

Julia Wood

Swallowed by the Mountains

The path I walk is cracked and grey, rubble lining the pavement where the earth, once whole and steady, has been split in half. It is as if some sort of demon lurking beneath the planet's crust suddenly emerged, damaging anything in its way. It fought with the cool winds that caress the Sibylline Mountains this time of year, bringing ash and debris in its moment of rage. In its fury, it took out the town hall, the homes of nearly every resident (though the population is only roughly 5,000), and even the basilica, on a Sunday of all days. Hell had finally come to Earth.

Monastero di San Benedetto is in ruins, destroyed by the most powerful earthquake to hit Italy since 1980. I went there as a child when my mother took me to our ancestral village of Norcia, the birthplace of Saint Benedict, Saint Scholastica, and all of my Italian relatives. I can easily recall that first trip; taking a two-hour train that departed from Rome, then enduring a consecutive two-hour bus ride up a winding mountain just to finally land in a town so small it could be circled in its entirety within half an hour. I was anticipating boredom for the next two days that I would be trapped there; I am a big-city girl and this quaint mountainside village was quite the opposite of that. But where I expected dissatisfaction, I found adoration.

I don't eat meat—unless I am in Norcia. While Americans can find all of their groceries in a singular spot, Italians separate their shops by specialty: formaggeria (cheese shop), panetteria (bakery), pescheria (fish shop), salumeria (delicatessen), et cetera. This town is riddled with salumerie, with taxidermied wild boar propped outside on the cobblestone streets or mounted on the walls, and is accurately labeled as the pork capital of Italy. Norcia's butchers have been

curing meats like no others since the 5th century, and they are the only people in the world that I trust enough to eat a product I would never touch in the States.

I don't pray—unless I am in Norcia. Although I was born and raised Roman Catholic, I have not willingly partaken in prayer outside of a mandatory mass, let alone on vacation, for as long as I have conceptualized free will. But when I found myself in Saint Benedict's Basilica, I felt the roots that my ancestors had planted deep within the fruitful soil beneath the church hundreds of years ago wrapping around my ankles and pulling invocations from my tongue. *Nel nome del Padre, del Figlio, e dello Spirito Santo*. My mouth moved faster than my brain as I whispered to God words that I now cannot recall.

Norcia strangely felt like home to me on that first visit. There was a familiarity in the air that smelled just like my Nonno's cooking. When I closed my eyes I swore I could hear him shout "Buon appetito" from across the restaurant my mother, brother, and I sat in. He had been here before, so had my grandparents and my great-grandparents and so on and so forth. I wondered if he had sat in my same seat, fetched groceries for his own Nonna, prayed alone in the heart of the Basilica. But this was not the Norcia my predecessors knew. The Norcia that they had called home for so many years had been destroyed by the 21st Century, and, before that, by the 20th Century, by World War II and Mussolini, by Fascism, by World War I, by Garibaldi, by the French, by the Guelfs and Ghibellines, by Charlemagne. The Norcia my Byzantine ancestors knew must have been mullered by the Lombards. None of us have known the same place, though the geographical location has always remained dormant.

The earthquake destroyed the Norcia I knew. It does not feel the same to me as it did when I was a little girl. The shops where I fetched black truffle olive oil and arrabiatta spice mix were leveled. Though the politicians promised to rebuild the town: the villas and the sole inn for

the few and far-between tourists, the salumerie that keep Norcia relevant in the culinary world, and the church that made me pray on my own accord, those same buildings I stepped foot in as a child no longer stand—they were, and will remain in my eyes, swallowed by the mountains.