

A sojourn in central Europe

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Czesław Miłosz said: “If you discuss political things, your entire soul should be in them.” Miłosz was referring to a book by a central European compatriot, a political treatise he happened to be reviewing at the time. Miłosz hated the book. Miłosz would do things like that – he would use the word hate. In this case he hated the book because it dealt with politics bloodlessly – and Miłosz had no respect for it. “If you discuss political things your entire soul should be in them.” SOLITUDE, SOLIDARITY, REVOLUTION.

Czesław Miłosz: A centenary celebration was the title of the talk – it took place at Trinity College Dublin. Naturally, I was intoxicated. It was a good talk, and the panel included another Polish writer, Adam Zagajewski. For Zagajewski, Miłosz was controlled by two belief systems: on the one hand, he subscribed to a leftist perspective on social issues; on the other, he was intensely religious. Heaney was

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also on the panel, and he spoke with customary class. For Heaney, Miłosz’s writing was a way to gain power over the negative forces in his life. Controlling and purifying darkness was important for Miłosz. He hated nihilism.

A few weeks after I attended the Miłosz talk I travelled to Krakow (where Miłosz died), and Warsaw (the big city where Miłosz cut his teeth), and finally Berlin (which has nothing to do with Miłosz but is a fun place). I went with my girlfriend, Vanora. Vanora’s a teacher and the school year was over. I had quit my job the week before, so my work year was also over.

We flew into Krakow on a Ryanair flight, which was lucky: all Aer Lingus flights were cancelled due to a labour dispute between the pilots and management. In Krakow airport a very tall and very thin man held a cardboard sign with Vanora’s name on it. Through email with the hotel concierge, Vanora had arranged for a taxi to collect us. The taxi driver was named Bart. We shook hands, left the airport, and crossed the thoroughfare where taxi men gossiped and smoked cigarettes. We made small talk with Bart. I’d done absolutely no homework on the Polish language and wanted to know the basics. I asked Bart how to say, “Do you speak English?” Bart smiled. He was thin to the point of abnormality. “Just say English, English, English.” “That makes me sound pathetic,” I said. “I’m trying to impress people here.”

The taxi ride was uneventful and evocative in equal measure –

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shades of brown and green, abandoned factories and sparse, flat-roof houses accumulated on the roadside and into the horizon in choc-a-bloc, unzoned fashion. The air was muggy; the temperature was above twenty degrees Celsius. I felt the usual odd elixir of travel emotions – a barbiturate sleepiness sliced by vivid attention. Bart’s English was good and he inquired about our holiday plans. We said we had none. Bart recommended the Salt Mine and Auschwitz. We said we’d visit the Salt Mine but avoid death camps. I asked Bart if he were familiar with Miłosz. “Of course. The writer.” Vanora noted it was like asking someone on Grafton Street if they knew Heaney.

“Are young people here political?” I asked.

“No. We think politicians steal from us.”

“So the taxes are high then?”

“No.”

“Do you have good healthcare?”

“Nye.” Bart shrugged, then told us how employers cheated the tax system to avoid paying employee tax: and how this was good for undocumented workers, who wanted cash in hand, and for employers, who didn’t want to pay added employee healthcare costs. Outside the hotel, I handed Bart a fistful of *złoty*, and he wished us luck on our holiday.

The hotel was typical Polish – a design dominated by an absence of irrelevant objects. This was the opposite of the west as I’ve know it; the opposite of developed decoration. Rather, a few choice ob-

jects achieve minimal fullness – desk, chair, a green leafy fern in a terracotta pot, bed, and a nightstand with a large dial-tune radio, produced by a manufacturer I’d never encountered. High ceilings and windows with heavy beige, velvet curtains. Some might call this poverty. Personally, I was enjoying this new sensory experience of minimalism and paucity. We dropped our bags. Vanora went down to the shops to get supplies. I showered, shaved. When I came out, Vanora was on the bed smoking a cigarette. Gill Scott Heron played on the radio, followed by Bill Callahan. The Poles took no prisoners on the radio front. Vanora’s heavy black hair looped on hotel sheets. We spent the rest of the day walking aimlessly.

Krakow is a rich, passive city; the food was cynically priced and mediocre. Structurally, the city pivots around Wawel Castle, an enormous medieval compound carved into the cliffs. The city appeared to be gently graded, sloping downward at an obtuse angle toward the river. At the city’s northern point was a large plaza, full of cafés and clothing boutiques catering to tourists. Our hotel was in this northern section. A salient feature of Krakow, along with the medieval castle, is the women. No one looked like anyone on TV. As we left the city’s core of restaurants, clothing shops and markets, and walked south into Krakow’s hinterland, we got lost; the city’s glamour was obviated by necessity: large intersections of gridlocked traffic and industrial warehouses. We ended up in a maze of yellow apartment blocks. The sound of techno thudded from an upstairs

window. All the apartment windows were open. I noticed in all the open windows the same faded, lightweight yellow cotton curtains rumpling in the breeze. The street led to a park. We sat on a shaded bench. More apartment blocks were being erected around the park. Blue steel I-beams were laid in rows, ready to be lifted with the help of heavy machinery, and placed in proper span. Kids played in front of us. Writing about this makes me think of Vanora and daydream about being a father. Things I remember: the way she liked the taste of alcohol on my breath. The story about her grandmother's father, who was a tyrant, a rough and disciplined man, who Vanora's grandmother called The Father until her dying day.

The following day we went to the Salt Mine. There were two options: we could have a chartered coach pick us up at the hotel, or we could make our own way, via local buses. The cost difference was negligible, but we opted for the adventure of local transport. At the Salt Mine we bought two tickets for the English tour and waited. Moments before the tour started a woman appeared and said, "You were on the bus earlier." She had an American smile: straight, white; it was her eyes that put me at ease. In her mid-fifties, she was dressed in North Face garments. Her earlobes, wrists, and neck were decked in tasteful, silver jewellery. "We were," I said.

"Where did you get off? I think we got off one stop too late. We walked through the village. Did you walk through the village? Some guy took pity on us and helped us find this place."

A man stood behind her. He had short silver hair, and he wore glasses and similar lightweight, breathable travel gear. As the woman chatted, the man smiled widely. I appreciate this smile. I know it well. It's a traveller's smile and it means, to put it crudely, *I will not hurt you, and I am in no way a threat to your physical wellbeing*; to genuinely possess this smile is like having proper identity papers.

"No," I replied. "We got off at the right stop." Actually what had happened was the original stop was under construction. Vanora and I got off one stop before the Salt Mine stop. We did so because a student had helped us. He was a kind man, in his early twenties, a student of Information Technology at the local institute. I knew as much because I inquired after he grabbed my shoulder as I meant to exit the bus five stops too early, he declaring, "Salt Mine?" then shaking his head and pointing further up the road. I tried to shake his hand when we all got off the bus. I embarrassed him. From there we walked down steps until we arrived at an old train track. We crossed the track and walked through a derelict field, through shin-high grass, underneath the hot sun, while a putrid burning smell in-folded in the stasis of a non-breeze, and on either side of us gnarled cars rotted, their metal frames stripped bare and burned black, until we arrived at the main road, which led to the Salt Mine.

"Yes, we got off at the right stop," I continued. "But it's a tricky one."

We filed into line and entered the mine, descending a wooden

switchback staircase. As we started our descent, the docent noted it would take approximately fifteen to seventeen minutes to reach bottom. My mind didn't fully register this. I peered down the stairway's shaft, that middle space, reminiscent of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. What I witnessed was frightening indeed. We began descending. The staircase was made of thick planks of golden timber. We moved downward in procession. I plodded, step after step, moving with my weight firmly planted on every downward beat. I got tired. My body and mind submitted to the rhythm of uninhibited and unrelenting penetration. The temperature dropped. And yet, after a while, the new air ballooned my lungs. I started to march downward with glee, jibberjabbering wildly to the couple we'd met earlier. I learned they were teachers – taught in Vladivostok but were from New Mexico.

The mine consisted of narrow hallways, tiny chambers, expansive ballrooms, chapels, office spaces, and there were lakes. The mine's network of hallways were coated with wet salt, like a second skin, over a richly green, dark bare rock. The salt was fine, like sand grains, and often wet. The tour was over-the-top and great. The tour guide had a moustache. I noticed having a moustache in Poland is tantamount to a political statement. Only older men, often working class, wore moustaches. I saw countless, older, working class men, moustached, military-booted, who chain-smoked and dog-walked evil-looking German shepherds. Our tour guide didn't have a dog with him but he did speak with a bizarrely inflected dialect, somewhere between BBC

English and how I imagine the Austro-Hungarian aristocracy spoke, when forced to speak English. From the guide, I learned the mine was created by King Wawel. It was the primary reason for Wawel's extensive wealth. Before the invention of modern food storage facilities, people used salt to preserve food. The demand for salt was intense. Having a job in the mine was viewed by the community, our tour guide informed us, as prestigious. Not only did workers receive a good wage but they were given bonuses; each miner received a kilogram of salt per season. The workers invariably sold the salt for a significant amount of cash. Fires were an ever-present danger. Because horses were used to turn large-scale digging machinery, hay was in abundance. The hay, combined with huge amounts of timber necessary for securing the structural integrity of the mine, meant the mine was a fire-breeding pit. When our guide mentioned the mine's largest fire, I was surprised to hear that only eight people had died, as opposed to eight hundred. During the tour I had several questions but didn't ask them. My questions were: (1) who owned the mine now? and (2) how many workers died in the mine when it was actively used for the production of salt? Even in my head, my questions sounded riddled with agendas.

The mine had large lakes. One of the lakes, which reminded me of cave lakes – the kind found by spelunkers – was full of inky, impenetrable water. The tour stopped. The cavern ceiling was incredibly high. The water bubbled. A green iridescent light lit the cavern, like

a spotlight washing the walls. At the cavern's ceiling, speakers hung from wires, and slowly, as the water bubbled with quickening ferocity, Chopin began to play. I have a fear fantasy that involves swimming in a confined space. A fear that floods the brain and makes me feel physically alive, like a nosebleed, or the humour, humility, and carnality of sexual acts. We entered a large chapel. Glass chandeliers were strewn from the ceiling. Grottoes gripped the walls – large-scale statues of the crucifixion, of Mary, and the Last Supper. The entire chapel was carved by hand out of salt. A few workers, men from the local village, had carved it. It took them sixty years. They never worked at the same time. One man would work for weeks, months at a time, and when he was finished the next man would begin.

The two-hour tour ended. As our group broke up, I noticed the couple from earlier. They seemed to be edging closer to me and Vanora. The next time I looked up they had materialized beside us.

“Pretty wild,” I offered.

“Stunning,” the man said.

“Do you guys mind if we follow you back to the bus?” said the woman.

“Sure.”

“Unless someone moves that village,” the woman said.

It took another hour to get to the surface. We waited in line. It turned out Janice and Paul were professors. Janice taught political science and Paul taught law. We paired off, Janice and Vanora,

myself and Paul, chatting more intimately, for the remainder of the wait. Paul did his PhD on “justice.” He seemed to intuit a cosmic ambivalence toward the word because he immediately launched into a monologue on justice. He had a soft-spoken humility I found endearing. But after a while I felt acutely disappointed: I was being assaulted with justice propaganda, and I recognized the assault, because I was an assaulter. I’d heard all this before. Paul’s opinions boiled down to flaccid humanism rooted in a misguided belief that we are all the same, and life will be enduring, if only we look out for each other. All through our holiday, I’d been reading a pink paperback by Miłosz; a collection of acerbic and nostalgic essays titled, *Proud to be a Mammal*. I probably had it in my leather rucksack as I listened to Paul. When Miłosz wasn’t producing poetry, he was often thinking about how to reconcile his social ideals with the world’s reality. He never figured it out. He accepted the world is not what we will it to be. I overheard Janice telling Vanora how she quit journalism after the Reaganomics and unregulated greed of the 1980s, and, as she spoke eloquently and gesticulated feverishly, I realized I hate how so many American intellectuals speak in eight-hundred-word grids. When Paul said, “I wonder what corporation owns that mine now,” I stopped feeling disappointed and started to feel shame. At one point, Paul stopped very suddenly and stared at the rubble. He grinned devilishly and laughed in a high-pitched giggle. He was focusing on a snail; he raised his hands in a peace sign, either mocking or admiring

the snail's antennae.

The line ended. We'd been moving through narrow hallways – hundreds of people, in a single line. We exited into a larger room with another staircase. The staircase led to an old split-level mine elevator. The elevator held eight to ten adults on each level. Doorless, the elevator shot upward with immense speed. Its metal parts clanged loudly. Air blew through the cabin. A bare light bulb hung from a wire, but the bulb was dimmed. It flickered on and off as we pulsed upward, passing levels of earth, driven by a force that felt like ecstasy.

We waited at the bus stop and made occasional, desultory conversation. Eventually a young man approached. We never got his name, but let's call him Little Hans. Little Hans wore jeans and a T-shirt and had a small notebook wedged in his back pocket.

"Tourists?" Little Hans asked.

"Yeah," we said collectively.

"*Habla español?*" he asked.

We told him we were heading back to Krakow.

"Number 36," he said.

"Yes," we chimed. "Thank you."

The man didn't move.

"Salt Mine?" he said.

"Yeah," we said collectively.

A moment passed in silence.

"You like?" he inquired, looking at Vanora.

"It was interesting," Vanora said.

It went on like that for five minutes or so. I noticed Little Hans had a brownish substance around his lips. I have no idea what this substance was. It could have been chocolate cake or coffee or some variety of South American hallucinogenic plant. No one said anything for a while and the man stared at Vanora.

"Are you from this area?" I said.

"From Krakow," he said.

"Oh," I said. "Student?"

Little Hans smiled. "Yes," he said, and he turned his attention toward Janice and Paul.

"How long in Krakow?"

"Three days," Janice said.

"Today Salt Mine, tomorrow you go Auschwitz?"

"That's right," Karen laughed. Paul gave Little Hans the silent treatment. The bus arrived. The ticket machine on the bus was difficult for us to use because it had no English language option. I asked our new friend if he could help us with the machine. Little Hans was obliging, and we bought our tickets, and made our way toward the back of the bus, where Janice and Paul were already seated. Vanora and I sat down on the seats directly behind Janice and Paul. Little Hans lingered in the aisle, choosing not to sit down. He continued talking with Janice. Paul looked at the scenery. I asked Vanora what

she thought Little Hans wanted. Either money, or he's retarded, she said. It was a forty-minute bus ride to the city.

"Your knowledge is very limited," I overheard Janice tell Little Hans. "You should read more to expand your understanding. You talk about things you do not fully comprehend."

"You two are friends?" he asked Janice, referring to her and Paul.

"I should hope so," Janice said. "We're married. And we've been friends for over twenty years."

A few minutes before Vanora and I got off the bus I heard Little Hans vomit his mongrel Spanish. Followed by Paul saying dryly, "Yes. We are gringos." I have no idea why Little Hans was speaking Spanish. He wasn't Spanish.

Janice and Paul turned around and we warmly shook hands all around. We wished each other good travels, and Vanora and I made our way toward the Wawel Castle. We stopped in a shop and bought cold meat, cheese, bread and two big bottles of beer. The view from Wawel castle was all-encompassing. Hundreds of feet below us was the river. An old American riverboat chopped by. We were at the land's highest point, the horizon was flatness stretched, and the city flickered with neon pink and red, Hollywood-style advertisements, as neighborhood stacked on neighborhood, and pushed back the horizon, like circles of water spreading after a disturbance. From there, we walked around the old Jewish quarter. Tucked ourselves into a snug bar serving rum and coke for what translated into three-euro

drinks. A man tried to pickpocket me; he had a shaved head and vicious gold teeth, he wore gold jewellery, had long limbs littered with faded, Indian-ink tattoos.

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Warszawa! What a relentless urban pit you are. We took the train from Krakow to Warsaw Central Station. It was another Polish summer day – sweaty, muggy, grey. Cars pounded through the city's guts. If there were speed limits, nobody paid attention to them. Warsaw is a city with boulevards too big to walk across; underground webs of connecting tunnels take the horrified pedestrian from sidewalk to sidewalk.

We hit the hotel. The road to the hotel was lined with trees, corner stores, small cafés, bars, and apartments. In a large park, grown men were passed out drunk. The hotel room was spacious, with a bathroom half the size of the room, and a bathtub half the size of the bathroom. When I looked out the window, I watched a high-heeled woman clip-clop back and forth on the street corner. She wore red lipstick and a tight-fitting black leather skirt. She chain-smoked and chatted with a casual grace to an old woman who carted her shopping in a travel trolley. The heat off these hookers was unbelievable. They had a gravity that pulled everyone closer. I'd catch cops knocking around the street, bringing them chocolate milks and what looked like scratch cards.

On our first day, I found an amazing bookshop off New World Street. Polish books, unlike the books you find in America, the UK, and Ireland, vary in shape, size, colour, and overall design. I bought Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's novel *622 Upadki Bunga*, a slim edition of letters between Thomas Merton and Miłosz entitled *Listy: Wydawnictwo Karkow 1991 Zank Thomas Merton Czesław Miłosz*. The Witkiewicz novel was purple and pink. The cover shows an apocalyptic angel hugging or feasting on a child. The Merton and Miłosz letters are orange. (The following day, Vanora and I went to a big market on the edge of town. I bought two more books I can't read. These books appeared, though I can't say for sure, to focus on a protest that took place in Warsaw in the 1970s. They were printed cheaply, the paper having the grainy feel of cheap toilet paper. The covers were red, black, and grey.)

Vanora and I then wandered into the red brick streets of the Old Town – large squares full of pigeons, bric-a-brac stalls, and Polish restaurants selling Italian food. We walked behind the tourist crush, down the slope near one of the universities. I was looking for another bookshop listed in the *Rough Guide*: it said Warsaw was exploding with book-lined cafés catering to bohemian types. I imagined arguments, discussions, and social dissent; I imagined bearded men reciting openly seditious prose poems in between mouthfuls of vodka, cucumber and herring. When we arrived at a café full of pastel furniture and well-nurtured middle-class youths, I wept. Then I shut up,

we went in, ordered, and had fun.

Dusk. The air thinned. A blue haze. The grinding, smoggy, relentless mood of the city slackened. We ended up on a street listening to a choir. The voices trickled down from the trees and ricocheted off the grey cobblestones. I could have stayed on that street forever. I would have paid any amount of money, worked any job, to live in one of those surrounding houses, and hear that choir everyday at six o'clock in the evening, and have the sound of those people's voices stop me at the sink, holding a newspaper, writing an email to a friend or jotting a note to myself, making food, cleaning. From that street we dilly-dallied. I heard the sound of shoes clapping behind us. An impeccably dressed man in a suit in his mid-thirties overtook us. He walked briskly toward another impeccably dressed man, bald, mid-thirties, who leaned against a black Mercedes Benz SL 600 sedan. They talked in familiar, clipped tones. We crossed the street. Halfway up the street a Polish youth stood on the corner. Embalmed in leisure wear, he jogged lightly in place, holding a small, red duffel bag. Another youth came up to him. They exchanged pleasantries while the new interloper escorted the bag-holding youth down the block, toward the older, besuited men. When Vanora and I arrived at the corner, a man no more than thirty, with clean sharp features and slicked-back hair, held solitary court on the curb; he held a phone in his hand, but wasn't on it. Staring at us, he spat calmly. I noticed his red leather loafers matched his ironed, red businessman's shirt. The

shirt was tucked into pleated trousers. When his phone vibrated, he answered, and slipped into the maze of apartment blocks. We kept walking. A woman sat against a wall blinking and swilling from a ratty, two-litre water bottle filled with amber fluid. When we reached the main boulevard, that Mercedes sped past, broke a red light, pulled a U-turn, tires balling and spitting smoke. Warsaw is a city divided. The river Vistula separates east and west. The east side, also called PRAGA or Star of PRAGA, is poor, and, until recently, a no-go zone for the non-Polish. Had we somehow wandered into PRAGA? In fact, we hadn't.

It drizzled. Heading back to the Old Town, Vanora and I ran into a celebration-cum-protest on New World Street. Around ten to fifteen men and women, all fifty-plus – and the men fully moustached – held portraits of a stoic, silver-haired man. Most held the portrait to the breast with one hand and a lit candle in the other. Directly behind them a huge banner depicted a John Wayne-style gunslinger, and Polish words in red. A crowd of onlookers and newspeople who trailed electrical cables and cameras hoisted on the shoulders of cameramen watched ambivalently. It appeared to be a memorial. Protesters to the memorial service, across the street, wore orange shirts and held picket signs. They flowed in and out of festival tents. Vanora said this must all be about their dead president. I vaguely recalled a plane crash, months before, and the whole Polish government dead. We crossed the street and walked into the sea of orange-

shirted picketers; they sang songs, chanted and handed out flyers. Vanora asked a picketer if he spoke English. “Basically,” he said; he was in his early thirties, wore glasses and had a beard. “Well...” he grimaced, searching for the right words. “Okay. So you see they are the Fascists, and we are...” He paused; then added vociferously, “*We are for the Weed!*”

3

“In Berlin, by the wall, you were five feet, ten inches tall. Candlelight and Duboney on ice. It was very nice. Oh, honey, it was paradise.” That’s Lou Reed from his 1973 album titled after the city itself. I’ve made love to Berlin one hundred times by proxy through Reed. The first time I was in Berlin was in the winter of 2004. I was reading the outrageously utopian writings of Joseph Beuys. Beuys was attractive for countless reasons. His political sincerity spoke to me. He was an incredibly spiritual man, and that spirituality bespoke a way out of materialism’s self-referencing gulag. Beuys could see how spirits and different forces rippled everywhere. He referenced the animal world, for example, ancient rituals and rites, and respected premodern culture. The artist as healer, as prophet, as visionary – these were terms that interested me even when that interest was dominated by the skepticism of someone neither raised around religion nor on long walks in the Mojave Desert. At the time of the first Berlin trip I was twenty-one years old, and I had a million ideas about the world I

wished to live in, and the person I might become.

The train from Warsaw took six hours; we sped by endless kilometres of flat land, and fields of red and yellow poppies under a blue sky. The small carriage smelled of stale sweat. A woman in her forties, sensibly garbed with a gold cross around her neck, sat by the window. Across from her was a man in his early twenties, who read large books on mathematics, until he put them away, and unearthed a smaller book of scriptures, which he read systematically, penciling notes in the margins. Across from Vanora and I were two other men, friends, thirtyish. During the journey I bickered with Vanora. I had misinterpreted a stray comment. I sulked, and let my misunderstanding transform into a tumour. We hit Berlin. Checked into the hotel. Dropped the bags off. The hotel room was sparsely furnished and had no personality. There was a small teddy bear on the bed. We later learned the hotel catered to a homosexual clientele. The staff were lovely. Vanora made a drink from the minibar. I threw on my running clothes. She lit a cigarette. I continued my excuses. Self-destruction and the spirit of desolation, blah blah blah. Old positions and known moods.

The holiday ended. I found myself back in Dublin. I needed a job. Dublin's main intellectual/professional industries are marketing and finance. I would have gladly taken a job in either, but I had the wrong degree, and I knew nobody. I'd been halfheartedly sending out CVs, but the truth was, after seven years in Ireland, I wanted a change. It

was 2011, and I'd arrived in 2004. I had it in my mind I was meant to contribute to society, either through writing, or local politics, or community activism, but my vague aspirations had stayed vague. I decided to move back to San Francisco, where I was raised, because I wanted to go back to school and study economic theory, the nitty-gritty of policymaking and programme management – essentially how to analyze the success and failure of state-funded projects. And I missed the city. I missed living in a climate where the weather can be your girlfriend on a Sunday. I missed the Mission. North Beach. The fog of the Richmond district and the low drone of the foghorns. The cliff house, and driving down the hill from the cliff house, and seeing the distant, endless pulse of hellacious, sucking, grey waves, which signify winter swells at Ocean Beach. Driving around the verdant hills of Marin County in an orange VW Beetle. The pungent pleasure of being engulfed by thick redwoods on Mount Tamalpais. Tildon Park in Berkeley. I remember hearing a tourist once say: in San Francisco you're either rich and crazy or you're homeless and crazy. I missed the Warriors, the Giants, the 'Niners. I did not miss the Raiders or their fans. Moving back to the city would mean moving into my mother's small apartment, where she and my stepfather live. I have two young, teenage brothers. I needed to find work, save cash, and find my own place.

The weekend after we got back from central Europe, we drove from Dublin to Wexford, where Vanora's mother's people are from.

It was a hot, late June day. We drove through the town where Vanora's mother was raised. We drove down a narrow road, heavy brush on either side, a canopy of green. We passed farmhouses, single- and two-storey structures with gigantic aluminum cattle, tool, and machinery sheds. Vanora watched it all with interest. She was looking for her Aunt Marie's house. Her aunt Marie had married a man named James. James had been a hurler for Wexford and a farmer. He'd won an All-Ireland in the 1960s. Marie still wears his medal around her neck. James died young. I've seen their wedding pictures. Marie surrounded by priests. Marie surrounded by her brothers. Marie surrounded by her sisters. James in his good grey suit. His sandy-blond hair, and his young-old face, threaded by laughter lines. Marie smiling. Her happiness palpable. I imagine Marie at her kitchen table. James sits down. Marie pours steaming tea into a blue cup. She creases back her thick, black hair with one hand, and pours with the other. And James watches her. He watches her shape, her in-the-fleshness, in which every strong, progressive, little thing is demonstrably stable. James curls into his obedience to the tightening coil of his desire. By all accounts James was a quiet man. He and Marie didn't have kids.

We stopped at the graveyard where some of Vanora's family were buried. It was small and surrounded by a hip-high stonewall, and flanked by a church. On the headstone were the names of her great-grandparents, along with her great-aunt. Her great-aunt had been

a nun and was actually buried in Korea. She had lived in Korea for years and thought them the most gentle and true people she ever met. When she returned to Ireland she told her family to bury her "with the yellow people." She was buried near Seoul. Vanora's great-grandfather was a farmer but he also sold different charms, spells, and holistic remedies for common ailments such as flu, hair loss, menstrual cramps, and weight loss. He was a tyrant, a hard man, who said little and stared much. He's the man I mentioned earlier. All his daughters referred to him as The Father; even after he was years dead, they referred to him as The Father. He wasn't physically imposing. He was of medium height, all skin and bone. He had a cold ferocity, like a razor left under a porch and smeared with rust. He had faith. He believed in God and the vivid pain of Christ tortured on the cross. He went to Mass every Sunday. He hid behind Catholicism and cultural orthodoxy the way other men hide behind bureaucracy, or money: to the extent that it gave birth to the sniveling, malnourished runt of his power: the readymade hierarchy. On social matters he was largely silent, choosing to avoid unnecessary human relationships. He liked to visit the town and drink in local pubs. But he wasn't a man to lose himself with drink. He had too much pride. He believed idleness was violence. He never had the courage to bet all his love in order to make his woman laugh, because he never understood the potency of his love, and thus of his real courage, and his manhood. He relished quiet force, like a slow rain, pledging itself to

the world of dominators.

From the graveyard we drove into the village where Vanora's mom grew up. It was tiny – a handful of houses, a shop, primary school, church, and graveyard. The roads were empty. I didn't see anyone. It was just the cooling afternoon sun. We found her aunt's house. Marie had three children. One lives in Dublin, while the other two moved to Canada and Australia. I asked Vanora if she wanted to go in and say hello. She didn't want to inconvenience them. We kept driving.

That day in Wexford we ended up at an abbey. We parked in a gravel lot adjacent to the abbey's fortresslike walls. We walked down a dirt track, entered reception, and chatted to a man about local history. In the fourteenth century, English monks made their way to Wexford and established a small community. Over a number of years, the monks made expeditions into the wilderness, procuring the necessary building materials, chiefly stone and timber, needed to build the abbey. They didn't hire local labour because part of their edict was isolation and extreme bouts of willpower, which, for them, was freedom. Many died. Eventually they built the abbey. At some point Cromwell took possession of the abbey and gifted it to his body-guard. It stayed in his family for the next several hundred years, until the early twentieth century, sometime after the Easter Rising. The last owner was a woman, who lived by herself without electricity or indoor plumbing. She survived on shrubs, berries, raised chickens,

and butchered small livestock. The scale and upkeep of the property became too daunting. She grew ill due to damp and hunger. She sold the abbey to the Irish State. The price of admission was three euro per person. I rummaged in my pockets but only had copper coins. The docent smiled and said not to worry about it, and let us in as students, for fifty cent each. The abbey was in Gothic style. It was on a hill overlooking a stone bridge, and beyond that, a brown river; on either side of the river was deep forest. We entered the abbey. The ground floor was like a newly built bomb shelter. Completely empty, cold, concrete rooms. We took a flight of stairs up a level into a room slightly warmer, full of wooden furniture and a ceiling of exposed beams. We exited through a doorway that led to bridge of steps leading to another room, a room bleached white, a corridor of light, burning bright through a wall of Xs. The wall of Xs overlooked the stone bridge and the brown river. The sun caught the Xs and imprinted the room with their burning. It was an irrevocable light. I let it leak into me.

We left the abbey, walking down the hill, toward the stone bridge and the brown river. I came to a tree with a pine stake by its trunk. The stake was wrapped in red cloth. Noting the stake, I heard a pound of sound, up in the branches. The more I listened, the more complex it became, not just a pound, but a thickly stitched mat of alternating intonation, a very low sound: a drone. I peered upward but saw nothing.

We walked on, crossing the bridge, and walking up a hill, where a woman jogged. We found another church and graveyard. The church's gable ends were intact but the ceiling was destroyed. Ruin has its own symmetry. An equation of decomposition calculates all integers of flesh and thought: all integers of pleasure. An open doorway allowed access to the church's interior, where, among the overgrown grass, a row of tomblike boxes sequenced the ground.

I left the church. The drone grew louder. Directly down from the doorway was a cube of spikes, a special place, connoting social privilege. It was here where the abbey's owners were buried. The need for structural demarcation was, perhaps, for them, a nearness to post-conflict permanence. The sun over the treeline made a hard glare. The drone got louder. Finally, I glimpsed them, the source of the noise, yes, chunky honeybees, yellow and black. We walked back to the car.

I've noticed most people don't bother thinking about what this is. I suppose in many cases life precludes thinking. There is not enough time and then it is always winter again.

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