

Apostle Under My Skin

Tania Runyan.

A Reflection on her Poem
“Man is Without Excuse”
from the new collection
Second Sky: Poems

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Paul of Tarsus, as “a servant of Christ Jesus, set apart for the gospel of God,” longed to draw us closer to the man we claim to imitate. But his words have bored, befuddled, or angered many of us. In fact, for most of my believing life, I found myself barely dipping into the epistles before flipping back to the comfort of the Gospels.

It wasn't so much Paul's comments about homosexuality or women in ministry that tripped me up. Those I could navigate by studying the cultural and occasional contexts of the letters. It was more his theological proclamations and demands—predestination, circumcision and long, meandering discussions about sin with no picture or narrative to ground me—that left me cold.

And some of his words, I had to admit, just seemed flat-out unreasonable.

I normally enjoy discussions about apologetics until this question comes up: “What about those who have never heard the gospel?”

The answer I like best is, “I don't know. But God is loving and just.”

But invariably, at some point during the conversation, this verse will make its appearance: “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

Sure, much of the world senses a creator's presence regardless of culture or geography. But how do we expect someone to make the leap from a ginkgo tree to the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ?

“If their hearts are soft,” they reply all too quickly, “they will find Christ.”

So, if only the 900 million Hindus in the world weren't so stubborn, they would find him?

“It's our fault for not being good lights.”

This is the point when I want to run screaming... toward Jesus on a hillside hugging a small boy whose lunch fed five thousand people. Paul, it was going so well. Why did you have to mess everything up?

No better way to find out than writing poetry.

A few years ago, I began the process of writing poems that grew out of my conversations with Paul. I wrote about Philippians 1:21 (“For me to live is Christ and to die is gain”) when my friend was diagnosed with stage four non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. The poem grapples with the difficulty of believing death is gain, but in the midst of my doubt, I drew closer to my friend and found myself praying for her more. (Her cancer is gone, by the way.) I then wrote about a 2011 bombing of a Coptic church after meditating on Colossians 2:1 (“How great a struggle I have for you.”) The process hurt. But by trying to understand Paul's almost obsessive love for the church, I found myself paying more attention to believers in other parts of the world.

I wasn't sure how far to go with the Paul poems, but I knew they were taking me to a fearfully new place. I added a few of them to my NEA application manuscript and declared my intentions to pursue a book-length project.

Then I received the surprising phone call. The application was approved and I was committed. And it was time to dig deep.

Let me return to Romans 1:20.

Whenever I begin writing about scripture, I start with journaling, following some advice from the Irish Jesuits on their website, Sacred Space. Imagine the Scripture is a searchlight, they say. Think about your life, memories, and fears. So I write freely, and when a certain image comes to the surface, I enter it fully. Then some lines and structure begin to form, and the mysticism takes a back seat: I start hammering out a poem.

When thinking about this verse, I couldn't get Somalian refugees off my mind. Here's what eventually grew out of my free writing:

Man is Without Excuse
—Romans 1:20

Perhaps you could say that in Rome, Paul,
where the olive trees of the Seven Hills

strung their pearls of rain against the sky.
And yes, as I hike Glacier Park

with a well-stocked pack, I can welcome
God's ambassadors of fireweed and paintbrush,

the psalmic rhythm of lake hitting shore.
But as the refugee trudges

from Mogadishu to Dabaab, is she to catch
a glimpse of antelope bone in the thicket

and intuit the sufferings of the Son of Man?
She wears her own nails and crown.

An Eden of lizards surges at her heels,
but she wonders at nothing

but the sore-studded daughter she left to die
on the road, and now, the baby

strapped to her back: six pounds
at one year old. He no longer cries

but flutters small breaths on her neck
like the golden wings of moths

she counts with worshipful attention.

Clearly, I don't reach an answer for Romans 1:20 here. If anything, I indulge my doubt and annoyance even more. But writing about the woman brought me closer to the heart of Christ. Perhaps visualizing her suffering drew me to his own pain. Or following her journey gave me a glimpse of what it must be like for Christ to watch his children torture one another. And how could he let it happen? Of course I thought about that. I always do. But I felt his comfort just the same, his "worshipful [if not bewildering] attention." The woman, through the writing, is saved. Even though the average reader may consider this one of the more "negative" poems in the collection, it's a favorite of mine.

At an earlier stage of my faith, I tried to flee doubt, explain it away. Misunderstood verses occasioned shame and guilt because they meant something was wrong with me. By writing about these passages, I've reached more intimate, albeit messier, encounters with God. Think about the couple who refuses to admit problems versus the one who addresses them. The first couple may have an easier time of it—and a marriage in name only.

Struggling with Paul has helped me struggle with God. We've fought and slammed a few doors. We've talked late into the night with the light heads and bleary eyes of lovers. The combination of Paul and poetry has brought me and God into some dangerously honest territory. And we haven't been the same since.

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