Asphalt Pews: Hymns from the Suburbs

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by

Christopher Bernstorf
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*poems by*

Christopher Bernstorf
Above all else, all thanks, honor, glory, and praise to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Without Him and the sacrifice of His Son, there would be no hope, and this would have not been possible. I am so eternally grateful that He has both saved my soul and put words in my mouth.

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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 crammed 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.
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, melding
with 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
thrive, 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 reveille—
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. They 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.
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,
corn cobs, 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.
Kudzu

—for Dillon

Even in the grimy, churning tidal pools of D.C., where urban sprawl first washes into 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 stares 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 is the only word visible from the weekly scripture. At the end of the drive, her taillights blossom briefly in the darkening haze. Above me, the 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 uniform green, blue notes waiting to be resolved.
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.
Eisoptrophobia: The Fear of Mirrors

A mirror can never see itself. Shown in another, it fingerpoints 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.
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.
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.
Hard Times are Hammers and Lathes

“Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.”

—Isaiah 64:8

Green branches
wrenched
backwards,
curled, worked
like a handle, shaped to
scraps of words, contortionists splitting, skin
spewing clear
blood, sinewy bones splintering,
ppeeded, separated, rearranged,
a beach, sand dunes, over
decades, an unfinished tapestry, unraveled, strands
turned thousand
untwisted helixes witnessing. Dried
in sun, pressured refined
gold rods, sculpted
to age,
they burn best finished.
Lessons in Linoleum

Like the wingtip beacon of a solitary flight out of Dulles, a red toenail blinks through a hole in her New Balances as she heaves rusted handlebars on top of bent pipes, worm-eaten 2x4s, a moldy carpet, and a three-wheeled plastic fire truck with windows so stained you can’t see inside—the unnatural ruins of the previous renters, grafted like rotten skin over yellowing Bermuda grass. She cuts herself repeatedly through her pullover, but she doesn’t find out until that night, when she strips, sweat formed in a suffocating cellophane across her peach skin, her muddy clothes tangled in a damp puddle of molted fabric. Lukewarm to save the hot water heater, the shower water still stings just enough for her to feel the cuts. She traces the swollen red lines uncertainly, up and down her forearms, across her back, over her calves, a burning map carved through once soft flesh, enflamed roads careening and collapsing, a heartless knot of arteries and veins. Outside, she can hear the traffic: thin at the moment—the post-rush-hour trickle of red taillights—but the wheels still scream like gagged abductees in a locked trunk. The pavement has been patched, torn-up, relaid, and patched again so many times that everyone stopped caring to count. Juxtaposed with the loud conversations of neon plaza signs, parking lot lights, and blinkers, her house
could easily go unnoticed—only its relative darkness
draws attention. Yet, she prays, unbeknownst
to passersby, her elbows firm on her shaky
kitchen table. Even though you can barely
see her kitchen light from the road, she reads
under it every night, Bible pages turning
to the wobbly table’s joyful song on the linoleum.
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 placelessness—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.
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.
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.
II
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, 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 father’s never even more than glanced at them— 
and my father’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, or the halls of Montezuma. 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 it’s 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 will lay 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 builders dug it for, like it’s done since they finished the store, carrying gallons upon gallons, night and day, back to the Potomac—it does more work around here than anybody.
The Body of Christ

i. Christian Metal Show

Screen-printed skulls blank-face with abyss-eyes
at tucked-in polos shaking cardboard picket
signs and clutching black King James Bibles,
crusaders after the demons buying tickets.
Pierced faces in V-neck shirts approach—
some seeking brotherly understanding,
some fast forging barbs of mockery
and thirsting for the cut,
others wondering what the fuss is all about.
Non-believers mix watchfully with the foaming crowd,
witness parking lot theologians and their expert opinions SHOUTED SHOUTED hoarse,
pocket-sized Bibles turning like souls in frustration.
Both sides recall, “Trust the Spirit for what to say.”

*You are children of the devil!* sayeth King James.

*Pharisee! Hater!* scream and spit the gauged-ears.

The *Satan - loving whores* pray intermittently for the *lost-lying ignorant false prophets.*

Paraphrased verses pelted like acid become corrupted slung - stones:

*Do not judge!* *Fools despise wisdom!*

A couple of mohawks brush the caking dust

From their combat boots, promise love and prayer, And walk away, but the seething crowd mostly swells like a tumor, a boiling pimple bursting.

On the fractured concrete, non-believers intently observe the rage — the stabs of *HELL, FREAK, FOOL, REPENT*

made in the precious name of Jesus Christ.
ii. Taize Service with Music by The Almost

*Jesus, Jesus, there’s something about Your name.
Master, Savior, there’s something about Your name.*

*Selah.*

The warm CD offers familiar hymns
and our eyes fix on the uniform whiteness
shining in the meek, disparate orbs—
red, green, smooth, cracked—dusty candle holders
brought from churches all over the city.
*Neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free.* . . . floats
above the candle cross in Portuguese,
French, English, and German, followed by *Trust*
in the Lord with all your heart
*and lean not on your own understanding*
in languages as mottled as stained glass. Prayers
rise in sackcloth from the ashen circle as the music
soothes, *Master, Savior, Jesus, Jesus.*
Surprised, we recognize each supplication,
the words filling the footprints on our tongues—
deep, crusted prints on well-traveled highways.
Colossians and Jeremiah then mix
in linguistic litanies over the candles,

the light revealing our waxy skin
and our wick-black eyes made white by the cross.

Our rejoicing lips sing songs of repentance
and salvation in the name of our Lord and Savior.

*Jesus, Jesus, there’s something about Your name.*
*Master, Savior, there’s something about Your name.*

*Selah.*
III
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.
Praise

My tires arpeggiate 495, brush cymbal-smooth residential streets, chorus over the 14th Street Bridge, vibrato expressway riffs on merge ramps, 200 miles down 95 until whispering into driveways or crowded city garages.

When I park, they knock softly—guitars plucked into the feedback of pebbles pressed into a parking lot, their endurance surpassing the endless asphalt hymnals of D.C. They’re timeless, placeless, their song raising the same joyful praise of dirt road to grassy field, even when they’ve run bare, and they’re discarded in rural burn pits, the bottoms of creeks, or chopped into the bedding of suburban playgrounds—saints and martyrs, singing.
Branches

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

—Hebrews 11:1

I admit I am little
like Columbus, raking
leaves here for minimum wage
beneath apple trees on fire
with autumn to make extra
cash on the weekends.
I don’t wear hats. Still,
I can see him in the days

after the miscalculation, when
there was no land, no gold,
no spices, just the ocean
consuming the horizon, the ship

upon a great gaping mouth, the blue
of suffocated cheeks. Yet there
must’ve been something else
beneath the pit-falling palpitations

of his heart, the writhing sweat
drowning his hat brim, something
keeping him moving—a structure
like the brickwork of this farm’s silo,
standing faithfully through two fires, 
three owners, and an earthquake. 
Beneath their charring and the tiny 
cracks, the bricks are still fresh, blood-
red clay. On the day the crew found land, 
that base frame within him must’ve 
emerged in his mind like November 
branches, when all the flame-drops 

have fallen to ash, the branches 
beneath so fat with fruit 
they bend like coastlines, 
there all the time.
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 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.
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 its value 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.
Xbox Evangelism

This unlikely field is ripe for harvest, a suburban living room, kids passing long nights on Coke and Swedish fish, killing zombies. United by death, believers and nonbelievers and the in-between fight for survival in a plague-ridden world, where religion emerges unexpectedly over exposed organs, the beyond discussed piecemeal as they hack a path through undead hordes. Testimonies ooze out almost unintentionally, the Holy Spirit moving effortlessly, like blood spewing from a severed carotid. There are no baptisms here, or corporate prayers, but love, the occasional shout of Praise God, encouragement all flow freely like grace, washing over the dim room and pixilated machetes. Bringing all the ingredients together, at just the right place, takes them hours, but they finally assemble a homemade deodorant bomb that bathes the room in fire, eating up the malignant dead flesh—not exactly Elijah calling down fire on wet wood, and not quite missionaries braving brush fires and malaria in sub-Saharan Africa—but the Great Commission nonetheless, salvation found or at least broached among shotguns and severed heads.
Plan B

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

No: 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, 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.

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

I’ll coat every needle and rubber glove, 
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 won’t have a summer blockbuster starring the resistance,  
because no one will escape untouched.

There will only be survivors.
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 every 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.*
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 cliff sides 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.
Sing It

Listen to the atoms—vibrating—
every object an orchestral pit

overflowing with obstinate

percussionists refusing silence
like a jury summons soaked in HIV.

Though we’ve thrown perfection

in the scrap heap with the geocentric
solar system and the four humors,

I know these infinitesimal musicians

follow the flawless Conductor. Zoom out,
and you’ll hear them accenting one

another. Go farther, and you’ll hear them

picking up new instruments, whole new
sections, trillions and trillions of symphonies—

you should hear the sound out of just

one pebble. Surrendering to the reality
of their worship, I no longer fear the metaphor

represented by tidal waves or thunderstorms
because I can feel the waves bowing, the lightning kneeling, in time with this pulse—the universe alive,

implacable, on a table, at an altar:

a lecture, a symphony, a sculpture and a back-door cut, a harmony and a tulip opening, another Monday,

a sunflower finally turning, a car alarm, a pigeon-toed boy, Bradford pears, the joyous crescendo
at the bottom of the page that makes the whole song

worth the while, mustard, I-95, talk radio, the implications

of praying mantises and lady bugs, children, the stars,
park benches, Dunkin’ Donuts, the stars, campaign

slogans, rehab, Driver’s Ed, SpaghettiOs, caged birds, free hugs, Gibsons, the stars, the librarian’s purple argyle sweater,
3/4 time, continents, crystal glasses, carpet fuzz,

a song, a song, a song.
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 its 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

trustimg 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.