

Praise for
**WHAT
WILL
SOON
TAKE
PLACE**

What Will Soon Take Place contains poems that live and move and have their being in the tension between the transcendent and the mundane—between the sharp pain of stepping on your kid’s Lego block and the breathtaking awe attendant upon the Four Last Things. Tania Runyan’s gift as a poet is to show us that the weight of our ultimate destiny lies hidden within the tedious chores and quiet joys of what we like to call “normal life.” In that sense, this collection constitutes an “apocalypse”—a revelation—that is at once disturbing, comic, and ultimately consoling.

—GREGORY WOLFE, Editor of *Image* and author of *Beauty Will Save the World*

Have you ever wondered how the great book of Revelation, that final, apocalyptic book of the Bible, could possibly speak to our suburban American lives? In these poems the Third Horseman of the Apocalypse, the Sixth Seal, and The Whore of Babylon meet Jell-O, carpooling, and Hollywood. The effect is sometimes terrifying, sometimes funny, often moving, always thought-provoking.

—JEANNE MURRAY WALKER, author of *Helping the Morning: New and Selected Poems*

This bold collection is a stunning exercise in cohesion, the seaming together of the ragged edges of ancient visions with present-day human conflict. These poems reveal the visceral views of both the prophet and the writer. (Who can explicate the Revelation better than a poet?) Adept at free and formal verse, she surprises us with glints of pain and glory in every line, glimpses of a future revealed in symbols that seem to challenge her on every front. Tania Runyan does this like no one I know.

—LUCI SHAW, author of *Sea Glass: New and Selected Poems*, and Writer in Residence, Regent College

The book of Revelation was not one of Martin Luther’s favorites, but that is because he had not read Tania Runyan’s piercing interpretations of it, poems which “enter through the garage instead,” revealing Jesus in the ordinary and everyday, as we do what we do—driving the expressway, going on business trips, shopping at Old Navy, waiting at the drive-through. The silence in heaven at a writers’ retreat, the antichrist at the mall, a poetry reading featuring the angels and then Jesus—in these poems the last things are familiar images we live with, transformed into extraordinary visions of the Spirit-infused universe we inhabit and so rarely notice. In poems of trenchant beauty Tania Runyan peels back the film that clouds our vision and reveals the utterly real world of grace that is ours for the taking.

—JILL BAUMGAERTNER, Poetry Editor of *The Christian Century* and author of four poetry collections, including *What Cannot Be Fixed* (Cascade Books, 2014)

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TANIA RUNYAN



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for my ragged band

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FOREWORD

The summer after my freshman year of high school, I came face to face with Jesus Christ while watching the *Phil Donahue Show*.

I'd been lying on the floor of my sister's living room on a blistering June day in southern California's Inland Empire. The silver-haired talk show host had invited Elizabeth Clare Prophet, founder of a cult known as the Church Universal and Triumphant, to speak about an impending nuclear attack (from Russia, of course) that would herald the end of the world.

Suddenly, I started shaking and crying. I wanted to run, but my bare feet had nowhere to land but the hot asphalt of Del Norte Place simmering under a blanket of smog. I looked out the window, suddenly despondent for the semi trucks that rumbled over the 60 freeway oblivious to their imminent destruction.

"Why are you afraid?" my sister, fourteen years my senior, asked.

"What do you think will happen to you when the world ends?"

I told her I hadn't thought about the world ending. While I felt personally invincible, like most teenagers, I hadn't considered that the planet could go first.

WHAT WILL SOON TAKE PLACE

She told me that Jesus had died for my sins so that when I die—or the world blows up, whichever comes first—I would go to heaven. All I had to do was pray to receive the gift, no rules or rituals required. I had never heard of this approach to God. Or, perhaps, if I had, I hadn't understood or paid attention.

"I guess I do feel like something's missing from my life," I hiccupped and sniffed.

My sister quoted *Revelation*: "Jesus said, 'I stand at the door and knock.'" Didn't I know that my terror and tears were Jesus' hand on the brass knocker, waking me from my sleep? How could I leave him standing out there? Of course I should open it, which in this case meant "receiving Jesus" by repeating a prayer my sister led. I didn't quite understand what was happening, but I knew it marked a change.

Years later, I would learn that this text (Rev. 3:20)—in fact, all of *Revelation*—was written to the existing church, not unbelievers. But during that afternoon in my sister's living room, the words worked for me, supplemented by a cult leader with feathered hair. With God, all things are possible.

For the next several years, I'd hear about the impending rapture and its false alarms, such as Harold Camping's ever-changing predictions in the early 90s and 2011, Heaven's Gate's Hale-Bopp scare of 1997, Nostradamus's foretellings, and a whole spate of millennial catastrophes—in a word, "what will soon take place" (Rev. 1:1). Evangelical Christians would come of age consuming *A Thief in the Night* and *Left Behind*, convinced that in case of rapture, their car would hurtle down the freeway unmanned.

Since then, I have changed in my theology. I'm no longer "pre-trib" or even premillennial, as I can't find enough biblical evidence to support those beliefs. Of course, these are not the doctrinal hills I

choose to die on. There is too much trouble for today, as Jesus says, to argue about what's going to happen tomorrow. Following the Great Commandment feels demanding enough.

But then what is *Revelation* for?

Nearly three decades after my talk show conversion, I still hadn't read *Revelation* all the way through. It was a confusing, violent book that seemed to have nothing to do with the compassionate Jesus I'd learned to trust. I hated how the book's garish, terrifying imagery had been used to scare people into Christianity—even though my own faith had been sown in fear.

But the passage that had spoken to me in the midst of my fear that summer afternoon is, indeed, from *Revelation*. And a scene that would later comfort me through the many anxieties of my youth—a fiery, sword-mouthed, waterfall-voiced Jesus who reaches out to John and says, “Do not be afraid”—hails from *Revelation* as well. Bits and pieces of this letter to the seven churches would haunt me with its tensions of love and terror, and the image of the Messiah who blasted the universe from a star, healing humans with a fleshly touch.

I had to face a question: If I was too scared to read a book of the New Testament (don't even get me started on the Old), how strong was my faith? If *Revelation* had nothing to say to me, what did that indicate about Scripture in general, or at least my view of it? Was Jesus paging through the Bible, shaking his head, and saying in the voice of Ron Howard on *Arrested Development*, “They made a huge mistake”?

It was time to gather some resources, which, when it comes to *Revelation*, can be an infuriating task. I'm no biblical scholar, so I tend to search for books geared toward decently read lay people. Not surprisingly, volumes of flame-covered, politically fraught propaganda books filled my search results for commentaries. Then I

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found Ed Cyzewski and Larry Helyer's *The Good News of Revelation*. Good news? When are sulfur-breathing locusts with bad hairstyles good news?

As Cyzewski and Helyer emphasize from the get-go, John wrote *Revelation* to comfort the suffering early church, not stir us into a twenty-first-century tizzy about which world leaders will play the parts of dragons and whores. Reading *Revelation* through the seven churches' eyes helped me to understand the intent behind John's book, which he wrote to communicate the hope and beauty of Christ's victory over hopelessness and suffering. His enduring love. The Alpha and Omeganness of it all.

By reading *Revelation* in the context of the past rather than the future, I live it more fully in the present. *Revelation* isn't about preparing for tomorrow's apocalypse, but clinging to God today, drawing near to him amidst dangers, whether they come from outside violence, personal doubt, or his own terrifying love that simply won't take lukewarm for an answer.

In writing these poems, I've drawn closer to the mysteries of *Revelation* rather than formulating answers, predictions, or theories. I no longer want to run from *Revelation*, but toward it, even when it scares and offends me. In the middle of all those beasts, gemstones, eyes, and swords, I listen for the knock. I hope these poems might beckon you to a deeper listening as well.

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—Tania Runyan

**ANGEL
OVER
PATMOS**



Patmos

No cave, cleft, or ocean shattering bluffs.

The only trumpet “Hot Cross Buns”

blatting from my daughter’s open window.

I circle the block to find my messengers:

a whimpering beagle roped to a magnolia,
ear flipped inside out. Cracked rainbow pinwheels,

plaster Nessie in the dandelions, all bought
and positioned for some prophecy of beauty.

If only a forsythia opened by my bedroom window,
I would spend a week in resurrection. If only

a birdbath and bench for prayer. Or a cherub
on the front steps, concrete wings spread

over a basket of trailing lobelia. Who could hide
from that serene, carved smile? But we always enter

through the garage instead: crushed milk bottles,
mud-scabbed boots, jump ropes coiled

with shovels and bikes. They were never meant to lie
in our way. Like it or not, they speak.

The Angel over Patmos

Such a burden of beasts
and rainbows, sulfur and emeralds
leaking from his knapsack
as John hunches in a cave down there,
picking at a skeleton of fish.

The body resists exile.
Even the smallest burrowing mite
is enough to make John claw his skin,
saltwater stiffening his hair
like the driftwood he tries to burn.

Any sort of trance is impossible
to achieve when shifting on rocks,
the fabric of your robe sticking
in your crack. But with time,
the Spirit will come.

The angel doodles dragons
in the air. He circles like a plane on hold
and waits for the one twilight
John will sigh, lift his chapped hands,
and receive his words like wounds.

The Cave of Patmos

*Blessed is the one who reads aloud
the words of this prophecy.*

John reclined in a cave
and echoed to God

what he heard:
incense, famine, Gog and Magog

filtering through bats' wings
like the words I chanted

into a box fan as a child.
Hell-o-o-o? Hell-o-o-o?

Here I a-a-am. Or just
ah-ah-ah-h-h-h,

my diced voice all
I understood about prayer,

the bumps on my wind-blown skin
His replies. And John dreaming

my face in the limestone
as the angel told him to speak.

Things That Will Soon Take Place

Will not rush through your heart like ball lightning.
They will smolder under your skin as you wait
for your chalupa in the drive-through
or latch the dressing room door at Old Navy,
wanting nothing more than to pull a preshrunk T
over your head in peace. But you must steady yourself
on the purse hook, nauseated by the spirit
burying inside you like a tick. Soon you will see
seraph wings in the price tags,
hear trumpets in the vents. You will awaken
to asphalt poking your soles like swords of fire,
to the grocery bagger's billowing breath.
These things will not horse through you
but nudge you like a dog in the street,
a matted earthbound begging for your touch,
wet nose you'll never wipe off.

Behold, He Is Coming on the Clouds

Jesus fishing for men in the mackerel sky.

Jesus shooting contrails from his wounds.

Jesus swinging in the low-slung hammock of a storm.

Jesus stratus boarding.

Jesus lobbing puffs of cumulonimbus at his enemies.

Jesus gripping a cirrus by its wispy reins and swooping down to the trees.

Jesus dissipating into fog and condensing on your glasses.

Jesus dampening your sleeve.

Jesus the smell of rain on your fingers.

Vision of the Son of Man

This morning I can't squeeze out
of my smallness. Damn the praise choirs
whining from my cell phone, the dot-to-dot
Jonahs crumpled in the back seat.
I want to blister under his bronze feet,
lie blood-hot slain on his double-edged sword,
cling to his smoldering sash
as he turns the terror of supernovae in his hand.

You there, with the shook-foil eyes.
Let me fall at the base of those lampstands,
light-headed from the simmering oil.
I won't even mention your name—
just dread you for a moment,
the waterfalls of your voice flooding my lungs
until you drop your stars and reach down.