

“Reality as Sacramental”: Christian Poetry on Contending with the Human Experience

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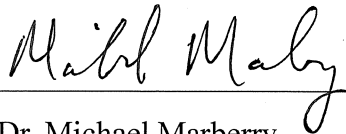
Carli Rae Wadas

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Michael Marberry

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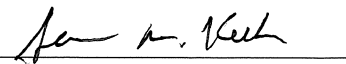


Dr. Michael Marberry

Thesis Advisor

4/9/2025

Date

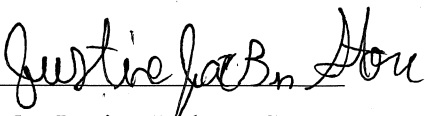


Dr. Sean Keck

Committee Member

4/9/2025

Date



Mx. Justine Jackson-Stone

Committee Member

4/9/2025

Date

ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Christian poetry, which draws on elements from confessionalism, resonates with and relates to every reader regardless of their spirituality. The argument relies on close readings from various confessional and Christian authors to support the connection of the two genres, showing how the content and style encourages every reader to contend with the human experience and ponder life's meaning. Following the essay, the confessionalism and Christian poetry ideas and craft are demonstrated in a chapbook of poems that covers themes of deteriorating mental health, failing relationships, and struggling faith. Lastly, the thesis ends with a personal reflection on writing the critical essay and creating the poems.

Carli Rae Wadas, M.A.

School of Writing, Language, and Literature, 2025

Radford University

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to Saint Jude the Apostle—

the patron saint of lost causes,

impossible cases,

and hope.

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Chapter 1.

“Reality as Sacramental”: Christian Poetry on Contending with the Human Experience

For centuries, poetry has been used to put words to our human condition and all of the complex experiences that we endure. Poet Andrew Tolkmith defines the purpose of poetry plainly and beautifully: “Much more than mere words on a page expressing lofty feelings or emotions, poetry is the act of giving voice to the otherwise incommunicable facets of life.” The aim of poetry moves beyond expressing the feelings of the poet to include fostering a connection with the audience through relatable experiences. Poetry is designed to be shared and helps each writer contend with the human condition in a way that reaches others. Spirituality blends well with this personal, emotional form of communication, bringing life to the genre of Christian poetry that uses elements of confessionalism to resonate with any reader.

Ultimately, Christian poetry allows us to view “reality as sacramental,” where the themes and experiences of everyday living connect to a sense of deeper spirituality (Lidner & Wilson 20). The attempt to define Christian poetry seeks to cover the wide range of faith experiences, including poetry that “explicitly or implicitly addresses religious subjects, written by authors who view existence from a Christian perspective,” no matter if their personal experience with belief is “firm faith, gnawing doubt, or even lapsed childhood practice” (Gioia). Therefore, Christian poetry can take shape in obvious or subtle manners while consistently aiming to relate to an audience. Poet Allen Tate’s assertion about the goal of Christian poetry captures its essence very well: “Communication that is not also communion is incomplete” (qtd. in Labrie 16). Tate argues that the goal and purpose of poetry is unitive as well as personal, and true completed communication involves sharing with others and creating a sense of connection. Christian poetry functions as a confessional form, which offers both the readers and the writers an opportunity for genuine introspection. Christian poetry offers any reader the chance to contemplate the search for meaning and purpose in life, regardless of a professed belief in Christ. Through the reading and

writing of Christian poetry, one experiences connection and coping with our shared human condition. It is through the confessionalism style of Christian poetry that this genre accomplishes these goals.

In addition, religious poems of various faiths explore the positives and negatives of the human experience; though the scope of this essay focuses on Christianity, this exploration is not limited to Christian poetry specifically. Other religions apart from Christianity use poetry to communicate ideas as well. For Jewish poetry, confessionalism comes into play with parallelism and evocative, concise language in the poems. There is a heightened focus on form, as Jewish/Hebrew poetry is found in the Bible. Themes of faith, community, history, and the human condition dominate Jewish poetry. Islamic poetry utilizes hymns, love poems (such as Ghazals, of which two poems are present in the following chapbook), and odes. These poems typically contain similar Christian confessionalism themes of love, loss, spirituality, devotion, and other deep and emotional topics.

The language and imagery of religion already permeate much confessional poetry, whether or not that poetry is explicitly Christian in nature. With confessional poems as a genre, there is “primary emphasis placed on moments of emotional and philosophical crisis,” where the poems involve “the dramatic element, autobiographical content, and a design to be interpreted and shared with an audience” (Hoffman 689). More specifically, confessional poems are designed to be autobiographical, raw in their content, and easy to understand. Their vulnerability in topic and writing style points to a desire to be shared with readers that can relate to the professed emotions or experiences. Often times, religious themes are embedded within the secular genre of poetry.

An example poet that combines religious notions and themes would be Sylvia Plath, a well-known name in the confessionalism era who wrote deeply vulnerable and personal poems that dealt with topics such as motherhood, mental illness, and mortality. Her poems drew upon her own life, as confessionalism challenges the New Critical notion of a separation between speaker and poet; this blending allows for the autobiographical experiences of the poet to fuse with the speaker (“Confessional Poetry”). Her popular poem “Lady Lazarus” welds confessionalism and Christian/Jewish poetry in an examination of death and her desire for suicide, where the title is even a biblical allusion to the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. However, Plath complicates the relationship between the genres by using typical confessionalism notions through references to multiple religions or spiritualities.

Her poem carefully walks the audience through her personal experience with suicide attempts, captured in a romantic, lustful sense with typical Christian images. Plath romanticizes death, seen in “Dying / Is an art / like everything else / I do it exceptionally well” (lines 43-45). The next lines of the poem give rise to Christian imagery—“I do it so it feels like hell / I do it so it feels real / I guess you could say I’ve a call” (Plath lines 46-48). She relates her experiences with her mental health to the idea of hell, and suggests she has a calling for this struggle, where the idea of a “calling” has Christian connotations of discerning God’s call. The simple metaphor allows her point to resonate deeply to the readers, as the easy-to-understand diction removes confusion on what the words mean and adds depth to her ideas. One could spend more time meditating on the challenging idea of death as an art rather than her language itself.

Plath continues the blending of religious poetry by including reference to other spiritual ideas and styles with Christianity. In the beginning of the poem, she uses Jewish imagery such as “my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade” and “My face a featureless, fine / Jew linen” to identify

with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and further the haunting image of her death (Plath lines 4-5 and 8-9). The linen she mentions refers to the coverings placed on the Holocaust victims' bodies and Lazarus' body in the Bible before he is raised. Her poem is also written with the evocative, concise language and structure that comprises typical Jewish poetry. Each stanza is three lines long with punchy, simply stated images. Later, the poem ends with the mythical element of a performance, a rising, a rebirth, of which she is an actress: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (Plath lines 82-84). The language conjures up the image of a phoenix, which is more of a Greek mythology reference than a religious one, but also, one could interpret this rising in a Christian lens of Jesus or Lazarus rising from the dead. She also alludes to Christianity right before the rising at the end when she writes "Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware / Beware" (Plath lines 79-81). Christian images dominate this poem with reference to other styles and images within the realm of spirituality.

She blends religious imagery and interpretation to complicate the reading experience, as Plath is not associated with being a Christian or otherwise religious poet. By doing so, she uses raw, honest, and simple diction to present a vulnerable experience of struggling with mental health and death. One would not have to personally relate to the experience in order to feel a sense of connection and distress at an examination of our mortality. The various religious allusions and images that Plath provides help these readers be able to connect with her distressing experience with desiring suicide, as these depictions complicate the experience of death and cause the readers to ponder the afterlife. It is exactly in this confessional style that explicitly Christian poets seek to express and contend with difficult feelings related to their faith or the secular world.

To start, Christian poets use their poems to share instances of human fallibility in faith, demonstrating that struggling with belief is natural and that faithful humans are not perfect in their religious practices. This idea represents a notion of both Catholic and general Christian poetry being centered around reality, where imaginative and autobiographical occurrences are blended together in an honest writing style that captures authentic emotions, struggles, and experiences (Labrie). For Ross Labrie, reality-centered writing in Christian texts emphasizes a meaningful design in the world that includes the full range of the human condition: where praise and skepticism both have their roles (11). Christian poets tend to include this range of personal faith in their works that draw upon their own experiences.

For example, Marie Howe's succinctly titled poem "Prayer" presents an honest and vulnerable depiction of the struggle with making time for prayer that comes from getting caught up in everyday life. She starts with addressing the poem to another person, saying, "Every day I want to speak with you" (Howe 123). As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that it is addressed to God. The poem then leads right into the confession within the rest of the first and second line: "And every day something more important / calls for my attention" (Howe 123). She does not shy away from the hard truth when she lists specific examples of the idols that take up her mental space instead of prayers, such as "the drugstore, the beauty products, the luggage / I need to buy for the trip" (Howe 123). The speaker's honesty is refreshing and relatable when they call attention to those mundane human plans and items that take up our brain space when we ideally want to set our sights higher. The poem is, in effect, a prayer as she then asks God directly: "Why do I flee from you?" (Howe 123). The poem ends with the supplication of a direct call of distress: "Help me. Even as I write these words I am planning / to rise from the chair as soon as I finish this sentence" (Howe 123). The confession in this poem takes the form of

supplication; as she conveys her neglect for God and distress, she calls out to Him to help her in her complacency. The diction and syntax that Howe uses in this poem are colloquial, blunt, and without filler; she honestly and effectively conveys the distressing experience of being trapped in a human routine without leaving any room for God. Even if a reader does not believe in Christ, the distress of reaching out for help in desperation resonates and relates to the agony of suffering in silence.

Andrew Hudgins tackles a different reason for struggle with prayer and furthers the prayer-conversation idea in his poem “Praying Drunk.” The title alone is a confession; the speaker admits to praying while in a state of intoxication, a known sin in Christianity. The sprawling poem provides intricate, vulnerable details with a mix of declarations, questions, and of course confessions to God about the speaker that blend with autobiographical details. He structures the poem with a typical Christian prayer progression starting with praise, followed by confession, followed by thanksgiving, and ending with supplication. The first stanza honestly presents: “I ought to start with praise, but praise / comes hard to me. I stutter” (Hudgins 94). This raw and honest confession mirrors the ideas in Howe’s aforementioned poem where the speaker admits to a difficulty when it comes to prayer and communion with God. Ultimately, the speaker admits to shortcomings and succinctly asks for forgiveness within the confession section in the lines: “Forgive me. This is my favorite sin: despair—whose love I celebrate with wine and prayer” (Hudgins 95). He does not want to be left alone or forgotten in his despair; in his final section on supplication, the poem ends with the quick powerful plea of “As I fall past, remember me” (Hudgins 96). This poem conveys the honest experience of trying to maintain a relationship with God while falling into the common worldly lifestyle of being a human, conflated with sin. Its vulnerability and rich detail offer solace to those who read that struggle with prioritizing their

relationship with God, or, if nonreligious, letting the substances and influences of the world distract from one's moral compass. Any reader relates to experiences of falling short of personal or moral expectations, and Hudgins paints a powerful scene of a prayer with a difficulty in staying focused on God from being under the influence and neglecting to praise Him.

In addition to the struggle with practicing faith, part of this introspective confessional process involves doubt. Christian poetry invites and addresses the kinds of questions, doubts, and struggles that all readers will likely have at some point, whether or not they are Christian themselves. As mentioned before, Christian poems emphasize human flaws and unachievable perfection. Mark Jarman, in his "Unholy Sonnet I" bitterly contends with his feelings towards God's majesty through a prayer-conversation. He begins the poem addressing God in a variety of names, each becoming more cynical, as he starts with the classic "Dear God, our Heavenly Father" and ends up with "Auditor Who Approves Our Bottom Line / Examiner Who Says That We Are Fine" (Jarman lines 1, 6-7). This progression of titles in the first half of the sonnet illustrates starting from the beginning with natural, engrained belief and worship through traditional titles, then examines the descent to questioning as it goes on. He begins with what is taught and known about God, and weaves his way through daring bitterness where the speaker attempts to cynically capture God's essence. He continues the aforementioned poem as prayer idea but with distrustful skepticism; the second stanza begins with "I can say almost anything about you, / O Big Idea, and with each epithet, / Create new reasons to believe or doubt you" (Jarman lines 9-11). The speaker attempts to take the power from God and bestow it upon themselves through how they choose to identify God. The skeptical, bitter tone illustrates that prayer is not always praise, and questions about God's nature and extent of power can dominate

a Christian poem. Those who are not Christian may relate to this idea of questioning and defining God, and Jarman shows that even as a Christian poet that process is natural.

Poems of doubt and questioning also offer didacticism to encourage those practicing the faith. Jeanne Murray Walker in her poem “The Sign” continues the confessional, personal style of language to convey the desire for a sign and how Christians should ponder the topic of signs as a whole. This poem is not specifically addressed to God as a prayer but to a general audience instead—she begins with “Give me a sign, I pray, and then I see / For Sale (Price Reduced) and I smile” (Walker lines 1-2). This brief instance of supplication and focusing on the world around her demonstrates the idea of looking for signs, and she expands this idea as the poem progresses. The speaker states that they need one in order to be more comfortable in their belief, as the poem confesses, “Two thousand years / bereft of Jesus’ body, I need a sign, / although I doubt that any sign could fix for good / how a God-man walked this curving earth” (Walker lines 9-12). She plays out the idea that seeing is believing, where people commonly desire to see tangible proof in God in order to believe. Attempting to process Jesus’ life on earth, her language furthers the idea of contending with belief where doubt weaves its way in. Walker skillfully uses enjambment as well to create emphasis and suspension, such as how she ends with the timeline of two thousand years, then how she particularly needs a sign, and how generally it will not fix her ultimate doubt. These language choices elevate the reading experience where each line could be considered on its own and then connected to the one after it. The lesson that the poem projects is that faith should not be contingent upon seeing but, rather, believing. This idea sympathizes with Christians who find themselves in this situation and offers encouragement for sustained faith. For those who do not believe in Christ, this poem works to illustrate the vulnerability of relying on proof for morality and suggests to the readers to examine their own moral compass and what

guides them. The notions of doubt and struggle in these poems offer a chance for readers to relate themselves to the poet and invite them to ponder life's meaning and contend with the human experience.

Joseph Pearce argues that “we discover a deep understanding of man's being and purpose” when we consume literature, and with poetry specifically, we cope with our human condition and take introspective looks within ourselves (1). Reading Christian poems has the power to re-enchant weary souls through such poetry's ability to speak to each and every person (Pearce 4). The comparison between confessionalism and Christian poetry could be never-ending in its exhaustiveness. The two genres often harmonize to achieve the ultimate goal of contending with life, offering the chance for introspection, and fostering connection with an audience. Christian poems invite all readers to ponder the meaning of life and develop an understanding of our purpose and the world around us. The raw and honest conveying of vulnerable and autobiographical experiences in these poems reaches that innate desire in all of us for relatability and connection. All that constitutes Christian poetry still makes it accessible and relatable to everyone regardless of their spirituality or belief in Christ, as humans all relate to the experience of struggling, questioning, and doubting different aspects of life. Through the lens of reality as sacramental, Christian poems ultimately teach the readers about themselves and illustrate how we all contend with the universal human condition.

Chapter 2. *Theology of the Body* Poetry Chapbook

Water(me)lon Seed

Momma always said not to swallow those
reminders lost in the bottom drawer.

But I sink my teeth into soft watery flesh,
cracking and crunching black pellets against molars
where the fragments tumble down the back of my throat
into my aching stomach.

They burn but it's normal.

Cortisol rinds join my veins that web through
hot skin, and a green sheer coats my lips
that matches my eyes.

White stripes burst through my clothes
framing a hard exterior, now cool to the touch.

My smile is black seeds—
more to plant.

Frogs with Fishing Poles

There they sit, feet dangling off the wooden platform
in the front lawn of the realty house,
with plastic perpetual smiles
and bucket hats adorned with chipped flowers.
Their fishing poles come up empty,
never any bites for them,
as fake hooks dangle above real grass.
Their creamy eyes look through my car window
meeting mine that search for that checkpoint
every drive home.
When I see them, I can cross that off the list—
everything is going to be okay.

But they are gone now—
my friends that always greeted me
around the sharp turn on Lake Anna Parkway.
Nothing remains
except the abandoned wooden platform.
Who would take them away?
What damage could they possibly have caused?
Silent ribbits woke no sleepy neighbors.
No fish stolen nor scattered lily pads on the lawn,
just frog-lipped grins you could count on.
Turning the corner, my eyes become ponds
and I feel that I've swallowed a fly.

words of affirmation

your praise brings me back to church
worshipping your words in wooden pews

i hate myself in red
but i will bathe in it
if you think it makes me beautiful

when you run your fingers through my hair
your knuckles just tangle in the knots

when you touch me i notice your silence
as if skin could distract from
what your mouth won't say

you don't understand
how your words can shape me

i'm a lump of clay with the power
to petrify into a statue
or crumble into debris

Cheerwine Ghazal

This is an intimate activity, you know, where
I'm sipping sludge from the bottom of your Cheerwine float.

I can't stand you, which is why I'm sitting in your Camry,
playing with your cocoa hair that appears to float.

Your moans are the jingle for a product I don't need,
and I beg my faith to be the one that stays afloat.

Heavy breaths and heavy steps rest within a liquid center.
My soles anchor me to the ground, but I used to float.

Naming the OCD makes it easier to manage, separating it from yourself,
Doctor says when I struggle to let my obsessions float.

Carli, get ahold of yourself, I scold watery eyes in the mirror,
but there's nothing left to hold when everything starts to float.

Sweet Sin

“Maybe the danger's covered by the thrill / 'Cause I know I should be running for the hills”

-Tate McRae, *run for the hills*

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak

I whisper against parted lips
and tighten my grip around your neck.

I find myself here with you—
scarlet eyes, panting breath, shooing the white figure
off my shoulder in favor of red.

Ripples and shockwaves push my conscience away
sending it back to deeper waters
while I swirl my toes in the foam.

Shaky breaths, shaky hearts—
though we're all alone, you whisper
my name, letting it linger
in your mouth, getting a taste of it,
savoring the sweetness.

“*Lovely Woman*”

The whisper leaves your lips and runs its course—
it pounds with cortisol in rapid beats.

That’s me, I am—I think?

My sleep eludes me,
evicted as you’ve taken up residence.
I think but I do not know.

But I slip your flannel over my shoulders,
slide your watch up my wrist,
clip your earring into my lobe.
We blend our musk and floral in hanky-panky,
a scent that never washes off my skin.

But I’ll trace your skin with no remorse,
fingers merging with stretch marks
that circle around your waist.
I wish they would choke me.

I cannot help that I’m twenty-three
and cheap kisses thrill me—
I bargain *Emotional Commitment* for *Momentary Pleasure*,
calling you by your middle name
to keep you as *closely distant* as possible.

Will you still think of me as lovely
even when I ride the spirals of my mind
and refuse to call you my own?

What about when I taste your tongue
but let your hand go on the sidewalk?
Or when I refuse to pray
and treat discernment as a solo act?
I'm a one-woman show, though I want you
in the audience.

I wrap my sins around me like a Downey-dried blanket,
breathing in the familiar scent of carefree warmth.
But I don't want to be alone.
There is room for you too,
under my fibrous wings,
and these ones don't melt from the sun.

After each drink of you,
I convince myself satisfied.
You taste so sweet on the lips but slide down so bitter,
and my cheeks tingle with the numbness before vomiting.
But I crush the empty glass between lonely fingers,
causing pinpricks in my knuckles,
where violent red passion drips out
and screams for more.

I thirst.

But where He meant water while dying for our sins, I mean you, my sin.

Am I so lovely now?

We lock our glassy eyes.

We pray before meals.

But while you thank the good Lord above
for sustenance, my prayer goes something like:
God, forgive me, for I have sinned,
unable to be his lovely woman.

Borrowed (What the F*ck is a Situationship?)

I taste your lips, yet they don't belong to me.
 The heat of your face matches mine,
 swirling between us in your mom's old Volkswagen.
 I could paint the heterochromia of your eyes—
 baby blue with a soft cocoa ring—
 down to the pinprick pupils that stare into mine,
 but you don't remember my birthday.

Consider me your muse,
 for I can sculpt the softness of your fine hair
 that I weave through my fingers,
 grazing your temples to get you to sigh.
 You smile with your whole face when I talk,
 an innocent flush spreading across your cheekbones,
 but my last name eludes you.

Then you sit next to me in the pew,
 where the *Our Father* flows from our mouths in unison
 and our fingers interlock against our thighs.
 At the *peace be with you* my hands
 slide around the small of your back,
 but I don't know how to grant you peace.
 I'm not yours.

Sweet moments dissolve
 on my tongue like snowflakes—
 refusing to linger because I am *unattached* and

this is *casual*.

Those words leave a plastic taste in my mouth.

You could say I'm checked out,
borrowed like your favorite library book—
where your fingers trace my gilded pages
whenever the mood strikes you to read.
But soon your rental is due,
and you cannot renew it this time.

You Can't Have Your Cake

In the mold of your body,
I search for sweetness to cancel out
my sourness, brewing all hot, thick, and raw
leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

Your creamy center brings pins and needles
to my lips when I taste you.
Your voice was batter when I cried,
and I stared at your sugary drool.
Why must I cry to receive this gentleness?

You whisk the lumps out of me so
I'm perfectly smooth, rich, buttery,
able to be drizzled on your tongue.
Able to fit the shape you desire,
I become soft and fluffy, needing to be held
together. I long for something sweet and exclusive;
no one else can make a wish and blow out the candles.
I crave sugar to make my stomach expand.

Your insults sprinkle
my skin, they stick to me, you know.
I can count each one:
reds, blues, yellows, and greens,
the whole ROY G BIV threatens to kill me.
Dote on me. Dote on me or teach me
I don't need to be doted on.

How Do You Know When It's Over?

Movies roll the credits to sleepy-eyed viewers
who have formed indents in their seat cushions.

Novels dot the last sentence with a period
halfway up the final page.

Straws suck the last bit of moisture
from the bottom of an empty cup.

Cashiers hand you a receipt,
demanding you to have a nice day.

Tops and bottoms cease their wet spinning,
waiting patiently to lose their wrinkles.

Snow sticks to gritted asphalt,
turning to ice in the now stagnant air.

The sky morphs into a sleepy cyan
after the sun's long shift.

Then the sun shines through the slats of your blinds,
ending a restless night of sleep.

But as I lie in your arms
with a dull ache in my chest,

I am unable to tell
when it's over.

Your Favorite Color

What brings you warmth makes me think of blood,
and the way my skin flushed
after your lips left my neck.
I could taste

my chapped heart.
and I tore the loose pieces with my teeth,
watching them fall to the ground with dead leaves

to decay. My eyes became brake lights
when you spoke to me with searing sarcasm.
I turned the heat down on crimson skin—
you always boiled

over. You made the robins scatter from the sidewalk
with your heavy, gritted soles.
You made me chew the edges
of my fingernails until the red ran down.

Red Light

Remembering our kisses at red lights
makes my knuckles crunch the steering wheel
pleading the light
Turn green. Release me.

I'm brought back to scorching seats in your red truck,
arm aching from draping across your back,
gripping your shoulder each time you leaned in
when the truck stopped to rest a moment.

These moments now burn like the hot leather.
Those kisses settled to the bottom where
we slipped into sin subtly in the silence.
I couldn't say no to you.

But I captivated your eyes, not your heart—
the way your gaze filtered along my skin
sent both of us sprawling to the pews,
eyes scrunched and hands clasped,
before the Father.

I sit awash in a crimson glow
like the inside of my cheek,
raw after biting pieces off.
I chew at the stringy surface and taste scarlet
so that I feel something
other than brake lights on flushed cheeks

when your memory hits,
sitting at the red light,
pleading.

Exit 188b

Nearing the exit dampens my mood,
soaking the edges in stale water
which creeps towards the center.

The loops of these symbols
mark my mind like a stain
that won't fully come out in the wash—
even if the common eye wouldn't notice,
I will always spot the faded residue.

It's just an exit, it doesn't have to lead to him.
But it does.

But what does the b stand for anyway?
Busting my hump?
Breathing exercises to blow your anger away?
Belittled by broken "I love you"s?
Or even better off with someone else?

Plastic green flies over my head
as my car accelerates past the turn.

Oh, I know what the b stands for—
Brokenhearted.

I flip my turn signal off,
not even realizing it was on.

Untied

I finally untied the knots in my shoelaces
from the trip to Atlanta, where you broke up with me.

I got tired of smashing the heel and remembering
how I synched these laces before the ten hour drive home.

I washed my hair and shaved my legs, washing away
the prints of your fingers and lips there on my skin.

Clothes You've Never Seen Before:

A new blouse that shows the curves of my chest
in a way that would have driven you crazy,
Two tank tops,
Four headbands to cover dirty hair which you promised looked good,
even though we both know it didn't.

I removed our pictures
from the cheap black and white frames we bought
from Walmart for \$2.88 and stuck them
deep into the memory box.
You're still here.
You're not gone,
but you're not taking up space.
The frames will go to Goodwill, someone else will use them.

The Local Dollar General

The line at Dollar General extends to the aisles
where I stand with my shopping delivery order:
Outshine watermelon ice pops,
honey barbecue *Ritz* crackers,
an eight-pack of *Aquafina*.
A feast fit for a king—
or at least for Andrew P.,
who is likely impatient from the wait of his bounty.

I'm sandwiched between two older men.
Tight shirts hug their sloped stomachs,
grey mustaches crinkled with impatience.
The one behind me, loaf of bread tucked under his arm
like a baby, offers to have dinner with me
with the spaghetti ingredients
left in a cart next to us.
I swallow the itch and laugh with him,
tugging the collar
of my Highlander Catholic sweatshirt.

The man in front of me hasn't showered
but his eyes are clean,
offering me gripes about long shopping lines
and the weather we've been having.
He sees me as a person
just trying to make a few extra bucks,
and I relax my shoulders.

Minutes on my watch move quick in succession,
as we discuss the state of the economy
and customers ahead scramble for cash
for the special Cash-Only Register.

His turn arrives. He checks out
and steers right to the double doors.
I wish he would've looked back first
so that we could have acknowledged
each other's existence
one more time.

Superstore

The Amazon Firestick stopped working again,
so now my mom and I are watching *Superstore* on my laptop
on her king-sized bed where my dad doesn't sleep anymore
since the couch is better for his back.

I lay on the non-indented mattress
eating popcorn from the designated popcorn bowl all by myself
since she just brushed her teeth and didn't want any.

I lay under the comforter to shield myself
from the air conditioner which reminds me:
I slept in this bed last summer at age twenty one
when all those flies infiltrated my room somehow
and I knew my boyfriend and I were going to break up.

I know these nights of refuge won't last forever
and I'll have to sleep in my own bed.

Down the street, my brother is signing a lease with his girlfriend of three months
and my underage sister is getting drunk off three Mike's Hard Lemonades
and everything is changing too quickly.

But we sit in thick silence during the ad breaks
and my phone buzzes but it's not from him. Maybe he is also watching
a sitcom in bed with his mother. Do the pretty girls or comedic boss babes
remind him of me? I know they are just characters,
but so am I. The cycle repeats:

The ad break is over now. The show starts again.

Theology of the Body

I.

I was only ten the first time
I felt ashamed in my body—
my dance teacher beckoned us over,
me in a teal dress with bunching fabric in the chest
and the other girl in an orange dress
with the fabric snugly stretching.
“She’s got bigger breasts than you. You know what I’m saying?”
Her nonchalance made my jaw clench
and reddened the tips of my ears.
I did know, unfortunately,
and she made us switch costumes.
I took her smaller orange dress in defeat,
the first time I learned to covet.

II.

For Lent a few years later I vowed to work on my abs
to be a hot, slim cross country runner,
but what I truly put to work was my brain:
mathing out how many Cheez-Its constituted a serving,
sucking in my fourteen year old stomach
to remind me of my goal,
grilling myself that extra skin around my waist
isn’t more to love
but more to be disgusted by.
Anything to make the boys like me.

III.

I told him I liked his smile.

He told me he liked my boobs.

I winced when I asked his favorite part of me,
and that word flew out again.

Now, as a young adult,
why doesn't that feel as good as I'd hoped?

His hands on my skin were warm, but didn't
melt the chill in my chest.

But I allowed him to touch me, love me,
because that's what boyfriends and girlfriends do.

IV.

I wear the title *prude* like a proud stitching
on my black mock neck sweater at Mass.

I won't give them anything to look at.

My crucifix traps the light against my chest.

I know who I serve now.

First Attempt (St. Jude)

“Forgive me. This is my favorite sin: despair.”

-Andrew Hudgins, *Praying Drunk*

I wear You, Jesus, like an accessory,
adorning myself with diamond-studded crucifixes
to proclaim the faith I struggle to claim.
As if trinkets could replace what my mouth doesn't praise
and what my heart doesn't sing.

My sadness tastes so sweet on the lips
I don't care how bitterly it goes down.
If that feeling were ice cream, it would be Rock Bottom—
a numb film coats the inside of my cheeks.
But I pray my rosary while planning my shower,
fingers slipping through beads, losing count.

My hands look gummy and silly
the way they are clasped together—
I feel so feeble
on my knees at the edge of my bed
with my door shut so no one can see.
Do You even hear me?
Is the fire bristling my fingertips
a sign, or just cortisol?

The doubt weaves its way through
my body like a serpent.
It constricts my core,

tightening my stomach as I sit during Mass,
listening to a homily about how doubt
is not the opposite of faith—
about how our faith is not contingent upon questions.

So why then do I fit the description of “O ye of little faith”?

To the Young Couple Praying Over their Meal at Chick-Fil-A

I admire your tenacity—
 surely, you couldn't hear your prayer
 over the shrieks of children
 in the indoor playground surrounding your tiny table.
 And your own kids too—
 wildly protesting the delay in their meal,
 sauce packets already ripped open,
 not understanding your offertory action.
 And don't forget the stares—
 I myself fall guilty as my eyes locked
 in witness to your moment
 along with the other diners,
 as the human eye is drawn towards the unnatural.

When I say grace before meals at home, I avoid
 looking at my family to avoid
 their uncomfortable smirks—
 a shared joke that I must be left out of.
 Swallowing the lump, the words tumble
 out of my mouth, as each second lingered
 in prayer earns another gripe,
 questioning *why can't we just eat already?*
Why do we have to pray?
 I rush the taps on my forehead and chest
 and breathe again.
You just do.

But you two, as one flesh, gave that moment to God
on display for the whole world—
or rather, for the small local Chick-Fil-A
that could have been a fishbowl.

The employee steps out with my pickup order,
and my eyes now shift to my car.
I exit the double doors without turning back,
already pining a sip of lemonade.

A Litany of Catholic Guilt

“Deep down, way down, Lord, I try / Try to follow your light, but it's nighttime / Please, don't leave me in the end”

-David Kushner, *Daylight*

Am I allowed to enjoy the storm
beating on my windows
late at night, cozy under covers,
when there is a lonely soul stranded outside
in the cold, body pressed to wet asphalt,
the scent of soaked cardboard filling their nostrils,
wondering if God even loves them?

Am I allowed to plug my nose
to choke down food
when a child would give their life
for just a scrap?

There are starving kids in Africa who would eat that—
reminders scold sharp thoughts about my body,
a body that feels too large
in double zero jeans.
But I try to let gratitude bubble up to the surface,
swallowing my “pride” and
swallowing small bites of dinner.

Am I allowed to keep the sweet boy close,
relishing in the warmth
he brings to my skin,
or must I push him away
in the name of chastity,

with my pink sugar lip tint still left on his neck?

Am I allowed to claim You with my mechanical speech,
but in the same breath
blaspheme You, dismiss You, chuckle at You
for the sake of the joke?
Friends swish *Jesus Christ* around in their mouths
which leaves a bitter taste in mine,
and yet I remain silent.

*Amen, amen, I say to you,
whoever believes has eternal life.*

The Belief might be there,
sitting criss-cross applesauce in the corner of my brain
twiddling its thumbs, waiting for action.
But Scrupulosity holds its hot, aged hand up to block Belief,
easing it back into the corner,
where it sits dormant
as I recite my litany.

A Confession(al) on Scrupulosity

Forgive me Father, for I have sinned,
it has been around three weeks since my last confession
or maybe it's been shorter or longer,
it's hard to tell anymore
when my mouth tastes of blood from choking
on my transgressions.

Firstly, I gossip a lot, or maybe it's venting, Father,
but complaining brings relief
so it can't be bad, right?
Detraction is only if their reputation is ruined,
and my words don't have that power.
I just want my coworkers to talk to me.
I'm not hurting anyone.

Lust is hard to pin down,
Father. I am a natural woman with natural feelings.
Sometimes those feelings lead me to hotter terrain
where I lose the map with the compass.
My Bible sits, stale as month-old manna, as I explore
the words of his flesh instead.

Then Jesus tells us "*Thou shalt have no other gods before me*"
but what about my rose-colored glasses?
I put him before Him,
where the capital makes all the difference.
A common denominator in every equation.

I don't pray properly
or as often as I should.

When I fall to my knees, I feel tone deaf
with a robotic *Our Father* scratching through
my teeth. I breathe a deep sigh when the "prayer" concludes.
Back to bed and back to my phone,
where Influencers influence me
more than the One who created them.

Does He see me trying, Father? Or would He tell me
to *depart from Him*?
Will He turn His gaze to His golden, cloudy bliss
while I scream my throat out below
begging for more life?

I still taste blood. I accept my penance.

Sick Day

Coughs seize muscles in my abdomen
as brain fog slides its sleepy purple warmth
down my neck,

branching into the tips of my fingers.
My pen buzzes to get all the words out
before they slip away as easily as they came.

Writing's a challenge,
but I cross my t's and dot my i's
confined to this bed with nowhere to go,

yet my mind has already left.
The fan blades swirl, churning the stale air,
and I stare at it uselessly.

My Bible waits next to the bed to be opened, explored,
while my hands beg to be clasped together, eyes shut,
lips offering my illness to the Father.

I want to lean on Him,
But instead, I sit and draft a poem
Not about Him but really

about Him. How does He find His way
into my mundane? Sitting amid scattered tissues,
He really must be a God of love then.

Perhaps when I'm healthy I'll get my faith in order.

But the glaze that has settled over my eyes

has made itself quite comfortable here.

Checking Out

“From heaven even the most miserable life will look like one bad night in an inconvenient hotel.”

-St. Teresa of Avila

Rotten drapes conceal my earnest trying—
sun bleached fabric from the fever of my sins
frames the pit that is my mind.
Stale heat refuses to circulate and
I clutch at paper sheets to keep myself from freezing,
all while a repeating drip in the faucet ticks my eardrums
and threatens to kill me.
A scent lingers here but remains untraceable—
smelling of stale “I love you”s and untouched metallic rosaries.
Stains coat the shag carpet of my skin
colored sickly green, violent red, cotton candy blue.
They do not erase. I wear my sins like Band-Aids.

My God, why have You forsaken me?
My only hope for You is alive through
a slit in the windowsill where a fragment of light filters in,
but the overcast days never leave it there for long.
I draw the blinds, but You draw Your eyes.
My sights are set on above,
pleading for the pearly gates,
and yet I take the late checkout every time.

Atheism Ghazal

“Blessed is our horror.”

-Andrew Hudgins, *Beatitudes*

My rosary beads just don't hit the way they are supposed to,
but with pearly teals and blues, you'd think I'd be more inclined to pray.

My gaze turns outward; jeweled crucifixes and aesthetic books woo me,
along with spit-shined loafers for Mass every Sunday where I am forced to pray.

I sit cross-legged in the pews for Adoration, looking intently at Jesus fully present
in the golden kingly monstrance, and yet no words come to my mind to pray.

Tears coat my pillowcase late at night when I should be asleep,
but instead, through the thunder, I long for God but refuse to pray.

I burn green in my chest listening to testimonies. Being “saved” and full of hope
eludes me. Maybe there is no hope left in me to pray.

I reach inside to grab myself. Carli, pick up your cross.
Would an atheist even try to pray?

Peachy Keen

It is the last day of sweetness before my skin becomes bruised.
With teeth made of sweet fruit
and honey dripping from my eyes,
the world turns to grains of salt around me.

I hesitate when answering how I am doing,
much to your distaste,
and the fuzz on my skin deceives you.

“But you are always so happy.”

I am not happy—
I am overripe.
I am ready to be consumed or discarded
before my stone pit makes you choke.

Chapter 3. Reflection

This thesis project has been brewing in my mind ever since I was a sophomore here at Radford University. At that point I was an English undergraduate who had been exposed to the master's program here, and I knew I wanted to do it. What primarily drew me in was the idea of the critical-creative thesis hybrid where I could produce a piece of creative writing that complements research on a chosen topic. During this time, I was an emergent poet; I had only had one college poetry class under my belt at this point, and I did not take to it particularly well. I thought I was an awful poetry writer and longed to go back to my roots in fiction. Nevertheless, I persisted, as I wanted to broaden my horizons with creative writing. My upperclassmen and first graduate years were spent in back to back poetry classes with Dr. Gallo at the advanced and graduate level. Being immersed in regular poetry writing allowed me to continuously practice those skills and truly better my poetry both in the objective and subjective sense; my poetry improved both in terms of Dr. Gallo's opinion and my personal opinion. I grew to absolutely love this medium. I found an outlet to convey my hopes, fears, relationships, mental health, and many other turbulent experiences in my life in a way that resonated with myself and others. To this day, my poetry is one of the key areas where I tangibly saw my progress the more that I worked on it. My poems from sophomore year to now would look like they were written by two different people. And I am grateful for that change. This project has allowed my style to come into fruition and helped me discover what really matters to me—especially my faith.

Ever since I reverted back to Catholicism in the fall of 2022 during my senior year at Radford, I knew I wanted my faith to become the forefront of my life moving forward. My reversion caused me to look for any instance to talk about or learn about my faith in graduate school. I often dominated class discussions on both British and American literature with my Catholic point of view. Naturally, I wanted my thesis to reflect this shift in my life and

complement my newfound love of writing poetry. The product of this blend, this thesis project, carries extreme weight to me. It has been with me through one of the hardest years of my life, where I experienced a major breakup and a transition into my second year of graduate school as an instructor of record. It is near to my heart—my ideas coming to life in a curated chapbook that I spent dedicated hours crafting and revising with the help of Dr. Marberry. I successfully combined two prominent aspects of my life, Catholicism and poetry, into one refined project for the last year of my master's program.

The chapbook itself of this thesis project was the most enjoyable part of the thesis to write. My progress while drafting the chapbook over the last ten months is tangible. When looking at my “Thesis Project Poem Drafts” from rounds one through eight, I can see clear improvement and discovery of my style. Themes of failed relationships, struggling faith, and deteriorating mental health weave their way through poems that use a variety of metaphors and conceits.

When deciding the order of the poems, I decided to keep it relatively chronological while journeying through two different subsections with a clear transition in the middle with the poem “Theology of the Body.” After my thesis defense and hearing my committee's agreement, I decided to name the chapbook after this poem entirely, as that one poem itself contains the whole journey of the chapbook and blends together both major themes in its content. The title is an allusion to Pope St. John Paul II's lectures on healthy Catholic love and marriage and human sexuality, but it becomes personal when I am considering the theology of my own body and my experiences. It blends the mental health, relationships, and spirituality content of the poems together in one cohesive, raw title. The chapbook has bookends of poems about mental health depicted through fruit imagery, and the first subsection weaves through a journey of struggling

with commitment and sin in relationships before blending in with a newfound spirituality with Christ that also contains struggles with doubt and confidence. The order reflects my tumultuous journey into discovering a sense of myself with my faith after leaving behind unfulfilling relationships, but the poems still reflect that the journey in faith still comes with struggle.

Consistently drafting poems has also helped me to discover my sense of style in terms of the form and craft of the poems. I would consider myself not super experimental with form, but the notions that I use frequently in my poetry are enjambment and subtle emphasis with italics. My meetings with Dr. Marberry helped me make use of these tactics more intentionally, and I love the idea of creating multiple lines of meaning by the way I choose to divide the lines. As I mentioned in the critical introduction, I admired this tendency in Jeanne Murray Walker's poetry which inspired my playfulness with enjambment to create multiple emotions in the span of one or two lines. Using italics for subtle emphasis helps me to stress certain aspects of the poem by distorting the consistent font to reflect thoughts, spoken words, or heavy ideas. I use it for my dialogue in "Sweet Sin" and "To the Young Couple Praying Over their Meal at Chick-Fil-A," and for ironic emphasis in "*Lovely Woman*," where the title has italics to demonstrate it as real spoken words to me. Though my use of form is subtle, the inspiration came from the religious poets I read that used those ways to create or distort meaning.

In addition to the themes, I discovered common conceits and motifs in my poetry. A friend from undergrad actually told me that she noticed a common symbol in my poems was food, and I noticed that that idea plays into this chapbook as well. I am simultaneously a watermelon seed, cake batter, a peach, and other foods that scatter their way through the chapbook journey. I am unsure why food, which is typically connotated positively, seems to resonate with me as a means of conveying distress, but I know it works; "You Can't Have Your

"Cake" is probably my favorite poem in the collection where I unite myself to cake batter to convey an agonizing relationship experience fraught with unfulfillment. In addition to the more overt references to food, such as the first and final poem of the chapbook with their fruit conceits, food also plays a role in more subtle ways throughout the bulk of the poems. Meals are painted as times of distress and experiences of discomfort with others or are connected to negative thoughts about my body and my self-image (seen in "*Superstore*," "Theology of the Body," "A Litany of Catholic Guilt," and others). I feel that I use the motif of food to convey my internal distress and show how it permeates the different areas of my life, which subverts a typical lighthearted connotation that food imagery can bring.

Another motif that I noticed throughout my poems and that was called attention to me during my thesis defense is the word "cortisol" specifically instead of anxiety, present in at least three of the poems. I do tend to gravitate towards this word, and after careful consideration I realized it was because I enjoyed the punchiness and the scientific/medical connotation that it gives. It demonstrates that anxiety is not only a mental experience but just as much physical, and it removes a sense of control or the tendency to gloss over the common word of "anxiety." The word "cortisol" makes you stop and notice it. It demands attention, as do all of the experiences in my chapbook; they are designed to be shared.

Amid all the metaphors and comparisons, I am ultimately identifying with the speaker the majority of the time. There are instances where I hyperbolize or add/fill in details about certain instances, but every single poem comes from my real feelings or experiences. Even a simple summer fling turned into one of my absolute favorite poems: "Borrowed (What the F*ck is a Situationship?)." As I mention in the critical essay, I embody the confessionalism idea where the autobiographical experiences imply the speaker is fused with the poet. I think that is what gives

my poems a raw feeling to them—the fact that they all are based on my true, real feelings and experiences. That is not to say that poetry that does not rely on personal experience is not as effective, but I have found for me as a writer that fusing myself with my poetry makes it the most authentic. Doing so has also given me the confidence to write about certain struggles that I never have recorded in poetry before, like my faith.

This chapbook contains the first instances that I ever wrote about my Catholic faith in my poetry. The poem “First Attempt (St. Jude)” got its title because it was my literal first attempt at writing a poem about my faith, and I ended up really enjoying that one. It feels like it effectively conveys the internal struggle I have with practicing my faith and battling passion with doubt, and the style and language are an ode to Marie Howe’s poem “Prayer” that is examined in the critical introduction. Surprisingly, despite its deep importance to me, I never wrote poems about my faith before this project. If I had to guess why, it may be that I was afraid of not conveying my turbulent experiences with doubt and scrupulosity (religious OCD) in an effective way or that I was focusing my poems on the more immediate emotional matters such as my two breakups that occurred while in this two-year program. However, I wanted to take on the challenge of learning about a new genre of poetry through both reading and writing it, so I wanted to seize the opportunity to gear my thesis towards my Catholic faith.

I wanted the critical essay to focus on that aspect and to make the connection between Christian poetry and confessionalism, a connection I made after countless hours reading Christian works, comparing them to mine, and noticing what they have in common. I centered these poems in the middle of the book, as they felt the most “meaty” in terms of their weight and vulnerability. When deciding the order of the Christian poems, I considered a few factors but decided to keep a relatively chronological theme; the poems start with coming into a faith while

struggling and end on a note of hope adjacent to the struggle. I end the spiritual poem section with “Atheism Ghazal,” which acknowledges my personal shortcomings but offers a comfort at the end with the hypothetical question of “would an atheist even try to pray?” The struggle with faith does not go away but, rather, is present alongside the strengthening devotion. I did not want this subsection, or the chapbook as a whole, to have a “happy ending” because I do not think that is what it is about. I believe that life is complicated and complex and requires active processing—therefore, my poems reflect a raw honesty regarding the struggle that I, and others, have in different aspects of the human experience. The ending poem, “Peachy Keen,” is one of the very first ones written in this collection and frames the chapbook with an ominous, vulnerable ending that demonstrates life’s complexity. The ultimate theme of the chapbook and a lot of my graduate work in general (including my comprehensive exam) is the idea of contending with the human condition. I saw this theme very prevalently in the readings I did in preparation for this thesis.

I enjoyed writing the close readings in the essay of Christian poets and seeing the connections between their poems and confessionalism. I had experience reading and writing about confessional poems in my senior thesis, “Confessional Poetry in the Modern World: Instapoetry and Confessional Poetry,” but I had never intentionally read Christian poetry in any sense. I had spent the summer pouring through Catholic and Christian poem anthologies (both contemporary and historical) and used their inspiration to begin drafting my own poems. I made note of which authors and specific poems stood out to me and that I would like to use in my analysis, like Marie Howe and Andrew Hudgins. Through my readings, the critical essay topic came to fruition: I wanted to argue that Christian poetry uses elements of confessionalism that allow it to resonate with everyone. The connections seemed glaringly obvious to me, and I

wanted to tangibly express this excitement in a way that could be understood by people who are both Christian and non-Christian. Even though I focused on the generation of poems first in the project timeline, I kept that idea in mind for when it came time to write the critical introduction.

The critical portion of this thesis was easily the most difficult part to write; I knew what I wanted to say and argue, but was not sure how to make those words come out of my head and onto paper into a cohesive argument. I was overly ambitious at first with Dr. Marberry, as the original “tenets” of Christian poetry that made up the outline of my draft could have each been a chapter of a critical thesis on their own. I started off writing four papers at once, but into the second semester of my second year in the program, we narrowed it down to one essential point that had other aspects woven throughout many close readings. I knew I wanted to argue that Christian poetry, with its elements of confessionality, relates to every reader regardless of their spirituality and invites that contending with the human experience. Once I focused on that argument solely, the third time writing the critical draft was a lot smoother. I compiled a healthy blend of primary and secondary texts, ranging from scholarly articles to webpages to additional books. Some of the authors of the secondary sources and editors of the anthologies had poems featured in the primary texts, which was lovely to see. I feel fulfilled by the knowledge I gained as I read through the research for the critical essay, and I know there is even more out there to see and learn in regard to this topic. This thesis merely scratches the surface of what could be an even deeper contribution to the field of Christianity and creative writing study; however, I think it to be a wonderful addition and a jumping off point for future analysis.

I am eternally grateful to Radford University for providing me with the opportunity to make a critical-creative thesis project. This experience has allowed me to truly garner an appreciation towards my own poetry and create a solid argument that complements my Catholic

beliefs. I broadened my horizons with Christian poetry and research as well, and I discovered poets that I plan to read further after my time in this master's program. My knowledge has culminated in this thesis project, but it will also take me further in my career as a creative writer and as a devout Catholic. I am truly proud of this project. I cannot wait to see where it takes me next.

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