

# 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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### **About 2River**

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Richard Long, Editor

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