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Hips Unsocketed, Names Changed

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Austin L. Church entitled "Hips Unsocketed, Names Changed." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Art Smith, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Marilyn Kallet, Ben Lee

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Austin Legate Church entitled "Hips Unsocketed, Names Changed." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

_____Art Smith_____
Dr. Art Smith, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

___Marilyn Kallet___
Dr. Marilyn Kallet

___Ben Lee___
Dr. Ben Lee

Accepted for the Council:

_____Carolyn R. Hodges_____
Carolyn R. Hodges, Vice Provost and
Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

HIPS UNSOCKETED, NAMES CHANGED

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of English
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Austin Legate Church
May 2008

ABSTRACT

This collection of poems represents my work from the past two years. I experiment with a variety of forms and measures, though most of these poems are in free verse. Two images serve as a cipher for understanding them as a whole: a peach tree and a red fox. Every year, I would wait in anticipation for the hard green buds to appear on the peach tree in my backyard, then, for them to change color, swelling with sweetness. By the time the ones that escaped the frost and insects were ripe enough to eat, I had forgotten about them and was surprised to see them on the kitchen table or catch a glimpse of red or orange in the leaves. Poetry has become my way of holding up my life's fruits, my memories, to the sun to see how they have ripened. This metaphorical process of waiting and the renewed sense of discovery that comes with the long-awaited harvest define my experience of writing poetry. The second image, a red fox, has come to signify for me spiritual awareness and encounters with God in unexpected places. I have often seen red foxes in unlikely places. Poetry, for me, is a movement towards a deeper understanding of God. Poetry is searching for *shalom* in the midst of alienation, severed relationships, and ruptured selves. In summary, I seek a balanced and honest treatment of human heart-terrain, open to all emotions and experiences, with the ultimate aim of participating in God's work of redemption and restoration.

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INTRODUCTION

One day, a friend at a coffee shop handed me Li-Young Lee's book *Rose: Poems* and told me to read "Persimmons." He gave me a knowing look. I did as he said and felt several tears slide from the corner of my eye. Lee leads the reader through movements of memory—vocabulary lessons in the sixth grade, making love to his wife, his father's artistic accomplishments and failing vision. The poem is at once about all of these things and none of them. "Some things never leave a person," writes the poet. "scent of the hair of the one you love,/ the texture of persimmons,/in your palm, the ripe weight."¹ I was thinking of "Persimmons" when I wrote "Peach Tree." My two sisters and I would wait in anticipation each year for the hard green buds to appear then change color, swelling with sunlight. By the time the ones that escaped the frost and insects were ripe enough to eat, we had forgotten about them and were surprised to see them on the kitchen table or still hidden heavy and waiting in the leaves. An entirely unrelated experience called to memory that peach tree, its fruit, and the day my father pulled it down. Poetry has become my way of salvaging and preserving memory, holding my life's fruits up to the sun to see how they have ripened. This waiting and renewed sense of discovery has come to define my experience of writing poetry.

Poetry is a big tent. There's enough room underneath for everybody, formalists and non-formalists, lovers of lyric or narrative poetry, advocates of every tent corner and every influential movement. This realization has brought me much relief because, for a while, I thought that writing a certain kind of poem was throwing in my lot with a certain tribe of poets whose identity was formed mostly in opposition to other tribes and was

¹ Li-Young Lee, "Persimmons," *Rose: Poems* (Rochester, New York: BOA, 2000) 17-19.

reinforced with antagonism towards them. I am a young poet. When I first became serious about writing poetry, I wanted to try out a variety of forms and meters. If I shared a poem with one of my teachers, I often felt like a kindergartner holding up a precocious finger painting. I learned not to expect much interest in my work from my teachers. My junior year of high school, my teacher complimented my diction in a quixotic poem entitled “Oak-Savanna.” I mimicked e.e. cummings by arranging the words into the shape of a tree. However, I remember little else I would consider critique or guidance. No one recommended poets or offered writing prompts. Neither one of my parents are writers. My father wanted to see one of my poems after it received honorary mention in a writing contest my junior year of high school. He finished reading, then asked, “Does this mean you think our lives are boring?” I gave up on expecting any outside help.

I did continue to write poetry in college. I took a secondary tutorial with Keiron Winn, a British poet, while I was studying abroad in Oxford, England. My best poem of the semester, “At the Imperial War Museum,” contained, in his opinion, “inflated rhetoric.” This vague term qualified by a few suggestions about some of the poem’s specific lines and words improved it enough to get it published in the Oxford University Poetry Society’s biannual anthology, *The Reader*. However, Winn’s tutelage ended there. I was left to follow the natural relief of my creative topography.

Not until my arrival at the University of Tennessee did I find a community of people who were willing to take my work seriously. Good critique forced me to ask myself what I was hoping to accomplish in certain poems, why the poem *needed* to be

written. Those questions situated in individual poems led to larger questions of poetics, craft, and my vision of the place I wanted to occupy under the big tent.

My thoughts on poetry writing have for a backdrop the larger discussion of aesthetics. A friend of mine told me about an exhibit he saw at the Tate Modern in London. A looped video recording showed a man in a Richard Nixon mask punching himself in the face. Once he was out of breath, the “artist” squirted ketchup and mustard into his boxing gloves and began to masturbate. My friend described this recording not because he has a taste for the obscene but because years later, he was still trying to make sense of the spectacle. Perhaps the artist hoped the video would provide meta-commentary on Western culture’s obsession with violence and sex, and with this end in mind, he was successful in his self-expression. Although video was thought-provoking and memorable, I am unconvinced: Although art is surely self-expression, self-expression is not necessarily art.

I remember a blue canvas I saw in the Reina Sofia in Madrid, Spain. This modern art museum also holds Picasso’s “Guernica.” In fact, I went to the museum for the purpose of seeing this masterpiece. It covered an entire wall, a dystopia of people and animals, distorted geometric figures in shades of black and gray. No one else could paint “Guernica” and capture its layers of political and social relevance; it is impossible to replicate. I also saw a blue canvas, called something along the lines of “Blue #247.” The problem was that I had already seen blue canvases. Perhaps, they spoke collectively of the monotony, the monochrome uniformity, of modern Western culture where everything, even fine art, is commodified, pre-packaged and re-packaged for easy consumption and immediate gratification. However, the existence of more than one blue

canvas diminished the originality of each. An absence of technical excellence makes me think “art” has degraded into a mere commerce of ideas, as opposed to a marriage of technique and subject, producing nuances of religious, cultural, social, and political resonance.

Somewhere I heard this absence explained in part as disenchantment with the metaphysical. Without a supernatural tenor, without belief in the Divine, or in good and evil, or in significance and purpose for human existence, an artist’s perception of reality can become solipsistic. Of course, this diagnosis has deeper epistemic underpinnings, a discussion of which would require more space than I have here, and although certain currents of postmodern thought tell me that I should know better than to impose my values, my standards, my aesthetics on other people, I still assert that much of modern visual art I have seen is notable only for its sensationalism and shock value. A crucifix in a jar of urine, a Great White shark decomposing in a huge tank of formaldehyde—I begin to think that just because it hasn’t been done before doesn’t mean it should be done. Artists have become our best shockers. Yet, even shock value depends upon a perceived, homogenized public sensibility—a standard, something to rub up against—and like anything else abrasive, “art” will worry and chafe only until calluses develop. I prefer art that offers a more subtle, studied marriage of technique and subject material. Whether they make assaults on “good taste,” implement the Golden Ratio, or work within the physical edges of a canvas, artists must always work within constraints.

T.S. Eliot claims that “There is no freedom in art.”² In many ways, to talk about art is to talk about poetry. Eliot believes, “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction throughout his career.” The best poets cultivate a “consciousness of the past,” which itself acts as a sort of historical measure.³ In his essay, “Tradition and Revolution: The Modern Movement and Free Verse,” Timothy Steele quotes Eliot from a 1944 lecture on Samuel Johnson:

Originality, when it becomes the only, or the most prized virtue of poetry, may cease to be a virtue at all; and when several poets, and their respective groups of admirers, cease to have in common any standards of versification, any identity of taste or of tenets of belief, criticism may decline to an advertisement of preference.⁴

Exploration of “poetry” presents challenges because the word itself opens such broad and narrow vistas. Charles Hartman uses the phrase “poetry in motion” as one example of expansive definitions for “poetry,” more a category or an umbrella term than a synonym for free and formal verse. “Poetry” connotes a certain grace or fluidity of movement, a special use of language, perhaps even a particular posture assumed when perceiving the natural world or contemplating the subtleties of human interaction and emotion. Poetry, then, can be sensibility.

² T.S. Eliot, “Reflections on *Vers Libre*,” *Twentieth-Century American Poetics: Poets on the Art of Poetry*, ed. Dana Gioia, David Mason, et al. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004) 108.

³ T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *Twentieth-Century American Poetics: Poets on the Art of Poetry*, ed. Dana Gioia, David Mason, et al. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004) 113.

⁴ Timothy Steele, “Tradition and Revolution: The Modern Movement and Free Verse,” *Twentieth-Century American Poetics: Poets on the Art of Poetry*, ed. Dana Gioia, David Mason, et al. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004) 430.

Of course, poetry is most often thought of as an art form and literary genre. Like other art forms, poetry thrives within constraints. The best poems subscribe to some measure—those limitations suggested by traditional form, meter, or rhyme, or by rhythm or line breaks. Poetry's limitations set it apart from other verbal and written acts of language. Hartman offers a helpful definition: “A poem is the language of an act of attention.”⁵ “Meaning arises not from what the poem says, but from what it does and the doing that it represents.”⁶ Working with a similar definition, my Modern Poetry teacher at Lipscomb University, Dr. Steve Prewitt, encouraged us to question not what the poem says but *how* it means. Forms become “an experience shared by the reader and the poet.”⁷ Writing poems involves putting language together in a new complex of meanings or resonances that requires a special cipher, a special way of reading. The prosody found in traditional forms acts as a common language between the poet and reader. Much contemporary and experimental poetry cannot gain a broad reading public because it fails to establish a similar idiom or vernacular that readers can rely upon to gather meaning from the poem. The reader is kicked out of the party before he or she ever received the invitation. Diction and rhythm, the preoccupations of much free verse, must work very hard to provide those acts of discovery that gives poetry its distinctive spoken and written magic.

In his essay “American Poetry in the New Century,” John Barr argues that contemporary poetry fails because it fails to correspond to contemporary life. But what if

⁵ Charles Hartman, *Free Verse: an essay on Prosody* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University, 1996) 12.

⁶ *Ibid*, 85.

⁷ *Ibid*, 87.

contemporary poetry succeeds because its portrayals of life are accurate? What if no one enjoys reading those portrayals because they are truthful? Barr also comments, “Groundbreaking new art comes when artists make a changed assumption about their relationship to their audience, talk to their readers in a new way, and assume they will understand.”⁸ What if their readers don’t understand? Isn’t that the problem we’ve had all along, not the irrelevancy of poetry but its distinction as a special kind of language? The best poems are not about what they are about. The language has denotations and connotations, layers of meaning. The way poetic language and its layers of meaning are put together distinguishes makes new meanings is what distinguishes a poem from an e-mail and personal letter. Poets and their readers must learn formal prosody and the poetic conventions of free verse before the psychic and emotional connection between the poet and reader across time and space can reach its full richness and power. Eliot describes this phenomenon as follows:

The final handing over, so to speak, of the poem to an unknown audience, for what that audience will make of it, seems to me the consummation of the process begun in solitude and without thought of the audience, the long process of gestation of the poem, because it marks the final separation of the poem from the author.⁹

The reader receives the poet’s child to the degree that the he or she has learned to separate the poem’s tenor from its vehicle. In most poems, the vehicle is easy enough to

⁸ John Barr, “American Poetry in the New Century,” *Poetry*, Sept. 2006, The Poetry Foundation, 14 Apr. 2008
<http://www.poetrymagazine.org/magazine/0906/comment_178560.html>.

⁹ T.S. Eliot, “The Three Voices of Poetry.,” *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) 99-100.

identify. Appreciation and understanding of the tenor, however, requires understanding how poems make meaning.

Poets who fail to cultivate a fair degree of technical skill with meters and measures simply shortchange themselves, their work, and their readers. I never gave credence to the supposed bankruptcy of fixed meter. One experience I had taught me the corridors of possibility inherent in metrical forms. I was studying German and humanities in Vienna, Austria, while living in Hotel Theresianum near Südtirolerplatz. Part of my curriculum was a trip to Rome, including several hours at the Coliseum which supplied many ripe images. One night, in the quiet of the hotel at midnight, I was revising a poem, attempting to vivify the Coliseum's history of lions and martyrs and capture the colony of feral cats I had seen lounging in the sun.

I wanted to capture the spirit of the place and the transmutation of its gladiators and predators over two thousand years. However, the poem itself was less important than the discovery that iambic pentameter—which at the time was the only meter I'd heard of—is soil tough to plow, especially if one is inexperienced with plow itself. I kept at it, though, pushing for a two-syllable word that could mean “red,” and “blood-filled,” and something like “bellicose” all at the same time. Of course, I was frustrated with the impossibility of finding such a word and knew that the content must change to accommodate for this obstacle. Then, it came to me. “It” was the perfect word and much more. I experienced in a very real sense Ted Hughes's “Thought-Fox.” There was a stink of fox in the feverish air, as I wrote down the final word—“sanguine.” The tough soil gave up its crop, although a better metaphor for my work that night is tinkering with an engine: When the final perfect word came—a trochaic foot but I didn't know it

then—it was as though I slid a key into the ignition, cranked the starter, and heard my labor come to life. It could drive it somewhere and take other people along for the ride. After I finished it, I admit I shed a few tears of joy and thanked God for the gift of poetry writing—how when my poem came alive, I came alive. I celebrated meter. Its rigidity rewarded me.

I have also found pleasure in scrapping meter and form and following the natural relief of those interior lands. Trying to wrench formal verse out of them like some sort of artifact can sometimes stop the flow of words altogether, yet “Free verse, like all verse, is prosodically ordered and not aimless....”¹⁰ My poetry teacher at University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Dr. Art Smith, assigned an apostrophe. I sat down to do the assignment, but what came out that day was not an apostrophe but a tongue-in-cheek warning to pigeons from a character on a popular sit-com. “George Costanza Lectures Pigeons On Foreign Policy” was a critique of the current administration’s foreign policy. Its narrator-persona was potent, and its language was colloquial rather than overwrought. It had spunk and humor. It was atypical for me, and I discovered that my sense of humor could shape my lines without angering Euterpe and her sisters. Had I tried to catch the stream of words in a prefabricated vessel or turned back to my assignment, I would have missed the simple pleasure of writing that poem. The assignment became a prompt. If the form gets in the way of the content, I’ll scrap it. Hartman does a good job in explaining T.S. Eliot’s “ghost” of a meter. If free verse is a negotiation of the “borderland,” it can draw useful conventions from both and let rest those conventions that

¹⁰ Hartman, 24.

have become outmoded or stale.¹¹ I think of rhyme, for example. Clever or unusual rhymes will always find a place in good poetry. However, predictable rhymes rob our ears of the nuances in the endless variations of spoken language. We cannot fall into the sweet rest of poetry because we anticipate the jarring rhythm of end stop, the formal snores. I refuse to take a side in the formal versus free verse debate. I write both types of verse, and feel that each has weaknesses and offers freedoms.

My exploration of different types of verse leads me to inquire why I write poetry in the first place. Poetry exists not only to make sense of the chaos of our emotions and the world, or worlds, around us but also to honestly reflect the chaos itself. I love Frost's definition of poetry as a "momentary stay against confusion," but even as I appreciate poetry's ability to suspend in artistic formaldehyde a moment of grief or an image of life's transience, I must at the same time recognize life's irresistible flux. It's as though I dip my hand in a stream, gaze into that tiny pool, and open my fingers to let the water return to the current. My hand and the tiny pool are a momentary stay. The tiny pool's literal and metaphorical reflection captures and inspires awe for its relation to the current and transitory distinction from it. Poetry's aim is fundamentally oxymoronic: capturing something that has already changed, that is always already changing by its isolation from organic experience. A diversity of lived experiences may change what is available for use within the current, but diversity in no way guarantees the strength and steadiness of the poetic hand. A diversity of lived experience cannot guarantee effective and innovative technique.

¹¹ Ibid, 46.

I have been *singing* since I was fourteen, although I have forgotten what possessed me to submit a poem I wrote to the eighth grade writing anthology. My English teacher, Mrs. Piper, used my poem as the cover of the writing anthology and named the anthology after my poem, "Reflections." I was gratified at first until I realized that if parents read nothing else in the anthology, they would read my poem because it was right there on the cover. Now, when I went over to friends' houses, their parents didn't just greet me, they scrutinized me, as though, for an eighth grader, my treatment of language's potential destructive power was a bit precocious and the immediate preface to a dramatic suicide right there on their kitchen floors. Thus, I made my entrance into public forum.

I claim many influences. Dylan Thomas's sumptuous if sometimes impenetrable diction, and e.e. cummings's playfulness and irreverent approach to form and grammar both thrilled me. I became aware of the innumerable rhythmic possibilities inherent in language and the beauty and importance of being immersed in the poetic tradition and tapping into its currents of form and thematic concern. Like Thomas, Gerard Manley Hopkins frolicked in language. Poetry has more in common with song, with musical textures, than with a newspaper article or even a short story. Hopkins's generous use of diction and the liberty he takes not only with linear thought but also with conventional modes of making meaning in a poem freed me from the compulsion to cling to either/or distinctions between literal and metaphorical meaning. I share Hopkins's metaphysical concerns; in "What Wonders Thresh in Me," "My Body's Future," and "Hawk." I celebrate natural wonders with an eye towards God's presence in unexpected places. Derek Walcott's *The Bounty* was full of sensory images from his native St. Lucia. After

reading Walcott, I would begin to find bounty around my own home in Brentwood, Tennessee—tulip poplars and dogwoods, whitetail deer and hummingbirds, the Little Harpeth River and hardwood hills of autumn leaves. “Scavengers,” “Initiation,” “Him Eager as a Boy, His Trophy!,” and “Botany with Jacques Derrida” all draw their content from middle Tennessee.

Other poets I appreciate for finer points of craft I unearthed in particular poems. I admire Ted Kooser’s intense focus on single image or moment as in “August.” B.H. Fairchild’s lyric narratives, especially “Beauty,” from *The Art of the Lathe* inspired me to write “Polite Men with Matches.” Many of Jack Gilbert’s titles, including “Chastity,” contain his entire tenor, a move I employ in “April Apologetics,” “Tenderness,” “George Costanza Lectures Pigeons on Foreign Policy,” and “Our Fathers Never Leave Us.” Lucille Clifton incorporates material from dreams into many of her poems. I wrote “Tiger,” “Ireland, 563 A.D.,” and “Constraints” as a result of dreams I had.

Finally, T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, particularly “East Coker,” convinced me of the boldness writing requires through its self-conscious acknowledgement of the impotency of words. By the time we find the words to say just what we mean, the moment, perhaps a decade, has passed, and again, we find ourselves gagged and mute. Yet, Eliot’s poetic finger reached down into that reservoir of experience and emotion I so often ignored even while writing and stirred the hunger there, for meaning, for origin, and for transcendence. From the beginning, I realized, I had picked up a pen to help make sense of emotional devastation. And what about other forms of devastation? The world can be an ugly place to live, and without contributing to the cyclic violence I hated, I

need a combative means of saying, “I am not okay with this,” and when my words failed, allowing my failure to become a kind of prayer.

The evolution of my artistic vision was coming to terms with the sensitivity, awareness, and vulnerability requisite to becoming a peacemaking human being. Unfortunately, that kind of vision is most often the very kind that is victimized. I have not suffered much, but I know that the people who have the courage to look suffering and violence in the face are the ones who get broken. I seek to take ownership of my disappointments and transgressions and to sublimate them into a cry for redemption. If that makes me a romantic or idealist, I don’t care. Poetry should be both purgation and alchemy.

I write poetry because I ache. I have had an inconsolable yearning inside of me for as long as I can remember. I found it at the end of middle school when I was in the eighth grade. It suddenly appeared yet had been there all along, I knew. The sun can bring out birthmarks, enrich their contrast to one’s complexion. I know this all sounds melodramatic, quixotic. Of course all writers must make an homage to a muse dressed in gossamer fabrics secreted in the halo of fog hiding the peak of Olympus. I am well aware how this will come across—a boy finds within himself a compulsion to express himself in words and must find some transcendent or sublime source to justify what many people consider a waste of time.

So what is it that I ache for? I don’t presume to speak for everyone on this account, although I suspect that most people yearn for what Henri Nouwen, a Catholic

theologian, describes as “an unambiguous sense of safety, a lasting home.”¹² I came to a deeper understanding of this existential ache while enjoying an exhibit of Japanese art and culture at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. Japanese philosophers and poets found the cherry tree in full blossom a perfect metaphor for what they called *mono no aware*, “the sadness of things.” I immediately understood this thread of sadness running through the cloth of existence, suggesting that life as we know it is incomplete. Things are not as they should be. A cherry trees bursts into blossom and overwhelms us with its colors and fragrance, but too soon, the tree drops its blossoms and the blow away. Although the fragility and brevity of life may lend poignancy to a cherry tree in blossom, we are still left with the task of finding meaning and purpose for existence.

Poetry, for me, is a movement past this sadness of things inherent in human existence towards a deeper understanding of God. Poetry is searching for *shalom* in the midst of alienation, severed relationships, and ruptured selves. On the other hand, poetry is a vision of awe, a means of celebrating the beauty and diversity of the natural world, the complexity and functionality of our bodies, and the eccentricities and mysteries of the human spirit. At times, even confessional, sentimental, plainspoken, or funny poems best preserve the catalytic moment. Thus, the stereotypical poetry of transgression threatens to homogenize human experience. Poets risk minimizing their audience and negating their influence when they set up a hierarchy of serious emotions suitable for poetry. One can find more bile than laughter in contemporary poetry. Although that bile may be a

¹² Henri Nouwen, “Prologue,” *The Return of the Prodigal* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 5.

symptom of a deeper cultural malaise and suffering may very well be the most common muse, broken mirrors and shattered dreams sometimes misrepresent the human heart. In summary, I seek a balanced and honest treatment of human heart-terrain, open to all emotions and experiences, with the ultimate aim of participating in God's work of redemption and restoration.

Initiation
for Zondie

I pause in the garage. Metal blinds chatter at the window
above the workbench. Probably a cicada, its buzz
the only unfamiliar detail here in the shadows

of the only home I've known. I tiptoe polished cement
past the Simplicity mower (*Don't go above third gear*, my careful father);
bicycles (I rode no-hands from the swim club to the vacant lot,

farther than any of my friends); Little Wonder trimmers
(belonged to Granpa Parkes, dead twenty years);
a scarred hammer on the workbench.

I pull the blinds away, expecting the cicada to fly at my face:
a hummingbird, his heart vibrates in ruby throat,
his wings sticky with cobwebs, *ZZZZZZ*

metallic green awhir. He panics, spins insect skeletons,
treads air faster than I can wet my eyes to watch. I call my father
who holds the blinds. I crouch like a gargoyle;

my hand, never so powerful, swaddled in a kitchen towel,
clasps stillness. I open my hand, he zooms.

our hips unsocketed
our names changed

Clint Eastwood *Cool Hand Luke*

archetypal badass

barefisted

champion of the world

snap a giant's chickenbone neck

Playboy pixelated hardcore

drink-sodden

ballparks

tiled locker rooms testosterone

semen knotted blood salt

silk neck ties

chainsaws

petroleum

imperialism

Agent Orange

cubicles nubile interns

profanity

collateral damage hyperbolic steroids

eugenics

records

smashed

We load revolvers we

shave with KA-BARs

we break our hands

on bone we pump iron

we fuck anything we

toss pigskin pound

whiskey

striking out

into war or wilderness

no one can tell us

who we are

we will not let you go until you bless us

Nought-fox

backroad

single dead leaf spins
in the car's crosshatched beams

a red comet of fox

blink miss Him

Poetry

(as if to preserve my grandfather in a mason jar of formaldehyde)

What Poetry Is Not For

how dense the stink fog almost seen
rolls across the road
and nestles into pasture shallows

the breeze of passing cars awakens it
and with a boogeyman's suddenness
skunk musk springs up.

glandular betrayal, an acrid bouquet
rising from his collapsed body,
its comical stripes.

as soon as he does not offend,
he is forgotten. our thoughts curl away
until there is only the dissipating tang of him.

April Apologetics

I pencil an algorithm
of vortex and dispersement
behind a spring gust
cargoes with whiskey,
brown sugar, and manure.
The gust
lifts brittle leaves from a lawn,
sucks them into cyclone.
Suspended,
they learn air like mayflies,
spirals and switchbacks,
brief animation
before they fall again.
Surely leaves mean everything.
My transparent skeleton of math
deciphers spring lust
as if God's name,
a 216-digit number,
were tattooed on the belly
of everything.

what wonders thresh in me

what wonders thresh in me
tremor of blood
bones thrum in quiet harvest
how You carve Yourself into me
how I am graven on Your hands
knit these rainings of ripe mangos
figs olive upon sun-drenched earth
into breathing men
sink silver-orange coals into my mouth

chambers of my heart lift like hands
to catch
memories of green rivers beneath stone bridges

Your crushed fragrant body
forgives the logical mind
sanctifying sex

my tears are tongues
they sing your name
pray give me
Yourself
of birth fire in obsidian sockets
of unapproachable brilliance
beyond the wildest throw of lunatic men haunting themselves

Yourself enfleshed
whose laughter shook
time from His hair
who chose dirt
whose laughter at His own tenderness
echoes across consciousness

in the sweet years of my sleep
turn me slowly
as You would
Your first bolt of lightning

O You sang into the sun mountains grew

You call to me
I am the tyger you slay in your sleep
I am the woman you will never meet.

What's left of the sweets

"Suicide bombers kill 35 youngsters as they scramble for sweets"
Metro, Oxford, 1 Oct. 2004

Bellies gluttoned with gulf oysters, we cat-sprawled
around the pool, our backs tender, hot
with sunburn. Gulls strangely silent. Surf. Fishy breeze
blows across the Forgotten Coast. We watch stars

surge, recede, embedded in heavens somehow new.
More foreign than Polaris yet closer, Iraq—
newsbreaks leak from the TV inside—it seethes,
its sand alien shades of wheat, its towns charred.

We could as easily be in Fallujah,
scared shitless, courage drunk. Bodies left to rot,
our Hummer bumps over them. My buddy swerves.
Our crusty serg swears, "You fucking retard,

they're already dead." His face, raw
with sun, chews what's left of the sweets. In Iraq
we've picked up new skills, survival strategy:
we've learned to roll our cigarettes.

No, I lay too lazy to move, appalled
by my imagination. I have lost
the *Metro* clipping. Here, no children bleed,
no chocolate-smearing faces, no flesh

singed, tattered, falling through slippery arms.
Their sticky fingers cost nothing here.

George Costanza Lectures Pigeons On Foreign Policy

We had a deal:
you deface our monuments and statues,
muck up our finest masonry, okay,
we look the other way.
But when we walk through the park,
you get out of the way,
you never defecate on us,
you show some respect.
Don't forget what happened
to your cousins, the Passengers:
we posed with shotguns
beside mountains of them, millions,
we have pictures to prove it,
we ate like kings.
What I mean is that we have the means.
So, when I'm walking through Central Park,
get out of the way
because I'm about to unleash.
I'll bake you into a fuckin pie.

Tiger

I came in blur
fire fur
puncture teeth
built to tear
all of me precision
rogue hunger
my taste for flesh
an evil to you
your minds cold
mine smaller hotter

I prowled Ukpom's empty lanes
its faces of locked doors
everywhere
in every breeze
an edge of fear
I love it
as I love my own body
my silken muscles
my sinew
my quiet creeping bones
my skull crackers
my silent paws
silence of death drawing close

Ireland, 563 A.D.

At Clonard Abbey on the River Boyne, Columba slew Finnian in a squabble over a psalter. Blood begets blood, and the Battle of Cúl Dreimhne began. God woke me from my bliss, gave me reason and language like a man, enlisted me as his scourge, and shrank my fins so that I could leave the loch and speed to sow his holy anger. This homicide, this war, this rage, was not a part of Christ's gospel, his work to stir shalom and push the earth back into perfect nudity between God and men. Terrible in wrath, and yet more terrible because my God gave me calculation, stealthy justice untainted by revenge, I ate those monks with murder in their hearts.

Holy Shit

to be alive in early Spring

Hawk

Perched on fencepost
hawk of ink frozen
inside a sky of milk
invisible eyes catch movement
wings burst
make substance of air

peak
dive
stun a mouse
frozen again
sated
feathered bullet of hunger

peak
wings crooked
to receive a mate
coupling in air
tumbling
to copulate
or die

yes
Jehovah's suicidal love

Other Lives

Perhaps there is no loss, only speed,
miles I rode south of Santa Fe
on dusty stretches, working caballero
season gripping my mustang's mane
until my hands wouldn't unclamp
but held the shape of days in wind.
Nights, I saw lightning lick the earth
and bounce after wild ponies
across the rocky waste.
Armored legions of Spaniards,
spectre-blue, so terrible
we were frozen to the ground
until they rode past.
What was real? What was illusory?
We were men and broke horses.
I smell mustangs everywhere I go.

Constraints

Never forget grace; say even nothing with beauty.
Never discount joy, especially the serious sort
laced with salt and iron, because it can open you
like a door to suffering, can cut the fish hook
out of the fat of your mouth.
Never dip into sentimentality
even if it seems sweet. Notice, instead,
violence in two sugar-heavy mangos hanging
above the *Iglesia de Cristo*, waiting to fall.
Never write fingers onto dawn or mention
your itching ears between the sheets
the night the night-storm swung in the elm
and tapped with hard fingers Morse code on the pane
and how out of your mind, half-serious,
you smelled her neck again, vanilla,
then felt silly, alone, sweaty inside the storm.

How Some Men Talk About Love
For Ben

A wounded doe will kill herself faster
to die next to water.

Bending to press fingertips into each print, I pray
the rosary of her path, track her.

Spots of blood.
Broken sticks.

I finally see her come together like smoke,
weaving through trunks, rusty banks of leaves,
an unseen trail to a silver thread of water
to drink in starts and stops.

Her gentleness, her sweet movements.
My desire worse than coyotes.
Patience like burnt powder.
I am kneeling when she stiffens.

Too close. Everywhere she meets
my ghost of terror, scent.
She gathers herself to bolt.
I spread my hands across cool earth

as though to soothe her, to coax her
into running alongside me for some wild home
beyond men and their mistakes.

Tiny work of birds

Bowing to unseen bits of food, chickadees
hop and stitch
around some purpose. Tiny work of birds,
their patience.
My striving to know as a hard bit of data
I will always be alone.
Consolation of no consolation.
Swallowing teeth.

I could spook these chickadees, admire
their swirling
into an arrowhead. Like them, I could eat stones
to grind down
my last indulgence—speculation—can warm skin
convince her?
Can my fingertips teach her?

Pain is given that we might learn something from it.
Only a woman devastated
by men could speak such truth
the moment I fell in love with her.
Whites of her eyes and teeth flashed warning. I receded
in echo down the darkening aisle of memory—
letters I wrote and dreams I dreamed
loosening from the earth like birds.

I felt more myself when with her.

That Night, the Decade between Her Memory and Body

I wanted to do something brave,
so I spoke three syllables
only to hear them fall through
silence.

Perhaps I knew even before I spoke
that you had no need for them.

What you needed were
a time machine
and tree pruners for his
fingers.

I wish you didn't

I wish you didn't make me
so damn happy

night whistling full of rare snow
I thought I saw

your face on Demonbruen
laughter swelling

in my ribs
til a stranger hurried past

you were ten hours away
in Oklahoma City

I stalled numb
more a fool
for that jolt
of joy

Peach tree

i.

Peach tree in the backyard, solitary, wind-shaped,
spread across a corner of our kitchen window.

I would shimmy up its black, crusty trunk,
my skinny, unscarred arms hugging hard,

clamp one through a fork,
stretch the other quivering, fingers uncurling,

sap-slow and sticky,
fingertips brushing a peach. Red, yellow, and orange.

If I could hold its heavy softness,
I knew I would be sweet too.

ii.

Years ago, my father wrenched down
that hollow tree.

“Your mother isn’t going to be happy,”
he grinned, brushing sweat with an elbow.

That afternoon, in the kitchen, my mother
blew up. His neck thrust forward, arguing, “Honey,

it was rotten. When was the last time we had any
peaches from that tree?”

He had a point. I forgot
about them until I touched your face.

Tenderness

Headlights splash the toad too late,
Ba-boomp. I saw it coming. I laugh.
My father's driving. "D'you feel that?"
I ask, "We hit a toad." "You laughed,"
he replies, "There was a time
you would have been silent the rest of the night."

I return later to check. Sure enough,
its tongue glistens, exploded from its mouth.
I picture picking it up, slobbery
strings of guts arcing to asphalt.
Nasty. I shake the image from my head
and wonder if dessert's ready.

Toads dry stiff as hide, their cut-out shapes
too precise, cartoonish, to have ever hopped
or pissed in some little boy's tight hand.
I should slide a brown toad cut-out
into an envelope, mail it to a friend as a prank,
scrawl, "Name that Atari game," on the back flap.

Playing make believe

You always knew I was awake. A nudge,
We're home, sleepy head. Let's go inside.
But sometimes, when I would pretend, playing possum,
you would pretend, gather me up like your only son,
lift, lift, lift me up the backsteps.
Before you put me to bed, asleep.

Ego

My niece licks cracker crumbs from the table. We all laugh.

Gross, Emery. Stop that. My sister, smiling, puts a hand
between the wood and her two year old's pink slip of ego.

Emery nips at her hand. My sister turns the soft face.

No biting, she says.

I wonder if I look like a single mother.

how I learned to fear myself

you fancied yourself a priestess,
sibyl in a Christmas sweater;
on scuffed linoleum you stirred brains
with a yellow fingernail,

raved Greek mythology,
pomegranate seeds, Cerberus.

You kept me after class, caught
my shoulder to pack prediction into
my bones:

I'm glad you have a good heart
because with your mind
you could do some terrible things

Pubescent, I was hungry to feel chosen,
dormant evil, faux bravado:
boy-shaped titan

you sputtered through
your broken front tooth, spittle on my books,

chimeras in my eighth-grade brain.
swallow your hocus pocus,
hemlock poultice,
choke down your omen.

Botany with Jacques Derrida

Hardwood hills deepen I-40 West,
Alexandria to Memphis,

warmth fades. rain. dyes bleed
across steeped earth; green leaves go
ruby, lemon, bronze, then fall.

oaks hold out, verdant or
silver on the wind. russet.
thicket of pine, exorbitant green.

weak sycamores and maples
naked, black-bony on fog pastures
rooted outside the orbit of words. I uproot,

without origin or immanence,
sheaf of differences. Archi-text spoke
me into disappearance disappearing,

I pass my ghost hand through dermis,
atria, empty boxes of vertabrae.

Jumping gene of prophecy

I came to Ukpom to meet Nigerians
who made my grandfather honorary chief,
their white friend with booming laugh like the gods,
sunscreen caked around his huge nostrils.

I wanted to meet black mourners
who, the day after his death,
threw out their arms to our brown Christ,
their tattered hymns to Him circling like carrion birds.

I planned to clasp their hands, kiss cheeks,
ask, *Do you see him in me?*—
to tell them of his last moments
with my letter in his hands.

I wrote him to ask why so many people loved him,
but he was too weak even to cry, sobs cracking
ka-ka-ka in his throat like a pistol clicking on empty chambers.
No words escaped.

I came to Ukpom to meet Nigerians
to ask, *What did you see in him?*—
not the melanoma, the other—
tell me what burned in him.

God created us then We returned the favor

Farmers pray for rain, but Mother prays for snow,
and her children's happiness, *Dear Jesus, please:*
digital cold fronts creep across the TV.
Expectant, she folds her hands, petitioning

for her children's happiness. *Dear Lord, please give them
godly mates, secure incomes, and please, also—*
her hands fold in petition as flakes tap windows—
let ice for sledding coat the streets. Remember,

Lord, what I want the most: godly mates, secure incomes.
Her TV shows schools closed, empty cars in ditches.
As snow melts, freezes again, ice-coated streets turn black,
threaten. *No matter,* she thinks, bustles for mittens.

School, closings; interstate delays; wrecks everywhere—
travelers abandon cars, homeless freeze, flakes of snow
threaten. *No matter,* she thinks, bustles for mittens
scarves, hats, cocoa. God, her children deserve happiness.

Him eager as a boy, His Trophy!

I take Granny White Pike home to my parents' house.

Blooms of mildew darken the shingles. Woodpeckers hammer
half dollar holes into the columns on the front of the house.

My father is outside weedeating the ditch, wearing his chunky, foggy goggles.
The job takes him twice as long with them on.

He waves, walks over, his v-neck t-shirt transparent with sweat,
clips of grass plastered on his arms.

I notice my broken canoe paddle leaning against the garage door.
How many today? I ask. He holds up four fingers.

Carpenter bees bore holes in the fence. He takes homerun swings,
knocks them from the pollen air, and stomps them.

It gets better, he says.
I've got something to show you.

I get out of my truck and follow him. Sunlight sparkles on the creek,
my boyhood stomping grounds,

slabs of limestone, muddy car batteries, salamanders,
bluegill, warmouth, and brown bullheads.

I finally got him. At first, him eager as a boy, his trophy!
He's laid it amongst fresh buttercups, the most magnificent
woodpecker, large as a crow, his redhead so fresh
I must've pricked my finger. Red, Black, White plumage,
such purity of color, richness of contrast,
We bought Dad a Crosman for Christmas.

My voice fails. Sunlight falling and the air soft and busy,
our thoughts unknown to the other, mine wondering
why it is we rob others of what we want,
until he surprises me, his voice bending,
It's such a pity. Side by side, we look our fill.

Polite Men with Matches

Tell me the story of my grandparents' sideyard
where you pinched cut grass to roll your first and only
cigarette. Your fingers disobeying, made of wood, you
licked and licked, time running out. Soggy paper, no glue,
tang of grass on your tongue as a lone tendril of smoke
disappeared amongst glossy leaves, a tulip poplar
your father planted. No cigarette, no transgression.
But your brother told on you anyway, glad to have a reason.
You two shared a room so he found the empty box
of mint cookies flattened under your pillow.
You would sneak it out in the drowsy quiet
to inhale its ghost of green fragrance.
One night the box was gone, you felt everywhere.
His voice corkscrewed through the dark,
I threw it away, weirdo.
Thirty-five years had to pass before you could admit:
The only person he cares about is himself.
You said this calmly, like "The rain has stopped."
What I wanted you to say was *My brother is an asshole.*
My brother is the most selfish bastard I know.
You never curse. What I wanted from your voice
was an ice-coated pipe, to hear it bludgeon
your only brother for taking himself away,
for his silence, his questions, "How's your new putter?"
Instead, you let him slip away with his sarcasm,
his jokes about your baldness and your Olds.
A splinter in your throat. I needed you to snap
like the old oaks in '96, the worst ice storm we
could remember. Re-tell the story. Give me wreckage,
give me whole grids without power. Give me a match,
I'll put it to his picture, and together
we'll watch his charcoal face open and curl away.

Our Fathers Never Leave Us

We roll up our sleeves, legs of jeans,
grabbling Sockeye so exhausted from spawning,
they bump one another like logs adrift.
I feel their relief, their thank yous of stillness,
as our hands search forward, cold curves
to gills. Fingertips hook and hoist
each one into sunlight.

Ernest and I pitch two apiece ashore—
salmon becoming rosy arcs in the golden air.
With a last flourish their tails throw
diamonds of water that float
as each fish thuds, grates across gravel,
red crescents of gills valving, drowning.
I watch their hooked jaws rake light.

While he cleans the largest, I nip bourbon
from the distillery bottle, heat in my belly,
morning sun building heat into my neck.
Mist from the waterfall downstream smears
a grizzly snapping jaws at leaping Sockeye.
Pass me one, I say, and bite through its spine
to watch worry bloom on my buddy's face.

Muttersprache (or) Mother tongue

Wanderlust you financed threaded me through
fourteen countries. You asked Dad to pay
for autumn in Vienna. "Please call me," you begged
as you kissed me Good-bye. "I want to hear
your voice." I hear, "What's wrong with us?
What's so bad about here?" Nothing, mamma.
My trans-Atlantic voice five thousand miles small
renamed you *Meine Mutter* to show how much
I was learning. For your birthday that September,
I ordered a *Sacher Torte* sent to our home
in a Nashville suburb, in our backyard
the quiet creek with gravel bars. Remember
how you felt when you read my note, ate *ein Stück*.
German gravel filled my mouth. I was homesick.
I walked the terminal towards you wearing
a scarf and wool hat, stories tangled in my hair.
Your eyes glowed, your vagabond come home.
I knew more about Hemingway, merits of the Austrian
mass transit system, Michelangelo's musculature,
than I knew about how to love by biting my tongue.
What sort of son makes his mother cry? Remember
me as a boy with square knees and scrawny legs,
muscleman poses, wet triangles of eyelashes
in the pool. Remember when all three hamsters
named Daniel died and I took their cage
with the sliding door and built a bird trap. I bounced
off the school bus, and before my feet touched,
I stood under the green ash in the front yard.
Would you believe it? A nervousness
inside the trap. You laughed in disbelief;
we set the bluebird free. I found fresh bread
and clean water, hoisted the cage back up,
grew into a man. Remember me, mother,
before I made your cheeks shine like wet apples:
"Promise me you won't write about me." I promise
to tell the truth.

Nipples

I.

A cocaine addict lounged
in his favorite Viennese coffeehouse,
Café Landtmann, stirred with his spoon
Greek incest into your theoretical breast milk.

Brown photograph from the 70s
preserves my sapling-mother,
chestnut silk down the middle of her back,
high-waisted bell bottoms,
striped polo with a white collar.

Pre-ego, before I said I,
before needs became self-aware,
before her gray roots,
loose skin under her eyes,

she spliced through umbilical cord:
facsimile of her pink skin,
deviated septum, thick hair,
bump in the bridge of our nose.
April arrived, Aries, wet exodus.

Her nipples touched my lips, grew me.
My untroubled memory of her
being what I knew as mother,
our aurora, up before us, bringing dawn,

her pink terrycloth robe,
her breasts hanging inside,
Cream of Wheat, pat of butter,
brown sugar, glass of milk.

Three of us caused her disgust with herself--
diets, one-piece bathing suits--
for the longest time I thought
she looked at us and saw
her compromises.

II.

Seven nights of moons, sand crabs, Mahi-mahi grilled with gulf shrimp;
six days watching the grandbabies rub breakers from their eyes.

We fan out across the sand. Sugar covers everything.
Beached family, we set up our skin in the sun.

I leave my glut of books and sunscreen for the water. My shadow
passes over, she sits like the Venus of Willendorf, I look down.

Her breasts have flattened, they follow belly contours.
No nipple, thank God, the difference between propriety and good poetry.

My mother turned fifty in October. Her nipples? Blasphemy.
Circular voids in my Oedipal memory.

How can I absolve soft truth
of my mother's naked body? Her alien sexuality?

III.

I forget my mother's nipples like angels
in the desert, if I ever saw I must have
repression is the lid on Pandora's box,
unhinged, its contents litter parchment
where cartographers of yore inked
giant squid, mermaids—fetish, fixation
displace the unknown; explorers find
themselves where they started:
confines of their skulls. To sail off
this darkened plane we call world
with Jules Verne, Captain Ahab,
and Reepicheep would be such relief.
I want oblivion the way I want women.
I hold her until the mermaid blesses me.

Voyeur

Having no shame, I stay too long
inside a strange cemetery
where a husband sweeps his wife's plot,
sobs without shame. I stayed too long,
sheepish, as crows unhinge their caws,
for prying open this husband's grief.
A shameless tourist, I've stayed long
enough inside this cemetery.

Hammer out salvation

I yawn, break the crust from my mind,
sweet talk the fire in my bones,
We can do this again. Each word matters
because I've often disbelieved in God.

Milky light blooms low in an oak,
one leaf dried like a saint's face.
Every breakfast, an apple, sips
of tea, whole minutes of silence
before birds flutter strings
of music, church bells vibrate
through the thick morning air.

We cope, we pray and drink, we grab.
God calls only some. Salvation takes
so many forms for the lost.

One night, in Knoxville, I sip Scotch
half as old as me—sobering,
my youth I mean—while a poet,
a Pulitzer winner, talks carpentry,
Dovetail joints, woods aromatic
*and exotic, he always uses
the best techniques and materials.*

He claims to know
the best carpenter in the world. So do I.
We all hammer out salvation,
a labor of uncertainty, love of mystery,
we silence or build our spirits
as we would children,
helpless, needy, complex in their simplicity.

Father, pity me, even more than singing sparrows.
Live in my bones. Touch me with awareness
as you would with dew.

scavengers

After dove swoop
through cathedrals of green air,
before grass keens again
and fresh coal burns old trajectory,
silence becomes presence,

moon-eyed deer where they rise
from the lee-side of a pine ridge,
their bellies printed on the needles;
they sift into the precursor gray
leaving curls of warmth

on ice-encased oaks
whose acorns disappeared;
they starve and slacken.
Coyotes clot around the feast.

cannibal insects and curveballs

I.

God is funny, people preach
and cite stale evidence from nature.
Duckbill platypus. Giraffe.
Bombardier beetle. God.
They don't mean he hides Gabriel's sword
or pretends to swallow Peter's keys.

God is funny is distance between us
and terror of the unknown,
between us and our insignificance.
Anglo-Saxons named the distance *Wyrd*,
intrusive fate,
like some angry drunk at a dinner party,
fate like a tight-lipped man in a black suit
riding in your backseat.
If you ignore him, maybe he'll go away.

Curiosities and jokes falter,
language begins to feel like a tranquilizer,
and the preachers grow quiet
as though waiting on a front porch,
shading their eyes, watching a rider
approach.

II.

God is funny. A hawk downtown
swoops a pregnant curve
into pigeons on telephone wires.
They billow above the interstate,
as the hawk comes to rest on a telephone
pole
like some god bored again
after the daily bloodbath at Troy.

A female praying mantis devours her mate.

A more awkward creature, man, sinks
to his knees, moans after being struck
in the groin.
The game stops while other men pretend
to empathize, smiling to themselves.
Every pitch God throws is perfect,
its speed immeasurable.
His only pitch is a curveball.
You pivot at the hips, but your arms are
heavy,
they move too slowly as though you're
dreaming.

God is funny. Perhaps we can laugh once
we know
who it is, out there
riding closer, tearing through dust curtains
on the plain.

My body's future

how disgustingly romantic
to discover in boyishness
my body's future:

when I was young,
my body was poetry,
not betrayal,

unfathomable art
of ragged breath, sticks, and dirt
of endless awe at creatures:

a snail's air-thin skin,
its house of spiraling ratio,
of limestone, moss, mineral darkness;

bluejay feather,
pinions of atmosphere,
of cobalt, sable, and cumulus;

bluejay and snail,
my body's future, and patience
for heavy machinery

to lift the world out of its socket
for the earth to give birth to its dead
for the healing of the earth.

VITA

Austin Legate Church was born in Brentwood, Tennessee, on April 6, 1982. He attended Scales Elementary and finished grade school at David Lipscomb. He graduated from Lipscomb University with a B.A. in English in May 2005. After teaching high school English for a year in Nashville, Austin moved to Knoxville and earned a Master's degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and focus in Poetry in May 2008.