

We no longer pray where people used to pray, in churches and mosques and synagogues and temples, inside man-made structures with cathedral ceilings and spires that yearn toward the sky. I am old enough to remember how it felt to be within a place of worship, the slanted light, the smell of burning candles and dust, the quiet. Sitting on a smooth wood bench, both feet on the floor, hands folded in my lap praying for a sign, maybe a dropped vase or a dove at the window or a whisper in my ear.

Week after week after week I prayed.

This thing I prayed for, it was not in me. It dwelled upon the altar, in the air between the Father's hands and in his words, *Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee*. It lingered in the musky incense smoke and the resonance of hymns sung by children. As I understood, it was not something one could snatch up; it had to come to you, to choose you.

I was waiting then and I am here, waiting now, sitting cross-legged in the dirt with crowds of people who go on and on in every direction, up to the crest of the hill and down to the shore of the lake. Outside—that is where we pray now because there are so many of us. We cover the trampled landscape like an enormous quilt. Seen from an airplane we would be a vast colorful mosaic stamped onto the rolling brown earth. But there are no more airplanes.

We sit in long rows arm to arm and knee to knee, accustomed to the true smell of the human body, sour and foul, and to the sensation of strangers' skin touching ours. There is gossip and laughter and complaining and arguing, a human pandemonium that seems to be the only sound left in this world. Children skip along the rows offering old bottles and jars filled with dusky water for trade. Adults barter for boots, brooms, bowls, and blankets.