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Newlyweds, Ukraine 1986

Poem found in the prologue of *Voices from Chernobyl* by Svetlana Alexievich

I don't know what I should talk about—about death or about summertime. Who's going to explain how the mouth wants

a kiss, and a flame the whole sky? At first there were little lesions in the morning. They came off in layers—white film,

a transparent curtain. Then burns like black handkerchiefs came to the surface. The trolleys stopped running, the trains.

They were washing the streets with white powder. No one told us a coffin could be built from a loaf of bread.

Barefoot in his formal wear my love squeezed into bed. There was an orange on his table. A swollen one, pink.

He smiled: "I got a gift. Take it." The nurse was gesturing through the plastic film that I can't eat it. It had been near

him a while. Not only could you not eat it, you shouldn't

even look at it. "Come on," he said, "you love oranges."

Almost, pain is a row of books

Almost, pain
is a row of books,
waterlogged, bulk buckling up against

itself in a long story. The days line up
indescribable; pages swell

and warp inward, wet paperweight
racked in the struggle to stand, to wring

sense from the garbling blotch.
Ascending the shelf, rot comes eating

the white out of noon, out of morning, rot
like an angel swallowing

mouthfuls of white you once tried to hold
above flood. Can you bear all

the water you hold in your heart?
Can you make out the words there,
dear reader?

Sarah J. Sloat

Sarah J. Sloat grew up in New Jersey and now lives in Germany, where she works in news. Sarah's poems have appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Tinderbox*, and *Mead Magazine*. Her chapbook *Inksuite* is available from Dancing Girl Press, which will also publish Sarah's chapbook *Heiress to a Small Ruin* in late 2015.