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The Poem, Some Pictures, A Letter

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SOLI DEO GLORIA

To Ariande, Tim, Ashley, Jess, & Amanda, thank you beyond words. You made this possible.

To all of the Michigan family, thank you for being just that: a family.
I love you.

To everyone who has invested in me over the years and believed in what God's given me to do, thank you for being a part of God's provision for me. I couldn't have done any of this without you. I love you, too.



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, 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 Pokemon 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 day cares 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 tastebuds—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

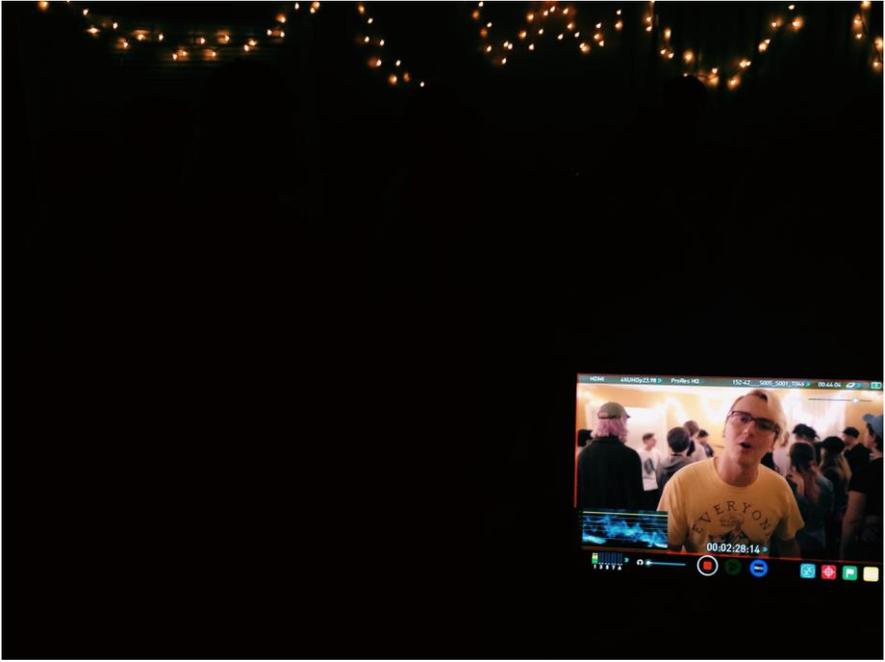
and doing the Hokey Pokey and *chang chang, changitty chang*
shoobop all the way to the top, dancing all over my grave,

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 *Hosana*

and a *Hallelujah* and AMEN.







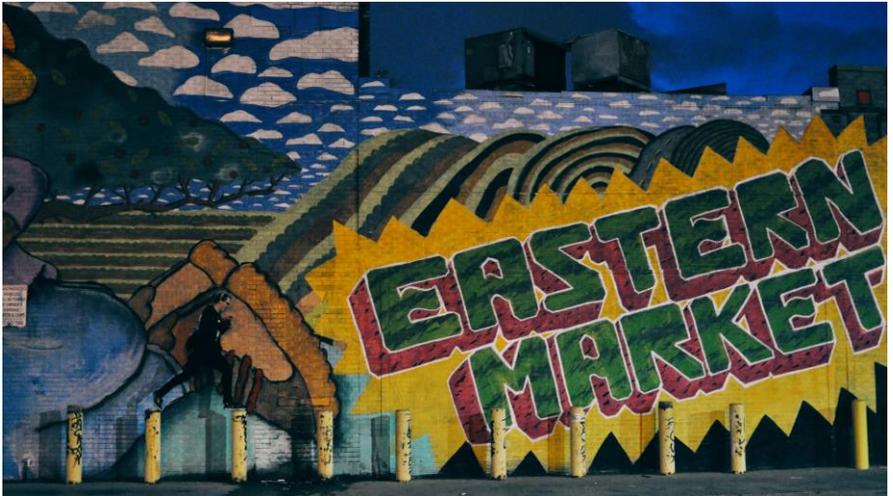












April 3, 2017

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 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

