

Return Address — Not Mine

Concode

2026-08-29

RETURN ADDRESS
NOT MINE
CODA · 2026

Wesley Ardoin
412 South Union St.
Opelousas, LA 70570

POLSKA

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A NOVEL IN LETTERS

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1

Sept. 14, 2000

Dear Sir or Madam,

My teacher Mrs. Vidrine says we have to write to somebody in another country and I got Poland. She wrote your name on the board and I copied it but I think I copied it wrong.

My name is Wesley Ardoin. I am ten. I live in Opelousas, Louisiana, in the United States of America. I live with my grandmother in her house. It is the same house my mother grew up in and my grandmother has been in it since before that.

We have a dog named Boo who is not smart.

I play football but not the kind you play. I know you play the other kind. Mrs. Vidrine told us that so nobody would look stupid.

What is Poland like. Is it cold there all the time or only some of the time.

Sincerely yours,
Wesley Ardoin

2

02.10.2000

Dear Wesley Ardoin,

You copy my name almost good. Is Paweł. The ł is like your w. So you say Pa-view. Is not important, you can write Paweł, everybody in school write it also wrong when they are from other country.

The capital of Poland you write Warsau. Is Warsaw in English and Warszawa here. Sorry I say this. My teacher say I must correct nothing but I already write it.

Is snow here already, small snow, not the real one. In November come the real one.

I have ten years also. I live in Wisła. Is in mountains in south.

Pawel Heczko

3

Oct. 19, 2000

Dear Pawel,

I have never seen snow. Not one time. My grandmother saw it in 1989 and she still talks about it.

Here is what it is like instead. In August you walk outside and it is like somebody put a wet towel on your face. Your shirt is wet before you get to the road. The air has a sound to it from the bugs. At night it does not get cool it just gets dark.

That is the best I can do. I have never had to explain it to anybody who did not already know.

Do not say sorry for correcting me. I would rather know.

Your friend,
Wesley

4

07.11.2000

Dear Wesley,

Now is the real snow.

My father works by wood. He make furniture and also he fix the roofs in the summer. In winter is only wood. Our house smell always like the wood.

My grandmother has a book of songs for church that is older than this house. The paper is brown at the sides. Her mother give it to her and her mother before. Nobody is allowed to take it outside.

I ask her how old and she say older than you can count. I can count high so I think she does not know.

Pawel

5

Nov. 21, 2000

Dear Pawel,

We go to church on Sunday. Everybody goes. My grandmother, my aunts, my cousins, everybody on our road. It starts at 10:45 and it goes until it is done which is not always the same time.

I am not saying it like it is a big thing. It is just what Sunday is. Like Saturday is for cutting grass.

The songs are out of a book too but the books belong to the church and they are not old, they are green and somebody wrote in mine.

Do you have Thanksgiving. I do not think you do but I did not want to say you don't and be wrong.

Wesley

6

12.12.2000

Dear Wesley,

No Thanksgiving. Is American, we learn it in school in a lesson about your country with the turkey.

I must tell you something and is difficult in English. My church is not the same like most Poland. Poland is katolicki, almost everybody, in my school also almost everybody. My family is ewangelicko-augsburski. In English I look in dictionary and it say Lutheran but I think this word is not exact.

Here in Wisła is many like us. Is normal here. When I go to Kraków with my father, is not normal.

I do not know how to explain more. My English is not enough for this one.

Pawel

7

Dec. 27, 2000

Dear Pawel,

Christmas was at my grandmother's like always. We had twenty-one people. I counted because my cousin Tee said it was more and it was not, it was twenty-one.

We had a ham and my aunt Ruby's dressing and the pies. My grandmother does not sit down the whole day. If you make her sit down she gets up again in about a minute to go see about something.

I got a football and some socks.

I do not know what ewangelicko is but that is alright. You do not know what dressing is either and I am not going to try to explain it in a letter.

Wesley

8

09.01.2001

Dear Wesley,

Twenty-one is many. We are nine.

Here for Christmas Eve we put one plate more on the table than is people. The plate is empty. Is for if somebody come who has nowhere. A traveller, or somebody alone.

Nobody ever come. Every year the plate is there and every year nobody sit there and then we eat.

I like it anyway. I do not know why.

Pawel

9

Feb. 6, 2001

Dear Pawel,

I got in a fight at school with a boy named Dontrell over nothing, over a pencil, and I did not start it but I finished it and I got put out for one day.

My grandmother did not yell. That is worse. She said get in the truck and she drove me to my uncle's and made me help him move sheet metal all day in the sun and did not say one word to me about it. Then at supper she said pass the rice like nothing happened.

I am not going to fight again but not because of the rule.

Wesley

10

19.02.2001

Dear Wesley,

Your grandmother is clever. My mother would shout and then is finished. Your way stay in the head longer.

Something happen here you will not understand but I write it anyway.

Adam Małysz win everything. Everything. He is ski jumper, he jump from the big tower and fly and he win in all countries this year. In Poland now is only this on television. In shops, in bus, everywhere is Małysz. My aunt cry when he win. She never watch sport

before in her life.

He is from Wisła. From here. My father know his family a little.

And he is from our church.

Is like the whole country stand up and shout for one boy from this valley.

Pawel

11

Mar. 3, 2001

Dear Pawel,

I do not know what ski jumping is. I asked Mrs. Vidrine and she said it is like skiing but off a ramp and I still do not have a picture of it in my head.

I drew what I think it is. I am sending it. If it is wrong you can laugh, I do not care.

We do not have a hill in this whole parish. The highest thing is the water tower.

Wesley

12

24.03.2001

Dear Wesley,

Is wrong. Is very wrong and I laugh, sorry.

You draw him going up. Is not up. Is down and then out. The tower is high and he go down very fast and then at the end the tower go flat and he leave it and then he is in the air for long time. Not like bird. Like something thrown.

I put a real photo in the letter, from newspaper. Now you see.

Also you draw skis on his feet like two sticks. Is correct actually. This part you get right.

Pawel

13

Apr. 17, 2001

Dear Pawel,

Easter. My grandmother started cooking Thursday.

Here is what there was. Ham, and a roast, and rice dressing, and butter beans, and cornbread, and potato salad which here is a hot dish and not what you are thinking, and two kinds of cake, and a pie my aunt Ruby made that nobody ate because of what she

puts in it.

Everybody eats outside because there is no room inside. The little kids eat standing up.

I ate until I could not and then my grandmother said you didn't eat nothing.

Wesley

14

06.05.2001

Dear Wesley,

Our Easter is quiet. Church in morning, long church, longer than normal. Then home, then eat, then is finished.

In town is more. The katolicki have the food blessed on Saturday, they bring baskets to the church with eggs and bread and salt and the priest bless it. Is nice to see. We do not do it.

When I was small I ask my mother why we do not bring a basket. She say because we do not. That was all the answer.

I did not ask again but I remember I ask.

Pawel

15

May 29, 2001

Dear Pawel,

Do you have television in Poland. I am asking because I do not know and I would rather ask you than ask somebody at school and get told wrong.

Somebody said y'all only got it recently. Somebody else said that is Russia and not Poland and then they got in an argument about it and I still don't know.

Wesley

16

18.06.2001

Dear Wesley,

Yes Wesley. We have television. We have also electricity and shoes and the wheel.

I am not angry. Is funny. I tell my father and he laugh for a long time and then he say tell him we also have the fire.

But is true nobody know anything about Poland. In your school they know only about the war probably. Is same everywhere.

Pawel

17

July 24, 2001

Dear Pawel,

Nothing happened today.

I got up late. It was already hot. I ate cereal standing up at the counter and my grandmother told me to sit down and I sat down. Boo would not come out from under the porch.

Me and Tee rode down to the store and back and did not buy anything because we did not have any money, we just rode.

In the afternoon it rained hard for about fifteen minutes and then it stopped and then it steamed off the road and got hotter than before.

At night we sat on the porch and my grandmother did not say anything and I did not either.

That is the whole day. I do not know why I wrote it all down.

Wesley

18

11.08.2001

Dear Wesley,

Also here nothing happen. I read your letter three times.

I go with my father to a house where he fix a roof and I hold things for him and he do not talk. In the middle of the day we eat bread and sausage sitting on the roof and look at the valley. Then more roof.

Is strange. Your day and my day is nothing, and I read yours three times.

Pawel

19

Sept. 14, 2001

Dear Pawel,

I do not know how to write this letter.

On Tuesday they came and got us out of class and put us all in the gym with the television on the rolling cart. They did not tell us anything, they just put it on. We watched it for a long time. Some of the teachers were standing at the back and Mrs. Vidrine had her hand over her mouth the whole time and did not take it down.

That is the part I keep thinking about. Not the buildings. The teachers.

I have never seen a grown person not know what to do. Not one time in my life until Tuesday.

My grandmother had the TV on when I got home and she had it on when I went to bed and it was on when I got up.

Everybody keeps saying we are going to be alright.

Wesley

20

24.09.2001

Dear Wesley,

We see it also. Here is evening when it happen, we are eating.

My father say nothing all night. My mother say Jezu Chryste, quiet, like to herself, many times.

My grandmother pray in the kitchen in Polish, and she pray old, the old words, and I stand in the door and listen and I do not understand all of it. Is our words but not the words we use now.

I want to tell you something. When she pray like that I feel afraid and also I feel that everything is held. Both at one time. I do not know how to say it better than this.

I am sorry for your country.

Pawel

21

Oct. 22, 2001

Dear Pawel,

There are flags on everything now. Every truck. Every store. The Lawsons put one on their mailbox and then the Guidrys put up a bigger one.

At church Sunday Brother Dale said we are a nation under God and that God has not forgotten us and everybody said amen loud, louder than they say it usually.

I said it too.

I have been thinking about it since and I do not exactly know what I said amen to. I am not saying it was wrong. I am saying I said it because everybody said it and it felt good to say it with everybody.

That is all.

Wesley

22

18.11.2001

Dear Wesley,

Can I ask you something and you do not have to answer.

You say God has not forget your country. And in the church here they pray also for your country. Everybody pray for your country now.

But the people in the buildings. Somebody was praying for them also, before. Their mothers. On that morning.

I am not saying something bad. I only think about it and I have nobody to ask. My father would say do not ask this. My pastor would give me an answer that is for children.

Do not answer if is stupid.

Pawel

23

Dec. 20, 2001

Dear Pawel,

I do not have an answer to your question so I am not going to make one up.

Christmas is coming. It will be at my grandmother's. There will be a ham and my aunt Ruby's dressing and pies and everybody will be there.

I noticed this year that I already know exactly what it is going to be like. Every single part of it. That never bothered me before and it does not bother me now exactly, I just noticed it, that I know.

Wesley

24

08.01.2002

Dear Wesley,

The plate again. Empty again.

This year I ask my father who is it for really. Not the answer for children. The real one.

He is quiet long time. Then he say: for the one who comes.

I say nobody comes. Every year nobody comes.

He say: that is why we put it. If somebody came we would not need to put it, we would just make room. We put it because nobody comes.

Then he ask for the salt and that was the end.

I think about this for one week already.

Pawel

25

Feb. 12, 2002

Dear Pawel,

My cousin Nook died. He was seventeen. It was a car on the highway by the sugar mill and he was not driving.

The funeral was Saturday and the church was full, people standing at the back and out the doors. His mother is my grandmother's sister's girl. She did not make any noise the whole time. Everybody else did.

I was a pallbearer because they were short one and I am tall.

The casket is heavier than you think it is going to be. Nobody tells you that.

Afterwards there was food at the house and after about an hour people were laughing in the kitchen, laughing real laughing, and I went outside because I could not do it.

He taught me how to drive a four wheeler when I was seven.

Wesley

26

02.03.2002

Dear Wesley,

I read your letter and I start three letters back and I throw them all away.

The first one I write about my grandfather who die when I am six. Then I read it and I see I am writing about me and not about you, so I throw it.

The second one I write things that are true from church, about the resurrection and about hope. Every word is true. But I read it and it sound like a card you buy in a shop. So I throw it.

The third one I do not remember what it was. It was bad also.

So now I write this one and this one says: I do not know what to say to you. I am sorry about your cousin Nook. I do not know what to say.

Pawel

27

Mar. 25, 2002

Dear Pawel,

That was the best letter anybody sent me.

Everybody at church had something to say. All of it was true and all of it went by me like the radio.

You said you did not know what to say and I read it four times.

I do not understand why that is, but it is.

Wesley

28

21.04.2002

Dear Wesley,

Now I have konfirmacja class. In English confirmation I think.

Is two years. Two years! Every Saturday morning, and I must learn the catechism, and at the end is examination in front of the whole church and then I am confirmed and then I can take communion.

Wesley I am telling you the truth, is boring. The pastor is a good man but he read from the paper and we sit. Marek sleep with open eyes, he can do it, is his talent.

I ask my mother can I not go. She look at me like I ask can I not have a head.

Pawel

29

May 19, 2002

Dear Pawel,

We do not have that. We have getting saved.

Here is how it goes. At the end of the service Brother Dale asks and the music is playing and if you are ready you go up front. Then you get baptized in the tank behind the pulpit, all the way under, and everybody claps.

I got saved when I was eight. April 12, 1998. My grandmother wrote it in the front of her Bible with my name and the date.

So I do not have to do two years of anything. It already happened and there is a date on it.

Wesley

30

09.06.2002

Dear Wesley,

I read this letter many times and I must ask and please do not be angry, I am not saying you are wrong.

Saved from what?

And how did you know at eight years old that it is the day? What happen inside that you know? Is a feeling? Somebody tell you is time?

And if is finished on 12 April 1998 with a date, then what is Sunday for after that?

I am not clever, I do not have a trick question. I try to make a picture in my head and I cannot make it.

Here nobody has a date. My grandmother is seventy-nine and she would not say she is finished.

Pawel

31

July 8, 2002

Dear Pawel,

Alright. Saved from sin and from hell, that is the answer, that is the answer everybody gives.

How did I know. I was eight and the music was going and my cousin Tee went up and I did not want to be the only one sitting. That is the truth of it and I have never said it to anybody.

I am not saying it did not happen. I am saying I do not know if the going up was the thing or if the thing was somewhere else and the going up was just the part everybody could see.

And Sunday after that is for. I started to write an answer to that and I did not have one so I am leaving it.

I do not like this letter. I am sending it anyway.

Wesley

32

29.07.2002

Dear Wesley,

Alright.

I have a bicycle now. Is my cousin's before, it is too big for him and now too small, so is mine. The brake on the front does not work so I must use the foot on the tyre, which my mother does not know and you also do not know.

I ride to Ustroń and back, is far, my legs are dead. From the top by the church you can see three valleys and if is very clear you can see into Czech.

Come here one day and I show you. You will not believe how much down there is when you never see a hill.

Pawel

33

Sept. 30, 2002

Dear Pawel,

Two years this month.

Mrs. Vidrine's class is over and we are not supposed to still be doing it. Everybody else stopped. Dontrell stopped after four letters. Most of them stopped after two.

I asked my grandmother for the stamps this month and she gave me the money and did not ask what for. She knows what for.

Two years is a long time to write to somebody you never saw.

Wesley

34

22.10.2002

Dear Wesley,

I must tell you something. In my school is now a room with computers, eleven computers, and we have one hour in the week and we learn the electronic mail.

You write and is there. Not in ten days. Immediately.

My teacher say is the future and soon nobody write letters. She say it like is good news.

I have an address now. I write it here at the bottom.

I do not know. I write it here anyway.

35

Nov. 18, 2002

Dear Pawel,

I saw the address at the bottom of your letter and I looked at it for a while.

We could. There is a computer at the library and my grandmother would take me.

Here is the thing though. It takes ten days to get to you and ten days back and I know that, so when I write I already know I am not going to hear anything for three weeks. So I put in what is actually going on and not just what happened today.

Your letter about the plate. You had that for a week before you wrote it. If you could have sent it in one second you would have sent it the same night and it would have been a different thing.

So I say we keep doing it this way. Not forever, I am not saying forever. I am saying we said we would do it and we should do it properly.

If you think that is stupid you can say so and we will do the other thing and I will not be mad.

Wesley

36

11.01.2003

Dear Wesley,

Konfirmacja, second year. Saturday morning, nine o'clock, in the cold room behind the church because the heating is in the main part only.

This week we get a paper about Luther. Not the catechism, a different paper, the pastor make it himself on the copy machine and it is crooked on the page.

Is one part I read twice. Luther write it in 1522 when people are already making the fight in his name and breaking things in the churches. He write:

I ask that people make no mention of my name and call themselves not Lutheran but Christian. What is Luther? The teaching is not mine.

I put it in English myself so maybe is not exact.

I think he would be angry about the name of my church. The whole name of my church has his name in it and he ask, in writing, that nobody do this. Five hundred years and every Sunday I sit in a building named after a man who ask them not to.

Marek fall asleep during this part. Sitting up, eyes open. I tell you already he can do this.

After we have the examination practice. The pastor ask me the third article and I say it correct but too fast and he say slower, Paweł, it is not a race, you are not being chased.

Paweł

37

Feb. 4, 2003

Dear Paweł,

I know the name Luther. That is it. I know it the way I know the name of a president I could not tell you anything about.

I asked my grandmother and she said he was the one who nailed the paper to the door in Germany. So now I know one more thing than I knew.

Here is what I did this week. Coach Fontenot said if I want to play next year I have to put on fifteen pounds by August, so my grandmother is making me eat two suppers. Not bigger suppers. Two of them, one at six and one at nine. She is enjoying this more than I am.

Tee got a car. It is a 1988 and it does not have a back bumper and he drives it like he stole it.

Wesley

38

09.03.2003

Dear Wesley,

Polish soldiers go to Iraq. Is decided. Not many, but they go, and Poland is on the list of countries with your country.

In the shop the old men argue. One say we owe America because of 1989, because of Reagan, because the Pope, because how it ended here. The other say we owe nothing, we are small, small countries who go to wars of big countries do not come home the same.

My cousin Marcin signed. He is nineteen. He signed before it was decided, in the winter, and now it is decided and he is in it.

My aunt does not talk about it. She talks around it. She talks about everything that is near it.

I do not know what I think. I know I am glad it is not my brother, and I do not have a brother, and I am still glad.

Paweł

38a

Apr. 8, 2003

Dear Pawel,

I want to say something about your cousin Marcin and I am going to get it wrong.

There is a man here named Dewayne who went to the first one, the one in 1991, and he has been back about ten years and he sits on his mother's porch. He is maybe thirty-five. Every so often somebody in this town says something about Dewayne in a certain voice and everybody nods and nobody says the whole sentence.

I have known him my entire life as the man on that porch. It did not occur to me until this week that he was somebody before it.

At church they pray for the troops and everybody says amen and I say it too and I mean it. And I have never once heard anybody at that church pray for Dewayne, who is four hundred yards from the front door.

I do not think that is anybody being bad. I think prayers go where the flag is and the flag is not on his porch.

I hope your cousin comes home the same. I do not know how to say it better than that.

Wesley

39

Apr. 22, 2003

Dear Pawel,

The flags never came down from before. Now there are new ones on top of the old ones.

Sunday Brother Dale prayed for the troops and everybody said amen, and then he prayed that God would give our leaders wisdom and everybody said amen, and then he said something about how this nation was founded on the Word and everybody said amen the loudest for that one.

I am going to tell you something and I do not know how to say it without sounding ugly.

I have started hearing it. Before I just heard church. Now I hear a man talking and I hear which parts get the loud amen and which parts get the quiet one, and I can tell before he says it which one it is going to be.

I do not think Brother Dale is lying. That is not what I am saying. I am saying I can see how it is put together now and I cannot stop seeing it.

Do not tell anybody I said that. There is nobody to tell but I mean it anyway.

Wesley

40

18.05.2003

Dear Wesley,

Everywhere is posters. TAK and NIE. Yes and no. On the bus, on the shop, painted on a wall by the bridge.

Poland vote in June, the whole country, if we go into the European Union. Is not small. Is the biggest thing since I am born, everybody say this.

My father is NIE.

He is not stupid and he is not angry, and this is important because on television the NIE people are shown angry. He say: they will buy the land. He say: for forty years somebody in another country decided for us and now we ask a new somebody in another country to decide for us and we are excited about it.

My mother is TAK and they do not fight about it, they just say it and then it is quiet.

I am thirteen. Nobody ask me. In school we make a debate and I get NIE because they put me there, and I argue my father's argument, and I win the debate, and I walk home and I do not know what I think.

Pawel

41

09.06.2003

Dear Wesley,

77,45 percent yes.

I write the number exact because I will want to remember it exact.

Sunday night the television is on and the numbers come and my mother put her hand on her mouth and my father look at the screen a long time and then he stand up and go outside. He is outside maybe twenty minutes. I go to the door and he is standing in the yard looking at the mountain in the dark, and he is not crying, he is standing.

I go out and stand with him and say nothing.

After a while he say, without turning: well. Now we find out.

That is all he say. Then we go in.

In the town there is fireworks and shouting and somebody is driving up and down with the flag out of the window. On our road is quiet.

Wesley I want to tell you that today my country decided something and I felt it in my stomach and I am not able to say if it is good.

Pawel

42

June 30, 2003

Dear Pawel,

I have to tell you the truth. I do not know what the European Union is.

I know it is countries in Europe together. That is the whole thing I know. I do not know what they do together or who is in it or what your father is afraid they will buy.

I asked at school and the answer I got was about money and it did not help.

I am not going to pretend. You wrote me the biggest thing that happened in your life and I read it twice and I understood that your father stood in the yard, and that part I understood completely, and the rest I did not.

Tell me like I am ten. I would rather look stupid to you than to anybody.

Wesley

43

21.07.2003

Dear Wesley,

Alright. Like you are ten.

It is a club of countries. Fifteen now, and in one year we come in with nine more. To be in it you must change many laws to be the same as the others. That is the part that take years and that is what we have been doing since I am small, only I did not know that is what it was.

When you are in it:

Money moves free. Things move free. And people move free — I can go to another country in the club and work there and they cannot say no to me because I am Polish.

That last one is the one everybody talk about. That is the one my mother is thinking about when she vote yes.

What my father is afraid of: land here is cheap and there is money there. He say a man from Austria can buy our valley with what he keeps in the bank for holidays. There is a rule about this for some years, a protection, but rules end.

And the other thing he is afraid of and does not say. If everybody can go, everybody goes. Then who is here.

I write all this and now I understand it better than before I write it. So thank you for asking like you are ten.

Pawel

43a

02.08.2003

Dear Wesley,

Two more things about the Union and then I stop, I promise.

The first. There is money coming. Roads, water pipes, the school. There will be a sign on everything that says this was built with European money and the stars in a circle. My father says wait and see what we give back for it, and my mother says the road to Ustroń has been broken since 1988.

They are both right and that is what makes it unbearable in our kitchen.

The second, and this is the one I keep turning over.

We were told for fifteen years to become the kind of country that could be let in. Everything was for that. Change this law, change this rule, be more like them, and then they will say yes.

And now they have said yes and there is nothing left to become.

Wesley, that is a strange feeling and I did not expect it and nobody talks about it. For my whole life the future was one thing: get in. Now we are in, in nine months, and I am thirteen and I would like somebody to say what the next thing is and nobody has.

My father would say the next thing is finding out what it cost. He would say it while looking at the door.

Pawel

44

Aug. 19, 2003

Dear Pawel,

I have a job. Mr. Lonnie's shop, sweeping and holding things and getting told to get out the way. Six dollars an hour, thirty hours in the week until school.

First check was one hundred sixty dollars after they took out. I stood in the parking lot and looked at it.

I gave my grandmother sixty. She did not want it. I put it on the counter under the sugar bowl and went outside and when I came back it was gone so I know she took it.

I bought stamps with some of it. A whole book of them. I am not going to have to ask her for stamps again and I did not tell her that is why.

Wesley

45

15.09.2003

Dear Wesley,

New school year. New English teacher, Pani Sikora, and she is hard. She give back my work with red on it and she say: you write like a person who learned English from letters.

I say yes. She say from who. I say from a boy in Louisiana.

She look at me and say — Louisiana? — and then she say, then you have learned to write English but you have learned an accent you cannot hear.

I ask what accent. She say: yours is warm and slow and you use the same words twice because he does. That is not how they will speak to you in London.

I am not sure if she insult me or you or nobody.

She give me a book of Dickens which is very long and in which nobody says anything in one sentence if they can say it in nine.

Pawel

46

Oct. 14, 2003

Dear Pawel,

Something happened at church and I am going to write it plain and not say what I think about it because I do not know what I think about it.

There is a family, the Chessons, and they have been at our church my whole life. Mr. Chesson does the parking on Sunday. Their girl Amanda is nineteen and she is going to have a baby and she is not married.

Sunday Brother Dale said there would be a time of restoration and repentance and they brought her up front and she stood there and cried and said she was sorry to the church.

To the church. Out loud. In front of everybody.

And then everybody prayed over her and afterwards a lot of the women hugged her and cried and it was a good thing, everybody said it was a beautiful thing, my aunt Ruby said it three times in the car.

The boy did not stand up front. He is not from our church so he was not there.

Amanda is nineteen and she stood up front in a dress and told two hundred people she was sorry.

That is all. That is what happened.

Wesley

46a

Nov. 2, 2003

Dear Pawel,

I have to add something to what I wrote about the Chesson girl because it has got worse and I do not want you to have only the first half.

The Chessons have moved to Ville Platte. Mr. Chesson still does the parking. They drive twenty-eight minutes each way now to a church they could walk to.

Amanda does not come at all.

I heard my aunt Ruby say to another woman that it was a shame, and the woman said yes, such a shame, and both of them meant it, and neither of them has been to see her.

She stood up front and said she was sorry to two hundred people and then two hundred people forgave her and then she moved twenty-eight minutes away.

I have been trying to work out what actually happened in that room. I think everybody there believed it was mercy. I believed it, I was standing right there and my throat went tight and I thought I was watching something holy.

And then everybody went home and it turned out the mercy was a door and she went through it and it shut.

Wesley

47

11.11.2003

Dear Wesley,

I know this. Not the same but I know the shape of it.

Here when somebody do something the whole town know before the family know. Nobody stand in the front but everybody look. Is the same machine, different clothes.

I want to say something to make it lighter so I say: at least she is finished now, yes? She stand up, she say it, is done, now they must leave her.

I write that and then I look at it and I do not think is true. I think it is what I want to be true.

Sorry. I am not good at this one.

Pawel

48

Dec. 21, 2003

Dear Pawel,

Christmas at my grandmother's. Twenty-one again, no, twenty-two, Tee's girlfriend came.

Ham, dressing, the pies, my aunt Ruby's thing that nobody eats. My grandmother did not sit down. I made her sit down one time and she was up in about a minute to go see about the rolls.

It rained the whole day and all the little kids were inside and it was too loud and it was good.

Nook's mother came. First Christmas she has come since. She sat with my grandmother in the kitchen a long time.

Wesley

49

19.01.2004

Dear Wesley,

I must tell you something and I have known it for two weeks and I did not write it.

In May we go to England.

On the first of May Poland go into the Union and on that same day England open the door. Not every country open it. England, Ireland and Sweden say come, from the first day, and the rest say wait. My father has a friend from here already there, in a town called Peterborough, and there is work in a factory that make food for the shops, and it is not wood but it is money.

We go in the middle of May when school is finished.

My mother is happy and does not show it because of my father. My father is going anyway. The man who stood in the yard and said now we find out is going to find out first.

I do not know how to be about it. In the same week I found out and I have already thought about it too much and also not at all.

Pawel

50

Feb. 16, 2004

Dear Pawel,

I read your letter three times and I want to ask a question that is going to sound stupid.

Why does the door opening mean you have to go through it?

Nobody here would go. I mean that. If they announced tomorrow that everybody in Louisiana could go work in California, nobody on this road would go. My uncle would say what's in California. And that would be the end of it.

I am not saying your father is wrong. I am saying I cannot get my head around a whole family picking up because a rule changed in a building in another country.

Where I am is where I am. I never thought about it before. I am thinking about it now because of you.

Wesley

51

08.03.2004

Dear Wesley,

Because it is not a rule that changed. It is the first time.

Wesley, listen. My grandmother was born and she could not leave. My father was born and he could not leave. To go anywhere was papers and permission and a reason and mostly no. When my father was my age the border by Cieszyn was soldiers and dogs and you did not walk to the other side of your own town.

And now on the first of May a person can put a bag in a car and drive to England and work there and nobody can stop him. Not because he is special. Because he is Polish and it is Tuesday.

You say nobody on your road would go to California. But your road has always been able to go to California. You do not go because you do not want to. That is a completely different thing than not going because you cannot.

And also this. Germany is next to us. Germany is three hours. Germany did not open. They said seven years, we take the maximum, come back in 2011. Austria the same. The two closest ones. So the near door is shut and the far door is open and we go far, and everybody go far, and in twenty years somebody will write that Poles all went to England and nobody will remember it is because Germany said no.

So we go.

I am sorry. I am angry and I put it in your letter and you did not do anything.

Pawel

51a

22.03.2004

Dear Wesley,

I am sorry for the letter I sent you two weeks ago. Not for what is in it. For sending it at you.

You asked a fair question and you asked it kindly and I gave you fifteen years of my father's anger with your name at the top.

Here is what actually happened. I read your question — why does the door opening mean you have to go through it — and I heard my father saying it. He does not want to go. He has said yes to going and he does not want to go and he will not say that to my mother, so it comes out of him as history lessons at dinner.

And I have been carrying it for him because he cannot put it down, and then your letter arrived and I put it on you.

You said where I am is where I am and you had never thought about it before.

I have thought about nothing else since I was six years old, because everybody I know either left or stayed and both of those are a decision here, and I am fourteen in May and I have already been told what I am giving up whichever way it goes.

That is not your fault. That is the thing I had to say.

Pawel

52

12.04.2004

Dear Wesley,

We are packing.

Is a strange work, packing a house. You find out what you have. Most of it you do not have any reason for.

My grandmother's book of songs is coming. It was the first thing my mother put in, wrapped in a towel, in the bottom of the case, before clothes.

My grandmother is not coming. She is eighty-one and she say she is not going to England and she say it like somebody say I am not going to the moon. My aunt will be with her. My mother cried in the kitchen where she thought nobody was.

The table is going to my uncle. The plate is in the cupboard with the other plates. Nobody said take the plate. I stood and looked at the cupboard for a while and then I closed it.

Pawel

53

30.04.2004

Dear Wesley,

Tonight is the last night.

Tomorrow at midnight Poland is in Europe and there is a thing in Warsaw with the flag and the anthem and the fireworks and on television they will show young people crying and they will be real.

We go in eleven days.

I walked up to the church tonight. Not inside, is locked. I sat on the wall by the graves. From there you can see the whole valley and the lights coming on in the houses one and one and one.

I know every road from up there. I know which light is whose house. That is not a big thing, everybody knows their own place. But I have never had the thought before that I know it, and I only got the thought because in eleven days I will not.

Wesley I am not sad exactly. I want to go. That is the thing I cannot explain to my father and cannot explain to you. I want to go and I sat on a wall for one hour because I want to go.

My country goes into Europe tomorrow and I leave it eleven days after. That is a joke somebody made about me and I do not know who.

Pawel

54

May 24, 2004

Dear Pawel,

I have started this letter four times.

I want to say the right thing and I do not know what the right thing is, so here is the wrong thing said honestly.

I am glad for you and I do not want you to go. Both. At the same time, all week, and I could not get them to line up.

I keep thinking about the plate in the cupboard.

Write me when you get there. Write me the address the first day, before you unpack anything, so there is not a week when I do not know where you are.

Wesley

55

19.06.2004

Dear Wesley,

Here is the address at the top. I write it the first day like you say. Peterborough. Is flat here. Wesley, is so flat. There is nothing standing up anywhere. I did not know I would mind and I mind.

School in September. Now is summer and I am in a house with three rooms and my mother is already working.

I tell you the thing that is strange.

Here is many Poles. Many. In the shop I hear Polish, in the street I hear Polish, there is a shelf in the supermarket with our bread. So I am not alone, is the opposite.

And a woman in the office at the school say to my mother, oh, Polish, so — Catholic? and she start to say about the Catholic church in the town and where is the mass in Polish.

My mother say we are not Catholic. The woman say oh! and then she does not know what to do with her face, and then she say, well, there is a Catholic church, and she give the paper anyway.

In Poland I am the one who is not Catholic. Everybody know exactly what I am, they know the word, they know which building, they know we sing different, they have an opinion.

Here I am Polish so I am Catholic, and if I say no then I am nothing, I am a mistake in the form.

At home I was a minority. Here I am not even that. There is no box.

Pawel

55a

11.07.2004

Dear Wesley,

Six weeks in England and here is what I have learned about the English, which is not a complaint, it is field research.

They apologise when you step on them. Every time. It is automatic and it is not sarcasm and I have tested it four times on purpose, which I am not proud of.

Nobody says what they mean. If a thing is bad they say it is not ideal. If a thing is a catastrophe they say it is a bit of a shame. My father's foreman told him his work was quite good and my father came home upset and I had to explain to my own father that quite good is very good here, which I had learned two days before from Tom.

They will talk to you for one hour about the weather and it is not small talk. It is the actual conversation. There is information in it that I cannot detect.

And a boy in my class asked me if we have cars in Poland.

I thought of you, Wesley. In 2001 you asked me if we have television and I laughed and my father laughed and told me to tell you we also have the fire.

This boy asked exactly the same question and I wanted to put his head through the wall.

I have been trying all week to work out the difference and here it is. You asked me because you did not know and you wanted to know, and you said so, and you said you would rather look stupid to me than to anybody.

He asked because he had already decided the answer and he wanted to watch me say it.

Same words. Completely different thing. I did not know that was possible until this week.

Pawel

56

July 25, 2004

Dear Pawel,

What is an Anglican.

I am asking because you are in England now and I have heard the word my whole life and if you asked me what it meant I could not tell you one thing about it.

Also: it is 99 degrees here and the air conditioner in the shop is broken and Mr. Lonnie says it is not that bad. He sits by the fan.

Wesley

57

22.08.2004

Dear Wesley,

I ask my English friend Tom and then I look it up myself because Tom's answer was, mate, it's just church.

Here is what I find.

Four hundred years ago the king of England want a divorce and the Pope say no. So the king take the church away from Rome and put himself at the top of it. That is the whole beginning of it. Not a doctrine, not a council. A man who wanted a different wife.

And the church is still like that. The king — now is the queen — is the head of the Church of England. Today. The actual queen, the one on the money.

But Wesley here is the part I read twice.

The title is not Head. The title is **Supreme Governor**. And it is that on purpose. They chose that word because the Head of the church is supposed to be Christ, and they could not write that a person is the Head, so they wrote Governor instead and gave that person everything a head has.

They wrote down the problem. In the title. And then they did it anyway.

I told Tom this and he said huh, and then he asked if I wanted chips.

Pawel

58

Sept. 30, 2004

Dear Pawel,

That is the funniest thing you have ever sent me. Supreme Governor. They wrote the objection into the job.

I laughed at it for two days and then I stopped laughing.

Is ours like that too.

I am not saying that to be smart. Brother Dale is not a king and nobody put him on a coin. But there is a way things are decided at our church and I have never once in my life been told what it is. There is a board. I know the names on the board because they are my

uncles' friends. I do not know what they do.

I asked my grandmother who decides things at the church and she said the Lord does, and I said no ma'am I mean who decides, and she said Wesley.

Just my name. That was the whole answer and I knew what it meant.

Wesley

59

18.10.2004

Dear Wesley,

School four weeks. I write it down because if I do not write it down I will make it nicer in my head later.

My English is good. I know it is good. In Poland I am the best in the class.

Here they hear the accent before they hear the words. There is a boy Callum who repeat what I say back to me in the voice. Not everything. Just enough. He does it and the others laugh and then he says he is only joking, and he is only joking, and that is the trick of it — if you are angry then you cannot take a joke and now you are two things.

In the geography a teacher say Poland and then look at me. Only look. And the whole class look because he look. I did nothing, I said nothing, I am the exhibit.

And I am top of the mathematics and second in the science and it does not matter at all in the corridor.

Here is the part I do not like. I have started to make my voice flatter. On purpose. I hear myself do it. I take out the Polish and put in nothing and it comes out grey, and Callum has less to work with, and it works.

I am doing it and I know I am doing it and I keep doing it.

Pawel

59a

Nov. 14, 2004

Dear Pawel,

About the boy who says your words back to you in the voice.

I want to tell you something and it is not the same and I know it is not the same, so read it as a thing next to yours and not a thing on top of it.

There is a way I talk to Mr. Lonnie's customers. It is not how I talk to my grandmother and it is not how I talk on this paper.

It is flatter. It is more careful. I say sir more. I do not use any word that would make a person from Baton Rouge think about where I am from.

I have done it since I was fourteen and I did not decide to do it. I learned it the way you learn where the step is.

Nobody at that shop has ever said one thing to me. Not one. Mr. Lonnie is good to me and always has been.

But there is a version of me that comes out at the counter and I did not build him on purpose and I cannot put him away.

You said you took the Polish out and put nothing in and it came out grey. That is exactly it. That is the exact word. Grey.

I have never had anybody to say that to.

Wesley

60

Nov. 20, 2004

Dear Pawel,

My grandmother is sick. It is her heart. They had her in Lafayette four days and now she is home and there is a machine and a lot of pills in a box with the days on it.

She hates every part of it. She hates the box worst. She says she has never in her life needed a box to tell her what day it is.

I do her pills at night. She lets me because I do not make a thing out of it.

I am fourteen and I have not thought one time about her not being here. Not one time. Now I have thought about it every night for two weeks and I cannot get it to be a thought, it will not turn into one, it is just a feeling that comes and sits.

Do not write anything special back. Just write.

Wesley

61

23.12.2004

Dear Wesley,

I write and I do not write anything special.

Christmas here. Three rooms. My mother and my father and me. My father work on the twenty-fourth, in England is a normal day, he come home at seven and he has the paper hat from the factory in his pocket and he does not know why he kept it.

We do the food the way we do it. Is not the same but is close.

I set the extra plate.

Nobody said anything. I do not know if my mother did not notice or if she noticed and said nothing. My father look at it once. Then we eat.

Nobody came. It is a very small table and the empty plate takes a lot of room on a small table.

Pawel

62

Jan. 26, 2005

Dear Pawel,

Grandmother is better. The doctor in Lafayette said better than he expected and she said she did not need him to be surprised.

I want to tell you what happened while she was bad because I have been thinking about it.

For three weeks there was food at that door every single day. Every day. Somebody different. Sister Adele, the Guidrys, women I could not name if you paid me, women from that church who put a dish on the step and knocked and left before you got there so you would not have to talk.

Nobody organized it that I could see. There was no list. It just happened, every day, for three weeks, and then when she got better it stopped, and nobody ever said one word about it.

Pawel, that is the church. Not the amens. Not the board. Women with a casserole dish and a piece of foil.

I have been hard on it in my letters. I am writing this one so both things are in the same place.

Wesley

63

15.02.2005

Dear Wesley,

I am glad about your grandmother. Genuinely.

And I have to write the other half of your letter, and I want you to know I am not making a complaint, I am telling you a fact.

When my mother had the operation in October there was nobody at the door.

Nobody was cruel. There is no bad person in this story. It is only that we have been here nine months and we are in three rooms and the people upstairs are Lithuanian and the people below work nights, and the church I go to sometimes on Sunday is a big English

church where nobody knows my name and I do not think anybody there knows that my mother had an operation.

In Wisła there would have been food at the door. Also there would have been six people who knew before we told anybody, and my mother would have hated that.

So I have both halves too. I just have them in different countries.

Pawel

64

Mar. 22, 2005

Dear Pawel,

There is a girl.

Her name is Keisha and she is in my biology and she has been there since August and I have said four words to her total and two of them were sorry.

Here is my situation. At church there is a whole thing about this. There is a night for it, they did it in October, and they had a man come and he talked for an hour and at the end they gave out rings. An actual ring. You put it on and it means you are waiting until you are married.

I took one. Everybody took one. Tee took one and Tee has a girlfriend and they are not waiting for anything.

I have it in my drawer. I did not put it on because I could not work out how to wear a ring in this town without every person on this road asking me about it, which is exactly what it is for.

And the whole hour, and I am telling you the truth here, the whole hour the man talked about it he never one time said anything about the girl. He said what she would think of you. He said what you would be giving your wife one day. He talked about her like she is a thing in the future that I am keeping something for.

Keisha is in my biology on Tuesday.

Wesley

65

06.04.2005

Dear Wesley,

The Pope is dead and I do not know how to write this letter to somebody who is not Polish.

He died on Saturday night. I want to tell you what happened here, in England, with the Poles.

On Sunday the shop where my mother buy the bread is closed and there is a paper on the door written by hand. In the street men who never say anything to anybody are standing together outside the Polish shop not talking. Somebody put candles on the ground by the door. By Monday there is fifty candles at a shop.

At my school Miss Halliwell say, I understand some of you have had sad news from Poland, and she say it kindly, and it is like somebody saying I understand some of you have had sad news about the sea.

Wesley. He was not mine.

He was Catholic. He was the Pope. My church is the church that left that church, that is the whole reason my church exists, we are the ones who said no to Rome. In Poland the word katolik and the word Polak are almost the same word in how people use them, and I have spent my whole life on the other side of that, being asked why I don't have a basket at Easter, being the one who has to explain at a new school.

He was the reason people here look at my mother and say ah, Catholic.

And I have been crying since Saturday.

I want to tell you why and I have been three days finding it.

When he came to Poland in 1979 my father was fourteen years old. Fourteen, the same as me now. And my father, who is NIE, who does not talk, who stood in the yard — my father has told me about that week maybe five times in my life, which for him is like another man telling it every day.

He says: there were more people in one place than anyone had ever seen, and there were no police in it, because there did not need to be, because the people organised it themselves, and it was orderly, and it was theirs. He says that for one week everybody found out at the same time that there were more of them than there were of the others.

Ten years later it was over. Not because of that week. But not without it either.

So he was not my Pope. But he is the reason my father grew up in a country that found out it could.

And there is one more thing and this is the part I have not said to anybody.

I am fourteen and I have spent all of it being the one who is not what everybody assumes. Careful. Explaining. Being the exception, politely, my whole life.

And on Saturday night the whole country I come from was one thing, all of it, every single one of them, in one grief.

And I was not in it and I wanted to be in it.

That is the truth and it has nothing to do with theology and I am ashamed of it and I am writing it to you anyway because you are the only person who does not have a side in this.

Pawel

Apr. 19, 2005

Dear Pawel,

I read your letter four times and I am going to answer it badly because there is no other way I can answer it.

It was on the news here. It was on for two days. There were pictures of the crowd in Rome and they said the number of people and it was a big number and the man on the television said it in the voice they use.

And then it was over. On Wednesday it was the weather and a thing about gas prices.

At school nobody said anything. Not one person. At church Sunday Brother Dale did not mention it. I do not think it was on purpose. I think it did not come up.

I am not telling you that to be cold. I am telling you because you wrote me the biggest thing that has happened to you since I have known you, and on this side of the water it went past in about the time it takes to change a tire.

I have been sitting with that. Something can be the whole world and nothing at the same time, depending on where the person is standing.

I do not know what to do with that yet. But I did not want to write back like it was the same on both sides when it was not.

And the part you are ashamed of. I do not think you should be. I think wanting to be in it with everybody is the most normal thing a person can want.

You are in it with me. That is one. I know that is not a country.

Wesley

64a

23.04.2005

Dear Wesley,

The ring in the drawer.

I have read that letter four times over a month and I want to say one thing about it, and it is not about God, it is about the man who talked for an hour.

You said he never once said anything about the girl. That he talked about what she would think of you, and what you would be giving your wife one day, and that he talked about her like she is a thing in the future you are keeping something for.

Wesley, in that hour, in a room full of boys and girls, the girls were sitting there too.

He was talking about them. In front of them. As the thing being kept.

And they had to sit there for an hour and be talked about in the third person by a man at a microphone and then queue up and take a ring.

I do not have a lesson. I have the picture and I cannot get rid of it since I read your letter.

We do not have the rings here. What we have is that nobody says anything at all, ever, about any of it, and you find out what you are supposed to think from what happens to people afterwards, like my uncle. I do not know which is worse. Yours says it out loud badly and mine does not say it at all.

Keisha is in your biology on Tuesday. Say something to her that is not sorry.

Pawel

67

11.05.2005

Dear Wesley,

Thank you for not making it nice.

I am recovered. Mostly. This week I laugh at something and then I remember and then I decide it is allowed.

Callum in the corridor said something about the Pope, to me, because he found out I am Polish and he thinks he has found the button. And I said: wrong church, mate. Try again.

He did not know what to do with that. He has not spoken to me since. Four days.

Tom says I have gone English. He says it as an insult and I think he is right and I am not sure which of us should be worried.

Pawel

68

June 14, 2005

Dear Pawel,

School is out. I am fifteen. There is nothing to do here and there has never been anything to do here and this is the first summer I have noticed it.

Mr. Lonnie has me full time. Six to two, then it is too hot to do anything else. Then there is nothing.

Everybody I know is somebody I have known since I was born. I can tell you what every single one of them will be doing in ten years and I would be right about most of them.

I am not unhappy. I want to be clear. My grandmother is better, I have money, Keisha said more than four words to me in June.

I just noticed something is all. That everything in my life has been decided and nobody decided it.

Wesley

69

09.07.2005

Dear Wesley,

I am thinking about university. Is far, three years, but here you must decide early, they make you decide early.

And the thing is, I could go back. Kraków, Wrocław, Warszawa. My Polish is still Polish and it would be cheap and I would be — I was going to write I would be home and I stopped writing because I do not know if that word still works.

Or I stay and I do it here and then I am a Polish man with an English degree and an English accent and Tom says I have gone English already.

My mother wants Poland, for the wrong reason, because she wants me to be near my grandmother, and my grandmother is eighty-two and my mother is doing arithmetic she will not say out loud.

My father says whatever you decide, and he has said it three times, which for my father is a speech.

Pawel

69a

Aug. 2, 2005

Dear Pawel,

I said something to Keisha that was not sorry.

It took me five months and what I said was that her brother's truck had a bad belt on it, which I could hear from across the parking lot, and that he should get it done before it goes.

She said thank you. Then she said, do you just listen to everybody's engines, and I said yes, and she laughed.

That is it. That is the whole thing that happened. It took four seconds.

I have thought about it for eleven days.

The ring is still in the drawer.

Wesley

70

Sept. 26, 2005

Dear Pawel,

It has been a month. I am going to try to tell you what happened.

It did not hit us. It went east of us and Opelousas got wind and rain and the power was out five days and one tree came down on the Guidrys' shed. That is all that happened here. I want to say that first so you are not reading this wrong.

Then the people came.

They came Tuesday, Wednesday. Cars with everything strapped on. Whole families. They came up the highway and they kept coming and there was nowhere for them to go.

Our church opened. Not the sanctuary, the fellowship hall and the classrooms. And it filled up. And then it was full and they kept coming and people started taking them home.

We had eleven people in my grandmother's house. Eleven. For nineteen days. A woman named Miss Cherise and her mother and her sister and her sister's four kids and three more from the same street in New Orleans East that I never got completely straight who belonged to who.

My grandmother is fifteen years old again. I am not joking. She was up before everybody, cooking for thirteen people three times a day on that stove, and she did not sit down for nineteen days, and I have never seen her like that in my life. She was happy. Her heart is bad and she was happy.

I worked at the church every day. I unloaded trucks, I carried water, I made up cots, I sat with a man for two hours who was waiting to find out about his brother.

Here is what I have to tell you.

The church worked.

Nobody called a meeting. There was no plan. Brother Dale unlocked the door on Tuesday morning and by Tuesday night there were sixty people in there with food and there were women sorting clothes by size and somebody had made a list of who was looking for who and taped it to the wall by the door.

The government did not come for days. Everybody knows that now, everybody saw it on the television. But that church had beds on Tuesday.

I have been writing you for five years about how I can see how it is put together. The amens and the board and the ring in my drawer.

And then the water came and the same people I have been picking apart put sixty strangers on cots in nineteen hours and cooked for them for three weeks and did not once ask a single one of them a single question about anything.

I do not know how to hold both of those. I am not asking you to tell me. I am telling you they are both true and I was there for both.

The last family left the second week of October. Miss Cherise cried and my grandmother told her to stop that and then my grandmother went in the back and stayed a while.

The house is very quiet now.

Wesley

18.10.2005

Dear Wesley,

I read your letter standing in the hall and I did not take my coat off.

There is £40 in this envelope. Is from the summer. I know it is nothing, I know what your country is like on the television and £40 is nothing.

Give it to the church, or to the woman with the four children, or to your grandmother for the food she cooked, or use it for stamps, I do not care. Do not send it back and do not write about it. If you write about it I will be embarrassed and you will be embarrassed and then it is a whole thing.

The rest of my letter is about school and it can wait until the next one.

Pawel

72

Nov. 30, 2005

Dear Pawel,

I want to write down some of what I saw before it goes soft in my head.

A man at the church, first week, sitting on a folding chair with his hands on his knees, not talking to anybody, for about four hours. Somebody brought him a plate and he said thank you and did not eat it. I asked him if he wanted anything and he said no thank you baby, real polite, and he was maybe fifty. He had one shoe.

Nobody said one word about the shoe the whole time he was there. That is what I keep thinking about. Fifty people in that hall and not one of them said anything about it. Somebody found him a pair by Thursday and put them next to his chair and did not make a presentation of it.

A little boy who would not put down a wet backpack. Days. He slept with it.

The list on the wall by the door with the names. People would come in and go straight to it, before they ate, before they sat down.

And a woman who came in the second week and looked at that list and found the name she was looking for and made a sound I had never heard a person make and I hope I do not hear it again.

I do not know why I am writing you all this. You cannot do anything about it and it is over.

But I keep thinking: I was fifteen and I was standing right there. Nobody planned for me to be there. I was just there.

Wesley

72a

10.12.2005

Dear Wesley,

I have read your letter about the man with one shoe about six times now and I want to tell you what happened when I gave it to somebody else.

I did not give them the letter. I told it. In the pub, to Tom and two others, when it came up on the television — the anniversary things they do, three months after.

And I told it badly. I know I told it badly, I watched it happen. I said there was a man with one shoe and nobody mentioned it for three days and somebody just put shoes beside his chair.

And Tom said: that's mental. And then somebody said something about the government, and then it was about the government, and it stayed about the government for twenty minutes.

Wesley, I gave away the best thing anybody has ever written to me and it lasted four seconds in that room.

I am not blaming them. I told it wrong. It is not a story, it is a thing you had to be standing in, and you were standing in it and you wrote it down and I read it in a hall in Peterborough with my coat on.

I am not going to tell it again. Some things only work between two people and I did not know that until I tried it in a pub.

Pawel

73

21.12.2005

Dear Wesley,

I have kept your letters. All of them, since 2000, in a box. I counted this week, is thirty-something.

And I read them from the start, all of them, in one night, and I want to ask you one question and I have been trying to make it a fair question and not a clever one.

In your letters there is the amens that get louder at the right place. The girl standing in front of two hundred people. The ring in the drawer that you did not wear. The board with your uncles' friends and nobody will say what it does. The man who talked for one hour about a girl and never said one thing about the girl.

And there is the food at the door for three weeks with no list and nobody's name on it. And the door unlocked on Tuesday morning. And the shoes put beside the chair with no presentation.

Wesley, is it the church, or is it the people?

And if it is the people — then what is the church for?

I am not attacking your church. If you turn it around it is worse for me, because at least yours was full on Tuesday. Mine here is a building I sit in the back of where nobody knows my mother had an operation.

I am asking because I have been reading your letters for five years and I think you have been asking me this since you were thirteen and I never noticed it was a question.

Pawel

74

Jan. 8, 2006

Dear Pawel,

Christmas was at my grandmother's. Twenty-one. Tee's girlfriend did not come this year, that is a whole thing I will tell you about another time.

Ham, dressing, pies. My aunt Ruby made hers and this year my cousin's boy ate a piece of it and said he liked it and she has not stopped talking about it since.

My grandmother sat down twice. That is new. She will say it is because there were fewer of us.

It has been cold, for here. Forty in the morning. Everybody acts like it is the arctic.

Mr. Lonnie is talking about retiring, which he has been talking about since I was thirteen.

Wesley

74a

Jan. 20, 2006

Dear Pawel,

Nothing much. Cold and then not cold. The shop is slow in January like always.

I have read your last letter about nine times. The one with the question in it.

I am not answering it in this letter either. I want you to know that I know I am not answering it, so it is not that I missed it.

I am going to answer it. I do not have it yet.

Wesley

75

29.01.2006

Dear Wesley,

Alright.

Pawel

— **unsent** —

Feb. 11, 2006

Dear Pawel,

Is it the church or the people.

I have been carrying your question around for six weeks. I put it down and it is there when I come back.

Here is the answer and I do not like it.

It is the people. It is women with a casserole dish. It is the shoes put down beside the chair. Every single thing I have ever seen work was a person doing something for another person and it would have happened if the building burned down.

And if that is true then the church is a shed. It is where we keep the ladder. And you do not love a shed and nobody has ever wept over a shed.

Except my grandmother would die for that building. She has given money to it for sixty years out of nothing. When my grandfather died she went and sat in it on a Tuesday with nobody there.

So either she is wrong about the only thing she has ever been sure about, or I am missing something, and I am sixteen and she is seventy-nine.

That is why I have not written back to you.

I am not going to send this.

W.

— **unsent** —

Mar. 2, 2006

Dear Pawel,

Second one I am not sending.

Here is the actual reason. If I write it down to you it is written down. Right now it is a thought and thoughts can be put down. If I put it in an envelope it exists, and you keep everything in a box, you told me, forty letters in a box.

Somebody could open that box one day. Not you. Later. Some person I never met, going through your things.

And they would find a boy from Louisiana in 2006 asking if his grandmother has spent her whole life on a shed.

I would rather be a coward on paper than in front of her.

W.

76

email · Apr. 3, 2006 · 11:47 PM

Subject: (no subject)

Alright I am doing this the other way, it has been four months and it got so it was too big to start.

Grandmother is the same. Not worse. School is school, I am playing this year. Mr. Lonnie did not retire.

I did not answer your question because I did not have an answer. I still do not have one. I have got about half of one.

Write me back on this thing so I know you are alive.

W

77

email · Apr. 4, 2006 · 7:12 AM

Subject: re: (no subject)

I am alive.

Four months, Wesley. I thought I broke something.

I typed a long thing here and deleted it. The short version is: I am glad you wrote.

School is fine, England is flat, my mother is well. I will write properly tonight. This is only so you know I am here.

P

78

email · June 20, 2006

Subject: youth pastor

We have a new youth pastor. Brother Cody. Twenty-six, he came from Texas, he has a guitar and he is good with it.

Everybody loves him. And I mean everybody, the kids and the parents both, which does not usually happen at the same time.

Here is why I am writing about him. He is the best speaker I have ever heard in my life and I do not agree with a word of what he does.

He tells a story about himself. Every single time. Something he did wrong, something stupid, he was a mess, he was lost. And it is funny for a while and everybody is laughing. And then he turns it. There is a point where he turns it, and the room turns with him, and

the laughing stops in about two seconds.

I have watched him do it four times now. It is the same shape every time. Same shape, different story.

And I sat there the fourth time and I thought: he knows where the turn is. He knew before he walked up. He knows what he is going to do to this room.

I do not think he is lying. That is the part I cannot get past. I think every word is true and he means it and he also knows exactly where the turn is.

Can both of those be true.

W

78a

email · June 29, 2006

Subject: re: youth pastor

One more thing about your Brother Cody and then I will leave him alone.

You said he tells a story about himself every time. Something he did wrong, he was a mess, he was lost.

Wesley, that is the thing I would watch. Not the turn.

Because here is what happens with confession from the front. When one man does it at a microphone with a guitar underneath, it looks like the bravest thing in the room. And everybody in the room now knows what confession sounds like, and it sounds like *that* — a story with a shape, and a laugh at the start, and a turn, and everybody warm at the end.

So what happens to the boy in the fourth row whose thing does not have a shape? Whose thing is not funny at the start and does not turn?

He learns that his does not qualify. He learns it by watching, and nobody ever says it to him, and he will never say his out loud in that building as long as he lives.

Your Amanda Chesson stood up front and said hers and two hundred people forgave her and then she moved twenty-eight minutes away.

That is the same machine, Wesley. The performance of the honest thing is not the honest thing, and I think it might be the enemy of it.

I am sixteen and I am telling a boy in Louisiana what is wrong with his church, which is not a good look, so I will stop.

P

79

email · July 11, 2006

Subject: re: youth pastor

Both can be true, and I will tell you why in one minute, but first —

I am in Wisła. Three weeks with my grandmother.

Wesley, it is full of tourists. Full. There are new hotels on the road up and a place that sells the local cheese in a wooden box with a ribbon for four times what it costs in the shop, and the woman selling it is from Katowice.

Małysz has a museum now. A museum. He is twenty-eight and alive.

My grandmother is smaller. That is the only word. Everything else is the same, the house, the smell of the wood, the book of songs is on the shelf and I picked it up and she said careful without looking up.

I walked to the church and sat on the wall like the night before we left. Same view, all the lights. And there are more of them now, new houses.

I did not know what I would feel and what I felt was: this is a place people come to. I never thought of it as a place. It was just where things were.

Now about your Brother Cody. You said can he mean it and also know where the turn is.

Wesley, my pastor at home also knows the turn. He has done the same sermon at Easter for thirty years and he knows where the room will go quiet. He is not a performer, he is a farmer's son who cannot sing.

I think knowing the shape is not the sin. A carpenter knows where the wood will bend. Your Brother Cody knows where the room will bend.

The question is what he does when it bends. That is the whole thing. Not that he knows.

P

80

email · Aug. 28, 2006

Subject: revival

Revival week. Five nights.

I am going to write down Wednesday night the way I saw it and you tell me if I have gone wrong.

7:00 music, four songs, fast ones. Everybody standing.

7:20 announcements, funny, Brother Cody, relaxes the room.

7:25 more music, and here the songs go slower, and the band drops out one instrument at a time over the last two songs so by the end it is one guitar.

7:40 he preaches. Twenty-five minutes. Funny for eight, then the turn, then serious.

8:05 he stops. And then he does not say anything for about six seconds, and the guitar is still going underneath, and six seconds is a very long time.

8:06 the invitation.

And they went. Eleven people went up. I know nine of them.

Pawel, I sat there and I wrote that whole thing in my head as it was happening, the times and all, and I could not stop doing it. It was like watching a man build a chair while he is sitting in it.

And a girl two rows up, Brianna, she is fourteen, she was crying so hard her mother had to help her up the aisle.

Something happened to her. I am not saying nothing happened.

But it happened at 8:06 like it happened at 8:06 last year and it will happen at 8:06 next August, and the guitar was underneath it the whole time, and I know the guitar player, he is in my grade, and afterwards in the parking lot he was eating a sandwich.

W

81

email · Sept. 14, 2006

Subject: re: revival

I read this three times. I am not going to say what I think.

I will say one thing and it is a question and it is not a trap.

When you were eight and you went up because Tee went up. Was there a guitar.

P

82

email · Oct. 30, 2006

Subject: after next year

People have started asking what I am going to do after next year.

Not asking. Confirming. There is a difference and I have noticed it now.

Mr. Lonnie says there will be full time for you here. My uncle says the plant is hiring and you can start at 14 an hour which is real money for here. Brother Dale says the church could use a young man on the sound board.

Nobody has said the word college to me. Not one person. Not once.

I looked up what it costs at Lafayette. I did it at the library so nobody would see me doing it. Then I closed the page.

I am not telling you this because I am upset. I am telling you because I did it at the library so nobody would see.

W

83

email · Nov. 22, 2006

Subject: re: after next year

Wesley, we have exactly the same thing and it is exactly upside down.

Nobody here has ever asked me if I am staying. It is assumed I go. Teachers say when you are at university, not if. My mother has decided. My aunt in Poland asks which city, not whether.

And I did the same as you. I looked up what a person does if they do not go. Apprenticeship, or the factory where my father is, or the trade. I looked at it and then I closed the page so nobody would see.

So you are expected to stay and you looked at leaving in secret. I am expected to leave and I looked at staying in secret.

We are the same person facing opposite walls.

The difference — and I say this carefully because it is not fair — is that if I stay, it is a tragedy. Everybody says what a waste. If you leave, it is a betrayal. Somebody says he thinks he's better than us.

Neither of us is choosing. We are both just deciding which people to disappoint.

P

84

email · Dec. 28, 2006

Subject: christmas

Christmas at my grandmother's. Twenty-one people. I counted, Tee said it was more and it was not, it was twenty-one.

Ham. My aunt Ruby's dressing. The pies. My grandmother did not sit down the whole day. If you make her sit down she gets up again in about a minute to go see about something.

It rained. All the kids were inside. Too loud.

That is Christmas. That is Christmas every year.

W

84a

email · Jan. 14, 2007

Subject: re: christmas

Wesley — I have read your Christmas email four times and I want to say something and I am not sure how.

You have sent me a Christmas letter every year since 2000. I have them all.

I read this year's next to the one from 2000 because I keep them in order and they were near each other in the box.

They are almost the same letter. Twenty-one people. Ham. Your aunt Ruby's dressing. The pies. Your grandmother not sitting down and getting up in a minute to go see about something. Rain, the children inside, too loud.

Same words in places. Not similar. The same.

I am not laughing at you. That is why this is hard to write.

In 2001 you wrote to me that you had noticed you already knew exactly what it was going to be like, every part of it, and that it did not bother you, you had only noticed it.

That was six years ago and you were eleven.

I do not know what I am asking. Maybe: do you still notice? Or has it stopped being a thing you notice and gone back to being just Christmas?

I think I would like the second answer better and I am not sure why.

Here it was three of us in three rooms. My mother did the twelve dishes with four of them missing and pretended that was normal. My father worked on the twenty-fourth again.

I would take yours. Even the aunt Ruby part.

P

85

email · Jan. 25, 2007

Subject: something I noticed

I have been going to St. Barnabas since October. Is a big English church near the college, Anglican, five hundred people maybe.

I go because it is near and because it is at six in the evening which suits me.

Wesley, nobody there knows what I am.

Nobody knows I am Lutheran. Nobody knows my grandmother has a hymn book from 1890 or that my valley has a church every two kilometres or that there was ever a question about a basket at Easter.

I am a tall Polish boy who comes at six and leaves at ten past seven.

And I have noticed — and this is why I am writing — that I have not missed being known.

My whole life at home, everybody knew. Everybody knew my family, my church, my grandfather, what we are, what we are not. It was warm and I never once got to put it down.

Here I put it down.

I keep waiting to feel that something is wrong with this and I do not feel it.

P

86

email · Feb. 8, 2007

Subject: re: something I noticed

I am going to push back on you and I am going to do it once and then leave it.

You are describing being alone and calling it freedom.

A church where nobody knows your name is not a church, it is a room where a service happens. You get to be at ease there because nothing is asked of you. Nothing is asked of you because nobody has any claim on you. And nobody has any claim on you because you have not given anybody one.

You are the man in the back row who leaves at ten past. If you stopped going, how long before somebody noticed. Be honest. A month? Ever?

I know exactly what you are getting out of it. You are getting the rest. I know it is real. You have been explaining yourself since you were six.

But I have watched what it looks like when people know you. Three weeks of food at that door, from women who knew my grandmother's name and knew which house and knew she was sick without being told. That does not come from the room. It comes from being known, and being known has a cost, and the cost is that you never once get to put it down.

You cannot have the casserole without the eyes. It is the same thing looking at you.

W

87

email · Mar. 3, 2007

Subject: re: re: something I noticed

Belonging to what?

That is my question and I want a real answer, not the warm one.

You say I have not given anybody a claim. Fine. Give me the list of who has the claim.

Because at St. Barnabas nobody has a claim on me. And at home in Wisła everybody had one, and I will tell you exactly what they did with it.

When I was eleven a woman in the shop asked my mother why we do not go to the Corpus Christi procession. In front of me and in front of four people. My mother stood there and answered politely. Everybody knew the answer. She asked so that my mother would have to say it out loud.

When my uncle's marriage finished, the whole valley knew in two days, and there was no casserole at his door, Wesley. There was silence, and looks, and it lasted years.

That is being known. It is the same organ. It brings the food and it asks the question in the shop, and you do not get to choose which one arrives.

So do not tell me I am hiding. I know precisely what I put down and I know what it cost to carry.

And here is the part I want you to actually answer instead of answering around it.

You have not told me one time in seven years that you love your church. Not once. You have told me it works. You have told me it fed sixty people. You told me your grandmother would die for the building.

That is her. Where are you in any of it.

You are asking me to want something you have not said you want.

P

88

email · Apr. 15, 2007 · 1:04 AM

Subject: re: re: re:

You do not get to do that.

You do not get to take seven years of me telling you the truth and turn it around and hold it up as evidence.

I told you about the eleven people who went up at 8:06 and I told you about the shoes beside the chair and I told you the thing about going up at eight years old because Tee went up, which I have never told one other person in my life, not one, not my grandmother, nobody.

And you file it. You have it in a box. And now it comes back at me as where are you in any of it.

I know where I am in it. I am in it. I am in it on Sunday and I am in it Wednesday and I was in it for nineteen days in September with eleven people in my grandmother's house, and you were in a room in England where nobody knows your name and you have decided that is peace.

You want a real answer and not the warm one. Here is one.

At least mine costs me something.

W

89

email · May 6, 2007

Subject: —

That last one was true and I deserved most of it.

I am sorry.

Not for the question. I still think the question is fair and one day you will answer it. I am sorry for the way I put it, which was clever, and I was pleased with myself when I sent it, and I knew when I sent it that clever was not what you needed.

My mother is well. The garden here is unbelievable in May, they are serious about gardens, it is the one thing about England I will take with me.

Write when you want. Or do not, and I will write again in two weeks, and we will not discuss it.

P

90

Apr — letter, posted, June 24, 2007

Dear Pawel,

I am writing this on paper because I do not want it on a screen and I do not want it in a machine anywhere.

Brother Cody is gone.

They told us Sunday. Brother Dale said he had resigned to pursue other opportunities and that we should keep him and his family in our prayers and that there would be no further comment. Then he said let us pray. It took forty seconds.

Nobody has said anything else. Officially there is nothing else.

Unofficially everybody in this town knows by now and I have heard four versions and I am not going to write any of them down because I do not know which one is true.

Two of the four involve a girl in the youth group.

I am going to tell you the honest thing about my own head. My first thought — my first, before anything else — was not about her, whoever she is. My first thought was: I knew it. I knew there was something. I have been writing to you for a year about the turn and the six seconds and I was right.

I was pleased with myself. For about four seconds I was pleased with myself and then I understood what I was pleased about.

There is a girl somewhere in this and I do not know who and neither does anybody who is talking, and they are all talking.

Wednesday night they had youth as normal, and a man from the church did it, and he did the lesson out of the book, and about thirty came instead of eighty. And the ones who came sat there and nobody said his name. Not one time in an hour.

Brianna was there. The one who went up at 8:06. Fourteen, or fifteen now. She sat in the back with her arms crossed and she did not sing.

I do not know what to do with any of this. Everything I said about him was right and I would give it back to be wrong.

Wesley

91

letter, posted, July 19, 2007

Dear Wesley,

Paper deserves paper.

I am not going to say the thing you are afraid I will say. I am not thinking it either. I want you to know that before anything else in this letter.

Wesley, you were not right.

You saw a man who knew the shape of a room. That is all you saw. What has happened has nothing to do with the shape of a room and you know that, because if the man had been the worst preacher in Louisiana this could still have happened, and if he had been the best it could still not have.

What you saw was craft. What happened is something else and it came from somewhere you could not see and nobody could see. That is the whole reason it happened.

So do not stand there and give yourself a bad mark for four seconds of being pleased. Four seconds. You are seventeen and your fifth second was the right one, and most men I have met would not get to the fifth second by fifty.

I want to say the other thing carefully.

The girl. Whoever she is. Everybody in that town will decide who she is by Friday and they will be wrong or right and either way they will decide, and if it goes the way it goes in my valley then in a year she will be the one who left the church.

Not him. He is gone and there is nothing to look at. She will still be there. And people cannot look at an absence, so they look at what is in front of them.

If you can do one thing — and I do not know if you can, you are seventeen and this is not yours to fix — do not be one of the ones who looks.

That is all. I do not have anything wise. I only have a valley where I watched them do it to my uncle for four years over a divorce.

Pawel

92

email · Aug. 26, 2007

Subject: sunday

I went Sunday. I have been every Sunday of my life so I went.

And I sat in the back which I have never done, and I watched it.

Not took part. Watched. The whole hour and a half. I watched the ushers and I watched who talks to who in the ten minutes before, and I watched which songs get hands up and which do not, and I watched Brother Dale not mention anything, and I watched two hundred people not mention anything, all together, in the same room, at the same time.

There is a thing where two hundred people all agree not to say something and nobody organized it.

I stood up when they stood up. I sang. I know every word of all of them, I have known them since before I could read, I do not have to think about it at all.

I got in the truck afterwards and I sat in the parking lot for a minute before I started it and I thought: I do not know if I was there.

W

92a

email · Sept. 20, 2007

Subject: —

Something I did not put in the last one.

When I sat in the back and watched the whole hour and a half, there was a moment I have not been able to shake.

Second song. There is an old woman, Miss Adele, who has been at that church longer than my grandmother. She is eighty-something. She cannot really stand for the songs any more so she stands for the first line and then sits.

And she sang it with her eyes shut and her hands on the pew in front of her.

And I thought — and I am ashamed of the thought, which is why I am writing it down — I thought: she does not know about any of this. She does not know the room has a shape. She has never once thought about where the turn is or who is on the board or what happened to Brother Cody.

And then I thought: or she has known the whole time. Sixty years in that room. She knows everything I know and more, she has watched four pastors come and two of them go badly, and she is eighty-something and she stands up for the first line.

I could not tell which one it was. From four rows back I could not tell, and there is no way to ask a woman that question.

Both of those are possible and they are completely different lives and she looks exactly the same either way.

That is the thing I keep getting stuck on lately. From the outside, the man who has stopped thinking and the man who has thought it all the way through and come back — they sit in the same seat and sing the same words.

W

email · Sept. 30, 2007

Subject: decisions

Forms. Applications. Deadlines in January.

Here is where I am. Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield — engineering, I am good at it, and my English is now good enough that nobody at the interview would ask.

And Wrocław. Which is a real one, my Polish is fine, it costs almost nothing, and I would be an hour and a half from my grandmother.

I put Wrocław on the list and I have not told my mother. She wants me near her grandmother and she wants me in England and she has not noticed those are two different places.

And Wesley, I will tell you the true reason it is on the list, which is not my grandmother.

I want to find out if I am still Polish. That is all. I have been here three and a half years and I flattened my voice on purpose in Year 10 and it never came back, and Tom says I have gone English, and when I am in Wisła the shop woman hears something in my Polish now, and she has started speaking to me slightly slower.

Both countries have started being slightly polite to me.

P

email · Oct. 21, 2007

Subject: —

Grandmother in Lafayette again, four days, home now. Same as before but they changed two of the pills.

She is seventy-nine.

I am not going to write a lot about it.

I will say one thing. When we came back from the hospital I helped her up the steps, and it took a while, and while we were doing it I looked at the house.

The porch needs work. The whole east side needs paint. There is a place by the back door where the wood has gone and I have known about it for a year.

And I thought, standing there holding her arm: I am going to be the one who does all of that. Not because anybody asked. Because I am here and I will be here.

It was not a sad thought. That is what I want to tell you. It came and it sat down and it was not sad.

I have not applied anywhere. The deadline was two weeks ago and I did not do anything and it went past and nothing happened and nobody mentioned it.

letter, posted, Dec. 28, 2007

Dear Wesley,

Paper again. You will understand when you get to the end.

I am in Wisła for Christmas. Two weeks with my grandmother, and my parents came, and the house is full and too small and my mother and my aunt cooked for four days.

On the twenty-first of December, six days ago, Poland went into Schengen.

I have to explain what that is and I have to explain the other thing first.

Cieszyn is forty minutes from here. It is a town. It has a market square and a church and streets that have been there five hundred years.

And in 1920 they drew a line through it. Down the middle. Down the river. One half stayed Poland and the other half became Czechoslovakia and is now Czech, and it is called Český Těšín, and it is the same town, cut.

There is a bridge. You can stand on the Polish side and look at a street forty metres away in another country. There are buildings you can read the signs on. When my father was my age there were soldiers on that bridge and dogs, and papers, and reasons, and mostly no.

My grandmother was born in 1922, two years after the line. Her whole life that has been a border.

On the twenty-first of December at midnight it stopped existing.

I went on the twenty-third. I took the bus with Marek.

Wesley, there is nothing there.

That is what I have to tell you. There is nothing there. No hut. No barrier. No man. There is a bridge and the ordinary noise of a Sunday and people walking across it carrying shopping bags, in both directions, not looking at anything, because to them it is a bridge.

I walked to the middle and I stopped, and Marek walked on and then turned round and said what are you doing, and I said nothing, and I stood in the middle of the bridge.

And then I walked the rest of the way into the other country and stood on the other bank and looked back at my own town from outside it, and I have never once in my life been able to do that.

And I cried. In the street, in front of Marek, who did not know what to do and lit a cigarette and looked at the water.

He asked me afterwards what it was and I said I do not know, and that was the truth then.

I know now, six days later, and I am writing it on paper because I do not want it in a machine.

It was not there.

The thing that shaped my grandmother's entire life, and my father's, the thing that made him grow up knowing there were places you cannot go and questions you do not ask — I walked through where it was and my shoes did not know anything had changed.

It was never a real thing. It was a decision that men made in 1920 and other men kept, and then one night other men decided differently, and now there is nothing there but a bridge with shopping bags going over it.

Wesley, I have been carrying a border in my head my whole life. I am the boy who is not Catholic. I am the boy with the wrong hymn book. And I have started to wonder what is actually there. If somebody decided it and other people kept it and I have been walking up to it and stopping my whole life because I was told where it was.

I am not saying there is nothing there. I am saying I have never once walked to the middle and stood on it.

Pawel

96

email · Jan. 20, 2008

Subject: re: your letter

I read it four times and I have carried it around for three weeks and I still do not have it.

I want to be honest instead of pretending. I understand every sentence you wrote and I do not have the thing underneath them.

I have never had a border. Not one. There is nowhere I have been told I cannot go. Nobody in my family ever had papers or reasons. The line at the edge of this parish is a sign that says thank you for visiting.

So when you say you walked to the middle of the bridge, I can see the bridge. I cannot feel what was under your feet.

Here is my honest question and it is not a smart one.

Is that why you can look at your church the way you do?

Because you have already seen one thing that everybody said was solid turn out to be a decision that men made and kept. And I never have. Everything I have ever been handed is still exactly where they put it.

W

97

email · Feb. 17, 2008

Subject: re: re: your letter

That is the best question you have ever asked me and I have been two weeks with it.

Yes. Partly yes.

But I want to say the other half or it is not honest.

When the border went, something went with it that I did not expect to miss.

My father's whole life had a shape because of that line. He was somebody who was kept out. That is a hard thing and it is also a thing to be. In 1979 when the Pope came, that week he talks about, my father was fourteen and he was somebody who was kept out, standing in a field with a million other people who were also kept out, and they found out there were more of them than there were of the others.

Now the line is gone. And my father works in a factory in Peterborough packing food for English supermarkets, and he is free, entirely free, he can go anywhere in Europe from Tuesday to Tuesday.

And Wesley, he is smaller. He is smaller than he was.

So I am not sure that finding out the line was only a decision is good news. It is true news. It is not the same thing.

That is the part I did not write on the bridge. It came later.

P

98

email · Mar. 30, 2008

Subject: eighteen

I am eighteen.

Grandmother made a cake back in January and there were fourteen people in the house, and Tee brought his little boy who is two and got hold of the icing.

Here is my week. Six to two at Mr. Lonnie's. Home. Do her pills at night. Church Sunday, Wednesday if there is something.

Here is my week next week, and next year, and the year after.

I want to be careful how I say this because I do not want you to read it wrong.

Nothing is wrong. I am not miserable. I have money, I have people, my grandmother is alive and there is a house that will be mine and a job that will keep being there.

It is only that at eighteen a thing is supposed to happen and I have found out that nothing is going to happen, and it is not because something went wrong. It is because everything went the way it goes.

You are choosing between four cities. I know that is hard for you in a different way and I am not saying mine is worse.

I am saying I looked up and I am eighteen and the road looks exactly the same in front as behind.

W

99

email · Apr. 27, 2008

Subject: —

I got in.

I am not going to say where yet. I want to sit with it a week and I do not want you to have an opinion before I do, and you would have one, and it would be a good one, and that is exactly the problem.

Two weeks and I will tell you.

Your letter about eighteen. I read it twice and I did not answer it and that was on purpose, because you did not ask a question and I did not want to hand you an answer to a thing you did not ask.

But I noticed you said the road looks the same in front as behind, and I noticed you did not say you wanted a different road.

P

99a

email · May 4, 2008

Subject: re: —

Two weeks, you said. It has been one and I am going to fill it with something else so you do not think I am waiting by the mailbox.

Mr. Lonnie's nephew came through and looked at the shop and looked at me and asked how long I had been there, and I said six years, and he said huh.

That is the whole story. He said huh and then he left.

I have been in a bad mood about it for four days and I would like to tell you why, because writing it down to you is the only way I ever find out what I think.

I am eighteen and there is one person in this town who has ever asked me a question about myself that he did not already know the answer to.

It is you and you are five thousand miles away and I have never seen your face.

I am not being dramatic. Everybody here is good to me. My aunt Ruby would step in front of a truck for me. But they have known me since I was born and they know what I am, and there is nothing left to find out, and so nobody looks.

You have been finding out about me for eight years. Every letter is you finding something out. That is what a letter is.

I do not know what my point is. I think my point is that I did not know that was a thing a person could need until I had it.

Do not answer this one. Just tell me where you got in.

W

100 — unsent

May 12, 2008

Dear Pawel,

I want to say this once, properly, and then I am going to write you a different letter and send that one instead.

I know what I am going to do and I have known for about a year.

I am going to stay in this house. I am going to look after her until it is done, and it is going to be years, and then the house will be mine and I will still be in it. I will work at Lonnie's or the plant. I will be at that church on Sunday, in the back, standing up when they stand up, singing the ones I have known since before I could read.

I chose it. That is what I have never said to you. I have written you four years of letters that sound like a man describing weather, like all of it is happening to me.

It is not happening to me. I did not apply because I did not want to go. I want to be the one who is here.

And here is the part I would not be able to say out loud.

I think I am going to be alone.

Not lonely. Alone. I look at Tee with his little boy and I do not want it, and I have waited to want it, and I am eighteen and I have stopped expecting the wanting to arrive.

There is a ring in my drawer from a night in October when I was fourteen, and I did not wear it, and I have thought about that ring more than any person has ever thought about a ring, and none of it was about a girl.

Everything in this town wants me to be a man with a wife and children in a house. And the house is going to be mine and I think the rest of it is not going to happen, and I do not know if that is God or if that is something wrong with me, and there is no living person I can ask.

You would answer this one. That is why I am not sending it. You would take it seriously and write me something true, and then it would be a thing between us, and I would have to be the one who said it forever.

W.

email · May 12, 2008

Subject: re: —

Alright, keep your secret, I will survive two weeks.

Mr. Lonnie is selling the truck. The 79. He has had it since before I was born and he says the transmission is finally more trouble than it is worth, which is what he said about it in 2004.

I told him I would take it. Six hundred, which is nothing, and he knows it is nothing, and he made a whole thing of pretending to think about it.

So I am going to have a truck that is eleven years older than me and does not have air conditioning, in Louisiana.

I have been thinking about what you said about the road looking the same in front as behind.

I have decided I am alright with it. I think I have been trying to be somebody it bothers, because a person my age is supposed to be bothered.

Anyway. The truck needs a whole exhaust and Tee says he can do it and Tee cannot do it.

W

102

email · June 3, 2008

Subject: re: re: —

Wrocław.

I chose Wrocław. Four years, engineering, and I start in October, and I have to tell my mother this week and I have been putting it off for eleven days.

I did not choose it for my grandmother, although I will be an hour and a half away and that is not nothing.

I chose it because I have spent four years becoming somebody who is not from anywhere and I would like to find out if it is still possible to be from somewhere.

Tom said, mate, you're going back? like I told him I was joining the army.

About your truck: get the exhaust done by somebody who is not Tee.

P

103

email · Nov. 15, 2008

Subject: from Wrocław

Seven weeks in.

The city is beautiful and I did not expect that. Bridges everywhere, an island with a cathedral on it, a square that was rebuilt after the war so carefully that you cannot tell.

And I am foreign here too, Wesley. Of course I am. They hear something. Not English — they cannot place it, they just hear that something happened to my Polish. One boy asked if I was from Silesia in a way that was not entirely a compliment and he was right, and I am, and I said so.

So that is settled. I am not from anywhere. I am going to stop looking into it.

The other thing. You will have seen it on the television — the banks, the crash, all of it. Here everyone is waiting for it to arrive. My father says on the telephone that the factory has cut the overtime already.

And there is a man on the news, an economist, saying Poland may not go into recession at all. Not smaller than the others. None.

Nobody believes him. I do not believe him either. My grandmother lived through 1939 and 1945 and 1981 and she has a way of listening to good news that I have inherited.

I put it here so that if he turns out to be right, it is written down that nobody believed him.

P

104

email · Mar. 19, 2009

Subject: the economist was right

The economist was right.

Every country in Europe is shrinking and Poland is not. The only one. They are drawing the map on the news with all the countries in red and one country in green and the green one is us.

I have watched my father's face while the news said it. He did not say anything. He is forty-four and he has spent his whole life in a country that everybody else was sorry for, and now there is a map on television with his country the only one still standing, and he watched it and then he asked my mother about the tap in the bathroom.

In England when we arrived there was a joke. Not a cruel one, that is the thing, it was almost affectionate. Lock up your bike, the Poles are coming. The plumber joke. A man at my father's factory used to say Polska, very good, very cheap, and slap him on the back, and my father would smile.

Now the maps are green and nobody has apologised and nobody will, and it does not work like that anyway. The joke will keep going for another twenty years after it stops being about anything.

I am not triumphant, Wesley. I want to be and I am not. I keep thinking: it was always going to be like this or it was never going to be like this, and either way nobody who said the joke was making a prediction. They just said it because we were poor.

P

email · Aug. 30, 2009

Subject: —

Truck runs. Exhaust done twice because Tee did it the first time.

Grandmother about the same. Slow. She has a chair on the porch now and she is in it more than she is not, and she hates it, and she says so about once a day.

Work is work.

I have started writing things down. Not letters. Just things, in a notebook, at night when she has gone to bed and the house is quiet.

Not a diary. I am not writing what I did, I know what I did.

It is more like — I will get something in my head at work, a thing about a verse, or something Brother Dale said that was almost right, or a thing about the people at that church that I could not say to any of them. And it goes around all day and then I write it down and then it stops going around.

I have four of them filled. Nobody knows. My grandmother would not care but she would ask, and I do not want to be asked.

Church, I go. Sunday. Not Wednesday any more, which nobody has said anything about, and I noticed nobody has said anything about it.

W

105a

email · Nov. 8, 2009

Subject: —

Wesley — a question and you can ignore it.

You said you have four notebooks filled and nobody knows.

Why nobody?

I am not asking why you do not show them to your aunt Ruby. I am asking why you have not sent me one page. Eight years of everything and you have four notebooks I have never seen a line of.

I am not offended. I am curious, which is different, and I have been curious since August.

Here it is winter early and Wrocław is grey in a way that is famous. Third year. The work is hard and I am not the best and that took some getting used to.

Ola — I have not mentioned her, there is nothing to mention yet, she is in the year below and she is from Gdańsk and she talks to everybody, including me.

P

— **unsent** —

Apr. 12, 2010

Dear Pawel,

I did the count today, because it is the twelfth of April and I always know what day it is on the twelfth of April.

Twelve years since I went up front. I was eight and Tee went up and I did not want to be the only one sitting.

I have been in that building every Sunday since. Twelve years, call it six hundred Sundays.

And I sat on the porch tonight and tried to say what I have got out of six hundred Sundays and here is what I came up with.

I know every word of about ninety songs. I know how to sit with somebody whose son has died and not say anything stupid. I know that if I do not turn up, four people will notice by noon.

That is not nothing. I want to write that down, that it is not nothing.

But it is not the thing they said it was going to be. They said a date. They wrote a date in the front of a Bible in my grandmother's hand.

And I think — and this is the thing I would like to be able to say to somebody with a face — I think it might be the opposite of a date. I think it might be the thing you do six hundred times and it is not finished on any of them.

Which would mean my grandmother has been right for sixty years and nobody at that church has ever once said it out loud in my hearing.

W.

106

email · Apr. 14, 2010

Subject: —

Wesley.

On Saturday morning a plane went into the trees outside Smolensk in Russia and everybody on it is dead.

The President is dead. His wife is dead. The last President of the government in exile is dead. The head of the army, the head of the navy, the head of the air force. The head of the national bank. The last living veterans of Katyń, old men in their eighties, who were going there because it is the seventieth anniversary of Katyń.

That is where they were going. To Katyń, where in 1940 the Russians shot twenty-two thousand Polish officers in the back of the head in a forest and then said for fifty years that the Germans did it, and everybody here knew, and nobody could say it.

They were flying to the place where it happened, to say it at last, out loud, on the anniversary. And the plane came down in the trees four kilometres short.

I do not have anything clever. I am writing to you because it is four in the morning and the television has been on since Saturday and I do not want to talk to anybody Polish about it because everybody Polish is doing the same thing I am doing.

You remember five years ago I wrote to you about the Pope and I said the whole country was one thing and I was outside it and I wanted to be in it.

I am in it this time. There is nothing to be outside of. There is no Catholic and Lutheran in this. There is a hole in the ground with the whole top of a country in it.

In Wrocław on Sunday people started leaving candles outside the town hall and by the evening you could not walk there. Nobody organised it. It was just everybody, at the same time, with candles, because that is the thing you do.

My grandmother is eighty-seven. I telephoned her Sunday. She said one sentence about it and then asked about my studies. She has done this before. She was seventeen when the officers were shot and she has been waiting since 1940 for it to be said properly and on Saturday it was going to be said and now it is not.

She said: they were going the right way.

That is all she said about it and I have not stopped hearing it.

P

107

letter, posted, Sept. 28, 2010

Dear Pawel,

My grandmother died on the seventh.

I am writing this on paper. I have started it about nine times.

It was in the morning and it was in her chair on the porch and it was not bad. I want to say that because everybody keeps asking me and I keep saying it and it is true. I was in the house. I came out and she had gone.

The funeral was the eleventh. The church was full and there were people standing at the back and out the doors, the same as Nook, and I was not a pallbearer this time, I was in the front row, which is a different thing entirely.

Twenty-one people came back to the house.

Pawel, twenty-one. I did not count on purpose. I counted because I have counted at that house every Christmas since I was ten, and I was standing in the kitchen doorway and I counted before I knew I was doing it, and it was twenty-one, and I had to go outside.

The women brought food for three weeks. Same as when she was sick in 2004. Every day, a dish on the step, knock and gone. Some of the same women. They are older now and they still do it and nobody organises it.

And here is what I have to tell you, and I have been trying to work out for three weeks whether it is a complaint, and I do not think it is.

They did everything right.

Every single thing. The food, the standing at the back of the church, my aunt Ruby taking the phone off me for two days and handling everybody, Brother Dale sitting in the kitchen not talking. All of it correct.

And it did not help.

I do not mean it made things worse. I mean I was carried, completely, for three weeks, by people who knew exactly what to do — and underneath the carrying, the thing was the same size it was on the seventh, and it is the same size now.

I think I had believed, without ever checking, that if the church did everything right then something would be different. Not fixed. Different.

They did everything right and it is the same size.

I do not know what to do with that. I am not angry at them. It might be that nobody ever said it would be smaller and I made that up myself when I was small and carried it around for twenty years without looking at it.

The house is mine. That was done years ago, she had it done, she did not tell me.

It is very quiet.

Wesley

108

letter, posted, Feb. 2, 2011

Dear Wesley,

Paper deserves paper. I have got that from you and I have kept it.

I have written you a bad letter about a death before. February 2002, your cousin. I threw away three and sent one that said I do not know what to say.

I am going to try to do better after nine years of practice.

I did not know your grandmother. Here is what I know about her, from your letters, over ten years.

She saw snow one time in 1989 and talked about it for the rest of her life. She would not sit down. If you made her sit down she was up in a minute. She drove you to your uncle's after the fight and made you carry sheet metal all day and did not say one word about it and then said pass the rice. She wrote your name and a date in the front of her Bible in her own hand. She gave you the money for the stamps and never once asked who they were for, and she knew, and she never asked. When you put sixty dollars under the sugar bowl she took it and did not mention it. She had eleven people in her house for nineteen

days at seventy-five with a bad heart and you said she was happy. She hated the box with the days on it. She said the Lord decides and then she said your name and that was the whole answer.

Wesley — I have had that woman in my life since I was ten years old. I never met her and she is in my head with a face, and the face is wrong, and I do not care.

She has been the third person in this correspondence the entire time.

I want to say the thing about the church doing everything right and it not being smaller. I am not going to argue with it. I think you are right and I think the fact you noticed is the most honest thing in your letter.

I will only say: it was the same size, and you were carried. Both are in your letter. You wrote the second one down as if it did not count.

My grandmother is eighty-eight. I telephone her on Sundays. I am going to telephone her tonight instead of Sunday and I am not going to tell her why.

Pawel

109

email · June 26, 2011

Subject: Berlin

I am in Berlin.

On the first of May Germany opened. Seven years they took, the full seven, the maximum, and on the first of May at midnight it was over, and by the end of May there was a job in Berlin for a Polish engineering student who speaks English and German badly.

I am here for the summer with a contract that may become more.

Wesley, I want to say what this is and I am not sure I can say it without sounding stupid.

I have been moved once before. In 2004 I was fourteen and my father decided and I got in the car.

This time nobody moved me. I looked at a door that opened and I walked through it because I chose to.

And it is Germany. Three hours from my valley. The near door. The one that was shut for seven years while we all went to England instead, and the joke about plumbers happened, and my father went into a factory in Peterborough. If this door had been open in 2004 my whole life is a different life. I would have grown up three hours from my grandmother instead of two thousand kilometres, and I would still speak Polish like a person from Wisła.

They did not do it to hurt us. They did it because their own people were frightened about wages. It was a decision men made and kept, and then they stopped keeping it, and now there is nothing there.

I stood at Ostbahnhof with a bag on the second of June and I thought about the bridge at Cieszyn.

The flat is one room and the window looks at another building. It is the best room I have ever had.

P

— **unsent** —

Aug. 3, 2011

Dear Pawel,

I read your Berlin one about six times and then I did not answer it for three weeks and I am going to write down here why, since I am not going to write it down anywhere else.

I was jealous. Plain, ugly jealous, of my best friend.

Not of Berlin. I do not want Berlin. I would not last four days in a city.

Of the sentence where you said nobody moved you. That you looked at a door and you walked through it.

Because I have got a door and it is standing open and it has been open my whole life and the fact that I have never gone through it is supposed to be my choice, and on a bad day I cannot tell the difference between a choice and a habit.

I made a decision at eighteen and I did not tell one person and I still have not, three years later. Not you. And a decision that you never say out loud to anybody starts to feel like something that just happened to you.

You told the whole world you were going to Wrocław. You told your mother and it was a fight and Tom said mate you're going back like you'd joined the army. It cost you something to say it. That is what makes it a choice.

Mine has never cost me one thing, because nobody has ever asked me to defend it, because everybody assumed it. And you cannot defend a thing nobody is attacking.

So I am sitting in a house I did not buy in a town I did not pick, doing exactly what everybody expected, and I chose it, and there is no way on this earth for me to prove that, including to me.

W.

110a — unsent

Oct. 3, 2011

Dear Pawel,

You asked me two years ago why I have never sent you a page out of the notebooks. You asked once, and then you never asked again, which is the thing you do, and it is why I have told you more than I have told anybody alive.

Here is the answer, on a page you will never see, which I understand is the joke.

Because the notebooks are the only place where nobody is on the other end.

When I write to you I know you. I know exactly what you will do with a sentence. I know which line you will take seriously and which one you will let go, and I have known since I was about fourteen, and I write differently because of it. Not falsely. But shaped.

The notebook has nobody in it. It is the only writing I do where I am not aiming at a face.

And I think — I think — that might be the only place I have ever found out what I actually think, as opposed to what I think while somebody is listening.

That would mean the truest things I have are things nobody will ever read.

Which is either the whole point or a complete waste, and I have been on both sides of that in the same night.

W.

110

email · Dec. 18, 2011

Subject: —

Sorry for the gap. Nothing wrong.

First Christmas. It is going to be at my aunt Ruby's this year, which is correct, and I have said so to four people who asked me carefully if I minded.

I painted the east side. Took three weekends. The place by the back door I finally cut out and replaced, and it is not a good job but it is done and it is not going to get worse.

I want to tell you something and I want to do it without making it a whole thing.

I have not been to church since October.

Not a decision. Not a fight. Nobody did anything to me. There was a Sunday in October when I was doing the boards and I did not stop, and then the next one, and by the third one it had turned into a thing I was doing.

Three people have asked. I said the house. That is not a lie, there is a lot of house.

Here is the part that matters.

I have prayed more since October than I did in the year before it. That is just true and I have checked it.

I pray on the roof. I pray at four in the morning when I cannot sleep. I pray in the truck on the way to Lonnie's and I do not close my eyes because I am driving.

For twenty years I thought that was the warm-up. The real thing was Sunday, in the room, with everybody, and the rest of the week was what you did in between the real thing.

And now the room is gone and the rest of it did not stop. It got bigger. It filled the whole week.

I am not saying the room was nothing. Do not read that. Twenty years in that room is why I have the words at all. When I am on the roof at four in the morning I am using their words. Every one of them came out of that building.

But I keep coming back to a thing you asked me when we were fifteen and I would not answer, and I am going to answer it now, three days before Christmas, four years late.

Is it the church or is it the people.

It is neither. That is my answer.

It is the thing itself, and the church is where they hand you the words for it, and the people are how you find out the words are true, and both of them are the box it came in.

And I have kept the box my whole life because I thought the box was the thing.

W

111

email · Aug. 22, 2012

Subject: re: —

I read your December letter about ten times and I have not answered it in eight months, which is worse than four.

Here is my confession to sit beside yours.

Berlin is godless and I like it.

Nobody here asks. In four hundred days nobody has asked me one question about God, and I do not mean they are hostile, they are the opposite, it is simply not a category. At work there is a man who found out I go to church sometimes and his face did the thing English people's faces do, and he said, oh, right, and then he was very kind about it, which was worse.

The church I go to here — sometimes, maybe twice a month — is a Lutheran church, actual Lutheran, in German. My own confession, the real thing, the one they named after the man who asked them not to.

And it is empty, Wesley. Four hundred seats and maybe fifty people, and forty of them are over seventy.

I sit in that enormous cold building with fifty old Germans and I understand about eighty percent, and I have never in my life felt so completely that I was at the end of something rather than in the middle of it.

At home in Wisła it is full. Full every Sunday. Little children being noisy at the back. My grandmother in the same place she has sat since the war.

Here it is over and everybody in the room knows it is over and they come anyway.

I like Berlin and I like the not being asked. And then on a Sunday I sit in that cold building and I think: this is what not being asked looks like after eighty years.

That frightens me and it does not make me want to leave.

Both. At the same time. I have not been able to get them to line up. You wrote that to me in 2004 and I have finally got there.

P

112

email · June 9, 2013

Subject: —

Ten months. I am not going to apologise, you did eight.

Everything the same. That is not a complaint.

I have been putting some of the notebook things on the internet.

Not a diary. Not anything about me. Just the things — the ones about a verse, or the ones about how a room works. I put them on a site where you make a page and people can read it.

Started in the winter. I do not use my name.

There are people who read them. Not a lot. But there is a woman in Ohio who has written to me four times and there is a man who I think is in Kenya, and last month somebody put one of them up somewhere else and about six hundred people read it in two days and I did not sleep that night.

Six hundred people. There are not six hundred people at that church. There are not six hundred people in this town who would know my name.

It is very strange to me. I have been writing to exactly one person since I was ten years old.

W

113

email · Feb. 27, 2014

Subject: news

Wesley — news, and I have been sitting on it for a while because I wanted to tell you properly.

I am getting married. Her name is Ola, she is from Gdańsk, she is a nurse, we have been together two years and I did not tell you because at the start I did not think it was anything and then it was something and by then not telling you had become its own problem.

And she is pregnant. October.

We are staying in Berlin. Her mother is not pleased. My mother is very pleased and has already asked what the baby will be baptised as, which is a question I did not think anybody was going to ask in 2014 and here we are.

Ola is Catholic. Of course she is, she is Polish, ninety percent of us are.

So the question is real and it turns out that after all these years of me writing you about being the one percent, the thing I actually feel is: I do not want my child to have to explain at every new school what he is. And Ola says, then don't make him, and she does not understand that this is not something I can decide to stop having.

I told her about the basket at Easter. She laughed, kindly, and said her family always had one and it was mostly about the eggs.

Wesley, I am twenty-three and I am going to be somebody's father in October.

P

113a

email · Apr. 6, 2014

Subject: the baptism question

Wesley — I am asking you as the only religious person I trust who has nothing at stake in this.

Ola's mother wants him baptised Catholic. My mother wants him baptised Lutheran. Neither of them has said this to the other. Both of them have said it to us, separately, in a way that was designed not to be a demand and was a demand.

And Ola said to me last week: what do *you* want.

Wesley, I did not have an answer. I stood in my own kitchen and I did not have one.

I have spent my entire life being the one percent. Explaining. The basket at Easter. The woman in the shop asking my mother a question she already knew the answer to. Being the exhibit in geography. I have paid for it every year since I was six and I have never once considered not being it.

And here is a boy who is not born yet and I could just — not hand it to him. I could let him be the ninety percent. He would never have to explain anything to anybody for his whole life.

And when I thought that, properly, for about four seconds, I felt sick.

I do not think it is pride. I have checked and I do not think it is pride.

I think it is that my grandmother is ninety-one and she has a book of songs from 1890 that her mother gave her, and if I do this then the last person in that line is me, and she will not say one word about it, and that is worse.

What do you actually think. Not the kind answer.

P

email · Apr. 22, 2014

Subject: re: the baptism question

You asked for the not-kind answer so here it is.

You are not deciding what your son will be. You cannot. He is going to decide that at about twenty-two and it is going to have almost nothing to do with what water got poured on him in 2014.

What you are deciding is which story he gets told about where he came from.

That is not nothing. It is smaller than you think and it is not nothing.

And I will tell you what I have, since you asked me and I am the one with nothing at stake.

I have a date written in the front of a Bible in my grandmother's hand. April 12, 1998. I have told you what actually happened that day — I was eight and Tee went up and I did not want to be the only one sitting down.

The date is wrong. Whatever happened to me did not happen on April 12, 1998, and I am pretty sure now it has not finished happening.

But she wrote it. In her hand. And she is going to be gone and that Bible is going to be in this house and my name is going to be in the front of it in her handwriting with a date.

I would not trade that for it being accurate.

So: do the thing that puts your grandmother's handwriting in your son's life. That is my not-kind answer and it turns out to be the same as the kind one.

W

— **unsent** —

Nov. 30, 2014

Dear Pawel,

Something happened and there is nobody to tell.

There was a piece I put up in September about the church at a funeral. About what they got right and how it did not make it smaller. Your grandmother's letter, my grandmother's funeral, all of it, four years of thinking about it, and it took me eight nights to write and it is the best thing I have ever done.

A thousand people read it in a week. Then more.

There is a woman who wrote and said she had read it four times and sent it to her sister. There is a man who said he had left his church in 2009 and read it and went back the next Sunday. A pastor in Tennessee asked to read part of it out loud to his people. I said yes.

And I sat here in this house in the dark on the porch with the phone in my hand and I could not put it down. Refreshing it. Twenty, thirty times a night. Counting.

I want to write down exactly what it felt like because I do not think I will be able to say it later.

It felt like the six seconds.

Brother Cody at 8:05, when he stopped and did not say anything and the guitar was still going underneath. That is what it felt like. From the inside.

I have spent ten years writing to you about a man who knew where the room would bend. And in September I wrote eight nights and I knew — I knew, Pawel, the whole time I was writing it, I knew which paragraph was going to do it, I knew where the turn was, and I put it there on purpose, and it worked, and a thousand people went where I put them.

And every word of it is true. That is the thing. Every word is true, I meant all of it, I would say it again tomorrow.

Both. At the same time. Like everything else in my whole life.

I am thirty-nine days from twenty-five years old and I am sitting on this porch counting strangers and the count is the thing I want, and I know it is the count I want, and I keep opening it anyway.

You have a son. You sent me a photograph and he has your father's face.

I am not going to send you this one either.

W.

114

email · Nov. 30, 2014

Subject: re: news

He is a serious-looking baby. He looks like a man considering an offer.

Congratulations, both of you, and I mean it, and I am sorry I am four weeks late saying it.

I have been busy with a thing that is hard to explain. The writing on the internet has got bigger. A thousand people read one of them, and then more than that, and a pastor in Tennessee read part of it to his church.

I know how that sounds. Like good news.

I have not decided if it is.

W

115

letter, posted, Mar. 16, 2015

Dear Pawel,

Paper because there is not much of it and it did not want to be typed.

I deleted it. All of it. The site, the pieces, every one of them, the account, the whole thing. Wednesday night.

There is nothing to look at now. There is no page.

I do not want to explain it and I am asking you as a friend of fifteen years not to make me.

Other news. The truck finally went. The frame, not the engine, which is funny in a way that only I think is funny. I have a Ranger now, 2003, which after that thing feels like a spaceship.

It has been warm early. The azaleas at the side went in the first week of March which is two weeks ahead of normal, and everybody says that every year, so I looked it up, and this year it is actually true.

Mr. Lonnie is retiring. This time it is real, his hands have gone. I am buying the shop off him over four years. Papers next month. It will be my name on the sign, which he says is not important and he has said it about six times.

I hope the boy is well. He would be six months now.

Wesley

116

email · July 22, 2015

Subject: —

Wesley, I have started three replies to your letter since March and I have thrown them all away and now it is July.

I am going to ask you once, and if you do not want to answer then do not answer and I will never bring it up again.

Why did you delete everything?

I am not asking to be difficult. I am asking because in fifteen years I have watched you take exactly one thing entirely for yourself. Not the shop, not the house, not the church, not the town — those were all handed to you and you stayed and I know you chose it and I have never once thought less of it.

The writing was yours. Nobody gave it to you. Nobody expected it.

And you deleted it in one night and told me not to make you explain.

So I am making you, once, and then never again.

The other news. Piotr is nine months and he is walking, early, and it is a catastrophe. He has decided that the way to move is at speed and the way to stop is to fall over, and he is delighted with the system.

Ola is going back on nights in September which we have not solved.

We had him baptised in June. Lutheran. Her family came and it was fine and everybody was very careful with each other and afterwards her mother said the church was beautiful, which it is, and which was not what she meant.

My grandmother is ninety-two. She was there. She held him and she said something to him in Polish that I did not hear and I did not ask.

I bought her a ticket for the train and she came all the way from Wisła to Berlin at ninety-three and she said it was nothing.

Write to me.

P

P → P 1

Berlin, 4 October 2015

Piotrek,

You are one year old today and you are asleep and you have no idea, and in about forty minutes you are going to wake up and be extremely annoyed about a tooth.

I am going to write to you sometimes. Not often. When something happens that I want you to have.

I am writing in Polish. I want to say that at the start and then never again. You will grow up in Berlin and your German will be better than mine by the time you are seven, and your English will be better than mine by the time you are fifteen, and Polish will be the language of holidays and your grandmother's telephone voice.

So these are in Polish, because there are things I only know how to say in it.

Here is the first one.

When I was ten a teacher in Louisiana gave a boy my name off a list, and he wrote to me, and he got my name wrong, and I corrected him and then apologised for correcting him.

We wrote for fifteen years.

I have not heard from him since March. I wrote to him in November — that is next month, I have not sent it yet, I am writing this one first, which tells you something about your father.

I want you to know that a person can be the most important friend of your life and you can never see his face. I do not expect you to believe that. I am writing it down so that it is written down.

Sleep. The tooth is coming whether we discuss it or not.

Tata

— **unsent** —

Dec. 2, 2015

Dear Pawel,

It came back today. My own name on it in your handwriting, and a label over the front, and NOT DELIVERABLE AS ADDRESSED.

I have been sitting here two hours and I have worked out what happened, and it is nothing. It is not even a story.

When Lonnie sold me the shop the mail for the business went to the box in town, and in September I put everything on the box, everything, and I did it in about four minutes on a Tuesday, and the house went off the list.

There is no drama. A man filled in a form and did not think about it.

You wrote to me in November and it went to a house I am sitting in right now.

I could open it. It is my name.

I am not going to, and I am going to write down why while I still know.

You asked me in July why I deleted it and I told you not to make me. And then I did not answer for four months, and then this came back, and I know exactly what is in it because I know exactly what you are like — it is you giving me the answer I would not give you, and doing it gently, and telling me about your son at the end so I have somewhere soft to land.

If I open it I have to answer it. And I do not have the answer yet. In July I did not have it and in December I do not have it.

So it stays shut until I have it.

That is the plan I made tonight, sitting at this table, at twenty-five years old.

W.

117

*A letter. Airmail, addressed by hand, Berlin to Opelousas.
It has been opened by nobody.*

Across the front, a printed label:

| RETURN TO SENDER
| NOT DELIVERABLE AS ADDRESSED
| UNABLE TO FORWARD

The postmark is 4 November 2015. The return stamp is 2 December 2015.

The envelope is unopened and remains so.

Berlin, 14 December 2015

Piotrek,

It came back.

I wrote to Wesley in November and today the postman brought it back to me. My own handwriting on the front. A label over it: NOT DELIVERABLE AS ADDRESSED.

I have put it in the box with the others. It is not opened and I am not going to open it. I wrote it to him. It stopped being mine when I sealed it.

Your mother says that is ridiculous and she is probably right.

Here is what I have been thinking all evening.

I have sixty-two letters from a boy in Louisiana, and one from me that never arrived, and I do not have a photograph of him. Not one, in fifteen years. It never occurred to either of us. He described his grandmother's face to me and I could draw her, and I could not pick him out of a room of three people.

I have decided this is not sad. I have decided it twice today and I will probably have to decide it again.

Tata

P → P 3

Berlin, 27 March 2016

Piotrek,

Easter. You are eighteen months old and you ate a piece of the wax from the candle and were pleased with yourself.

We had the basket blessed. Your mother's church, Saturday morning, the eggs and the bread and the salt and the little lamb made of sugar.

I want you to know what that cost me and also that it cost me nothing, and that both are true.

When I was small I asked my mother why we did not take a basket to be blessed like everybody else. She said: because we do not. That was the whole answer and I never asked again, and I have carried the not-asking for thirty years.

On Saturday I stood in a church in Neukölln holding my son and a basket with a sugar lamb in it, and I did not feel like a traitor and I did not feel at home.

I felt like a man watching himself from about a metre away.

Your great-grandmother is ninety-three. She knows about the basket. I told her on the telephone because I was not going to have her find out from somebody else.

She was quiet and then she said: does he eat well?

That is what she said about it. Does he eat well.

I do not know if that was mercy or if she was simply finished with the argument at ninety-four. I am going to choose mercy because I get to choose and she is not going to tell me.

Tata

P → P 4

Berlin, 2 November 2017

Piotrek,

Three today. You have opinions.

Something small and I want it written down.

We were at Ostbahnhof and there was a man asking, and you stopped and looked at him for a long time, the way you look at things, and you asked me very loudly what is wrong with him.

Everybody heard. Your mother went red. I picked you up and carried you away and said we do not ask that so loudly, and you said why.

I did not have an answer for why. I gave you the answer my father would have given me, which is: because it is not polite.

That was a lie and I knew it while I was saying it.

The truth is that we do not ask so loudly because if we ask loudly we might have to do something, and if we ask quietly we can keep walking.

You were three and you had not learned it yet. In about four years you will have learned it and I will have taught it to you, and I will do it with my voice and not with words, and one day you will stop noticing men on the floor at Ostbahnhof and neither of us will be able to say when it happened.

I am sorry in advance.

Tata

P → P 5

Berlin, 19 May 2019

Piotrek,

You are four and you cannot read this and it is the most important one so far.

Eight days ago two brothers in Poland put a film on the internet. *Tylko nie mów nikomu*. Just don't tell anyone.

It is two hours. It is men and women, now in their forties and fifties, going to find the priests who did it to them when they were children. They knock on doors. Some of the priests are still in parishes. Some of them admit it on camera, standing in a doorway, in an ordinary jumper. One of them is asked if he remembers her and he says yes and he apologises and it is the most frightening thing I have ever watched, because he says it the way you would apologise for standing on somebody's foot.

Twenty million people have watched it. In eight days. In a country of thirty-eight million.

Piotrek, I need you to understand what I am, so that you can understand what happened in me this week.

I am Lutheran. In Poland that means one percent. It means every new class, every new job, a small explanation. It means a woman in a shop asking my mother, in front of me, why we do not go to the procession — a question she already knew the answer to, asked so that my mother would have to say it out loud.

I spent my whole childhood being quietly, politely told that I was on the wrong side of something.

And on the eleventh of May the ninety-nine percent caught fire.

Here is what I have to tell you, and it is the whole reason for this letter.

I felt nothing good.

Not one thing. I waited for it. I am ashamed to write that I waited for it — I sat down on the eleventh expecting some small ugly warmth, thirty years of the shop and the procession and the basket, and I thought: now. Now let them see.

And there was nothing there. There was a woman of fifty on a screen standing in a driveway in a village that could have been my village, saying she was seven.

Piotrek, the thing I had been carrying was not about them. I found that out in two hours in front of a laptop at twenty-nine years old.

I had thought I was carrying an argument. About the Mass, about Rome, about a hymn book, about which of us had it right.

I was carrying being small. That is all it was. It was never theology. It was a boy who wanted to be counted in his own country.

And the thing that made me small was never a doctrine either. It was people. And it turns out the same people who made me small were doing something a thousand times worse to children in the room next door, and my thirty years of grievance about a basket at Easter is not even in the same building as it.

There is nothing to win. That is what I found out. There was never anything to win. There was only ever a wound and everybody had one, and the ones with the worst wounds were the ones sitting in the front row where I thought the winners sat.

I do not know what to do with my church now. I am not leaving it. I want to be clear about that in case you find this at twenty and think I was on my way out.

But I have stopped being *against* something, and I have found out that a great deal of what I called faith was actually being against something, and there is less left than I expected.

Your great-grandmother is ninety-six. I telephoned her on Tuesday and she had heard about the film and she said one sentence: *biedne dzieci*. Poor children.

Not one word about the Church. Not one word about Rome, or about us, or about any of it.

Ninety-six years old, one percent her entire life, and her whole response was poor children.

I have been Lutheran for thirty years and my grandmother is the first person who ever showed me what it is for.

Tata

— **unsent** —

Aug. 19, 2019

Dear Pawel,

Four years.

I have the envelope. It is in the drawer with the ring, which I did not do on purpose and which I noticed about a year ago and thought was funny and then did not.

I know the answer now. I have known it maybe two years.

I deleted it because I was counting.

That is all. That is the whole answer and it took me four years and it is one sentence.

I wrote the best true thing I have ever written and a thousand strangers read it, and I sat on that porch refreshing a number, and the number was what I wanted. Not the woman who read it four times. Not the man who went back to church. The number.

And I had spent ten years writing to you about a man who knew where the turn was, and then I found the turn myself, and I put it exactly where it needed to go, and it worked.

I could not hold both. Brother Cody could hold both, or he could not, and look what happened.

So I deleted it, and the thing I have not been able to say for four years is that deleting it did not fix anything either, because a man who deletes it so he will stop counting is still a man for whom the count was the thing.

You would have said something useful about this in about four sentences. You always did.

I would have to start by telling you what I did with your letter, and there is no version of that sentence that does not make me a coward.

W.

P → P 6

Berlin, 8 February 2020

Piotrek,

Your great-grandmother died on Tuesday, at ninety-seven, in the house in Wisła, in the room she was born in. Which is not a sentence many people get to write in 2020.

We drove. Fourteen hours with you asleep across the back seat.

The funeral was Friday and the church was full and there were people standing at the back and out of the door.

I want to tell you two things about that day.

The first. She had told my mother, some years ago, which hymn. Number 341 in the old book. She had not written it down anywhere, she had just told my mother once, in a kitchen, the way you say pass the salt, and my mother had held it for six years.

And the whole church sang it and they did not need the books, most of them, because in that valley they have all been singing out of the same hundred and forty hymns since before the war.

Piotrek, four hundred people singing something from memory is not a sound you can describe. I have tried three times tonight.

The second thing.

The book of songs is on the shelf above the television in our flat in Berlin. It came home with me on Friday, wrapped in a towel, in the bottom of the bag, before clothes. Which is exactly how it left Wisła in 2004 when I was fourteen and we went to England, and I have only just this moment noticed that.

Her mother gave it to her. Her mother's mother before that.

You are five and you are not allowed to take it outside, and that is the only rule in this flat that I will not discuss with you.

I do not know if you will want it. That is the honest thing and I am writing it because I promised myself these would be honest. You are five and you are German and Polish and half Catholic and half Lutheran and by the time you are twenty the whole question may be a thing your father was strange about.

If you do not want it, give it to someone who does. Do not keep it out of duty. She would say the same thing and she would say it faster than me.

Tata

P → P 7

Berlin, 29 March 2020

Piotrek,

They have closed the churches.

All of them. Everywhere. In Poland, in Germany, in Italy, in America. Not one country and not one denomination. Every building, at the same time, for the first time since there have been buildings.

Your mother is a nurse and I have not properly seen her in eleven days.

Here is what I want you to have from this.

For twenty years I have argued with a man in Louisiana about whether the church is the building or the people. He asked me first when we were fifteen and I asked it back and neither of us ever finished it. It ran through fifteen years of letters like a thread you keep finding.

And now somebody has run the experiment. Not a theologian. A virus.

They took the buildings away — all of them, from everybody, at once — and we are going to find out what is left.

I watched a Mass from Warsaw on a laptop on Sunday, which I have never done in my life, and it was awful, Piotrek. Not the priest. He did his best in an empty room. It was awful because a service is not a broadcast, it is a room full of people all doing the same thing at the same time badly, and take the room away and what is left is a man talking to a camera.

So one point to Wesley.

And then on Wednesday your mother came home at five in the morning and she was too tired to take her coat off and she sat on the floor in the hall, on the floor, and I sat down next to her and neither of us said anything for a long time.

And I found out that I was praying. Not decided to. Found out, halfway through, the way you notice you have been humming.

I could not have told you the words. I do not think there were words. I was on the floor of a hallway in Neukölln with my wife in her coat at five in the morning and something in me was doing the only thing it knows how to do.

And nobody had opened a building.

One point each. I want that written down, because if I ever see him again I am going to have to admit that neither of us won.

Tata

P → P 8

Berlin, 30 October 2020

Piotrek,

There is something happening in Poland and I do not know how it will look by the time you read this, so I am writing it while it is happening and I do not know the end.

Last week a court in Warsaw ruled that abortion is illegal in almost every case. And the country came into the street, hundreds of thousands, mostly young, mostly women, in eighty cities, in a pandemic.

And they went into the churches.

Not to burn anything. They stood up during Mass and held up signs. They wrote on the walls outside. There is a photograph from Poznań of a girl of maybe nineteen standing in the aisle of a church with a piece of card, and the congregation is turned around in the pews looking at her.

The bishops said it was an attack on the Church.

Piotrek, I have looked at that photograph a lot this week and I do not think it is an attack on the Church. I think it is what happens when an institution has been the parent of a country for two hundred years and the children have grown up.

You do not shout at a stranger in the street. You shout at your father in his kitchen.

Nobody in Poland shouts in a mosque or a synagogue. They shout in a church, because the church is theirs, because it has been theirs for so long that they have the right to be furious in it.

And here is the thing I want you to have, and it took me until Thursday to find it.

Those young people are the first Polish generation in two hundred years for whom the Church is not the thing that keeps the country alive. Under the partitions it was Polish when there was no Poland. Under the communists it was the one room the state could not enter, and that is the week my father talks about, 1979, a million people in a field finding out there were more of them than there were of the others.

That is over. It has been over for a while and last week is when everybody found out.

And when the enemy is gone, an institution has to be good for something in itself. That is a very hard test and almost nothing passes it.

I know that test from the other side, Piotrek. I found it out in 2007 on a bridge in Cieszyn when they took the border away — the border that made my grandmother's whole life have a shape — and there was nothing there. Just shopping bags going across.

You do not always get to keep who you were when they take the wall down.

I do not know how this ends. That is why I am writing it now.

Tata

P → P 9

Berlin, 11 September 2022

Piotrek,

You are nearly eight and today you asked me a question in the car and I did not answer it well, so I am answering it here.

You asked: are we Catholic or the other one.

The other one. That is what you called it. You are eight and you have been to your grandmother's church in Wisła four times in your life and to your babcia Gdańska's church rather more, and you have worked out that there are two and that we are on a side, and you have not worked out which.

I said: we are Lutheran, and it means we go to a different church from Mummy's family, and it is not important on a Tuesday.

That was the coward's answer and I knew it as it left my mouth.

Here is the real one, for later.

For four hundred years people killed each other over the difference and I could explain it to you and you would be bored, and being bored by it would be the correct response, and I would still have failed.

The difference is real. I am not going to lie to you and say it is nothing. It is about where you go for the last word, and that is not small.

But Piotrek, I grew up on the small side of it in a country that did not count me, and I spent thirty years thinking that made me right, and then in 2019 I watched what was happening to children in the churches of the people I thought I was arguing with, and I found out that I had never been arguing about the last word at all. I was arguing about being counted.

So when you ask me which one we are, the honest answer is: we are the other one, and your father spent his whole life finding out that being the other one is not an achievement.

Your great-grandmother would have said it in four words and gone back to the stove.

Tata

P → P 10

Berlin, 3 January 2024

Piotrek,

I have not written one of these in over a year and I want to say why while I still know.

I stopped because nothing was happening.

That is not true, of course. You started at the Gymnasium. Your mother changed hospitals. My father had the operation on his hip and is now, at fifty-nine, more mobile than he was at fifty-six and impossible about it.

But nothing happened *to me*, and I have only now noticed that all nine of these letters are about things that happened to me and were then explained to you, and that this is possibly not what a father should be writing to a son.

So here is one about you.

You are nine and you are funny. Properly funny, with timing, which nobody in my family has ever had. You get it from your mother's side and they are all like it and I have spent twelve years being the slowest person at that table.

You have decided you support Union Berlin because a boy at school does, and you have never seen them play, and you defend them with your whole chest.

You do not like church and you go because we go. I know that. You do the thing I used to do, which is work out how many songs are left.

I have not decided what to do about that. Your mother says leave him alone, he is nine. She is right and I will probably not leave you alone, and I am telling you now so that when you are twenty and you remember me pushing, you will know that I knew.

I am not going to make you into a Lutheran. I could. It is not hard, you take a boy every Sunday for ten years and you have a Lutheran.

What I would like is for you to know what it is, so that if you leave it you are leaving something rather than getting out of an hour on a Sunday.

That is the whole of my ambition and I am aware it is a strange one.

Tata

P → P 11

Berlin, 14 November 2025

Piotrek,

You are eleven.

I have not been to church since the end of October. Nobody knows. Not your mother.

I am writing this down because I promised these would be honest, and because I have noticed that I have started lying about small things in order to avoid a conversation, and a man who lies about where he was on a Sunday morning is not far from a man who lies about other things.

I will tell her. Not yet.

Here is what is wrong, as far as I can find it.

For thirty-five years I have known exactly what I am. One percent. The other one. The boy without a basket. It was a hard thing and it was also a place to stand, and I could always find it in the dark.

And it has been going for years and I have watched it go and done nothing.

Cieszyn took the border. 2019 took the argument. My grandmother took the last person who did it without needing a reason.

And you, Piotrek, sitting in a pew counting songs, are going to take the last of it, because there is no version of the future where you carry this, and I have known that since you were about six.

So what is left is a man of thirty-five going into a building on Sunday out of habit, and the habit has worn through in one place, and last month I found the hole and stopped.

I want to tell you something and it is the only useful thing in this letter.

I am not writing to you because I think I am right. I am writing because when I was ten a boy wrote to me who was completely certain about everything and by twenty-five he was certain about nothing, and he was better at twenty-five. And I never told him that.

He would have known what to say about last month. Four sentences and I would have been able to see it.

I have his letters in a box in the cupboard behind your winter coat and I have not opened it since 2019 and I know exactly which one is on top.

Tata

— **unsent** —

Feb. 11, 2026

Dear Pawel,

Eleven years and I am going to publish something.

Not there. Somewhere else. Somebody asked me — a man who read the old ones before I took them down and has been asking on and off for three years.

I said yes on the condition that my name is not on it.

I told him it was because of the shop and the town, which is not true. Here is what is true.

I am fifty-fifty on whether I have written this thing because it is true or because I want to be read again, and I cannot separate them, and I have been trying for eleven years.

So I am taking my name off it. If it is true it does not need my name. And if I want to be read, then a piece nobody can trace back to me is no use to me at all.

That is the only test I could think of. It is not a good one. I could not think of a better one.

There is a boy in Poland — a man, he is thirty-five, he has a son — who would tell me in one paragraph whether this is humility or another kind of vanity wearing its coat. He would be right and it would take him about four sentences and he would not be unkind about it.

I have his last letter in a drawer, unopened, eleven years old, and every year it gets harder because every year I have to explain why I waited a year longer.

The piece goes up in March.

I am signing it W.

If he ever saw that, he would know inside of a page. Not from the letter. From the sentences.

He never will. He does not read American religious websites and he is in Berlin and it has been eleven years.

But that is why I am signing it W. and not something invented, and I want that written down somewhere by me, tonight, before it goes up:

I am leaving the one thing he could recognise.

W.

CODA • 2026

A.

From a Christian website, general readership, published 9 March 2026. Filed under Essays.

The Way and the One He Points At

There is a verse everybody in my part of the world can say from memory, and I have been able to say it since I was six.

I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

I was taught it as a door. It is a door. That is not what I want to talk about.

I want to talk about what is on the other side of it, because I spent twenty years being handed the door and never once being asked to notice what the door was for.

Read the rest of that chapter. In the same conversation, in the same room, on the same night, he says: *the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. And: my Father is greater than I.* Three times in one chapter he takes the thing you are looking at — him — and turns it, and points.

He does it everywhere else too, once you have seen him do it once. *The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do.* When they finally ask him the practical question, the one they had been working up to, the one about how to pray — he does not say pray to me. He gives them two words and the first one is **Our Father**.

I am not making a small point about doctrine. I have no training and I am not qualified to make a large one.

I am making a point about where people stop.

Because I know what it is to stop at the door. I was in a building every Sunday for twenty years. I know every word of about ninety songs and I have never had to think about a single one of them. That room gave me the words I am using right now. There is not one

sentence in this piece that did not come out of that building, and I want that on the record before anybody decides this is an attack.

But somewhere in those twenty years the door became the destination. We got very good at the door. We could describe the door, defend the door, sing about the door, and identify with tremendous confidence everyone who was standing at a different door.

And he is standing there the whole time, pointing.

I have sat in that room and watched two hundred people, myself included, worship the doorway. I do not think anybody decided to do that. I think it is simply what happens when you are handed something at six years old and you are never once asked to look through it.

Here is the test I have started using, and I offer it for what it is worth, which may be nothing.

When something goes right in your life — is your first movement gratitude, and does the gratitude go all the way through? Or does it stop at the room, at the people, at the building, at the man at the front, at the fact that you were on the right side of the right door?

Those people are worth loving. That room may have saved your life. It half saved mine and I have never said so out loud until now.

But he is not pointing at the room.

I have been a long time understanding that the most important thing he says about himself is a preposition. *By me*. Through. He is the way — and a way is a thing you go along, not a thing you stand on.

I do not have a conclusion. I have one sentence and it took me thirty-six years.

He came all this distance to be looked at, and every time we look at him he is looking somewhere else, and the whole of it is in that.

— **W.**

B.

Piotr is eleven and he has the flu, and at half past one in the morning on a Wednesday in March, Paweł Heczko is awake in a flat in Berlin-Neukölln with a laptop on his knees, not reading anything in particular.

He has not been to church since November. He has told nobody this, including Ola, who has noticed and has not said. His grandmother died in 2020 at ninety-seven. The hymn book from 1890 is on the shelf above the television and his son is not allowed to take it outside.

He is thirty-five and he has spent the winter with a thing he cannot name sitting on his chest, and the nearest he can get to it is that he is not sure any of it was ever his. That he inherited a resistance and the thing it was resisting is gone, and what is left is a building his son will not enter.

Somebody has linked an essay. He does not know the site. He opens it because it is one in the morning.

He reads it the way he reads everything, which is quickly and looking for the place where it will disappoint him.

It does not.

At we got very good at the door he stops and reads it again. *At he is standing there the whole time, pointing* he sits up and puts his feet on the floor.

He reads it three times. The third time he reads it slowly and he is arguing with it, properly, the way he argues, and he loses, and he notices he has lost and is glad about it, which has not happened for a long time.

It is the truest thing he has read about his own religion in fifteen years, and he decides this before he has any idea who wrote it.

That is the part he will remember afterwards, and it is the part that matters, and he will never manage to explain it to anyone: he agreed with it first. He had already agreed with all of it before anything else happened.

Then he scrolls back up to see who wrote it, because he wants to find the rest.

There is no name. There is one initial.

And he is already standing.

He is standing in the middle of a room at half past one in the morning and he does not know how he got there, and he says something out loud, in Polish, that wakes his wife.

Because it is not the initial.

It is that he has read this before. He has read this cadence for twenty-six years. The way it arrives sideways at the thing it is actually about. The sentence held back until the paragraph nearly ends. The one honest concession put in early, before it is asked for — *that room gave me the words I am using right now* — the same move, the same exact move, as a fifteen-year-old writing *it did not hit us, I want to say that first so you are not reading this wrong*.

Two hundred words in he thinks: whoever this is, I like him.

Six hundred words in he knows.

And then the second thing, half a second behind the first, and it sits him back down.

He writes like this.

The sideways arrival. The concession put in early, before anybody has asked for it. The sentence kept back until the paragraph is nearly finished. He had always thought that was his own, and he cannot now say when it stopped being a thing he noticed in Wesley and started being a thing he did.

He does not recognise the voice. He recognises that it is also his.

He does the thing anybody does. He searches the initial, the pseudonym, the site, the phrase, and gets nothing, and gets nothing, and gets nothing, because there is nothing to get — because in 2015 a man deleted every page he had ever made and this is the first thing he has published in eleven years, and he has put one letter on it.

The site has a contact form. Two fields and a box.

Ola says something from the doorway. He says *nic*, nothing, go back to sleep, and she looks at him and goes.

He sits down.

He has the returned envelope. He has had it in a box since December 2015 with sixty-two letters, and he never opened it, because it was addressed to somebody and he was not that somebody, and it seemed to him at twenty-five that this mattered.

He has thought about it perhaps a thousand times in eleven years, most often in the car.

He starts typing and stops, because he cannot work out how to begin a message to a man who has taken his name off.

And then he can.

C.

Contact form. 11 March 2026, 02:14.

Dear Sir or Madam,

My teacher Mrs. Vidrine says we have to write to somebody in another country and I got Poland. She wrote your name on the board and I copied it but I think I copied it wrong.

That is not mine. You know whose it is. You were ten and you copied it off a blackboard and you got my name wrong and it took eighteen days to reach me.

I am not going to write very much here because I do not know if this reaches you or if a person who is paid to answer these will read it and delete it.

Three things, in case it is only three things.

The first. You did not have to explain it in 2015 and I should not have asked. I asked once and I said I would never ask again and I have kept that, and I have understood it for some years now anyway. I think I understood it the first time I put something of my own in front of strangers and watched myself start counting. I did not delete mine. I want you to know I thought about it.

The second. I wrote to you in November 2015. It came back. It is in a box in this flat with all the others — I have all of them, every one since 2000, including the one where you told me you have never seen snow and the one where you drew a ski jumper going the wrong way.

I never opened the one that came back. It was addressed to you and I was not you and at twenty-five that seemed to me like the sort of thing a person should be careful about. So it is still shut. It is thirty centimetres from my hand.

If you tell me to, I will send it. It is yours. It has been yours for eleven years and it was written by somebody who did not know it was the last one.

The third. I read what you wrote before I knew you wrote it. I want that to be the thing you take from this message, above everything else in it. I did not agree with you because it was you. I did not know it was you. I sat here for twenty minutes agreeing with a stranger, and arguing with him, and losing, and being glad — and then I scrolled up and there was one letter where a name goes.

We went a very long way apart and we got to the same place. Separately. That is not nothing. I think it might be the only argument for any of it that I have left.

My son is eleven. My grandmother died in 2020, at ninety-seven, and the book of songs is on the shelf above the television and he is not allowed to take it outside.

I have not been to church since November and I have not told my wife.

You will notice I am doing what we always did, which is that I have told you the thing I have not told anybody who lives in my city.

I am at this address. It is the same one it has been since 2011. I have not moved. For once, between the two of us, I am the one who has not moved.

Write to me.

Tęskniłem za tobą, Wesley.

— Paweł Heczko

P → P 12

Berlin, 11 March 2026, 03:40

Piotrek,

You are asleep and you have a temperature and it is almost four in the morning and I have just done something and I want it written down before I decide it was stupid.

I found him.

I woke your mother. I was standing in the middle of the room and I did not know how I got there and I told her it was nothing.

I have written to him. There is a form on the site with two fields and a box. I do not know if it goes to him or to somebody paid to delete things.

I opened it with the first line he ever wrote to me. He was ten and he had copied it off a blackboard and got my name wrong.

And at the end I wrote one sentence in Polish, which he will not understand, because in twenty-six years he never learned a single word of it and it never once occurred to him that he should, and I never once mentioned it.

I have thought about that a great deal over the years. I did all of it. Every letter, both directions, in his language, from the age of ten, and it was never discussed, and I do not think he has any idea to this day.

I am not angry. I want to be clear about that because you may read this at twenty and think your father was keeping a score.

I am not keeping a score. I am telling you that there are friendships where one person carries the weight and it is still the best thing in his life.

But I wanted one sentence to be mine.

If he answers, I will tell you.

If he does not answer, then you should know that I sat in this kitchen at four in the morning and sent a message to a man I have never seen, twenty-six years after a teacher in Louisiana handed him my name off a list and he copied it down wrong.

Tata
