

“The Red and White Herd”

By Nathan Sulek

What you can hear if you listen: The fluid, yet hard and cutting tones of Polish make English into a foreign tongue. With the whispering clanks of wheat stalks hitting each other in the winds of the countryside, the small village of Łomża bleeds into the hard-edged and modernized language of the sprawling city. Transformed by the rhythm and cadence of western European cities and culture. The eruption of laughter in the darkness, the volley of curses followed by the clash of a bottle, the shouts that make the old communist-era block walls vibrate and jar against the floor, making all others go silent and inciting invisible pressure. *Zostaw mnie w spokoju! Suka!*— the clamoring wail of children screaming amongst a woman crying, and her alleged lover rampaging like a trapped bear, hushes the ones listening: eavesdroppers wanting more but praying for less, treating it as their own personal soap opera. The opening of senses amongst the crowded streets: the whirring of the numerous bikes that the group of young boys rides through the square; the closely shaven heads of a group of men, greeting their newest recruit in a series of grunts and nods; the chatter of two women sitting at the quaint coffee shop on the corner; the violent hurl of words at a man who dares to wear colorful nail polish by the same head-shaven men. You can see the birds weaving between the steps of the people, fighting for a morsel of food; the reflective orange glare of the shining amber on the carts that line the alley; the gray cloud of smoke rising from a teens’ smoke circle. A paradise. A whole country is represented in one short block crowded with people, cluttered like livestock. They were nearly shut out from the rest of the world, but they are still intoxicated with the freedom of the past. The air is alive with the tension of assembling, gathering, and congregating. At any moment, the

promise of sameness, the miracle of generational trauma: large groups of people who share the same upbringing and the memories of old, a people by the books, and a people once oppressed threaten to become the oppressor. The oppressors once were soviet forces, which now in turn have left the country lagging and limping—holding onto its every morsel after being parted with their “freedom”.

In the dim, elegantly decorated church gathered a group of people, whose reason for immigrating was their sole connection. Poles far from home. It was a few days before Easter, standing near the front stood many people with children at their sides, watching. Waiting. Dusty bright blonde curls fell around her neck, framing her round little face. The little girl grabbed and pulled at her father's hand, it was much larger than hers. It was toughened up by the years of hard work in the hope of getting a grasp at the dream that was constantly rattling in his head, on the verge of becoming a nightmare. He was a tall man with a gut that hung over his belt like a sack filled with sand, his hair was jet black with faint peppery streaks of gray starting to poke their way through, ever so unwelcomed. In her other hand, she was holding a little basket that was full of assorted meats, eggs, and slices of bread. It was all lovingly placed by her mother's gentle hands, also worn but not for the same reasons as her father's. She was a woman of above-average height – but still dwarfed in comparison to her husband. Her hair was straight and blonde, but it held the same memory of being twisted and curled, softly defying gravity as the coils turned in and out. But this memory had been suppressed away, only to be passed to her daughter. She purposely straightened her hair to fit in with the rest, to integrate. Behind them lagged the girl's siblings, both boys, each sporting matching bowl cuts. The youngest had bright blonde hair that glowed like a halo and illuminated his childish smile which tugged at the corners of his soft youthful face. Next to him stood his older brother, the eldest hardened with a frown across his

cotton-colored cheeks. His hair was jet black, as cold and lifeless as his stare forward. The crowd of people all looked similar, sporting similar hair and style of dress, and sharing the same sad look that was glazed upon their blue and brown eyes. Staring at the sheep in shepherd's clothes. The priest sprayed the water of his deity upon the numerous baskets laid out in front of him. Eyes stared and watched with awe as the droplets hit pigskin and battered wheat grain. Above him, his savior watched with carven tears upon his glistening figure, his face thinking of imaginary prayer. The people of the embellished building grew quiet, the only noise being the monotone Polish chants of the priest as he continued to water the baskets as if they were his own personal garden of holy. The same little girl stared with the herd, unsure of what else to do but to follow the motions and actions of her kinned blood. In a unified motion, they breathed as one: "Z ojcem, synem i duchem świętym".

The air was gassed with the smell of pine smoke and cooking kiełbasa, a familiar scent to him and his cousin. His black curls are a stark contrast to the blonde. While his cousin blended with the blonde color but still stuck out with her curls against the pin-straight hair of the other Polish children. These were the formation of core memories that would shape their identity and their childhood as Polish-American children. When he had asked her to recall these times, she could merely close her eyes and feel as though she stepped back in time. She stood there with the rest of the children, they mingled and were deciding what games to play at the time since the rest of the adults were busy mingling with themselves and cooking for the entire party. Some events for the kids had already been laid out, but at this point, they were two hours into the party and have over-exhausted those meaningless games. Instead, they turned to the classic ball, bright blue and excitingly different yet the same. Red and white were everywhere and on everything: the cups were very considerably color-coded, each sporting one color or the other; the tees of the

children were red, custom printed for this community's special day out. Written on it, each branding the name of the school – Mała Polska Szkoła: Stroudsburg – written in cheesy comic sans and the glowing white eagle of their heritage proudly displayed in the middle. The other children of the park stared at their sameness, unfamiliar with the red and white branding. They wore neon clothes or tees that sported red, white, and blue. The addition of the blue marked them as a different culture entirely. lazily thrown between the trees above them was a banner that displayed the same information as the tees, with the absence of the ever so beloved eagle. All of these intricate little decorations and details would stick with her and be branded forever upon her curly blonde wool. The event was put together to celebrate her grade's graduation and completion of the year, oh so very momentous for a first-grader. She went up to the group of parents, beaming with a large smile, she asked her Polish teacher, “przepraszam pani, when will the kiełbasa be done?”. The teacher responded with a rush of Polish and the quick double sway of tongs to indicate her dismissal away. A different child went up after her and asked the teacher in full polish. Thus, they were greeted with a smile and a babied tone with an answer so sickly sweet it could give you cavities just listening to it. She puzzled at this, why was the other child's response so different from the one she had been given? She walked off, her plate empty.

A different memory replayed for her, this one hazier, not wanting to be remembered as strongly by the subconscious. Her family often went to parties at family friends' houses to celebrate numerous occasions, each one blurring into one another. This house was dim, but the atmosphere was ablaze with old energy. Externally laid lights illuminating the faces worn with many years past now pulled at the corners, breathing heavily as their bodies moved with the beats of the electric-powered music. Boots clanking against softwood like hooves. Tańczyć! Tańczyć! Tańczyć! – each word felt as clear as a fogged-up window pane. Most of the men wore

the same outfit, a white collared shirt with dark blue or black jeans which they save for special occasions such as this. The women had the illusion of being unique from one another, but each one sported a similar style of dress and shoes that would not catch the eye of anyone else but the impractical clones that surrounded them. All sheep of the same herd. Why do they always herd together? They all have followed the same style and songs for the majority of their lives, staying within the confines of their comfort, giving the excuse that they are “too old” to change and challenge themselves. So they continue dancing.

Their same blooded kin mingled in the rooms above, where the pulses of the music can be felt reverberating through their feet. They turned towards one another, exchanging words in English. “Do you think your mom will get drunk tonight?”, said the blonde-straw-haired boy probably named Peter or Sebastian. The girl with brightly blonde dyed hair responded nonchalantly with merely a shrug, “probably, but I bet your dad will be more”. A girl with dusty blonde curls watched this interaction with wonder from the recesses of her corner. She was different from the rest, and therefore she was separated by an invisible wall and forced into her corner by social pressure. Something to haunt her for the rest of her life going forward. She looked different from the rest of the straight, blonde, thin girls around her and they often used her as a disposable prop for pictures. Her hair was long and unruly, expanding into wild curls, unable to be tamed by a brush. Her figure was bulbous compared to the skeleton-like figures of the girls around her. Her Polish wasn't very good either, she often stuttered and had to think for a moment before speaking, while the blonde-white sheep around her spoke with vigor and confidence. She felt alone despite sharing the same background and pasture as most of the people in the room. Isolated from the herd. Why did they never make the effort to include her in anything? Was her wool a shade too dark, or perhaps the wrong shape?

Furniture was clustered in the small home, reminiscent of a time in the past. The different smells seeped from the walls and fell from the ceiling, clogging the senses, clouding him in a nostalgic stench. The same scenes of his childhood constantly played out here: hot summer sandals slapping the pavement as he and his sibling raced down the street; freshly made rosu with too little salt waiting at the table when he got back from his various adventures from far but familiar lands; the constant bark of the small, white, crusty-eyed dog. His grandmother eyed him from the table, her face now twisted and sour compared to the memories of his past. Her features were not influenced by her aging, instead aided by visualization of his presence in front of her. His features were far beyond what she had imagined for this particular grandchild. She looked at the other two grandchildren of the bunch with a soft smile and treated them with a gentle hand, despite their clear distance from her. He stood there, his black curly hair standing on end, horribly contrasting to his brothers' straw laid hair, reminiscent of their father's texture. True heirs. Back in the grandmother's day, in Poland, grandchildren followed the word of their parents and stuck to their small and organized boxes.

This black sheep stepped outside the box years ago when no other had dared previously, he was much happier that way. Feeding on the outer pastures of life. Expressing himself had saved him from the dangers that echoed off the barren walls of his own bone-laid head, the loud shouts now merely became hushed whispers. Consequently, this expression had cost him a very dear part of his identity, his very lifeblood, and his culture. It was something he grew up on, grew up as.

Polish parents left their homes in order to create a better one for their children, yet they merely lifted the foundation and carried it onto the plane with them. The Polish community is welcoming to all of those who fit the particular standard that the people desire, stray too far and

you are left to fend for yourself. Being an outsider in these groups of people that very often are called “relatives” can feel like the most isolating and lonely experience a person could imagine. You have to fit in with the herd. The dazzling white coats of sheep must not be infiltrated by the specs of brown, gray, or black. They cause panic and uproar amongst the others and taint the blood of the sheep they mingle with, spreading impurity. Tainting what's seen as purebred, pretty but with no other purpose than to reproduce the same product time and time again with little variation. My cousin and I have had to bear witness and experience this firsthand, our mere appearance and mannerisms were enough to separate us from the only community we had by blood. In what ways are you the black sheep of your own community?

Afterward:

Hartman treats her writing process as an artist with a canvas. She writes each paragraph strategically like brush strokes softly gliding across the gessoed fabric, creating a vivid image. They may be also described as dance moves, in the way that she makes certain moves to more accurately portray the messages she intends to convey. One of these dance moves that I strongly agreed with was the use of juxtaposition of contrasting ideas next to each other. I specifically used this to portray this split in the opinions of people in the Polish community and how they feel about certain things. Also, her repeated use of certain words to connect an overall greater theme together. For me, it was primarily the use of “sheep”.