ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:	THE OTHER LIFE
	Anna Cronan, Master of Fine Arts, 2024
Thesis Directed By:	Professor Maud Casey, Creative Writing Program, Department of English

The Other Life is a collection of short stories about identity in between two cultures, Polish and American, and the gifts, pressures, mysteries, celebrations, and challenges that sprout from this experience. Showcased through interconnected stories centering food, language, the natural world, and a child's perspective, this collection depicts a first-generation Polish-American's exploration of identity. Three children visit their grandmother's orchard, where mysterious events unfold that make them realize their grandmother may be a baba yaga. Two Eastern European girls find solace in one another in America, until they don't. A young woman and her grandmother embark on a foray in search of mushrooms. A village in Poland recounts its complicated history with salt mining. Throughout these stories, the yearning and longing for a life that could have been is explored as a way to make sense of the life that is.

THE OTHER LIFE

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2024

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Preface

Artist's Statement

Writing, for me, is a foray.

When I first began the MFA program at the University of Maryland, I had a general sense of the topics I wanted to pursue: growth and decay, the soul, the concept of time as a scientific and philosophical construct. It turns out that, over the course of this program, I have learned that the path to the abstract is through the concrete: the natural world, food, and Eastern European grandmothers, in my case. Ironically, this zooming in has facilitated a simplification that, in my writing, has materialized as indulgence, extravagance, and excess for the things that are actually quite ordinary: maximizing the sensory detail of a single apple, for instance. This shift in my attention has produced a collection of short stories inspired by my childhood summers in Poland.

As a first-generation Polish-American, I started out writing as a way to desperately hold on to the Polishness that, with my parents' title as immigrants, was in the rearview. I felt pressured to accurately depict Poland in my work, concerned that any native Pole would read my stories and dismiss them as totally un-Polish. Under the guidance of Maud Casey, I have found inspiration in un-categorizing myself and my work. Once I allowed myself to write about Poland, not from a native Pole's perspective, but from a Polish-American's point of view, I was free to experiment with the blending, tension, and amalgamation that comes from existing in between two cultures.

In my work I have attempted to make sense of these at times contradictory spaces, leading to an intense fixation on place. Inspired by both Gabriel García Márquez's and Bruno Schulz's depiction of place as a central anchor in their work, Poland has become my main setting, inspiration, and character all in one. After growing up visiting my own grandmother in Poland each summer and seeing the life that would have been had my parents stayed, I sought to

write about Poland as a way to lay those childhood summers, and that other life, to rest. Consequently, I have predominantly written from the perspective of the retrospective narrator, repeatedly going backwards in time for retrieval. In this process I have since come to understand that this project isn't just an archive of the past, but rather a promise of continuity, and it is through my continual creation of fiction that I can imagine, explore, and give life to a version of this identity that may have existed.

One of these promises of continuity is an expansive project I have worked on over the past three years centered around a salt mine in Poland. I want to carry this project forward beyond my time as an MFA student using the tools I have gained in this process. I am completing this program with the knowledge of how to utilize obsession, how to extract strangeness from the familiar, and how to use fiction to give consciousness to history.

For my sister, my Babcia, and Zuzia and the Cupriak family

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The Other Life

The way my Babcia slathered sunscreen onto our Georgia-tanned skin on the Baltic seashore. “You will crisp in this heat wave” she’d say creped in a leopard print cover up, the thermometer pushing eighty degrees Fahrenheit. We tensed every muscle in our olive bodies to absorb her force while she painted us. We protested that it was July and we had lived sunscreenless in the Atlanta sun for months now. She flopped a hat on our heads in counterprotest, and set us free to collect washed up golden bits of *bursztyn bałtycki*. Baltic amber.

The interest the housekeeper took in us as children. We were wary because she called her cleaning products *mikstury*. Potions. The imaginary mazes we formed around the house observing her as she floated from room to room. The smell of cigarette smoke that alerted us of her location. The way she would annually ask us, “How’s it over there in America?”

That we shuttled around by line train all over Warsaw and its ganglion of villages before we were thirteen.

The soft chamomile buffering the sharp barley fields on the bike path with its buttery flowers for ~~miles~~ kilometers.

That Babcia made us wear latex swim caps when we went to the indoor pool. She said the filters at the bottom would suck in our hair and drown us. But no one else was capped when we got there. We invented a game that we were a family of squids to cope.

We freely switched from Polish to English to find the right word. The universes that that opened up.

I slept in Ciocia's dark blue sweterek last night.

That isn't blue. It's granatowy.

The new colors I was able to see once I had the words for them.

The apples that hemorrhaged the ground of my great aunt Basia's orchard. The plums that bruised it.

That we could take a ski lift into town as a form of summer public transportation in the Tatras.

The elderly neighbor who lived in the shoebox house out front painted it fluorescent orange one year. How it smiled on all of Ludowa Street. I can't recall what color it was before that. His raspberry and red currant and tomato plots swelled and careened with heavy fruit gems through the slats of the wooden fence onto our side. He called us over and told us to pick as many as we wanted when he saw us playing outside. And once when I looked from the upstairs window I saw his hands threading the fullest branches through the slats.

The streets named after the trees that grew on them. Kasztanowa. Brzozowa. Jawora. Sosnowa.

When we hiked up to *Morskie Oko* one year and saw a blue lake displaced from the Mediterranean.

Months in a foreign country without my parents from the age of ten. Just me and my six-year-old sister exported over. The reactions of the other American parents. I wasn't exactly homesick the first time but missed my American familiarities. 4500 kelvin lights in warehouse-sized grocery stores of all things. That I miss the foreign familiarities now. Corner markets illuminated by daylight. Glass jars of pickled beets. Produce brought in from local farmers that day.

The delicate tissue paper petals comprising every poppy. Rendering them unpickable.

The cornflowers that pooled around the poppies in those sharp barley fields. As if to protect them. That we picked the cornflowers to ferment their petals in glass jars of sweet water on sunny windowsills. That the wine took time. The closer it got to being ready, the closer our departure came for another year.

That every cemetery was overgrown but not unkempt.

The cabin in the woods positioned perfectly along the ripest constellation of bilberries.

The fragrant mushrooms and pulpy logs saturated in wet moss.

How my Babcia would tell me, "I gave you those blue eyes you know." How my dad told me the same thing.

How everyone else in my family had the same amber-flecked brown eyes. Pupil indistinguishable from iris. The kind that don't exactly check the box for brown on identification forms but have to settle for it. The kind that gleam specks of burnt caramel and spilled ink.

The neighborhood streets that trickled to dirt paths in a blue-green ocean of cabbages. The towering *Pałac Kultury* standing guard in the background. How it always oriented us to the city.

The dill that fell like feathers onto mounds of golden potatoes in a cobalt blue and white ceramic bowl.

The dinner plate that spun. The only one that did and we never knew why. How each night we circled around the table rotating our identical plates to see whose continued revolving after giving it a whirl. The person with the spinning plate got to choose dessert the next day. Uncle Paweł picked up fresh dessert daily from a local bakery on his way home from the law office. My sister always chose something chocolate. I always chose the fruit tart.

How I began each school year. Talking about my summer in Poland. My classmates who talked about theirs in Bosnia and Ghana and Vietnam.

The summer we were acrobats. We were coached by the same man who coached my mother. I wondered whether the curve in my backbended spine made him remember 1979. That she was a world traveling acrobat. Leaping in Egypt and Syria and Jordan, and landing eventually in America.

The sun that rose at 3 AM and set at 10 PM. How we were geographically displaced by six hours so we stayed up and witnessed the five-hour summer night. A sunset, moonrise, sunrise, moonset all in the time difference between here and there.

The time we saw the shortest night of our lives because we flew far north over the ocean while the sun slung past us the opposite way. We watched the sun rise and fall through small ice crystals on the window. The same flight where the attendant responsible for unaccompanied minors clapped our window shade shut while we watched the short night and commanded we *śpi!* Sleep. How we stifled laughter at her sternness under clasped hands over our mouths because we were awakening to cultural nuances.

The fact that the winter night in Poland is sixteen hours. That the summer's is five. That I think about that now when I am going through darkness.

The day I dropped a glass bottle of pomegranate juice in a corner market. The way it splattered and shimmered and mosaiced at my feet. The woman dressed in a blue and white checkered apron who said, "You will have to pay for that you know." And I lied and said, "I know."

How eventually I stopped rolling my 'r's and learned how to pronounce 'th' and outgrew my accent. How everyone in America would say "You don't have an accent at all" when I told them English is my second language. The fact that that was a good thing. It still stung to hear. How I yearn now for even the vestiges of an accent. The fact that I don't have one is probably for the best. That I don't understand the downsides of speaking with one.

The countdown we kept on multicolored pastel sticky notes. The pungence of dryer sheets in orange boxes saturating our bags. Because Babcia couldn't get those in Poland. The fact that I don't use dryer sheets but keep a box of them anyway. I only open and smell them occasionally so that I don't lose the association. They still position me in her laundry hall today.

The morning I awoke to the enthusiastic shrieks of my stony grandfather. That the kitchen radio announced the meager Polish złoty surpassed the American dollar in value. The summer of 2008. The way I tried to pull strings of zeal from deep within myself to match his but couldn't find any.

The year Eyjafjallajökull erupted. How the ash made itself a rainy winter over Poland that summer. The only summer I longed to be back in America. For a June that didn't feel like a January.

How I've always had to explain that Ania is my name in Polish but so is Anna. That they're the same name but English fails to provide an equivalence. That I discovered those universes can't be opened with only one language. That everyone in Poland has two names. A formal one and a soft one. How I wish my parents enrolled me as Ania instead of Anna when I started school. That I was seventeen and didn't know which name was on my birth certificate. The amount of time I spend thinking about that *i*.

The day we visited Auschwitz and I kept finding my birthday on placards. That the delicate third digit in my birth year made a difference.

The way I still hear *Maliń się nie myje* when I wash my raspberries. The hesitation I have every time that they might turn to mush.

That Warsaw still houses its majority in Communist blocks.

That the word *kapcie* comes to mind before *slippers*.

That pomegranates and tomatoes and hearts all have chambers.

Babcia's voice I still hear that says "you'll catch a cold" when strings of wet hair dangle from my pillow.

The upstairs rooms filled with sweeping fabrics and sewing templates and dresses and tables with built-in meter sticks. Coils of colorful satins and silks and linens stacked like firewood. How my aunt and my Babcia and their team worked long hours during the day to come up with the next trend. I came back one year and they were designing clothes for the Prime Minister's wife. I came back another year and the upstairs rooms were barren and vacant.

A new location had opened up on the next street over. A beautiful three-level stone building deluged in fabrics and dresses. And a professional photography wall and a coffee and tea station. And a downstairs storefront stuffed with exuberant shoppers.

The tension I felt changing my last name. It's a lot simpler now. Moved twenty spaces up in the alphabet. But no one asks me where it's from when they hear it anymore. I used to smile at the pause people would take before attempting to pronounce it, a name that commanded a sort of slow attention. No one pauses anymore, so I don't smile anymore. A closed universe. The way it feels ever since like something has been cut out of me. I still feel a flutter when I meet someone whose last name ends in –ski.

How I can eyeball any recipe for pierogi. But still can't convert Fahrenheit to Celsius. The way that reminds me of where I didn't grow up.

How I forget another Polish word every day. How it feels like catching every leaf that falls in a forest in mid-November.

The way I romanticize the life I could have had if my parents had never left. The fact that I don't know I'd do the same the other way around.

Pierogi

Spotted yellow leaves litter the ground like overly ripe banana peels. They don't typically showcase themselves until early October, but the Augusts here possess the unique flexibility of playing summer or autumn. The bitter breath of the Tatra mountains signals winter is looming, that the muted evergreens will soon stand out vibrantly on crunchy monochrome snowfall, wispy smoke emanating from stone chimney tops the sole sign of life for months. Along the mountain towns, thick forests of astonishing spires of spruce and mountain pine carpet craggy outcrops, triangular wooden roofs fleck from above like crowns. Timeworn wooden structures, family farmsteads that have raised generations within their oaken walls, stand firmly on meadowy landscapes. The lush valleys dappled with white specks of sheep, the streets peopled with cheese vendors, woodworkers, and thickly wrapped children on school holiday. With much of the year claimed by bitter winter, babcias everywhere prepare for the bunkering.

I ask my Babcia what meal our hands will prepare today, anticipating the weeks-long chore of winter food preparation.

"Pierogi, of course," she swings a burgundy dish towel over her shoulder. "Get the bowl out from under the cupboard."

We all know which bowl is *the bowl*.

The kitchen is sanity's saving grace from November to April. When indoors is the only livable place, it functions as production line and dining room, cannery and movie theater, art studio and therapy office; feeding, entertaining, sustaining. On today's menu in this holy place is a staple, pierogi. These fat little versatile pouches have nourished the people of Poland through

communism and holocaust, and they are as inseparably entwined with the culture as the language.

Like most Polish grandmothers, my Babcia takes the business of pierogi making seriously. She recruits the household, cousins Małgosia, Michał, and Lena, Uncle Józef—grandfather is excused because his stage IV colon cancer is treated daily with whole green walnut spirits. We join the assembly line whether we want to or not, and the half-day-long procedure begins with the inaugural mixing of the dough. Powdery white pastry flour and warm water are the only components. Babcia lowers a deep purple glass beneath the running faucet.

"Water temperature is tested with the sensory skin on the back of the hand, never a thermometer," she begins, "because what happens if pierogi need to be made and there is no thermometer?"

We eyeball and massage the pastry flour and lukewarm water until an elastic dough manifests. Babcia reminds us it takes accepting the humble role of apprentice to know exactly the right texture. We roll the pillowy, forgiving dough onto the marble countertop and flatten it beneath a wooden rolling pin, one that dually provides utility and decorates the wall with its colorfully etched folk art display.

"You must learn the correct thinness of the dough through experience," the only teacher in Babcia's eyes. "Now mix." I get to work kneading until I see her glaring stare subside.

Mixing pierogi dough can only sustain our minds so much during weeks of winter food preparation. We have ample conversation rehearsed. "Have you ever thought about how every person in existence has seen the same moon?"

Babcia winces. "What, as if there is a new one every night?"

“When I’m in America, Babcia, and you’re here, we can both look at the moon at the same time, and our eyes share the same sight in the same moment. That makes me feel connected to you when we are five thousand miles apart, that triangle we form.”

“The moon isn’t always visible in these gray skies.” She dismissively hands me the rolling pin. “Now roll.”

“It’s good practice to acknowledge interconnectedness across space and time,” Uncle Józef chimes in from behind a flour sack.

“You acknowledge the dough with that rolling pin and nothing else.” We all have a healthy fear of Babcia. A healthy fear paired with a fierce love.

I always felt uncategorized being first-generation Polish-American. That’s what made me unique and different at school, being not entirely American. I kind of formed my identity out of that, being the Polish girl in America. But when I came to Poland, I was always the American girl. I didn’t exactly fit into either place fully, the way someone who has deep history in one location does. It turned me into a background person, but it also made me adaptable, open-minded. And I think Babcia was happy with that outcome.

Małgosia and I cut palm-sized circles with a drinking glass from a flattened mix of powdery flour and lukewarm water, each one perfectly formed, like a butter cookie. The stretchy dough showcases our fingerprints, patterned contours that run topographically across the dough. A whole world mapped on a single dumpling.

“You see those finger presses, ah? A mark from its creator, a stamp of pride, each one representing a uniquely distinct history. Don’t you ever forget your history,” Babcia lectures.

"Yes, Babcia." I smile.

"I wonder if our fingerprints are more similar to each other than other people's. Since we're all related," Michał inquires.

"Ah, a fantastic query!" Uncle Józef is a staunch encourager of questioning. We get our healthy skepticism from him. Their fingerprint exchange fades into the mass of industrious conversation, as my ear zeroes in on other conversations filling the kitchen contributing to a cacophonous bustle. I melt into its whirring comfort.

Uncle Józef teetered between lawyer and contractor throughout much of my life. He had an intrinsic need to heal Poland's wounded politics in an overly ambitious way, which is why he was also a contractor. When an issue was inevitably too colossal for him to fix single handedly, he could always restore the cinder in an old country home, repair the gray brick that composed the communist flats in downtown Warsaw. When he couldn't successfully execute a civil case, he worked on a Jewish synagogue, the oldest one in Warsaw that survived the war's destruction, and refreshed the peeling peach interior with a crisp mint green paint. Uncle Józef brought us to his job sites when we were younger and Babcia needed a break. Sometimes she came with us, especially when there was a chance to visit a cemetery. Babcia somehow had a relative buried in every cemetery in Poland, and she never missed out on a chance to pay her respects, to light those green and red glass candles and recite a prayer, to discipline us when we inevitably treated the rows of gravestones like a playground.

Babcia accompanied us one day to the synagogue. She is a staunchly devout Catholic, but dead family is still family, Catholic or Jewish. Małgosia, Michał, Lena, and I scurried off to a closet with emerald green carpet, ceremonial wafers, glasses of burgundy liquid, and discovered

a treasure trove: a box of yamakas. They were an army of colors. We riffled through the box, overturned it, placed a couple on our heads and over our faces like sunglasses and on our chests and shoulders like gladiators. We discovered they could fly like frisbees when tossed, and they flew like saucers out of that dusty green carpeted room and into the main sanctuary, where Babcia was quietly sitting. A bright red yamaka hit her square on the nose. I still have never felt a fear so primal as I did in the moment her eyes met mine, and she scorched me without uttering a word or lifting a finger.

Pierogi possess an extraordinary versatility. Their filling can encapsulate a spectrum of flavors: feathery potatoes and crumbly peppered mountain cheeses are a good marriage, as are fresh corner market meats and herbaceous spices, forest blueberries and cane sugar for dessert pierogi, earthy mushrooms and vinegary cabbage shreds following a successful foray. Boletes, chanterelles, porcinis, saffron milkcaps litter the mountainsides in autumn, their generative decomposition foreboding winter's season of death.

"Poles are born with an intuitive knowledge of edible and toxic, so we don't worry about the children," Babcia frequently says about mushrooms.

It's a half-truth; we always spent weeks on the Polish mountainsides in late summer. We were each assigned our own mountain, and dropped off in the morning with baskets in hand. By late afternoon, we were to return our baskets brimming with edible mushrooms. Uncle Józef filtered through them to ensure none turned red or blue when sliced or pressed before dropping them in a soup or on a flatbread, and that was our rite to dinner.

Babcia lumbers into her cellar to fetch a two-year-old jam. Black currant and gooseberry. A time capsule.

Forestfruit abounds. Along the wooded footpaths deep within the piny forest, wild blueberries robustly cluster green sprigs like jewels; collecting them is mining for sapphire. Sauerkraut is recycled from last season's cabbage soup remains, vinegar preserving both the vegetables and the memory of what we wore, what we smelled, what we talked about on canning day.

Babcia inserts a doughy hand into the refrigerator and extracts a wet block wrapped in blue film.

Pierogi cheese is always white, mild, crumbly, saltless. Its purpose is texture, the canvas on which stronger, richer flavors are showcased, an accompanying backdrop. We gather fresh herbs from Babcia's sunny kitchen windowsill, the same place where the whole green walnuts, collected with shells intact from the shadowy walnut tree in the yard, marinate in strong spirits, sometimes sprinkled with minerals gathered from the Baltic seashore. These minerals and walnuts and spirits combine to create a healing infusion, and it can treat anything, from a scraped knee to stage IV cancer.

Babcia reaches to her wired produce basket suspended from the ceiling and removes a paper sack.

Most prestigious is the ziemniak, the Polish potato. We shear the papery yellow skin so only the golden buttery starch remains, the nourishment that proves the land has never betrayed its people. One will never find a ziemniak wearing its skin; that, Babcia says, is what distinguishes ziemniak from potato. That and its veneration of a dill weed dusting. We tuck these decadent fillings tightly in their doughy cocoons, press each one shut with the teeth of a fork, an artistic edge.

I press my fork too firmly, and a hole bleeds purple wild blueberry juice onto the pristinely white shell. My shoulders tighten awaiting Babcia's scrutiny.

"Pierogi are never beyond repair." She demonstrates how to fold the flat seam delicately on itself in a scalloped coil. In its crevices imperfections can be masked. I am grateful she chooses empathy.

My mind fades once more into the white noise of the clamoring kitchen, the clattering of metal utensils on marble, the various pitches and tones in conversation. I turn to my cousin Małgosia. We talk about this unique symphony, how every time we cook, there is a new melody, each one uniquely different. No two instances of cooking have exactly the same sounds. Once the cooking is done, that sound series is over forever, and it can never be replicated.

Babcia, chopping kiełbasa and shredding young green cabbage, directs her voice to us while keeping her gaze on the food. "All the sound you need to worry about now is the tines of your fork pressing dough. Fret not about noise." She peels ziemniaki between a paring knife and her thumb, the spiraling skins careening over a small compost capsule.

Małgosia and I smile silently at one another, feeling a physical triangulation in that moment with our shared Babcia, who has always kept a close eye on us and who always will.

We had this fascination with toilets when we were children, Małgosia, Lena, and I. They were humorous and amusing to us, but you could also tell a lot about a person or a place by their toilet. We visited extended family a lot in the summers. One of our great aunts or someone (anyone who couldn't be immediately genealogically identified was lumped into the aunt or uncle category) lived deep in the woods in a cabin-like house, and to our disbelief, she had a purple and yellow plastic glittering toilet. The looks on our faces when we discovered it. We spent the entire family function locked up in that stuffy bathroom admiring the toilet while everyone ate dinner and smoked cigarettes outside. We flushed it and stood mesmerized by its cyclonic swirl, the way the glitter reflected in the whirlpool, closed the lid and stood on it to test its durability (a plastic toilet is very flimsy), encoded every little detail into our memory so we could draw it later in our collective art journal, which included a full toilet series of our favorites—at that time it was the fish tank toilet from the Bury Miś restaurant in the Tatras, but purple and yellow just took the cake.

The look on Babcia's face when she came hurling into the room one day, flapping the newly discovered art journal in her hands. "And what is this?" We just giggled. We couldn't help ourselves. The sight of our stern and rigid Babcia flailing a notebook embellished in our detailed toilet drawings was more comedy than we could ask for. Ever since then, we were always acutely observed by her menacing stone gray eyes at family functions, the kind that said, *If you need to use the bathroom, you will hold it until we get home.*

Thick crescents with bulging bellies, ready to burst at the seams, soon line the countertops like troops, hundreds of them. An inviting cauldron of saltwater bubbles audibly as Babcia fetches the only cooking utensil she's trusted for years. Garlic-infused, both the potato

pierogi and the decade-old wooden spoon that knows this process as well as my Babcia. She says the spoon has memory, that it collects flavors and disperses them to all her dishes, which is the reason it should never be washed with dish soap—*or it'll season your rear end*, she threatens.

Steam fills the room and keeps us great company. We exchange jests and stories in tandem with all the mixing, kneading, chopping, rolling, steaming, boiling, repeat. Uncle Józef and Michał discuss the ebbs and flows of Eastern European politics over the years. An enticing aroma centers our focus on the food and reminds us not to let the pierogi stiffen to leather from over boiling. They possess an intelligence though; after their plop into the piping hot bath, they signify their completion minutes later with a rise to the top, buoyant, bobbing, bite-sized, ready for retrieval. The dough has transformed to a shell of pasta al dente, the contents cooked. Babcia prepares the accompanying sauce to top them off, a drizzle of sizzling butter and seasoned onions.

"If I have taught you anything, I sure hope you remember to store the butter outside the fridge," she says, facing me, the American. "You never know when you will need soft butter."

A golden butter drizzle tops the freshly plucked pierogi from the steam bath, the peppery onions caramelized.

The first plate is flowing over and there are dozens more to go. We snack only on hearty bread specked with whole seeds and the crunch of gray rock salt crystals, fighting the temptation to bite into the pierogi until there are enough for dinner. Babcia takes this opportunity to remind us that when we eat bread, we are not merely eating bread.

"You are consuming the sunshine that sustained the wheat," she begins, "the rainfall that quenched its roots, the earthy soil that provided nourishment to the wheat berries, the sturdy hands of the farmer, the historic iron of the weathered farm tools, the thought and care behind the

tried and true recipe, the livelihood of the corner market's bakery, and you are not to take this for granted." She brings attention to our sore hands and fingers to substantiate her reminder, inserts a story about how our elders faced atrocity so we don't have to.

"Maja, make another loaf for the oven," she commands, noticing the dwindling slab on the countertop.

I whip up a mixture in record time, hopeful Babcia will notice my efficacy, but she is silent. I set the dough in the olive oiled glass bread pan and click a ticking timer. Yeast is fickle in that it never behaves exactly the same unless all factors are one hundred percent identical each time: elevation, the temperature inside, the temperature outside, humidity, the degree of the tilt of sunlight on a particular day or hour or minute. But the bread still rises, usually. It never comes out looking exactly the same. Sometimes the top layer is brown and crisp, sometimes the inside too soft. But in the end, it's all bread.

Babcia prepares the melting cheeses, and we wait restlessly. She pours cream into a buttered pan atop the dancing gas flame, steam accentuating the rivers of sweat on her forehead and cheeks.

"We reserve yellow cheese for flavoring," she reminds us, the cheese bolstered with toasted breadcrumbs from that afternoon's soup. The Poles were forced to learn how to maximize their calories, a trait I am certain Babcia has yet to consider obsolete.

The cheese bubbles and fuses indistinguishably with the butter and cream, each balloon of salty air frothing the hot oily mixture. Drenched in wonder, with mouths agape, we watch the thick iron pan tilt gently over a platter of pierogi z ziemniaki i z serem, potato and cheese pierogi, bathing the hearty pockets in a warm, cozy, savory embrace. Seasonings of dehydrated

thyme and cracked black pepper delicately crown the masterpiece. Babcia is careful not to overseason, filtering the pungent toppings through her weathered fingers.

"Overseasoning disrespects the dish," she reminds us, following numerous complaints about how Americans oversalt their cuisine.

Among all the lessons, labor and laughter fuels our hunger. At long last, when the sun goes down and the many ceramic platters are heaped with the velvety gems, it is time to feast. We close the laborious procedure with the clink of wine glasses filled with fizzing grenadine syrup cocktails. A layer of flour dusts the kitchen but will somehow vanish by morning.

"I thought it was too early for snow!" Uncle Józef typically inserts a comment at which we all feel obligated to laugh, and we do.

Seven family members huddled around a small wooden table draped with burgundy and white pinstripes can merely put a dent in the day's work, as is meant to be. Pierogi feature another element of versatility in that they can live multiple lives, boiled dumplings reincarnated into fried pockets. They can be cryogenic, frozen in time and boiled again in the dead of winter when fresh ingredients are sparse. Babcia favors the panfrying. Fried pierogi contain vestiges of last week's creamed potatoes. They have found new life in masło butter and robust herbs. Scorched just right, each battered in olive oil and Slavic syllables.

Babcia quiets the room with a stare and lifts a glass of sparkling grenadine.

"Pierogi are like the people of Poland," she begins in her native tongue, "simple and versatile. They represent timelessness and resiliency. We have seen depression, famine, war, corruption," she eyes each of us grandchildren, "and we somehow take these things and use them for strength. The best pierogi are made from scratch. As are the best people. Solidarity!"

“Solidarity!”

A windchime of clinking glasses unite above the table’s center, splashing sticky crimson juices around the dishes. Even the children partake in alcoholic drinks. Babcia says they are good for the spirits. “What better time to learn moderation than before the rupture of a childhood of repression?”

We sit down to eat, for the next twelve meals or so, a variation of that single day’s efforts. And we are always reminded with the threat of a wooden spoon to our rear ends to be resourceful and resilient, because my elders didn’t survive so long for us to be anything but.

The Orchard

In the orchard lived a witch. She lumbered about in ashen gray knits, threaded her spindly body through torsos of cherry trees and apple saplings. Her arms were sturdy boughs from which gangly fingers forked. I watched her shoot light from these spectral claws, watched as she pointed to a row of Jonagolds and dappled the trees with shades of Golden Delicious and Gala. She could grow three varieties for every one tree. Another time I stood tucked behind the woodpile and witnessed her cross a plum tree with sour cherry. “The next great cultivar,” she cackled with a swoop of her viny digits. The witch supplied a roadside produce stand that stood eerily unattended on the edge of an outskirt road. It remained fully stocked, glutted in wintertime with red cherries, piercingly purple plums, gleaming green apples, and jammy blue berries against a fleecy December snow. Few patrons ever stopped, few questioned the impossible sight of a bounteous harvest on the winter solstice. The occasional passerby pulled over to assess whether this was mirage or miracle. The unmanned stand stood audaciously at the orchard’s edge year round, existing independently from stand tends and regular purchasers.

The witch was my grandmother. The relatives called her Baba, but we cousins loyally called her Baba Yaga. Baba Yaga always greeted us with chocolates, the kind that are voraciously irresistible to children, with violet rabbits and smiling ladybugs inhabiting the wrapping. “Please, children. Go ahead and eat your treats,” she would say upon setting the bars onto our humid hands. She watched closely until the bravest of us took a bite.

The best part of visiting Baba Yaga was running about in her orchard, but we always had a meal to endure first. We entered through the wrought iron gates in late summer, the car growling over jagged gravel, the crows dispersing and gratily chanting, foliaging the corpse of another tree. The swollen little red car exhaled as we emptied from it in front of Baba Yaga’s

cinder home. Baba Yaga always dramatized the reunion with a careful calculation of just how long to wait until she materialized from behind her steel blue door. While we stood circled around the little red car and looked in all different directions at the surrounding apple trees and shadowy cherry trees, Baba Yaga creaked through the steel door and teetered unsteadily outside. "Ah, the most important guests of the season," was always her greeting. We waited for the adults to make the first move and followed swiftly and closely behind them up the stairs, concealing our small bodies behind the billowing skirts of our elders.

Baba Yaga's house was a marvel as much as her orchard. From the outside, it appeared a dilapidated box of weathered cinder, with an outside basement door and a breathing chimney atop the tiled clay roof. But as soon as we scaled the wooden stairs ascending to the unsophisticated gray structure, a complex labyrinth of great rooms and arterial hallways tangled throughout. The adults were never perplexed by this, never paused to wonder how a structure that could seemingly from the outside contain only one bed, a single toilet, and a stove, housed a splendor of grand rooms, including a library and a family portrait gallery.

Greetings were a long and necessary component of these visits, as were goodbyes, and they often consumed a revolution of Baba Yaga's chicken-footed cuckoo clock. Baba Yaga embraced the adults with her robed tree branch arms, the sleeves wisping like loose skin on a skeleton. We cousins remained behind the safety wall of the adults, but Baba Yaga always pierced the wall before long with her inky black eyes and floated in our direction.

"I brought treats for the children. My how you've all grown! We'll have to venture to the cherry tree out front and start a yearly marking on the trunk." Her arms drifted upward like the wings of a raven, shadowing us with a gargantuan squeeze. Baba Yaga was not a tall or broad

woman, but she could wrap her arms fully around even the widest baldcypress, or in this case, three whole children. An array of chocolate bars fanned from beneath her cloaks.

"Thank you, Baba," we each said with thin smiles as we took one. We knew the ticket to relinquishing her piercing stare was to begin unwrapping the treats and enjoying them.

A great feast set for a dozen sprawled the table in the towering dining room at the front of the house. Including Baba Yaga, seven of us occupied the heavy wooden surface, a cross sectioned slice from a soaring beech tree, but there was no square centimeter left undecorated with heaping plate of food, or greenery plucked from outside, or the warm melt of a wax candle. Intricate golden ropes on black wallpaper beanstalked from floor to ceiling, where mahogany beams webbed from the nucleus of an extravagant hundred-candle chandelier. The chandelier was easily six meters up, and there was no ladder or iron rod nearby to assist in candle lighting, but each time we visited, there they were lit like a great constellation in that tenebrous room of few light sources. Even with a couple of scattered windows, the outside sunlight never penetrated Baba Yaga's home. The golden threads in the wallpaper shimmered against the candle flames, giving the impression of dining in a tall bronze cage, an all-knowing perceiver watching us from the outside. Baba Yaga preferred to candlelight her home rather than rely on the capriciousness of electricity. The hallways were lined with iron candlesticks, the surfaces of every room smothered in thick wax cylinders engulfing multiple wicks. Spattering flames jerked with the disturbance of a visitor passing through, but the fire stood obediently still in Baba Yaga's hover.

If Baba Yaga's dining room was a bronze cage, her kitchen was a cathedral. White marble walls spired to the sky. An east wing and west wing intersected the main hall, the east side lined with iron pots and pans and wooden utensils, the west side a drying rack of upturned bundles of lavender, peppermint, rose, sage, chamomile, cornflower, dill, thyme. The stove

powered a shrieking tea kettle whose cumulonimbus output could fuel a rainstorm. The cast iron oven stood at the altar; behind it an opulent backsplash of stained glass patchworked the kitchen's spine.

We took our seats at the table. Fried cheeses and robust leafy salads were the first foods passed around. Baba Yaga watched her guests fill their plates before placing one corner slice of breaded cheese and a single shred of lettuce on her plate. She never ate, and no one ever asked why. We kept a close eye on her great iron oven. It was always lit but vacant, a towering stack of wood on guard nearby. "In case the food needs warming," she would say whenever one of the children glanced at it. The adults were never suspicious and heaped their plates with second-course yellow fasolka beans and sliced mosaics of sausage, a clinking and clattering of silverware and ceramic among the crescendos of conversation. The adults usually made us sit through the second course before we were released to play in the orchard.

When we were finally allowed to escape the house, we couldn't run fast enough out the steel blue door. The crisp appley air replaced the steaming tea kettle breath in our lungs as we scattered in all directions around the hundred-acre orchard. The crow cannons clapped and sent a cluster of birds dispersing into the sky. We scuttled down rows of apples, plums, cherries, gooseberries, currants, bilberries. I stopped when I reached a colossal cherry tree with green and yellow plums on top, pulled my wispy frame onto the lowest branch, then the next, then the next. When I was about halfway up, I spotted my cousins running through the mazes of fruit trees, stopping to see what new varieties had appeared since our last visit. As dark red cherries were slowly replaced with canary and jade plums, I heard them shout their new discoveries.

"Raspberry flavored apples!"

"Black currants with strawberry crowns!"

“Gooseberries the size of melons!”

We oscillated around this impossible orchard, mined for flavors the world had never tasted before, aware of both our luck and our surroundings. Although we knew the adults were inside feasting and engaging in hours of conversation, we kept our ears piqued and eyes sharp. The orchard was an unpredictable place. Once, years ago, I ventured into the woodshed lined with dusty blue rosemary bushes. After climbing stacks of fresh aromatic pine and buttery applewood inside the shed, I turned to exit and discovered the rosemary bushes had turned to spiked briar patches, ominous daggers sprouting from each snaking branch. I howled for my cousins. “Sabina! Olek! Sabina! Olek!” They came bounding across the orchard to my rescue.

“Relax, Inga. It’s just rosemary. You can walk straight through it.”

“No! No! It’ll cut up my body and Baba Yaga will sell me to the butcher!”

After convincing them the innocent rosemary they could see before them turned to barbed razors after entering the woodshed, Sabina and Olek fashioned a small makeshift bridge out of nearby sticks and branches for me to climb over. This feat took all afternoon, and as I crossed the bridge and looked back at the bristly rosemary bushes guarding the woodshed from the outside once again, I made them both swear never to tell Baba Yaga I had gone in there.

Our time in the orchard was robust, though we always knew it would end with a call for dessert. Dessert was to be enjoyed together. “Come in for cake, children!” A whipped torte of silky vanilla cream capped with sweet conical strawberries appeared on the dining room table, the dishes from the day’s feast nowhere in sight. The adults took a moment to pour drinks in glasses and we tended to the cake. Syrupy rivers of berry compote ribboned the yellow-white sweet cream.

“Some of you have traveled very far to be here today,” Baba Yaga eyed me with her igneous glare. “What better way for me to show my gratitude than with tort truskawkowy. Strawberry cake. I know the children favor such confections.” A dwindling stack of plates circled the family’s hands. Baba Yaga cut enormous pieces of cake, revealing a layer of bright red jam inside the sponge. She handed over heavy wedges of torte until we each had a slice the size of a cantaloupe. Lastly for herself, she peeled a single frosting daubed strawberry from the bottom tier and dropped it onto her plate. We enjoyed our dessert at the endless dining table as the sun dropped behind the sycamore trees outside.

With another rotation of Baba Yaga’s cuckoo clock, goodbyes were said and we were free to leave the house. The little red car swelled as we entered, fuller than when we arrived, with cheeses and sausage and fresh orchard fruit and strawberry torte. Baba Yaga waved her hand goodbye on her front porch like a limb swaying back and forth in the breeze. A firelit lantern outlined her frail body, her clothes dangling like cobwebs. I savored my time with the cousins in this extraordinary orchard, but I also experienced immense relief each time our visit came to an end.

One of the adults clicked the key to start the car. It rattled and sputtered with each turn, but the car remained asleep. “We’ve surely eaten too much,” another adult chimed in. After a couple turns of the key, it was apparent that the car would not start. The food cemented low and heavy in my stomach.

“Car troubles, ah?” Baba Yaga remained stone still on her front porch, silhouetted like a gray moth against her steel blue door. The cousins and I glared at each other in the back seats. We tried a few more times to start the car, then one of the adults got out and opened the hood.

Baba Yaga remained on her porch with the silent flame suspended in the lantern behind her. The full harvest moon rose and bobbed like a pumpkin in the sky, illuminating the orchard and casting elongated skeletal shadows on the ground.

"Best we try and leave in the morning," one of the adults finally said. "Are there any nearby lodges we could stay the night, Baba?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, descending the stairs. "I've got all the room you need right here." Her face turned vulturelike as she approached the car. "I'll call for a mechanic in the morning. Come, let's get you settled in your rooms."

The cousins and I remained firmly planted in our seats until the adults came around and opened our door. "Let's go, children. It's getting late." We silently slid out of the little red car and followed the adults closely once more up the elderly wooden stairs. Although the inside of Baba Yaga's house was always candlelit, I had never seen it so luminous. Sunlight never penetrated the home, but the moonlight drowned it. The dining room now felt like standing in a lantern, the kitchen an angelic saturation of brilliance, pillars of red and green and blue moonlight leaking through the stained glass.

"Children, you will sleep upstairs." Baba Yaga pulled a rope dangling from the paneled hallway ceiling and revealed a folded staircase. It unfurled and twisted like vines until an iron spiral staircase sat planted on the cold wooden floor. "Go and get situated. I'll show the others to their rooms and be up to check on you." The adults walked down the hallway, and we glanced upward at the previously concealed upper level, an unending abyss portaling above our heads.

"I'll go up first, but you two need to follow close behind," I whispered. We toed our way up the snaking staircase, dizzying ourselves with continuous upward circuits. With each complete orbit, a level of candles lit themselves so that only the next loop came into view.

“How much farther?” asked Sabina. “Everything is starting to spin.” We staggered up more and more coils of stairs, the darkness above our heads ever present with each row of newly lit candles. Beneath us was a growing well of shrinking candle flames, as if we were climbing the embered inside of a hollowed fireplace log.

“I think I see the top,” I finally exhaled. A final row of candles illuminated a tall brass door.

“How long has this room been up here?” asked Olek. “I never knew Baba Yaga’s house had an upstairs.”

“We discover something unusual each time we visit,” responded Sabina. “This is hardly surprising.”

The tall brass door scraped open as we summited the staircase. Inside was a slender hexagonal room built of stone. A long, narrow window occupied each of the six walls, providing a full panoramic view of the orchard, which looked like hot orange autumn under the harvest moon. A stack of twin bunks and a dusty emerald couch rested at the center. Various collections in glass cases inhabited the corners. One case displayed an assortment of beetles needled to a plank of wood. Another showcased fragments and bones of various species pieced together. A patchwork creature. Bouquets of dried brown flowers crunched and littered the timbered floor. Tiny spiders poked their heads from behind the papery petals to see what had been successfully ensnared in their lacy webs.

“You each take a bunk. I’ll sleep on this couch,” I said, unfolding a rosy quilt and needleworked bird pillow into a bed.

“How are we ever going to fall asleep in *here*?” asked Olek, examining a snakeskin collage framed in gold on the wall next to his pillow.

“Did you find your beds, children?” Baba Yaga appeared spryly at the tall brass door, neither sluggish nor out of breath. “Ah, Inga. I see you’ve been dealt my old couch. The thing is cushy enough, though be warned, I’ve had my very strangest dreams napping on it.” She slapped a knobby hand on its cushion, releasing a spew of dust, and floated back to the tall brass door, extinguishing the two torches on either side of it with a gold metal cap so that only moonlight poured in. “Sleep well, children. I’ll have breakfast ready in the morning.”

“Thank you, Baba,” we replied as she vanished behind the closing door.

Olek waited a moment before speaking in whispers. “How do you think she got up here? Clearly she didn’t walk up that staircase like we did.”

“Obviously this house has many hidden passages,” replied Sabina. “She probably flew up here on her broom.”

The three of us quietly giggled from our beds at our many concocted theories for how Baba Yaga traveled around her home. After almost an hour of muted conversation, both Sabina and Olek exhaled long, drowsy breaths. I laid my head back on the scratchy needlework pillow. The hexagonal room domed to a mounded ceiling. At the very top was a glass window, an eye, that opened to the sky. Baba Yaga lived far away from the city, so every square centimeter I could see of the night sky whirred with movement. Flickering stars, fiery bodies with bright cascading tails, spinning green and yellow and purple spheres, glittering satellites. The harvest moon was now on the other side of the sky from where it rose. *Moonrise, moonset*, I thought to myself.

Sabina and Olek had long been still and quiet. I sat up on the couch after extensive stargazing. When would I ever again have the opportunity to see the orchard at night? I walked over to one of the long and narrow windows and looked down onto the property below. Now that

the moon was beginning to set behind the trees on the opposite side, the ground was darker. But the orchard mimicked the night sky. Glowing specks of light littered the ground for acres. An expanse of constellations dotted the landscape. I walked over to the other side of the hexagonal room and peeked out another window. On this side I could actually tuck my chin and see Baba Yaga's house far below me, as cindered and as blocky as it looked from the ground outside. Nothing was different except that the outside basement door that we've never seen open before appeared ajar. I thought of waking the cousins. We always wondered why Baba Yaga had an outside basement door. She told us it was for storing wood in the winter, but such a reasonable answer doesn't suit her character. I studied it closely and, just like in the night sky, detected motion. Someone carrying something from the basement outside. Then someone else. Then someone else. They were men wearing hats and overalls and holding crates, a congregation of them. I looked out into the orchard and saw these figures bustling in between the rows of fruit trees. I thought again of waking Sabina and Olek. This was an adventure they couldn't miss out on. But Olek would never get back to sleep again after seeing this. I resolved that I would get a closer look myself, to make sure this wasn't a charm or façade of Baba Yaga's house, then be back to wake them if it were real. So I let them sleep a while longer as I slipped out of the tall brass door.

The candles lit up row by row as I descended the long spiral staircase. It was a different kind of trek walking down those stairs, perhaps more dizzying staring into an abyss below you rather than one above. The one above you don't risk falling into. I made my way to the final circle of stairs and planted my feet on the planks of Baba Yaga's ground floor hallway. The house was still and calm, as motionless and empty as I had ever seen it.

The outside basement door was directly below a small kitchen window. I crept up the hallway and onto the cold marble tiles of the cathedral kitchen, the change from wood to the chill of the tile causing my toes to curl, taking care to move more slowly and carefully with each approaching step toward the window. The orchard trees came into view, and they were planetary. The fruit glowed vibrantly on each tree, luminous apples, bright plums, sparkling cherries. The droves of overalled men plucked the phosphorescent produce from its trees and piled it up in crates. A conveyor belt of workers hauled the crates off toward the roadside produce stand.

That's how she does it, I thought. Under the cover of darkness, deep in the shadows of the countryside, where the nearest street lamp is so many hills away that its light could never betray this meticulous system.

"Crepuscular creatures we both are, I see." I jerked my head around and there stood Baba Yaga at the kitchen's entrance. "I've always been most active after twilight myself."

I stood cold and still in that marble kitchen. Baba Yaga centimetered closer to me in her slippered feet. Her footsteps made no sound. "Having trouble sleeping?"

"I have a hard time falling asleep in unfamiliar places," I responded. "I spent a lot of time looking at the sky before coming down here."

"Sometimes the only familiar thing about a place is its sky," she said, standing shoulder to shoulder with me and looking upward out the window. I thought it a strange thing to say.

"The sky here is actually the most amazing I've ever seen. Nowhere else are the stars so animated."

"They are, child. The stars never dull their performance. It's the obtrusion of the city lights that dims them."

I lowered my head and stared at the night sky below us. “Baba, what are all these glowing fruits?”

“I see you’ve discovered my workers,” she replied. “Why have regular apples when you can have this?” Baba Yaga often spoke in non-answers.

I watched as a line of overalled men walked mechanically in rows, crates out in front of them, brimming with succulent glowing cherries, the skin looking tight above the veins of juices even from the distance of the kitchen window.

“How does it happen, Baba? How does your orchard look just like the luminous night sky?”

Baba Yaga gestured dramatically to the setting harvest moon in the sky.

“Look, child, at this moon. Have you ever seen something that looks so much like a globe grape? And there,” she trailed the sky cinematically with her wrinkled finger, “the tail of a comet, a rosemary sprig. Jupiter, a big juicy peach.” I looked at the bright orange planet and imagined its red blood vessels running like rivers across its yellow-orange flesh. “Planetary bodies,” Baba Yaga continued, “are ripe fruits dangling from a careening branch, just like the ones in my orchard.”

I looked between the sky and the orchard, and I tried to comprehend Baba Yaga’s analogies, but I know my expression gave away my disorientation.

“You think, child, that stars don’t exist on Earth,” she pulled an apple out of a pocket beneath her cloak, “but then you slice an apple,” cut it in half on its equator with a knife dangling from the kitchen wall, “any apple, every apple, in two,” held the apple hemispheres up to me in the glow of the window, “and realize you were wrong.” Two stars inside those apple halves to reckon with.

“Have you ever been told the history of this place, Inga?”

I looked from the orbiting fruits outside to Baba Yaga’s starlit face.

“This orchard was once a graveyard, you know. And my house, the church. But who wants to live on a plot with a thousand headstones? Better to turn them all into something generative. If I lay rotting underground somewhere, I can only hope someone would come along and transfer me to a great big cherry tree.”

“All those fruit trees. They’re all graves?”

“Each one nourished by the body and spirit of a dearly departed soul. Really gives this place its charm, I surmise. Well Inga, it’s getting late, even for me. Spectate as long as you’d like. I’ll see you in the morning.” And she crept away silently until her thinning body blended with the hallway’s darkness.

Breakfast was a surprisingly underwhelming spread. Crepes with strawberry jam and cottage cheese stood stacked on a few plates. Scones, croissants, and bricks of butter were distributed around the table. An infusion of orange juice with pink cranberry mimicked the sky outside in a tall glass jug. It was nowhere near as luxurious as dinner the night before. The adults were anxious to get home and tend to their responsibilities. The mechanic was out front repairing the little red car.

“I made a discovery last night,” I whispered to Sabina and Olek while Baba Yaga and the adults indulged in a final conversation. “I came downstairs after you fell asleep.”

“Did you see her chanting incantations?” asked a wide-eyed Olek.

“Casting spells? Flying on her broom?” Sabina mouthed.

“Shh, I’ll tell you when we get home.”

The little red car was awake and running when we descended the creaky wooden stairs. Sabina and Olek's murmuring voices revolved around my head as we, once again, said our goodbyes to Baba Yaga.

"Until next season, children." She stood firmly planted on her front porch, her arm swaying gently back and forth. Sabina, Olek, and I turned our heads at the shrinking cinder home in the rear window of the little red car the entirety of the long gravel driveway and watched as it got smaller and smaller. A cluster of crows dispersed from the wrought iron gate as we exited, this orchard upon which lived a witch.

Staying the Course

I am at work. I am staring into the next participant's eyes, looking for clues. I am watching the little square window panes reflecting from their whites and sea glass irises. Checking to see if the treatment worked. Trying to establish a pattern in this research. What they see is reflected from their eyes into mine. The rind of their pupil and the inner edge of their iris, how that ring where the two meet is the cutoff for their vision, how they can't see anything past the circumference of their pupil. Wondering if this one was in the placebo group. I am staring into their eye, thinking about how they are in there somewhere deep inside the black hole of their eye. How there is an I inside this eye. Their pupil swells and contracts in the variable light, pulsating between voracity and protection. How everything they see enters that small black hole in their eyes. How it all enters and gets absorbed by the singularity, that point in the middle where gravity reaches infinity, where nothing that enters can ever escape. And it made me think of your eyes, if I'm still anywhere in them all these years later. Or if I've escaped, or if I'm buried, lodged far below the thin, glassy, convex surface that protects something deep and dark beneath it.

"Next participant, Klaudia. Please have the results uploaded to the system by the end of the day."

The door opens and they leave. And the next I enters.

———

Twenty-five years ago we were children on the school playground.

We didn't know each other then. We hadn't met yet. But we occupied the same space every day at 12:30. Mulchy wood chips that smelled strongly of camphor when the nearby coast

brought rain. We watched the same kids do flips off the swing and land in this cat litter for children. Did you also get a hulking splinter in your right toe when the weather was warm enough for sandals? I still have a scar from mine. It's no wonder the playground mulch has turned to rubber since our time there.

Twenty years ago we were aware of each other's orbit.

I didn't know your name then, and you didn't know mine, but I watched you fill a divided square of your lunch tray with a heap of yellow banana peppers every day in the school cafeteria. You picked them so carefully with the tongs, assuring none of the pieces had a stem or seedy pith attached. I ladled a syrupy scoop of yellow cling peaches in that place on my lunch tray where your banana peppers went. You and I were almost always one after another in the checkout line. We were both punctual about mealtimes, often leading our classes to lunch.

"That's a strange choice," the cashier would say each time she slid your card, "but I'll let it slide since it's a serving of vegetables on the food pyramid," and she tapped the laminated nutrition visual with the corner of your card before handing it back to you. You were so kind to give her a smiling *thank you* each day.

Nineteen years ago we started high school together.

I figured out your name because I heard a guy who sat behind me on the bus call you "that weird pickle girl" and someone else say, "You mean Lana? She's Russian or something. They eat a lot of pickles." And then someone else said, "Those aren't pickles. They're banana peppers, you dumbass." And the first guy said, "That's even weirder. Who eats banana peppers like that? She would be kinda hot if she didn't eat such weird shit." I wondered then if the food I

ate was weird. If these American kids knew I went home and ate gołąbki and gulasz. If I was another foreign girl whose external value was calculated by arbitrary cultural differences. I felt a silent moment of solidarity with you then.

Eighteen years ago we were in an art class together.

We weren't grouped together at the same table because your last name was Berberović and mine was Jakubczak, but we were grouped together because the art teacher reconfigured our last names to Berber and Jacobs. We were in that group with Maryajose Espinoza, who was Mary in that class, and Ramesh Chakrabarti, who was just Mesh, and everyone else's last name was Jones or Davis or Johnson or Smith.

I distinctly remember the bowl of lemons you painted when we learned shading. Most kids remember painting that candlelit bowl of fruit on a table with generously stretched shadows and too-bright-green grapes. Perhaps some of our parents still have them deep in a dusty cabinet somewhere. But yours was museum worthy. The astute curvature of the correctly green lemon leaf, a deep, wise green. I remember how everyone's eyes had a speck of lemon yellow in them that day, because yours was the painting that pulled all our gazes, those balmy lemons with tiny spots. It was the first time many of us learned lemons had pores. I thought of your painting for a long time after that, during many cold sunrises alone on the chilled leather seat of the yellow school bus, when I watched the sun crawl up the skeletal winter trees and envisioned it being a lemon. One of your lemons.

Seventeen years ago we spoke for the first time.

You were always independent in the way that you were limitless. I was independent in the way that I was detached. You weren't popular, but you were anyone's friend, and that made you everyone's friend. Socially, you had the upper hand. Which is why I still remember the feeling I had when I was standing alone in the afternoon bus line and felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around, and it was you.

"You're Klaudia, right?"

"Yeah. And you're Lana?" The question mark was manufactured. Everyone knew who you were.

"I am. It's short for Dzejlana actually, but no one calls me that except my family. I think we've had some classes together."

I didn't mention your lemon painting.

"Klaudia. Jakubczak, isn't it? That's Polish?"

"Yeah. And your family. They're…also Eastern European?"

"My parents fled the genocide in Bosnia. Slowly the rest of my family has trickled over. Were you born here?"

"No."

My family is from a town in Poland where six thousand people live on a single street. It's over nine kilometers long and almost everyone has a narrow slice of farmland in their backyard. When we moved here, I found the gridlock streets and back to back houses claustrophobic. I couldn't possibly understand why someone would want to build their house in someone else's backyard.

"I wasn't born here either. I think we're some of the only ones."

I felt a pull of gravity from you in that moment. Through your eyes. I didn't know how to take it, so I just looked away.

"Does your family go to any of the Eastern European festivals in the city?"

"No. My family doesn't go to the city."

"There's a spring festival this weekend. Would you like to come? I know some Polish families will be there."

There your hand was, extended to something you would realize later was impenetrable.

"I don't think I can this weekend."

"There will be so much delicious food, Klaudia. Roast hams, warm soups, pastries that will make you remember your childhood."

I watched my bus pull up directly behind you, bus number forty-nine. My focus was on your face, in sharp contrast against the blurred backdrop of deep yellow pooling behind you. It illuminated the amber flecks in your eyes. They appeared a sprinkle at a time in your inky brown irises, like stars coming out for the night.

"My parents are working this weekend. I won't have a way to—"

"We'll pick you up." You slid your backpack off your shoulders, unzipped it, and pulled out a shimmering pen and sticky note. "Here, write your address down. We can come get you before we go. Saturday morning at nine."

The bus grumbled impatiently behind you. I hurried to scribble down my address, nervous from the moment you mentioned coming to my house. I've never had a friend over before, even if it was just in the gravel driveway.

"I'll see you this weekend, Klaudia. Go before you miss your bus." I handed you back your pen and sticky note, the ink glistening in the sunlight, like the pen held a liquid galaxy of

tiny stars. Part of me hoped it would smudge. I swiveled my shoulders and slid delicately past you. When I climbed onto the bus and sat in my seat, I saw you in the silver frame of the school bus window, rolling the sticky note in the pinch of your fingers into a scroll. In that moment I worried both about my handwriting being so illegible that you wouldn't show up on Saturday, and it being clear enough that you would. Then I watched as a flurry of little children encircled you. They looked like little yous, three or four of them. You embraced them each tenderly. One was on your shoulders as the school bus rattled forward and my view was replaced with brown brick buildings.

That weekend I woke up very early. My parents both left for work around six and I was up as they were heading out the door.

"And what has gotten into you today, up before the birds?" my father asked.

"I'm going to the city."

"The city?" my mother said, wobbling a steaming mug of black tea in her hand. "And who will prepare dinner tonight? I need you to thaw the meat and peel the potatoes."

"I'll be home in time to do that."

"Good. And maybe you could begin weeding the garden plots? We will sow carrot seeds next week. See you this evening."

My parents were always really tired when they came home from their contracting and laundromat jobs. That is always what they told me, how they were so, so tired.

Once they were out the door, I stood in front of my closet for a long time envisioning what you pictured I'd be wearing. Had you seen me in your mind wearing a spring dress? I only had one. Perhaps a pair of jeans and a brightly colored sweater. That's often what you wore. But

mine weren't like yours. Even my brightest clothes were dull from years of wear and washing. They often came to me a few tones duller than they had been in their past lives. I looked outside at the faint light in the sky. It was tinted gray with clouds. A jacket would be safe, one I could curl up inside of. I didn't know how many people would be at the festival. I didn't know how many people would be rolling into my driveway in a few hours. How would I explain to your parents that my parents weren't home? That there wasn't a car in the driveway because they both shared one? That was normal in Poland, but not here, and I didn't know whether or not it was normal in Bosnia. Maybe it was better that there wouldn't be a car. Maybe your family would arrive in a big luxury van and it wouldn't have to be positioned directly next to our twenty-three-year-old sedan. Finally I chose a long dark brown coat, one that started high at my neck and draped down to my knees, and I slithered into it.

I walked into the kitchen and stared at the dark wood cabinets. Would we eat breakfast at the festival? Did you expect me to have eaten already? I paced around, opening the pantry, the fridge, the small closet of jars of cucumbers in brine, oat groats, jams. I sliced a piece of rye bread and smudged it thinly with butter. I took a bite. I put it down. I couldn't eat more. I wasn't hungry. I went back to my bedroom and stood in front of my closet again. I took the brown coat off. I tried my dress on. It didn't fit anymore. I put on some jeans and an unclaimed shirt my mother brought home a few months ago from the laundromat, the place where the majority of our clothes came from. I brushed my hair. It looked like splattered espresso. I tied it back. I let it loose and brushed it again. I walked back into the kitchen. I picked up the bread but couldn't take another bite. I walked back to my bedroom. The sun had fully risen now. I felt a pit in my stomach. Maybe I would tell you I was sick and couldn't go. Maybe my handwriting was too

scribbled and you'd never find my house. Maybe you were just being nice asking for my address, thought more about it, and wouldn't show up at all.

It was 8:50 and I sat swirling on the stool in the kitchen. The gray tint in the sky had unfortunately cleared to blue, which meant I could no longer substantiate wearing my long brown coat. I floated back to my closet and dug out a large once-white sweater. I pulled it over my t-shirt and jeans. It hung loosely in a way that made me feel safe. My stomach dropped when I heard the growl of unfamiliar tires in the driveway. I peeked out of my curtained window and saw not one, but two cars. A caravan. Two large sleek SUVs, each of them boisterously stuffed with people. They parked like tanks in front of our dilapidated carport. Doors began flinging open. Small children poured out. Adults maintained their seats in the front and middle rows, more than just two parents. I couldn't locate you. I balled up my bedroom curtain tightly in my fist, my eyes darting around for your honey colored hair. But everyone's hair was honey colored.

The doorbell rang. I collected myself and walked back out through the kitchen and placed my hand on the door. It trembled with a quivering hoard behind it. I opened it slowly. I saw four, five, six pairs of moving eyes, like they all belonged to a single shifting serpent. I looked around and found your amber brown eyes in the bunch.

"Hey Klaudia!" You parted the ocean of children and gave me a hug. I kept my hand on the doorknob to assure none of them spilled into the house. "These are my siblings and cousins." You turned around with the palm of your hand pointed upward to display the sea of children, seven of them I finally counted. You identified each of them by name, but I didn't retain a single one in that moment. They all looked up at me and ran in circles and wanted to give hugs and see the inside of our house.

“This is Klaudia, my friend. But we’re only here to pick her up. All of you need to return to your seats in the cars, please.” You helped me shuffle two small boys from bursting through the front door. A few had trailed off into the trees surrounding the house. One of the boys limped behind the other in a way that caught my gaze.

“Ernad! Adnan!” I heard an adult yell sternly from the passenger seat of one of the cars, like her voice was an object she could throw. She rolled her window down all the way and waved at me, bulky gold bracelets clattering at her wrists. “Good to meet you, dear. I’m Dzejlana’s aunt Elma.” I found her accent comforting. I did my best to smile but probably looked at her through horrified eyes.

“You can ride with me and my parents and grandmother. We’re in the black car. Sorry, it’ll be tight, but each car seats eight.” You collected the younger children by their hands. I locked the front door and followed you as a cluster of them whirlpooled around me.

We crawled into the third row of the black SUV. It had so many air conditioning vents dotting the ceiling inside, each of them functional, blasting crisp, cold air.

“These are my parents, and my baka, and three of my siblings.” Each of the adults waved from the front as they were introduced. Your grandmother was perched in between two children in the middle row, a seemingly intentional mediator. I sat smashed in the third row with you and your little sister.

“Your parents didn’t want to come? We’d love to meet them,” your father said.

“They have work today.” They had work every day.

“And what do your parents do for work?” Your mother swiveled her head from the passenger seat. She had to project her voice over the middle row of competing children, and it

was booming but kind, and in that moment I tried to remember if all Eastern European women have baritone voices.

"My dad is repairing a deck today I think," I said.

"Sorry, dear. Can you speak up?"

I turned to you. "Klaudia's dad is a deck repairman."

"Ah," your mother said.

"Deck repairman. A uniquely American job," your father laughed from the driver's seat. I tensed my shoulders. "In Europe of course everyone has a garden patio. Not many build their structures out of wood like here."

"Klaudia, does your family have a bakery they go to?" asked your mother.

"Not really," I said. "Usually I– we bake bread at home."

"You will give them a loaf, Dzejlana."

You turned to me. "My aunt and uncle run a bakery and deli in town. Dino's. That's my uncle. He was one of the best bakers in Sarajevo."

"You must go to Dino's and not the Kojićs'," your father gruffed. "The Serbs like to claim authentic Bosnian recipes."

"She knows this, Eldin. You're Polish, Klaudia, aren't you?" your mother asked me through the rearview mirror, thick dark sunglasses obscuring what I pictured to be your eyes on your mother's face.

"Yes," I said, but I hadn't ever heard about the Bosnian-Serbian bread rivalry.

"Where in Poland, dear?"

"Sułoszowa. Not far from Kraków."

"And what other Polish families do you know around here?"

“Not really any.”

“Oh, we will have to introduce you to the Adamczyks and the Sosnowskis. They should have booths at the festival today.”

I had no idea there were other Polish people in our town.

When we parked downtown and everyone scattered out of the SUVs, your uncle walked over holding a child’s hand in each of his and introduced himself. Your parents and aunt and grandmother quickly formed a circle around us.

“Good to meet you, Klaudia. I’m Dino, Dzejlana’s uncle. Maybe you’ve heard of Dino’s Bakery and Deli in town?”

I looked around for you. “Um, I’ve heard of it, yes.”

“Ah, heard of it? Have you tried any of our breads? I brought some for a booth at the festival today.” Behind him I saw you and some of the older children unloading the back of one of the SUVs. Large loaves of rustic, puffy bread in bags. Then I saw you unloading what appeared to be a stack of small paintings. “Why don’t I send you home with a loaf. What kind of bread does your family like?”

“We eat dark bread mostly.”

“Come. I’ll designate a fermented rye and a bag of lepinja for you.” He spoke more quietly. “Fellow former members of the Eastern Bloc need to take care of one another.” He winked.

Once your uncle had set up his booth with the help and hindrance of fourteen pairs of hands, you came over to me and asked if I wanted to walk around.

“Are you selling your art here?” I asked as we merged with the flow of the crowd.

"Yeah, some. Just a few small paintings to help with my uncle's business. Come, let's go find the Polish booths."

Though the festival was crawling with people, being out of the car finally allowed me to exhale. Some of the crowd were Americans, but mostly people who I wondered where they came from. I heard bits of Russian, Slovak, Ukrainian, Croatian, Romanian, Bulgarian. I kept recognizing words only to realize by the next sentence that it wasn't Polish after all. Where did all these Eastern Europeans live? They must have been from neighboring towns across the city. None of them lived in my neighborhood or had kids at our school. There were rows of tents, banners, and mini-markets showcasing produce, cakes, woodwork, handcrafted jewelry, blankets, traditional clothing, herbal soaps, spices, music, flowers. They were so much like the markets in Poland, only a slight degree of difference.

"Look, I see red and white!" You pointed ahead excitedly, and I looked through the crowds at the Polish flags down the row of tents. A splendor of elaborately decorated eggs dyed deep brown from onion husks welcomed us to the small cluster of Polish booths. The eggs were filigreed with ornamental patterns, symmetrical flowers. Wooden eggs sat in clusters next to the real eggs, etched and feathered with bright blues and crisp reds and sunny yellows. I had one like it on the dresser in my bedroom. Pisanki, they're called. Maybe you have something like it in Bosnia. We walked to the next booth and watched vendors ladle sweet batter over a rotating spit on an open fire.

"Sękacz," I said to you. "It's a spiky rotisseried cake we eat at weddings." That would send the kids on the bus into fits of hysteria.

"I've never seen you smile this much, Klaudia." And that was what alerted me to my state of comfort. "What are you going to buy?" And then I panicked. Why didn't I think to find

some money? I hadn't pictured a festival being like a market. I don't know why I had pictured a carnival. I should've grabbed a pile of coins from the jar in the kitchen. Why didn't I think to do that? Not that it would've been enough for more than a bundle of turnips.

"I'm only here to look today," I said, and I could tell by the way your gaze lingered on my face for a few long seconds that you could sense my panic, so I averted my eyes to the pink and white squares of serniki in paper muffin liners and imagined their sour sweet vanilla flavor.

After a while of wandering, and you taking me through the many more blue and yellow Bosnian booths than Polish ones set up at the festival and showing me the many versions of things I found familiar but through a Balkan refraction, we looped back to your uncle's bakery tent. A long line of people snaked around, and you jumped behind the table to help slice breads and package whole loaves and sign your paintings. Your aunt rested her hand firmly on your upper back as you collected money in a way that looked like she was placing love on your shoulders. I didn't know why that caused a sting, but I also couldn't look away. There your grandmother sat in a folding chair, in the back corner under the tent, protected by the safety of the shade, serenely grounded in the commotion. She watched as you gave customers change and handed loaves across the counter and received warm compliments about your paintings. It made me think of my own grandmother, my babcia in Poland, and how you had yours right here and I didn't have mine, and it made me want to crumble and decay in the same way it made me want to glue myself to you and nourish myself with that love secondhand, a push and a pull.

"Klaudia, you can keep walking around or go rest if you want to," you said through the bustle. Your dad tossed me the keys from under the tent and I walked back through thinning crowds to the cars and opened up the trunk of one and lied down in the back, my loose once-

white sweater flowing over, undulating in the breeze. I lied on my back and thought of the pisanki and sękacz. I thought of Poland. I thought about you bringing me to Little Poland, the first time I'd been back since moving here when I was seven. I closed my eyes and I tasted everything we had seen at those booths.

When I woke up, a mass of people with honey colored hair and amber eyes were approaching the car. Before I could locate you, a weight sunk the car down, and I looked for the gravity at my legs, and there you sat at my feet with bags of goods.

"Lana. Did you sell all your paintings?"

"Most of them. Here, my family and I got you some things."

I pushed myself up and crossed my legs. You scooted closer to me and placed four or five heavy paper bags in my lap. Your family dispersed and began loading children and tents and paper bags into each car. I reached into one bag and pulled out a whole sękacz cake. It was still hot and smelled of honey and cream. I could feel you watching for my reaction. Another bag had an assortment of Polish cakes: vanilla sernik topped with fresh strawberries, apple szarlotka, and makowiec with the blue poppyseeds I remember from childhood. Two more bags were stuffed with various loaves of bread, not just fermented rye and lepinja, but a full bakery's worth. I looked up and saw your uncle wink at me as he carried a folded tent under one arm and a child under the other.

"I'm so glad you could come with us today, Klaudia." You placed your hand on my knee and then helped me pack my goods in the car, and I can still feel the heat in my ears and temples and behind my eyes from that moment.

When you dropped me off at my house, I was deluged with hugs and warm farewells, and I had to wring out my last droplets of energy so I could turn around and thank everyone instead of running straight for the door.

My parents came home a few hours later when I was peeling the last few potatoes, the sink filled with curly brown skins. My father opened the door and walked wordlessly to his bedroom, another day of sawing, hammering, staining, and heavy lifting visible on his forehead. My mother exhaled, hung the keys next to the door, tied on her apron, wiped her forehead, washed her hands, and began filling a pot with water.

"Mama?"

"What is it, Klaudia."

"Why don't you and Tata have any Polish friends?"

"What Polish friends, Klaudia? They are an earth away."

"No. I saw them. Today at the festival. There were a few dozen Polish people there. Some had booths for their businesses."

She lit the stove with a match and tipped the bowl of peeled potatoes over the pot.

"We don't know those people, Klaudia. Just because they're Polish doesn't mean they would be our friends."

"But there are people from Poland like us here. You have them here and you're choosing not to make friends."

"We escaped Poland, Klaudia. We are here to be Americans now. Making Polish friends will be a regression."

Sixteen years ago was our final year of high school.

We hadn't become best friends following the festival. It was me who kept a distance. You and I talked at lunch every now and then, where you shamelessly brought cevapi and burek on days you didn't fill your tray with pickled yellow peppers. We said hello to each other when we passed in the hallways, your hair always swaying as if a warm breeze followed you. Neither of us played sports or went to dances or joined clubs. I spent a lot of time at home, gazing out of my bedroom window and reading books. I imagined then that you spent your weekends standing tall at an easel in front of the fireplace in your living room, your little siblings haloed around you, their golden little eyes drawn to their jewel of an eldest sister, repeating your brush strokes on their own miniature easels with exacting imitation. Your parents stood proudly in the threshold between the living room and kitchen, so as not to interfere but to showcase their pride.

You invited me over to your house from time to time. You said your family kept asking about "that nice Polish girl." I figured that meant they worried about me. Worried about my clothes, my family, our money, our car. I didn't want to burden them with too many visits. I did go with you and your family to your mosque one day, where each of you wore sleek, decorative, lavish garments, and I showed up in a long wrinkled dress my mother brought home from the laundromat, and that meant I could never go again. You reassured me so many times that it didn't matter what I wore, but it mattered to me when I showed up and stuck out like a potato sack in a sea of silk.

I dug a hole in the cavity of the house that was my room, filled it with books and chocolate covered plums, and I stayed in there. My parents weren't home often. The house was cold, even in summer. Most of it was built of dark wood in the sixties and never repainted. A bowl of tall, old, leafy trees enclosed it, the ones your little brothers had drifted off into the day you came to pick me up for the festival. I thought about the festival often. I knew it would return

again soon. A new spring was around the corner. It was one of my favorite memories since moving to America, and that scared me. It made me scared to accept profuse gifts from your family again, not knowing whether they felt sorry for me, whether I was burdening them. Scared to have to talk about my family again, seeing how exuberantly devoted yours was. Because we had both been through an international move, one of desperation, so our family was all we had, and my parents were supposed to embrace that. But they would never open up a Polish bakery, never attend an Eastern European festival, never reach out to look for other Polish families. Their strategy was to blend in and survive, to work as much as they could while flying under the radar. They only spoke Polish in the safety of home, despite their very fragmented attempts at English in public. Over time they started buying more boxed pastas and frozen vegetables and canned meats and stopped cooking pierogi and naleśniki. Two objects might share a trajectory, but when one of those trajectories differs early on by just a single degree, those two objects end up miles apart.

One day at school I was reading at lunch when a commotion broke out. People began receiving their college acceptance letters. You were one of them. You were accepted to the big state university with much of your tuition covered in scholarships. I know your family was so proud. I went home on the bus that day and peeled a stack of letters out of my mailbox. The state university had addressed one to me, and inside, my own acceptance. My offer wasn't as impressive as yours, but that was warranted. You were the more impressive of us. I found you in the hallways the next morning and told you about my acceptance. I asked which school you were planning on attending. I'll never forget your response.

"It's going to be the university. It's my dream school. Klaudia, we could be roommates."

I didn't know why you wanted me to be your roommate. You had so many other options. You could've selected a random roommate assignment and that person would have been the luckiest on campus, and that would have likely automatically made them a great roommate. But you asked me. We would never call each other close friends. We were friends by propinquity, and we happened to share a similar geographic background. We went through life in a similar chute, one more similar than anyone else we knew at that school, and I guess that was enough for you.

Fifteen years ago we started school together at the big state university.

I brought mostly books; you brought only one I didn't recognize. It was a children's book perched on the floating shelf above your bed.

"Can I have a look at that?" I asked while you were bringing your last car belongings in.

"Sure," you said cheerfully, handing it to me over the piles of boxes your family had helped you move in yesterday. "It was my favorite book as a child. My parents would read it to me before bed, about a girl who could go outside at night and scoop up stars from a lake. The stars are just reflections of course, but in this book, she could actually carry them around with her in a bucket or a jar."

I opened the cover, scrawled with well wishes and many *volim te*s in varying styles of handwriting. The next time I looked back up you had already unloaded each of your boxes. I must have read it seven times. It felt silly being that engrossed in a children's book. The illustrations were captivating; mostly dark pages with some specks of white starlight. You must have noticed how long I lingered in there.

"See why it's my favorite?" you said, smiling.

You hung miniature paintings all around the left half of the room, your half, though you said it was as much mine as yours. They were mostly pastoral landscapes from photographs you took in Bosnia. A soft field of cottony sheep. The bridge in Mostar. A bustling market with your stooped over grandmother leaning into a crate of tomatoes. My walls were barren into midterms that first semester.

"Klaudia, I made you a painting."

You handed me a whole sunflower field that day.

"For your walls. It's a type of orange sunflower called Evening Sun. It'll look good above your dusty blue bedspread. Orange and blue are complementary."

We hung it together. You helped me position it in a way that would draw one's gaze to the ocean of sunflowers above the rippling blue-gray sheets. It wasn't bigger than a postcard, but it brightened the right half of the room in a way that was minimal. Like a single jewel on display, good enough to stand on its own, so good that placing it with anything else would only crowd it.

"I like it very much, Lana."

"I'm going out with friends. There is an art show and jazz festival in the campus gardens this evening."

You grabbed my hands.

"Will you come with us, Klaudia?"

I wanted to come with you. I wanted to see the way your foot tapped in perfect rhythm with the jazz music while you stood in awe of a rosebush painting. But then I thought about your friends. That you would have a crowd of *me*s there, and I only had you. I had everything in you, and your everything was spread into dozens of *me*s.

"I can't tonight."

You smiled. “Okay. Just know I’m always here for you Klaudia.”

That would’ve sounded so patronizing from anyone else.

That was much of our interaction at the university. I could be close enough to you to nurture myself secondhand with your exuberance, but pull away when I felt that sting. It was a careful balance of push and pull, of closeness and detachment, one I later realized I could have walked more finely.

Fourteen years ago we were in our second year at the university.

We decided to be roommates again. You decided, and I shrugged my shoulders *sure*. Partially because I genuinely really wanted to live with you again, and partially because, after all the friends you had made since starting college, you still asked me. I had heard stories about other friends who tried to be roommates and it ended their decade-long friendship in a great splintering fight, the kind that does irreversible damage. But these were close friends, best friends. And we weren’t that. If it were anyone else, I would’ve known that living with a quiet acquaintance was a fortification for their closest friendships. I saw a lot of people choose to live with someone like me instead of a dear friend as a mode of preservation for their tightest inner circle. But I know I was not your sacrifice.

The first night back we read your favorite, our favorite, children’s book together. It became a little tradition for us, reading that book out loud the night before the first day of classes each semester. It had a permanent spot on the shelf above your bed, and I hoped that no one else would ever ask about it.

“Klaudia is an incredible observer,” you told one of your friends, Maggie, who visited our room one night. “She does so well in all her classes. She soaks in information like a sponge. She’s going to be a fantastic researcher someday.”

You were like that, always pulling threads of goodness out of people and holding them admiringly on display.

“She always has answers when I’m struggling with my math classes.”

Maggie’s eyes widened. She sat on her folded legs next to you on the floor. “Can you help me with my physics homework?”

The thought of that sent a wave of exhaustion over me. I started closing myself up in the library when I knew Maggie would be over. I did that on the rare occasion anyone reached out for me. I always wondered in those moments about energy exchanges. How some people seemingly abounded with endless energy. How they could take on multiple friendships and events and demands and still function. I thought then that I may have been born with some of the lowest energy reserves in the world. I hope I didn’t feed too much off of yours.

You flourished at that big state university. You became quite prominent on campus. People weren’t weirded out by your consumption of fermented foods. You were always going to big social functions. You made friends quickly and deeply. You had known them at the university for a few weeks, but your roots with them were fast, deep shoots, so they might as well have been your decade-long friends. You had a way of wormholing time like that. You started dating people, an endeavor we both entered late, but one in which you led the way and I observed. “Just some fun flings” is all you ever called them, but they were enamored by you, and it was their hearts that always broke when it was over, never yours. You stayed in close touch

with your family, calling all your siblings every Wednesday and Sunday night and singing songs with them in Bosnian and showing them your paintings. You declared an art major and painted beautiful fruit paintings that hung romantically in the studio. Your professor invited you for a summer abroad in Madrid.

While you were in Spain studying under great Spanish painters, I was hiding in my room from the sultry July heat, reading books on Madrid. I checked the entire shelf out from the library. I read about the architecture, the history, the art museums. I imagined you walking by Plaza Mayor and along the mirror lakes of El Retiro Park, snapping photographs that you would later clip onto an easel and paint in perfect replication, each leaf exactly as it was in the moment you saw it, and not some towering reach toward pretentious art. You'd see a floating moment, a flower or a bridge or a person, and you'd respect its individuality. You'd render it in its precise color and texture, because to you it's already as it should be. It's worthy of capturing in a painting and showing others, *look, this beautiful thing that exists, isn't it just unbelievable?* And just when they think you will impart your opinion and share your artist's statement and tell them why you chose that certain angle and that specific shading and reference a big name in the art canon, you are silent. You are gazing at the painting in a way that teaches people what it means to look lovingly at something.

Twelve years ago we graduated from the big state university.

You had a job lined up with an art museum in another state. You talked so much about how you would miss your family. How much they wanted you to go. How that was the only reason you went. Because they wanted you to. Their little Dzejlana, their forerunner in America.

I ended up with a research job back in the city near our hometown, just like you said I would. I was on the lowest tier of researching genetic diseases. I was tasked with studying light therapy and vision, mostly the math and physics behind it, while more important researchers focused on how it affected diseases. They would be responsible for any breakthroughs. I spent a lot of time with infrared and UV, calculating reflections and refractions, degrees of angles, photons, oscillation frequencies. It was monotonous, and no one cared about the quality of my work, which meant I was left alone.

I saw updates of you only through social media, which I perused very occasionally under a ten-digit number username and gray stock photo. You were restoring old paintings, traveling to other museums to collaborate with curators about a common artist, teaching painting workshops to artistically inclined children. Every now and then, you reached out to me.

Hey Klaudia! Look at this painting I worked on today. It reminded me of you.

Hope you're doing well!

You sent a photo of a painting of a woman dwarfed by great towering bookshelves in a dark library. I smiled, but I never replied, and every six or eight months or so, you would reach out again, and I would smile, and then never reply.

Eight years ago your brother died.

It was Adnan. He was fifteen. He had become severely ill. Even as a child, he was noticeably frail, but no doctors could ever figure out why.

You posted a memorial about him.

My dearest brother,

I can only see one side of this coin from where I stand, but I know you can now see both. To think I won't see you again on this earth forever changes its surface, but to have infused it with your life for the past fifteen years has made it brighter. I'll no longer see the brown meadows of late summer as grass, but as your golden hair. Every cloud that catches my gaze will be a specially crafted message from you. In the windchimes I'll hear your laughter. Thank you, Adnan, for these gifts. Volim te.

You posted it with a painting of a summer-browned field and a gargantuan blue sky, clouds in shapes you must have recently photographed, and a bronze windchime dangling from the porch of a small house.

It was the first time I imagined you breaking. A fractured Lana. All along, from the time I saw you in the elementary school lunch line, you were always a fortress. You moved to a new country and experienced all the challenges that came with it and you let them slide off your back and under your feet only to bring you higher. No amount of early language barriers or cultural differences or comments about your food ever rained on you. But this was different. I was at a distance, but I knew how you interacted with your family, and I could see through the glass screen on my phone that you were cracking beneath this grief, that those words you so carefully crafted and chose to display to the world were less for him and more for you.

In the end, they said it was from some unknown genetic disorder.

I should've reached out to you then.

Seven years ago you were awarded a prestigious prize for your art.

It propelled you into the art world. World renowned painters suddenly knew who you were. It came with a generous grant, an investment in your work by a philanthropic group. You found out about the award on the first anniversary of your brother's death. I looked up the interviews and watched them. You answered all the questions with genuine humility, not the fake kind where people say things like, "I'm so undeserving of this honor." You turned right to the camera, dressed in a wine-colored floor length dress, and you said, "I just know this was a gift from you, Adnan." and it felt like you were looking right at me through the screen, and I know everyone else who watched it felt the same way.

Three years ago I bought a house.

A small one near the city where I worked, but not in our hometown. It had two shoebox bedrooms and one bathroom, and the kitchen, living room, and dining room were all compressed into one space. All the walls were dull white when I moved in. I went to the paint shop and bought the paint on clearance, custom colors people had ordered but didn't like and returned. I picked them at random. One was lilac snow, a subtle enough grayish purple. Another was baroque geranium. It was vile. Like the color of every rose on mid-century floral couches. The third was porcelain green, a color that would look nice on a sweater, but not on a wall. I decided to mix the colors together to see if anything better came out of it. I should've known I would end up with something worse. In the end, I painted my house the same decomposing dark wood color in which I grew up. I tried to live with it for a while, but after I couldn't take it anymore, I returned to the paint shop and ordered three gallons of a crisp single coat off-white paint.

One month ago I woke up, opened my phone, and there was a photo of Adnan.

It had been eight years since his death, and you posted about how you were flying home for a while to be with your family. It had been five years since I last heard from you. Had it really been half a decade? That long of you not knowing how much I still thought about you. Guilt and grief knotted its way into a message that day. For once, from me.

Hi Lana. I know it's been years. I'm very sorry about that. I wanted to let you know I'm thinking about you and that I hope you have a good time seeing your family. I know it makes Adnan very happy to see all of you together.

Klaudia!! Thank you so much for this message. It made me smile. I can't wait to see my family. Are you doing alright?

Yes, I am. I have a house here now. Near the city. It would be so good to see you again, if you wanted to come over for naleśniki?

Oh Klaudia. It's been so long…

I thought about how my parents had run from a lot of things that could have brought them comfort, how they were fine running the course of the trajectory that was set for them. I thought about how I had followed in their trajectory, how it's easier to stay the course rather than

expending energy on pushing a new path, and I was a runner too. I stared at my phone until the screen went black, until the screen became a mirror, and I stared at my reflection for a long time.

You're right, it has been very long. It's my fault. I'm sorry I never reached out to you when you lost Adnan. Or any other time. You were the one who always tried. You were so kind to me. The least I could've done was check on you every now and then after we graduated. I've thought about it a lot and have tried really hard to get better. I have you to thank for that. You were the one who showed me a lot of things about myself. I'm really sorry Lana. I hope you and your family have a wonderful time together.

And because I'm a runner, I never clicked *Send*. Instead that message still lies in the graveyard of unsent messages on my phone. If ever I type your name to send a text, it's still that message that watches me. That last interaction the apparition of our friendship.

One week ago you flew back to our city.

You visited Adnan's grave with your grandmother, aunt, uncle, parents, and siblings, now one fewer than the clump that greeted you in the bus line seventeen years ago. I recognized everyone's face in the photo you posted online, though they were marked by age. I swiped through the pictures and I knew it was your aunt because of the way she held her arm around you next to Adnan's headstone. It reminded me of the day at the festival. Your family gave me

everything that day. I had to learn how to forgive myself for not knowing how to accept it. I still don't. We were no longer in each other's orbit, and it was me who passed that up.

The sting was back, only this time it was different, worse, because I understood now that you were not always the fortress I built you up to be in my mind, and that I had caused you pain, and that pain reflected off of you and back onto me, and it seared into my skin the way light does through a magnifying glass. I swiped through every photo of your smiling face like it was an obituary.

That night I turned off all the lights in my house and pushed the couch in front of the window and stared at the sky. I watched a bright white object streak across the sky, and I wondered if it was the blazing return of a comet, back in the orbit of our world again after being gone for decades, or centuries. I watched it journey across the sky until it disappeared again, bound to its trajectory, and I thought that maybe that was a once in a lifetime view of that comet.

The next day, I packed a small basket of food and drove the forty-five minutes to our hometown near the coast. I kept driving, over the two-mile long bridge and toward the island with the wild horses. It was a frequent field trip location as kids. When I finally arrived at the island quite late in the day, it was the first time I hadn't seen horses. Instead I walked along the shore while the stars started coming out and melting from the sky to the water. I walked to the other side of the island, to the marshes, and the stars had fallen in there too. I opened up the trunk, sat in the back of my car, draped a blanket over my lap, and ate chopped fruit from a red plastic bowl. Quartered strawberries, halved red grapes, and blazing orange tangerine slices.

I stared into the fading dark blue sky ahead, a thinning glow of orange slicing the bottom edge where the sky touches the still marsh water, where it's hard to tell what's sky and what's

marsh. More stars poked through with every minute that passed, seemingly in pairs. They looked like eyes opening for the night. I looked at the part of the sky between the fading dark blue and glowing orange. It was a difficult color to describe. You always said that complementary colors cancel each other out to make brown, but this wasn't brown. It was as if the blue and orange coexisted so perfectly that both colors occupied that sliver of sky simultaneously. Like it was both blue and orange, the blue side a bit bluer, the orange side a bit oranger, but somehow, both were right there. The orange gap in the sky started to close beneath the dark blue curtain. Another smattering of stars glistened from the sky, like someone was poking holes in it from the other side. Like it was their sunlight leaking into our anthill world for the night. I watched the orange deepen, watched the blue darken.

When the red plastic bowl was empty, I waded through the cold marshy water and tried to scoop up the fallen stars. I packed the melted stars in the back of the car and drove the forty-five minutes back home in the dark, passing our old elementary and high schools, Dino's bakery, the small strip of neighborhoods that were once home to the children you and I grew up with, the front porches dotted with dim lights. I looked up at the porch lights on in the sky. The bowl of stars glowed from the backseat. I knew, of course, that the stars weren't really in that bowl. But the mirror of water sloshing gently in the bowl reflected the ones in the sky, and the rearview mirror reflected the starry water, where the image of the bowl of stars entered my eyes. I thought about how old those lights must be, how what I can see from them tonight may not even exist anymore.

Foray

In a forest sprawling out of pine needle detritus, my Babcia and I would pioneer paths in search of mushrooms. A sustenance born of decay. Babcia dragged her feet on loamy soil, contemplated how mushrooms feed on dead things and provide nourishment in their own death. I scanned the ground, a breathable canvas bag dangling from my arm. A mustardy velvet breeze jostled clusters of savory pine needles, the chirring immersing us in a crinkling bath of atmospheric scraping. Twines of wind threading the slender needles.

Babcia lifted her knobby forefinger to the tip of her nose, always said it was the nose that is the true seeker of mushrooms. “It detects their presence through smell before the eye can see them. Watch.”

She closed her blue-green eyes, sniffed the air like a hound, led distinctly with her nose a stem ahead of the rest of her body. Head gently bobbing, she gathered threads of crisp green spruce, fresh pine, the sweet lacquery glaze of leaking sap, the thin sheen sharp on waxy leaves, the musky sweetness of decomposing sugars within fallen leaves, the diatoms in earthy soil.

“Alternatively, one can listen for the sound of a field at midnight. Relatively quiet except for the occasional rustling.”

Eyelids drawn, she asked me to describe the smell of a mushroom’s habitat. I pondered for a moment, rustled my clunking boots over a snap of pine quills to retrieve a sensory memory file.

“Wet.”

“That is sensation, Kingusia, not smell. Describe the scent of wet.”

I observed my Babcia, avoiding tree trunks and boulders with her nose alone, garnished with thick billowing burgundy cloaks on this mild September day, a forest witch. Babcia’s

favorite childhood color was red, but she couldn't dissociate it from Communist Poland, a saturation of Red. Nothing on her body nor in her home could be Red. Nothing could be gray either. Every Communist block in which she ever resided was gray, a deluge of cement infecting her childhood and young adult years, spray painted Red propaganda spewing from every wall. So she settled instead for burgundy, and it was burgundy that detailed her wardrobe and home: the foraging cloaks, the living room upholstery, the rugs, the rippling curtains, the duvet cover, the dish towels, the thready patterned details running along the edges of her milky ceramic plates and demitasse cups.

Nearby, a pheasant extended its emerald green neck from its brown speckled pear body.

"Moldy."

"Yes, better. Moldy. But rotten fruit is also moldy. Think further. Describe the moldy scent of forest mushrooms."

The pheasant retracted its head into an inflating pile of bark-brown plumage, a flower closing for the night. I closed my own blue-green eyes. "Soily, earthy, not putrid. More like decaying wood and less like sour milk."

I opened my eyes. Babcia interlaced her branchlike fingers, her thin smile curving upward in wrinkled creases. "Straw of the chicken coop, algal seadrift, cracked macadamias, freshly mown hay, bone broth, musty cave interior. That is the scent palette of forest mushrooms."

I led with my nose until it detected a cord of the mushroom palette. Following my body, maneuvering olfactorily, a lumbering Babcia trailing behind me.

"Your birthday is soon, Babcia. How do you want to celebrate?"

“Ah, Kinga.” Babcia cut a liver spot drenched hand through the piny air. “Birthdays are nothing special. Everyone celebrates a birthday every year, having done nothing in particular to earn it. But every year, the day of your death also passes, and you have no idea. Isn’t the mystery far more intriguing?”

I pursued a saprophytic tune, trailing the mushroom molecules that guided me. The sun screeched down on us, but a thick network of canopic leaves, green needles, and robust branches allowed only slivers of yellow heat to pass through crevices. Small hollow shrieks rather than the relentless wail of aggressive radiance. Babcia moved only when I did.

“You’re getting too old to be talking so much about death.”

“My age has nothing to do with it. I’ve thought about death since I was a small child. That’s when you’re truly at peace. It’s like going to sleep without ever waking up. I can’t remember the last time I had a wonderful night’s rest without an ache or a throb.”

A horseshoe of sunlight illuminated her corrugated forehead, sunlight seeping into the crevices of withering hair and skin. A peasant’s halo.

“Tell me, Kinga. Do you remember what it’s like to have awoken after never having gone to sleep?”

I balanced the fleeting essence of mushroom particles with Babcia’s questions. “No, I’m not sure I do.” I squinted my eyes, pinching the protruding sunlight into swiveling purple diagonals.

“That’s birth, of course. Death is the more obvious in the sleep-wake analogy, but for all the obsession with birthdays, no one ever seems to give birth much consideration.” She tightened the buttery yellow scarf adorning her head and neck, stuffing threads of loose hair beneath the

cover. “Poof.” She popped her hand open like a bursting spore. “All of a sudden you’re here. You exist, never having asked for it. No choice in the matter.”

Before us materialized what our noses knew all along to be in existence; a modest patch of penny bun mushrooms.

“Borowiki.” I folded myself onto the earth, knees cushioned on a rich green tangle of damp moss, the spongy chill dabbing my sunwarmed legs with a squelch, the pungence deliciously intolerable.

Babcia peered from behind my coiled body at the find. “*Borowiki*,” she repeated in her gradual, baritone voice.

Borowiki. Penny bun mushrooms.

Colossal. Clandestine. Chestnut brown. Globular. Stumpy trunk, an elephant’s leg. A cap like a crackly, wheaty, yeasty bun.

The borowiki grew in a dispersed trio, each mushroom cognizant of personal space. Some fungus types are prized for their bountiful clusters. Borowiki, however, are solitary king boletes; one mushroom contains the bulk of a dozen pocks of pieczarki, common white button mushrooms.

“We will have mushroom soup for your birthday,” I beamed, slicing the first elephantine base with my pocket knife, leaving the estuarine mycelial network undisturbed. A network of neurons. A galaxy. I cradled the mushroom by its bun top, squinted at its glistening mist refracting micro-crystallized sun rays, so very visibly not a dinner roll. A densely nutritious decomposer, a miraculous rebirth. “Zupa borowikowa for Babcia’s eighty-sixth birthday.”

“And perhaps someday for my first deathday. Who needs another birthday when you’ve already had eighty-five of them? Perhaps someday your children will celebrate my eighty-sixth deathday. Perhaps you and I will share a deathday.”

Still folded in my harvesting posture, I tucked the borowik mushroom neatly into my sage green canvas foraging bag, then carved into the trunks of the remaining two with a clean slash. “I would be honored to share a deathday with you, Babcia.”

New sunlight leaked onto the ground’s cold spots once shaded by borowik mushrooms.

“Let’s plan on it then.” Babcia straightened her spine creakily, stacked each weathered vertebrae one at a time. “The alignment of the stars has as much to do with our deaths as our births, you know. Note the arrangement of the sky on the night of my death, will you?”

“I will. Maybe we can go foraging in the sky someday.”

We slid deeper into the constellations of the woods.

“Do you think, Babcia, that space is considered the ultimate form of nature or completely devoid of it?”

She pulled up a sleeve and traced the green veins of her inner arm. “Nebulous galaxies resemble human blood vessels resemble the trickling veins of a leaf. What, do you think the nature on Earth is devoid of space?”

I stepped on a custard of mud and then a sponge of moss, splashing a squelch of green liquid around my ankles.

“Have you seen how many stars exist here with us, in anise, in sweetgum leaves, in borage?”

I thought of earthstar mushrooms.

“Kurki, Kinga. Give me their scent profile.”

We descended down a rooty slope, noses piqued. “Kurki are cheddary. Essence of brine, rind of a boiled egg, mildly peppery.”

Babcia followed blindly, detecting the audible crunch of snapping brown pine needles ahead, lines erupting from the corners of her mouth. “Or, alternatively, a higher pitched humming. That’s how orange sounds.”

Kurki. Chanterelles.

Sunset orange. Curly tops like tulle at golden hour, like marigold petals, like the serpentine edges of a daffodil’s cylinder. Communal, extroverted. Found in families, nuclear and extended. The intersection of chicken soup and aged cheese. The chicken *and* the egg.

The thought of a swollen basket of kurki always elicited for me the tang of tomato. “It’s like the mushroom pizzas we used to eat as children after spending the day in the woods. When we find kurki, Babcia, we will also make a mushroom pizza for you.”

A fresh sauce of sumptuous tomatoes and bulbous onions. Acidic tomato juice chambered with savory yellow teardrop seeds melds with buttery fat in a pan, unlocks the cheesiness of kurki when heated.

“Did you know, Babcia, that once you gave me twenty złoty to buy tomatoes from the corner produce stand and I lost all of it.”

Babcia traipsed behind me, matching the depression in the dirt left by my feet. “Well how did you buy tomatoes then?”

“When I got to the market, I picked out the roundest, firmest, plumpest tomatoes.” Cherry red cap ‘n’ belled with green star stems. “I placed them in a bag, the heaviest, juiciest ones on the

bottom, and the woman with the dark blue polka dotted apron weighed them. She stacked the tomatoes on a scale in a pyramid formation, the kind that reveals secrets. Nine tomatoes in a neat square on the bottom, four in the middle, a bulging crown tomato with a green bolt tearing through the plum-colored skin on top. They were six złoty per kilo back then. I reached into my back pocket and felt nothing. Then I reached into all my other pockets. It was a hot July day, *lipiec*, so I was wearing shorts and before long, I had run out of pockets. She looked at me knowingly and said *kasa zgineła?* and she let me take them. I was just a child, and she said I could take them home and bring back the money another time."

"The polka dotted aproned woman was intuitive," Babcia said with certainty. "She knew you had an honest soul. Some people can sense such things."

"I wonder if she knows how much I still think about her all these years later."

"But how did you make it right? When did you pay her back for the tomatoes?"

"It was the strangest thing. I left that produce stand with a lightness, an eager mission to repay the aproned woman with interest for her kindness. I set off down Ludowa Street assembling a cake in my mind. I reasoned she must like forest fruits, since she runs a produce stand. I was neatly arranging blueberry studs into velvety white cream when I saw it, lying there undisturbed glaringly on the path."

"King Bolesław the Brave?"

"Still folded neatly in the exact way it sat in my pocket. Cars were rolling by, bicycles, pedestrians walking to catch the train into town. A lavender pink banknote that could substantiate over three kilos of tomatoes, calling out from the gray stone sidewalk, and nobody picked it up."

"That was when you returned to the aproned woman's produce stand."

“It was. I was elated to return within minutes, to prove to her that I hadn’t run off, that I was propelled by her trust. I ran up to the stand eagerly and slapped the banknote onto the wooden slab next to the scale while she was assisting a man with her teetering pile of tangerines. I held up my bag of tomatoes, told her to keep all of it, and her eyes smiled at me without breaking her attention on the customer.”

Babcia plodded along tendrils of grabbing grasses. “And why, Kinga, is this the first time I am hearing this story?”

“Well, the story had resolved itself by the time I returned home. Had I never found the money, it would still be unfolding, and I would have needed you to help me come up with a plan. But because I returned with the tomatoes for which you sent me out, there was no need to rehash all those closed details.”

“You alluded me the story of a grand adventure.”

“I apologize for withholding that from you.”

“Never mind a grudge now.” Babcia brushed the air with her trembling fingers. “When I was a child, I used to remember my older self,” she began. “That has slowly gone away over the years. The closer to my older self I get, the less I remember her. Perhaps because now I am her.”

“Was your older self a genuine other person?” I was quite accustomed to my Babcia’s deviations.

“Not an entirely different person, but an outside version of myself, an extended perspective. She towered over my life from somewhere else and watched all-knowingly. I sometimes had access to her, but only when I really needed her.”

“What kinds of things did she tell you?”

“She didn’t speak audibly. Rather, she passed information to me intuitively. I always knew I would live to be very old, for instance, so I never feared danger. My parents always hassled me about lacking a survival instinct.”

She upturned egg-shaped stones with the toe of her thick clogs as the shoes melted into the dips of my footprints.

“For as long as I can remember, Kinga, I have always thought vividly about the last day of my life. I always had the strange feeling as a child that everything in my life was happening in retrospect, did you know? I can starkly remember perceiving events from my early youth as my sixty-eight, seventy-eight, eighty-eight-year-old self. That strange child, that’s still me. But that towering, infinitely aware version of myself, that person into which the child would one day decompose, that’s also me. An interconnected duality, you see?”

I clasped my fingers tightly around the arm of the foraging bag. “I am elated to know we will have you for at least a couple more years, Babcia. Even though I know you’re anxiously awaiting your deathday.”

“Relish in the old times, Kinga. Experience the intertwining of the events and people that shaped you. Allow yourself to get deeply nostalgic and sentimental. I know how you are, always trying to cork your brimming emotions to stoicism. But remember the woman in the spotted blue apron. Remember her good nature.”

Purchawka. Puffball mushroom.

White skin with tectonic brown scutes. A carapace. A cauldron. Inflated. Pregnant. A mushroom cloud’s namesake. A cumulonimbus mushroom cloud. A potato with an umbilical cord, no, umbilical pipe, grounding it to earth. An upheaval of nutrients, ready to burst in

trillions of microscopic spores when left to dry and wither. Birth only after its own death. A macrofruit. A mother.

I lowered myself to harvest the ballooning head of fungal cauliflower, dusting off minerals, microorganisms, microbiomes, universes.

“This purchawka will accompany the borowiki splendidly. Sliced, marinated, grilled purchawka steaks to add to the menu of your birthday feast, Babcia.”

I wrapped the purchawka like a head of cabbage in crinkly brown paper. It rested firmly at the bottom of the canvas bag, stacked by its density beneath the only slightly more delicate borowiki. Mushroom harvesting requires a knowledge of hierarchy.

A thistly briar ripped through the canvas bag as I swung it over my shoulder, its teeth catching loose threads, tearing open a gaping frayed mouth, borowiki caps and stems poking through, threatening to jump.

“Don’t fret, I’ve got my sewing kit.” Babcia slid a hand beneath her billowing cloak, retrieved a truffle brown cloth envelope from thin air, threaded a bristle of green yarn through the eye of her needle, and got to work repairing the laceration. “Damn thorns, even if they are the woods’ gatekeepers.”

“Do you remember, Babcia, the first time I came to visit you? When I was eight years old and you sent me back home on the plane with an imported flowering cactus from Turkey?”

“I made you the world’s youngest terrorist,” Babcia gleamed without taking her eye off the patchwork.

“That was when I discovered airport security customs marks cacti as weaponry instead of agriculture. They took me to a dark room full of confiscated goods that day. Because I was an

unaccompanied minor and couldn't be unattended. I saw an entire row of chainsaws lining the wall, apparently all collected from that week. Who brings a chainsaw on a plane?"

"You never know when you need to protect yourself, Kinga. Cactus or chainsaw, I armed you."

"I was flagged for ten years following that. I couldn't get on a plane to go anywhere without passing thorough security screenings."

"Voracious vultures they are," she exhaled, tying a knot with her thumb and front teeth.

We meandered through a city of slender sosny pines.

Mleczaj rydz. Saffron milk cap.

Rustic. Farinaceous. Capsized skirt. A trombone. Convex burnt orange cap. An upturned pumpkin. Red-brown stalk like the bark of coastal pines. Shrivels delectably in olive oil and thyme or, alternatively, in raw sunlight and time. Leather of the forest.

"Robaczywny," Babcia said, pointing to the loose gelatinous stem. "Maggoty. It's too old. Leave it for the snails. Deterioration is necessary to the ecosystem."

I blanketed the mushroom beneath a cold handful of clammy leaves, certain that a multitude of grain-of-rice-sized snails resided within that handful, that they would relish in a free lift to the feast of their lives.

"That is enough for today," she said. "We have taken our share. I need to apply a warm chamomile compress to my knees. They sting."

"Let's get home, then." I positioned the brimming sack of woodsy fruits securely across my body, extended an angled arm to my Babcia. Even proud Babcia had become too creaky to turn down this outreach.

“When you were a small child,” I said with Babcia in tow, “do you think your older self was perhaps an ancestor?”

“It’s possible. We come from a long line of immovable women, you know.”

“I do know that.”

“But we have also faced our perils. And we are a conglomeration of the survival of those perils,” she added.

This was as close as Babcia ever got to what she would never say.

“I think I had one of these women looking after me when I was a child, too.”

“Oh?”

“I remember her. I could visibly see her. Her face looked like an amalgamation of faces I recognized, but didn’t know. She never spoke to me. Not audibly, not intuitively, but her presence brought me the deepest sense of comfort I have ever known.”

“That is indeed the watchful role of our ancestors. It’s what I am training for next, a high honor for me to hold. A familiar face to add to the amalgamation.” Babcia turned her face skyward towards mine.

“Do you think you’ll live among the stars when you comfort our descendants?” I asked.

“Not the stars, Kinga. I’ll take up residency on Jupiter.”

The trek home to Babcia’s house commanded a swim through an undulating pasture of decomposing poppies sprinkled with ultramarine cornflowers. A once red sea turned blue.

“Do you remember, Babcia,” I asked as wisps of tufted wheat and feathery flowerheads grazed our legs, “when we used to make cornflower wine together? When I was a child? You

showed me how to ferment something so blue until it became unrecognizably coral pink. I am still amazed by such a transformation."

"You were indeed enamored with the process as a young child. *How can something so bright and pink live in something so unquestionably blue*, you would ask."

"Not in as many words I'm sure. It's like it was siphoned from another existence entirely, the flamingo pink wine. Like it *had* to come from roses or carnations, like it couldn't come from blue cornflowers alone. You think that shade of pink can't exist in the flower, but it does. It's extracted, but you think it's created. You never knew such a vibrant pink lived in a world so resolutely blue. It defies logic. What happens to all that blue? Where does it go?"

"Fermentation is as much a process as decomposition. A reconstruction, a rechemicalization. It takes on a new identity, but it's still the blue cornflower from which it is derived."

We bouqueted a fistful of cornflowers. We made a plan to dip backwards in time and spend an evening making flower wine together. A glass jar, distilled water, a handful of piercingly blue cornflowers, a sunny windowsill, and time. Those are still the only ingredients, the most important of which is time.

"I read recently, Babcia, that time doesn't trail linearly behind you. It fibonaccis up inside you. Sometimes like a snail shell, sometimes like the center of a sunflower, sometimes like a hurricane. Sometimes like a spiral galaxy. And that's why seemingly random memories dredge up at different times of your life. Why you feel close all of a sudden to something from long ago. It makes its way back to you. The way a pinecone's scales tightly coil up, or the way a young fern gently unfurls."

“Why else then, Kinga, would calendars be cyclical? Would weeks be cyclical? Would the 24-hour day be cyclical? Why else would the early years of our life feel ages longer than the hurtling latter. Why we spend the remaining scroll of time picking mushrooms, or flowers, or staring at the stars in a desperate attempt to slow it down.”

“Today, cornflower wine will slow time for us.”

Upon arriving home, Babcia fetched a glass jar from her jam cellar while I prepared the mushrooms for drying. I cut out decay, released lingering forest critters outside through the window, sliced caps, stipes, and gills thinly, laid them strategically on a burgundy cloth in sunlight.

“I wish I could stay long enough for us to enjoy a glass of fermented cornflower wine together,” I said when Babcia returned and began ripping minuscule cornflower petals and resting them in the glass. Around her knees sagged bulging chamomile wraps, rivers of chamomile tea leaking and pooling at her swollen ankles.

“That is the nature of fermentation. It takes time. It cannot be rushed. The wine will still be here even when you’re not, but I will drink it and be reminded.”

“It’s always so hard to leave, particularly now that I know I can’t just return anytime,” I sliced purchawka patties. “I miss it so much when I’m away.”

“You have to leave a place to lock in its influence over you. You have to leave a place to preserve it. If you stay, it becomes mundane. It loses its shine.”

A jar of bright pink cornflower wine chants in the kitchen windowsill in Babcia’s house, neighboring the tall shoots of a potted basil plant, the neon heat of the fermented flowers bending

and refracting sunlight at four o'clock each afternoon, emanating a stained glass window in the kitchen. The room drenched in the deep pink of blue cornflower wine. A sealed jar of leftover dried mushrooms keeps homemade jams company in the cellar, the meager vestigial mound an artifact of Babcia's eighty-sixth birthday soup. One glass encircling bright, blooming wine and another enveloping shadowy, dried mushrooms.

Salt

The Land

I was a sea floor. Under the saltwater flitted ancient octopuses and silvery bony fish. Benthic kelp forested the seabed. Sparkling diatoms and armored foraminifera stratified the glassy seawater. But my sea was not calm. For millions of years, a colossal chain of Carpathians was rising. The mountains ripped through my skin, the disturbance accompanied by splintering earthquakes and blistering volcanic eruptions, an entire epoch marked by instability and upheaval, and not for the last time. My sea dried up, leaving behind massive halite monocrystals, which fragmented to pieces under my imperious Carpathians, breaking and folding and cracking under pressure, pulverized among other mangled rocks and fractured minerals. Before my vast salt halls and chiseled chapels were deposits of primitive marine fauna and miocene flora, scattered arrays of protists, ferns, and microorganisms. Diatoms that once lived in their silica shells were captured in saline ones. The first inhabitants of a primordial salt world, what would millions of years later come to be known as one of the world's oldest and most prolific salt mines. The teeth of pinecones, the blades of grass, the skeletons of sea corals, and the barbed shells of mollusks would one day be found within my mine walls, where the salt would imprison them forever.

In the primeval days of planet Earth, a terrestrial mass collided with not-yet-Poland. The shrapnel, an offshoot of nearby forming planetary bodies, brought matter coding the physical laws from neighboring embryonic planets, prescriptions for otherworldly gravitational forces to develop within a dimple of Earth: a stretching of time like that of a Venusian planet, and an astronomical shortcut, a connective portal linking me with trap doors to the great river in the sky.

The Villagers

After a succession of eons came the first of us. It started with brine. We boiled glugs of salty spring water in pottery vessels over a fire until small crystals accumulated over the clay walls. Neolithic table salt. Salt production was a secret profession passed down through our generations, evolving as a specialized group of us known as Salters. Salters possessed the power of preservation, the ability to manipulate time. Salt became vital for our transition from hunting and gathering to farming. Our new agriculture was largely devoid of the life-essential mineral, and salt gave us the ability to preserve our food, to transport it over long distances, to improve its taste, to aid in the tanning of our hides, and to enhance our overall health. Where others found their fish, meats, and vegetables spoiled within days, we mummified ours in the mineral, rendering it captured in a single moment of our choosing. Those unfamiliar with the furtive process thought us to be either divinely gifted or not of this earth. Thus the lore surrounding the Salters began, that we could preserve life, that we could slow time, that we could ensnare anything in salt.

Our salt production was a clandestine and lucrative practice, swiftly leading to salt as a valuable form of currency. We quickly accumulated wealth, trading our saline gold with neighboring tribes and locals who did not know of a mineral that could preserve their goods through the harsh winter. This trade brought us metal, and with metal, we could boil more brine, collect more salt. And so this process remained throughout our early generations, underwent very little change for centuries. Boiling water until it hardened. Extracting one life force out of another. The entire region surrounding what would become our village sprung from boggy wasteland to thriving community. Three residential settlements and two stone churches calcified

our land. Trade and craft flourished, and we saw great prosperity in the early hamlet of Wieliczka. We thrived this way for hundreds of years, until the springs of brine began drying up.

The Well Diggers

When the Salters of Wieliczka brought us in from neighboring villages in a desperate attempt to recapture the fickle briny water and continue their enterprise, they promised stable work. By the start of the thirteenth century, the first deep well of Wieliczka was in progress. We labored in every moment of daylight and moonlight in search of underground brine springs. We bore deeper into the earth, digging further into the past. The younger the digging, the further back in time we went, so that our youngest generations perpetually had to go through the past to dip deeper into it. We dug out old layers of the Earth's skin and brought them to the surface again. We wondered what we were unleashing, what happens when that which has been buried for millions of years is resurfaced again. Were we liberators, or desecrators? What had been left alone so long at rest, entrapped, was now disturbed, free.

When we finally dipped into the saline groundwater, we brought it to the surface and boiled it to extract the salt, returning to the ways of the early villagers. The springs were capricious, sometimes flowing plentifully with saltwater, sometimes fooling us into digging ten more dry meters upon seeing the first trickle. The Salters brought more and more of us to Wieliczka. We comprised our own small community in this village, those who were employed to dredge, to exhume. None others' work demanded such a closeness to the underworld, and our days of digging stretched longer. More and more wells began perforating the land. We tapped into great flowing sunken rivers. We thought that belowground must have flourished entire communities. We worried what might happen when they discovered the community above

tapping into their rivers below. The Salters built a circumference of homes directly around our wells, magnetized to their portals of wealth. Eventually we lived around them too, in small wooden structures, and so did the other villagers, and large settlements of farmers, brewers, and craftsmen formed around the largest well, which became Wieliczka's early village center, a network that would occupy this land for many centuries to come.

Our wells were fruitful but the Salters pushed for more. We dug deeper and deeper underground, many of us perishing beneath heavy salty soil, drowning in saltwater, buried and preserved forever in the salt we were employed to capture. We tried to keep our perspective in those portals. We spent a lot of time in darkness, spent a lot of time in silence, and that was how we tapped into the unspeakable world. In the deep darkness of underground night, we gazed at the moon overhead, watched as something pinched it tighter and tighter each night, then slowly released. On days when the moon was at its freest, we gathered at the bottom of our deepest portal and took turns lining ourselves up precisely at the center and looked up to a perfectly aligned cap of silver engulfing our sky instead of darkness, the first telescope.

On a cold spring night beneath a moon so bright we mistook it for sunrise, we dug so deep until the pillars of moonlight revealed a hard shine. The moment our tools clanged a thing that wasn't soil, water, or stone sent a reverberation around the village. The Salters levitated to the well when they heard it, as if awoken in the night by a specter. They gazed down into the well, looming above us from the heavens, their bodies casting shadows beneath the flowing moonlight. They asked for a fist sized sample and we chipped and chiseled and sent it up in a bucket. They observed the specimen glittering tremulously in the light of the moon, licked it to be certain. We had struck rock salt. Everything changed after that discovery. Well digging was abandoned. The Salters began their search for miners as our deepest well crystallized into the

village's first mine shaft. We were forced to mine, leave, or starve as excavation converted each of our wells into a mine entrance, centering existing settlements on gateways to the subterranean. Many of us left, fewer of us found work, most of us starved, and a few of us became miners.

The Miners

The salt shimmered a silvery sheen underground. It looked not unlike the moon that portaled above. We thought that maybe the moon was made of salt, that it glimmered and glowed above in the same way the salt crystals did below. There were many salt moons above, several smaller ones, far away, glistening granules in the sky. And so we looked above to chisel below, looked for pieces of moon beneath the dirt between mollusks and bones and petrified grasses. There, with the mammoths, and everything else forgotten and everything yet to be discovered, we chiseled. We reasoned that inside our Earth must be a salt moon, that the moon in the sky was perhaps a primitive Earth, one that already had its skin peeled back to expose its salt interior. Perhaps the miners on the moon above were our ancestors, and we were connected to them, sent to free the next salt moon of its earthen crust. For hundreds of years, we existed for the sole purpose of retrieving salt. That salt was at the center of life made it a life force, made us the farmers of life. The further we got from that salt moon in the sky, the closer we got to ours.

The king arrived in the fourteenth century. Our mining had made the royal treasury very wealthy. The king founded, among many other progressions, our country's first university in nearby Kraków. The first university in Poland, built from our work in the mines. It was as if we had assembled it ourselves. Those days were good, and we were proud to be miners in Wieliczka despite our many challenges. We performed all the work in the mine manually. When we struck salt that was fit for extraction, we used pickaxes to chip away low corridors. Our work was

difficult and dangerous. We knelt or laid on thin scraps of leather and dug all day long, breaking salt blocks into clumps weighing a couple thousand kilograms. We loaded these hulking pieces into barrels and transported them on our backs. It took many of us to carry a single barrel. Our only light source was dim oil lamps, the moon no longer visible beneath our vast network of underground tunnels, and constant threats of flooding and methane explosions loomed. Many of us were killed, but no deaths ever halted the mine's expansion. We worked and lived in those tunnels. We were religious, and we prayed. So deep underground that we couldn't surface to go to church, we carved figures, religious and otherwise, into the walls of our mine. We carved ourselves the very gods to whom we prayed.

The king built castles, churches, and impressive townhouses for us. We no longer lived in meager wooden structures. The king saw that salt mining in our village would be protected for decades to come, signed a Saltworks Statute to ensure our success. We had a growing economy and our village swelled with each century. It is said that King Kazimierz found a Poland made of wood and left it made of stone. Our stone Poland was structurally sound and more resistant to attack. But it was also rigid and impermeable. This was an ossification, a transformation from softness to permanence. And there a path in our history was paved, set in the stone that marked it. The Salters lived alongside us in only slightly more ornate homes, but they still sought control. They became mine managers, distinguished by the surname *Salzer*. The Salzers believed the mine belonged only to them, instead of to all of us, so we sought separation, those of us who knew the mine was in existence because of the land, the well diggers, the miners, and not because of those who claimed control of it. This would be one of our first fractures, and it wouldn't be our last.

Our mine commanded professions beyond mining: we were surveyors conducting precise measurements, cartographers drawing the mine's first maps, mathematicians, blacksmiths, carpenters, stone masons. We learned our skills so broadly and deeply that we were certain to be more educated than the nobles who traveled to see us. The first known tourist was Mikołaj Kopernik. Nicolaus Copernicus. To commemorate his visit, we rendered him in salt. A tremendous statue secured in a chamber of the mine bearing his namesake. The man who told us that the salt moon in the sky and the salt moon in our Earth aren't the universe's center. That the moon inside our planet is at the pull of the Sun. And if our underground moon was made of salt, we wondered what the Sun was made of, what could be so strong a force that our inner moon yearned to circle it.

When our mine pierced three levels underground, it began siphoning any building resources from our region, copious amounts of wood to continue the construction of internal support structures. We leached Poland of its lumber. Our mine swallowed all our region's firewood, resulting in a shortage of heat during the unforgiving winter months. Favorably for the Salzers, the mine supplied a steady seventeen degrees Celsius year round. And because we were vital to the Salzers' wealth, we were given access to its protective elements as long as we were productive. As Wieliczka and our famous mine expanded, numerous travelers requested a visit underground. Our mine landed a place on maps outside of southern Poland and began cropping up in European literature. We had reached a peak when the partitions took place.

The Austrians overthrew the Salzers in a single night. Wieliczka and our acclaimed salt mine was no longer Polish, and what did that make us? The Austrians brought their own miners, who modernized our traditional methods of salt extraction. They used mechanisms we had never seen before: gunpowder, pneumatic drills, steel ropes. They engineered an underground railway

line, a steam extraction machine, and even commissioned a power plant within our mine. It was a new world to us, our familiar salt mine unrecognizable, our identities fragmented. Our mine became the Austrians' most prized company. We were no longer miners. They turned us into exhibits. They made us act out our mining, displaying how we carved the chambers from colossal blocks of salt, volumes of thousands of cubic meters, deposits unlike anywhere else in the world. The work so ingrained in our bodies, and no salt to show for it. The work that had built castles and universities, now a game of pretend. They prepared breathtaking attractions for their tourists. Horse drawn railway moved them throughout the mine. The tour began with the devil's drop, where the Austrians descended us in a bucket on a rope down a menacing trench of the mine, so the tourists could see what was down there. Then a boat ride across the saline lake, where some of us became divers to maintain the boats and strapped fifty kilogram weights to our bodies to keep from bobbing to the surface. During the tour, we illuminated the path with torches, the mining orchestra played exuberant music to accompany the display, even fireworks emblazoned the cavernous rooms. One would momentarily forget they were encapsulated underground and not gazing at the sky above a bustling city. Even we, enraptured in a blossoming succession of fireworks above our heads, sometimes momentarily forgot the toil behind this remarkable mine.

By the twentieth century, we saw a hundred visitors a week. Wealthy merchants, high-ranking officials, secular and clerical magnates, members of aristocratic and royal families all traveled to see our mine. The Austrians boasted about the size of their company to anyone who would feed its growth. Poles partitioned into new identities by the countries that overtook them visited us as a testament to solidarity. Deep beneath the cartography and politics, we were Polish underground. Our commitment to our identity was crucial in the face of Austrian occupation. But

then came the second world war, and our mine was German. Its development continued, not by Poles or Austrians, but by Nazis. They used our mine as an underground weapons factory, but the tourism continued. It was then that some of us were brought to Wieliczka from nearby concentration camps and forced to labor under the most hazardous conditions yet. We were made to entertain in dangerous stunts, blowing out great sections of rock with gunpowder, teetering our disposable bodies into unexplored crevasses of the mine to satisfy the tourists' curiosity, pressed to create larger, more spectacular fireworks displays, often resulting in our demise. When we wished to be early Polish miners again, our mine was captured by Soviets, and then by Polish Communist authorities, who employed full mechanization and electrification, and mining and extraction took place once again alongside tourism. The salt mine expanded to over two hundred kilometers of galleries on nine levels, all on the backs of miners rendered as machines. For six hundred years, we lived and died belowground. A Poland built of stone indeed.

One of us was Czesław Bogdański, son of peasant villagers in Wieliczka.

Czesław Bogdański

At fourteen, I was tasked with chipping away salt to create a network of tunnels and chambers. I resisted using mechanized methods, refusing to blast a chamber with the same technology that fueled the extermination of my family in the camps. Much to the dismay of the Salzers, who had regained control over the miners as ownership of the mine itself changed as often as the seasons, I carved out passageways by hand. As punishment, the Salzers frequently kept me in a small, deep, unfinished chamber of the mine rather than allowing me to sleep in the slumber chamber with the rest of the miners. They left me there without food or water for many days, sometimes forgetting about me, sometimes inviting noble travelers to see their rogue

prisoner boy on exhibition in an uncharted section of the mine. I spent long, dark, lonely hours in this lower chamber, only a few meters long and wide, and dozens of meters below the nearest exitway. As a carver, I spent my time chiseling the walls of my stone cage by touch, creating a sloped overhang that was concealed from above. When the Salzers came to check on me, it gave the illusion of being a closed room. But below the overhang, my small body could slide through, and I passed the viscous time in the mine by tapping farther into my secret tunnel.

During one of my punishments, I served nearly a week alone in my lightless cell. The Salzers only visited my chamber when there was someone important to show me to. Otherwise, I laid flat in my sloping tunnel against the sandwich of salt slabs, the entire weight of the Earth beneath me, the rest of its crust above, uncrushed only by my calculation of where to chisel and how much. Eventually I, unbeknownst to and neglected by the Salzers, had chiseled to the deepest point of the mine. By this time, the Salzers would come by to view me, ostensibly still cornered in my box of salt, my invisible chiseling creating the effect that there were no passages from which to escape the chamber. The Salzers created a new source of entertainment for their tourists, seeing how long I could survive without food or water. First they tried for a week, leaving me alone in dark solitude for seven straight days. When they returned and peered down the tunnel leading to my enclosure, I sat inert and despondent. The Salzers gave their visitors pieces of bread to toss into the box housing their pet. They trickled water down a tube, and I had to lap it up before it became too salty. To the great amusement of the Salzers and their tourists, they returned, each time in between increasing expanses of time, to see how long I could survive without nourishment. During my long hours alone, I carved away at my secret tunnel, eventually reaching greater depths in my gently descending diagonal passage, almost a full story deeper now than the existing nine stories, over three hundred meters belowground. I noticed that my

hunger and thirst seemed to abate when I spent time in my tunnel. My clothes became crusted in salt crystals, which I allowed to accumulate for peeling when the repeated tap tap tapping of chiseling felt torturous. When I heard the arriving Salzers and tourists, I scurried to my holding cell, appeared lifeless and weak in a corner, performed for them when they tossed me rips of stale bread and poured buckets of water over me, allowed them to laugh and marvel that I was still alive two weeks, three weeks, four weeks later without food or water. When they left, I retreated to my secret tunnel, where the food sat digesting in my stomach for over a week, the water hydrating me for just as long. I continued to chisel away.

Reaching an eleventh level belowground after three weeks of chiseling, I crawled back to my confinement with the same vigor my nourishment gave me upon the first day of consumption over a week prior. The Salzers and tourists returned, astonished that I had still survived, dropped a clunk of crusty rye loaf onto my head, which hit like a brick, and tossed a whole bucket of water down that landed square on my shoulder. I struggled to correct the bucket upright and preserve any water that remained within so I could be spared from licking the salty chamber floor.

"He'll surely be dead in a month's time," proclaimed the Salzers as they pulled their lantern up and ushered their visitors away with them for a full thirty days.

I attempted to calculate the amount of time I had between visits but found it impossible with the complete lack of light and disorienting sense of being so far underground. I resolved I would know it was time for another visit from my captors by detecting noise in that vacuum of silence. That month I spent alone felt to me like the passage of my entire childhood. I chiseled farther and farther into the earth. It was all I could do to know I was still in existence, deprived of many of my senses otherwise. I scooted the loaf of bread and bucket of water the few centimeters

each day expanded by my chiseling. I found that the bread never grew more stale or moldy, the water never evaporated as long as it stayed in the depths of my new tunnel. I took a few bites of bread at the very lowest point and only grew hungry after many weeks, to which another couple bites kept me sated for many more. When the Salzers and their visitors returned after three months, I clambered back to my chamber, tiny salt crystals dangling from the clumps of my brown hair and eyelashes, which glittered brilliantly in the face of the Salzers' lanterns. I left an entire half a loaf of bread and liter of water concealed in my tunnel. I collected my new loaf from my spectators, conceded to another bucket of water crushing my limbs, squinted at the sight of a firelit torch and lantern, a blazing sun after many weeks in a vacuum of darkness, and waited for my visitors to leave me alone for what felt to me like many years.

When the Salzers returned after six months, they were astounded to find me still alive in my crate of salt, and not trapped in a new block of it. They concluded that the salt mine had purifying qualities, that it could preserve one's youth and keep one's body from aging or decaying. Rather than continue to exhibit me, they ordered the other miners to build a wellness retreat where tourists could pay to spend days reversing their biological clocks. The Salzers lowered a rope to their obsolete exhibit. I tied it around my waist. They pulled my body up. I came out jeweled with a salt crystal crown, their treasured prisoner boy extracted from their deepest well, who could survive in this incredible mine for months with no food, water, interaction, or light. When I was hoisted up and out of the mine, I never again returned. I married a woman from my village, Halina, and never spoke of my time within the mine beyond a quick statement about laboring there in my youth. It was all I could manage, all many of us could manage.

Bibliography