I’ve been thinking about this essay for months. I kept putting it off until tonight (well after midnight on the night before it’s due, typical-college-student style). I think I’ve been hiding from it, actually, because I want it to be so… right. I want it to be full and real, to somehow encapsulate in 1000 words the depth of transformation I have undergone in the past year, to resolve all the messes in worldview and cynicism that I’m wrestling with now, to somehow welcome you into my experiences abroad.

Ha.

Instead, I’m settling for one story. I want to be able to tell you everything, but I simply can’t, so I’ll focus on this one place and this one time instead.

It isn’t an easy story, and for that I don’t apologize—but I do warn you. The world is messy, and if you dare to allow God to reveal Himself in it, you will never be the same. Or, more eloquently, in the words of Dean Brackley, here’s what’s going to happen:

“The visitors feel themselves losing their grip; or better, they feel the world losing its grip on them. What world? The world made up of important people like them and unimportant people like their hosts. As the poet Yeats says, ‘Things fall apart.’ The visitors’ world is coming unhinged. They feel resistance, naturally, to a current that threatens to sweep them out of control. They feel a little confused… like the disorientation of falling in love. In fact, that is what is happening, a kind of falling in love. The earth trembles. My horizon is opening up. I’m on unfamiliar ground, entering a richer, more real world.”

So. Let’s go to Bosnia.

We drove to Srebrenica through warm, soft meadows filled with yellow and purple flowers, the road winding through hills and woods beneath a brilliantly-blue sky. Gaps in the trees occasionally flooded our van with sunlight, and I tried to take pictures to bring back home and share, to capture the vast enormity of the beauty surrounding us. But I couldn’t, of course—and there is something right about the fact that the little metal box in my hands could not capture or contain the patchwork greens and yellows of fields along the mountainside, like a huge quilt, nor the reddish-brown tiles of rooftops that sit warming in the sun, nor the hulking mass of forested mountains far off in the distance. Bosnia is beautiful.

Sometimes it’s important to remember that: the world is beautiful.

Eventually we arrived at Srebrenica.

The town’s memorial to the genocide of 1995 stretches impossibly far, it seems: endless rows of white tombstones cover the hillside, blurring and dancing in the summer heat. We walked through the gate and were startled: in front of us on the grass were laid 775 coffins, filled with the victims being buried this summer, on this day of remembrance. Men were carrying them into
the complex on their shoulders, green plastic-covered caskets, lined up neatly in long rows. People crowded around the entrance, stretching out their hands to touch the coffins as they passed, but the men in green shirts handled them deftly, smoothly and quickly setting them in order. They must have been light. Fifteen years in a mass grave doesn’t leave much behind.

This much grief is troubling. (That word is so callously inadequate.) But this grief is the world’s sorrow, and it should be troubling.

I’d never seen so many vulnerable people: women weeping silently, stroking the green plastic cover gently, caressing with worn fingers the face, hair, hands they still see in their minds’ eye. Families gathered around a specific casket, each member sobbing, re-living last memories with their brother, son, father, husband. Men crouched and wept, grieving unabashedly. Wailing cries hauntingly penetrating the sweltering heat of midday. Oh, war is terrible. May Your kingdom come quickly, God!

A bit of background: on July 11, 1995, the army of Bosnian Serbs led by Mladic (who remains free to this day!) took a few UN hostages and threatened to kill them unless the Dutch UN soldiers stationed in Srebrenica gave up the protected area. They did. Women and children were separated from the majority of the men, who stayed close to the conquered UN headquarters. For them the next few days were hell: 8000 were murdered in the worst genocide on European soil since the Holocaust. Many of the bodies were then moved to secondary graves to hide the evidence.

The town of Srebrenica is normally almost abandoned, but for the memorial it swelled to bursting: 70,000 people filled the street and the entire memorial site. Foreign dignitaries from around world arrived; groups of pilgrims who had hiked across the country in remembrance marched in. The mass of humanity was beautiful. But my reaction was mixed. I couldn’t help but wonder: where is the attention of the world on July 12th? A number of diplomats gave speeches promising “never again,” which is important rhetoric but doesn’t actually do anything. I found myself angry, asking where governments’ support would be on the days without TV crews in Srebrenica. And at the same time, I wondered where they were fifteen years ago when the international community could have intervened and didn’t, even with the post-Holocaust promises of “never again” ringing in our ears.

What images. A never-ending line of green caskets, borne up the hills to already-dug empty graves—like rafts floating in an endless line on a sea of heads and hands. Hands upturned and bodies prostrate in prayer, the cry of the muezzin ringing through the suddenly-hushed horde. An endless drone of victims’ names, lasting for more than an hour. The terrible silence when they stopped. The hot sun beating down on our headscarves, causing trickles of sweat to run down our faces and mingle with tears. And the one grave with a cross, of a Dutch UN soldier who chose to die, rather than leave the innocent to be slaughtered.

Only one.

One cross in that whole cemetery.
For me, that cross spoke of the failure of Christians, over and over again, to actually live as Christ (and to die is gain!). How can we possibly love Jesus and just stand by?

Lament. Songs of lament. They speak to me now of hot sun in Bosnia, beating down on thousands upon thousands of mourners, upon the grieving mothers and lonely widows, upon the impossibly-beautiful mountains and the impossibility of so much grief. Welcome to the mess. Welcome to a world coming unhinged.

Kyrie eleison.