

ABSTRACT

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This collection of poetry depicts landscapes and experiences of loss. The poems occur in various locations: Baltimore, MD; Shenandoah, VA; Rochester and New York City, NY; Uppsala and Göteborg, Sweden; Vienna, Austria; Budapest, Hungary; Kusadasi and Ephesus, Turkey; Vilnius, Lithuania; Panama City, Panama; Washington, DC. There are some named characters, and many unnamed characters; these individuals appear across poems as their relationship to the speaker and the speaker's location change.

HOODOOS AT MONTAUK

By

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HOODOOS AT MONTAUK

We walk out past the danger signs a hundred feet up
where the cliff's platform of clotted, yellow dust

is undercut by air.

A ledge begins to crumble
and the dust rises and rides
a current of churning, darkening sky.

This is the farthest you've ever been. Maybe
it feels like an end, to look out
over cliffs named for incantation, past the beach,
the shallow, over the Atlantic,
which meets an angry, mute horizon.

Centuries-beaten, the coast is stone-middle.
Its base, a sand-ripple
is so haggard, so jaw-like,
it is more foam than sand or stone.

You are descending, pressing your eager body
into the slip, watching the dust rise

and I watch it engulf your reach,

stretching for dried shark eggs, rocks,
whole crab shells—

Our smiles ask the distance to keep silent this once,
to not tell us of the dividing future.

Rain falls in drifts; it pulls the dust together.

We shed the lightness of our laughter
as the rain begins to swirl
and I move toward you,
deeper into the mouth.

When people stop to ask if we are honeymooners
we are ankle deep,
hands and pockets heavy,
spilling the earth's gifts.

BAYSIDE: A LETTER

Dear L,

They said to clear the cliff-side to sell the view,
but I wanted to see,
before we sold it,
the part of your land I had feared.

Because there is no view now, just thicket,

T and I take the harder work:
trim the trees, dig out bushes.

Underneath, blooming, I unearth an amaranth,
blossoms jarred.

We cut back everything—
what you'd planted,
what had grown.

The creeping vine had begun to grip the paneling
of your house.

We let this place go.
We let you linger alone, in denial that your mind
could no longer hold you.

On the path that cuts the clearest trail to the bay,
where on a bright day
you can see the lip of the Canadian border
I thought I saw you:
knee deep in the bowing wheat,
in the hillside's drop.

I ran, following the deer tracks, the split teardrops and rounds,
where we'd thrown branches,
as if you were alive again,

on the thin careful ridges, off trail and too far down,
digging my boots into the dirt,

until I was gripping the vine-weeds
and praying.

But it wasn't a prayer.

I remember, as a child,
how I could catch each tree,
unable to breathe,

trunk after trunk only to roll off, roll further,
each jolt—

a fear your parents had of this land,

but when I stand at the edge looking out—
the view clouded by the cherry trees, pines, bushes—

I see the light in the surf.

This isn't so much a cliff,
as how earth drops off to water.

L, when your heart stopped I saw death:
not so much a figure,
but so like you, an absence.

I wanted to see if I could make it up the cliff.

At the top, T and I had cleared the view:
water, bridge, boats.

FLIGHT

The thick air of November frost
formed like chalk against the glass.

We laid ice over my sister's body,
folded the snow into dishcloths.

In the yard, in the blue light, the thin-spread ice,
birds collect at the feeder.

I remember my sister asking—
her arms bent, preparing to pull the gauze

off her wound, infection—
to open the blinds.

When I think of the birds
and the seeds that drew them to us

I imagine migration.
I loved to watch the earth from the aerial:

the cold, quick air;
clouds; looking over the patchwork

of hillsides, divisions in the groves, in the forests;
to watch the late birds' beaks

aimed at arched hunks of flying bread.
Now I watch the mirrors for her disappearing body,

hear her everywhere—in the air,
on a bus, in these crowded cities.

And what I see, I don't recognize.

COMMUTING TO DC

Beyond the city the tracks are lined with fugitive pigment.
Rust or a spark blossoms and recedes in this predawn darkness,

Cars' headlights replicate and skim across panels of glass.
In each flash I look more and more like my mother.

My fingers pressed in the supple space under my eyes,
swathed by the still dark,

mourning the sort of death
where there are no bodies to bury,

only a past which recounts the shifting
of one known to another.

I remember my mother
descending cement steps

into the pitch-resonating basement
of our first house, going to warm the car,

to get my father as the night shift turned to morning song
and I stirred the bird's call into pale dreamless sleep

from the backseat of our car.
Today I'm riding the train 50 miles to see the Black Box Exhibit.

Ai Weiwei's *Zodiak* outside, the dragonhead
replicating what a friend had said:

"This will be one of two things for you:
A year of fortune, or a year of hardship."

Inside, I watched a man open and close his eyes,
his head crawling with bees.

IN JUNE

Flexible, and
 swollen faced,
shaking in the bathroom stall

fogging up the mirrors—

how aerated—
 No, how emptied—

to leave
 yourself—.

In your wake, our words

 spoken being—

 to live,

to live in the shadow
 of how I couldn't have

become you

less.

LIMINAL SPACE

This thing happens: on the pulpit
grandfather

turning blue;
your body turning against you

walking around half-self, searching
for a map that makes distances
linear, measurable:

mark the spot you once were,
these forming you now.

I thought it was hard work, all this noise
to have worth

and it's taken me immeasurably

to the ends of many bodies of water

to understand myself
in relation to the spaces I inhabit.

In the night I am seeing
from another hemisphere the stars are no different.

Disoriented: feeling my feet
and head belonging to different bodies

adjusting.

In hot-iron-tin, I coast the streets of Izmir,
in a stupor,
with the student-philosopher
looking up

to the stacked apartments, to the city spreading
and my bag cuts into my shoulder and swollen,
I taste swollen—

I stay awake with the image of my grandfather,
the mewling alley cats, their noise in the tin
clamoring the soundtrack of his hurtling down
shallow steps,
 then the aisle,
the congregation standing

their mouths open Os
and his knees bow

under the weight of his overstretched belly.

I spent every penny I had
to book a flight that would take me as far
from myself as possible.

Even in the airport in the student-philosopher's home city,
nauseatingly, he keeps asking *Where?*

his dissertation on a word
that I've been looking for
with my mouth and hands, dry
and rubbing where into the map, the ticket
that brought me here, and the distance I feel,
but he's looking for a different answer.

In the morning, with my cheek pressed to the window
I watch olive groves. I want to tell my friend where is the water,
the air, insatiable thirst—

We wade through countries, languages, time, this liminal space,
our bodies oriented to sand
the distant islands,
to feel these borders but not see
the sea's swell grip our ankles.

I try to hide from the sun with my hands

walking the streets near the beach.
We rent a room with salmon walls,
and I worry, traveling with this man

who only sees the world in questions.

In the heat, in the room, in a stupor, I stand too fast,
slit my head on the edge of a shelf,
and touch my hand to the rush—
but the parts of me that are dead
aren't coming back.

Like the other places I've gone
I know the promise.

I find, in the water, swimming, his question—
like the water—suspended—

I couldn't see,
until I packed my things to leave
the necropolis of Ephesus—the ancient city

among the people with their camera's pointed up
out the Theater's opening, the expanding land,

the thin cut trade routes, thin cut hills
divided to keep fire from the olive groves,
paths that weren't death traps
any more than my numb moving—
that we'd detached.

In the sun's heat, which makes me dizzy,
makes me think falling,
how these walls have been falling
for centuries, how the dead surround the city—

I can't breathe in the ruin where I try to sit,

the letters of Greek's or Ottoman's
or some other ancient people press
into my back,
the imprint like a shadow
as I focus on each leg to move forward
past pillars of forgotten gods, past the dead
and dead languages.

I pay in a currency I don't understand
to walk a holy land in sectioned off lines,
to spend one minute in the last house of Mary,

my prayer to heal like his where?

I want one more sensory moment

but everything is distance
and this map, the bus
route in blue, monuments—

I left. I traded one self for another or another chance
of finding what I thought was forgotten.

For days it rains. I stay inside
my friend's white-walled apartment
reading poems to a singer and his lover, a dancer,
and I watch them with my hands

holding where my abdominal wall remains severed

and they ask me to dance, but I am heavy
despite their weightlessness.

If I could speak everything,
maybe I could come back.

Spinning, the lovers take me on the tallest swing in Europe.
I wonder if I will ever see

these friends again.

I spend my nights
on trains, in buses, studying the unfolding
before I enter the city of Buda.

Thumbing into my bag the rain
feels clean as it caresses
my head, my neck—

In the morning it has all changed, even from the balcony
with the blue sky,
a deeper shade than I've ever known.

where I hear the spraying of graffiti
on the outer walls of my rented apartment, I wait out the night.

In the alley outside, a brick wall is crumbled,
the space full of empty rusting bottles.

I learn the superstitions of the people here: don't inhabit
the space of the dead,
the space were families
were filed off to the woods. I don't go back
to that apartment, but find myself in the shallow water

tasting blood, the filaments tearing, the NG tube in my nose,
there aren't dreams here, but months
unthinkable months, and this new map, the world in diagram.

But the tests say
Unremarkable

watching the towers again,
the falling people, the mass grave in the middle of the woods
all this history that isn't mine, doesn't belong
to anything I could possibly know, the way the past in location
and trauma can't escape a body.

And the streets are circles, parallels, or crosses;
they are dirt, or cobble, or cement,

and I can't say where I am without them.

In the middle
of the city named Devil, or trickster,

their history: the people
killing their people,

these empty spaces. I am always lost
in cobblestoned neighborhoods, looking for the arch
that leads to my door.

MIRRORMAKER

Sending shocked white light across the room,
each transparent oval lifted between gloved fingers
my father stood like a priest lifting glass offerings
to the sterile lights.

He was careful, replacing his mask and gloves between each run.
He'd stretch graph paper across the dining room table
while he measured the sine and cosine of a light wave's color.
The broken, spotted, and imperfect mirrors
filled our home with blemished surfaces.

He taught me the properties of mercury, of silver,
to check the flat glass's surface, to tether the bindings.

I remember each descent of the coater's gaping mouth,
how it seemed to swallow the future—and when I'd pick up
or graze a thin clear surface, I knew exactly which would break.

My father's powdered hands have turned to leather;
our lake's water has turned deeper and deeper greens,
the sideways fish floating in the reeds—.

I imagine the machine opening and closing perpetually.

I want more from my reflection. To be greater
than a simulacrum, more than machine.

VITA NOVA

With each hair, each goose bump
erect, and everything an apocalypse

I went to close the open windows.

The first frost formed in crested layers
of papery ice, squares perfectly angular

and homogenous.

The summer was gone.
The oriole's nest—.

I felt around the glass, its melting condensation:
small ovoid pools on the sill.

I tugged, then shook
the first pane's top edge,

exacted my whole weight against it,

wanting everything that needed to be closed,
or opened, or changed

to change.

But snow's air-heavy breath spilled
onto the floor, the light,

the light like dust. I longed for the thawed lake's rush,

the waves where I spent summers;
the lives we'd led there were only remnants.

I HEARD YOU, ILYA

It must have been disappointing

To be my parent.
When I go home,

My father wishes daughters on me.

I don't go home.
My brother will inherit the earth steeping,

While I wait for the train.

Men here drape themselves over the railing the way one image
Cuts into another: the movement of the air brushing forward.

There was no fatted calf.

Too much
Has lost its meaning.

My mother suffers.

When I left
I took all of the spoons.

MOTHER

I left because I had to leave,
and my brother wrote on the walls.
The ink turned purple from scrubbing,

his letter was one I wouldn't see;
it wasn't my room anymore.

I remember how the cold seeped into the windows.
I remember running along the gorge and to the beach.
I must have learned music in the rhythm, each step in the heat, on the ice.

300 miles away
I spend my days rubbing the corners of pages
like a kind of need.

I don't know why it happened in the morning,
or why it was painless: the peritonitis, the paralysis.
Your voice like your rage filled the hospital's halls,
and the surgeon cut and seared the rupture.

Maybe recovery comes in bouts,
seeps in when no one is looking.

I think of calling, can't quite do it,
but I think of how you stayed,
waited out the surgery, stood
outside the recovery room and bossed the nurses.

FLAT OF FIGS

No one believes in a love forever anymore,
And alone, eating fig preserves on crackers
I think of the box you brought home—
Packed lightly in green tissue,
Flesh still a little hard for shipment;
I wasn't sure what to do with them,
Having never seen the palm-sized fruit.
My parents live frugally.
Unlearning poverty, I dreamt that my parents had died
And I had to go home to care for my brother.
He was hoping to wait tables at Pizza Hut,
And I had my closet of beautiful clothes and guilt.
Since you, I began dating men with good jobs
Who buy me dinners and flights, and I am not in love
So each ends warmly.

KILLING THE PLANTS

I put our plants outside to die.
Their death would be the last thing living

we'd both have touched, and I was ready to kill
whatever was left between us.

You had made our plants a metaphor for your survival.
I am tired of hyperbole.

You were fine when the basil died;
that was the second plant of ours

that wouldn't make it. The aloe froze
during a particularly nasty storm—

being on the verge of rot.

TRADE

In the back booth in Korea Town
New York, just after I'd recovered
And wore only a bandage over the gap
In my stomach knowing I'd been lucky
Again, I didn't speak much.
At the next table over, a man moved chopsticks gracefully
Over a tray of pickled vegetables
And demanded: "Say yes, Mister. Keep your eyes—
Yes—down." I looked over and he looked back:
His gentle-looking face, his silver streaking hair.
The woman was turned away,
Her hair swept over her shoulder as a curtain.
I had thought of the options of poverty,
Had thought of the trade of bodies.
I tried not to look again—stared at the red upholstery
Stretched and leather-like, the dim-red oblong lights—
I couldn't touch my food, afraid and longing
To learn her history, this woman who could have been me,
Could have been the girl who disappeared
In my neighborhood, grown up, could have been poor
Her whole life, was maybe lucky to be here in America,
Was maybe lucky to be eating. I was lucky
To be eating. Six months and everything I ate
Found its way up, six months and I was a body
That cost \$200,000 to save. I want solutions,
To save anyone, even myself, or this woman
From this man—who left a hundred folded in tip
As he followed her like a thread out into New York,
There on the table—I keep thinking,
What do I know of economy?

SUSTAINED ENERGY

When I am speaking to my friend
the word comes to me,
seems to surface like a fish coming up for air,
chasing bubbles: sustained energy,
for when we're running,
though now our acquired pains
don't slip away as quickly, and I wonder how deeply
your old illness affects you. Sustained,
which is to say ongoing, which is of course
neither a beginning nor an end,
but an energy already; no need to say them both.

WHAT STORIES WE TOLD

In the summer, hiking the gorge near your grandparents' house,
we walk in light and shale.

Once an expansive ocean, it is dry and lush in the canopy.
What was carved a second time by water, glacial retreat
now thinned and rushing at our feet.
You lean toward the glimmer-slick shale,
dropping down to pull back moss and brush
—a salamander!

Everything is simple.
We want to be alone together.
We walk barefoot, water to our shins,
the minnows scatter and swarm to each footfall.
With our shoes in our hands, you carry me towards the falls,
to a pool of receding water.

Your thumbprints blossom
rose-colored buds against my shoulders.

What moves beneath is a harbinger
of how I will stop speaking
when you take my head in your hands
as though to shake what you need and I can't give.

For a while I will still wear your shirts,
pretending that they are you holding me.
All that you did excellently, you did with your hands.

DRAFTS OF A LETTER

Dear X,

Outside it is the loudest summer.
The cicadas wake me to the empty house:
darkness so full of shapes I see you in them.
I see you everywhere.

Even from a distance I could always feel you,
would turn as you'd approach,
found even your quietest movement.

One quarter of spent time, my life, the currency
was not days. Lifetimes we'd had,
as though this were not our first.
We'd say things like soul
and I would feel my skeleton reshaping, making room.

Dear X,

Was it that kiss
that nailed the slow rotting coffin
where I've made my bed?

The way I knew spinning meant
an ending, and we didn't end;
we waited.

Dear X,

On Sunday I will see the ashes of my grandmother—
who you love too—in the black lacquered box.
And you're not family; we're not together, and you will take the shovel
and you will take the earth.

Dear X,

Today my body is an apiary
spinning pollen stains—azeleas, bitterroot—
gentle and I'm collecting noise,
clinging to the tips of each bodily edge
of you as if you were here.

Dear X,

In the morning light, our cat looks out the window.
When you left, she let me hold her as we slept.

She was your gesture of our making a life together,
A begging of forgiveness that I'm sorry
I didn't give you.

Dear X,

What are space and absence? Atoms,
their arrangements? I remember the winter nights
looking out into the blackened waves from the frosted lighthouse's base—
I remember nights feeling in the tips of your fingers your pulse
at the edge of each of us.

Dear X,

Each day like clockwork I work to be alone. Let's start over.
Let's pretend we never did any horrible thing.

NO CONTACT

In this cold morning light
My body prickles awake
As from a memory of intimacy.
I returned in my sleep to the city behind you:
The rummaging of other bodies
Whispering this anti-mantra
I've held myself to these months.

I am not in your city now;
I am writing in a hotel bed in Virginia.
Morning in an unfamiliar valley:
Dry corn husks, wheat, hills spotted with cattle.
The dream-image slowly erodes,
But not perfectly so that the bodies
Of my dream move with me.

When I've forgotten—at breakfast maybe,
A single occupant among
The other single-occupant tables—
The dream comes swimming back.

Then it's rush hour. I'm alone in my car
And cannot change the radio
To anything that doesn't sing of sad sap hearts.
And who cares if every day you wake up empty?
Or if you're moving? Or if you aren't?

WHERE ARE ALL THE GOOD MEN?

There are good men in my life:
stable ones with good jobs and
clean hands and clean teeth, the one
that brought me flowers, fresh
and delicate. They listen
to my grocery list or chores.
One comes to yoga
and speaks of the void left by our losses,
how the nice guys finish last
and I laugh, hold back that I think he's right.

But I want the ones with wandering
hands, erratic and critical and callous.
No, I want the bad man who knew love,
and knows how to fake it.

These good men
are not that good; it's not enough
to use a nail brush, bring me things
at the end of their beauty;
to never ask that I use my fucking brain.

I want a language that wakes me.

DEAR FRANK,

The beach is bounded by three jutting rock formations
Which bar the riptide assaulting the rest of this side of the island.
Here, the sand is pink.
Birds are launching forward from their heads.
You and I are swimming in this clear, tropic water.
I cut through the water fast;
Your strength is heavy but carries you further.
My path keeps intersecting the waders
Where the current is safe, where to stand
Doesn't demand bobbing up for air.
Though you learned to swim recently,
You take the deep water—long perfect strokes.
When I was telling you about the lake back home,
I knew I couldn't take you there.
In this moment, I think you realize we cannot stay together.
I don't know it yet, so my swimming is light.
On the beach, I just smile.
This is my first real vacation, and maybe the only time
I've ever relaxed.
I am amazed by how easily other people can read strangers.
Because we are so close, maybe,
Your face doesn't give so much away,
Or maybe I am still relishing
The way your whole face lifts when surprised,
How otherwise calm you are and thus, still youth filled.
If it were timing that was wrong,
If I were growing to love you,
I have reminded myself how we move so differently
In time, in space.
But when you stood framed by the large square window
Of your apartment, facing the sun, October and warm,
Your back strong, your hair a little wet-looking from your gel,
Knowing that this space is yours—something pure
About that moment. But what I knew, I only knew of your body,
Never how your family escaped the North
Or what it meant to remember yourself as a boy running
Across frozen rice paddies. And that mystery, why I stayed.
And what of me? What were you seeing?

THE TRAINS SHAKE OUR HOUSE

There's no straight shot across the four-lane highway parsing our small American village—or what was left after the piano factory was bulldozed.

Dad and I would sprint halfway—wait, leaning on the double yellow lines, for the cars to pass. Launching recklessly into their draft, letting up once hitting the sidewalk, jog the rest of the way to the railroad tracks.

At the railroad, I'd stare suspiciously at my laces. My grandfather watched my great aunt, his sister, pull to run, the train's horn warning like the droning panic they must have both felt. She was caught on the tracks outside Chicago; her small child-body drafted up and under and crushed.

*

When I got sick, my body remembered again something I had forgotten:
a retraction in the gut—

how deeply I feared as a child that no one loved me.

*

He came the worst day and not again.
My body was half off the hospital bed.
My father sat beside me in a burgundy chair.

I was looking at him sideways, trying to block out the light.
I'd dropped too much weight, the muscles—I'd stopped telling the nurses

when my veins would burn, the antibiotic seeping out the IV,
budding on my arm—drawing out the collapse of each vein.

Not with the ice, not with the fans, two weeks to cut the fever and I knew then what
they'd refrained from saying.

When he didn't come again,
I felt as close to the infinite density

of a black hole, my small life's version—

zero size, trembling.

*

I understood that my grandfather died young, was long dead, that Dad had watched it—his 13th birthday spent by the hospital bed—but then it meant something different.

I couldn't believe anymore that at 18 my life would start over; that my parents would always be their young tight-skinned selves; that I would always be a child, and death would never touch me.

*

I haven't lived there in a decade now, though I can feel the texture of our narrow stucco house, the jagged, nipping surface. At its slipping foundation, the basement was insulated by exposed asbestos—I threw my toys down there to die.

My father's life, I imagine, is him in that dark hospital room, his hands folded in a prayer.

FOR THE SURGEON

Before discarding the blade. Before you drain and sew,
In each stitch sing the incantation of your labor.

Before the machine closes her.
Before removing the staples again.
Before the incision tears open.
Before the veins collapse.
Before the heart pumps too fast
There will be no time for anticipation to manifest as fear.

Before you explain that you have to move fast.
Before you move her, before you tell us to prepare,
Before we pray
Don't tell us our child cannot come back the same.
Don't give times or expectations.
If our child's half-dead half waiting body will sing,
her song will be machine to her will to live,
to praise her living.

THE ARTIST'S APARTMENT

Hanging from the dark wood rafters
are the pieces of many bodies
that had been dug up, or extracted from bog.

Karen packed the bones in her suitcase before leaving Italy,
and now, like pruning a branch,
she removes a nub-ended, tea-stained femur
and holds it out to me.

Part of me wants a skull,
part imagines the startle of grazing
the cool calcium surface in the night
on the way to the bathroom.

I can't imagine today, what the TSA
would do with a suitcase full of bones,
and I didn't know that you could buy them.

Karen is a master of anatomy,
and maybe because we have the same feet
or maybe because I read her poetry,
we are testing the creative process.

Behind her, pigments are lined in glass jars,
pure powdery shades
interrupted by her handwriting, delicate on each label.

When I smile at Karen, I wonder if she's measuring sacred geometry,
or if I've revealed my discomfort with dismemberment,
but she holds another bone to me, says,
"these couldn't have come from the same body"
and laughs, reflecting a weighted flatness.

When I hold it, I expect the femur to speak,
but this is not magic, not math.
That I am bone, that I have watched muscle divide,
watched the sickening grace of it,
isn't a concern to share now.

Before the other artists arrive, the model disrobes,
a woman whose body scares me.
Though 23, she looks alarming older: sagging
everywhere, her skin dull
and discolored from years of chain smoking.

Karen believes in her oils
the way I believe in poetry.
We are both trying to remake the figure.

I HEARD SCREAMING

from the closet in my childhood. The trapdoor
of my nightmares was a space on my floor. I would leap

over it, sleepy-eyed in the lamplight.
I was dreaming my pillowcase into a parachute.

I was mesmerized by an off-ramp off the four-lane highway.
I heard her: the ricocheting yell,

the girl who evaporated,
her bike like a monument

across the street and still hot,
the near-perpendicular wheel spinning the curb.

Before that, it was never noise
that kept me up,

but the cars
and their lights traveling away.

BALTIMORE PENN STATION

Looking down on us early morning commuters
two cabbies hang over the rail from the road above
watching the platform where the trains board and shudder out.

I wonder if the men up there feel their waiting
like those of us down here
watching the distance for headlights.

I look up at their dangling bodies
limber in the early morning air, and maybe we're all
between cities, savoring the morning, this brief moment
of cold lung-contracting air.

BURYING YOUR DEAD

Perched on the laundry line, a blue bird stared at my mother.
She called us to the window.
All the loose papers began to swarm us like an Oklahoma tornado
in our living room in upstate New York. Toppa was dead.
I cried because my mother cried,
but it didn't mean anything until the burial.

What is left each of us take a shovel worth to cover,
the black lacquer disappearing. Waiting in the hot sun,
I feared leaving the graveyard was to be an end not just of the patriarch,
but of each of us.

It was an end of each of us. We sit in silence at dinner.
In my grief, I broke parts of myself like amputating
not just one lost limb, but all, at once, to sear what I couldn't bear
to lose slowly. Everyone said he lived in his own world;
what I know of art is such. We shed what we could,
my coat dragging across the grass.

WHAT I DIDN'T TELL YOU

there in the water past the borders—
the water of your childhood between Turkey and Greece—

I'd watched the forest change seasons from the hospital window,
bouquets blooming on the sill,
and as the leaves fell
I could see the lake's progressive freezing,
and I left—as though to heal.

I didn't tell you
I'd come looking for my past,
thinking that if found it—
in the trains, the overnight bus—
if I could speak the whole story,
that maybe to make a beginning
and an end would make an end.

We swam out and I could see the sea's floor
drop off, deep, and the space beyond: disappearing.

You asked "Where?" trying to show me by sinking that between,
the liminal, the problem of where.
I didn't tell you I'd died,
felt part of myself gone, couldn't get back
what I'd lost.

I would walk out on the ice
and imagined the fish trapped
but never myself.

I lay back in the water, let it mute the noise
of families on the beach in the distance.
I was reaching out, trying to find again
where I'd detached.

AFTER FALLING

The lithe trees pulse
along the edges of the upper ledge.
At the chasm, with the shale,
the mouth-wide brim—
centuries lay bare as rock.
In the distance there was a fire.

I was standing in the glen in Watkins, NY,
as though the membrane
of my body might be changing.
A ghost held half my face,
the other half seduced
by the black eddy amid
fast moving water.

It was then that I felt it,
the impulse to step off,
as if I could see my profile
exposing branch-like veins
budding before my head met rock,
and the incredible relief.

I remember the houses in the distance.
I remember the way the water carried my body,
and the exposed cheek-flesh
like I'd been washed in too hot water.

BIRTHDAY POEM

My friend worries she can't have children—
anorexia having stopped her period years before.
That's not her problem now.
She is afraid and unwilling to go to the doctor
who, she says, will perform routine but archaic procedures,
who will look inside her,
who will, at worst, determine nothing is wrong;
there is no cause and thus no treatment
for her suffering. I think she is wrong to tell people,
or, I think she is wrong to speak it—
to say, as if she knows definitively.
We are both about to be 25, maybe too young
to worry, but I'm afraid of it too:
of being barren, or worse,
that time might deprive each of us an easy birth.
I'm afraid of being cut open. I'm afraid
of being what my mother was—unprepared, unforgiving.
I hear my friend speak it: no children
like a curse.

TRUST

Tonight's rain pelts down,
all that heat of summer lifting, if only
for one breathable moment.

It's like that night in Vienna
when, dancing with a group of ballroom dancers
and my friend, a pop singer who had recently been signed
to a boy band despite all his classical training
dipped me low, inches from the beer covered cement;
it was easy to trust the strong hands that held
the small of my back, me, the American trying not to be
so obviously foreign. Our friends kept telling people
"we are dancers."

And then the night was over.
It was raining. The party disbanded,
the sky was slick-black, the streets too.

When I fell in love, my life changed.
I stopped being scared of my body.
I took greater joy in smaller things;
I watched R's hands choose brushes
and paints, how he would subtly shift in looking
at his work. Alone now, and unpacking boxes
from the recent move, a photograph of a ballerina
in arabesque slips to the floor. I see the same
careful determination to carry the whole weight
of our lives, to hold for a moment, suspended
and present in the sensual world.

ANHAGA

To go home—
To feel the spray
of Lake Ontario,
to return lakeside in midnight sun,
Mälaren, the summer I lived in Sweden—

I can't feel what I've left,
but sometimes the air fills with sweetness,
and, for a moment, like catching
my reflection in the water, like being shot back
to those homes, different lives:
a reverie of the Pacific coast, Panama—.

I am 16, full of language,
slipping against burning sand, a little drunk,
facing the ocean for the first time,
shading my eyes against the too bright
water, excited and scared of the roar and waves,
on the edge of going in.

INTIMACY

Though I haven't been alone,
Or because I haven't been
When my friend I hadn't seen
In a long time brushed my hair
From my shoulder
I felt the quick blush
Of being touched, being loved.
Though the love of friendship
Is more intimate than lovemaking
And more startling. And I remembered again
That I am waiting, trying not to rush—.

APOLOGIA

Because my father and I don't speak.

Because the days are long.

Because I've realized that they are not
Getting easier.

Because I stopped trusting you
Long before I stopped loving you, and because of it
We could never overcome my sadness
And your anger.

Because my mother mails me newspaper clippings
And coupons, and hopes I'll dedicate a book to her.

Because she doesn't remember.

Because today I realized that I cannot keep seeing
This man I do not love.

Because I have already lived enough.

Because I haven't been a good daughter,
Or partner, or friend.

Because my friends

Make mistakes with other people's hearts.

Because my home and my school became two places
I withdrew from.

Because I was cleaning when your letter
Slipped from the box of your letters
That I must throw away.

Because of it,
I wanted desperately
To be loved again,
And to remain free of the burden of loving.