

So Far

Collected Writings
2010-2018

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As far as I know, this is not nearly the end of my journey. However, before going forward with new material, I wanted to compile all that has come so far. This book, organized by album, contains the text of every poem I have ever officially released over the course of the last 7.5 years as a spoken word poet, as well as two letters. I love doing this. I love being a poet, writing and touring and performing. I love meeting and sharing life with new friends and staying connected with old ones. I love being alive. I have never, ever deserved one bit of it, yet, somehow, God has seen fit to not only love me and assure my salvation by His Son but also gift me into all of this as well. What a privilege. What grace. What love. I hope that all I do, and indeed all I am, is a *thank you* and an *I love you* to Him as best as I can.

I hope my work and life can be those for you as well.

Thank you.

I love you.

-chris

Soli Deo Gloria

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Move
(2012)

Ars Poetica

I am street performers
and stop sign scrawlings, graffiti
and the Memphis Gospel Singers.
I am the fine print on wasabi
bottles and the peeling stickers

on the back of the club's bathroom door.
I am the indomitable blast of the bass
and the pressed suits on corporate boards.
I am why you can't forget this place.
I turn street corners, subway platforms,

urinal dividers, and cold books on cold shelves
to altars. My brother is the lunatic
in the alley next to Merrell Lynch
with the full cereal box symphonic
orchestra that plays its heart out for the walls.

My sister is the grass-skirted hula harpy
on the dash of your daddy's '79 Chevy,
and I am a gateway drug—like PCP
but really penicillin. I am why you keep crying.
I am as accurate a report of the problem

and the solution as I can be.
I am in real time and living color
and have not been formatted for your TV.
I have not been edited for content.
I am not a test but rather a warning—

a desperate man desperately transmitting
a desperate message—and also a joyous acclamation.
I am a hopeful American David and his amalgamized
psalms of soul. I am a psalm.
If you happen by, listen to me sing.

Faith

—At a basement show

The walls shake and sweat, the crowd
seething, a collection of stained
teeth and gaping mouths—scars
black as the handles of kitchen
knives. The concrete crushes sound
into a ricocheting car crash, chords
skidding like bodies across immutable
pavement. The snare speeds glass
through the melody's eyes and lips,
and the amps waiver under the weight
of the distortion, a man on the side of a bridge,
tired of the track marks and the cutting.

The band hasn't heard vocals in an hour,
the crowd having accidentally kicked the plug
from the wall, leaving the already dented-in monitors
to moan mutely on the cement. Bodies
tumbling corpse-like, a collapsing pit smothers
one of the monitors, and the mic stands and amps,
crammed together and connected by twisting wires,
become the rotting vertebrae of the dead pets
buried illegally in backyards across this neighborhood.
People scream themselves hoarse, unable to raise their voices
above their own ears' ringing. Tight as a noose,
the duct tape around the mic still can't keep the cable
connected, so the singer has to force it back in
over and over. By the final song, the band has

surrendered to trust, placing fingers and sticks
where they should be, in spite of the riot raging
against the impenetrable walls. Through tiny
windows cramped against the ceiling, the sepia
beams of the basement's fading fixtures seep out,
and the people looking in from above hear everything
right, as if from a recording. Consumed

in the deafening gyre of the four walls,
the crowd somehow finds the chorus,
every note where it belongs, even though
they can't hear a thing.

O EXUBERANT DEATH

O EXUBERANT DEATH,
 You trickster, You!
 what a magnificent sting You pull,
 and one-manned, too?
 how impressive You are!—
 and what longevity You have!
 the same tale repeated,
 repeated, repeated, repeated,
 with only a fine alteration here,
 a casual substitution there,
 a minor magnification for effect—
 and sometimes not even that!

O EXUBERANT DEATH,
 i know Your secret,
 the truth upon which You've woven
 Your pathetic web of farce—
 You sham, Death, You mockery!
 You are no eternity!
 no fate to fear!
 no cause for trepidation!
 You're nothing more than a gateway, Death,
 a station where I will someday catch the train
 with a bloody ticket and a thankful yet
 entirely undeserving heart.

O EXUBERANT DEATH,
 Your hood's been pulled back for me to see
 Your greedy little eyes
 and Your filthy mustache that curls
 at the ends like a child writhing as he's found out.
 i can even smell Your foul breath, Death,
 with the festering flesh of deceit
 that's been hanging there for millennia.
 now that i know You, Death, can see You and Your fraud,
 i've nothing more to say,
 save:

get away! get away! get away!
go far from me with Your swindling ways!
i want no part of Your trickery, Death,
nor Your falsehoods either!
Your claims, Death, hold scant more weight than those
of a bed-time story, yet You insist, Death,
upon masquerading as infinite, omnipresent,
and all those words of power, Death, that You are not.
no more shall i bow to Your charade—
no matter Your persistence, energy, or will—
no more will i fear You, Death, a depthless abyss
that merely echoes the ersatz roars
of a laughable, toothless beast.

o exuberant death,
THROUGH CHRIST'S BLOOD,
no more shall I bow to you.

Debating at a Cocktail Party (a Poem NOT About Politics)

I wait for the discussion to come to a head,
 knowing you'll stumble in without a plan,
 arrogant enough to make some casual remark—
 Here it is! I can feel it coming! Wait for it! Wait . . .
I mean, do we really need it? How will we pay for it? I
just don't know. Oh, don't worry, I do. I will destroy you:

Who do you think you are? Don't you
 know that there are people who can't get ahead
 because of centuries-old societal wrongs? I
 smack you with Argument A just as I'd planned—
 I'd spent two hours on Wikipedia reading and waiting
 for just such a moronic remark,

and, trust me, I'll leave a mark
 because I cannot allow such foolishness! You're
 so smugly content with your unresearched opinion—just wait!
 My reasoning will kick your teeth back into your head,
 send you right over your coverage limit—hope you've got a backup
 plan!

(In a while, I'll realize that the plank in my eye has swelled to a
 lumberyard, that I've

ignored every Biblical precept for love and humility, and that I've
 placed pride over truth.) I'm dropping Jesus and Plato on you,
 marking
 down publicly the discrepancies between your unplanned
 comments and the cross hanging from your
 neck that I will soon separate
 with a guillotine of cunning. Hey, wait!

Everyone, don't go! I'm not done yet! Just wait,
 please, I've got more to say! Watch this! I'll
 Swedish-mace-claymore-55-pound-battle-ax you in the head,
 obliterate that skull with reasoned remarks
 flawlessly forged to show my righteous rightness! Your
 feeble counterpoints vaporize as my plan

reaches its glorious climax—a planned
surgical nuclear strike of purest logic right in your face—Wait!
No, no, you can't walk away, too! (I should've known you
would—I would, too, with how senseless this has become.) Well,
whatever, I'm
just going to do it anyway! I've got you marked—
BOO-YAH!! How's that mushroom cloud feel inside your head,

Sucka? My meticulously planned argument just messed your
opinion up! Now I'm
just going to sit, wait, and marinate in this empty room, in how well
my remarks
destroyed you and how well my imaginary crown fits my victorious
head.

 Volume

We are all born deaf, a man
 told me, growing our hearing involuntarily
 the longer we breathe. Some
 manage to avoid the loudness, somehow
 hiding it from consciousness, but it spreads
 like a violent mold through floorboards.
 It can suffocate a house. He said it presses
 down like the ocean on a trench, so everyone's ears
 bleed eventually. He felt his first trickle
 when he tried to count his sins and collapsed
 after an honest account of the last three days
 took him eight hours—and he still knows
 he missed some. Was it counting my own sins
 or a class about the Civil Rights Movement or 2 A.M. porn
 or Vietnam or Watergate or Jeffrey Dahmer or
 Rwanda or when I changed the channel from the Feed the World
 infomercial, that made me hear it first—the loudness—
 the humanity of our own existence, our own sheer
 weight, the impossible heaviness of the equation?
 All my sins piling unimaginably long and
 multiplied by 6.8 billion people and all
 the people before, after—there's no hope in self-
 repair, no great process of spiritual evolution,
 no chrome future full of billboard-brighter
 tomorrows, not because there was a Holocaust, but because,
 before the echo of *Never again!* had died, before
 the ashes had even settled, the Soviet Union was
 already placing prisoners in NKVD special camps housed
 at Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, because I've sinned
 arrogantly, violently, repented, been washed clean
 undeservedly by the blood of Jesus Christ, then gone right
 back to the same sins, blocking out the distance they put me
 from God, the fate I've been saved from, the suffering
 I cause, as if they're pop songs on the radio
 and my manmade GPS can navigate the cosmos
 better than the One who made it. In a bookstore,
 thumbing through poetry like a pharmacist, praying

I'll never reach the age where the strength to twist the child-
lock fails me, I met the man again, returning volumes
of Whitman and Thoreau, Dickinson and Hemingway,
and the cartons of neon ear plugs
he'd bought in search of peace. He said silence
comes in listening, in surrender to the quiet, but persistent melody
playing impossibly through the loudness, the heaviness
that brought him to his knees, where he could hear
the gift of grace.

Move

The Coso chose thousands of years ago to install a permanent exhibit—over 50,000 pieces of rock art now nestle next to craters

in a desert where the Navy designs and tests grenade launchers and cruise missiles. Sun-scorched in this viewer-less gallery,

their thin lines remind me of a local piano rock band that broke up after five starved years of basement shows and van-sleeping.

Some performing artists I know—a troupe named something about a hippo, an elephant, and a train wreck—still tour, living in a tent

and beating on their rusted saws and the busted washing machine they got for free if they hauled it. A particular chapbook—

the product of a bowler-hatted Hungarian man with a mermaid tattoo who read at the public library on a rainy Tuesday last October—

hurts through my mind, thin and maroon, like a painted arrow towards its target, a clay brown deer—here, a metaphor for Truth.

The man went by two initials like Eliot, who's gone down as the man who strung the world together on paper and plagiarism,

the best architect-plumber-heavy-equipment-operator-salvage-crew-Mr.-Fix-it we had at the time, but still we only got fragments

on ruins—a laconic visual of the stereotypical view of modern art that still elicits spews and snorts of *Stupid, bunk, just say what you*

mean already from much of the same species all of it's designed to reach in the first place. Yet, when it hits, when the startling

clarity of a white goat scratched on the shady side of a rock formation in the Mojave sticks a 21st-century suburban kid

in tight jeans and SPF 48, makes him consider time and space
and the endeavors of man, how God has gifted such an undeserving

species, then it all comes back to Havel and the fact that sitting
around speculating if an action will have an effect is the only way

that it surely won't, comes back to clenched fists and prayer
and working the pavement, back to Molotovs and Bic pencils

on subway cars to the minimum wage that's funding the next
revolution, back to not selling nothing till after you're dead,

back to barbaric yawps both virtuoso and in drop D, back to trusting
God and swinging away through hell and high water and whatever

comes next, back to soul, back to the tagger Freedom redoing
Goya's *The Third of May*, sans commission, sans press release,

sans artist Q&A and afternoon luncheon social, back to the ruler-
perfect shafts of light in that abandoned Amtrak tunnel

illuminating the deafening decibels of his paint, back
to the persistence of cement songs, which is the persistence of stone

songs, ink songs, lyric songs, the persistence of rising, of spreading,
of small sparks that don't know their own size or what the world

has to say about their particular potentials, of sparks ignorant
of statistics and theories, of sparks without hands to wring or scales

to weigh the pros and cons of failing, of sparks that simply burn and
burn and burn with all they have because they've been created

for that alone.

Eschatology and Autopsies

My spine will curve like a strange ladder,
 a warped teacher's pointer too long
 to wield yet more instructive

than all the biology textbooks in the world. Standing above
 my body, cold as a gavel upon the morgue table, draw
 the skin of my chest wall and abdomen

back. Take out my kidneys. Measure them. You'll see
 I am no different than the clown, nun, or murderer
 who just laid here. Take out my liver, pancreas,

and spleen, place them in the silent jars next to the mailman
 and the mayor's on the shelf where they all go. Cut out
 my heart. Like a raw slice of steak

with too much fat, it will plop in its metal pan, looking
 just like bin Laden's or King's, Malcolm's
 or Olajuwon's, Limbaugh's or Obama's.

I am no better than Jeffrey Dahmer, no less than Ghandi. Remove
 my spine next, rack it up with all its cousins, name them:
 Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Palin, Kahn,

Sherman, Gingrich, McVeigh, Poe, Dickinson, Falwell, Khomeini,
 Squanto, Gautama, Faulkner, Sitting Bull, Leopold, Tutu,
 Thatcher, Travolta, Bonaparte, Marx, Engles, Keynes,

the garbage man who comes on Thursdays and smiles like a circus
 tent—not cousins at all, but twins, identical, a whole
 species summed up in monosyllables: Adam, tree,

fall. Sin explainable in physics—a quark, a string away
 from perfection, an eternity. I'll be in line behind Hitler
 and Mother Teresa, a few down from my own

mother and Al Capone, able to see over them only
because I am taller. There are no platforms on Judgment
Day. Every bridge of deeds comes up short, their
ends splayed like burst arteries over the abyss, a fire that doesn't
cauterize anything. Your medals stay with your bones.
Philosophies, reasoning, the understandings synapses
and lobes can create all disintegrate, dissolving into the proverbial
sand upon which they're built. There'll be no doctoring
the footage, no fudging the logbooks,
tweaking the presentation, coaching the witnesses—no argument,
no excuse, no objection to trump the evidence, piled so high
it exhausts the alphabet and all the number systems.
Ironically, salvation will come, but only from the path my lawyer
friends assure me leads to prison—pre-trial confession,
remorse, the court- appointed public defender.

Light

Jesus!!! Make me an infinite supernova!
I want to be a light so bright
that they can see for hundreds of thousands
of millions of billions of trillions of miles so far
they have to use those BIG scientific words
that I don't know so well.

Jesus, make me Your light, so they can see
what You've done and still do for me.

Jesus, make me Your light, so they can see
how You've saved me, how You've changed me,
how You've saved me from hell in this life
and eternity as well.

Jesus, make me Your light so they can see,
when I was deep down in pits of sin so deep and dark
I couldn't tell myself from the sin,
that You didn't just stand up there on high, all like:

*Well hey man, I, uh, I love you a lot. You know,
I hope you make it out ok.*

No, no, no!! None of that! Jesus make me Your light,
so they can see how You came right down in there,
wrapped Your arms around me, pulled me right on outta
there, made me whole and complete in You.

Jesus, I will be whatever
size light You need me to be:
I'll be the supernova
or a lighthouse or a big ol' searchlight,

or, if you need something smaller, Jesus,
I'll just be a little tap light or a penlight
or one of those cool little racecar keychain flashlights
my parents got me for Christmas—

Just please, Jesus, make me Your light,
Just please, Jesus, make me Your light,
Just please, Jesus, make me Your light,

and let me shine,
let me shine,
let me shine.

Plan B

If the world seems cold to you, kindle fires to warm it.
-Lucy Larcom

Lucy, that's nice and all,
 but it's time to be a little more aggressive.
 Kindling, it's had its go—now it's time for
 an inferno:

I'll spread love like a pestilence,
 poison the wells with it,
 make it an epidemic,
 a pandemic, or even worse.

I'll conquer the airwaves with it,
 bring it into your workplace and your home,
 play it through your stereo, your TV, your MP3,
 play the Piper as I corrupt your children with it.

You thought MTV was bad?
 I'll sneak it into your water supply,
 release it into the ozone,
 let its toxins flood the atmosphere.

I'll coat every needle and rubber glove with it,
 put it in every pill and in place of the lead on your window sill,
 slip it into the blood banks, wire it into the phone.
 I'll even radiate your food with it—

bad as Three Mile and Chernobyl
 on HGH and anabolics and with no place
 to take out that pent-up rage
 except on you and your family.

I'll make it the common cold:
 airborne, seaborne, landborne, *thoughtborne*.
 Incubation time will be zero;
 quarantines will make it worse.

I'll message it,
subliminally and otherwise,
put it in the mail, pump it into the subways,
stick it in change returns and ATMs.

I'll hide it in your closet and under your bed,
drop it from a plane
or send it for a ride on a missile—
Little Boy, Fat Man, eat your hearts out.

Put down the phone—
don't bother calling anyone.
Not the army, the navy,
your lawyer, or your mother—

this cannot be stopped.
All opposition will fail.
Hollywood? They won't have a summer blockbuster
starring the resistance because no one will escape untouched.

There will only be survivors.

Windows

My pastor believed the most beautiful stained glass
wasn't glass but rather a free Happy Meal and a Number 3

no mayo in the hands of an out-of-work mother
and her autistic son. He preferred liturgies include conversations

about the weather and the Phillies with strangers on the subway
and in bars—the Body brought to the proverbial tax collectors

and lepers. For my sister, the most beautiful stained glass
was water, frozen in its own prostration, cascading

down the cliffsides of Rt. 15, runoff falling
into righteousness. Her favorite minister was the praying

mantis, his wordless sermons uniting peace and brimstone, silence
preaching stillness before God louder than a televangelist.

Here, panes kaleidoscope, hymnal-thick, light passing through
umber and ruby, violet and blue, soft gold, bathing

the small chapel of a Pennsylvania monastery in the joyful shades
of blood. The building bows in prayer, the patient breathing

of the vents fading like echoes of stones in ponds. If
the universe is a cathedral, everything is glass.

Reading My Bible

For months, I've stood by the sea
each morning, not knowing

its depth or breadth exactly. Oceanographers,
cartographers, estimate numbers,

gesticulating like croakers flopping
feverishly on sun-dried docks,

but numbers are like black birds
and only speak in relativities,

their context—a grave
or an apple tree—determining

so much. No, I understand the sea
in terms of surrender, the act

of sinking, the breath and pulse,
push and pull of wave and sand,

becoming my own—in terms
of the archetypical plastic

straw, floating in the Gulf
Stream: Perpendicular,

washing away in sad circles,
fighting the smooth current;

aligned, in sync, the stream
flows right through, the straw

full, floating in place, almost
invisible, pouring out endlessly,

murmuring new-found prayers
for tsunamis, to wash away oceanographers

and cartographers, graves and apple trees,
to drown the world.

Yellow

(2013)

Yellow

I am moved by the conversations
we have in our silence—
I don't know what we say

across the room, what the mute
atmospheric pull of my skin
towards you means, the hairs

on my arms standing up like metal
filings to a magnet whenever
you speak, but I know that I like it

and I can't wait for it to happen again
tomorrow. When your eyes accidentally
meet mine and then we glance away

immediately, you to the fluorescent
lighting, me to the speckled indoor-
outdoor carpeting that looks like something

I'd like to touch, I don't know for certain
if we are speaking the same language or if
your eyes are shouting or whispering

or what the context is—if you're fighting
with your best friend or you just got an A
in some class you're taking for fun or if you're

desperately in love with me or if
maybe your eyes have just been shunning
me all along, passersby to the men

who hand out comedy club flyers in Times Square,
and I just haven't noticed yet. The only thing
I do know is that your eyes are green as Vermont

pinetrees in September and I've been hiking
their forests for weeks now.
If they were a national park,

I'd donate on the way out—
not out of shame or a forced sense
of civic pride or even because the park

ranger is hot but simply because
I want to. It's been a good hike.
Pondering our indecipherable

dialogues, I like to imagine complementing
your style, pretending I'm James Bond
or Ryan Gosling or even just my friends

who are cooler than me, telling you
that yellow top, the one with the stripes,
is my favorite. It looks good on you.

It reminds me of canaries, which I know
are your favorite bird and for which
I consequently now possess a tremendous interest.

You said once, pressed to talk by one
of those awkward introduction games
in that community center class

we found ourselves together in,
that, if you had to be any animal,
you'd be a canary because their feathers

were the first place you saw God's
brushstrokes as a child and they've made you
want to paint ever since. Trying to contain

myself, watching you watch the floor
as the game continued, I thought,
if you were a canary, I would never

keep you in a cage or take you down
into a mine just to pray you wouldn't die—
no, I'd take you to a Vermont forest

and set you free, build myself a cabin,
then do nothing but go to church on Sunday
and sit on the porch drinking lemonade,

writing poems about taxi cabs and marigolds
and No. 2 pencils and candied ginger, waiting
for you to come back and sing to me,

and thinking how, if you did, I wouldn't
even have to force myself to like bird songs
anymore because I would love it.

I would sing, too.

Hemispheres

Let's be honest: I want to go
to the movies with you, buy
you popcorn, open the door
for you, do the clichéd arm trick,
and know that you let me do it.
I want to take you out for ice cream
after, spout my opinions animatedly
over paper cups of Neapolitan,
hoping to impress you,
then realize how stupid I sound
and apologize. I want to
put my jean jacket around you
and drive all night
while you sleep, have you
wake up on the edge
of the Grand Canyon
or stuck in traffic outside
Manhattan, the city lights
singing some kind of song
too beautiful for me to understand
beyond how they silhouette
you with the warmth of St. Patrick's
gold engravings. I want to buy plane
tickets while you change down the hall
in the classy hotel named
after a person we've never
heard of, whisk you away after
morning coffee and toast
to Paris or Beijing, spend weeks
backpacking past vineyards
or alongside the Great Wall.
I want to explore reefs in the Caymans
with you, make snow angels
on Kilimanjaro, dance with you
in Seattle like it's raining just for us
and the car horns and gawking pedestrians
are only signs that the floor

really has been yielded. I want to fly
you to Alaska just for the salmon
and Istanbul for the baklava, Moscow
for caviar and Jerusalem for matzah
(and maybe the churches too)—
but let's be honest again:
even if I had the money
for all of that, as we waited out
layovers in strange airports
and crawled exhausted
into expensive linens
beside exotic lacquer tables
or into worn-out sleeping bags
somewhere in the foothills
of the Alps, I know all I'd ever
really want is you, sitting at home
between my legs on the sun-
bleached carpet in my living room,
leaning your body against mine,
your head upon my right shoulder, your lips
pressed to my neck like blue smoke
mist skirting a ridge
in the Southern Appalachians,
my arms wrapping
about yours like the roots
of mangroves growing
together in the Florida Keys.
Eventually, as the night
wore on in the same slow rhythms
of long car rides home
down dark Virginia highways,
our faces bathed in the soft turquoise
glow of the dash, I'd want
to switch places, get up ostensibly
to change the channel from one overdone
late-night action flick to another—
not really caring at all
whether it was *Independence Day*
or *Men in Black 2* or *Die Hard 4*—
because I'd really just want

to be between your legs
then: falling asleep
with my head upon
your stomach, my cheek
soaking into the age-frayed
fibers of your high school
track sweatshirt, thinking
to myself about gender roles—
how real men really just
want to be held sometimes—
and knowing that my fingernails
flowing down the meridians
of your back's cotton seas
are really the only transportation
I'll ever need, your forehead
and toes my poles, your hip bones
the ends of my Earth.

The Feminists Aren't Going to Like This

because this is a song for your body, a song for all that God spent
too much time crafting for me to ignore:

the freckles on your left shoulder are an E.E. Cummings poem
my fingerpads can recite from memory, zig-zagging

down the stanzas, back and forth across the page, reading
even the parentheses out loud every chance they get.

Your spine is an ancient epic on a soft clay tablet I excavate
as slowly as possible

because I like the way my fingers fit snugly in the line breaks—
it's made me bilingual.

Kissing you, your lips full as the suburban creeks that coyly
enshroud themselves below oak-lined embankments,

feels like I'm winning the lottery without even buying a ticket.
Your eyes, their opal shores, subtle smaragdine tracks,

are Hawaii and Tahiti and the Canaries and belong in the Met.
I never thought I'd admit it, but I even love your armpits,

those slender oxbow lakes when we lay on the couch together,
watching *60 Minutes* because that's just what's on right then—

your right hand's fingers working my hair like a rudder and my head
steering carefully into the current of the bend,

my mind floating on the sweet Sunday night music of Bob Simon's
gravelly lilt and the slight ripples of preshrunken Hanes cotton.

I love to hold your calves, their curvature cupped quietly
in my palms, your feet tucked behind my back for warmth.

I love to hold every inch and ounce of you, listen to their music
and poetry, my skin a seismograph and sonar and the most

accurate stenographer I've ever seen, recording the volumes of you
for me to read and sing to myself when I am without you.

Yes, I love to hold you like an object—not the kind one owns
but rather the sacred kind,

the kind someone removes delicately from a locked wooden box
which bears its life in the scars upon its darkly-stained surface,

the kind that gets unwrapped, the tissue paper peeling back,
unfolding like a magnolia blossom, the kind that makes the air

go still when it's handed to you because you know you only have
so long to hold it.

Sunflower, Magnolia

—*to my future wife*

Your body's braille
an empire of subtlety,

sun-shimmers
on the Chesapeake. Forked

lightning. The place
where branches meet.

Two notes
resolving in slate

skies. One
freckle in your iris.

Fresh fulgarite.
The voices of night

& daylight
on watercolored horizons.

Your words.
Auroelin. Amber.

Apricot and auburn—
just enough. A wrist,

sea-salt stained.
Sand dollars.

Embers meshing,
onyx monuments.

The gravities
of skin, languages

of silence
and eyelids. Herons,

sandpipers,
in time with the surf,

our breath.
Fingertips of rain.

Tremolo upon
tin awnings and the quiet

windows, twilight
collecting gold strings.

Your mahogany
mandolin, a cistern

we carry home
like a child.

The Sidewalk Hymns

(2015)

Arson

SO HOLD YOUR BREATH AND OPEN YOUR EARS UP WIDE
BECAUSE THESE WORDS ARE GASOLINE
AND I BROUGHT THE MATCHES!

Beneath the glow of Marlboro Lights smoked by men
who look past one another, arguing about when the town
was really founded, counting the ageless bricks to themselves
like sins or stars or Hail Mary's,
you'll find me: a rusted-out burn barrel,
corroding into the cracked pavement of an alley, planted
like a tombstone beside a strip club
and a foreclosed shoe store, catty-corner
to an exit door someone welded shut and a fire escape
that couldn't hold anyone.
Look inside me—you'll see used
condoms and dirty needles,
chopsticks and fitness magazines, a rag doll
and a scale model of the Eiffel Tower
going up alongside a couple of beer bottles
bought with a somebody else's tithe money
and yesterday's newspaper. The leg of a dresser
twice painted over sticks half-way out and leans on a family
photo album that didn't survive the divorce
and half the headboard
of a dead son's bed. If the thought
of what you might metaphorically be breathing in
right now is making you uncomfortable, don't worry—
I'm just being honest—I'm a whole lotta things being made new.
Some of it's going to take some time, might need
to burn all the way down to unidentifiable
ash and get tossed in the bay and sink to the bottom and wait
a few decades, get dredged up again and used to fertilize a garden,
grow some cherry tomatoes or some squash or zucchini
out of old TVs on a rooftop overlooking a mural of men
hammering AK's and gloes into ploughs, but trust me:
it's all getting redeemed, every single bit of it,
and so now I'm just trying to tip myself over,

roll down any street God lets me, spew my flaming
guts onto anyone I can—a spark or a tornado or a hurricane
of flames—trying to catch a porch or a house
or a subdivision, a block or a city or a county or a nation
or just a single person on fire, watch him burn, pray
that he bumps into all his friends and spreads that fire like a rumor
made of STDs and the flu, that he catches the neighbors' house
on fire, sits down for dinner
and catches the table cloth
and then the whole family on fire, or plunges
himself into a crowded subway station or a congregation
or a convenience store or a deserted Pacific
island or the NASA building, the FDA or the CDC
or Hollywood or Anarbor or onto every desk
of my alma mater or into the wheat fields
outside of town, burns down blocks
and acres and then miles and time zones
and continents. So, go ahead—pick up
a piece of me if you're curious,
let the coal be pushed onto your lips
and maybe you can taste what was given,
the spark that was first put inside of me—let it touch
your teeth. Let it's song
sing through your jaw bone, climb up
into your ear, run your synapses
like a ridgeline in a Colorado wildfire—maybe
you'll even be able to commiserate with the rocks,
understand a tiny portion of what they have kept up inside,
the hosanna they've been singing since the Creator
first left His fingerprints on their edges. This is arson—
not for revenge or the insurance money
but simply because we need it
and I want it now, coat myself in Napalm and juggle
fireworks while skipping through a charcoal factory,
fill my sneakers with black powder and run
through all the oil refineries lighting matches
like it's my job—because it is. I want to
hear the volcanoes harmonize with this fire
and watch the Father's breath flow through the blowpipe
into us, elongating and spinning and curving us until

we are one enormous obsidian cathedral,
vortexing in a celestial crescendo, molten light
taking shape over and over, burning clay
in the Potter's hands becoming the final pot, the final body,
the Bride more and more. I want to see the fire
and sing its hymns, bellow its poetry to praise the Father
and fan the flames. If this room's a stabilized, all-oxygen
environment, then I want to smoke all of my cigarettes at once.
If this world's tinder, California
with no rain for months, then I want to be the flower girl
at the wedding, tossing gasoline for rose petals,
and the ring bearer, too, handing the single match
to the Groom and He's got a thing for flames.
Yeah, this is arson because I've got this fire
shut up inside my bones that I am weary
of keeping in: If I have my way,
I hope you burn.

Imago Dei and the Blood

Like Wolverine and Bach bumping into each other the day after Betsy Ross's Flag Day party, both perusing the potato chip aisle

and attempting to make conversation, Wolverine fumbling over the word *sonata*, Bach asking something ridiculous

about the ratio of claw length to sharpness, my dad and I finally opt for the immediate, the pros and cons of kettle-cooked and baked.

We reminisce about football, rehashing the same stories—how I laid out the return man in the state game, how Kareem

ran with a desperation no one's seen since. We argue the merits of single-wing hybrid systems on the NFL level, and I champion

RGIII and Tim Tebow, even though neither of us has watched a single game all season. We buy Hint-of-Lime Tostitos

and Newman's Own queso because that's what we've been eating for weeks now and we figure *Why change?*—We know what we like.

I don't tell him of the existential wanderings the kiwi display's multi-colored tiles induce in me, because he wouldn't understand

and I can't really explain them and existential wanderings don't always make good, polite conversation anyway—

but, staring at those rainbow cubes, I remain convinced, if Pablo Picasso somehow fell madly in love with Helen Keller

and painted her darkness, he would tell her, knowing she could not fully understand, and she would thank him,

knowing the same—but the pause after her *Thank you*, her fingers the tips of a willow branch frozen mid-kiss

upon the pond of his palm, would bear the titanic weight of their
love and then they would talk of the rain

and sip lemonade and while away the hours saying everything
in their common tongues—apples and Bermuda grass and Christmas,

the feeling of polished oak upon bare feet—circumnavigating
the globe of that inexpressible moment

until they'd soaked so long in its seas they both became convinced
they'd carry its salt forever. I say nothing of this because it won't

translate. Instead, I talk of Captain America and the new
Clooney movie, and my dad, the history teacher, enlightens

me on the night before Normandy, the drinking and the whispers and
the wide-eyes of men curled in the pregnant belly of history,

their heart rates increasing with every contraction. He tells me
Patton's shoe size, his favorite sandwich and favorite song,

and we overhear women fawning over Ryan Gosling and Joaquim
Phoenix while picking through leaks. Their conversation leap-frogs

to their book club and Elie Wiesel's *Night*—a favorite of my dad's—
but I keep silent the image of Wiesel locked in a hotel room

with Hitler for all eternity, my imagining of them, years into their
stay, long after the anger subsided and forgiveness bloomed

around the talk of their mothers, watching pay-per-view
and commiserating on the difficulties of capturing

rhododendrons with water colors. Such a thought disturbs
the black-and-white-TV-drama-loving corners of my mind

and would certainly upset my dad, and so I keep silent still and my
dad asks me again about that Neruda book I'm reading,

so I become Gene Kelly trying to teach the Hulk to tap dance,
explaining similes several times as we sift

through peaches and pears, but the smashed-in floorboards
and broken ballet mirrors are worth it for the minutes

whiled away with him and make me see all the times the roles
were reversed. We hunt for canned yams and fresh squash,

and I can't help but wonder what Jesus ate, what he drank,
how He and the disciples passed the hours of walking, can't help

but wonder what He talked about with all those prostitutes and tax
collectors and lepers, can't help but thinking some of it must've been

beer or baseball, discussions of Milwaukee microbrews or the Mets
or how nothing's been the same since the steroids. At some point,

the conversation must've shifted to Katie Couric or *How I Met Your
Mother* or *That's So Raven*—perhaps even to Syria or Iraq

or sidewalk chalk or the importance of the DDT to the professional
wrestling canon. I can see Him laughing about poop

and spit-up with harlots because that's what young moms inevitably
talk about if put together long enough. I ask my dad about his day,

about testing requirements I won't remember and handouts
I've never seen—we end up discussing 409 and how well it cleans

his students' desks, so we buy some, and he cracks another joke
about a dog and a petting zoo and a priest, one I've never

thought was funny but don't ever want him to stop telling,
and it becomes apparent that so much of love is transoceanic travel,

catching the trade winds of potato chips and superheroes and sailing
the seas of football and Schwarzenegger remakes and Harry Potter

fan fiction and Godfather impersonations, riding highways of Miley
Cyrus and Taylor Swift and bed linen thread counts

and Moroccan cuisine, that so much of love is endless
circumnavigation over the earth we can't begin to speak:

It's Wolverine and Bach laughing over bags of barbeque Lays
and Sour Cream and Onion Ruffles; it's Pablo and Helen

holding hands in silence on a front porch in the Mississippi sun,
Elie and Hitler watching reruns of *That 70's Show*

and contrived romantic comedies, and U2 and Marylynn Manson
stuck in an elevator together, gear-talking until the fire department

finally gets them out. It's the fact that Muhammad, Glenn Beck,
Anderson Cooper, Cee Lo Green, and Miyazaki all have the same

number of chromosomes, and a man's irises and fingernails
have the same DNA. It's easy to forget, to succumb to the tragedy

of cellphones and newspapers and thumb-twiddling and ceiling-tile-
examining, the red and blue maps and our first glances, the lies

of distance and awkwardness, to mothball our ships next to fear-
mongers and Pharisees and build sand castles on our own private

beaches, when in fact we were meant to keep sailing and even to
leave the ships altogether, to swim and to sink, to dive deep down

and eventually find the bottom, the real solid ground, the ground
that holds all of us and all of our seas and all our Toyotas

and our space shuttles and our slums, our sidewalks and our secrets,
our advertising and our carpets and our carrots and our McDonalds

and our dreams and our #2 pencils and our protoplasm and all our
museums of modern statuary, our diamonds and our quarters,

our bricks and our steering wheels, the base of the Earth,
the land beneath, that connects everything to everything,

pole to pole, continent to continent, D.C. to Damascus,
Hong Kong to Helsinki, iris to iris to fingernail to iris

to kidney to fingernail, the skin that the Earth's core wears
like a glove, like a bone bears flesh.

Redemption

This is a revolution of the broken teeth
and the '99 Civics wrapped around telephone poles
and all of last night's bad decisions—
of the homeless and the heartless, the dermatologists
and the bag-boys and the hypnotists
and the long-haired hippie freaks,
of the pierced and the tattooed and the dispossessed,
of the fat, entitled suburban kids
and their public school teachers
and the ER nurses and the ambulance drivers
and the mid-level managers and the people
who design the labels for green bean cans,
of the smokers and the non-smokers,
both sides of the aisle and the guy
who invented packing peanuts,
of the people who press vinyl
and the people who buy it
and the people who don't,
of the people who make cassettes
and the people who make CDs,
and all the people who owned Laser Disks,
of the taxi cab drivers and the botanists
and all the night-shift janitors
who've spent half a decade sweeping up
for people they've never seen,
of the people who've never thanked them,
who wire them checks
and never meet them—
the revolution of those faceless
check-wiring souls who've been seduced
by the cold naked scroll of exchange rates pole-dancing
their way down cruel screens in a thousand backrooms.
This is the revolution of the people who built those back rooms,
metaphorically and physically, the revolution of the wallpaper
and the children who sit quietly in corners and count
the flourishes while their parents neck with their numbers.
This is the revolution of the bitter and the judgmental

and the people like me who lie to themselves
about their character sometimes.
This is the revolution of politicians and pornographers
and the porn-addicts, me and Ron Jeremy
strolling through Central Park discussing mocking birds
and the '98 Olympics. This is Castro
and Kennedy tossing the pig skin
before Thanksgiving with the in-laws
at Nantucket, the revolution of every broken marriage,
divorcees returning to one another like magnets
across a third-grader's desk, the unexpected infusion
of romance into all of our lives—my friend
standing outside his house with a boombox blaring
some '80s song his wife thought he'd forgotten—not because
they ever got divorced but simply because we all need
to love each other a little more and express it,
even if it's cliché. This is Madonna,
Alan Greenspan, Bill Gates, and Lion-O
in zebra-print zoot suits handing you all their money
and carbon copies of the keys to Fort Knox,
and this is you hopping in the back of their purple and pink
'68 Cadillac and bumping Biggie, going to give
it all away again to someone else
because now it's everyone's birthday
every day and there's champagne for everyone.
This is the revolution of every team winning their bowl game
simultaneously, and everyone's bracket being perfect,
and every slot machine in the universe landing on triple 7's.
This is an army of tiny giraffes
hired by an anonymous benefactor
to give you foot-rubs
and help your kids with their math homework.
This is you saying I love you to strangers.
This is your dad giving you a key to something,
and you later realizing you're wearing shackles
and the key looks like it fits.
This is you turning the key.
This is letting people in front of you in traffic
and picking up somebody else's tab.
This is CPR without a mouth shield

and fleeing the scene
sometime between the paramedics
and the media arriving. This is the revolution
of every wound I've ever made
being miraculously stitched close
and the proverbial knives I've stabbed
into friends' backs materializing
and returning to my hands
and me getting to make them a chopped endive salad
and light some candles and wait for them
to come back and eat with me.
This is my enemies doing the same.
This is the revolution of sidewalk chalk
and bubbles, the revolution of dancing in your underpants
and paying somebody else's parking tickets.
This is the revolution that turns every scraped knee,
every missed deadline, every regret, every hurt,
every desire for understanding, every theory,
every Chomsky and Marx and Aristotle and Curious George,
every confusion and inscrutable desire
and all of our mind splatter scraped off the walls
and thrown on a lathe into a flawless set
of floral vases, filled with living water
and used to nourish countless chrysanthemums
once dying and now blooming, turns all of it into
a Picasso and a Michelangelo or a Jupiter—
because Jupiter is freaking gorgeous,
and even that storm becomes beautiful
when you look at it with the proper perspective.
This is dark matter, and my heart and bones
are the unfathomable scientific tests and calculations
that prove it's there because I can't see it,
but I can feel it like a tidal wave.
This is a tidal wave
and a single mustard seed,
a deafening trumpet and a stone
rolled away and a still small whisper
in the silence—a stream
we can pout along the edges of, muttering
about who got invites to the party

or how the invitations came or the set of directions
they offered, clutching the coals
of our perceived wrongs
with fists like cyclones,
only to find at the end of the day that,
no matter how hard we squeezed,
they never turned to diamonds,
they just stayed coal, and we lost our flame
squeezing something so lifeless so tight,
so *now* we can't even light them,
and we're just in the dark, still holding coal,
or we can drop it, step freely into the river,
and ride a blow-up polka-dotted
hippopotamus down the revolution
until it pours into the grand eternal sea
that is the Kingdom, where there is no coal
and still more than enough light.
This is cold fusion and mind-melding
and constructing the warped drive,
the revolution of every revolution,
all of history becoming one grand thrown-fight,
the heavy favorite betting everything on the other guy,
signing all the winnings over to him before the match,
and then letting him beat the crap out of him,
all while singing him a love song
with Diana Ross, Tammi Terrell, and Marvin Gaye on back-up,
the revolution of strolling into maximum security prison
and volunteering for somebody else's execution,
the revolution of the phrase *let me get your chair for you*,
of volunteering for the altar and handing the priest the knife,
the type every father imitates when he lets his children win.
This is the revolution of redemption, the complete baffling
of all human reason, of everyone who doesn't deserve it
and us realizing we're everyone—
all of humanity sitting in the bleachers
of a cosmic Madison Square Garden,
their jaws unhinged like a snake's,
fallen to the floor, watching the revolution take off
at half court and moonwalk his way
over every human conception of justice and mercy

to tomahawk in the game-winner at the buzzer
while rocking a pair of vintage '88 Jordans
and neon bell-bottoms with glitter-gold shutter shades
because redemption is extravagant.
This the after-party at the Ritz,
the neon lights, the crystal ball, the turntables,
the cartwheeling waiters, and Oprah Winfrey
doing the hokey-pokey. The prodigal son's brother
is outside crying about something, but the music's too loud
to hear him, and he's not my concern anymore
because he's got his invitation, the door's unlocked
and thrown open—security took off their ties and joined the party
hours ago, and we've all got rings on our fingers,
and we just can't stop rejoicing.

The War

We're all terrified of sidewalk chalk—
children's nuclear deterrent:
one-sided M.A.D. because the children are cockroaches,
immune, hopping over neon giraffes
and unicorns wearing space masks
like they're *not* made from powdered sticks of plutonium,
and we're all dashing for the garden
hoses like it's 1963, desperate to destroy
crudely drawn Ninja Turtles,
power wash Donatello, Raphael, Leonardo, and Michelangelo
from our driveways as if they were the cause
of radiation poisoning and heart disease everywhere,
their pizza alone popping up our cholesterol counts by proxy.

We retreat indoors, watch the neighbor kids
from our kitchen windows in our pleated khakis,
envious like mirrors, weighted to the credit-bought
wood floors as sidewalk chalk leads to tag
leads to war with stick machine guns
and imaginary grenades leads to bicycles
ridden in circles, their riders unaware of the symbolism,
the street an asphalt clock, the hands burning rubber.
We speak in necessities now, rhymes of equity
and responsibility, sprinkling our sentences
with acronyms and qualifications and tempered
expectations like the dried-up fruit that comes
with instant oatmeal.

One of the neighbor kids crashes into a mailbox
trying to do a wheelie, and some of the mural smears
onto his shirt, Michelangelo's face and most of Raphael's sai
skidded into a Jackson Pollock. The clock stops ticking—
the air charged with the silence of bomb bay doors,
but the boy hops up, laughing, his calves
two lightly punctured juice boxes—
and the clock resumes its asphalt hours,
and we try to remember the feeling

of skinned knees. We're terrified of sidewalk chalk
because it reminds us of our blindness—

we can't see the point
in untrained art or anything the rain
will wash away, can't see the recycling bin
as a walled-in jungle anymore, the Listerine bottle
a hippo, the milk carton a lion preying on herds
of toilet-paper-roll antelope. We can't remember
the last time we ran anywhere for anything
but exercise, and we don't climb trees anymore
or hop off the sidewalk just to fly
for how ever briefly we are allowed.

We walk, because it's sensible
and because nothing's worth anything
if it doesn't last. But nothing tangible lasts,
but we don't let ourselves think about that. The purple ponies
on the driveway won't get any of these kids
into an Ivy League, and the kids here just don't seem to know
the statistics—street art's like the NBA, except harder:
only one in a million ever even really makes it.
And what about health insurance?

The questions build like Babel, but we paint them
with practicality and promise ourselves we're not proud
or afraid. But every turn of that asphalt clock's hands
makes me want to defect, to find the nearest embassy
and surrender myself, to like sidewalk chalk again,
so let's go—let's sell out our country, leave our socks
and shoes on the front porch and roll down a hill,
raising up fireflies like beacons in the evening,
a runway for others to hop off their first curb
in years and fly to, where the tarmac is dirt
and all it takes is a little spit and a little bit
of faith to see again.

Parable of Water

Indecisive as usual, standing before
the drink cases in 7-11, the glass
doors all foggy when I open and close them,
looking like my philosophy professor's
glasses when he breathes to clean the lenses,
I'm thinking of Lake Baikal
in its Siberian nothingness—ethnocentric
of me, I know—just sitting there, thousands
of miles away, tucked between Irkutsk,
Ulan-Ude, and Severobaikalsk, which
I suppose are all as remote as they sound.
The biggest fresh water lake in the world—
20% of our unfrozen fresh surface water,
roughly 1,700 species, 2/3's of which only live
there, in Siberia, nowhere, nowhere enough
to make Iowa feel like Manhattan and Tokyo
rolled together and done up with Calcutta's make-up
when it stands before the mirror every lonely Friday night.
But Lake Baikal won't ever meet Iowa or
Manhattan or even Tokyo, won't ever pass out samples
of its locally famous omul at a Tokyo fish market. Examining
the obnoxious collection of water, lined up in its overpriced
rows like the lines of too-desperate bottle
blondes outside clubs in D.C., I think of Baikal's
sister, Lake Khövsgöl, hiding away in Mongolia,
even more remote—an Amish hermit moved to
Missoula—protecting its endangered, endemic
Hovsgol grayling from the world like the desperate
father who locks up his bottle blondes in baggy sweaters
and trench coats and tells them the club has AIDs,
syphilis, gonorrhea, and Democrats
or Republicans or independents or atheists—whichever
he thinks she'll be most afraid of. I am probably
the only person you'll ever hear even mention

Khövsgöl's Hovsgol graylings—which are running out of places to breed, you know? But no one talks about them, so it's like they don't really exist. Lake Vostok is buried beneath 13,000 feet of ice—that's 13 Eiffel Towers or one trip down the bar to talk with the woman bent on proving she's too good for you. Vostok's water is so pure nobody's even seen it, let alone done the backstroke or bathed in it or sipped it with a little lemon wedge. Still perplexed, deciphering the word *artesian* in its strange, imported fonts on the backs of bottles so effortful to be hip my dad's never even more than glanced at them—and my dad's like a lot of people—I think even of Lake Malawi, which you may have heard of, but I certainly never had until I accidentally found it on Wikipedia, having stumbled down the rabbit hole of blue-text-links while reading about Kathmandu and Port-au-Prince. The lake has the most species of fish in any freshwater lake on earth—over 1,000 cichlids alone—but it's literally farther away from this metro D.C. gas station, crammed with its fluorescent white lights between a foreclosed grocery store and a nail salon, like a lost engagement ring under a second-hand sofa, than Paris, Sao Paulo, the fabled shores of Tripoli, the halls of Montezuma, or Timbuktu. Yes, even farther than Timbuktu. But I've never been to any of those places or these lakes or the countries these water brands pretend to taste like, so I buy Gatorade, the red kind, because they're out of yellow, because it doesn't waste its breath trying to convince me it has been to Maine or Wisconsin or Scandinavia or that the Pacific Northwest's water is more refreshing and life-giving than Canada's or Fiji's or the tap's, because I just can't see myself with, or in, any of these other waters, all so bent on being

foreign and far above the competition, and everything else, with their minimalistic labels and text-based graphics and umlauts on words that aren't even German or Danish or Swedish or from whoever else uses umlauts. Outside, sipping red, I find the first place all night I can see myself in—the drainage ditch between the highway and the parking lot, a mucky rut dug deep in the earth like an infected cut, puss-laden with unidentifiable liquids and clogged at one end by what appears to be a tree branch and a diaper, jammed into the too-small pipe, an oversized zit on a forehead edged with grass coughing rotten shades of mucus and dying, suffocating under Hershey bar wrappers and Pepsi cans, leaked oil forming sheeny rainbow scales in a few places on the surface, making the whole thing look like some sort of mangy, malaria-ridden cat-fish hybrid monster spewed up from a poisoned well or like the spoiled meat boiling out of roadkill in the summer before the buzzards get there. Yet, somehow, these waters still reflect my face, clear enough to see in the fading light of this May night. All summer, this ditch lays parched and cracked, looking like the evaporated portions of the Aral Sea, a close-up of a stale French fry, or Job's face before the healing. This ditch doesn't have the purest water on Earth or a single cichlid or Hovsgol grayling to protect or a fancy label or any world records about some obscure statistic you didn't even know was widely measured and recorded. But, when the September rains finally come in quiet winds and slate clouds, like a shipment of vaccines pulling in to port at the last possible second, or like the feeling of Gatorade or the store-brand or even the tap on your lips, it will be ready to do what the builder dug it for, like it's done since he finished the store, carrying gallons upon gallons, night and day, back to the Potomac—it does more work around here than anybody.

Kudzu

—for Dillon and Alison

Even in the grimy tidal pools
of D.C., where urban sprawl
first churns onto the manicured
beaches of suburbia—briny
biomes of smog-stained office-plexes
and dilapidated gas stations—twilight
breathes slowly, the imperfect
silence of watching *Starry Night*
transpire overhead. I'm waiting
with the last kid to get picked up
from my youth group—he's staring into flames,
a twig of burning bush spinning incessantly
in his hard hands. He asks me what to do
about his mother—*I don't even care if she
drinks. Just how do I make her not do it
so much?* He doesn't give me time to answer,
the question star-bursting like ivy into a monologue
of endless tangents, crossing bloodlines
and state lines—Missouri every other weekend,
Pennsylvania for the holidays, two fathers
and a boyfriend with 15 years of prison,
a coke addiction, and a car accident
between them, a mother he hasn't seen
since third grade and a second mother
who wears sunglasses at night
because the boyfriend beats her,
a sister in the ground, another in juvie,
a brother he's only met twice in Afghanistan
with the 101st, and four siblings at home,
or maybe five. At fourteen,
he's already learned to speak in cigarettes
and fists, more fluent in *gettin' respect*

than anything else. When he finally pauses,
a step-sister is pulling around the circle drive
in a black Dodge Caravan, the strange
soot indigenous to the beltway coating
the whole van like dirty plastic wrap.
She misses the turn to pull out twice,
circling around and around until she can
make it out through the kudzu that hangs
from the trees and covers most of the sign—
Faith the only word visible from the weekly
Scripture. At the end of the drive, her taillights
blossom briefly in the darkening haze. Above me,
our morning glory vine weaves chaotically
through its weathered trellis, like DNA
gone haywire. A former alcoholic planted
it four years ago to celebrate the day
he became our pastor. Its tightly
spiraled buds—a series of elongated,
off-white fists, edges stained bruise-purple—
clash against the uniform green, blue notes
waiting to be resolved.

Isaac in Promesa

We love because He first loved us
reads the now windowless
Presbyterian church's marquee,
stained glass scattered before it,
every shard the dark brown
of weathering pennies that missed
their fountain, instead melding
with the dirt and tarnishing
for years. Reclined slightly
in the fresh scrub grass,
as if it died exhorting Heaven,
the marquee's been the color
of sweat-stain since the last few
families left town and the founder's
son drank himself to death, his body
rotting on the warped kitchen floor.
As if Promesa had never been
here at all, the Mojave sands slog
along like slow motion acrobats
in gusts of inexorable wind.
The town's "Welcome" sign
dead-man-floats in a pool
of sand that slithers up and around
and over it, towards the mural
on the boarded-up gas station,
the one we painted for merit
badges—all donated
or trashed by now. Somehow,
the sickly cacti we planted
for Arbor Day in the town square
thrived, now towering above
the crumbling, brick-lined beds
we'd built for them. Houses sag
everywhere, rows of forgotten memorials
with only flapping screen doors
to sound taps and revelry—
even Pastor Jobiah's reinforced porch

buckled and broke from termites.
The torn white cloth of a dust-covered
baby carriage waves frantically
beside an empty greenhouse, the rusted
frame having collapsed under its own weight.
Throughout the town's vacant lots,
desert five-spots push their tough stems
up from earth barren as Sarah and hard
as doubt and sprout prickly, dark leaves.
The lilac laughter of their blooms
echoes off the faded smiles
of our mural's mariachi band,
the sun and storms having
massacred its men—
defeated, peeling lepers
leering at the baseball diamond's
stubborn surrender to a field
of desert candles.

Psalm 46:10

Oregon's hills smoke their pipes in the morning,
and Frank O'Hara and the trees push their spectacles
up their noses and read the paper through the mist—the economy's
crashing like a weight-lifting accident through the Second World's
second-class gym floor, smashing the Third World's treadmills
Acme-Anvil style again, and the whole debacle shakes the building
enough that the First World's wine glasses start to teeter
on their rims, and everyone becomes rather flustered
at the dinner party while Anderson Cooper and Bill O'Reilly
and John Stewart all share the same eclectic electric
rectangle with Spongebob and Springer reruns, and the pixels
revise themselves like OCD masters students or dinner party guests
uncomfortable with confrontation, and the electrons do the hokey-
pokey and the Mamba and beat their drums and speak in Spanish
and Danish or whatever it is they do to make the weather girl
so attractive and the next hurricane we inexplicably insisted
on naming after a person bloom on the Doppler Radar
like a swirling fisheye photo of a well-organized produce
department, the light limes giving way to the somewhat dangerous
lemons giving way to the devastating apples at the core—the apples
are what get you. The electrons spin their gibberish into a clean-
fonted human name—is it Iris or Irene this time, and why this
strange ritualistic attempt at euphemizing or personifying
thousands of people's disaster? It doesn't make it better
if Iris wrecks your house instead of Irene. Arminius and Calvin
duel over Diet Sprites, the television a de facto Maginot Line,
and two passionate priests of Apple fire-and-brim-stone an Android
hold-out over features he's never heard of, while two couch cushions
down the Android owner's wife ignores his martyrdom
for talks of lypo and botox, and I can only wonder
what they do with the fat—can it go in different places,
like clay? Are we just Playdough, and every plastic surgeon
is secretly still wishing he could be making McDonalds French Fries
and Hamburgers with the playset, which really didn't make
any sense anyway because you couldn't eat them?
How little we understand what goes on in our own living rooms.
But I rejoice because I can walk outside and read the paper

with Frank and smoke a pipe with the Oregon hills
and take my socks and shoes off and put my feet
to September-cold pavement. The neighbor dog
will probably take my socks and add them to her pile on the deck—
yet another pyramid we can't explain—but I still can keep
my feet on the September-cold pavement and breathe,
let it all flow around me: advanced mathematics and VFD
and Hegel's dialectic and the lack of a future tense in some
languages, the abandoned zoo in Detroit and the wonder
of where the animals went and the anonymity of every graffiti artist
whose work I saw between Albuquerque and Salem.
I can realize that it's all in one river, and I can feel the river bed
below me, each shore beside me, the cataracts, and the delta,
even when I can't see them, and I can know.

152.42

Walking through the Russian literature section makes me feel like a sinner, insensitive, Dostoevsky and the other jawbreakers—

you know, Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn, Turgenev, Dumbledore—every single one of them keeping their sadness

in their beards—epic, masculine cellars of a people's despair overflowing onto bland, black suits—the weight of generations

raised on vodka and potatoes and cold statues. Just flipping the pages, I can hear the coughs of tuberculosis and pneumonia,

the click of malnourished bones—sure, we're generalizing here, probably being a little ethnocentric, but every one of those

volumes still comes off the shelf like a tombstone, and also like an anvil, because the grief is that heavy

and also because, if we're honest, the Central Party ran out of tombstones years ago. You can stack all of the Russian literature

together in the whole wide library and have enough height to change a lightbulb and enough sadness to create a blackhole—

so please just don't stack all the Russian literature together. Just a single sentence can carry more sadness

than Simple Plan's whole discography and weigh about as much as the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, which is a lot of weight

for a bookshelf or even for a human being. But thankfully, thank God, sadness is like smoke,

and sometimes you just have to open a window, let it diffuse into the greater air, get swallowed up—so let's open a window.

Let's open a window together and grab the *Oxford Dictionary*

of English and benchpress that baby, get swol, like Arnold
but really like Ryan Gossling—*hey babe, read me those 17 syllable*

words—let me soak in their sound—*defenestration, smaragdine,*
sesquipedalian—let me luxuriate in language. Now, teach me

Russian. Teach me Greek. Let's read about the implementation
of elementary Russian into primary schools, hold

the book's calloused covers like our grandparents' hands
when we were children, the spine flying between them

like a rope bridge, our feet walking on air. What a joy to be alive,
to breathe, to hold a book another man held in the spring of 1984—

maybe a woman? How old? How did he or she feel about lilacs?
About the Cold War? About macroeconomics? So many opinions

held beneath the skin and bones that held this book up
against the rudimentary physical forces acting upon it in the spring

of 1984—that are also acting upon it now—that makes us
colleagues, compatriots—we have all got at least one thing

in common. There was a person who hand drew the type face
of this book. I bet Russian people have different fonts like we do—

Vani and Helvetica and Times New Roman and creepy, gothic
Chiller in Cyrillic and different and wonderful.

My friend Jonah is dear to my soul, and my friend Jonah promises,
swears, that anything in the whole world is interesting

if you just pick it up and put it under a microscope, and my friend
Jonah's soul is the biggest microscope I know—

he tells me of the homeless people who come to his bank
to deposit Catholic Charities checks for \$7.25 and who tell him

about their cats. Homeless people have bank accounts *and* cats.
I found one once, climbing the fire escape

of an abandoned rehabilitation center for youth in downtown
Lynchburg, Virginia. I found the white and orange cat's

brand new food bowl and water dish sitting new and terrifying
and out-of-place beneath a weed grown from the building

for so long it had a half-inch stalk and leaves the size
of decorative 17th century serving plates.

Homeless people are people. The *Oxford Dictionary of English*
tells me that there are lost words, but I think that sometimes

we just lose each other in our words, people lost like trees
in the forests of our phrases and labels.

In 2013, the U.S. tax code was 73,594 pages long, and I used 500
pages of computer paper every semester at Lycoming College

in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, sometimes more, and thank God
I have never, ever, ever read the tax code—

depending on how you calculate though, just me and the tax code are
anywhere from three to nine trees, and my page count alone

is enough to start losing people. Pray over me in Chinese—
there are scores and scores of Chinese dialects, and Jesus Christ

speaks every single one of them. Jesus does not lose people. Pray
over me in Dutch, too, and Swahili why don't you?

Jesus knows all of the languages. Let's sing the national anthems of
other countries together—they have them, too, you know?

There are 150 countries—that's 150 histories all thumping their
geopolitical chests and trading their dollar store toys

and their oil and their minerals and their literature like Pokémon cards—the Earth is the bushes at recess, and we're all hiding

from one another, passing Charizards for cargo ships of coconut oil and tanks. And speaking of tanks, tanks have tow trucks,

and those tow trucks for tanks have turrets on top because sometimes tow trucks for tanks need turrets—

a friend of a friend got a concussion in one so bad it split the two hemispheres of his brain like a heart. The tow truck for tanks

hit a Jersey wall in Iraq trying to turn around because sometimes tow trucks for tanks need to turn around, too.

My friend of a friend got his concussion, each brain hemisphere deciding on a mutual trial separation at the behest of the bolt

in the ceiling that cracked his helmet. In the divorce, his ability to build things got forgotten, bounced about between the parents

but never quite feeling at home. My friend of a friend is a very, very real, fleshy, heart-beatin-kind of person,

just like you and me, and he's currently somewhere in southern Connecticut, trying to build himself a barn again, painfully,

devastatingly slowly, trying to relearn how to build again, to coax his talent out from under the stairs, to come home.

Let's rewind: there are Jersey walls in Iraq. There are people in Iraq—people who drink beer and chew gum and text

while they poop and have babies—there are daycares in Iraq. The people in Iraq have 46 chromosomes.

We have 46 chromosomes. The terrorists have 46 chromosomes. The members of ISIS, their impotent machetes

hacking away at all the wrong oppressors, have 46 chromosomes. They are made in the image of God.

If I'm honest, sometimes I hate that. If I'm honest, too, Jesus was probably brown. Jesus probably looked like a "terrorist."

Jesus was a terrorist, or a revolutionary, or a something semantically similar. Jesus was a threat. It's amazing

what you can do with words. Jesus was and is and will always be my King. Jesus threatens my comfort and my status quo.

Jesus makes me want to kiss you. Not on the lips, but on the head, in the deepest love I have ever known.

I want to hold you as honestly as I can, wrap you up and dance, spin you beneath these warm lights. We are alive. Our God is alive.

I'm currently sitting on a wide, white marble bench perfectly positioned beneath a clear, glass skylight, leaning my back

against clear glass—I'm walking on air again. The walls of this art building are lined with the pieces of people's souls,

glistening strands strung up and down like veins, and this bench is shockingly well-designed, a startling blessing.

There is music on—someone is practicing the piano. That's something I cannot do. My fingers, they can't even fathom it

when I ask them, and that's just electricity, me asking them, and I am surrounded then and now and always and you are, too,

by an unfathomable number of indefinable little specks of matter—whatever the heck matter is—all bumping into each other

at just the right time, at just the right speed, at just the right way, to produce a girl I cannot see practicing Chopin in a backroom

I can't see either—what a miracle! What a miracle to be alive,
to breathe, to sit on a shockingly well-designed,

wide, white marble bench perfectly positioned beneath a clear glass
skylight, to reach out and put my fingers

in Doystovesky's beard and to comb out that sadness.

What a miracle to watch Jesus combing and waxing the cellars

of our sadnesses, catching all of it up in His Hands, and raking
our sins into mutton chops and planting seeds in our superfund

hearts and growing corn and pumpkins and squash and tomatoes and
zucchinis—what a joy to watch the harvest come in!

You know if you've seen it; do not forget it. What a joy
to interlace fingers, to dance, to study Greek grammar,

to have O'Hara tell me of the trees and their spectacles—I can hear
them breathing now, too. And Pablo, I can see those flowers

that don't bloom and I carry their light within me now, too, next to
Yuri Gordon and his fonts. Oh Yuri! What a joy to be alive!

The soul is an empty library, and I feel daily, minutely, momentarily
God Himself is checking the books back in. One by one,

I am growing up in the knowledge of God, the speaker of worlds,
the designer of knee caps and holding cheeks in palms and hair

between fingers, the designer of taste buds—Chick-fil-a and
Chipotle a ballet across my tongue! I am in love with you

and with being alive, with the music that's on—Jesus dropping
a needle on the turntable, the Earth one grand 45,

America a hymnal, and the Holy Spirit teaching us to sing it.
And Syria's one, too, and the ocean—Pacific and Atlantic,

two dialects, like Chinese, and Jesus hears them all, speaks them all, spoke them all first, teaches them all—

day and night, the heavens pour forth speech. Pray over me in Dutch. Worship with me in Hindi. Shout with me in Ebonics.

God has seen me naked every moment of my life, and He still calls me son without hesitation. Do the Electric Slide with me beneath

the stars—what language do they speak? Who knows, but I know its praise. Teach me the Hustle. Let's hug everyone in the whole

freaking world and my friend Bradley, too, but let's do it in Swedish and make Swedish meatballs for everyone, Swedish-ly.

God is a generous, generous, generous, faithful god. Let's eat Ramen and raw cookie dough and give thanks for minimum wage

and yachts and play Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2 with old friends and their wives because praise King Jesus there is music on,

can you hear it? Praise King Jesus there is music on, can you hear it? Praise King Jesus there is music on, can you hear it?

What a miracle that, in a time of nuclear war and plots to bomb everyone and days where I cannot shake the sadness on my own,

two people can still love each other, and I can eat raw cookie dough with them and do kickflips and not break my legs.

Praise King Jesus there is music on, and so I am learning to dance, through the rows of Russian literature, through the lobbies

of libraries of schools I don't go to, through gas station parking lots and grocery store aisles, through the Capitol Rotunda,

through Tiananmen Square and Times Square and Trafalgar Square and Trailside Elementary's Foursquare Court,

through Chipotle, my favorite restaurant, through Cape Canaveral
and the subway and Chernobyl and riding that Ferris wheel

and doing the Hokey Pokey and *chang chang, changitty chang*
shoobop all the way to the top, dancing all over my grave,

Jesus and me and you and my parents and Tolstoy and everyone—
we're all dancing, and we're all singing, and it's a *Hosanna*

and a *Hallelujah* and AMEN.

Lean Into It

Entire generations have yet to see
the missing Raphaels and Da Vincis,
Donatello's *Joshua*, or Van Eyck's
The Just Judges from the Ghent Altarpiece.
Over 99.9% of the human race
will never hear a single movement of Bach,
Beethoven, or Brahms. Harry Potter
is published in around 70 distinct
languages, Shakespeare in approximately
80, the Bible in over 2,000.
There are more than 6,000
languages. Mongolians will never hear
an out-of-work architect
fill a German cathedral with only
his voice and the Indian rosewood
guitar he played like the Susquehanna
rolling silt and Pennsylvania rain
into the Chesapeake, and he will never
see them throat-sing, the plains behind them
harmonizing in the deep tones only vast places
sing when their mouths stretch beyond
the curvature of the Earth. My mother
never saw the quotes I found
written in tiny tiles on a sidewalk
in Connecticut, and few will ever feel
the way my spine curled in revelation
when I felt what they meant: *Have Faith,*
Keep Singing. I know a retired farmer
who still works a few acres solely
by hand and nature just because
he likes the feeling of the earth.
I once asked how he could ever find
the strength to begin, looking each spring
at his unplowed field stretching like a small ocean

and knowing that a drought, a flood,
a fire, or a thousand other uncontrollable
occurrences could destroy all his work
in an instant, like they had before,
and leave the field as if he had never lived.
Sending the seeds of a dandelion
into the wind with a practiced kick,
his leather boots long worn smooth,
he replied, *You lean into the plow.*

Unfold

(2017)

Unfold

—I want to hold you
because I know you will hold me, too.
I want to hide myself somewhere in the crook of your neck,
beneath your hair, between your breasts,
not because the world will solve itself
while I am there hiding
and not because it can't see me
when I close my eyes
and turn farther into your chest,
but because I am a storm cloud which lost
its thunder and can't tell if it's simply departed
like disco or a divorced wife with the kids
or if it somehow got buried and I just lost the map,
because, for a moment, the span of a few minutes,
the hemisphere of an hour, the minute hand
sailing the white sea of inevitably with a tacit
severity, I can escape—tuck myself away
and withdraw into the translucent cocoon of your love,
both with you and inside of you, and your love,
intangible at all times but these, moments
when it softly solidifies, like moonlight
mist descending into dew upon the skin
of folding flowers, tulips and lilacs
bowing their heads in sleep or prayer
or both, and I charge and rest, and your chest
and your silence say everything in the way an envelope
knows everything about a letter from their simple friction,
its fingers gliding like water over stone, somehow not just reading
but knowing, the water a half-mile downstream tasting
just perceptibly of granite, because, somehow,
here in this living room, upon this sofa,
I am on Everest and can taste the upper atmosphere
and see everything I forgot there was to see, and I can explain
nothing but understand everything, and then, because, before
the dryer's buzz or the movie's end respectfully, promptly, aptly
summons us, before the phone rings or the macaroni begins

to burn, the lightning returns to the heart of the cloud,
the thunder is restored, singing baritone rings around the rain,
waiting to pour out again, and we unfold—

Leftover Hymns

(2018)

Lazarus

—*Ashburn, VA*

Beneath imported sod and store-bought mulch, our soil is a
graveyard,

shallow as a dirty, road-side puddle, indifferent, bursting
with discarded tools, screws, and concrete slag—debris
entombed unceremoniously in thick Virginia clay.

Not much should grow here.

Overzealous builders transport everything into this place,

hoping foreign trees and shrubs will transform place-
lessness—*asphalt running into asphalt, yards*

crawling on top of yards, bumpers on bumpers—to home. Life here
is leaving, McAdam days and nights on 267 and 495, bursts
of air in the suffocation of rush hour, the meniscus of clay
our single-family homes balance upon, foundations of debris

and lawn chemicals. Construction workers abandon debris
when they finish subdivisions, then, like surly morticians placing
lipstick on corpses, plant maples in beds of glass and gravel with
tired, clay-

stained gloves. Our eyes frequently resemble graveyard
flower vases, hollow as a father's stare when he eats alone, bursting
inwards, deeper and deeper, like the potholes we won't fix. The
homes here

are often no more than their garage doors: you can hear
leaky pipes whisper-drip words behind dry wall, hear debris—
brown paper bags, bolts—blow empty rage through vents, the houses
bursting,

toilets breaking, power blowing, cheap sofas bought to fill the too-
big places'

too many rooms wobbling like old, chalky graves,
commuter marriages, or scaffolding dug into exposed clay.

Yet, the Bradford pears out front bore into that same clay,
branches spreading out and up like overpasses, blossoming here

and there like the quarry's loose rocks, tombstones from a graveyard
blooming white quartz when they break open in long petals of debris
under construction vehicles' brutal tires. In late May, this place's
plants, moved here on sooty flatbeds with out-of-state-plates, burst

with birth, white, fuschia, ochre, sapphire riding bursts
of cleansing, green waves born from imperfect clay,
transplants finding the heartbeat buried deep in this place,
pulsing through the food wrappers and pieces of PVC, the song you
can hear
if you put your ear to the earth or our chests, listen to the melodies
constructed
from rusty nails and too much Trugreen, divorcees and bad paper
trails: a graveyard

resurrected in place, renewed hands and mouths bursting
impossible worship from the detoxed clay, graves
reconstructed into lasting atmospheres.

Singing Lessons

The song sparrow knows nothing
of the I-IV-V or the controversy
a drum set can cause a congregation.
He has never studied liturgy

or the effects of appropriate lighting
and a digital soundboard with mixer.
I can't tell if he wants an audience
at all, or even just one listener—

if he needs me to hear his melody
dance with the wind like David before God
in order to validate it as an offering.
After a rain, he alights in a pine beside

the bowing willow and prostrate
reeds, as my friends and I
argue again the intricacies of worship and language,
whether it's palms or whole arms to the sky.

He looks neither left nor right
and clearly isn't hoping
in the least bit for my eye—
he simply swells his sooty breast and sings.

Fall-Finds

Skating on our pond, my father
always said it's in the timing,
in finding the patient rhythm
of *push-glide, push-glide*,

in avoiding the uneven patches
when you can and learning
to stumble through the rest with grace.
As we circled the pond,

he'd comment on the expanses
of snow, quietly rolling miles of fields
into smoothly piled offerings
of cotton diamonds.

He said he was thankful to fall
sometimes, because it revealed so much—
a white hare shivering beneath a bush, a tawny
doe cricket-jumping along the forest's edge.

His favorite *fall-find*: the way
ice crystals arch themselves
into the endless, intertwining lattices
of a hundred thousand humble cathedrals,

their chants and hymns rising
with our breath in clouds,
thick as organ toccatas,
to the fathomless opal sky.

Eisoptrophobia: The Fear of Mirrors

A mirror can never see itself. Shown
 in another, it fingerprints in perpetual
 comment, never comprehending

a cigarette's prophetic split to smoke
 and dust. The mirror sees only the immediate
 combustion, the cancer label—eyes the cast

on the smoker's arm, the fluorescent
 bar sign above, and assumes a drunken
 fall. Cleverly, the mirror's pieces deflect

the light of the two-tone kicking cowgirl
 onto the alley's bricks—so focused spotlighting
 the shadowed pock-marks, they can't

see themselves in pieces, mired in bottles
 and spoiled leftovers, crawling grime—the brother
 unable to see himself in the prodigal

son. Forever outside the party, unwilling
 to enter, arms folded, every laugh,
 every bite of meat, every sparkle of the new

ring, the softness of washed skin, becomes
 a boot heel grinding, fragmenting fragments
 till they no longer reflect at all.

Asphalt Pews

Beside the D.C. beltway, worship
rises to the staccato rhythms
of backhoes, rush hour horns,

and the soprano squeals of cars.
From asphalt pews, I witness
crows and sparrows line-sing

hymns on overpass choir lofts.
Yellow tulips demarcate
invisible altars, where gnarled

dogwoods bow, offering
wide spreads of gem-shaped petals.
Split-rail fences lift silent

supplications, their dried-out beams
recalling the desert and the prophets
who prepared His way, while

Allegheny mound ants testify,
laboring on fifteen-foot temples.
Over crumbling stone walls,

gingko leaves preach
their neglected theology—
wordless sermons of wind-dancing

praise. Construction sites
return me to the humility
of dirt, how a certain patch

waited faithfully for thousands, if
not billions, of years, trampled
and raked and defecated upon,

all to hold the actual handful
in its proper place to receive the blessing
of spit and enter a blind man's eyes.

Parable of Pennies

Pennies are made
in a single image that wears
the longer they live in the world,
becoming all the shades
of dust. In the right hands,
you can do anything
with just one: slip sleight
of hand, cure cancer, complete
a circuit, kill a man.
You can even buy
a house if you put one
penny in the right place
long enough. One man
traded his way from a penny
to a '72 Winnebago
and drove to meet Leno
out under the Vegas sun.
The mint printed 11.4 billion
pennies in 2007 alone
and enough in the last
200 or so years to circle
the Earth 137 times.
No matter if they're steel
or copper, cannon-shell
or mostly zinc, or if they're
different from how they started—
no matter the tarnish, the oil stains,
the scratches, or the glue
from well-meaning kindergarten
projects, they always keep their worth.
Their pasts shape them,
circumstances molding, spinning
them, smoothing each like clay
or a fingerprint. My favorite
ones are sheathed in dark
russet and copper green, lifetimes
of drowning but never quite washing

away. Regardless of the years
spent in the backs of couches,
the grime of drainage grates, or the pockets
of forgotten winter coats,
you can take them to a bank
or a minimart, spend them like new.

Lilies

Our neighbors don't believe
in redemption, that garbage
can, or should be, saved.
They laugh at our overflowing Salvation
Army bags and think
we're "idiots" for recycling
religiously, for believing one man
can make a difference.
Even when we composted
their own trash, *everything*—
used Kleenex, orange peels,
corncobs, cardboard,
lint—and the Easter lilies
burst from their tangled
stems, their blossoms gasping
new life ransomed
from decaying refuse,
outdoing Solomon's best
on peanut shells
and *The Washington Post*,
they insisted
we'd bought them online.

The Aurola County Museum

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance:
Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am
the worst.*

—1 Timothy 1:15

Your family's Bible still lies in view
at the end of that dim hallway,
floorboards warped from the weight
of coffins. Lifting it from the marble
pedestal left over from that other time,
“museum-quality” lights found
at the flea market casting its pages
in a nauseating shade, I turn to 2 Samuel,
your favorite—David, murderer,
adulterer, yet the man God declared
to be after His own heart. Leafing farther,
I find a five-inch fissure splitting 1 Timothy's
pages like an unstitched gash from a bar
fight. I remember how you'd try to teach me
Scripture, poor paraphrases that I learned
best from the way you cared for your neighbor
as the Alzheimer's set in and the way you spoke
to people as if their lives were what
determined your own. I leave the Bible open there,
where your penciled curator's print,
so much like the lettering on headstones
and monuments, reads next to Paul's
famous admission—*and he wrote most
of the New Testament. There is hope yet.*

Salvation

Gray like my father's hair,
like mine will be, a pigeon
smashes itself repeatedly into glass,
each thud echoing through the lobby
like an execution. The box office
attendant watches from her chamber,
mouth half-open, lips over-red, cheeks
powdered, her body still as the posters
suffocating in their yellowing cases.
She gazes easily past her own
reflection in the bullet-proof glass, disregarding
the crawling embrace of the booth,
the jammed ticket dispenser's muffled
choking. It's a cold fall, so the crowds
stampede to lock themselves inside
their cars, while the pigeon's chest heaves
upon the sill. The manager props
open all the front doors, despite the wind,
hoping the bird will find its way
eventually. In the corner,
a patient father rescues a neon creature
from a claw game in the arcade, willing to pay
the price for the twelve tries it took, even though
it was only a coworker's daughter.

Letters

April 3, 2017

Friend,

The truth about me: I've never been the right person for this.

I've struggled immensely with insecurity and fear for at least 15 years. For a period of time in middle school, I did my best to speak as little as possible because I knew, if I didn't speak, I couldn't mess up and say anything someone could make fun of me for. When I played football, I feared being successful and would lose confidence and miss plays at the last second. The first time I read a poem to my college creative writing class, my body literally shook. Though the Holy Spirit has healed me of so much of it, two days ago, I found myself sitting in the shower, crippled by shame and fear, not wanting to do anything other than sit under the water and stare at the tile. I am not the person one would choose to perform in front of people, and I am not the person one would choose to testify about God. My heart constantly turns out to be more disgusting than I ever realized. I return to the sins I've been set free of so easily. My mind and my heart are dark more often than I'd like to admit. By God's infinite grace and patience, I'm getting better, but I'm still so consistently horrified at who I can be and at what creeps into my heart. Based on any human scale, I should not be the person who gets to do what I do, and I definitely have not earned it. I've wasted so many opportunities due to fear, laziness, or some combination of both. I know countless people who have worked as hard, or harder, than me who haven't seen their dreams come to fruition in the same way. I've been professing Jesus for as long as I can remember, and I've been telling people about Jesus through my art for six years. I've literally heard God's voice, seen Him physically and spiritually heal people, watched Him work and experienced Him and His provision in countless ways, and, here I was, two days ago, Chris Bernstorf, the poet who loves Jesus, in a heap in a shower, wrecked by shame and frustration and completely afraid, of the future, of who God might be, of myself and my motives, of making the wrong choice, afraid to the point that doing anything beyond the simple tasks of existing was nearly impossible for a few hours.

This isn't self-deprecation or an elaborate effort to fish for affirmation. Just honesty and an attempt to encourage. God has no interest in what we are capable of or what we deserve. He chooses whom He chooses, and He prepares them for whatever He needs. His grace and love cover over all. One of the very first fundamental beliefs God gave me about this poetry project was that, a lot of times, people just need to see someone else out there doing it in order to believe that they can, too. The person does not have to be particularly good at the thing, does not have to get it right all of the time or end up particularly successful, and can, in fact, fail wildly and often. I forget this truth so frequently, but it remains true nonetheless. Sometimes, all we really need is somebody out there trying.

So, my poetry and the last six years of my life have been, among much else, me trying.

When you see me, when you read this poem, when you see this video, when you look at these pictures, when you hear any of my poetry, I hope that's what you experience. I hope you see the glory and grace of the God of the universe, and I hope you see the invitation. This has never just been about the art—we do not need more poets, more artists, more vagabond touring hobos, more art, more words, more of anything particular. We need more people who are fully alive in God and who He has made them to be. We need more people going out in vulnerability and love, deeper and deeper into pursuing Who the Father is and what He's made them for. We need it, and the exciting news is we can have it. If God can grant this kind of life, this kind of excitement, this kind of joy and fulfillment to a selfish, disgusting coward like me, if He can want everything to do with a person like me, then He wants everything to do with everyone and can give life to all of us. He's there; the door's open by the Blood of Jesus. Life and life abundantly like Jesus said He came to give us await all of us. We just have to be willing.

And, more good news: the willingness can be pretty ugly. I've explained what my insides so often look like. If you know me, you've seen the grosser sides of me and how scared I can be. If life is a high dive, I generally don't swan dive off in a shower of courage

and light. Usually, it's more a full-body-paralyzed-crying-twitching-falling-over sort of a thing. But God, gracious as He is, counts it. To know God, to find life, to find the joy we all search for, simply takes willingness, no matter how imperfect. If you don't have it, you can ask God for it. You don't have to earn it—Lord knows I didn't—and you don't have to be born with some special set of abilities that separates you from the rest—Lord knows I wasn't. All I am and all I have is from Him, and I'm simply using the ability He gave me to say *Here I am* as well as I can.

If you're skeptical, know that I am sometimes, too. If you're terrified, know that I am sometimes, too. If you're holding onto stuff you're not sure you want to give up, know that I am sometimes, too. If you're unsure you can, know that I feel that way sometimes, too. Know that it doesn't depend on you. If you're willing to simply step out and lean into it, He will carry you. I've been trying to step out for most of my life, but the last six years of this poetry adventure have represented stepping out in new levels. By no means am I there yet, but, by God's grace, I am farther than I used to be. I'm nowhere I ever thought I'd be, and it's more beautiful than anything I've ever known. All I am is willing, by His Grace, as best as I can be, and it's better than anything I could've ever imagined.

Love,

chris

May 2, 2018

Like many letters, this one began briefly before a carjacking and finished in a shower a few months later. You know, normal stuff. Life's wild.

On December 23, I was praying about this book and things God had been teaching me and had done for me. Specifically, I was thinking about receiving. My fiancé and I both have a very hard time receiving good things—we both consistently want to earn anything that happens, and we rarely feel worthy of receiving anything good. If something good comes our way—whether a financial blessing or a cool opportunity or love—we often find ourselves doing everything we can to keep it at arm's length. We know God loves us, and we know God desires to express that love in countless ways, and we know that we are saved by faith and not works, as Scripture teaches us. We know. We know. We know. But that doesn't stop us from constantly pushing against good things and feeling they are for everyone but us.

The Church focuses on teaching us how to deny ourselves. Given American culture and the basics of human nature, this seems like a good teaching to focus on. Scripture directly instructs us to it, and our inability to deny our flesh is what keeps us from God. However, often, the Church focuses a little too much on how to deny ourselves. No one tells us what to do once we have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior, received the Holy Spirit, and begun to carry our cross. All of the teaching is on how to continue denying ourselves and carrying the cross. No one tells you what to do once the Holy Spirit has begun to transform you and renew you and make you more like Christ. No one tells you what to do when you have the mind of Christ, as Scripture teaches, and you still want things. No one tells you what to do with the Godly desires.

This isn't entirely fair—it's not no one. Plenty of people *do* teach on these things, but, somehow, those voices aren't loud, or maybe we didn't listen, or I didn't hear them or something. Somewhere, there was a disconnect. My fiancé and I struggled (and still do), and our friends do, too. My roommates and I joke about our "receivers" being broken because a lot of us have trouble

receiving gifts. Receiving makes me feel lazy. It makes me feel incapable. It makes me feel like I don't deserve the gift because I didn't do something to earn it or, more often in recent years, because I literally *couldn't* earn it on my own. That's the real kicker. I literally can't earn most of the things that happen to me now.

A few years ago, God showed me that in the shower (a lot of spiritual revelation happens to me while praying in the shower—go figure. Don't make it weird). No matter where one is on the idea of spirituality, art is, for all people, only a spiritual experience. It serves no evolutionary or biological purpose. It cannot be a roof over one's head, provide physical nourishment, or heal disease. Outside of some intangible, spiritual realm, it serves no practical purpose. To a kid brought up in American dream culture by two parents who overcame tremendous personal struggle through self-discipline and hard work, finding out that, if I am to heed God's call to be an artist, I will never, ever be able to provide for myself by the work of my hand because the work of my hand is purely spiritual and of no practical, tangible value to society was humiliating. It exposed all of my pride, stripped me of it, and left me vulnerable and naked.

But it was beautiful. So, so beautiful. In that moment in the shower, God helped me to accept it with thankfulness. The Truth is that none of us can ever earn anything ever. Brian "Head" Welch writes that in his book *Save Me From Myself*. When he got saved, he said he had to learn that God paid his paychecks. Scripture teaches us that hard work, dedication, self-discipline, and the like are all of great value. But they are only of great value as submitted under the overarch of God's Grace. A kid I went to high school with went to college on a track scholarship. He died the next year, at 19 and in perfect health, for no discernible reason. It was just his time, and his heart stopped. We simply cannot hold ourselves together, no matter how much we want to think we can.

The beauty of that can easily be overshadowed by how completely and utterly fucking terrifying it is to our nature. The thought that we literally cannot keep ourselves safe and cannot provide for ourselves is awful and horrifying and embarrassing and contrary to almost every American and human principle I was raised

with. It assaults most everything I place my self-worth in. It requires me to realize that I am loved, I am worthy, I have value *only* because the God of the universe says I do. It hurts my human nature to accept this, but it makes everything infinitely more beautiful when I do because it takes the burden of my value off of me and places it where it belongs and where it cannot be tarnished by my failures and shortcomings. I am loved, I am provided for, I am valuable, simply because my God says I am. I don't have to earn it. Value, love, worth freely given by Him in His Grace, to me and to everyone, for no other reason than because He chose to. What beauty.

And I get it.

But I fight it.

A lot.

But I get it.

Sometimes.

On December 23, I thought I got it. I sat in my van, driving for UberEATS and thinking how incredibly good God had been to me, how, for the entirety of 2017, he had provided homes for me, even though I was a full-time touring poet who literally could not afford to put a roof over his own head. Amessa, a band comprised of my wonderful friends Ashley, Jess, and Amanda, took me in indefinitely. I'd probably still have been living with them if Amanda and I hadn't fallen in love. I went on tour for a few months and then moved out when I returned in order to try to live upright in the Lord as Amanda and I grew in relationship with each other. My dear friends Zayde and Alex put me up then until I left for tour again. When I came back, from July through September, my friends Andrew, Dan, Parker, Zion, and Calvin took me in, even though they were also poor as hell and definitely didn't have room for me in the house (Two bedrooms, six guys. You do the math. Whatever your imaging is accurate, I bet). When there were a couple of days when I didn't have a place at all, the Lord gave me my van and friends' houses to shower at. Never once did I go in need. There was nothing I could do for all of these people, nothing I could do for

God, nothing I could offer to anyone for anything. God simply gave to me because He loved me. I couldn't deserve it. I couldn't earn it. Scripture says it, and I know it firsthand: What can man possibly give to God? He simply gives because He loves me. He loves me because He does. He sent Jesus to die while I was yet a sinner. When I was away from Him, He paid it all for me, before I was even alive, knowing all the ways I'd turn from Him and spit on Him and hurt Him. What beauty. What grace.

That's what I was thinking about on December 23. That's what I thought I finally understood. I thought I had finally gotten it.

And then I got carjacked.

I was sitting in a McDonald's drive through, waiting to pick up an UberEATS order to deliver, and a startlingly nice man with a gun took my phone, wallet, and van, which had almost all of my worldly possessions in it. I got out of the van, watched it drive away, and immediately felt *Well, this is inconvenient. But it will be ok*. I walked around the drive-through lane to report it to the McDonald's people. The drive-through was littered with pennies (a sign between me and God ever since He gave me "Parable of Pennies" way back in 2012), and I knew He was with me. I rejoiced and prayed while I waited for the police. My roommates came to get me—all three of them. Entirely unnecessary but entirely in God's love. They love me and wanted to be with me in it even though there wasn't much to do but stand there in the cold with me and drive home.

And then I was in more need than I've ever been in my whole life. I was driving for UberEATS because I came home from tour and did not have enough money to pay my bills. Like, if I gave them every penny I had to my name when they came in, I wouldn't be able to pay them. The guy took my wallet, which had my ID, all my credit and debit cards, and the cash I had. My passport and checkbooks were hidden in the van as well. He also took my phone, which meant I couldn't access Paypal, Cash App, Venmo, or Facebook. So, he took all the physical money I had, every means of accessing what money I did have, my means of working, and any means of applying for a new job. I was helpless. I've literally never

been in that level of direct and abject need since I was a baby. It was time for all my acknowledgment of God's goodness towards me to come to the test. It was time for me to receive.

I didn't pass with flying colors at every moment. I had a day or two of feeling sorry for myself. I got scared sometimes. I was embarrassed to ask for help sometimes. Asking for rides felt terrible. I was required to simply receive from my friends, who showed me SUCH grace and love and patience, knowing that I could never fully pay them back. All of my plans for my poetry went out the window, though I tried to cling to them. I had been excited to contribute money to some of the people who had been helping me with different stuff for free the previous year. That became impossible. I had no choice but to wait on God and watch Him provide. And provide He did. My van came back unscathed. My bills got paid and then some. My stuff got replaced (and with better stuff to boot). I got drowned in blessings, spiritual and financial, encouragement and money and love and help poured in, and my faith and trust and awe of God grew deeper and deeper, even as He humbled me beyond any prior experience. It was tough and beautiful. So, so, so beautiful.

God was showing me on a deeper level than I'd ever known before that He loved me, that He cared for me, that He would provide for me, and that He wanted to. Even now, writing this, that's hitting me—He wants to. He loves us not because He has to but because He wants to (Bradley Hathaway first showed me that in his song "Samuel"). That's what I see in all of this. Receiving kills our pride. It kills our understanding, our control. It forces us to see that God is God, that He loves us, and that there is absolutely nothing we can do about it, save receive with a grateful heart.

And that's what I hope you see from this, from my story and my life and my poetry. God loves you. God wants you. I'm still learning that, deeper and deeper and in new and different ways every day. We weren't designed to put this life on our back and soldier through. We don't need to waste time trying to earn what's already been given, trying to prove what's already been proven. It's humbling, but we can simply sit bare before our God and receive what He has for us, His Love and His Presence. That's what life is.

Jesus instructs us to abide in Him, that He is the vine and we are the branches. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. The Gospel is about receiving, and we must receive because, if we don't, we won't have anything to give. My friend Andrew told me that as we discussed all of this. If we haven't first received from God, we have nothing to give, nothing to go and share and help with. Jesus showed us this—He said He only did what He saw God doing, only said what He heard Him saying, and only had those whom the Father had given Him. If Jesus was constantly getting everything from the Father, we should expect to do nothing other than that.

I write this in full knowledge of the fact that I am the target audience. As I've said, receiving God's love for me, abiding in Jesus, are things I'm frequently not too good at and often skeptical of. Can it really be that "easy?" God is constantly humbling me, constantly thwarting my understanding, constantly bringing me back to the Truth. I won't find freedom and value and peace anywhere but Him.

I know this has been a lot, but I hope it encourages you. You can rest. You can simply be. You don't have to earn what was already given. Mattie Montgomery said that, and God sends it rattling around my head quite often. I'm learning to believe it. The yoke is easy, the burden light. Allow yourself to rest in Him and to receive. You can come to Him. He invited you. He wants you. He loves you. You can be still. You can know.

Abide.

I'm learning that daily for myself.

If I can, you can, too.

Let's do it together.

Love,

chris