

**BETWEEN PRAYERS:  
A SEQUENCE OF POEMS**

Jeff William Acosta

## Communion

If I speak less in a language  
not lesser than a devotion

will the music turn slow?  
Will the sound of gunfire

ever stop at daybreaks?  
On the edge of your thighs

I pretend to kiss your flesh  
like how bombs kiss the pavement

before blooming to their fullest  
because where else could I

start a prayer? I must pretend  
that my drowning (does it ever end?)

in the sanctum of your temple  
is the closest to breathing

where I could be godless  
and not mistake you

for rain in my mouth  
like sharp blades, like sci-fi,

like sweat running in rivulets  
from my forehead to your parted lips.

I touch myself, yes I touch myself  
but not after a church service—

how could I pleasure myself  
without asking first for forgiveness.

I can only imagine being holy  
in your altar, in the crescent

of your moons. I knife  
the night sky, and waltz

between the craters of your ribs  
—where I found your holiness. Outside

the rain stops pouring its mercy.  
You gather all your strength

in the back of your throat, leashless. You move  
as I move a little closer

beneath the sound of your own  
galloping. Thrust it

deeper you said. How easily  
you reach for a God that has forgotten

his dying children. Tell them  
how your blade tightened,

like the way the barrel tightens  
around a bullet to make it worship.

Tell them how you whispered your prayer  
as if you have received the Eucharist

—lips not bothered by the silence  
after saying your clearest Amen.

## Aubade with the World Ending

See their faces drift  
not to the violin strings  
of a tripwire, but

to the lullaby it makes  
when it touches the midnight  
hour. The dead

pass like wind  
through a wind chime  
when the radio plays

*“if the world were ending.”*  
Imagine singing  
inside your shell

asking to be spared.  
In this world, where breathing  
is as close as fingers

trying to pull a trigger,  
I was begging. Above me,  
no moons could guard my teeth

nor traces of a few stars  
could be seen through a riffle’s  
scope. On my knees,

only the blank shells  
blanket the cold  
webs of our feet. Open,

my mother says  
and I opened my mouth  
wide like an unpinned hand

grenade—blossoming  
like auburn skies,  
like rose petals

spreading its boneless wings  
in the late dawn, like burning cities,  
like napalm strikes. Some mornings,

I try to forget I'd wake up  
with a trigger, with a hole  
in my eye, where a bird perches

on my sea-black tinted iris  
as they consider my wounds  
as their own and try to live.

## haibun for my summer soliloquy

In this city, where ocean waves are too close, it could drown you, I stay naked underneath a ripple—what better tithes could I offer other than a tenth of my burrowed breaths? With sound muted to maybe feel your godliness through slippage, through crevasses of my skin, through tides undoing my body—fingers with nothing to clench. Nothing clenches my fingers, only the taste of salt lingers on my tongue trying to hold a language.

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Here underwater, I've been scanning for coral bones. Cartography of faces. If I find any, I'd name them after each moon of Saturn, like we name children that died last summer, as if we know them enough to forget. Above me, sunlight striking through paper-thin tides like exit wounds. These little constellation holes. Every prayer that enters is now an accusation. Knifepoint, I fish them. These teeth. Like this. Hook the carcass left in my hymnal.

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Because the summer feels more hellfire than hellfire. The sun bares its teeth on the skin, unforgiving like a god's punishment: I tell my sister—that a scream is more prayer. That the thought of dead children killed in the drug war crosses, but stays a mere thought. I believe: all of this is imaginary. The sky fuming with August haze. A child dying on the pavement, bloodshot. Hands clasped like a cathedral. The crows go on pecking for his Eucharist. Last night, a child takes a gun. He mistakes it for a god. A child fears his breathing according to the police report. (*And I want to believe in this fable*)—He points to his animal head. He pleads to God. God answers like lightning. But he struck him twice. He closes his eyes like an answered prayer.

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If I could love more than what's left of love in me, I'd tell you about my nightmares. How it mimics water in my throat and is suddenly gone. How it faithfully lodged below the tongue and was merciful. That the footsteps arriving like a procession in front of my mouth constitutes a guillotine. How a sound takes the shape of death—that I do not know. How easily my body seeks refuge in God's warmth, mouthing invocations. Perhaps to ward off ghosts, perhaps for a blessing, or perhaps for a hand I do not have. It's strange—for a man to kneel, you need his legs cut. This is always the patriarchal paradigm: sands grating the skin, revealing weakness, unraveling the skin for its prayers—revealing the bones, and drown—is a myth, I almost told her. That a man could never enact grief more than violence.

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On my knees, I ask God: what happens to the hallowed alchemy of decaying machineries, to the dust of my body, the dark particles? Would I become a shooting star etched on the edges of galaxies and burn the night sky with scorching scars? Because what else is worth remembering other than the burning. That the only way to prove you lived, sometimes are unwanted marks on the skin—the moonlight making your bones look holy. Because waking up feels more and more like purgatory. It's almost death but not death enough. In this labyrinth, one could only hope for a Messiah to touch him. Because who else can hold this sacrilege, this burning offering other than God? If you must know anything, know that once, I tasted the rain in the middle of summer. How it kisses my parched lips like a lover with an intention. That I stayed for this drought—this manifestation to end. That for a brief moment, I listened to cicadas singing a flat chord in unison as they gather around my feet—pilgrims mapping each phalanx like attending a funeral. Look, at my body: drenched, as if baptized, but barely. Sometimes I imagined spring in this ritual: sunflowers greeting me with a hook. Moths buzzing like army helicopters on a Sunday morning. When I enter the teeth of the church, I remember the swallowing like how I remember that rain. At the altar, Pastor spoke in tongues as if the holy spirit is with him: *the body of Christ*—and I opened my mouth—like a slanted O and an-

swered—a mumbled *Amen*, as if my tongue holds me of another sin. And I walk outside, like an opened gospel. Stained glass mosaics of saints behind me. And still, summer does not forgive.

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God watches me pray  
beneath the sun—a wreckage.  
(All) The ghosts stay silent.



## Someday I'll Love Jeff Acosta

after Sylvia Plath/Sage Marshall /Ocean Vuong

Jeff, Dear Jeff, someday  
you'll stop thinking of dying  
young, so until then bury yourself  
to the sound of gunshots. Listen  
closely—to the faint snapping sound of a spine.  
Listen carefully how they ache.  
How they try to live  
a little slower, a little bit happier  
and still fail. Jeff, Dear Jeff  
do not mistake the sky opening  
its wet mouth for an arrival. You're already drenched  
in rain: brief and weightless. My words  
may only mean an epitaph. But does it even matter?  
You're blood-soaked and bent. Your skin yearns  
not only the touch of her hands, but a kiss you'll remember  
from your Father. Your father did not name you  
after a sexual offender. He did not know  
back then. You will be tongue-tied and barb-wired.  
Just because you are "God  
*peace*" does not mean you will forever shut your mouth.  
Wake up! Jeff! Wake up!  
and promise to not call this *sleep* anymore.  
Jeff, Dear Jeff, do not be afraid  
if your knife scars are your only battle scars.  
Here in the kitchen, stop looking  
at the oven with lust and with hunger.  
Forget your head. Even if the heat comes  
close to that of a bomb crater, think of Sylvia.  
Think of how her prayers, now trapped  
inside her mouth, could've saved her.  
She could've been a preacher to  
our tongues, shuddering, because of our own  
voices inside us. Remember, to breathe  
is not the only answer. In this world  
you cannot dance half-naked and say

you're alone. Believe this.  
Your ghosts are only ghosts  
when you name them  
after each saint. Like Sage, you have friction  
in your voice and that is something already.  
But still, know when to kneel and  
let the sands teach you of how sharp your teeth are  
when grated. Here, on the ocean, Ocean  
got up on his knees and did not let the tides  
take his body. Yes, Jeff, Dear Jeff, beg  
for mercy, beg for all the light  
you can't see despite trembling,  
despite what you feel is missing in your teeth.  
Despite *despite*, cross the red horizon  
and clasp my hands—pray  
that someone, someday you'll pray for me.  
This is not drowning, even if you held your breath  
close to your chest, please don't mistake  
the skin for water, for a wall. These walls for home.  
Your skin is not a sanctuary  
for bloodied beasts. Run! Don't worry.  
You can run now through rooms without touching  
the dead and make your cross a canvas  
for your epistles—carve my sins  
and not beg for forgiveness.

## I Want God in this Poem

I watch the world as it watches me  
drown and I call this baptism:            aftermath

mornings.            Maybe *rainy season*  
somewhere in Salcedo where I bid farewell

to *ghosts* tunneling our throats—pulsating  
like slow cleave algorithms. I pretend that

this machinery works                            like death  
tolls. One chime echoes (and I hope it echoes)

deep down the sinkholes, the talus, beneath  
the tooth and its fungal flowery.

When the gears to open my mouth are stuck  
and pressed against silence, it means nothing

of the weight it carries. I, too, would prefer it  
this way: clench my mouth                            forever

shut of uncertainties. Look,  
this is plausible than poetry: barter

my voice for shooting stars, telling myself  
that I am who I am. That all wars end

in the head, and not on dark pavements  
of piled flesh of children killed by stray

bullets. I want to believe in this astronomy:  
every slant constellation are stars aligned

to make you think the melody underneath  
my vocal folds means something?

I want God in this poem

to unmake me. Hear me  
I do not want another heaven

as a metaphor: a song of my skin  
a sonnet to my breath, each sigh

a strike blooming between the eyes  
socket. Instead, ask me something holy

other than the softness of your breasts  
or the sweet rotting of a flower

like home, like love, fleeting, but beautiful.

Ask me if I love you enough  
as I would have loved my elegies

to be real the way heaven  
heave its presence against my psyche

when the rain falls like guitar strings  
on my wet mouth—this crucifixion

until it hurts my tongue.