

GOD THE UNFINISHED

BY: CLAIRE SUNBERG

**TO YOU:
WHO ARE THE GIFT.**

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EXODUS 3:1-14¹

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am."

Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And said further, "I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Sarah, the God of Rebekah, and the God of Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their being enslaved. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

God said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain" (by this Unburned bush).

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is their name?' what shall I say to them?"

God said to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM."

FOR YOU (A NOTE)

We have mistreated God.

I will say it again: we have mistreated God. In attempting to engage in “meaningful” theology, we have - time and again - placed the unfathomable divine into categories that best fit our own understanding. Why do we deem this limiting practice necessary? Are these linguistic traps inherent to the work of theological discourse? Is there a way to speak and think of God without succumbing to this harm?

I will say it is oft difficult to name the ways we keep God from the cracks, the creeping-through moments, wherein one finds themselves at an utter loss for words. The moment wherein we find no words to describe the divine, no matter how insistently we may grasp, is perhaps the moment we come closest to utter (understanding). In allowing God to slip through our fingers, feeling warmth on our skin as holiness passes through, we are able to “touch”² - to point to - those always-changing things that God might be. By this I mean the following: whatever it means for God to exist and to invite us into the depth of holy presence, we surely do not know how to rightly speak of it. The event of interaction between the human and divine remains to us unspeakable.

And yet, we unceasingly speak of the divine. We cannot seem to keep the name of God off our eager tongues. We write books, sermons, treatises, songs, and the like, all seeking to pin down the divine character in premise after unholy premise. One will find, in this project of my own undertaking, no exception to those hazards. In using words to point to the many dangers of entrapping God (the Word) with words, I must admit I, too, have much for which to apologize.³ I, too, have spent much (if not all) of my life painting God in mine own image.⁴

For one may easily find that, in our human discourse, God always seems to wear another’s face. Perhaps because we do not know how to be before this face without a face, this God who is not me, and *be*. How is one to be before these things unseen?⁵ How does one begin to respond to the un-respondable?

It is because of the uncertainty of these phenomena that I believe in the sacredness of every question. Questions are, after all, the act of pointing our words somewhere else, somewhere *other than*, somewhere not me - like the holiest, Hail-Mary flare into a night both beyond and before us. The questions asked in this text are not meant to provide definitive answers, textbook categories, or in any way lead to definitions about God. The supposed theological “answers” engaged in this text are meant to probe questions. In this text you will find every question mark (and every question that leaves a mark) is different from the last; there are no two ? that appear the same, as there are no two questions - even the most persistent questions - that approach us in the same way, arise in the same manner. Each moment comes after the next in its own glorious particularity, meeting us at different angles all the time. In this way, every “perhaps” is pivotal: in speaking of God I do not know of whom I speak or of what (if anything) I can be certain. There is perhaps nothing certain about God, who is the Great Uncertainty, the Great Beyond-Our-Thought who provokes us to consider not-ourselves. To

consider ourselves (the way we act in accordance to our limiting reach) in considering not-ourselves. To consider it is only before the other, the not-ourselves, that we are able to begin to speak, to listen, to offer a chair and pour a cup of tea.⁶ The only reason I write these words is to be read by you - you who are the gift.⁷

I will say that of these words I have written, "I do not know what to say." In attempting to articulate the unspeakable, I find myself at a loss for words to write that will allow a person to read these poems well. I find myself unable to take up the mantle, to become the holder of these words, the keeper of the gates, that would determine how one might read well this well of my thoughts.

Just know that *you* are the occasion for these thoughts. It is for you who read these words that they were written. You have given me the gift of these poems, by gifting me a person to whom I can write. I am at your mercy.⁸

You may notice there are holes in my art. In the very form of these poems I hope to express the ways silence can be our most holy venture. Each blank space on the page is a chance for God to speak unfettered. And so, as much as possible, each of these works is riddled with them.

You may also find a lack of capitalization of the word "God" in these poems, which may be alarming for some. Of course, as can already be noted, I have referred to "God" as a capitalized proper name in this initial statement - this is so there can be no confusion on the prominent importance with which I consider the divine, nor any reason for confusion regarding who it is I seek to address.⁹ As is often typical, in this author's note I begin by inviting the reader to consider God by the name they are most likely to know. Consider these iterations of "God" to be a foot in the door, so to speak. Throughout the breadth of this poetic work there are, however, many suggested "proper names" - I AM, Ground, Bush, Grace, Unfinished, etc - that have been capitalized for the hope of unbinding God from "God" and one's particular assumptions, references, or notions about "God." In this practice, I hope to allow the reader (the guest) to deeply engage the truth that God - as the one who lived, suffered, died, descended into hell, and rose again - perhaps does reside in all the most unexpected places.¹⁰ Likewise, as even the "Expected" ways for text to appear on each page may be limiting, there are several instances where lines that point *outward* - to the "un" - may be found in orange, not black: even the standard appearance of text is not enough to convey the divine's ungraspable tendency. I hope to represent or allow one to carefully consider the transcendence of God, the other-ness of God, the unbound nature of God as the "evidence of things hoped for, conviction of things unseen."¹¹

There is a fundamental pointing outwards that arises when speaking of God, when acknowledging this transcendence¹² (otherness) of God, when revealing our utter inability to speak of God concretely, definitively, trapping-ly. It is for this reason that you will also find the word "God" penned as "g*d" throughout these works. The purpose of this asterisk is an attempt of mine to peel away our certainties, assumptions, and invite those who read this work to jump headfirst into cool, clear, fresh-flowing waters. In our jumping, in our questions, we may perhaps be confident that the divine goes with us (or before us).

We need not coax God into a theological mousetrap. Whatever it means for God to be present, I believe God is present in even (if not especially) our most forgotten dusty corners. Whatever it means to be before the divine, I believe it is a welcome, an invitation into welcoming, into hospitality. There is no need for a lasso to reel the divine into *our* presence.

There are two main themes that run throughout these poems: (1) a fervent attempt to point towards (or rather, *outwards*) to God's transcendence, and (2) a wholehearted lament of our failures to do so. And because there are no definitive, final binaries, there are several poems that grapple with both themes.

Consider this work to be a way of extending hospitality to God. As the human being exists in many ongoing iterations and particularities (and is said to be made in the image of God), so must we allow for the unfathomable multiplicities of God's existence. It is no secret that the measure of significant human events has often been one of violence; we have harmed each other, *the other*, by placing human beings into categories that remain representative of our created, essentialized hierarchies.¹³ When trying to definitively categorize and "know" the human being through our own lens of understanding, we actively colonize their very being, by filtering them through ourselves (when, in fact, they are by their very nature other than ourselves, not-ourselves, not *me*). How then is it that we have kept this secret of God's colonization - that is, *our* colonization of God? What does it mean for God to wear the face of the other, to dwell among these huddled masses?¹⁴ If God has been welcomed, clothed, and cared for as the stranger,¹⁵ and has been ignored among "the least of these,"¹⁶ should we not also say that God has been colonized as have the least of these? Mistreated as the least of these? Endured violence as the least of these?

What might it mean for us to engage in holy hospitality - that is, hospitality toward (*outward*) the most holy?

This is why I write of God the Unfinished. I do not believe God can be settled by even our *best* attempts at understanding. God is Always Happening, Unfathomable, Uncolonized. To speak of God as being Unfinished is to speak of God as unbound by our attempts to grasp, limit, and harm. God The Unfinished is God The Other, God The Unassimilated, God The Unnamed. God the Unfinished is an undoing of "finishing" itself, a total reverse (or otherwise new direction) of our tendency to draw the boundaries of those who are before us, making maps of those things infinitely un-mappable. Recognizing God as Unfinished is simply my best attempt to recognize God as utterly beyond me.

Likewise, God is utterly beyond these poems. Whatever God may be is not an experience that can be neatly gift-wrapped through our words, actions, or theology. We are always pointing towards (*outwards*) The Other, the not-us, the not-*me*, the Not Finished. This act of pointing outwards is an invitation, a moment of welcome, through which we may find ourselves drawn toward that which we cannot quite "put our finger on" (as though the fullness and character of God could ever be contained at will). This pointing outwards is not an answering, not a

knowing, but a continual circle of questioning, of claiming that we, perhaps, cannot make claims - and yet sitting with those things unfathomable nonetheless.

There is a sense in which “not knowing” is itself the grandest hospitality.

Admitting that which I do not know makes room for what might be, opening a rift between the cellars of our words, allowing possibility (or impossibility) to break through. The unfolding of harm allows space for the harmed to breathe - in this case, it is my hope that unlearning certain ways of speaking about God would bring us toward (outward) revelations of God’s otherness, God’s unfinishedness, God’s *un*-ness (God’s “unless”).

It is difficult to speak of these things which, as already said, may be unspeakable.

It may be useful to think of these poems before you as an expression of a kind of writer’s block. By that I mean, there is a certain sense in which I am unable to say what feels most important: I am unable to “say” (g*d).

In writing about the impossible, the un-graspable, the un-writeable, I seek to tear up and tear down, and to invite others, as I have been invited, into this grand movement of tearing/tearing. Alongside the divine (who may be other), alongside the other (who may be divine), I seek to break open the question of the holy (the question that is holy) - that is, the question of being before the other, the divine, the question that is asked of the self before the other, of how to *be a self* before the other.

How do our encounters with the divine rupture us? How do such moments call us - through tearing and tearing, breaking up and breaking down - toward (*outward*) ethicality, solidarity, responsibility, hospitality?

How might those things we commonly associate with God block that call? Perhaps it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of needle¹⁷ than it is for us to unlearn.

Perhaps this is why a consideration of God through previously un-considered associations is a sacred practice: in breaking beyond common tropes (traps) and models of speaking about God, about faith, we are tentatively (for the first time, tenderly) able to engage those things unseen - those things un-sayable, those things *un* - as closely as is possible.

With all our might, we have sought to take away the possibility for the ineffable to breathe.

And yet, there is breath.

Always, there is breath.

Despite our best efforts of violence, God *cannot* be chained, predicted, or reduced. Just when we presume to rely on the tides, these rogue waves sweep us off our feet.

With the divine, it is not a matter of conceptually being too “big” - theology is not a matter of trying hard enough. There is no sense in which someone could ever understand the Unfinished. We will never be able to fully speak of God, no matter how much effort, time, or studies we place into the subject. Whatever God is, *is* un-thinkable.

Wherever we cannot speak, those things that we cannot know, we must consider a call to silence, to un-saying - even among those things that are potentially most meaningful. It is, perhaps, precisely the “sources” of our meaning we are most called to un-speak about. There is so much beauty to be found in allowing our sources of meaning to be something other than “ours,” something that defies our ownership of any kind.

It is my firm belief that recognizing the harms of this fabricated, categorical box in which we attempt to entrap the divine is not “general,” “theoretical,” or “abstract” academic work. In allowing ourselves to recognize the depth of the divine, those things most meaningful, we are perhaps also able to recognize the depth of that meaning elsewhere - in bushes (burning or not), in the table, in otherwise empty homes, in the gift of other human beings.

As we colonize the divine into the confines of our own understanding(s), others (the other/s) are caught in the crossfire of our words. There is no way to both limit the divine and love human beings; we cannot worship God while violating God’s very creation.

Therefore, it is for *you* that I find myself pushing back: against category, colonization, limitation, consumption, and the systems we have created to uphold disdain for each other, and for God.

It is for you that I attempt to unravel my predisposition for harm.

It is for you that I, always and ever, am beginning to be comfortable with un-rest, with un-defined, with un-finished. You are my reason for pursuing the *un*, wherever it may be found among us.

It is for you I relinquish my hold on these words - those which are already, and those which are yet to come, yet to be read, yet to be. May I never cease seeking to unstick my thoughts from my clenched palms, to free the *un* from the prison of this throat, these prevailing notions, these typing hands.

Whatever you find here, it is *for you*.

Take off your shoes, take a seat, take this cup of steaming tea. All I have to give (and more) is yours, for you.¹⁸

How might I welcome you?

PRESENT (TO BE A KIND OF MARTHA)

welcome come in take your shoes off set your feet down
 hold this mug like the worries you forgot t h e s e
 drowned away at the door let me no let m e take
 that for you thank you for coming by thank you for being here
 thank you for filing the chair otherwise empty thank you for sipping the tea
 otherwise unshared thank you for hearing the words otherwise unspoken
 thank you
 thank you
 thank g*d
 for y o u

i have a voice because you listen i have a table because you eat i have a home
 because you visit because you ask everything of me by being
 here thank you for being here can i get you anything ?
 ? ? ? ? let me hear your troubles again
 let me fill your cup again let me take your plate again
 let me let me let me please g*d let me

every time you're in my foyer cross the threshold of this home i have a
 purpose a task a way-to-be thanking y o u
 for the way you b e thank you for this
 tiny glimpse of g*d for the space between what is said for the
 words we have no way to speak for the gifts i can never quite give as you deserve
 i may fill your cup / / / / / / / /
 over and over and over and over and and and and
 i will never ful- f i l l never fully f i l l
 this chair across from you there is not enough stuffing
 in the world to fill the weight of knowing you **thank you**
 for giving me reason for a chair for a table for a cup for a
 home - - - now - - - let me get that for you

it's the least i can do.

ON VISITING (THE HOUSE OF A FRIEND)¹⁹

what does it mean
 when someone burns before you
 begging to be heard

what does it mean
 when Justice - the Inferno -
 roars before you
 unwilling to be tamed

what does it mean
 when all you thought lost
 burns brightly in your hand
 when body awakens to the call
 and echoes reach your tired ears
 when memory moves you round

what does it mean
 when angels come to town
 announce the baking of bread and pouring of wine
 announce the laughter that comes
 hand in hand with the table
 announce the dawning of a day that breathes
 that has yearned to be among us
 among us as we are among u s

what does it mean
 when you see the face of g*d
 the announcement of the impossible
 the breaching of what has been
 the groaning of the could and should
 the to-be, the not-yet, the now

what does it mean to be met with forever
 to see all things burn but not die
 to be met with the fire that never stops fuming
 that implores you to grow in its heat

what does it mean
 when tomorrow is not promised
 when shepherds wander off the land
 and return
 for the first time
 with words on their lips

what does it mean
 when the one Before you screams to be heard
 does not wait to be announced
 calls the moment as it is
 when the one Before you knows your arms are for doing
 when the one Before you ruptures the you *before* them
 who *were* you

before them ?

what does it mean
when you face the undefined
when the burning "I AM" is not consumed
when you stand in the g l o r y of the Unfinished

surely
we can only take off our shoes.

GOD.

finished only in the sense of the final word a final unchangeable
 claim of changeability the final word that t h e Word²⁰ is not final
 never final never finished it is finished it is done - the Word will go on
 in this final forever forever without finishing a conversation to return to
 /// day after day after day after day after /// all is "said" and "done"
 on the matter that is that all is n o t said and done
 n e v e r said and n e v e r done(.) no punctuation
 no amen only awe only wonder words under constant movement
 o n l y ((as we can only ever say)) only movement only difference *différance*²¹
 only the one before you who refuses to be named the great / AM the naming of
 self the unchangeably changeable this cleft-of-the-rock-we-may-only-see-a-
 part-of kind of self blink-and-you'll-miss-it and we always are blinking it
 // this ever never finished // is always p a s s i n g by
 never stagnant in our memory

u n finished in the sense of never ceasing y e s yet also
 never p o l i s h e d never a final coat never a presentable explainable
 consumable up-for-sale self only a back-of-the-barn kind of wood
 weathered by years and hoof beats and sun pouring through the slated cracks of roof and
 who-knows-what ((maybe-g*d-knows-what)) maybe-*only*-g*d-
 knows-what surely never us never done never made to
 be anything other than a glimpse driftwood on a beach come from g*d-
 knows-where headed to the unknowable always and as a l w a y s
 to try and pick it up leaves coarse splinters in the skin refuses to be un-
 notably encountered refuses to be but a moment in your mind must be
 folded into the skin y o u r skin your roughness
 that once was touched by this u n f i n i s h e d one

fin in the sense of in f i n ite never ending never
 closed off never coming to an e n d an I AM who I AM meaning
 will be who I AM will be an always living always breathing
 always (us) waiting for the n e x t breath
 never fixed despite our attempts to fasten to make
 a buckled-down kind of savior to close off this brilliance ((glory))
 that is never closed off at a l l but always is all and in all
 but never known by any a t all // how *could* we know
 from our place in the cleft of this rock for us to know would be a dying a
 finishing we never do want to see the UN seen to make the promise *now*
 to make the *not yet* history n o

finished never in the sense of finished never dead ((yet one who died))
 never fastened never n o t this splinter in the hand
 this thing un polished not for sale never a conversation we can speak of
 yet never a final word for the Word never to be spoken f o r but
 a l w a y s

un

5:59 AM

O Come O Come g*d With Us *come* in all you are there is a
 promise all you are i s the promise the not yet the never yet
 the soon-to-be and never here the way that is not this the breaking
 into now as thunder cracks and interrupts as lightning begs to breathe
 you come as we smell the rising dough before it sets as the setting
 sun will rise once more we wait for what we know is here for what is
 for what could never be for what ? we don't know we say
 unfolding lawn chairs passing scratchy blankets round but the dawn brings life to
 our veins the space between heartbeats holding every expectation come, veins
 come *viens*²² *je ne sais pas*²³ *viens viens viens*
 the future comes whistling the most translucent of announcements bringing but
 not bringing not here not now but could be this exile of present
 this presence we fill our cups the stars whisper rumors
 they have heard tale of morning's light they long for warmth
 for rest for the u n a starless night to witness day the letters
 they write from lightyears away crinkle in our faded seats

“ v e n i creator spiritus 24 ”

for all have known the waiting we hold our breath and breathe another
 and o f t e n hiccups rise as we try to speak The Word
 and break our own silence with names we do not know with words from a
 beginning we never witnessed we w a i t like stars
 for the rise of a son we've never seen before there was a word to read
 The Word made reeds and swallows and suns and stars and lawn chairs
 when these words first breathed into silent earthen clay
 before the dawn first made its noise our skin was hot from holy lungs
 the breath which was and was not yet and held promise in its every moving
 ((in and out and in and out and in and out and in and out))
 each inhale a mourning breaking through still silent death break-in come
viens the one who was and is and breathes expectant
 the morning brings your life to veins again *come viens come*

our every breath a breaking

our every word a prayer

come.

I'VE BEEN WEEPING LATELY (A REVELATION)²⁶²⁷

this
 this is the reason we are before your throne
 to be in this presence
 to bear witness
 b a r e witness
 to this face we cannot see cannot bear at all

to feel these un-prisoning arms
 that hold but do not station
 that allow for this un-grasping
 this melting this moving this more-ing

these tears that fall
 cannot be counted
 this liquid crying (out) again
 each boiled, salted splat is wiped by glory

who could be in this place and not hear it ?? ? ? ?
 who could stare at this face and not weep ? ? ??
 who could be in this glory intact ? ? ? ??

this weeping
 this spilling over
 this crying o u t to the one who Holds Me
 to this one who holds my gaze
 and yet Holds Nothing grasps no thing at all

i am taught in this grandest un-telling
 this unravelling of all I had thought
 this shelter by the one who i s shelter
 the one the AM the o t h e r without whom no shelter is built
 this solidarity by the one who began it

whose tears fall first ?? ?? ? ?
 who t e a r s first ?? ? ? ?
 who is ripped from the way that they were ? ?

when i try to succumb to those things past and was
 when i think i could ever be complacent
 when i think of my crying and never this c a l l i n g

i feel again these hands of glory
 these ghosts of what i was uncounted crying out wiped away
 i see only your face this un seen face

and know that each tear is a tearing apart
 each falling liquid cry a crying out
 a voice with a new way to BE

i give my coat - it's yours
 i give these shoes for your feet
 i give the food from my table
 this water from my well
 this shelter from the heat
 these tears from my eyes
 f o r you
 that point me to y o u
 they could only ever come from you

glory

glory

glory

oh holy one
 as you open these cracks in my shell
 as you call for this crying i make
 as you pull me into an abundance

would you ever and always slip through my fingers

EXOSKELETONS²⁸

are you peace ? ?
 are you a place
 where we could ever be at rest? ??

we are met by you
 // over and over and over and over and //
 this sentence never stops

it is a life's work
 encountering you
 an opus of becoming
 of un becoming

if we are to realize these ills we have done
 what might "stillness" be ?

perhaps a kind of mental shelter
 exists in this undoing
 where we are held as we crack
 through this shell and another
 trading tricycles for training wheels
 and there and back again

with each shed skin
 we cry
 "here I am"
 "here I am"

here
 I
 am.

TURNING AROUND

are you protection
 a place within to hide
 this pearl within a shell
 wrested from the Deep

am i to believe in this sanctuary
 that the universe of Divine is for me

am i to believe in this sanctuary
 to find refuge at the point of a sword
 to keep in by keeping out
 to say prayers for peace by the light of stolen wax

am i to believe in this sanctuary
 hoping to place among the elect
 praying for absolution of my not-yet gleeful violence

ive made grooves kneeling on the altar floor
 creaking wood shrouding screaming guilt

i stand where a priest might
 kaleidoscope skylit holy Ground
 where many suffering may never touch

in rising to leave my feet crumble beneath me
 tripping over my own warping wood
 i Know Not

should i lament for those outside or for those nearest
 the ones Without or the grandiose within

who does this sanctuary save from harm?
 who does this sanctuary grant a prayer?
 who does this sanctuary alight to hope?

may we never know the meaning of the word.

ERROR: IMAGE NOT FOUND²⁹

who was it that first made an e m b l e m of **you**
 elevating human-archy with paint and brush // lead and wine who spoke earthen **will**
 to jewel-toned glass telling stories no panel could **make**

did they give you ((Autonomous)) the chance to say **no**

to name yourself as something living beyond all murdered aesthetics and not those **graven**
 stones which make things die ?? to forbid yourself from death-by- **image**
 to make us lie down in green (tomb-filled) pastures but not paint them? imagine a land **of**
 highest regard a bush ((unburned)) with no canvas for **me**

((to give shape to your // form // is the highest name-in-vain))

BABBLE

the towers we have built

lift
 to ourselves to you
 take us further and further
 from the bush which will not die

in seeking to make ourselves heavenly
 we sweep the divine undertow ((under toe))
 make I AM into the serpent
 crush the Word under heel
 smearing bloodied holiness into our skin

we confine g*d to a belly-slithering existence
 a stay-where-I-can-see-you life
 we make the divine an anthill
 and build our tower nonetheless

we wonder not
 what it would be
 to praise ourselves instead of you

for this tower holds the name of *our* g*d

RAILWAY CHRISTO-COPHONY³⁰

under the sound of whirling aging wheels grudging in only one direction i
 stand perplexed at the force of the rails entrenched to the deep that upon their return
 perhaps once ((or thrice)) rolled over those made to be finished if even my
 living doesn't fit within cars crushed on the freight how can we pretend to grant Grace a ticket

?? ?

?????

?

i will not taste the sweets of the trolley at the cost of those mining for coal

i will not taste the sweets of the trolley at the cost of those mining for coal.

BETRAY ME WITH A KISS

if even the shoe
 tramples the ground
 is master of the soil

how are heels to be
 and not be bloody ?? ? ?

soles kiss the ground scorching every Unburned Bush

((where the I AM came to pass))

with the tongues of conquerers

leaving death and death

((this final shriveling))

in every place we stand.

TWO BECOME ONE BECOME TWO

bread was made to break
 to crackle and s t r e t c h
 to sp
 lit into doughy factions
 to be shared among those who are willing
 to partake in the life of the table

take this bread
 take a life
 each parted crumb a story

to hold within your hands
 the very thing the other needs
 to pass the bread
 to the right
 with a smile

with a nod
 and a thank you
 i accept

for you pass more
 than your hands could rightly carry
 more than i could hold

and yet you pass to me
 you fill my plate

we meet each other
 where our fingers t o u c h
 grazed with grace

if one of you has betrayed me tonight
 i pass the bread all the same
 before the rooster crows
 i will pass to you
 i will pass to you
 i will pass to you

come as you are
 let me be in your presence
 it is a privilege to watch the wrinkles on your face
 to hear the gnawing sounds of family
 the continuum of the table

have i spent these pieces of silver?
 have i said
 not i
 not i
 n o t i ?

this thirst goes on forever
 this chewing never ends
 this plate is never empty

for you pass to me
 pass to me
 pass to me

pass o v e r the ways i have not yet arrived
 the ways i can never be still

pass over the knowing
 the grasping
 the telling
 the temptation
 to pluck the words from my mouth
 to make room for your bread

if you let i will eat to my fill
 m e be f u l l

may i be as liquid in your hand
 the cup that bleeds as one

always to be passed

over and over and over

i will pass to you

BY SOME OTHER NAME³¹

how could we have thought to name you
 to make you something we could touch
 letters on a page
 the Word to be uttered or read
 to be made into a rotting kind of flesh a meaty category
 a thing to be placed in one's pocket

a menu
 a recipe
 a "drink me" "eat me" kind of shrinking

whatever you are
 is beyond all grasp
 cannot be dissolved in a single cup of tea
 something cordial and discreet

what is a name
 if not a designation
 a way to point to what we know

how a b s u r d
 to meet the Impossible Unfinished Spilling-Over I-AM
 in a single word
 to let the balloon hit the floor
 to watch the gift be unwrapped
 to force the d i v i n e into a thank-you card
 a scrap of information
 the assumption ((consumption)) of the whole

we have found a way to girdle "God"
 to squish an abundance of life in a name

how could we have forgotten
 that whatever a "name" is
 we forget ours in your presence
 we are unmade by our maker

for all we try to "know"
 for names we try to speak
 for pretending to comprehend the mystery
 i am sorry to have let this "name" live in my lips
 i am sorry to have grasped you with my throat

as if whatever you are
 is "speakable"

forgive us, whoever you are

whatever you are called, may you "call" us even so.

AFTERTASTE³³

the first bite

d r i b b l e s

down

my

chin

layers upon layers of fruit e v e r l a s t i n g talking to my tastebuds seeming odd
 ly not enough but t o o much starving for this sacred
 meeting full already from a life of labeling making "*carica papaya*"³⁴ of this holy juice
 where each drop is a gift that never makes it down my throat each "g * d " an idol
 in the lining of my stomach preaching good and evil to these cells a prison
 for divine just a sapling of knowledge but the serpent lurks these borders
 licking lipless lips to taste this overflow as whatever you ((holy you))
 are my hands are left sticky from the presence

each tooth feels this i n - b i t e - i n g where sweetest cavities
 are made as even bone has not the strength to hold this y o u i n
 planted flesh i know not what it might mean to throw the skin away b u t
 we know there is always a p i t that cannot be digested

the holy growth discarded
 to decompose

((o r r i s e a g a i n))

I LACK NOTHING³⁵

if my cup ((grasped in hand)) spilleth over
 is it really mine at all ?? ?? ?
 each drip surpassing my tightly wound fingers
 reminds of what cannot be held

to say you are

enough.
 is to fill my own cracks with the gravel of your being
 to fix rain and mud to concrete
 to only keep myself from crumbling
 for when i say "enough"
 i make the divine into requirement
 determine the un determined
 turn infinite to bound

this is why
 i pray for you
 to slip through my fingers
 to take this cup from me
 to always and ever be so slick

for it is only at the table

where needs are met and met again
 where we are met by this abundance ((paradox))
 where we are pulled out of doing enough

where each cup spills over and over
 where every river runs forever
 where the presence of mine enemies ((whoever that should mean))
 becomes a place that's full

where i am asked to do more than pass to those i know
 where i am asked to confront why i'd ever give just enough

where i am asked to pass body and blood to each body and blood
 bread and wine to all who feed
 knowing there will never be "enough"
 but always more e

where ever you are
 always more

i do not need to leave for my cup runs over for me
 confronts each person in teeming turn
 leaves me speechless
 demands i not leave even enemies as enough

we lock eyes
 and spilleth o v e r again
 each tear a tearing
 a decimation of enough
 a realization of this common ground
 the need we find at the table
 the w e we find at the table

you do not stop at enough no
 whatever e n o u g h is
 you are more

always and ever

you

are

m o r e

THE LEAST OF THESE

we are not // your // huddled masses
 we need no saving from the deep

we are not the boat that carries but the roaring salted spray
 we could never be so small to fit // your // scope

we are not faceless begging blankets
 sopping in the city square

nor conscience check

nor marginal s p e c k

nor separate sheep or goats

we are the unmet placard at the table
 the whistle in the wind of something more
 the smallest c r a c k in ceilings
 where snaking drips get through

it is not
 by // your // request
 that we don the diner's belly

w e
 this ((fleeting)) we
 are the lasting invitation

to

be

f

u

|

|

O HOLY SISYPHUS^{36 37}

what is there about an empty tomb a dying which was and which wasn't
 a death so final and constant and not yet always on the rolling stone of mind
 these heavy stilted words that know not how to believe
 there is m o r e that know not
 how to see what cannot strike vision that know not now
 where to place these last spices in this creaking -breaking open- moment

do we push the stopper back on the oil ?

can we return the hours spent drying this cardamom ????? can we return .full
 stop. to the place that has passed? ??? to the mourning just
 around the bend ? to the morning
 just before ? to the grieving most final ly justified?
 one foot in the dust one toe in the tomb face fully in the mystery of
 ((corner)) stone on whom do we rest now that there is no one
 resting // they are not here // they are risen //

the only finality
 in this
 the only certainty - -

we will find ourselves here ((again and again))

always one toe out of the mystery once - certain
 stone s l i p p i
 n g through ((oil soaked)) fingers death coming round
 and round again
 meeting us on every corner ((and in every falling drop of drying spices))

to say

// the one that you seek is not found //

that is

// the one that is dead ((always dying)) is alive //

that is

// how silly we are to think we ever know . //

A MOST CORDIAL (MUSTARDLY) INVITATION

what is the speck that is buzzing in your ear
 the sound with no vision to reveal
 how might the small things be Infinitely spaced ?

what is the dust that is settled on the counter
 the breathed-in with no thought of invitation
 how might the speckled things be Expanding even so ? ? ?

what crust lies beneath each un-manicured nail
 the bed with no blanket for // me // ((no place to lay its head))
 how might the earthen things be part of Unburned glory ?? ? ?

PRAYING AS WE OUGHT

we thank g*d for this holy writer's block
 for the chance to boast of deepest void
 for the rights to nothing's screenplay

for there is no word to tell

did you not know ? ??????
 ((we never know))
 no eye/ear/breath/mind/heartbeat has known

what does g*d have in store
 what shelves lie in unkempt dust
 surely there is nothing
 surely there is nothing to be sold
 no Fire sale no cash to burn

what does g*d have prepared
 what easter eggs might lovers find
 surely there's no chocolate for the hunt

what does g*d amass
 what molehills we promote to mountains
 surely we can never know the deep

((are there plot holes in this story ? it seems it can't be written))

we walk round and round the streets each night
 hoping to shake
 W
 o
 r
 d free
 in the block
 p e r h a p s

the linger of this laptop is a liturgy

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NOTES

¹ Adapted from the NRSV

² In *A Touch of Transcendence: A Post Colonial Theology of God*, Mayra Rivera defines transcendence not as divine separation or superiority, but instead points to transcendence as a witness to a God who “is irreducibly Other, always beyond our grasp...but not beyond our touch” (Rivera 2). While the divine is both unseen and utterly beyond human perception, this particular definition of transcendence points to a God who is also intimately present even as they are radically other. God is embodied and yet transcendent, unseen and yet hoped for in a visceral way.

³ In *God Without Being*, Jean-Luc Marion writes of this topic: “One must obtain forgiveness for every essay in theology. In all senses” (Marion 2).

⁴ See Genesis 1:26

⁵ Hebrews 11:1 (NRSV) reads “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.” The CEB translation reads “Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don’t see.” For further engagement on this notion of transcendence, or “things hoped for/unseen,” John Wesley’s “On Faith” (see reading list above) offers some relevant questions.

⁶ When we place people into category, we limit them. We consume their boundlessness. When we try to definitively “know” the other through our own lens of understanding, we actively colonize their very being, by filtering them through ourselves, when, in fact, they are by very nature “other” than ourselves. The attempt to be before the other without this filtering is often called “alterity without consumption” - which means allowing for difference without assimilation of the other into oneself. Emmanuel Levinas describes encountering the other as a “face-to-face” moment, a notable event which ruptures us and calls us into responsibility to the one before us, who calls us towards the ethical with their very being. We do not have speech, community, or hospitality without the other who brings us these gifts and calls us outside of ourselves. The other ruptures our way of being in the world. The face-to-face is difficult to speak of because it is a moment “defined” by undefinition and the radical transcendence of the other - the face-to-face *is* the act of undefining the other, even when standing before them.

⁷ Levinas also often talks of how encountering (reading) a text is itself an encounter of the other, a moment of the face to face, as engaging a text is, in a sense, a way of opening oneself to something other, to ideas which are other, pointing outside the self to something beyond (which calls one to a different - other - way of being).

⁸ Contrary to what may be more popular understandings of philosophy, Jacques Derrida writes that hospitality - or rather, being a host - is dependent on the other, the guest, without whom one would have no ability to host. Hospitality is a gift from the other, which comes from the other, which could not exist apart from the other. In this way, the host is always and ever at the mercy of the guest, who grants them the gift of host-dom.

⁹ The words written (and even those unwritten, but perhaps implied) are written with regard to the God of Christianity specifically, with incredible regard for the God of Hebrew scriptures - a textual tradition of which Christianity often finds itself a part. There is no part of this text which is meant to imply any kind of supersessionism, or supremacy of Christianity over the long-standing, rich traditions of Judaism. Just as the texts of the Hebrew scriptures came before the creation of Christianity, so Christians find ourselves “before” the Jewish tradition, as a moment of the face-to-face. We must consider our responsibility to the ones before and before us (Christians), knowing we are long-standing guests among this spiritual tradition.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Browning has an untitled poem (see reading list) which reads as follows: “Earth is crammed with Heaven/and every common bush afire with God/But only those who see take off their shoes.”

¹¹ My essay “On Faith (And Responsibility): A Wesley Way Of Being” more explicitly cross references these (Wesleyan/Riveran) notions of transcendence, otherness, hospitality, and things unseen.

¹² See Rivera, *A Touch of Transcendence*, and the corresponding note (1) above.

¹³ In using the phrase “essentialized hierarchy,” I am intending to invoke some of the more negative connotations of Aristotle’s philosophy, particularly his assertion of a “natural” order of being(s), which he refers to as the “Natural Ladder” (an idea later co-opted by neo-Platonic and medieval philosophy under the new name, “Great Chain of Being”). Under this philosophy, certain material substances (and, arguably, given the contents of Aristotle’s *Politics*, certain human beings) are understood as inherently, or “essentially” containing qualities which make them more supreme (higher up the chain/ladder) than others.

¹⁴ Reference to the inscription on Ellis Island’s Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

¹⁵ See Matthew 25:31-46

¹⁶ While “the least of these” is a direct reference to Matthew 25:30, it is not dissimilar to imagery in Luke 14:7-24, wherein a rich landowner invites only the richest and most influential community members to a dinner. They all make their respective excuses (all of which emphasize just how *busy* and *important* and *powerful* they are) and neglect to show up. As a result, the landowner opens his invitation up to the city, telling his workers to invite the poor and most marginalized in the town. Once this has been done, his workers report that “there is still room,” and then go out of their way to make sure all who are systemically overlooked have been invited. In saying that “not one of those who were [originally] invited will taste my dinner,” the landowner emphasizes the importance of standing in solidarity with those who have been overlooked, as the rich, powerful, and privileged have means to take care of themselves. The phrase “there is room at the table” is really meant to mean “there is room at the table for all, *even* and *especially* those who culture gives us most cause to disinvite and ignore.” In the Kingdom of God, *all* will eat to their fill. This story is but one example of the ways welcome of the other is ingrained into scripture. Whatever it means to “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself” (see Matthew 22:36-40) is entirely wrapped up in understanding hospitality.

¹⁷ See Matthew 19:24

¹⁸ The kinds of philosophies that are/were prevalent in my preparation of this work (particularly that of Levinas and Derrida, though by no means limited to those two figures) are often fond of the notion that with respect to one's responsibility to the other, one can never give enough. In responding to the one before them, a person must, by point of fact, choose *not* to respond to the other call(s) of every other "other," who also engages and invites solidarity. In responding to the call of one "other," a person misses the response of their responsibility of every other other: in this way even "justice" is a kind of injustice, as any response to the call of justice is also a failure to respond to every other call of justice, and is thus not enough. What one person has to "give" will never be enough, and it is for this reason that they *must* give, entirely.

¹⁹ This poem heavily engages with the story of the burning bush in Exodus 3, wherein Moses learns the "name" of God and, speechless, removes his own sandals from his feet when faced with the anomalous divine.

²⁰ John 1:14 "The Word became flesh and made its home among us." This passage refers to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and in dubbing Christ "the Word" (*logos* in the Greek), the author of John ultimately points to a enigmatic merging of the unspeakable, divine "Word" and the (perhaps also unspeakable) mundanity of creation. Though the notion of Christ as "Word" has been used in varying ways, my interpretation and use of this phrase throughout this work is intended to the irony of the "Word" being unsayable, in that the paradox of a fully human, fully divine incarnated God (Word) made Flesh is not so easily understood.

²¹ In speaking about alterity, Derrida coined the new word "*différance*," which points to the necessity of understanding relation (like Levinas' face-to-face, perhaps) wherein human beings are understood as being utterly "different" to one another, yet still radically tied together relationally.

²² "*viens*" is a French word meaning "come."

²³ "*je ne sais pas*" is a French phrase commonly used similarly to the English phrase "I don't know." Here we are also perhaps to understand "*sais*" (from the verb *savoir*) alongside the English "say," as those things one cannot know (*sais*) are also those things of which one cannot ever adequately speak (say).

²⁴ "*Veni, creator spiritus*" is a Latin phrase which can be translated, "Come, creator spirit" - this phrase is the title of a centuries-old hymn often sung at Pentecost, which still remains prevalent in many liturgically-focused church communities/denominations around the world.

²⁵ This title refers to Matthew 7:13-14, "Go in through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to destruction is broad and the road wide, so many people enter through it. But the gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it." While these words of Jesus may certainly (and perhaps should) be interpreted differently, they have long been used to justify exclusion in the Christian church, particularly with regard to who may be "admitted" into heaven.

²⁶ This title is in reference to the song "Graves" by James Spaitte (see reading list), which includes the phrase "I've been weeping lately/might be the most I ever looked like you [God]."

²⁷ The content of this poem is largely inspired by and in reference to imagery from Revelation 7:9-17.

²⁸ See Isaiah 6:1-8.

²⁹ See Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 4:15-18.

³⁰ The line “I return my ticket” is a direct reference to the same phrase found within Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (see reading list), wherein Ivan dramatically declines his ticket to heaven, should he have one, if such a ticket depends on the needless suffering of others.

³¹ “What’s in a name?...A rose by any other name would smell as sweet” - the words of Juliet to Romeo in William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, wherein Juliet argues their belonging to rival families (rival *names*) should not be a means to bar them from loving each other.

³² From 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 (NRSV), during the last supper: “On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said: ‘This is my body that is broken for you. Do this [eat] in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup after supper, saying: ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”

³³ In *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, McFague suggests the following quote as helpful for considering the human tendency to speak of God in concrete manners: “The strong iconoclasm of the Old Testament, its fear of making graven images of God, resulted in a superabundance of images, none of which was to be regarded as literal or even adequate. As one exegete says, ‘A Hebrew [person] sucked the juice out of each metaphor as they used it, and threw the skin away at once.’”

³⁴ “*carica papaya*” is the scientific, or latin, name for the fruit commonly known as papaya.

³⁵ Psalm 23 (NRSV) begins with the famous phrase “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want,” which in the CEB (and select other translations which privilege a more modern vernacular) reads, “The LORD is my shepherd. I lack nothing.”

³⁶ See Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* (see reading list). “Sisyphus” refers to a king figure from an Ancient Greek myth, who angered the gods and so was punished after death with the torturous sentence of rolling a heavy stone up a hill in Tartarus (the field of punishment) over and over for all eternity. In his book, Camus likens the realities of human finitude to that of Sisyphus’ rolling stone, in that life itself appears to be a series of repeated tasks, emotions, and events. In attempting to address the potential for life’s meaning in a world which he dubs as utterly absurd, Camus comes to the conclusion that one must imagine Sisyphus happy in his predicament (for, in some sense, there is nothing else to do with monotony but attempt to prosper within it).

³⁷ See Mark 16:1-9. This iteration of the empty tomb in the gospel of Mark originally ended at verse 9 (as opposed to the longer ending, through verse 20), and in its initial completion it did not explicitly tell of the resurrection, only that the tomb was empty.

³⁸ The phrase “What do I love when I love my God?” was originally uttered by Saint Augustine of Hippo, and has been explored in depth by John Caputo (in conversation with the works of Jacques Derrida) in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (see reading list).

³⁹ “Inerrancy” is a term within Biblical scholarship and community, which can be understood as the idea that the whole of scripture (here meaning the Christian canon) is without error, utterly factual, and unable to contradict itself. This modern interpretive tactic often leads to a (limited) understanding of the world as easily placed into definitive category, and frequently upholds the adjacent worldview that every social, moral, or otherwise personal dilemma (even in modern/postmodern eras) is able to be completely and definitely solved by direct, literal reference to various places within the Christian canonical scriptures.