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Transforming

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Transforming

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Professor Felicia Bonaparte, mentor

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
of the City College of the City University of New York.
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“That’s All That I Have Left”

How can she be smiling,
hustling behind that counter?
“Yes, sir-ring” and “Yes, ma’am-ing,”
I remember when it was always
white folks on my side of the counter
and black folks hustling.
The only way I could keep answering those cold fish eyes
at Kress was to bend over backwards.
I feel embarrassed, why doesn’t she?

And before integration, in Nashville, 1960, at Woolworth’s.
Me, Joe, Dave, Frank, dressed for Sunday. Barry was there.
Waiting, keeping still.
Behind us they pressed without the slightest touch.
Keeping, waiting still.
No one exhaled.
Then they were punching us in the neck.
The lightning surge in my body.
Gripping the slick counter, yanked onto the tile.
To keep my fists down, my mind blew up.
A man spit over my eye when the police dragged us out.
I still see his pasty face sneering.

On the way to jail we could see it in each other’s eyes:
That’s all they could do, maim or kill us.
We were all puffy and trickling blood
but in the dim cab, we could see Barry was a little worse than the rest.
White boys hated a “n—r lover.”
Frank said, “Hey, Barry, you look like cherry pie.”
We all laughed, though it hurt our fractured ribs.

That was the first time I noticed Barry.
Just a matter of time before we were sleeping together.
The others knew. At first they tried to act like it didn’t matter.
Racially unprejudiced but disgusted by two men.
The people who said they were my brothers. And his brothers.
They went quiet after he or I entered the room,
they looked away when speaking to us,
they talked about us as if we weren’t there,
till we believed what they did: abomination, unclean, unnatural.
Standing face to face, Barry and I saw,
not the living man, but a stain.
Our brothers. Barry and I learned to despise each other.

“So let me grieve
in private
‘cause each time I see you...”

My mouth opens on cue,
I hear myself belting,
“walk on BY”—
and who else is drawing out that “Y” but that goofy little girl.

Opposite sides of that godamn counter,
our voices vibrating in unison.

“You know this?”
“Dionne Warwick,” she pipes.
“I have it on *vinyl*, *nine*-teen *sixty*-four.”
Her blood-shot, caffeine-bright eyes look into mine
and I know I have her. I know I got inside those transparent eyes,
I always could catch Barry off guard.
She realizes where she tried to go.
She looks down at the counter that comes up to her waist.
She bows, “I don’t even own a record player.”

Walking away, I feel a twinge;
my own grandkids couldn’t pick out Dionne and damnit they don’t care.
But, better to put her in her place.

The Higgs Boson

To be human—
 to be mortal, yet
 immortal
and the swim up from madness
to see, in life, both.

The Search Is Over

I would swing my legs over the concrete lip
and plunge into the clear pool.
Jeans darkening, splashing to the fountain base,
wet to the crotch.
I'd grip the brass petals and climb up the spouts to her wings, the angel.
But my molecules couldn't bind to Joe. I can't dissolve.

I can't not know it now. Everything that's alive in me scratches against it.

When I became involved with Mike, my ideal was a working lighthouse,
though boats use sonar to avoid the cliffs.
The turf split in a jagged gash, an accordion of soil and stone.
Veins darkened the base, then it crumpled like paper.
The top two-thirds roared down the rock face
and the sea turned white, leaping.
The beam: clear, wide, strong,
pressed through the black-green murk for some time.

The Secret Everyone Knows

My sunscreen had come off on your hand.
That titanium oxide sunscreen that made me look like a sweating kabuki,
but I had to use it up.

You had brushed my cheek with your knuckles.
Your penetrating gaze.
You said, "I expect you to keep sending me your writing."
What you actually said was, "Walk into the blaze."
The shadows deepened down the subway stairs.
I looked at you, dappled by sunlight, then descended.

This was after the seminar and lunch. On the way to the restaurant,
the guys and girls had separated, the girls ahead.
Strolling, the breeze around my bare ankles.
I was aware that you might glance away from your conversation,
up ahead at our backs. I hoped I didn't look too fat.
I had saved my good skirt and top for the occasion.

It was my first time in Chinatown.
Mama used to create precarious piles;
a stack of books under a sauce pan topped with sewing patterns.
This is what Chinatown is like,
not just Manhattan-crowded, but askew, mishmash.
The church that hosted the talk seemed tilted,
as if the teeth of a new culture were breaking the gums.

We found a kosher place.
I pretended I wasn't hungry so I wouldn't spend money.
Which was rude, but no one dwelled on it, being absorbed in Talmudic debate.
My gaze roved from one speaker to the next.
The topic of conversation was the true meaning of certain Yiddish words,
the preciousness of being able to exactly communicate one's intended meaning.
It was easy to keep quiet.
It was a subject I knew nothing about;
saying what you mean in any language.
There I was, and wasn't.
Listening among friends and remote from the table.
I felt you looking at me.

Life is somewhere out there, wherever I am not.
Years ago, that's what I thought.
Commuting from college in Boston to the Cape,
I had all day to be quiet and wait for the future.

But transferring from the subway to the bus, I couldn't see ahead;
the buildings blocked the horizon and chunks of the sky.
Moving in the human stream,
each person in the crowd had an individual direction.
I had no direction;
I was going backward to that tenuous connection, to spend the weekend with my mother.
Who wouldn't tell me anything.
And out of reverence I didn't ask.
Experience wounded her. She didn't say so,
I noticed her sleep too much
and heard her groan when she rose from bed.
From the time I played on the floor through high school, she sewed.
For hours at a time, the piercing machine revved,
responding to her foot flooring the pedal.
Her hands fed the fabric on either side of the needle stabbing faster than my eye could
see.
I remember hearing her sigh in the next room.

All those years I had grown up isolated, needing exposure to ideas.
I walked on the deserted beach,
ponderously thinking what Schopenhauer and Conrad sorted over breakfast.
Did Mama think it would be worse to influence me?
Once when I was sixteen, we were sitting at the kitchen table
reading by the sunlight from the window.
She said to me, "There is something about you,
but I don't want to tell you what it is, because then you'll be aware of it."
She couldn't help herself; she continued,
"You're like wild violets in the shade that I've come upon by accident."
I tucked her words away like the house key I wore on a string
under my shirt in middle school.
I would never be beautiful,
but one day maybe someone would find me who saw what Mama saw.

Joe found me.
Did he see the meaningful part of me?
Or did he just need someone to see his hidden part?
He didn't say.
I noticed that in a family of talkers,
he was loved because he listened.
He listened to other girls at interminable strings of parties and bar-hopping,
but his expression talked to me alone.
His body heat rose when he crushed me with his full lips.
When he napped before punching in again for another overnight shift,
I gazed at the cover slipping off his jutting shoulder.
That dutifulness spoke to me too.
We went in his direction. A year passed, then nine more.

As he became, we lost me.

If I could walk and keep walking.
Never stop. Never eat or sleep. Just walk and watch.
Down every street, any street, brisk winds in the green leaves,
glaring crystalline snow banks,
cars nosing into my path.
Further, less haggard faces of workers,
less mommies, thank God less proselytizers,
into wilderness. Pink granite, blue spruce, I would go.
Carrying this lodged in my body.
Just let me carry it and don't ask me to feel anything more.
That way it becomes a comfort, something that is mine, defining.

Since Boston, I move. There is nothing to move toward.
And yet, I entered the blaze.
That Lover calling my inner name;
Death, calling me to walk
until I couldn't hear the cars the size of my pinky nail,
further, until I could see nothing but crags and blue sky,
against my will I didn't rush to Him. He still turns my head, but I entered the blaze.

My 6'x8' room was unheated but the gnawing cold
kept my mind busy
until I lay awake in bed with earmuffs and the void.
At work it was warm
and every Tuesday and Thursday I forced myself to walk to the Manhattan bound R train.
The void scraped a widening cavity out of the still living tissue at my edges.
My fight would resurge at school.
I gained not friends but a host of equally overworked, overcommuted acquaintances.
If they had any idea—their few words and a glimmer of a smile was like a morphine shot.

I filtered through our classmates, or glanced off them.
They knew it was an act.
Some girl answered to my name and looked out of my eyes.
I watched and couldn't speak up; my voice too slow for the record.
I had lost my religion, my Joe.

You must be stubborn. Otherwise I don't know why you bothered.
You taught, and every time I knocked on your office door you stopped your work.
We tread carefully, me out of respect for your girlfriend, you for my ghost.
Eyes aflame with the eternal,
you waited for me to step into this live flesh and immolate in meaning.

Death would have had you, too,
climbing until you slipped in your tracks.

Lying, twitching as if to get up,
breathing dust and waiting for vultures.
You told me my stories by telling me yours.
Your eyes told me you have resisted His seduction;
prepared and prompt, with a smile and acid burning up your living tissue.

False Future

The trees, blue before dawn.
The sky pastel blue.
How weightless my heart
when I cross the border into quiet.

The pine needles are damp
where the snow patches have melted.
There are footprints.
They could be fresh
but each branch, each leaf, is still.

All around, nature proceeds as it does always,
and I have always moved with it.
The perfectly beautiful killing of winter
gives way to the messy, muddy budding of spring.
But last winter a part of me froze in place
and has not thawed,
moving in step with life.

As my stride lengthens
and lungs expand with chilled air,
a clamp inside loosens.
The air I stir with my passage
is a feather on my face and neck.

So few people say my name.
He says my name.
I knew him when we met;
I had already met him here, in this vision of the woods.

Delicate tuning of the orchestra,
dawn at the birth of a new spring.
The darkness was depthless, dimensionless, would never end.
But the light returns.
He sensed a presence in the ether.
This made me come into form, and the light returned.

This winter, the old woman appeared to me.
She was me in the future.
She said to me,
“Mama must have known they removed the breathing tube
because her eyelids opened at last
and she looked at me.

Then her eyes were still open but she didn't see me.
She was not there anymore."
The old woman crumpled and I pulled her down next to me.
The caved shoulders of the apparition
felt solid under my arm.
She sniffled and I gave her a handkerchief Mama had embroidered
when she was a young woman.

Light and form and I find I am a body in a place.
The pines stand sentinel.
I have no notion how long I pass among them.
As if the earth has paused in its turning,
the sky stays pastel blue, the pines remain blue.

Light and form and the stir of spring:
for the first time I said to the old woman,
"You keep your grip on what isn't there, don't you?
If you let go
you might find what is there.
My Josef, he was the sun.
It was like the sun shining on your face."

Ahead, his figure slowly faces me.
My vocal chords close.
Here we are as in the vision.
The walls might as well be woods,
the fluorescents might as well be false dawn.
My casual expression cracks in the hesitation.
In each other's presence, we hold time with our breath,
that border into quiet is crossed.

We don't touch.
I remember that when my hand hovered over his cheek,
the false dawn showed the shimmering
in the space between.

But what good does it do?
There is nowhere to go.
A few more minutes and we would profane it with speech.
An entire night and we would wish we were somewhere else.

It is out of reach, so I appreciate.
I yearn, that is my task.
I hope for what is lost to me forever.
What is lost to me forever, I wait for.

Gold Waves

Gold waves. Mietek's Fiat hovered. Clear road, open land. The steppe rolled, but the air in the cabin was still.

Motorcycles appeared on either side, Mietek's sons, come to usher us home. Through the glass I saw the middle son. He was older than me, fourteen, and driving, his t-shirt creasing and his hair blowing, while mine hung flat. The asphalt under him was dizzying. He was looking at me. Piotr, I learned, was his name.

Back in the States, cramped within my face and body, I imagined the gold waves to become bodiless. To know what was in his gaze.

Old enough to be behind the wheel, erasure had become a trap. Between Denver and Colorado Springs, at eighty, at ninety mph, the horizon in every direction stayed gold, no matter how the mileage spun. The space I occupied, the directions I traveled, were empty of mind.

The rolling steppe. The open air. Piotr, did you open the air?

Trust

The tunnels on the Colorado I-70 were blasted through the Rockies.
Flat entrance against cragged peak,
she passed the barrier from glare to pitch,
sensing the rock stacked thousands of feet above her hood.
The cave would collapse on the speeding Toyota.

Not from structural weakness;
she would be crushed because she was stealing through
the inner, secret body of the mountain.
Without permission, she knew it would be just
if her wheels spun in matte black space
never knowing how far she drove whether she drove or when she died.

The tunnel's end flashed, her vision went white.
She held the wheel.
The tires found the road instead of the cliffs.
The highway curved and now she could see it.

When the blank shaded into forms
she expected to have passed into some other world.
That world, she would give anything to create.

She drove the tunnels, black blindness,
the curves, white blindness.
She destroyed the world, but did not create a new one; she rides the subway.
In her mind's eye, she still sees that new world.
What is the way she should ask for permission?
Should she ask the litter at the station?

The Heaven Within

I had my New York, New York moment in L.A.
The Westin Bonaventure has a rotating bar on the 34th floor.
I wasn't drinking that night, it really was turning.
Slowly, the whole floor made 360°s,
floating among a turning cast of skyscrapers
like ice sculptures lit from behind by a blazing fireplace,
a dream of alien structures.

In New York City my signal jams.
The book in my hands is always open,
but shuffling in crowds to the subway or between transfers
I pass through interference. I'm radar.
Do you ever hear things that aren't heard?
Pass through walls? I set up my own
but it's particle board and, drained, I watch them stomp through;
it's a kung fu movie. Throw in a puff of powder for effect.

Every corner is floodlit
on the train. Do I ever get there? I'm always on my way.
I've sat with crying people. People have handed me tissues when I cry.
A three-penny stage.
Then we uncrush and swarm to work.

Above ground, I'm about to turn in to the library.
The sun is soft through the Japanese trees,
the pale court is breeze-swept, shade-swept.
I sit there, near the flag, to drink the tea in my thermos.
On the base of the flagpole are bronze figures;
one athletic nude holds a globe, another holds a book.
Suddenly my eyes are wet.

My favorite time to walk by Bryant Park
is when the library is closed and I can't do any more work
till I board the train. My eyes get air in the tangle of branches and cool blue.

My route home from the library takes me through Grand Central.
I make the u-turn to the 4, 5, 6 instead of walking a hundred feet to the constellations.
Twice I stopped to see them.
The staircases reminded me of Vienna.
The loft and arc of the ceiling, like a dancer's arm,
intended to lift the lid off the Last Calls on the loudspeaker
and the travelers milling and scurrying.
The windows looked like they open for planes.

Did my chest lift when I saw it?
I dodge the wheels of their luggage, if travelers ever knew
that someone's essence follows their backs
to overtake them, to see herself rushing away in their stream.

My room is almost empty and I still feel pressing.
This is the peace that I have found.

Between You and Freedom

I was pestering Rilke's ghost and finally he said this,

“Perhaps when you grow old you will come into youth;
you will mature into Unknowing.
You hint that captivity is the life of ease,
that expectations are stillborn,
that you learn to love by never being able to touch it again.

You ask if madness lies between you and freedom,
but you hear pebbles ricochet, as if down a chasm,
when you step toward that garden.

To keep dying,
you must abandon your strength—your regret.
If living is dying,
then it is harder to live,
so do the harder thing;
paradox is only a beginning.

Zippers of teeth
sink through your flesh;
that other dimension floats in you
but you are not there.

It's a typical night; you're walking and walking faint with hunger
past the shadowed figures by the projects in the dark bone-cold fighting to keep walking
without dropping your load toward you ask why do I think I'm moving toward?

It would be nothing if you changed your mind.”

Growing Up

We doze on the rocks.
We rest this close,
I feel their breath on me.
Between the sun overhead
and the sleek bodies all around me,
the arctic wind passes as if far above.

Rotting crustaceans,
wavy lines of dried salt
on musky skin.
My ear on the neck of my kin
hears a heartbeat.

When we seals haul out
we multiply our energy.
Heat and life gathers in us.
This realization is not absorbed
by the low rhythm
of the collective breath.

I try to stop,
but another thought chases that one:
does energy conduct our hearts' beat?
Awareness catches and curls
in my skull.

Grunts, heavy bodies slap the rock
as those closest to the water dive.
Fuzzily, dimly, I watch those near me
bump in their haste to the edge.
I follow them with all my might.
I haven't budged.

Like silk slipping off the edge of a table
the last of my family vanish.
The gusts rip like ice.
I flatten against the stone.
Moments ago, I would have flopped along with them.
Enmeshed, instincts fluid.
I was not aware that I existed.

My flesh burns from lack of circulation.
The rock grinds into my bones.

I squeeze my eyes shut after glimpsing my transformed body,
limbed, alien.

I lie for a long time
listening through the wind,
listening through the waves;
through miles of water, my relative's calls accompany me.
With a start, I realize I will never hear them again.

I scrape toward the sea,
inching along.
The sea will bear me away,
claim me without hesitation.

My head hangs over the ledge.
The salt on the wind, I can taste it.
I lie still.
I don't go over.

After Robert Doisneau's "Musician in the Rain"

Grim. Grim. All over everything.
But not touching me. Not actually touching me.
I'll lay my coat on the radiator tonight. If it's working. Glory in the gloom!
So, my bike was stolen? So, I'm getting a little old for this?
I manage. I pay my rent.

It's just a little room.
But she said, "What does it matter, so long as you have someone to love you?"
To love you...

Grit and grey. Soaking everything from the sky to the sewer.
If she saw me now, like this—I'll find another gig. Today.

The skin around her collarbone glows when she wears her *mère's* pearls.
She's leaving me. As sure as my socks are wet through these shoes.

Ah, if I just had a warmer coat. Or if, when I trudged through the door,
if a hot meal was already bubbling on the stove.
But she has to warm her leftovers from the café
after singing and waiting tables all night.
Has she had enough to eat today?

Once the bus arrives, all of us waiting at the stop will crowd in,
drenched and disgruntled.
We'll become overheated and the stifling air will permeate with our odor.
I'll wish I were coasting in the brisk air,
the cleansing downpour, my wheels sizzling over the pavement.

On board the bus, we'll hunt for an object of our exasperation.
Matrons will give me dirty looks,
and some suit will bluster at me for taking up so much room.
A *mademoiselle* will roll her eyes and a *vieille dame* will say, "*Calmez-vous.*"
Strangers playing an unheard piece, my part will be
to bow to them, then give a certain smile to the Bus Despot.

Or, alternatively, nothing will happen on the bus. Which will be worse. Far worse.
Apathy like this undifferentiated sky.

Hhh. In hindsight this time will be character-building. This is nothing.
I come from people who were in the *Résistance*.
I have my cello, my Beauty. And I have these good for nothing hands.
Good for nothing but drawing Heaven down to Earth.
I thought she undertood. This life. This way of living.

Close to the bone. A risk worth taking.

Marriage? Leads to babies leads to alcoholism or sobriety.

What I know when I play...

Near the space she occupies,

I'm transported in the same way.

If I wasn't, I would have said yes.

Her girlfriends, I know what her girlfriends are saying,

"See? See? That's how men are."

If we could all just get past the way we are...

Was That All

Rhode Island and Manhattan

I flipped over the sheet of notebook paper.
The other side was blank too.
The paper was stiffly creased
as if it had been folded in the book for a long time;
since 2004, when Seamus translated Rilke from the German.
I had read the collection cover to cover; the poem's prisms,
but when he translated "The Fourth Elegy,"
each word became a spectrum.
Within each yellow, each violet, were spectrums.
And within each of those shades was another spectrum
as the words combined and recombined
until Seamus and I reached annihilating purity.
It was in his tone and he saw it in my face.
I looked down. I was married to Joe and Kurt lived with his girlfriend Angela.

Now I wrote on the sheet of paper:
*I can't say my inner name,
I only know that when someone calls it,
I wish I could answer.*

Colorado, 2005

Joe and I hung out with Ed, Tammy, Max and Azur.
Tammy was of Czech descent, I'm a quarter Bohemian.
We both had small feet (hers were smaller), faithful husbands,
and sounded awkward; we tried not to say what we were thinking.

Joe would call Ed on Fridays,
we'd arrive, Max and Azur would show up,
and there only seemed to be lulls in conversation
when we waited an hour for Tammy to come downstairs.

I remember the guys laughing loudly
and the crystal clink as I swirled the ice in my whiskey.
Tammy always wanted to entertain at home
or go to the corner bar, Barracuda's,
never venture into Denver's playground nightlife.
She would come down to us wearing the perfect outfit,
one side of her mouth upturned, greeting us with apologies,
joining us with a breeziness that told me she was tense.

For a few months I stayed home when Joe went out.

Did she wonder about me?

When I went out again, we managed to get Tammy to a downtown bar.

She wore a low-cut blue dress that set off her gold filament hair.

One of Mama's silk Metropolitan scarves hid my cleavage.

It occurred to me that we had the same problem, but were reacting to it in different ways.

That night she turned to me out of nowhere, "I was sorry to hear about your mom."

Her chin lowered and she went on,

"Joe told me, you went right back to work—?

Were you not that close?"

I was trapped in her gaze. No words came out.

Her eyelids lowered a little,

the way mine do when I realize I've mis-stepped.

She tried to say what she really meant, making it worse,

"I mean, I can't imagine it.

I'd go to bed for two weeks. I wouldn't wash my hair. I wouldn't be able to function..."

I knew this impulse that made Tammy plunge

because it was in me.

I asked her, "You and your mom are very close?"

Colorado 2007

Our husbands graduated with M.A.s.

Ed and Tammy were packing for Illinois,

and Joe and I were packing for California.

I asked her if she had found any grant-writing jobs in Chicago.

She asked me if I would teach kindergarten in Santa Barbara.

She admitted, looking away,

"I would love to have a greenhouse. I'd love to start a nursery."

Once she had pointed and said,

"See that mirror? Five hundred dollars. I have to stop buying like that."

Another time she showed me an Anthropologie catalog and said,

"Oh, look at that dress! I'm going to hold off though."

There were Audubon paintings in her den.

Ed and Tammy were our only friends who had a house to sell when they left Denver,

Except Azur, but he worked for the military.

So I responded, "You could.

You could plan and do it little by little;

take business management classes."

She asked me what I'd like to do instead of teach. I looked away.

The ash burns our throats.

Orange creeps down the hill,

turns the night sky grey.

After Joe and I separated, he told me on the phone, "I talked to Ed recently."

I asked, "Oh, how are they?"
"Tammy left. She didn't tell him why."

California, 2007

There were ten of us that night at the bowling alley, almost everyone in Joe's cohort.
We hardly knew each other then; smiling too big, inflecting our voices too much.
We toasted weak sugary drinks and pitched marbles down the slippery alley.
I cheered strikes and laughed over fouls along with the others,
thinking: this is the most ridiculous waste of time! Bottoms up!
The giant video screens flashed and pop blared.
We could no longer hear each other.
In the privacy of the black lights, I had an absent, rummy smile.
James, my friend 2,000 miles away, had just emailed me images of his paintings.
Thunder crunching my bones.
Over the edge of the waterfall.
I leapt from the bank,
airborne one dizzy second,
then choking wet and swept away.
For the next two years I would have fun with this group every weekend,
but not one of them was my friend.

Rhode Island, 2000

Joe never got angry, or even asked me
where I went when we were staring in each other's eyes and mine would lose focus.
She walks toward the peaks,
her feet breaking the icy crust
and sinking knee deep into the snow.
Her satin shoes slide off.
Brooch, earrings, bracelets, rings and diadem plop through the snow.
Her fur trimmed cape blows down the hill.
The purple gown slips off her shoulders and she steps out of its ballooning layers.
She climbs naked.
His eyes had a quality, not merely warmth. Purity.
In downtown Providence, Joe and I were walking back to where he had parked.
The glittering street multiplied the lamplight.
He broke the silence, "I feel good around you."
It started to drizzle again. I said tentatively, "You make me happy."
The bare tree branches didn't shelter us.
Instead of walking faster out of the rain he turned to me.
His kiss smothered me.
His arms loosened and he looked down at me,
lips parted and eyes wide.
The ends of his hair were wet and curling.
He saw more than me; he saw who I was to him.

He was realizing how he felt, and was telling me.
I scrambled to make my eyes mirror his.
Aluminum and glass pressed together.
I am your reflection.
Throw something and you won't find anyone beneath,
just your own image distorted.

Rhode Island, 2009

We had dinner with Joe's good friend Jake, and Joe's sister Sarah.
Jake had dark circles under his eyes.
He murmured that he and his girlfriend were about to break up.
"She's hated every job she's had. I said, 'go ahead and quit. I can swing rent for a few months.' She's still depressed, so I keep asking her what she wants to do...
She comes in when I'm trying to write and says, 'let's run away and be pirates!'"

Within the year, Jake and his girlfriend had broken up, and Joe and I were legally separated.
Joe encouraged me to quit my job too, but I didn't.
And when we planned our semiannual trip to Rhode Island I begged him to run away too, for two days in Montreal, just he and I, no family no friends.
When we figured it would cost around four hundred dollars he said no.
As a compromise, he agreed to go to an art museum, Boston or New York.
When his mother found out she and Sarah volunteered to drive the four hours to the Metropolitan and back, so how could he refuse?
After an hour at the Met his mom said in a sweet tone that she and Sarah were going shopping.
She and Joe had the same eyes, but hers looked hard and flippantly at me; her son was too good for me and I couldn't make up for it with affectations to culture.

The night after Jake told us about his impending breakup we were at a party.
While Jake told me the plot of his latest play, his somber eyes grew brighter and brighter.
Suddenly, he grabbed my hands and pulled me into a dance embrace.
I reached for Joe and we made a three-part.
The vodka swayed us together
against the shadows outside our ring.

California, 2009

I attended a talk that Joe gave on civil religion.
His brows knit as he spoke. He was in his element.
He was too stressed to talk about his studies when he had free time.
By then he had found the denomination he wanted to commit to; Orthodox Christianity.

The Orthodox Christians, and Baptists before them, told me nicely that until I believed what was right, my soul was damned to Hell. All those years I listened nicely.

I've heard your immortality in the bass tones of your laughter.

Joe was hired as a TA while he completed his doctoral studies. He talked to me less, began drinking too much at parties, couldn't sleep, and by the time he came to bed it was time for me to wake up for the early shift at work. He used to speak to me with touch and kisses. We hardly ever made love. From the beginning, I had acted like I was in ecstasy, and I kept that secret for ten years. I never told anyone, not even Mama. When we met on December 30, 1999, we saw the invisible. We moved blocks into the structure of a temple, and when it was complete, he entered and I genuflected in the sand outside of it.

California, 2010

When I lived with Mama, I took photography classes. She taught me how to use my eye and bought me a fancy lens when I was married and shot less. There were pictures of Joe from a photography assignment in 2000 all the way through 2009, with the California cohort.
*I approached you using a viewfinder
as one communes with the god by placing a votive on an altar.*
I held my head and cried into the floor and didn't drive back to Joe.

Manhattan, 2010

My friend Mike, in whom I had placed my budding life when we decided to be a couple as soon as I was separated from Joe, my friend Mike was staring at me again. He didn't need to kill me. They were soul-taking stares. I had betrayed the trust he had placed in me. To make me stay, he said things. I don't recall them. Mama had been merciless. This was something other.

He went away for the weekend.
In the bathtub, my knees drew up and I started rocking.
I heard my voice, "Mama, help me. Mama, help me. Mama, help me..."

Late Sunday evening I looked in my contacts. Ramona was the one who answered first. She said yes, so I called a cab. I brought everything I owned to the curb and waited, willing to see a yellow sedan turn the corner, not Mike's silhouette, though he wasn't due to return until Monday morning.

The cabbie helped me load his trunk and drove me to Ramona's place.
An hour after I sat down at her table, Mike called, having returned early.
Our ideal was gone; we were both dead.

I put my boxes in Ramona's living room, since I'd be sleeping on the foldout couch,
and pulled out my collection of Rilke.

There was a bookmark in "The Fourth Elegy."

I flipped over the sheet of notebook paper.

The other side was blank too.

The paper was stiffly creased
as if it had been folded in the book for a long time;

since 2004.

Now I wrote on the sheet of paper:

To Walter

“To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.” Walter Pater, “Conclusion,” in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1873), 210.

Seawater seeped into my mouth;
I held my breath too long
swimming from one jetty to the next,
my sight tinged green.
Floating world that let me in.

Back then I was clean.
Always wet or drying off.
Mama and Dad fought the way people do when they’re killing each other.
At home I was alert.
I don’t flinch at loud noises, I brace.

To the cold sea I plunged.
The sand stirred by the waves scrubbed my body smooth.
I picked my way among the rocks like a fuzzy little goat;
my feet gripped the slick rock while spray fanned up.
The sea was constant. I knew I was safe within it so long as I obeyed its laws.

Now I step into sunlight
delineating the filth on store awnings, warming
the rotting garbage stench rising from the concrete.
I have caused harm.
I am no longer clean.

My relief comes in the gloomy
Manhattan downpour.
Those days, the air carries
a mineral scent instead.
I will not discover you, Walter,
for another year.

You warned against facile orthodoxy,
so you won’t mind my admission, Mr. Pater,
that I don’t quite agree with you.
But you could only say,
“To burn...”
if you knew what it was to not.

Too Busy to Get in Trouble

“Henry of Navarre’s head went missing,”
he said to me.
“Sometime after his assassination.”

“He was assassinated after all that?” I asked.

“Yeah, in 1610. His grave was desecrated by Catholics,
his head ended up in a private collection
until a French journalist found it
in the attic of a retired tax collector in 2010.”

“In the attic? That’s almost, no it’s worse than the basement;
it gets hot up there.”

“Forensic scientists verified that it was him,
it was very well preserved;
it had wounds, scars and holes in all the right places.
His long, brown hair was remarkably well preserved—”

“Ew, gawd. Ha.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t have liked the men back then,
they had long hair.
The tax collector donated it to the oldest living descendent,
the Duke of Anjou,
and it was reinterred with his body in a state funeral-
mass and funeral- in 2011.”

“When did they figure out his head was missing?”

“I guess when the Catholics desecrated the grave. Wait...
In 1793...during the French Revolution!
That makes sense, Louis XVI was guillotined on 21 January of the same year,
so they were beheading kings alive and dead.
They were inspired by the American Revolution.

“But that sounds like terrorism.
We had a proper war, ha.”

“Well, Robespierre was behind it.”

“Regicidal-Robespierre.”

“The word terrorism comes from his actions, they called it *La Terreur*.
The guillotine was invented by committee specifically for the Revolution.
That way you didn’t have the problem of the executioner who couldn’t make it in one
stroke.”

“And it’s a lot easier to kill someone by letting go of a string...”

*

He’s perfect for me.

I hear chuckling behind my organs,
cells popping and leaking into the bloodstream.

When I tell him I won’t
 (I am clothed in heatless, white flame),
he may withdraw his friendship.
And then,
will I glimpse an eyeless mist of cheekbone in the train window?
And beyond the window, the shadow world.
For no particular reason, just stay alive for no purpose again.
For the fight of it.

My work is books now.
The fleeting Breath when I danced
became a bellows.
It’s like lightning in the brain,
it’s living in lightning.
“This desert is luminous, radiant, one’s chest is dilated,
one is in good spirits, and it’s safe from robbers.”¹

There are no robbers here.
If he won’t be my ally
then I still have this desert.

¹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels A.D. 1325-1354*, trans. and eds. C. Defrémery and B.R. Sanguinetti, vol. IV
(Cambridge: Hakluyt Society at the Cambridge University Press, 2000), 955.

It Works in the Cartoons

Leaving the star of my home,
warm sun of my planet.
Into the dark.
On board the ship,
I walk to the window panel.
In view: burning points and void.

Blood

My father and I waited for Mietek to return.
Just him and me in Mietek's quiet house
while the minutes wore on.
As usual, he didn't speak,
but left room on the piano bench next to him.

I saw his hands, the palms that engulfed mine,
trim nails and scar on his thumb from a skiing accident.
They were poised over keys for the first time.

Air moved along my bare neck,
whirled in the arms of a partner.
The white living room walls and nubby beige carpet
zoomed out like a camera lens.

Couples' heads were close together
as if about to whisper.
The ballroom was mirrored, doubling the pivoting dancers.
Wool was under my left palm;
my heart dipped as if someone was in love with me.
I was in Poland before 1 September 1939.

The living room zoomed in;
my father's hands working out the Chopin.
His profile had changed.
He hadn't touched a keyboard in a lifetime.
His eyes were impossibly blue when he glanced at me.
What did it cost him to come alive for a moment?

*

Eventually, the bodies and limbs of his neighbors were buried,
the rubble was demolished and cleared. New buildings arose.
He could have booked a flight to his hometown.
He had not held his *matka*'s face since the Nazis invaded.
Instead he wrote letters for fifty years,
mailed packages, and paid once for her to visit him in America
until *Solidarność* defeated Communism in 1989.

The summer of '90 we visited Mietek at his house in Poland.
I played with the neighborhood girls except for the day
Dad told me to come with him.
Mietek drove us to the border of Ukraine,

which was still part of the Soviet Union.

For miles, gold grasses
annexed by Stalin at Potsdam
waved without a sound.
In that vastness, the border station was a box and triangle
drawn into being by grown children's hands.
If not for the guards,
you could cross without seeing the division
between Poland and Ukraine.
It is in the human blood,
the line.

We stopped a few hundred yards from the checkpoint and stepped out.
Mietek stayed by the car because he knew.
I stood by my Dad,
squinting into the burning sky and ground.
Listening, with him I was always listening: to his face, his posture, his breathing.
But I was little, so finally I spoke,
“Are we going any further, *Tatus’?*”

He continued to stare at men gunned down,
invisible to me.

He replied in that voice
I have heard only him use.
Humor bitten by helpless rage, like laughter through clenched teeth,
“No, I’ve had enough of the Russians.”

*

We stayed with Mietek one week, then drove west to our relatives.
There was a name his *matka* and cousins called him,
not a nickname for Steven, which was his name in the States.
Fifteen years later I asked him for his proper name in Polish.
“It’s unpronounceable,” he said in the tone that told me the subject was off limits.
When the following events took place, his name was Zdzisław.

Zdzisław and his cousin Jerzik escaped Poland together in 1944
after the Warsaw Rising.
He was sixteen, Jerzik eighteen.
Weak, emaciated, they traveled west on foot
with hundreds of thousands of other displaced persons,
and where train tracks were intact,
they rode the connecting joint between cars.
The rhythm of the train made him doze, drifting sideways.

He kept jerking upright,
turning his eyes from the blurred tracks
on either side of the strip of metal on which he sat;
gazing too long was hypnotic.

They had reached Soviet occupied eastern Germany
when they were apprehended
and forced on a train heading back to Soviet occupied Poland.
Two Red Army soldiers paced the aisle.

“We’ll be shot like stray dogs.” Jerzik said to his cousin.
“We’re not going back to the gulag,” Zdzisław replied.
“You’re asking for the impossible,” Jerzik whispered with a note of hysteria.
Zdzisław turned bright eyes to Jerzik.
They saw in each other’s eyes, it flashed between them,
the memory of the escape from Warsaw.

Part of their route was through the sewer tunnels.
Dredging in the slime Zdzisław paused;
there were no sloshing footsteps behind him.
Doubled over with nausea, Zdzisław dragged back to Jerzik,
who feebly pushed him away.
Holding up the lamp, he searched in Jerzik’s eyes but the other boy was in shock.
He tied his belt around Jerzik’s wrist
and kept trudging, the elder boy in tow.

Remembering flicked a switch in Jerzik,
“How are we to do this?”
Zdzisław grinned with bared teeth,
“We run into a crowd.”

The soldiers were throwing their heels in front of them, clunking in their boots,
sharing a pocketknife to cut hunks of lard for their bread ration.
Zdzisław called to them with his best Russian accent, “Hello! Officers?”
They ignored him.
“Excuse me, officers.”
One turned a set face to him.
“How about some bread?”
They looked at the two Polish boys, skin over skeletons.
The one soldier grunted at the other, who grimaced.
The first handed them each a chunk.
“Could you spare just a sliver of lard—for my cousin?”
Zdzisław gestured at Jerzik.
The soldier was still leaning down, close enough to see the boys’ grey skin.
He stood abruptly.
The soldiers stalked off. The prisoners devoured the bread.

When the train began its slow deceleration, Zdzisław nudged Jerzik.
The train was still moving,
but their guards were at the far end of the aisle.
The two boys looked at each other,
and without a word, jumped from the car.

Gunshots boomed around them.
Adrenaline made them fly.
Jerkik sprinted behind the younger boy so that at least one of them had a chance.
They dove underground into the U-Bahn. Some lines were operating.
Inside the metro car,
through the window they saw the soldiers appear on the platform.

The doors slid shut and the train pulled away.
Still breathless, Zdzisław approached a passenger and asked in German,
“Pardon me, sir? May I look at that map when you’re finished with it?”
The gentleman gave him a double take before handing it to him.
Zdzisław and Jerzik listened to the announcement for the next station,
traced the map with their fingers,
then grabbed each other.
They were in the Berlin metro.
Had they sprinted onto the train on the opposite track,
it would have transported them back to death by starvation in a forced labor camp.
But the train was traveling west: they were approaching the American sector.

Zdzisław and Jerzik ascended the dim metro steps.
He never found a moment to equal that one,
when the square of sky opened with each step and they were above ground,
free men.

*

My breathing stilled and my eyes couldn’t open wide enough
in the castles and art museums.
Among armor and paintings,
Dad’s features were composed.
He remarked from time to time,
“There used to be more.”
For me, he explained, “The Nazis stole it.”
He had last tread these halls and steps
when he was small like me; now his hair was grey.

I remembered too, differently.
The forest entirely of birch—white trees conjured the castle in their midst.
The waitress in Kraków—her wrinkles when she smiled at me,
(Mama didn’t smile at me. Mama didn’t smile.)

Sitting in train compartments familiar from black and white movies,
burgundy—plush—in life; only threadbare in spots though it was a coal train.
The masonry in the old city
echoing with footsteps, voices and thoughts of people dead for centuries.
Cucumbers hand-pickled by Ciotka Hania.
It was a return, though I had never been to Poland.

My father's cousins, Hania, Lala and Alicja let me watch them prepare meals.
I called each of them *ciotka*, aunt,
and picked up the words that were spoken to me,
but at table or walking along shady paths the adults conversed.
Waves of 'ch' and 'sh' sounds washed over me.

I had not been in the room when an argument took place about Poland's economy.
My father's habitual expression was fierce,
but I sensed that he was actually angry.
Like a drawbridge swiftly raised
and the fog left to curl around the stone,
when he was angry I drifted around him in fear
of the nothingness of not being able to blend into him.

He must have noticed this in my face when he entered the living room,
quiet, but lethal, though I didn't know that word.
His voice was normal volume but deeper,
the way mine is when I'm barely under control:
"Hania said, 'maybe the country should have stayed Communist.'"
I knew and I didn't know that this was sacrilege.
As an American, I already knew that Communism was the bad guy.
But my father knew whether it was the SS or the Red Army
That sent Hania and Lala's parents to a concentration camp.
I knew these women now,
but my father knew that after Soviet Russia "liberated" Poland,
his cousins had somehow not starved, gradually,
until they fell asleep and never woke up,
nor contracted tuberculosis, pellagra, dysentery, or impetigo.
Alecja had survived tapeworm.
I discovered this
when I asked Dad how she could eat cold cuts without trimming the fat.
And I had been told that Lala was the younger sister, but
Lala's hair was grey, her face ashen,
whereas Hania's laughter fizzed like the sparkling wine I was allowed to taste.
A cigarette holder perched between Hania's manicured fingers
even though she had a painful limp from a faulty hip replacement
and she couldn't retire from nursing because her pension had vanished.
I asked Dad why Lala seemed the elder. He said,
"They took her husband away, many years ago. He worked for the government."

That summer Dad spoke to me more than ever before or since.
Once he helped me ask for a napkin
but I couldn't explain to him even in English why I wanted it.
Ciotka Hania humored me.
I used the napkin to wrap a piece of chalk,
which I had found when we walked by a school.
I've kept it with me all these years.
Dad told me, yes, children go to school here.
The building had holes from artillery shells.

*

My father was a man so stunning you would catch your breath. I was homely.
He had been a green beret. I was slow in completing the long division problems
he gave me while the adults sat around the table talking for hours.
I accompanied him and Alicja through lush parks,
and we went shopping with Hania and Lala,
but on this day he took only me with him.

We walked through a run-down neighborhood
and he asked a girl my age a question.
She answered with a string of directions, something I couldn't have done at home.
Like a wild creature, her steps were light and quick.
Our dresses were the same
except mine was stiff and hers had been washed many times.
Mama had sewn it before the departure.

I didn't talk to the other girl.
Dad had warned me not to speak in public
so that no one would think we had money.
It wasn't that hard to do;
I wasn't a chattery, bouncing kid around Dad.
Each sense was listening.

His childhood home was once in the good part of Pabianice;
his father had been a business owner.
The house was dark, as if the wood absorbed rain.
Black windows, dark brown exterior with a patched roof.
The grass was parched straw.
This was where he lived when he had rickets.
My father didn't appear to react.
In the backyard I followed him to a black iron pump.
His voice lifted, "I used to draw water here."

*

Zdzisław became Steven
when he registered under a limited time military program
that exchanged American citizenship for service.
He was required to relinquish his Polish citizenship.
In the photo taken of him wearing his new uniform,
he had a look in his eyes.
In photos of Jan Karski during the war, his embattled gaze challenges the viewer
in the same way.

Karski, whose birthname was Koziński,
escaped the Katyń Massacre,
served the *Armia Krajowa*, the Polish underground resistance,
was tortured by the Gestapo,
slipped into the Warsaw Ghetto
and Izbica sorting station for the Belżec concentration camp,
gathered other eyewitness accounts that he recorded on microfilm,
which he hid in his razor handle,
and revealed the extermination of the Jews to the English and Americans,
who didn't believe him.²

How do you write about what cannot be communicated?
Words trivialize experience.
How do you avoid desecrating the dead when you stir up the past?
I can't avoid it.

But I cannot do otherwise.
When I was thirteen, riding my bike around the neighborhood,
on the roadside was a run-over cat.
It was about a year old, calico, and a pink film of blood
coated its yellow eyes
that did not see.
I scrutinized it, willing myself to feel.
Eventually I had to ride away.
Thirteen years later, Mama's organs were failing in hospital.
I read to her, but merely reflected the peace she emanated
until her eyes looked at me
then saw no more.
Then, I felt.
How grateful I am that when I see photographs—
a Polish girl's face contorted over the body of her sister
shot dead amongst rows of potatoes,
a Jewish boy in the Warsaw Ghetto, his face creased from starvation,
asking me, "Why?" I cry.
I write because if we can feel we can think.

² Jan F. Karski, *Story of a Secret State* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1945).

The Figure Eight

When we're laughing, we'll be laughing,
and inside our laughter will be bombs dropping.

I regard the face of evil
and find it is not
foreign from my own face.

59th St. Columbus Circle

At dusk
I entered the ring
of arcing fountains.
Inside I heard only the water splashing
though vehicles rounded the rotary
outside the ring.
In the deepening blue, underwater beams
changed the line of founts
into spraying gold.
I sat in the center of the water ring
and I was okay.
No one was seeing it with me,
I wouldn't go home and tell anyone.

Finally, I have life;
I have work.
A purpose I can stomach morally.
I'm not living for someone.
I'm living for you.
I'm okay.
I'm alive now.
The ghosts of history look into my eyes.

There were four sections of three tiers.
Lights set in the steps,
fourteen founts on the middle step,
fifteen on the top step, staggered about a foot and a half apart.
Twenty-nine founts in each of the four sections, one hundred sixteen fountains.

When I gazed at the side-view of glowing foaming running,
I was drawn within its constant motion
and then it was me arcing.

Someone had designed this. Others had built it. The city powered it.
And I was one of the anonymous number congregated here,
each a single golden spray,
a psychic world separate, united
by our vigil at the water ring.

The Black Book

Hyppolytus

I saw you once
in Paris
and then I knew what I longed for.
The encasing marble crumbled
to reveal your glowing, warm shoulders.
Your arrested stride resumed,
hair tossing to the beat of your footfalls.
The stony sleep
dispersed from your hounds and they sniffed the ground, perked their ears;
only they could hear the whistle of your arrows.
The quiver bounced on your back,
your sinuous arms launched direct hits.
I was pierced then, animated with heart-stopping life
and the place of the wound tastes intolerable sweetness,
Daughter of Leto.

Artemis

Don't pray too loudly;
the other gods will grow jealous.

Hyppolytus

At last,
I'm here.
From the Atlantic to the Rockies to the Pacific, there was no place for me.
Now in the City, the glossy decomposition,
the dwellers pay a premium for dirt baking, bugs hatching,
January blowing through a window that won't shut,
and bearing it on our backs.
At last,
I'm here.
In the lines of poets, historians and philosophers
I am running with air under my feet.
Breath moves in my lungs
and dogs bound beside me.
My eye targets the form amidst the leaves,
an arrow is unleashed from my bow,
the form leaps to life
the arrowhead thrusts into my body,
and the passages code into my *átomo*³.
A breeze cools between my shoulders:

³ άτομο

it is your presence, Maiden of the Accurate Aim,
and my throat catches.

The people on the street are like wild young creatures,
but I am heavy and stiff there.

Artemis

Then it is already happening;
decay has begun in the bones
that cover the golden shoulders I bestowed upon you.

The Lightning of my other arrow will not enter you
a gasp a flash the hot seizure of the heart—
because Zeus bars me from giving you relief—

no, if you refuse to honor all the gods,
then the points of your arrows will miss the mark.
Your companionship with me so delicate
will fracture like yellow parchment
and the flakes will scatter in the gusts of the gods' laughter.

Hippolytus

I waited I listened on a white
sound-dampened street lit by lamps.
When snowflakes fell through the hole in my sweatshirt
and melted on my collarbone,
you visited me.

I killed to be your devotee, Huntress.
I followed the trail
of a stag.
Once in awhile I saw antlers moving in the branches,
a sprung gait
that kept me crackling through the brush
till I was deep in the woods.
The only language I knew
was of no use to me;
I had killed the only other person who spoke it.

I beg you,
do not ask me to raise this language for Cypris' sake!
Is it not sufficient that "I worship her—but from a long way off"⁴?
Whom has she not scourged to vertigo
on the precipice of madness?
Whom has she not frenzied into trying to kill the body?

⁴ Euripedes, "Hippolytus" (102)

As a mortal I must endure Aphrodite's giggling lash,
but I will not yield my trust to her.
In the name of that goddess, mortals do what is not love.
Is this not reason enough to make offerings from a distance?

"You see my suffering, mistress?"⁵

Artemis

There is no respite for the mortal,
Not even for my disciples.

Hyppolytus

O sister of Apollo,
I find the gods in one place and in no one place.
Outside of books,
matter is inscribed with vibrating verses.
There is unheard music where I go.
The filthy air is a tonic.
I open the black cover,
under my fingertips are smooth-textured pages, I see black print

then I see worlds, cities, people—and I see their minds.
Is this not the brow bone, from the back and slightly to the side,
of the gods when disguised?
But I see also, there is no bargain, no buying time.

⁵ Euripedes, "Hippolytus," (1395)

The Good

On the Soviet-ordered tribunals, or show trials, in the years after WWII:

“The accused were reduced from presumptive political critics or opponents to a gaggle of unprincipled conspirators, their purposes venal and traitorous. The clumsiness of Soviet imperial style sometimes masks this objective—what is one to make of a rhetoric designed to mobilize public opinion in metropolitan Budapest by reiterating the errors of those who opposed ‘the struggle against the kulaks [peasants who hired laborers or owned farm machinery]’? But the public were not being asked to believe what they heard; they were merely being trained to repeat it.

One use of public trials was to identify scapegoats. If Communist economic policy was not producing its pre-announced successes, if Soviet foreign policy was blocked or forced to compromise, someone must take the blame. How else were the mis-steps of the infallible Leader to be explained? There were many candidates: Slánský was widely disliked inside and outside the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Rajk had been a harsh Stalinist interior minister. And precisely because they had carried out unpopular policies now seen to have failed, any and all Communist leaders and ministers were potential victims in waiting. Just as defeated generals in the French Revolutionary wars were frequently charged with treason, so Communist ministers confessed to sabotage when the policies they had implemented failed—often literally—to deliver the goods.

The advantage of the confession, in addition to its symbolic use as an exercise in guilt-transferral, was that it confirmed Communist doctrine. There were no disagreements in Stalin’s universe, only heresies; no critics, only enemies; no errors, only crimes.” Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 188.

The bookshelf made a certain sound
when your knuckles or knees knocked against it.
The length resonated when you slid your palm along it;
solid-around-space, like a stringed instrument, a solid encompassing a hollow space;
it was made of real wood.
The bookshelf was stained the darkest shade of brown, almost black.
No space was wasted on it;
the four shelves graduated from small to large,
according to the sizes in which books are published.

My ear was intimate with its sounds
because I had loaded it onto trucks
from Cape Cod to Rhode Island, Rhode Island to Colorado, Colorado to California.
My maternal grandfather built this bookshelf.
I’ve been able to relinquish so many belongings,
I didn’t realize I would regret leaving it behind
when I took a plane from California to New York.

I never met my grandfather.
I know that he went blind at the end of his life.
Dad told me
that once, Mama ripped her blind father’s cane out of his hands and screamed at him.

When I was a newlywed,
she once grabbed fistfuls of my shirt
and shook me back and forth so that I rocked on my feet.
When she let go,

I stood like a stone.
After a few minutes, I said to her,
evenly, slowly, "Please, don't ever lay your hands on me again."

She told me the child doesn't get to tell the parent what to do,
then said, "I didn't touch you."

For a second I wondered if she had split from reality, but then
I realized she didn't want to accept what she was capable of.
I said nothing more.

Her power. My boundaries.
This is why she shook me.
When it happened, the adrenaline felt like the bass at a concert,
where the boom thuds between the atoms and fills all the empty space in your body.
But I held still.
It wasn't reason or morality. I don't know how.

II.

Mama gave me Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *The Unicorn and other Poems*.
I was strangely stirred by the cover image of a unicorn
restrained by a fine golden chain attached to a brocaded collar,
circled by a low, but close fence.
Why must he be a captive at all?
Was his imprisonment not insidious for its subtlety and his contentment?

Years later, when I planned a visit to the Cloisters,
I didn't know The Unicorn Tapestries were part of their collection.
I never expected that in my life I would see them.
Before my eyes,
the 500 year old fabric still detailed people in varied poses
three-dimensional with shaded stitching,
detailed an array of flora and fauna of the time
and engulfed the high walls from floor to ceiling.

In the seven tapestries, hunters find and attack the beast, which defends himself.
Large as life, hunters plunge lances into the animal's neck, chest, and back.
The blood is stark red on his white hide.
To the Greeks, the mythical creature represented healing.
The tapestries make the unicorn a symbol of Christ.⁶
The tapestry with the slaying scene shows a later moment,
the limp corpse of the unicorn, shorn of its horn.

⁶ <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections?ft=the+unicorn+defends+itself+%28from+the+unicorn+tapestries%29&noqs=true>

The butchery is harder to look at for the glimmer of the ending that didn't happen.
In this other tapestry, which was ripped during the French Revolution,
the creature lies in a fenced garden, wounded,
but he's oblivious to the hounds licking his blood—
he has found refuge—
all that I could see was her arm, her fingers at his withers,
the rest of her figure is lost.

Another female figure standing nearby has a familiar expression,
the face of expediency;
this figure signals the location of the unicorn to a hunter,
his cheeks already puffing at his horn.

III.

I still hear my grandfather's bookshelf respond to my touch;
a thing simple, useful and well-made.
I'm often struck, as if by a blow
because I have no idea what the hell I'm doing.
But I open another book, revise what I've written;
it is not a question of whether I can be strong:
simple, useful, and well-made:
the past insists that I listen and try to understand.
The dead demand to be known
because they bled, their betrayal of purity and
the refuge they gave it is my own, is the human heritage.