The Way I Remember Arezzo

“Per di qua,” said the stranger. My bare legs stuck to the car seat as I stumbled in. The air settled heavy on my skin. The roads were twisted and rough, and we drove through a forested countryside at a leisurely pace. My sister sat beside me, eyes glued to the scenery outside. The air conditioner must not have been working, because all the windows were down. A warm, leafy scent wafted in. The radio was turned off, so I listened to the rustling grass and insects. The strangers who were also my relatives exchanged pleasantries in the front seats in a language that I barely understood. Their rich voices bounced off of one another’s. They pointed out the landmarks and castles they passed by every time they left their hometown.

When we arrived in the village, we crawled past a crowd playing volleyball. Squawking children paraded around the perimeter of the court while the players huddled together. Our driver slowed down to announce the cemetery where my great great grandfather’s remains were kept. I craned my neck to see the wall of ashes, full of shoebox-sized compartments. We stopped at the church where my great grandmother once prayed for a better life. Light filtered through the dingy stained glass onto the worn pews. My relatives sat back with smiles, amused at us Americans as we inspected the statues and took useless pictures. We trekked to the fountain where my ancestors drew water every day. My father and mother drank by lifting their travel-dirty hands to their lips. My cousin scrubbed his face with the crisp water, flinging ice-cold droplets everywhere. He laughed as we were startled by a pack of small dogs scrambling past us. They yapped at each other, kicking up dust as they trotted through the underbrush.
At my great uncle’s house, he gestured lazily across the street to where still more of my relatives lived long ago. The walls were sun-bleached and overtaken by vines. More people emerged from the house with smiles and open arms. They, too, hugged tightly, temporarily suffocating us. We weren’t strangers who were also relatives to them. Before we hiked up to the house, the man who drove us faltered and exclaimed. We turned to follow his gaze as he walked up to the car he had parked next to. Its windows had been rolled down and left there, and a striped cat had found its way inside. We stuck out heads in the windows and startled it from its spot basking in the sun. It sprung past us hotly. And even though we didn’t know each other, my whole family laughed together, long after the cat was gone.