Piercing the Silence

Roger Ferlo*

Earlier this year, I was privileged to join with my colleagues Tony Baker and Sofia Starnes in deciding on the winner of the *ATR*'s first Poetry Prize competition. I had to confess a kind of prejudice at the outset. Although I am a lifelong reader of poets who take religion seriously, I never much cared for overtly religious poetry—that is, poetry that is either doctrinal or sentimental or pious, and sometimes all three at once. Ironically, the best "religious" poetry borders on the irreligious: questioning, wrestling, doubting, perched precariously between knowing and not knowing, oscillating between the apophatic and the kataphatic, saying at once too little and too much, skeptical of well-worn myths, and all too conscious of language's inadequacies.

There is nothing sentimental about the three poems that early on distinguished themselves from the 370 poems submitted in this first *ATR* poetry competition. There is something Ignatian about the winning poem, Deborah J. Shore's "Purging," based on John 2:15 ("Making a whip out cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables"). The speaker imagines what it is, not just to see and hear the divine (sight and sound are after all the poet's basic tools), but also to taste and touch and smell it. Although the poem starts off in the tone of an ordinary Sunday Bible study ("The part that strikes me the most"), it quickly turns to what Ignatius might have called a "composition of place"—a sensory expansion of the evangelist's laconic account:

> The part that strikes me the most
> is not the crack-whip on the tables,
> the discombobulated sheep turning fast circles

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> in danger of hurting themselves, or the disdain
> for the clinking change. . . .

What I admire about the poem is the abrupt turn it then makes, imagining what the biblical passage does *not* describe, going beyond the text to illuminate the text: "The image in my head is Jesus in a corner / weaving ropes into a scourge all morning." We go from the composition of place to, as it were, the composition of grace—to an imagined Jesus, "misfit in His temple home," with whom the speaker implicitly identifies, transforming this spiritual exercise into an equally traditional ascetical discipline—an imitation of Christ: "I get; Lord, do I get, / braiding intentions, wishes, plans while heat creeps / up Your neck."

Ignatius, to be honest, was something of a sensory systematizer. Day by day, hour by hour, in his *Spiritual Exercises* he seldom gives much room for free imagining, for edging toward the limits of ordinary sense. Poets have learned a lot from Ignatius, but I suspect that many would have chafed in the end from too much guidance, too much control. Poems like Shore's—though compact, controlled, both colloquially accessible and prosodically intricate—resist too much systematizing. Or to put it more fairly, poets worth their religious salt are just getting started once the theologians have done their necessary work. They do so by returning to the letter of the text. The text is where they begin, but unlike the more literal-minded among us, that's not where they end. They love the text too much to pin it down. If poets are literalists when they encounter the biblical text, then they are literalists like the medieval kabbalist, who could discern mystery within mystery, worlds within words, within a single letter of Torah.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the *ATR*—so committed to serious, systematic theologizing throughout its long history—has long included poetry in its pages. These two uses of language are mutually correcting. The poet's intensity and her precision of image offer contrast and relief from the necessary discursiveness of the theological essay. I like to think that these three winning poets, like the others in this volume, cure the ground (Wallace Stevens's phrase) spiritually and linguistically for the theologians who share these pages. And the service is reciprocal. The theologian, by rigorous argument and avoidance of cant, schools the reader to enter the imagined world of the poet—a reader who is now keen to listen and wary of pious sentiment.

The two runners-up in the competition—Jenn Cavanaugh and Nikolus S. Cook—are both coincidentally from Seattle, Washington.

One thinks of the American Northwest as a particularly irreligious part of the country, which perhaps allows these two poets to exercise their scriptural and theological imagination more freely in a secular culture where there is not much to lose. Cavanaugh's poem, entitled "The Good Thief," like Shore's, imaginatively expands a single verse of scripture—this time from Luke's passion narrative ("Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," 23:42). What is startling about the poem is its violence, a violence that matches the violence of the execution, and answers to the violation of the divine itself in the God who consented "to be broken and entered": "Remember me to the mind of God if God / Looks like you, bloodied and close / (Were this hand not impaled) / Enough to touch, if God / Snuffs the fiery sword with nervous flesh."

Nikolus Cook's poem, "Connecticut Storm," is a kind of diptych, two matching and contrasting meditations on a cityscape in Connecticut. One thinks of Wallace Stevens and his ordinary evening in New Haven. But this cityscape is Bridgeport, a place even more ordinary than its northeastern neighbor. Where Stevens's extended meditation emptied the cosmos of any trace of divinity, "Connecticut Storm" imagines the possibility of a thundering God reanimating a city so desolate, so cold and bare: "So many steeples in Bridgeport / stick up like rusted nails / hoping to catch / hoping to tear God's passing robes / and unravel their seams."

In his moving new memoir, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*, the poet Christian Wiman, editor of *Poetry* magazine and now on the faculty at Yale Divinity School, says this about the poet and the mystic, and the relation of word to silence:

> The soul at peace—the mystic, the poet working well—is not simply inclined to silence but inclined to valorize it. Poets say that the better part of poetry is what is not said; mystics and other meditative savants say that the final fruition of prayer is silence. And they are correct. And yet the soul in extremity craves language; and even more than that, craves within language some fixed point of perception, some articulation of soul and circumstance that neither wavers nor decays, some—how the modern mind pretzels itself trying not to speak this one word—truth.[1]

[1] Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 127.

As these poets can testify, it is not always easy—or even appropriate—to pierce the silence with measured words. But to a soul in extremity—Jesus in his dusty corner, the good thief on the executioner's cross, the lover of cities contemplating the city's ruin—silence must be shaped by speech, the word must be spoken so, however faintly, however hoarsely, the Word can be heard. "The city prays, on bare knees, on bare beds. It prays for more steeples / with longer and sharper peaks, hoping against all odds to catch the / tattered hem of God."

Purging

—John 2:15

Deborah J. Shore

The part that strikes me the most
is not the crack-whip on the tables,
the discombobulated sheep turning fast circles
in danger of hurting themselves, or the disdain
for the clinking change, some of it bouncing off
the great stones with such a spark
it could seem to ignite a fire.

The image in my head is Jesus in a corner
weaving ropes into a scourge all morning,
rather alone, misfit in His temple home.
He cannot entrust Himself to them, even His fans.
Yet His message is communion, interdependence.

The bights in the rope rest against His thigh,
a somber reminder, an extended sigh.
I get; Lord, do I get,
braiding intentions, wishes, plans while heat creeps
up Your neck, while tears for the vulnerable
flow down Your cheeks—thumbing
the familiar fraying, feeling You must
twist every expectation in the inverse direction
of an ancient cowlick to make them fit.
The cords rubbing Your skin will always resist.

The Good Thief

Jenn Cavanaugh

Remember me to the mind of God if God
Looks like you, bloodied and close
(Were this hand not impaled)
Enough to touch, if God
Snuffs the fiery sword with nervous flesh,
If God props this tree of death
Against the wall,
A ladder up the tree of life
To your estate,
if God consents
To be broken and entered.

Connecticut Storm

Nikolus S. Cook

I.

So many steeples in Bridgeport
stick up like rusted nails
hoping to catch
hoping to tear God's passing robes
and unravel their seams,
so that we may take the broken thread
and coil ourselves tightly in it
hoping to feel
hoping to grasp some small warmth
in such a cold city.

II.

A thick, silver blanket of clouds rolled over the northern horizon,
wrapping the candy-striped smokestacks up for the night.
Stars stayed in bed, the moon rinsed her smooth complexion
in the giant Atlantic basin and Long Island began to glitter
across the sound, keeping its light on for a drowsy Connecticut shore.
The city prays, on bare knees, on bare beds. It prays for more steeples
with longer and sharper peaks, hoping against all odds to catch the
tattered hem of God, in case he passes through in the guise of the black
clouds;
white smoke; soft, pattering rain.