

HYMNS
OF
HOME

A Collection of Essays

Bill Bunn



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Title

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This book is dedicated the music of my life: my wife and family who made me want to write, and Moira Dann who helped me play my first notes.

I



THE BIG, SHORT PARTY

I ACTUALLY WISHED HE HAD started to kick and scream; it makes it so much easier when they kick and scream.

But he's a dedicated little boy, so he tries to take well most of what we throw at him. I watched him trying to manage his emotions as he contemplated me leaving him alone there. His chin trembled, and he blinked hard as I sat him down to take off his backwards boots, ones that he had proudly put on himself a few moments earlier. I watched his shoulders sag as the moment approached.

His body went limp as I removed his hat and coat. As soon as he was ready, he gave me a big hug and kiss, then went to the window as I prepared to leave him there. I stepped outside, moved toward the car, and then turned to him, to that place in the window where his face usually was.

He smiled weakly as I gave him my grin-and-bear-it smile—it's really facial advice. Then he started blowing kisses, as the tears rolled down his cheeks. I couldn't handle the sight anymore, so I turned and ran back to my car, afraid that if I turned to look once more, I'd quit my job to stay home and play with him forever.

As I drove away, my eyes averting my siren son, I noticed an angular pain in my soul, one I'd not felt very often. After a short session of emotional arithmetic, I could only locate one other occasion I felt this particular kind of painful longing: my grandfather's death.

He passed away when I was a teenager, and I remember struggling to understand what death meant in my lived experience. I couldn't understand the afterlife. How can you understand forever?

I felt claustrophobic thinking about what it might be like to be sleeping inside a coffin under the ground. Instead, I learned to believe that death was simply absence: he was "gone." That parting of ways, and lingering absence conjured this odd, and particularly sharp, sort of pain. Because I've learned to understand death as an absence, what my son and I suffered as we waved goodbye, was nothing more than a small dying, a death, an on-the-spot, makeshift funeral.

You could accuse me of being overly dramatic. I've accused myself of the same thing. I've taken my feelings to task, insisting that I get over this inappropriate emotion immediately.

But I can't.

And, now, I don't believe I'm being overly dramatic. Death and goodbye are the same thing, existentially speaking: my son was absent from my day, just as my grandfather is. My emotions, no matter how much I tried to jimmy them into seeing things another way, will not budge. They have marked this kind of occasion for me as a death.

So, death I must live with as I work through my professional day.

But, then, when the locks on my briefcase snap closed, I hop in the car to return to that home where I left him earlier in the day. What a miracle moment it is: The dead are brought back to life. I witness the resurrection once we make eye contact. The morning's shroud buries itself in our reunion, and death's permanent marks are wiped away for a moment. These milliseconds of joy have become one of my favourite instants.

Our reuniting is one moment of pure life, for in that moment death is completely erased. My time with my son has not yet become tinged with the weight of future good-byes, nor the sly death of taking one another for granted: it is my complete, momentary appreciation of my son, without the thought of what may lie ahead. A complete celebration of life. A huge party, lasting two heartbeats.

As I have come to understand goodbye and hello and their profound significance in my life, I don't let those moments go un-lived. I've given up resenting them and have embraced these daily deaths and resurrections.

These are some of the mundane miracles that bring a tear to my eye every time they happen, and hold me close to the root of what living is all about.

*Originally published as "You say hello and I say goodbye" in the
Globe and Mail, Facts & Arguments, June 1, 2000.*

THE CHILD BEYOND THE DICTIONARY

SHE FUMBLES FOR MY ear. When she finds it, she sets her lips on the outside of my ear breathing heavily into it as she thinks of something to say.

“Ummm,” she starts, still waiting for words to arrive. Her hot breath rolls into my ear, filling it with sticky sound.

“Christmas... um... birthday party... um... presents... ah... grandma... candy store, suckers... and slides, swimming pool, dessert.”

It’s my two-year-old daughter, Elise. I sit and listen because I love how her secret feels in my ear, as her little hands dance on the back of my neck.

And I realize that she’s giving me a precious gift, a string of her most-prized words, beaded sound, threaded on breath for my ears only.

She’s the same one who always asks for me to whisper things into her ears, especially goodnight. My whisper isn’t nearly as sticky. It’s drier, I think, and the words I use don’t burn beats on the eardrum.

She pulls my ear to her mouth again, as she remembers a fragment of another secret she can tell. “Baby soup,” she says. I know her words translate to “bathing suit” in a grown-up vocabulary.

Her mouth strings syllables together in a way that no dictionary could track. As she talks, her secrets plant meaning in me. They take me where a dictionary cannot go, to the uncommon sense of what childhood means: childhood sounds like one of Elise’s secrets.

Childhood looks like Elise does, after she dresses herself. “I do it myself,” she insists as she slams the door to her bedroom. Then after a five-minute storm of huffs and puffs in a fabric fight, she emerges with a turtle-neck shirt, with her lithe, writhing middle somehow squeezed into the neck hole, the bottom of the shirt was dangling open around her neckline like a bell. A pair of Teletubbies panties, on backwards with the gusset hugging her left hip. “I did it myself,” she says proudly.

I wear clothes just as they were supposed to be worn. I find no new way to wear my underwear, nor do I wear my shirt upside down simply because it’s possible.

Sometimes Elise sits on my knee and presses her forehead against mine for a quiet chat. In the growing warmth between our bodies, I catch hints of apple juice and chocolate cake. I spy the sheen of apple juice flecked with brown cake crumbs swabbed generously around her mouth, lolling down the cape of her chin.

Forehead to forehead we sit, and I imagine she who smells of apple juice and chocolate cake smells strains of my day—photocopier, cold coffee, book mould.

On her cheeks are tears, ones that have fallen because she

has. She pokes one of her small fingers into a tear and holds it out for my tongue.

“Salty,” she says. She watches me taste it as if she might see what salty looks like. Then, content with what she sees, she kisses me, and I taste mostly apple juice with a hint of chocolate. Again, I learn. Childhood is the taste of Elise’s tear and the smell of a kiss of apple juice and chocolate cake.

Childhood feels like Elise’s fresh-bathed skin. I watch her wiggle out of the bath, sink deep into a towel, and come and sit on my knee. I dry her hair. She’s so clean, her skin is so young, she feels almost sticky again—sticky clean.

Now, she’s fascinated with her belly button. She squeezes it from both sides with her hands. “Closed” she says. She lets go. “Open.”

She feels her own skin with some sense of wonder, as though it feels new to her too. “You do it, Dad,” she says. I lift my shirt and squeeze my belly button, and she says “Closed.” I let it go and she says “Open.” She squints at my recessed “inny” and looks down at her own again. She runs her finger inside my belly button and wiggles it, feeling the wound that began my childhood so long ago. It’s scaled, and filled with lint.

I touch her belly button and she jumps as if the connection is still live. I feel the jolt as I touch her too, and pull away. The lesson is complete. I know what childhood means. She’s taken me beyond the dictionary again.

A dictionary is a book of seeds. It contains the dry husks of words that have not yet rooted in living, waiting to find their meaning. The dictionary tells me nothing about how a word lives or finds a home in worlds. But I learn.

The word “childhood” grows up in me suddenly. I feel
the senses of the word branch and bud in my brain.

And I tremble.

The word now lives in me.

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