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TESTIMONY

by

Joshua Tilton

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

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PLAGUE DREAD

In the unusual dead
of spring I visit a Russian cemetery,
crucifixes packed tighter than a box of chocolates.
They're painted an array of ancient off-reds, teal, soviet
green – crossed sticks picked from a catalogue rationed
of every other color. I wonder what that generation of sprung
crosses remembered most – the war, the war, or the war?
Our war is a virus. The shortest tree ring gap. The marble dropped
in the stretched linen of our shared memory, to which all else
bends. We do not have the luxury in knowing that this will be
forgotten. The graveyard is a sanctuary of forgotten grief,
but the names etched inside, the numbers on either
end of name remember life, lives lived,
what each one survived, and how
magnificent they are
for trying.

I

A SPACESHIP LANDS ON THE NEW EARTH

As we settle, I make note of every “first”
this time, in case anyone later wants to know.

Such as,
the first earth-bound birth,
or the bite of that first bright apple or
a mother crumpled into a pillar of salt
as she remembers what she left behind.

The first death.

As it happens, the first real rain
is condensation on the bulkhead
from two young lovers making
steam. The father bangs desperately
on the door, catches the first ever act
of small, shared violence – he calls them
every kind of animal. The dull corridor light
refracts along a streak of sweat forms
the very first rainbow. They name the child *Promise*.

Some things are familiar. A brother still sports
a fur suit. An ass will not shut up. A bridge
is still a mixed metaphor for connecting things
and ending them. Most days are longer
than the nights and we still name
the planet Earth, for what
we will eventually become.

We agree to maul the dictionary, remove
words like *gut*, *shame*, and *shame* again.
Our conversation suffers and we struggle
for the words to mourn or remember
that first person’s absence. Because of this,
every death feels like the first time.

And it is.

I'm often asked how we got here, so I point to the spaceship, though now it is buried in weeds and choking vines, its portholes like skull sockets. The road to the access hatch is overgrown and no one knows what makes the earth rumble, though they say it is giants asleep in the hills and the lights that shoot through the sky are the tears of the dead. And they are.

And this is the first time we remember how to forget a good thing well.

ADVENTURES IN ODYSSEY

Some nights, I am Jael shunting
a tent stake through the king's head, or
three brave young men unburning
in a furnace hotter than hell, or
Lot's wife, Lot's wife looking back
& dribbling into pillars of salt. Some nights
I am listening in the dim-light bedroom
as Mr. Whitaker – the voice of wisdom
in the audio dramas – lifts me from
the Imagination Station™ into Odyssey,
the All-American hometown the radio
makes me believe in. To me, he is 32 ft. tall.
When he goes missing for three seasons,
his replacement voice actor is a two-bit sham –
I am too smart for that, so I discover
his death in Colorado Springs, only
he has a different name and face
than the one I knew him by. And some nights,
after longing for a home, I pull out the atlas
and dig for a town I know doesn't exist.



ODE TO MY EYES AT NIGHT

I will never fly,
step into a leap
into a soar, my arms
horizon-bent. I doubt
I could ever
bend metal,
cuff a villain, or
address the populace – snap
my fingers and flip
the world on its head.
And yet,
one night
I woke up to piss, the room
a pitch black. I wished
I could spark flame
with my fingertips or
float into the hallway,
try to stub my
invincible toes.
Instead, I clinked
the hanging lightswitch,
one eye pinched
shut, & sulked
to the bathroom.
When I faced
the dark ten feet
back to my bed,
I turned off
the light,
opened my other eye,
& learned
I could see
in the dark,
my crimson cape
billowing in the wind
behind me.

THE IMAGE

I look for god in a guelder rose
and find him there, surprised.

Later, god demands change
and I don't have any on me.

I listen to god shout slurs
in the subway and when god
shouts back, I hear it.

I look at god in the mirror
and pick at god's unfortunate face.

I practice god on Thursdays
with loops of white thread
and a basketball.

I dip god in the blood. Eat,
digest god inside me.

Praise god, praise god when god
still fits into my clothes.

I study god in the dip
between shoulders, find god
in the way of the body.

I close my ears and god is still singing
showtunes or mumbling about the light.

I take god back to the guelder rose
and leave him there, inside.

EXTRAMMISSION

*The belief that light is emitted from behind the eyes, inducing sight.
Popular 5th – 10th centuries.*

Imagine, all things	seen or unseen
by the discolored	pupils projecting
from you: each bronze	sunset your doing,
every commonplace	magic made light
by your hand. Even	the sun, projecting
such brilliance –	watching your
every mistake –	must be the twinged
oculus of a deity,	glaring and relentless.
Things get more	complicated: shadows
indicate a weak	eyelight,
and in	
darkness you must	be out
of juice. This was	before quantum
mechanics, though	it might explain
a cat that is both	there and not there,
or a piece of gold	foil, or a boy
both god	and man.



REMEMBERING THE LONGEST DAY ON EARTH
ON THE EVE OF THE ELECTION

13,546 feet above glacial Norway, whitecaps
burnished in the escaping sunset, I saw the sun
again, tremendous and bright – the sun, rising,
in the west. The plane was en route to Frankfurt,
descending from the arctic circle at sundown.
We chased the equator, and as degrees of latitude
gave way, in a brief and violent delight, the sun stood still,
before, like magic, it clawed its way back, back up the sky, un-
touching the mountains, refusing the onset of night.
I wondered – who else on earth has made the setting sun
into a sunrise? We did, in our sleek metal tube,
high above the stark hills of Norway, outpacing the dark
and returning the sun to its place in the sky. In our pockets:
the power to bring back yesterday. We held it loose.

MY (SHADOW) IS A HOKIE

Though no one knows what a hokie really is, (he) laughs and jokes
that it's a castrated turkey, its wild removed – what some call broken.

Watch, (he) says and cups one bruised hand over the other, shoots
a white-hot breath from the sharp pocket of (his) mouth, feathers
(his) outer palm and warbles into the moon. A hokie sings in kind.

A roaming turkey can recognize an imitation, but a hokie loses
its wild voice, so a turkey call is quick to lure it in. Too, they must
be sheltered from the rain, or when the first drops nestle on its head,

a hokie will lift its monocular eyes skyward. It yawns in wonder
and the beak becomes a cup. Rainwater fills its mouth
'til the warble turns to panic and the bird drowns, standing.

My (shadow) watches football with his Christian father. (He) cheers
louder than the man whose Hokies took the field, his alma mater.

Heavy clouds gather. My (shadow) prays with cupped
hands, as if to catch an answered prayer as it helicopters
downward – like leaves from seasoned silver maples.

Look up, (he) says and smiles at the sky, *taste and see His goodness*.
I see (his) knees knock together in the almost-rain. (His) voice
wavers, waiting for answers. My (shadow) tries to fold back

into me, but I refuse (his) annual pardon. I can hear him warbling,
calling softly as the water comes, though now I know an imitation
when I hear one. My (shadow) looks up in awe and wonder.

STARBOY LEAVES HOME

The starboy is adrift
in the tight black vacuum.

He imagines
someone has locked lips
with the end of the universe, sucked
the air clean out.

He looks back
at the violent surface
where his mother tends
what could be
his ranch, becomes
of all things, a poet.

Suspended
these miles above
and floating through
the pitch void, he sees
the blue planet –
like alabaster, a cracked
marble globe; how big
must the thumb
and forefinger be
to flick it into a pit
of spinning planets,
what placed it in the world,
to whom it belongs,
if anyone.

II

BALL JOKE

It is summer. I straddle rusted iron bars the color
of blood on my Uncle's cattle ranch. Today, we are
corralling young bulls into a terrible, loud vice
with metal claws that trap a body into stillness.
The bulls, they scream a scream rooted
in their bellies rising into the morning mist
before the vice tightens and we approach
from behind. Now quiet, my cousin holds
the testicles with shears, snips
the walnut sack into a large brown bucket.
I am uneasy, but he reminds me:
These aren't bred but for beef.

From the next stud, he hooks
the tendril connecting
the two around his gloved
finger, swings the bulging
bull testes to me; *Take those
to the house for your aunt.
Oh come on, it's a southern
delicacy. Don't you want to be like us?*
So, I walk up the hill,
blue and red veined
balls hung, their heft pulling
me down to the earth.
They knock together. Blood
trails down the side,
plodding the dirt. I tap
the kitchen window and my aunt
sees me, holding the balls,
and laughs.

Looking back,
I see them, my cousin
rolling on the ground, the only
time I have ever seen him cry.
Even after I throw them
at the woods, leave that fall
for my city, I still hear the bulls'
panicked groan, the weight
in my open palm.

TWO BOYS, MATCHES

Toy soldiers standing off
 in a sandbox, shelling their ears

while we cackle and light mines
 under the infantry,

child-fit bombs the size
 of small fingers. At tenth scale,

they shattered, cheap plastic
 shooting every direction,

legs severed, heads half empty -
 last man standing wins.

The loser chooses a leftover,
 torches him under the small

eye of a struck match, and the winner,
 if there's snow, balls together

a fist of white powder, lights the fuse,
 and chucks it at his brother's face

so we could inflict a kind of pain,
 get as far from pretending as possible.

CHEKHOV'S GUN

Act 1 – Pellet

My father, seed-sower, enlists us
to shoot pigeons as they steal grass.
Our perch is the second-floor balcony
and we take shifts, firing at small birds
eating. The metal beads are too dull
to kill – instead they lodge themselves
beneath the wings and you can only tell
a shot lands when the bird stumbles,
wobbling into the air. Unlike playing
war, there is the unmistakable joy
of impact. We keep score, defend
the killing fields & the grass grows green.

Act 2 – Bullet

My deep south cousin gifts his sons shotguns
at age five – a rite of passage. He takes me
hunting when I tell him I've never mounted
a kill. He lays walnuts on the ground in vague
deer shape, explaining that a head shot
ruins everything. He points to the crack
between the breast and shoulder, to
the heart walnut – a bullet there will leave
a blood trail, preserve the head unspoiled.
A young buck lingers at the business end
of my rifle: time stops, and I freeze too
when it looks at me. It flees and I learn
a gun rarely goes off when you expect.

Act 3 – Shard

I am grown and living by myself, my only
home defense a yard sale samurai sword.
Through my window a car is being rekeyed,
but the owner refuses, reaches into the boot
of his Charger and removes a sleek, black rifle.
He fires at the workers six times, missing
each shot and runs into the woods. Everyone
is thankful to be alive, until there's screaming
in the distance. Jordyn was nine years old,
washing dishes, when a bullet struck through
the wall & lodged itself in her forehead.



MARY ANNE

My grandparents bought three headstones
at a family discount. They knew Mary Anne
would never marry. When she entered
the world, umbilical cord wrapped
around her neck, her infant brain
suffocated until the surgeon's
trembling fingers cut her free.

How funny she looked
squeezed into the plastic
pink chair, spooning butter
beans into her gaping mouth
at our Sunday family meal. My mother
once called Mary Anne stupid.
She has yet to live it down.

My aunt – with the bruised
brain and eager eyes –
often I wonder if she knows.

Mary Anne works three days a week
for seventeen cents an hour stuffing
plastic cutlery into cellophane wrap.
The white van with a smile
stickered on the side
picks her up in the mornings
where she sits with like-minded
adults. At church, she is beloved
and works magic in the nursery,
where no baby in her arms
has ever cried. She sits, content
and focused, making sure
the head is firmly held
and the neck is free.

MY MOTHER TELLS OF HER MOTHER

After Penni

She was, at best, a prophet.
Otherwise, a siren. Regardless, her gift
was in knowing what people needed
to hear. Once, a pilot knocked on our door.
In hand – an aerial of the farmhouse. She saw it
as through God’s lazy eyes while I felt
the view of a summer bird, escaping. She bought
three. Some things are drifting away from me:
can crusher, switch, gourd bird houses –
passing the rook between her toes or winking
when she pulled an ace. She taught me god,
imparting those unshakable truths like
Everything you do is a worship of the god you most believe in.
I remember her dying body. I remember
the stemmed veins pumping like a delta
of stretched skin. Shucking corn late
one summer, I remember how the corn silks –
those soft whisps of thread – looked precisely
like my dead mother’s silvered hair.

WAFFLE HOUSE REGULAR

Your parents meet in a Waffle House and marry
not long after. Eating there, you're told to *keep
your eyes on the door – your soulmate might walk in.*

You learn that the beat a swinging glass door makes
is the rhythm of a full heartbeat and you count
the door-swings a waffle takes before you flip it:

52. Somewhere in those cooked waffles you'll find
the one, all the good stuff baked in, *they promised,*
and all that waiting will be paid off, and you'll be

happy, *they promised.* College comes, and you fall in
and out of love like a return customer at four a.m.
There is hardly anyone else but you all know

what you're here for: the slim chance of a perfect
waffle, flipped at 52 seconds, fresh from the maker.

DOUBT

*Reach out your hand and put it into my side.
Jn. 20:27*

In the mirror, my body's limp scars – a chipped tooth, the open hole of a dime-store earring, a patch of brown hair where skull met metal pipe when I was nine – my mother nearly killed me for getting so close to death. I imagine the hands of Thomas, the biblical doubter, the coward who felt the fresh portholes in a god's body. I imagine the silhouettes of flesh, finger-sized, and Thomas pressing in to really, truly see for himself. What would he see in mine? A dull and fractured faith: I pierced an ear & moved in with a girl. Visiting home, my mother recounts the tumult of my birth – two weeks early, two weeks in a glass box with pneumonia. She says she hardly knows me anymore, touches my earring, and smiles. She guides my hand to her stomach, to the stiches of her c-section. I can almost hear her whisper. *Touch here, she says. Believe.*



GODLESS GHAZAL

I watch my mother pray – I swear, sometimes she just glows God
and I'm still here listening. Next time you stop by, swing low, God.

See me whack it at 3am? Sneak cigarettes and prosecco
on the roof of my father's condo? Oh, I checked – no God.

Let's talk about faith, race, a gay brother, Scott, who folded
a ripped-out Leviticus to see how far he could throw God.

Look at this body. Watch these hips swing, lips sing freely
like blue water, blonde Adonis. Think I'd never outgrow God?

I am child of wrath, son of disobedience. The uncircumcision.
Here is my tabernacle. I am my temple. Joshua's new Jericho – God.

A MAN WITH A LETTER APPEARS IN MY ROOM IN THE MIDDLE OF SEX.

1.

Four years ago, a man (a man?) appeared
behind me in my bedroom. I was having sex.

He had a letter, ratty clothes. He appeared behind me,
out of nothing. I lived alone, but I was with a woman

I fell for. He had a letter in a sealed envelope.
A man appeared behind me in my bedroom.

I was naked and I punched him. He fell
into the dresser, clutching his letter.

With a headlock, I pushed him out the door.
I called the police, and could not go back to sleep.

3.

Once, I punched a man who walked into my bedroom off the street. I was having sex for the last time. He flew into the dresser – the cut above his right eye dripped down onto the carpet. I kept him in a headlock and screamed loud as hell, *who the fuck are you?* He tried explaining, all panic, *I have a letter. I'm supposed to be here.* I punched him above the eye, and He bled all over my naked body. Terrified, I dragged him out the front door, locking it behind him.

4.

[REDACTED] a man [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] bedroom [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] screamed [REDACTED] hell, [REDACTED]
are you? [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] *letter.* [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

5.

We went to her house.
I didn't sleep and I locked
the door. We broke up.

6.

Some nights, when I can't sleep at 2 a.m., which is when it happened, I think about it. Did I lock the door? I know I did. I try to piece it all together, find something missing. Find some hidden meaning, the contents of the letter. The pleasure in poetry is in assigning meaning, the trouble is in finding none, because once, I punched a man who appeared in my bedroom while I was having sex. I was naked as I dragged him to the door, blood everywhere, blood on me. The cops followed the trail until it disappeared after the third step down the balcony. Now I lock the doors, read my letters.

CHRONICLE OF RELATIONSHIP ENDING AT GOD

Now irreligious, I kiss her

and she says

it's not like we're going to -
before we do.

Weeks later I say

*I'm just not sure I love you
yet.*

She whispers softly, *leave*
and then I take my first 8 cigarettes
throw up
and fall in love.

In our house we raise

a dog, host friends, paint
walls absurd colors eat
mushrooms and avoid pregnancy.

Decorating the steepled
church for my brother's wedding
she says

I have never seen a love like that before,
which made me wonder.

We

travel the world, but,
in occupied Jerusalem, after
another shattering,
I rush to her locked door and
(by some miracle)
it opens.

Inside I lift
the edges from
her skin hold her
gently
in
the tub.

Some call it the spirit,
moving.

I leave her
the house, the dog
the held hands, the crutch
I was. I pulled out
after tasting
God in mid-December.

Maybe
I was rash because
I still hear
broken sobs, pleading:
I thought we were gonna get married
and
we have so much more to
and
I hate myself,
the spirit,
for moving.

Some nights
I still
hold her.
Some nights

I am
held.

ELEGY TO A SUICIDE VICTIM WITH CHERRY VANILLA COKE

I found you splayed
on the bed, absent-
minded.

At your wake, I whisper
your name into a cherry vanilla
coke, cap and bury it beside
the magnolia we date-stamped
with pocket knives, brothers
etched into a tree that would
outlast you. I pour drinks for you
and drink them.
In this way, I keep you.

Later I add you to the spicebox
of the earth. I buy a dog and meet someone
you would've liked. I'm told this
is supposed to be said but does not make it
any less true. I choose to move past you.

In the red-shifted autumn, after
another morning of shared memory,
I unearth the cherry vanilla bottle
and lift it to my ear. The soft hiss
of your escape hurries past me.

I WAS A BIRD TENDER

That first snow must have startled them.
In the morning I found a shivering pile
of feathers, ruffled and unkempt,
cowering in the corner on the ground.
Perhaps, I could say I scooped it into a dustpan,
lifted it back to its tender hearth.
I could say I dropped a tissue-laden shoebox
at its tender feet. Perhaps, in these scenarios,
the small creature refused to break back in
or skulked away from my makeshift hotel. Maybe
I touched or tried to lift it and it came to carry
my scent, which turned its mother away. Really,
two days later, I lifted the quiet batch of feathers
into the yawning dumpster at the end of the street.

Once I hit a bird while flying down
Zetus road. I couldn't shake the guilt,
so I turned around and cradled its broken
body into the woods. People would say
I am soft. That it's a small thing. That I
would betray Mother Nature by breathing
life back into it. I'm fine with that.
Not like she had cars in mind anyway.

Later, I saw a bird perching (proudly, I think)
on the streetlight above the vent. I can honestly say
I was there when it first took flight, the small
discolored thing. It rested on the wooden fence
and didn't look at me, but it did wait. I see all these things
around me that would take so much to change, that on
my own I cannot make a difference. Here,
in my way, I helped. I did not make the call.
I kept the heat on. I buried its kin.

SURFACE TENSION

I have stood on the edge of a lake in midsummer and asked for God to do something. How there, in the early morning, with the mist hiding myself (my human body) on the shore, and the rest of the world asleep, I wanted a miracle. Nothing big, like an angel twirling a sword or a fish that spits up a quarter (Washington's face all shiny). And *God forbid* I ask for something personal, like a dream or hearing the Boss whisper my name (a soft *Joshua* would suffice). Though, I have heard of such things. Being done, you know. So, there I was: barefoot on the dock, pockets empty, and I asked for a miracle. No one to see, no one to hear, just me and water, and my foot above that water, the surface unbroken. Maybe God is a God that fits into a bottle. Maybe someone corked God (into a bottle), and he(?) is always drifting from one shore to the next, waiting to be opened, corked, and released again... I step. The lake ripples (ripples). I don't know the specifics, I just know that when I closed my eyes and my feet left the dock, what happened is mine.

III

REVERSE BAPTISM

I'm rubbing water
into my arms and legs

as everyone arrives
from their evenings.

We plod backward
into the river running

upstream. All eyes
return to me. I confirm

before he asks
confirmation. The pastor

pushes me under the surface,
unshining, out of life,

into death. The world loses
its brief color. I emerge

alone on my own strength,
dry and weeping.

DUPLEX ESCHATOLOGY

Heaven is a bird I make with paper wings,
atonement for the night I pray a bird dead.

Atonement is a prayer made at night
and stuffed into a shoebox after light.

I stuff a box full of light and tissue.
I poke small holes to let the prayers breathe.

This is a holy place, the bird can taste the air.
I beat its feathered wings to teach it how to fly.

It learns to prop its wings against the lid,
fly straight into the pinholes of sunlight,

I tried to pin it down, but it flew straight toward the sun.
I should have known in trapping and teaching it,

I taught it how to beat a trap – I should have known
the bird owns heaven, and I have only paper wings.

I LET THIS LAND CLAIM ME

For the Caucasus

And now my breathing is miraculous
my shaking body beautiful - only here

a tuning fork in prime pitch
rung against the mountain shoulder

here stepping into my own ancient footprints.

I am these old hands placing boulders
in the empty steppe, a chorus of lungs
starting off the wind, the wind rippling
through stacks of river reed,
cottonmouth and cattail.

Once I let my own coarse blood
mix in with the carving water,
make way for the thunder
of a hundred softer feet.

Nightly I shout my name, Joshua, into rivermouth,
rockface, hear it whispered back
you are
you are.

My whole life I have been a few lives away,
and now, returning to a place
I've never been, I find
I've been here,
waiting to arrive.

AFTER MY SISTER NAMES HER MISCARRIAGE

Jordan,

I wish I could pray you alive.
Instead I bear you with a spent
breath, wonder if you can even
respond to it. Nothing is firm.
Though, I have learned belief,
like in promises, like in the promise
of a new and secret name given
in resurrection, one written
on an off-white stone, a name
none but the holder knows –

a name you know.

SELF-DISCOVERY

My nephew pinches the TIME
cover, waits for it to zoom
in or out.

When this fails,
he slides his small finger
across the glossy boldface print,
angry that the page
does not turn.

He finds the leather-bound
chaise where the iPad sits
that I bought him
in my wisdom –
I did not plug it in
the last time he let it go,
so when the screen
goes dark,
the boy looks back
into his own glassy eyes,
whispers hello.

I TEACH THE BOY A LANGUAGE

if a boy is not taught the color
blue, he will point up and call the sky *clear*
or the big empty
up above.

some languages do not count
past three, and use *many* or *much*
instead. if i teach the boy
this way, he won't obsess
over his notched belt
or the measure of himself.
he will know that many
is a multitude, much money
isn't, & he can count each person
by what they love most.

one language does not know the past
or future - all things happen now
or at a different time. if he
still lets me teach him this,
his dead mothers can hold
his hand while he walks, smile
at his first love, his last,
his love.

i do not teach him blue,
he does not miss it.

MY NEPHEW LEARNS HOW TO CATCH FALLING STARS

After the Lyrid meteor shower during quarantine, March 2020.

The silence of the earth at 3:40 am, vacant industrial hums, cars-become-ghosts, pinpricks of starlight splashed over a black canvas – and you keep missing them.

I point to the streak that flashes to our left and your head flinches, but you didn't catch that one, either, and tears start to muddle your vision. Desperate,

you ask how to catch them, and I tell you about the night our father stayed in the hospital, leaving us two brothers alone – how your dad found me crying on the bed in the darkness.

I beat soft tears while he held me. Then, he poked holes in a black sock and slipped it over a lightbulb, flipping the switch. We stared together at the fuzzy patchwork of night sky until morning.

The next night, we drew constellations on the walls painted in homebrewed starlight, a sky he made me. He pointed out an imagined shooting star, and I laughed at him, playing coy. And then I, too,

started looking, and I saw them. Shooting stars. Streaking along the corners of my vision. I asked if it was magic. *Just don't look away*, he said. And I didn't.

A LOVE STORY FROM MANY QUESTIONS

I remember when I first heard them: *take, and eat. This is my body, broken for you:* cross-legged on a living room floor, god flesh in a small ceramic serving dish, juice pods for blood. Later, on a run in the Mississippi swelter, confessing to my father my need for a savior on the front steps, my desire to be loved - white gown, the baptismal's overnight heat, the water's deep blue.

Many Tuesday evenings later, I confessed I'd changed my mind, blew our small world up. I left for college, learned to embrace a body imperfect as my own. We rescued a dog, bought a house, fell in love - normal things. We talked long, dark hours on the porch, god an afterthought. Mostly, we were fine - I was a favorite of her father, and she taught me laughter that ran thicker than blood.

On a trip abroad, I found her crying in the bathroom, blood seeping into the tub from her opened wound, her blues deeper than I'd known. That was the first time I prayed to the Father for anything, latched together in that warm water, pressing her body into mine. By some miracle, the locked door had opened (maybe God), and I learned then that there is more than laughter to love.

After we split up, I didn't look elsewhere. I started to pray again, to love a little more each day, as I had been loved, as she had. I took the blood, the body, and partook in small rituals of grace, held the word of god against my beaten chest. I wish I could say that every late, blue morning was better, that I stopped smoking, that I joined a body well. Instead, I worry that I could not make a good father.

It is December. I watch from my window as a young father shoots a gun at another man and misses him, fighting over love and a parked car. Later, I learn the bullets entered a 9 year old's body sitting in an apartment kitchen across the complex. Her only blood, her grandmother, wept on the curb amid yellow tape and flashing red/blue lights, screaming at the world. Her name was Jordyn. I have to ask *why*, God?

Most mornings, I circle the complex and search for the voice of God. I sidestep puddles, pass by the holes in the wall, think of that father they arrested, of Jordyn, who met me by the mailbox one morning, blue lights flashing in her sketchers. And would you believe it? I have fallen in love again - I have chosen to fall in love. Some Sundays, we drink the blood, the bread together. I am still listening, hopefully, for the voice of anybody.

I want to love as the Father loves,
like how he loved the one with the special god-body,
and watched as his son's blood turned blue.

TESTIMONY

In the courtroom at the end
of the hallway, the judge asks
are you a witness of these things?

I used to pray
for tragedy.

Baking in the heat,
rinsing in ice
water.

There is magic.

I held my breath
when I went under.

I was afraid of love.

Sometimes, I am still
holding my breath.

I could have kept the dog, if I tried.

Questions,
questions.

Sin and guilt.

There is still so much I do not understand.

I ate the cupcake.

Not guilt. Conviction.

I did.

All things are political.
Nothing is political.
All poetry is personal.

I am afraid of being
a man.

Jesus was the son
of God.

He died
and lived.

I cannot explain an ark.

But I have chosen
love.

I testify, *I am*.

