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You Saw You See: Wrestling With and Learning to Trust God Through 1st and 2nd Samuel A Collection of Poems

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You Saw, You See:
Wrestling With and Learning to Trust God Through 1st and 2nd Samuel

A Collection of Poems

By

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Of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of English

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ABSTRACT

STACK, PAUL *You Saw, You See: Wrestling With and Learning to Trust God in
1st and 2nd Samuel*
Department of English, June 2013

This collection of poems reflects my engagement with the stories and themes in 1st and 2nd Samuel, including forgiveness, God's will and promises, sin, relationship between man and God, and transformation (I also respond to Psalm 51, in which David responds to events in 2nd Samuel). My engagement involves reinterpretation of Biblical passages, connections to modern contexts and personal stories, and getting inside the stories and moments of Biblical characters such as Samuel, Hannah, Saul and David. Other modern poets doing similar work, like Mark Jarman and John Berryman, explore similar themes but do not focus on 1st and 2nd Samuel or make consistent direct connections to Biblical passages. In addition, their work leans towards more abstraction and free verse, while I tend to employ more concrete details and imagery and a larger variety of poetic formats including the sonnet, villanelle, haiku, and ballad. These poems reveal my living engagement with the Bible, from wrestling with concepts and stories I struggle to understand to learning to fully trust God. The Bible informs and transforms my worldview, beliefs, lifestyle, and ultimately *my* story; these poems offer a glimpse into what that process looks like, allowing my reader to see the transformative power of the Bible.

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1st Samuel 1:4-6 “Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Penniah and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb.”

Formed

I.

As Adam sleeps, the ghost inside the man
 Called Father reaches in, begins to mold.
 The rib is stretched, spreads out, breathes in, expands
 As bone and flesh and life arise, unfold.
 His artist hands conceive her form, her frame;
 Precision, craft, his gentle fingers pare
 The order flowing through her cells, his aim
 To sculpt a path where life comes through, prepared.
 She craves that vines will root within this path,
 For fruit to surface, life to shift and swell
 And spring up to breathe in a child's breath -
 A rooted hunger Father placed to dwell.
 When paths are closed, does craving shrivel up?
 Does Father meet dry mouths with empty cups?

II.

Pam never smoked and only drank the wine
 Blessed by the priest, and she married young.
 Before the wedding, the doctor said “You're fine”;
 Still, impatient breaths quivered inside her lungs.
 This womb should fill with vines and fruit, she thought
 As craving prayers shot forth, her lone outcry.
 And seeds took form, the hope of new life brought
 Pam to rest, the warmth of settled sighs.
 But the doctor's furrowed brows, his hands gripped tight
 Around the pictures, Pam sunk into tears.
 The crib was sold. Calendar date rewrites
 Were done in ink, concreting her shelved fears.
 Her shriveled prayers, now craving's hollow cries.
 Does Father hear while perched within the sky?

1st Samuel 2:5 “Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry hunger no more. She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away.”

When You’re Not Homecoming King Anymore

I.

On Saturdays, Hannah buried her head
in her shawl and walked to the market
early, before the others had woken.
With a baggy robe strewn around her thin body,
she scrambled between the vendors
to buy her things before the women came.

Too often, they came before
she had ducked away, and they huddled
together, darting their eyes towards Hannah,
covering their mouths in laughter.
“Married for seven years and still no children,
what a curse on that head!”
Still in earshot, Hannah would tighten her shawl
and quickly walk home.
When she got inside,
she’d close the curtains and pray,
weeping quietly.

But one afternoon, just before closing her curtains,
she heard one of the older women
wailing loudly to the others.
Her last son had run off with a girl
from the next town over
(rumors were spreading in the marketplace),
and now her household was empty.

Soon after, Hannah started
walking to the marketplace at noon,
wrapping her shawl
around her newborn son.

II.

I walked out of the office at a regular 5pm,
stopped by the corner gas station on my way home.
It was a dirty part of town, littered parking lots and such.
But it was cheaper, so I’d compromise.

Then I saw him. “Tommy Baxter!?”
I hadn’t seen him since our 5 year reunion,
when he was still sporting his massive pick-up
and thick black leather jacket.
Holding a browned sponge in his hand,
he nodded faintly, sheepishly asking
“Need a wash with your gas?”
I told him yes, and he got to work.

I watched him as he dunked the sponge in his bucket,
scrubbing the underside of my bumper
then wiping the soapy grime off his hands onto his pants.

“So Tommy, how’ve you been since high school?”
He mumbled something about community college
not working out. He had a loft now,
on Hoover street, a couple blocks
from the gas station.

When I got home, I flipped open my yearbook.
Tommy Baxter, Homecoming King.
I remember heads snapping towards him
when he walked into the lunchroom on Mondays,
after every game of the undefeated season.
He’d cut freshman in the lunch-line,
his hands around cheerleader waists.
Of course, he won “Best Smile”
and “Best Car” in the senior superlatives.

1st Samuel 2:2, 4 "Then Hannah prayed and said... 'Nor is there any rock like our God... The bows of the mighty are shattered, but the feeble gird on strength.'"

School 52

Brooklyn dungeon,
 School 52. I wipe the sweat off my face,
 it joins the sweat on my palms.
 9th grade English, with this bunch
 that 6th grade suburbia could out-read, out-write, out-score
 and would laugh at their stuttering attempt
 of a *Twelfth Night* monologue
 - if they had the balls to face what happens after the bell rings.

But after the bell rings, there'll be a bleak silence
 and these kids will shuffle out the door.
 Corn-rows girl will leave first, which makes sense -
 she's gone between staring out the window
 and staring at the clock, counting down ticks
 until she gets to go home at 3:00pm and flop
 in front of the TV, from 3:30pm to whenever
 she falls asleep. She'll grab the remote and toss
 the assignment sheet I gave her on the coffee table,
 where it'll collect dust and sit under soda cans.

At 3:30pm, I'll bet the back-row immigrant gets home too
 and stops pretending he gets it.
 He'll turn on Telemundo to midday European soccer
 and relearn one of the fifteen English words he knows:
 GOOAALLLLL. Again, and again,
 no one has asked if he can read one damn page
 out of *Catcher in the Rye*.
 Administration didn't want him
 left behind. So he sits in the back row,
 waiting for someone to ask.

I wish I could look
 up, breathe these stories in
 and teach like I get it, like I see.
 They don't tell me these stories,
 and I don't want to assume.
 I want to know, but every day
 I'm still sweaty-palmed,
 still counting down ticks
 until the bell rings.

Hannah, what did you see?

1st Samuel 3:6-7 “Again, the Lord called, ‘Samuel!’ And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, ‘Here I am, you called me.’ But Eli said, ‘I did not call; go back and lie down.’ Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.”

Knowing

I.

Samuel heard that voice, stirring him awake.
He heard it three times,
lit his candle and hurried down the hall
to speak to his master.

And each time, he never knew
to look to his window
and turn his ear to the quiet, the wind.

II.

When I was 16, I knew everything.
Most of all, I knew God. I knew
what he liked, what moved him
into a nod of approval.
When it came to worship,
He called for a new song,
(written in the past decade, of course)
in words people actually understood.
Words that threw hands up towards the ceiling,
bursting from souls through faces
with tightly shut eyes and open mouths.
Naturally, he'd prefer acoustic guitars,
and drum sets thumping through the congregation,
beating with the snares and crash cymbals
to flood sanctuaries with volume, heart.

A piano couldn't hurt, but never an organ.
God hated hymns -
He'd never say so out of tact for the elderly,
but any dragging rendition of “Ask Ye What Great Thing I Know”
put him to sleep, put me to sleep,
put the church to sleep.
Bored stiff, God lazily leaned his ears
towards the saggy-chinned grandparents
droning on in unison with the organ.
He fought to keep his eyes open, but gave up

by the echo of the final note.

He probably smothered his yawns the whole way through,
rolling his eyes at the years and years and years
His followers have sung these hymns,
doing it all wrong.

1st Samuel 3:18 "Then Eli said, 'He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes.'"

Good

And I think I see enough
to know what good is

my wife is good riding her bike
was good she will be good
she sees checks over her shoulder
knows when rush hour hits downtown
she's thrown down she didn't know
a drunk driving into the shoulder
it's four pm squints in the sun he didn't
see her reeled into her he speeds off
doesn't look back on her back
her head's open eyes
shut blood runs over her I
she can't see
good she's breathing
black blue splats around her eyes
squint open oh good
god can't lift her head up
to call me she can't
I see enough oh god I know what's
good but I know what I see

2nd Samuel 7:28 "O Sovereign Lord, You are God! Your words are trustworthy, and you have promised good things to your servant."

Your Word

It's reasonable to say we don't have
a prayer, a hope, a shot, whatever
word you want to use. We yell
in circles around words we repeat,
the thick mess strewn between us.
I say "I'm going for a drive,"
and I leave, drive out in the storm.

Rain drowns the sloppy ground,
the car struggles forward.
I drive in silence. When I'm done
firing words at her in my mind,
the points I wish I had made,
the car gets stuck in the mud
and I'm out of words.

In silence You speak, reminding me
You've spoken before.
When Moses whimpers that his words
are not enough, Your words
split a sea, and the people moved through:
"I am that I am."
"I am" topples the giant
as David speaks Your name.
You promise the word "David"
is in Your hands:
"Now I will make your name great,
like the names of the greatest men of the Earth."

Could our name be great?
In this silence I want to speak to her,
to the words between us,
the swamp of my mind
where I search for words in the muck
of my reason and rage.
The car's not moving,
I have nothing
To say.

But I have Your words.

2nd Samuel 22:2 "The Lord is my rock, my fortress, my deliver; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation."

Delivered

She's practicing every day now,
oiling her trumpet valves before she plays
and polishing the brass when she's done.
She goes through her scales first,
then glides through the book of sonatas I gave her.
Finally, she plays her own music,
the music she's writing.

A year ago, my team and I raided a brothel in India,
taking thirty four kids to our rehab center.
That's when I found her.
Most of the kids lit up when they saw us,
but her face was stone, her skin stretched.
When I asked her to come with us,
she didn't move, so I carried her.
Later on, one of the other girls told me
she'd been there the longest.

The other kids played together with chalk, finger paint,
giggling and smearing each other.
She didn't. She sat outside the center
in the dirt, scooping up handfuls
then pouring it over her head.
I'd bring her inside and give her some paint,
but she'd never dip her fingers in.
After a few minutes she'd leave.

So I started sitting in the dirt beside her.
For a moment, she'd look up at me.
She didn't speak. Her eyes would drop,
and she'd drag her fingers
along the ground before she scooped it up.
I stayed with her, I stayed and looked up.
After a week, I started drawing in the dirt
beside her. She'd look away at first,
but then she started following my finger
with her eyes. Eventually, her dragging
became drawing. Our fingers would glide
through the dirt, swirling patterns and circling
into each other's space, combining pictures.
One day I drew a school, and she drew a door

on the front with kids standing outside of it.
She started drawing a circle, then asked
if we could go inside. She followed me in.

She was quiet for the first few weeks,
but she started finger painting
and the other girls smiled at her.
Then she noticed one of the girls
playing a flute we had just got for the center.
She asked the girl if she could listen,
and sat beside her while she played.
Later that night, she asked me
“Will you teach me to play music?”

1st Samuel 17:10-11 "Again Goliath said, 'I defy the ranks of Israel this day; give me a man that we may fight together.' When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid."

Pacing

Saul slams the door
and racks his mind
pacing the ground
shadow behind
he bites his lip
quickens his pace
quick bits of breath
hands on his face

pulls out his board
hollow pieces
moved into place
movement freezes
as giant's words
shaking his board
make pieces tilt
fall to the floor

he stares downward
sand in his throat
his wispy prayers
begin to float

towards

no time for that
he slaps his face
and takes his seat
moves pawns into place

His mind wanders
through knights and kings
movement through squares
arrows and slings
to answer the roar
silence the fear
of bone, muscle
armor and spear

Fingers clutch pawns
eyes squinted tight
his stomach growls
grits through his fight
As night goes on,
Saul keeps playing
Hollow hoping
clutching, staying

But light peeks through
striking his eyes
Sun and shadow
of giant's cries
Reddened eyes stare
Fixed on the board
He moves pieces,
paces the floor

2nd Samuel 1:16 “David said to him, ‘Your blood is on your head, for your mouth has testified against you, saying “I have killed the Lord’s anointed” (Saul).”

Anointed... Still?

I swear Saul wiped that oil off
 When he polished his crown atop his head;
 God said “Give all,” Saul said “hands-off”;
 His own master, and now he’s dead.

Before, God set his hand inside
 Saul’s heart to tune, to sing his grace.
 The tuning slid when Saul untied
 His hands from prayer - his heart displaced.

But David cries “He’s still that one!”
 (That one with the anointed glow).
 Maybe heartstrings snap, undone,
 But heavenly seals, while faint, still show?

I, Samuel, Say...

I.

1st Samuel 3:6-7 “Again, the Lord called, ‘Samuel!’ And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, ‘Here I am, you called me.’ But Eli said, ‘I did not call; go back and lie down.’ Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.”

Now I know I heard a voice,
 One that has called me, found me,
 And I try to put a face to it,
 But it echoes without sound.
 It must be my master, so I put his face
 On the voice, and I get up to see him.
 I walk down the hall, moving swiftly,
 More so hurried, convincing myself
 That I know my master’s voice,
 And I keep walking.

II.

1st Samuel 8:6-7 “But when they said, ‘Give us a king to lead us,’ that displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: ‘Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.’”

Now that I know His voice,
 He tells me to listen to them.
 I’ve heard them before,
 Shouting in the streets for a king
 After they’ve looked over our city walls
 To the other nations.
 But He tells me to listen, and I do...
 I listen. They’re calling for a ruler
 With a golden scepter that will catch
 The glint of the sun and feed it
 To their eyes as they look to the throne.
 I listen to them calling for something other
 Than praying into the patterned night wind
 And trusting that it will reach heaven.

III.

1st Samuel 15:27-28 "As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. Samuel said to him, 'The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors - to one better than you.'"

When he leaps up from his throne to grab my robe,
The gold scepter falls from his hand,
Clanging to the ground.
As he tears my robe, I turn to him
And see the scepter rolling into the shadow
Of the throne. He buries his face
In the piece of cloth he tore,
While I look to the skylight
To see the sun piercing through.
I say my peace,
And I keep walking.

I, Saul, Say...

I.

1st Samuel 10:9-10 "As Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul's heart, and all these signs were fulfilled that day...the Spirit of God came upon him in power, and he joined in their prophesying."

Now, I know that I'm qualified, a head
Taller than the other men around.
I know the other nations around us
Sharpen their swords, add to their storehouses
Of armor and grain, at their king's command.
And I know Israel's people are all around me
Making noise for a king, fists in the air.
Samuel knows it too, he's still as I leave.
But when I leave, I look around
To the other priests. I stop, become still,
Surrounded inside. I see light and generations,
But timelines fade. I see people that I don't know
And their mouths aren't moving, but I hear them.
I don't know what I know, I join the flood -
The flood of a moment, it pours
Out as I join the other priests, surrounded.

II.

1st Samuel 15:27 "As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore."

Please listen to me I'm begging turn
Around and I'm tugging at your robe
My hand rips off a piece at the bottom
But you're not turning around do you see
Or hear anything I know I've turned
My back I heard the people's voices
And I heard and soaked in them turned
My head to them they made noise
It was hard to hear you so hard but
I'm the king you're not turning around I
swear I'll tear more of your robe grip
My fingers around listen I've done
Wrong I need peace to please just turn
Around I'm soaked I'm torn turn

III.

1st Samuel 16:15-16 "Saul's attendants said to him, 'See, an evil spirit from God is

tormenting you. Let our lord command his servants here to search for someone who can play the harp. He will play when the evil spirit of God comes upon you, and you will feel better."

I, Saul, wrought with orders
 Which I have failed, flailing
 To cover coughing in my
 Disease, disabled in my
 Temptations, transgressions
 (They follow, fall into each other).
 My groans grow as I spit blood,
 Gorge eyes with the spirit
 Staring inside. I stare, it stares,
 Seeps into me, thrusts claws
 Into my sagging, stubborn veins.
 I cry, call you to solve with sounds
 To settle a rickety, tormented mind.

And you play, place me in silence
 Where I only
 hear
 your
 music.

IV.

1st Samuel 16:23 " Whenever the spirit from God came on Saul, David would take up his lyre and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him."

And Your music
 Is all
 I hear.

There's no clang
 Of shields, swords soaked
 In flesh, in gasps. No tearing
 Of cloaks, no coughing up
 Rage or regret. I'm set
 In the silence

of only
 Your
 music.

1st Samuel 24:16-21

16 When David finished saying this, Saul asked, "Is that your voice, David my son?" And he wept aloud. 17 "You are more righteous than I," he said. "You have treated me well, but I have treated you badly. 18 You have just now told me about the good you did to me; the Lord delivered me into your hands, but you did not kill me. 19 When a man finds his enemy, does he let him get away unharmed?"

Grip and Release

You told me you used to stand
 on your tippie toes to lock the door,
 a jiggly dead-bolt.
 Hands tensed and fumbling,
 you turned the lock before you scrambled back
 under a thin, stained sheet.
 Rapid pleas to a God you couldn't grasp
 fled from your mouth.
 You heard his breath each time;
 It seeped under the door
 and coiled around your bedposts.

Low and thick, with clumps of cigarette ash,
 his breath carried the same weight as his hands;
 thick calloused meat, they gripped the handle
 as he wrestled with the knob.
 A gruff call of your name,
 and he was in. He slid his hands off the door
 on to you, gripping you instead,
 sliding his hand downward,
 his breath steaming on the back of your neck.
 When the grunts slowed, he was finished;
 he released his hands while you closed your eyes
 and bit your bottom lip.

You still do that, bite your bottom lip
 during pauses, when you're remembering;
 The way your teeth grip your lip
 in a stirring of scalding hurt,
 but you release. You let the lip go,
 unfurling into a place of rest,
 a small settled opening of your mouth.

I asked you how you forgave him,
 (more so, how you keep forgiving),
 how you let go of your grip.

You told me your prayers have a pattern;
there's still a rapid burst at the start,
a jagged rush of remembering and dying
to forget. Your voice tumbles
into a loud darkness.
You can't see, can barely hear yourself.
Your breathing slows
and you hear light, you hear rest.
You open your mouth and praise trickles out
where a fire of memory should rage.

It doesn't make sense,
but you say you believe in a promise.
You speak from inside
a peace, a warm grip from a higher Father
who laid his hands where they were meant to go.

Psalm 51:3,7-8 "For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me... Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow."

You Saw, You See

Saturday nights I come home from my shift around 11.
 Dad's waiting at the table,
 reading the used-car section of the paper,
 late-night coffee mug in hand.
 His eyes are sagging, but rise
 to meet mine when I walk into the kitchen.
 He asks me about work. "Not bad."
Any tips? "Yeah, I made around \$35 tonight."
Well, I was hoping "Dad I'm kinda tired, I gotta sleep."

I walk upstairs and wait
 by my door to make sure I hear
 the "click" of his door-latch.
 I creep back down
 past my little brother's room
 into the family lounge,
 where the computer is.

Door closed, lights off,
 I sit in my place.
 The screen glows with bodies:
 full lips, heads thrown back, legs open
 and flesh, tugged and pushed
 into walls, against metal bedposts.

Sunday mornings are groggy.
 I wake up at 9:53am,
 toss on a wrinkled dress-shirt
 and climb into the family van.
 We drive to St. Anthony's.
 I shake hands with the entrance greeter,
 but walk uneasily under
 the shadow of the steeple.
 Kneeling, hands clasped,
 I mumble the words I know
 by heart, to keep my mind away
 from where it wants to wander.

But last Sunday...
 Last Sunday, I got up
 after the priest said the final blessing

to leave with my family.
I paused. Unsure,
I sat back down.
“Dad, I’m gonna stay for a bit.
Can you pick me up later?”

The pews emptied, the room quieted,
and I sat there, still.
The priest walked down from the pulpit,
shaking my hand and nodding
warmly before he left the room.

I looked down at my hands
and shoved them in my pockets,
just as the light caught my eye.
I followed it towards the sky-light
on the ceiling, looking straight into it.
It was soft, I wasn’t squinting.
I sat there and kept looking up,
and I knew I was still in the sanctuary,

But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything.

2nd Samuel 21:14 “They buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the tomb of Saul’s father Kish, at Zela in Benjamin, and did everything the king commanded. After that, God answered prayer in behalf of the land.”

Bones to Water

Saul’s bones were dry, cracked
With bits of sand stuck inside
The small holes littering the surface.
Some of the holes sank
Through to the other side of the bone.
As they brought them to the tomb,
The wind picked up and weathered the bones,
Which became withered fragments
Before they were sealed in the dark.

As the door was shut,
The sun set in a soft orange,
And it began to rain.
Famine had dried the earth,
But the water drenched the ground
Until the surface began to sink.
The water swept through the layers,
Seeped into the dried cracks
Until everything was wet
And the soil remembered why it was there.

1st Samuel 16:12-13

Then the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one."

So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David.

Fit for a King?

They say the crown can't fit
On the head of that nappy haired boy.
He reeks of sheep shit,
His coarse rags scratch at his skin.

Dirty skin, like honorable mention trophies
Left in the back corner.
They tarnish, termites gnaw on the wooden base,
No one will know the difference.

They're sure the crown will slide right past
His sunburnt flimsy ears
And clang on his stick-thin shoulders.

But if the clang rings, echoes,
Who will hear it?
No, One will know the difference.

1st Samuel 17:40 “Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.”

Smooth Stones

Gentle peach hands in a quiet brook,
not a callous, not a single bruised knuckle.
He kneels by the brook, laying his crook down.

Dipping his hands into the water, he pulls out
the smooth ones, the ones washed by the water.

He's a child, in the mountainous shadow of war,
peach hands and smooth stones.

2nd Samuel 5:1 “All the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, ‘We are your flesh and blood... And the Lord said to you, ‘You will shepherd my people Israel...’”

Your People

After he saw
The men he knew, standing
Outside the temple, nudging
Dust between their feet,
Hands in their rags,
The king stopped, stepped
Off his horse. They looked
To him, anxious
But silent. One of them coughed
From a dry throat, a whimper.
The fields were scratched thin that year,
Flies buzzed around the town well.
The king, caught by his own breath,
Felt his lips chap in the heat.
With his eyes on the man,
“Here,” he reached his hand in his robe
For his water jug.

2nd Samuel 12:5-7 “David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die!...’ Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man!’”

Shadows: To King David

What moans in the shadow of your prick?

Is it Bathsheba, fleshy and curved upwards
Towards her king? At his command, of course,
But she likes the attention.
Her sly grin readily slips open,
Lit eyes burn between you both,
Sweaty legs tangled in thin sheets.
Your gruff exhalation rips through her
Veins towards the blade
Of her nails; satisfied claw-marks
Trailing blood.

Is it Uriah, as battle-cries flood
From tight, ragged lungs?
Fellow soldiers breathe heavy near him,
Dropping their shields. Wide-eyed,
He scans the field, but can't see
The stab from behind, an enemy's sword
Ripping his veins. The blade
Claws through the heart of a soldier,
Trailing blood
At the feet of his king.

Or is it you, the King,
In the memory of your songs to your Lord?
Fingers alternate between harp strings
And scrambling to write the moment
In ink, to put on the page the breath of your God.
Furiously, words flood the page, settle and still,
Becoming notes swelling upwards.
They are the sound of a man lost in his music,
The light of his God ripping through his veins.
No trail of blood, but a straight, lit path
Of life.

A path you trampled on,
That many men have trampled on
As moaning mothers, daughters, sons
Writhe in the shadow of our pricks.

2nd Samuel 11:4 "Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her... Then she went back home."

A Messenger's Ode

Oh gracious King, I bow down at your feet
As thousands bow before you too. Your voice
Extending to the heavens, full and sweet.

The holy moans of harp and prayer rejoice,
As I have heard your fingers fondling notes,
Lips wet from heaven's rain making the choice

To praise, exalt from deep within your throat.
And on your knees, the wisdom you impart -
Your messenger knows everything you wrote

To God. A man who's after His own heart,
Your heart pours out to her called to your room,
No doubt to open her eyes to your art

Of praise, to Him who knit you in the womb;
Of love for him, you find yourself consumed.

Pastor Phil

We speak about once a week, the pastor and I.
He glows from the pulpit,
hands in the air and eyes glistening
as he pours out to his people.
Each sermon, a booming "Welcome home!"
reminds us of our creator, and His desire
to be with us. From his lips come praises -
he curses the Devil and wayward paths
and teaches us to run to Jesus's open arms.
After the sermon, he rumbles down from the stage
and hugs all the grandmas,
shakes hands with the young fathers
and tousles the Sunday School kids' hair.

On Tuesday nights,
he takes me into his office
with a firm, warm handshake.
I smile and ramble on and on
about his message, the good word
that shakes me up and brings me

to my knees. He leans back
in his chair with crossed arms
and lets out a thick belly laugh,
grinning. "That's terrific, Dave."

Walking out his door, I pass
a blonde woman. She never tells me
her name. I wave at her as I pass,
and she smiles, nervously,
then looks down the hall.
I keep walking. I hear him take her
into his office and shut the door.

I get home and talk to my wife
about another sound time with Pastor Phil.
She smiles, and double-checks
to make sure he's on our Christmas card list.

2nd Samuel 11:2-3 “One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful.”

Let it Wander

I.

Upon my roof
Just for a look
I'll go upstairs
And close this book

I'll close the book
Wander away
I'll go upstairs
Later I'll pray

Later I'll pray
But now these stairs
I'll look outside
Only a stare

Only a stare
She's cleaning up
And bare as night
She'll fill my cup

She'll fill my cup
No time to spare
Now come to me
Take in my stare

Take in my stare
And rest assured
Just for a night
One night I'm sure

One night, really
It's just one day
I'll lie with her
Later I'll pray

II.

I'll turn it on
Just really quick
To see what's there
It's just a click.

It's just a click,
It's just a screen
She has no name
Soon I'll be clean.

Soon I'll be clean
But now, just her
I hear her moan,
She shakes and stirs

She shakes and stirs
She wants to please
She has no name
She's calling me

She's calling me
Just one last time
It's just a click
A subtle crime

A subtle crime
She'll be ok
And I'll be free
Just not today

2nd Samuel 13:14-15 “But he refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her. Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her.”

One Bed

You stare back into the glass of her eyes,
Eyeing the reflection of your own skin
Whose form you trace as you lie

In bed. Two in one bed, she lies beside
You, her skin warm like yours, but thin
And stretched around the glass of her eyes.

From her body, the heat starts to rise,
Leaving the body where your eyes had been
Tracing your form. You lie

where you had gripped her. You despise
Her, you hate the heat of her skin,
Your skin, the glass of her eyes.

She stares too. The sweat begins to dry
As the body grows cold from within,
And she’s tracing your form as you lie.

After the heat is gone, the body begins
To speak of uncovered skin, of love, of sin.
You stare back into the glass of her eyes,
Tracing your form as you lie.

1st Samuel 11:2 “One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing... Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her.”

Seeing

This morning, he creeps into my periphery,
sitting down outside of a 7/11
on the corner of Lexington and Park Ave.
It's close to my studio apartment.
His pants are like accidental capris,
torn at the shins in a tired rip.
He holds a cup in his hand with some grungy dimes,
pennies and a peppermint.
I pause, look in my wallet. But I only have a twenty.
I pass a couple more on my way to her house.

We met a couple weeks ago at a party I was slumming at.
Not my part of town, but I knew a couple guys there.
I saw her in the kitchen, standing next to the keg,
staring down at her feet. I didn't catch her eyes,
but I scanned her down, and my eyes got stuck
on her tight ass, well-displayed by her capris.
I told her I was looking for this guy I knew, had she seen him?
Then I slipped into some small talk and led her outside.
Leaning against the back porch railing,
we yelled over the party, and I heard bits of what she was saying.
I think she heard me though, I kept her giggling
and she didn't complain when I slid my hand around her hip.

After a bit, she started talking about work at the IHOP
and busting her ass to save for school,
to do psychology or something like that.
I looked around until she invited me upstairs.
We snuck into a room in the back and flicked the lights off.

This afternoon, we go into her den and pull down the shades.
Same deal, although her apartment smells better.
We finish, and she keeps talking about working at IHOP,
her double shifts, how tired she is.
I keep looking at my watch,
then throw out a question about her and sociology.
She sighs, correcting me,
but I'm already putting my shoes back on.

1st Samuel 23: 7-8 “Saul was told that David had gone to Keilah, and he said “God has handed him over to me, for David has imprisoned himself by entering a town with gates and bars.” And Saul called up all his forces for battle, to go down to Keilah to besiege David and his men.”

God's Will

A trap's been set, the walls close in,
A thirst that burns like fire.
These bars and gates leave no doubt,
This must be God's desire.

A prayer thrust from a gnarling mouth
That's pricked with razor wire
Rebounds; the Lord seems to agree,
This must be God's desire.

Saul locks on, with open eyes,
The fist of God unfurls;
Helpless David crawling out
Trembling into a curl.

He grips his spear, sets his feet,
His body's all aligned.
“Now finally, I'll spill his blood.
God's will is one with mine.”

It seems that God too views the man
With venom in his eyes
And snakes inside the spear of Saul
To bring the man's demise.

1st Samuel 18:10 “ The next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully on Saul. ”

Downstairs

I.

It might've gone like this:

One day, God got in the elevator, pressing the down button.
His face in his hands, he sighed
“I can't believe I'm about to do this...”
After a soft “ding,” he exited and walked down the hallway,
stopping at the third door on his left.

He rapped his knuckles on the rusty trap door.
A trembling Porky-the-pig demon peeped through the crack
and yelped. He stuttered something about going blind,
scurrying down the stairs and tripping at the bottom.

Snatching the door off its hinges, God tossed it in a near-by fire.
He clomped down the stairs
as the stick-thin evil spirits
froze in their game of craps.
Some fumbled to put up their hoods.

“Hey,” God said, “I'm gonna need one of you guys for a bit...”

II.

Or it might've gone like this:

One day, God was flipping through his photo albums,
pausing at fond memories:
Samuel memorizing his Torah flash cards,
Moses parting the shoreline waves with his sand-castle,
Jacob playing leap-frog with the angel.

Chuckling to himself, he took a sip of his tea
and kept thumbing through the pages.
He stopped towards the back of the book.

His eyes narrowed as he slid a crinkled Polaroid
out of the album.
Saul, of course, kicking sand in David's face
on the family vacation at Myrtle Beach.

Grumbling, he wiped the tea droplets from his moustache
and set the photo under his mug.

On second thought,
He crumpled it up and threw it in his fire-place,
watching the ink melt and drip onto the ash.

III.

But I think it went like this:

One day, God put Saul on his back,
carrying him up the mountainside.
Lifting him off, he placed him on his lap
and told him to look out and breathe in.
Saul nodded at first, but then started fidgeting,
bending down to tie his sandals.

“This is my land, these are my people.
They’re in your hands; obey me.”
“Huh?” Saul looked up from his feet.
“Oh, yes Lord. I will.”

God carried him back down the mountainside
and sat him on the throne, setting the crown on his head.
“Remember me, remember” -
“Mhmm,” murmured Saul, who was already taking
the crown off his head, gripping it with sweaty fingers,
staring hard at the glistening jewels.

Saul listened at first, saying grace before his meals:
a quick prayer - most nights - at his bedside.
When a giant’s roar rumbled the ground
and shook the crown off of Saul’s head,
He called to the Lord, and the Lord sent a boy.

The boy’s stones were dull, grey,
but the giant sank to the ground.
His people danced around the fire, singing
David’s name.
Saul left the party sulking,
shut his door and began polishing
his crown.
His face grew hot as he rose to grab his dagger,

But God barged in,

took the crown off
and snapped it in half.

1st Samuel 2:9 “He will guard the feet of his saints, but the wicked will be silenced in darkness.”

His Saints, the Wicked

I. On My Mentor, Jonathan Walton

At the city mission they held worship
before they served the community dinner.
No piano, no guitar, just men’s voices
barely in tune with each other singing up front
with one of them pounding on the pulpit in rhythm.
They knew every word, and the echo
cycled between surging and settling,
rising towards the balcony pews,
resting among the worn crowd.
The voices bled together, raw and full,
holding my eyes in a warm stillness.

Jonathan, one of the voices,
closed the song in prayer
before he led them to the dining room.
One night as he was ushering people out of the sanctuary,
a man turned on him:
“Hey, don’t you fucking touch me!”
Standing six foot four with sunken dark eyes and a ragged black coat,
he stared down at Jonathan.
Jonathan said, “Hey man, calm down, let’s just get” -
“No don’t tell me to calm down, don’t fucking touch me!”
Stepping towards Jonathan, he started to raise his hand,
but Jonathan cut him off:
“Would you like to have dinner with us?”
Startled, the man leaned back for a second,
keeping his eyes sharp on Jonathan.
“Well isn’t that... fuck it, I’ll eat somewhere else.”

After that he left the mission.
Jonathan kept ushering people into the dining room,
and the next night, he sang again.

II. Downsizing

His ragged coat,
Some stains, a splotch,
He asks for change,
I check my watch.

Sometimes he'd speak,
"Sir, could you spare" -
"No, not now,"
For I was aware;

A dirty bunch,
They ask the same:
"You got money?"
They don't ask my name.

But at my job,
My name was great.
The firm knew me,
I pulled my weight.

I rose in title,
I rose in pay.
I never begged,
Just got what I made.

They put guys under me,
They polished my desk,
They answered my phone,
Took notes and the rest.

They held my office
Until one day:
"Sorry, downsizing."
They took what I made.

They cleared my desk
And boxed my stuff.
They led me out,
That was enough

For them. I moved -
No kitchen space,
A tight bedroom,
A smaller place.

I looked for work,
I put out my name,
But no one called,
My phone never rang.

Then they shut off
All of my lights.
I looked for a fuse-box,
Nothing in sight.

I tried to call them,
But they shut off my phone.
So I sat in the dark,
Alone.

2nd Samuel 21:1

"During the reign of David, there was a famine for three successive years; so David sought the face of the Lord. The Lord said, "It is on account of Saul and his blood-stained house; it is because he put the Gibeonites to death."

Uganda

He was reading the National Geographic in his study,
a little back page article.

Again, he opened to the same page he's been before. he sips
his glass of water.

His eyes took him away from the text, onto the next page
with a photo of a woman.

Uganda, grasslands scratching at the back of your throat
like a dry, unwelcome salt.
The sun burns the horizon, blurring distant vision. It dries
the ashy grass.
Landscape of dusty dirt creeping into people's lungs,
prickly, barren.

Kneeling in the dirt, she clutched her son; ballooned stomach,
stickly knees, closed eyes.
After the wheezing, the child hiccupped and stopped breathing;
the dust settled in his lungs.
His jaw lazily hung. Her eyes were closed too, furiously shut
with a wrecked, wounded energy.
Mouth wrenched open, her scream struck him
as sharp, silent needles.

Her scream, he asks... maybe she too sought the face of the Lord
in a raw, unharnessed prayer.
Maybe the Lord replied, reminding her Uganda is
a blood-stained house, children ripped
From sleeping mats in the night, school pens and paper taken
from trembling hands.
The children stand in line, holding guns larger than they are
as dark men bark orders.
Bodies litter the dirt, vultures pick at remains, and guns
are polished at night.

The grasslands scratch her throat, the child lies limp in her arms,
and all she needed was water.
At least, he thinks that's all she needed. He sips his glass,
tosses the pages on the ground.
Dry and bitter, he curses God and demands the rain.
just rain.

1st Samuel 1:15-17 “Not so, my lord,” Hannah replied, “I am a woman who is deeply troubled... I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.”
Eli answered, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.”

What I Promised

At that point, there wasn't much else I prayed for.
I was still praying right before she picked up.
Somewhere in a long pause, she said “Ok.”
Two weeks later, she agreed to meet me.
We drove at night in a thick snowfall,
Sparse flakes on her windshield.
She parked in my driveway,
Turned, hit me in the arm.
Her fist shook, hot, quiet.
I tried to say... if I...
I couldn't promise
Her anything.
She told me to leave,
And I wondered if we'd ever
Find anything to laugh about again.

2nd Samuel 11:10-11 “David was told, “Uriah did not go home.” So he asked Uriah, “Haven’t you just come from a military campaign? Why didn’t you go home?” Uriah said to David, “The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents,[a] and my commander Joab and my lord’s men are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!”

Frontline

I.

He didn’t leave.

A warm bed, a beautiful wife craving his presence, a tempting meal crafted with roast lamb, pomegranates, olives, almonds. There’s probably a warm bath thrown in too, steaming, cascading down his bruised body, worn by the clash of nations and fists colliding. Swords, shields, lashes.

But he sunk onto a mat in the cold pitch-black outside the palace gates, with the king’s servants.

He was the one who saw tents in his heart, tents shivering in the nighttime wind with men barely asleep; teeth gritted, swords gripped, heads tucked into chests, they waited in the service of the king.

II.

We needed a new kitchen floor, and my family went on vacation, beach house in New Jersey. We couldn’t afford the service, so Dad stayed home.

I came home, tanned at the shoulders, bits of sand in my shoes. The whole week, I’d been falling into bed at midnight, lazily rising at noon the next day.

I walked in, and Dad stood

slouched, sawdust thick on his shirt,
gauze on his shoulders.
He looked thinned, more so bent,
with holes in his pants and shoes.
But he rose to hug his family
as we walked in the door.

The new tile, grayish blue.
Every square in place,
every corner smoothed.

1st Samuel 15:22 “But Samuel replied, ‘Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.’”

Sidewalks and Dust

I.

They kept offering the pastor a pay raise, which made sense.
 The people flooded downtown Chicago every Sunday,
 pushing through doors and cramming into pews
 until there was standing room only.
 Bodies cramped together, the crowd got sweaty.
 Those standing shifted the weight between their feet.

But they'd stand the whole time, leaning
 their heads towards the pastor.
 He'd thunder through the Word of God
 (or did God thunder through him?).
 Again and again, applause erupted
 after the final prayer.
 Just to hear him speak, they kept coming back.

The elder board kept dropping checks in his office mailbox,
 but he had taken a vow of poverty -
 “God’s money, not mine.”
 Anything beyond electricity,
 his church suits, some clothes
 for the wife and kids, and groceries
 (whatever could be bought canned)
 went straight back to the church.

And his wife walked to his church every Sunday,
 carrying the one-year-old in her arm,
 clutching his brother close to her side. He walked too.
 Winter took up over half the year,
 and she'd knot a thin scarf around her neck
 before tying up the laces of the boys' boots.
 They'd walk Chicago's icy sidewalks
 for sixty-five blocks north,
 then sit in the middle of the sanctuary.
 They'd wave to the pastor
 when he rose to speak.

II.

Matthew 9:10 "While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples."

The Pharisees hacked up another goat
Just this morning, began to burn the blood
In trust that it would turn them white and float
Them towards the temple in a holy flood.
They got to God's house and cleaned off their feet,
Shook the dust and entered, praying aloud -
A clamor clanging off the walls, complete
With righteous words, tightly polished vows.
They left and passed Jesus in the dust
Sitting with those dirty clumps of sin,
Scrubbing calloused feet, saying "Trust
In Me." And then he'd do it all again.
The Pharisees came home, the blood had dried
And crusted on the altar, luke-warm, fried.

2nd Samuel 18:33 "The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said : 'Oh my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you - Oh Absalom, my son, my son!'"

My Son

The Father's son, he
Dies, he's put into place, but
The King is alive.

Psalm 51:1 "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love."

What I Owed

I broke it, the driver side mirror.
On my bike, I barreled into it.
My dad yelled, then he sent me home.

A few days later, he sat me
down to look at the numbers; I owed
one hundred and thirty nine dollars.

When you're eight, and you owe
one hundred and thirty nine dollars,
you tug at your mom's shirt, form incom-
plete sentences until you start crying,
then sit in your room and wait.

Dad would call my name from the bottom
of the stairs, then send me to rake leaves
in the biting October wind.
My stubby fingers gripping the handle,
I got blisters that stung
when I picked up leaves and twigs,
over and over.
After an hour, my nose would run,
and I'd ask him if I could go inside.
Once I got in, I hoped he'd forget.

"Sunday, Sept. 3rd - 8 dollars" -
He kept a chart of my debt.
I avoided it as best I could,
but the numbers loomed,
still well over one hundred dollars.
I'd only make small dents with my work,
the number stayed.

But one day, my dad came up the stairs
and knocked on my door. I heard paper
crumpling in his hand.
He opened the door, looked at me, soft.
"You don't have to pay me anymore."
He came into my room,
tossed the paper in my trash can,
and sat down beside me.

2nd Samuel 24:12-14 “Go and tell David, ‘This is what the Lord says: I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you.’ So Gad went to David and said to him, ‘Shall there come upon you three years of famine in your land? Or three months of fleeing from your enemies while they pursue you? Or three days of plague in your land?’ ... David said to Gad, ‘I am in deep distress, let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for His mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men.’”

Peeling Hands

Well, let the plague come; boiling bits of skin
 Peeling off while mothers soak the sores
 Of children wailing without words to begin
 Asking why the boils, the blood, what is this for?
 And fathers hold their sons with peeling hands,
 Tighten their faces, clutch their children close.
 They pray that Father will hear and understand
 The children’s moans, the splitting skin exposed.
 But David sees a Father who sees, who knows
 The weave of justice, mercy, more than men -
 Some with dripping fangs, some with torn clothes,
 But no one with clean hands that will heal, again.
 Well, let them fall into the hands of men:
 Trust their hands, see what happens then.

1st Samuel 2:2 “There is no one holy like the Lord, indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God.”

Rocks

“The universe doesn’t owe us any meaning” -

The last statement of the atheist geologist debater
when he closed the forum
in the University’s largest lecture hall.
He shook hands with his Christian opponent
and waved to the crowd.

He headed back to his office
to drop off his debate notes;
He’d slaved for a good month, preparing
the structure, rebuttals, and core
arguments of his point.
He set his laptop down on top of his field journal.
Last month, he went to Mt. Fuji and collected
samples of the mountain,
sketching gradients on graph paper.

He’d look up to the peak
where the mountain touched the clouds,
then picked up a chunk of rock
from the base and put a ruler against it.
The measurements went in his notebook
and he put tape down where he found his sample.

But sometimes, wind would come down the mountain
blowing bits of dust off the rock,
and more clearly, he’d see
the crystals inside.
He’d set his ruler down,
hold the rock closer to his eye.

2nd Samuel 23:5 “Is not my house right with God? Has he not made with me an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part? Will he not bring to fruition my salvation and grant me my every desire?”

Heat and Light

In truth, He gave you His word, and made all
Right

With you and your house, giving you a clean
Heart.

But, if you saw her bathing on the roof
Again,

What would you do? More so, what would your heart
Crave?

Every desire: can you sift through the call of spirit and the pulse of
Flesh?

The tug of heat and the whisper of
Light?

But this covenant, arranged and secured in every
Part...

Maybe the battle has settled, and the scream of flesh was
Silenced

By light, and light is the only thing in your heart because it's
Clean.

2nd Samuel 7:5-6 "Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the Lord says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling.'"

The Tent

I.

It might've gone like this...

"Finally... here we are!"

David parked the car in the handicapped space,
got up to help God out of the back seat.
He kept his hand on the small of His back,
leading Him towards the polished front gate
next to the trimmed hedges and pastel flower beds.

"Welcome to Golden Age Manor Nursing Home!"
The uniformed nurse with blindingly white teeth
ushered them towards the lobby to join
the tour group. "Over here we have our game room" -
they peered in, observing a feeble woman
struggling to hold her shuffleboard pole -
"And here is our cafeteria" - a plump, drooping man
cleaned his glasses, then lifted a spoonful of jello
with his shaky hand towards his mouth -
"And my favorite, our outdoor patio!" - another woman
in a rocking chair, eyes glazed over as her aide
guided the chair back and forth.

God whispered to David,
"Well, it's better than the tent..."

II.

Or it might've gone like this...

"David, tell us again!"
The men roared in the great hall
for another round of David's tale,
the lifeless giant at his feet
before David sliced his head off.
They knocked mugs and spilled drinks,
slapping the king's shoulders
while David's cheeks grew sore from grinning.

“Alright, alright... one more time.”

He couldn't hear it, but God was grumbling to himself
and trying to sleep. If you looked out the window
On the side of the great hall,
You'd see a flimsy tent, shivering in the wind
with a pair of toes peeking out of the door flaps.

III.

But I think it went like this...

He promised Abraham the stars,
stars of descendents held freely in the flush of night
above the ground.
He remembered this, His heart bled
for the bent backs and stretched groans of his people,
slaves, digging worn hands into the ground
for bricks, building for their masters.
But the Master builds on his promise;
when Moses lifted his staff in prayer,
He threw the sea into the wind
and His people walked through on dry ground.
When the ground shook with the thick
steps of a giant, His word became flesh
as the giant collapsed and the dust settled
on the ground.

King David, should the King be moving
in a tent tossed in the wind
while His promises stake themselves
deep in the ground, giving rise
to the palace of the king?