

Surface Displacements

Poems from the Three-Way Continental Divide

Sheila Packa

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I. In The Water

In the Water-Filled Mine Pit

In the boat, I slide over her body, the excavation. She is slag. She is crushed stone. Unburied, geologic, Mesabi iron. I drift over knee and shin and float over her shattered self, heaped upon the earth. Over boulders submerged. Veins broken open, emptied and made into freight.

A cold current from the drift. The bow lifts. She is bedrock, the bottom of the continent. Through her runs dark and invisible rivers without shore. She is the Divide. In the seams of the tectonic plates, she is lit with dynamite and extracted, mined, carried by trains to the ships. I see a shoulder of iron. In place of her head, a deep shaft.

Remade, she becomes steel, becomes bridge, becomes beam. Ship and tank and weapon. At the end, junk in the junkyards rusting into the weeds.

^

The vessel turns like the needle of a compass broken from its post. I hear the tail splash of a trout. Fish spiral along the perimeter inside the pit. Inside, a winding road once traveled, in shifts, by men in hard hats in dump trucks and steam shovels. The trout tend the broken cables, the skeletal rusted frames.

Stained with ore, the water feels like ice. It rises. Engineers call it water gain: precipitation, surface water inflow, a rise in the water table, a threat to the walls of the pit. Light falls but can't find bottom three hundred feet below. Circles tumble and bend beneath the water's surface. I hear the gravel sliding in. I hear insects and bird wings over the factory of the deep.

^

Cold blue from afar, but near, the water goes amber. It magnifies the hand that I plunge beneath the surface. It breaks the lines of my body, her body. The vessel. Ore rises into dust, condenses into a red mist of atoms, becomes discharge, industrial contamination. We break the surface. We sink and rise.

II. Surface Displacements

Surface Displacements

An acre of music or a room closer to it

— Lorine Niedecker

^

The minerals whisper: iron, manganese,
copper, nickel, platinum, and titanium.
On the Laurentian Divide, one river falls over stones
to Hudson Bay. Another falls south through fields
to the Mississippi. The third river goes east
through the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway.

^

Handfuls of water. A body of sea smoke, of wind,
a body of motion, an ocean without salt.
In the benthos, tailings from taconite mines.
In the basin, shipwrecks and broken bottles and sunken
barrels and bodies the lake has claimed.

^

On a bridge made of paper, my voice turns to vapor.
On a bridge made of iron and steel
I veer between traction and black ice
wander through beams and woven branches
follow the rain in its tracks through roots and excavations.
I cross before, almost, never,
the thunder of interior dialogues
through heavy machinery.

^

Practicing the old art,
my father once crossed the slope
holding a slender branch, calling the water.

Divining. Now, in a dark room, a daughter holds
a cello to her breast. In the instrument is the old tree.
The wood turns toward harmonics.
The bow rises, glides, floats above the bridge.
Calls of the geese overhead vibrate
against the windowpane. Her fingers tremble
like strings and the water answers.
A car comes down the street. The driver
locked in a dream, rolls down the hill. Slower.
Still. The branch dips and the invisible flows
into containers. The forked branch
didn't know it had lost its root.
It only had yearning.

^

I call the rivers in the forgotten language
call the Sawtooth Mountains,
forested slopes with snowshoe hares and deer beds
and bears' dens and lynx.
I call shore's perpetual threshold.
In the city, in a house, I call a moth
caught between two panes of glass.
To catch it will damage the wings.
To leave it means it will perish.
I write of the trapped and desperate flight.

^

No one can follow the map of the bees.
Their business is in every direction,
from tiger lilies into the hives to the chives
to other realms with heads of clover.
Apple blossoms. In the lavender colonnades

of mint through the rooms of June
into purple irises, yellow daylilies, deep inside
delicate tunnels with hardly a foothold
hidden in clouds of pollen.

^

Along Fourth Street, the rapids climb a bed of stones
amid revelers, but alone
over a steep slope with winter's melt
below a bridge, a bird on a wire, hidden by trees
past a canvas tent and pillow with nobody home
the constellation of Orion
roams through clouds and goes on a shifting path
with the sleepless river, plunging deep.

^

A river catches herself as she is falling.
She is a cloud that breaks open and the earth
that holds the seed as it is broken.
The farther she has gone, the closer she comes.
The more she is lost, the more she has found.
Her body is formed by what she touches.
Blind, she sees. Deaf, she hears.
The wind is her breathing. In her emptiness
she fills. In her erasures, she is writing.
The colder the air, the deeper she goes.
The more that it rains, the more rain she carries.
The more stones in her path, the more that she laughs.

^

A blueprint on a scroll of paper: a bridge is built
for floating on air, but heavily, on pylons
wading in plaits of current.

Passengers go between steel cables and arches
and bows, through quicksilver and mercury and yellow.
The homeless meander below.
This bridge, made to join, to cast a permanent shadow.
This bridge, made to resist wind and gravity.
This bridge made, above all, to echo and hum.

^

Between the steel rails on ramps of forward and back
I merge in the traffic. In the union of opposing forces
each has its own lane. Through ribs of steel and spider webs.
Once in a dark kitchen, there was an old woman sifting.
The flour falls through the screen.
Once the oil of the lamp climbed a wick
lit a small conflagration above the round oak table
in a circle of chairs, a murmuring, a call for grace.
The roar of a flame mingles with
the chink of forks and knives.
A man, injured in the mine, lies in his bed.
On the bridge, red brake lights. Cars surge
past a blur of years suspended in fine dust.
The bridge sways.
Wheels stir the filaments, litter drifts
where words can't reach.

^

On foot. On the span, falling without falling.
Say I cross the bridge,
although it is windy and missteps are fatal.
Say clouds cover the moon and I cross borders
without knowing. Say the wind blows at my clothes,
strips me of my protection
and I lose my footing. Say I fall through the night

break through the surface in a cold fire.

Say I vacate — abandon my saying,
withdraw my breath, take my hands from my hands,
twist from my shoulders. Say I walk or am carried
to the place before birth, the place where the sun
comes as a ribbon of heat.

Say I arrive in another language,
wings lifting and landing,
to speak with a wild tongue.

^

Here, a sketch of shore. The pencil draws
a water line, a vanishing point. In graphite,
wings of a bird in flight. Two more curves,
parabolas that float. Next, between the boat's ribs, a bench.
A wave on the water's surface — not much — just grasses
bent beneath a wind. Then a shadow, three-dimensional.
There's a need to leave things out. In the silence
those that peer uneasily, advance, and then withdraw.
Granite outcroppings — broken by ice.
Already the currents pull and the hull lifts and sways, restless. I
render this as if I were — disembarked —
without a body, without a shadow, a current of air.

^

Jointed and broken, the skeletal hand raked the beach.
It drifted and reached, five long finger bones bleached
and worn clean. A hand and nothing else.
Was it a bear? A deceased? Wind blew from the northeast.
No other bones to be seen — no other walkers.
Grass was chased over the dunes. Trees leaned
away from the sea. Clouds lifted in each crest.
Pebbles unsettled the bottom, rode through the knuckles

and left no print. The water was sky,
clear and tinted with old blood or rust, rot of fish
and soft ice. Inside were rivers and constellations,
storm wrecks and lives ground into splinters.

^

In the hollow of the body, a crow comes with a sharp beak.
The door of the chamber opens and closes.
I cannot translate this well. The arteries are open.
There is nothing apparent, the same pressure as always.
Life goes on. The crow grows a long shadow
and takes short flights along low branches.
I walk under the trees when the days are short.
The crow flaps its rough wings and squawks.
This what you call death, she says, I eat.

^

Here, bulbs are forced to bloom. They are planted
in the ground before winter.
Here, mouths are filled with soil. Those
who entered the tomb and grew roots
and walked in cold layers
to draw the minerals out. Those are the ones
who yield to the shovel and receive the bones,
those are the ones who weave a net and lift the stones.
There are those who seep or are swept
into the underground river, who decay and are kept and yet,
rise in a tender green stem to carry new buds.

^

I walk over the narrow holes of diamond drillers.
Above the horizon, seagulls draw arcs in flight.
In the morning on shore, sandpipers run on wet sand.

Feathers lift and fall, driven by wind's breath.
I find, half buried in the sand, lost thresholds.
Scrolls of birch bark, small arches, angles
and grayed frames of doors that once opened and closed.

^

In the city are those who cannot be traced.
In the city of good air and bad are ghost cities,
old cities, cities of war with lamps that no longer burn
but pierce the tongue, cities that write in smoke
in a book open to depredations and
cities that reassemble endings in a dark room
of unknown dimensions, suspend belief,
up-end the fields. In the city, I affix the disappeared
to sheets of onion skin with stains and smudges.
Trans-literate. Splice the image.

^

My hand disappears over the horizon
and pulls up the sea for cover.
I travel as a cloud for miles, citizen of a bruised sky.
I cross the tides to climb the coast
follow roads to the interior
and rivers flow over my banks.
My border spans the continents, and my spine
grows into a mountain range.
My arms can't carry the load.
The cast off, the rejected, the driven
and defenseless. Everywhere they come forth,
everywhere off course.

^

Seagulls wheel. The hidden drifts.
Freighters and ships embark
in the harbor, trembling with heat,
breathe cold vapor
and speak in the language of horns.
In their wake, the undocumented
travel with currents that carry the vessel.
May it not sink.
May they not be detained or taken by claw or beak
or roll like driftwood on the bottom of the sea
but rise to their feet and climb the beach.

^

To swing like a branch in a storm
whose edges are accelerating,
to heave with the waves in the slant of hurled rain.
To hear the thump and crack in the too-early dark,
see the electric pour into a hollow.
To find a vein and excavate,
see absences in the landscape.

^

Strangers come to the edge and double back
because vessels are small and voices can carry,
because children are heavy and nothing is cheap,
because destinations are far and some roads lead nowhere
because fences are one thing and rivers another,
because rocks rise beneath the feet
and holes can be deep, because we look
at the water and don't see any crossings,
because journeys disappear and time erases the map,
because words cloud the distance

between us, because no matter how many have made it
or how many have foundered, they still come,
because what falls from our grasp lands in the past,
because when the wind rises, waves make mountains to climb.

^

Difficult, to move a border. To clear a forest.
Difficult even to open the furrows
in the field. We lift the seeds and scatter.
If we don't cut every year, the forest will take over.
Imagine a beaver on the sandbar of Lake Superior.
She slides into the surf and emerges
with a piece of driftwood, in that heavy surf,
and lays the first beam of her house.

^

In the forest, most seeds flung by wind or wings
never sprout. Seedlings compete for the smallest bit of sun.
A white pine, one hundred feet tall,
can be felled by gooseberries.
Slash and burn feeds a coming year's crop of blueberries.
The forest thrives on waste. Dark wings flutter.
A red-headed woodpecker knocks
on the houses of the dead and pulls the worms out.

^

The center was never a destination.
Inside the fallen trunks are roads — circles around circles.
Insects in the canyons of bark travel with their bundles,
fall into the dark rooms of the camber,
get caught in rivers of sap turning to amber.
Anchored in the rot where so much thrives —
lichen reaches up to sketch on the rocks.

^

A catbird hidden in the branches
whistles and squeaks and whines and mews.
A catbird says whatever it hears.
Short notes turn into phrases, are repeated.
She can see over the Divide a river of clouds.
She can hear underground, in the rivers that scour the drifts,
a moneyed sound.

III. Three Rivers

Four Stones

^

Buried in the earth, held by frost
warmed by the sun
are four wave-worn stones.

Each is an egg
that will never hatch.
Each is a has been.
Each is yet to be.
Each has been delivered.
Each has been born of mineral
born of fire
born of pressure.

The shore has washed
our tracks,
wiped each day.
The shore has no memory
only stones.

^

In the sound of water
I remember
all the launches we made,
the landings.

Remember my mother's morning task,
the wash.
Her waves in a machine,

the swish and flap of wet
clothes she wrung
and hung on lines,
small stones beneath her feet.

Remember a trip to the cold lake.
We slipped on stones and waded in.
skipped flat stones across
the surface and swam.
Cold water behind the ear drum
trickled from our ears.

Remember the bridge
over the bay,
the beach where
we laid in the sun.

In the sauna, fire roared
in the stove
and heated the round stones.
We sweated
threw more water
that hissed back with steam.
Laid cold cloths on our faces.
Cooled our naked bodies
with buckets of cold lake water
rubbed our peached skin
with rough towels.

Remember betrothals
and births
the baptisms.
The paddle splash and canoe that
broke the waves.

Over the sound of waves
was the sound of birds.

The shore comes up
all the time.
The wind has fallen to nothing.

^
These stones are time in my hands.
They have been broken by ice.
They've been in an ocean's
embrace and know
the motion that falls and rises.

Stones ride the continents' drift.
They fold.
The stones are born of weight.

They remember tectonic plates
the asteroid and endless winter.

A stone can hold even
a bird's tracks. Memory
momentary and heavy.

Each leaves a trace.

The ocean knows the wind's hand
and wind knows
how it can be driven wild by fire.
The stones roll in the sea
that rolls and rolls.

Edges join. The stones round
each other.
Seagulls shriek.

^
Each stone's weight
isn't always its center.
Each stone feels my hand like a wave.
I stack four in the wind
as if to say, stones have a body.
A body who won't stay.

Not Drowning

I was born into another language, my mother's tongue,
shore to sapphire and stones, music of accordions,
tailgate parties, and night-time arguments.

Instead of beginning, expect hidden sources,
underground springs. A brogue, a Finnish tongue.
I slept in her silences, in the sound of falling water,

learned to swim by drowning.

I poured sentences into waves that rose into crests and broke,
rolled my r's like surf and swallowed the mist, toxic waste,

green organic matter.

This is where I wade, oblivious to the drop off.
Pebbles ground down to syllables and vowels.

All the same, according to the river, erosion and accretion,
migration and digression.
Now is the river and now and now it's losing ground.

Nothing stops here. And her, she bewilders.
Wilder for a moment, then idler. Ice or vapor.
In shallows or in the deep, meanders.

Asleep in the river, a channel open
goes through violence and its after-wash,
through silence and sibilance and distant acquaintance,

a place to join instead to begin, a place of apprehension,
of tension, of fluid dynamics, all her saying now
a muted underground music.

Soliloquy

^

Grandmother poured a shot of brandy into her coffee. Puna, she called it. Always an apron and black shoes with thick heels and thin laces. The liquor bottle in the kitchen cabinet, top shelf, on the Iron Range. My grandfather was already gone. In several directions. They migrated from Finland and I was lost in their language. Years later, I learned puna meant red. I learned the word for river, joki, sounding like yoke key.

^

The pendulum clock knocks in the night and strikes the hours with small bells. The chrome kitchen table and yellow Naugahyde chairs listened to the empty rooms, pale green and the carpet, deep green. On the wall, a pastoral: cows heading toward a barn and a horse-drawn wagon on a road, never arriving. Nearby are silhouettes, framed, and a family portrait with my grandfather at the center, passed out near a kerosene stove below a ceiling vent. A television connected to an antenna. Behind its convex glass, interference.

^

When my mother was small, there were ten children in a two-bedroom house. Too many mouths, not enough hands. Shadows with a long reach. In the hallway, a Singer sewing machine, a pincushion, a basket of unfinished business, wool scraps to make a weighty blanket for the bed. Don't think about the past, my mother said. I was not released. In the kitchen, she stood at a

white porcelain sink with cold water only. It drained into a slop bucket behind a white curtain. One must remember to take the bucket out. To wind the clock. To keep the pantry door open so it wouldn't freeze. To leave things out.

^

No doors inside the house, just curtains with cabbage roses, maroon and pink. Outside the window, a view of clotheslines. In Toivola, the place that meant beautiful, she had an outhouse, a swamp full of tadpoles, and horseflies. Inside, a record player, a stack of 78s and 45s, Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, Patsy Cline. All the children left home early. Crickets. Grasshoppers. Cats.

^

In the barn, the hay slid into the stalls and hooves knocked on the barn floor. I saw tails tied up with binder twine and brown bottles of beer. This is where the bullets landed. Not in the flesh, only in the wood. If that was his aim. Acres of muskeg. The story was told but not to me. I heard whispers. It was over my head, and I couldn't swim. Nights of lighted tobacco smoke and accordions. On the instruments, bellow clips and register switches. Inside, reeds and wax.

^

Outside, push and pull. I realize the way my eyes deceive me. I went back, walked on the same ground, looked to the other country, the places where my grandmother left. Why did she leave? Why did she stay? I heard hands playing the instruments, and the sound of falling water. The swish of taffeta slips over secrets. The feet that said, Unohda! Forget it. The heels said, Ei kestä! Don't mention it.

Levels

for Lake Superior

The lake is blind
when it sings
the song's physics unwind
play on lower registers

under its face are landscapes
settling and unsettling
deep, liquid forests swaying
in a cold fire and weighing

what floats,
what comes ashore, the rhythm
the tension, the dart and slide
of lives unseen

where water becomes sky
mirrors course-ways of light
like sleep's strange rearrangement
of days when carried in ways

essential and unknown —
slime and muscled silvers
the geo-logic outlying
granite faces

the call and shriek of gulls
motors and horns
the way the surface breaks
the edges in constant motion

like in a mind
every collision and erosion
churning down to sand —
like us, like stones
with the waves inside.

Aqua Sienna

^

Beneath the plane in the aqua fields
waves of white vapor.

There, a current
steep waterfall of clouds
over an invisible precipice.

^

Beneath the willow, I lay
my cheek on the shoulder of the river,
a cleft in the body of the earth.
It shines back to the sun, the river
through blades of grass and stones
from a white crest into mist through the fingers
and legs whispering now, now, now
pulling a dark stream.
Red roots stretch from the bank, listening.
Knots are tying, tangles unfurling
boulders shifting.

^

Underground the rivers
are veins we press upon.
No way to know what they join
or leave or conceive
what stones they ride
or what body they become.

Breaking

Invisible guests come down the road.
The spruce in the last drift throws off its shadow
as darkness looms.
The indirection of wind fills the room
spider webs stretch.
Outside, frost and snow travel like snakes
over the cold streets.
We surround ourselves with digital fields
and sink. Subzero's in the cycle
the dragline to climb.
We backtrack and go forward, untested,
on a ledge suspended over waves
clashing like armies under our feet.
Our weight on that
ice, a mirror covered with steam.

Horses

for Symphony #2 by Jean Sibelius

^

In the orchestra, the conductor lifts his arm
reeds and muscles trade

with trembling strings.
The earth tilts a fraction of a degree.

Cymbals are struck, the sound un-leveling.
Horses gallop on distant pastures.

Hollows fill with water. The musicians sweat.
Flashes of silver and black. Burnished brass.

An ear for repercussions. The heartbeat of hooves.
Pearl moon on hot leather.

This body cannot contain its liberations,
nor the fire its sparks.

^

Before the interment, we set the horses free.
They crossed the empty field
through shadow and made a path to the burial.

They gathered behind us.
The ground split with the weight of a man
and water filled the hollow.

I felt the shovel in my chest.
We placed the young man's ashes, placed fallen feathers
into the underground river,

left notes. Words were taken, the soul
began to travel. The horses
retreated as if the last gate closed in their faces.

The weight is heavy.
I know the horses will return.
Eventually will go over, break free.

^

At the funeral feast we push back our chairs.
In the ragged hymn, there's the clang of plates,
a hundred horses, racing.

The body with its headache.
The body of the horse rises with its slopes
and glorious veins, dilating

into a poetry of silence. Of mares.
Meanwhile, a boat founders
in a hurricane beyond rescue.

Cries are heard behind glass.
Heat has risen, and there is need for
what will surely never come.

^

Horses roll into the capillaries
and follow the conductor
from the concert hall to other listening walls.
Blooded, going forward,

at the pace of heartbeats.
Never for the last time, ice with vodka
and cranberry and lime,
blankets wet and steaming.

^

A circle of quarter horses with braided manes
on diamonds, they prance
with iron shoes

on roads filled with strife.
On a dark night, a strike.
The sound of collapse:

one great wall and a country on its continent.
An opera in the house
and a crisis on the measures.

The circle runs through graves and their instruments
through Sibelius' latitudes
the hands that held the reins.

^

In horsepower, the soloist excels,
her fragile body
given over to the red violin.

She's a racehorse. Ears back, ears forward.
In chaos and howling war,
the motion of flanks and haunches.

We can't hear our own voices.
We can't tune it out.
Heedless riders, in the ebb of sound.

Hay in the loft spontaneously combusted.
The staves burnt in a white heat.
When the wind dropped, we fell.
Got up again. Shoulders in.

Erosions

A vowel rises from excavations
where roads end in mine pits and tailings ponds
in the headwaters at the top of the Divide.
I add it to the dark rags for my loom

add rock corings and depths of the great lake
to the warp, old growth and timbers that drift.
I ride rails between hills that are mine dumps,
in the wake of prospectors

and speculators with diamond drills. I thread
the weft with strings of a broken horizon.
Between the breast beam and back beam
in the days followed by afternoons followed by graveyards

amid handles and ratchets and beaters
I throw the shuttle, pound the bar
in perpetual motion
ply the treadles in this place of tool and die.

Erosions and accretions pour from the ridges
through minerals and ores
I hear the taconite plants spilling their waste
the trains pulling their heavy loads.

The water, suspect. The paychecks, scanty.
The ships that come in are not ours.
I always thought pines would stay standing
the sun would set on all our lakes. But that's not the case.

Geology won't keep
as the holes grow more deep.
In streams that fall into and out of my lap
I make rugs to throw on the floor.

Disappearing Earth

Beneath the map, a bolt
of heavy lightning
reached into pre-protozoic time
and threw a vein of iron into
the molten ground before the ice age
— we mine it.
The river winds like threads
around the coordinates.
Railroads stitch across the grid.
Towns that sprung up around the open pits
and roads that were built — move.
The Hull and the Rust and the Mahoning
became one mine
and the neighborhood teetered over the edge.
In Hibbing, a hotel slid off the back of a truck
other houses were lifted by jacks
and traveled south somewhere.
Now the main highway has been called back.
The signature's affixed.
Bulldozers tear up concrete
and shovels take over beneath
alter the three-way Divide
Now we cross over the mine pit on a bridge
built by taxpayers.
The company pulled out an old contract
signed by the state.
Every map becomes obsolete
on this temporary topography called tonnage.

Minntac Brand

At nineteen, I entered the gate
followed the road to the taconite plant
Minntac.

Scraped earth, not a stem of green.
In the pit, giant dump trucks
haul tons of rock to the Crusher.

This goes on to the Fine Crusher
and on.
Laborers in the Agglomerator
breathe black dust.
Big furnaces roll the fines into pellets.

The furnace vents fill with hot pellets
have to be emptied into the buckets
of front end loaders by maintenance laborers
wearing asbestos suits.

White pellets were 1000 degrees Fahrenheit
black were 400 degrees.
Pellets could stick to the skin, burn into the neck.
It was called a Minntac brand.

One day, I saw a front-end loader
roll over the foot of a laborer.
They cut off his boot and
called the ambulance.

Conveyors kept rolling.
Broken were nineteen out of twenty-six bones,
the end of his mining career.

Now, there are signs in many yards.
We support mining.
Mining supports us.

Open pits on the Iron Range
scar the landscape.
Underground abandoned mines
are cordoned off by steel fences.
The Hull-Rust pit is visible from space.

There's no mining
without accidents.
You take it or leave it.

Dialectics

from Hegel and Marx

Water to ice.

A change in the nature of a thing.

To go beyond appearances to reality.

To see with my own eyes, to hear, to think
and speak. A language of becoming.

Change is old, a mole

*burrowing underground unseen for a long time
that suddenly emerges into the light.*

The ground shifts, the surface turns over.

Never anywhere is there matter without motion.

From stop-motion, the river
lifts cornices of ice.

To reach the future of the past.

A chain of changes.

A trigger. A catalyst. A strike.

Propelled by being held back.

Negation of the negation.

To become what it was not.

Contradiction makes motion possible.

Inseparable are causes and effects.

One thing forms and the opposite reforms.

Progress proceeds through a series of contradictions.

The shattering of the old, *a sudden overturn.*

Vulture

On the ridge of Spirit Mountain,
we entered the vulture's house.

Wind stopped as the black umbrella
of wings snapped shut.

We smelled red cedar, Norway pine,
decaying leaves. Mud on our feet

we followed our need in and out of the closet.
Easy to forget many secrets are kept and profit on death.

There are words for this. Vultures
fly in a kettle and land in a volt.

Some call a committee.
Some call the election a special kind of greed.

Bare heads and bare necks make it easier to feed.
Here, no carcass of deer.

No volt that day on the slope
nor broken down house ruined by men.

To the mountain, this lone bird came to her nest.
The wake was somewhere else.

At the Edge

In the high wind off democracy
seagulls stopped scavenging
for French fries and crusts of bread.

People on the shore zip their jackets
tuck their hands in their pockets
keep their heads down.

Waves gray as the granite ledge
break the news of more erosions.
The battering continues.

The goal: run a profitable business.
Slices of banks tumble into the motion.
Ice goes traveling along the streets.

Populations are going extinct.
Deaf to the weathermen's predictions
we march to the will of the people

or not, to the president's decrees.
Nobody is having a picnic.
The seagulls know.

They are suspended in the forces
waiting to be fed.
Their wings lifting.

Antenna Farm

Towers on the hill hold rivers
of invisible transmissions.
Day and night, red warning lights
and high frequencies
send voices of lovers, worried parents,
or people who are looking.
Endless robo-calls.
Messages. Megahertz.
Deer come to graze in the fields
but don't stay beneath the bounce
of news, no news.
On their migrations, hawks
on the geo-thermals
don't divert their flights.
One night, at the base of a tower,
a woman died at the hands
of her assailants.
Nobody came to her rescue
but the grass bowed over her body.
The fox hurried along the edge
of the clearing to look in her face.
The crows gathered.
Detectives found no evidence.
No charges were filed.
Static fills the radios
pixels drift over a threshold
as people pick up, don't pick up
in the new language
the one made of zeros and ones.

Losing Ground

From upstairs I watched the endless rain.
The hill washed down the slope.
I saw the river's dark side, sinkholes and mudslides and speed.
Earth and water rose to the bridge.

Three doors down, the foundation of a house buckled
teetered over the edge. Clung to the wires.
Down the hill, the sumps could not pump and
water rose in the basements.

High water scoured the banks, moved boulders, uprooted
lifted old pines into arms of the younger.
Rails of bridges caught tree trunks.
Bridge decks got knocked off the pylons.

Neighbors went out to stare at what was no longer there.
A car was parked, but that ground beneath it sunk six feet.
Brewer's Creek, buried years ago, burst
through the macadam and removed the grocery parking lot.

At the zoo, seals washed away. The polar bear
escaped its cage and walked through the alley.
In the cemetery, graves lost their names
and unburied the coffins.

In the west a child swept into a storm drain
came out alive.

Trace

On the thawing ground, I found
a robin's nest,
a coil of mud and dry grass
woven around a single chamber.

I've worked like this
for the same result
something of my own disappearing.

My own child, grown and flown.
My old houses, abandoned,
the love sputtered out.

Every year, I enter the forest
and pick up broken shells
or the skull of a deer.
And now this, a drab and hollow nest.

When the robins return, they will build
a new work of art
only to be discarded again.
They will march across the yard and guard

that space. Will sing.
I must put it on my sill, to remember
in next year's unfamiliar spring:
how empty is the natal place.

Broken Shell

Before the earth, in the Kalevala,
a virgin of the air Ilmatar
wandered the high altitudes
with time on her hands.

The ocean lured her in.
She slapped the water, flirted
with wind and the wind dared
or the waves slid along her thighs
quickened in her empty womb —

she swam seven hundred years
with salt upon her tongue.
In solitude. A child within.

She heard a lonesome note in the sky,
some winged thing
searching for a land to build a nest.
In reply, lifted her knee, an island.
The hen came to nest
laid seven eggs. One was iron.

The hen set to brooding.
The nest so hot
Ilmatar in the indigo deep
couldn't keep still
twitched like an earthquake
and the eggs all broke.

One half shell formed dry earth
Terra, and the other half
the aqua vault.
One yolk became sun
and albumen, clouds
and the Milky Way.

The litter of shells
veins of iron and copper.
Ilmatar moved clay
beneath her feet to make reefs
and deeps for a silver cloud of herring
and icebergs calving.

Made the headlands
and mountains to hold up the sky
Unfolded the continents
drew out the rivers.

This is how Ilmatar's labor began.
Exertion became a waterfall.
From her moon's chamber
through the bony gate
she gave birth to a singer,
an earth diver.

Named him Väinämöinen.
Already he was an old man.

^

Winds rippled through grain fields
and swayed the dense forests.

The singer plucked at strands
on the jawbone of a fish,
hän lauloi laulun.
Laulaa taivanrannalle,
to sing to the sky's beach.

Loud migrations darkened the sky.

In the waves were multitudes.

Canadian Geese

in memory of Floyd

Radio signals wandered. The road a dark avenue north
through Seven Mile Swamp and the crossings of deer.
Our union went by land and water, under the stars, our truck
pulling a boat and motor in a blizzard of moths.

To live by the mine and not mine. To store, not excavate.
In the winter, to hunt rabbits and partridge,
leap and burst and flight.
To climb into the stand for the annual buck.
See how the body smooths the rough bark of the tree.

To hunt moose. Gut and quarter the body. Fry moose liver
in a cast iron pan, in onions. Sew a jacket from its hide
on a shoemaker's treadle machine. Trim the hood
with wolfskin and line it with goose down.

To form a small country, population two.
Carry water. Between killing frosts, plant flats of tomatoes
and can rows of red innards, tomato hearts
in wide-mouthed jars. Rows of deer meat, in gravy,
sealed in a pressure cooker.

To pick berries. Chop wood. Ignore the years between us.
In the spring opener, accustom ourselves to the rocking
of the boat in wave after wave. To anchor in the cold,
holding lines. At New Year's, turn a hand augur
and make a hole in the ice.

To jig for lake trout in a polar vortex,
the day bright with sundogs. Camp on the ice.
Warm our tent with a stove. Bale water from the floor.
To sleep at forty below zero. Hear the lake making ice,
a sound like thunder, except from beneath.

To find our melting point. Our boiling point.
To smoke trout. Wrap in butcher paper.
Set a table with the prize fish
served with cream cheese and slices of cucumber.
Drink vodka. Heat the pie
in the wood stove and eat.

Anything could be fixed, a propeller caught in the weeds,
the boat grounded on a reef or a broken leg.
Staples worked themselves through the skin after many years.
He moved the course of a small river. A forest was making
and unmaking.

We measured the old pines, built a house and dock
in another country. Made a child.
I can't own this, not even the words.
In May, my mother tied a scarf at her nape
and played a game of chance. Didn't win.

Life runs on whim and temper.
On this red morning, through sweeping balsam
comes the deer to the bird feeder.
The sunflowers grew fast and spent their seeds.
Our stake melted like snow. We thought it would last,
but Canadian geese contradicted us flying overhead.

Strange Beasts: Boulder Lake

Wind tears through aspens
scatters yellow leaves upon the waves
raises conflicting territories

turns and counterturns
against the shoulders of Moose Island.
I paddle away from the dam

over clumps of seaweed
over cutover and vestiges of old growth
in water tinted by tannins.

A lone eagle circles high over Lady Island.
Rising levels had joined Little Boulder and Boulder
Lake with Otter Lake.

The massive boulders grow moss
on their backs, fine blades of grass
ripple in the wind like fur.

Roots of the white pines have drowned
and their trunks rotted. In cauldrons of gray stumps
water swirls in the basins.

On the banks, driftwood lies like beasts
gone extinct in midstride and petrified.
Near Wolf Bay, the elephant stone draws close.

The most temporary am I. Like fog
drifting. Small islands
and large stones seem to glide.

On the surface of the water, wild rice
lays itself down
and my boat slides over its blades like grass.

We sway in the waves.
Four otters surface and hiss
Four otters like waterspouts.

Way Finding

To cross the wilderness is to lose all bearings
make too many tracks mostly in the wrong direction.
To know the halves of it, the creation and destruction.
To follow an azimuth and advance by degrees
toward a zenith, the method used by munitions.
Maybe the core is meant to be on a frictionless pivot.
No way to calibrate the gap between geographical
and magnetic North. To not call this lost.
Not call this found.

Snail

As the river rises, I carry my own house.

In a labyrinth of vertical dimension, climb
into a new tongue,

push blindly on, even as the riverbank collapses
even when plucked by a bird and dropped into a port.

I scale the docks, trace seaweed for diatoms,
open the lids and dine in the bins.

I follow my own method
harden the shell to protect myself

look toward space
emissions and reflections dark and planetary

as if nebulae were my map or the swirl
of falling water.

Blue

Trempeleau, Wisconsin

The earth below the blue October sky
belongs to herons, rails, terns, pelicans, and egrets.

Blue hills belong to the Mississippi,
the thousand mallards, blue-winged teal and wood ducks
feeding in the blue shallows.

The mud flats belong to the cattails, burreed,
sedges, bulrush. The bottom land to the silver maple,
river birch, swamp white oak, cottonwood, willow, and ash.

The algae on the water to the after-rain
where the prairie meets river bottom
to the sky where lines of pelicans turn south.
White feathers tipped with black.

Currents above, around, and beyond.
Moonlight looking after moonlight.
All hollow bones.
All words departed. Every heartbeat taken wing.

IV. The Otherworld

Vene / Boat

I sent my green boat across the border
over waves past the island of birch.

Into the mouth of the River of Pohjola
with hard rapids, standing edges of swords.
Half in, half out.

The bow slams waves that hit back
and break over the sides
filling the hold with their weight.

The boat goes over heartbreak
where a wall has fallen.
Under the water an old record spins

into an underwater forest.
My green boat,
shuddering, plunging sideways

through clouds and water.
An axe converses
with stones, converses with water.

I glide on momentum overtaken by wake
into a bay where the waters lay still.
The loon has built her nest behind a rock.

The small ones follow their mother
as she calls, wild music.
Laughing, as if the world were new.

Kieli / Tongue

Speak in the other language
where none of the vowels drown.
They roll on the tongue in motion.
Speak in shades of brown
in sky and wind
in water spilling.

Speak with river's logic
with velocity or amplitude
in rifts and ripples
reaching and unraveling.
Otherwise, meandering.
Otherwise, standing.
Beneath the surface
a fast current departing.

Speak through mud and roots
with no premise other than a stone
no conclusion
other than a channel
to cut the bank, to shear
fall over and between.

Although the river questions,
it drops, deepens,
finds an opening, an emphasis.
A season.

Satama / Harbor

On the wet sand of the Baltic
small wavelets and beyond, swells rise
not my grandmother's life
which has landed
on another continent, but mine
embarking
from maybe or between.

Kalevala Viidestoista Runo / Poem 15

for Akseli Gallen-Kallela's *Lemminkäinen Äiti* painting

The signs of his blood have led
here to the banks of the Tuonela River.
I kneel on red stones,
on skulls and broken bones.

A swan, distant witness,
draws in a circle of silence.
My eyes see what is underneath
in the rapids of death, my son.

I rake his bones
his scattered parts
take them back from the spirits,
back from the bottom.

I rub the ointments into his joints.
Seal the wounds
using glue that will never let go.
I push, make new contractions in his muscles.

I bend low, unburying memory
and sing for I have found him
breathless. I sing to the tiny stones
rolling beneath our weight

I sing the swan's notes.
New lines come. Lungs toss up
runnels of the river through his nose.
Minnows swim from his throat.

I take him back not into my body
that conceived, received, and raised this one
but back to his own. To the sun.
Darkness watches, his eyes like stones.

With a needle, I pierce the broken ends
and pull my thread.
I turn the edges, commend to God.
Say, remember him.

Take this cold back to the reaching ice
seize this body with new breath.
I shake the heart to make it start ticking
as I drop it into place.

put back the ribs and pull up the skin.
On the stones, he gasps.
Where I have wept and pounded.
On the shore where I have assembled him.

Rannalla / On the Beach

After the cities
with their sharp horns and teeth,
I find a place on the beach.

under the deep blue dome, empty,
filled with light and vapor.

Somebody has built a structure that barely stands.
I perch on the bleached bones of a tree
too wet to burn, silver like me.

Behind is a cut bank.
On the horizon, two ships wait as the sun heats.

The wind bends the waves horizontal.
Lavender no longer breaks on the sand
but slides into sepia.

Red sand fills the hollows.
A woman walks along the edge.

Children run into the currents and out.
Chains of the boats pull at the anchors.
There is so much weight.

Soon I will be full of sand
soon I'll drift.

She meets another, takes her hand.
I can hear the whisper of blades
in dune grass: come closer — don't come.

Kääntää / To Translate

On the dock, an old woman
lowers herself into the dark Baltic
swims with long strokes past the orange floats,
unmistakable channel markings.

I search for words, for conveyance.
The tongue with an old root.
Kääntää means to translate.
Kantaa means to carry.

I swim with her, let her arms
pull me to and from
the pine forest, suomen mäntymetsä.
the real and wavering image.

The sun is sinking
as she emerges, takes off her swimming cap
pulls herself up on the land as she
shakes off the water.

If only there were a word for this
Ilmatar forming the body of earth.
If memory was gold, a fly caught in amber.

Katsoa / To Look

In the morning sun translates blades of grass
back from the ice.

Sheep rise from sleep to investigate my route.
They are long-haired, brown and white.

The long road turns to mud. Fields slope to a still lake.
Three swans swim and pull behind a single wake.

There, a coarse cry. Was this the sound I heard
as a girl the morning when my grandmother died?

Or was this the sound of birth?
The sound of the sun as it rises from the reeds?

Looking into yards, I find a woman raking leaves
chasing leaves, finding only more leaves.

Hämähäkki / Spider

A spider works in this slant of sunlight —
in long shadows
like grandmother with her spools making lace
out of holes, out of knots.

It's all I have, that edging
she made for the pillow where I sleep.
I remember her dark hair with silver threads
the heavy brows.

The spider travels from the center
to a high corner I could never reach.

In silence, in gaps we speak in the old language
inch along narrow threads
work in drafts
rearrange the alphabet in loops and lines.

Her fingers moved the bobbins back and forth.
Even shoes at the door have eyes, a tongue.

She untied and fastened somewhere else.

I look for her words
watch a spider anchor and glide.
Some threads wrap. Some lead.

Roukaa / Food

In every aisle
in the ruokatavarat
grocery store —
leipä, juusto, munat, kahvia
bread, cheese, eggs, coffee,
grandmother's words come to my hands.
Things salty and sweet,
sour and creamy.
Now with the items in the cart
I roll to the till with a child's language,
so they can ring this up
and I can pay any price.
Voi mummon kieltä, älä unohda minua.
Oh grandmother's tongue, do not forget me.

Lautasen / Plates

Planks of the dock rocked with my footsteps

November's lake trembled. Tall cattails, bleached by cold,
some bent.

Broad leaves of seaweed drifted like empty plates.
A minnow was served to bigger fish.

Today I went to the graves lost in the mist.
On these flat stones black and polished, my names.

After her death, my grandmother's china joined the diaspora.
Nevertheless, once I found a plate
just like hers in a second-hand store
and brought it home for my kitchen cupboard.

Pulled by the currents of wind
at the cemetery, I closed the gate.

Maybe I should say something else.
The minnow was chosen.

Hevonen / Horse

At a crossing in the rain. On clay ground at a Y.
On one side were cultivated fields.
On the other an entire forest in moss a foot deep.
There I could see a mother stone.

I could see a horse farm like my home
and watch a woman throw hay over the fence.
I could have been her sister.

I might have planted these furrows
gathered chanterelles and lingonberries.

I turned back where these brown horses
tore at bales of hay and seasons passed.
The summer — one long day
and winter — one long night.

Once I rode a dump rake behind my father's tractor
rode on a horse that moved like a wave on the sea
picked white flowers in May.

I once touched the soft muzzle.
My hand stroked the crest and withers
I heard the rub of reins, the jingle of a halter
the groan of the saddle.

Smelled the dusty wool saddle blanket,
the horse's flanks and mane and tail.

Sammal / Moss

From the road, I noticed
a green shaggy bear.
Coming closer, it turned into windfall
from a storm,
a wheel of roots pulled from the ground
propped next to a fallen trunk,
both grown over and thick with moss
that grows on the living and the dead,
takes everything back to silence.

I was deep in that silence
when I noticed a spruce tree
with a broken top,
resembling a headless giant, a woman,
a pillar of the earth.
Boughs were arranged like a skirt
on her long torso.
Full of wind's motion, she came striding.

Mitä Jos Sota / What If a War

In the night I heard a voice crying or laughing.
In Finland. I had just arrived —
pulled up the window blind
on heavy rain and saw a beam of light
that stroked the wind-lashed tree.

The person holding the flashlight, unseen,
speaking in the other language.
I picked up my phone to see
3:03 a.m. and a news alert.
Terrorists attacked Bataclan in Paris.

That day, I remembered seeing
a long line of military vehicles, dark green
with camouflage over their loads
going through town. Assumed this was routine.
Remembered my mother Siiri.

She prized the one-way ticket
to the new country.
If I even mentioned a desire to see
where my grandparents were born,
she became frantic, as if under siege.

What if a war breaks out?
If you can't get back? Then what?
Civil strife, the Winter War,
World War I and II,
the Russian interventions in Eastern Europe.
Her evidence.

Thirty years later — I listen
to what I don't understand.
How long it had taken me to come!

Kuppi Jäkälä / Cup Lichen

for Helvi Juvonen

In the palaces of wilderness,
come to a small table.
Bird wings, above the open crowns of pines
in motion.
Below, wind only a breath
easy to mistake for your own.
Near are hidden movements of deer
or if not there,
then wolf and moose, or rabbit and lynx
the unlimited and narrow paths —
long streams in a boreal ocean.
Their lives are secret
and you in their lair. Listen with your eyes.
Sunlight comes between shadows.
Lingonberries drop down a digestive tract.
Here on the moss, sammal,
everything diminishes. Mushrooms.
Kanttarellit.
For every death
waits a kingdom of insects
and cups filled with rain.

Talvi / Winter

My hands gripped the steering wheel in the blizzard.
Not driving but falling through the night,

in the shine of headlights, tiny meteors or stars,
going to the center.

Upward, I was taken.
Behind, all tracks disappearing.

Illumination from below:
snow becomes clouds, and clouds become drifts.

Ahead, unfurled, a fresh canvas
and trees writing themselves into dark ink.

Sunnuntai / Sunday

Let me be in the lichen
in the leaf shorn birch
in the dark spruce
and red stems of sphagnum
inside the rain and mist in half light.

Let me be in the breath of the lake
layered by vowels in the fields
between furrowed sleep and spring seed
in cloud's light.

Let me be far
in the wind in the whisper
of the wood fire
in the heat, in the arms
of long lit stars
on the wings of the aurora.

Revontulet / Aurora Borealis

Stars shake off swaths of dust and fire.

I too disrobe under the small roof
of the sauna. There is a girl here, a mother
and grandmother.

Inside the mirror, silver and white
clouds and shadow and heat.
Inside the stove, an orange conflagration
compressing and spending.

Wood smoke drifts into the blue.
Rocks hiss. Birch leaves slap and sweeten the skin.
I am here
inside my grandmother's body. In the dark fields

grooves of the plow wait
for the snow's light, for spring's seed.

I shake the towels.
Sky's sheets unfurl.

Kengät / Shoes

Hämeenkyrö, Finland

At Runoklubi, accidentally photographed
my brown shoes under the table.

On stage, the poet performed in blue shoes
with a raspberry and white wave
on the edge of each of his soles.

Applauding —
I could never wear shoes like that
but then, I can hardly wear any.

Other people have smart ankle boots
tight-fitting, sleek, flexible.
On this trip, I brought just one pair, a mistake.

My feet are hot, they need to change a lot,
require air. They ache. The arches need stroking.
My heels want to go.

If I were to walk into the kenkäkauppa
I might find kengät.
But like so often, I'd sit on the bed
and try them on again
realize they were all wrong.
They don't fit.

My feet swell. Maybe I need
adjustments in
Attitude. Size. Speed.

These shoes are one-way only.
I must buy another pair
for the trip back home.

V. Headwaters

Identity

The grasses stitch but don't hold me.

I am taken by gravity
fill containers perfectly
yet my shores are ever wandering.

I quench and am never quenched
shift from state to state,
invisible through impenetrable.

Throw in one stone.
I draw myself in circles concentrically.
Linguistically.

The body acts out versions and
submersions and immersions

echoes that echo, reverse
and have an undertow.

The body compensates —
falls, rises, condensates.

Current

Every word is either current or strange

— Aristotle

I travel for the constant unraveling
that deprives me of words
to start over again with strange letters

to amend the old grammar
to seek arrangements from disarrangement
to seep, to spill, to pour.

Without an itinerary, I raid
the past and run over banks
abandon my accretions

to fall into a new mouth.

Pussywillows

because we used to have roots
but now wander along roads anonymous
rise from the last traces of snow
covered with dust and dirt

because when the sun bends down
with arms of light
we reach up, aching and tired,
knowing she would find us

because we like to hide
these thin brittle arms
with gray and silver buds
that bring no scent of mud or spring
no blossom or color

because it's a newborn touch
filled with memories of rabbit fur
when your mother snipped branches
and arranged them in a jar
on the table for the feast

because we are long gone and here
and part of that circle
that must be found every year
to bring this gift

No Other Morning Like This

I waited a long time for daybreak
listening to the faint sound of a battery in the clock
each minute measured, mechanical
slowly pushing away from my father's last breath.
There is never a line you can see
between night and morning — they come out of each other.

I turned the alarm off before it rang.
The day to make arrangements.
The first day in the world without him, ever again
and in the wan light, my feet found the floor.
Toward the sound of coffee, voices,
I groped my way back that long hallway.

Weight

Knife River Beach

In heat and smoke,
I watch the blue fire of Lake Superior
the way water burns into light
the island where the gulls bask and lift
the long-distance wind carrying their cries.

Children on the beach
call cold-cold
submerge to their knees, fold their arms
like landing birds.
Drought rattles the leaves.

The children laugh and scream in delight
dive like ducks
as clouds thicken
over the wildfire.

The shore's edge is restless
defies prediction
overestimates, falls short and then gains.
A billion years, these stones rolled.
Farther north, ash falls like snow.

Weight falls under the surface
of the lake where gods
haul the deep swells. Teams of workhorses
harness to this rolling weight
don't break at the task
bring in all they can carry.

Names

To say earth — the blue voice
of Lake Superior
speaks to the ledge of rock.
To say pine — an eagle lifts
from the tall crown of the Norway.

Into the circle of given and taken
naming goes on.
In every language, this is the work
never done.
There is no last word.
They lay down together, entwine.

To say horses, they graze
in the mist.
As they pull the grass
their tails swish away deer flies.

To say woman —
there's beginning without end.
To say children — there's the tight bud.
To say man — seeds take root,
a construction of strong deeds.

To speak is to mend.

The Dark Season

I walk in the field
and cast seeds into the furrows,
let go of all my holdings.

Impossible to predict blossoms will turn to fruit.
Impossible to tell what intricacy will unfold.

Impossible not to travel into winter and cold
not to meet anger or complacency.
I open my palm
release to the wind
my needs and apprehensions.

I don't mind volunteers from other places
weeds or opportunities.

My aim is not to deliberate
only to abandon the little things,
knowing for root and stem to grow
the split must come.

West Two Rivers

Summer on the river in Zim
beneath the bridge.
Three girls swam in the currents.
We left our towels
on the steep bank, in the long grass.
The water, dark as amber
or tea. It was cold. Spring fed.
We could cross from one side
to the other. We could
step in the drop off, not drown.
Cows grazing upon the ridge
kept an eye on us.
Then a bell rang and they went
across the field into the barn
which used to be the Woullet house.
The cows were in the old kitchen.
We never knew the Woullets —
didn't know the past at all
although it cast us out of its door.
Now hooves scraped
floors once washed clean.
Manure was piled high
outside the door
beside yellow dandelions.
The cows chewed their cud
and looked out the windows
at the evening light,
while my uncle tied their tails
with binder twine before milking.
We salted our toes

to make the blood-suckers let go.
We put our shoes back on wet feet
to walk over the new mown hay.
We climbed over the log gate
and ran toward a new house.
I've come to know that freedom now
it winds across the landscape
calling like girls' voices.

St. Louis River Route

The river unraveled like a yarn
through the forest.
I paddled the canoe
held the arms of wind-fallen
trees and pulled the boat
through the shallows.
I walked on the bottom
of the river, in its light,
went over the path
of the French explorer
who renamed
the river after another king
over the trail
of floating bunk houses
and cook shacks
when there were log drives.
I paddled past immigrants,
my Finnish grandparents,
past beaver traps and hoop nets
past wood ducks and mallards,
over the catfish,
walleyes, northern pike
and small mouth bass.
Paddled past moose
and bears and timber wolves,
past white tail deer and ruffed grouse.
Under the pines.
I was going nowhere in particular
was going to stop
was staying afloat, getting here.

At the Threshold

Sandpipers race along the edge
waves arrive with driftwood and depart,
taking sand from the beach.

Freighters come empty and leave
with the earth.

A feather comes and I catch it
on my way to the dunes.
Things that are lost are more than ever the things I carry.

Those that have passed walk with me.
Only by leaving did they arrive
to talk of things that we never could have spoken.

I slept and dreamed of being awake.
But when I awoke, went about in dreams,
emptied when I might have filled.
Laughed when I might have cried.

A wind presses against the house,
and goes, taking the house away.

Departure

Kakagi Lake, Ontario, 2019

The dock upon the night waters
led to a violet sky.
We went in the gray fishing boat and motor
on the old route, my son and I.

I did not think I'd return this way
after thirty years.
I was a sapling and now an old willow.
What was once a field of dandelions
is now a dark forest.

A ghost shadowed my steps. I saw him in my son
who went to swim and catch fish.
I saw him in the woodstove where a fallen bird
had burned, trying to fly.

I found large stones and a granite face.
Pine trees grown fifty feet.
Cedars thick and green. I did not sleep.
Footings had sunk.
The stream must have fallen underground.

A story I'd started had been taken over by others.
Reading their words
helped me see past my own death.
What seemed immovable was shifting.
Stacks of boards. Fishing tackle on the tables.
Ceaseless accumulation.

Lucky, I say, to cross over
and see new grandchildren on the slope.
To smell sun in their hair.
To give this all away.

The water lapped on shore
and loons called in the night.
A bear walked by unseen but left its mark.

Map / The Way Back

for Rai 1988–2017

Take the old road into the north.
Turn left and right past the Big Noise
over mud and frost boils to the old place
past logging trucks and gravel pits
past steam shovels
and horses galloping back and forth.

Remember the old growth
before the excavations,
the rivers before iron and taconite,
the skies over the Divide.
Remember the spark and flame,
the fire in the forge,
the iron in the earth
before it became steel,
the circles before the wheel.

Go through farms and cow pastures
past cars and their parts,
over rocks and through gates.
Travel the chain of lakes
with no beginnings or ends
portage around beaver dams
swim when you must
north around the bends
through cattails
past pine and broken birch
under tangle and windfall.

Take the song back into the bird's heart.
Sway the way your mother once swayed
holding you in her arms.
Under the glint of stars
where clouds gather and break.
Follow the roots of the white pine
back through soft needles
back to the cone. Unseal.
Let the birds take those seeds.

Half-Fallen One

In the forest, a slash.
Hard limbs hold a half-fallen tree
interrupted between ascent and descent.

I could not determine the conditions of its roots
or causes of its demise,
whether it was by beetles or the force of wind.
Nor could I guess what weight or sway
might bring it down.

Underneath are footprints of rabbit and wolf.
Squirrels climb and birds alight
on the trunk. Obstacle or miracle,
between gravity and flight.

Luck

When we registered at the hotel
paid for the room
the clerk dropped change in our palms
and we split the Sacajawea coins.
Two women, two dollars each.
Liberty was emblazoned over her head
and on her left shoulder In God We Trust
and on the flipside, an eagle flying.
The coins clicked in our pockets
as we opened the door of our room.
It was fortuitous, this goddess
bringing us through the wilderness
to that room where
daylight fell on the mountains and valleys
of the sheets
and the sound track played "A Case of You."
It was a cold March
and we were behind glass
looking out to Lake Superior
steam rising from the hot tub.
We fed each other slices of oranges
and focaccia pierced by
small arrows of rosemary.
The flying-by clouds propelled the wind
that circled the earth and came back again.
We were in a river that could not stop.
I rubbed the coins for luck
and the woman whose face I touched
led us onward,
explorers of the light,

not taking land
not trading in counterfeits.
We came up for breath on the river delta.
This was not luck but legal tender.
Sacajawea crossed our palms
and her eagle flew from the past
into the morning. We dove in.

Yoni

On a cold not so cold
morning
with clouds overhead
I came to your bed.
On the foot bridge
I looked down into the crevice
in the ice.
It was February
and night's river flowing
from underground
and back again.
The sound,
an earthy invitation.
A cervix of water
widening
in the throes of labor
the river about to
crown, brown again.

Spring

The river roars.
Rains press on the leaves
of the cherry tree.
Rain's fingers play the ivory
rims of the blossoms
and open the bottom of their bowls.
Near and far and the robins bring
weavings to their nests.
Wings brush wings at close range.
The levers of wind, the plunging roots,
the rain down the stem of each leaf
through intersections
down trunks
striations into streams.
Rain saturates the route of bees.
My grief, unburying.
No other music falls this way,
from clouds through full blossoms.

A Ghazal: Without Sinking

for Hildur Guðnadóttir

Fog ascends and descends on broken ladders
in sun's fire. Under the surface, collapsing architectures.

A sunken ribcage. Bubbles from the deep.
In the uncharted cave, twisting and glacial corridors

inhabited by shadows. Unknown spawnings,
suspensions and ripples of predators.

Below the horizon. On the surface, laughter.
On the surface, tension. A slow churn of trawlers.

Fire in the distance. Sparks rise
and the clouds climb and dive like otters.

In the place between chords, afloat.
Four strings of the cello, drifting registers.

The decrescendo of the dock and anchors
the sway of the crib and its timbres.

Flashes of lightning horizontal and vertical.
Bluebottles water-logged. The visible arterial.

An aquasphere of planes, volumes, parallel lines,
rhythms through dark matter.

Ode to Where

for Kathy

In the forest, where the river breaks free
we sleep in the resonant room back-to-back
close to the cello that sways on the night sea,
an ancient boat whose chamber empties perpetually.

Your hand trembles on the bedsheet in sleep
the thick callouses and grooves on the fingertips
remember each quicksilver string. The force you have
to plunge your bow into the invisible

and drive an arrow of notes in the air.
How not known, never known, the instrument's dreams.
The tumble into the great falls, the rush of the body
over the edge on the jagged earth

so deep. We resurface and look for each other
reach for – a breath, a handhold
the unwritten score etched on each of your palms
where forces circle and improvise.

The moon shines on its shelf and the river goes
and cello composes its grief
on parallel wires bound by night hours
rising in upward flights.

Dawn

I woke to an acre of mayflies
a lace of water lilies and weeds
before and after
nudges of waves
coming to and from the island
a cloud on the water, thick pollen afloat
and lines crossing.
Having slept beneath stars
I overestimated depths
and underestimated distances.
Underwater, a flash
of brown and silver walleyes.
The shore's edge a mix of tenses
and mosquitoes chased by dragonflies.
Ducks swim over the wakes
of loons' landings. Time's
concentric circles widen,
the forgotten, the remembered
and forsaken.
Over my head, the slow flap of a heron
a flock of starlings.

VI. Displacements: An Essay

Displacements

I was born in two languages, born of two families who came from western Finland across the Baltic and Atlantic to settle in Minnesota. My grandparents' language, my parents' first language, became waves. Their words sank beneath the surface as I entered my adult life, but the music of the language flowed in me, rhythms that did not fit into English.

The Finnish language is imagistic and close to nature. Taivaanranta is one of the words for horizon. It translates to sky's beach. Finnish requires a different placement of the tongue and a different way to hold the mouth. In Finnish the word for lake is *järvi*. The *j* is pronounced as *y* in English. The diacritic mark on the *a* indicates a short vowel sound, like in the word *hand*. An *r* is always rolled. The *i* is pronounced as a long *e*. Finnish uses noun endings instead of prepositional phrases to indicate position. For example, the word *vene* (which means boat) undergoes numerous transformations, like most Finnish words, in the process of telling a story. Consonant changes, vowel harmonies, and harmonic word endings reach a dimension of melody.

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In northern Minnesota, I steady the vessel as I paddle across each lake. Home from kayaking a while ago, I noticed a black spot in the upper corner of my vision, sort of like a tadpole in my left eye. In brightly lit rooms, hardly noticeable. When I walked into a darkened room, the spot flipped over. I noticed more floaters, a long black fiber which was like a bit of grass or spider's web located between my eye and the objects which I could see, revealing a third dimension that I had not realized existed.

Two days later, the doctor who examined me concluded it was a posterior vitreous detachment. What I was seeing, he explained, is called flashing. He added that it might change and move to the center of my vision because the vitreous continues to shift. He went on talking about the anatomy of the eye. It won't go away, but you'll get used to it, he said. Appalled, I looked at him through the speckled surface of my vision.

When one buys a blue boat, it seems one sees a lot of blue boats. It could be synchronicity in the universe, or it's a habit of the mind. A manuscript of poems is like a lake and stays fluid for a long time. But then, lakes turn over. My subject is the three-way continental divide in northern Minnesota. Watersheds travel to the Great Lakes, the Mississippi, and Hudson Bay. It's about rivers: surface, underwater, and underground.

Thomas F. Waters, author of the nonfiction book *The Free-Flowing River*, says rivers are erosional landscapes. As a river flows forward in a valley and carves itself deeper, the valley travels backward. There are bends or turns. A stream's structure is an array of patches, a patch mosaic. The pieces of the mosaic are large and small; these include the headwaters, midstream flows or a riffle over a moss-covered stone. Always, rivers are lines of energy.

My subject is surface displacements, the excavations in the landscape where I grew up. And in water, volume displacing other volumes. The Mesabi Iron Range, where I grew up, is an area 3 miles wide and 120 miles long, an erosional landscape and an industrial one. According to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, 4.1 billion tons of ore and taconite have been shipped away. Already mining has permanently altered the three-way divide and the path of flowing water.

Surface displacements also refers to migration. Tribal nations have lived here for centuries, but as the United States population grew and settlers moved west, the tribes were pushed west as well. The Anishinaabe people came to Minnesota, and with them, the vision of food that grows on water, wild rice or Manoomin. Minnesota owns 24 percent of the mineral rights in the state, but the rest is owned by private parties, primarily mining corporations (Mesabi Metallics, Keetac, Cleveland Cliffs, and others). This means mining gets priority above all else. Buildings are demolished as an open pit expands. If towns are in the way, they are removed. Highways are taken out and rerouted. People are displaced. This is where my grandparents arrived in the early 1900s along with so many other immigrants. According to the Minnesota Historical Society, over 40 languages were spoken. The only other region as ethnically diverse at the time was New York City.

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I worked as a maintenance laborer at Minntac in Mountain Iron, a summer job when I was in college. It was 1975. The pay was good. I was in the Agglomerator where four monstrous furnaces rolled taconite fines and bentonite into pellets. All the equipment in the taconite plant is larger than the human scale. Each furnace was the size of a train engine and as noisy. Laborers wore earplugs and other safety equipment like hard hats, goggles, and steel-toed boots. I was in an alienated workforce, about to go out on a wildcat strike, unauthorized by the union. The owners of the plant lived somewhere on the East Coast. Steel imports were coming into the United States for the first time, increasing the competition and driving down the price, and the workforce didn't fully understand what that meant. Within a few weeks, the strike was broken. The corporation sued the employees for lost profits, and the workers gave in and returned to the plant without having made any gains.

The job was hard, boring, and hazardous. Most shifts, I aimed a high-pressure water hose at the taconite pellets that had fallen off the conveyors to the floor of the plant. By washing down the floor, we were able to prevent a build-up that could stop the conveyor from functioning. Sometimes, there were extra chores like doing maintenance on the furnaces. When they were shut down, and after they had spent some days cooling, we would push wheelbarrows inside the furnace and shovel out broken bricks. Other times, on the floor of the plant, we emptied hot pellets from the vent pipes from the furnaces. Red pellets, like live coals, were 1000 degrees, and black pellets, 400 degrees. The vents weren't supposed to accumulate hot pellets, but they did. We had asbestos suits and gloves for the task. We opened the door of the vent and let the pellets fall out into the bucket of a front-end loader, which would turn and dump them onto a conveyor going out to the loading dock. My coworkers suggested always wearing a bandanna around the neck to avoid the stray pellets raining down through the catwalks on the upper floors. If they fell into the collar of one's coveralls, they would stick in the flesh and cause a "Minntac brand."

The dust in the mine enters the lungs. Taconite fibers are similar to asbestos fibers. Employees of the taconite mine run a risk of contracting mesothelioma. When Meridel LeSeuer was writing, radium was thought to be a miraculous element. It was used in cancer treatment, cosmetics, toothpaste, and painted on watch dials. Only later was it determined to be carcinogenic. Unfortunately, risks are usually discovered after exposures to substances, elements, or chemicals.

We were submerged. The Agglomerator had no windows. Laborers toiled in an industrial spume. The paperback books I tucked in my lunch pail curled up stiff as fallen leaves, darkened by heat and

whatever was in the air. After every shift, I showered in the “dry” and though I’d soaped and rinsed thoroughly, I towed taconite dust from my nostrils and the folds of my ears and behind my knees. Grease and dust stained my coveralls and my underwear. Once the whistle blew ending the shift, men drove to the bars and poured beer down their throats. They blacked out, and in oblivion, after the bars closed, drove erratically down sideroads to one of the many lakes, chains of lakes, or to the sinuous St Louis River. Some went skinny-dipping, some hooked up with partners they couldn’t fully see, and some collided with unmovable objects. Off-limits were the tailings ponds and the abandoned mine pits, steep-walled and filled with ice-cold water and unknown hazards.

The abandoned open pits suffer “water gain” because of underground water and rain. Pumps must be kept running to keep the excavation from flooding. In 2019, after a heavy rain, the embankment broke between the old Hector mine pit and the Embarrass River and water tore a ravine 50 feet wide and 25 feet deep. A burnt orange torrent, the color of iron oxidation, poured into the river and went downstream into the Embarrass Lake, Cedar Island Lake, and Lake Esquagama. Even before this, the lakes and rivers had been proven to have high sulfate levels which largely comes from taconite mines, as there are high levels of the compound in discharge from waste storage. This spill made things worse. Sulfates cause wild rice or Manoomin, to die, eliminating this sacred source of nutrition and sustenance.

On the east side of the Iron Range stretches the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, a wilderness designated by the federal government, recently the center of controversy. Some want to develop copper sulfide mining despite the fact that surface storage of waste rock,

tailings and sulfide-bearing ore creates acid, heavy metals, and sulfates that seep into groundwater and contaminate lakes, streams and rivers. In this region with a three-way continental divide, all forms of life are at risk of loss and displacement.

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There's so much weight. There are unknowns, and there are known things deliberately disregarded or dismissed. Events in the past, union-busting, strikes, sabotage, and murders are hidden under a shroud of silence. I've read data about mining accidents and environmental contamination and rates of alcoholism and violence. News and stories tell of industrial accidents and the effects of contact with hazardous substances. In the archives, each day's newsprint demonstrates the blindness people have going forward into the future.

History documents that the treaties made with the tribal nations were not followed, and yet silences have obscured the facts. Eminent domain has been used and misused against tribal land and later against settlers in Minnesota who buy land but not the mineral rights beneath its surface. The maps are redrawn when roads and communities are demolished and the landscape is excavated. Every corporation seeks to maximize profit. Against the size of large-scale mining operations, people's lives begin to diminish.

As iron ore was depleted, underground mines became open-pit mines. Technological developments allowed the industry to use lower-grade ore to make taconite. Now, the mine dumps are consumed in what is called scam mining, furthering the

metamorphosis of the landscape. When I drive along Highway 169, I see yard signs with the words: “We Support Mining, Mining Supports Us.” I know, and they know, it’s always been a story of boom and bust.

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Under the surface are hidden worlds. Things float away. Politics and disasters seem even more fluid these days, but I think this has always been true. Polarization has a wave pattern. When waves coming into shore bounce back: reflection. Waves that slow down and change direction: refraction. When waves affect each other: interference, which can be positive or resonant or can be negative or destructive. When waves bend: diffraction, which has shadow zones. A disturbance in one place causes disturbances in other places. One can’t escape this fact, no matter where one looks.

The experimental poet Rosemarie Waldrop wrote: “When eye and mind are interrupted in their travel, a vertical dimension opens out from the horizontal lines. Suddenly we’re reading an orchestral score....No longer one single voice.” The task is to bring together things conflicting, noisy, transcendent, and dystopian. Perhaps we need a new habit of mind, not just to focus on synchronicity but also disruption and dissonance, to look below the surface and look deeper.

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Water and language are fluid and ever-changing. As we were bringing the boats to Stewart Lake, a helicopter with a red bucket lifted over the trees and went north, carrying water to the Greenwood wildfire covering nearly 40 square miles. Beyond, in the Boundary Waters, were two more fires, the John Ek fire and Whelp Fire. Smoke caused a haze in the air. I was in my blue kayak and my paddling partner in her red one. The water level at Stewart

Lake was low. We approached our landmark rock. The boulder sat much higher above the surface than usual, just like the islands. The wind was intense. We went along the east side and then returned to shore as another helicopter with a red bucket flew north. The floater in my vision seemed like a spider web or a taconite fiber. My eyes were irritated and red from the smoke. The red bucket under the helicopter had the same orb shape of an eye, and it was filled with sloshing water. The image seems to be expanding and contracting because of my altered vision, the way that things at the bottom can magnify and shrink while looking underwater.

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Every letter is pronounced in Finnish, none are silent. Double consonants are each pronounced, elongating the sound as if it were a note held long, like a dotted quarter note, the dot indicating the need to hold the sound half again as long. At the time, it was winter. In the woods, snow had fallen on the roof of my small house and curved over the eaves reaching for the drifts. It felt like my grandmother's house when I was a child and awoke to the pendulum clock striking each hour in the night. Moonlight rained on the white roads, laden branches of spruce and balsam, mounds of snow. Through the windows, moonlight filled the room, making everything float. A moment like a photograph. The Finnish word *hetkessä* means a moment. It means *in next to no time*.

The darkest place on the Iron Range is the deepest place, the underground mine in Soudan. At Level 27, it is 2,341 feet deep. Along the shaft of the mine are stopes. It's a park now, and people can buy a ticket to take the elevator down to the bottom for a tour. The underground mine is so dark I can't see my hand in front of my face. The mine is so dark that a physics lab was temporarily created there to study dark matter, things in the universe that

cannot be seen at all, but that are known because of their interaction with gravity. Neutrinos were shot from the Fermi lab near Chicago through the earth and recorded by several tons of specialized equipment down in the mine shaft. The absolute darkness in the mine avoided a skew caused by protons in the research results. According to the European Council for Nuclear Research (CERN), dark matter outweighs visible matter roughly six to one. It travels in next to no time.

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I want a new habit of mind to note the invisible. When I walk in the forest, summer or winter, I rarely see wild things, only tracks and traces of slow ramblings and sudden chases. Poetry also has tracks and traces of the invisible or hidden. Poetry holds a negative space that is not silence exactly. It can mark the disappearance of land and old languages, mark the loss of trees and bodies of water, and trace the paths and reasons for arrivals and departures.

VII. Notes and Acknowledgments

Notes

I. In the Water

“Water-Filled Mine Pit” is an ekphrastic prose poem for the “Mine Songs” music and aerial images created by Sara Pajunen. The poem was also inspired by poet and journalist Meridel LeSueur: “Let yourself down, as if underwater, into these lost walls, to hunt for treasure, to illuminate violence with meaning. Under sea-strange light these little houses glimmer in memory, powerful as radium.”

II. Surface Displacements

The epigraph by Lorine Niedecker is from her poem, “(L.Z.),” which originated from a correspondence with poet Louis Zukofsky.

Three Rivers and the “Surface Displacements” poem refer to the three-way continental divide located in Hibbing, Minnesota, on the Mesabi Iron Range. The watersheds and rivers travel into the Great Lakes, the Mississippi River, and Hudson Bay.

The Hill of Three Waters or the Triple Divide is designated on a historical marker at the edge of the Hull-Rust Mahoning mine pit. According to the Historical Marker Database (www.hmdb.org):

A triple point, or triple divide, is the place where two continental divides intersect and water drains into three different watersheds. There are five such places in the United States. In Minnesota, the Northern Divide intersects the St. Lawrence Seaway Divide. From this

point, water flows in three directions, north to Hudson Bay, south to the Gulf of Mexico, and east to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. This area was called the Hill of Three Waters by the Chippewa, and its location is 47° 26.863' N, 92° 56.8' W. The marker is near Hibbing, Minnesota, in St. Louis County. The Chippewa Indians referred to the location as “The Hill of Three Waters” or “The Top of the World” and frequently held their council meetings there for tribes living within about a 100-mile radius. The site is not publicly accessible due to mining operations. Its official platting is Section 26, Township 58, Range 21.

The Historical Marker Database is a catalog of public history cast in metal, carved on stone, or embedded in resin. The database is maintained by volunteers who invite people to send in photographs and links related to historical markers.

A second historical marker is placed nearby this one at The Hull-Rust Mahoning Mine Pit Overlook. Here, the marker notes that mining began in 1895 and this mine pit was once known as the largest open pit mine in the world. Its maximum depth was 600 feet in the Scranton Pit. By 2000, nearly 2 billion tons of iron ore and waste were removed. Both sources note this information is provided in partnership with the Cleveland-Cliffs Foundation. Cleveland-Cliffs is a mining corporation.

“A river catches herself as she is falling” is inspired by the mystic Mechthild von Magdeburg (1207–1282), a Beguine.

“In the city are those who cannot be traced...” is an ekphrastic poem for visual art by Cecilia Ramón. The poem refers to Argentina’s Dirty War (in Spanish, Guerra Sucia), also called Process of National Reorganization, Spanish Proceso de Reorganización Nacional or El Proceso. As many as 30,000 people were killed or disappeared.

“In their wake, the undocumented...” refers to immigrants who are stowaways inside the hold of planes and ships and those that risk perilous passage over water. The phrase also refers to those who are brought across the borders in secret, inside closed freight trucks and vans.

III. Three Rivers

In the prose poem “Soliloquy,” the sentence *I realize the way my eyes deceive me* echoes a line from the country song “Paper Roses,” written and composed by Fred Spielman and Janice Torre. Loretta Lynn and several other country singers have performed and recorded it.

“Dialectics” is a cento. The italicized phrases are taken from Hegel and Marx whose writings are now available in the public domain.

“Broken Shell” is a retelling of the creation story in the epic poem of Finland, the Kalevala, that was performed by traveling minstrels or singers prior to being written down by Elias Lönnrot. Some of the runos, or poems, have never been in print. Beside creation stories, it has magic charms, laments, advice, stories, and adventures.

VI. Otherworld

The Finnish language poems were written while I was at Arteles in Hämeenkyrö, Finland at the Enter Text residency.

According to Veikko Anttonen in *Mythic Discourses*, in the Kalevala, Pohjola refers to the Otherworld and “can take the form of Pohjola (the northland), the womb, a burial ground, a forest, a grave, Tuonela or Manala (underworld or realm of the dead), a strange village or country.” He also writes:

In [Finnish and Uralic] folk narratives, Pohjola is described as a mythic island in the primeval sea, surrounded by open waters. In addition Pohjola is separated from the world of the living by the River of Pohjola, the River of Tuonela, the chasm of Manala, the age-old brook of Manala. The River of Tuonela is the boundary between this world and the other, where everything is reversed in relation to the world of the living.

“Viisitoista Runo / Poem 15” is a story about a woman who brings her son back to life from the river of death. Askeli Gallen-Kallela’s painting, *Lemminkäinen Äiti*, vividly depicts the story. Lemminkäinen is an adventure-loving braggart and mythic hero in the Kalevala.

“Kuppi Jäkälä / Cup Lichen” is inspired by a poem of the same title by Helvi Juvonen (1919–1959). She was a Finnish writer and recipient of the Eino Leino Prize in 1957.

V. Headwaters

The poem “Ghazal: Without Sinking” refers to the music of Hildur Guðnadóttir, an Icelandic composer and cellist.

VI. Displacements

Thomas F. Waters writes:

Landmasses that include streams and rivers — what we may call valleys or watersheds — constitute terrains known as “erosional landscapes.” The erosion of rock and land sediments is a process that moves the materials of the high plains and mountains to the sea, while at the same time the eroding process moves headward, causing river valleys to migrate upstream.

In 2022, the Biden administration cancelled two federal mineral leases held by Twin Metals Minnesota. This is still a controversial topic in Minnesota’s public discourse.

Read the history of the Lake Vermilion-Soudan Underground Mine State Park on MNopedia.

More detail and an explanation of the Cold Dark Matter Search experiment (CDMSII) conducted by The European Council for Nuclear Research is found in the *CERN Courier* magazine and website. The study is complete and the equipment has been removed from the Soudan mine.

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