

# **GOD THE UNFINISHED**

**BY: CLAIRE SUNBERG**



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

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**EXODUS 3:1-14<sup>1</sup>**

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”<sup>2</sup> - 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.<sup>3</sup> I, too, have spent much (if not all) of my life painting God in mine own image.<sup>4</sup>

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?<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> The only reason I write these words is to be read by you - you who are the gift.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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."<sup>11</sup>

There is a fundamental pointing outwards that arises when speaking of God, when acknowledging this transcendence<sup>12</sup> (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.<sup>13</sup> 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?<sup>14</sup> If God has been welcomed, clothed, and cared for as the stranger,<sup>15</sup> and has been ignored among "the least of these,"<sup>16</sup> 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 needle<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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)<sup>19</sup>**

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 Word<sup>20</sup> 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 *différence*<sup>21</sup>  
 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*<sup>22</sup> *je ne sais pas*<sup>23</sup> *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)<sup>2627</sup>**

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

**EXOSKELETONS<sup>28</sup>**

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 FOUND<sup>29</sup>**

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-COPHONY<sup>30</sup>**

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 over 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 me i will eat to my fill  
 be full

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 NAME<sup>31</sup>**

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 "speaking"

forgive us, whoever you are

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

**“IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME”<sup>32</sup>**

what are the words you do not yet have    which dance on the tip of your tongue    which  
 await the day of their telling    which ask for something    (( we know not what ))  
     to be done    what are the words you dare not speak    which ask to be  
 hidden from the air    which shrink away from shrinking others    which refuse  
 to pour dust from your lips    what are the ways your own words can capture

??    ?    how has your voice been a trap    ?    ??

what are the ways    y    e    s    what are the ways even these  
     ancient words    the trusted texts of old    the fossiled tomes of  
 liturgy    have made the follower the greatest fool    have sentenced the unfinished  
 into    s e n t e n c e    each jot    &    tittle    (( referent title ))  
 a    testament to this violence    which we c a l l  
     << holiness >>    in which we call    the Word    with words    with  
 sticky honey on our cracked lips    to lure unsuspecting divinity    to chew the I AM up  
     split the holy gristle with our teeth    in grand attempt to    d i g e s t    the  
 un digestable    as we swallow the    u    n    f    a    t  
**h    o    m    a    b    l    e**

**d**

**e**

**p**

**t**

**h**

**s**

of our g\*d  
 of *this* g\*d  
 (( who never could be owned ))

our greedy    blood-soaked    fingers    // somehow //    search for m o r e

when we approach the table  
 (( as our flesh traps Flesh in grasp ))  
 we are **filled** as this g\*d is emptied

and the Cup is dry  
 for this blood is on our hands.

**AFTERTASTE<sup>33</sup>**

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*"<sup>34</sup> 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 NOTHING<sup>35</sup>**

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

l

l

**O HOLY SISYPHUS**<sup>36 37</sup>

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 . //**







**INERRANT: ASKING FOR A FRIEND<sup>39</sup>**

what would it mean to never change

to never have words on sweaty lips be uttered      heard  
by this ear and that ear and these hands

to never be spoken to the ever Blank page  
and be only re traced steps      the      the      the  
   same      same      same      (( flows  
                       forever ))

to live on thinly sliced pages  
a translucent immanence of pulp  
black and red words making “ c l e a r ” all you are

but have you ever been a cup of water ? ? ? ?  
molded to the touch of glass

are you the steam inhabiting the outside only  
condensation against condensation  
surprising each grazing (( gracing )) finger with dew

if you were to meet your own literation  
pouring over Word in the text  
p e r h a p s

(( and yes      we must only say perhaps ))

you might make an eraser of the draught  
splashing certainty back to the womb  
making time to make again  
this time      pushing pencils to periphery

as we g (r) a z e the glory of the Backspace

and choose to name our tomes apology.

**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

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the NRSV

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> See Genesis 1:26

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>8</sup> 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.

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.”

<sup>11</sup> 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.

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

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> 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!”

<sup>15</sup> See Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> See Matthew 19:24

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<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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 anomaly divine.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> "*viens*" is a French word meaning "come."

<sup>23</sup> "*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).

<sup>24</sup> "*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.

<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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]."

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

<sup>28</sup> See Isaiah 6:1-8.

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<sup>29</sup> See Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 4:15-18.

<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> “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.

<sup>32</sup> 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.’”

<sup>33</sup> 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.’”

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

<sup>35</sup> 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.”

<sup>36</sup> 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).

<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> 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).

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<sup>39</sup> “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.