

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: MISSING YOU

Connor Watkins, Master of Fine Arts, 2022

Thesis directed by: Professor Joshua Weiner
Department of English

Missing You is a collection of poems that moves through simultaneous narratives of familial longing and grief, wrestling with God, searching for self-stasis and love, and living with depression—which covers the speaker’s world with an unsettled layer of dust. The poems are childhood stories, prayers, wishes, memories that can’t be forgiven. They often appear in contained forms of couplets or quatrains, other times the sonnet or the ghazal, setting boundaries for their shifting subjects. These poems exist in the curve of questions, looking out at what’s been lost and found, hoping to find somewhere, however unstable, to rest.

MISSING YOU

by

Connor Watkins

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Joshua Weiner, Chair
Professor Elizabeth Arnold
Ms. Lindsay Bernal
Emeritus Professor Michael Collier

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I.

But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the Lord has done this?

Job 12:7-9

Invocation

All I can offer is
 this heart beat staccato,
dying man's bravado,
 mucus spit on blind eyes,
spiraled dance of a house fly.

Glossolalia feet in dry shore,
 the last of life poured to steam,
 pirouette in water until all is gone,
the self, all breath and calamity.

The earth (out of love, hate, wisdom?)
 wants to keep me forever.

 Jesus, rip me from the hands of ash.

 Spirit, let your truth be a Bristlecone Pine;
 my pinprick blood, wishing music.

And God,
 if you want my life to be poetry,
 please, let me be a sonnet,
 and your love, a villanelle.

Mickler's Landing

Put it on record that the Holy Spirit speaks
primarily through gravity. The birds know this;
I forget when my body stifles its own existence.

Walking the East Coast, the breakers linger at my ankles,
yearning to pull me into their order. Beyond their touch,
a berm of a billion shells piled like reverie dust.

God surveys behind a cracked firmament of violet. I wonder
how I've become alone in so few steps. I see a woman combing
for shark fangs, a clumsy terrier chasing a ball in quick bounds.

A sailboat shines like Soria Moria at the scene's edge. God,
why are you out there? Here, where grief and earth fill my ears,
I hear the ocean's proverb: *Frail men trust we will never forget the sand.*

When I stand again: the muddy surge, shoreline stretching to the arctic,
if I could so far. The rain comes quick. Sandpipers flee their hunting grounds
as I approach. God is painting something arcane up above.

Retracing the miles I've walked, I search for shells and think of their lives
before they washed up. I lift my head to the downpour. The star returns.
I could be joy or suicide, grains stuck to my skin, but no one's around to say.

Another Morning*March 2020*

The streets are quieter.
A line of blue recycling bins
wait to be picked up,
but don't make small talk.
If there was ever a day
I could slip out of the world
unnoticed, this is the one.
Loneliness, compounding,
begins to amplify my self-
sabotage. Hope, like spring,
isn't sure it's a good idea
to stay. Alone for so long,
I think even more about marriage,
eating pancakes on the carpet
before the day can wake.
If you were here, my love,
I'd let you drool on the dirty t-shirt
I've been wearing for three days
as you lean on me, and sleep,
the whole house tired and still.
I'd be content with that. Greasy hair,
our clothes all stretched and wrinkled,
barely hanging on, like we are, the days
folding in on themselves. I try to wake you
and look out at a bird on a roof across
the street, the sun on its toes, trying its best.

Room

“Everybody say, you got a lot to be proud of
 Been high this whole time, don't realize what I done
 Cause when I'm all alone, feel like no one care
 Isolate myself and don't go nowhere”

–Danny Brown

Barely looked out the window
 these last six years
 another waist around the star
 and the sidewalk still cracked
 Fence woven frayed life events
 thorn wired top and bottom
 foundation collapsed
 name carved in rotten columns
 Crowd of half-finished paintings
 all crooked nails rusted
 hanging out drooped loose
 carpet climbing holds figure drag
 reaching gashes piled glass shatters
 No lady running in the walls
 just static amp siren songs
 chasing me on soggy rugs
 like radiation hunting vital signs
 Hair growing past my ears
 devils asking where'd the light go?
 tempted by tightropes
 hippocampus sold my chance
 to be a good disciple
 Feeling like a concussion
 might have hit my whole body
 don't know where I've gone
 brain giving wicked orders
 Spilled out on the couch
 someone no longer recognized
 nine tail lash synapses
 got eyes seeing blurry
 Snow hasn't lost its fury
 the door still blocked up
 left my key stuck in the deadbolt
 forgot what any thing matters
 Jesus sleepin' blow up mattress
 storm eying in the living room
 but the man never wakes up
 like he forgot about the garden tomb

or whatever contract
I thought we had made up
A birdsnest on the bookshelf
any day from toppling over
clothes hanging everywhere
they won't fall off of
The world outside
leaving more of me each daylight
not sure what kind of life
I should even dress for

First All-Nighter

The thick plastic TV set illuminates me and Mom, sitting on the trailer's sea green carpet. The neighbor's homes rise up to dwarf ours, so easily rolled away. My sandbox stands in the corner of the yard by my dad's pride:

the wooden fence hiding us from the forest's eyes.

I'd sit out there alone for hours, crafting towers in the sand. Maturity was water pouring from my mind at five years old, holding together the grains.

She plays Pokémon while I watch. *Take the controls, Mom,*

I say. We sit in the forgotten hours, waiting for Dad to return from the night shift at a plant spitting out Mercedes-Benz doors.

All the highway's grace can't carry his exhausted body

back home in the white Accord. When he arrives, Dad sleeps with tin foil on the windows to block all flickers of sunshine; Mom still prefers lamps and sunglasses in the winter. Ink on government pages will make the desired change.

They will agree on what cannot be fixed. *I've got it from here,*

I say. After we've had enough of what the 64 can offer, Mom and I lie on the couch; I remember this image from above.

Through the blinds, I see our young star rise over the fence.

I fall asleep before Dad returns. When I wake, placed in my bed,

I tiptoe through each room and find each object resting in preparation.

Depression

Don't blink: god will pull the carpet.

Lies have grown fond of me; Melancholia, a lover.

280 Million carry this caustic mystery 'till it spills.

My therapists ask, and I always say, *Yes, but I never will.*

Make your thoughts imitate logic. Live like a Macropinna.

Conform to the image of an ink blot.

God says *look at me*, but my life has no windows.

I can't see you past the ceiling fan. Can you hear me now?

Falling in love isn't what you want. You can't bet all of nothing.

The walls won't build themselves. I'll help, let's take a walk.

Have you seen the devil in his human-hair suit?

Quiet, quiet, Adonai. Death calls my name in the silence.

The carpet will pull your Christ if you keep on listening.

Little Heaven becomes a ball in your hands. Don't fumble the round weight.

Don't love: Have you ever seen a bloodstained dove?

Tear out what hurts and throw it in the frying pan.

Depression always comes back when it's bored with travel.

I welcome it in, let it sleep in its room, still decorated from youth.

Quality Time

Mom likes to ruin our visits together for her own good.
It's easier to leave behind what's left a wound. We drove back
to Texas on the only day the paralyzing Southern snow fell.
I knew we should have turned back in Louisiana, after the ouroboros
of anger, four hours of silence. Then Pandora radio found every curse
she wanted to chant over me. When we did arrive at dusk, she told me
she was driving ten hours back home, right then. *Bye*, not *Goodbye*.
I knew it was life or death, so I forced her to stay, my arm bent
in the van door. Morning brings a type of mercy, smoothing
like a nail file. Our traditional passed down. My weary soul
is the bull on the pyre to make her clean. Of course, we make
the best of the final days, then she must go. Her arms around me apologize
for the brain that wants to drive her off the road. The part she'll try
to evict again when she returns home. The part I've locked away in myself.

Normal

I stay up grading and piecing together lesson plans from my scraps, thinking of the pizza and spicy deli chicken my mom brought home back then. I know now they were not a treat, but a necessity of exhaustion. My receipts pile higher than dishes. I see how she continues the great performance of her life, now from my own editing room. Years of filling in her gaps have left me still too foolish for the average day.

She says there's no such thing as normal, and if there was, it sure as hell isn't whatever we are. Maybe we're all discovering fossil footprints in the dried mud we danced in the night before. We have no more than prayers like steam meandering upward until it's gone. I hope God sees when I'm sleepless and weeping a morning away, like today, for a woman who doesn't fall as desperately as me, who battles demons in different costumes.

Another day passes lying on the couch with depression resting on my chest, unable to lunge, even for the remote, to turn this whole thing off. I hope God sees my words condensing on his window in small, steamy breaths, and makes a picture of them with his fingers. Please, lift up the sun with the slightest motion of your great tattooed hands, and bring, inevitably, at the very least, some mercy.

Self-Portrait with Nissan and Failed Romance

I'm fingertips interlocked on the console
like an oyster. What is our pearl?

I'm an embrace that halts your heart and
I hope to be the vessels of wine-aged love.

I'm long stares and stolen glances, the shine off
your wood-grain glasses. You're tortoiseshell and

I'm black lacquer, wood burn, smoke signal.
I'm broken speedometer and bent signs.

I'm a meteor burned up in ozone and you're my phoenix
in the right seat. I'm tires blowing out, a black halo ripped.

I'm a get-out-of-relationship free card. Can you color
a fading man? I'm blue confidence, naked secret, violent silence.

I'm the kiss you've never felt, the felt tip marker you write
wrongs with. *Never use red, it's too harsh.* I'm lipstick, ink pen.

I'm the words I wish were in your throat, the handwritten ones
I fashion when you fold into an unread text. I'm the space below

the E-line. I'm lightning flash and Texas rain, but I wanna be
your Windy City. I'm our rotini twisted. Take and eat

unless I'm rancid and expired. I'm milk past its ninth day,
I'm on my ninth life. I'm a stray and I'm hands to my own clay.

I'm the flower that will last too long, the Valentine's day poem,
your unexpected *Yes*. You've given me your hand and I'm imagining

how that pearl will shine when I park this car. I'm letting go.
You're wildfire and dry air. Trust will come when I'm no longer smoke.

Response

A student emails me about rushing
to her last grandma's funeral. Others message
about stress and headaches, the now common
mysterious sickness in the body. The assignments
they'll miss, all the papers I have left to grade,
they stack for us into windowless towers. When I reply
I completely understand, I mean to say my depression
is looking for the right moment to stop
the guessing games, the day where hope is trapped
behind the snow-blocked door or when

God—I've lost even the memory
of how to build a fire, to feel your friction in the air.
I've got no broken mountains, no sleeping gods,
no rotten fruit. I don't have your supernatural
phone number to call anymore. What difference
would it make? What could I say anyway?

I give my students all the grace I can, some magic
in the spaces between expected words. I want to say
What you'll learn about loss is much more important than this class.
I hope you didn't meet the wrong man at the bar.
I wish I could be the prophet that hears you,
all the voices in the background of an ordinary day disguised.

I worry about them, young strangers
who take up so much space in my life,
who stare silently at me in class. I wonder
if they know how much I struggle to be present,
to give them what's left. To give these words to You.

My grieving students, I pray you keep everything I've lost.
Do you know how quickly a day becomes a life?

Imagine Your Mother

floating to who-knows-where or nowhere,
red sea from her bath bomb body, leaking
hope until she can't set a syllable to sail.

*

asleep forever like she practiced for,
bloodstream brimming with too much salvation,
whispering that it's time for an eternal smoke break.

*

ignoring calls and texts, run into the median
on her way from Tuscaloosa or Nineveh. How fast
can you drive? Do you remember wanting this for yourself?

*

now standing with you on river cliffs, joyous or dishonest,
standing with you in a stranger's living room yelling,
crying, finding which tactic will be magic tonight.

Do you know how long to disbelieve the grave threats,
or do you love her enough to tie the weight of her existence
tightly around your wrists? Now imagine the cliff again.

Repeat this: I'm the only knot in her rope.

She dares you to push.

Home

Home has always escaped me. Walls chipping,
white as bones. A winding river, a bare apartment.

A river winding bares cracks in my skull.
I hope they reveal a mural beneath my naked walls.

I wish to become a mural, not a wall, naked,
my body seen only by doctors when it fails me.

I cannot doctor what has failed me. I'm a picture
of straying away from God, his distant beauty.

Straying away from God, my only beauty,
my hands are in the dirt, digging for a family.

My hands in the ground—my dirt family,
is there any peace before I return to you?

Before I return to you, let my hands be full of empty,
the river full of wine. Don't let home always escape me.

II.

For a long time I have seen no plums;
alone I have climbed blossomless ridges.

Wu Li

Tribulation

God, where are you in my Babylon? Your distance taunts like a matador here.
The devil's locked away all your songs. Even he finds no allure here.

I deafen the day with car speakers, search for syncopated peace past the windows.
I wander barefoot through this wilderness, praying there's still a door here.

Melancholia never leaves, presses into my skin like bed coils. Home is
white walls, a transmuting mirror. The moon, too, looks away from my war here.

You've placed such longing in my chest. I see a future in someone on the train, her dress
like your first paradise. The dark tunnels silence me; there's nothing left to adore here.

To love you, I've learned, is to suffer, to feel nails hollowing out space for you.
Wordlessness is my jaded offering. Assure me it means something to endure here.

Would I be wiser to leave here, to leave you? The mysticism of one finger could be
all I need, but you're a poet too, unconcerned with time or what's obscured here.

I worry my spirit has flown beyond your eyes, that years have voided my name.
El Roi, if there can be nothing more than this, show me that you see me torn here.

Bird Psalm

I've grown tired of choking back
stained glass, chasing an apparition that
carries all loss, though I haven't seen the end
of cornflower fields, new lines of vines.

God, when will you let this Magpie fly?
Dove, will you finally perch on me
when my bones can only mutter to
Acacia roots invading my rented earth?

Could I lose myself in shoulder blades
if I were a Great-Tailed Grackle, calling after
some poisonous cure for this ghost-divined pain?
When will music inhabit the air once again?

I hear spring water in the well, but will
the sun guide these wings to sky when I hit bedrock?

Summer of '09

Moundville, AL

We skated on the left side of the road
through our one-light town where everyone
knew too much, except why the grocery store
was always cycling through new owners.

We knew the words to "Kick, Push"
better than Lupe did. Mom said our DC shoes
were too big, but we filled them with adventures
past her boundary lines. We shot Sponsor Me

videos on my flip phone, little films about
not doing drugs and giving your life to Jesus.
My friend smoked his Kools, hiding the pack
in dirty jean shorts. One day in June, we hiked

into the infinite forest behind his house,
emerging to a clearing cut for transmission lines.
We ran home when the rain came, knowing
our mothers couldn't bear to lose their murky boys.

I remember when we bombed that hill
on Elliot Ave. I ruined my knees, but he made it
to the car wash. My wounds taught my fear
of going fast. We lost our heads, dreams of starting

a skate mag atop his mom's shed. He ordered
porn one night, when she wasn't home, didn't think
about the bill for *Backseat Banging 5* his dad would find.
I had seen the consequences, his dad asking after us.

He was grounded for the week; I couldn't remember
My last time getting hit. I pushed home alone,
wheels clunking over sidewalk bricks. The last day
of summer, he gave me his hat, laughed

when I thought I broke my spine on a trick
at the Baptist church. It's been a decade since then,
even years since I visited that Indian Mound town,
but still, the red sidewalks carry cracks from our falls.

Winter Aperture

In the photo, you're holding
a bowl up to your chin,
the phrase *If you love the cat*
painted on it. I asked what
the other side said, but you
couldn't remember. No ending
makes sense—that profound
secret left among the shelves.

Only an *E* and *X* peek through
your puffer jacket's zipper teeth
(another phrase I do not know).
I transfigure them into words like
T-Rex or *Sexy*, a little irony to match
the laugh I imagine after the shutter
of your friend's camera phone.
Straight black hair streams over
your shoulders like ribbons from
the cuff of your Capitals beanie.
Thick-rimmed glasses draw me
into squinting eyes, your stacked smile,
then asymmetric lines of shelves
crossing behind you, bringing you close.

Seeing the picture months after,
I notice smaller details: the uneven
white tips of your nails at the edges
of the bowl, scattered hairs falling over
your clothes like scratch lines on old film,
orange clearance stickers making a future
out of crockpots, fake China, silverware.
I have no clue where you are, only that
some part of you moves from that aisle,
effortlessly, towards me, then away.

Sestets for the Devil

You're not much for poetry, but I know
you're writing. Something pragmatic, I'm sure.
You take something, leave another. How many,
even among your enemies, notice?
You've been busy (I know you'll like
to hear this), busier than God some days.

He likes to rest. You prefer strolling about
with your three-piece suit of glass, angelic body
that begged for Job's house to collapse. You hide
us up your sleeve, slip us into the wrong hand.
You had what I long for, but traded it for terror,
and still God outdoes you in punishing the body.

You must know the future, an old pastor said,
planting thorns in the most fertile soil. At times,
you drive us back to God with your Roman spear.
You like us best in his close comfort, easy then to slide
into the ear and make your joy of us. You know, I prayed
for you once. Maybe, just for a while now, you could try
the other type of evil, see where that takes us.

A Small Anniversary

Rain crowns the tree we sit beneath.
Our picnic blanket is soaking wet,
our pants too, the soles of our shoes.
We don't care. That midnight's passed,
that it's pouring down, that what's left
of dinner has blown into the grass.

She writes Chinese characters on my back.
I guess them on a third or fourth try,
then struggle to remember the small things
I've learned, tracing 我 and 瓜 on hers, feeling
the transitions from skin to sheer shirt,
bra band rising where my strokes lose shape.

I kept asking *Do you want me to kiss you or not?*
knowing we'd agreed against it, but still she closed
her eyes and left the world, leaned into me like
we leaned into that tree. We couldn't see the car
down the hill, only a deer passing, not looking long,
then the lightning, grey canvas clouds against the moon.

For Stephanie

You wanted to run from life since you were a girl,
leaving your drunken, loveless mother for Miami

then finding your way back to Alabama,
marrying young, having the kid you never got to be.

You gave up Stephanie for your middle name, Megan,
then Mom. You seemed happy, the early years I can remember.

Splashes at VisionLand in the summer, nights fading into mornings
as I watched you play video games, before I could. You say

I was always telling you where to go, what to do next.
We shined the most in the Sunflower Picture, both of us

in pale yellow, you flashing your teeth unprompted in that field
of rising gold faces. Now you never show them, hiding

a chipped tooth. You look like a sister to your self, a kind of dream
mother, the energy of two. You still want your hair that shade of brown again,

like mine, but can never find the right dye. The family curse
came in seventh grade (maybe you were the same age)

and the right man to ruin you again. Your boyfriend and I threw
a Frisbee with a hollow center in the yard, played Madden '09 inside.

He shared your love for thrifting and staying *crispy* tan, riding around
Tuscaloosa with no plans. Then, as suddenly as I had seen his naked,

tattooed body trailing into between rooms, Bruce Lee staring from his calf,
the house was empty. You told me, eventually. The marks he'd left.

I was even quieter after that, woke at 6 AM to read or build
with Legos upstairs. Other days, I skated around town, miles

of dust dirtying my wheels, found the stability in leaving. Desperate
texts each day, I wanted to die, never able to be enough for the older girls

who couldn't carry my weight and all of yours. I couldn't stop you
from losing yourself like gold pack Marlboro ash floating down cold.

*

Depression made you numb, made your work suffer.
The orthodontist let you go after a while. That's when we left

the house for an apartment. Soon you needed a roommate
to keep it. Then another blow, when I left for school at sixteen.

You'd start fights like fires, those three hours of distance
you couldn't take. Then a full day in the car for college in Texas.

In the summers when I was home, we had to sleep side-by-side
in the canopy bed you'd always wanted and finally bought.

I'd sneak in through the dark, always up late. Didn't care
when you'd walk past while I made out with the girl I loved

on our cramped loveseat. You and I were lost somewhere
in that two-bedroom, looking under furniture for joy.

You worked wherever you could, unemployed, then not.
Late nights at the gas station, triple shifts at Waffle House

to afford enough sleep to repeat the cycle. Our first trip
to Texas for orientation, we decided to drive through the night,

to get away from Granny's, our life trapped in the front room
of her trailer after the apartment was too expensive to keep.

On Thanksgiving, we watched a marathon of *Snapped*,
didn't leave the room when we heard our names in other's mouths.

We only unlocked the door once everything was foil-wrapped,
Granny passed out in her worn-in recliner. You swear

you don't know how, but you passed on that desire to run
away from death, craft a new life each place I went. And though

I've wanted to escape you, though all my therapists say
it's not my job to be your husband or father, we share

these toxic knotted veins. The further I leave, the heavier I feel
your life yoked to my neck, making it ache. I carry the nights

we yelled and cried into the morning. When I said I can't be
your reason to live. When you said that I don't love you anymore.

*

Still I stay up late, knowing one day you won't be lying to me when you say you're going to do it. Your new roommate who calls you his wife, might push you to the gun, the blade, that tainted white Mercedes at the bottom of the Tennessee River. Maybe it will be me who dies. Though I know

I must go on, you've said it many times: you couldn't go on after that. What else is there but the version of me you can't get back?

Like that boy, running around the park in memory, I want to create a life where you don't need to chase me, where I'm unnecessary,

where you understand why we can't live in the same city, why I'm anxious for my grandkids. I want to peel off the wax of worry,

see my skin underneath. But I don't know if I you can find joy anymore. Worse than the thoughts of you leaving this world

are the ones where I imagine myself at ease, no longer wondering where you might go, which part of you depression or rent will take next.

I see you weightless with wings, maybe like those wading birds I name for you as we walk miles along the coast. Further down, we can see

the pier, all the hotels and casinos rising high, empty of travelers and retirees, those beautiful Spanish roofs, a festival of lights applauding

as the sun steps behind the curtain of night. I pray there's a day before the end where you can walk the beach without me, the ocean almost silent.

And still I wonder if I can live a life not haunted by you. Perhaps I've been trying all these years, to say goodbye, not quite louder than the waves.

St. Christopher and the Christ Child*Cummer Museum of Art**Jacksonville, FL*

Does he calm the storm, or call it closer? Divinity
hasn't stopped the weight of his body from pressing
my shoulders into a grimace. I should have known
he wanted more than this red robe, more than me,
as I dug my staff into the river, avoiding sirens
I thought were myth. If I could see his eyes, fixed
on some invisible thing, would I see affection or
authority? I may not know the difference. I agreed
to serve, but I didn't know I'd carry this child,
his boyish voice dripping down as he commanded me
to walk until I couldn't. He'd already be saving the world,
he says, if only Mary had kept her promise to teach him
how to swim. He loves me for the little I can offer, a hand
steady in my matted hair, cold toes hanging to tickle my ear.

Outside World

At the Zoo, she insists on racing, even though
we're both wearing trousers and it's gotten a little
too warm for her sweater. She asks for a three step headstart,

even though we're only going *to the end of that bench*
not even 20 yards down the path, and I beat her the first time,
then she wins the second, then I say let's run *way down there*,

her decline heavy with breath. After close we walk the long path
back to the entrance, playing a game where we close our eyes
and follow the other's voice. We hold each other's hands up,

showing off to the empty park, finally walking in this world together,
the one outside—not the one we create in her basement apartment
where we cook shrimp and scallops together in a single pot

on a burner on the coffee table—but this one where we see a family
of gorillas sitting, and thinking; a single elephant standing under
an AC unit, her feet sinking into a floor of sand; the cheetah

curled up like a house cat; the tiger lying near an artificial river it cannot jump;
the zebra that we wonder about aloud (*Is its head bigger than a horse's?*);
the sea lions' parted flippers and slick, lazy bodies on the rock before they

dive past us, kneeling down, our faces so close to the glass. *All the animals*
seem happy to be alive, I say, knowing it's not true. They go on living as we pass.
Maybe we brightened their days. Maybe they didn't even notice us.

Seasoning

After the split, I'd visit on weekends,
sprawl across the arms of his office chair
and drink apple juice, eat leftover Howies cold.
I spent hours online once AOL discs had faded,

taking care of digital pets, talking to strangers
in chat rooms, watching sports highlights
come around again. I'd often wander
through the house while my Dad was sleeping,

night-shift tired, always looking as if he'd been
awake all his life until this moment, where he knew
I'd be there for dinner. Even now, meals mark
his days. He's always telling me what we'll eat

when I finally make it down to Mobile for Christmas
or the first of summer. He buys custom cuts of steak
at the grocery store or blends three types of ground beef.
We eat for days, until the plates are bare, each time

the blend of spices blooming beneath our knives.
I remember being around 10 when I had my first
crawfish. He boiled them in a huge pot in the yard,
and while everyone drank beer, I dipped my fingers

into a container of Cajun seasoning. Last summer,
we found the largest boiling pot in the store. *I might
as well get the one I want*, he said. Later, we bought
a forty-pounds of live crawfish, watched them fall

into water brown with zest. His beard was grey in places,
covering that face of meetings and partings. That day, even after
the scent had faded from our private festival, we sat savoring
the golden meat, throwing the husks into a bucket between us.

One-Sided Conversation

对对 she says, say that,
 even when you don't understand.
 It's alright, you can give it a try.
 Nod vigorously, keep eating,
 with the stomach of a deer,
 but not too fast. Don't let
 your plate get empty. It won't
 stay that way. Just another day
 she forecasts this fluent future,
 all the visits home to Shenzhen.

对对, but I don't understand
 the picture of life I'm holding.
 God, did you forget to attach
 the file? Did I miss a lesson?
 If you come back tomorrow,
 I'll regret the way I've spent
 my days stuck in the dryer,
 shrinking, died red, like
 the vintage t-shirts I leave
 at the bottom of the basket
 each laundry day that passes.
 Surely you'll give me a few
 more days to make it right,
 if I know anything about you.

对对, but each day makes me
 wonder if I ever met you,
 if I was always right to say
 I had known you like
 secondhand smoke,
 not the intoxication
 I had felt at church
 until I didn't, the words,
 the music, wax in the ear.
 Have you vanished
 like friends across the miles?
 Did you pass my wife the torch?

Where have you been
 hiding in my house? 对对.
 Maybe your face is unswept hair
 on the bathroom floor.
 Your arms are fridge handles,

your legs a bookmark in
a half-finished novel. Your eyes
are in a lightswitch, and your
ears are stains on the carpet.
The rest of you is stuck somewhere
in my bloodstream, hit a snag,
took a wrong turn in my veins
trying to settle in my brain.

How do I get outside this
revolving hotel room of mine?
How can it feel like home?
对对, but O Yahweh,
have you made me like
an eagle circling empty sky
between the world and sun?
Perhaps our love is like
the character 鹰,
a goose and a question,
lingering there, two birds.

III.

with love in his heart like a ruinous wound

St. John of the Cross

Who You Love

“Lying back on Jesus’ chest
was one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved.”—John 12:23

For years I’ve lied
on the stranger-stained carpet

calling out, wondering
where your touch turned

away, became this blight;
desire, dunes of sand.

I don’t find you in my love’s
skin kisses, your body

now packaged in plastic. Did you
intertwine us as a consolation,

a parting gift? Depression you gave,
always shadowing me;

drives I don’t remember driving,
the same lyrics looping back.

A lust for death covers my mind
like graffiti tags along the metro line.

I’ve learned to find beauty
in the curving, freehand font

of synapses misconnecting,
the old gone, their way home lost.

My church taught me I could always
talk to you, but all the answers

I need can’t be tested, can’t be
trusted in this imbalanced brain.

So many lies kneaded in neurons,
I can’t hear much over the static,

the worn-down record skip
of distance filling time.

I wanted to die sophomore year
(and later), wandered around campus

past midnight, wondering if I'd love
heaven like you say I will,

if I'll still feel far away,
just one of the billions

wanting to touch the end
of your robe, to disappear into its folds.

So much space and history
you see, and hold, and still hear me,

even if these words feel lost
between my room and where

you sit and watch the infinite twist.
As a kid, I wanted to be the first

to fly through Jupiter. Now I wish
I could just lean against you

like John did, knowing I was who you love,
to be the one who lived.

But I know you're found
in suffering, splinters stuck

until the skin sheds. Please, if you can't
help me feel the world again,

turn and tell me it will end. Let your voice
become a piece of paradise.

你想要什么 ? (What do you want?)

Lying just far enough apart
 that our faces aren't globs
 of acrylic paint, I ask, 你想要什么 ?
 and she tells me my pronunciation
 has grown so clear. At night,
 I scrub the piled dishes while she washes
 her face, then set out her mirror
 and rose lotion. This morning
 I brushed her hair, held sections
 to the light to see the balayage begin.
 We're both too kind, echoing
 ageless phrases one after another.
 We go back and forth, like a Chinese game
 we call Please Let Me Pay The Check.
 谢谢 ! 不客气 ! 要客气 ! 好客气 !
 Always such big plans for the day.
 Sometimes we do 7 things, sometimes 3:
 Studying vocabulary for her Ph.D.
 Watching documentaries on street food
 with rice and beef or rare takeout
 that takes her back to Shenzhen.
 Video games, card games, looking
 into the exchange rate of talk and sleep.
 Learning the dances her students do
 in the mornings. Seeing me dance to
 *Nsync makes her fall over laughing.
 The ice cream she chose solely on name
 yesterday surprised us both. *Pluto Bleu*.
 Sometimes she runs up to me across
 the room and squeeze tight or call me
 大考拉. When we first met, she said
 she valued her free time. Now she's
 always trying to give more of it away.
 As I write, I'm looking over at her
 (there's something we like about
 seeing each other from far away)
 and I ask if she can remind me
 how she answered that question
 however long ago. 我要你, she says,
 and of course, I repeat the phrase clearly.

New Year's Day

The fur of my parka holds me like an Adélie
as I walk the Gulf shore. The wind's eternal song
reminds me I'm still alive. Whitecaps crash over
uncounted grains of sand, steal them away unseen.

Willetts, Terns, and Sanderlings scuttle
where Poseidon's tired exhales meet the shore.
Dad and I brave the frigid day for this detour,
on the way to test Florida lotto tickets. He believes

with disciple-like faith that he will, eventually, win.
We keep our heads forward, only occasionally yelling
to check in. We pick up shells to remember the summer:
pristine homes collected 'till our pockets are full.

Easter Without the Magic

We celebrate the day you appeared again
 to all your clueless friends on the road
 showed skeptics the seeing stone holes
 in your skin. Walked around a little rotten
 maybe. Did you wanna be naked
 for a while? not be Jesus not be God?
 a little eternity before the ladies
 showed up? The old robes left behind.
 You knew we'd want something
 to hold. I used to find you
 in my walls. Caked-up paint dirt
 that won't come off the shower floor.
 Little pareidolias. Now it's so hard
 to feel anything. How many years
 I wonder until I forget the real you?

Would you visit me a moment?
 show off some souvenirs? Or just sit
 play video games take our minds
 off things. That'd be nice wouldn't it?
 I know you must be so tired. I just washed
 the sheets if you need a nap. I'll be quiet.
 Say whatever you wanna share.
 But I want to hear your voice,
 not just your words. Some answers.
 Would you sing for me? a song you wrote
 on your piano. Not a churchy one that misses you.
 There's room. I'll move the stone of laundry.
 I'll wash the earth from your feet. I'll try
 to write you a better poem than this.
 But the morning is quiet sitting on the couch
 watching church online. It's not just that.
 I turned and where did you go? My router
 can't reach you. The tomb (my God) is empty.
 Nothing feels the same.

Protection

July 2021

Her 姥姥 reminds me to protect her here
 after what happened (again and again) in Atlanta.
 She holds my hand tighter today
 after looking at ourselves in a window
 across the alley from what could be
 our new apartment. More and more names
 down the list of this endless season.
 I notice each person we pass, wondering why any
 must feel this way, why she must take inventory
 of the whole city, even here as we walk DC's Chinatown.
 We pass characters climbing up store signs,
 the arch embossed with 中国城, a mosaic of red
 sapphire, turquoise, three dragons resting over H Street.
 The shop I buy her taro tofu pudding around the corner,
 restaurants that might bring tears, if they have the right dish.

She rests her head in my lap, talking about
 news stories from WeChat, stones slung
 on either side about the Uighurs in Xinjiang,
 students returning home from abroad,
 bringing the *Chinese Virus* back with them.
 All the experiences that can't be translated.
 She worries about leaving the house without me,
 about what will happen when 妈咪 and 爸爸
 can finally visit. If they brush past someone on the sidewalk
 and don't have the American words to protect themselves,
 don't know how to avoid the centuries digging a trench
 to trap them in themselves. All I can say is 我的爱, 我的爱,
 let it out, let me try to carry some parts of you. I'll be in the papers,
 my name on the news, before I let the world take a piece of you.

Psalm for the God of Judas

Lord of the broken lot
 as I used to hear on late night TV
I can accept your baggage
 which we carry together you say
 I miss you in a new way this year

I betray my old devotion
 seek my own saints: dead poets
 piles of snow like tortoises in the shade
 little boxes & bags along the road
 with bread crumbs dried ketchup

I leave the window open for you
 a lantern distance soon consumes
 I look down & wonder if the neighbor
 with two dogs sees me naked
 strolling the house to wash

Maybe he's writing a poem too
 the odd pale image The trees before
 the hill the yard dressed with snow
 God are you a commercial in the night

for love songs lost for lips?
 Despite your heel's spur I wouldn't trade you
 I think I know You see my best
 like a star unnamed a faint white light
 in the corner of your room

Clean Shave

You video call from North Dakota, sitting on a bed of crimson sheets, the room like a freshman dorm. Quiet world (the way you like it), a foot of snow, orange-clouded mountains, pickups parked outside.

The hours are long. A man's work in the oil fields, nitrogen and frostbite at your fingertips. Driving a tanker back from Wyoming, another day riding into town to buy tall rubber boots, eating burgers

and chili you say you *shouldn't* with your illusive brother. You let yourself breathe when you quit, the air no longer *hot as hell* up north. Your voice doesn't carry the woods, the boy who waited, still in the daylight bush, for a buck.

A stranger sees the script *A* on your hat, yells *Roll Tide*, makes that bit of nowhere not feel as far. You laugh, smiling longer than usual. I take notes when you describe your new equipment, company email, that your beard

is gone now, for the respirators. You look like Dad again, your younger self staring at the TV, focused on racing for hours, passing the controller to me once you'd won. I ask how you feel about it all, but don't get much more

than elevator answers. But you send pictures each day: the smokestacks, the endless road, a rabbit licking its paws, an aerodrome of windy snowfall. It's snowing here too, for once. You sleep early. We wave across our screens.

Tangles

My arms pulled into a travel pillow of sorts
around my wife's head. Our legs in a fishtail braid,
destined for numbness if I don't say something.
The more twisted, the better must be her philosophy,
though she opts for *comfy* to characterize
these positions we find ourselves in.
Two minutes not working on something
and she's gone, forgetting the ever growing
list unrolling from her tongue. My approach
to sleep is more methodical by necessity.
My back must be straight, one leg curled
into hers, the other extending from the spine.
My head straight forward like a soldier
behind a comrade, marching into the darkness
until the bombs come in the morning—garbage trucks
with their unknown schedules that transcend the days,
which have by now lost their own sense of order.
Steady work and teacher pay come back after the summer,
and the daily joys of marriage become hard to carry,
not due to their weight, but because there's no good way
to grab hold of them. There's still boxes in the living room,
still the fallen closet rail. Odd ends that barely had a proper place
before we moved in together. Too many wake-up kisses,
the stir fry on my breath lingering like my mom
when I finally call. My wife makes me think even more
about all the moments that make up a day,
all the ones I waste. Love adds, but it can't take away
these worn parts of me. Days start with a crack of the neck.
Cold air outside the sheets and half-open eyes
that drive her to work and back. We march
into the night with two different cadences.
I overprepare for the journey and wake exhausted.
She travels light and tells me about her dreams
in the middle of the night. They are worth all that I lose.

If I Could See You in Miami

1993

Young, younger, your mother, states away. No one
calls you *crater-faced*. You get to be Stephanie for a while.

Summer goes until December, and boys love to hear you say
Ya'll are crazy down here, your Alabama accent in the ear,

for a moment, like sunshowers on beach-burned skin.
You don't have to worry about me, but I know you're

already set on graduating to that motherly dream.
A Benneton sweater, Reeboks double-strapped beneath

bright leg warmers; you make them seem like angelwear.
I can see the neon, the palm trees between sheets of blue,

and they're not holding up the moon or the casinos.
You're not holding the hands of your sisters

when your mother disappears into a flick of ash,
her magic trick. A snap, another man, then dirt on the carpet,

the shoes stacked tall. I hope you don't fear being like her
yet. You can't drink, so maybe you take me to the strip

to sing. We walk and hear "I Get Around" somewhere
along South Beach, slinking out from a glossy Caprice

with underglow. You wanna sing TLC, Madonna, or Whitney,
or maybe we're Kriss Kross before our roles get switched.

Then we're at the soccer field where the smell of barbeque
fills the neighborhood, and you bite into sugary muffins

with corn kernels peeking through. Something sweeter
than blueberries, you say. You don't have to think of

who will be lost and left. Your body doesn't ache,
and who but me knows your name? You're no mother,

no sister, no one's aunt. I want to remember you alone,
knowing beneath all beauty there's something buried.

Missing You

God, how many years have you been away
on vacation, sending unsigned postcards
folded into swans, now an Osmanthus bouquet?
I've longed to see you coming back from afar
like you did before a Cuckoo crafted a nest
in the hollow of my side. Are you shower steam
and Viperfish? Have you hidden a new address
for us in Alpha Centauri? Will heaven be
the end or the beginning? I don't know. Maybe
we're both the sort others label as *awfully quiet*.
I have the hardest time believing you can make
angels sing in this burning cathedral. So help me
forgive all I've left at your office door in piles.
Lord, Friend, tell me a secret. Tell me about your day.

Notes

The epigraph of section I comes from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

“Mickler’s Landing” references the painting *Soria Moria* by Theodor Kittelsen, which draws from the Norwegian Fairytale popularized by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe in their collection *Norske folkeeventyr*.

The epigraph of section II comes from a note for Wu Li’s 23rd poem on Macao, translated by Jonathan Chaves in *Singing of the Source: Nature and God in the Poetry of the Chinese Painter Wu Li*.

The epigraph of section III comes from “Madrigal” by St. John of the Cross.

“Home” uses the form of Jericho Brown’s series of “Duplex” poems in *The Tradition*.

“St. Christopher and the Christ Child” takes inspiration from the titular painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1518).

“Who You Love” begins with an epigraph from the New American Standard Version of the Bible.

“Psalm for the God of Judas” borrows a phrase from Gerard Manley Hopkins “The Lantern out of Doors” in line 12.