THE BOOK OF OTHER PEOPLE

by

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A THESIS

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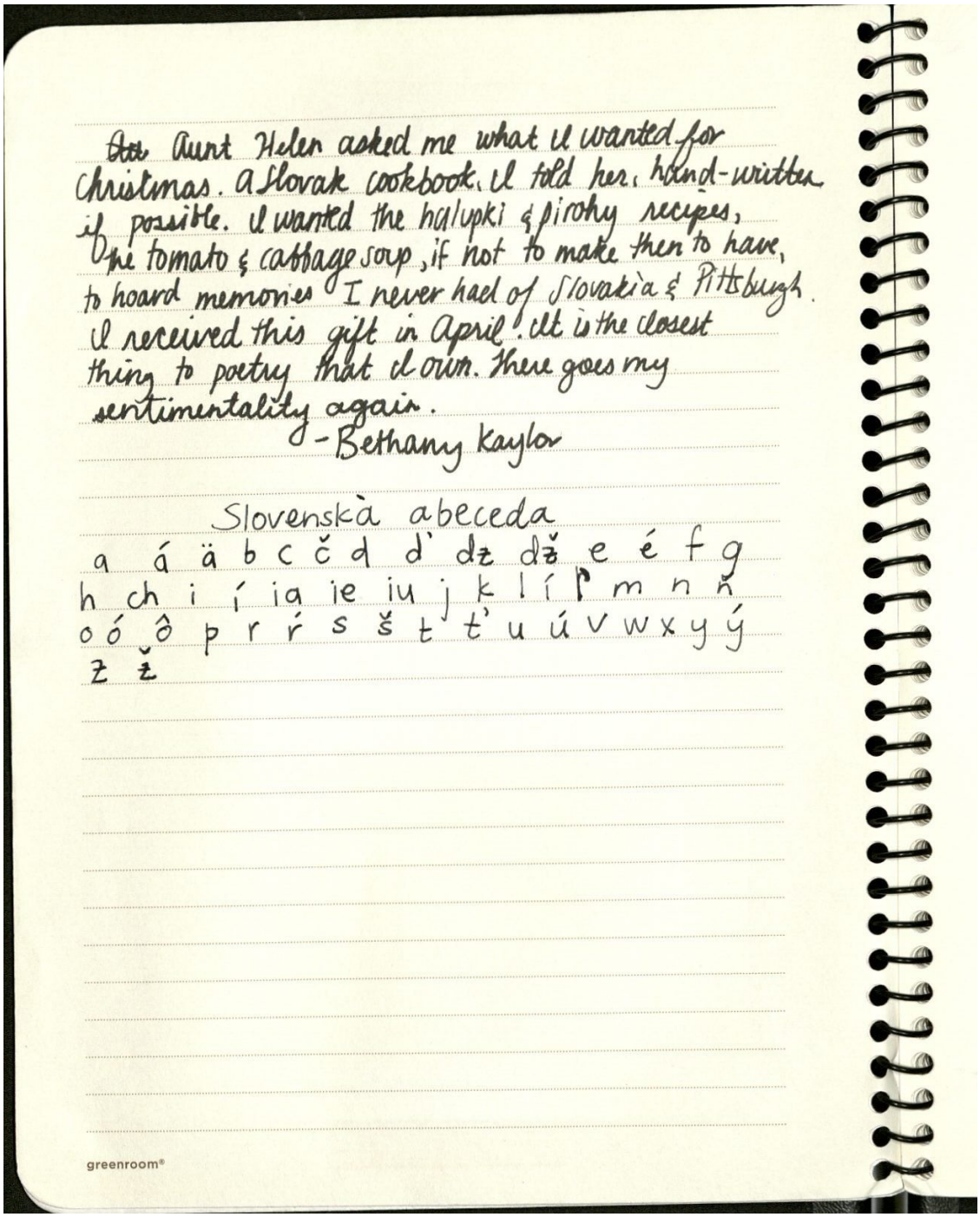
The Book of Other People

To write by fragments: the fragments are then so many stones on the perimeter of a circle: I spread myself around: my whole little universe is in crumbs; at the center, what?

Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*[1]

Author's Note: All images included are my own. There are journal entries, photos, sketches, a poem, all of which are currently stashed in a shoebox in the corner of my room labeled, "Slovakia." In more ways than one, the words that follow function like that shoebox.

[1] Roland Barthes. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (New York: Hill and Wang. 1975) p. 63.


Aunt Helen asked me what I wanted for Christmas. a Slovak cookbook. I told her, hand-written if possible. I wanted the halupki & pirohy recipes, the tomato & cabbage soup, if not to make them to have, to hoard memories I never had of Slovakia & Pittsburgh. I received this gift in April. It is the closest thing to poetry that I own. There goes my sentimentality again.

-Bethany Kaylor

Slovenská abeceda

a á ä b c č d ď dz dž e é f g
h ch i í ia ie iu j k l ĺ ľ m n ň
o ó ô p r ŕ s š t ť u ú v w x y ý
z ž

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Whereas by decomposing, I agree to accompany such decomposition, to decompose myself as well, in the process: I scrape, catch, and drag.
Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*[2]

In the beginning in Slovakia, I wrote and wrote. Everything was worthy of being scribbled in my journal. Among the entries, there are gaps of memory, of consciousness, and then, a burst of details; "The drunk Slovak men mournfully singing 'Wish You Were Here', "2 small dogs walking along the base of a wall, one trying to hump the other in stride," "Heat lightning across the Bratislava hillside."

Fragmentation is the way I hold onto Slovakia, as if these pieces would keep me there, in those moments. I do not know what Slovakia means to me in its entirety. All I have are these sporadic memories, strong and pungent and full of desperate feeling, as if they were pieces of a puzzle, waiting to be arranged to create some sort of wholeness, some sort of confirmation of meaning. As if finally I could point to it and say, "Look! *This* is what it means to me." As if people would nod in understanding.

[2] Roland Barthes. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (New York: Hill and Wang. 1975.) p. 63.

Strong Images of Slovakia that should remain somewhat ingrained in my brain:

- a small blond boy bending his body in half backwards to fling a stone into the Danube River
- sitting at the Bike Kitchen in that park, blending flour + water
- ~~the~~ a pug dragging itself happily along in the grass
- the Soviet highrises (my view on the hotel Družba)
- the Danube River at 7:20 pm, sun's last rays
- the drunk Slovak men mournfully singing Pink Floyd's "Wish you Were here" at the Mark Twain Club
- dancing to the Slovak folk music, everyone holding hands
- biking through + up the Bratislava city streets at dusk
- singing Slovak folk songs
- the 3 young boys on BMX bikes, passing along a 2 liter of Sprite + chugging it, hydrating for the ride
- 2 small dogs walking along the base of a wall, one trying to hump the other in stride
- waving at the construction man who was working on the roof of the atrium. After a moment, he smiles + returns the wave

As for him, he never knows whether he moves toward her, whether he is driven, whether he has made it up, or whether he is only dreaming.
Chris Marker, *La Jetée*[3]

In physics, the Heisenberg Uncertainty principle states that it is impossible to accurately measure multiple factors at once. There will always be uncertainty, fuzziness, in the measurements. No matter how close or far you are, you are never able to see things as they actually exist. The best you can do is to make an educated estimation, given what you think you see.

The only physics class I ever took was in high school, and I struggled. Not much has changed—I get my physics mixed up all the time. When I heard of the Heisenberg principle, I was excited. I thought, "I've heard of that before!"

As usual, I misunderstood. I had never actually heard of the Heisenberg Uncertainty principle. What I *had* heard of was the observer effect, a different physics principle. The observer effect states that an observer will always have an impact on the outcome. No matter the context, the phenomenon repeats itself—the observer will always alter the result of an action simply by being there.

As a writer, I am drawn to the observer effect. Why? Because none of us, no matter how talented we are, can escape it. We try to be the third person narrator, the disembodied voice that affects no actions but perceives all, but it is an impossible task. Our very presence in the same physical space as our observed subjects changes the equation. None of us can escape the affliction of the observer effect. To put it simply:

[3] *La Jetée*. Directed by Chris Marker. (France: Argos Films, 1962.) Film.

we get in the way. We change the narrative bit by bit, until a threshold is reached and it becomes a different story altogether. We are all complicit.

In much the same way, the Heisenberg Uncertainty principle attracts me. When I observe, I can never quite say with certainty what exactly happens. During the interval of time from seeing a subject to lowering my pen to write about it, some new factor has been introduced. It eludes me, and my scribbled observations become not obsolete but perpetually incomplete, slightly inaccurate. I have nothing more than estimations of what I think I see.

Try as we may to watch the world and record it carefully, we never get it quite right, and so we graft the pieces together. A woman's black hair becomes grey, the late August afternoon turns into a September morning. We are the poor damned man in Marker's "La Jetée"—we can never be exactly sure what we saw, what we did, who we were.

I don't want to say that I ever really gave poor George Vardon a whole lot of serious thought. It's just that once in a while his story, his terrible fate, would secretly animate a day for me as I walked around, and I would wonder what I was supposed to do with what I knew about him—with the whole fact of his sad life as I understood it.

Michael Byers, "Malaria"[4]

At my family's home in Jablon, an old man with dementia lived in the room off the kitchen. He was the father of Milka's husband. I never caught his name.

[4] Michael Byers, "Malaria." (Bellevue: The Bellevue Literary Review, 2012.)

His room was small, just large enough for a dresser and a twin bed with a blue quilt stretched thin over it. There was only one window, and it was tiny, placed high on the wall.

He spoke to me in such slurred Slovak that I had no hope of understanding him. I could only return with stock phrases, such as “Ano?” and “Zauimave, zauimave.” *Yes? Interesting, interesting.*

“What’s he saying?” I once asked my cousin, Lilka. She was my age. When she was younger, she had been a Slovak model. She was beautiful in a strange way that I noticed only later. Her skin was smooth and dark, and her long hair was silky.

She shrugged. “We don’t know,” she said. Then she got a serious look on her face. “But it’s important to listen.”

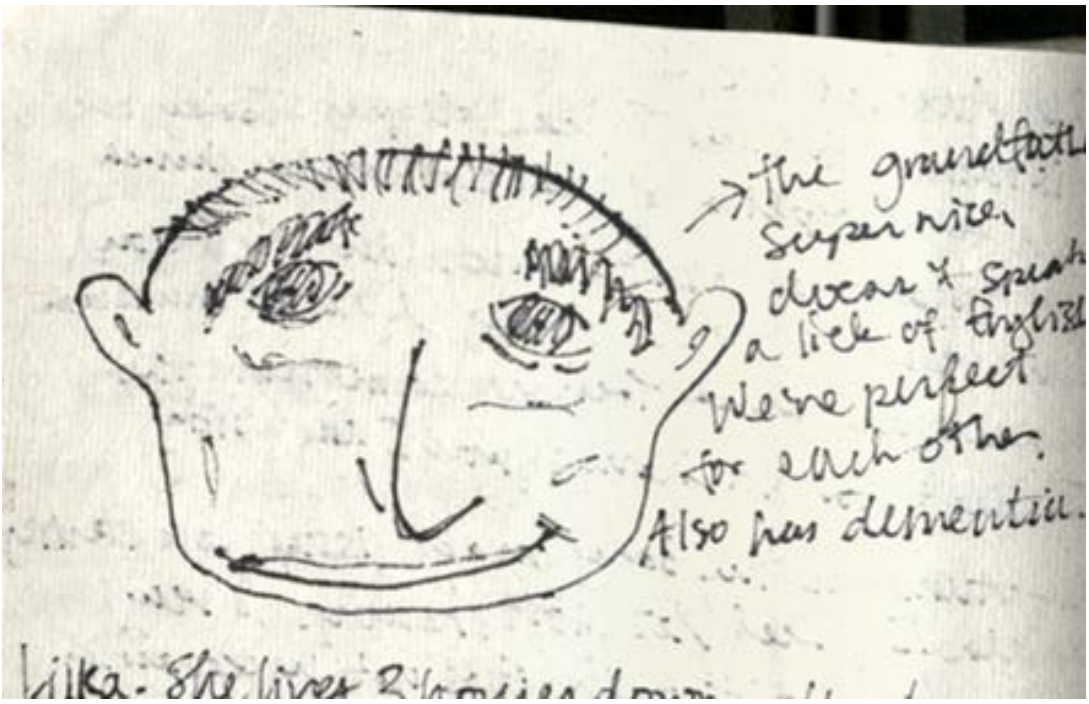
When it rained, the old man sat in the living room, watching TV. The National Geographic channel was his favorite. Although there were no Slovak subtitles, he seemed fascinated by the wild landscapes.

One day, I sat with him. From separate armchairs, we watched a documentary about lions. He laughed at the cubs wrestling. When the females hunted, he leaned forward and gripped the chair. I watched him. We were both riveted, he to the television, I to his hunched figure.

That evening, Milka took out some photographs and placed them on the kitchen table. The old man sat with us and touched them, speaking slowly, his voice growing louder as he pointed out familiar faces. His hands shook.

Milka nodded without really looking at him. Gently, she took the photographs from his hands and placed them in mine.

I gave each photograph a cursory glance, holding them flat in the palm of my hand, careful not to smudge my fingerprints. I smiled politely. I was anxious to return them to the old man. They were his to hold, not mine.



We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth, the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition.

Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown"[5]

The more I write about Slovakia, the more elusive it becomes. My memories are entangled, disorganized. The lines between what happened, what *seemed* to have

[5] Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." *from* Hoffman, Michael J. and Patrick D. Murphy. Eds. *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction.* 2nd Ed. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University, 1996) p. 38.

happened, and could *have* happened, begin to blur. My notes become suspicious and my journals fiction, full of incomplete stories.

Perhaps the transition from nonfiction to fiction provides me greater flexibility. No longer am I saddled with the truth telling and fact-checking of nonfiction, however "creative" it may be. With fiction, there are no truth-obligating stipulations: all details, characters, narratives, and lies are permissible.

But what may inspire other writers paralyzed me. I wanted the truth from Slovakia. Of the country, the culture, my family. But how to write truthfully about a space, about the people there?

In remembering and writing about Slovakia, I had to abandon the fantasy of a complete truth. I am both plagued and blessed with half-truths, incomplete stories. Roland Barthes asks, "How to write, given all the snares set by the collective image of a work?" A moment later, he answers, "Why, *blindly*. At every moment of the effort, lost, bewildered, driven, I can only repeated the words which end Sartre's No Exit: Let's go on."[6]

The more I try to understand my experience in Slovakia and exactly what is meaningful about it, the more confused I become. In actuality, ignoring the siren song of fact and truth is how I have been able to write anything at all.

And so I go on.

[6] Barthes, p. 136.

He traveled to the borders of Cambodia only for Sabina. As the bus bumped along the Thai road, he could feel her eyes fixed on him in a long stare.
Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*[7]

When drafting this project, I wrote in my notes: "It's not really about Slovakia, and maybe it's not really about my family, either. It might not even be about me. Thus far, from what I can tell, it's about yearning for something that was and never will be yours. You know this—it is both what makes it safe and dangerous." Whether or not these sentences are completely true, the sentiment remains—it is safe to imagine Slovakia and how it must have been for my family, but it feels problematic to confuse this desire of imagination with truth and restoration in my own life.

I think about Slovakia everyday. The hills of Jablon, the banks of the Danube River, the grey and pink Communist high-rises against the horizon. But I do not necessarily yearn for the space of Slovakia itself. What I miss more is my sense of self there, my bewilderment and confusion and delight with the unfamiliar banalities.

I travelled to Slovakia thinking I would find something. What I found instead were revelations of myself. I discovered what it was to hesitate with language, to move through a completely foreign space, to minimize my American-ness.

I am hesitant to show this project to my Slovak family. I can sense the disappointment in their eyes. "What's this?" They might say, closing the manuscript and handing it back to me, eager to be rid of it. "That's not what really happened. Those aren't our stories."

[7] Kundera, 270.

But they are and they are not, just as the stories are and are not mine. Perhaps what this manuscript demonstrates is my obsession with the *could-have-beens*; the fragments of memory and narrative that exist in proximity to my near and distant family, to myself. I crave these memories. I store them greedily.

In the end, what I create is a "theme park of lost illusions," as Svetlana Boym might call it. My nostalgia resides in dreams, could-have-beens, blurry memories. I am a member of the group Milan Kundera described as the "people who live in the imaginary eyes of those who are not present. They are the dreamers."[8] In this way I am Franz.

Unlike Franz, I'm not sure whose eyes I felt on me as I was traveling Slovakia. No one's but my own, probably.[9]

Look at it. You can see the whole complicated thing…And you know that from below you wouldn't look nearly so high overhead. You see now how high overhead you are: you know from down there no one could tell.
David Foster Wallace, "Forever Overhead"[10]

In appropriating other people's stories, memories, and wounds, I ignore my own. A third person perspective feels safer, more distant, than a first person. It is easier to look out than to look in.

[8] Kundera, p. 270.
[9] Kundera, p. 270.
[10] David Foster Wallace. "Forever Overhead." from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. (New York: Little, Brown. 1999).

My own wounds do not seem as heavy, as glamorous, as my Slovak relatives'. My wounds seem acutely shameful, embarrassing, and petty. I have yet to find the empathy and maturity to reconcile them.

This absence of self-empathy and compassion fuels my fascination with other people. Instead of looking at myself, I look at others. Their narratives seem more complete, complex than my own, which feel opaque.

This idealization of a "complete" narrative is the reason for my obsession with a grand theory of everything. Pastness offers more opportunities for insight than presentness. In the present moment, elements are startling; people surprise you, you surprise you. But in the past, these elements begin to take some sort of shape. The Aristotelian three-act structure of a plot materializes—she said this because of that, you did this because of that, and so the story unfolds.

Nothing affects my past, though. Nostalgia colors it, and sentimentality seeps through, deconstructing and reconstructing memory, but these do not affect my past. My past is concrete—I went to Slovakia, I met my relatives, I learned some Slovak, I returned.

Where nostalgia is most powerful is on the present. I spend my present moments remembering, reorganizing my past. Nostalgia reformulates the way I move through the present moment in my own narrative, even as I am preoccupied with other people's stories.

Though consisting apparently of a series of "ideas," this book is not the book of his ideas; it is the book of Self, the book of my resistance to my own ideas; it is a recessive book (which falls back, but which may also gain perspective thereby).
Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*[11]

There is a book that I borrowed from the Cincinnati library, titled *The Book of Other People*. It is a collection of short stories by famous contemporary writers. There were no concrete plots; the caricatures were the essence of the stories. I cannot recall the exact details of each character, but I remember becoming obsessed with the inner lives of other people. After finishing it, I turned every interaction I witnessed into a chapter from *The Book of Other People.*

When I began this project, I envisioned it as such. I intended it to be homage to my relatives in Pittsburgh, the first generation Americans and last generation Slovaks, as proof that they had not been forgotten. Although I would never admit it publicly, I thought this project a noble sort of academic endeavor, one that would benefit others, rather than myself.

[11] Barthes. p. 119.

Our notebooks give us away, for however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable 'I'.

Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*[12]

My journal gives me away. I try to write observations of the external world. I claim to be a third-party observer, analyzing the strange wonder of others' lives. But as much as I protest that I am dutifully engaging with others through my observations, that my writing manifests compassion and curiosity, I know the truth: I am lying. My writing is for my pleasure, and my pleasure is often independent from the truth, separate from what actually happened.

I cannot escape this truism. Everything I record is vital for *what it means to me*. I cannot manage to ignore my own presence from the landscape of Slovakia, or the people I met there, or the words I heard. I am irrevocably and inevitably in the center of it all as I record, try as I might otherwise.

I did not intend to write what *The Book of Other People* has become. I did not anticipate contending with the sheer force of my nostalgia, which simultaneously stunted and fueled my writing. I often came upon the question: how to meaningfully write stories that were never mine?

In my very best realist fashion, I tried striking a distant tone. I used every tool and trick I could remember from creative writing classes. It worked, to an extent. But when it came to the heart of my writing, the terrifying question "*Why does it matter?*" I slunk away. I tucked my pages in a drawer and tried not to think about them.

[12] Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux. 1968.) p. 125.

All this because I could not bear to admit that it mattered because it mattered *to me;* because I found it all to be heartbreaking in such a beautiful, shameful way.

Begin to wonder what you do write about. Or if you have anything to say. Or if there even is such a thing as a thing to say. Limit these thoughts to no more than ten minutes a day; like sit-ups, they can make you thin.
Lorrie Moore, "How To Become a Writer"[13]

Over a year ago, I tried to write short stories about my family. It was all mapped out in my journal. The stories would feature my great-grandmother's family in both Slovakia and Pittsburgh. They would span generations and decades. I would write from multiple perspectives: first, second, and third. Ultimately, I was hoping for a blend of Salinger's Glass family and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*.

I did not write that. What I wrote were forty pages of story drafts, all incomplete. I started each story with enthusiasm, full of ideas and confidence, until I reached a threshold where I had nothing more to write, and so I would stare at my notes, then at my computer screen.

It was a peculiar impasse. Peculiar because I felt stymied by my lack of knowing what happened next. It was not what *could* have happened next with my characters that gave me pause. Rather, what confused me was what *really* happened next in the lives of my family members. In order to proceed, I needed to decide whether I was writing fiction or nonfiction. If I were writing fiction, then I needed to spend more time getting

[13]Lorrie Moore. "How to Become a Writer." from Charters, Ann, Ed. *The Story and its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. 2003.) p. 1020.

to know my characters. If I were writing nonfiction, then I needed to revisit my family members and extract more information from them.

For a long time, I did neither. Ultimately, my attempt at nonfiction carried me to the point where I had no choice but to write fictitiously, to guess what happened next.

I did not have the bravery to commit fully to fiction. I cursed myself for wandering in Slovakia, all that time spent jotting observations in my journal, imagining the way my stories would form. In favoring my nostalgic tendencies, I wasted opportunities to observe my family members and gather their stories.

Eventually my task, to write stories about my family, morphed. The characters in these stories (my Aunt Helen, my great-grandmother, my uncle Mike)—they were not the people I knew and loved. It scared me that one of them might discover this discrepancy, and so I stopped writing. My nostalgic appropriation of those stories suited my own purposes and ego, not theirs.

I never showed anyone these stories. No doubt, they could have been improved in a workshop, or even if a friend just read them and gave me feedback. Maybe the writing could have been legitimate works of fiction, had I given them the time and effort they deserved.

But I was too scared, embarrassed that someone might see them for what I secretly knew them to be: my own nostalgic fantasies.

I know now that it was all fiction. The task was never noble. I cannot hide in my writing; lurking beneath my words is always the presence of the "implacable 'I'".[14]

[14] Didion, p. 19.

I mean Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties. Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

John Keats, in a letter[15]

The Andy Warhol museum is in northeastern Slovakia. The museum itself is a strange mélange of biographical information, Warhol's junk, and authentic art. It is the main attraction of Medzilaborce, a small town with a glass factory and a large Russian Orthodox Church at its center, whitewashed and ornate.

Milka took me to the museum. She is my distant cousin, a woman with greying hair in her fifties and tall, taller than most American women I know. She handed me pamphlets and pointed at the exhibits, speaking to me in slow Slovak. I nodded, following the trajectory of her finger, trying to place sounds to images.

Lilka was making out with her boyfriend, Lukaš, in the shadows of the exhibit walls. She is Milka's daughter, and my age, twenty-one. I liked Lilka, and I liked Lukaš, yet I could not keep from staring at them.

After the museum, we ate lunch in the dining hall of an old hotel. It was raining outside, typical for late August. Lukaš translated the menu for me. His English was the best of the three, having worked in London one summer as a dishwasher with a catering company.

I chose the cheapest option, bryndzové haluški. Sheep-cheese gnocchi. It cost close to nothing. I ate it all.

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[15] The Letters of John Keats, ed. by H E Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958.) i, pp.193-4.

Milka drove us home. It was raining harder, the sky darkening. I sat in the front seat. Lilka and Lukaš were in the back, his hand on her thigh. I touched my finger to the blurry window, practicing my Slovak to Milka. *Kopca. Dazd.* Hills. Rain. These were the words I knew—simple nouns, concrete images.

Milka smiled. Keeping one hand steady on the wheel, she motioned with the other ahead to the mountains, then to the side. *Ukraijne*, she said. *Polsko*. Ukraine to the east, Poland to the north.

I nodded. Lilka and Lukas giggled from the backseat.

I did not explain to Milka how the Ohio River split Ohio and Kentucky. Much as I wanted to, I did not have the right words to express to her that I too was able to look beyond one place and know another.

Signature (I display myself, I cannot avoid displaying myself).
Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*[16]

In Slovakia, I bought a notebook. It was yellow and thin, and flexible enough to fit inside my coat pocket if folded. I wrote on the cover in big letters: "The Book of Other People." In it I wrote character sketches, plot outlines, a genealogy tree. It was intended for fictive purposes, but inevitably I leaked into it. Slowly, I started including my own thoughts and feelings on the day, on the project. It quickly morphed into something that was about me, rather than other people.

I lost the Book of Other People. This seems fitting. I remember my joy as I sat and scribbled ideas for character development, pieces of dialogue, sketches of

[16] Barthes. p. 166.

landscapes. It was so easy in the beginning, to imagine a world for other people. It allowed me to leave my own world, if only briefly.

Perhaps this is what this project has become: a reflection on myself, on place and memory. I suppose it is a lesson in Othering—as soon as you make that distinction, you invariably come back upon yourself.

In creative writing seminars over the next two years, everyone continues to smoke cigarettes and ask the same things. "But does it work?" "Why should we care about this character?" "Have you earned this cliché?" These seem like important questions.

On days when it is your turn, you look at the class hopefully as they scour your mimeographs for a plot. They look back up at you, drag deeply, and then smile in a sweet sort of way.

Lorrie Moore, "How to Become a Writer"[17]

In a creative writing workshop, the desks are typically arranged in a circle—that way, people can make eye contact with their classmates. No one can hide. Your peers and instructor spend the majority of the workshop critiquing your work, asking questions such as "But what does this character even want? What does she *need*?" Like Lorrie Moore writes, these questions seem important. You silently berate yourself for not thinking of it earlier.

Generally, the author cannot speak during the workshop. Sometimes, she cannot even speak even at its conclusion. She must sit and listen to the critiques of her peers. Most of the time she scribbles notes on her own manuscript. Oftentimes she grimaces, cringes, nods in agreement at the rising criticism.

[17] Moore, p. 1018.

If she is brave, she will keep a straight face. She will not visibly shrink with the heaping of critiques. Nor will she necessarily write every suggestion on her manuscript; she will pick and choose what to accept, what to disregard. At the end of the workshop, when it is her time to speak or pose questions, she will coolly say, "Thank you for reading." That will be the end of it. Class will be dismissed. She will pack up her things, not too quickly, not too slowly, and leave.

I am not that girl. I am a compulsive scribbler of notes. I record every suggestion, no matter how asinine. My face betrays everything. I hide nothing. I grimace when they notice my nostalgia, my sentimentality. I nod along with them.

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!
Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*[18]

How can I write about nostalgia without drowning? Nostalgia drives and halts this narrative; it is the momentum and roadblock. Svetlana Boym explores nostalgia, explaining that "the object of longing, then, is not really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world."[19] That is what I'm looking for—a sense of intimacy with the world.

No shortages of opportunities exist for such intimacy. Even now, as I sit at my kitchen table, I look out the window and see: my neighbors sweeping their deck, the

[18] Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics. 1984.) p. 228.
[19] Svetlana Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books. 2001.) p. 219.

dying apple tree, my cat sprawled and sleeping in the grass. The proximity of life makes me feel less alone. I feel some sense of inner quiet. It is comforting.

Admittedly, this is kitsch. I see my cat sleeping in the sunlight, and I feel warm inside for no discernable reason. The referent: a black cat, lounging in the grass. The signified: The sense of relief I feel, the idea that despite all the anxieties out there, at this moment, all is fine.

> **None among us is superman enough to escape kitsch completely. No matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition.**
> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*[20]

I am trapped in my own nostalgia's kitsch. In the simplest sense of this trap, I am an American woman; the only reason I have ties to Slovakia is through my family's stories. I have chosen to adopt Slovakia within myself, to put it on display. In contrast, my brother shows no warmth towards his heritage. He is indifferent to the fact that he is Slovak; he has not made an exhibit of it. He has no nostalgia towards it.

In so many ways, it is problematic that the stories I hoard are not completely mine. The history and context do not belong to me, and as a result, my nostalgia seems perpetually misplaced. It feels as if I have committed a theft, appropriating my family's stories for my own purpose, my own desires.

But who can be a proprietor of stories? As Roland Barthes writes, "Can one—or at least could one ever—begin to write without taking oneself for another?"[21] In the seeds of all my stories, all my memories, there are traces of someone else's. It brings a

[20] Kundera. 256.
[21] Barthes, p. 19.

small comfort that this is the experience of every writer and storyteller: no matter how much we deny our participation, our involvement, still we remain. In memory, everything is stolen, borrowed.

In the final paragraph of his novel *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, Michael Chabon writes: "No doubt all of this is not true remembrance but the ruinous work of nostalgia, which obliterates the past, and no doubt, as usual, I have exaggerated everything."[22] And so I mimic Chabon's sentiment with this project. No doubt, I too have exaggerated everything.

Every artists, at some point in their lives, goes and reads a little book on quantum mechanics, and they hear about Schroedinger's cat or the uncertainty principle or something like that. And then they go write a really bad play. And it's inevitably terrible. People who don't know a lot of physics seem to like it.
Dave Kestenbaum, *This American Life*[23]

The mediocrity principle states that nothing (no person, place, or object) is inherently more special than any other. I first learned the principle in an episode of "This American Life." In the introduction to the episode, Ira Glass introduces an experimental particle physicist, Dave Kestenbaum, who admits to despising the fact that non-scientists take laws of physics and "apply them to ourselves and our petty little relationships with each other."[24]

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[22] Michael Chabon. *Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics. 2001.) p. 280.
[23] "Family Physics." *This American Life*. WBEZ Chicago, Public Radio International. 2002. Radio.
[24] "Family Physics." *This American Life*. 2002.

This feels familiar. *The Book of Other People* can be interpreted as a misappropriation of the mediocrity principle. Slovakia has no more inherent utility than the United States, or the Czech Republic, or Antarctica. Jablon has no more value than Cincinnati or Eugene or Pittsburgh or New York City.

The only way Slovakia and Jablon feel significant and special is through the filtering of my own experience. Retrospect allows me to weed out the boredom, loneliness and banality of my days there. Memory allows me to recall *ad nauseum* the bewildering aspects of Slovakia, the moments of pure happiness and wonder.

Retrospect is memory, and memory is dangerous. It permits me to forget the mediocrity principle; it allows me to remember Slovakia through a sentimental, hazy gaze. It lets me blur memories, infusing them with grandiosity.

But just as dangerous is a lack of memory. If I refuse to remember Slovakia and acknowledge its impact on me, I am a liar. If I try to convince myself that my time in Slovakia was just like any other, I am empty. Memory is part of the human constitution. We are all built of blurred recollections.

Memory is what allows me to write anything at all.

Nostalgia, like irony, is not a property of the object itself but a result of an interaction between subjects and objects, between actual landscapes and the landscapes of the mind
Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*[25]

Every summer, Pittsburgh's only amusement park, Kennywood, has a Slovak Celebration Day in the middle of July. For a stretch of pre-pubescent years, my brother

[25] Svetlana Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books. 2001.) p. 354.

and I would travel to our Pittsburgh grandparents' house especially for the occasion. My parents would remain at home, in Cincinnati. We would stay a week in Pittsburgh, playing mini-golf and getting books from the library, but the real event was always Slovak Day. Once a year, our Slavic heritage guaranteed us free entry into the amusement park. My Pittsburgh relatives always made pierogis and čeregi for the day.

Once we brought a tray of čeregi back to Cincinnati. My friend tried one. She grimaced and placed it into her napkin, folded it up. "What's in that?" she asked.

We shrugged.

"It just tastes like fried dough," she said, and placed her crumpled napkin aside. She did not spit it out, but still I felt affronted.

And so it was. Nothing special; just flour, salt, sugar, and oil. To us, it was decadent. We had no shortage of sugar in our normal lives, but we never had anything like čeregi, folded and deep-fried in a pot of boiling oil, laid out on a paper towel so as to let the grease drip.

V. The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"[26]

My nostalgia is phantasmal. At this very moment as I write, my memories of Slovakia feel elusive, hallucinatory. Of course, this is not uncommon—all memories are colored and transformed.

What does become phantasmal is the sense of detachment I felt while moving through Slovakia. As people, buildings, streets appeared before me, they felt like memories unraveling. I began to miss the things that were right in front of me. Faced with their presence, I reveled in the notion of their absence.

For instance, I once witnessed an elderly couple at a crosswalk. It was a sunny afternoon in Bratislava. The old man had only one arm, the right sleeve of his jacket hanging loose against his side. When the crosswalk flashed, he looked both ways before stepping into the street. He turned and offered his arm to the old woman, whom I presumed to be his wife. I remember thinking, *The man had one arm to give and he gave it*.

I imagined them buying vegetables from the market. In my mind, they return home to the flat, walking slowly up the stairs, the man struggling with his key to unlock the apartment. They place the vegetables in the cupboard, every item in its correct place. She puts on a kettle of water for tea, he sits at the kitchen table.

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[26] Walter Benjamin. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1955.) p. 255.

This image filled me not with sadness but with happiness. This is what their life had become, sitting in pleasant silence, waiting for water to boil.

When I passed them on the street, I averted my eyes. I didn't want to observe anything that might dispel my fantasy of them. It felt good to think of them like that. Even now, it feels good to remember them like that.

Such is the fantasy of nostalgia: objects are shelved into the category of memory, of pastness, even as they exist in the present.

What's fertile in a wound? Why dwell in one? Wounds promise authenticity and profundity; beauty and singularity, desirability.
Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams*[27]

One evening this fall, I was sitting in bed with my girlfriend. Both of us were reading books, our shoulders touching. Suddenly, she put hers aside and lay on the bed. She curled into the fetal position, her face against my thigh, her back bent like a knot.

Something was different. She did not usually curl so silently and without warning. She burrowed deeper against my body. I tried to look at her face, tried to pull away in order to create space between us. I wanted to see her.

She burrowed deeper. "You never let me burrow," she said.

"I always let you burrow."

She shook her head. "Not when I need to." This she said quietly. Perhaps her voice was muffled by my body. Perhaps she had not wanted me to hear it.

[27] Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams*. (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press. 2014.)

It was true. It is a quality I cannot shake—I cannot help but peer closer into the wound. In her moment of need, of desperation to hide, I wanted to see her face. I needed to see what she wanted to mask.

Later that evening, she told me what had happened. That day, she had waited for her brother to open the door, forgetting for a moment that he had died a year earlier in a car crash. We were silent in my bed, the lights off. In the darkness, I could not see her face. I rubbed her back as she silently cried. My chest became wet with her tears.

My preoccupation with wounds led me to Slovakia in the first place. Although I was raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, I visited Pittsburgh twice a year to visit my dad's family, the Slovak side. My great-grandmother, Mary Lorinc, spent most of her young adult life in Jablon, a village in Eastern Slovakia. After having her first child, she left for America alone, to work and send money back to her young son and husband. She worked at a textile factory in Pittsburgh.

I never asked to see the factory, or her first house, or where she spent her time. She died when I was fifteen, years before I realized all the wounds she had amassed in her life as an immigrant woman, raising six children in a small house, one of whom would die at age nineteen in a drunk driving accident, another who would spend his life in a mental institution, never able to fully recognize her.

What I knew about my great-grandmother was easy. She spoke with a thick accent and went to Mass daily. She was traditionally racist (upon coming to San Francisco on a family vacation in 1999, she whispered fearfully in my grandmother's ear, "Where are all the white people?") and hypercritical of her own children, although

full of love and lenience for the rest of her progeny. She had married a Slovak man with a Hungarian surname, a point no one in the family wished to belabor. She did needlepoint.

All these things I knew, the same way I knew the drumming of my father's fingers on the dashboard in traffic, or the way my mother looked at herself in the mirror. These small things, the details that integrate themselves into some sort of fabric. It is only through their absence that I notice strangeness.

I have been thinking about Tomas for many years. But only in the light of these reflections did I see him clearly.
Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*[28]

My great-grandmother was not a martyr. Her stories are not new; they are details of an immigrant's journey into an unknown world. She had many wounds, but so too did she have triumphs.

I neither wish to melodramatize nor sentimentalize her. I want to feel her stories, to emphasize, to understand. She was a Slovak woman who lived most of her life in America. Among my acquaintances, I would be hard-pressed to find a great-grandparent who did not match this narrative, although the details may differ.

The details—maybe they are what fascinate me. I am obsessed with the details of my great-grandmother's life, now that she is dead and now that I am older. I am preoccupied by the question of home. Her estrangements, from her country and family,

[28] Kundera, p.6

perturb me. I wonder what it would be like to step off a ship and know that you must begin again.

Her life seems elusive and alluring. She went through unknowable hardships that I never will endure, and to my shame, I envy her for them in some small, stupid way.

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well.
Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"[29]

This is a memory I would rather not remember. As such, I cannot forget it.

My first night in Jablon, my family held a bonfire, a welcoming party for me. They invited their neighbors and family members. For dinner, there was roasted wild boar and bean soup, fresh cucumbers and tomatoes. I was drunk off hot wine.

There were two young men off to the side, whispering to each other. Evidently the taller one had dated my cousin Lilka years ago. I cannot remember their names. Neither boy spoke much English.

The taller one looked at me and smiled. His dark hair was slicked to the side. He looked around. The family was engrossed in conversation, gossip. He stepped towards me. He licked his lips. "Nigger," he said slowly. His voice dropped on the last syllable, as if he were uncertain of the pronunciation.

I turned back to the fire. I drank more wine and excused myself. I walked to the bathroom. In the backyard, Milosz the Great Dane howled from his pen.

[29] Benjamin, p. 257.

I washed my hands. They were not dirty, but the cold water felt good against my skin.

I have no idea why he said that.

The Photograph does not call up the past…the effect is produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I has seen has indeed existed.
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*[30]

There are two photographs that haunt me. It feels irrational, that they perturb me this way. One is a black and white photograph of a boy in the field. He is a stranger to me—I do not know him. The other is of my great-Aunt Helen as a young girl, standing in front of her family's barn in Slovakia.

The first photograph has an easily recognizable aesthetic beauty—the foreground is in focus, the gap between his front teeth is barely visible; the background is blurry, the wildflowers hazy. The second photograph has less immediate aesthetic appeal—neither the foreground nor the background are in focus, and the image is whitewashed from too much exposure.

These images push on me in ways that I feel powerless to defend. But perhaps no defense is necessary. These photographs speak to my nostalgia; they play on my penchant towards sentimentality. They spark a rustic fantasy of my family's old country. They make me feel simultaneously whole and empty. Whole because I feel satiated, brimming with stories, characters, narratives. Empty because I know that they are not mine.

[30] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. (New York: Hill and Wang. 1981.) p. 82.

I can point to these factors and label them as "wound-making," or "sign-making." I want these photographs to speak to me in a deeper, more significant way, and so I ascribe meaning to them. Hence, I feel.

This is the rationale I wish I could believe. I want to write it off as cause-and-effect, to laugh at my own sentimentality. This feels stronger to me, more mature. This feels like what other people want to hear.

But the situation is messier than that. My laughter in the face of these images is either of joy or desperation, and neither can I fully understand.

Yet as soon as it is a matter of being—and no longer of a thing—the Photograph's evidence has an entirely different stake.
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*[31]

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes admits that his desire to write about photography "corresponded to a discomfort I had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical."[32] Photography eludes him because "it aspires, perhaps, to become as crude, as certain, as noble as a sign, which would afford it access to the dignity of a language: but for there to be a sign there must be a mark; deprived of a principle of marking, photographs are signs which don't take, which turn, as milk does."[33]

In *Camera Lucida,* Barthes provides the vocabulary to express more analytically *how* the photographs mean to him, and *why* they do. He is bold enough to admit his own

[31] Barthes. p.107.
[32] Barthes. p. 8.
[33] Barthes. p. 6.

pathos and sentimentality, although he grants that his "pleasure was an imperfect mediator, and that a subjectivity reduced to its hedonistic project could not recognize the universal."[34]

Camera Lucida inspires me to be honest, to be embarrassed. Most importantly, it gives me the courage to investigate my personal, primitive response. Like Barthes, I must "descend deeper into myself to find the evidence of Photography, that thing which seen by anyone looking at a photograph and which distinguishes it in his eye from any other image."[35] Confessing my pathos does not necessarily allow me to move past it, as it will always be with me.

I still struggle with rationally understanding why these two photographs (the boy in the field, and my Aunt Helen as a young girl, in front of a stable door) stick with me. Maybe that is the point. I must abandon rationale, and use instead pathos and nostalgia, as imperfect tools are they are.

As Spectator I was interested in Photography only for "sentimental" reasons; I wanted it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think.
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*[36]

I am hesitant to show these two photographs, of the boy in the field and of my Aunt Helen, to others. I both desire and fear their reactions. I want their understanding, their approval. I want them to look at me, look at the photographs, and then look at me again, full of enlightenment and serious feeling. But yet, I fear that they will glance at

[34] Barthes. p. 60.
[35] Barthes. p. 60.
[36] Barthes. p. 21.

the photograph, raise their eyebrows, and smile lightly. “Huh,” they might say, before handing me the photograph back. “Interesting.”

For Barthes, a photograph is constituted of two parts: the studium and the punctum. The studium is the “classical body of information,” such as historical, cultural, and political context. The punctum is what pricks. It “rises from the scene, shoots out like an arrow, and pierces me.”[37] The punctum is what I cannot quite grasp from the photographs of the boy in the field and my Aunt Helen—it is what leaves me, startled and exhilarated and full of pungent feeling.

He felt the job of having acquired yet another piece of the world, of having taken his imaginary scalpel and snipped yet another strip off the infinite canvas of the universe.

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*[38]

I stole the photograph of the boy in the field from my third cousin’s house in a small village in Eastern Slovakia. I was sitting at Milka’s table, and she motioned towards the old photographs splayed on the table. From America, my great-grandmother had been sending photos back to her family in Jablon. Over the years, these Slovak relatives had accumulated heaps of pictures of strange family members whose names and relation they did not know.

There were pictures of my great-grandma in Jablon, and of my father as a toddler in Pittsburgh. I even found a picture of myself as a baby. My great-grandma

[37] Barthes, p. 26.
[38] Kundera. p. 207.

Lorinc held me. I wore a yellow dress. I must have been three or four months old, my eyes squinted against the light.

Milka offered me the pictures of my family members. I reached for the photos, then hesitated. “Je dobre?” I asked in my timid Slovak. *It is okay?* Milka nodded and rolled off a quick response in Slovak, something to the effect of, “I don’t know these people, what would I do with these photographs?” I took the pictures of my father as a child and my grandmother. I left the photo of myself. A souvenir of my presence, my existence to these people.

The photograph I stole was not of my father, nor of my Aunt Helen. The boy is unrecognizable. When I picked up the photo, Milka took it from me, brought it to her face, and smiled. She replaced it on the table. I reached for it. “Chlapec v louka,” I said. *Boy in field*. Milka nodded.

Boy in field. Kneeling in grass. It seems like early summertime, with the wildflowers in full bloom. A hill swells in the background. In the foreground is the boy, with his overalls and checkered flannel, button to his throat. He seems to be between five and seven years old. He has white hair cut straight across his eyebrows, and he is grinning. He only has one front tooth.

The photograph is black and white. It is blurry. Someone must have moved the camera before the shutter could completely click. It is also crooked, as if someone had been distracted right before taking it.

Milka did not explicitly forbid me to take the photograph. Or she may have; my Slovak was elementary at best. But she did not offer this photograph as she had done

the others. She must have known the boy in the photograph; perhaps it was her brother, or cousin, or neighbor. With the hill and the fields of wildflowers, the photo was probably taken in Jablon, in the field behind the farm, the one I had wandered earlier that afternoon.

Milka asked if I wanted something to drink. Čaj, I told her. *Tea.* She walked into the kitchen, her plastic slippers slapping against the linoleum floor. I could hear her rummaging through her cabinets.

I slipped the picture into my pocket. “Musim ist do zachod,” I called. *I must go to the bathroom*. I ran upstairs to the guest room. I placed the photo in between the pages of my journal, pressing them shut.

Yet as soon as it is a matter of being—and no longer of a thing—the Photograph's evidence has an entirely different stake.
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*[39]

Regarding the photograph of my Aunt Helen, I found it taped to a page in a Slovak cookbook she had given me a few years back. She had gathered the family recipe notecards and copied them fastidiously into the lined pages of a notebook. Interspersed through the pages of recipes were newspaper clippings and photographs. Of me, my father as young child, my great-grandma Lorinc.

Of all the photographs in the cookbook, the most striking one is of my Aunt Helen as a girl. She is young, probably twelve or thirteen. Grandma Lorinc and she travelled to Slovakia in 1960 and spent a summer in Jablon, the village where Grandma Lorinc grew up.

The picture is blurry. In the background is a barn door with crooked slats. My Aunt Helen has just begun to smile. Her arm is bent, as if she were about to raise her hand to stop the camera.

[39] Barthes, p.107.

sautéed in butter.

Salt & pepper to taste.

Fry up in butter OR roast in oven

SEPT 1960

Jablon, Czechoslovakia

25 Aug 2014 → I just walked past the same stable.

Just for the cool glasses!

greenroom®

An odd thing, souvenir-hunting: now becomes then even while it is still now. You don't really believe you're there, and so you nick the proof, or something you mistake for it.

Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*[40]

Once, in a poetry course, my professor told us to find a lost item and write a poem about it. He was a young man, getting his MFA, and probably needed the writing exercises as much as we did. For inspiration, he suggested garage sales, antique shops, bathroom graffiti.

That afternoon, I searched through my closet, where my sentimental letters and trinkets laid in a Nike shoebox. I flipped open the pages of the cookbook and found the photograph of my Aunt Helen. I stared at it for a long while, desperately trying to memorize the details as if to unlock their poetry.

Days later, when I finally sat down to write the poem, I did not look at the image. Roland Barthes says, "I may know better a photograph that I remember than a photograph I am looking at."[41]

The poem was well received in class. Other students liked it. I have noticed that people enrolled in creative writing classes seem to love old and forgotten things. We gush at their existence, bow our heads with their significance.

However, my instructor was unmoved. He wrote, "Give us more of Helen. What does she mean to you? What does it mean that her dress reminded you of Pittsburgh summer?" They were good questions, and I had no answers.

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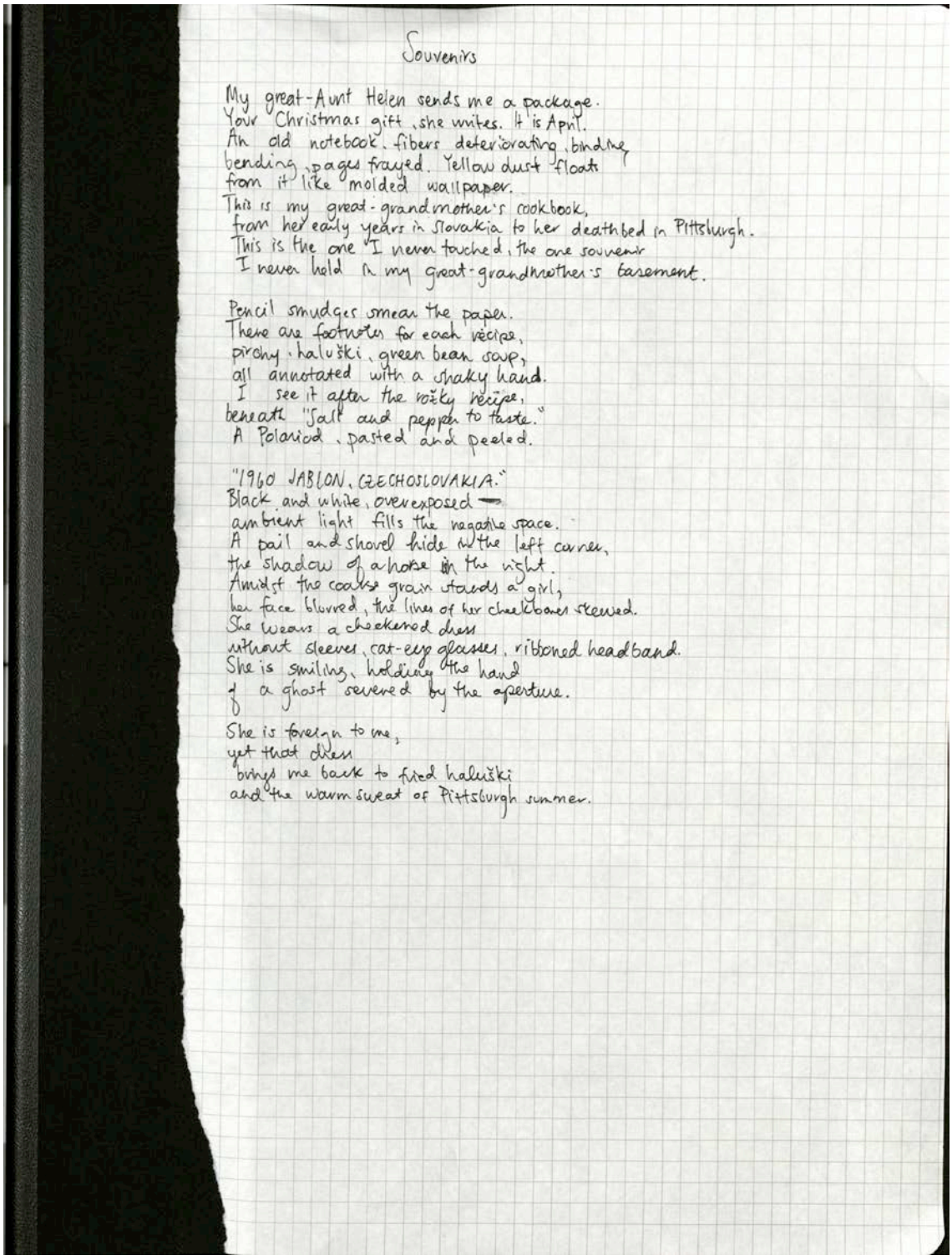
[40] Margaret Atwood. *The Blind Assassin*. (Toronto: Emblem Editions. 2001.) p. 217.
[41] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 53.



Souvenirs

My great-Aunt Helen sends me a package.
Your Christmas gift, she writes. It is April.
An old notebook. fibers deteriorating, binding
bending, pages frayed. Yellow dust floats
from it like molded wallpaper.
This is my great-grandmother's cookbook,
from her early years in Slovakia to her deathbed in Pittsburgh.
This is the one I never touched, the one souvenir
I never held in my great-grandmother's basement.

Pencil smudges smear the paper.
There are footnotes for each recipe,
pirohy, haluški, green bean soup,
all annotated with a shaky hand.
I see it after the rožky recipe,
beneath "salt and pepper to taste."
A Polaroid, pasted and peeled.

"1960 JABLON, CZECHOSLOVAKIA."
Black and white, overexposed —
ambient light fills the negative space.
A pail and shovel hide in the left corner,
the shadow of a horse in the night.
Amidst the coarse grain stands a girl,
her face blurred, the lines of her cheekbones skewed.
She wears a checkered dress
without sleeves, cat-eye glasses, ribboned headband.
She is smiling, holding the hand
of a ghost severed by the aperture.

She is foreign to me,
yet that dress
brings me back to fried haluški
and the warm sweat of Pittsburgh summer.

The Amateur renews his pleasure (*amator*: one who loves and loves again); he is anything but a hero.
Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*[42]

Now when I read this poem, I remember how I lied. The cookbook was not a "lost object," as the assignment had instructed. The notebook that my Aunt Helen sent me was not old, nor frayed. It was not my great-grandmother's original notebook. It was just a collection of recipes hand-written by my Aunt Helen in a notebook she had purchased. I doubt my great-grandmother even had a cookbook—she very likely had the recipes memorized.

I do not know why that dress reminded me of Pittsburgh summer years ago, when I wrote that poem. To be honest, I am not sure it did. There was probably something about that photo that caught me, a punctum, and I did not have the patience or energy to sit with it and explore it more deeply. So I made the checkered dress the sign, Pittsburgh the signified, and I ignored the hollowness of it, smiled when my classmates praised the ending stanza.

For Franz, a cemetery was an ugly dump of stones and bones.
Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*[43]

Yesterday, I thumbed through the pages of my journal. It was Sunday and rainy; I was in the throes of upturning my room in hopes of finding a certain letter. Instead I found a different piece of paper, folded carefully into the center of my notebook.

[42] Barthes, p. 52.
[43] Kundera, p. 104.

This particular piece of paper is a sketch of a family tree. It is of my Slovak family; the American relatives are relegated to the right hand of the paper, in squished handwriting.

I drew this family tree with Milka. We sat together at her kitchen table, each with a pencil in hand and a blank piece of paper in front of us. We wrote the names lightly, looking to each other for confirmation. I wrote names of people I had no idea existed; she did the same.

The top of the tree was arbitrary; we started with Jan Židzik and a Mary whose last name I did not know. They are my great-great grandparents, buried in the cemetery right outside of Jablon.

These people were as strange and foreign to me as Slovakia, but the next day Lilka and I walked to their graves outside the Jablon village boundaries. As we passed, an old woman came out and spoke to Lilka. She had a scarf tied beneath her chin, her grey hair tucked away.

Lilka gestured towards me and replied in Slovak. The woman nodded and returned to her porch. Her back was hunched.

We continued walking. “I told her you are my cousin,” Lilka said.

I nodded, kept walking.

We arrived at the graves. They were small and grey. Each had a rosary draped over them. Lilka handed me a match. She knelt down and lit our great-great grandfather’s candle. I followed, lighting a candle for my great-grandmother.

We made the sign of the cross for posterity and walked home. It began to rain.

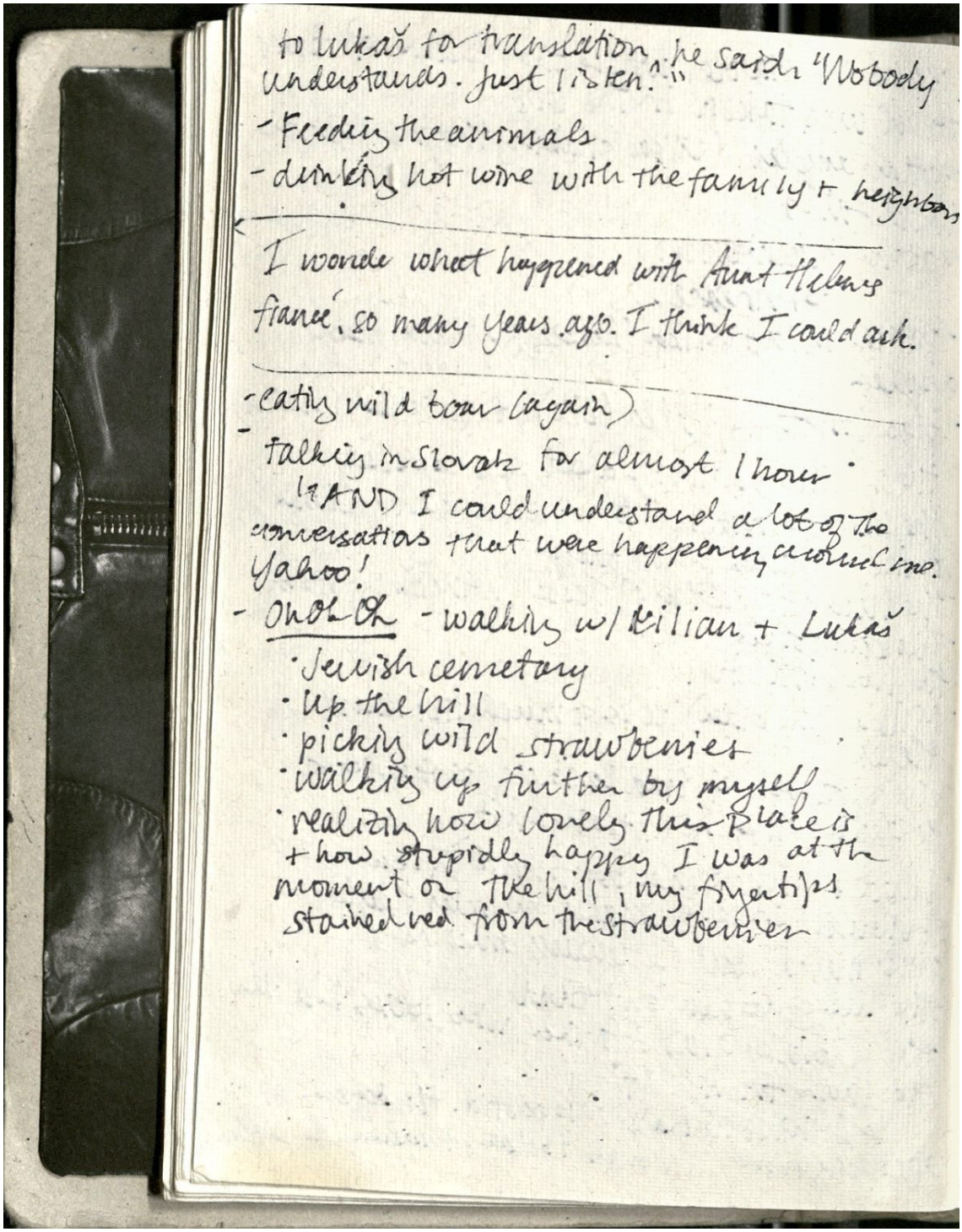
He struggled to hear himself, but produced in this effort no more than another aural scene, another fiction. Hence to entrust himself to writing: is not writing that language which has renounced producing the last word, which lives and breathes by yielding itself up to others so that they can hear you?
Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*[44]

To end it all with yet another physics principle: Occam's Razor. It proposes that the simplest theory is often the most appropriate. If you considered the possibilities of theories of a situation, you would go on infinitely. Thus, it is best to consider the most likely hypothesis.

In accordance with Occam's razor, I wrote all of this because—

I still don't know.

[44] Barthes. p. 136.



to Lukáš for translation. He said: "Nobody understands. Just listen."
- Feeding the animals
- drinking hot wine with the family + neighbors

I wonder what happened with Aunt Helena's fiancé, so many years ago. I think I could ask.

- eating wild boar (again)
- talking in Slovak for almost 1 hour.
  (AND I could understand a lot of the conversations that were happening around me. Yahoo!
- Ohňa Ok - walking w/ Kilian + Lukáš
  - Jewish cemetary
  - up the hill
  - picking wild strawberries
  - walking up further by myself
  - realizing how lovely this place is + how stupidly happy I was at the moment on the hill, my fingertips stained red from the strawberries

Afterword

The Book of Other People is implicitly self-reflective and confronts nostalgia and memory in order to blur the distinction between creative and critical writing. Its composition has been a labor of love, determination, sorrow and frustration. It is a piece of scholarship that explores the tension of memory and nostalgia through innovating on the genre of academic prose. *The Book of Other People* is messy, full of contradictions and musings and delight and shame. It is full of photos, poems and journal entries. *The Book of Other People* mirrors my own nostalgic process and memory in a way that a traditional research thesis would not. So here it is: my afterword, an offering that *The Book of Other People* is not just another attempt to reinvent the wheel, but an exercise to think formally and critically about how best to reflect on place and memory.

❖

I travelled to Slovakia in the late summer of 2014. Thanks to a scholarship from the First Ladies of Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union, I was enrolled in Studia Akademika Slovaka's summer language institute at Comenius University in Bratislava. I had earned the scholarship based on an essay I had written, explaining the importance of my Slovak heritage and my wish to become connected to my family's history. The ladies at the LPSCU lodge loved it, and my grandmother was proud.

My course at the Studia Akademika Slovaka was the most basic one available—no previous knowledge of Slovak was required. Most of the other students were from Western Europe. They had Slovak girlfriends or husbands and wished to learn the

language for their sakes. One student, an Austrian man named Christian, had no girlfriend but was hoping to obtain one through mastering Slovak. “One Slavic language,” he said, then snapped his fingers, “And the Baltics are wide open.”

I nodded and turned away, hoping he wouldn’t notice that I scribbled his words onto the margins of my notebook.

During those weeks in Slovakia, I lived in a Communist high-rise, the Hotel Družba. My room was sparse. On the bed were polyester sheets. Taped to the walls were magazine pages of Slavic bodybuilders, the yellowed edges curled and ripped. From my window I could see the Danube river and the forested hills beyond. The curtains were dirty.

I rented a white beach cruiser from a man in the park and cycled around the city. I spoke to no one, afraid of a language I could not possibly understand.

After one week of class, I finally felt brave enough to ask a question in Slovak outside of the classroom. It happened in a bookstore, where I was looking to purchase a journal. I walked to the counter, analyzing what I would say to the clerk. I would need to use the formal “Vy” form. I would need to use the accusative case. I would need to speak loudly and confidently. I would not smile. Americans smile too much.

We had practiced these sorts of exchanges in class—the store clerk and the customer. In theory, I knew how to order a coffee, a sandwich, cigarettes. I knew how to ask *Where are you from?* And to respond, *How nice!*

I reached the counter. I took a breath. “Máte dennik?” I asked, my voice tight, my spine straight. *Do you have a journal?*

The clerk looked at me, a maroon textbook in her small hand. I tried to match her stare. She was a couple years older, with dyed red hair chopped short and uneven. She shook her head. “I don’t speak English,” she said, her accent thick and slow. Turning away, she returned to the shelves. She had nothing for me.

I stood there for a moment. Then I left the store, ashamed and late for class.

❖

In a way, this vignette seems to serve as a metaphor for my experience in writing *The Book of Other People*. Sometimes the writing process was welcoming; other times, burdensome. My process has been both capricious and earnest, frustrating and elating. Some days, I think *The Book of Other People* is genius; other days, utter shit. In the figurative sense, I have tried again and again to ask for that dennik, that journal: my attempts at the Slovak language, of meeting my family, of writing about my family, of failing to write the stories I thought I wanted, of failing to mask my nostalgia, of realizing my confusing sentimentality, of trying to write despite it all. I’m often brought back to the memory of that woman saying, “I don’t speak English,” and turning away from me.

Maybe *The Book of Other People* was a success, in your eyes. Maybe not. That seems to be one of the tenants of writing—living on the edge of genius and shit. It’s terrifying. Oftentimes I cannot even muster the courage to review it myself. The thought of facing my own words, and the judgment and embarrassment that come with it, is too much for me.

Yet, even with my embarrassment, I am proud of *The Book of Other People.* I desire people to read it, yet I fear their reactions. This is a phenomenon that John Keats

called negative capability, or "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties. Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." *The Book of Other People* is proof of my own negative capability. I confess to a myriad of ethical failings—the appropriation of my family's stories, the misplaced nostalgia, the petty theft of the photograph. I am embarrassed, I am guilty; I throw myself before the reader and wait for absolution.

And yet, I am happy. Delighted even, to have these snippets of other lives. I relish in their imagined narratives. Every day, I live through my nostalgia of Slovakia, and the people I met there, and the places I wandered.

And I am happy. Not satisfied, but happy. Not whole, but happy.

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The Book of Other People is neither purely academic nor traditional research. It is a hybrid form, a series of fragments interrupted by other thoughts. It mimics memory and nostalgia. I wrote *The Book of Other People* in the first person because it allowed me to surprise myself in the act of writing, as well as created intimacy between the reader and the writing. Nostalgia is inherently belated, a perpetual return to memory. As such, to write about nostalgia creates temporal tension because in writing about the past, the present inevitably interrupts. The fragmentation of *The Book of Other People* mimics the tension of memory, as well as mirroring the writing process.

The Book of Other People intimidates me, but not because it feels inaccessible the way "proper scholarship" does. Rather, the *Book of Other People* intimidates me because it is so vulnerable, so intimate, so reflective. It is too close for my comfort, but that it the only way the project functions—to become uncomfortably close.

A feeling of discomfort, for both the writer and the reader, is the major similarity between the works that influenced this project. I pulled ideas and philosophies from Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*, and Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* to explore the tensions of nostalgia. From Kundera I studied his way of exploding the banalities of life. Boym provided me a critical framework to view nostalgia, as either reflective or restorative. Barthes' honesty and intimacy astounded me, and inspired me to use vulnerability in my writing to an advantage.

Aside from these three works, I pulled quotes from a number of short stories and literary essays I had read over the years. In *The Book of Other People,* the selected quotes provide the reader a starting point to understand the fragments. In a larger sense, *The Book of Other People* is a series of interruptions from other people, like Kundera and Moore and Boym and Barthes. They are the interlocutors, layering my exploration of nostalgia and memory. Just like in memory, in the *Book of Other People*, who said what slips into the background and new narratives begin to form.

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I have only attended several book readings thus far in my life, but I have gathered that within the literary elite, questions from the audience about an author's writing process are considered inane and silly, signs of desperation for the would-be writer.

However, I am wildly curious about other writers' processes. I am one of those in the audience dying to know how someone produced a novel, or a short story, or a poetry collection. *What's your secret?* I want to shout. *What's your secret?*

In my efforts to co-opt other writers' strategies, I have tried: waking up at 4 am, typing in a small and dark space, listening to white noise, listening to brown noise, listening to no noise, ditching the computer and writing on lined notebook paper, writing in parks, writing in coffee shops, writing on the bus, writing on the train, using a voice recorder, calling my voicemail, texting story ideas to myself, texting story ideas to others, scribbling notes on scrap paper, on notebooks, on my hands.

Ultimately, *The Book of Other People* was truly written when I let myself write what I wanted to explore—my own nostalgia. When I abandoned what I thought I needed to write, my process truly began.

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In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym writes, "Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values". I certainly fall into this trap of romanticizing Slovakia, of indulging my nostalgic fantasies. I want the antiquity, the "old country" of my great-grandmother's stories.

When I arrived in Slovakia, what I found was a country very much like my own home, in many respects. People drove cars, rode bikes, had sex, lived in apartments, smoked cigarettes, drank beer, spoke quick slang that I could not understand. Bratislava was not so unbelievably different from other cities I had visited.

What did feel different was Jablon. Jablon was where I witnessed relics of my great-grandmother's prior life. I sifted through photographs of her dead family. I picked wild strawberries on a nearby hillside that I imagined she had hiked as a young girl.

Jablon was the epitome of my fantasy. It was Slovakia as I had imagined for so many years.

And yet, my family's lives were utterly different than I had imagined. Their sense of national identity was fractured, their trust in politics frayed. They had lived through dark periods, of Communism and the fractured Czechoslovakia. I was prepared for none of this. I am still confused by the situation. It feels messy, intangible to me.

Perhaps as well it should be. In regards to Slovakia, I am and will forever be a stranger in a strange land.

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In a draft of *The Book of Other People*, I wrote: "Slovakia was not the most important event of my life. In many ways, Slovakia was a non-event. It only becomes an event when I write about it."

But this is not totally true. Slovakia is more important to me than I wish to admit, and I am embarrassed that I was so strongly moved by a place that never got to know me, by people who have probably since forgotten me.

I do not want to use Slovakia as a lynchpin in my own narrative. It feels too easy, cliché. Perhaps this is why I confess to my ethical failings in *The Book of Other People*, of being a stranger in a strange land and all its nuances. There were many drafts where I tried to downplay my nostalgia, my sentimentality. I wanted to seem more distant, more nonchalant. It seemed like this would make me a stronger writer, a keener observer.

What it made me was a liar, and not a very good one. My advisors saw through my attempts. "You beat nostalgia to a bloody pulp," one of them told me. They advised

that I defend my nostalgia and appropriation, rather than condemn them and wait for the reader's absolution.

So here it is. Slovakia was hugely important to me. I miss the hills of Jablon, the slow mornings and the Danube River, the stumbling through a language whose logic was just starting to take shape. I was stupidly happy there. I was terribly lonely.

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