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Homeless (excerpt from Devotional)

i
I open the door. Help me. Poor words. A woman asks for water. Because of her importunate look, I give her as much as she needs. I will not put out the outcast. I will not shut the door. She is worth more than ten thousand sparrows.

Yes, even when I was poor, I gave to the poor. Even when I was ill, I cared for the sick—even when I was ick of love, with patience, I knelt and prayed.

ii
The earth is the Lord’s and all its furniture

The homeless woman comes to my door and asks for a glass of water. My greatest weakness lies in pity.

But I understand. Behold, I consecrate and dedicate my will to her will; I let her in. And she drops into a chair. Spider veins abuse her legs, and I am walking here with water. Now, I give her the glass.

Glance at her clothes. Use has beaten them bare.

There are threads of meaning and potential here that we can’t quite understand.
Help me. I have given too much. Too late, I try to conceal myself and wait for her to leave.

Help me to my feet. She takes my hand and carefully rises from the chair. I think, I think and reach down and wait. The frail body shakes.

Too often, wretchedness goes unnoticed. Beauty is seldom seen in pity. Beauty is seldom enough.

Christ beautifully humbled himself to the point of death on a cross.

To escape the crushing crowd, she comes to the well.

But, no matter where you go or what you do, you can’t outrun your thoughts.

Look what I found, she cries then bends and picks a penny from the carpet of our apartment.

(You could say that she is gone.)
Call her the daughter of King Saul.

The madness between the two comes from the Lord my god look at her spotted, ropy hands; the eyelid entombed in its hood or those deep lines around her mouth, her marionette’s jaw.
When the homeless woman came to my apartment I was tired and needed rest

The woman without a house stands in my doorway and imagines herself inside. Ripe carpet fills the air I am living in a tomb, but to her, this is something good.

To see it all-together, is there a greater wound?

I have furrows of intellectuality, folds between the eyes and loosening jowls. I need some heavy help with my self-esteem and slow belief; I don’t feel old but I have a human face. Permit me to imitate the drink that she longs for.

Carry me away.
Oceans are warming at the same rate as if five Hiroshima bombs were dropped in every second.

I was once floating in a bag of waters.

My mother takes out her breast and nurses my brother, slaps my sister, comes home from work slumped at the table where we’ve pushed all our overcooked broccoli.

Josette Akresh-Gonzales

My Son Distrusts People Who Are Happy All the Time

what did people do before sponges / my son asks were their dishes even clean? / what did they do / for creation myths?

historians will find our merry objects formed a plastic layer / disposable / we throw away everything / reddit says they used rags / empty flour sacks / in the Reckless Decade of the late 19th century / they reused scraps

of clothing / stiff horsehair brushes / even sand now the Laminate / the Anthropocene / an era floating atop they used a tub for scrubbing / a bowl for rinsing / I explain to my son / who has a general distrust of mirth / another word for God

is my stubbornly optimistic method / of blowing the contents of my nose into a plain white hanky / I throw in the wash / over and over

Oceans are warming at the same rate as if five Hiroshima bombs were dropped in every second

I was once floating in a bag of waters.

My mother takes out her breast and nurses my brother, slaps my sister, comes home from work slumped at the table where we’ve pushed all our overcooked broccoli.
on top of the plate heaped with chicken, potatoes, her own portion of trees. “What do I look like, your garbage can?” she says.

“I already ate a whole bag of chips at the office. I already ate—” she says, forking cold meat into her mouth, “—the waiting room was filled.

I had the woman with the ingrown toenail who needed antibiotics, the man with the alcohol problem and high blood pressure—”

I’m recalling this because my teenage son too once floated in a sack of fluid, though I hate to remind him, the coral is bleaching more every year.

“We could fly to Mars,” says my son, “create an atmosphere by melting Mars’s ice caps by dropping millions of Hiroshimas.”

In a century or two the radiation will dissipate as it’s doing at Chernobyl, where now vodka sellers hawk Atomik, say it’s safe to drink.

My son wants to do that, to believe in “Planet B,” in Elon Musk—
  oxygen above water—
  a kingdom of potatoes.
Matthew Freeman

Beautiful, Finally

Tonight, as my heart may or may not be failing me, as the wind is blowing my papers all over the place, I know I have stayed true to my desire.

I can’t tell anymore whether schizophrenia causes pain or pain causes schizophrenia and now it doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is what word I use and the medical discourse that aims to erase it.

It could have been my dad yelling or my mother’s innuendo or my reading of the Old Testament that made me think my old buddy Red was mad at me. The miracle is that I do not care.

It’s funny to get off the elevator and slightly turn my head and see that someone’s already pushing the close door button.
Cursed from the start, I signed
the papers at Parkview Place
and took my seat in the smoking area
among the damaged.

A well-dressed and good-looking newscaster
I’d gone to high school with
came up and started questioning me.

“What happened to you? Are you on medicine?”
“Sure, I take a lot of meds.”
“What do you take them for?”
“Well, I’ve got schizophrenia.”
“I’ve never known you to act schizophrenic.”
“That’s because I take the meds, dude.”

I never really found out why he was
there. And when I told my nurse
about the conversation she said I ought
never tell anyone about my diagnosis.
And soon I got cheerful. I’m constantly aware
and there’s an anhedonia and everyday stress
that no one sees but I think I’m doing good work.
Just yesterday at Wendy’s
a girl in the back whispered my name.
Abriana Jetté

Fury

I was being killed. Murderous mothers flapped their wings. To feel how they suffer

I sang along. Half sleep. A precarious situation, yet I accepted their invitation for lamentations.

Warbled on. Lingered. Disappeared. My spear my dimmed conscience. My vision, Lear

like, a fool for casual inaccuracy, thinking of daughters and mad literality.

We swung up against sinning more sinned than sin; meaning: leave no trace of the feminine.

When it was over, I licked my fingers. Figured I’d devour whatever notes of bitterness remained. Lustful, loveless, shit out of luck, three dream sisters whispered: destruct, destruct.
Abriana Jetté

Persephone, Refrain

It’s not as easy as just deciding to leave and leaving. Consider the people involved who love the life they live. Including me. Whatever existed before dissolves when we’re together. Including me.

I’d bend over backwards and beg on my knees if I thought it might do something to change his mind. Instead I pay the price, play the fool. Casually slip off my ring. Time is my punishment, I pay its price whenever oxygen escapes the leaves. I could have learned to love the life we lived. Time and time again they let me leave. What’s going to happen when I no longer exist? Eventually, everything dissolves. Including me.
I saw someone crossing the bridge
and worried it was you. If it were
you would have missed us, here at our fire.

We lit it early so you could find us beneath
our willowy smoke. The wind makes us cry
round our fire, which is new, and needs the wind

it fears will smother it. If that was you I saw crossing
the bridge, your eyes unseeing above that deep drop,
you have missed us: you have gone too far.
Two Forms in Love

The blue snow catches
The falling orange light which had
Been hopeless.

The blue catches fire thus
And the orange is quenched
And takes a steady shape.

In time, the light will admit
It is not
Really orange.

And the snow
Will let the steady blue shape it’d taken
Fall away.

It will be a close night in spring. By then
They will have both already vanished
Each stepping carefully into the other.
New Geography of Faith

These are the years of thy will be done. I pray and listen and won’t stop listening. Outside Salt Lake, peaks reach towards God and nestle us like open-grazing hens, giving us rules and a place to climb, one limb in front of another, as if carpeted walls and massed produced pulpits were places of my understanding, as if they didn’t sprout from a fault line and ripple the gloss we no longer see through. My knees are pressed against the ceiling, Father, we disagree about ownership. Though the peaks hear our hymns, we are shielded by smoke, and we prepare our gas lamps for a new geography of faith, where parents don’t fold into their newborn linens, where there’s not much to compare yourself except the coming and going, and moments of realization between vast, compassionate silence.
Tanner Lee

The Devil Will Keep You From Freezing

You’ll never see him coming. He says forget everything about being alive. There is more to beauty than erasure.

He tells you in two years your faith will wake up blind and remove its face. Both eyes will be exposed like late blooms, and each pink hand plucked and savored. In the twilight he will sear your skin until every smile is shadowed in shame. He will drag your polished shoes to the stairway. You will promise him in rooms of gold and velvet. When you see others, approach them. Welcome your death now.
Jailbait

Even I was someone’s jailbait once upon a time sweet sixteen and the Beech Forest Trail full of bloom, a case of serendipity when in the glen I stumbled upon Danny, a flute playing minstrel & 32 years old.

Along the coves of Provincetown there were many stoned hippies & guys in drag & what not. But what I remember best was the rock candy & the way it rhymed in my mouth with the pebbles on Herring Cove Beach under my tender butt.
Tatiana Retivov

Sea Foam

I have watched the sea foam at the mouth as it reticulates my psyche.

Who would have thought that I would lament its transient activity.

I who have harbored the lost and the weary at some dock of the bay in the New World of which I have grown somewhat disdainful if not disappointed.

Nevertheless the sea beckons me with its polluted foam at the rim of waves forever recalling some coastal scene soliloquized by would be Lake poets hungry for salt. I am not one of them. For the New World is all ocean and lacking in sea. Despite its being from sea to shining sea.
Samn Stockwell

But order nonetheless

I boarded the subway to the heat rush, the smell rush, my hair blown back—seats alight with crushed candy and popcorn, a magazine in half, and the sprawl of assorted legs, highly decorated, some, in patterned tights with leopards running up the thighs. And a bench hunched over the glow of a phone—surely everyone thinks they are umbilical cords to the life above where someone is recognized as the familiar animal of a pizza stand, the animal of a family.

I sit in the coffee shop and read the news of the citizens and notice the coats padding the back of the seats. Ignorance is biting at my calves and I don’t want the sky to crush my sleepy head. I think I can put my gloves and hat aside and yet not lose them – everyone goes on if they can, even if they lose the parts that were meaning.

What will people think of me if they do? How many pairs of socks, how many shirts have I buttoned on to me? Such birds and waterfalls as I needed to tunnel to another self—I once piled stones into a staircase in a clump of wet ground. I dragged and tamped them into a series of steps—and above my head it went and I coaxed some of the branches out of the way and axed others. This is true. With no greater faith than my own woods, I hewed a place for me.
Samn Stockwell

On writing

You can write a note to a creature sleeping under your bed, you can write a note to ice cream, to bracelets and anything jangling from you. You can straighten the line of your cardigan if you wear your cardigan to match the glints of your earrings. You can, more plainly, think of your ears as glints, subterranean glints and interior music of their own, and you can wash and wash the table you write on, until it’s the hue of almonds and that plain for you.
Teresa Sutton

Burning Times

Mother, if you saw yourself reflected in the mirror of this poem’s inky half-tints, those blues and purples of ghostly nights,

would you burn it alive too? Would you recite the names listed on the wall of shame, the mothers and their mothers,

threads broken and knotted back together, the tincture of certainty that they can trace an arc of self-disgust far back

by following weary spliced cords to the garden and the first mother, the mother of all mothers, her daughter

and all the daughters that scrawled their mother’s names in books trying to redraft contours, to shift outcomes

and lessen the mythic significance of fire’s legacy, its living remnants, embers that beg to stay hidden in the name of bearing witness.
Teresa Sutton

Last Night I Read That Darkness Can Be Undone

by simply jumping off the ledge of your reflection into a still lake or even a puddle.

When you hear a dog barking somewhere outside, run to the streakless window, look down the road

in this quaint old town where you’ve resided half asleep trying to learn who you are without him

or her or the crows that once filled your yard or the rocking chairs that faced the moon.

Use the scissors of your fingers to remove the top of your head and bid the updraft to unsnarl the tangles

of nightfall that you have allowed to creep around your ankles and neck.
After Verlaine’s arrest, I could have left town,
I just couldn’t have gone anywhere.
When I drank beer, I lived in a dark damp house
Under the bar stools. Other folks—drinkers all, fellow thieves,
Concrete poets—with the same leather coat I favored
Lived there too.
But when I drank absinthe in the heat of your anger—
You wanted to shoot me?
The one who pulled you into the fresh air?
Shoot me?—
When I drank absinthe even tall ceilings crowded me,
And later the hangover mornings came on all sudden.
I woke up on the bus to Thompson Falls.
I woke up anywhere.
And there my head was: a galvanized steel blob
Banging around in shards of light.
The Umbrella Thief

André-Joseph Salis de Saglia was a famously gay, absinthe-drinking friend of Verlaine known for stealing umbrellas. Decades later, he was the subject of a Picasso painting.

Preparing late breakfast for his father, The Umbrella Thief contemplated rain. Rain, he figured, was dozens of wet rags Snapping at the top of one’s bald head.

In black rain littered with golf umbrellas, If someone approached you with an honest Plan, then the wind might smell clean But would be shot through with chiding hail.

His father shouted that he liked oatmeal. The Umbrella Thief was serving omelets. Do you want some tea, he asked gently. His father said coffee. I always want coffee

And who are you and where’s Mother? The Umbrella Thief couldn’t remember everything either. That dark Burberry on the coat tree, He’d stolen it from someone. Who?
Contributors

Bruce Alford teaches poetry at Louisiana State University. His debut collection, *Terminal Switching*, was published in 2007 by Elk River Review Press.

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Tatiana Retivov was born in New York to Russian émigré parents. She has lived for over 25 years in Ukraine, where she engages in literary translation and creative writing.

Samn Stockwell has published in Agni, New Yorker, and Ploughshares, among others. Her two books, Theater of Animals and Recital, won the National Poetry Series and the Editor’s Prize at Elixir, respectively.


John Whalen is the author of Caliban (Northwest Emerging Poets Series, Lost Horse Press) and Above the Pear Trees, which won the 2014 Floating Bridge Press chapbook contest. His work has appeared at here in 2River and in CutBank, EPOCH, The Gettysburg Review, Verse Daily, and VQR.
About the Artist

Megan Duncanson, who finds inspiration in nature and everyday subjects, takes normal, common objects and transforms them into a captivating artwork. Described as contemporary eclectic, she experiments in a wide range of art styles and subjects.

About 2River

Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry and art, quarterly publishing *The 2River View* and occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series. 2River is also the home of Muddy Bank, the 2River blog.

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