

Poems for Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ*

by [Tania Runyan](#) in the [April 2025](#) issue

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Father, Forgive Them

They flog me raw, no clue it's you.
My Father, please forgive them,
for they know not what they do.

The crowd convenes to cheer and spew,
my back their bloody lute to strum.
You king of Jews! No clue it's you.

The blackening clouds begin to brew
behind my thorny diadem.
Oh, they know not what they do

with nails so thick, my years so few!
You may weep, but don't condemn
them when they pound, no clue it's you.

My mother sobs just out of view.
Abba, please unbind them,
for they know not what they do.

As buzzards circle in the blue,
my Father, please enfold them.
They spear my side and can't see you.
They don't, they don't know what they do.

Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise

Remember you? How could I not?
Our cries echoed one another

as the nails drove in. Now our blood
etches rivulets in the sand,

crosses paths. Soon,
we will exchange our torn bodies

for new ones, and today's agonizing
shenanigans will all but be forgotten.

Your thievery? Just a down feather
I blow off my palm. The soldiers:

nothing more than the dissipated
sound waves of their whips.

Your lungs are deflating.
Your feet are turning blue.

Shadows splotch your vision,
and I, too, finally sense the seepage

of darkness. Let go, beloved.
Let your last breaths lurch

and rattle out as you drift away
to my voice. In a moment,

we will open our eyes
under a canopy of branches,

leaves skimming our shoulders.
We will stretch out our arms

the same way as now, this time
bracing for a windfall of fruit.

Woman, Behold Your Son

Tonight, you and John
will sit through the longest darkness

since the shapeless void—wordless—
an untouched plate of figs between you.
You will eventually stare up
from your sleeping mats, nauseated
by the scent of burial spices in your clothes
yet too withered from weeping
to change them.

Woman, you contracted
on a donkey through the desert,
pushed rumors away
from your tirelessly pondering heart.
John dropped his fishing net,
already hungry, then pursued me
into rising tides of sand.

Yes, my mission has just begun.
You'll know for sure
after one more catatonic night.
But right now, it is time for you both
to breathe, to melt into your feet
as you lean against the wall.
Together, behold an empty space
that expects nothing from you
but throatsore, twisting lament.

Then, Mother, grow old into peace.
Let John wrap a cloak around
your shoulders. When you miss
those earthly parts of me,
cup your hand beneath his stubbled chin
and call him son.

My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?

It's the question I get asked most often:
If I had this planned all along, why cry out

to my Father as if taken by surprise?

Being lost is not the problem. It's knowing
that someone lost you, back turned,
shutting off the lights to make sure.

I want to feel what all the forsaken feel:
the sex-trafficked preteen staring
at the ceiling, imagining herself

as the invisible silk of a spiderweb,
the veteran screaming at himself
in an alley. Even the rich couple

hunched over martinis, phones scrolling
in each other's eyes, have plenty
of despair to settle. I cry out

a question that really has no answer
because it's what you all cry out
every hour. Why the pain, why

the loneliness, why the loss of even
the smallest things, like hamsters
stiffened in children's cages?

Why crowns of thorns pressed
into the temples of all 117 billion
of you who've ever breathed?

Some of you would give everything
for a dark night of the soul,
for at least you would have one,

a self to mourn and love. I gave it all
to be forsaken, and my Father let me
bear it—even that flash of separation,

my arms stretched out, vinegar dripping
from my lips—*Come back, come back!*

It's getting dark out here!—was enough.

I Thirst

My throat smolders for the black water
I hovered over at the beginning,
the drippings from Moses' basket,
even the leftover puddles Noah swept
from the deck to the pulverized earth.

In those days of reckless water,
when soldiers scrambled up the walls
of the Red Sea and Rebekah sloshed
fifty gallons between every camel's flopping lips,
I knew this moment would come.

I saw it among the crystal drops
the Dove flicked up from the Jordan,
beneath the indigo sheet that balanced
the blistered soles of Peter's feet—
this prophesied hyssop stalk of vinegar

the hangdog soldier lifts to my lips.
Just a drop or two, enough to fill in
the cracks and remind my body of all
that it has lost. Just enough burn in the throat
to let me cry out at last.

It Is Finished

So why, beloved, do you live as if it's not?
You twist and cry on beds of wasps and nails.
You whip yourself with lead and leather thoughts
and stretch your body out on rumbling rails.

Rehashing sin is prodigal and dull.
Confess, of course, then undertake to breathe
and crack apart your shame-hardened shell.
Release the dread you've ground between your teeth.

Lest you forget, my back was stripped and flayed
so peace and praise could tumble off your tongue.
My wrists were nailed, humiliation splayed
as I hoisted sin with failing lungs.

So please believe: redemption needs no help.
It's insulting when you crucify yourself.

Into Your Hands I Commend My Spirit

My spirit staggers to your hands—
a muddled dove, a ragged wind,
my abandoned blood blackening the sand.

I shaped these lungs that can't expand,
charted out the cyclone of my mind.
Now my spirit staggers to your hands

like our first amoebae lurching on demand.
Is this the final stop of every sin,
my abandoned blood blackening the sand?

The pain enrages like a firebrand.
My nerves and teeth and muscles grind
until my spirit staggers to your hands

that begin to weave my loosened strands.
The crowds will find my flesh unpinned,
abandoned blood now blackening the sand.

I've poured out all the love that I can stand,
laid down my life for less than friends.
I've abandoned my blood to blacken sand,

and now my spirit staggers to your hands.

The Earthquake

I've split the rocks
like the black granite of your hearts.
I've split the rocks
and trickled blood into the cracks
where even bees and lichen start
to let me soak their souls apart.
Come. I've split the rocks.