

Chasing Zebras

Also by Margaret Nowaczyk

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Chasing Zebras

A Memoir of Genetics, Mental Health and Writing

Margaret Nowaczyk



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To my teachers and to my patients who also are my teachers

What one has to tell is not nearly so important as the telling itself.

– Henry Miller, “Reflections on Writing,” *The Wisdom of the Heart*

When you hear hoofbeats, think horses not zebras.

– Medical school adage

Beginning

“Who wants to read first?” Rita Charon asks our group. A professor of internal medicine and a Henry James scholar, for years she was known at the Columbia medical school as the “crazy book lady” who told anybody who would listen about how reading literature enhanced the practice of medicine.

I have to read. I just have to. I did not travel all the way to New York City to sit this out. This story has been eating at me for almost ten years. I remember the response from a female classmate three years ago when I read what I had written in my first creative writing class: “I hate this. I hate you for making me hear it.”

I so hope it will be different here – these are doctors, nurses, social workers who came from around the world to learn how to improve clinical medicine. An inner-city hospital chaplain sits directly across the table from me. They all have witnessed the enduring misery of the human condition, in patients and in doctors. And I want somebody, anybody, to see what my job is about. To see *me*.

I’m attending a narrative medicine workshop at Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons. In my workshop group are eight health-care professionals, huddled around tables arranged in a circle in a classroom on a glorious October Saturday in New York City. Outside, the leaves on the lindens lining Broadway are beginning to change, and the afternoon sun angles through the tall windows. Narrative medicine, a revolutionary approach to medical care, centres on a patient’s story as opposed to their condition, and was conceived and developed at Columbia by Rita Charon. Rita advocated for the study of narrative texts, both literary and spoken, to refine medical history-taking. In addition to the close reading of literary texts to improve a physician’s grasp of a patient’s medical history, she also uses writing prompts, reflective writing and

sharing one's writing with others to support physicians in identifying factors that might be affecting their patient-doctor interactions and deterring them from fully understanding their patients' health stories. As well, these techniques can help physicians process their own emotions. Because as long as a story remains untold and unheard, it festers.

I am about to realize how much.

"Me." I almost shoot my hand up, as I used to in school. It's been a decade and I've never told anybody how I felt. I am hurt, I am upset; I have to share. I must. I don't care if there are others whose need is as great, they will soon see how important, how damaging my story is. I just need to, have to, go first.

My heart pounds so much it hurts. Yes, I know, heartbeat doesn't hurt; what I feel is the increased heart rate and the adrenaline flooding my arteries and veins, the anxiety of unmasking myself and the fear of judgment and rejection on moral grounds. I don't care what the physiological explanation is – my heartbeat hurts.

I read.



When I finish, my cheeks and neck are burning. Already there seems to be more space in my rib cage, in that stiff membrane that has constricted my heart. I glance around. I met these people only the night before, when we shared an innocent icebreaker of a writing prompt: "Tell me the story of your name." What do they think of me now? What I have just read is not the same as "I changed my name from the Polish 'Małgorzata' when a teacher butchered it one time too many." They'd laughed at that. Now, silence pounds in my ears. Are they repulsed by my true colours? Too shocked to even say anything? Angry?

But the faces are not turning away in disgust or recoiling in horror. Nadia, across the table, smiles a kind smile that lights up her face and nods at me.

"What did you hear?" Rita asks.

"How much she's hurting," Thomas says. "How it's eating away at her."

"It's so dark, though," Nadia says.

“How can she make it better for herself?” Rita asks after a pause during which all I hear is my pounding heartbeat.

“She can’t change the memory,” Krisann says, “but she can change how she looks at it.”

“What if ...” Rita stops, thinks. “The name – Savannah. Is that her real name?”

“Yes,” I say.

“How about instead of thinking of her being trapped in her body you play with the image of her name – big spaces, the openness of the African savannah. Free, boundless.” She peers at me sideways, head tilted like a curious bird. “Hmmm?”

I nod, even though I am not convinced that this mind trick will change anything. I have always thought of Savannah as a ruined medieval castle. But something has already shifted inside me ...

Rita knows what she’s talking about.

“It feels so ... so great to have read it,” I blurt out. My voice is shaking. “It makes such a difference that you all listened.”

Rita watches me seriously. Waits.

“See?” she says finally, her warm grey eyes on me. “You made room for more.”



That day, narrative medicine crowbarred open the locked chambers of my heart and mind – the places where I stored my shame and pain. The loneliness of my first years in Canada. The sick competitiveness of my pre-med years. The shocks of medical school and residency. The crazy temper and mood swings that left me with no friends. Bearing witness to the savage heartbreaks of prenatal diagnosis and predictive genetic testing. Lifelong troubles with mental health issues – years of therapy, medications, psychiatrists, psychologists, hospitalization. Crawling back to a normal life.

Since then, words had poured out of me and onto the page, blue on yellow foolscap – my favourite writing medium. My words freed up space in my mind and body, making room for understanding and acceptance,

but I needed more than writing out what lurks in the dark recesses of my heart. Sharing and acceptance turned out to be my greatest medicine. Like lancing a boil, the hurt and pain had poured out of me, and my spirit had, finally, begun to heal.

My experiences, many of them traumatic, lived – ineffably, wordlessly – inside me for many years; there, they did a lot of damage. Only when I allowed them out was I able to see who I might be without them – in writing, we make our minds visible to ourselves and others.

Writing, I healed. I moved from being stuck in awfulness to becoming more able and adaptable, even if committing to a version of events that can't easily be “taken back” was scary as hell. But I wanted to tell my story because I wanted it to enable others to tell theirs.

Writing allows our experiences to become universal – through it, we move away from the conviction that they are ours and ours alone. Having written and shared our writing, we emerge from isolation. Listeners – readers – are necessary for the work to be seen, heard, validated and, hopefully, reflected back to us so that we can see what we still have to learn.

Part One

Signs & Symptoms

The day the University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine letter of acceptance arrived, I was preparing an agarose gel to separate human saliva proteins in the Bennick lab. My mother phoned the professor's office and read the letter to me. "I did it!" I shouted. Or maybe I just pumped my fist and squealed, "Yesssss!"

July 18, 1985, was no different than any other day that summer: hot, humid, hazy. I stood on the crumbling top stair of the Medical Sciences Building's terrace and scanned the university's Front Campus. The sandstone University College buildings loomed across the verdant lawn and the scent of the camomile trodden by Frisbee throwers wafted toward me; the neo-Gothic Sigmund Samuel Library and the 1960s Science and Medicine Library were to my right. The University Bookroom, where, in the basement, I had been sneaking peeks at medical textbooks for three years, stood tucked in the corner diagonally across from me and Convocation Hall, with its green dome topped with a flagpole, lay to my left. Students and assorted adults – faculty, staff and a clutch of tourists pointing their cameras every which way – went on about their lives. Leashed dogs peed on the trunks of acacia trees circling the lawn. Somehow, inexplicably, life went on. No parades, no marching bands. How could the world be the same if I had just gotten into medical school?

An ambulance siren wailed from the direction of University Avenue, its sound Dopplering as it sped toward one of the downtown hospitals and I thought, a bit melodramatically, "Soon, I'll be at the other end of that ambulance ride." Without any outward signs, life *had* changed. It was going to be so easy from now on: I would finish med school, become a doctor; I would be respected and I would always have a job. It would be a well-paying and prestigious job in a field that had captivated me since before I could read, sneaking peeks at the pages of the Polish *Little Encyclopedia of Health*

that I wasn't allowed to touch. As family lore tells it, though I don't remember it, I first announced that I wanted to be a doctor when I was five years old. And despite brief detours of wanting to become an architect, a chemist, a biochemist and – quite out of character – an English professor, that desire held true throughout my life. I never thought the job would be difficult; I was simply fascinated with how the human body was put together and how it worked.

Did I mention that I had just been accepted into medical school?



I had arrived in Toronto only four years earlier with my parents and six-year-old sister, Monika. I was sixteen years old. That first day in Toronto – March 3, 1981 – was cold and dreary; the kind of afternoon I would soon learn typified Southern Ontario winters. Gelled with an Arctic air mass and scattered with snowflakes, its colour palette did not extend beyond grey in all its shades and hues: the slate of the barren earth, the slick charcoal of the asphalt, cinereous skeletal trees raising their branches to the pale silver sky. Ronald Reagan had recently become the fortieth president of the United States; I had no idea who the prime minister of Canada was. Poland had been in the throes of the Solidarity movement for the past seven months – coincidentally, since the day we had left Poland. We had languished for six months in immigrant limbo in Sankt Georgen, a hamlet nestled in the foothills of the Austrian Alps, while our refugee petitions and immigration papers were being processed by the Canadian Embassy in Vienna.

Those six months were the worst of my life. First, the uncertainty – we had no idea whether we would obtain Canadian Landed Immigrant status or if we would have to go to another country instead. Then the lack of money – after the dollars we had smuggled out of Poland ran out, my father attempted to work in a sawmill where he nearly lost the fingers of his left hand; and finally, the everyday rudeness of the owner of our gasthof that had led to two altercations with my father. We carried the shame of being stateless and living on the mercy of the Austrian government and

the United Nations Refugee Agency. My former classmates in Poland were staging pro-Solidarity protests and participating in student strikes while I scrubbed toilets in an Alpine pensione.

It was in Austria that I had decided I would not be one of those Polish immigrants my mother had met when she visited Canada three years earlier – those who never learned to speak English properly, who attended the Polish mass at the St. Stanislaus church, shopped in the Polish grocery on Roncesvalles Avenue and banked their money at the St. Casimir credit union. I was not going to straddle the Atlantic with one foot in Poland and the other in Canada, waiting for the day I would return home wrapped in the glory of the immigrant success story. Instead, I would do everything I could to become Canadian, whatever “Canadian” was. For me, it meant speaking proper English, studying hard, reclaiming my best student status and getting into medical school. I was not going to waste time looking back. But my plans remained on hiatus as we waited for our immigration papers to be approved by a faceless embassy bureaucrat.

In Poland, at the end of grade eleven, high school students decided on the electives they would take in their final year of high school to prepare for university entrance exams. Before we left, I had wanted to study English language and literature. In Polish, I had loved giving novels and short stories a close reading, parsing their sentences and plots. I loved the history of Polish literature and language. In my English classes, I had loved learning a new vocabulary and grammar rules. I could see myself doing it for life. What I never dreamed of, though, was becoming a writer – one of those creative creatures who lived on a different plane of existence. That I could not aspire to.



My Polish classmates were mapping out their futures while I polished parquet floors and scratched for groschen under the rugs in a hotel bar, a job that I had cajoled from the fat, gum-chewing gasthof owner. For months, I did not know where, or even if, I would attend school come September. To save myself from going crazy with boredom, I studied the Polish grade eleven biology textbook my best friend had sent me and read Somerset

Maugham's *The Painted Veil*, which an Austrian high school teacher had lent to me to improve my English. As I read, I underlined the words I didn't know with a straight line, and the ones whose meaning I managed to glean from context – a technique I had learned back in Poland – with a wavy one. Then, I wrote all of these words in a notebook and translated them using Stanisławski's two-volume English–Polish dictionary that we had managed to bring with us. Painstakingly, I copied down the phonetics and definitions of each word, then memorized them. Soon I became well-versed in the vocabulary of the privileged, early twentieth-century English that inhabited the Far East outposts of the British Empire: “tanned” and “ayah” were the first two words I remember looking up, followed by “tiffin.”

I'd finished reading Maugham by the time we received our Canadian Landed Immigrant status documents from the Canadian Embassy in mid-February. A week later, our plane tickets arrived in a thick, cardboard envelope. Caritas, a Catholic charity, lent my father money for them but only enough to take us as far as Toronto – even though he'd said we wanted to go to Vancouver. “If you want to go to Vancouverzu you go to Vancouverzu. In Canada, you can do whatever you want if you have the money,” said Mr. Borowik, an official at the Canadian Embassy, during our interview. He spoke haughtily, his Polish rudimentary, his intelligence limited, betrayed by the declension of the city name – anybody with brains knew that in Polish you didn't alter the endings of foreign city names. We didn't have the money, and that's how we ended up in Toronto on that frigid March afternoon.

In spite of my seven years of English classes, two of those in English immersion, and committing *The Painted Veil's* vocabulary to heart – or maybe because of it – my English proved woefully inadequate for even the most mundane needs. At the time, Ontario Immigration housed new arrivals at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel on Charles Street in downtown Toronto. This hotel had nothing in common with its New York City namesake, as my father explained to me the evening that we arrived. The American one stood for opulence and luxury; the Toronto one was rundown, its single-pane windows painted with hoarfrost and its stained carpets an undecipherable colour redolent with the passage of others. In our room, a

thin wall separated the sitting area from two double beds; there was no TV, but there was a kitchenette with rusted elements and a wheezing fridge sat on the other side of the sitting room. Stacked white towels towered in the bathroom, many more than I had ever seen at one time. These white, fluffy rectangles were piled three high, their intoxicating scent probably a combination of cheap detergent and bleach. A Pole who had arrived from Austria before us explained that in order to appear civilized, he threw them onto the floor and sprinkled water on the pile to show he had used them. “And that thicker, smaller towel,” he said. “That’s for the floor when you get out of the tub.” I wondered how he had figured that out.

On our third day at the Waldorf, my mother sent me to buy lunch. “Go right from the hotel,” she told me, “cross three streets, maybe four” – the concept of “city blocks” does not exist in Polish – “then turn right on Yonge Street, the busiest street. You’ll see a big yellow ‘M’ sign.”

I completely missed Yonge Street and the Golden Arches, and lumbered along Charles Street almost as far as University Avenue before I decided that a street lined with old stone buildings nested amidst tall linden trees was no place for fast-food restaurants. Little did I know that two years later I would be admitted to Victoria College and get to enter those stately portals. Shamefaced, I backtracked and located Yonge Street after what felt like hours. The McDonald’s there exuded its signature deep-fried reek. I grew wistful, remembering the same aroma from Baltic seaside restaurants during childhood holidays. I took my place at the end of the single line snaking out from four cashiers – after years of lining up for food in Poland, I was a pro. Except that in Poland there would have been four separate lines, and those condemned to the slowest would look daggers at the lucky ones who moved along to secure their goods. By comparison, this was the height of civility. The single line feeding into four sales points impressed provincial, immigrant me.

When I reached the counter, my eyes settled on the silver flashing between the salesgirl’s pink lips: metal wires caged her top and bottom teeth. The previous summer, in Poland, I had read *The Godfather*; now I flashed back to Connie Corleone’s wired jaw, broken by her no-good

husband Carlo. This poor girl's jaw must be broken, I thought. My heart beat wildly at such a crass display of Western degeneration. Eyes fixated on her mouth, I haltingly ordered three cheeseburgers. I was speaking English in Canada for the first time.

"Do you want French fries with that?" she asked, metal flashing.

"No. Not French fries," I said. "Just fries." I did not know what French fries were. The counter girl shrugged, stepped back to pick up three oily red pockets from under the heater and dropped them on the tray in front of me. I checked the contents – yes, those were the kind of fries I wanted.

"That's it?" the girl asked.

I had no idea what she meant. "I beg your pardon?"

"Is that it?"

I shook my head, my cheeks burning hot.

"Is this all you want?" the man standing behind me prompted.

Relief. "Yes," I said. "Yes, that is all I want." I paid for the order, barely able to tear my eyes from the girl's mouth, and squeezed through the crowd feeling stupid and deflated.



On April 1, 1981, we moved into an apartment across from the Fairview Mall in North York. Its sixteenth-floor windows faced west over Don Mills Road and the balcony – almost a terrace – overlooked the Don Valley at Leslie Street, with Yonge Street buildings poking at the sky on the horizon. In Poland, only party officials would live in an apartment this size – three bedrooms and a living room, what a concept! The rental office wouldn't even consider renting us a two-bedroom apartment because the age difference between my sister and me – ten years – was too great. The apartment also had one and a half bathrooms and two walk-in closets, both not much smaller than my room in Poland. The rent was not cheap, but my father, flush with pride at his newly found contract job at Kilborn Engineering, with a yearly salary of thirty-three thousand dollars – which to us seemed like an absurd amount of money – signed the first and last months' rent cheques with confidence. My mother wrinkled her nose at