

The Rosary Poems



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Alison Shaffer

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The Rosary Poems: Joyful

Annunciation

*The light shines in the darkness, and the
darkness has not overcome it. JOHN 1:5*

Her yes becomes flesh
in flesh, white-winged fire swept
along sweat as if over the agitation
of waves, sharp spine of sunlight
in a slow serpentine across
the waters of her body—
there is no rushing it, no cascade
into the long cry of rising—only
a breath, a word, and the pouring
in of everything, even God.

Visitation

*When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary,
the babe leaped in her womb. LUKE 1:41*

They touch each other's hair, strand
by strand separate gray from gray
until gossamer ladders drift
between them—already it is in her,
something she cannot control, barely
hold, growing older and beyond
her—a tired voice whispers glory
in her ear, and the sun paces along
the filaments of tears that stretch
from earth into the heights of evening.

Nativity

*When the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give
light to those who sit in darkness. LUKE 1:78-79*

She longs to kiss his crown, still bright
and slick with the heat of her body.
In her throat, that warm, vast inverse
of sky, a song congeals, bursts
open like a star, drawn from her
tremulously, past the cradle of her lips
into a larger night—there is no room
in her now for emptiness—only aching
hope, this lullaby, the pulling away
of everything, which is God.

Presentation

*to offer a sacrifice according to
what is said in the law. LUKE 2:24*

She listens: two doves in their temple
of cage—like the child, newly named,
who has yet a child's palms and toes,
a child's mouth to discover them—two
doves purr soft eulogy of separation
and slow return, though she still clings
white and wavering as to the hilt
of a heavy sword. The doves tuck up
their empty wings, feathers stilled
and not yet flecked with blood.

Finding

*but supposing him to be in the company,
they went a day's journey. LUKE 2:43-44*

What distance is it that falls
so quickly to part them each time
she turns to seek him—he is too much
of a God to her, walking carefully
through the dust—for three days
the anxiety of space pulls across her
vision—if she could just drag aside
the horizon that divides them—only
when she finds him, his voice a boy's
lonely tremor of calm, does she cry out.

The Rosary Poems: Luminous

Baptism

After me comes he who is mightier than I.
MARK 1:7

How he waits, holds himself just under
that rim of baptismal shore, gazing
with water-wrapt eyes into a webbing
of sky and sunlight, cracked open—how
he longs to remain submerged in that
mumbled current—and when he finally rises,
how they see everything in his reflection,
in how the water, the sunlight, touch
him, and how they seek the place he
dwells, while he wanders in the desert.

Wedding

*Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water."
And they filled them up to the brim. JOHN 2:7*

In the midst of all their felicity,
they bring him the borrowed jars—
light's playful chance cannot obscure
this clarity with crimson miracle,
the rush of words that overcome
his lips—until their hands, wet and clean
from labor, rest like stone around
half-drunk cups, their eyes wandering
across faces like flies, and the jars are
empty again, though still so heavy.

Proclamation

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom
of God is at hand. MARK 1:15*

He is with the children when
news comes of the man, once wild
and soaked through, now become
a prisoner—teaching them games of
transformation, his hands now
long-legged mules, now wings hinged
around hooked thumbs—though he says
nothing, the children already discover
in their own fingers the archways
of temples, of whole kingdoms.

Transfiguration

A cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. LUKE 9:34

Perhaps it will be this same
mountain—perhaps always
the same, that ridge where they
will seem to lose him—that now
he kneels on, hands worn white
with prayer, breath sharpened in
his side, sound of blood a cloud
against his ears, and the muscled
echoes of climbing prickling
just beneath his quiet skin.

Institution

Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.
JOHN 16:33

The bread of his sun-caked body
breaks open for them, wine divided
into so many mouths, no hesitancy
in their hunger for him, for what will crack
his face into a smile—how can there be
devastation in the creases of his laugh,
dissolution of their hearts clenched solid—
no growing fear that he's meant all
along to teach them to scatter, to love
the shards of shattered alabaster jars.

The Rosary Poems: Sorrowful

Agony

*He came to the disciples and found
them sleeping for sorrow. LUKE 22:45*

We do not dream that through churning
light we hear him crying, expectant
ground trembling with dust-red tears,
reassuring thunder swallowing him—
the very lightness of sleep is what blinds
us, like watery daybreak that overcomes
these godly visions wavering before us,
as uncertain as heat rising—now he touches
our shoulders, and our harsh, squinted
gaze slips open into the dark night.

Scourging

Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"
JOHN 18:38

His silence blooms in blood, a budding
tangle of wind-whipped boughs, glistening
with sunset against the pale, dimming sky
of his skin—we urge on this murderous
spring creeping quickly across his spine,
reaffirm our frenzy, our distinction from his
senselessly chosen stillness—we grow
frantic to drown the hush of our own awe
at the beauty of so ancient and innocent
a forest spreading from his opened veins.

Crowning

Saying to him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" they struck him with their hands. JOHN 19:3

Our yes! punctures flesh,
thorn-thrilled crown circling his
eyes, lovely ruined temples
sanguine wet above a body draped
thick in bruised purple—swollen,
he draws in everything: our blame,
directionless, our very hearts
abandoning us—there is no stopping
it, no restraining what cries leap
throbbing from our tongues.

Cross

*Do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves
and for your children. LUKE 23:28*

Choked wailing, flung out with our
sweat-limp palms along the road,
and pulled back again, rushing gasp
of sand from beneath us—what good
is mercy now? No one can relieve him
of it, when even we are his—our rushing
forward to lift him, only his return
to himself—our cry beneath the weight
of it, his cry—we double over, unable
to tell for whose God we weep.

Crucifixion

What I have written I have written.
JOHN 19:22

He is no man, whom we raise up—
his ribs brittle like a serpent's
beneath the crusted blood flaking
from him like scales, his chest
hollow, like a serpent's, his mouth
hanging loose, so open
he might swallow us whole—
no man can survive our need,
only this poison we drain from him
and the sight of what heals us.

The Rosary Poems: Glorious

Resurrection

*Tell me where you have laid him,
and I will take him away. JOHN 20:15*

I seek you in the garden—
small roses blossom like tombs
from the earth, dark scabs of flowers
that itch between thick layers
of clotted petal, and butterflies
alight, unroll them, opening
with angelic curiosity—but you
are nowhere. Pained and peeling,
I find nothing but the tightened,
milky scar of this new morning.

Ascension

*The doors were shut, but Jesus came
and stood among them. JOHN 20:26*

What rises? Rivers climb, stumble
rain-drunk along shallow banks,
denying their end with salty
mouths—longing, riverbed stones
weigh down center of my palms,
wet, warm and hard, blood and nails,
the flesh of the river shrinking
into air, leaving only granite bones—
heat and water rise and, God,
so much that rises is lost to me.

Descent

*There appeared to them tongues as of fire,
resting on each one of them. ACTS 2:3*

Before, I laid aside the water jug.
Now you are dead, I wear a long,
blue skirt, thin sandals, knowing
they will not warm me, step into
the shallow creek, cold water current
like tongued fire licking at my ankles
—as if I need only to keep wading
slowly deeper, until my whole body
is under, numbed, submerged by
shadows—until the sunlight kicks in.

Assumption

*And all the people said, "So be it."
JUDITH 15:10*

I am older and so much lighter
than the rain, God, little soles
danced against my old skin, little
fingers clung to specks of lifted
dust—so heavy their whole lives
are falling, so heavy the trees'
and winds' slow droop—I touch
them and they are gone, and in their
place, your earth, your sky moving,
your ocean that has raised me.

Coronation

A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet. REVELATIONS 12:1

The skin I wear you weave
with the sun-spun warp of dawn
against horizon's sloping weft.
I shuffle across the floor in loose
slippers of moon, slip into the day
you've made—you are piercing,
embroider me with veins, blue
of emptiness, red of long breaths
of air—set in a thin hem of night,
you leave the stars as they are.

About Alison Shaffer

Alison Shaffer seeks to overcome cultural myopia by cultivating a rich inner life. She is dull but happy. Her work has appeared in *Delos*, *The God Particle*, and *Ink Pot Magazine*.

About Janet Snell

Janet Snell has shown her work in New York City; Baltimore; Washington, DC; and Cleveland. She is the author and artist of *Flytrap* (Cleveland State University Press Poetry Center, 1990) and *Heads* (March Street Press, 1998).

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