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POEMS

on the

CHRISTIAN CHURCH YEAR

by
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POEMS FOR THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH YEAR

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Advent

Advent

It is a familiar place,
all this darkness,
where we hide out
in bomb shelter constructs
meant to protect,
that now imprison us
with safety.
Wrapped against the cold
in dark chocolate velvet,
we console ourselves
in empty isolation
brooding over
our existential situation
in acedic despair.

Now here we sit,
isolated individuals
waiting,
listening in possible hope
for the imperturbable sounds
of rustling in the distance
of an approaching rescue,
until candles defiantly
stabbing the night
in vigil
reveal that deliverance
already among us
in plain-chanted longing
that breaks silence
as together we breathe
and feast on promised Word.



Photo by [Lorie Shaul](#)

Ordinary Advent Time

Awakened out of sick sleep
on a work day,
I stand at the window
fascinated and just watch
the afternoon sun
move light around
the sailing clouds
in a sea of sky
that turns from
grey to choppy blue
to golden glowing purple
on an ordinary
Advent day
when bare branches
click praise together
in wailing wind.



I was too sick
to go in today,
so my office
is merely to witness
and testify
to this background
of grace
in which we live and move
and have our being—
a glorious truth
we often fail to see
except when we watch
and pray
and join the praise—
not a bad day's work
after all.

Winter Solstice

It is the nadir of the year,
the longest night
when all is darkest.

The Christmas lights try
to hide this scientific fact
with a brave cheer

that illumines the fog
on the damp dark night
of the soul.

But out of Elijah's cave
the soul cries for Presence:
"Where are you, God?"

only to hear,
"What are you doing here,
Crouching Caveman, in fear?"

At your baptism you were given fire,
a little candle of Spirit
to stab against the night.

Though not a burning bush
or even a torch touching martyrs' fires,
it is enough.

Hold it high
and lift up your head
to scan the dark horizon

where suddenly New Life
will burst onto the scene
in a blazon of activity

as the light grows
ever brighter,
ever deeper

until all will be encircled
and absorbed whole
in Dawn's Long New Day."



Johann Conrad Seekatz (1719–1768), Ein Mädchen mit einer brennenden Fackel, Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie

Christmas

The Incarnation

The year my husband died
I began to understand
the need of Incarnation.

Though love's bond
endures eternity beyond death,
it wants flesh.

Indeed, love needs flesh.

Though actuality annoys
in all its ambiguities
toward death's wind-up,

ideality of anticipation
and remembrance
is empty without incarnation,

a mere phantom figment
projected against heaven
in an image of our own making.

One cannot ignore
an other's obdurate flesh
that defies our own ideations,

in the vulnerability of a child's need,
the riskiness of political sanctuary,
the messiness of love

beyond Word
in words made flesh
dwelling delightfully among us.

First Widowed Christmas Alone

In the deepest darkness of the year
I drag myself from embered hearth
to bundle against death's cold
and gather with the other crazies
somewhere near midnight
on Christmas Eve
in the cavernous tomb of a sanctuary.

Alone in the darkness with strangers
I listen to the bleak midwinter song
and am not warmed by the brass.
I should have stayed home in my grief.
There is no joy to the world for me,
and the angels someone else has seen on
high
do not sing to me—not even second-hand.

I can't seem to find myself in this story
anymore.

I must be the shepherd who stayed behind
to tend sheep while others went to worship.
So I sit resigned, resolute,
a dark lump wrapped in shadow.
Except that . . . here I am—
in worship with other hazy figures
huddled in muffled hope.

My neighbor carefully lights
her insignificant candle
and holds it aloft for me to light mine.
I, in turn, hold forth my unsteady light,
for another to light his.
The exchange pricks holes in our
surrounding darkness.

Together we stab our flickers of hope
into the silent night
like ancient people keeping
wild beasts at bay with torches of fire,
wide-eyed with wonder that it works.
We watch the Light gradually break forth
with the singing of the age-old song

and suddenly I find myself found.



*Annunciation of the Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox
Cathedral, Toronto, 2009*

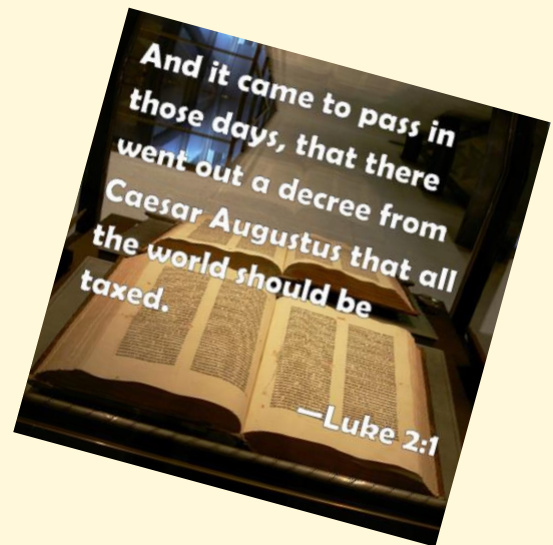
Incarnation Narrative

What is it that becomes incarnate?
Is it a story stitched together
around oppression's political hopes
and the birth of a child?

Is it respectability for a suspect
conception?
Or is it PR spin for a new religion
that needed God to be born
in order to keep up with the emperor?

Perhaps these things. Who knows?
But mostly what becomes incarnate is
love
woven out of seductive stories
that keep hope alive in dark times,

And as the story goes,
so reality becomes.
And perhaps this is God with us
after all, all along, which the Child
embodies.



Christmas Miracle

There in a feeding trough
in Bethlehem,
the house of bread,
lies the Bread of Life—
a little lump
of bastardly yeast
that will be pummeled
and needed,
before laid to rest
to rise
and feed the world.



Calling for Care

Because sometimes
there are no words
for this disaster of a world,
the silent Word comes
to watch
with wide-eyed
newborn tears.



Ding Dong Dung

Into the dung of human existence
covered over with clean straw
so we can pretend all is well,
He comes—
divinity comingling with humanity
to change a politically muddy Jordan
lurching through time
into a sparkling River of Life.
Like a drop of clarifying dye
into a bloody beaker of night
He comes—
And somehow, beneath it all,
in the midst of the painful cry,
all is indeed well after all.

Christmas Credo

Beyond the protective guard of Herod
who wants nothing more than to be in powerful control
out of fear of being dethroned
by what cannot be explained—
the divine mystery at the heart of it all—
lies a little child, helpless,
yet full of all power.

The old story is true at depths beyond language,
testified to by prophecies continually being fulfilled,
with storied words to help us see

the child who cries
cries for me,
with Wisdom's knowing
that even in some perverted way,
the one who rules with all demand
rules for me.
This one new born
has borne me in all my helpless power
while I waited in darkness
for hope of light that didn't come to save
in the way I, in my desire for control, commanded.

Yet once again the ancient wisdom of story
comes to birth at last
in the little child who leads us all
(as little christs) beyond our Herods within
by going straight into the adders' den
to embrace as Lamb our devouring wolves
until, killed by death's poisonous sting,
the child who cannot die
transforms all through understanding the ravening,
offering all to be taken in by our ritual
remembering and consummation
in the confusing Mystery's embrace of grace.
Wolves, while still wildly seeking
independent control,
thus become domesticated
into wily companions and devotion's friend.

Now here, at the cusp of this new day dawning,
face to face again with my child who lay cold
and hunted by grandiose Herodian dreams,

I understand better Love's sacrifice
in this child willing to be sacrificed for me
to aid in love what must be at last—
the quelling of Herod's governing guard
enforcing a rule of fear that swallows all in death—
that I, though refugee in Egypt for awhile,
might live and live free.

Epiphany/Ordinary Time



Photo by Simon Burchell

Starlings in Epiphany Snow

They come at dusk,
squawking in dark ominous circles,
a constant swirl of swooping activity
that demands distracted attention
until they settle into branches of beauty
to cling like dark knots
clogging sapped trees.
They are gathering like Advent darkness
in a world gone mad,
waiting . . .
stealthfully waiting
like bombers for orders to Iraq.

Something unknown startles

and they fly, a retreating dark cloud
in protest-screach against grey skies
leaving . . .
leaving bare intricate trees
wrapped up in spring dreams
dusted with brilliant snow
gleaming in the silent light
of a single streetlamp,
an urban Christ candle
illuminating the Way
of snowflakes dancing in delight
in momentary peace

Feast of the Holy Encounter

Like an ancient WalMart greeter,
the grizzled old man
stood at the gate
into the temple
and asked to bless the babies.

Hesitant mothers
watched with alarm
as Simeon's trembling hands
reached to embrace
such promise,

but he was so tender,
so delighted, as he hunched
over like a brooding hen
to look into their cuddled babes' eyes
that they relaxed into smiles

as he spoke blessing upon blessing,
his warm breath upon their face
sending startled little arms and legs
stretching in reflexive motion
as they clucked their spittled response.

He came each day for morning prayer
and kept his commanded, wearied watch,
for the Master had told him
he wouldn't be released from his post
until he beheld the promised consolation.

Simeon's withering body ached,
standing for hours among the shuffling heat
of dust's rearrangements
as weary travelers
sought mandated holy encounters.

Still, Simeon bent forward
into a question mark
reaching for babies' sentences
as a reception of sheer gift,
hoping that this time, maybe this time . . . ?

And he continued to bless
every bless-ed day in day out;



Rembrandt, Simeon Houdt Jesus Vast, 1669, National Museum, Stockholm

he eulogized newborns
with his own hope:
“Now, Master, may your slave depart . . .?”

This day was no different.
As She did each morning
the Spirit led Simeon forth
for morning prayer
and more beatific babies.

Each child he took up
was thoroughly blessed
in hope with his prayer
that perhaps now
he could finally find life’s release.

In each child he saw
the light of God’s future’s hope
as longed-for from of old,
and that day was no different
until the verb changed

from modal to indicative.

For this babe—Jesus—(and mother)
heard and took up Simeon’s blessing,
not as future anticipation but present declaration,
reaching out to embrace the ancient promise
of release for captives now.

Baptism of Our Lord Sunday



Photo by Kaihsu Tai. David Hamid, suffragan bishop in Europe, administers an Anglican confirmation

The bishop made those being baptized
redo their renunciations
so that they rang out louder, stronger,
for he knew they would need it
when evil's fear plays hide-and-seek
so well in our lives that no one can find it
so they just give up looking,
letting fear surreptitiously run the show.

One day during a youth lock-in
we were playing Sardines,
and Glen went to hide,
only we couldn't find him.
We looked all over that huge church.
The kid had slid through the secret door
of the pipe organ's Victorian oak paneling
into the compartment
that concealed all the pipes,
the place where the organ repairman works.
There, in that secret chamber,
Glen couldn't hear us calling and calling.
When we gave up (figuring he'd show up soon)
and turned our attention to other games,
he fell asleep.

When he didn't appear, we grew alarmed,
secretly panicked that he might have been abducted.
We ran around the church checking the locks
until at last the youngest kid there remembered
that she'd seen an opening into the bottom of the organ
through the door at the back of the sanctuary
when she came to church early one morning long ago
to help her father put on the coffee and turn up the thermostat.
Knowing that Glen was an organ student,
we tried this last spot before calling the police,
groping the oak panels for a latch
like actors in an old Hollywood movie
looking for a secret passageway behind a bookcase.
At last, we found it
and sprang the dazed and dusty Glen into manifestation at last.

Metaphors fail in calling out evil,
for it hugs shadows, seeping into those places
so hidden away as to be forgotten,
sometimes sleeping, awaking only to feed on fear.
It especially enjoys languor in adjustment spaces
where we try to fine-tune ourselves,
forgetting the grace of being found.
The latch that springs us, as the bishop knew,
is a resounding renunciation
of evil's perennially hidden desire
to let fear play all our stops
until sin sends us rogue.
So in the midst of searching saints
he made us practice
faith's obdurate daily office
of renouncing evil and resolutely adhering
to the One who finds, tunes, and holds us fast.

Evensong in Bleak Midwinter

Like the elevated Host,
the full moon rests
in raised boughs of evergreen priests
surplined in newfallen snow
descending in honor to greet
hills' horizon of purple dusk
with a kiss of liminality.

Speeding down dark highways
snaking across frosty purity,
snow blind, we do not see,
until, chased by luminous rising
in rear-view mirrors,
we glimpse the divine gift exchange
catching us up *in medias res*.

Blessed by backward vision,
we pull over and turn to watch
the ritual dance of day's demise.
Breathless with beauty, we stand in respect
like elderly southern farmers
going to market who stop their trucks,
get out, and stand with hatless heads bowed

before a funeral procession
of someone they do not know
out of deference to their known future.
Then, vespers' recession over
with night's descent,
we climb back into the car
that propels us forward

into a numb sense of loss
gliding toward town's artificial lights
beguiling us into a happiness
that cannot satisfy
like wafered moon
raising up the evocation
to pause and praise.



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Lent

Imposition of Ashes



In the same lines they form
during communion by intinction,
an endless stream of saints
slithers forward like one long snake.
They expose foreheads
to receive the sign of the cross,
this smudge of ashes.
I (yet not I) baptized some of them,
sealing them in like manner
with Holy Spirit water.
“Remember, you have been baptized!”
I want to shout with the wild-eyed Luther.
“Turn away! Look to the cross
Where the serpent writhes!
Choose life, not death!”
For something in me resists all this

wallowing together in the dust
of our own petty pietistic sins
imposed with the grace mark of Cain
and the inevitable pronouncement:
“Remember you are dust
and to dust you shall return.”

After so many, they become like walking dead,
zombies conveyed forward,
corpse upon corpse without reality
like cordwood-stacked Holocaust victims
rolled into the gaping jaws of open pits
in army films of camps’ liberation.
Out of this endless streambed of death
floats up the stench of deeper sin
that lies buried, unnamed,
yet looming on the horizon
with the threat of war—
an utter helplessness
before the onslaught
of row upon endless row
of cross upon cross
marking so much waste
in national cemeteries.
Lord, have mercy!

Then something changes.

As eye meets eyes searching
for my acknowledgement
of what this ashen stain means
for the beloved before me
just diagnosed with terminal cancer,
the unspoken knowledge
that our time is precious,
that we may never share this ritual again
before we are locked in deathbed struggle
against the serpent slithering through dust,
I am overwhelmed.
Tears begin flowing
into the pyx of ashes.
I pause,
breathless.
Memory stumbles
as words fail, and, forgetting my role,
I can only blubber, as with ash I sign:

“Remember . . . remember whose you are.
In life and death you belong to God.”
Then I kiss her smudged forehead
as with babies fresh from the font.
Out of this sudden baptism of Spirit Compassion
springs forth others’ sympathetic tears
with the wild crying priest marking all
with sign of both life and death.

In the sacred space hovering hushed
beneath brooding angels’ wings
in the shadow
of the sanctuary’s huge suspended cross,
the numb dance of death
becomes a stately minuet of life.
Corpses come to life again as,
through the baptism of all our tears,
we begin to see Something More come forth:

A child clings to her father’s knees,
crying, “But Daddy, I don’t want you to die!”
A couple, secretly estranged,
now reaches silently for hands,
exchanging a wedding-vow gaze.
Behind them the snaked line of individuals
begins to slough off
as folks now step up two-by-two,
wordlessly knowing we cannot face
this awful truth alone.
The body-pierced Green Hair tenderly
helps the immaculately suited Blue Hair
accept her fate.
The CEO who fired two workers just last week
steps in line with the long-unemployed ballerina.
At the rear, the two ushers
who ordinarily can’t stand one another,
bow together before me,
united with us all at last
in accepting their communion
in death to all death
under this transfigured sign.

Triduum—the Great Three Days

Foot Washing

Did anyone ever think
they could get in God's good grace
by taking out the garbage?

That shit's for the privileged few
who idealize their servants
to keep them in their place

by lauding them as greater
in the Kingdom,
as Jesus' foot washing implies.

Except that's not exactly the story.
Because it's not about the servant
as much as it is about the guest

being clean enough to be ushered in
to the host's household
with newly washed feet.

Always jockeying for position,
the disciples wanted their share
in Jesus' royal household.

So Jesus became their servant
to make them clean enough
to enter the host's banquet

to show them how to get in—
by serving all—not with self-righteousness
that I'm so good I can lower myself

to wash feet, and thus earn God's favor,
as the ritual's become for us,
to Paul and Luther's dismay,

but as an extension of the invisibility
of quiet service on behalf of others
getting in on divine grace



Illustration by unknown artist, c. 1100, in Otto III Gospels, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich

without even an inkling of hope
about ourselves being invited to join
that table ourselves

like the least of household servants
who washed the feet of honored guests
as they entered, moving from out to in,

or like that unnamed woman
so grateful for something Jesus had done for her
that she burst into the meal to give thanks

and offered what she had,
tears and hair and perfumed oil,
used in her sinful trade

to wash her Lord's feet,
not to drum up business anymore,
but just to show abject gratitude for grace

despite the shame she drew
from the upright community leaders
around that table in her prostration.

For she already knew she was out,
not in, as we're sure we are,
when we kneel to wash another's feet.

Maundy Thursday's not about us
washing grody feet as idealized servants
of the good gatekeeping folks we are.

It's about being washed
like babies and infirm folks
having diapers changed with tender care

by the One who loves us enough
to take on the shame of what's to come.
And falling down grateful, so awash in tears,

we forget the seating arrangements
to help everyone else with their shit,
so all are in—baptized, perfumed, and whole.



Engraving by Michiel Natalis, c. 1650, after Reubens

Langston Hughes on Maundy Thursday

When dreams die
they land with a dull thud
like a prizefighter,
who was supposed to win,
down for the count
never to stand again.

Age knocks most of us out
with the push of youth
coming behind us,
and we defer,
deafening our ears
to visions' music

until our life lies
like a beach splayed out
against the sky's ocean
with the stinging slap
of cruel waves
as grief ebbs and flows.

What's more real—
idealism's sunburned glory
or pragmatism's obdurate
sideways dance toward survival
like crabs upended
in time's surf?

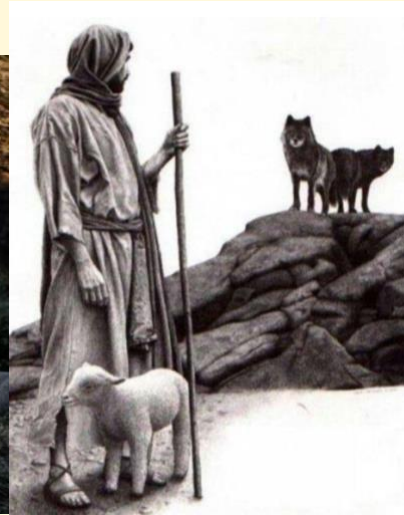
I don't know.
Instead, I avert eyes,
pass by on the other side,
like any good priest,
avoiding words
stripped of meaning.

For Hughes knew:
all dreams die eventually,
and the broken-winged dove
cries and limps,
unsure of how—and whether—
to go on.



Rembrandt, The Denial of Saint Peter, 1660, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Rembrandt captures the moment when Peter's denial coincides with Jesus being led to Pilate's court in the upper right background.

Scattering



To trick the devouring wolf
the shepherd smears himself
in the blood of his dead branded sheep
attacked earlier by wolves
so that the predator comes for him.
Thus diverted, the wolf
meets shepherd's crook
while lambs scamper safely away.

So goes the Good Shepherd
in solidarity sheep's clothing among wolves,
stripped and dressed as Passover lamb
thrown to military pack of snarling rage
so that all humanity's lost sheep
can scamper safe into the arms of God
bleeding out love, branding all
with a cross, "Beloved."



Delacroix, Christ on the Cross, 1846. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD

No Light Without, No Light Within



Although this is a wallpaper and fabric design for sale by [Porter Teleo](#), it is what stained glass windows look like with the tangle of lead being their prominent feature when it's dark outside.

In the gathering gloom we gathered
in an out-of-place Gothic cathedral
rising above nail salons and wig shops
policed by the poverty of sired fear,
and we heard of The One nailed
and crowned to the taunts and jeers
of steely drunken soldiers
anointing courage with vinegared wine.

In the descending doom of evening,
light through the stained-glass windows faded,
obscuring the pictures of divine life shining there
until eventually all we saw of Christ the King
was a tangle of lead like that that tipped the whip
beating a bloody course of chaos across meaning,
as one by one dimly burning wicks were snuffed out
and humanity's degradation, lifted up in darkness,
rose higher with the simple cry, "Forgive."

Strepitus
an elegy for DGB



[*Antoni Gaudi, Tenebrae Candelabra, Museums of the Sagrada Família*](#)

The Good Friday readings
roll like a stone downhill
gathering speed
until they slam
the tomb shut
on our Lord in death.
The liturgical strepitus
shocks/scares us
into silence.
I know it's coming, of course,
but it gets me every time.

I don't like loud noises
that startle suddenly
like a crashing emergency
that slams life down
and pins it to the mat
like some abducting wrestler
named God
wounding Jacob
in order to win the day.
We knew you were dying
but it crashed/crushed us still.

Usually the strepitus
involves a little stagecraft—
shaking a metal sheet
like a Foley artist making thunder
or dropping a heavy stone
on a wooden sanctuary floor
so no one knows what happened.
but it doesn't sound good,
like when kids are playing
upstairs and something crashing
to send parents running, alarmed.



[*Paschal candle, Church of St. Mary, Rotherhithe, England*](#)

I heard of a pastor once
who took the Paschal candle
from the year passing
and smashed it violently
on the altar table for the strepitus.
Old Mrs. McMurphy
was picking shards of wax
out of her wig for months afterwards.
The congregation had no light
of the world for a whole day,
no surety of its return.

After your funeral
I sit shocked in your office
amid all your books,
remembering all the times
I'd sat in that chair
talking sacraments and Word
and performance theory
with you so lively, so alive,
a big fluffy dog spread out
between us lapping up affection
and laughter flowing with tears.

Shards of those times
pick up speed,
threatening to melt
my Stoic façade.
I need to process, think, honor
with thoughtful words of gratitude
for how your gracious care
changed my life, but all crashes
on the word you taught me,
the only word that comes:
“Strepitus!”

Mary, The Next Day

Past all tears now,
Mary sits very still
like a rabbit
frozen
in underbrush of cover,
waiting for time, like danger, to pass
over and around and through her
in the hope
that by marking its flow,
she can bathe in its mourning
until all will somehow be safe
and cleansed into deliberate motion
again.

Perhaps then,
refreshed and renewed
through grief's undying vigil,
the promise that was hers
will rise reborn someday,
and she will revel once more
in Love's eternal entangled forest
that holds both her and time secure.

But today,
in these murky woods
where praying wolves howl,
hope lies
like a faraway angelic dream
of Messianic ideals
among shattered limbs
cut down by high winds,
and tossed into time's dark stream
that nonetheless babbles
the persistent eternity of love,
Mary sits still,
Very, very still.



Holy Saturday Gardening



It is too bright for our eyes--
all this chartreuse and fuchsia
bursting through blossoms of
intense lily white.

In the perfume of hyacinths
hanging humid and still
in the waiting air straining
toward . . . something more,

we still hang suspended
in the tortured screams
of last night's Good Friday
whose darkness is our reality.

So this blasphemy of blossoms
on choired birds' breasts
mocks us with hope
we cannot yet believe

but wish we could.

Blinded and still,
we strain toward tomorrow,
perched to wait and watch
and perhaps to see

what rises right in front of us now.

Easter

A Little *Hilaritas*

What if
lying in the tomb
the Light overshadowed
the darkness
and called Jesus' name,
"Arise, shine!
Anastasis: Stand up.
Be resurrected!"

And Jesus had replied,
"No thanks.
I'm tired.
I hurt.
Do you know what they do to people?
Why would I want more of that?
I'll just stay here
where it's safe from them.
Leave me alone.
I just can't take any more."

And he turned away,
curled up into the dark
and stayed dead.

No one could have blamed him.
It IS all too much—
this dying and rising—
all this fuss for so little

Yet so much,
for everything.

Easter is like a divine prank played on evil. Evil thought it had vanquished God's Way in the world with the crucifixion of Jesus, but, like a classic trickster character, up rose Jesus. The resurrection should be announced with resounding laughter, which is why some places celebrate Easter with hilaritas, humor. Despite the very real tragedies of this world's crucifixions, Christian faith is ultimately a divine comedy, a cause for joy and celebration and merry-making. It is in this tradition that this poem was written, imagining Jesus as a complaining Jewish comedian.

N.B.: Anastasis is the Greek word for resurrection. It literally means "to stand up or be raised."

Milton on Easter Monday



Jacob Jordaens, Adam and Eve, 1642, Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio

Dejected, I ride home from my class on Milton.
After all the great beauty of Paradise,
God conversing with Adam and Eve
in the cool of the evening—
a picture of all we long for as human beings—
I had hoped that maybe, just maybe
the story might turn out different.
But they fell just like they have been forever.

Last Friday I sat in church remembering
a petulant teen who balked at going to Good Friday services.
“It’s the same every year,” he protested.
“They kill him every time.”

Why do we keep subjecting ourselves over and over
to the same old trauma of the cross?
It IS pretty much the same every year.
The story doesn't change.
We hope it'll go otherwise,
but we know better.

We know about Bosnia and Rwanda,
conscripted child soldiers and baby doll sex slaves
satisfying the appetites of those with purchase power.
We can smell the terror of those hiding from raging abusers
drunk with staggering guns,
see the fear flash death against a black hoodie
of an African-American teen just walking
his way home in innocence.
History piles up the evidence like Ezekiel's bones
from mass graves in forests unknown.
It howls at us from the screech of police cars
or the silent accusations of babies with begging eyes.
We know how the story goes.
It's the same old same old year in, year out.

From a certain perspective, evil is without novelty,
despite its intensification of intrigue and gore—
the stuff that makes for good Hollywood box office receipts.
Every year it's the same sniveling religious leaders,
brutalizing soldiers, jeering crowd,
cowardly pompous Pilate
ignoring a wife's whispers in the background.
It's practically boring because it's all so . . . predictable.
Sad, lamentable, of course, but also expected
like Milton's fall in the lush narrative:
fear of threat, movement of shadows, snuffing of light—
a 1, 2, 3 formulaic of a Tinseltown script—
same old same old boring,
these powers of destruction.

Oh, you say this is sacrilege, blasphemy even,
perhaps an occupational hazard
of theologians who know
how the sausage is made—
by requiring the death of an intelligent pig
who, while baptized in mud,
somehow knows how his story will end, too.
Or perhaps you'll chalk it up to old age
in an age where after awhile

our culture's novelty wears off
leaving nothing but a thin veneer of ennui
no longer affected by others' suffering.
Maybe it's the narrators of the story
who read the Passion passionless each year.
But I don't think that's it.

The torture still kicks the breath out of us.

It's just that destruction is
so cause-and-effect predictable,
like a science experiment of chemical reactions
with explosive results,
as boring as the lecture of an academic
who no longer does field work
and has taught the same intro course
for decades with nary a change.

Compare Good Friday to Easter, though,
and surprise abounds.
We know that story, too,
how on the first day of the week at daybreak
the women were just going to anoint the body
and found everything awry, amiss,
and thereby back in order.

Something deeper beyond the historical familiar is at work here—
unique creativity, astonished whispers of resurrection.
Not restoration or repair of what's broken
or flower dying in winter and returning in spring.
But something so new we can't rationally comprehend it
even as we know its truth beyond images,
for it surges through creation's song itself.
Each year, yes, the lilies stifle with sweetness.
Scrubbed acolytes still process protecting precious light.
The choir sings the same songs they've been butchering for ages.
Yet somehow it's all breathtakingly new,
fragile and strong
as hope itself winging across the world
encountering astonishing novelty of choice
among humans who should know better
but who refuse destruction's predictability
in the embrace of resurrection's new creation.

Pentecost

Pentecost Invitation

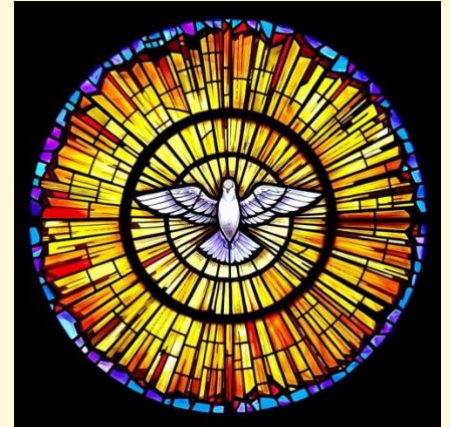
Spirit beguiles through preachers' cooing
like a Frank Sinatra crooner: "Come fly with me."
So we climb aboard the snow-white dove,
nuzzling into innocent irenics of soft-feathered down
while soaring up, as on eagles' wings,
exhilarated by drunken joy of transcendent viewpoint.

Then the dove dives straight into the wound of Christ's side,
bloodied with painting the town red,
bursting full-heart into the flames of a suffering world
before out Christ's mouth She's hurled in a torrent of Word.
Baptized in fire, molten,
we're sobered silent into shock.

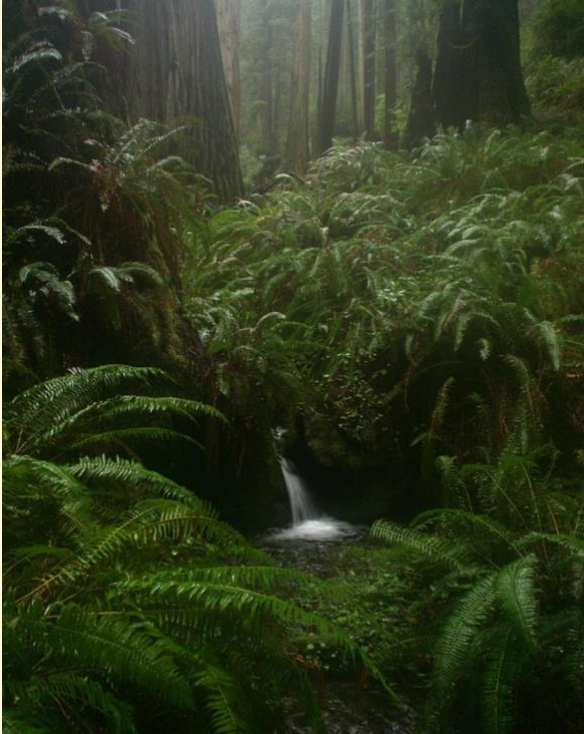
Still on the dove rides, dive-bombing an eagle,
weaving, bobbing, careful to avoid the eagle-on-top
shredding with razor-sharp talons.
Frightened, we scream to get off this kamikaze bird
like children on a rollercoaster that looked like a blast
until the first long drop with the loop-de-loop.

But on the dove soars, violently pitching on hurricane winds
that dance like wildfire across tinder woods of creation
until, burnt and babbling wild as prophets,
we hang on (we can do no other),
finally accepting our place under blessed wings of consolation,
smoldering still with memory, that fold tenderly at last

in wisdom descending
to roost peacefully camouflaged in clefts of rock,
preening beauty with dust and water-splash alike,
until once more it is time to spread breathtaking wings
over the abyss and ascend into next mission of divine invitation
to our delirious crowing delight.



Ordinary Time



*Photo by Owen Lloyd, Rhododendron Trail, Prairie Creek
Redwoods State Park, Humboldt County, California*

Ordinary Time

Ordinary time?
How could this possibly be?

Time itself,
descended from eternity,
stretches forth beauty
all around us
as its lava flow
hardens into
rocks carved by rivers
that feed ferns
in the depths of shadows
that eventually
tumble into pools
of splashy light
bathing us all
with flesh
touching flesh
and tenderness
as a mother
counts newborn toes
wet from the womb,
pondering
the love that made all.

Ordinary?
Hardly!

Feast Day of The Blessed Mother

A medieval illuminated manuscript shows Mary, who's handed Jesus to a mindful angel for safe keeping while she, sitting atop the devil like some WWE wrestler, beats the shit out of him. In another, she's poking the devil's eye out or punching him in the face or both. It's not clear which. In one she stands atop Satan driving the cross into his forehead. Another wrestling one depicts Mary holding Beelzebub's arm behind his head with one hand to get him to cry "Uncle!" as she flogs him with the other hand so that he's vomiting up Theophilus' contract. In yet another she's beheaded Satan with her terrible swift sword, victorious like St. George with his dragon.

When Jesus gets a little older, she raises a rod to some chicken-footed demon, as if to thump him aside so she can cross the street safely with her boy in hand. And then there's the one where she's hammering on the devil's head like a wild blacksmith while a grown Jesus, hanging out in a cloud, looks down with his hand up as if to say, "That's enough now, Mother." The angels in all these works look a little alarmed. As are we. Here's a woman who outmatches the devil in her blue dress for sure.



Taymouth Hours, 14th century MS, British Museum, London.



William De Brailles, The De Brailles Hours, 13th century MS, British Museum, London



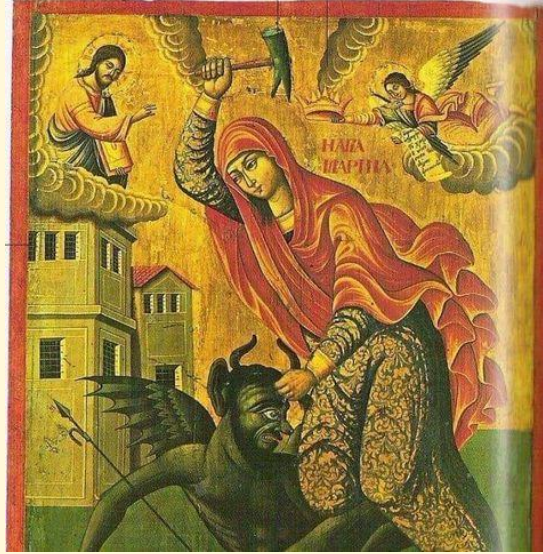
Taymouth Hours, c. 1350, British Library, Yates Thompson, 13



"*Smithfield Decretals*," 1300-1340, British Library, Royal MS 10 E IV



Giovanni Pagani, *La Vierge du Secours* 1506, Louvre, Paris



This is actually not Mary, but Saint Marina, after similar medieval depictions of Mary. *Lazaros, St. Marina Beating the Devil*, 1857, Byzantine Museum, Athens

I confess: I never cared much for artistic depictions of Mary. She seems an insipid vessel for men's salvation, painted as some passive, acted-upon milk cow cowering before the male gaze when she wasn't expressing the Milky Way from exposed breast. She's merely there to hold the baby most of the time, like too many women—mother meek and mild, never any trouble, draping her blues about her with lilies tucked away somewhere for abused consolation. Every now and then she gets to play the Queen as men dress her up in ermine and jewels like some ancient beauty pageant goddess sitting atop the world's pedestal in a gold throne. But mostly she's just there to further someone else's plotline. The blessed mother, blessed because she's mother, not real, flesh-and-blood woman.

I prefer the wild wrestling Mary because these crude depictions are true. Real mothers beat off the devil all the time for the sake of furthering their children's plots. They submit to the surgical rape of childbirth to ensure the first gasping breaths of someone else's life, endure bleeding nipples and mastitis seven times as they wonder if they'll ever wear anything

but this blue nightgown ever again.
 Or if they'll sleep. And they won't much.
 A real mother leaps out of her car
 to bless out some careless driver
 who didn't look before turning
 and almost hit her vehicle
 where her newborn sits enthroned in car seat.
 She stops the car in the middle of the street,
 blocking the driver's way, knocking on his window.
 "Look! That's my baby you almost hit! No, don't you look away!
 Look at what you almost did! You need to pay attention!"
 Shocked into meek and mild, the boy driver cowers before her
 and promises to be more careful.
 A real mother marches into the teacher's room
 to question what she knows is the wrong grade,
 livid when the teacher gets her child mixed up with another.
 A real mother, upon seeing a stranger pull her child into his car,
 picks up a rock and hurls it through the windshield,
 startling the driver to release. Then, holding her child's hand,
 she marches down to the police station to give a statement
 and description that nails the culprit, saving others.
 A real mother responds to her sassy child saying
 she hates her when she won't let her do something harmful
 with "Well, yeah? I love you enough for you to hate me."
 And when she suspects drugs might be involved,
 hell hath no fury as the battle lines are drawn
 and won with surveillance, locks, and ravaged tears.
 Motherhood is not for the passive, decorative faint-of-heart
 but for the valiant warriors who'll harrow hell itself
 for the sake of her child.

So give us more of the WWE Mary
 with flailing arms and legs on her prayers
 while shocked angels wonder
 what in the world
 God has done now
 with the creation of such awesome women
 that startled demons run for cover—
 as they should.

***For more on this more robust tradition of Mary, see Vanessa R. Corcoran, "Queen of Heaven, Empress of Hell," Contingent Magazine, 25 April 2020, accessed online at <https://contingentmagazine.org/2020/04/25/empress-of-hell/>.*

See also Magdalena Łanuszka, "Virgin Mary Beats the Devil," Blog Post on Posztukiwania: Searching for Curiosities in Art, accessed online at <http://en.posztukiwania.pl/2022/11/03/virgin-mary-beats-the-devil/>.

A Preacher's Prayer



Photo courtesy of www.ForestWander.com

Here in this foggy clearing of words,
may your Word emerge
like a deer from the forest
to grace with a glimpse
breathtaking beauty that gazes
with soft eyes of wondering kindness
before leaping once more into cover.

I understand I cannot look upon You
too long for fear my soul
will be burned into blindness
like eyes that gaze upon the sun.
Every now and then, though,
peek through fog with white flick of tail
so I remember this weary chase is not in vain.

I keep watch at poetic edge of language,
like a child mesmerized by lava lamps
where molten fluidity rises
in ever-unique amoeboid shapes
on a journey destined
only to fall back down again
into fiery primordial ooze.

My fellow creatures know our place in time:
death has numbered our days,
but it cannot change
your ways of Be-ing itself,
And your first law of thermodynamics--
matter is neither created nor destroyed;
it's all only energy changing forms.

We're but earthly lava lamp lumps
rising to fall back into
your glowing meonic potential
at the end of foggy language
where hidden Word awaits revelation
in glory's full fire,

uncontained by any form,
yet resurrecting all fallen shapes
with animating Be-ing-Itself,
transforming even death
into fiery minuet of glory
that discloses oozing forms
of Beauty's brief emergence.

So while I have breath to praise,
let me look for graced glance of promise
on the days' hot haze of horizon
where time falls into eternity's rising
and, seeing form approaching,
give chase through burning fog
with glowing globs of leaping words.

Light Interrupts This Program

I weary of worthless words
in a discount world
intent upon commodifying all.
Slogans, op-eds, even sermons
weave words into ads
for Wall Street, their maker, god,
trying to capture and sell us like slaves.

Meanwhile, Light reveals
beauty resting silent all around—
in that certain slant of sun
through the early morning window
providing a pad for stretching cat
with tips of fur afire;
in the way our beloved's face shines
with delight when we enter a room;
when the baby's insistent wails
dissolve into giggling smiles;
when sunflowers someone planted
by the interstate long ago
stand at attention
saluting the One who bids them rise
and live into their name.
The spider sits in her glistening web
broadcasting intricacies of connection.
Wind rustles through birches,
as birds sing out praise
over katydid drone
and children squeal in distant games.
Here is life's true background
in which we live and move and have our being.

Yet we choose to foreground
incessant squawks
of artificial TV hawks
greased by Oxy-Clean ads
convincing us that we need more light.
No wonder
no bushes blaze for anyone anymore
beneath this sacred canopy
scorched by the profane hole in its ozone layer.
We extinguish true prophets for profits,
leaving them to kill themselves
out of despair



Photo by [Laslovarqa](#), Ontario, Canada

underneath Cedar-O broom trees,
forgetting that angels of light come
with comfort food made by hands of love
that cradle all in robust songs of praise.

Lent at Harvest

Around the abandoned well
gallop horse weeds in a tangle
that no doubt holds snakes deep within,
yet she pulls her way through unafraid.
After all, she knows how
to take the clearing rake of bronze
and catch the writhing serpent,
casting it away far overhead
so that it slithers back to whence it came
long ago in some nearby far-off realm
where dew shines like jewels in the
morning sun.

She patiently proceeds,
not knowing exactly why,
except that some force compels her
to make her way in to the well
capped like an ancient altar
upon which fish were sacrificed
for sacred meals. This is not her land,
though it was her ancestors'.
She knows its course in her own ancient river
of blood that cries out not for vengeance
but restitution, peace.

Thirsty now, she makes her way in,
through all the dying underbrush
with wild rose thorns, greenbrier,
and sawgrass ripping into her legs.
Raw hands grasping solid coolness,
she struggles to roll away the stone
to the sweet aroma of living water
at the bottom of the dark,
as a flash of light proclaims
its rippled praise
in earthen rain from above.



Nikolay Andreyev, Untitled, 1930

If they see her at all, most passersby see
Native itinerant farm worker
clearing an overgrown land.
But to those who peer more closely,
over her penumbral edge of obscurity
into searching black-rimmed eyes,
they find poet, preacher, love,
staring back at them from desolation,
offering the promise of mourning's
hope of reconciliation
in Providence-dripping fields.



A Communion of Saints

Most folks are home asleep, snug in bed,
while I, who cannot sleep, walk streets
cold with premature snow, searching for . . .
what? . . . some nameless unknown.
Traveling familiar paths at linguistic edge,
I have lost my way in thought
until, drawn by light, I happen upon center.

Victorian streetlamps surround the town
square
with its gloriously carved frozen fountain.
Like still-life figures carefully placed by
loving hands
around the baby Jesus in nativity tableau,
the ancient torches stand like sentinels,
keeping watch over what once flowed free
and good with summer spray of grace.

Strangely warmed in memory, I find myself
found
on empty benches where daytime pigeons
brood,
dwarfed among stalwart saints that illumine
such nights,
gratefully guided by Christ-candle sentinels
whose shining still beckons the peripatetic
lost
in dark times, to come keep centered watch
over what was and is and will flow yet again.

Walking in a Cemetery on All Saints Day

I've come to commune with the dead.
Their stony silence somehow stills and comforts
the living, growling and rambling all around
like a chained dog frenetic to escape
and run away to peril.

In this soft seedbed of earth
comingling with witnesses of rock
testifying amid soft mounds and recesses
that in the molten uncertainties of terra firma,
death and life here meet.

Curious with us and one another
the saints call from beyond
with carved words of rock-solid hope
torn from scripted poetry long forgotten
by the dog-eat-dog world beyond the gates.

Yet still the saints' echoes hover hushed in silence
for all but those who can pause to ponder
the preponderance of our common fate
and the monumental hope that holds us all
in the firm forever death-grip of life eternal.

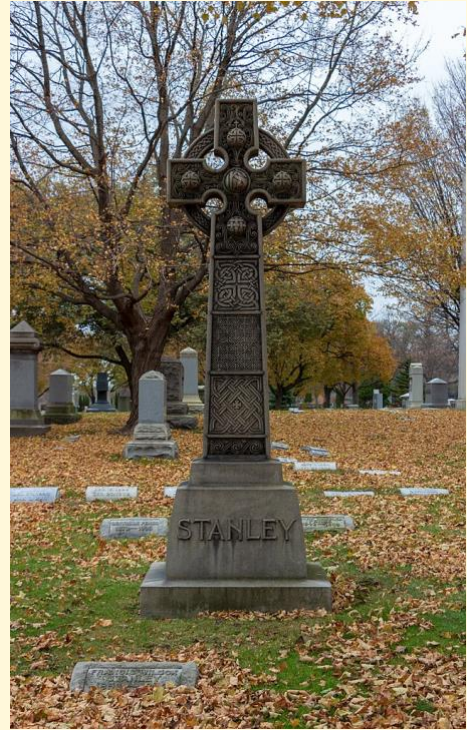


Photo by [James Conkis](#), Rosehill Cemetery, Chicago