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through a glass darkly

A Collection of Poetry

by

Michael Mendler

A Creative Writing Project Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada
1997
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To my Lord and Savior, Jesus,
in whose light
I first knew light

**“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then
we shall see face to face: now I know in part;
but then shall I know even as I am also known.”**

1Corinthians 13:12

Table of Contents

I. Blood

Pomegranate	1
Dishes	2
Swan	3
November Funereal	4
Amber	5
The Past	6
Cleaning Fish	7
Before the Storm	8
Children of the divorce	9
Uncle Charlie	10
At the Paving Company	11
Moving	12
T.V.	13
Joannie	14
Knowing and Dearth	15
Shoppers	16
Rush Hour	17
Yad Vachem	18
The Security Guard and the Riding Mower	19
Forebodings	20
Alabaster	21
Commercial	22
Metro	23
The Day the Sun Went	24

II. Water

The Apprentice	26
Capernaum	27
At Zion's Gate	28
Temptation	29
The Calling of Samuel	30
Months	31
The Evangelist's Horror	32
After the Arrest	33
Jonah	34
Half-Brother	36
Pilgrim Woods	37
On the Other Side of the Window	38
How I Know	39

Andrew	40
Centurion	41
Heaven	42
Martyrs	43
A Convicting Presence	44
Touch	45
Message to my Unborn Child	46
Introduction	47
After Forty Days	48
Good Friday	49
Archaeology	50
Stopping for a Photograph	51

I. Blood

“...but one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water.”

John 19:34

POMEGRANATE

I bear it like a treasure to the kitchen.
Among unpacked groceries it is
conspicuously exotic,
disdaining the shine of adjacent
oranges.
There are ribs hinting
at its secret compartments.

I am tempted
to leave it—by the window,
on a shelf behind glass
where oddities belong

but its body (built for breaking)
draws me,
lush pods to be tasted
only after violence

Puncturing the tough rind
my fingers steep themselves
in sweet blood,
cells of fluid pop
sprinkling my face and shirt

the seeds are more bitter
than I dreamed

When my wife enters
I am standing apologetic,
hands cradling the mess.
Horror of what is irrecoverable

DISHES

Mother's hands
dip
into pools of light,
traverse like lobster claws.

She swipes
the glowing back of one
against her forehead
leaving a shining bit of bubbles
at her temple.

Again and again
they fish from below
bones to be gleaned
of slight morsels.

S W A N

Breathless,
the slow body beats
over smoking water
pulling rushes skyward

mired in fog,
its hoarse trumpeting fall outward,
depart like an army
of errant spirits into the blanched
morning

NOVEMBER FUNERAL

Today the earth shows its death.
At the wind's direction
ashen bodies of cloud are whisked
to rooms faint with alcohol.
Bite of burning leaves is felt
by travelers
on roads for miles around.

Lopped branches,
we struggle to supply the day's
needed motion.
Though everything in half-light is doomed
by sorrow,

we rise—
from laundry rooms and irrelevant offices
to meet the day's procession,
our feet figments of brittle earth,
buoyed by the promise of snow.

AMBER

honey
spun without love

corruption
of ice

THE PAST

it arrives in packages
of brown paper,
unmarked
so that not even I
will know.

Inevitably,
my too-curious fingers
plunge
through innocuous wrapping
to prod at mysteries:
stinking clams
with haggard tongues,
open anemones

I leave them for the mail-man
in the morning

CLEANING FISH

My cousin's pépé taught me
of the crescent slash behind each gill.
Though merely twelve, I learned
to lift the scales with the heavy knife
and spill the blood like milk,

to slide the knife's point
like a pen along the dorsal fin,
and free the spongy meat with careful
strokes, all the time pinning
the shivering victim with my palm.

Through to the wormy abdomen,
its lining shiny as chrome,
where the swim bladder drooped
like a lung starving.
The fat belly yielded easily:
waste escaped like a landslide,
all at once,
the fillets unfurled
like iridescent angel wings.

Shrouded in newspaper,
the remains were tossed still living
into maggoty recesses to ripen
in the sun.

Then to washing, which,
after the landing is most sacred:
hose-water to cleanse
the knife and table,
absolving them of scales and gelatinous
slime,
the rudiments of cost.

My hands after scrubbing
were white like the fish
and glowed.

BEFORE THE STORM

tattered wind
and entropy:

dust serpents come-to-life
out of gutters
whip over deserts of asphalt,
leaves tick
the morse-code of warning

families bunched like willows,
watch from the porch
as nearer clouds skitter
like phantoms overhead

sky cobalt with threatening
shifts its dull belly,
cauldron of dis-ease
poised over the firming roofs

CHILDREN OF THE DIVORCE

They founder like swimmers
with salvation in reach,
children
wanting peace with father:

the boys brawling
in the parking lot at dusk,
girls steeled
in their brother's clothes,
they are dreaming of the voice.

At night mother has no words
for the storm
that beats their eyelids shut.

In his dreams Adam recalls
the world before:
yearning of like hearts

a walk in the park
in the cool of day

UNCLE CHARLIE

It was an odd play-thing,
Uncle Charlie in his spattered gown
parked over the heating duct in our kitchen.
At mother's request I would recall
each day at school.

Before long I realized
I could say anything: he gamed and smiled.
My stories grew vivid; gradually I forgot
that we were two.

Sometimes at football I would see him
sitting by the picture window,
legs twitching as with queer
fire,
his eyes full of crazed alighting.

Aware that mother watched through
the window, I would shout
Hey, Uncle Charlie, did you see that catch?
And he would sit grinning until darkness
his hand occasionally fluttering up
in a gesture of goodbye.

Then one night
stealing into the hall past bedtime
I saw a purpled buttock
loose from folds of hospital white
take a needle of clear fluid.

Smooth as a bird's egg that flesh
seemed to me—
dappled, full of possibility,
sadder than anything.

AT THE PAVING COMPANY

I come upon a heap of molds
for making engine blocks.
Sculptured in sand,
their towerings miraculous:
castles left
on a wave-beaten shore.

When I leave they cradle
my reverence like steel.

MOVING

The apartment at ground level.
Stooped like beggars
we make our slug-trails of boxes.
Strangers yet, we pause to survey
the carpeted expanse,
imagine the gardens of our lives
take root

The rooms fill like an hour glass.
Far from finished,
at evening we collapse on the couch.
Our bodies gauge the spaces,
learn how to breathe
in this womb

The window at eye-level stark.
Through it we begin to know
the wet sizzle of traffic,
portents of the world beyond:
black lawns that confuse distance,
and street lamps that make wells
of light
out of each fallen leaf

T . V .

On screens that shift
like curtains
merchants show their wares

dark angels
with invisible rods
that measure the world

JOANNIE

she roams the slim jungle
between her house and this

From the window
I watch her run with ends
of vines in her hair,
her fingernails keep
the earth close

only the plants understand

they sway to her,
clothe her with burrs,
seeds and pollen-gifts
until she is glorious,
a queen with pearls.

Occasionally
roots are shaken: music
from behind those walls
turned up to hide
the peal of voices.

Better to be queen
of the world this side,
where yellow-jackets drone
like bombers,

or when the rain starts
stand under the edge of the roof
and stroke the silver gills
of the air-conditioner.

KNOWING AND DEARTH

Afterward,
I hold you tight as ginger root.
Our bodies a wet braid, shine.

I want to speak,
to say *These hands know you in darkness.*
The ripples of your flesh speak
of events,
a centre I cannot trace
with a lover's finger

though beauty is birthed—

though your body,
angel-alchemic, unyielding,
never ceases to be more
than sheath of salt
earth to me.

SHOPPERS

They enter

not supposing
that shops too grow desolate:
at day's end the walls divulge
secret works of darkness,
and the mannequins grow
eye-sockets
deep as diamond shafts

R U S H H O U R

Beneath a billboard downed by storm,
arched like a wing—the derelicts sleep,
coiled with mongrels from the cold.

Close by,
steel traffic grinds slowly past
trailing blood-light
into the swirling gutters.

Snow falls lightly and thickly
until at last
the wing is white

To eyes blind with hurry,
no blooming there

but as the snow wraps silent,
the soul of a man
moth-faint,
strives to go real and breathe
on all dispassionate window panes.

YAD VACHEM*

We went on our honeymoon (it was part
of the tour).

Jaded with travel, we shuffled past
miles of black-and-white photographs
with our hearts in tow.

Our eyes passed, unseeing, over familiar
images: smiling Nazis smoking cigarettes,
their pistol-ends jammed into the necks
of skeletal Jews,
the boxcars, ovens, corpses stacked
like firewood.

We watched a ten minute video,
half of it in German
(I punched the wrong button on the console).
Dreaming of lunch we left early.

In the parking lot we sensed our transgression.
Inside once again, we paused at the door
to the Hall of Names,
then climbed dark steps to a room of books
(thick as a man's fist, stacked man-high).
As we sat, alone, in that wide place
I could feel the pages of the solemn volumes
unyellowing.

It was hard—to take my wife's hand again
and descend to an ordered world.

Outside, the tour bus gathered us
(startled animals arriving in twos)
to an air-conditioned haven
where cloves of darkness would break
in our mouths;
we saw the Yad Vachem on our honeymoon.

*The Yad Vachem is the official name of the Holocaust museum
located in modern day Jerusalem.

THE SECURITY GUARD
AND THE RIDING MOWER

On each patrol in the darkened mall
it loomed through the glass,
wheel-hubs gleaming
like a whale's side out of water,
its proud chest reared like a horse's.
At shift's end I left it
and went squinting into the siloam
morning.

FOREBODINGS

Sometimes as I write
there are thoughts circling,
keen-eyed birds
eager for my fingers' pause,
for a space to open up
between words to prey on.

When I am hard-forging
they fling themselves
like unformed sacrifices
on the altar

deliberately,
and with long ringing strokes
I hammer them
right off the page

ALABASTER

Every morning now she pauses
before the mirror,
frowns at her silhouette,
more gobleted than ever.

Hands on her hips
she turns sideways,
touches her growing belly
uncertainly.

She is alabaster:
in morning light
her skin is pale and translucent,
blue vein marbles outward
from her swelling breasts

Rising,
my hands are sculptor's hands
on her firmness,
relishing the new fullness.

She smiles, but her eyes wonder.
So I hold her close and speak,
*You are a room filled
with fragrance of our longing...*

COMMERCIAL

When they filmed,
the missionary was given clothes
lacking snot and blood,
was made to sit for the first time in weeks
while the dying coughed.

For thirty seconds
he recalled what he could
of hunger and the stares of children

then went away appalled
at the scarcity of words.
His shirt became a shroud
for a malaria baby.

At home I tried hard,
but the world when it reached me
was twice-paled by distance.

M E T R O

for Ezra Pound

A camper overturned with one wheel
spinning.

Down the long line of cars
heads turn for the incongruous beauty
of children's clothes
plastered like bright petals
on the highway.

The eyes of holiday travelers
mirror tragedy
through rain-streaked windows
and speed helpless, past.

THE DAY THE SUN WENT

I woke with no sense
of what the sky had wrought.
Stumbling from my room I stepped
into a hallway aflood:
light from a screen door filled to bursting.

The door was westerly.
So I waded through dust-motes thick
as gnats, my pajamas sopping
with lemon sun,
tiptoed over the slab of radiance
which had fallen like a tablet
onto the linoleum
to find only blue sky without—

I woke mother
delirious with the thought that we'd slept
until evening.
She came clutching her nightgown
to marvel at our light-shocked kitchen.
All morning we searched for what
we knew.

Some time later we discovered
the window,
on the backside of an apartment building
one pane that blazed like God,
leveled at our back door.

I walked to school in the afternoon
feeling light,
like one baptized.

II. Water

THE APPRENTICE

a commotion of music
gives the boy pause

He watches
as the flute-players pass in procession
by the shop door;
behind them mourners in black
trip dejectedly.

He thinks of the beggars clustered
round the still water of Bethesda
waiting for angels.

...

On the bench nearby there are tools:
a fist hammering sunlight,
an awl he may not touch.

Beside, blocks of wood
hunch silent,
the shape within them
yearning for release

His eyes grow fierce.
Unseen, he stoops with a finger
to draw in the dust.

Outside, his father is working

C A P E R N A U M

The beach was barred from tourists
by a fence.
Though permitted to photograph
the house where Peter's mother-in-law
rose from her fever,
my eyes kept climbing through the snarl
of bushes that fronted the water.
Even the sole surviving depiction
of the ark
couldn't keep my feet from needing
the firmness of shore.

Apart from the others I considered
scaling the iron fence in secret
to walk the path Peter took
when he dropped everything

*"Only the foundation remains
of the synagogue where Jesus taught..."*

My own Capernaum was equally distant:
an intersection on another continent
with a traffic light and store.

When the tour ended
I left my yearnings on the sand.
The souvenirs I'd gathered turned
to stone.
Capernaum had altered;
all I could do was leave it.

AT ZION'S GATE*

loudspeakers in the Muslim quarter
crackle with evening
prayer,
light bleeds from the uneven
stone street

Old City soldiers fatigued
in olive
recline in shadow by the wall

marked by the glowing
point of a cigarette,
one tosses a hunk of cheese
to a yawning cat and curses
in Arabic

and I move through
the streets of Zion smiling

hands in pockets,
searching awkwardly
for the means by which Christ wept

*The "Zion Gate" connects the Armenian Quarter of the walled Old City of Jerusalem with the region of Mount Zion.

TEMPTATION

The engine steadies as she fumbles
for her things.
I hold the wheel tight,
stirred by her eloquence.
I would founder—
but, perceiving, she kisses me quickly,
and our bodies rise like zeppelins
to the dark.

Outside she waves,
turns amber, then white
as my headlights sweep over the deserted
yard and point toward home.

The tires bunch distance like fabric;
all the way to Windsor my palms
sweat in rivulets
the ambivalent graces of God.

THE CALLING OF SAMUEL

The third time you hear it you know.
The priest's failing eyes pass
over your tears and trembling.
He speaks grave words,
firm words,
though brilliance clings to you.

Blanket in hand, you return to bed
to wait rigid as a corpse.

When He comes
it is not as you imagined:
there is light that breaks.
The longings of your youth
go pale and die.
You lose yourself in glory.
And all at once

the word of the Lord
is food

MONTHS

The first three are tenderest.
We become conscious of pesticides
and lead,
the air drunk from the window.
Wonder if the baby receives
morse of our anxiety.

We assemble at breakfast,
mom with her wheat toast and milk,
dad with his coffee and cheerios.
The life so dependent
between us grows.

Beyond hydroponics, filtering charcoal
and organic soup delivered
by the couple upstairs,
is prayer.
The grace before
is eminently more than ritual.

We hold hands against poison
from landfills, household disinfectants
and the rays that bombard our kitchen.
We do what may be done;
a threefold cord is not easily
broken.

THE EVANGELIST'S HORROR

Some nights your words fail
like wings the wind has left.
From the pulpit you see them go under—
a young mother tired of hushing her baby
tiptoes into the foyer.
A family of four expires quietly,
eyes tough as flint.

You give the call
and wait for dying hands
to pierce the thick

When the meeting is through
you pack up your things and leave
politely smiling.
All night you pray for your nets.

AFTER THE ARREST

Peter
(having simoned)
wept bitterly.

Thomas
was at once certain
of loss: hope
that enabled doubt.

John
of Thunder
watched in private,
cast stones of silence.

Simon,
wounded in zeal,
wondered exactly what
was Caesar's.

Judas,
neck-deep in remorse,
contemplated

the rope
which encircled them,
all.

JONAH

the Voice did not quiet in Joppa

you could hardly ask
the sea-captain for a ticket,
your mouth cramped
with chewing
gum of *Thus saith the Lord*

As the ship started for Tarshish
the sea began to wake in waves
purple as welts
raised on a prophet's back

you were below deck dreaming
of torches, swords
and an olive grove

Then the voices startling you,
telling of the gods' anger
and a broken rudder.
The questions,
the lots cast.

Knowing it would come
to this,
your eyes went heavenward
ears unstopping at last for words
sweet as honey, bitter
as Ninevite ash in your stomach.

You testified and the word
was true,
through your chastening
they found the God
of earth and sky.

At your command
they hurled you hell-ward:

fetal-like,
in blind faith you groped
for the whale's belly,

found the essence
of mercy there

three days later
you saw sunlight for the first time,
emerged choking
on sea-water,
your skin bleached brilliant-
white
renewed like a child's
and your mouth full again,
torrent of God's word
not yet articulate

*come Jonah
there is work for you*

they must be born
again

HALF - BROTHER

Your life was as slim as I am,
as you were
as in some ways I must be
now that you're gone.

I have the hair, the eyes
the shape
of a boy of seventeen
whose face turned to stone.
A hardness remains in me,
though by God's grace I've overcome
the life you lived.

Now, in uneasy separateness
I wonder,
did you cry out
as the fender hammered light
from the guard-rail
so that our fathers numbered two?

I've come near to you,
though Christ holds me fast.
You were bound
to be more than half,
brother.

PILGRIM WOODS

early mornings I come

gifts to lay
in consuming silence,

these vials of tears
I lose in the grass

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WINDOW

there is a baby screaming
as though its fingers are in flame

Such things happen the papers say,
yet tomorrow there is work
to be done

Four floors down
a garbage truck sighs at the curb,
jaws tossing back filth

I cannot save
all the babies in the world
as much as I would like to.
The mind says
there is only so much to give

Then I recall God's tenderness,
how he laid carpenter's hands
on the foreheads of little children

The grief must be His—

but even as my soul shrinks
from taking in hand,
I am slowly putting
my coat on

HOW I KNOW

You send bracing
fingers up
my sheer, lifeless body
and crack me like
the frost.

A N D R E W

My brother's eyes flared
as he scrubbed the keel

This is what I do...

The preacher's words
quick as net.

Twin kingfishers,
my eyes darted over Gennesaret—

Peter's stern face
encrusted with brine.

He glanced once
over the gilded sea

in my mind I was moving
among multitudes

CENTURION

Captain of a hundred
I march
in and out

the classrooms
lit with brush-fires
of expiring souls.

Behind me
like a worn parchment
the chalkboard shows ghosts
of old lectures,
hieroglyphs
increasingly indecipherable
to me

I stand gazing
on the sagging shoulders,
eyelids weighty
thick as brass

appalled I must again
administer
vinegar to these dying

HEAVEN

I don't pretend to know
entirely,
only that, in moments of prayer
I have held in my hand
white plumes plucked from the wind:
rare as manna,
resplendent as angel hair.

MARTYRS

I picture them

clay figures belching
bright water

petals of cereus.

Today

a lady on the highway praying
over a dead engine
smiles as my car
veers,
thankful for some death of me

A CONVICTING PRESENCE

He walks as though movement
were his own.
I've seen him stand
three minutes at an empty
intersection
with groceries in hand.

He rises for women.
When he drives
his speed is limited.

He visits with God.
(I know because he's
acquired some of His
mannerisms,
like the way he smiles:
unexpectedly
and with a trace of fire.)
He is seventy-six.

TOUCH

I wake deep in the night
to a crystalline world.
In such stillness, it is easy to imagine
the Christ I long for—with face and hands,
wounds He or I could press
my finger into

The minutes pass.
My need, only, materializes
from the dark

so I cling to what's nearer:
my wife in substance
strewn with frail moonlight.

Noiselessly, I move close.
My hand at her side
Christ's body in part,
delivering the touch we both lose
and deeply live for

MESSAGE TO MY UNBORN CHILD

Rare as wheat germ in your mother's
womb, onioned in flesh,
you await our touch.

Already you are gathering being like yarn
from another's hand—God's.
I whisper to you,
but my words drift shapeless and silent:
crackle of a distant star.

Father and child,
we are worlds kept by ocean:

your limits
enfolded by another,
and the fingers which trace
this orbit of belly
seedlings that long for your shore.

INTRODUCTION

Yesterday a butterfly extraordinarily
alighted on my hand

enraptured, I touched its wing
marveled at the smooth
and pointed flakes that jumped
from its frail skin,
couldn't imagine why a thing
of beauty should desire me.

My fingers closed as over paper,
and in that wreck of foil
and color I saw painted
the essence of all
that is *other*

AFTER FORTY DAYS

He staggered from the wilderness
on rubbery legs,
his body spent, but standing.

After blows that gnawed him to the quick,
that told each of his thirty years,
it was not too much—
to have his wounds anointed, his light
for all unbusheled.

For the carpenter's son to walk
with different steps the road winding
to Nazareth
where the world waited
like the edges of a ripe field
for a fully consummated
Christ

GOOD FRIDAY

what if
after the sermon was through
we'd departed with visions only
of the Christs that hang perpetually
in our fathers' parlors,
found we had missed
what is good:

the maples we pass
in our washed
cars
poised in tough kernels,
and the wine in our bellies
which is blood

ARCHAEOLOGY

Here above the fireplace a voyage
of discovery:
chiseling through hard-as-rock
strata of old paint
like digging through ruins of streets
for far away glory.

This building,
once the prize of an Irish lawyer
is now a hive for college co-eds.

Going back

ribbons of color
parchment-fine
burn and fall

At last there emerges
the priceless, desicated, brown mummy
of wood,
grain standing out
like a rigging of bone.

I step back
and begin to trace the snake
of trim around the ceiling and out
through doorways, under the foot of stairs
into invisible reaches of the house.

When last layers fall
from me

find such evidence
of the builder's adoring.

STOPPING FOR A PHOTOGRAPH
(ON THE WAY TO PETRA, JORDAN)

You smile beyond the window,
beckon me forward
like always, to places uncharted.
The meaning of your white hat
is clear: you are poised,
angel-like
between the light and me.
On either side of you
the narrow walls of the canyon
rise out of view.

There are people in the foreground
pausing to point
at something on my left,
and others farther on
where the rock parts to reveal
a vision of pink topaz
pillars.
Their forms grow thinner
until they are drenched utterly
in the radiance beyond.

I snap the photograph.
Shortly, we too will stumble
from this shadow land
into the now-blank permanence
of heaven

I stuff my camera into my bag
and wonder, *will you know me
in the other-worldly light ahead?*

You call me by name
and the miracle is:
without hesitancy,
I am walking

Vita Auctoris

Michael Mender was born in Hamilton, Ontario in 1971. At the age of twenty-three, he was challenged to examine the validity of the Christian faith, and after careful study, committed his life to Christ. He obtained his B.A. in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor in 1995, and is currently working on his M.A. in English and Creative Writing, also at the University of Windsor. He intends his writing to be the overflow of a life permeated and utterly transformed by the reality of a living Christ. Michael presently resides in Windsor with his bride, Tara. Their hearts' passion is to spread the Good News that *Jesus Saves!* to a world in need of hope. Together they are eagerly awaiting the birth of their first child.

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