

It's All Joy

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Swing

Listen, quantify a sunset.
Spreadsheet hydrangea petals.
5-year plan eucalyptus leaves
and watermelon seeds. Validate
the dew—so many prayers
on a single blade of grass,
which is here today and gone
tomorrow. Divide the salt water
by the fresh—what do you get?
I have no idea, but the Louisiana
brine daily teaches me
to lose myself, fresh and salt
indecipherable in the graceful
violence of borders
dissolving, the joy
of being consumed.
I don't know
if I care who I am
in the metaphor anymore—
the Mississippi River
riding the central U.S.
like a 90-foot slide
at a water park
or the gentle
Gulf tickling a little
child's toes for the first time—
I'm lost in the song.
Go ahead: market me,
count my meter, evaluate
my rhythm, underline every simile,
sell my skin, airbrush my face—
a Big Mac before a photoshoot—
auction my teeth, donate my kidneys
for the tax write-off, and footnote Eliot
so it all makes sense. I can't fund
a 401(k) with the joy
I get from eating kiwis

or save my neighbors' souls
watching reruns of *The Mentalist*.
I've never seen a couple survive
bankruptcy solely on disciplined
hand-holding and kissing at red lights,
but there's still something to be said
for those things, too, and what if
all I really needed was a few less plans,
and all everyone really needed
was a few less policy sessions
and a few more songs
sung by a few more
people serving food,
and what if we all took
online classes for plastic surgery
and secretly replaced everyone's
middle finger with a chocolate cake—crazy,
I know, but no more so than holding a knife
to the throat of a man holding
a knife to your throat
and calling it peace. Pop
the trunk. Blast me
with long-winded explanations
about life-experience.
Smother me with the wet blankets
of security mildewing
in the backseat.
I've been reading the Word,
and it's leading me to increasingly
ridiculous conclusions
like not being afraid anymore,
and did I tell you about the rain?
Well, the Word showed me
all creation's singing, and I started
listening, and it turns out that's true
and that the rain's been writing
poems upon the pavement
for forever—or at least
since we started paving roads.
The rain smashes itself

against the earth in full-
contact epics and sonnets
and villanelles and free
verse and forms
I don't even know
the names for, and I've started
reading them, and now
me and the rain and the grass
and the Bradford Pear
are all singing hymns and writing
poems together like it's Sunday,
and it's been Sunday
for three days now.
What if our logic
was really just our
gall bladder—like, you know,
it helps sometimes,
but really it's just not the most important
piece of the puzzle, and most of us
really don't know what it's for
or how to use it, and most
people end up getting that junk
cut out after a while anyway
because sometimes it gets infected
and kills people.
I have weekly tea parties
with Flight of the Concorde's
grandma and all of my emotions
and the intangibles that live inside
my head, and it turns out,
when I finally acted
on my suspicions
and stripped-searched
the whole room, courage
really did look like a lion,
and fear really had been wearing
logic's face for longer
than I can ascertain—
you see, it turns out logic is dead
next to Dr. Dre in Eminem's basement,

and fear has been wearing his face.
He took lessons from Zartan
and sits in the corner,
sipping Earl Grey and looking
over my shoulder,
whispering like a snake
and leaving the backdoor open
for doubt to come in and raid
the pantry. The Truth is that joy
can't be quantified,
and it's what we really
were looking for
the whole time, and love
is reality and gravity
and the fabric of the universe—
once it wells up inside us,
we just can't help doing
anything else but amputating
in favor of those chocolate cakes
and praying for the heart
transplants in the book of Ezekiel
and then carving tiny
giraffes from all
those removed stone
hearts and selling them
as cute coffee table
decorations and using
the proceeds to feed
the homeless of our communities.
What if I just let myself believe
what I really do deep down believe
because other people's doubts
do not belong to me and because
that father was right—I've got a lot
of sons with demons, and my sons
need setting free, so, Lord, help
my unbelief.

The Facts

Niland, California, has a population of 1,006.

Alaska has 32 species of mosquitoes.

The European Union was founded on November 1, 1993.

The largest squid ever found weighed 1,091 lbs.

There are over 4 million miles of road in America.

January 29, 2007, was the first church wedding in Antarctica.

The modern parachute was invented in 1783.

The Sistine Chapel took just over four years to paint.

Sodium is the 11th element on the periodic table.

Nepal does not have a McDonald's.

Magic Johnson wore #32.

The P-51 Mustang had a top speed of 440 mph.

Lyndon Johnson missed being the tallest president by 1 cm.

The terminal velocity of a falling object is 9.8 m/s.

I love you.

County Government

You blush like South Carolina in an election,
Myrtle Beach a blue freckle on your flushed cheeks
as I place a hand on each of your hips,
explain the platform, poll the electorate.
I am glad for the groundwork,
the grassroots, door-to-door, walking
your neighborhoods—you make me want
to be a career politician. Holding you,
I feel like Minnesota in spring,
that homeschool prom of a state,
all 10,000 lakes learning to touch,
messy and catastrophic and worthy
of a Weather Channel special.
We are filming live. I serve my constituents,
so I pledge to learn you: the travel time
from your shoulders to each of your fingertips,
the town flower of each of your wrists,
the best towns to lay my head for the night.
God bless your elbows and kneecaps—
the Midwesterns of your limbs. I'll cross them
over and over as I drive your state highways
and back roads. I love their diners and open skies—
they feel like home. Every fingernail, every rib,
they all need something different, localized
treatment, local knowledge for local needs.
I'll learn each of them individually,
know their names and where
they go to school. I'll be a part of the community.
I've surveyed your neck, how my fingers
can extract tension—I want the mining rights forever.
You see, it's coal country down there,
all across my hands, and the miners simply
must go back to work. We always need
more jobs. I advocate for free community college—
we can retool my whole workforce,
send them back to school, teach them
to study. This is no time for fiscal responsibility.

We need spelunkers and cartographers
and archaeologists, civil engineers and mail men—
there's so much to document, so much
to explore, so much mail to deliver—the more
I study, the more I have to say. I'm endowing
a museum, and I will become your local historian,
plaid-suited and passionate, painfully detailed
and pushing my glasses up my nose
as I read my notes back to you, barely legible
because my pen cannot keep pace
with all I am discovering—
I will tell you of yourself when you forget.
I want to serve you. I'll be the ranger
of each of your thighs' state parks,
map every trail. I'll adopt a highway—
all of them, even. I'll be a volunteer firefighter.
I'll be the librarian. I'll wash the windows.
I'll run the food bank. I'll be the meteorologist,
learn the climate pattern of each of your ear lobes,
each eye, your lips, the small of your back.
I'll be the artist-in-residence,
paint your forests and your beaches,
your apartment buildings and your alleys,
keep record of every cloud. Somehow,
every vapor merits remembering. Each evening,
I'll hang a hammock across your collar bones
and whistle while I whittle campy gift shop
tokens of my affection, proof
I'm thinking of you even at rest stops
and small towns desperate for tourism.
I'll be a deputy sheriff, your body a crime scene,
my lips examining the evidence, my tongue
running ballistics. We'll probably have to work
overtime—so many leads to follow, so many
books to file, so many ordinances to read,
so many historic buildings to research.
Civil service is a full-time job.
We can order Chinese, pass the long nights

on curry chicken and fried rice.
You can teach me to use chopsticks
and watch me work. I'll be nothing
if not thorough.

Geography

You are the world, and everyday I am asking you to be
with me. You are the North Pole, and I'm trying to put the Arctic

circle on your head, crown you like a queen, put the rock
of Gibraltar on your finger, the Amazon on your neck, take you

for a stroll in the farmers' markets west of Purcellville, for dinner
in Madrid, the symphony in Sydney, dessert in Poland.

I know nothing of Warsaw, but they must eat well. I am constantly
slipping my arm in the Mozambique Channel, wheeling you

through cobblestone streets and sunshine, whispering in Denmark's
ear, putting my hands on Brazil and Africa's hips, waltzing

to the moon's full band serenade, George Bailey finally finding
his artistic calling in conducting. I rest my head in the crook

of Italy's neck, kiss the freckles on your back, work my way from
Easter Island to Gaum to Tahiti. The Aleutian Islands

are Alaska and Russia's quiet hints across the geopolitical
coffee shop, but both sides are too proud, too shy, to meet, Little

and Big Diomedes separated by such a stern and austere tension—
let's not be them! Maryland and I dangle Virginia's eastern shore

like mistletoe, and I want to kiss you beneath it like the Chesapeake
kisses the Atlantic, full-mouthed, camera-swirling, soundtrack-

crescendoing unashamed, mix our waters, those hundreds of miles of
Pennsylvania watersheds, all those small towns and timeless

Philadelphia, their hopes and dreams and bathroom songs
and shower water, bursting out, so thankful to be one with you

in person, and, even if the metaphors start to mix a bit, it's ok
because you're a magnetic field and I'm a compass, you're sunlight

and I am dust and I always have my dancing shoes on,
you're the Redwoods and my spirit catches your beauty

up in its hands and it spills over like water and breathes itself
into fog all around me and I lose myself in the banks

and I don't mind at all, and then they part and I am sitting beneath
you and you're the Northern Lights above me, my favorite color,

all of them, all at once, and you swallow me up.

Doing This

The needle punctuated the air,
a relentless gavel handing down
sentences, the craft-store-bought
fate punching white nylon futures
through the presser foot and into dead
canvas my mother'd scrapped
from old projects gone wrong.
This was her first attempt
at the sewing machine after the doctors
finally cauterized the last retinal bleeds
and she'd begun to learn braille, walk
with a cane, find passing cars by ear.
She insisted that 20/1240 vision
didn't mean she couldn't
sew, so my father resigned himself
to hovering, wavering on his heels
in attempted help. *I can do this, Allen,*
met my father's hands and every word
he spoke, her back hunched like the edge
of a waterfall. I could see my father
work his frustration like a glass blower,
the liquid fire descending down into the mold
of his stomach to set. In his eyes, ghastly
potentialities—severed digits, pulpy flesh—
shaped themselves silently, but my mother
only leaned more over the machine. I don't
remember why she lifted the presser foot,
the blood when the needle passed through
her finger, or whether we went to the hospital,
but I can see my father that night, cradling
her thumb in an ice pack on the sofa,
my mother's tears carrying all the fear
of losing her life as a nurse, failing
as a mother and a wife, down into the soft plaid
of his shirt, the one that always
smells of pine. He whispered over and over,
You don't have to see.

Paris

I wander your body like the streets of Paris, not
the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre or the Arc de Triumph—

though they are beautiful, too—and not in search of Hemingway
or Stein or some false nostalgia but rather Rue Oberkampf,

Rue Sorbier, the backs of your arms, the apartment
I had a bunk in the first time I came to the city,

the cheap wine in that small kitchen that late night, the way
I knew exactly where I was, could feel the earth turning

beneath me like a kaleidoscope, the valleys on each side
of your ankles, each of my fingertips opening

to your light, each so intently focused on your shops, your cafes,
your flats, the kebabs and Thai restaurants, this city of immigrants

and fourth generation locals, each centimeter a new turn, a new
street. You open ever inward, flowers opening like hands

to the morning light, ever deeper, ever past the next turn.
I take my time, my fingerpads microscopes.

I am studying this great mystery, the kind that is not
so much solved as it is descended into, the deepest lake,

Baikal but not cold and with light at the bottom. I am walking
ever further, inward, turning corners, pressing in, rounding

the bends. I can tell you the number of balconies
on each building—this one has five,

with an old woman on the third who calls to her friends
in the street as if the town is theirs. I count your freckles.

I stare up at her. She makes me feel so small, her face a city,
each wrinkle a street just like this one, unfolding ever inward.

She is a new universe I have just found, right here
in the morning light on one of the balconies of your inner thigh,

and, somehow, it's here shining above me, outside of me,
in front of me, too far away and large for me to hold.

I can only be before it. She, this universe, the person,
this piece of you, is so high, and I do not understand

what she's saying, but I hear her, and I begin to know.

Sci-Fi

You make me a sci-fi still life—
 you some inexplicable, inarticulable
ball of light too big for the frame, me
 the silhouetted man,
painted one color and dissolving
 at the edges, frozen in terror
and awe, unable to hold you, unwilling
 to leave, fixed to the ground before you
like a monument and disintegrating.

 In all the obliterating, consciousness-
ripping depth of space and time, beneath the spirit-flattening
 lexicon of tragedy read into my soul by an endless
parade of scarred and horrified humans
 past and present, here you are, impossible
and tangible, and I so underserving—how could a miracle
 touch this place in the timeline and for me
and not leave and open itself and, through its center,
 reveal God running through it, carrying me
through on a tight rope of blood and flesh and metaphor
 to Himself and a stammering, wordless,
prostrate understanding? Constantly in this moment,
 here, in the throne room, on our bedroom floor, in the car,
at His feet, here and there and always and at the end
 and the middle and now and encompassed,
you dissolve me, and all I can say is
 Holy.

Dirt

Don't ever forget that God 50-50ed His way to Earth
down an unwed teenage girl's vagina. He manualed

out into the backwoods of the Roman Empire.
He did it on purpose. For a time, He had

to have His butt wiped. He had an umbilical cord,
and someone cut it. Mary might've pooped

during the whole thing—many women do.
Don't wipe away the blood and amniotic fluid

when you remember Him. Burn your Lysol wipes as incense.
Anachronistic hygiene is a sin. God incarnated Himself

to work a day job with His dad without AC in sandals.
He came at a bad time, pre-MySpace, fliers at the mall,

DIY touring, and word-of-mouth the only ways to spread
the Good News. He did it all on purpose,

took His time, slow-rolling down Woodward, letting the lights
chorus, not missing a photon of it all. To be saved,

Jesus said we must eat His flesh and drink His blood.
He said it before the Last Supper, so there was no grounding

for the metaphor, just crazy. Eat the scroll.
God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

Many of America's founding fathers were deists,
which means they rejected Jesus as the Messiah.

The Bible calls such people antichrists.
These antichrists helped found America.

I have been ashamed of Jesus before men.
The Bible says Jesus will be ashamed of such people before God.

God genocided the Amalakites. The United States
deposed Jacob Arbenz, a democratically elected leader,

for its own gain. I have masturbated more times
than I've had sex with my wife.

Jesus asked God not to die, and God said no,
so He died. Drink it raw.

If the Truth sets us free, then every piece of Truth
must be a notch in the key. Don't sand it down.

We need it all. God's strength is made complete
in our weakness. Jesus called a woman a dog

and then healed her daughter. Jesus befriended
His betrayer, knowing what he'd do. Jesus made

a way for pedophiles to go to Heaven.
Heaven is not a meritocracy. He chooses whom

He chooses. Jesus said He only has whom the Father gives Him.
If I'm honest, I don't always like the team.

Don't look away. Knowing Nagasaki and the blasphemies
of my inner thoughts and the Denver Spiderman

and the Khmer Rouge, fraternity hazing and the Congo Free State,
God killed His Son Himself to buy back all the dirt

He'd put His breath in. He did it on purpose. The pen didn't slip—
He didn't stutter. Let Him shape you. Sometimes,

love is unrequited and looks like wrestling and blood-
sweating and scars and a hole in the side

that you keep. Sometimes, holiness looks like a limp.
Existence cascades before me in endless branches

of flickering TV screens, a wall of static snow,
free will and the Spanish and Portuguese conquest

of Latin America, my mom's fear and child pornography,
the dads that leave and the dads that don't but who can't

straighten their crippled spirits back out once
they've been mangled by failure and circumstance,

my friends who are still trying to straighten their own backs
out from the passed down pressure, EDM and mint green

and Belle Isle at sunset and Cava and the small of my wife's back,
where my love for her pools, the day I got carjacked

at the McDonald's on Mack and 75, the fact that all
of my roommates came to pick me up, the kindness

of Andrew's coat on my shoulders because the guy took mine,
flower-picking outside Traverse in June, crying at the counter

of that coffee shop in the Phoenix airport as I reflected on all
I've been given, all of Walt Whitman's lists and his slouch,

"Go Home" by Julien Baker, the Holocaust, and all the pain
and love I can't reconcile, it all cascades endlessly and beyond

my reach and impenetrable and too large for me, and yet
Jesus parts it all with one hand, like a curtain between rooms,

and walks right up to me and looks me in the eye
and it's love and He doesn't blink.

One

I get why Peter started to sink—
the winds offer pretty convincing arguments
sometimes, like Glenn Beck and his chalkboard.
The last hundred years in Chechnya are a decent reason
for atheism. Sarin gas's existence and the thought
that someone made it on purpose are two more.
It's not hard to become Bishop's armadillo,
raising its weak mailed fist to the sky.
Stoked on the wave instead of the ocean,
Christcore, community, all my friends, and me
got slammed on the beach like false idols
in a purge, broken open like oysters. We spit out our pearls
like loose teeth, returning the bits of stained glass
we'd enshrined with our idolatrous gold
and wood. I don't know if God did it or shaped it,
if it was our mid-20s arriving or the efficacy
of deconstruction or just some will-o'-the-whisp
Screwtape found on Craigslist—who can say?
We are all flat little rectangles interacting
with an infinitely-dimensional entity
in an incomprehensible reality,
and, sometimes, it's hard to tell.
We hold our pieces of colored glass
with bloody fingers. Love fits in a hand,
eternity in your lungs, yet God is love and eternity
endless. The duality confounds, the nearness and presence
and coming-ness of the Kingdom, all at once
here and coming and inside us. Understanding
is a tightrope strung up between two towers in the fog,
Arminius and Calvin each holding an end with Piper and Dies,
and Jesus, dancing and strolling and asleep in the middle
like on the boat in that storm. Steve McAlpine
says all God's characteristics mutually inform one another—
there is no Venn diagram, just lots of whole pies,
the Chicago-deep-dishness of God, the pepperoni
and mozzarella always mutually informing one another—
so maybe its two circles joined, me and you, rolling over

and on top of one another in our bed, turning
on an axis, the way I found the universe's center
on a curb outside a Dominos when I was 17—life
and death and 16th century literature and Gaddafi,
the Planetears and Eli Whitney all flying around
while I ate pizza with Ricky in the stillness
of a sunset. There's nowhere to go,
everywhere to be. It's all a kaleidoscope
turning, God a gem, illuminated from within,
us constantly spinning, revealing new shapes and colors,
but always one and always deeper. Eternity is a place,
a point in time, and also the endlessness
we are always descending into—savor it.
Let your roots down. Let yourself grow. The whole
world is holy, every atom shaking, all of matter
working out its faith in fear and trembling.
I feel like I should take off my shoes, feel the telegraph-
tapping of it all on my bare feet.
The heliocentric solar system is a sacrament—
I say it like the Lord's prayer, each planet
passing through my fingers, each one going around
and around the sun, going over and over a coat of paint,
the way Yusef's poems are him talking around
and around a subject, walking around the pond,
saying so much more about it, the way electrons
orbit their nuclei, the way I imagine Mary,
going over and over the Word she'd been given,
treasuring it in her heart. Walt Whitman published
Leaves of Grass over and over again, expanding
and revising and basking in the light of it all.
Barry Lopez put his arm around my shoulder
and brought me to his microscope and showed me
every brushstroke of America—every state, city,
town, hamlet, neighborhood, house—is a world
all unto itself. Antman fell to the bottom, shrinking
smaller and smaller, finding new level of existence
after new level of existence until he finally found
love in the stillness at the bottom of it all.
I am buried by my smallness, beating my chest
at the back of the sanctuary, consumed

by all the sweat and weight and dirt. God lifts me
like Peter from the water, like a flower
to the light, and reminds me of Vienna
that day in March. I see it like a feeling,
like I'm there again. I love the flowers
and the doors—*Sie sind so schön. Ich habe keine
Freundin gehabt, als ich ihnen gesehen habe,
aber jetzt habe ich eine Frau und ich will ihr
sie geben, die ganze Stadt*, wrapped up in a bouquet,
Ich liebe dich, I love you, the words of God,
the axis, run through like a nail, what it all turns upon.
Everything spins on a potter's wheel, electrons
around their nuclei, the record on its turntable,
the earth on its axis, pizza dough on an index finger,
the moon around the earth, the gooseneck kettle pouring
its concentric circles on the coffee grounds, the planets
around the sun. Paul said he only knew Christ
and Christ crucified when he was among the Corinthians.
That's two things, but, really, just one, and everything else—
eating and talking and theology and laughing
and tent-making—must've come from that seed.
We are caught in the slow motion, the present
and the future and the past, the record spinning,
the song playing, the abiding, the stillness,
the waiting, all the colors of light returning
to white, each of us and every moment and everything
holding up its piece of the glass,
and God spinning them all together.
It crushes me, breaks me open just like Norelle said,
like the alabaster jar, and all my fear and anger and love
and yearning and thrashing and hope and worry and longing
all pour out, and it's myself and my spirit and all I have,
where I am in the process, and it's bare before God,
a drink offering, and the light washes in,
and I am reminded and know again that I am loved,
that my friends will love each other again, that my mom
will see again, that she already does and will again,
and I can't keep it all together—
the apologetics and the questions and the hurt
and Rwanda and the hypocrisy and the good intention and the love

and Andre's affair and the fear and the abuse and the hopes,
everyone blundering forward in some kind of upward tornado
of grace, but, somehow, He is gravity and a hand
and a silence and an easy yoke and a relief and a voice and a song.
Before I can even try to pull all the ravaged ends back together
again, He is there like Spiderman on that ferry
but better, and the web holds flawlessly, and the water
begins to feel like solid ground again, and there is nothing
and everything, and I am encompassed, consumed, and one,
Yes and *Amen* and *Hallelujah* the deafening and silent
and final and honest and grateful murmur
of my prostrate spirit, and then I, the uncertain,
thankful, confused, certain, speechless, humbled,
rejoicing, scale-less pot, finally say to the Potter,

Keep going.

