies and he only had a cold, so we all thought.

We visited the welfare doctors with your chicken pox and came out with a prescription for penicillin. A few nights in and you woke with hives all over your body worse than the pox. For me the seasons brought what I thought were also colds. Come August two boxes of tissues ended up on the shopping list.

Welfare paid for food, not our tissues and toilet paper, so again I scrubbed other people's toilets for the extras. Your father worked too, but his scheming became so intricate, I hardly remember the details of where his money went.

Five years in this top floor apartment, right under the roof to endure sweltering summers and freezing winters. Our first summer heat taught us the discomfort of touch. Our first winter brought longing. The stove turned into a furnace in winter. Frost flaked off the windows. The walls too cold to touch. But sticky and heavy summers offered no release without air-conditioning, so we stumbled drunk from our own sweat and wore tunics of drenched towels and sprayed water on the fan to simulate the type of rain we once knew—cool, consistent, mild. In Jersey City the rains swept in without warning. They carried promise of respite but only disappointed because when the deluge lifted, so did the steam rising off the scorched concrete sidewalks and asphalted

streets. The humidity intensified. Your father walked around in only his briefs, and you made me laugh when you mimicked your father rearranging his balls. The heat muddled dignity.

Life held on in communist Poland. We maintained a sense of decency through our creativity, making multiple outfits from the same fabric, passing it from neighbor to neighbor—a shirt, a scarf, a baby's hat. Recycling originated behind the iron curtain, offering cloths, dishes or anything of use to the less fortunate. We tried to uphold the Poland of our parents. Lace curtains, hardwood floors, long and wide windows—a joy to clean though I did not think it then. No one made us feel like we had deserved hardship. In the United States poverty is an offense, rather than a circumstance. Your father said, We left a system geared for the individual, not the people, and we came to a country with a system geared for the individual, not the people. Jersey City shamed its poor.

Dirty City, your father called it. He heard it from the streets and kept saying it to make us laugh and we did. Dirty City this and Dirty City that. But back then happy and sad had a way of bleeding into one another, and knowing others saw Jersey City for what it was did little to soothe the shock of culture. Dirty City solidified a sense of sinking, the same sinking when walking in the forests of my youth, distracted by the rhythm of my feet until my feet landed in a bog. Sluggish and warm the sinking sunk. Eventually Dirty City lost its humor. Eventually I had to claw my way up the bank to let my legs drop off the weight of mud. Deep in dirt. When my mother saw me she crossed herself and said, You have angels on both shoulders.

The longer we stayed on Grant Avenue, the more difficult it was for me see the details that initially shocked me. The world normalized, but not our bodies. Only later we would learn the

word allergic. Your brother sneezed to the mold growing on the walls and the dust mites in the forest green carpet and the down in his pillows. He was allergic to his home. This must have been a sign.

Grant Avenue had good days and bad days both inside and out. Inside the silence between your father and me steeped with regrets and expectations grew like the mold on our walls, slow and steady. I began seeing your father through a porous wall, a thinly stacked wall of contorted twigs, where tiny crevices were laden with messages, but neither him nor I noticed. I resigned myself to my children long before we came to the states, though I needed much more here than there. My security had gone. The noise intensified—glass breaking, sirens, a fist through a window in our apartment, confetti plate pieces on the linoleum, the crash of books to the floor, the downstairs neighbor poking the ceiling with his broom.

Tęsknota was all we had left. There is no equivalent translation although the dictionary offers yearning and longing as options. Really it's on the precipice of depression, but unlike depression, which often finds its explanation on a physical level, tęsknota is the spiritual equivalent. It's an emotion that stems from the absence of someone or something essential to an individual. If anything it conflates anxiety, sorrow and meditation, but these words carry bits of tęsknota and they limit the visceral and psychological depth of it. Eva Hoffman wrote *Lost in Translation* with that word in mind. It was the first time someone captured the torture of inadequate translations. Chopin literalized tęsknota by having his heart placed within an urn and returned to Warsaw, where it still rests today on a pillar at Holy Cross Church. Chopin's years in exile fostered his Mazurkas, especially opus 17, number 4, which is perhaps the most accurate translation of the

word. A person's home is in their language. And though I had it with me, though I thought in Polish and dreamed in it, I could no longer link it to a place. My home became a dream world.

To Those Who Left Without Notice—

I pull a generation from the back of the closet. Not the one with the shattered china, but accidents still happen. The same ghosts keep scraps close. Keepsakes color memories of a time when the corners of drawers were dry. When Renata curled onto empty shelves, clenching her belly of baby fat. When closeted mothers hid their children beneath varnished floors. Now we scream under pillows. We hide our color.

When Renata turned sixteen, I pulled the red of the edges of sun-scorched roses. She still dances but the music hasn't adapted. A menstrual red colors her body, drapes from shoulders. She swims in scraps of newspaper cutouts.

Our children live in a bottomless pond, the one that cracks an eye in still winter.

Grass springs at the hinges of a new decade. I stitch ruffled ends from white living room curtains. Dab lavender oil on wrists, behind earlobes. We build our children from the bricks of torn down monuments.

Cousins I barely know pick me up at Chopin International Airport. I met them for the first time two years ago on a visit with my mother. Kasia is eight years younger than me—quiet, short with wide hips and an asymmetrical face. Overwhelmingly large, lopsided grey eyes stop me. Michał is petite with a straight nose, pronounced cheekbones and square jaw. As my grandmother says, Michał belongs to our side of the family. I know how Kasia feels—growing up with a handsome older brother. You learn to live for seconds. I try to include her in conversation but her shyness wins. She shrugs her shoulders to my questions. Michał answers for her. She leans into him like a young daughter to her father. Half adult, half child.

We take the bus to my grandmother's, the only one I still have. Turgid clouds compress into color gradients of blue grey. This is not the stretching sky of Colorado, my home since high school. Here clouds rest claustrophobically low and wet pavement reflects tar-like. I tell my cousins how much I enjoy this weather. They do not understand this; they do not live in a land that forbids the collection of rainwater. It is May and already I hear a pair of old women with lackluster pantyhose and sacks of groceries at their feet talk of drought, though I have not seen this much rain in months. The potatoes will not grow, says the one with an exotic bird handle on her umbrella. It's either too much or not enough, says the other with a straw-thin braid. This was not the case in our youth—they both agree.

I tell Michał and Kasia to come in, but they tense up, stand in the doorway waiting. Grandma tells them to stop looking like orphaned children. Kasia and Michał's mother is Grandma's niece. They all live in the same city, but Grandma has only seen her children a few times. I am not sure of the reason why.

Grandma insists on gin tonics to welcome me, but with only one ice cube per glass, the juniper is too biting a taste and the tonic oddly sweet like aspartame. My grandmother asks if I want some sugar in my tea. I shake my head no. Good, she says. Because of that Tusk, sugar has doubled in price in the last month. She shakes her finger and looks to Michał. You probably voted for him, didn't you? Michał doesn't hide his politics. She continues: the young want a change, want to put the past behind, but don't consider the consequences of siding with the Russkies. Michał looks at me and smiles, his eyes are patient, expecting. Kasia half smiles, stirring the solitary cube in her drink.

I first saw my grandmother's apartment in the summer of 1993 when my brother took me to Europe. Tomas was twenty-one and on his way to study art and architecture in Rome for a year, on scholarship from Rhode Island School of Design. He wanted to travel before the program in Rome began. My mother said he should take me. She said it was important to see what we had left, not just the place, but the family. I think she meant left in both senses of the word: whom we had left behind and what family we had left.

Before that trip, it had been a year since Tomas and I had last seen each other. My mother moved me to Colorado in the summer of 1992, between seventh and eighth grade. My brother convinced her to get me out of Jersey City. RISD exposed him to a world of clean streets,

abundant trees, houses with gardens and green, quaint shops and restaurants. His Providence was no hodgepodge of immigrants and their early descendants. No glued together homes, pasted wall-to-wall, with cheap siding and plastic awnings. Crack-pipes didn't supplant dandelions in the parks and streets, and sidewalks weren't parks. Providence offered a glimpse of what we left behind—first in Poland, then in Germany.

If you don't get her out, I will, he told our mother.

Already then his premature grey betrayed his years, but he buzzed one side of his head and left weighted bangs to slant over his eyes, a testament to his youth. My brother ended up taking me, his thirteen-year old, Edward Furlong obsessed, annoying little sister, who was more preoccupied with the color of her hair than her history.

What I knew of Poland was what I had been taught in school in the States. Poland is a land where six million Jews died. Here lie concentration camps. Here World War II began on September 1st, 1939 and Poles fought German tanks on horseback. The land of stupid Pollacks. I had little to be proud of, little incentive to learn otherwise because shame is a powerful inhibitor, a reticent oppressor. And when Tomas and I visited historical landmarks or mausoleums of marble and bronze, displaying the names of Poland's kings and queens in gold, I sounded out familiar sounds with frustration. Mieszko? It was as if I stood before George Washington's grave and didn't know the significance. I was a foreigner in my own country. But I was also thirteen and like most thirteen-year-olds, my own appearance preoccupied my mind over dead people.

1993 was the first time in nine years that either Tomas or I had gone back, just three years shy of Poland's anniversary of the end of communism, two years after its first free parliamentary elections since the 1920s—though my grandfather said the same assholes continued to hold office. In 1993 the last Soviet troops left.

Back then at thirteen, Grandma apologized for her apartment like she would with every visit thereafter, a one-bedroom that at its densest slept four plus a longhaired dachshund. Crowding people in like cattle in feedlots was a strategy. A way of testing people's boundaries, which no longer were spatial, but emotional. They took away our bedrooms. Made us sleep on sofas, Grandma told Tomas and me. Then they took away our dining rooms. Made it *fashionable* to eat on coffee tables. And fine china was a lost bourgeois art form. We were to shame our past.

The apartment was small but bright. The living room alone had three huge windows, without grids, big tilt-and-turn windows with two-foot windowsills, a detail my mother still aches over. Grandma's husband, Henryk, as we called him, welcomed us with shot glasses. In the kitchen, Grandma heated chanterelle soup and Guinea fowl stuffed with a Turkish raisin and liver terrine, new potatoes with butter and dill. She stirred and tasted the soup. A dash of sugar. She told me she never measured and she never understood women who said they couldn't cook. She would tell them, if you can eat, you can cook. Then she looked around the narrow kitchen and added, We weren't allowed a bigger apartment, even with your Uncle being a veterinarian. I told her I never measured either.

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I squeeze between Grandma's dining table and the wall to get to a chair. She apologizes again for the crammed space. Michał tells her not to worry. We had it the same. Four in a one-bedroom no bigger than 700 square feet.

> Kasia and I always shared a bedroom; our parents slept on a pullout in the living room. And now you want to invite the Russians to your homes, she said and left to the kitchen.

Michał raises his eyebrows in defeat. Kasia gets a text. Says she going to a "hey" concert with her boyfriend. Hey? I ask. Michał tries to explain, but we're lost between our own assumptions. He tries to place the music within a genre and I think he's telling me about a style like "jam" bands. It isn't until I return to the States and he emails me links to the music that I realize "hey" is the name of the band—capital H. He sends other music. It all sounds like songs I overheard blaring out of my brother's room when he finally got one at sixteen. For three years he shared a bedroom with our parents, while I had my own room. I was a kid who needed room to play.

The beats and rhythms might have been similar, but not the lyrics. These Polish New Wave songs mourn the state of the country, its drunken citizens. Decrepit buildings. A bleak future. Still they preach love and honor for one's country, not spitting on the flag. One song called Warszawa by T. Love sings, When I look through your eyes, exhausted like mine, then I love this city, exhausted like me.

Odd details of our home in Poland remain locked in from memories of touch. Tracing the V-pattern hardwood floors, picking the edge of the wooden bench in the kitchen. Eating was always a process. Threading my fingers through lace curtains. Hiding behind burgundy drapes in the living room. The brown bathroom cabinets I painted with my father when I was three. The things we touch push back with equal force, but these first memories feel heavy.

I ask my father why we left and he says, I was tired of working twice as hard for half as much.

To think of communism as leveling the classes is a misconception. We had more than many. Though nothing like the Soviet sell-outs, the new class of the "Red Bourgeois," with their silk suits, private villas, foreign holidays and fast cars. The propaganda of classlessness, getting rid of class struggle, appealed most to the poorest but it simply was not a reality. Collectivization was hailed as a path to proper socialism under Stalin, but unlike many Soviet Bloc countries, Poland's farmland collectivization was not successful. My Grandpa was a step ahead. He sold his land before the government could touch it. He "maneuvered those assholes," the communists, and with the help of his brother-in-law, built our house: a two-bedroom with a garage and plenty of land to cultivate.

My father's brother, Zdzisław, tells me there wasn't enough brick in the 50s to build. Black market brick came from fallen walls of the Citadel, a fort on a hill that endured heavy fighting in the Battle of Poznan between Germans and Soviets. My uncle tells me, My childhood home has a foundation of violence.

When my mother married, she joined my father in his parent's home. My father's only sibling, his brother Zdzisław, no longer lived there, already married and alienated by tensions between his wife and mother. There was never any talk to leave the home on Tarczowa Street. Living with our grandparents was a norm. Generations stacked on top of one another forming relationships of care and neurosis. Strange behaviors ensued, but all in all, in terms of material possession, we had it quite good. A large living room where the sun washed the hardwood floors

in geometrical strokes. Light feathering through lace curtains in the kitchen. A basement to store the plum butter, jarred pears, black and red currant jams, pickles, sauerkraut, walnuts—all from the land surrounding the home, all things my father's parents planted themselves. Pictures of the home right after its construction show a barren land. Not one tree or bush. No lilacs.

It wasn't easy maintaining what we had, but then again our father was gone for months. This I don't remember, but my brother does. A small boy, trembling at the foot of the front door, paralyzed in shock when Tata returned. Joy locked in disbelief. Our father had been gone half the year. He brought home a new car and wallpaper. A 1960s putrid yellow with cartoonish moles and rabbits behind picked fences. He probably got it as a hand-me-down, by then out of style in Germany, but when it went up, the neighbors grew jealous. So much color. If it hadn't already made it to the wall, it might have disappeared into another house. But the real thieving didn't begin until we left, once my grandfather was left alone to tend to the house and land. Grandma long dead.

I ask my brother if he was eager to leave Poland.

> Yes. Germany sounded exciting. It also meant I didn't have to study Russian.
> How long did you know?
> Several months. At the beginning of the school year. Fourth grade.
> Who told you?
> Why does it matter? We left. That's what counts.

My brother doesn't share my need for details. Perhaps I am too concrete in my thinking that I want and need to visualize loss, to see what happens between moments of so-called significance. But, for me, minutia is where the heart of stories lie.

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Kasia puts on her shoes in the foyer and Grandma comes in from the kitchen. Leaving already, she says like she isn't the least bit surprised. I say it's okay. I'm jetlagged and need sleep. I ask Michał if he'd like to show me around Warsaw later. It's Friday night after all.

I sense jealousy in Kasia when Michał accepts. I might be projecting. I used to feel this way over my brother, especially when he went out with other girls. At the door, Kasia curls under Michał's arm and hugs him and doesn't let go. Watching them brings discomfort. My jealousy of Tomas might have been my process of acknowledging time, knowing that at some point my brother and I would leave our households and grow-up. I would be replaced, not as a sister, not ever, but in terms of connection. It was the only way I knew how to mourn over the loss of my childhood bond. But Kasia and Michał seem to have held on, and I'm not sure what is normal but watching them makes me miss my brother.

We kids used to play spy. We'd creep into the living room furtively to watch the adults drink and laugh and stay up late. The others would say, I can't wait to grow up. This confused me. Why? The adults just sit around and don't do anything. And then, there were my parents. I feared growing up. It looked anything but easy.

Though I've never doubted my brother's love for me, he's actually only said it once.

Tomas and I visited Aunt Jagoda, my grandmother's youngest daughter, in Goteborg, Sweden, a continuation of the itinerary in 1993. We danced to *Red, Red Wine* and The Doors in her apartment. Emptying bottles occupied the coffee table. Jagoda's eyes dulled into dusk. That night

Tomas and I met Katarina, the daughter of Jagoda's closest friend. A glib observation could have mistaken Katarina's reticence for arrogance, but there was no denying a level of mystery and intrigue surrounding her. She was tall, had slender features with dark eyes and short dark hair, so called aristocratic features as I heard the distinction being made in Poland, some lingering effect of feudalism that divided the populace into peasants—short, stocky with round faces and big foreheads—and aristocrats—tall with pronounced jaws and aquiline noses. Katarina had a few years on my brother and older girls made me want.

When we lived in Germany, my brother had a friend, the only girl in his group of guys. She cut thumbholes in her sleeves, slouched slightly, fidgeted with worn edges. She was comfortable in her awkwardness. I wanted thumbholes. Katarina made me want her voice, soft and precise. Mine was deep, manly. I grew sad and Aunt Jagoda noticed, made fun of the pout I didn't know I wore.

My brother pulled me into the kitchen. Something was wrong with me, this he knew. He asked but Tomas was never one to invite conversation when it came to emotions. We didn't talk about our mother; we didn't talk about our father. We didn't bring up the hurt of the past. No first months in the States. No talk of our mildewed apartment. The fights. No hint of Tata's yearlong process of separation. Tomas and I had been apart for a year, placed in opposite corners: my brother with my father and I with my mother. We knew, without saying, blame came in punches from both sides. But silence welcomed us. Poland had no expectations. Travel let us be. Between the thuds of railroad tracks. Staring into cathedral ceilings. Underwater in a lake by our Uncle's parcel of land. In time, we no longer knew how to open up or where to begin.

We visited both sides of the family. When I saw the aunts and uncles, the cousins of my father who had wronged my mother, I felt the discomfort of knowing what most thought I didn't know. I had already heard so many stories, but some families know how to pretend nice.

A fence, the fence of my baby steps, enacted a literal division. Grandpa was out in the yard in a plastic folding chair surrounded by members of my father's family. He stood up and welcomed us in through a six-foot chain-link fence, but my mother's mother stalled, apologized and said she had to get going. My grandfather insisted. Everyone on the other side insisted. But the divorce was too fresh and loyalty needed to be labeled.

Grandma was my mother's mother after all.

All the things my brother and I didn't talk about, the divorce, the fights, the poverty and thieving, Wojtek, how much we missed one another, all culminated in this moment, standing in my aunt's kitchen with slanted ceilings and slanted shadows from the diffused summer nights of the far-north, where darkness is a blink between equal versions of night and day, long lingering dispersed light.

Tomas asked what was the matter with me. It felt strange to admit, but he challenged the silence and I, uncomfortable with this version of quiet, caved. I told him I didn't want him going out with Katarina. He seemed surprised, but he wasn't stupid.

> You know I love you, he said.
> I shook my head, avoiding his eyes.
> This time the silence got to him. You're the only one I love, he said, voice quivering; then added, besides Grandpa.
> What about Mama and Tata? I asked.

I hate them. It was slow and deliberate.

I wasn't sure what hurt more: to hear Tomas say for the first time in my life that he loved me or that he hated our parents. Then he told me about the eraser and how he had little choice but to use it. We cried and hugged and all those years of fighting next to fighting parents fell away into the blink of night.

Katarina took Tomas to the bars and I was afraid. I sulked, not fully aware of the reason. But there was more to Katarina. I learned then she was family, but I did not yet know how to connect the dots.

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Friday night. Michał and I meet up with his friends, who spent the day at the Hey concert. There must be eight of them, split between men and women, but not as couples. His friends look like clean hipsters. After introduction, we decide to go to a pub-style bar with rows of long tables and benches. I mainly watch and listen. I'm embarrassed of my Polish, but they don't ask me questions. One girl with boy-short hair and long bangs and a short leather jacket keeps drifting into sleep over her steaming cup of tea. A tall lanky guy with suspenders and a constant smile orders a cheese plate. None of them ask what it's like in America. None of them behave like children begging to stay up late. This generation, my generation, doesn't slam back alcohol. They talk about music, Polish music, clothes and politics. They hope for international cooperation—mainly with Germany and Russia. I speak mostly with Michał, but try to make small talk for fear of being seen arrogant or too good.

We part ways. Michał takes me out on Nowy Świat, New World Street, a wide street with wide sidewalks for patio service restaurants and cafes. The street is filled with boutiques, artisan shops and coffeehouses, which have been serving coffee and tea in china cups for over three centuries to only now compete with the "to go" concept of Warsaw's first Starbucks. With Hitler's leveling of Warsaw there was little left to preserve and too much to rebuild. But choices were made. Choices guided by the new occupiers. So Nowy Świat and Stare Miasto, Old Town, were chosen, but Nowy Świat could only be rebuilt from the early 19th Century blue-prints, which did not include the Art Nouveau additions from the early 20th Century. A literal step back in history.

We find the back road of Nowy Świat. The "peasant" bars filled with youth and cigarettes, though cigarettes are already outlawed. These bars are makeover shack kiosks, each small, each distinct. One all red inside with pumping techno beats. Another green, with barrels for tables, hookahs and throw pillows. We choose one with the least amount of smoke. And we like the music—Bob Marley, Coldplay, Depeche Mode. Over shots of vodka, my suggestion, we get right to the heart of being human—love, depression, personal failures and family.

> I never knew I had a cousin like you. I say. We are mirrors over an ocean.
> Like a *Double Life of Veronique*, Michał says.
> I wonder what I would have been like if we had never left.

A blue haze steams in through the front door. Mothers have a way of conspiring with one another. My mother placed me on a mission to find out about Michał's breakup. A ten-year relationship. His mother, Aunt Ela, loved my mother like her own daughter. Everyone suspects it had to do with the death of his father, but do not dare bring that up. He just died six months ago. Instead I ask about his relationship with Kasia. I ask if he's open with her. Do you tell her things?

He shakes his head. Sighs and says, Somehow it's easier to talk to people who aren't close to you. He looks at me and smiles a devious smile.

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The older I get the more concrete loss becomes. Not just the death of relatives, but parts of myself in the death of memories. Stories slip away, transform and translate into vague, ambiguous tellings that lose the specificity of color or detail. Cabbage fields, not wheat, as the site of a motorcycle tumble. The beet-burgundy of the sofa set, not mustard yellow. The yellow was a blanket covering the sofa. Woolen blanket is one word in Polish.

Something has shifted. My mother's stories once consumed me. Literally left little of me for myself. I internalized the residue and aftereffect of her stories, swallowing her sadness and threat of suicide, churning the hurt into a knot I carried. Silent outbursts disrupted my composure. Hiding in showers and closets to cry without sound. My mother's depression fermented inside me. Angry punches thrown at friends, my father and even Wojtek. I once dragged a friend by her hair down the hall in our high school. No reason. I remember laughing. In time the anger exhausted itself and in the process me. Later, my mother's need to speak out dissipated. Her depression lifting slightly. And I learned to attenuate the impact of her words, not with walls or defenses but with forgiveness. I had to learn to forgive. Forgiveness offered release.

But something has shifted. Now I crave her stories. They fill me. The sadness has not lessened. The same ache grips me though now I allow myself to cry in front of her. Perhaps my mother's stories have taken the form of a bad addiction, but that seems too reductive. The stories no

longer originate in burden, from a need to tell a concealed side of things and to reveal secrets, but for my longing for another side of things—the side of Poland and the stories that come with belonging. I crave her past. Perhaps I want to retreat back to the familiar. Perhaps I have learned bad habits, but I cannot help but question our immigration. How different things would have turned out had we stayed.

My mother has been blessed and cursed to cope and endure her memories. Our family archive. She is unable to let go not because she cannot move on. She has been moving on, growing her entire life. Achieving. Pursuing. Buying a home in Colorado with the hardwoods of her past, watching the afternoon sun slide its geometric patterns and recalling her home in Poland. The details of one place echo in another. Thankfully. Sadly. She is unable to let go because to let go would mean a real suicide. A death to home. There are two types of immigrants—those who let go of their roots and those whose roots won't let them go. For me the latter, the remembering, requires courage. Not that moving away from one's home isn't an act of courage in and of itself, but the latter does not shut doors. It maintains a vulnerable and open space to experience life in a different setting.

I hunger for my mother's sense of home. The exiled Polish poet, Czelsaw Miłosz, who after the collapse of the Soviet Union returned to Poland to live out his final years, wrote in his essay *Religion and Space,* "To begin where I am: the Earth, instead of being a stable, solid foundation, slips out from beneath my feet, and were I, by some miraculous dispensation, suspended about it, liberated from gravity other regions, other landscapes would move past beneath me." Miłosz's ambivalence toward reality is a part of his creative process; the poet must soar above the Earth, be with the gods, while seeing the Earth in every detail because that is where the veil must be

lifted to get a glimpse of the miraculous. My mother's stories lift the shroud of the everyday and banal to unveil a truth, her impressions of her surroundings, her reading of a complex yet beautiful and sad world. A world untouchable for it exists in an immaterial place. She lives in two worlds. One firmly grounded in the matter of the present, the other wandering in the slippery reality of life in exile.

Poland is free now. Return, people say. But it is no longer the Poland of her youth. Her home resides in her stories. In an imaginary place of worship and longing—the unattainable, intangible home. A place I hunger to know, a place which needs to be grounded in language because it has no other material form. If a person's home is not in a country but language, than perhaps that is what makes exile so unbearable—it is no longer about place, but about the illusory space of syntax. A space no one should be expected to ever find, but I continue trying.

To Those Who Left Without Notice—

Ravens come for soil and shimmer, for charm. Christians churn soil for butter and baptisms, and good children learn to play with sand, but do not yet know water expands. A cornice closes in when swooping wings fall. A roof collapses on a boy. He places his ear to an hourglass that no longer tells time. Open eyes blinded against the weight of sand. Glistening distracts even the hungry and thirsty. A mother refuses to leave her house for fear of death digging in her garden. Planting fruit trees requires more width than depth. Plum wine displays two plums on one bottle, leaning lovers. Joined stems dangle cherries on the ears of children. The boy's heart stops. Another child, much younger, learns to swim in a sandbox. A father stops a procession of drunks with shovels. No glass of water, just hands to soil their Sunday's best. Ravens know to follow a shimmer of light, for promise. A father breathes for his son and when his son's eyes open, the father falls. This has all happened before, say the Christian brothers. It is best to cleanse your children pure.

I used to sit in pews to watch the weddings of unknown people. So called conveyer belt

weddings. Short, sometimes sweet, all done in fifteen minutes. No mass, just a walk, an exchange of vows, a kiss. The end. I was only a teenager. I was there mainly for the dresses, my own private fashion show, runway and all, though it might have been the silence that kept me coming back, that silence before the walk, the moment when the organs stopped, when everyone turned to the aisle. Not a soundless silence, not ever.

My childhood wandered off into a forest threatening to never come out. It knew better than to believe in the silence of the adults. Be silent, they said. What is silence, I asked. The absence of sound. There's no such thing, I replied. But I tried it, anyway. I sat amidst poplar and pine trees and pinched my ears shut, but still muted and dull the trills trickled into my ears. I went into the fields of wild grasses and pinched my ears shut and still the chirps persisted. The rustle of humus. The cracks of branches. The landing of falling pine needles.

I began to associate silence with pressure, the kind that evokes sinking, being pinned by water, and something in the architecture of those old world churches—perhaps the ceilings, angles and depths—trapped sound and air. Space saturated with a pressure that left me disoriented, but comforted and the only thing I could think of was that the weight in the air must be the same weight babies feel when they are being born, when embryonic fluid plugs ear and nose canals,

when silence has an actual weight, and maybe that is why people go to church: to feel the initial sensation of life.

The Church of the Resurrection was a short walk from our new apartment. We moved there when I was eighteen, my mother and sister and me, when I already knew they were not my mother and sister. We moved there to get away from my grandfather who also had a thing for silence ever since the Poznan Uprising of 1918 when an artillery shell fired off next to his ear, initially drowning out sound to the drone of his blood pumping and then amplifying each slither of a slipper or crackling of a newspaper for the rest of his life so that we became afraid of our own voices. We lived bound. A single room with no bathroom—just an outhouse—can bind any family in the most distorted of ways. Our new apartment had plumbing and once my mother and sister and I could enjoy baths and teas without pulling water from a well, we couldn't relate to our old selves, the selves that pulled water for ten years into a room where the only nice part about it was the big window facing the garden where Grandma could warm her arthritic hands in the soil.

We moved twice, ages six and eighteen. First from the forest into the room, then into the apartment next to the church. Grandma and Grandpa were not part of the forest, though Grandma was like me and left most of herself hidden beneath its decomposing floor. She disappeared with me, picking porcinis, ceps and chanterelles during summer months when everyone except my mother left the room and went to the country.

Grandma and Grandpa followed my mother and me into the room when the mother I already knew was not my mother took me out of the forest, swollen with a sister I did not yet know I had.

I never questioned why my grandparents lived with us; maybe it was as simple as a mother helping another mother and where Grandma went, Grandpa followed. That was a time when words meant something and "till death do us part" was as literal as it got. They lived through two wars and if those wars did not tear them apart, then nothing could and nothing did. But Grandma and Grandpa had a home in another part of Poland and I don't know what happened to it.

My grandfather was a quiet man who found space in a corner for his cigarettes, crossword puzzles and books, but his quiet put all of us on edge. Sometimes a day passed and nothing happened, but there were other days when something got the better of him and the quiet exploded into screams about something that took place days or weeks ago, about some thought or tale of the wars, scuffing about the things he read in *Głos Wielkopolski*, about Polish exiles returning home and civil unrests and riots in the United States, and under threat of his fists we four women scattered like baby spiders. So I developed my habit of walking out.

I walked out and wandered though there wasn't much to see. The room was in a residential district in Poznan where very few prewar houses existed and what was there was built mainly in the 1950s. Box houses lined the streets, the communist mandated architecture for family homes. No spiked roofs, no ceramic shingles, nothing to remind them of the bourgeois Poland before the war. Nothing too pretty.

There was a playground nearby with swings. I spun in circles, tightening the ropes and then letting my weight unwind the chains. That's where I met your father. I was thirteen sitting and turning in a swing when he came up to me and made fun of my braided hair. He said I looked

like a country girl. I told him he looked like a girl. He lived two streets away from me in one of the flat-roofed homes. He was scrawny and if it wasn't for what he was wearing and his short hair, I would have thought he was a girl. Years later we would meet again, again on the same swings though they spun faster and I hardly recognized him—he had grown tall and handsome.

I got lost in not knowing, a freeing from the world and even from myself, the kind of lost I practiced in the forest, where the land was flat and trees grew in the regularity of labyrinth patterns, where only the slightest of nuances—a rock overgrown in moss, a contorted root crawling out of the grown, a young tree or patch of lily-of-the-valleys—guided me back from my explorations. To lose yourself without ever being lost is childhood.

I memorized the path to the Church of the Resurrection with such precision I could forget about it and here I experienced a different kind of lost, a lost *within* knowing. Domes of tree branches lined the streets. May topple pollen floated in the air like rice in water. Lush grasses and weeds pushed through cracked concrete with equal determination. Concrete usurped the masonry sidewalks of that Poland, shattered by bombs and unprecedented foot traffic, but here the courtyard of the church served as a reminder of life in transition—remnants of roman-pavers interrupt the continuity of concrete, a tangible sign of resistance. Fragments of pre-war Poland lingered on.

When I watched the weddings of unknown people, I sat in the middle pews. Too far back I would have stood out as not belonging and I was already sick of not belonging, and I didn't have the courage to sit up front with the others because accusations may have been made. I was already sick of accusations.

I had no father to walk me down the aisle, but back then a bride and groom walked down together. The only father I had known was the father I called Uncle, the forest ranger who never left the forest. His name was Marceli and he walked me through the forest on his shoulders, and my mother who then I thought was my mother told me he carried much more than just me on those shoulders and that is why the forest floor took him. We stayed on for another year with a new forest ranger in the state-owned house, a worn down 18th century home that once functioned as an estate immersed in the thick of trees one kilometer away from the new train station, where "Budachów" was painted fresh in white on brick and was only a hundred meters away from the old marker, a brick tower of sorts with the other spelling, the German spelling of Baudach, faded white on brick, shreds of shifted borders.

Polish weddings had no expectation for fathers to walk their daughters down the aisle. Fathers were not expected to engage in some symbolic exchange from one patriarchal home to another, but in many houses that's exactly how it was and still is. I'm not sure if it was always the same, just the bride and groom, but maybe it was after one war, and then another, and then an occupation, that with the disappearance of fathers or the rise in incidence of unknown fathers, there was no exchange, only an escape for better or worse.

Most couples wore gloves, either too afraid to touch one another or too embarrassed to acknowledge the touching that had already occurred. Women wore thick chiffon to cover bellies. They clasped their bouquets close. Some did not smile or cry but walked like martyrs. Couples arrived within thirty-minute intervals, plenty of time to scrutinize the flaws, and in my mind I rearranged things to improve the cuts, the stitches. I took away accessories. I added where

needed: a flower, a belt, a button. I craved perfection. I adjusted veils, pulled back strands of hair. I rearranged the bouquets, added a touch of rouge to one but took it away in another. Everything was a matter of perspective. There were no rules, just feelings.

Sometimes I rearranged couples. Short men with tall women just didn't look right. Attractive men with less attractive women bothered me more than attractive women with less attractive men. I liked it when things were off. It gave me something to do.

It was easy for me to fix the wrongs. I had learned to watch for them. The mother I had grown to know as my mother was a seamstress. I watched the veins in her hands slither and pulse like garden snakes when she demonstrated meticulousness in the form of stitches. No need for a razor, she said. Just pick at the end stitch until it unbinds, then pull on one side until you can't pull anymore, then pick the end stitch on the other side and pull until you can't pull anymore and continue until there is no more thread to pull.

She managed to do this late into the night and it did not matter that I did not see a flaw because she had seen one and it had to be perfected. Exhaustion was no excuse. She delivered mail during the day and at night turned into a seamstress. This was my time with her and maybe that is still why I enjoy the night. Our habits define us.

By the way she stood you would have never known she carried 20 kilos of letters six days a week, tall and dignified. But I saw the imbalance. Daughters have the ability to see into their mothers, but you already know this. My mother's left shoulder sagged, not enough for others to notice, but enough for me to see and I saw because the weight didn't come from the bag of letters, but from

inside. Something pulled at her. I didn't know what that thing was and it probably wasn't just one thing but a gradual accumulation, one incident after another.

And maybe it was then, when I realized the weight came from inside, that I asked about the day my aunt with the hats and pretty nails came for a visit to cry to my mother and my mother to cry back to her.

I was no more than five. My aunt sat at a table down the hall. I knew her to be my aunt even before my sister who was not my sister was born. Then she was as she is now: manicured and decorous, fur coats for winter, scarves in the summer, hats of wide rims, hats with ribbons. I ran in from outside, capering down the hall, laughing and distracted. The doors opened to the two of them sitting at the table, at the end of the long hallway, holding hands and crying. I froze in concern. My mother acknowledged me and said to my aunt, No I won't give you the child. Not now. I love her as my own.

This is my memory. I know because I can still hear the thoughts I had that day, They're just talking about some stupid kid. And out I ran through the hallway, through the front doors to play with my treasure of dead beetles. I didn't kill them. I found them that way, and when I returned others had arrived pushing the upturned beetles, dancing around their dead, circling with indecisions, never not carrying their dead. I began thinking of beetles as tiny, armored people who stood guard to protect some treasure, but then I wasn't sure why the dead were treasures though my mother always told me to never speak ill of the dead and when I asked why, she said because they can hear you and through the years I learned this to be true.

They're just talking about some stupid child. So what? I thought. When I started school I learned to write my full name, first and last and I learned to write my mother's name, first and last and so the question was only natural since our names didn't match.

I asked the mother I grew to call my mother and her answer was simple and clear. She sat at her iron Singer, pulling out stitches of imperfection and said it as though not a beat interrupted our conversation. She breathed out the answer. A sigh. That is not your aunt, but your mother, she said and I knew it to be true because I was not angry or sad. It was as if somebody had told me it would rain tomorrow and there was no drought to cure or heat to relieve, but just a rainy day to come, an inevitability. I must have felt it coming. I'm not even sure if I asked why. I think I knew that answer too, but then my mother said to me, Don't hate her. She has had a hard life and has had to make difficult decisions.

Still, the image of the aunt with pretty nails and hats and my mother crying lingered. It echoed through me into adolescence, a time when life amplifies and everything takes on new significance and I did as my mother told me and I didn't hate the aunt-mother. Instead I turned the hate onto the mother I grew to know as my mother. I wanted to wear those hats and gloves and to be the older sister of her two daughters.

The man she married after she gave me to her sister, gave her two more daughters. I finally learned why Uncle Henryk looked at me the way he did all those years. I was her shame.

I wanted to call this mother, this Aunt Stefania, mother, but she asked me not to. I kept it inside, a secret bound by the stitches of imperfection, the ones the mother I grew to know as my mother cut loose. Perhaps she threw stitch after stitch onto the floors of our homes so if I ever needed to I could follow the trail back to the forest. But I had a hunger to feed. I wanted to be wanted. I craved belonging and defied the mother who taught me not to hate, who pleaded forgiveness. Instead, I ate her clippings to bind the starved bundle of secrets, emaciated by lack of expression. And then, with my mother's stitches gone, the Singer long put to rest into the ground, I continued to eat imagined clippings and thread secret into secret. I became a collector of secrets. I unstitched the dresses of the brides, spooling the thread and saving it for what was to come, for my own walk down the aisle, for better or worse.

But in time the secrets bled into each other and the bundle grew bloated, volatile. The stitches weakened. I hushed the bundle of secrets to sleep, but it rebelled and proved me foolish for believing the threads of imperfection could renew their perfection within me. The stitches were an illusion. They held nothing together. Even before we left Poland, the bundle turned on me. It controlled me. It sung its lullabies to me and I drifted. I just wanted to sleep, sleep with secrets.

Before you were born, after the mother I had grown to call Mama had died of a weak heart, after I had moved into the house of your father's family, after I had made my choice to marry a man I no longer loved, I drifted to the train tracks behind our house on Tarczowa. I drifted through the playground and passed a little boy bouncing a soccer ball on his knee and climbed the small hill to the tracks, the pebbles rolling out from under my feet, but I was determined and didn't fall. I stood waiting in between the rails for silence, that imagined pause before the train turned the corner, but there was no pause or silence although distant sounds were audible if slightly

subdued: a dog barking, a conversation in someone's yard, a car pulling into a driveway. I could smell dinner. I could see our house and if someone was looking out the living room window, they would have seen me too. It was spring and the weeds were blooming. The air was clean, no scent of flowers or even grass, just whatever was being served for dinner, stewed meat of some kind, onions and black pepper. I felt dangerous. I felt the rails. They were hot. They vibrated me awake, reminding me your brother was home waiting for his milk. Maybe I even heard him cry. The choice wasn't easy to make and the climb down was more difficult than the climb up and I fell. I scratched an elbow. No one noticed.

This was all I knew of how to survive. I came back often to the tracks, different seasons, different smells. Winter was quiet. Windows were closed and conversations lost to the thickness of frost, but still the rails were hot. I felt them each time to feel dangerous and then I returned, but surviving was not existing and I learned this from you. You asked for your mother like I asked for mine.

You asked when my Poland was already long gone and Jersey City was loud. You snapped the first stitch loose when you told me you missed my smile. All I had to do was pull, but I still kneaded the secrets into one another, fold for fold. It was later that the bundle came undone.

Again I sat in the pews, but here I was forty in New Jersey at St. Anthony's, the saint of lost things and yet I had found my way there at the right moment. The church was empty and that heavy silence should have been there, but I didn't feel it. I didn't feel anything. I had no tracks to turn to.

You need help, he said. You won't survive like this.

It was Wojtek dressed in clerics.
I told him I came for the silence and he told me that in absence lies the presence of God and that was why I was a wise woman and good mother.
Yes, but the absence of a mother is nothing but absence.

It had been four years since I last saw Wojtek. He had been away. He was the one who took us to our new home when we first arrived in the US. We lived alongside the priests of the rectory. St. Anthony's church was across the street and all alongside the street was a wall. We went from one wall to another. It once serviced the railroad high up, but for us it was a wall blocking the horizon.

Wojtek said I had aged. He said I looked sick. He gave me a number. The man behind the number told me to speak up and give voice to what I had withheld. He said it was the only way I would live. He told me this time and again and I asked, What will the children think? What will they say when they learn the truth?

It took me five years of listening to his reply to finally hear his words: They need to know the truth or else they will always blame you.

This I did for you. I spilled open. Nothing held anything together anymore. I had no boundaries. I was sinking, retreating into the forest where I pinched my ears shut. I hid for years not realizing you had become my forest.

Your father is a thief. That is what I told you first. That is what I told your brother but he may have already figured it out. He just pretended. We all pretended. But your brother tried to blame

me because he needed a father, but you listened. You sat and listened and I told you more because you listened.

Selfish. Loved only himself. Your father never stopped cheating on me, I told you later. Your brother didn't want to believe. Your father raped me like he raped my life. That is how I walked down the aisle, pregnant and barely showing, with white gloves. You were eleven and you listened. When the music stopped and the heads turned toward the aisle, the silence threatened to strangle me, but I still got out the words I wanted to. I whispered in his ear, I hate you. You were twelve and you listened. I told you about the suicides, about how I still wanted to die, and you just sat there on the couch, holding my hand, petting my head, listening. You were thirteen and fourteen and fifteen and sixteen and seventeen and eighteen and nineteen and twenty and all the years to thirty and now and still you listened. You became the silence of the churches of my youth, but I continued to sink my words into you, piling your mind and body heavy with twenty years of silence, and how could I stop the unraveling, twenty years pressurized into nothingness, when I had no more stitches to swallow?

To Those Who Left Without Notice,

Koom koom, the heart of the forest sings. Ice brother saves his siblings from the cold. He dives for breath in the lake of mirrors where leeches hide between toes. Feral kids play ring-around-the-Rosie, glide like water on razors. They sing, Leeches, leeches feed and heal us all. The village elders warn: run, run to your mothers and hide before the drownlings appear. Sticks and bones drive some home. Others burrow into the soil and let the white of their teeth and open eyes betray them. Double your joys and cut your sorrows, a man of grey chants while circling cleansing waters. Little by little his flesh comes undone.

The first time I saw my grandmother, I wanted to hold her hand long enough to feel the filed edges of her red nails, but I did not know her like that. When I tell Grandma she looks beautiful, she thanks me like a demure child, and then, I can see my mother in her.

Mama tells me to watch myself around Grandma. Sit up straight. Keep your elbows at your sides, never rest them on the table. Make tea in porcelain teacups. Mugs are for factory workers. If she asks you to set the table, make sure all the plates match. Knife and spoon on the right. Fork on the left. Teaspoon on top. Use a tablecloth. Iron it. And for God's sake don't smack your mouth when you eat.

Grandma has Internet in her apartment. She has her own laptop and smartphone, takes illustrated notes on which buttons to push. My father's computer is always on—now that he's retired in Florida. He's not one to sit still but he does Skype. My grandmother prepares herself before each conversation: lines thinning brows, puts in irritating dentures, pencils in lip definition, rouge to cheeks and a comb through her dyed bob.

My father rings my computer while we are looking through photographs over breakfast. I pick up and Grandma reluctantly stays though she has not yet preened herself. My father and grandmother have not seen each other in over eight years since 2003, the year of my college graduation. He addresses her informally, already an insult. She tries to laugh it off, comments on

his thinning hair. He calls her toothless. Again she tries to laugh it off, but instead finishes her sandwich hurriedly and leaves while he is distracted talking to me. I'm sure he does not know he hurt her feelings. He's clueless. She's silent. She never says anything to me about it, but later I hear her hurt through my mother. Toward the end of my trip my grandmother only says, He has always been crude.

Grandma's husband Henryk died on Christmas Eve 2000. He too was crude. Details trickle in from outside sources. My mother's friend came for a visit with my mother. Just teenagers. They sat down at the coffee table for dinner. Henryk called Grandma's soup slop. Dismissed it with a brush of his hand into the air. My mother told me there were few things my grandmother said about her past, but once she said, You were not the only one who had it bad. Once he bent me over to have me and said, I am not upset with this part of you. Grandma has had two daughters with Henryk. The elder one hates him; the younger one hates her. Grandma stood in the kitchen with Krystyna old enough to remember how he turned the gas stove on and locked them in the kitchen. Grandma too terrified to turn the nobs off stood catatonic so her child reached for the nobs.

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Michał's mother suggests the Rising Museum, so we go: Kasia, Michał, Aunt Ela and me. Grandma wants to but her legs fatigue too easily. She needs to medicate her eyes three times a day. And there's always the anxiety over incontinence. For a woman whose passion has been exploring the world, traveling to Egypt, Israel, the US and all over Europe, age has finally settled

her into a body bound by limitations, a crippling in time. She doesn't complain too much, only says, Live long and see for yourself.

When I first see Aunt Ela with her bright copper hair and faint smile, I am calmed. It should be the other way around: I should be comforting her. And maybe I am, I don't know, but Aunt Ela, like Kasia and Michał, is so quiet it becomes awkwardly noticeable. And yet refreshing. Already our first exchange is honest. No bullshit how-are-you-I'm-fine. What can I say to a widow in front of her children, but simply, Well, and wait. There is no need for words. Aunt Ela's faint smile returns, the pause so long, and then, she says, Slowly, slowly.

We let grief be.

A deep drone reverberates out the front doors to the Rising Museum. A path of cobblestones invites nostalgia. Such were once the streets of Warsaw. Gradually they are returning. Men on padded knees hammering Roman pavers, brushing sand between. Warsaw's facelift has begun with the support of the EU. The entrance path ends, blocked by a monolith with the inscription: September 1st, 1939 Hitler invades; September 17th, 1939 Stalin invades. It affirms two predators, not one—a discomforting reality for western allies since they needed Stalin to win the war. Then, Poland became a reminder of the just war's paradox. The Soviet ally brought salvation from Nazi Germany with practices no less abject than those of its Nazi enemy. Western betrayal was a multifaceted beast.

Michał and I take a photograph in front of a grainy, blown-up image of a street corner in Warsaw. The street corner is still there, the buildings are not. A red tramway rides off to the left

and a trail of Model T cars drives in from the right. Ornate balconies cast shadows on awnings of restaurants and storefronts. One sells hats. Practically everyone in the picture wears a hat. Three young trees stand supported by sticks and rope. On the side of a green telephone booth an image of Poland's crowned white eagle rests on a red background. It will take more than fifty years for the eagle to be crowned again, a symbol of independence.

The museum is an interactive maze of artifacts, photographs, models and recordings. There is no spatial linearity, no arrows to point the way. The experience avoids cohesion. Seemingly secret rooms and passages open up. The experience isolates, simulates vulnerability. I pick up a phone and listen to an old woman. It is August 1st 1944 and she is fourteen and on her way to church with her grandmother. The church is filled with youth. Her grandmother tells her, Something major is about to take place. There are too many young people here.

Michał tells me Warsaw stops every August 1st at 17:00. Cars stop in the middle of intersections. Vendors wait to take money. Children are held tightly, whispered to by their parents. No one moves. The radio silences. It marks the beginning of a two-month long battle for Warsaw. It ends in complete ruin.

A statue of a young boy soldier, swimming in an oversized uniform and helmet, carrying a Błyskawica rifle over his shoulder, becomes the symbol of the uprising. He can be no more than eight. Present-day Warsaw cannot separate itself from its fighting. Monuments cover every other street, markers of great military barriers or Nazi retaliation. The tram stop at my grandmother's is called Battles for Warsaw 1920, when Piłsudski stopped the Bolsheviks from taking Poland.

The monuments rise and do not apologize for the inconvenience of blocking tramlines or dividing fruit and flower vendors. People adjust to them, not the other way around.

We take a break at the Museum's coffeehouse and enter another time period: curved wooden legs of petite tables, lace tablecloths, glass displays with tarts and tortes and a tall wooden bar with a typewriter-style register. Aunt Ela whispers, Expensive. We order coffees, plum and apple tart, and bigos for me. The quiet sets in. We take in the atmosphere. Aunt Ela asks about Grandma. I ask Kasia how school is going. She shrugs her shoulders, says, Okay. Her mother speaks for her now, She's in the process of studying for finals in hospitality.

We walk through clean, dry sewers. We hunch the whole way. I say, I can't imagine the smell. 50,000 youthful insurgents walked miles through sewage to communicate strategies, to escape. 63 days. Waiting for ally support. A symbolic shot in Andrzej Wadja's *Kanal* follows a young couple through sludge to a literal dead end. Runoff flows into the Vistula through bars; the young woman holds her wounded lover in her arms, tells him not to open his eyes because the sun is too bright. The camera pans from this wartime pieta to land on the other side of the Vistula, but the bars remain in view. Churchill was convinced Stalin wished to have the non-Communist Poles obliterated, but also to keep alive the propaganda of Russian liberators. The Soviet army, along with a Polish battalion, stood on the other side of the Vistula, while street by street, Warsaw and its people, were leveled. Ninety-three percent of the city was destroyed or damaged beyond repair.

Large white linens hang from the ceiling. Before and after projections of streets and buildings flash and fall to the sound of rubble crashing. Aunt Ela says, It must have been such a beautiful city. I cannot not even imagine it.

And those who don't need to imagine, but remember are dying away. This pre-war generation whispered amendments to their children's and grandchildren's history lessons, taught under the bias and deceit of their victors. This generation remembers the face of a different Poland, a diverse nation of asylum seekers—in 1931, ethnic Poles constituted 69 percent of the total population; Ukrainian, Jewish, Belorussian, German, Lithuanian, and Czech minorities formed the remaining part of society. A nation overcoming the grim legacy of the partitions so eager for social, economic and spiritual rebirth. An independent Poland of unrealized potential. Now their stories are left to compete with the experiences of a generation under Soviet oppression, where scheming and manipulation became an art of survival, where the system made its people—not the other way around.

Jerzy Zelnik, a Polish actor starring in the 1967 Oscar nominated film *Faraon*, performed a one-man show in Denver, Colorado—a dramatization of Czesław Miłosz's poetry. Afterwards, he told me cities like Łodz need their diversity back. Without diversity a city stagnates, he said. He is part of my mother's generation. He had stories of his own to tell. Resisting communism, protesting and participating in the Solidarity movement.

And then, I am left wondering what will come of Warsaw. Michel de Certeau asserts in *Walking in the City* that Rome knows the art of growing old while a city like New York invents its present daily. Warsaw then is a city of the in-between. Its soul is old; it lives its history daily. But with

ninety-three percent of its age "lifted," with its materiality reinventing itself and its newness aggressively exposed, what is Warsaw if not a city of schizophrenics? What happens when stories don't reflect back onto the people and what is architecture if not an embodiment of time and tales?

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I keep asking my mother to tell me her stories again like I repeatedly ask for her Polish recipes. My memory is like my brother's. I need to ask everyone else because Tomas won't talk to me about these things. Ask Mom, he says. She's our database. For me the wrong details go with the wrong stories. I can't ever remember proportions to brine pickles. Is it two tablespoons per cup or per liter? And I forget what a liter is.

I don't know your measurements, my mother says.

I hate that they're mine. That we no longer have a common language in the kitchen. Thankfully I leave the baking to my brother.

Grandma grew up with Rosenthal china. She was born into a free Poland in 1928. Three partitions starting in 1772 and ending in 1795 kept cartographers occupied, only in 1795, the word Poland ceased to be written. If maps do indeed offer a kind of language, as JB Harley suggests, what effect did the erasure of Poland have on generations of people unable to read it? Grandma's father, Franciszek Poznan, took part in the 1918 uprising, which returned independence to Poland after 123 years. She would never know the type of man he could have been. She knew him to keep to himself unless one of the children used slang or poor grammar;

then he'd demand correction. They can take our borders, but not our language, he would say. He wandered the night when drink let rage loose. The children learned to hide their mother.

Grandma was eleven when the bombs fell. The whir of planes came with the winds. At the window, her childhood lake became a puddle of bouncing raindrops. Her father had already joined the front. Left alone, her mother grabbed the remaining five children—two sons were off fighting—a few satchels and ran through quaking streets, dust and rubble. They ran into the forests and stayed hidden for weeks, cooking in pits and bathing in rivers. It was an unusually dry September.

When the four weeks of fighting came to an end, the Germans demanded each civilian to register in their town halls. Franciszek was sent to work the coalmines in Czechoslovakia. The Gestapo sought the eldest son. Another son worked as a chef on a Polish submarine. All three daughters, twenty-four, twenty-two and eleven were sent to work for German families, but since Grandma was only eleven, they let her remain close to her mother's home rather than ship her off to Germany. A two-hour walk let Grandma return on some weekends from the German-occupied Polish estate, where she would milk cows and carry barrels of water and cook dinner and wash laundry. At the beginning of the war, lights were rarely used to avoid the bombs; at the end, lights were never used—electricity had to be preserved and rationed. She read by moonlight. Tilted a mirror to bounce enough light to read.

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Leaving the Warsaw Rising Museum leaves one fragmented by stories, quotes and voices. A video of a Wehrmacht soldier, now an old man with shimmering blue eyes, breaks me. Such a gentle face. He says he'll never forget the face of a young Pole seconds before he killed him in hand to hand combat. It was either him or me, he says. He nods anxiously, looks off. Those days in Warsaw have never left him; the things he witnessed cannot be explained. His Wehrmacht formation tried to evacuate a group of school children, but an SS Division intervened and killed them all. All his formation could do was stand and watch—to look away would have been an act of insubordination.

Retaliation did not escape the defenseless civilian population. A hospital set afire. Groups of female cancer patients raped. Women and children roped to the hulls of German tanks. Rows of hostages driven in front of German infantry. On September 2nd, the AK, Polish home army, evacuated the Old City center. 1,500 survivors, carrying 500 causalities on stretchers, found their way into four miles of sewage to safety.

A curtain of black offers entrance into a black hole, walls of black fleece with subdued lighting, and resin blocks of death certificates. 40,000 civilians dead in Ochota on August 11. Bodies stacked high in the streets. Grandma lives in Ochota. Communist buildings have no decoration. Bare exteriors of tall, rectangular blocks. The walls are flat. The roofs are flat. The courtyards are boring and sad.

A plane hovers within. I cannot tell if it is a replica. Soviet forces not only refused landing rights to British and American assistance aircrafts, they were willing to shoot them down. Stalin denounced the leaders of the Rising as "a group of criminals."

Outside, behind the museum, a marble wall towers with inscriptions. Not all the panels are filled. Names are still being added. 20,000 youthful insurgents. Over 150,000 civilians. Such numbers make me think of a quote, from none other than Stalin, who knew a lot about numbers: a single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.

Michał and I stop in the gift shop. He asks me if I have heard of Julien Bryan, an American photographer who caught Warsaw on film before its destruction. He tells me his uncle collects any pre-war images he can find. He tells me about the creation of a virtual tour of old Warsaw. It's supposed to be so good you feel like you're walking those streets. We realize the profession of war photographer had appealed to our youth.

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Michał's grandmother is in Constantine, a suburb of Warsaw, lush with forests and old and new villas. She is in a sanatorium for physical therapy on her bad hip. My grandmother is her sister-in-law. I tell Grandma I plan on going to visit, and she tells me she will also go. This surprises me. She barely goes anywhere besides down the block to the supermarket, vendors of flowers, kiosks of local farmers selling strawberries in May and Chanterelles in July. Beyond the supermarket is a makeshift bazaar of folded tables and tarp ceilings. Ukrainian and Russian accents. A Turkish mother and daughter type selling underwear. A jeweler of exotic beads next to a metal kiosk that sells detergents and deodorants. All part of Grandma's makeshift mall.

Incontinence confines my grandmother to her apartment. She is the type of woman to wear a hat or scarf, a skirt or dress—I don't ever remember her in slacks—with pantyhose, no matter the heat. At least at home, she says, I can wash myself throughout the day. Her apartment has no smell of urine, not even in the bathroom. Old age is no joy, she tells me. The trip to Constantine requires a tram to Central Station and then a half-hour bus trip. In visiting Great Aunt Zofia, Grandma is making herself vulnerable to embarrassment, a dread she almost cannot bear.

It is a wet Sunday. The sky stretches grey. Misty rain freshens our faces. Grandma went to the bathroom right before we left, but now we wait at Central Station for our connecting bus and the bathroom is far out of reach, so Grandma grows anxious but continues her small talk with Aunt Ela. When the five of us board the bus, we pause to consider the seating arrangement, but Kasia withdraws coolly. I sit with Michał. We pass from the center of Warsaw into the suburbs, where a large modern church is under construction.

> Are you religious?
> No, not really.
> Is Poland religious now?
> Everyone goes to church, but that doesn't really mean anything. We go because we are meant to. It is more habit then belief.

The bus drops us off in what seems to be nothing but forest. We walk on path of pieced together concrete cubes to the sliding doors of a white rectangular building. Nothing pretty. Simple, stark lines form the hospital. Marble floors, dim fluorescent lighting with wide halls and square windows. It's utilitarian. To the point. My grandmother says it's hideous, then finds a bathroom. She's right, it is, but there is something soothing that I identity with. It's what Michał says about the Palace of Culture, a phallic soviet structure built as a gift for Poles by their "liberators:" With the fall of communism, everyone wanted to tear it down, but it has become a symbol of my youth, and I can't help but feel a sentiment toward it. Communism now is also part of our history.

It is Great Aunt Zofia's name day, a day that once was more honored and celebrated than a birthday. It's as my grandfather used to say, Everything is born; not everything has a name. We bring candies and a necklace from my mother. I stand back, waiting to be remembered. I had last seen her when I was thirteen, playing out in the country with their puppies. She looks at me and says, You do not look at all like Ala. Ala is her favorite, her husband's niece. My mother came to spend her summers with Uncle Franek and his children. I don't like not looking like my mother.

I give her a hug and sit next to her. Someone says something funny and I laugh. She looks at me again and says, No, you look exactly like your mother. You have her voice. Everyone laughs.

Aunt Zofia looks frail, worse than my grandmother though she is younger, but then again, Aunt Zofia doesn't have dyed hair, rouge or lipstick. She's in a room with four other women. She offers her candies around. One woman gets up and asks if we would all like tea. It is tight, without privacy, but the air is not bitter.

We leave the grandmothers to talk. We stroll around. I am convinced *A Time to Die* was filmed in Constantine. I think I find the exact house—a decrepit mansion, three stories high where one side reaches a grotto structure on the roof. Big, cut-up windows with pieces of missing glass and shutters barely hanging on. An extended three-story sun room. Paint chipping, wood rotting. The film is about an old woman and her dog, about her struggle between the worlds of pre-Communist Poland, when the house was her family's, Communist Poland, when the house was divided by multiple families, and contemporary Poland, which wants to rid its past and build new

Beverly Hills mansions. In either case, she is simply waiting to die. At one moment in the film, when she finally decides to give her home to a school and not her greedy grandson, a student brings her tea in a mug, to which she says, No, never have tea in a mug. You must always serve tea in a teacup.

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When the Russian "liberators" arrived, Grandma was sixteen and not spared from the soldier's celebrations.

My Grandfather once told me Hitler and Stalin won the war. I kept quiet. A rebuttal would have been too obvious. He continued, They took our culture, identity and memory. If that is not winning, then I don't know what is.

To Those Who Left Without Notice—

Rotting wood cuts all other smells. In someone else's memory, the creatures drip and spin the scent of spoil. Sound should not be so predictable, someone yells. But monotony bores only the boring and without boredom children find no games to play.

Light feathers into a shed. Insects trill and drum the night. Children play Plump, pushing the fat, limp one while leaves jitter under each feeding. Sagging branches of mulberries brush feet. Plumping up creatures for survival, for bread and butter. A good girl feels her heart to hear synchronicity. A rotten girl licks the lock on the floorboard.

Here stories seek and find victims. Once you're in, you never get out, someone else yells. Those outside push the fat, limp girl inside. Plump is fun for all but one. The shorter leg finds no ground and down the fat, limp one falls, crashing screens to the floor. The creatures crackle next to her, breaking sleep. She cries and cries all the way through the whip, which comes later, when some of the creatures break out, snapping binding strings, eager for light, starving the children of their bread and butter.

Childhood is never our own. I know I called Marceli uncle, but I don't have a clear memory of him, only a feeling of warmth, and that must mean something. After all, life starts with emotions and ends with words, but you tell me words aren't real, so maybe I know nothing. Human perception is merely light perceiving light. I forget who said that.

People's stories make their way to my memories.

I had no friends or children to play with while living in the forest. Nora was our German Shepard. I liked to watch Nora shake the wet off—a wave of rattling from head to the tip of the tail. My mother told me Marceli was good because he wouldn't let her hit me. She had much to take care of with the garden, the cows and chickens, the flowers, dinner so sometimes Nora had to be my nanny. Life was different then and there. This wasn't neglect, but an assurance of safety in the land. In spring my mother spent her days outside and I wandered, sometimes far into the surroundings and Nora was responsible for finding me and bringing me home. My mother said to Nora, Nora find the child, and she always knew where I was. One shoe less, but found.

I carried out my toys to the stable and pinewood and left them unattended. Most of the toys, and there were many, came from the mother I did not yet know was my mother. There is some sort of irony in this, I am sure. But missing shoes and teddies found thawing came to be a sign of spring, a rotted rebirth. Soggy bears molded next to decapitated dolls, leather straps of shoes

eaten. Soles cracked by weather. I still made my own toys. Pine cone dolls. Braided cornhusk hair. Chestnut heads secured by sap.

The day my mother wanted to spank me happened in the kitchen with a bag of flour. Flour, sugar, salt were distributed in bulk, in burlap bags, to fill again and again because waste is luxury and there was little then. The bag sat on the white-tiled floor within reach of my hands. Fistfuls of flour to throw at Nora. I was three. The dog looked like an angel and when she shook the flour off, the kitchen turned to winter and I danced and laughed. Patient Nora let me play, but my mother got angry, not so much that flour filled every crack and swept into drawers and cabinets, but that poor Nora could not open her eyes, caked lids shut by tearful flour. But Marceli said not to spank me. He told my mother it was her fault for leaving the bag on the floor, in my reach, knowing imagination and mischief go hand in hand and I had plenty of imagination. You should know your child by now, he told her. He always said your or our, not hers.

My mother knew napping was a form of repentance. I cracked Mama's china making kogel mogel. I took a nap. I flung potatoes across the kitchen and broke a bowl. I took a nap. Logging trucks pulled pine trunks. Wheels large enough and high enough to run under and that's what I did. I called out to my mother to watch as I dashed between moving wheels. She screamed but I couldn't hear under the thunder of the engine. I ran out from under it without a scratch and still she did not beat me. I liked the way cats always landed on their feet. I took a kitten up the stairs to teach it landing. The stairs zigzagged up the second floor so when I dropped the kitten it landed on stairs, not floor. It was still. I remember the blood streaming from its nose, but little else. I must have closed my eyes too.

My mother married Marceli in 1947. She was thirty-two-years old; he was twenty years her elder. He died in 1954 and she never remarried. She did not believe good men happened twice.

Marceli never angered but the snake under his skin writhed whenever he used his arm too much. It squirmed when he picked me up, grew a spicy pink when he chopped firewood. He told me a horsetail whipped him as a lesson to never stand behind a horse. He carried me into the woods. He told me stories I no longer remember while we searched for the elusive Great Snipe, a lover of muddy marsh, a bird balanced between hiding and seeking: camouflaged in high grasses with enough markings to attract its lover. Marceli said without me he would never be able find the Great Snipe. As we walked he let me pick at the gummy snake. I kept pulling and twisting like a baby tugging a blanket between its fingers during breastfeeding.

When I was old enough and when Marceli's face dirtied with misremembering, my mother told me the wound was from the war. He was nineteen in 1914. The mother who took me in understood limitations. Marceli never spoke of the war and she didn't ask. She told me, Some stories are meant to be buried. You should go on thinking it was a horsetail.

But I didn't. I knew the snake slithered to sorrow and anger, to eat the unwanted and let Marceli live calm and content. We each must make meaning of our scars.

My mother was musical, a lover of opera with a mezzo-soprano pitch of perfection. Her voice in Sunday masses trailed long after other voices had already exhausted. She played the mandolin and piano and loved to dance. I imagine my mother with Marceli in the evenings, Caruso on the

gramophone, my mother signing, Marceli telling her she is beautiful. They dance next to the crackle of wood burning in the iron stove. They are happy.

Wood had become a commodity, a cheaper way to warmth; the forest needed protection. Marceli walked out into the morning to make his rounds, to list and listen. This was his time. To observe the land. White brushstrokes on bark marked the path, but he preferred to read nature's signs: the inflection of treetops and sunburnt casings, the flight of birds. My mother told me he always knew his way even in places he had never been before. Only once my mother wished someone ill and that someone had killed her Marceli. A ranger without legs is as useful as tractor with no wheels. It all started over a series of missing logs and the lack of a culprit.

The ranger from the nearby town accused Marceli of stealing timber. Marceli hardly knew rage, except when it came to lies and injustice. He believed the accuser to be the thief. My mother said the rumors took his sleep. For days he walked dazed, and then a week later while out on his rounds, the forest floor soothed him where he collapsed. Nora found him, eyes open with an expression like he was trying to remember the name of some bird. Its timbre distant and long. My mother wished for the legs of the other ranger to tangle and cripple beneath him.

Years later when she saw him on crutches, she begged forgiveness under her breath.

But that is the way with the women in our family.

My mother didn't speak much of her childhood. Only told me she left her father's house at eighteen because she could not stand to be in it any longer. She left to work for a pharmacist in Poznan. Here is the first ghost story:

Anna is reading in bed. Before sleep she reads. Her room is at the end of a long hall, far from the stairs to the pharmacy. A chill creeps in under her down comforter. She looks over her book to the end of the bed and there she sees a young woman in a wedding gown. The veil has not yet been lifted. Anna doesn't jump, doesn't hide. She puts the book on her nightstand and crawls to the bride, but before she can touch her, the bride disappears. It's as if something has sucked the ghost under the floorboards. The long hallway echoes with the drag of slippers. Anna opens the door but sees no one. The echo persists. The pharmacist calls from below:

> Anna, is that you? Are you still up?
> No.
> Oh.

The pharmacist explains: the young bride died on her wedding night, killed in a car accident on her way to marry.

My mother had a way with ghosts and so do you. The ability starts with your great-grandmother. I wasn't sure if you had it, but I suspected and when I sought the advice of a fortune-teller in Jersey City, when I asked if your father would ever change, she said, You don't need a fortune teller to tell you that.

Florence, our landlady in Jersey City who became my American mother, sent me there. No fancy signs or tasseled tablecloths, no crystal bowl, just a tight, dark foyer. She served me tea in a I heart NY mug, its lip so thick a trickle stained its side. She had blond hair, short and thick like a

pom-pom. You and your brother were home. Your father was out, maybe at work. I did not tell her I had children. She shuffled cards, turned one by one. She said your father had a heart problem. I laughed and said, He's always had that. She asked about you, and then said you had a gift of the spiritual nature. You are like the rest of us women.

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I told you about my summers of summertime so you would know how good they could be, not summers but summertime—there's a difference, you know—and it hurt me your summers were just summers. I even got angry knowing the mother who taught me to sew and taught me about motherhood had less money than we had, but still managed to offer me summertime.

When we moved, we lost. Family lines and land. A tradition of haunted memory clung to the four suitcases we carried into JFK. Relentless. No one listened but me.

My mother always made sure we had somewhere to go. Cousins and siblings might have been stacked sleeping on family floors or sofas, but we had summertime. In Płoty, my cousins and I, and eventually my sister when she grew, did what the seasons told us to. Spring was about seeds and wet soil and making crowns of flowers in the evening with dirty fingernails. A green so vibrant, it shimmered. Summer we climbed high to get the ripest sour cherries and plums, we pulled weeds, got cut by angry grasses, we ran into the cool of forests picking mushrooms and peeling bark for our grandmothers to chew and rid the pain of their arching backs. We cut hay into bundles to roll on top of, to laugh. We picked beets and peeled potatoes for dinner. Autumn made us hungry. Winter we were hungry.

There were days when we only had bread to eat and a choice of butter or jam, but never both because my mother never wanted bread dry. Before the end of her pay period she still had money, and though we cried for ham or cheese, she kept it hidden to put down for an apartment, to make sure my sister and I had somewhere to call ours when she passed. That is the way family thought then, never for the moment, always for potential. Not building the future. Re-building. Only countries that once had and lost more than they had can understand the impact of this kind of loss.

The mother who raised me was the second oldest of eight, born in 1915 just a year after Uncle Franek. The mother who birthed me was the youngest born, 1928 and this mother only knew a broken father. They both remembered the lake, the lake of their youth and the forests of their adolescence where they went off to sneak kisses from neighborhood boys. My mother who raised me never dwelled in that childhood of hers, but she made sure we had our own. Some sorrows bleed like paper cuts—thin, barely there—but these cuts still sting with citrus burns, still prick pain with salt, so it is best to cover them with forgetting.

My sister and I had two places of summertime. The first was in Płoty, near Zielona Góra, only a half hour train ride from Budachów, the forest home of my youth, where sometimes after it rained, the wind picked up a familiar scent. It rustled through trees to get to me and here, in Płoty, another forest edged the home, so I could remember how to trace the forest floor with my toes, how to pick porcinis and as I grew in summertime, I learned to climb the oak trees nearby, higher than all other girls, higher than even boys. I heard the yells from below, but words mumbled into indecipherable sounds, collapsing meanings and non-meanings. There was a

pleasure in this. People expected me to come down shaking, to display my fear, but I was never afraid. What I felt I wanted to conquer, I wanted to climb out of anxiety, love, distrust, anger, even beauty for beauty makes a desert of life. When I settled into the tops of trees, I got away.

The other summertime place was at Uncle Franek's. I didn't go there too often since it was on the other side of Poland, under Warsaw, closer to Ukraine. Uncle Franek had five children: three boys and two girls. Wojtek was the oldest, then me, then Andrzej. And that's how it was always, me between them, them fighting for my attention.

We children turned chores to play. Shooting sour cherries into baskets. Swift sweeping to be the first done and to win nothing in particular, but winning nevertheless. Picking mulberry leaves as a game of climbing, climbing to the top of sagging branches so heavy with fruit that once when I was already a teenager and still picking mulberry leaves, I climbed too high, snapping the bough and falling fifteen feet. Silence followed by a gasp then I burst into laughter. One of my girl cousins said, Oh Ala, you are a crazy one.

We children gathered mulberry leaves to fatten the creatures, which slept and fed in the shed of screens and each screen drooped, saturated with leaves and larvae. Light tasseled in, patterned to the cracks of wood. Leaves jittered under each feeding. Plump the creatures for our bread and butter, Uncle Franek used to say. But we all feared the shed, so we took turns and there were many because the worms never stopped eating and spinning. The creatures munched the leaves to confetti pieces.

The shed did not silence. Different stages of life presented themselves, displayed as a helpless abundance entirely dependent on us for food and reproduction. We had to sort the eggs from the moths, the larvae from the pupae, the final stage before spinning their cocoons, a protective commodity. These moths did not fly. They lacked fear of predators. Complete domestication. The air inside hung thick and sweet with the scent of spoil and birth. Whoever went in heard the others scream outside, just to frighten more whoever was inside. There was no leaving in a hurry. Too many screens had to be spread thin with new layers of leaves. Too much sorting and seeking of cocoons. Moths crawled down our backs like sweat, fluttering the hairs on our skin. Their droppings were black and we dared each other to go in barefoot, but I was the only girl to do it. Fallen larvae clung to toes, pinching and sucking slightly. They tickled with pleasure. I mainly minded the helpless beating moths, unable to fly while flies swarmed to heat and berry rot. In the spring these flies hatched fast and jet-black and small, but then turned sluggish late in the season, growing fat and grey. Their metallic green bodies idly sticking to our hair. So easy to kill it wasn't worth it.

We watched the larvae molt from black to white to sallow, waiting for the spinning to commence. A barrel-sized pot boiled over a pit of fire waiting for the shimmering white cocoons. We gathered them into baskets. On screen the cocoons slept, but in hand the pupae rattled inside like matryoshka dolls. We gave the baskets to our mothers, who dropped the cocoons in batches into boiling water. The cocoons hissed—but I was the only one to hear them. Once drained, I refused to unravel their dead bodies.

But I had already learned my lesson when I took a basket into the copse behind Uncle Franek's home, allowing for transformation to break the threads of silk, to let the moths fly free—I did not

yet know they could not fly. It did not take long for my Uncle to find the pile of broken silk strings and starved moth corpses. He was not mad. He said he would have done the same if it wasn't a matter of bread and butter. The he said, They are doomed one way or another. Bombyx Mori, he called them, cannot survive on their own. They exist because of us. They die because of us. We humans like to play God.

We like silk, I added, and thought of my mother's gentle stitching. She showed me and said, Be sure you know where you want the needle. Otherwise, an unintended pique will leave a mark.

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Płoty warmed my childhood with summertime, but here we did not just come for summers. With the train ride from the city only two hours long, Płoty became my backyard for all seasons. It was our family's gathering ground where we toasted the new year and mourned our dead to bury in the hillside cemetery nearby. This land, like the forest of my childhood, had for centuries belonged to the Germans—only after the war had the border shifted—and the elder Poznans, like the mother who raised me and her brother Franek and her sister in Płoty with seven children spoke German with no thoughts of translation from one language to the other. They did not second-guess themselves like I do with my English. And when the former German residents came to visit their old house and old lands, the elder Poznans welcomed them with tea and an awkward tension that only comes with guests who return to a place that no longer is their own. For years the German couple would return to watch their home wither under poverty and watch us gather. We kids listened to the exchange of language as witness to changing times, aware that the language of our occupiers had shifted. We now were made to speak Russian.

When I was barely a teenager, the other mother, the aunt with fine hats and lace gloves, sent her daughters on train, Krystyna just eight and Jagoda five. I knew I had half-sisters, but I called them cousins because everyone called us cousins and I did not want to be the one to tell them otherwise. Płoty brought dirt and scratches and burns, but Kristina and Jagoda knew nothing of this, coming from Warsaw, living in a commie-block where survival is a matter of tolerance. In Płoty they screamed and cried against bedtime. And when my aunt with fine hats and red polished lips arrived, she grabbed them both and scrubbed and scrubbed in the tub to rid the dirt, only it wasn't dirt. It was a suntan.

Then later, years later, summertime vanished. We children grew up and had no need to run the fields and climb the trees. I no longer let my hair down. I took each long lock and turned and twirled it round my finger until it willingly curled up to my head, pinning each piece into a beehive bun. It was the sixties. My hair had lost its blonde, darkened with maturity. Its luster calmed into the matte of ash. A childhood friend passed me in the street then and said, I almost did not recognize you with hair so sad.

We children got to the age where we forgot how to make chores fun. Strawberry picking into baskets and mouths lost even its sweet nostalgia. Its red tainting tips and palms, seeds getting stuck in teeth and nails. The smell of sugar drowning through the still, heavy breeze of wet air. But landscapes shift through circumstance as Płoty did for me when the aunt with seven children stood over me and asked, What makes you so special? I fingered through a web caught on the hairs of sandpaper leaves. I hated the feeling but pretended nothing happened. Taut tears barely hanging on. And when she saw them fall, she said, I don't believe you; you are not so special. Her countenance shattered summertime. Squatting I spilled the strawberries from my basket and

ground them with fists into a thick red paste. She added, My father fled here from you, and still he doesn't make any of us feel so special.

I never returned to Płoty. My mother knew hurt had tracked me down though I did not need to say a word about my aunt with the seven children. My mother simply asked, What was said to you? I denied any confrontations. I was tired of the attention, but she was the type of mother that didn't need explanations.

Pig. That's what I called my grandfather and it was enough of a signal for my mother to throw him out. Back then we still lived in the room. I was eighteen and my grandfather wouldn't let me listen to the radio, but I resisted him by turning it on only for him to turn it off again. Eighteen is an age of transition in confidence because children no longer regard themselves as children or even young adults, but as adults. Perhaps confidence is not the right word, but Polish offers a map to maturity with its release of the formal. At eighteen using the informal you becomes more common and something in hearing it makes adults out of children. It brings with it a sense of authority. Maybe even power. When I turned eighteen, I turned defiant. I had a right to my own voice. By the third slither of his slippers to the radio, he was about to hit me, but I pushed him and called him a pig and this was a trigger for the mother who knew good men only happened once. She looked up from her Singer. She did not speak. She stared at her father and then me and then back. She watched and watched. Her silence frightened me. I thought she would reprimand me for calling my grandfather a pig, but then she got up, handed him money and threw him out. She did not stop to pack his things. He did not protest. There no longer was a need for words.

How did you know? I asked.

> You are a good child. You would never call an elder a pig, unless he did to you what he had already done to me. When did it start? she asked.
> I was eleven. It was the summer.

When the calm set in, so did release and my mother sat holding me and wiping tears off of the table.

It was summertime at Uncle Franek's. The eastern hills of Lubielski rolled and bloomed red and yellow. Out of this countryside, so supple in its shades of green, my memory for color grew, and the difference in variances—some more subtle than others—challenged. I can still walk into a store and pick out a blouse for its color, remembering a skirt tucked deep into the folds of forgotten shelves, and know it would match the skirt back into wearable fashion. As a child I stared off into a field and waited until the summer's light burned my sight into darkness, and then I shut my eyes and spun and spun until I thought I might forget the color. When I looked at another field with new shades or shadows, only the difference in contrasts helped remind me of the other still smoldering in the back of my mind.

I was eleven visiting with my grandfather, who gave his first name to his eldest born—Franciszek, Franek for short. Uncle Franek was a schoolteacher teaching in a refurbished manor home, which the Soviets reformed into a school, a dentist's office and a veterinary clinic. No space wasted. And if it wasn't utilized it was a wasted space; hence the Soviet epidemic of disappearing sitting rooms. The school portion housed Uncle Franek's family—his wife and five children. The classrooms separated the sleeping area from the kitchen and bathroom so sometimes his children in nightgowns sleep-walked in front of a board of algebraic equations to get to the bathroom. Giggles trailing in the distance of dreams.

That summer too many lice got glutinous. I left my bed of restlessness and found Grandpa sound asleep in the other room. No lice must be biting him. I stood at his side, wanting the narrow space next to him. He wasn't asleep. He picked me up and lay me on top of him. There is space to the side. But he pushed and pulled my body against his like a rag cleaning a counter, back and forth. I didn't understand what he was doing. He had his pajamas on. I had a nightgown. Up and down, up and down. The smell of stale breath intensifying. I imagine myself wiggling free because I want to be that type of child, but I'm not sure if I pushed off or he simply finished, either way I didn't sleep there. I went back to my bed confused, forgetting to feel the lice bite. From then on, though nothing happened for months, embarrassment gripped my heels, rooting not down but up into me. Without the words to articulate the incident, my emotions cautioned his proximity to me. I avoided being alone with him. I held his touch to myself for seven years. His patting me there. His panting next to me. His jerking off. Not saying anything because the body was meant to hold secrets—that's how we were raised then.

We did not name our parts. They did not belong to us. We had nicknames, sweet names, but nothing that claimed a part to a whole.

To Those Who Left Without Notice—

Ravens ripple fields lined by barbed wire. No longer do they need to caw since all the bad humans have gone. The yawning legs of a solitary tower have chipped at the edges, a cement so porous it exposes metal bones. This is where ravens spread wings but never leave and grasses grow wild, move against the breath of logic. These fertile but fallow fields edge life. Another oblivious bell rings and lets school children play. Such blemishes have been left untouched for no clear reason. No monument, no signs. Only ravens ground the wanderers they carry, never asking to know their names. A mother passes by. Splashing puddles with soggy shoes, she pulls a cart of children covered in hay. Their octopus fingers curl through links of wire. They are not her own and she says, Not everything can have a name.

Gliding down the escalator to the platforms of Central Station. Leaving Warsaw by train on a two-and-half hour trip to Poznań. The two faces within, exhausted and restored, alternate from platform to platform, a visual before and after for Warsavians to witness their own rebirth as process. Navy specks the old upside-down, triangular pillars, but the soot has turned everything into charcoal. Scrubbed sections reveal the true blue of the pillars—royal indeed. A grill of white fluorescent lights hangs suspended from a white ceiling, a ceiling which shocks the unrestored grills into existence. For lack of light they have gone unnoticed. The other platform, the after platform, shines blindingly bright. Maybe it is as Grandma has said, They have turned our faces grey. They being the communists. What other light, if not grey, can shine from old sediment screens?

Grandma hates this station. When it opened in the seventies, its plaster walls were already peeling, she says. But what is to expected when it was built by a generation of workers who resented the Soviet structures they were building? Our country has been moving in circles, not forward.

It's a Tuesday. Men in suits fill in the compartments. With my luggage rolling down the corridor I search for one where women sit. My mother has cautioned me: avoid empty compartments; always sit with other young ladies. No visible threat exists, but I don't pretend to be able to see or

predict danger. It's not that I see the worst in people. I am simply suspect—not just of others, but of my own reactions and my own survival skills.

I drift in and out of sleep, soothed by the monotonous rhythms of train travel. My cousin Renata stands out on the platform. With a grey skirt and blazer, conservative heels, she looks like she has just come out of a courtroom. Black, shoulder-length hair cups her round face. Its black shines with stark contrast against her pale, bone china completion. She's one of three first cousins, all from my uncle Zdzisław, my father's only sibling. She hugs me curtly, but with tenderness. I've just come out of a deposition, she says. She's a bit flushed. Wants to get to the farmer's market before it closes.

Our fathers don't speak to one another. Haven't spoken since before we left Poland. When I ask my father why that is, he only says, I have nothing to say to him. He says what he's always said, One day I will tell you my side of the story. As if I wasn't asking already, but that is the way with my parents—one lives in the past, the other in the future.

We exit. A billboard of a cartoon panda spans the entire width of the front of Poznan's station. Scaffolds obstruct the rest of the beige brick. The entire face will soon disappear behind glass, Renata says. A project is underway.

> So much has changed.
> Exponentially since Poland entered the EU.

We get into her Volvo SUV. There is no denying Renata and her husband are well off. Neither, however, acts nouveau riche. They don't flaunt designer wear or eat out at Sushi restaurants every week. Renata and Piotr married young. Both twenty and still in school—Piotr in a

technical college and Renata in law. Some of the best years of our lives, she tells me, were when we were poorest. Counting *grosze* for our next meal. Bartering cigarette rations for food. Those were crazy and good times.

Her telling me this gives her away, or I at least I think it does. Not as a forced humility, but as genuine discomfort about wealth. I've observed this before on previous visits. When Piotr and Renata speak about their travels, land purchases or aspirations, Renata turns timid and almost embarrassed like a precocious and thoughtful child who's been made aware of the "less fortunate." Piotr doesn't appear to struggle in the same manner, but he's not pompous or boastful.

> There was another man I dated before Piotr, Renata says. My parents loved him. Wished I had married him instead.
> Why didn't you?
> After a couple embarrassing stunts, I knew what I didn't want. I had been ashamed my entire childhood. I wanted to be as far away from that as possible.

Piotr is shorter than Renata, rounder overall with doughy cheeks, a teddy paunch and puffy eyes. His countenance confirms the lightness present in his personality, so light he sometimes drifts in the company of others, but when topics of music, travel or film come up, he becomes joyous and ebullient. His patience won me over, Renata tells me. In my parent's home I picked up habits I wasn't proud of. Piotr steered me into a better place. I needed patience.

Back when ashtrays were a popular household item, my mother picked up a thick-bottomed one, at least two inches of pure glass and said, Imagine this flying toward your head. This is what Renata's mother threw at your uncle Zdzisław.

It was shortly after my father's mother died—1976 or 77—and my grandfather's house still didn't have a landline. The neighbor across the street called out to Grandpa, Józef come quick,

Miła is on the phone. Miła, her speech controlled and deliberate, told my grandfather to pick up his son because he'd lost his mind. Grandpa got him and brought Renata too. My mother cleaned Zdzisław's split forehead, wiped the blood off his cheek and chin, and told him to stay the night. You need to calm down.

After a few hours, he went home. Later, Grandpa said, Ala, you'd have to see it to believe it—broken flowers scattered, shattered glass and china and blood and dirt as one congealed smear. Renata must have been eleven or twelve.

I actually don't know what split his forehead, my mother tells me. I just imagine an ashtray since they breathed in cigarette smoke more than air. But that man did not need any more scars. He lost his face at eighteen. That should have been enough of a scar for a lifetime.

It was normal or just cool, no longer does the distinction matter, to jump out of a moving tram before it came to a complete stop. Why walk back the extra stretch? Uncle Zdzisław jumped and hit a patch of ice, slipping and sliding his face under the tram's rear wheel. Your uncle was more handsome than your father, my mother tells me. I have a hard time picturing it, putting his face back together to be able to see. The doctors didn't expect a recovery. They haphazardly stitched his face together, thinking he wasn't go to make it anyway. He stayed in a coma for weeks and when he woke, Miła told him no other woman would want him. Not now, or so the story goes.

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Five-story apartment buildings surround the market. Though compressed, the variegated roof top levels offer the illusion of space. These 17th century buildings stand on their own in color and detail. Ornate bell gables rise sporadically over red ceramic shingles. Cornices supported by geometric corbels. My gaze giddy, oscillating between asymmetrical and symmetrical aspects of this architecture. The placement of cast-iron balconies. The framing around doors and windows. Carvings on each façade. Pattern-play for the eye.

Renata leads me into the labyrinthine market, spattered with clean and organized kiosks. I ask how often it's here. Everyday. We walk through aisles, where ceiling tarps—alternating in green then white—sag like the draped cloth of my childhood forts. Though saturated with produce, the tables display the seasons. May is for white asparagus. Renata picks through them and says, Your mother told me to make them for you. She says they're no good in the US. I agree.

She takes me to her favorite producer, a petite woman, whose beauty unravels the longer I stare at her. She's probably not much older than Renata, no more than forty-five, but the sun has seeped in, marking her skin with premature wrinkles. My hand looks pasty next to her reddened tan. Renata addresses the woman with the formal "you." She asks about the tomatoes. Greenhouse this time of year, but local. She buys a bag full. She buys what I want and I want to taste my childhood—lightly salted pickles, fresh from a two-day brine, butter lettuce, fresh dill and new potatoes, the sweet citrus of Raspberry Tomatoes, a variety I haven't seen in the States—named for its taste and its magenta color. I miss the sense of being rooted to my food, of knowing my seasons and staying within the limitations of the seasons.

Right before my grandfather died, I walked a few blocks to get groceries at the Panorama, a brand new mall with a supermarket. Built in haste after the fall of communism, its aesthetic resembled a warehouse, a temporary structure to get as many goods in from the west as hurriedly as possible. It was March and I bought tomatoes. I made Grandpa a sandwich, cut-up into bite-sized pieces. He picked through the sliced tomatoes, stared at them though his gaze stretched far. He read each slice like a palimpsest, then pushed the pieces to the side of his plate. It's March. Tomatoes don't grow in March. These are going to make me shit my pants. I was nineteen and spoiled by abundance, never stopping to think food had a timeline. The awareness brought shame. Just another detail to separate me, not only from his generation—the obvious observation—but also from my connection to Poland and to its land.

Renata, even when rushed, never gets frantic. Her composure is evident, not simply because it's there, but more like she consciously works at it, and in doing so, makes the working-at-it apparent. But perhaps I have heard too much about her parents and assume too much.

When I ask Renata about her childhood, I sense the resentment she harbors toward her father. He was an alcoholic, she says. He was always making scenes.

My mother says she remembers both Miła and Zdzisław drinking. She tells me, Your Grandma Władysława worked constantly—baking and cooking dinner daily and gardening and cleaning—and Sundays were sacred family time. Every Sunday both brothers and their families and Władysława's sister and her kids sat down to dinner. Imagine Thanksgiving every Sunday. I don't remember uncle Zdzisław drunk then, but when your father and I went over to their house, drinking turned heavy—on both sides.

Renata has only said one negative thing about her mother. She is lazy.

We stay up late deconstructing our families. We sip on wine, something Renata and Piotr brought back from their tour of French vineyards. In talking, we realize how much we both have needed this. Not daytime soap opera. More like therapy. Our openness.

The next few days I plan on walking. Renata and her family live on the outskirts of Poznań and getting out is much easier than getting back in. In this, the layout and idea of suburbia seems similar regardless of country or culture. But I want to know Poznań through the cracks on its buildings and sidewalks, the scattered bullet holes, Soviet neglect and blemishes that not only tell of trauma, but also healing. Scars, after all, are proof of a type of progress. They infer the past.

I walk to know my mother. I walk to grasp the tangible, the visuals to her words. I find the post-office where she worked as a teenager, where my father visited and begged forgiveness after he dumped her. Now its abandoned and tagged. I do not understand the purpose of tagging. Is it simply wanting to leave a mark? Is it about ownership? Hubris? The symbolic red postal box still hangs against cement-grey stucco. White barred windows under a red sign, which translates to hairspray but word for word it means something like varnish in aerosol. I find the Polish more honest.

I look for the apartment my mother moved into at eighteen. This street recalls Paris—cobblestones, cast-iron balconies and an onion dome on a corner building. But this Paris is untended and marred. Here, poverty is so revealing it's nearly perverse. Everywhere I look I

think of what might have been, the potential. I can't stay within the present. This is the Poland I remember in 1993. This is the Poland my parents lived through. Dirty grey walls and dirty grey streets. It's like walking into a desaturated photograph or imprinting a black and white image on a color image and flattening the tones. A monotonous grey with scraps of color residue. My pace slows. I second-guess making my camera visible, and then I'm ashamed of my suspicions though I am afraid. Up the block a little girl in a pink jacket walks with her mother. This calms me. An old man sits on a front step and reminds me of Jersey City. The way people sat on their steps watching us kids play, except here the green is real. The trees rise as if in competition with the buildings. Jersey City the weeds drove through concrete. Grew waist high so we kids played around them. I liked cracking the stems to watch the sap drip like condensed milk off of a countertop.

My mother doesn't remember the exact address, but I step into a building fitting her descriptions, though the whole street is lined with copies. These are the edifices of World War II films. Wide front doors, geometrically carved, open to a long-hallway that empties into a concrete courtyard of irregular shape. With the backs of other apartment buildings crowding me in, claustrophobia resonates. I hurriedly take photographs, searching out the window of my teenage mother's bedroom—the one she did not leave for weeks after love proved crippling. If colors could perform actions, could become verbs, grey would do nothing. It would choose idleness. Perhaps that is why the communists favored it. Most assume red to be the color of communism, but that is pure marketing. Grey dominates Soviet cities and Maoist and gulag garb. Grey is the people's color. And as I stand immersed in its inertia, its effect overwhelmingly oppressive, I fail to notice the buoyancy of green coming from a tree tall and wide enough to have covered my mother's

window. It is only after I scan through the images on my camera that I notice the color and recall my mother saying, In spring I watched the bloom of the one tree in our courtyard.

In May topple pollen floats and falls. It gathers and collects into jaunty balls, which roll against the base of buildings, to one side and than the other, moving to the motion of a languid seesaw. A seesaw is just a swing in Polish, I hear my mother say. I walk down to the Church of the Resurrection, where I was baptized and my mother married. Gusts of warm wind push against me.

Inside, I see the appeal to my mother's aesthetic. Standing in the nave, a soothing white welcomes, accented by golden brown. Imbedded ionic columns frame the outside of a barrel vault, wherein stands the altar. But the breathtaking part is the coffer ceiling, where hexagonal islets pop with bronzed outlines. The design is understated and simple. The way my mother dresses. I sit in the back pews and listen to a homily on ascension into heaven. A row of children in white robs sit at the front—this is the month of Holy Communions. If you do not have a ladder, how can you climb to heaven? asks the priest. He addresses the children. One answers, Stack boxes. Everyone laughs.

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I tell Renata I want to see her father. I have questions. My mother used to say: However your uncle might have been, he was always a family man and his family came first. Perhaps that is why his youngest daughter Hania now lives in Grandpa's home, the only home I ever known in Poland. The windows of which my mother washed for ten years. The walls my father

wallpapered. All my memories of Poland remain trapped within the confines of this home, and when we moved, I fought against its erasure. Starting kindergarten in Germany rooted language into visible letters. I learned to read, but only German. My Polish became ethereal, all sound, and with no visual, words faded. Language materialized the act of passing as words from German fell in for words in Polish, sudden and unpredictable like slipping on black ice. Language represented loss. But I resisted it. I closed my eyes to visualize the world we had left, to walk through the green metal gate, waiting for its screech, its click when the tongue of the lock snapped into place. I wanted to ground memories so they would not follow the same fate as language. I kept walking. The concrete steps, forest green paint on the risers. The dark wooden door with a silver handle. The ceramic foyer and another set of doors. The long hallway where I once pulled Haba's tail to apologize for shunning her affection. The v-pattern parquet. To the left the bathroom, five steps, to the right the room with the mole and rabbit wallpaper, to the left the kitchen with the long white window at the end, the sink to the left, the corner bench and wooden table to the right, and down the hallway again. Five more steps and into the living room. Bright and big. And then from the living room another room opens to the left with a wall of a forest. I did this to remember. I walked through this home. I held on to what was mine. I continued walking and re-walking well after we had moved to the United States.

I am not sure why what was left of the house was left to my uncle Zdzisław. When the house was built, it was split—downstairs for my grandmother and upstairs for her brother. Soon the brother sold his portion off and built a different house down the block. When my grandmother died she split her share between her sons. When my grandfather died he left both shares to my uncle Zdzisław. For the longest time, I was confused. My uncle was a young teenager when the house was built. He didn't live there long before he married his pregnant girlfriend and moved out.

Being the elder brother, he left. My father lived there more than twenty years, eleven with my mother. So questions still remain.

Renata drives me out to my uncle's *działka,* where he spends his weekends. Under communism, tenants in cities and high-rise apartments were offered plots of land in the country for recreational purposes. This form of generosity helped maintain the countryside. Often little houses sprouted up with gardens. In some poorer areas, the homes looked like huts or shacks, but everyone received something, even if the hierarchy was evident.

We drive out of the city limits. Sporadic trees line the two-lane road. Clumps of forest interrupt the fluidity of agricultural field grids; but really, it's the other way around: deforested sections segment a forest. It's like envisioning the horizon shifting though it doesn't. It always remains a horizon. What actually changes is our perspective.

We drive through a secured gate into twisting dirt paths, winding through plots that display a variance in care and attention. Some have elaborate gardens with trellises and gazebos and petite-villa homes, while others are more utilitarian with gardens of produce and fruit trees and simple structures. The house my uncle barely started in 1993 stands finished in a warm peach color. Renata parks on the road though I see my uncle signaling her to pull in the driveway. She refuses. It's an awkward moment. One of those moments where standing outside the moment, the "drama" seems silly; but I understand such moments because I have been through them on the inside, and there is nothing silly about being in that vantage point.

Seeing my uncle is like bearing witness to a resurrection. My Grandpa. The sight is almost cruel; it surges so much love for a man that isn't really there. Only the scar on my uncle's face—the one that runs from his forehead down to his upper lip, deforming one eye, lazy and always leaking—helps orient my memories to recognize the man before me as my uncle. He has lost a lot of weight in the seven years I have not seen him. He looks happy to see us.

He walks us through his garden of fruit tress with trunks in painted calcium to keep away the vermin. He has such pride in his work. I can see it. I know it too well. He just finished mowing and bordering the grass with pansies. His hands are like my grandfather's, writhed with age. His skin is losing pigmentation. Patches of pig pink on the elbows and fingers. Scabbed over sores cover the backs of his hands. Hand and arm are one word in Polish, but a palm is still a palm. He offers us tea or coffee to go with the pastries we have brought. He sits down and picks at his scabs.

> Grandpa had similar sores, I say. Though not as many.
> The itching is unbearable. The doctors tell me to sleep with gloves on.
> Grandpa scratched his too.

I ask if I can record our conversation, worried I might miss things. I want what he tells me on record. I want to hear his side of why we lost our house, though I know better than to ask that question—at least not that way.

We begin light or so I think. My uncle tells me about his childhood. Being born in 1944, he remembers pieces of life after the war. Living on Grandpa's farm in Grudzielec, where my grandfather's family comes from. An airplane on a hill—maybe German, maybe Polish—marks the land sanctioned to my grandfather as compensation for living under a German for six years. The land reform of 1944. Grandpa didn't work too hard under this German man, who was a good man, treated his Poles well—for the times. Zdzisław remembers when his mother's brother

died, the youngest—just sixteen years-old, brought in dead from the fields. Kicked by a horse. Cleaning the body in the dining room to ready for burial. He remembers moving to Poznań after Grandpa sold the land before the communists took it. My uncle remembers the UB, secret police, searching their apartment in Poznań.

> Why were they there? Renata asks.
> Who knows now?

But even this my mother knows. She listened to my grandfather's stories. With my father working abroad and my grandmother dead, they only had each other to listen to. Grandpa was brought down to the station. The UB kept track of who was building what and with what money because the reality was no one could afford to build, but my Grandpa began building the house on Tarczowa. This was enough to rouse suspicion of chicanery.

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I smoked heavily then. They sat me down in an office. Me in a chair with this guy on the edge of the desk, maybe to intimidate me. He just stared and waited before he took his seat. Slid a pack of Marlboros across the table. Care for one comrade? he asked. I don't smoke. Marlboros were an impossible treat but I refused because I knew why I was there. Not smoking meant having more money. I was already setting up to win the game.

> Do you belong to the party comrade? he asked.
> I never finished the paper work.

What I didn't say was that I didn't like the wording. A line read: I beg to be part of the party. I would not beg.

Then, my mother-in-law lived with us. The retirement she was promised between the wars didn't materialize under communism. She was asked to live an unlivable pension. Finally the question I had been waiting for arrived: how do you have enough money to build a home, comrade? I had been preparing to answer. My dear comrade, I said. You are aware my mother-in-law lives with us, are you not? I liked reversing the questions. He nodded. That poor women receives only 300 złoty a month and so as to not upset her, I refuse to spend more than 300 złoty a month. Equal parts for each of us, my dear comrade. This man clenched his jaw, the edges of which began to tremble. They let me go, but kept up the theatrics with raids to our apartment.

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My uncle remembers the birth of my father in the apartment. He remembers the midwife and buckets of water. The smell I won't forget, he said. Every time I slaughtered a pig, I smelled birth. There is something wrong in that.

> Why do you and my father not speak?
> Things pile up in life. One after another and then another and I had enough.

He remembers the riots of 1956. The gunshots. The ones I had mistaken for World War II gunshot wounds. 100,000 people walked out and gathered at the Imperial Castle near the city center. Workers, students and intellectuals carried banners and posters. We demand bread. Better pay, lower food prices and better work conditions. It started out peaceful until Soviet tanks rolled. My grandfather remembers when one tank tried to push through a high chain-link fence and got stuck. The soldier, in Polish uniform, yelled Yob tvoyu mat—obviously, not a Polish soldier. These men began detaining protestors, arresting over 700, wounding between 500 and 600, killing between 57 to 100, including a thirteen-year-old boy, whom my uncle knew. The

hospital that took in the wounded was a block down from UB headquarters. Many were caught there, though most took what they could running and never stayed for treatment. These 1956 protests ignited the Hungarian protests of the same year.

> When did you know we were planning on leaving Poland?
> When I found out, you were already gone.

I sit with this information, not sure what to do with it. I heard you left from mutual people we knew, my uncle continues. Your father had access to passports and he got one and left before news of who issued his passport reached the border. The information traveled within twenty-four hours, so your father left immediately and the person who issued his passport was protected—no one would ask any more questions. That's how I heard it happened.

I don't understand. My uncle explains the nuances as if they were common sense, but I can't wrap my head around them; but more than the convoluted nature of communism, I don't understand how my father could leave without saying good-bye to his only brother? Especially in those days when families left thinking they would never return to a free Poland or any type of Poland. In this moment, more than the confusion and embarrassment of estranged family, I am just sad. I don't understand my own father.

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My brother burns bright in a doorway. An erratic flame licks the walls, a body with arms flailing. My mother heard the sound before she saw the fire. An uvular roar. Tomas was ten years old. These were the months, when empty food stores closed for most of the day, when families stood in line for hours for meager rations, when queues at gasoline stations stretched for miles, filling

spare canisters, just in case. It is a windy day. My brother played with fire before. He burned part of the fields in the back of our house, the fields under the railroad tracks. Something he only recently told me. But on this day, a cool spring day, the day of the hoarse scream, Tomas drenches a pile of debris and newspapers and when the wind picks up, these soaked paper bundles fly onto him. An instant. A toss of a match, the wind and up in flames he goes.

My father opened the front door.

I ask my Uncle if he visited my brother in the hospital, and even before I finish asking the question I sense the answer. No, he said. We avoided each other's eyes—our disappointment not yet rationalized, just felt. But I managed to add, He was there for a month. He was ten years old. Renata only sighs. Then softly says, more to herself than either of us, My god.

My father brought home a ski jacket for Tomas. The thickness of the insulation protected his torso. Fat and long skin grafts cover his thighs and calves. I don't remember his legs any other way. I was four. To this day my brother never wears shorts.

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I try to lighten the mood and tell my uncle that my mother sends her regards. I tell him how I've always heard nice things from my mother about him.

> I never said this, but after so many years I can say it. Your mother held a grudge against me because I would send your father to pick up materials here and there, but the truth is your father didn't go out for supplies, but out looking for sluts. And I covered up for him. Then another thing happened, and more incidents, and I simply had enough.

The truth is my mother has accused my uncle of stealing and lying, but she also has made excuses for him. She has defended my uncle, felt sorry for him—first his face, then his marriage. Perhaps she just appreciated him: hardworking, committed and family oriented. But she also said the brothers weren't treated equally. My father and mother paid for half a pig while my grandparents paid the other half, but it was Uncle Zdzisław who took sausages and ham out of the fridge. He came over and left with the food my parents paid for. He received the same for free while my father had to pay a share. Why the imbalance? No one can say anymore. And I don't want to ask. Some stories will have to remain fragmented. The truth may be buried deep. Necessary justifications are a means of coming to terms with regret. Excuses are lies in disguise. Disillusionments possibly protect frail minds. Whatever the reason for burying the truth, I don't want to peel off the layers. Perhaps my mother's voice is too loud. Perhaps I too feel sorry for him. Perhaps we follow too closely in our parent's footsteps.

Uncle Zdzisław never remembers his parents expressing affection. He says, My mother would command my father: Józef do this or do that; and my father would comply, put his hat on and leave. Ten years before her death, Grandma Władysława disappeared. Just like that she was gone. She left the house on Tarczowa and didn't come back. No one knew where she was.

I don't know if Zbigniew and I were the only ones who didn't know.

And then, ten days later she came home. She said she went to the hospital and they kept her there. Grandpa didn't tell his sons anything.

> What kind of relations are those? Renata says. Why didn't your father say anything?
> I don't know. But that's how it was.
> Do you think it was the times or was something wrong with their relationship?

Something was wrong. He drank. A lot. He worked in a brewery. I remember he wanted to hit her once. This was still in the apartment on Fabryczna. She ran from him into the one room we had. He ripped out the door handle. A moment like this I remember. But that is all. He was never aggressive again. He was always a very calm man. He just drank. But then everyone drank. Even bus drivers. Luckily, there wasn't much traffic then. My uncle calls my grandmother a choleric. She was very hardworking. No matter what, dinner was always served, he says. Sunday nights she'd stay up until 2am baking. Movement was constant in our house.

Family patterns must pass down. Tomas and I were thrown into our family's nervous energy surrounding the daily chores of cooking and cleaning. I must have been the only kid to hate weekends. Our father could only relax in front of a television, and even then he was moving, fixing some contraption on the coffee table, folding laundry or stirring a stew between commercials—our mother working alongside. Except as our years in Jersey City accumulated, she began retreating from view, hiding in the bedroom on the other side of the apartment.

1975—when Grandma Władysława came home on Tarczowa to die. She lay in the far bedroom off of the living room. There, the floors were painted with coats of dark chocolate brown. Her whizzing, air forcing itself through metastasized lungs, kept sleep remote for the household. I was not yet born, my brother only a toddler. My mother fluffed her mother-in-law's pillows, adjusted blankets. There are two forms of dying—one starts head down, the other foot up, turning feet cold and blue long before the heart stops. This is the slower, more agonizing death. This is what my parents tell me. I am too far removed to have any say. Death has been sterilized, tucked away. My Grandmother's death trailed feet up.

On a day when my father and mother were gone, Uncle Zdzisław came over with Renata to find Grandma Władysława on her knees chipping off the chocolate brown paint in the bedroom. A spatula in hand and paint thinner spread. I remember that, says Renata. The smell was nauseating. I begged her to stop, but she was stubborn. She wanted refinished floors. I thought she had lost her mind. No, my uncle says, that was my mother.

You had a construction company with my father, correct? I ask.

> I started it and your father joined. He was my partner. And really it was your father's friend, this small guy, Sylvek, that split things up between us. Your father had those kinds of friends.
> What happened?
> He defiled the reputation of my company. That guy was slimy.
> I know, I say. Did you know about the robbery?

It was close to Christmas 1982, a year after martial law. A piece of bad luck trapped my father in his getaway car. He was the driver, waiting in the courtyard, surrounded by dirty commie blocks, while his short, fat friend tried to rob the guy he worked for. A jeweler, said to have stashed diamonds at home in the crevices of his books. Little did Sylvek know the jeweler's son was also there. He tied the poor kid into a chair and gagged him, but not well enough because as Sylvek opened and closed books in one room, the teen loosened the knots in the other and managed to call the cops. When the short, fat friend ran downstairs, the kid screamed out the window to stop their car. Stop them, he yelled. Thieves. People surrounded the car until the police arrived.

> Miła carried the newspaper cutout for years.
> Why?

As a souvenir. My uncle chuckles. I sense Renata's embarrassment. So does my uncle. His composure lightens. Because your father acted like a great wise man, and if he ever got in her face about something, Miła could whip out the clipping.

Grandpa carried his wife's obituary in his wallet for years.

Sylvek sat on top of the roof of his house when the military police came looking for him. I even got called down to the Police, my uncle says, but I had nothing to tell them. We already did not speak. The policeman asked, The only two brothers and you don't speak?

I ask my father why we left and he says, After Martial law it was obvious it would not get better.

To Those Who Left Without Notice—

Again someone cracks the shell of an egg with the tap of a fork. Whisk the yolk with a riotous wrist. Let sugar cubes crumble like sand castles so children can gargle with pleasure. The taste of sweetness reserves the tip of a tongue and heaven reserves its place for a dying mother. Lovers take vows filled with regret. Cancer scrapes life of its layers.

Lost is not the same as blind but a fool is always a fool, says the new wife. She cleans windows and washes burgundy curtains, not forgetting to run cold water and not letting color run. The dying mother tells her children they too will crawl for a last drop of nectar. The pear tree outside her window droops with anchors of fruit. Its rot is made to wake the men from war. On swollen wrists, she scratches the remaining varnish off her floor. Ants carry offerings, following a trail of sugar. Even they must move a grain of dirt to pass on by.

Your father shattered the family's Rosenthal china. The only thing of value left. It was an accident. He was trying to move the armoire and didn't realize two separate pieces stacked on one another. He pushed and the top crashed. One teacup survived. The mother who taught me patience, wasn't mad. She only said, China breaks.

I dated your father for two years. I wrote him love letters when he entered a two yearlong-mandated commitment to the army. It's the only thing he's ever been committed to besides his cars. I remained so faithful I trapped myself. When friends invited me out, I refused for fear of temptation. I never again loved like that. How stupid to waste it on someone who thought love was a light switch? I begged him. Made a fool of myself. Fell down to his feet and begged him not to break up with me.

> Why are you doing this? What we have is so beautiful.
> Silence.
> But I love you.
> So stop.

My mother force-fed me. I crawled into bed and refused daylight. For a month she spooned soup into my mouth, wiping my face. Already frail she supported me to the bathroom. Her hands, my crutches, tried to life me into the tub, but my feet stuck. The tiled floor had shattered, turned to powdered mud. My body sunk deeper. A witch had settled on my chest, pressing me in, collapsing my breath. Barely there, I held onto the tub's edge. My mother soaked a sponge and

wiped my back clean, lifted my hands and hair. She lathered my head, squeezed water out so my hair stuck to the sides of the tub. My first cleaning in days.

I stared off into walls. I could not hear what others were saying to me. You probably do not know I already saw a therapist in Poland. It was before all of this. Your father knew and blamed my brokenness on the before. He said I was damaged when I came to him. He did not hurt me. This, of course, is not true.

Like with everything, time eased the weight. I returned to work at the post office. I slowly learned to smile. The first time I laughed—I don't know why a stubborn child refusing to hold its mother's hand, made me laugh, but it did—my laugh frightened me. So guttural, almost choking on itself. And just as healing had barely touched me, he returned. It was his turn to beg. He said his parents made him break up with me. Because I came from nothing, I was nothing. He didn't want to end things with me. When he wrote me letters, his letters were full of grammatical mistakes. They bothered me but I excused so much out of love. Now I knew better. I tried to avoid him, but he was persistent and then he came into the apartment, the one we moved to when I was eighteen, and he did to me what he knew would keep me by his side. He knew how I felt about family. He knew what it meant to me. He seduced me. We can't. I'm ovulating. And he did it anyway.

Then I had no choice but to walk down the aisle.

When I married your father, she only told me, Be sure; once you're married you can't come back. I could tell she did not care for him, but I was pregnant and I did not want my child to

experience a life like my own—fatherless. When I found out the mother who raised me was not the mother who carried me, I did not ask about my father. I still am not sure why, but I didn't. I suppose I understood the absence of fathers. Or the warmth of Marceli and my first years satiated my need for fathers.

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The sister that was carried out of the forest in the belly of my mother also lived without a father. A letter came for her when she was sixteen. My mother handed it over, unopened and Teresa read it silently before us. I knew the story:

She was the daughter of the man who came to replace Marceli in the forest. The home, the land did not belong to us. It came with the profession. The replacement walked the paths once marked by Marceli, and he would walk into the life of the mother who raised me. For a year we stayed. It was not an ideal situation, but no one thought to turn a widow and her child homeless, so we three stayed in that house while my mother saved her seamstress earnings. I don't know why but I don't remember him well. Maybe missing Marceli shrouded the new man's face. Maybe the replacement eased the missing for my mother, a woman born to carry, but Marceli left her no child and at nearly forty, her chances were falling away. So she let the new man into her bed; she let him gave her a child to bear.

Teresa ripped the letter in pieces too tiny to tape back together, so no one but Teresa knew what was in that letter.

Once I asked my mother why she did not marry the new ranger.

> When I told him I was pregnant, he said: Oh God, what are we going to do? I assumed the worst. I reacted and left, but with time I have second-guessed my decision. What if he only meant it in the practical sense? What if he was surprised, but not angered? What if he actually wanted us and I, too proud, left?

Strange—isn't it—how often words fail to communicate.

***

No priest should have married your father and me. I cried beneath my veil. Everyone thought the nerves were normal, but I hated him then. He took my hand to walk down the aisle together, and I leaned into his shoulder—a tender gesture—and said, I hate you.

So the saying goes: Love falls on shit. It can fall anywhere. We married in July 1972. And then I entered the house on Tarczowa, the house of your father's family.

Your father's mother was not a mother. I came from nothing into something without realizing what I had was more valuable. The family kitchen, the bitter pit of their home, turned food thick with fat so neighbors smelled conspiring in our dinners. What's for dinner? carried the weight of oppression. Food shortages, especially meat, were a way of life. But your Grandpa had ways because he worked for a brewery—the one place the Soviets replenished their goods. The market squares may have been empty, but never was there no vodka. Lines for bananas, a rare treat. Lines for bread simply because we had to. Lines to buy a pair of shoes, no matter the size. I bought rose heels too tight, but I got a pair. Lines for things we didn't even know we were waiting for, but we stood and waited. A shortage of alcohol never appeared. Trucks unloaded

drink without bread. Fogged minds are easy to tame so that even hunger no longer hurts like the pain of withdrawal.

In the 1950s, your Grandfather delivered beer in a carriage. Drinking and driving was no issue because the horse knew the way home, and with time when the alcoholism set in, people gave up their meat for liquor and beer. The Michalski family had their meat. And so did I.

Life on Tarczowa turned me cold. There was never time for anything but cleaning and cooking and pulling weeds and planting and pruning and gathering and canning. On and on. And the swearing. The name-calling. I sat down, nine months pregnant, and Grandma Władysława called me lazy. I wanted to hold my son, but was sent into the living room to take down the drapes and curtains and wash them down in the basement—always cold and drafty. One day—the disparaging of a cousin, the next day—the extension of an invitation to the same cousin. All because of a new armoire. Elaborate gatherings were organized to unveil each new addition to the house. Your father brought many things from across the borders. A meat grinder from Germany. A television and stereo system from Sweden. Two cars—one to sell, one to keep. Life on Tarczowa was a daily theatre performance—one I was not good at playing.

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I asked your father, Why did you broke things off the first time? He said his parents made him do it. They didn't want him marrying a destitute girl.

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On December 13, 1982, exactly a year after Martial Law, your father was placed in jail. The neighbors found out once the news hit the paper. Your brother was teased in school. You were only four, bragging to people in our corner store that your father was in the slammer. You must of overheard Grandpa use that word—slammer. You had no idea what it meant, but your poor brother.

The military police came to my work. It was a Monday morning. I was a secretary and had to be escorted down a long corridor out of the building, passing a line of co-workers.
They sent me into a small room where I sat in the same chair for twelve hours. Circles made around the same sets of questions—just to see if I would trip up. They were convinced I should know something, if not everything. I was the wife after all.

> How can a wife not know?
> Don't you know husbands who tell their wives to stay the fuck out of their business?

The less you know the better, your father told me. Something wasn't right. He was surrounded by a group of hooligans—uncultured, crude and dumb. I don't know why your father kept such company. Your grandfather didn't. Your uncle didn't. I knew he was up to something, but he wouldn't tell me. The less you know the better.

At the end of the interrogation, the officer congratulated me. Impressive wit, he called it. People forget their own lies sooner or later, he said. They fumble in their own web, but you didn't. This I remember. He leaned into me. Folded over, whispered in my ear so as to feel the tickle of his mustache, and said, He must really be worth it.

> No, he isn't. But his kids are.

Your father was locked up for two months. I hid in the house, ashamed of the looks. All types—pity, confusion, scorn and even joy. Christmas Eve tiptoed in that year. I barely managed to pull anything together. Dinner was meager. A few presents waited for Tomas and you under a dying tree. Both of you knew I was not well. You went to bed that night without protest.

Grandpa stared into the street, where snow flickered under the streetlight. Frost scaled the corners of the window. My tooth ached. The stress depleting me, inflaming my gums and turning them thick with crimson. Grandpa brewed me a cup of sage leaves. The leaves unfurled in the glass cup, floating petals within the golden brew. If he ever does this again, I will leave him. Grandpa strained the leaves and chilled the tea on the windowsill outside. He waited for the steam to calm, the sage to settle, and then said, If he ever does this again, we will throw him out.

When it came time to do it, your grandfather wasn't with us.

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On April 2nd 1975 I buried the mother who raised me. Since, I have never liked April 2nd. My other mother was to fly for a visit into Jersey City on April 2nd 1989 and something told me to tell her to please change this date. This was months in advance. She listened and thank God because on the day she was supposed to arrive, the only three people who could have picked her up, couldn't: your father, your aunt Kristina and me.

She arrived several days after April 2nd. I stood at the kitchen sink of our Jersey City apartment looking out the window at flat and patched rooftop buildings, my gaze tracing electrical wiring in

the sky, realizing a country speaks through its guts and the things it choses to hide and not to hide. The cords string stories along, but these are no arteries. They do not offer—only take and travel back depleted like veins. Ugly and primitive. Have you ever noticed how certain skies are the same no matter where you go? A gloom hung thick with clouds anxious for release. The grey contained their rain. Stalking skies are always a matter of place and they knew how to find me in my moments of low.

Kristina dropped Grandma off at our place. You and your brother must have been at school and your father must have been at work, because it was just the two of us. It felt like death in there, quiet and heavy, a drone of tension.

> You are not happy to see me. I'll go. I'll ask Kristina to pick me up.

Her tone was half angry, half sad. I avoided the comment, too embarrassed to say anything other than it wasn't true and I wanted her there. I am just sad, I ended up saying. I scrubbed the tea stains of a teapot with Comet. In Germany such cleaners smelled fresh: green apples, lily of the valley or the clean air of after rain.

> No, I think it will be best if I go.
> You would be sad too if a day early you were in jail.

She has never been one for empathy since empathy requires porous walls and hers have turned so dense they no longer let sound through. She is hard and cold, but still eager and full of wit and humor. I sometimes wonder what kind of mother she would have been had life not left its scars. She is a survivor but her way of surviving gets mean, and I understand it, and I don't think ill of

her or her comments. The other mother, the mother that would not release into the arms of this one, taught me empathy.

> Well I don't know what is worse then: to spend a night in jail or be raped by three Russians.

She left to the living room and I watched the brown milk of Comet and teapot stains swirl in the kitchen sink.

I kept saying we have enough. We work, we clean houses on the side. We are on welfare. This of course was not legal. He told the Department of Human Services we were separated, so that I could get the welfare check and he could work on paper. We were better off than many refugee families. Your father, I'm sure, would say we were better off because of the scheming. The poor stay poor because they give. But your father's fear of never enough, of losing it all, robbed him of his decency. He always afraid. I had to sit him down and show him. We sat on the cheap table in the kitchen, the one that felt like plastic and looked like wood, and I would point to my notations and say, See, you bring this much; I bring in this much; this is what the state gives us; this is our rent; this is our car payment, utilities. We can do without the welfare. Unconvinced, he'd tell me I was stupid.

After our nights in jail, I told your father to leave. Find something, find anything. It will be easier for you alone, than for me with two children. And so started battle of separation, a war that endured a year, but, of course, when Grandma was around, we played house. We made dinner. We drank and entertained and forced laughter, at least mine was forced.

Then came the summer of love. After work your father would come home, take a shower, shave, put on cologne and an ironed shirt and go out. Without me. He said he needed to find someone because he couldn't just leave. Skorpion. That was the Polish Club he went to with our mutual male friend. It took him several months to eventually find someone.

Each rejection humbled him. He came home spilling cigarettes and booze into the air, though your father was not one to drink. At seventeen he found himself covered in vomit on someone else's doorstep. No memory, just vomit, so he didn't drink. We both rarely drank. But during the summer of love I could smell it on him. The second-hand smoke saturated shirt. If the night went well, he'd go to the living room and sleep. If it didn't, he'd crawl into my bed and beg and beg to give everything another chance.

But once he met Grace, he was ready to move. And around September he moved out, but things didn't go well because all it took was one month and he was back with his luggage in the hall. And then in November it happened again.

Food Town on West Side Avenue a block from our house on Grant Avenue. We went grocery shopping. Your father's cousin Danuta was with us. She'd been living in New York City, and though she had a law degree in Poland, here she was cleaning houses and sending money home to her mother and son. She was your father's family, but I felt for her situation—a single mother, a bastard son. Another child without a father.

I loved spices, still do. Standing alone in the aisle looking for marjoram or coriander, Danuta startled me. She was panicked. Her English was poor but she said some guard kept repeating

husband, husband, thinking your father was her husband. When the guard came up to me, I knew. But all I kept thinking was don't drop it. Don't drop the spice. Don't let it shatter. Hold it.

He took me up to an office with an observatory window looking over all the aisles. I went up alone. Danuta went for a smoke. On the desk were neatly packaged steaks, chicken thighs and a plastic box of raspberries. Your father's white shirt had a pink stain on it. He wouldn't speak. He just gave me a look that only I could understand. The manager of the store asked me to sit down. I did. Then he said, We need to know if this is the first time.
Your husband says he has never done this before. Is this true?

I should have told the truth. They should have taken him away then. I couldn't bear to look at your father, but I had to because if this was to be his first time, I needed to express shock. It is what everyone expected of me—even the manager. So I did, and then, I told them he had never done this. The manager took my hand as though he wanted to read into its temperature. They were cold. He thanked me and felt assured that this would never happen again. He let us go.

Outside, Danuta was as grey as the ashes on the concrete. I said to her, Well, what do you make of this? Satisfied, I walked home, ahead of them, happy that someone in his family could witness my shame.

We had Christmas together that year. Our last. It is a haze of sorrow in my memory. Your father was already dead to me, but here we were as a family breaking communion together. Pretending everything was all right. But you should watch the video and see for yourself. Just don't let me see. I don't want to.

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I do. I go through the stacks my father has sent me. I've watched all twelve, but this moment, our last Christmas together as a family, is unsettling. Not that there aren't other moments like when my father pans the camera onto other women, zooming into their crotches or focusing on their asses, but this particular moment captures loneliness like none other. It captures my memory of our years in Jersey City. My brother seems happy, elated even, singing while he's setting up the camera. In a month, he'll be seventeen. My voice is squeaky, pre-pubescent. Polish carols play in the background. We're in the living room. We did this on "nice" occasions, bringing the kitchen table into the living room, where a wall of windows, even the double-hung windows my mother hated, seemed more inviting than the cold-laminated setting of the kitchen. Laminated table and floor and countertop. The camera light bounces behind long ivory curtains from the plastic covered windows. Poor man's insulation. The Christmas tree is decorated in red bulbs and ornaments from hay, angels and stars. Bowls of borscht in blue and silver rimmed china, pieces of Poland brought out on special occasions. A basket of bread and a red candle. Compote in glass cups. A long lace tablecloth. My father wears a pressed pink shirt with grey slacks. My brother in a white blazer, spiked hair; my mother in black. She's thin, too thin. Sunken cheeks, deep grey under deep-set eyes. She's very quite, mumbles from time to time. My father is hyper. Cheery and unable to sit still, getting up every few minutes to get something from the kitchen.

Before we eat, we follow tradition. We each take a piece of communion wafer to offer blessings for the coming year. My mother hugs me for a long time. I can't hear what I have told her. My parents kiss each other on the cheek. My father's cousin is with us. They grew up together.

Danuta came to send money back to Poland. She tells my mother an unsettling comment, You are as thin as a survivor of Auschwitz.

Christmas without tears has been an anomaly growing up, which have been tainted by my mother's depressions, her crippling perfectionism down to the last detail—polished silverware, ironed tablecloths, three course meals, ribbons and bows for each present. Something always went wrong. Too much salt in the borscht. The fish too dry. A later dinner than anticipated. My brother may have known the cause of these mishaps, and if he did, he did not share them with me, then or now. My mother's sadness severed its ties with cause and effect. Coming home I held my breath to the twist of the doorknob, my gut churning slightly before I could see her. Reading her moods like sheet music, observing the keys rise and fall, dictated the tone of my own moods. But her erratic rhythms, so unpredictable and without pattern, took their toll. Patterns offered comfort. Toys offered insight into how things worked, disassembling them just to see how the pieces fit together. But I could not see the pieces of my mother. She hid them so well for so long.

I ask my mother how it began. What? she asks. I maybe should have left it alone, let her sit there in silence, drifting deeper inward, but I can't stand watching her disappear. I rather listen.

When did you first open up to me? When did you start telling us the truth?

The first truth is always the hardest to tell. You had just turned ten. You were very protective of me then. We were in the back room, the last room of the caterpillar apartment, segmented to no privacy. You asked me not to be sad. You said we would move soon. You knew how much I hated the apartment. We were sitting on the bed across the bookshelves. You looked at all the

Disney movies your father kept giving you and you said, Instead of buying those tapes, Dad should save up for a new apartment.

I could no longer keep silent. I sighed and said, No honey. Your father doesn't buy those tapes, he steals them. I even showed you the Bible he carried into stores. The VHS cut out innards. You didn't know, but your brother already did. He accepted it. It had already become normal for him, but not you. Children do not compromise so easily.

Later in the same Christmas video from 1989, I hear myself ask my mother about her father and mother. I knew so little then, but already I wanted to know about our ancestors. Already I wanted to belong.

To Those Who Left Without Notice—

Sea currents change beneath the surface. A child runs through pine needle beaches for one last swim. Dunes hide the horizon, but birds still fly with hollow bones and hollow breath. The scent of pinewood cushions a net full of herrings. Soaring swallows with food still in mouth. A father fears as of yet an unrealized fear. There is no need to offer breath to a body breathing. Flickering scales in the sunset confuse sky from sand. It's not the taste, it's the texture, cries a child choking on fish splinters. A father dreams of a field of beige surrounding his own suffocating, writhing body. He sweats salt. Grains of rye foam with the waves. A yellow refrain. A mother holds the heart of her son and when she lets go, the seawaters flood.

I want to know my mother before life's hands gripped her too firmly. Before the molestations and intense crowding and poverty. Before my father and his dysfunctional family. The depressions. Before she learned to defend herself with intent to harm.

> A law of nature governs all relationships, Wojtek tells me. Predators eat prey. Prey hide or become predators. There is no in-between.

Who was she before the immigration, the divorce and her deluge of stories? I want a sense of the mother my brother had. I want to see her life in the forest, not only to get a sense of her then, but because I want to know what it means to have such a place, a place of unadulterated memories. Floating on a train from Poznań to Zielona Góra, passing a familiar landscape—undulating hills, patches of forest. Transfer to a slower, local train to be dragged into the countryside. Sparse forests vacillate between deciduous and coniferous. Poplars and oaks surround the tracks, and in the distance, towering, skinny pines sway, needled only at the top third with the rest barren. Distance so visible here.

An hour in and the train pulls into Budachów. A brick station with two of its five arched windows intact and the rest have been modified with cement for arches and square windows below. I have seen this in my neighborhood in Denver, Colorado. Replacing arched windows is expensive everywhere.

I hear my mother: once you get off, walk to the left down a dirt path by the tracks, then cross the tracks and walk a kilometer through the woods. Once the forest ends, you will see my childhood home.

She even showed me a photograph, but I forgot to bring it. I walk. And though the descriptions fit, I question each step forward, sometimes pausing all together. There is no one beside me. Having grown up in cities, nature unnerves me, or I should say, my mind unnerves me in nature. I have always heard it described as serene and quiet. For me, it is opposite. City sounds form background music like listening to a piece of classical music while reading. Nature is layered in cacophony. Anxious, unpredictable and afflicted as in the sonoristic music of Penderecki's Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima. Nature has no melody to follow.

Even before the woods end, I know I see the right home, welcoming with its red wooden gate—already swung open. A wire fence surrounds the rest of the property. Acres and acres. The all-seeing tail of a peacock watches over me. Its iridescent blue eyes shimmer to its waddle. The space between the barbules of feathers, not pigment, dictates color. It is a simple matter of reflection dependent on movement and the angle of light.

A woman in a floppy straw hat works her garden, pulling weeds. When I approach her, she seems timid and nervous. I tell her my story. I am looking for my mother's childhood home. She lived here with a forest ranger. The woman's body petrifies before my eyes. This has become private property. I can't read her. I don't understand the source of her anxiety.

> Yes, this once belonged to a forest ranger. Mr. Sieradzki.
> Before him. Marceli Dudzinski?

No, you must have the wrong house.
But this is the house where the rangers lived?
There were others, where the workers lived.

She points into the field beyond the wire fence. A wide field of swaying grasses. The homes were torn down for safety reasons. Too decrepit. I want to go inside the house, but I don't ask. The woman's guard is too strong. I ask to walk the premises to which she agrees with a faint smile.

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Open the door to a long hallway, at the end of which I saw my mothers cry. This home belonged to German wealthy owners on wealthy German land. With cattle and agriculture, this family housed and fed its workers, building smaller homes to the side of the main manor home. Inside the home where my childhood flourished, everything was made of stone—whether marble or ceramic—I cannot say because children don't know the difference. They only know the cold of the stone, but nothing was plastic or fake—this much I know. Even then I could tell the difference between something beautiful and something ugly and inside the details—the wood molding, hardwood floors, the stone staircases and porcelain bathtub, even pieces of furniture left behind—were beautiful.

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I know this is the house. I see my mother hiding in the bushes. Grandma Anna calling her. She's found her shoes but no child. My mother mumbles to herself, I'm not going to Mama; I'm not going to Mama. Grandma Anna hears her, puts her shoes back on. I see the open fields where

my mother roams to play with dirt and bugs, and the toys from the other mother. Scattering clothing, heads of dolls and shoes. I see her in solitude, not loneliness.

Loneliness is solitude unfulfilled by its own presence, writes John Keene. If so, is it then possible to observe loneliness? As a child I thought I could. I thought I did. Seeing my mother curled up in bed, her barely-there eyes staring back at me, pained me for her. If ever I was asked *what is loneliness* this is the image I would describe. But what effect did my presence have on what I was observing?

I once saw my mother in a painting. *La Mort de Marat* by Jacques-Louse David, in which Jean-Paul Marat is immersed in his own blood with white sheets draping at the sides of a bathtub, his head bandaged in white cloth, one arm holding a letter, the other lifeless, hanging and brushing the floor. Here is my mother draped in sheets on the sofa, her hand also drooping, also lifeless. Even without the blood the image is appropriate.

Maggie Nelson puts it differently: loneliness is solitude with a problem. For me, the only imaginable problem worthy of loneliness is depression, and I know depression is a problem, but sometimes I have trouble believing it. Having observed my mother's depressions, I always feel inadequate to write or comment on the subject, as if I were not worthy of depression. Hers makes sense. Mine doesn't. I have been blessed and encouraged and loved. But I also know I have most likely inherited this form of loneliness, and yet, I resist purging it because it connects me to suffering. Not that I wish to romanticize depression here because there is no denying its agony and torment, but I cannot ignore the idea that perhaps it has purpose. There are limits. There are always limits. I have been told, You don't need to feel this way. I watch commercials that

offer blue skies only to render the cure more toxic than the ailment. Take a chill pill. With diagnosis and treatment of depressions in the United States increasing substantially in the past two decades, I fear depression's extinction. Even loneliness maintains connections, helps me understand others, so in a way maybe I just don't believe in loneliness as problematic though I have experienced the problem of loneliness.

It is easy to see my mother in the expanse of fields and forest. Whenever my mother returns to a nature, calmness enters her. Her breathing slows. Her face relaxes. This is the mother I imagine under layers of calloused skin. This is her other side, the side that stops to admire the beauty of bluets, Indian paintbrushes, and columbines in the Rockies. She can relax into this pace—something I struggle with.

I thank the woman in her garden. Perhaps she sees my disappointment because she tells me to speak to someone in town, in Budachów. If anyone is to know this Marceli, she will. I believe her.

A round woman with thinning hair, her pink scalp exposed in patches, hangs laundry outside communist blocks. When I knocked on her door, her neighbor told me she was probably outside. How he knew this, I don't know, but this is what it must be like living in a small village. Notions of privacy and private space take on new interpretations. I tell her why I'm there, what I'm doing. I say, Marceli Dudziński. She shakes her head and tells me to walk down a road to the first convenient store. One of the oldest men in the neighborhood lives there. He may know something.

In front of the store men sit in shade and drink beer out of cans. I stand in line. Processed food and corporate names line the shelves, obliterating the nameless, artisan food before the fall. I tell my story and ask to speak to Mr. Barnoś. The woman invites me into her home, tells her sister to take over the register. I am guest. Everything stops for me. She tells me to go around back, where she brings in her father into the vestibule. I tell him my story. I ask about Marceli Dudziński. Yes, yes, he knows the name. I am elated. At last I can learn something about the man who cared and loved my mother.

> Whenever I think of his name and even more so when I say it, I get such a rush of warm emotions. It must mean something, right? Like remembering your first pet.

Yes, such a man existed. He nods his head. I hold my breath and wait. He continues, But I don't remember anything. Ma'am, I am eighty-six years old. Those years are gone. What about Anna and a child? Yes, there was a child. A daughter, I believe. I keep hoping if I ask enough questions, memory will be triggered. But he says, I couldn't tell you anything more than his name is familiar, the man existed, if my life depended on it. Who else might know?

His daughter says, Seradzki's mother-in-law lives on the outskirts of town. Look for a white house. I walk up a slow incline and follow a winding path to a house with blooming clematis on a trellis. A picture-perfect garden of green grass and flowerbeds, a withered barn in the distance. I open a petite wooden gate. A doll's house.

No, she has not heard the name, but there is a man down back the way I came. Take a right and go around the bus stop, pass the second convenient store in town and the house will be on the right. An old man answers the door. Hard of hearing but eager to talk, he keeps me at the door talking of early Budachów days, the chaos right after the war. His accent is evident in the slur of

l-sounds. Ukrainian. He is one of thousands brought in from the east to fill lands taken from the Germans, transported from lands once belonging to Poland. Roosevelt thanked Stalin for his war effort by expanding the Russian frontier and marking a trimmed Poland—a third of the size of its in-between war period. Land-locked countries find nothing arbitrary in borders; they understand them as reified power. The stroke of a cartographer's pen uprooted millions of lives. Two months, the man continues, we lived in wagons on the side of the road, fearing German sounds and searching out empty homes. Many were already taken. We weren't convinced the war was over. We had been told, but habits take longer than reason.

This Ukrainian man has heard the name. Says the man was here when he arrived in 1946. He says after Dudziński was another ranger named Podraza. He can't tell me any more details. His memory keeps slipping. But yes, the man was here. I'm beginning to think I am searching out Jesus Christ.

> You have to go to the next town—Drzewica. That is where Podraza lives. He will definitely know Marceli.

I walk two kilometers to the next town, down a narrow asphalted road bordered with wheat and rye. At the town's edge, a group of elders stand in a courtyard. I ask if they have heard of Marceli Dudziński. No, they all shake their heads. But then one woman asks, Marceli Dudziński? There was an Anna Dudzińska.

> Yes, she is my grandmother.
> She was a seamstress.
> Yes, I say and smile.
> She moved to Poznan. Yes, I nod. She used to visit this woman here, she points to a house behind hers, but that woman died last year.
> Oh.
> But if anyone would know anything, Mr. Podraza would. He used to live a few homes down. He just died a month ago.
> Oh.
> But his wife is alive. You could ask her.

Two women from the group, both in springtime dresses and aprons, walk me down the street. Scarves cover their heads. Hearing my Polish, one asks me where I am from. She says she has a son in the United States, in Chicago. She says she's happy I have returned. I am only visiting. One day you will return for good.

I ring the bell at a metal gate, waking a Rottweiler. It wags its tail. I wait a long time. Hopeful. A petite woman in a blue cotton dress approaches. She pats the dog and stands confused by me. I introduce myself and my project. Do you know a Marceli Dudziński? Her pause is long. She wipes her forehead with a handkerchief and then she smiles. Yes. I light up. But, she continues, I don't remember much. You see, ma'am, my husband just died and with all this grief I can barely pick myself together. We were married fifty-six years. And after so many years I no longer know how to be alone. Luckily, I have a grandson who looks after me.

She doesn't tear up. Only maintains a calm composer. Her pitch rarely changes. Her speech is slow, reminiscent of those elders who linger onto each word, letting themselves relive time in their retelling. And though she is physically right in front of me, her gaze and tone tell me otherwise. I worry she will disappear before me. I plead for her to tell me anything she might remember of Marceli, Anna or my mother. She invites me in, but as my luck would have it, I am hurried. After wandering all morning and afternoon in Budachów, I now have only a few minutes left to walk back and catch the last train out of Budachów.

I call my mother. I went to Budachów, I tell her. I found someone named Podraza. Silence on the phone.

Mr. Podraza? You weren't in Budachów then. You were in Drzewica.
How did you know?
If I only knew I would have a daughter like you. I wait. Podraza was your aunt Teresa's father. How did you find him?
I didn't. He died just a few months before I got there, but I met his wife. She said he never hit or cursed her a day in his life.
See, he was a good man after all.

I grew up thinking the sister my mother believed to have been her sister was the daughter of Marceli. Only a few years ago did I learn that was not true. Not that my mother hid the truth. I just don't think it ever needed to come up. Then I started asking questions. For whatever reason, this little alteration to my idea of Grandma Anna and our family history unsettled me. I had grown up thinking my ancestors were superhuman. Anna, loved by all her neighbors, honored by the government with a Good Samaritan Award, had a man other than Marceli. Nothing scandalous. Just that she had someone after Marceli. Knowing this made me realize her humanity, her want of affection. Grief materialized.

Mrs. Podraza could only tell me what I had already known—everybody loved Marceli. He was a good man. No one could say a bad word against—no one. He sometimes came to the schools to teach children about the forests, about nature. Children loved him.

My mother adds, That woman knew about Anna and the baby. When my mother left Budachów, her belly held no secrets.

***

When I get back to Poznan, mother's day approaches. It's always on the same date: the 26th of May. Renata's mother isn't doing well. She's had spinal problems for years. More physical

therapy, the doctors have cautioned her. Her spinal compression fracture was completely preventable. All she had to do was move her body. There is something fitting, or maybe even deserving—though that seems too cruel—in this outcome.

Whenever Renata brings up her mother, her tone changes. Her speech softens into a near whisper. I had always heard—honor your mother and father and this is a doctrine in Polish upbringings. It does not matter who these people are, you must honor them for giving you life. And so Renata continues to visit her and bring her gifts. The last time, Miła tossed aside the gifts Renata brought her. Treated them like junk mail. Aunt Miła kept watching television, but Renata kept trying to engage her in conversation. She brought pictures from a trip to Italy. Here is David now—her eldest son. He's studying in Amsterdam. Here is Marcin, her other son, painting. Miła didn't see Marcin until he was walking though they live in the same city. Here is Piotr now. At each she glanced, but to Piotr's image she said, He's aged horribly.

> I don't know why she hates me.
> Because you're different, I say.

Only recently is Renata able to question her mother's flaws. At seven-years-old, she traveled miles to school, walking through busy intersections, crossing railroad tracks to ride several miles on the number nine only to continue walking to her destination. Aunt Miła never took her. Not even part of the way. Aunt Miła sat at home and smoked. This Renata has admitted.

Renata feels obligated to visit on Mother's Day. She wants to bring another gift. We walk through a bookstore. She says she doesn't read, so we buy my mother books instead. She decides on facial creams for Aunt Miła. Renata tenses with anxiety. I tell her if she would like, I could come with her. Renata's posture opens with a sigh. After all the generosity I have received from

Renata, the least I can do is support her. But I also have a different agenda in mind: I want to see my aunt for selfish intentions. I know I will eventually be writing about her and because I am aware of the bias that has matured within me, I want to get another sense of her. My Uncle the victim, my aunt the heartless and lazy wife, mother, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law.

It's difficult to get a different side. Both grandparents are now dead. My father hates Aunt Miła. The last time he saw her, at my grandfather's funeral in 1999, he shook her hand and told her the next he would see her, he'd be pissing on her grave. My mother tells me, Miła blamed everything on your uncle. She was ungrateful. He worked, supported her while she sat at home and smoked all day long. And still, rather than walk a few blocks to take her son Jarek to catechism class, she would call around the neighborhood searching for Zdzisław to cut across town and drive Jarek to catechism class. My mother says, She was a filthy woman. She looked homeless. She wore sweaters with holes and stains. Everyone has told me, including Renata, Aunt Miła and Grandma Władysława, hated each other. Two stories—both from my mother. First at my parent's wedding reception, she kept nagging my uncle on, elbowing him at his side and reminding him to "say something" to his mother. To start a fight. The witness—Anna, my surrogate grandmother. That dear woman, my mother says, why would she lie to me? When Grandma Władysława was diagnosed with cancer, a cancer intimate and feminine, the information spread beyond the family's circle and when it did, a mutual friend brought back Aunt Miła's reaction: Good for her; let her pant to her last breath.

Aunt Miła seemed cordial enough with me. Though as a child I remember her bossiness and curt commands, and my uncle never arguing with her. But I want to try to get my own understanding of her. Perhaps that is impossible knowing what I know, but I remain open and curious.

Renata and I walk up to the fourth floor of her childhood home. Another fine example of Soviet architecture: a bland staircase with a makeover gone awry. Years of color deprivation have inflicted an aesthetic in the other extreme, where loud colors turn aggressive, producing a sense of claustrophobia and overall spatial discomfort.

> My father and I carried a pig up these stairs. He held the head and the ass. Renata chuckles.

Anticipation hung in the air. Something big was about to happen and when Uncle Zdzisław went to the country to pick up half a pig's worth of products, the farmer gave him his half, whole. Take it and get out of here, the farmer warned. The UB has been raiding farms. Something big is about to happen. I don't want to get caught. With meat under the control of communist authorities, slaughtering swine was illegal. All meat went beyond Polish borders into the rest of the Soviet bloc.

> We had to prepare it in our tiny kitchen. Dad used a saw to cut it up. Blood splattered up to the ceiling. I scrubbed for hours.

I want to ask—where was your mother—but don't. Martial Law took effect the following day. Renata was home alone. A neighbor came over, anxious and scared. Does your TV work, your phone? She shook her head. Come with us. Why? Dear child, don't you see the tanks in the streets. War is starting.

The day was December 13, 1981. My brother remembers waking up, turning on the TV and seeing only snow, as he put it. Our father became convinced he broke the thing.

The Solidarity Movement—the only independent organization of its kind in the history of the Soviet Bloc—had initially proved to be a pest, a group of rouge Polish workers, but as it gained enough momentum it threatened the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact. It began with a call for independent trade unions and ended with the collapse of the communist system in 1990. In between, Martial Law happened. 1981-1983. Throughout, when a Military Council of National Salvation (WRON) ruled Poland, tens of thousands of innocent people were detained without charge. Forty-nine interment camps sprouted up to hold them. War was declared on daily life. Checkpoints, curfews, curtails to all transport and travel, banishment of social gatherings and more shortages, especially meat.

My uncle tells me a joke.

> What word is the same in English and in Polish?
> Meat—a synonym for *mit* or myth.

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I ask my father why we left and he says, You are like your mother; you ask too many questions.

***

We come in and Aunt Miła lies on the sofa. Her hair is disheveled. She's wearing a sweater with holes and stains. The TV blares loud Polish-dubbing over some Spanish soap opera. Aunt Miła has barely aged. Pearl skin with barely any wrinkles or blemishes, coming from chain-smoker. Renata has her mother's complexion and face, round with full cheeks and dark eyes. Aunt Miła's

proud of her baby steps. She stands up and waddles a few steps. Aunt Miła's lost a lot of weight. Her leg muscles sag like drooping plastic bags. Renata has been paying for her physical therapist. My uncle paces. Aunt Miła turns down the television. He offers us tea or coffee. I sit on the sofa. The coffee table is covered in fuzzy, dried rings of tea stains, topped with dust and lint. The room is stuffy, not just with cigarette smoke, but also stale air. My uncle sits and puts on headphones, cocking one off his ear to listen to our conversation while listening to the soccer game. Aunt Miła says, Shut the closet. I look and it's open only an inch. He gets up and closes it, then sits back down.

I ask to see some photographs. I want to see my uncle before the accident. There's not much, says my uncle. Renata pulls out an old shoebox with tattered corners and bursting stacks of photographs.

Who is this? Where and when is this?

Whatever Uncle Zdzisław says—your aunt Kasia or your great-grandmother Victoria or 1971 on Fabryczyna—my aunt responds: What do you know? You don't remember anything? The comments aren't horribly offensive, but I imagine with years and decades of layering snide remark upon snide remark, something might accumulate. Something ready for impact.

The faces in most of the photographs are too distant to make out any details. I want a better picture of Grandma Władysława to see if I look like her, but when I do, there isn't any resemblance. Part of me feels relieved. Having listened to the romancing of the Poznańs, even with their dysfunctions, I like belonging to this side. And in admitting this, in a split moment while looking into Grandma Władysława's identification photograph—taking note of her pointed

chin, thick brows and oval face—and sensing the relief of difference, I realize how much my own identity is trapped within the syntax of my mother's stories. Appearances, more than anything, are about belonging. But there is an image I cannot see. My mother's father, my grandfather, remains a blur of possibilities. I am eager to return to Warsaw and ask my grandmother questions. My own face remains a mystery.

We find a passport-sized photograph of my uncle before the accident. Renata sounds like a teenager—Wow, Dad, you were a handsome man. Handsome like his daughter, Aunt Miła says, her tone too dry to discern its intention, but either way, I am not sure Renata hears her.

At least a dozen times, my aunt says, Why are you yelling? Stop yelling.

> Am I yelling? my uncle asks, genuinely unsure.

I don't say, no you're not. Neither does Renata. Even with one headphone on an ear, he wasn't yelling. Aunt Miła's television was yelling.

We find another image: a chubby Renata, no more than eight years old. Fat cheeks, a big kid belly. Look how plump, my aunt says. Your grandmother did always smear your bread with lard.

> No she didn't. Renata's tone changes. Her brows press together. Defiant.
> Yes she did.
> That can't be. I never like lard. I wouldn't have eaten it and Grandma wouldn't have made it for me.

The exchange continues and refuses to be settled. Why lard is better than butter, I don't know. But this isn't about lard or butter. Renata defends her grandmother, for whom she has only the warmest of memories, a warmth that remains bound in childhood, so here something else comes to surface—the passive aggressive nature of the comment. It is meant to attack Grandma

Władysława. The comment clarifies and affirms a tension between the two women. The extent of which I can't ever know, but emotions don't hide as well as words.

***

Be careful of what you think you know, my brother warns me. You need to listen to all sides. I know that. Everything is a matter of perspective, he continues. Take for instance what Mom says about Grandpa standing over his wife's grave: Now you can no longer call me a doormat. Maybe Grandpa didn't mean it the way Mom tells it. Maybe he didn't have a grudge against her, maybe he said it out of affection and longing, that she can no longer call him that. Perhaps all it was was a lament.

I understand his point. I know to weigh the options and perspectives, but somehow I always come back to the way I've learned to feel these stories. My grandfather is the tragic figure. No level of reasoning shapes him otherwise.

***

Before we part ways, Renata tells me how strange it is that all her family's friends, the ones she remembers growing up to, have cut their ties with her parents. No one is left. They have no more friends, she says. All they have left is each other.

And all I can do is listen.

***

I take the train back to Warsaw. I sit with Grandma in her living room. Another Spanish soap opera is on. Dubbing over in Polish so the Spanish, barely audible, echoes. Grandma repeats them. Buenos días. Good morning, she asks, though she is sure of herself. Grandma is open to the world, to culture, the arts and languages. She seeks and hungers for more knowledge. When it comes to personal narratives, the private lives of her daughters or her own past, she shuts down. Access denied for anyone, even herself. She is only open on her terms.

My flight leaves in a few days. I have so many questions. But as I sit beside, I sense a wall. She knows why I have come. She knows my project—the family saga, she calls it. There is no ridicule in her tone, just a hint of concern. The idea that lives will be bound by words must be unnerving for someone so closed off and private. I begin with the "easier" questions—the experience of war. I get stuck. I don't know how to ask what I really want. My mother's father. Who was he, but I don't ask. I want to know why she didn't fight to get my mother back. I want to know if and how Uncle Henryk was abusive toward her. What he thought of my mother? Was he the reason my mother didn't live with her? Did she want children or did they just happen? Did she enjoy motherhood? How did she cope with the aftermath of the war? Was she depressed? I have so many questions and am only able to ask one.

> What was it like?
> She sighs. These are things no one wants to discuss.
> I wait, regretful for asking such a stupid question.
> It was like this: one came off, another came on.

There were three Soviets to be exact. It lasted several hours. She was sixteen. They poured moonshine down her throat to burn the screaming out. A guttural, hoarse voice, Please shoot me. But they didn't.

And of all the questions I could have asked, this feels the stupidest. Perhaps it is as my cousin Michał has told me. It is most difficult to ask questions from the ones closest and dearest to us.

But there is more. At least I want to know this—Who is my grandfather? The question comes in a letter months after my return. Letters offer distance while mimicking intimacy. They are as much about connection as they are about self-reflection, allowing the opportunity to know oneself. She writes me his name. She remembers it. She was nineteen. It was the fifties. Those were tumultuous years. Many stories told of girls losing their lives for putting up a fight. He was a Polish soldier. Armed. It was the 24th of June. The day of John the Baptist. Honored as a festival with the placement of candles bound by wreaths onto a lake. A glittering banquet of reflecting lights. The translation of pagan tradition, the summer solstice, into Christian traditions. A beautiful day. They danced together. He offered to walk my grandmother home. He took her under an underpass. My grandmother did not fight him. They may or may not have lived in the same village.

On June 24th my grandfather died. Not in his home on Tarczowa, but in a hospital.

Your mother is the product of a rape, she writes. If you want to know what this grandfather looks like, if you want to know whether or not he was handsome—look at your brother.

***

I take a bus into the Kampinoski National Park, where I intend to rest and reflect. Earlier online, I found a bed and breakfast about two kilometers inland from a small village. The photograph on the website sold me—an early morning field misted with morning dew. The innkeeper tells me to walk down a paved road to a fork in the road. Take the left and keep walking. The paved road ends quickly and then I'm walking on a dirt path, wide enough for a car. The soil is loose, composed of both blonde and ash black sand, mixed with pine needles and wood chips. I walk for ten minutes. I pass empty beer cans and think disturbing thoughts. I'm convinced I'm walking the wrong way, so I head back. A woman carrying groceries heads my way. She tells me I was going the right way. She says it's good to have company. The bed and breakfast is across the street from her where she lives. She proceeds to tell me one violent story after another, all about these woods. A killing of a young woman with a backpack. I have a backpack. She continues with stories about her brutal ex-husband, who got involved with a bunch of gangsters and robbed her out of her home. By the time I get to my destination, I want to head back but I don't want to walk the way.

The innkeeper tells me their neighbor is not right in the head. I am somewhat relieved, but my thoughts are still not settled. I am alone. I go to my room and decide to continue walking deeper into the woods.

Wojtek asks me, What do all religions have in common?

> A deity.
> Something more fundamental.
> He waits, but I shrug my shoulders. He likes to slow time down.
> Walking. All religions involve miles and miles of walking.

Before I left my uncle's, I told him of my intentions to go into this National Park.

> Your grandfather walked through it during the war.
> I had no idea.
> He spoke often of the war, especially when I was younger.

My grandfather fought in the single largest battle in the September campaign. Proudly, my brother tells me, They even pushed the Germans back the first few days. The Battle of Bzura. Entire pieces of the horizon went up in flames. With villages full of straw roofs the imaginable was too easy. We were so far behind technologically, my uncle says. The things Germans left behind—cars and motorcycles and tanks—Poles burned them because they didn't know how to use them. They preferred destroying them than allowing the Germans the option to use them again. But what can be achieved in twenty years, after 123 years of division and oppression?

My grandfather lost his father to friendly fire in World War I. German or Polish friendly fire? Then they were both "friendly." He fought a German battle. It wasn't enough to be a divided and occupied country, men also needed to sacrifice their lives for wars not their own. Sent to different fronts dressed in foreign uniforms. Poles fighting Poles.

Grandpa had an older brother. The two were inseparable, raised by a single mother. His mother never remarried and Grandpa lost them both to tuberculosis in World War II. A letter left behind as witness. Taken out of Grandpa's wallet to read to anyone who would listen. I found it after his funeral, tucked away in a dresser, hidden under embroidered handkerchiefs. Taped together at thinning folds. The ink from front and back bleeding into the fibers of sallow paper. A sliding of scripts. Dearest Brother, it reads and tells the story of an older brother pulled into the army, but unable to fight because of his illness. A discussion about money and debts and then

again, Dearest Brother: You stand in front of an enemy and we don't know what will happen and if we shall ever see each other again. Someday we will see.

I don't know if they ever did see each other again. The letter continues,

> It's a sad reality. It's only us two and I am convinced that as I have loved you, you have loved me. Each of us had numerous plans. I know we would have worked together to improve each other's lives. Now everything has to be put aside.

This unknown uncle, Uncle Franek, died before he could see the war end. He was twenty-seven-years old. He writes on: Our motherland is menaced. I cannot fall in line because I am not well, but you must be the type of soldier worthy of all the soldiers who have lain down their lives for our motherland. Would life be worth living if we were to lose our independence?

My mother tells me, Grandma Władysława complained your grandfather did nothing but sit under a pear tree for two years following the end of the war.

The letter goes on:

> Our father offered his life for a foreign affair, for his enemies. If you are to die, be consoled that you die for Poland, for the legitimacy of the affair you are fighting!
>
> I am writing in a crucial hour, but with God's hope that this storm shall pass. Maybe we will still see each other. And if we were not meant to see one another again, let this letter be my final farewell, let it be the final assurance that my thoughts will always be near yours, that in their path my best wishes will follow.
>
> Your loving Brother, Franek.

I follow a trail marked by white paint on tree trunks. Trees alter between stretches of pine, where the land is flat and visibly deep, and deciduous trees of all shapes—round, pear, pyramidal—that clench the narrow path. I am not used to forests without a variance in height. Altitudes help

orient me. This land, though so fitting on some subconscious level, is foreign to my senses. I hike up and down, not forward and backward. This land does not have the familiar flux; getting lost is much easier. I try to pay close attention, fearing the possibility of disorientation, but my thoughts keep drifting and wandering. My grandfather walking this same terrain on the retreat, deflated and defeated, avoiding capture. A calm sets in. An attainable rhythm more evident without the ups and downs. My mother in her forest, mushroom picking and playing and hiding. And then I look up and a small creek I had not seen before appears. I am lost.

***

Before I left Poznan I went to see our old house on Tarczowa. The street had been repaved. No longer did two-foot potholes litter the asphalt. The playground at the end of the street disappeared behind a wall of trees. As verdant as a photographic backdrop in a cheesy portraiture studio. Doubled in size, even the railroad tracks on the ridge vanished.

Walking up to the gate of the house felt familiar. I sensed my arm wanting, reaching for the handle. The lilacs were in bloom, faint in color. Weeds smothered the garden. A wall of Grandpa's currants, red and black, dead. The pear tree with no pears. The apple trees with blighted apples. The weeds as high as Jersey City weeds. A stinging nettle jungle to burn the skin. Weeds pushing through the cracked concrete driveway.

The house itself hid behind an overgrown green, covering its degree of neglect. My grandfather died for this house. Refused to follow us to Germany or the States because he didn't want to leave his house behind. And here it stood. Wooden paned windows in need of replacing. One

window with a cracked piece of glass. Dirty walls in need of paint. The green of the risers chipping. The neglect brings me shame. Such disservice and disrespect to our grandfather. Watching the house is like watching death crawl feet up.

***

How do landscapes imprint on us without us realizing it? For my undergraduate thesis, under the mentorship of Robert Seydel, I created a photographic exhibit of narratives framed into and by photographed landscapes. Text within image. Western Massachusetts and Poland share rolling hills, flora and weather patterns. My images were taken at night. Brooding, dark shots of fog coating frosted land—all under low-light exposures. When I walk the Kampinoski forest, I don't see the resemblance. The time of year and day is off. I don't think of Massachusetts. I just feel comfortable. A pull of the land. A memory unaware I had. But when I stare into the innkeeper's photographs of the Kampinoski Park—hanging on the walls in my room—I am taken aback by what I see. It is as if I am looking back at my own images. Which reflects which is the question. How could I see something I did not know?

I am not panicked. I know to retrace my steps. I get back in time to watch an ochre sky stretch long clouds into grey. And then, in twilight, in the moment after the sun sets and craved light disperses in a final attempt to linger and hold on, I see a glimmer of belonging, my own version of home—a realized vision of my mother's dream home.

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