Apolonia

Justyna Anna Pekalak
Krakow, Poland

M.A. English, Clemson University, 2014
B.A. English, Clemson University, 2010

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Nie wiem, czy będzie jeszcze kiedy jaka Polska, ale
tego jestem pewien, że nie będzie już Polaków.
Mikołaj I Romanow

IN THE HOT GEORGIA AIR JOLANTA UNMOTHERS HERSELF

This is how luck accumulates: when the three brothers Lech, Czech, and Rus go out after their father's death, Czech goes West after the sun, Rus goes East before the sun, while Lech, having witnessed a large, white eagle in a tall oak tree against a red sky, stays in the North, mistaking the eagle's warning gesture of outspread wings as a good omen, and founds Gniezno, the beginning of all misfortune to follow; Wanda, daughter of Krak, having conquered an entire invading army, sacrifices herself into the Wisła to prevent further attacks beckoned by her beauty; Smok Wawelski, having settled the Krakowian lands prior to the arrival of humans and whose true name of Żmija isn't known, is blamed for widespread disappearances of virgins, is consequently slayed; in order to achieve political strength, Mieszko I accepts the baptism as he weds princess Dobrawa and converts his pagan lands to Christianity; Perun, Weles, Swaróg, Mokosz, Rod, and others do not find their continuance in the new beliefs and gradually fall away, not being taught in schools even today, despite the continuing presence of numerous and undeniably pagan holidays and rituals, and thus, Polish children dutifully build their Marzannas without fully knowing what they do, make their trek to the river, and drown them to welcome spring, around the same time as they dutifully pack their Easter baskets full of food and make their trek to church for a priest to bless them; Adam Mickiewicz, despairing in not having partaken in the failed November Uprising, writes *Dziady, cz. III*, irrevocably naming Poland the Christ of Nations, and years later, dies in Constantinople among the sweet smell of his choleric shit; Izydor Morawski takes part in a 1934 theater production of Mickiewicz's poetic drama and

trips on stage, losing exactly one tooth and his hat; ten years later, his son Tadeusz is sent by his AK commanding officer to ambush Nazi collaborators and finds his girlfriend Julia at the designated place, exclaiming only, "Julka, co ty robisz?" before she is shot and killed by his fellow uprising soldiers, after which Tadeusz descends into the Warsaw sewers and reemerges only months later, right at the feet of an SS officer, which ends in the precise way you imagine it because it is easy for you to imagine Poland at war, shake your head and say what bad things we were dealt, and if it isn't, all you have to do is watch Andrzej Wajda's *Kanał* and it will be easy then; little Waldek Longiewicz, aged six, the youngest and most willing out of his siblings, Lucyna and Henryk, helps his father Władysław plough a potato field when the horse-drawn machine disturbs a hornet nest beneath the ground, the swarm sending little Waldek into a week-long coma and eventual death; Lucyna Król (née Longiewicz) is unable to haggle down the price of her daughter Jolanta's dreamed American Wrangler jeans at the Tomex Bazaar; Franciszek Morawski narrowly misses the martial law curfew, is promptly arrested, held, then released.

This is how luck is spent: in the annual act of institutional benevolence or semi-reparations, the U. S. ambassador to Poland in 1993, Nicholas A. Rey, reaches in and pulls out the fortunate name of the person to be granted the possibility of permanent alien residence in America: Franciszek Morawski.

This is how luck accumulates, again: Jolanta wakes on her side, facing the luggage. It is 1:03 am. She has slept in one of two pairs of jeans she owns, the button pressed deep into her skin. It leaves a small, bruised dot above her waist. She rolls on her back and places a single finger on it, making sure she is intact for the moment, making sure nothing has fallen out. Nothing has. She turns her head towards Marysia, who sleeps next to her, and looks, takes account of the passing minutes, attempts to memorize the smallest of things—the freckles on her

daughter's cheeks she cannot fully see in the dark, the direction of the scar above her lip, a little ash-brown curl in front of her ear. Marysia breathes—slow, steady. Jolanta breathes with her—slow, slower, until she stops, parts her lips, involuntarily begins again. This is, she thinks, what it will be like for Marysia now and forever—falling asleep with her mother, waking up without.

She takes the two small duffle bags and a large leather tote given to her by her mother—the only one she has ever owned—and carries them out into the hallway, closing the door behind her. Through the frosted, thick glass she can still see the backs of Franciszek's magazine cut outs of Depeche Mode, large skin-colored stains. In the living room, she hears his laugh, then the voices of their mutual high school friends, Sławek and Irek, who are driving them to Warsaw.

"We should leave if we are to make it by 6:30," she tells them from the hall, looking into the main living room. Around the table sit Sławek, Irek, Bożena, distinct only through the colors of the curly clouds of their hair—dark brown, blond, fire-red, all dimmed by the smoke from Bożena's cigarette snaking its way towards the ceiling. Franciszek stands above them, one hand in the act of brushing back his long, straight hair from his eyes. On the sofa near the television, his parents nod off, hands in their laps, fingers braided. On the screen, an ornately dressed woman lays out a deck of Tarot cards and speaks, but isn't audible. They all say their goodbyes. The road to Warsaw passes in a blur of dark, ruined roads and flashes of women's flesh, waiting and pacing the sides.

The first plane is small and headed to Paris. As it takes off, breaking away from the soil and rising to reveal at first large rectangles of green, yellow, and brown, then the clumped gray lashes of Soviet bloki streaking the face of the land, Jolanta looks to Franciszek, asleep with his mouth agape, facing the small window. This is the moment she allows herself to cry—silently, pushing it back into her chest, turned away. An older woman in front of her steals this moment:

her blue eye, surrounded by baby blue eyeshadow spread far up to her thin eyebrows, gazes disembodied in between two front seats before she emerges wholly, rising all in blue above the headrest, looming like the sky. Jolanta stares back, her right hand folded in half against her lips. The woman smiles, her lips stretch out, reveal a missing tooth.

"Niech Pani nie płacze, zawsze można wrócić. Polska taki kraj—zawsze Panią przyjmie spowrotem," she says, lingers for a moment in Jolanta's silence, then disappears behind the headrest once more. It is clear to Jolanta the woman has been elsewhere before, had come back, is leaving again.

None of it matters. Jolanta turns to the window, panics, believing she has missed the glimpse of os. Strusia where Marysia is still asleep, then realizes she isn't looking at Kraków, but Warsaw—the indistinguishable swaths of bruised land buried in itself, then rebuilt on top, ongoing, endless, and small. Sleepless, she recites a litany of, "Sorry Polsko, sorry Polsko, sorry Polsko, wybacz mi. Wystarczająco przerażająco jest żyć" to the blue eye hovering between the seats before her. This takes her through Paris and the lonely hours over the Atlantic, during which she finally realizes there is nothing beneath her feet but air.

In Atlanta, Franciszek and Jolanta are fingerprinted by two stone-faced, bulky immigration officers, then asked whether they have fulfilled the terms of the Green Card Lottery and secured jobs. The officers look at them; all four are silent for a long while.

"Czego on chce?" Franciszek whispers, leaning into Jolanta. She looks to the two uniformed men and shakes her head once.

"Do you have work? Jobs?" one of the men repeats, waving his arms in circles, then imitating sweeping motions.

Jolanta nods.

"Yes. Clean."

The officer's gaze lingers, but he nods.

"Children?" he asks, is met with silence. He points to Franciszek, then to Jolanta, then indicates a small height as you would a dog. "Kids?"

Jolanta lowers her head and lifts a single finger.

"One," she says quietly.

"Not with you?" the officer asks, sweeping his hand from left to right. Jolanta notices his raised eyebrows and remains silent.

"We make dollars, we take her," Franciszek says finally, unknowingly preventing Marysia from acquiring a travel visa four years from this moment—she will make the trip to the U. S. Consulate General in Kraków's Old Town with both grandmothers and Bożena, will sit before a white-haired man behind a glass pane, will be sent back to the waiting room, will be summoned back and rejected, will not be able to visit her parents in America in the summer, will cry while Bożena smiles pleasantly and pleads with the consul like she would with a fellow Polish person to whom everything is also negotiable, but is met with a cold stare and remembers she is speaking to a person only temporarily living in the same place as herself, but not of the same place as herself; they will all return home and say: A nie mówiłam? to one another, say: Boją się, że tam zostanie, then lament their collaborative decision for Marysia to stay safely at home until Franciszek and Jolanta make a new, certain life in a far-away, unknown place they think they know from movies, then question whether Franciszek and Jolanta even love Marysia if they left her in the first place; Marysia will hear all of this.

Franciszek and Jolanta wander the airport for half an hour before they find the exit. These are the small things of which Polish jokes are made. Go ahead and laugh now, I won't mind this

time. They pass underneath an International Concourse sign, which will be commemorated two years later on a photograph taken by my mother, Marzena, marking the beginning of their last trip back together: Jolanta smiling, waving to someone off-frame; Franciszek smiling widely, his hand halfway to his mouth. Behind them: International Concourse, Gates T1 – T14. For years, Marysia will be convinced she was the one who captured this moment at the Kraków-Balice airport once it opens to international flights. This will be the moment she realizes the power of photography and the importance of time, its shrinking and expanding—from three weeks of having parents, which will seem like forever and about which she will not worry, to two days, six hours, ten minutes, five minutes, three minutes, one minute, then they leave, irrevocably, and the countdown begins anew, with Marysia slouching towards the next time. This is the moment she will live in for six years. This is the moment she will write a thousand poems about, writing them down on the photograph's back, having made a thousand copies. Only years later she will realize it wasn't her that took the photograph, which had come into her possession in an envelope sent by Jolanta and had been surrounded by others—Myrtle Beach, a Thanksgiving turkey, Christmas, Chimney Rock.

Outside, the air is dense, hot. Jolanta breathes: in, out. She had thought air was the same everywhere in the world, but here, it is unbearable, stifling. She opens her mouth, afraid she might suffocate. It comes: unwillingly, bitterly, resentfully, with each breath. At least, this is what I like to think of the moment my own mother left me. In truth, it could have come swiftly, unannounced, like time. She looks to Franciszek, who stands next to her. Yellow taxis, people pass them by. In the distance, they glimpse the curves of a concrete overpass.

"Jolka, patrz, cywilizowany świat," he says.

Above them, the roar of a jet engine tears the sky in two.

MARYSIA OTHERWISE KNOWN AS MARYLOU HEARS THE SOUND OF SOLITUDE

Returning is much like falling to one's death—you begin in one place and end up in another; everyone makes a fuss. Marysia, in her American passport known simply as Maria Apolonia Morawska, on her boarding pass denoted as seat 37H, descends through a thick, milky fog, which suddenly gives way to vast gray swaths of concrete stretching out towards a dark mass of green trees. She cradles Franciszek the urn in her lap, turns him photograph-first, gaping towards the window. Minutes later, she steps off the airport ladder onto the wet pavement, boards the crowded, steaming bus, Franciszek the urn in her mother's travel leather tote underneath one arm, steps off onto the pavement once more, and is ushered inside, along with the crowd of other Chicago – Kraków returnees, many older and gold-clad but if younger, clearly dissatisfied and groggy after ten long hours, likely pulled out of slumber by the sudden and boisterous clapping that always follows a successful Polish landing. She waits in line to hand her documents to a pretty Slavic boy in a military uniform, vaguely reminiscent of Janusz Gajos during his *Czterej Pancerni i Pies* days.

He flips through then gazes at the passport, silent and bored, then at Marysia, to him otherwise known as no one at all but another distinct but distant Slavic face, then back to the paper.

"You have Polish passport?" he asks in English, his bored gaze traveling up to her face once more. Franciszek the urn vibrates softly within the bag.

"Tak," she replies in Polish. "At home, I never use it."

"Next time please use Polish passport to enter," he says and stamps the little blue book with a loud clang and slides it underneath the glass pane separating them.

"I don't think that is legal," Marysia, otherwise though not officially known as Marylou, says and looks at the officer, but he is already looking through and past her, silent. She takes her documents and passes through a little gate.

"Would you like please follow me and teach the great history of our beautiful country of Poland? You receive bread, salt, poppy pie for visit to Poland!" A man dressed in a worn but fully decorated uniform stands in her way to the baggage claim. He is short and balding, his mouth invisible underneath a thick Piłsudski mustache that seems to move up and down of its own volition, and adorned with a nametag proclaiming: Waldemar Pawlak.

"I greet you in Poland!" he exclaims excitedly, the numerous orders and tassels clinking together like teeth.

"Ja jestem stąd," Marysia, in this moment accessing and reclaiming this unotherwise part of herself, says.

"Ah, to przepraszam," Mr. Pawlak says and bows deeply before her, unembarrassed, before leaving to accost other travelers he deems Westerners.

Now, this isn't real and I am telling you this both because I know I must feel tremendous gratitude if you possess any knowledge of the country Marysia and I come from and thus await to receive the proverbial cookie, but also because I want you to think about whether you deserve it. There is no Mr. Pawlak, but would you secretly love it if there were?

Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, retrieves her one suitcase off the conveyor belt, heads for the exit into the general arrivals area and stops. The automatic door slides open as a pair of teens exits to the excited shouts of their probable names. This was, once and not too long ago, before the borders fully opened and travel became commonplace, all of us—the moment when the door pulls back, a split second of anxiety before the sea of expectant faces, then,

finally, a wave of relief at finding those searching for your own. The saddest part of being away comes when these faces you hope to wait and search for yours begin to change and then become fewer and fewer yet.

Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, lets another couple pass before her, the door sliding open, a glimpse of the crowd outside once more, then closing. She sees Mr. Pawlak ushering a confused, middle-aged couple into a side room adorned with maps before be closes the door with another deep bow and wink in her direction, his mustache bopping up and down above his chin. She steps through the sliding door.

On the other side, it takes her a long, almost infinite, moment to recognize Hubert Morawski, technically most likely an uncle, but whom Marysia, to him otherwise known as Mysia, has always considered a cousin due to their five-year age difference and the fact that they often spent summers together, Hubert being similarly parentless, though in a more literal sense. He has grown his hair out since she last saw him five years prior—it now hangs, sand-colored, straight to his shoulders in two even curtains split in an exact middle part. Still, he wears the same faded black The Cure t-shirt.

By his side, tightly wrapped around him, stands a young woman unknown to Marysia, at this moment otherwise known as both Mysia and Marylou. She is almost as tall as Hubert and surprisingly thin, made obvious by a simple black dress clinging to her skin.

“Mysiu!” Hubert exclaims, finally recognizing her and untangling himself from the woman’s grip to hug his cousin.

“Ale urosłaś,” he teases as they separate. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, shoots him a crooked smile.

"This is Skinny Anka," he says, beaming and motioning towards the woman, at which she leans on one leg and pulls her long hair over one shoulder, exposing a long, thin neck. "She has the most successful ASMR Youtube channel in Poland."

"What is ASMR?"

Skinny Anka cocks her head to the side.

"I whisper," she says, her voice flat but delicate. "Or touch the microphone with my makeup brushes. People like it."

Marysia nods.

They stand, silent, for a long moment before Hubert grabs the lone suitcase and leads their tiny procession out of the airport and to his ancient, bottle-green Polonez in the parking lot, followed by Skinny Anka, silent behind him, her stride long and languorous, and Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, trailing at the end in the cool and muted summer day.

"Can we stop by uncle Henryk? I need to pick up the keys to Stalowe," Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, asks as Hubert pulls out of the Balice airport, the building left in the milky fog. Outside the window, swaths of green and yellow farmland peppered with square, red-roofed houses come into view and slowly pass. The fog hangs low, gray above stretches of bare, dark earth.

"It must be nice living in America," Skinny Anka says finally, turning in the passenger seat to face Marysia, to her not otherwise known as anything but the American girl, her eyes narrow and dark. Hubert laughs and gazes in the rear view mirror.

"It's all right," Marysia, as an almost American girl otherwise known as Marylou, replies.

"Americans have no history," Hubert begins and waves his hand. "We have history. We have the Gold Train. Skinny Anka and I are going to Wałbrzych this weekend to help look for it."

"What's a gold train?"

Hubert slams his open palm on the well-worn steering wheel.

"The Gold Train! The train on which the Germans tried to haul off all the things they stole from us—art, gold, everything."

"Don't they teach you anything over there?" Skinny Anka offers up, pulling out a pack of cigarettes from her purse and placing one between her lips.

"Do they teach you American history here?" Marysia, perhaps in this moment more otherwise known as Marylou, replies, leaning forward in the back seat.

Hubert whistles. "Hamerykanka. Do you know what year the Battle of Grunwald was?"

"If you don't, you aren't Polish," Skinny Anka chimes in once more, manually rolling down her window, the ash from her cigarette sparking orange outside, then fading. Marysia, less and less known as feeling as such, catches Hubert's eyes in the rear view mirror. Franciszek the urn, momentarily forgotten, rattles quietly on the floor behind the passenger seat.

"1510," she answers after a long silence—wrong, but knowingly, leaning back, not letting his gaze slip away.

Skinny Anka scoffs loudly, but Hubert remains silent, finally averting his gaze and looking at the gray road ahead for the remainder of the way to the edges of Nowa Huta and os. Tysiąclecia, where Henryk Longiewicz, brother of Jolanta's mother Lucyna, and the keeper of the keys to her apartment, vacant now after her death, lives quietly and alone.

When he opens the door, Mr. Henryk is dressed in a maroon sweater vest pulled over a crisp white shirt and what can only be assumed to be his Sunday pants, his white hair brushed back around a large, shiny bald spot.

"Marysia!" He smiles and beckons her inside. "Come, come. You must see my new washing machine."

Inside the tiny, brown-tiled bathroom, they stand before the brilliantly white machine, fit neatly between an old bathtub and toilet.

"What do you think? You like it?"

"Yes, it's beautiful."

"You must have better ones in America, no?"

Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou though here not otherwise known as anything, smiles but says nothing.

"Hmph! Do not listen to an old man. The only place I have seen is Budapest and that was in '78. Here, you must want your keys. Do air out the apartment, I have not visited this month."

Mr. Henryk leads her to the small living room. On the lace-clad table is a small leather pouch keychain, a small bag of bird food, and a birdcage, in the center of which a brown finch sleeps, unbothered. All is silent for a moment, the sounds of cars speeding past on the wet pavement outside dissolved, until Mr. Henryk clears his throat, his lips pulled into a small beak.

"Listen, please Marysiu," he begins, hands clasped behind his arched back. Marysia, whom Mr. Henryk would never imagine being otherwise known by any other name, notices the folds of the white shirt bulging out around his shoulder blades, small, stunted wings, then Mr. Henryk's tiny, bony wrists, the skin sunk in between each blue-green vein, sticking out of the clean white sleeves without even brushing the fabric. She looks to the bird.

"I am traveling to sanatorium day after tomorrow for a month and I task you with Wiesław, if you allow. He is good bird—you only must put seeds in this cup every third day. He does like company, also. I apologize for burdening you, but there is no one else."

"No, I will take him."

Mr. Henryk nods his head once, benevolently.

"When I return, we will go to see your grandparents at Grębałów. I think Jola will like that," he begins, then stops, his mouth slightly agape. He looks to the leather tote on Marysia's, otherwise known as Marylou's, arm. "Of course, I am sorry about your father."

She nods. Gathered around the birdcage, they do not speak for some time. Finally, Mr. Henryk says: "I will bring mineral water from Świeradów—I know you do not have this in America!"

And so, with Wiesław the finch underneath one arm, the keys in her pocket, and Franciszek the urn underneath the other, Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, makes her way back to Hubert and Skinny Anka, who had remained behind and most likely had, from what she can tell of Skinny Anka scooting in her seat and wiping her mouth delicately with a single finger and Hubert smoothing his hair in the mirror, kept themselves busy. The way further into Nowa Huta, toward the Sendzimira Steel Mill, toward os. Stalowe, passes in a thick, heavy silence.

Once there, surrounded by a maze of old, Soviet bloki with blooms of greenery in the spaces between, Huber, leaving Skinny Anka in the car, carries the suitcase to the last, fourth floor and sets it before the broad, wooden door.

"How long will you be here?" he asks.

"Six weeks, I think."

"You should come to Wałbrzych."

“So you can quiz me on more history? I should probably take care of this first.” Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, looks to Franciszek the urn, cradled in her leather bag. Hubert nods.

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.”

They stand in silence for a moment.

“Thank you for coming to pick me up and bringing me all the way out here.”

Hubert waves his hand.

“If you change your mind—there are cheap buses to Wałbrzych. We will be there a while.”

“Okay.”

Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, waits to open the door until she sees, through a small stairwell window, Hubert driving away in his Polonez, and then places Wiesław the finch on top of her suitcase. She slides the large, heavy key into the old lock and feels the familiar bump, hears the metal turning within the wood. The door gives without touching and she pushes it gently open. Inside, the air is dense and warm, accumulated from the early summer days. Marysia, in this moment nameless altogether, breathes it in deeply and closes the door behind her. Wiesław the finch and Franciszek the urn find their place on a wooden desk next to the bed in one room, before a large window. She pulls the dusty lace curtains apart, opens the window. The cool, wet outside air makes its way in past the curtains, laying them out on the desk and bed, draping both Wiesław the finch and Franciszek the urn in creamy white.

In the small bathroom Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, undresses, unfurls her dark hair, disentangles herself from every thing and steps into the old stone tub in which years-long

use left large, oval discoloration marks. The surface feels like sand against her bare skin, tempered only by the warmth of the water. She lowers herself in further until the water meets her chin, the ends of her hair splayed out across her shoulders, and regards her naked body, its lines and angles softened and slanted by the surface of the water: greenish, distant, disowned. She raises one palm and lets it hover above one pale knee, the water dripping down her fingertips, the drops growing slowly before detaching, then sliding down her skin into the tub, leaving a glistening trail behind—one after the other, detaching, returning.

Afterwards, as we Polish daughters of Polish mothers know in our hearts, so Marysia, otherwise christened by her mother as Marylou, knows she must call her mother. She lies in lingerie and a t-shirt on the old, bare sofa bed that once held her grandparents, her cell phone just below her fingertips. Wiesław the finch bounces around his cage in the breeze, Franciszek the urn, is beside him, still. Around them, the lace curtains flow inward, reaching towards Marysia, otherwise known but slipping away, the hem tenderly brushing her bare leg. The lace billows and slides across the grainy old wood of the desk, along the thin metal bars of the birdcage, along the smooth, warm metal of Franciszek the urn, along her warm, wet skin. Marysia, unknown to anyone but herself at this moment, closes her heavy eyes and listens.

MARYSIA OTHERWISE KNOWN AS MARYLOU GOES ON THREE DATES

Adam Mickiewicz, immutable, stands in his place on the Kraków Main Market Square. It's 1 am. Cobblestones are wet from a brief, cool night rain. You don't know who he is. I won't tell you; it isn't indispensable to the story. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, sits below, the urn with her father inside and a photo of his face taped outside next to her on the rough stone step. She laughs and it is like rain—slow to start, then all at once.

"*Tato*. Prawie jak Bogusław Linda. Co ty, kurwa, wiesz o umieraniu?" she says and raises a vanilla cigarette to her red-lipsticked mouth, then stifles a cough. It's a moment of sour-mouthed rebellion for an orderly, quiet daughter, and Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, cherishes it and the absence of her mother—the one responsible for the otherwise state of Marysia's name and being, who one day, instead of "Marysiu!" called "Marylou!" up the stairs and Marysia, obediently, irrationally, answered—within it.

Polish daughters must love their Polish mothers and thus we do. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, was no different when her mother Jolanta, one of the Morawska Home for All Souls, handed her the plain metal urn containing the ashes of her hated once-husband Franciszek, whom she had incinerated herself after he had drunk himself to death in true Polish tradition, by which I mean with all abandon, and is no different now in her revelatory moment.

"You must take him back, the old dog. I cannot do it. I will not do it," Jolanta said on the muted, plush carpet of her grand funeral home located in the center of West Pelzer, South Carolina. In that moment, Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, noticed how small and gray Jolanta had become—or perhaps had always been, it was unclear, as Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, had been, at a very young age, a precursor to the contemporary and oft-mentioned phenomenon of Euro-orphans, with the exception that she had been an Ameri-orphan and never

described in newspapers or television specials. In the Polish nineties migration was still largely a dream that nonetheless left some children, like Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, and myself, alone but with new clothes, Barbies, Furbies.

Polish daughters must love their mothers, however, and Marysia, then not yet otherwise known as anything, much less Marylou, loved and longed so for a decade, during which Jolanta and Franciszek mopped BiLo floors, ate dinners out of used paper plates while sitting on stolen bottle crates, and grew discontent with one another as people are wont to do when in recurrent stressful situations and close quarters. This, in turn, pushed Jolanta to consider making a business of her own out of a different kind of cleaning up after people, and Franciszek further into his inherent propensity for drinking, with which (along with cynicism, late reactions and failed revolutions, self-hate and low self-esteem, lost wars and leveled cities, stubbornness, etc.) all Poles are generously endowed at the magical moment of their birth. When Marysia, just on the cusp of being otherwise known as Marylou, got to America and thus un-orphaned herself with a stifling, hot breath of Georgia's scorched air, Franciszek was already gone from Jolanta, alive and drunk most of the time, including that during which he slumped over his mop through grocery aisles and allowed it to lead him forward. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, was left, through the benevolence of the 24-hour BiLo, to take photographs of him at night every so often, his bald spot reflecting the fluorescent lights, a little white beam traveling past a wall of canned goods. Once or twice she caught his face, mid-turn, mouth open, eyes drooping and wet. This became the face of Franciszek, the urn.

You don't know it, but Kraków Main Market Square is beautiful on a wet summer night, mainly because it is nearly empty. This is the way one remembers one's home no matter how ugly or uninteresting it may be to everyone else. Everyone will say, "Yes, it is beautiful," but

only because they haven't seen all of it and knowing only the pretty parts of something constitutes nothing at all. This isn't even Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, Morawska's home to begin with, really, nor is it mine—our parts of Kraków, more intimate in their ugliness, aren't cut for tourists with their concrete, stained black and green from rain and moss. They are wounds—do you know what Poland would look like had things gone differently during a year none of us was alive? Possibly, Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, and I would not even be here and then how would you know any of this? In the loser places of the world, history is inescapable. It matters little here. Or it matters most.

Cigarette finished, Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, takes in the view—Sukiennice with their rusted, mythical blade (who commemorates a fratricide with the supposed murder weapon?); Kościół Mariacki, silent at this hour; a small and newly-erected, thus ill-fitting, fountain; no pigeons save two: one dead and wet-feathered, the other incessantly pecking the first, picking up the small, limp head only for it to drop back to the glistening stone. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, rubs her hands. She picks up the urn, clutching it tightly, the metal uncannily warm against her skin, then cradles it underneath one arm, the photograph of Franciszek peering from behind her elbow.

On Św. Tomasza Street, past the cinema where she had gone to see Babe the pig film, there is a fully-packed, PRL-themed cheap watering hole that is a favorite with English speakers and where bartenders rarely talk. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, finds a spot by quite an atmospheric photograph covering a large portion of the wall: an old man, white hair torn and vodkaswept, stepping bravely, uncertainly forward, all the while being held upright by a wall—a familiar, homely sight. She slips Franciszek the urn into her large leather tote and orders five rounds of homemade lemon vodka with a bartender of vaguely familiar features. He places five

shot glasses before Marysia, to him otherwise known as no one at all, pours the yellow liquid out of a chilled bottle. He is deliberate, mechanical. He has done this before and will do it again, then again. He collects the twenty złotych. On the other side of the bar he tends to a group of loud Englishmen, making their way through a barful of shots. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, replaces her empty fifth glass in a neatly ordered row. One of the Englishmen appears by her side, announcing his name, which she hears but ignores.

"Lydia."

She extends her hand, loosening her wrist, her palm easily and quickly slipping out of the Englishman's large hand. Her tongue carefully, indulgently rolls out each letter and sound, rounding and softening the edges, slipping into an easy, silky fluency.

"You're American," the Englishman announces once more, signaling at the same time to the quiet bartender. He lays down four more shot glasses and pours the lemon vodka with a blank face, closed mouth. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou and now also Lydia, watches his face, then his arm. He allows her a passing gaze once he finishes.

"You aren't," she tells the Englishman as the bartender closes the bottle.

The Englishman grins. His teeth are long and broad.

"What are you doing in Kraków?" he asks, leaning in closer to her face, pushing one glass towards her with a single finger.

"Business," Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, replies and raises the glass to her lips. It clinks against the wooden bar when she sets it back down. "You aren't scared to be here?"

The Englishman grins again.

"Why should I be scared here?"

"Don't they eat people like me and you in places like this? It's savage, all wolves here. Someone's been offing foreigners left and right, haven't you heard?"

The Englishman still bares his broad teeth. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou and now fully embodying Lydia, laughs: it bubbles slowly to the surface, spills, and stops.

"Let's skedaddle, friend," she says and places both hands on the Englishman's knees. Then, she downs the second shot. It is precisely the thing Marysia Morawska would never say.

In the restroom, the Englishman is sloppy, his mouth too wet. Franciszek the urn sits in the corner and unwillingly watches with drooping eyelids, in which Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou though in this moment nameless altogether, takes a deliberate pleasure. It is the only thing keeping her from wiping the Englishman off her face. Instead, she allows him to dry slowly on her skin and imagines Franciszek the urn willing with all of his ashen and metal being to turn from the corner into which she has tucked herself with the Englishman and towards the door. Franciszek the urn rattles subtly, inaudibly in the leather tote but remains unmoved. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, once known to Franciszek before the urn as Dzidziuś, now unknown and immediate, smiles and slides her hand across the wall, onto which old, yellowed newspaper clippings have been plastered, touching one snippet proclaiming: martial law.

Nowa Huta is different: Mickiewiczless and therefore not the place for culture, unless it is the angry culture of bald, thick-necked men or bald, stick-thin boys, and which consists of writing pedały do gazu on any willing or unwilling surface, playing with machetes and other potentially dangerous objects within close proximity to other civilians, only some of which may support rivaling local football clubs. This is the hay lining Kraków's otherwise quite inviting boots, the sweeping gray underworld best safely glimpsed from a turning airplane, best not

glimpsed at all. This is where Marysia, then not otherwise known at all, Morawska and I were born, screaming presumably, possibly at the same hospital named after the author Stefan Żeromski, possibly with both of our young mothers cut by the same unfeeling doctor, without having ever conceived of painkillers. Polish women have weathered worse.

Os. Strusia is arguably the second worst neighborhood in Nowa Huta but this is where Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, stands, Franciszek the urn carefully cradled in her bag. Had he stuck his reddened, photographed face out into the open, gray space of Nowa Huta, Marysia knows she wouldn't be known as anyone at all courtesy of a potential polite bottle to the face following the question, Za kim jesteś? which she would have brought onto herself by sticking out too much. This is a question we had asked one another as children often, with no consequence—you could ask a classmate this and receive an answer such as this: Za moją mamą. You would both then laugh. It would pass.

Marysia, because of being otherwise known as Marylou in a place where such questions aren't asked or even thought, is, of course, overly dramatic in her estimation of the potential danger of her current situation. The amount of her overreaction is directly proportionate to the time she has spent outside Nowa Huta, which is to say, intermittently, fourteen years. This is a condition that afflicts us all, whether we like or not.

Os. Strusia thus isn't really the worst, and Bożena, Franciszek the urn's still-living sister and Marysia's, otherwise known as Marylou's, aunt, lives here in a ten-story Soviet blok, now painted yellow and orange. Before it, down the sidewalk leading to a main road, one of Kraków's arteries that gather in the heart from such peripheries, is Fabryka Pizzy, into which Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, enters and orders a pasta dish. Fabryka Pizzy is a franchise and you may wonder why this matters and I will tell you this: Kraków, much like every

other city in Poland, was once a place where you went to the single McDonald's on Floriańska Street once a year for your birthday. If you lived in the country, maybe you were fortunate enough to go on school trips to places that had been graced with a single McDonald's. Now, you go to Pizza Hut because it is the only place to serve free and unlimited drink refills. That is, now, our last western frontier. Fabryka Pizzy, however, is a Polish, Krakowian franchise.

Inside, it is hot and Marysia's, otherwise known as Marylou's, thighs stick to the leather seat. She is the only one in the restaurant until a man about her age walks in, wearing the traditional Nowo Hutian garb: athletic shorts that rest high above his knobby knees, a faded t-shirt, tall socks, sneakers. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, watches him hungrily from above her penne—the sharp turn of his nose, his lips hinting at a deep-seated, distant anger remind her of a boy with whom she had gone to elementary school here in this place, who had carried the ungraceful last name of Ciećko. His small, flat face would turn red, his lips curve downwards, exposing a wet glimpse of spit gathered in the corners—he was often angry about small and all things. Marysia, then known only as such, did not talk with him much, except the rare times they ran into each other around Os. Strusia, where she skulked after school with her girlfriends in search of older boys to follow. Thinking about that time now, all Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, can recall is a classmate dressed in a green, Tomex bazaar sweat suit, the tapered pants just short enough to expose faded, worn socks, but that, really, could have been any of us.

Franciszek the urn leans himself against the back of the seat, rolling slightly and coming to a rest against Marysia's, otherwise known as Marylou's, hip. She watches the man across from her and wonders what she would have been like had she never left. There had been a time she thought of this exclusively in terms of the film *Cześć Tereska*, which you do not know, but

which you may expect to be quite tragic, which it is. Now, she isn't certain of anything: how much of herself is Marysia, how much is Marylou, how much is Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, who spent countless afternoons painting the faces of deceased people in the basement of the Morawska Home for All Souls and taking their photographs for her own keeping, how much Jolanta, how much Franciszek, how much the cold, Baltic sea. These things are indistinguishable, unanswerable, inseparable, now she knows.

"Grzesiek Ciećko?"

The man raises his face to look at Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, in a flash of unrecognition. She smiles, has her answer, and leaves the restaurant, with Franciszek the urn tucked into her bag. Bożena, her aunt, will have to wait. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, boards a bus heading toward Plac Centralny, Steel Mill Sendzimira, her grandparents' apartment where she stays, sits by a window and watches the gray dusk. She cannot tell where the buildings end and the sky begins; the end of day makes all things equal in its shade.

Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, sits at Zen Sushi Bar, back on Św. Tomasza Street, and watches small boats with different colored plates float by before her. Franciszek the urn sits beside her on a separate chair, only half-hidden by her leather tote. She reaches and takes a plate with two pieces of salmon nigiri.

There was a time when sushi bars sprang up all over Kraków and Poland at large, marking those cosmopolitan enough to try raw fish or any kind of seafood, so vastly different from the traditional Polish diet of potatoes and cabbage, which, in turn, makes it highly unlikely for Polish restaurants to appear anywhere in the world. Zen is the reminder and the remainder of

this already-passed trend—now, almost empty, though perhaps due to the weekday and near closing hour.

Behind the bar, two young men cut fish in a smoky, dim light. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, turns the nigiri upside down, dips the salmon in soy sauce, and places the whole piece in her mouth carefully.

"You eat sushi beautifully," one of the men behind the bar says, gazing once at her, then to the roll beneath his palms. Marysia, now having forgotten her name altogether and caught off guard, chews—the rice sticks to her teeth and gums, fills her mouth—and swallows. The man is blond, broad-shouldered, his hands large but delicate handling the food.

"Not many people here know how to eat sushi properly," he continues in Polish, and Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, has a flash of a second to wonder why, having been mistaken for a foreigner countless times, both at the airport and elsewhere, before she simply smiles and mumbles an ambiguous, "hmm." The man, nameless and untagged, slices the roll into eight pieces, places them on a yellow-colored plate, and sets it on an empty boat floating by. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, eats her second piece of nigiri.

"You have a strange companion," the man says, nodding toward Franciszek the urn.

"My father," Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, announces, almost surprised at this sudden bout of honesty.

"You must be very close," the man says, slicing through a slab of white fish.

"Just angry."

He remains silent for a while, pulling out a bowl of chopped salmon, rolling it in seaweed with a little bit of rice, and disappearing with it in the back kitchen. After a few moments, he

reemerges and sets the plate in front of Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, to him not known at all.

"Try this."

She does. There is a moment of silence between them in which Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, chews slowly, locking her gaze with the man's, a slight smile stretching her lips slowly, unwillingly.

"I'm Artur," the man says.

They walk together afterwards—Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, though not to Artur, towards her tramwaj stop, he to his old, historic apartment on Starowiślna Street, right across from the stop. At night, Kraków is bathed in warm, yellow lights, the Wawel Castle looming in the background, history and the present quietly, seemingly reconciled. At the tramwaj stop, Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, looks up at the stone façade of the old buildings lining the street, in the direction Artur points out. In the large window of a dimly lit room, she sees the silhouette of a small dog.

"That is Geralt," Artur says.

"He does not look like Geralt."

Artur shrugs. "Potargany jest."

As the tramwaj pulls away some minutes later, Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, keeps her gaze on the small dog until he disappears from the windowsill. On the seat next to her, Franciszek the urn tips himself over and, for the first time, she notices. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, no longer known to anyone as Dzidziuś, sets him upright once more, letting her hand hover above him to guard against the jerks of the tramwaj.

Back in her apartment, once her grandparents' apartment, Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, places Franciszek the urn on a small wooden desk next to Wiesław the finch's cage. She opens the old, creaking window wide, strips down to her lingerie, and lies down on the bed in which her grandparents had once slept. Franciszek the urn rattles softly against the wood, but Marysia, slipped into a dreamless sleep and no longer known as anything, cannot hear: the black sky of Nowa Huta, endless and bulging, reaches in toward her with the clanging of beer cans like the ringing of bells.

BRZEŹNICA, SUMMER 1998

Justyna, in a field of cabbage. She wore a white linen dress, bare toes chicken-sprawled in the dusty earth, lifting up once, twice, sending a gray cloud against the cool green globes, open and waiting. The empty two-liter Coca Cola bottle in her hand came down sideways with a hollow swoosh. In the distance, near the wild strawberries, she saw the gleam of a brown ceramic insulator plate, fallen from the towering power lines. She went to it, the glaze thick and smooth underneath her fingers, the inside white and rough. She slipped the half-disk into her dress pocket and reached for a ripe wild strawberry laid on its side in the dusty earth. She blew on it, sending another cloud of dust before her, then wiped the small fruit on the hem of her dress, leaving a wet pink-brown smudge near her thigh. The flesh was sweet, the earth gritted and sparked in her teeth, but she swallowed it and returned to her previous post in the field of cabbage, framed by a golden sea of wheat and marked by the crumpled white wings and dark bodies of butterflies—bielinki—lying among the unfurled cabbage leaves.

"They eat the cabbage," her grandmother said.

She raised the bottle and waited, the sun pouring on her little blond head and all around, all the way down to the dust.

"Uh huh," Justyna said when her mother asked over the telephone whether she was having a good summer. A year earlier she had gone through a phase of carrying everywhere a small Pietà figurine gifted to her by her godfather on the occasion of her first communion, for which, notably, her parents had come, and with a video camera, a rare and precious thing only a few other parents had. On the tape, she straightened her white floral headband above a short curtain of bangs and smiled, looking past the camera, like a child. What nobody knew—

dismissing the attachment to the figurine as a passing thing—was that she had carried it everywhere—even to bed, laid underneath her pillow—as a kind of talisman, repeating the same pleading words over and over and over in her head, "…if not here, then in America. Anywhere." She imagined her mother bending over her in the same way as the white face of Mary, but in this case, it would be happy, a kind of reunion. Then, one day, carrying the figurine in one hand by her waist, she accidentally dropped it on her foot. It was heavy—a faithful though miniature replica executed in white stone that in the end caused her skin to bloom purple, then gray, then yellow over the course of a month. In the bath, she would pull her foot out of the water and lay it against the cold tub, studying it, touching the center with a single finger. She abandoned the figurine after that, but kept the words, now muffled into the pillow each night.

"Marzenko, when will you visit?" her grandmother sing-songed into the telephone from over her shoulder. Her mother, disliking her mother-in-law, squirmed audibly.

"Do you want to talk to your father?" she asked. "Darek!" she yelled away from the receiver. Her father asked her whether she was having a good summer out in the country.

"Uh huh," Justyna replied.

Afterwards, she grabbed one of the old bicycles lined up against the wall in an unfinished room that served as storage and bolted out the door, pulling it alongside. She hopped on and made her way down a long grassy driveway, past the wild strawberries, past the cabbage, past the potatoes. She made sure to stay in the groove rubbed down to the earth by the wheels of cars, but the tall grass on both sides reached towards her legs, tickled her bare skin with a soft sigh. In the wheat to her right were spots of bright color—red and blue wild flowers. She had gone in once to pick them, but retreated immediately when a thin spider web spread between two stalks brushed against her bare shoulder unexpectedly. When she reached the gravel and then

eventually asphalt road, the thin wheels of her bicycle first grinding the dark stones and then leaving a shallow indent in the road in their wake, her grandmother's old, pre-war childhood home was just a gray triangle of a roof hovering above the wheat field. She passed houses identical to it—all square, with dark windows for eyes and opened doors for appalled but silent mouths. Behind one fence, a dog began barking and running after her until he reached the corner and could do no more. She laughed and pedaled past, passing all houses, a church, a small grocery store that sold the best scoops of Zielona Budka lemon-flavored ice cream, the taste of summer.

She came to a small parking lot, abandoned the bicycle in the tall bushes, and headed towards the stone steps leading up to the top of the hill. This was the place she would sometimes go because it was the only interesting place around, but today it was empty save for an old, hunched man standing at the foot of the stairs, his hands folded behind his back. He was dressed neatly—a crisp button-down shirt tucked into gray Sunday trousers—though inconveniently for the summer heat. He was looking at the board situated near the stairs alongside a stone and iron tablet, both proclaiming: 15,000 people killed, then splitting the number into three distinct groups, all marred by white spray paint.

Justyna stopped and stared for a moment, glued to the first step to the left of the man, long enough to think of how his hair reminded her of her grandfather's—a white, windswept crescent crowning the back of his head, a few strands sticking to the wrinkled skin behind his ears. He looked to her, and Justyna, propelled by a kind of deep, inexplicable fear and confusion, raced up the stairs, two at a time.

At the top was a wide, circular clearing, in the middle of which stood a square, concrete bunker covered with a thick mound of grass. Today, its iron-bar gate was wide open,

undoubtedly busted the night before as it sometimes was by the bored, drunk element of the local populace. The bare concrete inside gaped, dark as a wound against the thick grass. To the left, on the very periphery edging out of the trees, sat a concrete sculpture: a gray obelisk towering over a figure of a man, his face obscured in the crook of one arm but holding up a half-opened, reaching palm. Where the obelisk was straight and angular, the was melting, soft, irregular, the palm so large and thick-fingered as to seem hollow, fragile. But every time Justyna wandered close to touch it, the surface felt rough and hard as stone.

Now she wandered towards the bunker but stopped just at the edge of it, where the concrete was being slowly swallowed by earth and grass. The few flowers and glass votives left before it were knocked on their sides. She grabbed one iron bar of the gate but remained still then, letting go as quickly, as deliberately. She climbed the mound, careful to avoid a small square opening there, and sat down cross-legged, staring down into it and the cracked concrete just below her. She looked to the sculpture, but the man continued his pose, mute and blank, devoid of any distinct human features but the bare minimum: limbs. She picked at the strawberry-dirt stain, now dried and settled into the fabric. She extended one leg forward, silently pleased at the cool touch of grass against her skin.

The old man appeared at the top of the stairs slowly: first just the tips of his hair, then his head, torso, arms still entwined behind him, then the rest until he stood there whole before Justyna. He inched closer, obviously having trouble walking, his steps tiny, sporadic, stiff.

"What is your name?" he asked finally, standing at the open gate, his voice a thin creak.

"Justyna."

"And, Justyno, do you know where you are?"

She furrowed her brows.

"I know where I am. I'm right here."

He shifted his gaze from her to the concrete cell below, bringing a trembling, crooked hand to a sunken cheek.

"Then, Justyno, why are you here? People did many bad things here long ago."

"I know."

"I am here," he said, replacing his hand behind his back. "This is where I saw my friends' bodies burned. This is where I smelled them in the air. This is where I saw the smoke rising above the trees behind my back when I ran."

She watched him, pulling her own limbs as close as she could, folding, making herself the smallest she had ever been, smaller even than in the hours after her parents departed each time, until she was just a flesh-colored spot, barely visible above the grass.

"Be careful, don't fall in," she heard the old man say, though she could not be sure it was her hearing the words. Leaving, she pulled the insulator fragment out of her pocket and laid it at the iron-bar gate.

In the evening, before sunset, she set out with her grandfather on their daily bicycle trip around the area—through Pustków-Osiedle, Kochanówka station, and past, through the forest roads.

"Zbrodnia to niesłychana," her grandfather began, cycling up to her, quizzing her on the Mickiewicz ballad.

"Pani zabija pana," Justyna replied.

"Zabiwszy grzebie w gaju na łączce przy ruczaju."

"Grób liliją zasiewa, zasiewając tak śpiewa," she continued, watching the wheels of her bicycle spin, dark parts of earth and damp leaves stuck in the shallow grooves. "Rośnij kwiecie wysoko jak pan leży głęboko. Jak pan leży głęboko, tak ty rośnij wysoko."

They stopped at one of the dirt roads trailing off into the woods, and Justyna, thinking she knew this place well and thus drawn forward, abandoned her bicycle once more, trudging through the forged path to a small but overgrown clearing filled with wild poppies, at the end of which stood another sculpture, this time of a helmeted man lying on his back, supported by a single sharp elbow, his legs stretched out, a long barrel of a gun resting against one of them, his head leaned far back, exposing a thick, formless neck. The stone, once white, was stained green from years of rain. Below, lay shards of a smashed glass tablet, now impossible to read, covering a few glass votive candles fallen on their sides. Justyna went forward, slowly but deliberately, before her grandfather appeared at the clearing behind her and told her to watch where she was going. She stopped and looked down, the cracked and sunken concrete she was standing on almost invisible in the tall weeds. It was a rectangle-shaped rim, the inside sparsely filled with earth and thin, tall wild poppies, their red and black heads leaning toward the ground. Above, in the middle of the rim, she noticed a small tablet, fitted with a large red star rising out of its gray background. There were five more around her and she stepped off quietly, remembering her grandfather once telling her about graves in the woods. These were marked and still, she hadn't even noticed save for the poppies, their wiry stems bent forward underneath the weight of their brilliant, red heads. She clasped one delicately in one hand like a goblet, the petal cool and silky against her touch, the center smoke-black.

"Tak ty rośnij wysoko," she said and let go, the flower swaying up and down three times before becoming still again.

MARYSIA OTHERWISE KNOWN AS MARYLOU SALTS THE EARTH & RECONSIDERS HER SELF

Sunday is thick and hot. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, sits on the dusty pullout bed that once belonged to her grandparents, her bare thighs spilling out in two milky, round pools, smaller after a month in Kraków. The bare skin of her back, unfolded against the wall in search of cool relief, sticks to it instead, occasionally pulled away from her flesh in thin, burning swaths, merging with the painted plaster. Wiesław the finch sleeps in his cage by the open window, with Franciszek the urn beside it, both still and unmoving, the bird's tiny dark head buried in the feathers between his wings. The air is heavy; Marysia, still partly otherwise known to herself as Marylou, imagines it drooping towards the floor, and she unglues her skin, separates herself from the wall, and lies down, begins to breathe easier the closer she is to the ground.

On the small and old television, one of the three channels she is sometimes able to get, under a pouring sun, under a banner proclaiming Marsz Przeciwko Uchodźcom, under a small graphic of a stick family running forward hunched within a crossed, red circle, a sea of faces: older women on whose features PRL imprinted a distinct kind of dismay, whole families of probable Catholic devotion, young girls with long, cascading blond hair, angry young men with their shaved heads, and the rest—an indistinguishable swarm covering the whole Main Market Square, with only Mickiewicz hovering above, blue-green and silent, a pigeon perched on his head.

She watches this with one heavy eye, the other buried in bedsheets, and wonders who would want to seek refuge in this place to begin with. This would be a time for digression: about the bubble Mickiewicz propelled us into and which no one has managed to fully dismantle as of yet, about us being wolves to each other in every place of the world, about us being a nation of

cockroaches. But this isn't it, because when you are in Poland, you don't think this way. Instead, you go through it like a museum. While Marysia, to me also otherwise known as Marylou, doesn't think of this, I do, but that isn't what this story is about.

Outside, she hears a man's deep, abrupt laughter, which momentarily wakes Wiesław the finch, who raises but doesn't turn his head, then returns it to its place between his wings. Marysia, otherwise known as Marylou, turns onto her back and rises to the open window, the skin on her stomach folding and sticking together. The playground below is empty. She realizes the sound came from the open windows in the building opposite hers, in the darkness of which she glimpses a man's protruding, bare stomach cradled by a pair of grayed and stretched out boxers. She looks away. There isn't anything else to look at—the gray buildings form a ring around the grass and old monkey bars, a rusted slide.

Something light hits her head, then bounces to the concrete in a burst of smoke and amber. She turns her gaze upward, to the last story, and sees, framed by the sky and two flowing lace curtains, the head of a woman her age, similar in features but with light hair, almost gold in the sun. The woman smiles, revealing neat, clean rows of pristine white teeth. Marysia, in that moment not thinking of her name at all, stares back.

"I'm Julia. You should come up, mam pierogi."

Marysia, having considered the woman's voice and her English and thus been jolted back into her otherwiseness known as Marylou, feels herself slide back into the apartment slowly like into a shell, the warm, still air inside closing behind her.

She is at her door, then the wooden door directly above hers, Franciszek the urn cradled underneath her arm. She hears the heavy bolts move within, the door opens slowly, revealing an old orange carpet and parquet floors, and there is the woman—similar, round cheekbones, but

draped in paler skin; similar, round but leaner flesh, dressed in a light pink mesh bodysuit; a cloud of thin but blond hair, bent casually, straight out of bed.

"I'm Julia," the woman repeats in English, but pronounces her name the Polish way. "Little darling Marysia Morawska that used to live here but went away to America. Mrs. Gaborowa to the left here always speaks of your grandmother Lucyna."

Her voice is low and husky, lilting but sharp around the Rs.

Marysia, now christened anew as such in this place, steps through the threshold into a near exact copy of her grandparents' apartment, complete with a similar old pullout sofa, grainy orange curtains overlaid onto yellowed lace ones, an old mired mirror in the hallway linking all four rooms together—the small bathroom with its old, stone tub, a blue-tiled kitchen, and two bedrooms, only one of which is occupied. Franciszek the urn vibrates in her arms. Julia closes then locks the door behind her and disappears in the kitchen, Marysia, here not otherwise known as anything, witnessing her movements as shifts of light and shadow on the blue wall. On the television, slightly larger than her own, she sees the same sea of faces, now serving as background to a muted newscaster. Instead, she hears a woman's quiet voice sing out of a pair of small speakers: muscle connects to the bone and bone to the ire and the marrow.

Julia reemerges from the kitchen, a plate of pierogi covered in sweet cream in each hand, and holds one out to her. Marysia, in this moment not otherwise known as anything, sets Franciszek the urn down onto the floor by the sofa, takes the plate and halves a pieróg with a fork. Dark, purplish liquid spills out and spreads in a thick, round pool, bleeding into the white cream.

"Blueberry," says Marysia, who since having been otherwise known as Marylou hasn't tasted this particular food. "My favorite."

Julia flashes her pristine smile once more and nods.

"The last time I ate these," she begins in Polish this time, her voice softening with each word. "I killed man named Jacek Kłos."

In her mouth, the Ks are careful, distinct, sharp as knives. She pierces one whole pieróg with a fork and slides it into her mouth in one swift motion, her tongue sweeping across her bottom lip, lapping up the dark juice and cream.

Marysia, nameless in a moment of abjection, stops, her hand, fork inside, resting on one knee, next to the plate. She feels her mouth open, a burst of air escape in a quiet half-chuckling sound. Julia smiles, her lips glistening.

"You don't believe me," she says.

She pulls back the orange curtain, sending a cloud of dust into the air, and reveals a white windowsill, same as in the apartment downstairs. Marysia, attempting to swiftly gather back her otherwiseness of being known as Marylou, notices a faint, rust-colored smear near the edge, parts of which have chipped and lie clumped and dry in the sun. She looks at Julia. Their eyes are identical—both steel and Baltic gray and dark.

"Are you the one killing foreigners in Kraków?" she asks.

Julia laughs, a pearly sound. "No," she says. "You don't have to be scared. I know you're like me—you've come back."

She reaches over, touches Marysia's shoulder, and at this touch the otherwiseness of her being falls away once more, slides her fingers across her collarbone and underneath the strap of her dress. It falls away too; then, the second. Their bodies are the same, Marysia knows and sees, and she touches Julia's thigh to make sure it is real. It is warm, it is soft. Franciszek the urn rattles against her leg. They fold into one another.

Later, Julia unmutes the television. Mickiewicz still presides, unasked, over the protest, a pigeon, the same one or different, still crowning his head.

“Old men and their ideas,” Julia says.

“There are many young people there,” Marysia counters, watches the faces carefully.

“Old ideas. They will die,” Julia replies and looks to Franciszek the urn, now rolled on his side on the carpet. Outside, Marysia hears that same guttural laugh, then silence. She begins to think of staying.

“And then, it’s us. We will salt and repopulate this terrible earth.”

THINGS AS THEY ARE

Julia stood in front of the shopping center, clutching an unopened map of Kraków in her right hand. Before her stretched a small, tiled plaza full of people coming in waves at her, around her, sometimes visibly tired, sometimes angry, mostly with blank but suspicious faces. She tried not to look at one person for too long. She looked just like them, but they didn't look at her. Behind her, men crawled on scaffolding covering the front wall of the shopping center, detaching large, glass tiles from the surface in a roped off area. Just a few days before, a tile had fallen off sometime after midnight, covering the plaza in shards of glass, though nobody saw it and nobody heard it over the sound of the city. It was finally discovered by the morning commuters when the glass crunched under their shoes, and the building looked on down at them, now gap-toothed.

Julia thought she could taste the glass in her mouth, feel it grind and screech against her teeth, though perhaps that was only fear. She continued to search the faces approaching her, looking for his, one she had put together from her mother's description, which she pulled out of her with care. It was like pulling teeth, attaching a small, white string around the thing you wanted and pulling slowly and calmly until it gave way and came. Her mother didn't want to; she had said her last visit, an unexpected and rushed one to her own mother's funeral, and the subsequent cleaning and renting out of the inherited apartment had been enough. What she didn't say was that she had nothing else to come back to, but Julia knew. Even before, her mother had preferred to visit for very short periods of time, a week and a half, maybe two, and not every year, only to regret the visit at all after a few days. It's impossible to live in this country, she would exclaim and ask first both her parents, then just her mother, to come live overseas, but

they never did. I am too old and alone, Julia's grandmother would say to her when Julia visited each summer, at which words Julia welled with anger at her mother and herself.

His name was Jacek Kłos, like a stalk of wheat, which was perfect, because she would be the wind, swooping in like a bird, brushing against the golden field, bending the blades until she found and touched him, only him. You may wonder who Jacek Kłos is, but he is no one at all. The first time she saw him, she knew it was him; he had dark hair that curled softly, beautiful, defined lips, eyes that were brown, or at least she thought. She smiled then and she smiled now in anticipation, looking at each face – the old women with dyed hair pulled back into buns and doughy, pale faces, the young girls in skinny jeans and jet black hair, the businessmen in dark suits sitting in the cafe outside Andel's Hotel. Julia smoothed her denim shorts and shirt. She had laughed that morning when picking it out, seeing herself in the tall mirror, dressed in stars and red and white stripes. Maybe it was too much, but not for her and not right now.

She opened the map slowly, sweeping it with her gaze, knowing each corner, each street better now than when she had lived here. She would feed the pigeons on the Main Square as a little girl in a red pinafore dress and a white button down shirt with a beautiful lace collar she had hated wearing then. The pigeons would swirl in the air and swoop down onto the grains she threw on the ground. Some would sit on her arms and eat out of her hand and Julia would wince, scared but excited at once, half smiling, exposing small, milky white teeth. Nobody sold grains anymore, though the pigeons, taught generation by generation, clung to the Main Square and to Kraków the same hungry way she did.

She saw the red Converse shoes first, then, raising her eyes, she saw him walking towards the shopping center, towards her. She lowered the map slowly and kept her eyes on his shoes. When he was right in front of her, she looked up, still clutching the opened map with both hands

and said, “Excuse me?” He almost walked past her, but she repeated it, taking a step back. He stopped and turned to her, surprised, his lips slightly parted, his eyebrows arched, creating small wrinkles in his forehead. He was waiting for her to speak.

“Could you tell me where Kazimierz is?” Julia said, doing her best to scatter the letters, let them roll off her tongue softly, make them sound foreign. He blinked and looked at her for a second, taking his hands out of the pockets of his jeans, then chuckled.

“Kazimierz?” He hesitated. “Is there.” He pointed over the old buildings surrounding the plaza in the direction she very well knew. “I—” he stretched the letter out, thinned it out, made it sharp. “No English. Nie mówisz po Polsku?”

“Trochę?” she said carefully, breaking the word apart with her tongue and teeth. She shrugged. He laughed.

“I show you? Zaprowadzę Cię,” he said finally, gesturing for her to walk with him. The words sounded square in his mouth, sharp and angled.

They walked past the hotel and into an underground passage full of people without saying anything. Julia kept her eyes on his red Converse shoes, almost bumping into an older woman selling lilies of the valley at the end of the breezeway. He smiled, as she barely side-stepped the white bucket full of flowers.

On the other side, stretched before them, were the alleyways circling the walls of the Old Town, leading right up to the Wawel Castle and the river. Julia still clutched the map in her hand.

“First day in Kraków?” he finally asked, as they left the alleyways and turned into Starowiślna street.

“So you do know English?” Julia said, looking up at him.

"No—from films. Internet. Very little," he said slowly, searching for words. He looked down when he did it, as if they were scattered at his feet and he only needed to find the word he wanted in order to know it and say it. "You are American, yes?"

She shrugged. "I think. How do you know?"

"You talk different. All Englishmen in Krakow, I can't never understand. I try explaining directions to drunk Welshmen one day, I don't even know where they want to go." He laughed. "My name is Jacek."

"Julia" she said, using the English "j".

"Julia," Jacek repeated the Polish way, smoothly, like a knife sliding into the water with only one quiet sound. She smiled and repeated it after him, almost as if for the first time.

Julia stood in the third story hallway of a gray apartment building watching Jacek fumble with the keys. She leaned on the wall, waiting for the light to go off automatically, occasionally gazing outside the window into the dark of Nowa Huta. She could hear the rattling of beer cans and the deep voices of the men that yelled at her and Jacek as they passed, asking for cigarettes and to borrow both their cell phones.

"Try lifting it a little," she said absentmindedly. A woman's voice joined in with the others outside, followed by the hiss and pop of a can being opened.

"Sorry," Jacek said finally, as the locks clicked and the heavy, wooden door gave way with a creak of the handle. Julia did not say anything, her heart growing in her chest, each beat stronger than the last, reaching somewhere deep in her bones. She thought Jacek could hear it too, like a deep tolling of a bronze bell, bouncing off her ribcage, sending echoes all through the stairway. She stepped into the apartment just as the lights went off and heard him lock the door

behind her, the familiar thump of heavy metal and creaking of wood. The crawling, she thought, back into a womb, dark and small, uncanny, a prodigal return.

Jacek turned on the light in the hallway and Julia looked at the old, orange and yellow carpet underneath her feet, the matching drapes in the room in front of her. The hallway stretched the width of the apartment, linking all rooms together. It was covered in an aging wallpaper the color of light wood, with small flower motifs. There was an old mirror hanging on the wall between the kitchen and the bedroom.

"Is this your place?" Julia asked him, looking nowhere in particular, knowing the answer.

"I—" Jacek began, as he took off his shoes. "Rent. For university. Nowa Huta is not very good place, but cheap."

"Hm." Julia smiled slightly, the corners of her lips raised only a little. She walked up to the mirror without taking off her heels, each step a hollow knock against the thin carpet on the wooden floor. The surface was dirty, blurring and dimming her reflection so that she could not make out where her features began or ended.

"You haven't changed much in here," she said.

"No. I want to, but I need it only for school and I have one year. How do you know this?"

Julia raised her hand to her face, almost touching her cheek, but touched her lips instead, pretending to fix her lipstick in the mirror.

"It looks old. Everything," she said. When she turned to him, Jacek was leaning against the doorframe to the bedroom, looking at her. She smiled, flashing her teeth in the dim hallway.

"It is," Jacek said, shrugging.

"What will you do after school?" she asked, walking toward him slowly. He raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

"Move to a place that is better—UK maybe or Germany. They need engineers. I am good."

"Why do you want to do that?" Her heels knocked against the wood with each word.

"They pay more money. Poland is good for tourists, for you. To see old buildings, to see what people have here and what they do not have. It is not for real people."

"I'm not a real person," Julia repeated.

"I am sorry," Jacek said quickly, shaking his head. "I mean only that it is good museum. You see it, you do not live there."

"Many people live here."

"Many do not," he cut the sentence with a sharp click of his tongue against the roof of his mouth and paused. "But, you can teach English to me now, no?" He smiled.

"We'll see." Julia leaned against the wall next to him.

His arm snaked its way around her waist, pulling up her dress a little and she let him kiss her neck slowly, only placing her opened palms on his chest. His other hand wrapped around her neck, Jacek led Julia into the bedroom and she lay down complacently, her black dress halfway up her hips. His lips were warm against her skin and before she realized, he disappeared between her thighs.

"Wait," Julia whispered, touching Jacek's hair, but his hands traveled down her legs, pulling her lingerie along with them. She propped herself up on her elbows, her fingers still tangled in his hair. Jacek looked at her confused.

"Come here," she said, letting the lingerie fall to the floor. Jacek listened and climbed on top of her, covering her lips with his. Julia ran her hands down his back and up again, finding his shoulder blades, feeling the bone shifting and sliding underneath the skin. She dug her nails in

until he gasped. She giggled and pushed him off, straddling him, her hands finding their way to his zipper.

At four thirty in the morning, Julia slowly got out of bed, careful not to wake Jacek. She slid on her dress and grabbed a cigarette out of her purse.

The kitchen was painted blue with white tiles and an old, wooden table covered with a wax-cloth of blue paisley. Outside, the sun was just waking, ready to make its way across the sky, tinting everything with gray. Julia sat down at the table and lit her cigarette. Smoke swirled around her head and hung in the air underneath the ceiling. She placed her hand on the corner of the table, feeling the sharp angle. She covered it with her fist and sat silently, exhaling the smoke, moving only to shake the cigarette into the rusted, old sink. When her knuckles were white and stiff, she let go of the table and laid her hand flat on the surface, keeping her gaze on it. Her red nails stood out against the wax-cloth and the blue floor. She began shaking her hand, slowly at first, growing more violent with each second.

She broke away from the table and chair suddenly and walked up to the cabinet standing against the wall across from the table. It was white and old, full of small shelves, drawers, doors with even smaller keyholes. There was only one rusted key and Julia pulled it out, placing it in another door and opening it. She grabbed a large piece of cotton wool and a swath of gauze, closed the cabinet door and returned to the chair and table. Slowly lifting the wax-cloth, she slid first the cotton, then the folded gauze, underneath it, wrapping it around the corner of the table. Then, she laid her hand flat on the table again, the material softly giving way underneath her wrist.

Julia sat by the open window, smoking another cigarette when Jacek woke up. Her lips were still stained red with lipstick from the previous night, leaving faint traces on the white of the cigarette. She extended it to Jacek as he sat up. He took it and leaned back on his pillow, furrowing his brows as he inhaled. Julia slid down from the windowsill onto the bed and sat down next to him, her back against the wall. It was cold even through the thin fabric of her dress.

"You never tell me why you come to visit Poland," Jacek began, handing back the cigarette. "Good you didn't go to Warsaw, there is nothing there, except the Palace of Culture. You heard of this, yes? It is first and only thing people see. A shame, because it is ugly. Kraków is beautiful."

Julia laughed.

"You said you don't like Nowa Huta."

"Anything build by Communists is ugly." His voice was deep and raspy with sleep.

"It's part of Kraków."

Jacek nodded. "Maybe."

"It is," she said, placing the cigarette between her lips, adding another faint cloud of red on white. The smoke lingered between them before being swept out into the morning air through the open window. Julia reached out and touched the orange drapes, holding the heavy and rough fabric between her fingers, scrunching it in her palm. It felt like tiny grains of sand rolling in the creases of her skin. When she let it go, she felt the dust clinging to her hand.

"My family is from Poland," she said carefully, turning her gaze back to Jacek. He looked at her with an impenetrable half-smile, his dark curls spread out in all directions. Julia lowered her gaze to his throat, then to his bare chest, moving slowly up and down. She noted every barely noticeable flash of thin blue lines underneath his tan skin.

"You don't look like it," he said finally, motioning for her to pass the cigarette back. She held it in her hand for an extended moment, letting her gaze travel back down to his Adam's apple, before handing the cigarette to him and getting off the bed.

The hallway was dark despite the morning sun, save for the two pools of light pouring out from the kitchen and the bedroom. Julia picked up her shoes and held them in her left hand, feeling the dusty, orange rug underneath her feet. She walked up to the mirror hanging between the two rooms and looked at the surface more than at her own reflection, hidden somewhere underneath the frosted glass. There was a small lamp right above the mirror, but when Julia pulled the short string attached to it, the lamp clicked and the light did not come. In the mirror she saw the outline of her face, two dark dots for eyes, a light cloud of hair that could perhaps pass for a nicely tousled look. She pressed her hands against the glass. It was like a lake covered with ice.

When she leaned on the doorframe of the bedroom, Jacek had fallen back asleep, the cigarette butt most likely already lying in the grass below the window. One of his hands draped over the edge of the bed, almost touching the carpet, and his face drowned in a black pillow. Julia felt her nails digging into her palms, but did not break away from the doorframe. As Jacek's back moved up and down rhythmically, the light from the window spilled onto his skin, highlighting the smooth curve of his spine.

She unlocked the door as quietly as possible, the heavy lock grinding against the wood with a hollow sound that echoed in the silence of the stairwell on the other side. The handle creaked in her hand and the door itself opened with a short scraping sound that returned when Julia closed it behind her. She reached into her purse and pulled out a bunch of keys. Two of them were larger than the rest, long and heavy, with only two teeth. She took one and slid it into

the top lock carefully, slowly turning it until she heard the metal sliding into place inside the wooden door.

Julia smoothed the white bed sheet with her foot and gazed out the open window. The dusty lace curtains stood still, barely touching the old, wooden floor. There was no breeze, only hot and dry air, pasting her white undershirt to her skin. There were no sounds outside; it was a placid, hot Sunday, interrupted only with the ringing of church bells each hour. She heard Jacek shuffling around in the kitchen, plates scraping against each other. When he appeared in the doorframe, holding one large plate in both his hands, she smiled.

"Pierogi," he announced, lowering the plate in order to show Julia its contents. "With blueberries and sweet cream, like my grandmother makes. I buy this in store around corner here, but they are still good. For day like this, especially."

He handed Julia a fork and placed the plate on the bed, then sat down across from her.

"Polish food is not popular outside here, no?"

"Pierogi are," Julia replied, pushing her fork down in the middle of one. A dark liquid seeped out into the white of the cream. Jacek placed a whole, pale dumpling in his mouth and chewed. Soon, his lips turned a darker, purple hue.

"What do you think?"

"I think they're delicious," Julia said with a full mouth. The dough was soft, almost sweet from the cream and the tart taste of blueberries coated her tongue. "Can I put some music on?"

Jacek nodded his head in the direction of a small television shelf that also housed an older tower stereo. "It is not mine, but landlady say I can use it."

Julia pressed play and watched Jacek's face. He sunk his fork into another dumpling, as the song opened and flooded the room with a woman's soft voice.

"Who is it?" he asked. "Sound cold—like doctor's clinic. Like sleep."

"St. Vincent. It's a love song." Julia placed the second half of her dumpling in her mouth. The plate was now covered in a deep, dark liquid, swirling and bleeding into the cream. She touched one dark stream with her fork and spread it out.

"Love song singing, 'cut me open'?"

"'Come, cut me open.' It's about cleansing," Julia replied, cutting another dumpling with her fork. "Wounds."

"Wounds?"

"Holes. Scars. Things that once hurt."

"Like this?" Jacek pointed to the top of his left arm, where two circular scars left behind by tuberculosis vaccines were visible.

"Like that."

"You have any?"

"I have the same ones you do," Julia said, turning her left shoulder towards him. Hers were smaller, paler, less noticeable. "I also have one above my lip. If you look in the right light you might be able to see it."

Jacek furrowed his brow, as she turned her head towards the open window. The song began playing once more.

"I got this scar from running around as a little kid and tripping on the carpet—right here in the hallway," Julia said after a small pause and turned back to look at Jacek.

"Here," he repeated slowly. His fork lay on the plate with one of the pierogi attached, the dark blueberry preserve dripping out of it slowly. "You locked my door when I bring you here first time."

Julia nodded.

With her hands on his shoulder blades, his face hidden between her thighs, she was pulling him apart, opening him, like an orange. The skin felt similar, soft and spongy, but smooth, velvet-like. As she dug deeper, Julia felt fat droplets sliding down her arms until her hands were warm up to her elbows.

"You okay?" Jacek's voice and a gulp of water brought Julia back to the tiny pink bathroom now swallowed up by steam from her bath. It was an old room filled with old things: the bathtub, a shelf with toiletries whose names were written in Cyrillic, even the baby powder, smell of which she recalled simply by looking at it, and an old wire for hanging clothes near the ceiling.

It took Julia a second to recognize the two pale, flesh-colored mounds growing out of the pale white water as her own knees and she slowly awoke to the rough stone of the bathtub underneath her feet. She lifted her hands out of the water and ran them over her face and hair, a faint scent of lavender lingering behind them. She could hear the quiet fizzing of the bath bomb somewhere behind her knees.

The door of the bathroom opened, letting in some outside air, not much cooler than the steam already clinging to her skin.

"You are in here for very long," Jacek said as he stepped in, dressed only in his boxers, his skin glistening in the fluorescent light.

"I think I fell asleep," Julia said quietly, her voice raspy and faint.

Jacek left the door open and walked over to the sink without saying anything. He picked up his electric trimmer from one of the shelves by the square mirror stretching the width of the bathroom. Julia couldn't hear the dissolving bath bomb over the low buzzing. She parted her knees to see where it was and saw the small spinning white ball dancing somewhere underneath the faucet. When she switched her gaze to Jacek, she saw he was looking at her in the mirror.

"I was imagining my grandmother," Julia said, moving her hands right underneath the surface of the water, following them with her eyes. "In this bathroom. She would take care of my grandfather. He had Parkinson's. She would carry him here, bathe him. She would never let me in while she was doing it. Then he would sit at the table and his hand would tremble right there on the edge. She would place pieces of cotton or gauze underneath the tablecloth, so he wouldn't bruise himself. I would stand in the hallway and look at him, watch his hand."

Julia raised her palms right to the surface of the water and looked at them, silent. Deep wrinkles had already formed on her fingertips and the color of her skin seemed even more washed out than usual. She placed her hands on her ankles and moved them slowly along her legs, feeling a shudder budding somewhere in her lower back.

"Memory is a collective thing," she said finally. "My mother's, her mother's and so on. I'm the end of the line. Things can be borrowed, taken, kept. When you're like me, you assemble your self."

"What are you like?"

Julia shrugged, making small ripples in the water. She slid further down into the water, the old and rough surface of the tub rubbing against her skin.

"Not real."

Jacek kept his gaze on her in the mirror.

"Sometimes I wonder what I would be like if I never left," Julia said, holding his gaze.

He smiled and turned to look at his stubble in the mirror.

"I tell you—very blond hair, bald boyfriend in cheap sweatpants," Jacek said and ran his hand along his jawline. "Pregnant."

"You are making it too simple. Those are stereotypes," she explained.

"How do you know?—you leave, you give away right to talk about it."

"Why is that? I didn't make the choice to leave—my parents did."

"No matter—you are not here."

"The same will happen to you when you leave."

"I do not want to talk. I want to do, but I cannot do anything here."

Julia remained silent for a while. She lay her palms on the bottom of the tub, the old, gritty texture of the stone rubbing against her fingertips.

"You don't understand," she said finally. "This choice you've made—the choice my mother made—and every choice after that, it leads to this. Right now. This is what you get. One day, you won't have anything to return to. You don't know what you'll have to live with."

"You do not understand—I do not need to return. You like to be here, to play pretend. You are on vacation. It is easy for you but nobody else."

"Leaving is easy," Julia shot back. The water in the tub had slowly turned cold, but she did not move. "And that isn't what I'm doing. I want to stay here."

"And do what?" Jacek said and exhaled, frustrated.

Julia had no answer to his question. Jacek's expression now carried a certain sharpness to it she had not seen before. The straight cut of his jaw cast a shadow on his neck, his Adam's apple jutted out underneath his skin, his cheekbones seemed protruding, rigid.

He sighed.

"Your mother knows about me and you?" he asked finally. "I need this apartment."

Julia remained silent, simply looking at Jacek from the tub. She knew the question had been simmering, rattling somewhere deep inside him for days. With a splash, grabbing the edges of the bath, she then rose, keeping her gaze on him, conscious of every droplet traveling down her skin. She placed one foot on the floor and then the other, leaving puddles of milky water behind. Jacek's stubble felt like needles against her soft palm, but she ran her fingers along his jaw and touched her lips to his, lightly, only brushing against them.

"No," Julia said and sat down on the edge of the bathtub, stretching out her legs before her, towards him. The buzzing of the trimmer filled the small room again and Julia, gripping the edge of the tub with her hands, raised her head and fixed her gaze on the ceiling reflected in the mirror.

"Do you want me to leave?" She asked once the buzzing ceased. Jacek grabbed his toothbrush and turned on the water, silent. They stared at each other through the mirror, Jacek with the toothbrush in his mouth, white foam nestled in the corners of his lips, Julia's fingers wound tight around the edge of the tub.

She smiled and slowly nodded her head.

"You don't know," she said. "But you will."

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The sky outside was turning a pale blue-gray behind a crop of gray apartment buildings visible through the window from Jacek's bed. Julia lay stretched out on the edge, with Jacek's arm draped over her stomach, his face buried somewhere near her bare shoulder. She could feel his hot breath against her skin, where droplets of sweat were already formed by the night air. There was barely any to breathe, despite the window being wide open, the orange drapes pushed out to the sides, moving only occasionally with small gusts coming into the apartment.

Julia slowly picked up Jacek's arm and placed it by his side softly. She scooped up her white one-piece bodysuit from the floor and slid into it, straightening out the thin spaghetti straps across her shoulders. Out of her purse she grabbed a cigarette and lighter and went to the kitchen, to her usual place at the table. She touched the corner with her hand and felt the cotton wool and gauze sliding underneath the wax-cloth. The white, thin fabric of the one-piece was already clinging to her skin and even the wall she leaned against in the chair was warm to the touch of her back. She felt her shoulder blades moving within her as she raised and lowered her hand holding the cigarette. Her fingers were long and slender and the gray smoke trailed above them as gracefully as the way Julia held the cigarette between them. Her hands were too small to open anyone.

When she finished the cigarette, Julia dropped it into the rusted sink and opened one of the drawers in the kitchen cabinet. With a pair of old, heavy scissors in her hand, she stepped into the bathroom and climbed onto the toilet without turning on the light. It was only a second before she found the wire.

The orange carpet softened the sound of her steps as Julia slowly moved towards the bedroom, her heart swelling again like the first night she had come here with Jacek, the first time

she had come in years. His name was Jacek Kłos, her mother had said and she loved the sound of it, the sound of stalks moved by the wind, laid down by the wind. She could have loved him.

When Julia reached the bed, Jacek had turned on his back, his face, with lips slightly parted, towards the wall. She climbed on top of him slowly, as lightly as she could manage, supporting herself on her knees. Jacek turned his face towards hers but did not open his eyes. She slid the wire behind his head. Julia leaned down and touched his lips, first with her finger, then with her own lips. When she pulled the wire, his eyes shot open and his body jerked with such force that she almost lost her grip. But she pulled even harder, feeling the wire in the folds of her skin, feeling it cutting into her hands until there were warm streaks all over her fingers. Sweat built on her forehead, droplets rolled down into her eyes and dripped on her bare shoulders. She felt it sliding down the groove of her spine, its path disturbed by the touch of somebody's hands clutching at the bone underneath her skin.

She stopped when she couldn't feel her hands anymore, letting go of the wire and drawing a long, deep breath then letting it out. The skin on her hands was red and opened where the wire had cut into it between her thumb and index finger. It burned from sweat. Julia gathered her hair, strands of which were clinging to her face like pale lashes, and stumbled off the bed, her knees almost buckling underneath her. With a trembling hand she reached into her purse, pulled out a cigarette and placed it between her lips. The lighter felt slick in her hands. She stumbled toward the open window, throwing the lace curtains to the sides, and leaned on the white windowsill. The smoke of her cigarette blended into the gray of the dawn sky and when she lifted her hand to shake the cigarette off, she saw the faint, rust-red stains on the wood of the sill. Let the world see, she thought, tapping the cigarette with her index finger and watching the ash

scatter. A few specks landed on the windowsill but Julia disregarded them and pressed her broken palm down against the painted wood once again, harder this time.

ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER

"You can go on her bicycle," Mateusz told her. "It might give you more to write about dead mothers, et al."

"That is sick," Justyna replied, but took the pink and white women's bicycle nonetheless.

She left her iPhone behind, tucked in between two folds of the duvet, so it would appear to have been forgotten. She almost convinced herself that she *had* forgotten it, reaching involuntarily toward her pocket, only to find it empty. Admitting she placed the phone away herself would be admitting that, somewhere, there was a fear inside her—the gold iPhone would be the last resort of help if she got into a situation, but it also could be the underlying cause of the situation in the first place. She would be by herself after all and didn't know the people that lived here, other than they were part of the same collective history that nonetheless would not prevent anyone from smashing her face with an already half-smashed bottle and slipping the iPhone out of her pocket or hand. Justyna was convinced that if anyone had actually voiced similar fears to her upon his or her trip to Poland she would be outraged, as she was used to being at having her name pronounced the Russian way, softening the "n" like dough plastered against the roof of the mouth, which was not the correct way, nor was it the close-enough way. But here she was, close enough to home (Kraków) in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski, the hometown of her newly-wed husband's mother, who had just passed away, not having witnessed the small wedding-event at an American courthouse, attended by Justyna in a sequined jumpsuit and Mateusz in black jeans. She biked ahead, reaching to her pocket every measured ten minutes, waiting for the moment when she would do it naturally, having forgotten what she had done and become.

They had met in the terrible summer of 2006, particularly plagued by bouts of death of Justyna's grandparents, with whom she lived while her parents cleaned the floors of American

grocery stores, and only made easier by the release of Myslovitz's *Happiness Is Easy*, which Justyna regarded as a vital step in her emotional education.

"I had a dog named Justyna," Mateusz told her, smash-drunk at a mutual cousin-friend's backyard, to which Justyna was invited as the honorary American relative and of which she took advantage by forcing everyone repeatedly to take shots in her name.

"I did not know Justyna to be a dog name."

"It isn't."

She married him, as she liked to say, because she couldn't be bothered to teach an American man to pronounce kiełbasa properly, or to be introduced perpetually as the Polish girlfriend, or be asked by men how old she was because her cheekbones looked exotic and confused them, all of which happened to her frequently.

Mateusz told her he had once known a kind of American girl like her named Mariola, to which she snapped back, "I am not American, okay?" and remained offended for the rest of the day, especially when he mentioned a walk along the Wisła river, by the Wawel Castle and the dragon lair beneath it, which she interpreted as an invitation for a tourist.

"You don't think I've been to the dragon lair? I was born here. I came out of it."

They learned each other slowly and cautiously henceforth, stumbling only when the thick, cinderblock wall of their shared language came between them, as it did when Justyna failed to translate "funny" the correct way into Polish and ended up telling Mateusz he was ridiculous, which he took seriously and proclaimed the worst thing to call a man. Justyna, on the other hand, focused on and obsessed over the linguistic slope, down which she was apparently, and hitherto unknowingly, in the process of slowly, soundlessly tumbling towards an irreparable

forgetting, a perpetual otherness, incommunicability, ceasing to exist in the language into which she was born, death.

What Justyna neglected to learn, or perhaps ignored, was Mateusz's reactions to the death of mothers, particularly his own, probably because of her own incessant prodding of the subject, which she excused as a side effect of her own mother discovering she had Multiple Sclerosis, which she liked to call the illness that inspired *Harry Potter*, though she did not particularly subscribe to the series' treatment of the subject. This had been the crux of both their arguments and Justyna's bicycle day trip.

When Mateusz's mother died, they were both in America—Justyna indulging herself in the fresh and lowly adjunct position she had taken after completing a graduate program and Mateusz scrambling to piece together a new kind of life on new ground, stonewalled by the burning realization that it was not as easy as his previous life had been, though that one didn't seem as such while he lived it. It was also not the way he imagined the place everybody's Polish-American uncle living in Chicago or New York described, while waving thick and heavily gold-clad hands. When he went to the local dentist practice, tamely named Palmetto Dentistry, because as he noticed, everything in South Carolina revolved around palm trees, of which he had only seen one before (a fake nonetheless, stuck in the middle of Warsaw at the Charles de Gaulle roundabout seemingly so that the droves of daily commuters could glimpse a sliver of glamour by imagining themselves in a motion picture set in Los Angeles), the receptionist looked skeptically both at him and his CV before handing it back, claiming she had never heard of Uniwersytet Jagielloński and that it didn't even sound like a real place, so what was he trying to do here, exactly, to which he replied,

"I thought teeth were the same everywhere in the world."

"Sorry, no."

In this way, Mateusz, like numerous waves of immigrants before him, dipped into Justyna's family business and began dipping a mop into a yellow bucket and smearing it over the floor of an Abbeville BiLo five nights a week. When he heard about his mother, he almost felt relieved.

With Mateusz locked into a private kind of grief, which Justyna understood well from liking to keep things to herself but disliked nonetheless, she found herself stopped in front of a large, seemingly abandoned house (the likes of which littered the Polish landscape frequently: a country of unfinished, gray faces sticking out of the wounded land)—a bare skeleton, with bricks and cinderblocks visible, windows black and gaping, uncovered. There was only a large truck in the grassy driveway, parked facing the gravel road on which she had been biking. She reached into the pocket of her shorts and laughed. She would have to come by the house another time with her phone in tow for purely photographical purposes, fully conscious of the reasons because of which she documented these kinds of small moments in her now somewhat uncanny corner of the world—abandoned houses old and new, bubble tea, pot holes, road intersections glistening after rain, dogs. For a second she considered going into the house, imagining herself in a B-horror film (an immigrant returns to the motherland and nobody recognizes her), deterred only by some movement in the dark of the glassless windows and only by her fear that someone would end up stealing the bicycle that had belonged to Mateusz's mother. She had dressed stylishly that morning, all black out of obligation, and decided she wouldn't mind dying in a pair of Birkenstocks, as long as she was creatively arranged afterwards and found by a brooding and wolfish Polish detective, smoking Lucky Strikes. Could she still be the Last Girl if she was the only girl?

The gravel road continued down past the unfinished house, past a few freshly built, nearly-identical ones surrounded and obscured by strategically planted lush shrubbery, towards a yellow-painted near-mansion, fenced off with cast-iron spikes, but conspicuous in its bare and plantless façade. On the side was a ground terrace, with the double door left wide open, large rectangles of bed sheets hanging on a line stretched between two walls, softly swaying in the summer breeze, as if making up for the lack of any trees in the house's vicinity. Justyna laughed out loud as she passed, convinced the house's owners and inhabitants, undoubtedly having returned from somewhere, had remembered to bring their worldly status and broadcast it, but had forgotten the very essence of Westernness: the clothes dryer. She made a mental note to write a story about thwarted people: families who spend their hard earned pounds, dollars, franks on houses so large they cannot afford landscaping and still betrayed their native status in the most Polish way possible; Polish women flying between Chicago or New York and Kraków in all their glittering glory of baby blue eye shadows, peroxide hair, and pointed-toe shoes. Thwarted people perpetually aiming to make up for something—their existence, the past half-century, the glamourless joke of migration: always trying to surpass, outdo, transcend reality. Justyna remembered her own mother, Marzena—only 27 when she herself was eight—in a cream, lace dress, with a wallet full of credit cards that inspired awe in even the most unsatisfied supermarket lady-clerk. She remembered herself, proud, in new clothes at her mother's side, eagerly eyeing all the products she was not allowed to get when shopping with her grandmother, unaware of the clothes having come from TJ Maxx or Stein Mart. She laughed again. It was another life. Her mother was a realist; her job, years of uncollected sleep and manual labor, as well as illness, would have made it hard to best reality anyway, though that had never stopped anyone as far as Justyna knew.

Following the road, which transformed into a proper asphalt one, full of potholes and small grooves carved out by years of heavy trucks and sunlight (possible essay idea: a comparative study of American and Polish roads to finally put to rest the ever-present comment, "Justine, I don't know that asphalt melts;" include photographic proof, close with a comment on how something deemed impossible by a Westerner most likely occurs in Poland on at least a semi-daily basis because of absurdism, magical realism, Communism, etc.), Justyna passed small wooden houses, dated by their mustard-yellow paint that recalled scenes of Reymont's *Chłopi* as it had been emblazoned in her memory by the film adaptation she caught glimpses of as a child. That was, arguably, her earliest impression of a woman deemed transgressive, wild, and bad: Jagna and her two thick, blond braids unfurled and splayed across a white, embroidered blouse smeared with earth, the body, the after-image, carried out of sight on a pile of hay, on a horse wagon, excommunicated, left, ostentatiously forgotten (writing about the Polish village: over).

She stopped only once she approached a sign bearing the name: Kurzacze, a sad name invoking the creation and dispersal of dust or, in a most hopeful reading, vacuums. Fittingly, Kurzacze consisted of a single, quiet dirt road, lined with old houses, once again calling up the *Chłopi* reference, for which Justyna felt guilty, as she never got around to reading the actual book, but refused to admit even to herself the tangential nature of her relationship to the very place with which she pretended to be so intimate. She tapped the pocket of her shorts again and pushed off, kicking up a coffee-colored cloud in her wake. She had almost forgotten that the earth was not red everywhere and especially, ironically, not here. She stopped again at a crooked roadside chapel constructed out of wood like a birdhouse, housing only an image of Mary, who is the Queen of Poland, darkened with age and wear, benevolently bent over what Justyna assumed to be a child. Someone had stuck a few fake orange flowers in the crevices between the

boards, successfully covering half the image so that only the child's wispy curls peeked out beyond the weathered fabric of the flowers at which Mary appeared to be gazing adoringly to what Justyna imagined must have been great joy on the part of the flowers' owner.

She reached around her neck, finding the small clasp of her necklace and tenderly undoing it. Mateusz's mother had given it to her, with a round, gold likeness of Mary in her Black Madonna of Częstochowa iteration suspended delicately within the sphere of her own halo. Justyna fastened back the clasp and wedged the thin, gold links in between the boards of the roof of the chapel, so that the pendant lay against a background of orange, fraying fabric of the flowers. Mateusz would notice within a week, in which time Justyna would be able to tell him, without lying too extensively, that she must have had left it in Poland.

At the turn of the single dirt road that comprised the village of Kurzacze, which could have been considered quaint had it not appeared quiet and empty to the point of abandonment, stood another ancient house, adorned in the usual mustard yellow paint, and half-hidden behind a dilapidated wooden fence overrun by tall weeds burned colorless by the summer sun. Justyna stopped once again, drawn by the lace curtains hanging in the two windows framing an orange door. She knew she could lay the bicycle against the part of the fence that seemed most sturdy, brushing some of the tall weeds to at least attempt to cover it, could wade in through the grass towards the door. The dry stalks would hiss and scrape her bare legs and this would make her remember: the sticky coarseness of wheat stalks against the skin, the startling softness of a spider web spread in between them, the recoil of her hand. The question of constant remembrance, of necessity for everything to be derivative of the past, would linger in her mind, then disappear—a precaution, a burden. The round doorknob would turn but not give and she would laugh, uncertain of what she expected in a place named after dust. She would lean toward the window,

but even the thin lace, upon closer inspection a bit more yellowed than she previously thought, would obscure the inside into darkness. She would imagine it to be like the house of her great-grandmother, long-dead—a wood stove, stone-cold, uneven floors, walls blackened with years of soot and smoke, and a bed tucked into the dark corner of the kitchen. She would look at the patterned lace for a moment, heavy and separated, silent and still, before noticing the Juwentus Security sticker in the far corner of the window and retreating back to the bicycle. She knew herself very well.

The dirt road led into a forest, where Justyna realized how dark it had gotten while she fantasized about things she didn't do. She wasn't nervous—the whole trip had been a kind of dare for herself and it would have been embarrassing to end it in a forest filled with birch trees, which were considerably less affecting than willow trees and had anyway acquired a quite controversial reputation in Poland due to the Smoleńsk plane crash and the lone, fateful birch tree that almost toppled an entire government, which, in turn, once took part in toppling iron and concrete walls. Once the trees gradually gave way to smaller brush, the road again turned to asphalt and curved back in the direction of what Justyna assumed to be the city of Ostrowiec. She passed by a few small houses before she came to another one in a state of undress: whole, save for the unfinished exterior, which consisted of cinderblocks waiting to be covered. By the wooden fence Justyna saw a man lying in the tall, wild grass, one arm flung across his face as if to shield his eyes from the setting sun. This was not an uncommon sight—Justyna couldn't count the many men she had seen in various states of repose: on benches, underneath them, on the grass, behind bus stops, on concrete sidewalks, behind trash cans. They were all older men like her grandfather had been, easing their way out, relics now in the vein of the gray apartment buildings erected in the Soviet period, resisting erasure through pure immensity of number. The

benches, the bus stops, like the apartment buildings, were painted over and renovated, which changed nothing other than their color and whereas in the early nineties one could see these men sleeping on benches with blue, peeling paint that then remained in their torn, wispy manes and in the folds of their trousers, now they lay on green ones without any evidence of having done so upon their return home. The bus stops, in turn, were painted blue and equipped with plexi-glass in order to make it harder for these men (and others—bus stops as frequent loci of vandalism committed by working class, yet unemployed, young men disillusioned with Europe, convinced of the inaccessibility of other venues to air their grievances, which manifest themselvesself in mainly anti-Semitic graffiti, not considered worse than a broken glass pane and consequently not always painted over: Poland watching herself in the mirror?) to quickly undo the city's hard work by knocking a hole in the glass in the stupor of a drunken dream.

The road was empty and Justyna considered stopping, if only to look, which she did. The man lay still and silent, and she suddenly felt the uncomfortable pang of perhaps stumbling into something she shouldn't have. This time she actually dropped the bicycle in the tall grass so it would not be visible from the road and slowly approached the man, parting the stalks with her palms, stepping carefully forward. For a moment, both Justyna and the man, clad in what appeared to be a kind of mechanic's jumpsuit, were frozen—he resting his back against the fence and she standing over him, suspended mid-step, holding back her hair.

"Mister…?"

Silence.

"Please excuse me…Mister?" She tried again, louder, hovering one hand above his arm, as if he could feel it by virtue of proximity, but he gave no indication of awareness of her presence. She straightened up and looked around nervously, but the plain surrounding the house,

inhabited only by what Justyna recognized to be potato plants and other, unknown crops, offered no relief.

In the distance, the sleeping sun left its last tinges of color across the sky. As Justyna carefully set her mind upon leaving the unfortunate scene, she saw a slight movement in between the boards of the fence. In the thin space she noticed a round, black eye, whiskers, then part of a wet snout pressed against the wood—a small dog was watching her, stepping from one paw to the other, curiously silent.

"Cześć." She squatted down and extended her arm across the man's body and pressed her palm to the board, feeling the cold touch of the dog's nose. When she pulled her hand away, the dog's eye returned to the thin crevice, barely visible in the growing shadows. Determined, Justyna gripped the top of the fence with both hands and pulled herself up enough to catch a glimpse of the dog, a dark thing crumpled up against the boards. When she let go, one of her feet fell onto the man's calf and she froze with the unmistakable rasp of a breath caught in her throat. The man sloppily swatted in her general direction with a grunt and flung his arm back across his face.

"Ej, Mister! Get up, your dog awaits."

In his jerky movement Justyna recognized the familiar gestures of a person intimately acquainted with the national sport of vodka consumption. She touched his leg with her foot, lightly at first, then pressing harder and harder, the movement sending ripples through his limp body. The man's arm slid down to rest above his head. His face was unremarkable: tired and overrun with a thick mustache Piłsudski-style, at which Justyna groaned. She could have guessed he was Polish even if she had seen him on a South Carolina back road.

From the man's leg, Justyna moved on to his shoulder, nudging him incessantly, while casting quick glances at the dog, whose eye was now distinguishable only due to the thin, white crescent framing his iris.

"Jezusie Nazareński, widzisz i, kurwa, nie grzmisz," the man grumbled and swung his large hand, grabbing Justyna's ankle and pulling her down into the grass. It took him a good minute to focus his gaze on her, during which he interchangeably widened and squinted his eyes, finally resolving to stare at her with eyes as big and round as the single dog eye watching them both.

"Who are you?" he thundered from underneath his mustache, one palm resting on the boards of the fence now, as if bracing himself for the answer.

"Who are *you*? Who leaves a dog up to fate like this?"

The man smacked and licked his lips and focused his gaze on the wooden fence, undoubtedly searching for the animal in the dusk.

"He will live," the man said finally and upon hearing his own words appeared startled, suddenly pulling himself up to his feet shakily, swaying in wide arcs before coming to rest against the boards. Justyna followed, cautiously putting more distance between them.

"You are here to help with mother, yes?"

"No."

Realizing the precarious nature of her presence next to the sobering man and unwilling to let go of at least an attempt at escape, Justyna began heading back towards the road and the bicycle.

"Wait, Miss. I need help burying my mother."

The man still rested uncertainly, ass-first against the fence. Behind him, Justyna knew, was the sad pile of fur she briefly glimpsed from above.

"Please."

She was aware of a particularly peculiar and cumbersome trait in herself, which mandated utter and complete honesty when caught off guard or confronted by a stranger, which she refused to accept as a lack of imagination due to a partiality towards writing fiction (once, when young, she hung upside down from her favorite trzepak, mouth open, a tiny branch or something of similar nature—she never figured it out—found its way to her throat; she had closed her lips and swallowed). Because of this elevated degree of honesty and kindness, Justyna found herself wading through the tall grass, following the awoken stranger, who stepped uncertainly forward, one hand on the fence, one knee jerk at a time. From behind, she noticed how old he appeared—his angel-hair spread out around his balding head like a dispersed cloud. Very briefly, because she was uncertain she could allow herself such things at the moment, Justyna faced the vision she had seen years ago at her grandfather's dying in a hospital (a true Polish tradition): an old man, not unlike her grandfather, sliding forward on the slick hospital floor, toward a large window unironically sitting at the end of the lightless, long hallway, his old and worn-in blue stripe pajama pants faintly soiled in the crotch area, the fabric rippling softly off his bony frame. In his room, her grandfather had said, "Let us go," most likely having meant home, and died. Years later, her mother would speculate he also had MS, only misdiagnosed, or wholly undiagnosed, maybe because it consoled her to pretend to know where hers had come from.

The backyard was wild and overgrown, but empty of anything save for the dog, now barely visible in the grass. From what Justyna could make out, it was missing an ear. Their small

procession in the order of awoken stranger—Justyna—one-eared dog crossed the yard slowly, almost ceremoniously, and entered the house through a bare, rail-less three-step staircase made of coarse concrete.

The inside of the house was just as empty—sparse and old furniture clung to corners and unevenly painted walls, while dark, wooden crosses hung in each visible part of each visible room, creating a kind of triangle with Justyna right in the middle. She watched the man half-crawl up a narrow and steep staircase, waited until he reached a height safe enough for her to follow, and ascended after him, followed by the silent dog, making its presence known only through the sound of its paws scraping against the creaking wood.

At the top, Justyna came face to face with Queen Mary the Black Madonna of Częstochowa once more, encased in a golden frame peppered with dark time-spots, resting on a green wall between two rooms on opposite sides of the stairs. The stranger stood in the room on the right, slumped in front of a small sofa bed tucked in an alcove framed by potted ferns. On the bed was a woman, lying on her side, one arm underneath the pillow, the other across her breasts, palm folded into a fist neatly laid against the mattress. She was tiny—Justyna did not know whether naturally or from age—the thin, paper-like, loose skin of her body seemed too large for what was contained within. Even with her eyes closed, she did not appear to be sleeping—she was distinctly absent, with only the many sun-spots and soft wrinkles gracing her unmoving face suggesting she was ever present at all. Justyna looked on silently from behind the awoken stranger, for whom the sight must have been a gradually sobering experience, because he slowly straightened his back, almost growing in stature before her eyes.

“If Miss would take the foot-end of the bed sheet, I will take the head.”

Thus the ordeal proceeded: the awoken stranger, cradling his mother's head and shoulders in his arms, with Justyna carefully stepping down each stair behind him, a bed sheet corner in each hand, and the silent dog following at the close, his wet snout brushing Justyna's bare ankles.

Outside, the sun had disappeared, leaving only an indistinguishable mass of gray and grayer shadows by which Justyna felt welcomed, ushered back into the world, just as she was each time she looked upon the tall concrete blocks that had towered over her childhood—a profound and bitter relief of someone born in a country best viewed obscured by night. She watched the stranger bend and curve his back, then straighten it, his neck straining against the weight of the earth he was pounding with an old, rusted shovel, faster and faster. Not once did he turn towards her—instead, he disappeared soundlessly into the hole of which he was the creator and Justyna heard only the wet and soft earth, occasionally punctured by a sharp, metallic sound of a rock sliding against the shovel. She sat near the edge, accompanied by the dog, who leaned snout-first against the crook of the neck of the stranger's mother, shaking soundlessly but visibly. Only when it came time to lower the mother into the grave did the stranger instruct Justyna to once again helm the foot-end of the bed sheet until the mother came to rest on the bottom, against a background of pink cotton adorned with print roses. Justyna watched him pour the loose soil down, slower now, barely tipping the shovel, so that small, round clusters fell like rain onto the body of the mother, bounced and rolled off to the side. For a while, Justyna watched her silhouette grow surrounded by a thick layer of fresh, disturbed earth, contoured into place, but white and immaculate in the flesh. Her hands were the first to disappear, then her legs, then shoulders, and eventually, her still face disappeared underneath the dark soil, with only the small, white tip of her nose barely visible in the dusk. Once finished, the awoken stranger stood frozen

in front of the mound softly rising from the ground, the shovel still in his hands, stopped mid-throw, empty. He dropped it dangerously close to the dog, which sent the animal skittering into Justyna's legs, and went back into the house. The dog, on the other hand, inched closer to the foot of the grave and rested his nose on the loose earth. Justyna stood still.

"Mineral water," the awoken stranger announced, handing her an empty glass and twisting the cap of a green plastic bottle. Justyna heard the crack of the plastic seal and the hiss of the escaping gas.

"You did not really need me," she said.

"No."

They remained silent as the stranger poured the sparkling water into two glasses. He took a sip.

"I traveled to London in year 2005, left her here. Worked cleaning plates in a restaurant—Italian. Work, sleep. Work, sleep, send pounds. Never said a word to no one—I learned Russian in the school. I did not want other Poles to find me out—you must know this: we are wolves to one another here, elsewhere, everywhere."

Justyna took a sip and resisted nodding—she knew.

"One day a neighbor called me. Told my mother lost control of her left arm. I sent more pounds. I came back only when she lost the right leg and the sight in her right eye turned gray. In true Polish tradition, she never visited the doctor. She stashed all my pounds in a drawer. I turned her this morning, then found her this way after noon. Then, you were here."

He paused.

"You have a mother?" He asked.

"Everyone does."

"I do not."

Justyna did not know what to say, so she said:

"I am here because my husband's mother is dead."

"What did she do?"

"She was an art historian in Kraków. She was born here."

The awoken stranger nodded and said, "Mhm," like he agreed.

"Take the dog," he said.

"He has no ear."

"I dropped a knife on him."

Justyna, acutely aware she did not want to divulge the temporary nature of her presence in the motherland, remained silent, which the stranger assumed to be acceptance of his gift.

"Thank you," he said, handing the small ball of fur into her reluctant arms.

Justyna left him with the burial mound, to grieve lonelily in the enveloping dusk. She placed the dog in the front wicker basket of the bicycle, which surprisingly rested where she had left it. The dog fit perfectly. He stood sideways against the breeze and out of his closed eyes fell large, wet tears, which then slid down the snout and fell to his paws. Justyna pulled over to the side of the road and hid her face between her palms.

When she returned, Mateusz sat at the breakfast table in the kitchen of the house that belonged to his family.

"Where were you?"

"I am sorry—I have a peace offering. A comfort dog for you."

Justyna gently placed the dog on the top of the table.

"It is crying," Mateusz said.

"Yes, I think so."

She sat down next to him. The dog sat in front of a vase of peonies, with his eyes half-closed, his nose on the table. Justyna watched the wet puddle inching forward on the red oilcloth, closer, closer to the edge.

MARYSIA IN ALL THE CIRCLES OF HELL

If I were to make a movie about hell, I'd set it in Nowa Huta. Imagine all this: the plateau of Plac Centralny, named after Ronald Reagan; osiedle Zgody, named perhaps ironically, being possibly the saddest one in the entire land, there never not being an unfortunate incident here—a man slitting a woman's throat outside the store in which I was trying on shoes for kindergarten, a man jumping off one of the twelve-story Soviet bloki; the Sendzimira Steel Mill rising above the trees and everything; the sprawling Tomex bazaar where you could buy knock-off Adidas or clothes with nonsensical English slogans from Russian women; Church of Arka Pana, built to resemble Noah's Ark; osiedle Strusia, osiedle Tysiąclecia, rain-stained and concrete gray with rusted, peeling playgrounds; the small hill of Grębałów, at the end of everything. If I wanted to be clever, I'd make shot after shot after shot so similar only I would know the difference. It wouldn't be hard. You could have the sense of a circle and I would have shown you what it was like to grow up alone in a place like this day after day after day, knowing full well there was a world outside, kept away by a single piece of paper.

I stood there before her, and so Marysia stands, Franciszek the urn in her leather tote, at the edge of an old playground, now razed and made into a parking lot, filled to the brim. To her left is a small field once used for soccer and a large, hollow bush where an older boy once placed a sweaty palm over my mouth when I told him it was time for me to go home. As Marysia returns now, I returned then to a plate of cold rosół. That summer I stood in a wooden outhouse in Brzeźnica for two hours, looking up at the soft, milky brown belly of a large spider directly above my head, only a thin veil of her web between the two of us. Marysia passes a group of young, bald-headed men in sweats huddled and talking loudly at the edge of the parking lot. That boy, much older now, is there too, though she doesn't know his sagging, alcohol-ridden face. He

eyes her as she walks past. Now, she stands at the door of her aunt's apartment, a rusted spot underneath the visor where her and Franciszek's parents' name had once been—Tadeusz i Alicja Morawscy. She pulls Franciszek the urn out of the bag, cradling him between her arm and breast, then rings the doorbell. The sound bubbles on the other side.

"The prodigal daughter returns," Bożena says when she opens the door.

It's almost the same Bożena from that smoky, long night in 1993—hair still a deep-red storm of curls haphazardly strewn atop her head, red lipstick, smooth skin now marred by a few tiny capillaries stretched at the top of each cheek, cigarette in hand. She envelops Marysia slowly, all at once, Franciszek the urn caught somewhere in the middle—for a moment the three stand in the dark, long hallway, fused into one. It is Bożena who breaks away first, looks down on her dead brother and places the cigarette between her lips.

"Come," she says through her teeth and leads Marysia down the L-shaped apartment, into the living room where the only thing different from that night in '93 is a newer, bigger television set, then shuffles into the kitchen. The walls are uneven and white, one side covered entirely by a wooden PRL commode, complete with sliding glass shelves and a small key-operated bar. Opposite it, on the wall, hang a hundred family photographs—Franciszek and Bożena as kids, the former toothless and smiling, in the process of removing a shoe; Franciszek and Jolanta, both long-haired and baby-faced, holding Marysia, the baby they had made unintentionally though pleasantly enough at the time; Alicja Morawska, stone-faced and sun-weathered with a little Bożena on her knee, gazing up at her mother's face; Tadeusz Morawski in uniform; Hubert holding a tree branch like a sword; Izydor Morawski on a theater stage, bowing.

Marysia sits at the table like at an altar, her legs bending slowly, her eyes on the wall. She places Franciszek the urn in the middle of the table, the photograph facing slightly away from Bożena, who comes back with two teas and sits down opposite her.

"Do you remember when I asked if I could call you my mother?" Marysia says, dropping two slices of lemon into her glass.

"Oh, I remember," Bożena says, tapping her cigarette against a thick glass ashtray, positioned before Franciszek the urn. "Which is why it surprises me painfully that you come see me only now, a week before you leave. You know, Jolka's been calling me almost every day. You haven't talked to her since you landed."

Marysia stirs two spoonfuls of sugar into her tea, watches it swirl inside.

"I'm staying here."

Bożena looks at her and smiles, then turns her head and expels a line of white smoke.

"And what will you do here, my child? There's barely anything for people who have lived here all their lives, let alone those that have not. Franek and Jolka had it right—this is a place you leave."

"This is my home."

Bożena laughs, a rasping sound.

"I loved my mother," she says, looking up at the photo hanging above them. "But she liked to fill your head with bad, stupid things. Her way of being merciful was telling you to always lie about being born six months after Franek and Jolka's wedding and then in the same breath, lying to Hubert about his mother dying in childbirth. You tell me what's worse—knowing or thinking you know." She takes a drag of her cigarette, then leans the tip of her thumb against her bottom lip, the smoke halving her face. "You don't know this, but Jolka cried all the

way to Warsaw when she left. Franek—Franek was what this place made all men out to be. He was never going to be responsible for anything, not even himself." She made a gesture towards Franciszek the urn, her gaze resting on his face, the photograph. "The one good thing he ever did, besides you, was covering for me with a girl, in high school. If our father found out, I wouldn't be sitting here. And now, he's sitting here. Have you been toting him around Kraków all this time?"

Marysia nods, at which Bożena laughs once more, clouds of smoke snaking around her.

"Of course. And now you want me to take him because you're done?"

"I don't know what to do with him."

"And you think I do? It's expensive to bury people, even bad ones."

Marysia takes a sip of her tea, the thin glass burning her fingertips. It's too sweet. She sets it down.

"I will tell you this—leave him with me," Bożena says, replaces her cigarette between her lips and stands up. She takes Franciszek the urn into both hands, her long and fleshy fingers splayed on each side of her dead brother. They face each other—Franciszek the urn through his droopy eyelids, Bożena with her lingering gaze. "He's warm," she says, hugs him to one breast, opens the glass sliding door of a shelf in the commode and places him inside, among their parents' fine china. "He'll be safe here. One day, when we're both ready, I will take him on my Krzesławice tramwaj route and spread him all around Kraków."

She slides the glass back. For a moment, the commode rattles, Franciszek the urn within it, the china cups clinking like teeth. Slowly, the wood settles, but Marysia and Bożena remain still.

"You ever tell Hubert the truth?" Marysia asks after a long silence, her gaze still on Franciszek the urn. Bożena remains facing the commode for a while longer, the smoke from her cigarette rising towards the ceiling.

"No," she says, turning around finally. She sits back down. "Did it ever do you any good to know?"

"No."

They both glance at Franciszek the urn.

"Besides, I don't know the whole story. I was fifteen when Gieńka did it. She had forty years to think on it and put it all together—being born in '45, unlike any of her family, her mother's cold eyes. Some other things, maybe. That's where that got her. Afterwards, no one even said a word, not even our father. And he *loved* her—she was his younger sister. All this to say—you should call your mother."

Bożena extinguishes the butt of her cigarette in the ashtray, the lipstick-stained and crumpled thing sticking out sideways, a thin trail of smoke still rising from it. She pulls another from a pack of Marlboros on the table and lights it. She rests her middle finger in the hollow of her cupid's bow. Both she and Marysia gaze at Franciszek the urn, silent. Marysia thinks she hears the china clink once, twice faintly, from behind the glass. This is the most distance she has put between herself and Franciszek the urn. She feels the entire weight of her body now—each limb, each organ, each vein, each fold of skin, all reaching, pulling down.

"Makowiec?" Bożena says, slicing the thick silence. "Ewcia next door makes it best, come, we will visit her."

Ewa Wrak's apartment, on which door appears a clean, shiny plaque: Wojciech i Ewa Wrak, is green and alive, filled with clusters of ferns large and small from the parquet floor to the

ceiling. Ewa is a tiny woman with a thin face and short, blond hair the ends of which curl forward near her cheeks. Bożena kisses her on the mouth with a smile.

"I've heard a lot about you," Ewa tells Marysia, handing her a thick slice of makowiec. It is sweet, then almost-bitter. Marysia smiles, licking the glaze off her lips. Now, this is the farthest she has ever been from Franciszek the urn. She takes a large, deliberate bite, chews slowly, the poppy seeds filling her mouth. She smiles at Bożena and Ewa and their hands on the kitchen table, touching.

Later, when she leaves, she grabs her leather tote from Bożena's apartment. It is light on her shoulder. On her way out, she stops by Hubert's room, the same one in which she had fallen asleep with her mother Jolanta by her side, then woke up without the next morning. Franciszek's Depeche Mode poster still hangs on the glass part of the door. On one wall, Hubert hung a poster of a half-naked woman with an intricate tattoo reaching down her smooth back. On the wooden wardrobe hangs his black Juwentus Security uniform, clean and pressed. He sleeps in the same bed she had slept in.

It is later still, when Marysia takes a seat on bus 132 heading towards Sendzimira Steel Mill and places her leather tote on the seat next to her, that she sees Franciszek the urn, his droopy, photographic face turned towards her own. She rides the rest of the way turned to the window, trees, buildings, neons, and people blurring into one outside.

Back in her grandparents' apartment, she places Franciszek the urn in his place next to Wiesław the finch. She undresses, opens the window. Cool evening air pushes its way in and around her, brushing strands of hair across her skin. On the desk, Wiesław the finch sleeps, his breast puffed and his face hidden in feathers. Franciszek the urn, slowly at first, then faster and

faster, rumbles and vibrates, filling the night with a low, metallic clanging. Marysia, fists clenched at her sides, stands before him, waiting.

CUTSCENE

Franciszek the urn, on the table: forever bound to his droopy, photographic eyes. He feels his mouth: wet, hanging open eternally. The air is hot, as hot as he, and he does not know where he ends or begins. On the bed, under the pink crescent of his eyelid, he sees his daughter Marysia, pink and naked like a child. A blond man trails a single finger from the milky flesh of her foot, up her inner thigh, her stomach, her neck, her face. His thumb is in her mouth. Then, everything.

Franciszek the urn thinks of the time there was to love her. There is none now. He remembers: him and Bożena on the edge of a black lake, tiny stones digging into their skin, leaving red welts; Bożena's eyes, dark and full, next to the face of a girl he had seen around school; his father's thick, stern hands; eating scrambled eggs with Jolanta at Waffle House at 5 in the morning after sweeping, mopping, buffing floors; Marysia sleeping, always; the glisten of the floor tiles; burning; Jolanta's face behind the square glass window.

On the bed, Marysia laughs and he thinks of rain. Muddy footsteps on the tiles. He had seen her that one time: the flash burst and then she was gone, already past the sliding door. Pelzer, South Carolina was a place you went to die, they joked with Jolka, and he had gone and done it, face-first into a puddle of congealed Coca-Cola. That was how he got Jolka: for a glass bottle of Coca-Cola in his Wrangler jeans. How she had tasted of burnt sugar afterwards. Stores were empty in 1988, so no condoms. Nobody talked to him about sex anyway, everyone was busy just surviving for nearly fifty years. And so, Marysia: pink and naked, a child born in the hospital hallway. Jolka in tears. But, careful daughters come from careless fathers, he thinks. He, unwittingly, has given her this much.

And all this anger too. She was at the stoplight, the camera in her lap, when he fell. When he had tried to raise his head, the skin on his cheek, glued to the burgundy puddle, stretched, pale as a bedsheet. This is the death of a floorman, he had thought.

Marysia opens the door and a small white dog runs into the room, jumps up on the bed. She touches her nose to that of the dog and laughs again.

Dzidziuś, he thinks.

When she was tiny, he would hold her across his arms, her head dangling back, neck exposed, and listen to her giggle endlessly, the milk teeth in her open mouth like little pearls. This was the photograph he had of them together but it got lost somewhere along the way. Now, they sit, all three, on the bed against a backdrop of a dusty, red carpet hung on the wall: Marysia, smiling and unashamed, looking to the dog; the man, to whom she had purred: "Artur," looking to her; the dog looking to the open window. He looking at them from the table. This is the photograph he would like to keep, the pink shadow of his eyelid in the corner and all. This is the photograph he would like to give to Jolanta. This is the moment he does not know he has been waiting for.

Marysia gasps.

He hears himself clatter against the wood. He feels the sleek polish underneath him. He feels himself sink into feathers.

"He's all over the bird," he hears Marysia say. He feels her warm hands, he sticks to them. She breathes in sharply. "What do I do?"

He knows whatever is left of him—chips of bone and teeth—is in her palms. Other, weightless parts drift away in the breeze. He hears the click of the cage door. His feathers are

smooth in the air. He lands on a tree. Elsewhere, he slides off Marysia's skin and far, far through the air into the land.

He grows quieter by the second.

Then: nothing, save for the low, everlasting hum of all this concrete.

MARYSIA LIVES HERE NOW

This is how it ends: tramwaj number one, speeding down Kocmyrzowska Street, Bożena in a blue MPK uniform at the helm, guiding it along the rail and electric lines, Marysia and Mr. Henryk together in the first row of seats. When she met him at the Teatr Ludowy stop he was already waiting, leaning forward toward the ground on the bench, like a bird. She hadn't thought what to tell him about Wiesław the finch, so she remained silent, the two of them sitting there—Mr. Henryk once more in his Sunday clothes on actual Sunday and Marysia in a loose, black column dress like a thick, black line to reinforce her presence—until they saw Bożena barreling down in their direction, her unmistakable red mane visible from afar. Marysia only had time to wave, while making sure the automatic door did not close upon Mr. Henryk slowly making his way up the steep steps. Now, outside the window, she sees the green countryside pass, conscious that just beyond the edge of the trees and her sight is the steel mill, giant and sprawling. If you look at the map of Kraków, it appears as an expanse of gray: lines and blocks connected together. Grębałow cemetery, on the other hand, our last destination, appears as a small green L-shape glued to the gray. I would not blame you for mistaking it for a park and the mill for a cemetery stretched out for kilometers, fit for a country obsessed with its dead. Poland: the cruelest landscape.

A cool, metallic voice sounds: przystanek Darwina, and Bożena stops the tram for a longer moment. She leaves her cabin, bows her head slightly in Mr. Henryk's direction, and then looks at Marysia.

"You took Franek?" she asks.

Marysia waits until the three of them climb down the stairs and onto the pavement outside, watches Bożena light a cigarette.

"No," she says.

Bożena inhales, her eyes trained on Marysia. She blinks slowly; her red curls sway in the August breeze. Turning her head towards Grębałów, she expels a cloud of smoke, which disperses and disappears immediately. She looks at her shoes, then nods.

"He knows what's best for him," she says finally, standing with one arm folded across her breasts, the other extended up, the cigarette near her temple. "Don't worry."

Marysia says nothing.

Polish mothers tell us, their Polish daughters: you must visit your dead and so we do. The sidewalk snakes forward before Marysia and Mr. Henryk. It is whitewashed and bright in the sun. They proceed, Mr. Henryk slowly, slightly bent forward, the legs of his pants swaying back and forth with each step, and Marysia alongside, the leather tote empty on her shoulder. At a small stand before the entrance to Grębałów, she fills it with six memorial candles of different colors. The glass clinks when she moves. Mr. Henryk pays the woman at the stand and she hands him a box of matches with a toothless smile.

"We have everything?" he asks Marysia.

She nods. They head toward the iron gate; the world grows silent. Marysia thinks, briefly, of her mother, quiet and composed at her own mother's funeral here six years ago. It was July of the hottest summer on record, the sun pouring down onto Marysia's neck, soft as the earth being poured back into itself by two sweaty men. Marysia had watched them carefully, each move of each shovel crusted with dried clay. They worked fast. Her mother had sunglasses on and was silent all the way back to the freshly empty apartment, her hands gripping the steering wheel of the rental car, unflinching. She still wore her wedding band on her right hand, if only because she couldn't take it off, her hands having swelled after years and years of scraping and scrubbing

floors. Later, with the Morawska Home for All Souls, her hands were the one thing she was most conscious of—always trying to discreetly hide or obscure them when talking to the bereaved or even my mother, whose hands are so similar: folding them behind her, sliding the tips of her fingers underneath her thighs when sitting down, folding them together, palms up but closed. At the funeral, she stood with them by her sides, clenched.

"How is Wiesław?" Mr. Henryk asks once they both step through the threshold.

The gate closes behind them with an audible, metallic click. Marysia weighs her words in her head with Mr. Henryk's gaze upon her.

"Wiesław is gone," she says finally. "The urn—my father—he spilled himself. He was all over Wiesław. He didn't even flinch. I let him out and he—went. I'm sorry."

Mr. Henryk's lips stretch out across his face and Marysia does not know whether he is smiling or wincing. A quiet and warm round sound pours out of him.

"You know—he came to me one day, just like that, on the balcony. Came into my hand for breadcrumbs. I only thought—Waldek, my brother, had the same color of hair. I thought, why not? An old man can dream, I believe. When you are old like me you will believe anything. But he was useful for something, yes? That was Waldek, yes. Always."

It seems to Marysia, for a moment, that he had leaned closer to the ground with each word. She feels all parts of herself fold down into nothing. She will tell Bożena if she makes it out of this place.

"Come, we must not waste time," Mr. Henryk says and begins to lead the way forward to one of many crisscrossing alleys. It is three in the afternoon. Marysia follows, draping an arm across her tote protectively. Within, the death lanterns clink, a toast for each of her steps. They pass first the empty plots: family tombs that have been built but not yet filled, among them one

named Grób Bólów, too good to leave untranslated, though also ruined by the process: grave pain, literally, or with my poetic license, the Tomb of Sorrows. Among the stones, they see older women carefully wiping the stones of their husbands or sitting with them on tiny, thin benches. Within Marysia's bag, the glass keeps ringing. They pass a trashcan overflowing with wilted wreaths, brown petals and leaves spilled out onto the alley and pushed onward by the breeze. They walk on, Mr. Henryk leading the way, the landscape enveloping them from all sides. The sky grows darker.

"Here they are," Mr. Henryk says when they reach an expansive field of granite. Franciszek and Jolanta's parents' graves are close, one above the other. Marysia sees Tadeusz Morawski and Zygmunt Król raising shot glasses to one another, then throwing their heads back and hissing.

"Oho! Visitors," Zygmunt booms, his single tooth bright in the black of his mouth. Marysia, as a child and in child's play, imitating the fights she had seen on television, had once punched him in the mouth, claiming the only other tooth that he had possessed. She pulls out two memorial candles, opens and lights them, the crackling sound of the matches, their smoky scent a familiar but strange comfort. She places the candles on the Król grave, then moves to the Morawscy tomb and does the same.

"Marysiu," Lucyna Król, Jolanta's mother and Mr. Henryk's sister, becoming visible, says. "You should forget us."

"I can't," Marysia replies.

"Where is Franciszek?" Alicja, his mother, asks.

"I heard he died," Zygmunt thunders, his voice low and expansive, as if coming from all directions at once.

"A pioneer!" Tadeusz roars. "The first Morawski to pass in America!"

"He died drunk and alone," Marysia says.

The sky darkens. Alicja begins to wail.

"Jak na Polaka przystało!" Tadeusz roars back, his laugh like thunder.

"We go drunk or in war," Zygmunt offers. "Sometimes both. It is our way. To Franek!"

They raise their glasses once more, throw them back. The two deceased women, Alicja having momentarily paused her lament, shake their heads, looking to each other from their respective granite plates.

"Where is he, then?" Tadeusz asks.

"He isn't here," Marysia replies.

Tadeusz waves his hand down at Marysia.

"What, did you bury him over there? You young ones don't care for tradition," he roars.

Alicja resumes her lament.

"And what about you, Marysiu?" Zygmunt asks.

"Me? I am right here."

"For now," Zygmunt booms and the two men begin to laugh.

"Do not listen to old, dead men, Marysiu. They cannot care for anything anymore," Lucyna grumbles. "Get out of here."

Marysia stands still for a moment, the sound of Alicja's cry making her eyes water. These are not the people who loved me, she thinks; they are dead now. She hurries back to the alley where Mr. Henryk waits.

"Let us go on," he says and begins the way onward, up the sloping hill, his face closer and closer to the earth.

"Why didn't you come?" Marysia asks when they reach the center of Grębałów.

"I am about to join them," Mr. Henryk replies, the folds in his shirt on his back becoming more pronounced. "There will be time enough."

The center of Grębałów, to which all alleys lead, is filled with tiny graves, dedicated to those who lived only a few years in the world. Mr. Henryk waves between the stones until he comes to one with the engraving: Waldemar Longiewicz ur. 27. 07. 1949 zm. 17. 08. 1955. He takes one memorial candle from Marysia and lights it, then places it in the center of the gray plate. On the head, to the right of the name, is an oval black and white photograph of little Waldek, his eyes round and black, his nose and mouth pointed. He looks serious, much older than he must have been when the photograph was taken. Marysia thinks of Wiesław the finch. Mr. Henryk stands in silence for an extended moment. The sky grows gray. He begins to walk away and Marysia follows.

"Why wasn't he there?" she asks.

"I do not know," Mr. Henryk answers. "He never is."

With their last candle, they head to the corner of Grębałów, where Marysia spots Genowefa Morawska right away, the blue line across her throat pulsing and dark. She sits on her granite plate in a brown skirt and matching shirt, her eyes wide. Marysia sets the last lighted candle by Gienia's thigh and waits.

"You don't want to know about Hubert?" she asks finally, her voice getting caught on the words.

"No," Gienia replies, unblinking.

Marysia stands there for a moment longer, shifting and sinking in the soft earth, then turns and walks back to Mr. Henryk in the alley.

"We are done," she says, feeling her empty bag once more.

"Yes," he says.

It is 6:03. They head back to the gate, passing rows and rows of headstones placed on long granite rectangles, some crooked, having been built too quickly, some caked in mud, but many clean and glistening. At the gates grows a willow tree, half of its branches hanging low in the parking lot on the other side of the fence, the other brushing the wide granite plate of a black headstone. An old woman, a black scarf tied around her sagging face, enters. This is the place Marysia has chosen.

If this were my film, the music would begin now, quiet but growing, the camera would follow Marysia to the exit, only her head and shoulders visible, single strands blowing back on one side. When she stops, the camera would stop with her: a shot of Marysia, framed by the blurry iron gate on both sides. Then, slowly, it would turn to face her. She looks ahead. She looks at you. Her lips part. A shot of Marysia framed by the sloping green-gray hill of Grębałów. She turns around. You, the camera, and thus also I, move forward, slow, above her right shoulder until the frame is filled and we see what she sees: the alley rising before her, snaking up the swelling hill dotted with stones like a cresting wave about to descend. And that is all there is.