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April 14, 2015

Crown of Planets

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An abstract of  
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
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## Abstract

### Crown of Planets

By Christopher Rhett Henry

*Crown of Planets* is a collection of poetry that takes up as its question: what happens after the tragedy? My work is interested in extreme emotional experiences felt because of, or in the aftermath of, personal trauma. My thematic palette spreads to religious authority, gender, domestic abuse, death, working class experiences, and the ways in which art and meaningful relationships develop, not merely as reactions to traumas, but also as a way to actively resist and remake the world. A shifting "I" inhabits multiple speakers, including an alien abductee, delirious lovers, devil worshippers, and stressed-out few minimum wage workers. By treating these subjects and their concerns with the utmost seriousness, I try to develop, in the manner of William Blake or Tracy K. Smith, a collection that inhabits its own world and operates on its own principles. A witch bemoans a bourgeois god's breaking and entering; the last man in a post-apocalyptic Rome surveys his ruins; a young, monkish antique dealer gains enlightenment; a television recounts the horrific birth of the universe. Blending together lyric, narrative, and contemplative poetic styles, *Crown of Planets* is an experiment in tonal alteration and formal play. It is my attempt to generate a properly focused collection that remains in constant motion across emotional and poetic intensities.

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## Acknowledgements

To my mom, Sherry: my first friend and the first great storyteller.

To my grandmother, Diane Aughtry: for your spooky demeanor and attunement to the strange.

To my aunt, Pandora Golden: for the occult books I would pour over during visits.

To Kevin Young: for your counsel, time, and lucidity. This project is a testament to what I have learned under you.

To Molly Brodak: for your friendship and mentorship, without whom this project would not be possible. A poem knows what the universe knows: it all ends in an image.

To Wendy Farley: for showing me what I knew in my heart was true of a Christian.

To Marsha P. Johnson: for showing me what a person could be, and who I can be.

To Ryan Conn, Lauren Radford, Kelly Chen, and Jorge Lumbreras: for the bedrock upon which I have built myself since I was 15.

To Steven Wright: for living with me through hell and back.

To Priyanka Krishnamurthy: for your wisdom, joy, understanding. For endless nights across deserted highways.

To Ben Crais: for your partnership in this ridiculous mess.

To Alexa Cucopulos: for teaching me how to be mischievous.

To Anusha Ravi: for spurring me to build a garden within myself.

To Bobby Weisblatt: for your hollering, such hot hollering.

To Harrison Farina: for instructing me in gentleness, and lending me your Barnard translation of Sappho.

To Sarika Joglekar: for your vigor and your good spirit. For good conversations.

To Erik Alexander: for your centeredness, your clear vision.

To Nick Bradley: for your good sense for play.

To those who have not been named but are held in the deepest affection.

To those who are not yet born: these poems belong to you.

## Table of Contents

### **Fires in the Vineyard**

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| Moving Days                         | 2  |
| Meditating Near the Osborn Railyard | 4  |
| Son of a Preacher Man               | 5  |
| Science Fiction                     | 6  |
| Child Surgeon                       | 7  |
| Fly Me to the Moon                  | 8  |
| All the Hits                        | 9  |
| Fortune Tellers                     | 10 |
| Venusberg                           | 11 |
| Ransacked                           | 12 |

### **Holofernes**

|                     |    |
|---------------------|----|
| Young Prayer        | 14 |
| Annunciation        | 21 |
| Saturnalia          | 22 |
| When the Cops Come  | 23 |
| Among the Sculptors | 24 |
| Jupiter Whistles    | 25 |
| Sabbath             | 26 |
| Duet                | 27 |
| Earned the Crown    | 28 |
| On Brutalism        | 29 |

### **Crowns into Plowshares**

|                        |    |
|------------------------|----|
| Garden                 | 31 |
| Exorcism               | 32 |
| Antiqueland            | 33 |
| A Bigger Splash        | 34 |
| The Beauty of Surfaces | 35 |
| Tapestry Torso         | 36 |
| Military History       | 37 |
| The Good News          | 38 |
| Aubade                 | 40 |

# Fires in the Vineyard



## Moving Days

Three days before splitting  
the palm reader told me  
*You're leaving town soon.*

I tipped her,  
got sidetracked  
on the way back,

wasted gasoline  
on a couple country roads  
worth of bitterness

towards this rich hick hellhole  
where I served out my exile  
with good behavior—

what a waste!  
Our neighbors,  
all assholes,

could use a hassling,  
a leery weirdo crisscrossing  
on long walks in the off-hours

of any given Wednesday.  
I never visited the nearest park,  
but from the street it looked like sin

in a swampland.  
It flickers with the image  
of the park back home,

the old home,  
which also looked like sin  
with even worse parking.

The patchy green and mud,  
old red soil, thick and wicked,  
packed up around yellowjacket nests.

Dig, and things start crawling,  
but I pull back, back out  
of the gas station and go home

to pack. A ghostswarm of hands  
square up boxes, fill trash bags,  
peel up rugs.

The smooth spaces of my room  
are littered with garbage truths  
that leave me filling filthy.

How did I live in such gunk?  
Under the first few layers  
of stuff, we found our photo albums,

chewed up by the generations  
of spiders who now made it a grave.  
It was charismatic,

this big, maudlin  
*Fuck You*, an image too rich:  
my shaken taste for metaphor

replied in kind,  
told the symbol  
to *Get the fuck off my body*

and grabbed a pair of gloves  
to pick through remains.  
Alack! I lived on fast food

shoved in with dusty hands  
on the off hours of moving days,  
hustled house-to-house

in the hateful July heat.  
The new house was in the old town:  
sweating in the same places

I used to sweat.  
Delirious, thirsty and tired,  
there was a film

over everything,  
every surface made of plastic,  
made tangible, chemical.

## **Meditating Near the Osborn Railyard**

About ten times a day, about eight times a night  
you heave and you drag past the warehouses  
and the missile defense contractors.

It is healthy for me  
in this industrial hell.

Even when I scorch my eyes out  
with grime and crystal  
I see the way you shake.

Diesel Machine, you make yourself known  
but turn your face from mine.  
I learned this back in bible school,  
the mark of holy things.

## Son of a Preacher Man

Heading west on extenuating circumstances I detour at Birmingham  
and now I'm visiting friends in Memphis.

I'll show around 4 or 5 and start sending out nets at the next  
gas station. Feted as a PYT, I'm cheered across drinking spots  
when somehow or another we're at a hacky karaoke night  
and I'm feelin' all sorts of smeared by this point. I don't quite recollect it  
how I got myself in such fine eyeshadow before all this  
and I'm a real beauty, don'tcha think?

Now you're a real pretty young man, far back as I figure it,  
and I dovetailed into this,

but I'm really hitting those old record coos. Uncertainties slip  
cuz what's unsure is the how but the what's all settled:

I'm gonna flirt my way into that friend's head and you're gonna make a treat outta me.

Come on, kiss me Tennessee, lemme get a lil dusty for ya,

Tell me what's what. I'm a sultry drunk.

Every maneuver moan mechanism is mine for the learning, yours  
for the morning.

## Science Fiction

My doctor tells me I was born like this,  
how I'm a mess just through and through,  
a handful of melted wires.

Therapy sessions dig up the memory  
of how much fucking money I wasted  
on these therapy sessions.

The social worker told me  
I'm *near* high-functioning,  
*There is nothing to worry about.*

My medical reports require  
suspending disbelief, its tense plot  
in an alien land— a trash novel.

## Child Surgeon

Your man, Abe, sleazy stringbean of a Marine,  
took me out while you were drunk  
to show me how to chop wood.

A splinter the length of his hand  
launched from my crooked swing,  
his mid-calf sliced at the strangest angle:

you could barely see the bone. He filled  
a crystal bowl with rubbing alcohol, found  
our button repair kit, told me

the body is unfit for broad needles  
and thick thread. He positioned himself  
on the kitchen counter, urged

me to make the repairs. I pierced him  
and he let go of a Baptist holler,  
which didn't wake you, and told me

*Stopping now will make things worse.*  
I was told and I believed, pulled string  
across the wound, sanitized my tools

and my smooth fingertips.

**Fly Me to the Moon**

*after Astrud Gilberto*

Not the Sinatra rendition:  
warm bossa nova swinging

from your phone speakers  
while Saturday light climbs

through my eyelids, your lean  
when kissing me. I'm whispering

in my aunt's perfume, *in other words*  
*hold my hand*. You grin

and tell me to speak up—  
my manner of making

me be desired. Knuckles  
in the grass, *spring is like*

*on Jupiter and Mars*  
when you're kissing me.

You project me across surfaces  
of the sky, make me sweet

thick nectar, *darling kiss me*  
in delirious humidity.

## All the Hits

While clearing the house out, I found them under a bed.  
It felt just pious, me digging through your cassettes.

Springsteen, Rogers, Fleetwood Mac, the guitar music,  
scatters of the old music run through the cassettes.

In the backseat of the car when a swear came in—  
the foppish riot of listening to your cassettes.

Everything goes down to Goodwill tonight,  
but I might can save a couple of these cassettes.

Do you remember the trip to the good state lake?  
The torn up mixes, passing days on your cassettes.

Making myself strong, I heave up my backpack.  
Like Christ 'cross the river, I will carry your cassettes.



## Fortune Tellers

The one good thing  
about our ratty-ass duplex  
is reading tealeaves  
on the patio  
with you.

You set the water on the stove  
and I clean out our two cups.  
We sit in the dawnlight and stir,  
I predict your bad customers  
and screams from the day manager.

You tell me sweeter things, about a big tip,  
how my song will come on the store PA,  
and I know you want to cheat the reading  
when that forehead crinks up.

**Venusberg**

I thought it was a drifter  
who forced the door.

Turns out, some practical god  
canters in, dimmed the light  
and made this his new holy place.

Typical! I run out for a lotto ticket  
and some fuck with 20 eyes  
thinks he can set up shop.

His morals were nothing but good sense,  
covered decency, taxes, marriage, love, commerce, death, war,  
and worst of all

wisdom. Wisdom!  
What use could I have  
of his sacred wisdom?

I beat him out the house with my broom  
and threw my attack cat at the oracle.  
Why can a witch not live

without practical gods showing up?

## Ransacked

But I could be so much worse.  
Everything will seem trinkets  
when I know  
what remains to be known.

Run through the streets  
while breaking up mosaics.  
I pull out spools of copper,  
collect handfuls of glass.

I fashion myself a crown of planets.  
Venus a halo from ear to ear,  
the Rings of Saturn jangle like eyes  
and direct up to a Neptune jewel.

I'm cannibalized by plaster,  
my insides hard and smooth  
to seal away the brickwork  
of unskilled hands.

I survey my grounds,  
cook spiders  
on fires  
of violent Bible paintings.

It's a princely thing  
to rule a Roman ruin.  
Rats credit to the fountains  
a long and artful life.

## Holofernes

## Young Prayer

I

Lights come through one window  
and I raise my torso up  
offering *why why why why why why*  
with upturned palms, head split up  
with six tongues, six visions  
of a dim night, low long light  
of six dizzying red suns  
counting off cycles  
along the rim of the earth.

I grab the horizon  
and wear it as my halo,  
I become my young prayer—  
six weird verses grow out  
into six strange faces.

In the dim long night, why,  
a monstrosity can  
weave garments, fashion rings  
of light for what comes next.

II

There is a rider after me—  
I hear the scrape of claws  
on frozen soils.

Palaces erect themselves  
along ultraviolet rivers  
in the violent arctic sky.

Demons crack belts, six licking  
to tempt, to dominate  
and consecrate.

## III

I need my rings of light  
to navigate this graveyard.  
I'm digging up old skulls  
to bake a bread of bone.

Even monstrosities  
hunger, need warmth  
in the belly.

And I'm spreading fossil marrow  
to cover my tracks.

Leather and feathers grow out my back  
to weave me a pair of wings.

Quick encampment, then dawn carries me  
to the plateaus of young prayer.

**IV**

When I cast the young prayer  
angels climb into my DNA.

My body fills up with mansions  
because the world cannot be home.



## V

Three days ago I settled in a clearing  
    facing northwest  
while my wings tear through, my nerves  
    exposed and stinging in the wind  
when— the rider has come for me.

The rider calls me by name; *Here I am.*  
I hear my crime, the sin of young prayer.

Tearing my wingbone from my back  
    I bury the hatchet in his head.  
Ultraviolet blood flows the wound— wrap my cracking feet and march to the sea.

## VI

Horseshoe crabs nip my ankles,  
toes cut up on shore glass  
and thorny shells.

My rings of light have led me,  
and lead me still to the river mouth.

I massage myself with rich muds  
and beat away flies  
with fragrant reeds.

And it stays warm near the ocean.

## VII

I build my palace of fabric,  
as the seamstress did.

A chorus of bloody hands  
shake out little suns of dust  
that glow in the hotlight.

I take the horizon from my head  
and break it up around me.

I ran so long, that I may:

let my long hair down,  
say grace with six faces,  
hang rings as chandeliers  
to light my woven mansion.

A young prayer splits from my palms.

## Annunciation

There's a numbers station broadcasting  
forty miles outside town;

my uncle's shortwave radio  
picks it out of the sky.

A dusty note above the workbench  
lists three frequencies and a message:

*learn nato alphabet*  
*why gong chimes sometime??*

The first night, I tried to focus,  
rubbed out my eyes,

slept on the garage couch.  
The second night—

I snuck away the coffeepot  
after aunt went to bed alone.

My thin shirt was drafty.  
When I came back with a jacket

from upstairs the voices poured out.  
*1-3-4-4-1-6-6-4-6-4-2*

The fourth night me and aunt  
went out to a movie.

The sixth night I was hypnotized,  
fell off the stool, banged my head.

Under the bench was a broke lockbox  
with filled little notepads

and a thick pamphlet  
on the nature of radio.

**Saturnalia**

I'm propped on a plush endpillow  
while three talking heads  
blare against the kitchen radio.

You and our hosts  
swap silly gossip songs  
over an unseasoned pot

of stewing fatty beef.  
Wine flows while

my epileptic mouth  
remains dry  
and sealed.

## When the Cops Come

Mother, mother,  
you won't get hit  
tonight.

They cut through your husband's lie  
that we were dealing, saw him  
for an idiot from out west

with a bone to pick.

I packed til 4 AM  
saying young prayers  
to my basement wall.

The cops told you and me to *Cool it,*  
*stay out of his way, find a new home*  
*soon.* No shit!

I prevented his fists

so he called the cops on us.  
Reaganite golden boy,  
the spoiled prick. What has that man done

when I wasn't around?  
But there was no time to panic.  
Need to lawyer up,

get a rental, get out of here.

## Among the Sculptors

Bruised skin as resistance.

Molecules crack me,  
the curves are brittle,  
eroded, eroding—  
this fleshy stack of concrete.

Stone radiates from the earth.

## Jupiter Whistles

Opening eyes, I'm shredded  
by blaring radiation.

Noise pours onto me.  
A dead arm regrows.

I rupture off the sofa,  
fall flat in terror.

It's 3 AM and space ants  
crawl across the screen.

Dinner, then tidying,  
a movie, then bed.

Harsh broadcast whirs  
stirred my aching belly.

My tongue is swollen  
in a velvet mouth.

Walls glow in the spacelight,  
my skin is grayed and green.

The television pours screams from the Big Bang.



**Sabbath**

What use could I find in a proper god? I'm crafty, I require  
a faun, a jackal, some chartreuse demon  
prepared to meet me in the wilderness or a Jersey harbor.

A gaudy cross in the sky, an army of Romans:  
holy words carried with arrows.

I predict a lifetime of cave visions, palms of olives pressed to my eyes,  
oil squeezing down my cheek. I'll roll myself into a scroll,  
sealed away with a band of devil worshippers in northern California.

I need a god who gets impractical, giving secrets to the bees  
and serpents, who tempts the dizzy preachers.

**Duet**

Everything will fold together  
like it's one thing,  
as though your whole body  
became one aching belly,

a few drinks too many  
at the séance,  
which some took  
as an insult.

Do you fear imperious things?  
Will you close in  
and speak softly to me?

Come, take the palm leaves from me.  
Unburden me. The day was long,  
the sun made a secret of me.

### Earned the Crown

A couple of twenties, and the sheets  
I'm wrapped in, too. Reading Sappho  
with the flood of streetlight, feeling

stoned, alone and wanting love  
all over. I can trust my mutant body,  
the abrupt way it moves: the moon et up,

me as a moth. The plastic crown  
I took from work slides  
on the side of my face, hangs

at the right, feeling fun, free, sleazy.  
I lay on my side, flip on the clock radio,  
listen to the night mystic on 89.3,

engine block popping three streets over.  
I fix my crown, stand on the bed,  
kiss the grain of a sandalwood cross.

## On Brutalism

Iron vines go deep in the concrete,  
rust tin-tin-tins with the cement  
the plumbing pipes, the sewers  
draining away.

It bubbles, the walkway bubbles.  
Lichen steams in the heat,  
sticks to rain-stained bit up rubble  
of government office walls.

Tinted windows trick in light,  
joints wail their strange call.

*KEEP ON PUSHING  
TIL YOU DONT HIDE*

—graffiti scrawls  
on the bus stop  
awning.

## Crowns into Plowshares

**Garden**

Spinning down in gray mud  
and warm salt water  
all the angels of creation  
array in geometrics  
in slopping colors all at once  
shimmering and forms of sliding beasts  
emerge I emerge from the mud  
the mind spins up and the body  
climbs vines into the air  
6-7-8-9 inches high and higher still  
the angels lap around  
draw swords in love to mud beasts  
other origins come up spread up  
the universe gets thick with stuff  
over 16 inches high and  
rhythms go sound waves bounce back  
the birds of dawn rupture  
from bubbling mud.

**Exorcism**

My lips are laminated  
with remnants  
of your lipstick,  
necks as Eucharist,  
a liquor fix.

Turquoise tiles,  
us circling a pool  
in the warmth  
of Georgia before  
the winds come.

You make me  
float above  
my own self,  
a thing that speaks  
in tongues.

## Antiqueland

Cloistered up in this  
'70s strip mall,

I grab my rags, get woozy  
on ethanol, and chip up  
plaques of shellac.

Trace the flaking gild  
that gets beneath my nails.

Buffing out the gyres of time  
with shell-thin lacquer:

I lack for nothing.

The table's mirror surface  
returns my face,  
a word from the clutter.



## A Bigger Splash

Okay, chill well.  
Take in surrounding things,  
a swinging ceiling fan.

The air is—  
a little too cool.  
Trigrams of sunlight

slice into the living room.  
Bobbie hops along  
the diving board

with skip steps and  
hollering, such hot  
hollering.

Slide off the couch  
into your flip flops and  
prepare your eyes.

Dazzled, squares come together,  
collages of the scene at hand.  
*It's not so cold*

Bobbie laughs  
(a proof in motion)  
*if you just jump in.*

## The Beauty of Surfaces

It's prettiness from here on out—  
fruit tossed to you with a spin, my way of crossing my palms  
at the movies, your love of costume jewelry, my love of costume jewelry,  
money spent on candles, the looseness of our fifth summer, slinking down the street,  
the deep weave of our personal effects, the way we decorate each other.

How could anyone dismiss mere trinkets? The so-called fake things,  
as if you had a jeweler's eye. Who lives that way? When I'm with you,  
everything is sweet to me, in a way that stains. Our secret smiles  
get their prints all over, so even the walls talk about us. Yep,

it's like on vacation in the Ozarks, when you taught me  
silly little birdsong to trill back to the blue jays. In our pretty world,  
which hums, everything gives way to touch,  
you and me just joy machines.

**Tapestry Torso**

I sprang a joyful noise when the linens arrived  
after your will was settled. These garments fit me  
a bit strict, but I drop jewels of sweat  
when I imagine my self in your clothes,  
like I could be you if I made myself  
a certain kind of way. My hands, full of shards,  
come to my face, align  
as a razor mask. My body  
a monument, my face as versified  
history. Yes, your clothes fit  
and undo me, or rather: in your clothes  
I find shimmering threads  
to climb up, to find  
the root—

## Military History

I shout as a gleeful beast  
about your husband

and his prison sentence.  
Greens get limp in the kitchen

while I breathe a summer breath.  
Lips against the grit of pear flesh,

the phone call and your joyful voice.  
I will eat and stretch at the table

placed under an empty hornet nest.  
Dinner is a military history,

a celebration of still walking  
the pocked highway at dawn.

I scrape the bruises off peppers,  
butter melts in the pan.

## The Good News

You appeared just above my flowerbeds  
with smooth unmoving lips, saying  
*It's time to perform the surgery.*

You were gentle with me, stupored as I was,  
and helped me up the loading ramp,  
which was considerate.

My one complaint, hesitant though I am to say so,  
is how you left me in the Winn-Dixie parking lot;  
otherwise, your hospitality was enviable.

You lifted me onto the table  
and gave me time to adjust  
to the metal on my torso.

You transplanted parts, played with my DNA,  
cut open my brain and gave a run down  
on the biologies at this end of space.

Everyone knows about it, how I gat taken up  
and sewn back with queer organs,  
but when I mention it, you'd swear that...

I inherited this sinful hearth  
and the monster house surrounding it,  
and the flower beds I flood

with piss and vomit  
night after night, more or less.  
I'm at odds with this town,

I drink to make my case,  
to disrupt the hauntings,  
vacate the vermin ghosts.

I snag ragweed off a teenaged dealer  
to help handle this liquor living,  
but the angels' orders tut-tut me regardless.

But you, friend, have been tender,  
given me mechanic wrists  
and told me the story

of how, when I was young,  
I sang  
in the afternoons

*I can love*  
*I can love*  
*I can learn to love the alien.*

**Aubade**

In the evening, in the morning,  
my skull slides across concrete walls.

Anna is the callword,  
a mechanism that springs and arrows  
the sinking heat,  
distances the hands...

Anna, I call, in the morning, in the evening,  
let the rain come today  
and cool the wicked earth.

This husk grew another hundred heads  
a little under the skin.  
When it came time to ride out,  
a hundred jaws gnawed through.

But god, if I could grab the sun in my hands.

Anna, Anna, the new light stings against me, I see  
a purple metro slouching out its arm to day,

to pungent entropy, to fertile gunk—

in me I will build a garden  
and grow you a host of sweet things.