

Requiem for a Lost Cause

by Jackson Neal

*Simul ergo cum in unum congregamur,
Ne nos mente dividamur, caveamus.
Cessent iurgia maligna*

*As we are gathered into one body,
Beware, lest we be divided in mind.
Let evil impulses stop*

-From Ubi Caritas

In the church where I was baptized, everything is gold. I don't know much about the Lord, but He has expensive taste. Six bodies, to the right of the altar— starch pressed dolls, folded into devotion. More than anyone my mother arches her spine into a prayerful crook. The Madonna on the wall handles an aseptic birth. Her neck, wilting. The lamentations on their knees.

It is written the lepers of Jerusalem were banished from the city, forced to shout *unclean, unclean* for the duration of their exodus.

Every saint inside— Magdalen in glass, Teresa in stone, Our Lady of Fatima etched into the coin around my neck— casts a piest glare.

unclean, unclean.

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I remember the first time I kissed a boy. He just broke up with his boyfriend; needed to feel vindicated. I was out to prove myself to myself. An ex-girlfriend asked if I stayed to convince myself I wasn't gay. I still don't have an answer. (Yes). He took me to the playground where he buys his weed. Parked his dad's Toyota Avalon in front of the plastic slide. For a while we sat, mute inside an expecting silence. Then a spark—two leaves licked by flames, descending into ash. The windows glowed soft orange, a forest fire inside.

I only have two dreams: it's passover and I forgot the lamb's blood. Or, my father, being a father, takes me to Mount Zion to build an altar. I carry all the sticks. He slips a twig between my ribs. Do you know what a faggot is?

The rosary beads dangling from the rear view mirror studied us. Skin on ruby skin. Two clouds, collecting light. The beads prepared their report, one hundred eight glass eyes sent to watch.

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The Hail Mary is easy enough.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Our Father's are trickier.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.

Meaning, bring unto me what is due:

a blade tucked, like a note, beneath my breast.

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Most holy and near the Lord in heaven, we call upon the saints to pray on our behalf. In the sacrament of Confirmation, young Catholics will take the name of a saint.

I was late to my own Confirmation. Came straight from marching band practice, still sweaty. The cardinal was unamused.

Legend has it, after Saint Jude Thaddeus passed Christians rarely invoked his name in prayer fearing it would be mistaken with Judas Iscariot. The Saint became so desperate to prove himself he would answer even the most dire invocations. For this reason, St. Jude is the patron of lost causes.

I've never known God to have faith in a lost cause.

The other Confirmation candidates and I walked in line to be anointed. In front of us a gold thurible let smoke in place of prayer. I wondered who inside was burning.

The Lord Gave Up: On Lucifer. On Sodom and Gomorrah. On the entire world before Noah.

A man in red drew his chrismed thumb across my forehead. He announced my new name to the congregation—“Jude.”

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I was quiet then. Sixteen. There was a lot to not be said.

One night, after a mass in which I sang no hymns, my family was at the dinner table. I wound spools of pasta I didn't plan to eat. Little cocoons full of little secrets. My father, suddenly very worried,

“What's wrong with you?”

I burst into tears, right there. My oldest sister yelled something harsh, I didn't hear, at my father. The youngest one had never seen me cry. He grabbed me by the arm, took me into his room.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses.

I hit the ground. Curled into a trembling shell.

“Are you doing drugs? Did you get drunk? Is someone pregnant?”

“Jay, stop it!”

“I'm going to get it out of him!”

I opened my mouth, but a scream, like the boulder before His tomb, blocked the exit. How long did we sit there? Hours? It was a hot, uncomfortable Not Speaking. Finally, exhausted and aware I always skipped the Lord's Prayer on my rosary, my father left the room. My mom touched my coiled back, finding the wounds: a pair of wings, cut and cauterize. I told her what I could:

I'm not straight. I don't know what that means. Sometimes, I spend hours clutching my knees begging the God of Unlost Causes to take it back.

My mom, she just put her arm around me.

“It's ok. It's ok. We love you.”

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For the next month I listened to Gregorian Chants on my iPhone. I bought a devotional Scapular—two square pieces of cloth made into a necklace. The first, Eugene Kazimierowski's “The Divine Mercy”, resting in the middle of my back. The second sits centered on my chest. It reads, “Whosoever dies wearing this Scapular shall not suffer eternal fire.”

There are boys. And then there aren't. They pass through me like incense. What is an afterlife, but a room with everyone you've ever touched and not a single word?

*Gaudium quod est immensum, atque probum,
Saecula per infinita saeculorum.*

*The joy that is immense and good,
Unto the ages through infinite ages*

There is a shrine to the Virgin Mary on my nightstand. I perform the one miracle she could never. I want to say she smiles. *Blessed art thou amongst women.* Her child looks away.

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I am trying to unlearn shame. I am trying to be as lovely as the errant doves that fly from every city God has ever burned. I am trying to be *unclean, unclean*. A mouth full of ash, a fist full of hair, a river shallow without its dead.