ABSTRACT

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DIRECTED BY: Professor Michael Collier, Department of English

*Accidental Ghosts* is a collection of narrative lyrics that examine the cyclical and often paradoxical relationships between children, parents, and grandparents. Many of the poems bear witness to parents as caretakers, to the mirrored identities among relatives, and to preserving a family’s historical memory. In order to take claim of family stories, *Accidental Ghosts* also persists in defying what goes unsaid between generations.
ACCIDENTAL GHOSTS

By

Amy Katzel

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Michael Collier, Chair
Professor Elizabeth Arnold
Professor Stanley Plumly
Professor Joshua Weiner
For My Grandparents

Ruth Diamond
Joseph Katzel

In memory of

David Diamond (~1925 - 1989)
Estelle Katzel (1926 - 2004)
Acknowledgements

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The first line of “Estelle” is borrowed from “Letters for the Dead” by Philip Levine, from *1933*. Atheneum, 1974.

The Larry Levis poem referenced in “The Two Trees” is his poem by the same name from *Elegy*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997.
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The Story

She wasn’t there
    the morning she pictures—
Nazis shot his father and mother
    on the field of his farm he saw it he hid
    with his brother and sister,
    pressed high between
    the wooden beams of the loft.

Too much she won’t
    understand—
    his seeing,
    his having to leave the bodies in the grass
    like blown birds,

    and those hunters
    what they stopped as quickly
    as a foot to the throat of a hose.

Fifty years later—
    he took his grandson
    not to the zoo
    but to shul,
    her brother’s hand reaching up to the old man’s
    like he was holding the string of a balloon.
    He showed the boy the names
    lit along the walls, the letters aglow
    like reflected sun
    and told their mother
    (she, growing inside)
    how the boy sat so nice and still during the service
    and held his little finger on the page
    as though he knew, he knew!,
his young forehead lost under a large woven yarmulke,
    and the whole way home
    orioles high above them,
    her brother flapping his arms in envy,
    the constant flopping
    of suit sleeves, the pushing of air,
    the rising.
Mirrors

I woke to my grandmother at the edge of my bed, folding my sweaters in the dark. Her fingers knew how to tuck around the wool, musical instruments her body played without her. I think now of her steps: black hallway, carpet like grass, her children’s faces reappearing through clothes flapping like flags on a clothesline. I sat upright, blankets tangled across me and I waited, finally whispered, MeeMah, as though she should be the one to take my hand, lead me back to where I had wandered from.
Mapping
for Rachel

You write me, taking the train again
just when the sun stains its orange net
over Berlin: first, empty lot after lot,
new buildings sharp between old ones, then
flat plains, miles of green, dirt, the occasional
church spire, and then, like sapphire, a river.
You always sit by the window,
your bag beside you on the seat,
the books you brought shut still inside.
You tell me you like to guess
when you cross state lines, some invisible
shrug, I suppose, a kind of memory sense
of cartography. This makes me think
of visiting your grandfather after school.
He offered us cake that he’d warmed
in the microwave, its nervous hum
something we didn’t understand then.
He told us stories from the war
that weren’t about war, but potatoes,
flax, beets, setting back in his seat
and holding photographs
to the light of the kitchen window.
We gathered around his small, metal table.
He traced a picture of your grandmother’s face
like her cheeks and lips were faded lines
on a map. Isn’t that what old pictures hold,
blank spaces, curves like the borders of a place
we know, silences we fill with color
we remember once filled them?
The way your grandfather closed his eyes
and tilted his head like a coat hanger,
it seemed he had felt some invisible
force, as if the ground beneath the house
had shifted, as if he’d crossed a line
into somewhere he’d once been,
lost, and was now returning to.
A Man, a Woman, and Van Gogh

The streetlight slivered through the blinds could be the moon. You tell me, *write this down*, mocking our lying at the foot of my bed to look at “Starry Night Over Rhone” above my headboard. We’re backwards, our bodies logs sticking out from the wall. My cheap poster has warped Van Gogh’s colors so everything is blue, the bottom half a river, the top the night sky, his orange stars little fires reflected in the water in long, dripping strips. I tell you I never noticed by the dock, a man and woman waiting by a boat, brushstrokes like hay, his wide-brimmed hat, her shawl, their arms linked. They’re facing outward, away from the river.

I ask you, What if they’re looking at *us*, my head tilted on your chest, your long arm in wool reached under my neck and over my breast, my hair sprawled across you like damp seaweed. The light catches the side of your cheek as you turn and for a moment we watch each other’s faces as though our eyes are adjusting to dark for the first time. You laugh, and maybe it’s minutes or hours when I imagine the room tilting, tilting until my bed is the wall and the wall and the poster and the lovers are washed back in the blue of the Rhone. I keep this to myself, and the light never moves.
Old Jewish Cemetery, Prague

The bodies here know one another, huddled like children under a stone. So many graves, there’s no room for their shadows, sunlight seeming to gather between the rocks.

Our guide tells us as many as twelve deep are still beneath. Around us, Hebrew letters as though they’re floating, speaking out loud. They work to remember: the famous

Rabbi Loew, mothers and children, so many dates and dashes as if to sing we’re here and yet this place is ruin, rusted mirrors, jagged teeth of the earth’s mouth—

I squint to read the words I recognize from prayer books, Baruch, Bless, carved once by hands that are below too, now, those fingers gripping the chisel gone centuries ago and

I catch myself killing them again. My family isn’t supposed to be under this ground but far back, before Kiel, before Brussels, is it possible? Quiet, I walk, hands behind my back, only my shoes scuffing the ground. How else can we intruders join them, we listeners, listen, listen.
The woman in front of me is fanning her face with her sun hat and shaking her head, talking to her companion louder than she should. I want to hurry around her, for the stones to lean over in the dirt and turn their heads in disapproval, but instead my finger wanders inside a letter, traces words I don’t understand, and it seems the dust from the coarse rock is all over us now.

Leaving, I stop at the stone fountain for the wash. Only one other goes with me and I see it’s her, the brim of her hat veiling a shadow over her eyes. The water spills over our hands, douses our wrists,
under our nails so we leave death behind, 
and I’m looking and the sun is reflecting off our wet 
skin and I’m not sure what’s happening, what’s come off, 
what I’m taking. We listen to the trees rustling,

the birds, the water swallowed in the drain, 
the silence from the bodies we might have had.
Buddy Rich in the Basement

My father turns the dial
to full blast, trumpets
screeching while Buddy
slings the cymbals, smooth
and gold, sets the house bouncing.
Upstairs, the carpet pulses.
He calls me down, “You
have to hear this!” and I
thump down the steps
into the wave, piano jingling,
the horn’s croon—
My mother is shouting
from the kitchen
to turn it lower,
but we are washed
in the sound of orange.

The backs of my heels
knock against the couch,
slowly at first, like they’ve
snuck up on themselves.
My father stands, rocking
his hand at the downbeat,
his baritone horn
hitched on his hip—

This is more than just
play. Buddy keeps control
and loses himself
at the same time, that thirst for
the four-four count, the same
beat of the snare as the beat
of the heart, the other men
unpacking their sweat as easily
as loosening a tie from a neck.

And now, the stereo shakes.
My father’s mouth is moving
but I can’t hear the words.
He begins to sway, tap his toe,
and then he nods to me as though
I was in on the secret
the whole time, his arms lifting
the heavy gold, his fingers
laced in the valves,
the mouthpiece in place.
Estelle

*aft*er *Philip Levine*

The air darkens toward morning
I’m sitting beside
an empty kitchen table

bowl of ripened fruit
like my child
that hasn’t been born

that I haven’t broken
my body with another’s yet
to give your name to

It’s twenty years after you’ve left
nine years between
what I know now

and what I will then
but you’ll be just as gone
and goner, even, seasons’

past leaves dried
from trees, vanished
into their roots

*

Grandfather never beat you
but my father tells me
stories listening

from the stairs
only his father’s voice
and silences

his small face
peering around the corner
like light bending on the walls

his hands gripping
the vertical bars of the railing
that trembled
when someone was coming near

*  

_Estelle_ reminds me of music
wind chimes dangling uneven bells

a family myth
my older brother, an infant

gave you a name
of Mommy backwards, _MeeMah_

a kind of reverse
birthing as though you’d come after

our mother gave birth to us
the names in circles in our mouths

*  

I cannot look back at us
with all the pieces
    my pieces
stitched together
like the lace gloves
you used to wear
so worn that patches
were missing or torn

I look forward

I ask you
for answers you couldn’t give
once I’d grown old enough
to ask you
    all the while
I’m left here holding
a heavy satchel
of stories

I can talk to you in dreams

but I never dream of you

I’d like to say we meet
at the hem of night
to morning
and that the winter snow
has melted
the radios come to life
oranges wet under their skins
books pulled from the shelves
pages falling open
on the table
your hair grown back
    my name
rising in your chest
your hand on my waist
as if to say I’ve seen
The Two Trees

A boy who told me he loved me
told me, once, my name in Latin
means beloved,

       spinning around
to his computer and switching on
a song with the same title, “beloved,”

_  because it means Amy_

and it seemed the moment he said this
that everything beloved in the world

had sprung from my name.

He hadn’t yet said
the other words, the words

I wouldn’t return, the V
releasing his tongue back
to its resting place.

I read a poem by Levis
that begins, too, with his name

but then moves to his disappearing
into trees, into dear aging friends,

white skin revealed beneath their bark
peeled back like burnt paper.

I, too, have gone walking

through fall trees littered with orange
and yellow that stand, finally,
in a bed of their own leaves.

Walking past, I’ve moved my lips,
my questions and secrets of love
hidden now in their branches,

       these gentle trees
that cannot speak the words
they wish to say,
beloved souls who don’t know
they were given a name.
In Summer
Mornings at the bus stop,
    my mother lathering my small arms
with sunblock, the white lotion
    transferring from her skin to mine,
from mine to hers, her silky hands
    cupped around my plump wrists.
We’re on a corner, standing under
    a large elm’s shadow, the shadow
like a pond we stand in, the grass
    tickling my ankles above my socks.
A yellow bus groans to a stop
    and I wrap my arms around
my mother’s waist as she bends herself
    around my body and kisses
my cheek, the flimsy rim of my cap
    knocking her face and then I climb
the tall, rubbery steps.
    I walk through the aisle, past the other
children, my dragged bag bumping
    behind me, bumping the seats,
her round face outside the window,
    its vertical bar, then another window.
The bus exhales and begins to move,
    my mother’s hand is waving like a bird’s wing
and I’m wobbling further to the back
    while the bus is gliding forward,
out the window the leaves
    of the elm, the brown of her hair,
and the bus moves forward and I move
    back and for a moment I’m floating
in one place and her face
    is in one place, face, bar, window, bar,
my hat at my eyes, my legs shuffling
    beneath me and she’s waving back, back
Cousin David at Rosh Hashanah

My name called, the voice not yet finished
being made. David’s shadow sprawls
against the bathroom tile, this boy young enough
to be my nephew, young enough so questions
are just beginning to pile. I move through
my grandmother’s bedroom to reach him—

I haven’t come in here in years, the bed
and dresser looking wrong from this height,
the pillowcases blue satin like ocean water.
Even as a child, I looked for my grandfather,
gone before I could speak: my fingers
on the trinket by the nightstand, his name
engraved in its glass, the grooves couching
my skin when I traced. I wonder, his shoes,
did he step out of them beside the bed
or kick them to the back of the closet?

Were they left there the night he felt his chest
collapse like a tent, his body going numb
like he’d been under the cold ocean too long?
But David’s called me again, his own name
here in the glass, and I find him at the sink.
I hoist him up by his waist, his body solid
in my arms. He reaches for the faucet—
a rush—and then I see our two blushed faces,

my grandfather’s grandchildren
reflected in the mirror

as water fills the pond of cupped hands.
The Hold

Our bodies will never come closer than this, my blouse against your shirt on this busy street, cherry on your breath. Your wrists press into my back, my arms reach up and around your neck like I’m fixing your collar but our public bodies, they know, and so they wait—

Our shoulders, waists, a statue.
We’re standing white and pockmarked in a museum where the sun moves overhead through a glass roof and pushes our shadow like water around our feet, my face nothing like Aphrodite’s, my heavy chin lodged over your shoulder, unable to look at anything but the fold of building to pavement, a car hums louder, louder and then softer, my hair’s quiet music against your stubble and then it is done.

    We push apart, cold air between. All we cannot have: wind filling our chests, then leaving.
Similar Mornings

Sometimes, there is a window.
In one version, my grandfather is outside
and the sun is cold behind the clouds.

In another, he’s already inside the barn,
grabbing his brother’s arm and pressing
behind the wooden slats by the roof

when the gunshots cry.
This story only exists now
through others, like yellowing pages

of books, like photographs of stars.
I was too young to ask, and then
I couldn’t. My grandmother and I

have stood together, wet plates passing
between our hands. Her auburn hair
just misses the height of my chin,

this woman who made the woman
who made me. I see her, too, as a child,
running barefoot from her bed the morning

she heard her father burst through the door
and call out her mother’s name.
I’ve wanted to ask about Brussels,

the last time she saw her father alive,
but I’m afraid to bring it up, afraid
to take her hand and guide her back

to the pogrom, only to leave her there,
sleeping next to my grandfather’s empty
side of the bed. Once, I dreamt of their faces

in black and white. I dreamt of leaves returning
to trees. Sometimes my grandparents are
in each other’s stories like accidental ghosts

and I’ve wanted to reach back, place my hand
against their young cheeks, whisper that
they’ll find each other, that we will exist.
Mirrors II

She’d gather my curls between
two hands, her hands cool at my neck.
My chin would lift just enough to see
our reflection over the tile counter.
Her wrists twisted like knitting needles,
my long strands water falling through
her fingers. Her hands would slide down
from my temples, smoothing. I don’t know
if it’s really us or our copy watching back
in the mirror, but we are being watched,
and watched again from the beginning.
Futures

Fourteen or fifteen years old,
walking the dogs around the block with my father.
They’re wandering, sniffing deeply in the grass.
Our sneakers almost silent in the road.

*What about you? How do we know you won’t—*

He’s stopped us, the dogs turned
over their backs, waiting.
I can’t say Alzheimers, or the rest,
that you won’t become like your mother, that I won’t
become the witness—

A passing car sloshes through puddles
from last night’s rain. Trees hang over us heavy
with water. My father rubs my shoulder,
laughs. Laughs? *I’m sure it won’t.*

He never says *I.* *I* think,

Look at us, yards away from our house, lying
to each other, language missing like holes
in a brick wall, and yet—

What answer do I want?

I ask again. *I* think I’ve said it all, said *what if you forget*
all there is, *forget me*
and
*if you don’t remember*
*who you are, then*
*who am I*

but actually,
*I*’ve only said

*So?*

He’s looking at the dogs circling,
his hand still on my shoulder. *I*’m wiping my nose
with my sleeve. *I* am asking
my father. *By your time there will be medicine and it will be treatable.*

The answer he can give.

*Our older dog always lets the little one*
trot in front of him, but lately, she’s waited,
just stopped, the leash yanking her neck
and we’re all lurched forward for a moment like a braked train

as she lets him go ahead of her.
Another car goes by, the puddle water rearranging.

My father’s saying a lot of things and he hasn’t
answered me
and I walk *I’m not talking about me*
even though I know he knows what I’m afraid of—

Once, I went to the library to read about the brain.
Lied about something for school, and the lie felt
large, good, like visiting the gone
and no one else seeing but the stone.
Walls tall with pages tight in plastic jackets—

I needed the books in my arms, to feel the work that had been done
for us. I didn’t find any relief in the red and blue
graphs of the hippocampus—
I think now—know now—I just hoped God was watching

and that it would count as part of the work.

*The chances are slim* he is trying

*Don’t worry* the smile again, *Come on, Lucy*
picking up the shih tzu
and tucking her under his arm,
a sagging sweater licking the air
but don’t you see, I want to say, we can’t know anything.

He runs
his hand over her fur, smoothing the hair back
and back again as we turn home and then he sings

*Don’t be sad* like he’s singing
to the dog, and I wonder now, looking back, if
he wasn’t really
singing to me, either.

At home, my face balmy,
we could have gone on.
The words could have
gathered between us like a puddle.
The door smacks shut.

Inside, my mother’s potroast steams the living room potato and red wine and the shy light from the street pours into the tiles cool in our kitchen and the leashes jangle hanging from their closet hooks. My father kisses my mother and lifts the pot lid, the steam rising into his glasses.

Once, after the nursing home, in the parking lot, my brother and I waited in the car, stuffed in the backseat in our winter coats, watched my father’s head fall onto my mother’s shoulder.

Now, I see the nursing home bricks where our stove should be and remember the seatbelt buckled too early pressing into the coat, into my chest—

I look again, only see the stove.

Hanging by the closet, my father’s white lab coat, our name embroidered by the breast pocket.

And by your time there will be medicine—

In dreams, my father and I sit on the haunted house ride at the Magic Kingdom the time the ride got stuck, our coffin car halted in the ballroom—

my young head low in the shadow of the play lid curved like a large eggshell,

the animated ghosts kept circling the ceiling even though the music had stopped

and I squeezed my father’s hand so tightly I almost broke it, those tricks of light still circling, circling
white against the dark, hollow hall,
    they were dancing, hanging
from the chandeliers—

In the dream, I know the ghosts aren’t real
    but I’m still gripping my father’s hand
and I hear the far-off children cackling,
    booing the machines
that have revealed their flimsy parts,
the voices crackled as if from an old recording.

The dream usually ends
    before the ride starts up again
but once, I kept on sleeping:

    the growl of the belt reviving, then
the car pushes us ahead and still, my father’s knuckles
    like rocks in my hand,
and we’re both tucked beneath the crescent lid,
    both of us moving through the grand
mansion rooms, the corridor with a single grandfather clock,

the hall of paintings, our faces in the mirrors.

   -

My mother calls for me to help with the table,
    the dogs curled on the sunspots on the tile,
and I hear my parents laughing,
    the full-chested music of our house
I’ve heard all my life—

That afternoon at the nursing home, in the parking lot,
my father at my mother’s shoulder,
    their motions silenced by the window I watched from,
we’re driving later through Norwood,
back to Baltimore, when my father pats my mother’s arm and says

_Honey, if I ever get that way, just shoot me_
    and the two of them erupted in a laughter
so loud and sweet
    my brother yanked off his headphones to ask what was funny
and my mother replied that they loved us kids

and maybe it was her and not my father who said
    the part about shooting,
maybe it was both of their voices as one voice
but I felt suddenly sick
and also tired, their lingering crumbs of laughter
  lulling my head against the seat.

My mother asks me to help with the table
  and my body drifts toward their voices
  and the sizzling roast.
  The television clicks on in the next room.
Two, four dinner glasses round, heavy in my hands.

  We begin to forget,

forget the walk,
  the damp grass,
the ghosts,
  the chill of an open parking lot,
the view of the lot from a car window—

I’m fresh again. Embarrassed.

I’ll be reminded later—
  My grandfather calls,
or I find my grandmother’s
  pink, velvet hair barrette deep in my dresser.

  Even the story of this day, the dogs,
  comes back to me by accident.

But what of my father? What dreams are there,

  what happens when he goes to sleep?

  Maybe worse than forgetting
    is the remembering—

My father’s hand on his mother’s
  like a fan of feathers,
and he is holding
  them, he is
holding

and my grandmother’s pale face
  stiff and shaking,
cruel memory
keeping her this way in my mind.
But there could be other dreams—

light in the corners of rooms,

my grandmother sitting at a table,
her kitchen curtains swaying behind,
and her hand knows

to pick up his hand—

My father and I will walk again the next day, and the next,
the dogs at our feet, the pavement’s rain shine

turned matte.

For a while, I’ll think I will ask him again.
Leaves will grow back on the trees.
    We’ll wear out our sneakers.

Across the street, a field spanning
for acres, grass hills dipped like the bell of a horn
    and from where we’re walking
we only see green, and everything is reaching the same way.
The Czech Poet and his Translator

He creases back the spine, places the pages in her hands. They sit side by side behind a table. We can see his wide pantlegs, gray ankle socks disappearing high under the cuffs. She is tall, thin, wearing stockings. Dark in the balcony, the stage glows stark yellow white against our black, the dome of the theatre a small, velvet cave. I’m still in the in-between of sight, able to make out the shapes of shoulders and faces down below, elbows bent on armrests, chins weighing lazy on tilted palms. Not even the thick red curtain catches light, roped tight on either side of the stage. I lean forward. Her mouth opens and I hear the first words purred into the microphone. Her lips are close to the metal; they echo sharp puffs with every purse. Somewhere in the line about love between the blind, how they hold each other’s wrists, there, his voice without his voice, the gruff Slavic dja now female American English. Her consonants fill the room like rain tapping glass. I’m watching him watch her with her finger following the lines, his neck angled downward, their large, blurry shadows blending behind them on the floor. Every few moments, a pause, the bobbing water of her voice waits at the breaks, these words that used to be his. When he lifts his hand to his chest, reaches under his open collar, rubs his white, wiry hair, perhaps he is calming the breaths caught in his coughing, or maybe he’s making sure of his lungs, his heartbeat. Still, the smooth soprano from her throat. Then, the sound of paper at her thumbs.
Pas de Deux

Once, you fell asleep as I was reading, finishing a novel of star-crossed lovers running through crowds, running from themselves and their promises, the woman pedaling her bicycle to her lover’s flat in the middle of the cold night, in and out of lamppost light, her dress bobbing on her knees, and I mention all this because as I read you tightened your arms around me like I was a wall trapped in your vines, making me think about what dream you were living inside, and how two faces pressed so close could be so far apart, like side-by-side listeners at the orchestra hall, but then the moment the woman lover died, thrown from her bicycle into the dark, tarred street, the man miles away busy in his kitchen, that was when you jolted awake as if something had struck your back, flung you forward, your mumbling caught at the end of something unfinished, and you stayed sitting up like that as my finger held the page, the man beginning to reach for the ringing phone.
Here and Not Here

The trees’ curtains draw back and there, the library steps. They hulk, steep stone leading up to the dome, watching over the grasses, hand-rails, sunken bricks.

Even as I stand below, far across the campus littered in leaves, the backs of my knees remember the steps’ pockmarked granite, cool like milk.

This is nothing new, memory invading the body as the body itself,

so the steps, like a mountain, pull me closer and my eighteen year-old fingers are curled around the neck of a guitar. I’m climbing the steps again.

It’s different every time, the strangers’ faces scattered like stars but also just as it always was, as I want it, my palm on the large alma mater statue, moving down her long, bronze robe. Athena, your book of knowledge,

what do you know of returning? Of wanting the steps but also

the memory of steps, of time doubling back on itself.

I reach down and find a yellow leaf I’d seen years ago before it fell and became again, again, this leaf with a stem like a wiry guitar string, like the deep lifeline valley of my hand. I want to forget this place so I can know it,
want to be here and not here, the object
but also the shadow, the body

forgetting and becoming again, again
At Abraham’s Grave

I can’t picture his face, the man whose name
created mine, can’t hear his voice calling
to his boys, now grown, now older than their father.
My hands push down into my pockets,
my own letters rocked in the ground.
I wonder about the five months after
he died and before I was born, where
our name went, if it stalled above him.

I remember great aunt Sonia scooped me up,
my crinoline dress bunching in her arms—
She showed me portraits of Abe
before the cancer, her son in black
and white, seated in rows with other cousins
I never knew. They tell me
he wore a camera around his neck, always
snapping pictures in the house, the stills
now watching from the walls of his sons’ shop.
I’ve seen them: rivers like shattered glass,
tree branches reaching through sun.

I imagine his family here, bending down
to place stones, arms tight around each other’s coats.
They’ve been coming for twenty-five years,
seeing his face in his grandchildren
while I have worn these sounds like skin, like anything
forgotten. Maybe they hear him when they
see me, the flop of the screen door, the knock
of his camera set on the kitchen table.
I’ll never see him standing in the dark room.
I’ll never see his fingers gripping
the lens, how his eyes reflected light
when he pulled prints off clothespins.

Here, this rock jutted between us,
the line will go on, the separate knots
on this rope. I hear all of our names,
the long A off our mother’s tongues.
Absence

To the man who sat alone in Covent Garden,
wispy white hair, drooping eyes, slice of walnut pie,
I don’t know why I was drawn to you
and your worn-out wooden cane,
your blue button-down, wrinkled like your hands,
but I was waiting for someone to join you—
anyone to share your dessert—
two forks stuck down in the filling, like friends.

I want you to know I’m sorry
I let you fumble your plate into the garbage
and walk away into the crowd.
I mourn the night you will disappear
from this world, leaving just an absence—
the single parked car left in the train station lot,
the last piece of luggage drifting
around the carousel, unclaimed.
Mirrors III

O my Body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and women, nor the likes of the parts of you;
I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the Soul, (and that they are the Soul;)

-Walt Whitman, “I Sing the Body Electric”

In winter, your body died without you.
Without your children, without your name,
no memory of music, nighttime, water after thirst, no rain hitting the roof, no sudden red in trees, no beadwork, no memory of hands,
of silk, of decks of cards, of wool at your feet,
without your books, without your voice, your armchair, tea leaves,
without the gold necklace cold on your chest, without the yellow light of the room—

What would Whitman have said in your last moments? Your body glorious and beeping, beeping with the monitor
as though it were your body announcing itself through song,
your cheeks pink as if from steaming tea, as if you’d just leaned over the mantel in your house, wiggled your fingers above the fire like it was your old upright piano—
What would Whitman say of your soul?

The soul the body, the body the soul—

Is this your soul in your eyes tilted downward at the bed, is this your soul exhaled from your depths
through your dry, caked lips,
your chin protruding like a hooked, hung fish?

I, just a child, stood at the bedside, afraid to kiss your forehead as I was told, afraid of your present body so close to death,
the body unnatural
to me in such states:

Months before, a school trip to the mummy exhibit,
I clung to the corners of the crowded room, far from what lay beneath the glass, their painted gold masks, enormous mouths like onyx,

and before that, my family’s tour of Westminster Abbey, the sleeping stone figures folding their hands on their chests, a large box beneath each one,
my breath grew short and I left the tour early, gripping my mother’s hand as we fled back through the halls filled with statues of the Virgin Mary, angel cherubs with stone eyes—
But those were bodies long after death, piles of bone present in a room for centuries, their physicality miraculous, terrifying

whereas you, grandmother, were still alive, your body preserving itself just as it had through all your life, just as my own body has through mine, and yet I feared the body as much as I feared the loss of body for all it loses with it, for all, I had learned, had already been lost long before:

lost were your lust (would Whitman say this is the soul?), your taste, visions of your parents, visions of your brother, versions of untold stories,

and lost, I feared, was all
I never kept, all that you were supposed to keep for us both, but didn’t.

All I have are blurred colors, your face in the mirror, your thumb at a spoon sprinkling sugar over cantaloupe, the white morsels disappearing.

In winter, your body died without you, and I, just a child, stood, both of us staring into faces we didn’t recognize, both of us fragments, both of us children, broken mirrors, visions fleeting like melting water, hands that didn’t remember the other’s.

O I say, these are not the parts, these are not the soul, the soul, dear Whitman, out of body, cold, beating body—

if only we knew which deserted which.
Kitchen Gravity

My hand reaches,  
the knife teeth  
sleek on the  
cutting board—  
Sliced tomatoes  
split, dripping  
onto the plate—

I don’t have to look:  
your hands are  
floating away  
from my hips—

Sometimes in  
quiet I  
like when you  
draw me  
gently into  
your body’s  
blanket but

here my waist  
is cold and you  
are rinsing glasses,  
browsing cupboards,  
too much love  
to wreck me  
open—

But I’ll collect  
the scraps,  
wipe clean  
the juices,  
set for dinner,  
the tile floor  
still there.
What to Say of These Hands

Time kept music in
your house, your father’s
collection of grand-
father clocks crowding
your living room like
a forest of strange plants.

Childhood sleepovers,
nights of bells surprising
and chiming at fifteen,
half past, though later
you’d tell me none told
the right time but one.

What to say of these
hands inching bit by bit,
the way we don’t feel
the earth move. Now,

I picture this forest,
smooth oak in angular
lines, the birds erupting
from their houses
and erupting again
like it wasn’t really morning
the first time. And below,
tucked in blankets,
our sleeping breaths
rise and count with their
singing, never knowing
which songs were which.
Our Daughter Speaks

A boat, a ship rocking, not rocking
but lifting and settling
as if the ocean’s breathing.

Our cabin’s cupboard door, a swinging pendulum,
only the knock
and another knock.

In bed, my hair
at your back

while far across the ocean,
across the beaches,

there, like a single star,
a house window aglow:

A woman stands,
her hands on the knobs of a stove.

She’d been stirring
sauce in a large pot,
tossing the spoon to the sink,
reaching for the pepper grinder,

she’s gliding
like a broom

and then nothing,
her young thumbs
at the knobs ’enamel
as her mother’s had once been.

We won’t meet this woman for years, won’t recognize her
as she is in this moment,
dark curls at her neck,
a crimson dress falling
too loose around her hips,
creases by her eyes
like the valleys of her hands—
she no longer resembles the girl that will come from my womb,
from both our bodies

but she’s calling to us across the water,
telling us
we can’t be prepared—

We can’t be prepared
for a mother’s mouth in old age
shaping words
from girlhood
like a broken
transmitter.

We can’t be prepared
for water soiled like gutter water,
a vase of weeks-old
flowers, forgotten,
crusted white clouds on the stems,
the brown petals
hanging their heads.

We can’t be prepared,
the woman’s telling us
at the stove,
no one prepares you

keep on
sleeping

she’s saying

no, look out
the window

But the cupboard
keeps creaking,
and our tiny cabin
rocks us

as the far-off kitchen glows,
a star’s faraway gasses
hot and contracting
that have pushed outward, outward
to bright explosion.

It will be years
until our eyes can see its light.
The Great Softball Injury

White sky, the ball lost in the trees rustling
and then I was apologizing for the blood
on our front steps, face hidden in my hands,

my hands later stiff and cracked as if
from dried paint as I lay on the bathroom rug,
tilting my head back like my father had said to do.

Why don’t I remember pain?
Only the ice my mother wrapped in paper
towels, neatly, like packed sandwiches.

Later, I’d only need a small splint on my nose,
my outline gone entirely from our rug,
my ad-hoc gurney. Still, reminders stayed:

the mitt in the yard, the ball tossed like shoes
to the back of the closet, my father’s eyes
that night and other nights glancing, glancing

at me through the car’s rearview mirror. I don’t know
where I wandered before the ball came down,
before the ball released from my father’s easy hand

like a fallen bird he hoped could still fly.
Da Capo (1943)

My grandmother quiet on a boat. I’m still trying to see it. Her brother, my old uncle Sid with the glasses and squinted eyes, a little boy boxed in a coat too large for his body.

My grandfather is older, fifteen: He’s home on his parents’ farm. He’s inside, standing in the dark, holding his breath behind a door. For a while, I could not get past these moments playing over, continually playing like rain spilling from a gutter and filling it again. For a while, I could not touch these stories, could not clutch them like my grandfather gripped his brother’s sleeve in the rafters, could not bend them like tired metal that needed to become something else. I’d see my grandmother, and her father before he was taken to the camps, what of him? What did his voice sound like?

I’d see my grandfather and hear four gunshots. For a while, it seemed I was always breaking what was not mine to wreck, but then like Beethoven watching the piano keys move up and down, no sound coming out, nights surrounded by those large, hollow instruments and a nothingness, I thought of the vibrations, how he stood by the open lid, reached over the hammers and slid his fingers across the strings—

I wasn’t there, but I can see my grandfather years before the invasion, tall and skinny with dark skin, leaning back in his chair and laughing in their kitchen, pots and pans dangling overhead like chickens. Slowly, I smell the beef kreplach. I can see the cloth curtains around the window, feel the warmth of the fire crackling there. I am standing by the flame. I am reaching out my arms—
Before Sleep
for Robert

Strange how when he reaches to shut off the bedside lamp, he returns to her someone different, his clavicle stretched like a tree root, their legs planked under the blankets like driftwood—
She knows this is how they will lie when they go down in coffins, he on that side, she on this, their necks folded toward the center like orchids keeling toward the sun—

She watches his eyelids close, the mattress suddenly becoming ground, cold under her spine, the nape of her neck, the pillow smelling like wet grass—

She can’t not think how far she’d have to stretch her arm between them through the casket, the packet dirt— a lonely fist kneading through unforgiving soil—

cannot heave their covers fast enough, pull herself onto his body, his hands pouring over her back like heavy sand. She presses tighter, wanting nothing but to be stone, sunk into the cave of his chest—melded, unselved.
Mirrors IV

Winters at their condo in Fort Lauderdale.
My brother and I tucked in the fold-out couch in the flowered room off the den with the small black and white television where my grandmother loved to watch Mr. Bean. Where once she’d sat with her legs crossed and laughed, glancing at the light flickering on our faces. Mr. Bean setting the egg timer, Mr. Bean late for his dental appointment, Mr. Bean stripped down to his underwear chasing a car through Marble Arch.
St. Maarten, 2005

Without his glasses, my father looks like someone else: squinted eyes like slits on a face that seems too small to be his, the absence only making him more naked as he walks away in his swim trunks. He staggers to the waves billowing against his sand-dug feet and pours himself into the water, smooth as egg yolk.

Instantly I see the stories he always tells: Jamaica Bay, my grandfather’s prized 16-foot boat, the Johnson motor thundering and my father, age eight, knee to knee with his sister, believing in heat, poles wobbling heavy in their hands.

I thought I knew everything he loved, but now I’m reminded our lives cross only by half, this strangeness of parents and children, shadows that can only blend in part when they sprawl across the ground.

Trailing on the shore, I mourn everything that can only be shared through story, the unseen layers we pass along and trust because we are told: the erased origins of scars, the wooden keel of my grandfather’s old boat, the covered side the moon carries on its back until the sun chooses to reveal it.
Telling

“Full many a flow’r is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.”

-Thomas Gray, from “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”

I’ve spent all afternoon with my grandfather on the terrace drinking soda.

He’s telling jokes, looking

at the clouds, looking

at my face.

He can still recite poetry from grade school,
Byron, Gray, lifting his chin
and holding the lapels of a pretend suit

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.

“He do you know what a knell is?” he’ll ask

and I don’t

but it doesn’t seem to matter to him that I don’t,
his voice gentle, his wide, old body

pouring off the sides of his chair

like it poured over his cane

when he used to visit my grandmother, kising her bare, cold forehead.

Why couldn’t I write all this until now? I’ve wanted to write his character,
his moneyless childhood before decades

hunched over tax forms in windowless offices
before his wife forgot

who they were.

I’ve wanted to write
what I wasn’t supposed to know,

how when he was seventeen
in a bar fight

he beat up a guy so bad

the guy died

but I can’t write any of it
with him sitting here
beside me on this terrace

with a dry cigar in his mouth
and his loafers pointed toward me
like old dogs.

There’s more—

Before he took
my grandmother to the home,
he packed her bags,

and I’ve imagined him folding

her lace nightgown against his chest
and pausing like it looked foreign
without her inside it,

setting it atop the awkward pile
of her things on the bed

and reaching

for their wedding picture
on their nightstand

and putting it in there too

so he could go with her,
so she could have something
to own.

And all the air a solemn stillness holds.

My grandfather says it’s too bad
he won’t be around
when I’m famous, famous

words grandfathers
say to granddaughters

except he believes it

and never thinks

I’ll search for the guy from the bar
in his hands

and now I’m talking
about him like I’m writing

his elegy—

not the kid who bled to death

but my grandfather
sitting next to me
on this terrace.

What I’m supposed to do
is write it all,
write to prove

that people are dark,
people are wrong,

that this
is what our hands are capable of.

But here, also, the air is cooling

and the sun has moved
from my grandfather’s feet,

and it reminds me of sailing,
the wind at our hair,

the music of passersby gone quiet.

\begin{quote}
Full many a gem of purest ray serene \\
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear.
\end{quote}

“The image of that flower,
I never forget it,” he nods,
ashes at his lip,

and I keep listening

and he keeps telling