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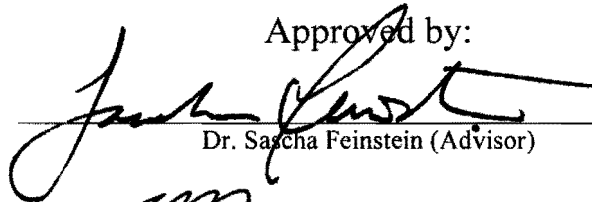
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Asphalt Pews: Hymns from the Suburbs

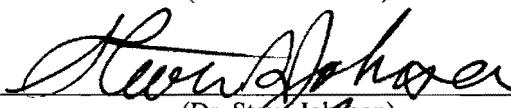
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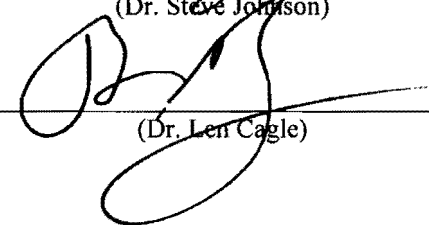
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Asphalt Pews:  
Hymns from the Suburbs

*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.

My deep thanks to Dr. Sascha Feinstein, without whom I would not be the writer I am today and many of these poems would not have grown to their present forms. Thank you for your guidance, teaching, words, and friendship. You are a gift from God.

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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.



**I**

## 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

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 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,  
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.

## 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.



## 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.

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.

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.



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*

in their too-short shorts

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 14<sup>th</sup> 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.

## 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 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.

## 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 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—hurtles 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 21<sup>st</sup>-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.