Silence by silence you have built a wall.
I was born on the other side and I have been trying to find a way to reach you ever since.

I tell you about the people I have written to.
The craftspeople.
The cousins.
The things I want to learn.
The country I want to know.

And you tell me
you have recently become friends with the cat.

There it is again.
The sudden turn.
The small escape route opening beneath our conversation.

Please tell me about the cat.
I want all the ordinary things
that make up your life.
But sometimes I wish you would stay with me when I ask about the extraordinary things that made it.
I don't want our conversations to end whenever the past begins.

There are forty years and a sea between us.
And I have only been given the edges of this story

“Ask Ken,” you say.
„But Ken is angry with Lebanon.“
Are you angry too?

Papa, are you angry at me for doing this?

Are you angry
At the country that offered you no future?
At the war that took your best friend?
At your mother, who dressed you in Austrian Tracht so she could feel at home while you stood out even more?

At being a stranger here
and a stranger there?

Or is there nothing to be angry about?
Because there was just the beach.
The beach, backgammon and the sun.
And the boy by the sea.

Perhaps that is all you can give me:
A happy boy by the sea. The sound of backgammon pieces and the warmth of the sand. A place where the sun is always shining because nothing else is allowed to enter.

I don't want to take these memories away from you. I don't want to make them less beautiful by asking what else has happened.

But I do not need you
to make your past harmless
so that I can bear to hear it.

I can bear the terrible.
I can bear the hurt.
I can bear that you loved a place
you could not stay in.

Lebanon is a country of windows of opportunity, you say.
And this one has just closed.
It's a shame we missed it.
A journey postponed,
and the story remains unfinished.

When I say I am Lebanese,
people look surprised.

Sometimes I am surprised myself.

As if I am claiming something
that was never quite mine to begin with.

What does it mean to belong to a place
that only lives in my mail address,
and in the food you make?

How much of a culture
must I know before I am allowed
to call it part of me?

I thought I had to know everything.
Every story. Every missing piece.

Your past is not mine to demand.
And I do not want to turn your pain
into material for my belonging.

But neither do I want your silence to decide
the limits of my inheritance.

I am trying to learn what you never taught me.

Perhaps I am looking for a language
that does not require you to speak.

You have built a wall.
Don't fear that I will tear it down.
I am not asking you to open every locked room.
Not every question must end in an answer.

But can we stand before it
and admit that it is there?

I can respect what you cannot share
without pretending that nothing is missing.

I can hold the beautiful without needing it to cancel the terrible.

Perhaps this is what I am asking:
Not for the whole story.
Not for the truth of every room.

Only that sometimes you stand beside me
in front of what we cannot enter.

That we look at the wall together.

The space between your memories
and my questions does not have to be filled
to be shared.