

From a Lost Gospel of Mark



poems by Peter Weltner

number 22 in the 2River Chapbook Series

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A.M.D.G.

Advent

A boat with a single sail slides across
the sea. Waters part. A late dawn wind
rustles the rushes along a wide shore.
The blunted bulk of an ox heaves awake.
In search of dew-wet twigs, a ram bounds
from rock to rock. Snake, lizard lick
desolation from the sand. Hermit-hived
bees fly free. The Galilee's cold as ghosts'
breath. Repairing nets, even a host of
fishermen won't wade in. Locusts flying
over head rattle like wind-tossed palms
before a dust storm. Where no one dares
to look, the head-high reeds divide for him
and the sun that walks like a lover by his side.

The Need for Secrecy

“Teacher, why do you speak
in mysteries?”

“Lest they understand me
and so be saved.”

Crushed flat and boneless,
a squirrel’s pelt lies
on the white line. The road’s
shoulder, crumbling into

a tangle of kudzu, sweats
tar. The trees’ dry leaves
shade what they can.
A man parks his car

on a stretch of packed
clay. A path begins
out of nowhere, leading
through lush underbrush

and tall cane into
the woods’ spare light
where fern and bark moss
sparkle next to a boulder,

pocked and worn as an old
shoe heel. The path to the creek
zigzags down slick red clay,
its steep bank thick with pink

and white rhododendron.
Gnats swarm over
the trickling water
where skates dart frantic

as trapped flies. He can see
the cave where, years before,
a child, he dragged
the body, its face slashed,

its flesh torn, a rust red
wound in its side wider
than a bullet hole.
But he looks no further.

In the clearing beyond
the woods, a dirt road
curves along a field,
the dry corn only hip high.

Yellowed, stained,
a farmhouse's shades
are drawn, its old paint
curled like wood shavings.

A sallow woman answers
his knock and with a long
wood spoon points
to an ancient plank bridge.

When he reaches it, thirsty,
he scrambles down the bank
and kneels on a rock.
Reflected by the creek,

his face scares him. He cups
some water to his lips.
It tastes like brine or blood
still seeping downstream

from that bad old dream
he cannot forget. Real
or not, what's done cannot
be undone, no slaughtered

lamb unslain. He swallows,
washes his face, and, cooled,
refreshed, walks on. With luck,
he'll reach his car by noon.

Clothes Like a Dove

1.

City folk. A car idles at a bridge.
Its driver in a dustcoat fetches water
for two ladies wearing broad brimmed
hats, their lace veils sewn with roses.
As they drive off, the wheels splash mud
on the boy's coveralls. He washes them
in the river where he waits for hours,
hoping to hear above on the old planks
the drumming of their tires as they return
from touring a lake's breaking ice.

2.

Her son refuses to smile. His hair glitters
with sawdust. His forearms are tapered
like a baseball bat. He leans on a garage
door that's weather-worn and overgrown
with wild roses and vines. The sun glares
in his eyes. In the photograph his mother
snaps, they look black, suspicious
as a bird's. A rip in his coveralls reveals
a worse hole in his drawers. His pale
hair blurs into the flare of his shiny shirt.

3.

Dust clogs his nostrils. The air tastes
like tin. The tobacco shrivels into weedy
stalks. The corn looks trampled. The hens
have quit laying. The cows' ribs protrude
like posts. His older brother develops
a cough one night, dies the next,
grown so thin so quick his daddy
must bury him in his younger son's
clothes. The boy steals his brother's
old torn jacket to wear at the funeral.

4.

“Live shall your dead for your dew is
the dew of light and Sharon’s land
shall give birth.” The preacher kneels,
fingers the earth, crumbling it,
scattering it like seeds. A wind topples
his bowler off his head into the grave
where Father’s shoveling dirt in fast,
a hundred times quicker than it took
to dig. Home, the boy takes a hat
off a hook and tries it on for size.

5.

His ears ache. His vomit is cow-cud
green. He hides in a closet. When his father
sticks the hog its squeal pricks
the boy’s eardrums like a pin. The slaughtering
done, his dad showers off the blood
as the boy tries on his father’s drawers,
wearing them round his neck like a bandanna
or on his head like a baseball cap.
His old man’s slap spins his head
like a sudden snap in crack-the-whip.

6.

He carves creatures from wood--lifelike
doves, titmice, blackbirds, orioles.
But wooden ones won't fly by themselves.
His mother owns a fur-lined cloak
he wears as Superman or wraps round
his birds so that they some day might soar
in the sky. He'd like to see them twirl
faster and faster in smaller and smaller
rings until, sun-bright, their flight
would blind the sight of every unbeliever.

7.

Woven from cotton or wool like clothes,
carved from hard wood or soft, chiseled
from stone or marble, moulded like clay,
wrought like a poem from words, the body
rises to paradise dressed its best, light
as dove's feathers, the boy's mother says
as she knits him a pullover warm enough
for any winter storm that might rage yet
that year. No need to fear the iciest cold,
she says, wearing so loving a sweater.

The Hem

Twelve years a bleeder, unclean, the woman presses ever nearer as the mob recoils, recedes. Her fingers tremble to touch a fraying, dusty hem of his heavy cloak, too warm for such a sun. Yet, a seamstress herself when young, she knows, even trusts in the virtues women sew in clothes, especially those as coarsely woven as his, which somehow still adorns the man before whom she cowers, who calls her daughter, her gushing blood dried up by the miraculous power of his new testament, to which she testifies: Metonymy, beloved son.

Loaves, Fishes

1.

Lost, stolen--the old man
could no longer remember--
gone, impoverishing him
for good: the ruby cut like glass

to form a tiny oval window
through which his master
could peer so that the day
he slit his wrists wine-soaked

happy Brundisium
would look through his stone
as bloody as the bowl
Gaius had given him.

2.

Once he owned thirty goats.
Now road dirt, dust
on his feet were his household
gods, no weaker than the ones

he'd swiped from his master's
mantel. He squats in a fig grove.
His bloody stools stink
and steam. Figs cramp his guts

worse than seeds or nuts.
Spirit birds fly near
the moon whose light
each night unweaves

more threads from his threadbare
life, his only shelter caves
that lie too near
where the dead sleep,

shuddering like lashed slaves
he would have forgiven
had their cries, screams
not ruined his rest.

3.

Take, eat: loaves, fishes.
Strip off your sackcloth.
Do not hide your faces.
No longer deceive the Lord

your God. Wear new clothes.
Love your neighbor
as yourself, you who
will leave me one by one.

4.

However much the crowd
devours, the basket never
empties. He grabs more grub
than he can eat to save

for hungry days ahead.
Naked except for a tattered
loin cloth, a boy leans
against an old oak god,

its thinnest roots thicker
than his arms. His nose's
been gnawed, his tongue's
a stub, his fingers nubs.

Careful not to touch
his sores, the old man
cracks open his pouch
to offer him a taste of fish.

The boy struggles to eat,
swallows, and chokes on a bone.
The old man pounds
on his back hard until he spits

it out. The sliver on his finger
is as white as a tooth
from an old ivory comb, the last
of his master's things he'd sold.

5.
No more fish for the boy,
but instead just bread soaked
soft in wine he can easily steal
from a crowd weary

from too much food and talk,
like his master at his last meal,
leaving behind so many
fine bottles undrunk.

Transfiguration

A misty mountain top, sun dazzled by
a song of sorts. A fugue perhaps whose
cold strict parts resound with a fiery
tune. How hear it now? How could any
choir sing it? Any gong, bell, celeste,
flute, fife, clarinet, oboe, zither,
sitar, lyre, pipa, biwa, all of the Concert-
gebouw together play it? Had dust-covered
men ever beaten it on deer skin drums?
Black-clad women, tossing seeds on graves,
wailed it, tearing the air? Had any bard
intoned it after battle? In the Negev
holy men, in Compostela's narrow streets
pilgrims chanted it? Did viols perform it

as a courtiers' pavan? On what village green,
beneath what shell, had a band played
it as a march for soldiers in gray or blue?
Did Grumiaux tune his fiddle to it before
he played Mozart or Bach? Did Corelli
warm his voice to it before he sang
E lucevan le stelle? Do birds, their hearts
light-quicken, warble it at noon? Or wolves
howl its agonies at the moon? The song
is lost to us like strands of the sun. Yet deep
in a forest, a plain bright eyed little girl,
centuries dust, still hums its tunes as she
picks up pretty pebbles and gathers nuts
to please herself and comfort us.

Lazarus

The hotel's abandoned, shut down. He locks the door to the lounge. Listening to storm reports, he washes cocktail glasses behind the bar. Each one he's dried, he places on a plastic shelf that runs across a mirror he's never looked in, scared of the dead man he'd see at fifty-three, afraid to count the days until, one by one, they're gone again. Restless, he's waiting for a call but won't pick up the phone, numbering each time it rings as just one more he has to hear before it's really over, his heart unable to bear another loss. The brutal winds shake

the building, bouncing the bar's tables and chairs around as if an earthquake, not a hurricane were breaking the island apart. He tastes ash on his tongue and swills some Cuban rum he keeps stashed beneath the cash register. A hundred burning huts make their own storm he'd learned as his best friend ran amuck after their platoon had lit them all, screaming he deserved a god damn medal some lieutenant had deprived him of, then shooting chickens, pigs, gooks before he blasted his head off his neck with a grenade that killed them all. Only Marcus had survived, brought back from the dead in a field hospital,

still gripping his best friend's dog tags.
He wears them around his neck like an amulet.
After he's rinsed another glass in the soapless
water, he wipes it with a fresh towel
and inspects it for spots by the absinthe green
light that fills the room as the dying winds
chill the air. The chain around his neck
feels tighter than it's ever felt before,
Danny's tags weighing on his chest heavy
as a shield. As he falls, he can't pull
them off. Is his zippo out of fluid? Danny
hands him his. For once a hut burns fast
enough, as the enemy flees from the flames
in his brain while their animals bellow and squawk.

The Ficus

He bought me in Laguna Beach where
I'd been properly raised from a seed and grown
content to stay in a house that was much too dark
and lacked any views to speak of, though
I was pleased by the ceiling I could touch
if I chose. What man attends to a tree's
forebodings? He should have stayed put,
but he thought he needed new friends, new
lovers, and moved in search of them
to a cramped cottage parked on a hill
overlooking the seedy orange glow of Silver
Lake. Shoved indecorously into a morose
corner of the dining room, I did as I pleased.
Out of spite, I dropped all my leaves

and almost died. At more than one party,
drinks were drained, cigarettes snuffed out
in my pot soil. I bore the affront like a stoic.
As trees measure time, only a trickle or two
of sap had passed before one afternoon
I heard weeping on his bed. For days,
he abandoned me without the least
concern for my fate. In a pique, I plopped
all my leaves on his floor and cared
not the least when he walked through his door
with one arm less. He never bothered
to sweep. I was sure he had sold me cheap
to the cottage's new owner when he moved
back south to Laguna. But, like a saint,

he forgave me my sins and gave me back my corner. I decided to thrive even as he grew thin, lost hair, coughed up gobs of red phlegm. But when he cursed God for all his misery and swore great oaths defying heaven, I shed my leaves in shock onto the decorative prayer rug that was still littered with them when Ricardo found him in a pool of blood. If I'd known his distress, I'd have made less of a mess. But goodness itself, Ricardo took me into his home anyway, setting me up on Catalina's better stretch, where the light is right and the view, well, the view is wide and almost satisfactory.

The Fig Tree

A damp wind blew along the Bethany road through the grove. I huddled among the other trees, neither the spindliest nor the hardiest, my branches criss-crossing, tangled with the others, my leaves' sharp frond shape dully green, my bark marked with tumors. Still low in the sky, the sun was barely ruddy as he and the twelve passed by taking no notice of us until he turned to one and declared he hungered out of season after figs and demanded of me some fruit to eat who had no figs to offer. Whereupon, out of all reason he raged like a thwarted

lover and cursed me for my fruitlessness that had left his hunger deep, unsatisfied. Before sunrise the next day, I withered away, unlike the tree far less innocent than me he never cursed. Make of me an image in your poem, a symbol in your sermon. Write an edifying allegory of me as type of all who deny their Lord. None of it matters a fig, as they say, to me anymore who am nowhere to be found, neither dust in the air nor dust in the ground along the route he took from Bethany to Jerusalem, working his famous miracles, just or not.

Judas's Fate

One son fights in France, another for years in
New Guinea. A brother serves in the Balkans
advising the OSS. In a week or so, a nephew
will be out of hospital at last. He's ordered
his wife, two daughters to dress always in black
as they knit soldiers socks, sweaters, warm caps.
Mornings, he reads the news. In the afternoons,
he listens to dispatches on the wireless.
Nights, he scans the skies for enemy planes.
Children have risen against their parents before,
brother has betrayed brother. But he will not flee
to an inland refuge. Let the bombs fall. Let no
housetop not burn to the ground. He abhors dawn.
It is more darkness the world is fighting for.

Gethsemane: Keep Awake

The guns across the river keep shooting.
The jerries are re-grouping in the woods.
I didn't mean to leave you. They tell me
the war is over. But I can hear the guns.

Our platoon has drawn the enemy's
attention. Yesterday, they shot Tom.
Death is our gift for the birthday of time.
I love the sun and stars more than most.

I never rest but watch the river, farms,
and mountains. I know every secret of month
and year. You are goodness. Life is
horror. I can't smoke because of the danger.

I miss the easiness of bed and slumber.
On the third day of October, I sent you
a tender sign of fall, a shadow from
a tree outside my window. Do not hide

your face. Do not turn away in anger.
I have news that will make humanity
rejoice. Our days are hard.
God's nights endure forever.

A Tribune's Pride

Pilate's private gardens are jeweled
like fall in Gaul where in winter
my men wore the fur and hides
of the beast-hordes they put to the sword
in woods thick with trees as Nile banks
with reeds. Instead of the peace I sought
the gods have given me Jerusalem.
Rome sows confusion like Carthaginian
seed on all the earth it's salted. Tomorrow
three more to crucify. Death will wait
patiently for them, loyal as a soldier
hardened by the wars. I like to watch
the eyes of the crucified, how like rodents'
they scan the skies for signs of hawks.

Forsaken

God on the cross beside himself accuser
and accused do not say tribe clan nation
race do not say en masse many peoples
death comes one by one in the murderous
chambers and locked burning barns
the body-strewn rice fields the fire-bombed
cities on Stalingrad's two lines the first
to kill the Germans the second to shoot
their own men running away one
by one make no lists necessary impossible
to name them all all of history recall
as best you can what names you know
start with your own keep reciting so
my aunt the tumor in her jaw grown

so large it rivaled her head my mother
in her desolate hospital bed writhing
in wretched pain maddened by Parkinson's
choking to death my father talking
of his boyhood Staten Island farm then
I'm tired rolling away from me one last
time or yesterday the bum in the park
beating his dog with hand and stick God
near infinitely far the pain like prayer
perhaps if pain is lamentation expiring
on the cross so lost for words he must quote
a psalm forsaken into pain and dread
of the last breath he breathes with us one
by one or do we not breathe at all

The Faith of a Centurion

1.

Fall of 'sixty-seven. Lit. 101.
Three sessions late, he struts
in. A carbuncular scar like
a zigzag L slices his face.

Booze on his breath, he chooses
a desk in the right back
corner. In a Zurbaran,
the boy Jesus plays at making

a crown. When he pricks his finger
on a thorn, Mary's bright eyes
mourn for him that morning
as she will weep by noon

at the foot of the cross. Larry,
Guy, Brett, Kelly, then
John — all vets just back
from Vietnam. But only

John's eyes, bleak blue,
look at me as if he's always
in mourning. After the semester
is through, he leaves Coltrane's

A Love Supreme propped
against the door of my ramshackle
cottage. Every night
I listen to that LP.

Uninvited, he brings his girls
by. None of them lasts long.
He makes out with Suzie
on my couch, not so drunk

he can't get aroused but tight
enough not to care I watch.
The bar he likes best is blocks
from my cottage, a place to crash

when the SAE house is too far
to walk to. If I forget to leave
my door unlocked, he pounds
on it until I let him in.

Twice, he rips through a screen
and breaks a window. I bandage
his hand and cover him with
a blanket where he lies on the floor.

Good Friday that year,
he insists I attend mass
with him. Next to the altar,
the priest has placed on a gold

stand a reliquary of the true
cross. John whispers, If all
the slivers taken from that tree
displayed in churches round the globe

were glued together they'd repopulate
the forests we've poisoned and burned
in Nam. Yet he prostrates himself
in adoration. After a matinee

of Bonnie and Clyde, he nurses
an ale at Nick's Saloon and talks
about fighting for the whites
in Rhodesia. Of the movie, he says,

At least they know what it looks
like when you shoot a man.
Late April, after dating her two
weeks, he marries Sarah

Somebody. Before summer,
they divorce. When one of his frat
brothers calls him a fag,
he drives his fist through a plaster

wall, breaking three fingers
and a thumb. Stumble-down
drunk, he still is wearing the splint
on his hand as he kicks at my door,

his t-shirt filthy with crud.
I haul him in and hide upstairs.
At first light, he walks straight
from the shower into my bedroom,

the sunshine like mist or steam
gleaming off his untoweled body.
More broken letters than I had seen
scar his knees, thigh, hip, butt.

I loan him a new shirt.
He abandons his own for me
to dispose of, though I know
he knows I won't or can't.

2.

Spring of 'seventy-three. Hand
in hand, he and his girlfriend
or wife are hiking up the steps
toward my hilltop house

in San Francisco. I don't have
to see his scarred face
to know it's John, only his strut,
his starlet blond hair,

his curiously boyish bum.
Just fifty feet behind them,
I wait until they've reached
my door before I turn down

the hill to linger in a North Beach
bar until I'm sure he really
has gone for good and won't
ever return. One night,

when we were both tight,
when I couldn't guess the answer,
John told me how many
pieces of shrapnel still lodged

in his flesh. Thirteen, he said.
It felt like a thorn or better yet
a splinter of the true cross
had been forced beneath

a fingernail, he said, then
plunged so deep in his body
no human had the wits
or guts to knife it out.

A Naked Boy

Spring, the garden a green fire burning
the earth. Woven from fine linen, the boy's
loincloth is too thin for the gusts of wind
that still blow south from an icy north,
stinging its flowery things, withering blossoms.
The fig he picks from a near dead tree
is miraculously sweet, a happy omen.
But the moon's as glum and pocked as the bald
pate of the Sadducee he serves, rising irate
from a late cold bath. Scattered about
the olive grove, the devotees lie sleeping,
snoring, wheezing, whimpering like the Romans
he also waits on, impossible to wake after
a guzzling feast or a long night's carouse.

Behind him, soldiers march up the hill, the lord
he adores strangely prostrate as their torches
drip blood-red sparks on the bodies
of his followers who scare like hares or slaves
afraid of whips and lashings. Frightened, too,
of what the soldiers might do with their spears
and swords, the boy tries to run, but snags
his loincloth on a thorn that hook-like rips
it off him. He chases after the others, loses
them, finds only a cave to hide his nakedness
in, resting his head on a stone slab, soon
sleeping, dead to the world, coiled like a snake
in a basket only a wizard's flute could coax
awake and make dance to its magical tune.

The Tomb

Lovers
of gardens
lovers
of men
each time
you die
shine
brighter
each time

Sick Bed

Unable to sleep, Joe lies restless on his bed,
staring at a dead man stretched out across
from him on a mattress flat as a slab in a morgue.
Soon a nurse or doctor will barge in to see
who in the ward's failed to weather the night.
Not Joe, who's borne worse storms than most.
Fluid in his lungs almost drowned him once,
tugging him back to Texas. But his bleary
eyes cleared. He survived. And now the naked
phantom boy with the face white as linen
sits again at the foot of a dead man's bed,
his voice like a flute's, sweetly rueful as he says,
What's more to fear? Here, he says pointing, or
there, each time smiling brighter than before.

They Were Afraid

Sitting too proud in a crypt they find empty
as his words, dressed in blinding white, the young
man frightens the three women, who drop
their spices. Running for their lives, they try
to sing to quiet their fears. Yet their song
too easily becomes more dirge than psalm,
less hymn than lamentation heard by
the desolate men gathered in a room more
barren than any tomb who stare at the door
they've barred and the bare walls from which
they've angrily torn away all images of him
who betrayed each one of these mournful,
disquieted men by leaving no sign he died
two thousand years and more ago.

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About Peter Weltner

Peter Weltner has published five books of fiction: *Beachside Entries/Specific Ghosts* (1989), *Identity and Difference* (1990), *In a Time of Combat for the Angel* (1991), *The Risk of His Music* (1997), and *How the Body Prays* (1999). His stories have appeared in several anthologies, among them *O. Henry Prize Stories, 1993* and *1998*. His books of poetry are *Laguna Beach: After Shelter* (Barnwood Poetry, 2009), *From a Lost Faust Book* (Finishing Line Press, 2009), and *News from the World at My Birth: A History* (Standing Stone Books, 2010).

About the Artist

Gerald Coble lives in Battenville, New York. His drawings, collages, and constructions are in many private collections in the United States and Europe, and he is represented in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. His books, *Ten in the Morning* and *Battenkill Book 2: January*, both with introductions by William Corbett, are available from Pressed Wafer.

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Richard Long, Editor

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