

## Becoming American

MICHELLE BONCZEK EVORY

Wet with sweat, Grandma Cymbala's hugs  
smelled of onion. She'd squeeze, we'd squirm.  
She wouldn't let us pull away. Kisses firing

our faces, damp hand brushing our long, brown hair,  
she'd whisper *malutiki, Kocham Cię*. She fed us  
borscht, pinched our cheeks, cinched pierogis.

Her arms dusted garden brown, her hands stained  
pink from beets. She never talked to us of Poland,  
only in its language, which we were never taught.

Her granddaughters were going to be American.  
Beside cold, dilled potatoes, Pop-pop's vodka  
stuck in circles on the counter. On Sunday drives

from church, his gold Cadillac swerved yellow lines.  
One year after Easter service he crossed  
the living room humming a hymn and cracked

the wooden table with his head, blood streaming  
like a sacrifice from his split skin. I didn't know  
he'd spent twelve years in Belgian coal mines, survived

Birkenau. Didn't know yet that he'd met my grandmother,  
a prisoner forced to cook in the German's kitchens.  
They never spoke about such things.

On his last Christmas, sober, confined then  
to a wheelchair, he burned two beautiful cheesecakes,  
and set the kitchen curtains on fire.

I had never seen Mom cry. We laughed our bellies  
into ache, the whole house blooming  
smoke, weeping sweet burnt sugar.

