A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

DECEMBER 19, 2014

$3.95 US/$4.50 CAN

www.commonwealmagazine.org

Founded in 1924
Commonweal

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Commonweal [ISSN 0010-3330], a review of public affairs, religion, literature, and the arts, is published biweekly, except in April, July, August, and November, when it is published monthly, by Commonweal Foundation, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 405, New York, NY 10115. Telephone: (212) 662-4200. E-mail: editors@commonwealmagazine.org. Fax: (212) 662-4183. POSTMASTER: send address changes to *Commonweal*, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834-9982.

Commonweal is indexed in Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, Book Review Digest, and Book Review Index. *Commonweal* articles are available at many libraries and research facilities via ProQuest and OpinionArchives. Serials Data program No.: ISSN 0010-3330. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional offices. Single Copy, $3.95. Yearly print subscriptions, U.S., $65; Canada, $70; other parts of the world, $75. Special two-year rate: U.S. $98; Canada, $108; other parts of the world, $118. Add $45 for airmail. For digital and online subscription options visit www.commonwealmagazine.org/digital.

Cover design: Cecilia Guerrero Rezes
Cover image: Giovanni Bellini
Madonna and Child, 1470–80

LETTERS

'True Catholic art,' contraception, religious education

AND MANY MORE

Congratulations on ninety years of excellent North American, lay Catholic journalism. I have been reading you pretty much since 1951, during William Pfaff's initial tenure ("Trying My Hand," October 24). Neither you nor I (to say nothing of the pope) has always been infallible, but I've always found your prose worthwhile, enlightening, and enjoyable, your poetry frequently beyond me, and your letters to the editor revealing. I only wish more people could be exposed to your "considered opinions" (to quote your former editor Margaret O'Brien Steinfels). May your magazine and our planet continue on for at least another ninety, and may your readership increase aplenty!

ANDY GALLIGAN
Tracy, Calif.

IGNAZ'S REACH

Regarding "A Question of Conscience: The Excommunication of Ignaz von Döllinger," by Thomas Albert Howard (October 10): A lesser known but significant aspect of Döllinger's conservative early decades was his influence on the definition of "true Catholic art." It was Döllinger who recommended that Alexis-François Rio read Karl Friedrich von Rumohr's 1824 text on Italian painting, and who encouraged Rio to write a history of Christian art (1836). Rio, along with Comte du Montalembert, author of *The True State of Religious Art in France* (1837), promoted the formula for true religious painting: "To illustrate dogma, to symbolize the traditions of the church set down by the magisterium—to have nothing in common with humanitarian philosophy." These dictates set the tone for neo-Catholic art (also known as the Nazarene style) that critiqued the late style of Raphael in favor of the purity of Fra Angelico—a truly interesting period in which conservative politicos and royalist sympathizers like Rio and Montalembert were part of an elite coterie drawn to liberal theologians.

JOYCE POLISTENA
Worchester, Mass.

PRECIPITOUS MISTAKE

Someone has finally gotten it right. In Thomas Baker's review of *Young Catholic America* by Christian Smith, et al. ("Kids Today," October 24), it comes out that the main reason young married Catholics are not becoming practicing Catholics is the ban on birth control. The problem is not bad priests, bad sermons, or an old, all-male hierarchy. Most priests are good men and do a good job with well-thought-out and prayerful sermons.

The typical American family has two children. The reason they don't have more is because they are using the pill, or another form of contraception. A woman and her husband with those two children would have to be hypocrites to say they are good Catholics. People don't like to be hypocrites, so they fall away. The Catholic Church teaches that by practicing artificial birth control people are committing serious sin, risking eternal damnation, and therefore cannot receive Communion. The church turns against them, not the other way around.

Humanae vitae is the problem. Pope Paul VI (now beatified) was advised not to ban the pill but he did so anyway. Encyclicals have been wrong before. Church leaders (including the pope) must admit the error of *Humanae vitae*.

ARTHUR FLEMING
Pittsburgh, Pa.

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DECEMBER 19, 2014 • VOLUME 141 • NUMBER 20
commonwealmagazine.org

RESSOURCEMENT

Thank you for Cathleen Kaveny's insightful reflection on what the church got right in the 1970s ("That '70s Church," October 24). I began working in parish faith formation in the 1980s. At that time we were using Carl Pfeifer and Janaan Manternach's *This Is Our Faith* catechetical series. Janaan used to affectionately refer to it as the "Cadillac of religion texts." It was the successor to *Life, Love, Joy*, and it retained the three-step process that I believe Carl and Janaan adapted from Thomas Groome's "shared praxis" pedagogy. If teachers understood and used this method, it was almost impossible even for volunteers to teach a bad lesson. Unfortunately, in later years the method was diluted or abandoned so that publishers could cram in more doctrinally correct "content."

For years the popular and politically correct wisdom has been to blame all the church's problems on the failure of Catholic religious formation over the past two or three decades of the twentieth century. The authors of *Young Catholic America* (reviewed later in the same issue) seem to endorse this conclusion. They blame the large number of "disengaged" Catholics today on the lack of "unified, lucid, authoritative instruction." One wonders if they took time to actually look at something like *This Is Our Faith* or the texts Groome wrote for Sadlier—or the well-intentioned new series that were found to be "in compliance with the Catechism of the Catholic Church."

Catholic religious education in the '70s, '80s and '90s did not fail our children. They were the best educated generation of young Catholics in the history of the church. What failed was the broader church, which is to say all of us. We prepared our youth for a church that never quite developed—a church grounded more in word and sacrament than devotion and duty. In effect, we catechized them to be aliens in the church, so—contra conventional wisdom—it's no great mystery why so many are "disengaged" as adults. The good news is, the vision of church that was so attractive back then is no less attractive now. You see it on the faces and hear it in the voices of Catholics, engaged and not, who are mesmerized by Pope Francis. In him they see hope for a church built on life, love, and joy.

DAVE CUSHING
Waterloo, Ia.

The next issue of Commonweal will be dated January 9, 2015.

From the Editors

Out of the Shadows

A delegation of U.S. bishops traveled to Nogales, Arizona, in April to say Mass at the Mexican border and call attention to the human cost of the broken U.S. immigration system: dangerous conditions at the border; separated families and unaccompanied children; underpaid and exploited workers; fearful immigrant communities. Cardinal Seán O'Malley preached in English and Spanish on the parable of the Good Samaritan. "We come here today to be a neighbor and to find a neighbor in each of the suffering people who risk their lives and at times lose their lives in the desert," he said. Then, he and his fellow bishops distributed Communion to worshippers reaching through the border fence, in a powerful image of solidarity.

The bishops' "Mission for Migrants," which included a later Mass in Washington, D.C., was meant to pressure Congress, and especially the House of Representatives, to move forward with immigration reform. The Senate had passed a bipartisan reform bill in 2013, but House Republicans refused to bring it up for a vote. Even as the numbers of unaccompanied minors crossing the southern border surged over the summer, Congressional Republicans fought legislation addressing the crisis and characterized cooperation with Obama's proposals as "surrender to a lawless president."

This is the context in which Obama went ahead with his recently announced executive action on immigration. Critics have labeled it "amnesty," but its scope is rather modest. It provides no path to citizenship and only temporary relief from the threat of deportation for certain groups—undocumented parents of children who are U.S. citizens, and some young adults who were brought to this country as children. Approximately 5 million undocumented immigrants could find relief under the new regulations, but more than 6 million would remain at risk of deportation.

In response to concerns about executive overreach, the administration released an analysis by the Office of Legal Counsel that frames the new orders as a legitimate extension of existing laws designed to ease the impact of immigration enforcement on American citizens and their families. Rather than withdrawing resources from enforcement (which the president could not do without Congress's approval), the new order directs the Department of Homeland Security to focus those resources on deporting criminals. Obama called it a step toward "accountability"—a chance for undocumented residents to "come out of the shadows and get right with the law," obtaining official permission to reside and work in this country.

Because the order is necessarily temporary—and subject to reversal by the next president—it remains to be seen whether those to whom it offers some reprieve will be willing to risk coming into the light. Their situation will remain precarious until Congress can be persuaded to once again take up comprehensive immigration reform, a prospect that seems highly unlikely before the end of Obama's presidency. GOP leaders have complained that, by acting unilaterally, Obama "poisoned the well" and ruined any prospect of bipartisan cooperation. But while Obama challenged Congress to respond by "pass[ing] a bill," he acted only after House Republicans made it clear they had no intention of doing so.

Unfortunately, the humanitarian conditions that urge action on immigration reform appear less important to legislators than the politics surrounding the issue. Having won a majority in Congress, Republicans now must choose between actively opposing a policy that could improve the lives of many American citizens—specifically, children whose parents might otherwise be deported—and allowing the president to claim a measure of success on immigration. Those political calculations are no doubt a significant factor for Obama. But in his November 20 announcement, the president leaned on the humanitarian case for immediate action. As is customary whenever the subject comes up, he reminded his listeners that the United States is "a nation of immigrants," but he also framed American identity in terms of our obligations to our neighbors: "Are we a nation that accepts the cruelty of ripping children from their parents' arms? Or are we a nation that values families, and works together to keep them together?"

These are the terms on which the U.S. bishops and other religious leaders have been pushing for progress in Washington, and they ought to keep advocating for comprehensive reform. Giving voice to the excluded is a powerful use of their office, not to mention a major part of Pope Francis's agenda for the church. But advocacy alone has not yet been enough to produce a law. If Congressional Republicans want to argue that reforming the immigration system is their job, they now have the opportunity to prove it. Obama's initiative will make a difference for a few million American residents, if only temporarily. But if it can provoke Congress into passing a reform bill, it will be a true miracle. It will also be a victory for Obama—but Congress should do it anyway. ■

December 2, 2014

John Garvey

Surrender

REMEMBERING WE'RE NOT IN CHARGE

Lord, Thy Will Be Done *by Philip Hermogenes Calderon, 1855*

I have served as a priest in the Orthodox Church in America for twenty-two years. The parishes where I've served have been varied. For ten years I was the pastor of an Albanian Orthodox church in Queens, during the period when Communism fell in Albania. The parish population doubled, with an influx of immigrants who were eager to be part of the church after having been denied any opportunity to worship by the world's most fiercely atheistic regime. My second church was a more typical OCA parish on Long Island, most of whose members were lifelong Orthodox, or converts from the Catholic and Episcopal Churches.

The church I am attached to now, in Washington State, is unique in both its composition and its clergy. We have a large minority of Ukrainian and Russian members, but the majority are converts. Of the clergy only one, my son-in-law, was born Orthodox. The rest come from Catholic, Pentecostal, and Episcopal backgrounds. In addition to the pastor, we have five priests and two deacons, more than any other church I know. There is always someone available to hear confessions before every liturgy, and our parishioners make a serious and frequent use of the sacrament. I've heard more confessions here than in any other parish where I've served, and I've noticed some patterns that say a lot about our culture. What comes up frequently is the need many people feel to be in total control of their spiritual lives, to know *now* exactly what their status is before God.

In my last column I wrote about the illusions involved in the idea of political control, but, as I reflect on confession, it occurs to me that the issue of control goes much more deeply into our culture, for all sorts of complicated reasons. We think that unless we are in charge, unless we control our lives more or less completely, something is wrong. Though I disagree with *Humanae vitae*'s conclusions about contraception, there is something genuinely prophetic in its suggestion that our current need to control everything in our lives is lethal.

This need for control involves not only such obvious areas as contraception, euthanasia, and abortion. More subtly and dangerously, it also involves our own spiritual lives. This need goes back to Eden. We want to be like gods: in control, in charge. To realize that we aren't in control and can't be wounds us; it makes us feel inadequate—which we are, and always will be. To know that we are contingent, dependent, and needy goes against the grain of our culture in just about every way.

I worked for a while in a local history archive and read a lot of nineteenth-century newspaper articles about deaths from freak agricultural and hunting accidents, women dying in childbirth, and a distressing number of children who died young. People had less real control then, but also fewer illusions of control. The advent of sulfa drugs, safe thoracic surgery, good anesthesia, birth control, and, later, abortion and euthanasia gave us a sense that we had mastered our mortality, if not quite cured it. I understand the appeal of such mastery. My baby sister died quite suddenly of a high fever, and it altered the life of our family. I would be in favor of any form of control that could have prevented that.

But this need for control becomes insidious when it takes over our spiritual lives, which form the way we see everything else. We want to make sure *this moment* that we are in the right place where God is concerned. One of my aunts (named Patience) had a pillow embroidered with the message, "God give me patience and I want it now." Where God is concerned, however, our knowledge of where we stand is necessarily incomplete—when we have any knowledge at all. Fundamentalism is one way to deny this, but so is any other kind of religion that promises certainty.

When I was moving toward Orthodoxy, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom told me three things: Get spiritual direction; come to as many of our services as you can, but don't be part of a community that doesn't pray; and realize that, if you should be Orthodox, God will make it clear to you—in his time, not yours. In other words, wait, watch, and pray. He was right on all counts, and in retrospect it occurs to me that all his suggestions have to do with not being in control. When we try to be in charge of anything, including our spiritual life, we can narrow ourselves and limit what we might be given. We are part of something larger than ourselves, and we have to surrender to it. The moment I knew that I had to be Orthodox was a moment of surrender, a moment when I knew that Someone else was in control. ■

Charles R. Morris

Whose Recovery?

WHY MOST AMERICANS ARE STILL STRUGGLING

There is no question that, in the aggregate, the U.S. economy has been performing fairly well of late. Its recent quarterly growth rates have been solidly in the 2.5–3 percent range, far better than those of any other major developed country, and also better than those of most emerging-market countries. But as the midterm elections made clear, the voters haven't exactly been turning somersaults of glee, for the simple reason that their pay packets have lagged well behind the growth in the economy.

Why has this happened? One answer is that it the recovery was basically engineered and directed by the Federal Reserve Board, and its then-chairman Ben Bernanke. Given the tools at his disposal, he did a fine job, but he couldn't quite get the country back on a robust, sustainable growth path. To understand why requires a little background on the Fed.

The Fed, to start with, is a bank. The most important fact about any bank is its balance sheet. Since the Fed is a bankers' bank, its assets normally consist of government notes and bonds, loans to member banks, gold, and cash, while its liabilities include deposits from member banks and Federal Reserve notes in the hands of the public, which serve as the nation's money. In normal times, the Fed manages the nation's monetary affairs by buying or selling government securities. If it wants to add a little zip to the economy, it will buy government bonds and notes and thereby inject cash into the economy; and if it wants to put on the brakes, it will sell government securities to mop up excess cash.

In January 2008, before Bernanke morphed into Spider-Man, the Fed had a balance sheet of about $900 billion—with almost all its assets government bonds and notes, and almost all its liabilities Federal Reserve notes. When the economy first tanked, the Fed did its best to flood the banking system with money by buying up all the government securities in sight. The goal was to drive interest rates down like a stone, so consumers and businesses would start borrowing and spending, and jump-start the economy. It didn't work. Interest rates did fall nearly to zero, but the corpse barely fluttered. The banks were choking on trillions in possibly worthless assets, while the sudden crash had paralyzed businesses and households.

Something like this had happened in the Great Depression, which was a primary focus of Bernanke's academic research. He formed the conviction that in truly dire circumstances the Fed should try "quantitative easing," or QE. So he started buying up all kinds of securities from the banks—mortgage-backed bonds, credit-card receivables, short-term paper, whatever—to the point where the Fed's assets have ballooned fivefold to $4.5 trillion, about a quarter as large as our annual GDP. By now the more exotic portfolios it absorbed in the early days of QE have almost been paid down or otherwise retired, so about two-thirds of its holdings are in government securities and the rest in mortgages. In effect, the Fed has been funding our budget deficits and the housing market. The liability side is dominated by $2.9 trillion in deposits from the member banks—basically cash the Fed has infused into the banks that they don't know what to do with.

Fed Chair Janet Yellen

So, did it work? Well, sort of, as evidenced by our relatively strong recovery. But the recovery has been very spotty. All that cheap money has pumped up stock and bond markets to the joy of corporate executives, and 95 percent of the income gains since the crash have gone to the top 1 percent of taxpayers. Those undesirable outcomes are not the Fed's fault. The tools they have, including Bernanke's new ones, are designed to work through the financial sector, which has the highest compensation-to-capital ratio of any industry. It's like contracting with jewel thieves to staff the local fire department. They may still save your house, but it will cost you.

What's required now is more government spending. The federal government can now borrow at the lowest rates in its history. Borrowing and investing in roads, bridges, and schools takes a while to percolate through the economy, but pays high dividends in terms of middle-class jobs. (Federal spending in general is much more tilted to ordinary families than spending processed through banks.) And if we don't want to incur more debt, we can finance it through taxes. American taxes of all kinds are among the very lowest as a share of GDP of all developed countries.

Almost all economists agree that a spending response is needed to kick the economy back to normal. Bernanke and current Fed chair Janet Yellen have each said as much many times. The Republican lock on Congress will block any new spending programs until the next election, condemning us to years more of stagnation and growing inequality. But of course, that's what the billionaires who have been funding the Republican resurgence may be hoping for. ■

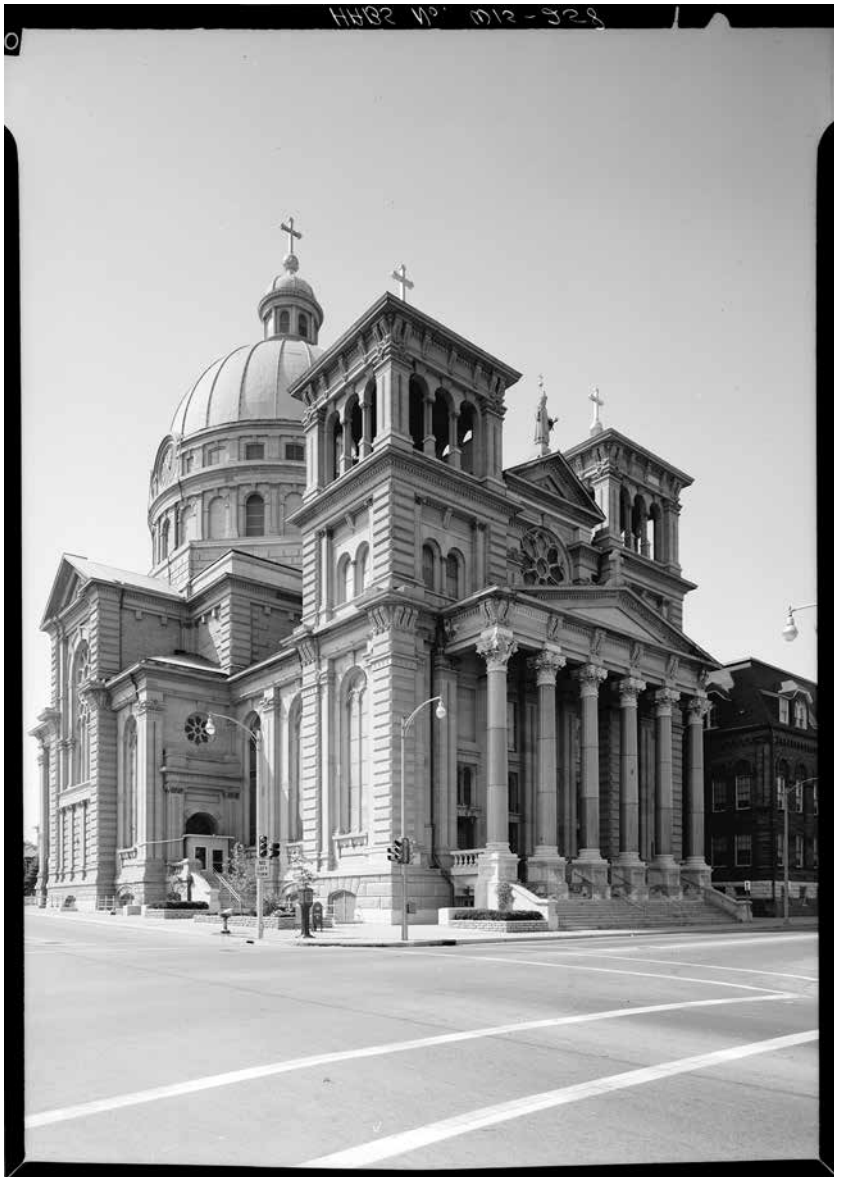
Paul Schaefer

A Brief for the Baroque

IS BEAUTY WORTH THE COST?

On an urban block on the south side of Milwaukee stands the grand Basilica of St. Josaphat. Though that part of town is crowded nowadays with Spanish bodegas, the church remains a testament to the Polish immigrants who flooded the neighborhood in the late nineteenth century and named their parish after the Polish monk martyred in 1623 during the conflict between Orthodox and Eastern-rite Roman Catholics. Within a decade following its 1888 founding, the parish swelled to more than twelve thousand members, becoming the largest in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Soon the initial church was too small, and so the pastor, Fr. William Grutza, sought to build a new one.

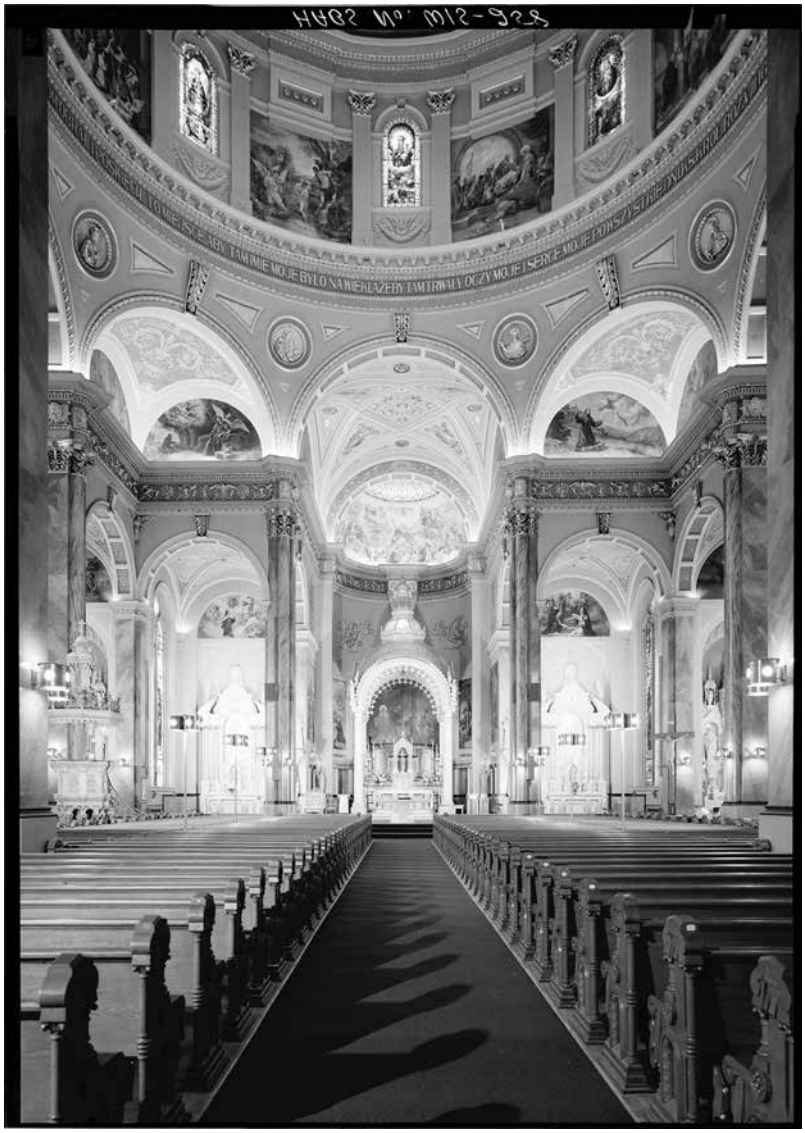
Grutza hired the renowned Milwaukee architect, Erhard Brielmaier, and together the two men, both immigrants themselves, set out to fashion a church that would emulate the cathedrals they had left behind in Europe—a structure grand enough to inspire the impoverished families who were St. Josaphat's parishioners. These newly transplanted Polish families didn't have it easy. They sent their men to work sixty-hour weeks in Milwaukee's smoky, claustrophobic steel mills and tool works, while their wives and daughters worked equally hard cooking meals, scrubbing factory-stained clothes, and caring for their many children.



Milwaukee's Basilica of St. Josaphat

For us looking back today, the stark contrast between such an elaborate and costly building as St. Josaphat and the lives of the hard-laboring men and women who worshiped there raises challenging questions. What is the role of beauty for those who live in such drab and difficult conditions? What human emotions attach to the perception of beauty, and which kinds of architecture, sculpture, and painting best bring forth those emotions? And finally, is a richly ornate—and staggeringly expensive—structure like St. Josaphat justifiable in a social sense? Should we view it—and the enormous and elaborate churches of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and eighteenth-century Europe that were its models—as magnificent monuments to the spirit or as needless displays of earthly power?

These moral and aesthetic questions are of more than historical interest; today many parishes are struggling to restore old churches in neighborhoods where church attendance has dwindled, while others are building new churches in places where the Catholic population is growing. Bethe Dufresne's profile of liturgical designer Lawrence Hoy ("A Sermon in Stone," June 1) touched on many of these questions. I think St. Josaphat provides a similar view into the nature of beauty and its function—and offers a key to understanding why the church, should it ever abandon its quest to preserve and create magnificent places of worship, will only further the spiritual impoverishment of the poor.



Interior of the Basilica of St. Josaphat

The opportunity to tour St. Josaphat arose this past summer when I went to Milwaukee to visit my brother, who helped raise funds for the basilica's restoration. By way of preparing myself, I had philosopher George Santayana's 1896 treatise *The Sense of Beauty* on my Kindle. Santayana, who called himself an "aesthetic Catholic," is said to have brought beauty down to earth and American aesthetic theory to maturity. I wondered what he would say if he were present as I walked through St. Josaphat's imposing neoclassical façade and entered a space large enough to accommodate more than two-thousand congregants.

I craned my neck to stare in wonder, trying to take it all in: the soaring dome, adorned with paintings of biblical stories in brilliant hues; a Corinthian-columned baldachino topped with a ruby lantern that canopied the elaborately carved tabernacle at the main altar; four marble-statued side-altars flanking the main altar, one with a gilded statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe; twisted columns, painted to resemble multicolored granites; a pure white, Italian marble pulpit towering on high; statues of angels with golden wings holding lamps that light a main altar populated with statues of the Virgin and other saints; Christ- and Virgin-figured stained-glass windows, topped with rose windows or lunettes; and so much more.

Feeling all but overwhelmed by the splendor around me, I wondered what to make of St. Josaphat. It was obviously beautiful, but was it *truly* beautiful? Many critics have dismissed these styles as decadent imitations of the Baroque and Rococo employed by the Catholic Church during the Counter Reformation. Some would say that even St. Peter's Basilica in Rome borders on the vulgar, and that simplicity of design is the only true way to perfection: a New England Presbyterian church, say, built during the Federal period, with a classic Doric-columned porch, a plain white interior, and clear, evenly spaced windows.

I know just such a Presbyterian church; I have been inside it several times for weddings. I am always struck by the single, centered, perpendicular window over the sanctuary. A tree stands in full-length view just outside that window. While I do find this church beautiful, it is partly because it serves as a frame for that happily placed maple tree, ornately dressed in fall colors or naked in winter, a remarkable amalgamation of sinuous lines glistening with falling snow.

It was not until I read Santayana that I understood why this plainer church might lose interest without the beauty of the tree outside. In its classic simplicity, Santanaya would say, the plain church is somewhat like the most perfect abstract form, the circle. Yes, the circle is beautiful, but it is so final and determined in its form that it becomes less interesting over time, unlike the tree that the window frames. As Santayana points out, even the Greeks moved from the pure, repetitive lines of the Parthenon to St. Sophia. I believe that St. Josaphat is like the tree, endlessly changing no matter when or where you look; like the tree's living branches, it is indeterminate, holding your attention through its very changeableness.

I know someone who thought that even trees are guilty of bad taste—a woman who prided herself on aesthetic sensitivity and who confessed to me long ago that she despised

fall foliage because it was "too gaudy." (A similar judgment is common in garden-club circles: the tuberous dahlia, for instance, too large and vividly colored in purples, reds, yellows, and pinks to be planted by any respectable gardener, is left to benighted old men, perhaps retired English colonels.) There exists an American prejudice, deriving from our Puritan heritage, against the ornate and the colorful—an intolerance that correctly identifies the Baroque and the Rococo with the papacy and Rome. Thus, even fall foliage and brightly colored flowers are scorned as the equivalents in nature of these styles.

Yet for those who celebrate and protect this kind of beauty, the question remains: Is it worth the cost? Beauty's rarity can raise its price to formidable heights. A Wall Street hedge-fund manager recently spent $155 million for one painting by Picasso, and houses along the Hudson River, near where I live, are out of reach for all but those contemporary Astors and Vanderbilts who reign in our new Gilded Age.

As for St. Josaphat, to the practical-minded—and even to those who simply believed in moderation—the plan that Fr. Grutza adopted from Erhard Brielmaier was wasteful. The initial cost of the building was estimated at $150,000 (in today's money, roughly $3 million), but the final, actual cost reached more than twice that amount. Though the parish was large, its immigrant families were poor, and indeed it was not until 1925—more than two decades after the basilica's dedication—that the debt was paid off, allowing the decoration of the interior to begin at last.

The basilica is now over a hundred years old. During the 1950s and '60s it fell into disrepair through lightning strikes, electrical fires, water damage from storms, and what might be called benevolent vandalization, when the colorful interior was painted almost all white. Its resurrection meant that millions more had to be raised. This time it was obvious that parishioners could not sustain the cost; many of the original Polish families had moved to the suburbs, and the new immigrants were perhaps even poorer than their predecessors. The Milwaukee business community was called on, and responded with crucial support—and with the new understanding that St. Josaphat, while still a Catholic parish, would be available to all, as the site of Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and Bel Canto Chorus concerts.

How much has the basilica cost over the past century? It is hard to estimate, but the rough answer is: many millions. Would a simpler structure have been more appropriate? Instead of restoration, should money have been raised for the

Basilica of St. Josaphat

poor? Of all the arguments against erecting such a monument, this is the most potent: Let us feed and clothe and house the poor, rather than build grand churches. Along these lines, is it not ironic that it is the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor, founded by the Apostle of Poverty, which now owns and administers the parish? Of all religious orders, Franciscans might be expected to argue most passionately for feeding and clothing the poor. Why spend for beauty, when those who crave it can find it in art museums, or in the public parks and beaches that line Milwaukee's Lake Michigan? After all, to individuals who are resourceful in looking for beauty, a leaf fluttering in the wind can evoke it. So why divert millions that could feed the hungry?

To answer these very reasonable objections, Santayana in *On Beauty* argued that "the wider diffusion of sensuous beauty makes it as it were the poor man's good." I would add that the beauty of a church like St. Josaphat provides a free education in aesthetics. Yet the ultimate answer, I think, is more fundamental still. The truth is that beauty is intrinsic in any religious setting; religion after all is the expression of the ideal, of perfection. It is true that the earliest Christian churches were simply meeting places in homes, and of course in the Catacombs. But quite early on, as the church developed, more elaborate places of worship were built. Santa Maria Trastevere, the oldest existing Catholic church in Rome, was built in 333 A.D., and it is thought that the original structure used columns from either the Baths of Caracalla or the Temple of Isis. The Pantheon built by Marcus Agrippa was converted into a Catholic church in the early 600s. The idealized image of Christ, wrote Santayana, "has inspired all the conversions, all the penances, charities, and sacrifices, as well as half the art of the Christian world."

One need only look at San Marco in Venice, or at Salisbury Cathedral, to see that this is true. They were built in "the Age of Faith," and it was faith, not practicality, that raised up such monuments. Many of the people who built them lived in hovels and wore rags; even their lords and masters were poor by today's standards. It is not only practicality, but a failure to recognize the aesthetic aspects of faith that allows some to view a mundane community hall, suitable for PTA meetings, as a proper setting for worship. I believe that first-century Christians would have joyously welcomed St. Peter's had they possessed the resources (and permission from the Roman Emperor) to build it. After all, many of them had memories of the recently destroyed and much mourned Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

Like Santayana, the novelist Albert Camus commented frequently on aesthetics. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* he famously asserted that life was "absurd" because it had no meaning, and that the "lucid" man realized the inevitability of final, unending nonexistence. Camus believed that it is only the "overloading and pretension to the eternal" that prompts man to create art larger than himself.

Say what you will about Camus' view of life's absurdity, but he was absolutely dead-on about art. It was belief in the eternal that brought about Chartres, with its flying buttresses, and St. Peter's and St. Josaphat, with their soaring domes. I believe that Christians should continue to embrace such magnificence. Indeed, those who claim a "pretension to the eternal," like Fr. Grutza, cannot do otherwise when facing the task of conceiving a house of God. And neither can we. St. Josaphat may not be the model for the churches we build today, but that is no excuse for not using the Berninis of today—the best modern aesthetic thought, the best materials available—to construct churches that will stand as monuments for centuries to come. ■

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You Will Be Missed

Alice McDermott

Brian was sixteen on that Saturday morning in 1986 when his father woke him by tapping a hand that smelled of shaving cream against his cheek. "Get dressed and come with me," his father said, and then added, "Get dressed for church."

Downstairs in the kitchen, his father made instant coffee for them both. He cut two pieces from the sticky coffee cake still in its box and set them out on paper napkins. His father was in one of his old business suits. His thinning hair was wet from the shower. "What's up?" Brian asked and his father replied somewhat shyly, as if to acknowledge the delicacy of what he had to convey.

"My sister's husband has passed away," he said. "The funeral is this morning on the North Shore."

Alice McDermott *won the National Book Award for* Charming Billy. *Her most recent novel is* Someone *(Farrar, Straus and Giroux).*

The icing on the coffee cake was a bright white shell, solid along the top, a thin, arrested dribble at the side. The cake beneath was somewhat damp, easier to break apart than to bite into. Brian broke it in half. "That's where we're going?"

"It seems only right," his father said. He moved his own uneaten piece across the table. "Finish this up and go brush your teeth. We want to get a seat."

His father's sister was eight years younger and had an odd name, Bronagh. As a child she had been red-haired and freckled and, in his father's words, hell on wheels. On West 65th Street where they had grown up, she was a collector of stray cats and lost dogs. Bronagh didn't find them, according to his father, the dogs and cats found her. As did any fledgling bird fallen from the thin trees, any injured pigeon flapping on the tar roof, one of which, the story went, she named Georgiana and led around like a dog on a leash made of sewing thread. Bronagh had a lisp and spoke to these various creatures in a precise and demanding tone, not like a child cooing to a pet, his father said, but like a foreman instructing a makeshift crew. "Look," she would tell some tomcat, holding him firmly by the scruff of the neck. "Pay attention now." To a shivering mutt that was suddenly trotting behind her, bumping his nose against the back of her knees, "Listen to me, you dope, here's what you've got to do."

She was christened on the same morning their poor mother was buried. Their father was already gone—a heart attack when Bronagh was only three months along in her mother's womb. A tragedy that ended in the happy circumstance of both orphaned children being taken in by their father's older brother—the legendary Uncle Jim—and Aunt Mary, his dear, if less storied, wife.

Whenever Brian's father made pancakes on a Sunday morning, he would recite a hilarious, lisping version of the children's tale Bronagh used to repeat, about how the big fwat cook made the big fwat pancake that would noth, noth, noth be eaten. He said, "Apple bwon Betty," whenever Brian's mother served it, quoting Bronagh. He recalled walking beside her one morning on the way to church, aunt and uncle behind them, and seeing her hold out her hand as if to feel for rain but catching instead a blue robin's egg in her small palm. She wrapped the egg in a handkerchief and kept it in her purse through Mass and then convinced their uncle on the way home to give her brother a boost—threading her fingers together to demonstrate—so he could return the thing to its nest.

And what else? Brian looked at his father as they walked out to the garage. He had his learner's permit by then, but his father didn't offer to let him drive. Given the solemnity of the occasion, Brian was hesitant to ask. He asked only if Mom was coming along and his father said, "Your mother's a little under the weather."

Brian could not be certain if they had even met, his mother and his father's sister. Certainly, Brian knew he had never met her, Bronagh. Aunt Bronagh, to be precise. She was a feature of his father's childhood tales, a character among the many: jolly Uncle Jim, frail Aunt Mary, pals with names like Willie Fitz and Corny Donleavy. She was, in these stories, a perpetual child—lisping and wise—furious, too, always telling someone off in an admirably effective way. But until this morning she was also a shade, a figure from a time long past. Brian was the last of his parents' six children. His mother was forty-eight when he was born, his father fifty-seven. It seemed to Brian that everyone in their childhood tales was already dead.

> "Who the hell reads obituaries?" he said to the glass in the car window—mumbled it because he wasn't sure he wanted his father to hear, but wishing, too, that his father, having heard, might cuff him on the ear for the impertinence.

It was as if the coffee and the sugar had finally brought him fully awake. He realized that he had not known until now that little, lisping Bronagh was still alive—never mind grown old, with a husband, and living on the North Shore. "What did she do, call you or something?" he asked.

His father briefly slid his eyes from the road to his son. "I saw the obituary," he said. "In the paper."

Only a year ago Brian would have accepted the answer quietly, understanding that his father had said all he wanted to say. But that was before he had begun to spend his evenings alone in his room, or in the crowded cars of his laughing friends. Just last week, one of them had announced as they pulled away from the curb, "As usual, Brian's old man and old lady are in there sucking whiskey. Getting plastered."

These were his high-school friends. They were smart, clever guys who liked to be funny. Without much effort of his own, Brian had somehow earned their affection. He was grateful to be among them.

"Come on, man," he had cried in response, laughing as well. "They're old. Give them a break, what else do you want them to do?"

Not the worst betrayal, perhaps, except that he had not known until then that his parents were getting plastered every night, sitting in front of the TV with their after-dinner whiskies. Meant to ease digestion, they said. Except that the memory of it, of turning his parents into a joke, still filled him not so much with shame as with a kind of vague disappointment. He'd had some intention to be better than that, as he grew older.

But it *was* a joke, he thought now: the drinking on the couch, the way-too-late-in-life baby, the vivid little sister of the sunny childhood tales suddenly made flesh because of a newspaper obituary. "Who the hell reads obituaries?" he said to the glass in the car window—mumbled it because he wasn't sure he wanted his father to hear, but wishing, too, that his father, having heard, might cuff him on the ear for the impertinence. Because he was pretty sure his words said, too, What kind of people don't see their only sibling for years, then show up at her husband's funeral? What kind of Irish joke are you?

He didn't turn to see how his father received the words, but, angry at himself for the impertinence, he was ready to be angry at the old man for any reprimand. None came. He looked. There was the familiar movement along his father's jaw, the brief pursing of the lips that meant he was being visited by a thought that struck him as tremendously amusing. "We're all peculiar in our own way," his father said.

The church was small, a chapel, really, and there were only three cars in the short apron of parking lot. Brian saw his father look at his watch. "Are we too early?" he asked him, and his father shook his head. "Right on time."

They went inside. The place was mostly empty—a trio of middle-aged people in winter coats, two women and a man, sat together in a pew to the far right. A woman in a sweater and a long wool skirt and squeaking shoes came and went across the altar. Brian and his father reached for the holy water, blessed themselves, and then slid into a back row. They both sat on the edge of the seat while his father pulled the kneeling bench down and then father and son knelt side by side. Brian watched the church lady light the candles on the altar. She genuflected again and again disappeared. Another couple came up the aisle—they brought the odor of cigarette smoke with them as they passed. They sat on the opposite side, waving as they slid into the pew to the three toward the front. Then the couple turned to Brian and his father and nodded. Brian nodded back. He understood that all of them were hoping for more people to appear.

His father blessed himself to end his prayer and Brian did the same. They both sat back in the pew. His father unbuttoned the suit jacket he had just buttoned as they got out of the car and again looked at his watch. He leaned his shoulder against Brian's and whispered, "I used to tell her she'd be late for her own funeral." Brian breathed a small laugh. The nearness of his father, the thin shoulder against his own, both pleased and saddened him in ways he didn't want to consider. "How long has it been since you saw her?" he asked. He watched his father's cupped fingers move with his calculations. His father's hands were lined and speckled, the blue veins so pronounced they seemed to ride above the skin, an old man's hands.

"Thirty-seven years," he whispered.

There was the snap—although in the silence it reverberated like a rifle crack—of the hinges on one of the double doors as it was pushed back. All seven of them turned to see a man in a suit efficiently using the toe of his polished shoe to hook the door to the wall. They watched him swing open the second and do the same. Then he walked out.

There was a metallic rattle in the vestibule, and then the silver coffin appeared. It was rolled up the aisle, not carried, only two men in dark suits—one of them the man who had secured the doors—for pallbearers. The priest was at the foot of the altar now, the lady who'd been coming and going now dressed in a white surplice and standing at his side—a sure sign, Brian knew, that the scheduled altar server had not shown up. The priest watched the men maneuver the coffin so that it was parallel to the altar and then he doused it with holy water. As he was doing so, Brian followed his father's lead and blessed himself. The priest then shot a glance at the man who had opened the doors. The man hurried back down the aisle. Brian looked to his father. He saw that ripple of amusement move along his jaw. "Late," his father whispered. "Always late."

There was the sound of another car just outside, a car door closing, and then another. And then a small woman in a deep blue dress, high black heels, and a straw hat better suited to a country fair, walked quickly down the aisle. Her head was bent, her shoulders straight. Behind her walked the man in the dark suit with a boy of about ten beside him. The boy wore a blazer and a wrinkled pair of khaki pants. He was blonde, pale, and handsome. It was clear that he had been crying.

Brian glanced at his father and saw that tears stood in his eyes as well, but there was no way to tell if the sight of his sister or the boy had sparked them.

The two took the first pew. The priest walked around the coffin to say a few words to them before he began the Mass.

It was quick. The priest was a large, florid man, all business. He read the story of Lazarus and then addressed his remarks to the woman and the boy. He called them "Bronagh and Mike," using their names warmly and perhaps too often, but speaking in generalities about sadness and redemption, what you savored about life and what you looked forward to at its end.

At Communion, Brian followed his father to the front of the church. He glanced at Bronagh, but saw just the top of her straw hat. She and her son both had their faces buried in their hands, the way people used to do, post Communion, when Brian was young.

It wasn't until the Mass was over and the man who sat with the other two women on the far side of the church stood up stiffly and went to the pulpit that Brian realized the

late husband's name was Hugh. (What Hugh savored about life...what Hugh looked forward to at its end.) Hugh was great and easygoing, the man said. He had his disappointments, who didn't? But he was bowled over by the arrival of little Mickey here—you (Hugh?) just knew the kid was the apple of his eye. "In closing," the man said, "Hugh will be missed. That's a definite."

After the priest made the last blessing over the coffin, the two undertakers guided it out on its metal stand. Bronagh and the boy came down the aisle behind it. Now Brian could see that she had a small face, freckled in the faded way older people wore freckles. Washed blue eyes in the way of redheads. He saw the eyes fall briefly on his father and he saw, too, as she passed, the familiar movement along her lips and the curve of her jaw—a great, silent laugh roiling beneath the skin.

They waited for the other few mourners to precede them, so that by the time they passed through the vestibule and into the sunlight she and the boy were already in the limo that was parked behind the hearse. They watched it pull out. Through the window, Brian could see the straw hat, the white face beneath. He saw her hand brush the glass. His father raised a hand to wave back. Then Brian and his father walked the short distance to the car.

Inside, his father said, "Let's get some breakfast. I saw a couple of good-looking diners on the way."

Brian only waited a beat before he leaned back against the door to say, "That's it?"

Brian had three older sisters of his own—all in their thirties then, with jobs and children and homes—but he had not thought of them and their fist-to-his-jaw, Brian-can-do-no-wrong affection until he saw that suppressed amusement in Bronagh's small face. Had she given that shout of laughter she appeared ready to give, coming down the aisle, seeing his father, he knew it would have had the exact ring of his sisters' voices when they called out their delight—even after the shortest while—in seeing him again.

"Do you know how weird this is?" he said. "After thirty-seven years. We're just going home?"

The old man pursed his lips. "No," he said softly and Brian knew the voice with which he had spoken to his father, his dear, beloved father, was the same one he had used in the car that night with his friends—jokey, detached, indifferent to the affection, the loyalty, that he felt for the man—the voice he had used when he said, "Come on, they're old." He felt a stirring of that same regret. He had disappointed himself again.

"No," his father said carefully, shaking his head. "We're not just going home. We're going to get breakfast."

In the diner, they slid into a booth. His father lifted the heavy menus and elaborately handed one to Brian. He opened his own and groped for the glasses he kept in his suit jacket. He held them to his nose and said, "Eggs Benedictine sounds good. Though I don't suppose there's a drop of Benedictine in them."

Brian kept his eyes on his own menu. "It's Benedict," he said. It seemed he could not wrestle his own, gentle voice away from the SOB who now wielded it.

"There's probably not much Benedict in them either," his father said easily. "Unless Benedict's the chef."

When the waitress arrived, Brian ordered elaborately: eggs, bacon, home fries, bagel, a blueberry muffin, in some vague anticipation of smothering the vicious words he feared he might speak to his father, who was now looking around the shining place with a kind of happy satisfaction, as if the morning's work had been good and this respite well earned. The waitress returned with their coffees. And a tall glass of juice for "the grandson." His father winked at him when she turned away, but Brian raised the glass and drank quickly—it was bitter and too full of pulp. His father took a paper napkin from the dispenser at the table and lifted his mug to wipe up the spilled coffee beneath it. "Your mother wouldn't be happy with this," he said. "You know how dedicated she is to cups and saucers."

His father studied him with that suppressed smile. It was the way another kind of father would study a child to whom he had just proposed a complex riddle: a hushed moment in which the progenitor is assessing the intelligence of his offspring.

Brian said, "She didn't want to come?" Knowing there was a challenge in his voice.

"She was weary this morning," his father said. "Feeling a little under the weather."

Brian said, "I'm not even sure what that means," and saw his father let it pass. Even this strange new voice of his would not let him say, "Does it mean she's hungover?" Even the teenager in him was unready for the pain such words would inflict. He said instead, "Who was this guy anyway? Whose funeral we just went to?"

His father was blowing gently on his coffee. He tasted it

and then lowered the mug. His eyes said *I surely hope this is not sheer stupidity on your part*, but his voice was kind enough. "My sister's husband. I thought I told you."

"Yeah," Brian said. Even the possibility of his father, his old father, condescending to him in this way suddenly annoyed him. "You told me, but, I mean, who the hell was he? Did you ever even meet him?"

His father poured a bit more cream into his coffee, stirred it gently, and then, fastidiously, took another napkin from the dispenser and placed the wet teaspoon upon it. "No," he said. "We never met. I didn't even know she was married. And had a son. I saw it yesterday. In the paper. He looked like a natty little man. In the photograph. A bowtie and a small mustache."

Brian threw himself back in the seat. The plastic upholstery of the booth was overstuffed but uncomfortable. "I'm not getting it," he said, speaking to his father as if he were speaking to a friend, or—less friendly than that—a peer. "Why we even came out here." He had left his blazer and his tie in the car, but now he unbuttoned his cuffs and began to roll up his sleeves, as if to show his father how unnecessary the dressing up, among other things, had been. "When you didn't even know the guy."

The waitress came with their food. His father had only the one plate, but Brian's order seemed to fill the table. He didn't really want any of it. He had a sudden image of a small balding man with a mustache, a bowtie, a checked sports jacket, lying in the darkness inside the metal coffin. Hugh.

"If you don't go to other people's funerals," his father was saying wryly, cutting into his eggs, "No one will come to yours." He looked at his son again, there was that bright amusement in his eyes.

"It's weird," Brian said. "You've got to admit it, Dad. It's kind of weird."

His father shrugged. "When my Uncle Jim died," he said. "This was back in 1946, we had the wake, and on the second day, after the dinner break, I come back into the funeral parlor and there's a man sitting there, the spitting image of my uncle when he was younger. Spitting image, size, shape, everything. Except younger, maybe thirty years younger. More in his prime." His father suddenly squinted at him, gauging something. "Do you know Banquo's ghost, from Shakespeare?"

Impatiently, Brian said, "Yeah, sure," and his father nodded, relieved. "Well that's what I thought of. Here's my Uncle Jim in his prime, coming toward me. Here's my old, worn-out uncle in his coffin at the front of the room." He laughed and took another hearty bite of his eggs. "So you talk about weird," he added, finishing the tale.

"Well who was he?" Brian asked.

His father shook his head, as if this part of the story were irrelevant. "Some cousin from the other side. He'd seen the obituary in the paper and recognized the name. So he came to the wake."

"Did they know each other?"

"They might have met once—the man wasn't really sure. He said he might once have written to my Uncle Jim to ask if he'd sponsor him to come over. And my Uncle never wrote back." And here again was that shivering amusement that ran itself along his mouth and jaw, that would have, in a more demonstrative man, erupted in laughter. "The man said he wasn't sure if he wrote the letter, but he was certain Uncle Jim hadn't answered it."

His father studied him with that suppressed smile. It was the way another kind of father would study a child to whom he had just proposed a complex riddle: a hushed moment in which the progenitor is assessing the intelligence of his offspring.

"So he brought a bit of a grudge with him to the wake," his father went on, deferring the decision. He raised his coffee mug, a kind of salute. "But it was a great thing anyway, on a day like that, to see Uncle Jim's young face again."

"Was Bronagh there?" Brian asked.

Without hesitation, his father said, "Of course."

"Was that the last time you saw her?"

"No," he said. "She was at our wedding. That was the last time I saw her."

Brian took a small packet of jelly from the tiny metal stand on the table, peeled it open. Slyly he asked, "She didn't like Mom?"

His father shook his head. "No," he said. "She liked her well enough. I suppose. Who knows, with women, how much they ever like each other?"

Brian bit into the bagel. He was aware of how the food, the morning smell of bacon and coffee and toasted bread was, perhaps, calming the beastly kid inside him, soothing that bitter voice. Here he was in a diner with his father, just the two of them on a Saturday morning in the fall, shooting the breeze. Or here he was—not such a bad person after all—letting his old man talk.

"So how come?" Brian said. "How come you haven't seen her? How come you didn't say anything to her? She's your sister."

His father said, slippery, "I'm sure the poor undertaker had somewhere else to be. She was always late, Bronagh. She liked to shake her fist at time."

"That's not what I mean," Brian said. "I mean, thirty-seven years. I can't see the girls"—their collective name for his three sisters—"letting me get away with not seeing them for thirty-seven years."

His father raised his coffee mug in a salute. "Everything you need to know about getting along with women you learned in your crib. I've seen it. You're not afraid of girls, young or old. You're not in awe of them, either. You're lucky in that."

Flattered, Brian asked, "When have you seen me with girls?" He knew his father was right. He spoke easily to women, more easily than his friends did. Whether or not this had to do with being born into a family already equipped with three teenage girls he couldn't say.

"Oh, I've seen it," his father said coyly. He pointed to the untouched muffin. "Should we have them wrap that up and take it home to your mother?"

Brian looked down at his plate and was surprised to see how much he had eaten. "Sure," he said and then watched his father call to the waitress to ask her if she had some wax paper so they could take that "monstrosity" home.

She took the muffin away and brought them more coffee and the bill. His father was reaching for his wallet before Brian understood how well his question had been deflected.

"So I still don't know," he said. "Why thirty-seven years since you've seen your sister. Was it a fight or something?"

His father considered this, as if a reply involved some struggle to recall. "No," he said. He had the check and the bills in his hand. He had already turned in the booth as if to stand and so it seemed it was something beyond his control that required his answer be short and succinct. "You make a decision in your life: Are you going to be happy or not? I made my decision when I married your mother and it's worked out very well. I've had a good life. But with Bronagh there could be no peace in this world as long as a stray mutt was out in the rain or some clerk wasn't speaking politely. She's a scold. Maybe it had to do with the circumstances of her birth, orphaned so early." He raised his eyebrows, his brown eyes amused. "The mortal universe never quite met with her approval." He placed the knuckles of his free hand on the seat beside him, helping himself out of the booth. "I love her dearly," he said, sliding to his feet. "But there's enough misery in life. Why rub it in?"

There was an awkward bit of silence: birdsong and cars driving by and a strange hum to the sunlight which, Brian was beginning to understand, was what thinking about death—this boy's father with his bow tie lying inside the steel casket, his own father saying "I've had a good life"—could do to a sunny autumn day.

It was a point of pride for his city-bred father that he knew his adopted homeland—Long Island—so well that he could take back roads all the way to Montauk. Brian thought they were only taking a short cut home, through a leafy neighborhood of small narrow houses, when his father suddenly pulled to the curb. He took the keys from the ignition and said, "Slip into your jacket, you don't need the tie."

The brick house they approached had a narrow stoop and a screen door with aluminum scrolls and vines. His father had barely raised his hand to rap at it when a mob of small, yapping dogs appeared in the hallway, scratching their black nails against the linoleum. And then Bronagh herself appeared, without the straw hat. She eased the dogs away with her foot, speaking to them in that annoyed and impatient way his father had described ("What are you barking at, you dummies? Do you even know what you're barking at?"), before she looked up to say, "Hello, Bill. Nice of you to come."

His father slipped inside and Brian followed. "Hello, Bronagh," his father said. "Sorry for your trouble. This is my youngest, your namesake, Brian."

Bronagh looked up at him. Her face was small and wrinkled about the eyes. The roots of her red hair showed gray. Brian had never been told that he was named for her. "You'll have to meet my Mickey," she said and then said to the crowd of dogs at her feet, "Oh, yeah, aren't you a ferocious bunch?" Ferwocious. They were all ugly: two fat-bellied mutts with small heads and ratty faces, an ancient blonde spaniel, a beagle with a hoarse croon. "Says you," Bronagh told the hound over his baying as they walked into the living room. She had exchanged her high heels for house slippers.

The two women from the church were perched on the couch with teacups on their knees. The man was in the leather recliner. They all nodded at Brian and his father as they were introduced.

There were small sandwiches on the dining room table and the same boxed coffee cake he'd had at home. They followed Bronagh into the kitchen, where there was a bar set up on the wet counter beside the sink. The boy was there, now in just a white shirt and a loosened tie. He was pouring himself a glass of soda from a large bottle and he seemed to do a double take when they entered the narrow kitchen, the dogs still following. He had a girlish face, large brown eyes with long lashes. "Give Brian here a soda," his mother said, and then to his father, "What will you have, Bill?" There were bottles of whiskey and gin on the counter and Brian was pleased to hear his father say, "Just a ginger ale." If his parents were alcoholics, he knew, they were, at least, home alcoholics. His father would never take a drink if there were car keys in his pocket.

Bronagh leaned to push open the screen door at the end of the short room. She waved the dogs toward it, saying, "You boys go out and get some fresh air." It took Brian an extra, awkward second to understand she meant animals and humans both.

He glanced briefly at his father, who was smiling, and then followed his new cousin out the door and down a few

steps to a small concrete patio. An ancient yellow lab stood up to greet them. A fat tabby cat on the picnic table did not. There was a narrow yard beyond the patio. There was a small, rusty-looking swing set in the far corner. The two boys sat at the table. Brian spent a few minutes patting the old lab, collecting dog hairs on his blazer.

"Sorry about your dad," he said, after he had asked the lab's name—"Reginald Van Gleason," Mickey said—and how old he was—"really old" was the answer. Mickey said, "Thanks," and looked away.

There was an awkward bit of silence: birdsong and cars driving by and a strange hum to the sunlight which, Brian was beginning to understand, was what thinking about death—this boy's father with his bow tie lying inside the steel casket, his own father saying "I've had a good life"—could do to a sunny autumn day.

"What grade are you in?" Brian asked.

"Tenth," the boy said.

Brian heard himself say, "Really?" They were only a year apart. "What are you, thirteen, fourteen?"

Mickey said, "Fifteen. Sixteen in December."

They were born the same year then.

They both drank from their stubby glasses. Brian felt the sun on the shoulders of his blazer. "So we're cousins," he said.

Mickey said, "Strange, right?" He smiled shyly. His face was smooth and pale, with something of that tired look people got when they were finished crying. "I guess they had a fight or something," Mickey said cautiously. "My mom and your dad."

Brian only shrugged. There was no way he could repeat for this poor kid, his natty father just laid in a grave, any version of what his own father had said. Your mother's a scold. You make a decision in life. Hugh.

"My parents fought a lot too," Mickey offered.

"Oh yeah?" Brian asked. "Like cats and dogs," Mickey said and then looked up and laughed. "Except that these guys"—he gestured toward the cat, and the dogs who were now scattered across the grass, studying them—"never fight."

"What did they fight about?" Brian asked. He felt the awkwardness of speaking unkindly about the dead.

"Everything," Mickey said. "All the time," he added. "I only realized it in the last few days, when it's been so quiet here—they fought all the time." He looked at Brian from beneath his long lashes. "Your parents fight a lot?"

Brian tried to remember. "Not really," he said, and when he saw his cousin's disappointment, he added. "They're pretty old, my parents."

"Well, yeah," Mickey said. "So are mine."

Brian nodded, conceding the point. "Your mother ever talk about my dad?"

Mickey said, "Oh, yeah. 65th Street. Uncle Jim and Aunt Mary. And Mr. Bannister who had the bakery."

"Banana-nose Bannister," Brian said. He knew the story too.

Mickey laughed. "Right," he said, brightening. No one would believe this kid was almost sixteen. "You know the one about Georgiana, my mother's pet pigeon?"

"Yeah," Brian said.

Mickey said. "How about the time your dad hocked Uncle Jim's gold watch to get a Mass said for my mom because he thought she was dying?"

Brian shook his head. "Never heard that one."

Mickey rolled his eyes. "He got like five bucks for a watch that was worth fifty. And then ran to church with the money. When all she had was a head cold."

"Pretty funny," Brian said. "I guess they liked each other then."

"I guess," Mickey said. He touched the shut-eyed cat behind the ear. "So what happened?"

Brian shrugged again. "Who knows?" He looked into the yard. The old swing set was listing to the right. There had been a similar set in his own yard when he was very young. His only memory of it was the way the rusting chains pinched his fingers, the way his three sisters would descend on him when he cried out, vying to kiss away his tears.

"I sure can't see going thirty-seven years without talking to my sisters," Brian said.

The boy looked up casually. "How many sisters do you have?"

"Three," Brian said. And then, as if to make up for bragging about something he had never before thought of as an advantage, he added, "But I hardly see them. They're a lot older."

"Any brothers?" Mickey asked.

Brian said two. "Also older. I'm the only one left at home."

Mickey nodded, twisting his mouth a bit, as if weighing the mitigating benefits of Brian's siblings' ages. As if considering whether such a circumstance was better than, or equal to, being an only child left home with a widowed mother. "Same here," he said finally.

Brian drank from his soda. The sun was warm on his shoulders.

It was a fall afternoon so much like summer that it was hard to believe, looking back, that only another winter followed. The winter that Brian too would become an only child, left home with a widowed mother.

Mickey leaned across the wooden table. He squinted at Brian. "Here's what I want to know," he whispered. "They're old. Your dad, my mom."

Brian said, "Yeah," ready to defend his father against what he himself had only recently accused him of. "So?"

"So," Mickey said. He closed his lips over what he wanted to ask. The sun was on his downy cheek and a muscle was moving along his smooth jaw. His eyes were large and brown and heavily lashed. For a moment Brian felt the thrill of it—the certainty that he was looking into his father's face as it had once been, back when his father and Bronagh both were young. A great thing to see, as his father might have put it. A great thing anyway, on a day like this.

"So what I want to know," Mickey was saying, "is why the hell did they have us?" ■

Richard Alleva

Spooks & Creeps

'ROSEWATER' & 'NIGHTCRAWLER'

When good writers contemplate evil, they write something like *Macbeth* or *No Country for Old Men*. When they detect stupidity, they can make it the material for farce, as in the stories of Gogol or the movies of Laurel and Hardy. But what happens when writers or filmmakers encounter the collusion of evil and stupidity? In that case, isn't satire what's called for?

Jon Stewart didn't think so when he decided to bring to the screen Maziar Bahari's memoir of the months he spent in Iran's notorious Evin prison. The film that Comedy Central's leading satirist has written and directed is painful, poignant, suspenseful, and sometimes wryly funny, but *Rosewater* isn't the satire that Stewart's fans may have expected. He made the right choice. Satire, among its other functions, can startle us into a new awareness of problems so quotidian that we take them for granted—as when Gulliver's Lilliputians mistake his watch for a god whom their giant visitor continually consults, thus making us laugh at our slavery to time and schedule. But why would Stewart use satire against a regime that nobody takes for granted and one that announces its stupidity so starkly that it's too easy a target for ridicule?

In a sense, the movie is an apology for a bit of satire that backfired when Iran's police turned it against the Iranian-born, London-based Bahari, a reporter for *Newsweek*. Stewart had dispatched *The Daily Show*'s Jason Jones to Iran just before that country's 2009 elections, when the egregious Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ran against the liberal reformer Mir-Hossein Mousavi. The show's producers set up a deliberately ridiculous, nudge-nudge-wink-wink interview with Bahari, in which Jones made silly jokes about being a spy and about how ogrelike all Iranians seem to Americans, with Maziar tacitly playing along with the joke. Though the skit was meant to show Americans that they had a lot in common with Iranians, Iran's police interrogators took the comedy footage as proof that Bahari was himself a spy for the West, in league with MI6 and/or the CIA. Now, by creating a nonsatiric film of such humanistic simplicity, Stewart has achieved precisely what the original mock interview strove for: through one person's plight, we witness the bewilderment of a privacy-loving people preyed on by their own meddling, paranoid, humorless leadership.

OPEN ROAD FILMS

Right from the start, *Rosewater* manages to be both stinging and compassionate. Upon Bahari's arrest, his mother (played by the wonderful Shohreh Aghdashloo, who possesses the smokiest voice since Melina Mercouri) insists on serving tea to the arresting officer. Not because she's hoping she can change his mind, but because she won't let the regime's cruelty and fanaticism keep her from adhering to venerable Persian courtesies. Ayatollahs may consider themselves the guardians of law and order, but she is the real conservative. And the officer's response? "Put on your veil, Madam."

Kept in a solitary confinement interrupted only by interrogations and beatings, Bahari summons the spirit of his late father, a communist of the 1950s who never buckled under the tortures of the Shah's secret police in the very same prison that now holds his son. But the paternal inspiration proves shaky because the son can't help reflecting that what fortified his father was an ideology just as fanatical as the worst mullah's. Indeed, Mazier Bahari is being tortured by a regime that learned its brutal techniques from the Shah's men, who had learned them from Stalin's men. Much of *Rosewater* is double-edged in just this way, which makes it astonishing that some critics have accused the film of glibness.

The acting supports the complexity. As Bahari, the Mexican actor Gael García Bernal is such a compound of frailty, slyness, and high intelligence that you're often as puzzled as his interrogators as to whether he is close to breaking. And in the role of the chief interrogator, or "spe-

cialist," the Danish actor Kim Bodnia manages to be frightening, pathetic, and even funny. (His prurient interest in the sex lives of Westerners is darkly comic.) A realistic, well-rounded portrait of a monster is always more frightening than a melodramatically concocted gargoyle.

On his first outing as director, Stewart proves astonishingly adroit. Let other directors sweep horizons with their cameras; this neophyte knows how to fill a tiny prison cell with drama. Digital effects can give us monsters, planets, battles, but here, in one brief, magical passage, they project the protagonist's remembered childhood and adolescence onto storefront windows as he strides down a London street. And while other filmmakers desperately ratchet up the levels of violence and gore to satisfy the jaded moviegoer, Stewart limns the brutalization of a human being without ever sinking into the pornography of violence.

From the journalist as hero to the photojournalist as scumbag. *Nightcrawler* is a monster movie that wants to be a social indictment. Surely it's no accident that the title evokes images of vampires or outsized devouring worms, since its protagonist, Louis Bloom (Jake Gyllenhaal), preys on the public's appetite for sensational news by scouting out violent street crimes and bloody traffic accidents and then selling his video footage of them to a ratings-hungry TV station. By the end of the movie, he has caused several deaths but has achieved his ambition of heading his own camera team.

Louis isn't so much a character as a demonic force unleashed by the public's bad taste, and it's the public whom the film ultimately indicts. But the public doesn't have a face; Louis does. And so it's this monomaniacal creep the viewer has to live with for two hours. Perhaps writer-director Dan Gilroy could have made Louis compelling by exploring the psychology behind the hunger that drives him; but, as rendered here, the character has no past, no human ties, no moments of doubt or inconsistency, and no real purpose apart from making money. We never wonder what he's going to do next because we always know: the worst possible thing.

You can pinpoint what went wrong here by watching Billy Wilder's *Ace in the Hole* (1951), which deals with exactly the same theme. Kirk Douglas plays a reporter who prolongs a victim's agony in order to turn a single article into a series. His character is just as ruthless as Gyllenhaal's, but he's also challenged by the better elements of his own nature, including his pity for the person he's exploiting. This tension is what sustains our interest. Goethe's Faust (another egotistical SOB) lamented, "Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast," and that applies to all interesting antiheroes. But Louis doesn't seem to have even one soul. ■

OPEN ROAD FILMS

Eugene McCarraher

Capital Offenders

Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste

How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown

Philip Mirowski

Verso, $29.95, 467 pp.

Surveying the American scene shortly after the end of the Civil War, Walt Whitman recoiled from another pandemonium unfolding before his eyes. America, he railed in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), had grown "canker'd, crude, superstitious, and rotten," riven by "robbery and scoundrelism" and stricken by a "hollowness at heart." Alarmed by "the depravity of the business classes," he cursed "the mob of fashionably dress'd speculators and vulgarians." The industrial and financial elites reigned over a cruel and ravenous plutocracy, grinding the faces of farmers and industrial workers with legal impunity. But business ruled America, Whitman surmised, not only with lawyers and guns but also with the gaudy spells of avarice, the enchantments of the unrighteous and insatiable Mammon that beguiled the poor and downtrodden. "Business," he snorted—"this all-devouring modern word, business"—is "today sole master of the field."

Whitman saw the advent of a populist crusade against the chop-whiskered wolves of Wall Street. But what of our own era of robbery and scoundrelism? Despite the most serious economic crisis since the 1930s, our own speculators and vulgarians have suffered nothing in the way of embarrassment or ignominy; indeed, many of those who designed and superintended the calamity remain in power, managing the reconstruction of the rubble with unrepentant, vainglorious aplomb. Protected and worshipped by expensive legislators and a craven intelligentsia, our overlords have emerged more acquisitive than during the mercenary delirium of the '90s. So with capital more brazenly entrenched than ever before, the contemporary American scene is bereft of anything but plutocratic vistas; capitalism remains the horizon of moral and political possibility. The ontological sublime of the Market; the *summum bonum* of shareholder value; the awe and veneration we common clay should exhibit toward that higher species, the Entrepreneur—these sacred doctrines enjoy a secure position in the American moral imagination.

In *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, a pugnacious but dispiriting book, Philip Mirowski explains how neoliberals have survived and even flourished in the midst of the catastrophe they wrought. The Carl Koch Chair of Economics at the University of Notre Dame, Mirowski scolds the neoliberal members of his guild for their venal, econometric sophistry. But economists aren't the only ones to blame.

Friedrich Hayek

LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS LIBRARY

Mirowski's book demonstrates that the resilience of neoliberal folly owes much to the intellectual and political ingenuity of the right, to the protean perversity of neoliberal doctrine, and to changes in our everyday lives that appear to ratify neoliberal tenets.

Mirowski traces the genealogy of neoliberalism to the 1940s, when a motley constellation of economists, political philosophers, and other intellectuals gradually united to turn back the tide of social democracy and New Deal liberalism. Ensconced in university economics departments (especially the University of Chicago), foundations (the Lilly Endowment, the John M. Olin Foundation), and think tanks (the Hoover and American Enterprise Institutes, the Federalist Society), they formed a "floating transnational agora" recruited from academia, politics, and business. Its inner sanctum was the Mount Perelin Society (MPS)—"the executive committee of the capitalist insurgency"—and its brightest luminaries were the Austrian economists Ludwig Mises and Friedrich Hayek, the latter the author of *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), the ur-text of neoliberalism.

For three decades, MPS and its affiliates inveighed against the mild Keynesian consensus that prevailed in economics, protested the willingness of corporate business to negotiate with labor unions, and denounced the welfare-regulatory state as a modern form of servitude. Yet the unprecedented prosperity of Cold War capitalism—steady growth in real wages and productivity, a distribution of wealth not obscenely inequitable, and a modicum of social peace—rendered the insurgents "a thought collective in pursuit of a mass political movement." Their moment arrived in the 1970s, when stagnation and

falling profits provoked capital throughout the North Atlantic to unilaterally break the social truce. Spearheaded by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and supplied with legitimacy by the new prominence and vigor of neoliberal academics and journalists, the ensuing forty-year assault on organized labor and the welfare state issued in a resounding victory for corporate business. Even in the face of stagnant real wages, accelerating inequality, and the unblushing venality of the rich, neoliberalism has demolished or demoralized all opposition to global capitalism, and established a near-monopoly on elite and popular political discourse.

Neoliberals do not call for a simple return to the gospel of laissez faire, which presumed that the market, however unfettered, was insulated from society and the state. As Mirowski explains, their aims are much more ambitious: they seek to reweave "the entire fabric of society" by "increasingly erasing any distinctions among the state, society, and the market." More than a paradigm of politics and markets, neoliberalism names an attempt to remake human life in the crucible of capital accumulation. In this view, far from merely allocating goods, the market is the ontological architecture of the cosmos—an omniscient and inerrant being more righteous than mere quivering mortals. The Market can never be coercive or unjust; only resentful losers have the effrontery to question its edicts. Hayek insisted that regulated economies cannot work because of the limited and fallible reason of individuals. Neoliberals elevate this epistemological conviction into a political and quasi-religious principle: the "spontaneous order" wrought by the Market must not be violated by human hands. As Mirowski puts it, neoliberals admonish the individual to "surrender your selfish arrogance and humbly prostrate yourself before the Wisdom of the Universe"—i.e., the imperatives of capital.

While advocating deregulation, neoliberals are also forceful proponents and users of state power. Neoliberalism sanctions what amounts to a kind of entre-

preneurial feudalism: state services are privatized or reconfigured to operate on a for-profit basis. Reshaped according to a business model, the neoliberal state protects the Market from the interference of democratic politics—understood as a collective and impertinent attempt to outguess the Wisdom of the Universe. Because democratic niceties must be respected, a "double-truth doctrine" becomes essential: a populist charade for the rabble (now staged by Fox News and the business press) in which the Market is the quintessence of democracy, and the deeper truth—revealed only to the cognoscenti—that "spontaneous" order of capitalism needs to be safeguarded by corporate and political elites. Focusing on Hayek, Mirowski emphasizes throughout that neoliberal success depends on what he calls "an optimal allocation of ignorance among the populace," illustrated most appallingly by the manufactured "debate" over climate change.

The double-truth doctrine's effectiveness depends on what Mirowski dubs "everyday neoliberalism," an ensemble of attitudes and practices that turns all of life into a never-ending market. In the neoliberal imagination, the human person is an "entrepreneurial self," a package of vendible talents and qualities: "a product to be sold, a walking advertisement...a jumble of assets to be invested...an offsetting inventory of liabilities to be pruned, outsourced, shorted, hedged against, and minimized." Promulgating a "catechism of perpetual metamorphosis," neoliberalism denies the existence of a "true," invariant self, and celebrates the "eminently flexible" personality always ready and willing to submit to the Market. Averse to solidarity, the neoliberal self erases class from its political lexicon. Inoculated against empathy, it espouses a punitive sado-moralism toward the poor, the weak, and the unsuccessful. (*American Idol, The Apprentice*, and other "reality shows" are, in Mirowski's words, "an unabashed theater of cruelty," reflecting neoliberalism's unforgiving attitude toward "losers.")

Loudly proclaiming its autonomy, the neoliberal self is often cheerfully entrapped in "an invisible grid" of state and corporate gradients. Even its conceits of rebellion are fraudulent: because the line between commodities and everyday life is ever more steadily obscured or erased, dissent or resistance is expressed through purchases that reinforce the authority of consumer culture. Through "murketing"—the art of convincing consumers that they're savvier than the marketers who manipulate them—we reach the highest stage of what Thomas Frank has called the "conquest of cool," where everyday neoliberalism eviscerates the meaning of apostasy, insurrection, or revolution.

Although Mirowski appears to be a social democrat, his bleak account of neoliberal hegemony suggests that opposition is futile where it isn't counterfeit. If political discourse has been so thoroughly cleansed of antagonism to the market, and if marketization itself has seeped into every crevice of our lives, then Thatcher's ominous ukase—"there is no alternative"—becomes true by reason of default. Mirowski's trenchant critique of the Occupy movement concludes with the judgment that "protest has been murketed." In his view, populists such as Sen. Elizabeth Warren are naïve—too square to realize the supple and enormous dimensions of neoliberal guile. Mirowski's harrowing portrayal of everyday neoliberalism implies that, as Slavoj Žižek often says, it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

Perhaps it's time for the left to look the fact of historical defeat in its gilded face—not as the first step toward a graceful, melancholy resignation to the rule of money, but as the prelude to the arduous vocation of healing our moral and political imagination. To do that, it will first have to cure its own maladies: the mythology of "progress" it shares with capital, and the aversion to the sacred that renders it incapable of mounting a compelling defense of our dignity against commodity humanism. All that, while enduring the furies unleashed by savage inequality, ecological wreckage, and the decline of American empire. It will have to confront the world as it is: canker'd, crude, superstitious, rotten—and longing. ■

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Jo McGowan

A Larger World

Fully Alive

Discovering What Matters Most

Timothy Shriver

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $27, 304 pp.

I thought I knew pretty much everything there is to know about special needs. I've been taking care of my daughter Moy Moy, who has profound disabilities, for twenty-five years. I've run a foundation for children with developmental delays since 1994. I meet other parents. I advise fledgling organizations. I raise funds, serve on expert committees, write articles, give speeches, and conduct workshops. A real know-it-all, right? Except that with disability, it doesn't work that way. Every day might just as well be the first day. Any encounter, even twenty-five years into the game, has the potential to stun and astonish. That's true about any human exchange, of course, but in most situations we are good at keeping the barriers firmly in place. Disability, like illness, breaks these down.

Timothy Shriver's *Fully Alive: Discovering What Matters Most* is a series of distinct narrative threads woven into one compelling story. I had a hard time putting it down. It's the story of how disability changed the lives of the Kennedy family (Shriver is the son of Eunice Kennedy, JFK's younger sister and Sargent Shriver, who was, among other things, the first director of the Peace Corps), and it is the story of how this family changed America for people with disability. It is the story of how the Special Olympics started and how it grew into the international phenomenon it has become. Finally and most profoundly, it is the story of Timothy Shriver's personal journey to discover what matters most in life.

Rosemary Kennedy was born in 1918, a year after her famous brother Jack and three years before her sister Eunice. Shriver describes his mother's relationship with her sister as close and loving. Photographs from the time show Rosemary as a vivid, engaging young woman. Her limited intellectual capacity, however, was a problem in a family of intellectual high-achievers. Shriver is at pains to be fair to all and explains at length the common misconceptions about disability in the 1930s and '40s—the growing influence of the eugenics movement and the common practice of isolating those with mental handicaps. This section of the book is a fascinating view of history through the lens of disability, reminding the reader how far we have come from those dark days.

But what also emerges from Shriver's account is how difficult life became for Rosemary. She grew more and more frustrated by her parents' unreasonable expectations and the inappropriate way she was handled. Her "acting out" of that frustration was labeled as violent and erratic, though today it would seem like a normal response for someone in her circumstances. Afraid that her behavior might damage the business and political aspirations he had for himself and his sons, Rosemary's father, Joseph Kennedy Sr., arranged—without consulting his wife—for Rosemary to undergo a lobotomy. This was a popular solution in those days. The result was disastrous. Her difficulties worsened dramatically and she became permanently and severely disabled. She was

CNS FILE PHOTO

Eunice Kennedy Shriver dances with a young man during a visit to a Catholic school for exceptional children in St. Louis in 1975.

FLESH IS FUNNY

My mother was tinkering around with the sofa the other day
and the spring jumped up and bit her on the mouth.
They stitched her up so you can barely see the mark.

She remembered with me the time I split my eye open
on a baseball from my brother's hand,
and the doctor's office
and her fainting at the mercurochrome
on my face.

Flesh is funny—how saveable and markable it is,
How it rejuvenates but won't forget,
how it keeps memories like the sofa spring and baseball,
ones you don't want,
but also ones you do,
how a touch, for instance yours,
can go on living its life within
for days, months even, after it's gone.

—Zach Czaia

Zach Czaia teaches English at Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Minneapolis.

sent away to an institution for the rest of her life. Her father never saw her again; her mother and her siblings didn't meet her for twenty years.

Yet, in Shriver's view, Rosemary remained an important influence in her family. Perhaps out of remorse, her father soon shifted his entire philanthropic activities to the cause of the intellectually disabled, allowing Eunice and Sargent Shriver to direct the work of the Kennedy Foundation in whatever way they saw fit. Timothy Shriver also makes a strong case for Rosemary's influence over the Kennedy style of leadership:

> I believe Rosemary was a major source of the political genius that my uncles brought to public life; an energy that would change the course of a nation. "Ask not"…sprang (partly) from the faith that taught [JFK] to give himself to Rosemary and the unspoken happiness he received from her in return.

Whether Shriver's theory about his uncles is true or not, his mother, Eunice, soon emerged as a major advocate for people with intellectual disabilities. Once JFK was elected president, she used her relationship to influence policy, secure funding, and, ultimately, bring into being the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development. It was the beginning of a new era for people with disabilities in the United States. A short while later, Eunice broke the decades-long secret about Rosemary's existence in the pages of the *Saturday Evening Post*. In 1965, Robert Kennedy visited Willowbrook, the infamous New York facility for children with disability. He emerged visibly shattered by what he had seen and called the place a "snake pit." It was soon shut down, along with many similar institutions around the country.

Eunice Shriver had her blind spots. For example, she was adamant that concern for intellectual disability not be mixed up with concern for mental illness, not recognizing that exclusion of the one group was no better than exclusion of the other. Still, she was light years ahead of her time in her understanding of one central truth: When you plan for the most vulnerable, you make the world work better for everyone. In her search for possibilities for children with intellectual disabilities, Eunice Shriver came across the work of Dr. Susan Gray, who was engaged in pathbreaking research on the importance of the earliest years for children's long-term development. "What she's discovering with children who have disabilities might make a difference for all children," she told her husband. She told him he should meet Dr. Gray, and he took her advice. The result was Head Start, a program that has had remarkable success.

But the Special Olympics is, if possible, even more extraordinary. *Fully Alive* chronicles the remarkable story of the Special Olympics from its humble beginnings as a one-day event in Chicago in 1968 to its present-day status as the world's leading athletic organization for people with developmental disabilities. It does this through the stories of individuals who believed in its unlikely premise: that sports could be a tool for changing the way we think about disability. Even more affecting are the stories of some of the athletes who have participated in the event.

For me, though, the most moving parts of this very moving book have to do with the author's own experiences with people with disabilities—and with how these changed him. Many speak piously and superficially about how much they've learned from those with special needs: patience is always at the top of the list, along with counting their blessings and taking life as it comes. Not very convincing and not very useful either. Shriver is convincing because he is specific and concrete. The lessons he's learned are practical rather than sentimental. Most convincing of all: He quotes the people he's talking about as if they actually have something important to say. As I read this book out loud to Moy Moy, I thought: This guy gets it. ■

Jo McGowan *is a* Commonweal *columnist.*

BOOKMARKS

Anthony Domestico

What do we mean when we call a story a "fairy tale"? Nowadays, the term is often used pejoratively. It means that the story has failed the test of realism, that it trades in all of those elements—supernatural interventions, incredible coincidences, pure wickedness and pure virtue—that don't conform to our sense of how the everyday world works.

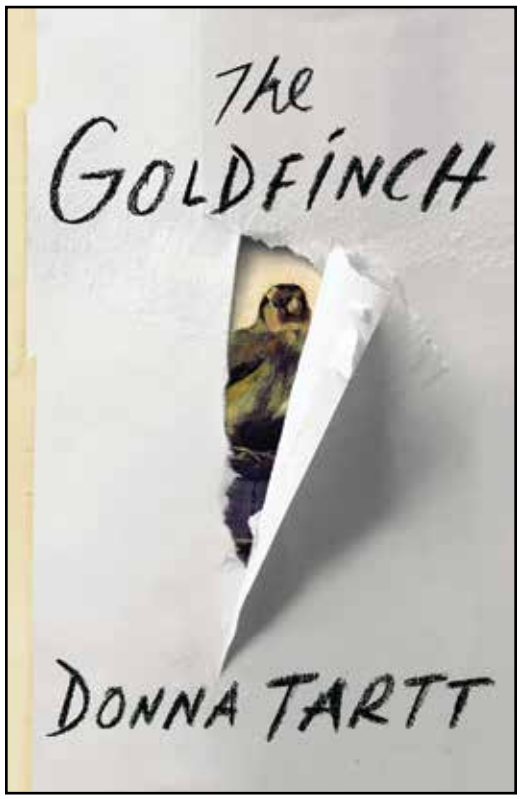
Yet the fairy tale as a genre is far more complex than such usage suggests. The true fairy tale isn't a failed work of realism; it's a story that tries to get at something beyond our usual understanding of what counts as real. Think not of Disney movies but of tales by the Brothers Grimm or Angela Carter. These stories pierce the veil of the ordinary in order to show us uncomfortable truths: that things are darker and more terrifying than we tend to think, that our normal way of perceiving the world doesn't do justice to the horror and enchantment that lie beneath it. As G. K. Chesterton wrote, "Fairy tales are more than true." They offer a different, elemental kind of truth, truth that is not concerned with probability or factual accuracy.

The nature of the fairy tale has been much on my mind lately, mainly because of the heated critical conversation surrounding Donna Tartt's Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Goldfinch*. When *The Goldfinch* came out in the fall of 2013, it elicited immediate and overwhelming praise. Seemingly every reviewer described the novel as Dickensian, and it was easy to see why: Tartt's almost eight-hundred-page novel is intricately plotted and unafraid to express sentiment, bursting at the seams with melodramatic events and sudden reversals in fortune.

If every review seemed to have an obligatory Dickens comparison, then almost as many mentioned *The Goldfinch*'s fairy-tale qualities. Some critics meant this as praise, a way to get at the particular kind of narrative magic Tartt casts; others meant it as a putdown, a shorthand description of the novel's purported childishness. *The New Yorker*'s James Wood went so far as to describe the novel as a children's book—a judgment seconded by Christopher Taylor in the *London Review of Books*. Such claims have ignited a serious debate in print (Vanity Fair ran an article about the critical dustup titled "It's Tartt—But Is It Art?") and in the blogosphere. Was *The Goldfinch*'s Pulitzer Prize another indication of, as Wood put it, "the infantilization of our literary culture"? Or was it instead the case that, as the novelist and critic Lev Grossman claimed, the "kinds of things that [*The Goldfinch*] does particularly well don't lend themselves to literary analysis"—i.e., creating a compelling plot, weaving together different storylines, giving sheer readerly pleasure? And all of these questions circled around the problem of the fairy tale. Is the fairy tale an inherently childish form, or is it simply doing something that works of "literary fiction" aren't interested in?

The very first page of *The Goldfinch* prepared the way for just such a debate. There, Theo Drecker, the novel's main character and narrator, describes the "fairy-tale sense of doom" with which he sits in an Amsterdam hotel. Later on, he claims that he feels "as if [he'd] botched some vital fairy-tale task"; later still, he describes a room as having "a Nordic, wicked, fairy-tale feel" and a building as "a turreted fairy-tale castle." The word "fairy" appears more than a dozen times.

Tartt, then, is aware of the tradition in which she is working, and her story—gripping, fantastical, full of transformations and enchantments—makes this even clearer. The plot consists of many different moving parts, but very briefly stated it goes like this: When Theo is thirteen and living in New York with his mother, the two step into the Met while trying to avoid a rain shower. They look together at Carel Fabritius's *The Goldfinch*, a luminous seventeenth-century Dutch realist painting and the favorite of Theo's mother. While walking through the museum, Theo finds himself enchanted by a girl he sees in passing. She seems almost elfin in her beauty: she carries around a flute, moves swiftly and lightly, and has "golden honeybee brown" eyes and "beautiful skin: milky white, arms like carved marble." Moments later, a bomb goes off in the museum, killing Theo's mother and many others. Theo survives and, in the post-explosion confusion, encounters the elderly man whom he had previously



Two Poems by Jack Lindeman

GOING

And there was the distance
behind me like a fading shadow
while the stress
of having covered miles
vanished before the thrust
of softer obstructions
in whose midst
I no longer foundered

HUMDRUM

I keep thinking
of a man and his marriage
with the snowflakes falling
and whether he should wear gloves
or swallow an aspirin
before opening the door.
He zips up his jacket
and flings the hood over his head
spoiling the neatness
of his combed hair
with a necessary gesture
while reminding himself
there are other alternatives.

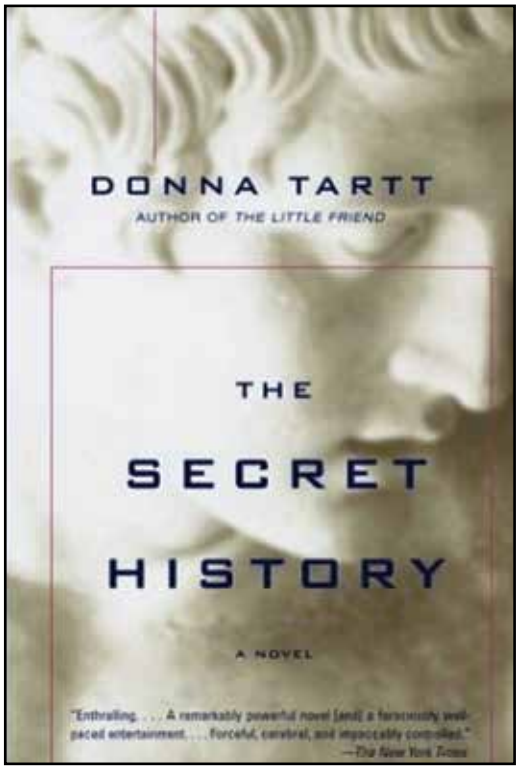
Jack Lindeman has published two books of poetry, Twenty-One Poems *and* As If, *which was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.*

seen accompanying the flute-carrying girl. The man gives Theo a mysterious ring, says some cryptic words ("Tell Hobie to get out of the store"), and dies. Why does Theo accept the ring? Why does he then pick up Fabritius's painting, which has miraculously survived the bomb, and take it with him, hiding it in his family's apartment? Because that's what people do in fairy tales: they find talismanic objects, they pick them up, and then they suffer the consequences.

Over the course of the narrative, Theo, now effectively an orphan (his father left when he was young), moves between several different locations, usually with the painting—and the trouble that surrounds it—in tow. We follow him to a Victorian-style workshop, owned by a character named Hobie who specializes in the restoration of antique furniture; to the Manhattan apartment of the Barbours, wealthy friends who take Theo in; to a Las Vegas subdivision that has been abandoned after the real estate–market crash of 2007; to Amsterdam. All of these places are described in magical terms. Some are light-filled and enchanting (the workshop is "a wilderness of gilt, gleaming in the slant from the dust-furred windows"), others dark and romantic (the Barbours' apartment has "shaded lamps burning low, big dark paintings of naval battles and drapes drawn against the sun"), still others soulless and threatening (the suburban Las Vegas town is "a toy town, dwindling out at desert's edge, under menacing skies," looking like a "planet depopulated by radiation or disease"). But all seem less like places we might actually find ourselves in than places we might find ourselves dreaming about. In short, we are in the realm of fairy tale.

Tartt's first—and, I think, superior—novel, *The Secret History* (1992), brilliantly described how we might find ourselves drawn into a world that is more magical and more frightening than our own. In *The Secret History*, it was the world of the wealthy and well-educated. At the beginning of the novel, Richard Papen leaves California for a liberal-arts college in Vermont, where he falls in with a group of wealthy students studying the classics (one is perfectly nicknamed "Bunny"). They introduce him to Greek philosophy, drugs, and other habits of the young, rich, and bored; eventually, they initiate him into orgiastic ritual and sacrificial violence. And yet, even after Richard participates in a murder and its cover-up, even after he sees how exploitative and cruel his friends can be, he can't help but be enchanted by them. The life of the mind, and the life of the rich, is that seductive.

The Goldfinch likewise spends a great deal of time describing just how enchanting wealth and the things wealth provides can be. If the novel had a color scheme, it would be mahogany. Much of it—perhaps too much—is devoted to lavish descriptions of beautiful things: the antique furniture that Hobie restores, not for financial gain (he's a terrible businessman) but for his love of old, well-made things and "the magic that came from centuries of being touched



and used and passed through human hands"; the easeful life of the Barbours, complete with evenings at the Oyster Bar at Grand Central, filled with "vintage crocodile bags" and "silvered shoes, embroidered shoes, ribboned and pointy-toed, a thousand dollars a pair." Despite the novel's length and various settings, it can occasionally feel claustrophobic; the beautiful stuff threatens to smother the very life out of the novel.

But it doesn't. Why not? Partly because Tartt is so good at evoking wealth's lush attractiveness. In this way, *The Goldfinch* follows in the tradition of one of America's greatest fairy tales, *The Great Gatsby*. We know that Gatsby's parties and his closet of endless shirts are ridiculous, but Fitzgerald makes us want them anyway. The same goes for Tartt. In one of the novel's most interesting and challenging moves, Tartt connects the Barbours' somewhat crass love of luxury to the much nobler love of beauty displayed by Hobie in his workshop and Theo toward the painting. Throughout the novel, a question nags at the reader: In such a painful world, where parents die and fate is cruel, why should beauty matter? Why should Hobie continue working on his furniture. Why should we care about Fabritius's painting? Aren't they just distractions from the harshness of the world, fairy tales that we tell ourselves to forget our pain?

Toward the end of the novel, Theo writes at length about the relationship between beauty, reality, and illusion:

> I've come to believe that there's no truth beyond illusion. Because, between "reality" on the one hand, and the point where the mind strikes reality, there's a middle zone, a rainbow edge where beauty comes into being, where two very different surfaces mingle and blur to provide what life does not: and this is the space where all art exists, and all magic.

And—I would argue as well—all love. Or, perhaps more accurately, this middle zone illustrates the fundamental discrepancy of love.

This is a strong, and ambivalent, defense. Love and beauty aren't reality—or "reality," since Theo puts the word in quotation marks. They are a form of magic. And it is in the nature of magic to be both blessing and curse: love and beauty can distract us from reality; we can choose to reside in the middle zone forever. But they are also the only way to move toward reality, to allow the mind to strike the real. Illusion, it turns out, isn't a distraction from the truth. It is truth.

So why, if *The Goldfinch*'s fairy-tale qualities are both so clearly signaled and so thematically important, have some critics found them so dissatisfying? I suspect it's because Tartt hasn't written a pure fairy tale. Instead, she has written a novel that, on its surface, looks an awful lot like a work of conventional literary realism. Like such works, it is intensely interested in physical detail (all that furniture and drinking and architecture); it is tightly focused on Theo's interiority; it even describes Hobie's activities in the workshop in a way that recalls Philip Roth's focus on glovemaking in *American Pastoral*. And yet, in the deepest sense, *The Goldfinch* is not a work of literary realism. It uses many of the tools of that genre, but in pursuit of different ends.

This can make for a disorienting reading experience. When I read the book last winter, I thought that it was a very strong, very enjoyable work of conventional realism, and I didn't understand what all the fairy-tale fuss was about. Then my wife pointed out all the fairy-tale tropes—the magical objects, the orphaned child—and I reread the book. I couldn't believe I had missed it the first time around. And this is why I think *The Goldfinch* has been so divisive: it looks like literary realism and it sounds like literary realism but, beneath its dazzling surfaces, it's something else entirely.

One novelist who stakes her claim to the fairy-tale tradition even more clearly than Tartt is the Nigerian-British novelist Helen Oyeyemi. Oyeyemi is a frighteningly precocious writer—*Boy, Snow, Bird* is her fifth novel and she hasn't yet turned thirty—and all her novels display a willingness to rework fairy tale and myth. *Boy, Snow, Bird* is Oyeyemi's boldest recasting yet. In it, she tells a tale of radical transformation and radical evil by placing the Snow White story in 1950s New England.

In a recent interview, Oyeyemi talked about the misconceptions surrounding the fairy-tale genre:

> People say things like "I want a fairy-tale existence." The Brothers Grimm would be looking at them in this astonished way, like "So you would like your whole family to be murdered and then eaten in a pie?"

Boy, Snow, Bird doesn't feature cannibalism, but it does give us a rat catcher, a child who can talk to spiders and doesn't cast a reflection in mirrors, and a birth that reveals long-buried family secrets. Unlike *The Goldfinch*, there's

little pretense that this is a work of realism. It is fairy tale through and through.

The novel opens in New York in the 1950s. The narrator, Boy Novak, is a "girl with a white-blond pigtail" who delights in illusion: one of her favorite games is "setting two mirrors up to face each other so that when I stood between them I was infinitely reflected in either direction." Her father is a rat catcher, and if there is a nice kind of rat catcher, he isn't one. He yanks out the eyes of the rats he catches because "the rats that are blind and starving are the best at bringing death to all the other rats." The basement is a chamber of nightmares: "there's nothing else in that cage with them, and all your father does to them at first is give them water, so it stands to reason that it's the rats making the holes, eating themselves."

As soon as she gets a chance, Boy runs away to a charming small New England town called Flax Hill. There, she marries Arturo Whitman, a man whose house "looked like the kind of house you could start a fanciful rumor about: 'Well, a princess has been asleep there for hundreds of years…' and so on." When we find out that Arturo is a widower with a stepdaughter named Snow, the fairy-tale elements have been locked even more firmly into place.

And then history—more specifically, America's tortured history with race—intervenes. Boy gives birth to a baby girl, Bird, only to be told by the nurse, "That little girl is a Negro." It turns out that Arturo's family has been passing as white in Flax Hill for generations. Boy responds by sending her stepdaughter Snow away to live with Arturo's relative. Like Snow White, Snow is literally too fair of skin, and the child must be banished not for her stepmother's good but for the good of Bird: Boy fears that her daughter will be made to feel lesser when seen next to her lighter stepsister.) At this point in the novel, one might think that *Boy, Snow, Bird* is going to turn into a racial allegory, but it doesn't. Oyeyemi's writing is much too strange for that, and race swirls around, but never overwhelms, the other things the novel is interested in.

Boy, Snow, Bird centers on crossings-over and transformations—moments when characters move from one world or identity to another, moments that seem to resist normal explanation. Oyeyemi is Catholic, and she has talked about her interest in mysticism: "In these writings we're offered a nutshell or a rose or spear and each image is part allusion to something just beyond words and part utter misdirection." Julian of Norwich wants to talk about divine love, but she can only gesture toward it with the figure of the nutshell. Similarly, Oyeyemi wants to talk about the strangeness that lies beyond everyday experience, but she can only gesture toward it with myths. That is what the best fairy tales do. They don't reduce the world's complexity. They use simple tools to open up that complexity. ■

Brimstone on the E Train

Liam Callanan

We knew the trip was going to be an eye-opening experience. My eleven-year-old daughter and I, headed to Greece: she's besotted with mythology, and I'm always looking for something new to write about. We talked things through beforehand—not just which gods we'd encounter where, but practicalities, logistics. How the bathrooms might be different (very different). How Greek not only is a different language, but uses a different alphabet. How the main religion in Greece is Greek Orthodox, and that's like Catholicism, but different, in that—well, at that point, I realized I was getting off-topic and switched to more pressing matters, like how we would get from Milwaukee to Athens.

We wound up traveling almost 1,300 miles around Greece in a phlegmatic rental car my daughter proudly dubbed "Pegasus" (indeed, what paint remained on it *was* white), and another six thousand miles by air via Istanbul's Ataturk Airport, where we saw Catholic nuns in blue habits, Tibetan monks in saffron robes, women in black hijabs, and a group of men who seemed to belong to the Order of the Resort Spa, as they were all wearing very short, loose white bathrobes.

Nevertheless, the first thing my daughter told her mother and sisters about upon our return was a ten-mile stretch we traveled in the United States at the outset. Traffic was heavy and my wallet was already light, so instead of a taxi, we took public transit between New York's La Guardia airport, where our flight from Milwaukee landed, and JFK, where our Turkish Airlines flight took off. We had the time, Google had the directions, and we'd promised ourselves adventure, hadn't we?

What should be a simple public-transit proposition—two massive airports located just ten miles apart—requires three different conveyances. The first leg, a city bus. The last, the not-quite-worthy-of-the-Tomorrowland-name AirTrain. In the middle: the E train.

As soon as we boarded, I realized we'd committed to the wrong car. A few seats down, a subway preacher was in full roar. No great wonder for New Yorkers, but for a Catholic schoolgirl from Milwaukee, this was quite dramatic, made even more dramatic by the fact that no one else seemed to be paying attention. Could it be that she was the only one who saw what was going on?

No. I did, too, and I also saw how rattled she was, so I tried to put her at ease: "I see we've entered a rolling prayer service," I whispered.

Her wide eyes, though still nervous, suddenly turned ever-so-slightly relieved. A prayer service: she knew her way around a prayer service. Missing—or ignoring—my sarcasm, she nodded, clasped her hands together, and lowered her head in prayer.

And on we, and the preacher, rolled.

He had the lungs for his vocation. We could hear him much more clearly than the stop announcements, and—unlike 90 percent of our upcoming stay in Greece—we understood every word he said. His theology, though, was not as strong. It was mostly brimstone. And he was a bit preoccupied with clothing, or the lack thereof: *NAKED WE COME INTO THIS WORLD AND NAKED WE DEPART IT. NAKED, NAKED, NAKED.*

Eventually, his volume fell. He'd given up on the whole car; he was going to focus his efforts on the soul up for grabs closest to him, a young woman who seemed not rattled in the slightest by his ministrations. He finally rose and got off without a parting word at the Kew Gardens stop.

My daughter looked up, relieved. I was too, and sheepish. I should have moved us; I should have told the man to pipe down; I should have sprung for a cab. It wasn't a prayer service, it was a rant, and though I could imagine the movie where it turns out the strap-hanging Bible-thumper is a true prophet, this wasn't that.

My daughter accomplished many things on our trip. She climbed Mount Olympus (as far as you can go in spring before being turned back by snow). She found our passports when I'd lost them racing from one flight to another; she found the Ancient Theater at Epidaurus when the GPS refused to. She didn't despair when Pegasus refused to start along a lonely stretch of highway and didn't panic when tour buses swerved past on twisting mountain roads.

Greece wasn't scary. But the subway had been. That's why she told that story first: it was the trip's biggest test and she'd survived. I'd thought she'd mistakenly taken my comment about a subway prayer service as sincere, but hearing her tell the tale, I realized the mistake was mine. The "service" had been fake, but her prayer was real. That was my eye-opening experience: remembering when she'd closed hers. ■

Liam Callanan *is the author of* The Cloud Atlas *and* All Saints. *His new short story collection,* Listen*, will soon be published by Four Way Books.*

SUMMER 2015

Writing Programs at the Collegeville Institute

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Writing for the Online Audience, with the Editors of Religion Dispatches

Entering the public conversation

Tuesday, June 9 – Monday, June 15

Writing to Change the World

A Week with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

For those interested in writing for social change

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Women Writing

A Week with Lauren Winner

For women writing autobiographical, non-fiction prose

Sunday, June 28 – Saturday, July 4

Awakening Theological Imagination in the Congregation

A Spiritual Practice of Writing with Karen Hering

Helping pastors and religious educators cultivate personal attentiveness and invigorate theological conversation in their congregations

Monday, July 6 – Sunday, July 12

Poetry, Prose and Prayer

A Week with Michael Dennis Browne

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Tuesday, July 14 – Monday, July 20

Apart, and Yet a Part

A Week with Writing Coach Michael McGregor

Independent, unstructured work in community

Wednesday, July 22 – Tuesday, July 28

Words for Worship

A Liturgical Writing Workshop with Michael Joncas and Susan Briehl

For writers of liturgical prayers and/or hymn texts

Thursday, July 30 – Wednesday, August 5

Words that Sing I

A Week with Mary Nilsen

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Tuesday, August 11 – Sunday, August 16

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