No Such Thing as Under Tow

Walter Pavlich
No Such Thing as Undertow

(for my sister Melinda)

One hour after lunch it's safe
to think of the sea, but twenty years
after I found you huddled
beneath the surf,
the hard ocean in your throat,
nothing's felt safe.

My arms did not wait
to be asked, reaching through
the ceiling of water,
my hands not pranking
that time, pulling you by the hair
up and back into summer,
our sunburns resuming.

What was it that wanted you?
Some mornings it has wanted me:
first move out of bed
I'm already walking the plank,
the plank daylong and drooping
further with every step.

Then I call.
You say there's no such thing
as undertow. Your voice waving
to me from land, instructing:
swim parallel to shore,
you're just snarled in a current
and tired. Relax, keep going,
take the next open wave in.

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