[strontium-90 exhibits biochemical behaviour similar to calcium,
after entering the organism, it is deposited in to the bones and marrow.
the remains become stored in blood and soft tissue.
the body's absorption is involuntary and permanent. ]

[for katherine,
the earth]

7 june 2012

tomorrow, we go to chernobyl.

i've become irritated and agitated the last few hours
as the thought of actually going is overwhelming
and it hasn't become any less worrying

i've been more conscientious than ever with supplements,
especially iodine.

kiev is a mess and we got lost many times.
our hotel is on an old cruise ship floating in the river.
the balcony overlooks a steep bank and a park with a market.

there are fireworks over the river tonight.

my thoughts escape to romance. i have the most vivid images that flash for seconds,
mute themselves to blocks of colour and lines
then, they disappear.

how can you erase only one memory? only a few?

*the weight of snow*в а г а   с н і г у

6 june 2012

i am waiting on the tarmac at borispol. the landing was rough.

we flew in to an oncoming storm cloud,
i saw a bolt of lightning from one cloud to another, suspended in the air,
right next to our wing.

we've been stuck on this plane for two hours now
waiting for the storm to pass

my arrival in kyiv was startling. highways lined with tidily planted trees,
tall fences that hide what lies behind.

my driver's ring tone is cats meowing.

we drive in to the city at the moment dusk turns. people crowd the streets, which are lined with a combination of haphazard markets and western-style stores. already i'm unable to stop myself from orientalizing this place, and am trying to keep it in check. my mind is consumed with communist horror stories.

everyone is walking. everyone seems at peace.

i am terrified.

18 august 2011

We are on our way to church
None of us religious except for my grandmother
My parents discuss house prices and macroeconomic policies
I sit in back with my grandmother
We drive past a fenced pasture, always empty

She asks
Have you seen any horses there?

8 june 2012

geiger counter reading: 11 micro roentgens per hour

this morning, i couldn't eat.

we met our translator and our driver, we packed our cameras and microphones and went on our way. we went to chernobyl in a nissan sentra.

our translator talks about the bridge, still under construction, billions over budget. actual construction cost? less than half of what was spent so far. where do you think the rest goes?

minutes out of the city we're stopped by police. the driver rolls his window down, and slips the officer a bill. we're on our way. "that's how it works in ukraine", he says

i'm struck by the countryside, how there's little difference than what i know at home.  Our driver has made a mix cd: the knife plays, then tracy chapman. mark has to tell the driver that tracy chapman is, in fact, a woman. i claim it as the highlight of the day. we talk about video games.

The question strikes me: why would anyone take this as a job?

as we approach checkpoint one, i begin to decompress slightly. i had expected a soviet military experience, and got an informal, comfortable, flexible journey.

checkpoint one: 12 micro roentgens per hour

we enter the exclusion zone.

28 september 2011

I overhear my mother and aunt
I found three bars of ivory soap in her clothing she says
And more in her bag

It’s for the cancer she explains
She places the bars close to her body
Where the cancer is

A cure

She becomes more religious
Understandable
I'm reminded of Daniel and his lion
My lion
carrying on as you would
And knowing you're going to die

8 june 2012

geiger counter reading: 17 micro roentgens per hour

we have seen the first glimpse of the chimney of reactor 4.

our translator and escort explains there is no such thing as normal when it comes to background radiation.

it is akin to normal climate
normal rainfall
normal temperature.

we pass a dry storage facility, cement factory, and the new containment structure, barely under construction. no photos allowed.

we reach a cooling tower. geiger counter reading: 81, 83, 77
when we reach the abandoned city, 71

in front of the pripyat sign, we took some photos
and drove through the beautiful forest city
the shocking part became clear how organized austerity had given way to cottage country.

we see evidence of sneaking in, drinking in the zone
i think i see a condom wrapper but it isn't
and there my mind goes again
thinking of romance

7 december 2011

days before her birthday her body is donated, as her wishes dictate
to science
we are told that we will receive notice when her ashes are ready to be collected,
a rough estimation is one year.

during her wake, my head buried in chernobyl, i toast to her
her entire life she was against the evils of alcohol
and now we are raising a glass in her honour
her mountains of photos
her plastic figurines
her carefully preserved and decade old cookies
as though this mere act of gathering transfers her physical presence
in to memory

8 june 2012

after the brief and horrifying alarm of the geiger counter while we passed the red forest
we have arrived at the reactor, but before we go we have lunch.

the cafeteria is beside the sarcophagus
separated by an access road
no filming is allowed

i somehow can't find my appetite
we grab extra bread for feeding catfish as large as me

before we exit and enter every checkpoint and every building
we have a radiation screening.

each time, i pray that nothing is contaminated,
that nothing happens
that we can go on our way

in front of the reactor building, geiger counter reading fluctuates. 200, 300, 400
i refuse to get out. i want a photo, some footage, and we can leave.

we get stopped by an officer.

an eternity passes.

8 march 2013

half year / half life since chernobyl
and an eruption

i became very conscious of the object growing from my skin
at the time my sister became very conscious of those underneath hers

every day my devotion has become as a leper
rise, wash, cover, hope for healing
eventually i would feel him cut through my skin
taking away piece by piece as i felt every move
it revealed a small, disappointing wound for my trouble
now held together by string

my grandmother was a devout christian her entire life
never marking her body
when she was irradiated
her skin was tattooed
as a map to guide the isotopes to heal
did she make peace with leviticus?

i keep thinking of the babushka we saw in chernobyl
and how she said there was no one else, she was the only one
she blessed us
wished us well
and walked off, stopping only to cross herself at a roadside icon

as we drive off,

wild horses

11 june 2012

after a few days i evaluate my memory
i recall seeing only one bird in our entire time in the zone
i recall the fairgrounds, the town square
the feeling
the wind
i recall everything as vivid as i was there

i recall measured points where helicopters landed, spray painted spots
on asphalt
invisible threats
i wonder how i would feel if i could see
every atom that threatens
like a pack of lions in a den
which i threw myself in to

tonight we dined on red olives and white beer
which was named after a white lion

tomorrow we will eat boxed sandwiches
mail our postcards
and land in oslo
and everything will be a memory

14 february 2013

somehow, last night as i was falling asleep i had the most lurid vision of kiev. it was warm, a soft breeze flowing through the streets. we were walking from the biennale to soviet monuments and back to the city. then, the markets. then, the river.

it was an animal memory, sentient or not
as though my body remembers water and is drawn
forgetting consequence

my body was again filled with electricity; i sat up, breathing heavily. it took me another hour to get to sleep.

it's valentine's day. this morning, buried at the back of the newspaper i read that the roof collapsed over the reactor, under the weight of snow.

i haven't seen the sun for three days.

*[credit roll over black, audio is my grandmother's voice recorded through the baby monitor my parents used for me, while she talks to a volunteer from a senior's centre about her life]*