The Imperfect Beauty of this Earthly Life

St. Peter's B-List: Contemporary Poems Inspired by the Saints

Mary Ann B. Miller, Ed.
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Review by Erin Zoutendam

"The lives of the saints are poems," writes Fr. James Martin in the afterword of *St. Peter's B-List*—an afterword that could have been the foreword, a sentence that could have been the title, so rich are the implications of the idea. But the book, a hefty anthology of over 100 works collected by editor Mary Ann Miller, is a collection of contemporary poems "inspired by" the saints, not about them. Whether Christian or not, the poets (including Dana Gioia, Paul Mariani, Franz Wright, Mary Karr, and many others) seek not to retell the lives of the saints but to say something about the presence of the divine in our world.

In the foreword, Ron Hansen calls the poets' tendency to see in the world a metaphor for God a demonstration of the "analogical" imagination: "This divine presence in the human world makes itself known over and over again at any point in history, first through Christ, but later whenever God's grace is manifest through human experience," Hansen writes. The poems, separated into three parts (Family and Friends, Worship, Death and Dying), all speak to the intersection of this life and the eternal.

If *St. Peter's B-List* is a representative sample, you are most likely to encounter this intersection of the temporal and the divine—and to write a poem about it—if you are caring for young children, travelling in Italy, or at a deathbed. And this makes sense: the innocence of children, the experience of true strangers, death—these things take us outside of ourselves, forcing us to shake off the mundane and enter something other. These are the experiences that, paradoxically but truly, force us to be the most fully human and the most fully transcendent.

In this vein, perhaps three of the strongest poems in the collection are the first three, all about mothers of young children. Martha Silano's "Poor Banished Children of Eve" begins as an extended creed ("I believe . . . I believe . . . I believe"), but the subject matter is the most terrestrial of all—dirty dishes, dirty floors, tiny dirty faces. "I believe the creator / of the mess in the living room / cleans up the mess in the living room," she writes, using clever wordplay to testify to the mixture of holiness and humanness that can never be untangled. There is a Creator of the world, and seven billion creators of messes in the world, and they are not the same, but they are both worthy of love.

Kate Daniels also finds holiness in motherhood; in her poem "In Praise of Single Mothers," she describes a mother who is trying to carve out a sliver of time for the good and noble work of poetry but is instead distracted by her young son who cannot sleep and, immediately after persuading him to go back to bed, by the cries of her infant daughter. Though the poet's work is holy and though by pursuing her profession she is "baptized / back into words," the call of her children is holier. Like St. Theresa of Lisieux, the poet-mother tries to find "sainthood and sanity in the daily round of cleaning up and bringing order." As Hansen points out in the foreword, the poem ends with a feminine image of God in the form of the poet-mother nursing her daughter:

"[S]he drains me and I do not / even care, holding her there / in the time-stopped milky darkness," and it is this emptying of self, physically and emotionally, that prompts the poet to declare "[t]hat I love her more, / much more, than poetry."

The paradox that we are filled by emptying ourselves is also present in the anthology's second section, Faith and Worship. In Karen Kovacik's "After Saying The Chaplet of the Divine Mercy," the narrator describes reciting the prayer of St. Faustina ("Cinderella among nuns") as a way to overcome the trials of earthly life, climbing up the words "like a beetle / tired of dodging shoes." The speaker's heart, full of longing, begs for mercy for herself and for the whole world. But, exactly halfway through the poem, something changes, the climbing stops, and her teary eyes become clear. Exhaustion becomes gratitude as the speaker, still addressing Faustina, finds that her weary emptiness has been filled:

> like after the Eucharist,
> solitary in a crowded pew,
> when words leave me
> and I feel my hollowness
> hum like the larch floors
> you scrubbed on your knees.

Equally often, the poems in this second section are about how to make peace with longing and emptiness when they are not filled by a rapturous, life-giving wholeness. Two of my favorite poems in the book, Lorraine Healy's "St. Rita" and Edward Hirsch's "Away from Dogma," consider how to live without miracles. Both narrators live among those who expect miracles, but the miracles never seem to come. In "Away from Dogma," Hirsch describes an episode from the life of philosopher and mystic Simone Weil, an episode in which Weil watches fishwives process down to the sea for Vespers. She struggles to find God in such poverty, but the faith of the women speaks to her still:

> this life is a grave, mysterious moment
> of hearing voices by the water and seeing
> olive trees stretching out in the dirt,
> of accepting the heavens cracked with rain.

This is an honest poem, a seeking cynic's poem. But it turns out that there is something deeply holy about accepting cracked heavens after all.

If accepting cracked heavens is difficult, accepting the death of loved ones proves harder

The Feast of Stephen
for Mary Charlotte Griffin

Joseph Bathanti

A deer stand knifes out of a blackened elm
in a field once held in cotton.
It is the day after Christmas,
the Feast of Stephen,
first martyr, who died praying
for those who stoned him.

On Grassy Island Road,
men with dead quail in their pockets,
lean on pickups, smoke,
and wave grudgingly at passing sedans.

The Star of David spins through a bird sky
that presses the blond earth
with a vast blue sleep,
shadowing tithed tracts
purchased with 18th
along the Pee Dee and Buffalo Creek.

Corn cribs and cypress cabins
bone into millstone grit;
crumbling grey rock cob;
burlap and buckram;
broken iron, hand-forged
by Ansonville selectmen now buried
in Bethlehem Cemetery.

In All Souls Churchyard,
along its walls of Smith
and Nelme family sandstone,
the stained glass blazes.
Candles burn across the cropland.
century sterling

from the collection *St Peter's B-List*

Pietà

Paul Mariani

New Year's Eve, a party at my brother's.
Hats, favors, the whole shebang, as we waited
for one world to die into another.

And still it took three martinis before
she could bring herself to say it. How
the body of her grown son lay alone there

in the ward, just skin & bone, the nurses
masked & huddled in the doorway, afraid
to cross over into a world no one seemed

to understand. This was a dozen years ago,
you have to understand, before the thing
her boy had became a household word.

Consider Martha. Consider Lazarus four days gone.
If only you'd been here, she says, if only
You'd been here. And no one now to comfort her,

no one except this priest, she says, an old
friend who'd stood beside them through the dark
night of it all, a bull-like man, skin black

as the black he wore, the only one who seemed
willing to walk across death's threshold into
that room. And now, she says, when the death

was over, to see him lift her son, light as a baby
with the changes death had wrought, and cradle him
like that, then sing him on his way, a cross

between a lullaby & blues, *mmm hmmm*, while
the nurses, still not understanding what they saw,
stayed outside and watched them from the door.

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yet. In the final section, Death and Dying, the poets speak almost exclusively of loss—loss of parents, loss of children, loss of friends. Perhaps my favorite is Paul Mariani's "Pietà," in which the narrator tells of a friend whose son who was dying of AIDS "before the thing / her boy had became a household word." Even the nurses were afraid to enter the room, but a priest enters fearlessly, "the only one who seemed / willing to walk across death's threshold into / that room." The priest lifts the son into his arms, like Mary holding Jesus' body in her arms (the Pietà). This liminal position—between death and life, between heaven and earth, between joy and sorrow—is the condition of every human, and the power of the saint is that he or she guides us over this threshold and into the eternal.

St. Peter's B-List is a true communion of saints. Whether reading about the lives of the historical saints from the book's appendix or contemplating the lives of much more ordinary saints—a nurse, a hunter, an alcoholic, an aging single woman longing for a husband—readers will be drawn into the imperfect beauty of this earthly life and the diverse, funny, and sometimes startlingly irreverent ways that God works in his saints' lives to draw them into holiness.

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