

Poetry as testimony

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [October 21, 1998](#) issue

I have long been an evangelist for poetry, a word which seems to engender as much cheer in the average American as the word "Calvinism." I am not easily discouraged, and in most of my speaking engagements manage to sneak in a poem or two, by myself and other contemporary poets, to demonstrate that listening to poetry can be enjoyable as well as illuminating.

In fact, as an oral art, poetry is far more compelling than prose, something that is reconfirmed to me every time I begin to read a poem in the middle of a sermon and observe people sitting up straighter and listening more attentively, as if I'm reading again from the Bible. It seems to me that at its best poetry does inspire the heart in a way that is similar to scripture. Like scripture, a fully realized poem is not mired in the surfaces of things but has immediate access to our inner being.

When I am subverting Christian audiences with contemporary poetry, I frequently use poems that are inspired by the Bible, such as Li-Young Lee's "The City in Which I Love You," from a book of the same name. The poem imagines the narrator of the Song of Solomon as an immigrant in a contemporary city, seeking his beloved while passing "two men jackeling a third in some alley / weirdly lit by a couch on fire." Lee, a refugee from Indonesia, might be speaking for any Christian when he refers to this unnamed city as the "city I call home, in which I am a guest."

I like to prove to ignorant or skeptical audiences--and when it comes to contemporary poetry, many Americans are both--that much good biblical interpretation is to be found in slim volumes of poetry from university presses. Jane Flanders's *Timepiece*, for example, includes the poem "Spit," a retelling of the miracle in Mark 8:22-26, from the point of view of the blind man who is healed. When asked why he didn't simply strike the stranger's hands away, he replies, "I was remembering how, when I was small, my mother spit on the hem of her skirt / and wiped my dirty face."

In recent years Oxford University Press has provided several anthologies that should help enormously to inform Christians about poetry on biblical themes. One is a two-volume set edited by Robert Atwan and Laurence Wieder titled *Chapters into Verse*, which matches each book of the Bible to a selection of poems based on it. In taking from the storehouse of literature both the old and the new, the editors have made an anthology that is exceptionally wide-ranging and instructive.

The chapter on Job is typical, including poems by Hart Crane, George Herbert, Lord Byron, Herman Melville, Jones Very and the contemporary poets Elizabeth Sewell, W. S. Merwin and John Ashberry (on Job as a beleaguered office worker with boils). Theodore Roethke's powerful "Judge Not" makes a good companion to any reading of Matthew 7:2. The book is full of surprises: while we might expect that John Donne and Emily Dickinson were inspired by the Gospels, we're delighted to see connections made between scripture and the work of Allen Ginsberg or James Dickey.

Another Oxford volume, edited by Atwan, George Dardess and Peggy Rosenthal, is *Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry*. It truly is a world collection, including poems from Africa, Asia and South America as well as from the European and American traditions. As with *Chapters into Verse*, Bible texts are provided alongside the poems, and again the juxtaposition of contemporary writers with ancient ones gives the book a deliciously heady feel. On the incarnation, St. John of the Cross is paired with R. S. Thomas; on the

annunciation, Hildegard of Bingen precedes Primo Levi.

At a time when the word "diversity" is overused to a dangerous degree--it is how words become meaningless--the sheer diversity in this book is inspiring. The postresurrection appearances of Jesus as depicted in Luke and John, for example, are illuminated by a little-known Dutch medieval nun, Sister Bertken, as well as by Thomas Aquinas. From the European-Anglo tradition comes work by Rainer Maria Rilke, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Edward Markham. Among the contemporaries are Hae-In Lee, Kostas Varnalis, Ole Wivel, X. J. Kennedy, Jane Kenyon and Chinua Achebe. This is not diversity for diversity's sake, but rather for the sake of demonstrating the Bible's ability to reach people in any age and culture.

The Gospels in Our Image, edited by economist David Curzon, is another volume devoted exclusively to 20th-century poetry. Bible verses and informative notes on the poems are included. This anthology is not quite as global in scope as is *Divine Inspiration*, but the range is still exceptional. The section on the Sermon on the Mount, for example, contains versions of the Lord's Prayer by D. H. Lawrence, Jacques Prevert and Nicanor Parra. César Vallejo offers a poem on "Our Daily Bread," and Antonio Machado a meditation on the words "thy will be done," which begins with a piercing cry: "Lord, you have ripped away from me what I loved most."

A personal favorite in the Curzon volume is "Born of Woman," by Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska. Her title is from Galatians 4:4, but the editor has placed the poem in a section on the Word made flesh. "So that is his mother," Szymborska begins, "That little woman. / The grey-eyed perpetrator. / The boat in which years ago / he floated to the shore." When the narrator adds, "The bearer of the man / with whom I walk through fire," we realize that this is a disciple standing before the cross. He meditates: "So that is she, the only one / who did not choose him / ready-made, complete"--an observation that allows the reader to meditate further on the pure grace of Mary's assent, which is not unlike the faith demanded of any pregnant woman. The disciple reflects that at the last his dying friend, this "wanderer to omega," has kept things simple: "'This is my mother,' / was all he said to me."

Two of the best contemporary poets writing in a Christian vein are Kate Daniels and Lynn Powell. They work in the secular literary world--Powell as an artist-in-schools for several state arts councils, Daniels as a literature professor at Vanderbilt--and are published primarily in the secular press.

A biblical sensibility informs nearly every page of Powell's *Old and New Testaments*. She writes of memories of Bible camp and of Baptist Training Union "sword drills," with children vying to be the first to find their Bible verses as "judges watched from their row of straightbacked / chairs behind Miss Swope, who commanded us: / FIRST CORINTHIANS 13:12: REPEAT. / FIRST CORINTHIANS 13:12: CHARGE!" Powell also reflects as an adult on a variety of scriptures, finding inspiration not only in Job and the Song of Solomon but the Book of Numbers. In "Manna," marriage serves as a metaphor for Israel's wilderness journey. "Excavating" in her kitchen, the poet finds "the recipes of our early marriage," for "a coq au vin I never made for you," and reflects on "what our Egypt could have lacked."

A "testament" is something that serves as a tangible proof, and there is much that is tangible in these poems, primarily the physicality of motherhood, to which Powell insistently gives a religious dimension. In "Beulah in Ohio," she writes:

Husband and wife sleep skin to skin,
flesh of their flesh, close to the bone.
Then, house by house the women
stir, stumble toward tiny lamentations.
It's OK, they whisper, and the milk falls down.

Powell also knows the trials of raising children within the context of an ancient religion. When her daughter asks what is "the baddest thing" that can happen to anyone, her mother realizes she is "remembering the museum, the crosses / hung a step away from the joyful births." In "Raising Jesus," a kind of paean to Mary, Powell laments, "My own son growls, 'when I grow up I want to be a Bad Guy.'"

The first of Kate Daniels's "four testimonies" probes the life and ministry of Simone Weil. Excerpts from Weil's prose act as a preface to each of the other sections, which focus on different aspects of motherhood. "The Marvelous Dimension" consists of monologues by three survivors of the 1989 earthquake that caused a freeway in San Francisco to collapse onto the top of another. It is difficult to explore the human aspect of such an event without seeming voyeuristic or exploitative, but Daniels succeeds. She gives witness to the man who focuses on the windowsill petunia he can see with his one undamaged eye through a shattered windshield, and finds himself loving it "for all it is worth." She is a witness for the young mother whose three young children have died, who insists that she was never rescued but is "in there / forever with my three little lambs, / the smell of blood, / and their dead faces, full questions, looking at me."

The third narrator of the book is the mother of an abused daughter who cannot regret that her son-in-law has committed suicide:

I hated
the way he touched her, as if she were
his grandest possession, hated too, how
she glimmered at that touch. Once I saw him
stroke her jawline with his middle finger, then drop
his hirsute hand to encircle her throat.

As the woman recalls her pregnancy, her daughter's childhood and her own divorce, the reader is struck by the authenticity of her voice. The depth of her maternal rage, as she stands at her son-in-law's graveside, is expressed in a manner reminiscent of the cursing psalms:

He's going
down now, finally, into the cool
dark earth. Let him think about it
a long time. Let him suffer. Let the creatures
of the earth lay their hands on him
in an unkind way.

The last testimony of the book, that of an ordinary young mother who alternately rejoices and depairs over her brood, is an unmitigated delight, particularly in its wealth of biblical allusion. In the first poem, "Genesis 1:28," a young couple, having decided to begin their family, embraces on the subway. The woman reflects, "To anyone watching, it must have / looked like lust . . . What kind of being," she asks, "could possibly see / a new world being made, a universe / created? . . . How godlike / it was, how holy?"

This poem is followed by "Fink," a tiny masterpiece in which Daniels manages to juxtapose "the third day, when God / created the earth," with an infant awakening in a soiled diaper, "a dazzling smile rippling through the bars of the crib." In "A Prayer to the Muse of Ordinary Life," the young mother reflects on the many ways that her life "is broken / into broken pieces. / The fabric is rent. / Daily, I roll / the stone away . . ." The book ends, fittingly, with a poem that evokes the mysterious intensity of mothers and children. In "A Prayer for My Children," the narrator marvels at

These three who love me
exactly as I am . . .
Who rear up eagerly when I enter,
and fall down weeping when I leave.

The litany concludes with quiet power, in a prayer any mother might make: "Whose first meal was my own body. / Whose last, please God, I will not live / to serve, or share."