

HYMN CALIFORNIA

adam gnade

part 5 of 12



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Born and raised in San Diego, California, Adam Gnade enjoys swimming in rivers and lakes, driving at night, and drinking red wine out of mason jars. He currently lives in Portland, Oregon with two rescued pit bulls and considers himself a better than average shot with a Remington shotgun. This is his first book.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE NEW SONGS OF PRAYER

How do you beat feeling helpless and small? How do you transcend obscurity? How do you keep from going bitter and losing your way like all the rest? Is there good in all people or is humanity the worst virus Earth's known? The sign is in the sky. It looms over electric lines, over fences in farmland, over cloud canopies dark with rain, over skyscraping buildings, over planes and birds and monument stone and it reads, "Keep going."

SONG OF PRAYER

The crag fog and chill mornings of American towns with lakes, their rough blue waters ruffled by noon, the steel girdered suspension bridges that cross them, over Columbia River Gorge, Kansas River, or Lafayette, rock-lined and freezing, fisherman in ski jackets at their banks.

East Coast, aching in dawn. West Coast, soft and golden at dusk.

Let's get healthy. Let's sleep off hangovers. Let's line our window sills with plants, then leave them to die. Let's see everything and not forget anything.

Don't forget our friends on highways or on white-washed board porches in Portland, in hotel parking lots in gray dawn of rest stops, in grizzled chin of restroom, in drizzly street of Graceland wandering for Southern grace, or on freeways of all-night driving. In records they sing their blues, in books they will write behind thick-lid eyes of early morning terrors shitting out hollowed shit bowels and groaning sick with cigarette and shoes, no socks. Don't forget those road-driving lunatics alone on holidays.

SONG OF PRAYER

Don't mistake cigarette head-rush for clarity, brother. Don't mistake wine buzz for brilliance, sister. The sunset over purple mountains in Virginia looks like cold sunrise in California.

We're not free of this world. Let's go down to the well together. Let's talk quiet and remember our families. Let's talk quiet and remember every birthday party we ever had, the scream and cry of gulls overhead in beach parks with our cakes and streamers under blazing hot sun.

Let's lie still in grass pastures and want for nothing. Let's mend our tattered suit jackets and pants, our clothes like coffin rags and ragged. Let's lay our traps where we've always wanted them laid.

Let's shine the chrome of big-finned American cars then comet ourselves across the great raw divide.

SONG OF PRAYER

Emblazon your path on Earth's snow-white belly. The shiver of milk fat, the promise of rest and sanctity. You can go anywhere you want, you can ignore the rules of money. You can stand on one coast and you can race to the next. You can run all your days but not find

the Promised Land.

But you don't understand—what you hide from can *save* you! Look not for wisdom in your demons! Everything you do is because you're *afraid!* You want to be led beside calm waters, but you have doubts. You apologize and sweat and yank out your hair and eat pills, comb the bookstores for answers, listen hard at night and hear nothing but hard silence—or crickets, the rain beating on your windshield.

And you can run away again, this time to Virginia and redemption on Civil War battlegrounds, now green grassed fields like golf courses and trees that diminish in the distance.

Where next? Where will you go when your time runs out? Go find solace on rainy Brooklyn corners, in tall weeds and gray crushed-roof farmhouse of Kansas. A wrong-headed alien in Seattle's frozen sludge streets.

Sleep all day and make another record in crumbling Victorian Portland. To cocaine and cold hands in fake-rich Chicago, to soft sigh of red sunset and whiskey drinks in Florida, baptized in a thousand iced cricks with a thousand iced crick names.

Or sit now on gray dock boards in Norfolk and stare into oil-slicked harbor bay, the tug boats and trawlers creeping out to find bounty in dark tossed waters.

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

“Well shit, you stupid homo, at least punch yourself in the face before you leave,” said Mike Morris. He got up in Sean’s face and began to chant, “Punch yourself in the face! Punch yourself in the face.” Morris looked around the room, frantic, grinning, waving his hands up like a preacher, flapping his arms like a bird, trying like hell to get the rest of us in on the game. “Punch yourself in the face! Punch yourself in the face!”

Sean, though drunk and crazy minutes before, now looked sadly around the room and down at Morris, who was hopping from foot to foot, chanting and dancing. “Punch yourself in the face! Punch yourself in the face!”

“Aw, no, man, I don’t ... Morris ... I don’t wanna do that again, Morris.”

“Punch yourself in the face! Punch yourself in the face!” Morris continued, but it was clear that Sean wasn’t going to punch himself in the face this time. “Alright, alright,” Morris conceded, “at least tell your cat story before you go. Frankie wants James and Bethany to hear the cat story.”

“I do. Tell the cat story for James and Bethany, pleeease,” begged Frances.

“Okay, the cat story before I leave.”

“Yes! Yes!” hissed Morris, falling down on the couch next to Frances’ cousin Bethany and slapping her thigh hard and loud to which she yelled “Fucker!” and pushed him away.

“This’s gonna be good,” said Morris, intently trying to light a cigarette with a lighter that wouldn’t spark.

Jude and David came in from outside, taking their coats off. Frances sat down on the couch opposite me.

Sean stood in front of us, looking back and forth, sizing up his audience, and struggling to get his words. He had a stuttering speech problem we suspected came from a medication the Navy had him on. David had told me all about it: a neck jerk followed by Sean grunting “guh! guh” like a robot malfunctioning.

But tonight, he was composed, much to David’s dismay, who sat back on the couch, his eyes glittering with joy, whispering, “Do it, do it, say ‘guh guh,’” under his breath. But the speech impediment was gone, and so was the punching himself in the face. Like a switch flicking off, from that night on, Sean was calm and sweet, a caring, clear-headed boy scout, the kind of guy that would do anything for his friends.

“I hope none of you likes cats and if you do I’m sorry but, alright so these two guys from the ship, two friends of mine, and they are crazy motherfuckers ... named Stalker and Winterbottom ...”

“Stalker and WINTERBOTTOM?!” laughed Jude, “Those were their *names*?!”

“Yeah, Stalker and Winterbottom, I dunno, they were some weird guys. Real weird. Anyway, they came back from an underway, got off the ship, bought some booze, and were driving around Norfolk one night and suddenly a cat runs out in front of the car and WHAM, y’know, they *hit* it.”

Nervous laughter rippled the living room.

“They get out and they see this cat over on the sidewalk, just goin’ CRAZY, jumping around and hopping and flipping, and Stalker’s like, ‘Man, that poor thing. It’s dying. We gotta put it out of its misery.’ So, Winterbottom opens the trunk and grabs the tire

iron, goes over to the sidewalk, and beats the cat's head in and kills it. So, they're standing around, don't know what to do, get all embarrassed and throw the cat and the tire iron in the trunk."

"What?!" says David. "This isn't the cat story I know! I thought this was the story where Karl hid in the bushes and jumped out and punched a cat?"

"No, no. Just hold on. So, they drive off looking for somewhere to toss the dead cat. Then they go buy cigarettes and then, like, they forget about the cat. So, little later they're driving and looking for this party they were supposed to go to. All of a sudden a cop pulls up behind them and flashes his lights. They pull over. Turn off the car. Cop comes over to the car and is like, 'Did you guys run over a cat tonight?' Stalker he says, 'Yeah, we were driving back there and yeah, we hit it. The body's in the trunk. Wanna see it?' The cop's like, 'Uh, please step out of the vehicle.' The cop walks Stalker around to the front of the car, and there, mashed up in the grill, is a cat. A dead cat, but a *different* dead cat. Stalker doesn't know what to think. He goes over and opens the trunk and the cat they killed is still in there, but now there's another one smashed up in the grill."

"Stalker and Winterbottom," laughed Jude.

"Cop's like, 'We got a report from the owner of these two cats who said she'd let them out to play in the front yard and from the kitchen window while she was doing dishes she sees one of them run out into the street and get hit by your car. Then she sees you get out of the car, walk over to her OTHER cat, the one that was still alive on the lawn and club it to death with a tire iron and throw that one in the trunk and drive off.' That's what the cop told 'em. So, they killed the first cat, saw the other one, which was just being playful and friendly, thought it was the one they'd hit, and killed that one too, with the owner watching the whole thing happen."

No one knew what to say. Sean smiled shyly and walked back into the kitchen to get his jacket and keys.

"Jäger-bombs, y'all!" screamed Morris, jumping up from the couch and bounding into the kitchen. "Who's with me?! James?! C'mon! Jäger-bombs!" He was already in the kitchen pouring shots of Jägermeister and popping open Red Bulls.

I got up and followed Morris.

FOOTBALL SEASON IS OVER

We'd only been living in Virginia for a few weeks when the old war-horse killed himself. We got the news and Frankie cried. Jude was asleep in the other room, so we talked in low voices and stepped out on the porch to leave phone messages for our sleeping friends back in San Diego; bad news they'd get in the morning, but we figured they should hear it from us first.

Later, Frankie baked oatmeal cookies without eggs or butter. One of those was for our friend. Now, two weeks later, it's in a Ziploc bag that has his name written across it in Sharpie.

Plan is to bury it in the woods or in the swamp. For weeks I've been reading up on hoodoo rituals, old slave magic, the politics and policies of shushing evil spirits and sending someone where they need to be, unencumbered by unwanted ghosts.

BUILDING FAMILY

Sometimes I realize I'm preaching and it makes me feel like a cult leader or some flimflam artist and it sours my whole day. Visiting Frankie's dad and step-mom in Kansas, Frankie and I try to talk her sister Sadie into moving out to Norfolk with us. She's depressed and can't take San Diego anymore, so we lay it on hard, giving her our standard party lines, presenting all the bits of enlightenment's golden yolk—what we've found of it anyway. Simple stuff. About how you don't have to do anything you don't want to and all it takes is a choice and one first step. Or how you don't have to play by the rules of money and how you can live outside the lines of society, buck consumerism, vote with your dollars, follow your desires above all, live by your wits, live off the land and in the moment. We tell her this is all easy stuff she probably knows already and that being happy is more willpower than anything.

But it starts to get to me and I begin to think we're fooling ourselves, that all of this is just us being selfish and lazy and not wanting to do things that don't please us, that we're not actually operating under new philosophies and that we're just decadent and self-centered. There is a special kind of guilt that comes along with second guessing and in that instant my confidence dries right up and I feel raw and bare and clumsy.

Frankie's still talking and now Sadie's crying and telling us how miserable she is and how all she wants to do is sleep. Frankie has me tell Sadie about crazy Mike Morris and about Sean's Stalker and Winterbottom story and she brightens up and laughs when they find the second cat. Soon all is good again.

The three of us sit downstairs in Frankie's dad's library and tell stories. Sadie's are all about her friends finding people to buy them booze or hanging out down at the base and picking up marines. Frankie's are about Jude and the sailor kids in Norfolk and how our other friends, the ones in California, think soldiers are nothing but Right Wing baby-killers and how the sailors are just like anybody you'll meet anywhere. We give Sadie our adventures and it's just what she needs.

Soon it's settled. Frankie and I will head back to Norfolk in two weeks. Sadie will meet us out there a month later. We tell her we'll take care of her, make sure she's fed and has some way of getting around town, and introduce her to Sean, who we think she'll like.

We celebrate by going upstairs and filling an oversized coffee mug with rum and coke and passing it around 'til we're glowing drunk. Sadie laughs easier now and looks flushed-faced and younger, all sad eyes, braces, freckles, and blonde girlish hair.

I realize then that I wasn't pitching or preaching. I was trying to help this person I love and that all this talk Frankie and I do is just to keep everybody nearby since our time here is so short and all this living brutal and filled with loss and blind fighting and disappointment.

Can't we all just hole up together with the people that we love and stay put a while and be domestic and safe and lock ourselves indoors while the world goes to hell outside?