Communion of Saints

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Susan L. Miller

POEMS

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For Josh

and in memory of
+Charles William "Flynn" Hirsch

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Foreword

My friend Anne, a Tibetan Buddhist, posts hotly colored images of deities and demigods on the walls of the room where she writes—just a few from the dazzling array of her collection, a huge celestial cast. Some are radiant, some tender, some poised in a cool regard for nothing we can see. The fierce ones can be unnerving, with their necklaces of skulls and their teeth dripping blood. I began to feel more friendly toward these when Anne described the images as visual representations of states of consciousness, pictures one might contemplate to access a quality of mind or heart in oneself. Just as we need to find our steadfastness sometimes, or to more fully inhabit our kindness, so we may suffer without our ferocity, without embodying that which cuts loose, or dissolves old associations, and goes striding fearlessly into the future.

Something like this idea seems to me to inform Susan Miller's understanding of the saints, whose lives and example resonate through this collection with remarkable power. We are all called to be saints, the Church teaches, and we form a "communion" with those who have gone before, those who stand with us, and those who are yet to come. For Miller the saints seem both their historical or legendary selves and archetypes or emblems. Their energetic presence is to be found among friends and colleagues, neighbors and parish-members. It's an especially lovely way of thinking about history, and the continuing presence of grace in community, in the works of the living.

And, since these are poems about the living—parents, theologians, teachers, parishioners, artists, writers, housekeepers,

nurses, nuns, babies in a neonatal intensive care unit—they are poems of struggle, of what the poet has elsewhere called "the arduous work of being human." This book's revelatory strategy is to place these very real lives into relation with the saints, and in this way Miller's tender attention lifts people she knows and loves into another sort of light, not an elevation that erases flaws or human failings, but a way of seeing, within the daily, vectors of grace.

Miller's book is marvelously populated, and both failings and grace are reflected everywhere in these portraits. There are studies of what might be personal saints of Miller's, Flannery O'Connor and Nina Simone, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gerard Manley Hopkins, brilliant makers who spun art from trouble. The poet finds herself mirrored in the lives of St. Edith Stein, St. Agatha, and St. John of the Cross. And there are Miller's most densely structured poems, "double portraits" in which the speaker sees in or behind one of her friends the shadow form of a saint. These poems present a dyad—an elder poet in her garden, for instance, and St. Fiacre, the patron saint of gardeners—but in truth they're three-way studies, since their speaker is very much onstage; it's she who sees for us the tender gesture of an almost impossibly tiny flower held in the older writer's hand.

Surveyors use a process of triangulation to identify their location. Miller's poems do something like this too: here's Chayo, cooking chayote soup and talking about her son who should have died and didn't, and here's St. Jude, patron of lost causes, and here is the speaker in "Portrait of Chayo as St. Jude Thaddeus", being instructed by cook and saint both that no cause is entirely lost: devotion, faith, or ingenuity may yet rescue both soup and sons. It takes these three characters to bring this poem to life, to lend depth and resonance to the scene.

If poems are to resemble the world in which we find ourselves they must leave room for uncertainty, for interactions whose shadows and depths we may never understand. "Diptych of Two Charleses as St. Irene and St. Sebastian" is a compelling illustration of the principle that the poetry of faith is not necessarily, or even usually, a poem of certainty. The poem introduces us to two gay men, one a friend of the speaker's. She joins him for dinner in his apartment and hears the story of an old friend of his, a man who shares his first name. "Friend" seems too mild a word; the poem doesn't tell us whether the Charleses were ever lovers, but it does make clear that one has been St. Sebastian, the adventurer, the wilder spirit whose racked body is so often the subject of beautiful display, while the other has played the role of St. Irene, comforter, protector who could not protect. Charles One describes Charles Two as in terrible shape, but when the two men and our speaker meet, to visit a Kandinsky show at the Guggenheim, he seems fine. The three enjoy the exhibit until they're stopped in their progress by a masterwork, described in this way:

> crowning jewel of the exhibition: Several Circles,
> a map of the universe in blues, pinks, black, red, gold,
> and purple. At its center, the largest circle deepens to a
> dark
> iris, like an eye that enters the viewer's gaze. I say so.

If the speaker has been a kind of saint, for a moment, smoothing the waters between these two men, enabling all three to enjoy the outing, then suddenly Kandinsky seems one too, since he's punctured the moment with a gaze that seems to "enter the viewer's gaze." The painting is so startlingly alive that it seems, as only the greatest art does, to be looking at us.

The poem leaves the three friends rapt in study of the picture:

> And the three
> of us sink into contemplation of the colors: within us,
> the superimposed circles rising and floating, trapped
> beneath our ribs like wounds that heal themselves.

They have been given a gift, brought together in contemplation of an image of color in harmony, of color that can heal. Kandinsky thought of his brilliantly colored abstractions as expressions of psychic states, and thought that color communicated directly to the human soul. But what a mysterious gift his painting has brought to these three. It seems, by becoming an eye itself and entering the viewers' collective gaze, to offer a sort of renewal on a frigid winter day. He who believes the other needs care, and he the adventurer who may or may not need rescue, and she who wants to be a good friend, to be of use—all are suspended a moment, caught up in the clear and reassuring light that emanates from the canvas. Just why these three characters need a healing, or to what degree, outside this moment, this bit of grace may avail, the poem doesn't say. It brings us right to the moment where, as in a Flannery O'Connor story, a character might choose grace, or be chosen by it.

The book comes to rest with a series of poems concerning St. Francis, marking his humility and affection for animal life, and exploring the poet's pilgrimage to Assisi in search of confirmation, vision, some disruptive sign. I'd suggest that the final poem is such a sign. By employing the second person, Miller fuses both herself and her reader with the despised and homeless creature. Miller's wolf is the abject self without faith, without hope of receiving care or grace, or faith in some sustaining love. But this wolf does learn to receive charity from the hand of St. Francis, because it has been so

terribly hungry, and because Francis does not strike. The wolf allows Francis to lead him or her into community, into a new possibility: a relation founded on love. What's offered is a complete revision of the world the wolf has known. Could the creature, or any of us, be one who'd be

> fed at any door you pass through,
> beloved and belonging. Would you
>
> call it a miracle if you knew
> that wherever you went,
> someone provided for you?

Every wanderer has felt lost, every abject soul has believed we'll never be "beloved and belonging." The wolf stands for all of us who have the opportunity to believe that a benevolence is there for us, a communion of saints we could attempt, in our wolfish or human ways, to join. I imagine it's no accident that this surprising and moving book begins with a "manual for would-be saints" and ends with a ruined, heartbroken wolf learning to be loved. To become a saint, the lesson might be, it is necessary to enter completely into one's abjection, and then to give oneself over completely to what might provide for your hunger.

Mark Doty
April, 2016

Manual for the Would-Be Saint

The first principle: Do no harm.
The second: The air calls us home.
Third, we must fill the bowls of others
before we drain our own wells dry.
The fourth is the dark night; the fifth
a subtle scent of smoke and pine.
The sixth is awareness of our duties,
the burnt offering of our own pride.
Seventh, we learn to pray without ceasing.
Eighth, we learn to sense while praying.
The ninth takes time: it is to discover
what inside the seed makes the seed increase.
The tenth brings sorrow, the eleventh light.
The twelfth we reflect on the Apostles,
their flame-lit faces turned toward us or away.
The thirteenth, we practice forgiving Judas.
The fourteenth, we love Judas as ourselves.
The fifteenth is a day of feasting; the sixteenth
is a day of ash. Seventeenth, we watch and wait.
Eighteenth, we enter the stranger's city
at the mercy of the stranger's hand.
Nineteenth, love flees the body,
and the spirit leaves its husk. And suddenly
the numbers do not matter: nothing that is matter
matters anymore: all is burned, all is born,
all is carried away in the wind.

I.

FAITH

A Vision

Last night I dreamed the church in winter.
Crowds of people filled the pews, laden
with armloads of roses and larkspur,
each with a tray of lit candles. St. Clare
loosened all her blonde hair in a pew
in the front of the sanctuary, and I knew
St. Francis nestled between friends somewhere.
The priest told us *In this dark hour of the year*
we light candles to dispel the vision of evil,
which shadows us whenever we forget to turn
towards the light. Directly I could feel
beside me the grey one on his ashen horse,
his face obscured under his tattered hood,
and felt the wind of his galloping, but
my candle's flame did not flicker.
You must make your own light, the Father said,
and as I raised my head I saw every man
and woman, every child, clean and naked,
brighter than the glow of a thousand candles.

Reading the Hours of Catherine of Cleves/*I Believe in You*

On the A train, going downtown, the lights
flicker and dim, and the car wobbles
back and forth, shuttling at the speed of nausea.
In my seat, I bend with my elbows on my knees
and pray, though I don't know what I am praying for:
an end to the soot, the cold, the indignity
of slush crushed into dirty ice at the curb,
an end to illness rising like a cough
to shadow the kindness of my every word,
an end. I've been keeping Neil Young
on the Walkman, listening to his lament:
Now that you've made yourself love me, do you
think I can change it in a day? How can I
place you above me? And I wonder daily,
though John Donne and St. John and Gerard
and Thérèse believed, how can I know
what they thought was true is true?
It was so long ago...

And then I slide the Book of Hours from its blue
slipcover, the box built to keep it new,
and I open to a page where someone drew
(five hundred years ago) a dozen mussels, tiny, precise,
their dark lips ridged at the edge of their soft flesh,
just as they are in my dinner-bowl
when I steam them and eat them now.

Portrait of Chayo as St. Jude Thaddeus

In a green apron, Chayo stirs chayote soup,
holding her palm taut so she can daub a taste there

to check the salt. Her skin doesn't feel the heat
though if I try the same I blister myself. She sings

while she chops chives into tiny rings
that float on the surface of the liquid.

When Clementina first told me about her, she taught me
in Spanish *riñones*, kidneys, because Chayo gave one

to her son, who almost died when his failed.
In Mexico City she pinned a bean-shaped charm

to the skirt of a statue. *Priests, I don't talk to much,*
she says, *but San Judas Tadeo, him I trust*.

I prayed to him to intercede, to heal my son. She lifts a copper bowl
down from the cabinet and hugs it

against her chest with both arms. *Now he works*
as an engineer, and lives with his girlfriend. She sets the bowl

on the counter, lifts a stack of plates onto
the wheeled cart she uses to set the table.

She wraps warm tortillas in a cloth, spoons salsa
into a shallow dish, fills the serving bowl

with pale green soup I watched her form
from three chayotes, a potato, and bouillon.

Above her the stove-light burns in its hood,
illuminating each loose strand of hair on her head.

Nothing, she tells me, *is a lost cause. This soup,*
for example. If you cook it too long, add water and Norsuiza.

If green beans turn dark, a little baking soda keeps them bright.
She smooths her hair and straightens her apron,

ready to serve. *And if you use a pressure cooker*
for frijoles, they'll be perfect inside of half an hour.

Portrait of Angela as St. Agnes

On Sunday, Angela slides into the pew beside me
saying, "Yesterday was my anniversary: eleven years

consecrated," and I puzzle. I know she isn't married,
have watched her bring her elderly mother to church,

serve communion barefoot, read from the pulpit
when our lector Eric's not present. She's always laughing,

a strong Italian scrape from deep in the chest, and when I came
to receive the sacred rites for the elect, she stood by

as Father crossed my palms with oil, the only person
I knew from church who wasn't also marked that day.

"I'm a Consecrated Virgin living in the world," she explains,
and shows me her gold wedding ring, shaped like a chain.

"The day of the ceremony, reporters crammed the cathedral:
no one believed that two virgins existed in Brooklyn.

The other's from Trinidad, and very serious. Her mother
told me *you've given my daughter the gift of laughter.*"

The day's reading, I Corinthians, says *An unmarried woman
or virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord,*

so that she may be holy in both body and spirit,
and I squeeze her hand, both of us chuckling.

After Mass, on the sidewalk, she jokes with the priest,
"Eleven years, and we've never had a fight."

"You and Jesus?" he asks. "My mother says He's the best
son-in-law in the world," she replies. She pulls on

her green scarf, fishes her keys, remarks that she's seeking
the Bishop's blessing for a residence for teenage girls

in our parish. "I visited him, and he said he would pray.
He thinks I'm a *nice woman*," she says, and laughs,

shaking her lamb's-wool curls. Three rosaries tangle
on the rearview mirror as she waves and drives away.

Portrait of Sister Carol as St. Cecilia

On a rainy Tuesday afternoon, I ring the bell
of the rectory to meet with Sister Carol,

who meets me standing in the hall
in her grey habit and black nurse's shoes. She brings

me around to the office, pointing out
the bulletin board where she has printed

YOU ARE THE CHILDREN OF LIGHT.
Beyond the door, we can hear grades K-8,

delighted at their afternoon break, their shouts
a lot of joyful noise. It's hard to hear the sister's voice,

on any day a humble tone, and here
between the rain and my deaf ear almost

inaudible, but when I ask how she found her vocation,
she ducks her face and shyly tells how her older brother

played his guitar for the choir where she followed.
"I still love those songs," she murmurs,

and I think of recent Sundays when she stood
among the children in the pew, barely taller, shushing

with whispers when the hymn began *Sing a new song*
unto the Lord. Surrounded by eager fidgeters

poking their brothers and sisters or diving to offer
envelopes to the collection basket, elbows

and crowns of heads and open mouths around her,
Sister Carol, married to God, was singing alleluia.

Self-portrait as St. Jerome

It is the red robe, the folds loose around the shoulders,
that marks him: the red robe, and the open book on the desk,
and the skull. Sometimes, a rough stone.

To hold that granite in hand is to know
that all knowledge could never match the scope
of one's own ignorance—the cranium empty, its eyes gone.

Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. It is all
my fault, these faults of mine, a fractal pattern of cracks that deepen
into black chasms, black type on the page that I am too weary

to read. My blind hands smooth the pages. My dim
eyes gum the letters, which squirm between my eyelids
like tadpoles as I raise the stone again.

Portrait of Charles as St. Francis

Christmas Eve, a cold Friday,
after hours of cleaning and packing,
I called Charles to see if he would come over

for homemade chicken soup.
We had to eat it all; we'd leave the next morning
for Massachusetts, where Josh's mother

was still strong enough, despite her cancer,
to spend the day with family.
Our midnight Mass for the English-speaking

would be held at 8, choir music first,
then the procession of the infant Christ
to the crèche behind the altar.

Charles arrived with packages:
our wedding present, two years late
but no less sweet,

and a mysterious box taped and taped
with yellowed scraps of cellophane,
plus a plastic bag that held what looked like

another box. Cut open, it revealed
a crèche constructed from a peach flat,
its labels still visible under its bottom.

The other box, of course, was filled
with paper towels wrapped
around the Holy Family, German

figures painted in delicate pastels,
and a strange mismatched menagerie:
two glass birds, two camels,

the ass and the cow with one horn,
sheep flocked with fuzzy velvet,
some handsome angels. *This angel*

I won as an attendance prize at school, Charles said.
In the kitchen, Josh put on the soup,
then suggested, *Why don't you set it up*,

so I cleared the coffee table,
and down it went, the Easter grass
marked "Hay" laid in its floor,

the cotton marked "Snow"
on its roof. *I didn't know back then*
there wouldn't have been snow, Charles said.

He insisted the ox and ass be placed
beside the manger (*they kept him warm.*
The Bible says so.) When I set

the tallest angel in the back corner,
Charles rejoiced: *That's just*
where I used to put him, too!

I always wanted it to go to a family,
Charles said, as I set the cardboard manger
into the hay, and *Should we put Jesus*

in tonight? I asked. We all agreed
we should, and I laid him in a cotton wad
on his side, his sleeping face crowned

with a halo. Charles sat back on the couch
and surveyed the array: it seemed to suit,
and after our bowls of soup

we walked the six blocks to church,
where families had brought their own
images of Christ, icons arranged

in bassinets or boxes lined with cotton.
Look, the tiniest one! said Father,
lifting a doll the size of his palm.

Charles leaned over Josh in the pew. *Next year,*
he whispered, *we'll bring ours too.* And then we rose
to face the procession, the deacon bearing

the cross of San Damiano, both priests solemn,
and a boy lifting Jesus high
like Charles did one Christmas as a child.

Self-Portrait as St. John of the Cross

The world is small, a five-foot cell
with damp stone walls and not enough room to lie down.
And still I love you Lord though you have gone

from my thoughts like a hart that shoots
through the forest on the way to its own panicked future.
I have seen that deer. I know its pace,

the fleeing toward somewhere the world might offer grace.
I have been that deer. It sees only sky and feels
only the air howling in its ears, and then

darkness, and a sleep that does not rest
its sweat-chilled body trembling. My God
I know that even Christ

doubted his Father
for a moment, in his suffering, and cried out *My God*
why hast thou forsaken me? without

feeling your hand in his chest, that hand
that wraps itself around the human heart and presses gently
two times every second.

Portrait of Josh as St. Pascual Baylon

Every morning for years you knelt to pray the prayer
of St. Francis before the twenty-minute trudge to work,

through snow or in the rain, to unlock the kitchen,
kissing me goodbye at the door. Each day you came home

with a fresh cut, a burn, sometimes so slight you didn't
even bandage them, sometimes deep. I never knew

how your skin renewed itself. When the wounds
healed, you were still smooth to my touch.

I imagine you as a child in school, one of
the wild lambs, each day beginning with *Lord, make me*

an instrument of your peace, before you learned
to stay so quiet. Before the years turned you inward,

I know you ran headlong and unafraid, legs
pumping in the California sun. I've seen the gnarled

apple trees you ate from until you were sick of apples,
and I've seen the house you grew up in. You've kept

the handles carved in the shapes of bear and fox from
the chest of drawers, remembering the light of summer

afternoons, the warm interior of that house before
everything slowly cooled. You've always remembered

month and year, date and day, when I forget so easily.
Your angels throng around you; I imagine their

million eyes, their million wings shuddering,
a swarm of bright bees keeping the hovering shadows

at bay. Sometimes I cannot hear for all their singing.
I do not know if they always win. The years of suffering

are seared into your skin, but still each day you kneel
to pray in English and Hebrew, keeping the past

present with you, just as you leave the lids of jars
slightly loose, as you did for your mother

in the last years she was alive, so her arthritic hands
wouldn't hurt when she opened them.

Portrait of Father Santo as St. Anthony of Padua

I. February

The Italian priest traveling with his relics
told us this story in a cliff-hanger style:
that St. Anthony's bones had been exhumed
so we could know how strange they were.
He died of dropsy, the little priest said,
but the most unusual thing was his kneecaps:
flattened, thinned, twice as wide as
a regular man's because he prayed
on his knees for hours every day.

At the front of the church, a huge gold
torso of St. Anthony raised one hand;
inside, the relics (a scapular bone?
part of an arm?) reminded me
that all we are, after we are, becomes
small and brown, as if time dyes our bodies
with tea and smoke. The priests
handed out prayer cards with an image
of the reliquary, green ones for Spanish,

blue for English, red for Italian. I took several,
knelt in front of the torso, held St. Anthony's
upraised hand in my hand and touched
the cards to the glass enclosure.
Uptown my 19-day-old daughter slept
inside her own clear isolette, so I prayed
not for anything I had lost (*O gentle and
loving St. Anthony who held the Christ child
in your arms*) but only not to lose her.

II. May

New mother that I was, I arranged confession
on a day I could walk to church and plan;
the baby in my arms made waiting difficult,

and nobody wanted to hear her cry
in the confession line. Father Santo
had made me tea, and gave a small

green apple to my daughter, which fell
and rolled around on the dining room floor
in the rectory. She kept wanting it,

reaching, so I bent down again and again
to retrieve it, and she'd palm it, then
drop it again. I don't remember

what I confessed—kicking the bottle
across the room after I dropped it,
cursing the hospital-grade pump,

probably cursing my husband, though
he'd done nothing wrong—but I remember
how thrilled she was to have the apple,

a little runty thing unfailing. Once
I had run out of sins to number,
Father Santo blessed me and held her—

his Goddaughter—while I collected
our things. And when I looked up,
Father was carrying her on his hip

(all six-pounds-seven-ounces of her,
the apple clutched in her two hands)
just like the foot-tall plaster statue behind him.

Mary Flannery O'Connor and Company

In Milledgeville, a Bird Sanctuary,
Flannery's mother Regina lets her choose

the forty peafowl—cocks and hens—
that drag their dun or dazzling plumes

across the bare-dirt yard. She's good
with birds, Miss Flannery, as proved

when as a girl she taught her favorite
chicken to walk backward as a stunt.

There's footage of it. Flannery
in stiff dress and patent-leather shoes

wary before the camera
coaches her hen to move

the opposite of what nature intended.
Its spurs go last in the dust, its talons wheeled

like the cut-out paper girl from a birthday card,
her four-legs'-wheel pinned on with a brad.

Birds are often better fun than humans,
smart and stubborn, boon

companions to the end, and they don't mind
if you're swollen, curt, or tired.

They don't mind much as long as corn
keeps coming from a feed-cup

as they rule their yard-wide domain,
a world where all have their place:

cocks shrieking loudly to corral the hens,
hens in comity, one chick pipping in a ring

to cap and rise from his shell
in damp and blinking wonder. It's her

world, too—from the bedroom window,
all she can see: the peacock spreads his crown

of green-and-purple jewels, six feet aloft
in the arms of a weathered tree.

II.

HOPE

Portrait of Mr. Menzies as St. Rita of Cascia

After his stroke, for months, all I hear
of Mr. Menzies are stories his daughter carries
from the assisted living: he's improving,

he uses the wheelchair adeptly, he's ready
to return home. Then for a month, requests
for the priest. I write and mail letters, send him

prayer-cards of St. Francis, joke about my forays
into the lectorship, the Sunday I make everyone
do extra penance by reading the wrong section.

Finally, one Sunday I hear he's confessed
and received communion, and two weeks
later he's sitting in the pew, the back

of his head familiar, though shorn of
the small ponytail he used to wear. I gaze
through the homily at his curls of white hair.

When he rises for the Eucharist, returning
at once to his seat, I see his face in profile, skin
of his jaw translucent, veins visible under

his tan. A hard lump rises into my throat; I'm
so choked I worry I can't swallow the host.
But after the Mass, he greets me: "Thank you

for remembering me," he says, supported by
a three-footed cane. He asks about the bandage
on my ankle. "In case of a sprain, you chill

a quart bottle. Roll it over the ankle to make
the tendons return to their right places.
Then you tear a paper grocery bag in strips.

Soak them in vinegar, and wrap the foot. This
will bring the swelling down." I smile, remembering
the cough remedy he'd offered the week

I was baptized: coconut oil, lime juice, and salt,
which I warmed in a shot glass and drank.
Disgusting, but it worked. I thank him,

and we walk out together, me limping slightly,
him, tall and graceful in his good grey suit,
his cane barely grazing the floor.