

# THIN PLACES

PORTRAITS, PRAYERS, & LIMINAL GRACE

*selected essays*



ARTHUR THOMAS LEE 

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# WORDS



ONLY A HANDFUL OF TIMES, REALLY, HAVE I BEEN AT A LOSS FOR WORDS. FOUR of those *times* sit with me around the dinner table most nights and call me “Dad.” That, though, in time, will change. One fewer place setting at the table, I mean. One less chair hastily pulled out. Then another. And another. It is already changing, in fact. Their unique points of departure are already set, their first steps along a different path, so many paths, already underway.

But I remember still the moment between breaths in which each one was born. How they came out of their mother’s womb, one part after another, like a complex sentence forming—slimy, naked, and gray but then (after two sets of screams) ruddy, beautiful, and hungry. Their unblemished bodies made up of so many lines and, as it seemed, various points of punctuation: parentheses, periods, and exclamations (yep, definitely a boy!). And their eyes—as they first opened (just barely) to let in the light—like apostrophes, making them mine. Not to overlook all that white space in between. So much room in the margins for life to leave its mark. So much room on which they too, eventually, would leave their own marks, for better or worse. And I remember too how their tiny mouths almost immediately began a relentless search for vowels (*A* and *E*, of course, then *I.O.U.*). And how their fingers began to unfold, slowly, so very slowly, reaching for the consonants as if they were among the constellations. And then, in the air, last of all, this wish upon one of those stars, this unspoken pleading from their heart: *fiat experimentum in corpore purus*. Let the experiment be done on the body pure.

I knew little about being a dad. And compared to those preceding me on the path of fatherhood, I still know very little. I knew next to nothing about what it would exact from me, how these children who once fit in my shaky hands would challenge and change me. I could not comprehend the bitter and the beauty that awaited, nor the discouragement and the delight—yes, above all, the delight, the delight, the delight. They have been my refiner's fire, sure. But more than that, they have been my Balm of Gilead. They have been my guiding cloud by day, and by night, my burning pillar for light.

Among all the words I've ever written, among all the words I ever will, my four boys are the greatest. And though I wrote them in a flurry, and though I often beg for chances at revision, I have been reading them ever since, each time as if new and untouched. One day, they too will make and then bring a child into the world. One day they too will hold him or her in their shaking arms, and I, in turn, will hold my child while he is holding his—that story within a story within a story. And we will once again, the three of us, be at a loss for words.

To that end, in this the beginning, what is true for books is true for people; the deeper you go, the better you will understand them. And even though you won't always be able to rightly articulate what exactly it is you do understand—about the person or yourself or the situation or the words spoken but especially those left unspoken—you will feel deep down that what you have read and consequently come to comprehend between the lines is of great importance. That it not only *can* change lives but *will* change lives, yours and mine among them. Let it be so. Or, in other words: Amen.

mid-desert surrounded by  
sage—these, our teachers

# ALL AGOG

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I DON'T RECALL DOING IT. NOR DO I RECALL THE FEELING OF DIRT ON MY bottom. But my mom tells the story, and she says it happened. She says I was almost three years old. She says it was spring, and I stepped from kitchen to deck, resolute in my sudden march toward this little garden plot near the back of our yard. She says she watched from the kitchen window, befuddled, as I proceeded to pull down my pants then plop my bare bum over that same patch of freshly turned soil near the fence line. She says she was all agog.

“Agog” is a funny word. Growing up, my mom said a lot of funny things like that. Like “Oh, my stars and garters.” Or “discombooberated” instead of “discombobulated.” In this case, she might have used or felt all three. As for me, I just felt dirt. And maybe, I’m guessing, a burgeoning sense of satisfaction being as one with nature as I was in that early attentive moment.

Mary Oliver said, “Attention is the beginning of devotion.”<sup>1</sup> Brian Doyle said that “all stories are, in some form, prayers,”<sup>2</sup> “prayers of terrific power.”<sup>3</sup> And if both of those are true, we can likewise deduce that attentiveness is also the beginning of powerful stories. Thoreau, in so many words, exhibited these ideas too. But I wonder if he ever felt the need to flatten with his fanny the soft silt around Walden Pond.

“Arthur,” my mom says she asked, “what are you doing?”

“I take my pants down,” she says I said.

“Yes, I see that,” she says she responded. “But why?”

Came forthrightly my reply, perhaps having, even at two, an *au natural* grasp on the aforementioned principles: “I want to know how mud feels on my

bare bum.”

Of course. How stupid to ask. Because why not? And who, by two years of age, has not wondered this very thing among the other questions surrounding life’s mysteries?

Who am I?

Where did I come from?

Where do we go after we die?

And what does dirt feel like when pressed by one’s posterior?

To that end (not my rear end), I’m still trying to figure out my purpose and who it is I really am. I don’t know with any concrete certainty where I came from before earth either. And I can’t really say where we will go after our time on this planet. Those things are a matter of faith. I’d like to think I’ve got, in total, a good eighty or ninety years surrounded by those I love and the ones who love me back, but I don’t even know that. All I know, without shadow, is that I have got today, that I am here right now; and that you are here right now; and that guy over there, he is here now too; and that gal right in front of you is here now; and so too are those kids outside, the ones making a ruckus, as are the ones sitting in quiet observation, they are also all here right now. And that’s a whole lot of “now.” So, what are we going to do with it? Or, more poetically put by Mary Oliver, “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”<sup>4</sup> As if in reply: “In wildness,” wrote Thoreau, “is the preservation of the world.”<sup>5</sup> So, “live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of the earth.”<sup>6</sup> I like to think he scribbled that lasting line while sitting outside in the altogether, if you will, in his own sunlit garden.

That’s all I was doing by placing cheek, as it were, to Mother Earth’s cheek. I was simply resigning myself to the influence of the land from which things grow, not least of all our imaginations and our understanding and the stories that follow. Now, as for the answer to what dirt feels like when wrapped around one’s derriere . . . well, I guess that is for me to know and you to find out.

And that, in a manner of speaking, is my prayer. Not that you, like two-year-old me, will drop your drawers and lie naked in the soil, but that we, in our attentiveness, will drop instead what we are doing, and maybe our pretenses too, and not only “catch stories”<sup>7</sup> or “shards of light,”<sup>8</sup> as Brian Doyle

used to say, but not be afraid either to lay them bare when we do. And that we will refrain from disdain or disregard when others lay bare their souls before us too, choosing instead to be attentive and agog (which is still a funny word but the right one to use here)—agog at the liminal grace behind our dusty, disparate, at-times-discombobulated, but ever-delightful diurnal journeys, at which end, I believe, we will all earn our *stars* and our *garters*, those highest honors only a king can bestow. Amen.

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Of this misnomer, the  
Lesser Goldfinch says:  
I'm more than my size

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