

TOC religion batch 2 November 2025

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The Death of God

When the news filtered to the angels
they were overwhelmed by their sudden aloneness.
Long into the night they waited for instructions;
the night was quieter than any night they'd known.
I don't have a thought in my head, one angel lamented.
Others worried, Is there such a thing as an angel now?
New to questioning, dashed by the dry light
of reason, some fell into despair. Many disappeared.
A few wandered naturally toward power, were hired
by dictators who needed something like an angel
to represent them to the world.
These angels spoke the pure secular word.
They murdered sweetly and extolled the greater good.
The Dark Angel himself was simply amused.

The void grew, and was fabulously filled.
Vast stadiums and elaborate malls –
the new cathedrals – were built
where people cheered and consumed.
At the nostalgia shops angel trinkets
and plastic crucifixes lined the shelves.
The old churches were homes for the poor.

And yet before meals and at bedtime
and in the iconographies of dreams,
God took his invisible place in the kingdom of need.
Disaffected minstrels made and sang His songs.
The angels were given breath and brain.
This all went on while He was dead to the world.

The Dark Angel observed it, waiting as ever.
On these things his entire existence depended.

from Poets Of The New Century. Roger Weingarten and Richard Higgerson, eds. Boston: David R. Godine, 2001.

Stephen Dunn

Talk To God

Thank him for your little house
on the periphery, its splendid view
of the wildflowers in summer,
and the nervous, forked prints of deer
in that same field after a snowstorm.
Thank him even for the monotony
that drives us to make and destroy
and dissect what would otherwise be
merely the lush, unnamed world.
Ease into your misgivings.
Ask him if in his weakness
he was ever responsible
for a pettiness — some weather, say,
brought in to show who's boss
when no one seemed sufficiently moved
by a sunset, or the shape of an egg.
Ask him if when he gave us desire
he had underestimated its power.
And when, if ever, did he realize
love is not inspired by obedience?
Be respectful when you confess to him
you began to redefine heaven
as you discovered certain pleasures.
And sympathize with how sad it is
that awe has been replaced
by small enthusiasms, that you're aware
things just aren't the same these days,
that you wish for him a few evenings
surrounded by the old, stunned silence.
Maybe it will be possible then
to ask, Why this sorry state of affairs?
Why — after so much hatefulness
done in his name - no list of corrections
nailed to some rectory door?
Remember to thank him for the silkworm,
apples in season, photosynthesis,
the northern lights. And be sincere.
But let it be known you're willing to suffer
only in proportion to your errors,
not one unfair moment more.
Insist on this as if it could be granted:
Not one moment more.

from www.Cortlandreview.com

Mary Karr

Disgraceland

Before my first communion, I clung to doubt
as Satan spider-like stalked
the orb of dark surrounding Eden

for a wormhole into paradise.
God had formed me from gel in my mother's womb,
injected by my dad's smart shoot.

They swapped sighs until
I came, smaller than a bite of burger.
Quietly, I grew till my lungs were done

then the Lord sailed a soul
like a lit arrow to inhabit me.
Maybe that piercing

made me howl at birth,
or the masked creatures whose scalpel
cut a lightning bolt to free me.

I was hoisted by the heels and swatted, fed
and hauled around. Time-lapse photos show
my fingers grow past crayon outlines,

my feet come to fill spike heels.
Eventually, I lurched out
to kiss the wrong mouths, get stewed,

and sulk around. Christ always stood
to one side with a glass of water.
I swatted the sap away.

When my thirst got great enough to ask,
a clear stream welled up inside,
some jade wave buoyed me forward,

and I found myself upright
in the instant, with a garden
inside my own ribs aflourish.

There, the arbor leafs.
The vines push out plump grapes.
You are loved, someone said. Take that

and eat it.

Peter Everwine

A Story Can Change Your Life

On the morning she became a young widow,
my grandmother, startled by a sudden shadow,
looked up from her work to see a hawk turn
her prized rooster into a cloud of feathers.
That same moment, halfway around the world
in a Minnesota mine, her husband died,
buried under a ton of rockfall.
She told me this story sixty years ago.
I don't know if it's true but it ought to be.
She was a hard old woman, and though she knelt
on Sundays when the acolyte's silver bell
announced the moment of Christ's miracle,
it was the darker mysteries she lived by:
shiver-cry of an owl, black dog by the roadside,
a tapping at the door and nobody there.
The moral of the story was plain enough:
miracles become a burden and require a priest
to explain them. With signs, you only need
to keep your wits about you and place your trust
in a shadow world that lets you know hard luck
and grief are coming your way. And for that
—so the story goes—any day will do.

Wisława Szymborska

Miracle Fair

Commonplace miracle:
that so many commonplace miracles happen.

An ordinary miracle:
in the dead of night
the barking of invisible dogs.

One miracle out of many:
a small, airy cloud
yet it can block a large and heavy moon.

Several miracles in one:
an alder tree reflected in the water,
and that it's backwards left to right
and that it grows there, crown down
and never reaches the bottom,
even though the water is shallow.

An everyday miracle:
winds weak to moderate
turning gusty in storms.

First among equal miracles:
cows are cows.

Second to none:
just this orchard
from just that seed.

A miracle without a cape and top hat:
scattering white doves.

A miracle, for what else could you call it:
today the sun rose at three-fourteen
and will set at eight-o-one.

A miracle, less surprising than it should be:
even though the hand has fewer than six fingers,
it still has more than four.

A miracle, just take a look around:
the world is everywhere.

An additional miracle, as everything is additional:
the unthinkable
is thinkable.

translated from the Polish by Joanna Trzeciak
from *Miracle Fair*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.

Miracle Fair

Commonplace miracle:
that so many commonplace miracles take place.

The usual miracle:
invisible dogs barking
in the dead of night.

One of many miracles:
a small and airy cloud
is able to upstage the massive moon.

Several miracles in one:
an alder is reflected in the water
and is reversed from left to right
and grows from crown to root
and never hits bottom
though the water isn't deep.

A run-of-the-mill miracle:
winds mild to moderate
turning gusty in storms.

A miracle in the first place:
cows will be cows.

Next but not least:
just this cherry orchard
from just this cherry pit.

A miracle minus top hat and tails:
fluttering white doves.

A miracle (what else can you call it):
the sun rose today at three fourteen A.M.
and will set tonight at one past eight.

A miracle that's lost on us:
the hand actually has fewer than six fingers
but still it's got more than four.

A miracle, just take a look around:
the inescapable earth.

An extra miracle, extra and ordinary:
the unthinkable
can be thought.

Translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh & Stanisław
Barańczak

Pattiann Rogers

The Greatest Grandeur

Some say it's in the reptilian dance
of the purple-tongued sand goanna,
for there the magnificent translation
of tenacity into bone and grace occurs.

And some declare it to be an expansive
desert—solid rust-orange rock
like dusk captured on earth in stone—
simply for the perfect contrast it provides
to the blue-grey ridge of rain
in the distant hills.

Some claim the harmonics of shifting
electron rings to be most rare and some
the complex motion of seven sandpipers
bisecting the arcs and pitches
of come and retreat over the mounting
hayfield.

Others, for grandeur, choose the terror
of lightning peals on prairies or the tall
collapsing cathedrals of stormy seas,
because there they feel dwarfed
and appropriately helpless; others select
the serenity of that ceiling/cellar
of stars they see at night on placid lakes,
because there they feel assured
and universally magnanimous.

But it is the dark emptiness contained
in every next moment that seems to me
the most singularly glorious gift,
that void which one is free to fill
with processions of men bearing burning
cedar knots or with parades of blue horses,
belled and ribboned and stepping sideways,
with tumbling white-faced mimes or companies
of black-robed choristers; to fill simply
with hammered silver teapots or kiln-dried
crockery, tangerine and almond custards,
polonaises, polkas, whittling sticks, wailing
walls; that space large enough to hold all
invented blasphemies and pieties, 10,000
definitions of god and more, never fully
filled, never.

from *Firekeeper: New and Selected Poems*. Milkweed Editions, 1994.

John Brehm

Sea of Faith

Once when I was teaching "Dover Beach"
to a class of freshmen, a young woman
raised her hand and said, "I'm confused
about this 'Sea of Faith.'" "Well," I said,
"let's talk about it. We probably need
to talk a bit about figurative language.
What confuses you about it?"
"I mean, is it a real sea?" she asked.
"You mean, is it a real body of water
that you could point to on a map
or visit on a vacation?"
"Yes," she said. "Is it a real sea?"
Oh Christ, I thought, is this where we are?
Next year I'll be teaching them the alphabet
and how to sound words out.
I'll have to teach them geography, apparently,
before we can move on to poetry.
I'll have to teach them history, too-
a few weeks on the Dark Ages might be instructive.
"Yes," I wanted to say, "it is."
It is a real sea. In fact it flows
right into the Sea of Ignorance
IN WHICH YOU ARE DROWNING.
Let me throw you a Rope of Salvation
before the Sharks of Desire gobble you up.
Let me hoist you back up onto this Ship of Fools
so that we might continue our search
for the Fountain of Youth. Here, take a drink
of this. It's fresh from the River of Forgetfulness."
But of course I didn't say any of that.
I tried to explain in such a way
as to protect her from humiliation,
tried to explain that poets
often speak of things that don't exist.
It was only much later that I wished
I could have answered differently,
only after I'd betrayed myself
and been betrayed that I wished
it was true, wished there really was a Sea of Faith
that you could wade out into,
dive under its blue and magic waters,
hold your breath, swim like a fish
down to the bottom, and then emerge again
able to believe in everything, faithful
and unafraid to ask even the simplest of questions,
happy to have them simply answered.

from *Sea of Faith*, first published in *The Southern Review*

Ellen Bass

Pray for Peace

Pray to whomever you kneel down to:
Jesus nailed to his wooden or plastic cross,
his suffering face bent to kiss you,
Buddha still under the bo tree in scorching heat,
Adonai, Allah. Raise your arms to Mary
that she may lay her palm on our brows,
to Shekhina, Queen of Heaven and Earth,
to Inanna in her stripped descent.

Then pray to the bus driver who takes you to work.
On the bus, pray for everyone riding that bus,
for everyone riding buses all over the world.
Drop some silver and pray.

Waiting in line for the movies, for the ATM,
for your latte and croissant, offer your plea.
Make your eating and drinking a supplication.
Make your slicing of carrots a holy act,
each translucent layer of the onion, a deeper prayer.

To Hawk or Wolf, or the Great Whale, pray.
Bow down to terriers and shepherds and Siamese cats.
Fields of artichokes and elegant strawberries.

Make the brushing of your hair
a prayer, every strand its own voice,
singing in the choir on your head.
As you wash your face, the water slipping
through your fingers, a prayer: Water,
softest thing on earth, gentleness
that wears away rock.

Making love, of course, is already prayer.
Skin, and open mouths worshipping that skin,
the fragile cases we are poured into.

If you're hungry, pray. If you're tired.
Pray to Gandhi and Dorothy Day.
Shakespeare. Sappho. Sojourner Truth.

[stanza break]

When you walk to your car, to the mailbox,
to the video store, let each step
be a prayer that we all keep our legs,
that we do not blow off anyone else's legs.
Or crush their skulls.
And if you are riding on a bicycle
or a skateboard, in a wheelchair, each revolution
of the wheels a prayer as the earth revolves:
less harm, less harm, less harm.

And as you work, typing with a new manicure,
a tiny palm tree painted on one pearlescent nail
or delivering soda or drawing good blood
into rubber-capped vials, writing on a blackboard
with yellow chalk, twirling pizzas—

With each breath in, take in the faith of those
who have believed when belief seemed foolish,
who persevered. With each breath out, cherish.

Pull weeds for peace, turn over in your sleep for peace,
feed the birds, each shiny seed
that spills onto the earth, another second of peace.
Wash your dishes, call your mother, drink wine.

Shovel leaves or snow or trash from your sidewalk.
Make a path. Fold a photo of a dead child
around your VISA card. Scoop your holy water
from the gutter. Gnaw your crust.
Mumble along like a crazy person, stumbling
your prayer through the streets.

from The Human Line. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper
Canyon Press, 2007.

from www.ayearofbeinghere.com. February 9, 2015.

from The Sun. June 2003.

1165 – 1240 born in Spain. He was an Andalusian Arab Sunni scholar, Sufi mystic, poet, and philosopher who was extremely influential within Islamic thought.

Muhyiddini Ibn Arabi

There Was a Time

There was a time I would reject those
who were not of my faith.
But now, my heart has grown capable
of taking on all forms.
It is a pasture for gazelles,
An abbey for monks.
A table for the Torah,
Kaaba for the pilgrim.
My religion is love.
Whichever the route love's caravan shall take,
That shall be the path of my faith.

from ayearofbeinghere.com

from The Interpreter of Longings, 1348. translated from the Arabic by R. A. Nicholson

The Kaaba is a stone building at the center of Islaam's holiest site, the mosque Masjid al-Haram, in Mecca, Saudia Arabia, around which Muslims circle 7 times at the end of the Hajj.

David Budbill

On the Road to Buddhahood

Ever plainer. Ever simpler.
Ever more ordinary.

My goal is to become a simpleton.

And from what everybody tells me
I am making real progress.

from Moment to Moment: Poems of a Mountain Recluse. Port Townsend, Washington:
Copper Canyon Press, 1999.