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There Is an Unformed World in the Sky of My Heart

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ABSTRACT

“There is an Unformed World in the Sky of My Heart” contains works of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. All the pieces were written after my conversion to Christ in December 2012 and before my graduation from Cedarville University in May 2015. Though my spiritually-themed poems are the pulse of this portfolio, the title refers to the fantasy world of Sembercron, which I am discovering and creating through my writing. The title also refers to heaven growing in my heart, or Christ’s image supplanting my own, or God sanctifying me for his purposes. This portfolio observes, explores, and delights in this sanctification.

THERE IS AN UNFORMED WORLD IN THE SKY OF MY HEART

by Nate Spanos

A Collection of Creative Writing Submitted to
the Faculty of the Department of English, Literature, and Modern Languages
at Cedarville University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Creative Writing Minor

Cedarville, OH

2015

Approved by

For Kat Spanos, my beautiful sister

INTRODUCTION

The poems and stories included here represent the personal reveries and labors of my college years. Most have not seen the inside of the classroom, though a few (including the first two Sembercronian excerpts) do bear the edits of my Oxford tutor.

The poems resulted from runner's highs and amorous sighs, from a full head after a long day. They attempt to express my experience. I am still learning how to write in concrete terms rather than ambiguities. I am still learning how to say what is true.

The fiction stories are set in a fantasy world of my discovery and invention. The world, Sembercron, is an island that floats in the sky, and which also has floated in my mind for as long as I can remember. In the tales included here, I attempt to explore the world, engage the characters, and listen for big themes like grace.

In this collection clusters of short poems are divided from each other by short stories. The pace of reading should be brisk, but I invite you to linger and consider both the content and the craft. I hope you are edified.

FOREWORD

When I came to Cedarville I did not know Jesus, but now I intend to follow Him for as long as I live. Writing brought me to Christ. In the months preceding my conversion I wrote in my journal incessantly, funneling classnotes, poems, Scriptures, and observations into the great wash of my creative thought and interaction with the world. The truth of the Christian Scriptures began to bleed into my thought life and creative output. I remember discovering one morning that the rap I'd just written was actually about Jesus, and, perhaps relatedly, that it was one of the most coherent of the then-Symbolistic poems I'd produced.

Today my writing takes its ideas about what is true and good from the words of Scripture. Since coming to Christ, I have gone to the Scriptures specifically for inspiration. In order to find out what the world of Sembercron is like, I peruse the pages of Old Testament prophecy; I find in the canon the raw materials for my world-building.

As a writer I take my courage and honesty from the person of Jesus Christ. He is the Light of the World, and I invite Him to shine in my soul as I write. God's work in me is to conform me to His likeness, and He is the one who has given me this gift of writing, so I take the act of writing as an opportunity to thank Him and to ask Him to change me.

I take the many Scriptural injunctions regarding wise use of the tongue seriously. I apply them to my writing life. I never want to be flippant or glib or vile. What's more, my purpose for writing corresponds to my purpose for speaking: to edify others and to praise God and to spread love. That may all sound whitewashed: understand that I understand that true stories have bleak elements, sometimes nothing but. I intend to tell stories the same way God weaves reality: as a complex but unified strand of events that points to His love.

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SEMBERCRONIAN EXCERPT #1

After traveling west they found a clearing in the forest. Kroova entered first and then stopped. Ashe was thinking about napping on some sunny pile of hay and bumped into Kroova. Neeld lumbered up from further back.

“Neeld,” Kroova said, “what do you think of this?”

He was gesturing around the clearing. A huge, lumpy hillock dominated the north side. A shock of blue bamboo-like shoots crowned the mound and a moat of short grass surrounded it. The rest of the clearing teemed with broad-leafed ferns. Across from the Three was an entrance back into the woods.

“It’s pleasant,” Neeld said, “but is it defensible?”

“Who do we need to fear all the way out here?” Kroova asked.

“We are outcasts,” Neeld replied. “We need to be wary of everyone, everywhere.”

Kroova didn’t disagree. Ashe hardly heard them, enamored as he was with the sunshine.

“I want to sleep,” he said. “I want to lay down in those ferns and sleep.”

Without hesitation he punched his javelin tip into the ground. Then he waded waist-deep through the ferns, which whispered together in greeting. He threw himself down, put his hands behind his head, sighed, and smiled.

“Ashe,” Kroova called, “there’s a huge bug crawling toward you.”

Ashe opened one eye and scrunched his chin toward his chest. A hard-armored, six-legged bug as big as his torso was scabbling through the ferns toward him. It emitted a sound

like a metallic dog growl. Ashe jerked up and scampered out of the ferns.

“I’m going to kill it,” he hissed. He pulled up his javelin with his right hand and flipped it into hurling position. The ferns shuddered and disgorged a surge of the bugs. Their chittering rolled with them like a discordant grindstone. Kroova counted at least ten as he drew his short sword from its scabbard. Ashe was howling in fear and jabbing his javelin toward the oncoming wave.

Neeld’s sledgehammer flattened the first bug. Its orange guts gushed from its underbelly. The second and third bugs began to slip in the innards of their comrade, but then their back legs found purchase on the turf. Both bugs launched themselves toward Neeld.

Kroova’s short sword slashed the second bug. It split into two, its metallic growls sputtering into silence. The third bug crashed into Kroova’s chest, knocked him flat on his back. Kroova wrestled with it, trying to toss it off. Neeld stood amidst the stream of bugs. He brought the hammer above his head with both hands, and then swiveled and squatted with each downblow. He crunched one bug after another with slow and murderous care.

Ashe’s javelin clattered against the back of the bug rushing at him. With a high-pitched lament, he turned and bolted toward the hillock. The entire stream of bugs skittered after him.

“Help!” Ashe shouted. He got as far as the base of the hillock before the bugs buried him with their plunging legs and bucking thoraxes. By the time Neeld ran over Ashe’s blood was spreading out from underneath the mass of insects.

Kroova managed to get his sword underneath the bug writhing on his chest. He stabbed it through, shook it off his blade, and ran toward the hillock. He saw Neeld bowling bug after bug off Ashe with the head of his hammer. He saw the bugs’ sharp legs plunging halfway up their short length into Ashe’s shuddering arms and chest. He felt his blood boil, his sword arm swing

back, and then he was hacking at the bugs and howling his throat raw.

Moments later the bugs lay twitching and torn on all sides of Ashe. Their orange guts and Ashe's red blood started to stiffen the lush grass. Kroova's fist uncurled from around his sword. It fell and clanked off a bug's shattered shell. Kroova dropped to his knees next to Ashe.

Ashe was breathing shallowly. His blood bubbled up from the dozens of little sinkholes the bugs had rent into his upper body. An orange fizz crested each upspurt of lifeblood.

"We need to wash these out," Neeld said. Ashe moaned.

"Where will we get the water?" Kroova asked.

Neeld held up a finger. His eyes stared off into space but he looked attentive. After a few moments Kroova realized he was listening. With their friend covered in blood below them, the two of them stood still and listened to the sounds of the forest.

Kroova first noticed the crackle of cooling bug shells. Then he heard the ferns and breeze consorting in maniacal whispers. He heard breath. Ashe's was labored, Neeld's was slow, his own was heavy, and the forest's was leafy, broad, and ancient. Far off to the west he heard birds chirping and just beyond that the gentle babble of a brook.

"West," Kroova said, and Neeld nodded.

"West."

"How will we carry the water?" Kroova asked. He looked down at Ashe, whose skin was dry and yellowed.

"We'll use our hands," said Neeld.

Kroova looked up sharply at him. Neeld was grinning.

"I'm kidding," he said, when he saw Kroova's scowl. "See that stock of blue plants?"

He was pointing to the cluster of vivid blue shoots that sprouted from the top of the hill.

“Those are quatcha shoots,” he said. “They’re nature’s own water pails. If we submerge a shoot it’ll swell up and retain all the water until we slice it open.”

Neeld paused, then drew his knife from his belt. He wiped the flat of his blade on his tunic. He looked down at Ashe and nodded.

“We can collect a half dozen or so,” he continued. “That’ll be enough for washing Ashe’s cuts and for drinking, too.”

Without another word Neeld ran to the top of the hillock. The cluster of quatcha shoots quivered with his footfalls. He dropped to his knees next to the cluster and hacked at the nearest shoot. A few moist thunks later he was rolling his plunder down to Kroova, watching it jolt down the hillside, and then he was bearing down on the next closest shoot.

“I think that only one of us should go,” Kroova called. “We shouldn’t leave Ashe alone here.” Neeld kept hewing and throwing the shoots.

“You’re right,” he shouted over his shoulder as the sixth shoot tumbled down the hillside. “Who’s faster?”

“I’m faster,” Kroova said.

“Then go.”

Kroova laid his hand on Ashe’s forehead in blessing. He murmured a prayer to some attentive and benevolent deity. Then he bundled the quatcha shoots in his arms and sprinted out the west side of the clearing into the forest.

The treetops quenched the light. Kroova stumbled on a root and the shoots jostled in his arms. He stopped, panting. He strained for the birdcalls he’d heard before, but now there was only his rushing blood and pounding pulse. He groaned and ran on, westward, dodging tree trunks, shrubs, and vines.

Above him there came a sound like a huge whooshing exhalation. The sound came again, again, again, beating on in a ponderous rhythm. Through a momentary gap in the canopy the shadow of a mammoth bird was cast across the rug of roots. Then all was dim again, and Kroova heard his pulse as the tremendous flaps diminished above him. He noticed that his pumping knees had knocked some of the shoots from his arms. He ran on.

Just ahead Kroova saw daylight beaming between branches, and then he was staggering out of the forest onto an expanse of sand. The grains scattered from beneath his toes as he came to a stop and observed his surroundings. The sand patch was at least as broad and long as the hillock. At the north end there was a high-banked ditch. It threaded through a slit in the forest and halted at the edge of the sand. At the south end there were a pair of pools. These were small, too short to swim across. They were surrounded by withered, grey grass and perky, outward-leaning trees.

Kroova moved towards the pools to dip the quatcha shoots in the spore-speckled water. He heard a sound overhead like canvas ruffling against more canvas. He looked up and dropped his load in fright.

On the canopy that shadowed the pools there stood a tiny man with huge wings strapped to his arms. While twice as wide as the man was tall, the wings boasted an intricate yet sinuous network of gears and chains. The man was only four feet tall. Nonetheless, his features were those of a fully developed adult, complete with a hard brow and a black beard. He scrutinized with Kroova with wagging pupils.

“You won’t want to get water from there,” he said. “That’s stillwater.”

His voice was airy. His sentences flowed in pitch between the same three or four tones and so produced a sort of careless songlike speech.

“Thanks,” Kroova managed. “The stream, then?”

“The stream.”

Kroova gathered up the quatcha shoots. Under the perched man’s gaze he passed through the trees and out onto the bank of the tumbling brook beyond. He submerged shoot after shoot in the stream. The winged man stayed silent the whole time. When Kroova straightened and looked up, he saw that the scrutiny had not ceased.

“The way you move and express yourself are familiar to me,” was the man’s soft and unexpected next statement. But before Kroova had a chance to respond he continued.

“Your friend back at the hill is badly bitten,” the winged man said. He swung a knapsack that was bound to his lower back around to the front and rifled through it.

“You’ll want to put these on his wounds,” he said. He pulled a wrapped bundle from his bag and tossed it down to Kroova. It plopped into Kroova’s palms and he unwound it, noting that the gauze could be used to tighten the contents to Ashe’s flesh.

“Those are terminin leaves,” said the man, sinching up his knapsack. “I found them today in a bush that was growing in the middle of a tribal campsite.”

Kroova thumbed through the stack of yellow leaves. His head felt like it was full of bees. He didn’t know what to make of this information or of the winged man with his devastatingly casual manner.

“Thank you,” was what he decided on. The man closed his eyes and nodded in response. Then he yanked mightily at the levers in his hands. The mechanisms of the mechanical wings creaked tremendously, and then the wings beat down, up, down, up, down, and the man was up above the treetops, wheeling like a hawk, and before long he had glided far beyond Kroova’s line

of sight. With his head awlirl and his arms burdened Kroova took off in a run toward the hillock, toward his wounded friend, and toward a multitude of other mysteries.

HOW ART IS MADE

Notions of tradition
are the potion of fruition.
Down the syrup;
it'll stir up any form
that you were wishing.

Calm your senses.
What you're hearing
is foul innovation leering.
Yes, it's lovely,
but above me,
and its vagueness ain't endearing.

Quell these urges, brash pariah!
Utter omens which aren't dire!
Form's your maker,
past's your master,
but solitude is your messiah.

MUNCHIES

waiting for anyone else
to signal their pleasure with
the donuts, the coffee,
any other source of my excess,
so that guilt
is swallowed up
in imitation.

UNDERTAKERS ASK

Undertakers ask:

how many bodies can the graveyard eat?

Hedgerow trimmers made the first maze
to mask that unnavigable mystery.

Sailors stiffen sails

and drivers twist wheels.

Doctors deliver babies

and priests bad news:

apparently, no humans

have the option of winking out like stars.

Purportedly, we can only

flourish or fester forever.

We can only grow

more nourished or more desperate.

Well, I crave respite

from the toil

of directing my existence.

SOMETHING CALLS TO ME

Something calls to me.

It is more abundant than the words I scribble in these margins.

It is more continual than punctuation will allow.

It is more ephemeral than my pencil can capture,
yet lingers beyond my capacity to endure.

It is more immense than my pride,

more sensual than my lust,

more astounding than my life.

And yet it calls.

It calls to me.

For its charity

and for the benevolence of its tone,

I will answer.

HONEST, EARNEST, ORNERY

I will not rest until I have you.
In the mean time
I will evaluate the life
out of every encounter,
commending your appealing
or dismissing your repulsive contributions.

And after we finally arrive
at an agreement of mutual affection,
I will scowl over any grade of amendment,
even as I'm turning, growing
more bitter than a root vegetable.

Wanna date?

APOLOGIES

I am sorry
to be so frequent a lover,
to leap from close acquaintance
to close to consummation,
never having touched.

I am sorry
that I cannot tell her this,
that I have told her little,
that I am greedy,
always wanting less.

1: SINAI, AND WHAT WE TRIED TO MAKE IT MEAN

After we saw the holy mountain
with its stormclouds like filthy wool
and its lightning flashes like religious epiphanies,
spiritual clarity,
we took out our smartphones and snapped one picture after another
until the alpha-coward texted the knee-knocker next to him
and said “I have the best picture of all of us.”
Perhaps he did.
We were in awe of this one’s diversions,
the way he jerked his elbows for brave new camera angles,
and we urged him to share the picture.
So he did. We saw it,
and in each of our hearts we said
“I can do better. I can do so much better.”
So we attempted to one up one another
snapping photos by the millions by the chilling flashes of lightning
while the mountain smoldered.
In the morning we told Sinai
“throw thyself into the sea, knave,
you’re blocking that copse of trees.”
The mountain obeyed our kingly decree,
and the next morning we commanded the copse to do likewise
and so on ad nauseum
until the sea was full, the land was bare,
and our harddrives were gorged with stored data
which we never recalled because we are corpses.

–inscription on a cave wall

2: SINAI, AND HOW IT RESURFACED

Dearest mother mountain,
do not take us to task (o past master)
for putting those tablets about your neck,
you're pique itself, yes, even the uppermost reaches,
to drown you like you did us.

We missed you,
for we never attained you.
We must have your stony teats,
you're stairs, yes, though you only ascend
to suckle us just below the surface.

Mother,
if we climbed you now
we would still be unable to breathe,
for you are the dive we should still be.

Mother,
lover lets us like blood;
it is your silt-water or his blood-air.

But his house is on stilts and the move
and I miss the way you coddle me.
There is safety in numbness, no,
and in scuba?

-scrap of a sodden parchment

SEMBERCRONIAN EXCERPT #2

That same night was the first that Neeld saw his Reflection. He couldn't sleep. He stacked the firewood on his bedroll, let the rain put out the fire, and left the campsite. He hardly noticed himself moving. He was absorbed in feeling his spirit heave and snarl like angry surf.

When he became aware of his physical reality he was standing at the edge of the right-most Frog Pond. The darkness all around him was split by a single beam of light from the largest moon. The beam splashed across the surface of the Pond.

He looked down. A silver form of himself looked back, and looked back with an intensity that terrified him. He saw that his reflection did not stand like he did, did not in fact mirror him. The moonlight-and-water Neeld held itself erect with a muscular nobility that made the flesh-and-blood Neeld feel feeble.

"Speak to me," Neeld entreated his Reflection. He felt welling up in him the accumulated emotional onus of the past few weeks: the annoyance, the despair, the loneliness.

"Speak to me," Neeld begged. "Tell me what to do."

He watched his Reflection turn its head away. Its face was an inscrutable silver mask. Suddenly it looked up at Neeld, pulled back its arms, and rammed its hands into the surface of the water.

The silver blanket of water bulged upwards, taut around his Reflection's vying fingers. Neeld screamed and bucked backwards into the sand. The hands retreated into the depth of the

silver water. His Reflection was looking at him in a way that seemed utterly cool and unflappable. Then, as he watched, it wriggled around and swam deeper into the Frog Pond's moonlight much like a man underwater might swim for the surface.

The moon moved behind the trees. The water became dark. The forest was silent. Neeld rocked, gasped, and sobbed.

Hours later he became aware that he was sitting in a little stream and that he was cold. Totally forgetting his surroundings, he got up, stumbled a little to his left, and toppled onto the bones.

The enormous ribcage cracked beneath him and he fell feet first into the cage of the chest. The rain had turned the sand in the bottom of the pit into deep mud. He sank up to his armpits before he managed to grab one of the skeleton's ribs. But it was one of the bones he'd broken in his fall. It snapped off the skeleton, flinging his arm back into the slurry. The mud seized and swallowed his arm with a slurp. He flailed his other arm for another rib. He felt it hard and cold in his fist before it too snapped off, flung his arm down, shoved him deeper into the slough. His nose filled with mud. He sneezed a single stream of sludge before the mud clawed back into his nose and down his throat.

The moon eased out from behind the trees and threw its light onto Neeld. Just before the mud swallowed him whole he saw that he was drowning inside the skeleton of a creature that was as large as the hillock he'd been hollowing out with Kroova and Ashe. Not only that, but it was animate. Its vertebral column, thick as a tree trunk, swiveled and snaked around the edge of the pit as though exploring its surroundings by smell. Then the mud closed over him.

His last hope had been to kick off the lower ribs of the skeleton, but he never made contact with them. Instead he sunk, mud expanding in his lungs like a voluminous life-breath,

and died.

No, came a whisper, it is not time yet.

He was convulsing and puking mud over the edge of the skeleton's pit. It splattered in the pit below like slop from a farmer's pail. The skeleton's long neck sank from its full extension over the treetops and coiled in the bottom of the pit. It hissed as it discharged heat into the rain.

When, gut taut as rock, Neeld finished retching, he lay on his side and breathed. The air was sweet like lilacs. His lungs and throat and nose still felt muddy.

"How?" he asked, voice airy. "Who?"

The moon retreated behind the trees. When Kroova and Ashe found him there in the morning, they couldn't get an explanation out of him. In the woods between the Frog Ponds and the campsite they decided that he must have spent all night filling in the pit, as the sand had been perfectly filled in and flattened. They couldn't make sense of the long horizontal streaks across the sand pit, or the fragments of bone in Neeld's hair, or the huge silver handprints burned into his flesh. They didn't have time to wonder. For the next week they had their hands full fighting Neeld's furious fever with every herbal remedy they could concoct. When he became conscious, he told them nothing.

DR. BROWN'S DAY OFF

Cedarville's a small college town
and I'm the University's president.
Even on the weekend
at the outskirts
of a Christmas tree farm,
while pulling my blanket-bundled
and blubbering grandbaby in a red sled,
I can not shirk my duty.
I can not avoid students.

These ones,
their eyes wet with the cold,
are caroling a capella.
What should they need from me
but for my ears to hear?
I lift my earmuffs
and linger to listen
for a few huffs more.

LITERARY BARBARIAN

I live off letters to other people.
I swallow up words for a different time & place,
for those with homes.
I am a savage reader
because all I read deconstructs
my already drifting & sallow self.

HAIKUS

On that frigid peak
he inhaled a mote of air
that none had before.

Lil' cousin Levi
finds my cancelled flight among
this world's false goodbyes.

"More? More?" begs Levi.
Yes, young one, there is more, but
you may not like it.

I curl on my side,
think impotent, bleached thoughts, and
fart oh so gently.

SPREAD YOUR RIBS

Iodine tornado rib cage
rings the moon oh so luminous.
Solo cyclone self spins
that I'm good enough—that's ludicrous.
The dye of heaven's psalter
stains the songs I sing as numinous.
So sparse expanse round moony midst
must grow with Breath voluminous.

BARK PENCIL, APPLE FIELD

I don't have to marvel.

The full extent of my awe
can't bear half of its object.

I won't be forced to wonder,
for under me wonder will never be subject.

But as far as this moment's concerned,
I haven't channeled its content,

I haven't seen all that there is
to see yet

here

OUR ACOUSTIC SOUL

What the humming, ancient soul
inside us wants
(when we are one)
is for our mute young love
to croon so deep as to root us soundly,
to harmonize so widely as to grow into the needy,
and to strain so high
that it, so taut,
is plucked by
and thrums for
the songful hereafter.

11:32, BASEMENT DESK

It occurs to me
that it is the simple day
that pleases me most.
I love the hours gone by
without looking like or for
anything splashy,
but invariably turning up
invaluables.

EVAPORATION

We pass
from dingy room
to dingy room
like wraiths in the rain.

We are unbecoming.
What once we were
we now are shunning.

I LONG TO BE

I long
to be
short of breath
because you
your skin
and mine
have peeled away
and I have swooped
into your approximate length and duration
which, with me,
is mangled
like a metal bird
in a nest of paper barbs.

ACCENT OWNERSHIP

Tonight I walked Farley the dog around the block. The walk is his social hour. None of the other dogs came today, but he read their stained messages on tree trunks and in bushes. I pulled him along like a harried parent might. His legs tangled the leash. Every now and then I collected a warm turd with a Walmart bag.

The sky was incredible. My first reaction to its beauty was an attempt to collect it like I might one of Farley's turds. Rather than absorb a stunning sight I attempt to capture it with my words. This isn't to say that my words are entirely futile devices, but it is to say that sometimes saying anything diminishes what I'm seeing. Fits it in my head. Feeds it to my narrow engine of comprehension. Turns it into fodder for pride. Wonder seems a more humble and desirable approach. Words can come later.

I approached a family. A boy in a black shirt scooted past me, then looped back to his parents. His father wore a blue and white polo and his wife a green sundress. She held the hand of their toddler daughter, who marveled at Farley as a more aware Nate might at the sky. I felt social apprehension. "Will these people like me? What will I say?" But I smiled and greeted them.

"What's his name?" asked the mother.

"Farley," I told her.

"See the puppy?" she cooed to the toddler. "Well, not a puppy. A big dog."

They petted him. He pooped.

“Good night,” said the father. He walked on.

“Good evening,” I responded. I knelt in the grass to pluck up the poop.

As I did so I thought about words and names. It occurred to me that to name is to assert ownership. To name a dog “Farley” is to say “this is my dog.” To give another example: I’m writing a fantasy novel about an island that floats in the sky. Until I knew the name of the island, it didn’t feel so much like it was mine to shape and explore. Now it does feel like mine, and writing is a tremendous experience that resonates back with power and responsibility alike. I am a small-g god who can only hope to be benevolent and redemptive to my fictional peoples as the large-g God changes my sinner’s heart.

I encountered that same family later in the walk. That same apprehension flared up, but I smiled through it into conversation. I stopped on the sidewalk as Farley smelled the mother’s groin.

“Do you keep him trimmed?” the mother asked, repelling snout with palm. The father looked like I felt—socially apprehensive. But I smiled at him and her and their children. The toddler stood a few feet away in the grass, still wide-eyed. I imagined how magnificent an English sheepdog might look to a tiny girl.

“He’s not my dog,” I said. “I’m walking him for my cousin.”

“Oh,” the mother said. “Where are you from?”

“New Hampshire,” I said from my heart. Florida is not yet home.

“What is your accent?” she asked. This is a familiar question.

“It’s mine,” I said simply. They looked quizzical. I continued.

“I used to make many recordings on my iPhone,” I said. “I’m a musician, so I record ideas. You know people say ‘oh, I hate my voice when it’s recorded’? I think that I altered my voice so that I liked it better.”

Other times I’ve also added, “that’s the hypothesis. I’d have to go back and check it” or “I wanted to speak with more precision, so I did.” This time, though, the conversation took an unexpected turn into the territory of epiphany.

“You should come up with a place where it’s from,” the mother said. The name of the place came to mind immediately. I was delighted.

“Do you have any suggestions?” I asked, my mouth wide with mirth.

“Um,” she said. Her toddler still stared at Farley. The husband was engaged but sheepish. The boy spoke up at the same time I said “Sembercron.”

“Something,” he said. I mean, he said something, but I was too engaged with my thoughts to really hear it and remember it. Plus he spoke softly. But I liked the general impression I got of the name.

“That’s good,” I said. “I’ll have to write that down when I get back. What are your names?”

Braden is the boy, John the husband, Rachel the wife, and, if I heard correctly, their toddler is Aria. But I think I’ve got that name wrong.

I left soon after that. It would have been fun and easy to stay and chat. To tell them about Sembercron, those who live there, and how they talk. But I had to get back to write. My head had filled up again.

YOUR HANDYMAN

Darling,
for you the green rug will unroll.
I will measure the bedroom,
clean the floor, remove the doors,
cut and paste the tackless strips,
lay and trim the carpet pad, staple its seams,
notch and trim the heavy carpet,
lay it down and glue its seams,
press it so it burrows into the strips
and trim and stretch and bind it
till that rug lays snug
so your bare toes
on their way to bed
feel happy and warm.

And for you the master bathroom's drip will cease.
I will shut off the water, close the drain,
remove the faucet's handle,
ease out the cap and collar,
cam and washer, metal ball,
swap out the valves and springs,
lift the spout and grease the O-rings,
then reassemble them piece by piece
till our water runs smooth
so your lips,
my midnight,
feel soft and full.

Oh, darling! Darling!
This house is not enough!
Let me make a window in the roof for you
so as our evenings come and go
I can take your little hand
and kiss each finger
as we count the stars
one by one
and feel beholden to joy.

LABOR DAY

I'm listening to the space
between the copious shadows
of trees on the riverwalls
when the clouds, like shutters,
silence the sun.

BRING ME TO FULLNESS

Call me off my rocker, but Jesus Christ,
the Savior of All, having saved me from offers
of empty world-baubles, yet contains
not only this saving but also Wisdom

Wisdom,

Wisdom, at it is the real, raw, bloody-knuckle/
peace-loving variety. Pure wisdom.

I crave it. I am made for it.

When I am grown and young'ns ask

“for what ought I seek,” I’ll answer

“Wisdom, because

easy, cheap, or not,

it makes the home your heart needs.”

WRITE ON

Temperate as days with frayed ends
set against the cold stones
which lead to the front door

and mystical as moth dew
the morning burps with,

for the ways the calm expands
I set my soul aside
just as these winds know me completely.

LIGHT FOR TWO BOYS SLEDDING ALONE

The sledding hill transformed by floodlights
holds in its gut that need
I too have to be seen and touched, but,
passed over, we plead
Stay with me: talk to me and plead with me
not to change. But we'll change,

worn down by light play into narrow ruts,
halved between, for one,
the brotherhood of single-minded selfish ambition
and for the other
love. I sledded alone;

Alex often passed over me
1. for a steep slope of good reasons like
other people, dreams, and destinations;
and 2. for no reason too bad, because I am his brother.

Too bad: grow up and move on this loneliness
says. No, I say. I'll stay,
for though I am worn down
by my numberless givings-up on him,
my vertical heart has been won
by a love too full to slide on empty.

WE'LL HAVE TO LAUGH LATER

I try a joke
because the air between our chests
is gravity and laughter
is propulsion and fear
comes in me
that too soon do we bare
our souls, our skins,
our thickest fingers in thickets,
forests of yours, mine, ours, oh.

HE THE FIREPLACE

Knowing it's snowing
doesn't count for a good coat
nor a single premonition
for the mighty double zipper,
nor do hunches
stand straighter than arrows to shelter
on snow-speckled roadsigns illumined by headlights.

Yet bastards like me,
who knew only dark,
have gained heaven's hearth
by an ember of faith.

FOR THE AMEN

Let me discard my slick pride when I'm eloquent;
after all, pretty words aren't always true.
Let me shed also those raincoats of silence
which cozy my fear to confess and praise you.
Instead, let my mouth be sunlight and wind:
let me beam forth your brightness, carry your seed.
Consider my lips and my tongue your dominion
and use them however you need.

PATH OF LEGENDS

My spirit, with its many words
without form, babbles on in longing
for spiritual kisses and caresses
to soothe its contumelies and calumnies.

It is too tender to receive modern succor.
It scrambles for lost ages' words,
for scrolls of poetry and screeds of prophecy,
for older self-expressions from a greater spirit.

My spirit will always turn back to you
because it knows no other way.

PSALM 4:50 A.M.

O healer, beater of every chest,
unlocking every hidden spool of intention,
threading each into the web of us
where you make your nest —

heal us, for after you have broken us open,
changed our shapes, our interior figures,
you can leave us so
please do not leave us
in the tense knowledge of our guilt.

PSALM 5:20 A.M.

You release the hope
of other saviors from my veins,
my very mortal veins,
and you climb higher,
a subway car with all seats full,
to make room for behavior on two legs.

You beat back patterns of decay
with their bent, bruised heads
dangling shamed and pendulous
with the very chants of victory
they composed to trap the miscreant riders.

You are, to put it simply,
my hero, my driver,
my new and rooted tunnel love.

THE BRIDGE

See, it is nighttime, but don't streetlamps spew
light enough to see my own death by?
To see the water, which rushes by
in tandem with my ignorance?

What is the name of this overreaching tree?
Toward what riverbed do its roots and my soul flounder?
Why is the wet blank dark so sweet and repulsive?
Since I know so little, does the dew throw me?

No, I baffle it too, clinging to hope
as I do and as it does
the branches giving way to light fog.

OLD AND BROKEN HOME, NEWLY PARCHED THROATS

And, dangerously, after hours
have expired, and we in our sullen way
have abdicated every last pretense of misery,
we will choose to sit at the feet of the Master,
drinking in His words, thoughts, galaxies,
as He storytells us who we are.

And we, so late, will learn
that all that came before
is dirtier and darker than we'd known,
and that the few kisses we gave to God
were sweeter than we'd imagined,
and that now, although incapable and inadequate,
we find ourself the recipient
of a love so great and wide,
deep and pungent,
that it lifts us from the floor to the ceiling.

This is the same floor we broke in that rage
over night pleasures gone sour.
This is the same ceiling we cracked open
to tune into the night's bitterest songs.

Oh, our home is broken,
but now that we know You, Master, won't You
teach us Your words
the way You mean us to sing them?

SEMBERCRONIAN EXCERPT #3

The barn, which was worn down by the incessant rain, slumped against the four trees on the property's far side. Their upper branches poked through its upper window and the holes in its roof. On this evening, with the sun already expiring on the hilltops behind, the barn resonated with the shouts of two boys.

They were battling with sticks. The taller of the two, who was slim with dark brown eyes and hair, clearly had the advantage. The other boy, who was built like boar, staggered under the aggressive downblows of his opponent.

The smaller boy's stick snapped in two. The larger part jabbed his face and he yelped in pain. The stick clattered to the floor as the larger boy swept the other's legs from under him.

The smaller boy landed in the hay. He huffed, glared up at the larger boy, and then lay flat on the floor.

"Go ahead," he said. "Beat me up. I've had worse."

This startled the larger boy somewhat, and he lowered his stick.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said. "I only mean to drive you out of the barn."

"Then you'd better go ahead and beat me, because I won't leave."

As the smaller boy said this he sat up and glowered at the other boy, who stared down at him thoughtfully. Finally, the larger boy threw his stick aside and sat cross-legged across from his former opponent.

"I'm Kroova," he said, holding out his hand in greeting. "What's your name?"

The smaller boy looked at Kroova suspiciously for a long while. When an abrupt gust of wind blew open the barn door, he shivered and curled in on himself, tucking his hands into his armpits. Kroova's eyes softened.

"Why don't you have a winter tunic?" he asked gently. "Don't you know that the alpine winds are due any day now?"

"Yes, I know that," the smaller boy spat.

"Well..." Kroova looked at a loss.

"I don't need your pity," his opponent said fiercely, and scooted back along the floor.

Kroova made no attempt to follow. Instead he looked pensively over the boy's shoulder toward the house beyond, where a lone candle was burning in one of the lower windows.

"My foster parents will be expecting me," Kroova said. "They thought it was a big cat that got into the barn."

His eyes glinted suddenly.

"Should I tell them it was a big cat?" he asked.

The smaller boy looked up at him, startled.

"What?"

"Are you a big cat?" said Kroova, and winked.

"I'm a man," said the boy.

"Yes, but what should I tell my parents?"

The boy looked angry and opened his mouth to respond in kind, but then he stopped and looked over his shoulder at the rain that was slowly flooding the carpet of wildflowers. He looked back at Kroova and lowered his head.

"I'm only passing through," he muttered.

Kroova stood and walked over to where he'd thrown his stick. The smaller boy became tense and watched him with squinted eyes and bowed head.

"Good," Kroova said. He flourished the stick. "I'll tell them I had a mighty duel with the cat and that I was the victor."

The smaller boy lowered his head and said nothing. Kroova walked toward the door, but placed his hand on the boy's shoulder before passing him.

"There are provisions in the unlocked chest upstairs," he said. "Blankets too, and other gear if you need. All free to take."

Beneath his hand he felt the boy's shoulders tense, then relax, and then heave as the boy sighed.

"Why?" the boy asked. His voice had none of the feigned gruffness of before.

"I was an orphan once," said Kroova, "and someone took me in out of the rain."

He walked to the door.

"See you in the morning," he said. As he sprinted to the house he imagined he could hear irregular sobbing beneath the rain's steady drumming.

WHAT YOU MUST

You have become one of my thoughts,
the busiest of the fair,
the fleck which reminds yesterday is behind.
You began as my turmoil,
my unease,
my ancient architecture,
and now you are dissembled
by resembling me.

There is more, I think
because I must
mask space
with obscurity.

Clean me now.

A PRAYER TO THE GOD OF MY LIFE

Where I find my worth is me
and my worries too
close a garment to discard

for how long

have I not known
that words from me
only resound empty

for so long

as I am forthright,
I beg of you,
show me the way,

I long for

You are my love and the peace
I am given I share
with You, I am not restless.

DESERT VINE PSALM

Your vine surrounds me.
Your bounds be my freedom.

In the wilderness
You are my wall, my safety.
You move me on
in awe and safely.

Bind me the tighter
that our love might increase.

In truth, here's my heart;
the brink set me loose;
You are my peace
and the love of my youth.