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A Mixture of Cathedrals

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Gothic was a matter of vocabulary and style until I climbed halfway up the tallest church tower in the world. Somewhere along the way, twisting up the tight, curling stairs I realized that pointed arches and vaulted ceilings aren't just architecture; they are a way of life. In my humanities 101 course, mansard roofs, naves, and flying buttresses had no context; they were pictures and diagrams. But inside the Ulm Cathedral, I discovered that vaulted ceilings are an attempt to re-create the heavens, to capture the ethereal in stone and the dark rooms hidden above them were an escape for monks to ascend from the mundane. As I walked up the tower steps, I learned that a cathedral is a way of mixing religion, art, and the day-to-day grind of stone masonry. Germany had caught me off guard; I loved the rolling hills, the cathedrals, the old men riding rickety bicycles, but I wasn’t in my place; I needed the Wasatch mountains to be just outside my window. I had found beauty in riding trains through Bavaria where cornfields ended abruptly in a solid wall of pines and in listening to Croat refugees speak of bullet-scarred homes and the beauties of mixing milk and Coca-Cola, but I felt out of place.

Out on the walkway, next to the cathedral’s tallest spire, looking between iron bars and buttresses, trying to memorize the southern part of
Schwabenland, I realized that for the first time in over a year, I wasn't lost anymore. I can't explain it, but standing next to the spire, I found myself. The cornfields and refugees had become a part of my sense of place. They were a way of seeing the world.

I tried to capture that way of seeing by writing about the deep-colored Bavarian autumn. In Utah, autumn is sudden and brilliant orange. But in the steep-hilled valleys of southern Germany, autumn feels older. It comes more slowly, and the colors are more subtle—rust instead of scrub-oak orange, and the trees are so thick you know they are hiding something in their shadows. I didn't have too many chances to walk through the forests; I just watched them from train windows.

In my journal I tried to explain the comforts of drinking Kool-aid and talking about Arkansas with an American serviceman and his family. The first time I met the Glovers, I knocked on the door and was greeted with, “Just a second, we're necked.” “Necked” meant naked, but they weren't really. They were lounging about in underwear and pajamas. Once my friend and I were allowed inside, the Glovers would start telling stories. John said that in Arkansas Renee had kept a whole bevy of animals: three dogs, two cats, five rabbits, a turtle, a raccoon, and a baby skunk. In Germany, they only had room for two dogs. Rocky was a small, long-haired mutt that liked to hide behind the recliners when company came, and Budge was an immense black lab mixed with something else. When he was excited, Budge would start urinating all over the place.

I had always thought of landscape as being what you physically see, but the Glovers became part of my landscape. In Bamberg, they were my family. I was learning about Arkansas and Oklahoma; I was learning what it means to have five-year-old Ashley Glover sit in my lap and whisper slightly spitting secrets directly into my ear.

I've written poems and stories about ninety-year-old Frau Nossek who walked with her arm in the crook of mine, telling me about Prague and Saint Francis of Assisi. But I'm afraid I won't ever truly write Frau Nossek or the ritual of visiting here. Every Tuesday and Thursday my friend and I would arrive at two, and Frau Nossek would have two bottles of German multi-vitamin juice waiting for us. I never realized that you could mix eight or nine different types of fruits into one bottle of juice, but the Germans seem to believe they have mastered it. Nor did I realize that visiting
a ninety-year-old woman would be one of the highlights of my week. She would tell us about growing up in Sudetenland, about sleeping in a room over the barn and about one horse that would kick its floorboards in the middle of the night. Frau Nossek’s stories weren’t simply events; they became a part of my way of seeing. I became fascinated with Catholic Saints and Frau Nossek’s devotion of donating all of her stamps to the Franciscan monks. Writing was a way to place myself in the context of my experiences in Germany.

Germany enlarged my sense of place, broadened it beyond Mount Timpanogos and Provo, Utah. Now when I walk in the Wasatch mountains, I see them differently. Sometimes I see pieces of Bavaria—I see Staffelberg and Krammer’s peak. I remember I have to go back to Germany to climb the Zugspitze, its tallest mountain. And when I read Rilke’s poetry or Raymond Carver’s story “Cathedral,” I understand them differently. I hear elderly German men speaking to one another, and I see the stained glass windows in the Ulm Cathedral. My sense of place, my way of seeing the world, had to incorporate Germany.

Consequently, when I came home after two years there, I had to reacquaint myself with mountains. I started running trails. I thought I knew the trails I was running. I had walked them dozens of times, but I had forgotten them. Or maybe I never really knew them until my ankles were sore from misplaced steps on jutting rocks, until I had made my way past aspen-bordered meadows filtering morning sun, or until some rock ripped a crescent half-moon scar on my left knee. I ran because I loved the motion, because I loved chasing after vanishing elk. I didn’t run to find my place, to connect myself to the landscape, or to see the world in a new way, but that is what I found in running. The small patches of avalanche that I ran across in the end of winter were a part of me; the hail that I ran through on grey afternoons was a stinging reminder of the sky and my body’s physical connection to the landscape. Mountains and running crept into my writing and reading. The two monarch butterflies I saw locked in tenuous gyration became a part of my poetry. Standing under a waterfall, watching the rising sun, I found a perfect way to start an essay. Similarly the need to write about a dead grasshopper in the middle of the sidewalk caused me to look at insects in a different way. Now I notice yellow jackets stunned by the cold and frozen to the pavement. And once while hiking
in the foothills surrounding Spanish Fork, I read Yeats's “Second Coming.” I not only read about falcons flying in widening gyres, but I saw them—perhaps not falcons, but red-tailed hawks spiraling in the wind. I can't be sure if Yeats transformed the foothills or if the foothills changed Yeats. But I noticed, for the first time, that hawks playing in canyon winds signaled a new world, a new way of seeing things.

Landscape isn't merely a matter of mountains and foothills. It is a way of mixing myself with what I experience—a process of discovery. I used to think that most people had a specific place where they could feel at home, and if they extended beyond those boundaries, they would find themselves bewildered. But I don't think so anymore. I can mix Frau Nossek's saints with my own. And I can believe that St. Francis spoke to birds even if I'm not Catholic, because I believe my grandfather speaks to birds, and sometimes I imagine that birds speak to me. When a blue heron leaves its stillness and seems to defy gravity with the precise calculations of heavy, beating wings, I remember to be surprised by life. I remember that details like yellow jackets on pavement and Ashley Glover sitting on my lap are important. I remember that I shouldn't catalog my experiences and separate them as science or art or religion, as familiar or unfamiliar. I need to take the mountains of Germany and blend them with Timpanogos because both can teach me about the other, and both teach me to appreciate what I see. I can't look at the cathedral in Ulm as an edifice to someone else's religion; its verticality and vaulted nave are a chance for me to imagine the heavens.