The Blessed Mutter of the Muse

“I’m curious: how many others of you were brought up Catholic?” I asked, and to my surprise, ten of the fourteen students in my class at a small Methodist college in Virginia raised their hands.

We’d been discussing a poem submitted by one of them early in the semester, a poem that seemed to this lapsed Catholic to have come out of a similar religious background. There were no obvious references to the Pope or Holy Communion, but the writing had a certain kind of sensibility that struck a cord with me. The young poet had looked at the same scenes I had as a kid, at the Stations of the Cross, no doubt, at its scenes of Jesus’ suffering, his writhing face and muscles wrench in ecstasy and pain. How could anyone forget those images, especially a child looking up at them in fear and wonder from a hard wooden pew down below? And of equal enduring power were the smells—the indelible, sensual smells of candle-flame, of “Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!” as Robert Browning’s dying Bishop utters in his dramatic monologue, “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church.”

This deeply imbedded Catholic sensibility arose spectre-like again and again in the four years I worked with young poets at that very Methodist college, Virginia Wesleyan. It was repeated in the many years after at a variety of schools ranging from large, secular public universities to private colleges like VWC. More recently, as the editor of *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, in the thousands of poems that I read in my four-year stint, I could hear Browning’s “blessed mutter of the mass” far more often than I thought I might, given contemporary taste.

Sometimes the allusions were obvious, as in these opening lines from “The Calling” by Denise Preston: “Those hands, they make me shy/cupping the chalice, aloft/in the stained-glass air./Does he know their beauty, or were they his crosses—/too calm for stickball, marbles, war?” Or the lines might be more subtle like this section from Deirdre Hare Jacobson’s “Other Woods”: “I breathe in leaf rot and snowmelt,/savor it as I will the air liquored/with hyacinth, the lilac and peony;/the rose, blooded or pale,/scented with citrus or redolent of wine.” And this troubling, provocative conclusion of “Root and Peril” by Gina Pulciani: “Drought-weary, I’ll scrape from my skin/a raw beige for her bone, and I’ll bleed her;/you will meet with our marrow right here/on this plain, lengthen in shame along the earth’s/mad girth, our common root and peril.”

Whether these three poets, or the hundred or more others I published in *Spoon River* grew up Catholic, I have no idea, but given the images, sound patterns, and sense of mystery so many of them share, I’ll bet they did. Could it be then that the muse isn’t Greek after all? That Mt. Parnassus is really St. Peter’s?

My earliest memories have to do with the rituals of a Sunday morning, the first of which was getting dressed up to go to Church: shoes shined and slacks or dresses ironed, all laid out the night before so we six kids could be ready for the 8 o’clock Mass, a “low”
Mass compared to the baroque but lengthy “high” one of 9:30 with its organ music, incense, and the priest’s procession down the nave in his golden robe.

Low Mass was shorter and simpler but still replete with mystery. Where else could an ordinary American kid go and hear a foreign language spoken at least once a week, and a dead language at that? Years later in college I chose to spend my junior year in Italy which made no sense because I had studied French since seventh grade. I realize now, however, that Latin was really what I grew up hearing—no, inhalings—acted out and chanted as I kneeled in prayer those Sunday mornings and every Holy Day.

But Sundays really began on Saturdays, in the haze of late afternoon. At seven years old, the age of reason according to the Church, I would be called in from playing catch with my Protestant friends on the block to go to Confession. From being actually outside, I not only came into the house but had to turn inward as well, to search my soul for my transgressions which weren’t that many, at that age anyway. Mostly I made stuff up—saying I’d stolen a water pistol perhaps, or had used a bad word—but I was careful to mention “lying” at the end of my list, figuring that was going to clear my record and make me pure enough for Communion the next morning.

I got quite creative with my sins as I got a little older and started growing hair in odd places. By ten or so, I had myself making out with Patricia Biggins who was the most popular girl in our class, but who, of course, had no interest in me. She was also a foot taller, but that didn’t stop me from putting my imaginary lips to hers, though I would have needed a box to stand on to do it. By ending with lying as the last of my sins, I could get away with anything, the way I can with the poems I write.

With their content, at least. I can be most anybody in a poem, the way Robert Browning became a dying Bishop or the murderous Duke of Ferrara in “My Last Duchess.” But the patterning and shaping, the writing in syllables, in sounds—these I can’t get away from. The rise and fall of the priest’s chanting, the repetitions of prayer, the standing, the kneeling, the sitting down: going to Church was a physical experience, visceral and enduring.

It was also scary. I feigned a kind of smart-aleck way of going to Confession because it scared the crap out of me. Waiting there in the pew for others ahead of me, I could feel my pulse in my throat, pounding away. What’s taking her so long, my grandmother, a pious old Catholic woman who’d take me with her those Saturdays once in a while. She’d be in there forever, it seemed, though I couldn’t imagine what she was confessing. What had she done that week anyway except finish all the ice cream, scoop after scoop of it? I’d close my eyes and try to pray but saw her spooning away instead, creamy with joy, indulgently fat, asking God for forgiveness.

Then it would be my turn and all sugar-plums vanished as I’d draw back the velvety curtain and, trembling, kneel in the purple light of my side of the confessional, alone now but for the faint, whispering voice of someone else on the other side, a grown-up, no doubt, unburdening genuine grown-up sins. How eternal it was, that wait for the sliding sound of the little window opening and the shadowy profile of the priest muttering in mysterious syllables, then suddenly silent.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,” and so I began to recite the words I’d memorized in Sunday school, words tap-tap-tapped into me by the nuns, those angels on
broom-sticks . . . “My last confession was a week ago,” its perfect iambic pentameter a subtle mnemonic device, like a line from Shakespeare, the rise and fall of the beating heart, mine then in my spondaic throat.

For penance, if I hadn’t been practicing hyperbole with my lies, I was usually given a light sentence—a couple of “Our Fathers” and a “Hail Mary” which, after decades without saying them, I can still recite without pause. Fear and trembling were part of my motivation for memorizing, no doubt, but the syllables were crafted so you almost couldn’t forget: “Our father who art in heaven/Hallowed be thy name./Thy kingdom come/Thy will be done/On earth as it is in heaven.” With all that repetition, rhyme (both exact and slant), plus a basic iambic pattern, the words of my penance were a lot easier to memorize than any poem in today’s *New Yorker* which I defy anyone to do. Plus, the prayers came with pictures like those of the “Stations of the Cross.” Little did I know it at the time, but I was learning to see in symbols, ones that would never leave me.

In *The Art of Memory*, Frances Yates explains how classical orators could deliver speeches hours long without any notes. They trained their minds to map ideas or facts onto virtual loci they created as mnemonic devices. The artificial place—such as a room in a house and the hall leading to it—became identified with the concept to be remembered. The more “active” the scene, the more memorable it was. Thus, blood stains, purple cloaks, and crowns helped the orator remember “by arousing emotional effects,” as Yates put it.

When I first discovered this book in graduate school, I was flabbergasted. So the Church fathers knew very well what they were doing when they created the “Stations” with specific locations along the north and south walls leading to the altar in the east. And as for blood stains and other emotional magnets, each loci was a sensual plethora of spirit and flesh.

And as for purple, I not only saw it in the “Stations” and trembled in its failing light in the Confessional, I lived it at Lent, that forty day period of Christ’s suffering when even my grandmother tried to give up “her cream,” as she liked to call it. She went to confession a lot, it seemed, during those days of sacrifice, a spooky time because all the statues were cloaked in twilight—even my favorite, St. Francis, who looked like my pious and gentle grandfather, though Grampy was the guy who smuggled in dear Nana’s frozen goodies.

But on Easter morning, the place was ablaze with color, the altar festooned in flowers, *yellow, yellow*, and the priest’s robe adazzle of gold—dark to light, mourning to joy: symbols so simple and profound. My earliest memories are of these purposeful moments that transcended language, whether living or dead.

And then to Holy Communion!—me with my slicked-down, schoolboy hair, all dressed up and sinless, going down the aisle through the wafting smoke of the candles to kneel at the altar: “Dominus vobiscum . . . In spirito tuo,” the priest coming near, cupping the chalice, the bread now body, the wine its blood, that wafer on my tongue a holy metaphor, the Son of God Himself.

Who wouldn’t write poems after all that!?

In his essay, “Milktongue, Goatfoot, Twinbird,” Donald Hall reminds us of the primitive origins of poetry: the new-born’s babbling and kicking, and those two tiny
hands in flight. Anyone who has raised a child or has been around an infant knows this world of the crib, an instinctual world where the primal elements of lyric poetry are rediscovered by each of us. “Milktongue”: the play with sounds and succulent pleasure in the mouth, the source of vowels and consonants; “Goatfoot”: the muscularity of fitful legs always in motion, the genesis of rhythm; “Twinbird,” the two lonely hands seeking each other, our bisymmetry the origin of pattern, of rhyme, of love.

Lying on his death-bed in St. Praxed’s Church, Browning’s old Bishop would seem a long way from the crib, but not so. Describing the marble he wants for his tomb, the tongue in his mouth is still lush with pleasure: “Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe/As fresh poured red wine of a mighty pulse.” His muscular energy, his “kicking” like Hall’s “Goatfoot,” is transformed by age to a rant at his “sons”: “There, leave me!/For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude/To death—ye wish it—God, ye wish it! Stone/—Gritstone, a crumble!” And all the while, hypocrite though he is, the dying Bishop longs to retrieve the part of him that’s missing, that “twinbird” hand of the infant, that longed-for “other”: “Nephews—sons mine . . . ah God, I know not!/Well—She, men, would have to be your mother once,/Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!”

No wonder Christmas and Easter are Catholicism’s greatest celebrations: from the sky-blue of the Madonna’s robe and sun-gold of her halo, to the blood-stained garments of Jesus and the purple shrouds on the saints at Lent, to the burst of silver and sunlight forty day later, Easter Sunday. Buried below the troubled institution of the Church lie archetypes as deeply human as those of the crib.

Although I haven’t been to Mass regularly in years, my senses remain tuned to its sounds and symbols when I read a poem or when I try to write one. The altar was bare back in the chapel of that Methodist college years ago, and its plaster statues prosaic, without a trace of anguish or joy, or as I came to realize, of both. Both at once, that is—the anguish, the joy, like the spirit and the flesh, inseparable—that profound truth made memorable by the colors around me as a boy in that huge pew, by those stupefying smells and that rhythmic chanting that haunt me still, and will forever, amen.