

*Meditations
on the
Way of the Cross*



Milania Austin Henley

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Walking the Way of the Cross
at St. Andrew's Abbey at Valyermo,
I took back to my room a little symbol
from each station to help me remember
my meditations.

— M.A.H.



I
His Trial

A bare bare branch of a tiny shrub,
White where once sap ran through its living trunk,
Thorn-like
Like the crown Christ wore.
Who judges God?
We who think we know better say,
“How can God allow evil —
(What *we* name as evil)?”
We say He’s a good God,
As though He could be bad.
They crowned Him with piercing thorns,
They who scoffed at His saying He was God.
Bad God, they judged,
Here’s your reward.

II
His Cross

How deceptive, little parasite, mistletoe,
You cling to the juniper,
A variety I do not know.
Exquisite little pale pink waxen berries,
My tongue is tempted to try your delicate texture.
You seem to disguise yourself
In among the juniper branches.
Only your thicker leaves and denser clusters
Give you away. You are death.
You absorb the juniper's life.
Its pale blue hard-crust ed berries fall,
And there instead are the lovely pink bits of poison.

My impulse is to run from juniper to juniper,
Pulling out every dense circle of mistletoe.
Save the junipers! Save them from death!
Kill the mistletoe to save the rooted shrubs.

Why must one thing die so another may live?
Christ dies
So I may live.
Do I kill Christ so I may live?
No.
I did not ask to be saved,
As I did not ask to be.
He made me;
He died for me
Freely.

All I can do is let the parasite self

Die
So He can live in me.

III
The First Fall

Broken flower,
Rust-red, like dried blood,
Crushed when Christ fell.
You are the victim of blindness,
Of the blind men who gave Him His cross,
Of the eyes of God
Blinded by blood
So that He did not see the rut in the road.
He fell.

I come now,
Long after He passed,
And find the dried flower
Here where He fell.
I am late coming to see where He fell;
I am late feeling the pain of His fall.
But now I do.

This morning I fell in my driveway,
Slipping on a fallen leaf
Wet with morning dew.
I lay there with a skinned knee bleeding,
A scraped elbow hurting.
I laughed as I rose,
Seeing leaves clinging to my skirt —
A funny fall no one saw but me
And God.
Perhaps He laughed too.

But I do not laugh at His first fall.
It is ignominious.
It hurts terribly to fall holding a cross.
I do not laugh.
I weep.

IV
His Mother

A twisted dry root pushes its way
Out of the earth.
“Jesse’s root” comes to mind —
Mary, the root of Christ.
He bloomed from her body,
A blossom that would die
On another tree.

She is our root too,
The root of love only women know.
Oh — it is different to have carried a child
In your womb
Than to have given your sperm
In a flash of passion.
No man can truly know the ache
Mary must have felt
Seeing Christ on the way to Golgotha.

There He was,
Struggling to carry the enormous cross,
His eyes filled with blood
From the crown of thorns pressed on His head,
Stumbling, falling,
Bruised and beaten.

Would she have done it for Him if she could?
Oh — I know so.
Her womb once filled with the Son of God
Would have contracted in agony
Seeing Him there
Climbing that hideous hill.

Would I die for those I love?
Oh — I know so.
Should I then be amazed
That He died for me,
And that, in her way,
So did she?

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V

Simon Cyrene

A piece of wood lay on the path,
As though to say,
Simon not only helped Jesus carry the cross,
But he got a piece of it to take home
For his trouble.

It seems to me we often are taxed even more
When we tell God we are ready to serve Him.
The more you offer, the more He takes.
“Let me learn humility,” I ask.
And He humbles me until I beg for relief.
It is only when I say,
“Oh — all right — I asked for it.
I accept it,”
That He lets me feel the joy.



VI

Veronica's Veil

Some say the shroud of Turin is Veronica's veil,
And the picture we see is what Christ really
Looked like.
So we have all those paintings agreeing —
From the East and the West —
That Jesus had those features —
A handsome man, well-proportioned, compelling.

We are told we are made in God's image —
But some of us are only somewhat handsome.
Some are ill-proportioned.
Few are compelling.

I picked out from among rocks glittering with mica,
From golden igneous stones and wildly-patterned granite
A plain gray rock
Without anything special to set it apart
And let it be God's image.

God is in all things,
From the simplest to the most complex,
From the ugliest to the loveliest,
From the useful to the useless,
Including us.



VII
The Second Fall

Near the Station commemorating the Second Fall
Was a kind of chaparral I've never seen.
Perhaps I'd recognize it
If I saw it blooming in the spring.
Dormant, it is covered with tiny dead flowers,
Shaped like stars.
I took a tiny branch
And thought about the juxtaposition
Of this One Man's death
And the billions of years
That billions of stars take to die.

Yet all the while the stars are dying,
He lives,
And us with Him.

Tears come as I think of a patch of blood
On the ground after He rises from the Second Fall —
The earth spinning in its orbit
With a wound in its side,
God-soaked soil
Trampled by dusty feet
While stars die.

VIII
The Women

A silver branch, vital and bare of leaves and bark,
Reminds me of the gray-haired women
Who gather around Christ
Seeking meaning, offering service.

It's almost a joke,
It's such a stereotype —
All the empty wombs,
Chasms of loneliness,
So full of longing to give life.
We come to you,
Knowing our worth,
Hoping to help.

I am strong enough to help carry the cross.
I know how to salve wounds;
I could bind Your bleeding side.
I can sing a song of comfort
To soothe Your pain.
I have known my own pain;
I know how to share Yours.
Let me.

No? You must go on,
Go on bleeding,
Go on to die alone?

No, not alone.
I'll be there.



IX

The Third Fall

The hard spiky leaf of a dead yucca plant,
Pointed enough to penetrate,
Looks like it would produce a piercing pain.

The last fall is like living with pain,
Pain that pierces every moment,
Penetrates all awareness,
Tempting one to give up trying for life,
Pain like the mist of blood
That sprayed from Jesus as He fell that last time,
A haze of pain blinding one to possibilities.

How hard it was for Him to get up this last time.
He must have been tempted to stay there
And die.
But that was not His way.
He must reach Golgotha.

Hard enough to get up after a fall
To go on to what we perceive as good.

He perceived Golgotha as good.



X
He is Stripped

A smooth bare sliver of a weed,
Just the inner part,
Stripped of blades of grass
And whatever bloom it bore,
Stands alone.
God utterly man now,
Approaching the abyss of doubt and despair,
Hangs naked on the cross,
Revealing not only His humanity
(For He died)
But His manhood.

Strange that Christ the infant
Is always shown nude
To emphasize His maleness.
No artist I know
Painted Him nude on the Cross.
We cannot bear, it would seem,
To think of Him as a whole man,
In death
Or life.
Scripture ignores His sexuality.
Yet if He was human
He was sexual.

Why do we hide from that part of His nature?
Why was this revelation of His whole body on the
Cross
So utterly humiliating
We cannot depict it in our art?
Was revealing his full humanity
The final mockery?

XI
The Nails

Forged by man,
Metal nails
Made to construct, not destroy,
Penetrated His living flesh.
Hands — two nails;
Traditionally, one nail for both feet,
A perverse sort of trinity.

In the name of the Father
(Pound the nail in the right hand)
And the Son
(Now the left)
And the Holy Spirit
(Hold those feet —
Even though He does not struggle,
Can we count on His surrender?)

A strange reverent act,
The Sign of the Cross.
It says,
“Without these nails, no salvation.”
Christ does surrender to the tools
Of the soldier-carpenters
Erecting their man-cross creation.

And the nails do their job.

XII
He Dies

A sprig of golden grain,
Food for tiny desert birds,
Still sheathed by a feathery blade —
The whole scene falls into place.
First the fullness of physical humanity
Expressed in His cry for water.
Then on to the abyss where He,
Even He,
Loses sight of the Father,
Who has been His center.
Now He cannot feel His father any more.
(Why is that moment of despair
Not sin?)
“Father, why have you forsaken me?”
Is it not the cry of every lost soul?
(It is not sin when
Questioning God out of pain
Only brings us closer to Him.)

Then as He died He said,
“Into Your hands I surrender my spirit.”
Even in death He uses metaphor.
Hands are what make it possible
For us to express our inner being
(Hands and voice).
Into His Hands He took bread and wine
And left us Himself.
In death He is held in His Father’s hands.
Hands offer,
Hands receive.
Like loving.

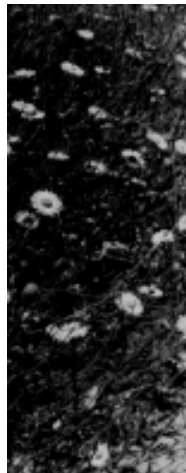
XIII
Mary's Arms

A small colorless stone
Sits atop a piece of pink sparkling granite.
Death in the hands of life.
Christ's lifeless body seems shrunken now.
Mary is wet with His blood,
As once He was wet with hers.
From her He was delivered
And now He is delivered into her arms,
Lifeless.

Does she think He will rise again?
I think not.
Her grief is beyond all other grief,
As her joy was beyond all other joy
When she bore Him.

As a mother
I often want to hold my children,
Knowing they are dying,
As we all are dying.
And I want to reach beyond the children I bore,
And hold all who suffer,
All who are dying.
I want to hold the one
Who has turned from God
And hope the love I feel
Will banish that death.
But my love is not yet strong enough.
I have not held Jesus to my heart
Yet enough.

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XIV
The Tomb

Some lovely wild flower
Creamy and bright,
Light in darkness,
Is Christ in the tomb.

What did He do there?
Rest awhile?
Did He really die,
Or was He in a trance?
Did His body,
If He died,
Begin to decay?
If not,
Why should we believe
In the miracle of life
Coming out of death?
If Christ is "light from light,"
Then in death,
In the tomb,
That part of Him which is truth
(Light)
Lived.

Darkness can enlighten
As silence teaches.
So in the darkness of the tomb
Christ metamorphoses,
Like the chrysalis in the cocoon
Or the child in the womb.
From old matter comes new life,
In Christ a new kind of life,
God's Body transformed to bridge
Time and eternity.

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XV
He is Risen

Within the juniper berry
Is a new tree.
So Christ rises and shows
He bears a new me.

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Milania Austin Henley is an oblate of St. Andrew's Abbey.