Mila's story keeps creeping up on me, in the middle of class, in the middle of intersections, in the middle of the night.

University of Alberta

Swim the Shattered Rhine

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

Department of English and Film Studies

Fall 2013
Edmonton, Alberta

FOR MY MOM, PAULA

FOR TEACHING ME TO WRITE ON THE FIRST KITCHEN TABLE I CAN REMEMBER…

AND A MILLION OTHER THINGS

ABSTRACT

Swim the Shattered Rhine is literary collage: a fragmented travelogue arranged around both the sharp and dull edges of memory… a series of snapshots cemented together by fiction and nonfiction. As it meditates on the meaning of story and truth, this piece strives to answer the question of how it is we manage to heal from the wounds of history and of our own small lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This project would not have been possible without the support of a whole host of people. Thank you, Mom, for knowing it was all going to be okay, for listening to every sentence, for the tough love and editing. Dad, thanks for the hugs and the phone calls and all the insights on voice and personal connection. Dana and Laura, you know who you are and how you helped…ice cream, hot soup, kitchen tables. Christine, your mentorship and faith in the project got me through all the patches of writer's empty. Kristoff, you have always been there for me. I am so grateful you are okay and that you've been able to teach me to hope and believe again.

There are too many people to recognize on a single page, but please know that without all of the myriad interactions, introductions, and hospitality none of this would have been possible.

And Mila. Thank you…for opening the door.

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PROLOGUE

July 2011
Coeur d'Alene, ID

I spent July at the edge of Coeur d'Alene Lake, distracted by the knowledge that Mila's eyes were contemplating the same scenery a bay and a beach away. It was an uncommonly wet Idaho summer. A writing workshop had an opening – an opportunity for escape from the damp and wind. One afternoon, the conference attempted to make art critics out of us at a local gallery.

Contemporary paintings. Abstract sculptures. I found a corner and sat on the floor to write, skeptical about how talented an artist need be to mount a slab of granite and then label it with a name and a price. Moving expertise seemed the only key. I wondered which entrance he'd fit it through. The skylight?

Sand covered the gallery's tiles. I thought about getting up and dusting myself off, but couldn't stop gazing at the cracked rock installation. It evoked the boulders that Roman legions once catapulted at besieged cities, now grounded and powerless, but with a past as storied as any tableau. Notebook on my knees, I penciled three questions and two answers:

What is Art?

Anything done well.

What is it in a broken piece of polished granite that is so arresting?

What happens when an art gallery is bombed?

Oberhausen 1942

Mila leaned against the brick wall and lifted up the back of her shirt so she could feel the cool and gritty mortar against her spine: sandpaper to rough away the salt of yesterday's cold sweat.

"Find anything that is in one piece. Put it on the truck."

Find any piece of art that hasn't melted, that the painters were foolish enough to leave behind, that the sculptor thought would outlast him. Mila slid down the gallery's last remaining wall and winced.

The roof was a skylight. Cedar joists framed shreds of clouds while debris pinned oil sunsets to the pavement. In one, a dark-haired girl stood in a park with cathedral spires

behind her. An amateur's debut.

"Find anything in one piece." Mila pulled herself up, and let her shirt cover the scratches that were such a relief to actually feel.

*"Find any***one** *who's in one piece" had been the orders yesterday, and every morning before that for too long now. She lifted the canvas with the girl and the church from the wreckage of the wall. Heat had unstuck the oil leaves. The painting's park crumbled to an avalanche of green and grey. One tree clung to existence. Mila brushed it into the pile of colorful rubble and slid the canvas, rolled up, into her coat pocket.*

March 1992
Winnipeg, Manitoba

When I wasn't quite three and it wasn't quite spring, my favorite time of day came after lunch and after stories, when Mom and I would fall asleep on the French Provincial couch in the one o'clock sun. She would draw up her knees so I could stretch out my legs in the triangle of space behind them. She'd tickle my feet then shush me, laughing:

"Okay, we need to nap!" I would promise that I couldn't but always slept the longest. When the light dipped behind Lansdowne's bungalows, I'd wake up on the empty couch and, with my fingernail, finish tracing out the pink wild roses that laced around the upholstered buttons. I'd lay there listening to onions frying in the kitchen and to CBC news, that Mom always tuned in to. Then I would get up and walk through the living room to take my post on the bottom runner of our oak staircase.

"You were such a funny kid," my mom would tell me eighteen years later. "I'd always find you on the stairs with your little hands on your knees."

Staying out of trouble. Staying safe.

I was scared of intersections, the dark, of cars, dogs, and, especially, of our basement. It was dangerous, you see, and the steps were half way between my strong bedroom door and the storage room, that had shadowy holes in the floor.

I knew that Mom couldn't see me when I sat on my step — a good spot for listening to 98.3 FM, before she realized I was awake and clicked the radio's dial off, back to Nana's album *Passport.*

One afternoon I heard the echo of static and explosions. A woman, who called herself "Anna Maria Tremonti, in Sarajevo," reported a sniper attack and marketplace

bombings. I didn't know what 'sniper' meant, but the voice taught me to feel sadness without asking why.

Two million people displaced. 11,000 civilians killed.

Fifteen thousand children wounded. 1600 dead.

In just one city.

I could not comprehend the facts and so forgot them, while in my mind World War III had already been launched, as if World Wars all share the same beginning.

The Siege of Sarajevo finally ended three hundred hours before I turned seven. I was in grade three, in Alberta, studying fractions and French, calling my dad "Mr. Saurette" (my parents ran a private school), and missing out on all the international news updates I'd surreptitiously attended as a three-year-old. I learned different things that year: how private schools didn't pay their teachers well, how being the principal's daughter didn't come with any free passes, how throwing away a half-eaten apple resulted in twenty-five lines about young ladies not wasting food.

School standards required the Three R's, but Dad's love of Tolkien and geography brought us daily readings of *The Hobbit* and gave us glimpses of borders beyond our own. One afternoon I raised my hand and asked why I couldn't find Czechoslovakia on the map of Europe. It was the country Mom's grandparents were from.

"Well, this text was printed in 1990, right before the Cold War ended," Dad explained. "After a treaty, countries can split apart or even disappear. Flip back to your Atlas of Europe. And take a pencil out. We're going to trace in the boundaries of the missing countries."

New textbooks were too expensive, so our seven-year-old hands arbitrarily imagined Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic into existence.

"I wonder if Alberta will just disappear one day," the boy next to me mumbled.

Do you ask why I'm sighing my son?
You shall inherit what mankind has done.
In a world filled with sorrow and woe
If you ask me why this is so, I really don't know.[i]

I

June 19, 2012
Solopisky-Trebotov, Czech Republic

Pinewood steps reach from the foyer up to a second story, where two bedrooms and their skylights make the most of the ceiling's steep pitch. Red laminate flooring runs through the main level, but white tile for the *koupelna*, a modern bathroom with strange radiators, pink toilet-paper, and, in the shower stall, a bottle of Dove's Pro-Age body wash. The rest of the square living space is cut in two. One strip of beige cabinets stretches along the kitchen's west wall. The dishwasher turns out to be a fridge. What I think compacts garbage is really the dishwasher. In Europe everything is smaller. The half-sized oven's clock reads 17:34. Time is longer, I suppose.

> 2/9/2012
> Dear Gabrielle,
> We will be happy to help you! Will you mind if you stay with us? What we can offer is a separate little house with a bedroom, kitchen and a bathroom. Regarding transportation to Prague - there is a bus that takes you to the train station, the train is in the center of Prague in 15 minutes….And it will be free of any charge, of course.
> In Christo Rege,
> Michal

I had emailed Michal Semikova in February, asking if his family had an extra couch for me to sleep on. He had sent back a photo snapped from this guesthouse's front steps, where the view was storybook perfect, lush hills just hiding Prague Castle's nightly lit facade.

Before the trip I dreamt my way through several versions of the "separate little house," but, as Michal gives me the grand tour, I forget to compare it with my imagined blueprint.

"So you built this for guests?" I ask. "Does your family get a lot of visitors?"

"No and no," Michal answers. "I built this for my wife Micha's grandmother. We wanted to take care of her here, instead of placing her in a, what do you call it… a care facility. She was ninety, with dementia, quite badly, yes, and did not even know who Micha was. Great-grandma passed away almost precisely a year ago." Michal nods towards a tiny bed just inside the living room.

"This was her room."

She died in this room, is left unsaid.

As jetlag's insomnia hits, I go through the wardrobe searching for extra blankets and find some musty with the scent of someone else's reminiscence and loss.

This is the perfect place to begin forgetting.

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
……
……
……...
Why should I mourn?[ii]

July 7, 2012.
Czech Republic
5:00 AM

Before even one sip of instant coffee, I am flattening my forehead against a window in the Semikova's minivan. Michal drives us out of Solopisky.

We avoid the tolls by following meandering highways that begin at cobbled intersections and bend around the edges of miniature forests. The roads' narrowness shocked me when I first arrived ten days ago. Even covered in asphalt, they seem to be footpaths that are somehow older than the land. As I doze, I imagine ancient engineers assembling delicate catwalks and then stitching hills and fields to their ditches.

The oncoming traffic does not meander. The minivan's mirrors squeeze past a Volkswagen and a fence. We are heading to Brno (brr-*no*) Czech's second largest city where Michal's daughter Anna will represent Southwest Prague in her traditional Bohemian costume. Mass, celebrated by a brand new Czech priest, is this festival day's first and main event.

By 8:50 AM, local time, I am sitting in a courtyard that's no bigger than a tennis green, watching kids as they finish dressing for the day. They lace up bodices and belts that are meticulously embroidered to regional (but not seasonal) specifications. The Moravian girls wear lime, fuchsia and sky blue skirts, which stick out from their waists at sharp angles. Crinolines twenty inches thick prop up their petticoats, but it's a woman wearing a drab tee shirt and shapeless skirt who approaches and points to the empty space beside me.

She sets down her bag and asks a question I can't possibly understand. I remember that 'no' translates to 'yes' in Czech and 'ne' means 'no.'

Is anyone sitting here?

"Ne." *No.* This is the conversation I think we're having. I smile. The woman scowls. I pat the maple stained seat. She moves on before I realize that "*CAN I sit here?"* was the actual question I so bravely answered. For the entire ceremony, I'll have the whole bench to myself.

At 9:30 AM, the sun turns every shred of cloud into a manifestation of God's existence. Brick walls, green stucco, and the pale facade of the main house cut off the cross breeze. Mass is in Latin, a language I learned when I was eleven. The sermon is delivered in Czech. I toy with the idea of retreating to the cement coolness of the courtyard's arcade, but it's occupied by the drab-dressed woman.

An hour later, Anna Semikova faints into her friend Martina's arms. She's carried into the house just before the priest's final blessing sets us free. Martina's friends slip into cooler modern outfits, but several of the boys refuse to change out of their red wool pants that have those medieval front flaps laced awkwardly to their belts.

There is one man whose costume doesn't match.

"Major Todd!"

Rough hands with a gentle shake introduce my newest acquaintance. I count the medals pinned to his Army dress-blues. We sit in the sun, sipping wine on empty stomachs. He is stationed in Stuttgart, managing diplomacy between Turkey and the United States. I tell him I'm from Canada, and, as a show of good faith, he promises to keep me surrounded by English speakers for the rest of the day.

"There are other Americans here?" I ask.

"No," he smiles. "I'm it. But there's a seminarian from Canada and a couple of Czech guys that spent time in the midwestern states. How long are you staying?"

I look around and at my watch. It isn't noon yet. Michal is on the porch drinking beer and talking about religious controversies, an elaboration on the sermon, perhaps.

"Well my ride looks pretty comfortable. They're passing around desserts. How long do these parties last?"

Todd laughs. "My intel suggests we could be here for hours, so you'd better eat something before you refill that glass."

A blond pale guy walks over to us.

"And you better not sit in the sun. You *will* pass out. Hello, I am Tomas." Tomas explains that the pastries are just appetizers. Father Nemec will set out his award winning goulash — beef simmered with paprika, potatoes, and beer, all served with beer and brown bread. There will be chocolate and espresso shots, followed up by walnut topped *kolache*.

"I usually only get kolache at Easter," I say, and Tomas draws his eyebrows together in confusion.

"You eat kolache? Where are you from anyways?"

"She's Canadian," Todd says.

I don't mention that the only passport in my backpack is eagle-embossed and that my car's license plates read Idaho Famous Potatoes, but I do add:

"My mom is culturally Czech. Her grandparents left Czech a century ago, before the First World War. All we have left is the food. No cool outfits or parties like this."

Voices and the twang of a cimbalom ricochet off the cool stucco and red brick walls of the courtyard. A little girl naps in the shade of a bench. A boy in a beaded vest, blue apron and white shirt and pants begs his sister for just one more dessert. I close my eyes and listen to a young couple polka. His boots scrape the old pavers; her skirts are too stiff to billow or swirl, but they are not noiseless as they mix the courtyard shade with the afternoon's long light.

Todd, Tomas, and I watch them dance while we let dark chocolate melt under our tongues and talk about the similarities in Czech and Canadian defence policy. Tomas claims that the superiority of his country's liquor factors into its military's strategy. To prove his point, he sets out on a quest for Slivovitz, one hundred proof Czech brandy, making me promise to do a shot. He returns. The priest who distilled the plums doesn't want to share. We content ourselves with beer and avoid heat stroke in a parabola of shadow that extends from the archway of the courtyard's former stable. Instead of tack and hay, kegs and firewood line the stone walls.

Czechs drink more beer per capita than any country in the world, so it is no surprise that Jan is slightly inebriated when Tomas introduces him as his brother.

"Gabbie's from Canada," Tomas tells Jan. I shake Jan's hand, steadying him on his feet a bit.

Instead of asking the polite questions I have been fielding all afternoon – what do you do? What do you study? What do you write? Who are your parents? – Jan is more interested in the sound of my voice.

"So, do you have that high, squeaky, Canadian accent like they do on Family Guy?"

"Sorry," I say. "I would have to force the accent. I can try if you want."

"You sound like you're from Idaho, anyways," he says.

"What? Who told you?" I ask and take a step forward into the stable so I can see his face. "Michal Semikova told you, didn't he?"

"Told me what?"

"That I'm from Idaho?" Jan hasn't fainted or even stumbled…but now I'm the one feeling strangely unsteady on my feet.

The boys are all looking at me now.

"We thought you were from Canada! You said you were from Winnipeg. Are you making things up?"

"No, I'm not making things up! I *am* from Canada…. originally, but I've lived in Idaho for eleven years." I focus on Jan, shocked that after fourteen words this random guy from northern Czech Republic has pinpointed the source of an accent I do not even know I have.

"So you *are* from Idaho." Jan laughs triumphantly.

"Not *from*, but sure. How do you even know it's a state? Even I had never even heard of Idaho until we moved there!"

Jan has one friend from Idaho, a friend I sound "just like."

I go on to tell Jan, Todd, and Tomas that Idaho is not like other states. In its networks of small towns, lakes, and Ponderosa pines, people avoid high property taxes, gun control and education regulations. Survivalists build Medieval fortresses against the inevitable collapse of society. Not all the compounds have been naive. The area has a history with neo-Nazis.

When we moved to Idaho, a year before 9/11, seatbelt violation fines had just doubled…from $5.00 to $10.00 Twelve years later the fine has not increased, and Idaho is still the state my family calls home. I continue to file my taxes from an address that belongs to our Blossom Mountain farmhouse and haven't changed my driver's license.

As I sit describing the peculiar sites and sounds of my current abode, it's Idaho I am trying to escape….even though it has somehow slipped into my voice.

In Idaho I taught myself words I imagine I can unlearn by leaving it and the country. *Seizure. Malignant. Bipolar. Prognosis. Disown.*

These words are tethered physical sites that I'm trying to forget: a patch of asphalt at the end of our driveway where my brother Kristoff's epilepsy began; a picnic table along

an old train track where Mom and I sat with Rose, Dani, Olivia and Soph – my younger sisters – as we waited for Dad to run and get the van. Mom couldn't walk back because a brain tumor is exhausting.

There is the couch in my parent's living room where I heard Kristoff say:

"It would suck if this was cancer," and the uncomfortable chair where I sat two months later and cried with almost unacceptable hopelessness, after Kristoff visited the law firm where I worked to tell me it had metastasized to his lungs.

Metastasis. Originally a rhetorical term. 'A sudden transition in subjects.'

He left, saying he'd only do chemo as a last resort. I am still attempting to abandon the memory of the desk's ugly melamine that felt so smooth and stable under my forehead.

And in that same black office seat, I also learned a name that I'm now trying desperately to disremember.

Lady of silences
Calm and distressed
Torn and most whole
Rose of memory
Rose of forgetfulness
Exhausted and life-giving
Worried reposeful
The single Rose
Is now the Garden
Where all loves end
Terminate torment
Of love unsatisfied
The greater torment
Of love satisfied
End of the endless
Journey to no end[iii]

"So you're in school," Jan says, interrupting this catalogue of memories that I have begun to silently dwell on. "And *now* you're in Canada. But how do you live?"

"You mean money-wise?"

He nods.

"Well, I study English literature. I guess I'm being paid to write a book." The guys raise their mugs of warmish Pilsner; my red wine's more suited to the temperature. They cheer 'na zdravi' to Gabrielle, their new writer friend from Idaho, who was born in Canada and is half Czech. I say they're generous. Tomas thinks my name will look good

on the book cover. Jan needs to hear whether it's a novel and when he'll be able to purchase it.

"What is the story about?" he asks.

His question has no simple answer, not this afternoon. All I know is who the story *can't* be about, but I have to start there, and so, in Brno, 5200 miles from Idaho, I mention Mila's name.

But with you, dear reader, there's time to start at the beginning.

May 2008
Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

Mila and I met on the phone, during a call date-stamped 05/2008. It was supposed to be a twelve-minute conversation during which I would collect Mila's age, her mother's maiden name, and what kind of legal situation she wanted our law firm to address. She was seventy-nine that spring. I had turned nineteen.

I fell in love with Mila's voice while she booked her consultation, before I knew anything about her life. The incongruity between her accent and her French last name intrigued me, and I asked her if she spoke the language.

"But can't you tell I'm from Germany, my dear? Pierre was my husband's name. I lost him in Vietnam." Then she said my name out-loud…my full name. "*Gabrielle Saurette*, *a nice French name*. And you're nineteen? What do you want to be? Can you believe it, when I was nineteen, I became a television reporter for Germany's first network? Ja. I covered the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, in England, you know. There was only one television station, and it was the first live international broadcast, so everyone at home watched the report. When I returned to Berlin, I was, well, just a little bit famous. People stopped me in the streets." Mila paused. "But, Gabrielle, what are you going to do, a bright young person like yourself?"

My boss, Matthew, wanted me to go to law school. A month before, he'd stood next to the photocopier and promised tuition assistance and a contract. I didn't think I was *bright* enough to pass the bar. I wanted to be a writer and had decided teaching English would pay the bills.

I hoped Mila would keep embellishing my afternoon of forms and cover letters with her past, but our twelve minutes had expired twice. We didn't know I only had eleven

innocuous months left till survival rates would tag my brother's lungs, or that in eighty-four days the phrases '*cancer*,' '*passed away peacefully*,' and '*she made me promise not to tell you*' would collide in one paragraph about Mila's favorite daughter, Kim.

The other telephone line lit up.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Pierre," I said, "I need to take another call. But before I go, can you tell me again why your trust documents need to be redrafted?"

"Oh, my dear, I didn't tell you yet." She paused. "I want to disown my eldest daughter. I need Matthew to make sure that she does not get a penny." Line four gave three long blinks. "Everything goes to my youngest, Kimmie." I heard the rush of Mila's breath that sounded more like a smile than a sigh. "Not that I have much."

"Okay!" My voice was too loud. "Okay, I'll let him know."

I hadn't thought about the word in years, not concretely. *Disown*. Two short syllables that do their best to dismantle the double helix of family connection. The prefix originates from Latin's *de* – "the reversal or absence of an action or a state," – and the root word's source is *ãgan*, old English meaning *owe*.

Disown. *The absence of a state of owing*.

Disownment *is* a more monetary arrangement than reality, more ritual than fact, but it labels a child as unknown or dead, while denying her even that strangerhood and death, since strangers can, of course, be introduced, and the dead, remembered. A parent can't force un-inheritors to change their names, erase memory and abandon photographs, nor can unwilling beneficiaries change memory and abandon all the names. But the limits of disownment are camouflaged by its huge estate of emptiness.

Mila did not disown her daughter.

Two weeks after Kim's burial, I delivered Mila's unchanged trust and all the other paperwork our office had collected: will, living will, car title, account balances, a list of valuables, a pile of letters and numbers, like unassembled code…a sliver of the story she had begun to tell the first day we spoke, the only glimpse I thought I'd get.

Her face appeared as I pressed her doorbell, as though she'd been watching for me. She looked much younger than seventy-nine.

"It was nice to finally meet you," I said as I passed her the heavy stack of documents. "And I'm so sorry about your daughter." I couldn't shake her hand and tell her to take care; her arms were full. So I just stood there for a moment with the storm door leaning

on my back.

"Well, come on in!" As if it was expected.

Mila apologized for keeping the lights off and the den curtains down, set the files on the coffee table and sat down in a wingback armchair. I slipped off my sandals so I could feel the carpet between my toes and sat across from her. A bead of sweat from my un-air-conditioned ride over dried in the dim cool. A band of sun slid between the blinds and turned Mila's hair into a white halo.

"So, tell me about yourself," she said. I gave her my hyphenated answer to *where are you from*.

"Why Idaho?" she asked. "How did you end up here?"

I mentioned my high school and the twenty Catholic nuns in full habit who, even in the 21st century and without yardsticks, still had their ways of inspiring work ethic. Mila had moved once upon a time to send her kids to Catholic school. A non-practicing Presbyterian, she still thought teaching sisters were the only ones to handle her children. The connection was enough. Suddenly I was at the will of her backward glance.

I began following her itinerary of places she once lived and worked in, not knowing the trip would last four years. Her stories transported me from a toy shop on a busy German street to a yacht docked near Honolulu, from Heidelberg's University to the pink stucco walls of southern California, and then to trams in Budapest and Berlin. I wished for paper or a tape recorder and closed my eyes to let her words encode themselves in synaptic darkness. I remembered for a second that I should call my boss and let him know I had not been kidnapped, at least not according to conventional techniques. I did not call, could not interrupt the magical randomness of Mila's anecdotes…

"You know Julia Child? She was my friend. Yes. We had the same hair appointment each week. I remember the first time I heard her from under the drier, thought she was drunk. That accent. Impossible to mistake it. Well, we chatted, and, after our hair set, she had to meet my two spaniels, who were waiting in Herman's back seat. You saw Herman on the way in? I can't drive him anymore.

Anyways, Julia and I would go shopping and then walk the dogs on Tuesdays. When she died, there was a special about her on TV. Her voice played and my two spaniels jumped off that couch, there, and ran to the television set, just barking and barking. Can you believe they remembered her?"

There was a story for every personality and politician that Mila had met both during her short career and after her American Army pilot swept her off her feet: Hubert

Humphrey, 38th Vice President; Willy Brandt, Mayor of Berlin; Walter Brattain, transistor inventor; the last Shah of Persia; Eleanor Roosevelt; the pilot and crew of Airforce One. But when I pressed her for details about the War, Mila opened a desk drawer and put a Sony voice recorder on the coffee table, its minute cassette still plasticized.

"Kim gave this to me years ago. I want to write my memoirs but I always get stuck at the year I turned twelve. When I try to think of what happened in 1942, I just begin crying. Kim asked me to tell the stories I do remember to this machine, but that is difficult when there is no one listening, you know."

I'll listen. I'll listen. I'll write! The words marched through my head like the tickered text of an emergency broadcast, but the message couldn't find my voice.

I should have pressed play right then and captured 'Take One' of the afternoon. Mila's eyes, flashing with their chronicles of loss and peace and laughter and suspicion had hypnotized my ambitions into silence. I left with no recording, no notes, only the invitation to return.

"Come visit me again, Gabrielle. I like you and that is something. I usually don't like young people these days, but you are different."

I imagined that I'd go to see her often. We'd drink tea, watch television, tell stories, and start the tape.

Christmas came before I called Mila back. I asked how she was doing – *not too good, my dear* – and if I could drop by. She had a cold…no visitors. And Kim had always done the decorating…no tree.

Three months later, my brother was in surgery for cancer. In May, rain crushed wilted lilacs against our windowpanes. I criticized Kristoff's faith in homeopathy and then cried on his shoulder. Summer blurred slowly by, a film of unfocused frames that caught me closing out work files, transferring schools, and leaving town. I moved away feeling guilty for not stopping by Mila's house. Coeur d'Alene Lake, the view from her living room, glinted in my rearview mirror. I did not even call to say goodbye, suddenly unqualified to offer consolation and unwilling or unable to request it from her for myself.

July 7, 2012
Brno, Czech Republic
4:00 PM

"So, you went back?" Tomas prompts. Major Todd looks at a wine bottle, then at my empty glass. I nod my head.

"I didn't call her for a year and a half, not until I graduated from college and moved back home. My brother was in remission."

"Remission?" A term the Rabichek brothers never learnt in Nebraska.

"He got better; the tumors shrank." I smile. "I was so scared that his crazy cancer cure stuff wouldn't end up working, but it did. He even posted his CT scans on Facebook. I mean, seriously! My brother has pictures of his lungs floating around the Internet! Who does that?"

The boys laugh and look relieved, and I am jealous. Even now I can't trust that Kristoff's 'all clear' is more than a temporary reprieve. Is that why I tell strangers his story? So that their knowledge of his survival can insure against his relapse, like a record in an off-site archive that can't possibly be updated, that even God must leave alone?

Oberhausen 1934
Marktstraße - The Toyshop

Mila sat on the last step of the hall staircase and watched the boy. For half-a-clock he'd been pressing five fingers and the tip of his nose against the toyshop window. Only his eyes moved as they followed the steel blue blur of the new train Poppy had unpacked yesterday: Locomotive 52. Five blue cars with gold handles and railings, red doors and windows and the tiniest light bulb on the engine top.

This morning Poppy was telling a customer that he would never sell the 52.
"This will be a rare one. The manufacturer is closing…bankrupt."
Mila could not see the train, but she heard it as it ticked around the toyshop: Ott, ott, rott, rott, krott, krott. Bankrott.

Mila gazed curiously at the boy. A newspaper was crushed between his dirty shirt and the glass. The morning was almost over. Mila stepped out beyond the ting of the door chime.

"You will never sell your last paper! How old are you?" Mila could see the boy's

suspenders. He had no jacket.

"I'm six and I'm Erlig. You're only four. I heard your father tell the last customer, so you don't have to tell me."

"Well, just because you're older and have good ears doesn't mean you can run faster than me," Mila said. "Race to the cafe!" She dashed off down Marktstraße. Ixi, Mila's German shepherd, bolted out the door after her. Erlig put his heels into the pavement, but his legs ached from the chill of the street and a morning of waving papers.

Mila slid her buckled boots to a standstill at the cafe doorstep.

"Poppy lets me run down the street as long as Ixi is here," she puffed as Erlig rushed up. Ixi stretched out under a table while the children walked toward the glow of the pastry case. Erlig's tiny torso growled and Mila giggled.

"Mummy says that's a bad sound. It means I fed my dinner to my dog."
Erlig hoped this little girl, who went hungry just to hear her stomach, had money so they could split a Brotchen. His own pocket was full of coins, and he could count them all by touch, but they would buy tomorrow's papers. Every extra Reichspfennig would go to his mother. Mila seemed to know all this.

"Pick something," she whispered. "Herr Seidel knows me. But do not touch the glass!"

"Ah, Miss Herrmann," Herr Seidel smiled at the pair, "I shall tell your mother that you ate a roll here and she needn't worry about your meals for another week."

"What does he mean?" asked Erlig, as they sat down by the window with tiny cups of chocolate.

"I don't eat at home. It is so boring, nothing to look at but the plates and dishes. I eat here where I can watch the people." But Erlig watched the steam swirl up from his mug. Then he looked up at Mila's eyes. They were blue like metal. They moved from left to right, then right to left, as the mothers and shoppers and business fathers stepped into view and then beyond it.

"Do you like food?" Erlig asked, when Mila began to stare at his reflection.

"I like to run. Mummy cries sometimes when I don't eat. Sometimes she lets poor children come to our dining room above the toyshop. She thinks I don't know how to eat because I don't see other children do it. I heard her say that to Agnes. Agnes is our housekeeper. Agnes doesn't like running. You are good at eating. Mummy would like to have you come to the dining room. Then, I will take some bites and we'll race back to your house! Are you poor?" The plan sounded wonderful, except:

"My house is far away," Erlig said. "Even with Ixi, your mummy won't let you run there."

"What if we tell her it is close? I run very fast," Mila said. Erlig stood up solemnly.

"I will only come back to see you if you promise to eat and if you promise not to lie to your mummy. Now I have to go. Thank you Herr Seidel for the chocolate."

"Nice boy, your new friend," Herr Seidel said, as he picked up the cups and the crumbs.

"His name is Erlig and he's six and I am four."

"Well, run home and tell your mother what you ate and that Herr Seidel wishes her a smile." The ring-smack of the cafe door and a blur of dress and shoes was Mila's answer.

2011
Coeur d'Alene, ID

I did not tell Mila about my brother when I dialed her number to apologize for not calling in so long. '*My brother had cancer*' was a valid excuse; I wasn't sure how she'd react to '*but he's okay; he's fine now.*' I settled with '*I am sorry*,' equal emphasis on all its syllables. Pure apology, something I am a little too good at, actually.

"And how are you, Gabrielle?"

"Okay. I'm okay."

"You're too young to be just okay."

"I know. But I'm just okay." I asked Mila how she was holding up.

"If I could just forget, just for a little while…" She trailed off.

Kim had been gone almost three years but every two weeks the memories came flooding back. If she could block them out, she said, she could move on. But where do you move on to at eighty-two? Where do you go when you remember being four before a World War? How do you disremember death when you feel your strength failing?

Instead, Mila was forgetting to organize grocery shopping, when to pay her bills and how to file taxes. She had lived through air raids and rumors of the Red Army. I sensed some of that same terror in her voice as she related missing her prescription refill and fainting alone on her kitchen floor. I tried to downplay her anxiety, observing that bad memory is the reason I write. I encouraged her to jot down notes. I worried. I didn't know the warning signs of dementia or understand that a woman who remembered the name of

her favorite doll could possibly be its victim.

Mila continued to answer my calls, and, for a year, I would let her tell and retell the same stories, never revealing that I had heard them before. With each repetition her voice peeled back more colors: gold leaf floating in the alcohol she'd served to that inventor, termites stampeding in the walls of her Hawaii house, Pacific sun hammering the harbor on the afternoon they found her husband's plane.

One morning Mila talked for three hours. I was cleaning my parent's house, pretending to be surprised by the termite story, when she paused, sighed, and said:

"I finally remember the year I was twelve."

I stopped ironing my dad's dress shirt and strained to listen as Mila hushed to a whisper. Two weeks ago the History Channel aired a documentary about the Fall of Berlin. She had watched the footage of dead bodies stacked six feet tall and deep along the city's roadways. Memories she had repressed for six decades, images of digging through bombed-out Oberhausen buildings to find the dead, the dismembered and the wounded, now dismantled the refuge of her forgetfulness. She was a terrified girl again, sifting through the rubble that filled the living rooms, choking on the ash that filled the air, the ash that no one would reverently scatter.

"I was forced to join the League of German Maidens in 1942. That was my title, Air Raid Warden. If we did not show up, we did not get our ration cards for the week."

The weeks had stretched into a year…and now, after decades of straining to recall those months of horror, Mila needed to forget. But, with her memory restored, would it now be possible for me to say:

"I really want to write about you."

Mila told me she was too tired to reminisce. Remembering had become an act of grieving.

"Now I know, if I had had these memories for the last sixty years, I would not have been able to live."

I steamed away salty spots on the white linen, and as Mila agreed that maybe there was something I could write, I listened to her resolve to go on living.

And I pray to God to have mercy upon us
And pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain[iv]

Berlin 1950

"You'll never make it; you're nineteen! How do you expect to pay for an apartment? You really care so little about my shop? About continuing this tradition?" Poppy wanted Mila to stay and talk up the expensive train sets he'd finally managed to invest in again and to flirt with the young dads who came to pick them out.

"Mila, you helped rebuild these rooms! You! On television?! You're a girl. Will you ask questions, expect men to even answer you? Mila, answer me!"

Mila remembered everything her father had said as she dressed for her interview.

"Should you ever get married, don't expect…" but she'd closed the door on the end of his threat.

Oh, the toy shop! Her father had taught her to fix the broken toys brought in for birthdays and special occasions. He paid her to sit at the bench by the south window, gluing, soldering and wiring the trains and trucks together. Torn teddy bears were her specialty. But she couldn't stay.

One afternoon, four months ago, right before Christmas, when the sun disappeared by three and the lamp outside caught the wet snow flakes in a globe of light and she almost felt content, her father had walked across the cracked tile floor. He set two dolls down on the workbench. The porcelain head of the first had been snipped off, as if by a cruel sibling. Stiff batting peeked out the collar of its red velvet dress, the slice set off by delicate lace.

"I'd reattached that by sewing something sturdy and then gluing the neck back like this, nice and deep," and Poppy pushed the porcelain face tight against the cotton torso. "And this other doll…cut off the arm and get a replacement from that bottom drawer. Do your best to match the skin tones, but I'm not sure how many plastic ones we have left."

The baby doll's arm had melted length wise, the bubbled plastic exposing a slim hollow tube. Her compassionate little owner had wrapped the injured limb in gauze and paper. Mila removed the tiny cast and crumpled it. Then there were tears searing their way from behind Mila eyes, something she'd never let her father see since he came back alive. She squeezed the cast harder, till her hand went white and numb, shutting her eyes. The tears melted back to the bright snowflakes she'd memorized against her retina.

"Mila, what's the matter?"

She hadn't known, had only known she could not stay and stitch limbs and sell puppets and dust miniature petticoats.

That basket full of tiny legs and extra porcelain heads, that had been why she'd

bought the suit, had sliced the ad from the Saturday paper. It had asked for a confident young woman, beautiful implied, to audition for a spot as an announcer on West Germany's first new television network, **ARD**. *If she could forget the workbench she could find the confidence.*

Now Mila stood in **A**rbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen **R**undfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik **D**eutschland*. The front desk was merely a table covered in files, a telephone at one corner. An interview, not Mila's, was in progress. There were no benches for anyone to sit and wait, so Mila stood and stared out the foyer's double glass doors, marveling at their unshattered surface, a phenomenon that showed the war was really over. But their frail rigidity, while proving peace, didn't promise it forever.*

A girl wearing a more expensive suit than Mila's walked out from a door marked STUDIO. *The secretary waved Mila in.*

"Head towards the stage; they will see you."

The room was darker than Mila had expected, or seemed darker against the off-white brilliance of the stage's backdrop. They called it a stage. Just a platform, carpeted so that the heels of guests wouldn't clack. Equipment hemmed it in. The announcer's desk was a slender oval, hard wood, with a cutout for notes and pens. They were waiting near it, the director, the filming supervisor, two senior reporters. Mila shook hands just as her father had taught her when she was three and customers had asked her for her name or her opinion.

She took a seat, script in hand.

Hans would play her co-host.

"Let's roll the camera's just for reference," someone said. Two cameramen stepped forward; one climbed a ladder to gain a higher angle. The floor lights clicked on one by one, twenty-six inch globes of light that circled the stage like planets all sharing an orbit. Every face disappeared behind the fierce glow, but Mila could feel their eyes and nods as she began to read.

"Guten Abend*, West Berlin. We bring you a special bulletin this evening from Paris. Members of the Committee for the Study of the European Question have issued a report today advocating the use of the Atomic bomb in Korea. International leaders think such drastic measures might be necessary as Russia surrounds itself with satellite nations. Today Russia is supporting the North Korean army as they close in on American forces. Will she encourage an attack against Western Germany tomorrow?"*[v]

As if in answer to her question, Hans hit the floor head covered against the hollow

boom of shattering glass. The cameras swung towards the floor lights with military reflex, then back to capture Mila's calm voice and face as she explained, still deep in character:

"Dear audience, as you have heard, and maybe seen, there has been a minor explosion here on set. Please don't be alarmed. This was merely an overheated bulb trying to sabotage the new segment, not the station. There have been, I believe, no injuries." She would have continued with the night's announcements but was interrupted by the station's team applauding from the studio's wings where they'd sought safety.

Mila had the job before Hans had picked himself up off the floor. The director would watch the tape a half a dozen times, searching for the moment where Mila flinched, and wouldn't find it.

2011
Edmonton, Alberta

In August, I moved for school, drove to Canada with Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* narrated through my sound system instead of music.

In September, Mila began saying, "I love you," at the end of every call.

In October, she agreed to let me write her story.

"And if there's ever something you need to talk about but can't tell your mother, this will happen in your life, you can always talk to me about it."

November came. I asked Mila what her father's toy shop had been called. She answered that it started with an 'H,' but wouldn't divulge the other letters because they belonged to her maiden name, a secret she adamantly kept. I proposed Odenheim as a fictional one. She didn't like it.

In December, I spent ten hours scanning Google Deutschland, trying to track down footage of Mila reporting on Queen Elizabeth, but without her real German name it was impossible.

In January, I won a scholarship to a writing workshop in Prague. Mila was pleased. She had lived in Prague during the War.

In February, Mila warned me not to forget lip balm and a poncho. I reminded her the trip wasn't till June.

In March, on my birthday, my bank telephoned with a special offer on accidental death and dismemberment insurance, which I declined. Instead, I booked my flight:

Spokane, Washington to Prague, forgoing the airline's trip insurance to save sixty bucks. Mila cautioned against pickpockets and added:

"I wish I could go with you."

In April, I wrote and rewrote the contract for Mila's biography and promised I would see her soon. On the month's last day I packed my clothes and books into my car, used chewing gum to re-stick the plastic kitchen baseboards in my basement apartment, and got the damage deposit back in full.

In May, I drove from Canada to Idaho, passing through a snowstorm, then spring, and happily found Blossom Mountain's lilacs in full bloom.

On May 20, 2012, I went for coffee with my friend Katie, who was curious to know how I'd be spending my summer. I searched the Prague workshop website and excitedly read her the list of classes, then the list of scholarships.

My mouth went dry.

In a sinking moment that left me breathless, I realized I'd been misreading my financial aid benefits. The John Woods Scholarship did not reduce tuition *to* a thousand dollars, but *by* a thousand dollars.

I was two-grand short.

Purchasing a non-transferrable, non-refundable ticket had felt frugal two months ago if also a little reckless. Now, it felt stupid. If I pooled everything, including my car fund, I'd have seven hundred dollars to buy a subway pass and food.

"Can I live in Prague for six weeks on seven hundred dollars?" I asked Shana, the writing program's coordinator. She suggested buying lunch and dinner from grocery stores.

"Keep busy with classes and writing. Absolutely no souvenir shopping, maybe two museum visits…tops. And no extra traveling."

Shana gave me a bunch of sandwich ideas that included spreadable cheese.

"Have a credit card for emergencies," her last bit of advice.

I borrowed a bag from Katie's sister-in-law, Hannah, who lived in Idaho but had grown up in Munich.

"Okay, I'm letting you take this because I trust you'll bring it back." She adjusted the shoulder straps.

"Of course I'll return it!"

"It's just some of my friends don't have your conscience," Hannah said. "And look," she pointed to the embroidered logo. "Deuter is a German brand. People will think you

are just a local backpacker and won't bother you as much." I sighed and slipped the bag off my back.

"The only adventure your bag's going to see is between the airport and the guest house I'm staying at." The scholarship mess and my spectacular misconstrual of the word 'reduction' poured out it one breath.

"I'm so stupid," I said. "I still can't believe I read that information wrong, over and over again! I wanted to go see Germany! My reason for going on this trip was to get to Berlin to find out more about Mila's career. Now I'm stuck in Prague for six weeks, eating spreadable cheese." We sat down.

"Gabbie… drop out of that expensive course. Keep your money and go to Germany! You can stay at a lot of hostels for two thousand dollars."

"But the whole point of going to Prague was to take the writing class…"

"Gabbie." Hannah's bag sat upside-down on the other side of the coffee table, its' shoulder straps flailed accusingly. "Tell me what you are writing."

"A biography of a German woman. You know that."

"I also know you're talented, but I'm telling you that if you travel so close to Germany and you don't go, as wonderful as this book is going to be and even though you are my friend, I swear, I will refuse to read it."

"Hey!"

"No. I'm serious." Hannah's threat had less to do with authenticity or research responsibilities and more to do with pragmatism. That I would suffocate my entire summer in a single European city horrified her sense of practicality.

She planned out my new trip, right there, drawing a rough oval in the fuzz of a couch cushion and mapping Germany on the fabric's texture. We began dropping dots and 'x's along and around it: tic-tac-toe, but better. Hannah transferred the destinations to a napkin, and I left with the Deuter bag and the sense that packing light now had a purpose.

"Pilgrimage: a journey undertaken in the light of a story. The story precedes us. We have certain expectations…we want to test with our eyes and see if they stand up, to sound them and see if they're genuine."[vi]

May 24, 2012

The next afternoon, I stood in my parents' kitchen, my mom's recipe in hand, about to make potato salad for my family's first out-door barbeque of the season. The telephone receiver wedged securely under my ear, I was also about to announce to Mila my plan to switch out the summer school workshop for a backpacking trip through Germany.

"Hello, Mila? This is Gabrielle."

"Hello."

"How are you feeling, today?"

"Not very good; I have come down with a cold again." Mila left off the 'my dear' that she'd used to begin dozens of our conversations, but I didn't notice the omission.

"Oh no! I'm so sorry to hear that." I was crouched next to the potato bin, trying to count and speak simultaneously. "I was hoping to come over tomorrow to start recording for the book, but if you're not feeling well enough…" I paused. I waited for her to postpone and to ask me how *I* was doing, like she always did. I was so excited and couldn't wait to tell her that I was going to Berlin and Oberhausen and seven cities in between.

But she stayed in declarative mode:

"I read that paper you left here." The disclaimer that stated I would record Mila's stories and turn our conversations into text. We had gone through it together on Monday. Now it was Thursday.

"I appreciate what you said about this being my story and how you mean to respect that." I squeezed a potato, tested it for rottenness, kept listening. "And I…this book…it's not going to work. I talked to my old law professor, and he said what I am thinking: it is a stupid idea."

"What." But I had heard her perfectly. I had the potato in my left hand and the telephone in the white knuckles of my right.

Mila began to respond. I sat on the ground. I knew the procedure for receiving bad news, even if Mila had forgotten the etiquette around delivering it.

"Yes, if you write this book, people back in Germany will not believe me. There is no way to prove that any of my stories happened. They will think I have money; they might sue me."

I exhaled. Fear was holding Mila hostage. I just needed to keep her on the phone, like a negotiator would, and explain how unlikely a libel suit actually was. I'd be the one on the hook anyhow, not her. She would understand. I set down the potato.

"Can we talk about it?" I asked calmly, ignoring the tunnel vision that had crept out of the pantry. The line was silent but not dead. Three long seconds passed. I needed Mila to turn to page five of the book contract, where it outlined anonymity and fictionalization options and dealt with the catalogue of concerns I'd brainstormed: memory loss, trauma, confidentiality, publication. Mila quitting the project had only made the list in a parenthetical sort of way… to prove I had considered it, however briefly.

"We *are* talking about it," Mila said.

I had not considered her abandoning me.

"Do you have the paper?" I asked.

"I do," she answered. I sensed I had one shot at this. *Just keep her talking.* And she did keep on, for fifteen syllables:

"You know, there is someone at the door, a salesman. Goodbye."

The floor was, thankfully, not far.

I could feel the hardness of pine planks against my scalp and the grit of the kitchen under my arms. There were grease spots on the ceiling I'd never seen while standing. Between the grey stains, every week that I'd spent planning Mila's "stupid book" queued up a parade of protest…or was it mockery? A crooked waste-of-timeline. I remember hoping Mila had heard me crying before she disconnected the call.

An angry wailing filled the farmhouse. Polite, modern people didn't sob this way. But I had to recognize the sound as my own voice.

"Someone at the door? Really? Shit! No one ever visits you!"

Mila had used her storytelling tone for the excuse. I was simply another character in her montage, a fabrication she'd edited away, deliberately and with ease. With a lie.

Can we talk about it? What had *it* been, after all? Mila hadn't asked.

Can we talk about the easy way we spoke to each other, the way you said "I love you," and how I really meant it back; the way you somehow were my grandmother; the way you scolded me for being listless and 'just okay;' the way I counted on, but never cashed in, this offer:

"Wherever you are, no matter what time it is, you can always call me collect."

Beside my ear, the dial tone blinked, then blared. The offer had officially expired.

I had promised Mila: "*Your story is your own."* Lying on a kitchen floor, I came to recognize this as the falsehood, the false hope which we all harbor: that we can age in anonymity; that we can hoard our life and its story; that, with the currency of our own loneliness, we can pay down the pain of separation.

"It's going to be okay; it's going to be fine; you're fine; better now than later," my mom said as we sat that night, sipping martinis.

The mantras helped. The alcohol helped, but only to a point. As it wore off, I could hear Mila's voice reciting an incident that involved bad luck and bubbly:

> *My worst interview ever. 1953. The television station was doing a series on German fashion abroad. Soraya's mother was a German. S-O-R-A-Y-A. The Persian Shah's second wife. She was absolutely breathtaking. The Shah couldn't keep his hands off her during the entire interview and wouldn't even listen to my questions. But what were they thinking, sending me? He was secular, but still a Muslim man. I was a woman, a child really. The only reason he did not throw me out: he was on a state visit, trying to sell oil. On the train ride home, I was in first class. I ordered champagne and cried. It helped. I think it helped. Anyways, Barbara Walters had little luck when she interviewed him in the seventies. She was good. He was still rude.*

I called Mila back, the next day, just to make sure. I let the phone ring, listened to Mila answer, and announced my name. I heard her breath and the deliberate click re-initiate the ritual of separation. A week later, I dialed again and considered, for a moment, changing my name and accent – *strangers can, of course, be introduced* – but left a message under my full name, *Gabrielle Saurette*, *a nice, French*...

Can they be disowned?

People said to give Mila time, but I knew the investment she put in stubbornness and snap decisions, and the power they lent to her life. I attempted to disentangle all the memories she'd left in mine.

"…As I am forgotten
And would be forgotten, so I would forget
Thus devoted, concentrated in purpose."[vii]

July 7, 2012
Brno, Czech Republic
5:00 PM

I lean back from my summary of all these scenes, lean against the stable wall where Todd and Tomas and Jan are still standing. Brno's afternoon sun has baked the stucco, and warmth prickles through my tee shirt, not a shiver, not quite its opposite.

"Wow." Jan's sympathy, like his appreciation of sobriety, is understated. "What are you going to do?" he asks slowly.

"Well, try to forget. Find a new story. Or write a novel."

He's a fiction fan:

"Write a novel!"

I look around. Anna's little brother is finishing his beer at a rate that says our ride's about to leave. His sister carries her costume towards the van. She still looks pale. The sun drops behind the courtyard's green wall. Coolness from under the house tries to slip out across the cobblestones, but the heat is heavy and stands its ground.

"I'll figure it out," I say.

I don't figure it out. Not now. Not during the silent ride back to Solopisky. Not after Michal gives me a plate of *kolache* and wishes me 'good sleep.' I wander through the empty guesthouse, not-figuring-it-out.

I brew *Winter Fruit & Spice*, then remember that I never got the chance to share a pot of tea with Mila. Even three *kolaches* can't numb regret or silence my mind's variations on the theme, "You should have known."

I sit on the doorstep with my mug, watching the cement and stucco houses crouch between the valley's trees. Blue seeps out of the sky, turns the green hills grey. Fireflies blink against the blank air. I try to light a candle. It is so humid that the match tips crumble into sulphery mud. The wick stand flameless and the day is suddenly gone.

"For those who walk in darkness
Both in daytime and in the night time
The right time and the right place are not here."[viii]

II

Crisis. Derived from the Greek word *krinein*, a verb that means 'decide.' Crisis. A decision. Also, the turning point in an illness or disease.

I remember wondering about the word when I was still too young to read, but old enough to kneel up for rosary. One evening, after we let our prayerful postures collapse and while I watched smoke ribbon away from the candlewicks that had been lighting up the room, I wanted to know what *crisis* meant.

We were already in pajamas, ready to mix Nesquick powder into vanilla ice cream. Dad would read half a chapter from *The Hobbit*, our reward for being good that day. But before the warning, "DO NOT drip that on your nightie!" and before we heard how the dwarves were chased by giant spiders, I asked:

"What's a crisis?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well," and I tucked my sockless feet beneath me. "We've been praying for the crisis in the Church forever! What is it?"

"A crisis is a tough time," Mom approximated, "a hard time, when there are problems." The pope, priests and people like us were having serious disagreements about what was happening in the Church, specifically about what language the Mass should be said in.

I had soaked up rumors of this Crisis during supper parties spent sitting on the laps of my parents and their friends: nuns were suddenly homeless for their refusal to exchange their veils and tunics for street clothes; priests had been thrown out of their parishes for refusing to phase out the liturgy which had, in the first place, attracted them to their vocation; my mom used to be called out of class in high school to be lectured by the parish school principal about *her* dad's faults.

Grandpa Dick had stopped going to the Rapid City Cathedral after he discovered an oil painting of St. Joseph abandoned in an alley by 'reformers.' He and Grandma had found an old priest to say Latin Mass once a month in a windowless construction office at the edge of town.

We went to church there once a year, when we visited Grandma and Grandpa for five days, trying to catch up on the three hundred sixty we'd missed. We always made homemade ice cream and root beer floats, ate smoked turkey sandwiches with Wonder

Bread, Miracle Whip and lots of salt, ran in the sprinkler, rode Grandpa's wheelchair and played Uno till past bedtime. At Christmas, when Winnipeg's winter held us captive, my dad always borrowed a camcorder and filmed the baking, the eating and unwrapping. We blew kisses to the camera and squealed, "I love you Grandpa! I love you Grandma!" before the season faded out.

July 1998
Rapid City. South Dakota

I sat on the floor of Grandpa and Grandma Karsky's kitchen, flipping through a black and white picture book about the Korean War. Even if everything had been printed in full color, it was difficult to imagine the sky could be anything other than that consistent sheet of grey. Grandpa was telling my brother, Kristoff, how he used to creep by night near enemy camps, unspooling telephone lines along the ground, hoping the shadows would do their part to cover him.

"Every night, when I went on watch, I'd count the minutes and hours by praying the rosary, fifteen minutes for one pass, four rosaries for an hour; that's why God gave us ten fingers: you never need the beads." I flipped a page and found a 'line runner,' but the caption didn't say it was Richard Karsky.

"It was good I got out when I did," Grandpa was saying. "We signed up because we believed in freedom, but when it came down to it, they didn't care about ending goddamn Communism at all!"

"Dick," my grandma scolded from the la-z-boy. "Don't talk like that in front of the kids!"

"Well, I do want God to damn Communism." I closed the book and slipped it back on the shelf.

"Are you going to bed, Snickerdoodle?"

"Maybe." I ran over to Grandpa's chair and let him pinch my nose.

"Wait," said Kristoff. "Aren't you going to tell us the story about the hill, escaping off the hill?" Grandpa looked at me.

"Only if Snickerdoodle goes to bed. Too little still for that one." So at the bottom of the stair case, where the carpet treads turned ninety degrees and musty basement odors tickled my nose, I sat and listened.

"One night, our unit had lain some line along the front. We were spotted by the Commies, and surrounded. We had enough ammunition to hold out for twelve hours at least, and the brush cover was thick. We thought we'd dig in, hold our position on the hill till dark really fell, and then crawl our way out."

With my hand resting on my knees, I wondered why I'd been sent to bed. I'd heard this story every summer. This close shave with death was the reason Grandpa used to chain smoke and had had to teach himself to not duck under tables when doors slammed. I knew this story, but I kept listening.

"Then before the light faded, the CO, he decides we should probably surrender; and I can't believe it, that he hasn't heard what happens to American soldiers who run up the white flag: if those Commies don't kill you right off, they torture you, then they kill you. He must have been brand new on the job not to know we were all going to be dead men if he does what he's saying he's going to do. There's not many of us left. We try to quietly tell him how this is the worst idea, that we might as well hang our dog tags from a jungle branch and walk into the line of fire. But he finds the flag in his goddamn pack."

The curse hung in the air.

"What happened?" Kristoff asked.

"I did what I had to. I shot him."

The carpet felt suddenly rough under my bare feet. My hands left my knees and found my shoulders, arms crisscrossed in a hug that held back my gasp.

"But he was American."

"We would all have died."

"So then what did you do?"

"Took off his dog tags, rolled up the white flag and waited. After the cover of dark, we all crawled out on our bellies. We swore to each other we'd never tell."

In five years, old age would come too soon. Grandpa began to claim that what I'd overheard never happened, that he always loved the military, and that he'd, quite simply, convinced the commanding officer to not surrender. In those last few months, when we wanted all the stories to be ratified and recorded, he refused to own up to a single one. He'd burnt away their tracks with something like forgetfulness or remorse. A fifty-year marriage, ten children, thirty-six grandchildren, and a life of suffering born with something more than patience, these rested on the outcome of an anecdote that no one could confirm.

Grandpère and Grandmère Saurette, Dad's parents, lived only 1.9 kilometers from our Winnipeg avenue, but our visits to their house were infrequent and brief.

Grandmère did not sew, crochet, or quilt like Grandma Millie. She came to few birthday parties: caring for Grandpère kept her busy. Instead, she sent us strange gifts: tube socks, old jewelry, French chapter books, a real iron that plugged in…and that could melt my dolly's dresses. Mom hid the iron from me.

And Grandpère gave no gifts, except for the memory of a single afternoon. It begins with straw bales under my snow pants and the bounce of a sleigh. We glide by a stand of maple trees. Buckets perch on the trunks with hive-like precision. My eyes are glued to the burnt-gold of the maple syrup candy. Kristoff stands beside me. I can feel Grandpère behind us. He watches our unmittened hands twist the sweetness up into an amber globe, popsicle stick fossilized for now. The shack's dull grey walls match the snow-packed troughs we twirl in. We take no pictures. The ride home is a blur and my memory of the candy's flavor dissolves against the confusion of Grandpère's ability to take us anywhere alone.

In two short years, when I am five, he and I will be reintroduced, and then again…and every time.

Honolulu 1969

If life were fair, or good, or safe, Mila and Roxanne would never have met. If safe, their husbands wouldn't have shared a room at Honolulu's VA hospital all spring; if good, the word Vietnam would not be an adjective for 'conflict;' if fair, John and Ray wouldn't have headed back as soon as they were cleared to fly.

Roxanne's husband, Ray, did not belong to John's division, but as recuperation buddies, the pair found out they both loved sailing. After the clatter of their plane engines, they found solace in the poetry of currents and cross-breezes. Their wives took note. One weekend, when Ray was almost recovered, Roxanne bought him an old wooden yacht, and when he left, she told him to end the war soon, so they could restore it and sail it home.

American Army Residence
March 1969

"Mila. This is Roxanne."

Fairness. Goodness. Safeness. They were Army wives. Their lives possessed none of these qualities.

"You don't have to tell me, my dear."

They listened to the humid silence of each other's kitchens. A sympathetic cliché that Roxanne would have hated wedged itself behind Mila's teeth. Mila waited for her friend to take a breath.

"I guess I just believed he'd beaten the odds. Two serious crashes and, you know, you think, no…you just think a little less, you just think that maybe there's a–." Roxanne paused.

"I know." Empathy felt dangerous.

"I just can't forgive myself for buying that damn boat. No. Not for buying it, for imagining Ray and I standing together on deck in a sunset. Can you believe that! I fell asleep with that ridiculous hope night after night after night! To think I could be so sentimental, so…"

If life were predictable or protectable, Mila would have known what to say.

A week later, Mila received another phone call.

"I'm going to the mainland, to my family, tomorrow," Roxanne said, without announcing herself.

"Okay. Do you want to meet tonight to let the children say goodbye?"

"Mila, they're five, three and one. They don't need to say goodbye."

"Alright then, I —."

"Oh," Roxanne cut Mila off. "The papers for the boat are in your post box on base. There'll be a fee when you and John get it, you know, seaworthy."

"What do you mean?"

"The sailboat? I'm giving it to you."

"I can't accept that. Roxanne, you know I can't."

"It's just a gift."

"No. Sell it back to that dealer. He wasn't honest about the work that it needs, and you need the money."

"No. I don't need anything, just need to put this all behind me."

"I don't —."

"Goodbye."

For two days, Mila left the yacht bobbing at the Honolulu recreational landing. But she wasn't superstitious, so on the third morning she packed a picnic lunch, put her kids, a hammer and a toolbox in the car, and drove to the slip. What the dealer had never told Ray and Roxanne was that every nail in the sailboat had to be replaced with a galvanized, rust resistant model. It was good work to wait out the war with.

Karen and Chris ran up and down the length of the deck and Kim slept away the March afternoons to the lullaby of hammer strokes. They went everyday for a month and soon shiny nails dotted the dull silver of the unfinished wood.

April 1, 1969
Waikiki, Hawaii

Mila didn't hear the car because a rock dove swooped low just then, and the children began shrieking with delight.

"Mummy! Mummy! The bird is dive-bombing us!"

Then she saw the army sedan. She smiled. She didn't recognize the officers. Word had really gotten around base about the sailboat.

"If you've come to check progress, I have a good report to give, Captain," and Mila laughed and pushed up her bandana out of her eyes.

"Mrs. Mila Pierre?" It was the way they said her name that stopped her hands.

"Yes?"

"Wife of John Pierre?"

"Yes." And she sat down on the bumper of her car. Above, on deck, Karen and Chris shushed each other, their toes gripping to where the boat's guardrail had been. One officer glanced at the children, uncertainly.

"Just tell me where he is," Mila said.

"He's in hospital, here."

"He's okay, then. Karen, Chris, come down. We need to go, now."

He was as comfortable as possible, considering everything. That's what the nurses would say. Mila would find him in a makeshift trauma bay that during peacetime held extra mops and lab coats, not heroes. She spent four days saying her one-sided goodbyes. And the boat was a gift, nothing more. A gift, that was all.

Spring 1997
Calgary, Alberta

"Your mom is sick," Dad's saying as he wraps my long hair into loose, uneven pigtails. "She's having trouble swallowing, and she has to rest for a while, maybe for a couple of weeks. I need you to really help out with the little girls." I promise to help. I go to school, hating my hair-do. In the afternoon, I walk home and find the kitchen quiet. The girls are still "farmed out." I sit on my bedroom floor, and, while I wait for Dad to come prove he still knows how to cook, I finish sewing a beanbag dove Mom and I started together.

Two weeks ago, Mom cut this pattern and eleven like it from thick paper. I measured beans, wound lengths of thread, folded foot-square swatches of felt. Mom wrote directions and slipped needles and pins into these homemade, Ziplocked craft packs. We delivered them on a Friday night to the church bazaar and I begged to keep one dove.

Now, I finish stitching up its felt sides and funnel kidney beans into the dime sized hole I've left, then whip the opening shut. I lift it by the tail and watch the head bulge dangerously. I jab the needle into a blue tuft of carpet and walk up five steps to the kitchen. There's an absence of onions, of simmering, of the hiss of steam and thud of wooden spoons against a skillet.

I climb the last six steps to Mom's room and knock. She's awake, propped up on pillows, breathing so I can hear her. I hide the dove behind my back, walk over cautiously and lean against the bed.

"How are you feeling?" I don't wait for an answer. "I made something for you."

Her face looks less pale with the white felt body of the bird against it. We talk, just her and I, much like the day last fall when she told me how babies are made and born. Like last year, I will not remember her exact words from today, but only the gist of them: Mom is sick; Mom might die; you have to be a good big sister and help your dad out. Always do what he says.

Sunlight sneaks through the blinds. We let it in and the dove becomes the conversation's prop.

"Death is when the soul and body split up for a while, you know that. When I die, my soul like the dove will fly towards the sun." She tries to lift the bird but doesn't make it as high as the window's sill. Heaven or God, that is the sun's role in this analogy.

"You're not going to die, Mom."

But I think: *you never taught me how to iron, how to use my little iron. How will I iron Dad's shirts?*

She won't remember that we talked about this, talked about how death is made. In a month, when Mom is well enough to swallow again, I'll find the dove inside her headboard's cupboard, and will try to discard my fear with the forgotten bird. But in fourteen years, I'll still remember the thud of its body against the trashcan's empty bottom.

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.[ix]

III

July 8, 2012
Czech Republic

The refrigerator's tiny hum wakes me. Or is it the silence? I'm ready in enough time to pack a sandwich and catch a ride to Prague with half the Semikova family. Michal swerves the Volkswagen in and out of sleeping towns. On the edge of Černošice a lonely farmer builds his vegetable stand. Tomatoes crowd each other like unbroken billiard balls, some ripe, some green. Layers of lettuce snuggle in between in the cool morning shade.

We beat the train that I've been riding for two weeks. The empty track passes yards where weeds choke clotheslines and laundry anticipates the heat. Between the houses, on both banks of the Valtava, Prague weekenders crawl out of their tents.

The river flows from the campsites to the city. During Smetana Street's short red light, Anna, Adela, Martina, and I jump out of the van. Michal drives off to search out elusive Prague parking while I follow his daughters to St. Clement's, a church wedged between apartment blocks and empty monasteries. We hear Sunday Mass in old Slavonic, and after the final announcements, I stay to beg for Divine intervention in my case of the missing thesis project, and for maybe just a small dose of retrograde amnesia.

"So today, you visit…where?" Adela asks, as I join the girls outside. I point in the direction of Prague Castle Mountain.

"Strahov Library. I will go to see the monastery books." I've loved libraries ever since I was too little for story time. Strahov's is one of the most beautiful libraries in Europe. Adela nods. The sisters are all leaving for summer camp tomorrow. I'll be catching a train to Berlin while they pack, so in Karlova street, where the shop facades give the noon light a mustardy glow, we shake hands and say goodbye.

"Have good…travels in, ah, Deutschland."

"Thanks."

I need a novel for my trip. My handwritten directions to Prague's English Bookstore & Cafe take me down towards Charles Bridge. Faces, camera's and sun burnt shoulders choke its span. The crowd quivers more than the Bridge's thirty statues, but the tourists have packed themselves immobile between the stationary saints.

I don't merge with the bodies. My list of streets leads me along, not across, the Valtava. Down by the water, beer gardens are already filling and from where I stand on

the high embankment the paddleboats, sailboats, and swan shaped boats look like a bunch of bath toys.

A block from the bridge I step into the street to avoid a film crew and their movie scene. A woman wearing a mid-calf floral skirt, buttons running up the middle, and a long sleeved blouse, tucked in, rehearses in front of a tripod. A muffed microphone picks up her lines, hot wind scatters her echo, and the air's humid sheen makes Prague Castle shimmer behind her like a backdrop.

I want to follow the crew to the next location, but I let my feet be pulled away by the need to appear nonchalant, to hide my kindergarten stare and to practice taking art for granted.

12:30 PM
The Globe Bookstore & Cafe
Pštrossova 6, Prague 1

"What can I get you?"

"I'll have the apple strudel and a latte. Thanks." The café, mostly empty, has reservation signs on almost every table. Sunday brunchers begin to wander in. My strudel and coffee comes with the Wi-Fi password that's printed on a slip of paper no bigger than a fortune cookie's prophecy. I log in to my email. Two unread messages. The first is from a guy named Rick Blackwell, a film professor who was supposed to be my mentor for the writing workshop that I'm not attending. I had signed up for his class hoping to learn enough from his expertise in screenplay writing to begin a film version of Mila's broadcast history…back when it was still mine to write. Rick's replied to my question about resources and promises a meeting when I get back from Germany:

> I still like Syd Fields' two books, *Screenplay* and *The Screenwriter's Workbook*.
> I'm old and these books are.
> I'd be happy to talk with you anytime.
> I'm in Prague through 01Aug, and then back again for the duration starting 01Sep.
>
> Enjoy Berlin.
> I hear good things about it.
> Rick

The second email from Nina Black:

> Hey! Does tomorrow still work for you? We might still be able to meet up. I don't really have transportation though… Lidice is about 20 km from Prague so maybe we could hang out here if you can't come to Kladno?? Hopefully you get this message before tomorrow! :) Love Nina.

"Tomorrow" is now today.

Nina, like me, is not quite from Idaho. Her family ended up in Spokane, Washington, a city that just across the state line. Her grandparents were Russian refugees. She is volunteering at an English camp, near Prague.

I weigh a coffee date in a quaint suburb against a tour of a library and write Nina back:

> I'm going to head to Lidice and message you from there. Leaving now. Hopefully there by three.

Two train rides later, I find a lamppost that lists transit codes, dates, and times. The bulletin casts a shadow that I shamelessly monopolize. Across the street the Hotel Diplomat advertises the temperature: Forty Celsius.

A bus arrives before I melt.

PRAHA-KLADNO, printed on a paper sign, flaps as the doors pop open. LIDICE is supposed to be half way between the two.

"Yedna doe Lee-Dee-Chey," I say. 'Jedna' means 'one' in Czech. 'Do' translates to 'to.' The bus driver frowns at me, not angry, just confused. Sandwiched between native speakers, alone, dressed in a faded skirt and Birkenstocks, I look like a woman who should be able to pronounce my destination.

"Ah, Lid-its-ah," he smirks, after I point to the fare chart. He prints a ticket saying, "Jedna do Lid-its-ah," and doesn't count out my change until I repeat the name correctly.

"Lidice."

Prague ends suddenly. The highway sinks as wheat fields billow into hills. The bus has Internet and no air conditioning. No one else seems bothered by the heat but sweat dripping down my back makes me think a trip through these particular amber waves of grain might drown us. We keep breathing, somehow.

"Nina, correction. I'll be there by 3:30."

Refreshing my phone a dozen times does not prompt Nina to respond. I look at a map, trying to figure out when to request my stop. I play with the obviously sealed window. The bus' reader-board catches my eye. Lidice bubbles across the screen.

Suddenly, I'm alone on the road with my sack lunch, a handful of Czech crowns and a phone whose only function is capturing photos and sounds. Beyond double rows of

linden trees, the fields ripple, dull gold under an overcast sky. A sign on a concrete shelter reads LIDICE. I see no town.

Is this why the driver laughed at me? Not for my mispronunciation but because Lidice is a three-sided lean-to at a highway intersection? Up ahead, at the right hand turn, the bus slows down, and, for a split second, I consider running after to beg for an extension to the next real stop. But that's how tourists lose their feet.

I stand there, feeling like this is a cruel, blind audition for a Czech version of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, where the Pevensie kids step off the train to an empty platform and a crossroad. Unlike the story, no housekeeper will be arriving around the bend for me, and the closest film crew is the one I saw wrapping on Smetana Street.

The only thing *I'm* wrapping is my backpack… in a plastic bag. It starts out as a sprinkle but this rain doesn't follow any script, and soon I'm soaked. I turn left, hoping that Nina Black will materialize. A sign puts in an appearance. Lidice 1k! I walk in the direction it suggests, and, when the lane is nearly out of meters, I see houses with matching tile roofs sitting on parallel boulevards in rows that are straight and manicured and almost suburban. My cork soles echo in the narrow front yards, yards that, save for birds, remain as still as sealed movie sets.

The first order of business is to locate Lidice's version of a Starbucks and email Nina in whichever cute, identical house she's staying. I find the town center. My plan is flawed. The town square — all three shops of it — are shut for Sunday observance, though what's observed isn't all that clear: instead of a church, there's an art gallery, as empty as any chapel these days, but open.

"Ahoy! Do you speak English?" I ask the girl, who seems too bored for how young she is.

"Yes."

"Is there any place here I can get Internet?" I dig out my phone, preemptively. "I am trying to contact a friend who's staying in Lidice. Or is there a hostel or a camp or something nearby?"

"Sorry, no," the gallery attendant says. "But the museum cafe, maybe? At the village, the other end. Maybe they…" She looks at the clock. "I am sorry; I need to close now? The museum, it is open until six o'clock."

A Volkswagen, stuffed full of people, drives by. I stare through the tinting, willing one of the passengers to be blonde, petite, and English speaking, but no one recognizes me. The museum parking lot is empty except for one tour bus.

Can I find the driver and buy a seat back to Prague?

Cement arcades flank a colonnade of eight stone pillars that's meant to protect an 'eternal flame,' ironically unlit. The paved space feels like a convent enclosure, hallowed by something other than monk's footsteps. As I pass through the rose garden, the grounds tip down to a stream. The green hollow is creased with footpaths, dotted with life-sized statues, flecked with labeled stones. I walk into the museum to learn why the park is so perfect and so empty.

"The tour begins through that door," the admission clerk explains, after selling me a ticket. "Yes, that one. A video, you must watch before the rest of the exhibit. What language?"

"English, please." The entrance clicks shut. The room goes dark. In the two minutes it takes for the screens to warm up, I wonder if I should have tracked down Nina first.

It's too late. Unprepared, I have paid to become a sequestered juror for an already decided and archived case, for a massacre so complete that daily pronouncements of a guilty verdict are too infrequent.

Frame by frame, catalogues of damning evidence flicker up around me. German soldiers and Hitler youth dynamiting the village out of its valley, all filmed by Nazi propaganda crews. I sit and watch, my hands gripping the bench edge. This documentary begins with photographs of Lidice's men as they walk in groups of five to stand between a firing squad's drunken aim and a barn hung with mattresses and quilts that should have still been wrapped around their sleeping children. Fourteen year olds were not considered boys, but waited with their fathers for their turn. No sound track captured the voice of one who yelled before the soldiers reloaded:

"Just tell us what we have done!"

The executioners said nothing. They were simply following orders. No. Not simply. There is nothing simple about shooting a parish priest or forcing a cripple to walk to his death, nothing simple about tearing toddlers out of their mothers' arms and filming it all.

Hitler demanded Lidice's destruction taped. He would show the Czechs that assassinating his viceroy had been a mistake. He ordered that 'it' be wiped from every map, from every legal reference, every chronicle and file, but held up the video footage as his fury's metaphor. A nameless, non-strategic town barely noticing the war, razed because patriots had grown up there, or, perhaps, passed through, 'Lidice' was to become the Czech language's unspeakable synonym for fear.

Cottages burn. A soldier stops and smiles for the cameraman. The school and the

church explode. The graveyard is bulldozed, its bones, scattered. All the cobbled streets have to be plowed up, and the stream, redirected, before the lives of five hundred Czechs, the site of six-hundred-year-old memories can be turned under the soil and planted with a rippling field of rye.

Because I know I shall not know
The one veritable transitory power
Because I cannot drink
There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing again…[x]

The screens go black. An exit sign begins to glow over a door I didn't notice ten minutes ago.

I linger.

How wise is it to visit a holocaust museum while alone?

But I am not quite alone. Mila's voice manages to find me as I push through to the main exhibit.

So my school was evacuated to Prague and every so often my mother would send a letter with a bit of money inside. I don't know how she managed it. I would take it and go with a group of girls to the bakery and I'd treat them all to delicious Czech pastries. You know? Yes, you make them with your family. Well, I wish you might find this place this summer. It was a tiny shop just around the corner from the hotel there.

I didn't love to share, but the adults warned us never to leave the building alone. Groups of three or four. That was the rule. The Czechs were not happy, you see. The Nazis had done something to them. Girls, German girls, were disappearing, being kidnapped by the angry Czechs. So we always went around in these groups.

That was towards the end of 1942.

10 Cervna 1942 is printed on Lidice's blue, memorial street signs. Cervna. June.
Had Mila ever learned the source of that Czech anger?

July 1, 1942, was the date the Lidice girls scribbled on four-inch slips of dirty paper, the postcards they were allowed to send their grandmothers or aunts.

"We need diapers for the babies, and bandages."

"I am sorry for never writing to you Grandmother and now I am, but just to ask for help. Send money, please for food."

"We are hungry."

"We are all alone."

Translations of the messages slide across the display's screen, each heartrending sheet inscribed with naive expectations of survival. The grandparents' care packages would arrive at the somber return address too late, the authors' little bodies already buried so secretly that their surviving mothers would never find them.

I have no adjectives left for a written record and pictures are forbidden. I stand near the museum exit, sketching a pattern in my notebook, a motif embroidered to a dress whose little girl never had the pleasure of turning three. I look down at what my pen has traced, and it's a tiny bud, a wild Bohemian rose.

Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgment not be too heavy upon us…[xi]

15:45
Lidice
Outside the Museum

The rain has stopped. Exhausted, I wait on the memorial grounds for Nina to collect me. Hopefully, she'll come. The park is where I'd look. A woman in workout gear jogs through the valley, climbing the opposite slope. I squint: not Nina.

Seventy years ago, Lidice's last father and son, who had worked a night shift at the Kladno mine and escaped the dawn execution's role call, pedaled their bicycles down that hill. They had already been warned by farmers about the night raid on the village:

"Do not go back. There's no one left. The children have been bussed away, the women were put on the Kladno train."

"It is my family. I need to know what's happened." Smoke blackened with family photographs burnt the husband's nose.

"Musime se vratit. We must go back. "

The pair had waved and rode away and fifteen minutes later their well wishers heard a rifle's double rapport.

I follow today's afternoon shift of armed security guards down into the valley. Seeing the pair in uniform makes me feel safe, less alone, more likely to survive the heartache, but at the site of St. Martin's Church, a slab scraped bare of pews, parishioners and corner stone, the pain wraps around my legs. A warning of the storm was heard here, on this spot, when, two days before the end, police forbid the Corpus Christi procession Father Sternbeck would have intoned with Latin chant: *Procedamus in pace. Let us go forth in peace*. I sit on the single sanctuary step, where altar boys had daily and for centuries recited King David's forty-second psalm:

"Quia tu, es Deus, fortitudo mea: quare me repulisit, et quare tristis incedo dum affligit me inimicus."

"For thou, oh God, art my strength: why hast Thou cast me off? And why do I go sorrowful whilst the enemy afflictith me?"

June 15, 1995
Winnipeg, Manitoba.
The corner of Church Avenue

We came half-an-hour early for Mass that morning. Mom and I were standing in the back lane behind the church, watching girls maneuver into line. They all wore white dresses and had baskets hanging from their fists, not Easter baskets – Easter was two months ago – but baskets full of rose petals. It was Corpus Christi day, and I was six, and we were going on procession to celebrate Jesus, present in the Eucharist.

My basket was empty. Mom had pulled it from the kitchen cupboard that morning. She'd promised I would scatter flowers in front of the canopy that covered the monstrance and the priest, but now she was arguing with a woman who clutched the shopping bag of petals closed.

"Nobody told me Gabrielle needed a white dress," Mom said. "No, she doesn't have one! No, I don't *happen* to have a Communion dress just laying around!" My blue pinstripe poplin had a cotton sailor collar. I contemplated the basket's cracked wicker and ignored the line of lace princesses.

"Well," said the petal lady, "maybe next year, after she makes her First Communion and has a dress, she can be in the procession."

"This is because I pulled her out of school, isn't it?" Mom wanted to know.

"No, Paula, this has nothing to do with school or politics; it's just the rules for the procession…"

I could see I didn't match. Six years old and homeschooled, I was almost old enough to be embarrassed and say:

"Mom, it's okay…" and let the woman with the petals win.

But I needed to be in that procession. I had just finished reading a chapter book called *Blessed Imelda*, about a little girl who became a nun when she was nine. (Mom said this never happened anymore.) When Imelda was ten, she was so good that Jesus flew the host over to her and hovered above her head for a long time until the priest came and lifted it out of the air and set it on Imelda's tongue. And then, because she was so good and prayed so hard and wanted to be with Jesus so much, she died.

And I had done the math. First Communions were always in May. Corpus Christi was always in June. If I was as good as Imelda — and I was pretty good at being good — it was possible that today would be my only chance to be in the procession.

"Look, I promised Gabbie that she could walk," Mom said. "She's wearing blue and white, Mary's colors! What more do you want?"

The Blessed Virgin reference worked. I got the petals; we carpeted the sidewalk with the bruised flakes. Behind us, altar servers carried candles and swung thurbils full of incense. I heard Dad lead the hymns. We circled three city blocks before the flowers ran out. The wind put out the candle flames, stole the incense smoke. The priest walked Jesus back through the chapel door, and, after church, a couple moms complained about the mistmatched dress in the picture.

If you Google "Lidice last Corpus Christi Day," and click *I'm Feeling Lucky*, a photo will fill your computer screen: number 87 of an album called, "How we used to know." The picture's focus is grainy: girls in their short communion dresses, with stockings to match, blur like a late snowstorm against the rest of the town's dark-brown Sunday best. All their hands have felt the silky colors of the rose petals they've carpeted the route with.

Some of the little heads are wreathed with pale flowers

In the spring of 1995, while I wore blue and white and tossed blossoms on an avenue in Winnipeg, thirty of Lidice's children returned to the rye fields as bronze statues cemented to the hillside. By the time I get here — 4:15 PM, July 8, 2012 — dozens more

have joined them. Now, eighty-two silent children stand, life-sized but breathless, wearing the frozen looks and tattered rags of their murdered models. The artist's hand has chiseled away all trustfulness and innocence from their faces and cast their lips in unspoken sorrow and reproach. Unwept, saltless tears of fallen rain stand in their brown eyes, eyes that stare out at me, or through me, or up to heaven. One girl, her bronze cheeks blued with eighteen years of vigil, gazes at the ground, holds a palm to her heart, a mea culpa.

"*Just tell us what we have done!*"

Teddy bears and tea lights, toy cars and turtles huddle, too colorfully, in the no man's land between the shrine's surveillance system and my camera. A stuffed dog, his face not quite sewn into a smile, has waited out weeks of rain in a Ziploc bag. I have no flowers or doll to add, so I pray, empty-handed, for resignation.

Who walked between the violet and the violet
Who walked between
The various ranks of varied green
Going in white and blue, in Mary's colour,
Talking of trivial things
In ignorance and knowledge of eternal dolour…[xii]

I give up on meeting Nina and head back toward the highway. I remember Mila's advice, that recordings are better than photographs, and take out my phone to tape a memo:

"There seems to be no actual town, just a neighborhood, as if they're scared to reinsert any form of commerce or real life, that all one can do here is merely reside…"

I stop talking to scan the traffic, looking for a break. Someone's standing at the shelter, not reading the schedule that I nervously hope lists one more bus back to Prague, but looking at me, shading her eyes. I squint back.

"Gabbie?"

"Nina?"

Suddenly we were both laughing on opposite sides of the highway. With two hours before the 18:39 bus, we head back to meet the friends Nina's been staying with.

"Can you count to ten?" asks a tiny inquisitor.

"Well, yes," I say. "And what's your name?"

She shakes my hand, emphatically, like a true Bohemian.

"I'm Sophie." Then she giggles hard with her head tipped back. "No! In Czech! In Czech! Can you count to ten in Czech? What is *your* name? Where are you from? I'm Czech *and* I'm American."

"My name is Gabbie."

"Miss Gabbie, to you Soph," says Sophie's dad. He shakes my hand. "Hi, I'm Kevin. Nina might have told you that my wife and I are missionaries, originally from Washington State. We decided to raise our girls here. Sophie is pretty excited about speaking two languages."

"I have a sister with your name," I tell Sophie, "so I'll remember your name forever for sure." She smiles more, if that's even possible, then yells:

"Count to ten if you can!"

"Okay," and I raise my eyebrows to think. "Jedna, Dva, Tři, Čtyři."

"Čtyři! Čtyři is *four*." Soph holds up the correct number of fingers. "I'm four. How old are you?"

"Twenty-three. Can you count to twenty-three in Czech?"

It's a silly question with a joyful answer.

Dvacet tři. Twenty-three. How many birthdays will Sophie get before she buys a ticket to that room I visited an hour ago? Admission for children fifteen years and younger is 40 Kc, about $1.95. Or is it free for village residents?

"Comeer. Come see my dog!" I run after her.

How do you play in Lidice?

Sophie is a cheerful triumph for Lidice, but a paradox in motion: a girl playing in untroubled ignorance, and a little person who's practiced her Czech counting the valley's somber crowd of children, who perhaps has already left her favorite baby doll alongside the teddy bears.

Life and, with it, death, are facts that we, while aging, tend to complicate. I learnt three simple things at the first funeral I attended: you are supposed to cry when someone dies; crying makes headaches; Tylenol helps headaches go away. Mom lifted me up so I could see the tiny baby who'd been so sick. I was four.

"It just looks like he's sleeping, but he's with Jesus." I wasn't scared, but sometime, between then and this evening, I stopped playing and forgot the rules, not just of make believe, but of hope.

Sophie's Lidice teaches me the danger of *that* kind of ignorance.

After pizza and a game of Frisbee, Sophie's family stuffs my pockets with chocolate and oranges for the trip back to Prague. Alex, a girl attending Kevin's mission weekend, travels with me.

"Is Lidice always that quiet?" I ask her.

"Well," she says, "Czech's don't visit it too much. The communists used Lidice for propaganda. They held vigils and attendance was necessary. I think Czechs got tired of Lidice, and visitors thought it was a communist sight. Anyways, the rose garden died." I must be looking at her funny, maybe for the way she keeps talking about her nationality in third person, because she adds: "I'm not Czech, you know."

Alex is a Russian refugee.

"Since I was seven," Alex says, "my family moved every year to a different country, sometimes twice a year, because our status would expire."

"But you live in Prague now?"

"Yes, I've settled here, I think." At Prague's main station we stand near the subway entrance and talk about our lives in fast-forward. I invite her to come to Idaho some day, but we hug as if we'll never meet up again. I write her name into my notebook and watch the smudge of her blonde hair disappear into the crowd.

My 21:12 commuter train slides towards the sunset but does not catch up to it. By the time I reach my stop, the last bus has left. I run two kilometers in the dark, holding my penlight out in front of me, hoping the speeding traffic can see my face. I slow down when Solopisky's first house comes into view. Its stucco is painted the yellowest yellow that any homeowner has ever dared to brush or roll. Even in the dark it glows a little.

I turn the corner to climb the village's last hill. A megaphone dangles over Solopisky's single intersection. It's attached to still-healthy wires, looking not quite as out-of-date as I want communism to be.

Right at the crossroads, a plaque, like an oversized tombstone, with a soldier painted in fading blue, hides in a grove of un-pruned shrubs. I stop to read the date, to try to decipher what happened here.

The story is stamped with a Hammer and Sickle.

The overgrowth that's been allowed here suddenly makes sense, though a vase of dried-out but only week-old wild flowers betrays an ambivalence about whether the present has been better than the past.

IV

Oberhausen 1942
Marktstraße - The Toyshop

Erlig used to wait by the toyshop window. If he rang the doorbell at all he'd run from the step to the window and put five finger tips on the sparkling glass, leave prints that Agnes would frown over later. Today was different. Today, there was no bell; today, there was no glass, unless you counted the sharp bits of it all over the toy shop floor. When Mila didn't come, Erlig stepped through the gaping store-front and called again.

"I'm here, Erlig." He turned. She was behind him, standing in the street wearing dust on her navy blue dress. "My mother insisted we go to the shelter even though I *kept insisting it was over. What house gets hit more than twice in a night? So, I have not slept." Erlig helped Mila over the casement and past the brackets that had once held up a glass shelf and a row of perfect French china dolls.*

"But you are okay! I saw the store front and the roof…"

"We are fine. The top floor people moved months ago. Their stuff probably just fell through to my bedroom."

"I'll go look at it with you," said Erlig.

Marble panels had loosened above the staircase and fallen fifteen feet, some to a gravelly demise. In Mila's bedroom, the cracked plaster ceiling creaked and shifted like the flows of a barely frozen river, an icy surface ready to give way. The floor wasn't gone, but buried.

Erlig had never seen Mila's room before, and he tried to imagine what it had looked like before the force of bombs had thrown every toy she owned to the floor: tall ceilings, like a church or a library, with walls covered in shelves, that empty, revealed their bolts. Until last night, every doll and teddy bear had been perfectly placed.

"This is why I never played with these. I was scared of making a mess," Mila said, trying to make Erlig laugh. "I know, I know, it was like sleeping in the shop downstairs, more dolls actually, because no one ever gave me trains. The problem is doll-makers never get the fact that for some girls, even toy shop girls, one doll is enough. Now where is Mausi? Look around; if you find a dirty little dress and a plastic baby doll, they go together." They began to step around the glass and shards, began wading through the stuffed animals of every different furry species. One doll looked perfect, still attached to

her stand, her back to the paneled wall, her feet on the hardwood floor. Erlig lifted her excitedly, thinking about his littlest sister, forgetting about the impracticability of glass dolls in a bomb shelter. But then it did not matter. The back of the doll's head collapsed into the empty face. Erlig's cradling hand pulled away in surprise and he watched the pale bits of the doll spill to the floor.

"Oh, Erlig," — how can Mila be giggling, *Erlig thought,* but she is — *"Oh, Erlig, oh no. I'm sorry she must have flown from the windowsill and hit the wall and slid all the way down it. Don't worry. That's not my doll. Well it was mine, but it's not Mausi."*

He explained about his sister. They found an animal for her. They found Mausi and her dress which, just as Mila had suspected, had somehow ended up apart. They found on a bottom shelf five dolls that hadn't fallen. They wrapped them in blankets, slid them under Mila's bed.

For after.

"Now what do we do," Mila asked, pointing at the rubble of toys. "I could take off all the dresses and save them."

"No!" Erlig said suddenly, and too loud for it merely to be a suggestion about doll clothes. Again: "No, we have to stop; we're late already!" Mila set Mausi down on the bed.

"Late, late for what?"

"That's why I came here, to tell you before you get in any more trouble. Now that the Americans are against us, and they're obviously bombing Oberhausen, the Bund Deutscher Mädels is not optional anymore. You know that. The Hitler Youth can fine you or put your mother in jail. You cannot stay home reading all day!"

"And why not? You sound like my father."

Erlig stepped close to Mila as she tried to sit down on the bed.

"No. Come on… If you are late, you'll miss the work party and only people who work are allowed to eat. Those are the rules now."

Mila crossed her arms against this news and avoided an answer and departure, counting the missing buttons on Erlig's Hitler Youth uniform.

"Mila, I know what you're thinking. 'I don't even like eating.' That's what you're thinking."

"No, actually I was thinking 'five,' just the number, 'five.'"

"What?"

"Five missing buttons. Won't you get in trouble for that?"

Erlig walked close to her, pried her hands from behind their opposite elbows and pulled her toward the staircase.

"No one really care about that in anymore. It doesn't matter anyways."

Erlig did not trust Mila to really go to the BDM office, which was the girl's version of the Hitler Youth, so he marched her all the way. He found her a place in line.

"Promise to stay," he said, as he shook Mila's hand goodbye.

"I will, Erlig. I will see you tomorrow, wearing a uniform smarter than yours!" Erlig sighed, exasperated. Or was that sadness? He began to walk down the street, then turned. He rubbed his eyes a couple of times, looking at Mila until the line she was standing in slid between the doorposts and was gone.

July 9, 2012
Between Solopisky and the train:

"So did you go to the Strahov Library yesterday?" Michal Semikova asks as we drive to the train station. He's on his way to Prague. I'm finally taking off for Germany. "You were gone so late. We were beginning to wonder if you were coming back at all!"
There's something wonderful about being missed but not searched for.

"No, I made some last minutes plans and just jumped on a bus to meet a friend in Lidice."

"Ah. Lidice. You found out about what happened during the war? Last month there was a commemoration for the seventieth anniversary of the Lidice event." I look at Michal as he says 'event,' thinking his word choice strange. *How about 'massacre?'*

We say nothing else, which gives me time to remember Michal's involvement in the Velvet Revolution and the fact that his answer to "When did you become Catholic?" was: "I was an agnostic until I met some believers…during my time in jail."

Before I can ask for Michal's thoughts on the communist's propagandizing of Lidice, he's pulling over near the tracks.

"Thanks for the ride," I say, jumping out of the passenger's seat. "I guess I'll be back in about three weeks."

"Okay." He shakes my hand. "Safe travels and God bless."

The train is late, which leaves me seven minutes to kick myself, and my borrowed backpack, for not recruiting Michal as Mila's replacement, even though the free

Solopisky accommodations didn't come with a back stage pass to his life. I give the conductor my one-way ticket to Berlin and find myself completely empty-handed.

I share supermarket chocolate with my seat mates: (in order of appearance) a curly haired architect from South Africa and an art student from California, who never gives her name but offers this opinion:

"How do you know that any of those woman's stories are true?" she says. "Why did you believe her? Or do you still believe her? She could be making all this up, stringing you along from her lonely living room. Then, once you decide to call it truth, bam! She backs out. Makes sense to me."

It doesn't' make sense to me, however. I've trusted Mila's memory because I trust my own and have taken flack my whole life for making similar recollective claims.

"You're just piecing this stuff together after you see the photographs, Gabbie. Overactive imagination." That's what my family has told me.

But no one took pictures the evening Mom and Dad drove Kristoff and me from Manitoba into Ontario, to a stretch of prairie where we got to play hide and seek. We hid in a field of wildflowers that rolled on as far as I could see (which wasn't far: white daisy petals kept tickling my eyelids, and their stems raveled around my wrists). We stayed until the sun settled among the orange-dipped petal tips of blanket flowers, and we drove back to Winnipeg in the dark, with the moon, white as a daisy, following us home.

Every field of wild flowers since that game of hide-and-seek feels perfect but somehow not quite, because I've grown taller than the stalks of prairie roses.

The refusal to give up on those places we've outgrown, this is the uncertain nostalgia which tangled Mila and me together. Was I in love with the untraceablility of both our memories, or with that first moment at her front door, with the unlikeliness of the earliest phone call, or simply with a voice?

We pass a field of sunflowers and I watch the Artist take a picture.

"Are you reflecting on life or antsy to get off the train?" Her question is for the Architect, not me.

"Both," he says. "Is that a valid answer?"

In the middle of a conversation about education, allergies and craftsmanship, Berlin arrives, its skyline bulging behind the Hauptbahnhof's twin glass tunnels. We topple our packs from overhead, shoulder them, and act out one of those "have-a-nice-life" scenes that travelling presents with exponential frequency. The Artist adjusts her mustard-

colored cardigan. We grab onto each other's elbows as the compartment's floor suddenly decelerates.

"Good luck with your tour and writing and everything." She pushes thick-framed glasses into her uneven bob. "And if you visit Paris this summer, look up my friend's art installation. She's getting paid like fifteen grand to do it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, it's pretty cool: she's built a model house scaled up so that as you walk through, you experience life from the perspective of a cat."

"A cat. Seriously? Do you have to crawl through it? How is that even possible?" But before the Artist can answer my indignant questions, the theme music to *Harry Potter* starts broadcasting from somewhere in station's steel trusses.

"Welcome music. Ha." says the Architect.

The enchanted soundtrack reminds me of the wishful impossibility of my original trip. Could I really have retraced Mila's footsteps to revive her 1950's perspective of Berlin, checking in with her each evening to make sure I'd walked every applicable street, mailing photographs to show how the capital's managed to fare without her? The endeavor suddenly seems like it would have been no less esoteric than Parisians crawling through a house like cats.

My empty hands just might be easier to write with.

I don't take any notes about the Berlin Wall. I walk with Ashley (the owner of the next magical couch I'm crashing on) along the East Side Gallery, that's soaked with commemorative graffiti. With barbed wire and no-man's-land peeled away, the smooth cement seems almost suburban, like a noise reduction barrier that might cordon off a North American neighborhood. I don't pay five Euros to get my passport stamped with the Democratic Republic's defunct visa and, instead, buy a five-day transit pass.

"Well, what do you think?" Ashley asks as we zip along.

"Of Berlin?" I've been staring more than chatting, taking in the view and recalling where Ashley and I first met. We took classes together at the University of Idaho. Now she follows my gaze out the train window to a forty story tower that reads PARK INN and reflects the clouds perfectly, but the sky in a somehow different shade: Cerulean Blue against Royal.

After un-bombed Prague, post-battle Berlin is spacious.

"It's big, I guess, and new." In the old East quarter there is construction everywhere, as if a war's just ended, because, in fact, it has.

The refurbished shrines, rehabilitated chapels, and rows of contemporary, residential blocks all cast shadows whose edges blur in a déjà vu. By the time we hike out of the subway station, I know the source of the city's strange familiarity: the Game of LIFE — the game-board with removable, "3-D" hills, bridges, and university. It's as if modern Berlin is snapping and sliding its monuments back in between the cardboard streets and plastic cars of the communist GDR.

Ashley's apartment is a life-sized Milton-Bradley-esque building; white vinyl siding covers every outdoor surface. Inside there are walls rolled in low VOC white paint and a stain-resistant, Crypton, ivory couch. The floors are beautiful, faux hardwood.

Ashley pulls a bottle of wine, also white, from the refrigerator.

"So, I didn't know if you have anything planned," she's saying, "and I hope you don't mind… I told my father-in-law's girlfriend we'd meet her at an outdoor concert for a picnic. It's in a church square, we don't have tickets, and she only speaks German, but we can sit on the stairs and listen while we drink. How does that sound?"

It sounds like the gentle thud of our wool blanket on church steps and Ashley's translated introductions, like the tap of sandals as locals fill the granite treads of this sudden amphitheater, like the creak of baskets flicking back their lids. This crush of 5:00 PM picnics echoes with plastic cups squeaking free of their translucent stacks and with the shiver of chilled champagne. We clink our fake flutes and listen to the orchestra's cymbals sizzle around the corner. The standard view from our free seats includes only the concertmaster's shadow that quivers against a hotel's sunburnt facade. Across the street, plein air waiters memorize orders while their patrons' gesticulating forks plink against imported crystal.

Fireworks pick up where the sun leaves off. Their finale blazes holes in rain clouds we somehow missed seeing till now.

We stand under the cathedral's portico until the storm turns sideways and then run behind a shared umbrella to the subway. Half a hundred bottles crowd the base of a stop sign — beer and wine all abandoned during the damp evacuation.

"Ein Schrein." Ashley turns to me. "It's like a shrine." I have to laugh:

"Not like any shrine you'd ever see in Idaho."

Neither is the Holocaust Memorial.

July 10, 2012
Holocaust Memorial

"They say you're supposed to make of it whatever comes to you," I hear Ashley saying from quite close, but when I turn to ask what she's "made of it" in the past, she's ten meters away, at least, her voice blown towards me by a wind too cool for a July noon. I wait for her and we walk deeper into these five acres of concrete slabs. They reproach the city like some central cemetery, each piece a raised tomb but empty, statue-less, and blank. A game of hide-and-seek that's searching for the Memorial's edge squeals by.

"It's like so many things," is my response. "Too many things…" A grassless Stonehenge, but with rocks smashed into regular shapes and rows, that in five thousand years may very well attract scholars who'll try to determine what ceremony or tragedy could prompt such a collection.

Or is this place a field of quarried marble, forever unpurchased, the artists that might have carved them having perished before they could judge the quality of the stones. The brick path we're following suddenly plunges down, as if an ocean has been swept away in a sudden and permanent tide.

We wade between the tomb-like rocks in single file. The tombs turn into walls, the walls of a prison, but the halls are where we're caught. And if not a prison, then a windowless city of inhabitant-less high-rises that tower above our heads.

No…it's a maze, not cut from shrubbery and roses but from crushed gravel and lime, poured not planted; a maze with no finish line or any barricaded path, but that takes your voice and breath away and still somehow slows your feet. I stop to press my fingertips against the grayness.

"It's too smooth," I say, finally. "As if all the names are missing."

Oberhausen 1942
The BDM Office

At the Hitler Youth office, a woman wearing a frown and a white linen shirt wrote Mila's

name down in a ledger book. She made a note that said Mila had avoided membership for two years for unacceptable reasons, but that the fines had been waived.

"What is your father's occupation?"

"Soldier."

"No, before the war!" the secretary said, her voice rising with annoyance at the final syllable.

"The toy shop owner on Marktstraße."

Mila received a card with a number and her name. A girl in uniform took Mila to a table.

"Sit down and write a description of yourself on your membership documents."

"What do you mean?"

"Your age, what you look like. There is no film for photographs."

"But why do you need a photograph?" Mila asked. The older girl sighed.

"We are collecting descriptions not photographs."

"But why?" Mila asked again.

"Just write it. Here look at mine."

The girl pulled a green cardstock case from her skirt pocket. She opened the booklet to a grey sheet of paper that had a list of names and numbers on it.

Name: Effie Vogel Birthday: May 26, 1926

Resides at: 27 Helmholtz Street City: Oberhausen

Mädelgruppe: #7 Mädelshaft: #13 (group leader)

Under this information, Effie Vogel had written the description she wanted Mila to mimic:

Sixteen years old; 120 pounds; 1.75 meters tall; blond hair (long); blue eyes.

Instead of writing "Twelve-years-old; 90 pounds; 1.52 meters…" on her own blank badge, Mila began giggling. She couldn't help it. Except for slight variations in height, all the girls in the registration line looked the same. It was silly.

"This doesn't make any sense," Mila said putting down the pen Effie had given her.

Effie did not laugh.

"Let me say this: if you should be working in a bombed apartment next week, taking food from the shelves for the winter supply effort, or carrying a hurt child to the trucks or an ambulance, and the American's foolishly decide on a daytime attack and foolishly to drop more bombs on a street that has already been destroyed, and you never even hear the plane coming and do not even hide your face, is there something about you, a broken

finger or a birthmark that will help us send the right girl to the right mother?"

"Is that what we're going to do," asked a girl who was standing next to Mila, whose brown hair did not match her green eyes but made them look greener, made them look more beautiful*, Mila thought…*and more scared*.*

"What." Effie said. It was not a question, just a word to tell the two girls know that she was done explaining.

"I thought the boys did that," Mila persisted.

"Did what?" Effie said again. "Died in air attacks? Everyone dies."

"No, I thought the boys dug out the buildings and the food and the…." But even Mila was not as tough as Effie.

"The boys are gone."

"What?"

"They left for Berlin for training or to fight. Now write something down so we can get on with it."

Mila looked instinctively towards the line where Erlig had left her. "But my friend? He was just here," Mila said. Effie was not listening.

Mila squeezed her eyes shut.

They went to fight. That is why, when Erlig shook my hand he looked at it and not into my eyes. They left for Berlin. That is why the buttons didn't matter. He hadn't come to clean my room, or to walk me to this office. The boys are gone. He'd come to press his fingers one last time against the glass.

Mila opened her eyes.

She never thought about what she looked like and there was nothing so special about her. Across three fingers was a scar from when, as a little girl, she'd grabbed a piece of glass. A picture frame had fallen off a wall. Mila had thought the shiny bits so beautiful and had wanted to carry it to the window to let the sun dance through it. She had been so little. No one had taught her the word sharp before.

. She wrote a sentence about the scar on the BDM card. She remembered reading about fingerprints in the Agatha Christi book, <u>Das fehlende Glied in der Kette</u>. She rubbed the curve of the pen nib over two of the scarred fingers and pressed them to the paper.

Museum of Film and Television
Potsdamer Str. 2
10785 Berlin

Ashley and I ride the glass elevator to the fifth floor of the Berlin Museum of Film and Television. We don't look down the translucent shaft.

"So, what is the name of this reporter you're looking for?" Ashley asks.

"Mila."

"Last name?"

"I don't know. I only have her married name. She worked for the TV company before she met her husband."

"Wait, you met Mila twice, knew her for more than four years, and didn't learn her maiden name?"

"Mila wouldn't tell me what it was! Actually, she let it slip once, in the middle of a story. I was so stressed out about trying to remember it that I only got the first letter."

"Gabbie, I'm kidding."

"Well, kid away. I'm here to do research and I don't even know my subject's full name." The elevator's only opaque wall slips back. The museum attendant, who doubles as a security guard, doesn't let us disembark — Dies ist die Ausfahrt! — and sends us down to the third floor, where he believes our self-directed tour is supposed to start.

"Okay, we only have one hour," I say as we find the entrance. "If you see any exhibit referencing a Mila H. and Queen Elizabeth's coronation, find me."

We split up. I read and record trilingual factoids at a speed only graduate school texts on literary theory can have taught me. The disgruntled guard materializes in a doorway, pointing to my Nikon and then the security monitor he spotted me on. Camera's are apparently prohibited. Why are pens and paper allowed? I pull out a notebook:

Oskar Mestor. Asta Nealson. Ernst Lubistch. Greta Garbo. A Foreign Affair.

The rubble is one of a kind. Sets this real could never be reproduced.

The pain was piled with the crumbled piece of Berlin. These were not props.

A half an hour passes. I stop reading names, words, and dates and start scanning faces for Mila's. Although I have only seen her twice in life and in one photograph, those eyes haven't changed in the sixty years since their debut. I run past shadow boxes filled with make-up tool kits and images of film stars shot in 1926.

"Attention," says a disembodied voice. "The museum is now closed. Please follow the arrows to the lighted exits."

July 11, 2012
Ashley's Apartment

The next morning, as Ashley and I drink strong coffee, I complain:

"I still can't believe it. A museum about film *and* television. Yeah right. The only television exhibit in that whole place covered the 1936 Olympics. The rest of that collection was about movies and the German relationship with Hollywood." I pick up the museum's brochure. "I mean, talk about false advertising!"

Ashley is browsing train ticket and hostel prices in Leipzig, my next destination.

"So you want to leave Friday, correct?" she asks.

"Yep." I sip some coffee. "Oh shit…"

"What?"

"Ashleeeeey! nooooo…"

"What is it?"

"Just listen to this: '*The Time Tunnel, located on the topmost floor of the museum, puts emphasis on the extraordinary achievements of the medium: live broadcasts of events of national and international significance, including* ***audio-visual material from the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953…'*** We were in the film gallery, on the wrong floor! That top floor we first tried to get off at, that's where we should have started looking! I could have watched Mila's entire report!"

Ashley sits down on the bed next to me and reads the pamphlet for herself.

"We could go back, I guess. Do you want to go back?" she asks.

The museum is an hour away, but I could go back, spend another afternoon running past black and white, flickering exhibits.

"Well, it is, like, one of the main reasons I came to Berlin; I mean, other than to visit you. As far as museums, it was the only one that was really on my list." Ashley nods and turns back to the computer.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing. It's up to you."

"Well, I'll never be closer than this. I'd be an irresponsible researcher not to go."

If you say so, says Ashley's smile.

"How about you decide while I shower," she says aloud.

She leaves the room. I sip some coffee. I don't decide right away but move to the computer and open the League of German Girls online archive of portrait photos:

hundreds of uploaded faces that once had been printed on the adolescent members' identification cards. Disembodied busts in irregular rectangles, they hang on the whiteness of the browser window. I scroll through them quickly, hoping to make a match with my memory of Mila's Prague photograph from 1942, practicing facial recognition before returning to the museum.

Three hundred photos in, and I still have not found the breathtakingly beautiful toyshop owner's daughter. Or am I just trying to prove that she existed…simply searching for a name? I need the name, like the fabled miller's daughter trying to save her first born from Rumpolstizken. As if knowing it will solve everything, as if uncovering one image will patch the broken trust and Mila's dementia. Do I believe I can apologize away disease?

"Use your brain to invent something to keep old minds going," Mila made me promise last September. It was the first time she said 'I love you.' I would have promised her anything.

"At least do it for yourself," she'd said. "It's too late for me, but you know all my stories now, anyways."

What if the magical formula is spelled the same way as 'acceptance' or 'relinquishment?'

What if the invention is called letting go?

Ashley emerges from the bathroom, wrapped in a white terry-cloth robe.

My resolve wobbles for a second. *I can go back to the museum by myself and give Ashley the day off. She probably needs to do some shopping. Isn't her sister coming to town next week?* These sentences cross my mind. So does the idea that I will regret returning to the museum almost as much as not going back.

If I do not go to the Museum, will I wonder forever whether I missed the bargaining chip that might have bought my fake grandmother's good graces back?

If I locate the footage and snap one unsanctioned picture of Mila's face as proof, what will happen to me after I carry it to her front step and the door fails to open? What ensues after I realize that even Mila's curiosity cannot repair our estrangement?

If I take the glass elevator back to the fifth floor but find nothing there about Mila, will I finally begin distrusting her?

Can I choose to not go and, like a child who begins to realize that the facts of fairy-

tales belong to other worlds, but their truths to our own, can I continue to disbelieve and to believe?

To trust and not to trust. The cadence of this possibility is one I've heard before, but where?

"Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks…"[xiii]

"Well, what's it going to be?" Ashley asks.

Can I be satisfied with the fiction? With imaginative doubt?

"I think it's time for me to let go."

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place
I rejoice that things are as they are …
Because I cannot hope to turn again
Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
Upon which to rejoice…[xiv]

Today, letting go involves sharing spinach quiche with Ashley under a red and ivory awning. A bicycle courier pulls his blue company jacket tight against the afternoon's relentless drizzle. He delivers an envelope. The restaurant owner tips him in espresso shots. But where do you go to let go?

Things to do in Berlin, flashes on the screen of Ashley's phone.

Guggenheim lecture series.

Letting go requires that I follow Ashley across two lines of traffic. We find seats in a courtyard and listen attentively to a curly-haired PhD from Sheffield, England talk about the physical and psychological gaps in human perception.

At question period, I raise my hand and ask if rod and cone clustering in the eye is the reason why galaxies are easier to spot with peripheral vision.

"Rods, the photo receptors responsible for light perception, are situated around the retina's edge. So yes, a star appears brighter and more clearly defined when you focus your vision just beyond it, in the negative space beside it, as it were. Good question."

Everything comes into focus the second that we look away.

Ten minutes later, the Q&A ends. After Ashley and I line up single file to sign a release of liability disclaimer — which gives a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal* enough information to describe us as "30 or so people rang[ing] from an American tourist from Idaho to a German psychology professor" — we march to Rosenthaler Platz where we all transform into experiment "apprentices," about to pull perception pranks on unsuspecting Berliners.

The *Journal* journalist (her name is Shirley Wong) shoots video of our study.

I don't know that in two months, when Shirley's article finds the front-page of the *Wall Street Journal* as well as its online publication, I will watch her three minutes of iPhone footage four times, hoping to catch a glimpse of myself against the crowd. None of the blurry profiles will match mine.

"In one test," Shirley narrates, "a man asked a passer-by for directions. Then Dr. Stafford arranged for a full sized wooden door to be lugged between them. During that brief instant, the man seeking directions was replaced, by a very different looking, much shorter person. Yet the passerby failed to notice any change. He turned to walk away before being alerted that he had just been fooled."

Change blindness, the result of not monitoring our environment for improbable changes, and people "fail[ing] to notice differences in seemingly critical information when they are distracted," that's what we're witnessing.

One woman protests that she's too hungry to register an identity *and* gender switch in the door-toting personnel.

Was that my problem the last time I saw Mila? Was I just too distracted to realize, as uncharacteristic, the strange, distant way she looked at my car after I had made my final shoulder check? She had stopped smiling and waving too soon, much too soon for the Mila I knew, and her eyes were pinched together with a quality that was equal parts confusion and resolve…that I'd later and finally hear coloring her voice.

Although I do not hope to turn again
Although I do not hope
Although I do not hope to turn

Wavering between the profit and the loss
In this brief transit where the dreams cross
The dream-crossed twilight between birth and dying…
…The blind eye creates
The empty forms between the ivory gates [xv]

Final Visit
May 23, 2012
Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

Summer had wrapped itself around Coeur d'Alene again. Magnolia blossoms balanced on branches like misplaced teacups. Street sweepers had brushed away winter's salt and spring's gravel so that even the Old Subaru's bald tires felt safe. I just wished it would stop stalling each time I took my foot off the gas. I negotiated red lights in neutral, fluttering the pedal, standing on the clutch, tearing away from the intersections like a racecar driver. Whenever I accelerated, the '85 station wagon backfired to remind me it was no BMW.

It was a Wednesday afternoon, the afternoon Mila had approved for our face-to-face visit, the follow-up to our first. We were ready to sign the research contract, to catch up, to drink tea, to begin recording maybe. Ready to begin everything, I thought.

I stalled the car across the street from Mila's front steps and realized as I ran up them that four years ago I'd misremembered their railing as beautiful wrought iron, warm under my fingertips. Now, I dusted slivers of rust colored paint from my palm.

I didn't knock right away, but took in the view for a full minute: the lake, Mila's red door that I'd never expected to be invited through, her yard overrun with last season's perennials that had already strangled the energy out of this year's flowers. I thought about offering to garden, but I hated getting all hot and sweaty and sunburnt. I stood on Mila's front step writing those reflections and these emotions into my memory: happiness, thankfulness, excitement, uneasiness. We had such great telephone rapport. Would she continue to love me in person? Was I still different enough for her to like me?

The storm door was locked, and the doorbell, disabled. I reached around to the picture window and knocked on the glass.

Mila's face appeared with a questioning frown in a half round window, and then, her forehead smoothed to recognition. Triple locks relaxed. I walked in. Mila grated the bolts back into place before giving me a hug.

"Oh, my dear, it is so good to see you," Mila said. "You are such a mature young woman now!" I had to laugh.

"Can you tell that grad school's given me some extra worry lines?"

"Don't you talk to me about being old, young lady! But I suppose I should be okay with it already. I'm in my eighties you know."

"I remember!" I couldn't let her know that over the last four years, every time I'd

tried to picture her, the silhouette had come up faceless: a backlit billow of white hair and a voice.

Mila looked younger than her voice.

"You don't look eighty," I said to close out our set of compliments.

We walked past the living room — where 2008's meeting had taken place — and into the den.

"I would offer you a snack, or something," Mila said, "but I have nothing in the house."

"Don't worry about it at all. Yes. Water is just fine." I set down my glass next to a copy of People Magazine, noticing that it was this week's issue: a tribute to Queen Elizabeth's sixty year reign. Mila sat down.

"If I'm ever out and I see something about the Queen, I have to buy it. You know, to see if I'm in any of the pictures or the stories, because, you remember? I was a news reporter."

"Of course," I answered, smiling, but thinking: *I hope you remember that that story is the reason I'm here*.

Mila had set up the coffee table with other things that were on her mind: a Polaroid snapshot, flipped over, with *Fall 1942* written on its back; Kim's recorder, with its unwrapped tape now installed; a small envelope, unaddressed; a tube of Nivea lip balm.

"This is for you," Mila said. "You need good body products on a long trip, and Nivea is the best."

"Okay." I slipped the box into my purse.

Not pausing for any small talk, Mila picked up the old grey Sony.

"Do you have a tape recorder? Well, even if you do, it will make Kimmy in heaven happy and it will make me happy if you take this one. You need a tape recorder and a notebook, because photos are not always enough…enough for remembering what things are really like." This valid advice seemed ironic coming from a woman who had written little and, so far, left no recording. Then I remembered the vividness of her memory. Mila retained every detail. I needed technology. She just needed an audience.

"Okay, I'll take it." I moved it to my side of the table, imagined myself at intersections capturing the timbre of Czech traffic and commenting on the cacophony in English that would be hushed by lack of use.

Then there was the picture.

Mila flipped it over, handed it to me. The snapshot showed her at age twelve, a little

girl with delicate features that her school uniform couldn't disguise. (Or was the uniform the war's? Coat sleeves failing to reach her wrists, her skirt too short — no extra fabric rations for a growth spurt.)

Hunger imposed a uniform as well, but even with knobby knees and white socks wrinkling around her ankles, Mila was gorgeous. I held the film so close that, had I been breathing, the finish would have fogged.

"That was taken outside of Prague," Mila said. "It is the only picture I have of myself."

"The only?!" Her photo-poverty shocked me, the normal North American, spoiled with a dozen poses at every different age.

"Well, of me as a child, yes." Mila said. "Naturally, all the paper and photos in our apartment were destroyed when the roof finally fell in. That's why I'm glad you're visiting the Czech Republic. Prague was hardly bombed, the Germans moved in so early. This hotel here," and she pointed to the modern balconies that curved away any harsh angles of perspective, "it was part of the spa town of Podebrady. The Germans took it over so that all of us evacuated school girls could stay there, and you know what? We didn't think anything about it, moving into people's homes and businesses."

A tree-lined boulevard framed the image of Mila's figure. I kept staring at her young face, trying to memorize all the details of it. She appeared innocent but old, old at twelve, and unable to remember what had aged her.

The photographed girl wore the look of someone re-teaching herself to smile.

I glanced up and saw that the faces matched.

The eyes knew fear. The lips recalled none of its names.

April 1942
Oberhausen

School let out early that year, after a classroom suffered a hit, and when it did, Mila discovered that she'd been placed on Effie's Mädelschaft, a team of twelve girls who'd all once lived near Marktstraße. Effie led the group and had arranged this. She also believed that women could do anything, not just sew uniforms, so she trained all her girls, even the terrified, green-eyed Anna, to be air-raid wardens.

After every sunset, the dozen of them would march between the apartment blocks where roofs still outnumbered rubble heaps. They knocked on any windows whose curtains let the glow of candles through:

"Put out that light!"

"Hey! Lights out there!" Or they ordered families to take cover in shelters:

"Air-raid coming! Evacuate immediately."

When the bombers thundered towards Oberhausen's factories, the girls retreated to their own brick-lined shelter.

Mila preferred this place to the dungeon-like cellar near the toyshop, though the air was still too thick for breathing and the benches, too narrow for even dozing off. Here there were no babies screaming, no women crying for the sons they'd lost, no prayers for faith, no talk of hope…but also no room for despair.

The girls here were all younger than sixteen years old, but none of them were children.

They did not cling to optimism, like children. They did not, like adults, trust in a future time.

Mila was twelve.

She did not expect to turn thirteen.

She did not expect not to turn thirteen.

She did not expect.

"The future is now, and tomorrow is far away," Effie told Mila the first night. Mila did not know what this meant, but she liked to make her mind repeat it during the roaring minutes when the girls all held their breath.

Between those moments, the whole group sang songs that the planes couldn't hear or told the story of the Rhine Gold, the hoard that was never found, that ancient Hagen sank in the river to prevent his angry sister from raising her own army in revenge against him.

After the story and before the silence, Mila imagined Erlig into safety. Not quite praying, but dreaming up five minutes — three hundred seconds attached to no particular hour and no particular day — during which they would laugh, just laugh, maybe about all the times he failed to beat her at running up that six-block bit of Marktstraße.

Marktstraße. Would it even be there?

Dawn began threatening the bombers. The sky grew quiet and bright. A long morning got underway.

By the time Mila, Effie, Anna and the rest reached Eduard-Platz, a woman was already digging out her home, if only to abandon it. She had found a suitcase and into it she shoved clothes and cans of food. Maybe she had relatives in a town nobody cared to destroy. Her children stood by the road in a tired line. The rubble hid all other people from view. An ambulance whined angrily, close by, but invisible. There was a scraping of the shovels and a terrible smell.

Why is Effie carrying laundry baskets? *Mila thought. .*

"You two come with me." Effie said "Come now and pick that up." A stretcher that the ambulance had left behind. The part of Mila that ran her legs wanted to run them away from this street, but timid Anna was following after Effie, dragging half the stretcher, and would never make it alone.

"Hello? Hello? Is anyone here? Is everyone okay?" There was no answer. Effie turned. "That's what you can say when you enter a bombed house. Then you have to listen carefully, because the people might not be able to call out if they are very hurt or if they are children. Yes? You understand?"

They understood. And Mila understood that they were too late, that they would always have been too late.

In the fourth house, someone had hung a necklace from the newel post of what had been the staircase. It was a locket, mostly melted shut. After the Mädelshcaft had cleared the house and dropped the family treasures into the cellar (in case a father or a brother came back), and after the girls had requisitioned all the food and all the pots and pans that could be weaponized, Mila stood in the sun and broke the pendant open.

Ash spilled out into Mila's hand, fine, perfect, dusty ash, powdery, not greasy. She rubbed her finger in it and remembered that feeling from long ago, when Erlig still sold papers on the corner of Markets and Alsenstrasse…

…1937

He'd been standing on Alsen that day. Mila decided to go and help so she and Erlig would have more time for exploring the city. Her mother was out of town and wouldn't care.

As Mila had crossed the road, carefully, she'd noticed something on Erlig's forehead and said:

"You silly boy! Of course you have not sold your papers! There's a big smudge of dirt on your forehead! No one is going to buy a paper from a grimy kid." But when she had walked closer to him, she'd seen that the smudge had a shape. It was a square little cross.

"I do not have dirt on my forehead." Erlig looked silly when he tried to sound indignant.

"Than what is it, paperboy?" Mila reached her finger toward his forehead so she could feel the dirt, and maybe taste it, and call him a liar.

"It's ashes. Stop!"

"Ash?"

"Yes, ash, in the shape of a cross, can't you see? Today is Ash Wednesday. The beginning of Lent. I went into that church on Lindnerstrasse where the priest says a prayer and uses his thumb to draw the cross. It's special, so don't touch."

"I think it's silly." Mila said. "What's it for? What is lent?"

"Lent is the time of year when children aren't supposed to eat dessert or chocolate or buy new dolls. My sisters never have that stuff, so it's pretty easy for them. I just try to go to Mass more and be nice to my sisters. Mum tries not to complain. You, Mila, you would have to eat every day, every meal and stop making your *mummy cry. Lent is when you try to be extra good." Mila took a paper from Erlig and began to read the headline story. It wasn't as interesting as lent.*

"Why? Why be good?" She asked.

"That's a lot to explain. We need to sell papers."

"But why the ashes."

"Okay," Erlig answered. "On Ash Wednesday, the priest says:

'Remember man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.' Today is the day when we are reminded that we don't have forever to live? Like my dad. The priest uses ashes because they're kind of like the dust that we turn into when we die."

"We turn into dust when we die?"

"Not right away, but after." And Erlig sold a paper. Then Mila asked:

"Will I die?"

"We all do, Mila, but not for a while. When you're old, older than your Grandma."

"I don't know my Grandma."

"Oh. Well, you won't die until your hair turns white. And you run so fast I don't even know if death will ever be able to catch you."

"Can I have some?" Mila asked. Erlig handed Mila some papers.

"No, can I have some ashes?"

"I think the priest is gone now."

"No. Can I have some of yours? You've got a lot." Mila giggled.

Erlig stood still while she reached up to his forehead and traced her finger over the black cross. Then he tucked the newspapers under one arm and, wrapping his hand around Mila's wrist, helped her trace the right shape on her own forehead. Then they sold papers with a vengeance, and Mila ate dinner for a week before the novelty of Lent wore off...

...1942

This War was like Erlig's Lent, so on the back of her hand, with the photograph ash, Mila now traced a little, square cross.

"We turn to dust when we die. Not right away, but after."

No.

Sometimes right away. Sometimes burning into dust, it's what makes us die.

She wished she could see Erlig one more time.

To warn him.

And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee.[xvi]

V

July 12, 2012
A Thursday
Berlin

"Are you superstitious?" Ashley asks, and her question's earnest pitch catches me off guard.

Our conversation has lulled after a sobering 120-minute tour of Berlin's last Cold War fallout shelter. Ashley is probably curious to know whether I believe that waiting for the End-times' Rapture is a plausible alternative to preparing for a nuclear winter.

"No. I'm not superstitious. Why?"

"Well, your train ticket to Leipzig, it's for tomorrow, and tomorrow is Friday the 13th."

Belief in Providence, in a Divine Plan, is something altogether different from belief in luck or karma or superstition. I learned my first big lesson about God's Providence a couple months after the world survived Y2K. One normal morning, my sixth grade teacher, Miss B. unlocked the classroom door for us only to find chaos behind it.

Our block of cubicles, a massive structure made from repurposed slabs of melamine, had torn holes in the wall and tossed all our books around the room.

"Okay kids! Wow! I guess the shelf fell. Be careful. Stack up your stuff and take a seat."

I saw my desk. The cubbies, while catapulting their contents, had cracked the armrest off and the seat back was completely gone.

"Um, Miss B.?" She looked up.

"I need a new desk. The shelf broke mine." Then everyone was staring.

"You could be dead!"

I don't know if that was just a thought, if one of the boys laughed crassly while saying it or if I read those words in Miss B.'s suddenly concerned eyes. Mom gave luck short shrift that night when I dramatically retold the day's events. I highlighted the fact that I could be dead or paralyzed, probably hoping for an extra hug or dessert. I got the hug.

"But you're fine," Mom said. "God wouldn't let that happen unless it was supposed to; it looks like you are supposed to live a little longer. Of course the shelves fell over the

weekend."

There was no new desk readily available, so for half a week I leaned forward from the emptiness behind my back and for much longer than a half a week I wondered if it would have hurt and what it would have looked like from Miss B's point of view.

"I'm not superstitious," I tell Ashley now. "I'll be fine."

Twenty-four hours later, I'm beginning to wonder if Ashley was right to worry.

I have just spent three hours searching Leipzig's historic downtown for Say Cheese! — The Hostel for Smiling People. "The Hostel Nobody's Ever Heard Of!" would be a more accurate tag.

Even though I'm finally at its entrance, standing opposite a cartooned rat and an illustrated hunk of stylized Swiss, I do not feel very cheesy or smiley.

The door is locked.

The lobby is dark.

There's no way I have missed curfew. It is barely 8:00 PM.

As I leave a forehead print against the glass, I spot uninstalled light fixtures and bubble-wrapped furniture crowding the front desk, all covered in drywall dust.

"Still under construction?" I ask my two dimensional welcoming committee. The rat just keeps on smiling.

I carry my reservation receipt to a three dimensional waiter at the restaurant next door.

"What do you think? Why is Say Cheese Leipzig allowing online reservations if they aren't open for business?"

"I will get my manager," he answers in miraculously perfect English. I set down my bag. The manager sees a light in the courtyard's second story. She disappears up a back staircase to collect the Say Cheese staff.

Sure enough, five minutes later, three men appear, apologizing in varying degrees of English.

"The website? It let you register? It was not supposed to complete the order. Our main staircase is not finished. The permit of occupancy is not granted to us yet. Next week, maybe."

"Well, next week doesn't help me. Where do you recommend I stay," I ask, reaching

a bit aggressively for my receipt. I can at least scrapbook about my frustration later.

The trio does not answer. They begin a furious exchange in a language that blends Italian, German and Spanish and seems to work for their business partnership. Finally the tall, thin one turns to me:

"Hello! My name is Sid. Can I buy you a drink?"

Inside the restaurant, Sid orders a Sprite, pours it over ice and walks outside to continue discussing the "possibility of arrangements with Lars and Timur." I sip the non-alchoholic stalling mechanism and keep my expectations low.

If I don't get the $3 booking fee back, a soda costs about that much. I guess we're even… but Sid eventually runs up to my table.

"So I talked to my boss and what we can do is, and we're sorry, we wish you could stay here tonight, but this is what we can do: we will pay for your room tonight, your own room, at AO Hostel, a very nice place by the train station." Sid points to the map he's been unfolding. "Well, not so nice. I am sure the beds are not quite so soft as the beds here at Say Cheese! But if you are staying just one night, maybe it will be fine. You are leaving tomorrow, yes? You know, one night, it is not sufficient. This is a wonderful city!"

Sid's tour of Leipzig, which he gives while wearing my thirty-five pound backpack through its streets, tells me why twenty-four hours is not long enough:

"The museums are closed until Monday; you've missed the fruit market which won't occur again till Tuesday. You have heard of Goethe? Yes? Did you know that he used to write his plays down in that tavern there, which you will not have time to visit? And the international Bach festival begins tomorrow evening, and tomorrow evening the biggest organ in the world, if you please, will give a concert. Also, Leipzig is turning 1000 years old this month, and for the birthday, a subway system is going to be installed. How do you expect to meet people if you stay only one night? Answer that!" Sid asks finally.

I explain that this is supposed to be my chance to move through a city where no one knows what I am up to, to strike a balance between independence and loneliness.

"These 24 hours are my experiment in solitary travel."

Sid grins at me.

"What?" I laugh in protest to his crooked smile. "I'm serious. Don't look at me like that. I need some time alone to write.

"You are a writer?"

"Yes."

The affirmation rolls off my tongue more comfortably than it did even a week ago. Somewhere in Berlin, between the Memorial and the Museum, I decided that 'yes' is this question's answer, but my lack of hesitation still shocks me.

Sid over-politely inquires about what I write, and, after my overly-rehearsed synopsis of Mila's story, he plugs Leipzig as my next topic of merit:

"You could, for example, write the true legend of this tower." A terra cotta turret, centuries old, clings to the corner of a white stucco pharmacy.

"You seriously want me to write a story about this tower?"

"Just listen. You see the vines carved into it?" Sid asks. I nod. "Well, once real vines grew all around the tower. A young woman had her bedroom through that window. A boy was in love with the girl of this house but their families were enemies. Like Romeo and Juliette. The lovers asked for permission over and over to marry, while night after night the boy climbed the vines to the girl's bedroom. They made their own secret vows…and they made love. Finally, they received the consent." Sid has my full attention now, even though I'm standing in the middle of an intersection. Happy endings don't have such tranquil lead-ups. "The night before the wedding, the boy climbed the tower one last time."

"Let me guess: they got caught!"

"Ha! No!" Sid continues. "The boy was climbing down, when suddenly, he lost his grip on the slippery vines and fell! To his death! Right there. No…right, see those bricks there? Right there."

"What happened to the girl?" But Sid has no useful information relating to the female protagonist of his morality tale.

Later, I will search online for: [the star-crossed lovers of Leipzig], [death at the Renaissance oriel window], and [Leipzig AND fell to his death AND tower]. The final query will elicit this headline:

"A Swedish musician fell 20 meters to his death during a performance at a Leipzig street festival over the weekend."

Sid's tale will appear to be fictitious, transplanted to this intersection just as the terra cotta turret was after World War II destroyed its original house, but I will have already told the story, as fact, in four different countries.

We make it to AO Hostel by dark. After Sid pays $50 US for my room, and offers to carry my bag upstairs (a favor I decline), I listen to this proposal:

"I don't want to make you…Excuse me if this is too much to ask." *Will I not need to pay for dinner, either?* "Ah, it's just this little thing my boss thought you might, you could do for us…We are wanting to put some pictures of Say Cheese on our website. We want pictures with people in the rooms, but we have had not guests yet, you see. So, only if you want, you could come back tomorrow, for a half hour, and we will take some pictures? We get this room for you; you do this little thing for us?"

A photo shoot in exchange for a free bed? No pressure. This was why they kept me drinking Sprite so long. They should have switched it vodka soda…

Instead of alarm bells ringing, I hear Mila's voice, telling me two months ago:

"I don't regret much. The few things I regret in life were the things I did not do."

So tonight, I add "Photo shoot with unknown persons in a European hostel" to my bucket list and prepare to check it off.

July 14, 2012
10:30 AM
The Photo Shoot

"Say Cheese!" Lars orders as his camera's shutter clicks open. We all start laughing. I press my lips together in a close-mouthed smile to keep from blurting out:

"Who picked the name of this place anyways?"

The photo shoot starts at the hostel door (which was locked and dark when I arrived, on time, at 10:00 AM).

Sid reenacts yesterday's polite greeting, with motions that are slow and exaggerated.

"So Lars' can get all the angles," Sid says.

Because you and Timur were out drinking till 6:00 AM, I think.

I drag an empty suitcase into the lobby where Tim hands me a champagne flute of Perrier water and seats me at a table. I pull out my notebook, pretend to write a poem, and then give a far away look as Lars steps in close with the lens.

"You have really never been in a shoot before?" Sid asks. "I don't believe it. You are an artist. I'm telling you. Lars, isn't she an artist?" I laugh, knowing that Sid's compliments are timed to get a better smile out of me. Under today's date I write:

So not like anything I've ever done. They say I am an artist! Ha.

"And do you have time to see the bedrooms?" Sid asks. "Can we do some pictures in

a bedroom?"

"Sure," I laugh. "Of course. My train doesn't leave till two." Of course I have time to do some bedroom shots. We climb the unfinished, un-permitted stairs, and then I scale a ladder to the top of a bunk bed. With the three men standing around, I crawl under the down comforter and close my eyes.

"So, are our mattresses more comfortable than AO's?"

I prop my head up on my elbow, trying to pull a look that says: *I'm so comfortable I don't want to move.* It should be easy enough, but does not have a lot of photographic kick.

"Timur, stand next to her. No sit on the bottom bunk. This is the co-ed dorm, anyways… Now, Gabrielle, look at him." Timur's eyes are bloodshot. Sid and I tease him about his impending hangover until the last picture is taken. The session ends with Sid giving me his business card for the third time. I promise that if I come back to Leipzig, I will, for sure, stay at Say Cheese.

A month from today, I'll check their website for evidence of my modeling debut, but there'll only be concept art and watercolor sketches on the PHOTOS page. Frustrated by my American friends' protesting the truth of my Leipzig photo shoot, I will contact Sid's assistant who'll write:

"We are glad to [be] hearing from you! Thank you very much for you[r] mail. We are now using some of your photographs in our Facebook pages, where you can join us." I will click over to Facebook where there'll be one photo, the pose in which I'd leaned over the top bunk safety rail and made awkward eye contact with Timur. A Facebook user named Mikael, will have typed "Zuuuup!" in the comments.

And that's what I will get for all my artistry.

I make it back to the train station without further incident. (Unless you want to count the clean-cut stranger pretending to steal my bag after he offered to take a picture of me with J.S. Bach!)

The train from Leipzig to Bonn isn't late and isn't full. I find a seat and show my ticket to the commuter sitting next to me, pointing to the numbers.

Is this the right train? I ask with my only my eyebrows.

"Ja," he reassures me, then squints funny. "Oui!" he translates, thinking I don't understand his German, and that I'm French.

Across the aisle, a man sleeps with an International Law textbook propped between his fists. Behind me, a woman is having a phone conversation, and from the intonation and length of the call, her daughter seems to be dating the wrong guy. I lean my head against the window, listening to the blur of sentences that I can't quite understand, waiting for Central Germany to roll away, watching the plain pull itself up into ridge.

We rattle through a tunnel that shoots us out to where the light is so brilliant it seems the sun's trying to decide whether it might permanently settle here. Vineyards stripe the hills like rows of green regiments, guarding each bank of a river that, without warning, has fallen into rank beside our track.

I have, to date, dipped my fingers in the Danube, crossed the Columbia on a miniature ferry, and gone skating on Manitoba's frozen Red. I've seen the Loire, the St. Lawrence, the Mississippi, and the Seine. But today the Rhine wins the river contest, and for some reason, holding my breath indefinitely is the only appropriate way to reverence its presence.

Castles where bards once sung Norse legends still cast shadows and keep watchtowers. Towns that in North America can only exist as porcelain Christmas villages, reach with stacked foundations down to where mythology is buried deep.

Between my blinks and stares the scene freezes, an optical illusion. The motive pieces of the valley reverse their places: for a split second, I am motionless and the Rhine also pauses to become an opaque window, while it's the port cities that are moving in a northwards march. Then, just as suddenly, it's over and our engine is again racing with river's barges, barely winning.

The other passengers in my car are numb to Rhine's effect or are still stuck in the illusion's paralyzing dimension. They don't acknowledge, with so much as a glance, the rippling current or even the double rainbow that suddenly spans the swirling, slat-grey depths.

Oberhausen 1942

Sunday was a day off. Effie had arranged what she called a "no work meeting." On the way to join her, Mila passed by Herr Seidel's cafe. The window she and Erlig had first sat by eight years ago was still there, cracked and dirty, but intact; the cafe door's brass hinges, however, had been taken and had already found a deadly mark in some ditch far from Marketstasse. The oak slab tilted like the ancient tombstone Mila had once seen in a painting of the Resurrection.

She slid by it, walked behind the front counter and leaned down to the lidless coffee bins to sniff the memory of breakfast around a table, the taste of that bit of bitter liquid Poppy always left in his mug as he rushed downstairs to open up the toy-shop for the day.

Yesterday, Effie had told Mila to wear her bathing-suit and today, she was waiting in Ruhrpark, near the Ruhr River, with four girls Mila had never seen. The morning was still chilly, but:

"A swim is what everyone needs," Effie said as Mila approached.

"How cold is the Ruhr?" Mila asked, and then asked for the names of Effie's friends: Lulu, Kamilla, Frieda and Silke.

"Oh, we're not swimming the Ruhr," Effie replied. "This is a trough, not a river. We have a two-hour walk from here to the Rhine. I brought you some lunch."

"Swimming the Rhine is against the rules. Everyone knows that," Mila said. "My mum would not allow it, even if it was legal."

"Swimming the Rhine is not against the rules," Effie declared. "And I know you are strong enough to cross it and that you probably have always wanted to."

Effie let the other girls go on up ahead and walked with Mila, looking at her several times and once for so long that Mila felt miserable.

"What?" she asked, instead of crying.

"I'm your friend," Effie said, which seemed to mean that she would not mind tears, but it was also a confusing thing to say.

"No. You are the leader of my BDM group and you are a girl. All of my friends are boys." Effie would not break her stare.

"My father was a train conductor before he was sent to the front. He bought a toy train for himself from your father, probably before you were born. I want to help you," Effie waved back toward where they'd been working yesterday, "to get through this."

"I don't need help," Mila said. The brown haired girl, Anna*, she thought,* she won't get through this.

Mila had not seen Anna in a while, but, on Friday, while Mila had waited in line for ration cards, she'd spotted her at the secretary's desk. The secretary had been consulting a list and comparing it with Anna's membership booklet.

"Anna, I am sorry," the secretary, who wasn't sorry, had said. "Records show you've missed your work party four days this week. Ration cards go only to those who work. You can go explain that to your mother. Next!" Mila had thought of what one could say about calling what these girls did a 'party.' She had tried to send the words to Anna like an invisible hand shake, but Anna had just stood there quivering and staring at the desk edge until someone had pushed her away.

"You are tough," Effie was saying now. "Someone told me that. But being tough is not enough. The war, this, everything…it will get to you, Mila. I saw a tough girl like you, after a week like this, on a sunny afternoon like this one, fill her pockets with rocks and her stockings with broken glass and walk down out into the current before I even knew what she was doing. Then she was gone. I was her leader. I am your friend." Mila chewed the tail of the bread Effie had given her and then asked:

"Why the broken glass?"

"I don't know."

"Well I know it is illegal and dangerous to swim the Rhine. Besides, you just told me that girl died," Mila said.

"There are four rules to being my friend," Effie replied. "The first is: don't cry. The second is: forget. The third is: lie, and the fourth is: Learn to swim the Rhine. I will teach you."

Effie explained all the rules. She told Mila that crying meant emotions and "we do not need to waste our tears on this stupid war time." The second rule, 'forget,' meant that every time Mila walked into a bombed-out building, she was to distract herself with a memory, something happy, and as soon as they left a house, she was to leave all the sadness behind in its cellar.

"It's the best place for it," Effie observed. Then there was: "I mean it when I say lie is the third rule. BDM girls are supposed to tell the truth, but when your mother asks what you've spent the day doing, lie. When you ask yourself, lie to yourself. Close your eyes and imagine how you might have spent today. Believe it. Never talk about what we do. Forget. Always forget. And swimming the Rhine, the last rule? Well that's for the thrill of it. To blow off steam and to make sure you never end up in it by mistake."

"Which bridge will we cross back on?" Mila asked as the current with the riverbank factories and ports came into view.

"The bridge at Berliner Strasse is open," said the tallest girl, Frieda. "We will walk back from there."

"That's a mile down stream from here!"

"By the time you make it to the middle of the river, it will try to sweep you all the way to Dusseldorf. You have to be ready to swim fast and hard."

If a security patrol had been walking the ramp along the Rhine factory roofs, he would have made out five blonde heads bobbing near the rocks, clinging to the shore, wading. He wouldn't have known it was one final pep talk. He would have noticed them face the slick Rhine water that slid like molten glass towards the south. This patrol might have thought to raise an alarm, or he might have wondered, since the golden specs dissolved so quickly in the blue-grey flood, if he'd spotted anything at all.

But nobody watched these children race against the swelled current; nobody watched them rinse away the ash and blood, the grit and the remembrance of that summer. These girls had no audience as they struck out, with tired arms, against the thing that would have conquered them.

VI

July 16, 2012
Monday

I am sitting on a train. Encore. (My favorite French word wraps up the sense of 'still,' 'yet,' and 'again' in two efficient syllables.)

This double-decker commuter glides alongside the Rhine. Under drab Monday morning skies, the river has lost some of its glamour. Rain paints the scene in wartime colors: black and grey and white.

The rattle of the car's connecting doors prompts the two girls sitting across from me to erupt in sudden sibling banter.

"I cannot believe you remembered your purse and forgot your wallet!" lectures the older, dark-haired sister before turning to me. "It's illegal to be out in Germany without identification cards, especially if you are under seventeen," she explains. "Now Kathi does not have her train-pass either."

"I am nineteen, Theresia," Kathi laughs defensively, as the conductor mounts the staircase. "The man will look up my pass if he's in a good mood, and then the fine will only be 7 Euros."

I met Theresia and Kathi a day ago, when their family opened their Rhineland home to me. Yesterday, after Mr. Ko said: "*Here is to new friends from far away places*," I had had the correct response: "Prost!" But as Theresia and I clinked glasses, I stared at the point of impact, at my wine, an all-American toast.

"Hey!" she yelled. "You do this wrong! You must look into my eyes, or you will have seven years bad luck!" She's as concerned as Ashley was about last Friday being numbered thirteen.

"Oh my gosh! I totally forgot. In America and Canada, we look at the drink, not the person. Here, let's try it again." But Theresia did not seem convinced that I was telling the truth.

"You're lying. You just forgot and now you are making up this story!"

"I'm serious."

"You're telling us that all Americans just stare at their cup? How stupid!"

"I guess we're worried about spilling or something, or we think eye contact is

awkward."

"I'd be more worried about the curse."

The curse does not appear to have caught up with us. The train conductor records Kathi's fine as 7 Euro. With a blonde nod Kathi agrees to never travel undocumented again. In the time it takes for her to pocket that promise with her receipt, the train is already stopping.

"Keep your head down until we come around the corner!" These are Theresia's orders as we climb out of the station. She and Kathi want my very first glimpse of the Cathedral to be a complete one.

How I made through Catholic theology and philosophy, taught by a German nun named Mother Ursula, without seeing a single sketch of Cologne Cathedral, the largest Gothic church in Northern Europe, I will never know, but that lack of photographs now gives me the chance to apprehend it one sense at a time.

It's the wind I notice first, fierce gusts that whip around the bevels and curves of the buttresses. A storm is brewing in the courtyard but not the sky. A cathedral so massive it can bend the weather to its will. That is how I'll remember this place.

"Okay. Look up now!"

"Oh." Big. Enormous. Mountainous. Tremendous. As big as promised. Heartbreakingly big. Heartbreaking because pilgrims not tourists used to crowd through the facade's triple doors; heartbreaking because somehow, in the effort to update its image to modern expectations, the Church has managed to empty its cathedrals, has rendered their hugeness obsolete.

Kathi and I smile for Theresia's camera. Behind us, the soot-stained spires reach like blackened twin peaks towards the low flung clouds.

"Do you want to climb the tower?" Kathi asks as we avoid eye contact with the gargoyles. It only costs 1 Euro to gain access to the spiral staircase. I pay for a ticket and also buy a postcard of this church, this place of prayer that is nearly unphotographable in its enormity.

We climb the stairs to the tower's first landing where the tiniest bell named 'Ave' makes one thousand six hundred and sixty pounds of bronze noise as it marks one o'clock. We take in the fantastic view quickly, hoping to descend before the quarter hour strikes. Proximity to this particular kind of music is painful.

We slip without falling down the five hundred thirty three treads that are narrower than our sandals' soles.

"Who designed these stairs anyways?" I say as we make it back to the ground level.

"You have never heard the myth of this cathedral?" Theresia asks.

"No." Supporting my up-tilted head with both hands so I can stare continuously at the domes and arches, I follow the girls past fifty-six pillars and listen to the story. The columns are so massive they might have grown straight up from bedrock. Theresia's tale is so strange that pieces of it must find foundations in some ancient truth.

"Back in the twelve-hundreds, when the old cathedral burnt down, the Archbishop held a contest among the best architects of the city for new cathedral blueprints. Nobody won the contest. The youngest architect was depressed about losing. He went to the edge of the Rhine to throw himself in. But the devil appeared to him before he jumped off the bridge and said:

'Give me your soul and I'll give you the blueprints to the best cathedral in the world.' The young man asked Satan for one day so he could think about the deal. That night, he went to find a priest, to ask what he should do, and the priest advised he try to get the plans. When the architect went to meet the devil, he asked Satan if he could review the blueprints before signing the contract for his soul. The devil agreed again. Super quick, the architect slipped the papers under the statue of St. Ursula, beyond the devil's power. But Satan cursed him:

'You will never see this project completed and no one will remember your name.' More than six hundred years, that is what it took to finish the Cathedral. It was done just in 1880, and to this day the name of that architect has not been learned."

This cathedral has another myth that none of its 20,000 daily visitors has heard. No one in Cologne remembers the name of the Berlin reporter who asked in 1953, if she could tea-dye the white vestments of the priests and altar boys. Mila's television company was broadcasting the Easter Vigil service that year, and the pure-white linen surplices and robes would lose all depth and contrast through the camera's black and white filters. Mila had the task of reassuring the Archbishop himself that the end result would be a subtle, off-white.

True to her confidence and her constant expectation of success, Mila didn't pre-test the corner of one garment, but tossed them all in, at once.

"Well, you're Catholic; you know how many of those things they use at Easter!" was

how Mila began the story. “I went to rinse everything out, and nothing would rinse. How was I to know linen would not wash out the same way as cotton? Guess who had to go back and explain things to the bishop! My boss even made me ask if we could dye a second set of robes in weaker tea. Ack. It was terrible.”

Today, I pass the old sacristy and wonder if there are any off-white vestments behind its locked door. Did the old archbishop have any idea that a decade after Mila’s dying incident, the Novus Ordo would deem ornate vestments unnecessary and would delete them, along with half the prayers and pomp and reverence, from Church ceremonies?

In North America, this turn from the cult of God to the “Cult of Man” prompted parish councils to toss out artwork and strip chapels bare. At least here in Europe, the archival value of some traditions are still sacred.

In the Cathedral sanctuary, artists restore medieval paintings. The place suddenly feels museum-like. I begin snapping photographs along with the rest of the crowd, sliding my lens between the bars of an iron grill to capture the Infant Jesus of a sculpted nativity scene.

“So is that the Three Kings thing everyone’s been talking about? Those statues there?” asks the voice of an American tourist. The question is for her dad, who does not know, so I answer:

“Actually, the bones of the Three Kings are up there, above us, in the golden coffin-looking box.” The girl looks to where I’m pointing.

“Their bones? Are in there?”

“Yes.”

“Seriously? Like, as in, the real Three Kings. The Three Kings were real?” She lowers her own camera. It’s difficult to tell if she’s incredulous or is experiencing the collision of history, religion, architecture, and geography, a moment that can smother our limited American sensibility with the collective force of their narrative and presence.

We learn history, even our country’s own, as an abstract, as if events, hard facts, dates and deaths, somehow occur untethered from any physical locale that we might later stand next to or upon.

And relics…most of us are not ready for relics. Their reality is unnerving especially to a generation that believes truth is relative and that time mythifies all things. Relics are too Catholic for America. Relics are too real.

How does one authenticate bones from the first century? It is impossible, so how could those kings exist? But these bones have been venerated for a millennium as

belonging to three men who followed a star and brought funeral spice as a birthday present for an Infant King.

Not far from Cologne Cathedral, in St. Andreas Church, the documented bones of Albertus Magnus lie unattended in its 13th century sarcophagus. He was a Dominican monk, one of Germany's most accomplished philosophers, a brilliant scientist and a bit of an alchemist, as well as a saint, but there are no physics students, astronomers, or pilgrims posing next to his tomb.

I kneel and recite my favorite prayer:

"Deliver us from all evils, past, present and to come, and through the intersession of Blessed Mary ever Virgin…grant us peace in our days…"

Deliver us from evils, past… Past evils. Even Mother Church knows we are only human, that our human pasts stay with us, and that their pain attempts to stifle us so we can't breath in the beauty of the present.

I follow Theresia and Kathi out of the damp crypt. As we leave the church, I spot, in a niche, a wooden bust of a saint that I immediately recognize: St. Dominic, the founder of the religious order Albert the Great joined. In the base of the statue is a glass disc covering a fleck of white bone, and it is my turn to be overwhelmed.

During the summer of 1206, this man established, in southern France, the first house of Dominican nuns. In 1991, Dominican teaching sisters moved into a house in Idaho and opened a school. My family moved to Idaho in 2000, so that I could attend Grade Seven at St. Dominic's. Half way through 2006, I graduated high school, and in mid-December, on the laurels of my liberal arts diploma, Matthew's law firm hired me as their secretary. In 2008, Mila told me for the first time, to call her back and in August of that year, after I explained I'd attended Catholic school, she decided to trust me long enough to share an abridged version of her long life. And now I'm here.

Causality is comforting, but its tenuousness can be frightening.

I am not superstitious. I stand in this chilly church, looking at the image and the bones of the man responsible for the way my present is playing out, the medieval monk who couldn't know 20th century nuns would melt his life story into stain glass windows for a hillside chapel on a continent that, when he died, had not yet been discovered.

"Thanks," I tell him out loud, and since I probably haven't said it enough in the past, I elaborate. "Thanks for inspiring so many people and saying 'yes' to all the situations

God presented you with." I grin suddenly, and, as if I'm addressing a family member – He is our distant spiritual dad, after all – say: "Thanks for being a part of my life."

I try to take a picture of the reliquary, but its Plexiglas protection sends back my reflected flash instead.

Out on the street, Kathi is battling the wind with her umbrella. The downpour helps us decide against walking the length of the Rhine railway bridge.

"I mean, we can see it pretty well from here," is my argument.

"Shall we find Anton then?" Kathi asks, referring to her tiny Opel, that's parked somewhere we'll barely be able to find.

First we stand in the rain, taking in our adequate view of the Rhine in a silence that lasts several minutes until Kathi tells me:

"It is illegal to swim the Rhine."

"I know." Theresia turns to look at me.

"How do *you* know that?"

But I only answer that someone told me once about the deadly current.

Tonight, when I close my eyes to sleep, all I can see is the Cathedral's spiral staircase, plunging down, and the phantom fear of falling haunts my dreams.

At the first turning of the second stair
I turned and saw below
The same shape twisted on the banister
Under the vapour in the fetid air
Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears
The deceitful face of hope and of despair.[xvii]

Oberhausen 1942
Marktstraße

On Tuesday, when Mila and Effie walked into a house where the hallway was open to the sky, Mila blurred away the entire morning with a memory from the Christmas she turned nine…

1939…

All the preceding summer she had begged for a bicycle and, finally, on Christmas morning it was there, red, the perfect size, with a basket. Although there were no big drifts pushing up against the windows, Mummy had said something about the slippery cobblestones and getting sick and "why don't you wait till spring." Poppy had wanted to see if the contraption actually worked; Agnes, the housekeeper, had the day off; and spring had been very far away. Wearing her Christmas dress, Mila climbed on the bike and, holding the wall, rolled the length of the hallway. The rubber tires were uncertain, but on her second time Mila had pedaled the length of the apartment and nearly smacked the perfect wire basket into a windowsill. During all January and February of 1940, Mila had pretended that there was no roof over the toy shop hallway, that the marble ceiling was a mottled sky, that the pillars were trees, and that Agnes' shrill reproach was just wind whipping past her ears…

…1942

That was barely three years ago.

The bike was still perfect, but the roads were now too full of rubble for any riding.

It was dark by the time Mila finished the day's work and stepped through the toyshop window, into the back office where she and her mother now slept. Dark, but she could see Mummy had not moved. For weeks she had sat with that same vacant stare. It did not matter if Mila read to her or wrote to Poppy. The war had broken her and there were no spare smiles in the shop.

"Where have you been?" Mummy whispered.

"What did you do today?" Mila asked back. "I worked at the recycling center for a long while. I did a good job. They want me back. I found some candles and postage stamps, in one of the dump heaps. No one needed them."

It was so easy. It became effortless to practice all of Effie's rules.

July 19, 2012

Theresia and Kathi are still sleeping when my train leaves Thursday morning. Their mother drives me to the station. She doesn't just drop me off, but double checks my ticket, stands on the platform and, when second class pulls up and makes its momentary stop,

she waits for me to find a seat, waits to wave me off. The engine quickly drags me back toward the Rhine. Mrs. Ko stands there waving until all I can see is a spec of her on the empty platform.

At Bonn Hauptbahnhof, my connection is twenty minutes late. The platform conductor tells me this and then tries to teach me German.

"'Fahrradmitnahme reservierungspflichtig' means you have the possibility of taking your bike on board, but only if you have made a reservation. 'Bicycles reservation obligatory.'"

"I don't have a bike."

"'Fahrrad' means bike," the conductor says, tapping her nail at the 'd' of 'Fahrrad.' She pauses, looks at me, as if waiting for me to repeat the word so:

"Fahrrad." I say, rolling the 'r' incorrectly, probably in a French way. I feel like a schoolgirl who foolishly hasn't learned her lesson for the day. "I don't need a reservation for a bike," I add.

"What is your destination?" She asks, reaching for my ticket. "Linden? Okay. Because of the delay, you can't make this connection in Bingen. So wait for an hour for the next Regio Bahn."

"Okay."

"Fahrrad," she says, one more time.

VII

October 1942
Oberhausen

Somehow they survived the summer. Somehow fall arrived.

School was indefinitely canceled. Mila spent her mornings with Effie and the short afternoons in what was left of her father's library, reading Dickens. Somehow the bombings got worse. Mila's trust that the toyshop would not be hit a fourth time became shaken. Finally Effie told Mila it was over.

"All the school aged girls are being sent to Prague, where no bombs have ever fallen."

"Are you coming too?" Mila wished.

"I'm too old," Effie clarified. "You know that. Besides, what does school have left to teach me?"

Mila's mother was evacuating as well, to some place in Bavaria. One morning in October, the two of them left the toyshop with just one bag each and with a parcel that held their valuables. The parcel fit in Mila's bicycle basket. Mummy tied the heavy bags to the seat with twine. She and Mila pushed the bike between them, a handle each, and made no comments about the broken buildings that they were passing.

The entire city seemed to be heading to the station. Everyone was the back of a head, a face that did not turn.

Mila looked right and left. With her mind, she added red and white striped awnings to the bare storefronts. She set the glass street-lamp globes atop their posts and attached the tram to its cables. If she squinted hard enough, she could remember meat hanging in the butcher shop window. Onto the remaining bricks of the Alsberg clothing department, she imagined the ivy that used to grow there. And if Mila closed her eyes completely, letting the bike lead her steps along, she could restack Marktstraße's scattered roof tiles, re-mortar the parade of chimneys that should have been there and watch make-believe smoke curl out of every kitchen she'd run past as a child.

It was a good game.

Mila opened her eyes. Real smoke was spewing from the train engine stacks and settling between the cases and parcels and people and faces all turned towards the track.

On the platform, Mummy unwound the twine and carried Mila's bag toward the closest car.

"What about my bike?" Mila asked, not moving.

"Just lean it up against the lamp post there."

"But you are leaving right away with me. Who will come and pick it up and bring it home?" Mila asked as she wrapped the handles around the pole.

"Just lean it there, Mila," her mother said again.

"But Agnes is gone, and no one knows that we're leaving!"

"Mila, get on the train." Mummy stood there with the bags.

"But someone will steal it!"

The conductor walked the length of two cars, making final preparations. Mila's mother said nothing, just turned her head. That was her answer. Mila had to follow.

They found seats. Mila leaned forehead and five fingers against the window. Through the thick glass the bike and lamppost looked almost like toys lit up in her father's shop. The curve of the red handlebars seemed to be the only color in the grey city.

Tonight there would be no lamplight here. Nobody would know if the bike's owner were alive; nobody would care. Mila realized this. She realized that, by morning, her bike would be gone and with it all the memories of the happy past she'd been using to numb away the present. If only there had been room to take the red bicycle, she could have gone on pretending.

"What are you thinking?" asked her mother, in a sudden burst of interest and relief. Mila blinked at the bike as the train tore her eyes away.

"That we will finally be safe," she lied.

July 20, 2012
Linden, Germany

In Linden, my friend Annie, who landed in this town on her husband's military contract, teaches me to smoke cigarettes.

We spend Friday evening smoking on the balcony beyond her living room window and reminiscing about her childhood in Montana and my vacations to her family's ranch.

"You know what," I say. "Your family's story is so crazy, it is just begging to be written; there's just one problem."

"What is that?" Annie taps some ash off the end of her cigarette.

"No one would believe it could all be true. I mean, with the relatives sabotaging the

fish hatchery and then all the accidents that happened or almost happened…"

"Did you ever hear the one about the train?" Annie asks. I have. I let her retell it. The train story involved a Trackhoe — one of those huge, one-armed earthmovers with tank-like wheels. Annie's dad had rented one, and the delivery driver had gotten the heavy flatbed trailer stuck on the train track, high-centered, like a teeter-totter.

"So my mom was on the phone with the central train control, giving our coordinates, and as the controller was saying:

'I can't get through to the engine approaching your location.'

"They both heard the whistle: Mom in her left ear and the controller gal through the phone. Mom didn't know that Dad was driving the equipment off the trailer. She was staring out the window yelling:

'Jesus, save us!' at the top of her lungs, with the controller still on the line, both of them just waiting for an impact. You know, it was an Amtrak full of people heading to New York?"

"Yeah, I remember that." I suddenly realize that I took my last long distance train ride last week. I'm flying back to Prague, not riding.

"But you know how the end of it goes," Annie continues. "They pulled the trailer free in the last ten seconds, with six inches to spare. The train swept by at whatever ridiculous speed it was going.

"My brother was floored by the whole thing, first by the fact that he didn't die in whatever explosion that would have caused, but then he just kept saying over and over:

'A woman in one of the compartments was putting on lipstick, wondering why we were there. She had no idea how close she'd come to someone picking her up off the track in pieces. She had no idea.' He didn't get over it for weeks. I don't suppose it's something you really ever 'get over,' you know?"

Annie stops talking and lets the story stand in the air with the smoke. I press my toes into the grout between the balcony's glazed tiles and say nothing for a while. Then:

"Yeah, that would stay with you."

"Of course, I wasn't at home for any of that," Annie adds. "I was at the nun's boarding school in Idaho. I'm glad it's just a story."

Christmas 1942
Prague

Mila checked the Hotel's front desk every day, hoping for a letter from Erlig, but the only deliveries to her Prague address were her mother's weekly letters, with their magical bit of money. Now it was Christmas. There had not even been a post card from him.

Mila worried that Erlig had lied about his age. Had he been sent against Russia? He did look a lot older than fifteen. Didn't documentation prevent things like that?

But Mila's letters were never sent back, so she kept on writing, wondering if Erlig had no paper, trying to imagine where in Germany her notes might be collecting.

December 1942 - Podebrady (That's right outside of Prague)

Dear Erlig,

I hope this letter finds you, and then that it finds you well. I had my picture taken yesterday and would have sent you a copy, but I only had money for one and you know how mothers are about things like photographs. Besides, I'm sure you can easily recall what I look like. I'm not so sure my mummy remembers my face. She probably thinks it is skinnier than it really could be.

I have a question for you, if you know the answer. Last week, I met a girl from Heidelberg. She said that the Americans have bombed none of the buildings there. Only a few explosives hit the ground all of last year! It sounds like the place we should move to. But, they never know if it is too good to be true, so her mother made them go to the shelters anyways, and became so upset about all the silence, that she sent her children away to "safer" places. (I would have refused to go, of course. Heidelberg sounds quite safe, if you ask me.) But isn't that strange! How could that be? That is my question.

And now…no more room. Stay safe. Write to me here. I'm stuck here for a while.

~ Mila.

July 21, 2012
Heidelberg

Standing in the castle courtyard in a chilly breeze knowing the rain is about to come…knowing that the pictures I've just snapped can never capture the lanes we hiked up to get here. Cramp in my hand…

And, with that, my notes run out. Heidelberg was Mila's favorite city. She was married here. I have waited my whole trip to visit and now I have nothing to write? From the medieval castle ramparts, the Old Town is just another panorama of red-roofed buildings. The view doesn't move me. Have I put off Heidelberg for too long and numbed myself to the novelty of its white stucco courtyards, red brick palaces and bridges set with statues?

Annie comes over to read what I've jotted down.

"I could see you living here," she says, "Studying or even teaching at the University. Here, stand there. Yeah. It looks good on you." We both laugh. The streets do feel homey and I *am* responding to them not as tourist or writer, but as a resident, surveying the view through a lens that familiarity has clouded with ambivalence.

"You know a US Army General, not my father, walked me down the aisle for my wedding?" Mila once told me (or maybe even twice). "He explained to me why Heidelberg was not bombed during the War. This General went to university there before the 1930s. He and his college buddies all ended up high up in the Army. Well, these generals got together and made a pact not to drop any explosives on Heidelberg. They had all passed such happy years there when they were young. They could not bear to part with it."

Official sources and vacation blogs confirm the existence of Mila's story, only as an apocryphal legend, of course, claiming the non-strategic nature of the city as having been its good luck charm, but I prefer the unnamed general's myth.

Far below us, the bells of the Church of the Holy Ghost begin to ring. Organ fanfare bursts open the chapel doors. A wedding party tumbles out, the bride as overjoyed and overwhelmed and beautiful as the woman who stood there five dozen summer ago.

White light folded sheathing about her, folded.
The new years walk, restoring
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
With new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem
The time…
……
Redeem the time, redeem the dream
The token of the word unheard, unspoken.[xviii]

Easter 1943
Prague

At the hotel, a Reichspost agent counted out the letters for the evacuated schoolgirls, but held onto the last one, marked "Return to Sender!" The sender had written a Berlin address in precise, block letters. It did not matter if the numbers were clear, however. Two words stamped the envelope, front and back:

"Empfänger verstorben."

"You're going to tell her," the agent said. She reread the somber label and finally slid this last piece of mail across the counter. The teacher in charge of evacuees slipped the unopened letter into a drawer where a pile of unheard messages was growing. "Was it her father or brother?" The agent asked. "She needs to know. She needs to stop writing. Why does this girl keep writing?"

For an answer, the teacher locked the desk, then said:

"Now is not the time. Let her keep writing. I know this girl. She needs something she can hold on to, something like hope, as long as she can keep pretending it."

The agent shrugged.

"I thought she might want to spend her stamps on living souls."

"Well, for a little longer, this boy she writes to will be as alive as she thinks he is." That night, the teacher finally returned Mila's letters… by burning the folded notes near an open window. The smoke, that smelled of glue and ink and tears, twisted in the breeze and up to the sky like incense. The words' ashes fluttered, unnoticed, to the ground.

"And God said
Prophesy to the wind, to the wind only for only
The wind will listen."[xix]

VIII

July 25, 2013
En route to Prague

Thousands of feet below my window-seat the Black Forest marches in all directions. Villages that have been staving off the woods for centuries stand like islands, with evergreen needles scratching at their circular shores. Ancient roads wind invisibly between the trunks, connecting these houses in an impossible hopscotch. The towns begin and end suddenly, and suddenly the forest ends as well, crowded by advancing fields of wheat and rye and sometimes sunflowers.

When this plane lands in Prague, after I find my way back to Solopisky, I will ask Michal Semikova if I can write his story: agnostic university student finds God in a jail cell then becomes a conservative Catholic writer in modern Czech Republic, a country where 64% of people practice no religion. It's an unexpected plot and a bit ironic. It will be perfect. I have Thursday, Friday, and Saturday before I fly back to Idaho. If I can just have one good conversation with him, I'm sure I can get Michal to agree.

In the morning, I try talking to Michal. We sit awkwardly in his living room for ten minutes until he finally admits:

"You know, now is really not a good time. Tomorrow is the anniversary of the death of my wife's grandmother and there is a ceremony for scattering her ashes. I have much preparation to do, so if you will excuse me. Do you have any plans for the day? Are you going back to Prague?"

I end up walking to a coffee shop two miles down the road so I do not have to look at the photographs of the woman they're burying tomorrow, the woman who just happened to have died a year ago exactly, on the most inconvenient 27th of July.

I give my double espresso order all in Czech and sip it, approximating a resigned demeanor, trying to conjure up a scenario in which a story somehow falls into my lap within the next forty-eight hours. I let the 11:13 AM train whistle away to Prague without me and log onto the internet to research writing schools, just to pass the time. I check my email first.

Dear Gabrielle,
Lunch tomorrow?
That's Thu.
Lemme know.
Rick

Rick, the screenplay guy that emailed me the Sunday I visited Lidice.

Dear Rick,
I'll be in Prague at noon and we could definitely meet for lunch. Just tell me where. Sorry I didn't get back to you till now. There is no wifi at my house. Great for writing. Not so great for communicating. ~ Gabrielle

Two minutes later:

GS,
Wanna say Corso, on Republic Square?
Or the Dubliner?
12:30?

I choose the Corso, because I can get to Republic Square without a map. The memorized route takes me through the Old Town Square where Prague's Astronomical clock is about to strike noon, with its medieval marionette procession of the Twelve Apostles.

11:58 AM.

A familiar accent stands out in the blur of foreign languages. An American man in his sixties has claimed the streetlight adjacent to the one I've anchored myself to. He wraps one arm around the cast iron pole, clinging against the surge of sightseers, and tucks a cell phone under his ear.

"Honey, I'm standing under a light. No, a streetlamp, one of the fancy ones between Starbucks and the Clock. I'm waving but I don't see you."

I try to spot his wife for him, but every sun burnt tourist is turned towards the blue and golden faces of the clock.

The hour begins to strike, clanging without much reverberation against the crowd. Hundreds of hands, with fingers gripping cameras and phones, shoot up from the sea of heads. There isn't much to record. Statues that look just like the ones my teacher commissioned for their chapel in Idaho scoot from one archway to the next. Before the twelfth bell rings, the door to the Apostles' cubbyhole snaps back into place.

Sweaty tours groups pause long enough to tag their pictures and tweet their location,

then clatter off to the next exhibit.

The misplaced husband remains.

Across the street, two parents sit their kids down on the suddenly vacant curb so they can finish eating ice cream cones. A city worker, wearing a reflective orange vest sweeps the sidewalk behind them. He stops for a minute intently watching the children, as if they are the courtyard's main attraction. Then, for no apparent reason, he clangs his broom against the metal dustpan, and smirks at the family's collective flinch.

On my side of the street, the lost wife finally picks the right lamppost. As I leave for Republic Square, I cut in and out of the reunited couple's vacation video and peer into the camera's aperture. For some reason, to stare unsmiling into as many camcorders as possible has become a habit, perhaps even a goal, of mine. Most of the footage I photo-bomb will never have a viewing, but as of this final afternoon, I have ensured that my face has been registered in dozens of international, untraceable archives.

12:30 PM
Corso Café

At Corso Cafe, although I've never seen him or even heard his voice, I immediately recognize Rick. He looks exactly the way he writes: Spartan, inquisitive, direct, considerate. His tanned head nods as I move towards his table.

"Gabrielle?"

We share gnocchi and salmon tartar and trade bits of our lives. Rick has studied forensics, is a retired Navy Seal intelligence officer, a writer who made millions in Hollywood, a Pentagon consultant, a professor. He's currently designing war games. I respond with "wow!" at all the appropriate moments.

"I am just letting you know all this to give you an idea of the ways I can be a resource to you," Rick says. "Enough about me. Tell me about yourself."

But instead of my own story, I narrate, in fast forward, the journey that began four years ago in Mila's living room, when she made the same demand — "So tell me about yourself"— the request I never really met.

Finally, I set down my fork and ask this military consultant:

"What am I supposed to write about?"

"What do you mean, what are you supposed to write about?"

"I mean, I've crossed Germany chasing a woman and a name I can never find, and now I'm leaving Sunday and have nothing, absolutely nothing, to show for my trip, except some bad photography."

Rick requests the bill.

"Let me tell you a little story, before you go," he says.

It is a good story, one he makes me promise not to use or steal, scout's honor, even though ideas have no copy write. It centers on an old German woman and a long lost foreign lover on the wrong side of the War. The characters include worried grandchildren. The opening scene begins in a first class train carriage and then spills out to all of Europe.

"I overheard this story," Rick concludes. "I'm going to use it one day, and when I do, I'll change the names and a few details and make it into something that is both not quite so generic and also not so unbelievable as the real life version." He pauses and pays, covers my cheque.

"Write the story, Gabbie, your story, your take on the old woman's, the whole thing. Just go for it!"

"Okay."

"Okay. Think outside the box. You're young. It's the young artists that will invent the future. And remember," Rick says as he stand to go, "interesting people often end up alone."

Even though these words are meant to reassure me that the loneliness is not unbearable, Rick's last bit of input sounds like a warning or maybe even a cry for help. He does not shake my hand, but clasps it, completely still, for three seconds, as if his palms, already troubled with tremors of age, appreciate the motionless moment this parting grip affords.

For the rest of the afternoon, I wander mapless through Prague, trying to find my way to the Church of Our Lady Victorious. Rick's advice steals my attention. Should I have made a mad dash back to the Berlin Museum? Do I have all I need to finish the story or to begin it?

Malostranska! The road that leads to the Infant of Prague, the miraculous, wax-carved statue of the Child Jesus that stands within Our Lady's church. On my first morning in the city, I visited the shrine, kissing the little prayer card I've had since childhood, matching the face with the original. Now I want to say a farewell prayer.

After my experience with German efficiency, however, the tangle of Prague's streets throws me off. I end up at a different door: eight feet tall, sheeted with a copper colored metal, ends of bolts protruding from the corners and along the central seam. It is propped six inches open, just enough for me to wrap my fingers around its stile. Even though I can only see darkness beyond the latch, something childlike and adventurous nudges my feet inside.

Mahogany, marble, oil, velvet, gold, glass, bee's wax. A sanctuary light glows red beside this tiny chapel's high altar. My little Infant is here, but hidden within the tabernacle. I bow, genuflect, then slide into a pew, turn down a kneeler and begin to marvel at what I've found behind the curious door. A functioning church not yet repurposed to accommodate tourists should not be so surprising. Perhaps it is the emptiness that shocks me, the emptiness that is full of Presence.

I pray for all the healing and protection that it's decent to beg of God in one sitting. One last time, I request a story, a plot, a thread of dialogue, that's all. A bit of inspiration. A prompt.

A priest, who is old enough to have seen both sides of Communism, limps out of the sacristy, disables the sanctuary security system, and picks up a pile of Mass books. Wearing a long cassock, he walks the length of the empty aisle twice, distributing missals and hymnals one by one to the vacant pews. Against the backdrop of the Church Crisis, the memory of the war and the hardness of the Atheism outside, this priest's daily journey from doorstep to altar stone stands as the living shrine my own pilgrimage has been seeking all along.

I look at him. He smiles, continues setting the books out for his invisible congregation.

The unread pages fall against the wooden seat like hammer strokes. The echo is tragic and hopeful, like the Crucifixion, like martyrdom, like forgiveness that has been spoken but that cannot be received. The wordless sound is the most authentic profession of faith I have ever heard.

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
If the unheard, unspoken
Word is unspoken, unheard,
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world;
And the light shone in darkness…[xx]

July 28, 2012
Solopisky

This morning I write to Mila, on a postcard that I'll send from Solopisky, no return address. I will have left this town by the time she receives the note and picture. I fill the entire back with writing, convincing myself and her that the trip has been worthwhile, and that she has not hurt me as much as memory suggests. It feels final.

I sit at the tiny kitchen table, imagining she'll be too curious not to read the un-enveloped card. I've chosen a photo I hope will be too beautiful for her to throw away, and I daydream that Mila's almost disowned daughter will one day find my message handwritten against the watermarked Prague skyline.

Through all these implausibilities, however, a thought interrupts: the reality that Mila simply did not know enough about me to trust me…or to remember who I was.

Oberhausen 1945
The Toyshop

Mila's bedroom floor was still in one piece. The toys she and Erlig had left lying there three years ago were not. No matter how many minutes Mila gazed at the dolls, they did not put themselves back together or disappear.

Mila's father had stood behind her while she'd opened the door. Although he was no longer the Poppy that either of them had known before all this, now he rested his palms on her shoulders, the way he did when Mila was very little, when she used to sit for hours, watching the people on Marktstraße rush by.

"What do you think?" her father finally said. "Shall I buy you a new doll?" Mila could feel him smile a little, but she did not laugh.

She had walked to Erlig's house last night. He had not been there, rearranging rubble. No one would be rebuilding today or ever. The road back to the toyshop had never been so long.

"Do we have to sort any of this?" Mila asked, turning to her father. "I mean, some parts of the dolls might be salvageable, but do we have to save anything?" And although Mila's eyes were eyes he could no longer really recognize, Mila's father knew that they needed to cry themselves out, alone, in this room.

"No," he said. "Just toss it by the bucketful out the window."

Mila didn't cry. She walked slowly towards the bed, her heels dragging through powdered porcelain. She lifted what was left of the mattress. She pulled five moth-eaten doll dresses and a piece of canvas from between the slats. Something metallic clattered to the ground: a chain with a lumpy piece of gold dangling from it. Mila frowned, trying to imagine who might have hid it there. She certainly hadn't.

Someone must have lived here while we were evacuated.

"Vater!" Mila called, leaning out the window. He was in the street, waiting for the pails of debris.

"What?"

"I found something you could buy your first merchandise with. I don't know where it came from, so it's good luck." She tossed the necklace down, and of course he caught it.

They bought the first toy and several more besides. Replacing the storefront window would have to wait. The work was not in showing off new toys, anyways, but in fixing broken favorites that children had hugged too hard.

One day, a woman carrying a toy train engine appeared at the shop door. She smiled when she saw Mila, and seemed to recognize her.

"Is this still where one can find the best toy repair in all of Oberhausen?" The woman asked. "And how are you Mila Hermann?" A hug looked imminent. Mila crossed her arms.

"How do you know my name?" The woman stopped smiling.

"You don't remember?"

"Remember what?" Mila asked back. The woman, who was young, almost a girl still*, Mila thought, looked from the train to Mila's hands.*

"What?!" Mila asked again, too loudly.

"Don't worry about it," the woman said sadly. "This is as it should be. This is what I wanted. Please, don't bother your father. I'll find a blacksmith to repair my toy."

"We can fix the train." Mila was determined not to lose the sale. The woman turned to go:

"It's better this way," she whispered and slipped into the street.

Mila sprang to the door to beg for the job, but the woman walked too quickly. Something about the way she moved, the way she picked her steps in the empty street and cradled the melted train engine in her arms made Mila want to run after and say:

"Let's figure it out. I must have forgotten. Where did we meet?"

As the woman flattened to a silhouette and faded, an unspoken sentence flashed in Mila's mind, the voiceless shape of the words lingering there like a photograph:

"Swimming the Rhine is not against the rules."

In her canvass-patched shoes, Mila walked two hours to the riverbank.

The current was strong. Too strong.

Notes

[i] Peter, Paul and Mary. *Day is Done*. Warner Bros, 1969. CD.

[ii] T. S. Eliot, “Ash Wednesday,” from *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 95-105, available online at http://collections.chadwyck.com

[iii] Ibid.

[iv] Ibid.

[v] "Atomic Bomb's Use in Korea Proposed," *New York Times* July 8, 1950, L, 4.

[vi] Elie, Paul. Interview with Krista Tippett. *Fired by Faith*. Speaking of Faith. American Public Media, September 28, 2006.

[vii] T. S. Eliot, “Ash Wednesday.”

[viii, ix, x, xi, xii, xiii, xiv, xv, xvi, xvii, xviii, xix, xx] Ibid.

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