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## When they say, "Where is your God?"

Carmen Klopfenstein

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## ABSTRACT

### WHEN THEY SAY, “WHERE IS YOUR GOD?”

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The widespread tenor within evangelical denominations toward homosexuality maintains that opening up discussion regarding homosexuality is to blatantly deny the authority of God’s word. As a member of the LGBTQ community, my exodus from the Christian circle in which I was raised was an inevitable result of the discourse structuring that worldview, which declares that homosexuality unquestionably negates one’s relationship with God. Currently, no middle ground exists regarding this tenet; the evangelical discourse labels those who do not conform, as well as those who try to speak out against this verdict, as deceived and unsaved. My manuscript counters evangelicalism’s rigid stance on homosexuality by conflating the binaries of good and evil inherent within the discourse. In the tradition of poets Dan Bellm, John Fry and Christian Wiman, I explore themes of exile and home through the traditional imagery and language of Christianity. Throughout my manuscript, I invoke biblical stories and sentiments to challenge the notion of sin (specifically, the sin of homosexuality) as well as to defy my exile by reclaiming God’s name. My poetry stands between the rigid binaries of my former community and in that void issues a voice that is both victim and challenger of their resolved discourse.

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WHEN THEY SAY, “WHERE IS YOUR GOD?”

BY

CARMEN KLOPFENSTEIN  
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

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Amy Newman

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## INTRODUCTION

Poets addressing themes of exile and isolation often characterize their individual struggles against the backdrop of an insensitive collective. Although a collective consists of individuals with varying thoughts and perspectives, poets often cast them as a single entity, saying the same words and acting in one motion toward those who are not a part of its body. One example of this characterization is Crane's (1895) poems in *The Black Riders and Other Lines*, which set the intimate drama of an individual's adversities against an injurious throng. Crane's (1895) descriptions in poem "XLIX" evoke this image of a group as a single body. Throughout the poem, the crowd speaks and acts as one. When the protagonist addresses the crowd, "A thousand voices" (l. 9) respond en masse. When the crowd directs the protagonist, "A thousand fingers" (10) point in one direction. Crane (1895) does not particularize the people who constitute the multitude; instead, he obscures their human features, portraying the crowd as a river and referring to them throughout the poem as a quick and ceaseless "stream" (3, 19) and a roaring "torrent" (6, 36). By depicting the mob as a river, Crane (1895) illustrates the unified force of a group. The protagonist both perceives and feels the multitude as a cohesive body, an animate They with a thousand uniform faces, a thousand voices screaming a single message.

Like poem "XLIX," chapter 42 in the book of Psalms elicits similar notions of a group as a single They, acting and influencing as one. Here, the collective asserts its presence in the psalmist's psyche. No longer actively a part of his former community, the psalmist remains perpetually hounded by their words:

My tears have been my food day and night,  
While they continually say to me,  
“Where is your God?” (Psalm 42:3, The New King James Version [NKJV])

Although the plural “they” denotes a myriad of individuals, the group speaks collectively, asking the psalmist a single question, “Where is your God?” The psalmist’s former relationships with those of the multitude have lost their singularity. No longer an assembly of varied individuals, the psalmist’s former community morphs into a body that moves and acts as one, becoming, to the psalmist, the formidable force of a blank and faceless They. They remain an ever-present influence on the psalmist, but the interaction is undeniably altered. The psalmist is no longer part of its body but a separate isolate, cut off but not completely beyond its touch and haunted by the memory of belonging.

My mom once asked me why I felt cast out and who had done it. I could not answer her. No one moment, no public excommunication, no specific comments or defining events led up to my expulsion. There were quiet moments, trifles of gossip and stares, conclusions about my blue hair and what it meant concerning the state of my soul, but no scene, no act of injustice from one particular individual. I could not answer her. I faltered for an explanation, and I falter still.

To my childhood church and home, the world is a place of binary opposites: good and evil, right and wrong, heaven and hell, the saved and the unsaved, God’s Truth and Satan’s lies. All of these binaries are considered clearly evident in God’s Word, constant and incontestable. However, in that world, a void lies between the opposites. There is nothing in the middle—no conversations or questions, no blurring or obscuring the stringent classifications of good and evil, sin and holiness. Often, those who attempt to speak or exist in this middle ground are simply moved from the category of believers into the category of the deceived, and the deceived can be ignored because they are spouting Satan’s lies. According to my childhood beliefs, I am

unsaved, staunchly living in my sin, unrepentant. I know these responses because I hear them in my mind on my worst nights: I am given over to a reprobate mind (Rom. 1:28, NKJV), I will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9, NKJV), I will be judged for my sin because God is a holy God (Rom. 1:32, NKJV), I am going to hell (Jude 1:7, NKJV). This is not up for debate; this is the Truth of God's Word (referred to hereafter as "the Truth").

As an individual in love with someone of the same sex, I no longer fit within the confines of evangelical Christianity. To be a Christian, one cannot be homosexual, and to be homosexual automatically negates one's Christianity (Idleman, 2014). This is the doctrine that raised me and consequently forced me outside its walls. This is the doctrine that no longer wants to hear my voice. I stand between the uncompromising binaries of my former community and in that expanse offer a voice both victim and challenger of their resolved discourse.

Foucault (1972) defines discourses as "systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, and courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak" (p. 285). Gee (2012) enumerates the ways in which discourses, by their very nature, are resistant to change, stating that every discourse "protects itself by demanding from its adherents performances which act as though its ways of being, thinking, acting, talking, writing, reading, and valuing are 'right', 'natural', 'obvious', the way 'good' and 'intelligent' and 'normal' people behave" (p. 215). As Gee (2012) notes, discourses "change in reaction to other [d]iscourses" (p. 155), but if no opportunity exists for discourses to interact with other ways of thinking and being, then each discourse naturally remains confined in, and protective of, its own worldview.

The evangelical discourse in which I was raised attests that the right and natural ways of behaving are clearly defined in Scripture. Biblical objectivity—the belief that the Bible is self-

contained—is a key tenet of the evangelical discourse. Because the Bible is considered a living, infallible text capable of speaking for itself, interpretation is denied as playing a role in the reading process. Herman (1997) remarks, “the idea that one read[s] these writings in their social context, or interpret[s] them in light of changing values, is [seen as] an abomination” (p. 12). As a result, hermeneutical debates are absent within my church and home community. In that world, there is sin, and there is righteousness; every component of life separates into one or the other. Once categorized, critical consideration is rarely given to those things again, but if a second sorting is necessary, the easiest way to reorganize is simply to move an action (or thought, or person) from “righteous” to “sinful” or vice versa. Some topics, however, remain unquestionably cemented in sin. Homosexuality is, in many Christian circles, one of those topics. The widespread tenor within evangelical denominations is that to open up discussion regarding homosexuality is “to deny . . . the claims of God’s own Word which marks true Christian faith” (International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, n.d., n.p.).

With my manuscript, I hope to decrease the prejudice and injury that queer people endure, especially within strict religious communities. Prejudice toward individuals of varying sexualities is often due to lack of exposure and empathy for those whose identities differ from the norm (Costa, Alexandre, Pereira, & Leal, 2015). The contact hypothesis suggests that interpersonal interaction with those who are different “can increase tolerance and empathy while decreasing stereotypes, prejudice, and conflict” (Marr, 2015, p. 5). My identity and experience not only differ from the norm within my home and church community but altogether fall outside the vocabularies of their worldview. Through the lens of the contact hypothesis, I view my project as an envoy laying my humanity bare in the hands of those who do not know how to handle it. My manuscript counters the rigid forcefulness of the Truth, confuses the boundaries of

sin and holiness, and simultaneously begs forgiveness and demands vindication, pleading for it and forcing my humanity on those who will not hear.

Intermixed within the morals of evangelical Christianity are the assumptions and values of American discourse. Through traditional gender paradigms, marriage, and childbearing, modern Western culture continues to uphold and sustain heteronormative values, especially heterosexuality (Rubin, 1984; Seidman, 2009; Weeks, 1989). According to Kavanaugh and Maratea (2016), this heteronormative value system increases the potential risk of ridicule, humiliation, limited social mobility and criminalization for those whose sexual practices or identity fall outside of the normative standard. As Rubin (1984) notes, heteronormative value systems “function in much the same ways as do ideological systems of racism, ethnocentrism and religious chauvinism” (pp. 152–153). The damaging effects of heteronormativity on queer individuals occur at the institutional, social, and individual level (Yep, 2003).

Heteronormativity manifests at the social and individual level as microaggressions, which Sue (2010) defines as “the constant and continuing everyday reality of slights, insults, invalidations, and indignities visited upon marginalized groups by well-intentioned, moral, and decent family members, friends, neighbors, [and] coworkers” (p. xv). Sue (2010) discusses how a society’s specific biases and prejudices often pervade individuals of that society “outside their level of awareness” (p. xv). Consequently, microaggressions are subtle, and their effects can go unnoticed. *Microaggressions: Power, privilege and everyday life*, a Tumblr-based website dedicated to sharing the experiences of marginalized individuals, further explains:

each event, observation and experience [of microaggression] . . . is not necessarily particularly striking in and of themselves . . . Instead, their slow accumulation . . . is in

part what defines a marginalized experience, making explanation and communication with someone who does not share this identity particularly difficult. (“About,” n.d., n.p.)

Through the accumulation of the individual poems of my manuscript, I articulate the microaggressions of heteronormativity and communicate the subtle and splitting wear they have.

Throughout my manuscript, I often—purposefully and involuntarily—invoke biblical sentiments and language for two reasons. One, I want to conflate the notion of sin (specifically, the sin of homosexuality) with holiness. In Winterson’s (1985) *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, the main character, Jeanette, is confronted and condemned by her church for her love for Melanie. While the pastor, in the rush of condemnation, reads passage after passage of the Bible, Jeanette hurls back another biblical reference, “To the pure all things are pure . . . It’s you not us” (Winterson, 1985, p. 105). This exchange of verses, while insignificant to those who do not take the Bible as an authority, demonstrates the immense support within the Bible for the perspectives of many individuals. Both the pastor and Jeanette wield the Bible with authority and validity to support their view. Through the words that I use in my manuscript, I also call into question what is automatically outcast from Christianity, giving it holy and human dimensions. Like Jeanette, I want to show that this human dimension also has a place and justification within God’s word.

The second reason I invoke biblical images and phrases is because I cannot speak another language—my soul still flings itself to God involuntarily. Poet and author Christian Wiman argues that one must speak their given language (socratesinthecity, 2014, 00:41:20-00:42:08). For language to take new forms, “there must be a shattering experience” (Wiman, 2013, p. 54). Yet even in this shattering, “language has its bloodiness, through history and through our own beating hearts” (Wiman, 2013, p. 54). Aspects of our personal vocabulary remain indelibly and

inescapably part of our most intimate selves. Wiman (2013) views this not as a limitation but as a creative impulse, enabling him to both sing of God and sing of godlessness (p. 61). Like Wiman (2013), my images and “words are tied ineluctably to the world” of my childhood community (p. 54). I have been given the language and imagery of the evangelical discourse, and although I no longer belong within its borders, my words still echo its voice, issuing from that same source both the vileness and sanctity of my soul.

Water, an image with particular biblical resonance, appears throughout my work. In Psalm 42, the psalmist describes his thirst for God “as the deer pant[ing] for the water brooks” (Psalm 42:1, NKJV). Later, the psalmist illustrates the depth and motion of his internal response to God as the “deep call[ing] unto deep at the noise of [God’s] waterfalls” (Psalm 42:7, NKJV). Immediately after this comparison, he summons another image of water to express his desolation, saying to God, “all Your waves and billows have gone over me” (Psalm 42:7, NKJV). The psalmist’s use of water to express such variegated aspects of himself draws on water’s transmutability. I, too, am drawn to this facet of water, both fascinated and absorbed by a substance that offers so many expressions of itself.

I use water imagery in my poems to encompass water’s transmutability and unified duality and to consequently dissemble any preconceived categorizations or perceptions that readers (specifically evangelical readers) may have regarding LGBTQ individuals. My poem “Over Half of Me, Water” forefronts the interconnected and myriad forms of water. Here, water articulates the duality and inseparability of external versus internal, strength versus weakness. Water combines these perceived opposites in a single element and enables me to simultaneously depict myself as capable of “lift[ing] surf to the sky with the force of my body” yet incapable of power because over half of me is that same, non-solid substance (l. 17). “Have patience with me,

please,” I entreat the reader, “over half of me is water” (ll. 19-20). I use both these presentations of water as a synchronous plea and vindication to challenge my audience with the complexity and transience of humanness, thus making it more difficult for readers to see only my sexuality and my sexual body and automatically stamp predetermined judgment on me.

Throughout my project, I sought out the works of other authors and poets who have written from, and of, corresponding situations and themes to “start the blaze / in this emptiness searching for godwords” (Warn, 2010, ll. 18-19). Saeed Jones encountered a similar emptiness. Regarding his work, Jones (2015) writes, “there was no one moment in which I was suddenly able to shatter silence into language” (para. 7). Each time he sat down to write was an attempt to voice the unsaid and seemingly unsayable, but after many moments, language gradually came from that tangible void. Through this process, Jones (2015) found himself among others who came before him and wrote their voices and experiences into existence.

In *Prelude to Bruise*, Old Testament imagery and accounts speckle the landscape of Jones’ (2014) poems. “Isaac, After Mount Moriah” imagines the aftermath of Isaac’s near sacrifice by his father, Abraham. Both creative license as well as personal allegory, the poem repurposes a familiar story, animating its characters and adding a new and intimate dimension to a traditional biblical account. In “Boy in a Whalebone Corset,” Jones (2014) similarly evokes Old Testament stories. The poem describes the speaker’s confrontation with his father, who ravages his room “looking for more *sissy clothes*” to burn (l. 15). The speaker conveys the motive behind his father’s actions by alluding to Sodom and Gomorrah, the ancient city God destroyed because, as traditionally interpreted, of the sin of homosexuality: “His son’s a whore this last night / of Sodom” (Jones, 2014, ll. 18-19). By framing the night’s events in light of Sodom, by illuminating the purpose behind his father’s actions as righteously inspired but

malevolently cruel and unprovoked, Jones (2014) alters how readers typically view the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as just and deserved. The poem ends with another Old Testament reference, but Jones (2014) again changes the angle from which readers view the story so as to highlight its harsher aspects. While watching his father burn his belongings, Jones (2014) evokes images of the children of Israel's escape from Egypt:

. . . night made  
of locusts, column of smoke  
mistaken for Old Testament God. (ll. 23-25)

Instead of these images standing as a testament to God's faithfulness to his chosen people as traditionally seen, Jones' (2014) allusion illustrates that even those causing harm to others can find justification for their actions by misaligning themselves with the righteous.

John Fry uses biblical stories and language to express notions of being outcast from Christianity and yet finding a home in the Christian God. Fry (2017a) describes his work as "God-haunted" . . . haunted by the open-ended question of God, the possible absence of God, the indefinite presence of God" (para. 25). Similar to Wiman, Fry (2017a) states, "for all the wars I've waged against it, the Bible is both spring and spur for just about everything I've put down on paper" (para. 4). Fry's (2017b) poem "we lifted our eyes to the hills" demonstrates this creative tension. The poem proceeds from Psalm 121, which begins:

I lift up my eyes to the hills--  
From whence comes my help?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
Who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:1-2, NKJV)

The Psalm continues, resolutely and joyfully testifying of God's faithfulness to those under His protection. Fry's (2017b) poem, though imitative of the Psalm in image and phraseology, alters

its timbre. Fry (2017b) uses the Psalm as an evocative source from which to issue his own testament, not of God's faithfulness but of the absence of His help:

... we'd lifted burnt  
offerings, our hearts, as shorn  
  
things bleat, cling, for help  
had not come (ll. 1-4)

By echoing yet simultaneously altering Psalm 121, Fry (2017b) creates a juxtaposition between faithful pursuit and expectation of God's help and deprivation at God's unfaithfulness.

Like Fry, Dan Bellm also uses the stories and images of Christianity as creative source. In many of his poems, Bellm wrestles with the notion of belonging to a religion that rejects queer people. Bellm's (2008) poem "The Crossing" offers the well-known story of the children of Israel going to the Promised Land by way of the wilderness as a depiction of Christian LGBTQ people leaving the slavery of silence to follow God to their Promised Land:

God did not lead us by the nearer way,  
  
but into rising waters, which do not part unless,  
with an outstretched arm, we step forward, and stand fast.  
Roundabout, by way of the wilderness,  
  
we have come. (ll. 12-16)

In that wilderness, I—like Eve Grubin (2007)—ask, "What is exile? What / is home?" (ll. 1-2).

I open and intersperse my chapbook with epigraphs from Valentine Ackland and Jeanette Winterson because these excerpts precede and echo the exile, justification, and placelessness that I evoke in my poems. Their words make me feel less alone. Even if I do not belong to a people, even if I have no place that claims me as its own, I feel a closeness to Ackland and Winterson. They have felt what I feel, and I make a home in their words. This vagrant community is my own; I want my poetry to offer the same home to others who have been outcast, to others

“without knowledge of home” (Ackland, 1973, p. 47). Ackland’s work, although not well known in her lifetime and little known today, clearly and beautifully displays her love and her wanderings, her speculations and losses. In her autobiography, Ackland writes of her lifelong love, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and the vows they made to each other in the solitude of their home. This strikes a particularly vulnerable chord in me. Although cultures and times have changed toward LGBTQ individuals since the mid-1900s, the stillness of living room vows remain. The uncelebrated love lived out is as strong now as it was then. I find comfort in knowing that others have lived in the quiet walls of their own love, unbolstered and unacknowledged from the outside. Knowing this lends validity and sight to the vows my love and I have made in our home.

I have a similar affinity for Jeanette Winterson’s work. The two epigraphs from Winterson that I use in my chapbook come from her novel *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. Although the novel encompasses a variety of themes, two in particular resonate with me: the hypocrisy of religious communities and living life with disparate and incompatible realities. Like Winterson’s main character, I want to challenge the condemnatory rigidity so often found in religious communities.

My poem “god with us” issues this challenge, softly but insistently claiming that God’s presence goes with my love and me just as much as with those who have cast us out. I use a ghazal because the form is steeped in a tradition of expressing loneliness and longing for a lost homeland. The requirements of the form, that each couplet remain independent of the others except for the rhyme and refrain, amplifies the isolation and exile of loss. For me, the ghazal extends the softest and most poignant invocation for justice. Like Jeanette in *Oranges*, who confronts the harsh verses of condemnation with a soft verse of purity, I defy my exile by

claiming that the essence of God's name, Immanuel, God with us, also belongs to me, no matter how outcast I am by others.

The second theme I draw on from Winterson (1985) is the notion of living with split realities. In the novel, after Jeanette has left her home, someone asks her if she ever thinks of going back. Jeanette responds, "people do go back, but they don't survive, because two realities are claiming them at the same time" (Winterson, 1985, p. 160). In the movie *Pride* (Livingstone, 2014), the main character leaves their shouting home and walks resolutely away from the hurt and conflict of their family. The scene depicts the main character's exodus as a glorious epoch of freedom and the victorious climax of the movie. The movie sidelines the grief and repercussions of loss if even the loss of an antagonistic home in which resolution is unforeseeable. Winterson (1985) does not sideline the loss but fully acknowledges the fissure that remains as a result of no longer belonging in one's home. "And what if I stay?" the protagonist asks, "You will find yourself destroyed by grief. All you know will be around you, and at the same time far from you. Better to find a new place now" (Winterson, 1985, p. 147).

The grief I know, and the intimate distance, but finding a new place? What does that look like when you don't want to leave home? What does that look like when you return again and again and build aspects of your life with those who live in a disparate reality? My poems occupy this uninhabited space between the two worlds, where one scene or comment takes on dual meanings, where forgiveness and bitterness form an unseen union, where God laughs in malevolence and comforts with showerhead grace, and where heaven is both a place I am cast out of and the arms in which I am held. My words, within the void between opposing worlds, begin to bridge the abyss and create a unified place for myself and others between the conflicting boundaries of former homes and new lives.

I write not only for those like me, the prodigals who never left home, but also for those who named us prodigals. In the story of the prodigal son in the book of Luke, the boy takes his inheritance and leaves home. After spending all of his wealth, after living with pigs and eating their slop because of his destitution, the prodigal realizes his unreasonable filth and foolishness, remembers the abundance of his father's home and decides to return. From a long way off, the father sees him coming and runs to him, crying a welcome. The son admits that he has sinned and asks to be readmitted into his father's house as a servant. The story ends with the father throwing a lavish feast in honor of his son's return, joyfully proclaiming, "my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:24, NKJV). I write for my mom who waits for my return when I never left. I write for my sister who believes I have lost my inheritance in the filth of my sin. I write for those who look at me from a long way off when I am in their midst. I write for my former community who, like the multitude in Psalm 42, have transmorphed into a grief-ridden memory and a suffocating force, continually demanding "where is your God?" when they have taken Him from me.

WHEN THEY SAY, "WHERE IS YOUR GOD?"

Carmen Klopfenstein

*Whether the lost thing found, the exile reaching coast  
Late and at last, a wide ocean crossed  
And foothold on soil once more:  
Which, soul does not know for sure, but feels  
Sometimes this, and sometimes as if she were still  
Alien, a stateless creature, one without knowledge of home:*

– Valentine Ackland

“To the pure all things are pure . . . It’s you not us.”

– Jeanette Winterson

## First Kiss

My mind is stuck on Michigan piers.  
Something so docile in the way the waves  
slap in my memory. It is a breakwater,  
with a lighthouse at the end. Sometimes

something so docile in the way the waves  
break is the farthest thing from the truth.  
With a lighthouse at the end, sometimes  
the memory makes me cry again,

break. Is the farthest thing from the truth  
the guilt? Stunned, I slipped into the bathroom.  
The memory makes me cry again.  
She held me in the bathroom and I sobbed.

The guilt stunned. I slipped into the bathroom  
and heaved. I remember every single moment  
she held me in the bathroom. And I sobbed  
like heaven had cast us out. I was sure of it

and heaved. I remember every single moment  
our lips lingered, wanting to speak warmth  
like heaven had. Cast us out, I was sure of it—  
my whole body felt wrecked on some shoreline.

Our lips lingered, wanting to speak warmth.  
We imagined God, lapping as if after a storm.  
My whole body felt wrecked on some shoreline.  
The calm of autumn is repetition, wind heaving.

We imagined God, lapping as if after a storm.  
Slap in my memory. It is a breakwater.  
The calm of autumn is repetition, wind heaving.  
My mind is stuck on Michigan piers.

Over Half of Me, Water

I will put band-aids all over my arm  
to fix a wound that isn't there, to bind up the ocean  
of my skin. I have drowned in a solid body, Lord  
thank the day the pier breaks and the cradle of structure  
falls. The steam dries, the mirror is streakless  
and I am clothed.

Someday I will filter to groundwater, decay  
into precious dirt that feels only rain.  
I will not have this body. I don't know  
if I am reassured, or deplorably sad.  
I will rush away to ocean.

I kissed imaginary nipples in the bathtub,  
used my hands to come. Don't think I'm proud  
of this body I did not make; there are waves  
besides the ocean's and these are mine.  
I would gladly burst against a rock,  
lift surf to the sky with the force of my body.  
I tell you there are things I will never understand.  
Have patience with me, please—  
over half of me is water.

## I Woke Up Unpeacefully

There is no way in, no nice plunge  
cold shock of water and sun,  
no tide-coming-in scurry and shriek  
of pure wave joy. I have a confession  
to make. I am scared of the ocean,  
and certain pools in shadow.

[I think about you all the time. Not obsessively, I don't mean that, just... every thought,  
every normal, everyday thought, is somehow a thought of you, even if it's not of you  
directly.]

My head broke the surface of pool-bottom blue  
at 9:15. I was curtain-hot, dream-restless.  
I have more confessions to make.  
The resort worker cleaning the pool made some joke  
about turning up the water heater and he meant  
the Bahamian sun of course but I took him seriously  
or confusedly anyway and I have the stupidest voice,  
so I ducked under water multiple times to clear  
my embarrassment.

[You're in so many places that to see you in body is strange sometimes, I mean, that you  
actually exist as your own body, separate, whole, condensed into a person. That you  
actually exist. It's so amazing.]

There is no way in. I haven't said  
what I wanted to say, and I can't in this poem.

[If I had a garden, I'd walk you down its paths blind  
feeling the way. And there'd be only summer nights  
with strings of lights along our fences, hands.  
And it wouldn't matter what we were.]

So I Have a Hand to Hold.

And then home feels like a wave  
that guts your stomach and peels the sand  
from under your feet, wants to drag you out  
slam you down, terrorize. So big  
and you saw it coming,  
could hardly eat, didn't sleep.

*There's a fine line between  
loving someone and being in love.* How  
I didn't journal at all that week.

Across the street from her house  
the trees seize evening like shattered  
tranquil glass. We sit on a frozen bench,  
water covering her house and mine.

## Sleeping Under Waves

I have sandbagged against the ocean,  
it seeps under the door and puddle snakes  
to my consciousness; *no commotion*. I slam  
the door shut, turning over: *conotion*. Notion  
I have sleep-waking, a blend of no  
and commotion; jumble of seaweed words  
catching in the tide-pools of these eyes  
not opening. *No ocean*.

Nap to steel the blues away,  
bluish gray, gray slipping under  
waves coming through—  
*conotion, cannotoccean,*  
*commotion, nooccean, canno*

“And what if I stay?”

“You will find yourself destroyed by grief. All you know will be around you, and at the same time far from you. Better to find a new place now.”

– Jeanette Winterson

When they say, "Where is your God?" I say,

The sound of waterfalls are prayers I pour from my bones  
shattering into rocks, rushing into foam. I know  
the darkness of His hand, that it is vast but also  
day. He sees the ways I have sunk  
roots, anchored to words that steady these sunken  
eyes always ready to despair.

In the morning, I skim on its surface; fearfully, wonderfully,  
lifting off of waves joy-breaking, calling to the deep:  
*my soul thirsts for God even when He dwells in the sea with me!*

## Speak the Truth in Love

I feel God like a dark wave only meant to crush. I feel the destruction of whispers and gossip and slit-throat prayers from holy people, dark, with knives pinpoint like their eyes. Of course it is in love! Heaven-genuine concern only for the state of my soul. Anything on limits to say and do so long as I'm saved at the end. Even if it's body over rack of words ceaseless and careless that I am tearing. I'll be saved at the end. Bloody-split, but saved. Wrecked with their Christianly concern at the gate of heaven.

*Let us gather the free and batter them until they are useless, their mind a dull stare, a smattering wound, and place them in our asylum in heaven.*

If the sun hits you on one cheek, turn the other to it also

If,  
in the kitchen, annexed by light,  
I am holding  
a wound,  
or clefting it open,  
who is to know?

## Shower

I have begged on my knees to my sister  
 who loomed before me, reclined like God,  
 sparkling-powerful and malignant, a tinge of laughter  
 demanding retribution. I cried, "I love you!"  
 but she didn't understand. I kept begging,  
 "I love you, I love you!" and when I woke up

I couldn't shower off the dream. I looked up,  
 face to showerhead like it spilled grace. My sister  
 is not the enemy. Something I know but am begging  
 to understand. I cannot soap off God  
 or stop hearing, "I want to harm you.  
 To take away your future and your laughter."

Everything is unholy, even our laughter.  
 God will not hear the prayers we cast up.  
 "Your sins have hid his face from you,  
 he will not hear." I am followed by God and my sister  
 in the apartment. Unheard I cry "my God, my God!  
 why is everyone I know casting me out, begging

You for my punishment, begging  
 You for our destruction, for our laughter  
 to be turned into tears. God!  
 what kind of salvation offers up  
 the innocent for slaughter? God! My sister  
 is trying to be like You!!"

In my dream, when I begged and begged "I love you,"  
 she never understood. All this grief and this begging  
 is coming out my hands, weeping everywhere. My sister  
 is human, is prophet, is God, is unsparing laughter  
 I cannot shake because I was looking implorably up  
 and all she was doing was laughing like God.

When I think of my sister, I think of God,  
the Great Demander of more, though "I love you"  
is all I can say. My sin has shut up  
Heaven to me. They have left me begging  
at the gate, their laughter  
guffawing "the wages of sin!" Sister,

I love you. Sister, in the valley looking up  
I will fear no evil, though you are with me, and God.  
My tub overflows: begging, suds, laughter.

I was never taught this, have never been witness to this type of love.

What forgiveness is I know:  
that it can reside  
hand in hand with bitterness,  
unholy marriage unblessed by God.

Bitterness sits in a chair, cries  
all over the house. Forgiveness is silent,  
doesn't know how to hold a wound that stays  
open in the middle of their floor.

They write an email;  
agree to pretend that forgiveness  
doesn't hold bitterness, that bitterness  
doesn't lift forgiveness's face to its own.

They are severely alone.  
They make love in their room  
by the river. Determine how two  
shall become one.

In a conversation about what constitutes marriage, her brother equates bestiality with same-sex love

He says it casually, as if it were any other self-evident example.  
Real marriage, he says, is a covenant between a man and a woman  
and God. Not a man and his dog, not a man and a man  
but I have stopped listening. Intent instead on watching  
my throat disappear over my lungs' cliffs. Amazed, I survey  
my skin, a thousand hot air balloons that expand,  
ignite, and float off to an unreachable place.

Expectation: 1. a strong belief that something will happen or be the case in the future;  
2. a belief that someone will or should achieve something

To migrate over blazing chill,  
the fields harvested and the trees nothing  
but proof that all things breathe in  
I wonder how reasonable it is  
to presume peace is a right, or if  
what I want is what no one is entitled  
to have or to hold like secret burning  
leaves.

## Upon Hearing of a Potential, Heterosexual Relationship

So suddenly the darkness of the car is refuge. I wish  
for someone's hands to wring my arm with relish.

Instead, I scratch, grateful for the time of year. The cutting  
cold light reaches for nighttime. I understand its need

to hold something sharp, like stars, like beacons, like something  
straight and narrow, guiding it home. The prodigal

turns its face into nighttime and weeps.

## Waltz

He swept in, swept up baby girl  
to waltz. Baby girl laughed, enriched  
with height and music, her daddy's arms  
a dance floor, high above the living room's carpet and clutter.

I was enriched with the laughter,  
with the moment  
that is blessed observation.  
A bountiful gift, this father-daughter dance  
given me to witness.

He swept in, swept up baby girl  
just after grandma suggested,  
“Let's dance, Chelise!” It seemed a rushed in  
interruption of our assembly, a disruption  
to save his daughter, and remind her, little two-year-old,  
that boys dance with girls.  
No alterations of this theme,  
no variations.

I was disoriented with the flurry  
of child laughter, with patterns waltzed  
over carpet. Couldn't figure out if loving  
or sinister. If the head bent to kiss his little girl  
whispered thanks, or offered one  
everlasting prayer—

## Disjointed

In a dream I showed your mom the rings.  
In reality she cries across the table in heaviness  
and my heart is folded over, over and over  
with cold metal incapable of tears.

Later I spit bitterness, detesting myself.

My body has broken open.

My brain is befuddled with rain.

Vows – [beginning to accept]

A special affinity towards our stuff—witnesses, what they are. A humid, home-night feel. Our window frames, picture frames, are not malicious. Our plates don't care. Our lamps are on our goddamn side, as is the night. She said to me, I love you. I thought, this blessed couch is our witness. Imagined crowds and thought how this—this quiet, mid-week assertion—is more lovely. The stillness of our drawers and dressers, our cabinets and bookshelves. Gathered here to watch, and love the ones who love: day in, day out, day in.

Before god and these many witnesses.

## Dissociate

I am left with a dumb evening  
stuck up against my tongue  
wordless with listless  
inability, dumb to explain  
finger quakes, a lost stomach  
to phone calls from old friends  
who get caught up on everything  
but the home we sit in, the love  
who is holding my hand.

It is necessary in order for the phone not to break.  
I am ashamed at my reaction.  
I take a bath. I think of disunity  
in poetic terms, know that I can use this pain  
for material and feel no better because my material  
is crap.

## Back for the Holidays

I am picking burs from my tights in the sunlight and you are saying something about wanting to shield your parents from homophobia, wanting to keep words from being spoken to them, from being spoken period. Already silence swells with hurt that never articulates—waves that never breach, submerged as they are. I've said nothing of this but say something then, picking off fuzzies from your coat. Because, even though I say I won't apologize for our love, I am guilty and know it. I always know. You offer your hand, gray-gloved, tender, and I take it.

We walk back to our apartment and I bathe away hell, and all its scattering birds looking for a home.

god with us

When she holds me, we point out grace to each other,  
beauty no one else sees because they are not outcast.

The river flows past our windows—when the wind blows,  
downstream looks upstream, the reeds a renegade, a fraught outcast.

We came in August, up from where the geese are flying over  
now. I sat down by the window and wept, a hot outcast.

Loneliness is where the deer sleep—empty when we found it,  
edged with tall grasses, a place we accidentally sought, outcast.

We talk of god over breakfast, over lunch, walking up the stairs  
to our apartment. We are all the sins we've been taught, outcast.

In my mind we stand precipice, sheer outcrop over sea, exorbitant,  
wave-dashed, dazzling; drenched figureheads on the spot outcast.

They have taken our home, at peace with themselves, self-possessed  
and certain that we have left our souls an abandoned plot, outcast.

In autumn, the deer stand in the bend where the river knows it is sky.  
I try to praise without desolation but cannot, outcast.

Her words, tintured with light, break along the shoreline of my skin.  
Like a wash, seaside, I am shattered; drifted, wrought, outcast.

We speak our names: oath of god, traveler from a foreign land, song  
of joy. We unfurl for a homeland like a hope or a thought outcast.

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