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# godspeople

David Deborde

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# *godspeople*

**Thesis submitted to  
The Graduate College of  
Marshall University**

**In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
English**

**By  
David Deborde**

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**Mary Moore  
Katherine Rodier**

**Marshall University**

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**Abstract**

**“godspeople”**

**by David Deborde**

*godspeople* is a creative thesis focusing on the relationship between humanity and divinity. In three sections of poetry, the work explores the idea of sacrifice as it relates to the human conception of the divine (“gods and people”), presents a portrait of a godless, and therefore hopeless, society (“godspeople”), and explores the search for meaning in individual lives (“people of god”).

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## **Introduction to the thesis**

To me, the backbone of human existence is the relationship between men/women and the divine. While the divine includes the concept of a Judeo-Christian “Yahweh” specific to my own background, it also includes references to other religions (paganism, for instance, or like my Grandfather, Native American traditions), societal gods (power, how others perceive us, love), and so on. I show a bit of my existential bias by saying that in this work the relationship to the divine is intertwined with questions like “What gives meaning/value to life?” or “What has given me significance as a member of the human race?” In “Dirty Little Secrets” the parents’ concern for their child is sacrificed to their worry about how the family is perceived by others. Which value is highest? These are the questions that keep me up at night, that force me to write, the actions “Bed Poems” describe as “record[ing] life and death.” Within these poems is the “working out”, in a way, of existential questions through (mostly) concrete events, actions, etc. Hunting and Latin Mass may seem a strange combination, but for my grandfather, hunting is very much a religion. On my end, time with my grandfather, our shared ritual of hunting, the taking of a life, etc. reflects the ritual of mass, the idea of approaching divinity through the sacraments (particularly transubstantiation in communion), and the theology of Christ’s sacrifice. Biologically and culturally my grandfather has strong Cherokee roots and the prayers over dead game, the methodic actions during the hunt, the

cycle of death and life (death of an animal provides life, or sustenance, for his family) provide an interesting contrast to my religious upbringing.

The family, used several times in the work, has the potential for something very divine. I don't think it is a coincidence that so many religious groups use family imagery in their texts, worship, icons, etc. Part of what gives me value/meaning is being a member of families, biological and otherwise. In many ways the family can be seen as a concrete answer to that very question—"What gives me meaning?"—family, despite the little quarrels and personality conflicts that accompany them. A poem like "Here, dammit, let me do it," shows the interaction between two family members who give value to different things but share a biological connection (and a connection through an incident like repairing a heater) and in turn value each other. This provides a good contrast with the family in "Dirty Little Secrets"—at a certain point a comparison of these two poems hopefully makes a reader question which family is really dysfunctional and which is, to use the terminology above, valuable. Rilke's use of the concrete to anchor the abstract in *Stories of God* was influential here. I like the seemingly offhand conversation and the use of the powerful image of God's hands to introduce and ground a discussion of meta-topics. My use of hand imagery throughout the work is an acknowledgment of this. The hand imagery is so strong in my world anyway—the famous painting of praying hands that hung in churches and my grandparent's dining room, rings on hands as symbols of marriage, the injured hand of my grandfather, the arthritic hands of my grandmother and the widow Lebad (it is interesting to see how the hand imagery, for instance, works differently in "Bluebells", "The Widow Lebad", and "My Great Aunt Edna, V.I.P."), etc. Of course for me, the greatest association with

hands has to do with the act of writing—creation in my world is the physical act of taking a pen and putting a poem on paper.

Two ideas drive this thesis: 1. Any encounter with divinity, no matter what form it may take, leaves a person changed, and 2. The reader can make a judgment about how closely a given poem's speaker comes to experiencing a concept of divinity (and even, perhaps, making a judgment on that concept of divinity) in the poem. The woman in "Cancer's gotta leave a mark," and the speaker of "The Divine Hand" have both changed, but the value of their encounters and reactions (or even how they affect other people) are in sharp contrast. The woman in the previous has battled a life-threatening disease, and perhaps in the eyes of popular culture, is physically unattractive. She is revealed, however, a strong and beautiful. She is a life-giver to the speaker of that poem. The allusion to Jacob wrestling with God is very deliberate. He was permanently injured in the hip, but was given the new name Israel and was considered a patriarch of the Jews. The woman was also permanently affected physically, but found something stronger in herself and in turn becomes a matriarchal figure to the speaker (something similar is happening in "Bluebells"). I wanted to create a new concept of beauty, one based on (watch out, this sounds clichéd) inner rather than physical characteristics. Rather than deal with a bunch of individual characteristics, I chose "strength" as a catch-all term to describe inner beauty. I felt this applied to the woman and it is something I see as coming very close to divinity. "Lillith" is the reference to the apocryphal first wife of Adam, who was the real strength in the relationship and who God killed because he was scared Adam would worship her instead. I changed "breathing life into" to "breathing life with" to create a sense of equality. This last line has to do with God encountering a

powerful female figure . . . he presumably knew he would have to kill her, but he created her anyway. To me, there is something very interesting in that. The character is a modern-day Lillith, a beautiful woman diagnosed with breast cancer who survives and becomes even more beautiful for it. A reinterpretation of an old myth. On the other hand is the experience in “The Divine Hand.” Another “true life” poem reflecting on the funny turns fate, divine favor, or whatever we want to call it, takes in life. A big moment in what author Tom Robbins called the journey to “create the myth of me.” Despite the seeming “rise” in the speaker’s social status, however, the reader hopefully questions if the permanent damage done to another boy (sacrifice by someone else for the speaker’s sake) was worth what the speaker received. A big question here is “Was it God’s action/inaction that guided the snowball?”—and by extension—how much is God responsible for bad things in life or maybe even “how does God feel when we come in contact with him?” Likewise, it is interesting to compare/make judgments about the different views in “Bluebells” and “Love Garden.” They both use harvest/earth imagery and they both deal with love, but their speakers’ views of and proximity to love (a pure, unselfish love) are radically different. They both also deal with leaving something behind for others—the “gift” is a reflection of the value of the speakers’ concepts of what it means to love someone.

Religious references, besides being intertwined with my major themes, are also used because of two objectives I brought to the work. Like Robert Pinsky, I see the job of the artist as building on the great works that have come before him/her. The greatest works, in my opinion, are the Bible, the Koran, the Septuagint, Native American creation stories, etc.—the oral/written traditions of any culture—where people are trying to figure

out who they are, where they came from and are going, etc. On a grand scale, this work is about me trying to figure out who I am and what my place is in this world. It is also about me trying to figure out who I am as a poet. Pinsky's "Vision of Daniel" is interesting here because with his poem he is building on Biblical/apocryphal stories about Daniel. My "Outbreak Against Uzzah" also builds on an Old Testament character, as well as building on Pinsky's rhythm and tone in "Visions of Daniel." The particular way I tried to build on Pinsky's work in my poem was by including one of my major themes (touching divinity leaves us changed) with the line "dared because he tried to touch God." It is a reflection of my efforts to find out who I am as both a person and a poet.

To me, the biblical idea of proximity to God is fascinating. It is commanded—"Draw close to God and he will draw close to you"—but it almost guarantees that it will be difficult (i.e. Christ's words that anyone who followed him would be required to "take up his cross"). Without getting into too big a theological discussion, Paul of Tarsus is an excellent example of this. No one person probably did more for the Christian Church than Paul, and it is doubtful many have ever been as close to God as he, but his life was miserable. He was shipwrecked, imprisoned, bitten by poisonous snakes, flogged, and probably killed by Nero for his faith. One of the most fascinating parts of Paul's epistles is when he recounts praying to God for a "thorn in his flesh" (some physical deformity/illness) to be taken away and is given the response "My grace is sufficient for thee." The other saints of the Catholic Church are another example of the idea that closeness to God requires great sacrifice—something I tried to express in "Free Man Stigmata." St. Francis was revered, supposedly possessed amazing powers, but also

suffered greatly. He is also part of one of the most famous encounters between God and man. Again, this goes back to the idea of how we must change when we encounter something divine. He faced hunger, painful wounds, and isolation, but he also saw God. One interesting question that comes out of all of this is—“Is the sacrifice worth it?”

Another reason I incorporate religious references is that, because so much of art addresses religion, (the search for meaning, what happens after death, etc.) these familiar references hopefully better connect the reader to the poem. Including a line from *The Inferno*, a myth from the *Sandman* library, or Old Testament characters is intended to pull the reader’s mind back to the original and give the words in the poems more meanings (the original works, in turn, reference other things). In “Clinigal”, for instance, the final stanza contains the line “the delicate hell of Rachel crying for her children.” This a reference to Jewish history and a political leader’s murder of all Jewish children under the age of three. It is referenced in the gospel accounts, the records of Jewish historians, and actually goes back to the murder of Israelites during earlier (B.C.) occupations. If someone knows the reference, it can bring a lot of meaning to the line, and the poem as a whole. Besides that, I think it is a beautiful sounding line. Certain threads of thought, images, or concepts are eternal because people keep going back to them, not only through art, but also in everyday life. Days of the week are named after ancient gods. Journals, magazines, and newspapers reference religion and myth everyday. Most people circumcise their kids, not so much for medical or religious reasons, but because of societal reasons. Just a few random examples, but I think they make the point. That is why, inevitably, all people are godspeople. Not necessarily because they subscribe to a particular religion, but because all humans at some point have to decide what is valuable,

what is redeeming, and to do so they have to come to terms with other spiritual views. It is because, at the heart of things, there is what “Sacro-sanctuary” calls a “knot”, an intertwining system of old beliefs, systems of conduct, stories that make up the world we live in. One job I see myself needing to do is not only to identify this divine knot, but also identify its true and false threads. That is where the judgment of the reader comes into play again. The poem “Godspeople, Pennsylvania”, for instance, is my vision not only of the idea of people as place, but also of people without meaning, without the divine. The “Better Business” line that precedes this poem is my version of Ashbery’s “The cathedral is slated for destruction” poem and reflects a sense of hopelessness. Experimenting with the use of the first person plural is effort to create a collective sense of failure, depression, etc. and to pull the reader in; this technique hopefully contrasts with or accentuates the meaningful things in his/her life. This poem is full of the “false” threads I hope readers can recognize . . . dreams of hitting the Powerball, severe substance use that is a “solution” to something wrong inside, and so on—that desperate lack of meaning (immortality) that can’t be found or is focused on the wrong thing (which is, in the theology of this work, a definition of immorality). Despite all the seemingly negative portrayals of God in some of the poems, this is my presentation of a godless society. Two more “personal” poems put the speaker into similar situations. “Boy’s Town, Mexico” is another portrait of someone without meaning. Another example of what I think about when I hear “hell on earth.” Everything is menacing; the poem is intentional vague to convey this and the “dustiness” of everything there. The final line is from Fuentes’ *The Old Gringo*. If I think about the idea of proximity from something good or redeeming this would be about as far away as one could get. This is the state that leads to

the events in “Be still”; at a certain point it feels like life or death isn’t that important. The sister poem to this is “The radius of salvation”—Boy’s Town is one of the places referred to in the poem--which is in turn a reference to Dante’s Inferno (the last line is adapted from this work). Here I was really trying to experiment with how poems within a whole work can affect one another.

# I

## gods and people

*No one can touch the divine  
without losing something.  
Zeus Yahweh Allah –  
all are uniquely thieves.  
- Regina Jecturé "Shema Adamah"*

"Cancer's gotta leave a mark,"

She says to me over soup.  
No hiding under baggy sweatshirts –  
skin-tight white lycra, because she is proud  
of wrestling with Death who  
touched her in the morning,  
drew a long scar jagging where her breasts were,  
and gave her the name *survivor*.

Later, her bald head in my hands  
body lying flush against mine  
there is *strength*  
like making love to a man;  
I kiss her and wonder what  
Lillith felt breathing life with God.

My Great Aunt Edna, V.I.P

Family and friends— the morbid mob  
of black veils and somber suits—  
make their way to the gravesite,  
this great macabre wave of sniffing, shuffling mourners  
moving across manicured grounds. The dearly beloved  
gather to keep a covenant,  
an elaborately ridiculous scenario,

but now in stiff hands she holds coveted insight.  
The squander of immortality  
lies cloistered in calloused, pale hands  
in a lacquered pine box  
and those six feet above can only speculate  
about *Sheol's* sweltering strange vistas,  
the relentless labors of Sisyphus, saints' songs  
and streets of gold— such extraordinary knowledge  
all within easy reach of a shovel. These visits

reopen diplomatic relations with the afterlife, excluding  
rare moments of agony or ecstasy  
when we peek around the corner of the moment  
and catch a glimpse of  
Tantalus  
Fiddler's Green  
Abraham's bosom.

Looking around I wonder if the real reason we cry  
is the predicament of faith and flesh:  
people's importance is solely postmortem  
because grave secrets are always kept.

## Outbreak Against Uzzah

Uzzah beside the cart, a place of honor.  
Triumphant, thankful.  
The children of God celebrate  
the victorious return of the ark to Jerusalem.

Hardworking descendant of Abraham.  
At his fields when he heard:  
the nation of Israel, King David at the head,  
would march into Baalah of Judah  
where tired Philistines huddled at forges,  
crafting rats of gold to appease the Israelite god,  
confused men bargaining with an unknown divinity.  
Confronted by the impotence of their idols, waiting  
for the captured ark to be taken away.

Uzzah in a foreign land, a city of Philistia,  
hand clenched on the handle of a sword.  
But the enemies of Israel were weak and the pious  
whispered Yahweh sent a plague of  
tumors through the town. Tense  
moments as Israel turned her back to the pagans and  
re-entered the desert. In their haste,  
priests left the ark on a Philistine  
cart. The oxen proved faster than the carrying poles  
dictated by law.

Relief. The expected raid  
never came. Uzzah walked among  
the Levite priests. An honored protector  
of the glory of God hidden in the ark and member  
of a chosen race.  
At the threshing floor of the city of Nacon,  
the oxen stumbled and Uzzah  
placed his hand on the ark to steady it. The Lord's anger  
blazed and struck him dead.  
Uzzah smoldered in the dirt and many present  
that day would never look directly at the ark

again. King David renamed the place  
Perez-uzzah, meaning Outbreak-against-Uzzah,  
and it became a place of fear.

Uzzah, chaste and helpful,  
a pillar of ash,  
sinned through forgetfulness and  
died because he dared to touch God.

## The Divine Hand

In December '89, the neighborhood wrapped tight in snow,  
I skipped church to go sledding.  
The Lang brothers, Stevie Begbie, and I were meeting suburban tough  
Johnny Lee Galt—  
who dropped out of high school  
and smoked unfiltered Camels—  
to descend Miller's Hill and the thought of it

made me feel smaller than I already was. God,  
it seemed hard being the skinniest, youngest kid.

At the corner of Poplar and Clay,  
gloves in my mouth,  
I fished for a stolen cigarette to look tougher.  
They came out from behind the apartment complex,  
pelting me with hard packed white missiles, and  
cold tears in the corners of my eyes, I realized  
why they had asked me.

In panic I stuck bare hands into a snow bank,  
and clawing out a chunk of ice, flung it blindly,

puncturing the delicate membrane of Johnny Lee Galt's left eye,  
blinding him there permanently, a feat  
which carried me through my high school years  
and elevated me,  
a piece of sheer, frightened, divine luck,  
to heightened realms of unfiltered Camels and bullying docile younger kids.

"God smites the Philistines," I might have thought  
if I had spent more time in Sunday School, but then I was content  
with learning what it felt like to be God.

## The Radius of Salvation

On the radius of salvation  
between me and the horizon  
are waiting rooms,  
the areas in Dante's eighth circle.  
These are frightening, lush—  
populated by women in scarlet sashes  
baring indiscreet flesh above the knee  
and old men with ginny voices,  
without the capacity for shock or embarrassment,  
making promises and proposing trades.  
Sin carries the innovation of danger.

I often find myself lingering there,  
bathing senses, dulling the ethical  
line, until my actions  
can't find rest on my conscience  
and the divine unseen hand pulls me on,  
leaving those souls in flight  
to eternal bartering.

## Forecast

The local forecaster, Doppler radar, and even  
the farmer's almanac –  
most faithful modern augur –  
promised a sunny, temperate day,  
ideal conditions  
to calm a tempestuous relationship.

The perfect picnic; touches of her favorite chicken salad sandwiches  
and moderately-priced wine  
carefully unpacked the moment before a summer storm approached.

"God prepares to weep,"  
she said in her annoyed voice,  
always dramatic at the wrong times,  
and despite the heavy smell in the air  
and her anxious glances, I chuckled  
thinking about the proverb "God laughs  
when we tell him our plans."  
Divinity and I shared a joke on me.

The meeting of hot and  
cold fronts. This is the law of physics.  
Humidity a second skin on bare arms and faces,  
sharp words, resigned stuffing of Tupperware and a tartan blanket  
into the wicker basket,  
the wine unopened.  
Staring up at the clouds, I cursed proverbs  
and weathermen.  
It rained anyway.

## Bed Poems

come late at night.  
Morpheus is a muse  
when I'm insulated in flannel sheets from the day,  
tired, mad, hallucinatingly lucid,  
with thoughts  
hanging from the tip of my subconscious,  
like hesitant  
suicide jumpers before the plunge.  
Past bloodshot eyes, a dry mouth,  
to a quivering pen, waiting to record life and death.

## Sacro-Sanctuary

The forgotten gods of ancient trees groan,  
heavy and full from spring,  
and light reaches down through the branches.

I force myself to walk slowly,  
penance for a pilgrim.  
Temple, church, or shrine,  
I remain a gentile in the Holy of Holies,  
this sacred knot of nature  
where stories of Gaia and Gethsemane  
took root.

Here creation touches creator,  
and we can wait quietly,  
hoping to see Christ in prayer  
or Artemis bathing.

## Free Man Stigmata

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross,  
on bruised knees, Francis of Assisi  
weak at the end of a thirty-day fast. His hunger  
reminds him the price of revelation  
was the burden of sacrifice.

*The Passion* —  
feverish meditations and ecstasy,  
appearance of a seraph  
who opened six flaming wings  
like an apocalyptic book  
and revealed the image of Crucified Christ —  
*The Passion.*

Black marks on his hands, feet, and side  
oozing blood.  
He donned shoes and hid his hands,  
embarrassed the Spirit would choose such  
unclean flesh.

But that did not stop  
rumors —  
sweet smell of a bloody wool tunic,  
simple white cross chalked carefully on the front.  
On cool nights he was seen talking  
to crows.

Followers watched his painful walk from the hut at Monte La Verna,  
the silent, laborious steps  
down the rocky slope,  
and envied his humility.

A medieval artist painted him  
with benevolent smile,  
iconographic bird on his shoulder,  
bloody feet large in the foreground,  
a reminder of the difficulty of following  
footsteps of the saints.

## Lover's Leap

Nearly every park has a Lover's Leap,  
an overlook that once served as a place  
of passion and destruction.

Where Indian braves and maidens,  
sons and daughters of rival families,  
or just two lovesick kids took a literal plunge,  
a big, final step for love.

We, too, are drawn here with loved ones at our side,  
inevitably weighing their suicidal decisions  
on personal moral scales,  
making conjectures about final thoughts,  
until we walk away shaking our heads  
masking cowardice with contempt,  
because standing on the edge  
we realized our love wasn't worth dying for.

## II

godspeople, pennsylvania

*The Better Business Bureau is closed until further notice.*

## Godspeople, Pennsylvania

Our mothers shop for groceries everyday  
along aisles and advertisements,  
scan magazines waiting for checkout.  
Our fathers are pilgrims  
landing on the granite rock of John Wayne's jaw  
and as iron sharpens iron, practice his steely gaze.  
Welcome to Godspeople, Pennsylvania,  
with the milky secrets of chemicals in our drinking water.

Our mothers come home from the store  
and set our dinner tables with popular culture.  
They cry for us at night.  
Our fathers guestimate whose asses they can kick  
and get beaten down by their black- and- blue- collar jobs.  
They beat our mothers.  
Welcome to Godspeople, PA, where everyone still remembers  
the recession of '88, furloughed from economy,  
the staggering weight of food stamps in their pockets.

We were their children, breathing smoke from our factories  
through clenched teeth –  
like smoking a pack of cigarettes a day –  
and left our adolescent smells on brand-name clothes that once hung  
on discount racks.  
Welcome to Godspeople,  
where we keep our accomplishments in a shoebox.

One day you and I will break records and hit the Powerball,  
but right now we still wake up with the ashy taste  
of desperation in our mouths,  
wondering who lies beside us, and trying to remember  
our dreams of immortality or immorality.  
Twenty years ago our parents rubbed whiskey on our gums  
to ease the pain of teething.  
Some solutions still work.  
Welcome to Godspeople, where we rescinded our rights to something better,  
living in the basement of someone else's life.

# III

people of god

*To measure a man,  
simply find the distance between him and God.  
- Sonny Lagidorp Souls in Flight*

## Clinical

The grocery store ignores Rachel gliding through the aisles;  
even the cart wheels are silent.

She pauses in front of formula and pureed peaches,  
but knows she can do without.

I could reach my hand through her belly,  
grab a loaf of wheat,  
or ignore her  
if her belly and jaws weren't tense with need.

These days she bears the labels of almost-hard labors  
and her past, a drunken daddy with a brown belt –  
leather that left a permanent mark in her furtive eyes.  
His late night whispers –  
secrets and scars even after a visit to the clinic –  
a pregnancy which was the initial difficulty anyway,  
followed by a pimply prom date in high school, then  
insistent close-eyed coeds smelling like cheap beer,  
nameless rebounds and temper fucks  
as she tried to fill herself up, and remorse  
as she got rid of it.

Now, me. The words  
*I'm pregnant*  
like a last breath rising to God  
and the hurried decision made so many times before.

Tomorrow, for thirty pieces,  
it is another disinfected death at a reasonable fee,  
it is peace for my mind  
and it is the delicate hell of Rachel crying for her children.  
If she didn't have a shadow I could ignore her  
or swallow her whole.

Here's a toast to killing

"Here's a toast to killing," we say  
and hold our glasses high because we can't do the same with our heads,  
drinking heavily because this  
is our escape route for the night.

With hearty backslaps echoing through the emptiness inside  
and coarse jokes because we stopped feeling clean long ago,  
hoping external robustness will cure internal withering.

We plan to black out to flank dreams —  
those explosions of screams and blood and  
evil that wake us sweating, breathless,  
even scared.

To wait in the darkness for another order  
sending us back into the mountains.

## The widow Lebad

A visit to the widow Lebad.  
I knew him and knew of her  
and mom says it will make her day.  
He was rich, influential.  
Hovering in his shadows,  
she was his supporter,  
but he was her life.

At the door of a large, dark house  
a small woman who has been crying answers  
and turns on lights as we walk.  
She begins to speak of him,  
shows me pictures with arthritic hands,  
says cold, wet days are the worst.  
Her children have children now  
and have moved far away.  
But she'll see them at Christmas,  
two months from now.

Again at the door a frail hand is put on my arm.  
Words of thanks, tells me to come back anytime,  
anytime.

## Dirty Little Secrets

For twenty minutes, raw and pink under scalding water,  
my son has washed his hands.  
Something his teacher says is an obsession,  
the doctors a condition,  
but around visitors we just call him a clean freak.  
“It must be from his mother’s side” – everyone laughs –  
and the subject quickly changes  
to politics. There are advantages to an immaculate room,  
but right now it is another thing to hide.  
His mother and I are like nervous lovers  
hiding behind fig leaves  
and gourmet dinners in an imaginary Eden,  
with forbidden knowledge of angry bruises,  
red belt marks, and little white pills  
without prescriptions.  
She’s already taken three tonight  
because each trip he makes to the bathroom  
or his meticulous cleaning of each fork with a napkin  
makes us uneasy around the guests,  
fraying a few more threads in a tapestry of domestic perfection  
we hope will cover our dirty little secrets.

Boy's Town, Mexico

Chasing guilt into dirty cantinas,  
while courage gathers dust beside a tequila bottle,  
half-empty.

One hundred and one  
dry degrees; I wonder what the weather  
is back home.

Those painted seccuba —  
dark women with dark eyes —  
are hiding secrets; I'm hiding from  
reality  
responsibility.

Vulture men hover nearby,  
deadly hands with hard, slick nails.

We're co-conspirators pouring drinks for one another,  
listening to a sweating band pour misery into their instruments.  
All of us waiting for euthanasia.

*Altare Dei*

I've learned the prayer for the fallen beast  
as we pass the broom sage and rabbit tobacco  
he smoked behind barns at my age.

Grandfather and I set out on our pilgrimage  
with sky dark and wind cold.

Light reaches over the hill leading us to the waiting place.  
*Emitte lucem tuam et veritatem tuam:*  
*ipsa me deduxerunt et adduxerunt in montem sanctum tuum*

He kneels before the old muzzleloader,  
checks if the priming and cap are worthy, then rises  
to administer sacraments of death: wadding, black powder,  
a small lead ball.

*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen*

From a blind I watch a deer crossing the clover.  
Three times he dips his head to eat –  
*Misereatur tui omnipotens Deus, et dimissis peccatis*  
*tuis, perducatur te ad vitam aeternam*  
– until that immaculate moment of silence  
and stillness  
before the explosion and the acrid smell of death  
herald an end of days.

I take my first life, a neophyte  
learning bloody theologies of the hunt.  
*et sic fiat sacrificum nostrum in conspectus tuo hodie, ut placeat tibi, Domine Deus.*

## Interview

Beauty is somewhere in the hoping,  
when the night before the interview,  
faithful hands together in prayer,  
I practice the secret silent language of God  
and imagine angels ferry my stammerings on high.

A saint once prayed in the dirt  
of a Roman amphitheater while half a dozen lions circled  
but refused to attack. The power  
of speaking divinity's dialect.  
He just smiled and walked out.  
I would be content with something smaller:  
a tenure-track position at a small college,  
or a transcript error granting me an A in American Lit  
instead of a C. In a small room with three middle-aged professors,  
the first lion asks me for a definition of beauty.  
I just smile.

## Bluebells

Because the soil is better,  
because she is dying,  
grandmother is transplanting her bluebells in my garden.

We work without gloves, slowly,  
her fingers like gnarled roots in rich dirt;  
for awhile we forget about the cancer.

She saw fields of these once –  
the somewhere and sometime escape her –  
but I can see them in her words and eyes.

As new caretaker of this organic inheritance,  
she gives me solemn duties. Careful  
instruction for cutting flowers is her way of saying  
goodbye. Soon  
they will decorate her grave.

We put them in the ground.

## Love Garden

I'm planting my anxiety in the fertile womb  
of a young woman.  
Sowing motley insinuations for a few years  
until she *does* act like her mother and I reap  
gradually widening hips and breasts heavy with sour milk.

We wage a cold war over re-runs and frosted cereal,  
crawling inch by inch over emotional eggshells  
until we riot against invisible domestic hedges.

An ugly thing is conceived with blood and pain and crying;  
and I leave her dried up to search for greener pastures.

## Erstwhile Janitor

“Are you just working for him or are you the new janitor?”  
he is asking me, a man with threadbare soul like his  
work shirt wore and washed so many times it’s nearly nothing.  
No cell phone or internet, just hopes three more paychecks  
will cover the removal of a swollen gall bladder and  
a return to normal pants.  
He works without union reps under the cloud of veiled threats,  
not knowing he’s too cheap to get rid of,  
so he is worried,  
but I swear to God I’ll never take anything from this man  
not like the real estate agent who stole his wife a decade ago  
or the tenants who daily rob him of his dignity with their  
tones and glares.

## Hair

I was born in a hospital  
bloody bald and squealing.  
My uncle joked I was a perverse Buddha  
in another life.

Eleven and I shaved smooth cheeks in vain.  
Doug Fugitt was a year older, tough  
with full mustache and secret envy of almost  
pubescent boys in the locker room.  
In insecurity I joked he was a Yeti in a previous life  
and paid for my nervous wit with a bloody lip.

At a class reunion, sporting a full beard,  
I asked about Doug. Two years earlier he was killed in prison,  
chest-stabbed, shiv fashioned from a Gillette.  
He'd been born again and died squealing  
on a dirty shower floor.

A lifetime away from Buddhas and Yetis  
I'm bald again, but every treatment,  
every lump of hair falling out, buys me a few months.  
It is only now I realize the importance of hair  
in matters of life and death.

## Be Still and Know

A man down the street committed suicide  
in a final, leaden moment of intimacy – a .44 caliber kiss.  
Thirty-three lonely years and he still didn't know.

Barefoot boys and giggling girls  
still hear the same golden lies:  
you'll find true love  
you can be anything.

Still,  
occasional moments cause a tired housewife joy,  
the winning lottery ticket  
scratched while chatting to a friendly gas station clerk.  
She and her husband  
just celebrated their tin anniversary;  
his gift to himself a box of bullets.  
The only thing they built  
together was equity.

"Here, damnit, let me do it,"

always precedes a hand,  
four fingers and half thumb,  
taking something away from me. I'm all thumbs  
standing dumbfounded beside my grandfather  
as he fixes the heating system of my house.

"What do they teach you kids in college nowadays?"  
"Poetry and truth," I want to say, but he'll berate me anyway  
for not properly balancing the torch's acetylene with oxygen,  
or handing him the wrong saw.

A few moments later I'll wince  
under sparks flying from the right saw  
as he cuts off excess metal.  
Little sympathy from my grandfather,  
who cut off half an opposable digit with a table saw,  
made a tourniquet out of an oily rag,  
and drove himself to the hospital.  
Our project nears an end,  
and I know my time is coming,  
when by the door he'll try to offer me a silent smile,  
four fingers and half thumb,  
then wince under the words "Thanks, grandfather"  
before an always-awkward embrace as we try to find the compromise  
between a hug, a handshake, and a heating system.

## **Reflections on the thesis**

Much of what I focus on is narrative poetry. As most of these poems are either from my workshop class or written specifically for the thesis (or submission to journals) I found myself consciously aware that my poems would read by others. I have tried to make the “drama” in my poems something that others could share, regardless of if they could relate to the actual action or personas presented. This, I’ve found, is easier said than done. One strength I think my poems have are their images—“Poets try to think of new images,” as Louis Simpson said. Some of my strongest images are those that use Biblical/mythological references, a reoccurring thread throughout the thesis. I like Magritte idea of a “secret affinity between certain images; it holds equally for the objects represented by these images.” I feel I use the images I do because mythological/Biblical references are really just precursors, perhaps, of what I try to do with my poetry. People in the past came up with these stories to try and capture/explain truths they saw in the world, which might be a handy summary of one of the main goals of my narrative poetry. Many of these “truths” are what I am searching for in my poetry, hence the references to these searches by earlier people. Using these references to construct images gives them, many times, resonance with readers and gives them strength. In writing about *The Want Bone*, Pinsky commented that he was concerned with religion because it was a “vivid, charged example of the passion to create.” Religion, be it paganism, Judaism, Protestantism, etc., is a communal expression. In trying to be aware of community in my writing, it makes sense to me that my poetry should have some sort of commitment to these community expressions. The use of the Mass in “Altare Dei,” for example

recognizes the ceremony of the Catholic community and tries to use Mass as a vehicle for expressing the ceremony of a grandson hunting with his grandfather for the first time. In doing so, I hope to help members (or at least those familiar) with the rituals of the Catholic community make the leap to understanding the rituals of hunting passed from one generation to another and the importance my grandfather places on this particular activity. In mythological terms, I like what Levertov has to say in “An Admonition”. I think she correctly identifies that myths can be used universally/effectively even if the exact references fall outside of their educational history. She says that “if a poet within himself identifies with Actaeon; or has felt the hand of any god on his shoulder; or has himself been steeped in the cosmology and mythological history of any place and time; then he can write of it so that his pain and terror, or delight, will be felt by the reader.” “Sacro-sanctuary” actually has an indirect reference to Actaeon in it—“waiting to see Christ in prayer/ or Artemis bathing.” The effectiveness of the image has more to do with the reader “feeling” what the reference is about by the context of the poem than the actually precise knowledge of who Actaeon is.

The distinction between a spiritual and sensual world is one I have attempted (with greater and lesser degrees of success) to use. As I hope is evident in my thesis, the third section of my poems “people of god” tries to put these two worlds in contrast. These poems often present the sensual world at its most negative and depraved. The conscious use of the word “god” (or something similar) in every poem is motivated by the attempt to create a tension in the poem. I want the readers to see people/events that move in the basest areas of the sensual world. The “god” always points to the spiritual world; the actions/emotional of the poems are many times presented as corruptions of the

spiritual and hopefully the tension helps the reader recognize this. I want the reader to ask “Why do we want such things?” or “Why do we do the things we do?” In something like “Love garden” or “Dirty little secrets”, the poem is built to make the reader ask the same question.

When putting together a poem and choosing the exact words to use, I often find myself very concerned with sound as opposed to content. At some places I am more successful at being “musical” than others. What I see in my poems (specifically, in my choice of certain words), is a concern for “what the poems says, only as a poem”, i.e. not worrying about what morality judgments may be passed on me as a poet as much as creating a with morality that is self-contained. Certainly Patricia Smith’s “Skinhead” might be seen as a model here. Branching out of this is my choice of certain words based on the way they sound “right” in the poem versus whether or not they are exactly the “right” word for the content. This would be my attention to what something I learned about in my poetry workshop, an idea Donald Hall calls “milk tongue”, i.e. the oral pleasure of saying the words, saying the vowels and consonance. Certainly all of the “s” words in “V.I.P.” would be an example of this, but it extends to many of my poems. I use alliteration, consonance, assonance, etc. in my poems. Reading a lot of Emily Dickinson this past year has also made me try to use half-rhymes in the context of trying to create tension, point out contrast, and so on. One of the best things I have learned at Marshall is that I have to read every poem again and again out loud. By no means have I even come close to getting this down pat, but it is something I am working more and more on.

The mention of Hall's milktongue might provide a good segue into some of the difficulties I have with my craft, because his concept of "twinbird" is something I struggle with. "Godspeople, PN" also sees me trying to work this concept into my ideas. To be honest, I really need to work on my sense of closure in my poems. I think I do a pretty good job of this in "Cancer's gotta leave a mark," and after revision, "Free Man Stigmata" and "The Divine Hand."

Another problem I think I have is my use of the abstract. I try to stay away from it as much as possible, but when I do use it the result is often not very effective because I'm not anchoring it in the concrete. Certainly in "V.I.P." I really tried to correct this problem, but it still has a way to go. I like what Rilke does with the abstract and the image, like how he takes a seemingly ordinary conversation with a woman, a strong image like the hands of God, then uses these as a springboard for philosophical musings, but I see myself having a long way to go before I can do that with every poem.

Tension also seems lacking in some of my poems. From the beginning to the end of my poems I need to find more ways to put in "power." I also try to build tension throughout the whole collection, but I need more focus on how this is working within every individual poem. I'm writing more now than I ever have, but I think with many of my problems it is just going to take time, trial and error, etc. This would definitely be true about meter. I think the rhythm of a poem should be something the poet allows to take shape without thinking too much about it. It is an unconscious skill for good writers. Really, though, in many cases it remains something I have to do consciously.

