

Introduction

In the mid-1960s, southern Catholic fiction writer Flannery O'Connor attempted to define the term "Catholic novelist" in her essay "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers": "The Catholic novelist doesn't have to be a saint; he doesn't even have to be a Catholic; he does, unfortunately, have to be a novelist." It is with this same understanding and in this same spirit that I call the poems that follow Catholic poems and their authors Catholic poets. I am making no judgment upon whether the author is a practicing Catholic, only that the content of these poems contains a basic underlying assumption that is essentially Catholic: the voices in these poems reflect belief in and hope for, often in spite of themselves, eventual union with God.

When O'Connor expresses misgivings at the difficult task of being a true "novelist," she opens up the need for discussing what she means by "novelist." She maintains with fiction, as I do here with poetry, an incarnative view of art. Christ's humanity validates the natural world as wholly able to reveal to us the presence of the divinity within it. 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. A correspondence exists between the human and divine realms, such that no writer can lead us to divine Truth without first characterizing human speech and action in a believable way.

In her essay "Novelist and Believer," O'Connor explains the quality that makes human character believable by appropriating Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero for her Christian aesthetic: "The serious writer has always taken the flaw in human nature for his starting point, usually the flaw in an otherwise admirable character. Drama usually bases itself on the bedrock of original sin, whether the writer thinks in theological terms or not." For a work of art, be it a novel, drama, or poem, to be a "good" work does not mean that the characters are drawn to be morally good but that their speech

and actions follow the laws of probability in the human, or natural, world. Good works of literature have intrinsic artistic merit because they avoid sentimentality—the depiction of moral innocence at the expense of qualities of character that remind us of our need for redemption. Catholic poems, as well as Catholic novels, remind us of our need for Christ, regardless of whether the poets themselves explicitly profess this concept in their poems.

To remind readers of the continually repeated presence of the divine in the human world, I have chosen poems that are not historical poems. That is, the speakers of these poems are not the saints themselves, speaking about incidents in their lives from distant time periods, but they are contemporary voices speaking from within some very contemporary dramatic situations. The great number of these figures and the wide variety of social, regional, and occupational circumstances from which they speak is reminiscent of the “communion of saints” and the litany that springs from trying to convey the individuality of these people who lived in particular times and places in the form of a necessarily limited list.

Indeed, any attempt to convey the uniqueness of the speakers in these poems turns into a litany itself: a mother trying to get her newborn to fall asleep at 3:00 a.m., a man returning to a depressed coal town in western Pennsylvania after abandoning it, a factory worker playing a mean-spirited prank on a coworker, a Native American child experiencing the pains of assimilation in a Catholic school, an older brother concerned about the kind of marriage his younger sister might make, a burn victim's compassion for a small child with whom he shares a hospital room, a woman holding the hand of her dying mother, a Catholic woman whose marriage to a Jewish man causes her father's rejection, a woman who is estranged from her mother because of her conversion to Catholicism, a woman doing laundry, a homeless woman, a woman who has rediscovered the joys of cycling after twenty years, deer hunters, a jogger, a yogi, an alcoholic, a disillusioned nurse whose back goes out from lifting so many bodies, a friend of a gay person who died young, a friend

of a woman who attempted suicide, a townspeople reflecting on a man who left the priesthood, an unemployed woman sending out résumés, a patron of a food pantry who finds money on the floor, a patron of a beauty salon, pilgrims visiting the incorrupt remains of saints' bodies, art lovers contemplating a worship space or visual art, a classical music DJ dying of cancer, a flood victim who receives FEMA money for a destroyed home, a college student who drank too much the night before an exam, a young man trying to meet a woman in a bar, among others. These voices are those of mothers about children, fathers about children, daughters about mothers, daughters about fathers, sons about fathers, sons about mothers, husbands about wives, wives about husbands, sisters about brothers, brothers about sisters, singles, neighbors about neighbors, friends about friends, and adults looking back on their childhood faith.

Once immersed in the research of Victorian poetry, I have grown quite accustomed to poetic methods of deflecting charges of sentimentality in literature, and so in working on this collection, I have continually found Robert Browning's words to his friend Milsand in the 1863 dedication to *Sordello* to serve my aim well. In this brief epistle, Browning downplays the importance of the historical background in which he imbeds his speakers' words, emphasizing that his "stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study." As in Browning's poems, these speakers are souls in process, not souls at rest or peace with their spiritual states. These speakers do not address the saint directly, as if in prayer. They remember the saint in the midst of daily activity while demonstrating varying degrees of belief in or practice of the Catholic faith. Some of them seem to believe in the saint despite a pervasive sense of doubt about religious faith in general. For others, remembering a saint seems to be the last vestige of any formal practice of Catholicism in their lives. Still others identify very personally and very intimately with the saint. Many show a profound sense of humor about the reality of the saint and sainthood that is a strong indicator of a higher level of security in their beliefs than they might openly profess.

Regardless of their level of identification with the saint, all the speakers make readers think about their own relationship to sainthood and ultimately the possibility of their own union with God, despite a prevailing sense of self-doubt about being saints themselves. Most of us, I think, imagine we would be on St. Peter's B-list, invited to the dimly-lit bar after space is allocated for the canonized in the well-lit banquet hall. Nonetheless, belief that the saints have essentially "made it to heaven" makes them attractive figures, showing the relevancy of faith in the saints to contemporary life, and while these poems are not prayers themselves, they give credence to the concept of seeking intercession in the midst of many hardships. These poems show us spiritual movement within the souls of their speakers, not stasis. In the spirit of Browning, little else is worth reading.

I.

Family and Friends



Poor Banished Children of Eve

Martha Silano

I believe in the dish in the sink
not bickering about the dish in the sink
though I believe the creator

of the mess in the living room
cleans up the mess in the living room
sucks up cracker pizza potpie peanut popcorn

and I believe in the earth which also ends up on the rug
which must also be vacuumed up as I acknowledge
our blessings running water not teeming with toxins

and even though this might sound like nagging
especially in the face of dying and of burial
and of purgatory and of hell especially when

I could be instead of asking could you please
wipe up the olive juice that little pile of parsley
wailing and moaning at your wake

or maybe just sitting there stunned where beside me
sitteth the six year old and the 19 month old who most definitely
wouldn't get the dying concept though maybe the son

from thence being the owner of two dozen dead ladybugs
And I believe in the holy in the hole in the toe
of his feet-in pajamas *Mama look how much I grew*

in just one night! His reminder I own a sewing kit
and also all the holy saints (especially the martyrs)
the resurrection of peace-sign pasta three nights running

and the father of course thy will be done
though in fact a whole lot doesn't get done
like fixing the cracked windows re-upping prescriptions

or dusting let's not forget dusting hallowed be the trip
to Safeway for lettuce yogurt our daily beer
and lead us away from bitching about picking up

the hallowed son from the bus-stop
lead us away from resenting the filing
the trips to the curb to the bank

lead us away from martyrdom
(though did we mention we love the saints)
lead us away from the temptation to chuck it all flee

to Thetis Island and glory be to dishwashing liquid
and the sponge glory to the microwave and Mr. Coffee
for the world and all its Huggies all its wet wipes

glory be and have mercy and save us from the pot
of boiling water from the fires otherwise known
as letting the smoke-alarm battery go dead

to thee do we cry poor banished children of Eve
poor ants at the mercy of unforeseen disaster
poor praying mantises stuck in our plastic cages

poor and thankless a valley of tears
though actually a giant crevasse
grant us eternal grant us merciful
o clement o loving o sweet

Miracle Blanket

Erika Meitner

My mother calls it
that straitjacket.
Do you still put
the baby to sleep
in that straitjacket?
she asks, and I say
Mom, you mean
the miracle blanket?
and she says *yes,*
the straitjacket,
and I have to
admit she's right,
that it looks
like a straitjacket
for babies, especially
in the "natural" color
which resembles a tortilla
so when he's wrapped
the baby seems like a
burrito with a head,
and some nights
the straitjacket
helps him sleep, but
some nights
it does not
though we follow
step-by-step
instructions
and we shush and
swing the baby
wrapped tight

in his straitjacket,
but he screams and
won't go down,
which is what we
call sleep now—
going down, as if he's
drowning in his
straitjacket at 3 a.m.
in our bedroom
and we want him
to drown—we'll do
anything to make him
go down, even pray.
Nicholas of Tolentino,
the patron saint
of babies, is said
to have resurrected
over 100 dead children,
including several
who had drowned
together. He always
told those he helped
to *say nothing of this*.
Holy innocence, my son
in his miracle blanket
is sleeping. O faithful
and glorious martyr,
say nothing of this.

In Praise of Single Mothers

acknowledging C. S.

Kate Daniels

That I have closed myself into my study at 8:45 p.m. on this
Thursday evening in early October,
the paper before me, the word processor whirring for revisions,
the coffee in its thick blue mug
fragrancing this small space beside the washing machine
which, too, whirs companionably (fifth time today).

That my chores are done, my children sleeping, and I have just
begun to make relation with words again,
a sweet tinkly string of them tumbling lightly, back of my teeth,
about to erupt, when

The magisterial Peter Augustus, forty-five months on the planet
today,
only recently weaned of his bedtime bottle,
the one with black hair and big ears
whose eyes squint suspiciously at every encounter,
it was he, intelligent and terrifying, who took the key
to the minivan and started it up, and drove it in reverse
one hundred yards down the boulevard, trying to stop it
with his hands pressed to the roof, ignorant
of steering, grim-lipped and dry-eyed, stalling out,
thank God, on the lip of a curb, placed there, obviously,
for just that reason. He, he is the one
who pushes through the bifold doors of my makeshift study
and holds forth his sippy cup with furious civility.

That I love his fierce will, his inability to compromise,
his sweet, sleek ass, the thumb in his mouth, the pale skin
tightened

over the harp of his ribs. That his ear
is a spiral of unspeakable wonderment, a pinkish
cornucopia lined with hair, buttered with gold—
and down deep, last week, the black bean blocking the outer canal.

That I give thanks for his uniqueness in the universe
and fill his cup and chat quietly,
and pick him up in his Tiger t-shirt,
his long legs wrapped around my waist,
sucked thumb sickeningly scented,
mouth working busily at the plastic cover of his drinking cup.

That I carry him back upstairs, fifty-four pounds
straining my back, my neck tense, quadriceps pulling manfully,
and lay him down in his bed and lean into him again and again,
finally inhaling one last time, and tiptoe out, taking his beloved
odor
with me on my fingertips and cheeks.

That I enclose myself once more in the laundry room/study,
pondering briefly
the nature of discipline, remembering the self-sacrificing saints,
especially
St. Zita, lifelong servant, patroness of washerwomen,
charladies, housekeepers, cooks, and St. Paula, widowed
at thirty-three with five small children, renowned for her
“excessive” self-mortification.

I try to be like St. Theresa of Lisieux, that exquisite
Little Flower, not mystic at all, living her simple life, finding
sainthood and sanity in the daily round of cleaning up and bringing
order.

That I am not a saint, my days are marked by bitten lips and cutoff,
angry words, my voice
rising impatiently with creatures too undeveloped to understand
those wings inside me, rising up wildly in protest of one more
interruption.

That the Hail Mary calms me with its lovely images, its soothing
rhythms,
its praise for women, I say it like a mantra.

That I say three, then four, then close the study door again, shut-
ting myself
once more into solitude.

That I whisk my mind into a stiff froth of egg white–like consistency
and
lower myself into it as a mother and arise, rinsed into a poet,
baptized
back into words.

That something flows. The liquid of language, that liquor,
the familiar warmth, the watch melting off my arm, body
disappearing into timeless space: a sound, a rhythm, an urge
to follow. That I am flying here, and floating there, and rising
and writing . . .

Like a snake in unfamiliar territory, advancing warily, but slowly
gaining in confidence
and volume, a sound is born.

That she wails, she wails, she wails.

That I arise and go to her automatically.

That this one, at least, is quiet, can't talk, and fits
into one arm's crook, tightly bound inside a blanket,
I am thankful, and so race to retrieve her.
That the breasts turn on in concert, predictable
as a percolator on automatic timer, the milk
warming and rising, the breasts suddenly stuffed
sausages, uncomfortable and embarrassing.

That I love my milk, my mother's milk,
thin and sweet, yellow and oily,

and she does, too, wailing now
at a volume that threatens the sleep of the others.
That I lift her up hastily with one hand,
the other ripping at the clever closing
of the nursing bra, the pads already soaked through
and dropping to the floor with a sodden thunk.

That she clamps on with a moan, and wrenches
my nipple with her toothless, bone-hard gums,
reproaching me for my tardiness.

That my last line written downstairs—was it
a line? an entire line? maybe just an image, fleeting but brilliant—
that last hard-earned line (or whatever it was) must still be blink-
ing behind
the cursor, mustn't it? Unless
I forgot to save it again.

That the milk is flowing now,
the endorphins surging through my head and torso,
even the pads of my feet feel good,
we tumble backward, she and I, onto the futon
her father and I conceived her on.

That I think about that for awhile, body swelling
and pulsing in various locations.

Whatever that line was, I can't
worry about it now, the machine
has it, surely. Entirely, I trust
technology, though I'm milk
and heat, white softness and the smell
her mouth emits opening to switch
to the other tit.

That we sink into it, whatever we are,
whatever I am, nursing mother, postpartum
poet-on-pause, being suckled and holding,
sucking and being held, mother and daughter,

her mouth on my breast, my hand on her head,
our eyes on each other's.

That she drains me and I do not
even care, holding her there
in the time-stopped, milky darkness.

That the two of us are lovers.

That I love her.

That I love her more,
much more, than poetry.

That the cursor blinks blankly
at the end of an empty line.