

# BRYAN BORLAND

## *Selected Poems*

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Bryan Borland is founding publisher of Sibling Rivalry Press and editor of *Assaracus: A Journal of Gay Poetry*. He is the author of a chapbook, *Tourist* (2018), and three 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. He is 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, the poet Seth Pennington.

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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.

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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

**There Was a Moment of Tenderness**

There was a moment of tenderness  
that returned with the smell  
of the dentist, sterile metal and blood  
and I thought of the foolish night  
he drank his way into a telephone pole,  
the bone of teeth breaking into pieces  
that proved he was handsome even  
in fragments. After his surgery,  
I skipped school to drive him home.  
In the cold, broad daylight the warmth  
of his hand startled me.  
It was the medication talking  
or maybe I misheard  
when he slurred words that made us equals.  
It was weakness when he offered me his wounded smile,  
how I sped from validation,  
and returned us to familiar territory,  
stories of sex with his girlfriend  
while she was on the rag.

Originally published in *MY LIFE AS ADAM*

## BRYAN BORLAND

### **Blood**

I passed time in math class and marching band  
watching handsome Cain relate to handsome Abel  
with nuzzles and punches, memorizing them like  
infallible geometric proofs, following off key to their  
perfectly tuned trumpet and saxophone.

They shared hard features, jagged noses, blue eyes.  
They shared my attention like family. They wore  
birthright uniforms of gold and brown I admired  
with jealous froth at the corners of my hungry mouth,  
only-child quiet and waiting.

When God invented brothers  
he intended for them to be one year apart.  
It pained me to think  
they could destroy one another, that the sun  
could go dark and take along the moon,

I couldn't stand to see something so beautiful collapse  
so I offered myself, my jaw for their fists,  
absorbing their fate so they could survive,  
Cain and Abel, living happily ever after,  
drops of heredity running down my grateful chin.

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

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

### **The Duane Effect**

I buy purple shoes. Duane says they go with nothing so they go with everything. The right and the left are different sizes. Duane talks the clerk into giving me a discount. At the next store I buy a turquoise jacket. Duane says it's mint. He tells me he makes shopping more economical by swapping price tags from cheaper pieces. He's developed a technique. Which means someone someday will pay more for less. I tell him I worry he'll be punched in the face by a stranger. He responds by asking a stranger if she likes to dance. The stranger likes to dance. Duane looks back at me as if this will save him. It probably will. Duane lives with a gay couple. I avoid more shopping by stealing their shirts. Duane is this type of influence. He tells me to take one shirt but I take two. I feel like Duane will appreciate this. I've never met his roommates. They're traveling when we visit. My husband and I sleep in their bed. My husband is my husband because of Duane. Duane sent us into marriage to queer it from the inside. My husband and I fuck in Duane's roommates' bed. I press the underwear I find in the room to my husband's face. I don't know whose they are. We use their lube, too. We do not use their edible body paint.



We cum in their towels and pet their dog. We score free  
whiskey at the Eagle by wearing stolen jock straps.  
Duane is this type of influence. He rents a locker  
to house our pants for a quarter.  
I keep the purple shoes on.  
Duane is right. They go with everything.

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

**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

### **Airplanes**

From my work desk I watch  
the airplanes take off and land.  
Remember at fifteen the first time  
I flew but not the fear which maybe wasn't there.  
At fifteen there was barely the possibility  
of love; that was enough. At fifteen there  
was hardly the possibility of sex either.  
When it did happen, rare as it was,  
it was a crash I survived. Now that I'm older,  
I hate to fly but love to fuck.  
The older I get, the less time I have  
for metaphors.

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### Full-Length Poetry

*My Life as Adam* (Sibling Rivalry Press)

*Less Fortunate Pirates* (Sibling Rivalry Press)

*DIG* (Stillhouse Press)

### Chapbooks

*Tourist* (Sibling Rivalry Press)

### As Editor

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*If You Can Hear This: Poems in Protest of an American Inauguration*

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