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These poems move between water and land and the longing in between.
They are the connection and distance of moments, stillness and movement, the
comfort of spirituality and the bareness of its absence.

SWIFT ON THE MOUNTAIN

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Bodies in Water

1.

A moment before I turn the kayak to face the white
curl of wave, I almost – almost –
let the paddle drop, let the boat drift
back to the shore, be pushed to the deep
calm downstream.

I can too easily imagine the pressure of river
holding me down, holding me under.
But I paddle forward, let the green nose of plastic
dip under, held in place
by current. Then, I feel a slip
and overbalance – falling, falling – shift away
instead of into, and I am pushed under,
pulled along without will, rushing down, rushing downward;
below there are rocks
hard and unmovable against my skull
and the push holds me down against them –
just a moment, just long enough to feel
a panic and wonder where the sky is – before
I am knocked loose and get pulled out, pulled upward.

2.

At the top of the rock there is plenty of time
not to jump, plenty of time to look
and see that my perception from below was just wrong;
it *is* that high, the lake at a distance, and my feet
want to stay on ground, arms want to hold onto
instead of let go, but with a push
of my toes against the slick wet rock, I am jumping,
more falling than an active movement, falling faster
than I can think, almost, except now I have to hit,
have to meet the surface feet-first and I do,
cold sting against my skin moving upward,
suspending me in the colder touch
halfway down to the bottom until I rise,

breaking the surface with a rush of escaping air.

3.

I am strong in the pool, forceful, and I can twist
my body and push against the wall in a fluid
movement between one breath and the next.
My arms work in one round motion, left right
left right, fingers long and reaching for the next
pull, shoulders rotating in windmill form,
feet, knees, hips like gears turning gears turning
pistons, smooth control. Breath is loud
inside my head, ragged rush in out in out,
motion of breath, motion of arms, motion of legs
three motions pushing against tension and air.
Above, the flags and ceiling are fogged with
humidity, fogged through the drops landing
on goggles, purple and heat. Tuck and roll,
push against the solid wall into nothing, into
the next kick and pull against water.

Seeking Prayer

Lying in bed and feeling the afterimage of waves rolling over your body

The tremble in your stomach at the end of a roller coaster

Heat rising off your skin after a shower

The halo of light behind your eyes after a flash bulb

Blurred streetlights reflected on wet pavement

Fog on the morning mountain burning off in the sun

Dust swimming in the column of light from a movie projector

The first crocus of the year breaking through snow

Incense soaked wood though the smoke is long gone

Blush of freckles seeping down your shoulders

Floating on your back in a green lake, sharp smell of algae and mud
soaking into skin

A word tattooed inside your lip, blue-black ink fading out

Riverbeds

The heron rises with a squawk,
only graceful once in flight, and
heads downriver away from our intrusion,
away from our unnatural bright plastic.

The current takes us toward the bird again,
where it again flies tight against the river
to find a low hanging branch hugging the shoreline.

We carry displacement and belonging,
a moment of settling and a moment of flight.

The riverbed has shifted course:
tree trunk rotted and washed down;
discarded tire half under like
the curved neck of an ancient beast;
pieces of the old railroad bridge;
broken hull of a canoe caught
in the curl-back of whitewater; heavy rain.

Stretch of pebbled beach now an island —
smooth stones shifting beneath my feet.

Exhale

I watched the sky and waited. *The storm will come as it comes.* Trees in the wind threw their branches at the evening. Despite the lack of human voices, or perhaps because of it, I catalogued noises—
crickets, wind, traffic, drops of water hitting a sink, hum of appliances, click of the well pump.

Air inside the house stilled during the storm, though wind continued to strike the hillside and rain washed down the side of the house. When the full force of the storm finally hit, and lights flickered once, then died, the stillness of the house sounded like the rest between heartbeats, the sudden quiet when the morning alarm is shut off pre-dawn. The house still creaked.
It seemed the logs would tear themselves apart.

After the storm, I waded through the heavy wet grass to the center of the field. There wasn't a rainbow, though far-spaced raindrops sliced through sunshine. The field's middle depression was filled with water, thick in mud and heat. Mosquitoes will be born there, will nest in the deep puddles and swarm up in summer air. The house settled at night, air expanding and contracting, plaster pulling between logs with each breath.
All night I heard small noises—*just the house, the weather*, I thought.

In the morning I find the trophy my cat left—
a small creature—a mouse or mole
almost neatly dissected on the rug in front of the cast-iron stove:
body, then head, then organs clustered like whitewashed pebbles.

Endless Things

I stand as the edge of cold tide carries outward;
sand, burying my feet alongside, carries outward.

Old isolation, once filled in, opens again,
goes on as it always did, carries me outward.

Green algae waves in the river, stones tumble,
curl of fishing line cast wide, carries downward.

Thrumming pulse close to the surface becomes a plucked
string, red neon on the spine slides, carries outward.

Touch is always skin-bound; you're nothing but a voice,
the disconnect of the inside carries outward.

A monarch pulls away from a transparent womb,
unfolding wings soon dried, carries itself outward.

A word echoes in my head, whispers against skin,
touches with scarred thumbs side by side, carries outward.

Soldiers rip women faster than doctors can sew while
the ground weeps of genocide, carries them downward.

Under the clean slope of rooftops, canvas awnings
wave as the breeze subsides then carries outward.

Unending road sinks into the slow swell of land;
it rises like a distant guide, carries outward.

Rosary beads smell of wood; their blessing, clinging
to them in a light knot across the palm, carries outward.

My Song in the Night

Rain slips over stained glass;
all the rooms of your house
open into each other, one leading
into the next and rising upward.
Though I put on many shoes, I am
barefoot. In the garden a horseshoe of green
hedge surrounds a crumbling statue of Mary;
off the broken brick path, wet grass covers
my feet. There's just salt on my skin –
God, I am blind after nightfall.
Wind, wind, and the cold is tearing
me apart: I am made of shards.

Susto

*For, day and night, your hand was heavy upon me. I have been converted
in my anguish, while still the thorn is piercing. –Psalm 31*

*My bones wasted away when I kept silence.
At midnight, the room flashes lightening. Bright white.*

Seconds spark against sky. I cannot see
into the dark but I keep my eyes open anyway.

I am soul-sick this night,
swallowing anger down in filthy gulps.

I hold my tongue. I am scared, God, and my fear is you.
Because I was silent my bones waxed old.

I try to swallow down the whole world,
this lonely place. I cannot do more than touch a surface.

I can confess nothing from a bitten mouth. The body is
another matter, confession gripped close like disease.

If passion is sickness, if apathy is sickness.
If my fear would float. But it sinks into the skin.

Fear eats and eats with carnivorous teeth. I could cry
into the night but it would still be dark, still be sound.

Conversation

Five days later I am still holding
my breath expecting the worst;
it pins me to the board like a butterfly.

A friend asks me, *What would be
your conversation with the universe?*

The main thing is to pay attention
to a pink sky hushed
in hurricane waiting
breaking before it reaches land.

I wake on a Sunday after
I've fallen back asleep
beneath the crescent
of moon. When I wake again
wind fills the sunshine.

There is more light today
than any other and we race to use it.

Stories Under Skin

Bruised anklebone from a table leg in the midnight living room.
Toothpaste and metallic bathroom water on my tongue.
Eyes dry and aching from waking far before morning.
Scrapped knuckles, raw sting in even lines of reddened skin.
Heavy heartbeat clanging, too much caffeine, too much.

This does not give name
to the thing that pulses
beneath my ribs. Fierce
and so fragile. This can't name
something that big. It doesn't have
mass enough. This won't make a picture,
no matter how long I knit.

Coal-heavy train passes at midnight.
Tangled brush pull a slatted fence downward.
Shallow river muddy, no wider or deeper than a bathtub.
Red clay of a dying lake, mica sparkles just below the surface.
The sound, the sound, the sound.

I Remember the Place But Not Me in It

The dog would have bitten at ice, you must have
smoked a cigarette; where was I while numbness
seeped through cold stones and layers of clothing?

Cold below the shadow of afternoon,
cut of land leaving dark smudges on the trail.

The pool beneath the falls doesn't look like water at all,
looks like a field gone fallow.

I can't remember what this story meant: four, five years
later, all I can know is the sharp air, the transformation
of the falls; they still moved, but in silence beneath.

Dogwood Petals on Wet Soil

Green patches sprout on the shed's shingled roof after the recent rain; a twisting vine hangs low over the roof, tangling with itself again and again in old growth. Far above, a pine tree reaches up and up away from the soft ground. Short-tailed squirrels kick up scattered pinecones — roof to magnolia to pine tree, chasing each other in arcs over and around the branches.

In the morning, the house shades patches of grass growing long and neglected, but by ten or so, sunlight falls full on the backyard. Everything grows in knots: the dogwood tree's gnarled limbs cross and uncross; dogwood links through the magnolia's lower branches; brambles snarl around each other on the fence; ivy races along the ground and through the chain links; bamboo spreads inward into the yard; monkey grass smothered by a shapeless bush.

There are no clean lines, no clear lineation of start and finish, one into the next. Layers of pine needles cushion bare ground where nothing grows in the middle of the yard. The sky is cut across with branches; rain blackens the bare earth of a garden patch; the air steams and crackles as everything dries out. I am dirt sticky and sweating; each shovelful stinks sharply of manure. Dirt falls into my shoes, darkens my white socks, gritty beneath my soles. I wash off with the hose, cold water sticking to my skin and weighing down my clothes. I spray the garden to weigh down the new earth and watch sunlight move through the mist in a prism.

Porch Music

I'm forty years in the forest
always headed toward mecca,
still looking for that star ahead.
I'm wading deep water
trying to get home before the flood.
No boat, no oar, no guide or path,
finding my way by creek bed.
A storm rolls over the ocean
soon to be breaking land, so I leave
for meadows green beneath my feet.
I'm longing for a field of sunflowers
A red and weathered barn
always leaning toward my home
of wood and earth and air.

Thirty-Seven Years

Fear has a whisper and it creeps through yellow rooms, old isolation getting farther and farther from the outside world. In the 37 years since William Sr. died his widow has slept on the couch until the 4:30 whistle. Their bedroom has stayed closed, boxes stacked higher and higher, plastic covering suits and afghans. His son ages but never leaves, his father's death the last in a long line of hurts. He recites Pick-5 lotto numbers each week, though he hasn't been out to a store in years, and mumbles stories from between broken lips. His memory is a dangerous load of junk, a wheelbarrow mess that runs close to the family's surface. He can't leave his town, can't leave this house, wallpaper tumbling down years caught between the layers.

200-Pound Tumor

It *is* her,
not just a part,
not just growing within, from her;
fed by her.
Blood vessels thicker than a thumb
siphon off food and energy,
fully twice the size and weight
of skin and bones, blood and organs, teeth and hair.

Weighing her spine,
shrinking her down,
but it is her spine,
double helix replicating
her skin, her tissue,
the fingerprint of Lori in each cell.

Stealing all the blood and oxygen,
starving the stomach and skin,
the tumor kills itself with greed.

Everyday Love

Does she feel pain? Is she aware we're here?

We—her husband, a nurse, the director, assistant,
social worker—talk about Mrs. Graham in third person:

Has new medication eased her tremors?

I take notes for an internship. I will write:

Rigidity indicates muscle deterioration

in the blank on her forms. I will not write:

He rubs his thumb against the inside of her wrist.

I will write: *Mr. Graham continues*

daily visits at mealtimes. I will not write:

Fear in his eyes. He holds her hands and watches

her face while he talks about her,

drives 58 miles from Covington to visit

every day. He rouges her cheeks

and fixes red lipstick each morning—keeps the image

of his wife as he knows it. A beaded necklace,

a spoon-fed meal: she'll only eat for him now.

Fall Morning

Forget the shape of last night's
dream slipping out under
the sun. Forget the ghosted
weight on your chest; grayed
paper lanterns lining
a stone walkway shiver
in the wind and blow over.
Forget there was
no sleep when hedges
closed the shadows round.

The sun is out, pale on pale
skin; a wind
hides high in the trees.

Forceful breaths urge
upward, outward –
chest wall like jaws opening.

Ants drag through the grass
and minnows hover beneath
the surface. A mockingbird
reflects the world back.

Apples are dropping,
the world spinning.

My Mother's Hands Cool Against My Cheek

You slip a gardenia flower
into my hair, warn me not to handle
the petals because touch turns them brown.
All day their scent follows
me, drifts into my hair and down my shoulder,
a shadow, your shadow, in the corner of my eye.
I never knew you carried
white gardenias on your wedding day, but now
I think how you must have
wrapped their stems in green silk pinned in place,
careful not to brush against the blooms the whole
careful walk to the altar. In my hair the white
is fragile, but on the hand-colored photograph,
thick paper behind glass, the blooms are
yellow against the white of your dress.

Orb Weavers

Afternoons I walk to the shed to check
their webs; a week later they still work while
I halt my work for them to build:
opening the shed doors would tear
apart their calculation, so I leave
the yard unfinished. The white strands anchor
into shaggy untrimmed bushes, running
from shed to ground in a precise hold.
Yardwork will wait and spider season is short.

One day they are gone, but I have lost track.
I have been preoccupied by crickets
in the house – loud enough at night to keep
me awake. I catch and set one free, only
to hear another take its place near the kitchen.

There might as well be no concrete between
me and the crickets. They find every small
opening beneath doors, along window jambs
while the orb weavers' geometric construction
emerges between balanced edges.
The lines of their webs hold long past
the spiders' time, the balance of shapes pulled
apart as summer deepens. Walls hold me
in, hold them back, but imperfectly,
each of us finding crevices.

I Make You in the Image

Working backward I reconstruct you:
today, last week, last year.
I come to the scene upstairs,
your noisy and unfiltered
sentiments spoken in hot words.

You left; we never spoke
again. Day by day I retranslate
the message – Did I get it wrong?
Or so right there was nothing left?

It always comes to this end, the same
loop of garbled tape pulled
from its casing: upstairs, apartment
too small to muffle our fight,
the small choked sound,
of day, to day, to day
in a long loose string.

Who I Should Have Been

Where the blanket stops at
the cold line of skin, morning stretches
to pull me awake.

Your voice is barely words, barely
breath, face exposed to cooling air, fingers like jittery
piano wire, like you can't wait to leave.

Your love opens minutes at a time,
the rest tightly wound until it unravels
in a thousand silver threads.

A square patch of sunlight creeps
across the bed; by the time it would reach
your hand, you will be gone.

What I Do Not Say

A crater also tells of creation
in impact, absence: what isn't there
to find – still defined in space
spoken blankly. The story told
by what is missing
each and every line, voice outside
and gone, and I am silent
when I pray. Sometimes nature tears instead
of builds, mountains fall inward
without a sigh and mountains push upward:
the story follows back to the empty source.

Workers Interviewed at the Closing of Hooker Furniture

Four year old Clyde Jr. blew the brass steam whistle
on the first day his daddy's factory opened in 1924;
83 years later, a crew dismantles the last production floor
one engine at a time, machinery pulled apart
and sold off piece by piece.

Back then, new workers learned
about calibration and adjustments
without a single manual, furniture built like carefully fitted
puzzle pieces. Covey adjusted
belts and wheels within millimeters by sight.

I ran this sander
by sound, knowing by timbre when belts were out
of alignment. After four decades of work, Mattox numbered
seven and a half fingers, one never found, one never reattached,
one half-chewed by the saw.

You can tell which machine
we operated by our hands, where there are
calluses and where skin is worn down to smooth planes.

Holiday Meal

Beets taste like dirt, I decided,
but like swallowing down
the earth to hold in my stomach.
I made barshch from scratch
for the wigilijny dinner and burned
my fingers pulling aside their hot dry
hulls; we peeled the unfamiliar
roots and grated until red
stained our skin and wine-colored
patches covered the woodblock counter.
We took a photograph, my mother holding
broccoli like a bouquet, three of us holding
out our hands like new pink skin.

Teeth of a Lion

Dandelions soaked in the kitchen sink
dull metal covered with yellow blooms
like costumes for a Mummers parade
against a gray sky, their wine the color
of winter sun and sweet on my tongue.

The common flower everywhere: growing
by roadsides and meadows and city parks, finding
their way between stones walkways, sidewalks
and parking lot pavement, in spite of us all.

Fierce yellow defies a green field –
children wove wreaths for their heads
and old women made medicines; far away
lovers sent messages to each other and wishes
blown into their halo of seeds flew over the hill.

Movement

I felt the earthquake through
my stomach, the first time
I'd felt the earth like that,
as something that might not
be solidly beneath my feet,
in sudden confirmation
that the whole planet *moves*,
is not static.

That day, I knew this was not
my home where my body
had no faith in the ground.

My body,
the needle on a spring arm
above a slowly turning record;
in that moment, the record rose
from its smooth revolution
and the needle lost contact
and the song skipped.

Building Inward

The sculptor built an egg
framed with fallen sticks and grape vine,
peeled long skins of birch bark for the shell.
He curved walls built from bottom to top,
slowly shaped over weeks of soaking
and curling softened wood along a skeleton
that soon reached his shoulders.
Filled in chinks with
dried grass and pine needles,
their stiff crackle.
By spring, the egg was complete,
flattened bottom resting
in wet morning, pointed top
creating long shadows as the day went.
An open half wall – as though a baby bird
had already broken free – faced west,
a grove of fir trees hanging low
against a hill. He climbed
inside this opening at dusk,
curve of interior
folding his body into a ball.
Head rested on shoulder,
arms rested on knees, thighs
against chest, compacted into the round space.
From inside, he watched the shadows
cast by his round walls shift and spread.

City View from the Mill Mountain Star

Distance doesn't make the city more clear –
I see everything but still see less.
From top the mountain: a jubilant city –
like distance covers over all the wrongs,
roads and patchwork blurred in soft
lines, airport lights passing quickly
in the mist. Neighborhoods all gathered in
and no one looks above to see
the sky. Street lights are stars
of their own; parking lots, bleeding store signs
into the air, force out the ends of things.
Puddles of darkness beneath clustering trees.
Beneath, everything still. On the surface
everything still. Every car is focused – like they know
where they will end up. Like there is an end, like
they can reach it before the road is swallowed dark.
I see the street I used to live on, not
the house, its roof all swallowed beneath full
leafed trees; though, scraps of green
Spanish tile glint under thin branches bared in winter.

Vedran Smailovic Plays the Cello in Sarajevo.

He played half for belief and half for beauty,
played the Adagio that survived the bombing
of Dresden, notes blood soaked long before
they filled the crater of a Balkan storefront
where 22 people died waiting for bread.

The song seemed a more reasonable response than another
mortar, so wearing his good suit, the one for performances
at the hall in the center of town that no longer stood,
he sat on the market corner
blackened from a shell
only a day before--his formal tails
brushing the rubble left of a sidewalk--
and rubbed his hair-strung bow across
polished maple wood and metal
tightened beneath calloused fingers.

For 22 days he played each death
amid glass, and concrete, and twisted baking pans.
There was no statue, no grave markers, no clutch of flowers laid,
no ceremony in a city bereft of mosque, cathedral,
library, city hall, all equally and utterly destroyed.
Albinoni's G minor curled into the square
and mourned for those that died and those
that did not. For 22 days shelling continued
though nothing touched him,
and he played *the beauty of life without fear*,
in the graveyard of sidewalk on Vase Miskina Street.

He played at an ordinary door
in what used to be an ordinary city. Words had lit bonfires
between people, so he played without words: the slow stringing
in the low sweeping bell tones that moved
toward a middle note, a capture of movement,
the burn and stink of the place: a daily Janazah Prayer
the only thing to do. A lower register beneath the ear,
in rubble and tatters, the dip of his hand and chin,

the swell of chest rising with notes, he moved inside the notes,
fingers carrying the weight, the moment absorbed
in sound, a city six centuries old carried into hell,
a cello, the only instrument left.

Spring Ghazal

He holds his grandson like shoulders hunched around the world,
arms curling around the baby and holding all the world.

At the feeder every morning Goldfinches gather
while squirrels steal seeds, scolding the world.

You always prided yourself on being strong, not pretty,
more certain of the curve of your arm withholding all the world.

She pushes seeds deeper into the cold soil
where they spark and bend, unfolding the world.

Above grayed-out peaks Spy Rock emerges; snow
falls into the valley as I watch, beholding all the world.

Chilled and quiet, I am still awake to watch
a measured sunrise over the bay golding the world.

In wet precision, curls and tar, the road loops
around the dark mountain upholding all the world.

I was confirmed with the name Christine not knowing
the fires set to burn her ended up scalding the world.

Field Beyond the Horse Trail

I got stuck on a definition, could not move
forward without it; like a spring morning, I didn't know
whether to shiver or turn my face to the warmth.

Nothing came to me in the hidden
heaviness – something about a coat
of fear, something about vague shape.
Of lullabies and prayers. Of distance that is so close.

All I knew was that I was blind. High up on the ridge,
nothing holding back the sweeping current.

At Comer's Rock, finally asleep
on grass beyond the horse trail, sun and wind
on my shoulders, and thought I was awake.
A wide creek bed, mossy tree trunks face north,
slow movement of my feet fit in well-grooved paths –
held onto that feeling a few moments upon waking.

She Concluded

Dinner's stew feels heavy in her body;
she pushes away the bowl and gulps down air.
She thinks these hands must be
a shadow of her own strong hands. How can this be
all – earthbound as it is? These hands wash dishes,
fold sheets, wash and fold. Where is their flight?

She goes for her run along the road at dawn;
wind pulls at her skin.
The vacuum cars leave behind
push her along while morning rushes into pink.
Her feet feel heavy, as though she might be pulled
over by their weight.

She runs parallel to the road, and cars
swerve to avoid her; she is not the flash
of deer beside the highway. The deer's eyes luminesce
green and white but are gone before
drivers catch the shape and bulk of her flank.
Her eyes catch headlights but
do not reflect them.

Swift on the Mountain

The girl found the whitetail,
still warm, still twitching,
but gone – some vital light
pulled out and smeared along
the rock shoulder of Route 11.
She pulled the corpse
the last few feet to the tree line,
perhaps where it had been
headed all along. No visible signs,
no outward wounds. She severed
the legs at the impossibly thin joint
with a camp saw from the trunk.
All the way home she planned.

She scraped
out the flesh with a blade, left fur.
For four days, she salted the skin;
in the evenings, she kneaded
the deer skin between the knuckles
and palm of her hand until she'd worked
all the stiffness out of the hides. Soon
they would be ready to wear.

*She slipped
on her deer feet and ran
sure-footed in the woods, agile,
nimble with each delicate step
barely breaking twigs.*

She had to cut
a line down the leg to work her own
foot in, even her bony ankle
too thick, the wrong shape
to slip inside the deer's, her heel
bulging against the hide.
But she could not balance
on the hoof, the way the deer had,
her calf aching with the weight.

*Her deer feet were wings,
light as mist
in the morning, rising despite gravity.
And the heaviness of her body floated away.*

Eventually she had to cut apart
the hide to form a skin over her feet,
discard the hooves altogether;
her feet couldn't mold to a deer's.
Rough stitched with gut to make shoes.
Steel needle piercing hide.

*Her deer feet gave her passage to the forest;
she climbed the mountain as though she belonged.*

But she would not become a deer,
the hollowed-out feet merely a covering
for her own pink soles, her all too-human feet
the only way she knew to walk.