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The Department for Wandering Ghosts

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Abstract

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This collection of poetry explores the boundaries of the body—human or otherwise—focusing on the body as a locus for inheritance. Over the course of the collection, I move from probing directly into the body’s interior to questioning the way that we might think about our physical selves as entities that accumulate over time. Anomalous, animal, and female bodies in particular play a large part in these poems, as they demonstrate the ways in which the body can mutate or perform strange feats of multiplicity and ambiguity. The pregnant female body, in its ability to be occupied by or wholly connected to another person, is especially tied to concepts of inheritance. A woman’s body can contain more than one person at a time; she is simultaneously both herself and her ghostly image, both mother and child. From DNA coding to family histories, our selves are palimpsests of other people. History is a ghost of other histories. Through the exploration of these concepts, this collection asks: what do our bodies leave behind? In these poems, residue from past actions and memories repeats across time and place. People, events, and images recur in multiple poems, leaving afterimages within the collection at the same time that the poems themselves are afterimages of history and memory, real and imagined. After all, what are poems if not ghosts?

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Found Autopsy

In small valleys along these crested paths,
these islets where blood breaks on the shores,
like a carousel the occipital belly
moves freely over your skull.

Like a carousel your large intestine
obliterates. These are the great vessels
and their branches, the sympathetics,
the peritoneum and its reflections.

A proper relationship must be established
between your pituitary gland and your soul,
that cone-shaped pea lounging on the roof.

The artery brushing off brain sand,
draining wizened umbilical veins.

Cricoid cartilage strokes the throat.

The aqueducts of Sylvius arch overhead,
sulcus to plexus, inguinal and easy.

Your corpus is found and firm.

These Days I Hear Du Pré

Did her hands buzz like moths when the sound swelled?
Did she stroke the long, black neck of her sobbing
cello strings, run her finger down the brown line
on her belly, play vibrato on me? Behind the curved body
of her cello, pressed up against the smooth soundbox
of her stomach, I learned the grain of the red wood,
the buzzing notes against my webbed hands. Did she nest
her head against the scroll, mirroring the way mine
lay against her spine? Did she know that my fingers
would split, long and clutching for music that growled back,
that I would wait below the stage and listen to the cellos cry,
sensing something known in the waves of sound around me?

These days I hear Du Pré and feel my mother behind me,
the cello before, and suffer the buzzing of moths playing on my ribs.

Cell

– for Kilmainham Gaol

Peer through the slits to the wire, the fading murals.
This place is a relic and a reliquary, the highest degree
of sainthood, curled in, double pleated. Or maybe just eyes
squinting for leftover spatter on the stone wall, the same
wire-rimmed glasses, the shells singing 1916, Kilmainham
aching. Look up to the cathedral ceiling, the vaulted ribs—
digress from your human form. Gather into your cells.
Even in stillness you move with the earth, waiting
like a laurel on a windless day, you are spinning.
It's this body that drags, is fluid, is petulant. Somewhere
in the bones, in the shading of muscle to tendon,
you appear. Locked up like a splinter examined under glass,
sliced into the smallest version of yourself, and still
you press against the frame. Still a fog gathers at the edges
of the long-clear lenses, still something red seeps out
from the brickwork. You know how Daphne felt inside
her tree, her skin peeling every spring like your own
roots you to this moment. *Hard earth of termites and flaking
fingernails, stop spinning. Stop twisting my limbs into being.*

Forty Years

Your legacy comes like a flat upper lip
 from your grandmother, flapping across the Atlantic
 —For You: From Hungary— like wasted eyebrows,
 chicken you can't chew. Smear'd lips on chalkboard
 and skinny fingers, no heat in Strawberry Mansion,
 the streets creasing between crabapple trees
 and piecemeal chocolate sold in the park.
 You got forty years away from the corner store,
 from wandering and wanting. You got a gallon of milk,
 plastic bags bulging like swollen feet in the basement,
 molding pillows ballooning on the curb in the condensation
 of your smear of a lip, where the angel pinched you
 to forget the rain of smear'd chrysanthemums,
 your shifting island. The basement folded in half again,
 spring floods washing your sour smell away.
 Your lip is lost in late arrival, in the restaurant rafters,
 joining abandoned constellations in the late smear'd sky.

Keys to Missing Teeth

That's the whole tale, and I can't lie anymore. – Slavic storytellers' saying

I. If there really is a house in Westport, it stands on gilded chicken legs. When I come near in a rental, it hops into the gummed-up lake and taunts me with the beak it wishes it had. No mill ever tilled those flat waters of lake feck and mosquito eggs. The forest on the mountain as bad as the house—impassable. Do I look like a helicopter? My blades don't swing so wide, my eyes are not so open. Inside the foul house, there is a room full to the gills with knickknacks and dead potato bugs, some hand-made brooms in the corner. Pickerel? Small-mouthed bass? A handkerchief tied around the forehead. An unsmiling face against grained wood. Scrawled on the garage: "Gil loves Mil," a heart still pounding under white paint.

II. Oh, Gene. Your softly cutting voice always lured me in, your tapping soles under the red moon. A milk jug landscape under the piano. The shepherdess in rosy silk, guttersnipes and penny violets beside her. If you can find middle C, you'll always know the way back—past the grayscale abbey and o'er every mountain. Puddle the applesauce, play your hand. I'd call every morning if I could, from the balcony or the beach, across a crowded room or a pickle barrel. Every softly cutting morning.

III. Late night at the German restaurant and the dark beer is dripping. Mahogany panels surround you'd, enclosing you'd in gherkins and schnitzel. Do you'd see constellations when you'd eat your fried pickles? Would you'd know a constellation from street lights hanging in the air? A taste of turtle soup, a slap on the rear. An apron frill brushing past a white window. A whitened widow. You'd wallow in the sycamores, wade through the evergreens. It is raining outside in the German night, and you'd can't go home.

IV. If there really is a witch in Westport, she sits on the edge of a blackened forest. She eats ferns, swallows their fiddleheads whole. Bird goddess, whooping crane, pelican mouth. Stick your nose into the chimney, give me gifts that I cannot receive. Whose birth do you attend? Whose fingers do you stroke? Go mat your hair, go mutter to yourself. Grind your teeth to bits, but don't forget me, whoever you are. I'm going swimming in the lake, going fishing, going out into the forest where your bony legs can't find me, where your spells and charms won't work. Where I can eat your memory, swallow you whole, bones, bits, and all.

The Moment When You Fell in Love in the Kitchen of an Atlantic City Casino

comes down to this, my finding of the photographs
from a forgotten honeymoon under moldy rubber bands
in the corner drawer. I can't smell their musk,

or the kettle burning, but I can smell
the air somewhere in Europe, the solid blue air in waves,
droning over the ochre field. There are no faces,

no oil sputtering, no tracks across the field.
This could be pre-industrial Bavaria; you could be
a peasant enjoying the view. I could be a peasant

enjoying the view of your view. Set me down
in a field of rubber bands. This is my story,
now my beautiful bright field. You gave me your dishes

breaking, your telltale yellow eyes, your bigger beaches
free of rubber and plastic. Go back to the fiefdom,
because I am the field, I am the plaiting

of blue against gold, I am your breaking dish,
your love of medievalism, the end of Atlantic City.

The Ossified Man

After the fact, after skin had already fled
from bone, after bone had erupted to coat
his sinews like snow on a branch, after
his body had fallen to snow, after ribs
and scapula had fused, after he left
the hard part behind, so many of us watched
and wondered: if I put out a warm finger
to stroke the twisted spool of his spine,
would it shiver? Would it thaw?

Their Nymphs Emerge in June

It was the summer when the seventeen-year cicadas hatched,
and they were everywhere. Walking down the sidewalk
sounded like fresh popcorn, their black and yellow bodies

scattered like they had fallen, mid-flight, out of fuel.
We learned to look before we sat on the grass,
not to brush our fingers against trees, the sad face

of waste staring from puddles, stuck between windshield wipers.
They appeared so suddenly, they might have always been
lounging there, clogging the swimming pools, forgetting life

if they ever knew it. After the first big storm came churning,
we jumped, shrieking, into the quarry, glad to see the surface cleared
after weeks of sweaty necks. I felt my bottoms loosen,

then drag down to my ankles as I kicked to the surface,
panicking in the dead water, shadowy kisses
of soggy wings against my bare topography,

their decomposing bodies clinging to peeled skin,
clothing me in racing colors. I drowned in rotten vestments.

Lucy

Lucy the Elephant, or all that was weathering—
Lucy the restaurant, Lucy the theater,
the three-star hotel with ocean views.
Lucy the immigrant, the starfish, the jeweled,
plush Lucy—stuffed Lucy—Lucy under cover,
under pillows. Big-eyed, south-facing Lucy.
Lack of direction Lucy. Give me your tired,
your hungry, your sales-tax Lucy. Lack of lies
Lucy. Lack of dye Lucy, in a pile Lucy.
For all time Lucy. I lost you once, Lucy,
in your worldly eyes—you rolled away
with the tide, Lucy, crushing cement
against the seawall. Lucy, screened,
Lucy molding, slowly turning in the water,
dancing patterns, spinning daughters, Lucy
ringing in my ears. Bitten twice,
soaking nights. Lucy of the earth, Lucy of mud,
indigo and copper Lucy, stuffed with smelling salts.
Lucy of my hours, inside-out Lucy,
big-ribbed, empty, I don't doubt you, Lucy.

Landscape with Fish

It grew every day, like an ear spool
stretching us across some great chasm,
weaning us from our own skin. No more

mothers, no more star-lit scenes
hovering above clean streets. Ribs lay
open with no remorse. A mass of blood sank

into the foundation. A cross-section would find:
several last breaths, twenty-two near misses,
and a host of scraped knees. We left the bikes

in the woods when they caught the killer
because these things happen more than once,
because comparatively, the roots were in our way,

and that old blood was bubbling up the stream.
The fish stank like we had killed them,
like we had left and taken ourselves with them,

tossing their heads over our massive shoulders, joyfully slicing
our fingers on their still-gaping jaws.

Sediment Days

Our ire spreads like mercury, making everything silver
and reflexive. There lacks a cure for your hunger.
We all want more, a maw for a muddle, a tooth
for a nose. The surface
holds a great weight in the evenings, tension rising
like yeast in crust, in the days of a sun like mercury.

We are coming to the days of mercury.
All will fall to rivers and oxbows of silver,
rings of fish rising in hunger,
stamping and gnashing their pebbled teeth.
Bubbles will rise like an oracle to breathe, to surface
for air that we will only exhale, our ribcages not to rise

again. The ridges of our spines will begin to polarize,
lifting and separating under layers of murky
fluids, oils, sap of the body. Our scars embossed in silver
will blend in with our surroundings. Your hunger
finds no foil. In the days to come, your teeth
will lose their cusped contours, their surface

dull from lack of use. No surfeit
here, no swell of the stomach. The only thing that rises
is the temperature, falling then like Mercury
against the sun. Light reflects off lakes like silvered
lungs, collapsed concave, forgetting air, forgetting hunger
and the action of teeth

as the jaw does not expose itself. Our teeth
live on without us and float to the surface
to mark our places. Collectors will come to appraise
them and find a curious lack of canines, a mystery
of roots and remainders. We are a sliver
on the river's bottom, hunkered

down in legend. They speak of a hunger
so hard it could break your tooth.
You can see us at the surface
in the waves that never break, rising
up from the pressure of empty mouths snapping shut, the memory
of bile. Keep your arms close and your liver closer.

From under bottomless silt, from under the weight of hunger,
every furious tooth gone to see the surface,
the last figments of our bodies will rise, washed away in a mercurial tide.

Underground Sonnet

I. Sweetwater, Tennessee, 1996

We went down like bandits into the dark, down to the lake
where unexplained waves slapped against the rowboats waiting
as if to take us somewhere. As if the chambers went on,
blister to blister, blooming under layers of calcite and shale,
womb-dark, the quiet broken only by trout flipping.
The ceiling dripped down to meet the floor, pinching
as if to reassure each other that they were still there.

II. Ballyvaughan, County Galway, 2009

Above us, the gorse was flowering, turning the hills yellow,
my eyes still smarting from their afterimage. I found them
clustering like bees at the edges of my eyelids. Sloping down
the passage, we came to a smooth hollow in the cave wall,
an old hideout scattered with bone, a place where bears
long in the tooth had slept, burrowing their snouts
in warm necks, licking minerals off the wall through winter.

III. Boyne Valley, County Louth, 1690

Over the spiraled stone, down the low pass leading
to the lightless center, this mound rose like an egg buried
in the hillside. At the yolk, only the dead crowded in the dark,
brushing papery skin against rock, thinking of light breaching
like a spear, the dust in the shallow burial basins twitching
as rockets shook the hills. As the valley was planted
with fingers and feet, grasping into the ground.

Teratoma

You wore skin like pajamas,
 so small you had to squeeze.
 Like an ice-encrusted pelt.
 Like a silicone mask or caramel
 stretching across the face.

Your face stretched across the street,
 molding to the pavement
 as though coming to realize
 that you were not as tall
 as you thought, that you lay inside

the body. You, like a cyst inside.
 A gray molar and three strands
 of dishwater hair, knocking around
 like a stone baby. "Body Malformed."
 Potato head, you have too many eyes.

Upward, aching eyes, in shadows
 your bones are swollen but unbroken,
 unmade like a tuber under glass.
 A guarding wellspring, singing roots
 and hearing tendrils, you are held against:

"Have you heard the one about the potato
 that grew into a baby? That'll teach
 to let them rot under the sink."
 You wore your skin with pride, turned
 those cells inward from the street.

Facing outward: "Baby on Board!"
 You are a potato carried
 against the belly, with eyes cut out,
 a lump of flesh for a home,
 wearing a body like a bed.

Hooks and Eyes

Hanging in the air like fever, disease,
they catch—on stained walls, on mattresses
gaunt with age. On basements dark and damp
to their foundations. They are more mirrors
than you care to see and more rooms
than you thought you'd built, linking
into the distance, a place where someone coughs
when you're home alone. Where you see spots
billowing on your face and arms, little drips
that gleam like wet paint or water beading
up on the bathroom mirror, lesions that leave
no mark on a second inspection. Where the dirt
knows mucous and blisters, where legions
have come and stayed, under basements,
in glass that wavers, in your fingers spreading
shocked across a board game, spelling
a bitter voice, mocking, choleric.

All ends come to knots:
a black butterfly beating on a wall, a bed
compressed under weight that isn't there,
a cold spot. A Colonial that makes your toes curl.
These are the places where holes find their laces,
leaving foggy prints on the mirror,
old soldiers and their old wounds,
their cold breath still hanging in the air.

Father to Son

There's really no reason to come here anymore.
The belly's boarded up and gases seep through the chinks
in the wall, the tower I built, the outer rim taken
in the seventh revolutionary war. My flag doesn't fly.
Thunder growls behind the tree line, whips through the ruins,
marks the old precincts. Since I swallowed it,
no sun rots in the blood-filled sky, and light leaks in
only at the margins. Child, to come to the tower, to eat
in arms, to put a stop to sleep when there is no day,
just one tall, dreamless night—my flag doesn't fly.
I will part my lips for the sun like a stone to rise,
like a sound to swell like a son to salvage,

but I make no guarantees, and never have.
I am always awake, and you are always apart.

Please Bring Me Back My Head

You left it on the shelf, behind the aluminum sulfide
and crows' feathers. It stinks of grease

and hears nothing but the clinking of ice
in your emptied glass. Bring back the soil,

the grainy heat. Stop chiseling
at my eye sockets. They're down where you left them,

in the pressure box at the Danube's bottom
waiting for soft tissue to leave.

I'm sick of swan shit and acid rain,
dank pavement, this city and its shining,

its windows—from which you tossed my head,
to see which fell faster, mine or the lettuce.

We splattered equally, but those leaves lie
in the ground somewhere, while my head sits,

wishing for tear ducts, propped up on the stand
between Cameroon and Benin. The glass is smeared.

My face is printed in your journal,
in ten thousand copies at dusk, when you knew

you didn't need my photo, knew
there would be time later to study my face

under lights, in the river, packed in ice, stripped
of skin in a museum case, a century older

and three stone-blocked floors above the ground
I miss so much, sour to the bone.

Study for Princeton Battlefield

I apologize for the flippancy, Mr. Mercer,
the stumbling cartwheels and the picnics.
You were not there, not reflected
in the camera lens, not crawling
in the carton of strawberries
we ate with whipped cream.

When I tripped on nothing at all,
we might have fallen together, breathless
from badminton and Hessians in pursuit.
Your musket might have scratched my leg
where that broken stick dug a groove.

The mud that splattered my face—
just mud. There was no stain in the grass
that we plucked and placed between
our thumbs, to squeal out.

The oak that heard your hissing breath
was pared down by lightning,
fenced in and replanted. You do not stand
behind the columns on the monument, waving
from wedding portraits in stained and ripped uniform.

I find your face only fading,
drawn in pencil on wet onion skin,
the line of your jaw almost passed
through the paper.

You have already been parted—
from cartwheels and Ferry Farm,
the sawdust apothecary and our badminton game.

Grass

Mist gathers like the condensation of memory
around the edges of a film clip,
the bridge rises and falls before us,
and the streets begin their wet whispering.

The water below us makes no noise. There is only the sound
of moss lapping at its edges, at the underside
of my city, the last place I knew only my own secrets.

No matter how many times I return, how low
the stone steps sink into the canal, it will always be
to this place that I return, inside the old year, the old city,
my old body, to the sounds of rain and glass.

The murals give way to the brick underneath,
out of every window a bird, a wicked mask, beaks jutting
out where noses should be. I know this place after years away.

My head keeps it like the cellars they can't build here,
like jail cells, weighted down and peeling, like bodies
given under false pretense, like the grass
that I was. The things I'm not saying

are the ass's ears. Everything spread like molten glass,
gleaming darkly and eating up the streets,
to harden, to hold.

Fault

Where is the line for limbo drawn?
In the air of body cavities,
that covert no-man's land. In air stale
like vault-air, papery and thin.
Like light through skin, draw the line.

In light of vaults, what is the line?
It is shrill, and nausea-inducing.
It is not a rope, but a scent warning
you away: This Is The Line. Don't Cross It.
It keeps you hungry but doesn't let you eat,
burrowing in your stomach lining and sucking
up your breath, eating from the inside out,

all the pressure of seven oceans in a stomach.
And now you know the line, tow it back
taut from the edge, to stop the swinging,
to ease your tendons screaming,
one hand on each loamy end.

A Natural History of Sleep

I appeared at the turning of the year, in June,
drowsy in my mother's arms in hazy, rising June.

She taught me how to doze, to sleep
without blankets as the mercury rose in June.

In the nights while I dreamed, she canned peaches to keep
past the summer, past the waking days of June.

Near the *Parque del Buen Retiro*, Arthur sleeps his last sleep.
The months pass from June

to *junio*, and still laid out, he keeps
in oils, flanked by Morgans and the buds of June.

Oleander. Laurel. Nightshade. This is the way my mother sleeps.
There's no waking her, even in the shade of May, even in the breath of June.

She slumbers like bedrock, like the lost rubble of his keep.
The day Avalon sank was surely June.

The peaches bobbed like suns in mason jars—I see them in my sleep,
dream them on my tongue. Every flaming June.

Perennials Are Endless

I. Exit

She sat, sucking on saffron fibers, clutching low
on her belly, feeling it turn and shrivel. The rusty threads
were supposed to help with the pain. From her perch

at the acropolis by this red pillar, she could see across
the sunken plain spreading in front of her that the crocuses
were blooming. Small brown backs bent over, lifting

them from the ground before they could wilt or shrivel into a draft
that would blow them over to the beaches and into the sea.

Where her linen tunic should have shown a curve, a new gust

came aching. Amber formed in the sweat dripping off her nose.

Behind her, the house smelled of gold. The sea
was breaking gold. Below her stomach but not quite

between her legs, at the center of everything,
another burst of color, another red pillar.

II. Entering

They had known he was lying when the vellum bled yellow
across the manuscript, the saffron flooding the page
where it should have set like leaf into a smooth gold layer.

Gabriel's golden news ran into Our Lady's halo, the adulterated
dye exposed in a fuzzy illumination. Lines of sunlight strained through
the window like strands of wavy hair. When the authorities came,

he was sitting in his laboratory among the alembics, distilling
pomegranate fibers from a jar of saffron threads, sweating,
trying to get back the gold. After his hearing,

after days in a dungeon stained with feces and rotting skin,
after they placed him in the ground, his hood finally off,
the sun hit him like an axe. The ground smelled of spring,

of gold melted, powdered, pounded. He tasted soil in his mouth,
swallowed mouthful after mouthful as they buried him like a bulb.

III. First Signs of Spring

Funny, how it was fall, the grass dying under them
while they planted crocuses. All up-side down,
pointing up instead of below to the dark, bellowing

underside, the rivers shaded gray and murky.
The bulbs pointed up to wind and leaf piles
thick with spiders laying late eggs, sticky globes

full of legs and torsos waiting to be assembled.
They sat beside the cement path, this woman and her daughter,
laying the corms down as though they were sacred.

She was thinking how easily her daughter could disappear
into one of these piles, the leaves rising in a hard wind
to bury her. She was thinking about the line that surfaces

from bulb to bud in the spring, from the first spot of purple
down to its source in the dirt. She was thinking
of placing a hand on the ground, of telling her daughter,

“This is the only thing that can divide me from you,
and you can see, it’s easy enough to tunnel through it.”

The Enamelist

The Mongolian nightingale has been extinct
for seven hundred years. The underground caves

of the Khangai are littered with their beaks,
an offering to the snowy crests

overlooking the river of my nightingale,
who sang for the enamelist, who has sung

from many throats. There's no shame in melting,
in separation, in waiting

for the right century. None in souvenirs,
or in linen with wool. The bird still clutches

the branch, still holds tight
the note from the white mountains,

crooning into the matte darkness
for saltpeter and steady hands.

In solid lines across the steppe,
forging silica and song, the enamelist

coming closer to eroded cliffs. A post-mortem
remembering: *I will come in parts,*

*as a skeleton song, as wind
through carved bones. Like the Gobi,*

*I was a sea, now an empty mouth
of basalt and sand, scarps and memory of wings.*

Button Baby

Whose daughters are these,
whose girls come to echo
back their recoiling faces?

How many bodies
does it take to illustrate
your point? Do they feel

those black bars blocking
out their widened eyes,
full and cat-like, the only

features you can't bear to see?
Their breasts like saucers,
catching spilled pigments

spreading out from their centers.
Their hips crooked, their legs fused.
Did you mean to leave

this book for me to find?
This is no saloon, no shrouded
back door circus booth.

Sirens, they pull me in,
grinding my organs like worms
on cement after rain, caught

out from comfort, slowly ripping
their skin to shreds. Is this
my torso, these my arms? My eyes

follow the surge and slump
of anonymous sighs. *Just
leave me my body.*

Five Daughters, Six Specters

The *Saxonia* sketches itself out of the postcard, its black stacks shining, its wake churning white behind. Even at sea, birds can croon their way to waking.

Along shipping routes and island chains, dotted and dashed along the wide neck of the Atlantic, Ilona leans against the rail, dangling my necklace above the seething wake.

Along every spider line, I've traced grooves into the map. Her breath sticks in her throat when they sight the coast and its crowded island, her mouth jammed open, suddenly awake.

Five daughters stand for the photo on arrival, their pale, round faces repeating down the row like milk teeth. They've thrown their names in the ship's wake,

washed up twice on this shoreline. They've lost the soft down of their ears, and Eleanor leans against a fence, the ground not moving, her bones not waking.

In the postcard, the photograph, in the songbird on my necklace, their voices hang behind, leaving sounds to trace: a child's button clinking on a railing, a wet yawn.

To Paint the Portrait of an Ossuary
 - after Jan Švankmajer and Ray Bradbury

Down the street, a bicycle clatters
 out. From inside, the bones
 peer through the chapel windows,
 showing themselves like teeth.

Out from inside, the bones
 are beating, scraping, gathering,
 shining like the teeth
 that are missing, first to be

knocked out, scraped, gathered,
 easiest to rip from their roots.
 It's their nature to be missing first.
 These femurs—ball-headed, bodiless,

easy to rip from their roots,
 from mass graves where snails,
 bald and boneless,
 ripple over the pelvic ridge—

forming a mass, this grave
 and grinning chandelier. 1870:
 Rint finds a pelvic ridge
 in a pile of bones. He sculpts

a grinning chandelier. 1970:
 Švankmajer films it. From
 would-be bones, he sculpts
 the scene, the architecture.

Švankmajer films the form,
 the Gothic ribbing arcing
 across the scene, the coat-of-arms,
 the skeletal beams packed tight

with ribs. Like an ark
 assembling one of everything.
 The skulls, packed in, smile tightly.
 One invents a city born without bones,

assemblies where everybody
 sways like jellyfish, cartilaginous.
 One has to invent this city,
 where jazz plays on the streets,

swaying like jelly, its cartilaginous
citizens rippling through their lives,
the kind where jazz plays on the streets—
one has to invent this city, or

one sees the ripping of their lives,
the manner of their deaths.
One must invent this city.
The insides are out. The cold,

macabre face of death
peers through the chapel windows,
its insides out in the cold, whistling
through the streets, jaws clattering.

Minor Prophets

A successful person is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks that others throw at him or her.
 – Psalms, Ch. LXXV, v. 6

If we inherit ourselves
 the way Lamarck predicts
 (when a giraffe

loses a leg,
 its calf is born lacking
 from hoof to shoulder)

we must all carry inside us
 small instruction manuals.
 You know, you write your o's like that

because *H. sapiens*
 lost a fingertip to a sabertooth.
 That propensity for songs to stick

in your head like stubborn burrs—
 Russian rabbinical school.
 You'll forget yourself

and your language, your name
 lost at sea,
 somewhere over the mid-Atlantic trench.

You'll always love sand dunes
 and caves (pre-Cambrian aquatics
 swimming in your blood).

Always wind-ready,
 seeing stars and craving salt.
 You were born to throw chairs,

to lack oxygen,
 and to be inflexible.
 You see yellow more than most people

and adore the number 3.
 (you might blame this on Sesame Street
 but cells, swimming lonely in a body

like a ship carried to the far shore,
blood will always tell—
trace it back to Augustyn Tzedudka,

institutionalized in Lublin in 1793,
who left unpublished: “Minor Prophets:
Three Perspectives on Jonah and the Whale.”)

You’ll try to avoid the number 3

but it will always pull you back.
Red for lamb’s blood
and oil paints,

for the sky over an expectant Sinai,
the hearth fires of 1934,
and the sea that lingers.

The Missing Link

The girls were evidence
of her body, neat in a row
like a graph of years past,

productivity aligned
with birthdays. Their eyes,
their flat and solemn stares, these

must have come from
somewhere. On the ocean liner,
on a cold metal bunk bed,

did she curl her body
around the baby? Did she
whisper them into dreams,

stroking down the hairs
on their arms, willing
them to forget the dark

cavern of the ship's belly,
the way it smelled
of salt and rocked all night long,

the way she held their bodies
tightly together, pressing
them back to back, curled

like brine shrimp waiting
in a whale's stomach,
watching out the porthole

for a flat line of land,
a steady streak in the body
of water around them.

Source Mythologies

It's as easy to become a father as it is difficult to be one. – German proverb

It's the first thing you see, those teeth hanging above you
like the points of a drawbridge. This will be your new home.
Goya paints them in the shadows, too steeped in blood to appear,
but Saturn's knuckles grit together, tight-knit molars,
ready to rip your body down its center,
down the line between your legs until you're split to fit
like kindling. His eyes swell out,
and is it horror? Did he really mean it? Consider the image:
your father, belly taut, waiting for news of your birth,
for another weight in his stomach, a year of heartburn. Waiting only
to avoid your steady gaze, to open his mouth
without unfolding the blanket. Consider the taste of hair
and new blood sliding down the throat, gathering low in a crowded belly.
The stone sinks. The plan works. Your headless body is only
a smeared apparition. How easily the meat comes off the bone.

Sand Shark Impression

Dear daughter, one night I dreamed
I was swimming through salt water,
that you were with me in the way
you always were then, cradled below
my kidneys, pushing out
the wall of my stomach
like a small tank. My mouth
was full of tines, long rows hiding
in the back of my jaw, snagging
the water I swam through.
It was dark, and I wanted to hold you
though you didn't need it. You never
slept, always twitching, ready
for battle with your own small barbs.
I hid in a crevice and ate grenadier
and hag fish while the water trembled.

You asked me why you are so snappish, why
your jaw points so sharply, why you swim
when you should be walking. Why I am silent
and bloat when I should breathe, why
you lack joints and love the sea, why the other
children hide. Why your skin is so smooth.
Why you have no sweet tooth and dream
only of skin shredding, of ruptured cartilage,
only the crunch of bone on bone, the heavy
pounding of your own crude heart, the sudden
peripheral sight of a thousand empty mouths
coming at you from the shadows.

Shark Triptych

I. Annunciation

It starts with salt
 working on new skin,
 white teeth hardening
 like plaster casts of themselves,
 sharpened, small, and solid
 in the murk of the internal.
 All this carried like a sodden blanket
 spreading sanguine through dark water—
 these things have to settle somewhere.
 No way to hide your raging, gaping teeth,
 past reflection and regrowth. It's the hardening
 of outlines, it's taking care of war.
 Where to begin? You're tracing shadows,
 culling blindly in a bony compost heap,
 a toothsome, half-baked, amniotic stew—
 from which slides your baby

clad in battle gear, all angles
 and slippery velvet, blood-spattered
 from birth. The blanket settles
 on you, on your own stiff skin.
 What do you bring to the table?
 Enough salt for your own ocean,
 enough to saturate and collect
 in ghostly quarries, rustling, squabbling,
 like salt does. The shadows still waiting
 for light to form them. Your gravid frame
 is not a light source but a magnet.
 Even your savage body blooms.

II. The Adoration of the Echo
– after Paul Thek

Lying like film on water, our hands and eyes
connect like valves—one shuts, the other opens

to paint and plaster, filling the shallow cracks
in our unmade skin, plugging our noses

before we can breathe. My eyes water and close
in the dark, the stubble of your sprouting eyelashes

brushing mine, the sound of swelling, your eye expanding,
yellow. You worry me. You don't fight back.

I came inside with you only because of my reflection,
only because of your damp palms squeezing mine,

the smell and shine of plastic. I only see what you don't.
Sand sharks surface for air, for their

swollen bellies, for one floating, Plasticine second.
In this tomb-like interior, in the middle of a battle

for birth, I come to realize that
we are mutually assured. When the plaster

begins to crack, when I open my bloodless eyes,
when the shell breaks, the privacy of your body

will be preserved. Where I go, you will not follow. This
is the tooth rupturing the sac, is the still

hand, is the smooth brow pressed to the wall
that thickens like skin, is the small, warm hand,

the uncurling, the rising and submerging.

III. The Ghost Speaks, Swims

I know that you are there; I dream
 of empty waves rising above my stretch of sand,
 above my flat-bottomed boat. Each time you rise
 to the surface like a nightmare remembrance
 the lifeguards search, but find only sea glass
 and clam shells spotted with holes bored by acid.
 In all that time my body drains into a cavity.
 We are both hollowed out, at the surface
 where the water is still, at the sandy bottom
 where you hide from light, shuddering
 away from gulper eels, bodiless and bright.
 I ask questions with hinges: *Do the fragments sound
 like rain when you swim? Will you ever grow again?*
 All that cultivation and slow growth for a single, willful child,
 sharp and loud, a child stinging with salt, born jaws first.
Will you calcify? Will you sink? Do I want your true words?

You are echoing wartime down there in the murk.
 In the wrong zone, barnacles drop off in waters too warm
 for parasitic growth, raining down clippings
 in the salt-saturated brew, stretching out threads to grasp
 and meeting only each other. Planted as teeth
 they will sprout on the ocean floor
 to rise armor-plated. All that work, all that bloat,
 all those gaseous nights. *Do you run your tongue
 over the peaks of your teeth? Do you wish bluntly?*
 You will forget as the water clouds with salty specters,
 the ones you lost before you knew them, before you recalled
 the stirring in your gut that did not belong to you.

The Department for Wandering Ghosts

The war has used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated like motor-car tyres...we are now confronted with a depreciation of all our terms...that may well make us wonder what ghosts will be left to walk. – Henry James, 1915

Kunming, 2010

Uninvited, it comes back,
the way we hiked down in the dark,
the edge of the mountain backlit, glowing,
our breath hissing into the wind.

We walked down the dark
corridors between the hemlocks,
our breath hissing into the wind
that carried the shouts of the PLA

caught between the hemlocks in the valley.
Dust muffled the dogs, their howls
rising to join the shouts of the PLA.
We choked down our dark footing,

the dust that muffled the dogs, their howls
drifting slowly through the smoky air.
We choked down our dark footing,
swallowed the mountain. White mounds rose

slowly through the trees and the smoky air,
bound in orange peel and colored paper,
swallowing the mountain in long, white rows.
Our throats were too worn down with dust to speak.

Bound in orange, peeled in paper,
they were the long-gone dead,
their throats too worn down with dust to speak,
their tongues dry as bone.

The long-gone dead, the ones the locals
wouldn't touch. The sound
of tongues hitting dry bones,
of vowels not our own. We walked

not touching any sound,
not meeting any plane but dust.
On vowels not our own we walked,
on cold dogs and copper mines,

not meeting any plane. Just dust
hanging in the air, like the stiff back
of a cold dog or a copper mine's last sigh.
In that thin altitude, all mouths swung open,

hanging stiff in the air and arching back
like sunken stone ceilings dark
with altitude. All mouths swung open
when the dust had settled, coating every tooth.

Our sunken ceilings darkened,
shade coming in through every white and gleaming echo,
and the dust settled, coating every tooth
with a cold, wordless breath.

The shade, the echo,
the edge of the mountain where it glowed white.
At the hiss of a cold, wordless breath,
it comes back.