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UNEXPECTED ZEUS

By

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B.A. English, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2013

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing, Poetry

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2015

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Lambert, Adam, M.F.A., Spring 2015

Creative Writing, Poetry

Title: Unexpected Zeus

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Abstract: *Unexpected Zeus* is a collection of poems observing the connections between love and belief, or disbelief. The first section of the manuscript, *The Gospel of Judas*, inspects Protestantism's function in the modern world, specifically in Southern Appalachia. The second section, *How to Break*, explores hanging love in the landscape of the American West. The manuscript concludes with *Praying to myself*, which interlaces ideas from previous sections with the author's personal experience. Ultimately, the poems use intimacy and imagism to cause the reader to question love and belief in their own human experience.

UNEXPECTED ZEUS



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Judas walked directly to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him.

Jesus replied, “Do what you must, friend.”



Matthew 26, 49-50

PART I: THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS

Salvation

I was told I was not born whole
And a man survived a whale's belly.

One of these sat right with me,
So I reminded myself of every misdeed

I could remember, burned the forgotten.
Lord my eyes are swollen shut,

Worn to a beat like the bare feet
That trail the dying. All my brothers,

Sisters, laid out with skin like blister,
Like pall over the field. -Here, a bruise

Of umbrellas hides the sensation of rain.
Here, everything feels old.

If deliverance doesn't survive us death
We should want what death provides. Not rest,

But stubbing thought. How I was taught
Jonah could see when he prayed. Or hear himself.

Rahab

They didn't blow their horns but beat them
Regular and right as the mason's hammer.
They didn't march but paced with god's gleam
In their eyes and hearts for six days,
And on the seventh his rage. Pure devotion
Is to give something up entirely;
So in piety they barked as saints bark,
And with their torches tore through
To burn my every neighbor's child
In the Lord's Name. They spared me—
Whore to god, whore to Canaan,
Whore who hinged a war for nothing.
So often now I wake to woodfire
Snapping out in the wee hours,
Mocking like a prayer the six-day's din.
Morbid belltower of Jericho alive.
The clack of their horns echoed for miles.

In daydreams where I shoot myself: *Three Poems*

Through the cheeks, blowing my right dimple
through my left. The bullet line a mile-long
silver wire, and my tongue the lone cardinal
chirping relief of an open field.

In the stomach, untying my naval to spill
vertebra, sliced for display like a mower blade
through a golf ball. Now we see inside the unexpected
greens and yellows. *Clack!* I am the letter G,
hunched, pointing back at myself, bent to what I did.

In the neck, through so much wiring. Red to black—
no, red to blue, sparking off my last thoughts.
See how I swallow? See how tilting makes a harp
of me? Careful fingers, careful. We want to see
what was wrong this whole time. Open and shut.
See how this hole's a loaded hinge?

The Crawling Things of the Earth

Goofy enough for the old man's shoes
But too thin for a belt or suit,

We went to Penny's. I must have tried
Ten coats before she told me *fine*,

Held up a belt, *Now try this too*.
So wizard-sleeved I slinked it through

Each loop and considered myself
In the stage of mirrors. All three of me

Turning from one mocking angle to another.
All six of mother's hands pressing my arms.

At the wake they circled like fat planes
Waiting to land on my head, as if they knew

Where he'd gone, then taxi to mother
Who answered my why with *There, there*.

They congested each other in eagerness
to leave, shuffled back into being alive

in the evening. We said goodbye too,
then went home and undressed, shed

ourselves clothes the color of shadows.
I wrapped the belt around my hand, cinched it

like a tie. I closed my eyes and felt
a black snake biting itself and cried.

Goliath

I'd done a hundred like him before—
let them tire beating my barrel body,
then pin him, choose a limb, and wrench it
loose to see how far the heart would
chuck blood until the eyes fogged.

Had it not been the perfect opportunity
for me to escape to peace, to give them god
in the process, I'd have had to kill him.
Expected and legendless. Instead, the stone
swung from a hairless boy, impossibly

knocking me down. Out. All doubts overthrown
by faith, by feeling, by my head thrown over
his shoulder like a sac of rags. It requires saying:
I allowed it. I fell and held my breath until the shunk
came clean, and welcome, thinking how I could have won.

The Televangelist

“By his hands we are fed.” –a prayer

Facing from stage the carpet sea
Before the crowd arrives, he parts

His hair with a pocket comb, breathes
Powerful breaths. He’s come so far.

Backstage his wife brings plastic bags
Of food –chicken– he smells, and throws

His ersatz tie onto his back
Like a beaver’s tail. Seven shows

This week alone. He’s lived and died
A hundred times, conducted souls–

He blessed a baby till it cried,
Punched black cancer from a widow.

Today he’ll do the old routine;
This city ate it up last time.

He stains a thin napkin with grease,
Checks his reflection, adjusts his tie.

A murmur swells across the pews
Like spilt coffee. He chucks his plate

Of bones and glances at his shoes.
They are ready to receive him.

Spreading his arms he exposes
Cufflinks like nails through the wrists.

His eyes glance up to nothing, then close
To walk through the cobwebs of shine.

Zaccheaus (Good Ol Boy)

Of course he knew my name. I climbed and waved
and feigned surprise in front of all of Jericho.
Sincerely swore on pain of death that I'd repay
every soul I'd snaked money from, fourfold.

He smiled his placid smile in front of everyone,
then touched me on the head. And as agreed
I staged a scene like nothing you've ever heard.
I wept and tore my clothes and claimed a waking dream

Of heaven –golden streets, trumpets, new skin,
the whole shebang. And they said Lord he must be
somebody to save that tax man! They swallowed
the hook whole. I didn't smile once.

He was two heads taller, so under my low roof
I guess he did look like a god. But he was a man–
Of that I'm sure. Cause when he left he left
a bag of silver by the door.

Shadrach's eyes said to Abednego

When we were boys
and you climbed that olive tree
I was standing on a root
watching you reach
for the next branch-
and you were the only thing
between me and the sun,
and you burned in a blush of leaves.

Tongues

The whole flock fell silent still
on the green pews watching God
shake the teenage puppet around,
the same way her father handled her
mother earlier that morning.
Youths leaned into their parents
to see such violently divinity;
Old hands covered mouths and moaned
Words that weren't words.
One tongue split seven ways,
slinging words into a red swell,
churning but not advancing toward
the swollen pastor, praising forth.
hundreds of holy invisible strings.
The proud mother rocked uneasily
in the sling of her husband's bronze arm,
blubbering *Lord help her, Lord, Lord.*
Then the girl lay still, panting
for breath, covered with a white towel
the deacon had thrown over her to curb indecency.

Hanging Mary

Emptied and ready to go. Again
Across the bridge's narrow tracks
The CSX Coal line pulls
Steel gondolas over the clearing,
the valley below made famous
by a gritty picture taken in 1942, which-
along with the newspaper column-
can be found on the wall of Stall's Diner, hanging
by taut picture wire.

They said she pressed his head into the ground,
Like a leaf in a book. Blew her trumpet
And reared back on her hind legs
Landing a level paw on the head of a trainer.
That's how Jones Gap made the Knoxville News Sentinel.
Front page: that coal gray beast hanging from the bridge,
lynched with weaved cable wire,
her bottom leg blurry from
a last sleeper's twitch.

Bottle Rocket

Drunk at sixteen I shot
bottle rockets
from the backseats of Jeeps
stemmed them in an empty
and aimed one-eyed
at some poor folks' porch
to rile against their door
until the *whapszzzew*
sent dad out
with a shotgun,
blowing both barrels
straight up
as if to spook a horse
or cut down my howls
before they reached the moon.

PART II: HOW TO BREAK

Horseback

You promised to teach me, and you did,
How to give and take weight, how to lean
Into the steep, or sit back at the decline.

How to hold the reins so as to show trust,
And ask by squeezing the thighs.
How to repeat -harder.

How to deal with skittishness, and let control.
How to fall correctly. How to notice
The signs of things just before they happen.

How to convince yourself otherwise.
What must be done when it goes lame.
How to say its not sound but its something

We can work with. How to hold your head
When the words are said. How to know
How much you can take. How to break.

What is not love quenches it

Upper Rattlesnake, Missoula, MT

Things determined, undetermined, what can be done
against them? Ride. Wring the handlebar
past fields and fields lightly bouncing in the face
of evening. Butter and eggs along the highway,
stark in the uncollected marbles of light.

A little lost. Not something I can't get out of—
these northern peaks purpling like mood rings.
Is it a reflection, or to be told how to feel?
Neither.
It's the element of reprise.

Blur in, blur out.
Orange hawkweed behind a log church in the rearview.
The present is not the present but the immediate past,
closing and opening like a compact.

Three geldings near the fencerow slow me down.
Procession to inertia.
Something rings when I shut off the engine—

Hay.
The hay is ringing.
And there.
A long hair in my helmet.

I show the horses,
then singe it against the exhaust.

For what it's worth, it's worth

States north of me,
in a house wrapped in a house of ice,
you bake with your father
for hours.

After dark
you sweep flour
from the shins of table legs,
leave some in the corners
on purpose.

When the refrigerator light goes dim
the Christmas tree
in your glass of water
is a cupful of jewelry.

After an argument

I sunk down the stairs of your building
to the guilt of a snow-covered parking lot,

and, already missing you, dragged my feet
to write your name in the snow.

Bumper to bumper I stretched the letters,
three times my size, as you appeared to me:

shadows on the left side, light on the right.
I did not know who you would be, which you

would see through your third story window
my shuffling work. I wanted to say *I love you*

this much, show your stamp on my days,
convince you of your own importance.

Instead, I left— backed into the G, over the H,
then struck through the whole thing with my tracks.

That was last winter. This year, I'll keep the new
sheets, leave them blank until strangers make

snow angels. And that's OK, cookie-cutter happiness.
That's OK if I start to write your name again

and stop. I won't back over you, won't look up
to you. I'll write M E and be satisfied. I'll stay.

Conception

I don't need permission to write about your confinement.

I was there.

I brought you books,
 stole sips of your cranberry juice and
 complimented your traction socks, your lack of jewelry.

You really do look better with no makeup.

I'd a good mind to throw a chair,

be kept past visiting hours

to stay with you.

Or be dragged out in the most romantic fit
 you've ever seen. But you needed calm
 if you needed anything. So I stayed
 till someone came round to clip our exchange.

I started taking the highway that your window faced,
 not because I hoped you'd see me, but because

Si vis amari, ama.

as the Romans wrote.

I don't know what else to tell you—

Except

I'm certain it was the first night you were home.

The fact we were never expecting.

All those feelings breaking
 around the room like thrown vases.

Then it was gone.

Your bare feet, those nipples, your lips.

The wet click of their parting

with a little blood.

Miscarriage

My postcard holds its pose and breath
Till it reaches you in the backcountry,
Wrangling horses for the summer.
What keeps us from what we want
More than distance? Words
Get lonelier by the day, promise futures,
Hold memories like oil in a white bowl.
One night, knife-cold and snowing,
Your thighs warming me, an icicle tall as a man
Fell four stories outside the window.
I dreamt I had baby teeth and awoke
More careful. The next morning
You pointed to its absence through the curtains.
“We’re always near the satisfaction,
But never a part of it.” I poured that
Into the bowl along with the thought of you
Turning forty horses west at once.

Fawning

I am begging the woman I sleep with
To be happy.

The doe tattoo on her shoulder
Watches her back

And me tonight, in the loud snow
Of a new year.

It begins to wander her body for a place
to fawn. A bed

on the post-apocalyptic
whiteness of her skin.

When the snow is at its loudest
I cannot hear her

whining out. I sleep beside her
deepest pains.

Ode to the Tattoo You Haven't Gotten Yet, for the One You Already Have

The tulips that will bloom on you
require a winter chill. Your skin
will provide, wherever they root,
as it provided for the wandering
doe, looking over its shoulder
on yours. Give her a field to feed.
Do not hide the unbloomed altar,
the unplotted plot. Keep it clean
and bare it. Water it, for him—
the one with access to your skin.
The one watching the doe at night
raise from your blade and walk your spine.
The one who follows you back to bed. The tourist.
The one you left me for in the ephemeral forest.

Revenant of the Living

Naked as a candle,
walking in lambent light,
you visit me, a manifest memory

in this midnight aquarium room.
October; the leaves have shivered free,
and grayed in the moonlight.

Their concerted scraping
through the bedroom window
is your march. Your music.

How do I say it's your
body I miss the most?
I bring you closer.

You bring me what I brought myself:
another you, vague-limbed,
standing in the window glass laughing.

The reflections we do not see
all day fade in to mock us.
They bring the details and the pang.

They mouth
I love you
because we ask them to.

We ride the line of realities
to sort one side or the other.

Like tourists

clapping at Chichén Itzá,

we answer ourselves.

We answer ourselves

here, in the open field

of late understanding.

We fall asleep,

and whatever is faraway,

the thing we most can't have,

grows alone in the heart-

a rhododendron swelling

with clusters of blossoms

that do not smell, and are nothing.

Burros

You had an odd affection for them,
their coarse hair hiding all subtleties

and scars, their graceless faces, dumb ears
stuck up like a deer's tail. Still you sat

on your high horse, petting from above,
awarding them the dirty apple core

you and your mare didn't care to eat.
All things have their places: some below

others, some beside, and some so set
in their ways that swaying them would take

the thunderous pull of a thousand
wild horses. What makes the ass stubborn

is its being called so. What makes us
apart is your affection for things

that can never say they love you back,
and your telling them they always will.

Whitewashing

Wrangling the geldings one evening,
 a shoe flew from your mare and planted
 itself in the tall grass. You said it was a pain
 to limp her five miles back to Ponil,
 the long way around the lake. Said you were tired,
 that the geldings didn't want to turn, restless
 under a lucent moon.

By the time I said *I'm sorry*,
I miss you, you were breathing into the phone.

I stepped outside to see oil spots reflecting blue,
 and remembered the mirror laying in the backseat of my car.

I'd spent all day whitewashing our room,
 bleaching the sheets, making it new for your return.

But I'd forgotten the mirror, cut wide to tilt light
 from the window to the vaulted ceiling—
 an illusion of more space.

I carried it across the street, jarring stars
 at my waist, throwing moonlight on the bellies of birch leaves.
 When I propped it and saw myself in that scant shirt,
 facing the hallway of dark behind me,

I played your scene:

The horseshoe swooping through the gloam,
 hinged for a moment on a nail of wind.
 And you, moving away from it,
 diminishing toward something else.

I realize now there is nothing new.

All things are familiar and short lived.
They flash and fall like an ancient bangle.
Season after season walking itself into the earth,
slow as moving giant furniture alone.

Rough

We grew something like where we met,
a dusty rodeo on the far side of Montana,
mountains on either, all sides, scraped
and cut like paint, smooth to the eye
but broken up close, cragged buttes
with ledges of loose gravel, rubble,
nothing to stand on, or be caught on,
especially not from the beginning-
stable once, maybe, now broken,
permanently rough from years of cold
before it, frost filling then splitting,
something like your hands petting mine,
gesturing as best they know how,
easy as piano keys, porcelain, quartz,
warming themselves, meaning well,
meaning to tell a story for sleep,
to bloom through concrete
and lean toward only me-
but failing from the start,
never once having touched something kindly.

Knew That Now

Once again he'd come to collect her out of love. What a substantial mess she was: smoking by the river in the snow, approaching midnight, her body broken in on itself at the middle. He felt, holding her in the dark, she did not know or care to know. What they had become in this moment belonged to neither of them, though each winter would recall its truth like a souvenir. He knew it would diminish but called out to it occasionally. We can, with our little remains, make a modest bouquet of life. We know by our wind-burned hands that elsewhere doesn't mean what it means. Certain in his beliefs he squeezed her. She ghosted through him and waded away.

PART III: PRAYING TO MYSELF

Always is when the heart is involved

after John Winship's Painting "Woman with a Stroller"

Suddenly you, leaning over an old pram
in Maine. The time of day for shadows, deep
guttural understandings of what is. What is
this has happened before. In the old times.
The *old* times. People have had their hearts
pressed on by the sun and they've warmed away.
Someone who loved them carried the thought
don't you go anywhere on me, you understand?
Then the wind blew. And nothing moved or stayed
the same. And the light changed to what it is now.

Words I Wish We Had

Cafuné is the first.

the act of tenderly sifting through someone's hair.

Afterglow's first affection,
mindless, lightheaded love.

Almost a state of Hygge,
a Danish word meaning
the complete absence of anything annoying,
or emotionally overwhelming,
and the presence of and pleasure from comforting,
gentle and soothing things.

Something you might accomplish on an Uitwaaien,
which literally means a walk in the wind,
but we'd probably call it a calming stroll,
a walk one might take to clear his head
of that regrettable moment of inaction
that the Yagán people called Mamihlapinatapei,
when neither of us wanted to go,
but we didn't have the words to keep us together.

Words I Wish We Didn't Have

Oblivion is the first.

As if it were a place we could get to.

As if we could leave ourselves

gone, to be looked back on

like a shed *cicada* -another word

that's crawled into every book

on the shelf, applauding over itself,

clogging thought quicker than

an audible *moist*, which we all agree

should be banned. Are you discussing

dessert or your hand? No one wants to know.

And *yolk* sounds like you're choking

while eating one. It's the consistency-

like *curdled*, pouring reluctantly

out of the mouth the same way it does

a jug. For god's sake, let something else

do the talking, or beat a goose to death.

What would have happened if we'd kept on dancing

Every day I am making first loves
for an hour after I wake up. Such as,
I could have lived with her by the sea.
Or, *I don't know when it became me and you,*
but it did. I tell them (myself) this, but
I have never been honest with anyone.
How we sweeten our days. The orange lilies
on the counter were a clue. What is precious
moves from house to house like lamplight.
Where the water holds the moon depends
on where you are. Slowly, you can change it.

Reverse Wedding

He raises his arms in a victorious gesture
Then takes a step back and kisses my sister.
They stare at each other and say *do I*.

I take my arm from around my mother
and unnotice her shivers. Two rows back
sweat crawls up my father's brow. He nods.

We grab Sis and march her up the aisle,
out the door, then into the rain.
Everyone talks about us.

I loosen my tie in the car window
then unpin my father's corsage.
He thumbs my knuckle and says
Could we what did we.

Träumen

Midnight rain monets the walls
 Of your childhood bedroom to a sea.
 My hands are clams holding your breasts
 As we make drowsy love on our sides.

I know the limits of my language are not the limits
 Of my world. You slur a word I take to mean
We are dolphins, pale and curved. Two scythes in a deep blue.

Wooden boats of English float overhead,
 Knock silently on the surface.
 I cannot reach the words
 For the taste of your hair. I think: *breathing, hollow.*

We sink past each other: mute sex
 Till we drown in sleep. Our dreams
 Keep the static patter of the roof.

A newborn drifts from the purple rope against your thigh,
 Its cries a hundred bubbles.
 You float away from one another
 Like forlorn astronauts, one dead.

I wake to feel a lone
 Dent you left in the sheets: a tangerine.
 I shed it, consume the body.

Downstairs in the kitchen you stir
 Egg whites into flour, a blurb of yolks in the bin.
 I see the fingers of flour across your hips

As gills, your body breathing.

I want to tongue kiss you
After you have eaten butter.

Twenty-two

This is where we answer the questions
we don't want answered but pretend we do.

They aren't trying to disprove god,
but they will anyway. I have watched suicide

on the internet. I remember considering it.
At seventeen I went to a summer camp for aspiring doctors.

Hands-on experience can make you sure
of what you do not want to do.

They let me do compressions once they knew.
Broke her ribs right before she died.

Forget your own blind grandmother
that's a whole new pity.

The year before I almost died myself-
lying in a car, ribs collapsed like rows of tiny bridges,

rain and pine needles everywhere.
Thankful to this day I don't remember the smell

like metal, of metal (on metal). God
what a cage of shards the body blooms into.

I could pick pieces of me off me.
The tree was stained, but fine.

Luckily I was wearing my seatbelt, so every
lover would ask me about the sash scar.

For months I was a pitiful experiment—
Everyone peering over me like a buffet.

I wanted the tubes out. I wanted to talk.
I wanted to be that 5 seconds of Triumph—

Wheeled rebellion and rebirth in Benjamin Button,
When his hair is slicked and his scarf chokes.

I wanted my old body back, 50 pounds ago.
I still can't lift what I could before.

That's not a trade. That's something being taken
From you. That's how it is, and it's gone.

Abandoning god is a requirement to finding him,
but in a new way where he entertains our possible lives

with motorcycles and wives, all love just the same.
And first, and true, like Harleys and Elizabeth.

Sometimes I still think of her bathing,
but her back is to me so it *was* love.

She once washed the scars with her hands
and I cried about it later. I never told her

the worst of it. I could have ruined her—
but some people need god whether he needs them or not.

She could not conceive of it all
without that lens. She knew too much misery

and so thought it was there for a reason.
“What else is there to live for?”

As if my being wasn't enough.
That is a question I want answered

and don't. I'd rather buy a motorcycle,
see if it comes to me in the flames.

Twenty-five

The coffee table admits the stack of yellow self-help books
like a cage of canaries, or a curio of porcelain dolls,

telling all that need be told about a person,
their road the last few years, a wheel of hurt,

off tilt to the point you consider going to church
again, for the fellowship, instead of rewinding

old loves every Sunday morning, instead of eating
whatever doesn't have to be made. I keep singing

old country songs, Waylon's *I'm a long way from home*,
which has been true for years all of a sudden,

and Loretta's *Don't come home a-drinkin*, and Hank Jr.
and Johnny Cash *believing That old wheel is gonna roll around once more*.

They all know life sneaks up on you when you've forgotten
how to take care of yourself, when you find yourself

begging for love on your knees, saying I'm worth nothing.
And going home won't make life's weather any warmer—

no catnap in no noon sun could get you drunk enough
to ignore the dust under the rug —the broom of self-love,

self-compassion, in the back of the closet. Reach for it,
like you might an old instrument your fingers fit,

but one without a reed, no way to make her sing–
and so you doubt if it was even real, your past ability,

or if it was another built dream, something you made on the road
driving home with a car-full of sleeping people, none of them her,

aurora on your right, dead night out your left, and you say:
I've come to an understanding of things, lying to yourself...

and lying because the moment is beautiful has taken lives...
...Knowing you're dying is nothing worth dying over.

So sweep – inhale whatever dust you deserve,
but shed the rest. Give it to the grass.

When did you stop giving things to the grass?
When did you stop singing but a level below deaf?

You've built something that doesn't serve you, instead of
making things with leaves and leaving them to be seen or not.

There are other ways to go about this thing. Or so sayeth the book
under my mug, a violently-colored coaster called *Anxious to Please*,

the two biggest words in my life besides *deserve*.
I'm trying to fix this. I'm seeing somebody.

I cried on a couch saying, *I'm capable*, and he replied, *time's up*,
But I stepped back into the brightness of the day and sang

In my lowest tones, *Don't be weak, as they sew they will reap*
Turn the other cheek and don't give in. That old wheel will roll around again.