Hymnal Essay

1.

Not the wolf but a shepherd counting. He would not want us to sleep by highways—I prefer to be a secret, would not wish to get caught in a sermon. Many parables feature children. Both shepherds and I rely on roadside flowers to tell time. One girl plays greenly in a graveyard, small beasts unafraid of her. A child is a small animal—unlike a beast, she wrangles words.

My first three: Da-da, Anna, Amen

As prayer, my dad translated them:

Father,
Grace.
Amen

He teaches me to speak,

and so original sin
teeters on two wheels. Hornets nestle under a seesaw; I fall with them. A first sting is the shock of a gun—fangs that would protect a kingdom.

Christianity—
in the beginning—a heretical Jewish cult.

Splinters and lullabies lean toward We would not be destroyed.

Koine Greek eats cheerios. Dad explains Santa to a five-year-old: a dead Turkish bishop. But when I cry:

God created wasps to protect Earth from aliens. Needles are bright swords one may carry in the mouth. Does a beast know it was created? Wonderful tigers—may they simply die?
Crawl under pews;
gather rhymes in graceful turns: bound songs
 lure fledgling
 bookworms. Dad lifts me up
to drop pennies in the crossed tithe box. Bible paper
and common measure—
they suffer with power.

I found the wrecked box
(splintered shock)— I wasn’t there
with the robber, but I see his shadow
circle the altar.

Would a poached lamb hunt doe? False idols strike
his right cheek. His four blows strike one bell.

All the long hair and all the bold columns, they defend—
but they couldn’t put the offering box together again.

I stitch words, bake Dad’s favorite pie.

Coins scavenged
under cushions
gas the car:

we take brown bags to motel-homes; I meet Tuberculosis
at a nursing home.

*Laborare est orare:* to work is to pray.

*Parsonage* means: we have a home.

*Car* means: theology
when Toni Braxton dresses the radio in red contralto

(a voice is God’s gift—even a preacher’s daughter may abuse it).

The shepherd sits outside, goodness and mercy
in his dim-lighted pen, in the shadow of his crook.

Red doors date back centuries, open to sanctuary:
I promise
to keep my father safe.
Where I anticipate

a note,

my fingers brush the limits of this sphere.  (Does my hand brush safety from song?)

Red carpet

belongs to itself,

shoulders shards of the offering box
and its broken lock.

2.

My matte devotion is quotidian.

I meet Grandmother before first light
to pick peas.
We kneel in untitled dirt,

seeking weeds we can’t yet see;
branches snore; verbs preach, blustery.
Damp earth wakes worms as birds cut

the pregnant sky. Dawn’s stubborn
locket snaps open.
We sit by ourselves,

hedge-hidden. A small town gathers outside.

Social insects
carol the doors of churches.

Always, there are no babies, but she and I remain in the nursery
(a wolf prowls sanctuaries and church school—like rabbits,
when startled, we sit still.)

Today I will wear       waxy scraps
from the lift-lid desk
and Grandmother’s legendary skirt:

Black velvet        over soil-crusted knees.       Kitchen-wall homilies.       Vascular
Buttons pearl       the moss mattress,       the stem-spines.       The darkness
of hyacinths.            Worms and yarn       drape detritus       of dairy barn.
Bones of canned salmon.         Our curls       in the beak.

Throw the rake behind the roots. How wordlessly death takes her breath from my cheek. Jesus would
gather children to safety. Nestled now with her Lord Grandma can’t save me from thinness.
Sway under titled ground.

My name used to be Graceless. Then they named me.

Mother nightingale, where is lightest wind? Why is there the right to gather a bird? Why are broken eggshells longing to be gathered?

Struck by a clapper, the circumference wobbles. Even a cup of milk may splash a growl. Mouth of gun. Bell towers. A man’s thumb till the nest is adjectives.

Winded, explain worth to a hunter: I have been loved as if I were complete. (Adjectives sit close to the body.) Grandmother’s skirt tempted every spruce tree to gossip. Her favorite melodies twining:

I come to the garden alone, biting from itching vines whole tomatoes. We garden together while the dew is still on the roses.

3.

In my bedroom, blues metronome; reds needlework a psalm.

Maintain the flame in corners. This bethel is no building.
Four walls may seam a full skirt. Dear God,

your face is all mosaic: beasts that ever were born
ascending stairs of tongue.

Odes canopy over, but there’s no unison.

Alpha through omega, 
cadence curves words devoutly. I don’t know 
my body,

but I know letters magnetize fingers. I think of 
my friend, her brown eyes—someone 
should. It’s pilgrimage to become. Jonah stickers, 
nightlights, syllables 
spin my stupid tongue.

The Word catches blue glass (Mary’s face)

and cracks Tenebrae. A good example to save me hangs above the bed—is it heresy for a small beast to cower? It’s hard to be seen over and over 
by a savior. (Jonah’s whale was a room with the nature of a robe.)

This is still my room.

I reverence danger.

My Master—the Owner—only a Word. Pavlovian clichés and Chekov’s refrain nimbly go and come.

I could not pull their muskets, the burning match to the palm. The mouth emits pleasure: you pull her trigger, expecting letters to break up. She is endowed: line breaks clamp until the pulse moves.

4.

Angels drop candlesticks above an airport. Prudence asks: do you still carry baggage from the past?

I pocket my ticket.

I wish to be in the storm but outside of the plane.

The man in the aisle seat—

Mr. Bible School Boot Camp. He drunk-preaches to cleavage:

sins of the flesh 
tempt as women. Weaker vessels listen well as wives.
We are all sinners,
and this is the value of time.

Palm branches wave: do not be afraid. Jesus stirred a second time.

Concealed carry enables us to adore.

Property:

_We are his sheep._

Lonely and loaded, is his eye yellow? There are places where cocks can’t crow.
A bell answers its own purpose: are the good guys martyrs?

Organists do not play guns, but do they practice drinking songs?

The aisle seat slurs through a few more verses; leers warp harmonious lines.

Somewhere God’s exact rhymes fall on the chamber of a firearm. I resent the turbulence.

I was formerly the torch of an ordinary word.
He formerly rung out powder.
Is anything more worthy than to guard a master?

Evening approaches to be snuffed clean,
to be quitted to the bottom of its lightning wing.

(An armed church might shoulder fire through the woods.
A sovereign breath might rest upon the seventh if it could.)

The choir cues: I set my bell to the flame and extinguish. With no light,

I cradle matchlike syllables.

When God’s cherubs eye a trembling lamb— that lamb trembles over trigger.

Inside a cherub’s choir robe, every line-end grazes on a savior named perimeter.
Though frayed, I put the line-ends on,

offer some planet or shooting star as tithe
and in its eye—fear.

I would have a celestial body turn itself even once.

But everyone knows the law of the work—vowels slant flammable.

A thousand tongues
in a simple room. I would never deny it.

They think

they want

to protect you,

these creatures

grazing at large.