The Treasury of Valparaiso
  John Ruff

A New History Museum
Tries to Get Religion
  James B. LaGrand

An Order for Delivery
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VERSE

The Cobbler
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On Transformation (With Figs)
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REVIEWS

Susan Power Bratton’s ChurchScape
  Mark D. Bjelland

Anya Krugovoy Silver’s From Nothing
  Jeffrey Galbraith

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Alison Saar is an acclaimed contemporary artist and the daughter of Betye Saar, herself a contemporary artist of some significance. In her work, Alison Saar explores themes of African American identity using sculpture, printmaking, even fresco. Her pieces can be found in museum collections nationwide, and she has received many awards during her career. The provocative, haunting Cotton Eater II presents the subject blank-eyed, barefoot, and pregnant as she endlessly ingests the cotton that surrounds her. Like the character Beloved in Toni Morrison's novel of the same name, Saar's subject inhabits a realm of unreality and endures as a reminder of injustice and sadness, past and present.


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whatever is **NOBLE**

whatever is **RIGHT**

whatever is **PURE**

whatever is **LOVELY**

whatever is **ADMIRABLE**

if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.

*Philippians 4:8*
ONE AFTERNOON THIS PAST JUNE, I HAD the opportunity to meet up with John Ruff, English professor at Valparaiso University (and former poetry editor of the Cresset), at the university’s Brauer Museum of Art. He offered to give me a tour of the current exhibit, and I was glad to take him up on it. I had previously visited the Brauer just once, and while I had appreciated the serene space and some of the paintings had caught my eye, I knew there was more to experience than my brief visit had allowed.

John’s familiarity with and enjoyment of the collection shined through in his animated introductions to the pieces on display. Having him as my docent helped me understand that on my earlier visit I had only seen the paintings in two dimensions—a realistic expectation for paintings, of course, but my experience had been decidedly flat. Suddenly, though, it seemed as if the paintings were leaping off the walls, calling me over, and telling me all kinds of things—where they were from, why they were there, who they were related to, how they came to be in the first place. It was as if John had flipped a switch, and the new light allowed me to see more fully. Over the course of an hour or so—it was not a long tour—the artworks took on personalities and histories. I could see each piece as an individual member of a much larger, captivating, and remarkable family—one that I felt privileged to meet.

John is eager to show you around the Brauer, too. His tour starts now, on page 4. You’ll get a sense of his zeal for the museum and its collection in “The Treasury of Valparaiso,” as well as his assessment of what it represents at this particular point in time. “The stylistic, cultural, and curatorial juxtapositions in the room are amazing once your eyes and expectations adjust,” he writes. “And adjusting your eyes is the idea here.”

This is not the only museum visit you will find in this issue. James B. LaGrand, professor of American history at Messiah College, takes us on a tour of the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., where he describes deeply moving exhibits, but also points out the weakness of some of the interpretive panels about African-American Christianity, even as they accompany some extraordinary artifacts. The “flattening and taming” of religion on these panels, LaGrand writes, is symptomatic of a larger national trend in which “religious belief has become a foreign country to many Americans today.”

It seems fitting to share these two essays with you now, as the country reflects on the events that unfolded in Charlottesville on August 11-12 and the aftermath of that white supremacist rally and counter-protest. While the hateful traits of racism and xenophobia were on full display there and elsewhere over the summer, Ruff offers a more encouraging vision, one of an evolving national portrait that is becoming more beautiful as it becomes more intricate and encompassing. And LaGrand tells of the power of Christianity in shaping the self-understanding of its adherents throughout U.S. history—even when those faithful Christians faced the grimmest of circumstances. “Even while enslaved, African-American Christians came to know and celebrate their full and equal humanity,” LaGrand writes, “and they connected this to being children of God.”

Finally, don’t miss Thomas C. Willadsen’s column that starts on page 54. In it, he writes about driving a family of new Wisconsinites—recent refugees from the Congo—to church. His story is full of awkwardness and discomfort, but it also bears witness to how those feelings were transformed into connection and communion. The picture Willadsen paints of one small act of mercy might not be on display in the Brauer, but it’s a picture worth contemplating, sharing, and reproducing at every possible opportunity. 

—HGG
The Treasury of Valparaiso
New Acquisitions in Context at the Brauer Museum of Art

John Ruff

If you live beyond the Great Lakes region and know about Valparaiso University, it is likely that you are Lutheran, and even more likely that you are a college basketball fan. For many Americans, Bryce Drew's famous last-second, game-winning shot against Old Miss in the first round of the 1998 NCAA Basketball Tournament, replayed countless times on national television whenever March Madness rolls around, put Valparaiso University squarely on the map.

But here is one thing most people—even people at Valparaiso University—do not know: as unlikely as it is that a small Lutheran university in Northwest Indiana would have a basketball program as strong as Valpo's, it is even more unlikely it would have a museum with a collection as rich and as deep as that which resides quietly and unobtrusively at the Brauer Museum of Art.

If ever you come looking for the Brauer Museum of Art, it is not well marked. It lives in the Valparaiso University Center for the Arts, better known in campus parlance as "the VUCA." Signage is scarce, but landmarks will guide you. First, get yourself to the entrance of the Chapel of the Resurrection. It is the largest college chapel in America so you won't miss it. From there look north and east, to a broad brick building with an all-window front and doorways shaped like the entrance to Agamemnon's tomb in Mycenae, Greece. You can google "Agamemnon's Tomb" to

get a look at that doorway. Agamemnon's Tomb is also called the "Treasury of Atreus." You are looking for the doorway to the Treasury of Valparaiso.

Near the west entrance of the VUCA, the one nearest the chapel and also nearest the museum, you will see a large, abstract, stainless steel sculpture that rises in the shape of a V by Chicago artist Richard Hunt. Once you are in the building there is yet another Hunt sculpture, a smaller one, just opposite the entrance to the Brauer. Two more wait inside the Main Gallery, in the current exhibit entitled "New Acquisitions." It's crazy to think that works by Richard Hunt, the most prolific living creator of public sculpture in America, direct traffic, act as greeters, and stand like docents for the Brauer Museum of Art in Valparaiso, Indiana—but it is delightfully true.

Wikipedia has less to say about the Brauer Museum of Art than it has to say about that single shot by Bryce Drew—"the shot," as it has come to be known—although the Brauer's permanent collection, at last count around 4,000 pieces, includes more works by artistic "Hall of Famers," more "All-American" artists (if there were such a thing) than will ever leave their mark on Valpo's basketball court. The Brauer's permanent collection, mostly American art, is remarkably comprehensive, with works by significant artists of almost every school and movement in American art from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The museum boasts a rich assortment of religious art from around the world and includes work by internationally renowned artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe, Ansel Adams, and Andy Warhol. It also possesses a deep collection of landscapes by prominent Hudson River School painters.

Not only is the larger national narrative of American art well represented, but the regional and the local is as well—the art of Chicago, of the Indiana Dunes, of Brown County, Indiana, of the American Southwest, the Pacific Northwest, and the midwestern heartland—it's all there. Or so one would think, until you see the new acquisitions, beautifully curated over the summer to show not only how they fit into the larger story but also what unique elements they add, what complexity and diversity they contribute that we might not have known we were missing without them.

When you enter the Brauer, you come face to face with a beautiful Louis Sullivan door you can't go through. You must turn left or right. If you go to the right, you enter the Sloan Gallery—the Brauer's trophy case, if museums included such things. We will take a quick peek in order to meet Junius R. Sloan. There he is to the right in a charming self-portrait, and again to the right is Sloan's portrait of his son Percy, the Brauer Museum's first great benefactor, as just a boy.

Percy Sloan grew up in Chicago and became an art educator and collector. In 1953 he donated to Valparaiso University 276 paintings by his father and 106 paintings by other American artists, as well as an endowment to preserve and develop the collection. Percy Sloan wanted to donate his collection of his father's work to a university that would keep it intact, conserve it well, exhibit it respectfully, and benefit from its use as a great educational resource. Percy Sloan also gave to the Brauer his father's sketchbooks, two of which are on display, plus many letters, even ledgers. More than half a century since that original gift, the Brauer's collection of Junius Sloan's art has grown to 400 pieces, in a variety of media. Included among the new acquisitions are five small watercolors by Sloan, all landscapes that have a distinct Hudson River School look and feel. They came out of the blue, from two new donors.

Born on an Ohio farm in 1827, Junius Sloan began his artistic career as a self-taught itinerant...
portrait painter. He eventually settled in Chicago, where the market for painted portraits was sufficient for a man of his artistic skills to maintain a studio and prosper. In the Sloan Gallery you can see several of his portraits as well as portraits acquired recently by benefactors who wanted to put Sloan's portrait painting into a broader American context.

Though Sloan made his living as a portrait painter, his passion, his purpose—what he came to describe as his religious vocation—was landscape painting. You can usually see two of his most ambitious landscapes on display: a salon-size oil painting entitled *Kaaterskill Lakes* and a smaller landscape entitled *Cool Morning on the Prairie*. *Kaaterskill Lakes* provides a broad panorama of the Pine Orchard, a scenic spot in the Catskills overlooking the Hudson River in upstate New York. Thomas Cole, father of the Hudson River School, depicted this same vista from the same spot in 1845. It is the locale where Rip Van Winkle slept through the Revolutionary War in the Washington Irving story. It is the same vista Natty Bumppo praised as his favorite place on earth in a famous passage from *The Pioneers*, James Fenimore Cooper's first Leatherstocking Tale. After Cole transferred to canvas the beauty of the Catskills that Irving and Cooper immortalized in their fiction, generations of Americans traveled there to see it for themselves. On the left side of Sloan's painting a tiny image of the Catskill Mountain House appears, the first luxury hotel in the Catskills. Long before Yellowstone or Yosemite or even Niagara Falls became tourist destinations, this was the place where Americans discovered leisure and learned to enjoy the natural world. For several generations of Americans, this is where the natural world became a thing of beauty, an object of contemplation, a source of health, relaxation, even holiness.

*Whereas Junius Sloan rendered *Kaaterskill Lakes* in a visual vocabulary that Thomas Cole invented for generations of American landscape painters, no visual vocabulary existed for *Cool Morning on the Prairie* before Sloan helped invent it. *Cool Morning on the Prairie* is an exquisite painting, for me beyond anything else Sloan painted in oil. I love how the sharp clarity of the grasses, the coneflowers, and other native prairie plants in the foreground gives way to the translucent look and feel of the low-lying fog in the middle ground, and how the split-rail fence leads our eye with those cows and that little girl to the milking shed in the distance. Sloan's enduring importance may ultimately reside in his being one of the first artists to recognize the beauty of rural life on the American prairie and...*
show others how to render it. This painting, and other smaller paintings of the Sloan family farm, puts Sloan at the forefront of an artistic tradition that culminates in the work of better-known American Midwest regional artists Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, and finds its fullest literary expression in the Great Plains novels of Willa Cather.

Though Junius Sloan rightfully enjoys a place of prominence in the gallery that bears his name, nowhere else in the world do his works keep better company. Beside his portrait of his son Percy hangs a wonderful hand-colored engraving by John James Audubon entitled *Grackles*. Across the gallery from *Kaaterskill Lakes* hangs a landscape by the acclaimed Hudson Valley artist and teacher, Asher B. Durand. Next to *Cool Morning on the Prairie* hangs a landscape by John Kensett, on the same wall with a Frederic Church and an Alfred Bricher. These were Hudson River School painters of the first rank, as Childe Hassam is among the very best American Impressionists. His lovely painting of the Golden Gate hangs beside a cityscape by William Glackens, a significant painter of the Ash Can School. Whenever *Rust Red Hills* by Georgia O'Keefe is not on exhibit
in Madrid or Dublin or at the Tate Modern in London, that splendid work would appear next to the Glackens, with works of the same era by American modernists Arthur Dove, John Marin, and, now, an exquisite, newly acquired watercolor by Charles Demuth. All this and more, in a single small gallery. It is hard to believe you would find such riches tucked away in Northwest Indiana.

Now let's go left, past a small gallery just inside the main entrance where a large, beautiful blown glass bowl is spending the summer. It's by Dale Chihuly, America's premier sculptor of glass. Fill your eyes to brim. Then, before you enter the West Gallery, spend a moment examining a portrait of Richard Brauer, the museum's first director, seated in the actual Treasury of Valparaiso—a vault, in fact, in the basement of the museum where most of the permanent collection spends most of its time. The vault was purchased by a local family whose generosity to the university in building the museum was such that they were awarded naming rights. Rather than put their family name on the museum, they chose to put Richard's. Richard Brauer, choosing to have his portrait painted in the vault with the paintings he loved, was gracious in his acknowledgment (typical of Richard) of that gift. If you look closely at the painting, by VU alumnus Caleb Kortokrax, you can see surrounding Richard some of the museum's most significant acquisitions. The O'Keefe is there, the Childe Hassam, Charles Burchfield's Luminous Tree. Robert Bechtle's 58 Rambler, a Junius Sloan, and part of a huge hyperrealist work by Joseph Raffael entitled Ch'i.

"Ch'i" is the Chinese word for an ancient Taoist concept. It informs the practice of acupuncture as well as that of geomancy. The idea is that a life force exists in all things and that it flows through the earth even as it flows through our bodies. It can reside in water, in rocks, even in paintings of water and rocks. There is, indeed, much good ch'i gathered in that dark vault where the Raffael resides with so many companions. Oddly enough, it is often in the summer, when so few people are around, that so much good ch'i flows up the freight elevator, is carefully hung on the walls, and dwells in the light.

The first impression you are likely to have as you enter the West Gallery is what amazingly diverse and emotionally powerful art objects surround you, in just about every medium and mode of art, both two- and three-dimensional. You may be confused initially, especially if you are coming directly from the Sloan Gallery, where the work is mostly oil paintings, in mostly recognizable styles of American art, in genres easy to identify: portraits, landscapes, some urban and rural scenes, and a still life. You can understand the evolution of styles. The paintings are not difficult to read.

It's a different story in the West Gallery. To your left hang newly acquired twentieth-century ceremonial objects from Borneo and Papua New Guinea, including an elaborately carved splash-guard for a canoe, two intricately decorated Dayak shields (one of which uses human hair, the other partially constructed from a huge tortoise shell), and a carved and painted skull rack. Suddenly the context is global, non-Western, and anthropological. These objects share the wall with...
two works of Christian devotional art—a newly acquired body of Christ carved for a crucifix by an unnamed Spanish American artisan, and a decorated wooden crucifix carved and painted in the nineteenth century by noted Spanish santos artist José Aragon. The Aragon crucifix has long been part of the permanent collection, which from the beginning has included religious art and devotional objects from around the world. It is these objects together on the same wall that is so startling, and some version of this experience occurs often in the exhibit thanks to the skillful and strategic curating by Gregg Hertzlieb, director of the Brauer, and Gloria Ruff, associate curator and registrar. I find myself both enlightened and exhilarated by their arrangement and integration of the new acquisitions with works already in the collection. It makes the exhibition much more than the sum of its parts.

There is a great example of this on the wall to the right as you enter the West Gallery. Two batiks, products of a printing process native to Indonesia, and fashioned by a Lutheran clergyman from South India, R. Solomon Raj, depict events from the life of Christ. These appear next to The Birth of Christ at Bethlehem Steel, a woodcut by Northwest Indiana artist Corey Hagelberg. These pieces are even more powerful for the company they keep. The stylistic, cultural, and curatorial juxtapositions in the room are amazing once your eyes and expectations adjust. And adjusting your eyes is the idea here.
Your eyes, adjusted or not, won't know where to rest on the wall opposite the entrance, where three large, powerful works from the permanent collection frame the new acquisition *Cotton Eater II*, a large color woodcut print by contemporary biracial artist Alison Saar. In *Cotton Eater II*, Saar has depicted an African American woman putting tufts of cotton into her mouth. She stands barefoot in a transparent shift, her eyes empty and white, both haunted and haunting. Her swollen abdomen suggests she is pregnant, or starving, maybe both. To the left of *Cotton Eater II* is displayed *Crucifixion*, a huge crucifix drawn upon panels of paper by Chicago-area outsider artist Raul Maldonado and attached with thumbtacks in the wall. Maldonado grafts the very bold, graphic, decorative style characteristic of Chicano tattoo and graffiti artists upon the *santos* tradition of the Aragon crucifix around the corner.

To the right of *Cotton Eater II* hang two powerful works from the permanent collection by Jewish American artists Leon Golub and Leonard Baskin. The Baskin piece serves as a great bookend opposite the Maldonado, a large woodcut print from his Holocaust Series, where a huge man stands naked and bent before us, his suffering as deeply


inscribed in his flesh as in the Yiddish inscription that accompanies the image. At the bottom of the print, Baskin translates the Yiddish into English: *We Lie Here Dead and His Godly Name Grows Greater and Holier.* Here I find the curating most inspired, to place on either side of Saar’s poor cotton eater Maldonado’s image of Christ the King crucified and Baskin’s Holocaust victim. Additionally, linguistic and graphic dimensions link the works. Baskin’s image is inscribed in two languages, Yiddish and English; Maldonado’s in three: Latin, Spanish, and English. Even the script Baskin writes in and the street font Maldonado imitates have expressive power.

If the arrangement of this part of the gallery doesn’t sound divinely inspired enough, the curators have also placed between *Cotton Eater II* and the Baskin woodcut a painting by Chicago-born Leon Golub, a member of the Monster Roster group of Chicago artists who gained international acclaim for his politically engaged art. In this painting, entitled *Niobid,* a single male figure, done in the artist’s highly expressive gestural style, points directly to *Cotton Eater II.* To my mind, a new acquisition could not be more warmly or wisely welcomed into the family than the curators enable these artworks from the permanent collection to do. It is a classic form of Brauer Museum hospitality enacted on the walls.

Given everything on the walls in this room, it would be easy to walk quickly by the display cases that exhibit several works of pottery. I know because I did. But I jotted down the names of the potters—Maria Martinez, Lorencoito Pino, Dylene Victorno, and Lucy Lewis—and went on the internet to find out what I missed. These women are considered among the very best in their craft. One of them, Martinez, of the Ildefonso Pueblo in New Mexico, gained international acclaim for her black ware pottery, an indigenous art form that might have perished but for her re-discovery and rejuvenation of it. The forms have a beauty and near perfection that mark each of the pieces as expertly handmade. The decoration is abstract, sometimes biomorphic, other times geometrical, always a pleasure to the eye and something to think about in relation to other forms of abstract expression in the galleries. Having these beautiful pieces in the collection challenges, enlarges, and enriches the notion of American art.

The story continues in the Wehling Gallery and in Main Gallery: more interesting art, more good curating, though none of the new works has the same emotional power for me as the Saar woodcut, or the wit and freshness of the Hagelberg,
or the strangeness of the Raj batiks or the Dayak shields. There is additional religious art, beautifully textured collagraph prints depicting significant archeological sites in Palestine by evangelical Christian printmaker Sandra Bowden, from her Israelite Tel Series, plus two paintings by prominent Lutheran liturgical artist Ernst Schwidder. There are new acquisitions by local and regional artists already well represented in the collection: a highly stylized Indiana Dunes painting by Vin Hannell, a pencil sketch and still life in oil by Indiana Dunes painter Frank Dudley, an oil painting of a Venetian scene by Konrad Juestel, plus two works by his protégé, the recently deceased Virginia Phillips. Those five new Junius Sloan watercolors mentioned earlier adorn a single wall; the corresponding wall across the gallery holds four Japanese Ukiyo-e prints.


**RETURNING TO THE WEST GALLERY, I CANT NOT MAKE STRONGLY ENOUGH THE POINT THAT IS SO OBVIOUS TO ME HERE: THE PERMANENT COLLECTION OF THE BRAUER MUSEUM OF ART IS BECOMING, AS AMERICA ITSELF IS BECOMING, MORE RICHLY MULTICULTURAL, MORE BROADLY INTERNATIONAL, MORE DEEPLY INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERDENOMINATIONAL. WHILE ALL OF THE ARTISTS WITH WORKS IN THE SLOAN GALLERY (EXCEPT O'KEEFFE) WERE WHITE MALES, AND ALL (EXCEPT AUDUBON) WERE AMERICAN-BORN AND OF NORTHERN EUROPEAN PROTESTANT DESCENT, I AM PLEASED THAT THE NEW ACQUISITIONS INCLUDE, BY MY COUNT, WORKS OF ART BY SIX WOMEN. IN ADDITION TO THOSE ALREADY MENTIONED, NEW WORKS HAVE COME FROM JEWISH AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHER LOUISE WITKIN BERG. THESE ACQUISITIONS, ALL GIFTS, SEEM SO WISE AND GENEROUS TO ME, AND REFLECT SO POSITIVELY ON THE UNIVERSITY ENTRUSTED WITH THEIR CARE, Whose VALUES THEY BODY FORTH, AS THAT UNIVERSITY IMAGINES ITSELF AT ITS VERY BEST. ✨**

John Ruff is professor of English at Valparaiso University.

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**UPCOMING EXHIBITS AT THE BRAUER MUSEUM**  
August 22–December 10, 2017

*The Indiana Dunes Revisited: Frank V. Dudley and the 1917 Dunes Pageant*  
Wehling, McGill, and West Galleries

*Now, Then, and Again: The Art of Douglas Calisch*  
Ferguson Gallery

*Old Master Prints from a Private Collection*  
Education Room

www.valpo.edu/brauer-museum-of-art
THE COBBLER

You ring his bell. He climbs from the basement, where he's spent the morning. Hasn't spoken a word to anyone.

Now: Okay. Replacement heels, new soles.

You bow together over broken boots. You're embarrassed at how homely, rotten they've grown. You almost feel despair. He listens, strokes them: they might be holy.

He brushes away the dust. Your eyes blur, perhaps with love of boots.

We're dust, we're all dust—it's where we came from and to what we will return. Above his bench, his awls, his busy knives and scissors, he keeps this note:

Pilgrim, there's no path. You are breaking unbroken ground. You find the path by walking.

Jeanne Murray Walker
An Order for Delivery
How the Food and Birth Movements Connect, and What One Can Learn from the Other
Agnes R. Howard

On a recent flight I sat behind a dad flying solo with three daughters, a comparative rarity from which it was hard to look away. The eldest, in the window seat, used earbuds to defend her personal space. The baby squirmed on the father's lap. The middle child spent most of the flight watching construction of an elaborate cake on the Food Network, whisk attachment sending up billows of whipped cream, offset spatula spreading batter across the whole of the child's small screen. I wondered: why are dough and frosting sufficiently interesting to hold this girl's attention the whole flight? Why would I—and apparently her father—consider this appropriate viewing material for a child? Maybe it distracted her from the poor quality of her in-flight food. Maybe anything would suffice as long as it kept her busy and allowed dad to mind that baby. On an airplane it is easy to see why the presence of somebody else's baby and the quality of the food matter to everyone. Back on solid ground, those two concerns might not seem so natural to treat together.

But Barbara Katz Rothman links the two issues and shows why we should care about them, beyond our own private intake and offspring, in her book, A Bun in the Oven: How the Food and Birth Movements Resist Industrialization (New York University Press, 2016). Rothman, distinguished sociologist at the City University of New York, has studied birth practices and advocated midwifery for decades—a movement she entered with her own home birth in 1973—and more recently became interested in the social context of food. Not just what we eat but where it comes from, how it is processed and sold, how it gets tagged with status markers, how small personal decisions about eating get made against the backdrop of manufacture. Her acuity is to put the two issues together, to diagnose problems in both areas as stemming from the same source: industrialization. Eating and birthing, she argues, are important features of life to which violence has been done by standardization, factory processing, profit-seeking—and in which industrialization has gotten pushback from those striving to recover something better. In food, industrialization means crops developed for sameness and shelf stability rather than for flavor or nutrients, grown by methods that denigrate the skills of farmers and cooks, and processing that harms the environment and wastes nutrients. In birth, industrialization means pathologizing the female body, distorting normal variations of human experience, submitting women to hospital rules and machines, and devaluing the skill of midwives.

Rothman notices that “foodies” seem to be having more success than “birthies” and wonders what the latter might learn from the former. Put practically, how could strategies behind some achievements of the food movement—turning us away from Hamburger Helper and Burger King and toward the farmer’s market and the Food Network—be parlayed into paradigm shifts in the way normal births are done? A few food-movement features could be leveraged for “birthie” success, starting with the collaboration of different groups and their efforts to build awareness, what
Rothman names “splashing together” and consciousness raising. Additionally significant is the strength of elites to change opinions. The trickle-down effect of raised tastes has made better food available. By popularizing fancier food, foodies also have cultivated esteem for some old production methods that require specialized skills, thereby elevating those who have this mastery.

Before considering how foodies’ strategies might be appropriated, foodies themselves deserve a little puzzling over. Why did upper-middle class Americans suddenly become more interested in food in the flush years of the late twentieth century? Food so easily could have stayed unglamorous, associated with drudgery and domesticity. A couple of factors came together. People who did not have to be interested in cooking began to be interested, with increased visibility of men as celebrity chefs and discerning diners. We all eat—and when possible prefer to like what we eat—so getting people to see a personal stake in food matters was not that hard. Interest in food avoided mere piggishness by acquiring high moral valence.

This consciousness raising was abetted by some widely publicized books, like Michael Pollan’s The Omnivore’s Dilemma (2007), David Kamp’s The United States of Arugula (2007), and Eric Schlosser’s Fast Food Nation (2012). Films like Super Size Me (2004), Food, Inc. (2008), and Fed Up (2014) helped turn a fad into a movement. Fine-food advocacy managed to hit bunch of right notes while (mostly) skirting pitfalls of self-righteousness. Not mere gluttons or epicures, serious people argued that eating well not only provides enjoyment but boosts health and longevity; it displays refinement, choosing what is choiceworthy; it shows concern for others, for ecology, for labor conditions, for the future of our planet.

All pitfalls have not been avoided. Health and enjoyment in food can work at cross-purposes. The moralizing of your dining pleasure can go awry in many ways. One could say the heightened attention to food simply swapped one kind of gluttony for another, excess exchanged for obsessive concern with delicacy. (Even delicacy has trouble beating back excess, as evidenced by quests for the perfect gourmet fried-chicken sandwich or matcha cream-filled donut.) The difficulty comes in linking one’s private sense that these choices are nicer with a conviction that those choices should sway the behavior of others too. Foodie concern for the earth and the growers is real, and some in the movement care intensely about these and act accordingly. But the reason that most people care about food goes little beyond the belly gods. They like to eat what tastes good. Concern for sustainability is secondary.

This mix of conscience and indulgence has never been easy to balance. A. O. Scott named the contradiction in a New York Times review of The United States of Arugula:

You can glimpse the anxieties and aspirations of a segment of the native bourgeoisie (boomers, yuppies, bobos, whatever) struggling with the burden of cultural hegemony, and struggling also toward a quintessentially American, defiantly utopian goal, namely the reconciliation of pleasure and virtue. It is not just that we want food to taste good and be good for us; we also, with increasing fervor, want it to be the vehicle and symbol of our goodness.

What Scott describes is not just an American problem. There is, though, a specifically American twang to the phenomenon: foodies looking longingly to the Olde Worlde to supply a tradition we lack—the Tuscan, the Catalan, the Provençal—while simultaneously burnishing nostalgia for our own agrarian past.
Ah, that agrarian past. This tension goes clear back to Thomas Jefferson, who bequeathed us this vision, the sage of Monticello importing French haute cuisine and varietals to the Virginia countryside while dubbing farmers the chosen people of God.

Irony ferments within foodies’ contrary loves, the matchmaking of muddy-boots authenticity—locally grown! artisan made!—with that industrial gleam of efficiency and choice. Consider the artisan. Everything gets labeled “artisanal” now, bread, cheese, WheatThins (though the correct expression should be “artisanal,” made by the artisan). The Renaissance drew a hard line between the artisan, that mere craft worker, and the Artist, a genius. Our new respect for the well-made loaf blurs that line, the artisan now honored as the genius, the well-heeled willing to pay well for his mastery of crust and crumb. Elite enthusiasm for elevated peasant cuisine revived appreciation for such work of the hands. Some elite eaters even dabble in these arts themselves, perfecting sourdough, putting up occasional preserves. But that is not daily bread, which most of us still buy at the store.

Because who has time? Mechanization of all that domestic labor frees many to do other jobs, jobs that involve the head more than the hands and feet, jobs that pay better than many works of our hands and allow us to pay someone else to make better bread for us. Nobody forcibly took away our ability to crimp a pie crust or the leisure to do it often. We gave them up voluntarily to do other things. Some might even say they were delivered from this handiwork by industrial processes.

Because we do not all have to grow our own grain and bake our own bread (or, for that matter, weave our own fabric or sew our own clothes) we have time to do other things. This arrangement is not straightforwardly better. Something is lost, both for our bread and for us, when we no longer know how to leaven that lump in our own kitchens. Nevertheless, amnesia about why we once fell hard for canned soup and Rice-a-Roni makes current nostalgia for artisanal bread a little hollow-sounding. Furthermore, disgust for the industrial clangs in contradiction with our hot ardor for the sleek, high-tech automation in so many other areas of life—including the kitchen. How are we to fit together these loves, of the smart fridge that tracks expiration dates and orders groceries, and the carrots we prefer to buy with dirt still clinging to their roots? Okay Google, find an answer while you set the oven timer.

**Trying to inspire one movement with the other, Rothman recognizes that the path to enlightenment has not been direct:**

For both of these movements, one could say it is the best of times and it is the worst of times. It is the age of wisdom, it is the age of foolishness, it is the age of organic kale chips, it is the age of McDonald’s, it is the epoch of belief, it is the epoch of incredulity, it is the moment of the unattended water birth, it is the moment of the elective cesarean section, it is the season of light, it is the season of darkness, it is the time of the rising star of the master chef, it is the time of ubiquitous processed corn, it is the spring of hope, it is the winter of despair.

The food movement might be too complex and checkered in its accomplishments to provide clear inspiration to the birth movement. Still, some elements of that might be instructive for birthies. Foodies’ appeal to aesthetics, their collaboration across related causes, their success at expanding options and elevating tastes might be borrowed readily. But birthies have a much harder time raising consciousness.

The aesthetic appeal seems well suited for advocates of midwife-assisted birth. The appeal of personalized care at the birthing bed is not much less obvious than the appeal of the artisanal loaf. Like better food, better birthing care can be presented not just as a luxury for the few but a good for the many. Rothman reviews the excellent safety record of U.S. midwifery: data for normal births indicate that midwife deliveries are at least as safe, by some measures safer, than doctor-hospital ones. Making hospitals the default setting for births has invited unnecessary intervention. The high incidence of cesarean section, now used in about about a third of American
births, is the most telling evidence of the trends that Rothman rues. Emergency treatment in hospitals is essential in some births. But where this is not needed, midwife births tend to be less costly. Better care at affordable costs sounds like a sustainable package.

Rothman encourages us to stop maligning this birth choice as a quirky preference of the wealthy, conceding, “It is so easy to make fun of the elitism in our movement.” She invites readers to follow a thought experiment. If every woman with over $200,000 in annual family income had a “planned, elective cesarean,” a woman with a $75,000 income who had a “lovely, natural, healthy birth” might feel cheated, even if all the data show the latter option is better. In contrast, “if every woman who made over $200,000 had a midwife and a backup midwife she’d chosen early in her pregnancy, met with regularly throughout, arrive at her home when she went into labor and stay with her until the baby was born,” how would the woman with a lower income feel about her choices “as she had to pack her bag and leave for the hospital in labor”? The birth movement could follow the food movement in persuading elites this care is desirable and hoping the preferences of other women might follow. Changing the tastes of some could swap what is now a culturally dominant option (hospital birth with epidural) with preference for something that could be better for many. Rothman seeks a move from “the medical monopoly over birth…where a woman is expected to joyfully receive the baby the doctor delivers to her from the gaping hole in her abdomen,” to “a world in which a baby grows slowly underneath its mother heart, is birthed in love and in a moment of strength and power.”

The artisanal appeal also applies. The midwife is the artisan of birth. Food analogies are useful again: we are not only thankful to the baker because she gives us more choices for sandwich-making, but because the baker’s skill is valuable and the baker’s bread is good. Helpfully, Rothman places emphasis not just on the birthing woman’s freedom of choice but on the skill a midwife brings. You call a midwife because you need a midwife, not just because you want a choice that identifies yourself as a kind of person who prefers a midwife.

Figuring out how to make personalized, hands-on, respectful care the norm for birth might be a way for birthies, like foodies, to resist industrialization. But is industrialization really the problem with birth? For food, it is somewhat clear how industrialization is the culprit, how “factory farming” harmed eating, and how this resistance movement could help recall something lost. With food, there was a “before” that many could recognize, after raw nature: your grandmother’s table or the table of someone else’s grandmother was a good that could be reclaimed. For birth, industrialization might be part of the problem but is less clearly so. More evidently what changed birth is a certain kind of scientific approach mediated through medicine. It is much more difficult to conjure up a “before” for birth or to generate wide interest in reclaiming it. Reclaiming birth from what is sometimes called the hospital-industrial complex is tricky, since medicine often appears on the side of safety. Birth before heavy-duty medicalization came preloaded with some negatives (pain and infection) along with its obvious life-changing significance; it was a predominantly female event and substantially private. Most of us cannot pull home birth from a usable past.

There was not much of a public way of talking about birth at all until the medicalized way of talking about birth. So there is no ready alternative popular model of birth to swap out for that labor-and-delivery model. This is the uphill task for what Rothman names consciousness raising. Birth matters to everybody, but very few people think about it unless they already have a
stake, as care providers or as expectant parents. Certainly most people think much less frequently about birth than they do about food. Thinking about food every day makes sense, while thinking daily about birth seems like an eccentricity. Why care so much about birth when the whole point is to get that baby out? Who (else) really cares, as long as mother and baby make it through healthy? In conversation birth often moves too quickly from a topic on which one has no opinion to one quickly polemicized; either you have given no thought to how babies are born, or you choose a side decisively and defensively. Somebody else’s birth choice feels like it impugns mine. Your homebirth implies that my emergency c-section for a preterm infant with breathing issues was somehow to be mourned, and my defense of hospital care implies that your bathtub birth was, at best, a little flaky.

The problem for the birth movement is not just figuring out how to normalize gentler modes of birthing, but building some common regard for childbearing. Without that, one’s particular preference about delivery is only that, a private preference. The problem is not so much that birth has been industrialized, or that doctors are involved. The problem is having doctors involved too much, claiming authority to explain and oversee childbearing, rather than only providing services to remedy medical emergencies. A range of circumstances and conditions make families grateful to have able doctors at birth. Still, the explanatory authority belongs elsewhere, to culture, custom, women’s practice, perhaps to religion, and in large parts to midwifery.

Rothman recognizes that in some cases women and babies need care provided by doctors and hospitals, and they should have access to it. But, given the history of midwifery in the United States and its intentional suppression by obstetrics through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, patients should not expect seamless collaboration between the two specialties. In Rothman’s model, if you have a normal pregnancy, you should pick a midwife; if you pick a doctor, even one who shares a practice with nurse-midwives, what you will get is an obstetric kind of care. If you pay that piper, he’ll call the tune, and American women have been paying that particular piper so long that alternatives are not obvious.

Giving due credit, Rothman appreciates that the “foodies have taught us how to think about our food.” That is really the quarry. Not just changing who attends births and where they happen, but how ordinary people think about the whole thing. The way you think about your little bowl of cereal can engage the whole globe. The way you proceed in the hour of birth rests on the rest of life, just as our understanding of a good death hangs with the whole tissue of a life. The connection allows Rothman to demand, “Can it possibly be right that almost every baby begins life in precisely the place almost every older person passionately wants not to end it?” What is at stake in the way births occur, to allow one of Rothman’s chapter titles to draw near the final word, is “Living the Embodied Life.” I don’t think it should be all that hard to persuade people to care how they, personally, came to be, and how the species at large keeps on doing it.

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ON TRANSFORMATION (WITH FIGS)

Wasps stream from the fig in an endless ribbon. The insects hatched in the fruit's hidden garden, hundreds of tiny flowers lining the fig's inner wall. It's a realm accessible through one small passageway, wasp-sized, and only the wasps know it. Once they've emerged,

they can't turn back. Each wasp will find another fruit to enter, a place to lay her eggs. She knows which tree is hers, each species of wasp drawn, intrinsically, to its own species of tree.

A symbiosis 80 million years in the making looks like infestation, the fruit a ruin, the tree past hope. But it's how things survive. It's how the wasp perpetuates her species. It's how she pollinates each tiny fig flower, spreading the microscopic code the fruit needs to set seed, the tree's next incarnation, and how the fig, once the wasps depart, swells and ripens into sweet food for something else.

Kathryn Smith
A New History Museum Tries to Get Religion

James B. LaGrand

The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), the latest history museum to be added to the Mall in Washington, D.C., is approaching its first birthday. It has already proved a massive success. It has drawn well over a million visitors and created a buzz about how to acquire the much-coveted advance online passes.

There's good reason for the museum's popularity. Museum director Lonnie G. Bunch III and his team of curators have done a marvelous job collecting artifacts. The museum has put all these objects to good use in teaching the public about many chapters of African-American history. In some sections, the range of objects is almost dizzying. The museum deftly and thoughtfully addresses both the themes of slavery and freedom, no easy task. It also teaches about a wide range of African Americans through history—not only political activists, but also musicians, writers, business leaders, and more.

The museum features both well-known and lesser-known but significant figures. Lack of agreement between the museum and the family of Martin Luther King Jr. means that there is almost no material related to King. This led some to worry that the museum's exhibits on the civil rights movement might be compromised. Happily, this is not the case. The sections on the movement are full of compelling objects and images that effectively tell many important stories from this time.

The most painful sections are perhaps also some of the most important. The museum does an excellent job impressing on visitors the overwhelming injustice and cruelty of slavery and segregation through objects and text. Many fine books and documentary films address these topics. But for many members of the public, to see the actual manacles used by a slaver or the ax handle used to beat back civil rights protesters will make these chapters of history come alive in a way that sitting at home reading a book or watching television might not. Some of the artifacts displayed by the museum serve as civic relics of some of our nation's lowest and highest moments.

The Emmett Till memorial is among the museum's most moving exhibits and, when I visited, it was also the most popular. As a 14-year-old visiting Mississippi from his Chicago home in 1955, Till was said to have been seen violating the South's racial code by flirting with a white woman. A group of white men lynched and murdered him in response. The exhibit's design is simple. As you approach, you join a line as at a viewing or wake. While waiting to enter the room in which Emmett Till's casket sits, you hear Mahalia Jackson soulfully sing "Trouble of the World." When you finally reach the elevated coffin, viewers tall enough can choose to look inside the casket. It's empty except for the infamous photo Jet magazine published of Emmet Till's body after it was pulled from the Tallahatchie River, face beaten and eye gouged out by his killers. When I visited, some parents chose to have their children walk by the coffin without viewing the picture. Others lifted up their children in their arms to confront the image. Perhaps they
had in mind the words of Emmett’s mother, Mamie Till Mobley, who insisted on an open casket at her son’s funeral in Chicago “so all the world can see what they did to my boy.” The whole time I visited the Emmett Till Memorial exhibit, I was the only white person in line. My brief minority status during this time seemed right to me somehow.

This is a museum for all Americans and all people, but for white visitors in particular there is the opportunity to observe and rub shoulders with fellow citizens. In visiting soon after the museum opened, I was moved by the crowds and their responses. It seemed like all of Black America was there—grandparents with their grandchildren, church groups, school groups, students and alumni from historically black colleges and universities, fraternities, sororities, and more. The words of Langston Hughes’ poem “I, too, sing America” came to mind. For any white Americans who feel that they seldom leave their bubble, a visit to the NMAAHC is an effective antidote.

In several places throughout its five levels of exhibits, the museum explores religion and religious experience in African-American history. Although museums typically do not include a bibliography of resources used in putting together exhibits, there is certainly a vast range of scholarly materials that curators could consult on this topic. Indeed, some of the most important figures in African-American history have written about religion and the Black church in particular. Carter G. Woodson, the “Father of Negro History,” was a virtual one-man history industry—writer, publisher, and event planner—throughout his life. Woodson founded the Journal of Negro History in 1916, and in 1926 he launched the annual celebration of Negro History Week, which later became Black History Month. In fact, without Woodson it is hard even to imagine the new museum on the Mall. Among Woodson’s books is The History of the Negro Church, published in 1921, in which he emphasizes the many roles played by the Black church—religious, political, economic, educational, and more.

Woodson wrote as a Baptist, but W. E. B. Du Bois serves as a reminder that even those critical or agnostic about Black popular religion can be knowledgeable about it. While not a church member, Du Bois remained curious about the Black church. In The Souls of Black Folk (1903), Du Bois criticized much of African-American Christianity for its emotional style and other-worldly focus. But he clearly understood it, describing at length the central role played by Black churches and preachers, and writing that “the study of Negro
religion is not only a vital part of the history of the Negro in America, but no uninteresting part of American history” (Du Bois, 193).

Beyond these iconic figures, historians such as Eugene Genovese, Donald Mathews, and Albert Raboteau have produced important, award-winning work on African-American religion and religious life during the nineteenth century.

Sermons, prayers, and songs of Black Christians during the Second Great Awakening repeatedly referenced Peter’s words from the book of Acts that “God is no respecter of persons” as far as station or rank in society. All are equal before God.

They have shown us that Africans brought to the Americas in chains as slaves remarkably ended up transforming Christianity in the New World. Some scholars have argued that American evangelicism would be unrecognizable without the contributions of African Americans in the nineteenth century. The central emphasis they took from Christianity had to do with their status and dignity before God. Many slaves came to recognize that Christianity “proclaimed the freedom and inviolability of the human soul,” in the words of Eugene Genovese (Genovese, 167). This idea was revolutionary both for slaves and their masters who often tried unsuccessfully to control how slaves received Christian teaching.

Religious movements among African Americans especially took off with the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century. The religious style it promoted—direct, non-hierarchical, and democratic—especially affected Baptists and Methodists, both white and Black. The number of Black Methodists in the United States grew from 3,800 in 1786 to nearly 32,000 by 1809, and Black Baptists from 18,000 in 1793 to 40,000 in 1813 (Galli). In considering the Christian faith, slaves had always had to reconcile its teachings about hierarchy and obedience with its message about social leveling. The Second Great Awakening seemed to tilt this balance. Sermons, prayers, and songs of Black Christians during this time repeatedly referenced Peter’s words from the book of Acts that “God is no respecter of persons” as far as station or rank in society. All are equal before God.

Black Christians emphasized that God is active in the world. Like so much else in Black American popular religion, this emphasis emerged from a mixture of old and new. Supernatural protection was a part of many traditional African religions. In the New World, Blacks drawn to Christianity focused on passages in the Bible that described God delivering his people collectively from oppression. This led to the popularity of millennial movements that anticipated God’s working in history.

In thinking about God’s actions in history, Black Christians tended to draw on biblical types and to interpret their own lives and times in light of them (much like the early Christians.) Many spirituals focused on Moses, Jonah, Daniel, and the Exodus. “Go Down Moses” and “Didn’t my Lord Deliver Daniel” are still sometimes part of worship services for believers today and more broadly remain a part of American popular culture.

The egalitarianism that African Americans emphasized in the Christian faith led slave owners to try to control and restrict slaves’ religious activities. But at secret services and prayer meetings during the week away from watchful eyes, Black Christians further made their faith their own. They preached, prayed, and sang—in a quiet whisper if they thought spies might be near, but in Spirit-fueled shouts if given the freedom.

Clearly, then, those putting together exhibits on African-American religious history have a lot of material to draw on. Especially given this, the NMAAH’s various exhibits on the Black church end up disappointing. The picture is not uniformly bad. The museum displays some remarkable artifacts and quotations that capture the power and influence of religious beliefs for African Americans over the past 200
years or so. But artifacts and quotes do not stand by themselves in museums. Curators use text panels of 100 words or less to contextualize artifacts and to provide a narrative line allowing visitors to navigate big, sprawling exhibits.

And herein lies the problem. In the sections at the NMAAHC on Christianity and the Black church, there is a striking contrast between the quotes and text panels. The museum’s problem getting or understanding religion lies not in its choice of subjects, nor in the quotes or artifacts chosen, but in the content of its text panels. A few examples of the contrast between quotes (both those used in the museum and other well-known, representative quotes) and text panels will demonstrate the pattern.

The influential abolitionist and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church member David Walker (1796-1830) is one of the museum’s subjects. Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, published in 1829, held nothing back in documenting the barbarism of American chattel slavery. Throughout, Walker contrasted slavery to the principles of both republicanism and Christianity. About the defenders of slavery, Walker wrote:

> They forget that God rules in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, having his ears continually open to the cries, tears, and groans of his oppressed people; and being a just and holy Being will at one day appear fully in behalf of the oppressed, and arrest the progress of the avaricious oppressors.

The museum includes another well-known quote from elsewhere in Walker’s *Appeal*: “America is more our country...we have enriched it with our blood and tears.”

Compare Walker’s words with the text panel in the exhibit entitled “To Seek”:

Enslaved African Americans made a way out of no way by holding fast to their faith. Slave owners promoted Christianity as a means of control, but African Americans found ways to make it their own. Diverse faith practices helped enslaved Africans Americans survive the shared experience of slavery. Through word and song, dance and prayer, enslaved communities were strengthened by faith.

Next consider Nat Turner (1800-1831), leader of the violent and bloody slave rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831 and another of the museum’s subjects. Turner was a deeply religious young man who spent countless hours secretly praying, fasting, and reading his Bible (on display at the museum) while waiting on visions from God. Turner recounts in his *Confessions* his third vision that launched his rebellion:

> I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.

Turner’s last line above, referencing the words of Jesus as recounted in Matthew 20:16, is included prominently at the museum. Now compare Turner’s words with the text panel in the “Religion” exhibit:

Enslaved and free, African Americans found themselves in a world that was hostile at best. Harnessing the transformative power of religion, they worked to restore justice. Many became active in Christian churches, moved by evangelical messages emphasizing God’s love. Others pulled from western African traditions including Christianity, Islam, and indigenous faiths. Each religion helped build an identity beyond slavery and discrimination.

One more of the museum’s historical subjects to be noted here is Harriet Tubman (c. 1820-1913), the AME church member who after escaping slavery devoted herself to helping other slaves escape.
The museum contains an exhibit with a picture of Tubman, her hymnal, and a quote by her on the wall: “God’s time is always near.... He set the North Star in the heavens: he meant I should be free.”

Nearby, the text panel for “Anti-Slavery—To Effect Change” reads:

Between 1820 and 1861 abolitionists changed America. They were few in number, had little access to political power, and did not always share common beliefs about the future of African Americans. Their tactics also varied. The American Anti-Slavery Society publicized the horrors of slavery. The radical abolitionists reached for political power and endorsed antislavery candidates Black and white. Others, such as Harriet Tubman and John Brown, took direct action.

So what is the difference between the language of the individuals quoted by the museum and the language on the text panels? The words about religion and religious experience from Walker, Turner, and Tubman bristle with energy. In contrast, the words on many of the text panels are vague, abstract, and sterile. Written in the language of “social-science-speak,” these text panels end up flattening and taming religion.

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This is wrong, bizarrely wrong even, given the subject matter. In their time, David Walker, Nat Turner, and Harriet Tubman were compelling and notorious. They all divided opinion. More than this, Turner led one of the most ambitious and deadly slave revolts in American history. After receiving the last of his visions in the summer of 1831, Turner and a group of followers killed fifty-five whites in southern Virginia before being caught and executed and initiating a time of white mob violence against local blacks. The various degrees of controversy that Turner and many other museum subjects engendered centered on how they responded to their religious beliefs. Unfortunately, this point is lost in many of the museum’s text panels on the subject. Too many of these panels are tone deaf and biblically illiterate and, as a result, do not help us to better know and understand their subjects.

Yes, African-American Christians (like all Christians) were moved by messages “emphasizing God’s love.” More important, though, was the social levelling in Christianity—that God is no respecter of persons, that he drowns Pharaoh and his army, but rescues his children. The biblical types and patterns that filled the messages, prayers, and songs of Black Christians during the nineteenth century (and since then) are missing from text panels at the museum.

Too often, these panels miss the main point, especially this: even while enslaved, African-American Christians came to know and celebrate their full and equal humanity, and they connected this to being children of God. There is remarkably little mention about this at the museum, nor about the democratic influence of the Second Great Awakening. Instead, visitors read anodyne statements about the “transformative power of religion,” and truly head-scratching lines about how the Bible and gospel songs helped Black Christians “find grace in their communities.”

The language on the text panels on religious topics never seems sure-footed. This leads to some confusion about the role of the church during the civil rights movement. In the exhibit “Upon this Rock—The Role of Black Churches,” a text panel states: “All civil rights organizations recognized the vital importance of Black churches and sought to work with them whenever possible.” The suggestion here is that the movement developed first, by itself, and that then it discovered there were churches and church people to make use of. This gets the role of the church and Christianity in the movement backwards, as many historians have demonstrated.
In general, the museum takes a functional approach to religion and especially to Christianity. Many of the summative statements on text panels suggest that the primary purpose of religion through history was to play a part in making the world a better place and to serve as a vehicle for social movements. This view might be popular in many circles today. But it does not do justice to the experiences of countless religious believers now and in the past. It especially compromises the telling of African-American history.

Granted, it is difficult to communicate fully within the confines of a 100-word text panel. But this challenge does not prevent curators at the museum from writing effective text panels on many topics that address politics, social structure, economics, the arts, and yes, even religion in African-American history. For example, the text panel for the exhibit on Father Divine, leader of a religious sect popular during the 1930s, is very well done. So too the panel on the Nation of Islam, which reads:

W. Fard Muhammad founded the Nation of Islam in Detroit in 1930. Four years later Elijah Muhammad succeeded him as the group’s leader. He oversaw the operation of schools, religious centers, businesses, and a newspaper, *The Final Call to Islam*. African Americans, the group believed, should return to Islam and ‘teach the downtrodden and defenseless Black people a thorough Knowledge of God and of themselves, and to put them on the road to Self-Independence.’ This message appealed strongly to many African Americans.

The statement is lively, accurate, and informed by the writings of Black Muslims themselves. A contemporary member of the Nation of Islam would likely recognize himself in this panel. Unfortunately, that’s often not the case with the museum’s panels on the Black church. Something more than a word limit, then, is to blame for the unsatisfactory panels on the Black church and African-American Christianity.

The claims made here about the NMAAHC’s exhibits on the Black church are in keeping with other recent findings about the place of religion in American life. Evidence suggests that there is a growing gap in understanding, perception, and identity between religious and non-religious Americans (Beinart). The NMAAHC is yet another example of this trend.

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No longer do we expect today that American adults will necessarily be conversant with the main themes of Christianity and the Bible. Indeed, it is common today for influential figures in the media, higher education, entertainment, and the arts to broadcast both their lack of knowledge and lack of interest in Christianity—even as a cultural phenomenon.

This is part of what several writers and cultural critics recently have described as our emerging “post-Christian culture.” The term is multi-faceted and debated, but among other things, it refers to a widespread lack of familiarity with Christianity and the Bible, as well as the weakening of Christianity as a cultural force. Both trends are on display at the NMAAHC. The museum professionals there by all accounts are well educated and well trained and have done fine work on many exhibits. When it comes to writing about Christianity and religious belief more generally, though, they act as if this is their third or fourth language. They are not alone in this...
tendency. In recent years, media figures have regularly displayed their biblical illiteracy, even about things as central as the passion, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Demographic data about religion may provide another clue to explaining the uncertain and awkward way in which some exhibits at the NMAAHC talk about this subject. The Pew Research Center’s recent study on America’s religious landscape shows growing numbers of “nones,” those who report having no religious affiliations. Although this secular trend has affected whites more than Blacks, even the number of young, Black “nones” is increasing. As Emma Green reported in the Atlantic, only about 10 percent of Black Americans fifty and older state that their religion is “none” compared with about 33 percent of Blacks between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine.

For various reasons, then, religious belief has become a foreign country to many Americans today. This is not only a problem for clergy and religious believers. Anyone interested in accurately understanding other people will be handicapped if they reflexively dismiss religion. New York Times executive editor Dean Baquet recently recognized this, acknowledging in an interview: “I think that the New York-based and Washington-based… media powerhouses don’t quite get religion…. We don’t get the role of religion in people’s lives.”

THERE MAY BE SOME GOOD NEWS ON THE horizon, though, at least as far as history museums are concerned. Recently, the National Museum of American History (next-door to the NMAAHC) announced it was hiring Peter Manseau as its first curator of American religious history. This may bode well for how history museums in general treat religion. Manseau outlined his goals in an interview last October with S. Brent Plate, explaining that he wants to “engage with religion as a subject of vital significance” and “tell stories about religion that feel inclusive and welcoming.” Clearly, Manseau believes these two goals—communicating the vitality of religion in the past and attending to inclusivity and diversity—are mutually reinforcing. An examination of NMAAHC’s treatment of African-American Christianity, though, shows this is not necessarily the case.

For the last thirty years or so, we have become accustomed to seeing diversity regularly invoked at schools, museums, and other centers of culture. For some, the word communicates a set of political bona fides, but “diversity” as the word is often used today does not necessarily help us with the goals of history—describing and understanding the past. Instead, it can function as an empty shibboleth. What’s more, an irony has developed as the word has become more ubiquitous. If everything becomes part of the diversity project, history ends up being homogenized and flattened. Everything becomes diverse. This word—increasingly common in our lexicon today—does not do much to help us actually try to understand the past, the goal of history museums. Several times while visiting the NMAAHC, I wondered about how some of the museum’s subjects might respond to this contemporary trend. How would Marcus Garvey or James Brown, for example, respond if they found out that their life’s work could be put within the framework of “diversity?” My guess is that they would have words with us.

Unfortunately, the NMAAHC’s reliance on diversity and other abstract categories ends up muddying our understanding of the role of reli-
igion in African-American history. This is indeed a problem, but this is not to say that the museum is a failure. Far from it. It is a remarkable success story that has justly earned its popularity. If anything, the museum's many strengths and virtues make its problem in treating religious people and religious themes in African-American history stand out in contrast.

Moreover, the museum's difficulty in getting religion is not unique. It's of a piece with the challenge always facing historians trying to accurately understand people in the past who differed from contemporaries in significant ways. One of the most important differences between many Americans today and people like David Walker and Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman centers on religious faith and identity. If we continue following the trend that dismisses or minimizes or abstracts religion, we will end up dodging some of the all-important "why" questions of history. Why, in fact, did Walker and Turner and Tubman act as they did? To address these types of questions fully, the NMAAHC and other history museums will need to work hard to get the role of religion in the lives of people who came before us.

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Works Cited


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THE HOST

Vast furry-edged things, they spread (pyrite-colored)  
Across the black skillet.  
Rising into disks as thick as a thumbs, they showed  
Cysts of almonds, grains of sweet cooked rice,  
The blurred loads of blue berries.  
I've known men to make pancakes like pretty rooms,  
Like silver dollars, like gaskets  
Frying up so neatly they shine picture-perfect and stink  
Of the pop-music of margarine  
And Betty Crooker cake-mix,  
But seeing my brother make pancakes is watching  
A man mixing up a gigantic yomp of batter  
(Hands sunk into eggs, into whole-grain flour,  
Into the fattest kind of cream),  
And eating his pancakes is chewing the world:  
Pans concert and clang. Steam scuds the room, laced  
With whiffs of hot butter and vanilla,  
And I know (when I am not looking—there beside the window  
That glimpses a patch of the Hudson)  
My brother stirs the river into the pancakes.  
He ladles in the metallic brown water, and so he takes  
The river's voice, beats in  
As well the calls of the gulls, adds in the slow measures  
Of slug-colored tugs numerous now  
As they nudge the currents North toward White Plains.  
And the barrio (Inwood)—what else crackles in my mouth  
But the cheer of Dominican voices rising up  
From the gush of Spanish streets? All descend into a taste of cloves,  
Where garlic should not be and goes  
Jacketed in a lacquer of honey.
Mornings like these, the city moving into autumn,
After breakfast, my brother takes off
The creased slacks he's worn all night. He hangs the noose
Of his tie (its tin-cross pin shining
Like a target) on the hook in the hall.

The Bible in his hand is whiter than ivory. Its golden pages flash—
Too brightly to be real. Still, he puts it
On the shelf where it fits like a missing tooth.
He's preached all night on the A Train.
All night his voice has tolled up the car:

"Kneel down with me," he has said. "Lay your hands here
Inside my own." "I come in that holy name."
"Come as I come to tell you: you are not alone."
Pressed close, thuggish with wishes, gripping
Their bags to their chests, only the mad meet his eyes.

He goes on: hands great and open, face wet with belief.
Mornings, he tells me how he succeeds:
How there comes a man or woman up to him
Stinking in the shreds of thrown off clothes,
And they pray. They take his hands....

"Because they are hungry," I tell him. "Because they are sick."
"Because you give them money,
And come home empty-handed." And he does come home
With an empty voice:
And eyes as empty as red stained glass,

But the grocery bags are full of eggs, raisins, almonds, prunes.
And as the pan grows red hot, these fall:
Dropping into the batter, dollop after dollop,
And now, he clunks down the syrup's silver can,
The butter's block, the jam. And here is the Host.

Andrew D. Miller
Deaf in the Brain

Gary Fincke

The Last Time My Father Drove

Coming home from church, my father ran over a rock, one large enough to gash his gas tank. He drove two miles, parked in the driveway, and hobbled to the mailbox to retrieve the Sunday newspaper. His neighbor, standing in his own driveway to wash his car, waved, then shouted, “Bill, you spill some gasoline over there?”

My father shook his head, but his neighbor hurried over and showed him the thin trail of gasoline that stretched into the street and down toward the highway. When my father looked confused, his neighbor told him to put the car in neutral and steer while he pushed it into the street. My father didn’t move, but he let his neighbor open the car door and do as he pleased. In a minute the car was parked along the curb. “Bill,” his neighbor said, “look at all that gas on the ground. You’re lucky you didn’t blow yourself up. What did you run over?”

My father said he thought he’d run over an animal, a raccoon maybe, something more substantial than a rabbit.

“Most likely a rock or a piece of metal,” his neighbor said.

My father, when he told me this story, claimed he hadn’t seen anything, but his neighbor acted as if he’d run over a boulder. “He made me feel like a little boy,” my father complained. “He said he had your number, and he would give you a call. Like I’d peed my pants or something.”

“He was just worried, Dad.”

“He was more than worried. He said, ‘You can’t be driving this car anywhere.’”

I didn’t argue. But we both knew that neighbor was aware my father, three weeks earlier, had driven into the curb when he’d tried to enter a gas station. My father, who had refused glasses for a decade, had explained that the light was bad. A bent axle. A tow and repair, the tank half full like it always was when my father bought to make sure he never ran low. He’d driven that car just once since getting it back from the body shop, to church the week before, taking roads he knew so well, he said, he could get there and back with his eyes closed.

The Last Time My Father Sat Behind the Wheel

After I sold the car for my father, and after I hired someone to mow his lawn and trim his shrubbery, my father took to sitting on his porch like a sentry. “The empty driveway makes it look like nobody lives here anymore,” he said. “Before you know it, there will be kids breaking in.”

“The grass is kept, Dad,” I said. “The newspapers aren’t piling up. You’re not the only one without a car.”

“Those others never learned to drive. Those others never had their car taken away like they were idiots who forgot how.”

I nodded at my Prius and said, “You want to drive mine for a bit? Up and down the street, maybe to the convenience store. I’ll keep watch so you have an extra set of eyes.”

“Don’t you say one word, and it’s a deal.”

So I didn’t, letting him sit behind the wheel and stew for a few seconds before asking for the key. “Just press the brake and push that button,” I said. “Like it’s a toy?”

“In a way,” I said. “It’s that simple.”
"No clutch either?"
"Just nudge that lever into drive and we're off."
My father muttered and fumed and pressed the start button. "Not that simple," he said. "It didn't turn over."
"Yes, it did, Dad. Trust me. Take your foot off the brake and we'll go."
And we did, very slowly because my father was suddenly afraid. "This thing goes by itself," he said.
"Almost."
"That's not driving. This is like sitting in a wheelchair." He pressed the brake and kept his foot there. "Now shut this fool thing off and let's go sit on the porch and keep the thieves away."

The Last Time My Father Recited

My father asked me if I could recite the Gettysburg Address. "Four score and seven years ago," I said. "That's about it."
"That's what I thought," he said. "You have a watch on. Time me."
"You know it all?"
"You can follow along from this copy if you want, but keep your eye on your watch."
When he finished, he said, "How long?"
"Just over three minutes."
"They say Lincoln did it in two minutes and forty seconds," he said. "I want to do it exactly the same."
A half hour later, he said, "Time me."
"Only eight seconds off, Dad," I said when he finished.
"I did it right to the second once when I was by myself. It was like getting a hole in one when nobody's around."
A half hour later, he said, "Time me."

The Last Time My Father Talked about the War

My father, sixty-six years from the draft for World War II, touched his ear and said, "This thing is why we're here," beginning a story about his failed physical, the moment when a doctor said a ruined ear meant he could ride back to my mother and ordinary work.
"I took the physical with my friend Al Perkowski. He passed and I didn't. He was killed in Italy. Two good ears, and then he was dead."

I didn't say a word as I looked at the photograph of Al Perkowski in his uniform. "1942," was handwritten beneath it in the old album. "McConnell's Mills."
My father was in the adjoining photo, standing beside my mother wearing a t-shirt and baggy pants. My father took the album back and closed it. "Al and me would have stuck together over there. When I heard the news, I knew right away that I would have been killed with Al," he said. "This ear saved my life and yours."

The Last Time I Heard My Father Sing

On the way to his ninetieth birthday dinner, my father sang three hymns aloud from the passenger seat. All four verses of each. If the restaurant had been any farther from his house, my wife and I would have heard a fourth, a fifth, or even a sixth. Once inside the crowded restaurant, I posed with him while my wife took pictures. So did my two sons and seven year-old grandson. After the photo session, I smothered his singing with appetizers and buttered rolls. I ordered him salmon so chewing with his false teeth wouldn't be an issue, and he would concentrate on cleaning his plate. I followed him to the bathroom as he struggled with his walker. Because he remembered what we said for no more than ten minutes, I showed him the photographs of his other great-grandchildren...
twice as if I'd just remembered to pull them from an envelope. But when the cake arrived, the candles extinguished with six blows, he began to hum as we ate our slices, and I braced myself for a rendition of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

However, on this day in mid-May, as if he had become a version of himself from before I was born, he began a ballad full of the sort of old-fashioned double-entendres and innuendos that would make my grandchildren snicker in a few years.

I am a young Scotsman from America
The kilt is my pleasure it's true
You can call it a skirt, but your lady will flirt
If she has a chance she'll leave you.

He grew confident, none of us at the table interrupting. His voice took on a resonance I hadn't heard in several years.

I have no red hair, but my skin is quite fair
But it does nothing to show off my pride
But my Scottish family tree, I wear on me
And it makes the ladies giggle and sigh

By now diners at nearby tables were looking our way. All of them sat with forks poised.

I feel like a man both noble and strong
When I dance my kilt swishes in time.
But I must confess, it's for the ladies I dress
And undress too. Is that a crime? *

He carried on for two more risqué verses, but when he stopped, the people at adjacent tables applauded, and so did all of us at our table. I was certain he hadn't missed a word.

The Last Time I Visited My Father in His House

In late September, in the basement of his church, I played dart ball with him for the first time in forty-four years. The other players were nearly all strangers because it had been that long since I was in high school and went with my father on Monday nights to throw darts underhand from twenty feet away at a board marked with diamond-shaped targets for all the ordinary possibilities of a baseball game.

There were six teams playing on three boards, and though the basement was noisy with good-natured dart ball jock talk, it felt empty because none of the teams had more than four players, a few with only three, about half the numbers I remembered from the 1960s. The men who were playing against my father's team asked if I wanted to be in the lineup.

Though it made the whole league seem suspect, I jumped at the chance. I underhanded a dozen darts at the board and declared myself ready. A few minutes later I was relieved when I got my first hit and then another. I managed a home run early in the second game, earning some high fives from the truck driver, the machinist, and the construction worker who had shown up that night.

When I played dart ball during high school, my father was among the league's best players. He held records for home runs in a season and consecutive home runs, once throwing six in a row into the tiny home run diamond that most men were pleased to hit one time in ten. Now, in order to take his turn, my father, at ninety, balanced himself by holding onto his walker with one hand while someone from his team handed him darts that he lobbed toward the board. As often as not, his darts fell short of the board, and everyone cheered when, during the third game, he managed to lay one into the home run.

My father, when I asked how his team was doing on the drive back to his house, said it "had won both halves." There were a few early Halloween decorations in front of houses, but the leaves were still mostly green on nearly every tree. The league begins in September and runs into March. The first half ends just before Christmas. Six months earlier, when I had asked him how his team had done, he had answered exactly the same way, even though I held a program that declared his team near the bottom for both halves.

When we were back in his living room, he showed me a newly framed photograph of his family when he looked to be about fourteen. "When was this taken?" I asked, and he shook his head. I tried to work out the date by using the ages of his sister and three brothers. I knew when each
had been born except the youngest, who I remem­
ered as about ten years younger than my father.
“How much younger than you was Ed?” I said,
and my father shook his head again. His guesses
for the ages of his siblings in the photo were off by
two or three years. “Who gave you this?” I asked
at last.

“Somebody brought it.”

“A relative?”

“Somebody.”

He held the picture up to the light as if an
answer was there. My father, without prompting,
said, “It’s like going deaf in your brain. You know
there are voices, but they’re all mumbling.” He
pulled the walker close and heaved himself up. “I
have something I want you to see,” he said. It took
him a minute to navigate the hall.

In my sister’s old room there were slides set in
rows on a stand with a light behind it. “Look,” my
father said. “Who’s this?”

I squinted, unable to tell. He handed it to me.
“It’s you.” The slides were unlabeled. He passed me
three more, and each time I had to ask what I was
seeing. I remembered that once there had been a
magnifying glass nearby and a mini-projector that
was hand held.

My sister’s old closet was open, and I noticed
two large cans I recognized had been salvaged
from my father’s long-closed bakery. I asked my
father if one of them held the coin collection
I’d begun in fifth grade and forgotten about by
seventh. “I didn’t take them with me when I grad­
uated from high school. Mom said I’d just spend
them so she kept them some place.” The coins
were half a century older now, likely more valu­
able, though I couldn’t be sure. There were dozens
from the 1800s, still circulated in the late 1950s
by people making exact change when they bought
cakes and pies and bread. I could see the images
on them, the standing Liberty, the buffalo. Now
they seemed ancient, like something you’d find
inside a pyramid.

My father said, “You’ll have them when I’m
gone,” handing me another slide to puzzle over.
“You make sure to keep all of these when the time
comes,” he added, and then it was time to drive the
200 miles home.

The Last Time I Visited My Father

The last time I visited my father I had my wife
pull off the road at Climax, the drive-thru strip
cub sixty miles from the senior center where
he lived. “We have other things to do today,” she
reminded me. “This will always be here,” but I’d
thought about taking a closer look since I’d learned
about the drive-thru nature of it, and now it was
winter, a few days before Christmas, and so early
I told her this was our best chance to visit because
it couldn’t possibly be open despite one set of tire
tracks in the overnight snow. A customer at eight
a.m.? More likely, an employee.

“Be quick then,” she said, and we glided
through the entrance. I was fascinated, concen­
trating. Surely, this was an improbable business,
the only one I’d ever heard of where men, from
the convenience of their cars, could pay to watch a
woman undress behind a window. Something like
banking, like choosing breakfast on an English
muffin or croissant, or briefly viewing the recently
dead from the driver’s seat.

The door, I fancied, would lift like lingerie in
the hands of a lover. I tried to estimate how much
viewing time something like five dollars might buy
before the window was covered. Whether men
spent ten dollars or even more to keep the woman
in view. Whether they reached for themselves as
they watched or whether they waited for that plea­
sure or resisted completely, filing the image away
like old photographs and newspaper clippings.

My wife parked and I opened my door. A cam­
era memorized our car, but it wasn’t trained on
where I tried the door like a woman late for work.
The heavy growl of speeding trucks sounded so

In my sister’s old room there were
slides set in rows on a stand with a
light behind it. “Look,” my father
said. “Who’s this?”

close I began to imagine a flurry of customers or
a patrol car carrying two curious policemen. My
wife opened her door. “Finished?” she said.
An hour later, my father and I played Crokinole, a board game resembling shuffleboard with a circle of pegs to complicate finger-snapped shots with wooden rings. The game was full of pauses as my father occasionally nodded off, sometimes with his finger poised behind his next ring. As if there were commercials interspersed.

He seemed animated now, beginning to name everybody in the photographs. “There’s Ray and Bud, Fritz and Ted.” His head drooped for half a minute before his eyes opened again. “Jack and Ad,” he finished. “I remember all the nicknames.”

As if he’d left the room while they played and then returned exactly at the moment when the game resumed, his eyes opening, his head coming up, his finger releasing in a remarkably consistent way.

Muscle memory, I thought, but while I found myself wishing him a run of successful shots, some temporary joy, I was convinced there wasn’t enough oxygen reaching his brain.

We managed to finish two games, the shortest session we’d ever played. I guided his wheelchair into the bathroom for the second time in an hour. Exhausted seemed a euphemism for how he looked. When he lapsed into silence, I lifted an old photo album from a shelf and asked him about the girl posed beside him in half a dozen photos labeled 1938 and 1939.

“Ginnie,” he said at once. “Virginia. She liked to have a good time.”

“What happened to her?” I asked.

“She was special, but she was Catholic so she was just a pal.” He seemed animated now, beginning to name everybody in the photographs. “There’s Ray and Bud, Fritz and Ted.” His head drooped for half a minute before his eyes opened again. “Jack and Ad,” he finished. “I remember all the nicknames.”

“It’s kind of like Lucky Cows Drink Milk.”

My father brightened, closing the album. “You know that saying. Good. It helps you remember your Roman numerals.”

“They’ve started to come in handy for the Super Bowl,” I said.

“LaVerne, Maxine, and Patricia,” he said. “You know who they are?”

“No.”

“The Andrews Sisters. Isn’t that something? I know their names like they went to school with me, and I can’t remember to tie my own shoes.”

“It’s like that for everybody eventually.”

“It’s like wearing a name tag so you can remember who you are.” He nodded off, and this time, when he snapped back, he needed to use the bathroom again.

“I know you’re busy,” he said when he was finished. “You don’t have to humor me.” When I returned the album to the shelf, I paged ahead and took one more look at Al Perkowski.

Returning home, we passed Climax during the early evening. One car was re-entering the highway, but despite the expanse of space surrounding the viewing area, I didn’t see any others in line or parked. Was it, in fact, closed all together, that driver disappointed?

My wife said nothing. We could have driven up and seen for ourselves, but it was unthinkable, and anyway, she was driving and had an excuse for keeping her eyes forward. I conjured a rationalization that began, “We only spent ten minutes there;” but she never brought it up again.

The Last Time I Talked to My Father

I made my Christmas phone call in the afternoon when I knew my sister would be in his room and answer the phone. “Merry Christmas,” I shouted.

“Good,” he answered, plainly unable to make out my words.

“The boys are here,” I tried.

“Good,” he repeated.

And so it went, my father answering “Good” as if it was a period at the end of my paragraphs about my children and grandchildren, whatever the news.
“Good,” he said for the beginnings and ends of relationships.
“Good,” he said for their pleasures and dissatisfaction with jobs.
Though sometimes I knew he’d nodded off, that his silence wasn’t indifference or impatience, that if I counted to twenty or thirty he would say “Good” and I could tell him one more story before I encouraged him to enjoy his turkey and stuffing and pumpkin pie.

The Last Time I Saw My Father

A week later, returning for the viewing that preceded my father’s funeral, I made myself look at the driveway to the Climax booth. If I had averted my eyes, I would have been sick of myself. Instead, I was merely ashamed. My wife, if she looked, said nothing to confirm it.

My father, who had been a scoutmaster for nearly sixty years, was laid out among the flowers in his Boy Scout uniform. “What Daddy asked for,” my sister said while I examined the sewn-on badges and the three medals displayed just above my father’s folded hands, all of them featuring likenesses of animals.

A small line of old men in what looked to be half century-old suits shook my hand and pretended to hear me, some of them with wives who corrected their answers and assured me my father was in heaven. An hour into the viewing I noticed my sister’s husband walk in wearing a gray parka that he slipped off to reveal he was wearing a red sweater circled by two rings of green and white prancing reindeer.

“He was watching his football game,” my sister said, and I felt my fists clench. After he shook my hand, he announced that one team already had a two touchdown lead. “It’s just the end of the first quarter,” he said, “so it still might get interesting.”

“For whom?” I said.

My sister’s husband looked perplexed. “You don’t follow college football?”

I thought of a string of curses, but opted for “Not tonight.”

Fifteen minutes later my sister stepped close to tell me, “Danny thought you’d want to know nothing’s changed. He said you’d understand.” She pivoted to greet three strangers who turned out to be my father’s neighbors. I shook their hands and allowed my sister to speak, which gave me time to spot the red sweater leaving the viewing room.

“Excuse me,” I said, and I followed him until I could see him disappear down a flight of stairs. Half way down myself, I could see into an office where there was a small television showing the game. I retreated, and when Daniel reappeared, announcing the half time score as if he’d placed a bet, I began to count the green and white reindeer that circled the sweater, losing my place when my brother-in-law turned. I started over, then lost count again while their knitted hooves lifted as if prancing in snow.

A man leaning on two canes told me that he was older than my father and yet he’d outlived him, giving his age in years and months and days, getting the score so exact I could count the hours since the old man had won that wager with himself.

I began to count the green and white reindeer that circled the sweater, losing my place when my brother-in-law turned. I started over, then lost count again while their knitted hooves lifted as if prancing in snow.

In the car my wife said, “Daniel works at a college…” and I knew she was about to launch an attack on the hideous sweater. “So you get my point,” she went on, and she began to concentrate on retracing the route to our motel.

During the funeral service, at the end of my eulogy that I’d typed out in order to make certain I said exactly what I wanted the attendees to hear about my father’s virtues, his life of self-discipline and his work ethic and faith, I ended by reading my thirty-one-line poem about my mother’s death that my father had memorized and often recited for more than twenty years. An hour after my father’s burial—you can’t make this up—the first dart I threw landed dead center, home run, in the
board my father's minister set up in the basement of the church as a way of celebrating his love for the game. My sons had never thrown the large, wooden darts with feathers, let alone thrown any dart underhanded. They managed to hit a scattering of singles and triples because they didn't throw straight enough to find the home run and double that were aligned in the middle of the board.

It took me fourteen more darts to lay another one into the home run.

The Last Mail I Received from My Father

In mid-January, two weeks after the funeral, a letter I'd sent my father months earlier showed up in my mailbox. The original postmark was dated November 13. The address was correct and legible. There was sufficient postage. "Not at this address," the envelope was stamped without irony.

There were photographs inside, and most of my letter was an effort to explain to my father just who was featured in those photos because they were all photos of grandchildren, one of which he'd never seen in person. After all, I'd told myself in November, hadn't I recently carried home from my father's house a large box of unlabeled photographs when he'd gone into the nursing home? I'd spent a few hours picking through photos of dozens upon dozens of people whose names I would likely never know.

"Grandson Gavin on our living room floor with his robots," one caption read because my father hadn't traveled to our house for ten years and might wonder just where that jumble of small toys happened to be.

"Granddaughters Raea and Sabina ready for the school Halloween parade," another photo was labeled in order to explain why my daughter's children, ages five and two, were dressed like Dorothy and her dog, Toto. Or even just who Sabina was, since, at two years old, she'd changed so rapidly from the photos I'd shown him in late summer.

"Sabina as a bee for Halloween," another one read, this time to make sure he knew it was the same girl in a different costume, someone enjoying two celebrations because costumes were all the rage with her and her older sister.

My wife posted each of those photographs on our refrigerator just below the ones from the ninetieth birthday celebration. I looked at them each time I opened the door. And each time I reread that letter, I felt embarrassed at how hasty it seemed, how brief and routine, as if there were years more in which to visit.

We'll see you again "before too long," that letter ended, the easy phrase sounding like the phony promises people make about visiting those they have little intention of seeing again. Even the stationery, an obsolete sheet with an outdated logo from where I work, seemed like reproach.

The last time my wife and I had visited I'd looked for those photos, figuring they'd been left in the envelope and were in danger of being lost in the stack of Christmas cards piling up on a table. Frustrated at not finding them, I'd noticed that a framed photo of my grandson was prominently displayed. I'd vowed to follow my son's lead and frame the next set of photos before I presented them in person.

When my mother had died twenty-one years earlier, her last letter to me was waiting in the mail when we returned from her funeral. She'd written it less than twelve hours before her death, several pages in her perfect, Peterson-Method script. The letter described how sick she felt—"I've never felt so nauseous"—but it was also full of trivia, including how she intended to have my father walk it to the mail box when the New Year's Eve football game he was watching entered half time.

I still have it.

And now I have a letter that feels as if it's come from my father weeks after his death. I'll keep it as well, forming a small collection of unanswerable mail.

Gary Fincke's new collection of essays, The Darkness Call, has won the Robert C. Jones Prize for Short Prose and will be published in 2018 by Pleiades Press. He recently retired as the Charles B. Degenstein Professor of English and Creative Writing at Susquehanna University.

Work Cited
Kilted for her Pleasure (traditional)
THE HUM

You can only hear it in silence—
a low rumble, barely perceptible.

You may initially attribute it
to the refrigerator.

Later, you know it is a diesel truck
thrumming down the monochrome highway.

Then, you realize it is seaplanes
buzzing in and taking off again on the sound.

It is none of these.
You turn your head—it’s gone.
You hold your breath—it’s gone.

You soon suspect the earth itself,
whispering its urgent secrets
to anyone who’ll listen:

this is the sound of snakes coiling,
this is the sound of grass greening,
this is the sound of gravity folding
and re-folding the ocean like a garment.

Listen.

Julie Sumner
Tolstoy Goes to the Theater

Josh Langhoff

"I just hate the experience of going to the theater and, you know, having to sit down and being very proper and being quiet and being in the dark. That wall that goes up is not so interesting to me."

So said the theatrical composer Dave Malloy in a 2014 interview, speaking about his acclaimed musical *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812*. Nominated for twelve Tony awards this year, the show sets to music Book Two, Part Five of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*—the part where young Natasha becomes smitten with the cad Anatole and breaks off her engagement to the absent soldier Andrey, while central character Pierre spends the bulk of eighty pages being drunk and sad. It's a soap opera crossed with a philosophical crisis.

In the musical staging, Malloy and director Rachel Chavkin have tried to erase Malloy's dreaded "wall" by pulling the cast into the audience and the audience onstage. Broadway's Imperial Theater is decorated like an opulent nineteenth-century ballroom, with velvet curtains and fantastic starburst chandeliers. For the price of an orchestra seat, lucky audience members can claim a handful of tables front and center, where Pierre sometimes sings over their shoulders and Anatole might plop down beside them. Even the cheap seats are in on the act. Members of the company, most doubling as instrumentalists, venture into the mezzanine for a couple raucous dance numbers, and to serve pierogis. They also help explain things with a swinging, Klezmer-style "Prologue":

This is all in your program
You are at the opera
You're gonna have to study up a little bit
If you wanna keep up with the plot
It's a complicated Russian novel
Everyone's got nine different names

So look it up in your program
We'd appreciate it, thanks a lot

Despite these valiant efforts, most audience members will enter and leave the Imperial feeling like typical theatergoers. Everyone still has to sit when the lights go down, and *Playbill* still prohibits electronic noise. Audience participation is limited to catching a prop or two and eating a pierogi. In Broadway theaters, fourth walls don't fall easily.

Josh Groban sings the role of Pierre in his fluffy sweater of a baritone voice. As the show opens, Pierre has retired to Moscow to study, drink, and finish out his days trapped in a loveless marriage to unfaithful Hélène. (Groban spends much of the first act reading at a desk in the band pit, occasionally taking over the piano from musical director Or Matias.) "It's dawning on me suddenly, and for no obvious reason, that I can't go on living as I am," sings a troubled Pierre, like most of the characters taking his words directly from Tolstoy's prose. Also visiting Moscow are young cousins Natasha and Sonya, family friends of Pierre. Their job is to introduce Natasha to Andrey's family and get into their good graces. The visit does not go well. Natasha and Andrey's sister Mary quickly decide they hate one another, holding out the words "constrained and strained" at a difficult half-step dissonance. Natasha leaves, pines for Andrey by singing an aria, and then goes off to the opera feeling disconnected from everyone around her—everyone, that is, until she meets Anatole.

Anatole enters to the thump of electronic club music; he clearly means to seduce. As played by the hilarious Lucas Steele, Anatole purrs and smirks his villainy, and "Natasha & Anatole," his duet with the charming Denée Benton, is a sexy
highlight. Innocent Natasha falls for Anatole, who plans her elopement/abduction with the help of the feral troika driver Balaga, who merits his own galloping Slavic dance number. But Anatole's plans are foiled by faithful Sonya and the cousins' stern godmother, Marya D (Maria Dmitrievna Ahrosimov in the novel—remember, everyone's got nine different names). Anatole, threatened and banished by Pierre, departs for Petersburg belting a high C-sharp. Having broken off her engagement to Andrey, lost Anatole, and embarrassed her family in Moscow society, Natasha sinks into a depression that only lifts when she encounters Pierre in the next-to-last scene. Pierre pledges to her his friendship and tenderness, then walks outside to spot the titular comet, which inspires in him an epiphany, the feeling of "blossoming into a new life."

The Great Comet originated in tiny dinner theaters before Malloy and Chavkin adapted it for Broadway. Its roots, like the author's, are in the immersive and adventurous off-Broadway world, where the performance spaces are small and the concepts run high. To read Malloy's previous credits is to imagine a series of vodka-fueled dares. His Three Pianos adapts Franz Schubert's Winterreise, only its three pianists chase one another around the stage and ply the audience with drinks. Preludes incorporates the music of Sergei Rachmaninov, because—why else?—it takes place inside the composer's hypnotized mind. According to the New York Times, Malloy's Beowulf: A Thousand Years of Baggage, a collaboration with lyricist Jason Craig, "demands to be described as demented," while the two men's Beardo, a character study of Rasputin, "wallows in cheerful degradation."

Dementia and degradation appear briefly in The Great Comet, mostly in the character of senile old Prince Bolkonsky, who growls like Tom Waits over a pounding backbeat that slips into a terrifying atonal blur when the prince loses his glasses. (They're on his head.) But if the musical is a touch more sedate than Malloy's previous productions, it still betrays an idiosyncratic mind at work. Malloy's aesthetic development recalls that of Baltimore film director John Waters, of all people. In a span of sixteen years, Waters went from the grotesque, micro-budgeted Pink Flamingos—"An exercise in poor taste," read the X-rated movie's tag line—to the crowd-pleasing comedy Hairspray, itself later adapted into a Tony-winning musical. Though vastly different from one another, both films were clearly the work of the same subversive spirit. Malloy has never been as extreme as Waters. But even the populist Great Comet reflects Malloy's experimental willingness to break whichever theatrical rules don't serve his story.

Take the famous writer's dictum, "Show, don't tell." By making his characters sing their own stage directions, many of them lifted verbatim from Tolstoy's narration, Malloy doesn't break the rule so much as render it irrelevant. Sometimes the experiment works and sometimes it doesn't. When Anatole sings the line, "Anatole followed with his usual jaunty step, but his face betrayed anxietyy," the moment is perfect: a rogue who can't see beyond his own ego, grappling with an emotion he can barely explain. On the other hand, when Natasha, her spirits finally buoyed by Pierre's love for her, sings her line, "For the first time in many days, I weep tears of gratitude, tears of tenderness, tears of thanks," the narration feels wrong for her character in that moment. You might wish Malloy had simply written her some new dialogue so she could address Pierre directly, in kind, rather than ungenerously singing about herself. A simple "Thank you, Pierre," would have sufficed.
Writing songs based on extensive passages of Tolstoy's prose—how's that for a dare? Malloy's solution is to write songs that sound like nobody else's. The musical numbers in The Great Comet rarely rhyme, and they often mimic the jazz technique of vocalese, singing new words over existing instrumental solos. The results can sound like characters unfurling their thoughts in real time.

The musical numbers in The Great Comet rarely rhyme, and they often mimic the jazz technique of vocalese, singing new words over existing instrumental solos. The results can sound like characters unfurling their thoughts in real time. The best use of this technique comes at the beginning of Act Two with "Letters," in which—you guessed it—the characters write and sing letters to one another. (Along with the hit show Dear Evan Hansen, which won six Tonys this year, it's been a good Broadway season for epistolary songs.) Pierre reels off an increasingly bizarre stream of consciousness to Andrey, his voice tugging against the steady drumbeat in unpredictable phrases, rising to a manic pitch when he reveals, "I have calculated the number of the beast—it is Napoleon! I will kill him one day." Malloy realizes that Tolstoy could be very funny, and his peculiar songwriting methods capture the characters' own peculiarities.

The sprawling cast of characters ranges from the stuffed shirts of Moscow society all the way down to Balaga, apparently dressed in the contents of a fascinating rag bag. Malloy uses a deep bag of musical tricks to depict them. Rock, blues, waltzes, and the very Josh Groban-y ballad "Dust and Ashes," a new song written specifically for the star—everything is fair game. The accordion, strings, and woodwinds of Eastern European folk music provide a musical through line, but those stomping polkas morph seamlessly into the throb of electronic dance music. Unexpected genres jostle for attention. The ten-minute cast number "The Opera" moves from ballroom waltz to minimalist arpeggios, avant-garde parody to stalking electronica; yet all these abrupt transitions make clear musical and dramatic sense. Through his prose, Tolstoy imbued his characters with the illusion of lives lived beyond the page. His stories take shape naturally, following his view that history is the sum of "an infinite number of diverse and complex causes." Or, as Pierre sings in "Letters," "We are just caught in the wave of history. Nothing matters. Everything matters." Malloy doesn't achieve Tolstoy's naturalism with The Great Comet—there are still arias and patter songs to remind audience members they're watching a musical. Unless Anatole steals a spectator's chair, it's doubtful they'll feel like a participant in the action. But because Malloy violates musical norms so frequently and deliberately, his audience leaves knowing it's seen a show unlike any other.

Josh Langhoff is a church musician living in the Chicago area. He is also the founder of NorteñoBlog, a mostly English-language website devoted to regional Mexican music.
IN A PARALLEL UNIVERSE,

which some physicists say may exist,
perhaps the husband actually asks

for forgiveness, head bowed,
confessing his offenses,

giving them their proper names—
this being one alternative

on a quantum scale that doesn't mean
how it sounds—not epic, but small.

Then again, when she stares at memory's
polychromatic walls, she thinks of Pollock's

full-bodied swirls, how they imitate
the same geometry of galaxies,

& wonders whether her existence
preceded its essence, or the other way around,

while she walks along the floors of her future,
the night sky, her roof,

Earth's lone moon, her window,
God's good stars, particles

of light in the only life she knows.

Julie L. Moore
Reviewed in this issue...

Susan Power Bratton, *ChurchScape: Megachurches and the Iconography of Environment*

Mark S. Burrows (ed.), *The Paraclete Poetry Anthology: Selected and New Poems*

George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*

Anya Krugovoy Silver, *From Nothing*

Landscapes as Metaphors of the Spiritual Life

As a member of a small mainline congregation in Michigan, I don’t spend a lot of time around megachurches. But many people do, and their experience confirms that megachurches are more than just ordinary churches grown large. The immense size of these congregations has altered the relationships between church and community, and their large budgets and extensive land holdings create opportunities for innovative new “church-scapes.”

In *ChurchScape*, Susan Power Bratton takes the reader on an eye-opening study of the landscapes created by megachurches—some dull and uninspired, others innovative and redemptive. She details how megachurches have incorporated fountains, sculptures, prayer trails, community gardens, and restored wetlands and prairies into their spacious campuses. Most importantly, Bratton finds in these new religious landscapes a vantage point from which to observe American Christianity’s changing relationships to place, art, and environment.

Bratton’s academic home at Baylor University in Texas puts her in the heart of megachurch country, where non-denominational, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, and other Protestant congregations are reimagining religious landscapes. Equipped with a master’s degree in theology and doctorates in both botany and the humanities, Bratton approaches her subject from a multitude of disciplinary perspectives. During years of fieldwork visiting more than 200 megachurches, the author scoured archives, attended services, walked church grounds, and took photographs, some of which appear in the book.

Bratton sees megachurch designs responding to three competing historical influences: the “plain style” colonial meeting house; Victorian ornamentation and civic beautification; and twentieth-century corporate pastoralism. During the colonial period, the plain, white-washed meeting house was the preferred style for Puritans and non-conformist groups who emphasized the preached Word and had little sense of sacred space. In its favor, the plain style reflected the virtues of simplicity and modesty and was accessible to poorer congregations. Megachurches today have embraced the plain style in the form of nondescript, prefabricated buildings or repurposed shopping centers where many congregations now meet.
A key deviation from the plain meeting house tradition is the proliferation of religious iconography on megachurch campuses, even among churches that are theological descendants of Reformed traditions that were deeply suspicious of religious art. Bratton sees these crosses and figurative sculptures as a continuation of nineteenth-century ornamentation, when civic memorials and formally landscaped cemeteries gained popularity. In the Victorian era, cemeteries with ornate tombstones featuring carved stone angels and crosses were viewed as morally edifying places to honor the dead and to engage in refined leisure and uplifting reflection. Bratton argues that much of today's outdoor megachurch art draws from popular culture and is highly realistic and sentimental, owing as much to Disney culture as Christian theology. Rare is the sculpture that references Christian saints, theologians, or cultural leaders. Much of the new megachurch iconography falls short of the medieval cathedral’s combination of visual prominence from afar and fine detail at close range. Instead, there is the plain 170-foot-high cross at Sagemont Church near Houston and the 52-foot-high, open-armed Jesus at Solid Rock Church near Cincinnati. Both are intended to be viewed at high speed from nearby highways. Bratton challenges the artists who create such works and their megachurch patrons, asking whether their outdoor sculptures and gardens are open to the public and worthy of inclusion in regional tourist guides.

The third and most important influence on megachurch design is corporate pastoralism. After World War II, the widespread adoption of automobiles allowed corporations to move their headquarters to suburban campuses set amidst expansive, meticulously manicured lawns. The idyllic, semi-rural settings of college campuses inspired corporate pastoralism, as did the desire of corporate leaders to escape urban congestion for the work of thought and reflection. The corporate campus synthesizes picturesque landscape ideals with an emphasis on uniformity, polish, and prestige. Unlike college campus lawns, the ample lawns on corporate campuses are typically for viewing rather than for use. Given their concerns with church marketing and first impressions, megachurch leaders have mostly defaulted to corporate pastoralism.

Whatever style they adopt, Bratton emphasizes that megachurches can cause significant ecological damage and contribute to the fragmentation of urban life. The size and suburban location of most megachurches make for long commutes, immense parking lots, and church buildings physically isolated from surrounding neighbors. In colonial New England, plain style meeting houses were built on the town commons, which served as both church grounds and civic space. But contemporary plain style megachurch campuses devote most or all of the church grounds to asphalt parking lots. This contributes to declining water tables and highly degraded nearby streams. Vast, unproductive lawns require irrigation and chemical inputs that stress ecosystems.

Bratton argues that much of today's outdoor megachurch art draws from popular culture and is highly realistic and sentimental, owing as much to Disney culture as Christian theology. Rare is the sculpture that references Christian saints, theologians, or cultural leaders. Bratton's research shows that water features are common on megachurch campuses, but all too often they mimic shopping mall fountains. While some water features incorporate inscriptions of biblical passages, the potential for explicitly connecting to the rich biblical symbolism of water goes mostly untapped. Churches that practice baptism by immersion have created the most innovative waterscapes. Returning to their roots of outdoor baptisms at the local river crossing, some Baptist churches have created fountains or pools with outdoor baptisteries. First Baptist Dallas has created a publicly visible waterscape befitting its setting at the
heart of a global city. The fountain of glass and steel has choreographed jets of water and an inscription from Jesus’s words to the Samaritan woman that the water he gives will become in her a spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4:14).

Many megachurches have created prayer gardens. Some are quite successful, such as designer Richard Neutra’s beautifully meditative gardens and fountains that flow seamlessly in and out of the Crystal Cathedral complex in Southern California (purchased by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange in 2011 and renamed Christ Cathedral). Riverbend Church in Austin, Texas, built a remembrance garden and memorial walk that welcomes visitors. The garden connects to the bioregional landscape with water running over native limestone blocks reminiscent of the nearby Colorado River rock outcrops. Willow Creek Community Church outside Chicago exemplifies effective landscape management by coordinating with the local watershed planning organization and engaging in prescribed burns to maintain the ecological integrity and biodiversity of its prairie landscapes. The church features a 1.5-mile worship trail with wooden benches, interpretive markers, and Scripture messages. Bratton notes that, unlike Willow Creek, many megachurch prayer gardens are not good locations for quiet prayer or Bible study because of the roar of nearby freeways or air conditioning units.

For Bratton the relationship between megachurch and the wider community falls into two models: church as place—a self-contained village within the wider metropolitan region—and church in-place—a church open to and responsive to the wider community. For Bratton the relationship between megachurch and the wider community falls into two models: church as place—a self-contained village within the wider metropolitan region—and church in-place—a church open to and responsive to the wider community. The church as place resembles a private country club, offering an enclosed sacred environment for its members amidst what cultural geographer Justin Wilford describes as the sea of secular post-suburbia.

The church in-place exemplifies neighborliness as it responds to the assets and needs of both its immediate neighborhood and regional context. Bratton defines neighborliness as more than serving the local community—it also involves responsible property ownership and engagement with regional land-use planning and ecological and hydrological processes. A church in-place creates landscapes that are functional, aesthetically pleasing, and reflective of the local bioregional context. As an example, Bratton highlights First African American Episcopal (FAME) in Los Angeles. In the late 1960s, FAME hired architect Paul Revere Williams, the first certified African American architect working west of the Mississippi River, to design its new facility. Williams created simple, modern forms set in a relaxed, Southern California landscape of succulent plants, palm
trees, fountains, courtyards, and a plaza. FAME's facility opens into the surrounding community, and its outdoor spaces welcome both church and community members for daily exercise classes, food distribution, and medical clinics.

A church in-place avoids a gated mentality and thoughtfully considers how it relates to outsiders. Upper Arlington Lutheran Church near Columbus, Ohio, has community gardens that connect visually and spatially to the wider community and offer biblical messages and prayer suggestions for the volunteer gardeners. Austin Ridge Bible Church in Austin, Texas, welcomed local disc golf enthusiasts to design a course using its property's rugged topography. The church provides a small parking lot and bathroom area for disc golfers, most of whom are young adult males—a demographic that churches have the most trouble reaching. Adopting the model of the neighborly church in-place seems essential if the Church is to be faithful in its mission. But as a geographer, I found myself longing for more exploration of the contemporary meanings of place, neighborhood, and geographic context. Megachurches have flourished in settings described alternately as the galactic metropolis, edge city, post-suburbia, exopolis, or metroburbia. Lacking a clearly defined center, the galactic metropolis is a sprawling, disjointed urban region, held together only by transportation and communications networks. Places are no longer bounded areas but nodes in networks of flows of people, goods, and information. During the course of their daily lives, each resident constructs their own city as they navigate through the fragmented and geographically stretched-out galactic metropolis. Contemporary megachurches reflect these changing geographies of everyday life as they draw attendees from vast distances, complicating simple notions of place, neighborhood, and geographic context.

The tagline "The Purpose Driven Lawn" on the dustjacket suggests a sneering exposé of kitsch and ecological insensitivity. Instead, Bratton offers mostly neutral description, always looking for the good, even when the styles are not to her taste. Her criticisms surface at the end of chapters and are gentle, muted by generalizations and constructive suggestions. Her goal is not to mock failures and shortcomings, but to explore how churches might do better. At times, Bratton hints at larger questions regarding the messages that church landscapes convey. Here, she would have done well to interact with work by cultural geographers who have explored the symbolic, social class, racial, and normative dimensions of landscape.

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Endnotes


An Anthology You May Actually Reread

WITH THE RIGHT BRANDING, The Paraclete Poetry Anthology could be one of those unique anthologies that you may actually want to return to and spend time with, devotional style. And that’s how I’m going to recommend you approach it. Alas, Paraclete presents the book somewhat plainly as simply an anthology of recently published poets. If you know who Paraclete is, of course, this will work for you, and you will get just what you would hope for from it. If you do not, well, then you may skip it and miss what is actually a fine little book that offers real spiritual and poetic returns.

The Paraclete Poetry Anthology attempts something different from a conventional anthology. Instead of one poem by each of 100 poets, we get closer to a dozen poems by each of thirteen poets whom Paraclete has published in the last ten years.

It’s not exactly a deep dive, but it does give you time to get to know the poet much better than your average collection. Consider this: when I think about my favorite anthologies, I have impressions of the whole or I remember specific poems. When I think about this anthology, I think about specific poets, like Paul Mariani or Rainer Maria Rilke or Anna Kamienska.

Admittedly, I knew those names already, but it’s notable that I now associate them with this book (and with Paraclete as publisher). I also think about some of the names that are newer to me and were pleasant to encounter, like SAIID (an Iranian-born exile who uses his first name only) and Rami Shapiro. But right there, that’s already more names than I could list from most of my other anthologies.

So, from the writer’s point of view, this anthology works really well. It also works well from the reader’s perspective. That is, it offers the reader a satisfying and rich experience of poetry and poetic voices in the Christian tradition.

Rereading Mariani, for instance, I remember again my fondness for his working-class gruffness and sensitivity. He writes poems such as I’d expect my grandfather, who was a foreman for a concrete company in the city, would write: direct but with a sparkle in the eye. Full of the city’s concrete and steel, but grounded by a profound love of family. Rooted to the past through stories of a world that no longer exists:

So much to do, the father's hands say. So much to care for, so much to fix. And oh cries the boy, and oh cries the little toy train, which will soon disappear.

You might notice there’s nothing explicitly religious here. But over the course of several poems you’ll see that for Mariani recuperating memory is a means of orienting the self toward its source, “As the parched sunflower turns toward the sun.” Like the sun, this source is outside of oneself, and like its warmth this source is always “filling [the] self with itself” in a moment “where the timeless crosses with time.”

Rereading Rilke—newly translated by Mark Burrows, who also edited this anthology—I discover anew his sense of mystery, his difficult logical chasms, his reticence:

I love the dark hours of my being, for they deepen my senses; [. . . . ]

From them I’ve come to know that I have room for a second life, timeless and wide.
I could spend a season meditating on that “second life;” it feels so evocative. It certainly suggests the modern gap between individual experience of the divine and our fragmented, atheistic social sphere. But it also puts me in mind of the infinitesimal distance neuroscience has found between sensation and perception, or the performative gap between my physical and my digital selves created by information technologies.

And yet how seldom I dwell in the dark hours of my being, there to feel my senses deepen, there to resolve the paradox that presence is not immediacy, that the infinite God uses finite means.

In SAID and Shapiro I find traces of Rilke’s influence—or perhaps simply the family resemblance to Persian and Jewish mysticism? In contrast to Scott Cairns, who begins this book with his blend of breezy, soft-spoken words and ironic awareness of his own limits, SAID and Shapiro crack language against the limits like a raw egg.

whoever evades the south

to endure the truth

will be startled by death

which dismantles the light

within fragments of ruins

and builds nests in the silence-keeping

SAID (quoted above) tends toward negation of familiar religious language in an attempt to “win back our wildness”:

look o lord

i don’t sing your praises

but i seek you

with my limbs

Or, more directly:

lord

i refuse

to engage prayer as a weapon

i wish it to be like a river

Shapiro prefers gnomic paradoxes, as in his paraphrase of Psalm 42:

No one asks of the deer:

“Where is your stream?”

Yet everyone asks of me:

“Where is your God?”

The deer need not answer.

I cannot answer.

Bonnie Thurston, another new name for me, similarly strives for the poignancy of paradox:

Give me this life:

a center empty

of all but light

My inner cynic wants to resist such lines as all these as mere verbal trickery, but as Anna Kamińska writes, “even when I don’t believe / there is a place in me / inaccessible to unbelief” that knows such words are chipped from the temple of Truth.

Not surprisingly for Paraclete, the poems in this volume tend to concern spiritual matters such as the presence or absence of God, how to speak about holy mysteries, and the relationship between the modern self and this ancient faith. I have focused on the more mystical thread, but there is also a very concrete thread, notably in poems by Phyllis Tickle and Greg Miller, in addition to Mariani. These poets are more likely to begin with nature, memory, or experience and find their way to God or the self—even if the self, as for Tickle, must die away, “The shell from around the life.”

Despite its lack of explicit theme, then, this anthology still coheres around Paraclete’s broader values like exploring mystery, embracing doubt, and re-orienting, psalm-like, to God. More specifically, however, I found myself placing each poet on a spectrum of presence-absence until a kind of collegial dialogue emerged. The effect was less poets arguing about whether God was more one or the other, but rather a performance of several voices saying, “With any luck, together we will help one another love God.”

Or you could say the poets each offer their own eminently sensible advice, which only appears to conflict. As Paul Quenon puts it:
In case you’re lost:
Streams go down.
Follow that.
Upwards trails go
towards the sun.—
Follow that.

This is how the devotional aspect takes form.
One can dip into a single poet and spend a solid twenty minutes meditating on several poems. Perhaps they help you to attend to the simple graces of everyday. The next day a new poet will challenge you to remember God’s transcendence and, thus, grandeur, which is never contained or constrained by the everyday in which it manifests. Call it “Thirteen Ways of Speaking of God.”

For all that one can ruminate on so many of these poems, with their paradoxes and mysticism, it would be a mistake to expect that these poets hold you at arms length or make for difficult reading. Quite the opposite, in fact. This anthology could work quite well as a kind of intro to certain trends in recent Christian poetry, the kind of book you might give to someone who “doesn’t read poetry” and they would find plenty to enjoy.

We’d both be within our rights, and we’d both still find continuing enrichment in this varied but pleasant, if quiet, collection of poems.

**Telling Ghost Stories**

George Saunders’ *Lincoln in the Bardo*, like many of the short story collections for which he has earned praise, creates a strange version of the real world, but, remarkably, it all seems entirely plausible. The novel seems to meet Aristotle’s famous requirement for art: “a probable improbability is to be preferred to a thing improbable and yet possible.”

In this case, Saunders’ first novel, the impossible is easy to identify. The novel is populated mainly by ghosts, the dead of Georgetown’s Oak Hill Cemetery who, as the title of the novel suggests, are in the *bardo*, a liminal space between death and rebirth described in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. However, Saunders is not merely telling a ghost story. The novel addresses a larger, familiar, and necessary epistemological query: how confident can we be that our understanding of things—our personal experiences, the world around us, the afterlife, ourselves—is accurate?

As one might expect from the inventive Saunders, the novel defies easy categorization. Random House, the book’s publisher, is not even sure of the genre. The webpage for *Lincoln in the Bardo* lists it both as “Literary Fiction,” a nod to Saunders’ place in American letters, and “Historical Fiction,” which acknowledges the presence of an actual historical event: the death of Willie Lincoln, second son to the sixteenth president, who died from typhoid fever on February 20, 1862 at the age of 11. What it really is, finally, is a mash-up. Historical fiction meets Dante. A comedic ghost story with spiritual overtones. Personal accounts of history (real and created) combined with a sentimentalized tale of guilt and loss. You might say that the novel has it all or that it simply has an identity crisis. However, the mixture of genres and perspectives contributes to the question raised in the novel about the reliability and accuracy in knowing.

Three nineteenth-century American men headline the novel, all of whom are ghosts that have differing understandings of their current state. Publisher Hans Vollman has been in a May-December marriage. Roger Bevins III is a young, homosexual man who has felt the guilt about his orientation as reinforced by the period in which he lived. Reverend Everly Thomas, a minister, has his mysterious background revealed through the course of the novel. The story opens with the three men welcoming Willie Lincoln to the afterlife.

It is certainly an unusual premise. But then, we have come to expect nothing less from Saunders. He has never shied from the bizarre. His four collections of short stories have included narratives
that incorporate science fiction elements such as virtual machines that can download memories ("Offloading for Mrs. Schwartz"), and prisoners testing drugs that cause severe mind-altering reactions ("Escape from Spiderhead"). He has written about brutally violent episodes, such as a home invasion ("Victory Lap") and children being crushed to death at a waterpark ("The Wavemaker Falters"); alternative realities in which humans are used as yard decorations ("The Semplica Girl Diaries") or amusement parks that immortalize the confederate South ("Civilwarland in Bad Decline"); fantastical ideas like anthropomorphized snack foods ("In Persuasion Nation") and ghosts ("Sea Oak"). In a 2016 interview, he explained his propensity to include the unexpected in his stories:

"Often when I do something strange in a story, it is just an attempt to find a natural-seeming way of doing something theatrical. So, for example, when I have a ghost appear, that's a way of objectifying something that's actually rhetorical."

The oddities in the novel are dramatic, but they are not simply "something theatrical." Here, the strange elements are a key part of a play that Saunders has created, in novel form, in order to dramatize the epistemological ideas in question.

In fact, the novel incorporates elements of a play while still utilizing aspects of the other genres from which it borrows. For instance, the novel includes more than 150 characters, and when the characters speak, their "lines" include attribution (the audiobook version of the novel comprises 164 voices, including those of A-list actors Nick Offerman, David Sedaris, Julianne Moore, and Susan Sarandon). The plot advances via dialogue, with characters often describing the actions of others, including past events or incidents occurring "off-stage." But the novel is not without its monologues as well; a variety of characters telling their life stories over many pages with little interruption or commentary. There are even soliloquies of a sort: Reverend Thomas, for example, shares his experience of going to heaven while alone on "stage," a story that covers two chapters and that Thomas cannot share with his graveyard companions. In addition, Saunders provides the novel's setting and context almost as set direction, outside the action. After the first chapter introduces the main characters, the next seven chapters are comprised solely of quotes from historical documents such as memoirs and letters—some real and some fake, though the text makes no distinction—that establish the world of the play (or novel). Finally, the rather unorthodox structure results in an episodic tale, with what feels like scenes, the entire novel divided into two parts, or acts, a familiar dramatic format.

By incorporating these theatrical elements, Saunders manages both to add drama and to objectify something rhetorical. Though the novel's "rhetoric" might be lost among the fantastic (ghosts, angels, and "matterlightbloom occurrences"), the dour (the undead floating through a cemetery), sentimental scenes (Abraham Lincoln holding his dead son in a Pietà-like pose—an image Saunders says, in part, inspired the novel), and the gratuitous, sometimes silly, details, ultimately everything contributes to the novel's focus. The odd combination of forces intentionally leads to confusion; the entire novel emphasizes the inability to know anything for sure. From the
start, as (odd) details pile up and multiple characters speak, the reader must adjust, always revising what can be known and what cannot. It's a little like sitting down to watch a Shakespearean play for the first time. Initially, the Elizabethan English, the storyline, and the wordplay might be hard to follow; slowly but surely, though, it all becomes clearer. Yet it's still easy to miss things. *Lincoln in the Bardo* seems to remind the reader that there is always more to know.

Between the central narrative, the characters' life stories, and the supernatural elements, *Lincoln* confuses the reader and raises doubts. In the course of the novel, Saunders raises numerous questions—some direct, some implied. Metaphysical questions such as, "What happens to people when they die?" evolve into more specific queries: "What happens if your experience of the afterlife is not what you imagined it to be?" "What criteria are used to damn souls to hell?" Ethical questions surface, as well: "Should people be told the truth if that truth might destroy them?" "Am I obliged to help those who clearly do not want help?" As might be expected given the novel's historical context, Saunders raises questions from the past: "Is there a moral imperative to fight a war to unite a nation that does not want to be unified?" "Can war address the very real struggles of the African-American slaves?" Finally, epistemological questions emerge: Even if one can answer the preceding questions, how do we know that the answers are right? What evidence can and should be used? There are no clear answers to the questions raised, and thus the characters, as well as the reader, feel no real confidence in anything. Roger Bevins, while reflecting upon a minor decision many of the characters make early in the novel, states, "Truth be told, there was not one among the many here—not even the strongest—who did not entertain some lingering doubt about the wisdom of his or her choice." It is an attitude, a reaction, that resonates throughout the novel.

All of these uncertainties, and others, slyly offered through an historical, comedic, and sentimentalized ghost story, magnify in importance as the action of the novel increases steadily toward a conclusion—the dialogue and episodic nature of the text do not allow for a break in the pace.

The novel, set in an impossible world, continues to examine probable questions. Are the facts legitimate (especially since some of the historical documents in the novel have been fabricated)? Have situations been interpreted correctly? And, just as importantly, how would you know if they have? (Most of the characters refuse to face the fact that they are dead, heightening the question of interpretation.) Are things as they appear? As he does in many of his works, Saunders presents *Lincoln* readers with possible answers, some of them coming from traditional sources such as religion. These answers are neither comforting nor definitive. It seems the confusion is intentional and necessary, if only to make readers consider the questions and to encourage us to be less dogmatic about how we answer. In this effort, as well as in efforts to entertain, intrigue, and beguile, the novel succeeds.

**What May Come from the Grief of Illness**

**THESE DAYS THERE SEEMS TO BE A GREATER** sense that grief, whether experienced for the loss of an intimate or for the loss of one's own vitality, is a private affair that no one but those directly affected can know. Pain and suffering reduce the distance that separates human beings from each other, but they just as often reinforce our differences, pushing the individual toward isolation. What grief means, and where one stands in relation to the concentric circles that ripple outward from the ache of a particular loss, is fraught with uncertainty. We are too quick to console, or perhaps we say the wrong thing. When we are the ones in pain and the roles are reversed, we can be too quick to reject consolation. It is ludicrous to hear that our suffering is somehow the result of God's plan. No wonder so many readers seek the counsel of the afflicted in these matters.

After witnessing a friend's battle with colon cancer, I gravitated toward the first-person accounts of illness in J. Todd Billings's *Rejoicing in Lament* (2015) and Paul Kalanithi's best-selling *When Breath Becomes Air* (2016). Such testimonies help make loss livable, granting readers access to the personal experience of suffering while preserving it as a form of private property, unique to
the witness of the individual telling the story.

As a survivor of breast cancer, Anya Krugoyov Silver is a capable guide in matters of grief and loss. Her second collection of poetry, From Nothing, reflects on the experience of living through illness while attempting to embrace the fullness of both motherhood and mortality. In these poems, bracing honesty coincides with the quiet transformations of language. Especially moving are the expressions of praise that take shape in the absence of consolation.

In a 2011 pamphlet, pastor John Piper exhorted Christians not to "waste" their illness. He urged that we look for "[t]he design of God in our cancer." As Silver makes clear, there is a great distance separating the pastor from the poet, and much to learn in turning from moral instruction to the burdensome journeys of the body.

Silver's poems explore the facts of being acted upon, plumbing the experience of weakness that results from severe illness. An example is the poem "Poise," which begins by comparing the poet to the perfect balance of "The little ballerina in my cardboard jewelry box." The small figurine only serves to point up the stark differences between ballerina and cancer patient. What characterizes Silver's experience of illness is not "poise" but, "rather, that I am posed." The patient is forced to confront her lack of control at the level of the multiplying cells that ravage her body. She feels like an automaton in her regimen of treatments, stating "I perform cancer." As an actor, she cannot resist the role that she must play. In "How to Unwant What the Body Has Wanted," Silver gives herself a set of instructions, in the hope that self-discipline may perhaps recover a measure of freedom. The instructions include such advice as "Confuse the body with sugar until the sugar tastes like love." "Take root," she tells herself. "Let the web of branches hold you." Especially resonant is the one-line command, "Sleep as deeply alive as an acorn in your bed's black earth." The acorn stands out as a complex image of burial and birth in this rhythmic line. It suggests how the cancer patient holds within herself, even when undergoing treatment, the potential of one day returning to the open air.

The hope of return and restoration is carried forward in "Kore," a poem from the last of the book's three sections. The poem's title refers to the goddess Persephone, who according to myth was abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld, and only permitted to return to earth for the seasons of spring and summer. The poem serves as an allegory of the patient's escape from the privations of treatment. In particular, the description of return suggests the end of chemotherapy, as in the lines "Instantly, her shorn head comes alive, curls forcing themselves through her bald skull." The patient returns to the luxuriance of the body. The image of return takes even more sensuous form in "Wisteria," where Silver describes a woman who, being "forty-five / and disfigured," rues the loss of physical intimacy: "She hadn't wanted to let it go, had wrenched hard / to keep it, had wept, gone stiff and angry." The poem recounts the surprise when, "suddenly, he was back, the bark / she had traced so wistfully bearing blossom." The shift from loss to indulgent joy is overpowering:

Wisteria hung opulent from the wire fence, papery petals sweating sugar. Yes, she had it again. Temporary, but no matter. It had returned to her. She forgot how to speak: she crammed; she raved.
This portrayal of the reawakened body is striking, the depiction of sexual vigor gorgeously rendered.

Silver's poems struggle with the problematic nature of speaking for others. An example is "Tenebrae," which refers to the church service during Holy Week in which candles are gradually extinguished to leave the church in a pall of silence. The service commemorates the darkness of Christ's journey toward the Cross. The title is fitting for the subject matter of the poem. The service enacts the confusion and sorrow that result from serving as a witness to suffering. In several poems, Silver inhabits a liminal state where consolation is distant or uncertain. The choice of Holy Week, and the liturgical tradition in particular, offers a ritual framework that gives expression to the experience of pain. If, as countless sermons have told us, God uses suffering to bring us closer to him, Silver suggests how trite such words can sound. As if in response to those who have offered spiritual consolation, the poem opens with a prayer for a fellow cancer-sufferer who has recently entered hospice:

Lord, I know the bitterness is for her own good.
Through the numbness that has made her quadriplegic,
she has drawn nearer to you, has been purged
as with bloodroot of whatever sins still grieved you.

This opening strikes a curious tone. The assertion of "I know" suggests the distance that separates doctrinal knowledge from lived experience. It is the same distance that separates the outside observer from the sufferer. The poet begins by taking the perspective of the one who knows better or who sees more clearly what God is doing in another person's life—in order to show readers the hollowness of such words. Whatever is "for her own good" is something the patient would not willingly choose. The illness has stripped the woman of her will.

As these lines sink in, the reader begins to recoil from them. Something like this happens, for instance, with the scriptural echo of the "gall of bitterness," from Acts 8:23 (KJV), in the first line. The echo suggests our tendency to spiritualize the experience of brute pain, to look for a divine purpose in a complex series of unthinking secondary causes. In the opening of this poem, it is important that the sentence stops at the end of the first line. The coincidence of syntax and line gives the appearance of a self-contained unit, as if complete in itself, as if one had all the knowledge one needed. The fact that the poem continues belies the pretense of certainty.

From this description of "Tenebrae," one of the most wrenching poems in the volume, it might sound like the poet is angry with God, or at least with Christian culture, bent on critiquing the pat explanations given in response to questions arising from misfortune. But Silver's poems do not mock. They question and confess, but they are not laced with gall. She writes in "Tenebrae," "Thank you, God, for your wisdom that widows, / For the orphans who continue to praise you." The "wisdom that widows" is a crushing phrase, yet we are called to recognize, rather than discount, the hosannas of the orphan. Although the tone here is complex, I do not read Silver's expression of gratitude as ironic. Silver quietly accepts that wisdom does indeed issue from suffering. She is unwilling to discount the experience of those who make such claims based on personal experience. Illness does, in many instances, draw a person closer to God. But such wisdom is not what she yearns for. The demands of empathy require her to affirm the voice of the orphan, and yet the poem suggests that there is something distasteful, perhaps unethical, about claiming suffering's wisdom on behalf of the voiceless. To claim such wisdom for the friend in hospice is inappropriate. The ending of the poem refuses to draw a moral lesson. While her friend "sleeps her morphine dreams," the poet pleads to God: "spare me your will and secret knowledge. / Let me continue to live, ignorant and erring." At this point in the book, the reader knows full well about Silver's cancer. The ending unfolds not with defiance but with a hint of the spirit's exhaustion.
It is a mystery, when one is ill, that life for others continues to hold blessings of deep joy. It becomes difficult to keep the wisdom of mortality from extending its blight to others. The poem “Coincidence” wrestles with this mystery as it recounts a post-mastectomy visit to the doctor: “The same morning I press my shorn chest / against an X-ray machine and hold my breath, / my sister births from her body a baby girl.” The occasion becomes a reminder of absence, with the “shorn chest” serving as a stark contrast to “the nursing whole breast” of her sister. What follows is an act of praise that is more the result of disciplined practice than spontaneous expression—but which is no less valuable for that. The X-ray becomes a metaphorical hinge that unites the two life experiences:

Praise God, whose hands pass over each other like river currents as they give and take, pulling one film from the whirring machine while pushing in a new, unprinted slide.

The reader does not take this praise for granted, because Silver continually attempts to grasp the “fearful doubling” of joy and pain that consists of life in the present. “Coincidence” ends in restrained wonder, offering a description without a verb. Silver imagines “Little breathing at the nursing whole breast / of my sister, little gold seed of death / awakening as the first sun touches its tendrils.” The organic metaphor demonstrates the refusal to turn away from the brute facts of mortality that one often finds in this collection. The bright newness of the infant is an occasion for praise even as we are reminded that the child contains within it the beginning of its end. Silver may not offer the celebratory exclamations that are customary in such circumstances, but she has seen too much to content herself, or her loved ones, with platitudes. Her voice, like her body, bears the scars of her experience.

The phrase from nothing recalls the theological doctrine of creation ex nihilo. As a broken or partial phrase, Silver’s title points to the uncertainty that follows loss. What assurance do we have that beauty can be wrought from the void of suffering? How can the activity of making follow from the experience of being on the verge of nothingness? In the midst of grief, this moving collection attests to the strength and persistence of Silver’s voice. An image of her will to endure appears in “The Raven.” In the dreamscape of that poem, Silver imagines how the huge black bird, after carrying her through the night, “set me gently down in my home, among the sleepers, / and dawn drove a pen into my hand.”

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THREE YEARS AGO MY PASSENGERS WERE IN the Congo hiding from war’s crossfire. Now they are in my Prius on slippery Wisconsin roads, maybe not fearing for their lives, but certainly wondering, “How did we get here? And who is this guy driving the car?”

I have some time to think as I drive my passengers from Appleton to Oshkosh. The Weather Service calls the freezing rain and sleet coming down a “wintry mix,” so the windshield wipers are on. Conversation in the car is difficult. I don’t hear well, especially when there is a lot of background noise. The other passengers in my car are fluent in six languages, but not English. We do a lot of smiling and pointing, but after a while it’s just easier to travel in silence.

I met Jonas and his wife and daughter just twenty minutes ago, right after I arrived at their house. Pastor John introduced us in their living room before heading out to his van to shuttle a different refugee family to the worship service we are all about to attend. Sophie, the daughter, has good English, but she’s a teenager. She spends most of the drive texting her friends.

Jonas points to the clock on the dashboard. “Clock,” I say, then point to my watch. I point to the speedometer, then change it to kilometers per hour, because he is probably more familiar with kilometers. We’re traveling over 100, which feels unsafe on these roads, so I switch back to miles per hour. He is watching the animated display that records how much fuel we’re using and whether the Prius is running on gas or electricity. I have no idea how to say “fuel economy” in Swahili. The only word I know is “Papa,” which I overheard Sophie call Jonas. “Papá,” I repeat. “Hey, I just learned my first word is Swahili!” I beam. Jonas, Sophie, and her mother beam back.

I ask Jonas if he can drive. Sophie laughs. Jonas smiles and shakes his head, no. I realize that probably the family did not have a car back home. So the transportation barrier in getting the family to church is more than just getting the family a reliable car. Someone in the family will need to learn to drive. In a foreign country. Where the road signs are in an unfamiliar language.

During the twenty minutes of silence in the car I think about what it would be like to be a refugee. Most of the refugees from central Africa who have settled in our part of Wisconsin have fled tribal wars. Some have lived in multiple countries, picking up new languages on the way. In Oshkosh we do not call it “English as a Second Language” anymore. It’s “English as a Foreign Language.” It’s humbling to me. I took French for eight years, but have never had occasion to speak it. I took Biblical Greek and Hebrew in seminary, but all I can do in those languages is sound words out and look them up in my dusty lexicons.

I wonder what it would be like to have to leave my home with only the things I could carry. What would I take with me? Reflexively I think about my baseball card collection. I’ve been paring it down the last few years, so I only have around 4,500 now. I ask myself, “If I could only bring one baseball card with me, in my wallet, which one would it be?”

“Al Spangler,” is my immediate, surprising answer. I have a card that is more than 100 years old. I have cards of Hall of Famers and All Stars. I have cards that mark important, historic milestones. This is not one of them. Al Spangler was a part-time outfielder, never a star.

I REMEMBER GETTING HIS CARD ON A RAINY Sunday afternoon. It was 1969. My brother, age 8 at the time, and I, 5, put on our slickers and walked a few blocks to Walgreens in the East Bluff
neighborhood of Peoria, Illinois, our hometown. A pack of cards cost a nickel then. I recognized the Cub uniform Spangler was wearing. He had a grin on his face, posing for the photograph of his follow-through of a swing of his bat. The Cub logo on his sleeve smiled, too. Despite his benchwarmer status, he would hit four home runs for the Cubs that year. The team finished in second place, behind the World Series champion New York Mets.

I want to ask my new friends, "What's your Al Spangler? Do you have one possession that connects you to home?"

After the service, I ask numerous people what Jonas's wife's name is. Maybe Pastor John gave her name during introductions and I didn't catch it. Maybe he didn't say her name at all. I want to be a good host for our return to Appleton, but trying to find out her name is like a frustration dream. I ask Pastor Shadrach, "What's Mrs. Jonas's name?" He points her out, thinking I'm in a hurry to get on the road and cannot find her. Finally, I ask Pastor John, who doesn't know. Then he tells me, "It would be impolite to call her by first name. I just call women of her age from the Congo 'Madame.'"

In that shining moment, I am able to address about one third of the worshipers by name! I spot Jonas and Sophie at the door, waiting for me. "Jonas, Sophie, let's be on our way. Madame, take my arm because it's slippery and your shoes are smooth on the bottom." We smile at each other and head to the car.

When I pull into the driveway, Jonas turns to me and says, "Thank you! You have us so happy! So happy!"

"Yes, Jonas, I am happy. I have made new friends today!"

Sophie walks beside Madame up the icy path to the door.

On the drive home I wonder what it would be like to get into a car with a stranger in a strange country, knowing only, "This is Pastor Tom. He will drive you to church." I am humbled that they put such trust in me. I realize that I too, am so happy.

The Reverend Doctor Thomas C. Willadsen is pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.
GHAZAL: SIGNS

Words mean too much to you, she said. It's all a sign. Nothing she's ever told me felt more like a sign.

After the rally on the square, she begged the trash. "Can I keep them? An artist could use these signs."

God, the words are blooming like algae, like tumors. They've forgotten how to die. They will not resign.

"We wanted to listen, to follow, to align," read the form. "But we'd never read what you assign."

He swooped down the zip line, flashing flight, insight. A sick thwack. His form smacks fate's ladder. Not one vital sign.

As a child, she played Azaz, the king of letters—Satin costume hot glued with letters—mother's design.

Fifth beer, texting from the lonely admiral's club. He thinks of the oven bird. Singing, he won't sing.

Your finger wondered over the edge of my scar: I had cancer. Survived. My whole body's a sign.

The teacher told her, "Work to relax your line. You make too many points—always, graphing cosine."


Tiffany Eberle Kriner
Jeanne Murray Walker was born in Parkers Prairie, a village in northern Minnesota. She is the author of eight books of poetry, most recently, Helping the Morning: New and Selected Poems (WordFarm Press). Pilgrim, You Find the Path by Walking, will be out in 2018. A mentor in the Seattle Pacific University MFA Program, she works in the Food Cupboard at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and travels widely to give readings and run workshops.

Kathryn Smith is the author of Book of Exodus, a poetry collection forthcoming from Scablands Books. Her poems have been nominated for Best American Poetry and the Pushcart Prize, and have been published or are forthcoming in Poetry Northwest, the Laurel Review, the Collagist, Mid-American Review, Redivider, Rock & Sling, and elsewhere. She received her MFA in creative writing from Eastern Washington University and lives in Spokane, Washington.


Julie Sumner has worked as a critical care nurse, liver transplant coordinator, and massage therapist. She has been writing poetry for over ten years. Her work has appeared in the San Pedro River Review, Catalpa Magazine, The Behemoth, and Catapult. She is currently pursuing her MFA in poetry at Seattle Pacific University. She is on Twitter @windowonwords.

Julie L. Moore’s books of poetry include Particular Scandals, Slipping Out of Bloom, and Election Day. A previous contributor to The Cresset, Moore’s poetry also has appeared in Alaska Quarterly Review, Christian Century, New Ohio Review, Poetry Daily, Prairie Schooner, Windhover, The Southern Review, and Verse Daily. She lives in southwestern Ohio. Visit julielmoore.com to learn more about her work.

Tiffany Eberle Kriner is associate professor of English at Wheaton College. She is the author of The Future of the Word: An Eschatology of Reading. She and her husband, Josh, live with their two children at Root and Sky Farm in Marengo, Illinois. They pick wild raspberries and raise Berkshire hogs in the oak and walnut forest; they have planted a new pasture for organically raised meat animals and are planning a permaculture orchard.