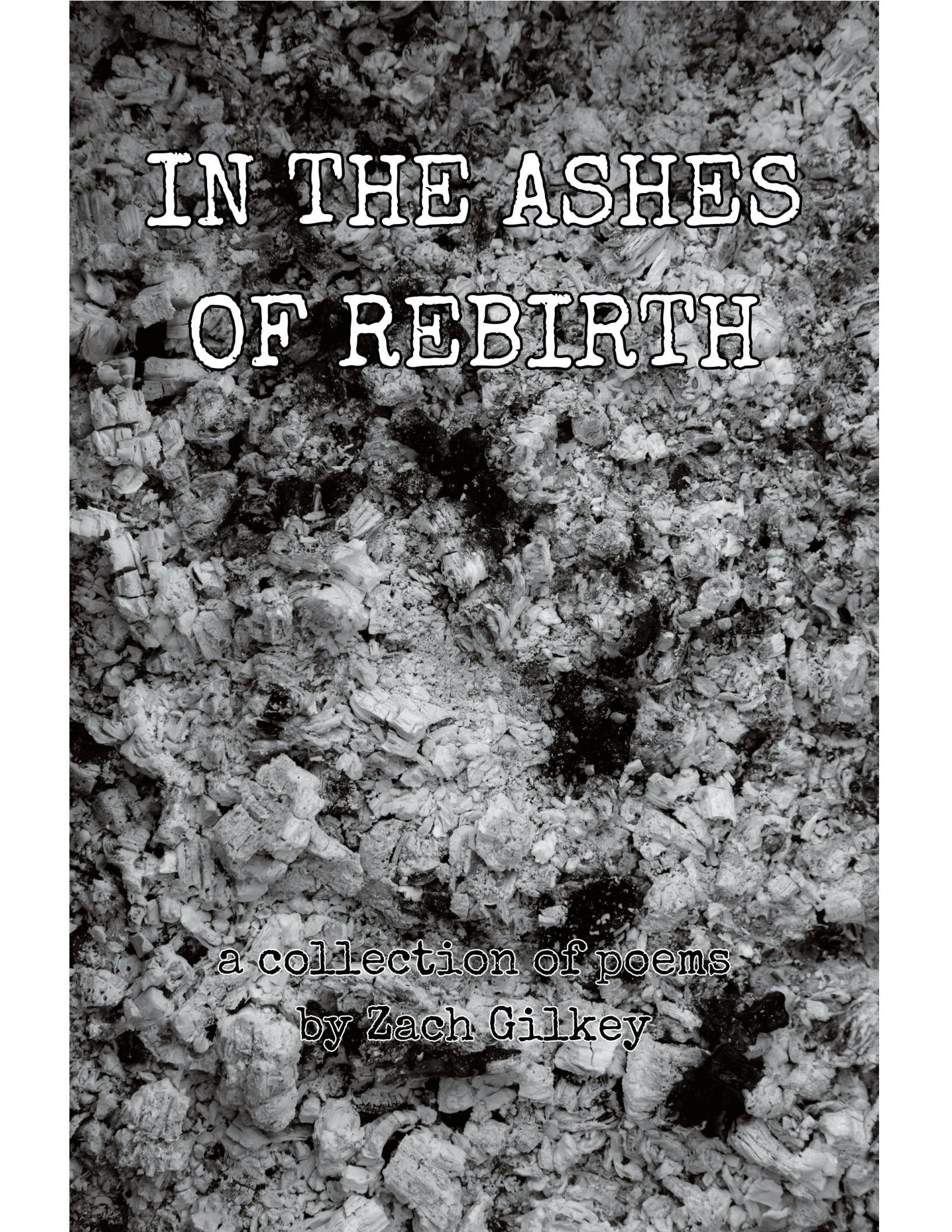




IN THE ASHES OF REBIRTH

a collection of poems
by Zach Gilkey

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Preface

What do you do when it all burns down?

You can stay as ashes, or you can rise again—reborn like a phoenix.

At the time of writing, I had become someone so invested in what others thought of me that I had very little time to look inward. I was depressed but wouldn't admit it, heavily dependent on substances, and had long since abandoned myself, my dreams, and any idea of doing things differently.

Tragedy struck and shattered my world—the very foundation I was built on crumbled. I was left with a choice: continue as I had for so very long and end up exactly where I was, or learn to use that pain as fuel to heal and grow beyond the things that had held me back for so long.

I realized I had a hard time even identifying my own emotions, let alone knowing how to handle them. Searching for ways to confront that truth, I came across emotional journaling. I began writing two or three prompts a day, beginning with:

“Today I feel _____ because _____.”

What I discovered was that writing itself became a tool for processing my feelings. It reminded me that, as a kid, I'd always wanted to be a writer. And even if no one ever reads a single line I've written—I am a more complete person for having written them.

I wrote this collection of poems during a heavy season of grief and heartbreak. They explore the pain of loss and separation, and the strength found in growth and self-reclamation.

When you face your own adversity, remember: you always have the choice to remain as you are—or to choose growth.

I hope, when that moment comes, you choose to rise.

I. Descent – When the Flame Dies

The breaking open—grief, confusion, loss; learning to stop rekindling what has already burned out.

Calmer Waters

By the end of us,
I lost myself—
so sure your needs
were all I should meet.

In the storms of your departure,
while searching for the calm,
I anchored to you,
needing safe harbor.

In the wake of the flood,
I reached for you—
the one who broke the dam,
already sailing with other plans.

For so long I tried to save you from yourself,
and in my frantic fixing, I left myself behind.
I thought I could feel through you—
that if I just kept trying,
my light would shine through.

In the ashes of our love,
I found myself—
doused, but still aflame;
a heart learning to be tamed.

And when the sky turned from black to blue,
I saw what I was meant to do—
to finally see that I needed me,
not you.

If You Must Go

If you must go—
go to find yourself.
When you walk out,
let your truth drown their doubt.

Don't believe their story,
their version of *why*.
Seek your truth,
not the mirror in their eye.

If something hard must carry on,
let it be your voice, not theirs,
that guides you out.

Following another's path
will only lead to wrath—
so don't be led astray.

They will mistake,
they will misunderstand—
but your voice
was never their plan.

Fate's Entwined

As I look into the future,
I don't know what I'll see,
but one thing I am certain –
what's meant will come to be.

Long did I hide myself,
And years did I sit still.
In my silence, time did spill.

I didn't know I'd have to grow,
Believing facts untrue.
I dimmed my light beneath my love for you.

No anger clings when I look back,
Only questions of the past –
Could anyone have told me –
this was fate's design?

Had I known,
Had I tried,
Would fate change its side?

If I had another chance,
To hold you – one more dance,
I'm not sure I'd ever find
a better soul to meet mine.

If time could turn, undo, rewind
Would I still arrive –
in this place of mine?

No — you were right for me,
even if momentary.
I just hope that, in time and grace,
you look back with a smile on your face.

While we pass on our separate ways,
And live our longest days,
I still hold some small regret,
even if I wasn't grown yet.

And maybe one day, when years have passed,
You'll see I've grown — at last.
In that moment, I hope it's true—
you've grown and found joy too.

Maybe in another time,
my hand will find yours, yours in mine,
But not the hands of old,
hands reborn — where new love unfolds.

Meant to Be

Every day, my heart still waits.
With every breath I take,
with every lingering glance,
I realize—there is no chance.

When I search my heart
for where you used to reside,
I see the quiet ruin you left inside.
I know I was wrong,
and the faces you speak with will blame me—
but when I see them, I must stay strong,
for their eyes don't define what it means to be.

No, I wasn't the best,
but I gave all I had
to be who I thought was right.
Every mile we traveled,
every time we'd fight,
reminded me—it wasn't right.

I folded myself into your frame,
convinced that's who I was.
I shrank to fit your plan.
I wasn't allowed to fully feel—
and that's how I know
our love wasn't real.

We felt it for real.
We meant it for real.
We said it for real.
But what did we feel?

We felt love that was true,
but neither of us knew
what love should really look like.
In the mistakes,
in the silence,
we replayed the echoes
of our childhood wounds.

There was a time you couldn't convince me
that it wasn't meant to be.
And even now, in quieter hours,
my heart still whispers—I want you to be mine.

But not the old you, you see?
Because I am no longer the old me.
Our patterns consumed what we called love;
instead of blooming, it turned to dust.

Yet deep within, there's still a space
that lets your memory trace its way—
but not the kind I used to know.
No, because we both must grow.

And in the future, I hope you see:
despite it all, this time was meant to be.
Our souls were meant to find each other,
and through the pain—
become better lovers.

Left Unsaid

... and I'm sorry for the way I acted,
the way I added worries,
and let them drag you down

I'll forever regret each word uttered
the quiet in your frown.

... and every action I'd retrace –
if it put a smile on your face.

If I could undo, and think it through –
I'd never wound the heart I knew.

Blind to your unsteady ground,
darkened by my own,
never knew the truth
until it shone.

Hiding from my shadows,
fighting with myself,
I left both me and you –
sabotaging the love we knew.

Forever saddened and grateful too –
may you live, may you mend
and be true to you.

II. Reckoning – Among the Embers

Picking through the ashes to find what remains—reflection, self-awareness and the first sparks of understanding.

Armor

The hardest thing of all
was not to let you fall—

despite everything within,
and everything given.
All for granted, all considered,
perhaps I should've let you wither.

Instead, I watered the grass—
not because I miss you,
but because my heart won't let me
leave the picture that untrue.

If you fall, of course—
no matter the cause—
it's not that I owe you, or you me.
It's simply who I choose to be.

I will don the suit of armor again,
and ride to where I'm needed.
But when the helm comes off,
only my face is reflected back.

Not that I think less of you,
nor more of me—
but because I finally see:
I no longer need to bend the knee.

Your knight has found a truer crown to serve—
and upon the throne...
me.

Because I Am Difficult

The day all was lost — a day won.
I could've stayed down,
But I chose to stand.

Not because it was easy. Because *I* am difficult.
I was made to stand, to build, to mend —
this is not my end.

Until then, I'd drifted easy
And in that stillness,
Decayed my own worth.

Never again will I stand
On the sidelines of my life,
If I lose it all — it won't be standing still.

Beyond the Fork

On the path of life, there comes a fork—
a quiet divide, where thoughts may spark.
Anger, bitterness, frustration, fear—
within them, the path can disappear.

Instead of choosing left or right,
you may sit and stay,
refuse the fight—
curse the path,
swear, and rage,
unleash the wrath that guards your cage.

But what you miss, my friend, is this:
the path goes on; it does not end.
The fork is but a choice, you see—
a gentle guide, not an enemy.

The way may twist, may feel untrue,
for everything must change in view.
It may grow heavy, hard to mend—
but every step still helps you ascend.

And if you find yourself in a rut,
where anger knots deep in your gut—
pause, take a breath instead,
and see the paths ahead.

Then keep on walking—
unchained by dread.

Cease the Chase

At some point, the hard thing must be faced – whatever form it takes.
Moving forward, falling back – leaping, or standing still.
Whatever the choice, life moves untouched.
Stillness closes the door to new moments.
And in every moment, a new chance arises.

Life is imperfect. When we search for pain, it appears.
The same is true for joy – look, and you'll find it.
Finding it means releasing what joy should look like.
Joy isn't a moment to catch; it lives even in pain.
When the heart is heavy,
The mind can lighten the load – if allowed.

To linger in pain is suffering by choice.
Run from pain and it will call you by name later.
When it does, you'll pay for the distance fled.
When the choice comes, do not prolong the chase.
In running, discomfort burrows deep within –
the body's reminder of a debt still due.
Do not run; pain has its purpose.
In the most painful depths, space for true growth is created.

Through growth,
we learn to quiet what distracts.
We learn to embrace whatever comes.
Not because we know the outcome,
but because we see the truth in emotion.
Each moment teaches through emotion.
We choose not to cling to emotions –
doing so would end the lessons.
We write our own story – life decides the circumstances.

My Concern

They ask if I'm doing alright,
how I'm holding up,
if I need anything.

No.
I will be just fine.

They don't see that I glimpse their struggle in the question,
hear their fear behind the concern,
feel the heaviness in their chest.
The answer they seek lives within.

No.
I will be just fine.

For once in my life, I realize:
I don't need anyone to feel complete.
Their confusion,
as I hold my head higher than before,
speaks volumes of their stories—
not of mine.

No.
I will be just fine.

Blinded by the lie
that another will make them whole—
complete them, fill their emptiness,
chase away their sadness—
if only they knew
the power of sitting with their own emotions,
not searching for an answer,
but feeling the feeling.

No.

I will be just fine.

I will sit in my sadness.

I will dance in my joy.

I will comfort myself when I am afraid.

My only concern now
is how many remain so broken.

My only fear today
is how few know the truth.

My only heaviness—
that so many could be whole.

In Morning's Light, In Darkest Night

When I see your face,
My pain meets grace.

And when you smile wide,
Love swells my chest; inside.

Your future shines within your eyes,
But in the present I'll reside.

If the moment I would leave,
I'd lose the joy before me.

To see you laugh, to live, to grow
Through every storm or undertow.

With every joy your small hand finds,
Mine will be there in kind.

And should you ever fall,
I'll be there when you call.

When you scuff your knee or need to cry,
If I'm not near, I'll run to your side.

In morning's light and darkest night,
My love will always hold you tight.

Always your father—
steady and true.

III. Embers – Facing the Shadow

Confrontation and integration—sitting in the silence, facing inner monsters, turning pain into growth.

Silent Screaming

Outside, silence—
Inside, screaming,
A deep hum in my chest.

Screaming to take it back,
Screaming for what I lack.
Screaming at what's been done,
Screaming the wound has won.

Screaming to let go,
Screaming to grow.
Screaming—not of guilt; of wound.

Hold the breath, keep it in—silence is strength within.

Sit in Silence

Do you sit in silence,
or let your mind wander?
Do you embrace the quiet,
or drown in thought's wonder?

Can you sit with pain,
no matter how it feels?
Or do you run to soothe
the stories you call real?

Does the noise drown out
what stirs inside?
Turn within.
Let silence begin.
Hold your thoughts—
and unravel your mind.

The Hidden Monster

Hidden deep inside myself,
there is a monster I dare not wake.
If ever my mind drifts too near,
I quiver, I shake.

The monster is no brute,
nor armed with claws—
it's cunning,
and damages with words from its jaws.

It digs and tears at the soul,
spewing venom to wear me down,
to twist my truths,
and make me drown
in lies that wear a crown.

I believe the words,
and blame myself—
guilt-ridden,
ashamed of self.
I forget the nature of what it means to *be*,
because the monster has hold of me.

But something changed as of late—
when it awakes, it's no longer fate
that I must suffer endlessly,
for the monster lives *in* me.

It took some time for me to find
the strength to still, to realign—
to face those parts I used to flee,
and tell it, "That's not who I'll be."

The monster still lives inside,
but I no longer run or hide.
It may whisper—but I am free.
The monster is not all of me.

The Curious Creature

There is a brook—
past the meadow,
through the wood—
where the soul sits.

The wind whispers through the trees,
the birds change their song,
and water crashes against the rock.

As you walk the path,
the birds ask each other:
What song shall we sing today?
What brings you to the trees?
What do you see in the waters?
How long will you stay?

Never judging, only watching.
They see the pain you carry,
the sadness you hold,
the exhaustion in your eyes,
the way your head hangs.

And they think: *It must be a bird,*
for it sits in our meadow.
But what a curious bird this is—
that moves without wings,
that roosts without nest,
that sings without song.
Why does it not take flight?

As you wander the woods,
past the meandering brook,
the trees lean closer—
watching you wrestle your fears,
the unease in your stride,
the burdens on your shoulders.

And they think: *It must be a tree,*
for it walks in our wood.
But what a curious tree this is—
whose roots are not defended,
whose trunk is unsteady,
whose branches not wide.
Why does it not stop and grow?

You sit by the brook—
through the wood,
past the meadow.
The waters crash against the rock;
they do not hold your reflection.
They only move forward,
carving the earth,
never swaying in their flow.

Watching you by the brook, they think:
This must be a fish—
but what a curious fish it is,
that leaps from the water,
that dares to look into me,
that would halt my current if it could.
Why does it not return,
and move with the stream?

There is a brook—
through the deep wood,
past the meadow—
where the birds sing,
where the trees stand,
where the waters flow.

Each knows itself.
Each wonders of you.

Ink Splotches

In the in-between of you and me,
where the ink runs grey,
I lost what it meant to be,
reading lines of yesterday.

For too long, my worth
lived in others' eyes.
I drank from their reflection
in the well of mine.

Mistaking comfort for safety,
I turned from my needs.
It took tragedy to see
how long I'd abandoned me.

In those darkest moments,
red ink bled in a rage—
I thickened my skin
And chose to turn the page.

No longer would I write
the lines of others into mine.
From now on, my ink
will write my lines instead.

In the in-between of you and me—
I found what longed to break free.
The strongest parts
were always inside of me.

When the ink finally parted,
and grey darkened to black,
I saw the lines I'd need—
and I can write them back.

IV. Rebirth – What Still Grows

Acceptance, release, gentle understanding—memory fades, worth
rekindles, life renews.

The Place You'll Never Be

I caught myself the other day,
wondering how you were.
And in that moment,
there was nothing I adored more.

I let you slip into my mind
and take its hold again—
just like it used to do,
before we were only friends.

In those solemn moments,
in that haunting solitude,
I try to find
some peace of mind—
by wondering what you do,
where you are,
and who you see—
familiar thoughts for me.

But when I find you lurking,
deep within my reverie,
I draw the line, define the place—
the place you'll never be.

The Quiet Pull

Torn between holding on
and moving on.
Afraid if I leave this place,
you'll never return—
scared I might not come back either.

Everything inside clings to you,
begging to take it back—
to whisper what my chest is screaming.
To admit my flaws,
to say I was wrong—
but would it be enough,
or is it too late?

Shaking inside,
tears spilling from my eyes,
I'm not sure which voice to follow.
One sounds so familiar—
but is it still right?

And is it really familiar
if I've become someone new?
How do I know I've grown
while I still ache from the past?
After everything I've shown,
would it ever be enough to last?

I still love you.
I always will.
But my heart can't tell
if I should be moving—
or standing still.

Unanswered

Do you have others' voices
whispering in your head?

When you look within,
do you find yourself at all?

Do my thoughts take hold of you
the way yours once held me?

When reaching within,
I used to hear your voice in my mind.

Do you know –
how I rid myself of you?

Or when you look
is it only my face you know?

I used to think it through –
what you'd say, what you'd do,

But with unanswered questions,
what was left to do

When Memory Forgot

The other day, a thought occurred to me—
I realized you hadn't been in memory.
Your smile, your gaze, your subtle ways
were lost among the yesterdays.

And when I caught myself,
reminded of the pain I felt,
I knew right then—
you had left me for good.

There will always be
a hollow place in me,
but I've come to see:
the hole makes room for new.

New cares, new feelings,
new friends, new loves—
though none will ever fill
the space your leaving carved.

I'm not sure I'll ever know
a love so deep, so pure,
that even in my breaking,
I found myself grateful still.

And should I see your face—
not in memory, but across the distance—
a part of me will always be
softly longing for what was.

But until that day, you'll drift from me,
no longer haunting memory.
For the day you left, you set us free—
from a love not meant to be.

If Ever You Should Fall

If ever you should fall,
you must rise again—
not because the fall was painless,
but because it cannot be
the story that defines you.

If life is a stage,
then you decide
which plays unfold upon it.
There will always be tragedies,
but they need not be
the only tale you tell.

Within the shadows of your soul,
and the light within your heart,
you hold the power to transcend.

Pain, suffering, sadness—
they may leave their scars,
yet they carve out space
for joy, for happiness, for peace.

Choose not the bandage—
but the healing.

Worthy Worm

Down beneath the darkened dirt,
lives a worm who knows his worth.
He munches rot, he chews the clay,
and works the soil, day by day.

He never asks what's up above,
he never doubts what he's made of.
No clocks, no calendars, no chime—
he only knows the wriggle time.

Chomp, chomp—chew the muck.
Squirm along, don't get stuck.
Every nibble has its place,
every wiggle leaves a trace.
Every moment makes more space.

And though the moles may chase him down,
and shadows stir beneath the ground,
he wriggles on—he does not hide,
for storms are gathering outside.

The thunder rolls, the earth will shake;
the roots will tremble, stones will break.
And in that moment, he will know:
it's time at last—it's time to go.

Upward climbing, through the rain,
past the struggle, past the pain.
From the muck, at last he's freed,
to greet the sky—to plant the seed.

Acknowledgements

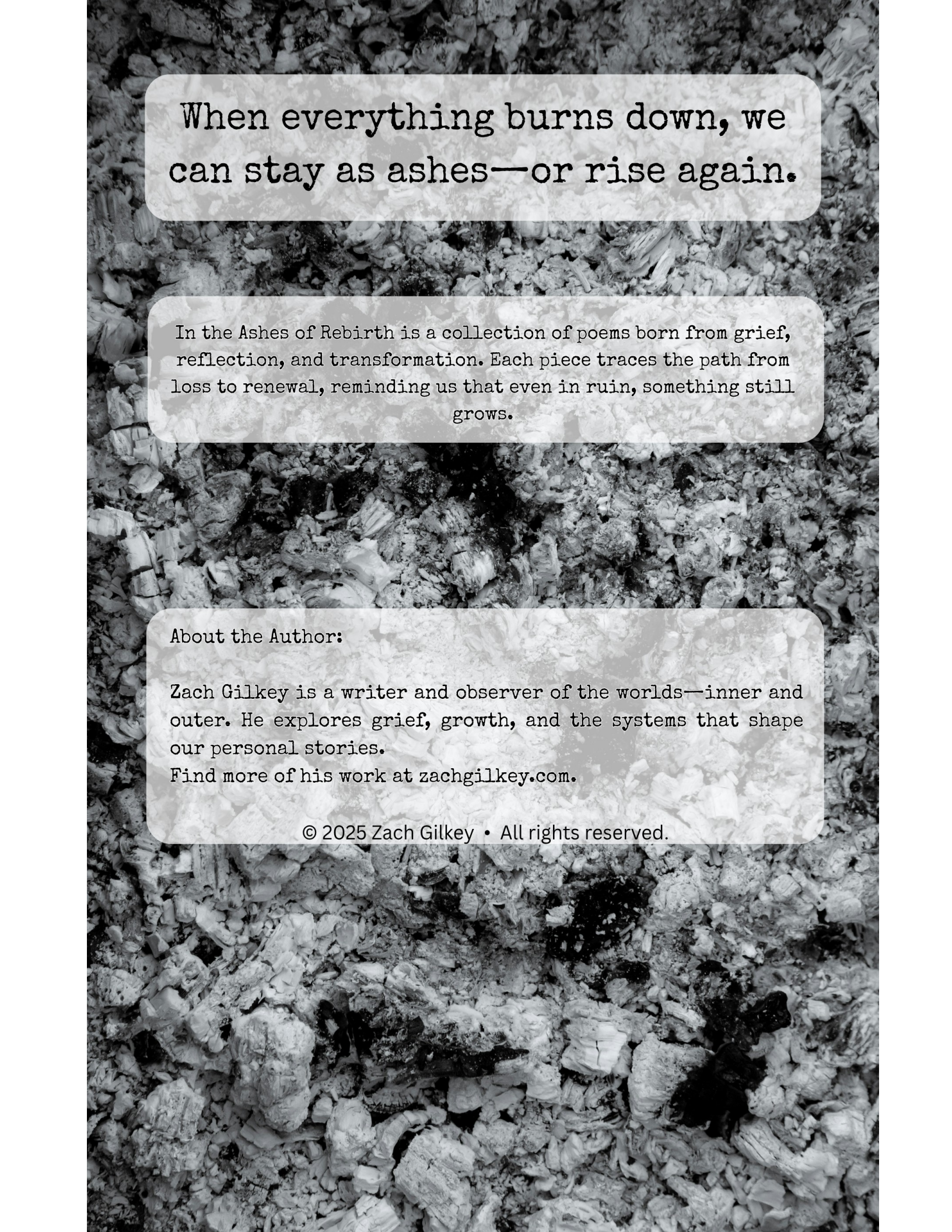
My muse—may the fire you left ever burn in my chest that I can be reborn again, forever.

My sons—for giving me reason to pick through the ashes.

And to you, the reader—thank you for walking these ashes with me. I hope they help you in your own rebirth.

About the Author

Zach Gilkey is a writer, observer of the worlds—inner and outer. He explores grief, growth, and the systems that shape our personal stories. Find more of his work at *zachgilkey.com*.



When everything burns down, we
can stay as ashes—or rise again.

In the Ashes of Rebirth is a collection of poems born from grief, reflection, and transformation. Each piece traces the path from loss to renewal, reminding us that even in ruin, something still grows.

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