

A CHILD'S PRAYER

by

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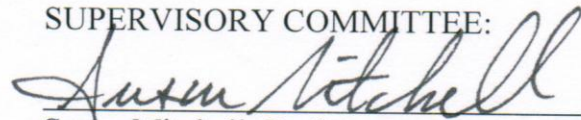
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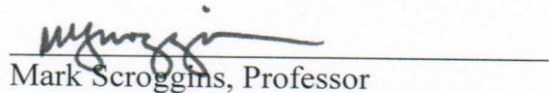
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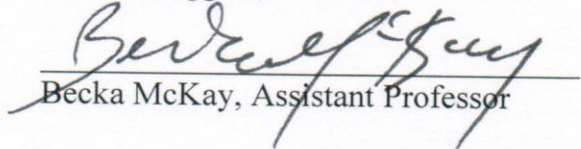
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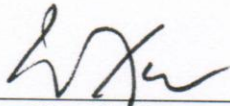
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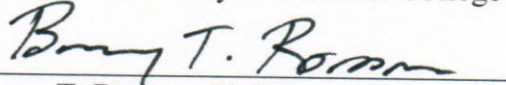
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ABSTRACT

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A Child's Prayer is a Creative Work of 28 poems. This collection examines the relationship between religion and the familial, the habitual and the sublime. Through the reconfiguring of stories, often from a child's point of view, this collection seeks to question the past through the process of retelling it. Themes that are prevalent include memory, alienation, nourishment, and the sacramental. *A Child's Prayer* gently questions patriarchal religion and its multi-generational effects.

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A Child's Prayer

Lord, you have searched and known us,
but our sins are not great enough
to die for, so we make bricks with fire, sea grit

and asphalt to build you a tower of our days.
We offer you our nights of clattering pans
and bathroom floors. There is no sky

we have been safe beneath.
May we never lose control like our mothers,
their bodies spooned into strangers.

May we never take control like our fathers,
their hands striking our mother's thighs
until they flower with red opium poppies.

We hold a sibling's head under water, rock
a kitten's neck between thumb and index finger,
steal figurines from stores—tiny deer

and rabbits glued to paper squares to build
a kingdom savage enough to love you.

The Acrobat's Daughter

She clung to the sides of streetcars
and knew she was smarter
than other girls, and the kernel

growing beneath her rib bones, safe.
Riding to classes each night after work
she held to salt-sprayed trolley bars

triumphant, young.
When earth swung around her,
she buttoned in tighter,

stepping high over sour men,
their bottles in bags,
coats flapping open in fogged night air.

The landlord menaced
in the doorway, crushed her body
against a wall, and panthers

lurked in the hills
but she winged them all away.
Holding a bar on the trolley one night

a man lurched and grabbed her. She froze,
arms full of Chaucer and Shakespeare. But escaped,
as my fingernails came in slick and strong.

Archimedes' Principle

While hiding he forgot his father's language
of Colorado storms, his mother's dialect
of bodily assumption.

While hiding he forgot about physics,
and was the youngest boy astronaut ever,
traveling the furthest distance from earth.

He never panicked in the dark,
or felt afraid of small spaces.
Feet planted firmly on Mars, he surveyed

its dust storms and volcanoes. Weightless,
greater than the volume of a balloon,
expanded, each cell of him an orbit.

Party Favors

Church girls swarmed me in summers,
each wanting to come over and swim.
One admitted none of them liked me.
I was new, the Pastor's daughter,

they kept stones ready in their pockets.
But at June birthday parties my father,
striking even in a t-shirt and paint-smeared
shorts, would come outside to spray

the begonias around the edge of the pool.
The girls would stalk him, gathered like thieves
in the bushes. He would whistle, one hand
in his pocket, gaze up at the apostolic sky.

When they pushed him he fell comically,
his mouth shaped in an *Oh* as he landed,
arms raised in mid-air as if to fend off attack.
I could count on that stage fall every year,

the gift of his performance for false
friends, girls whose bathing suits
dripped popsicle juice as they left
through the catacombs of our house.

Sunday School Lesson

It was her talk of escape
that caught the boy's attention,
flattening a Joshua made of felt
as she lowered him
from the woman's window.

They sang, *Rahab saved her family*,
to the tune of London Bridge,
then ate some graham crackers
with grape juice.

Their teacher passed out scissors,
and asked them to cut their own
scenes of walls with men clambering down.
Ribbons were passed, and tugged
through the hands of the harlot.

The boys were bungee jumping Joshua,
Ka-plum, from the bricked barrier,
Parachute-straps were fashioned,
then slings,
and the girls

savoring their dark juice,
thought of how it might feel,
being somebody's savior,
of holding the line of that rope
in the night.

Hamelin, Germany, 1284

Those who saw the stained glass window
told of the strange way the man held his pipe.
There was fear of what could swallow

one whole then. The priest's stories of Jonah
and the great fish -- the rats added later
to account for the missing.

Children floating guiltless as flatfish,
dumb as smelt. At the stream afterward
women washing would stop, hold

their damp linens close, swear on
St. John they heard laughter slipping,
the splashing away of so many feet.

Vessel

At night, too weary for touch,
their bodies chafe together,
as currents sway this beast of an ark, knee against backside, hip against groin.
Waves fouled with bodies and wreckage. Dreams interrupt; soil flecked
with loam, hands deep in silt, a seedling held between her teeth, the smell
of mint and clover. She climbs the upper deck, swallows rainwater,
remembers how dry earth cradled before. Thinks of what
it might be like to leave this swollen body behind,
fly away to desert sand, cerulean sky,
a world bereft of punishment.

Safe Haven

In July of 2008, Nebraska became the last of 50 states to adopt a Safe Haven law, which decriminalized the act of abandoning unwanted infants and children.

One mother drove from Michigan, past
open prairie, scattered trees, acreage
where quail bones curled under the feet

of snowshoe hares. She drove past
forests, lakes where massasauga snakes
coiled in hibernation, drove until she saw

tall grass and prairie, striped squirrels,
until mourning doves and swallows signaled
the destination. Some mothers said they'd be

right back, and left their children
with sandwiches and carrot sticks.
Some kids were left with nothing as the mothers

sped away. A few children never opened
the hospital doors, instead they ran back
to chase after taillights. At the highway

entrance one mother cried.
Her jaw opened wide
and all the animals tore out.

Recess

The house's windows are covered by newspapers,
sheets, a Mickey Mouse pillowcase. It longs to be
unbandaged. The fence with metal diamonds digs

against our bellies, our uniforms splotted
by rust as we balance away from the jump ropes
and dodge balls. The women approach men

in their cars, squat in scalloped tank tops.
What they whisper in the chambers of their ears
is so important, it draws them to enter the yawn

of that house, not even glance at us pressed
against the railing. Teachers disrupt our thoughts
with whistle blows, and we spring away like tree frogs,

heads full of an alphabet we can't sequence.
We know men will follow us someday if we ask
the right question, that our torsos will lengthen,

our feet will arch higher, that this school
with its dreary chalked stories will wash
from our shoulders like handfuls of dust.

Crossbow

Skill holds the arrow sharp.
It does not guarantee anything,
the line of Tell's arrow a silvered web,
invisible to all other eyes. It is not tender,
it does not nourish, it is dogged and gnashed.

Missing his marks would make life worth less
than arrows, serrated skies; what is skill
between a man and his son?

And what splits is the whole
of him, what breaks is the apple –
its seeds falling
from the starry center, its downy
unmade self.

Blue

He was born two weeks late, with withered hands and toes as if he had soaked too long in the ocean.

He never played with toys, he played with shoes.

He sucked a pacifier for 12 months, then spit it out and starting speaking.

He used to stand beside his parent's bed in the middle of the night until one of them recognized him.

If his mother left a pair of her heels behind, he would put them on and walk until his father yelled for him to take them off.

He holds grudges and remembers everything.

He has a pair of lapis elephants in his room because his mother once called him her baby elephant.

He used to write his name on what he could reach; tables, walls, t-shirts and pillowcases, until his parents hid all the markers in the house.

He remembers everything.

Once, he found a staple gun, and stapled every inch of his wall with drawings, the letters of his name, and a plastic kitchen strainer.

In Kindergarten he came home with bruises but never told his teacher he had fallen.

If his father threatens to take his iPod or Playstation games away he'll say, *Take it all. I don't care.*

He once saw a scene in Tarzan where the mother lay on her back and raised the baby up in her arms in a swirl of blue butterflies. He said he remembered that happened to him once.

Sarah

A woman knows when things aren't right;
her womb parched, eggs shriveled
as dried grapes. She decides not to leave things
to her husband's God, even though he foresaw

constellations of children. A handmaid
will do nicely, and Hagar agrees,
but after Ishmael's birth life starts to stem
and flourish inside her.

It pushes brittle bones apart, bursts through
pelvic bones. The pulse in her babe's
forehead visible, a vulnerable spot she can
touch with one finger. Now, her household

is no longer large enough. Hagar is banished
to the desert, the boy's dark eyes flash.
Let her husband's God save them now.
Let Him open the heavens,

prophecy over someone else for a change.
But when she closes her eyes, the image
of this half-son flickers against the back of her eyelids,
the failure of one woman born in another.

My Mother Worries She's Lost Her Salvation

I climb the cypress tree, and listen for the rustle
of bat wings the night my mother knows
something is terribly wrong. The thought occurs
like a slow spreading stain. She calls her parents,
then drives from Monterey to Salinas, past fields
choked with strawberries to get to the parsonage
 where they pray the four spiritual laws with her
while she kneels on their lime green carpet and cries.
I scramble down the tree, bark against toes, certain
there are monsters in the woods around our house,
devising ways to stop them: needles, steel, mirrors.
boiling water. At night I cross my arms.

 Across the hall my brother cries that butterflies
assault him. My father writes sermons, *We crucify
our flesh and walk in the spirit*. My mother repeats,
We receive Christ by faith, as an act of our will,
and prays to feel changed. I memorize; *stones hurled
across rooftops, the sprinkle of mustard seeds*.
My brother says, *Butterflies, all over me*.
My mother says, *I'm sorry*. My grandfather says, *Nothing
can separate us from the love of God*.

Leah

The first son she named Reuben, *God has seen my misery*. Then Simeon, *Because the Lord heard I am not loved*. She believed God might hold the ladder

of Jacob still for her, but as Simeon slaps boats from dirt and water, her mouth runs dry. Let God not be a keeper of favorites.

Levi, named for want, demands to be held. Lulled to breast in palsied heat, her body heavy with child, she is uncertain whether

each son is orison or failure. Night paces careful footsteps, Jacob visits less and less. In her breathing it begins, this awful letting go –

romantic laborer, blessing thief. Leah sees clearly with her weakest eye. Names her fourth son *This time* – as night spills stars from her skirts,

sons tumble from her body, so much want changes nothing. *I will praise the Lord* she names him. If I were her, I would never name anything again.

Nocturne with Coffee Fields and Lightning

The summer our mothers divorce our fathers
fireflies perish. We don't cup them in our hands,
or slip them into empty pickle jars.

Instead, we are ruthless and tell ourselves
our fathers would approve. When we watch "Out of Africa"
our Dads become Robert Redford, fly planes and show us

coffee fields from the clouds. We want to be women
who leave men, different from our mothers
with their high school French and popover recipes.

My mother sent me to live with yours.
You want to be sent somewhere with an ocean
and a room of your own, but you share a bed with me

and turn your back at night to avoid sharing secrets.
We never talk of how one week crawled into a summer,
or how my mother pays yours to keep me,

and we spend the change on lipstick and pantyhose.
You can't resist showing a city cousin how to catch fireflies,
their sacs of light plucked like berries off a stem.

You show me how to stick the orbs from their bodies
on my forehead, wear lightning like jewelry. And no one
ever tells us to come in from the storm.

My Father Broke Up With Me

at a restaurant named for a kitchen utensil.
He leaned over his mushroom omelet, knife

scraping green pepper, and said *You chose
to live with your mother, not me.* The waiter delivered

chopped onions, potatoes in red-skinned bonnets.
Eat up, he said. I scraped

at my hash browns, twirling strands of onions
over my fork, like untied ribbon on a present

I hadn't asked for. In the bathroom
in front of framed eggplant, I yanked

hair in place, pinched at my cheeks.
Who hurts a father this way?

The hand that cupped to feed them sweet potatoes,
chocolate. Walking back to the booth my stomach

held the pit in avocado, the stone in every
plum. I sensed there were tables of meals behind me,

plates of sandwiches in skirted triangles.
So many crusts waiting to be cut.

Lot's Daughters

They had wanted to stoop,
save each granule of their mother
in their sleeves, but their father

urged them to run. They found a place
to hide at the end of the world; a cave,
dark, with stalactites and shadows –

a lake underground that wound
through passageways like the blood
coursing through this last line of girl-

children. Daughters who whispered
among themselves, and knowing their end,
poured wine for their father

Traveling Song

The bus includes children of divorce
each weekend, hauling their neoprene
backpacks, and their careful love
notes. A girl with earphones looks

and doesn't look at the man who wears
hooked net stockings and lipstick.
She bites at a hangnail, pretends to read.
There is no lady on the bus with apples

in a bag, no one to whom she can unravel
her twined story. The woman who does sit
beside her offers her a job in alterations;
says she owns a shop downtown. She may

or may not have this place where women sit,
sew and hum. A girl is easy prey.
The man in stockings might be kind, might have
a son or daughter who visit him

on weekends. Maybe they visit together,
not apart the way this girl and her brother are.
Much later, she will hear a story of how a freight
ship collided with a bridge.

The collision caused a bus to fall into the Bay,
and everyone on board died. It is known
as the largest loss of life on a Greyhound bus.
Fifteen years later, she will order

a tin replica of the coach, and mail it to her brother
for Christmas. Just to say, *Remember this,*
look at what we both survived.

Jump

You'll be crossing over the Golden Gate bridge,
driving back from San Francisco where she
tried to force you to try on dresses,

give coins to the monkey at Fisherman's Wharf,
look at the windows in the Grace Cathedral Baptistry
to lift your spirits –

When she suddenly turns and says,
You know, it doesn't usually work out.
In the voice she uses to tell you what colors clash

with your hair, or the mechanics of sex.
You could end up a paraplegic, live at home forever,
think about that. The waves out the window

will look rough, inhospitable, you'll press
your forehead to the window, defeated.
Until one day years later, you realize the kindness.

Wolf

Pick some flowers, he tells her,
they'll please your grandmother.
Taste the wild geranium, mayapple, bloodroot.

She laughs, thinking there would never
be a reason to scream,
having never been ripped open.

He'll devour her grandmother before
she reaches the house, it's fire burning,
the smell of cinnamon and cloves.

She'll smile, thinking there is cider,
before she sees him beside the bed.

She won't know that her grandmother is safe,
the woodcutter minutes from bursting in to split
the wolf's belly with one blow.

How can she know yet that one can be gobbled alive,
ravaged, and still emerge whole, as the apple
she drops in surprise from her basket.

The Steadfast Tin Soldier

His mistake is not to look close enough
to see the dancer's leg is not missing, but kicked
sex-high in the air, pointed. He feels
a kinship in their losses, but is only

a fool, tripping down river in a paper boat.
He stands fiercely at attention even as he drowns
and is consumed, Jonah-like, by a fish.
Here he prays for salvation, and is cut from its belly

by the cook, free to be swept in with rubble,
thrown in the furnace by a careless little boy.
See how the course of want is arbitrary? How the ball
of it hits the ground before the hand can reach

the metal stars – one flip of the wind's lips, and he
could change course, be sent back to his barrack,
tobacco box or drawer, the boy's pocket of rubber bands
and crumpled treasures. Formed from desire,

his spoon-mother fuels his return. The dancer's dress catches
in the breeze, the heat will dissolve him, and obliterate her.
In the morning the boy holds what's left
in his indifferent, sweaty palm.

Prayer Before Meals

*God is great, God is good,
Let us thank Him for our food*

When I hear this recitation now,
I think of Kindergarten, how we learned
to draw a line from C to caterpillar,

and how to enter jump rope games,
the rope slapping our legs like the switches
they gently threatened us with.

How teachers read missionary stories --
Amy Carmichael, who prayed for blue eyes,
but was fortuitously blessed with brown

since God called her to India. Who patted mud
on our cheeks, envying the damned
who played bare-bellied in the sun, ignorant

of their need for rescue. We longed to stick
cattails in our hair, unlearn our fear
of lightning. When a girl was pushed

down the slide blood spurting from her lip,
no one admitted anything. The teacher knelt
waiting for her to catch her breath.

In that space before she spoke
we glimpsed paradise; the citrus trees
and the herons comprehending nothing.

Conjuring Angels in Davao City

At the meetings people speak in tongues
and fall prostrate to the floor.
They tell us to pray until visions come
and our sins are forgiven. They tell us

women here will hand over their silver like a drink
of water for a compliment, so I never tell Dakila
that her earrings glow like dying stars.
For three months we sleep on air mattresses

soaked with bug spray, learn to scrub dresses clean
with hard soap, ring dirty water from our skirts.
But I want the grass of my own backyard, sheets
that smell of lemon. At the Sisters of Mercy orphanage

I hold children with arms like spindles, whose legs
wrap me tight and won't let go. The nuns toss
candies from baskets while children reach, wilting
on our shoulders. Is it a lie to say we see visions?

Or that anyone can be washed clean as snow? I make
a sailboat for a child from the wax paper, crease
and fold until my fingers stick with coconut and sugar.
Dakila says tomorrow we'll have fish crackers

to give them. But tomorrow they will wake hungry
again. So it is easy to tell a woman on the Jeepney
how much I like her bracelet of hammered silver.
I want to hold something in my hands that lasts.

Ruth

It doesn't matter if you loved him,
only that you want to live. A mother,
not your own, hums foreign melodies

whose strange notes keep you awake.
And when the metrics of your heart
are weighted sand she whispers counsel –

lay yourself bare on that threshing floor,
no artifice. Face and hair
are freight enough, you are not

finished. More aching field than widow.
How hard it is not to be dead,
only still, blooming late.

Anniversary

Every March the kettle of warm air
makes her think of rot,
 of watermarked flowers
 sinking into ponds. She panics

in grocery stores,
forgets why the trunk of ice
 or sling of clean peaches weights
 her hands,

tries to comfort a loaf of bread.
Slicing into melon, she dreams the knife
 hits her thumb bone,
 finds herself crying

through crackerjack sitcoms,
rubbing her arms against the polished
 cold metal of the sink.
 Rinsing pink roses

brings on coughing fits,
pendants of hives decorate her throat.
 Everything too ripe, too sweet,
 like the jasmine her husband planted

outside the window,
and she worries for the bees
 diving into the stamen's sick
 sweet center.

Rachel to her Midwife

On the barren road you speak my name,
offer me a drink. That morning
at the well Jacob rolled the stone away as
if it were straw. What a man

would do for me then. He told me
*I saw God face to face, yet my life
was spared.* And now you say
Your son comes, but your hands

struggle inside me as the owl cries,
and I know this earth will take everything
from me, even the name I give him. Sister,
there is not enough salt in the Dead

Sea for all our tears. Our bodies, destroyed
temples. We are exiles, all of us. I give you
my name for your daughters and their girls
to come, but remember this: a man's favor

is a heavy offering, it crafts one day into
seven, then multiplies the years. Slams a veil
between sisters. In the end, when you hear
your name called, all you long for is home.

Lot's Wife

This is not a story
of redemption.
no gopher wood ark, no rainbow.
This is a story of flood

without water, of ruin,
not forgiveness.
This wife turned her head
to look back and became

the very thing
tears are made of;
crystal, salt,
regret.

Practice for the Rapture

The talk was of God's tabernacle, a diagram
with the palm of his hand, fingers tucked
into the holy place, when you threw an apple to me.
I wondered until I saw the rough square cut.

Inside the fruit, a note, damp with seeds
and juice, "You are altogether beautiful,
my darling, there is no blemish in you." You spent
that night tracing a circle over my ankle bone

as we crowded on the floor for worship.
I was halfway up the stairs when your fingers
found my leg. A leader not much older than us
wore a shirt drawn with a line through

the letters S.R., no Special Relationships allowed.
It was the first rule we broke there.
He was the one who caught us one night after dark.
Maybe we wanted to be sent home.

Maybe it would have been clearer what we did believe in,
if we admitted what we did not. Instead, we clung
to each other under the banana trees, kissed
like the saved. You carved my name

into a stalk of sugar cane, filled it with white
lehua flowers. Pushed me on a strip of swing
until my hips rose higher than the white sand below us.
Forgive us our humanness; we needed a God with hands.

