We Walk and Say, “Oh”

A dissertation presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2016

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We Walk and Say, “Oh”

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ABSTRACT

MODLIN, BRAD A., Ph.D, August 2016, English

We Walk and Say, “Oh”

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“To Cleave Means to Separate and to Join: A Look at Interstice in Prose” examines the use of interstice—the interlude between sections within segmented prose structures. The essay explores the benefits and risks of writing segmented structures and how gaps create meaning in the work of authors such as Roger Rosenblatt, Lia Purpura, and Maggie Nelson. In additional to structural interludes, interstice in content—the unsaid—is also explored through the works of Debra Marquart, Jenny Boully, Joy Castro, and others. The creative component, We Walk and Say, “Oh”, is a segmented creative nonfiction manuscript about a long walk. Collaging narrative and reflection, it explores questions of pilgrimage, stories & legends, and providence & accident.
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CHAPTER 1: CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: TO CLEAVE MEANS TO SEPARATE
AND TO JOIN: A LOOK AT INTERSTICE IN PROSE

The nearer the peregrini are brought to the Holy Land, the more their progress is slowed by the increasing number of shrines and holy places lying in their way.

(Christian Zacher, Curiosity and Pilgrimage: The Literature of Discovery in Fourteenth-Century England, p. 137.)

Refract: “to break the course of light and turn it out of a direct line. To break the course of.” [...] Gaps below doors breathe cold gusts in. [...] Refraction occurs at the boundary between two mediums. At the boundary between two mediums—body to body, cheek pressed to cheek—is a little black line into which everything falls.

(Lia Purpura, Increase, pp. 139-40.)

Lia Purpura speaks of a little black line between objects. The gap—between the door and the floor—that breathes. Let us call that the “interstice,” the place that enacts both meanings of “cleft.” In segmented nonfiction such as the book Increase, interstice breathes its way onto almost every page. Between prose segments, interstice is not a black outline or black ink, but, of course, the white space. The easy-to-overlook location in between noticeable, real locations. The “absence” —I say in loud quotation marks—that segments need in order to exist in the first place, what they require just as rooms require walls to separate them from other rooms. (Or, to speak Italian or poet: stanza breaks create stanzas.)

This essay explores effects of using two forms ofinterstice in prose. As we will see, the first form, structural interstice—along with segmentation—create first and last lines; create pauses (which come with their own benefits and risks to be dealt with); and enable opportunities for joining, for juxtaposition. The second form, interstice in content, is noticeable silence or the unsaid, and it invites the reader to join the author by participating in the writing. Strolling through many examples, we will note how authors use interstice to their advantage.
It is fitting that a discussion of interstice accompanies a manuscript about a walking pilgrimage. As Christian Zacher’s above quote highlights, before peregrini finally reach Jerusalem, (or Santiago de Compostela), they stop in many shrines—quiet places, pauses between miles—and then they walk again.

Between footfalls, the foot hovers in space.

The Interstice as Source of First and Last Lines

Let us start at the start: one advantage of interstice is that it gives us many beginnings—and endings. In 1962, psychologist B. B. Murdoch, now famous for it, read to his study participants lists of words (ranging from ten to forty of them), and then he asked participants which they remembered. Which were easiest for them to recall? The first and the last. Hence the “serial position effect,” which notifies us of the “primacy effect” and the “recency effect”: order matters, and we best remember that which opens or closes a list. Therefore, a likely advantage of the segmented structure is that, because it allows for a greater number of first and last sentences (or images, or thoughts), it also allows for more sentences to be well remembered.

This puts pressure on these firsts and lasts, of course. If readers are going to remember them, they had better be strong. Again and again, the writer must make an excellent first impression (and say goodbye well). Let us look at three examples of segments’ first sentences that rise to this challenge:

1.) “While you were alive the past was a live unfinished thing,” (Abigail Thomas, Safekeeping, 5). Note the speed and impossibility packed into this powerful sentence. Thomas’s lack of commas heightens the insistence of the declaration, a declaration that is in a way, nonsensical. Good sense tells us that of course the past is neither living nor
unfinished; the quick certainty of her sentence collides with that good sense, creating a
tension like a starting pistol about to go off. The sonic repetition of “alive/live” highlights
that paradox and a similar one: while asserting that, since the deceased’s death, the past no
longer feels like an unfinished thing, the narrator is, in fact, addressing the deceased (the
passed) in the second person as if he can hear now.

2.) Taking common writing advice literally, Roger Rosenblatt writes, “Hook me in
the gullet,” and opens a segment with a “hook,” a short, powerful imperative that readers
can quote the second they set the book down. (Kayak Morning, 49).

3.) With an approach different from the other two, Dorothy Allison chooses to open
her segment not with a tripod camera fixed on its subject, but with a camera that revolves
around it. She says, “She kissed me gentle, kissed me slow, kissed me like Grace Kelly, a
porcelain princess, a lace-curtain lesbian,” (Two or Three Things I Know for Sure, 66). The
alliteration, repetition, and syntactical patterning here create music that borders on mimesis
of a series of kisses.

Of course, authors want to write books filled up with great sentences throughout,
but those sentences placed as first or last within a passage are bound to stand out. Be they
attractive or unattractive, they are tallest kids in the class group photo. If it had come in the
middle of a paragraph in the middle of the novel, might some of us have read, “So we beat
on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past,” and continued on to the
next sentence without pausing?

In “Postcards from Costa Rica,” Joni Tevis ends a segment with a mundane
occurrence: “After [the boy is] gone, [the mother] sits alone awhile, drinking her cup of
coffee, before getting up to wash the dishes.” The placement of the sentence cautions us
from dismissing the action as trivial. It encourages us to think back to the previous gesture—
the woman, who is perhaps the boy’s mother, has “brush[ed] him clean […] as though it stands for something. May no harm touch him.” The final sentence therefore suggests that dishwashing may be a gesture of protection the mother wishes upon herself. Because of its placement, readers do not glide past it. (The Wet Collection, 55)

Another last sentence demanding attention comes from John D’Agata. “God blew, Picasso said at the [art exhibit] opening, and we were scattered,” D’Agata writes in “Collage History of Art, by Henry Darger,” (Halls of Fame, 179). This segment, about compulsive and/or mentally-troubled artists, concludes by mentioning an art opening. If it were followed by a sentence such as, “It received rave reviews” or something else within the literal art gallery context, we would miss the resonance and “statement-about-humanity” afforded by the openness possible to a last line. Without my brackets, D’Agata’s sentence lends itself to even perhaps a double meaning about creation/human history—“God blew at the opening, and we were scattered.” As nothing follows the sentence and locks it into either interpretation, both are available to us.

Segmented Structures: The Interstice as Pause—Benefits and Challenges

If these frequent first and final moments are indeed strong and memorable, then the interstice between sections gives the reader an opportunity to savor important ideas. Those ideas can echo across the white space, and the pause between segments can last as long as the reader wants to keep reflecting on what he or she has just read. Of course, on one hand,

1 In his craft essay, “How Abigail Thomas Creates Narrative Tension,” Paul Zakrzewski asserts that such endings are key to Safekeeping’s success: “Thomas uses the short section or vignette as the basic building-block of her book. But like chapters or scenes in a more conventional memoir, each of these builds toward some epiphany, some moment of resolution. This propels the reader forward.”
this is a great advantage to the writer. Who doesn’t want her readers to reflect? Through interstice, she invites them to do so—right now—without risking missing any written action or losing one’s place on the page. The writer can include narratives that needs a bit of unpacking, she can include heavier ideas that need a second to sink in, and she can take these risks knowing that the reader is about to be given the time this content requires. Roger Rosenblatt’s *Making Toast* depicts the year after his daughter’s death, and enormous questions find their way into small narrative segments. In one two-paragraph segment, he has a public conversation at the 92nd Street Y with Alice McDermott. This is the second paragraph:

> We talk about *After This*, her novel about the Keane family, whose son is killed in Vietnam. The novel centers not on the death, but rather on the family’s grief, which challenges their faith in God. I ask Alice what God has to do with it. Isn’t life just luck, good and bad? She says we have to believe in God’s overarching good will. “Even as we face unbearable sorrow,” she says, “small things happen that make us able to bear it. John and Mary Keane face the greatest tragedy that a couple could face, and yet things happen in their lives that bring them back to moments of joy.” Alice ascribes such moments to God’s benevolence. I cannot tell if she sees that I do not. (28)

Then comes the pause, during which the reader can think for a moment. The reader has just been presented two grand hypotheses: that God is involved with humanity and that God benevolently makes small good things happen. Two opinions—one for and one against—these hypotheses have also been presented. The reader may want to consider these; Rosenblatt surely hopes they will, as it is one of the thematic questions of the book. At this moment on the page, to continue on with a narrative could seem disproportionate (even
mildly humorous), or the writing could seem heavy-handed—“Oh, what a coincidence! It just so happened that during our afternoon together, Alice talked about parents grieving their children, and then we got potato salad and two dill pickles at the deli.”

While on the one hand, the interstice presents an advantage, on the other, it poses a risk. By inviting the reader to stop and think, the pause invites the reader to stop and think, and an author risks losing his or her reader to daydream. Will thoughts about God and grief take the reader back to a personal experience for ten minutes? Will he pick the book back up afterward? The author has, after all, provided her reader with numerous stopping places.

While many writers, myself included, are glad when readers’ connections to the material slow them down, we want those readers—eventually—to finish the book. The segmented work may not be a page-turner, at least not in the sense of the crime novel’s continuous, forefronted, uninterrupted plot. How to keep the people turning the page (even if slowly)?

Lia Purpura does it through a soft momentum in her book Increase, the first part of which occurs during pregnancy. She from time to time gives us signs that we are approaching the baby’s due date. The literal month and day sit at the top of each segment, but also in other ways, Purpura lets us know we are quietly approaching the book’s first climax—the birth. The book opens, “A blue X slowly crosses itself, first one arm, then the other in the small white window of the test.” Weeks later, she says, “[I] feel increase in the crowded space I am becoming.” And later, as the fetus grows, “[I] lift my shirt and look down, just to see your arm or leg move, graze my stomach from within. Or to see you reach for your ceiling, your soft tent, and make a moving roof of me.” And then, speaking of the approaching day, “And already it is underfoot, slackening, untwining, passing into hardy
dusk. Rounding Gaining on. A day is coming with a name for all I cannot hold off saying much longer.”

Jenny Boully creates page-turning movement and cohesion in even her most disparate, segmented books. In *The Book of Beginning and Endings*, each right-hand page functions as the first page of an essay, and each left-hand page is the last page of a different essay. While the book could be considered a collection of dozens of pieces, it can also be thought of as one segmented book. Boully’s unities, to use Larson’s term, encourage us to read the book the second way. In multiple pieces, the eye-like marks on the wings of luna moths appear. Winged creatures pop up in many essays, with those images becoming more or less pronounced as the book progresses. The moths are atmospheric until their eye-spots become observers. Homing pigeons are a metaphor, and then in a dream, a winged old woman sits atop her home. Butterflies, a little girl is sure, will hatch and fly all over her bedroom if she catches enough caterpillars. The subtle absence of wings: a little girl tries but fails to fly with her umbrella alone. At one point even death has wings. At another point, Boully spotlights her “micro-level unity” in her segment title: “Every Winged Thing Passes Unmolested Through Infinity” (33).

Turning the pages of the book, the reader finds himself connecting to new material as if it is somehow familiar. Again the wings. Again that second-person address to a lover. Aside from the ways this complicates/scrutinizes the many facets of an idea, experience, or color—it also creates a simple affinity. (Though I cannot find the principle documented anywhere, I do not think my college psychology professor made it up when she told the class about the “frequency effect”: that many people in apartment buildings end up marrying their across-the-hall neighbors because they become fond of whom they often see.) The reader, I say, sometimes wants to make friends with a book—or at least with certain aspects of it. On
the crowded street, it is a comfort to see a familiar face, especially if it is one you have seen many times before, if it is someone you have on occasion sat down with for periods of time. We turn the page because we like the wings, and here they are again.

In my own work, I aim to create a rhythm that mimics either the rhythm of walking or the driven feeling, the compulsion to walk—the tomp-tink of the walking staffs. The following segment provides an example:

In naps, I dreamt of shins—of shins tilting up hills, of uphill climbs, of an uphill that endured until it tipped into downhill. In mud, I thought of water. Crossing water, I thought of stones. During the grand rain, streams were called rivers, and rivers were called floods. The water rebelled past the lines the tree roots had drawn for it. It spread past the edges of bridges, and in one forest, a fallen tree seemed a safer crossing than the footbridge. More than many things, I feared slipping a foot into wetness. The river rocks that you must hop across could be covered in slick moss, or your backpack could topple you. And if your socks soak themselves, how will they ever dry in this rain? Walking with wet feet equals blisters, and you can’t stop walking yet. And blisters can make you want to stop walking ever, but tomorrow you must wake and do what you do when you wake. In beds, I dreamt the verbs andar and marcher, and they were not vocabulary.

2 Comedians dub this a “call-back.” Having heard about something before, the audience is pleasantly surprised each time it recurs.

3 Providing such Easter eggs, Bouly encourages readers to proceed across even the interstice between one book and another. The Book of Beginnings and Endings, and The Body, and [one love affair] all contain, at nostalgic moments, the same image of a leaving lover—“the train […] departing”. In each book, the lovers notice the color Payne’s grey, which is the title of a beginning in The Book of Beginnings and Endings.
Because walking is syncopated and ongoing, many of the syntactical building blocks in this paragraph are short. (The first prepositional phrase is two words, the clause is four. Two sentences later, we have again a two-word introductory prepositional phrase before a four-word clause.) The pattern of similar prepositional phrases—a technique borrowed from Boully—feels continuous (“of shins...of uphill climbs...of an uphill).

Particularly in the first sentence, I wanted to repeat words across syntactic units—a quick chain:

[I dreamt of shins] [of shins tilting up hills] [of uphill climbs] [of an uphill]

While a writer often avoids reusing the same words, in this section, it is the right choice because the immediate repetition sounds like endurance—“[T]omorrow you must wake and do what you do when you wake.”

If a reader can get swept up in an obsessive concern for blue, then, too, he can get swept up in compelled sounds, and that energy can push him through pages. A final technique for making readers turn the segmented page is one that takes full advantage of this structure: the episodic narrative.

Joan Wickersham uses this in the opening parts of *The Suicide Index*. At the end of the first segment, the narrator’s father has grabbed the gun and looked at his wife asleep in bed as if for the last time. The next segment opens with her hearing the gun shot and ends with her calling the narrator. In the third segment, the narrator answers the telephone. Though not the cliff-hangers of a crime novel, these breaks in the story do give readers an itch that the next installments will scratch.

I too aim to create curiosity through interrupted narratives. The narrative is interrupted by other narratives or by thought-pieces, and it may be a dozen or more pages before readers next return to the men in the boat. My hope here is that this puts the reader
in a place of constantly anticipating another bit of that story. That the reader leans forward out of a degree of curiosity about the pair, and also for the simple fact that the reader does not know when exactly that next installment will appear.

Mary Robison’s segmented novel *Why Did I Ever?* divides up all its narratives and scenes, making the reader constantly curious about what comes next—and enabling Robison to braid several stories—be they now-time or flashback.

Part of what happens here is that as the narratives pull the reader forward, the reader is further habituated to this type of reading—when the narrative is interrupted by something else entirely, the reader grows more accustomed to the seemingly random and more accustomed to connecting the dots before him. In one section, Robison’s main character says, “I think part of the drag of being lost is that it’s called that […]” In the next, she is still on the road. Then two segments that are sort of connected to the scene but do not further the narrative line: #305) “[My coworker] is here already […]” ; #306) “He and I are supposed to meet up and do a lot of work […] because wherever we are, we’re on the payroll.” The next segment returns to the narrative of trying to find her way on the road: “This spooky stuff along here means I’m going the right way […]” (114-15).

The segmentation/interruption allows addition information (*I’m irritated about my job*) to contribute to her frustration about being lost. The reader is also invited to connect emotional/metaphorical dots (“I don’t know where I am, but one thing I do know is that my job owns me. And it is supposed to scare me [The spooky stuff means I’m going the right way]”). Such interplay encourages readers to turn the page because they never really know when a storyline is finished.  

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4 In some cases, the same can be said for a thought-line. Maggie Nelson often juggle-alternates her subject matters, continuing thought processes/topics and sneakily introducing
In a similar way, divided narratives allow for character/thematic connections within one story or even across distinct stories. In the aforementioned opening sections of *The Suicide Index*, the point of view shifts from the father to the mother to the daughter, but there is not more than a minute’s pause between any of them. As soon as the father enters the study with the gun, the mother hears it go off. She instructs someone to call the daughter, and in the next section, the daughter answers the phone. This technique, often seen in film, makes it feel like the characters are tossing a ball. Rather than occupying exclusively one character’s POV and setting, this method shows us how connected they are, how the story impacts each of them. Across rooms or miles, they are catching the same ball. This is not just the mother’s story or the daughter’s. The segmentation allows for a near-simultaneity that encourages a comparison of their individual reactions.

Such comparison can occur across distinct stories when narratives are braided together. The braiding highlights similarities in each story.

Again, segmentation allows readers to pause, which comes with its own advantages as well as the risk that the reader will stop reading. This danger can be reduced through—for example—signal ing a progression of time, highlighting compulsive content, creating insistent rhythm, or dividing narratives.

This technique can also highlight causal relationships. In comics or graphic memoirs, a given panel could be—at times—likened to a segment of prose, and the gutter between new ones without giving the reader a chance to pull away between topics. At times (aside from interstice), there is no coffee break between subjects. Here is her pattern of topics/segments from pages 52-58: Blues singers; alcohol and depression, as compared to fire; blues singers (Billie Holiday); Billie Holiday; memory as blue; alcohol to help one forget; the Tuareg—blue-skinned people who live nomadically in the desert; roaming; Billie Holiday and Joni Mitchell; depression as compared to fire; the painter Joan Mitchell and alcohol; women, alcohol, and Marguerite Duras; a quote about women from a Duras novel; the Tuareg; the Tuareg.
panels likened to white space in writing. Allison Bechdel jump cuts for this reason in Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic. In one panel, Allison’s father, who works in a funeral home, shows something troubling to her. A relative of theirs, a boy Allison’s age, was killed in a crash, and in this panel in the mortuary, her father lifts the sheet to show her the body.

“[The boy’s] skin was gray,” she says, “which gave his bright blond crewcut the effect of yellow tint on a black-and-white photograph” (148). In the next panel, Allison, who is struggling with obsessive-compulsive disorder says, “My diary entries for that weekend are almost completely obscured”—obscured by the symbol she had begun drawing over diary entries as a superstitious way to protect people against harm, hence Bechdel depicts (Show, don’t tell!) how much the sight of this particular corpse rattled her—despite her having grown up playing games at the family-business funeral home.

While interstice provides an opportunity to demonstrate clear, causal relationships, it also grants an opportunity for ambiguity at the same time. Some segments can follow a logical progression, and others can challenge that clarity. In one section of Bluets, Maggie Nelson speaks of virgin saints blinding themselves in attempt to become unattractive to would-be suitors who would distract them from God. The next section is clearly a follow-up:

In these religious accounts, these women are announcing, via their amputations, their fidelity to God. But other accounts wonder whether they were in fact punishing themselves, as they knew that they had looked upon men with lust, and felt the need to employ extreme measures to avert any further temptation. (23)

What follows is a hanging quote from Leonardo da Vinci—to what might it refer?—“Love is something so ugly that the human race would die out if lovers could see what they were

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5 Scott McCloud, author of Understanding Comics, would call this a scene-to-scene transition.
doing” (23). The juxtaposition makes us want to think of Leonardo’s quote as a comment upon the above idea, as if Leonardo himself read this amputation paragraph sitting in his armchair and muttered to himself. Is Leonardo saying that the saints were right: human love (lust?) is so ugly one should avoid it through self-destruction? Or is he saying that love itself is destructive—love (for God) makes us hurt ourselves?

Is this Nelson’s savvy way of saying both things at once without, herself, saying anything at all?

Likewise, one page of Jenny Boully’s *The Body*, (a book consisting entirely of [un]related footnotes) reads: “98. You will never find the life for which you are searching. 99. Except, perhaps, for poets and prostitutes” (45). Maybe these footnotes come from two separate topics. Maybe it is a joke in the jump-cut style: poets and prostitutes can find the life they are looking for.

Interstice and juxtaposition allow for double reads—they provide the writer with a way to be both direct and subtle in the same breath. I aim to take advantage of this opportunity in my own work. In one segment, the narrator sees a painting of a saint whose devotees assign him a patronage that does not correspond with his life. The next segment is a one-liner that says, “Once a story becomes legend, maybe we can change it.” And the following segment is personal narrative presented in the form of a legend. In this way, the one-liner comments on the (collective) ownership of the saint’s legend, and it also provides a key to the subsequent personal narrative—its legend-like presentation hints at a desire to change the story.

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6 On the other hand, often a connection is not clear. Often the white space serves as a chance to change the subject. In the above case, however, the Leonardo quote is followed by a segment within the same topic more or less.
Similarly, one section toward the beginning features the narrator at an intersection, unsure which option is the pilgrim route. It concludes, “Maybe the red dirt path ahead of me makes sense?” The next section may be a complete shift in thought, or it may hinge off that red-dirt guess: “Sometimes we hear stories that are ridiculous, but we go ahead and believe them anyway.” The subsequent sections, about ridiculous stories, ask which stories we should trust, which of course can have a metaphorical connection to the act of asking which path to take. (Juxtaposition bears the responsibility of drawing this metaphor, one that would seem obvious and heavy-handed had it been delivered directly.) These story sections interrupt the red-dirt narrative, and when we return to the narrative, we see that the narrator chose the wrong one, potentially casting more gravity onto the consequences of choosing stories as well.

In a wonderful way, the reader of any segmented work may find himself or herself asking, “Is this section in support of the previous idea or in contrast to it? In what ways is this paragraph reacting to what I just read? Could it be preparing me for what comes next? Does it, in fact, feed into both its neighboring paragraphs, moving backward and forward?”

This asking of questions is one of the great benefits of interstice. Structural interstice is bound to get the reader involved in the text. The two segments of text are like riverbanks and the reader builds the bridge across them. And because, of course, the shape of each riverbank is different, no two bridges are identical. The writer prints off what she has typed so far, takes her scissors, and cuts out each segment. (Or in Mary Robison’s case or Maggie Nelson’s, she has written each of them on a notecard.) Then she moves the segments around on the floor, placing this one against this one, and seeing what different bridges each pairing will encourage her reader to build.
In addition to interstice in structure, writers can use the unsaid. The information not given. The decontextualized. The gap in the larger dialogue.

For an example, let us look at Debra Marquart’s flash nonfiction piece, “Some Things About That Day,” which opens, “The placards I walked through. The wet raincoat on a hook. The questionnaire on the clipboard placed before me. Couples sat around me in the waiting room.” This opening jumps into a situation in medias res, and readers see that the title functions indeed to prepare them for a list of “things.” Later, Marquart notes, “But I remember, the men seemed the more bereft. Facing forward their, elbows resting on knees, their faces covered with hands. Or pushed back hard in their seats, gazing at a spot on the floor, legs stretched out in the aisles.”

At this point, the reader may begin to suspect what the (quasi-)described situation is. In a later paragraph, this suspicion is verified when Marquart says:

The doctor arrives, hurried and unfriendly. Her one day in this clinic, she’s flown in from another state. Death threats follow her. She asks me if I want to proceed. I tell her, yes. I lie back in the stirrups. The apparatus arrives—a silver canister on wheels with gauges and hoses attached to a long, cylindrical tube, thin like a spout. The sound of vacuuming close now. The nurse by my side, holding my shoulder. The doctor working away behind the thin film of my gown.

Teaching this essay, I encourage my students to notice that at no point does Marquart ever use the “A-word.” Why not?

Students point out that in a subsequent paragraph, (in the essay’s one parenthetical statement and one flashforward), she writes: “(My friend tried to soften it for me afterwards. Just say you had a procedure dear.)” Here is one reason; she does not want to call it “abortion.”
By not using the word, Marquart hints at complicated, perhaps regretful feelings about the experience. The reader can catch that hint (fairly easily).

There is another reason the A-word never appears—the essay contains another conspicuous absence, one students notice a little less quickly.

One of the first sights Marquart—going to the clinic alone—notices is couples. She remembers “the men seemed the more bereft.” We might assume she is single, given that not until around halfway through the essay does she mention her husband. “When I first informed my husband I was pregnant,” she writes, “he said, Is it mine? Not the best beginning. We’d been married for a month. […] Who else’s could it be? He had an important meeting at work that day, some critical task. I had driven myself.”

The next man she sees is the pharmacist:

Could he see from the prescription where I’d been? A softness dawned on his face. Go home, he said. They would deliver it.

Only then, in the car, did I start to cry. So stupid. Over the kindness of the pharmacist.

His kindness is immediately followed by “When I got home, my husband was on the couch, watching the NBA playoffs. Even before the drugs arrived—even after—he couldn’t stop telling me what a brave girl I had been.”

I ask students, “Wait, why couldn’t her husband drive her to the clinic—and be one of the bereft men in the waiting room?”

“He had an important meeting at work,” they say.

“But—”
“But—,” they echo, realizing that he was not at work, but at home watching basketball while his wife needed companionship, the same husband who had asked, “Is it mine?”

And so another reason she does not use the word abortion is because on one level, the essay is not about abortion. Instead it is about how, as a student last February phrased it, “Her husband is a jerk!”

I would not claim to know exactly what Marquart intended in writing this, but I suspect she wanted this student in the pink hoodie in the back row of my class to blurt this out. This is one of the powerful results of choosing to have interstice in content. If the writer gives the right clues—such as the supportive boyfriends and husbands in the waiting room, such as the kind pharmacist, such as the important meeting and the NBA game—the reader will draw the conclusions himself. By not saying something, the writer prompts the reader to do so.

Between the writer and her reader are ten steps. She can choose to take all ten toward him and meet him where he stands. (She can say, “My husband, the unsupportive jerk, lied about the meeting.”) Or the writer can take nine steps toward the reader and encourage him to take one. She can take eight and encourage him to take two. If possible, why not involve the reader in the walking? It emphasizes the reader’s role in the communication act; it increases his investment in the writing.

My personal working definition of art (as opposed to entertainment) is a piece that is worth experiencing again and again because it yields new gifts upon repeated exposure. Picasso’s Guernica gives you a fresh shiver each time. Do you look at the horse’s face or the man’s? Is that light-bulb eyeball the bomb? The sun? The eye of God? Which current war
are you bringing to the horrified expressions? As the one, or two, or three steps that the reader takes can vary each time, the interstice makes the piece worth repeating.

Maggie Nelson quotes Goethe: “We love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it” (Bluets, 4).

Jenny Boully’s The Book of Beginnings and Endings asks readers to guess-supply middles and even halves of sentences. One ending asks the reader to supply what comes next, and the unsaid heightens irony. The Ice Cream Man will soon retire—“When he counted out his change for the last time for her, she looked up at him with a forlorn face and said, ‘Mister, but if you’re no longer our Ice Cream Man, who will be?’ For the first time, it occurred to him that not only were his daily rounds daily miracles to the children, but no one would take his place.” Here, Boully sets us up for an almost melodramatic reflection on maturation and lost innocence. “He wondered just what kind of child-kingdom it was that he was about to destroy,” she adds. With this in mind, the reader comes to the last paragraph (which is one of Boully’s trademark, long, list-y, wistful sentences):

She would continue to look for four-leafed clovers when the Ice Cream Man drove his wares away; she would continue to catch and release butterflies in her room in the belief that they would mate and lay eggs which would hatch and produce caterpillars, which would swoon and spin themselves into green cocoons, which would split and spit out more butterflies, that they would all forever stay alive. (14)

Reading this conclusion, the reader, who already awaits the destruction of a child-kingdom, brings the adult knowledge the little girl will soon have. The girl’s bedroom is not the ideal butterfly habitat. The butterflies will not reproduce by the dozens. And most importantly, they will not live forever. The adult knows the insects will die. The adult knows this is what
the next paragraph—should it exist—would describe. So the reader collaborates with Bouly in writing a punch-in-the-gut, sad scene. Had Bouly written out the next paragraph singlehandedly, the melodrama would increase and tip the whole essay over. As it now stands, the irony allows the reader to join the character in hoping those butterflies will live, while simultaneously sharing the Ice Cream Man’s realization that times are changing and the magic is over.

Draw three Pac-man’s with their mouths open toward each other, and though you haven’t drawn a triangle, you have created triangular negative space. The viewer’s mind sketches the connecting lines. In my prose, I speak about this concept, and then make use of it: “Because the chapel feels like a cave inside, the aged frescos seem like cave paintings. Their partiality—“What did that monk’s legs look like before they faded?”—is part of their charm. The gaps ask the viewer to draw lines. (Is the Gestalt principle what makes us study history?) Without us, that monk, legless, will never walk.” In a later segment, the writing depends on the spoken to highlight the unspoken—“We can say this.” Though the reader cannot yet fill in this narrative, he can guess that the unsaid may entail violence. He has not yet read about Clavijo, but he begins to creates an outline of it for himself—and the last sentence of this segment suggests that this outline will be filled later:

Sometimes a stained-glass window or a church ornamentation shows a cruz de Santiago, which is also called a cruz espada, or a “sword cross” because the bottom part tapers to a point and the three upper appendages are stylized to look like a hilt. We can say it represents the way the saint died, his beheading. It is usually red, and red is usually the color of a martyr, and we can say this. We can speak of Jerusalem instead of Clavijo, of the Year 44 instead of the
Year 844. And besides, Clavijo is in Spain, as are most of those crosses, and I am in France, and I do not want to think about it now.⁷

John Cage’s composition “4:33”, is not exactly four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. It is the sound of the audience breathing, the squeak of a seat, the man coughing in the third row, all of which are music the listeners bring. Though otherwise they would barely notice these sounds, because they are at a concert, and because “musical instruments” occupy the pieces played before and after “4:33,” the listeners do notice these sounds now. They recognize the (apparent) absence for the presence that it in fact is.

About two kinds of palpable absence and her father’s suicide, Joy Castro’s essay “You Can Avoid the Mistakes I Made” says, “My father is a dead man now, and the space where he used to be is a corridor of ruined Sundays, a baker of stale cakes fallen in at their centers […] Sundays keep coming, and you leave the phone in its electric black cradle where it does not ring, where the sacred numbers will not appear again in the little screen” (68). Here, like Cage, Castro directly highlights the presence of an absence. She does so more subtly and ironically in the opening paragraph:

There’s a way you can tell when people are serious about killing themselves: they look kind of funny around the gills, like they’re breathing harder, faster, just to get enough air. Their eyes wander, dull like the eyes of old dogs, gloss lost, brown marbles gone sticky and coated with dust, staring off to a place you can’t see. When they laugh, their hands tremble, and they laugh when

⁷ Here, as the reader contributes to the outlining of an unfilled shape, he is also forced to participate in the procrastination. When the Battle of Clavijo is eventually addressed, the narrator continues to want to avoid it or change it. The day the narrator tries to board a bus to Clavijo, he procrastinates and avoids looking at Clavijo square-on. His acceptance of/reconciliation with the battle is the decision to let Clavijo be. And so upon this first exposure to Clavijo, the reader’s participation foreshadows what will come.
nothing’s funny, a high cracked sound like the squawk of a grackle spearing the air. In the shower, water puddles around their feet, clinging near them with a new molecular gravity as if reluctant to let them go, and when they lift their feet there’s a weird sucking sound, a wet dirge, as the water rushes into the damp foot-shaped spaces on the tile, obliterates each trace of them. (68)

At first, the premise of the paragraph seems plausible—a person considering suicide may demonstrate noticeable signs of distress. His eyes and gestures may change. The presence of these specifics helps support this premise, and the level of specificity suggests these are details from the narrator’s lived experience. But the shower water? Even if the narrator were present in the bathroom, of course she would not notice the speed of the puddles. Water knows no one’s emotions. There is no “weird sucking sound.” There is only the normal silence. Herein is a “4:33”-style gap. As a result, the title’s suggestion—You, reader, can prevent suicide by noticing the signs—is ironic. Neither Castro nor her reader could really know.

In this way, the interstice in content has aligned the author/narrator and the reader. The unsaid invites the reader to say.

*At the End of the Journey, Shrines*

This essay opened with an epigraph from Christian Zacher’s *Curiosity and Pilgrimage: The Literature of Discovery in Fourteenth-Century England*: “The nearer the *peregrini* are brought to the Holy Land, the more their progress is slowed by the increasing number of shrines and holy places lying in their way,” (137). Though perhaps unintended, Zacher’s phrasing, “in their way,” suggests that shrines—those quiet moments along the journey—inconvenience
pilgrims. But as we have seen through examples, in writing at least, interstices can enrich the walking. In cases of segmentation, the interstice creates beginnings and endings. It allows for pauses. It makes juxtaposition possible. Interstice in content allows the reader to step into that shrine and pray aloud or to shuffle and let his or her feet echo on the stone floor.

Glyn Maxwell writes in *On Poetry*, “Poets work with two materials, one’s black [ink] and one’s white [space]. Call them sound and silence, life and death, hot and cold, love and loss: any can be the case but none of those yins and yangs tell the whole story,” (11).

Writing in black ink, in her book of footnotes in which the body of the prose has become entirely white space, Jenny Boully begins, “[…E]verything that is said is said underneath…” (*The Body*, 1).

In my own intersticial manuscript, the reading process invites the reader to knot up some hiking boots and take steps through open air onto solid ground. Much of the geographic progression takes place between scenes. Questions like “And what of this story that I’m now walking into?” or “I am what? A comma in the Chemin’s dictionary?” echo into white space without being overtly addressed in any given segment. “Taken out of context,” says a one-sentence segment without any context, “puddles are merely rainwater to step around, nothing to fear.” The, reader, however, can supply that context because he has become part of the walking experience.

The walking staffs that a pilgrim carries say, *tomp-tink, tomp-tink*, and between each syllable is an *n*-dash of silence. The left foot thuds down onto the dirt or gravel. Then the right does. And between those two thuds, the right foot—for just one second—swings noiselessly through the air, and this is how we get somewhere.
CHAPTER 2: CREATIVE NONFICTION MANUSCRIPT: WE WALK AND SAY, “OH”

* 

In the beginning, we learned to walk by falling down. Our skin was chubby; our bones did not break; our baby bodies were prepared for this: we came from a forever lineage of babies, generations of brand-new people tumbling to floors before they’d learned fear. Years before our grandfathers became fathers, they crawled on carpets and reached their hands upward. They stretched to make their bodies longer, and though they had not yet learned about height, they reached upward to make themselves taller. When we reached, we felt for a coffee table, a kitchen chair, a sofa cushion. To balance ourselves, we grabbed onto objects we hoped would not move, but sometimes, they did. When we fell, our skin was chubby—our bones did not break. We laughed, except when we cried, and sometimes we looked around for an adult to tell us how to feel. We wanted to move, the freedom of crossing an entire room. We wanted the pacing, the heartbeat of left-right-left-right. We wanted swinging arms. Because we did not know fear, we did not know courage, we just knew to reach up again. One shin, then one foot, one heel on the floor, two palms on the sofa. In the beginning, we learned to walk by falling. We imagined that once we had mastered walking, we would not fall again. We pulled ourselves up by palms until both heels were flat, and we stood several seconds at a time—an experiment against gravity. Gravity kept going. Despite it, we lifted our left foot, dropped it a few inches to the side. Our hands moved to the left, too, and our whole bodies. The view of the sofa changed. We lifted our right foot. We had been babies, but because we were learning to toddle, the adults gave us a new name.
May 10, Taizé, Bourgogne, France 1860 km to Saint Jacques

This beginning is Taizé, France, a village with more sunflowers than people. I chose this place because I wanted as much walking as the European Union’s ninety-days-without-a-visa would allow. Even though the village is tiny, the monastery is famous, and in the summer, tens of thousands of people stay here.

The cabins here were full—I’d neglected to call ahead—so I slept outside, badly. No, you can’t stay here until the bells ring for the noon hymns, I tell myself. “But it would be good to eat the lunch afterward,” I argue aloud, “and get some energy for the big day.” Instead of listening to this, I fill up at the water fountain. I zip up my backpack, tie my sleeping mat to the outside. It swings clumsily as I pass other Taizé guests drinking hot chocolate. I smile goodbye at them, wishing them a meaningful stay, but they don’t notice. They don’t notice me walk to the archway under the bell tower, the archway that is the gate to the monastery. I pause, but no one else at Taizé is holding their breath. No one sees, and it is without fanfare that I begin my first kilometer, walking toward places I have never been. And places I have.

May 10, Cluny, 1850 km to Saint Jacques

Day One, and I’m trying to figure how to fumble with my walking staffs when in public. The clerk at the ticket desk wouldn’t let me leave anything there, so I’m wearing my backpack—Please don’t let me bump into any artifacts!—with the blue staffs poking out the top. Another visitor sees them and asks, “Are those poles of skiing?” and performs downhill gesture. I say, “Of walking.”

May 10, Cluny, 1850 km to Saint Jacques

I suspected the visit to this ruined monastery would be disappointing, and I am not
disappointed. Which is to say, it is disappointing, but in the way I expected. The problem is, ever since the French Revolution, the monastery is only ten percent here. (I have friends back home who act like being angry at the Church is something new we just invented: We’ll stay up way past bedtime discussing it until one of us finally says, *Well, this isn’t getting anywhere we haven’t been before* and tosses a pillow and blanket onto the couch.) Before the construction of St. Peter’s in Rome, this was the biggest church in the world, but now it’s mostly one tall tower. Seeing it from inside isn’t much different from seeing it outside—and if you see it that way, you don’t have to pay eight euros and fifty cents. I’m complaining about money mostly out of habit—because nothing ever costs as little as it could. And also this is only my first day, and who knows what expenses lie in the twelve hundred miles ahead? (And it scares me when money disappears—I held my breath back home when clicking *Purchase tickets* on the airline website—as if the computer might electrocute me.) I float through the empty stone spaces of the monastery. The rooms where monks used to read to each other while eating. The phantom limbs that were once bell towers calling them to rise. Placards here and there speak of power, the hierarchy within the community. This is—was—Cluny Abbey, which, despite my complaints, matters a great deal.

*  

May 10, Saint Cecile, 1838 km to Saint Jacques

By the time I reach St. Cecile, its only bakery looks closed. The *Guide Orange* mentions a pilgrim’s lodging here. I’m imagining a couple of bunk beds, a dirty floor, and a bored volunteer who may or may not be around. On the side of the street, a handwritten sign says, *Lodging This Way,* and then another says, *This Way,* and then I’m walking up to someone’s front door. I wonder, *Maybe there’s a tiny drop-in hostel connected to the back of the house?* The door is answered by a woman who looks barely old enough to have white hair.
“Excuse me? Can I? Stay here?” I ask, glancing into her living room.

“I’m very sorry, but it’s not possible today,” she says, widening her mouth in regret. “Simply impossible. We’re leaving for Spain in the middle of the night.” I don’t grasp why this means she can’t point me to the place with the bunk beds. “Did you make a reservation?” she asks, even though she seems to know the answer.

“No,” I apologize, “Was I supposed to?”

“It’s better,” she says. “Come in, we’ll call someone.” Her living room is painted gray, which makes the bright South American wall hangings stand out more. She pulls her copy of the *Guide Orange* from a drawer. “I’m sorry. My boyfriend and I are just too busy making preparations.”

“Of course,” I say, trying not to sound too surprised. I have just realized that there is no drop-in hostel. This couple lets strangers sleep in their house, and the strangers probably call first.

“Do you have a tent?”

“Not exactly, but—.” I have these aluminum foil bed sheets meant to keep you from freezing from death. A couple months ago, I read you could jam your hiking poles into the ground on either side of your sleeping bag and stretch the foil across them to cover your face. “C’est bon,” I say. *It’s good.*

She points me to her backyard where I lean my bag against the only tree, and fumble with this foil for ten minutes, and try to push the staffs into the ground in a way that won’t leave big holes in her yard. The best part about this is what has been the best part about this whole first day: It’s really *happening.* When I tied my shoes at Taizé, it wasn’t practice. When I almost knocked my backpack into Cluny walls, I was *at* Cluny, and my backpack swung
lopsided because in it was everything I now own. It all feels like the first second of a first kiss—a kiss you’ve been imagining since freshman year.

Francine startles me from behind: “Do you want some dinner?”

She walks me to a door on the lower level of the house. On the table is a bowl of broccoli soup, a hunk of bread, and a pitcher of water. “Sit, sit,” she says.

“No! It rains all the time!” She laughs.

“I guess that’s why it’s so green.”

The display on her wall begs me to stare. It’s a giant map of the Chemin with pink highlighter tracing from Saint Cecile all the way through France and northern Spain to Saint Jacques, just a centimeter before the Atlantic Ocean. Tacked to the map is a photo of her in front of Saint Jacques’ Cathedral. Its two taller rectangular towers are covered in so many knobby spires they remind me of coral. The stairs lead not straight up to the church’s doors, but point to the sides and then double back, as if to make the pilgrim’s journey last still forty-five seconds longer. And directly above, on his own, shorter tower is a statue of Saint Jacques himself, his head tilted down, looking at the plaza. Francine stands in that plaza, her hands wrapped around her hiking poles, her face so surprised and shining it probably glowed in the dark that night.

“Here’s my scallop shell,” she says, taking it off the wall and presenting it to me. It has years written on it. “It took me eight years,” she says, “Ten to twelve days each year.” I turn the shell over and back in my hands. “C’est bon,” I say.

This is the club I will join. People who have walked to Le Puy and from Le Puy and to Saint-Jean and from Saint-Jean, to and from, to and from all the way to—maybe—the silver
casket in the Cathedral. She is Francine-who-walked-from-her-home-in-Saint-Cecile-to-Saint-Jacques, and I will be—already am—Brad-who-walked-from-Taizé-to-here. And this must be why Francine lets strangers stay in her home or in her backyard, even if they show up without a reservation the night of her flight.

* 

May 11, 1836 km to Saint Jacques

At Taizé, a man asked me why I was walking the Chemin, and I said, “For no one reason.” And this wasn’t a lie, but it was also a way of saying, For many reasons and some of them I’m not ready to share, and some of them are cloudy, even to me. But the moment the cyclist on the bike path called “À Saint Jacques!” was not the first time those words had made it impossible to stand still. And so when, thirty minutes past Francine’s house, I realize I forgot something in her backyard, I pause—shouldn’t I keep going forward, only forward?

Last night, I unscrewed the plastic guards off my hiking staffs to reveal their pointy ends. It made shoving them into the ground easier. But now, I see I don’t have those guards, and I think they might protect the poles. Maybe being struck against the pavement on this country road could cause vibrations that will rattle up through the aluminum and crack them. And if I don’t turn around this minute, it’ll be too late. It seems like a bad gesture to go backward. (You have to let the past rest, and You can’t go back, and Move forward, and all those clichés that all the sudden seem more meaningful than they did back home in Ohio.) But then again, if I ruin my poles, what will I do? I’m sure of where the guards are—on the ground, right against the trunk of Francine’s only tree—and when I return to her yard, I see that I was right.
May 14, between 1740 and 1745 km to Saint Jacques

The first day rubs hell into your feet, they say, especially if you didn’t break in your boots before coming. But it’s been four days, and I did break them in. I wore them to work, wore them all day, outdoors and indoors. I carried bricks in my backpack. It’s not even noon today, and every tenth of a kilometer I’m stopping, poking my hiking staffs into my armpits so I can lean on them and lift up one foot at a time like a wimpy horse. Why does complaining with someone shrink the problem? If I came across another hiker, I could say, “Wasn’t that huge pine forest terrible? Seventeen kilometers of identical trees and not one person—except at the lumber mill where I asked for water. A couple hours in, I had to start singing out loud to keep from going bonkers.” Or I might say, “Do you think it’s normal for feet to hurt this much?”

But I haven’t seen any other walkers since my first day. Of course, there’s an authentic taste to this solitude, like you mean it more when the messy sky sends the farmer indoors and you squish through the wet fields alone. Sure, in the Middle Ages, the Chemin was bustling with pious folks and robbers and criminals sentenced to walk, but at points in the twentieth century, walking the Chemin meant getting lost and having no one to ask for help.

This afternoon, I like this quiet. I like holding a conversation with a shell plaque or a red and white stripe on a tree. Which way are you telling me to go? I have no idea what you’re saying. I like the sound of my feet on pine needles and of the bells around the sheep’s necks. This unnoticed walking—and even my unheard whining aloud—feel honest, in the way that sometimes secrets are truer than what we do say.
And if not too slow preparing my hiking feet, then too slow choosing which necktie to wear to work. “Hurry up. How much does this really matter?” I say, frozen at my closet, lifting the strips of gray, of navy, of green-and-blue stripes. “Not at all,” I answer, and keep flipping through silk.

May 15, between 1720 and 1725 km to Saint Jacques

When I see them, I want to run to them, but my feet hurt too badly. He sports an army green rain poncho. Hers is dark navy. They carry backpacks which are enveloped by shower-cap-style waterproofings. Most importantly, both people wear hiking boots. I wince-walk as quickly as I can. They disappear over a hill, but then I find them. They disappear again, around a curve, behind a farmhouse, over another hill; they are the carrot dangling on a stick in a cartoon, and I am the donkey following them. When I reach them—Bonjour!—we ask each other what we already know: “Are you a pilgrim? Pilgrims?” And then I can’t stop talking or listening. “My wife and I started in Cluny this time.” “From Ohio, in the middle of the United States, more or less.” “I’m Claudine, and this is my husband Fabian.” Claudine, too, likes bluegrass music. She collects stamps, and the way she describes it, it sounds like a much more interesting hobby than I realized. I don’t collect anything on purpose, but I throw nothing away, so I suppose I collect by accident. They have an adult daughter and son, and two grandchildren. My father offered to teach me guitar, but I never said yes long enough to learn. Because I am from America, they ask me about mass shootings. Guns, they say, are forbidden in France. I feel embarrassed, somehow responsible for the culture I live in and help create. ‘C’est horrible,’” I say. “C’est fool.” We have bought little pizza pastries at a bakery. I offer them some nuts, but they say no. They are from Strasbourg, on the German
border, a city in some decades part of France, and in other decades part of Germany. They started from home years ago, and each spring and fall, they walk a leg of the Chemin.

People like to talk about miracles of the Chemin. Before leaving, I read advice, and much of it said, “The Chemin provides.” About claiming such things, I am hesitant, much more so than I was at twenty-two, but I say a vague, laugh-like thank you for this surprise: though years have past since the summers at the French school, my mind must have jumped back in time. My speech and comprehension are as good (and as klutzy) as ever.

And on this, my fifth day, I decide not to lose these people the way I lost the reticent German pilgrim I saw at the very beginning.

*

Someone may have told you that you are the center of the universe, but don’t believe them; read stories instead. Read about people who live in decades or centuries not your own. Read about Atticus Finch or Clarissa Dalloway. Read about Hemingway’s Old Man Santiago and the sea. Read about a different Santiago—one who is also named Saint Jacques in French or Saint James in English or Jacobus in Hebrew, sort of—on a different fishing boat, read about him eating breakfast with Jesus, getting his head chopped off. Read the *Liber Sancti Jacobi—The Book of Saint James*—comprised of five smaller books compiled, they say, by Pope Calixtus II in the twelfth century. Read, especially, Book II, its collection of miracles stories that happened to pilgrims journeying to Compostelle. Book III, the account of how Saint James’ body was transported from Jerusalem to the Iberian Peninsula. Read Book V, a guidebook for pilgrims written by Aimery Picaud, who identified Chemin paths by referring to the churches they passed, “[One road goes by] St Mary of Le Puy, Saint Foy of Conques and St Peter of Moissac.”
Of pilgrim’s hostels, Aimery Picaud writes, “They are holy places, houses of God where holy pilgrims can refresh, the destitute can relax, the sick can receive comfort, the dead can be prayed for, and the living given help.” Not the first (or the last) churchman to make assumptions about the sexual practices of people he does not know, he warns the pilgrim that the residents of Navarra “have sex with their farm animals. And it's said that they put a lock on the backsides of their mules and horses so that nobody except themselves can have at them.”

* *

May 17, 1668 km to Saint Jacques

At a four-way stop. There’s supposedly a shell tile pointing me where to go, but I can’t find it. I walk backward, look for a tree. The stop-signs also say nothing. Both left and forward seem right, as in southwest. Right seems wrong. Forward is a reddish dirt road, left is a highway. Lately the path has avoided pavement. Some concerned local, maybe one who himself has walked the Chemin, is probably having a salad and smiling about his good deed of marking the path so it keeps pilgrims safe from cars. In some places, we know history. We read the scraps of Bishop Godescale’s travelogue or Aimery Picaud’s guidebook in *The Liber Sancti Jacobi*. We know others walked through a particular historical village. That ruined monastery. Sometimes not much guesswork is required. Other times, path-makers connect the dots on the map in the most logical way. Two days ago, I butted up against a train track where a shell pointed me left, so I walked along the track for about a football field, then under a tunnel to be shell-pointed right and to head along the same track—on an evening I was already late and slow and risking walking in the dark—, and to end up just across from
where I’d been two hundred yards ago. “But I know how to look both ways before crossing train tracks!” I said. The problem is if you choose wrong, you may not know until the next intersection whenever that comes. So you may waste a whole kilometer glancing around like someone in a haunted house, and if you reach a second unmarked intersection, you assume you were supposed to turn left a kilometer ago, and you have to go back and try again.

* May 17, 1668 km to Saint Jacques

I go forward down the red dirt path, which I begin to suspect is meant for horses, not pilgrims. I see hoof prints and then tractor marks, but no walking staff stamps. And this morning, I did see Christian and his wife who never introduces herself, so if this were the right route, they’d have taken it. Of course they could have taken the wrong one, but they’re French so they probably have a better sense of it. This seems like the right direction, and I see buildings so this must be Georgeville When I arrive, I pass a highway sign for a town not mentioned on my map, which features only the towns you’re supposed to go to. I head to a grocery to ask a cashier if I’m really not in Georgeville, and he says no. I buy half a baguette and a tin of fish, and, though it’s three o’clock and I’m not hungry, I eat all the bread. I take my airline spoon and stab this fish I’m mad at.

* May 20, 1554 km to Saint Jacques

I want to say thank you for Day 11. Since buying the gel pads for my Achilles tendon, and the insoles for everything else, these feet feel like mine again. The pharmacist back in Montbrisson must have once earned a degree in social work because her goal seemed to be making life easier for people. She filled my incomplete French sentences. When I didn’t
know the word for burn, and so described my toes as “like when the sun turns your skin red,” she raised her eyebrows behind her glasses, said, “The same sensation,” and pointed to cooling cream.

And now 140 kilometers since Montbrison, my mind is catching up with my feet a little. In a month I will meet pilgrims who maybe have imagined the path will snap-change their lives. On their second day of walking, two will tell me about revelations the path has already given them, and I will say only uh-hmm, Oh, wanting neither to discourage them nor to suggest anything happens fast, the crack of a baseball bat, a homerun. Now, after a week and a half, what I know is my boots are no longer enemies, and I less often think I’ve made a mistake coming.

I’m singing to myself down a cut-out path in some woods outside Saint-Vincent. The trees on either side hold out the gifts of spring—light green leaves or little buds, and their branches gesture down to violets, which in French are violets—and today things are named what they are, and the song I sing is “Amazing Grace,” which makes so much sense here.

* May 20, 1552 km to Saint Jacques

I pass the trees, see the picture of Saint-Vincent from above, enter, twist through its streets, looking for the shelter the Guide Orange lists. I don’t understand what “the shelter” is, and it’s a small-town Monday, so many shops have fermé signs on their doors. But in an open patisserie near the church square, I show the Guide to a baker who knows the shelter exactly—it’s the fire station. “Go down this street and turn right. If no one’s there, come back.” I’m sleeping in the fire station? I think, turning right. No one’s there, so I come back to the patisserie. I like this baker who makes it his business to help me find a bed. I become a dozen merci’s. He calls the number in the guide, speaks to the woman with the key; she’s a friend of his.
She’ll meet me there. I walk down this street and turn right to wait for her, and I like this woman with curly hair and a key who has left her dinner simmering on the stove across town to help me in. Above the fire station, dozens of rooms of bunk beds pack two floors so that people can stay if a flood strikes the area. I think that’s what she says before she hands me the key and turns toward her dinner.

All these rooms get me giddy with choice, and it doesn’t matter that they’re identical. I can sleep on the second floor or the third, and then turn left for rooms 1-8 or right for 9-16. And then which bunk beds? By the window or door? Upper or lower? There are so many ways tonight could happen, and I giggle a little bit.

I choose one of the several bathrooms, one of the multiple sinks and—*stupid!*—wash my socks. Not my white inner sock liners, of which I have two pairs, but my brown outer socks, of which I have only one pair. Sundown’s on its way, how will I dry them before tomorrow?

Even though it’s Day 11, I still don’t know what I’m doing. On the floor, I toss my ultra microfiber, super dry towel, which is the size of a dishrag and not all that effective at drying. I lay my—*What were you thinking?*—wet socks on top and roll the towel up, stand on this burrito. Still too wet. In the kitchenette is an electric stovetop. I hold the socks above it until I smell them burning.

* 

May 20, 1552 km to Saint Jacques

Something starts. Before the gift of the open patisserie and the baker with the telephone—on the church square I found an abandoned packet of tobacco and rolling papers, *how European,* just sitting on the steps saying, *Grab me, I’m yours* like an Easter egg in an open field. I’m not a smoker, but I grabbed it for its cheer. And now, having resigned that I’m just
going to sleep with the socks inside my sleeping sack, hoping body heat will warm them, I am sitting on the stairwell balcony rolling a cigarette for the first time. It’s quiet enough on this Monday night to hear the crinkle of the paper and the small pop as it burns. Tomorrow will take me to Le Puy, a big city and major starting point for pilgrims. Whereas I haven’t seen another pilgrim in a couple days, tomorrow dozens may join. With others around, we can commiserate together. They can energize me into pushing myself out the door. We can laugh about getting mixed up. But how much noise will they bring? With so few pilgrims, this leg of the Chemin has been a secret I keep whispering to myself.

Across from the balcony, the sky darkens and golden streetlamp-style bulbs start popping light onto the church in the square. This is the type of building people take long flights to see: full of corners and shadows, towers, unnecessary decorations, impractical beauty—*Are those the buttresses my eighth grade art teacher told us about?* I have to see it closer. It’s chilly, so I grab a blanket from inside, a big wool one that wears clumsily across my shoulders, and I follow the spotlit towers to the square.

There’s a bench near where I found the rolling papers. Seeing me on it in my blanket coat, a couple walks by and gives me strange looks. But I forget to be embarrassed for too long. I’ve seen many churches these eleven days—what lifts me from the bench to circle this one? Is it the light? The townspeople must have lit it because they know the best time to watch it is night, when it’s silent. I return to my bench another twenty, thirty minutes. No one in the whole town is breathing. When I was a boy, a grown-up read me a book I’ve forgotten, but the part I remember is that the main character walked through snow, and he liked the feel of the warm air inside his mouth.

My feet have been learning their shoes, and the French word for *burn* is *allumer*. I sit as quiet as a rolling paper waiting to be lit.
Joining. Feeding into. Merging streams. I've read that the converging lines of the scallop shell remind us of the multiple Chemins coming together. A few days back, the Chemin-from-Lyon fused with mine—I saw in the rain three dark green ponchos I didn’t recognize, and never saw them again. Here in Le Puy, my twelve-day Chemin-from-Cluny joins the sixteen-day Chemin-from-Geneva.

Today I call the Chemin mine, and maybe this is wrong. I haven’t bought it or made it. I want to say I have begun earning it, but have I? Twelve days—how long is that? The day I stepped out of Taizé and onto the rails-to-trails path now feels as distant as last Christmas. But the pilgrimage has existed since the year 951, and thinking about this is like counting the rings on a redwood tree.

I am what? A comma in the Chemin’s dictionary?

I keep forgetting the date and the day of the week and then counting them out on my fingers. Every day is one day closer to July 24th. Saint Patrick, Saint Valentine, just about every date is some saint’s feast day. For Saint Jacques/ Saint James/Santiago, this is July 25th, enormous to pilgrims. Called “Holy Days,” Book I of the Liber Sancti Jacobi offers songs, histories, and liturgies specific to July 25th, and for centuries pilgrims have planned to arrive on or before that date. Because church holidays begin the evening before the actual day, on July 24th fireworks explode off the Cathedral at Saint Jacques de Compostelle. Music all night, and then every night for a week. The king comes. Parades. Cheers for The Apostle, as people of the region call him, as if he is the only one. Originally, I scheduled my trip to avoid arriving on this noisy day. To avoid walking a month alongside the crowd aiming for July
24th, the path at its absolute fullest. But something I knew: some pilgrims debate whether it is harder to walk to Saint Jacques de Compostelle or to stop walking and leave it. For me, it’s more than fireworks and fiesta, it’s an extension of ritual, it’s more closure. It’s shouting *It’s over!* with a mass of joyful people. My previous arrival to Santiago seemed, at first, so meant-to-be perfect And in retrospect, I want it all to be different.

* May 23, countryside beyond Saint-Privat-d’Allier, 1495-1500 km to Saint Jacques

On these lookout boulders, splotches of moss or fungus. The boulders are green, but the hills below out-green them. These few days since Le Puy, the farms are famous for green lentils. When the church divides the year into seasons—Lent, Advent, Christmas—it assigns each a color. Lent gets purple for death, and Easter gets gold for new life. Just after Pentecost Sunday and just before I arrived in Le Puy, the seasons changed. Everyone has now entered Ordinary Time, the six-month stretch during which nothing much happens. A monk once told me this season is assigned green to remind us of plants slowly growing, an everyday kind of change.

Boringly, the lentil plants grow in mud, and the next day they grow in mud again, and eventually someone plucks them, washes them, and drops them into a plastic bag with a label on it: *Le Puy lentils.* The Chemin too, feels scrubbed cleaner here, wrapped in cellophane that shines depending on the light. Even the tiniest villages sell ponchos and electrolytes. Yesterday some pilgrims hired a tour company to bring them soup at the top of an ascent. Others have packed dinner clothes and dangly earrings. Today, thinking I was as alone as I used to be, I stood on the path and pissed into the woods, and all the sudden I was apologizing because another pilgrim—*another person!*—dashed by.
I take a picture of myself atop this fungus-covered boulder. Over my shoulder, the background reaches far and the hills aren’t selling anything. The lentil fields below aren’t noisy because they aren’t new and nervous.

Maybe the measure of how much we love something is how much we fear losing it. We guard it like it’s our birthday candle and all the other guests are trying to blow it out.

The French word for burn is still allumer and, though I won’t smoke them now, the cigarette rolling papers I found beside the church in Saint Vincent still exist. They are still tucked into my backpack, safely valueless to any would-be thief.

The other party guests are wearing clean clothes and dangly earrings and I am climbing a boulder to escape them.

*  
May 24, 1472 km to Saint Jacques

All morning after Saugues, I try to make myself feel better, but my guilt walks just as fast as I do.

Two opposite, small events happened in Saugues. But nothing is small. Not here. On the Chemin, every tree or sunset has two and a half meanings, and every choice calls for self-reflection, and maybe the person you are here is the person you most truly are anywhere.

A married couple who lived in Saugues had renovated their upstairs into a small pilgrim’s gite. “The Chemin is like an addiction,” Sophie told me when she passed me a cup of tea in her kitchen. Together, she and her husband Richard had walked from their front door to Santiago. And then started further east to walk from Geneva to their front door. And then from Cluny to Le Puy. And they soon would again. Surely generosity had prompted them to put those twin beds upstairs, a generosity that makes you shake your head
and say \textit{Wow}. But also, I suspected, their addiction fueled them, too. Having pilgrims in the house gave them a needed contact high. “But it’s an addiction to something healthy,” I said.

Sophie showed me the upstairs, the comfortable chairs, and the beds onto which Stephan from-Germany and Maxime from-Near-Geneva-But-the-\textit{French}-Side-of-the-Lake had already tossed backpacks. When we passed the table with the \textit{donativo} box, she modestly waved her hand at it—I could leave her and Richard a donation if I wanted. She changed the subject: “And here are the showers.” “What a wonderful place,” I said as she left. “See you in the morning—you’re invited downstairs for breakfast,” she called back.

This place had a kitchenette, and Saugues had a small grocery store, which meant we would probably cook a pilgrims’ dinner together, so I dropped my bag and went to find food to contribute. And this was the beginning of the first of the two Saugues events: At the grocery, just before it closed, I grabbed some lettuce, and cheese, and the least expensive sausage I could find. When the owner rang up the total, it was around eight euros, and I reached into my pocket, but I had only a five-euro bill and some change. I looked through the money belt. I wear it beneath my clothes, where no one can pick my pocket, but then, on the downside, it looks obscene when I’m opening it. (I usually hide in a corner, but there I was, in the grocery-store-open, pawing and panicking in front of this cashier.) “I’m afraid I left my money at the gîte,” I said, embarrassed. “Maybe I can put something back.” But he said, “Tomorrow.” At first I thought he meant, \textit{Come back when you can afford it}, but I looked at him smiling and realized he meant, \textit{Take it now, and pay me in the morning}. “Really?” I asked. He wrote arithmetic on my receipt. He handed me a sack with all three of my items in it.

The next morning, I woke in the comfortable bed and cozy blankets Sophie and Richard had bought for people like me. I sat in one of the chairs they had provided, dressing
my feet—but I couldn’t find the gel squares from Montbrisson, the cushions that had
been rescuing my Achilles tendon the past week and half. What had made walking possible
again. They weren’t in my boots, they weren’t on the floor, they weren’t in my bag, and I
tossed the bag down, re-searching its pockets, but it was the wrong way to treat the bag, and
the camel-bag must not have been sealed because a whole liter of water spilled onto the
floor, and the kitchenette had only a couple of dish towels, and my own little microfiber
towel did nothing, and maybe I was ruining their floor, and I was keeping them waiting
downstairs at the breakfast table. And it all made me nervous, which sometimes for me
quickly turns into nervous about money.

Richard came upstairs with a friendly scold: “Come on, when we can all eat breakfast
together, we’re happy home!”

They gave Maxime, Stephan, and me bread and homemade jam. Coffee, hot milk,
and the stir-in chocolate powder that is meant for kids, but I can never get enough of.
Sophie asked us where we would walk to that day, though her daily breakfast guests probably
always give her similar answers. I should have said, What a nice start to the morning, merci, merci,
but the missing gel squares got in the way. Could I even walk without them?

Upstairs, as we gathered our backpacks, Maxime, standing near the table donation
box, turned to me and said in English, “Brad? It’s your water?” He gestured to the floor.
“Yes, I’m really sorry I couldn’t get more of it up.” “Thank you for my feet,” he gruffed. He
was still angry as we laced up our boots at the front door. “Brad, did you make a donativo?”
“Oh, it’s upstairs,” I said, pretending to think he’d asked where to find the box. “But you
made a donation?” Accusation traced his words. Maybe he had looked inside the box. “Yes,”
I lied.
But, I thought, if it’s a donation, doesn’t that mean that it’s okay not to give anything? True, I had eaten their bread and drunk their chocolate, but not that much. And this trip was already costing more than anticipated. And I had lost my gel squares, and if I could find new ones, they would be expensive.

“Go ahead without me,” I told Maxime and Stephan. “I have to go to the grocery.”

The grocer smiled the same way he had the day before. In my backpack, I’d found the exact 2.72 euros I owed him. “Thank you so much,” I said, and it sounded like a sigh. We chatted about walking for a minute, and then he reached into a basket on the counter. He handed me some local cheese, special to the area. It had a price tag he ignored. “For the pilgrim,” he said, and it sounded like a wink.

Since the grocery was east of Sophie’s, the path out of town took me beside her house again. I could sneak back upstairs, back to that donation box, I thought. Drop money in their mailbox? Or maybe knock on their door and say, “I didn’t have cash yet when I left…” They were so generous to renovate their home and to give me tea the day before. And they had to pay for those twin beds somehow. I should stop.

And the second Saugues event, opposite of the first, is that I looked up at their house with its white front door and the water all over its upstairs floor, and kept walking past it.

*

If I ever walk the Chemin again, I’ll first prepare by working overtime. I’ll take on odd jobs and earmark the extra money just for the hospitaleros who run donativo pilgrims’ lodgings. I’ll give them lots.
I offer Maxime from-Near-Geneva-But-the-French-Side-of-the-Lake some of my coffee, and he says, in English, “I hate coffee.” I strongly doubt this is true, and I take it personally. In French, I say, “But you’re French (you jackass!),” Though his smirk is subtle, it spreads across his face to his eyes as he looks at me and says, “But. I do.”

* 

In mud, I thought of water. Crossing water, I thought of stones. During the grand rain, streams were called rivers, and rivers were called floods. The water rebelled past the lines the tree roots had drawn for it. It spread past the edges of bridges, and in one forest, a fallen tree seemed a safer crossing than the footbridge. More than many things, I feared slipping a foot into wetness. The river rocks that you must hop across could be covered in slick moss, or your backpack could topple you. And if your socks soak themselves, how will they ever dry in this rain? Walking with wet feet equals blisters, and you can’t stop walking yet. And blisters can make you want to stop walking ever, but tomorrow you must wake and do what you do when you wake. In beds, I dreamt the verbs andar and marcher, and they were not vocabulary.

* 

Avoid walking eastward, we say. Neither rivers nor trains flow backward. If you realize you left something in a village where you no longer are, you can debate retrieving it, but probably you will decide the current is too strong to swim against.

But what, then, of memory? And what about when you return to North America and Santiago lies to your east?
Taken out of context, puddles are merely rainwater to step around, nothing to fear.

* 

I suspect that some French pilgrims find me safe: They can tell me the truth since I don’t understand every word. One has thick glasses and an eye that veers to the side. She confides that she has come to the Chemin because the eye gives her such self-consciousness she fears talking to people. (Is self-consciousness what she means by problèmes?) She thought it would be easier here. “Do you understand what I mean?” she asks. “Oui, je comprends” I say—Yes, I understand. “Plus ou moins”—more or less. Only later do I think that maybe this more-or-less, which often makes me feel like a klutz, can be some type of gift to them. 

* 

From time to time along the path, we see Saint Jacques, and sometimes we see Saint Roche. I confused the two until I learned about the dog and the bread. In paintings and statues, they both wear floppy hats and scallop shells. Saint Roche, however, sports a bloody gash on his shin, and a beagle holds a baguette up toward him. Roche was born along the Chemin—not this one that begins in Le Puy, but France’s southernmost one, which begins in Arles. He did not walk to Saint Jacques de Compostelle but to Rome, and upon his return he got banned to the woods, where he grew sick and hungry. From nowhere, the dog appeared, baguette in mouth. As science had not yet taught us about germs, Saint Roche ate it without hesitation. 

* 

Sometimes a church window shows a cruz de Santiago, which is also called a cruz espada, or a
“sword cross” because the bottom part tapers to a point and the three upper appendages are stylized to look like a hilt. We can say it represents the way the saint died, his beheading. It is usually red, and red is usually the color of a martyr, and we can say this. We can speak of Jerusalem instead of Clavijo, of the Year 44 instead of the Year 844. And besides, Clavijo is in Spain, as are most of those crosses, and I am in France, and I do not want to think about it now.

* 

What all the sudden matters: If your socks have wrinkles. If the sun comes out. If the grocery is a quarter mile away. If, on the morning of a day the path will fork, you don’t say Bon Chemin to a friend who walks more quickly than you, just in case. Whether the tree branches overhead make enough of a canopy for a rainy night. Whether the farmer will probably enter this barn before you wake in the morning, whether he would give permission if you just knocked on his door and asked, or he’d tell you to scram. If the sign outside a lodging says Gîte (a room of bunk beds), Gîte d’étape (“hostel of the step”—a room of bunk beds with hikers or pilgrims in them), Hotel (expensive), Chambre d’hoté (expensive, but includes breakfast), or if your guidebook describes a place as donativo or libre participation aux frais (donation or pay-what-you-will). If, when the path forks after the town of Figeac, you should turn right, toward the Sanctuary of Notre-Dame de Rocamadour, and spend a week on that path before it rejoins at Cahors. That a chocolate bar weighs 250 grams, but gives you much energy. That a liter of water costs a kilogram and adds ten percent to the weight you’re carrying. Whether you shake hands and say, Vraiment!, when thanking the helpful stranger who acted as if she knew you and had all the time in the world.
Despite having been a human for quite some time, certain aspects of the experience continue to surprise me. For example, the recurring need for water. Where, even, do we feel that? Not exactly in the throat, not the mouth or chest. But at least every hour, here it comes, calling for our attention as if it’s something new. Sometimes my camel-bag runs out between public water taps in farmland. When the next village or bar or cemetery is who-knows-when ahead. Then I knock on a farmhouse door and ask to avoir une tipeau de l'eau. More than once, walking to these doors has felt like walking into a horror movie. Me, the defenseless, naïve stranger climbing steps to a front porch covered in odd trash: broken plastic toys, like the red and yellow cars kids ride in, or piles—piles—of old, water-ruined newspapers. And on the other side of the door, a habitual killer who covers his victims’ bodies in papier-mâché. But, no, the homeowners simply take my camel-bag to their kitchen sink and return with voila. Sometimes they say, “How full would you like it? Do you want more?” What they never say—maybe because they get thirsty too—is “no.” After “merci, merci, merci,” I affix the bag back to my backpack and pull that first sip through the straw, which is something else that surprises me: how pleasant it is to meet the thirst—it’s an answer to a troublesome question, the other half of a rhyme. I wonder if sometimes the human subconscious makes us forget to drink for a while so we can build up the need, then quench it.

This building up of need may be why I so often decide not to sleep indoors. Not to spend some of the money I do have. Not to eat menus du jour in villages with nice restaurants.
The first time I wanted to choose the outdoors when I didn’t have to was a few days after Taizé. I’d walked a day’s worth, and there, to the left, in plain sight, was the yellow, two-story gîte the Guide Orange had listed. “Maybe it’s expensive,” I thought, though the Guide said it wasn’t. “But I want to walk a little more,” I said aloud, though I didn’t really. The wise option was to sleep indoors, take a shower, accept that opportunity when it appeared. But—. Just thirty feet ahead on the Chemin were woods. I stood at the intersection a couple minutes, then continued forward. Across from the woods were some Jersey cows who came up to their fence and shoved their faces at me to pet. I obliged for a while and then said, “I’ll see you in the morning,” and walked into the woods. “This is probably necessary,” I thought as I looked for a flat space on the pine needles. To whom did I feel the need to justify it? But I did, and I felt a tad guilty, too. Like I was wrong to make anything more challenging than it had to be. “It’s okay to camp out just because you want to,” I said. “Right,” I answered. I spread my aluminum foil sheet onto the ground, and then my orange sleeping sack that says SOL, which means Survive Outdoors Longer, but must also be a joke (Shit Out of Luck). I put the liner inside, inflated my pillow, and in the morning said goodbye to the Jersey cows.

And for prayer let’s substitute walking: “While I was speaking, a strong feeling came over me, urging me to withdraw within myself again. The Prayer was surging up in my heart, and I needed peace and silence to give free play to this quickening flame of prayer, as well as to hide from others the outward signs which went with it, such as tears and sighs and unusual movements of the face and lips. I therefore got up, saying, ‘Please excuse me, but I must leave now.’”—The Pilgrim’s nineteenth century diary
Pilgrims—past and present—are marked by scallop shells. In art and real life, they wear them, pinned to their medieval clothes or tied to their twenty-first-century backpacks. Mine has been swinging behind me since Le Puy, and everyone knows why I look so rough, so pissed off or joyful. Here, we proudly announce difference.

Let’s not forget that people who aren’t carrying backpacks sometimes have kitchens of their own. Before this started, I had cabinets full of dry noodles, balsamic vinegar, just-add-water mixes, spices, canned three-bean-salad—how much did those cans weigh? I miss the way they would just sit there on their shelves waiting for me to get home or get hungry. Vegetables staying crisp in the crisper drawer, cucumbers and zucchini ready to throw themselves onto my cutting board, a suicide for the love of soup. My hand-drawn stick figures wouldn’t impress anyone—especially if that person were Renoir or a high school art student—but if I had a canvas and paint right now, I’d prop that canvas against this tree and make a still life in celebration of potatoes, and cauliflower, and chickpeas—foods that, last month, seemed boring.

May 30, Senergues, 1331 km to Saint Jacques

Bird poop between the pews—someone has built her nest on the chandelier. For Rachel and Katy it is Day 10. For me, Day 21. For the dead church mouse on the floor, who could guess? Only those who are alive can shit, and this bird knows it. She’s singing all over the place. Then our presence must scare her off, because she chirps her way to the stained-glass
window above the door. She darts out a hole no human would have noticed. When we follow her to the outside, we’re on a little street and next to us is a pasture. A donkey in it sees us, and he comes to his fence and brays like a happy knucklehead. I don’t think I’ve ever heard a donkey in person, so it’s a treat worth pausing for. Bonjour, he and I say to each other. His gray face looks soft and friendly—nature and I have a great mutual respect today. I reach my hand over the fence to pet him. “Careful with that!” Katy cautions, “They bite.” I’m sure it’s fine, I’ll be gentle. And I am; his face is basically one big, pet-able nose, and it feels as soft as it looks. Then he clamps his teeth into my hand. And I scream (in the instinctual, cartoonish, high-pitched way that has embarrassed me ever since my voice deepened and I outgrew adolescence). He nods his head back, tugging my hand, so that he drags me a couple inches, and I slip on the grass and fall in front of his fence, and my fingers scrape out of his mouth. I jump to my feet and try to look like my pride has not been nicked. This donkey is such a jerk, but Katy, however, is too nice to say I told you so. Instead of saying anything about it, the three of us look for the red and white stripes painted on a post and start walking to Conques.

* 

May 30, Conques, 1321 km to Saint Jacques

For days, I haven’t seen any of the people I used to know, the people who left Le Puy the day I did. Before our two days together ended, Katy and Rachel les Soeurs Americaines taught me that you can eat dandelion greens. The ones I grabbed bed were too bitter to chew. But the sisters’ point was the leaves were tasty if you topped them with cheese and fruit. Their point was you could just pick them—they pop up everywhere.
When we say, left-foot, right-foot, we mean continue. When we measure by a foot, we mean the distance between one ancient man’s toes and heel. When we say heal, we mean we will eventually walk normally because the pain will end. When we say end, we mean Saint Jacques de Compostelle, near the coast of Finisterre, which means End of the Earth. When we say earth, we mean the dirt on our hands and faces, which is like the Eden dirt of Adam’s hands and face, which is a story many of us long ago stopped believing, but still we’re dumbstruck if we ever stand in the Sistine Chapel and look up at God’s finger. It’s a story that makes one kind of sense when we’re walking and each left-foot, right-foot sinks down one-hundredth of a foot into the familiar, and when we say familiar, we mean, somehow, we are related.

And for prayer let’s substitute walking.

Throughout the countryside, lots of wrought iron crosses on cement pedestals, and they aren’t for the dead. I’ve heard that in the past they marked property boundaries. I could read something symbolic and unpleasant into this use of crosses, but I won’t. Instead I will do as pilgrims do: grab a stone and add it to the pile beneath the cross. Such a pile or larger cairn to mark the path is called a mont-joie, a name—I read—reminiscent of Monte de Gozo, the Mount of Joy from which the pilgrim finally sees in the distance the towers of Saint Jacques Cathedral. And so adding your stone reminds you of what you hope to reach.
Some mornings I say, “Thank God this is where I live” and then take up my staffs. I grab my backpack, my straw hat with the green visor and the blue feather that pops out. The other day, a friendly French shopkeeper told me the hat was very funny. She sold black silhouettes that stick to walls. Metal decals of pets or birds or old fountains. Three customers browsed there—a married couple and a young woman. The couple looked up and down the display wall, and they paged through the catalog, hunting for a certain type of dog, a decoration resembling what they knew. If they found their dog’s breed, then they’d probably hang it in their kitchen and have a picture of what’s right in front of them. And maybe this couple had the answer to what home is—maybe it’s the place where we recognize things twice over. The shopkeeper clicked my very funny photo on her phone, and I tapped the top of my hat, at the right-hand side: two o’clock. I don’t know the breed of whatever iridescent bird it was, but I knew my half-blue, half-black feather was still there.

People who study saints call Saint Jacques/Saint James/Santiago unique because art identifies him by posthumous experiences. Whereas the Renaissance painted Saint Catherine with the wheel that killed her, and whereas Saint Agatha presents on a platter the breasts that her torturers cut off, Saint James almost never holds the sword that beheaded him. We see a statue with a bird and say, Saint Francis, but the shorthand for recognizing Saint James has nothing to do with his presence at the mountaintop Transfiguration or his falling asleep when the weeping Christ needed him in the garden. Instead, he looks like those who sought his casket. He wears the floppy brown hat that kept the sun and rain out of medieval pilgrims’ eyes. He carries a walking staff. Pinned to his hat or his coat is a white scallop shell.
You know St. James because you know pilgrims. It’s a circle of naming: when we wear the shell, we identify ourselves as his in the way that he identifies himself as ours.

And I dare anyone to tell me to not to love him wildly because of it.

* 

Why a scallop shell? One theory aims at the self-punitive—pilgrims eating the live, squirmy scallops as penance. Another theory: because the city of Santiago is so close to the sea, many pilgrims bought shells there as proof of arrival, so the shell marked one to whom the pilgrimage had happened—one walking homeward, one living at home, owning the shell.

* 

When I thought to myself or talked aloud, which was often, I referred to it as a peculiar type of sadness: How can I explain how, some mornings, walking away from a pair hospitaleros whom I’d known only a few hours felt like someone had snuck upon me, tackled me, and shaved my head? Last night, I thought they were just the penguins Michael from-Illinois needed. That he could visit with them in the days he awaited the delivery of his new boots. I brought him, and they told us to come back for dinner, and after dinner, they told us to come back for breakfast. They were never a part of you, I remind myself, too conscious of the distance between 1) Marie-Claude and Jacques and 2) my walking staffs, pulling me farther away. Their handles have straps to wrap my hands into them. These poles are mine, and my hands are pole hands. If it were this pair I found myself without, then yes, I would go back. If I’d left these poles beneath my bed in their gîte, I would turn now, follow the half kilometer back until I reached the front door, beside the Lady of Mount Carmel Convent. Jacques would be mopping the floor and pushing up his eyeglasses, their lenses and frames thick like
an uncle’s, like those of an uncle who might slap you on the back and call you *sport*. Marie-Claude would already be peeling tonight’s potatoes, her movements smooth with the peeler as if spreading the threads of spider webs. Jacques, hearing me at the door, or once again seeing me through the open window would say, “Brad! Come in, have some water and syrup.” We would talk about the day’s chores, even though they’d only just begun, and they’d ask me about my day’s walk as if it were more than just one kilometer so far, as if they had never heard of something so fascinating, so pure, as a pilgrim walking. He’d say, as he has before, “You’re super.” I’d offer to scrub the skillets, put away the cups, *Let me scour something*, but she’d insist I stay seated. “Tell me more about your grandchildren,” I’d say, and “Tell me something more about your trek to Compostelle.” And she’d answer, but not too much, twisting her silver pendant, her head framed by the map on the wall, the map with the various routes to Compostelle highlighted in different colors, the map on which the hospitaleros have been too modest even to circle Figeac. And the morning would last so long it would become the afternoon, and they would put on the recording of “Le Chant” as background music to the meal they’d insist we all three eat. And I’d—finally—grab my forgotten staffs from beneath the bed—and then only so as not to disrupt their work too long. At the door, Jacques would say, “May Saint Jacques protect you,” as he did this morning, and I would thank, thank, thank them for all they’ve done, but still it wouldn’t be enough.

* June 4, Cajarc, 1230 km to Saint Jacques

Last night I dreamt about throwing up. The ink on my hand says *Day 26*. I’m hoping today brings a pond. Before bed, I wanted to vomit because I ate oily, oily canard—inside my belly, the duck swam in its own grease. Sometimes I write the days on my hand as if they are
marking me. Passing lakes and ponds, I have wanted to swim but have made excuses about time and kilometers and daily goals. In waking life, I didn't throw up, though I was camping in a grotto and could have conveniently done so. I take a picture of my hand, and this day matters. It's not just ponds; always and everywhere I am intending to do something simple and good but am not doing it and instead am worrying about something I should be doing but am (also) not doing—many of my afternoons are a conflicted but uninteresting puppet show about the twenty-first century. Last night at the grocery store, I picked up a bottle of wine to drink in the grotto, but I forgot a way to open it; I also bought too much food to carry very far, and anyway, instead of groceries I ate restaurant duck. On Day 26, I am regretting the purchases I made on Day 25, but I am afraid to get rid of what I have. Because the canard was a gift from a well-to-do pilgrim who flew to France for only four days and wanted to dine with other pilgrims, and because a pond would be another free gift, I left the wine atop a stone in the grotto with a duct-taped note, Servez-vous, pelerin. At the grocery store, I noticed that a stick of deodorant weighed only sixty-four grams; a package of gummy bears weighed three hundred: which did I leave on the shelf, and which is doing nothing to help my stomach but tastes kinda sorta like lime?

* 

The first verse of the song, “Le Chant du Pelerin de Compostelle” says, “Every morning we go further. Day after day, the route calls us. This is the way of Compostelle.” So we are beckoned to the path toward Compostelle. I first learned the song walking alongside a French pilgrim, and he told me that because it was an old folk song with no clear author, how could we know what the words might actually be or how they might be spelled? Because voie and voix sound the same, the lyric could also say, “This is the voice of
Compostelle.” As in, that electric sound you hear each morning as the sun catches the grass on fire is Compostelle saying Get over here.

*

Why should I feel anxiety? Doesn’t everything I own lay down inside the backpack that’s always with me?

*  

June 5, Varaire, 1213 km to Saint Jacques  

But even here I worry. The Chemin is a mirror of your life. Sometimes when the path simply rolls on, I can be a stalk of wheat bobbing its head in the field. But show me a map of tomorrow with a fork in the path, and I turn into a house painter on top of a ladder on his first day.

Don’t make the wrong choice. Before I bought the plane ticket, I planned to follow the Chemin from Le Puy until it reaches the Pyrenees and becomes the Camino Frances, which leads all the way to Saint Jacques. But Patrick from Switzerland walked that path just two years ago and says it’s now crowded and noisy and commercial. When he reaches the Pyrenees, he plans to walk three days north through the mountains and reach the Camino Norte. It follows the coast and takes you to the same Saint Jacques, but without this new “touristique” feel. But also, I think, without all the villages Aimery Picaud listed in the Codex. Without the stream he described as poisonous to horses. Without the other, miraculous stream at San Bol. Is the better pilgrimage the one with obscurity or the one with history? I am not yet to the point of feeling it in my stomach, of curling up in the center of my bed as if I might fall out of it, but that is how the pattern sometimes goes.
June 6, Cahors, 1180 km to Saint Jacques

What my twentieth-eighth day brings: shitting beside the parking lot of a budget grocery; and walking too far and too long, trying to find an inflatable swimming pool mattress for sleeping; and all my city errands vacuuming up my day; and hating the whole damn Chemin; and wanting to give up and go to Venice instead.

The late afternoon also brings the Cathédrale Saint-Étienne, consecrated in 1119 by Pope Calixtus II—the Codex Calixtinus pope. The Liber Sancti Jacobi pope. But what keeps stealing my eye? Something new: An artist has printed enormous photographic portraits onto some kind of clear material that spans across all the old stained-glass windows. The light shines through both, and contemporary faces wrap across saints’ torsos. A little girl smiles through the Virgin Mary’s robe. A living man’s calves stretch from Saint John the Baptist’s arm to Jesus’s anointed head.

June 8, Lauzerte, 1134 km to Saint Jacques

A story of Saint Roche, says he, sick and tossed into the forest, builds a hut of leaves and branches. He’s thirsty; a spring of water bursts up in the place. A hunting dog brings him a baguette and licks Saint Roche’s wounds until they are healed—never mind the germs in a dog’s mouth. Now, a common tongue twister adds another character to the story simply for the phonetics of his name: El perro de San Roque no tiene rabo porque Ramón Ramírez se lo ha robado. (Saint Roche’s dog hasn’t a tail because Ramón Ramírez has stolen it.)

I am standing beneath a large portrait of him in this village church/gallery for art from bygone mansions. Other paintings on the wall are blue monochromes of landscapes that look like china plates, which seem far too refined to hang next to someone who lives in the woods and smells like dog breath. Next to him, in the same painting, is the martyr Saint
Sebastian, who never stood so close to Saint Roche in real life because he lived eleven hundred years before him. Why are they in the same painting? Why, for that matter, have I seen their statues paired together in several churches this past month?

*  

June 8, Lauzerte, 1133.5 km to Saint Jacques

I am just outside Lauzerte, hitching up my left outer sock. It will be a sleep-outdoors night, and I have a good amount of walking ahead of me before bed. The right boot strings need retying. I pull my right sock up and—oh shit!—it rips. This small disaster takes only one second, and the gash—or should I call it a wound?—stretches as big as a silver dollar. A hole directly above the lip of the boot, which will rub my Achilles tendon sore. My mouth becomes a factory of curse words. These are my one pair of outer socks, and both of my inner socks are too thin for any kind of comfort. It will probably be days of blisters and limping before I walk through a city large enough to have a sporting goods store, and even then, will they have hiking supplies? The minimalism which made me feel free and a bit proud now seems stupid. Who hikes hundreds of miles with only one real pair of socks? How much would another pair have weighed, really?

Once, I vowed to cut down on cursing. When I said damn, I reasoned, what I was really saying was, Something didn’t go my way like it’s supposed to. Because the world is supposed to adjust itself to me. To correct this self-centeredness, I wore a rubber band on my wrist and snapped it each time I slipped up, which was a dozen times a day.

Damn-damn-damn-damn-damn, I shout to the empty field I’m standing beside. Eight years since making the vow, I still want to have a more balanced view and accept that my place in the world’s daily events is small. But I still curse just as much, if not more, and I long ago forgot the rubber bands.
I stand here shouting at the grass until I remember what the past weeks have taught me, and I grab my staffs, and turn westward, and put my soon-to-be-raw right foot in front of my left because what else can you ever do, anyway?

Three kilometers later, I come to a countryside church and cemetery. When I pop in, it’s a contrast to the art gallery church where I stood earlier; it is white and empty but for a small cross and a few chairs. A display of before and after photos shows that this place was in disrepair—until recently repaired.

A math equation jumps up at me, and the addends are: a.) It's getting late, and b.) No one will probably come by tonight, and c.) Sleeping in a church would be mischievous fun, and d.) That rope in the corner is for ringing the bell!

When I hear a car pull up, I bow my head as if immersed in prayer, but the person must have come to visit a gravestone because he or she does not enter the building. I roll out my sleeping bag, and the next morning, I roll it back up. I pull my socks back on, slowly so as not to exacerbate the gash. I continue down the Chemin, and after seven minutes, a tree branch offers itself over the path at eye level. Tied to it are two navy hiking socks that do not have tears in their Achilles tendons.

* June 9, outside, somewhere between 1100 and 1095 km to Saint Jacques

At this moment, my concerns are only physical. How long a stride can I manage? How fast on this hill that rises so steep I want a rope? How much bread? Where is water?

* June 9, Espalais, 1087 km to Saint Jacques

I have been at it for thirty-one days. A German pilgrim tells me, “What we are trying to do is keep alive.” Between us are two glasses of water.
Some mornings in a gîte, stuffing my backpack or buttering my toast feels like someone else is forcing me to procrastinate, and I keep thirstily looking out the window. Why does morning light look different from evening light? Whether the sunrays come from the east or the west, shouldn’t they be the same brightness? At the table, I force my feet to sit. Here is coffee, here is bread, eat all the carbs you can. Laid-back as if he has already experienced this particular morning, Patrick from Switzerland passes me the jam. “Bon Appetit.” The three other pilgrims from my bunkroom have already left. I make conversation: “Did you sleep well in the hallway? You didn’t you snore yourself awake, did you?” I joke. Patrick claims he’s so loud this occasionally happens. But I’ve never heard him because he always sleeps at a distance from others, even if that means on the floor or in the yard. Despite this, I’ve only seen him cranky once—when David from Belgium and I suggested we three take a short day so we could spend the afternoon and evening in a town having its annual fête. “I don’t want to make a party,” he said in English, “I want to walk!” None of us can predict which hours will be the compelled ones. The ones that feel like when we’re crossing under electric power lines and hearing them crackle. Here is coffee, here is bread. Out the window, the sun is lighting every single blade of grass. “Before you can open your presents,” my father said at Christmas, “you have to sit down and wait your turn.”

Before I left, I read advice from other pilgrims. One said, Don’t take walking staffs. They are a hassle, and you rarely use them. But, instead of believing her, I bought two blue poles, and this is an example of doubt pointing you in the right direction. Now, my left-hand pole balances each right-foot step. My arms help me up hills and down them. In a stream, the poles brace
me as I hop from rock to rock. They retract; when I untwist them, they collapse, so, indoors, I can store them in my backpack, which I seldom do, because why take the time when I will need them as soon as I step out? When they rest, propped against the outside wall of a bar, someone walking by can see them and know another pilgrim is inside. As I lean forward into them, they share the weight of my bag. If I'm sleeping outside, I can shove them into the ground and drape a sheet of foil across them as a tent over my bag in case it rains (I've grown better at this), or stretch the foil directly on top of the bag and use the poles as paperweights. From the times I have twisted and untwisted them to retract them, I have rubbed off some of their blue coloring. Maybe I could apologize to them for that, but I like how it makes them worn-in and shows me exactly which height to extend them to when it’s time to walk again. Because they are aluminum, they ding out the *tomp-tink* like I am a small bell passing through the woods. Alongside the highway, they crunch gravel, and it’s the second hand of a clock. And this is another reason the other pilgrim’s advice was wrong: without the staffs, what sound would I long for when at rest?

*  

_The way Patrick from Switzerland walks:_ Strong as an ant, he carries way more than any guidebook would advise. Twenty kilograms. At night, a bottle of wine. Kerosene lanterns and bottles of water so he can boil pasta in the fields. If he passes me around lunchtime and I offer him to sit for a pilgrims’ potluck, he says, “I never stop until I’m there, or I can’t keep going.” Some new pilgrims look at their maps for shortcuts along highways. I have done so thrice, each time with hesitation. Patrick says he will never do this. “For me, the way _is_ the Chemin,” he says. Why not walk it?
People I meet:

Ilrsa from-Italy. Short with short hair. Older and extremely energetic. Probably runs instead of walking.

Maxime from-Near-Geneva-But-the-French-Side-of-the-Lake. Nice brown eyes. Told me most of his dreams were about sex. Jackass.

Kenji from-Japan. Problem with his debit card. I tried to help. He speaks English but not much French. I translated. My (very) limited Japanese did not impress him, but it did impress the Italian spouses next to us.

The Italian Spouses. In their sixties. Friendly. Impressed by my Japanese. Let’s be honest, the real reason I spoke it to Kenji in the first place.

*  

June 13, Eauze, 986 km to Saint Jacques

Forty-one days until July 24th.

*  

And when one uphill reveals itself to be several, who reveal themselves to be mountains, you may not notice at first. You may, as I have done, wonder if it is yet the moment to give name to this steepness. How tall can a “foothill” be? But you know it’s a mountain by the time it takes before downhill begins. You know a mountain when you realize the fog to your left—It can’t be!—is actually a cloud. No matter how high the path takes you up it, you will find a lump in the land, an incline off to the side, a point still higher. As a boy I climbed boulders, but now when I do, it is not to prove myself a conqueror. Only once on the playground did I play King of the Hill, and I didn’t last long because I didn’t want to shove anyone off. I’ve seen
an illustration here with a competitive air; it depicts blistered pilgrim feet and reads, “No Pain, No Glory.” As if we can win something and non-hikers will praise us. When I climb this boulder now, it’s for the view. You know a mountain by how startled you feel when looking down from it. Houses or train tracks or chapels, if they can be seen, are tiny. Hike all you want, all the way up: Unless you happen to be the person who stacked all this earth and rock together to make a mountain, there is nothing for you to brag about here.

*

There was the hungry kilometer. There was the soaked kilometer when I realized my backpack was not, in fact, waterproof. There was the kilometer I belted that line from that song again and again—I’m not fuckin’ around, I’m not fuckin’ around. (That was quite a few kilometers, three or four at a time.) There was the day I wrote those lyrics on my hand to see them—no there were several days I did that—days when I was frustrated and tired and an idiot and lethargic, and the whole thing was so damn stupid, and the path too windy—why couldn’t whoever marked it just give me a straight line? There was the kilometer my gross, wet clothes made me stink to anyone within ten feet. On the way to Montarcher, there was the kilometer so cold, the rain turned my hands purple-red and I couldn’t unzip my jacket. And when I stopped to make a call to find an indoors place to sleep, I dropped the phone card in front of a polite, sorry-I-can’t-help-you stranger, and my fingers couldn’t lift it off the pavement. They just kept skimming the plastic like water gliders on a pond. There was the kilometer five before that, when, to thaw my knuckles, fumbled open the drawstring and zipper on my pants and pissed on my hands. The warmth lasted only a quarter of a kilometer. There was the kilometer it stopped raining. The day it was only overcast, and I thought How easy life is. My voice bounced, I sang into the forest, and sat on dry tree roots
and—leisurely—ate a baguette and tinned meat. Did anything more even exist in the world? There was the kilometer of poppies, which is a true name for them, because they pop out of the yellow wheat. Their French name is *coquelicot*, which sounds like how they look. There was the kilometer so full of their red-orange nonsense, it made me laugh. No, there were many kilometers like that.

*  

June 22, 756 km to Santiago

When the Chemin turns itself into the *Camino*, don’t expect a sign. Don’t expect a Spanish lesson. Maybe don’t call it *Spain* because the people who live here all the time call it Basque Country on either side of the border they don’t really believe in. On either side, they speak the same language, and maybe you do too. For them it’s Euskadi, and for you it’s *Ow*, and *Thank you*, and *Oh*. When the Chemin turns itself into the Camino, the markings change. The red and white rectangles are painted alongside yellow arrows, and then they disappear. The rectangles might have formed an X if you were making a mistake, but the yellow arrows do not tell you if you’re heading the wrong direction. When the Chemin becomes the Camino, there is no sign, but a concrete marker that does not say *Spain*. When the Chemin becomes the Camino, it promises sun. The Camino promises more remnants and more ruins, more collapsed pilgrim’s hostels from centuries ago, and they are called *hospitals*. The Camino cares about you and wants you to say *Busco el agua*. On the Camino, you don’t have to look for water in graveyards. Because it’s hotter there, you can expect more old fountains in more village plazas. When the Chemin becomes the Camino, sleeping inside becomes much cheaper, but noisier. The Camino laughs, and if you’ve been on the Chemin, then it feels like an inside joke you two share. The Camino knows both the earth and the Milky Way. *El Camino es duro*, people say, but the Camino never apologizes for being hard. It thinks it has
just the right amount of mountains, the perfect number of kilometers on its treeless plane.
The Camino makes no excuses about the sheep shit underfoot, and one of its favorite miracles is the chickens that poop and squawk in a church. The Camino has tasted the pus of the nations. Curse the Camino, and it says, *Te joder también, mi hijo, “Fuck you, too, my son,”* and extends its arms. The Camino knows how to partner dance, and that does not mean some prim waltz.

* 

When the Chemin becomes the Camino, a pilgrim becomes not a pelerin, but a *peregrino,* and Saint Jacques becomes Santiago, and some of his statues become violent, and you won’t want to claim them. But the others show him with his shell and pilgrim’s staff—they call this representation *Santiago Peregrino.* The Camino doesn’t give a damn what you call it. For all it cares, call it *Jakobsweg,* as its routes are called through Germany. Call it *Via de San Giacomo.* In France, it is *still* the Chemin. It has always been here. It has neither moved nor changed. You have.

* 

Crossing the Spanish border means certain stories are harder to ignore.

* 

It begins with someone who starts off saintly, but no one is as trustworthy as the statue you would make of them.
44—the year Santiago’s head falls to the ground. When we say Santiago, we mean the close friend of Jesus—famous in life for gathering leftover miracle fish, for being confused by Jesus’ parable stories, for letting his body fall asleep while his friend Jesus stayed up all night crying—the saint about whom we have the phrase, “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” 811—the year his body is found in northwestern Iberia. When we say the body, we mean the body that fell asleep permanently, which is, by then, a skeleton. When we say the Body of Santiago, we mean, the body of the bishop of Iria Flavia called Santiago. This is a portion of the story I love, and it takes place before 844, and perhaps my favorite years to live the Santiago story would have been between 811d and 844. But we live after 844, which was a year 133 years into the Moorish Conquest/Spanish Reconquest, one of the many years in which people have killed people and called it religion. In the valley called Clavijo, the bodies of the colonizers and the colonized were difficult to tell apart on the ground, but among those standing and swinging swords, the Spanish were many fewer. (Across the whole nation, the standing Spanish were fewer, but they did not know how to kill better.) At the Battle of Clavijo, the remaining had two choices: retreat or die. But then, over the hill came a knight, which in Spanish is the same word as gentleman. A man on a white horse, a horse that reflected sunlight. He charged down the hill. His sword was like a scythe in prairie grass, except the grass had necks.

*  

At Clavijo, the Spanish Christian soldiers cheered, and later the Spanish Christian civilians cheered. The church leaders said it was Santiago, and the faithful said it was providence.
* Over the hill came a knight, which in Spanish is the same word as gentleman. Over the hill came a gentleman who could charm the masses.

* June 22, Roncesvalles, 749 km to Santiago

Famous peaceful valley, famous monastery, monks who have recited a traditional benediction over pilgrims for centuries. A famously difficult day on the Chemin (now the Camino) ends and you are meant to sleep well, perhaps in the old barn-style building full of bunk beds. But here in the room where a pilgrim might check-in is a flyer: for just one euro, you too can be the lucky owner of a ribbon reading Camino de Santiago that the monks have prayed a blessing over. I think, I thought in the Middle Ages we stopped selling what comes free. Disgusted, I keep walking.

* Burguete, 746 km to Santiago

At the moment, my concerns are physical. I did not eat much last night, and I refused to buy any of the microwave dinners out the vending machines—vending machines!—at the monastery. As I, grouchy and self-righteous, looked for a place in the woods, I came upon a tent, and sitting outside it, my goofy new friend Alexis from Bordeaux who walked from home along a Chemin that joined mine two days before the border. “Hey guy,” he said in English, “you want to sleep with me?” This is how he phrased it a couple nights before when a handful of us from multiple paths—David from Belgium, Patrick from Switzerland, Alexis, two Italian girls, me—asked a farmer to borrow his field. It was a language mistake too endearing to correct.
It’s a two-person tent, but only if neither of us thrashes our arms while we dream, if we don’t dream about walking. Good thing each of our sleeping bags trap our arms inside. After the monastery—with its coin-operated massage chairs—Alexis’s generosity and mistakes made me feel better.

In the morning, he made us instant coffee on his camping stove. Offered me some of his hand-rolled cigarette as we waited for the anxious pilgrims to pass us by.

Now in this little grocery, I am buying cracker-cookies and sardines. Maybe cheese? Alexis mostly wants tobacco and rolling papers. “Can I get you a baguette, Alexis?” But he says no. “Don’t you want some food?”

* 

Not a baguette from a dog, but six loaves to feed a thousand. Not a single hungry person that day in Galilee, but tell that to the daughter of the man who starved somewhere last night.

* 

And for prayer, let’s substitute walking.

* 

June 23, Zubiri, 727 km to Santiago

Standing outside a crowded bar across the street from the crowded pilgrim’s hostel, which, since crossing the border, we call an albergue. “There’s people everywhere,” complains David from Belgium, whom I have known two weeks, longer than I’ve known anyone. “Maybe Patrick was right,” he says, worried. David, who would get Patrick from Switzerland and I to sing “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” as we walked between farms and fields. “Here’s a little song I
wrote,” he’d sing, as if it were true, as if he himself had written these words and the advice had just occurred to him that moment.

“I’ve been wondering if Patrick had the right idea, too,” I say.

Patrick warned us, “On the path you’re taking, there will be so many people, and some of them will be more like tourists than pilgrims.” At Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, he tried to get us to join him in walking three days north to a quieter Camino. We three had been talking about it for at least a week before that. In the Saint-Jean gîte, anxiety woke me up four times. I stirred around in my bunk bed—I’m sorry if I woke anyone—trying to decide. A small-but-enormous decision, its consequences affecting the remainder of the journey. On the one hand, quiet, maybe more of the authenticity you can expect before the arrival of people with cameras and money—many of them behaving like the American I hope I am not. On the other hand, the Camino Frances, the path I walked before. The one I want to revisit. The path where I first came out to someone—and it was a confession and it meant something different then. The path where everything seemed meant to be, and then it led me to Paj.

“It’s not too late,” David says. “We could still find a way to walk northward to the other path.”

*

And if it were possible to stop this *tomp-tink*, would we? Don’t call this rhythm mechanical, don’t call it sexual. What then? Call it a hummingbird’s wings played in slow-motion. Or the horse’s cloud of breath on a cold day. These walking staffs connected to my arm: who is swinging whom.
All the time now, if I’m not walking—which means when my staffs are on the ground and my arms are just flopping useless at my sides—my fingers have a new nature: they curl like a vulture’s. Stretch them out, and they crumple-pop back. It hurts to keep them straight. During sleep, they ball up into fists because even my hands dream of walking.

Or call it the rhythm of the horse’s breath if he’s sick. Or the throb of twisting a loose tooth—you wince, but you keep doing it. Or a kite back and forth in a strong wind.

* 
For another attempt to explain at what’s happening, we can look at a monologue from “Cigarettes and Chocolate” by playwright Anthony Minghella. For stop speaking, substitute start walking: “When you stop speaking, it’s like stopping eating. The first day there’s something thrilling, and new, before the pain begins. The pain where you want to give up, where you can think of nothing else. Then the second day, you feel wretched, the third delirious, and then suddenly there’s no appetite, it shrinks, it shrinks, until the prospect of speaking, the thought of words retching from the mouth, how ugly and gross it seems.”

* 
June 25, Pamplona, 707 km to Santiago
I bought cheap wine—meant for cooking or for people with terrible taste. It was perfect, just my taste. I poured a lot of it into my camel bag, and I am sucking it through the straw. I also bought a bag of factory-made croissants, which I am sharing with people on the next park bench over. I assume they are homeless, and so they often sleep outside and carry what they own on their backs. One man jokes, “This croissant is my mother, and the other is my father!” I don’t really understand this, but I laugh anyway.
I am in a laughing, wine-for-the-hell of it mood because I am in Pamplona, once again on the Camino Frances, the path I walked eight years ago, and this my choice, to stay on it. Earlier today, I walked away from it, ten kilometers north along the highway, beginning a makeshift, three-day journey to join Patrick from Switzerland on the quieter path. It made sense until it didn’t. The wind felt panicky. A man, who must have noticed my walking staffs, stopped his car, right there on the highway and said gently, “Are you sure you aren’t lost?”

Then I was walking again, nervous about cars, nervous about moving without yellow arrows or red and white bars painted on trees, nervous about not being on the Camino after all these weeks. Singing songs louder than semis, trying to drown out this enormously wrong feeling. Wrong path. Wrong way—north. No longer facing the sunset or Cathedral in Santiago. Then I was sitting on the shoulder of the road, talking aloud for forty-five minutes. I made a deal. I’d stick out my thumb. If a driver picked me up within a few minutes, I’d hitchhike back to the eastern suburb of Pamplona, the exact spot I left this path this morning.

I stood. Extended my arm. The right car stopped before even one and a half minutes had passed.

* 

So far, there are only about a thousand saints in all of human history, so odds are against me ever being named one. But, even so, if I get to become a patron saint, I want to be the one for people who are running late. Of racing through the airport because your first flight was delayed and you have only four minutes before the gate closes—a job interview or a hospital goodbye that will not wait long for you in the destination city. Of the moment you don’t
care what you don’t believe, you just beg *Oh, please, Oh please, Oh please*. You think your hamstrings will give out, your biceps will break, your carry-on will tumble down, you will trip, you will trip, you will crash into a person or post, you can’t do this, you have only three minutes, go faster, and the terminal you need is too far, and you are so stupidly weak, and what more could be more sacramental than this drive that says, *Go faster, Go faster, It doesn’t matter that you can’t go faster, Go faster.* I want to hear you even if you don’t know my name, even if you don’t say anything aloud. I want to part the Red Sea of people and roller bags that blocks your path. I want to distract the desk clerk before she can grab the microphone and say *final boarding call.* I want to mysteriously tie your shoelaces for you when you aren’t looking, so I will not let you fall. I will grab you by the torso and pull you like wind in reverse. I will increase the oxygen in the terminal—I think saints can do that—so that you do not lose breath, even though you are out of shape, and it’s your fault your lung capacity is so small and human. You’ll never get there in the next minute, there are a dozen more gates between here and your flight; I will the be the patron of those dozen gates, the patron of your shoes that do not slip on the floor, the patron of the door to the boarding ramp that the clerk is swinging shut, the patron of *Wait! Wait! Wait! Wait! Wait!* sounding like a dog, the patron of *I’m here, dammit!*, the patron of squeezing through that door even though it was impossible, the patron of just barely making it, the patron of just barely enough.

*  

This is the world I, still human and desperate, want to be true.

*  

June 26, 701 km to Santiago

Little monument to another dead pilgrim, the second this week. *DEP* is Spanish for *RIP*, and
a cross is Spanish for someone’s friend who never walked any farther toward Santiago de Compostela. I find a rock to leave below it, and the grass grows another fraction of a millimeter. Your horse was white and your shoulder blades were strong. People started walking and looking—looking in part, for you. The pope issued a guidebook. Sometime after this, someone invented the steam engine, and then someone invented a car, and then the invention invented new ways to suddenly die. The weeks went on for seven days, then started again. People squinted in sunlight as if they’d never seen such brightness. Gravel crunched as we walked to the places we would sleep. The people who knew how to shear sheep taught their children, and the sheep stopped panting. The red leaves dried. Twins and triplets got born. Another teenager and another old person found new reasons to dislike themselves. People started drinking and then drank less. Someone took a job making crosses that said DEP. The priest said to the young man, come sit close beside me. The conductor called, All aboard. In the old valley, the armies were busy stopping each other’s pulses. Your white horse crested the hill. You raised your sword and decided who would never walk further. You lopped off human heads, and the clouds whispered Stop.

*  
Because I am not yet a saint, I am allowed to have doubts. If, the day after my death-bed day, someone offers me sainthood, I will say: But first, explain why a baby was born terminally ill yesterday morning somewhere. And Why did someone die in a crash somewhere? And also, Why did the God of the story put the tree in the garden in the first place if he didn’t want the young couple to eat from it?

*  
Variation on The Year 844: In an earlier life, I speak better Spanish. When I say guerra, my
R’s roll like a waterfall over rocks. I say *mata* with a toughness, an international masculinity. In this life, I am the blacksmith who makes a sword until I am the soldier who uses it. In this life, everyone is a soldier, and we call this religious piety. Thirty-some years ago, the Saint’s body was found, and I am younger than thirty-some, so my whole life we have known that someone in heaven loves us more than he loves other people. The village priest says, *Take this bread,* but he does not hand it to me unless I extend my palms just right. The commander says, *run,* but he never says where. He says, *Don’t be the one who dies.* When I see a certain other young soldier in our troop, my pulse becomes a broken-wheel oxcart rumbling on the brick streets. When I lock into his brown eyes, I remember my fear of snakebites. One of us two knows the secret to make us live almost forever, but I’m not sure which one of us. Say *mata* and mean it. The enemy speaks another language. God speaks Latin. My tongue freezes between the enemy and God. The other army is one hundred thirty-three years old, and my uncle calls them *conquerors.* Sometimes the village priest hides from them and tries to hide the church too, but the building will not fit in the woods.

*

Variation on 844: In an earlier life, I am a soldier who speaks no Spanish because I am mute. When the priest places the bread on my tongue, he looks closely, as if he thinks the bread will make it come alive. *It is alive,* I think. The commander says the conquerors will arrive tomorrow, but they are already everywhere, a whole country that is not ours anymore. The commander says we are *re-conquerors,* but really I am a herdsman with a sword. The priest says the conquerors will prevent us from praying, and this is how I know the priest has never left the altar long enough to discover a blackberry bush and think, *Thank you* as he eats. My pointy metal sword hangs at my side, which makes my legs nervous, despite the sheath. My
feet remember every time they have tripped, and they count high. Only the saints can count higher, they have had time. The saints do not need sleep, but tonight we camp out so we have energy for killing. Killing is what wasps do, and we are humans. Our eyes close somewhere between the wasps and the saints. When our eyes open, our swords shine the sun back to us. When we raise them, we raise the sun, and that makes us like God in his heaven, which makes us imposters. The conquerors and re-conquerors are in the same Valley of Clavijo. My fear of tripping. The pointy metal. Ears, mouths, exposed necks. Who does God want killed first? The dying starts happening without permission. I raise my sword, and then I lower it. Two men run toward me, and I can’t tell if they are they type of people I am supposed to rescue or to cut down. I throw myself to the ground like a discarded sword. I lie flat, and I want to swallow all the wasps of the field.

* 

Variation on 844: In an earlier life, I cut off someone’s arm, and it falls to the grass of the Valley of Clavijo. There are more dead people I know than dead people I do not know, and this makes me think that God, or at least the village priest, lied to us. I yell words like mierda and joder, but God does not speak curse words. When I kill the first man, I laugh, when I kill the second, I vomit. When I kill the third, he looks up at me, his eyes still moving even though he is dead. When I kill the fourth, I turn myself into a boulder of the valley because boulders are never guilty. The people who pray in Spanish keep yelling, and I hear even though I lost my ears to stone. The people who pray in the other language cheer, except when they die. I do not know which language boulders pray in. At the top of the valley, what is that white horse?
Sometimes you are pissed off, and sometimes a winery’s wall has a water-tap of unending red wine so that pilgrims can help themselves. With so many emotions available to us, how could we ever settle into one for too long? “Please enjoy the wine here, pilgrim, and don’t take any with you,” a sign says.

The backsplash behind the fountain bears a cruz de Santiago, the cross that looks like a sword. We’re not now far from the Valley of Clavijo. You can take a quick bus ride there from the upcoming city of Logroño. But never mind that, what could be more joyful than all this wine on this hot June 27th afternoon? I have not been hungover but a few times in my life, and one of them was on the Chemin with Patrick from Switzerland, David from Belgium, and the young two French women whom David introduced to me by saying, “Brad! You have to meet these girls! They sneak into chapels to sleep just like you!” (It had, by that point, become a weekly occurrence for me.)

We were at a pilgrims’ gîte called L’Alchemist; they sold soap there, bar soap, a luxury compared to my stupid just-add-water detergent papers. And it smelled like coffee and mint, scents stronger than my sweaty socks and underarms or that moldy dishrag odor all over my bag.

If this new bar of soap wasn’t enough to make you feel drunk, they also had actual wine. A ceramic pitcher that the two volunteer hospitaleros kept refilling. The two dreadlocked, college-age men had walked from Le Puy, and when they arrived at L’Alchemist, they fell too transfixed to leave. And so they had cooked and poured wine and played guitar at the gîte for two weeks so far.

A guitar, a ukulele, the “Chant du Pelerin”—how could we say no? “Every morning we take the Chemin,” the guys sang in French, “Every morning, we go farther.” They did it
reggae style, then American country style, then more wine, then jazzy, then more wine, then as loud as possible, and at the chorus they lifted their hands and we all burst out as if at a surprise party: “Ultreya! Ultreya! E Suseya! Deus adjuva nos!”—from the old Latin phrase with which pilgrims once greeted each other. *Onward, onward, and upward! God help us!*

The next day, my new soap did not make me more alert. None of us left the gîte until noon, and our sunglasses weren’t dark enough to block the terrible light, and we couldn’t drink enough water, and walking or moving made us miserable. But we regretted nothing from the night before.

“Ultreya!” we said to each other. And we kept saying it for kilometers, and we walked onward, onward, and Patrick walked upward to the northern path, and in Pamplona, David—I have heard—took a bus north without saying goodbye.

* Ohio, 6024 km from Santiago

Suppose I were to lie and say, “I’m not an idiot. I knew all along—reasonable, thinking, calendar-watching person that I am—that it would all end.”

* The pilgrimage to Mecca is called the *Hajj*, and after becoming a person who has experienced it, one is, from then on, called a *Hajji*.

* Before leaving, I thought I’d told only four people in Ohio, but I must have miscounted or else forgotten to tell all four to keep quiet about it. And so when I returned, many people asked if I’d made it to Santiago: people to whom I’d previously told nothing, kind people
who hoped they could congratulate me, new people I’d known only a few days, people
who make me laugh and whom I trust, people with whom I eat lunch and drink beer. “How
was it?” they’d ask, expecting me to sum up the whole everything into a couple sentences.
“It was… a lot of things,” I’d answer. (I hate the assumption that if someone doesn’t speak
to you about something, he or she is ashamed of it—that a less-discussed topic is,
necessarily, a secret; that a secret is necessarily a source of pain. As if talking widely is the
only means to, or sign of, healthiness. “Have you ever sliced an apple?” I want to say.
(“Have you seen how exposure to air turns it brown?”)

*

Or maybe the topic, the story, the aspect of yourself, matters so much that you need a long
time to figure out the accurate words. Maybe you’re refusing the quickness of elevator
pitches and sound bytes and protest signs.

*

If I could steal anything from a church, it would be the bit of skull. Years ago, a library book
told me that a church near the northern coast claimed to have it, Saint Jacques’. And then in
the 1800s, the Cathedral compared it to a hole in the skull, and yes, it matched. Once, this
gave me the inkling—no not the inkling, the suspicious hint, that it was really his. I know I’m
supposed to question it all and assume the skeleton belongs not to him, but to a shepherd or
tanner who, had he known his bones would be swept up as in a game of jacks, never would
have died. No thinking person would buy that his freshly martyred body floated to the
Iberian coast. America didn’t raise me to believe in miracles. But the truth is, when I step out
of the rain and under a church roof, the game is called, Where is the St. Jacques statue now? and
when I find it, this feels like bumping into someone I know. Whenever my mother happened upon a friend in the checkout line, she’d greet them, “Hey, stranger!” And sitting in the grocery cart, I’d think, “But, Mom! You know them.”

*

I hated that morning and I hated those new pilgrims, chattering like a herd of squirrels tossed into a clothes dryer. As a child making this mistake with word choice, I heard from my babysitter, “When you don’t like someone, you don’t hate them, you dislike them.” Was I allowed to hate someone’s noise, at least? To hate their before-dawn hands fumbling as if zippers were a foreign language and they needed a translator to explain? Bustle-rushing out the hostel door as if there were only so much path out there, and they had to snatch their share before it was all gone. Over one thousand years! I wanted to call from my bed. There’s been enough to go around for over one thousand years.

*

I later saw it was a fear we shared. The worry that there wasn’t sufficient room for both my pilgrimage and theirs. As if they could seize it away from me. As if anyone could seize the oxygen from another’s lungs, in this world full of air.

*

I cannot claim to have learned this lesson quickly.

*

I met Bodina from Amsterdam because she offered me help, which, it turned out, was an
accurate first impression of her. “Are you lost?” she asked. Yes, but *in a relatively mild way.*

The bell tower of this church has been renovated into rooms for pilgrims in which we slept upon brown mats like those from gym class. “I’m looking for the shower,” I said. We were a few days past the French/Spanish border where many had started walking, and I was still adjusting to the buzz. She probably thought I was new. “Upstairs and to the right,” she pointed. She had the familiarity, the acquired calmness of a friendly senior visiting a freshmen homeroom class. She’d been walking over a month, long enough to quit caring if her dark blond hair was tidy. She’d begun at Vezelay, the starting point for another of the four major paths in France. When we found out we had this type of history in common, we clung to each other. Not the fierce clinging of teenage hands on a rollercoaster, more like the light clinging of children’s hands around lightning bugs. You can’t open your palms and stare. The occasional peek is enough to know they’re still there.

* June 30, Grañon, 556 km to Santiago

But here is something to stare at: on the *Chemin from Vezelay,* Bodina walked weeks before seeing another pilgrim. “Never in my life have I believed in God,” she tells me, “but out there all alone, I started to. Because it felt like I wasn’t alone. Sometimes in the fields, I’d get so overwhelmed with it, I’d just start crying.”

* The way Bodina from Amsterdam walks: The *tomp-tink* of her hiking poles is quieter than mine. She bounces a bit on the balls of her feet, as if trying to graze leaves with her head. The bounce in her step pronounces her name: *Bo-di-na, Bo-di-na.* At breaks, she remembers her sunscreen and offers it to others. Her light eyes find you on their own, like they have been
looking for you all day. They look eyelined, but they can’t be—she quit caring about makeup weeks ago. Besides, she cries when alone. She has walked alone and quiet for so long that she needs that, and she sneaks away in the morning. But everyone adores her—Bo-di-na—and she does not avoid them when they catch up.

*  
June 30, Santo Domingo de la Calzada, 562 km to Santiago

Here’s how Santo Domingo de la Calzada became a saint: he moved to the Camino. He built a pilgrim’s hostel. Calzada means “causeway”—he is named for the fact that he built an eleventh-century pedestrian road. What I love about this—love as in buying a saint’s medal in the town so I can wear it and remember, love as in May I really, actually, truly do it—is that his famous accomplishment is not something tremendous like curing diseases or like lifelong chastity; instead, it’s doing something practical and smallish to help make a traveler’s journey easier.

*  
Ohio, 6024 km from Santiago

And so I’m pulling the car over, offering a ride to this hitchhiker.

*  
Ohio, 6024 km from Santiago

And sneaking potato chips into a friend’s mailbox after she signs her divorce papers.

*  
June 30, Santo Domingo de la Calzada, 562 km to Santiago

When I meet Kai from-Germany, it’s in the village plaza. He is a friendly-looking stranger, mid-forties, in synthetic pants and a plaid, short-sleeved button-up, and he is standing next to Marta from-Austria-who-walked-here-from-Le Puy. I could talk to Marta, but that would
mean talking to a bat-shit crazy person who stands outside people’s tents and stares while they sleep. This information came from David from Belgium, a reliable source who said Marta clung to him—wouldn’t leave any gîte in the morning without him—no matter how many times he mentioned his wife.

But this is, after all, Santo Domingo de la Calzada, and we are, after all, pilgrims with the same kind of swollen feet.

“Hi, Marta,” I say.

“Brad! This is my friend Kai.” She sounds proud. “He’s from Germany, so we speak German together.”

“Glad to hear it,” I say. I shake his hand.

“Do you speak German!” Kai enthusiastically asks in German.

“No,” I say in German. I have now exhausted my German abilities, and so I say, in English, “Well, nice to meet you Kai. See you two down the path. Buen Camino.”

“Buen Camino,” he says, “Go see the chickens!”

*  

Santo Domingo de la Calzada, 562 km to Santiago

The rooster and the hen are here, and the wood from the gallows is here, which make this church more exciting than any I went to growing up.

For a minute here, I want to celebrate quirky faith. As a student, I heard many sermons divided into five parts. Five Keys for Divorce-Proofing Your Marriage. Five Steps to Regaining Hope after Loss. Five Explanations about Death. Five Proofs that God Exists and Loves Us. As member of a species that—who knows why?—makes a stupid, broken-breath sound we call laughter, as a person who lived under a sky that twice a day turns orange and purple and yellow to no practical end—I grew tired of bullet points.
Instead, I'll take the story of Jesus as an absurd performance artist, bucking everyone’s expectations of king-dom by riding into the capital city on an ass. Instead I’ll take these sloppy chickens. They peck in the straw of their fifteenth-century, polychrome, gothic-style henhouse. For centuries, they and their predecessors have bumped around, reminding people of resurrection and of the mayor who disbelieved that the hanged boy had not died. The mayor whose paraphrased words grew famous among pilgrims: That's ridiculous—the boy is as alive as these two chickens!

Above their cage is a piece of wood identified as from the hanged boy’s gallows. Below it, a painting of the miracle. Who wouldn’t want to make art of a story like that? Someone, impossibly, living? He has every reason to quit believing until he has the best reason not to.

“Hola, gallo, bola, gallina! Hola-hola-bola-bola-bola!” I say in a chicken voice, trying to get them to talk back, but they continue ignoring me.

Lore says if the chickens crow for you, you will be blessed. French pilgrims used to say that if you didn’t feed the chickens bread, you would die before you reached Santiago. But now plexiglass prevents that, so either the French were wrong (which is unlikely), or we are all about to die. Given how much some of these new pilgrims keep whining that everything is so hard, maybe half of us will indeed keel over.

Across from the henhouse waits a mausoleum and an effigy of a dead Santo Domingo with his hands crossed over his chest. He smiles a bit, perhaps thinking of how with those arms, he posthumously rescued the hanged boy. (Or maybe it was Santiago who saved the boy. Maybe in Toulouse, France. Maybe it happened twice.) Beneath this effigy lies the crypt where he is buried. As I descend the steps, I hear so much cock-a-doodle-doo-ing
that I think the Cathedral staff must have rigged motion sensors and sound effect recordings in the tomb. Then I realize the live chickens are blessing me.

Here is Santo Domingo’s tomb. The lights click on as I approach. I like this guy. He wanted to be a monk, but none of the monasteries would welcome him. So he made his mission to welcome others. Hearing the story before, I have seen myself in, of course, the pilgrims he helped. But quiet tombs being what they are, now I’m thinking of all these panicky pilgrims limping beside me in shoes that don’t fit because they didn’t break them in. Pilgrims who say, *This is harder than the movie I saw.* The woman who said, “My friend and I came here for a vacation, but this is not a vacation, so we’re going to Barcelona.” And the pilgrims at whom I roll my eyes as they race past, anxious to claim spots in a hostel, afraid the beds will run out.

“Okay,” I whisper.

I’ll try to remember my first few days. It was difficult (still is), and so I complained. If anyone had been around to hear me then, I surely would have annoyed them. I now know tricks about feet and backpacks. When I get anxious, I—sort of—know the feeling will pass in twenty or so kilometers.

I’m serious about this. This is something right and spiritual. I promise to help them. Without fanfare, and hopefully without coming across as bossy or snarky, I’ll offer them Vaseline for their feet, and I’ll mention how comfortable it is to sleep outdoors when you can’t find a bed.

Above me, Santo Domingo’s arms stay crossed, and the chickens continue pecking in straw.
The pilgrim boy and his father debate who should die for the not-stolen cup, and the son wins, so his father is the one who continues to Santiago, and the boy is the one the judge hangs. The judge and the villagers assume the boy to be dead; they leave him hanging from the tree outside of town and forget about him. In what may be the boy’s last moment, his mind is fast, and he thinks of his father, whom he does not blame, and he thinks of God, whom he does. What more can one say? He wishes he had grown old enough to make sense of this unjust place that God made. He thinks adults probably understand why tragic events and wonderful events can happen in the very same day. Right now, as he is dying, someone else is being born somewhere, and all the sudden he realizes that this must have been the case for at least two other people every hour of his life. The rope around his neck slackens. Beneath his feet, he feels something—a pair of hands?—lifting him four inches upward. He is supposed to be dead by now, but instead he is smelling poppies in the air.

In his torso, his diaphragm contracts and flattens. Because his diaphragm is a muscle between his thorax and abdomen, this contraction makes the abdomen bulge outwards, increasing the size of his body, and this increase in size lowers the pressure in the thorax (the name of which the boy has never heard), and this causes the expansion of the lungs. Because he lives in the year 1090, the boy does not know it, but the air filling his lungs consists of 78.62% nitrogen, 20.84% oxygen, 0.96% argon, 0.5% water vapor, and 0.04% carbon dioxide. The air sacs in his lungs are connected to tiny blood vessels called capillaries. The oxygen, which the boy cannot see, travels through the capillary walls into the blood stream, and the oxygen-rich blood flows to the heart. The heart, in turn, pumps this blood out through each one of his arteries, delivering oxygen to all the cells in his body: his skin, his
eyes, his brain, his bones. Someone holds him up, and this respiratory cycle happens 20,000 times a day for seventy-two days until his father returns and cuts him down.

*

Patrick from Switzerland. Carried wine bottles. Wants to live on the Chemin. Slept on an inflatable mattress like the ones in swimming pools.

David from Belgium. Said after three weeks, his Chemin started. Had high standards for French fries, pointed out French fries come from Belgium.

Andres from Miami. Terrifically gregarious and very devout. Thinking of becoming a Catholic priest. Said he had some miracle that involved falling in love with a girl.

*

July 2, Atapuerca, 511 km to Santiago

Tonight at dinner, some Italian pilgrims give me shit for dropping the noodles in before the water bubbled. “Brad puts his pasta into cold water,” one says, standing in the albergue doorway like he has a grand announcement. He’s speaking Italian, but my Spanish is good enough to understand, and besides, you can usually tell whether someone’s laughing with or at you, no matter the language. On the one (trying-to-be-sympathetic) hand, I could think that maybe they feel I am desecrating something valuable, that I am shaming the spaghetti their people have labored over for centuries, the semolina recipes their grandmothers passed down, coughing out their final words on their deathbeds. On the other hand, maybe they are just being assholes about something that’s none of their business.

In America, we romanticize how Italians make meals and food preparation a community experience. Bustling families singing around cutting boards, commenting on each other’s skills. No individual-sized microwaveables for them. When I was lonely, I lived
by myself in a drafty apartment with a tiny kitchen. The front door sagged on its hinges, exposing the place to winter. I put blue painter’s tape all around it and plastic on every surface. I wore gloves. I should have moved out, found somewhere warmer and gentler with a better landlord. I should have spent all my salary turning the heat higher. My third year there, I noticed—how bad I missed it?—a silver-dollar-sized hole in the wall just beneath the desk. Though the kitchen was tiny, it did have a full-sized gas stove, and I made giant pots of pasta, whole boxes at a time. Meals for several days, I said. But some nights I ate half of it, right out of the pot. Sometimes I poured a jar of sauce into it and ate it all, wrecking my already bad stomach. What bothered me most was that no one said, *Stop that. Take better care of yourself,* because no one knew. I put the noodles in first so that I could add just enough cold water to cover them, so I would waste no time waiting for it to boil.

* July 3, Atapuerca, 511 km to Santiago

Another morning, another baguette for the road. At a table in this little shop, three people drink coffee. You can spot them as pilgrims because their backpacks have shells on them, and because they are speaking English in the little town of Atapuerca. You can spot one of them as the Canadian priest you have heard about because he is wearing a short-sleeve black button-up and a collar. Since, despite everything, I continue to view priest-type people as small-scale celebrities, I am anxious to meet him.

“Hi! You must be the Canadian priest!” I extend a hand. He has an actual name, and it is Father Simon. We chat for a minute, but the Camino is also a celebrity, and I’m anxious to meet it today.

I say, “I’ll look forward to talking to you more down the path.”

He says, “Buen Camino,” which is what we all say.
The way Father Simon from Canada walks: He moves like his boots never hurt him. Each morning, he picks which village he will sleep in, and he sticks to that. If he can’t find an arrow at an intersection, he does not worry. He wears a black hat with a string loose around his chin. When he can find a tree in the Mesta, he makes no apologies about peeing behind it, and since he is Canadian, he calls this “going to the washroom.” I start politely to ask a villager where we can find a water tap, and Father Simon jumps in, eager as a kid: “Donde es agua?” He likes to talk theology, says hmmm, in a way that means he’s listening, even if you’re disagreeing about the Catholic catechism. He’s young, and once when he was younger and not a priest, he started falling in love with a woman and then had to choose between her and seminary. (I want to ask if he ever regrets that, but what good would it do?) Probably one of the points of the vow of celibacy is to avoid vanity. But one of my favorite moments about him is when his Canadian companions describe another priest-pilgrim, one who is smart and fun, and Father Simon asks, “But I’m more handsome than that guy, right?” His family is from India, and one time there, he coordinated a group of breakdancers performing to a contemporary praise and worship church song. Or maybe it was his father who coordinated that—he seemed so proud of them it was hard to tell.

How lucky I am now, constantly to happen upon people with whom I share this particular brand of weirdness. People easily recognizable, marked with shells.

If today I have anything of value to say about spirituality and history—histoire—it is this:
As a child, I played that game we all played with the balloon. *I’ll toss it up, now you hit it, now me, now you, now him, and in this way, we keep it from landing on the floor.*

*  

It is a responsibility, but also a game. Lenten ashes making our foreheads look like those of so many mortals before us. Avoiding the word *alleluia* in the weeks before Easter, and then belting it out with trumpets, as generations have done. The same pageantry about old-new surprises—death, fresh life. Following a path, treading it down for the next person. Saying *thank you* because your grandparents reminded your parents, as toddlers, “What do you say?”

That day I saw the Black Madonna statue. I looked up at the church built high into the cliff, and I did not take the elevator. I took the 216 stone steps. On my knees, like the tradition. Ungloriously. Someone from the top took a picture of me. I heard the click, but I ignored it.

*  

July 3, Burgos, 490 km to Santiago

In the city, a street vendor approaches Claire from-Paris and me. Do we want to buy key chains, paperweights, or attractive statues of El Cid? “We’re pilgrims,” Claire says, “We can’t handle any more weight.” “But these are small,” he insists. I ask him to let me hold one, and then I exaggerate halfway-falling-over from the weight. We all three laugh, and he walks away. We have a new kind of frugality now, and when we look at a possible purchase, and say, “I can’t afford it,” we mean grams, not euros. “How many kilos?” people ask. New pilgrims who just joined the path want to know they’re doing it right. I want to assure them they’ll be fine and their spines will learn this new language, but the truth is no one’s bag is as light as it should be. *How many shirts are you carrying? Any books? You may not want liquid soap.*
You can use the same bar on your body and your clothes. Suzanne from California’s back keeps twisting up. We walk together for an hour after bumping into each other and sharing coffee on a swing set. She says others keep telling her to throw away and throw away, but what can she spare? When vacationers in cities ask us “How many kilos?” they act impressed by either how heavy our backpacks are (Que fuerte!) or how light (Tienes razón!). The guideline we all know, and quote, and feel a tad inadequate about is that you should carry no more than ten percent of your body weight. I’m one or two kilos over, but what can I lose? The rain poncho? True, it hasn’t rained in days. The flip-flops I wear in the evenings? Feet will blister if you don’t give them a break from shoes. I asked my optometrist for three months’ worth of disposable contacts so I wouldn’t have to carry a heavy bottle of solution. But now I wear my glasses, and half the mornings, I don’t have a sink to wash my hands in. The box that had kept the contacts tidy—the rain busted it weeks ago and now dozens of little plastic packages get in the way of any object I try to find. I know I should toss them all or mail them to Santiago for later. But back home, people tell me I have nice eyes, and I think glasses make them harder to see. If I wanted, I could put in a pair of disposables some evening, in a village, and maybe strangers would notice. Maybe other pilgrims—those people who have caught the weird stench of my backpack’s shoulder straps or seen the childish scrunch-up my face becomes when I limp on a blister—might say, “You have nice eyes.” “Suzanne,” I say, “Think about where you put the objects. If you put the heaviest ones at the bottom of the bag and closest to your body, maybe you can keep them all.”

*  

On the other hand, there’s an I-don’t-give-a-damn freedom in how gross and un-good-looking we are. Since when do snails care if they’re muddy? Or toads? Just keep hopping.
* 

**How Claire from Paris walks:** She has already walked the Camino once before, and she says she now wishes she had never reached Santiago, that she never saw it. That instead of finishing, she had hopped onto a bus her penultimate day and headed eastward.

* 

Ohio, 6024 km from Santiago

Bodina, my toes are soft now, and I drive a car, and when I do, I listen to the radio. It’s winter here, which means going as many as three days in a row without walking a single kilometer. This is the stationary life we knew before, so normal we didn’t even notice it then. I wash the coffee cups, and this action has nothing to do with the 10:45 meeting I’ll probably run late to, and to which I will carry many papers and a legal pad, not thinking of how much they weigh. I’ll borrow a pen from someone I don’t really know. And after we adjourn, all of us will stand from our chairs and walk, in different directions. I’ll turn on an electronic device, read something, reply to a message. And later, on my way home, I’ll pass a movie theater, think of seeing something new, but see nothing. And besides, none of the movie posters know about my coffee cups, my legal pads, or the saint medals hidden beneath my sweater. It’s been four months now, Bodina, which means we’ve been stopped walking longer than we were walking. And what I’m quietly missing today is the way everything used to point westward. When choosing food, we chose carbohydrates. We slept where we did because we were pilgrims, and we slept **how** we did—our feet propped up—to prepare for the next morning. We rubbed more sunscreen onto our left sides because we were always facing west. This morning, before I put my shoes on, I stepped onto a bit of plastic wedged into the carpet. Because my feet are sensitive now, it hurt.
I’m out of town and accidentally at the quiet baptism of a baby I don’t know. But I am here, and the baptism is here. This is how church works—people tossed together like salads because why? Then I am at the reception because I like cake. I am talking to the grandfather, who—no kidding?—grew up in Santiago de Compostela. “When were you last there?” I ask. And he says, July 24th, the eve of Santiago’s feast day. And I say, leaning closer to his face, “How did you get there?” And he says, “By plane.”

Here begins the Meseta plain. Flatness, few trees, flatness, wheat fields. Ten days. It’s July. Bring water.

The Meseta is a whale’s belly except dry and unending and un-belly-like. It’s like a whale’s belly in that it swallows you until it decides to spit you out. We’ve just started it, and already the flatness feels burning.

There’s a deep dip—a descent—in the flatness, which should alert our suspicions. Again the Camino is changing its own rules. It slides me downward, and then I see trees, at least a dozen of them, a quarter of a kilometer away. Beside them, a building peacefully crackling—Look my way—in the middle of nothing-fields. When I approach it, the sign reads The Oasis, an albergue. And behind it, a stream. Soaking their feet are Kai from Germany, Caroline
from Sweden, and two pilgrims I’ve never seen, relaxed and content as a dream. Is that cotton that’s blowing all around the ground?

* 

July 4, San Bol, 466 km to Santiago

The historic name of the Oasis is San Bol. The stream we soak our feet in bears an old promise—“I read we won’t have any more foot problems all the way to Santiago,” I announce. “So I will wash my whole body in it!” Kai jokes. Each of the five of us has been limping, sewing thread through toe blisters, and rubbing our sore shoulders for somewhere between five days and seven weeks. We don’t really believe in this water—it’s ridiculous—but, still we keep our feet right where they are, immersed in it.

* 

July 4, San Bol, 466 km to Santiago

No hospitalero is here to check me in—there’s just sign that says you can buy breakfast items for a charge in the morning—and we feel mischievous, like kids who have snuck into the neighbors’ empty house. The Oasis dining room has a dome ceiling, and Caroline hums to check the acoustics. “La-la-la-la,” Kai echoes. “Ow-ooo. Ow-ooo” I sing, a deep bass to harmonize with the other two. “If you want the breakfast,” Caroline sings, “you have to pay five-fifty.” “La-wa-la-la-wa,” goes Kai. “But you must pay one euro extra for the orange juice,” she sings. “One euro, one euro, one euro,” I sing. “The coffee is not free!” Kai adds. We sing until we are laughing too hard to make words and we forget that the whale’s belly is the whole Meseta—with still eight days to go—and not this reverberating dome ceiling.

* 

The way Kai from Germany walks: He wears synthetic hiking trousers, so when he walks,
he sounds like pieces of typing paper blowing across grass. He wears short-sleeve plaid button-ups as if to look presentable, a goal I have given up (mostly). Avoiding a scraggle-cloud like the one on my jaw, Kai carries a razor to use every morning. Back home, he lives along the Camino, which Germans call Jakobsweb, and the occasional pilgrims passes alongside his backyard fence. He wants to decorate it with shells he will buy in Santiago.

* 

When Kai finds out that I enjoy literature, he asks me to help him write a musical. I haven’t known him long enough to tell if he’s serious or joking. Though in his forties, he reminds me of a zealous junior-high boy—both in his round cheeks and in the laugh that peeks out from behind his sentences. He says he doesn’t like musicals, but even so, he has a great idea: the story of a man and woman who meet on the Camino de Santiago. (By now, nothing we think isn’t in some way about this Camino we’re on. Every Band-Aid points us westward. Every chocolate bar or childhood memory spells left foot, right foot. The water splashing in our bottles gurgles, Seven kilometers. Six hundred kilometers. Eighteen hundred kilometers.) In the way of distance trekkers headed in the same direction, the characters of Kai’s musical will forget they have known each other only a few days, weeks. They will recognize in each other a similar raggedness: their unwashed clothes, their new priorities that make sense to only each other. The will sing about such things and fall into passionate love. At the end of the play, they will part ways—she will take a bus home because of her job, and he will journey to the coast, the epilogue destination for pilgrims whose feet still won’t quiet down—because, though he’s seen all he intended to, it’s too hard for him to stop walking. From her bus window and from his beach, they will look at the night sky and realize they share the same view of the stars, and sing a duet called “Stars.” The idea, Kai confesses, comes mostly from
his time with Marta from Austria, the woman who introduced me to him. Marta, who perhaps wasn’t, after all, bat-shit crazy, but was just particularly expressive when she had feelings for someone. Marta who, Kai tells me, boarded a bus back to her job a few days ago.

I say, “I can’t read music,” which is true, but even if it were a lie, I’d still be tempted to say it.

“Well, what about the lyrics?” he asks.

“I’m sorry about Marta,” I say.

*

“In this blissful state I passed more than two months of the summer. For the most part I went through the forests and along by-paths.” —The Pilgrim, in his nineteenth-century diary.

*

In retrospect, I want to write a thank you letter to bunk beds. In the morning, you made us look at each other. I turned to my side, and all the sudden, there were twelve of us. Yes, I hated the sound of the metal frames sawing when someone rose before dawn, and I hated being on the top bed, afraid to edge down the ladder and wake someone, even when my bladder had turned into a water balloon. But I want to thank bunk beds for shoving us all into the same room, so when we woke, the day was already surrounding us with people who knew—knew as in the same stories every year at the Thanksgiving table. My bunkrooms were cluster-packed with people named Andres from-Miami; and Joey from-Iowa; and Rachel and Katy, les Soeurs Americaines.
Stateside now, I could find these bunkmates, make a video call, but I’m afraid to.

_Afraid they’d say it wasn’t special? Are you afraid of eating the last piece of cake, and then it’s gone?_ No.

I’m not sure, but I think I’m afraid that if I called, we’d ask each other about tax returns.

We’d be these ridiculous, shaven people in comfortable shoes talking about our fucking tax returns, and I don’t know how to bear seeing them that way.

*

At night now I drag clean sheets across a double bed, such a big mattress for just one person. When I wake and look around, I see my alarm clock. My walls are white. The room stretches so wide I can do pushups, jumping jacks, burpees—without kicking a single backpack or hiking boot.

*  

_**July 5, San Nicolas, 441 km to Santiago**_

This old church is now just a chapel without electricity, and inside, Italian people make you pasta and wash your feet. It’s just shy of overwhelming when a total stranger rubs your callouses and hugs his fingers around your reeking toes.

*  

_**July 5, San Nicolas, 441 km to Santiago**_

Kai from Germany at the door, but no beds left. I’m sleeping outside myself. Kai waves at me, peppy even in minor disappointment, and tells the hospitalero, “Thanks anyway.”

*  

_**July 7, Población de Campos, 422 km to Santiago de Compostela**_

I’m sitting on some steps on the village edge, boots off to let my feet dry and to give my big toe and its hot spot a break. I just took a rest in Población, and I’m already stopping again. If
I could cover the toe up and reduce the friction—. “Damn, I wish I had some tape!” I think. Not a minute later, a pilgrim in a long scarf walks toward me and pauses. And, hardly glancing at my feet, she asks with certainty, “Do you need some tape?” She reaches into her backpack.

*

Away from it all, my right windshield wiper squeaks, and at the grocery, I forget to buy bananas. It’s a Wednesday, so I take the trash to the curb instead of leaving it for my housemate as I usually do. I wave to my friendly neighbor walking his three Chihuahuas whose names I can’t remember. *It’s nice weather for walking*, we agree. While trimming the wild hairs on the back of my neck, I snipped the string that tied my saints’ medals to me, and I should find something stronger for them, but I haven’t looked yet. I have been learning to bake soda bread in the skillet, stirring different seasonings—I have many—into the dough each time. In my cabinet, I have pizza spices. I shake them into a clear mixing bowling, and preheat the oven to 400 degrees, and scrub this morning’s eggs off the skillet, and scoop two cups of white all-purpose flour, and the recipe requires using vinegar to curdle one cup of milk, but one cup of yogurt is an easy substitute, and the pilgrimage to Mecca is called the Hajj, and after completing it, a person is called a Hajji.

*

Aleso from-Italy hopes to luck into an academy for musical theater. Gary from-England wants to be an artist who gets noticed: back home he sculpts spheres and paints them colors that stand fore dates and times. David from-Belgium, wherever he is, wants to be a man whose wife loves him. Patrick from-Switzerland wants to be a man who runs a pilgrims’
hostel along the path, giving people laundry soap, and hot Nescafé, and how he says
“The Chemin is the way.” Noel from-Malaysia, whose wanderlust grows like hair, wants to be a man who never stops moving—“a vagabond,” he says. Don’t think this isn’t possible. He hasn’t stopped for four years.

*

I want to be a man who pays each bill the day it arrives. I want to be a man who knows the precise location of every object in his backpack. I want to be a man who knows about carpentry. What skill could be more strong and useful than the power to build someone a bookshelf or a box for their vegetable garden? You’d help them feed themselves that way. Then they’d gather all the lettuce, and radishes, and red bell peppers, and cilantro, and carrots of ever color into a feast—and half the town would crowd onto the benches your hand had sanded, lean their elbows onto the tabletop you had fit into place, and everyone would gabble together and trade jokes—even people who didn’t like each other, even people with years-old, small-town grudges, and you’d lean back, cover your smile with your napkin, surveying it all, and think, Look what I made.

*

Father Simon from-Canada. Perhaps the sanest of us all. Says, “Much of our faith is without profound moments or epiphanies.”

Talitha from-Canada. Jokes about being Mother Superior because a guy back home asked her out, and when she said no, he later said he had a near-prophetic vision of her as a nun. Speaks French and English. Apologizes in either language. Feels guilty about everything. Apologizes for laughing at the prophetic-vision guy.
Chris from California. Alliterative name, easy to remember. Friends with Bodina from Amsterdam. Wants to live in Barcelona. Talks out loud and calls it praying.

*

First, unspool the thread. Prepare what you can before you grab the matches, because once you disinfect the needle in flame, you shouldn’t risk touching it to anything else. Strike with your right hand and inject the needle’s pointed end. Wait a second for it to cool, then, still holding it in the left hand, flip it over. If quick enough, you won’t have to waste a second match. Now inject the eye side. If it is your first time, you can tell whether any untouched parts remain because fire turns the metal darker. If the metal is already dark, you can tell yourself you’ve done this before so don’t get nervous when you thread the string through the needle’s eye and through your skin. Sometimes you can talk yourself into courage. Keep your hand slow and steady like Aesop’s tortoise as you glide it between the puffed, mostly painless outer layer and the sensitive layer beneath. When the water spills out, it may hurt, but push the needle to the other end of your blister until you have dragged the thread across the inside. Tie the ends of the string together, and now your Achilles tendon is a present with a bow on it. Blisters come when water fills the skin—and the resulting pressure is what causes the pain—now any new water will instead drip down this string. Talitha from Canada said, “I’m sorry I complained about my feet all afternoon while you kept quiet about yours. I apologize.” I said, “Don’t.”

*

We have seen green fields, bright flowers, and bell towers far too many times for them to still catch our attention.
Santiago None of the other people in this thirteenth-century church are moving because they are all statues.

* We are participating in a pilgrimage (a sacred endeavor), and Father Simon’s name is Father Simon because he is a Catholic priest (a man who turns regular water into holy water for a living)—and the Pope or whoever probably wouldn’t want us to be talking about excrement in this context. But even so, I am telling Father Simon about the time my college suitemate called to me from the bathroom, “Guess what I’m doing?” And I said, “I’d rather not.” And he said, “I’m sitting on the toilet, eating a bowl of cereal.”

“Was it bran flakes?” Father Simon asks.

* “Father Simon,” I ask, “have other pilgrims been seeing you and thinking, ‘The Camino has sent me a priest to answer all my problems’ and bombarding you with questions?”

“No,” he says. “A lot of them pretend they don’t notice.”

He’s wearing a collar.

* I decide I will bombard Father Simon with questions.

* I want to be a man who knows when to stop eating. I want to be a man who remembers
where stomachaches comes from, not one surprised when he stands up from the dinner table, not one shitting chicken and saffron rice behind this bush as cars of sensible people glide past.

* July 8, Moratinos, 377 km to Santiago

Sixteen days till July 24th. And seventeen days until July 25th. Until recently, Santiago shared his day with, appropriately, Saint Christopher, patron saint of travelers. Why this patronage? Why does he, plastic, perch on so many dashboards, lifting a child? The story says he was a giant who carried people across a bridgeless river. One day, he transported a child, and as they approached the riverbank, the child grew heavier and heavier, like lead instead of skin. When Christopher struggled, the boy told him he was the Christ Child, weighed down with the sins of humanity. Christopher means “Christ bearer,” which seems quite the coincidental name for his parent to have given him. And so the Church, seeking to separate the false impossible stories from the factual impossible stories, has removed him from the calendar. It has not, however, removed him from anyone’s dashboards.

* Ohio, 6024 km from Santiago

Because I like literature, an Ohio nonprofit asks me to present on poetry and reverence. At the bottom of my title slide, I place a quote from the poet who fell in love with a color: “That this blue exists makes my life a remarkable one, just to have seen it.” I point to the Virgin’s robe in stained glass, the cobalt blue of Chartres Cathedral. I do not mention—to this room full of strangers—the cathedral I am thinking of, the one I have seen. I continue saying nothing as I read lines from Rilke: “sometimes a man stands up during supper and
walks outdoors, and keeps on walking, because of a church that stands somewhere in the
East.”

*

One reason to say nothing is people may ask, *A walk in Spain? Like from that movie?* And I
have to decide whether to say yes or no, when neither answer seems true. Occasionally I
want to say something sharp like, *You mean the movie where no one gets a single blister or sore
shoulde*r*? or *The movie with fast epiphanies and a soundtrack?* or *The one where people talk so much they
can’t hear the fields?* But instead of being a jerk, I apologize on the film’s behalf—apologize to
whom? “I suppose it would be boring to watch someone on screen walking alone for hours
through farmland, thinking. But that’s what happens.” I worry about how many people want
to talk about it—I’ve seen T-shirts—and I worry about how I may contribute to that. But
how long can you say nothing about something that exists? And others have seen it too, and
they are saying so. One day after I’m dragged into a *Like that movie?* and am feeling
discouraged, the book about blue saves me: “It does not really bother me that half the adults
in the western world also love blue, or that every dozen years or so someone feels compelled
to write a book about it. I feel confident enough of the specificity and strength of my
relation to it to share. Besides, it must be admitted that if blue is anything on this earth, it is
*abundant*.”

*

Which is one way of saying I can’t hoard it.
Meseta Song: Think of Van Gogh’s blackbird field. Sun so big, it’s in our eyes from any direction. Men and women, we lie backs on the ground, legs in the air at various angles, and no one thinks to make a dirty joke. Inside my boots, my feet grow dangerously fat. We walk tomorrow’s kilometers tonight without strong flashlights. Think of Van Gogh’s blackbirds. Ryan from Oregon adds rocks to his backpack each day. Antonio from Madrid is worried about me. I soak my feet in an irrigation canal, the water knows almost all the secrets that ice knows. Antonio tells me, “If you walk in the afternoon, you’ll die.” Walking eastward, nuns in white say, “Come pray with us in town.” Beatrice says the monotony’s fuzzing up her head, would someone please walk the next four kilometers with her? Think of his irreducible yellow, brought on by illness. In another irrigation canal, I swim my whole body. If on his white horse, Santiago charged across this plane, swinging his sword, we could not hide. Cut any belly open, and you will find 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. The dust that we don’t kick is as still as a plugged ear, the air as yellow as a siren. The chapel you seek lies farther than expected.

Along the street, I nap in a shaded alcove of snack machines—parents stare at me, but when I close my eyes, I don’t notice anymore. The conquerors said, Give us one hundred virgins, please, and we will not behead the whole pueblo of Carrion de Los Condes, but they did not say please.

Someone told someone to line his boots with maxi-pads to absorb the humidity, so I do. I stick a maxi-pad to the forehead of my sweaty hat. But now the wind has bent-ripped my friendly straw hat with the green visor. Its blue-black feather vanished kilometers ago. Every year, one hundred virgins, one hundred blackbird silhouettes against the Meseta sun. The overflowing trashcan makes an unfair resting place for a hat that fit my head so well for so long. I take a picture. At the adjacent shop, I buy another one.
A pair of newish pilgrims, two weeks into their walk and quietly angry, ask me if I ever grow annoyed with it, if I ever want to say te joder to it all. I tell them the truth: “About once every two weeks.”

I say, not exaggerating, “Some days it rattles me so much I think my sanity is slipping. Like I’m falling out of my damn mind,” which, I hope, is also another way of telling them: “We are all three completely normal.”

July 10, beside a ditch, 352 km to Santiago

Last night I walked in the star-dark for about ten kilometers and then went to sleep beside the dirt Camino. I’ve slept in, and I’m half inside, half outside of my sleeping bag when Father Simon from-Canada, Talitha from-Canada, and Markus from-Canada come along.

July 11, León, 312 km to Santiago

I buy Father Simon’s espresso. One for me too. And a triangle of whipped egg. We eat this way a lot, and it’s charming. In miniature, the coffee cups and sugar packets and forks seem like precious commodities—savor them.

We wandered the city a bit, looking for a place to talk. To me, nothing seemed right, nothing private enough. Plus I was procrastinating. He picked this bar that does breakfast, and it’s as good as anywhere else, I suppose.
I’m walking out of Leon, and not one nerve in my feet hurts.

I’m thinking of how another word for priest is vicar, as in vicarious. It’s too soon to grapple with the logic that one person can apologize for another. Besides, I don’t give a damn; that gnawing is finally over, and my backpack is full of cotton balls.

A tiny espresso cup to sip.

I am strangely drawn to this little park because above it shines an attractive billboard announcing a department store, and this probably says something about me as an American capitalist. The grass feels too soft to be real—touching it is like running fingers through my Camino beard. No exaggeration, the ground is the most comfortable I have laid on for all sixty-three days. Falling asleep is like letting go of a balloon.

When lowering down to the ground, you don’t want to bend at the waist, or your backpack will knock you down. Slowly fold your legs at the knees. Keep your back straight up, your left elbow holding the left shoulder strap in place. The straps on your walking staffs will help you too. Flick-twist them around each wrist and you can tuck the poles behind you. Don’t set them on the ground—they also are part of this. You can glide down or pop down. Slow or fast, you’re still learning the precision. The rock can be any rock, but sometimes a particular one shines to you. Something reflective there in the field, a bit of driveway gravel,
a hunk of jet black that looks like heat radiates off it. Lift yourself back up and hold the rock a half-second longer than you need to. Set it on the marker as if the concrete is wet and you are pressing this rock into it forever. Or maybe, when you first approach the marker you’re so filled with *walk-walk-walk* you think your feet will catch fire if you stop. Even so, snatch a rock, and drop it on top. It is possible to close your eyes on the inside.

*At the turn of the millennium, Pope John Paul II apologized to the world on behalf of the whole Catholic Church, past and present. The Inquisition, and the Crusades, and every wrongful act committed by 2,000 years of people he had never met.*

*In stories, what are characters but stand-ins for us?*

*Caroline from Sweden. Sang about orange juice. Walking alone in the woods, we each shared about a different man who was perfect in every way except that his taste in significant others did not include us.

Kai from Germany. Sang about orange juice. In love-ish with Marta from Austria, but then who hasn’t gotten hung up on someone all wrong for them?*

*In those days, no one was ever too busy to listen to someone. And so we would take turns; one would talk, and the other would nod and say, “Uh-huh” and “Sí” and “Tell me more.”*
You’re new around here, aren’t you? “Is this the men’s room or the women’s?” she asks in an American accent. I look up from the socks I’m scrubbing, smile at her in the doorway of the albergue bathroom. “I think it’s all the same.” She cocks her forehead at my sink and soap. “And you’re doing your laundry here—there isn’t a designated place?”

Rolling up our sleeping bags in a pilgrim’s hostel, I meet Damien. His full name is Damien from-New Zealand, but it could be Damien who-talks-and-talks-and-talks-and-assumes-everyone-knows-what-astral-projection-is-and-can-do-it-without-any-training. If they’d just worry less about nonsense like washing the dishes.

The way Damien from-New Zealand walks: He taps the ground with his walking staffs. The staffs are fingertips, the earth is a piano, and he’s playing "Chopsticks."

I know this monastery chapel well. I’ve been here once, of course, but many times since then, too. The door on the right. The wooden choir stalls, where you can confess to a monk, maybe tell him something you’ve never said aloud before. When I sat bonkers beside the highway north of Pamplona, thinking I had made a mistake by leaving the path, deciding to hitchhike—this chapel kept showing up in my mind. I wanted to come back here. I had no grand gesture planned.
I’m not saying anything aloud except *amen* and *peace* because mass is happening around me. In English because of the priest. Not Father Simon, unfortunately, but Father Larry, his American *nemesis*—an unforgiving, telenovela-type word that Father Simon would never use. This is the priest-pilgrim about whom Father Simon asked, “But I’m more handsome than that guy, right?” He has brought a dozen university students to Spain where they ignore all things Spanish. Father Simon from-Canada was shocked at the American rudeness. He told me, “I said to him, ‘Maybe your students would enjoy mass with a local priest, Father,’ and he answered, ‘I don’t think my students would like a mass *in Spanish,* Father Simon.’”

I have little interest in competition on the Camino. As we approach Santiago and July 24th, increasingly, pilgrims are joining, which means more people panicking over beds and racing each other for them. *I’m grabbing a bed so that you don’t.* I refuse to participate—I came for sidewalks and fields, not mattresses. I am resigned to sleeping outside mostly now, and I don’t have to play that game. A stream or river makes a good shower.

I say this to myself, with a hint of cockiness that ignores the fact that—though better about it—I’m still judging these new, noisy, picture-snapping pilgrims. *Tourists,* I think as they speed by, looking at their watches. It’s a lesson I’ve been re-learning since Le Puy: someone else’s disregard—should I say *different* regard?—for what I love does not have to change what it means to me.

Though I remain uninvolved in the competition between the two priests, my favorite is of course Father Simon. Especially in this mass, at this moment, in this location that means much more to me than it does to Father Larry, who has come to the Prayers of the People, the part of the mass when he says, for example, *For peace in the world,* or *For those without homes, that they may find shelter,* and we say, *Lord, hear our prayer.*
When some Christians get pushy and try to silence people and to pass laws, even laws against others, I wonder if they are forgetting where we come from. That we come from first-century prisons. That we come from laws against religious expression. That we come from people hiding in attics. We come from stonings. We come from religious persecution; how dare we ever pass that on to others? We come from being thrown to lions—a spectator sport of cheering, and of human skin on the ground, and of more cheering as the eyeballs left the body. We come from Saint Foy’s burning, and Saint Eulalia’s burning, and Saint Kibuka’s burning, and from Saint Lucy’s eyes being plucked out, and Saint Agatha’s breasts being chopped off, and from Saint Sebastian’s torso full of arrows, and from Saint James’ beheading. We come from shibboleths—the Jesus fish that some of us proudly stick on to cars is legend: It wasn’t safe to say Christian aloud, so one person, maybe talking about the weather, would take his walking staff and casually brush an arc in the dirt. The stranger beside him might add an arc to complete the fish, and only then were they safe to say the truth about themselves. We come from that dirt. We come from the fear of coming out.

* July 16, Cacabelos 195 km to Santiago

Swooping his soaked, longish hair back, Chris from California is my favorite person on this bridge, myself included.

* July 16, Cacabelos 195 km to Santiago

Here’s why: We were at a restaurant with great prices, which is to say a restaurant that gave pilgrims a free tapa and glass of wine. This restaurant was not some crummy hotdog stand, either, but a fancy place that must have hired an interior decorator. A sculpture of colored
lights hung above the bar, and instead of chairs, we sat-reclined on cushions at our low table. Through the magic of crochet, they had turned live trees into upright afghans.

Because I often hesitate to let people know how food-greedy I generally am, when I asked the hostess about this free tapa tradition, I mumbled a bit apologetically. But when we were seated, Chris lay back upon the pillows, as cool as if he owned stock in the company. He said, loudly but not rudely, “Una tapa, por favor.”

This path teaches you what to expect. (This is to say nothing of how it changes its mind, as well.) We’re surrounded by generosity. We send it out, and we receive it, and we say, Oh, and Muchisimas gracias. The danger is that if we expect generosity, then haven’t we undone it? Is it still generosity if we feel entitled to it? Trying to teach you, the path says, Here’s something in front of you right now, and because it’s here now at the moment you are here, I want you to say yes. And we say, Oh, and Yes.

“And a glass of wine?” the waitress asked, and Chris, confidently and thankfully, said yes.

I had met Chris about three hundred fifty kilometers before, and I’d failed. Sometimes you can say, I didn’t know for sure what was right in front of me, and sometimes that’s just an excuse. The path was dirt, it was morning, the highway was nearby, the sky was gray but not yet raining, we were talking about spirituality, and because dirt makes you honest, we were telling the truth. Mostly. Though he believed in God, he felt he knew very little about God. “That makes two of us!” I joked, “Two people out of all of humanity!” He was part of a supportive spiritual group, a non-Christian, not-exactly church. One Sunday morning, they discussed sexuality and afterward hosted a sort of fair. A man and a woman lay down on the ground naked, covered in cookies. Passing individuals were invited to grab a snack.

This never happened in the churches I grew up in. “Are you Catholic?” Chris asked.
“Not exactly.” (*Not exactly,* I think, is a fitting phrase for many spiritual conversations.)

“But you’re Christian?”

I said yes, and he said, but? and then I used my frequent phrase *It’s been a windy road.* And he said why, and I said y’know, struggling with church teachings, and why things are the way they are, and if God is all-powerful then why do *xyz* happen, and he said that’s an old one, I get it.

So in the designer restaurant beside Chris, I said, “Yes, I’ll take a glass of wine.” I said, “Red, please.”

We reclined on the cushions and chatted about sleeping outdoors, how natural it had become. The wine arrived, and we talked about wine. We talked about our feet. Pilgrim are always talking about their feet because they are important. I don’t want to overlook other important parts of us, so I have started asking others, “How are your feet? And how is your mind? Your heart?” And I don’t care anymore if *heart* sounds corny.

Chris’s heart and mind felt clear, philosophical-and-calm. I felt joyful—*Look at these tapas!* They came with little forks on rectangular plates—today is a surprise party when it wasn’t actually your birthday.

We ate and reclined and drank and reclined and the wine swam in my mind because it is a hot summer day and tapas aren’t very filling. We reclined until it was time to walk again because—even though we had no stress and we recognized the path won’t leave without us—it’s always almost time to walk until it is.

We walked through Cacabelos, bought a bit of food, popped into the town church because it was in front of us, and Chris started talking about relationships, which for the past several years has made me squirmy.
At the edge of town ten minutes later, we reached a bridge with teenagers swimming in the river underneath. A few feet ahead of us, two teenagers dove off the bridge. A celebratory yell while I gasped.


Chris said let’s do it, and I said hell no, and Chris said I’m serious, and I said hell no, and Chris said c’mon.

He said, “The Camino has given us this. We have to do it.”

Pause.

I said, “Ugghh. What is it? Seventy-five feet?”

Chris dropped his backpack.

He was right, I knew it. “I’m terrified of heights,” I said.

“This is your chance to face that fear.” He said warmly. He yanked off his shoes.

I felt the tug that said the Camino or someone had, perhaps—probably—provided this bridge and teenagers here outside Cacabelos on this sunny day.

But that bridge was so damn high.

Chris tossed his shirt onto the bridge.

“Coming?” He put one foot on the ledge.

Though I knew it was definitely the wrong answer, I said no. I guess my excuse was that I already had jumped, ten minutes earlier.

* Sometimes I wonder if Damien believes his own words, he’s just trying to see how people will react. He gets insistent about his philosophies with an earnestness that I question, and once or twice, I’ve caught his mouth turning upward around the edges.
Damien tells me more about his girlfriend, whose name is Carly. Together they created a small business: they lead spiritual retreats at various holy sites and points of energy worldwide. Carly is very intuitive and savvy. He’s positive he will marry her. “One hundred percent,” he says.

“How do you know?”

“Loads of psychics have told me.” Also, he says that once when she and he were meditating alone in Egypt in front of the Great Pyramid, he had a mystical experience. A trance overtook him and shook him flat to the ground. Inside his chest came a cracking feeling; he kept screaming, someone grabbed his hand and held it. And then, when he thought would probably die, the spirit of Mother Mary came to him.

“How did you know it was Mother Mary?”

“Because she identified herself,” he says, irritated, as if I’ve asked whether snow falls from the sky.

“Then what happened?”

“She said, ‘The person holding your hand is the person you will spend the rest of your life with.’ And that got me scared because the hand felt like a man’s hand. But then I opened my eyes, and it was Carly.”

“That must have been a powerful moment for you,” I say. I mean it sincerely.

Damien believes that we have spirits, and they are mobile. No one is ever far away because you can summon their spirit. Sometimes during meditation, he asks Carly’s to come to him all the way from England, and it does. When it steams over him, he recognizes it because it feels like her.

*
Among the many repetitions we enact—our full names: Claire from-Paris. Caroline from-Sweden. Kai from-Germany. Stephan from-Germany. The Hanged Boy from-Germany.

Among the many repetitions—our fuller names: Patrick from-Switzerland-who-walked-here-from-Geneva. David from-Belgium-who-walked-here-from-Le Puy. Brad from-Ohio-who-walked-here-from-Taizé,-next-to-Cluny,-not-far-from-Lyon. Father Simon from-Canada-who-walked-here-from-Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port. We identify ourselves by where we came from, and no matter how the kilometers behind us grow, we are always still walking away from the place we started.

*

Therefore, we have also many middle names, which we seldom tell: David from-Belgium(-whose-wife-received-brain-damage-after-a-car-accident-and-she-lost-her-emotions-and-would-no-longer-say-I-love-you-) who walked here from Geneva. Patrick from-Switzerland(-whose-life-there,-for-no-one-reason,-made-him-generally-sad-and-angry) who walked here from Geneva. Brad from-Ohio-(but-before-that,-the-South,-twenty-two-miles-from-the-state-that-said-you-cannot-say-“gay”-in-schools,-from-a-South-that-both-was-and-was-not-as-unfriendly-as-you-might-think,-from-Hate-the-sin,-love-the-sinner,-from-both-God-made-each-person-unique,-and-Suppress-that,-from-Say-nothing-out-loud) who walked here from-Taizé.

Maurice from-Provence(-whose-wife-of-thirty-seven-years-left-him-and-he-told-a-friend-to-sell-the-house-while-he-walked) who walked here from-Le Puy.

*

And all the people whose middle names are known to them alone.
You know whom I haven’t seen for a while? Kai from-Germany.

He must be on the Camino somewhere. He seemed too cheerful and determined to give up.

July 16, 182 km to Santiago

The way Markus from-Canada walks: He moves quickly, never tired until bedtime, and often first to arrive at an albergue. He keeps his walking staff in his backpack; on hills, he snatches it out, whips it around as if nunchucks. Markus walks by luck. In the dark, in the middle of a day-and-a-half long, steep nowhere, people stop their cars to invite him to dinner at their homes—they are about to throw a party. “We will drive down the road to tell your pilgrim friends where you are,” they say, “When they arrive, you can all eat and drink and sleep on the floor of our extra building.” “Again, something like that happens to Markus!” Father Simon laughs. I later tell our hostess, “We were wondering where we could sleep tonight.” I couldn’t find a place flat enough in the forest. She says, “Es el Camino.” Markus does not call it luck.

California, 8,848 km from Santiago

“I’m of the mountains,” I say in my head, and I’m smiling about the Pyrenees and O Cebreiro, on the edge of secret laughter until the plane lands.

July 17, the mountains, between 175 and 170 km to Santiago

Six days till July 24.
A tiny village of maybe twenty houses, some of them round with thatched roofs. No room in the pilgrim’s hostel last night, so Chris from California and I snuck in after hours and shoved chairs and ottomans together. I slipped money under the office door. Today feels bright, and not only because of the sunlight sliding in—a perfect line—through the clear window in this chapel. For weeks, the lyrics of the “Chant de Pelerin” have said, “Day after day, the route calls us,” and especially today. The Cathedral must have a gravitational pull all its own; the past few days, when we stumble, we fall toward it.

This village of O Cebreiro whispers its two legends loudly, as if telling a secret it wants overheard.

On a foggy Sunday—one of many in these mountains—a shepherd got lost. White, white, no clue whether a few steps ahead lay land or ledge. He heard a flute and followed its music to O Cebreiro and this chapel, where he paid respect to the silver chalice.

The silver chalice marks the older, more confusing legend: Centuries ago, a priest had mostly lost his faith. Over what? No one remembers, but we can fill in blanks: If God is all-powerful, then why do tragedies strike? If God exists, then why so much loneliness? On a snowy, icy Sunday, no one showed up before mass. It was too dangerous. But right on the hour, one parishioner appeared. Okay, I guess I’ll do this mass, the priest thought. He went through the liturgy. The Creed with its I believe’s. The prayers of the people. The Peace be with you. When he arrived at the communion part, when the bread and wine were supposed to turn into the body and blood of Christ, he thought, What an idiot that guy in the pew is. Risking his life just for some bread and wine. And that instant, someone above must have snapped their fingers because
in the chalice, the wine turned into blood. As in the type-O-negative kind of blood. And the bread turned to skin.

Also, maybe at that same time, a Virgin Mary statue tilted her head.

The statue, the chalice, and the plate that held the bread are all here. And it doesn’t matter that it was centuries ago and none of the characters have names or verifiable characteristics. All us foreigners in the O Cebreiro chapel fall silent because of it.

* Galician countryside, 150 km to Santiago

I’m not sure what to say, but I have to say something, so I say, “Oh.” Peter from Brisbane has just told me he prays for the stigmata. To receive it, like a birthday present in the mail. He says, “But you have to have a special devotion to the Crucified Christ to get it.” I say, “Oh,” again, and we walk. I ask, “So your hands would bleed?” even though I know the answer. Beneath us, the path has decided to be dry dirt tracing a border around a forest. Instead of a family portrait at home, Peter says he has an icon over his mantle. He’s mentioned his wife and kids, and when he brags about his daughter, sunrays shoot out his mouth. But still, when he talks about his icons, it’s like St. Julian of Norwich is his girlfriend and he wishes he hadn’t forgotten his stupid wallet because he wants to show everyone her gorgeous picture. Maybe instead of a husband, he wanted to be a mystic—maybe he missed his chance, I think. No matter how many times we hear this old story, we wince: on some days, he regrets what he chose to love. The path is dry dirt and it is tugging Peter and me forward and uphill—ultreya et suseya. Our staffs tomp-tink as we lean into them so our arms move us.

Ascending an incline is not about the feet, but the triceps. We jab our staffs into the dirt ahead, then pull ourselves up until our torsos pass the staffs and we push against the ground. The path twists a few yards to the left as if we’re headed toward the trees, but then it points
us uphill again. Finally I say, “I suppose one crucifixion is enough in this world.” We
walk, and Peter says, “Oh.”

*

When our staffs hit the ground, they weren’t *creating* the *tomp-tink* sound so much as they
were *joining* it, it was occurring, spreading out over years, years that moved in both directions.
When I woke in the fields, when I turned in my sleeping sack and saw my backpack pressed
up against the enormous sky, I’d say, so easily, *Thank you, God, that this is my life.*

As a teenager, I couldn’t imagine ever living into my thirties, but I also couldn’t
imagine ever not living. Later, I—too briefly—dated someone almost perfect, and we would
stay up talking for six hours, but eventually, we had to hang up.

*

But still, I can’t deny it: I, from inside the electricity and the habit, didn’t really think it would
ever be over. How long the days seemed, the sun in our eyes until well past dinner; and how
old the churches along the way, the Heavenly carvings around their doors depicting an
eternity with Saint Jacques in it; and, because it was impossible to walk 1,850, or 1,900, or
1,950 kilometers at all, let alone today, tomorrow we would walk and Compostelle would still
be too far away to see; and, because each day taught us to depend on the Camino—an
interdependence like a couple married too long to still be called *newlyweds*—we were
becoming less and less ready to say goodbye. The guidebooks remained silent about this.

*

July 19, Sarria, 117 km to Santiago de Compostela

Sometimes veteran pilgrims say *Sarria* like it’s the name of that bitchy girl from high school
who dumped them for their best friend. Here’s why: the Cathedral in Santiago de Compostela gives nice certificates to those who prove they have walked at least one hundred kilometers. One hundred kilometers, four hundred, twelve hundred—the certificate’s the same. Some folks want only this official recognition. Rumors say that Spanish students put it on their resumés. Whatever their reasons, dozens of people start walking in Sarria, the last town with a bus stop before the one-hundred kilometer mark. Churches and bars offer documentation: papers, signatures, and stamps.

This busyness is medieval, I comfort myself. In the Middle Ages, crowds packed the Camino. I walk past a church with an illustration of a stamp. A line of people stretches out its door and to the sidewalk. I count on left-foot-right-foot, to get me out of Sarria, remember the chapel in O Cebreiro—cool inside and silent despite the mountain wind.

* 109 km to Santiago

In this field, under a Sarria electric wire, here’s a tent I know. “Hey, guy!” calls Alexis from-Bordeaux, “You want to sleep with me?”

* July 20, Portomarín 98 km to Santiago

On some concrete steps above a river. Not so high as the bridge Chris leapt from. Locals have been diving. I have been standing here, shoeless, shirtless, pantsless for ten minutes. Twisting the Saint Jacques medal around my neck. In the water, three teenagers see me. They start chanting, “Tira-te, Tira-te.” Jump. Jump. I do.

* July 21 Eirexe, 79 km to Santiago

Concrete markers have started counting down by the half kilometer.
Santiago de Compostela

These new pilgrims are Spanish and young, and they like white wine. They keep asking the waitress for more. She brings two bottles at a time to go with our plates of octopus.

“Drink more, Brad!” a young man says, pouring wine into my bowl.
“No thank you,” I say too late. “No thank you,” I say too late. I keep saying it too late, and I should be less polite and more sober. The Spaniards want to see a church with the archways found on the ten-euro bill. We stand from the table, and it’s hard, and we’re crossing in front of traffic, and I’m laying down in the grass beside the church, falling asleep as one of the Spanish girls apologizes, “I think we hurt your pilgrimage,” and then I’m awake again and turning my head to the side, vomiting into church grass.

*  
**July 21, Melide, 56 km to Santiago**

I wake hours later, and I’m an idiot for letting that happen. For throwing up and sleeping instead of walking. I grab my backpack. I still feel the white wine, I wish I had some bread, I have at least a dozen kilometers yet, I wish I could vomit it all out of my system, I feel like I have cheated on my fiancé right before the wedding, where were my blue walking staffs when I needed them?

*  
**July 21, Something like 46 km, maybe, to Santiago**

And so I got lost or misread the markers in the dark. I am definitely not on the Camino and I’m too tired to retrace my kilometers. I fucked-up on my third-to-last full day. Here is a stop for a regional bus. A glass covering. I inflate my swimming-pool mattress and spread it over the bench and say I’m sorry.

*  
**July 22, Arzúa, 42 km to Santiago**

I am back on the Camino, which means that each of my steps goes in the right direction. Fog yawns through the Arzúa streets; we brush aside as we walk. In this town, pilgrims who walked along the northern coast will join our path. I look for Patrick from Switzerland and
David from Belgium, but I know I won’t see them. In Santiago maybe. The air smells like eucalyptus, which tells us which forests we’re near, which part of the country. The Crypt is close, and every tree knows it. Here in Galicia, they call him The Apostol. There is no other.

*  July 22, 28 km to Santiago

In this eucalyptus forest stands a memorial with a pair of sculpted shoes. After following the arrows for however many weeks, a pilgrim died here in 1993. My guidebook points out the unfairness: “Just one day short of Santiago.”

*  

We’re always partway through something until we are not. The names and markers cascade: Empalme, 26 kilometers. Santa Irene, 24 kilometers. A Rúa, 22 kilometers. A rca, 20.5 kilometers. Lavacolla, 11 kilometers.

*  July 23, Monte de Gozo, 4 km to Santiago

*Monte de Gozo* means *Mount of Joy* because from this hilltop you can see the towers of the Cathedral. After twelve hundred and fifty miles, you can see them. I’m sleeping here tonight and walking to them in the morning, early enough to see the Cathedral in quiet. Behind the towers, the sun sets in its usual way—slow, slow, and then suddenly gone.

*  

I’m not an idiot. I knew all along—reasonable, thinking, calendar-watching person that I am—that it would end. Every step westward was part of a countdown. When I ripped each
page from my guidebook, I tossed it away because I would never need that page again, and so the little maps of places no longer ahead of me were pictures of places I was losing. I was walking the leg of the path called “The Chemin between Cluny and Le Puy,” and when I reached Le Puy, the name changed to “The Chemin from Le Puy.” Other pilgrims said they would walk only as far as Conques, as Figeac, as Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, as Pamplona, and when we reached those towns, those people disappeared. Other pilgrims arrived so they could disappear too. Knees gave out, heels gave up. For people around me, it was ending already. On a post, a handwritten sign pointed to the left and said, “St. Jacques, 1,850 km,” and later another said, “St. Jacques, 1,675 km.” Embedded in the cheer of the folksong “Le Chant du Pelerin” was a warning: “The sun sets at Finisterre,” the nearby coast. Only the word wasn’t sets, it was dies, and Finisterre meant Land’s End. When I reached my halfway point, I tried to talk the kilometers out of it. I tried math tricks so that more time would exist in the future than in the past. Forty-five days behind me, but maybe forty-six still to go… But the only way to stop it was to stand still all day, and how long could that last? And so I kept lacing my boots each morning, and trains kept echoing across valleys we would pass through only once, and pilgrims kept asking each other, Which do you think is harder? Going up a hill or down it?

* July 24, Santiago de Compostela

In a pew, I pray for for Marie and Jacques, the hospitaleros in Figeac who said, “May Saint Jacques protect you!”
The monks of Taizé. The monks of Cluny—even though they are dead. The monks of Roncesvalles, selling their blessed ribbons. The monks of Rabanal, now and eight years ago.

* violin

July 24th, Santiago de Compostela

We pilgrims keep walking around town, pacing—because what else? Each time we look at each other, one of us puddles up into tears.

* violin

So, yes, fireworks will be good. Fireworks exploding off the front of the Cathedral, saying, *It's done! It's done!* Music to celebrate that.

* violin

Drawn back to the Cathedral—maybe I will sleep in the plaza so I can fall asleep watching it. In another pew, another list: Patrick from Switzerland and David from Belgium, wherever they are. And, wherever they are, *les soeurs américaines*, who taught me that you can eat dandelion greens just outside of Conques, home of that trickster Saint Foy. Damien from Australia, who never shuts up. Kai from Germany, wherever he is. Maxime from Near-Geneva-But-the-French-Side-of-the-Lake.

* violin

Chris from California, who is not missing, but probably here in the city somewhere, who said only “Oh” when I came out to him, and maybe one of the greatest gifts people can give each other is the you can say is the phrase *No big deal.* Father Simon from Canada who
nodded when I talked about Paj, Father Simon who was deeply spiritual and also pettily and wonderfully concerned over which priest was more handsome.

*  

July 24, the eve of the Feast Day of Santiago, Santiago de Compostela

It’s still more than an hour before the fireworks begin, but I can barely squeeze through the mass of people. *Lo siento, lo siento,* bumping into folks, walking funny without my backpack. Slightly taller than the crowd, and chatting, stands Damien—talks and talks and talks and assumes everyone knows what astral projection is and can do it without any training. I apologize my way to him. He’s the perfect person for a celebration. He’s loud and head-bobby, even without music, and like Kai from Germany, Damien always seems on the cusp of laughter.

All of us here, though, keep laughing. Hundreds of us, caffeinated by all the kilometers. Looking at the famous steps, the towers—even the statue of Santiago looks about to crack up. If I’m talking to someone beside me, I’m shouting. To our left—an enormous pilgrim’s hostel King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella built. Behind us, for the first time in months, is the western sky. (When you face an old church, you’re always facing east—the rising sun is supposed to remind you of resurrection.) This place, these people, are lightning, and we probably won’t sleep for days.

A voice, a loudspeaker mounted to the Cathedral. I can’t understand the sound or the Spanish—is he counting down?

People ask question-words, turn around, grab their bags from atop their feet. “What happened?” Damien asks me.

“What happened?” I ask a Spaniard who heard.

“It’s because of the train accident.”
And I ask *what*, and she says a train was going around a corner about an hour ago, just outside the city, and I ask *what*, and she says it jumped the track, and I ask *what*, and she says fifteen passengers have died, and I ask *what*, and she says, “So far,” and I ask *what*, and everything is cancelled.

*

Fifteen dead.

Twenty-two dead.

The numbers are gossipy and hard to follow or confirm.

*  

July 25, the Feast Day of Santiago, Santiago de Compostela


*

Is it possible that is was there all along, written illegibly into everything? On that first day, that first shell pointed me out of the village of Taize and onto a rails-to-trails path, a path that was once a train track.

*  

July 25, the Feast Day of Santiago, Santiago de Compostela

For weeks, we all had planned to attend this cathedral mass. Today is Santiago’s day, the very same July 25th we kept on our minds for miles. The tragedy last night was only a coincidence. The priests process up the aisle. A nun sings a hymn. The king of Spain has not come after all. Yesterday, in the hours before it happened, pilgrims were the only ones scrunching our faces against tears. Now, that’s everyone.
One of the priests reads a prayer. We kneel when we’re supposed to.

A camera crew is with us. They shove their wheeled cameras up and down the aisle, filming people having feelings. I’m sitting at the end of my pew where I can’t hide. Because I have an enormous beard—I haven’t shaved in months—I must look like some kind of part they want played. The camera keeps thrusting itself right beside me, tilting at the best angles.

Each time it spurts toward me, I spread my hand across my face, trying to ruin its shot.

Thrilled, Damien who-talks-and-talks later tells me that he and I were both on TV, “National TV.”

*

Thirty-something dead.

At least forty dead.

People whose tickets promised they would arrive on The Eve of the Feast. For weeks, kind strangers have stopped their trucks to tell us if we’re walking the wrong way. Pilgrims happen upon each other in the woods and one has the wise advice the other has needed for years. We find a tent on the side of the road and say meant to be. My—rediscovered?—belief in providence is too new; I’m not ready to puzzle through the unjust fact that we arrived the day others did not.

Forty-six dead.

* Reporters in front of our Cathedral. Where else would they point their cameras but at the city’s most iconic building, the place where all the train passengers were headed? Where else would
mourners leave their photos and letters but against the famous steps? The national news wants quick video clips, and though it is not fair of me, I hate them for it. (Dislike, my childhood babysitter would have corrected.)

I won't leave just yet. Everyone always stays just a bit too long in Santiago. A pilgrim friend called it white rice. You take the time to soak up what's around you.

Father Simon will be among the first to leave. Today he and I are on the far edge of the plaza where we can't be any TV crew's background. When he says, casually, “How's it going?” I say, looking at the steps on this first day of not walking, “I feel useless today,”—because what can I do?

* 

Fifty dead and more red candles. July 25th is no longer the feast day for Saint Christopher, the patron saint of travelers, who carried people on his shoulders as he crossed the river.

* 

Among the passengers on the train were a family from Virginia: a daughter/sister, and a husband/father, and a wife/mother who works for a diocese of the Catholic Church. They were going to Santiago to congratulate their brother/son, a pilgrim who’d walked there. Among the seventy-nine dead is the wife/mother.

* 

Much later, I’m accidentally at the quiet baptism of a baby I don’t know. I am here, and the baptism is here. This is how church works—people tossed together like salads because why? Then I am at the reception, talking to the grandfather, who grew up in Santiago de
Compostela. “When were you last there?” I ask. And he says, July 24th, the eve of Santiago’s feast day. He arrived there from Madrid. And I say, leaning closer to his face, “How did you get there?”

And he says, “By plane. We were going to take the train, but we changed our minds and took the plane.”

* *

And I say, “What do you think about that—that you were almost on the train that wrecked?” And he says, calm, as if satisfied with the answer, “God has a time for each of us, and it wasn’t my time.”

And all I say is, “Oh.”

* *

79 dead. Final count.

* *

One night I asked for a sign I was doing things right. The next morning, I opened the door of the cabin and—on May 25—the ground was covered in inches of snow. I put my rain poncho on my back and socks on my hands and shivered all morning. In the afternoon, a farm peacock fanned every one of its feathers and turned to face me, stared. Later in the afternoon, I found both the gel squares I’d lost. I didn’t know what to make of these three things.
Another person who appears right when I need him: Damien who-talks-and-talks-and-talks-and-assumes-everyone-knows-what-astral-projection-is-and-can-do-it-without-any-training. I slip down to the Crypt of the Cathedral. It seems like the place I needed to rest in. Damien is here, meditating in a corner.

We sit on the cool floor a long time, his eyes closed, mine on the silver reliquary behind the gate.

They say Santiago’s skeleton lies inside—if it is his body, then it’s a body that existed centuries before anyone painted him as pilgrim or as Moor-slayer. It’s the skeleton that arrived on a boat without sails or rudder. The story says this casket now contains, too, the remains of his disciples Theodore and Athanasium, whose journey had a definite endpoint, and it was the right one. Isn’t that how stories, especially legends, work? Because it’s a story, we know all along that each step is leading the person to a conclusion that makes sense. An innkeeper’s silver cup, a priest’s silver chalice, a dog with a baguette, an empty field, a field with a living star, a living torso full of arrows, nothing happens at random. It’s why we’re secretly jealous of main characters and of saints. It’s why—even though it’s ridiculously implausible that this box contains Santiago and his friends—Damien and I are nonetheless sitting, baffled, in front of them.

Damien finishes his meditation and stands, rolls up his sleeping mat. He steps over to the stairs, then turns back to me and whispers, “How do you feel?” and all I can answer is, “I don’t know.” Damien, uncharacteristically quiet, slides back down to the floor, and stays beside me for ten more minutes. We looked again at the silver reliquary.
One night, I dreamt I had popped into the Cathedral—in the dream it was so easy to get there—and I went down to the crypt of Santiago. But he had been stolen, and the space was cram-packed with black beads and voodoo masks that saw me. Their mouths gaped toward my face, frowns that could eat a person. I fled up the stairs screaming, “Where are the bones of the saint? Where are the bones of the saint?”

* 

After the Feast Day of Santiago, Santiago de Compostela Little events pop up—perhaps many events do for many of us to see—but the ones I, who lingers in Santiago, gets to notice: In the morning, when I wake in the park, a rainbow is stretching over the city. And from my spot in the grass, the arc lands precisely on a tower of the Cathedral. In the evening, I step out of the Cathedral and I am facing west and the sunset is too gorgeous and too bright to make sense, and the street musicians have finally returned to the plaza with their bagpipes. And the stone tiles on one side of the plaza are sprinkled with paper and metallic confetti, which means two people just got married, which means two people believe the ridiculous idea that they will never be without each other.

* 

I dreamt I got lost in the Cathedral: I tugged on doors, but they opened only to stairwells and more doors, and more stairwells. To call it an M.C. Escher painting would be to deny how terrified I felt, unable to find what I knew—knew—was somewhere. Not a single yellow arrow guided me.
Our skin was chubby, so when we fell, our bones did not break; our baby bodies were prepared for this: we came from a forever lineage of babies, generations of brand-new people tumbling to floors before they’d learned fear. Years before our grandfathers became fathers, they crawled on carpets and reached their hands upward. They stretched to make their bodies longer, and though they had not yet learned about height, they reached upward to make themselves taller. When we reached, we felt for a coffee table, a kitchen chair, a sofa cushion. To balance ourselves, we grabbed onto objects we hoped would not move, but sometimes, they did. When we fell, our skin was chubby—our bones did not break. We laughed, except when we cried, and sometimes we looked around for an adult to tell us how to feel. We wanted to move, the freedom of crossing an entire room. We wanted the pacing, the heartbeat of left-right-left-right.


