

Poetry and Spirituality— A Conversation with Molly Bosch, Molly Porter, and Doug Thorpe

Pray For Peace by Ellen Bass (2003)

Pray to whomever you kneel down to:
Jesus nailed to his wooden or marble or plastic cross,
his suffering face bent to kiss you,
Buddha still under the Bo tree in scorching heat,
Adonai, Allah. Raise your arms to Mary
that she may lay her palm on our brows,
to Shekinah, Queen of Heaven and Earth,
to Inanna in her striped descent.

Hawk or Wolf, or the Great Whale, Record Keeper
of time before, time now, time ahead, pray. Bow down
to terriers and shepherds and Siamese cats.
Fields of artichokes and elegant strawberries.

Pray to the bus driver who takes you to work,
pray on the bus, pray for everyone riding that bus
and for everyone riding buses all over the world.
If you haven't been on a bus in a long time,
climb the few steps, drop some silver, and pray.

Waiting in line for the movies, for the ATM,
for your latte and croissant, offer your plea.
Make your eating and drinking a supplication.
Make your slicing of carrots a holy act,
each translucent layer of the onion, a deeper prayer.

Make the brushing of your hair
a prayer, every strand its own voice
singing in the choir on your head.
As you wash your face, the water slipping
through your fingers, a prayer: water,
softest thing on earth, gentleness
that wears away rock.

Making love, of course, is already a prayer.
Skin and open mouths worshiping that skin,
the fragile case we are poured into,
each caress a season of peace.

If you're hungry, pray. If you're tired.

Pray to Gandhi and Dorothy Day.
Shakespeare. Sappho. Sojourner Truth.
Pray to the angels and the ghost of your grandfather.

When you walk to your car, to the mailbox,
to the video store, let each step
be a prayer that we all keep our legs,
that we do not blow off anyone else's legs.
Or crush their skulls.
And if you are riding on a bicycle
or a skateboard, in a wheelchair, each revolution
of the wheels a prayer that as the earth revolves
we will do less harm, less harm, less harm.

And as you work, typing with a new manicure,
a tiny palm tree painted on one pearlescent nail,
or delivering soda, or drawing good blood
into rubber-capped vials, writing on a blackboard
with yellow chalk, twirling pizzas, pray for peace.

With each breath in, take in the faith of those
who have believed when belief seemed foolish,
who persevered. With each breath out, cherish.

Pull weeds for peace, turn over in your sleep for peace,
feed the birds for peace, each shiny seed
that spills onto the earth another second of peace.
Wash your dishes, call your mother, drink wine.

Shovel leaves or snow or trash from your sidewalk.
Make a path. Fold a photo of a dead child
around your Visa card. Gnaw your crust
of prayer, scoop your prayer water from the gutter.
Mumble along like a crazy person, stumbling
your prayer through the streets.

**A Blind Man's House at the Edge of a Cliff
by Denise Levertov (1989)**

At the jutting rim of the land he lives,
but not from ignorance,
not from despair.
He knows one extra step from his seaward
wide-open door would be
a step into salt air,
and he has no longing to shatter himself
far below, where the breakers grind granite to sand.
No, he has chosen a life
pitched at the brink, a nest on the swaying
tip of a branch, for good reason:

dazzling withing his darkness
is the elusive deep horizon. Here
nothing intrudes, palpable shade,
between his eager
inward gaze
and the vast enigma.
If he would fly he would drift forever
into that veil, soft and receding.

He knows that if he could see
he would be no wiser.
high on the windy cliff he breathes
face to face with desire.

Haiku by Dōgen (c. 1250), trans. by Adjei Agyei-Baah

midnight — no waves, no wind
empty boat
flooded with moonlight

Poetry and Spirituality— A Conversation with Molly Bosch, Molly Porter, and Doug Thorpe

Archaic Torso of Apollo, Rainier Maria Rilke (1908), trans.by Stephen Mitchell

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

Love (III) by George Herbert (1633)

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.

"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here":
Love said, "You shall be he."
"I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on thee."
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
"Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve."
"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"
"My dear, then I will serve."
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
So I did sit and eat.

How Prayer Works by Kaveh Akbar (2021)

Tucked away in our tiny bedroom so near each other the edge
of my prayer rug covered the edge of his, my brother and I
prayed. We were 18 and 11 maybe, or 19 and 12. He was
back from college where he built his own computer and girls
kissed him on the mouth. I was barely anything, just wanted
to be left alone to read and watch *The Simpsons*.

We prayed together as we had done thousands of times,
rushing ablutions over the sink, laying our janamazes out
toward the window facing the elm which one summer held an
actual crow's nest full of baby crows: fuzzy, black-beaked
fruit, they were miracles we did not think to treasure.

My brother and I hurried through sloppy postures of praise,
quiet as the light pooling around us. The room was so small
the twin bed took up nearly all of it, and as my brother, tall
and endless, moved to kneel, his foot caught the coiled brass
doorstop, which issued forth a loud *brooong*. The noise
crashed around the room like a long, wet bullet shredding
through porcelain.

My brother bit back a smirk and I tried to stifle a snort but
solemnity ignored our pleas—we erupted, laughter quaking
out our faces into our bodies and through the floor. We were
hopeless, laughing at our laughing, our glee an infinite rope
fraying off in every direction.

It's not that we forgot God or the martyrs or the Prophet's
holy word—quite the opposite, in fact, we were boys built to
love what was in front of our faces: my brother and I on the
floor draped across each other, laughing tears into our prayer
rugs.

Laundry by Ellen Bass (2024)

The baby's dragged the sheets to the kitchen
and now she's stuffing them in the washer,
one hand lifting a wad of yellow cotton,
the other reaching down for more and more. Breathing heavy,
she's feeding vast swaths by the armful,
bent halfway into the mouth of the machine,
a strip of skin exposed where her shirt's ridden up,
an edge of diaper sticking out of her pants.
Who can watch a child and not feel fear
like static in the background or a tinnitus you try to ignore.
This morning, in the *Times*, I saw the galaxy LEDA 2046648—
each spiral arm distinct and bright against the dark ink. Light
from a billion years ago, just as the first
multicellular life emerged on Earth.
What are the not-quite-two years of this intent creature
in the sweep of time? Her quadriceps and scapula, the alveoli
of her lungs, twenty-seven bones of her hand
that evolved from the fin of an ancient fish.
And her scribbly hair sticking up from her first ponytail.
When she was in her mother's body,
the California fires turned the air a smoky topaz
and the sun glowed orange on the kitchen wall.
Last month the floodwaters rose and seeped under the door.
Still, there must be time for this, to watch her—
hands deep into the doing, she's wedded
to the things of this world.
When she stands, her sleeve slips down
and she pushes it up like any woman at work.