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# Acquiescence: Stories

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ACQUIESCENCE: Stories

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Justyna Anna Pekalak  
May 2014

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Accepted by:  
Keith Morris, Committee Chair  
Dr. Cameron Bushnell  
Dr. Jillian Weise

## ABSTRACT

This creative thesis consists of two short stories centered on implications of immigration and uprooting: the possible loss of control and the self, and as a result, existing solely as a body in transit, all of which may lead to a threat of violence. Both stories discuss the immensely radical act of migration, but are set in different landscapes (Polish and American) in order to explore the issue from two different viewpoints: that of someone returning to a place they had left, and that of a person living on still foreign soil. The issue of movement is especially important in today's global, connected society, which nonetheless is conducive to the alienation and stigmatization of migrants. While these stories do not offer any solution, they are meant as a discussion of the experience so that the scope of influence a decision to move initiates may be evident. The auxiliary document also touches on the issue of otherness in the work of Joyce Carol Oates and a recent Polish film, *Pokłosie*, both of which discuss the strained relationship between the Jewish and Polish identities and the places where they intersect.

## DEDICATION

For my parents, Marzena and Dariusz Pękalak, in gratitude.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members for their support and guidance: Keith Morris, for believing in my stories and encouraging me to be brave enough to go in this direction; Dr. Jillian Weise for always allowing me to write about what interests me, though it may be uncomfortable; and Dr. Cameron Bushnell, whose Postcolonial Literature class taught me that it is possible and necessary to talk about experiences from places that most people would deem as the periphery.

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ACQUIESCENCE

## Things As They Are

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

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

would exclaim and ask first both her parents, then just her mother, to come live overseas, but they never did. I am too old and alone, Julia's grandmother would say to her when Julia visited each summer, at which words Julia welled with anger at her mother and herself.

His name was Jacek Kłos, like a stalk of wheat, which was perfect, because she would be the wind, swooping in like a bird, brushing against the golden field, bending the blades until she found and touched him, only him. The first time she did, she knew it was him; he had dark hair that curled softly, beautiful, defined lips, eyes that were brown, or at least she thought. She smiled then and she smiled now in anticipation, looking at each face – the old women with dyed hair pulled back into buns and doughy, pale faces, the young girls in skinny jeans and jet black hair, the businessmen in dark suits sitting in the I outside Andel's Hotel. With her left hand, Julia smoothed her denim shorts and shirt. She had laughed that morning when picking it out, seeing herself in the tall mirror, dressed in stars and red and white stripes. Maybe it was too much, but not for her, not right now.

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

generation by generation, clung to the Main Square and to Kraków the same hungry way she did.

She saw the red Converse shoes first, then, raising her eyes, she saw him walking towards the shopping center, towards her. A few years ago, her heart would have skipped a beat, would have stopped for a few seconds after one push against her chest.

She lowered the map slowly and kept her eyes on his shoes. When he was right in front of her, she looked up, still clutching the opened map with both hands and said, “Excuse me?” He almost walked past her, but she repeated it, taking a step back. He stopped and turned to her surprised, his lips slightly parted, his full, dark eyebrows arched, creating small wrinkles in his forehead. He was waiting for her to speak.

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

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

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

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

They walked past the hotel and into an underground passage full of people without saying anything. Julia kept her eyes on his red Converse shoes, almost bumping

into an older woman selling lilies of the valley at the end of the breezeway. He smiled, as she barely side-stepped the white bucket full of flowers.

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

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

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

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

She shrugged. “I think. How do you know?”

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

“Julia” she said, using the English “j”.

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

Julia stood in the third story hallway of a gray apartment building watching Jacek fumble with the keys. She leaned on the wall, waiting for the light to go off

automatically, occasionally gazing outside the window into the dark of Nowa Huta. She could hear the rattling of beer cans and the deep voices of the men that yelled at her and Jacek as they passed, asking for cigarettes and to borrow both their cell phones.

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

“Sorry,” Jacek said finally, as the locks clicked and the heavy, wooden door gave way with a creak of the handle. Julia did not say anything, her heart growing in her chest, each beat stronger than the last, reaching somewhere deep in her bones. She thought Jacek could hear it too, like a deep tolling of a bronze bell, bouncing off her ribcage, sending echoes all through the stairway. She stepped into the apartment just as the lights went off and heard him lock the door behind her, the familiar thump of heavy metal and creaking of wood. The crawling, she thought, back into a womb, dark and small, uncanny, a prodigal return.

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

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

“I—” Jacek began, as he took off his shoes. “Rent. For university. Not very good place, this Nowa Huta. But cheap. Landlady lives in USA, I only saw her one time.”

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

“It look dirty, but it is an old mirror. Can’t be cleaned,” she heard Jacek say.

“You haven’t changed much in here,” she said.

“No...Landlady say it was home of her mother. She pass away when this daughter was in USA. I need it only for school and I have one year. How do you know this?”

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

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

“It is,” Jacek said, shrugging.

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

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

“Why do you want to do that? Do you know what it means?” Her heels knocked against the wood with each word.

“I know they pay more money. I know I can have better place. This country is good for tourists, for you. To see old buildings, to see what people have here and what they do not have. It is not for real people.”

“I’m not a real person,” Julia repeated, fingernails grazing the soft flesh on the inside of her palms.

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

“Many people live here.”

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

“We’ll see.” Julia leaned against the wall next to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You never tell me why you come to visit Poland,” Jacek began, handing back the cigarette. “Good you didn’t go to Warsaw, there isn’t nothing there, except the Palace of Culture. You heard of this, yes? It is first and only thing people see. A shame, because it is ugly, like gray needle in our sky. Maybe I take you there one day. Kraków is beautiful.”

Julia laughed.

“You said you don’t like Nowa Huta.”

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

“It’s part of Kraków.”

Jacek nodded. “Maybe.”

“It is,” she said, placing the cigarette between her lips, adding another faint cloud of red on white. The smoke lingered between them before being swept out into the morning air through the open window. Julia reached out and touched the orange drapes, holding the heavy and rough fabric between her fingers, scrunching it in her palm. It felt

like tiny grains of sand rolling in the creases of her skin. When she let it go, she felt the dust clinging to her hand.

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

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

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

When she leaned on the doorframe of the bedroom, Jacek had fallen back asleep, the cigarette butt most likely already lying in the grass below the window. One of his hands draped over the edge of the bed, almost touching the carpet, and his face drowned

in a black pillow. Julia felt her nails digging into her palms, but did not break away from the doorframe. As Jacek's back moved up and down rhythmically, the light from the window spilled onto his skin, highlighting the smooth curve of his spine.

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

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

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

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

“Polish food is not popular outside here, no?”

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

“What do you think?”

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

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

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

“Who is it?” he asked. “Sound cold—like doctor’s clinic. Like sleep.”

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

“Love song singing, ‘cut me open’?”

“‘Come, cut me open.’ It’s about cleansing,” Julia replied, cutting another dumpling with her fork. “Wounds.”

“Wounds?”

“Holes. Scars. Things that once hurt.”

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

“Like that.”

“You have any?”

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

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

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

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

Julia nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I like to think that when you’re like me, memory is a collective thing,” she said finally. “My mother’s, her mother’s and so on. I’m at the end of the line. Things can be borrowed, taken, kept. When you’re like me, you assemble your self.”

“What are you like?”

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

“Not real.”

Jacek kept his gaze on her in the mirror.

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

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

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

“You’re oversimplifying things.”

He looked back at her, brows furrowed together, confused.

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

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

“Why is that? I didn’t make the choice to leave—my parents did.”

“No matter—you are not here.”

“The same will happen to you when you leave.”

“I do not want to talk, I cannot do anything here—I want more. No shit apartment. Good job, good money. Life.”

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

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

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

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

“And do what?” Jacek said and exhaled, frustrated.

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

He sighed.

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

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

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

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

She smiled and slowly nodded her head.

“You don’t know,” she said. “But you will.”

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

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

When she finished the cigarette, Julia dropped it into the rusted sink and opened one of the drawers in the kitchen cabinet. With a pair of old, heavy scissors in her hand,

she stepped into the bathroom and climbed onto the toilet without turning on the light. It was only a second before she found the wire.

The orange carpet softened the sound of her steps as Julia slowly moved towards the bedroom, her heart swelling again like the first night she had come here with Jacek, the first time she had come in years. His name was Jacek Kłos, her mother had said and she loved the sound of it, the sound of stalks moved by the wind, laid down by the wind. She could have loved him.

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

She stopped when she couldn't feel her hands anymore, letting go of the wire and drawing a long, deep breath then letting it out. The skin on her hands was red and opened where the wire had cut into it between her thumb and index finger. It burned from sweat. Julia gathered her hair, strands of which were clinging to her face like pale lashes, and

stumbled off the bed, her knees almost buckling underneath her. With a trembling hand she reached into her purse, pulled out a cigarette and placed it between her lips. The lighter felt slick in her hands. She stumbled toward the open window, throwing the lace curtains to the sides, and leaned on the white windowsill. The smoke of her cigarette blended into the gray of the dawn sky and when she lifted her hand to shake the cigarette off, she saw the faint, rust-red stains on the wood of the sill. Let the world see, she thought, tapping the cigarette with her index finger and watching the ash scatter. A few specks landed on the windowsill but Julia disregarded them and pressed her broken palm down against the painted wood once again, harder this time.

## Mac Smith's Grill

At 6:55 in the morning, Jeanette Uminski opened the door of her mobile home, wrapping herself tightly in a thick, white cardigan against the cool October air. Barry the horse and King, a donkey, stood together behind their flimsy wire fence across the road, their heads close and unmoving. Jeanette didn't know their real names, if they had any, but had taken to calling them as such in her head. Sometimes, she would even sneak two apples from work and creep towards the fence with her arms outstretched, slowly and lightly, as if that would prevent her from being seen. Barry, a horse the color of curdled milk, would come first, graceful on his thin legs, and lift the apple from her open palm. King would follow reluctantly, as if begrudgingly, after a minute, unable to be away from Barry for long. He would bare his teeth as he grabbed the apple greedily, always leaving a small pool of saliva in her hand. There were times the two stood in opposite corners of their small enclosure, facing different directions, and those days always carried some small misfortune for Jeanette—one of her pies tasting different despite having been made in a way identical to the hundreds of other pies that had come before; a glass shattering, sending her on her knees to pick up the larger pieces; an empty mailbox. Jeanette didn't blame them. Rather, she made these small pilgrimages across the road, offering up ripe, red apples. She approached cautiously, sideways, never looking at the animals directly, almost afraid of the unassuming allocators of the littlest everyday deaths.

The land around Jeanette's home was an open plain, now yellowed by the season, faded by long months of the summer Carolina sun, speckled with cows of mainly dark suit, stretched out in the last rays of warmth. The house across from Jeanette's mobile

home, which she believed belonged to Barry and King's owner, though she was not certain never actually having seen anyone, was similarly small—a white square with a lightly green roof and placed on dark, dark grass she imagined as soft and wet, leaving stains on bare skin.

She gave Barry and King one last look and made her way up the road. At a four-way stop about two minutes from her home was Mac Smith's Grill, a small diner painted all in white, boasting a sign of *Cheesebrgr plate w/ drink \$6 thanks est. 1947* on the side facing her home and *Pie of the week: apple* facing the four-way stop. The diner sat on a triangular scrap of land, forced by the angle at which one of the crossing roads was built, which, in turn, contributed to its tiny size, so that inside there was room enough for four tables, while on the asphalt outside stood a lonely metal picnic table. This wasn't entirely by chance; Mac Smith had owned the land before the roads and even the diner were built, parts of which he later sold to the nearby university to conduct its agricultural research, while he enjoyed a full house for lunch every day. Across from Mac Smith's Grill was the owner's small, white house with another wooden sign announcing the diner's name and homemade hotdogs. Behind the diner stood mobile homes, all white; one served as storage, the other as home to Cecil, the bald-headed cook who, despite his profession and passion for hamburgers, retained a slim, wiry figure. He would say it was to keep his tattoos in form, to extend their art beneath the skin of that small body of his, a small temple, a small, compact coffin.

With one hand tucked in underneath the large and soft braids of her cardigan, Jeanette knocked on the door of the diner. The front was dark. The only light flooded in

from underneath the double kitchen doors at the back of the building. Within a minute, Cecil emerged in an all-white chef ensemble he took pride in wearing, despite the fabric hanging on him like a loose sail perpetually waiting to catch the faintest breath. This appearance was misleading, however; Cecil was content to spend his days on the black and white checkered linoleum floor, content with ordering his bottles of spices alphabetically, content with the cool and moist touch of ground red meat that gave way under his hands when he mixed it with chopped onions, breadcrumbs, garlic. He took care of his hands, never putting them in his mouth or running them along his scalp, not that there was anything wrong with doing such things—only hands were the altar, as he would say, they needed to be clean.

“I’ll ask Mae to return your key. I can’t leave the meat by itself back there every morning,” Cecil said, letting Jeanette in and locking the door behind her once more.

“Best you don’t. Just remember to keep the door unlocked for me and pray she doesn’t see you from the house.” Jeanette took off her cardigan and laid it on top of one of the tables.

“Look at you, million dollar girl.”

Jeanette smiled.

“If I had a million dollars I wouldn’t wear a uniform like this, Cecil.”

She had slept in curlers and her thin blond locks curled about her small face and brushed her shoulders. Years ago, she had found a pink retro server dress in a thrift shop—just the right kind of pink, bubblegum but lighter, to highlight the light blond of her hair. Her mother said she was certainly a sight.

The kitchen was small, the black and white linoleum stretched throughout the whole building. The fluorescent light stained the white tiles a shade of blue. Jeanette grabbed a bag of apples and set to work—peeling, cutting, shredding them. All the recipes had been her mother’s, perhaps her mother’s before her still, Jeanette was not sure. She didn’t remember much of her grandmother other than the strong scent of perfume filling her mouth with sweetness. She enjoyed the soft touch of the dough, the way it enveloped her hand, the way it glued itself back together, without lines. This wasn’t really a pie, not in the conventional sense here, on the land of which Jeanette occupied only a fragment, a sliver. It was a pie somewhere else—the pies made in Kraków, not round but square, doughy and golden brown. Jeanette made them all, different each week—rhubarb, plums, she sometimes even ventured into walnuts. Men had gone crazy for her mother’s pies, for her mother. Mainly for her mother. She had died telling Jeanette in Polish, “Żanetko. I wish I should not have gone and changed my name, Żanetko.” Then she was gone.

At ten o’clock, when the pie was ready and on the counter, Jeanette went to unlock the front door of the diner. She flipped the sign to “open” and turned on a small neon indicating the same in red letters framed by yellow lines. She barely made it to the front counter when the door opened with the chime of a small bell. In walked a tall man with curly gray hair reaching his shoulders, clad head to toe in what looked like old and faded denim, frayed at the edges and in some places dangerously close to tearing.

“Mornin’,” he said, walking up to the counter, the heels of his shoes clicking dully against the floor, a slow and deliberate knocking.

“Good morning,” Jeanette replied. “If you know what you’d like I can get your order to Cecil—if you don’t mind, I need to use the restroom.”

The man sat down and looked around, silent.

“Cecil here makes the best hamburgers in town,” Jeanette said warily.

“Burgers? Too heavy. I’m on business.”

“What kind of business?”

The man looked at her for the first time and chuckled. His face was like leather, sun-worn with deep wrinkles surrounding his eyes and chiseled in his cheeks, eventually disappearing into a thick, white beard.

“Other people’s business,” he said.

“Don’t you got your own to take care of?”

“Other people’s business is my business—none of yours. Where is this Mac Smith?”

“He died just last week.”

The man pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes.

“Who’s the new Mac Smith?”

“His wife, Mae. His son,” Jeanette paused. “Hunter.”

He nodded.

“Why’s there two names on your nametag, Jeanette—what’s the other one there?”

“Zaneta. In case someone from the place I was born stumbles by.”

“And what is this place you been born?”

“Somewhere you don’t know.”

He laughed.

“You got a pretty face. Shoulda been a model with the cheekbones.”

“From my mama.”

“Your momma?”

“*Mama.*”

“That how you say it in this place I don’t think about?”

She shrugged.

“Mamuś. Mamo.”

He attempted repeating the words. Jeanette shook her head.

“What’re you doing in this back-road hole with hamburger grease, girl?”

“I make the best pie you’ll have in your life.”

“That so? Better get me a piece, then.”

“Ain’t that too heavy for a man on business? Six dollars.”

“Six dollars?”

“Six dollars,” Jeanette repeated and went into the kitchen.

When she placed a large, square piece on a white plate in front of him, the man looked up at her with his eyebrow cocked. Jeanette raised both of hers and headed to the restroom without another word.

She locked the door behind her and stood facing the toilet. Nausea came at about the same time every day and so Jeanette waited, one hand on the sink. She could feel it—a plum-sized thing, like a coal embedded deep within her, hot and intangible, so that when Jeanette pressed down on her stomach, it almost wasn’t there. If her mother was

alive she would have told her what to do. At the least, she would have warned her about Hunter and his large, often moist hands and Jeanette wouldn't have listened.

Her mother had made her own bad decisions, the change of her name being perhaps the least of them. She was born Elżbieta Grabowska and became Elżbieta Umińska upon marrying Jeanette's father. He would call her *Elu*, *Eluś* because he loved her. Entering the Green Card Lottery at the US Embassy was also her mother's idea and, because she was beautiful and thus often handled gently by life, they received the letter in the mail and were soon on their way across the Atlantic. Żanetka Umińska, now Jeanette at her mother's advice on pronunciation, was thirteen years old at the time and forced to leave her first boyfriend behind. He had bright, blue eyes and dark hair; Jeanette often fell asleep chanting his name, "Łukasz, Łukasz, Łukasz..." and crying.

Her father also cried as it turned out, because after a year he simply packed his things and returned to Poland. Her mother went back to being Elżbieta Grabowska. Jeanette remained Jeanette Uminski, her father's last name literally, though Anglicized, due to linguistic incongruencies in terms of masculine and feminine conjugation, and gradually began falling asleep reciting her own last name, "Umińska, Umińska, Umińska..." with the soft, middle sound of her tongue against the roof of her mouth, a word similar to *umyć*, *umilknąć*, *umiłować*, *umrzeć*.

A year later her mother met a man named Douglas somewhat mysteriously. Jeanette believed it must have happened on the Internet and dismissed it, but one day Douglas showed up on the doorstep of their apartment and whisked them both away in his white pick-up truck, into the South. Chicago at first had seemed immensely distant

from Kraków—louder, expansive in a true sense of the word, whereas Kraków sounded larger than it really was when Jeanette stood waiting to cross the road at its intersections, thick and loud like veins. South Carolina was, most of all, quiet.

Douglas lived in a small house, worked at a nearby farm and frequented Mac Smith's Grill during lunch hours. He was a cold man; Elżbieta, now officially called Elly McCall, spent her days locked in the house, cooking. As long as there was a fat steak accompanied by mashed potatoes and fried okra on his plate on Sundays, Douglas allowed Elly to cook and bake what she would. Poland being a country where potatoes and bodies lay hidden in the dark and stained earth in multitudes, Elly had no trouble in making them for Douglas; the okra, on the other hand, proved more challenging and went untouched by him the first time Elly made it. Jeanette, then, spent her time after school watching her mother cook—*goląbki*, *flaki* (the only thing Jeanette refused to eat), *bigos*—and pretended it tasted the same way as in Kraków. Douglas would often eye his plate suspiciously, but empty it without a word nonetheless.

This was how Elly's pies had made it into Mac's diner the first time, despite Elly herself not having set foot in the restaurant in her lifetime—Jeanette, being another man's daughter, was hired as a waitress and heiress to her mother's recipes. By the time she was diagnosed with Parkinson's and unable to handle the kitchen, Elly was known by all local men as the beautiful foreign woman Douglas McCall kept locked in his house. Mac Smith was the only one granted a visit, two even, on account of his business. He was also the one who spread the word of Elly's high but wide cheekbones, defined lips and blue eyes, much to his wife's and Douglas's dismay, which was then transferred onto Jeanette.

As an act of contrition or because of her mother's inaccessibility, Mac Smith took a liking to Jeanette and even provided her with some extra money for part-time college classes. Later, under the silent but resentful eye of his wife, he also gave Jeanette her mobile home into which the slowly dying and shivering Elly moved once Douglas decided she was becoming a liability and he would have to be the caretaker, the undertaker, and not the other way around as he had imagined years prior. Taking care of her mother forced Jeanette to abandon classes, to which she never returned even after Elly died, a miniature of the woman she once was or was perceived to be. Mac Smith arranged and paid for Elly's ashes to be sent back to Poland, on Jeanette's request, but his gifts proved to be a double-edged sword; Mac Smith, in the moment of giving convinced of whatever time he had left, died quite unexpectedly and inadvertently left both the diner and thus also Jeanette in his wife's soft hands.

Jeanette took a deep breath and swallowed. Her body seemed and felt calm. When she came back to the counter, the man was gone and underneath his plate were three bills: a five, a one, and a fifty.

At 6:30 pm, when she left Cecil to close the diner by himself, Barry and King were still out in their enclosure, together in a corner nearest the road. Jeanette reached into the pockets of her cardigan and pulled out the usual two apples. Slowly, with eyes on her feet, she made her way towards the pair, gradually stretching out her hands. Once she found herself by the fence, she raised her gaze and looked at the animals up close. Barry's eyes were round and black like coals floating in a sea of milk. King's were smaller, but just as dark. Jeanette didn't know whether they were looking at her—their

eyes seemed unmoving and fixed upon something, somewhere. When the animals took the apples from her hands, leaving her palms empty, she raised her hands and laid them flat against both Barry and King's heads. Neither of them moved.

"Thank you," she said quietly and, breaking away, retreated across the road and into her home.

The next morning when Jeanette came out of the restroom, the man was already there, sitting in the far corner of the diner, with his back to the wall.

"You're back," Jeanette said, making her way to his table.

"Still on business," he replied. "Think I could get me some more of the pie?"

"Apple or plum?"

"Both," he said. Jeanette smiled.

In the kitchen, Cecil was tending to his ground hamburger meat silently, mainly due to the presence of Hunter Smith, who was circling the counter on which the two freshly-made pies rested.

"Baby," Hunter said with a wide and open grin. His teeth were small and too white for the kind of person he was. Jeanette thought this when she first met Hunter, in the very same spot he was standing now—loitering around, hands in the pockets of his jeans. He had told her that he had never been with a Polish girl and she laughed reluctantly and gave in after the third time he insisted on taking her out to dance. "You look pretty today. Bright as hell."

“I don’t know what that means,” Jeanette said without looking at him. She reached for a small plate and felt his hand on her hip. “What do you want, Hunter? Your mother send you to keep things in order? She’s got a view from the porch.”

“I came to see you, baby.”

Jeanette cut a large piece from both pies and then slid them both into a large refrigerator. She returned to the plate and looked at Hunter, propping her long and pale arms against the counter. The plate sat between them. At another counter, Cecil began to chop onions.

“I’m pregnant.”

“How?”

“You tell me.”

Hunter remained silent for a minute, rubbing his lips with his right hand.

“Ain’t there something, you know, to do to nip it?”

“I want this just as much as you, Hunter, which is not at all. I need you to take me to a doctor.”

“Baby, no. If Ma finds out I been with you she gonna turn me out.”

“This is all I will ever need of you. It’s yours.”

Hunter paused. Cecil continued tending to his hamburgers, slightly bent over a wooden chopping board.

“How do I know? Maybe you’re just trying to get into the family through the backdoor. You and Cecil are in here together all by your lonesomes all the time, ain’t nobody to check on what you do in here.” Jeanette heard the knife strike the chopping

board and out of the corner of her eye saw a few small, white onion pieces fall to the floor. Cecil didn't move to pick them up. She looked at the pie in front of her silently for a minute before picking up the plate and walking out of the kitchen.

"I apologize. I was held up in the back," she said, laying the plate on the table before the man.

"Sit down with me here, Jeanette, I got a question for you," he said, gesturing to the seat opposite him. She looked around. "Ain't nobody else here, you can take a minute."

"Shouldn't I know your name first?"

"Miller."

Jeanette sat down.

"Miller, my name's not Jeanette. It's *Jeanette*, like the French. That's still not my name, but close."

"You from France, then?"

"No. I want it to sound more like my name, is all."

Miller chuckled and sunk his fork into the plum pie. It clinked against the plate.

"Well, *Jeanette*, what can you tell me about the Smith family?"

"I don't know that I can tell you anything," Jeanette said and paused. "Do you want to buy this place?"

This time he laughed.

"No. No, I sure don't. What about Hunter, then?"

Jeanette looked at his plate and watched him take another piece, revealing a glistening, red piece of plum.

“What about him?”

“Do you know him?”

“Barely,” she replied.

“You’re a pretty girl, didn’t I tell you? Bet he’s done as much to tell you the same.”

Jeanette squeezed her hands in her lap.

“Hunter’s the big prodigal son around here,” she began slowly, mincing the words. “Ran like a dog back into his mother’s arms some weeks ago. Something about gambling charges in Florida, I wouldn’t know.”

She fell silent. Miller leaned in over his half-finished pie, his elbows peeking through the worn out denim, and Jeanette noticed a worn out, leather gun holster the color of a dried orange resting on his belt.

“Is that all?”

Jeanette looked in his eyes, the same dishwasher gray as his hair. She nodded.

“I have to get back to work.”

When she walked through the double swing doors leading to the back, Hunter stood in the hallway, his back against the wall. She heard Cecil still chopping onions in the kitchen to the left.

“There’s a man out there asking about you,” she told Hunter.

His face seemed to sharpen and he approached the small, rectangular windows of the double doors with caution, one hand against the white-tiled wall. Jeanette watched him.

“Shit,” he whispered and jumped back with eyes open so wide Jeanette had to look away. “You didn’t tell him nothin’ about me, baby, right? I’ll take you to the doc tomorrow in the truck. Just don’t tell him nothin’.”

“What is this? Who is he?”

“Go out there and talk to him. I’m gonna leave out the back door here. You don’t tell him nothin’ of me, you hear?”

“Is this about Florida? What did you get yourself into down there?”

“If you ain’t gonna help me here, he’ll kill me, all right? Who’ll take you to the doc then, baby, huh? It definitely ain’t gonna be Ma. You go do what I say and we both get out of this well and alive, you understand?”

Hesitantly, Jeanette walked back out into the diner hall and slowly made her way towards the man who called himself Miller.

“I should thank you—“ she began.

“How do they treat you here, Jeanette?” he interrupted her. Through numerous fliers of the local university pasted onto one of the diner windows, she saw Hunter’s shadow move across the road.

“Cecil and I are the reason anyone stops by.”

Miller smiled.

“I ain’t what you’d call a patient man. That there by the road is the Smith house, correct?” he asked, motioning with his head in the direction where Hunter disappeared. Jeanette remained silent. “And about a minute from here on down is a mobile home belonging to you, Jeanette.”

She felt her hands clutching at the back of her skirt and forced herself to let go.

“You, I like. Hunter, I need for something he knows is coming. Coming quick. That’s all there is to it. These are not your people, Jeanette. You ain’t got nothing to protect here but your own skin.”

He looked down and took the last piece of pie. Chewing it, he began gathering leftover crumbs with his fork. When they formed a small pile in the middle of the plate, he placed the fork on the table, pressed his right thumb against them and raised it to his mouth. On the clean plate he laid a pristine hundred dollar bill. With only one extended look, he pushed the plate and fork in Jeanette’s direction and leaned back in his chair.

“Coffee, please.”

When Jeanette was leaving the diner later that evening, he still sat in the corner, but did not look at her as she walked to the door. Barry and King stood together, grazing, facing Jeanette’s home. She had forgotten to bring any apples, so instead, she sat on the steps and watched them silently. Barry stood with one leg curled under and raised his head occasionally. She remembered the coarse touch of his hair against her palm. King was much less graceful, his back not straight as Barry’s was, but curved inside, as if under a great weight. Which one dealt out the misfortunes Jeanette did not know. Maybe it had been coincidence after coincidence, unrelated, chosen and given by no one and

nothing. The thought that Hunter would never take her to the doctor glued itself to the back of her mind and grew until it filled all of her—each hair strand, eyelash, limb. He had run to his mother's house like a dog the second time around, tail slung between his bony legs, and now he would lie in her lap with her hands on his head. Mae was a smart woman, she had to have been, surrounded by these kinds of men, to do their thinking for them and let them claim it as their own. Until Mac had laid his eyes on Elly, a kind of epiphany, he had been that kind of man too.

Jeanette imagined Mae searching her son's face silently. She wouldn't even have to say a word; Hunter's knees would buckle, he would fall before her and tell her everything. She would be merciful again, she would spare him again, if only he would tell her the whole truth and that whole truth had to do with Jeanette too.

She stood up and went into the house, only to reemerge with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Elly had been a smoker, until her hand began to tremble too much, enough to have almost burned her cheek, her hair. Jeanette remembered taking the cigarette from her mother's hand. This was the same, crumpled pack of Marlboro Silver Lights Elly left behind and out of which Jeanette smoked one cigarette a year, on the anniversary of her death. It was not this day. Elly managed to empty half of the pack before she went; now, Jeanette took the fifth last cigarette and placed it between her lips. The lighter clicked and she drew in the bitter smoke, swallowing it down with some difficulty. Her eyes watered for a moment. Barry and King still grazed together, their necks extended downward. King's tail swung sideways occasionally, a broken clock. The house of their probable owner was dark. Jeanette counted the swings.

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Around midnight, there was a knock on the door. The pack of cigarettes lay on a kitchen counter with its top opened. Jeanette slowly poured herself a glass of milk and returned the bottle to the fridge. Leaving it on the kitchen table, she went to open the door.

“May I come in?” Miller asked.

“Do I have a choice?” Jeanette replied.

“No,” he said as she stepped back to allow him in.

She closed the door and returned to the table, taking the glass in her hand.

“I have pie in the fridge,” she said, looking at him.

He nodded slowly, looking around the narrow home. His knuckles were red and raw.

“You see, tends to be situations like this come to be unfortunate for the smallest of people. Hunter’s made a hideout out of his mother’s home. I went in civilly. Now, I beat him good, almost popped an eye out. That mother of his ain’t even flinch once as I did, like she agreed he deserved it. See, Mae is a businesswoman. She deals with people—in people,” he looked at Jeanette. “You shouldn’t have told him. I’d only have him to deal with then and he ain’t smart enough to deal with me. You’d be all out of this and I’d have the money and him to hand over. What did he promise you for protecting him, Jeanette? A good man that keeps his word is hard to find, ain’t he?”

He kept his distance, only looking at Jeanette, who stood with the full glass of milk still in her hands.

“Well, whatever it is you done to these people or whatever they think you may be about to do, that is what all this hinges on,” he continued, folding his hands behind his back. “Mae is a woman of opportunity with a coward for a son who, frankly, will die one day or other and deserve it. Not by me—I’m here to collect. The next man, might be, he won’t care to make a splash. There’ll be a next man. There’ll be nothing left to barter with then. That should give you peace. He likes that skin of his. He likes it more than you.”

“I won’t make a splash?”

“The smallest of people,” he repeated. “Is that all right by you?”

She didn’t answer.

“Now, there’s two ways this goes down. The first one I’m offering you is much more favorable for your person. Now, I normally don’t support this kind of thing, but a man’s got do his job. I ain’t got a choice in that,” Miller said. Jeanette imagined a rusted nail caught at the base of his throat, vibrating with each word. “Mae suggests I take you in place of Hunter.”

“What do you need me for?”

“There’s always use for a woman, Jeanette. More use than someone like Hunter anyway.”

“And the other way?” she asked, gripping the glass tightly in both hands.

“Well, you either come willingly...look, your life ain’t nothing to me, but I like you. I can make sure you ain’t treated too bad. So, you come with me or we do this the old-fashioned way.”

“I have no choice,” Jeanette said.

“It ain’t much of a choice, but it’s the best you got. Only make sure you can live with it.”

They were silent for a while. Jeanette set the glass back down on the table.

“On my terms,” she said, looking him in the eyes.

“You people all have your terms here.”

“I want to say goodbye.”

“To what? None of this is yours, the way I know it.”

Jeanette ignored him. She turned to the refrigerator and pulled out a plate covered by aluminum foil. She uncovered it and cut a small piece of the pie, sliding the thin knife underneath and lifting it to place on another, empty plate. She pulled the foil back over first, carefully pressing it against the round edge, and placed it back in the refrigerator. Under Miller’s careful gaze, Jeanette placed the knife in the sink. A few crumbs were stuck to its blade. She laid the piece of pie on the kitchen table, next to her glass of milk. Out of a small, wooden bowl, she grabbed two large apples and headed for the door. It was a cold and clear night. Half a moon shone down on the silent plains. Barry and King’s enclosure was now empty. Walking down the steps, Jeanette slowly took off her shoes and tossed them into the dark. A few dry leaves cracked under her step, surprisingly quiet and distant. She made her way across the road, stones cutting into her bare feet. On the other side, near the wooden fence, she felt the dark, green grass; it was cool and dry. She heard Miller’s dulled, deliberate footsteps behind her. As she leaned over the fence with the apples in her hands, she felt the wood give way underneath her

weight and press further into the soft earth. The apples fell onto the grass with a quiet thud.

Back across the road, Jeanette stepped into Miller's truck silently. It was old and creaked when she took the passenger seat, but pristinely clean down to the gray, worn out rugs on the floor.

"You ain't gonna grab your shoes?" Miller asked, holding her door open.

"No."

He shook his head and headed back towards the steps leading to Jeanette's mobile home, where she cast her shoes into the grass. When he came back, he tossed them onto the floor at Jeanette's feet and closed the car door. The car groaned again as Miller climbed into the driver's seat, the sound a quiet protest in the thick, silent night. Once the locks clicked into place and Miller steered the truck onto the narrow road, past Mac Smith's Grill and house, Jeanette clutched the window crank and slowly turned it, the swirling, cool air lifting a strand of hair from her cheek.

## The Disintegration of the Self: Fiction and the National Narrative

Joyce Carol Oates's story, "My Warszawa: 1980," occupies an uneasy space as a fiction written by an acclaimed American author about a lesser-known country in a rather complicated political and social situation. Oates's protagonist, Judith Horne, an American journalist of Polish-Jewish origins, returns to Warsaw, the city her family had left decades prior, and suffers a gradual mental breakdown, the cause of which is clearly connected to the act of her return, the exact place she revisits, her ethnic heritage, as well as her gender. The fact that Oates writes this narrative as fiction, as opposed to arguably a more objective gaze through non-fiction, poses the question of what exactly the focus of her inquiry may be: the gray, foreign place, cut off from the Western world by a concrete wall and the differences that exist between the two sides; reconciliation of past and present; different performances of womanhood; the consequences of a return to a troubled place, tainted with destruction, that of both World War II and the Holocaust; or, perhaps, all of these ideas at once. The question of fiction is key in this instance, because in 2012 a Polish film, *Pokłosie* (*Aftermath*, dir. Pasikowski), with themes similar to those of Oates's story, made immense waves in public opinion and was often branded as anti-Polish for its depiction of the Polish countryside, its culture, and most prominently, its rampant anti-Semitism. The most common negative reaction to the film was based on the premise that it was pure fiction, historically inaccurate, and therefore had little to do with the events that live quietly in the Polish subconscious and conscience: the 1941 pogrom in Jedwabne, where over three hundred Jewish inhabitants of the Polish town were

massacred by their Polish neighbors. Despite these two narratives existing in very different mediums, it is useful to talk about them together not only to create an image of Poland as both its citizens and outsiders see it, but also to continue a tough, deeply troubling, and fairly quiet discussion about Poland's past and its flaws, in order to move past the trauma and perhaps a little closer towards answering the question of what it means to be Polish in the first place. The use of fiction and narrative can and should be a part of this process in order to allow a deep and critical look at both history and the national self emerging from this history, while also allowing a certain degree of detachment. The narratives created by Oates and Pasikowski, even though separated by over three decades, do touch on similar themes, the most prominent of which seems to be the very silence surrounding the non-existence of Jewish people in Poland, a silence both narratives question and challenge from different perspectives. In a way, both stories also revolve around the construct of narrative itself, the telling of stories in opposition to silence, and thus prove that fiction, despite its complicated relationship to reality, is crucial in working out issues of cultural identity.

Oates begins her story in a rather claustrophobic space and in a way that clearly indicates a foreign setting to the reader: "in room 371 of the Hotel Europejski in Warsaw a bellboy in a tight-fitting uniform is asking Carl Walser a question in English. But it is not an English Carl or Judith can comprehend" (431). Right from the beginning, Oates begins to create a gap between her American and Polish characters, while being acutely aware of the dichotomy of privilege: the "successful American—which is to say, simply, an *American*" (434) Judith Horne and the "poor, [...] desperate" (432) Polish bellboy in

an ill-fitting uniform, who, right away proves to be either working with illegal money exchanges of dollars and the Polish zloty currency or an informant for the police and thus, the communist state. Thus, immediately, the people of this foreign country Oates is writing about are deemed ambiguous morally—it is unclear whether they are simply trying to survive in oppressive and poor conditions or making a living through upholding them. The latter brings to mind something that is particularly important for Judith, though it goes unsaid throughout the story—that similar circumstances existed during the German occupation of Poland and, even though many people did risk their lives and hid Jewish people in their homes, there was also always the possibility of the opposite: being sold out to the Nazis. There is a similar underlying feeling in the situation with which the story opens, which again points to a moral ambiguity and unpredictable nature of Polish people and their possible collaboration with a state oppressive even to them, in that it is plausible that Judith and her lover, Carl Walser, might have been arrested had they involved themselves with the bellboy “agent provocateur,” as they begin to refer to him. Thus, since the opening of the story, a very grim possibility haunts and hangs over Judith, despite the fact that she begins as a character with a strongly ambiguous relationship to her ethnic heritage (when Carl questions whether she should even “risk” traveling to Warsaw in the first place, Judith is quite offended: “As if she were Jewish—a Jewess!—*she*, Judith Horne” (436)). In fact, Oates writes of two mysteries that pertain to her protagonist, the second of which is her heritage and background:

Horne is an English name, a nullity of a name. But Judith. *Judith*. Biblical, Semitic...And consider the woman’s dark somewhat kinky hair, and her dark uneasy eyes; the edginess of her imagination. Her American fame too, with its

New York City base. (Her Polish hosts have generously exaggerated all this, but no matter.) All of which suggests—the Biblical Judith, the Hebrew Judith (434). This particular discussion of Judith’s Jewish origins seems to allude to perceptions of Jewish people that are common in Poland—successful, American, influential—but it also points to an almost inherent, or inherited, “edginess” of mind, an acute awareness of what it may mean to be Jewish and in Poland.

As the story progresses and Judith continues to socialize with Polish intellectual elites on whose invitation she appears in Poland, she becomes more involved with the part of her identity she had tried to stow away at first. She vows,

to keep her background to herself, which seems to her nothing more than discretion in this part of the world. She sees no reason to burden her well-intentioned hosts with the dreary and possibly too-familiar recitation of facts—another American with Polish-Jewish ancestors, Polish-Jewish victims, come at last to visit Poland. And Judith thinks of herself as only obliquely Jewish anyway: she has some Jewish “blood,” no more—remote aunts and uncles, cousins, who lived in a farming village northeast of Warsaw and who were shipped away (yes, all were shipped away) to die at Oświęcim; that is, Auschwitz. But Judith does not care to bring up the subject. Judith is not going to bring up the subject (435).

In the ending of this paragraph, all of which exists in parenthesis within the narrative, almost as an aside, a mental note Judith may repeat to herself, this repetition of not wanting to refer to her background betrays a dawning obsession, which begins to unravel and unsettle Judith throughout her stay in Warsaw. What adds to this unraveling is not only the fact of her family having lived outside of Warsaw, but her awareness of there having been a pogrom there in 1946, one year after the War had ended. She relays this knowledge to Carl, at his questioning of whether she is ready to visit Poland and to his

inquiry of why, she answers, “not why—we know why. We always know why. The question here isn’t *why* but *how*” (441). This reply, despite the discrepancy in time, does seem to allude to the Jedwabne pogrom, which was carried out not by Nazis, but Poles, and in an absolutely horrific way—about three hundred Jews were burned alive in a locked barn outside of the town. At the very least, the fact that Nazi influence could not have been a true factor in 1946 does suggest an underlying anti-Semitism and a physical evidence of hate and violence that occurred outside of the systematic destruction carried out by German forces on Polish soil.

This involvement with her Jewish heritage is apparent through Judith’s increased interest in various places of importance or simple information about the state of life for Jewish people in Poland. However, most of Judith’s progressing inquiries are met with silence. When she questions about the current number of Jews in Warsaw, her Polish guide Tadeusz replies, “There are no statistics” (457). Similarly, when she is taken to visit the Warsaw Ghetto monument, she questions the status of Warsaw as a “Phoenix City,” rebuilt from its ashes, “When you say that Warsaw was completely rebuilt, you don’t of course mean *completely*—the ghetto wasn’t rebuilt” (457). Both the lack of statistics and the ruins of the ghetto having been built over suggest an erased absence, the implication of which seems to involve more than the Holocaust, but rather an active erasure on the part of Poland of its Jewish inhabitants. The only visible things acting out against the silence is a swastika etched into a Jewish gravestone (466), a twisted symbol of the past and of memory, and the Warsaw Ghetto monument depicting five Jewish men and one woman holding a baby, all of which, as Judith thinks to herself, “boasts a craggy

Aryan look—not a Jew in their midst” (457). This active erasure stands in contrast to what Judith often hears her Polish hosts refer to themselves as:

she studies publications the Poles have given her and notes the recurring words, the inescapable words—*collapse, subjugated peoples, revolutionary fervor, sacrifice, betrayal, tyrants, annihilation, survival, partition, national independence, clandestine organizations, secret police, Uprising, oppressed peoples, despot, oppressor, suffering, struggle*” (471).

This is a clear juxtaposition of the rhetoric often present in the way Polish people talk of both themselves and Poland and the possibility of the oppressed also being an oppressor, a notion that is most definitely absent from the kind of rhetoric used to talk about Polish identity.

All of Judith’s thinking on the subject and her questioning of the Jewish absence in Warsaw culminates in a meeting with a young Jewish woman, Marta. Judith immediately notices this, as she sits down to an interview with Marta, who admires her. She also notices a small, gold cross hanging around Marta’s neck. This detail, by Judith’s commenting upon it, steers their conversation towards their shared heritage and towards Marta’s confession, “Yes of course I am a Catholic” (477). Marta admitting this, further suggests an active erasure and absence of Jewish people in Poland, though this time through assimilation. Here, Judith’s observation of the similarity between herself and Marta seems especially pertinent, as Judith herself had eschewed her Jewish blood in the beginning—the very image of which is embodied in the younger Marta. However, this also marks a turning point for Judith in that when Marta begins to speak of Jews being somehow complicit in their own destruction—“they could have saved themselves, the

ones who ended up in Oświęcim. But they did not try” (478)—she begins to imagine her reaction to these words, “in one version Judith suddenly slaps the cigarette from Marta’s fingers: it falls to the table, rolls to the floor. In another version Judith simply rises from her chair so abruptly that her interviewer is startled, jerks back, drops her cigarette. It falls to the table, rolls to the floor” (478). As it later turns out through Carl Walser’s puzzled questioning of his lover, the latter scenario does actually happen and marks Judith’s first, physical act of personal resistance, which began with her questioning. Thus, throughout the course of the story, Judith goes through denial of her Jewish blood, to a despondency caused by it in combination with her gray and dreary surroundings, to finally being bold enough to revolt against them and regain some kind of control.

Furthermore, Oates also seems to collate Judith’s Jewish blood, her sense of and resistance against being a victim, her disintegration, with her womanhood. At the point where Judith’s mental breakdown begins, she thinks,

She does not know why she isn’t herself here, in this particular place, when she has traveled widely since the age of twenty—when she has boasted of being most comfortable while traveling, in motion. She doesn’t know why she feels so edgy here, so obsessed by melancholy thoughts. The architecture (which should interest her) depresses her; the smoky air (to which she should have become accustomed by now) makes her sick; the odor of fried onions, the sight of Pepsi-Cola bottles everywhere, displayed on banquet tables like bottles of French wine, the half-fearful half-brazen references to Soviet Russia (“The light doesn’t always come from the East!”—the boldest statement she has heard a Pole utter), the shabby hotel room in the shabby hotel, the very look of the overcast sky...Judith cannot tell him that she feels unreal; a fiction; an impostor; shaking so many strangers’ hands, smiling and being smiled at in return. She feels weak. She feels Jewish at

last. And womanly—in the very worst sense of the word. A Jew, a woman, a victim—can it be? (442)

The implication seems to be that, despite her immense success and being an American, Judith is a victim precisely because of her Jewish blood and her womanhood, both of which are broken down during her visit in Warsaw. This notion is further expounded on through her meditation on the Warsaw Ghetto monument, in which five supposedly Jewish men stand heroically, whereas the lone female sculpture stands feebly behind them, hidden, holding a child. The thought of having a child itself is of interest to Judith, due to her complicated relationship with Carl, which also seems to be unraveling throughout their stay in Warsaw. Still, her position as a successful, career woman, despite being a “womanly woman” (“the Poles will not know how to interpret her” (433)), does not allow her to be weak and it is this particular perception against which she seems to create her persona, which is then unraveled and built up in a new fashion at the end of her trip to Warsaw. Even in her conversations with Carl she mentions, “I think you exaggerate my weakness. [...] My sensitivity then. My ‘femininity’”, despite Carl’s answer of, “You are hardly a weak woman” (441). This is perhaps a feature of the “edginess of imagination” that Judith sees in herself as a result of her Jewish blood and which prohibits her from exhibiting any signs of weakness. It is also corroborated by Marta’s words, when she suggests that the Jews that perished in concentration camps were, essentially, too weak to save themselves (“they were peasants—mainly peasants. Very ignorant” (478)).

Interestingly enough, *Poklosie* begins in a way much similar to the opening of Oates’s story. The opening shot of the film imitates the viewer looking up at the sky,

awaiting something that turns out to be an airplane of the Polish LOT airlines, which lands in Warsaw. While Oates's story indicated a claustrophobic, suffocating setting, here, Pasikowski uses a shot that suggests openness, mobility, and infinity, only to cut it apart with an airliner crossing from the right upper corner of the screen to the lower left. This kind of open shot is rarely used in the film, which is carried on in similarly tight, claustrophobic shots typical of thriller films, which *Pokłosie* markets itself as. Nonetheless, the presence of an airplane and this notion of openness suggest something similar to what Oates's story introduced: a foreign element. Soon enough, it turns out that Franciszek Kalina has returned to Poland from Chicago after twenty years in order to visit his younger brother Józek, whose wife and children suddenly immigrated to the United States for unknown reasons. Despite the fact that Franciszek has a more direct connection to the place he is returning to, he is constantly referred to as "the American" or "the brother from America"—even as he leaves the airport, he is accosted by a taxi driver asking him where he would like to go in English (he replies in Polish). This continues throughout the film, as he is widely known in the town he is returning to as the Kalina that immigrated to America.

The scraps of Warsaw Pasikowski chooses to show in the beginnings of the film indicate a city much different from that which Judith called, "my Warszawa" in the story's closing—there are multitudes of color, and very noticeably, English-language advertisements pasted throughout the airport, which once again emphasizes a new kind of openness and mobility. This is the Warsaw of 2012—a metropolis connected to other large cities of the world, a place to which it is now presumably possible and also feasible

to return safely. Franciszek mentions this to his brother, when he is accused of not coming to their parents' funerals, claiming that his passport could have been taken away and he could have been arrested had he returned earlier, before the collapse of the communist regime. Józek dismisses this as mere excuses, further accentuating an existing conflict between the older brother who left and the younger one that stayed behind and still lives on and takes care of his parents' land and property.

This image of a new, European (rather than post-Communist) Poland quickly disappears, however, the change heralded by another meaningful open shot of the Polish countryside passing by behind a train's window. Similarly to the opening shot, it is quickly cut apart by another train passing in the opposite direction, blocking the view. Both of those shots indicate some kind of disruption of an established perception, things being literally cut apart and obstructed from view. Franciszek is shown making his journey to the small town in which his brother still lives, the colorful, Westernized environment of Warsaw quickly giving way to dilapidated bus stops, filled with anti-Semitic graffiti (the Star of David hung on a gallows, accompanied by "Jews go away"), old country roads, dense and dark foliage, things and spaces shrinking. The rest of the film abstains from any open shots, even in its climactic shots of Jewish tombstones stuck amongst a burning wheat field; in this case, Pasikowski still uses very tight, close-up shots of the stones being blackened by the flames, which cannot help but conjure up allusions to gas chambers and the burnings of Jewish bodies in concentration camps, but also echo the events of Jedwabnem. These tombstones lay at the core of the film—they are the reason Józek is ostracized, threatened with violence, eventually killed, and also

why his wife and children leave for the United States in order to escape both the behavior of Józek and that of the small town he inhabits. Having discovered these tombstones used as parts for an old country road and also pavement in front of the local Catholic church (conjuring up the images of Warsaw being rebuilt over the ashes of the Jewish Ghetto that Judith contests), Józek begins to dig them up and collect them on his field in order to protect them from the hostile inhabitants of the town. The implication there seems to be that one's land, which both Józek and Franciszek presume belonged to his family for decades, is more sacred than the tombstones that used to mark the graves of Jewish people living in this small, countryside town. This is also eventually violated, as someone sets fire to Józek's field before he has the chance to gather his harvest (*pokłosie* literally means what is left after a harvest; it can also mean consequences, aftermath of one's action—what is left, in other words), but as the final underlying mystery is revealed, it also turns out that a large portion of the town's populace now occupies land previously owned by Jewish families that were presumed to have perished in concentration camps, but who, in fact, have been massacred by the town's Polish inhabitants during the War. The big revelation comes when the Kalina brothers begin digging in the ground around the ruins of their old and proper home, where they find human remains. What the brothers come to find out is that their family was complicit in the massacre, that their father took an active role in the burning alive of Jewish families inside his old home, and that the land they now occupy was taken from the murdered families.

After this traumatizing revelation, there occurs a seemingly irrevocable split between the brothers. Józek, the younger one, suddenly abandons his fervent quest to

preserve the memory of the Jewish families, clearly shaken by his family's involvement and leadership in the slaughter and his inheritance of land that does not truly belong to him. Because only one inhabitant of the town still remembers what took place during the War, Józek wants to keep his family's actions a secret in order to avoid national and possibly international attention. Franciszek, on the other hand, who refers to Jewish people in a derogatory way numerous times throughout the movie and who discusses his knowledge of Jewish people in the United States with certain disdain, presses his brother to reveal the truth to everyone in order not to contribute further to their family's actions. The Kalina brothers and the troubling situation they find themselves in are thus clearly symbolic of the division of Poland itself. When light was shed on what exactly had occurred in Jedwabnem and the involvement of Poles in the massacre, without any help or pressure from the Nazis (though it is generally understood as there having been some sort of instigation—but whether this is meant to alleviate the collective conscience or is actually the truth isn't particularly clear), people responded in similar ways, which was partly the reason for the film's controversial and divided reception. What is especially important and poignant here, however, is that Józek proves to be too weak to carry on his mission, muddling his good intentions and making his character more ambiguous and more tethered to reality—it suggests that one does not have to be specifically violently anti-Semitic to be unable to accept one's historical guilt and implication of history. In this way, Józek proves to be the everyman, a morally complicated and ultimately weak citizen.

Because of this, Józek's death, when it comes, appears even more poignant in that he is killed for something even he ceased to believe in. Pasikowski never explicitly shows who murders Józek, but when his body is revealed, cross-like nailed to the large, wooden door of his stables, after the camera lingers on it for an uncomfortably long period of time, it then cuts straight to a crowd gathered in front of the house. It pans to the side slowly, to show each and every face of Józek's neighbors, staring and emotionless. Thus, the murder was, at least symbolically, a collective and gradual effort. This lingering on the faces of the town's populace can also mirror the Polish population as a whole and provide a commentary on the very rhetoric of victimhood that Judith finds repulsive in Oates's story. It is not uncommon to hear Poland being referred to as "the Christ of Nations"—eternally persecuted, stripped, violated; eternally a martyr in the unattainable quest for freedom. It is a nice and seemingly innocent thought, but it does also create a religious dimension to the national identity, a dimension that has often been linked to anti-Semitism in the past—the blaming of Jewish people for killing Jesus Christ. This rhetoric of victimhood is so deeply rooted in the national consciousness that anything (such as this film) which goes against portraying Poland and Poles as passive sufferers of the iniquities of the world is rejected as anti-Polish. In this way, Poland is all these townspeople at once, looking toward something incomprehensible, looking without understanding, looking without critical thinking about itself, looking at its own death.

It is useful to also mention the way both stories serve as commentaries on narrative, making them into acts of witness. In Oates's short story, Judith slowly acts against the silence permeating Warsaw—the lack of statistics on how many Jews still live

there, the mute monument of the Warsaw Ghetto, the silent tombstones, any traces of Jewish identity lost in the Polish post-War rhetoric of victimhood. Her persistence in asking about any of these traces—her comment on the Warsaw Ghetto especially, implicating a literal burial, a building over—unearths an evident absence and erasure, which in turn, creates a narrative of the Jewish identity and what is left of it in Warsaw. Her mental breakdown that occurs in this troubled city seems to be linked to the fact that she is acutely aware that this return to a place of origin is a tainted one—that she simply cannot return to the place linked to her family, because it is not there. Similarly, in *Poklosie*, the Kalina brothers begin piecing together a narrative of the Jewish families that lived in their town, a narrative that is inescapably linked to their own family in a horrific way. Here, they are also working against a unified code of silence and even hostility of their neighbors and their questioning of the established story—that the Jewish inhabitants were shipped away by Germans—unearths a literal grave and a completely different narrative. Additionally, that *Poklosie* was marketed as a thriller rather than a drama, also serves as a commentary on the nature of the revelations found in the film—they are slowly unearthed, shocking, and, to the Polish audience at least, incredibly terrifying. The fact that the film ends with the wheat field still filled with tombstones, but now also containing a small memorial for those who were murdered, along with a small group of Jewish visitors (possibly descendants of those who died) paying their respects, paints an optimistic picture, suggesting that coming to terms with one's conscience—or the collective conscience—does not have to lead to decay or ruin of Polish identity. Similarly, the existence of both of these narratives itself serves as a touchstone in a

discussion about the troubled history of Polish-Jewish relations, a discussion that needs to continue.

Indeed, similar themes were the subject of a recent book by Katarzyna Marciniak and Kamil Turowski, *Streets of Crocodiles: Photography, Media, and Postsocialist Landscapes in Poland*, which called attention to the deep incongruence that exists between Poland's projected image of a modernized, European nation and the anti-Semitic, xenophobic graffiti that often mars the country's both urban (as presented in Turowski's photographs of Łódź) and rural (as seen in Pasikowski's film) landscapes. This quite absurd reality stands in direct opposition to the freedom of movement that is fundamental to Poland's new, European identity and that is quite central to both Oates's story and Pasikowski's film, where the narrative hinges on the ability of both main characters to return to Poland, albeit in completely different circumstances (the established American and the returned émigré). This newfound freedom has also been analyzed in the work of Ewa Mazierska, particularly in relation to European film, in *Crossing New Europe*. Through her work, Mazierska also poses the question of what Poland should do and does with its leftover socialist landscape and architecture, which is the main site of the previously mentioned obscene graffiti. Thus, the discussion arrives at the notion of hybridity (Marciniak, Turowski 117)—the existence of both new and European establishments alongside old, postsocialist ones, and the anger, hate, and boredom that manifests itself at their intersections through particularly anti-Semitic and racist graffiti. Still, this conversation is only beginning, as more scholarly interest is invested in what is often deemed as “the second world.” In addition, there has not been

enough said about *Pokłosie* and the way it specifically relates to the making and possibly re-making of the Polish national narrative, while Oates's story is certainly not one of her most popular ones, possibly because of its unique and troubling subject.

At the core of both stories, then, is this very kernel of Polish identity and the conflict between the narrative Poland has constructed for itself after centuries of partitions, wars, and violence and the multiplicity and diversity of its citizens and their perspectives that may not be entirely compatible with the national narrative. Both Oates's story and Pasikowski's film serve as a similar railing against the silence and overwhelming national narrative. It is useful to look at both of these works together to step outside of this narrative and see how Poland is perceived both by outsiders and its own citizens—not only do these works call attention to the silence surrounding the absence of Jewish identity in Poland, but they also allow for their audience to imagine the possibility of both of them actually happening. Perhaps the biggest complaint against *Pokłosie*—that it was historically inaccurate—was simply a defense against the thought and the possibility that a similar situation might have happened somewhere other than Jedwabnem and no one even knew about it.

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