LETTERS

ISSUE 1 | SPRING 2013

LITERATURE/VISUAL ARTS & THE SPIRIT

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Stella Maria Baer was born in Santa Cruz, California and grew up in New Mexico, Wyoming, and Massachusetts. She studied Philosophy at Dartmouth College and Religion and Art at Yale Divinity School. She lives in New Haven, Connecticut with her husband Seth and a hedgehog named Hegel. Visit www.stellamariabaer.com to see more of her work.

Mary Jo Bang is the author of six collections of poems, including *Louise in Love, The Bride of E,* and *Elegy*, which was awarded the National Book Critics Circle. She's been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University. She teaches in the creative writing program at Washington University in St. Louis. Her translation of Dante's Inferno, with illustrations by Henrik Drescher, was published by Graywolf in 2012.

Dianne Bilyak, an alum of Yale Divinity and Yale ISM, had her first book of poems, Against the Turning, published in 2011. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and excerpts of her interviews with poets about writing and spirituality are on the Poetry Society of America's website. Her play, *Cradle to Gravy,* was selected to be part of the United Solo Festival in NYC October 2012. For more information about Dianne's work, please visit her website: www.inthewayback.com.

Tom Cocotos is a collage artist. He's recently exhibited at The Art Director's Club NY, The Boca Raton Museum of Art, The Leslie Lohman Gallery in Soho NY, Miami Basel Pulse, Miami Basel Just Mad, and has one-person exhibitions coming up ath the Piegatto Gallery in Guatemala City and the Hollywood Center for Culture and Art. You can view more of his work at his online home, www.cocotos.com.

Rachel Fainter graduated from Savannah College of Art and Design in 2008 with a Masters in Painting. In 2009 she received a scholarship to attend Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. She is a New York-based artist who explores the unreliable and mercurial nature of memory and its relationship to representation in image-making, focusing on ideas of verbal overshadowing and Gertrude Stein's continuous present.

Steven Earl Hobbs writes fiction and teaches writing and literature at the College of New Rochelle, School of New Resources. He also serves on the committee for the Prison Writing Program at PEN American Center. He lives in Manhattan.

Andrew Hudgins is the author of several poetry collections, including *Saints and Strangers* (1986), which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, *The Never-Ending* (1991), and the forthcoming *A Clown at Midnight* (June 2013). Hudgins is also the author of a new memoir, The Joker (2013), which chronicles Hudgins' life as a teller of jokes.

Nate Klug's poetry has appeared in Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Poetry, Poetry Northwest, Sea Ranch, Threepenny Review, Yale Review, Zoland, and other journals. A chapbook, *Consent*, is out from Pressed Wafer, and *Rude Woods*, his versions of Virgil's Eclogues is forthcoming from The Song Cave.

Paul Mariani is the author of seven poetry collections, including *Deaths & Transfigurations* (2005), *The Great Wheel* (1996), and, most recently, *Epitaphs for the Journey* (2012). He has published several books of prose, including the biographies, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (1981), which was short-listed for an American book award, and *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life* (2008). Mariani has also been honored with fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Angus McCullough was born in and raised in New York, NY. Looking for meaning in the human environment as an observer, performer and designer.

Bryan Patrick Miller has published essays and poems in the New York Times Magazine, International Herald Tribune, Seattle Magazine, and Poetry International. He also edited Leo

Tolstoy's *How Much Land Does a Man Need*, translated by Boris Dralyuk (2010). He was a Writer-in-Residence at Richard Hugo House in Seattle and a Geduld Master Fellow at New York University, where he also taught poetry to undergraduates. Miller was a finalist for the Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship in 2011.

Anthony Opal lives near Chicago and edits The Economy. His work has appeared in Poetry, Boston Review, Tri-Quarterly, and elsewhere. To read more, visit www.anthonyopal.com/

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Mark Powell is the author of three novels—*Blood Kin, Prodigals* (winner of the Peter Taylor Prize for the Novel), and *The Dark Corner*—and has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Breadloaf Writers' Conference, and the Collegeville Center for Ecumenical Research. He is a graduate of Yale Divinity School and currently an Assistant Professor of English at Stetson University in DeLand, FL.

Spencer Reece is a poet and Episcopal priest currently teaching at Our Little Roses, a home for girls in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, as part of a Fulbright-funded project to compile a book of the students' poems to benefit the OLR home. Reece's debut collection of poetry, *The Clerk's Tale* (2004), was chosen for the Bakeless Poetry Prize by Louise Glück and adapted into a short film by director James Franco. He is also the author of the collection *The Road to Emmaus* (2014)

Joszef Ramos is in 9th grade and is currently a scholarship student in Spencer Reece's poetry class at Our Little Roses in San Pedro Sula, Honduras.

Leyli Carolina Figueroa Rodríguez is in 9th grade and currently resides at Our Little Roses, a home for girls in San Pedro Sula, Honduras.

Jon Seal's studio practice is organized around identity as it relates to memory, loss, and redemption. He works in both large and small formats, using painting, drawing and mixed media to articulate his images. His work mines fading memories in an effort to better understand how those memories shape his identity. For seven years he was chair of the visual art department at a college preparatory school in Clearwater, FL. In 2012 he received an MFA in painting from Savannah College of Design and has been admitted into the MARc (Religion and Visual Art) at the ISM scheduled to begin fall 2013. Jon Seals has been exhibited throughout Florida, New York, Chicago, Boston, and Savannah.

Martha Serpas's two poetry collections are Côte Blanche and The Dirty Side of the Storm. Her work has appeared in The New Yorker, The Nation, Image, and Southwest Review and in The Art of the Sonnet and the Library of America's American Religious Poems. She teaches in the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program and serves as a hospital chaplain.

Jackson Taylor is the author of the novel The Blue Orchard, and he directs the newly launched Writer's Foundry MFA at St. Joseph's College in Brooklyn. He's also directs the Prison Writing Program at P.E.N., where he co-edited and co-wrote the program's Handbook for Writers in Prison. He also advises the Anne Frank Center's Prison Diary Project, teaches creative writing at the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen in lower Manhattan, and was one of the founders of the MFA program at The New School. Previously Taylor was a floater at The New York Times at the Culture, Week in Review, Arts and Leisure, National and Metro desks.

Alex Tatusian works with people. He runs BF Bifocals with several friends has received a degree from an accredited institution. Presently Alex works out of New York City, primarily as a graphic designer and project manager in the arts. He emphasizes collaboration and working with available materials.

Steven Toussaint lives in Auckland, New Zealand. His poems have recently been published in The Cultural Society, LVNG, and The Winter Anthology.

R.A. Villanueva lives in Brooklyn. A finalist for the Beatrice Hawley Award and the Kinereth Gensler Awards, his writing has appeared in AGNI, Gulf Coast, Virginia Quarterly Review, McSweeney's Internet Tendency, DIAGRAM, Bellevue Literary Review, and elsewhere. He is a founding editor of *Tongue*: A Journal of Writing

Christian Wiman's most recent book is *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer.* In the fall of 2013 he will join the faculty of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music and Yale Divinity School.

JOY'S TRICK

9 paragraphs on poetry & faith

I know a lot of poets one might describe as unbelieving believers. They wouldn't believe in anything beyond the material world at all were it not for the insights they were given in their own life and poetry, yet by means of those insights—these "spots of time," as Wordsworth called them—it becomes possible to live, even to praise. Abraham Joshua Heschel defines faith as primarily faithfulness to a time when we had faith. We remember those moments of intensity and closeness to God and we endeavor to remain true to them. It's a tenuous, tenacious discipline of memory and hope. Some theologians have seen their practice similarly. Here's Karl Barth: "[Theology] knows the light which is intrinsically perfect and reveals everything in a flash. Yet it knows it only in the prism of this act, which, however radically it may be understood, is still a human act." Barth goes on to talk about how limited this act is, and how distinct theology is from divine revelation. Most poets I know would not draw this distinction.

A poem doesn't ask you to assert your beliefs, at least not at its deepest level, not first. It asks you to assert yourself. It does this by the intimate way it insinuates itself into your consciousness, the way it involves you in its very creation. Poems do this by various means, but the primary ways are with form and sound ("That night, that year / Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God"); metaphorical explosiveness ("telephones crouch, getting ready to ring"); and a kind of injectable idea—that is, an idea so concretely rendered that it enters your bloodstream as well as your brain ("The empty vessel makes the loudest sound").

I don't think it's enough for believers to stand outside of the most powerful achievements of secular despair and say, "if only that artist could see what we can see," as if our visions were greater than what the artist achieved in the work of art. No, if we have seen properly, then the identification has been too deep: we have participated in the revelation, however dark it has been.

One of art's functions is to give form to otherwise inchoate and corrosive feeling, to give us a means whereby we can inhabit our fears and pains rather than they us, to help us live with our losses rather than being permanently and helplessly haunted by them. "Preaching is cheap," says Rowan Williams, "if it fails to meet human beings at their darkest points." As it happens, Williams is speaking of a poet in that sentence, T. S. Eliot.

Recently I came across a very good essay by a contemporary poet about Philip Larkin and George Herbert. I won't go into the entire argument, but at one point the poet, after cataloguing some of Larkin's numinous clarities, said that he doomed himself because he was never able to see poetry as a "personally redemptive activity." This stuck in my craw, because it's an issue I've wrestled with for years. It goes right back to the distinction that Barth draws between divine and human inspiration. I think it's very dangerous to think of art—or anything, actually—as a personally redemptive activity. For one thing it leads to a lack of real urgency in the work and overproduction: if it's art that's saving you, you damn well better keep producing it. But that's almost beside the point. The real issue, for anyone who suffers the silences of God and seeks real redemption, is that art is not enough. Those spots of time are not enough to hang a life on. At some point you need a *universally* redemptive activity. You need grace that has nothing to do with your own efforts, because at some point—whether because of disease or despair, exhaustion or loss—you will have no efforts to make.

I have in my life been drawn to absence and emptiness as animating energies. I have found myself unconsciously opposing vitality. Part of this is simply being an artist—a modern artist, that is. Light writes white, is the old saying, the idea being that nothing is so inimical to art as happiness. ("Deprivation is to me what daffodils were to Wordsworth," as Larkin put it.) In the end, though, I don't think this state of mind is limited to artists. I have come across many people whose expressions of spiritual anguish have a tinge of self-satisfaction, even self-exaltation, to them. I have noticed this in myself. The fact is, there's nothing so difficult to outgrow as anxieties that have become useful to us. "Without my loneliness I would be more lonely," writes Marianne Moore, "so I keep it."

But are happiness, wholeness, unity, a sense of intimacy and rightness with others and the world around us—are these really something that we have to *guard* against? "Joy's trick," writes Richard Wilbur, "is to supply / Dry lips with what can cool and slake / Leaving them dumbstruck also with an ache / Nothing can satisfy." This is what it means to be fallen, to be broken, to be, in a word, human: nothing is ever enough. This rift in reality, this bright abyss in our brains, is a source of great pain. It is also a source of revelation. "Sumptuous destitution," as Dickinson calls it. "Destitution" because there is never, in this life, any perception or emotion on which we can fully rest. "Sumptuous" because something in the very nature of the destitution calls forth its opposite. "For need can blossom into all the compensation it requires," writes Marilynne Robinson.

To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweet as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savors of ripeness and earth, and when do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing—the world will be made whole.

It's fairly easy to talk of God or spirit or "radiance" and remain within the contemporary intellectual climate. The word "God" is often just a gesture toward ineffability, or an attempt to import a certain kind of spiritual intensity into a secular context. Christ, though, is a problem—not only because he situates the poem in a creed that many intellectuals automatically dismiss, but also because Christ is . . . a problem. Christ is a thorn in the brain. Christ is God calling I am here, here not only in what uplifts and exalts but in what appalls and offends. So many contemporary "spiritual" poems tend toward a kind of watered-down Romanticism, a woozily mystical communion with nature, "the weak tea of Emerson and Whitman," as W. B. Yeats warned long ago. Christ is anathema to this.

One of the things poetry can do is help to keep our religious feelings fluent, in both senses of that word. Poetry can help us not only find a language for faith, but it can help us to resist our own confidence—or lack of confidence—in the language we do have. The literary critic R. P. Blackmur once said that great poetry "adds to the stock of available reality." He was speaking of John Berryman, and speaking specifically of the lightning kind of metaphorical insight that Berryman, Blackmur believed, was capable of. This doesn't mean that poetry somehow creates reality ex nihilo or even that it creates meaning. Think of it like this: reality is constantly in danger of hardening on us, not because of the way it is but because of the way we are, our tendency to settle into fixed perceptions and formulations. Language seeps into calcified reality and reanimates it. This is why John Keats could say that poetry ought to strike us as a "fine remembrance," and it's why there is a deep truth in Blackmur's quote, for by enlivening atrophied insights we do indeed add to the amount of reality that is available to us. And yes, I do believe that by experiencing reality more intensely we come closer to God. "The eye with which I see God," as Meister Eckhart says, "is the eye with which God sees me."

LAUDS

Because it was not yet beautiful
Because the light knit the dark
Because sleep was patched with thought

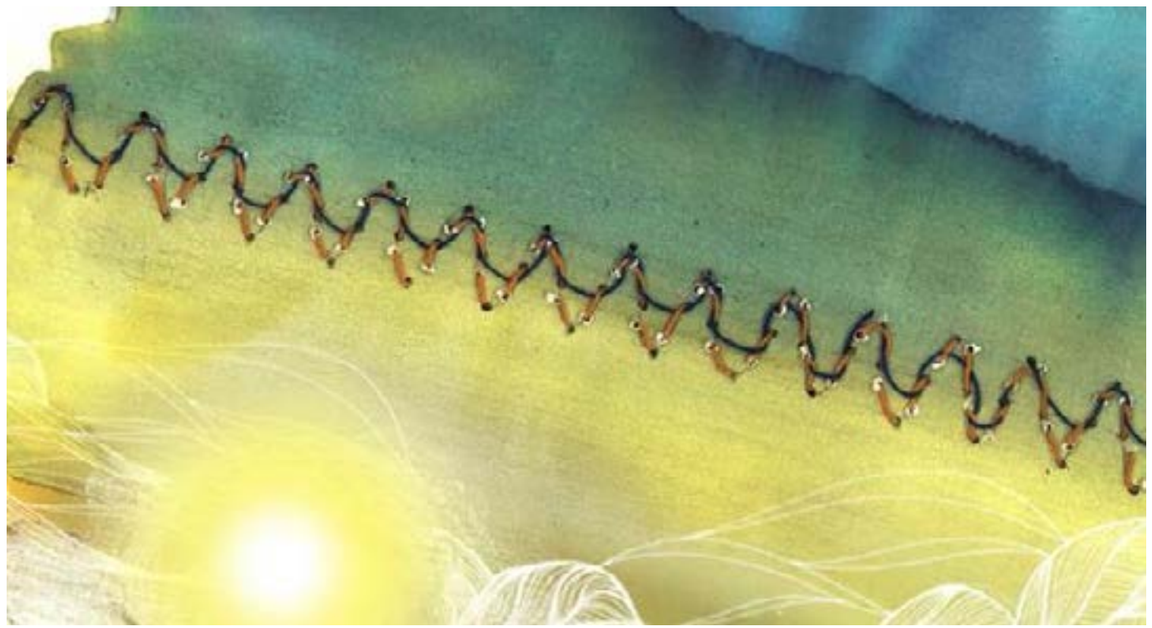
Because the votives were electric
And the chalice was filled with chablis
Because it was not yet beautiful

Because the light knit the dark
Because the field grass was tipped
brown
And the trees fell in spokes

I didn't wake her from the cupboard bed.
I didn't make tea. I didn't
Walk out to the barn with the dog.

I counted on another two hours of sun
To stretch through the clouds. I counted
on this life.

MARY SERPAS



SONNETS

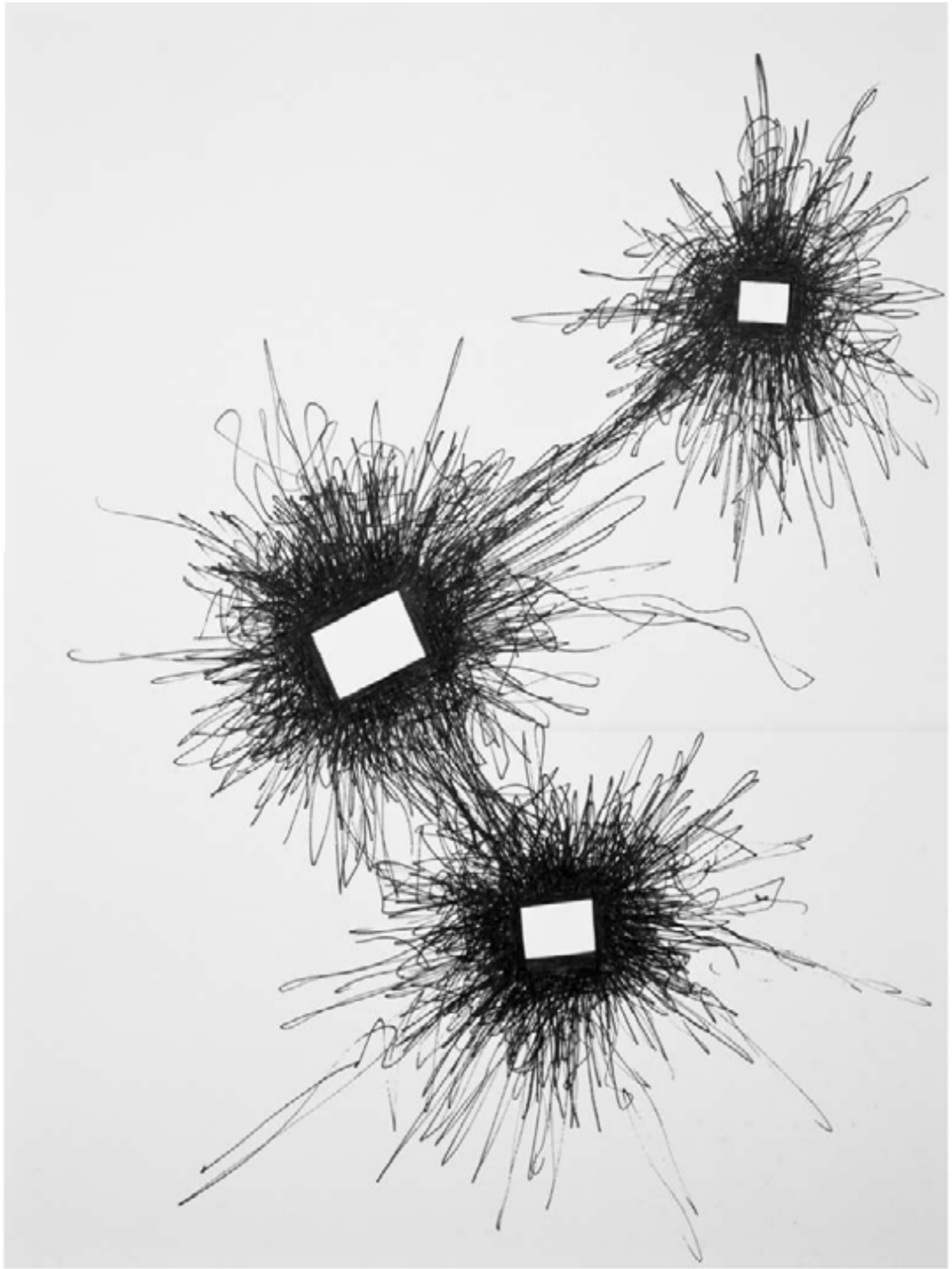
ANTHONY OPAL

I

“I hope that like a hatchback bird at least
some strange semblance of worship comes from these”
was supposed to be the last couplet of
this last poem but I couldn’t get there and
so I decided to start here (with what
gratitude) as I walk through the hospital
lobby and out into the parking lot
leaving behind tubes of my blood with
my name on them my address birthday it’s
all so odd that soon I will be one
petal on the mechanical sunflower
which reminds me how a friend once told me
that for some love leads to discipline
and for others it’s the other way around

II

as the sunlight goes fractal your hand moves
from your hair through the clear air to your side
where it rests in perfect stasis balancing
the silence inside each unit of sound
obeying neither space nor time you find
a stick on the ground and begin to climb
a small hill like a small Moses though none
of this is real and none of this is a
dream really but rather the result of
a waking vision like the motion of
water following a boat spreading out
for hours until the shore on either side
receives the tide in such a way that we
speak of nothing in terms of happenstance



III

sunlight in every city is different
due to the humidity and other
various factors like pollution and
the voices of children refracting off
buildings made of glass unbreakable
in even the most violent storms the
wind sweeping through the streets
like Jesus moving through Galilee
the fishermen seeing this strange figment
that looks more like a fragment on the beach
stoking a fire and cooking some fish
Peter swims to him and the others follow
just like old times though Peter is naked
and Jesus is newly resurrected

IV

as snow falls from a foreboding syntax
and night excuses itself with the flu
and the dog from next door continues to
bark bombs rapidly until I turn left
down Briar Cliff Drive and hating the stars
for their persistence and my lack of love
“a dove is just a symbol” but also
just an animal I say in response
to those metaphors I find so fitful
simply because I’m now turning thirty
and trying to keep my first time hunger
about me as I walk through the cold snow
wondering about how my righteousness
will ever exceed that of the Pharisees

A SPOFFARD LAKE NOTEBOOK

NATE KLUG

1

“A partially centered energy,
initially hardly distinguishable
from its cosmic, physical, and spiritual
environment, which comes to be
cumulatively distinguished and defined
by the objects of its attention
and affection”
is what St. Augustine believed
was a person.

2

Reeds trapped for a time
in the stubby suds
of builtup
cove ice:
questions, gestures
that swim or get stuck
between us
in spite of us.
Some stay under,
reemerge
after winter.

3

All day that one thing
that won’t settle,
ice sliding in place
like an airplane plate,
jarring its foreshortening,
far too near to us
looking out at
the edge of inside.

“The endless pressure
of God through the events, the things
and the people of his world.”

5

“As if a wall should say
that it gave birth to a sunbeam
that it received through a window.”

4

Silver gelatin
clouds today;
with you away
visiting Jammy,
this too roomy
beauty
gets scary. So I
go on touching
things with writing—
things that don’t ask to
be touched.

6

Razors, hubcap spokes,
twisted trinkets:
sunstrewn
iceeffects,
cheap and perfect.
Soon already the last
bands of color
began above the trees.
Keep a few
fuschia
for you and me.

7

“God’s endless pressure”—
meaning just as likely
to happen in the ordinary,
even
happy.
Landing awake, hands
think to work
through ambivalences
of static
towards her back.

8

“What makes love the principle
of all other Christian virtues
is not, then, its psychological
quality
but the fact
that love ‘approaches nearer to its object.’”

9

10

12/25
Words came near. They helped
me cling
If love is the word
that comes to rest
nearest its object
If love is a word
Aching world
letter by letter
to be rearranged
until the words
(Help me cling!)
Until the words
converge
on a child

PASSPORT REDUX

(Or: that time in an airport when I tussled with Dorothy Day)

JACKSON TAYLOR

I

Wanderlust can only upgrade the giving art
In wayfarers, worldy macaronics develop
Rehashing those elite tales, embracing irony's inner circle
Saint camouflage downplays its giltbraid
uniform

II

Waiting on a plane, I recall a conversation:
An Irish priest – Protestant
He tells how some ancient dogooders
sailed for adventure with Recalde'
Incanting in perfect Spanish
Grande y Felicísima Armada!
And
After dead reckoning brought them to the Isle of Mutton
They cleverly transcribed Irish folktales
Until they heard
Confession
Voiced by the Sherriff of Claire
At their execution:
"I am a spoiler," he sang
"I exist to spoil the pleasure of your curious craft."
(Today, such spoilage is archaic, gone with flimsy carpetbag, malaria,
yellow fever, rat plague, trader's disease, hoof & mouth,
quinine by the case & personal belongings packed in a coffin
in advance, prepared for the long journey home.)

III

Suggestions for modern missionaries:
Visit the Champagne regions
Travel's advantage admits no crime
Snap the Taj Mahal
Application grants fellowship, defrays expense
Avoid any Nandi and Masai!
Share a shower hot with sandalwood
Dabble in atheism, casuistry & curious custom
Give away free tea
At Machu Picchu, teach Peruvian children the list poem and jazz!
(Why settle for Occoquan when you can have Madagascar?)

IV

Waiting on a plane, I recall bits of a conversation
Dorothy Day:
In forgiveness, we see every fault but your own
In transit, our outward vision is but a scrim
Beyond it lies that indicting silvered glass
How much is willing to believe
To give
What is the only transformative source at our command?

V

Contempt of court:
"For Gawd's sake, Dorothy. One can still sip soup!
But why not a real Bouillabaisse in Marseille?
There is no shame in adventurous service – none
Any good cleric furloughs through Jerusalem – at least once
So why not take in Tel Aviv!
Or drink rum in Caracas? Wear a sarong? Practice dying languages?
Ever wear a fez?"
(Dorothy shudders)

VI

Suggestions for modern missionaries – pt. 2:
If the Sabbath seems too constricting, too holy to sketch
Sharpen your pencil on Monday!
Set aside some time each week to paint flies in the eyes of your subjects
(In Bucharest, that fellow health clinic worker – so dowdy – can make for a blistering villanelle.)
Better yet, why not make your students model?
Or in a writing class – make a video?
(Ask them on camera how like Eve they might escape this prison!)
And to any doubting Dylan – sails full of envy at such talent
Suffer him a lesson in 'art appreciation'

VII

Notes on selfpity:
You see, our biblical friend isn't the only Job enacting a suffering
In your job (of even limited duration), Hugo might reason a more perfect novel:
Because I've toiled so long & labored so completely – without recognition
    Because of my past
    Because of your depression
    Because of her depression
    Because of Christ's depression
    Because of his privilege
    Because of those parents
    Because of that poverty
    Because of polygamy
That stolen bread…
Because…
Do you hear me?

VIII

Trial outside the skylounge: or the indictment of pantomime:
Dorothy Day — admonitory sword at side – lonely:
Our gifts can telescope inward as well as out
Sleep & death pose mindlively places
It takes imagination to pray – & hope

And scribe!
In the lines you evince across the face of God's minions
(Our crestfallen colleagues)
Your blue ink runs cold
Your brush & quill scalp the weak
In unforgiving meter their skulls ache
The chilly chop of your icedull axe

IX

The applauded waits at the gate: (Exotic service:
Faith's simple probe).
"Dorothy. My backbent
ambition navigates the globe
The wretched poor live everywhere
Pain stamps this passport
Their plight – can divine – with my voyage
Shouldn't the afflicted be mystified?
See elusiveness ordained, see me come and go?
I've dedicated my sensitive glass eye to their every fracture
And because of my labor they live on
This unflinching canvas their shroud
My page of commissioned orthometry their epitaph."
(Like Sammy Davis, blind weakness grows stoic.)

X

The backhanded bow:
"You've become renowned. A worker. The admired beachcomber. Not me.
Sacrifice like yours, like his, develops its own pedigree
I can only imagine
How it must feel."
(Defer to critics – let them see you too are wondrously defenseless.)

XI

The ruling: (You carry no quinine.)
That damn spoiler Dorothy:
Blake posits virtue is a rarer act than vengeance
You say you've toiled so long & labored so completely – without recognition
Why are you a hero for doing an ordinary job? Teaching, clerking, digging toilets
Voluntary poverty is the rare
Your cynical work is not rare
You confuse inconvenience with suffering
A career with a calling

XII

Death row auction: (Last Rites).
Voluntary blindness yields vision
And revision
Active along eyelid's slippery red underlining
Down labyrinthine ways
Embracing the mystery
Vaingloriously, the quasar deepens the vainglorious
In whereabouts perplexing & uncharted
Destination uncommonly common
Shadowing prayer's solipsistic reversal
A spectacular galaxy far beyond reach of any brass ring
Here? There's no treasure hunt for geography, no careercurious
Armada
Here entices the real triangle of Bermuda
That passage of Maimonides curving the sail
Far beyond adoration,
The contingency of service
& holy chance
Far beyond the quasar that is faith.

Greatly Abridged Version: Genesis to Revelation, in 10 Hours

Samson and Delilah (Nonso Anozie and Keerston Wareing) in "The Bible," which also depicts Noah's ark.

the Noah's ark tableaux, followed by the Daniel in the lion's den diorama."

the great laws of life, Commandments, a curiously ...ous thing to leave to a voice-

...he result is a mini-series full of ...moting that does not register emotion-...ally, a tableau of great biblical moments that doesn't convey why they're great. Those looking for something that makes them feel the power of the Bible would do better to find a good production of "Godspell" or "Jesus Christ Superstar." And those thinking that the ancient miracles might be better served by the special effects available in 2013 than they have been in previous versions should prepare for disappointment. The Red Sea parts no more convincingly here than it did for Charlton Heston in 1956.

AFTER

words, to
ward
the parts
inside us we
cannot see
alive

STEVEN TOUSSAINT

POEMS FROM
NUESTRAS PEQUEÑAS ROSAS

I am living in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, for this year. I am serving as a priest and a teacher of poetry. I live and work on the grounds of Nuestras Pequeñas Rosas. Attached to the orphanage is a bilingual school where my classes are held. Some of the girls from the home are mixed in with students from the neighborhood. I had a total of five girls from the home this term, and fifteen from the neighborhood. The poems published here contain two poems by the girls

from the home and one by Joszef Ramos, a scholarship student. Leyli Figueroa Rodriguez presented her final project on Langston Hughes, Joszef presented on W. H. Auden, and the schoolchild who wishes to remain anonymous presented on Richard Blanco. They all did exceptional jobs memorizing the poems and writing biographies on each poet they picked. Their recitations were without mistake. While they were studying poetry in the English literary canon, I was working with them on writing poems. These three poems came out of an assignment to write what they saw when imagining the mural that a friend of mine will begin painting in May on the grounds.

Honduras is a country of beauty and poverty. The poverty has caused there to be less of an emphasis on poetry being taught in the schools: it is not regarded as practical. However, it is my belief if a country loses its poetry it loses its voice, and if a country loses its voice what next? Its soul?

All proceeds from the anthology I am creating with Richard Blanco will be returning to the home. It is hard for me now to read these poems without seeing the faces of the children behind them. I hope some of that spirit comes across the page for you as you read them. I want the world to hear these children, and this special country that often gets forgotten.

SPENCER REECE,
March 28, 2013

LEYLI FIGUEROA RODRIGUEZ

Cuando miro al cielo mi mundo es blanco.
El viento sopla las nubes.
Quiero que mi mundo sea azul como el océano
al lado de la calle en mi imaginación. Quiero que mi vida
sea feliz como las niñas alrededor de la calle.
Mi nombre es largo y complicado.
No se quien me dio este nombre.
No me gusta mi nombre. Porque es difícil escribirlo.
Quiero ser psicóloga
porque me gustaría ayudar a las demás gente.
Yo no tengo hermanas ni hermanos.
Yo tengo padres pero no los he visto hace mucho tiempo.
Cuando tenía seis años he visto mis padres algunas
veces de una a cuatro por la tarde.
Se me olvidaron sus nombres.
Cuando miro al cielo no me pregunto nada sobre
ellos. Voy a jugar y a bailar para divertirme
con las sombras negras.
Seré una niña feliz.

When I look up at the sky my world is white.
The wind blows the clouds.
I want the world to be blue like the ocean
across the street in my imagination. I want my life
to be fun like the girls I hear around on the street.
My name is long and complicated.
I don’t know who gave me my name.
I don’t like my name. It is difficult to write.
I would like to be a psychologist
because I would like to help many people.
I do not have brothers or sisters. I have parents
but I have not seen them in a long time.
When I was six I saw my parents a few times
between one and four in the afternoon.
I forgot their names.
When I look up at the sky I do not wonder
about them. I am going to play and I am going to dance
to make some fun in the dark shadows.
I will be a happy girl.

JOSZEF RAMOS

Joszef Ramos es mi nombre y Honduras es mi tierra.
Vivo en un país en el cual ser incomprendido
y mal juzgado es común. Necesidad, enfermedad y pobreza
no han golpeado mi hogar pero si han golpeado a
mi tierra. Mi padre murió en Guatemala cuando
yo tenía once anos. Fue asesinado por la espalda.
Le disparon mas o menos veinticinco veces.
No había querido poner esto en este poema
porque esto saca una parte que no me gusta.
Vivo en un país en el cual el gozo esta en el corazón
pero hay dolor en los ojos de todos. Hay belleza
pero escondida detrás de muros rojos, muros que han sido pintados con
sangre. Sangre de toda esa gente inocente que en su
búsqueda por la felicidad terminan chocando fuerte y cayendo con
agonía y dolor. Pero aun con todo eso hay una esperanza en el corazón
de todos que algún dia ese muro rojo no significará dolor sino amor.
Joszef Ramos es mi nombre y Honduras es mi tierra.

Joszef Ramos is my name and Honduras is my land.
I live in a country in which being misunderstood
and mistaken is common. Necessity, illness and poverty
have never hit my home but they have certainly
hit my land. My father died in Guatemala when
I was eleven years old. He was murdered and shot
from the back. He was shot twenty five times
more or less. I didn’t want to put this in this poem
because it shows a part of me that I don’t like.
I live in a country in which joy is in the heart
but there is pain in everyone’s eyes. There is beauty
but hidden behind red walls, walls that have been painted
with blood. Blood of all those innocent people that
in their search for happiness end up crashing hard
and falling down with agony and pain.
But even with all of that there is a hope in everyone’s heart
that someday that red wall will not mean pain but love.
Joszef Ramos is my name and Honduras is my land.

ANONYMOUS

Tengo diecisiete años.
En dos meses
Tendré diesiocho.
Pronto voy a salir de este lugar
Que se llama
Nuestras Pequeñas Rosas.
Salí de Honduras una vez.
Me fuí a Philadelphia.
Mi sueño mas grande
Es ser una aeromoza
En EU.
Quiero explorar el mundo.
Este lugar es mi hogar
Ha significado
Todo para mi.
¿Qué es hogar para ti?
u escuela puede ser tu hogar
Aun si tu no tienes una cama.
Vivir aquí es como
Saborear dulce de algodón.
Esto es tan dulce.
Mi familia esta formada
Por personas que me aman
Y me apoyan.
Voy a extrañar a Doña Diana
Porque ella es como una madre
Para mi. Es verdad.
Mi historia real es una crónica
De caridad. No
Olvidaré este lugar llamado hogar.
Honduras, prefiero los paisajes
De tus montañas verdes.
No estoy seguro si el mundo
Me va a querer como en este lugar.
¿Que espera el mundo de mi?

I am seventeen
And in two months
I will be eighteen.
Soon I am leaving
This place called
Nuestras Pequeñas Rosas.
I left Honduras once.
I went to Philadelphia.
My biggest dream is
To be a flight attendant
In the USA.
I want to explore the world.
This place is my home
And it has meant
Everything to me.
What is home for you?
Your school can be your home
Even if you don't have a bed.
Living here has been like
Tasting cotton candy:
It is that sweet.
My family is made up
Of the people that love
And support me.
I will miss Doña Diana
Because she is like a mother
To me. That is the truth.
My real story is a chronicle
Of charity. I will never
Forget this place I call home.
Honduras, I prefer the visions
Of your green mountains.
I am not sure if the world
Will love me like this place.
What will the world
Expect from me?

3poems by BRIAN PARTRICK MILLER

TAKING ACCOUNT

We can burn the body, the
clothes
she wore when they took her
away (pink sweats, mauve shirt,
cream tennis shoes), her
glasses, the blue couch
that grew wings.

COMMUNION

Something I just noticed in a picture
I look at all the time—on the end table
next to where you're covered in blankets,
a dull yellow cup, the same one I use.
Near the end your gums leaked.
Stained whatever touched your lips.
Only say the word
& I shall be healed.

MULLENIX ROSE

Twenty minutes in the small plot in hard rain
& I can't find the blue leaf fern we planted
to mark the spot where we dug
with our hands, kneaded you into the earth.

& a response

GOD PARTICLES by R.A VILLANEUVA

The man in the pew in front of ours turned to the man on his right and kissed him on the mouth. There in the unfinished cathedral, before blood and body from wine and leavened bread. Before we made the sign of peace and hummed into our pressed palms Now and at the hour of our death.

Before Lapu-Lapu's men found him
a grave, Magellan drank rum straight
from the casks, paced the deck of his caravel
and licked his thumb, pressing it
to the prevailing winds.

Earlier that morning, three days
after passing through the straits of All Saints
and naming the ocean after peace, the captain
knelt for the Virgin, ordered his men to sharpen
the end of a cross they will plant into the rocks.

October night, typhoon. The houses, candle-lit, glow like the yellow
eyes of crows. I think of delivery, hollow cries, bones to be found
and sorted into strange, precise skeletons. Before I knew
you, we slept with our heads pointing north. You said

Our dreams will rivet us, atop the shallow of our mattress and *I've already cleaned the bathroom* and *Yes, Death is beneath us, and all these stars are dead so it's above us, too*. Through the narrow, snaking stone gully
at the end of the street, you kissed me under my sweater

and you held me and I sunk you a little. Tell me I can
be bloody. Tell me in your family the veins go first
finding alternate routes, pulling back the tide stranded,
luminous as eyes and I will weigh us down with cod bones stuck to a skillet
coated with grease. I will speak of visitation—a dead sister
come as a beekeeper or my finger tapping yours.

Whether by galleon or caravel,

St. Francis Xavier made landfall in Malacca
and met a boy named Anger,

who pleaded to be saved.

It was in his eyes—all along Anger's skin,
which spoke of an archipelago ripe with idols,
a distant continent plagued by gods.

And so Francis christened him with water,
thumbed a cross to his forehead in oil and balsam,
and lifted Pablo de Santa Fe from the lake.

Hear those few survivors at the dune-edge
of the Namib Desert, those men run aground

on the Skeleton Coast, beside a trireme's broken masts
or a carrack's open ribs, praying against the surf.

Imagine whaling ships weighted with fat and bone
and ambergris, the crew in the shadow of these wrecks

watching springbok in their herds, living on thorns alone,
drinking from drift-clouds with a flick of the tongue.

Miles beneath Geneva the men dig
with shovels and picks, churn
the bedrock with tumblers and water-

drills. Soon, tunnels will run
beneath the Jura watershed
into France, will be held

together with pipes and bolts,
supercooled magnets in triplet
arrays. There will be beams

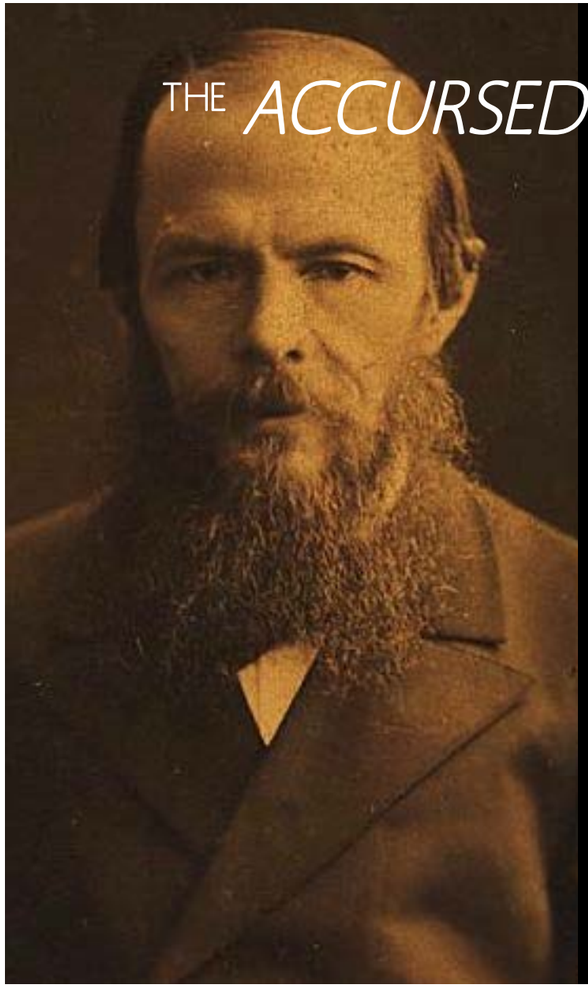
of light, diodes in measured pulses.
If the God particle exists, they promise,
we will hold it—there, in the instant

between nothingness and mass.

NOTES

l. 5-6 The phrase "Before Lapu-Lapu's men found him / a grave" originally appeared in "Shoals," a poem by Jon Pineda.

l. 15-28 This sonnet is composed of lines and images taken from the poetry of Alessandra Trinidad-Foley, Jessica Flynn, Alison Moncrief Bromage, Amber West, Mrigaa Sethi, Anna McDonald, and Sassy Ross.



THE *ACCURSED* QUESTIONS

Dostoevsky
believed
there were
five great
questions
of human
existence.
He called
them
prokliatye voprosy—
”the accursed questions.”

1. WHAT IS GOD? 2. WHAT IS THE NATURE OF TIME?
3. WHAT IS THE ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE OF DEATH?
4. WHAT IS EVIL? 5. WHAT IS LIFE?

The poets, Mary Jo Bang and Andrew Hudgins answer:

WHAT IS GOD?

God is a metaphor, around which people often organize elaborate creation myths. Sometimes people overinvest in a specific myth to the point of murdering those who don’t subscribe to it.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF TIME?

Humans measure the interval between observable events—sunrise to sunset, for example, is “a day”; birth to death is “a lifetime”; the movement of a watch hand between two parallel lines is a “second,” and so on. Humans sometimes feel sad that so many intervals have elapsed because we know (we’ve heard, we’ve seen) that the number of intervals we have on earth is finite.

WHAT IS THE ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE OF DEATH?

The riddle of death is: Why must the number of intervals we have on earth be finite? The answer is: Because.

WHAT IS EVIL?

Evil is a lack of compassion that can take many forms: torture, bullying, intolerance, revenge, conformity, imprisoning the mentally ill and providing no treatment for them, killing people for personal gain, wasting precious resources because one can, etc.

WHAT IS LIFE?

Life is the presence on earth of whatever is on earth and on the satellites around earth (moon rocks from the moon, for instance, are part of life and so are craters on Mars). Sometimes people look out into space, hoping to find some mirror image of this presence, and sometimes they do: ergo, rocks on the moon and craters on Mars.

Mary Jo Bang

WHAT IS GOD?

I don't know. Something larger than human intelligence that is interested in us at least some of the time, and all things evening out, is probably benign and life approving?

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF TIME?

I know time is more complex than my working understanding of it. My understanding is practical and primitive. I sleep. I get up. The clock rules the time until I sleep again. Then one day I don't get up.

WHAT IS THE ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE OF DEATH?

Though I'm hopeful there is one, I don't know of one that I trust very much.

WHAT IS EVIL?

Working, deliberately or inadvertently, to the detriment of others or the world.

WHAT IS LIFE?

Again my answer is primitive and practical: Life is what I wake to everyday, and on the day that I don't wake up to it, others still will, some for the first time.

Andrew Hudgins

At the Turn

STEVEN EARL HOBBS

Ruth woke up early on Saturday. She sat on the edge of the bed and pointed her toes. A gray light filled the room. She felt as she did on her wedding day, just under a year ago. She could almost taste that same sense of possibility, that feeling of immortality. Her heart fluttered as she stretched her arms up to the ceiling.

Glancing over at David—her man—sound asleep, breathing deeply, his arm wrapped around a pillow, she whispered a prayer of thanks to God. The Lord works all things together for good. She made a little hop off of the bed and stepped into the bathroom.

Ruth was a petite young woman. In a pair of comfy socks, she stood just two

inches below five feet. She purchased her clothes in the kids' section at the Gap and had to sit on a phone book when eating at the dining room table. She was, at times, a tad self-conscious of her small size. And yet, had she been measured by spunk and spirit, she would have towered over any of those greedy giants rumbling around in the book of Genesis.

The bathroom light flickered its lime-green color as she made careful preparations for the day. Their day. Ruth smiled. How she loved David. The feeling of bliss brought a hymn of praise to her lips while she tweezed a few hairs out of her eyebrows. She held one in between her fingers, made a wish, blew it onto the tile floor, and stepped into the shower.

Their young marriage, by any standard, had been difficult. A month after the small yet spunky wedding ceremony, David was demoted to part-time at Lily Street Christian Church. Because, really, when times are tough—financially speaking—how many fulltime youth pastors do you need? Or something like that.

David was the youngest in the youth department, so his unwrinkled brow was put on the block. He would have preferred a clean cut. Not this blunted and embarrassing part-time assignment. But Pastor Honeycutt believed that things would turn around in six months. No more than ten months. So, why not stick it out? Have a little faith, David.

But faith can't fill the refrigerator or put gas in the tank, David told Ruth later that day.

So they fasted and prayed. Ruth started a second prayer journal, asked for more hours at the Christian bookstore where she had worked since her sixteenth birthday. And within a week, David landed a job as a golf coach at a local high school. They celebrated. They praised God. They went to Applebees. Then, on the first day of practice, a flighty freshman drifted into the aggressive practice swing of hulking senior. There was blood, an ambulance, and a long night in the emergency room. Pastor Honeycutt even stopped by to pray with the family. With plastic surgery, therapy, and luck, the boy might regain some semblance of the original function and appearance of the ear. For now, though, prayer and fasting are the best options. "More fasting?" David had mumbled. The next morning, he stepped down as the golf coach.

David had taken all of this hard. Who wouldn't? He turned sullen. At times, despairing. At night, Ruth would find him reading the book of Job or Jeremi-

ah in the living room, shaking his head and murmuring to himself. She even overheard him in the bathroom at night saying such strange, awful things. Things like: "Fuck this shit." Or: "I hate this fucking shit." Eventually, he took to sleeping on the far side of their double bed, at least an arms length away, sometimes whimpering, sometimes grinding his teeth.

Ruth understood. She prayed to take on some of her husband's suffering. She wrote lengthy passages of praise and benediction in her journals. She became even more involved at Lily Street, teaching a Sunday school class and singing in the worship band. Her faith was . She could move mountains

with it. Her Bible and Pastor Honeycutt told her so. In fact, she somewhat welcomed experiencing the "for poorer" and "for worse" phases of marriage so early in the game. She knew that God would bring them closer as a result. And the Bible is full of heroes and heroines who suffered to the glory of God. She wanted to live up to her Biblical namesake, that unfaltering woman who had survived and suffered so much. Even with a sassy mother-in-law in tow. Ruth knew that better days were ahead for her and David. For those who love God, for those who are called according to His purpose.

"At least we have our health," she often said to David. "At least we have each other and a community of friends and loved ones at Lily Street. We have so much to be thankful for. Think about all those poor young girls sold off as sex slaves in South America!"

David responded that he was already depressed enough. "Do you really want me to take up drinking?"

But Ruth believed that today would bring about a change. Everything was set up for it. A friend of David's had given him two tickets to the pro golf tournament at the course just outside of town. A mere thirty minutes from their home. A passionate golf fan, David had been all the more depressed that their meager budget could not come close to justifying the overpriced tickets to the event. Adding to his despair, all of his beloved professional golfers were slated

to play. "You name them, they will be there," David had sighed before getting into bed one night. So Ruth prayed. Ruth fasted. And God provided. The unexpected gift had, like some kind of spiritual smelling salt, roused David. The smile that had first smitten Ruth began to return.

On the evening he received the tickets, David had told her that up to this point in their marriage, they had been playing "bogey golf." Nothing spectacular, nothing disastrous. Just a steady string of bad club selections, misjudged yardage, unseen water hazards, and unforgiving greens. Typical of first-timers at an unknown links. "We'll have a better back nine," he had said and scooted over to the far side of the bed.

Though confused by her husband's analogy, Ruth began to believe that this day at the golf course would reenergize their marriage. She soon felt as sure of this as she did of her own salvation. She could even picture the two of them describing this monumental day while delivering a testimony of praise before the congregation on a Sunday morning. She already had the perfect dress in mind.

David was in a good mood at breakfast. He complimented her appearance and even kissed her cheek. A pair of snug capris, a plum-colored polo, and a sample set of Mary Kay had done the trick. She still knew how to dazzle, how to wow her man.

Between sips of coffee, David read out the names of the players they would soon see in action. Read them as if they were the many names of God found in the Bible. And while Ruth was clueless about golf, she beamed at her husband as he spoke. She could care less about so and so's stunning drives or the number of majors what's his name had won. It was all a clanging cymbal to her. What she loved were David's thin lips, his dark hair, and those pensive Irish eyes. Those hands.

In the car, Ruth noticed a black backpack in the backseat. She had never seen it in the house before and asked David about it.

"It's filled with souvenirs for autographs," he replied as he started the car. "I want to get as many autographs as I can today. Some for me, some to sell. The big names bring a lot of money."

Ruth didn't like this. Bringing the backpack felt wrong to her, but she couldn't say why. She almost wanted to chuck the thing out of the window. Instead of

dwelling on it, she took David's hand and hummed "Great Is Thy Faithfulness."

After the first verse, Ruth felt reassured. She opened her compact and made a few small adjustments to her hair. She was pleased with the final product.

"God is good all the time," she said, closing the compact. "And all the time God is good."

David nodded and turned on the radio.

The golf course was crowded. Far more people than Ruth had expected were in attendance. Who knew so many people cared about golf? So much for intimate strolls.

David parked a healthy distance away, next to a four-door sedan that looked familiar. Where had she seen it before? She could almost picture the face of the driver. She wanted to mention it to David, but he was already making his way toward the course, seemingly oblivious to her. Forgetting the car, she ran to catch up.

They waited in line at the entrance. Everyone around them reeked of stale sunscreen and bug repellent.

They fought through the crowds. They were separated for a few moments. Ruth tripped. But she picked herself up and kept her sights on David's black backpack and followed.

Finally, they broke free from the mob and walked down the tenth fairway. Flustered, Ruth took a few deep breaths and prayed for strength. "You are my rock in times of trouble," she whispered.

Maintaining a brisk pace, David explained that the space between the tenth green and the eleventh tee box was the best place to see everything, everyone. "It's a crucial point," he said. "The turn. You can see the players stand over putts that will make or break their back nine, their tournament. You then can watch their tee shots on the eleventh. Also crucial. A lot of pressure and

tension in this small space."

Ruth responded with "awesome" and dabbed the sweat off of her forehead and cheeks with a handkerchief.

After ten minutes or so, they arrived at the shaded area between the eleventh tee box and the tenth green.

"The players should start coming in the next fifteen minutes," David said and removed a mangled bottle of water from the black bag. He guzzled half its contents and handed it to Ruth.

Ruth nodded and took a quick sip. She forced out a weak smile. All I have needed Thy hand hath provided.

A humid breeze shook the thistles of the sand pines behind her. A frond fell to the ground from a tall palm on the other side of the fairway. A flock of ibises rippled across the sky. Ruth thought she heard the sound of distant thunder. But there were no dark clouds to be found. Only a glaring white shimmered above her head.

"I'm sorry things have been so hard this year," David said, taking back the water bottle. "I didn't want it to be like this for us. For you."

Ruth put her arms around her husband and kissed his nose. She reached up and ran her fingers through the sides of his thick hair.

"God is faithful," she said. "We'll get through this." She added: "We're getting through it."

David nodded and said, "I hope so."

"I know so. His faithfulness is great. Besides, God's given us this beautiful day to enjoy. Together."

Ruth felt her heart lift at the word "together."

Other spectators began to show up to their spot, and David engaged many of them in conversation. He talked with enthusiasm about so and so and the type of year he was having. Such promise, such potential. He knew when the players would arrive to the tenth green. He had the information written down in

a brown, leather-bound journal filled with tables of stats and figures.

Soon, golfers were standing over their putts on the tenth green, the harsh sun and humidity breaking through the shade. David whispered names and numbers to Ruth. He pointed at various lines in his journal. She smiled and tried to harmonize with his expressions of excitement, struggling to find the right key.

After a few hours of what just looked like more of the same thing, Ruth began to feel tired and hungry. But she didn't want to mention this to David. He was so elated as he talked with other spectators and watched the men make or miss putts and follow up these successes or failures with straight or errant tee shots. Often, he stood transfixed as a player lined up a putt. Ruth could hear his intake of breath and his loud exhale after the ball either dropped in the hole or "lipped out." She wanted to share in his zealous interest, but she just couldn't understand it. The day—their day—wasn't exactly going as she had hoped or even expected. How was God going to use all of this to realign their marriage, to alleviate their struggle? To make good on His promise? The Lord does work in mysterious ways.

The tense, enveloping blaze of the afternoon began to soften.

All of the players had made the turn, and Ruth and David, along with the masses, followed the leaders from hole to hole. Fairway after fairway they went. David's excitement seemed to build, while Ruth felt her resolve diminish. Her polo shirt kept coming untucked. Grass and dirt blemished her white Keds, and the shoelaces refused to stay tied. The humidity had caused the ends of her hair to frazzle.

On the fourteenth hole, David's favorite player hooked his tee shot into a large water hazard. "This doesn't look good," David whispered. But somehow, the young man managed to "save par" with what David described as a gutsy and determined club selection. "This guy just won't give up." Ruth sensed that the majority of the crowd was now pulling for this young man to have a finish. David sported a satisfied grin as they continued following him.

Walking down the eighteenth fairway, she clung to her delighted husband, thankful that this day had brought him back from the edges of despair. She told herself that hers was a sacrificial part, that she had to suffer just a little to see him lifted up. And how meager the suffering! Compared to the abused young girls in South America and the cleft-lipped babies in Asia, Ruth knew that she was blessed, that she was loved. She saw that David now had a

spring in his step, and he affectionately held her hand and kissed her cheek. So, as the day drew to a close, Ruth felt content. Sure, she had battled exhaustion, hunger, and bewilderment. Yes, her Mary Kay had faded a little. But she thanked God even for this. All things work together for good. Maybe, as a result of her sacrifice, David would even receive a job offer of some kind as early as Monday of next week. For those who are called according to His purpose.

The finish was exhilarating, even for Ruth who knew so little. David's favorite player, the gutsy young pro, sank a twenty-foot putt to take the lead for the final round on Sunday. The crowd roared and Ruth joined David in showering shouts of praise onto this young man who had fallen to his knees on the green, jabbing his putter into the air.

Despite this rush of excitement, Ruth was still glad that the day had come to an end. She wanted to go home, shower, eat, and maybe curl up with David in their bed. She wanted to write in her prayer journal and go over her Sunday school lesson for the morning. She had so much to tell her young students about faith and sacrifice, about the mysterious ways of God.

On their way out, David stopped her near the rows of white hospitality tents. "I'm going to go see how many autographs I can get," he said. "Wait here."

Ruth had almost forgotten about the contents of the black backpack. Before she could respond, David walked away toward one of the tents. She watched the backpack bounce through the crowd until it was out of sight.

Alone, her gaze drifted through the sea of people. She was still amazed at the size of the crowd. But, she had to admit, people probably had the same thought when driving by Lily Street Christian Church on a Sunday morning. Examining the concession options across the way, Ruth at once recognized the driver of the four-door sedan from the parking lot. It was Pastor Honeycutt. She should have known. The minister was also a golf enthusiast—per-

haps even more so than David. The pastor was talking to young Phillip Hoxter. They were drinking what looked like cups of lemonade. They looked happy, and Ruth smiled. When her David was young, he had had a mentor similar to Pastor Honeycutt. Like Phillip, David had felt as a teenager that God was calling him into the ministry. His mentor had helped guide him along the path to God's work.

Ruth admired Pastor Honeycutt. He was handsome. His sermons were so moving, and she always went home with a ton of notes in her sermon journal. He was a good man who wanted the best for his church. No one's perfect, of course. But he was always sincere.

Ruth made her way over to Pastor Honeycutt and Phillip. Nothing like a little Christian fellowship to revive a weary soul. After a few steps, though, she ran into David. He looked panicked, exasperated.

"They won't let me," he said, gasping for breath.

"Won't let you what?"

"They're only letting kids inside the tent for autographs."

His face had returned to the hardened expression of despair she had seen for the past eight months. Ruth bit her lip. She didn't understand why such a little thing would cause him to break down. So what if he didn't get his hero's autograph? So what. David bent over and put his hands on his knees, letting the backpack slip off to the ground. Ruth reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. David sprang back. He now wore a different expression, one that Ruth had never seen before. One that looked manic, almost hungry.

"I have an idea," he said and slapped his thigh. "Yes."

He picked up the backpack and handed it to Ruth. "You go," he said.

"What do you mean?" Ruth replied, holding the bag out in front her chest.

"It's perfect," he said and seized her forearm, leading her toward the tent. "They'll think you're a kid. With your size they won't even question it. Some of those kids probably have that same outfit on. Security won't bat an eye. No sir. Let the little children come unto me. Here, put this on."

David pulled a powder-blue ball cap from the backpack and placed it on her head. He straightened out the bill. He tucked her blonde, carefully prepared hair behind her ears.

Ruth stepped back from David. She laid down the bag and took off the cap. She wanted to rip it apart. To fling it to the ground and stomp on it. She wanted to set it on fire.

"Ruth," he said, "come on. It's no big deal."

"David, I—"

He looked down and crossed his arms. He pursed his lips and shook his head.

Ruth couldn't think. Her thoughts became jumbled. Her hair was a mess. She felt tears burning in her eyes. She held the cap limply in front of her, as if asking for donations from those more fortunate.

"Look," David said, "I'll point to the players whose autographs I want. Don't worry about the objects—the golf balls, hats, and shirts—just get signed what you can. Actually, just get the leader's autograph. Don't worry about anyone else. Can you at least do that for me?"

Ruth felt sick. Hadn't she done enough already? She placed the cap back onto her head.

With the brim just above her eyes, Ruth moved toward the crowded tent. She was terrified of what lay ahead. She turned back to see David shaking hands with Pastor Honeycutt and Phillip. David pointed to her, and Honeycutt and Phillip, smiling and laughing, waved and gave a thumbs up. She didn't acknowledge them and pressed on, keeping her head bowed.

She made it past the security with ease and stepped inside the tent. It was dim and musty. Pre-teens and teens were jockeying for position, practically tackling each other to get near their beloved idols. The canopied space smelled of sweat and fertilizer. A kind of burning incense. Was this how the

world first smelt when God spoke it into being? Or will this be the sulfuric smell of the earth moments before the Lord rains down fire and brimstone? When the moon turns to blood and plunges into the water hazard nestled along the fourteenth hole?

Ruth tried to look outside, to spot David. But the low afternoon sun had created impenetrable walls of white light around the tent, making it impossible to see beyond.

There was no escaping the task. The leader of the tournament, the one David and everyone had golden calfed, had the biggest crowd of children around him. He was smiling and signing. Sharpies and shirts flying everywhere. Ruth unzipped the black backpack to find it filled with countless golf balls and shirts and hats. “Dear Jesus,” she called out.

The closer she got to the man of the hour, the sicker she felt. Tears began to spill from her eyes. There was a wrenching in her empty stomach. She began to shake. People were yelling. Was she going to collapse? Was it just dehydration? Dear God. She was pushed. She tripped. She fell to the ground. Golf balls spilled out of the bag. Children began diving for them like animals. Would she be trampled and die here in this sweltering tent? She could taste the fertilizer, the pungent body odor. It was almost intoxicating.

Someone ripped the backpack from her hands and emptied it. She grabbed one of the golf balls and held it tight and wept. Gritting her teeth, she attempted to escape on her elbows and knees.

A hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her up off the ground.

“Hello there, little lady,” the leader said. “No need to bow down.” He laughed and took the golf ball from her hand. He signed it, blew on it, and returned it to her. He stepped back as if to leave. But then, he reached out and put his hand on her head. Ruth closed her eyes and everything went silent. She felt him signing his name onto the brim of her hat.

Somehow, she managed to get out of the tent, through the walls of light. She was red-faced, soaked with sweat and tears. Her shirt was untucked. Her knees, elbows, and palms were covered with dirt and grass. She realized that she had left the backpack in the tent. But it didn’t matter. She felt a sudden calm come over her. She spotted David, still talking, still laughing with Pastor Honeycutt and Philip. She turned and walked away from them.

The sun was setting fast. Everything looked as if it were lacquered with some kind of oil. Then, for just a moment, everything went up in flames. She longed for a meteorite, some piece of land discarded from heaven to drop down on the mass of people behind her. And God will hurl the clubhouse and the professional golfers into the sea.

Still wearing the autographed hat, Ruth walked toward the area between the tenth and eleventh hole. The marked golf ball was a hot piece of coal in her hand and she squeezed it tighter.

She heard a voice calling out like distant thunder across the long fairways. Ruth picked up her pace.

Dusk descended. She continued walking, making her way down the eleventh, then the twelfth, then the thirteenth fairway, retracing her footsteps.

She stopped in the middle of the fourteenth fairway, beside the expansive man-made lake, and chucked the golf ball into the water. She took off the hat. She turned her face to the sky and shouted, “Fuck this shit! I hate this fucking shit!” She fell to the ground, pounding the fairway with her fist. “It’s nothing but a fucking joke!” With this same language, so new, so sweet to her lips, she continued crying out to God.

And all around her, sand pines shook and palm trees bent down. Water hazards overflowed. Birds plummeted from above. Every thing, Ruth felt, was dropping to its knees in a kind of harmonious act of praise. Her heart fluttered and, for a moment, she felt as if she might live forever.

PATTERN OF LIFE

He listened as the Reaper circled nine thousand feet above the valley floor, green eye fixed on what appeared first as a rectangle of white light but, on looking closer—and Luther Redding had been looking closer for three days now—revealed itself as a squat aluminum-sided building, a worn Chevy Bronco parked against it. That he had come to hear the sound of the drone's engine, even here, six thousand miles away, a planet between them—he understood this as perfectly normal. A form of projection, he had been told by a psychiatrist at Holloman out in New Mexico, a coarse-handed woman who wore a flight suit and stuck pencils in her hair. A form of alignment, she said. The bodies need not to be separate, evolution having not prepared the soul for this form of disjunction, stick-and-rudder, fiber-optic line.

Mark Powell

"Motherfucker has to have ants in his pants," the man beside him said and Redding did not bother to look. To look would be a deep violation of the intimacy he had come to feel with the man hiding inside the building. Kareem Saman was holed up with his wives and bodyguards, perhaps a few trusted lieutenants in what composed a small cell of the Haqquani network. Redding had been twelve hours on, twelve hours off since Tuesday, but actually it was more like eighteen hours on, coffee and Red Bull taken like a sacrament, followed by four Tylenol PM and six hours of sleep on a break-room couch. It wasn't unheard of, but it wasn't encouraged either, and it had taken access to the flight schedule to pull off.

The Reaper banked slowly and the building made its lazy pirouette. The landscape was green on green, the darker demarcations as fluid as the sea, while the metal of the Bronco seemed to radiate white light. Somewhere to the north four thousand marines were moving south from Khost toward Tani, only a few miles away now, Redding suspected. But they would come no closer until the target was invalidated.

"Gotta be squirming," the man beside him said. Tanner was his name. Maybe Chris, possibly with a K, Redding thought. Twenty-four, twenty-five. Twelve hours over the mountains and off to some club in Ybor City, techno music and an all-night Twitter feed, a tattoo of a winged Grim Reaper mapping one shoulder. Redding had nothing in common with the boy, old and married as he was, forty-four with two teenage daughters and a house in Orange City he couldn't afford to refinance.

"Gotta be moving."

Pattern of life, they called it. Hanging for days above a target, one bird going up as another came down. Given time, you saw things, came to believe things, read the future in the past. Watched men and women for days on end, pissing at night in the gardens they'd spent the day hoeing, eating under trees with their children, and just once: burying an IED along a trace of road eleven or so miles out of Kandahar. That had been Redding's sole engagement. A Hellfire missile that looped its graceful arc and erased the man in a flash of incandescence. That had also been the squadron's only engagement and from it Redding had come to be seen as some sort of sage, the silent prophet wired into a headset and flying nap-of-the-earth, one hand on the joystick, the other instant messaging with the customers on the ground. It was fine with him, really, to be seen like that. He had come to understand his work as holy, the complete immersion a

form of self-emptying so that it became pure duality: Redding and the Reaper, as omniscient and whirling as God.

He leaned toward the screen. They had been over the target for almost seventy-four hours now and he knew the end was near. He knew too what would happen: at some point the door would fly open and a figure would scurry from the building toward the truck, his body the green of a fir tree but around him and ahead of him a halo of phosphorescence, as if in running for the Bronco he had made certain to carry with him his soul. The truck would swerve wildly—there was the illusion of safety through speed—and he would get the fire call from a JAG officer in some basement office. Redding would align the sites and dip the drone's nose. Firing the missile would amount to little more than a slight bending of his index finger. And then the marines would march forward. His only concern was whether or not Saman would prove worthy.

He let the Reaper drift up to ten-thousand feet, checked the radar for air traffic, and thought of his girls. At first he had made certain to ward off such thoughts, to stay fully in the green flow of the moment, but now he understood that distraction only heightened his concentration. Thinking his way through their days was what allowed him to sit with complete focus for hours on end. A Zen renouncement of the present. He had no real notion of what time it was—his watch and cell phone were checked and waiting at the entry desk—but he sensed late afternoon, four, four-thirty. Just after midnight in Khost. Kareem Saman sleeping. Redding's own daughters doing he didn't know what. Lucy was home for the summer, her first year of Bible college in Jacksonville behind her. Katie would be a high school senior in a few weeks' time.

It was July but he had yet to divine how they spent their days. Arguing—there were the arguments. Katie's goading of Lucy, bad skin, bad hair, though in truth she had grown into herself in a way Redding had never expected, taller and less baggy, her face pocked from childhood but now almost as clear as her sister's. She spent her evenings at the church helping with the youth group, Katie tagging along, Redding suspected, out of two parts boredom and one part spite. There had been issues with both girls—how could there not be issues?—Lucy with her fundamentalism and fanaticism and Katie with, first the boys and now, Redding feared, some form of cutting. Self-mutilation the word, though that seemed unbearably direct. The cuts rowed symmetrically along her inner wrist, not deep but long and sinuous. The only time he'd seen them was that night in the kitchen when his wife Pamela reached for Katie's arm and what had followed was screaming. Pamela—

The Reaper rose to 10,200, 10,225 and he edged back the throttle, allowed it to float back to the ten-thousand foot hard deck. Kris or Chris spitting sunflower seeds and sweating, his chin water-bright, lips chapped.

Pamela was probably leaving the office, or had already left. She sold real estate, but the work had withered over the last few years and now she spent as much time at the gym as she did at her desk. They had drifted but he suspected that was as it should be, the creeping desiccation of their love neither better nor worse than that of the couples around them.

"Dance, dance motherfucker," Kris—Redding remembered the K now—said, and turned to Redding. "You know he's in there, don't you?"

"He's in there," Redding said.

"I mean actual visual confirmation. I keep disbelieving and have to run the tape back." He shook his head. "The motherfucker can hear our orbit. Either he's lost it or the man has balls of like gigantic steel." He kept shaking his head. "What do you think he's doing? I'm betting on an orgy. There must be ten women in there."

"More like three."

Kris wiped his chin. "One wild fucking send off before the Reaper comes knocking. That's the way you do it."

They made another slow pirouette. Seventy-five hours over target. Chatter of marines on the ground. The room smelled like foot spray and day-old pizza.

"I gotta life, man," Kris suddenly said. "I got a fiancée and a new boat, a one-twenty Evinrude on the sucker, and I am just about to lose my patience here. That motherfucker better cha-cha on out here in a minute."

“Just wait.”

“I ain’t done a thing but wait, cap.”

Redding instant-messaged a pointless flight-status update to the squadron commander. Pointless because there was nothing to report, and pointless because they were all watching, how many he had no idea. All you needed was a laptop and security clearance. Predator Porn, they called it. He thought of them sitting in the D-ring of the Pentagon, debating lunch. Thai, Ethiopian. No, no, let’s order in and watch shit blow up. Redding felt it a grievous violation, but one he had learned to live with, and it wasn’t the voyeurism that upset him so much as the intentionality: your intentions had to be pure. Lucy had taught him that. He and Pamela were never church people, not in any conventional sense, but suddenly their thirteen-year-old girl was busy giving away her tennis shoes and quoting the Gospel of Matthew. It seemed to happen overnight, a few C.S. Lewis books and a silver cross around her neck and suddenly she wants the family to hold hands before dinner, daddy to bless the meal. Are we saved by works or grace? And Katie looking at her big sister like she’s about to vomit, like she can barely contain what wants to pour forth.

Redding thought it had something to do with her skin. He’d never known how much bad skin could matter to a thirteen-year-old until he had a thirteen-year-old with bad skin. Nothing debilitating. Childhood acne, light purple splotches when she was hot. Somewhere three or four generations back Pamela had a relative who must have been part Seminole as Pamela’s skin was the lightest shade of olive imaginable, smooth and unblemished. It had taken Redding years to realize how Lucy must have seen this as a reproach. The trips to the dermatologist, buying Proactiv in bulk, all the while Lucy going dumpier by the day, pear-shaped, doughy arms. Redding never noticed until the day he suddenly did.

Lucy must have been fifteen—Pamela had just taken her to get her driver’s permit—and she came home buoyant, laminated card in hand as she stood in the foyer and bounced. Redding came from the kitchen and spotted his daughter, how happy she was, he knew now he should have fixated on how happy she was. But all he could see—and he saw it for the first time—was this strange, heavy girl, so similar to his beloved daughter and yet not, an older, uglier version. What had shamed him hadn’t so much been that revelation—that shame would come later—but his too-late understanding of how hard the last few years must have been for her, the teasing, the parties she didn’t attend, going alone

to whatever dance the school sponsored. Those nights when Redding dropped her off outside the middle school gym while around them boys and girls poured laughing from minivans and the occasional rented limo—how could he have missed the tired implications? No friends. No enemies. No one, not even her father, to mourn her living. How could he have missed that?

Because she had smiled, he realized later, because she had always continued to smile. It was Pamela who took her to the dermatologist—for a while there were weekly trips, pills, scrubs, liquid oxygen sprayed against her bleating cheeks—and Katie always rode along, bored, earbuds plugged into her head. Katie who, though two years younger, was already two inches taller than her sister. Blonde, lithe with deep-set green eyes. At some point Pamela had allowed her to get a series of piercings in her upper ears, which followed the black mascara and black tights, which followed the black knee-boots. Goth Barbie, the other kids called her, with a sort of wonderment, it should be said. And it was easy to get carried away: she was smart and sarcastic and saw the world with the sort of caustic amusement usually reserved for cosmopolitan exiles, rich plutocrats fleeing revolution. She could do whatever she wanted, and because of this, though only here, deep in the bowels of MacDill Air Force Base and high above the southern mountains of Afghanistan, would Redding admit that he loved his youngest daughter a little less for it.

He remembered—

Then Kris was screaming shit shit shit a gush of profanity that flecked white against the display screen. Kareem Saman was out. Chatter filled Redding’s ears but he heard none of it, his eyes fixed on the figure who ran from the building toward the Bronco exactly as Redding had known he would. Moving, he’s moving, a voice said, and he was, the Bronco in wild motion and then he heard Kris, perfectly and radiantly clear, request the fire call. And the response: clear to fire, Redbird One, I say again: you are clear to fire...

He was disappointed in Saman and thought it okay to admit as much. Almost seventy-six hours over target—he had thought the man capable of so much more. But such were the risks, you study a man, fall in love with the possibilities, but ultimately there was free will, one’s inability to endure.

He put his finger to the trigger.

You set yourself up as judge, jury, and executioner, Pamela had said, but that was wrong: you set yourself up as angel and await the word of God. Seventy-six hours. How much would’ve been enough? He found he could not answer.

He knew only that the man's name would not be scripted in the book of life, and knowing as much, Redding allowed him a last breath before he touched the trigger, and then Kareem Saman became brightness.

When his shift ended, Redding logged out and walked to the locker room where he changed into his civvies, got his phone and keys back from the flight sergeant. The shuttle was running but he decided to walk. When the shuttle trundled past he regretted it. The late afternoon was muggy and overcast and he was sweating by the time he made it to the parking garage. There had been a lot of whooping and naked cheering, a soft roar of chatter, and then everyone had stood around as if winded. The heavy dump of adrenalin. The missile-induced hangover. A review board would examine the shot, but about that he had no concern. He had done his job, and even now marines were proceeding out of the mountains and through the ravines, some probably approaching the charred remains of the Bronco. Saman was reputed to have beheaded several farmers who refused to assist in the movement of bomb parts. Now the man was dead, and deservedly so. What remained for Redding was sheer emptiness.

When he sat behind the wheel of his Acura he realized he was just a man again, his clothes soaked through and his car rank with the vanilla air freshener Lucy had hung from the rear view mirror. He was hungry and felt hollowed by the caffeine, a blistering absence beneath the fat mounded around his waist. He started the car and pulled out from the garage and over the speed tables and along the base's access road. It was twenty minutes after six. Pamela was at the gym. Lucy at youth group. Kareem Saman was in hell. He didn't know where Katie might be, though he felt a grinding sameness to the world. Seventy-six hours over target, and still the Lee Roy Selmon would be bumper to bumper.

He drove to the Extended Stay America and climbed the exterior stairs to his room. He wasn't back on shift for the next four days. It was time to go home but he couldn't, not yet, and instead stood on the balcony and drank a Bud Light while he stared down at the pool. The problem, he had once believed, was that he was in charge all the time. He'd even believed it enough once to tell Pamela. I walk in at work—flight leader—and people ask me what to do. I go home, same thing. I need to not be the authority for just once. But if it wasn't true

then—and it wasn't—it was even less true now. Pamela did what she needed to do and the same was true for the girls. He finished the beer and walked back inside, popped another, sat for a moment and dug his toes into the carpet, shirt untucked, belt loosened.

When he walked back out a woman sat by the pool in cut-off shorts and an orange tank-top, long-legged, skinnier than appeared healthy. He didn't recognize her. Not that he necessarily should. But over the two years since he started flying drones he'd come to feel he knew everyone who passed through the hotel, not names but a head-nodding familiarity, passing each other at breakfast by the waffle iron or juice fountain that offered apple and orange and—just once—pineapple. A circle of mid-grade business travelers reading complimentary copies of USA Today while circumventing America's mid-major cities. Tampa to Memphis to Dallas to Phoenix. Dinner at chain restaurants and the occasional airline upgrade. A great circus of mediocrity. But he didn't recognize the woman. And no one ever used the pool.

He put on a pair of sandals and a nice guayabera Lucy had bought for him on a mission trip to the Caribbean, took a fifth of rum from the mini-fridge, stuck a Bud in each of his pants pockets and headed downstairs. When he reached the landing she was still there, head back and eyes shut, bare feet spiny and tan and propped on the chaise longue. He had his car keys out when she asked what was the rush. He looked at her: eyes still shut, head still back.

"Didn't you just get here?" she asked.

"Like twenty minutes ago."

She nodded and he waited for something else.

"Nice night," he said finally.

"Could be."

He took 275 back through the city, across the Old Bay, and into St. Pete, where he hit a Burger King drive-thru in Pinellas Park. Three Whoppers and thirty-two ounces of Coke he sipped all the way out to Seminole, not removing the plastic top until he made Reddington Shores. The cup was down three fingers and he filled it with rum, refit the top and stirred with his straw all the way south to the causeway from Madeira Beach to Treasure Island. He'd discovered the place over a decade ago with Pamela and the girls. They'd spend the day at the zoo and drive to one of the high-rises that overlooked the Gulf, let the girls play in

the white sand while they sat on the beach and drank. The land here was impossibly narrow, on his left a slim bay, on his right hotels, the water visible between them. There was the road and a lane for parking, the occasional seafood joint when the spit widened, but not much else, and it wasn't difficult to imagine the water turning against the string of islands. The geography as fragile as the moment. Erasure, he felt, never that distant.

He waited for the light, crossed the bridge, caught another red by a 7-11, the windows boarded with plywood. The sense of fatality seemed to have crept and blown into every possible crevice—or maybe it was just the failing economy—but whatever it was, a seediness prevailed. Stripes of peeling paint. Rutted parking lots. Empty fields strewn with plastic bags and the remains of crushed shell. He parked in the near-empty public lot and walked along the boardwalk carrying his burgers and Coke. The Buds he left in the car for the ride back. Decompression. Warm beer and the salt air blowing through the open window. He would wake in the morning from his stupor, head clouded and stomach churning, empty his bowels, shower, and go home.

Almost no one was out despite the warm breeze, a few joggers and leathery women power-walking, a man prowling the sand with a metal detector. He sat beneath a cabana and faced the darkening water. The giant umbrellas and chairs were meant for rental but he saw no one else and sat quietly eating the sandwiches and periodically topping off the Coke. His scalp began to sweat and his mouth filled with saliva and by the third Whopper it became a matter of breath, chewing, swallowing, remaining perfectly still to make sure the hamburger didn't come bubbling up. When the nausea subsided he filled his mouth with rum and Coke and swallowed slowly. Finally, the food was gone and he collapsed back into the sandy fabric of the chair. He'd gained twenty, maybe twenty-five pounds in the last two years, all fat and all situated loosely around his waist. He thought of it as a statement of sorts, a response to an indifferent universe. The need to explain and self-justify was relatively recent.

He had flown MD-11s for United for seventeen years and learned nothing, but now, in just thirty-six months of downward spiral, he knew about all sorts of subjects, a few of which—things like toxic assets and credit-default swaps—he could have done without. Arrogance—that was Pamela's diagnosis. You got arrogant and you started grabbing. Which was true. As soon as the real estate market started to boom, Redding had tried to grab everything in sight, a series of condos on Cinnamon Beach, a few strip malls around Daytona, and, finally, a thirty-acre housing development just as everything evaporated, first the economy and then his job. But for a while it had been magic, every day their net worth growing, appearing in their accounts as if out of nowhere, a string of ones and

zeros transmitted over fiber optic lines.

It was gone before they could count it.

They were in the kitchen the day they learned they were broke.

Redding took the long view: "It was always theoretical anyway."

Pamela loaded the dishwasher. "Apparently so is our future."

But they had survived, banded together after the crash to save both house and marriage. Counseling. Date nights. Three trips to a psychiatrist in Winter Haven they couldn't afford. It had proven to be enough, and eventually Redding had wrung himself clean of the happy pills, the amber phials of Welbutrin and Paxil, while Pamela had joined a gym and hired a personal trainer. They had salvaged enough, he thought, and for months he dreamed in ocean metaphors: withstanding battering waves, swallowing seawater but still afloat. They weren't in love, but neither were they going anywhere.

The compromise was clear to the girls, even if it wasn't to Redding, and around the time he turned his part-time commission in the Florida Air National Guard into a job flying UAVs, he belatedly noticed an uptick in his daughters' collective powers of sarcasm. Which surely was natural, he thought, and could probably have been dealt with by talking to them had he not been sick to tears of talking.

He crumpled the empty waxed paper cup and buried it in the paper bag, left the bag under the beach chair and stood a little unsteadily, allowing his big feet to dig into the sand before he began to lumber back to the car. The first time he'd taken a drone up over Afghanistan he had been overwhelmed with the presumed simplicity of lives, the herds of barnyard animals and the neat garden plots. Waking in the morning and tending to the body's needs: food, shelter, water and sex. But he had come to doubt this. Kareem Saman was not a simple man. Locked inside his shabby bunker, life was not reduced to its elemental nature. That, ultimately, was Redding's job, the gift of the missile he fired, the absolute and irrevocable reduction it carried with it. To be incandescent for a

moment, a shatter of snowy light, and then to be nothing at all.

The woman was no longer by the pool when Redding got back and he was irritated to admit he'd wondered all the way whether she would be waiting. He sat in the car outside his room and drank the second Bud Light. A few windows were squared in blue but beyond that there was only the soft hum of traffic on 275. He walked to his room and stared down at the pool. Two potted palms were lit with tiny up-lights staked in the dirt and the light from beneath the surface of the water waved up in shimmers. He looked again for the woman, thought of her bony feet and spindly toes. He had never really gotten a good look at her face was the thing. Because of that, it felt difficult to put behind him, though he suspected he was simply lonely.

Finally, he found the ice bucket and several quarters, walked back downstairs and got two Cokes out of the machine, filled the bucket. There was another fifth left in the room and Redding intended to sit on his balcony until the rum was gone. He collected his ice—the little plastic liner meant for sanitation had slipped so that the ice rested on top of it and not within it—and turned to find the woman behind him, one hand balanced against a rack of tourist brochures.

"You look bored," the woman said.

He was startled enough not to speak, the ice bucket hugged to his chest and a Coke beneath each arm, the aluminum cans cold through his shirt.

"I'm not going to bite you," the woman said. "Where you going with those?"

There was enough shadow to hide her face, but when she stepped forward he saw she was younger than him, though not by a great deal—mid-thirties, he thought, her face stripped to a rawness usually reserved for late middle age. But she wasn't unattractive.

"I've got some rum up in my room," he said.

"Why don't you invite me up?"

He pointed up. "Just right up here."

"I know where you're staying," she said. "Why don't you invite me up?"

He said nothing and she looked at him as if waiting for a dumb child to speak, a pitiable patience stretched too thin. She was still barefooted and he saw her

toes clearly, not as long as he had remembered though there was still something birdlike about her.

"Do you have any money on you?" she said.

"In my room," he said, "not here."

"Well, if you have any money on you we can have a good time. Why don't you invite me up?"

He shook his head but found himself asking simultaneously: "How much?"

"How much is it worth?" She pushed off the brochure rack and stepped toward him to finger the lapel of his bright shirt. A heat was coming off her body, a smell he associated with domestic animals, tangy but clean. "How," she said, "do you quantify lonely?"

He didn't know and staggered back until he felt the Coke machine behind him.

"But not in my room," he said. "Let's go for a drive."

"I'm not looking for a hassle," she said.

"Just a drive. That's all."

She shrugged and looked out at the parking lot. "Bring the rum back down with you."

He bolted past her, shedding ice as he loped up the stairs and jammed the key card into the slot. It swung open and he stood in the center of his room and tried to think: the rum, his wallet. Then he put his wallet back on the nightstand and removed several bills, counted out one hundred dollars—how do you quantify lonely?—then one hundred more. He felt the manic lure of possibility in a way he hadn't in years—Lucy's birth, the summer on Prioleau Street—and wound up brushing his teeth with his finger. When he blundered down the stairs he realized he had forgotten everything but the money and his car keys. Then he heard her voice and stopped. She stood beneath a glare of light yelling at an Indian man Redding recognized as the night manager. He slowed to a walk.

"There he is," the woman was yelling, "there he is."

The Indian looked in the direction she was pointing, and there stood Redding at the base of the stairwell with his expensive shirt and sandy feet.

“Just ask him,” the woman said.

The Indian—was he Indian? He could have been from Pakistan or Yemen or any number of countries that formed a single blurred mass in Redding’s slow brain—wore khaki pants and a white-button down, a blue Maltese Cross tattooed just above the collar.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the man said. “I’m sorry but this woman says she knows you.” He looked at Redding, a hard vole of a man, his features bunched in the middle of his face like a badly arranged centerpiece. “This woman says she is with you. You are staying here?”

Redding pointed vaguely up. “In 204.”

“Room 204,” the man repeated, “yes. And this woman, she is with you?”

Redding saw she had put on shoes, straw huaraches of some sort. An orange pocketbook hung over one shoulder.

“Sir?” the man said.

Redding looked in her eyes. He knew those eyes. They belonged to his spurned daughter, they belonged planted in his own head, the disappointment, the petty betrayals that should have been nothing but—in the end—were everything, as rowed and symmetrical as the cuts on Katie’s arm, and all of it beneath the green eye of God, if God was watching.

“No,” Redding said softly.

“Excuse me, sir?”

“I said no.”

He watched the woman roll back her head and turn and he turned himself, crossed the parking lot as fast as he could and sat down in his car. They were still yelling at each other when he pulled out and he thought they would still be yelling when he returned. Then it occurred to him that he might not have shut his door and the woman would ransack his room, or the night manager would dump his belongings into the green dumpster that sat behind a span of collapsing lattice. But none of it mattered. There was the illusion of safety in speed and he sought it, understood it, Kareem Saman barreling across the valley in a fit of laughter. If there wasn’t simplicity let there would at least be speed.

He jerked onto the ramp for 275 and weaved through the light traffic, bounced off again onto Hillsborough Avenue where he took the first right and was suddenly on a street crowded with pedestrians spilling out of clubs and bars. He jammed the brakes at an intersection where a pack of men and women shuffled across in skinny jeans and mod bubble dresses. His tires locked and a few of the women squealed, but most seemed not to have noticed him, laughing and gesturing, pawing at a man with a shaved head and a black loop expanding one earlobe until it appeared nothing more than a tongue of connected skin. Redding panted. He was soaked with sweat and for the first time he realized he smelled himself, not the alcohol and bad food but himself, the indelible heart of Redding, the cholesterol clotting his blood, the sadness in the gray folds of his brain. It was the one part of him that had been present for everything.

He was looking mournfully at his hands on the steering wheel when someone drummed on the hood, and he looked up and who should it be but Kris! Kris with his fiancée and boat! Kris with his calm request for permission to fire. What comfort it gave him, not his acolyte but his friend—for Redding saw him now as a friend, baptized and bloodied together. It was Kris!

Or was it?

The man looked at him with no recognition though Redding thought perhaps he saw only himself in the glare of the windshield. Redding watched after him until a horn honked and he realized the light was already going from green back to yellow and he gunned the engine on down the street. There was another traffic light up ahead but he already had the car up to sixty, seventy. The Acura’s engine groaned to eighty and he realized it wasn’t his car he was hearing but the drone. The world tinted green and suddenly he was looking down at his car as it careened down Highland Avenue and it took only a slight tip of the Reaper’s eye to see closer, the man inside leaned forward and gripping the wheel, angrier and so much smaller than Redding felt he should have been. Then he looked ahead—and here was the great genius of the drone: to discern from the past what was to come, to read the pattern that had always been present if only someone had bothered—he looked ahead and saw the intersection, and saw it filling with cars, and saw too the Acura not stopping but plowing forward, faster and faster, until it disappeared in light.

CONVERSING WITH THE SYMPHONY OF THE DEAD

an interview with

PAUL MARIANI

Paul Mariani *is the author of seven poetry collections, including Deaths & Transfigurations (Paraclete Press, 2005), The Great Wheel (W. W. Norton 1996), and, most recently, Epitaphs for the Journey (Cascade Books, 2012). He has published several books of prose, including the biographies, William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked (1981), which was short-listed for an American book award, and Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life (Viking, 2008). Mariani has also been honored with fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.*

Dianne Bilyak: What, for you, is the relationship between God and poetry?

Paul Mariani: All my life I've been a practicing Catholic. It's the foundation for who and what I am and I try to take my Catholicism seriously. After I made full professor at UMass—I was thirty-five then (nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita). I was doing critical and scholarly work and working on my own poetry at odd moments. I had written a little bit when I was in my teens, but I'd long put that aside. But around 1972 or '73, I began to get back into the practice of writing a poem now and then. Then, when I was rector of a Cursillo weekend in the fall of 1975 and was in prayer, I remember a strong message coming to me: "What do you want? What would you like?" I said I wanted nothing. That being able to serve had been reward enough. But the voice insisted, and so I said: "Okay, if I could use the gifts I have in your service. I would like that." And shortly after that, the poems started coming, one after the other.

So if you ask me about God and poetry, I really can't separate them. That doesn't mean that all my poems are God-filled. In fact some of them deeply question the reality of it all. I've said to myself, "So, you want to talk about death without God. Well, this is what it would be like: a kind of identity theft, I suppose, the self collapsing on itself like a pile of rubble at the close." I try on different voices, as I suppose one must in the present philosophical view of things. But the poems that most deeply satisfy are those in which I confront the mystery. Forget fame. That's out of my hands, and I really don't care anymore about all of that except in the way Hopkins cared. If the work is useful, he says, if the work helps somebody, let it survive. If it can't, throw it away. I get that from Hopkins. The thing is to do the work given me to do, and do it to the best of my ability. To be as honest as I can, though God knows we fool ourselves often enough. If you're in a dark space then write about that. Hopkins did that. John of the Cross did that. If you can praise God, then by all means give praise.

DB: You appear to be open to the idea of writing as a calling. I wonder if that comes from the fact that you studied to be a priest first?

PM If you're asking me do I think what I'm doing is a calling, then in my case, yes. I remember when I was sixteen—I was a junior at Chaminade High-school—a young priest telling me he thought I had a calling and so I entered the seminary prep in Beacon, New York. It was a great year for me. That was where I learned to study. I'll never forget the little German priest who taught us Virgil. I remember how one time he showed me his books in his office and I thought, "I want this." It's funny, but when I think of the world of scholarship, I think of Irving Howe and Allen Mandelbaum and this little German priest. I also remem-

ber when I realized that what I really wanted to do was get married and have a family. But I also remember my promise to God on the soccer field one afternoon that I would bring the same fervor to my teaching as I would had I become a priest.

DB: So then teaching, and later writing poetry and biographies became a more urgent calling?

PM: Yes, but I didn't have anything like a writer's community that I could turn to at the time. How different if I'd gone to Iowa, say, and done an MFA there. Would I still have written biographies? I've always been fascinated by narratives. But I wasn't sure how people actually wrote biographies. And so I started with a commentary on Hopkins and then moved by degrees to biography, beginning with the dozen years I spent on William Carlos Williams, and then moved on to Berryman and then Lowell and finally Hart Crane. For the past several years I've been working on Hopkins. After that: Stevens.

DB: How do you decide on which poet you would focus on?

PM: They come to me. They come to me in my sleep.

DB: Like Berryman did?

PM: Yes. It was Berryman who told me to tell Lowell to move over to the side for a while so that I could concentrate on him. I take such warnings seriously. I've had dreams of each of the poets I've written about. For several nights I slept in Williams' bedroom, thanks to his son, William Eric Williams while I was researching his life, going through hundreds of private letters. I visited Berryman's home, thanks to Kate Berryman. And though Hart Crane's house overlooking the East River was long ago torn down, I have walked across the Brooklyn Bridge in ninety-eight degree weather, I walked the streets where E. E. Cummings and he used to meet up. So I've been in those places. I remember the peculiar problems of working on the Lowell biography, because Lowell was a Boston Brahmin and my own background is working-class. Which is why I hesitated undertaking the life of Lowell. When I interviewed Elizabeth Hardwick she kept the television on, watching the tennis play-offs while I interviewed her. It was a gesture which said, "I'll give you a little bit of my time, but I'm not going to take this too seriously because I really don't like biography and I don't trust biographers."

DB: In one of your essays you speak of the act of recovery, and then ask, "Isn't

that what happens when you write? Don't you recover something you thought was gone, even as you bury something else?" I'm curious if you feel that statement seems to fit into how you choose the people you've written biographies of. Beyond that, what is gone and what is it you are burying?

PM: Let me try to give an example. It was not easy in my family. My mom was, for many years, an alcoholic, although she was in recovery in her last years, and she was quite courageous and even heroic at the end. She died when she was my age now, died finally of lung cancer from smoking. My father was both a charmer and a very, very tough guy, although he inevitably softened, as he got older. But he was always himself at the core. Two weeks before he died of the cancer that was wracking his body, he said to me, "Paulie," how many years you think I got left? Fifteen?" I was stunned, didn't know what to say. Hadn't he heard what we'd all told him by then? So I looked at him, looked right in his eye, and said. "I don't know. Maybe five." He did not go easy.

What I've tried to recover in telling you this is that I have tried to learn to forgive him for his many acts of selfishness and for his anger. And here's where the poetry has helped. Language, meditation, prayer, poetry: they give you a deeper understanding of what's involved here. So in a poem like "Death of the Father," I kiss my dying father's hand, the same hand formed into a tight fist which he smashed against my face when I was nineteen. He never talked about it again, even though we had another forty-five years together. The day my father died, I asked my brother to hold his hand for a minute. But he just couldn't bring himself to do it. He had his reasons. That I know. Later that night, alone, when my father's breathing became more and shallow, when he was gone, I took his hand there in the dark of that hospital room and kissed it. It doesn't mean that the nightmares still don't come back, but something did change, and that's why I have had to write about it: for myself as for others who might find themselves in a similar situation.

DB: It seems that in order to stand out in the poetry world you've got to be unconventional. Wilbur's term, "obligatory eccentricity," is a very interesting notion. What do you think?

PM: That's a great phrase: obligatory eccentricity. Still, eccentricity only goes so far. You'll find a lot of people starting out, MFA students very often, adopting this perspective and thinking they're getting somewhere. Young novelists are like this as well. It's just that they haven't had enough experience. They think life's a big nihilistic farce. But it goes deeper than that. And by the time you're 35, you should be getting beyond that.

Berryman had some of that, though he managed at the end to escape it. I remember a Princeton classicist who thought Berryman's voice was just too damned idiosyncratic. And there was one poet—Louise Bogan I think—who once said Berryman had managed to ruin the English language with his linguistic eccentricities. But in his best poems—in *The Dream Songs* in particular—he actually managed to extend the possibilities of the language. He gave us a greater sense of what syntax and a panoply of dictions could do. But I suppose most poets—from Shakespeare on through Milton and Keats and Hopkins—have had to go through the language as given to arrive at their own particular idiom, their way of understanding the world. And after a while you stop talking to your contemporaries and you start conversing with the symphony of the dead.

DB: The Psalms seem to ask us how we relate to a god who causes pain, and then ask us to rely on that same god to provide the means to lift us out of it. What are your thoughts on God's role in human suffering?

PM: Eileen and I have been talking about this very thing, especially since her cancer operation last year. But neither of us has said, "Why me, God?" Because why should anyone have to suffer? Why should it be the person next door and not us? We're all part of the human family. Things happen. I've had sixty-five good years, and we've gone through a number of deaths. My father died last year, and I was with him daily for his last fourteen months caring for him, listening to him, trying to offer him what comfort I could. And before him it was my wife's parents. And before that my mother. I've also lost some very close friends. As I get older, I find the question of suffering and death—this is going to sound odd—is a way of becoming more intimate with God. You are more or less forced to look hard at God, and you begin to see that God is speaking directly to you in that suffering.

Suffering can be meaningful. It can help you grow, help you fall more deeply in love. I've known some holy people who have been very brave. I've also known people who have not had God, and at the end there's a kind of despair in them when I talk with them. That doesn't mean I understand suffering any more than my little grandson understands it when I steer him away from an electric outlet. He doesn't like to have his strong will thwarted, but he seems to know I'm somehow looking out for him. I've had what I think of as experiences of intimacy with God, with being in God's presence, though one also comes to understand that God has always been there, but that often one's head was turned somewhere else. Who but God gave me the strength somehow to wash my father's distended body and to bite my tongue when my father was angry or frustrated?

But this illness with Eileen--this really scared me. This was the hardest. In fact

at one point I said to God, "Well, if she goes, you may as well take two for the price of one, because I can't face it alone." Still, again, it didn't work out that way. "She's a good woman," I remember praying. "She's the one who has held us all together. She's the cement." I don't see anything wrong with crying out as Job cried out, or the Psalmist: "God, why are you doing this?" I think God expects that of us. I'm not a Buddhist, in the sense of accepting whatever happens. I'm certainly not a Stoic. It's a very intimate thing to turn to God, naked as you are, and ask, "Why is this happening?" Or, "Help me to understand it." No use saying, "I'm not going to Mass anymore" or "I'm not going to pray anymore." To me that's spiting yourself, holding your breath until you turn blue, and then having to breathe again anyway—and isn't God the very air we breathe? Better to say, "I don't understand what is happening here. Can you help me, please?" Invariably I do get an explanation. I mean a deep explanation. By that I mean not just a rational answer, but something more, an answer which comforts me, which says, "I am with you through it all."

DB: Is there a self that writes the poem, or some unknown other who rises up through language?

PM: Both. There are times when you set yourself an exercise, as when, in a workshop, you assign a Petrarchan or Shakespearean or curtal or caudated sonnet. Or a villanelle or a pantoum or a sestina or a free verse poem after Williams or whatever. And then, as you work out that exercise, you surprise yourself as the form you're working with suddenly, inexplicably, gives rise to something other. Sometimes this works, and works well. Sometimes it's a dead end, except that for a while you were in an unexplored landscape before you frantically began searching your map for co-ordinates into or out of the Land of the Jabberwocks.

You can't just wait on inspiration; though it's true that inspiration waits on you sometimes, sometimes even for years. I know I've got this poem I need to write. It has to do with Tobias, and with Rembrandt's use of light in his painting of the subject. It's an early painting. He was barely 30 when he did it. The light is coming from somewhere off the canvas, filtering most strongly over the angel, and then—not as intensely—on the face of Tobias and his wife. It does not touch the mother-in-law and it hardly touches the dog. The thing is, if you study the light in the picture, it shows you that there are gradations of God's presence represented here and in the world. Even the angel, who is God's messenger, is partly in shadow, so that even he doesn't totally see into God's mysterium. Now the poet too is a messenger, which is what interests me just now. As for the others in the painting, perhaps they're like readers, some of whom get more of the meaning, while others get less. Which means the perceptive observer will return to a text

of a painting or of a poem for more elucidation. Wasn't it Goethe who said, Meer licht. Meer licht?

How many poems did I read when I was twenty and then come back to when I was thirty or forty or fifty or sixty? Just this morning, I was reading Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle, "One Art," where she writes, "Write it!" But that can also be read as "Right it." I.e., "Correct it. Get it right." And the way you correct a troubling or even chaotic event in your life is by giving it shape or form. In her case it was by writing about it. That double entendre was sitting there, all these years, as if waiting for me to hear it. That's what I love about these little timing devices, these little explosions that occur, all the way through a good poem. Hopkins—even after reading him for forty years—is full of these happy surprises, even in his darkest poems. And these insights come up through the language or the pigment itself, the way lightning strikes. Williams called this light his Kora, which simply means the unnamed one. It's the unnamed center and source, containing all language, too vast to be contained by any word itself.

DB: Like Yahweh, whom the Israelites would consider the ineffable name?

PM: The ineffable. Yahweh or Spirit or the Muse. But the concept that works best for me is the spirit. It comes out of air, the thin, swarming air, for which you must listen, sometimes for a very long time. I'm not a patient man, but I hope I've learned to listen and listen carefully.

DB: Heidegger says that poetic thinking is "being in the presence of and for the god, where presence means a simple willingness that wills nothing, counts on no successful outcome, being in the presence of, purely letting the god's presence be said, for letting be said that responds to the word given to us." In what ways do the poets you've done biographies on express the sentiment of presence being the willingness to will nothing.

PM:Ah! Paying attention. That is so very, very important. The more I study Stevens the more it becomes clear to me that his becoming a Catholic at the end was no mere whim or accident. There's something in his poems—in the way they seem to be moving towards some final statement, towards the luminous. Like Denise Levertov, he's moving towards some kind of light, some kind of new seriousness, something more all-encompassing: the whole of his Harmonium. Different people will call it different things because the reality itself remains nameless, finally. But I revere whatever it is. I revere it and want to approach it there. To be in the presence of the ineffable in the act of writing the poem.

Now obviously, after you've been to the mountain, you might think, "Hey, I've got a poem here, maybe the New Yorker will pick it up." But that's beside the point. Except that you want to share what you've found. That instinct seems valid to me: to want to offer the poem as a gift. You write out a line, and realize it won't do, then shift it around, and: "Ah!" Sometimes you even have to send it out to a friend for verification or criticism. And they'll write back: "Well, what about this word? What about this?," or "Bingo!" And you either defend what you did or change it. But the first thing is that deep intimacy between you and that pregnant silence. Yes, it's a gift. But you've got to prepare for it. It's like approaching the altar of God. So you sit down before your computer or typewriter or notebook or foolscap, and give yourself time over to the process. It's like going to daily Mass: some days you're aware of something happening, some days you seem to just go through the steps. But you're there, waiting, fishing, and that's what's important. Then you catch sight of a glinting fragment of something, and in time you become aware of the entire iceberg.

There's so much there that needs to find utterance. So you go with it. You learn things about yourself you never even knew you knew. Sometimes you even look back and say, "Did I write that?" In the end it's your child, and you want everybody else to love it, and you dread someone smirking and saying, "Some ugly child you got there, man." So with your work. You send it into the big world beyond and you wait. But the most intense moments remain the private rendezvous between yourself and the words. You and the silence. You and the page. You and yourself. You and the Ineffable.