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# The distance is more than an ocean

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**The distance is more than an ocean**

by

**Chris Wiewiora**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:  
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Iowa State University  
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2014

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For my grandmothers:

Lois Flanagan Almond & Anna Wilczynska Dumas

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This thesis is not only a book of my life, but also a book about my family: Mom, Dad, and my brother Joe; I love you.

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## ABSTRACT

The first part of *The Distance Is More Than An Ocean* takes readers on a coming-of-age journey to Poland. I recall my childhood attending the American School and struggling with language as an American-Pole. On a visit to my family's house in Warsaw, my adult perspective confronts my childhood memory as I consider the historical rebuilding of Old Town after its destruction during World War II. With my father, I visit Auschwitz and then recount my grandmother's story of surviving the camps. While in Krakow, we visit my mother's friend who taught her Polish. On a bike ride through the countryside of the old capital, I swap languages with that woman's son. I leave Poland with my father, both of us reconnected to the country of our blood.

The second part of *The Distance Is More Than An Ocean* reorients readers in a dislocating move to America. When our parents attempt to quietly settle in a suburb of Orlando, Florida, my brother and I wildly adventure throughout the city. We splash into backyard pools, cheer for Christian weight lifting teams, fight in public, reject communion, and participate in Pentecostal spiritual gifts. When I contemplate other places, noise totters back to silence. In West Virginia, I survive a freak truck slide down a mountain. I cut ties with an elementary school crush who walked past the Virginia Tech killer the day of the massacre. In Colorado, at a summer Christian youth retreat, my brother and I drift apart as twin sisters tug at our attention and I come down with whooping cough. My faith dries up as I suffer from extreme sweating that isn't cured with prayer, but is healed with aluminum-based medicine that could cause memory loss. Finally, at Chautauqua, I yield to the whisper of God rippling through a Quaker meeting.

**PART I**

## *Matryoshka*

At our dining table, I spun the Lazy Susan, and a Matryoshka orbited the saltshaker in the middle. I stared at the hollow wooden nesting doll with its lacquered, babushka-covered head. I picked up the doll and pulled her torso off from her stumpy legs. Another, smaller babushka doll sat inside of the first one. I opened her up until I was left with a solid thumb-sized doll.

I waited while Dad copyedited my essay for the Honors College about growing up overseas. Mom washed dishes by hand at our stainless steel sink. Even though we had moved to Florida almost twelve years ago, she said she couldn't get used to having a dishwashing machine. Mom always did the laundry as well as the dishes before bed. In Poland, the Communists used to scale down the electricity and cut the water off at night.

Mom pulled her left hand out of the water to push her glasses up the bridge of her nose. A purple scar cut along her pinkie from an injury in a car wreck the previous summer. She liked to soak her hand in the sudsy warm water.

Mom was paying for Dad and me to fly to Poland for several weeks that summer with money from the wreck's insurance settlement. She said it would be a good father and son thing for us. It would be my first time back since third grade.

I considered my last day in Poland as my ninth birthday on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1996. Outside, I had played blind man's bluff with my friends. They hid behind the trellis, but couldn't go as far as the apricot tree. The sweet pulp from dropped, over-ripe fruit filled the backyard.

Inside, white boxes filled our living room. In big black letters, the names of cities were printed on all the sides of the boxes. Only two cities mattered to me: **WARSAW** and **ORLANDO**.

The wax from nine lit candles melted as my friends sang “*Sto lat*/Good Luck,” which meant, “Live for a hundred years.” I blew out the candles. The smoke curled into the air.

At the dining table, Dad handed me back my paper. The word *because* was circled in a sentence that read *We moved back to the States, because my grandmother died*. In the margin, he had made a question mark, and also wrote *around the time*.

“What’s wrong with *because*?” I asked.

“You wrote it as if it’s why we came back,” Dad said.

“But that’s the reason,” I said.

“We were already planning to come back,” Mom said from the kitchen. She unplugged the drain in the sink and then flipped on the garbage disposal, which gnashed the scraps that couldn’t be saved for leftovers.

I couldn’t argue over the noise. Mom flipped the switch off. Everything ground to a halt.

“Grandma died and then we came back,” I said. For the past twelve years, I’d been saying that.

“Don’t you remember,” Mom said. She dried her hands on a dishtowel. She sat down across from Dad.

“My mother died after your birthday,” Mom said. “She waited, but we were already coming back.”

I considered the boxes. The cities and the route were already planned for them. Mom and Joe were already in America. Dad and I had stayed to pack.

Now, Dad and I were going back, but I didn't want dates and facts. I had the memory seemingly solid in my mind. I had stood in our Warsaw kitchen. The cold tile under my bare feet sucked out my skin's warmth. Everything seemed white, too bright. Dad told me Grandma had died and I stared out the window at the light filtering through the smudged glass.

***M-I-S-S-I-S-S-I-P-P-I***

In kindergarten, I sat on gray carpet. Cutout letters of the alphabet strung above the blackboard. The other kids repeated after the teacher, “Ah.”

I knew that the sound wasn’t the one that connected to the letter. The teacher made a noise like the one I heard Mom make at home when she lowered herself into the bathtub. The only reason Mom said I could ever disturb her was if I was bleeding or dying.

“Eh,” I made the correct sound like the Canadians at the International Church said at the end of their sentences when they wanted clarification or for someone to agree with them.

The teacher ignored me.

“Bi,” she said.

The other kids repeated her.

I said “Be” and held it. I let the E elongate and buzz around the room. I thought of the TV show *Maya the Bee*. Each night, Joe and I got to watch the half-hour of *Dobranoc/Goodnight*. We were already sitting in front of the blank screen and waiting for the VCR to blink 19:30. Then, one of us pressed the on button. We sang along to the theme songs of the cartoons that were kept in English. When the show began and the Polish narrator dubbed over the English voices we turned the volume down. In kindergarten, I ran out of breath.

The teacher looked at me.

“Sa,” she said.

If I knew anything, then I knew how to say the first letter of my name.

“Cee,” I said. It sounded the same as see. I wanted to shout SEE! Couldn’t she see I was an American? It didn’t matter if Mom and Dad brought our family to Poland, because they were missionaries. I was born in America. And even if Dad was Polish, Mom wasn’t, and I wasn’t going to speak Polish.

“Da,” the teacher said, looking at me.

I stared down at the gray carpet. I plucked out bunches of woven material. By the time the teacher was done saying the wrong sounds, I had made a pile of torn pieces.

I only knew it was lunchtime when I saw some of the other kids take out their plastic bags from the cubbies while some of the others lined up at the door. I had brought my Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles lunchbox that opened like a briefcase. I followed the other kids led by our teacher down the hallway.

I felt smaller than I usually did as a kid, because it didn’t matter if I was a loudmouth. I couldn’t be understood. I didn’t ask where the kids were going, I just followed.

I walked at the back of the line. We went down a staircase into a basement. The windows let in a pale white light from the outside. Kids grabbed bowls and then had something that looked like cabbage and broth plopped into them. At the end, a table held a stack of pastries made of spirals of browned dough with flakes of sugary glaze and a yellow dollop of custard or a scoop of candied fruit.

I didn’t have any zloties. I only had the lunch Mom had packed for me. I went back to the classroom with nothing.

I took my lunchbox out of a cubby. I walked over to a corner and sat with my back to the wall. I opened up the clasps of the lunchbox.

On top Mom had set a note: *As long as I'm living my baby you'll be.* The sentence was from a book Mom loved to read to me before bed as I cuddled in her lap. The story followed a mother who would cradle her son each night and sing the words as a lullaby.

I shoved the note in my pocket and wiped my nose with the cuff of my sleeve. Mom had made me a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. I hummed the tune to “Choosey Moms Choose Jif.” Wedged between the PB&J and my thermos was a box of California raisins.

I cupped the thermos and drank apple juice while looking around the room. I couldn't understand most of what the kids were saying as they ate and played. They weren't all Poles. Mom had pointed out that some kids who were Indian and others Thai. A group of them chattered.

A Thai girl walked over to me. She waved her hand. I opened up the box of raisins and chewed one. I didn't see if she had a lunch. I wasn't that hungry. I opened my hand and dumped some of the raisins out and then offered them to her, saying, “Raisin.” She smiled and took them, one by one. When she ate them all, she said, “Raisin.” I shook the rest of the raisins into my hand and offered her the rest. She took them and then finished again. “Raisin,” she said. I shook my head and showed her the empty box. She walked away.

\* \* \*

The film of water on top of the puke-green tiles was cold. I walked up on my toes trying to touch the least amount of water. A huddle of boys in Speedos stood by the edge of the indoor pool. I was the only one with trunks.

I held a plastic cap in my hand. Mom had bought it and packed it in my bag along with my trunks and a towel. The school required swimming lessons at the pool inside the building.

The swim teacher's belly hung down and a necklace nestled in the hair on his chest. He blew a whistle. He pantomimed for me to pull on my cap.

I put on my cap and then followed along with the other boys putting in nose plugs. We jumped into the pool. I got water in my ears but didn't shake it out.

I held onto the pool's edge and kicked. I wanted to swim up and out of the pool onto the tile and through the halls and across the parking lot and then plunk into the Vistula that I knew was near the zoo. I would swim across the Atlantic that we flew over to reach home each summer. I couldn't wait through winter and spring here in this school. I needed to go to America. I would go up the Mississippi. Up was the same as north. I would paddle along next to the steamboats that I had seen in Joe's Great Illustrated Classics book *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. I would go up, and then right. Right would be to West Virginia. Almost heaven, away from Poland. I would swim down the hills to my grandparents' house in Buckhannon with strawberry patches across the road.

When I got to Buckhannon, I would ask Grandpa Almond to fix me. He had been a doctor. He knew when things were wrong and he could cut out the Polish.

In the pool, I breathed in water. I choked, and then gulped down more on purpose. If I filled my body with water, then maybe I could become a fish and I could swim back to America.

I felt two hands haul me up and out of the pool. I thrashed. The water foamed. My body slapped against the tiled deck and a hand smacked between my shoulder blades. I couldn't keep the water down. I threw up.

\* \* \*

Mom and I had walked past the Marines guarding the door of the American School. The kids and their parents hugging on their way inside all spoke English. I had been to the

American School many times before to drop off Joe with Mom. I would plead to be able to go, too, but she had always taken me away to the other school.

But then Mom and I sat in the principal's office, because Mom had called Grandma Almond. I didn't know if Mom just told Grandma about me almost drowning at the school or asked for money to send me to the American School, but Grandma had sent the money and we were enrolling me.

Mr. Roland, the principal, wore a white button up shirt, a red tie, and pants. He reminded me of my Grandpa Almond. Mr. Roland even had reddish hair. Grandpa Almond was called Doc or Red around town, even though he had retired and his hair was white.

Mom signed forms. The secretary made a copy of my American passport with my blonde mop in the photo that didn't match my hair anymore. I had begun to brown since going to the other school. I swung my feet over the chair's edge, imagining pumping my legs out on the swings I saw in the playground.

Mr. Roland tapped the stack of forms onto his desk, evening them all out equally.

"Your Mom says you can read a little already," Mr. Roland said.

"A lot," I said. My voice sounded loud. I was beginning to be the boy I had been. Mom was always reminding me to use my inside voice again.

"Alright now," Mr. Roland said. He nodded at Mom. "There's always a question for new students to get into the American School of Warsaw. You have to spell one thing." He held up his pointer finger.

"Okay," I said. I could spell my name. I could spell my brother's name J-O-E, but sometimes messed up the S and the E when I tried to spell his full name Joseph. But I could spell pretty well.

"Spell *Mississippi*," Mr. Roland said.

I stared at him.

“It’s a river,” Mr. Roland said.

Of course I knew it was a river. I knew it was a state, too. I knew it was in America. I knew about steamboats and the water that flowed south cut the country in half, but I didn’t know how to spell it.

I felt dunked underwater and gulping. Grandma had already paid all the money. I wanted to speak English. I wanted to be with my brother. I was an American. I wanted to say I was Mississippi!

But I was Polish. I couldn’t speak Polish and couldn’t spell English. I felt dumb.

“Okay, okay,” Mr. Roland said. He put his open hand out and then said, “Nothing to get in a huffy about.”

Mom placed her hand on my shoulder. It felt like being pulled from the pool. I held down the urge to throw up.

“Em, eye. Es, es, eye. Es, es, eye. Pee, pee, eye,” Mr. Roland sang the spelling.

“You’ll never forget it. Welcome.”

\* \* \*

During the week, I didn’t speak Polish at the American School. My Polish driver—who wore a leather jacket, T-shirts, blue jeans, and sneakers—sang along to his American rock ’n’ roll tapes on the way there. On Sundays our family went to the International Church where they served tea after the service, but everything was in English. For lunch, we went to the American Club at the American Embassy. I showed my new American Passport with my darker hair at the guarded front entrance. Joe and I watched American cartoons in the kid room while we waited for our orders of burgers, fries, and Welch’s Grape Soda.

Mom and Dad said they were afraid I would lose the language, but I had never had it. I didn't want it. I could read and spell in English. Both of them always spoke English to me. I only spoke English to Joe and my parents could speak Polish for me on the streets.

Still, I sat in the living room across from the Polish tutor my parents had hired.

When she had said, "*Cześć*," I said, "Hi."

Mom sat with us and nudged me each time the tutor showed me a photo that I was supposed to identify in Polish. Even though I didn't want to speak Polish, I still knew some. I took my time staring at the picture of a dog.

My parents had looked for a dog for Joe and me. Even though Mom had cats, they thought American boys should grow up with a dog. We had gone with them to attend dog shows where greyhounds raced around tracks. We had driven out to the country and seen packs of German Shepard mixes guarding junk piles and their pups yipping and rummaging in the rusty metal. We had visited a breeder who had sheepdogs with hair that hung over their eyes, causing them to bump into furniture around the house. We didn't want any of those dogs. Joe and I had thought the search for a dog was over.

Then, one day, Joe and I had come home from the American School and saw this black and white dog running back and forth behind our front fence. The dog looked like Grandpa Almond's brown collies that he always named Briar. We chose to name our dog Patch.

When the neighborhood kids had walked by and noticed our new dog they asked in English, "What his name?" I told them, "Patch," but they mispronounced it *patrz* and gave thumbs up. I asked Dad about it and he explained that the word meant, "you watch." They thought Patch was our watchdog, but we had named him for the large spot on his hair and because we wanted to think of West Virginia.

“Krzysiu,” Mom said my nickname in Polish. I didn’t respond. I looked outside the window.

Joe ran around the backyard with Patch barking after him. My brother knew enough Polish to talk to people on the streets. I watched Patch jump up. Joe said, “Down.” We had taught our dog English, so why did I have to know Polish?

“Christopher,” Mom said.

“What?” I asked.

“The card,” Mom said.

“Dog,” I said.

The tutor rubbed her eyebrows. She set the card back in the stack. Mom excused me.

\* \* \*

On a photocopy, I colored in the plume of a giant rooster with a man saddled on its back. A cratered moon filled the space behind them. The teacher told a story about this man who was given wishes by the devil in exchange for his soul. When the devil came to collect the man’s soul the man had hopped on his huge rooster and flown to the moon.

The guy had gotten that huge rooster and escaped, but then he just waited on the moon. I wondered if he tried to breathe out all his air to float up there like I had tried to gulp water to swim away. That didn’t work.

The teacher said it was just a story, but also more than a story.

I didn’t know what to think about that. I just knew I had to come to the Polish culture class each week since I wasn’t going to learn the language. I had to sit and listen and color.

I continued to color as the teacher told another story about a simple maze constructed by a village. They put all their treasure in the center. A stranger to the village

went in with a sack, stuffed it full, but then got lost. After years his spine curved under the weight. He didn't know the treasure was enchanted. The more you carried, the less you remembered the way out.

## *Exchange*

At the Warsaw Chopin airport's gate, a man stood with his chest out. The wide expanse of his middle covered in an unzipped leather jacket, stretched at the wool of his seaweed green sweater. The man smiled at Dad.

"*Czesc, Zdzichu*," Dad said, which sounded like "Chech, G-who."

Dad and Zdzichu hugged. I'd only seen Dad hug family that way—full and tight.

"*Krzysiu*," Zdzichu said my childhood nickname that sounded like "Shess-who."

I wanted to say, "I'm twenty years old. I'm not the kid I was twelve years ago when we left." Instead, I zipped up my jacket and stuck my hands in my pocket, avoiding both a hug and a handshake. I said, "Hi."

"It has not been so good weather," Zdzichu said.

"Really?" Dad asked.

"It has rained, but I hear it will be sunny," Zdzichu said.

As I waited by the luggage carousel for my bag, I considered how people talked about the weather to continue conversation's sound instead of allowing for silence. I zoned out as I stared at the luggage carousel.

In the summer of 1996, when the international airport was called Warsaw Okęcie, Dad and I had checked in blue leather suitcases with metal nubs that scraped along the linoleum floor. Patch and Mom's two cats Fun and Nora yowled in their crates. Since then, our pets had all died and were buried in the sandy ground of our backyard in Orlando while the luggage deteriorated in the heat of our attic.

Dad pulled our bags off the conveyer belt. Zdzichu took my bag, opened its collapsible handle, and then led us out into the parking lot.

“We’ll want to exchange money,” Dad said.

“Oh yes, yes,” Zdzichu said. “We will go to the—” He stopped, lost on a word.

“Bank?” Dad guessed.

“No, no. It is a place with better rates.” Zdzichu said, trailing off as he glanced around the parking lot. “Ahh, yes,” Zdzichu said, guiding us to his car. Then he said the word he was thinking of in Polish.

Dad sat up front. He and Zdzichu babbled back and forth like the wipers flicking the rain off the windshield. Zdzichu drove up onto a sidewalk and parked beside a row of tin kiosks guttering water off of their ruffled roofs.

We walked along a snaking asphalt path. In worn out spots, murky brown water pooled. Zdzichu pointed to the closed shutters with padlocks.

“This is Worker’s Day,” Zdzichu said, “But no one is working.” He laughed and Dad chuckled.

Dad noticed that I didn’t get the joke.

“It’s funny because the Communists made up the holiday,” Dad said.

“Yes, but now it is celebrated as Constitution Day,” Zdzichu said. He opened his arms wide, and then dropped them back to his sides, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

We walked farther to a storefront with a closed door. The lights were turned off. Zdzichu raised his palm over his eyes to peer inside through a window. He rapped his knuckles on the glass and then twisted the locked doorknob.

“It is closed,” Zdzichu said. “We must go somewhere else.”

As we returned to the car, I noticed Dad place his hand over his chest like he was going to say the Pledge of Allegiance. I realized he was checking his money pouch around his neck and tucked inside his shirt. I put my hand in the front pocket of my jeans, touching my wallet and passport.

As Zdzichu drove us to a bank I remembered how I mostly used money in Poland on Saturday mornings when I went to our neighborhood's corner store. I redeemed the deposit on empty glass cola bottles and then buy a Sprite for me and a Coke for Joe. I clutched the cool green neck between my thumb and forefinger and the clear bottle tinted with black caramel soda between my middle and ring finger. In my other hand I held a box. Inside the box a small Snickers bar fit snug against a stack of pogs with pictures of soccer players printed on them.

Back at our house, I elbowed the bell at the fence until Dad buzzed the front gate. In the kitchen I ate the Snickers as Dad uncapped the bottles. I pocketed the pogs in my sweatpants and then I walked up the wooden staircase. At the landing, I touched the wobbly banister knob. In our bedroom, Joe climbed down from his top bunk and I handed him the Coke.

Down the hall, we sat on the floor of the entertainment room. Joe turned on the TV and flipped to the cartoon *Biker Mice from Mars*. The Polish narrator spoke for all the English voices. Still, the dubbing couldn't completely cover over our language. I cranked up the volume.

At the bank, a list of exchange rates fluctuated on a digital board above the tellers' windows. The dollar traded for about two zloty. When I gave my dollars to the teller, he glanced at the digital board. I was handed a few bills and then a pile of coins. Zloties began

to be paper money in tens. I tucked the bills into my wallet and then filled the left front pocket of my jeans with coins. My jeans pulled to that side.

After the exchange, Zdzichu drove Dad and me to an apartment building with a grocer on the other side of the street. Inside the apartment building, we crammed into an elevator. It was as small as a bathroom stall with the same sort of graffiti and smelly pools in the corner. A single light bulb illuminated us. Zdzichu, Dad, and I huddled in the middle with our personal space compromised, our shadows overlapped. When the lattice gate closed, it triggered the lift.

At the landing, Zdzichu knocked on a door and a girl opened it.

“Hello,” the girl said. Her hair was pulled back into a greasy ponytail. I noticed childhood merging into teenagehood. Baby fat melted into curves and pimples mixed with freckles. She wore the uniform of jeans and a T-shirt.

“*Joasia*,” Zdzichu said, which sounded like, “Yo-ash-ah.”

“I’m Asha,” she said and then stuck out her hand to me. “Nice to meet you.”

“*Czesc*,” I say. As I shook her hand, I added, “Actually, we’ve met before.”

I remembered when on furlough, Asha’s parents had come to visit my parents in Florida. Her parents wanted to go to the beach, and so they took Joe and me along with them. Asha wiggled in a car seat between my brother and me.

Asha’s father drove to Coco Beach where the green waves mixed their sand and shale into a harsh shoreline. Because he didn’t want to pay a daily fee, he parked at a public access lot without bathrooms or even a foot-washing station; only a boardwalk led from the asphalt lot to the beach. Joe and I got out of the car, already wearing our trunks with towels slung around our necks.

Asha's parents pulled down her pants. I turned away. Joe had started walking toward the sand.

Asha's parents kept her at the shoreline. Thankfully, they had put her into a swimsuit. Where she sat the water rushed up to her legs. Joe and I filled a pail with wet sand for her to make a sandcastle. Then, we splashed deeper into the water to bodysurf the waves.

When it was time to leave, Asha stayed seated at the shore. Her father told her that we were leaving with or without her. Asha turned around from her father and began to slap the water.

Asha's mother walked ahead with Joe. Asha's father began to walk away. I stayed between them still on the sand.

Asha turned around and saw her parents' backs turned to her. She got up from the sand and ran past me. She grabbed her father's hand with both of hers.

After Zdzichu left, Dad went to the bathroom and I stood while Asha sat in the kitchen where she sipped tea. The electric kettle churned with refilled water even though I didn't ask for a cup. I didn't have anything to say to Asha about my memory and how she was older, but looked the same. I considered talking about the weather, but then the toilet flushed and Dad reappeared. He said something in Polish to Asha.

"I speak English fine," Asha said, and then added, "If you prefer."

"Either/or," Dad said. "I'm ready for a nap."

"I'm tired, too," I said. My mind felt worn from accessing memories in the moment. I couldn't believe I was back in Warsaw and everything seemed so normal, but also slightly changed Asha.

She led us into the living room and then left, closing the double doors behind her. On top of an old rug, a mattress with blankets and pillows took up most of the wooden

floor. Light came through the lace curtains over the window behind a sheet-covered couch. Bookcases lined the walls. I noticed several C.S. Lewis translations and theological texts on the shelves.

Dad lay down on the couch. I stretched out on top of the mattress. I stared up at the low ceiling, which felt like it pressed down. I closed my eyes to imagine myself back at the Orlando International Airport the day before when everything felt open. Dad and I had ridden the monorail from the terminal to the gate. I remained standing and held a pole while Dad sat at the end of the caboose in a hollowed-out space.

Through the tinted glass I watched the last day of April fade into summer. Egrets drifted onto the airport's retention ponds. Palm fronds waved in the same wind. Inside, the air conditioning blasted and a robotic voice blared over the intercom something about having a safe trip.

After takeoff, I looked down to spot the cluster of giant steel stick-figure sculptures at the departure drop-off and arrivals pick-up. One figure held its I-beam arm pointing up. Another figure held its hand over its brow following the trajectory of our dissipating jet stream's trail.

On the mattress, I listened to Dad breathing steady from the couch. His rhythm was momentarily interrupted when the kettle whistled. He snored as it was clicked off.

## *Powsin Spring*

In a forest, outside of Warsaw, two rows of metal faucets gushed water into white ceramic sinks. I stood in line holding Dad's hand. One of the spigots squeaked closed, the flow stopped, and then a Pole left with a filled container. I could whistle more birdsongs than I could say Polish phrases that I'd memorized. I stayed quiet with Dad. Another Polish person stepped up and untwisted the valve, opening the flow again.

Mom didn't trust the tap water in our house. She said the pipes could be made out of lead. Even Superman couldn't see through lead, so how could anyone know what was in the city water? This water from the spring was clear and had to be clean.

I breathed deep and got a whiff of the pollen from the trees and the diesel from the parking lot. I knocked one of the plastic jugs against my leg. Dad held his jug steady. Rivulets of overspill mixed with the dirt path.

I moved away from the mud. I didn't want to get my Air Jordans dirty. Mom had wanted me to wear my leather sandals, but my toes always got cold, and socks in sandals looked dumb. I was wearing my matching purple shorts and shirt with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles bursting out of their sewer hideout.

I knocked my jug harder and the empty plastic echoed in dull thunks. The jugs were as big as the luggage that we packed each summer when we flew from Warsaw to Chicago before driving to West Virginia. At the airport gate, Grandma Anna always wore her apron tied around her waist. She would call me *Serce/Heart*. When Grandma bent down to kiss my cheeks, a gold cross plunked out of her shirt. She smelled like the strings of dried mushrooms wrapped in plastic that we brought her. She smelled like the earth at the spring.

Dad took a step forward. He set one jug in a sink. I set my jug down on the ground.

Dad picked me up underneath my armpits and I tried not to laugh because I knew a Ninja Turtle wasn't ticklish. I forced a frown. Behind my head Dad reminded me, "Lefty-loosey."

I unscrewed the faucet. Water splashed into the jug, filling it fast like when Mom would turn on the bathtub at night. I wasn't going to wash with this water; none of us were, because the clean, safe water was for drinking. One jug would sit on our porch next to Patch's doghouse and another jug would sit in the kitchen next to the frosty glass windows with the hinge. Mom always opened that window to yell at Joe and me in the backyard when we used the clothesline to launch forked sticks into the air.

Dad reached out and twisted the faucet closed. He set me down. The water trickled and then dripped. Dad capped the jug and then gripped the handle and curled it out of the sink. Dad's bicep curved like a softball pitching out of his sleeve. His muscles inflated as big as Popeye's arms after gulping a can of spinach, but Dad's arms were built from walking Patch, who always pulled his leash forward.

After Dad filled up the other jug, he lifted them both and began to walk back to our car. I followed, whistling the cardinal song that Grandma Almond had taught me. In West Virginia, she said the song of the red bird made the words, "What-cheer, what-cheer. Birdie, birdie, birdie."

Dad and I walked down a path. Tree roots made a stairway to the parking lot. The water sloshed back and forth.

## *Krakow by Bike*

Adam biked into the intersection as the traffic light dropped from orange to red. I lifted my butt off my seat and threw my weight on my bike's pedals. Cars converged in the middle of the intersection as I made it to the other side.

"We go this here," Adam said over his shoulder. He jerked his chin at the tram lane to the right of us. Then Adam rode over the tracks.

I biked in the road parallel to Adam.

"Once," Adam turned to me and said, "Bike stick. I get throw off." He took one hand off his handlebars and gestured a quick plummet.

The road dipped below an overpass. Cars half the size of American sedans zigzagged through the lanes. They flicked their headlights to signal passing and tailgated so close it seemed like they were towing each other. Drivers mostly stayed out of the tram lane.

As the road rose, I glanced down at the track. My tires' tread could easily slip in and lock, and then my bike would pitch me off. When the road emptied, I chanced the crossing. My tires bumped in and then out of the tracks.

Adam was leading me on a tour of Krakow while Dad stayed back at the apartment of Mom's friend Małgorzata. That morning Dad and I had taken the train from Warsaw to Krakow to stay with them. Since Adam didn't have classes at his university that afternoon he had suggested a bike ride. I didn't know how far we were going.

Cool wind poured through the mesh nylon of my gym shorts and filtered through the cotton of my sweater. At a stoplight, I had yanked my socks above my ankles. Despite

the summer sun, the bare skin at my wrists and calves chilled as I passed under the shadows of buildings.

As the road crested back to street-level, a cluster of shops filled my periphery. Shimmers and sparkles flared from behind a jewelry store's windowpane. The sharp tang of the sourdough from a bakery mixed with the road's oil and the city's soot. A street-side counter displayed pastries with drizzles of cream and dollops of fruit fillings. A crowd of people in windbreakers and warm-up jackets stood in line under a sign carved to look like a waffle bowl that held three circles of brown, white, and red; a miniature umbrella was stuck in the side like a cherry on top, and a spoon shoved into the Neapolitan ice cream.

The road narrowed. Adam threaded through two black metal posts, blocking any cars from continuing. I weaved behind him. Our ride on the smooth asphalt changed to bumpy cobblestone.

We passed under an archway and into a wide-open market square where we dismounted from our bikes. The smell of hay and manure wafted from horses harnessed to carriages. Blinders kept them from being startled.

A long rectangular two-story building divided the middle of the market square. On the rooftop, rows of red and white flags flapped in the breeze. I walked up next to Adam pushing his bike.

"What's with all the flags?" I asked him.

"It is flag of Poland," he said.

"I know that, but they're everywhere here."

"It is nation pride."

"National pride," I said. Adam had asked me to correct his English.

“It is national pride,” he said. “This is flag for Kingdom of Poland. Always same flag. White represent peace times. What we want. Red represent blood of people in war. In tragedy. Together this is people of Poland.”

We continued to a corner of the market square where a café’s wrought-iron gates blocked off an outdoor seating area with white plastic chairs and tables with umbrellas in the center. Chortling gray pigeons pecked at French fries stuck between cobblestones, their necks scarved in plum and emerald feathers.

“We stop by my restaurant,” Adam said.

A guy with a faded beard, wearing all black and holding a white towel in his hand, came out of the café.

He waved and said, “*Czesc, Adaish.*”

“*Czesc,*” Adam said and shook the waiter’s hand.

“*Kto jest?*” the waiter said, looking at me.

“*Krzysztof.*” Adam turned over his shoulder. “*Mój amerykański przyjaciel.*”

I knew they were talking about me in Polish. I recognized my name. Adam must have been saying something about me being an American, but he didn’t mention that I was Polish, too.

“Nice to meet you,” the waiter said in halting English. He extended his hand.

“*Czesc,*” I said. I shook the waiter’s hand.

“You speak Polish?” Adam asked me in English.

“*Bardzo malo*/very little,” I said.

“*Jest póť Polak,*” Adam said, “*Mieszka w Orlando.*”

The waiter tilted his head, unsure where I lived.

“Magic,” Adam said in English, and mimed a jump shot at an imaginary hoop.

Before Adam had started our bike tour of the city, we had first gone out in his neighborhood. We walked out of his mother's apartment building and through the front gate to the ground-floor street-side druggist. I told Adam in America we called it a pharmacy. The clerk gave Adam some cash from the register. I couldn't quite figure it out, but guessed that Adam used the store as an ATM.

From the pharmacy, we walked out of the one-street neighborhood. A yellow film of pollen dusted the windows of parked cars. A dirt-packed median separated four lanes of traffic. On the other side of the highway, a rusty unfinished frame of a skyscraper stuck out.

"That building called *szeletor*," Adam said.

"Skeleton?" I asked.

Adam nodded and then said, "Not finished, no cash."

Adam walked toward a squat building that looked like a gas station without the gas pumps. Inside, there were no aisles of convenience store products, only island counters with small boxes of bubble sheets like multiple choice tests and several pens chained to the sides. Behind several windows clerks waited like bank tellers. The walls were covered with sheets of paper with labeled columns and numbered rows. Every page had pairs of teams and the time they would play against each other.

"You're betting on sports?" I asked.

"It is wager," Adam said. He was already filling out a bubble sheet.

I looked over Adam's shoulder. He was putting down for Real Madrid to beat Barcelona. The Orlando Magic was listed, too. You could bet that one team would win, tie, or lose.

"You can bet a tie on basketball?" I asked.

"Any team tie," Adam said.

“But in basketball, you can’t tie.”

“You know about basketball?”

“I used to play and I watched the Chicago Bulls.”

“Yes, Bulls. Michael Jordan,” Adam said and stuck out his tongue. Then, he asked, “How good is Magic? Play strong?”

“They’re doing well,” I said, since I knew that they had just won the Southeast Division Finals and made it to the Eastern Conference Semi-Finals.

“They win tonight?” Adam asked.

“Who are they playing?”

“Detroit Pistons.” Adam hovered his pen above the bubble sheet.

“They’re a good team.”

“Magic win tonight,” Adam said, believing it.

“Sure,” I said. “They could.”

Adam had filled in a bubble.

At the café, Adam shook his waiter buddy’s hand and then we biked out of the market square. The cobblestones transitioned back to asphalt. The street-side houses and shops opened up to speckles of yellow dandelions and purple stalks of thistle between tufts of struggling grass. The street snaked off past Wawel Castle and then paralleled the Vistula River. Willows along the bank sucked up the muddy water.

The land smelled like fresh cut grass and tilled soil sprinkled with the start of rain. On a plot next to the river, people ran around a dirt circuit, using it as a cross-country track. In the center of the plot, people sat with wicker baskets weighing down lacy tablecloths with embroidered green vines and blossoming flowers stitched into the border. Little kids pumped their arms as they ran around in tank tops. The air popped with quick slaps of the

children tagging each other. Glimmers of gold necklaces flared in the sunlight. Crucifixes lay on old men's white sprouts of chest hair and on pillowy sun-freckled women's cleavage.

Clouds lulled in the sky. Couples sprawled in the grass and pointed up and said things. I couldn't pick out exactly what they said, but Polish words had been forming into ideas in my mind. It felt like seeing fluid shapes in clouds.

I followed behind Adam as the path clogged with other bikers ringing their bells as they passed, joggers huffing along, and rollerbladers scraping their polyurethane wheels.

"I play here," Adam said when we passed a rectangle field with soccer goals on each end. A group of kids passed a ball back and forth. I couldn't tell if it was a league or pick-up game since they all wore jerseys with a variation of red and white.

"So, where're we headed?" I asked.

"We-er?" Adam asked.

In our conversations, I'd come to realize Adam didn't recognize contractions. I had to separate the words. I tried not to talk slower and louder like Mom did when she spoke to Puerto Ricans in Florida. With Adam, I kept the same cadence and volume, but emphasized.

"Where *are* we going?" I asked.

"I show you girlfriend house," Adam said.

I felt weird biking all the way out of the city to visit Adam's girlfriend, but it would have been rude to ask to return. I didn't know the way back. So, I continued on.

At the end of the road, it was like it had been our destination for the whole tour. Adam biked into a neighborhood. He stopped in front of a house with floor-to-ceiling windows. I pulled up beside him. He didn't get off his bike.

"This is house," Adam said.

"How long have you been together?" I asked.

“One year, almost.”

“Wow.”

“You have girlfriend?”

“Not anymore.”

“No more?”

“No more.”

“This is the same thing with Anka.”

I didn't say anything.

“It hurts,” Adam said. He formed a fist with his right hand and thumped it against his heart. He turned to me and asked, “How long does it take not to hurt?”

I kept looking at the glass and said, “It still hurts.”

“Always?”

“Sometimes.”

Adam looked back at the house and breathed out. We were mirrored in the windows. Adam seemed to be trying to see something, somebody, inside. There was nothing there other than our reflections. Adam looked away first, and pedaled off.

I followed Adam, shifting into a higher gear to get away quicker and catch up. Soon Adam and I both were standing on our pedals, up off our seats, climbing a spiral hill. We were in our lowest gears and it felt like we were biking up a wall. We barely pulled past a power-walking gray-haired lady.

The road plateaued into a gravel parking lot. Adam slung his leg up and over his bike's frame as he slowed. I rolled up, finally taking a seat, and took both my feet off the pedals to plant them on the ground.

I wondered why Adam had led me to the top of the hill since I had already gotten to see the city. He looked over at the houses below. We must have been above Anka's house. I couldn't spot it, but I was sure Adam knew where it was.

Adam sighed and then walked through the parking lot. The parking lot led to a zoo. It felt random that a zoo was on top of the hill, but it seemed like a good excuse to not talk about spying on Anka.

Adam paid for our entrance. Uncaged male peacocks strutted around little brown females. The males' hundred-eye tail feathers fanned open, showing off.

A roar sent the peacocks scuttling. We followed the sound to a crowd gathered around a boxcar-sized cage constructed from timber poles sunken into the earth and wrapped in chicken wire. A lion on its haunches opened its mouth—wide—and roared. I was so close that I could have reached out and touched his mane.

Adam said what sounded like "Cruel Left."

I remembered when the billboards in Poland had advertised for *The Lion King*.

"My mom likes the cats," I said. "They're cool."

"I show," Adam said. "Come."

A Siberian tiger hurled itself against the glass of its enclosure. A mother bounced her baby in front of the viewing area. Another tiger prowled the perimeter. Razor wire topped the fence around the pen.

After the tigers, Adam and I left. In the parking lot, Adam didn't hesitate to look at the houses below. I believed he already knew there was nobody there anymore.

We got our bikes and began to coast down the hill. We started going so fast that I tucked into the handlebars to avoid being pushed off my bike by the headwind.

“My cousin,” Adam said and turned around, still able to take the turn of the hill’s curve like he’d ridden it so many times before, “broke arm here.”

I squeezed my brakes, but the tires only skidded, I couldn’t stop. I released the brakes. My skin rippled in goosebumps as the trees blurred by.

Back at Małgorzata’s apartment building, I sat on a picnic table in the backyard with Adam and his mother. They had their English workbooks open to their homework. Małgorzata and Adam were in the same class taught at the British Embassy.

“Your mother has the same color as me,” Małgorzata said and pointed to her eyes. Małgorzata said “color” like she was sounding out the British spelling “colour.”

I didn’t correct Małgorzata. I just looked at her pale blue eyes the same as Mom’s. Małgorzata wore denim dresses like Mom, too.

“You know,” Małgorzata said. “I learned to speak English from your mother and she learned Polish from me.”

Mom had told me about learning Polish; that she never learned the Polish verb tenses, so she always spoke in present. Sitting there, it seemed too soon to become friends with Adam, but then I considered how we were speaking in languages traded more than twenty-five years ago by our mothers.

A little gray cat appeared from under the table. He rubbed against my ankle and mewed.

“*Myszku*,” Małgorzata cooed.

“What’s his name in English?” I asked.

“Mouse,” Adam said. He smiled across the table.

I laughed and then scooped Myszku up into my lap. He surrendered his belly to be scratched. He rumbled a sustained purr.

## *Warsaw Market*

Brown water pooled on the uneven concrete pathway from the bus stop, leaving dry spots that looked like lily pads. I held onto Mom's hand as I jumped from one to the next without splashing. I kept my sweatpants dry that she had helped tuck into my pair of frog-green galoshes. My red coat came to my knees. The slick material wicked the rain to drip down the bottom.

Underneath the chicken stand's thin corrugated tin awning the man behind the counter didn't mind practicing his English with Mom. At other stalls, Mom ordered in halting Polish—trying to remember memorized phrases from Dad—but there, she smiled and gestured and even corrected the butcher's grammar as he lopped off the feet and head of a bird so that it looked like one in the grocery stores back in the States, minus a Styrofoam tray swaddled in plastic wrap. Mom told me she didn't mind paying a little more for all that.

I didn't care how much anything cost as long as I got a pickle. And so, I pointed for the next shopkeeper, the vegetable man, who used a plastic bag as a glove and plunged his hand into the murky brine of a barrel. Like always, he handed me the plastic-wrapped pickle. I chomped on the crisp skin as Mom filled crosshatched nylon woven bags with mushrooms.

At a pushcart, Mom selected several quarts of raspberries. For the thousandth time Mom told me that she had craved them when she was pregnant with me. She had eaten them until she threw up.

The smell of sourdough drifted from the baker's booth. I pulled Mom to the shelves displaying rows of un-sliced loaves. Some crusts browned almost black while others looked as white as flour. My eyes glazed in front of the egg-washed pastries with dollops of cream in their centers. Mom told me that we would wait to buy bread back at the bakery in our neighborhood.

Grumpy, I imagined all the shopkeepers as trolls. Not evil, just bulbous. I knew their bodies were lumpy from toil. I only recognized if they were men or women by the cap or shawl that covered their hair, gray bangs tucked behind their ears. As I walked next to Mom, holding on with my non-pickle-sticky hand, I watched their saunter—something between a waddle and a swagger. They were worn from growing and raising and foraging all the food from their gardens and farms and coops and sties and orchards and fields, and then bringing it all to market.

On the way out, we stopped by the flower booth with bouquets in three-gallon buckets. Mom picked a bunch of tulips and then handed them to me. I held them upside-down. The yellow blossoms looked like empty cups.

## ***Where People Baked People***

At Auschwitz, Dad and I walked along a rutted path. A metal sign above the entrance read: *ARBEIT MACHT FREI*. Dad told me that we had visited Auschwitz some time around when the Berlin Wall fell. I didn't remember it.

We entered a sagging two-story building. The middle of what once must have been straight-cut rectangular stone steps were worn shallow. The building had to be a house, because off the entryway a kitchen took up a corner. Wooden floors creaked with the weight of people. What could have been a living room smelled like dust.

Clusters of other tourists walked around the room. Plastic panels sectioned walls into cubicles. I stood in front of one of the panels and stared at a white haystack-size pile that looked like wool. Then, I noticed a set of pigtails next to each other, a French braid, and toupee-like tuft.

A sign next to the walls said that the pile contained two-tons of human hair. All the white had once been brown, but grayed, and then had lost all color. The sign said the hair had been used to make carpet.

I moved to the next cubicle. A pile of shoes. Individual soles had patches. Others had holes.

I moved to the next cubicle. A pile of glasses, the lenses had been busted out. Some of the frames were neatly folded.

I moved to the next cubicle. Crutches leaned together like a stack of wood to be burned, the ashes scattered, the evidence gone. There were several fake legs.

The piles grew. The room compressed. I shuddered.

I left the building. I didn't want to look at anything else. I didn't sit on any of the stone steps, because I didn't even want to touch the ruin.

While I waited for Dad, I read a sign. The sign explained an ethos at the camp called *destruction through work*. Workers took an armful of bricks as far as they could walk in half a day and dropped it off, and then took another armful of bricks and moved it back to where they began. The next day they did the same. And then the next day did the same. And the next, and the next, and the next.

Would a slow awful death be worse than a quick awful death? I didn't have an answer. I didn't know annihilation like this. No name, just a number. Then, a tally.

In America, the largest burial ground I'd been to was Arlington National Cemetery where white headstones crested over the rolling green lawns. Each of those soldiers' gravesites was at least three by seven feet. At Auschwitz, the sign said there were one million people on fifty acres. One body under every two square feet. Normally, they couldn't fit in that space. The bodies had to be burned down to ashes and then mixed with dirt.

How could I have forgotten what should be unforgettable? Even forgotten, the place was still there. Proof to remember.

When Dad came out of the building, he didn't ask me how I was doing and I didn't ask to leave. I said that I wanted to see the ovens. Where people baked people. I needed to reencounter it, because I didn't want to forget again.

At a low-to-the-ground, boxcar-size building I read a sign about the crematorium. Guards had said that the only exit was through the chimney. People shoveling people into ovens had written their accounts on scraps of paper, put the paper in jars, and then buried the jars in the ground. They wrote on the paper to testify to what was happening.

The oven doors were left open. Deep inside a blackness, a darkness. The hinges were rusted, unable to shut again.

As we left, I considered how people reverted to talking about the weather when there's nothing to say. White clouds swabbed the sky-blue sky. It was ridiculous to expect sleet storms and mucky roads and freezing wind in summer, but I wanted to remember the place without beauty. I turned around to the weed-covered train tracks cutting under brick arches. The rails almost converged into a vanishing point.

Back at the second floor of Małgorzata's apartment building, I warmed my hands around a cup of Nescafé. The freeze-dried coffee had a hint of cocoa-flavor. It almost tasted like hot chocolate since she made it with steamed milk.

Dad was out for a walk. In addition to making me the Nescafé, Małgorzata set a tub of margarine, a plate of ham, slices of tomatoes, and a glazed loaf of chąłka—egg bread baked in a braid—on the center of an oak table.

I sat in the corner with a view of the room. Małgorzata washed dishes a few feet away with an apron wrapped around her waist and a dishtowel slung over her shoulder. Natural light came in through a glass sliding door, slightly opened out onto the balcony.

Greg, Małgorzata's nephew who lived above her apartment, stopped by to visit. He seemed more like a younger brother since they looked close in age, both with hints of graying hair. Greg had told me about how that summer he had returned to Poland, escaping from Chicago's imploding construction industry. His English sounded as fluent as a natural-born American citizen's. He said he left because there were too few buildings for too many contractors. He got out while he could, selling his house just before the market flooded.

“So,” Greg asked, “What did you do today?”

“Udali sie do Auschwitz,” Małgorzata said over her shoulder.

The name sounded German in any language.

“The camps?” Greg asked. He tilted his head, wanting to know what I thought.

I didn’t know how to explain that feeling of not being able to escape myself. So, I just exhaled and cooled my coffee.

“Us Poles are tough,” Greg said. He raised his hand, reached out, but stopped and set his hand back on the table. If Greg knew me better, then he would have probably patted me on the shoulder.

Crumbs dotted my plate. I thought I hadn’t been hungry. I couldn’t remember eating an open-faced sandwich.

“My grandma was in one of those places,” I said. I knew her history, but I had never asked for details. Since I’d seen and wouldn’t forget the worst place, I didn’t want to know.

“Everyone knows someone,” Małgorzata said.

“That’s right,” Greg said. “We survived. All of us. It’s like Szymborska wrote—”

“Who?” I asked.

“She won the Nobel Prize,” Greg said, as if giving me a clue.

I was sure I should have known who it was, but I didn’t and I shrugged.

Greg waved his hand like it was nothing and then explained, “In a poem, she wrote that *a view isn’t a view, except by a person who sees it.*”

“The whole thing is translated in English?” I asked.

“The Polish is beautiful, so simple.” Greg said, “But yes, the English, even though a different language, means the same.”

Małgorzata’s little gray cat Myszku walked through the kitchen to the balcony. He was barely big enough to hold in my hand.

I considered other small things that clumped and piled: dirt and ashes. Each individual became part of a collection. A shape, a mass, a list.

A shadow passed my face. The natural light cut on and then off as Myszku strutted in front of the bars on the balcony. He was full of life. Myszku wiggled through the metal, coiled at the edge, and then leapt out into the open.

## *Leftovers*

At the kitchen table of my grandmother's house, I copied down her recipes from index cards tucked inside plastic sleeves of a photo album. Grandma measured grounds into a filter and then flicked on her coffeemaker. The aroma of coffee rolled through the room as a fresh brew sputtered. A pot of water churned on the gas stove.

"It doesn't say it on there," Grandma said, reading over my shoulder. "I use half ketchup, half tomato paste."

I scratched out the full cup and edited the correction in the margin. Outside a thin layer of snow brushed Grandma's tomato garden hibernating next to the fence. I hadn't flown up from Florida to Chicago in the middle of winter to write down recipes. I had flown up because Grandma, who was in her late seventies, had breast cancer and was scheduled for a mastectomy. I thought that it might be the last time to see her and possibly the last chance to hear about her history. I didn't know much about Grandma other than she was born in Poland, went to the camps during the war, and after came to America.

On the counter, Grandma had set aside homemade blueberry jam she canned and a vacuumed double-pack of kielbasa. More of both filled the fridge. Grandma planned to stuff them in my carry-on duffle bag along with the golabki that she was preparing.

The coffee finished before the pot of water boiled. Grandma poured coffee for me in an orange mug. I wrapped my hands around the ceramic glaze, warming my palms. I admired a painted flower that blossomed on the mug. The white flower had a polleny center. I knew it was one that grew in Poland, but I didn't know its name.

“Do you want the cup?” Grandma asked. If I said yes, then I knew she would wash it, dry it, and wrap it in newspaper for me as soon as I finished my coffee.

“No, no,” I said. I waited to take a sip and covered the lip of the mug with one hand.

On the stove, the pot of water boiled. Another pot, with rice, began to simmer.

Grandma lifted the lid on a frying pan to check on sizzling ground beef. Grandma had set her sauce to the side, rounding up all the ingredients for golabki.

“Do you remember Poland?” I asked.

“Of course,” Grandma said. She stayed at the stove.

Grandma must have thought that was a silly question. I wanted to ask her again, but I didn’t say anything. I waited to see if she would fill in the silence. I took a sip of coffee. Grandma plopped cabbage leaves into the boiling water. She wiped her hands on her apron, walked back over to the table, sat down, and then began, “We lived in a village....”

There were only six cottages. The roofs thatched together above overlapping logs of the one-room structures. Her father Josef owned a store. The store was a cabinet in their cottage. He sold sugar, flour, salt, tobacco, and matches.

During the day, Josef farmed and in the evenings at the tavern he drank and gambled. One winter, Josef came home through the snow in socks. He stood in the glow of the cottage’s doorframe and cupped his red-chapped hands together, blowing into them. Babcia his wife—her young face already worn with worry—pulled him inside. Josef shuffled in, unable to feel his toes. He had lost his shoes playing cards. In front of the fire, blood and pain rushed through his thawed veins.

Betting and losing his shoes wasn’t enough to quit. The cold didn’t knock sense into him. Only after he fell off the local tavern did he finally sober up.

Josef wasn't the nicest drunk. He wasn't mean, either. He never hit his wife or children. But one night at the tavern, Josef made fun of a young man. And the guy just stood up and hit Josef. Hit him so hard he fell off the building. The tavern was built on stilts. Josef fell off the building into snow. It sounded cartoonish: Josef had burst through a double-hinged saloon-style door and flipped over a railing on a deck and then fell backwards—over a story high—thudding into a drift, his outline indented into the ground.

Grandma got up from her table. She lifted the lid from the pot of boiling cabbage. A cloud of steam escaped. She adjusted the gas, turned the heat down low, giving herself more time to tell me about her family, our history.

Grandma returned to her chair and said, “The Russians came on horses....”

They invaded, but they didn't torch cottages. The thatched roofs didn't burn with flames that crackled up, blackening the sky. Instead, the Russians set up schools where they taught, “No God.” Josef forbade his daughter from attending because he wasn't going to have her reject being Catholic and he would not have her forced to speak another language.

When his stepmother had kicked him out of the house at sixteen, Josef had lied that he was older to join the Polish military. During World War I, Josef had patrolled the Czech border, but was captured and taken to a prisoner camp in Italy. He ate dogs and cats to survive. Josef escaped by killing a guard at the prison. He grabbed the Italian soldier's throat and squeezed until he was done.

Josef still served as a border patrolman and the Russians believed he would join the Polish resistance. Several men came to the cottage for Josef. The men blocked the door, the only way in or out. They were there to take Josef outside and make him dig a body-sized hole so they could shoot him and then bury him in it. But Josef had already fled to the next village, so they grabbed Babcia.

Grandma grabbed my wrist. “They took her fingers,” Grandma said. She held my hand. Her skin was soft even though she had worked for years as a cleaning lady. Grandma straightened all my knuckles.

“They put her fingers in the door,” Grandma said, “And asked her where he was.”

I wanted to tell her to stop, that I could guess what had happened next.

“She said she didn’t know,” Grandma said. “And they slammed the door, shut.”

Grandma bent my fingers into a fist. She covered her hand over mine. I pulled back my hand, away from her, and hid it under the table.

“Babcia left to go find him,” Grandma said.

Grandma was left alone with her younger brother Pete. No parents, no school, no supplies in the store’s cabinet. They just had some chickens outside.

Then, a man came with a note: *Anuszka, you and Piotrek go with this man.* No one else had ever called her by the nickname for Anna. And so, she and Pete went with the man and were reunited with their parents.

But her family was caught and taken by train to an industrial city in Germany. In a building labeled *Margarine*, they assembled cogs and nuts and bolts and other pieces of metal to build the war machine. The tin warehouse’s soot-stained locked windows baked in body warmth and stench. Pastel flares streaked the smudged glass as the city, but not the building, was bombed. After the sight, the sound: explosions ricocheted around the building and the metal reverberated like an earthquake tearing apart Europe.

After the bombing, they were sent to a forest. A work camp. Together, she and Pete cut down trees. He was hardly tall enough to reach the end of the double-handled saw. Pete looked funny hanging on, his toes barely touching the ground.

They labored from sunrise until sunset, before they ate “soup.” If they were lucky, then maybe there was half of a rotten potato at the bottom of the translucent broth. That was all their food for the entire day.

Once, at twilight, guards walked the workers to a trampled field next to the forest. Straw was stamped into the earth. The guards carried sacks that they dumped upside-down in front of their spit-polished black boots. Out tumbled bright red apples.

The workers rushed forward. As they reached to grab an apple, clubs came down. There was hardly any muscle to cushion their bones. The cracks—of clubs, of bones—mixed with laughter.

Grandma stood up to turn off the stove. I tried to see if I could spot a pang of an old fracture as she drained the cabbage. I wondered if Grandma felt a phantom pain when she reached for the strainer.

I didn’t ask Grandma to explain anything because she had shared more history than I’d heard from her before. I stayed quiet. I listened.

“After the war,” Grandma said, “We didn’t go home. The village is in Ukraine.”

Josef, Babcia, and Pete all made it to Chicago. Before Grandma came to America, she went to England where she worked at a hospital. She felt insulted that they told her she needed to learn English, learn another language just like the Russians and then the Germans had demanded. She knew she wasn’t going back to Poland so she forced herself to speak it.

“Then I dreamed in it,” Grandma said. “God.”

Grandma shook her head as she realized that Josef must have known that language would take over our family. Dad grew up speaking Polish with his entire family crammed into their apartment and spoke English through grade school and everywhere else, but then

he majored in Russian. I only spoke English. For me, Polish was a lost language. The only hints were when Grandma sprinkled it in conversation like the pepper in her golabki.

The cabbage drip-dried on a cutting board. Grandma took a spoon and scooped a serving of the beef and rice mixed with sauce into a leaf. She rolled the cabbage up and stuffed it into a plastic bag to freeze. I would take home as much as I could.

## *Krakow by Foot*

A sweet, crisp smell wafted up from the cement floor. Hay rustled beneath my sneakers as I took a step closer to the stall with eggs. Adam stood behind me, ready to barter so I wouldn't get ripped off. During my last day in Krakow I acted as a tourist going shopping in the middle of the market square inside the long rectangular building with gargoyle waterspouts and suits of armor in each corner. Adam had called it the hall, but I thought of it as a bazaar.

Two aisles of stalls showcased authentic Polish goods: stacks of the iconic blue patterned Boleslawiec dishware; heaps of woven wicker baskets shining under the lamp-lit glow; mannequins modeling traditional folk clothes of square hats with a feather sticking out, frilled cuffs on white shirts, black vests, and capri pants; rows of sheep hide and fur moccasins; hand-carved wooden furniture stacked in corners; lacy embroidered doilies and curtains and table coverings; wool scarves, sweaters, and blankets; pewter utensils and figurines; hand-sized black boxes polished so well they gleamed with a waxy finish; and the mounds of colored eggs.

The eggs were the same size as chicken eggs, but when I lifted one up, instead of a hollow lightness it held a dense heft. The rest of the eggs in the mound collapsed into the space left from the egg I had plucked. They knocked together like sticks tapping.

I inspected the wooden egg. The black-painted background made the foreground design stand out. The clean lines spanned around the curvature like pruned vines. The foreground's colors could have been based on blossoms.

I asked Adam to ask the seller how much.

The seller pointed to a sign that showed the numbers two and three.

Adam shook his head and pointed to a stall farther down the aisle that sold eggs, too. Adam grabbed my shoulder and began to direct me away when the seller said, “*Jeden*,” which sounds like “Yed-din,” and stuck up his pointer finger. Adam smiled.

“He sell three for two złoty,” Adam said. “But for you, two egg for one. Deal.”

“Deal,” I said.

The seller opened a brown paper bag and I filled it with a variety of background colored eggs all illustrated with a bird theme: lime green with a flared-out peacock feather, blood red with a bursting flock of sparrows, pearl with a brown duck flapping, black with a rooster of brilliant rainbow comb, lemon and a stork nestled into its nest on a chimneystack, and sky-blue with a swan floating placidly in the air.

\* \* \*

The day that Dad and I had planned to leave Krakow and go into the mountains to visit his friends from the missionary days, Adam had asked his mom if I could stay with them in the city. There was going to be a soccer match that evening and Adam had tickets. Dad asked me what I wanted to do.

I had seen an incredible amount of Krakow in just the few days with Adam, who acted as a tour guide and translator and buddy. He had finished taking courses during his university’s summer term and enjoyed hanging out with an American Pole to show off his city and practice his English.

With Dad, I had to endure visits with his friends asking me the same questions about my college classes, what I wanted to do, and what I remembered from when I was a kid in Poland. After I gave the same answers, the friends reminisced with Dad about the past glory days serving Jesus under the “Iron Curtain,” and then told him how the secular world now

encroached on the church. I would wander their small apartments, taking as long as I could in their closest-sized bathrooms. I didn't connect with any of their kids who sat silent next to their parents. Many of them were homeschooled. They hadn't had a chance to consider anything beyond their parents' beliefs.

"Can I meet you in Warsaw?" I asked Dad.

"Well—"

"I will take care of him, Richard. He and Adaish have so much fun. He can explore the city, history, being a Pole," Małgorzata said.

"I don't remember this place and it might be the last time I'm here," I said.

"Okay," Dad said. "I'll meet you at the station in Warsaw."

At the soccer match, I sat next to Adam. He stretched out a scarf between his hands, held it above his head, and yelled the fight song along with the majority of the red-and-blue-wearing Wisła-supporting crowd in the stadium. Several minutes into the match, the home team had scored their first goal.

I wished I had a scarf for my neck. The temperature had sunk with the sun. Bright, blue-tinged white lights buzzed an undercurrent with the action on the field.

My plastic seat's chill seeped into my back and settled into my lungs. I reluctantly took my hands out of my jackets' pockets and thrust them up in the air as the Wisła dominated the full ninety-minute game. Adam explained that the match was an exposition where another, lower league team got paid to play and most likely get defeated.

Finally, we stood as the Wisła received a trophy half the height of one of their players. The little warmth from my seat swept away. I clapped my hands and stomped my feet.

I walked with Adam along the path we had biked on my first day in Krakow. A current of young men flowed next to the Vistula River. They wore blue jeans and soccer jerseys. Many of them looked like Adam with a faux-hawk, sharp eyes, smushed nose, and puffy cheeks.

The yellow glow of town filled in the perspective. The Polish flag hung from balconies. People waved at us in the streets.

We were welcomed home from the countryside into the old capital—the city with heritage in every stone under our feet to the onion bulb spires of the castles. I wondered if this was like when the Nazis were defeated, the newly proclaimed pope was Polish, or the Soviets' wall fell. A swell of history surged in me.

I raised my hand and whooped. Then I began to repeat the words in songs from a language I didn't know, but knew was mine.

Outside the café where Adam worked, we met up with Małgorzata.

"How was the match?" she asked.

"We win," Adam said.

"Won," I said.

"Won," Adam echoed.

"Fantastic," Małgorzata said, glad both that the team did well and that I was working with her son on his English. "It is night of celebration." She opened her hand to all the other people in the town square.

Other cafés as well as bars kept their lights on. Musicians played songs for circles of dancers. On the outside of the dancing rings, other people recounted shots from the game with one person miming the quick strike of a cleat-to-ball-to-goal.

"That tower's shorter than the other," I said, pointing above the people.

“Come, come,” Małgorzata said. “Let me show you the story.”

As we walked over to the building Małgorzata explained that two brothers had a competition to build their tower higher than the other. During construction one brother stabbed the other. She said the knife was still kept inside.

“It is time,” Małgorzata said, checking her watch.

Instead of leading us home she led us to a spot and pointed up. A bugle popped out of a window. Notes pushed into the night sky. Suddenly, the sound swallowed itself, cut short. The bugle disappeared into the window.

On the way back to the apartment, Małgorzata explained that the song was a story. The bugler was a man who had been shot with an arrow as he announced the town’s gate closing as enemies approached. I touched my fingers to my neck and coughed.

I woke up with a raw throat and goop filling my lungs. When I sat up on the foldout couch my nose dripped. I wiped the back of my hand across my face.

Adam walked into the living room. A blanket draped over his shoulders. He looked as sick as I felt. He carried two mugs of tea and handed me one. A wedge of lemon bobbed on top.

Throughout the day, we watched soccer matches. Adam held his betting card and flipped between games in the European leagues. I shuffled into the kitchen to flip on the electric kettle for more boiled water to douse over my empty mug’s teabag. I cut a slice of bread from a loaf on the table. I took a bite, but when I swallowed it felt like sand.

In the evening Adam asked me, “Have you seen City of God film?”

“I don’t think so.”

“We watch.”

We had watched TV the entire day, but there was no way we could go out in our condition. I sat back trying to understand the story in Portuguese with Polish subtitles and Adam translating into English. I closed my eyes in the braid of languages.

Then, a hand shook my shoulder. Małgorzata stood over me with a frown. Gray light seeped through the window and droplets from a morning shower slid down the glass.

“We must go to the doctor,” she said.

“It’s probably just a cold,” I said.

I was on Mom and Dad’s health insurance, but didn’t know how I was covered overseas. Dad was in the mountains with some staff family or another whose name, let alone phone number, I didn’t know. Mom was a half-day’s flight over the Atlantic and just as many time zones on an international call away.

“Yes, the cold,” Małgorzata said. “You and Adaish are both sick. Krzysiu, I promised your father I would care for you. We must go.”

I put on a raincoat and followed Adam and Małgorzata to the clinic around the corner. In the doctor’s office I didn’t say anything. I didn’t call Małgorzata Mom in Polish. I didn’t sign any paperwork. I let Małgorzata suggest Adam and I were both her sons. I let the doctor think my throat hurt too much to talk.

Back at the apartment I didn’t ask what Małgorzata had picked up from the pharmacist. She plunked two tablets into cups of water. They dissolved in a fizzle like Airborne that I had taken before my flight to Poland. I believed the cup that Małgorzata handed me probably wasn’t filled with medicine. At best, I thought it could be an overdose of vitamin C. Even if it was a placebo, I knew a placebo didn’t work if you knew it was a placebo, so I didn’t ask. I drank the cup of water believing it would work.

Yellow light filtered through the lace curtains in the living room. Plants in pots on the windowsill tilted toward the sun. Chimes from bells either from church services or marking the hours in town tolled. The days of being sick, visiting the doctor, and recovery had merged. I didn't know the date.

Adam stuck his head around the doorway and said, "We eat."

At the table I slathered margarine on several halved-rolls and then arranged sliced ham and tomatoes on them. I sprinkled salt on top. The food didn't hurt to eat. I downed a mug of tea followed by a mug of coffee.

"Let us visit family today," Małgorzata said.

I went to my guest room to dress up. Adam stood by the front door with a bag slung over his shirt. We followed Małgorzata out.

At the end of the street, Małgorzata stopped at the flower stand and bought a bouquet. We crossed the tram tracks to a cement walled area with an open gate.

People walked along pathways in front of crosses, sculptures of angels, and rectangles with names and dates chiseled into marble. Melted candles dribbled down the stone in waxy tears. Inset black and white portraits behind glass showed images of the dead when they were alive.

Visitors chatted loudly and sat on the plots eating lunch. A group of older kids ran around playing tag, while younger ones crept about in a game of hide-and-seek.

Małgorzata stopped where a tree bough hung above a headstone. She brushed off leaves and then splayed the flowers on the cleared slab. Adam pressed a can into my arm. When I realized it was beer I shook my head. He shrugged and popped it open for himself. Adam gave his mother a beer, and then took out another beer from his bag, popped its tab, and set it on the stone.

\* \* \*

After buying the eggs, Adam wanted to show me something at the castle. Wawel hunkered on the edge of the Vistula just outside of the city where we had walked home from the soccer match. The walls had been built to block invasions from the mountains. I wondered what Dad had been up to with his friends out there.

Fire blasted out of a sculpture. A cluster of children screamed in delight, scattering and then regrouping. The sculpture looked like a small, sinewy dinosaur on its haunches.

“*Smok*,” Adam said.

“Smoke?” I asked.

“Dragon,” Adam said. “Send SMS for fire to shoot.” Adam took out his cell phone to show me how he could send a text message for the fire. A blast shot out. The kids screamed again, happy at the surprise repeated.

“You want food before go?” Adam asked.

“As long as it’s not hot,” I said.

At an ice cream stand, away from the castle, I ordered currant flavor. Lavender colored my scoop. When I ate it I tasted the fruit and felt the flecks of the berry’s skin.

A kid practicing parkour leapt onto a boulder. He bent and then backflipped to the ground. When he stuck the landing, he clapped his hands.

Adam took me to the station. At the platform, he got on the train with me. We found my compartment and sat down.

“You enjoy visit to my city?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I never really knew Krakow.”

“It is crown of kingdom of Poland.”

“Kingdom of Poland,” I echoed. I believed the history, the myths, the stories, the architecture, the families, the people—my people.

The conductor made the train whistle its warning for departure. Adam stood up. He stretched out his hand for a shake. I pushed it aside and hugged him.

“*Dziękuję*,” I said.

“You are welcome,” Adam said.

Adam left. My ticket got punched. The train pulled down the line to Warsaw.

### ***Still Life with Polar Bears***

After the end of third grade, after my birthday, after Grandma Lois died, but before we flew to America, Dad took me to the Warsaw Zoo.

It was the morning and a weekday. Dad wasn't going to work and I was out of the American school. Along with our tickets, Dad bought me a rope bracelet of bread rings.

Instead of talking about Grandma's death we looked at animals. I held Dad's hand and bit the bread off my other wrist. Peacocks pecked at the crumbs that I dropped.

A motor sputtered by the birdhouses. A cart with buckets idled outside of an unlocked cage. A young man and woman, both in khakis, stepped out of the cage holding empty buckets. They greeted us in Polish.

"What's that?" I asked, and pointed to the buckets on the cart.

The two Polish zookeepers spoke to Dad, who translated.

"It's feeding time," he said.

Then Dad and the zookeepers spoke back and forth. The woman frowned and clutched her chest. She looked at me and then at Dad. She asked a question. I knew because her voice lifted.

"Do you want to go feed the animals?" Dad asked.

I shrugged, but also nodded. The woman smiled and offered her hand. I had eaten all the bread so the rope slid down on top of our hands.

"I'll be here," Dad said to me. He said something to the zookeepers, and then sat on a bench and watched me drive off on the woman's lap.

The zookeepers parked the cart by a cage that seemed to rise above the rest of the zoo. I hopped off. The man driving grabbed a bucket of red meat from the back.

The woman took a key from a loop on her belt and stuck it in the lock of the cage. She turned the key, undid the lock, and opened the door for the man who ducked inside. The woman turned around to me.

*“Chodź tutaj,”* the woman said.

It sounded like, “Hotch, two-tie.”

I knew what the woman meant because at home we yelled the same phrase to Patch when he barked too much in the backyard and he needed to come inside.

The woman said something else. I tilted my head like Patch when he didn’t understand us. The woman raised her eyebrows, waited, and then followed the man.

I looked at a sign by the cage. It showed a picture of a big black bird. I opened the door to the cage and peered in. A bird swooped down to an area where the woman and man stood. They must have dumped the bucket out, because a flock of birds had landed and were jabbing their heads into the pile of meat. Their wings stretched wider than my arms.

My vision pulled back as a feather cartwheeled in front of me. I bent over and picked it up. I held it by its tip. I waved the feather through the air, feeling the resistance as I went back outside.

The zookeepers continued to drive from cage to cage. At all the other stops, I stayed with the cart. I twirled the feather between my fingers. I tried to whistle what Grandma used to sing, “What-cheer, what-cheer,” when the cardinals came to her birdfeeder. At the zoo, I didn’t hear any chirping like that.

When we returned to Dad, he broke from staring out in the distance. He noticed the feather, but didn't tell me to wash my hands. He thanked them saying, "*Dziękuję*," which I echoed saying, "Gin-coo-yea."

We finished our trip by visiting the polar bears. Three sides of their pen were walled off. With a breeze, the surrounding moat of water sloshed on a jutting rock.

Grandma had pillows with polar bears, sweaters with polar bears, and a poster of polar bears and had sent me a polar bear stuffed animal. Polar bears were Grandma's favorite animals. I would never know why.

I stood next to Dad and watched a motionless polar bear stretched on the slab of rock. The water lapped close. I wanted to wait until I saw it move.

## *In the Neighborhood*

Warsaw wasn't as I remembered it. The sky should have been cement-gray, but it was as beautiful as a Florida spring afternoon. A slight breeze swirled wisps of clouds in the sky-blue sky.

The tram, clacking along its tracks, shifted Dad and me back and forth in a rocking, swaying motion, and then came to a stop. Dad and I got off the tram at that stop, next to a field of dandelions. Some still had their yellow mane of petal clumps while others sprouted their hundred-puff beards. I used to pluck their stems and blow out the puffs like birthday candles, the seeds floating up and away like a wish in smoke.

Dad and I walked through the field. A dirt path cut from the tram's stop to a road. Dad had taught me how to ride my bike there. He would hold the handlebars and my seat while he ran along beside me. Then he only held onto my seat, allowing me to steer. Finally, he just placed his hand on my back, and then let me go.

The road led into our neighborhood. The houses huddled next to each other. Not crowded, but snug behind gates and fenced-in front yards. Roots pushed up the sidewalk blocks and split the asphalt road with creases like palm lines. An umbrella of willow boughs filtered the sunlight into strands of amber yellow.

I remembered the bus stops with babushka-ed ladies on the way to market, men driving diesel Mercedes and Volvos blinking their "TAXI" signs, and children in socks and leather sandals that walked by our fence to the Polish school that I thought looked like a Styrofoam box for leftovers.

Dad and I came to the start of our street, *Miaczynska*. I couldn't recall how to count in Polish, but I could still recite the address of our home: *dwadzieścia pięć*/twenty five.

The ever-peeling white birch tree still stood behind our house's gate. I remembered how Joe and I used to play "soccer": I would stand at the bottom of the driveway, my hands spread out like a jumping jack, unable to defend both sides of the "goal" which was the door behind me. It seemed like an eighty-degree slant up to Joe at the top of the driveway. Joe could only manage to lob the ball down with the inside of his foot, no swift-kicked strikes. I had to bunt the ball with the toe of my sneakers at his "goal," the gate. There was no danger of my shots soaring into the street, because the spikes on top of the fence were so high that they seemed to chomp at the clouds.

Dad and I approached the fence. When I stood in front of our house, the gate hardly reached my shoulders. The "spikes" were just nubs. If I had stood in the middle of the driveway with my arms fully outstretched, then I could have gripped each side. I didn't even know if a *Maluch*/toddler Polski Fiat could fit in the driveway. And the driveway had barely any slant; closer to a thirty-five degree angle, if that. I could have easily launched a ball up and over the fence and into the sky.

As my memory collapsed I grasped to remember something else that was true from when we lived there. In the mornings, I would wake up to the metal buzz of Dad's electric razor. I stood outside the bathroom, waiting for Dad to come out so I could see his face, afraid he had shaved off his mustache. I would watch the steady light peek underneath the bottom of the shut door.

It had been twelve years since I last stood in front of the bathroom door or in front of our home. I should have known that our driveway was different, because I had been

wrong before. I had believed that we had moved back to American across the Atlantic because of Grandma Lois's death.

The distance was more than an ocean.

I couldn't recognize our old home as much as I couldn't recognize Dad when a few days before he had picked me up at the Warsaw station. My train from Krakow had pulled in and I thought Dad had forgotten me until an old man with a thickening gray beard came up to me. Dad said that he had accidentally left the American to European adapter for his electric razor at his friends' house.

Before our tram ride to the old neighborhood, Dad bought an adapter and shaved. Then, in front of our old house, Dad rang the buzzer. We came all that way, but there wasn't an answer at the door.

Dad tried the next-door buzzer. A woman with blonde hair opened the door. Dad introduced us to her in Polish. But he didn't need to. The woman, our old neighbor, put her hand over her mouth like she couldn't believe it was us, even though Dad once again looked the same as always with his mustache. The woman welcomed us inside.

I followed Dad. I was still trying to figure out what was wrong with my memory. I wanted to test it. I knew that the neighbor kid was nicknamed *Jeżyk*/Hedgehog because he had spiky hair. I asked this woman, his mother, if that was so.

Dad translated my question to the woman. And before she answered I already knew from her slight smile pulling at her cheeks that it was true. She said, "*Tak, to jego przydomek*/Yes, that's his nickname."

I smiled back. I thought that my memory worked, but I still wasn't sure. I looked around the hallway as the woman and Dad caught up.

A side table was covered with jars filled with honey, the colors ranging from creamy-white to translucent-sunshine and to opaque-mustard. I remembered the bees. The man of the house had kept beehives. “The retards,” what my brother and I had called the kids from the special needs school behind our house whose park abutted our backyard fence, set fire to our neighbor’s bees. The melting hives oozed and Jezyk’s father tried to put out the flames with a garden hose.

I asked if that fire had happened. Dad translated. The woman nodded, but without a smile. She looked away as she answered, like it was something too hard to remember.

A drizzle started outside, returning Warsaw to the city I remembered with heavy, close clouds. Dad and I bought a jar of raw honey before we left. We ran in the light rain, down the street, and away from our old house.

Dad and I made it to the overhang of a corner store just as the rain spilled. Dad asked me what we should do. I said we should see if it let up.

I watched a few people with umbrellas walk on the wet sidewalk. Everything was gray. Above, the cement sky was the same as the city’s foundations.

At home in Orlando, Mom had a print of “Old Town,” the historic downtown market square in Warsaw. Mom said it was a print of a Venetian painting that represented what the city used to be. During World War II, when Germany had occupied Poland, the Poles fought back in the Warsaw Uprising. The Germans initially retreated when the Soviet army appeared, but then they returned as the Soviets didn’t reinforce the Poles. After the resistance surrendered, Hitler commanded that the buildings of downtown Warsaw—the very framework of the capital—be dynamited. Over ninety-percent of the city was destroyed.

After the war, the Poles rebuilt Old Town to make it look like it had before, as if the war had never happened. They based their replica off the Venetian's paintings. The oil canvases must have looked like a dream of what once was.

I considered how a dozen years ago that fence at our house was huge to me, but then the fence became how it was. It seemed the new replaced the old. But really, both memory and the moment could be true. I didn't have to replace one with another.

The rain didn't let up completely, but it lessened. I told Dad we could go. I led the way out of the neighborhood and back to the tram stop. The dirt path was damp and smelled like wet clay, ready to be shaped.

**PART II**

## ***Look***

After church, I stood between our front yard and backyard, along a small alley by our garage. The apricot tree dropped a ripe fruit onto the tin roof. Joe wasn't with me and both our parents were inside.

A set of golden stairs appeared in the sky. Angels lined the steps. They didn't come down to me, they just shone above me. I wanted to keep watching them, forever, because I didn't know how long they would stay there.

At the same time, I wanted to go inside and get Mom. If she saw what I saw, then it would make it true, instead of something I said was in the sky. I didn't move.

In Sunday school, I had just learned about Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, who was on the run, because he took his older brother Esau's birthright. Jacob slept outside and used a stone for a pillow. He dreamt of a stairway from heaven to earth with angels coming down and going up on it. I imagined the stairway moving like an escalator.

During Jacob's dream, God said that Jacob's children, and his children's children, would be as numerous as the specks of dust on earth. In Sunday School, I raised my hand and said I remembered that God had made Adam from dust and that people turned back to dust when they die and wasn't that like making alive people from dead people? The teacher said that, yes, it was similar.

Then the teacher finished the story. At the end of Jacob's dream, the last thing God said to Jacob before he woke up was, "Remember, I will be with you and protect you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done all that I promised."

After the story, the teacher passed out pieces of yarn with the two ends knotted together to make a loop. The teacher stood in front of the class and showed us how to thread the yarn around our thumbs and between our ring and pinkie fingers. The teacher made sure everyone had the first step, and then said to follow along.

I stuck one of my middle fingers on one hand underneath the yarn crossing the palm of my other hand and pulled back. Then I looked up to check if I had followed correctly. My hands matched the teacher's hands, so I continued. I kept going over and under and around until a zigzag pattern in a rectangle stretched across the yarn in my hands. The teacher told the class to turn our hands so that we held one up and the other down, making a ladder.

In our yard, the stairs weren't a ladder. I looked up at them, watching. I stayed there, trying to remember them as they disappeared.

## *Pepper*

If you're my mom, then you don't use pepper because thirty years ago you spent twelve weeks in South Central Los Angeles to complete cross-cultural diversity immersion training before going overseas as a missionary.

It was 1980. Less than six months ago you had walked down the aisle of your home church, First United Methodist in Buckhannon, West Virginia, with your new husband Rich Wiewiora. You changed your name, or rather added his after your maiden name Almond. You were still getting used to pronouncing the Polish. You said, "Vee-Vee-Or-Ra." You'd learned that the W's are V's. You couldn't rely on your eyes, even with your glasses, to understand this other language. You had barely passed Spanish at Marshall University where you earned an elementary education degree. At Marshall, a student knocked on your dorm door and she asked you, "If you were to die tonight, then do you know where you would go?" You hadn't asked Christ into your heart, even though you had gone to First Methodist and Sunday school and Bible camps throughout your life. At twenty-one you were confronted with having to make the decision; and you hadn't. So, you did. You didn't want to be left behind.

You wanted to find out why the student knocked on your door. So, you asked her. She said she was part of an organization—Campus Crusade for Christ. She had just gotten back from a big one-hundred-thousand-person revival in Dallas where Crusade announced they would be expanding from college campuses in the States to overseas countries' universities. She invited you to Crusade meetings. You loved the other Crusade folks at Marshall. They were mostly Asians.

After graduation, you moved to Wisconsin and then flew out to California to Crusade's headquarters in Arrowhead Springs to start staff training. You completed a certificate at the Institute of Biblical Studies. You met Rich—your husband—via another Rich, an Asian man. That summer you were in dorms crammed with eight people per room. Definitely *not* co-ed. But some of the gals who bunked in your room knew Rich and Rich. You thought nothing of those guys. Well...maybe you crushed on Asian Rich, but nothing happened.

You went to the Philippines on a mission trip where you learned to cut pineapple, live without air-conditioning, and deal with cardboard-box-poor living up against the fortress-like walls of the rich. You felt called to serve there, but when you came back to the States you bumped into Polish Rich again. He had converted from Catholicism to Protestantism. He was headed overseas to Poland. Crusade was going to the communist countries in Eastern Europe. Rich asked you to marry him. Just like that. No dates. No relationship. Of course you said no. He left, but you thought about it. You were in your late twenties, almost thirty. Rich was a good guy. When Rich came back, he asked you again. That time, you said yes.

So your last name became Wiewiora and you could barely pronounce it let alone sign it on checks. You were out, way out. West, but not across the ocean. Just California. You didn't even think of L.A. as California—the Hollywood-type place. It was the inner city. You'd driven your brown Toyota Corolla named Chocolate out there. Thankfully the couple you were staying with—Liz and Archie—were required to provide a garage as well as a bedroom and bathroom for you and Rich in addition to making you breakfast and dinner each day. It felt divided out there. You could sometimes feel the lingering static charge from the previous year's riots. But it wasn't like you hadn't grown up with black folks—your

freshman roommate was black—it was just that everyone was black there. And you, you were a white speck of salt.

That was the place where you were supposed to feel as different as you would be when you were overseas. At least everyone spoke English, though. You were still in America no matter how radical and otherworldly it might have felt to be in L.A. And you felt overwhelmed in your “How to Learn a Language” class that you and Rich took in the mornings at the church. That’s why you were glad Rich knew Polish, had grown up with it, and maybe even still dreamed in it. Even though he had no accent, you knew he knew how to speak it. That was a comfort in that uncomfortable place.

Between classes, you savored your PB&J because it was nothing like the peppered pork chops, peppered beans, peppered potatoes, peppered everything that Liz made at the house. You couldn’t stand it and your stomach couldn’t handle it. After class, you begged Rich to go to McDonald’s so you could have a non-peppered quarter-pounder with cheese. You knew that you shouldn’t have kept wasting money like that—you were supposed to be saving money and getting more “support” for your mission—but you couldn’t confront Liz about her cooking. Not after she had chewed you out one night for tying up the line when you had just been calling your sister after your mother’s back surgery. You had wanted to chew Liz out for hogging the phone after her peppered dinners when she yakked to her girlfriends over the blaring TV. But you didn’t say anything.

For an assignment, you had to find a pocket of Polish culture. Rich called around and found a parish on the city limits in the ritzy part of L.A. You drove Chocolate out of Liz and Archie’s neighborhood to the Parish. Some Polish ladies that looked like Rich’s mother Anna offered you plates of food and said something in Polish. Rich translated, “The best, the best.”

During your afternoon rounds in the neighborhood, your PB&J sustained you as you went door to door with Jeanne from Buffalo. She had short hair and glasses and she was nice. You two walked along one side of the block while Rich and Andy, another staffer, covered the other side. At each door, you knocked and then said, “I’m Ruthie. This is Jeanne. We’re from Faithful Central Missionary Baptist Church over on Hoover with Reverend Dr. Robinson. And we’re seeing if you’d like to hear something about Jesus.” It almost felt like selling Girls Scout cookies. (You could have died for a bite of a thin mint. But it was supposed to be about something more than cookies. It was Christ!) You recited the script you had memorized to alleviate any worries about why two white women would be in that neighborhood. More often than not the folks who opened their doors knew the church or mentioned another one they said they attended. If they said that, then you asked, “Have you made the wonderful discovery of knowing Christ?” When they said that they hadn’t committed to Christ, then you opened up the *Four Spiritual Laws* pamphlet and read through the steps with them.

Then you walked back to the sidewalk. You checked on Rich and Andy. Rich always did such a great job following a script, but also just listening. You couldn’t argue with him about the pepper in Liz and Archie’s house, because they would have heard you through the walls but also because Rich didn’t like to argue. He’d rather just take you to McDonald’s, kiss you with his mustache brushing your lips, and have quiet sex in the evening. You didn’t know why, but you loved that man—maybe just because Rich loved you and had wanted to marry you. You watched him walk down the steps of the house across the way and remembered seeing him dancing down the aisles of Faithful Central with the choir on Sunday. You had noticed his mustache moving with different words than the song. He was supposed to be moving forward and dancing and singing, which was much too much for

him all at once. You smiled, probably the only one who noticed him counting the steps instead of singing.

On the sidewalk, you and Jeanne bowed your heads and then you prayed out loud, “Dear Lord we just had a wonderful conversation...” At the same time, you prayed in your head, thanking God that Rich would be with you in Poland and he would be able to tell you what people were saying. When you were there, you planned to attend a church that didn’t require him to dance and sing. Also, you’d go to McDonald’s whenever you wanted and you’d never have pepper in your home. Then, you said, “Amen,” asking God to let it be so.

## *Namesake*

My brother Joseph was always going to be called Joseph. Mom had picked the name. Her mother-in-law Anna said the name was perfect. Anna's father's name was Josef, Polish for Joseph, a good Catholic name. While Mom had picked the name from the Bible, she hadn't picked the name Joseph for Josef or even Jesus' stepfather. Mom had picked the name Joseph from the son of Jesse: Joseph with the coat of many colors. Joseph whose brothers sold him into slavery. Joseph who became Pharaoh of Egypt. Joseph who forgave his brothers and gave them grain during famine.

My brother Joseph was sometimes called Josef, but Josef was always called Jaja. One picture shows the same-named generations together: Josef's white and thinning combed-back hair stays in place. He tilts down to look at the crook of his arm. His light blue cardigan matches the blue blanket of the swaddled turnip-face of Joseph. A tuft of slicked dark hair sticks out of the great-grandbaby's head.

My brother Joseph was named Joseph because of the Bible story and he shared his name with Jaja, but Joseph also shared his name with the place and date of his birth. On March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1985 Mom birthed Joseph in her hometown of Buckhannon, West Virginia at the same hospital her United Methodist mother had birthed her. At Saint Joseph's Hospital, the nun-nurses didn't wear habits, but they were all called sister. The day that Joseph was born at St. Joseph's a sister told Mom that Joseph was the perfect name. Before Mom could explain Joseph was named for a different Joseph in the Bible the Sister said, "It's Saint Joseph's Day!"

I always call my brother Joe. Joe always calls me Chris. My parents weren't sure what they wanted to name me.

Mom liked the name Jacob. She thought that since her and Dad's names rhymed then we brothers could share sound, too. Our parents were Ruthie and Rich, and then we would be Joseph and Jacob.

I don't know if Mom considered the Bible story of the twin brothers Esau and Jacob. Esau came out first, but a hand still inside held on to his ankle. Another baby, Jacob came out second. Esau grew up to be a hunter. Jacob grew up to be something like a chef. After a hunt, Esau traded his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew.

Dad liked the name Christopher. Christopher means Christbearer. Maybe it was because Mom had picked Joseph's name or maybe Jacob was too Jewish a name for Grandma Anna or maybe it was because Christopher still meant something about holding someone, but Dad's choice became my name.

Like Joe, there's a place and a date connected to my name. For every grandchild's birthday Mom's father Grandpa Almond would take the folded-into-a-triangle American flag out of the utility closet of his house and then go outside to drag the flagpole out of the garage. He attached the flag to the pole, walked out across his front lawn, removed a slat covering a hole by a chestnut tree, and stuck the pole in the hole.

A picture taken on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1987 shows Joe standing with Grandpa in the front lawn and with Old Glory hoisted. That Sunday, Corpus Christi as well as Flag Day, was the end of Joe being the only son. He looks confused, unaware at two years old what the day meant and unsure of a new name he would come to know.

Summers later, spent in Buckhannon, we brothers discovered the best patches where wildflowers grew between the clover. We earned a penny a petal from Grandpa to fill a vase

on the table. We memorized where the knots of clay-like earth clumped under the lawn's turf. We guided croquet balls across the uneven grass through wickets. The soles of our bare feet hardened from stepping on the chestnut tree's burrs. We knew where to step on the wooden slat covering the flagpole hole so it wouldn't crack.

## ***Pools***

In first grade, I learned how to swim at West Virginia Wesleyan College in Buckhannon. The private Methodist school had an Olympic-size pool that the public could swim in for a small admission fee.

I stood in my trunks on the pool's steps watching Dad lower into the water. Dad strummed chords on an invisible acoustic guitar and sang the folk song *I'm being swallowed by a boa constrictor*.... The snake ate him throughout the verses: "Oh no, oh no. He's swallowed my toe / Oh gee, oh gee, he's up to my knee / Oh my, oh my, he's up to my thigh / Uh-oh, uh-oh. He's at my torso." Higher and higher the water climbed up my father. Then: "Oh heck, he's up to my neck—Gulp!" Dad went under and the water burped.

Then Dad coaxed me into the pool, "Jump in, I'll catch you." My father's song hadn't scared me because he had resurfaced. So, I splashed into his arms.

In the water, Dad held onto me with one hand on my stomach and let me practice the crawl. "Stroke, breathe, stroke." Dad said, and then he let me go. "Keep your head up."

I dog-paddled in place, slapping the water frantically. I started to sink, about to breathe in water instead of air. Dad caught me just before I submerged.

After sinking again and again, I suddenly swam. I paddled in the shallow end without needing Dad to save me. I even crept into the deep end where I couldn't put my feet on the floor.

After my father taught me how to swim, my mother wanted to teach me how to float. Mom would lie on her back and skim half in, half out of the pool for hours. I always expected her to puff out a snort like a whale.

Mom initially tried to explain the concept of floating as perfect harmony between my diaphragm and lungs—“the opposite of hiccupping,” she said. In the college pool, Mom held one arm under my neck and the other at the base of my spine at my butt. The balancing was easy, with her help.

Mom said, “Inflate your stomach, but breathe out. Good. Now alternate. Okay? I’m going to let you go.”

I buoyed in place, but then, like hitting an iceberg, I sprang a leak and went down, man overboard, S.O.S. My nose filled with water. I thrashed for Mom. I found her neck and scrambled up her crow’s nest of permed hair. Sunk, but raised.

“One more try,” led to another. Mom held me again. I was close enough to feel her body warmth wash off like when I peed in the water. This time Mom told me to shut my eyes. When I clinched them tight, she said, “Relax.” And so, I opened my eyelids slightly. A beam of light peaked through my interlocked eyelashes.

I practiced breathing with her. I breathed in as Mom said, “One, two, three.” Then I breathed out, “Three, two, one.” Mom counted off as she let me bobble at the surface. Mom told me she’d have her hands under me the whole time.

My ears filled with water. The numbers muffled in semi-deaf, water-clogged mumbles. The waterline touched the space between my ears and eyes. My face was left above the surface, with the edges of my mouth almost bailing water.

Then my belly rose, breaking the surface, too. I rocked and drifted like a lifeboat. My arms filled with oxygen coursing with my red blood cell submariners making a speedy trip from my heart to my fingers.

After the floating lesson, Mom dragged me to the women's locker room, saying someone would steal me in the men's room. I told her if I could float, then I could change out of my trunks by myself. Mom said, "You're not ready, yet."

In middle school, my family moved to Florida where we first lived in a condo. The only openness of the tucked-together complex was the large pool. Dad, Joe, and I went to the pool every day after school. The three of us walked over to the gate with sunscreen drying oily streaks on our backs.

Between games of sharks and minnows and Marco Polo with Dad, Joe and I explored an Atlantis world. We would fill our oxygen-tank lungs and snorkel to the pool's floor. We swam all eight feet deep down to the center, where the bottom filter gurgled. My ears popped in the depths.

Joe and I held contests to see who could hold our breath the longest. We both dove under with one hand holding onto the edge of the pool. I kicked my own survival instincts away and forced my brain to plead for anything other than air, as I waited the last second before Joe chickened out.

We also competed to see who could swim the entire pool's length underwater. At the end of my turn, almost to the other side, air bubbles escaped from my nostrils. My coordinated breaststroke turned to clawing. Rising, I reached out and slapped my palm on the opposite side's deck.

After all the competition, Joe and I would dive to the floor again. I learned how to blow bubble rings from him. It was all about manipulation of air, he said. I followed his lead and made a circle with my lips, punctuating the middle with my curled tongue. Water filled in my mouth. Above, Joe had told me to breathe out short puffs like warming my hands in

winter. Under, ring after ring rose as thick as bloated donuts. The rings raced, sometimes bull's-eyeing each other.

In high school during a summer camp at Colorado State University, I jogged across the campus' lawn to Moby Gym—as big as a whale. There, my lane was my space.

I backstroked with the Rockies framed in the floor-to-ceiling windows. Only jet streams slashed higher up in the blue skies than the mountaintops' toothy peaks. While swimming parallel with that range, I remembered other times swimming in the Appalachians.

Back in Buckhannon there was also an outdoor, L-shaped pool at the county high school. Every hour or so, ten minutes were tolled for “Adult Swim;” so folks could do laps without kids' cannonball wakes. During the timeout, I sat by the edge of the pool. I wasn't even allowed to dangle my feet over the water. The air exposure chilled me while I waited with my damp towel cocooned around my body.

Another time, at the college pool, one of the lifeguards on patrol dropped his keys. I treaded water in the deep end as the metal sank straight to the bottom. What startled me was the lifeguard's reluctance to dive in to retrieve them. I wondered if he only had to save people who were drowning in the shallow end.

After the keys plunked into the water, I pushed off the sidewall and swam diagonally down, trying to keep up. Even with little hesitation, I couldn't reach the keys. My breath of air before I dove wasn't nearly enough. I swatted once for the metallic blur, and missed.

I broke the surface gasping. I heaved in air. I had emptied out my lungs to send myself to the surface quicker. On my second try, I stretched and expanded my lungs fuller. I filled my lungs to capacity and then dove again.

The twenty-foot depth made my ears pop. Close to the floor, I couldn't hold my air in anymore. I let it out.

With no additional buoyancy, I deflated to my knees and to the pool's floor. I grabbed for the keys. From my squatted position I pushed off. I caught up to my seconds-ago released air. My hand speared through the placid surface with the silvery metal clinched in my fingers.

Back in Florida, after the condo, my parents bought their house—a split plan 3/2 with a grapefruit tree and a pool in the backyard. The first time I went into the pool was probably the last time Mom saw me naked. Joe and I didn't have trunks with us. The house was officially SOLD with the sign staked in the front lawn. We drove over to check our new keys in the locks.

In the backyard, behind a property fence, I pulled off my shirt and then my shoes, socks, shorts, and briefs—flinging them all into a pile on the patio. I stood on top of a small mound made by the septic tank under the lawn. I ran down it. The spongy St. Augustine grass cushioned my feet. I stepped onto the concrete deck. My next foot placement was perfect—right on the lip of the pool.

I shoved off and up. Joe said he never saw me jump so high or so far. I pulled my legs into my chest, into fetal position. I floated in the air like Mom had cradled me in the water. I held my arms tight around my knees. As I braced for impact, I thought I heard Dad singing his folksy-tune. The pool gaped open up like a snake. I cannonballed a jawbreaker. The impact broke the water's molars and made an exclamation mark splash!

## ***Hulking Salvation***

Candle-size flames flickered on the corners of cement blocks stacked around the Orlando Arena's stage. Wisps of smoke rose up to Joe and me and the rest of the youth group sitting in the stands. Electric guitar solos blared from the sound system and then a God-like voice announced, "Ladies and gentlemen we are the Power Team and we're here in your city to wage war on the devil."

People wearing black clothes squirted liquid onto the cement blocks that erupted in fire like volcanoes. Then huge muscle-men wearing red, blue, and navy warm-up suits jogged on stage between the piles of fire. They wore bandanas tied like pirates and skullcaps like bank robbers. Their gym shorts hung below their calves, near their thick ankles spilling out of their unlaced high-tops.

The huge men karate-chopped through the cement blocks. Their heads were reddened and slick with tears of sweat. The people in black who had set the piles on fire poofed blasts from extinguishers on the rubble.

From sacks that I hadn't noticed the men pulled out objects. They snapped baseball bats over their thighs. They bent rods around their elbows and into giant pretzel shapes. They curled frying pans in their palms. They tore license plates with their teeth.

The youth group applauded. I spun my WWJD bracelet. The white letters glowed on my wrist. Those huge men's necks looked as big as the green tree trunk of the Incredible Hulk from Joe's comics.

The leader of the Power Team stood in the center of the stage with a microphone and said, "The world thinks Christians are weak."

The audience booed and a kid from the youth group shouted, “No way.”

“We’re here to show our strength in faith,” the man said.

He unzipped his jacket and then shrugged it off to reveal a screen-print on his tank top with the word *Power!* splattered in red across his chest. Below the word was a picture of Jesus carrying the cross.

The other men unzipped their jackets. Their shirts showed the sentence “God made you to win!” Even though I had sung the song “Jesus Loves Me” many times in church and knew the verse, “They are weak, but He is strong;” I didn’t know where in the Bible that quote from their T-shirt was written.

“Yeah!” I heard someone shout next to me.

Joe pumped his fist in the air. Did Joe think that faith was like the experiment that made Bruce Banner into the Hulk? Wasn’t it rage that transmogrified the doctor into the monster?

Instead of Hulk’s length of rope, the Power Team wore chunky black leather belts like professional wrestlers. The stage looked similar to the destruction at the end of the WWF matches that I sneaked on TV. Instead of bashed-in folding chairs, broken ladders, and cracked tables there were chunks of cement, splintered sports equipment, knots of scrap metal, and ruined cooking tools.

The Power Team continued to show off. They set up races between two of their teammates to tear up stacks of phonebooks. They had one of their guys hold his own hands and then invited men from the audience to try to pull apart his grip. With their audience’s elbows hooked in two lines on either side of the guy it looked like a barrel of monkeys. They couldn’t pull his hands apart. Another man on the team took an empty pink hot water bottle and inflated it with his lungs like a whoopee cushion. Instead of letting out the air like a fart,

he blew it up until it burst like a bubble of chewing gum. Finally, the leader ran around the front row slapping high-fives with lucky kids before he rushed forward and bashed his head like a battering ram all the way through the other side of a wall of ice.

The leader got up and stood in the center now with paper fluttering down around him and then sticking in the puddling ice shards. “The power is real. The message is eternal. The time is now,” he said. “Two or three people out of every ten in the stands will come down to the altar and acknowledge their strength in believing. Come on down.”

I figured at least someone from the youth group would go. I turned to ask Joe who he thought wasn’t saved yet, but he wasn’t in his seat. He was walking down the stairs.

Our parents hadn’t had us baptized as babies. They said they dedicated us, but the choice was ours to show what they said was the outward sign of our inward commitment. I had asked Jesus into my heart several times during Sunday school, but I never felt anything happen. During the summer after second grade, I had stood in front of Mom’s church and Aunt K sprinkled water on my head in front of the family. Joe asked me how it felt. I told him the dampness trickled down my head, rippling the hair on my neck.

By the stage, Joe kneeled down with other kids. I felt left out, but I wasn’t going to join him. I’d already done everything I was supposed to. Joe bowed his head. I didn’t know what he felt, but I guessed he believed in the strength displayed.

## ***Retreat***

In the lobby of CSU's Summit Residence Hall, a sign posted below the front desk read, *Lost Keys Cost You \$20*. If I needed to replace the key on my lanyard, I didn't know how I could find Mom or Dad at their meetings on the campus during their summer conference with Crusade. I tucked the lanyard inside my T-shirt.

"They've got Street Fighter," Joe said behind me.

In a corner of the dorm's lobby, an arcade machine flashed and blipped. The pixilated boobs of Chung-Li bounced when she kicked her legs as high as her face. Joe tapped the machine's analog buttons. The screen blinked *Insert Coins* over Chung-Li.

"Give me a quarter," Joe said.

"I don't have any money," I said and tugged at my gym shorts without pockets.

Joe searched under the machine for change.

I wandered outside and sat under a pruned tree. The bottom of the trunk was bare of any boughs. Then, above, the branches burst out wide. My throat hurt from pulling in the thin mile-high air, but I stayed and watched the sky over the Rocky Mountains darken until the sun sank behind them.

I went inside for supper. Mom and Dad met Joe and me in the lobby and then we all sat together in the cafeteria. That evening our parents had a meeting, but there was nothing for us brothers to do. So, we stayed in the dorm.

In the morning, Joe and I shuffled our feet through the dew-tipped grass. Lines of other kids walked toward Lori Hall, the building that hosted the conference's youth program. Rock music blared from the open doors. Inside the building I recognized the lyrics

from “Extreme Days,” a song featured in an action sports Christian movie. Electric guitars’ power chords mixed with turntable scratches.

We crammed into theater seats. At first, Joe sat next to me, but he looked around the aisles. When Joe spotted his friend Matt, he got up and left.

“Is this seat taken?” a girl with brown hair asked me.

“Jenny,” another brown-haired girl, who looked exactly like the other brown haired girl said. “Just sit down.”

The twins sat down next to me.

“I’m Jenny,” Jenny said.

“He knows that,” Jenny’s twin said.

I didn’t have a chance to stick out my hand to introduce myself. A live band plugged into the sound system and began to jam. Lyrics projected on a screen behind them.

After worship, a man walked across the stage. He introduced himself as Josh MacDowell and told us that he was there to show us how to prove Christianity true. He had studied and now taught apologetics. I thought the word meant something about being sorry. Josh said it meant how to reason faith. I didn’t understand why I should prove something that was true. Mom always said that Christianity was true truth. I glanced at Jenny and figured that what Josh had to say I already knew.

Jenny smiled at me.

“I’m Chris,” I said.

“That’s Jeanne,” Jenny said.

Jeanne reached her hand out to shake mine, but then pulled it away when Josh asked for all of us to stand up and then hold hands for a prayer.

“We’re all brothers and sisters in Christ,” Josh said.

Jenny and I held hands. I held some other kid's hand next to me. Through the prayer, I peaked at Jenny. I waited for her to look at me again, hoping she'd smile.

In the afternoon, Joe didn't want to go on the day trip bus ride into the mountains to ride horses. He said he was going to play Frisbee golf with Matt and they might go back to a lounge in another dorm and watch TV and then he was going to just sleep the afternoon away in our shared dorm room. He told me not to tell our parents. I said I didn't believe I was my brother's keeper. Since Joe was busy, I didn't tell him about the twins.

On one of the buses, I sat by Jenny and played cat's cradle while Jeanne leaned into the aisle and bragged about sports I didn't play.

"This one time, I stiff-armed this guy in the chest," Jeanne said.

I imagined Jeanne's fingers targeting my ribcage and knocking the wind out of me. I moved my elbow to protect my chest and scooted closer to Jenny. She held out her fingers threaded with string.

"Unhook the two loops around my pinkies," Jenny said and puffed a breath to blow a strand of hair out of her eyes. "And put them around my thumbs."

The string in Jenny's open hands weaved over and under her fingers. I wanted to brush the hair up Jenny's forehead and tuck it behind her ear. She let the string slide off all her fingers except her thumb and pointer. Jenny flicked her wrists and showed me the zigzag pattern we had created between two parallel lines of looped string.

"Jacob's ladder," I said.

She smiled.

I smiled at Jenny. Jeanne slapped her hand against the vinyl seat covers. I jumped in my seat.

“Anyway,” Jeanne said. “We were running down the field and in the end zone I spiked it for the win.”

The driver turned our bus onto a dirt road. We drove under an arch made of twisted branches with a low-hung sign for the horseback riding ranch. The smell of manure seeped through the open windows. All the kids next to the windows slid the panes shut, but then the stench lingered inside. As soon as the bus stopped, they pushed to get outside.

I followed Jeanne. In the mass of kids huddled outside together in a tight bunch by the front of the bus, I realized Jenny wasn't with us. I tapped Jeanne on the shoulder.

She whirled around, and asked, “What?”

“Where's Jenny?” I asked.

More kids streamed out of the buses. Jeanne started to walk away from me.

“Let's wait for Jenny,” I said and grabbed Jeanne's arm. She shrugged off my grip.

“I'll be over by the horses,” Jeanne said and shoved through the group of kids.

I kept checking for long brown hair. Everything looked brown: the tanning kids, the dirt under our feet, the log cabin, the dried out mountain slopes, the cluster of horses. I had lost Jenny, Jeanne had left me, and I was on the mountain alone.

The other kids probably only rode in mini-van carpools to teaching co-ops or they just stayed home where their parents home schooled them. Joe attended an academy, but I had wanted out in the world with normal kids and so Mom let me go to public school. Everyday I got picked up and dropped off by the bus at the end of our street. I knew bus-exiting etiquette.

“There you are,” Jenny said. She was the last kid off the bus, but didn't seem to mind. She pulled her hair back in a ponytail and rolled a scrunchie off her wrist.

We walked over to a corral.

I stood next to a horse. My eyes sat level with its saddle. The horse puffed through its nostrils and then stamped a hoof on the ground.

“Whoa, whoa boy,” Jeanne said. She reached out and rubbed the horse’s nose. I couldn’t imagine her being that nice to people. The horse leaned down to nuzzle her hand.

“Someone knows something about horses,” said a man in leather-covered jeans and spurred boots. The cowboy tucked his thumbs into his belt loops as he spoke. I didn’t know if this was a real cowboy or if he was in a costume for our ride.

“I work at stables on the weekends,” Jeanne said. I thought Jeanne had transformed into Jenny. Instead of twins, I imagined them as one person with split personalities.

“Well, little lady,” the cowboy said, “I’ll count on you while we’re on the trail.” He tipped his hat and started to help the other kids onto horses.

“Did you see that guy?” Jenny asked.

I wanted to laugh, but I didn’t know if she was asking me how ridiculous he looked or telling her sister how cool it was that a cowboy was talking to them.

“Let me help you up,” Jeanne said to me.

I took a step away from Jeanne.

“Come on,” Jeanne said. She pinched my bicep.

I moved to the horse by Jenny.

Jenny held the reins for me. I stuck my foot in the stirrup and gripped the saddle’s horn. I pulled myself up and swung my other leg over the saddle. Jenny got on the horse behind me, and then Jeanne got on the horse in front of us.

We rode single-file along a sidewalk-wide path. My horse’s face followed Jeanne’s horse’s tail. I kept looking straight ahead, afraid if I checked on Jenny behind me then my

shoulders would follow my arms and my horse would follow my shoulders and we would create a roadblock.

I watched Jeanne's hips rock with the horse's clomp. Her jeans slid from her waist. I spotted lacy elastic on the top of her underwear.

My crotch felt stretched in the saddle. I already felt the next day's inevitable ache in my thighs like the sunburn that would tighten from my reddened arms, ears, and face.

Then, the horse in front of Jeanne stopped. Jeanne's horse bumped its head into the other horse's butt. A hind leg shot backward and metal crunched against bone. Jeanne clutched at her knee. Her jeans darkened with blood.

I was wedged between Jeanne and Jenny screaming.

The entire line stopped. The cowboy rushed to our section. He wiped one hand across his forehead and held his hat in the other hand.

"This looks bad," he said.

I smelled the bitter iron.

"It's okay," Jeanne said. "Really, I've had this happen before." She clenched her teeth and gripped her knee, but waved the cowboy away.

"Let's get on back," the cowboy said and waved his hat down the line.

I kicked my heels into my horse's sides, but kept the reins taut to pull its face back from Jeanne's horse's butt. I didn't want a horseshoe to my knee. I could feel Jenny looking over my shoulder at her sister, like she was looking through me.

In line at the barbeque back at CSU, Jeanne pushed at me and said, "We don't need you to hang out with us." She hobbled away with her bandaged leg.

"She doesn't mean that," Jenny said. "Find us."

I filled up a plate at a table of food and then found the twins. I sat down cross-legged from them. I said a quick prayer asking to still be able to hang out with them.

Jeanne and Jenny sat back to back. Jeanne had changed into shorts. Bandages covered her hurt knee. Jenny reset the scrunchie in her hair.

Jeanne stretched her legs straight out. I thought I saw some wispy hairs. I wondered if she didn't shave her legs up there. I knew I shouldn't look, but I looked.

Jeanne set her paper plate in her lap. I stared at the same spot, now covered, where her legs seemed to point like an arrow. The charcoal grill smoked and plastic bags of potato chips crinkled. My hot dog dripped ketchup onto my plate. I waited for Jeanne to lift her plate so she wouldn't spill her baked beans' brown syrup on her clothes. Charred meat mixed with the freshness of the mountain air.

Jenny turned around between gnaws of her corn-on-the-cob.

"Are you enjoying it?" she asked.

I didn't know what she was asking, but I looked down at my plate and nodded.

"I'm having a great time out here," Jenny said.

"Do you ever shut up?" Jeanne asked.

I didn't know if Jeanne was being mean because she was hurt or because Jenny and I ignored her or if she didn't want Jenny to see what she was showing me. Again, I glanced at Jeanne's spot. It wasn't her legs that weren't shaved. She had pulled aside her underwear, or maybe wasn't wearing any.

"Well, I'm done," Jeanne said. She scooted aside and Jenny fell backward. Jeanne got up and shuffled away.

"Hey there," Jenny said. She was looking at me upside-down. Her smile looked like a frown.

I coughed and said I was starting to feel sick.

Walking back to my dorm, I had an itch in my throat. I coughed. The itch was scratched. The itch pulsed again. I coughed, twice. Phlegm came up. I spit.

I knocked on Mom and Dad's door across the hall from Joe's and my shared room. Mom opened the door. Dad bent over his shoes, lacing them up. They both wore nametags on their shirts.

"You ready to eat?" Mom asked.

"I ate at the barbeque thing," I said. I rubbed my nose with my hand and then wiped my hand on my shorts.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Do you have any Kleenex?" I asked.

Mom turned around, found her purse, and took out a travel-size packet of tissues. She handed them to me. I took out one and blew my nose, soaking it.

I staggered into my room. Mom followed. We sat side-by-side on my bed. She felt my forehead with the back of her hand.

"No fever," she said.

"It hurts."

"Just because you don't have a fever doesn't mean you're not sick."

I sprawled out on my bed.

"I saw your brother hanging out with the girl you've been palling around with."

I turned away from Mom. I faced the wall with exposed bricks. Somehow Mom knew I was hanging out with the twins. With my pointer finger, I traced the grout between the bricks. I wondered what else Mom knew.

"Jenny or Jeanne?" I asked.

“There’s two of them?”

“They’re twins.” I thought Mom knew everything.

“Good, good.” She said. “My biggest fear is that you boys will fall in love with the same girl. You need to be loyal to each other.”

I wanted to tell Mom that just because I saw a girl didn’t mean I loved her and just because Joe is my brother didn’t mean I needed to be loyal to him.

I closed my eyes and waited for Mom to leave. I coughed. I wondered if Joe hung out with Jenny or Jeanne. I wondered which one he wanted and what they showed him.

By the evening, bunches of used tissues piled in the trashcan. A few missed shots that had bounced off the rim littered the floor. I didn’t want the soup Dad brought for me. It looked like snot. I coughed and up came mucus that I didn’t want to swallow. I got up and rushed down the hall to the men’s bathroom.

I spit in the sink. The sudden use of energy made me gasp in air, tickling my throat. I coughed and coughed and coughed, and then threw up.

The next day in the doctor’s office, I sucked on a menthol cough drop. I flattened the hard circle down to a sharp sliver. I poked the sliver against my tongue.

After I threw up in the dorm bathroom, Dad had bought cough syrup. I gulped down enough to suppress my cough and knock me out until the afternoon. Dad had scheduled an appointment. He sat in the corner as the doctor set his stethoscope on my chest.

“Breathe in deep for me,” the doctor said.

My breaths wheezed out from the back of my throat. I couldn’t fully expand my lungs. I wasn’t coughing anymore, but I felt I was slowly suffocating.

The doctor asked me to open my mouth and then he pressed down my tongue with a stick and looked down my throat with his penlight. He held his clipboard in one hand checking off boxes and scribbling notes.

“Well,” the doctor said. “You’ve got whooping cough.”

“But he had all his vaccinations as a baby,” Dad said.

“There’s been quite a few cases of a hybrid strand developing from major colds,” the doctor said.

I raised my hand to ask a question. Dad pointed his finger at me. The doctor turned to me.

“Isn’t...” I didn’t know how to say it. “Isn’t whopping cough.” I made air-quotes. “An ‘Indian’ disease?” I asked.

The doctor smiled at my ignorance. “Many Native Americans are susceptible to it, because they don’t have a built-up immunity to it from lack of exposure.”

“So, what do we do?” Dad asked.

“There’s a prescription,” the doctor said. “And I’ll have the nurse come in to give him a booster shot.”

At the dorm, Dad put the prescription we had picked up at the pharmacy on the desk next to my bed.

“You’ll take seven pills today, then six tomorrow, then five the next day,” Dad said.

“Then four and so on,” I said.

“And three, two, one,” Dad said. He laughed and then got me a glass of water. I put my head on the pillow and closed my eyes. I hadn’t seen Joe since Mom told me she saw him hanging out with one of the twins.

In the morning, a hand shook my shoulder. I turned over to see Dad waving his hand in front of my face to see if I was awake. I didn't know he had a key to our room.

"I'm taking you to the health fair," Dad said.

The light from the hallway beamed into the room. I covered my forehead with my hand, squinting. I didn't have an alarm clock, but it was dark behind the shaded windows.

"We already went to the doctor," I said.

"We've got to be there shortly," Dad said. "Get dressed."

I pulled my mesh gym shorts up from the floor and around my waist. I coughed, but only to clear my throat. The whooping had stopped during the night. I wanted to plop back onto my pillow. I started to fall back into bed, but Dad flipped on the dorm room's overhead light.

"Turn off the light," Joe said.

I looked over at my brother in his bed. I wanted to ask Joe about the twins. He pulled the covers over his head and rolled over to face the wall on his side.

"Come on, Chris," Dad said.

I got up. Dad flipped off the light. I walked into the hall following Dad.

"I'm hungry." I hadn't eaten solid food in several days. I didn't even know what day of the week it was.

"You can't eat anything," Dad said.

"What?" I stopped walking. We were almost to the cafeteria.

"They're going to do blood work." Dad walked toward the dorm's exit.

"I'm hungry," I said, again. I thought I could smell greasy bacon and the citrus zest of orange juice down the hall.

"Come on, Chris," Dad said. He grabbed my hand and pulled me along.

At the health fair, I flipped through a complimentary copy of *The Maker's Diet*. On the cover, two fingers reached out to touch each other. One of the chapter titles read:

*Fasting.*

"I'm really hungry," I said.

"You'll get some orange juice and cookies afterward," Dad said.

Dad filled in a clipboard of forms with all my insurance information. I shut the cover of *The Maker's Diet*. We walked to the front of a line for blood work. The line was shaped from nylon straps looped around poles. The straps zigzagged back and forth like a cat's cradle.

When Dad handed over the clipboard of information we were directed over to a metal folding chair. I took a seat and an old lady shuffled over to us. She shook my hand, introduced herself as a nurse, and then put on latex gloves.

I stuck out my arm. Dad said he couldn't watch. He looked up at the ceiling. I listened to the hum of the fluorescent lights as I watched the nurse.

The nurse tapped my arm, but couldn't see my veins. She gave me a stress ball to squeeze and I gripped and released, gripped and released. My veins stayed submerged.

"You're a tough one," the nurse said. She tied an elastic band around my bicep. A faint, thin blue line rose at my elbow's inside bend.

The nurse took her needle and shoved it in. I felt the pull of my blood leak out of my vein and into the vial she held. I looked around the room, hoping to maybe spot one of the twins. Rows of other staff families sat in metal chairs, one at a time they held their arms straight as a nurse collected a vial of blood.

I glanced at Dad. He still stared up at the ceiling. I looked up to see if anything was interesting.

The ceiling panels seemed countless. Their squares filled the void. I spaced out in the uniformity.

“All done,” the nurse said.

I zoned back on my arm. The nurse held a cotton ball against the needle-prick. She covered the cotton ball with a Band-Aid. The nurse told me to keep my hand at my shoulder. I folded my arm bending my elbow closed.

When I got up, I stumbled into Dad. He looked down and then escorted me over to the table with refreshments. I downed cups of orange juice, one after another, slamming the cup back down for refills.

On the last day of the conference, Joe and I sat in the back of our parents’ rental sedan. Our seatbelts locked as Mom accelerated through turns. We spiraled up mountain passes and corkscrewed back down their cliff sides.

I breathed in, deeply. I didn’t cough. I breathed out, listening to the clear rush of air.

Mom wanted to go to Vail before we drove back to the airport in Denver to fly home. After we had packed up our dorm rooms, I didn’t get to see the twins. I didn’t know what I would have said to either one of them.

No cars were allowed in Vail. Mom parked the rental in the town’s underground garage. We walked to an overlook. Straight across from us the ski lifts swung empty.

A set of stairs led to the main street. Joe sat on a handrail that went down the middle of the stairs. The handrail’s sheen reflected back the blue of his jeans. Joe took his sneakers off the ground and then slid on his butt along the railing to the landing.

Mom put her hand out as if to stop me from following my brother, but pulled back. I got on a pole. I stuck my arms out for balance. My fingers sliced through the air as I slid

down. At the bottom I jumped off and turned around to watch my parents take one step at a time, grasping the handrail, down the stairs.

Storefronts opened onto the streets. Most of the stores specialized in outdoor wear. Restaurants filled in between the stores. In front of one of them, a sign for *Joe's Pizza* hung on a wall. Dad bought a T-shirt for Joe to add to his collection of "Joe"-shirts.

Mom and Dad walked the streets, holding hands. Joe and I planned to meet up with them later. We found a courtyard with a garden planter in the center. Stairs led up and down them. Joe and I slid down a short handrail.

"Did you talk to the twins?" I asked following behind Joe.

"Who?" Joe dismounted halfway down the set of stairs and got on a parallel rail.

"Jenny and Jeanne." I landed first.

"I saw them," Joe said. He walked up the stairs. "But like only for a minute, they were hanging out with other people, too."

"Did they ask how I was doing?"

"I told them you were fine," Joe said. "They didn't really say anything else."

I started down a rail, but on the descent felt a tug of resistance. A tearing sounded. At the bottom, I saw that my shirt had ripped its hem in a gaping V-slash up my back. The next time I rode down I felt the flap of the jagged coattails.

When our parents met up with us, Mom shook her head at my torn shirt. Dad asked us to show him what we could do. We slid down the rails.

After the demonstration, we followed our parents back to the car. Vail settled in the sunset. A yellow gloss shellacked the rooftops.

“I bet I can do that,” Joe said. He pointed to the long set of stairs leading from an alternative entrance into the garage platform and down to the streets of Vail. More than twenty steps stacked on top of each other. He ran up the stairs.

As he slid down the rail, Joe let his sneakers bump the top of each stair, slowing him down. In the middle of the length of the rail he pulled his feet up and accelerated. I wondered what it would look like to see him fall.

Joe kept his hands just above the rail like brakes. When he went too fast he gripped the metal and his skin squeaked as his body came to a stop. He leapt off the rail.

I ran up and stood at the top of the stairs in Joe’s spot. I sat on the rail and shoved off. I hadn’t been able to imagine Joe falling. My arms flapped out. I didn’t want us to be frayed like my T-shirt whipping behind me as I slid to the bottom.

## ***Snack***

### Warsaw International Church

While the boys' choir sang Polish hymns, I doodled a tank on the bulletin. I drew a cannonball shooting out of its barrel. Mom didn't let Joe or me bring cars to church anymore. We had made too much noise smashing the bumpers into our chairs.

I used my chair as a table. My knees itched under my slacks as I kneeled on the carpet. Joe wasn't allowed to get out of his chair because his head would stick above the rows. I propped my elbows on my chair's cushion and looked at Joe on the other side of Mom. He folded his bulletin in half; hot dog style. Then he opened the paper up. He folded two corners into the creased middle making a triangle. I knew he was shaping a paper airplane to throw after service from the sanctuary's stairs to the lower floor's fellowship hall.

In the fellowship hall, there would be canisters of boiled water to pour over tea bags in mugs. I liked lifting sugar cubes with the small tongs and plopping them into a cup. I didn't like the dark brown color of the drink so I poured milk from the rectangular boxes with plastic snap lids. My tea would be light and sweet and eventually filled with soggy crumbs from the biscuits I dunked in it.

My stomach gurgled. We had to wait longer before fellowship because it was communion Sunday. The other side was being served first. From the windows on both sides of the sanctuary, light made the aisle down the middle yellow.

Finally our row was ushered into the aisle. I flipped over my drawing on my chair. Joe let Mom go in front of him. He cupped his hand to my ear and said, "Dare you to drink the wine." Mom tugged Joe's arm and put him in front of her. Dad pulled me behind him.

Bending around both our parents Joe mouthed, “Double dare.” Then Mom yanked him back in line.

I wondered what wine would taste like. I knew it wasn’t really Jesus’ blood. I always took the purple mini-cup of currant juice along with a circle wafer. I liked sipping the juice, letting it dry out my mouth, and then putting the bland wafer on my tongue. The wafer soaked up my spit. When I chewed the wafer it would taste sweet.

I stuck out my palm to receive a wafer as Joe coughed out his juice. The adults all paid attention to him. I pulled a cup of wine and drank it all at once. I sputtered like Joe. Tears burned down my cheeks. When I ate the wafer it tasted sour.

#### First United Methodist Church of Buckhannon

I shadowed Grandpa down the red carpeted aisle to our pew by the altar. The sanctuary wasn’t much cooler than the summer day outside. Mom, Dad, and Joe were already there. I wondered if Grandpa acted absentminded so he wouldn’t have to make it to church on time and endure the entire service. We had missed announcements and the opening hymn and arrived just as the congregation was called to welcome everyone.

Grandpa let me slide into the pew first so he could sit on the end. The family behind us shook hands with Grandpa saying, “Peace be with you.” Grandpa just pumped each hand once and said, “Peace.” I shook hands with Joe and he clinched hard asking, “Uncle?” I said, “Mercy” and he let me go.

Everyone sat down and the pastors filled in the three throne-like wooden chairs behind the lectern. The lead pastor sat on one side of the middle and the associate sat on the other side. I figured out that the middle empty chair was for God.

The organ's pipes blasted and the robed choir stood in the loft. I shared a hymnal with Grandpa. He sang the words the same as talking. I elevated and dropped my voice as the musical notes appeared higher and lower on the staff parallel the lyrics.

The last puffs of sound dissipated and we sat down again. A church member came to the lectern and read from the Bible. I opened an NIV and checked that they said what was written.

The pastor said a prayer, and when he finished Grandpa's eyes drooped. Sometimes Grandpa napped during the sermons. He must have been warm in his suit and the sanctuary didn't have any air conditioning. I pulled at my sweaty pants and came away with a clump of dog hair from Grandpa's Jeep. Since Grandma died Briar would take up the passenger seat.

I braided the hymnal's red bookmark strings trying not to think about a cold cup of punch from the fellowship area. If I didn't rush back up the aisle at the end of the service, then the ice cubes would melt and the ginger ale would be flat. I checked the bulletin's schedule and we still had the offering and then communion.

The pastor prayed again and the music director began to play the piano. I clasped the hymnal shut and it clapped. Mom glared at me, but Grandpa sputtered awake. I didn't want him to be unprepared when the usher appeared for the offering.

Grandpa winked at me. He shifted his weight and pulled his wallet from his back pocket. He handed me a two-dollar bill to give. When the usher came, Grandpa passed the plate to me and I set the bill down.

"How about we go see the Colonel, fellar?" Grandpa asked without whispering.

After service we usually went to KFC. Grandma and Grandpa used to go every Sunday. I remembered she would order the rotisserie thigh and leg with mashed potatoes and a corn muffin.

“We’ve got communion,” I said and pointed at the bulletin.

Grandpa nodded.

The ushers returned to lead us to the banister around the half-step circling the altar. Grandpa’s knees popped when he knelt. We opened our hands to receive square pieces of bread. I knew the church ladies cut loaves with scissors because I had seen Grandma help.

I put the spongy bread in my mouth. I chewed it. I took a mini-cup of grape juice from the tray and swallowed it in one gulp. The sweet taste lingered in my throat until we left.

#### University Carillon United Methodist Church of Orlando

At the Saturday evening service, Joe and I watched Matt Bhalnik sit on a stool and strum his acoustic guitar on stage. Matt wore a T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers like us. We had grown up with him in youth group. Matt’s parents had been original members of the church when the congregation met at an old theater outside of the Carillon subdivision with an empty bell tower at its entrance. Now the church owned a discount store-size multi-purpose building.

When Joe entered the University of Central Florida he scheduled all his classes in the afternoon so he could stay up at night. As long as we lived at our parents’ house we were expected to attend a church service. After several weeks of going to the Sunday service with our parents and attending the high school Sunday group alone, only to come home to Joe still sleeping, I began to tag along with my brother to the Saturday evening service.

The Saturday service was even more casual than the contemporary Sunday service. Instead of feeling awkward about having my polo not tucked into my khakis, I felt comfortable wearing what I did every other day of the week. College students like Matt and

Joe came with their friends instead of their parents. The friends wore shorts, flip-flops, and the occasional tank top. Nobody looked at them twice.

Joe nudged my knee with his bulletin. I glanced down at his note, which read, *Arby's?*

I wrote, *Yup.*

After most Saturday services, Joe would drive us to some fast food place so we could use up some time before going home. The Saturday service ran shorter than Sunday's because there wasn't greet-your-neighbor-time, the litany of affirmations, ten-minute praise songs with multiple repeated chorus outros, and prayer between every single part. There wasn't even an offering. Instead, envelopes and pens were stuffed into the back pockets of the chairs and boxes sat by the doors.

I flipped my bulletin over and noticed it was communion Sunday. I circled it and wrote *Snack* in the margin. I nudged Joe's knee.

He wrote, *Jesus juice!*

The new pastor walked on stage. Matt continued to play his guitar. The pastor pulled a cloth napkin off a lump set on the altar. He used both hands to hold aloft a circular loaf. He pulled it apart along its pre-cut center and said, "The body of Christ broken for you."

The pastor lifted up a simple brown clay chalice like the Holy Grail from Indiana Jones, and said, "The blood of Christ shed for you."

The pastor gave one half-loaf to two ushers who had come forward. He handed another chalice to them. Then the pastor's wife stood up from the front row and took the other half-loaf and first chalice. The pastor opened up his hands welcoming everyone to the table regardless if they were members or not. He asked that they just recognize Christ's sacrifice for them.

Joe and I stood in line. Matt started singing, “Better one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.” Joe and I would exit as soon as we took communion.

In front of the pastor, I offered my palm. I received a chunk torn from the loaf’s soft center.

I dunked the bread into the chalice, staining its white a bruised purple. I set the bread on my tongue and pushed it up against the roof of my mouth, making the juice gush out.

## *Survival of the Fittest*

Puffs of dandelion seeds floated in the air outside the conference. Joe complained about not being able to chomp down on the boiled potatoes sprinkled with dill and then he couldn't even slurp the borscht. When Joe hacked to catch half-breaths our parents believed that his throat was closing. Dad drove him back to the cement city of Warsaw. I stayed behind with Mom. While she attended a prayer group, I garbled the words to a Polish song with other staff kids. We selected one kid to be "it" as a hibernating bear. That kid sat on the ground as we walked in a circle. Once we finished singing our song, the bear woke up and ran after us, angry and hungry.

\* \* \*

Joe and I sat in the backseat of Mr. Christopher's white Mercedes. Mom had hired him to drive us to and from the American School of Warsaw because his car had seatbelts and other drivers didn't have them in their backseats. Spirals of burns that I had just made with the cigarette lighter scarred the armrest between us. As punishment, Mr. Christopher said we weren't allowed to sit in the front anymore. We had to stay in the back with the lingering singed smell.

"It's all your fault," Joe said. He stared out his window at the wall of graffiti along the roadway. The portrait of Santa holding a box-with-a-bow present had been spray painted over with a bomb, its fuse sparking.

"You dared me," I said. I patted the armrest to the one-two beat of rock 'n' roll blaring from the tape deck.

"I get no," Mr. Christopher sang. "Satisfaction!"

“Don’t cross into my space,” Joe said, and shoved my arm off the armrest.

“I’m not crossing,” I said, and then put my arm back on the armrest.

Joe slammed his fist down on my hand.

“Joe’s killing me!” I yelled.

“Josef, stop fight now.” Mr. Christopher put his right arm around the passenger seat’s headrest and turned around in his seat as if backing up. His driver’s seat was covered with a mat of wooden beads that clacked together.

I looked out the windshield. Fiats, buses, and taxis zipped forward in their lanes. The Mercedes began to drift toward the median filled with tufts of brown grass pushing up through snowmelt. I flapped my hand at the road.

Mr. Christopher twisted back around in his seat and then spun the wheel. My body slid toward the door and my seatbelt locked against my shoulder. The Mercedes’ tires skidded and we aligned back in our lane.

I kept my hands away from no-man’s-land in the middle. Joe continued to stare out his window. Office buildings with smog-tinted windows reflected the city.

\* \* \*

Mom dried me off as Joe filled up the tub again. I had scooped water with a bucket during my bath because Joe wouldn’t let me play with his cars. Joe plunged his cars into the hot water. The cars changed color from their red paint jobs into a clear blue.

After Mom dried me off and helped me into my pajamas, we walked down the hall to Joe’s and my bedroom. I rolled onto another towel laid across the lower bunk. The plastic-covered mattress crinkled. Even if I didn’t drink anything during the day and peed before Mom turned off the lights after saying a prayer, I still woke up with a wet bed in the morning.

In the middle of the night, I woke up dry and went to the bathroom. When I returned to our bedroom I walked over to the built-in closet and climbed the shelves. I reached above my head, stretched my hand into the closet's blind opening, and fingered for Joe's wallet. I looked over my shoulder at the top of our bunk bed. Joe slept with a particleboard wedged into the side groove as a guardrail so he wouldn't roll off. My fingernail scraped the nylon cover of Joe's wallet.

I pincer-ed with my index and middle finger, clutched nylon, and then withdrew my hand from the hiding spot on the top shelf. The neon yellow wallet glowed in my hands. I listened for a stirring in my brother's breathing as I broke each strand of Velcro. I pulled out the first bill I touched and then jammed the wallet back under my brother's corduroy overalls on the top shelf. Joe snorted, turning over. I slid into bed, trying to muffle the sound of the plastic. I shoved my clenched fist into my pillowcase.

I flipped over onto my back and looked up at a row of two-by-fours. I worried that God would make the slats collapse, cave in, and crush me. Joe would probably sleep on, sandwiching me, suffocating me. I scooted to the edge of my bottom bunk.

I didn't risk crumpling the crisp paper to see how much I'd taken. Joe got more allowance than me and he could spend more on toys. Now I could buy cars that I could keep from Joe.

Even if God didn't punish me, Joe would. I couldn't sleep. Joe would notice his money gone. He always counted it in front of me before stashing it back on the top shelf.

Joe wasn't just my older brother, but my bigger brother. When Mom wasn't looking, he would punch me in my arm if I just touched one of his cars. I thought about how many times Joe would hit me for taking his money.

I pinched the bill with my fingers. I slid out of bed and tiptoed back to the closet. I reached up and grabbed Joe's wallet. I put the bill back and then returned the wallet to the top shelf. Back in bed, I breathed slow enough to focus on the beams above me but still support Joe's weight.

When I woke up I stripped and then threw my wet clothes onto the soaked towel. I stood naked in the room. Goosebumps rippled on my skin. I set the top sheet in the middle of my bed and then pulled off the four corners of the bottom sheet. I bunched everything together and swung the sack of laundry over my back. I walked down the hall. I dumped the load in the washer and set it like I had every morning for as long as I could remember.

\* \* \*

In summer at Grandpa Almond's house, Joe had become a thin teenager shooting up like a dandelion while I still dealt with the last layers of childhood that Mom called "husky." One afternoon, Joe called me fat and I punched him in his mouth. Joe's lip became pulp against his braces. A chunk shredded in his metal brackets. After the moment of surprise and attack, I turned around and ran.

I hustled out of the living room, past the kitchen, and down the L-shaped hall. Grandpa probably hadn't noticed our fight because he mostly sat for the entire day at the front table reading detective novels. If we talked to him he would repeat medical stories from his retired practice and sometimes he would turn around lifting his empty cup for more coffee, even though it had been several summers since Grandma had died.

I took the corner at Grandpa's bedroom. I heard the slap of bare feet behind me. At the dead end, I slid into the guest bedroom.

I couldn't even get the button-lock pressed in. Joe shouldered the door open. He punched me down to the hardwood floor. I fell with my left arm underneath my body.

Joe sat on my back. He took my right arm and yanked it up toward my neck. I felt a separation.

“You’re breaking my arm!” I yelled.

“I don’t care,” Joe said.

Someone shoved Joe off me.

“Can you move your fingers?” Mom asked.

“It hurts,” I said. “Get him away from me.”

After, I sat on the green corduroy couch of the living room watching cartoons with my arm in a sling. Grandpa didn’t think my arm was broken, only sprained. He said I needed to relax. I said I needed Joe to be punished. Mom shook her head and said, “You boys need to be loyal to each other.”

\* \* \*

Joe said he felt like his head was clogged with something. I asked him if the “Space for Rent” sign took up all the room in his skull. Mom told us to knock off the fighting and that she was scheduling an appointment for both of us to get hearing tests at a clinic for Orange County kids.

A week later, I sat behind a vault-like door. A window showed a similar room connected to mine. My ears popped in the room’s compressed quiet. I closed my mouth and forced yawns like I had on our transatlantic flights when Mom didn’t have gum.

I saw the technician in front of me through the glass. She mimed for me to put on the headphone set on the counter. I clamped the hard plastic cups over my ears.

“Raise your hand when you hear a beep,” she said.

I gave thumbs up. There was no microphone for me to say anything. She spoke, I listened.

The technician compared my and Joe's tests for Mom. On my graph the scattering of dots continually rose, while Joe's dots sloped up but then flattened out. I passed and Joe failed, but I didn't make fun of him. He had never made fun of my bed-wetting.

The technician noted that we had just moved to the area and maybe Joe's clogged hearing was caused by an allergy. So, Mom took us to a dermatologist who said that yes, something was causing fluid to build in Joe's ears. To find out what thing, the dermatologist pricked a grid of allergens under Joe's skin. Red dots scattered across his back.

\* \* \*

"Come on," I said. "Change the channel." I swatted at Joe's hand.

"No way," Joe said. "We'll miss the show." Joe pulled away the remote.

"That never happens."

"What about yesterday?"

"What about it?"

"You got back to the movie late and we missed the ending."

"We'd already seen it."

"I didn't."

I lunged for the remote. Joe pushed me off the couch and I fell to the carpet. I jumped up and curled my arm around Joe's neck and headlocked him.

"You're choking me," Joe said.

"You don't ever let me choose the channel," I said and slapped at the remote.

"You're killing me," Joe said. He clawed, unable to get my arm off his throat.

Joe gagged. His spit lubricated my arm. He'd slip out of my headlock soon and when he did I was dead. So, I squeezed a little harder and then shoved his head away.

Joe collapsed to the floor, heaving. I ran out of the living room and to the kitchen where I picked up the cordless phone. I continued into our parents' bedroom.

I shut the bathroom's sliding door and dialed Mom. Joe slammed up against the frame. The wood cracked, but the frame held. Joe fumbled with the turn-screw lock. Inside the bathroom, I held the lock's clasp in one hand and got Mom on the phone.

"Why are you two boys fighting?" Mom said.

I couldn't explain why we couldn't share control of the TV.

"I don't know," I said and shrugged like Mom was in the room with me.

Joe banged on the door.

"I'm talking to Mom!" I yelled at the crack.

There wasn't any more sound from the other side.

"I can't leave you two alone without a babysitter?" Mom asked. "As teenagers?"

"He started it." Joe's voice came on the line. He had gotten on the phone in the guest room.

"I'm coming home now," Mom said. "Go to your rooms."

We hung up the phones and waited.

\* \* \*

My thighs touched and I bent my knees to one side. The chiropractor grabbed my legs and pushed them all the way to the left of the table. He spread on top of me and pressed down. My spine cracked from my tailbone to my neck.

The chiropractor realigned my legs and bent me the other way. Each bone popped and released its tension. My body ached.

Mom considered the chiropractor as the last resort for my bed-wetting. I had taken pills to supposedly relieve my bowels' pressure on my bladder. Both Mom and Dad woke me

up at random hours of the night to go to the bathroom. Neither worked. Mom gave me a pamphlet about an alarm that could be inserted into my urethra and it would sound as soon as I leaked the first drop.

The morning after the chiropractor, I took my soaked sheets to the laundry room. Mom woke up to the spin cycle churning. I put the load into the dryer after breakfast before going to my first year of high school.

By the end of the year, a farmer's tan covered my arm from skateboarding. I had started skating with some friends. I would sweat myself to dryness. Two nights in a row I woke up without having to do laundry. I pushed down the street under the sun. A whole week passed of dry nights.

I skated with a surf style on my longboard, dipping my fingers into the street's asphalt waves. I carved down our street. When I did a cutback, my wheels sprayed up gravel out of the drainage gutters arcing like a wave.

"Can I try?" Joe asked. He stood at the bottom of our driveway.

I jumped off my board.

Joe stepped onto the convex longboard.

"Is this it?" Joe asked with one foot still on the ground.

"Almost," I said, because I didn't know if he knew how to balance.

Joe stepped on and then immediately slipped off like a cartoon character tumbling in a somersault after stepping on a banana peel. The board whooshed across the street. Joe's body crunched on the asphalt.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Joe curled into fetal position. It took him a second to say "No" and then a minute to get up.

\* \* \*

My feet couldn't figure out the rhythm of the dances. I didn't even understand the names: Lindy, East Coast, and Charleston. I let go of my girlfriend's hand. All around us, couples twirled in figure-eight swing dance moves.

Joe had suggested I take my girlfriend dancing. I didn't think Joe had invited me on purpose to fail at the dance. He didn't know that I couldn't feel the beat.

Joe had been getting shots from the dermatologist for years and by college he loved listening and dancing to music. He burned mix CDs of tunes, ran a late night dance, and even drove all the way to Tampa for competitions. Every weekend night, he put on his black silk shirt and black slacks and put his clean pair of dress shoes that had never touched anything other than hardwood floors in his bag and headed off to dances.

At the dance, I walked over to the row of chairs pushed against floor-to-ceiling mirrors. My girlfriend followed. We sat down. She crossed her legs and bounced her foot.

Joe bowed to a girl sitting down. She stuck out her hand. Joe pulled her up. They glided on the waxed dance floor.

Instead of the simple two-step, Joe and his partner shuffled in a triple-step circle. He led with his left hand hooked around the girl's palm. He guided her with his right hand on her lower back, edging her into turns.

They gyrated, close. The rest of the couples opened up a space for them. I got dizzy watching Joe and his partner spin.

### ***Cut Here***

The truck stalled out on the steepest part of the dirt and gravel road spiraling up the mountain. My stomach sloshed like I was at the pinnacle of a rollercoaster. My family was leaving my uncle's property in West Virginia. He called it the Promised Land. His wife, my aunt, was driving. My mom was in the front with her, while two of my cousins were in the back seats. My uncle and I sat, facing each other, in the bed of the truck.

I looked at my uncle hoping to find assurance that my aunt would start up the truck, and we'd be on our way home after a day of eating around a campfire. But my uncle frowned. His glasses pinched his sunburned nose, his eyebrows furrowed together under the brim of his hat, and his reddish-brown beard turned downward with doubt. Behind my uncle the forest of pine trees and fern-covered ground blocked the mountaintop view. I had never thought of the vista as a valley of spears until the truck began to slide backward.

"Hit the brakes!" My uncle shouted against the wind flicking the tips of my ears, snatching away his voice.

My uncle opened his mouth wide, screaming as the truck kept rolling in reverse. The back tires started to grind up and into the side of the mountain. In a glimmer of the moment, I was grateful that the truck didn't roll to the other side, over into the valley to impale us. But the truck careened laterally, losing traction. My uncle held onto his hat as he moved to my side. I shoved my sneakers on the other side of the truck's bed. I leaned back, trying to shift my weight and level the truck that was turning like a wave about to curl over. I wanted to jump, but everything blurred. I thought, *We're going to flip.*

The truck churned into the sharp angle of the mountain. I leapt, abandoning my uncle in the truck bed as well as the rest of my family caught in the cab as the truck groaned its metallic frame and turned over. I plunged toward the gravel road.

A smear of earth filled my vision. I slid with my hands forward. The gravel ruffled my skin under my T-shirt. Dirt clouded my face, filling up my nose and ears. I expected to hear the crunch of my spine, snapped by the truck falling on top of me. I prayed, *Jesus, please...*

I uncurled from fetal position. I pulled out my glasses from under me. The frames were bent and the lenses were scratched. About a dozen feet up the road from me, the truck's bed teeter-tottered and the cab's roof crinkled against the ground. I could smell blood.

"Mom!" I yelled. "Speak to me. Say something."

People scrambled out from the cab. The tires spun in neutral. Everybody was yelling my name. I was the first one to see my uncle's body wedged in a ditch with the truck seesawing on top of his hip, nudging him deeper into the ground.

Blood streamed from my uncle's head. When I ran over to him, he was stunned. He blinked his glassy eyes, stretching his hands out wanting to be saved. I pulled my uncle out and carried him away from the truck.

Everyone surrounded us. One of my cousins picked up shattered ice from the cooler. She gathered the melting pieces from the ground into a towel, compressing it to her father's forehead, elbow, and knee where he bled. Mom patted me down with one hand. Her other hand was bent to her body. She was trying to find anything more than scrapes on my elbows.

"What's wrong?" I asked reaching for the hand held to her body.

“My finger,” Mom said, opening her hand. A gash split it from tip to webbing. The ruptured skin peeled and opened all the way down to bone.

I grabbed my collar, took off my shirt, and then removed my undershirt. Mom held her other hand and pinched her vein at her injured hand’s wrist. I ripped my undershirt into strips. I wrapped the tourniquet around her finger. The white turned red.

My aunt bent over and picked up the strewn leftovers from lunch, saying that it was all her fault. My uncle shook his head, holding onto my cousin’s shoulder as a crutch. My other cousin hugged her mother’s body, making my aunt stop. Mom’s blood continued to gush through the undershirt. We needed to get to a hospital.

“Let’s thank the Lord for saving us today,” my uncle said. He held my cousin’s hand. My uncle’s opened his other hand, ushering a call for prayer. My aunt and other cousin linked into the semi-circle. There was a gap.

*Look at my mom’s finger, I thought. You want to pray, now?*

I started to walk up the mountain. Mom touched my shoulder and then bowed her head. I turned around to complete the circle.

\* \* \*

The words strung together so fast that at first I didn’t believe they were made up. The speed of the clicks and spits from her teeth and lips could not be fake. It was the first time I had heard my girlfriend roll her tongue. From the back of her throat to the fillings covering her molars gushed a faucet of spiritual language. Her words sounded like water if everything else I had ever heard had been air.

I stood inside the cluster of other college students. Some had their hands raised toward the ceiling while others sang, “Rend the heavens/Rend the heavens/Rend the

heavens” in a feedback loop. An acoustic guitarist strummed with the chorus. They were calling for evocation.

I had joined the leadership team of a campus ministry after walking away from the truck accident without a scar. The college campus minister said that the gibberish I heard was my girlfriend speaking in tongues. An interpreter would be needed to translate. I thought, *How can someone hear God and tell everyone else what He says?* People shouted out suggestions: “He wants us to endure.” “We should love each other.” “There is hope.”

The air tingled with static, but the hairs on my knuckles were limp. With my thumbs threaded through the belt loops of my jeans and my fingers shoved into the pockets, I rocked off my heels and up onto my toes, trying to rise above the huddled group to peek at the clock.

At these special gatherings, students shared their college fatigue. Afterwards, some said their aches and pains evaporated. I always looked at this one guy in a wheelchair, who never stood up and walked. I thought he must have gotten tired of being prayed over and nothing happening. I hadn’t told my girlfriend that I had prayed to God: *Please don’t let me sweat one more drop*, because I didn’t think He would heal me, either.

I have axillary hyperhidrosis: severe sweating under my armpits that I can’t stop. There isn’t anything that starts the sweating. It’s a swamp that I can’t drain. When I went to my physician he had said that a high-concentrate Aluminum-based topical solution could completely stop my sweating, but it could result in Alzheimer’s. At the time, I didn’t have anything I wanted to forget, so I didn’t get the prescription. I thought, *God should heal me*.

After the service, my girlfriend wanted a picture of us. Our first photo would be of me with a brown polo and her with an orange no-sleeve top. She was about to leave on a

weeklong retreat as a counselor at a ministry for teens. I hoped she would remember me while she was working for God.

She handed her camera to someone and reached her arms under mine.

I was nervous having her close because I thought I would start sweating. Then she was close and I started sweating because I was nervous. And I kept sweating because I was sweating.

The flash went off. I looked at the displayed digital image. I drowned in her cringe.

A year after my girlfriend broke up with me, on a Saturday before work, I ran on the empty asphalt trail next to my apartment. The sun baked the air while my legs hovered above the ground. In the end, my girlfriend had been spending more time with God's ministry than with me. On the trail, the humidity made my back stick to my T-shirt. I wondered if my ex-girlfriend's counselor-retreats had actually been about wanting to get away from me.

A breeze chilled the sweat on my arms and legs. The exposed skin on my neck guttered sweat down my spine and basined into my waistline. The mesh shorts I wore filtered out the rivulets that trickled on the back of my knees. The stream of sweat sank my feet with their weight as my socks sponged up a waterfall.

I hadn't thought about the campus ministry much since I quit. But that humid morning running, I remembered the prayer groups. I was still curious if my ex-girlfriend had just wanted attention or if she really thought she was speaking with God. I wondered if God could talk to me like He did to her. When she broke up with me, she told me that God had called her to be single.

On the trail, I dripped in perspiration, waiting for God to hear me and cure me. My eyebrows flowed into my eyelashes and teared down my cheeks and into my mouth. I tasted

my own bitter salt on my upper lip. At least while I was running, the fact that I was supposed to sweat camouflaged my shame.

Then, right above my hip, my muscle tightened. It didn't quite cramp, but flexed. I hadn't eaten or had time to stretch before heading out. My right side collapsed in on itself and I leaned sideways. I shuffled my next footfall.

I jogged with my left hand swinging limp while I clutched my right hand on the space between my pelvis and ribs. I shuffled the final length back to my apartment.

I showered, changed, and then drove home to Mom. I unlocked my parents' house with my key. The cramps in my stomach pulsed. I barged down the hallway to the bathroom unbuckling my belt. My pants fell to my ankles. I sat on the toilet and pushed anything I could out of my bowels.

Through the bathroom door, Mom asked me why I was home on a Saturday. I usually dropped by my parents' house on Sunday afternoons, after they got home from church, so they couldn't invite me to go with them.

"This is the worst stomachache ever," I said.

On Mom's bed, I curled in fetal position. Mom hovered over me and prayed to Jesus for guidance. With outstretched arms, she asked me where it hurt. When she placed her hand on my right side, my insides clenched and twisted.

"We're going to the emergency room," Mom said.

At Florida Hospital, blue and white fluorescent lights glared. I swallowed the taste of formaldehyde. In the aura, I was being readied for the removal of my appendix.

A nurse took my temperature. I crossed my arms, feigning pain, to check my armpits for their saturation level. The nurse told me to open my arms. I gave her my damp hand. She held my wrist, counting my rapid pulse. Then the nurse wiggled a needle under my skin at

my inside-elbow. The vein moved as she searched to puncture it. Mom held my hand, whispering to Jesus. I listened to Mom thanking God for giving us doctors.

“It’s rolling,” the nurse said.

I wondered if the truck accident had shifted my internal organs like tectonic plates and awoken something dormant. I held my breath.

“Your face is pale,” the nurse said. I had absorbed the room’s white glow.

“Breathe,” Mom said, stroking my back.

I inhaled and the nurse plunged the needle into my vein. I gasped. My face flushed red as sweat dripped from my armpits and spilled over my chest down to my belly.

While I waited for the blood tests, I drank an orange mixture that tasted like pennies. An hour later, my T-shirt was soaked as I lay horizontal on a flat tray. Near my feet a circumference of plastic and computer chips the height of a doorway circled me. My ankles disappeared into the machine’s encapsulating dark tunnel, ready to close around me and pick up the metallic traces floating in my body. I asked the technician what the hospital did with fat people. He said that they were sent to SeaWorld.

“We’ll put you through surgery in the morning,” a doctor said. The drugs gave them all the same face of stoic kindness. They were genderless and blank, except for a slim smile.

“Everything’s going to be alright,” Mom said. She squeezed my hand as she appeared next to me in my hospital room.

“Good thing you came in,” the doctor said. “It could’ve burst.”

“Thank God,” Mom said. “I’ll pray.”

I wished she would tell me a joke to take my mind away from the ebbing pain instead of focusing on it and talking to God. My underarms slicked. I didn’t think God could do

more than the doctors. Underneath my hospital gown, the dribble from my armpits poured out of my skin. I closed my eyes, hoping I could forget everything.

A hand rocked my shoulder and waved in front of me. I blinked. Mom had disappeared. I was in a long hallway.

“What operation are you having today?” the hand asked.

“Laparoscopy,” I said.

“Good, good,” the hand said.

An overhead light bleached the room into pure white. I couldn't see. Other hands lifted me from the trolley up onto a table. A mask hovered above my head. I prayed, *If I die before I wake....*

A few weeks after my operation, I walked along a beach with Mom. The sand lifted and swirled around us. Each gust of wind rolled from the ocean breaking on the shore.

I had had scar tissue along with my appendix removed. There was a cavern scooped out of my body that I was slowly rebuilding with muscle. I dragged my right foot's steps along, not wanting to stretch and compress my healing skin.

“I think you're still bitter about her,” Mom said.

“Who wouldn't be?” I asked.

I knew that Mom thought I had left the campus ministry, and my faith, because of my ex-girlfriend. I wanted to ask Mom if she wanted to forget about Nick, her love before my father. She had told me the story during every summer's thousand-mile roadtrip from Florida to West Virginia. In college, she met this guy. She moved in with him, a big No-No for her small town.

“We were living in sin,” Mom had said. Within a few years Mom used her relationship with Nick as a conversation piece for the conversion of others. She called it her “Testimony.” I thought it sounded like regret.

Mom picked up a shell, inspecting it for damage.

“What do you believe?” Mom asked. She turned the shell over in her hand. Her scarred finger stuck out straight because the taut skin made it hard for her to bend it. Even though it had been several years since the truck accident, the pink scar tissue still looked fresh. The stitches had left perpendicular bumps every centimeter along each knuckle.

I shuffled my feet, mixing wet and dry sand.

“You never ask me what I want to do in life,” I said.

“I don’t care what you want to do,” Mom said. “I only want you to be someone who walks with Jesus.”

A wave rushed toward the shore. Mom threw the shell in the water. The tide pulled it under.

In the fall, I sat in a dermatologist’s office, looking at a poster on the back of the door for Botox that showed a before and after of a woman with a wrinkled and then smooth forehead. I had read about injections and other cosmetic cures for my sweating, but they were more and more risky: electro-shock treatment with water conducted through metal or even cutting out the glands. I was willing to do anything, even though the side effects could be a constant higher body temperature, always feeling feverish. What scared me the most was that my sweating wouldn’t be cured, but could return like a flood in the same place.

“My niece sweats so much she feels embarrassed to shake hands,” the nurse practitioner said.

“So, it’s the best?” I asked.

“Without it she wouldn’t be able to write,” the nurse said.

“I’ll use it,” I said.

I dropped off the scribbled prescription for the Aluminum-based roll-on. I had read that long-term side effects included a higher risk. But I didn’t care that my mind could be erased because I didn’t want to remember a time before I could clog my overflowing pores.

Every night for the recommended two weeks, I dried off my armpits with a washcloth and shellacked a layer of the prescription on. The first few days I still sweated, but then the circumference of the damp circles on my T-shirts started to shrink. And the oval diminished to a thin line, until the sweat only slashed like the stitches of my appendix scar below my ribs. While I believed that God must have heard me when I was thrown from that truck at the Promised Land, I wondered why He hadn’t saved me when I was drowning in sweat from the thick humidity of Florida.

For Christmas, I flew up to visit my grandparents in Chicago. On the way to Mass, I sat in the backseat of their car with my five-year-old cousin Taylor. We stared out the window at the tires gripping the salted cement road.

“It’s a good thing this snow doesn’t melt,” I said. Outside the mounds of gray slush matched the clouds’ colors.

“Uh-huh,” Taylor said. She nodded her head and made her parka’s hood bounce.

“Or else it would flood,” I said. “Like Noah’s Ark.”

“What’s a flood? What’s an ark?” Taylor asked back-to-back. She only went to Mass when she stayed at our grandparents’ house over the occasional weekend.

I remembered when I was a kid how Mom had told me stories from the Bible, saying they were the truth. And she used to hug me before going to school, hold my hand at the

table, and pray beside my covers, saying, “Be a man of God.” But also, Mom had always allowed me to believe or not.

So, I told my cousin about how God made it rain for forty days and forty nights. Taylor bobbed her head. She didn’t think that Santa brought gifts, but God making it rain worked for her. I said that God put a rainbow in the sky as a sign of His promise that He wouldn’t flood the world again.

Taylor looked out her window to check the sky. It was still a frozen gray. The car skidded a little as we turned into the parish’s parking lot.

Inside, I knelt on the prayer bench. The worn cushions mashed their cranberry leather into the mahogany wood. Taylor clasped her hands together like mine cupped one in the other. I closed my eyes and murmured the Our Father along with the priest. I heard a little girl’s whisper along with me, “And forgive us our trespassers.”

My ex-girlfriend had written me an e-mail, apologizing. I had two immediate thoughts: I wanted her back and I wanted her to go to hell. But I wrote her, *I forgive you.*

At Mass, I pointed my two fingers to my forehead, my belt buckle, and both my shoulders with dry armpits. Taylor mimicked me.

“Amen,” I said.

“What does ‘Amen’ mean?” Taylor asked.

“Let it be so,” I said. “Or agreeing with God.”

“Amen,” she said.

I flipped the kneeler up. After all the hinges squeaked back into position and Sunday bests swooshed to settle in their seats, the sanctuary quieted. I tried to sit up straight, but the uncomfortable sharp curve of the pew made me bend.

For the first time in four years, I was back at the Promised Land in West Virginia and walking down the mountain where the truck had flipped. As I stepped over the ruts in the dirt road, I thought of the Bible verse that went something like, *lose everything, and thus gain everything*. The middle stripe of grass and weeds whipped my legs like the air that had rushed by me as I leapt from the truck.

Mom huffed behind me. Her weight crunched down the gravel in the ruts and stamped her footprints deeper than mine. The mountain's humidity uncurled her permed hair and frayed the gray strands.

"Do you remember the accident?" Mom asked.

"Yeah, I remember what happened," I said.

I kept a few feet in front of Mom just in case she slipped. She stopped at a random spot. She looked at nothing.

"We rolled into the hill, then flipped." Mom said it so easily, staring at the spot where she said the accident had happened.

I didn't think that it was the spot. I expected to see shards of glass sprinkling the sharp turn in the road curling around the mountain, even though I knew there were no broken windows in the accident. Rhododendron bushes hedged the slight slant next to the hill. Their flowers were soft pink, with a yellow epicenter. No pieces of shrapnel littered the area. I didn't know what I should have seen, but I remember more danger than a rusted pipe following us along the side of the dirt road like a railing.

"Do you remember what you told me afterward?" Mom asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"You said you prayed, 'Jesus save us,'" Mom said.

Mom wanted to remind me that it was more than luck. I didn't tell Mom that I had really only cared about my survival. I had thought I was going to die, so I prayed because that was all that was left.

As we continued our descent, the dirt road dampened and then leveled off next to the river. All the rocks that usually churned the water into rapids were submerged. Only one or two boulders' tips were dry.

At the river, I remembered a parable. There was a man on the roof of his house during a flood, and he prayed to God to save him. A boat came by, and he told them to go away because God would save him. Then a helicopter came by, and he told them to go away because God would save him. He drowned, and in the afterlife he was angry with God for not saving him. Of course, God had sent him the boat *and* the helicopter!

After we got to the bottom of the mountain, we cooked corn on the cob and chicken on a grill above the coals of a fire pit. The flames gasped for the air, the logs popped. I gnawed on a piece of corn. Mom rubbed her thumb along the scar from her finger's knuckle to nail. She stared into the flames.

"You took off your undershirt and gave it to me to wrap my hand," Mom said.

I remembered that I used to have to wear undershirts to catch my sweat.

"You said, 'Don't look, don't look,'" Mom said. "My finger was smashed to the bone."

While I didn't want Mom to look at her sliced hand with blood everywhere, I meant that I didn't want her to see me with the damp circles under my arms.

Mom looked at the forest around us and started to explain about how wild places in the world like the Promised Land were "thin." She meant the physical world was closest to

the spiritual world there, like finding God in nature. I wondered if she wanted to remind me to believe.

As we headed back up the mountain, I noticed that there were no birds singing. The sticks in the forest were too damp from the week's rainfall, so there were no snapping echoes, either. The quiet surrounded Mom and me.

I wanted to tell Mom that I might have had an unreasonable expectation that God would save me by bellowing, “You’re healed”—*zap*—and stop my sweating. Still, I did think God healed me. Because, like Mom said, God gave us doctors. The film of chemicals that I continued to apply weekly, that keep my pores closed shut, was the miracle.

Instead of saying anything, I tried to listen to the silence. Behind me, a mix of Mom's jasmine perfume and powder antiperspirant clogged the air. A sweat bee floated above my skin and then flew away.

## ***Familiar***

The subject line read, “For Christopher...” My full name. “For,” as though it was a present. Ellipses at the end of the heading stopped me from immediately opening the message. What if it was a virus? Some people had opened e-mails to them titled “I love you,” but received a worm program that infected their computers.

The “From” field read “Sheena Phillips,” a common name. I knew a Phillips, but an older woman—a friend of the family. She worked in Washington D.C. for the Department of Agriculture. But there was no way they were related.

Sheena, with two *e*'s. The name sounded familiar. I opened the e-mail. The message read: *Hi Christopher, It's Sheena Phillips from first grade. I got your e-mail address from your aunt in Buckhannon. I hope that's ok? I was thinking of you. I've been going to Virginia Tech. I wonder what you're up to. Love, Sheena*

My name is Christopher. She was a Sheena Phillips. I have an aunt in Buckhannon, West Virginia. What did “thinking of you” mean? What was this Sheena Phillips up to? And “Love.” That was a strong word.

I knew about love from where I was born in Buckhannon, West Virginia—a small town with a main street called Main Street lined with thrift stores, pharmacies, banks, and one hardware store and a bookstore. My grandparents had fallen in love at Wesleyan College in town and then stayed and lived in a house on West Victoria Street also known as The Hill. Not *a* hill, but *The* Hill.

Before first grade, my parents had moved our family to Buckhannon for a one-year furlough. I walked down The Hill to Academy Elementary School. I held my hand above my

head as I crossed the street at the light so the truckers could see me. On rainy days when we couldn't go outside for recess, we got to watch videos on a TV. A hundred kids sat "crisscross applesauce" on the wood-floored gym.

There were two choices of public broadcasting: Mister Rogers' Neighborhood or Barney the Purple Dinosaur. Some of the other kids were already humming the shows' theme songs. I liked the hopeful and welcoming lyrics of "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood" better than the overly affectionate "I love you / You love me."

There was a show of hands to vote which one to watch. First, Mr. Roger's was eyed in. More than half of the hundred voted in favor. Second, Barney was up. I had already voted for Mister Rogers. I liked his Land of Make Believe, even though the hand puppets were creepy. Still, I watched to see who raised their hand for Barney.

In purple sweatpants and Barney underwear pulled above her elastic waistband, Sheena Phillips sat in front of me. When Mom had come to volunteer in our classroom she told me that Sheena Phillips was cute. My teacher would often mention that Sheena Phillips was cute. I raised my hand along with that cute girl, seconding the motion for Barney.

I wasn't the only person to double vote. They must have followed other cute girls' hands up, too. For the next half-hour, a gymnasium full of a hundred elementary school kids sat glued to the screen watching the purple dinosaur. I watched Sheena, while the rain's pitter-pattering matched the flickers of the fluorescent lights.

I had remembered that Shenna was cute, but I couldn't remember what she looked like. I pulled out a photo album from my closet and surveyed the lineup of kids from my summer birthday party in 1994. I had turned seven years old. The girl with her arm around my shoulder, straight brown hair flowing over her corduroy overalls was Sheena Phillips.

For my party, Dad set up a scavenger hunt on The Hill. Mom bought the best cake ever. It was chocolate, chocolate, chocolate. Frosting, mix, and ice cream. I don't remember the presents I got. I was just glad to have fun with my friends one more time. After that summer, my family moved back overseas.

I closed the photo album. My family had returned to America a decade ago and I was planning to visit West Virginia that summer. I went back to the computer and clicked “reply.”

*Sheena, I'm here in Orlando going to the University of Central Florida. Actually, I'm going to be in Buckhannon soon. And yes, I do remember you. If you're in town, I'd love to grab a cup of coffee and catch up. —Chris*

I sent my message, but then realized I had written *love*. I meant, *It'd be cool to see someone who I knew back in elementary school and see what they're up to. If they're a success or failure. If they're still cute.*

A week later I walked to The Daily Grind—the one and only coffee shop in Buckhannon. As I walked into the café I saw Sheena. She still had a perky nose, rounded cheeks to chin, and the same brown hair, but streaked with blonde highlights.

It must have been harder to recognize me. I wore glasses that I had started to wear in sixth grade. No longer did I have a kid's bowl cut of dirty blonde hair. I had aged, going fully brown with matching stubble.

There was a pause. I said her name as a question, “Sheena?” She said my full name, “Christopher.” I started to stick my hand out for a shake. She pushed her chair aside, put her arms through mine, and pulled me toward her. For a moment, she set her head against my chest. I heartbeated off her.

“It's good to see you,” we both said.

Sheena started talking about movies, books, music, and college. It was like six degrees of separation. Our opinions intersected often.

I thought we were having a conversation, but it seemed to turn into a competition. We tried to step up each other's accomplishments: Sheena wanted to go to Africa. I had lived in the Eastern Bloc of Europe under the "Iron Curtain." I wanted to go on and get my master's. Sheena wanted a doctorate. Finally, she trumped me. Sheena told me she had walked past the Virginia Tech killer.

The day of the massacre Sheena went from her dorm to her first class. On the way over, she spotted an Asian guy who she sort of, kind of knew. No real connection other than routine repeated enough to imprint a memory.

Later, Sheena watched the live news feed and found out who it was. She drove from Blacksburg back to Buckhannon. Sheena stayed home until the semester was over.

I didn't feel I knew Sheena enough to ask her what I was thinking: When you came home, how tight did your parents hold you? How soon did they start to ask you questions? How much did you tell them? And why are you telling me, of all people, anything at all about it?

Then Sheena took out three letters written in my crayon second grade script. The postage was Polish. The blue perforated stickers with a white goose silhouetted on it read *Air Mail*.

"I thought you'd want to see these." Sheena gave me three letters. I had written a romantic trifecta: *I like you. / I love you. / I want to marry you.*

When I refolded the last envelope, Sheena said, "Isn't that cute? I was looking through my hope chest and found them."

“I can’t believe I wrote those,” I said. Pretending to scratch at stubble, I covered my shaky jaw. I wondered if after the shooting Sheena had escaped to these innocent memories, of maybe the first time a boy told her he loved her, thinking that if she held onto that she could feel safe.

I gave my letters back to Sheena. I said she could keep them safe in her hope chest. I didn’t have a place where I kept things like them. I told Sheena I had to leave.

Sheena offered to drive me home up The Hill. We forced small talk: How long will you be in town? We should hang out again. You should e-mail me. I said I would, but I knew I wasn’t going to keep in touch. I felt trapped and I wanted to escape.

As I got out of Sheena’s car I wondered if she thought the shooter story was enough to interest me. Instead, the story had changed her from the cute girl who I might have once thought I loved to a survivor who had walked past death. I wanted to tell her that my letters weren’t an actual contract. Only a little boy’s words. No man’s promise. I shut the door on Sheena Phillips. The driveway’s gravel dinged against her car as Sheena backed up to descend The Hill.

## *Yield*

On stage, Steve Hambrick paced back and forth wearing a T-shirt and jeans and flip-flops like us college kids. In his deep, gruff Southern drawl that came through his full dark brown beard, Steve asked, “Do y’all think someone just wants to hear what *you* have to say all the time?”

It was the Tuesday night service for Central Florida Wesley, the campus ministry at my parents’ church. I sat in the crowd while Steve preached that we didn’t hear God because we weren’t listening. He said it would be a short sermon, but a long lesson. A screen behind Steve unfurled and then glowed blue. He gave thumbs-up to the guys in the video booth.

Horizontal lines distorted the screen. A guy with a bleach blond buzz cut and black square-framed glasses sat on a sofa, looking at the camera filming him. He held a remote in his hand. An aquamarine rectangle filled the bottom of the screen with the words:

*Noise* | 005      Rob Bell      NOOMA.com

The sound of traffic and then sirens whirred through the windows behind Bell as he continued to stare at the camera. Bell clicked his remote and the screen showed a digital green 73, 74, 75.... The channels sounded like a western’s twangy guitars and pistols firing, then a Looney Toons orchestra, and finally an interrupting conversation from a talk show.

Suddenly Bell, aware of being watched, said to the camera that there was a nature filmer who in 1968 had to record fifteen hours to get one hour of natural sound, without airplanes or cars or sirens. Today, that same guy has to record 2,000 hours just to get that same one-hour without interruption.

Then Bell recounted the story of the Jewish prophet Elijah, who was totally stressed, totally fried, was told by God to go to the top of a mountain so that he would hear Him. So, Elijah went to the top of the mountain. There's this whirlwind that rushes over, but God wasn't in the wind. Next an earthquake rips through, but God wasn't in the earthquake. Then a fire roars by, but God wasn't in the fire. Finally, this still, small voice comes.

Bell said that translators debated if the voice was even an audible sound in Hebrew. God was in the sound of sheer silence. Bell clicked the remote again and the screen blacked out.

Sentences faded in:

*Do you have a cell phone?*

*Do you have a pager?*

*Do you have voice-mail?*

*Do you have a cell phone with voice-mail and e-mail?*

*Is there a connection between the amount of noise in our lives and our inability to hear God?*

Again, the screen blacked out. Steve stood back up. He clicked on the battery pack connected to the mini-microphone clipped to his shirt.

“The word NOOMA comes from the phonetic spelling of the Greek word meaning *wind, spirit, breath*,” Steve said. “Tonight we’re going to try to hear God. Not talk to Him, but let Him talk to us. So, folks turn off your phones, close your Bibles, and sit—right here—in the sanctuary, and just listen.”

I didn't know what to expect God to say. He might say something as clear and strong as “You’re supposed to be a missionary just like your parents.” I was curious, but also afraid.

I closed my eyes. I heard the fluorescent bulbs humming overhead, denim scraping on chairs around me, and cars on the road outside skimming through a rain shower. It was going to take longer to get home in the rain. Also I was hungry and I wanted to eat something, and—

I tried again, but kept my eyes open. I looked around and spotted a girl bowing. She used her black hair to cover her face. I stared at the ground, but then thought of the disquiet in the room. I tried to think about something outside of the room and remembered that I needed to finish my research paper on noise pollution I was writing for my composition class. According to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 30 million Americans were regularly exposed to 100 decibels or more of dangerous levels—the sound of a rock concert, a chainsaw, or a baby crying—that could create hearing loss.

I had spaced out again.

I had let my mind wander. I kept trying, but I couldn't concentrate because whenever I tried to think of nothing I thought I'd already missed something. But I had been thinking about something the entire time if I was thinking about nothing!

Steve clapped his hands together. He stood on stage. He nodded at us.

“Welp,” Steve said. “I believe that was productive. Throughout the next couple of weeks, we'll be going deeper with this and discovering what God wants us to hear. If you would like someone to pray with you, Wesley interns will be standing along the walls. Now, we'll have the band play a bit.”

The praise band played a song with the chorus: “I'm in love, / from the moment that I saw Your face / I'm in love / You never turn away Your gaze / I'm in love / Now the

reason for the rest of my days / is to love You, I will love You.” I had heard some of the guys in the band sing it to their girlfriends.

I didn’t stick around to get prayed for or to try to listen again.

At the beginning of my freshmen year in college I had joined Central Florida Wesley. Wesley as in John Wesley—the founder of the Methodist Church. My mother’s side of the family was Methodist as far back as my great grandfather Flanagan who was a preacher. Mom joked that my father—a Polish Catholic—converted to Methodism after meeting her.

Growing up, my parents prayed over everything, and always out loud. In the morning I’d find my father sitting at the table in his pajamas with a hardcover Bible cracked open. He kept up his Polish by reading a translation in the hazy morning sunlight right before he swam laps in our backyard pool. With his head bowed, eyes closed, and hands folded I would’ve thought he had fallen asleep in his chair if not for the slight whisper under his mustache.

Before I would get to the bus to go to public school my mother held my shoulder by my backpack’s strap, closed her eyes, and said, “I pray that Christopher will be a man after Your own heart and know true truth.” And when I came home in the afternoons, I’d find Mom on our screened-in porch with a yellow highlighter in her hand, a pencil on the plastic table, and her red leather-covered Bible opened in her lap. She was filling out worksheets of homework and lessons for Women of the Word and Bible Study Fellowship she attended every Tuesday and Wednesday.

At dinner, whether at our family table or out at a restaurant, we all held hands and bowed our heads and then one of my parents, usually my father, prayed, and then ended with “In Jesus’ name we pray.”

Even though my parents prayed to Jesus, they never acknowledged hearing from Jesus. My folks said things like, “I felt that God [blank]” and “I believe that God [blank].” They never said, “*Jesus said*, [blank].” I didn’t grow up expecting God to answer out loud.

Until watching the NOOMA DVD, I hadn’t considered that the stories of Adam and Eve walking and talking with God in the Garden, Moses and the burning bush, Samuel hearing his name called out by God during the night, even Elijah and the whisper, and all the other times in the Old Testament that God spoke to people—not just hearing and responding to their prayers, but literally, verbally speaking—was something that actually still happened now. I believed that God was Jesus in the New Testament, and Jesus was a man who lived and walked and ate—and who had ascended into Heaven—so then didn’t He have a voice? Wouldn’t He still speak?

Wesley meetings relocated from the sanctuary to the newly built “Warehouse” adjacent to the church. The church members had invested millions of dollars in a boxy corrugated steel building for the college, high school, and middle school groups. A full-size outdoor concrete basketball court bridged from the Warehouse to the rest of the church. Inside the Warehouse had an arcade with the videogames Dance Dance Revolution and Guitar Hero as well as air hockey, pool tables, and even a two-story rock-climbing wall.

In the Warehouse, we began to study the spiritual gifts. Each week we dissected and attempted experiencing one specific gift. One week we invited the Holy Spirit to flow through people to speak in tongues. I heard what sounded like castanet clicks from one of the students. An intern asked for a translation and the students said things like, “God wants us to have hope” and “He wants us to persevere.” Another week, we were told to lay healing hands on one of the other students who had a cold. Afterward, the sick kid said he didn’t know if he felt any better, but he felt warm when we prayed over him.

The last week of spiritual gifts we studied vision. We paired up. I partnered with Matt Nelson. I knew him from high school Sunday school classes.

Matt looked tired, but he always looked tired since he worked full-time at Beef O’Brady’s—a faux Irish-themed sports restaurant. That evening the black hoodie he wore to hide his heavy frame was splashed with an acid-wash pink from dunking his arms into bleachy water to scrub the day’s cutting boards.

For the vision exercise, we were supposed to lay hands on each other and pray for the other person to see something they needed to see. Steve told everyone to quiet our minds and open our hearts to God. Matt shut his eyes, while I set my hands on his hunched shoulders.

“Let Matt see, let Matt see,” I prayed over and over.

“Hold on,” Matt said. He put his hand up, quieting me. “I see a circle. A bright circle. Like the sun.”

I wondered if Matt had just shut his eyes so hard that he saw static speckles of light converge together.

“And there’s a flatness,” he said.

I imagined it as his eyelid.

“And there’s a clump of trees.”

I peaked.

Matt squinted his eyes shut, but lifted an eyebrow as he said, “Maybe one.”

I thought, *Eyelash*, but I asked Matt, “Savanna?”

Matt guessed that maybe he was supposed to go on the Wesley summer mission trip to Africa. I didn’t say anything contradictory. We left it at what Matt figured he had seen.

Then, it was my turn. I didn't want to see something that could be interpreted as a call to a mission trip, but at the same time I wanted to see something. I took a deep breath.

Darkness engulfed my sight. I focused on the spot between my eyes above the bridge of my nose. I felt I was looking up to my forehead, the place I think about when I think about thinking. I thought that I should have been feeling something in my chest near my heart, where there's supposed to be belief.

Before I could think any more, out of the darkness a swath of aquamarine filled my mind's eye. It looked blurry, like my vision refocusing after getting out of my family's pool. Blobs walked in this turquoise. The color flowed, like water. A river? And the blobs linked arms together. People were crossing this river, in the middle of its current. The person at the end took their time, going slowly, purposefully. The person held back. When the person stopped, I knew it was me. Then I let go.

I told Matt what I saw, except I didn't say that I was the reluctant person. Matt had no idea what to make of it. We asked an intern what a river represented and he said that the flowing represented the Holy Spirit.

A few summers later, my Aunt K, a retired United Methodist pastor, paid for me to spend a week with her in Pennsylvania at Chautauqua—an annual conference in a small town featuring a four-pillared institute of arts, education, religion, and recreation. Victorian houses with wrap-around porches lined the one-way roads. The sides of the townsquare featured a library, a post office, a bookstore, a barbershop, and a small grocer along with a few cafés. Cars weren't allowed on the grounds, but a big parking lot took up the space across from the institute's front gates.

Every morning, across from the Methodist deaconess's house where Aunt K and I stayed, bicycles rolled down a wood-planked bridge. Children rode to the Boys and Girls Club on the shore of Lake Chautauqua.

A bell tower chimed out the hours. Aunt K and I walked to the whitewashed, open-air amphitheater to attend morning lectures, afternoon interviews, and evening entertainment. There was little to no Internet or cell phone service available. I had never seen more people in such a consolidated space reading newspapers, magazines, and books.

Most of the people at Chautauqua were either in the twelve-years-old-and-under crowd going to the Boys and Girls Club in the morning by the shore or in their early-forties-and-upward range who attended workshops, lectures, and concerts in town. Only a few college students worked around town. During the mid-morning, I skipped the religious panels and walked along an asphalt path next to Lake Chautauqua. I ducked into the Game House to play a few rounds of ping-pong with some of the teenage counselors before going outside again to watch sailboats float along noiselessly until lunch.

At the end of the week, instead of going to the evening entertainment, I read on the porch of the deaconesses' house. Moths fluttered around the overhead light bulb occasionally tinkling their floury wings against the glass. Coolness flowed in the darkness.

Aunt K came back from the amphitheater with Kay, one of the deaconess-caretakers. Kay wore hiking boots, cargo shorts, and loose T-shirts. Her graying hair came together into a rat-tail. I liked Kay better than the other caretakers since Kay bought bagels and fruit on the mornings she set out breakfast instead of doughnuts and cereal, and she respected the morning quiet until I drank a cup of coffee. Kay had attended a university where boys attempted to court her, but afterward she remained single and worked for a church in Ohio. I figured Kay might be a closeted lesbian, but I didn't care either way.

“Oh, Chris-to-pher,” Aunt K trilled. She and her husband were my only relatives who called me by my entire first name, and usually Aunt K sang my name like a birdcall.

“How’s life?”

“I just finished *’night, Mother,*” I said.

“Tragic,” Aunt K said. “Did you think she would do it?”

“Well, right at the beginning she says she’s going to kill herself,” I said. “So, it wasn’t a surprise or anything.” I also felt empathetic with the character. Or maybe I just empathized with shooting your brains out to escape.

“Tomorrow would you join me for a service?” Aunt K asked.

“What one do you think you’ll go to?” I asked.

I was stalling. I was waiting for Kay to go inside. I figured Aunt K would attend the Methodist service and I would pass on going with her.

“Perhaps a Quaker meeting,” Aunt K said. “I always like to try a different denomination each time I come here.”

“It’s good to branch out to see the other groups here,” Kay said. “The Quaker meetings are so peaceful. They’re always nice and small and quiet.”

Kay stood there with her arms crossed nodding like I should go with my aunt.

I remembered visiting Aunt K and going to her services. When I was a kid I sat at her feet for children’s time. She started one sermon with the question, “Who is the church?”

Most of the kids said, “Jesus!”

“Yes, He is, but...” Aunt K said, “Look at this.” She had the word *CHURCH* written on a piece of paper. “You, all you children and everyone in the seats—your mothers and fathers and family—make up the church.”

I had enjoyed those simple lessons. I felt like I owed Aunt K for her gift of Chautauqua. And I didn't want to turn her down in front of Kay.

"Alright," I said. "I'll go."

In the morning, Aunt K and I walked by other denominational houses with crucifixes on their roofs and black placards out front with announcements pieced together from white clip-on adjustable letters. Organ pipes puffed chords out the open doors and warbling voices of the old members sung hymns. Stain glass windows cast collages of color on the pathway.

Aunt K led me to a one-story octagonal building that looked like a one-room schoolhouse. Out front on a blackboard easel, written in chalk, read *Friends Meeting*. At the door, a woman with white hair said, "Welcome to the Society of Friends." We shook hands.

"Have you been to a meeting before?" she asked.

"I've been before," Aunt K said. "I just love it."

"This is my first one," I said.

"We are so glad to have you both today," the woman said. "Feel free to read any of our literature."

Just inside the door pamphlets covered a card table. I picked up one that read *The ABCs of Quakerism Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)*. I took a seat at one of the desk-chairs formed in a circle. A Bible, book of prayer, and hymnal formed a three-tiered pyramid on each of the desk-chairs. I opened the ABC pamphlet without setting it on the crowded desk and flipped to Q:

*QUAKING* at the word of God was the reason a judge gave Friends what he thought was a derisive nickname of Quaker which, today, is worn proudly.

I read through the rest of the ABCs as a few more people came into the room. Aunt K took a seat next to me. I was the youngest person there.

“Alright now,” the white-haired woman said as she stood in the center of the desk-chair circles. “Even though there is no formal hierarchy in Quakerism, I will guide us through today’s meeting. How about we first get up and go around and introduce ourselves to one another?”

Everyone stood up and shook hands. Each person said their first and last names and what city or town they were from and where they attended the so-and-so meeting. It felt cultish, but friendly.

Since we were all standing, the non-leader woman then led us in a hymn.

“I didn’t expect this,” Aunt K whispered to me. She ruffled through her hymnal.

I turned to the same page.

We sang along a cappella. I wasn’t used to that. At my parents’ church, worship was different.

At the front doors of my parents’ church, ushers say the same greeting to me as they do to the person in front of me. They slide their hand into and out of my palm without a grip, like swiping a credit card. Then ushers at the doors into the sanctuary hand out a bulletin recycled from the service before. In front, one of the church leaders holds a microphone and reads through the announcements, welcomes everyone there, and gives a reminder to silence cell phones.

When the leader says a short prayer, the praise band gets up on stage while the congregation has their heads bowed. The lead singer starts clapping along to the beat from the drummer while the three-person guitar section with lead, rhythm, and bass strum their opening riffs. The backup choir swells, pulling everyone into the song. On a Jumbotron

screen the worship lyrics scroll down a PowerPoint slide in yellow blocky text with a nature-scene background. Sometimes a tambourine or an occasional horn group with a saxophone joins along. Spinning strobe lights flare on the stage. Some people raise their open-palmed hands or clap along to the beat. A sea of shoulders sways as feet move side to side in a simple white person's two-step.

After a few songs, my parents' pastor climbs on stage with an earphone mic. The mic clings to his ear like a hearing aid but extends out toward his mouth to free his hands for gestures. He asks everyone to pray with him as the praise band loops the same chords over and over.

The Quaker meeting was just a meeting in a building. No aisles with hundreds of stackable chairs, just a dozen or so desk-chairs in the shape of a circle. No four-foot high stage, just a broom-brushed wooden floor. No audio/visual systems, just unamplified voices. It was just a place to gather. The people weren't even an official congregation.

"Now, let us take the rest of our time to yield to God," the non-leader woman said and sat down. She folded her hands in her lap and put her chin to her chest. She looked like she was going to take a nap.

The other Friends sat down. Aunt K settled into her seat and held her hands together in prayer. I figured we would sit in silence and try to listen to God speak like I had tried back at Wesley.

I knew I needed to empty myself of everything and open myself up to be able to receive something. I focused on the emptiness of the room. I listened to the wooden floor creaking, the rusty hinges on the joints of the desk-chairs squeaking, the rustling of wafer-thin Bible pages flipping, the occasional cough, the brush of a sleeve pushed up an arm, and a watch's secondhand ticking.

Just as I thought there was no way I could hear God unless He audibly spoke to me, an old woman stood up. She wore a fleece vest over a long-sleeve flannel shirt, jeans, and no-nonsense trail-boots. I imagined she was the kind of person who woke up before sunrise and hung a pair of binoculars around her neck and then hiked into the woods to go birding, waiting to hear the first song of the day. Then, next to her desk-chair, this woman sang like a bird. She ended as abruptly as she had started.

“God nudged me to sing,” the woman said. She shrugged her shoulders. “I needed to share that on this beautiful day,” she said and sat down.

Soon after the woman sang, the service ended. Everyone shook hands. Aunt K and I exited the octagonal building. I imagined when it had been a school the room was filled with students echoing their teacher, memorizing lessons, and learning through repetition instead of experience.

Aunt K and I walked back to the deaconess’ house. On the path, yellow sunlight filtered through the trees’ green boughs. I spotted specks of dust swirling in the bluish glow.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Chris Wiewiora was born on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1987 in Buckhannon, West Virginia. He spent his childhood in Warsaw, Poland and then grew up in Orlando, Florida. In spring 2010, he graduated with Honors in the Major of English (BA) from the University of Central Florida where he worked as an editor at *the Florida Review*. In spring 2014, he earned his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and Environment at Iowa State University where he served as the managing editor *Flyway*. He serves on the editorial board of *BULL: Men's Fiction*.