

Hymnal Essay

1.

Not the wolf but a shepherd
counting. He would not want us to sleep by highways—
I prefer to be a secret,
would not wish to get caught in a sermon. Many parables

feature children. Both shepherds and I
rely on roadside flowers to tell time. One girl
plays greenly in a graveyard, small beasts
unafraid of her. A child is a small animal—unlike a beast,
she wrestles words.

My first three: *Da-da, Anna, Amen*

As prayer, my dad translated them:

*Father,
Grace.
Amen*

He teaches me to speak,
and so original sin
teeters on two wheels. Hornets nestle
under a seesaw; I fall
with them. A first sting
is the shock of a gun—fangs
that would protect a kingdom.

Christianity—

in the beginning—a heretical Jewish cult.

Splinters and lullabies lean toward

We would not be destroyed.

Koine Greek
eats cheerios. Dad explains Santa to a five-year-old:
a dead Turkish bishop. But when I cry:

God created wasps to protect Earth from aliens.
Needles are bright swords one may carry in the mouth. Does a beast know

it was created? Wonderful tigers—may they simply die?

Crawl under pews;
gather rhymes in graceful turns: bound songs
lure fledgling
bookworms. Dad lifts me up

to drop pennies in the crossed tithe box. Bible paper
and common measure—

they suffer with power.

I found the wrecked box
(splintered shock)— I wasn't there
with the robber, but I see his shadow

circle the altar.

Would a poached lamb hunt doe? False idols strike
his right cheek. His four blows strike one bell.

All the long hair and all the bold columns, they defend—
but they couldn't put the offering box together again.

I stitch words, bake Dad's favorite pie.

Coins scavenged
under cushions
gas the car:

we take brown bags to motel-homes; I meet Tuberculosis
at a nursing home.

Laborare est orare: to work is to pray.

Parsonage means: we have a home.

Car means: theology
when Toni Braxton dresses the radio in red contralto

(*a voice is God's gift—even a preacher's daughter may abuse it*).

The shepherd
sits outside, goodness and mercy in his dim-lighted pen, in the shadow of his
crook.

Red doors date back centuries, open to sanctuary:

I promise

to keep my father safe.

Where I anticipate
a note,
my fingers brush the limits of this sphere. (Does my hand brush safety from song?)
Red carpet
belongs to itself,
shoulders shards of the offering box
and its broken lock.

2.

My matte devotion is quotidian.

I meet Grandmother before first light
to pick peas.
We kneel in untitled dirt,

seeking weeds we can't yet see;
branches snore; verbs preach, blustery.
Damp earth wakes worms as birds cut

the pregnant sky. Dawn's stubborn
locket snaps open.
We sit by ourselves,

hedge-hidden. A small town gathers outside.
Social insects
carol the doors of churches.

Always, there are no babies, but she and I remain in the nursery
(a wolf prowls sanctuaries and church school—like rabbits,
when startled, we sit still.)

Today I will wear waxy scraps
from the lift-lid desk
and Grandmother's legendary skirt:

Black velvet over soil-crusting knees. Kitchen-wall homilies. Vascular
twigs for slurping. Narcoleptic hairpins. Our rocking chairs creak.
Buttons pearl the moss mattress, the stem-spines. The darkness
of hyacinths. Worms and yarn drape detritus of dairy barn.
Bones of canned salmon. Our curls in the beak.

Throw the rake behind the roots. How wordlessly death takes her breath from my cheek. Jesus would
gather children to safety. Nestled now with her Lord Grandma can't save me from thinness.

Sway under titled ground.

My name used to be Graceless. Then they named me.

Mother nightingale,
where is lightest wind? Why is there

the right

to gather a bird?

Why are
broken eggshells

longing to be gathered?

Struck by a clapper, the circumference wobbles. Even a cup of milk may splash a growl.
Mouth of gun. Bell towers. A man's thumb till the nest is adjectives.

Winded, explain worth to a hunter: I have been loved

as if I were

complete. (Adjectives sit close to the body.) Grandmother's skirt

tempted

every spruce tree to gossip. Her favorite melodies

twining:

I come to the garden alone,
biting from itching vines whole tomatoes.
We garden together
while the dew is still on the roses.

3.

In my bedroom, blues metronome;
reds needlework a psalm.

Maintain the flame in corners. This bethel is no building.
Four walls may seam a full skirt. Dear God,

your face is all mosaic: beasts that ever were born

ascending stairs of tongue.

Odes canopy over, but there's no unison.

Alpha through omega,
cadence curves words devoutly. I don't know
my body,

but I know letters magnetize fingers. I think of
my friend, her brown eyes—someone
should. It's pilgrimage to become. Jonah stickers,
nightlights, syllables
spin my stupid tongue.

The Word catches blue glass

(Mary's face)

and cracks Tenebrae. A good example to save me hangs above the bed—is it heresy
for a small beast to cower? It's hard to be seen over and over
by a savior. (Jonah's whale was a room with the nature of a robe.)

This is still my room.

I reverence danger.

My Master—the Owner—only a Word.
Pavlovian clichés and Chekov's refrain nimbly go and come.

I could not pull their muskets, the burning match to the palm.
The mouth emits pleasure: you pull her trigger, expecting letters
to break up. She is endowed: line breaks clamp until the pulse moves.

4.

Angels drop candlesticks above an airport.
Prudence asks: *do you still carry baggage from the past?*
I pocket my ticket.

I wish to be in the storm but outside of the plane.

The man in the aisle seat—

Mr. Bible School Boot Camp. He drunk-preaches
to cleavage:

sins of the flesh
tempt as women. Weaker vessels listen well as wives.

*We are all sinners,
and this is the value of time.*

Palm branches wave: do not be afraid. Jesus stirred a second time.

Concealed carry enables us to adore.

Property:

we are his sheep.

Lonely and loaded, is his eye yellow? There are places where cocks can't crow.

A bell answers its own purpose: are the good guys martyrs?

Organists do not play guns, but do they practice drinking songs?

The aisle seat slurs through a few more verses;

leers warp

harmonious lines.

Somewhere God's exact rhymes
fall on the chamber of a firearm. I resent
the turbulence.

I was formerly the torch of an ordinary word.
He formerly rung out powder.
Is anything more worthy
than to guard a master?

Evening approaches to be snuffed clean,

to be quitted to the bottom of its lightning wing.

(An armed church might shoulder fire through the woods.
A sovereign breath might rest upon the seventh if it could.)

The choir cues: I set my bell to the flame

and extinguish. With no light,

I cradle matchlike syllables.

When God's cherubs eye a trembling lamb— that lamb trembles over trigger.

Inside a cherub's choir robe, every line-end grazes on a savior named perimeter.
Though frayed, I put the line-ends on,

offer some planet or shooting star as tithe

and in its eye—fear.

I would have a celestial body turn itself even once.

But everyone knows the law of the work— vowels slant flammable.

A thousand tongues
in a simple room. I would never deny it.

They think

they want

to protect you,

these creatures

grazing at large.