

from LIGHT ON SURFACE

In one version of the story, she is barefoot,
black dress orphan, too old already. Her knees
shake as the river, cold-boiling to foam below,
breathes *hush hush* to the night.

In another, it is a dark listener, a confidant. She stands
on the stone bridge; city lanterns, a scatter of freckles.
The night sky is so low. The river ducks & waves. *I don't*
know what I'll do, she tells it. But the river knows.

Sometimes she's a country girl – brokenhearted
(of course); others, a ghost in plaster –
slowly driving a family man mad, or stopping,
suddenly, her estranged father's heart.

Always the men – the lovers, the fathers,
the princes that spurned her, the artists
that watched her – they give her her words,
they tell her her name. Always an other,

a helpless, a need, a haunting, a fear.
They name her Silenseaux, Madeline,
Annie, throw her up on the bridge
where the water is loudest; then stand

after sundown with notebooks & daydreams,
their tragedy wishes for lives
they couldn't have lived. Always the distance,
always the lost, always the muse, always still dead.

Some days she's Ophelia & it happens off-stage –
no one to witness, only to find her, to bury & monolog,
try to place blame, to dream up a story, a picturesque madness:
she felt too much, too easy to wound, she must have been simple,

*harmless, pious; her smile, so peaceful –
must have been a relief. & there – that’s the moment,
the turning to romance: the woman, the water,
the dying alone without losing her beauty.*

They can kill her again & again.
She always comes back. Some say we die twice
for the one life we’re granted.
The physical death of the body, we know.

But the second, more symbol, more *settling accounts* –
one ghost needs closure (forgiveness or penance);
another, revenge before it’s done with this world. Who’s
pulling the strings depends on whose story:

sometimes God sends you back to relive your old grudges,
to be humbled by feeling the suffering you hastened.
Other times it’s the ghost – with its soul in a knot
& its eyes full of fire only the living can quench.

But what is it called when the world won’t let go?
When the living can keep you from falling away?
When the worshippers who don’t even know
your name, can bring back your sorrow

as if it was theirs – a new kind of grief
each time they find you? When they
have the power to force-resurrect you –
hoist you up to the bridge, silhouette in the sky?

To fill you with misery, docile confusion,
just to drop you to drown in the water again?