

BRYAN BORLAND

Selected Poems

Copyright © 2010-2025 by Bryan Borland

Made free for printing, distribution, copying, and sharing
by the author.

Bryan Borland is founding publisher of Sibling Rivalry Press and editor of *Assaracus: A Journal of Gay Poetry*. He is the author of a chapbooks *Tourist* (2018) and *Crow in the Desert* (2025), and four full-length collections of poems, *My Life as Adam* (2010), *Less Fortunate Pirates: Poems from the First Year Without My Father* (2012), and *DIG* (2016), which was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in Gay Poetry and a Stonewall Honor Book in Literature as selected by the American Library Association, as well as *Brotherful* (2025). He is a Catalyze Fellow, a Lambda Literary Fellow in Poetry, and a winner of the Judith A. Markowitz Emerging Writer Award from the Lambda Literary Foundation. He lives in Little Rock, Arkansas, with his husband and any number of animals, tame and feral.

www.bryanborland.com

bryan@siblingrivalrypress.com

BRYAN BORLAND

My Life as Adam

In the beginning, I was the first on Earth
to feel this way, born

from the dust of the ground, the salt
of my father, hungry for graven images of myself,

awakening from shameful dreams
ripping bone from my new body,

a boy carrying mankind's progeny
in sweaty psalms.

In the beginning, I tilled the garden, planting
seeds of normalcy that never grew,

ever-present voices inventing sin,
threats of banishment in booths meant for confession:

it is not good for man
to be alone

when he discovers his soul
is between his legs.

Originally published in *MY LIFE AS ADAM*

BRYAN BORLAND

The Dead Sea Scrolls

I kept them hidden from my mother,
the notes my brother left
in a shoebox under his bed,
mostly from his girlfriends, some
in his handwriting,
undelivered or unfinished.

I knew I was gay
the year that he died.

His room felt the way houses do
when their families leave them,
a cold and quiet winter with
the curtains drawn.

I read every one,
searching for an explanation,
trembling like a three-legged dog
who'd not yet mastered
the new distribution of weight.

Originally published in *MY LIFE AS ADAM*

BRYAN BORLAND

Marks of the Beast

Unpacking the campsite we discovered
with shrugged shoulders the deliberate accident
of one sleeping bag forgotten. Three days of
rain had left the world dirty, our fingers
snailing muddied trails behind everything
we touched. I watched him ignite
the fire, saw the heat coax away clothing
as light melted into a slow-moving pendulum
of purr and prayer. At dawn, when the blaze fell
to ashes and soot and we were boys again,
the cool, gray birth of morning showed us
the marks remaining from hours before,
our bodies tattooed in the night we became tigers,
one stripe for each claw and grasp.

Originally published in *MY LIFE AS ADAM*

BRYAN BORLAND

Sons of Abraham

My grief grows with the years. I count
seventeen Octobers come and gone,

imagine a green-eyed boy
with hair the color of straw,

wooden walls sturdy on branches
long since chopped and used

for firewood. The older I get,
the more aches and pains: a nephew

and a treehouse, these things
my brother would have made.

Originally published in *MY LIFE AS ADAM*

BRYAN BORLAND

Flawed Families in Biblical Times

They're wonderful now but
when I told them I was gay,

my mother demanded God's reasons
for striking her grandchild-bearer dead,
manly loins fertile and righteous impeded
by my barren inclinations, her last straight hope
zooming past as she traveled
the stages of grief from the passenger seat,
my future like a tornado-ravaged town
with collapsed houses on the bodies
of grandsons and granddaughters,
crumpled white picket fences wrapped around the dead who
looked like Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia*.

My father took the proactive approach
and said if I tried I could find a butch woman
with a mustache or a petite little thing,
small-chested, like a freshman,
he could coach me around the bases,
close your eyes, son, and you'll never know.

My grandpa spoke of it
with the hushed words of a repressed war memory,
I was Hitler, I was Mussolini. He saw me
in grotesque scenes with a fat man and a little boy,
pink triangles lost on his sensibilities.

I was Hiroshima aftermath to his peacetime America,
pacific-rim foreign on toes farm-kid strong,
the flag at the post office flying half mast while
taps played solemn and survivors wept.

My grandmother didn't change at all,
stringing me out with sugar and butter creamed together
until I saw visions of her worshiped in another time,
a one-named siren in a bar surrounded by my people,
dirty jokes and colored hair,
God we would have loved her.
I think that homosexuality is genetic,
a decadent recipe passed down to
diabetic queens of the family.
I never went hungry.
Thank you, Grandma.

I still wonder what he'd say, my brother,
who arranged my GI Joes in sexual positions,
who explained biology
with pornographic magazines,
who knew before anyone but left
before I could truly make an appearance.
When we'd play hide and seek as children
I always ended up in the closet.

He would help me out gently.

I think it was a sign.

Originally published in *MY LIFE AS ADAM*

BRYAN BORLAND

Arkadelphia

We lied to our parents
and drove too fast on an overnight trip
to revisit people and places from the limp
and leaning pedestals of his childhood memories.
I helped prop them by listening from
the passenger seat as he told of
what life was like before his parents' divorce, before
Pangea cracked and drifted apart and
distance as he knew it was created.

A hundred and twenty miles at fifteen is continental, when
crossing county lines seems foreign, when
feeling warmth through the holy shroud of tight denim
is enough to inspire acts of self-inflicted arson.

He knew I was in love with him. I'd hand him
painstakingly-crafted letters on folded notebook pages,
sweet words the same as any cheerleader would write to
the High School Golden Boy.

But he was never golden, this one.
He was a tarnished Boy God of sun-soaked skin,
North Carolina eyes, Arkansas tongue.
Southern Colossus chiseled in
Arctic-blue crystal and cloudy onyx,
black hair he or I would push away from his eyes,
black heart that in private pumped lava

just for me. He was
a chest just beginning to define itself,
to define my thoughts and my
slow unfolding.

He was lips wet with spit I craved
and chipped teeth sharp and almost a man.

I remember the moment I acknowledged
I was aroused by thoughts of kissing him,

him,
another he,

when before it had been the
bare bone basics,
sex raw and rough, like boys with dirt-stained knees
wrestling with no hint of softness or intimacy.

My hand moving across
the newness of his pectoral muscles,
it was the same as
two fifteen-year-olds driving
their first hundred miles in the dark.

When we made it,
he showed me his old house
but couldn't remember what he'd really come to see.
One in the morning with nowhere else to go
we parked under an overpass and made
peace with geography.

When he looks back,
I'm sure I'm not the jewel
in the crown of his youth
but for that year
I was his kingdom.
I was his highway and road map.

Originally published in *MY LIFE AS ADAM*

BRYAN BORLAND

The Night We Fight

I think:

I cannot leave him
 because he knew my father,
no man who came after
would.

Originally published in *LESS FORTUNATE PIRATES*

BRYAN BORLAND

How to Grieve

Primordial screams are acceptable.

Remind yourself to eat.

Spontaneous tears in the morning
will last several weeks.

Spontaneous tears at kindness
will last several months.

It will affect you in ways
you do not recognize immediately.

Some days you will not recognize
yourself. The stages are denial,
anger, bargaining,

depression, acceptance,
but they do not come
necessarily in that order.

Do not hold yourself
to impossible standards.

Do not tell yourself
to man up. Do not pretend
you have both legs.

Do not think yourself crazy
for talking to walls.

Expect to lash out
at your spouse. When a stranger
cuts you off on the freeway,
try not to chase her down.

Do not run her off the road.

BRYAN BORLAND

The Lady Chablis

Already I think of her mortality,
this kitten we have rescued
from the silence of your living room.
She was your favorite; because of this,
I have sewn your ghost to her
with thread from salvaged scraps
of the pillowcase I refuse to wash.
You realized, of course, that you named her
after a drag queen, Father. You'd watched
Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil,
and in the minute of decision to feed
the dumpster feline, echolalia christened cat
and it turned destiny for the homosexual son
to become caretaker apparent.
She rests on my chest with no understanding
of what she's lost, what we've gained,
or how my love for you has been transferred,
wordplay I cannot resist
for you taught me humor,
but in my humor, there is sadness:
one day she will leave me, too.
The blacks of her pupils hold
a reflection of me that resembles you.
Father and son, we look the same to her.
That thought is comforting, but fleeting.
Ladies age gracefully, but they age.

Originally published in *LESS FORTUNATE PIRATES*

BRYAN BORLAND

Dream Journal, December 30

We are in the cotton field.
The bridge that killed you is near.
We speak through our eyes. You tell me
it was your brain, and in a flash, I see
that parts of you were poison. Another flash:
a memory of a house I don't know,
my mother and sister are laughing.
I see my older brother's face, golden
with the joy of a child's wait
satisfied. I see you both younger
than I ever knew. And then
we are alone, father and son,
riding in a car through
an Arkansas autumn. I ask
without words if you know
the strength of my love.
Your answer comes like life,
a luminous *yes*.

Originally published in *LESS FORTUNATE PIRATES*

BRYAN BORLAND

What I Want You to Know

We are lucky.
We have mapped our survival
like fortunate pirates.

We have found him in treasure unexpected:
an inherited kitten,
the swale of farmland.

We miss him with a terrible ache
but our lives have fallen back
to the amber grass like leaves tossed in the air.

We've learned taxes and mechanics,
the things made larger
in the sudden absence of a good father.

I asked him
two weeks before he died
What would I do without you?

He said

You'd be okay.

Originally published in *LESS FORTUNATE PIRATES*

BRYAN BORLAND

Weather, This

Dear Bryan the storm is soon
to begin I write not in warning as you
will appreciate the autumn flowers
you always wanted The herb garden fragrant
basil and rosemary you think dead from drought
will come alive again in September
Instead I write to bolt down your bones
scarecrow they turn out to be You already know
the direction of these winds The strange
chill of a home in the beginning of wane
A week from now you will be tucked into bed
by a lover who will stab you in your sleep
You will swim in bloody pools
He will tell you dreams and poems mean nothing

Listen dream this poem
How this rain will grow you
a family How some part of you
remembers the hunger of time smells
the blood sees your prints in the mud We are
powerless to what is by right of nature ours
these lunar pulls these campfires warm you night-
bathed when you'll swim together two
untamable things in the breathing river Your arms
will fold like paper birds around him Your histories
will circle starving beasts soon to eat You'll make
shelter of every crater and scar Every pain
a guide Everything is instinct

Originally published in *DIG*

BRYAN BORLAND

The Kitchen Table Treaty

If this is meant to survive
we must agree now on the terms
of war itself a contradiction as
war by definition tramples lines

Do not say tonight there will be
no war you know armies
gather in all backyards everything
we read can turn against us the poison
ivy you cut from the fence weeks ago
remains in skeleton vines to crawl again

We have to have these conversations
we are not the enemy never
with words as weapons across
the table instead we map the battle
inward days when one or both of us
carries the madness of the other
like a wounded soldier slung across the back

And believe me now there will be madness
when we have promised to end these bodies looking
lived in

So at times our breaths
will smell of the adolescent
dank and semen
the swamps we wade through
when absence makes us not ourselves

You are not yourself
today so I am not myself
but tonight we again will be
ourselves this is
the treaty of attraction
blood from the wrist of marriage
we are human countries you and I
the rules of war between us this:
let's just hold
each other tonight ok?
All night.
No sleep.

Okay.

Originally published in *DIG*

BRYAN BORLAND

Don't Kill the Dead

I'm trying to learn not to kill
the dead in every poem. I've written poems about
my brother's death, an entire book about my father's
death and some days must talk myself
down from the ledge of repetition.
Some days I dam the walls. Some days I
damn the walls and jump into things
I've newly noticed, like how my fluency in
the common language of ghosts has eroded
over time. I rarely dream of them.
When I do, they are background noise,
not the loud songs of myself I heard
as a younger man. The long dead, I'm learning,
become quiet with age. My brother never made it
to this second puberty of silver hair. In my mind
he's a mixture of space and light.
My father doesn't answer when I ask him
how a heart is designed to pump through pain.
He doesn't know. Now
his throat is full of rocks. We're designed
to disappear like this, piece by piece,
the same as our bodies begin to fail
if we make it past a certain point. I'm aging.
The arch of my foot is sore today. I feel
my hinges when I stand. I cannot remember
my brother's voice. The poetry of it
abandons me.

Originally published in *DIG*

BRYAN BORLAND

Lonoke

We both come to this having lived
here all our lives. Only now do we see how breathing

things drop from trees. Mid-afternoon the insects
have white wings, our backyard full of moons.

Last week a ballet of sunset moved into night. Everything
a show. Even your shape is foreign to your eyes.

The V of your abdomen. The rise of your shoulders.
Your muscles reach for me like begonias reach for light.

We've found one another grown in this
half-mowed cemetery grass.

Across the highway are adolescent fields,
bodies on the cusp of gin.

I am the son of a farmer.
You are the son of a mortician.

We grieve like we eat like we kiss
these lantern ways of our American south.

Small towns have their limits. Cars filled
with families pass. Seeing us they think they

understand why I cling to you.
Something has died.

Yes. We buried our dead today.
Now we celebrate our living.

Originally published in *DIG*

BRYAN BORLAND

You, House Martin

Sweetheart we've landed
on a new planet advice column said
never become complacent
so one Sunday after breakfast in a walk in the rain
I said let's move you said let's move
by the next Sunday we had numbers
on Martin Street
worried the renter so much his hair
fell out and we fell in.

Sometimes it feels we're boys
in the trees or playing house
where we take turns being wives
for booze at five or one husband
sending the other out the door
and down the steps with a kiss and
the trail of ants in the morning.

There are things we allow from an old house
a leaky faucet dents in the walls from
the angry years of 1939 or 1957
the light in the kitchen that has no switch
the air is different on Martin Street
the gas stove and her mothering clicks
the bumpers of cars blue and hip
a mix of age these neighbor women
who knew the pantry was full of moths.

Once we were new now we are
ourselves on Martin Street we
itch and kiss we
check the lease for some unknown date
we've our own marks to leave
our grease in the oven handprint on thigh
your fingernails against these walls
my fingernails against these walls.

Originally published in *DIG*

BRYAN BORLAND

Mirror Boys

My husband thinks of his own father's chest
of knowledge and worries he doesn't have the tools to
build a son into being. But I have seen his hands pull
beauty from the barren, roses and stray dogs brought
back to life by the gentle rains from his brow. I know
some day he will make our boy smile by telling of how,
before the animals ever dreamed him, we chose
clothes for his unborn body in a department store
or of the afternoon in the water park when we
pointed at families swimming and invented his knees.
I remember our flight from Boston through a storm,
how he held my hand and asked about my childhood to grant
my mind clemency from the rocking cabin. We were still
stubborn then, getting to know each other, embarrassed
to show the other a single flaw. After an emergency
landing in Texas, I refused to get on another plane and
rented a car to drive the five hours home. He promised to stay
awake next to me but fell asleep against the passing fields,
exhausted from keeping a hundred-ton machine in the air
through will and love for me. My husband worries he will not be
a good father. I fear turbulence and runway fires, everything
that could go wrong. I do not fear nights when our son will cry.
I've heard the songs my husband will sing. I rest easy.

Originally published in *DIG*

BRYAN BORLAND

Summer in America

It's summer in America and no one knows
how high to fly their flag
 or which flag to fly
for our part we have again pledged allegiance
to one another but this isn't a love poem
there are no love poems in America today
only the poetry of necessity of documentation
written at a time when we can make no promises
of life in twenty years or less than that
if our skin is brown or black look back
that same number of years to what the poets
were trying to tell us and who listened
and why we didn't look at the revolutions
that begin when we remember to point
the camera outside ourselves the enemy
of our enemy is our enemy is what they
teach us but what does that camera catch
: the murder in front of our smiling faces
the blood splatter on our shirts
they tried to tell us was decoration

Originally published in *TOURIST*
Also featured in *Children of Grass: A Portrait of American Poetry*
by B.A. Van Sise

BRYAN BORLAND

Chicago

It's a celebration another kind of riot this city needs
nothing of statistics not all marriages end in divorce
the effect of a broken streak is something made stronger
the bar is full of expectation the bed later is full of boys
one of them wears the colors of the hometown team
another wears nothing I wear the colors of a traitor
all blue and red and blue
the only time in eighteen states I share a bed
the entire time I think of you
the entire time I think of you
the entire time
I think of you

Originally published in *TOURIST*

BRYAN BORLAND

Tourist

You research the stage, the venue before the drive
as much to decide what to wear as what to read.
You learn to do this, which part of your body to cover,
what skin to show for the red carpet or the dirt road,
the slow and easy drawl in the baseball cap
or the literati with the queer scruff and bag.
You do this naked or in drag and sometimes
these terms reverse their definitions
depending on your mood or the weather,
depending on the city. Still the pretty girls will always
smile when you say husband
and this is how the world has changed,
though how many times you say it and in what accent
is measured for presentation. Or protection.
In California you're entertainment.
In Mississippi you're education.
There are still freshmen who've never met
a person who is openly gay and writing about it.
This is mostly in the south, in rural schools
with dry counties and curiosities wet with prohibition.
Then there are classrooms full of students who
don't believe in labels at all, or coming out,
each row of desks a different color
on a spectrum they dreamed after you woke.
There are no lines. They all hold hands.
Across the country you change
the game plan on the fly, the set lists,

asking the audiences if they it want it
dirty or if they want it sweet.
No smiles means you're a missionary poet tonight.
Laughter means you might go home with someone,
end up in their bed, one way or another.
Your books on their floor.
Your words in their head.

Originally published in *TOURIST*

BRYAN BORLAND

Buying Groceries with Money from Poems

Someone taught me not to expect money
for this work. Someone taught me to question
whether it is work at all but I rarely do that anymore.
Last night I read poetry for some people.
I signed a few books.
This morning there is money in my pocket.
I've made more in other jobs but can't remember
a thing I ever bought with it. Now
I remember everything: the significance of salt,
of day-old bread softened
with the juice of ripe tomatoes.
My husband loves fresh fruit.
I buy him a bag of the sweetest apples.
Someone taught me not to expect satisfaction.
I want to offer them an apple.
I want to say, *Here. Taste this.*

Originally published in *TOURIST*

BRYAN BORLAND

If You Can Hear This

If you can hear this
 you are the resistance
 you are the underground

there is static in the air
the connection isn't stable
there is talk no longer rumor
of iron walls and white curtains

but if you can hear this
 you are the resistance

get the books you love
you'll need them more than ever
harden your right to memory
you'll need that too
steel your body for the poison
and the antidote
if not bread and water
we must talk in the languages
of poetry and survival

if you can hear this
 you understand

we now must decide what to fight
to protect first

who to hold closest
who to hide

whether to leave the art hanging
in the living room
or bury it for preservation

Originally published in *TOURIST*

BRYAN BORLAND

How to Write This

At night I bury the news like a body.
Like an ax in the back of America.
Come daybreak regretful of my crime,
I let myself know the terrible score
from the arena the night before: everyone
still alive has chosen a side. Each
morning someone I love loses more.
All the poets are dead
because the living are at a loss
for what to say. Everything once certain
is no longer so. An impossible equation.
An incorrect atlas. Entire masses
of continents have broken away.
I ask myself when I look at you how
I would turn these hands to a weapon.
This wedding ring to brass knuckle.
How can this poem protect us; protect
anything we love? We kiss.
Somewhere the explosive is detonated.
Somewhere the trigger is pulled. Another
black man dies. The earth has grown so hot.
Some days I'm done with poetry.
Some days it's the only thing I have.

Originally published in *TOURIST*

BRYAN BORLAND

Lineage

There are things you aren't meant
to understand.

The only brother to survive the war
had twelve children and four generations
later here you are.

Decades ago someone fed a dog
and because of that you have a dog.

You'll never know the woman who
planted the tree but you love her
because she did.

Originally published in *Container*

BRYAN BORLAND

**They Say The Music You Hear at Fourteen
Is the Music of Your Life**

Small town anywhere a mother is
driving her son to the party
because that's where the boy is
the boy that makes him feel like
a bird just out of the nest part clumsy
wing part maple dream when every
little leap might lead to sky where
each Saturday is its own new
season where the lights will
heartbeat bright and deep
and calf will rise against calf where
a song will begin where he'll open
his mouth to sing instead a
timid moment will bloom to power
first lips like the warm wet mouthpiece
of a trumpet he'll remember
that music every first of his life

Originally published in *Lovejets:
Queer Male Poets on 100 Years of Walt Whitman*

BRYAN BORLAND

Husband in the Garden

One hummingbird transformed to nine no longer
just the two of us in the morning a bridge
to the rest of the world
I've walked that bridge in this year
of places let my body be taken
by machine and muscle arriving now
with few regrets I made my choices
sitting here coming to
another day with the sun having been with you
for hours now just beginning to show
itself to me it has seen you kneeling
in the garden I too picture you
replay the years replay yesterday
unsure of what is memory and what was dream
your face before I knew your face
you in the garden thousands of miles away

Originally published in *Crow in the Desert*

BRYAN BORLAND

To Oliver, Not Yet Born

Listen, kid. I'm gonna let you in on a secret
I want you to put in your pocket and carry with you
all your life. You are loved.

Before you are even here, you are loved.
This family loves you before we know anything
about you, before we know the color of your hair,
the sound of your voice, or what the weight of you
feels like in our arms. This family loves you.

And this family will love you as much tomorrow
as it does today, in whatever future you arrive in
and exist in. No matter who you become or how
you grow. This family loves you.

This family loves you no matter the choices you'll make,
the clothes you put on your body or what that body
can or cannot do. We'll love you through
wins and losses, good days and bad, mistakes
and disappointments, through every decision
you make, whoever you love or don't, whatever
you make of this life that is wholly and completely
yours. This family loves you.

Put this certainty in your pocket, kid,
or bury it like treasure. The map to it is in
your heart, in your memory, in the face you'll see

in the mirror none of us have seen yet. Return to it
when you need it. Look yourself in the eyes,
whatever color they are and say it like a magic spell
to summon us around you even when we are not there.
Say these words. Say,

I am loved just as I am.

Originally published in *Brotherful*

BRYAN BORLAND

Selected Poems

Copyright © 2010-2025 by Bryan Borland

Made free for printing, distribution, copying, and sharing
by the author.

If you enjoyed these poems, read more here:

Full-Length Poetry

My Life as Adam (Sibling Rivalry Press)

Less Fortunate Pirates (Sibling Rivalry Press)

DIG (Stillhouse Press)

Brotherful (Sibling Rivalry Press)

Chapbooks

Tourist (Sibling Rivalry Press)

Crow in the Desert (Queer Punk Collective)

As Editor

Assaracus: A Journal of Gay Poetry Issues 1 - 16

Joy Exhaustible: Assaracus Presents the Publishers

Lady Business: A Celebration of Lesbian Poetry

If You Can Hear This: Poems in Protest of an American Inauguration
(All from Sibling Rivalry Press)