

## ABSTRACT

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ACCIDENTAL GHOSTS

Amy Katzel, Master of Fine Arts, 2012

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

ACCIDENTAL GHOSTS

By

Amy Katzel

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*For My Grandparents*

Ruth Diamond

Joseph Katzel

In memory of

David Diamond (~1925 - 1989)

Estelle Katzel (1926 - 2004)

## Acknowledgements

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

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

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## The Story

She wasn't there

the morning she pictures—  
Nazis shot his father and mother

on the field of his farm he saw it he hid  
with his brother and sister,  
pressed high between  
the wooden beams of the loft.

Too much she won't

understand—

his seeing,  
his having to leave the bodies in the grass  
like blown birds,

and those hunters

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

Fifty years later—

he took his grandson

not to the zoo

but to shul,

her brother's hand reaching up to the old man's  
like he was holding the string of a balloon.

He showed the boy the names

lit along the walls, the letters aglow

like reflected sun

and told their mother

(she, growing inside)

how the boy sat so nice and still during the service

and held his little finger on the page

as though he knew, *he knew!*,

his young forehead lost under a large woven yarmulke,

and the whole way home

orioles high above them,

her brother flapping his arms in envy,

the constant flopping

of suit sleeves, the pushing of air,

the rising.

## Mirrors

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



Mapping  
*for Rachel*

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

## A Man, a Woman, and Van Gogh

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

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

Old Jewish Cemetery, Prague

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

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

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

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

I catch myself killing them again.  
My family isn't supposed to be under this ground  
but far back, before Kiel, before Brussels,  
is it possible? Quiet, I walk, hands

behind my back, only my shoes scuffing  
the ground. How else can we intruders  
join them, we listeners, listen, listen.  
The woman in front of me is fanning her face

with her sun hat and shaking her head, talking  
to her companion louder than she should.  
I want to hurry around her, for the stones  
to lean over in the dirt and turn their heads

in disapproval, but instead my finger  
wanders inside a letter, traces words  
I don't understand, and it seems the dust  
from the coarse rock is all over us now.

Leaving, I stop at the stone fountain for the wash.  
Only one other goes with me and I see it's her,  
the brim of her hat veiling a shadow over her eyes.  
The water spills over our hands, douses our wrists,

under our nails so we leave death behind,  
and I'm looking and the sun is reflecting off our wet  
skin and I'm not sure what's happening, what's come off,  
what I'm taking. We listen to the trees rustling,

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

## Buddy Rich in the Basement

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

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

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

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

laced in the valves,  
the mouthpiece in place.

Estelle

*after Philip Levine*

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

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

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

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

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

past leaves dried  
from trees, vanished  
into their roots

\*

Grandfather never beat you  
but my father tells me  
stories            listening

from the stairs  
only his father's voice  
and silences

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

his hands gripping  
the vertical bars of the railing  
that trembled

when someone was coming near

\*

*Estelle* reminds me of music  
wind chimes dangling uneven bells

a family myth  
my older brother, an infant

gave you a name  
of Mommy backwards, *MeeMah*

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

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

\*

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

I look forward

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

I can talk to you in dreams

but I never dream of you

I'd like to say we meet



at the hem of night  
to morning  
and that the winter snow  
has melted  
the radios come to life  
oranges wet under their skins

books pulled from the shelves  
pages falling open  
on the table

your hair grown back  
    my name  
rising in your chest  
your hand on my waist  
as if to say *I've seen*

## The Two Trees

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

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

*because it means Amy*

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

had sprung from my name.

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

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

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

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

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

I, too, have gone walking

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

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

                  these gentle trees  
that cannot speak the words  
they wish to say,

beloved souls who don't know  
they were given a name.

In Summer

Mornings at the bus stop,

my mother lathering my small arms  
with sunblock, the white lotion  
transferring from her skin to mine,  
from mine to hers, her silky hands  
cupped around my plump wrists.

We're on a corner, standing under  
a large elm's shadow, the shadow  
like a pond we stand in, the grass  
tickling my ankles above my socks.

A yellow bus groans to a stop  
and I wrap my arms around  
my mother's waist as she bends herself  
around my body and kisses  
my cheek, the flimsy rim of my cap  
knocking her face and then I climb  
the tall, rubbery steps.

I walk through the aisle, past the other  
children, my dragged bag bumping  
behind me, bumping the seats,  
her round face outside the window,  
its vertical bar, then another window.

The bus exhales and begins to move,  
my mother's hand is waving like a bird's wing  
and I'm wobbling further to the back  
while the bus is gliding forward,  
out the window the leaves  
of the elm, the brown of her hair,  
and the bus moves forward and I move  
back and for a moment I'm floating  
in one place and her face  
is in one place, face, bar, window, bar,  
my hat at my eyes, my legs shuffling  
beneath me and she's waving back, back

Cousin David at Rosh Hashanah

My name called, the voice not yet finished  
being made. David's shadow sprawls

against the bathroom tile, this boy young enough  
to be my nephew, young enough so questions

are just beginning to pile. I move through  
my grandmother's bedroom to reach him—

I haven't come in here in years, the bed  
and dresser looking wrong from this height,

the pillowcases blue satin like ocean water.  
Even as a child, I looked for my grandfather,

gone before I could speak: my fingers  
on the trinket by the nightstand, his name

engraved in its glass, the grooves couching  
my skin when I traced. I wonder, his shoes,

did he step out of them beside the bed  
or kick them to the back of the closet?

Were they left there the night he felt his chest  
collapse like a tent, his body going numb

like he'd been under the cold ocean too long?  
But David's called me again, his own name

here in the glass, and I find him at the sink.  
I hoist him up by his waist, his body solid

in my arms. He reaches for the faucet—  
a rush—and then I see our two blushed faces,

my grandfather's grandchildren  
reflected in the mirror

as water fills the pond of cupped hands.

## The Hold

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

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

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

## Similar Mornings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Mirrors II

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

Futures

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

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

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

A passing car sloshes through puddles  
from last night's rain. Trees hang over us heavy  
with water. My father rubs my shoulder,  
laughs. Laughs? *I'm sure it won't.*  
He never says *I*. I think,

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

What answer do I want?

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

but actually,  
I've only said

*So?*

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

The answer he can give.

Our older dog always lets the little one

trot in front of him, but lately, she's waited,  
just stopped, the leash yanking her neck  
and we're all lurched forward for a moment like a braked train

as she lets him go ahead of her.

Another car goes by, the puddle water rearranging.

My father's saying a lot of things and he hasn't  
answered me

and I walk *I'm not talking about me*

even though I know he knows what I'm afraid of—

Once, I went to the library to read about the brain.

Lied about something for school, and the lie felt

large, good, like visiting the gone

and no one else seeing but the stone.

Walls tall with pages tight in plastic jackets—

I needed the books in my arms, to feel the work that had been done  
for us. I didn't find any relief in the red and blue  
graphs of the hippocampus—

I think now—know now—I just hoped God was watching

and that it would count as part of the work.

*The chances are slim* he is trying

*Don't worry* the smile again, *Come on, Lucy*

picking up the shih tzu

and tucking her under his arm,

a sagging sweater licking the air

but don't you see, I want to say, we can't know anything.

He runs

his hand over her fur, smoothing the hair back

and back again as we turn home and then he sings

*Don't be sad* like he's singing

to the dog, and I wonder now, looking back, if

he wasn't really

singing to me, either.

-

At home, my face balmy,

we could have gone on.

The words could have

gathered between us like a puddle.

The door smacks shut.

Inside, my mother's potroast steams the living room  
potato and red wine  
and the shy light from the street pours into the tiles  
cool in our kitchen and the leashes jangle hanging

from their closet hooks. My father kisses  
my mother and lifts the pot lid, the steam rising  
into his glasses.

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

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

I look again, only see the stove.

-

Hanging by the closet, my father's white lab coat,  
our name embroidered by the breast pocket.  
*And by your time there will be medicine—*

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

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

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

and I squeezed my father's hand so tightly  
I almost broke it,  
those tricks of light  
still circling, circling

white against the dark, hollow hall,  
                  they were dancing, hanging  
                  from the chandeliers—

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

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

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

-

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

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

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

and maybe it was her and not my father who said  
                  the part about shooting,

maybe it was both of their voices as one voice  
but I felt suddenly sick  
and also tired, their lingering crumbs of laughter  
lulling my head against the seat.

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

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

I'm fresh again. Embarrassed.

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

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

But what of my father? What dreams are there,  
what happens when he goes to sleep?

Maybe worse than forgetting  
is the remembering—

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

and my grandmother's pale face  
stiff and shaking,  
cruel memory  
keeping her this way in my mind.

But there could be other dreams—

light in the corners of rooms,

my grandmother sitting at a table,  
her kitchen curtains swaying behind,  
and her hand knows  
to pick up his hand—

My father and I will walk again the next day, and the next,  
the dogs at our feet, the pavement's rain shine  
turned matte.

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

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

## The Czech Poet and his Translator

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



## Pas de Deux

Once, you fell asleep  
as I was reading, finishing  
a novel of star-crossed lovers  
running through crowds,  
running from themselves  
and their promises, the woman  
pedaling her bicycle  
to her lover's flat in the middle  
of the cold night, in and out  
of lamppost light, her dress bobbing  
on her knees, and I mention  
all this because as I read you  
tightened your arms  
around me like I was a wall  
trapped in your vines,  
making me think about  
what dream you were  
living inside, and how  
two faces pressed so close  
could be so far apart,  
like side-by-side listeners  
at the orchestra hall,  
but then the moment  
the woman lover died,  
thrown from her bicycle  
into the dark, tarred street,  
the man miles away  
busy in his kitchen, that  
was when you jolted awake  
as if something had struck  
your back, flung you forward,  
your mumbling caught  
at the end of something  
unfinished, and you stayed  
sitting up like that as my finger  
held the page, the man beginning  
to reach for the ringing phone.

## Here and Not Here

The trees' curtains draw back and there,  
the library steps. They hulk, steep stone

leading up to the dome, watching over  
the grasses, hand-rails, sunken bricks.

Even as I stand below, far across  
the campus littered in leaves,

the backs of my knees remember the steps'  
pockmarked granite, cool like milk.

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

so the steps, like a mountain, pull me  
closer and my eighteen year-old fingers

are curled around the neck of a guitar.  
I'm climbing the steps again.

It's different every time, the strangers'  
faces scattered like stars but also

just as it always was, as I want it,  
my palm on the large alma mater statue,

moving down her long, bronze robe.  
Athena, your book of knowledge,

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

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

I reach down and find a yellow leaf  
I'd seen years ago before it fell

and became again, again, this leaf  
with a stem like a wiry guitar string,

like the deep lifeline valley of my hand.  
I want to forget this place so I can know it,

want to be here and not here, the object  
but also the shadow, the body

forgetting and becoming again, again

## At Abraham's Grave

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

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

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

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

## Absence

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

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

Mirrors III

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

-Walt Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric"

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

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

The soul the body, the body the soul—

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

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

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

and before that, my family's tour of Westminster Abbey, the sleeping stone figures  
folding their hands on their chests, a large box beneath each one,  
my breath grew short and I left the tour early, gripping my mother's hand as we fled back  
through the halls filled with statues of the Virgin Mary, angel cherubs with stone  
eyes—

But those were bodies long after death, piles of bone present in a room  
for centuries, their physicality miraculous, terrifying

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

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

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

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

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

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

if only we knew which deserted which.

## Kitchen Gravity

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

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

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

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

But I'll collect  
the scraps,  
wipe clean  
the juices,  
set for dinner,  
the tile floor  
still there.



## What to Say of These Hands

Time kept music in  
your house, your father's

collection of grand-  
father clocks crowding

your living room like  
a forest of strange plants.

Childhood sleepovers,  
nights of bells surprising

and chiming at fifteen,  
half past, though later

you'd tell me none told  
the right time but one.

What to say of these  
hands inching bit by bit,

the way we don't feel  
the earth move. Now,

I picture this forest,  
smooth oak in angular

lines, the birds erupting  
from their houses

and erupting again  
like it wasn't really morning

the first time. And below,  
tucked in blankets,

our sleeping breaths  
rise and count with their

singing, never knowing  
which songs were which.

## Our Daughter Speaks

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

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

In bed, my hair  
at your back

while far across the ocean,  
across the beaches,

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

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

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

she's gliding  
like a broom

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

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

but she's calling to us across the water,

telling us  
we can't be prepared—

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

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

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

keep on  
sleeping

she's saying

no, look out  
the window

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

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

It will be years  
until our eyes can see its light.

## The Great Softball Injury

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

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

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

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

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

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

like a fallen bird he hoped could still fly.

Da Capo (1943)

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

My grandfather is older, fifteen: He's home on his parents' farm.  
He's inside, standing in the dark, holding his breath behind a door.  
For a while, I could not get past these moments playing over, continually

playing like rain spilling from a gutter and filling it again.  
For a while, I could not touch these stories, could not clutch them  
like my grandfather gripped his brother's sleeve in the rafters, could not

bend them like tired metal that needed to become something else.  
I'd see my grandmother, and her father before he was taken  
to the camps, what of him? What did his voice sound like?

I'd see my grandfather and hear four gunshots. For a while, it seemed  
I was always breaking what was not mine to wreck, but then  
like Beethoven watching the piano keys move up and down,

no sound coming out, nights surrounded by those large, hollow instruments  
and a nothingness, I thought of the vibrations, how he stood by the open lid,  
reached over the hammers and slid his fingers across the strings—

I wasn't there, but I can see my grandfather years before the invasion,  
tall and skinny with dark skin, leaning back in his chair and laughing  
in their kitchen, pots and pans dangling overhead like chickens. Slowly,

I smell the beef kreplach. I can see the cloth curtains around the window,  
feel the warmth of the fire crackling there. I am standing by the flame.  
I am reaching out my arms—

Before Sleep  
*for Robert*

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

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

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

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

## Mirrors IV

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

St. Maarten, 2005

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

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

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

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



Telling

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

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

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

He’s telling jokes, looking

at the clouds, looking

at my face.

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

*The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.*

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

and I don’t

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

pouring off the sides of his chair

like it poured over his cane

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

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

his moneyless childhood  
before decades

hunched over tax forms  
in windowless offices

before his wife forgot

who they were.

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

how when he was seventeen  
in a bar fight

he beat up a guy so bad

the guy died

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

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

There's more—

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

and I've imagined him folding

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

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

and reaching

for their wedding picture  
on their nightstand

and putting it in there too

so he could go with her,

so she could have something  
to own.

*And all the air a solemn stillness holds.*

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

words grandfathers  
say to granddaughters

except he believes it  
and never thinks

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

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

his elegy—  
not the kid who bled to death  
but my grandfather  
sitting next to me  
on this terrace.

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

that people are dark,  
people are wrong,  
that this  
is what our hands are capable of.

But here, also, the air is cooling

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

and it reminds me of sailing,

the wind at our hair,

the music of passersby gone quiet.

*Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear.*

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

and I keep listening

and he keeps telling