

my sister. The girl who fed me while the marriage collapsed
around us. That girl is not.

I am walking
through a lawn of shoes, commemorating the dead so far in Iraq.
100s of men's army boots & an occasional stuffed animal,
plastic flowers: a moving cemetery. A side-show.

There is a pile to represent Iraqi civilians — women's shoes
& the shoes of small children.

These piles should be bigger, I keep thinking, as I walk
unsatisfied through the field.

What happens when we cannot trust the dead?

The artist fills an armoire
with a woman's cotton nightgown & cement. You can see corners of soft
cotton emerging from cement, but can do nothing,
cannot brush it aside . . . *knowledge and control are precarious tools*
for us to deal with reality — The cotton coughs *yes she was*

* * * * *

My sister re-tells history — her history & mine —
until our past is not ours.

I cannot argue.

If I interrupt
with my version
she will turn at me,
eyes skipping in panic,
her face tense & no
longer hers. She will become something

I cannot recognize & remember how to love.

Her voice will stretch high & taut
(animal gut over a broken window)

& her words will spit out tight & fast,
faster with accusations covering years of my life.

So I say

nothing. Why such allegiance to a past
full of men's hands? Why not give up & give her
my childhood & stop fighting? The radio says we are bombing Faludja.

2. Museum

You must buy a ticket to walk through the Holocaust
Museum. Once you're in, you can't come back
without another ticket & timeslot. *I don't believe
that space can be neutral.* My brother & I take four hours
& skip lunch. The museum is built like a lyric: a corridor
conveys us past the sheer cliffs of another. We move
slowly between a left wall of portrait photographs, a right wall
full of names. Dozens of tourists pass us,
talk of other things past thousands of destroyed Russian villages. Gone.
Words on a wall, then piles of eyeglasses,
& piles of hair, even higher, mostly brown —
(a haystack, a __, not this —)

It takes all our energy to stay awake & to keep this hair pile hair.
—to resist the clamp of nouns. The fixing of sight lines.

So much depends on where
you stand to look, to lose, we stand back, gazing across
the expanse
of similar versions: the body of history.
By the time we get to the empty boxcar
on the third floor, boxcar is no longer boxcar.

My brother & I walk not speaking to the Mall & devour
our sandwiches. I tell him about the neighbor who touched me
& my sister when we were very young. He looks up,
his face exhausted, rinsed clear from the exhibits: "I am
so sorry it took you this long
to tell me." The space between my sister & me contracts for a moment,

then widens.

* * * * *

There are so many ways to hide the body count:
contract workers
consultants
embedded journalists
And if we want to see the dead returned under flag-cover?
We must be morbid, insurgents.

& a sister who returns from psychiatry foreign, invaded
by generic drugs, dominated by diagnosis —
& the family —
How to find what the artist seeks (*the splendor of a complete life*)?

* * * * *

In the gallery she tries to give us nothing
to see — to experience almost, but not —
(a bookshelf full of cement) *These pieces stand as pure absence.*
to leave a trace —

Where do I put the other sister, the one before disease came to stay?
In a photo album, the lines of a poem, a cement-filled bed?
Quantum theory says both exist —
what version of me do I use?

3. Unfinished

She was born premature & pigeon-toed & worse.
Three operations before her first birthday.
“I put her small legs in casts & kept them
separated by a steel bar when she slept.
The doctors said it was a good idea.”

Come into this world & —
the body will adjust to another's —

“I raised a girl knowing
there was no where to run.
I believed the diagnosis.”

The artist stacks up the boxes in the corner of the gallery. Beautiful
boxes of dried cow bladder, lacquered & waiting.
She stores our escape—
Look at the family albums.
See for yourself.

News flash & then gone: we bombed the Kabul Zoo.
The streets are full of wild animals,
uncaged & starving, schoolboys
corner a tiger in an alley,
taunt her & eat her. Suck the grease off each finger
one at a time. Polish their shoes with their hands.

4. Not To Relic

Third World waste is extreme like our reality—
she wanted to make sculpture out of nothing—
after eight Colombian Justices were torched
inside the court & she smelled their dying.

She could only make work out of nothing—
so she took objects that had meaning
to the deads' living & worked the objects until they had no
meaning, but still this was not nothing,
not nothing—

Our ordinary terrorisms:
to wake in the night to watch your daughter beaten
& shoved into a car
& then nothing.
How to build from that?

* * * * *

If your daughter
disappears, you must go to the mass grave
& look for her shoes. You will not find her
thin ankles, you will not find the small scar
on her left knee. You will only find
her shoe (is it hers? it might not be) — *in one object is
the dispersion of an epoch* & you will
take that shoe home (you will
hide it in your sweater so others do not
know & you can hold the secret & carry doubt's public shield)
 & you will put this shoe in a box in a corner of the attic
 where you do not go
 & not for a minute will you doubt

the shoe is gathering power, getting larger
 & pushing against the walls of the box.
It glows slightly when the village sleeps.
It shudders when you think of it too long, or her name is named
in the café. You have no doubt, & so when the artist
comes from Bogotá you take her to the attic & hand
her the shoe. She tells you her art will take
responsibility for your grief & you surrender —
 In these pieces I see the light of a memorial ethos.
& your daughter is & is & is &.

* * * * *

I try in vain to recuperate
the irreversible. There is only
history blurred by politics / cataracts of public memory.
 Such pain has no borders & to remember such
pain has no place & time
 so it is all wheres & no wheres & even
the body cannot contain it — even the body —
 & once the body cannot contain
your panic — what then?
 pain leaves & wanders an abandoned house

