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## The Cresset (Vol. LXXXI, No. 5, Trinity)

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# THE CRESSET

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE, THE ARTS, AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

TRINITY 2018



VERSE

ESSAYS

REVIEWS & COLUMNS

Stitched Mouth Prayer  
*John M Ballenger*

When I Think of Firmament  
*Nicholas J. Molbert*

  
**VALPARAISO**  
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Vol. 81, No. 5

Against the Integrated Life  
*Peter Meilaender*

Marriage: A Travel Guide  
*Michael Kramer*

Joyce Carol Oates  
and the Springs of Belief  
*David Heddendorf*

Steal Away to Jesus  
*Martha Greene Eads*

The Return of the Tyrants  
and the Price of Democracy  
*H. David Baer*

Michael Plekon's *Uncommon Prayer*  
*Nicholas Denysenko*

David Finnegan-Hosey's  
*Christ on the Psych Ward*  
*Brent Schnipke*



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James McGarrell is a respected figurative artist whose paintings and drawings present enigmatic, lyrical scenarios in complex compositions and rich colors. A longtime art professor at Washington University in St. Louis, McGarrell has traveled extensively. In this piece, he depicts a lush Italian landscape framed in the windows of his studio. McGarrell's works appear in the permanent collections of major museums worldwide, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Art Institute of Chicago. The Brauer Museum is grateful to the artist and Printworks Gallery for enhancing its collection with numerous McGarrell prints and drawings.

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# THE CRESSET

Trinity 2018 • Volume LXXXI, No. 5

## ESSAYS

- Peter Meilaender* 4 Against the Integrated Life  
*Michael Kramer* 14 Marriage: A Travel Guide  
*David Heddendorf* 20 Joyce Carol Oates  
and the Springs of Belief

## COLUMNS

- H. David Baer* 26 The Return of the Tyrants  
and the Price of Democracy  
*Daniel Silliman* 31 The Man from Mars Who Wants to Know  
*Josh Langhoff* 35 "When They Question You, Speak Boldly":  
Revisiting the Music of Julius Eastman  
*Martha Greene Eads* 55 Steal Away to Jesus

## REVIEWS

- Nicholas Denysenko* 39 The Struggle to Become Truly Human:  
A Review of Michael Plekon's *Uncommon  
Prayer*  
*John Ruff* 42 Two Old Friends Hanging Together Again:  
The Rediscovery of Takuichi Fujii's Art  
*Brent Schnipke* 47 Co-Sojourners on a Difficult Journey:  
A Review of David Finnegan-Hosey's  
*Christ on the Psych Ward*  
*Katie Karnehm-Esh* 49 Manure, Garbage Pits, and Cancer Wards:  
A Review of Jeffrey Galbraith's *Painstaker*  
*Marjorie Maddox* 52 Up in the Heavens: A Review of Sofia  
Starnes's *The Consequence of Moonlight*

## DEPARTMENTS

IN LUCE TUA 3

ON THE POETS 57

## VERSE

*John M Ballenger*  
Stitched Mouth Prayer  
13

*Isaac Willis*  
A Sonnet for the Architect  
19

*Devon Miller-Duggan*  
After Christopher Smart  
25

*Lynn Domina*  
Is God Zero?  
30

*Evan Gurney*  
Angel's Share  
34

*Michael Schmidtke*  
Dear SELF,  
38

*Nicholas J. Molbert*  
When I Think of Firmament  
46



whatever is **TRUE**

whatever is **NOBLE**

whatever is **RIGHT**

whatever is **PURE**

whatever is **LOVELY**

whatever is **ADMIRABLE**

if anything is excellent or praiseworthy

—think about such things.

Philippians 4:8

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# IN LUCE TUA

## *In Thy Light*

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### Mining the Text

IN “THE UNKNOWABLE MORE,” AN ESSAY BY Stephanie Paulsell that appeared in our Easter issue, she referenced medieval readers who looked for “sparklets,” or “bits of text that sparkled up at them as they read.”

Dear reader, I’ve found a bounty of sparklets in this issue. The essays, columns, and poems cover a wide array of topics, and, unlike many recent issues of the *Cresset*, do not have an obvious through-line that clearly connects them—but the sparklets glitter nonetheless. My sparklets will not be the same as yours, but I am eager to share a few that caught my eye:

From Peter Meilaender’s opening essay, “Against the Integrated Life” (page 4): “Any theory that culminates in the suggestion that I would be a morally better person if only I raised my own chickens, or that a society of chicken-raisers would be a morally better society, has taken a wrong turn somewhere.”

From John M Ballenger’s poem, “Stitched Mouth Prayer” (page 13): “How long, O Lord, / can a boy fall? How many times / does his face need to hit / that metal bumper?”

From H. David Baer’s column, “The Return of the Tyrants and the Price of Democracy” (page 26): “Today...the mini-dictators who would destroy democracy resemble not so much the totalitarians of the twentieth century, but rather the self-aggrandizing tyrants of ancient Greece.”

From Daniel Silliman’s remembrance of Tom Wolfe (page 31): “When I read Wolfe, I felt like I was suddenly free from every rule, every convention, every ‘right way’ of doing things. But more importantly, I felt like I knew what that freedom was for.”

From Josh Langhoff’s column on the resurgence of interest in the music of Julius Eastman (page 35), a quote from composer Frank Ferko: “I think I (erroneously) considered the Julius concert ‘just another concert’ in a long line of music events at Northwestern.”

From Nicholas Denysenko’s review of Michael Plekon’s *Uncommon Prayer* (page 39): “Prayer is not so much words, but a process wherein the person *becomes* prayer through all of life’s activities.”

From Martha Greene Eads’ “Steal Away to Jesus” (page 55): “I thank my Lord for that great-hearted hostess, who opened her home to wet and dirty strangers, who gave them her best and bore more loss than she had planned.”

Throughout the production of this issue, each of these lines has sparkled up to me, allowing me think or feel something unexpected or clarifying. I marvel at the scope of our contributors’ insights and knowledge—and I would love to hear from you about what in this issue catches your eye or heart or mind. I am confident that something will. ✦

—HGG

### Celebrating Our Best

In April the Associated Church Press recognized three of our contributors with “Best of the Church Press” Awards:

Matthew L. Becker, Award of Excellence for Theological or Scholarly Article for “Christ in the University: Edmund Schlinck’s Vision” (Easter 2017)

Rebekah Curtis, Award of Excellence for Personal Experience/First-Person Account (short format) in a magazine or journal for “The Tree Killers” (Advent-Christmas 2017)

Thomas C. Willadsen, Honorable Mention for Written Humor for “Al Spangler,” (Trinity 2017)

The *Cresset* also received an Honorable Mention in the “Best in Class” category for journals. You can read all of these award-winning pieces on our website, [thecresset.org](http://thecresset.org).



# Against the Integrated Life

Peter Meilaender

IN BOOK IV OF *PARADISE LOST*, JOHN MILTON introduces “our first father” and “our general mother,” ancestors of the human race: “Adam, the goodliest man of men since born / His sons, the fairest of her daughters Eve” (Milton 2000, 86, 83). Together in Eden they lead a perfectly harmonious existence in which conjugal love, productive labor, and worship of God are seamlessly interwoven, their lives together one great hymn of praise. After a day spent tending the garden, they return to their bower for the evening, thanking God for his goodness before joining in the “mysteries of connubial love”:

Thus at their shady lodge arrived, both stood,  
Both turned, and under open sky adored  
The God that made both sky, air, earth and  
    heav'n  
Which they beheld, the moon's resplendent  
    globe  
And starry pole: Thou also mad'st the night,  
Maker omnipotent, and thou the day,  
Which we in our appointed work employed  
Have finished happy in our mutual help  
And mutual love, the crown of all our bliss  
Ordained by thee.... (Milton 2000, 92-3)

It is a delightful picture of a world not yet tainted by sin, in which men and women together join their bodies and souls, minds and hearts, in which there is no clear distinction between their family life, their daily labor, and their religious worship—a holistic vision of all human existence as perfectly integrated and whole.

Christians, of course, long for the day when

that vision will be restored. In the meantime, however, this ideal of harmony can supply a tempting standard against which to measure actually existing human societies. One such critique has sparked considerable discussion over the past year: Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. In a discussion ranging across politics, education, work, sex, and technology, Dreher depicts the many ways in which contemporary mainstream culture is antithetical to Christian belief and practice. He takes his cue from the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who argued, in *After Virtue*, that moral thinking in the modern West has become incoherent and who closed his account of our condition with this half-grim, half-hopeful assessment:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope.... We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict. (MacIntyre 1984, 263)

DREHER TURNS TO BENEDICT AND HIS rule as an antidote to the “forces of dissolution from popular culture[, which] are too great for individuals or families to resist on their own” (Dreher 2017, 50). For contemporary Christians who are “adrift in liquid modernity,”

having “lost the thing that bound ourselves together and to our neighbors and anchored us in both the eternal and the temporal orders” (Dreher 2017, 50), the rule of St. Benedict can supply a recipe for creating anew MacIntyre’s “local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained.”

Dreher’s critique of contemporary society is bracing, and it is difficult to disagree with large parts of his analysis. The scourge of pornography and a casual hookup culture have distorted many young people’s understanding of sexuality. The judicial imposition of same-sex marriage has further undermined the family, and its potential for transforming anti-discrimination law leaves Christians in many professions vulnerable to legal attack. Technology and the ubiquitous smartphone have fragmented our experience of the world and scattered our attention. Geographic mobility has eroded communities, and the distances that many of us travel from home to work or to worship challenge our families and churches alike. For several decades, many Christians have thought that they could turn the cultural tide through political activism, by electing the right representatives or appointing the right judges, but those hopes have proved largely empty. Thoughtful Christians should therefore take seriously Dreher’s contention that the only way forward is through a kind of secession from many mainstream institutions and the building of “a vibrant counterculture” (Dreher 2017, 18) existing parallel to them.

Despite my sympathy for much of Dreher’s argument, however, I find myself, in reading his book, constantly suppressing slight twinges of misgiving. These become especially urgent when Dreher’s claims grow excessively uncompromising, for example in his apparent demand that all Christian parents should either put their children into classical Christian schools or homeschool them: “Because public education in America is neither rightly ordered, nor religiously informed, nor able to form an imagination devoted to Western civilization, it is time for all Christians to pull their children out of the public school system” (Dreher 2017, 155). As it happens, my wife and I (but mostly my wife!) have been homeschooling our own children for about fifteen years now, hav-

ing stumbled into it somewhat by chance (rather than out of any principled commitment, religious or otherwise), and having continued because, in a variety of ways, it has seemed to work well for us. And I heartily encourage other parents to consider doing the same. But doing so cannot possibly be a moral obligation for “all Christians.” Since

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one parent must forego full-time employment, and because many curricular materials are expensive, homeschooling involves significant sacrifices both of time and also of money. Private Christian schools, needless to say, involve comparable sacrifices. Not all families will be in a position to make these sacrifices. Some parents may also think, not unreasonably, that there is value in having their children confront a range of fellow citizens of varying backgrounds and beliefs by attending public schools. Is homeschooling a valuable option that many Christian parents might want to pursue? Certainly. Is it morally required as a necessary part of building a new Christian counterculture? Certainly not.

It would be unfair to seize upon this one passage and criticize Dreher on account of it. Most of his recommendations are more flexible than this, and he frequently recognizes that not all of his suggestions will suit all readers or all families. He is open to a wide range of ways that diverse believers may go about seeking to recreate meaningful forms of community. Still, there is something both predictable and vaguely unsatisfactory about the litany of cultural criticisms: we need more meaningful forms of work; we need to



be more intentional about living in close proximity to family, friends, and our fellow parishioners; we need to put away our smartphones; we need to withdraw from the schools and avoid mainstream media; we need to “[p]lant a garden, and participate in a local farmer’s market” (Dreher 2017, 98), “[s]ecede culturally from the mainstream” (Dreher 2017, 98), and “reverse the seemingly unstoppable atomization of daily life” (Dreher 2017, 141). Taken individually, most of these recommendations will probably seem reasonable to the typical reader, as they do to me. Taken collectively, especially against the backdrop of that haunting ideal alternative—the monastic order guided by the Rule of Benedict—these recommendations may prompt us to wonder whether Dreher is not covertly longing for a return to an Edenic paradise, the harmonious and integrated community that will one day be restored but that is not now, for us, an appropriate goal.

**B**E THAT AS IT MAY, I AM INTERESTED HERE not so much in Dreher specifically—who has written a good book, worth pondering—but with a certain kind of cultural criticism that I think his book represents and that may often be tempting to Christians: the yearning for a lost wholeness that modernity has destroyed. In a very different context, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of this urge in a letter to his friend and confidant Eberhard Bethge, in terms that have a certain pertinence to Dreher’s backward look to medieval monasticism. Describing the modern world’s growing tendency to account for more and more of human life without reference to God, Bonhoeffer wrote from his imprisonment:

Anxious souls will ask what room there is left for God now; and as they know of no answer to the question, they condemn the whole development that has brought them to such straits. I wrote to you before about the various emergency exits that have been contrived; and we ought to add to them the *salto mortale* [death-leap] back into the Middle Ages.... It’s a dream that reminds one of the song *O wüsst’ ich*

*doch den Weg zurück, den weiten Weg ins Kinderland.* (Bonhoeffer 1997, 360)

Here Bonhoeffer quotes (or very slightly misquotes) a poem that Brahms had set to music under the title “Heimweh.” We might translate it loosely but metrically into English thus:

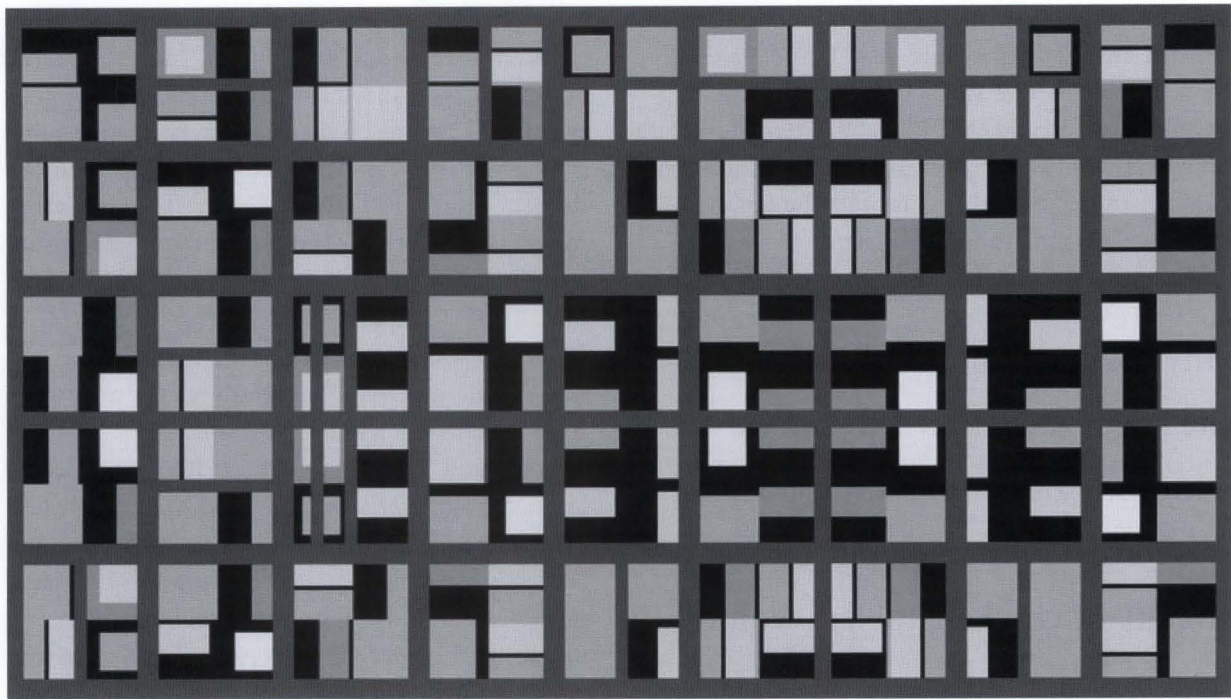
Oh, if only I knew the way to return,  
The long way back to the land of my  
youth.

Bonhoeffer continues: “There is no such way...” (Bonhoeffer 1997, 360).

This longing for the integrated life appears in many contexts. One with which I have some familiarity is education, where we see it frequently in battles over curricula. Many Christians, and almost all of those with a traditionalist bent, believe firmly in rigidly structured core curricula, in which all students proceed through a largely “Great Books” course of study, integrating history, literature, philosophy, theology, social theory, and the arts, and sometimes even mathematics and the natural sciences as well. This is also Dreher’s ideal. Such curricula, needless to say, have a great deal to be said for them (and are, in fact, the sort of thing I enjoy teaching—at least to the right students). They function reasonably well in very small, highly intentional communities of like-minded faculty and students—institutions like a Thomas Aquinas College in California, or a Thomas More College of Liberal Arts in New Hampshire. Almost everywhere else they degenerate into ideological battlegrounds and turf wars over guaranteed student enrollments. Most students in most places are better served by a *less* integrated curriculum. Even the most learned professors possess knowledge that is highly fragmentary; even those of us who do this for a living realize that achieving some satisfactory understanding of the whole is a lifelong and never completed endeavor. Students suffer no great harm—may even benefit—from having to struggle in order to fit together the various fields they are studying, combining and recombining them in different ways as they progress.

The longing for an integrated life is also clearly visible in our attitudes toward food. In this area,





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Fractal Art Series by Thomas Wallace Scherzer

we encounter what we might call both “pagan” and “Christian” versions of the same phenomenon. But one need think only of the movement for more “natural” and organic foods to discern the desire for a more holistic, authentic relationship between human beings and the natural world. (One could extend this analysis, no doubt, to a consideration of environmentalism more broadly, or to attitudes toward health and wellness, where “holistic” is an inescapable buzzword.) Most people no longer know where their food comes from, no longer know the farmers who produce it, no longer—for that matter—have any idea of the genetic manipulations that plants undergo, or the conditions under which animals are raised, or what it is actually like to slaughter one of them. We are in a sense alienated from our entire food system, which has taken on an industrial and mechanized character. Christian versions of this critique tend to emphasize the importance of respect for God’s creation and of maintaining an attitude of stewardship toward the entire natural world.

Here too, I am inclined to respond with a “Yes, but...” Indeed, I have come to think of arguments like Dreher’s as what I call “Raise Your Own Chickens” arguments. Several years ago I was asked to review a book entitled *The Politics of Gratitude*,

by Mark Mitchell. Mitchell’s book is in some ways a more scholarly version of Dreher’s: an argument in favor of small communities on a human scale, in which men and women can exercise meaningful control over their lives, practice stewardship of both the natural environment and of our common culture, and experience the worlds of work, family, and education in more authentic ways. In discussing our relationship to the natural world, Mitchell criticizes our distance from the food we eat and the processes of producing it, such as slaughtering livestock. My own reply to this was simple; as I wrote at the time,

I, for one, have absolutely no desire to slaughter even a chicken, much less anything larger, in order to put supper on the table. Nor can I persuade myself that this is a moral shortcoming on my part, or that I should view with regret the economic division of labor that has permitted these activities to be taken out of my home and located elsewhere. (Meilaender 2013)

My thoughts on the matter have not changed in the interim. To the contrary, Mitchell’s book (which is, to be fair, considerably better than this



brief reference may imply) enabled me to formulate for myself a principle that I find generally reliable: any theory that culminates in the suggestion that I would be a morally better person if only I raised my own chickens, or that a society of chicken-raisers would be a morally better society, has taken a wrong turn somewhere.

Arguments like Dreher's or Mitchell's stand

**Any theory that culminates in the suggestion that I would be a morally better person if only I raised my own chickens, or that a society of chicken-raisers would be a morally better society, has taken a wrong turn somewhere.**

in a long tradition. They are the conservative Christian variation (there are other variations, on the left as well as the right) on an old theme: the critique of modernity as fragmented and alienating. (It is no accident, I think, that Dreher's book begins by tracing the roots of our present discontents all the way back to late-medieval philosophy, then to the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment, on through the "calamitous" nineteenth century and into the wars and sexual revolution of the twentieth—modernity as a narrative of decay.) This critique probably originates in Rousseau's *Discourses*, later drawing nourishment from economic criticisms of modern capitalism as well as sociological ones of rationalized and bureaucratic society. In outline, it runs something like this: In a pre- or early modern world, most people still lived in stable communities that structured their lives, providing shared norms and a sense of place in an intelligible world. Their local communities, their work, their families and kinship networks, and their religious practices all overlapped and fit neatly inside one another, creating reinforcing structures of meaning. But the accelerating processes of modernity, especially over the last three centuries, gradually broke apart

this coherent world. Political authority and structures of governance grew larger, more powerful, and more centralized; the decisions shaping people's lives came to be made far away, by unknown strangers, even as their consequences reached deeper into one's life. Workers became more mobile, and work moved out of the home, losing its connection to family structure and the rhythms of daily life. Employers, like states, became large, faceless powers, and urbanization took more and more men and women off the land and away from their traditional customs into massive, strange, and anonymous cities. Religion became an increasingly private affair, and in a mobile and diverse world, neighbors could no longer assume a set of shared norms. People were left alienated, powerless, and lost, their lives fragmented among different spheres of family, leisure, work, faith, and citizenship (or subjecthood) that they no longer knew how to integrate. Over time these processes have accelerated and have become even more acute in the post-Cold War world, with its intense globalization and rapid technological change.

We may not be able to reverse these processes entirely. But we can take steps to counteract their effects. We can intentionally live closer to family, friends, and church. We can put away our smartphones. And we can raise our own chickens.

**T**HERE IS A GREAT DEAL OF TRUTH IN THIS story. It correctly describes fundamental differentiations that have gradually taken place within liberal modernity: between church and state, state and work, work and family. It goes wrong, however, in diagnosing these simply as marks of fragmentation, of a lost wholeness that we should be striving to restore. These forms of differentiation are not modernity's weakness, they are its strength; not its sickness, but rather its health.

The division of human life into separate spheres, governed by their own distinct principles, has been among the most important achievements of liberal modernity. The political theorist Michael Walzer has described this phenomenon nicely in an essay on "Liberalism and the Art of Separation":

I suggest that we think of liberalism as a certain way of drawing the map of the



social and political world. The old, preliberal map showed a largely undifferentiated land mass, with rivers and mountains, cities and towns, but no borders.... Society was conceived as an organic and integrated whole. It might be viewed under the aspect of religion, or politics, or economy, or family, but all these interpenetrated one another and constituted a single reality. Church and state, church-state and university, civil society and political community, dynasty and government, office and property, public life and private life, home and shop: each pair was, mysteriously or unmysteriously, two-in-one, inseparable. Confronting this world, liberal theorists preached and practiced an art of separation. They drew lines, marked off different realms, and created the sociopolitical map with which we are still familiar. The most famous line is the “wall” between church and state, but there are many others. Liberalism is a world of walls, and each one creates a new liberty. (Walzer 1984, 315)

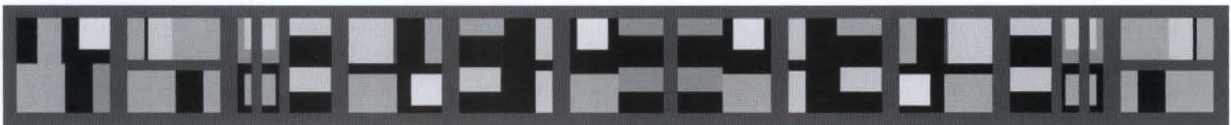
Walzer rightly describes this “art of separation” as an extension or elaboration by analogy of that initial distinction between church and state—a distinction with which few Christians today will want to quarrel. It spawns others in turn. Just as that initial distinction creates religious liberty, for example, so too “the line that liberals drew between the old church-state (or state-church) and the universities creates academic freedom, leaving professors as free to profess as believers are to believe” (Walzer 1984, 315).

Walzer briefly sketches several more such separations or differentiations. The “separation of civil society and political community creates the sphere of economic competition and free enterprise, the market in commodities, labor, and capital” (Walzer 1984, 316). It is true, of course, that “market freedom entails certain risks for

consumers,” but, as Walzer points out, “so does religious freedom” (Walzer 1984, 316). Similarly, the “abolition of dynastic government separates family and state” and in this way creates the possibility for people to pursue careers according to their talents, opening up the “sphere of office and then the freedom to compete for bureaucratic and professional place, to lay claim to a vocation, apply for an appointment, develop a specialty, and so on” (Walzer 1984, 316-17). Finally, Walzer writes, the same process, by separating “public and private life” (Walzer 1984, 317), enables new forms of domestic intimacy that are profoundly important to most of us. In the privacy of our homes we become free to pursue “a very wide range of interests and activities...: reading books, talking politics, keeping a journal, teaching what we know to our children, cultivating (or, for that matter, neglecting) our gardens” (Walzer 1984, 317). Raising our own chickens, we might add, or not raising them! “Our homes are our castles, and there we are free from official surveillance” (Walzer 1984, 317).

**T**HE VIRTUE OF WALZER’S ANALYSIS IS TO correct the one-sided portrayal of modernity as a story of decay, fragmentation, and alienation, the loss of a pre-modern, pre-liberal Eden. The story of modernity is also one of increasing richness and diversity, of freedom and pluralism, of a world in which, to borrow a line from C. S. Lewis, “Everything is getting more itself and more different from everything else all the time” (Lewis 2003, 281). Lewis was not describing the spheres of society—family, work, church, state, and so on—but his point is analogous to Walzer’s. As he writes in the preface to *The Great Divorce*, “life is not like a river but like a tree. It does not move towards unity but away from it and the creatures grow further apart as they increase in perfection” (Lewis 2001, viii). A new, richer, and redeemed form of community will one day arise—can arise—only as the outcome of that increasing process of differentiation.

Indeed, Christians are especially well placed





to understand the characteristic forms of modernity not simply as examples of fragmentation and loss but rather of differentiation and enrichment, as a process in which the various spheres of society gradually become more and more themselves and less and less something else. I suspect that various Christian traditions make this argument in their own ways. The Catholic thinker Michael Novak, for example, analyzed democratic capitalism in terms of a tripartite distinction among political, economic, and moral-cultural aspects of society. Among Reformed thinkers, there appears to be renewed interest in Abraham Kuyper's theory of sphere sovereignty. But perhaps no theological tradition is better capable of illuminating modern processes of social differentiation than Lutheranism.

The claim that Christians necessarily live out the tensions of competing claims—that we inhabit two kingdoms simultaneously—is the very cornerstone of Luther's social thought. His most famous statement of this idea is in the 1523 essay "On Temporal Authority." There Luther struggles with the problem of political coercion, seeking to harmonize scriptural passages such as the command to "turn the other cheek" with Paul's injunction in Romans to be subject to the governing authorities. True Christians, Luther argues, do of their own accord all that is required of them and therefore need neither law nor government. But such true Christians are few and far between (if indeed they are to be found at all), and God has therefore instituted earthly government to protect the innocent and punish the guilty. And Christians, although they neither need the law themselves nor call upon it in their own defense, uphold and support government out of love for their neighbors, who do require its protection. In this way, Luther argues, we navigate the demands of both realms:

In this way two propositions are brought into harmony with one another: at one and the same time you satisfy God's kingdom inwardly and the kingdom of the world outwardly. You suffer evil and injustice, and yet at the same time you punish evil and injustice; you do not resist evil, and yet at the same time, you do resist it. In the one case, you consider yourself

and what is yours; in the other, you consider your neighbor and what is his. In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the gospel and suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns the person or property of others, you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbor. (Luther 1962, 96)

ONE COULD HARDLY ASK FOR A MORE pointed description of the need to live one's life according to the different requirements of distinct perspectives simultaneously. When I teach this essay, I like to drive home its practical implications by making sure that my students do not miss my favorite sentence: "Therefore, if you see that there is a lack of hangmen, constables, judges, lords, or princes, and you find that you are qualified, you should offer your services and seek the position, that the essential government authority may not be despised and become enfeebled or perish" (Luther 1962, 95). My well-meaning students are typically eager to lead lives of Christian service. Some of them expect that law school—"constables, judges"—could be a way of doing this. But not even the most career-oriented among them are likely to have asked themselves whether they are "qualified" for the position of hangman, or should serve the Lord in that line of work.

This suggests in turn another of Walzer's separations, the creation of a distinct sphere of work or vocation. Luther elsewhere develops his two kingdoms doctrine in a way that anticipates this as well as the potentially broader spectrum of differentiated spheres that Walzer describes. In 1532 he preached a series of sermons on the gospel of Matthew, parts of which were copied down and published as a Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. Here he develops the idea that each person fills a variety of "offices." "I have often said," Luther comments, "that we must sharply differentiate between these two, the office and the person. The man who is called Hans or Martin is a man quite different from the one who is called elector or doctor or preacher. Here we have two different persons in the one man" (Luther 1956, 23). Luther



argues that because we fill a variety of roles and stand in different relations to different people, we must fulfill multiple and distinct sets of duties:

[E]very human being on earth has two persons: one person for himself, with obligations to no one except to God; and in addition a secular person, according to which he has obligations to other people. In this life we have to have social relations with one another. Take a husband or the head of a household, for example, with his wife and his children. Although he is a Christian, this does not mean that he has to stand for it if the members of his family raise a rumpus or cause trouble in the house. Rather he must resist wrongdoing and punish it, to make them behave properly. (Luther 1956, 171)

As a husband and father, I have obligations to love, cherish, and be faithful to my wife and children, to maintain, together with my wife, the good order and discipline of the household, and to provide for the religious education of my children. In the same fashion, I also fill other offices with their own corresponding duties. As a citizen, I must support the governing authorities, uphold the rule of law, and assist my fellow citizens in need. As a professor, I must help my students learn, expose them to important works and thinkers in my discipline, and help them develop their intellects. As a member of my parish, I have duties to support it financially and in other ways according to my talents—perhaps by caring for the church grounds or teaching Sunday school or singing in the choir. “There is no getting around it,” says Luther, “a Christian has to be a secular person of some sort....[For] now we are talking about a Christian-in-relation: not about his being a Christian, but about this life and his obligation in it to some other person, like a lord or a lady, a wife or children or neighbors, whom he is obliged, if possible, to defend, guard, and protect” (Luther 1956, 109).

When Walzer describes liberalism’s many “separations,” he is describing a world in which the various offices we fill have become increasingly numerous and differentiated, with the various

principles or duties that attach to them increasingly distinct and clear. In a sense, of course, one can live out all these offices in the form of an integrated life. They are all part of God’s plan for us, the avenues by which he enables us to serve our neighbors. In filling all our various offices, we are always seeking to serve Christ and the neighbor. For now, however, the possibility of their ultimate integration is more a promise than a lived reality, and we are as likely to experience their tension as their harmony. This is simply the form taken by the Christian life in a fallen world. In the meantime, this fragmentation within the self that we may feel as we seek to fill our different offices is not simply

Luther argues that because we  
fill a variety of roles and stand  
in different relations to different  
people, we must fulfill multiple  
and distinct sets of duties.

a tragedy to be lamented or escaped. As Walzer points out, the multiplication and differentiation of our roles is also a check on the inappropriate exercise of power by one office over another—each wall creates a new liberty. Moreover, our diverse offices help realize a world in which everything becomes more and more itself—in which the father is ever more a father, the citizen ever more a citizen, the neighbor ever more a neighbor, the professor ever more a teacher, the worker ever more a plumber, a mail carrier, an insurance agent, a dentist.

We may not quite want to say, paraphrasing Socrates, that the integrated life is not worth living. But neither should we be overly concerned when we fail—as we will—to achieve it. For us who inhabit the temporal meantime between Christ’s first coming and his future return, living an integrated life is a misguided ambition. Nor should this really surprise us. The Christian is called, not to realize any particular form of social order—not even one shaped by the Rule of St. Benedict—but simply to a life of faithfulness. For some that may



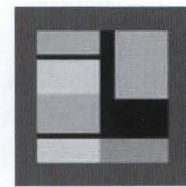
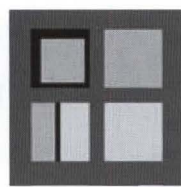
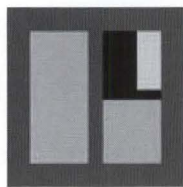
mean homeschooling their children; for others not. For some it may mean turning off their smartphones; for others not. For some it may mean intentionally choosing to live close to family or within walking distance of one's church; for others not. For some it may even mean raising their own chickens. For others—I am confident—it will not. Our task is to fill our offices faithfully, to play the part assigned us. As Lewis writes in “The World’s Last Night”:

[W]e keep on assuming that we know the play. We do not know the play. We do not even know whether we are in Act I or Act V. We do not know who are the major and who the minor characters. The Author knows.... That it has a meaning, we may

be sure, but we cannot see it. When it is over, we may be told. We are led to expect that the Author will have something to say to each of us on the part that each of us has played. The playing it well is what matters infinitely. (Lewis 2012, 105-6)

If we do that, we may rest assured that the scattered fragments of our lives will be gathered up and fitted into place within a coherent whole. Then, at last—but not before—we will lead an integrated life. ✦

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## STITCHED MOUTH PRAYER

His father is inside the house,  
the boy is outside in the bed of a Ford.  
He climbs up on the side rail.  
It's 1980, maybe the Olympics  
have been on. This is the balance  
beam. He always makes it  
from the cab to the tailgate. This time  
he'll try the tailgate too. Even then,  
at eight years old, he knows the cost  
of the narrow way, the claims it will make,  
the mark that will remain with him,  
inside. Years later he'll feel it with the tip  
of his tongue, the scar that runs from  
the corner of his mouth, as far up

as he can reach. How long, O Lord,  
can a boy fall? How many times  
does his face need to hit  
that metal bumper? Teeth slice  
inside the tender mouth? How many  
stitches, O Lord, to knit  
the cries of your children into groans  
so inarticulate that your Holy Spirit  
will hear, understand them as prayer?

John M Ballenger



# Marriage: A Travel Guide

Michael Kramer

I dream of you walking at night along the  
streams  
of the country of my birth...  
— Wendell Berry,  
“The Country of Marriage,” ll. 1 - 2

**F**IND MYSELF CONTEMPLATING THE IMPENDING marriage of an acquaintance. This prospective groom matters to me; due to his vocation, he and his new wife will become an intimate part of my world. That seems inevitable. And so I offer the only thing I really can: my own well-earned wisdom regarding married life.

Becky and I have been married forty-six years. Although we know folk married sixty-two years and others brushing seventy, I suspect the experience of our forty-six is worth a few words to the prospective groom regarding his life with his bride. I do not presume to prescribe, only to advise—and the grand thing about advice is that one can always choose to ignore it, whatever good intentions might elicit it.



A man lost in the woods in the dark, I stood  
still and said nothing. And then there rose  
in me,  
like the earth's empowering brew rising  
in root and branch, the words of a dream...  
—“The Country of Marriage,” ll. 8 -12

The first precept I offer is the most difficult. As a retired English teacher, I turn to poetry to help explain because, as William Wordsworth

wrote, “all good poetry comes from the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion...recollected in tranquility.” The poem I turn to, Wendell Berry’s “The Country of Marriage,” is one I treasured since before I married.

As the poem opens, Berry (my generation’s Frost or even Wordsworth), finds himself lost in the dark. There are a multitude of paths the lost man might follow. Yet he finds himself, influenced by the heady brew of nature, following a dream.

Two points here: First, a human will never cease to be alone. We each wallow in our own life blood, our own dreams and fears and visions, even in the midst of the greatest crowd.

When I was young, I believed that marriage—perhaps the simple reality of cohabitation, but more likely the act of sexual intercourse—would somehow grant me knowledge of the thoughts of my spouse. More importantly, I believed she would receive that same knowledge into my feelings and needs. I since have come to despise passive-aggressive behavior that fails to ask, fails to articulate needs, that may on occasion hint at things unspoken, that presumes my other, if she really cares for me, will anticipate my feelings, perhaps even before I understand them myself.

That, of course, is rot.

I use the word “rot” intentionally here. We’ve all found that the one bad potato or apple or berry, left in the bag or basket, spreads its condition to all about it. “Rubbish” merely accumulates. Rot spreads and contaminates, and a rotten marriage contaminates both partners, any children. It also affects friends and neighbors. A rotten marriage is bad for humanity in its precedent and its influence.



Like Berry, I am lost in the woods. (I can't say that the poet intentionally evokes the opening of Dante's epic of the soul in the second part of his poem, but his sentiment, while perhaps less cosmic, amounts to the same.) My solitary world is dark, filled with scary shadows. My sense of direction is unreliable. I seek a beaten path but also feel that the ground I stand on is untraveled. I cannot expect my lover, once I've found her, to find my way. She struggles enough to find her own.

Dialectic becomes the model. She and I discuss. Sometimes we debate. Once in a great while, we argue. But the inevitable feedback from frequent agreements and compromises provides assurance as I discern the right path, as does my faith in the will of God and the study of God's Word.

As in the poem, the words of a dream interrupt my silence. And that allows the other point.

Unable to capture truth exactly, I can only dream. But my dream of my partner may be more real than the woman who stands before me. I yearn to see the woman God intended. In her love for me, I gain a glimpse of the man God intended in me. The light of that closer-to-the-truth-in-the-mind-of-God we mutually uncover becomes our lantern. His light does shine in the darkness. And, together, we can seek the path more- or less-traveled by, whichever we find closer to the will of God.

This doesn't take long hours of corporate prayer, mutual meditation, or dual devotion. But we walk in the woods holding hands. And we talk.

One year, the chair of theology at the high school where I taught asked me to talk with his seniors about marriage. I scared the be-jeebers out of him with my proposed title: "The Importance of Pre-marital Intercourse." I never got to give the talk. I never got to explain that *intercourse* in that inflammatory title refers to conversation.

I meant to explain that a couple contemplating marriage needs to talk a lot. Exhaustively. Humorously. Seriously. Hopes and dreams. Brutal facts. Financial reality. Priorities. Child rearing (even if only grand-children through a grown and blended family are assumed). Politics. What kind of lettuce goes best with the avocado in the salad. Conversation before marriage needs to range widely and consider carefully.

Such conversation needs to continue throughout our walk in the woods of our lives. We humans only stop growing emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually with death. And marriage remains "until death us do part." As well as I know my partner at this point, seldom much time passes without her surprising me with an opinion, some knowledge, some desire. I find myself unaware that she holds an idea because she didn't hold that idea yesterday, last week, or last year. My love remains relevant only as I listen to her.



...there is a graceful clearing  
and in that opening a house,  
an orchard and garden,  
comfortable shades, and flowers  
red and yellow in the sun, a pattern  
made in the light for the light to return to.

—"The Country of Marriage," ll. 19-24

A contractor built the house in which we live in 1957. The original owner added an apartment behind the garage. When we purchased the property in 1999, we added a room. Over the ensuing years, we painted, landscaped, and removed carpeting to show off the hardwood floors. We have blueprints for all the structures. Becky and I have built a home. The home we built, however, lies deeper than any of that construction or renovation.

Memories fill our home. Our daughter, Megan, married in this backyard; our lower deck served as a dance floor for their reception. The side yard near our rose garden saw our son Nicholas explain his desire to marry a dear girl when they were nineteen. "You guys aren't exactly an advertisement for postponing marriage," he said. (We married when I was barely twenty.) "We've prayed, and we think this is what God wants us to do." His wife, Rachel, died of an unexpected and aggressive cancer just two years into their marriage.

Some of our home memories did not take place at this address. Years earlier, a different address saw that same son accidentally hit that same daughter with a baseball bat in the front yard. Becky drove to the hospital while I sat in the back holding a towel on Megan's bleeding forehead. Still



another address saw me drop and break a new jar of pancake syrup on the carpet near the pantry. Our oldest son holds memories of four addresses, his youngest brother only two. But each address had a share of Christmases, birthdays, and serious conversation about family issues.

The distinction between house and home lies in the distinction between flesh and spirit, between body and soul. *House* is built with land and stone, concrete and lumber. *Home* is built with memories and aspirations, intentions and actions.

We live amidst our respective and mutual passions. In our sitting room, Becky hangs one quilt on the rack. Another graces the coffee table. Soon she will enter two, “Happy Homes” and “Red Poppies,” in a show. Our books are everywhere, including in the garage, in boxes that need to go to the thrift shop. Photos of our children and grandchildren fill the walls throughout our house and are displayed in frames on dressers, bookshelves, and the entertainment chest.

The distinction between house and home lies in the distinction between flesh and spirit, between body and soul. *House* is built with land and stone, concrete and lumber. *Home* is built with memories and aspirations, intentions and actions.

As I write this, the elm in the front yard shades the Adirondack chairs that catch the afternoon breeze. In the back, the Chinese Tallow tree begins to set its honey-sweet blossoms and soon will buzz with a thousand bees. My roses, returned from winter pruning, are beginning to demonstrate their colors, the beautiful symmetry of the blossoms just formed and those falling past their prime. Amaryllis flowers fill the length of the side yard. Honeysuckle threatens to explode in fragrance and white flower. Flowers on the trumpet

vine start to sound their violet fanfare. Meanwhile, the white and yellow Lady Banks climb the back wall. I love my garden. Becky laughed yesterday afternoon as I regaled her with my luncheon spots—the rose garden brick patio, the redwood bar, the small round table behind the back door, the table beneath the canvas gazebo.

Our home becomes the place where we live married. Still, we can take that sense of home with us wherever we go. Home simply shelters us, adding comfort as we spend time in our own dark woods.



...I rest in peace

in you, when I arrive at last.

—“The Country of Marriage,” ll. 37-38

No doctor ever diagnosed my psychology, but I spent times during high school and college in what I now recognize as depression. Whether caused by some chemical imbalance or just the surges of adolescent hormones, I sometimes spent hours, even days, doing little besides staring off into space. Something akin to mania offset those moments, and I would undertake heroic bouts of cleaning or exercise or writing or study.

Marriage left that all more steady. Instead of a valley of depression or a manic mountaintop, now I reside more in the foothills of emotion, generally upbeat, enjoying the calm and quiet as well as intellectual and physical activity. (Studies have shown that a healthy sex life, in my mind part of a good marriage, produces oxytocin. This adds to the endorphins that stimulate good feelings.)

The grand thing I think we have both found in our relationship shows up when either of us is stressed or has reason to be down. Even if all Becky does is pick up the slack for me, I realized long ago I'm not in this alone. Someone beautiful, vibrant, intelligent, and compassionate cares for me and my well-being. She tells me in words and actions that the same holds true for her.

Just as importantly, she shares my elation when I have something to celebrate, even if my accomplishment is not something in which she shares strong interest. When I received word recently that I had sold an essay to a magazine, I



barely waited until she came through the door to tell her. Life goes better when one shares joy or sorrow. Burdens become lighter and joy becomes deeper when shared.

These past months, a number of issues brought about my retirement a bit earlier than planned. Teaching has been so ingrained in me that I recognize even planned retirement would have left an empty plain, a sort of Great American Desert for my soul. Three things kept me from that wilderness. First, God provided opportunities for me to share my expertise, my ability to teach, and my writing with new friends and colleagues. Second, my love for my wife and the busyness of her continued career moved me to take on the bulk of household work. (She complimented my labor recently, citing things kept neatly but not neurotically.) And third, her unconditional love for me, her willingness to make the best with me, left me feeling I needed to honor her trust and love by refusing to give in to despair.

Our new routines provide more time for what we would pursue either together or separately on weekends. Our financial adjustments have not been too severe. Her assurance that “we deal with these things together” provides me inspiration and support.

Even with marriage, life continues its ups and downs. God’s candid response to Adam and Eve after their disobedience set the tone for that. Yet marriage provides the knowledge that we work in partnership, “our mutual burdens bear,” as the old hymn proclaims.



Even an hour of love is a moral predicament,  
a blessing  
a man may be hard up to be worthy of. He  
can only  
accept it, as a plant accepts from all the  
bounty of the light  
enough to live, and then accepts the dark,  
passing unencumbered back to the earth, as I  
have fallen time and again from the great  
strength  
of my desire, helpless, into your arms.  
—“The Country of Marriage,” ll. 51-58

I don’t deserve the devotion of this woman I love. She might say she doesn’t deserve me. As far as “earning” her, however, I’ve courted, given jewelry and flowers and candy (a gumball in a colorful, well-padded tin was one of my first gifts to her), written poems, driven miles out of my way, and put aside important work. None of that could have been enough.

I continue those efforts (no gumballs for some time, however). A better word than *efforts* might be *services*. I gave up doing what it might take to deserve her years ago. Rather, I find I do what I do because I choose to.

I am a better man because of her love. I work harder and more meaningfully. I am more careful in my behaviors and attitudes. My strength flows from the grace of God and also from the grace of Becky. God is often intangible. My wife never is. In our more than forty-five years of marriage, we’ve rarely spent more than twenty-four hours apart. Frankly, I like things this way. Shared experience, good and bad, pleasant and awful, grant unity and confidence.



What I am learning to give you is my death  
to set you free of me, and me from myself  
into the dark and the new light.

—“The Country of Marriage,” ll. 59-61

These lines make me miss my classroom. There was always one student, who, unafraid of appearing dumb, would raise a hand and give voice to the confusion many would feel with this stanza. “If he loves her, if he loves his wife, why would he want to die?” But Berry’s *death* here is not that cessation of life. Rather, death signifies an end to self, a start to selflessness.

Long ago Becky and I came to realize that we were a couple to more than the IRS. Economically, of course, we form an entity. Our bank accounts are jointly held. Retirement funds and Social Security remain separate, but we list each other as beneficiaries. We are fiscal partners.

More than that, though, we consider decisions, even ones that seem only to involve one of us, together. Becky’s taking a quilting class next



Wednesday. I know that, and we plan accordingly. One weekend in June, I'm participating in an online writing seminar. She knows. Not much that happens in our life remains separate for long.

In the language of Berry's poem, we "thirst" for the rich beverage of our joint identity. Our "commonwealth" holds more strength, more value, more security, than our respective individual states.

When Christ promises that "the two shall become one flesh," He means just that. I am complete with and in her. Alone, I am lacking. I believe that offends the modern value of independence. But here we mistake mutuality for dependency. While I am indeed dependent on my wife, on our marriage, that does not hurt me the way dependency on alcohol or some drug might. Rather, together we are stronger, complementary, complete.



I give you...

— "The Country of Marriage," l. 72

I can well imagine a Christmas full of family: wife, children with their spouses, grandchildren, even close friends gathered in our sitting room around the tree covered with ornaments collected on our travels over the years. The room is rife with expectations of gifts to be given and received.

I can imagine further this grandfather lost in the shuffle, enjoying the toys opened by grandchildren, the books and brocaded scarves unwrapped by children, perhaps a diamond pendant long overdue to my wife. Somehow, if I were forgotten, I'd like to think I might not even notice for the joy I'd find in watching those others find pleasure in the gifts I selected, wrapped, and set under the tree for them.

I do love presents. Truly though, my joy that morning would come in seeing the delight on the faces of others.

I finally found the bicycle I wanted for my wife: a beach cruiser, three-speed, two-toned blue and pretty. I had a basket mounted and bought it for her birthday. Days of beautiful weather in early spring left me eager to give it to her. I tried to assuage my anticipation by showing it to

my daughter, inviting friends to come and see. I finally gave in and presented it to her early—not even April, and her birthday falls in May.

She loved it. A few days later, after we'd bought her a lock and a helmet, we rode out to picnic in the park, just far enough for her to get used to pedaling and the feeling of the seat. We will never ride bikes across country, but this summer's farmers markets remain a real possibility.

Marriage offers so many gift-giving occasions. And while the wrapped ones are wonderful, no gift is better than time for listening, for sharing joy or sorrow or concern. No gift is better than my other knowing I am hers, me knowing she is mine.

This gift-giving comes with grace. Her grace and my grace fall short of the limit, the need, even the expectation. Instead, I know my life, my joy, my partner, my friend, my lover, my critic, my champion arrive all through the grace of God. I deserve nothing. I want little. I receive a bounty.

The return comes in the urgency I give, and not just to her. God's grace and Becky's grace create grace in me. Kindness begets kindness. Joy uncovers itself in this.

**SIT BACK NOW. I'VE DIGESTED AGAIN** WENDELL Berry's poem as I have many times. I've discovered an Englishman, Jon Cleary, wrote a novel by the same title, in which nationalism unravels the marriage of an Australian wife and English husband. The lesson that author surely intended through his title is that marriage is a country unto itself, transcending all loyalties save that to God alone. And a blessed marriage must be pleasing to Our Lord.

I discover I cannot say enough. Perhaps my journey's nowhere near complete. Is there marriage in Heaven? I can only say the closest I find to God's Heaven in this life comes in the arms and in the eyes of that woman I love and who loves me. ✦

This essay honors the Rev. Robb Ring and Mrs. Bethany Ring upon their marriage. Michael Kramer enjoys retirement with Rebecca, his wife of 47 years this August.

## A SONNET FOR THE ARCHITECT

—for Andi

The site has been selected, so they dig,  
to break in soft and untouched grass. So draw  
the plan. Then draw again. You lay your wrist,  
poor broken wrist near mine, so red, and all  
among my pens and paper you—stopping—  
glance over metaphors and images  
to find that all my iambs were blocking  
your compass. Circles erase blemishes;  
lend more, more of your protracted scratches  
to build a roof. Not build, exactly. To  
pitch for us some meaning, and me thatched. It's  
for you, the desk, the translucent bright blue  
paper. I use mine to make a bandage  
for your wrist; you yours to draw the landing.

Isaac Willis



# Joyce Carol Oates and the Springs of Belief

David Heddendorf

“**S**HE’S SO *PROLIFIC!*” SOONER OR LATER THE remark comes up in almost any conversation about Joyce Carol Oates, who turns eighty years old in 2018 and has more than forty novels and many other books to her name. There’s usually a note of condescension in that word “prolific”—as though rapid, voluminous writing inevitably means hasty, superficial writing. After all, didn’t James Joyce labor heroically on just a handful of books? Didn’t Raymond Carver revolutionize the American short story with a few brief volumes? From T. S. Eliot to Virginia Woolf to Thomas Pynchon, authors with modest bibliographies command lofty reputations, while fast-working novelists like Anthony Trollope and John Updike come in for disparagement and even scorn. Oates’s vast output has been similarly questioned, but anyone who troubles to read a handful of her books will discover a consistent intensity and a brilliant devotion to craft. Unlike Trollope and Updike, for example, Oates creates a distinctive verbal texture for each tale she tells, whether the genre is bleak naturalism, domestic realism, social satire, Gothic horror, or fictionalized contemporary events. She designs a specific “narrative strategy,” as they say, for each world she populates, each vision she pursues. The technique is the exact opposite of a formulaic method.

And yet there will be unmistakable signs that you are reading a Joyce Carol Oates novel, beginning with what Harold Bloom calls “her immense empathy with the insulted and injured, her deep identification with the American lower classes.” Especially in early novels like *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967) and *them* (1969), Oates writes

about poverty with a matter-of-fact intimacy, neither patronizing her characters nor using them to make a point. “She is not a political novelist,” Bloom continues, “not a social revolutionary in any merely overt way, and yet she is our true proletarian novelist” (2).

Again and again in Oates’s fiction, economic suffering results in shattered families, whether through simple neglect or in a gruesome explosion of violence. With the distinctly middle-class drama *We Were the Mulvaney*s (1996), however, the disintegration of the family becomes an American phenomenon without social parameters. In Oates’s world, it really doesn’t matter whether you’re rich or poor: family exerts a determining influence on character, while any given family proves fragile and short-lived.

As they emerge from these blasted homes, Oates’s characters grasp at some kind of identity. Gatsby-like, they often construct new versions of themselves, at times accomplishing complete makeovers. Jesse Harte in *Wonderland* (1971), Francis Brady in *Middle Age: A Romance* (2001), and Rebecca Schwart in *The Gravedigger’s Daughter* (2007) adopt new names to go with their invented selves, concealing their former identities from current friends and acquaintances. In *Blonde* (2000), Norma Jeane Baker submits daily to the hair stylists and makeup artists who create the fabulous product known as “Marilyn Monroe.”

What raises “the search for identity” in Oates’s novels above the level of cliché—what makes it downright subversive in our age of fashionable atheism and survey-response “nones”—is Oates’s refusal to deny her characters a spiritual dimension. They



think about the state of their souls—or at least, as in *American Appetites* (1989), they debate the existence and nature of the soul, even while professing a brittle materialism. *Middle Age*, as the title suggests, involves an array of characters who pause and take stock of their lives. One divorced woman, estranged from her teenaged son, wishes she'd challenged his cocky nihilism and told him, "No, no, no. We are not pond algae. We are HUMAN, we have SOULS" (310). Whether they embrace it, deny it, or simply puzzle over it—Oates's characters can't stop thinking about ultimate mystery.

The answer to the banal question "Are you religious?" thus becomes an integral part of identity in Oates's fiction. At some point almost all her characters decide whether or not they believe in God. For many characters in contemporary fiction, by contrast, the question doesn't even make sense. In *Brazzaville Beach*, for example, a 1990 novel by William Boyd, the scientist narrator is asked if she's a Christian, and she replies impatiently, "Of course not" (263). For Oates's characters, unbelief is rarely attained so easily. Relinquishing belief in God *hurts*. Teenaged Maddy of *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993), pondering evolution in a natural history museum, discovers "her heart's broken" because "she can't take God seriously ever again" (103). Proud Leah in *Bellefleur* (1980) rages when a terrific storm washes out her lavishly prepared party: "God has been cruel, I will never forgive Him" (322).

Unbelief seems to be the official Oates position, just as it is for the fictional Bellefleur family. On the record, Oates has dismissed faith in God as "fantastical" (Johnson 39–41), and character after character chooses science over religion, or rejects the oppressiveness and boredom of churchgoing, or simply feels too crushed by life to believe in God. Characters who do profess some kind of faith, meanwhile, run from fanatics to nominal believers to hypocrites. In Oates's historical/Gothic novel *The Accursed* (2013), the Socialist writer Upton Sinclair heroically preaches secular revolution, while a benevolent old minister winds up confessing a hideous crime and accusing God of duping humanity. Such programmatic story lines—happily few in Oates's work—reveal her debt to Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, the great secular triumverate.

And yet for every loud assertion of unbelief, a helpless prayer seems to escape these characters. Swan, the frightening boy/man of *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, finds himself praying "in his mind to God, who he [understands does] not

## Whether they embrace it, deny it, or simply puzzle over it—Oates's characters can't stop thinking about ultimate mystery.

exist and never [has]" (409). Jules Wendall of *Them* believes that "about this world there is much information, mountains of facts and wonders, but about the other world there is nothing, and so [he detaches] himself from it without regret" (105). Later, however, Jules writes to his mother and sister from a hospital, requesting their prayers and telling them he's "certain that there is a Spirit of the Lord in us all" (326). Ariah Littrell, the minister's daughter in *The Falls* (2004), renounces her faith, then bargains with God over the births of her children. With all of this, of course, Oates could simply be illustrating the old adage about atheists and foxholes. As she examines the psychology of unbelief, she includes inevitable instances of wavering. But the persistent turning to God might also indicate something deeper—not a fully ripened Christianity, certainly, nor even a nebulous theism, but nevertheless something genuine, something to do with the primal energy that makes Oates's fiction so powerful and memorable.

**O**F OATES'S MANY ASTONISHING NOVELS and stories—for once, the overworked adjective applies—*What I Lived For* (1994) stands out as a major achievement. Echoing Thoreau, the title seems to promise a sylvan meditation. Instead, Jerome "Corky" Corcoran's story explodes in a crowded world of hustlers, toughs, and pols, crammed into one Memorial Day weekend in a fictionalized Buffalo, New York. Corky the Irish city councilman and real estate developer verges on stereotypes we've seen many times in fiction and film, but Oates renders her



character with such unflinching intimacy that one can't help being swept up in Corky's weekend. After a somber prologue relating the mob-ordered murder of Corky's father when the boy was eleven, Oates jumps to the adult Corky's point of view, delivering a present-tense blast of profane interior monologue, riotous misdeeds, and frantic sex. As an uncensored specimen of male libido, Corky Corcoran makes Updike's Rabbit Angstrom look like a choirboy.

Forty-three-year-old Corky joyously embraces surfaces. He's proud of his hair, his suits, his shoes, his car. He disdains people who settle for cut-rate versions of the belongings that define them. "You're an American, you're good as you look" is his motto (94, 359). Corky grew up Catholic and attended a pricey Catholic school, but he now considers himself an atheist, shoring up his views by devouring popular science books. His religious upbringing nevertheless still permeates his thoughts, and Oates, herself no more than a nominal Catholic as a girl, imagines her way into a profoundly Catholic temperament. Corky assures himself that he's abandoned religious belief, but the idea of God still bothers him, and he reverts repeatedly to problems of the soul and eternity.

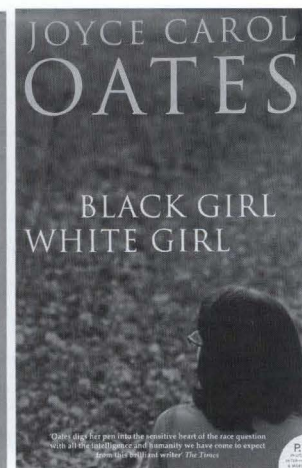
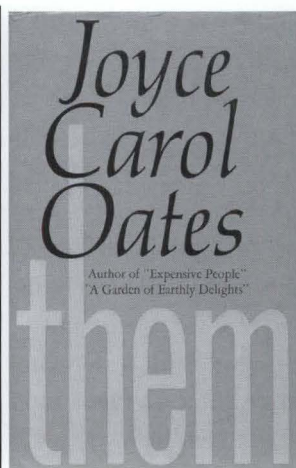
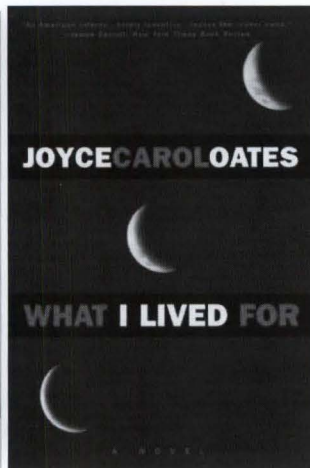
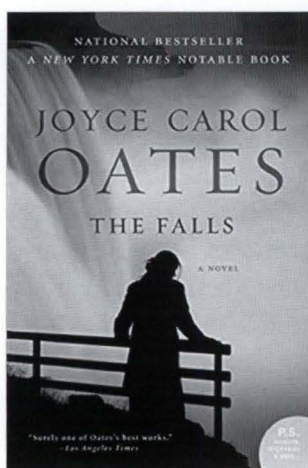
Rushing from a tryst with his lover Christina—"What the hell do we need God for? *Us?*?" he asks her (61)—Corky has lunch with his financial advisor Howard Greenbaum, whom he badgers with urgent questions: "What do Jews think of the universe?" "They believe in God, don't they?" "But how did you—do you—keep people in line? Without Hell, how do you scare them?" Corky registers Greenbaum's suave amusement, but Corky

can't help it: "for him this is serious talk" (129–32). Later during the fateful weekend, Corky wanders into a stranger's funeral in a crematorium chapel, where the carefully neutral symbols unnerve him. No pictures of Christ, no religious images of any kind: "Corky's shocked" (407). After the service he hastens to his car, then notices smoke billowing from a chimney overhead: "Rooted to the spot, staring upward, mouth slack, not knowing what he does Corky Corcoran makes the sign of the cross—fingertips to forehead to breast to left shoulder to right shoulder. Slowly" (409).

Is Corky just superstitious? Surely his unconscious gesture means more than that. But neither is he a deep-down Catholic in the Graham Greene mold, held fast by grace while thinking he's damned. Even a renegade Catholicism of whiskey priests and Irish boozers is too much Catholicism for Oates. Beneath his studious atheism, and his stubborn need for ceremony and symbols, Corky harbors a wordless spiritual core, a dim spawning ground of belief.

**I**N DECEMBER 1971, DURING A STAY IN LONDON, Oates had a mystical experience—a "sensation," as biographer Greg Johnson describes it, "that her individuality, her 'ego,' had surrendered to a larger, transcendent reality" (206). She brooded over the intense revelation for months, studying various mystical traditions. This period of searching helps explain Oates's otherwise surprising appearance at the 2004 Festival of Faith and Writing at Calvin College—not a place you'd expect to find a writer of her skeptical bent.

Her novels portray similar moments of abrupt





openness to the supernatural. In *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006), the narrator Genna surprises her former roommate Minette, a Christian, in the middle of a candle-lighting ritual. “The candle flames were mesmerizing,” Genna recalls. “How like human souls tremulous, transparent and fleeting, this continuous burning-away, expiation and extinction.” As she continues to watch the flames, Genna is gripped by an awareness that defies the scorn of her radical activist father: “*Be here now! Be here now! God is here, everywhere, now!* My pulse quickened in the sudden knowledge that this was so, all that Max Meade denounced as bullshit was so, the very core of the living god that binds those who believe together yet it was not a truth that one could bear for very long, like a passionate inhaled breath” (234). The *Foxfire* gang leader Legs Sadovsky, asked by Maddy the “official chronicler” if we have souls, replies in the final words of the novel, “Yeah probably we do but why’s that mean we’re gonna last forever? Like a flame is real enough, isn’t it, while it’s burning?—even if there’s a time it goes out?” (328) In both *Black Girl/White Girl* and *Foxfire*, candle flames signify brevity—like the brevity of Oates’s own transforming experience—yet they also convey an intense awareness of spiritual reality. Belief, or perhaps a formless precursor to belief, comes over one as a convulsive, overpowering vision.

In personal statements collected for his pioneering study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William James offers scores of such critical moments. He even slips in, anonymously, his own famous episode of spiritual terror, the mental image of a helpless asylum patient who prompts James’s realization: “*That shape am I*” (134). For James, “whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the ‘more’ with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life” (403). Mystical revelation, in other words, arrives through the buried regions of the self, in images and feelings that defy concepts and language. Oates, distrustful of creeds yet too honest for a doctrinaire materialism, supposes something like the liminal region that James hypothesizes, as her praise for Flannery O’Connor’s mysterious universe suggests (see Bloom 5-6). *Crossing*

*the Border*, the title of Oates’s 1976 story collection, refers primarily to characters’ trips between the United States and Canada, but it also recalls other porous boundaries in Oates’s fiction. Jules Wendall, Corky Corcoran, and Genna Meade are all disturbed by intimations of the supernatural that mock their assured denials.

The Falls stand for everything we associate with Joyce Carol Oates: blind violence, primitive emotion, irresistible power. For a writer whose work is inevitably described as “a force of nature,” what better image than the ultimate display of nature’s terrible grandeur?

IT WAS PROBABLY INEVITABLE THAT OATES would write a novel about Niagara Falls, located near her girlhood home and for two centuries a kind of test for American writers. The Falls stand for everything we associate with Joyce Carol Oates: blind violence, primitive emotion, irresistible power. For a writer whose work is inevitably described as “a force of nature,” what better image than the ultimate display of nature’s terrible grandeur? In *The Falls*, Oates yokes this broadly controlling metaphor—one that conveys the achievement of her entire career—with the hidden wellsprings of religious experience. The Falls, a symbol for some of a callous, indifferent universe, evoke for others the soul’s inchoate yearning for God.

Even for Oates, whose *Wonderland* one blurbist referred to as her “latest shocker,” the opening sequence of *The Falls* is a horrifying nightmare: after a disastrous wedding night, a sexually confused young minister leaps from Goat Island into the Niagara River, leaving Ariah virtually catatonic, the “Widow-Bride of The Falls.” Swiftly wooed and won by her second husband, Ariah constructs a normal family life in the city where



her first life shattered, fierce in her determination to be content and serene. She'll have nothing more to do with God. She will cherish her husband and children. But the Falls, churning with ungovernable memories and emotions, won't be ignored. For one thing, Ariaiah can't be certain who fathered her first son, Chandler. *Could* it have been her tormented first husband? Then, as if by a dream-like necessity, the Falls claim her second husband through a mysterious murder. Relentless as the thundering cataract itself, her believing impulses give Ariaiah no rest. In aimless spasms, she visits an assortment of churches, gripped by what her second son, Royall, recalls as "religious fevers that overcame her at unexpected times, like an onslaught of flu" (284).

Ariaiah's daughter, Juliet, shares her mother's spiritual leanings. As a teenager Juliet grows obsessed with the place where her father died, lingering over the turbulent waters and identifying with a young girl of local legend who received a vision of the Virgin Mary. "Desperately, Juliet wishes to believe" in the story (428)—but when she visits a modern-day shrine commemorating the vision she finds only a tacky tourist site. Like Ariaiah, who becomes "bored, restless" with the "silly people" she meets in church (428), Juliet rejects the crusted layers of institutions and

traditions. Instead, both mother and daughter respond to an intermittent but powerful inner urging.

Oates is no "social revolutionary," as Bloom points out, but her stories of unbidden, barely acknowledged religious experience are the work of a courageous *spiritual* revolutionary. Believing and unbelieving readers alike find in her fiction a discomfiting alternate dimension. Believers know that faith involves something more than pious deeds, approved doctrines, and warm feelings—but what exactly is that something? Are we prepared to find out? Unbelievers, meanwhile, cling to orthodoxies of their own, warding off intuitions that might ruffle their neat conclusions. Oates surveys the quintessentially human, often uncomfortable territory that theists, atheists, and agnostics all share. Through almost six decades of electrifying novels and stories, she thrusts us into that inarticulate region where the soul has its dealings with God. ♣

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## AFTER CHRISTOPHER SMART

Strong against earth and air  
where *ask* is *have*  
against the tide,  
where lion's eyes glister and burn like steel  
and bastions pray the breast of prayer  
and horses run the sea of pride  
and nothing there cools the oceans.  
For strong as seas against the tide,  
for *pray* is *have* and *have to*,  
for lions run across the waves  
for waves are stilled with filth,  
for coal burns through my skin,  
for coal burns through my breastbone,  
for coal becomes my heart and beats  
for burning,  
for burning oceans,  
for the raven flies toward the ark  
to say the oceans have been boiled.  
Strong against the earth,  
we have asked to have and have again.  
Strong against the rains and oceans,  
should the ark be sunk to  
feed the cycle's end.  
Should *clear* be both *weep* and *heart*?

Devon Miller-Duggan



# The Return of the Tyrants and the Price of Democracy

H. David Baer

**D**EMOCRACY TODAY IS UNDER SIEGE. IT IS being replaced in parts of the world with soft authoritarian regimes that preserve but manipulate democratic trappings to guarantee perpetual rule for a single ruler. The ease with which the new authoritarians have dismantled democratic institutions has caught many by surprise, in part because twenty-first century potentates appear so cynical and transparent in their grabs for power. In the past, the great threats to democracy came from rival political ideologies—communism, fascism, Nazism. Today, however, the threat lacks strong ideological definition. The mini-dictators who would destroy democracy resemble not so much the totalitarians of the twentieth century, but rather the self-aggrandizing tyrants of ancient Greece.

Those ancient tyrants used their rule to pursue private gain with complete disregard for the common good. In Aristotle's view, tyrannical regimes, dedicated as they were to personal self-aggrandizement, combined the worst features of democracy and oligarchy (*Politics*, Book V 1311a10). Like democratic leaders, the tyrant appeals to the people, but he does so through self-serving demagoguery. The tyrant's true aim is that of an oligarch, namely, the accumulation of wealth. So, too, in our time, modern autocrats employ populist strategies to disguise the kleptocracies they create, which they use to accumulate massive personal fortunes.

The self-aggrandizing character of modern autocrats helps to explain, also, the stealthy way in which they have come to power. The ancient tyrants often rose to power by exploiting weaknesses within democracy. So, too, the modern tyrants have consolidated their hold on power by capitalizing on defects with liberalism. They did not seize

power by overthrowing governments; rather they transformed the democratic systems into petty despotisms. In the twenty-first century, the greatest threats to democracy come from within.

Many of the dynamics contributing to democratic devolution are illustrated by the failures of democratic consolidation in Europe. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, policymakers tended to believe democratic evolution was inevitable. The greatest challenges in facilitating that evolution, so they believed, were technical. The experts, overestimating the capacity of capitalism to generate prosperity and create the social conditions necessary to sustain democratic governance, recommended "shock therapy"—the immediate introduction of full free market capitalism into societies that had functioned on command economies for more than a generation. But "shock therapy" required rapidly privatizing state businesses, a process that was invariably accompanied by large-scale corruption. While the well-connected few got rich, almost everyone else got poorer. Economic liberalism produced manifest injustice, and the democratic systems aligned with economic liberalism appeared rigged. Consequently, the peoples of Eastern Europe, at least large segments of them, could discern no vested interest in a liberal democracy, and have proven largely indifferent to its demise.

Through much of the 1990s in Russia, for example, average citizens saw their savings evaporate in hyperinflation, while a handful of oligarchs secured enormous wealth through rigged public tenders and inappropriate relationships with banks. Massive corruption in the Russian economy contributed to its total collapse in 1998 (Sattler 2016, 43–48). Instead of prosperity, Russia's experiment in liberal democracy brought a criminalized



economy, lawlessness, and widespread poverty. As Plato and Aristotle might have predicted, the anarchy generated by democratic rule led people to look for a strongman, Vladimir Putin.

The strongman, however, as Plato and Aristotle might also have pointed out, does not address and repair the social woes that led to his rise. He makes them worse. Nineteen years after Putin first ascended to power, the Russian economy is still run by oligarchs and weighed down by corruption. Just 110 people control thirty-five percent of the country's wealth (Sattler 2016, 164). Some speculate that Putin may be the richest man on earth (*Washington Post*, February 7, 2018). Russian elections, meanwhile, have become a sham. If the people should ever desire a change in their government—well, they no longer have a say in the matter.

A similar, if less extreme story, could be told about the rise of the Hungarian autocrat Viktor Orban. Hungary's transition to a free market economy was carried out by ex-communist elites who were conveniently positioned to benefit from the process of privatization. At the same time, an assertive Constitutional Court, exercising muscular judicial review, placed into law key democratic liberties that were never fully appreciated by a majority of the Hungarian people. Throughout the democratic period, however, quality of life and standards of living deteriorated for many. Two years after the global economic crisis of 2008, a landslide election carried Viktor Orban into power, allowing him to rewrite the country's constitution and dismantle its democratic institutions. In the absence of constitutional restraints, Orban has created a regime with symbiotic, porous boundaries between state, party, and key oligarchs. While those in the party's upper echelons have grown enormously rich, a third of the Hungarian population now lives below the poverty line (*Budapest Business Journal*, Dec. 13, 2017). Should the people want to change their government, a rigged electoral system repeatedly criticized by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe makes a peaceful transition of power well-nigh impossible.

Liberal democracy in Europe has failed to deliver societal goods at a level needed to meet people's expectations for a better life. That failure,

coupled with the population's shallow commitment to democratic institutions, creates an opportunity for populist strongmen, who, once in power, entrench themselves in power through political and economic corruption. Eastern Europe, of course, does not have a long history with democracy, a factor that one suspects would make its people susceptible to the manipulations of a tyrant. Yet unsettling signs exist that a basic commitment to democracy is weakening even in the United States.

General dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the country might render an American population with increasingly shallow commitments to democratic institutions susceptible to the populist machinations of a tyrant.

In a research survey conducted by political scientists Yascha Mounk and Roberto Foa, respondents were asked to rate the importance of living in a democracy (*The New York Times*, Nov. 20, 2016). Although two-thirds of Americans born before 1950 thought living in a democracy was essential, not even a third of those born after 1980 thought the same way. Almost 25 percent of millennials even say that democracy is a bad way of running the country (Mounk 2018, 105–107). If the commitment to democracy among some Americans is as flaccid as this data suggests, one wonders how disturbed they would be should a populist strongman assault democratic norms and institutions. Persistently stagnant wage growth, economic insecurity caused by globalization, declining confidence in political institutions, frustration with the factionalization and unending stalemate that appears to render democratic governance impossible—general dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the country might render an American population with increasingly shallow commitments to democratic institutions susceptible to the populist machinations of a tyrant.



Indeed, one suspects much of Donald Trump's appeal originated in his populist strongman image. "I alone can fix it," Trump declared at the Republican National Convention, reinforcing the cult of personality central to his career as a politician. Those who admire Trump like him for "telling it like it is"—a claim which, while patently false, captures his willingness, like other populists, to violate social norms and say what people are thinking. In ways truly striking, President Trump comports himself like the tyrants described in Aristotle's *Politics*.

Trump's sole political tactic consists in polarizing the electorate, sensing that a people divided by intractable partisanship will not act to restrain him.

The tyrant, Aristotle says, surrounds himself with flatterers (*Politics*, Book V, 1314a5). So, too, President Trump demands obsequiousness from his staff. One need but recall footage from the first full meeting of his cabinet, in which members went round in a circle extolling the wonderfulness of Trump, starting with Vice President Mike Pence (whose Twitter account appears specially dedicated to praising the Grand Poo-Bah) (*The New York Times*, June 12, 2017). The tyrant, Aristotle says, humiliates his subjects (*Politics*, Book V 1314a17); so, too, from Sean Spicer to Jeff Sessions to Rex Tillerson, Trump publicly criticizes and undermines his own staff. Another trick of the tyrant is "to set men at variance with one another and cause quarrels between friend and friend" (*Politics*, Book V 1113b17). Trump's sole political tactic consists in polarizing the electorate, sensing that a people divided by intractable partisanship will not act to restrain him.

**B**UT MOST TROUBLING OF ALL IS THE WAY IN which Trump's rule, like that of the ancient tyrants, aims at his own self-aggrandizement. The full extent of Trump's financial

relationships remain hidden because the president refuses to disclose them. Even so, however, a clear picture is emerging of a president who, like the East European autocrats he admires, refuses to separate his family's business interests from the interests of the country.

Consider the case of Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. In 2007 the Kushner family borrowed \$1.2 billion to purchase a New York office building on Fifth Avenue, inauspiciously numbered 666. Almost immediately, the investment in 666 Fifth Avenue tanked, thanks in part to the 2008 financial crisis. The office building lost millions; meanwhile the \$1.2 billion commercial loan marched toward maturity. Jared Kushner needed to find investors to pick up the enormous debt. Throughout 2016, during the course of Trump's political campaign, Kushner met with Russian ambassador Sergey Kislyak as well as the head of a Russian-owned bank (Frum 2018, chapter 4, kindle location 960). Kushner failed to disclose a number of those meetings on his application for national security clearance, and their subject matter remains unknown. Hence, connecting these meetings to Kushner's financial woes is purely speculative, and, as far as we know, no Russians have invested 666 Fifth Avenue. But the meetings remain suspicious. Later, in November 2017, right after Trump was elected, Kushner met with a Chinese holding company called Anbang Insurance Group to discuss financial backing for 666 Fifth Avenue (Frum 2018, chapter 4, kindle edition location 947). When the Chinese deal fell through, Kushner then turned to the government of Qatar, an important American ally where the United States maintains a large air force. Unfortunately for Kushner, the Qatari government also declined the unique business opportunity (*The Intercept*, March 2, 2018).

At this point, of course, Kushner was an advisor to the president entrusted with a portfolio in the Middle East. A few months after Kushner's unsuccessful business meeting with the Qataris, the government of Saudi Arabia accused Qatar of supporting terrorism and, allied with other countries in the region, moved to put Qatar under an economic blockade. President Trump, instead of working to de-escalate tensions between these key

U.S. allies, began tweeting his support for Saudi Arabia and criticizing Qatar (Frum 2018, chapter 8, kindle edition, location 2293). According to reports, Kushner also backed Saudi Arabia and directly undermined efforts by Secretary of State Tillerson to de-escalate the conflict (*The Intercept*, March 2, 2018). Given how contrary to U.S. national interests the actions of the president were, one cannot but wonder if the policy he and Kushner adopted toward Qatar was not related to the family's effort to bankroll a bad investment on 666 Fifth Avenue. According to *The Washington Post*, concern that countries were manipulating Kushner through his business interests was one reason he was refused security clearance (*The Washington Post*, Feb. 27, 2018).

In a bygone America where people understood the importance norms of governance play in guarding against tyranny, the Kushner affair alone would have been enormously scandalous. Today it

is not the only, and probably not even the worst, scandal involving conflicts of interest to surround the Trump presidency. In ways without precedent, Trump is merging the national welfare with his private interests. The dangers posed by that merger, overlooked or undetected by many, were well known to the Founding Fathers, who knew about tyrants of ancient Greece, had studied the fall of the Roman Republic, and personally experienced the tyranny of King George. For the authors of the U.S. Constitution and for generations that followed, tyranny was an ever-present and recurring danger. The price of liberty, they believed, is eternal vigilance. Which makes one wonder: how much longer will we be free? †

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## IS GOD ZERO?

*Numbers from one to ten, however,  
are called "God."*

—Annie Dillard

Envision the numeral's  
inner slope, curved  
like a cupped palm. See how you could  
rest there, curled  
within its elongated  
oval. My palm  
holds emptiness now, waving  
good-bye or hello. I would rather  
God slide between the limits  
of lifeline and heartline, twin crevices  
pulled together then away, the curve  
of zero swooping up again.  
Perhaps God is dissolved  
in the black ink stretched  
into a cipher, or God is  
the emptiness bounded by zero's arcs,  
or the space exceeding a digit's place,  
compressing presence into the blank welcome  
we've named nothing.

Lynn Domina

# The Man from Mars Who Wants to Know

Daniel Silliman

I LOVED THE PYROTECHNICS.

With Tom Wolfe, of course, it's Pyrotechnics™. That's what everyone talks about. It's hard not to, with Wolfe. If not a fireworks metaphor, then what? His sentences practically roman-candle on the page: ZZZZZZZZZZZTch!—popop POW.

His prose goes zoom and it can take you with it.

It took me at eighteen, nineteen, twenty. Wolfe's writing—I couldn't tell how it did what it did, but I could tell *what* it did. It grabbed readers by the throat like I wanted to grab readers. It made readers care about things they didn't think they cared about. I wanted that power. His words had a thing. But what was it?

Wolfe died in May at the age of eighty-eight. With the news comes memorials to his prose and power with words. His style is hailed, rightly enough. But when I think back to why Wolfe mattered to me—mattered so, so much to my writing—it actually wasn't the excess of style. I learned something different.

I read *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* my first summer working at a daily paper. It was the *Peninsula Daily News*, in Port Angeles, Washington. I had just finished a year at the community college in town. I'd taken a few journalism classes and picked up the rudiments of reporting at the school's biweekly paper. So sometime in May I went down to the *Peninsula Daily News*, a warehouse-looking building on First Street within shouting distance of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and I asked to talk to the publisher. The publisher was an old bureau chief for the Associated Press, retired from that to run this local paper in the Pacific Northwest. I asked to see him to see if he had a job for me, or maybe an internship. He laughed at me.

He laughed at my clothes, actually. I was

wearing a \$12 jean jacket and a pair of clean blue jeans. I had some big, lace-up work boots, which I wore for mowing lawns, cutting trees, killing chickens, pouring concrete, and all the other jobs I'd done before this job I really, really wanted: reporter.

The old bureau chief took one look at my be-denimed self and snorted, "What is this, wear denim day?"

I don't remember what I said back. I stuttered something. Then he explained I didn't have what it took to be a reporter. But how did he know? The jacket?

Like that, I was back out on First Street.

A couple of weeks later, the news editor called. Did I have a job for the summer yet? I figured I would run the chipper for one of the local tree companies.

Did I still want to work at the newspaper? I told him there must be some misunderstanding. I had already talked to the publisher.

"Some things changed," he said. "You want a job, you start tomorrow." So I did.

When I got to the newsroom, the place was empty of reporters. There had been three, but something happened and they all quit and I had a job: general assignment reporter. It was an incredible moment, but also more than a little terrifying, how fast things could change.

So I started. A place like that, a job like that, you can write about anything. But you also have to write about everything. I wrote two, three stories a day. It's a quick, quick pace, always in the oncoming traffic of deadlines, and pretty soon you start writing about things and getting assignments to write about things where you think, *how is this a story?*

A car show. A quilt show. A boat show. A jazz festival. A parade. The publisher who *knew* I didn't have what it took once personally assigned me an



important story, he said, about a sand-castle carving competition—that I had to write about before it happened.

I was so happy to have that job. But also, I knew they expected me to fail. I knew I could prove them right with one dumb question, one messed-up story. And there I was, in the office before anyone else, wracking my mind: How is a car show interesting? How is a car show a story? I had no idea.

Tom Wolfe had an idea.

The title piece in *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* is about a car show. For Wolfe, though, the story wasn't about cars, but the people who cared about cars. It was, even beyond that, a story about what they cared about when they cared about these cars.

"The cars mean more to these kids than architecture did in Europe's great formal century, say, 1750 to 1850," Wolfe wrote. "They are freedom, style, sex, power, motion, color—everything right there."

When I read Wolfe, I felt like I was suddenly free from every rule, every convention, every "right way" of doing things. But more importantly, I felt like I knew what that freedom was for.

That was the first lesson, the most important lesson I learned from Wolfe. I don't have to care about cars. I don't have to think a tangerine-colored paint job is important. I have to care that people care and think it's important people think something's important. That's where the story is.

The second lesson was that there is more than one way to tell a story. There are choices. You should think about the different ways, and decide how you're going to tell a story.

Other denizens of the style called "New Journalism" were probably better at this, honestly. Jimmy Breslin's piece on the guy who dug the grave for John F. Kennedy is maybe the best example, but there are lots of examples. These writers

emphasized that you might want to focus on the "wrong" person. You might do better to start with an "irrelevant" detail. A story could be better, sometimes, if it were upside down.

The point was just that you have to make choices. Everything is a choice, in writing. Novelists have long known this, the New Journalists said, and will think about whether to tell a story in first person or with an omniscient narrator, whether to start at the beginning or *in medias res*, and even what tense to use. Journalists should do the same.

In an interview once Wolfe talked about a biography he read when he was seven. It was about Napoleon. It was written in the present tense. That blew Wolfe away, that you could do that. You could tell the story of long-ago Napoleon like it was right now.

The truth is the truth, but the telling is constructed. Maybe everybody else always knew this about the art of narrative. It was a revelation to me.

When I read Wolfe, I felt like I was suddenly free from every rule, every convention, every "right way" of doing things. But more importantly, I felt like I knew what that freedom was for.

The third lesson was the suits. Wolfe wore white suits. They were basically his brand. His obits all mention his clothes. How often is that true, for writers? But that's how he stood out, with wildly fancy clothes. He was so pretentious about it that when asked once to describe his style, he said it was "neo-pretentious." Others, digging for descriptors, frequently come up with "dandy."

I have an impossibly low tolerance for dandyism. And I couldn't pull off a white suit for anything. With a normal sports coat, I look like I'm going to jack a truck. In a tie, I look like I just stole a chicken. Wolfe and I couldn't be any further apart than when it comes to clothing.

But Wolfe said the clothes were also just about being separate and knowing you are separate. The reporter is not part of the scene. The reporter is in the world, not of the world. In the crowd, but watching the crowd. The separateness is an important part of the job, because that allows you the critical distance to tell the story. So it's OK, and maybe even a good thing, if people see you and think, that person doesn't belong.



"I found early in the game that for me there's no use trying to blend in," Wolfe said. "I might as well be the village information-gatherer, the man from Mars who simply wants to know."

Wolfe wasn't, by any means, authorizing my jean-jacket-and-blue-jeans look. But I could be the man from Mars. And here was Wolfe saying my weirdness, my awkwardness, could be a powerful tool to help me know. I could embrace my out-of-placeness like an odd-duck superpower and then I could really see. Then I could really tell a story.

The end of the summer at the *Peninsula Daily News*, I got a crime story. By then, the paper had hired a few real reporters, with real experience, but they decided to keep me until I went back to college in the fall. I was there early, earlier than anyone, going through stacks of mail and faxes, trying to find a story I could write about. A car show. Something.

The police scanner squawked a message about an arrest, a suspected bank robber, and a bar. I went to the bar. I was eighteen. I'd never had a beer and never been in a bar, much less at 10:30 on a weekday morning. I walked in.

I told the bartender who I was and asked if there was a bank robber arrested there. She said yeah, and she'd talk to me after the police finished taking her statement. I could wait. She gave me the beer the bank robber bought before she called the police and they came and arrested him. "He didn't drink any," she said. So I did.

The man had been on a bit of a bender, before that last beer he didn't drink. Released from jail a week before, he robbed a bank, lost a bunch of his stealings at a casino, got a cheap hotel, and drank all day for four, five days at the bar next door. Until they caught him.

When he robbed the bank he was wearing a cowboy hat, which the police thought was a disguise, obscuring his face, distracting eye witnesses. When he was arrested, he was wearing the same hat.

I was able to reconstruct his whole week. I got the report about the bank robbery and found one of his dealers at the casino. I talked to the clerk who checked him into the hotel. He had no luggage, she said, just a limp and a brown paper

bag with money. And of course I talked to the bartender, who told me the police said her tips were hers, even if it was stolen money.

I wrote it all up and turned it in to the editor. There were no pyrotechnics. I just tried to tell the story. It was about a man and what he wanted. I made choices, in the narrative construction, with which details to focus on and how to unfold the

I got the story because I didn't  
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I was the man from Mars who  
wanted to know.

chronology to serve the story the best I could. And I got the story because I didn't worry about fitting in. No question was too dumb for me. I was the man from Mars who wanted to know.

The editor read it. Didn't say anything. He took it to the publisher and shut the door. I waited for what seemed like an interminably long time. I couldn't think of anything to do. I just sat there. The publisher came out and growled, "This detail, how much the beer cost? How do you know how much the bank robber's beer cost?"

I told him I got that from the bartender.

He said, "Kid, I don't believe anyone but you would've got this story."

Wolfe's dead now, and people are praising his pyrotechnics. I'll admit, I loved his pyrotechnics. I wanted to write like that and tried to write like that. But when I think back to reading *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* for the first time, that wasn't the thing. That wasn't the important part of what Wolfe was to me. I learned something different. ♣

Daniel Silliman is a Lilly Fellow at Valparaiso University. A U.S. historian, his research focuses on religion in American culture. This column first appeared on his blog, [www.danielsilliman.org](http://www.danielsilliman.org).



## ANGEL'S SHARE

High up in the rafters dangle  
the master distillers  
and their immortal palates:  
oh, they're tipsy but unfallen,  
just nosing in on this mystery of age  
and oak, exacting their own  
whiskey tax: a third of all holy spirits.

After a lifetime of ambrosia  
one thirsts for the terrestrial,  
for a real thoroughbred, with notes  
of caramel and spice, just a hint  
of limestone and rebellion,  
their angelic nostrils tickled  
by the ascending smoke and heat.

Evan Gurney

# “When They Question You, Speak Boldly”: Revisiting the Music of Julius Eastman

Josh Langhoff

**Editor’s Note:** *This article pays tribute to the work of Julius Eastman, a queer/gay, African-American composer and self-identified racial provocateur. This article contains language that is considered racially offensive, but which accurately reflects the titles of three musical works. We ask the reader to consider the context in which this language is being used within this article: as a way to honor Eastman’s political and social statements, and to honor his contributions to the discipline of music composition.*

**G**AY GUERRILLA WAS A PROVOCATIVE name for a piano piece, but it was the least controversial title Julius Eastman performed at Northwestern University on January 16, 1980. The composer, a queer black minimalist from New York, was on campus to rehearse and perform three of his compositions written “for any combination of instruments,” but usually performed by four pianists. Eastman might have been unaware he was stepping onto a campus rocked by ongoing racial unrest. For Members Only (FMO), the black student alliance, had been staging non-violent protests and running newspaper ads to push for better representation. Shortly before the concert, the group’s coordinators took public issue with the “racist” titles *Crazy Nigger* and *Evil Nigger*, the other two works on the concert. Eastman and the music department compromised with FMO: they would strike the titles from the concert advertising and programs, and instead Eastman would explain them during his opening remarks.

Eastman tried to reclaim the offending word. He said he used it to connote “that person or thing that obtains to a basicness, a fundamentalness, and eschews that thing which is superficial or... elegant.” It’s anyone’s guess whether Eastman’s reclamation attempt satisfied FMO, but he surely succeeded at banishing superficial elegance from his music. Each of the three pieces was over twenty minutes long, the longest lasting fifty-five minutes; each was built from combinations of quickly repeated notes that grew into thick stacks of pitches, dissonant and enveloping, a process the composer called “organic music.” One of the pianists, then-

doctoral student Frank Ferko (a 1972 graduate of Valparaiso University), would later write in an email interview, “I think I (erroneously) considered the Julius concert ‘just another concert’ in a long line of music events at Northwestern” (Hanson-Dvoracek, 2011). Indeed, the controversy over the titles quickly dissipated. But only ten years later, Eastman would die in obscurity, most of his scores lost or destroyed. Northwestern’s concert tape would prove crucial to reviving his reputation and his remarkable body of work.

On February 25, 2018, *Gay Guerrilla* reappeared before a standing-room-only crowd at the Chicago Cultural Center, closing out a program that also included Eastman’s 1981 work for ten cellos, *The Holy Presence of Joan d’Arc*, and its twelve-minute prelude for solo voice, which Eastman had originally improvised and recorded in his apartment. Presented as part of Chicago’s Frequency Festival, the concert fit into a recent series of Eastman-related events. There have been high-profile concerts in London, New York, and Los Angeles; an essay collection, also called *Gay Guerrilla*; and numerous articles and interviews with musicians who have carried Eastman’s torch. In addition, music publisher G. Schirmer recently signed a deal to reconstruct and publish Eastman’s works. This current wave of appreciation has been building since 2005, when New World Records released *Unjust Malaise*, a three-CD set of his works that included the entire Northwestern concert. To paraphrase the old saw about the Velvet Underground’s first album, *Unjust Malaise* didn’t sell many copies, but everyone who bought one



started a research project into Eastman's life.

What they found was a musical career that see-sawed between moments of great promise, even triumphs, and professional disappointments. Eastman often struggled with poverty, substance abuse, and what his mentor Lukas Foss called "personality problems." These problems weren't helped by being one of the few black musicians in his field. When he attended Philadelphia's exclusive Curtis Institute in the early sixties, Eastman was one of five students of color in his class of 100. While most of his classmates roomed with host families, Eastman lived at the YMCA and had few friends. After graduating, he fell in with New York's new music scenes, first at SUNY Buffalo and then in New York City. During the seventies he performed on two important albums, singing Peter Maxwell-Davies's virtuosic avant-garde monodrama *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, and playing piano on one of the earliest commercial recordings of Morton Feldman's music, Columbia Odyssey's pressing of *For Frank O'Hara*. Along the way he infamously infuriated John Cage during a performance of

**Wearing a hoodie espousing black activism, Otis transformed the Cultural Center into a sacred space with his charisma and skill. This otherworldly music seemed to usher the three saints and Eastman himself into the room, and the audience sat riveted.**

the legendary composer's free-form theater piece *Song Books*. Cage's instruction for Eastman's "Solo for Voice" read in part, "perform a disciplined action." Eastman's interpretation involved giving a lecture on "a new system of love" and undressing his young male volunteer. The audience loved it, but Cage thought the performance was a mockery of his work and angrily denounced it.

Eastman associated with fine musicians and performed his own work across America and Europe, but he had trouble translating that work

into a steady paycheck. He could alienate his peers. During the Northwestern rehearsals, Ferko recalled, he would "explode with rage" whenever someone made a mistake; his manner "was very off-putting, and I was uncomfortable whenever I had to be around him" (Hanson-Dvoracek 2011). New music composers often settle into college teaching positions (like Feldman) or regular touring ensembles (like Philip Glass and Steve Reich); Eastman maintained neither. "Instead, he flew free," writes the musicologist Paul Griffiths, who argues the composer's precarious existence had one aesthetic advantage: it allowed him to experiment with wildly different forms and ensembles.

**T**HE TWO JOAN D'ARC PIECES ARE PERFECT examples. Performed in Chicago by tenor Julian Terrell Otis, the *Prelude* begins with a slow descending melody, a repeated incantation of the three saints—Michael, Margaret, and Catherine—who appeared to Joan in a 1425 vision and urged her into battle. In Eastman's conception, the three saints appear again before Joan's subsequent trial, commanding in a higher vocal register, "When they question you, speak boldly." The piece requires its singer to switch between high and low passages and deftly bend his pitches during long notes. Otis's performance was even more assured than Eastman's original, a masterpiece of slow-motion technical control. Wearing a hoodie espousing black activism, he transformed the Cultural Center into a sacred space with his charisma and skill. This otherworldly music seemed to usher the three saints and Eastman himself into the room, and the audience sat riveted.

Powered by ten cellos, the raucous *Holy Presence* conjured a different musical world. At the end of the seventies, Eastman was living in the Bowery area of New York City, amid a new wave scene centered around clubs like CBGB. In 1978, the singer-poet Patti Smith recorded a self-aggrandizing punk-rock song called "Rock 'n' Roll Nigger," positing herself as a "black sheep" and an outsider—trying to reclaim the term like Eastman was doing. The difference was that Smith was white, and the mostly white punk scene suffered from a flippant racism that sometimes turned vicious toward its African-American minority. In his *Village Voice* essay "The White Noise Supremacists," critic Lester Bangs recounted the experience of his black friend Richard Pinkston.



“When I go to CBGB’s I feel like I’m in East Berlin,” said Pinkston. “[I]t’s like down there they’re *striving* to be offensive however they can, so it’s more vocal and they’re freer. It’s semi-mob thinking.”

**W**E DON’T KNOW WHAT PINKSTON thought of Smith’s song, but Eastman heard it at a party and loved it. He took the rhythm of one of her lines—where she repeated the offending word seven times in quick eighth notes, *one-and-two-and-three-and-four-and-five-and-six-and-sev-enmmn*—and transformed it into the riff that runs through *Holy Presence*. All ten cellos begin playing the riff in unison, then break into different lines, some of which reinforce the riff while others create gorgeous legato counterpoint and slide through far-flung tonal areas. Eastman was doing something new here, grafting minimalist repetition onto harmonies that nodded to the expressionism of Wagner and Schoenberg. It’s easy to imagine this music playing over the wrenching close-up shots in Carl Dreyer’s silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, highlighting the inner turmoil of a faithful soldier at the mercy of a mob.

That theme becomes even more explicit in *Gay Guerrilla*. At the Cultural Center, concert organizer Seth Parker Woods introduced the piece by inviting the audience to imagine we were strolling across an Italian piazza surrounded by churches, hearing the overlapping toll of bells and the occasional hymn wafting through the air. This notion makes some sense—the pianos start softly, repeat an insistent galloping figure (think Rossini’s *William Tell* overture), and build until they finally start peeling out “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” But the image is too pastoral for a piece Eastman introduced at Northwestern as a queer call to arms. “[A]t this point I don’t feel that gay guerrillas can really match with Afghani guerrillas or PLO guerrillas,” said the composer in 1980, “but let us hope in the future that they might” (Hanson-Dvoracek 2011). By using Martin Luther’s hymn, *Gay Guerrilla* again invokes heavenly aid for earthly warfare. Luther, like Joan’s saints, becomes a talisman of boldness in the service of a cause. Of course, Luther would have denounced this particular cause, but that just makes Eastman’s appropriation of his hymn more deliciously powerful.

Eastman’s music resonates now even more than it did during his lifetime. Before minimalism entered the mainstream, he saw beyond it, mak-

ing the style’s repetitive patterns a home for other musical and programmatic ideas. And what ideas! The suggestion that God would give strength to queer activists is no longer far-fetched; alarmingly, the struggle to make black bodies matter as much as white ones continues. To a generation of young musicians, Eastman is becoming what Joan of Arc was to Eastman, a symbol of liberation and “inspired passion.” “Dear Joan,” he wrote for the 1981 premiere of *Holy Presence*, “When meditating on your name I am given strength and dedication... I shall emancipate myself from the materialistic dreams of my parents; I shall emancipate myself from the bind of the past and the present; I shall emancipate myself from myself.” Sure, he might not have been very personable, but a cursory reading of *The Lives of the Great Composers* reveals he was far from alone. If there’s room in the Church’s canon for a cross-dressing convicted heretic like Saint Joan, Julius Eastman’s place in the Western musical canon looks just as likely. ♯

Josh Langhoff is a church musician living in the Chicago area. He is also the founder of NorteñoBlog, a mostly English-language website devoted to regional Mexican music.

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DEAR SELF,

It's embarrassing, this trying to think.  
The thoughts stick out from you  
like shiny *Get Well!* balloons.  
Won't you choose one,  
won't you focus? At least  
let me rest, stumble back  
to the cradle, watch planes  
glimmer their concentric journeys.

I can't tell what you believe in:  
Adonai, Elohim, YHWH, the closer  
to breath, the better? Or nothingness  
falling on you gently as dandelion seeds—  
now you're covered in them.  
Now you're growing.  
The sky siphons itself  
into each yellow eye.  
See? I've made for you  
a very small task.

Michael Schmidtke

# The Struggle to Become Truly Human

## A Review of Michael Plekon's *Uncommon Prayer*

Nicholas Denysenko

PRAYER IS AMONG THE FEW RELIGIOUS practices that remain a topic of steady interest among the ebbs and flows of Church growth and decline. The sustainability of the topic of prayer would seem to render the publication of another book on prayer insignificant—after all, what could demonstrate that a new book on prayer is truly one-of-a-kind? To the surprise and delight of readers, Michael Plekon's *Uncommon Prayer* is not only original, but pushes the boundaries of the common definitions of prayer. The adjective “uncommon” seems designed to unveil the primary feature of this book, but there is much more to be learned about prayer in reading Plekon.

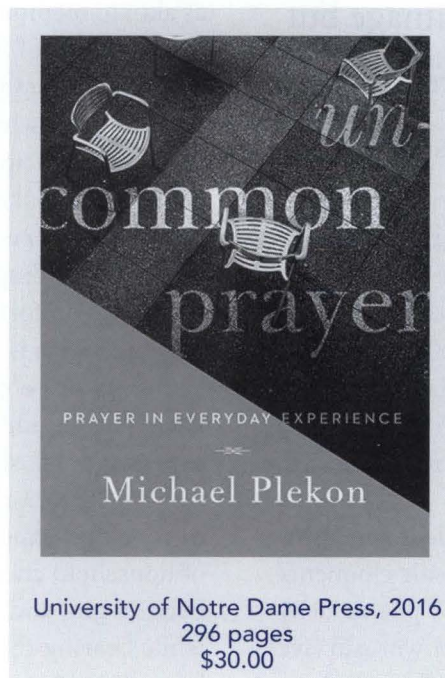
“Uncommon” does not satisfactorily define the words and rituals Plekon describes as prayer—his book depicts prayer as a collection of writings, dialogues, encounters, and ritual processes that are deeply wound up in the tumult of daily life, the chaos of life-changing events, the complications of community, and participation in the world. *Uncommon Prayer* is not a taxonomy of prayer or a guidebook—instead, it's akin to putting raw, live, real observance of the way that people really pray into words. No book of prayers that people can say at appointed times could possibly contain the myriad of ways that people pray as described by Plekon. The reader's realization that covering all of the ways and types of prayer is impossible is simultaneously the crowning achievement and great frustration of Plekon's

work. This is not a criticism of the author—despite the anxiety his reading produced for this reviewer, he has essentially liberated prayer from institutional control, and, better yet, his definition of uncommon prayer makes conforming it to a taxonomy an impossible task.

Authors are effective when they build upon their strengths, and Plekon's *Uncommon Prayer* is methodologically compatible with his recent monographs that redefine the meaning of holiness (*Hidden Holiness, Saints as They Really Are*). Drawing deeply from his sociological training, Plekon listens carefully to a selection of voices and immerses himself in community. Another reviewer might challenge the author on his selection of voices: he draws largely from North American figures—monastic and lay, theologians and poets—who represent Christian diversity. Therefore, this book does not examine prayer through the lens of religious or racial plurality. Nevertheless, the author performs his task well because he is capable of working with the material at his disposal,

and his coverage of theologians of the Russian Religious Renaissance in immigration adds an international dimension to the text.

Plekon's selection of voices includes well-known theologians such as Thomas Merton, Sarah Coakley, Rowan Williams, and Richard Rohr, the renowned poet Mary Oliver, and the champion of Catholic social ethics Dorothy Day; he stretches the boundaries by including excerpts from col-





umnist Heather Havrilevsky. Plekon adds his own recollection of experiences with students during his teaching career and observances from being part of a community of primarily older folks at his Orthodox parish in Wappingers Falls, New York, that gathers to make pirogi. Plekon is multidisciplinary in his approach—his personal observations make up a large chunk of the book, so it is a combination of careful listening and observation with fragments of memoir. Holding together the pieces

Prayer is not so much words, but a process wherein the person *becomes* prayer through all of life's activities. Prayer is also complicated—it cannot be reduced to a pithy definition or captivating image but it is frequently akin to wrestling, with God and with one's self.

of text is his thesis, drawn from Paul Evdokimov and confirmed by the collection he has gathered: prayer is not so much words, but a process wherein the person *becomes* prayer through all of life's activities. Prayer is also complicated—it cannot be reduced to a pithy definition or captivating image but it is frequently akin to wrestling, with God and with one's self.

The quality of prayer as struggle is something Plekon teases out from the text with eloquence. His inclusion of Christian Wiman's poetry delivers insight into the story of a man who survives a cancer diagnosis and subsequently reflects on the entirety of his life through his struggles with the disease (78-86). This is not only a matter of questioning God and pondering the meaning of human suffering, but it is also an exploration of the way sickness demands adjustment in all other areas of one's life. In Wiman's case, reflection on God and sickness cannot be separated from his relationship with his wife and children and the possibility that the dreaded disease could return

(82). Wiman's poetry sounds like prayer but it is much more than that—it is the struggle to find meaning in the midst of human suffering.

Plekon's coverage of Merton elucidates the same struggle in a different way. Here, Plekon shows how Merton's spirituality revolved around the work of daily life: engaging the physical activity of menial labor; meeting God in the act of cutting wood; seeing the design of God in the forest surrounding the monastery (60-62). Plekon's honest look at Merton reminds us that no struggle is reducible to a single moment or one brilliant idea that influences many people. Merton himself struggled with his vocation. He lived on the edge of life—evidenced by his falling in love with a nurse—and this struggle is an important part of the person who wrote so eloquently about discovering God in the little things of life (55).

Plekon's most persuasive examples of prayer as struggle come from the sections I have described as akin to memoir. In addition to his testimony on the evolution of his prayer list over the years and how that list symbolized the communion he shared with those for whom he prayed, Plekon drew from years of participation in the small group that gathered to make pirogi at St. Gregory's. Plekon notes that the people pour themselves out to one another, spending the time sharing their joys and sorrows, comforting one another, and listening (177-82). This is a powerful image of an ongoing gathering of people in a tight community. A bit later, Plekon adds examples from his classroom experience. He shares the story of a student who responded to a difficult memoir by sharing her own painful experience of taking on the majority of household chores because this was expected of her as a girl, and assisting with an ill grandparent while bearing the expectation of academic excellence (210-211). When she admitted that these challenges contributed to depression, her fellow students responded with empathy and encouragement, leading to "more intense conversation" (211). Plekon describes his classroom experience as a "community of trust" where individuals felt safe to make themselves vulnerable to others and thus disclose their true selves (211).

This community of trust is similar to the pirogi group—dialogues are exchanged in a pattern of



pouring out, receiving another's outpouring, and responding with charity. This pattern of person-to-person dialogue evokes the hope of one's prayer to God: that God would hear that prayer and respond with charity. In these examples, Plekon highlights the way prayer involves making one's self vulnerable to another or others; his description of a community of trust is what makes this vulnerability possible. The view one obtains of this particular type of uncommon prayer is the wholeness that can come from disclosing one's self as one truly is to another. Trust engenders vulnerability, and honest self-disclosure makes it possible for the one who is releasing their burden to receive charity from another.

**P**LEKON ENDS HIS TREATMENT OF THE examples and types of uncommon prayer by profiling Richard Rohr, who depicts the spiritual life as one of "falling upwards" (241-2). In terms of literary genre, reading Rohr at this point feels out of place, since the primary figures of the book appear earlier. But Plekon features Rohr at the end to show that the struggles and sufferings of life and the failures of perfecting prayer make it possible for one to stand still before God and realize that life is not about "me," but that life is experienced in community and is about much more than our "private lives" (244). Plekon builds upon Rohr to argue that the falling upwards results in the insight that it is not about "me" and permits one to see that liturgy leads one to seek justice and feed the hungry (244). Uncommon prayer, then, usually happens in the context of community. It is not a set of prescribed words, but a series of rites, dialogues, exchanges, and the constant struggle to come to terms with God about one's self and one's place in the local community. Plekon's achievement here is tremendous: despite drawing from broadly diverse sources, he shows that prayer is tied up with all of life, and his connection of uncommon prayer to community makes it possible for him to confirm Evdokimov and claim that one is called not to pray, but to "become prayer" (229).

Some readers might quibble with Plekon's claims, especially given the complications of community. His treatment here occasionally sounds

utopian. To his credit, Plekon asserts that the communities he profiles are also flawed and are hardly univocal, sometimes bursting into places of veritable tension, conflict, and even alienation (182-6 and elsewhere). Other readers might wonder if God is removed from the picture, especially when Plekon narrates his experiences from the classroom. Is it prayer if it is not directed to God? In these instances, Plekon seems to draw the

**Trust engenders vulnerability,  
and honest self-disclosure makes  
it possible for the one who is  
releasing their burden to receive  
charity from another.**

parallel between intercessory prayer (asking others to pray for you) and the real-life, enfleshed instances of people actively responding to the petitions and testimonies of another. Plekon sees these real-life events as prayer lived out, incarnating Evdokimov's ideal that one would become prayer. Others might suggest that these are informal and even formal instances of collegial support; the relationship between therapeutic human dialogue in community and prayer probably deserves more analysis.

Plekon has given readers something new and interesting to consider here. And that is the beauty of this book, its greatest benefit: Plekon has lifted the curtain and unveiled a diverse array of prayer practices that take place every day. These prayers are not so much said, but lived in the crucible of daily life. Above all, prayer is a struggle to become truly human, and thinking about "who I am" in the chaotic universe governed by God is a worthwhile and noble pursuit. We have Michael Plekon to thank for guiding us on the journey of uncommon prayer. ✝

Nicholas Denysenko is Emil and Elfriede Jochum Professor and Chair at Valparaiso University.



# Two Old Friends Hanging Together Again

## The Rediscovery of Takuichi Fujii's Art

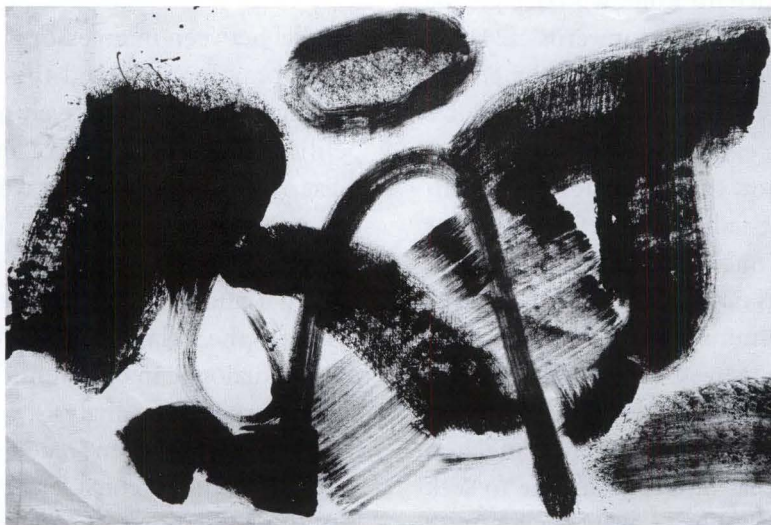
John Ruff

TWO OLD ARTIST FRIENDS FROM SEATTLE have paintings hanging just around the corner from each other in the West Gallery at Valparaiso University's Brauer Museum: a mostly abstract, partially figurative painting by Kenneth Callahan, *Fossil Canyon*, and an abstract expressionist painting by Takuichi Fujii. Callahan's place in the history of American art, as a founding member of the Northwest School, as one of the Northwest Mystics who were important precursors for abstract expressionism, is well established. Fujii, though once a member of Callahan's circle in Seattle, was until quite recently largely forgotten and virtually unrepresented in American museums (the Brauer owns one piece, the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle another). Now, after having dropped out of sight and faded from memory since the 1940s, Takuichi Fujii has been rediscovered and his importance is at long last being reassessed.

The Brauer's Fujii, a calligraphic abstraction painted with broad, bold brushstrokes in black enamel on an unstretched canvas, occupies a place of honor in the exhibit, front and center on the wall between a lovely Joan Mitchell and a recently acquired Al Held. The Callahan painting

and Elaine de Kooning's *Veronica* face each other across the gallery and function as boldly colorful bookends. Fujii, given pride of place, might have achieved artistic greatness and acclaim on a par with other painters featured in the exhibit but for circumstances of history and race which contributed to his almost being forgotten.

I say "almost." The Brauer's Fujii is a recent gift from Japanese print expert Sandy Kita, Fujii's grandson, and his wife, Terry Kita, long-time friends of the Brauer Museum. Sandy Kita has been instrumental in assessing, expanding, and improving the Brauer's collection of Japanese



Takuichi Fujii (1892-1964). Untitled, est. 1950s. Enamel on unstretched canvas, 27 x 38 1/2 inches. Gift of Sandy and Terry Kita.

Brauer Museum of Art, 2013.02.002

prints. He helped to curate a major Brauer exhibition of esteemed printmaker Sadeo Watanabe (whose image *Ten Virgins* graced the cover of the Lent issue of the *Cresset* this year), and brought to the Brauer an exhibition by contemporary Korean abstract artist Sue Kwok. Together, the Kitas have helped facilitate the rediscovery of Takuichi Fujii.

Sandy Kita (whom I met years ago through my wife, Gloria Ruff, the Brauer's associate curator), gave me a bound photocopy of his grandfather's art diary, entitled *Minidoka XX*, not long after he and the late Reverend Honda Shojo finished translating and annotating it in 2011. I have been



reading it, teaching it, and writing about it since then. In Kita's introduction to that version of the diary, he relates how in 1999 he found a cache of his grandfather's art in a box in the back of his mother's closet while cleaning out her apartment in Chicago after she died. Fujii himself had died in 1964. I assume the Brauer's Fujii came out of that cache, which included around 100 works, oil paintings, water colors, a pair of carved wooden sculptures of Fujii and his wife, and, most significantly, an art diary Fujii kept during his family's incarceration during World War II. Historian Roger Daniels, an esteemed expert on American immigration and on the Japanese internment, calls Fujii's art diary the most remarkable document by a Japanese prisoner to come out of the camps.

Johns. Having already written three excellent books about Seattle Issei (first generation) artists, no art historian alive could have been better prepared than Johns to write Fujii's story. This began the heavy lifting involved in re-establishing Fujii's reputation as a significant West Coast artist. (Johns also curated *Witness to Wartime: The Painted Diary of Takuichi Fujii*, a traveling exhibit that so far has appeared in Boise, Idaho; Tacoma, Washington; and Alexandria, Louisiana.)

In her book, Johns situates Fujii in a number of significant overlapping contexts. She weaves his biography into the larger history of Japanese immigration to the United States from the late nineteenth century to its curtailment in 1924. She provides local history that shows what made



Brauer Museum of Art, 62.01

Kenneth Callahan (1905-1986). *Fossil Canyon*, 1959. Tempera on Masonite, 26 5/16 x 52 inches. Sloan Fund Purchase.

Given the vast amount of materials that have been recovered from ten different camps over the past seven decades, that is saying something. Though I'm not sure his claim goes far enough: in as much as the diary is a work of composite narrative art, both words and images, in Japanese, in English, and sometimes in Japlish, it is so much more than a document, with expressive means capable of great power, nuance, and depth.

Daniels penned the foreword to *The Hope of Another Spring: Takuichi Fujii, Artist and Wartime Witness* (University of Washington Press, 2017), a new book from Seattle-based art historian Barbara

Seattle's Japanese immigrant community distinctive, and against that background she inserts Fujii into an artistic milieu in which he came to thrive, composed of both Japanese and Caucasian artists, some of them highly accomplished. Johns provides a fascinating and inspiring account of Fujii's participation with other Seattle-based Japanese immigrant artists in an art circle gathered by Kenneth Callahan. It seems the Seattle art scene in the 1930s largely revolved around Callahan, who recognized something distinctive in the line and color used by the Japanese urban scene painters he welcomed into his circle. It is hard



to imagine Fujii flourishing as he did during the 1930s apart from those Japanese friends and without Callahan. Daniels claims that group of artists who socialized in Callahan's home and exhibited together, the Group of Twelve as it came to be called, may have been the only interracial group of artists then working together in America, or one of very few. Mark Tobey, the fourth member of the Northwest Mystics and considered the founder of the Northwest School, acquired his interest in Chinese calligraphy while in Seattle. Given Jackson Pollock's documented interest in Mark Tobey's art, it's hard to deny a strong West Coast influence on abstract expressionism, with a particularly Asian accent we can see clear as day in the Brauer's Fujii.

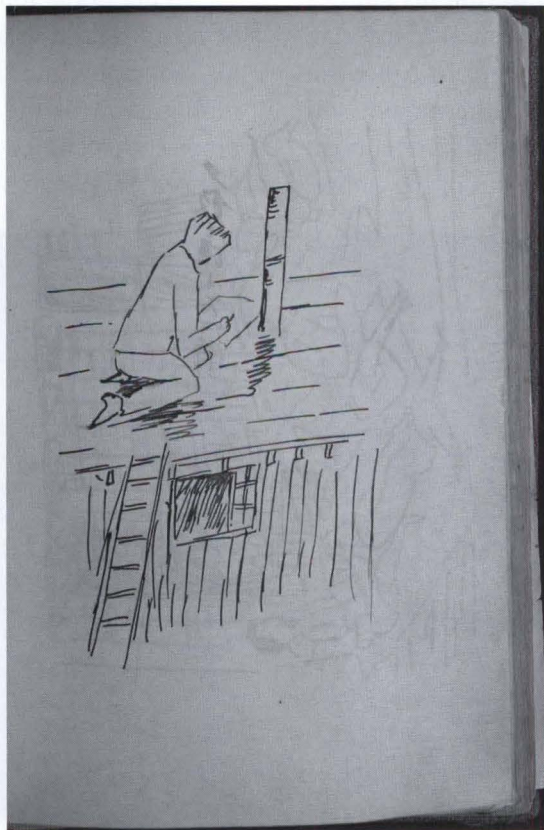
Johns' chapter on Fujii's life in Chicago after the internment breaks new ground for me; I learned Chicago became the largest population center for Japanese Americans after the war. For people back in Seattle, Fujii fell off the map after the camps closed and the war ended. Some thought he had died. Others believed he had returned to Japan. The Brauer's Fujii dates from his time in Chicago, during which time Fujii's abiding interest in abstraction, which first appeared in his art diary, came to fruition.

The art diary is the single most important work of Fujii's to come to light, and Johns provides a rich context for it, reproducing a sizable portion of it in her book, and including commentary and captions Fujii wrote for almost every facing page. She has also included color reproductions of a selection of paintings that seem to have begun as drawings in the diary, as well as paintings from the 1930s. Johns' scholarship is thorough and

carefully annotated, and her analysis of the artwork excellent and readable. Johns maintains that the experience of confinement is ever-present in Fujii's diary. I read the diary somewhat differently. Even at the euphemistically named "Camp Harmony"—a temporary detention center hastily thrown together at the Western Washington State Fair Grounds in Puyallup, Washington, where the Japanese residents of Seattle were locked up amidst armed military guards, watch towers, and barbed wire fences—I also see something else begin to appear. Exactly thirty-eight pages into the diary, after we have seen Fujii and his family taken away in buses, seen them locked up in converted cattle stalls, seen the guards, the fences, the squalid shower room, and the men's latrine, we see—quite inexplicably—teenagers playing volleyball. In the next image we see a crowd watching dancers perform on stage, and, in the next, a crowd gathering to watch a sumo wrestling match. In such scenes, the fences, guards, and watch towers almost disappear, or they disappear entirely.

This is not to discount or

deny any of what Johns sees—there is a pervasive feeling of sadness, lassitude, and degradation at Puyallup to go with the sense of confinement she feels is so dominant. But I also see a man who, through the practice of his art, begins to enact and record a process through which he starts to draw himself to a different place, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. At Minidoka, at its worst, it is not so much a sense of confinement I feel looking at Fujii's images as a sense of abandonment. At its best—or at Fujii's best—I see him recording, through frequent images of himself at leisure or working at his art, his effort to escape or transcend the worst aspects of a terrible ordeal. He records



A sketch from Fujii's diary.



that ordeal faithfully, and through that process achieves a sense of purpose, psychic health, and wholeness despite circumstances that tragically interrupted his career and nearly ruined his life.

I especially love an image he drew of himself drawing up on the roof of the barracks. For me, this image connects to the concluding sentence of the only Artist Statement we have from Fujii, written for an exhibition before the war and reprinted as an appendix to Johns' book:

To me, the most important element in painting is its power to raise the observer above the everyday affairs of life into a higher plane of existence.

In his image of himself drawing up on the roof, a ladder leaning up against the barracks becomes a crucial metaphor for Fujii's art and his project in the diary: to provide witness to a grave injustice that caused terrible suffering and trauma, and also to record how he and his community strive to live their lives with dignity and purpose—sometimes with success. Most importantly, he demonstrates how through the practice of one's art one can survive, surmount, and even transcend awful circumstances and achieve a form of healing, all the while expressing essential truths about that experience, about the human condition generally, and about the human spirit. This process of abstraction that Fujii practices has a spiritual dimension beyond the aesthetic that both interests and inspires me.

**S**ANDY KITA'S INTRODUCTION TO HIS grandfather's diary at the end of Johns' book is crucial for the way it gives us both the man and the artist, for how it puts Fujii in his studio again, and at his breakfast table on Saturday mornings presiding over the conversation. For Kita, Fujii was the man who helped to raise him after the early death of his father, and also the man who gave him his first art lessons. Kita's account shows us his grandfather still pursuing his art, still embracing and expressing his Japanese culture as well as the culture around him. Under his grandfather's influence, Sandy Kita would grow up to study art at the University of Chicago, earn a Ph.D., and become an expert in

Japanese Ukiyo-e prints. Perhaps no one alive is better prepared to put Fujii's art diary, an *e-nikki*, in traditions of Japanese art and Japanese art diaries, and I believe Kita does it very well.

The abstract expressionist painting by Fujii that the Kitas donated to the Brauer shows the full flourishing of an impulse toward abstraction that was planted in Seattle, was born in the camps, and was likely guided by new non-representational modes of art that Fujii encountered in Chicago.

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As he practiced this new mode of painting, we can imagine him drawing upon training he received in Sumi (black ink wash) painting while still a boy in Japan. We observe him drawing upon his skills in calligraphy as he did in the camps, but for new expressive purposes and with a very broad brush. I love Sandy Kita's account of how his grandfather replaced his horse-hair brush with one he made himself, using his wife Fusano's hair for its greater expressiveness. There is something very poetic in that gesture that I won't soon forget.

If you can, visit the Brauer and enjoy the works by these two friends who are reunited in this exhibit. We could all learn something from Kenneth Callahan and the other Seattle artists who welcomed Fujii and other Japanese immigrant artists into their circle. It's a rare treat, a Brauer exclusive, to see works by Callahan and Fujii hanging together again after all these years, the Fujii so bold and sure in its gestures, the Callahan still searching, still on the road in that deep canyon, but the colors so rich, so warm, and so welcoming. ♣

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## WHEN I THINK OF FIRMAMENT

*And God said, Let there be firmament  
in the midst of the waters, and let it  
divide the waters from the waters.*

—Genesis 1:6

Stop me from thinking of watered-down  
syrup on stiff Eggos or banana sandwiches.  
Stop me from thinking of the dishsoap

stretched even further or trout runs  
where silence kept us and the motor  
stirred the canal's brack. I was raised

by a beautiful man who speaks  
in *Let there bes* and rig talk. A man  
whose first ingredient is silence,

who has been betrayed twice  
by his own body, his blood  
thinned and flushed, his chemistry

the same cocktailed medicine as his father's.  
Stop me from thinking of soured legacies—  
give me the father who knows the waters

of speckled trout from the waters of gars,  
who coaxes catfish with chartreuse spinnerbait  
straight into a cast-iron coubillion.

I was raised by the man who sits  
at the front of this fourteen-footer  
while I man the back by the humming Yamaha.

Nicholas J. Molbert



# Co-Sojourners on a Difficult Journey

## A Review of David Finnegan-Hosey's *Christ on the Psych Ward*

Brent Schnipke

DECIDED TO BECOME A PSYCHIATRIST FOR many reasons: an interest in the diagnoses; longer time for patient care; opportunities to pursue teaching and writing; and a desire to help people. When I think of that last point, I think about Christ's charge to care for "the least of these." Patients with mental illness and/or substance abuse frequently qualify as "the least of these," and at least part of my motivation to become a psychiatrist is to participate in the ministry of reconciliation, to help heal the sick and make the broken places whole. Accompanying individuals in their rock-bottom moments, offering them hope, is what I imagine Christ would do.

This image aligns with the central idea in *Christ on the Psych Ward* by David Finnegan-Hosey. The author, now a chaplain-in-residence at Georgetown University, was a seminary student when he was first admitted to a psychiatric inpatient unit, the "psych ward," with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. He writes from this joint perspective, as a chaplain and a patient.

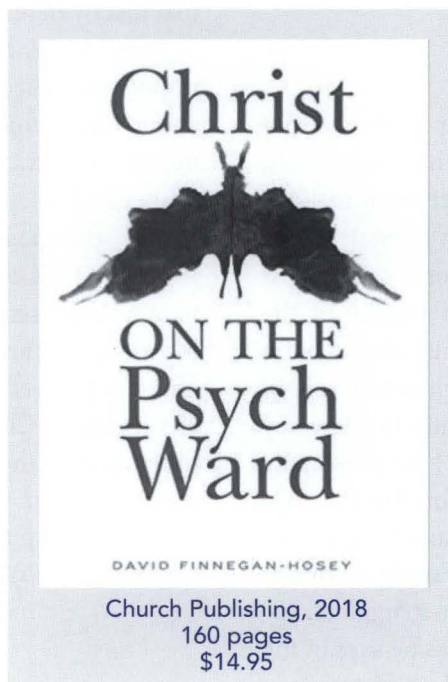
Early in the book, Finnegan-Hosey shares a personal story from that initial inpatient experience, about a nurse who offered him encouragement after asking him about his habit of reading his Bible. But this book is not primarily a memoir, detailing specific experiences and then considering their broader significance. Instead, the book is mostly commentary. Finnegan-Hosey returns to the central image of Christ on

the psych ward—an image that, for him, inspires hope. He imagines Christ the servant, who meets hurting people and sits with them, listens to them, loves them. He uses this image to put forth several tangible ideas for how the church could model its treatment of individuals with mental health struggles. Some of these ideas include starting the conversation about mental health in small groups and worship services; checking in on people who may be isolated or lonely; holding mental health training sessions; and advocating for just and equitable access to mental healthcare.

The idea that Christ would get involved with people at their messiest moments, showing up in surprising and unexpected places—for example, on the psych ward—is an image I also carry, and I appreciated Finnegan-Hosey giving voice to this. When he does write about his own specific experiences, he discusses how nurses, social workers, and doctors have embodied Christ to him. During his time in the psych ward, he was comforted with the understanding that

Christ was present with him. He advocates "physical presence" over "intellectual arguments" as ways of supporting people in crisis in a manner of Christ-likeness.

Books like this one, which exist at the intersection of disparate fields, sometimes do not have a clear-cut audience, and that seems to be the case with *Christ on the Psych Ward*. Finnegan-Hosey writes in an academic style, and his seminary





education informs much of his writing; there are long paragraphs about biblical interpretations and theological terms. He uses this knowledge to share his insights and recommendations with church leaders, but this material doesn't always blend easily with the narrative elements that seem addressed to a broader audience. In some places he writes directly to individuals with mental illness, asking forgiveness for poor treatment by the church and encouraging these readers to contemplate and find solace in the idea of Christ accompanying them.

## An individual's spirituality and religion can deeply affect his or her mental health, and this book provides a great example of that connection.

One audience for which the book did *not* seem to be written is mental health professionals. I had hoped this book would offer fresh insights into how psychiatrists or other mental health workers could function in a pastoral role. *Christ on the Psych Ward* scratches the surface of the connection between faith and mental illness, but it contains very little about the psychiatrist's role in bridging the gap. The author mentions a few key interactions (both good and bad) he personally had with mental health workers, but his message is aimed, for the most part, toward people outside the psych ward: friends and family members of people with mental illness ("co-strugglers, co-sojourners on a difficult journey," as he says in the introduction), and churches and ministers trying to discern "how to be in ministry with people struggling with mental health problems."

Even if the author didn't write this book for people in my line of work, I found numerous points of value as I think about my future as a psychiatrist. First, all patient narratives offer

insight of some kind. Finnegan-Hosey provides an important reminder of the significance of each interaction between patient and caregiver. A patient's understanding of his or her illness and self-image can be rooted in a few simple sentences spoken by a doctor. If those sentences are careless, they can cause damage. Finnegan-Hosey seems to have a clear understanding of himself and his illness—and, like every individual patient, he has a perspective shaped by his background and worldview.

A second lesson this book drives home is the importance of the connection between theology and psychiatry. I am fascinated by this connection, and I appreciate that psychiatrists must consider the spiritual background of each patient. An individual's spirituality and religion can deeply affect his or her mental health, and this book provides a great example of that connection. Not every patient is a seminary student, but we are all spiritual just by nature of being human.

*Christ on the Psych Ward* contributes an important voice to the ongoing conversation about how people and churches should address mental illness. I would have liked more of Finnegan-Hosey's personal story because it was, for me, the most captivating aspect of the book. And while his critiques of the church's responses to mental illness do not break new ground (nor do his ideas for their improvement), he nonetheless offers a perspective that may enlighten readers. His image of Christ serving the most vulnerable individuals is the crucial takeaway. For those who want to begin thinking and reading about the complex interplay of religion and mental health, *Christ on the Psych Ward* is a fine place to start. ✝

**Brent Schnipke** is a writer, doctor, and psychiatry resident based in Dayton, Ohio. His professional interests include medical humanities, mental health, and medical education. Brent can be found on social media @brentschnipke.



# Manure, Garbage Pits, and Cancer Wards

## A Review of Jeffrey Galbraith's *Painstaker*

Katie Karnehm-Esh

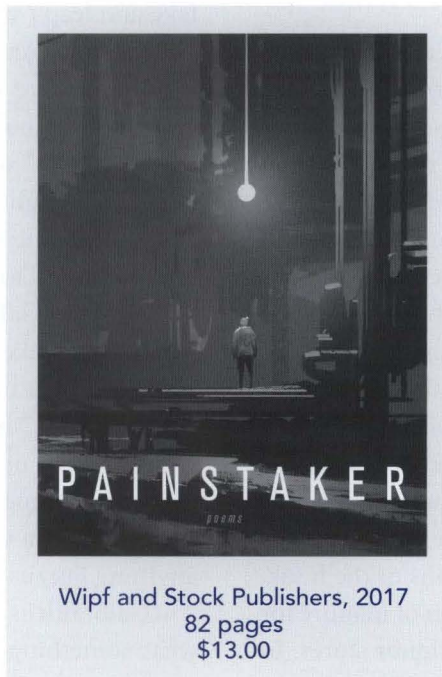
THE COVER OF *PAINSTAKER*, THE NEW volume of poetry by Jeffrey Galbraith, features a figure looking up from a grey industrial scene toward an orange light, a kind of Detroit landscape where dawn is breaking. I expected to find a similar spark of light in the poems enclosed in the volume. I kept looking for it as I read, realizing the poems were more grounded in Midwestern cornfields and the western suburbs of Chicago than the shuttered factories I imagined from the cover. Perhaps my unmet expectations began to get the better of me. As I moved through the first section, I found myself growing impatient with Galbraith. Was it the titles, often awkward mouthfuls (“Who Do You Say I Am,” “Hope New Rising”)? Was it the self-aware, wry endings? Was it the clever turn of phrase used to describe mounds of manure, or simply the writing of manure itself?

Galbraith is intelligent—his poems in this volume reference Greek mythology and the poems of John Ashberry. He uses similes, metaphor, alliteration, and Robert Frost’s blank verse construction. He knows how to convert a psalm into a poem about riding a bike. He knows how gorillas groom each other, how God kills us with cancer and farming equipment, how we burn our trash and make our children a graven image, and how sometimes those children lose a thumb or a toe. So much of what Galbraith knows gets packed into dense poems with sudden, punchy conclusions. As the reader, I often felt unprepared

for the poems’ ends. Yet Galbraith recognizes the connections between our stories and the universe, and explores those connections relentlessly. He is at his best when he lets those stories, as well as his readers, soften around a personal connection.

A member of Wheaton College’s English faculty, Galbraith writes poems that reflect the landscape and culture of the Midwest. This landscape includes the garbage pit at the edge of the farm (“The Garbage Fires”), and the memory of boys taunting each other “as the bus / turned from blacktop roads to gravel, past scraping / harvesters, the eaten fields, dropping us off one by one” (“When Matt’s Dad Lost His Hand”). Gradually, the location migrates from the farm to the Chicago suburbs, with references to Downers Grove and Aurora, and the litter of suburban life in “Isaiah in Chicagoland.” Further in the book, St. Louis, Lake Scituate, Michoacán, the Pacific Ocean, and even an absurdist venture into an overhead bin (“Lobster through the Heavens”) appear.

The volume is divided into three sections: section one seems grounded in the past of adolescence; section two transitions through young and current adulthood; and section three explores the present, as well as Christian culture, with poems like “Prayer,” describing a missionary kid from Kenya on a college campus; “Early Christian Advice Column,” which advises readers not to “skewer or schism or be / with others overly / harsh”; and “Elegy for Deer-Man,” which begins





Psalm-like with “As the deer panteth for flowing/streams.” The poems explore the cultures that formed Galbraith, while never quite growing comfortable with them.

Galbraith describes his cultures in detail, unpacking each point. Sometimes this exactness distracts from the overall beauty and insight of a poem. In the title poem, the line “To climb into the miniature car / I catch my nail on the tiny door, / close-stooped, surgical, / as if laying open

**Galbraith is at his best when he lets himself write something beautiful and favor personal connections over logical gymnastics.**

an insect wing,” confuses my mind and my tongue when I read it aloud. Sometimes, too, the description is so graphic, as when, in the poem “God as Gorilla or Wolf,” Galbraith asks us to envision a God who scrapes our scalps for lice. In “The Garbage Fires,” “flames darken cans of tin / half burn the labels pop / gristle of the chicken bones.” We watch and smell the garbage burn, admiring the verisimilitude as we hold our hands over our noses. The Frostian first line of the next poem offers no relief, describing flies descending on pig manure on the farm. In some of these poems I feel as if I’m reading James Joyce or watching Louis C. K.—the imagery is precise but unpleasant.

By the second and third sections of the book, Galbraith has traded his description of manure for descriptions of cancer wards and liquor stores. In “Hope New Rising,” Galbraith writes, “I commute both ways into the sun / past the aggregate company where gravel / and dirt pile into a mound made by / trucks backing up in low gear unloading.” Eventually Galbraith watches the mound of dirt “begin to catch / with life as grass composes itself blade / by clump and watch what could be.” Here Galbraith’s observation, description, and expert enjambment make this reader catch a vision of the blooming dirt pile, along with her breath.

Galbraith’s description grows on me in the second section, but it takes a little longer for me to

adapt to the musicality and endings of his poems. This is, perhaps, because I often feel I am reading a complicated monologue when I read his poems aloud. In “Fields a Green Wave” Galbraith writes about the smell of manure and the clods of flies that come with them. At the end of the poem, he writes, “lost to myself I think on them / how the rich dung intrudes / into nearby towns, / where the thick smells waft, come down.” This poem reminds me of William Carlos Williams’ “Red Wheelbarrow” with a less enchanting set of farmyard tools. In “Captain of the Wrestling Team and His Best Friend, During Practice,” the poem ends with an exclamation from a speaker in the poem: “I’ll bit it clean off, Captain! / And we rested on each other like sons.” I feel, quite frankly, befuddled and annoyed here. This emotion continues in “Metamorphosis” when he writes: “You headfake and leap / into the end zone, wiry strong star / of the field. Anything to dull being downsized, / running a store now. Enter the haughty / former co-worker” who the speaker imagines as a deer that the “you” of the poem no longer wants to hunt. The weight of the first lines slows me down, and by the time the co-worker has become a deer bolting away, I’m just confused.

And yet, Galbraith redeems again. In the title piece, “Painstaker,” the speaker closes a mystifying poem about a medical procedure by instructing the reader to “shrink yourself to a jot, / small as a hum, serif / of ink on a miniscule of snow.” No matter how much I ponder the meaning, or even the situation in the rest of the poem, I can forgive anything because of these last beautiful lines.

Galbraith is at his best when he lets himself write something beautiful and favor personal connections over logical gymnastics. He dedicates “re Controversy,” a poem evoking the underlying anxiety of working in Christian higher education, to Larycia Hawkins, the embattled former Wheaton professor who lost her job for declaring her solidarity with Muslims. A lost poet receives his honor in “Elegy for a Poet Catching Stride.” In “Two Decades Gone, *Barra de Navidad*,” Galbraith imagines a long-lost, presumably long-drowned subject finally being found. “Imagine that homecoming, that looming world,” he writes, with all the wonder and loss of anyone who has tried to rei-



Imagine the dead back to life. In this third section, the poems turn more heartfelt and wonder-filled, even as they mourn. They are of friends, dead colleagues, the sick. Here it seems Galbraith has less energy for an enthusiastic description, and instead simply tells a story. As a reader, I whisper *thank God*. By the time I am reading about poets dying of cancer, I do not want tricks or wordplay. I want images. I want liturgy. I want the poem “Isaiah on the Promise of International Space Projects” with its layered, complicated, and beautiful imagery of praise and worship as we launch toward outer space. “It will take more than years,” he writes, “to project the heart so large, the weaving / of arms lifted up in the music of intense praise / away from the earth, braid after / braid into one glowing rope spiraling / beyond all that weighs, constricts / and blankets. / At which point will begin the age of invisible buoys / and giant stars, the era of light.”

Here at the end of the last poem, the reader has found the light Galbraith promised on his

cover. It is hard-won, certainly; I have carried this volume in my backpack for two months, often pulling it out to re-read a poem and ask myself if I like it this time. I’ve realized that this act proves Galbraith has accomplished a difficult and powerful task: he has written a dynamic book of verse that changes and expands with each reading. The poems may not be what you want in the beginning, but keep reading—you have to earn your last launch into space and the era of light. ♣

Katie Karnehm-Esh, professor of English at Indiana Wesleyan University, graduated from the University of St Andrews, Scotland, with a Ph.D. in creative writing. She has published creative nonfiction and poetry at *The Other Journal*, *Topology*, *Whale Road Review*, and *Windhover*. She writes regularly at [annesley-writersforum.com](http://annesley-writersforum.com).

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Bass, Dorothy, ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Wright, Basil. “Filming in Ceylon.” *Cinema Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1943): 231–32.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Long View*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1974.



# Up to the Heavens

## A Review of Sofia Starnes's *The Consequence of Moonlight*

Marjorie Maddox

IN HER NEW COLLECTION, *THE CONSEQUENCE of Moonlight*, former Virginia Poet Laureate Sofia Starnes holds up our illuminating but limited language until it dims the light we think we see by. What's left is a mysterious moonglow that immerses the world in stories we cannot help but follow. "Does not your heart," the poet asks early on, "weary from things apparent, / ask what each storyline will tell, // which words carry their roots with candor?" ("Emerge," 22).

This willingness to trail and engage language—and thus all we define with language—opens up to the reader worlds of misses and near-misses, birds and saints, bicycles and baptisms, the bodies of lovers and the Lenten corpse of Christ. Throughout, we are called to examine and reflect. "A word," Starnes tells us, "depends on impulses—air-catch, air-lease—that hold its meaning hostage. // Language, like the dawn, is the defeat of hours / and a second's gain.... Shouldn't we ask // who and why, the plot and the denouement, the ache / for endings?" ("Last. Child. Last. Child.," 52).

In a world where belief can hinge on language and *hurt* and *heal* can be close cousins, Starnes taps into our desire for destination and arrival. Despite the misses and near-misses of accidents and lost opportunities, she moves toward love and afterlife. Unafraid to "brave a new calligraphy of skin" ("Love and the Afterlife," 120), she patiently travels toward final meaning.

And yet, never does she rush the journey, be it across Galicia or the rough terrain of the soul. Steadily, the trek from Point A to Point B moves us, as readers, toward epiphany. Knowing who we are and from whom we come "*starts with a little leaf / that tells us how our bones / are like luxuri-*

*ous stalks / grafting in secret*" ("Ancestry," 35). It calls us to observe and learn from nature—as in the closing lines of "The Clover":

Come,  
see the sky the moon the sun,  
the non-erroneous olive  
branch  
that falls on human hearts;  
  
falls on the errand bird and  
bloom: they do not know  
the good they do,  
or wonder how  
the good gets done. (39)

With its content sparrows, lambs, and doves, the poem echoes Matthew 6:28 and its injunction to stave off worry. The lamb seeks the clover, but knows no anxiety in doing so. The dove, "a harbinger of peace," nevertheless is "no wiser / than the dawn or dusk" (38).

The poet also associates birds with calm in "Baptism of Desire," and yet a calm that is not easily obtained: "Again, an eye on whirled and wintered / bird. Awareness is the proper name for nest. // Restless we live....Until, confessed, // we hunger for the birds" (91). Likewise, in "Tunnelers" she laments, "Come April, we are nothing, / nothing like the birds..." (93). It is language that helps approximate her sense of restless urgency for both the heavens and the calm the birds inhabit, as well as their noisy fleeing. It is language that leads us as readers into both experiences.

In "The Bridal Ferns," the poet further contemplates such nuance by following the philosophical breadcrumbs of her questions:



I wonder how such puny a word as *pit*,  
 could be both seed and slum, both dormant  
 agency  
 and tomb; both conflict verb—met up  
 against—

and scoop; a stone that yields, yields small,  
 yet hurts the hand. I wonder how,  
 but pittances deceive: this is the way of potency

and plea; the soil is notched by hooves  
 and by the Fall, and then by fledglings,  
 insecure.

How measured is the earth for gift and scar,  
 for creaks and croons, for the precarious child.  
 (“The Bridal Ferns,” 69)

Throughout *The Consequence of Moonlight*, the poet negotiates sound and sense—“we try ‘aloft’ and ‘lamp’ for meaning” (“The Consequence of Moonlight,” 87)—noting how “[t]he world survives / through barter” (“Peddled Looms,” 59). Often, she arrives at language that speaks to our desire—on the physical/spiritual and adult/childhood levels—to name and be named, to love and be loved.

For instance, in the poem “Unknowing,” she describes how even if we forget the “bright red apples dangling.... if they fall, we shall remember *thud*, / and with each peel, the aftermath of *leave*.” In this reflection on memory, loss, and love, we hear echoes of Eden and its Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Yet, in the poem what immediately follows is a call for intimacy: “Touch me, my love. For knowing reconvenes / as constancy. // We had a birth, a life of fingertips. / How do we know? / How, but through trembling” (44-45).

Thus through language we call out to be heard, known, and understood. We reach toward

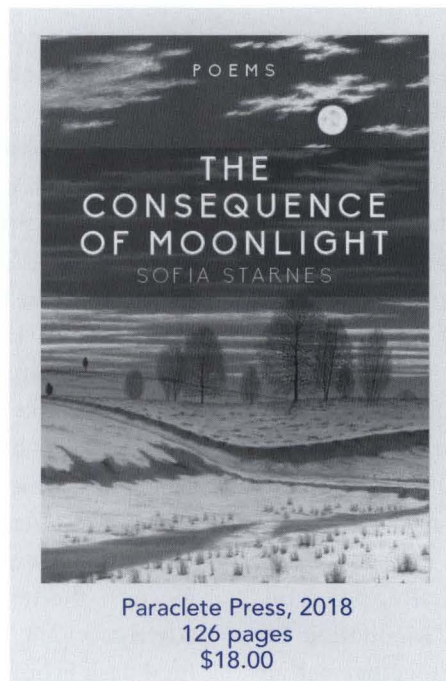
“learn[ing] the residue / of taste” (103), “the urgency of touch” (96), how “evening light translates to evening / wind” (91). Starnes invokes us to immerse ourselves in the natural and spiritual through experiencing language.

In this same collection, though, the poet also acknowledges the limits of language. We must not be afraid, she explains, to move beyond words into solitude. We must “know the stillness / for what it brings” (“Exodus,” 63). Similar to the moonlit saints in her title poem, we must welcome stillness: “[a]nd so, from word we turn to wordless” (“The Consequence of Moonlight,” 87).

In part, such quieting allows us to fully experience the world around us. We observe; we contemplate; we take in. As Starnes explains in “Mushrooms,” “Where / nothing feels, nothing is ever real. / Heaven, I think, lives off our daily / skin, props us as sentient mushrooms / on our stems, stems over healing / wounds, wounds over soil, / over the gutsy beds of streams—oh, / how the glorious body happens” (25-26).

Using what she observes of our vibrant, complicated world, Starnes connects us to ourselves as well as to the world to come. She encourages us to embrace the deeply felt, be it joyful or painful. Many of these invocations come through poems that focus on a child named Elena,

which Starnes notes is “etymologically akin to the moon....[and] harks back to our being called by name” (“A Note to the Reader,” 122). In the poem “Elena, Halfway (Or: The Quality of There),” Starnes cries out, “Come, swallow whole your share // of grief, for no one pushes off with half / a heart, or half an awe, / or half the obliging lung” (41). There is happiness, struggle, and loss in these poems. In them, as the subtitles suggest, the persona also approaches the qualities of “Departure,” “Forgiveness,” “Detachment,” “Assent,” “Oblation,” “Here,” and “Return.”





In other poems as well, Starnes addresses moving from this world to the next, where “[e]ternity slips in as something else: / new skin for our elusive shadows” (“A Mode of Permanence,” 80). In “Mortality,” we hear echoes of T. S. Eliot in “It will be fine; it will be fine, / to leave this rented consequence / with nothing but our borrowed

**In the final lines of her book,  
Sofia Starnes again shows the  
consequence of moonlight: the  
ability, like the saints, to shine  
light on the dark; to be both of the  
world and beyond it.**

feet, / to trade this skin—our reach, our dearth—both sanctuary and residence, // far nearer to our bones than we, / for vacancies in glory” (24).

Starnes further weaves together natural and spiritual themes in the three sections of *The Consequence of Moonlight* by placing biblical verses at the end of eighteen of the sixty-nine poems. Such placements amplify the collection’s move from self-discovery, to doubt and rebirth, and finally to “a meditation before the Crucifix... [where] we discover who we really are, through the One who calls us, tirelessly, by name” (“A Note to the Reader,” 123).

This final section is especially powerful. Beginning with the long poem “Meditation on a Lenten Corpse,” Starnes draws together earlier themes. In “II – The Carver,” where the sculptor “wouldn’t think *idea* / the right word” (84), the poet asks us again and again to *feel*: “Not flash, but *feel*, grasp, gauge, glory. / Throb and texture” (84). In “IV – Resurrection,” she concludes, “It is not memory that makes us, not the spellbinding lace / on nitty-gritty nerve-ends,” then moves us beyond what is lost to the connections that remain: human and divine love. It is her love’s cheek that carries her “beyond remembering.” It is her hope in the

divine that propels her even further: “I’ll press it; part need, part instinct—no, *all* instinct, true / as genuflect love. Lose and God gives. / So ready, ready to resurrect” (86).

The moon, the saints, the child Elena, and images of childhood and birds also reappear in this final unifying section. “The consequence of moonlight / is a sigh, / and saints out in the garden, strong / and pure, lift stories, as if bodies, / to the sky” (“The Consequence of Moonlight,” 87). Here, the poet is also lifting the reader through her narrative up to the heavens, where “a bevy of crows” flocks and “moonlight darts” (“White Crow,” 100). In this world between worlds, the skies are “a grant of memory” (“A Viable Way Home,” 109) where we arrive, finally, at “[a]ll this: the journey of a vast world / through our ears, whispered as breeze / and finishing as birth” (“What We Know,” 98).

And so, as in Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” “the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.” The cost of all this according to Starnes? “Invasion, inhale, intake...the bonus of reflection” (“After-Rain,” 114). In the final lines of her book, Sofia Starnes again shows the consequence of moonlight: the ability, like the saints, to shine light on the dark; to be both of the world and beyond it. “This much is heaven in our push and brink,” she concludes, “this much is world. / For all the love we root in afterlife, time // to greet earthly flesh: here, we conceive / a heart, here between fern and fence, // the tenderest outlast—” (“Love and the Afterlife,” 121). What language and life follow the final dash is ours for the choosing. ✦

Marjorie Maddox is professor of English and creative writing at Lock Haven University. She has published eleven collections of poetry, most recently *True, False, None of the Above* (Poeima Poetry Series and Illumination Book Award Medalist). For more information, visit [www.marjoriemaddox.com](http://www.marjoriemaddox.com) and @marjoriemaddox.



# Steal Away to Jesus

Martha Greene Eads

**H**AVING DONE VIRTUALLY EVERYTHING else (pay a hospital bill by phone, text my brother and a babysitter about upcoming events, switch out winter for summer clothes in closets, skim the student newspaper, list tasks for the day), I come guiltily to meet my Lord. Guilty because if I were going to dally this way, it should have been to grade papers.

I strike a match, and my candle's wick flares.

"You are the Light of the world. What do you have to say to me today?"

Before I open the Word, a memory surges: my eighty-seven-year-old dad's recent account of his father Mansfield's confession.

On a boyhood journey home with *his* dad after selling produce in town, young Mansfield had to ask for shelter in a barn during a violent summer storm. Kindly, the lady who opened her door invited them instead into her house, brushing aside their protestations about tracking in mud.

Probably they were ashamed. They were bedraggled, not only from their wet wagon ride

but further from the harvesting they'd done before dawn. They were poor. Mansfield's dad, Harv, was nearly debilitated by arthritis and spent more and more time in bed. Mansfield's mother had died giving birth to his youngest sister, so already, at age seven or eight, he had shouldered significant responsibility on the mountain-side farm. He'd had so little schooling that he could only write his name. (That's all he would ever be able to write.) The lady welcoming them spoke as if she might be educated, and everything about her shone.

Her family had already eaten, but she urged Harv and Mansfield to sit at her table. No corn-bread-and-milk supper in this kitchen; she piled blue and white plates high with fried chicken, green beans and new potatoes, creamed corn, cat's-head biscuits, gooseberry cobbler. When she saw that they were beyond satisfied, she led them to an unused bedroom. For young Mansfield, coming from a simple shelter, children-crammed, the sight of a spare room stupefied.

The bed's crisp sheets smelled of sweet grass



<https://flic.kr/p/5osTRv>



and sunlight. On a small table sat a cream-colored pitcher and a matching basin. Beside them were an oil lamp and a tiny matchbox, beaded in red, blue, green, and white. When Harv wasn't looking, Mansfield slipped that box into his right-side over-all pocket. He didn't mention it—not that night before sleeping for the first time on a feather bed, nor the next morning when he feasted on country ham with red-eye gravy and stewed apples and more of those biscuits, nor when the lady and two of her children waved to them from their doorstep. Mansfield watched them over his shoulder from the wagon, feeling the weight on his lap of the lunch she had packed him and the jab in his thigh of the matchbox corner through his pocket's fabric.

Mansfield never saw that lady again, but he remembered her always—certainly long enough to tell my dad about her. He didn't say what happened to that matchbox, but he did tell Dad that it never gave him a moment of pleasure.

### I, like Grandpa Mansfield, cannot forget the kindness of strangers, and I wonder what debt I owe.

**L**ACHE FOR MY GRANDPA MANSFIELD AS THAT poor boy, and I admire him as that honest man. I ask my Lord, who looks with love from beyond time upon us all, to have mercy on that boy and to honor that man for his willingness to reveal his shame to his son for the sake of both their souls. I thank my Lord for that great-hearted hostess, who opened her home to wet and dirty strangers, who gave them her best and bore more loss than she had planned. I imagine her forgiving them her loss and perhaps even telling her children not to mind. Maybe one of her children had given her that matchbox, but she soothed that child's angry crying, pointing out that Mansfield obviously had so little, and they had plenty. I ask

my Lord to bless her for her kindness, fighting my fear that she or that child turned bitter and never welcomed a stranger again.

And then I remember visiting my own much older cousin and his wife when I was seven or eight. A kindly neighbor of theirs whose daughter was grown loaned me her dolls during my stay. A darling white doll purse caught my fancy and found its way into my pocket, even though I, unlike Mansfield, had plenty of toys back home.

My cousin and his wife are in their eighties now, and I am nearly fifty-three. Maybe the neighbors moved far away long ago or have even died. Did their daughter ever notice the disappearance of the purse with which she no longer played? I, like Grandpa Mansfield, cannot forget the kindness of strangers, and I wonder what debt I owe.

As an English teacher, I remember Tennessee Williams when I think of the "kindness of strangers," but I don't linger long on him. Instead, my mind races back from the twentieth-century South where Williams lived and wrote and where my grandfather and I lived, and I stole, past my grandfather's boyhood theft (circa 1892), across the Atlantic to Little Gidding in the seventeenth century. I envision George Herbert's hostess from "Love (III)," and the meat she serves is fried chicken. Then I travel on to fourth-century Hippo in what we now call Algeria, where another youth stole pears, not out of hunger, but just because he could. His memory persisted, too, even after he stole away to Jesus.

And so must we all come: poor or privileged, muddy or clean, illiterate farm-boys and their Ph.D.-granddaughters. We steal away to Jesus, our Lord, who looks upon us all with love. Who has paid our debts and bids us, smiling, to go and do likewise. †

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## ON THE POETS

**John M Ballenger** lives with his wife and two children in Ohio. He teaches English and writing at Mount Vernon Nazarene University. John grew up in rural southeastern Ohio, the northern edge of Appalachia. That landscape and people influence much of his writing and interests. He is the poetry editor for *Relief Journal*.

**Lynn Domina** is the author of two collections of poetry, *Corporal Works* and *Framed in Silence*, and the editor of a collection of essays, *Poets on the Psalms*. Her recent work appears in *The Southern Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The New England Review*, and *Christianity & Literature*. She lives in Marquette, Michigan.

**Evan Gurney** is an assistant professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Angle* (UK), *Appalachian Heritage*, *Dappled Things*, *Relief*, *Still*, and elsewhere.

**Devon Miller-Duggan** has published poems in *Shenandoah*, *Margie*, *Christianity & Literature*,

*Rattle*, and *Gargoyle*. She teaches creative writing at the University of Delaware. Her books include *Pinning the Bird to the Wall* (Tres Chiccas Books, 2008), *Neither Prayer, Nor Bird* (Finishing Line Press, 2013), *Alphabet Year*, (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2017).

**Nicholas J. Molbert** lives and writes in central Illinois and has work published in or forthcoming from *American Literary Review*, *Christianity & Literature*, *Missouri Review*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Valparaiso Poetry Review*.

**Michael Schmidtke** was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest. They received an MFA from Eastern Washington University. Other poems have appeared in *Stirring*, *The Swamp*, *Tin House* (Online), and *Ruminant*.

**Isaac Willis** writes from and about his experiences in downstate Illinois. A full-time Monmouth College student, he edits the campus literary magazine, *COIL*, and occasionally writes his own poems.

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### Created for Creativity

Steven R. Guthrie

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Late last September, a week or so before the conference that gave rise to this essay, I was lying in bed, desperately wanting to give a talk. I was thinking about the talk I was to give, how quickly it was coming up, and how very far it was from being written. As I lay there, I offered up a sleepy prayer that went something like: "Oh God, please give me words and ideas for this presentation!" Those who heard the talk I ended up giving can judge whether or not God answered that prayer in particular. A much more interesting question, however, is how we should think about such prayers in general: whether God indeed answers them, and, if so, how. The theme of the conference at which I was speaking was: "Created for Creativity." [Read More](#)

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