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These poems are motivated by grief that began in infancy, when my biological mother gave me up for adoption, and continues in adulthood. The collection is a record of my attempt to process this grief. With no memory of the biological family, the adoptee accesses these experiences through imagination instead. The term *ghost kingdom* refers to the place where the many imagined versions of the family and self, both biological and adopted, exist within the adoptee. Both the term and these poems are a way to give parameters to a loss that has often felt infinite in its unknowns.

ECHO AND INSTRUMENT

by

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Approved by

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*For JBE*

APPROVAL PAGE

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the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North  
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*I believe I am choosing something now  
not to suffer uselessly yet still to feel  
Does the infant memorize the body of the mother  
and create her in absence?*

—Adrienne Rich

I

## Which Is Loss

the silver stolen by the crook  
of your arm or the ruby ring  
of blood that comes as it's  
drawn from your vein

pain brightened pain  
the wound you mine  
for the color of a strangled  
throat

which looks like an unstrangled throat  
from the inside

the bruised neck  
of sky turned pale  
from the afternoon  
or the forest bone-  
strength of prisoner  
abandoned

which trumpets the louder sorrow? You pull me

from your body.  
I think about you.  
This is how I learn  
I have a body.

Which is heavier to lift  
the metal coffin buried  
in the dusk of me  
or the nothing it holds

which is you?

## Birth Mother Looking at a Map

I pull the crewneck continent  
over my head, become a blank  
island, clean coast. If she wants,  
she can name the island  
*Peninsula*, can hold her  
loneliness like an ax, take it  
out on the only forest, build  
a house with skylights.

If the moon falls onto her  
floor of sand, she can  
draw squares. This,  
her new moon; the floor,  
her new sky. She can love it  
through the night, though it cries.

She can change her mind  
silent, if she wants the sound  
of propellers, she can name  
the island *Island*. She wants to  
hold her decision like a match,  
take it out on everything that breathes  
in her, encircled by flame. If she can  
be lost. If she can.

## Birth Mother Cleans

when there is nothing left  
to destroy or save, her mind turns  
to the hospital floor. Tiles diamond  
the room of her. No longer  
dimensionless, her pain  
has a ceiling. Her memory  
of the ghost-part is roped off with neon  
caution. She does not want her creation.

I mother the twin pain bright  
in the veins, liquid light, unspilled  
garnet. Clean with spells of bleach.

If joy was never our birth-  
right then what is  
ours was the opposite of

mid-wife please can I hold her  
mop or be held in her fist forgetful  
of my wanting to be  
dragged across the floor soaked  
in the dull mess pulling shattered  
mirror splintered in

the smooth bone  
memory of windows,  
the custodians of dream?

## Ghost Kingdom

In this version, death  
is so clinical, like parting  
legs, and I have the feeling  
of lying down in a field,  
sinking into night-  
dark earth, un-thinking blades  
of grass, scarred sky. You, me.  
That gentle. Like a word  
you didn't say. That close  
to forgetting.

## Notes for My Biological Father

If the light is on, my parents are still alive,  
in their bedroom down the hall,  
watching sit-coms – the laugh track a lullaby  
as I drift into the dream house, where I keep  
their dead bodies.

\*

You must be the half-moon  
night-light that shines on my doll,  
but leaves the dollhouse  
dark, the doll's eyes open;  
makes everything strange and not  
mine; sends me running to my  
father's side of the bed. No.  
You are the vanishing space  
between the tee-shirt warmth  
of his back and the edge  
I fall from in sleep.

## Only She Remembers

I think of my birth mother  
before anesthesia. Then I am alone  
with her pain. Swollen, she asks  
to be hollowed out empty  
with epidural, or I am feeling something  
only she remembers. We are together  
in this forgetting, this nothing  
but colors unnamed. Do not un-mother me  
yet, Mother. I know the medicine wants,  
but I wonder: if we let it take over  
will there be rooms are they white  
with wait will I wake recover

## Birth Mother Giving a Massage

She unknots me from her knowing  
how to speak the orphan  
tongue of touch how her body is  
a memory holding my trace raised without  
blade without blood wound around wound  
she knotted in me unknowing.

## Birth Mother as Sign Language Translator

She held the song  
of my body in her  
body, a chorus  
about the sea, how  
it filled the dust-  
dry socket of earth  
to teach us its silent  
language. When she sings  
now there is no sound.  
She grows pale  
wings from her  
wrists. They cannot fly  
though they can mean flight.  
Our story begins  
with the desire to drown  
in an ocean unnamed.  
Curved palms make  
waves when she tells it.  
This means fly,  
the way a bird can  
also mean freedom.  
She needs another way  
to say this for the part  
when I leave her.  
She curls two fingers.  
This means I love  
you, turns into an air-  
plane when she moves  
her hand across her  
chest to mean the bird-  
less fly. Our story does not  
end, but her hand will  
reach the limit of her  
body. And she  
will stop telling it.

## Ghost Kingdom

You wake in the wilderness  
of my body. It should scare  
you. And it does.  
Will I always be left  
alone, arrow of wonder,  
searching for the fixed  
point of what it was  
I meant to you?

## Birth Mother as Someone Else's Child

Baby is turning on the colors inside  
Baby's head, is leaving  
for a little while. No visible  
hummingbird waves in baby's  
chest. Is baby dead? She is  
not moving, makes no sound.  
Baby is not my baby.  
No problem of how  
to love a light bulb. I do not  
draw hearts in ink, or  
imagine gold rooms with calendars  
for her. I do not say *Mother*,  
when I point to myself,  
do not wait for her to say it  
back or imagine any instrument  
is made from an echo.

## Birth Mother as Birthday Phone Call

May I ask who is speaking  
through the fireworks? She is  
busy being born as the atmosphere  
dulls shades of Independence  
Day. May I ask who is calling  
this liberation? She is unavailable  
at the moment she is turning back  
to the first page looking for the blur of her  
arms full. May I take a message  
for your torn paper lantern sky  
floating away?

*Pretend I'm not here.*

## Enough to Change Next Time

Born in the stitches of her.  
Grew fields in the dandelion-  
fragile of her. Breath mine  
enough to change next  
time. Sun wrung and  
wrung for more of her.  
Death dead of fright-  
death.

Stitched in the birth  
of me. Crying in fields  
for me. Breath not his  
enough. He wrung and  
wrung for more of me.  
Me wrung and wrung.  
What fear of fright-death.  
What sun.

II

## His Questions Led to More Questions

Deep drowse of July  
he didn't touch me

I combed my mind moonless  
with stars for the mood swing  
of his arms he censored

the bedroom window I  
burst into champagne lit  
myself on traffic

can I have more of this  
humid dream unbleached  
by daylight

heat broken his body  
on mine asking  
am I crushing you

I have more questions  
about dying he didn't  
answer

and then he did.

## Before I Became the Size of His Thumbnail

When I think of everything  
I've ever wanted, I want to lie  
down on the curve of summer:  
the hill by the spring, when  
he was in love with her, and I  
was in love with the shape  
of the grass between his body  
and mine. We drew outlines  
of each other, filled them in  
with the color of the night  
it got so hot we ran  
from my house to the spring  
just to cool off. And when I asked  
if he thought about dying,  
he didn't look at the water,  
which was the color of how  
wrong I am when I say we were  
swimming in the summer crushed  
sky and he was mine, which is not  
a color, but another way  
I've missed, continue to mis-  
understand. When I say I want  
to sleep for a long time,  
I mean I want to lie down  
until the vision comes: he's still  
you, and I'm me, but bigger;  
and the whole arc of earth is enough  
for the length of my spine;  
and if you have something  
you want to tell me,  
you'll have to scream it.

## It Sharpened Against You

There is a blade in my head  
and I'm afraid of its sharpness:  
I drag a sword the distance

of sleep to keep you or I spend the night  
alone cutting stones: we have different ideas  
about what we mean: in the stream

of morning you draw me out  
from the darkness: say you dreamed  
of an ax, so you planted a forest.

## His Hands Bloomed a Field

When he had hands,  
they were many  
or they were enough  
to light me on  
light. As a feather,  
my body was not touched  
enough to levitate  
open. Palms opened  
on the bed. Unmade,  
when he had hands.  
His work was honest enough  
for morning song or so soft  
I slept through him.  
When he had hands,  
I had hands under me.  
What did I hold  
there, was something there  
to pin above his head,  
what was in the dark  
when he had hands?  
I had a master. Fat with  
moonlight. My work was  
skinned. Knees sin enough to need  
night bleeding through slits of  
light. My body poured out  
light. Unmade morning.  
When I did not have  
wrists of night, he held  
knives so soft they slept  
through me, made my body. Stiff  
as a board, he had fingers, light,  
enough. For each eyelid to close  
each open eye unblinked. Looked  
asleep. When I was not.  
Enough. For he did not have hands.

## He Held the Lack

like a summer storm of fire-  
flies and sex. Like a body can be  
perfect. His is terrifying:  
sharpness of a needle, soft  
bleeding. Like hot-  
cotton pain. He brings me  
the world makes me wait  
inside so he can drive the car around  
the rain in my head holds  
the door open. Like a mind  
can be perfect. His is next to  
mine is always in his  
head is delicate electricity is  
dragging a balloon across the floor.  
He is sometimes missing  
a sock all the time. Am I too  
bright-sided can never hold  
what was missing I wonder  
if strangers think I'm pretty.  
He is was. I wanted the all  
of the aboveness of it. Always  
hovered over the bed adding more  
versions of myself over us getting higher  
how far before I can call it deep  
space dear astronaut you left  
for so long everyone you knew is dead.

## We Borrowed Light

The photograph flattens    washes us  
we can't tell the difference    time-  
yellowed paper    keeps you  
a blur    movement    flawed  
machine    I remember  
your name    I remember  
you me    silent    you saw  
I couldn't    how alone  
we were    you started  
to tell me    never finished

## Because He Could Not Stay

Bees white

Because he lives in fear of touch

Before they fell mute they hovered his hands

Because the venom he could not hold

The color that contains every color is not a color

Because he could not vanish you

My body was covered

Because you think of him in terms of light

Soft and at first like snow

Say what you mean

There is so much I do not know

Bees

A drift of white because he could not stay gone a drift

## In Rooms He Built

*length of dinner table*

Cradled in candlelight,

*he placed candles on floor-boards*

But he did not want to  
imagine doors but she did  
not want to imagine doors.  
So he reminded her of the car.

*filled her with empty rooms*

up the stairs down  
the stairs up the stairs  
down the stairs up  
the stairs down the stairs  
up the stairs down the

*lit them*

I mean he reminded me  
of a car I mean I remember  
the car ride he told me he used  
to be a house of needles  
and he tried to die there  
I mean you you wanted to  
die and you tried and tried  
and I tried I mean I am  
trying not to believe in  
the miracle of you in this  
car or any moving body  
with doors I mean I was  
trying not to believe in  
a universe so careful  
Careful, careful. I was  
carving out dark places  
in my body where they could  
build rooms I mean I do not

remember where they were  
driving only that you didn't  
tell me and I didn't ask.

*lit them*

## When I Cannot Find Him

my brain is islands I let it  
go up and down streets  
again this town is better again  
when I cannot find him he can stay  
everywhere I unbraid what I know I was  
with him when he found out  
I was with him after  
the funeral he wanted me to come over  
on the floor he had questions so  
many he didn't ask for  
answers I didn't know silence  
could be an erasure forgetting  
is like silence I remember now  
all those walks we took  
I was quiet he was always okay  
with it.

\*

My brain is not islands I want to unbraid  
what I know from what I know he cannot  
stay everywhere I know other people are living  
here many people each with a body each  
with a name a mother made knowing  
we were not meant to hold one thing only I desired  
drowning I remember thinking  
his body was whole enough to hold something  
like light or sea knowing often we are made only  
of what can make a body after all or again.

## He Speaks with Thunder

I harbor still, sick with sea  
and shark-filled silence: *he*.  
Nothing but the lightning  
harbored against my sleep-  
wrecked body. *He*: sinking  
teeth into the ship of our  
flesh, unhinging his jaw  
for more. He asks the  
thunder to speak for him.  
It gives its sentence in the  
language of exile; says, *you  
made this dusk night-less*. Or  
it says nothing. Nothing  
like the relief of lighthouses,  
he pulls his teeth out for me  
to find, dull with beach and  
weather, in the sand of sleep-  
later. It is the only way he  
knows how to say *I'm leaving  
now* without thunder.  
Nothing like the still we  
summered, weathered with  
unsick slumber: *now*. I drown  
in the sea I call the wide-wake.  
*Now*: I do not speak of teeth  
or stream relief like I still  
wonder if he will wake and  
when; and if, when he opens  
his mouth, he will devour me or speak.

III

## Birth Mother as Dentist

If I am good she will give me  
a sticker that says I was  
here, but she is asking questions  
I cannot answer. My mouth is full  
of her hands, her hands  
are gloved, but she won't touch me  
any other way. She is putting wings  
between my teeth, but she is asking me  
to bite down, she is asking me to breathe. Finally  
a question I can answer: Yes I remember

my first love yes I sleep with my door  
closed and still wake with fists  
full of teeth yes in the bed of the first boy I loved  
I ask if he will brush my teeth  
when I am too tired to do it myself  
yes he says *no* always that doesn't stop me  
from asking I just want to spend hours with the small  
of my back on the hardwood floor pressing  
thinking about how to stand up  
straight I just want to find  
pants that hit the perfect length  
above my ankle I want to wake on the surface  
of something other than a table  
I want the sentence of my dreams  
to mirror more than the floor of a river  
tell me you are a doctor  
tell me you have medicine  
tell me I will remember this  
but not the pain of it for once  
not the other way around  
and then cover my mouth.

## First Night

Everything lost  
in silence. Her  
heartbeat. Body  
heat. Her.

Not my mother.  
Her nursing  
scrubs. Not yet  
thinned from wear.

Not my mother's  
daughter. Me.  
Not lost. Or all  
has been.

No imprint.  
Now Mother.  
How she holds.  
Our jet-lagged dance

slow. The phonograph  
toward the ceiling  
blooming.

Not my body  
not crying.

We fractured silence is ours ends.

## Dawning

I can be everything  
now that you're gone,  
so why not the tired sky?  
It is always night.  
Or it is not. Or I was  
made of emery:  
scatter of starlight.  
Or I was made of  
emery: blackness  
broken by. The sky  
is nothing more  
than a girl born  
to hold the aching  
mess of sun.  
Or this is how  
I grew up: bright  
with glass bulb  
in my paper cup  
hands. Or this  
is how I grow  
up: with my back  
to a room that  
surrounds me  
and never  
with light.

## Conception

The movement never making  
a thing they could hold, my mother  
let her belly become a balloon she blew into.  
Full of emptiness, my father carried her  
far from the black blind of their bedroom,  
pointed to the other side of the world.

          a woman   the lamp   reaching  
*Are you picturing light?*  
          a man   the bed   not speaking  
*Are you inventing language for what happens when they touch?*

She feels the future now,  
their bodies, on Earth.  
Their holding now a making,  
its aching now a call.

Decree of Adoption] Fragments of Sappho

that the Infant mentioned in these be and is]

] you will remember

hereby legally child of] for we in our youth

further changed to a true copy of the taken from and did these things

1.

2.

yes many and (and further the nature of July) beautiful (before me appeared known) things

proven]

named]

made true]

## To Mother

She taught me how to love  
like her. Without her  
everyone became  
before her.

There was a world  
without her. A girl.  
Was not her.  
I loved

her like after. Without.  
Bodies in graves in.  
To touch. Eyes in  
petals

taught me. How to bear  
the sky of how to hear  
to fire of how. To hunger.

## Ghost Kingdom

If you harden inside,  
I become nothing but  
ruby pain, broken,  
cutting my way through  
you. Your only memory  
of me is still the cry

of my sharp leaving.  
If you are always certain  
there was a wrong way  
to hold, you already know  
what to call me. But who will  
carry the crouching  
life that still lives in  
the cage of my name?

## Birth Mother as Cook at Korean Barbecue Food Truck

Stranger talking to me strange.  
In strangest language  
shuffled keyboard speaks.  
This is my least favorite thing she  
does. Go away! I am ocean strain  
stranded instead. Instead: You may only speak  
in my sharpest dreams.

She is showing me her crown  
of hair. Black tangle  
of thought. In her voice  
she is shorter than I  
imagined. She is short grained static  
filling bowl, filling mouth.

No seconds I would not like seconds  
No I would like to go to sleep  
for a long time now please let me  
have the lion sleep I'll save you  
the fang of dream.

## Birth Story

Slice the web  
of your hand  
with a knife.  
I'll tend to it  
by feeding you  
a sword. I have one

already. The streams  
of blood on the cutting  
board already sent me  
into your dark hand.

Already a saw.  
Already a throbbing.  
A second heart. Small fruit.  
The thought of a sword.

You want this  
to be a story  
about your pain,  
your hunger.

It's not.

## Notes for My Biological Father

My mother and I watch a movie,  
watch the cartoon dinosaur sleep  
on mother's back as she dies,  
watch as he can't stop  
mistaking his own shadow  
for her. When we take a walk,  
we pretend the cul-de-sac at the end  
of our neighborhood is the valley  
from the movie. Distortion  
of length and movement, body  
of absence, you are our late  
summer-angled shadows.

At nightfall, we follow you home.

## After the Fire

*For Catherine, age 6*

My arm still feels the pulse, the kick and pull  
of you learning the way your legs work

in the water. I spent that summer carrying you  
from one end of the pool to another.

It was there you came up for air  
and saw the ivory frame of a car catch fire.

What was small burned infinite, everywhere:  
the fist fight of fire, the red rush of lifeguards,

pieces of scorched fender, wheel, hair, skin  
floated in the air. I thought of your lungs,

covered your mouth with my hand  
to protect you from the smoke. Later,

you told me you couldn't help but see the fire  
everywhere.

And I can't either. I'm still the arm,  
the lung, the memory you've outgrown.

I'm still standing hip-deep in that water  
warmed from the heat rash of hot days.

When you asked me to let you go  
so you could see the wreck,

I wrapped you armpit to armpit in a towel,  
carried you home on my hip.

But nothing could keep you forever  
from learning the specifics of the disaster:

first the lifeguard used his hands  
to save her, and then he used his mouth;

after the fire, she stayed underwater  
until she ran out of breath.

## Tolerize

I ride the carousel  
of grief.  
my grief is a girl  
on a cliff      *don't leave me*  
*don't*      I don't  
remember losing you.  
Anger   *how could you*  
*how could you how*  
is a brass ring.  
she throws  
pieces of mirror  
in the sea  
A shining thing  
with a handle.  
*what you took from me you took from me*  
you are the rain  
that made the sea  
she drowns herself in  
the mirror  
I reach to hold on to.  
you are the rain that covers her screams

## Let This Be the Last Time I Use Light to Explain You

I am teaching myself how  
to become a long-distance  
runner. The trail stretches  
through a curtain of trees.  
Sometimes sleeping  
hands (mine) in hair (yours)  
shines through. The runner  
behind me doesn't  
announce he wants to  
pass: I see his shadow  
on the pavement  
and know.

## Birth Land

*will I recognize anyone    will I feel  
small on the ground    when I land  
will I recognize the land    if I find her  
will I remember    to call  
home    who will answer*

IV

## The Sound Is Me

*for my brother*

Driven by the need to bite  
hard on the baby fat of

your arm, I climb from my bed  
to yours, where you are

sucking your thumb thin,  
as you dream of milk from

a woman. If I always find the ladder,  
it's because it is there for me

to find. We sleep, grow up, and sleep  
separate; become orphans one

last time. Colin, this life was not meant  
to be ours. If it was, if it is given, as it was

given to us once, I will be left being  
nothing but a jaw full of teeth, and you

the arm bone they were trying to  
get to. If our graves, stacked, form

a bunk bed, if loneliness  
of bones rattling still

keeps us from the long rest, then  
this: I was not your sister when

I was born, but I remember waking  
in the deep-earth of my childhood

bed, and you dreaming below.  
If death is nothing but light

drained, we could call it night.  
When it comes, I will find you

the only way I know how: feeling  
for a ladder in the dark to climb down.

And you will know the sound.