

*My Father, the Light*

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*I could almost hear... no, I could only imagine hearing it. & that  
Is what it has become:  
Having to imagine, having to imagine everything,  
In detail, & without end.*

—Larry Levis

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TO MY FATHER, THE LIGHT

In the room there are two reels projecting onto the wall. One is playing your death and the other, my birth. One starts in a bathtub, the other, staring up at the sky. Both in a pool of light—of water, of blood, voices flickering on the soft flame of my ear. One starts with mother holding me up for your embrace, light passing through us thin as a blade. One starts with your eyes closing, then opening for the last time, planes disappearing above you. One starts with nothing and one ends with it—cries like empty vowels shot through the air. Where else could I go, but deeper? The light pours over my hands like a wave. I'm at the shore, your ashes on my fingers, your hands through my hair. The light cuts through my chest and I'm blown open. It spills out like your blood on the tarmac, the first time I made love. The reels catch fire. I try to save myself, leaning against the wall as your image dissolves beside me. I can't see you, only the light you passed through to get here.



THE POET AT TWENTY-FOUR

Buying avocados six for a dollar on the side of the road and my god,  
I just remembered that we die. Once, in a small town in Southern California,

I drank a liter of cheap vodka and woke up laughing in the hospital. What I remember—  
the plastic bottle's narrow kaleidoscope as it tilted toward the light, the burn

like iodine on my acned jaw, dissolving into honey as I wandered into the night,  
sweetly unconscious. I remember the conversation with my brother the next morning,

how he cursed me through the phone, saying *I thought you were dead*  
in a voice that could have been my father's. I've had this premonition before,

of death's landscape. At grief therapy with my eyes closed, a sweet old lady guided me  
through my house. To not forget, I drew me and my father in crayon

alone in our living room. I found the source of the chill in my bones, words  
he could have spoken, bruises on the body, the avocados' ripe flesh.

KARA

We lifted the parachute  
high as we could, took turns  
on our backs, arms pulling the sky apart  
overhead. Someone said  
close your eyes and I felt the room  
breathe. My father was there  
and the house was on fire. We walked  
the seam between rooms together  
like I too had died and death  
was a hallway. How else could I be there?  
It was the dream we all had, our hands  
becoming hands as we moved them  
in tandem. He opened a door  
and I couldn't tell the living  
from the dead. I thought we all  
were ascending. On the night my heart  
finally opened I saw a black ocean  
hang like a pendulum under a black sky.  
I swear I've never felt love like this.  
I say I'm afraid I won't be the same  
as I was before, and you say  
it doesn't matter. Let go.

INSOMNIA

1.

If memory starts at birth I was born on the back stairs  
as you wrapped your arms around me

saying it was better this way for him at least  
that it was instant as in no pain as in—

*your father didn't know he was dying*  
but there must have been a moment of clarity

somewhere not unlike the nightmares that came after  
where I felt him pressing on my chest

or that anxious feeling that drew me into bed with you like a bird  
folding in on itself inside my stomach

2.

Barely sleeping, eyes crushed open. The bed  
an altar I waited in and the window beside it,  
a sheet of glass that became  
the body, dreaming. Mother, what was I before this?

Each night I'd ask you what to think about, my hands  
reaching for his shape  
in the dark. I'd hang my clothes from the door  
like I was dressing his ghost. Then—

a fist, blood-soaked from the other side,  
a painted sleeve I'd raise my arm through.  
I knew where my imagination could take me,  
so I tried to exhaust it. Remember

the summer I'd stay up till the sun's first light, lacing  
my shoes in the dark? Those mornings,  
I'd run along the overpass, to the Bay, watching the planes  
land, slipping into the horizon just now



## AFTERLIFE

I'm in San Francisco again, in the basement of that big pink church on the corner of 14th and Judah, handing Max a scrap of paper with the word *heaven* scrawled in cursive. Music is vibrating from the patchwork carpet like a prayer on fire, the reds oranges and yellows matching the sweet flame of his cheeks, as he steps out in front of us, conducting the other children from atop a piano bench, waving at empty spaces as if something were really there, something we can't see. And so they begin to act out his drama, what he needs to be real. Running around the room in silent fury, beating their bodies together, as if they could feel their lives unraveling—they pretend to kill each other, not knowing what their hands could do if they pressed them hard enough in the right places. But these kids don't understand death, thank god, or their own bodies. These kids whose mothers and fathers jumped from the Golden Gate, or died of cancer or a brain aneurism. Sometimes they don't even know what happened. One morning, Max's father just didn't wake up. And now there's a room full of children playing dead on the floor, so Max comes down from his throne and touches each one of them, the newly dead, and they rise, one at a time and begin to spiral around the room like little angels, whirling around me. I didn't know this could happen, that there's a place where I can see myself as I once was. In a room full of children with no mothers or fathers, dancing, I mean really dancing, in the basement of St. Anne's of the Sunset, in San Francisco, on a Wednesday night.

LIVING ROOM

I know there's nothing here but your residue, the way a body  
might ignite from within and burn inside out, leaving what—

a pile of ash, an image of you that can't get any older. I can  
feel you too, like the smoke a candle leaves after it's blown out.

The space your body filled is still here, emptied,  
waiting. I want to understand the moment you stopped breathing—

who held your body together as your blood pushed it apart,  
spilling out onto the afternoon. And when I tell people, *it was Father's Day*,

I always laugh a little, because it's a joke—it has to be. Then I remember  
the night before, all of us on the couch in the living room, laughing

about god knows what, and I think that if I try really hard I can live  
in this moment forever—I say, *Dad, tell me a story*,

and you tell me about the first time you and Mom made love,  
how it didn't feel so different from the way you feel now.

How you could feel along her ribs your own death,  
as if something inside her might open up and overtake you,

like a flood of light. Maybe this is what she means  
when she says she can feel you in the room.

IN LOVE WITH A GIRL EATING STRAWBERRIES—

whispering to each other in the dark,  
pushing the bed up against the window of her tin-can trailer

surrounded by redwoods and looking up at the stars.  
How the light touches her body without going through it.

She moves her hand across my belly and the pulp in her cuticles  
looks like blood, looks like she's reached inside you

to give me something. *This won't last*, she says,  
and I'm thinking about the nights I'd run into bed with Mom

after you died, mistaking the gunfire from the range over the highway  
for thunder, a thief on our back steps, or sometimes your voice

I thought I'd forgotten. I look more and more like you as I get older.  
I wonder if Mom ever woke thinking it was you sleeping beside her—

all those nights staring at myself in the mirror, trying to touch you,  
shaping a gun from my fingers, opening my mouth, hoping

to hear you scream. *Fuck, Dad, where are you?* I open  
the trailer door with a revolver to the sky and try to shoot holes

through the air. Can you see me staring back at you?  
Would I bring you back if I could?

1991

When I heard about the fire I ran down the block looked  
over the highway. I saw a cloud of smoke rising far above the mountain,  
like the shadow of some holy thing. The last time I saw you we made love.  
I pulled a tick from your bicep with a pair of pliers, held a flame under its body  
and watched it decay. I prayed the fire didn't reach you. My mother  
met me in the intersection. She told me about the Great Oakland Fire,  
and her cousin whose home burned to ash. How he killed himself with a shotgun  
the year I was born. I held you in my arms, in a cloud of white bed sheets,  
kissed you on the mouth and told you I would always love you. I hate myself  
for my poor memory but if I try hard enough, I can reconfigure your face,  
your eyes staring at me in the mirror, your neck the night you cut off  
all your hair. I had this feeling as a child I've been trying my whole life  
to duplicate. I try every night in bed to push myself further into being,  
but I never dream of you as I see you now, something is always changed.  
On TV they described the smoke, ascending the side of the mountain,  
into the sky. A woman said she could see it moving toward her in the night.

[UNTITLED]

I once asked mother if she'd ever had a miscarriage  
and when she said no, I didn't want to believe her.

I wanted her to have another reason to mourn—  
something unrealized and perfect, like the lies

we tell ourselves. Tonight we are dancing to Sam Cooke  
under the coffin-shaped roof of the attic, as planes arrow

through the night sky. I have lived my whole life  
in this house; here, my mother has lived one of many.

What I would give to see her at the age I am now,  
to dance through that house, to swallow its golden light.

## GOD'S EYE

My last night at St. Anne's and the kids chase me  
in the dying light outside the church, wrapping themselves around  
my grown body, faces buried at my waist, pulling me down  
into the grass. We look up, together this time, and as they crush their small bodies  
against mine, I want to say something like *be good to yourselves* or  
*don't forget this*. And when it's too dark to see their faces, I become  
my father, laughing as he wrestles me off the bed,  
only to pull me back up. I'm the child kneeling in my mother's chest,  
looking out as she says, with her hands on my shoulders,  
*your father's been killed*. The night becomes  
the blanket one of us pulls over the other,  
crying ourselves to sleep on the couch. I see the stars, almost  
opalescent in the fading sky, and I think of those tiny windows, illuminated  
outside the basement. I hear my name  
like an incantation, like I might forget it otherwise.  
I see Max standing in the doorway, and I know he knows  
I'm leaving and not coming back. He rushes into the yard  
and grabs my hand, holds it like the last memory of a father, holds it  
that close, and drags me inside. If nothing else, let there be  
more of this. The tiny rooms filled with light, our awkward and  
graceless prayers, everyone threading an eye  
to see the side not saved by love. Like a name, desperate  
on a child's tongue, I once thought we all disappeared.  
I want these kids to give themselves over  
to each other. I want them to know what this means. That I might never see  
them again. Still, they tell me everything  
and I tell it back without ever looking away. Grief spilling  
from their mouths and eyes. How little of it we've touched,  
how little of it we'll ever see.



ARIZONA

Tell me again about the boy who took a spade to the earth  
and tried to find his father's bones, how he ended up singing dirges  
in his own hollow, glassy eyed under the moon. Tell me about the dream he has

where the girl gives birth, how he says *I love you*, and her face becomes  
someone else's. Tell me how a nine year old could ever know  
his father's body on the table is not really his father, and how fifteen years later,

watching the sunset at the Grand Canyon, he is to understand the moment  
he pulled into the driveway with his mother, the crowd of neighbors and strangers  
in the blank afternoon, the policemen who tell her, *Mrs. Dhyne, your husband...*

why she dropped to her knees and dug her hands into the yard, as her son  
was dragged across the street and told over and over *he's in a better place now*.  
Or as he stood at the southern rim, and the sun had left completely, how badly he wished

he could remember the bathtub where his mother would hold him as a child,  
resting him against her breasts and along the surface of the water, his father's hand  
reaching out for him as he sat beside them on the blue tile floor—

how all he wants is to return to the bodies where he was born.

## YOUR BLOOD

There was a tiny room covered in plush at the end of the hall and sometimes my hand around another boy's neck, raising him toward the light. In this sea of stuffed animals, the body was a thing to step into, a trick sung backwards from ten. All of us bruised and wanting. When my anger would take me too far, when the boy would cry, *stop, and I mean it*, I felt a palm over my fist as someone much older pulled us apart. I knelt with my eyes closed and counting. To think I could have been there to carry you from this life to the next. To have been in the blood pooling around your body. But no, it's the son that must keep his father inside him. A child's body can only hold so much but there were many of us in that room, singing to you. And if I return to find you, I only recover this vision of myself at ten: shoulders thrown into the wall, thrashing light. I held your name on my tongue to keep you alive. I felt heaven crushed like pulp in the throat of your longing, which was my longing. That you might have a way of reaching me. Even now, I find myself waiting. And every so often I realize I haven't thought of you for days, and I lose it, I want to fucking scream.

NEW MEXICO

Tonight the sun drops its bloodstained tongue on the highway. We're driving to Las Cruces, where yesterday somebody put a pipe bomb in the trash and walked away. I wake Jesús in the passenger's seat because I've never seen light that looks like this—like a radiant bruise. Lightning cuts into the sky then disappears. I wonder if we should be afraid. The night's turned black and blue, and my insides feel silver. The lightning in the sky is the blood in my veins. It is the white hand of God flinching at its own power, my father's ghost over my mother's body, a light caress of oblivion. Jesús, I'm afraid—In ten days you fly home to your five sisters and your dying father, your mother who drinks holy water and spits on the car as we leave. But this is how I'll remember you—thin and wild and handsome, hair overgrown and wet with rain, walking through this city's streets at midnight. In ten days, I'll have a new home and it won't be with you, or in this intersection where lightning has touched in all four directions, and we stand, like in a minefield, holding onto each other. I say your name and look into your eyes. It is your father's name. They are your eyes. Now *you* say it. The sky flashes once more—this time, a kiss, and you tell me you don't want to die, which means you're thinking about it. Jesús, listen, what if love is waiting for us to annihilate ourselves. It will swallow our voices and we will become a song.

4 A.M.

Where I slip into bed and dream my father's death.

Where the baggage cart that crushed his body

after he hooked it around the concrete pillar, on the tarmac at SFO,

is lifted from his chest, and I see him staring up at the sky

as blood pours like honey out of the crushed cave of his sternum.

I can see him as if I were one of those last planes he watched taking off,

or a wave of starlings crashing overhead. And because

this is not real, because this is the only way I can explain to you

something I couldn't possibly understand, I can feel his warm blood

pool around my body, I can taste its sweetness.

TEXAS

I don't know where the words come from, but I open  
my notebook and there they are. *More blessings than hands.*

Sunset, West Texas. The body remembers being held, and spilling  
across hundreds of miles of nothingness, the sun cut by the horizon, light

torn open. It's something my mother might have said  
one of those nights it was just us trying to console each other.

There's a tape of my father buried below the house.  
*Just his voice*, she'd say, and I can see my one year old self

reaching for him, his face just behind the camera, his mouth,  
his eyes, a perfect imagined country. Jesús and I stand beside the car

on the side of the road, and he tells me he's been praying  
every morning, our shadows falling onto the 40, monumental,

growing dark. I wonder if the dead have a version of this too.  
Call it mercy, what lets me believe it's my father

I'm falling toward, that he's calling my name too,  
as we peel out into the night, tires kissing the blacktop,

our small, miraculous bodies become one. Tell me  
it was his unearthed voice that tore out the landscape

as our greasy hands sliced through the wind,  
turning off the headlights to look up at the stars.

ELEGY FOR YOUR BROKEN HAND

You slam the door on the back porch and the window shatters  
into a thousand pieces as you run into the yard to cry because  
there is no one to punch, no body  
that could take it.

You beat your right hand into the earth like you want it  
to break, and when your mother calls you  
back into the house  
you look at the bright shards shimmering on the pale tile,  
the impossibly small crystals already  
sinking into the dirt, and the ones  
now entering your bloodstream, your knuckles  
pink and swollen.

You re-glue the window in your mind, you  
make it whole, look in  
from the other side. You see your father's hand on the table  
reach into a bowl of oranges,  
your mother falling to her knees.

You try to push your fist  
through an already locked door.

## LOUISIANA

A man walks by the house and says someone tried to burn it to the ground last week, but I tell him we just got here, we're renting a room for the night. We stumble through Bourbon Street, smoking cigarettes, holding beer bottles by the neck, into a stripclub, where a girl named Elizabeth asks me if I prefer white girls or black girls, and pretty soon I give her forty dollars because I wanted to write a poem, and now she's on top of me and says I can touch her, so I do. I place my hands on her small pale breasts, trace my fingers softly across her stomach, like a child in a gallery. All I want to do is kiss her, because all I want is for this to be beautiful, and maybe it is in some fucked up kind of way, but the truth is I can't stand it. I look to my right and Jesús is there with a girl named Couture, riding him with her back turned, and he gives me this blank empathetic look like he has nothing left to give, but giving in, and I have nothing to say. I look back at Elizabeth and I picture her on a tightrope high above the city. I close my eyes and her body pops out of the colorless sky like a bone pushed through flesh. Everything below her is on fire, but she doesn't look down at the strange burning music she has inspired, or the sparks, of which I am one, filaments harshly arranged into an ecstatic earth. She does not see the bodies ignite, white bodies becoming black, blackening the blue night. She floats off of me with a kiss on my cheek and I run to the bar with Jesús. I ask if I can kiss him and he says absolutely and I do.

TWO BOYS BATHING IN THE LIGHT OF THEIR FORMER SELVES

This was your life too. The ocean was a bathtub  
and your mother held you like the sun. Your life so far

a preface to a life without her, and the first thing you remember  
you can't remember, though you think it has something to do with water—

the basement flooded, the bathtub spilling over, the watermelon cut  
in quarters, its bright juice sliding down your chin. She once said

you're lucky because you have your father's blood inside you  
and she doesn't. Now, you've sliced yourself open, summer

pouring into the bathroom where your friend has stepped  
into the shower with you, like a flare

ripping through a black sky. Did your body always go numb  
when it touched another's, or is that just what happens now,

as Jesús starts to cry, telling you things you promise never to write  
into a poem. You have never held a life like this, but you have prayed

to its silence, held the seams of its back, muscles wound thick  
with fear, waiting to unfurl like the caress of your mother's voice—

TENNESSEE

where the *you* I call my father becomes a trick of self-love, a blessing  
in the dim light of a rented basement room. We wandered through  
this perfect neighborhood for hours in the cruel August sun, past homes  
reminding me of the childhood I could have had. This morning Jesús and I  
took two tabs of acid we bought in New Orleans, kept cool in an icebox  
driving north through Mississippi, following a smoldering blacktop  
lined with wildflowers as we crossed into Nashville at dusk.  
Reader, if you believe one thing I tell you, let it be this—  
that as Jesús sketched my portrait, I sat crosslegged on the floor,  
and wrote *I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you*, and yes  
I was high and in love and crying, but I really did feel my father's spirit  
move through my body, that he wrote those words, not me.

A BEGINNING

We light your body on fire. We learn to pray.  
Summer opens and falls to its knees. I hold the sun  
behind my eyelids. I see your lips on Mom's  
swollen belly. She holds your head at both ears.  
Listen. I can't go back any further. Look at me  
shouting behind the glass, my dumb hands  
banging on air. I see you standing on the porch  
of the dream. Even here, you're turning  
to ash, dissolving into ocean. Years of nothing.  
How can I explain this feeling. Mom says  
you're still inside me. I trace the lines of my palm  
with a switchblade. I learn to beg. Undress  
language with my tongue. Collarbone, lipstick.  
I come over the bathroom sink, drag my palm  
across the mirror. Call it horizon. The beginning  
of heaven. The house I'm always leaving.  
Say, *goodbye*. I dare you. Say, *I'm sorry*.  
My hand reaches for your face. It could fit  
in your eye socket, dissolve into night like  
your ash on my fingertips. I've forgotten  
so much already. I drive across the country.  
I fall in love. You have no idea. I look exactly  
like you. I dissolve into hands. We smile.  
Mom reaches for me across the table, says  
*look how far you've come to get here*.  
And outside, the rain assembling  
like bones in a dream.

## VIRGINIA

So, what if you do go east? What if you say goodbye to everyone who ever cared for you, except your friend in the passenger's seat. What if you break your mother's already broken heart, your mother whose face flooded with tears as she stood in the doorway your last night in California, whose pale eyeshadow lit up, radiant with desperation, as she told you, *it hurts*. What if you're making a mistake. What if you really did love the girl you left behind. What if the brake lights glowing off the wet black highway are a warning. What if you're two hours from your new home, driving through the heaviest downpour of your life so far, and thinking about turning back. Turn back, Michael, we're not finished with you. You pull to the side of the road to take a piss. You watch Jesús pull down the passenger's seat mirror and fill the car with light. You remember what your mother said all summer, as you cleaned out the basement. *I want to feel what it's like to have openness*. Yet you picture her down there, holding the deflated husk of your father on an empty bed frame, as water starts to rush in, rising. You remember when she told you you'd find love again, even though she might not. *Just imagine you're moving toward it*. And what if there are no epiphanies, just tiny moments filled with light. Remember that feeling of ascension as the trail of blinking emergency lights guided you forward in the rain. Remember the sign outside the Baptist Church as you drove past: *Will the road you're on take you home?*



CHARLOTTESVILLE WINTER

The snow, infinite as a visitation. The feeling  
when, after minutes have passed away, you remember you're driving  
and might find him waiting beside you in that foreign brightness,  
reciting the words you've practiced. It does so little

to stand in the bathroom shouting your father's name  
in the crook of your arm. No other flesh to drown  
the sound of your wanting. Even as you write this  
you know there's only so far his name can take you—

deeper into yourself, a hole burned through the canvas  
to the other side, just as blank, empty as eggshells  
next to the sink. You say this is how he disappeared—

like the snow on your tongue, like the ash falling  
from the tip of her cigarette as it burns

taking everything with it.

SELF-PORTRAIT (FOR NICHOLE)

I draw a line from your lips down the center of your chest  
as if to say, *here is where it happened, here is where grief*  
*crushed me*, where my father's body opened like a parachute

into darkness—the room with nothing in it, the sound of mother  
crying through the door. I tell you I never wanted to escape  
my body. I wanted to re-enter it, to go back to that pain.

When they took me to see him for the last time, she said, *remember,*  
*that's not your father*. I learned to know myself through absence,  
the empty hours where healing meant forgetting. So many years lost

looking at my own reflection, because I didn't know where else  
to find him. Those nights my touch was a wasted prayer,  
a supplication. My whole life, I'd try to explain

and fail. *An accident at work, a spasm of light. No—*  
*I don't really understand either*. But when we touch  
(phantom limb, fire asleep in my hand), I realize

I am not finished becoming. Maybe the hour is empty  
because it's leaving space for you. My pale torso  
glimmering in the halo of light over the bed.

NOTHING

Like walking through a memory  
that never happened, talking about my childhood  
not believing a word I say. I can feel myself  
coming out of you as I lie on my back  
with my neck pressed to your lips, your perfect thighs  
cradling my ears. I can almost hear their language, my parents  
at the beginning of love. Listen, I didn't know I would want  
to remember this. I found myself  
like a body at dusk, which is also a room filling with night,  
surrounded by faceless children and the kind of help  
that helplessness pleads for. They handed us markers and told us  
to draw the body. I didn't even know what it meant,  
these hard outlines. My heart and lungs  
blue like a sky is blue in summer. My head, my hands  
red, then pink, like blood in water, and I suppose this meant  
I was angry, or wanted to be eviscerated, or felt  
like I couldn't keep from falling apart, or  
maybe I wanted to find my father's last breath.  
But of course I don't remember any of this,  
so let me try again, as you hold my palm  
in your hand, saying *see how it splits in two*,  
tracing my lifeline back  
into nothing.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH SKY LEFT OVER

Who believes children anyway? Their bodies  
glued together, one afternoon, from scraps of construction paper—

grief and its primary colors torn to sky in their hands. Or,  
maybe my eyes, reconstructed

at my father's chest, looking up as he reaches for oranges  
in the backyard. And if I squint, his arm looks like the hand of god

caressing the face of the sun. Some days  
I felt so close to nothing

I could have been anything—lifting myself onto the washer  
in the sun room, my mother's underwear

stretched tight over my adolescent hips.  
The seam between my flesh and the pale

lace: what leaves the sky  
unfinished, as I'd run my thumb along it.

And where is she? At the pool again, swimming laps  
like her life depended on it. I'd hold myself against the window's

warm touch as the day patched  
all of us together. What grace we encounter in solitude.

Those afternoons, all I did was learn to love myself.  
Why did I wait so long to speak? How could I know

I'd be doing this my whole life? Tearing the red patches  
from my throat, pasting them to your lips.

Busted tires like half opened birds. That's how you describe them.

Or maybe you say

*guttled*, something more beautiful, trace how they fell with your finger—  
graceful, idiotic—as we burn through the Atlantic coast.

Maybe you name them for your father, everything he could have said

spilled onto the blacktop.

You hold your hand to the rusted light, flickering through the pines, fold it  
just above my knee. Who knows

if this is the one where you take the pen knife and cut a ring  
around your finger, or the one where heaven opens  
and bodies fall from the sky like rags.

Maybe this is the one where I'm already the person

I've been waiting to become. One night at St. Anne's,

I had the kids make timelines of their lives. They unraveled

fits of yarn in their hands and stitched them wall to wall

over nothing. Like a needle from the other side, that feeling I thought

I'd forgotten. *My dad died today, Left the city, Started fourth grade—*

written on post-its, pinned to thread. It's one thing to remember, another

to not forget. A girl says

*can I start with my birth*, and I ask her if anything happened  
before that, her eyes bright with wonder.

We're getting closer

to St. Cloud, to your father's house.

The sun falls over your side of the car and I have to squint to look at you, as you fold

down the mirror, drawing the corners of your eyes.

And when you touch your blood-red lipstick to your lips,

I think of times you've held my father's name in your mouth, how this means

you know him well as I do.

And because this could have ruined me but didn't, I want to tell you everything

so you can remember it for the both of us. How we kept switching rooms

after he died. How we couldn't stand

to be in the same place, but were too afraid

to leave. I've written over the memory of that day so many times

it's night. The first time I slept in the last room

my father woke up in, I heard a moth and its bad wing rip up

the hardwood floor like a saw.

The door fluttered like an eyelash in a dream,

and the voice on the other side said *I don't want*

*to leave, either.* Each room in that house remembers me  
differently. I've listened to my mother read my poems to my father in bed,  
as if he was there beside her. But sometimes she'd arch her voice upwards,  
to the attic, where I'd lie on my mattress on the floor,  
listening to her mouth my words to him,  
back to me.

ON SILENCE

When my silence like a fist clutching shards of glass  
opens, you ask me what I remember. A lightbulb  
pressed firmly into the blood, a hand on my shoulder  
and a woman bending to whisper in my ear.

I am standing in the circle with you. I  
squeeze your hand and you squeeze the hand  
of the child next to you. We move like this  
around the room. You turn and ask me

what I want. Our touch incandescent,  
everything opening like a mouth into words.  
The mouths of your eyes, the mouths of your lungs—  
The mouths of our hearts open like sky and

I have so much to tell you. If this wasn't our story  
it is now. The childhood I never needed  
to remember, those empty summers  
in front of the TV. How I learned

the body's false edges, that we  
don't end. And because no one asked  
I said nothing. I waited and nothing came  
but the hand on the other side.

*I'm sorry I wasted so much time  
getting here, I say, our pale flesh  
swallowing the moonlight. Tell me  
you wanted this too.*

[UNTITLED]

I found heaven's body  
in the crawlspace below the house—

pulled a string hanging from the ceiling  
and held a slide up to its light.

My father sits at his desk upstairs, hands folded in his lap.  
He looks at my mother, holding a camera.

Would you believe me if I told you I felt him enter me  
like the light entered that slide?

YOUR FATHER'S VOICE SLICED OPEN RINGS OVER THE CITY—

It was more like a *yes*  
and wanting it to scar. Your mother on the phone  
telling you she cried at work today, that she felt him  
everywhere. It's why Nichole can convince you of heaven  
with her fingers in your belt loops, pulling  
you down, and why she leaves the porch light on at night.  
Her ex got drunk once and lit the mattress on fire and now  
she clutches you on her balcony as she tells you,  
flicking matches into the snow, saying, *yes, yes—*  
*this is what I wanted, what I always wanted.* And  
there are holes in your sight like the holes  
in your hands, like the holes in your heart, the subway preacher said—  
shaped like god. And if you are not holding her it's not  
because you are gone, it's because a poet once told you  
sounds never die, so when Nichole texts another picture, naked,  
cropped from her ribs to her lips, you don't tell her  
you just spoke to your mother, that today was  
the day your father died. You tell her  
you want her here with you as his voice  
circles around you, until somewhere  
he switches on a light and you scream out.



WOULDN'T IT BE NICE

And they're crying, holding each other in his bed.  
This will be the last poem in the book, he decides.

They laugh about it, cry about it some more.  
*I really could have used you when I was younger,*

he says. Snot and salt on their faces.  
It's not happiness, but something else they're feeling,

something they don't have a name for, recovered.  
Her hand on his heart, his hand on her cheek.

She leans back against his leg, propped up behind her.  
Eyes, almost unbearable. He wants to say something

about his father, he wants to say  
*I wish you could have met him.* She says

*I hate to think of you as a child. All those years,*  
*alone.* And what comes next (the furious writing to remember)—

his whole life, her blood almost black in his cuticles,  
the hiss of powerlines and streetlight through thin white curtains,

the comforter stained red, and what they did to each other.  
Her blood drying on his cock, the taste in her mouth.

And in the shower, how she shaved his neck  
under warm water as he faced away from her,

how it hit their bodies and covered them completely,  
the blood now pink, swirling in porcelain at their feet.

She tells him she's afraid of sleeping because  
she's afraid of not waking up so they keep talking

just in case. He shows her pictures of his mother  
walking into the ocean with a bag of his father's ashes.

He takes her to meet him, standing on the cliffs, staring out over the water. *Dad, this is Nichole. Nichole, Dad.*

She is holding his whole left arm as she falls asleep, curled away from him. I have to remember.