

The radiance of religious poetry

Two anthologies locate grace in unexpected places.

by [Peggy Rosenthal](#) in the [October 25, 2017](#) issue

In Review

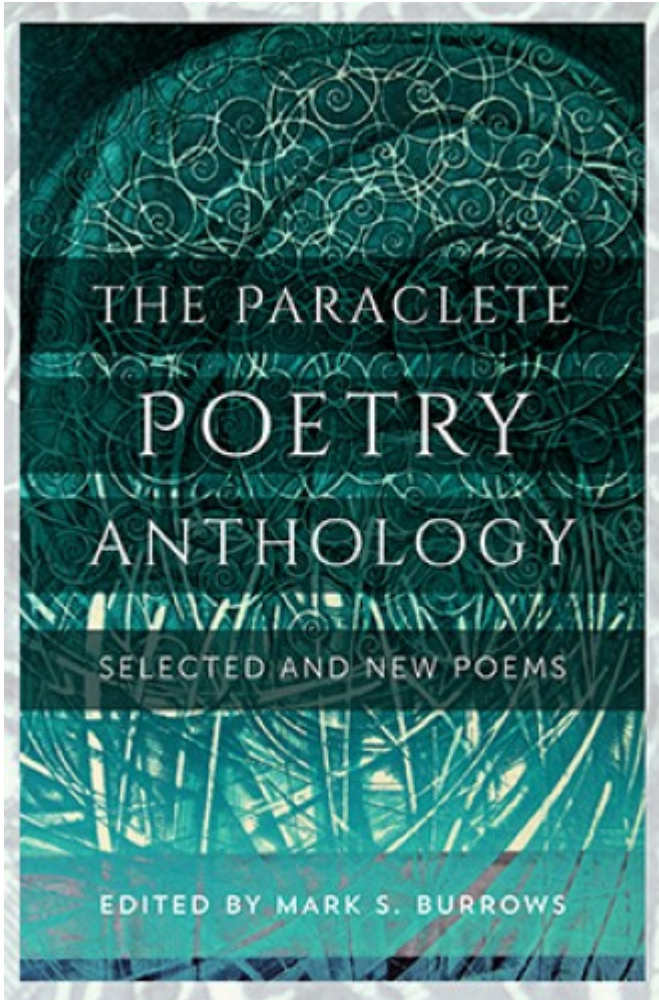


The Turning Aside

The Kingdom Poets Book of Contemporary Christian Poetry

Edited by D. S. Martin

Cascade Books



The Paraclete Poetry Anthology

Selected and New Poems

Edited by Mark S. Burrows

Paraclete Press

The Turning Aside takes its title from a beloved poem by Welsh poet R. S. Thomas, placed as the book's epigraph. Called "The Bright Field," the poem begins with an image of a field illuminated by the sun, which the speaker notices and then forgets. He then admonishes himself for not treasuring that moment, for "life is not hurrying on to receding future"—

It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush . . .

The editor, D. S. Martin, explains that all the poems he has assembled in some way pause to “turn aside.” The anthology includes the work of many of the most significant English-speaking Christian poets, including Richard Wilbur, Scott Cairns, Mark Jarman, Jeanne Murray Walker, Luci Shaw, Julia Kasdorf, Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, Les Murray, Christian Wiman, and several younger accomplished poets like Tania Runyan. I was delighted to find included one of my favorite poems, Wilbur’s “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World.” Its opening image of “the morning air . . . all awash with angels” is dazzling, even when we learn that these angels are sheets hung outside the window of a person waking.

Runyan discovers the transcendent in the mundane by taking biblical lines into her current context. For instance, in “Put on the New Self” (which alludes to Col. 3:10), the speaker, lying on the couch with her dog, “turns my eyes to things above / in the window,” where she sees not only “squirrels gibbering” but “the face of Christ in the bark.” Angels and Christ appear in unexpected forms, but we see them, these poems suggest, only when we pause to turn aside.

Baumgaertner’s “My God, My God” approaches Christ’s cry to God on the cross with an unexpected image: his “ragged cry” is

like a mound
of sand, piled high, giving way,
falling grain on grain burying
the burrowing crab almost impossibly

as he does his dark work.

Other poems in this anthology turn not to a single moment, but to a reflection on language and its relation to God. While Baumgaertner’s poem ends with a sober statement of God’s “silence,” Walker writes noisy creative fun into “In the Beginning Was the Word.” The deliberate slang that opens the poem—“It was your hunch, this world. On the heyday / of creation, you called *Okay, go!*”—continues through “the kerfluff / of a moody moon,” and trees with “their endless rummage / for light, their

photo-what's-it," until:

Soon people, bursting into language.
Creation thinking about itself: our words soaring
like yours through time, dangerous, ordinary words.

Another take on the interplay between God and words appears in Murray's deservedly famous "Poetry and Religion." Deftly, he makes his title terms metaphors for each other. For instance:

God is the poetry caught in any religion,
caught, not imprisoned. Caught as in a mirror

that he attracted, being in the world as poetry
is in the poem, a law against its closure.

The Paraclete Poetry Anthology takes as its epigraph a poem on the theme of poetry and spirituality, "On the Threshold of the Poem," by the 20th-century Polish poet Anna Kamieńska. The poem posits that when you enter a poem, you must "step alone / and the tenderness of things will enfold you." The poem will then lead you unexpectedly "toward the dark." But there, "as if you had lost worldly sight,"

whatever was named will return
and stand in the radiance so you and I
can find each other
like two trees that were lost in fog

The claim that we must be in the dark for radiance to shine through is an image of what poetry does. As editor Mark Burrows writes in his elegant introduction: "when we find ourselves 'stand[ing] in the radiance' through the lines of a poem, we discover how poems are able to cast a beam of light into the night, particularly in those times when we had lost our way."

Burrows chose the poems for his anthology from poets previously published by Paraclete Press. This saved him the need to seek permissions from other publishers, as D. S. Martin had to do, but it also limited the poets he could include. He includes a few major poets—himself, Paul Mariani, and Cairns (the only poet to appear in both

books), along with two great earlier 20th-century poets: Kamieńska and Rainer Maria Rilke (in Burrows's translations). But he also includes minor poets whose work sometimes fails to take readers someplace new.

The treasures in the collection include Cairns's "Theology of Delight," which has long been a favorite of mine, with its closing image of freewheeling joy: a lone sheep prancing in the field, where

it leapt for
no clear reason, and set out walking
through a gathering of flowers, parting
that grip of flowers with its face.

One of Cairns's new poems included in the anthology, "Recreation," could have been called "Theology of Death." The first five lines describe, in grim terms, how we kill and bury our souls. The last five lines move into Christ's salvific action: "He acquiesced to be interred in us"—

So when he had descended thus
into our persons and the grave
He broke the limits, opening the grip,
He shaped of every sepulcher a womb.

William Woolfitt's "Crummies Holiness Church, Harlan Country" is a palimpsest of lives—holy and not—layered over the years on a single site. Mariani's "Passage" describes a sacramental moment when the speaker's mother-in-law, "fast approaching the threshold / now of some great mystery," asks him to read aloud a passage from a book on prayer.

Either of these books would be fruitful for daily meditation: take a poem a day and let it "turn you aside."