

The Crows of Warsaw

By AnnaMarie Seiler

Kiedy wejdiesz między wrony musisz krakać tak jak one — Polish for, Once among the crows, caw as they do.

During my week in Poland, I didn't see a single crow. Instead, there were pigeons the size of soccer balls, and sex-work business cards splayed across the sidewalks, and copious amounts of bars containing copious amounts of drunks; all of which seemed easier to find than crows. The latter, understandably, was the most enjoyable to be around. Perhaps the proverb should've said: 'Once among the drunks, drink as they do'.

Somewhere in a bar in Warsaw, I played catch-up feverishly with the locals. Unlike America, drinking in Poland began at lunch and concluded around the same time the following day. Where I lived, somewhere thousands of miles across the Big Ocean, NASCAR was deemed a sport the same way racing towards intoxication was here.

My first drink — an abrasive combination of grain alcohol and sugar — tasted as foreign to me as the rest of the country. The glass formed rings of condensation on the scarred oak table like that of Saturn's, only much less astronomically significant. In the intimate setting, the dimly-lit overhead lights cast long shadows across the floor and the people dancing on it. With dozens of moving bodies packed into the attic of a bar house several decades older than myself, the air was a thick, musty blend of sweat and breath, like a humid day on a too-crowded subway car.

Some of those moving bodies, I knew. Our college sent us here — well, not *here*. Our adventure to the bar was not a part of our itinerary, and unbeknownst to our professors, we'd decided on the flight into Europe to swallow as much of Poland as we could in our short visit, which included the country's nightlife. Despite being in the same class for months now, I held a very poor understanding as to who my classmates really were. For the most part I knew what they chose to present to the world: their names, personal expressions, and relationship status'. I knew their political views; they'd emerged during classroom discussions about the second World War, which was the purpose of our travel. And now, I was getting to know how they handled their liquor.

Whether the rest of them would admit it or not, that night, the bar was our release, poorly disguised as cultural emersion. For months we'd read novels, watched documentaries, caught up present-day political strifes, and recounted more survivor stories than I'd ever imagined possible. Being here, where so many of our ancestors had been killed (or were responsible for the killing), was like living a lucid dream. I'd prepared for the monuments, for the tragic stories, for the camps. I hadn't prepared myself to recognize a church-steeple-turned-sniper-tower from a black-and-white photo in the back of one of our history books. I hadn't prepared to sit inside prison cells, staring at the claw marks on the walls, comparing them to my own fingertips. I'm not sure

if any of us found the release we were looking for at the bar that night. The more we drank, and danced, and laughed, the worse it all felt.

Social drinking was nothing new to me, but I had little experience with bar culture, and for much of the night I feared my virginity on the topic showed. I felt awkward and clumsy, as if the practice I had in college was an arbitrary substitute. The backs of my thighs stuck to the plastic cover of the bar cushion. I squirmed in my seat uncomfortably, well aware of the striking differences between myself and the local women. Made up of long, lean legs and elegant silhouettes, straight blond hair chopped evenly at breast level, many of them seemed fit for magazine covers or fashion shows. Their pale skin glistened in the bar light like warm honey milk. I looked nothing like them, and I knew it.

My roommate nudged me with her beer bottle.

“See that guy with the beard?” She said, jutting her chin out towards the less-inhabited side of the bar. “He’s cute.”

My eyes followed hers to two people standing separated by a dutch door, their heads bent towards each other in conversation. One of them, a chimney-column of a human, harbored a bearish masculinity that many women might’ve found to be attractive. His height and wide stature, combined with the dark hair that spiraled from his head and chin and forearms, was enough to warm many women’s faces. I smiled and nodded politely, hoping my roommate couldn’t see the disinterest on my face; thankfully her attention, shortened by alcohol, was already turned towards a drunken Irishman who seemed to handle eight beers the same way she handled one.

A determined person since childhood, I always knew what I wanted and what I didn’t. Candy, for instance, was almost always a ‘want’. Napping was not. Boys? Funny but unreliable. Girls? Many made terrible friends, but regardless, I always found ways to be near them. When relationships became more than platonic, I was the outlier in my own head. I imagine I felt the way a television might if its wires were crossed — my cables plugged in to opposite outlets. Even the biggest, burliest electrician could not fix my wiring; nor did it need to be.

Which is why, when I saw the man my roommate had been appreciating, my eyes lingered for only the briefest passing of a second before sliding to the woman he conversed quietly with. The two of them spoke quietly, voices muffled by the thrumming beat of the music that played overhead. *Dirty Diana* by Michael Jackson.

Without much thought, I made the assumption that her wires were askew, too.

The narrow-framed woman stood out like I did, removed from the rest of the bar. Her raven-black hair, cut short above the ears, hung into her face. Thick lashes cast shadows across her cheekbones. In the low light of the bar, her face looked sharp and angular. She raised a hand and pushed the loose strands from her forehead. Bluish-black ink colored up and down arms, disappearing beneath the rolled sleeves of a white cotton t-shirt.

The tattoos resembled the images found in the margins of a high-school student’s notebook. Despite better judgment, I found myself staring at them. Poorly drawn snakes entangled in one another, a robot head, a flower. Sneakers with the shoelaces tied together, a broken heart, the silhouette of a woman, a quote in a language I couldn’t read. I knew they were carved into her skin, yet some small, youthfully innocent part of me wanted to close the distance between us and

wipe them away with my thumb, like they were pen or cigarette ash. Unconsciously, my fingertip swirled in the small puddle of condensation that was gathering around the bottom of my glass."

She shrugged at something the man said, motioning with a hand to a group of people dancing freely in the center of the room. He smirked, laughed. Their lips moved with an eloquence I only dreamed of possessing.

It was not difficult to the conclusion that her partner was the short, fluttery woman with hair the color of corn silk. The hem of her skirt ruffled as she danced — she stroked it back into place each time she twirled. I caught them exchanging glances; reserved, intimate looks that made me feel as though I was intruding on a private occasion. I blinked and looked toward my peers. They were drunk; ignorant to most everything except the unkempt gurgle beginning in their stomachs.

The woman watched her partner dance with strangers. Her lover's movements were self-governing, as if she had never spent a second of her life under the judgment of someone she loved. She spun and clapped and sipped honey infused vodka from glasses of strangers.

The air that lingered between them was spiced with a flavor I had yet to see in a country so arid of a similar love; one of hickory and hot peppers, of grain alcohol and sugar. A flavor that made tongues dance behind closed lips. The brevity in their tender affection was as heroic as it was careless.

In this country so different and so similar to my own, I wondered what life might be like. Where I lived now, my girlfriend and I continued our lives unabashedly; holding hands in grocery stores, kissing in the movie theater, rarely looking over our shoulder at who might see. Now, here, three thousand miles apart, I thought of her. I thought of her safety, of us, of how things could be so different had we been born a few thousand miles to the west, across the Big Ocean.

I nearly missed the women connecting in the center of the room and navigating the narrow, dusty staircase down into the lounge, snapping myself out of the fog forming between my eyes. My heart began to race, fearful of the sudden absence in the otherwise crowded bar. Despite the assortment of strangers, I felt alone again — as if for a moment, the women provided a spark just bright enough to see myself in. My brain, delirious and disoriented, cried, *follow them!*

You're insane, following strangers in such strange places, another, more rational part of me reasoned. But I wanted to know more, like a teenage girl prowling the pages of *Seventeen Magazine* for any hint of validation. They were the first gay couple I had seen in Europe — coming from a place where love of all kinds flourished, the deprivation here had made me desperate and thirsty for that kind of traction.

Of course, I didn't follow them. I didn't take up my glass and carefully climb down the staircase, making sure to keep my distance and my eyes cast down. I didn't find them leaving hand-in-hand, each movement resonating love or passion. I didn't long for my partner as the woman pulled the other closer by the waist. I didn't wonder if they were going home to make drunk, stupid love.

I stayed in the booth in the attic long after they'd dissolved into the crowd, alone but surrounded by strangers, and stared at the place they used to be.

My roommate sighed, then hiccuped.

"I need air," she said. This time, I did follow. I cursed myself with every step.

The bar crowd was overflowing onto the sidewalk. Tables and heat lamps filled the space to accommodate. Most of the men — and a majority of my female classmates — congregated there. I was an accessory hanging around my roommate's neck, unengaged in the conversations she held but never failing to smile and nod to keep from seeming rude. I tried to hide it when I searched for the women amongst the bodies on the sidewalk, even though I knew I was alone again. They were the crows of the proverb; ones I didn't realize I'd been searching for. I was the ignorant child, guilty for chasing the flock and scaring them off. Their presence, rare and fleeting, had gone as quickly as I had found them, somewhere in a bar in Warsaw.