

## What Ails Them

There are ailing people who have not touched the robe of Jesus.

Among them are old men, who navigate their mobilized wheelchairs with surprising agility in downtown traffic.

The invariable American flags, posted on each handle, are decisive symbols of might, but nothing conveys strength quite like the arrangement of one man who holds a scruffy chihuahua in his lap and, in front of it, a handmade sign that reads: "Do Not Touch The Dog: It Bites."

A woman, hair streaked fuchsia and body squished into a pleasant blouse, also fuchsia, shows no sign of capitulation as she in her chair bumps across a faux brick walkway on a street where the red light is sometimes not acknowledged.

As they make their way, make their way, up the hill of God.

The intrepid also stand before the anonymous brick fort of the homeless shelter.

Propped on crutches, a woman of great girth readies to cross the street.

She's been born with one eye cast far from the other, and possesses an enormity that jostles her breasts, like bells tolling under her T-shirt.

She shares the same air of smiling pleasantries as the boy dressed in the gold lame skirt. Seated on a metal chair, he stations himself in front of the shelter to show an impressive muscular hip to oncoming traffic.

As they make their way, make their way, up the hill of God.

Bus # 80 is set to surge and stop, surge and stop toward the poor part of town.

Mounting the bus is a woman who has woven Fruit Loops through her close cropped hair; she wears a card – "Fruit Loops" – pinned at the shoulder so that people have a sure reference before their eyes travel from shoulder to neck to head, where the cereal blooms like a meadow drawn by a child.

Up she steps and the flora are gone. Like the others, she has got on with it.

As they make their way, make their way, up the hill of God, where the first will be the last and the last will be the first, saying "I am here."

## ASH WEDNESDAY

No more the gray smudged thumbprint of childhood, now my death-cross is large, black and oily, reaching down into the furrows of my forehead.

The whispered "for you are dust and to dust you shall return" brings a lump of assent to my old throat.

Is it time yet? For I am one great sin to be covered by ashes when it is time.

I could never last 40 days. All of those stones to become bread, and mammon to debase me. I would *try* not to live on bread alone, even with no angels to tend me.

The Son of God is a distant relative, needing just 40 days to practice. I have been given years, and dread when I must eat ashes like bread.

## **IN THE LAP OF ST. ELIZABETH**

Beginning to end, this day lies in the lap of St. Elizabeth, and in the encircling robe is God's grace: bread, as alms, all her robe could hold (and never enough).

Crowned, hallowed, yet burdened, she became a curiosity. From bread came roses, whorls the scent of ripe apricots, spilling through the ages onto my lands and into my hands.

But beauty is not abundant if contained behind the garden gate.

Take these loaves beyond, give them, and be glad.

## HAT QUEENS

The worthy matron – the African-American woman, the classy sista – works that hat, a golden helmet of salvation.

Be faithful until death and I will give thee the crown of life.

Salvation is fine. Just do not touch the hat.

Worthy matron is one dressin' lady, flashing red satin and a hat with an extended circular brim, sprouting red feathers.

And there are other women in waiting, balancing a cumulous cloud of yellow mesh, or a badge of pink concentric circles, resting on the forehead.

They come from mothers and grandmothers who passed on the royal gesture of tugging the brim forward, then backward, before caressing the hat like a rare bird.

Be ye ready to go shoutin' on a Sunday morning.

That's a good alleluia.

## **I Believe You**

“I can do anything.”

I had never heard anyone say this before, and I believed him.

Believed him through throat cancer  
as he chugged on, smoking, death defying  
and drinking, a bit, no where what he used to,  
since the chemo turned the taste of beer to brine.

So, narrowly missing his own silence,  
he did what he knew, creating sharp, strong angles of joinery and  
stopping the flow of water through my ceiling.

He built decks in perfect plumb  
And unclogged nasty toilets.

Then came the tongue and the jaw.

Cocking his head and opening his mouth,  
he revealed the part that remained.

He lisped without self-consciousness and after he left,  
I had a sump pump to keep the flood waters at bay.

The next time, I watched for him.  
Appointment at nine, he rolled up at eight, fifty-nine,  
churning through a curbside bank of leaves in his old  
Ford F-150, its gray primer holding the promise of paint.

The water came through again in the same spots,  
leaving yellow blooms on the ceiling  
that he had sanded and painted in flawless white the season before.

Taking the investigation outside, he examined the roof's drip edge,  
and said they didn't get it all, it's somewhere,  
in the spots on his liver or back in his head.

The November wind cut cruelly,  
so we went in for one of our talks.

Our talks were painful.  
They were long, one-sided and bilious,  
full of hate for Obama and social workers and black people.

I could almost see my precious Saturday minutes,  
dropping to the floor like salt,  
And felt disgusted by my inability  
to shut down the hate crimes he committed with his partial tongue.

He stubbed out his cigarettes in a copper ashtray,  
obliterating the face of some Incan god.  
And he gave me a bright blue stink eye,  
from a face that was 61 but looked 80.

The last time I called, he was bloated and abusive,  
responding to my sympathy with a sharp "C'mon."

He had friends to take him to his doctors' appointments  
and he had a house full of love, though as far as I knew  
he lived alone in an apartment on the bad side of town.

We laid plans. He had bent a piece of coil stock to nail at the edge  
of the roof and stop that ceiling leak once and for all.

He said he could lay a concrete apron in my driveway,  
even in December.

We wanted to replace my basement windows and Sheetrock my living  
room.

He loved my house.

For it, he had a soft spot.

In the summer, seated under a trumpet vine  
that attracts hummingbirds, he scanned the yard  
and called it Shangri-La.

He talked baby talk to the dogs and  
called me buddy.

Now, in winter, I am touched by his work.  
I hear the sump pump come on in short,  
determined grumbles.

It is warm, because of the insulation he packed into the attic,  
where he balanced on rafters.

But the ceiling stains remain and the basement windows frost over  
and I wonder who will fix them next.