

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: On the Phone with My Mother
Leigh Claire McDonald, Master of Fine Arts,
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Directed by: Professor Michael Collier, Department of English

On the Phone with My Mother considers intimacy and its antagonists: technology, physical and temporal distance, and mental disorders and diseases. Landscapes and geographies, mostly of the North American East Coast and Ireland, as well as photographs and domestic objects, provide occasions for the speaker's explorations of family and its matrilineal history.

ON THE PHONE WITH MY MOTHER

by

Leigh Claire McDonald

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Michael Collier, Chair
Professor Elizabeth Arnold
Professor Stanley Plumly

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Mātr

She called it
thick, reddish syrup,
the stain on her underwear

*

My mother found her
grandmother in the barn
and showed her.

*

She must have known the association:
sweet, life-giving.

*

“Menses,” in Latin, is “moons.”

*

I wonder if women,
when asked by their men,
would point
in explanation.

*

Starry sky. Glowing one.

*

When it came,
the world split inside my abdomen

and I asked a god I didn’t believe in
for death.

*

Something you could tap from a tree,
something to savor.

*

This is our common pain,
and, if I could,
I'd pull it up by the root.

*

Mother: the first utterance; a wild gourd.

*

Every time I call her: a garden through the phone.
No, more like a weed.

*

The mother is named by her child.

I.

Sunday, Annapolis

Houses, some raised a level for air
and water to pass under, that steel-blue
color we like. John and I spend the day
traversing neighborhoods: summer cottages,
English Tudors, white, cross-hatched gates
and wrap around porches. We watch house
hunting shows to learn the words for what we love:
open concept, curb appeal, arts and crafts.
In Thomas Point Park, we find pink tufts of blossom
all along a sprouted tree, Japanese we think,
and take a picture, promise to find the name for it.
I worry we conflate taxonomy with understanding
or possession. We pass the park attendant's house,
the dark log cabin, now unoccupied.
I tell John I once knew the boy who lived there—
the bathtub of flowers in front of the house
has been removed, but I can see the indentations
of claw feet in the ground. The windows
of the house are empty, dark. We take a drive
through Highland Beach and point out
every house as belonging to Frederick Douglass
until we see the plaque, the preserved
yellow house with green trim and a view of the creek.
With every pointing gesture I see myself with John,
behind an orange door, aging well and peacefully
in the suburbs and wonder if he thinks this too—
my face grown so familiar it's disorienting,
if he forgets, for moments, which body he occupies.

The Parade

After my great-grandmother's autobiography

They think I'm a bad girl to have squeezed myself through the icebox and into
the parade Not so I only wanted to see the costumes their
horses and their drums Mom's just scared cause last time I left
I found myself in another family the door was open They
served me biscuits pork chops all smothered in gravy And I got
seven love pats for that but the cherry pie was worth it Wouldn't the folks
want me to see those white horses the dog and his spots and the
fireman who tosses me a present I won't let go this time Not
even to catch the colored beads or wave to the lady in the fuchsia
headdress No This time I know what I've got

Museum of Archeology, Dublin

Brown, sunken, and worn as leather,
the bog bodies stretch over Dublin.

Dimmed light for reverence, must be.
Their flesh is too decayed to preserve.

They need nothing on the wall beside them
to tell of their importance—

each body is surrounded by a circular wall
so that patrons must travel inward to see.

I lose my partner in the exhibit.
He reads inscriptions at the entrance

to each tomb. I follow the signs
to every body, heart racing.

But after every sacrificed king
and fallen peasant, I look for him

and the expression in his face:
if he witnessed the contorted bodies,

the calcified, ridged fingernails left
on the lucky ones?

Making Ramen

Bent over the stove you say
I love this. Counters clean,
the Sunday afternoon spent cooking.

I hold the vegetable stock to your nose
and say *umami*. You shake your head
that it's too sweet. I want to follow the book

but you insist on scallions, adding water.
I'm afraid to muddle the mixture,
the hours spent grocery shopping,

sautéing shiitake, browning each
flat side of the extra firm tofu.
But just like that, we've diverted.

I'm telling you to go ahead—
add fresh, chopped cilantro, enough
water to drown the noodles.

I am not the sum of what I can't control.
And here you are with heaving teaspoons,
enough Tabasco to stun the taste buds.

I've made a point to practice letting go
and the store was out of ginger root.
The ground spice, we agreed, lacks depth

and has a narrow bite. We keep going,
bending over each other with wooden spoons,
tasting, questioning what's missing.

After-Image

going eighty down the highway thinking
with one turn of the wrist that's it it's over

and I'm not afraid to say this because
everyone does this like everyone

has fake arguments in the shower
and everyone always wins except

this one guy and I'm just assuming gender
because his car was blue and in flames

I guess he thought a little too hard
about death but hey that could happen right

I mean it has to happen somehow
and we were all in the minivan

and I was behind my mom driving
so I saw it in the rearview and I was going

Look look or something I don't remember
I remember the flames pouring out

of every window and the car going
at least a hundred miles an hour

passing us and we could see it really see it
for a long time because of all the light

and I was wondering if he was trying
to outrun it and if you can outrun fire

and everyone I tell this to just says Huh
maybe it was pyrotechnics even you

you said the same thing when I told you
my whole family saw as if some eyes

are stronger than others but I remember
when the car disappeared finally

down the road I could still see the flames
all over my family's car all over

their faces as I tried to blink them out

eBay Listing: French Boudoir Dolls, “The Thief of Baghdad”

I didn't know they were a gendered pair,
both have soft features and painted lips,
headdresses. I only name what I know.
The dolls are dressed the same: princess and thief
in ruby velvet, now flesh toned by the sun
as if the light could animate them.
The pictures show the intricate grid of their skin,
the cloth rubbed and worn on their faces—
thinnest on their noses like they've been kissing.
Both sets of eyes look left,
the way they've been looking for a hundred years
in the wrong direction. What would she do,
my great-grandmother, put them face-to-face,
insist on eye contact, clear communication?
I only knew them as decoration,
something to remove from the bed.
But on the internet and as an item,
I find myself drawn to the dolls—
perhaps the threat of losing something held
by all the women in my family line.

Being Here

There are small moments
my brother joins our family.

This one, after a long talk
in a cold car—I found him

walking to our grandmother's old house,
taking pictures of the birds.

Our mother knows the window is closing,
knows my weakness, to see myself

in another moment—home videos.
My father's been digitizing months worth

of footage, deciding where to cut the clips.
This one, a familiar scene, he puts up

on the television so we can all see.
I am two so my brother is three, maybe four,

and we're both in bed with my father—
something that will never happen again.

He reads us a pop-up book and
my brother keeps it out of my reach

so I can't pull the pictures from the pages.
I cry and whine, my mother, filming, hands me

a musical stuffed animal. My father
begins to make strange sounds, enticing

my brother closer. He puts his baby face,
his strange pink nose up to my father's,

eye-to-eye, like I've never seen them before.
And it's as if this decade of differences,

of existing worlds apart, never happened.
And I'm sure, the uncomfortableness of this intimacy

is overwhelmed by our being here.

County Wicklow, Ireland

In my dreams I remember you.
Which means, for moments,
you are forgotten.

The trout swims into and out of
the reflection; into and out of
the sun.

A bird, a finch probably,
knocks torn pieces of bread
from the railing into the water.

I can hardly see the
small speckled mass moving
through the stream in Glendalough.

It sucks each bit of bread
into its smooth, growing mouth.

The fish, against the background
of pebbles, swims against
the speed of the stream.

Living Image

Henry James Sohm kneels on the lawn,
holding some kind of terrier in his left hand,
and you, Mother, are barely secured in his right.
You're the only one in the photo
who doesn't pretend to look at the camera.
Even the dog's got his eyes wide,
fixed on a squirrel or something
just right of the photographer.
Pop's got a deep brown, wooden pipe
between his surprisingly lax lips.
It's almost like the holly bushes behind him
are doing the work—producing
the puffs of smoke above your baby curls.
Something about your baptismal dress—so vivid, so white
it is almost blue.
I don't have the expertise to know
if your photos look better
because of money—that lack of sepia tone—
or because of content.
Your grandfather holds your forearm,
tries to pull you back into frame.
But you squint, shift,
and turn toward the sun.

II.

Help

I'm doing the best I can. I start to cry
into the phone but realize what I look like,

stuck in traffic on 495. He's making chicken
dumplings for dinner & I ask him to stay with me

a while longer. I try to remember what I'm saying.
At the intersection of the highway exit

& Georgia Ave., the couple behind me is red
& locking lips. I tell him I can see their tongues,

her hand on his face or his on hers. I wonder
if we kiss like that but I don't say it. The couple

turns green & I'm driving. At the CVS, I buy
mouthwash & Prozac. The woman in front of me

slams each item onto the self-checkout scale.
My mom once made a game of this—snickering

when the automated voice came on and said:
"HELP IS ON THE WAY." Earlier, at the appointment,

the doctor told me my normal is not normal.
Not anyone else's normal. It felt like a revelation.

Something I couldn't learn from looking out
from my eyes into another's. I ask if dinner's made

& he tells me he's shredding chicken.
I know he's standing at the counter, holding

the phone against his ear with his shoulder,
my voice staying in place from the pressure.

J.R.S., 1962

A few inches to the left of center, my grandfather, John Russell,
smiles at the Kodak Retina. He wears blue gingham—

it is summer in Naperville, Illinois, and he is twenty-seven.
It's out of frame, but the sun is directly above the photo—

it leaves notice on my grandfather's skin, while the area below
his forehead is covered almost completely in shadow. I can barely

make out his eyes, his pupils staring back at mine as I examine
the image on my cell phone. He's home now, but his haircut suggests

military duty—that two-year assignment in Bar-le-Duc, France.
My grandfather's shoulders spread the length of the photo. I can't see it,

but I'm sure of the scene behind him—flat, decorated by evergreens planted
long before he was born. I wonder if their size still extends from there,

if my mother swung from their lower branches,
pricked her finger tracing names into one of their trunks?

My train passes Metro Center—I am reminded of his crow's feet,
my mother's nose, eyes before their disconnect, that white plaque

on gray matter—I almost miss my stop. I could swear that the sound
of the train braking into Farragut North

is the lots-of-different-sounds-all-at-once of his soul leaving his body;
the passenger seated to my left, his flesh in the hospital bed.

Lost Messages for Stereo-B

In 2014, NASA lost contact with Stereo-B, a satellite that takes stereoscopic images of the sun. After 22 months of silence, NASA resumed contact for two hours before losing it again.

What is the noise of the sun?

Today on Earth, someone mows a lawn
in the background of what few birds are left.

I will never be important.

The only storms
I detect are the ones that pass my window.
I am comforted in the excuse not to go anywhere.

Do you remember our atmosphere
through all that light?

Our planet turns
into the dark.

I am tired of being human, unprogrammable.

I think our only purpose is to communicate.

His silences on the phone use to anger me.
I didn't know he was making meaning.

What have I become?

I am afraid to turn off the screens.
I think, How can I waste time today?

I want a cat, but I'll settle for pictures on the internet.

I once saw a movie about space.
I felt alone.

Grandfather's Walk

The forsythia in Thomas Point Park,
like peeling the sheets off the bed
to find my own feet, bare, crossed,
making a dent in the mattress.

Irony that he'd take his poodle
leashed and heeling on those walks,
her own sense of the path strong, sensory
and his, though cerebral, fading.

I only walked that way once with
my grandfather. I climbed that dinosaur
along the wooded path, gripped
my sticky hands around its spotted

neck, slid down its torso and tail.
And there was a boy who lived
in the house at the edge of the park.
I'd wondered if he was like the plaster

brachiosaurus or the bathtub filled
with perennials outside his house,
an attraction. What I remember is
my mother telling me one morning

that he hadn't come back, that he'd
gotten lost somewhere between
his house and the water. I figured
that the dog had played dumb,

hadn't wanted to betray his sense
of autonomy. What I remember is
Venice, Italy, still a child though
a few years older, those labyrinthal paths

from the Rialto to St. Mark's Square
where I'd pretend not to recognize
the streets from the maps or the cognates
in the Italian signs. I'd run back and forth

through the welter of shouts, faces,
those paper mice that danced on strings.
The disappointment when I'd find my way
back to the Basilica and its triumphant

domes, the pigeons, grey with plurality,
and those white granite columns at the edge
of the Piazzetta that announce the city
as it resolutely lowers itself into the sea.

Dusk in Chincoteague

I don't know where to look.
You're taking pictures of the sunset

behind me.
I walk farther onto the beach—

my eyes on the ground
on silver-sheen oyster shells, orange spirals,

translucent sideways crabs
like fingernails

so that the beach is a reflection
of the sky

you are trying to capture.
The sun continues to set

and we walk until we lose color—
the sand stars turn beige, then gray

so I know we're missing something.
We collect them anyway.

I say I've never seen a black sea shell
as I place one in your hand.

And you ask which I'd like to keep—
your hands full of ocean stones—

as if we could take this with us.

I'm on the Phone with My Mother

She's telling me how to make guacamole:

Cut the avocado into cubes.

I scoop out the mush I've already made
from the glass bowl with my hands,
cut round the ellipse of another fatty fruit.

She tells me to rub the extra
into my skin; *it's good for it.*

I remember her home beauty treatments,
she'd splash her face with skim milk above
the kitchen sink. *Your brother thinks he's doing so well.*
I arrange the green shapes along the bottom
of the Pyrex, assemble the hydroponic
pale tomato between the layer of avocado
and *like three tablespoons of onion. Finely chopped.*

My mother hasn't made guacamole in her life
but I follow her every direction until
she tells me to blend it all together.

*When I try to talk to him he holds his head
in his hands. I don't like saying these horrible
things to him.* I'm worried about presentation,
leaving a green film on the glass display.

*People squeeze in some lemon juice to preserve
the color, so the avocado doesn't brown.*

I thought it was lime. *Yes, that's right.*

Can you come home today?

I tell her I'm going to a party, but that
I can come home if she needs me. I want to
be there. *That's alright. It's always the same.*

Nothing ever changes. I put her on speakerphone
while I squeeze the early lime with two hands.
Its vesicles unfurl; dry. She calls up
to my brother—her voice climbs the
string-wallpaper walls, fills the foyer,
fans out across my cutting board,
halts at my brother's bedroom door.

Scientists Find Black Holes Not as Black as Previously Thought

Consider the shades of absence,
the absorption of light not reflected.

No one's stuck in a black hole.
Swallow a strawberry and the memory

is in the lips licking. It can come back,
not as red speckled mass returning,

but as chaos. When is information preserved?
I say I love you and it's a footprint receding.

The brain creates new information
to trick the mind into believing in preservation.

See that shadow on the wall? When I move
my hands there's a wolf in the room.

His howl shakes the bones—mechanical
vibration to electrical impulse—and

in four seconds he's lost but not gone.

Spring Break in Pocomoke

You say, My mom's Cape Cod has hardwood
floors and giant bedrooms—the house is a cube.
Upstairs, there's a room with just a rocking chair.
We can sleep in my parents' bed or push
my and my brother's twin beds together.

The house has a smell from not being lived in.
You can't tell while you're there but it sits
in your clothes and in your hair. You'll have
to wash everything when you get home.
You might be allergic to the dust—my mom is.

She takes medicine for that. The Shore
was her home before she married my dad;
her family and friends live there. You'll see her
cross-stitching all over the house—flowers
and psalms—that's how girls learned to write.

What would you like to do on the Shore?
There're some decent restaurants in town.
We should go see my grandfather and the farm—
eighty-five and he still takes care of that land.
Ruby loves it down there. We let her off her leash.

Which is the island with the ponies? Chincoteague
and Assateague. They swim back and forth
between them. They hang back in the marshes.
We can pull over to the side of the road
and look with all the windows down.

How Close?

I thought I knew close until I was listening to it
 laughing through closed doors
& it was sleeping together in beds without kissing
 & I kept wondering what it was that I said
& if someone else was wondering about it too.
 My mom tells me to take a walk
in the Sun Shine & she capitalizes it like that
 like it's a proper phenomenon
which I type into Google using random
 letters because I know it will give me
the result I want anyway, like my blinds aren't closed
 & it's not a text message from Europe
& how does she know it's sunny?
 I keep thinking about the way I sit
& if it's a normal human distance
 from another person or if I'm doing it wrong,
how to make conversation, how to breathe
 through my nose without making noise
& is it ok to want to be alone?
 Someone outside is mowing the grass
& I hope that is all they hear
 because soon it will be cold
& the blades will break at the smallest touch.
 I started writing this in the wrong journal,
a sketchbook without lines
 & my words were coming out all slanted.

III.

I Want to Write a Poem

about the horse
that tore through its fence
onto highway 64
and shot
in front of my uncle's car.
He knew
instantly, that beastly shape.
I want to write a poem
but I'm afraid
I don't know
if my uncle was alone,
did he swerve or brake,
what color was it, was it a stallion,
and did its coat reflect the lights?
I'll write the horse was black,
galloping along the shoulder,
matching pace
with my uncle's Mercedes.
But how fast can a horse go?
And where's it going?
No, it was a close call—
my uncle saw the flash
of strength, tight muscle,
thick hair,
and just by seeing it,
felt the wind
knocked out of him.
He didn't tell his family,
wouldn't warn his son,
till I saw the shadow-figure
fenced along the road
and asked him.

Olive Picking in Roquebrune, France

Grainy, snarling, a woman wields her blue staff
like she's putting out a fire. I expected the bandana,
the brightly patterned pants. Not the sound, this sound
like a weed wacker or a warning rubbing up against
the ridges of an animal's throat.

I'd thought every
sweating olive was twisted into jars by thin hands
after being brought to the mouth to dislodge the pit
with a tongue.

My mother sent this video across the Atlantic to say
this is what it's really like, the harvest. I picture
her standing on top of a hill, holding her camera out
in front of her, thinking this is something her daughter
needs to see.

A voice from the crowd asks, Are you
watching? My mother replies, Yes. The woman pushes
forward, uses the mechanical tool to shake the fruit
into a green fabric pulled taut, keeps her eyes
on the next shrub, the next olive. Some undoubtedly miss
the net and fall to the ground.

No one acknowledges this—
the lost moments of pleasure, the suns not risen
on tongues, salads everywhere bland with absence.

In my refrigerator in America, my 3.99 jar of pitted
Kalamata olives collects a white residue,
a harmless lactic yeast called "mother."

People call this mold, say to throw it all out. I rinse
some in a colander, watch the white blanket fall
in clumps and strain through the little plastic holes
then drop a tablespoon of vinegar into what's left
and wait to see if it will come back.

Teaching

I am not a good teacher.
I want my students to write good poems
and to like me.
And they too, want to write good poems—
that's the problem.
I tell them
write like it's a journal entry,
eschew artifice,
clunky wording—remember Zinsser!
More drafts about strangers,
smoking
and lovers.
In workshop, I tell them
to worry about what's on the page:
what do the words say?
But still they read *existential crises*,
loneliness symbolized by
rainfall.
We sit in our library of a classroom,
surrounded by thousands
of volumes of poetry,
my students making meaning
out of failed drafts,
the room growing so
thick with warmth
we crack the windows.

Scanning

My mother is a baby and so she's held in her baby blanket
with details that are lost in overexposure. Her mother is just
green-jacket-clad arms holding her to support the weight of this.

Where am I? Nowhere in this picture, to be sure—it's 1960, exactly.
Although those lips, blonde hair, and long fingers in the corner
could almost be mine—I'm almost holding my own mother as a child.

My mother's face is perfectly centered and I know this because
I've dragged my finger down the middle so that if this weren't a picture,
and if she weren't a newborn with flesh loose and hydrated

like a rose just cut for a vase, I'd be pushing her eyes closed.
As if I haven't thought about her skin creasing around the pearls I gave her.
She used to hold me in her arms, I'm sure—I can't remember now.

I'd rather a picture of our three generations, to see myself on the page
as a child, my mother and her mother seated beside me—age kept constant
by way of intervals. I think of my own future daughter scanning this picture—

the fall-browning grass and dry asphalt out of focus—the way
a daughter looks to her mother to be recognized.

Inis Mor, Ireland

This side of the wormhole
I am revisiting a foreign landscape

like recalling a stranger's face as familiar.
I do know this place from somewhere:

the wild-green-rolling vegetation,
the stone walls for safekeeping

of livestock and property
(something about the pagan religion

before the Roman Empire,
they only took from the land

what they needed),
the clear blue salt water

wetting the white-sand beaches,
and the sparse signage, Irish as ever,

in unapologetic Gaelic.
As we approach the wormhole:

red spray painted arrows
on the surface of rocks,

a gravel trail behind a yellow house.
Poll na bPiost,

the hole of the serpent,
named for the sound

of struggle, the waves
against the four sides of stone.

Unintelligible is the size of the pool
and the symmetry. How everyone

I ask can't tell me how
it got here, how it formed.

How every inch of earth around it
is covered

in barnacles, black clams,
red sea plants like jewels and

we can't take a step
without crushing something.

And holding onto the crag
our hands are slipping against algae

so I keep telling you, and maybe meaning it,
we should turn back.

Turkey Buzzards, After the Election

What's the red called? My mother says, pointing
at the turkey buzzards on the neighbor's house.

Jowels, I joke. *Gizzards!* Wrong again.
They're her favorite, she says, speaking of her mother.

Because they're like her. They prey on the weak, I snap.
No, they eat what's already dead.

Their wings outstretched, a reminder of the wild
we inhabit. Even in the suburbs, even in

the days just after Christmas, when the manicured
lawns are punctuated with blinking lights and

recycling bins are filled with ripped patterned paper.
These walks are our bonding time, my mother insists.

I ask about the family across the street,
the husband that disappeared for months

—she found the court record for the hit-and-run online.
And the brick house in the cul-de-sac, *infested*

with bed bugs on Christmas, can you imagine?
This is when we're at our best; she's telling me

what I can't dispute, wouldn't want to, anyway.
When our fields of information are the same,

the small world of my childhood neighborhood
and the lore I was oblivious to as a child.

In these moments, I almost miss this one-way
transmittal of knowledge, a question asked and answered.

She points out the house that burned to the ground
when that 15-year-old menace smoked in the garage.

The roads were blocked off with fire trucks,
and the water tanks were dry, and everyone stood

on their front lawns, watching the smoke rise
above the leaf-barren, intentional trees.

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

In the voice of one of the victims of 2016's clown epidemic

I knew it was wrong
because we weren't at the circus.
Just beyond the backyard
hanging in the trees surrounding
I saw the red, the brightly colored
costume, polka dots. He reached
his yellow-gloved hands through
the thicket and was holding out a treat—
a plastic bag of candy. Tootsie rolls, maybe.
And he kept jostling them like they were bells
and I would come closer to the ringing.
But Mom was watching
from the kitchen window.
She must've seen him
because she came running
down the yard and pulled me
from the sandbox where I was playing—
picked me up, my body facing hers
so I could see red hair flashing,
disappearing behind the trees.

70° in December

Walking down L Street now it smells like a circus.
The elephants are swaying in the heat,
lazily bumping into parking meters.
I wonder if it's their waste or if it's their skin,
their very presence smelling like shit and hay—
a hopeless family outing. I cross 16th, the White House,
there's a presidential motorcade and I'm late to work.
A couple pedestrians look up from their phones
at the policemen—waving and edging down the block—
who look back expectantly at the citizenry.
Now I see a man, overweight and, let's say, homeless,
bent over his wheeling shopping cart with everything covered in blankets,
his ass crack peeking out over beltless jeans
and I've got my arms out-extended, balancing on the street,
smiling so tightly—almost without lips.

Revisiting

I don't remember the swans
in the Galway harbor,

just seeing the water for
the sake of seeing it.

They swim independently
unlike the seagulls, I think they are,

somersaulting in the water
to clean themselves.

The swan closest to us
makes a show of it.

Stretches his wings and lifts
off the water as if his fins put
pressure on the surface.

It's just an instant. Too small
to take my camera out.

It's strange to be back
as a teacher instead of a student,
responsible for myself, and perhaps,
my partner.

He stretches along the cement
siding, apologizes for his head
bumping against my lap

but asks me for attention.

Our game of iterating
what's already apparent.

It's warmer than it should be
and he's given me his sunglasses.

He tries to block the sun from his face
with my shadow.

There're enough people hanging
their feet off the dock,
having coffee, and too far

to catch an accent, that we're alone.

Today we broke the silence
we made excuses for in traveling.

Promised to do better, be better
for each other. In Dublin,

the city had him on high alert,
over stimulated. He's worried

about leaving me in Ireland to teach
and the vague horrors that might
happen.

It's the first day
on our trip we're not sure what to do
with ourselves: walk some more
or peek into restaurants.

On the walk back to the city center,
more swans. All along
the docks, swimming.