The Space Between Eye Contact

By

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ABSTRACT

This collection of poetry focuses on distances: distances between people, between objects, between different time periods, and even distances that can be found within oneself. These poems speak about how isolated everyone and everything is, despite the fact that we are all living here, side by side. However, they also tell stories of how we try to find connection in this disconnected world. Whether it’s about childhood, teeth, identity, or lessons, every poem tells tales of how expansive even the most mundane thing is and where we can find ourselves in that.
CONTENTS

I.

One, etc 2
Tamam 3
The Composer 4
Importance of the Metaphor 5
Holding my Breath 6
Room(s) 7
Exponential Growth 8
Mother Bird, Departed 9
Chipping a Tooth 10
Headstones 11
Flip of the Switch 12
Celery Sticks for Amy Liu 13
Feng Shui-ed Walls 15
Revolutionary 16
Lone Commanders 17

II.

Grandmother 19
Sedimentary Mosaics 20
New Life 21
Laundry Service 22
Border Control 23
Leftovers 24
Ocean Bottom 25
I Need More CD’s in my Car 26
Fishing for Ghosts 27
Body Language 29
Pattern in Mulberry Trees 30

III.

My People 32
Running in the House 33
Draw a Circle 34
Teeth 35
Juggling Balls 36
On Cue 37
Dark Hallway 38
The Fermentation Process 39
A Broken Compass 40
Touching a Ruin 41
Etcetera Sky 42
Untitled 43
Lessons 45
One, etc

One is never oneself
but a kaleidoscope
in which several
selves intersect.

One is the train station
in which another waits to leave
and also the clocks
within the waiting,
knowing only
to keep on.

One is the snapshot
following every previous shot,
including this one.

One is many people
brought together
by drawing names from a hat.

One is never one’s self
but several strangers
gathered in the same moment
to be taught to shake hands.
Tamam

*Tamam: Arabic for just; right; one with integrity.*

My *teta*’s name has surrounded her since around the time
when her hands would rise to touch brown hair,
when she would walk to Aaba every day to learn the alphabet.
Her name was with her between the olive trees
when she would hear the wood tongue each syllable
of the *Ta* and *mam*, the *m* held long after.
Later, she would make oil.

Her name was there when my father learned the difference
between *Mama* and village woman.
Her name laced threads within her ears.

And now, these tongues call to me
with my splintered name –
my own variation of righteousness,

and across the globe in Dedde,
my *teta* removes the white hair from her face
to eat a bite of labne with oil,

oil that came from a tree
that could never be commanded to grow
by *Teta*’s village hands.
The Composer

I am the treble clef
sitting on a low E with my leg dangling
over the edge, waiting
to orient dreamers,
send stars to their rightful places
in one of the constellations.

I am the composer
orchestrating a symphony
of echoes of youth,
puppeteering raw emotions
so their hands are tied with rope
and I alone move them at my will
to conform to a specific key.

I am the conductor
sending ripples through the air,
telling notes how to put on a tie
and comb their hair.
With my baton, I teach them good posture.

I am the strum, the vibration, the echo.
I am the acoustics of the hall.

But most of all, I am none of these things.

I am the dangling leg.
Importance of the Metaphor

We need the metaphor
because there are eyes everywhere we look
and everywhere we don’t.
Because I am a tulip when I hum
and a flycatcher when I screech.
Because you can picture me as both
and know that a garden exists
within my voice.

Without the metaphor,
a broken heart would just be
a malfunctioning organ next to the lungs,
and the melting pot
would be a kitchen item that you use to make fondue.
The apple of your eye would have to be surgically removed.

People just want
to step outside of their bodies
and examine themselves with a magnifying glass,
to peer through different windows
and into mirrors
concave, convex,
add dimensions to their vision,
to be bifocals perched on the bridge of a nose
peering back into the brain.
Holding my Breath

The first time I held my breath underwater,
I wasn’t sure where the breath would go, if not out.

I imagined that it would stomp back and forth, arms crossed,
somewhere near the opening of the throat.
It’d get claustrophobic
and begin knocking at the nose’s door.

I tried to trace the breath’s path in my body
and was surprised to find that it didn’t demand release
but stood with its hands folded in its lap,
waiting calmly to be escorted out.

I expelled it in bubbles.
It wasn’t the breath
but I who had been doing the banging.
Room(s)

my world is a small room
of brown futon lint and
muted cartoon characters
moving in pixels.

nothing exists beyond these walls –
no cigarette pollution or
terrier tugging a leash out of a hand
that comes with
a name,
usually a face.

the boiler hums
and when my neighbor opens his door,
the creak slips out of some compartment of air
located within arm’s reach.

for all I know
my hand belongs
to someone else’s imagination,
my featureless face conjured from
pencils of her mind
over there in her room
probably smelling of curry.

dust passes between our separate places,
mine and hers,
to mutely hit the bricks
that held my room together
the last time I left the world.

it’s no wonder
that at times
I stick my head out the window.
Exponential Growth

I could’ve chosen not to write these words and let lines live within unspun ballpoints, rubbed erasers into unmarked space.

I could’ve kept my hands in my pockets, away from that 4th dimension that grips itself together like a Rubik’s Cube holding onto the promise of no twists.

I could’ve written these words inside out, eyeballs taped shut.

I could’ve locked them in a room to starve.

Instead, I’ve given them a book with no name and told them to be exponential, to mutilate the conservation of mass.

I’ve given them guns to kill each other off so I can polish their atoms with my silent tongue.

But they turn their weapons on me and my brain sputters onto something indivisible by zero.
Mother Bird, Departed

When a thought flutters into your mind, it bolts the door behind it.

You hear it at the closet that the tall dresser hides and feel the splinters, as if beneath your own chipped nails.

You tell the thought you don’t exist

and go on swallowing the sound of skylarks, forested orchestras while discarding dissonance of blizzards and all the avalanches that mark their finale.

You leave the survivors cemented in snow.

You leave them as hatchlings tarnished by the touch of a human hand, their feathered mother, departed

and their little cries.
Chipping a Tooth

It was sudden,
the chipping of my tooth.
I was just biting my nails.
I wasn’t smashing bricks into my mouth
or rubbing stones between my gums.

I wasn’t even thinking about the dentist, or
weakened enamel, plaque, gingivitis, my brushing routine,
but my tooth chipped, all the same.

It chipped as I read for class,
it chipped with my fingers tapping on the table.
All I wanted was to continue, uninterrupted.
Funny how those things added up to a chipped tooth.

When I reached into my mouth and pick up
the little wandering piece of calcium,
it wasn’t mine
not the same tool I’d used
to deconstruct lollipops in 4th grade,
not even the same portion of white
that hid behind my top teeth
in an overbite.

This piece was quiet.
It spoke like a dust particle
or scrap paper.

I felt the remainder of the tooth
there in my mouth
feeling for its new roof
its new jagged cliff, its mountainous terrain
that would be permanently mapped
into my mouth’s geography.

With every opening and closing of my jaw
it’ll be there,
with every nibble of food,
a new friction of bite
for which no words
can find apology.
Headstones

Death is nothing new.
My life resigns a little with every hair shed.

My strands can be found under the table of
Dearborn Heights’ Coney Island,
buried in the pebbles of Southwood’s jungle gym,
even caught on the rocky surface
of the Roman ruins in Baalbeck.

My keratin spirals curl into rigor mortis
at their birth in the follicle,
long before the maggots are called to dinner.

A strand of hair tells no story
of whose intestines
once belonged to its body

of who might, in fact, be tasty in mold’s seasoning.

My abandoned curls trail several journeys
so one never knows which piece is the last to land
on the tiled floor,

never knowing which strand
draws the end of the procession.
Flip of the Switch

A strange time it is
when street lights spark to life.
In unison, they blink
out of the paleness of their bulbs
rubbing their crusted eyes.

They scramble to find
the friction in a wet match.
They flicker, zigzagging around.

Pulling a newborn from cobwebs
is nothing like turning on a switch;

Somewhere amid the trembling,
their pitches polish one another
as if some conductor has raised her baton
and out of the shadows,
(the hands reaching out of the womb)
lulls their hums into harmony.
Celery Sticks for Amy Liu

I traded lunches every day
with Amy Liu in third grade.

She had the quarter-cut butter sandwiches,
I had the celery sticks

standing single file in the Ziploc bag,
I didn’t like the way they seemed
to want to teach me a lesson
with their austere lines, like

the ones on Mrs. Keelan’s face
curving unnaturally to tell me
to speak a little more loudly, *honey.*
We were masters in this business of trade,
auctioning mothers’ rushed attempts
at preparing their children for the world.

We bargained in elementary school classrooms,
each trade: a lesson from a different mom.

That’s the real reason why some children are so
different from their parents. They once traded lunches.

I didn’t know what butter tasted like
until one day I did. Then I knew every day.

Once I tasted it, the flavor stuck like
the image I had of Josh picking his nose
in the jungle gym after tag
when I didn’t try so hard to hide my giggles.

My mother continued to
pack celery sticks for Amy Liu.

If she had been aware of what her ignorance
was placing in my tummy,
she would’ve suctioned it all up with
the small vacuum that she used in the tough corners
thinking the entire time
that I had grassy green mush settling in my stomach.

My mother didn’t find out
and I watched Amy Liu strip the celery to threads.

Amy never really knew what went into the
locking of the bag or wondered

who it had belonged to, whose fingers
risked themselves to slice pieces of celery

into neat sticks before putting the knife
facedown in the sink.
Feng Shui-ed Walls

The walls of this coffee shop are green as if bribing happiness.

I don’t buy it.

***

I know you’re probably thinking by now that I am being subtle, smuggling money into walls for you to unmask with good readings of figurative language and an eye for government watermarks.

I still haven’t told you that some of the walls are red, the shade you’d find in a sweaty bed or folded in lipstick over a cooling mug with its edge kissed in halves.

What?

Some love now? seeping from wall paint

that I can affectionately push my chair back into or blame my subconscious mood on?
Revolutionary

We’re always complaining about corruption in the world, as if we’re the first to tilt our heads at a wall that’s been built with bones. Our generation has created the fist. We’re the best at forcing the crease between the eyebrows that screams, take me seriously, I’m important, as if we weren’t all changing the world already with our rippling bike riding; choosing one coffee shop over another. It’s this lie we’re all buying into, that one thing can lead to more things. But we’ve got the equation wrong: the net worth is always the same – one ripple telling secrets to the other ocean waves, its message making its way to the nerve center where it can be decided if we’re going to label the stir a hurricane, or simply continue sipping our coffee, noticing the dark tides inside the mug that wade to a different moon’s tug.
Lone Commanders

You never notice the way
people sit behind the control board,
the way they peer out from behind the eyes
into the universe,
the way each movement is triggered by a button,
each pulse, by a hiccupping machine.

You notice the skin’s motions,
the grey t-shirt,
and the hair hanging in the way it does
but no amount of looking
will take you to the commander behind the glass.

You may shake a hand
or put your face close to another,
but notice how your glass fogs
when you press close to skin
and let your window open.

The cold permeates the eye’s stratosphere,
so when I’m off in space and you kiss me,
I only see cloud cover between our galaxies.
II.
Grandmother

In the garden,
my brother kicks the soccer ball: *thump,*
the birds pitch their voices above my *teta’s* head.
She doesn’t even hear the *click* of the photographs I take of her fig tree.

Then, a block away,
the church bells sound and *Teta* remains uninterrupted,
thinking of a time when the world was big,
thinking in a frequency too brittle for any of us to hear.
Sedimentary Mosaic

It’s funny that
I should notice a rock
and suddenly envision
my mother’s hand thumbing it,
skin, ten years unwrinkled.
She drops its mass
like a tidal bomb
into Lake Erie’s reflection of the sky
that August day in Point Peelee—

clouds rippling;
mama’s white sheets,
rumpling together
when I crawl out
from under the covers.

It’s funny that in your gaze, reader,
the rock morphs,
mosaicks from your own mind’s residues,
turning you and me into canvases
laid face-to-face against a wall,
having been painted with separate brushes
we’d assumed to be one.

It’s funny, the way the rock
does its sly dance
the way it fossilizes sediments
in the space between eye contact.
New Life

In a new life
I would be Atlas
balancing the weight of the world on my shoulders
with my bare hands,
no need for biting nails.

I would be a tidal wave curling into myself
the way dough kneads into more dough
under my mother’s palms.

My nervousness
would be sent to prison
to stare at the same cell wall every day
and eat watered-down oatmeal.

I would never pay it a visit
or send a post card.

My grief would be harnessed in a stable
on some deserted farm.
I’d put a match to the map
watching as the flames devour
the only way of getting it back.

I’d be the funniest.

But in this life
I’ll pretend,
as I watch my grandpa cup his ear upward
to hear a question, repeated,
as I sit in class, too cowardly to speak

I’ll look in the mirror day after day
and squint to catch a glimpse of the world
atoms leaning on me,
the dark matter of the universe –
a lovely sight to see.
Laundry Service

After I hit the play button, the notes of Shakira’s album step into my kitchen like travelers off of a plane scanning baggage claim for relatives, a friendly face to welcome them.

They tango around the room moving with the guitar-picking and the *bandoneón* breathing in and out.

But when her voice chimes, I hear it as if from another room. It strings a harmony I’ve never heard, one that calls to the 10-year old who would ask her parents to play the Shakira cassette, again.

Now, Shakira’s voice rings out in a way I don’t remember, in a way that no longer speaks to me but some other layer of skin that’s long been gone

the same layer that I call out to sometimes trying to tune my own voice to that old melody.
Border Control

Driving across The Ambassador Bridge to Canada, my mom gets out our passports. I hold them for her in the passenger seat and hope she doesn’t hear their accusations, the periwinkle pages whispering to one another between my fingers.

The Detroit river drifts between the two countries. Above, we wade through limbo.

When we get to customs, we turn off the music. The officer and the passports exchange a knowing look. My mom’s mouth makes a line, her hand turning white on the wheel.

In that moment, we forget the zebra mussels in the river behind us holding against the tides as they’re pushed and pulled,

And there in the car with the window rolled down and our minds silenced by the things we don’t talk about, we become flat like paper.
Leftovers

I was happy for a little bit yesterday.

Today is last night’s steak
numb in the Tupperware
with fat clusters congealed on its surface.

*Reheat:*
The rotations in the microwave
draw crackles from the meat.

The knife saws against the plastic plate.
I bite the heat
and spit the cold spots
into a napkin.

I feel yesterday’s joy
as though with a different tongue

and with the warmth of yesterday’s spoils
settling between my teeth.
Ocean Bottom

I no longer see art where I used to.  
Trees are rootless props,  
hollow, except for the dark.

*

Music floats on the surface  
of my ocean mind.  
There are no openings in the sky  
for me to crawl into  
or to wear as new glasses.

*

There is a blurred line  
between what is  
and what I know.  
Neither casts a shadow.

*

The mysteries have been written  
and locked away in books  
that haven’t been crafted to open.

*

The ocean has found a bottom.

*

A bird calls in the morning,  
I don’t envision the way its voice  
twists in the air,  
how its pitch might hit other ears.

I hear its chirp and think  
\textit{shower, sleep,}  
\textit{teeth cleaning at 3.}
I Need More CD’s in my Car

If I had to describe it
I’d say I’m still correcting the glitches
in your skipping tracks
following you out from inside a void
where all I hear is
Wilco and Radiohead.

They trail behind
like emblems of what we were
(objectively speaking, more like
what I wanted us to be).

I could’ve sworn that Jeff Tweedy of Wilco
was there that night
in between the pauses in our conversation,
strumming a chord in both of our heads,
being the emotion I never had a note for.

And Radiohead –
don’t flatter yourself,
that was after you.
But I do have a looping video
in which you mention their name once,
before I ever bought their album
or the poster on my wall.

They hide themselves in my glove compartment
beneath the insurance.
Pulling them out
rekindles the light in my car’s stereo
that illuminated our small universe
the many times we drove around.

Things would’ve probably been different
if you had been driving.

I would’ve parted my hair to the right.

I would’ve caught slivers of white noise
amidst the change of stations as I twisted the knob.
I probably wouldn’t even have known who Jeff Tweedy was.
Fishing for Ghosts

The lake
lay across the street from my childhood house.
I would go down there with my tape recorder
like they did in *Ghost Hunters*
to the exact spot where they pulled the man out
a few days water-wrinkled.

The goldfish would
look up at me curiously,
those little mirages swimming quickly past my feet.
I stuck my toes into the gooey edge,
fishing rod in hand,
waiting to reel in sounds from the dead,

to have a real catch
exhaling secrets amidst the white noise
of the recorder
and the plunging sounds
that my feet made
being pulled in and out.

The static was filled
with geese, runners’ sneakers,
conversations about grandchildren
but never that ethereal voice.

No matter how far I extended my arm
or in which direction I tilted my recorder,
I never got the signal to
pass through the murky waters
and find him hidden
within a clam’s shell
buried in the mush.

No last words from the grave
to tell me where he left all his gold
or tell me about the meaning of life.

I found out a few years ago
in a different house
that that lake was man-made

and that the man
had overdosed,
dying before even hitting the water. 
His lungs had been dry.

His bubbles never exploded on the surface 
above the gazing goldfish.
Body Language

My aunt yells at Teta for trying to set the table with her shaky hands. She thinks it’s something you just fall into, resigning the use of your body, like becoming eligible to vote or buying your first bra. My Teta's hands are to be treated like a roadside pop can: rusted, infected, to be kicked and flattened with tire marks. They are to be ignored, their blood and skin creased into nothing more than trash hanging off the arm. My aunt expects Teta to just sit down and say, well, I guess I’ll just fold these up and put them in the drawer now, like she’d fold a dress after a long day of crinkling and stirring in the wind, as if it were impossible to imagine that Teta could remember using those hands for more than just setting the table, hands curving to write sentences, used to carry children, hands now empty. One day my aunt will have to do the same. She’ll have to find a way to yell without flailing her hands in the air. With time, her air will not take them. It will be hurricanes and house fires. It will give her wind and snow when she simply asks for a cup of water.
Patterns in Mulberry Trees

I look for patterns in the alignment of my bed pillows, the undulating flowers of my comforter,
I count the missing blinds where the sun slides through.
I find myself in the garden picking at the mulberry tree, tasting its body, forgetting to count.
And I understand from the juice on my tongue not the pattern but its creator.

Suddenly, I find the light that casts it before I find the shadow. I find the hour glass before I find the table top.
III.
My People

At a restaurant in Beirut,
I wonder if these are really my people.

They echo the part of me
that thrives on Fairuz music in the morning,
the ten-minute goodbye’s after every sahra,
and the labne that’s always on the table.

I’m comforted by the thought of having
another piece that I can ration myself into,
a layer that I can add to the feet I walk on.

A nice thought,
but when the power goes out,
no one else notices.
Running in the House

“Tammy, don’t run in the house. You’ll fall and break your butt.”
– My dad on several separate occasions.

Not under my roof.
You think the world will wait?
You think the tiled floor will catch you when you fall?
You think gravity has time for tag?

I said no running.
Good luck when you use the bathroom.
Good luck walking to your bus stop.
Good luck sitting through the speed bumps.
Good luck fighting regret.

You’ll need luck out there in the rusty world.
I used to run. Have you seen my cushions?
Stop laughing.
Forget hospitals,
there are too many splintered bones already.

You’ll stop playing soon enough.
You’ll drop the smugness from your face
and the baby fat from your body.
They don’t teach you that in school.

When you roll down that hill you love, be careful.
Someday, the grass will turn to daggers
and you’ll have broken your butt by the bottom.

This is serious business.
You don’t want to listen?
Good luck, good luck.
This is nothing like the chicken pox.
See a circle. Draw a circle. Draw it again. Draw it upside-down. Let it begin. Let it end. Draw some more. Let them overlap. Spin a circle. Twirl it between your fingers. Stretch the circle so it fits like a glow stick about your neck. Drop it and measure its bounce. Multiply it by three. Let it turn exponential. Flirt with the circumference. Feed it some pie. Draw a circle around the pie so that you can slice it into equal pieces. Follow the edges of the circle. Let your eyes be a hound sniffing at the ground for a scent. Follow until the circle ends. Follow until it begins. Fill your tiled floor with circles. So many circles, it’s a crowd. So many, the tiles are bedrock. See a circle. Draw a circle. Be a sphere.
Teeth

My bottom-front teeth are crooked.
I always feel the difference with my nail,
trying to force them hip to hip.

They want instead a side hug
and kiss on the cheek.

Their distance has been cemented,
gum encasing their embrace
until the day that I wear thin
sixty years from now,
brITTLE nails against rotting teeth

when my need for dentures
will finally relieve the two of their halfway love,
too long half-held and overlapped.
Juggling Balls

Welcome to life, the latex fingers say. Umbilical chord amputated, lonely body; you must learn to juggle with your remaining limbs even if you don’t quite like the circus.

It’s all part of the act, the one that tricks its audience to believe there’s magic in each footstep.

It used to be so easy before you trapezed into being, when the juggling balls sat quietly together. You weren’t even hidden in the elsewhere.

But you’ve taken on that job and boy, do you look good in face paint’s pallor.

Now you can be seen tossing grocery lists, jury duty notices, mortgage payments, the knife from your daughter’s second birthday that submerges itself upside-down in the cake.

You stack these things as if they’re of your choosing, as if you willingly secured your tight rope above the lion’s snarl.

You juggle these loads denying the thin air’s possession of them as it revolves their bodies, manipulating their gravity all the while teasing you with the idea that it could swallow some of these burdens into its fissure before they make the return trip on the parabola, back into your callused fingertips just in time for the tricycle act.
On Cue

A car honks and, on cue, the brakes are slammed by a foot.

A child cries and, on cue, the sound is stifled by a mother’s hand.

A breath wavers and, on cue, the visitors are quieted by the cardiac monitor.

A house catches fire and, on cue, the dog is saved by the tail.

A door opens, and, on cue, the room is bent by its perimeter.

A poet dies, and on cue, the poem is restored.
Dark Hallway

His apartment was cold and dark after I turned off the bathroom light. I was alone in the black when it consumed me and I dissolved into something denser than water.

I probed through the hallway, hoping for no cliffs, no anglerfish night-lighting.

I was surprised to find the wrist and then the fingers.

They reminded me of the existence of my hand there in its socket and led me back to the bedroom where, for a little while, it was warm again.
The Fermentation Process

I once pickled my doubt
and let it ferment atop the fridge
next to the bread loaves.

I returned to the Mason jar
a few months later
to find that it had sealed itself shut
to avoid tarnishing its complexion.

So, I left that jar and didn’t hesitate
to pickle my jealousy in another.
A Broken Compass

suddenly each tree is that first tree. is that first shaded rock the first step away from home that had been taken a bit too far. each drop of water is your last, the last great lake that ever was, the last gulp your dry mouth ever took. and you didn’t even enjoy it. your bug net is pulled from your head and you hear the wasps moving their ugly little wings, all “bzzz”. each tree becomes a familiar face until you realize that it isn’t. the sun pokes at your skin. You think of your soft bed and wonder why you ever took that first step from home.
Touching a Ruin

I put my hand on the surface of a Roman ruin and my mind climbs into it.

It pokes around, feeling for a candle: the fingertips that must have been a part of this construction, the bodies that must have piled to create this monument.

My hand feels the dust, the area that must’ve been touched hundreds of times before. It feels the roughness.

My mind relishes this moment. My hand says, next.
Etcetera Sky

It’s easy to look at the etcetera sky
and see its ellipses trisected into periods,
little blue dots pieced together
like the framed puzzle behind glass
that a cloth passes over to remove pollution.

The sky gives no focal point
as oceans do, when sinking
always leads to sunk.
It calls for a frenzy of eye movement
to locate the elusive sandy bottom;
algaeed ships floating into constellations
and undocumented galaxies.

It’s taxing to know that we’re gazing into nothing,
easier to think that the sky is
the universe’s ceiling.

But no distance from Earth to star
gives measure of the importance
of the things we do.

Boundlessness requires a looking into.
If we gaze far enough,
we can see ourselves fall into that space
long enough for our bodies to become dust,
the earth – just a little dot
at the end of a sentence.
Untitled

1.

That time I awoke a different person,
I hadn’t yet understood the face of change.

2.

My mom calls every day
and I tell her nothing new.

There was once a time
when I told her all things:
the new letter that I’d learned,
the hill that I’d rolled down.
She would ask, “what’s new?”
only once.
Once was enough.

3.

In my hands,
the creases tell tales
of the bending of light,
of shadows and the flushing of skin.

But in my face,
the wrinkles tell grim stories
They are told in the dark.
They are unheard by the young.

4.

This has never been a place for renewal.
New layers can only thrive atop the old.
They root their seeds in the decay.

5.

The table with the feet on its back.
The apple seeds in the garbage,
The thought you never wrote down.
The thought that was mutilated into action.
The teeth after a smile, beneath the dirt.
The doorknob’s nail that’s come loose.
But not the eyes closed in the grave.
Not the ashes or the flame.
Lessons

“The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

You were right to tell me to be careful, and about the bad people, the things they do.
You were right about physics, gravity pulling runners to their fall.
You were right to read ingredients for preservatives, toxins that want to make my hands fold and my heart clog.
You were right to say that every circle ends in chaos every moment in longing for a better time.
I could list all of the warnings you’ve given me—you were right about them all.

But you didn’t tell me about the after, the new circle the rebirth after every burial, about the on and on and how many spheres we glide on to get through.

I hope you’re listening, I am here, in the after.
I am here, with my tendonitis and my chipped tooth, with my lessons learned.

I am part of a different globe now, a harder one, more careful now.

But I live in a dimension unlike one you’d ever mentioned.

In this one, I am layers, I am song, I am bone I am the ground we drive on I am the moment that sound becomes language.