

to joy, elaine, alisha, & sarah,
thank you guys for being
there for me through it all

<3

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.”
John _____ 12:24

disclaimers

Dear Reader,

Some of the content ahead may be deeply uncomfortable to read. It is a raw record of the mess that was my life—and the message Jesus turned it into. If you feel resistance to that name, don't worry. It used to do the same for me. I'm not asking you to believe in God. But this testimony is a reminder that He believes in you. No matter how far I ran, little did I know He was always pursuing me, preparing to turn my shame into glory.

If you feel a knock on your heart at any point as you turn these pages, I encourage you not to ignore it. Listen to it carefully. If you are willing, ask who is at the door. Open it and let the sunlight in. We would love to see you blossom into all that you were created to be.

When resistance arises, I propose a simple question:

Would you rather continue living in a comfortable lie, or know the truth?

Søren Kierkegaard put it this way: “There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn't true; the other is to refuse to believe what is true.”

The Truth may feel uncomfortable and even offensive at first—like throwing away clothes you've outgrown but grown attached to. But it will make room for freedom. It will make room for the new. It will make room for a wardrobe perfectly tailored for you. You'll get to know the Designer, and you will never settle for less again. You will realize that what you thought fit you so well could only suppress who you were designed to be. Those old clothes were never made with you

in mind.

I will take no responsibility for the ways the Light may find you on your darkest day. Not after the night is over, but unexpectedly in the midst of it. Just in time, and right where you are.

Until then, the aim of these branches is simply to scatter the seed. And the seed, having nowhere else to wander but the soil, will find your heart after the dark winters have prepared it for spring's explosive growth. When the soil is tilled, broken down, and ready, there will be no choice but for the seed to land and true life to begin.

Here, the Son will shine brighter than ever before, and He will remind you that the harsh winters of the past cannot stop Him from rising again to nurture your budding.

You will go from seeking death to chasing life.

We are confident you will sprout!

From,
a branch from the Vine

apoptosis

THE BURIAL BEFORE THE BLOOM



artwork & writings by
Esther Ko

02 **DEATH**

04 **EXPOSURE**

01 NIGHTFALL

03 DAWNING

05 REBIRTH

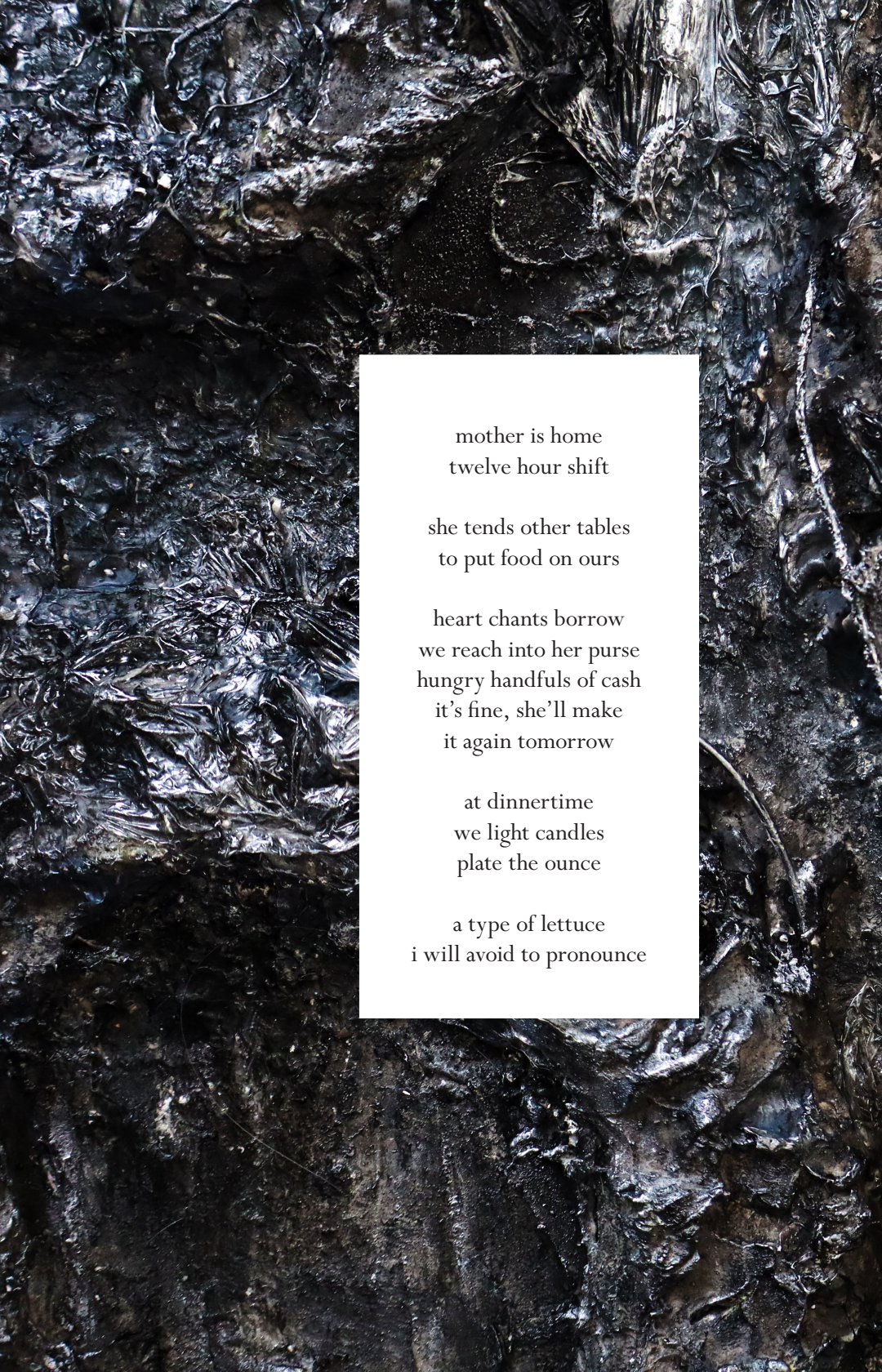


Nightfall, 2026
Mixed media on canvas
24 × 32 in.

Jeremiah 17:9

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and
desperately wicked: who can know it?”

01 NIGHTFALL



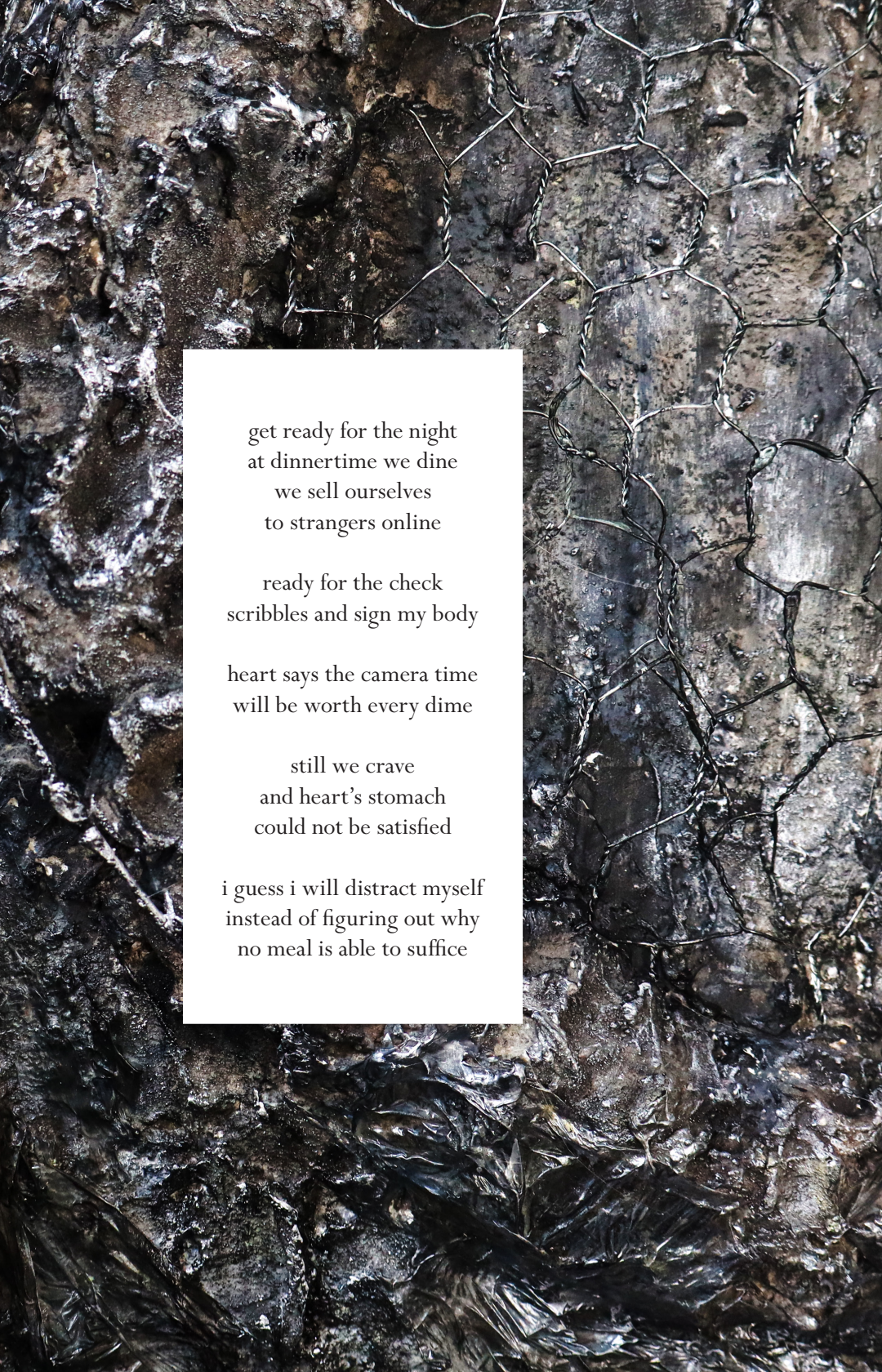
mother is home
twelve hour shift

she tends other tables
to put food on ours

heart chants borrow
we reach into her purse
hungry handfuls of cash
it's fine, she'll make
it again tomorrow

at dinnertime
we light candles
plate the ounce

a type of lettuce
i will avoid to pronounce

The background of the entire image is a dark, heavily textured surface, possibly a piece of weathered metal or stone, with various shades of brown, black, and grey. Overlaid on this background is a chain-link fence, which is visible as a series of interlocking diamond shapes. The fence is made of a dark, possibly oxidized metal, and its lines are sharp and prominent against the mottled background. The overall mood is gritty and industrial.

get ready for the night
at dinnertime we dine
we sell ourselves
to strangers online

ready for the check
scribbles and sign my body

heart says the camera time
will be worth every dime

still we crave
and heart's stomach
could not be satisfied

i guess i will distract myself
instead of figuring out why
no meal is able to suffice

I always hated the first week of school, especially because everyone was introducing themselves and forcing me to answer the three words I feared the most. I was scared of why I could never actually answer it, and why I couldn't seem to get rid of the burning appetite to find out.

“Who are you?”

When I answered this in kindergarten, they made me write my favorite color. I would copy my friend. In middle school, they made me stand in a circle during orientation and anxiously wait for my turn as I rehearsed my made up hobbies. During quarantine, they made me write at least 300 words on Canvas. I preferred this method because I could get away with the most. The more I performed, the better my heart felt. My heart, empty and paining with constant hunger, felt fed when I was able to trick everyone to love me for who I wished to be.

But at the end of the day, the question would remain unanswered. And starved, I became again.

To avoid the existential crisis of craving but failing to be content, throughout my life I attempted to find the answer by following the advice around me and what seemed to work temporarily in the past. These were the only solutions I knew of. And I hate being hangry. Having casual sex made me feel empowered and whole for a moment, but that escape maybe lasted only as long as it took for me to forget their name afterward. Shame would come whirling in. Having boyfriends lasted a bit longer, but never more than a year. Then I would need to replace the hurt of watching two broken people try to complete each other, only to leave one another with less than what they started with. So, at my first festival, I met Molly. It was love at first try. When Molly and I were together, I felt like she knew exactly who I was and how to make me truly believe this is who I'm meant to be. She made me feel like this version of myself was the one the world—

no, the universe—revolved around. She fed me perfectly. But we could only be together for six hours until my heart became hungry again, so I starved until I could see her on the weekends. The hunger pains were worse than ever before. After two years, she wasn't as much fun anymore, so I tried to binge in all three vices together. But the multiple course meals became a lifeless cycle of consuming that never left me satisfied. If I wasn't indulging, my heart would begin to eat itself. It's appetite only knew of two solutions for starvation—eat the same food that would soon leave it hungry again, or stop itself completely. When I attempted the latter after my second breakup, I was thankfully stopped instead. Unfortunately, that meant I kept needing to feed it, so searched for new foods I haven't tried before. Still, they all left me hungry. This led me towards darker pathways, and sooner or later, I was face-to-face with my choice of diet.

I'm not exactly sure how I got here either, but here I am, swerving the car in the midst of a full blown psychedelic-induced psychosis. I was attempting to kill myself and my partner at the time, Dylan—convinced that if I took a road I hadn't before, I could escape the hungry question that was now audibly and visually hallucinating on repeat.

Psychedelics at first felt promising because they kept me full almost twice as long as my girl Molly. As I'm spiraling, I am realizing that my wish for eternal fulfillment was coming true. Just the complete opposite way.

There was no more fill, not even temporary. It was raging, uncontrollable, tormenting and desperate hunger for relief.

At this point, it had been 72 hours after taking only a single tab, and my mind remained stuck in a thought loop with no solids, liquids, or sleep in my system. Dylan was trying to keep me from causing collateral damage to myself and everything I came into contact with.

Thank you for locking in, Dylan.

Every attempt to climb out of the pit of my heart's gut was met with heavy chains that I had been too full, too distracted, to notice before. When I saw how the chains were linked to everything I had attempted

to previously satisfy my heart's hunger with, clasped together with indestructible regret, I was convinced I was in hell. I saw how truly impossible it was to escape the hole I had dug, especially because my soul knew deep down somewhere that it was for eternity.

It was the summer before my junior year of college.

That day, I ended up on my parents' porch at four in the morning.

I hadn't spoken to them in years. I was wearing a short-sleeve tee, which meant all my tattoos were exposed, proudly announcing themselves after years of hiding. Asian parents and permanent ink don't usually go too well together.

I was trembling uncontrollably, covering my ears. Still, the only voices I could hear—and trust—were the demons telling me to murder my parents so I could spare them from this alleged hell I deserved to be in. They told me that saving them would give my heart validation, and, hell knows—that was my favorite dessert.

My heart was shriveling up, on the verge of exploding but unable to, intensely anxious without relief. I remember constantly hearing the volatile chime of a ticking time bomb in my chest, but it would wind up and start from the beginning again right before detonation.

Evil had to be real.

I begged whoever was out there to make it end.

This was pure torture, and my spirit was helplessly and completely aware of it all. I believed I had already died, yet I felt trapped on a hamster wheel with no escape. I was a snake being forced to eat its own tail in vain attempts to die an impossible death again and again.

Throughout it all, I would hear hysterical, mocking laughter. I felt like a puppet on strings, tangled and tied to Satan himself.

“Esther.”

As I stood there, unable to recognize what I had become—tortured by a highlight reel of all the not-so-nice things I had done in my twenty years of living—I heard my father call me by my name, even when I could not, for the life of me, recognize myself.

While I was clothed in the stench of death, my parents didn't hesitate to wrap their arms around me.

In that moment, it was almost as if another eternity had reached down and interrupted this one.

It was the beginning of the unwrapping of who I was in the depths of my utter weakness for the very first time.

At rock bottom, it was in their embrace that I received the first hint.

A father's and mother's love.

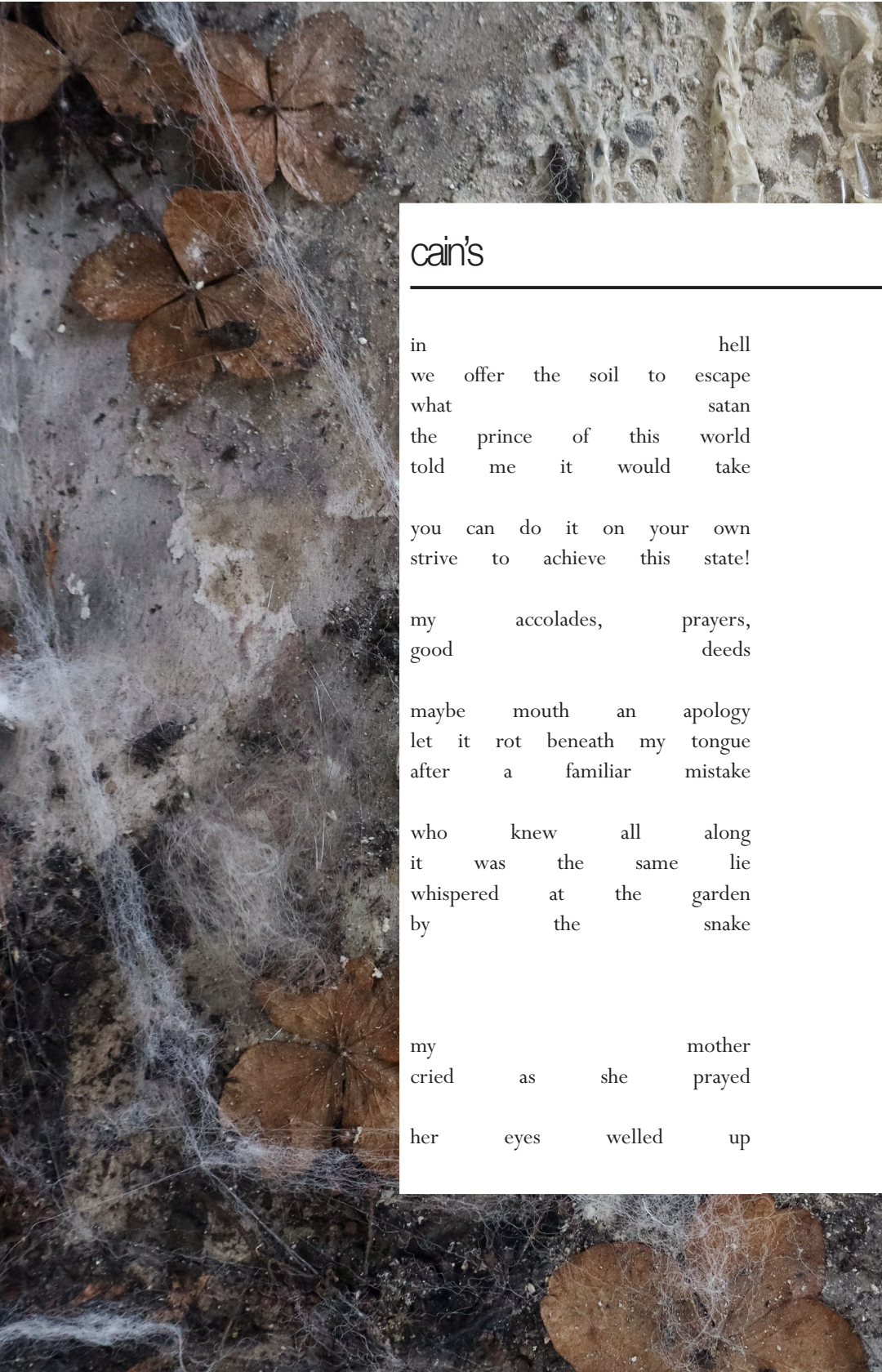
A taste of what I had been searching for all along.



Death, 2026
Mined Media on Canvas
24 x 32 in.

Genesis 3:17-19

“Then to Adam He said, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’: “Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.”



cain's

in hell
we offer the soil to escape
what satan
the prince of this world
told me it would take

you can do it on your own
strive to achieve this state!

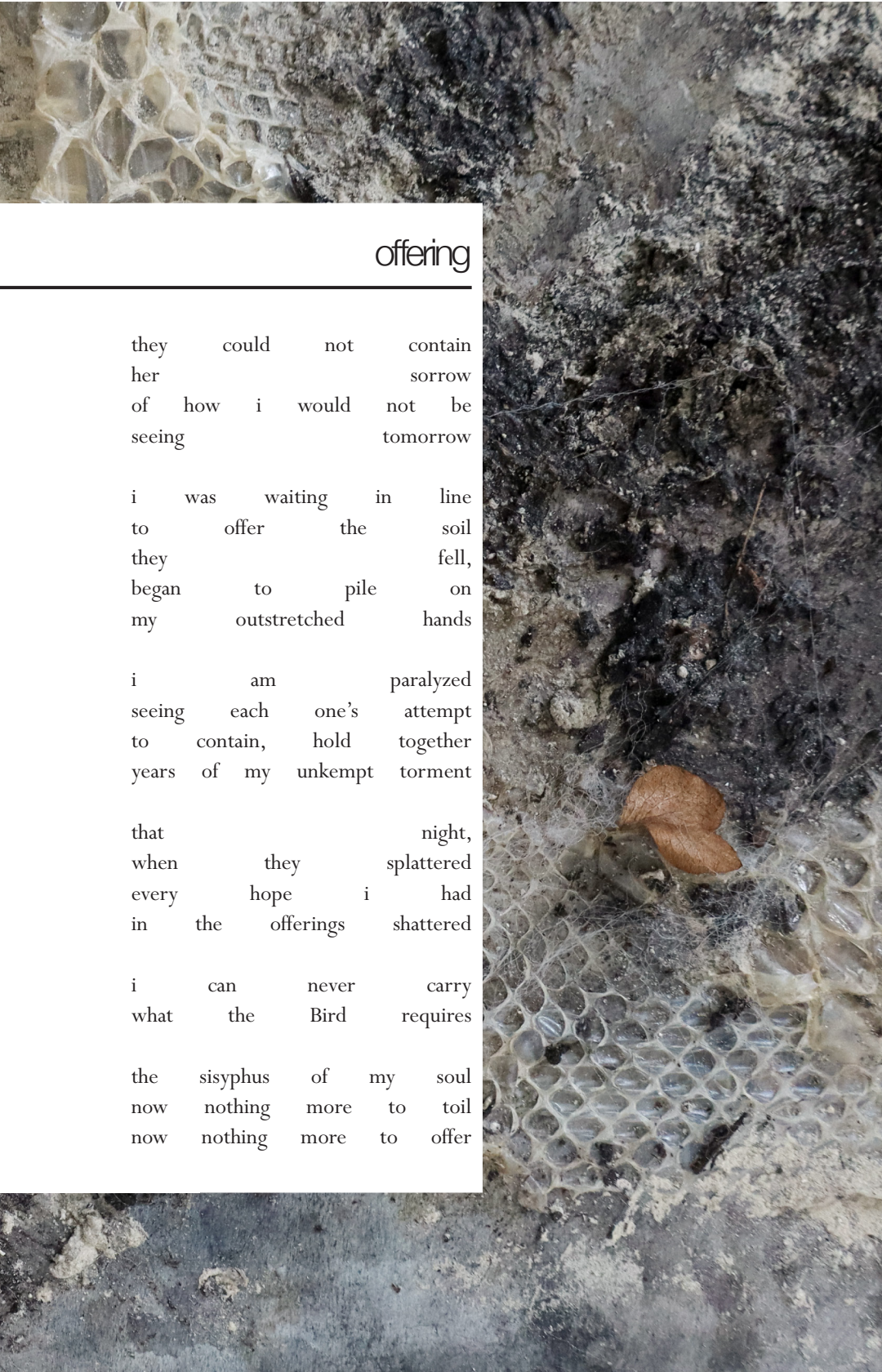
my accolades, prayers,
good deeds

maybe mouth an apology
let it rot beneath my tongue
after a familiar mistake

who knew all along
it was the same lie
whispered at the garden
by the snake

my mother
cried as she prayed

her eyes welled up



offering

they could not contain
her sorrow
of how i would not be
seeing tomorrow

i was waiting in line
to offer the soil
they fell,
began to pile on
my outstretched hands

i am paralyzed
seeing each one's attempt
to contain, hold together
years of my unkempt torment

that night,
when they splattered
every hope i had
in the offerings shattered

i can never carry
what the Bird requires

the sisyphus of my soul
now nothing more to toil
now nothing more to offer

"For the wages of sin is death;..." Romans 6:23a

I used to think my good deeds could outweigh my bad ones. That somehow, if I did enough good in return, it would compensate for the hurt I tried so hard to ignore. I believed kindness could cancel corruption. That apologies could reverse damage. That morality was a scale I could eventually tip in my favor if I worked hard enough.

Until eventually, from my perspective, I had gone too far. I felt unredeemable.

This realization came when I began seeing just how deeply I was hurting the very people who continued embracing me. Time and time again, I disrespected them, exhausted them, and wounded them—yet still they refused to withhold their love from me.

That summer morning, as my parents looked at me not for what I had done, but for who I was to them, I began seeing myself for the first time.

Ironically, only knowing how to use my own eyes, I could only see what I had done instead of who I was. Regardless, their compassion led me to finally stand in front of a mirror.

Deep into my reflection, I realized I was not a good person who just sometimes made mistakes. I had no room left to justify my evil. When your entire life begins replaying before your eyes—every lie, every manipulation, every time you used people, cheated others, stole, hated, mocked, or wounded those around you—you begin arriving at conclusions you once spent your whole life avoiding.

I realized I was a sinner. Not the ambiguous kind casually acknowledged in church before moving on with life, but the kind capable of deeply wounding people who loved me anyway. I realized that my

my problem was not merely the mistakes I made, but the heart that kept producing them. No matter how many leaves I tore from the branches, the root remained untouched.

I was an evil person, believing I was good. And a compass means nothing to someone convinced they already know the way.

Now I was seeing myself too clearly. My way had led me to destruction. Despite the horror of it all, this was the first glimpse into answering that suffocating question I had spent my entire life running from:

Who am I?

“For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.” James 2:10

For the first time, I stopped asking how bad my actions were compared to someone else's. I stopped measuring myself against other sinners and began measuring myself against goodness itself.

And suddenly, the scale I had spent my whole life trusting shattered beneath me.

If God's standard is perfection, then even 99% would still fall short before Him.

Before perfect holiness, human comparisons collapse. The trembling girl on that porch, the pastor's kid who only told a few lies, and the worst tyrants in history all stand equally unable to justify themselves before a perfect God. Sin still leads to death whether we consider ourselves ninety-nine percent good or fifty. This is the flaw in subjective morality.

C.S. Lewis tells us that in order to recognize a line as crooked, there must first be Someone who drew a straight one. An objective Truth.

Yet we spend most of our lives obsessing over how crooked everyone else's lines are instead of looking at our own. And in doing so, we have grown rigid and forgotten how a straight line is even supposed to look.

So God reminds us.

He presses and draws it into our hearts.

That ache after hurting someone. That tension before apologizing. That weight of guilt you try to rationalize away. All those things simply point to the existence of an Original, Straight Line—and our helpless deviation from it.

If something inside you feels resistant to this, I understand. I resisted it too. Wrestle honestly with it. Bring your anger, your questions, your accusations before God if you must.

But will you be ready when you realize that the very breath in your lungs is already evidence of mercy?

Stick with me if you would like to see how much He loves you, despite us completely bombing the line test.

If the payment required for sin is death, then can good deeds reverse the consequence? Can guilt truly be erased through effort? Would it be just for a judge to accept an apology in place of a sentence?

As you think about these questions, pay close attention to what feelings that begin surfacing inside you. Do you feel confused? Angry? As if all of this sounds unjust? Helpless? Maybe even nothing at all? Hold onto whatever criticisms, thoughts, or emotions arise as you continue to read below.

**“...but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”
Romans 6:23b**

I love the word *but* because it holds the power to interrupt and negate everything that came before it in an instant.

I love the word *gift* because there is something deeply moving about

receiving what you did absolutely nothing to earn. It's always a nice surprise.

And I love the way humans always stumble over their words, struggling between gratitude and the burden within to somehow repay the giver.

Sometimes the recipient realizes the gift was exactly what they needed all along. Other times they awkwardly force a smile because they do not yet understand its value. Sometimes they even grow suspicious because it has been so long since they have received anything freely.

But almost always, the recipient realizes it would be rude to deny, so they gladly open their hands and surrender.

Instead of opening their hands to offer something in return, they open them empty. Because, of course, all gifts are free!

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” Ephesians 2:8

Now the Gift being offered above is unlike any other because it does not disappear at the grave. It is eternal. Because it is free it can only be received with open hands, offering nothing in return. To open your hands is to recognize your need for it, and your inability to earn it on your own.

The Giver of this Gift is infinitely mysterious, yet fully revealed. There is no other giver in this world whom you have never seen, yet understands you completely. He knows every fear, every desire, every hidden wound, every shame you bury, and every longing you cannot even articulate yourself. He understands exactly what your heart needs because He is the One who made it.

He knows exactly what to give you because He knows you completely.

It will be everything you have ever needed and will need.

He gives this Gift again and again, asking nothing in return, so that you would long to know the One who gave it.

The Gift He offers is not merely peace, purpose, morality, or religion.

It is Himself. It is His presence. Everything else may follow, but the source will never change.

That Gift, offered to all of humanity, was God Himself on the cross.

God is not a prosecuting attorney trying to win a case against you. He is the Judge who willingly stepped down from His seat to bear the sentence Himself, so that you could walk free.

The question is not whether the Gift is being offered. It already has been.

The question is whether you will finally let go of whatever fear or doubt you are clinging to, trust Him, open your hands, and ask to receive it.

You will know you have received it when this is all your heart, mind, body, and soul can say in response:

“Thank you.”

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father. *But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.* The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. *For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.*’ So they began to celebrate.”



Dawning, 2026
Mixed media on canvas
24 × 32 in.

John 8:12

Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”



the Light is always there

in due season
it hides earlier than usual

winter is dark enough
for the soil
of my stubborn heart
to crave its warmth

one night

unable to produce
a spark of my own

my mother

opened the blind

desperate

i let hope invade

wincing,
my eyes adjust

i wonder what
it means to trust?

“Daughter! Let’s eat breakfast!”

My mother swung open the curtains. I jolted awake as the morning light rudely burst through the blinds. Immediately, the voices came screaming in, and my mind began suffocating beneath fear and darkness. My jaw began trembling and tightening uncontrollably as I was reminded of how my soul felt as though it were being fought over and torn across the chasm of hell every time I attempted to sleep.

It had been about a month since I showed up on my parents’ porch, and my condition was still not improving. Once again, I did not know what day it was. I did not know who I was, who I could trust, or why I was convinced I was already dead and needed to escape whatever sadistic realm I was trapped in as soon as possible. I had never been more confused in my life.

My mom lifted me up and sat me down at the dining table. I stared blankly at her with heavy eye bags hanging beneath hollow eyes that had not known sleep in days. My body was an empty carcass, and my spirit felt trapped elsewhere, somewhere far outside of time. It was weird. At the same time, I felt as though I did not belong here at all, yet also as if there was nowhere else I was supposed—or deserved—to be. I could only explain this friction as immense regret, puzzling longing, condemning loneliness, and hopeless sorrow.

She gently blew on the spoonful of soft tofu soup, my favorite, and guided her homemade delicacy into my mouth.

She’s trying to poison you.

It whispered.

You have to spit it out or you’re going to have to relive your entire life and go through this again until you figure out how to escape.

It sounded just like me.

I cannot forget the look of defeat that stretched over my mother's face as I spit the soup back out onto her hand. I also noticed white hairs and wrinkles that I hadn't seen before. She was getting old.

Your poor mother is going to die of stress at her age because of you. You have to help her. It's what Jesus would do. You are Jesus, and you are the only one who can save her from this hell. It's all up to you.

Jesus?

I hadn't heard that name since it was briefly mentioned to me as a kid at church.

I began hyperventilating as the edges of my vision seemed to close in on me. I looked around and found an emergency fire blanket hanging on our kitchen wall. I ripped it off the wall, and the force caused our family photos hanging nearby to come crashing down. I didn't care. I needed to save my mother. I grabbed the blanket by the corners and attempted to trap her underneath. She began frantically moving and gasping for air.

"What the hell are you doing? Stop, it stings!"

She picked me up again and embraced me, not minding how my shirt was soiled with soup.

—

That afternoon, my mother bathed me. I couldn't even be trusted to wash up on my own. I sat in the tub, paralyzed with guilt as she lathered up her hands. The voices continued telling me that no matter how hard she scrubbed, she could never wash away the shame of how I had given the body she carried in her womb to strangers whose names I would quickly forget. They told me she didn't see her daughter, but a disappointment of one.

After she finished washing me, she took me back out to the living

room. She had to go to work and told my brother to take care of me for the rest of the day. He looked at me, brows furrowed in concern, and gave a nod toward my mother. I pushed him away throughout my life because I saw him as one of those “really Christian” people and I was so far and different from whatever that meant. Inside, I was really just embarrassed how my lifestyle could never compare to his, and I thought getting close to him would mean the shame would get worse.

“Esther, do you want to go to church with me today?”

Church? The place where I witnessed my loved ones get sexually harassed and groomed? The place where they publicly shamed us? The place where supposedly “God” was and never fixed why my parents always fought and hated each other? Where was “God” when I would lock myself in rooms and bang my head on the wall as I screamed at them to stop? When I would slit myself in front of boys and beg them to love me? When I would eat lunch alone in bathroom stalls at school? When I would shove fingers down my throat, weigh myself, and puke out the extra pounds because of the way “God” made me? Where was “God” when my classmate committed suicide? Where was “God” when he was letting older men on the internet use my twelve year old body? Isn’t church for people who love God? I hate the idea of a ‘loving God,’ let alone loving something that I hate. And I hate myself for knowing that I can’t hate something unless it exists.

I was appalled at his invite.

But I was desperate to try anything to quiet my mind—anything except drugs, the very thing I believed had gotten me here in the first place. That day, when I showed up on my parents’ porch, they took me to the emergency room, and I flushed the prescriptions they gave me down the toilet.

My brother was waiting patiently for my reply.

I was willing to let hope invade, even if it was through a little sliver.

“Fine.”

“Take the very hardest thing in your life— the place of difficulty, outward or inward, and expect God to triumph gloriously in that very spot. Just there He can bring your soul into blossom.”

Lilias

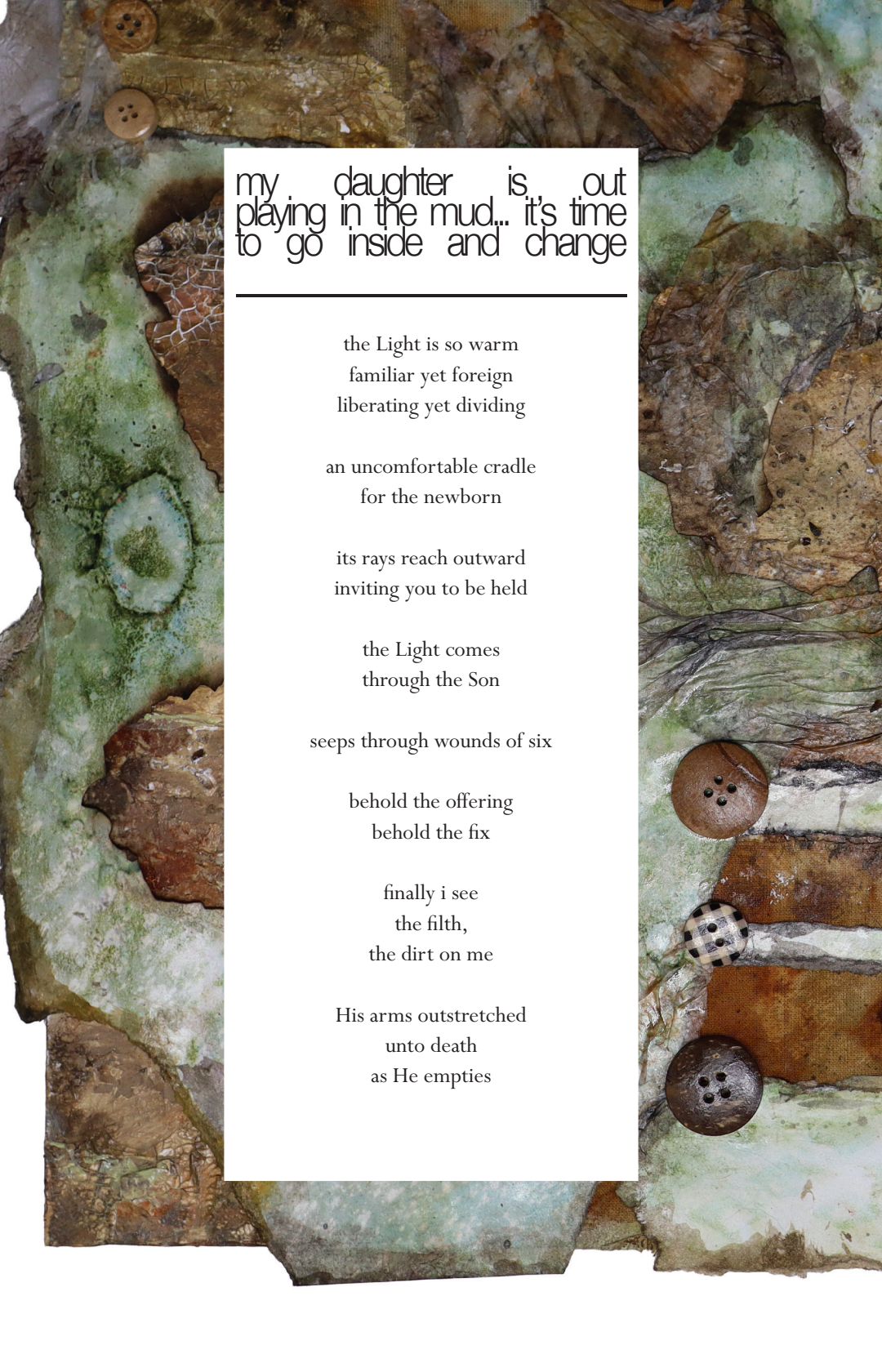
Trotter



Exposure, 2026
Mixed media on canvas
24 x 32 in.

Isaiah 64:6

“But we are all like an unclean thing, And
all our righteousnesses are like filthy
rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniqui-
ties, like the wind, Have taken us away.”



my daughter is out
playing in the mud... it's time
to go inside and change

the Light is so warm
familiar yet foreign
liberating yet dividing

an uncomfortable cradle
for the newborn

its rays reach outward
inviting you to be held

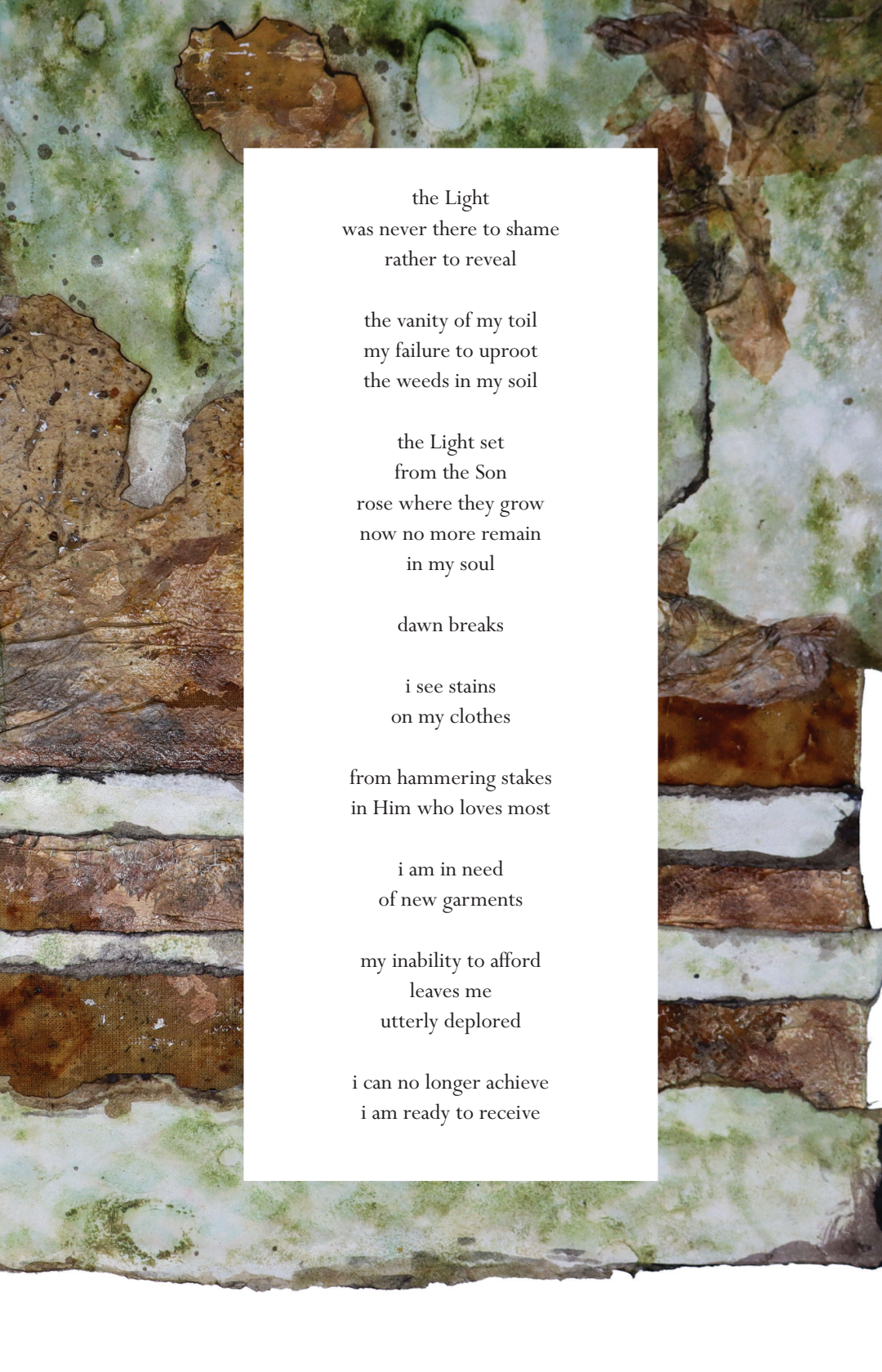
the Light comes
through the Son

seeps through wounds of six

behold the offering
behold the fix

finally i see
the filth,
the dirt on me

His arms outstretched
unto death
as He empties



the Light
was never there to shame
rather to reveal

the vanity of my toil
my failure to uproot
the weeds in my soil

the Light set
from the Son
rose where they grow
now no more remain
in my soul

dawn breaks

i see stains
on my clothes

from hammering stakes
in Him who loves most

i am in need
of new garments

my inability to afford
leaves me
utterly deplored

i can no longer achieve
i am ready to receive

“Is this okay to wear to church?” I nervously asked my brother as he got into the car. I fidgeted with the hem of my pajamas while Dylan helped buckle me into my seat.

“You can wear anything you want,” he said. “Just come as you are. I’ll meet you there.”

The building was small, yet somehow overflowing with people. Everyone seemed so put together. Ironed clothes, warm coffees in hand, smiles plastered across their faces. Although some of those smiles would begin demonically twisting into looks of disgust, by then I was used to the hallucinations enough to ignore them as best I could.

As we stepped inside, loud greetings and scattered hugs surrounded us, though most of it now feels like a blur. What I remember most clearly is grabbing Dylan’s hand and suddenly dragging us toward the front row just as the service began. Everything I was doing was so out of character, yet I knew I needed as much help as I could possibly get.

The instruments slowly filled the room. Piano keys and soft synths ushered melodies through the sanctuary while large white letters began projecting onto the wall ahead.

Adonai... Elohim... Great I Am... Lives in me... El Shaddai... Prince of Peace... Emmanuel... Here with me... Your Name is great... And greatly to be praised... Worthy You were... Worthy You are... Worthy You will be forever... Yahweh

Immediately, like a gust of wind, something had enveloped the room. The weight of its presence brought me to my knees.

The first thing I felt was how small and unworthy I was to stand before such overwhelming and vast holiness. I felt as though if I moved a

single muscle, I would turn to dust.

The second thing I experienced was what I can only describe as the embrace of Perfect Love—as if it had waited my entire life for this exact moment just to hold me. I was filled with a gratitude for the safety within that embrace that I still cannot fully explain, one I knew I could only understand after realizing how much danger my soul had truly been in. The longings of my heart for relief felt so seen and understood. I felt like I was back home after wandering for so long.

The third thing I felt was peace. Tangible peace that surpassed everything I thought could obtain it before. The kind that loosens every tightened muscle after a long cry or a tight hug. The kind that reassures you and lets you exhale, after holding your breath for so long.

The thing is, every other kind of peace I had known before always eventually faded.

This one lingered. Somewhere deep in my heart, I knew it would remain even after I left that building. The sigh of my soul was so deep that it began pulling me toward sleep.

I had not slept properly in almost two months.

So there I laid. On the floor in a puddle of tears as the worship washed over me. I felt a soft hand resting on my back and heard the quiet murmurs of strangers praying over me. I heard someone call me “Daughter”. For the first time in what felt like eternity, I fell asleep.

At the very feet of this unknown yet strangely familiar presence, I was rocked into the deepest and safest rest I had ever known.

Later, I woke up to Dylan speaking with a woman who had greeted me when I first walked in. He was explaining who I was, what I had taken that induced the psychosis, and how long I had gone without proper sleep. As I slowly opened my eyelids, she looked at me and smiled softly.

“You will be able to sleep very well tonight.”

I didn't have the strength to walk after whatever had just happened. So Dylan carried me on his back to the car while I closed my eyes again, silently repeating the lyrics in my head, trying desperately to savor whatever it was I had just tasted. He dropped me off at my apartment before heading to work, and my brother walked me inside.

I hadn't been here since I took the acid. It was a mess. Drawings were scattered across the floor, puzzle pieces everywhere, and there was a hole in the window screen. If I were to explain why there were puzzle pieces, it would take too long, so I'll leave that to your imagination. My brother asked if I needed help cleaning up and went into the kitchen to grab trash bags. I began filling them with anything that brought back painful flashbacks of my self-destructive habits.

The voices began creeping in again. This time they sounded more like me than ever before. Strangely, though, there was no anxiety left in them. Only confidence.

You now know the answer to escaping this hell. You need to throw all this away and go back to where you found the answer. You can do it on your own!

I ended up filling three trash bags with paraphernalia.

My brother asked if I would be okay alone, and somehow I convinced him that I would. The moment he left, I grabbed a backpack, emptied it out, and searched for the church address on my phone.

God—or Whoever I met there—I'm ready to escape this hell. I'm coming to You with nothing, because I remember something about surrender in those lyrics, and this will be my way of showing You that I deserve to be free!

I walked for over two hours before my phone died. The voices told me to throw it away—that I would never truly meet God unless I surrendered everything important I had.

So I did.

I eventually got lost and passed out on the sidewalk outside a hospital. An elderly couple called an ambulance, but my brother found me

before the police arrived. Later, when I asked him how he found me, he shared that someone had miraculously found my phone. They charged it, contacted him, and helped him track me down.

After that night, he brought me back to my parents' house, and exhausted beyond words, I slept through the entire night like a baby.

From that point on, the voices slowly began fading day by day. I gradually started assimilating back into ordinary life as my sanity returned.

Once I was recovered, I wanted nothing more than to forget that entire summer. Especially anything related to spirituality or God. Thinking about it made me extremely anxious. I wanted a break. I wanted to live normally again. But there was one thing I couldn't get off my mind. I could not deny that throughout the chaos of those two months—and through the peace of that single moment—there was one name that continuously echoed through every depth and height I experienced.

That name was Jesus Christ.

After I settled back into school, I attended another rave. For the first time, I decided to go sober. And for the first time, I remember feeling deeply sad observing the rave scene I once called home. I watched as my friends accepted random pills from strangers without hesitation, casually gambling with their lives. I felt remorse for the way I had encouraged others to do the same with substances at every festival, just to get them hooked. After that summer, I remember thinking that if there was one thing I had learned, it was that tomorrow is never truly promised.

I laid off the raves for a while.

A couple weeks after, I was lying in bed when I came across a YouTube video titled *Ex-Gang Member Interview—Johnny*. I clicked on it because he was Asian, had tattoos like me, and was featured on a channel I used to watch often.

I had no idea what his story was about to awaken.



Rebirth, 2026
Mixed media on canvas
24 x 32 in.

John 3:3

“Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”



the

pelican

again in the womb
now an empty tomb

its stone has rolled away
the sunlight rushes in
the darkness can no
longer comprehend

here was the death
of another in my place

it does not end there

here is the resurrection
of another in my place

now a gateway to life

we do not stop at the gate
nor dwell in between

boldly come home
stand up, walk through

our feet are washed clean

in her piety

the soil is tilled
emptied of the old

let go of the mold
ready to birth anew

the chlorophyll, my soul
absorbing the blue,
where He resides,
the red of His flesh
came down,

the Light from above,
blamed for every shadow,
yet never
withdraws warmth
for you and I

i pray you will believe
you are no longer unclean

abide and trust
the unseen
come forth, birth
a life inexplicably green

Johnny begins sharing how he grew up. I was not a gang member with abusive parents, yet I deeply resonated with the brokenness he described within his home. Because he never received love properly as a child, he searched for it elsewhere—in gang validation, in the highs, in women, in money. He spoke about suicide attempts after he got out of prison, when nobody in the world would accept him except his gang.

Then he said something that really stuck with me:

His lowest point was when he finally had everything he thought he wanted, yet still felt empty.

I turned up the volume and began listening intently. He was speaking of my heart's hunger when nobody else had even noticed it, let alone pointed it out.

He then went on to describe an interaction with a pastor during that season of his life. One day, he had to drive his mother to church, though he made it very clear that he was not going inside or speaking to anyone. She agreed.

But when they arrived, the pastor invited him to eat with him and his mother. Coming from an Asian background, Johnny felt it would be disrespectful to refuse. And because gang culture had deeply ingrained pride and honor into him, he did not want to risk anyone seeing him as disrespectful.

That day, they happened to be serving his favorite food: black bean noodles. He couldn't resist.

At this point, I was completely caught off guard by where this video was heading. Nothing about it suggested that it was suddenly going to become about Jesus.

Yet here I was again, face to face with the very name I had been trying to avoid.

Johnny then shared a conversation with the pastor—an exchange that has remained burned into my memory ever since.

“Johnny, are you a sinner? Do you know what sin is?”

Johnny said anger immediately began bubbling inside him at such a loaded question.

“Yeah, of course I am.”

“What do you think sin is?”

“Sin is when you do bad things. Shooting people, stabbing people, lying. You know, I didn’t go to prison for selling strawberry shortcakes.”

“Not so.”

What?

I remember being caught off guard too. Even though I was not religious, we can all generally agree that doing bad things is wrong.

Then the pastor explained:

“Sin is twofold. First, it is trusting yourself above the Word of God—placing yourself over God. Second, it is an inheritance.

You are Chinese. You did not choose to be Chinese. You were born that way because your father passed it down to you.

Sin is similar. It is not merely that you commit sinful acts; it is that humanity inherited a sinful nature through Adam.

Look at children. As cute as they are, children are naturally selfish. Nobody has to teach a child how to lie, steal, or rebel. In fact, we have to teach them not to.

An apple tree naturally produces apples because that is its nature. Likewise, humanity naturally produces sin because sin exists at the root.

The sinful actions you thought were sin are actually symptoms of a deeper sickness.

If you only treat the symptoms, they will continue reappearing in different forms. You have to address the root—the heart itself. You have to address identity.”

The next thing Johnny shared from that conversation suddenly aligned it all. It answered the question that had followed me ever since. It felt as though he were speaking directly to my heart through the screen.

“The braking system in a car must overpower the accelerator, or the car will crash.

If we lack self-control—let’s say with drugs—we crash.

You are an imperfect person trying to reach perfection on your own. So every time you fail, you feel emptier. More hopeless. Until you crash. Until you hit rock bottom. At rock bottom, you do not have the power to save yourself. You need someone greater than you to help you out.

But when you believe you are okay, that you are right, you refuse to let anyone help you.”

That was the story of my life, easily unraveled in one paragraph by a pixelated stranger on the television. I thought about all the times in my life when I trusted myself to find happiness and peace. I thought about all the ways I tried to escape my suffering and become perfect on my own, never asking for help—whether that was in my toxic relationships, family feuds, self harm and especially during psychosis. I trusted every flawed thought as though it were my own truth, and spiraled deeper into blame and hate when I couldn’t fix myself. And I thought about how it had all led me here—invested in some guy’s life review—and finally making me reflect on my own.

Taking the pastor's advice, Johnny eventually apologized to his abusive father. At first, he was furious at the idea of a world where the victim apologizes to the aggressor. Yet for the first time in his life, he trusted that maybe this pastor could see him more clearly than he could see himself.

When Johnny opened up to his father and told him he was sorry he couldn't be a good son, his father broke down and apologized in return. He apologized for not being a good father, for his drinking, and for failing to give him a proper childhood. They embraced, and decades of bitterness, anger, and unforgiveness collapsed in a single moment. It was so touching that the next time I saw my parents, the same reconciliation took place.

Had Johnny continued clinging to his own righteousness he never would have the relationship with his father that he treasures today. Had I continued clinging onto the resentment that once blinded me from seeing my childhood from their shoes, I would never be able to see my prayer for my family to be one again unfold. We eat dinner together now and joke with one another at one table, something I never thought would happen in a million years.

The core of our sickness, beneath all pain, is sin.

I had always heard phrases like "Jesus died for your sins," but none of it truly made sense until I encountered this story of love during one of the darkest seasons of my life. I clung to drugs, relationships, validation, and unforgiveness toward both myself and my parents as forms of self-protection and distraction. At the time, those options genuinely felt like my only solution. They were familiar and all I knew how to soothe. Until I fell into the very pit those vices had created, and I could finally see the Light that had been reaching down all along.

Running to my vices was a natural instinct. I was producing symptoms of a natural sickness rooted much deeper than behavior. I was placing my own solutions and understanding above God's wisdom. I hated the idea of God because then I wouldn't be in charge of judging what was good or bad in my life anymore. And my default setting loved to play God. And when I thought I was God and would mess up, I would

remember my faults and drown in self hatred. Then I ran because I hated remembering my mistakes. I lived recklessly because I believed that if I was already imperfect, then there was no real worth left in me anyway. The enemy was taking my hand, patting my head and telling me how great of a god I was. That I'm the master of my life. How I could get away with the craziest decisions, like trading my body to travel for free with a random man so I could brag to my friends about how unstoppable I was. And how my parents would never find out. I lived for these highs.

But then he would take it, make me hit myself, and ask me why I would ever do something like that. He would call me stupid, worthless, and dumb. The worst part is I couldn't tell the difference between Satan's voice and my own. He would scream it through my thoughts at night when I'm alone to make sure I wouldn't forget how horrible he said I was. Then he would gently whisper that I would be better off dead. If he spoke too suddenly about something the god who was unstoppable would never think, he might get caught. I tried to end my life at these lows.

At rock bottom, I would realize that God was the rock that I had stepped on and ignored, holding me up all along. Here He said something completely contrary to the lies I had believed all along.

**“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”
Jeremiah 29:11**

**“Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more...
For by one offering He has perfected forever them that are sanctified.”
Hebrews 10:17,14**

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” 2 Timothy 1:7

“I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well.” Psalm 139:14

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding” Proverbs 3:5

“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” 2 Corinthians 5:21

God chose not to remember my sins even when I could not stop remembering them myself.

God chose to call me perfect even when I couldn't see myself that way. He no longer saw me through my failures. He saw His masterpiece and the perfect righteousness of the blood of Jesus covering me instead.

God placed my sin upon Himself and paid the price I deserved to pay.

Death.

And He alone conquered that very death, proving the payment had been fully accepted. No matter how much the enemy tries to condemn me for my mistakes, you cannot undo what is finished. My record is clean. I will listen to the voice that is for me instead. I am free.

There, upon a mattress set on the floor, I sat. Still staring at the screen. I had a choice to make.

Would I continue trusting the unstable foundation of my constantly shifting thoughts and feelings—something that has repeatedly lied and led me toward destruction?

“Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Genesis 6:5

Or would I trust this Word that claims to never change?

**“Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever.”
Hebrews 13:8**

The Word that says I am righteous not because of what I have done, but because of what Jesus has accomplished for me.

The Word that says I am now a child of God—not because of my performance, but because of faith in the Son who gave up His life that we may receive His sonship, His identity. The same way my parents and I recognized each other on that porch. Because I trusted them, I let them take care of me. How much more would my heavenly Father do so?

The Word that promises I am never abandoned, never unseen, and never outside His attention.

The Word that says my Maker desires intimacy with me, a relationship enough to fill every emptiness I once selfishly expected others to fill.

What I worshiped in others were fragmented reflections of the One who made them. My soul's longing for its Creator.

Well. I was clearly a bit crazy already, and everyone around me knew it by now.

What exactly did I have left to lose?

That day, I clicked off the video and bought my very first Bible. I had not read a book in years. I could not believe I was actually trying this “Jesus thing.” I could not believe I genuinely thought this book contained words breathed from the mouth of the living God. I could not believe I no longer found all of this cringe. And I especially could not believe I had to come to terms with the reality that the only thing I contributed to my salvation was the sin that made it necessary in the first place.

What a devastating wound to my pride. You mean there is nothing I can do to earn my worth after spending my whole life trying to manufacture it myself?

I sighed. There was going to be a lot for me to unlearn.

But after everything that happened that summer, I was starving for

truth. I knew evil was real. So I needed to know who was truly Good. I needed to know why the name of Jesus would echo through my mind during those two months of psychosis. I needed to understand what that presence was at church.

And if that presence truly was God Himself—and Jesus truly was God... then I figured I should probably get to know Him before we meet face to face one day. If I didn't, I imagined that would be pretty awkward. The only clues left before me were the wreckage of that summer, the suffering woven throughout my life, and this newly ordered Bible resting in my hands.

So I opened the cover, wrote my full name inside, and began the only way I knew how:

Page one.

It's been two years since I first heard the gospel, tried this Jesus thing out and ordered my first Bible.

Yet strangely, the greatest blessing wasn't the restoration of my parents' relationship, sobriety, or the disappearance of those long nights spent spiraling in fear, anxiety, depression, or loneliness.

It wasn't even the way Scripture would speak to my heart, reveal my reflection, and gently show me how each page had always been pointing to my need for Jesus all along. You can find Him hidden between every line, and it's the most beautiful scavenger hunt ever. God is like a Dad who cannot help but talk about His Son. And everything He says about the Son now applies to you. The Son gave Himself for you.

It wasn't even seeing the world in color again, witnessing Christ pursue Dylan on His own, or finding myself surrounded by the welcoming and enduring friendships of brothers and sisters in Christ. Friendships no longer founded on transaction, but on grace. I never knew how raw, knit-together, fun, and sharpening fellowship could be.

It wasn't even the new sense of purpose I found in creating alongside Him through tattooing, art, and writing—dreams I had buried for years because I was never bold enough to pursue them. Now I know how capable He is. God is my courage that goes before me.

“So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” Isaiah 55:11

When you realize the quality of your life is no longer rooted in what you accomplish, but in the One who uses your shortcomings to tell a story of redemption—everyday feels like an adventure. You get to watch His hand move in areas of your life that you put back on the shelf and thought you would never visit again. He sends you back to places where He has saved you from with a mission to carry the Light. You will witness transformation from the inside out and growth in ways you thought would take decades to reach. When you look back, all you can do is rejoice at the beautiful garden He is has sprouted the moment you believed that He had risen. This growth overflows into

the lives of others and you no longer live from a place of lack or jealousy. The emptiness inside of you has been filled by the precious blood poured forth from the cross.

You begin to love more radically than ever before. And when you stumble, He gently guides you back to the foot of the cross where You find gratitude all over again.

This is the true blessing. Simply put, it's the walk with Jesus itself.

Each morning when He gives you the gift of a new day, He is giving you the gift of Himself. You get to admire the ribbons and experience a childlike excitement to see what He has for you in store.

Scriptures are love letters that come with, and He writes them each day, just for you. No matter how busy you may be to forget to read them, He does not forget about you. He does not ever miss a day because He does not ever get tired of loving you.

The nails are His pens, and His blood, the ink.

The other day when I opened this gift, I was sitting with my cats. One of them had litter stuck to his nose. For some reason, it was the cutest thing in the world. He sneezed a bit, and I was the one tearing up instead. God wrote to me how He created all types of wonders so that we might one day long for the Author of its beauty. These cute little creatures made me think about His heart. Almost like a kid jumping up and down, excited to show off their colorful drawings.

G.K. Chesterton writes that it may be possible that God makes every daisy separately and never grows tired of making them. It may be that He possesses "the eternal appetite of infancy," because while we have sinned and grown old, our Father remains forever young.

Isn't it beautiful how boundless our imaginations are? And if we are capable of imagining realities greater than what already exists, then how much more infinite must the imagination of God be—the One who imagined us first? How much greater must be His imagination for our lives? I have no idea what He's thinking, but I do know He's

thinking of me and you. How much beauty could He be imagining for you right now?

I do not think I could ever grow bored of knowing such a creative and loving Father forever. He is the coolest Author ever and will never run out of ideas.

The story He desires to write with your life will always surpass the one you attempt to write alone. Give Him the pen and watch His hand move. I pray that what He is writing with mine will leave hearts curious and wanting more of Him.

Your heart is a door that only you can open from the inside. No one can take that decision from you because the One who gave you the choice to choose honors your free will. He is full of a patient love that cannot be forced.

The question I once despised has now become my favorite question to answer:

Who am I?

I am many things to many people. But before all else, I am a daughter of God.

I am chosen, loved, forgiven.

I am held, wanted, and His.

I am no longer alone and never will be.

I have been found, and I am no longer hungry.

It's all a beautiful paradox because at the same time, this body came from dirt. One day it will return there again, and my spirit will return home.

Till then, I want the dash engraved between my birth and death date to tell a greater story—one of death’s failure to hold Him, and because of that—now us. I want to rub it in the enemy’s face and remind Satan that he has already lost. God has redeemed what the enemy meant for destruction for His glory. God has turned my mess into a message, and I can’t imagine it any other way. I want my grave to tell of what comes after: from burial to blossom.

In Genesis, we see what humanity was originally created to be:

Gardeners for His Kingdom.

People who bear fruit in season and multiply His goodness.

People who bear His image, loving and encouraging others.

Working together to create life.

We are ambassadors, called to scatter the seed and carry the testimony of the love of Christ. This seed is what brings forth the living in a barren and broken world. I have seen it ripple through my own.

“You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage, but [God] is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.” —C.S. Lewis

You can spend your life building a kingdom that will die with you, or you can devote it to the one that will outlive every other.

I hope to see you there!

The enemy cannot take out God so He will go after what is most precious to Him: His children. Creation. The greatest form of revenge is to go after what one loves most. Who God loves most is those who bear His image to create. This has been Satan's heart of destruction, vengeance, anger, and pride from the beginning.

He will sprinkle lies that it is better to consume than to create. He does not have to go through the effort of dragging you to hell if he can just distract you from heaven. Do not fall into the trap of mistaking that voice for your own. You were created to create from a place of love, just like your heavenly Father.

Be reminded that he has lost, death has been defeated, and that the destructive yell that once tormented your mind will eventually shrink into nothing more than a weak whisper compared to the voice of the One who spoke the universe into existence with a single word. All you must do is turn up the volume of God.

Scripture is where you will find the knob.

When God says, "Let there be light," there will be light. No amount of darkness has ever stopped the sun from rising. Even the smallest spark of faith is enough for Him to work with. Your "yes," however trembling, has the power to flood darkness with light.

Remember:

It was never the nails that held Jesus on the cross.

The ransom was too high for you to pay yourself.

It was His love for you that held Him there.

Your beliefs shape every action you take. If you believe you are benched, you will never take the shot. But if you believe you were created to step onto the court, you will move boldly.

Ask yourself: Are you moving toward life—or toward death?

There is a one-way ticket to eternity with your name already written on it, freely offered through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But it is still your choice whether or not you will trust the Pilot enough to board the plane.

And when you finally arrive at your destination and are asked to present your ticket, I pray you will not reach for your own wallet in an attempt to pay your way in. Your card will decline, no matter how high you believe your credit score to be.

Heaven is not for those who are good enough.

Heaven is for the perfect.

The perfect are the forgiven.

The cost of perfection is far too great for you to ever carry on your own. I pray you remember that your entry was already purchased long ago by the perfect One who paid in full, the perfect price, Himself.

Your life is of unimaginable value when you consider the worth of the blameless life willingly laid down in place of yours.

Will you choose your own death, or the death of another in your place? There is only One who has truly defeated death.

“I am He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.” Revelation 1:18

Will you see the end as the beginning—the grave as the gateway to life? There is only One whom the grave cannot hold. Enter by the Door, boldly through the Way laid out by His blood.

“I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” John 10:9–10

“Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.” John 11:25

salvation prayer

If God is speaking to your heart, respond to Him now.

“Satan is quite content that we should have faith for future sanctification, just as he was content that we should have faith for future salvation. It is when the soul rises to ‘here and now’ that he trembles.”

—Lilias Trotter

Not tomorrow, not in a week, but now. The biggest lie from the enemy is the promise of tomorrow. You will never regret making this decision to follow Jesus—not now, and not through all of eternity.

“...If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” Romans 10:9-10

It can be as simple as this:

Lord Jesus, I come to You as a sinner. But I thank You that You died the death I deserved and conquered the grave for me, which I could never overcome on my own. Now I can live the eternal life I could never obtain on my own. You took every past, present, and future sin of mine and placed it on Yourself so that I can walk in Your righteousness and Your freedom. Thank you for cleansing me of all my sin. Thank you for now making me a righteous, perfected saint through faith in Your sinless blood. Thank you for transferring me from death into life. Thank you for forgiving me. I pray all these things in Your name. Amen.

Welcome to the greatest life of all. The seed has begun to bud.
You will blossom into all you were created to be!