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FACING GOD: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DEVOTIONAL POETRY

by

Sarah E. Jenkins

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Art

Department of English

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GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Sarah E. Jenkins in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

FACING GOD: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DEVOTIONAL POETRY

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Master of Arts

My thesis examines the connection between scripture and contemporary American poetry. Scripture is inherently poetic, employing devices that require analysis and explication. Poets drawing from scriptural text for narrative, language, or form are not looking to replace scripture, or even enhance it. Poets create new experiences in language, and their writing can illuminate the poetics of scripture. My thesis will examine work by three contemporary poets who have imitated, alluded to, and re-created scripture: Jacqueline Osherow's "Scattered Psalms" from 1999 collection *Dead Men's Praise*; Louise Glück's 1992 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *The Wild Iris*; and Morri Creech's "The Testament of Judas" from his 2001 collection *Paper Cathedrals*.

Each of these texts investigates the metaphor "Man is like God"—a metaphor which Allen Grossman argues is the most important in Western civilization—from a

unique and yet scripturally archival point of view. At the same time, each features a strong individual speaker, one of the hallmarks of contemporary poetry. Osherow identifies the speaker of her psalms as a version of herself, explicitly personalizing her poetry. Glück's speaker is isolated, and is defined as she speaks to both God and her garden but is heard by neither. Creech's Judas is concerned solely with his personal experience with and understanding of Jesus. Emphasizing the individual makes poetry a personal rather than shared experience. It becomes the individual speaker's responsibility to establish his/her relationship with God based on how they perceive God and how they represent him through language.

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INTRODUCTION

In *Summa Lyrica: A Primer of the Commonplaces in Speculative Poetics*, Allen Grossman posits, “The fundamental metaphor substantiating human presence . . . in Western civilization is ‘Man is like God’—enabling the perception of a relationship by distinguishing its terms” (249). In saying that “Man is like God,” we comprehend what both God and Man share and what separates them, and through this comprehension we understand what Man is based on what God is not, and vice versa. We also perceive the relationship, however tenuous, between an immortal, perfect being and our mortal, fallible selves. “God creates the mortal person at every moment of interhuman perception,” Grossman argues, “by participating as *difference* in relationship” (249). Although Grossman is more concerned with the poetic function of metaphor, his aphoristic discourse presents a strong case for the presence of God in contemporary American poetry. If we understand our humanity through what it is not, then God does indeed become our “fundamental metaphor” in his divine and sacred role.

While all texts are concerned to some extent with defining Man, there is one text that is constantly engaged in establishing the difference between God and Man. This text is scripture. “Scripture,” according to Grossman, “is privileged text. The nature of the textual privilege of Scripture derives from the fact that the source of its language is identical with the source of reality. Scripture is the text which is the perfect whole from which experiential reality has departed and to which it will . . . return” (245). The inherent perfection of scripture requires belief and refuses departure from the text itself. It is a reality that establishes the constant metaphor of “Man is like God.” Because the language of scripture is tied to the reality of scripture, Grossman argues that “Scripture

and poem are antithetical and contradictory terms” (245). The poem uses language to create a reality, while the reality of scripture is assumed, although affected by the language and subjectivity of the author.

Grossman’s reasoning follows logic centered in aesthetics which is respectful of scriptural tradition, and yet he ignores the poetry inherent in scripture. Sir Philip Sidney argues that poetry “is an art of imitation,” and that the authors of scripture “imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God. Such were David in his Psalms; Solomon in his Song of Songs, in his Ecclesiastes and Proverbs; Moses and Deborah in their Hymns; and the writer of Job” (122). Although Sidney names only a select handful of writers, his stance extends to all scripture: in imitating the divine, scriptural authors became poets. In the introduction to *A Poet’s Bible: Rediscovering the Voices of the Original Text*, David Rosenberg suggests that scriptural authors were more than scribes, but poets in their own right: “Much of the Hebrew Bible was written by poets who were not parochial writers but more resembled a John Donne or T.S. Eliot: poets first, devotees second. They wrote in the language and imagery of the mainstream culture, whereas now religion finds itself an ancillary culture” (xxiii). Religion elevates scripture to an “untouchable” text, but even when untouchable, scripture is still poetry. It employs poetic devices that require analysis and explication. Even so, we don’t directly approach scripture as we would any other poem—moving through the language and form to understand and appreciate the text—but we instead disguise our exploration and explication in “exegesis” and “midrash” in order to create a respectful distance between reader and text. In truth, poetry prompts poetry, and scripture has served as inspiration for countless poets, including future scriptural authors. Percy Blythe Shelley states, “It is probable that the poetry of Moses,

Job, David, Solomon, and Isaiah had produced a great effect upon the mind of Jesus and his disciples. The scattered fragments preserved to us by the biographers of this extraordinary person are all instinct with the most vivid poetry” (363). Shelley’s hypothesis suggests that it was natural to use and respond to scripture when Jesus and his disciples were alive, and we can infer that scriptures are written to engage and challenge the reader.

Poets who choose to study and interpret scripture are confronted with its omniscient tone, the reverence it demands, and its inherent poetic nature. Robert Atwan and Laurance Wieder, editors of *Chapters into Verse: A Selection of Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible from Genesis through Revelation*, observe that “The Old Testament presents a special challenge to poets because of the extraordinary poetry it already contains” (xx). Atwan and Wieder also quote Walt Whitman who, although he set out to write a “new Bible” with *Leaves of Grass*, observed, “No true Bard will ever contravene the Bible” (xx). It is important to understand that poets drawing from scriptural text for narrative, language, or form are not looking to replace scripture, or even enhance it. Poets create new experiences in language, and their writing can illuminate the poetics of scripture. My thesis will examine three contemporary poets who have imitated, alluded to, and re-created scripture in nationally-received publications: Jacqueline Osherow’s 1999 collection *Dead Men’s Praise*; Louise Glück’s 1992 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *The Wild Iris*; and Morri Creech’s 2001 collection *Paper Cathedrals*. Each of these texts investigates Grossman’s metaphor from a unique and yet scripturally archival point of view.

The idea that “Man is like God” has been challenged by the modernist argument that “God is dead.” Grossman argues that when we remove God from the metaphor, “the distinctness of the human image is eroded [. . .] and the world with it disappears” (250). God is necessary to understand our humanity; replacing God with Man or the products of Man, such as imagination or art, detracts from what Man actually is (250). This dependence on God is echoed in contemporary literature. Gregory Erickson states, “New theories of literary interpretation [. . .] need to acknowledge the inescapability of religious thought and the enduring complexity of the idea of God, not only within texts but within our modes of analysis” (10). If God indeed is the fundamental metaphor, we cannot ignore his place in the texts we use to define ourselves; neither can poets disregard God’s position in their poetry, although A. Poulin, in his influential essay “Contemporary American Poetry: The Radical Tradition,” does note, “To a large extent, most contemporary poets [. . .] view traditional, formal, and established religious belief as impossible. Rather, they affirm a personal and vital religious or mystical, spiritual sense” (664). For contemporary poets, religion is a personal rather than collective or organized experience, which means that he/she may not acknowledge the religious importance of scripture. However, even if a poet does not accept the religious tradition of scripture, he/she must recognize the literary traditions inherent in and initiated by scripture, which in contemporary American poetry most often points to the Judeo-Christian tradition, although Roger Gilbert acknowledges the invocation of “Eastern religions” as well (24). Through their choice to invoke scripture, poets align their work within these religious traditions.

Osherow, Glück, and Creech connect their poetry to the Judeo-Christian religious tradition through their allusion to and imitation of Biblical narratives. This contradicts Poulin's description of most contemporary poets and associates Osherow, Glück, and Creech with the older devotional tradition of poets such as Donne, Milton, and Hopkins. Their poetry, however, shares a distinctly contemporary characteristic—the individual speaker. Grossman presents “Man” as a collective, all humankind, but in establishing the metaphor he opens the door to compare part of the collective, the individual man, to God. The individual is one of the primary concerns of contemporary American poetry. Poulin explains, “Poetry is no longer considered an escape from personality by contemporary poets but rather a fuller cultivation and use of personality” (647). The personality of the poet becomes central to the poem, at times to the point of conflating the poet and speaker. Osherow identifies the speaker of her psalms as a version of herself, explicitly personalizing her poetry. Glück's speaker is isolated, and is defined as she speaks to both God and her garden but is heard by neither. Creech's Judas is concerned solely with his personal experience with and understanding of Jesus. Emphasizing the individual makes poetry a personal rather than shared experience. It becomes the individual speaker's responsibility to establish his/her relationship with God based on how they perceive God and how they represent him through language.

Atwan and Wieder consider poetry inspired by scripture an exegesis or commentary of the original scripture: “Each poem, as it retells, contemplates, expands, debates with, praises, voices, or reimagines the language and events of the Bible, becomes [. . .] an exegesis of the text. [. . .] The authority of this commentary derives from the individual poet's imaginative insight—from an intuitive precision and

expressive vitality” (xix). Again the individual poet is emphasized, as well as how he or she understands and interprets the text. Rosenberg argues that recognizing the individuality of the poet is important not only for the contemporary poet, but also for the original scriptural author, which in turn results in a more individual, specific understanding of God. The purpose of both scripture and poetry becomes the examination of the individual’s relationship with God or the divine, returning again to Grossman’s metaphor “Man is like God.”

Contemporary poets continue to examine and imitate scripture because it allows them to explore this metaphor of “Man is like God.” Jacqueline Osherow, Louise Glück, and Morri Creech find the relationship between man and God as recorded in scripture particularly crucial because, for them, it opens a venue in which they establish a conversation between God and the individual speaker. Osherow begins her sequence of “Scattered Psalms” by invoking the scriptural psalmist David. She initiates ten of her thirteen psalms with verses from Psalms, using scriptural ethos to enforce the reality of her own psalms. Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris* reinvents the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden. Glück rejects the language of scripture in favor of the voices of her speakers, but maintains the narrative framework of the garden, Man, and God. With this structure in place, Glück gives voice to each of the traditional characters, Man and God, while justifying the introduction of a third—the garden itself. In the prayers voiced by the female speaker, here filling the role of Man, she defines herself through her relations with the God she cannot hear and the garden she cannot sustain.

The third and final work that I consider is Morri Creech’s “The Testament of Judas,” a poem sequence voiced by Judas Iscariot following the chronology of the New

Testament Gospels from the beginning of Christ's ministry. Again I argue that the poems rely on the reality of scripture, but here the speaker rejects the metaphor "Man is like God" as Judas insists on the superiority of the human Jesus over the divine Christ. Grossman argues that "when difference is repudiated ("Man is God"), the *eidōs* [the countenance of the speaker] and the world with it disappears" (250). Creech's Judas, like the scriptural Judas, does in fact "disappear" via his death, but the world does not. What Judas' narrative argues is that salvation, and therefore God, are just as dependent on humanity as they are on divinity.

That God is present in these works is indisputable, but how we read him is determined not by the scripture the poems allude to, but by the individual speaker and the individual reader of the poem. What is created here is not only a conversation of how man is like God, but how the individual is like God—how the reader can relate to a being who is all things, who is in every way so unlike him/her that the only way to understand is to find those similarities. Osherow's speaker turns to scripture, Glück's to prayer, and Creech's to the physical, mortal manifestation of God in order to find and define God. It falls to the reader to find his/her own way of discovering, interpreting, and communicating with God.

A SONG OF JACQUELINE:

THE “SCATTERED PSALMS” OF JACQUELINE OSHEROW

“All I know is, I want to join those guys / Calling God’s name,” Jacqueline Osherow writes in “My Version: Medieval Acrostic” (2–3). It’s not enough for her to wish, though; in the same poem Osherow demands “Let me in guys” to the Jewish medieval acrostic poets (7). Osherow’s understanding of speaking to God is a communal, yet privileged act, reflecting her Jewish background and the scriptural texts which commence her own work. Her faith serves as a catalyst to write poems that transcend religion as they address the relationship between Man and God. Her 1999 collection, *Dead Men’s Praise*, includes her “Scattered Psalms,” a series of thirteen poems in which she joins the Biblical psalmist David in praising God. Most of these begin with epigraphs of two or more verses from the Book of Psalms, which Osherow then explores in the accompanying poem. “In this sense,” suggests Steven P. Schneider, “her composition is midrashic, writing ‘with’ the original Psalms—sometimes incorporated as lines in her poetry—and turning and sifting through the words and verses to discover some new insight” (64). Schneider quotes Gerald Burns’s essay “Midrash and Allegory” to explain that “the term midrash derives from *drash*, meaning ‘to study,’ ‘to search,’ ‘to investigate,’ ‘to inquire’: it means to go in pursuit of” (61). The original Midrash is a collection of rabbinical commentaries on passages from the Hebrew Bible dating from the second to fifth centuries. Osherow creates out of this tradition of investigating biblical texts in order to re-experience David’s praise while initiating her own conversation with God. Accordingly, she begins the “Scattered Psalms” imitating David. In reading her first and last psalms, along with three others (II, V, and XI), however, I contend that the

speaker realizes that the traditions of David and the Midrash are no longer adequate to address the spiritual conditions of the twentieth century. For her to truly understand Man's place, and consequently communicate with God, she must incorporate contemporary events, discoveries, and interpretations of the sacred.

The first of Osherow's "Scattered Psalms," "I (Handiwork/Glory)," declares her objective in this series, which is to both join with and respond to David as she praises God. She mimics David's invocation of the self ("To the Conductor: A song of David"), but not without some hesitation: "Dare I begin: a song of Jacqueline? / But what, from my heart of hearts, do I say?" (1-2). The speaker—who identifies herself as Osherow—acknowledges the precedent and parameters set by the original psalms and seeks both to be true to that archive and to her own voice, to what she has to say. Learning from the original psalmist that "every line / Will murmur with the heavens," the speaker proceeds undaunted, cheekily determining, "So how hard could it be to write a psalm?" (3-4, 10). If the heavens and earth already declare the glory of God, then the speaker has all she needs to praise God. She simply needs to organize her images and she has already seen David do that. "Think of David's fairly modest territory," she muses. "There are other trees than cedar, willow, palm" (11-12). She begins to catalogue the "kinds of praise he couldn't know" (14):

The ferns on their unfinished violins,
 The jonquils on their giddy, frail trombones,
 The aspens shaking silver tambourines,
 Then yellow-gold ones, then letting go. (15-18)

This demonstration of her greater knowledge than David's is not disrespectful; she is writing to add to David's praise, not challenge it. She acknowledges his work as her catalyst, and with each new plant mentioned she adds to the music created in the original psalm, creating a new voice for the earth, a voice which seems to pay tribute to the musician David. She also acknowledges David's guidance by repeating two phrases of David's psalm in each stanza: "*The glory of God and then His handiwork*" (7). The one distinction she chooses to make from David's original presentation is the subsequent nature of recognizing the glory of God and his handiwork; however, each stanza reverses the order of the two, suggesting a continuous process, where recognizing one is nearly indistinguishable from the other.

Osherow pauses her cataloguing to ask "What did David know about such changes? / The top arc of the spectrum gone berserk?" (19–20). This is in response to the subtle, almost delicate change of the aspen leaves from silver to yellow-gold before they fall. Their "letting go" builds from that small moment to the entire earth changing

when some skyward barricade unhinges

Without even a breath, a noise, a spark

(The glory of God and then His handiwork),

No single earthly thing stays as it was [. . .] (21 – 24)

Even in the midst of everything changing, everything still praises God and his handiwork.

The speaker continues to follow the pattern set forth by David's psalm, seeing and hearing God in all his creations, from the crocodile to the glacier, and from "the hornet's diligence" to "the forest's lazy ease" (31, 34). Her catalogue ranges across the globe, encompassing all that she can of God's handiwork and glory, before resting on her final

note of praise: “Our own extraneous efforts at creation” (35). As she acknowledged at the beginning of her psalm that she is mimicking David, she now acknowledges that she is also mimicking God as she attempts to create. And although it may be “extraneous,” she knows it echoes the voice of the earth and heavens in praising God.

Osherow continues to praise God in her psalms, but she also begins to question David in the second of her “Scattered Psalms”. Her approach in “II (Pure Silver/Seven Times)” to Psalm 12:7—“The words of the Lord are pure words, refined silver (clear to the earth) / (in a furnace of the earth), purified seven times”—initially reads like a poetry workshop dialogue, with the speaker asking David about the accuracy of his imagery. She adds Psalm 14:1 (“The degraded man says in his heart there is no God”) to her interpretation as she begins her open dialogue:

Let’s pretend, for an instant, we’re not degraded,
 That we’d know, if we heard it, the sound of pure silver
 Fired in a furnace seven times.
 Could it possibly be transcribed?
 And if it’s *clear to the earth*, who needs transcription?
 And if it’s *furnace of the earth*, why are we listening?
 An earthly furnace for the words of God? (1–7)

In setting up these questions, Osherow follows the midrashic tradition of Jewish culture, rather than the reverence commanded by the psalms. Combining verses from different psalms allows her access to new readings, as well as new questions. She wonders if someone who believes in God would actually hear what David describes; she wonders how well David knew God, and consequently, how well she knows God. The

impossibility of hearing “the sound of pure silver / Fired in a furnace seven times” calls into question not only her faith, but her standing with God, which in turn complicates her understanding of herself. It is acceptable to question God when she believes he could deliver answers if he wanted to, but here the sheer ludicrousness of what is necessary to communicate with him only serves as a momentary frustration—a reaction antithetical to the praise of the psalms.

Osherow’s speaker chooses not to dwell on these problematic questions and their implications, and continues her search for other possible readings. Through this searching, David becomes the furnace, a vessel for testing words and rewriting praise, “Mumbling beneath his breath, there is no God / Unless He’s here beside me, writing psalms” (11–12). Here the speaker drifts off in ellipsis, realizing that perhaps she’s gone too far, and admitting “David didn’t say that about God; / That’s an innovation of my own, / Which is why God never trusts me with His store of silver” (15–17). The commands of the psalms stop the speaker from presenting her narrative of David’s qualifications for God’s presence as truth. She instead changes direction with one word: “Imagine” (18). This command from the speaker stops the reader, shifting the attention from David to “us”—the speaker and the reader (19). She redefines the refinement of “the words of the Lord” as our need to be told repeatedly, to have his vision translated so that we can understand him, or, as the speaker wryly states, “To let us know how very lost we are” (20). In this interpretation, the speaker attempts to position Man in terms of God, but finds God too omnipresent for us to locate our relation with him, and possibly too grand for us to understand or even establish a relationship with him, although he keeps attempting to create some form of understanding with us.

In a third reading of David's psalm, Osherow's speaker observes, "God's refinements always come in sevens" before enumerating the seven days of the creation, again combining scriptures to aid her interpretation (21). This line calls attention to another set of seven in Osherow's psalm: her seven stanzas composed of seven lines. Osherow creates her own holy form, perhaps with the underlying hope that by the seventh line of the seventh stanza her words will begin to achieve a level of sacredness akin to the word of God. Here it becomes the speaker attempting to present herself in a way God will understand—God repeats himself, Man mimics God's language. As she aligns herself with God, the reader can acknowledge and appreciate her efforts, but there is no way of knowing if God recognizes her poetry as an attempt to be like him.

While the psalm's form enacts God's process of refinement, the speaker begins to doubt the existence of "*pure words*," wondering if they are simply the result of David's wishful thinking (39). She concludes that even if they are "an invention of desire / In the face of everything that's horrible," the words are still pure, perhaps refined by the furnace of what is horrible (39–40). Ultimately what the speaker finds pure are the words of the Psalms, which reaffirm their status in the archive of the sacred. Even if the midrashic tradition breaks apart and reconstructs the psalms, the words are still there and still "*clear to the earth*" (43). Questioning them, as Osherow does seven times, is how they become refined.

Despite the questions and additions Osherow puts to David's psalms, her invocation has been fairly straightforward. In the title poem of the collection, "Dead Men's Praise," however, the symbolic psalms are confronted with the frank realities of history. In the first stanza Osherow acknowledges these two traditions from which her

poetry commences: “Yakov Glatstein already / used this verse in a poem, / translated, in that book / (*Radiant Jews*, 1946), / *Dead Men Don’t Praise God*” (1–5). Glatstein, a twentieth-century Yiddish poet, represents the archive of Jewish culture, including the Holocaust. Glatstein has been described as “one of the great elegists of Eastern European Jewish life” (Prager and Schwartz). Cynthia Ozick paid him tribute, saying, “if Jacob Glatstein had not lived and written his splendid poetry, and if there were no other Yiddish writers present to write as only they can about our lives and our natures, there would be no hope for a Jewish literature of any kind in America” (60). Writing out of any culture requires an understanding of the significant authors; in Jewish culture, this includes Glatstein. Understanding how Glatstein addressed the Psalms gives the speaker a shared perspective of respect and reverence with her reader, which in turn permits her to suggest new readings to the reader. The second source she alludes to is the Hebrew Bible, “this verse” being one from Psalm 115 which she quotes later in the poem: “*The dead don’t praise God, / or the ones who go down to silence, / but we’ll praise God / from now on forever*” (15–18). The synthesis of Jewish culture and the Bible creates the space in which Osherow’s speaker can address both history and sacred texts. Her recognition and respect for both commence her speaker’s narrative, pairing elements of the two to create a new and unique text.

Osherow contextualizes Glatstein’s poem, citing the year it was published and alluding to the events that would lead Glatstein to believe “this verse had festered in its psalm / waiting to reveal its acrid heart” (8–9). Osherow’s speaker does not intent to negate Glatstein’s poem with her own, but to observe the midrashic tradition of reexamining Biblical texts and she recognizes that a poem about this verse must take

Glatstein's into consideration. She wants her poem read and listened to, but to achieve this she must recognize the texts that came before hers. "I don't blame him if he thought / all praise had ended," she explains, "but I wonder if it's heartless / after only fifty years / to think—again—the praise has just begun" (10–14). The speaker is prepared not only to offer a new reading of the psalm, but also to contradict Glatstein's poem, albeit gently. After witnessing the atrocities of the Holocaust, Glatstein "thought / all praise had ended" (10–11). Although Osherow is part of the generation born after the Holocaust, she understands this as part of the cultural inheritance. Still, she wonders "if it's heartless / after only fifty years / to think—again—the praise has just begun" (12–14). She sees that there are still people to praise and that praise is still possible. How Glatstein chose to interpret his relationship with God was valid, but that was Glatstein's relationship; it is still her responsibility to discover her own similarities and differences with God.

The speaker does more than contradict Glatstein's poem; she observes how the traditions of culture and scripture have clashed, contradicting each other and causing problems for those interpreting as she considers the word "chosen":

[. . .] the annoying epithet *chosen*
 that has caused us so much trouble over the years

(though there are a host
 of twentieth-century explanations:
 chosen for suffering, for near-annihilation,

or—on the other hand—for the idea

of public ownership of means
of production, relativity,

A la Recherche du Temps Perdu). (28–36)

The epithet “chosen” comes from the Bible, referring to the privileged status of Jews in the favor of God. Questioning this denotation, Osherow applies the label to subjects and topics housed in Jewish culture: Were they chosen for the Holocaust? Were Karl Marx, Albert Einstein, and Marcel Proust chosen to produce ideas that would define the twentieth-century? Faced with the terror of the first explanation and the pretension of the second, the speaker gives her own explanation: “chosen for this / tenacious language, / to be the *we* / who get to say this word / and live forever” (37–41). This proud ownership of the language that defines both culture and scripture is her response to Glatstein and to the conflict between culture and scripture—to those who believe praise is no longer possible after the Holocaust. “This word” they “get to say” is *hallelujah*:

not—you have to understand—
an English hallelujah
with its vague exultation and onomatopoeia
but a word composed of holy signs
that could actually spell God’s name
if they weren’t ordering the universe
to praise Him. (48–54)

She acknowledges the word “hallelujah” exists in other cultures, ones that house “Handel, / gospel singers, televangelists,” but without the intimate understanding of its divine purpose (42–43). The privilege of *hallelujah*, of writing from a culture that has an

intimate understanding of God, lends a divinity and voice of praise even to Glatstein's bitterness, although there are apparently levels of sacredness, as the speaker determines by repeating a story her "friend Isaac tells / before he reads *Akdamut* on Shavuot" (55–56):

the poet Rabbi Meir ben Yitzhak
 first wrote *Akdamut* in Hebrew
 and the angels stole it away, page by page,

 so he had to begin all over again,
 this time in Aramic,
 to keep his genius secret from the angels. (57–62)

The story of words so sacred the angels steal them leads Osherow to wonder how David managed to keep his psalms from being taken in the same way: "Were the angels just so riveted / by what they heard / that they left him to go on and on?" (63–65). With Glatstein, though, the angels simply laughed at "this poor *shlemazel* writing / in an instantaneously dead language" (68–69). Despite Glatstein's foolishness, the speaker still wants to believe the story of Rabbi Meir ben Yitzhak and that there are angels present and reading the work of Jewish poets—and she hopes that they are reading her words as well.

The speaker continues to navigate the space between the culture and scripture as she begins questioning David's psalms and the place for her own poetry, allowing herself to wonder if the story of Rabbi Meir ben Yitzhak and a Hebrew version of *Akdamut* is true. The excitement and joy of praising God suddenly spirals into solemn consideration:

“Maybe, reading over his shoulder, / the angels rejected David’s poem / (didn’t they have enough of praising God?)” (81–83). In this question, both David’s psalms and the speaker’s “Scattered Psalms” become redundant. Praise, which is the purpose of the psalms, is primarily the job of angels, making David and the speaker unnecessary. If there is enough praise from the angels, why should man praise?

and my *hallelujah*,
 my precious, rising *hallelujah*,
 doesn’t have the stamina
 I need it for,

has, in fact, been burned away
 before it could adorn a single tongue
 for countless generations of David’s offspring. (89–95)

Scripture and culture collapse into each other, as the David from the Bible takes his place as the ancestor of the Jews, connecting his psalms with every praise that came after since his is the praise that commences praise; but the conflicts between the connotations of “chosen people” and the terror of the Holocaust seem too great to support even the speaker’s *hallelujah*. Contrary to David and Glatstein’s verses, that dead men don’t praise God, the speaker believes those who died “are around here somewhere, singing *hallelujah*” (97). Instead, she mourns “the other ones, numberless as stars, / who never got to sing a word at all” (98–99). Instead of following the tradition upheld by Glatstein to mourn the living who died, she remembers them, but mourns the “permutations of permutations / of permutations of permutations / of pairs of double helixes,” the future

generations who were never able to live (100–02). “Among them,” she ends, “certainly, at least / a few who might / have liked, even for / an instant, to live forever” (107–11). The dead continue to live, whether in an afterlife or in the memories of the living, but there is truly no hope for the souls who were never born. Faced with these countless possible lives made impossible, Osherow complicates the distinction between Man and God. God will always exist, while there are these lives that will never exist. Rather than presenting the hope for a relationship between God and Man as in previous poems, Osherow’s conclusion eliminates even the possibility of a relationship with God.

The enormity and immensity of the Holocaust unites individuals as they attempt to distinguish the events of the Holocaust from God. Osherow explores this struggle through the hypothetical story of a prisoner in Auschwitz in “Scattered Psalm V (Psalm 37 at Auschwitz).” Her prisoner is a scholar, one who had learned “by heart the words of every psalm” (8). “What I want to know,” her speaker muses, “is: could he have tried, / Before his slow death from starvation, / To bring himself a little consolation / By reciting all those psalms inside his head?” (13–16). Rather than run the gamut of psalms, the reader focuses on three verses from Psalm 37—one verse which promises the eventual leaving of “the wicked one,” one verse that every Jew would know from grace after meals, and one verse that the speaker uses to answer questions which arise from the other two. These she accompanies with the actions of her scholar—who is not fictional, but created by what she has been told about Auschwitz and the “legend” of boys educated in the scripture (3). The speaker expects such a scholar to have the psalms entwined in his every action, although they do take on a poignancy when she imagines him reciting, “*Just a little longer and there will be no wicked one / He’d murmur to a shovel full of ash /*

You'll contemplate his place and he'll be gone"(17–19). The speaker drifts from the scholar to her own interpretations of this psalm, although she initially keeps the questions in context of his thoughts, which cannot stay on the psalm when confronted with the horrors of Auschwitz:

[. . .] he was too busy saying kaddish

For his father—lost a few days before

Along with his own reservoir of psalms,

Still stunned by the crudeness of the cattle car,

A man known to go hungry giving alms,

.....

Was he to say his father wasn't righteous

That his only son should go in search of bread? (16–20, 23–24)

The verse in question is from *Birkat Hamazon*, or Grace after meals: "I was young; I've also grown old, and I've never seen a righteous man forsaken or his children begging bread" (Psalm 37:25). The speaker is able to question the Biblical verse through the persona of the scholar and his narrative; all evidence attests his father was a righteous man, but his son now goes "in search of bread" (35), suggesting that the father was forsaken by God. The conflict between what David declares in the psalm and what happened in the Holocaust creates a tension the speaker hesitates to navigate, restricted by the belief required by the psalms and the historical validity of the Holocaust. She notes that "the psalm does say *begging* bread, / And begging was of little use of Auschwitz" (36–37). Backing away from the conflict, the speaker looks for another answer for why a

righteous man's children would beg, and returns to the psalms, now questioning David's reasoning: "*Nourish yourself with faith // (Is that why David says he's never seen / The children of the righteous begging bread? / They're meant to be sustained by faith alone?)*" (40–43). The speaker then turns to another source to confirm her interpretation, but here is presented with an even greater conflict. She considers asking her father-in-law "If, in all his years at Auschwitz-Birkenau, / He ever once overheard a psalm" (49–50), but she knows his answer:

Giving me the slightly baffled stare
 He keeps in reserve for these conversations
 That says: Where do you find these foolish questions?
 And then: How could you know? you weren't there;

If I hadn't been, I wouldn't believe it either. . .

Aloud, he'd tell me: *Psalms, I didn't hear,*

You were lucky to put two words together

Without some SS screaming in your ear,

But this was nothing. This was nothing.

Most of his descriptions end like this.

He almost never says what *something* was. (53–63)

In imagining her father-in-law's response, the speaker realizes that her narrative of the scholar and his store of psalms is impossible; her story is outside of what the Holocaust sets as its parameters for discussing this set of texts. These parameters include a respect

for those who experienced the Holocaust firsthand; by asking if anyone would have recited a psalm, she has called into question the beliefs of the victims.

The impossibility of the narrative contests the overlapping of scripture and history the narrative incited; after all, “only a fool / Would try to be literal about a psalm,” she seems to apologize (75–76). Yet even with this apology, she continues to attempt to navigate the disparate space between the two as the narrative begins to run back and forth between David’s “confession: / That, for all his affect of compassion, // He never, even once, bothered to look” at the righteous children begging bread and the story of Auschwitz, although this time the narrative is from “a Vilna partisan” describing how his girlfriend crippled “a Nazi train / Loaded with guns and bombs and ammunition // With a single handmade ball of yarn and nails” (83–85, 90, 91–93). In the confusion, the triumph of both David and the girlfriend is undermined. David, who earned his success as a youth, ignored the children, and his slingshot wouldn’t have done much good at Auschwitz; the girlfriend manages to cripple the train, but it only slows down the transportation to Auschwitz and the killing continues.

This confusion becomes the equivalent of defeat for the speaker, who admits her scholar “had no thought of a psalm” (103). “But think of the others,” she pleads, “many religious people” who could have recited a psalm, “or not even a whole psalm. Just one line” (104, 114). She remains intent on believing one person could have recited a psalm, although what she does know of the Holocaust influences her reading of the psalm, with particular poignancy when she notes that “The women, of course, were on another line / And this was not a psalm they would have known” (117–18). As the possibility of someone reciting a psalm diminishes, the verse she chooses, “*Just a little longer and*

there will be no wicked one; / Just a little longer . . . he'll be gone,” loses its triumph under the weight of those sent to die (119–20). The speaker’s understanding of herself is influenced by two metaphors: that Man is like God and that she is like other Jews. Her hypothetical situation confronts her with the possibility that the psalms she knows are not enough to maintain her understanding of God or herself. David wasn’t simply praising God; he was establishing identity, and the speaker has invoked his psalms for a similar purpose. If no one found comfort or reprieve in the psalms, how can she?

After Osherow’s midrashic exploration of the psalms and Jewish culture, her final psalm departs from both, maintaining just one psalm-like characteristic: praise. With *hallelujahs* ending every other line, “XIII (Space Psalm)” looks to the constant energy of space. She offers stars, planets, suns, moons, galaxies, nebulae, black holes, and comets in her song of praise, allowing her subjects to reign grandiose, accompanied only by the word she has already taught her reader is “a word composed of holy signs / that could actually spell God’s name / if they weren’t ordering the universe / to praise Him” (“XI (Dead Men’s Praise)” 51–54). Here she enacts the universe praising God, each astronomic body defying seeming chaos: “Let suns confound eclipses—hallelujah— / [. . .] / Let nebulae uncloud and celebrate” (3, 6). The majesty and power of space overwhelm, much like God, but, like God, she can identify them and, in this way, know them. The ultimate purpose of the psalms is praise and Osherow uses her final psalm to sing praise in a way that would have been impossible for David. At the end of her exaltations, she leaves her reader with a string of words that are not elements of space but of praise: “Anecdotes—songs—suspicions—prayers” (12). With this closing statement, Osherow expands the possibilities for what a psalm can be. The praise she finds evident

in the grandiose of the universe is also present in something as common as anecdotes, which also serves to remind the reader of the many anecdotes that have accompanied Osherow's previous psalms. Her songs are not limited to the songs of David, but include the song of Jacqueline and invite her readers to compose their own songs of praise. And while *suspicious* might suggest doubt, it also inversely denotes a "slight belief," the idea that God exists, or even that there is someone or something divine governing the universe the speaker has described and praised. The beginning of praise is belief, even a small one. Prayer is the result of this suspicion, the belief that someone will be listening.

These elements of praise open the praise of the psalms and the possibility of a more intimate understanding of God to the reader. The speaker suggests that praise is not a privileged act, but one that everyone can participate in and individualize as they tell their stories, raise their voices in song, whisper in prayer, and simply believe. Everything in Osherow's universe praises God, from the crocodile to the planets. In this she echoes David; however, in order to truly praise God and to understand the relationship between God and Man, scripture is not enough. The individual must take into account the history and culture that influence their perceptions of the sacred. How do we continue to praise after the Holocaust or any other tragedy of the twentieth century? Osherow's poetry argues that we can only come to understand God and ourselves through the synthesis of such events and belief. Synthesis is more than the collision; it is the questioning and reevaluating that allows us to grow closer to God in a way which personalizes him, permitting us to better know him and ourselves. In this way, Osherow has made the psalm both a relevant and viable vehicle for contemporary American poetry.

UNIQUELY SUITED TO PRAISE:

THE MATINS AND VESPERS OF LOUISE GLÜCK'S *THE WILD IRIS*

Louise Glück's collection *The Wild Iris* begins with an end: "At the end of my suffering / there was a door" (1–2). This first poem, the title poem, initiates the collection with death as the wild iris remembers "It is terrible to survive / as consciousness / buried in the dark earth" (8–10). Through the iris, Glück articulates the fear which drives the collection, the fear of "being / a soul and unable / to speak, ending abruptly" (11–13). *The Wild Iris* becomes an opportunity for speech, not just for the iris who returns to "speak again," but also for the human voice as Glück presents the traditional Judeo-Christian myth of the Garden, complete with the figures of God, human inhabitants, and the garden itself. I argue that she subverts the Biblical narrative, in which God and Man speak with each other, by voicing God, Man, and the Garden, not in conversation, but in monologues which go unacknowledged. God relates his disappointment, frustration, and love for his creations; the human speaker, a woman, both praises and accuses God; and the Garden—represented by flowers, weeds, and trees—says what neither God nor Man can say. As plants which "can't move / learn to see" ("The Hawthorn Tree" 4–5), the garden observes both God and Man, making arguments for the joy and pain of earthly existence, the reality and duality of the soul, and the necessity to speak. But just as God and Man cannot see what the Garden sees, they also do not hear the Garden. Despite the inability to converse, however, each continues to speak, following "The Wild Iris," who promises "whatever / returns from oblivion returns / to find a voice" (18–20).

Much has been written about Glück's audacity in voicing God and the garden, while little has been written about the human speaker who follows the Christian

canonical hours, “which mark the daily cycles of prayer” (Gregerson 133), with her seventeen poems titled “Matins” and “Vespers.” Helen Vendler argues that, based on these titles, “the book is really one long poem, framed as a sequence of liturgical rites” (17), thus making the sequencing of poems significant as the Matins appear in the first half, or morning, of the book and the Vespers appear in the latter half, or evening, of the book. Although I disagree with Vendler’s assessment of the collection as “one long poem,” the time constraints dictated by the titles of the poems do create a framework for what can be read as a chronological narrative. The speaker’s prayers form an important thread of thought in *The Wild Iris*, one in which her distinctly human presence serves to link heaven and earth as she speaks to her garden and to God. Her one-sided conversation forms her understanding of God, as she cannot hear him. As she takes on the role of the first woman, what has been commenced by the Garden mythology—prayer in the form of Matins and Vespers—creates the God of *The Wild Iris* through the voice of the human speaker, allowing the reader to at least glimpse “the hem of [his] garment” (“Vespers” 36).

The human speaker is often overshadowed by the more intriguing and daring project of voicing Nature, in the form of the garden, and God, even though, as Linda Gregerson observes, “God and the flowers speak with the voice of the human; the human writer has no other voice to give them” (134). These voices address but do not interact with one another in a series of dramatic monologues. Gregerson itemizes these voices and monologues as “three sorts: (1) those spoken by a human persona to God, or that which holds the place of God; (2) those spoken by the botanical inhabitants of the garden cultivated by the human persona; and (3) those spoken by divinity” (133). Most critics

agree on these three categories, although some argue that God does not speak or even appear in the text. Ann Keniston states, “The human speaker’s failure to find a metaphor or natural analogy for God testifies ultimately to God’s evasiveness: he continually frustrates her attempts to know and speak to him” (84). Keniston refigures the three voices as “a woman laboring in a garden addresses a divine other; [. . .] flowers address humans or God; [. . .] seasonal or natural entities address humans” (79). Keniston’s categorization is understandable, as the poetic voice attributed to God is attached to titles such as “Clear Morning,” “April,” and “Retreating Wind”; but while Keniston chooses to interpret morning or April or wind as being the speaker of the poems, Paul Breslin offers another interpretation, reading the seasonal and natural entities as manifestations of God’s voice, and perhaps his attempt to deliver his word to the human speaker (120). The first of these poems, “Clear Morning,” lends validity to Breslin’s reading, as the speaker (who I will refer to as God) explains,

I can speak to you any way I like—

I’ve submitted to your preferences, observing patiently
the things you love, speaking

through vehicles only, in

details of earth, as you prefer [. . .] (2–5)

While these lines show that God is able to speak through nature, it is important to note that this isn’t the only way he can speak, a point made more emphatically when we read the garden poems and realize that the “vehicles” have voices of their own. In truth,

Glück's God would prefer to use his own voice, but "you would never accept // a voice like mine" (9–10). He has waited for humans to mature past their fascination with details, but they have not, and in frustrated, terse couplets, God gives up:

I cannot go on
restricting myself to images

because you think it is your right
to dispute my meaning:

I am prepared now to force
clarity upon you. (21–26)

In the following poem, "Spring Snow," he follows through with his promise to "force / clarity upon" the humans with the directive "Look at the night sky" (1). He is prepared to force clarity and will continue to do so throughout the God-voiced poems, but he must do so in a way humans will understand—through their relationship with nature. They are not prepared to directly hear the voice of God, so God uses what they do understand—their environment. The human voice replies in the only way she knows how, using the Matins and Vespers, although she defies tradition with her conversational and at times irreverent tone. With God and Man unable to converse with—or at the very least, hear—the other, both struggle to understand the other. Taking into consideration Grossman's theory that in order for Man to know himself, he must have God as a means of comparison, the inverse is true—God comes to know himself through who Man is. In Glück's Garden, this means that both God and Man are unable to truly hear and understand themselves.

Matins: "I asked you to be human"

The first "Matins" (2) introduces the human speaker, an imperfect, depressed voice "passionately / attached to the living tree" (8–9). This intimate connection to nature, "identifying / with a tree" (14–15), presents itself as the metaphor the speaker prefers to God. This does, however, introduce us to the speaker's ability to imagine deity and prepares us for her many attempts to speak to him. It also sets up one of two human foils the speaker relies on occasionally in the narrative of *The Wild Iris*: Noah and John. In this "Matins," Noah criticizes her ability to relate with the tree, "says / depressives hate spring, imbalance / between the inner and outer world" (5–7). By admitting the presence of other humans, the human speaker is given more validity and emotional appeal than she would have alone in the garden. "The poet," argues Gregerson, "is clearly aware that her central device, the affective identification that characterizes so large a portion of nature poetry in English, has sometimes borne the stigma of 'fallacy,' so she incorporates a preemptive ironist" (133). The presence of Noah is not only necessary for the speaker, but for Glück, as she uses the report of his voice to offset the passion, depression, and imbalance of her speaker, offering an opinion to steady and balance the effect of the poem. Noah's harsh take on his mother's relationship to spring creates sympathy for the speaker, making her prayers more palatable.

"Matins" (2) does not directly address God, but it still functions as a prayer. By giving each human monologue the title of "Matins" or "Vespers," Glück implies that every human action is not necessarily in praise of God, but is connected to God. The speaker is aware that the garden she inhabits and marvels at and tends to is not hers; at the same time, she wants the garden to recognize her as she recognizes God—and for

God to recognize her. She strives to mimic her creator, perhaps a more sincere praise than her prayers. Noah tells her that her desire to be “curled in the split trunk” of a birch tree is “an error of depressives, identifying / with a tree, whereas the happy heart / wanders the garden like a falling leaf, a figure for / the part, not the whole” (10, 13–16). She is unable to become the whole, and according to her son, her wish to join with the garden is an error, a sign of her unbalanced take on the world and her place in it. Her next prayer, “Matins” (3), addresses her inability to fill the role of God, and in doing so, begins to define God’s role from her perspective. She hails him as “Unreachable father,” which can be read as both praise and chastisement (1). She acknowledges his role, his superiority; but he is also an inaccessible, absent father and she feels his absence—although, she brashly states, occupied with her own life and own role as gardener, “We never thought of you / whom we were learning to worship” (15–16). When she does think of God, she is unable to recognize him, something she feels necessary to enhance her relationship with him because “I cannot love / what I can’t conceive, and you disclose / virtually nothing” (“Matins” (12), 3–5). The speaker creates a catalogue of possible metaphors for God (hawthorn tree, foxglove, rose, daisy) in her attempt to know God, but there is an underlying futility and frustration that ultimately ends in silence.

Rather than consider herself as a possible way to know God, the speaker attempts one more metaphor in “Matins” (13). Only birches are added to the list of plants that are possibly analogous to God, but those birches tell her something about God: “I see it is with you as with the birches: / I am not to speak to you / in the personal way” (“Matins” (13), 1–3). The speaker determines that she has demanded something impossible of God—to be like her when he is inconceivable. “I am / at fault, at fault,” she admits. “I

asked you / to be human” (6–8). In the absence of a human response, “of all feeling, of the least / concern for me” (10–11), the speaker returns to the birches and her “former life” (13). According to Keniston,

“Matins” (13) chronicles several connected losses: the speaker acknowledges the inaccuracy of her former belief in the possibility of “personal” speech; she relinquishes apostrophe; and she gives up agency by submitting to a burial beneath the birch leaves. Perhaps most centrally, the notion of forward movement is undermined: the speaker has no choice but to return to the “former life” the poem implies she once believed she had outgrown. (91)

The absence of God impedes the speaker’s emotional maturation, returning her to the personification of the birch trees and a Romantic tradition which can only bury her—“in the end death is what links the autumnally yellow birches, long-dead Romantics, and the speaker” (Keniston 91). The speaker is resigned to a fate without God, which must ultimately lead to death, despite sensing there is something greater just beyond her understanding.

The progression of the speaker’s “Matins” advances toward an understanding of God. While the first “Matins” (2) fails to acknowledge God, “Matins” (3) explains why: God and the lessons he wanted to teach were unknown. “Matins” (12) attempts a catalogue of the different possibilities of God, although Keniston points out the catalogue “marks not what God is but what he exceeds or resists” (84). The midway point of the “Matins,” “Matins” (13), provides the reader with an understanding of why the speaker needs God. Keniston argues that the speaker is forced to return to her former life of

addressing nature rather than God, it is also possible that the speaker simply threatens to return to that life. She is confident that God desires her praise and she taunts him with the loss of that praise. In the final three “Matins,” however, we witness her taking more formal steps to praise him, rather than retreating into what she perceives as the safety of addressing nature.

In “Matins” (25), the speaker takes a new approach to God: “on my knees” (4). This is a submissive position; it is also the position of work in the garden, but the speaker is “never weeding” (4).

I’m looking for courage, for some evidence
 my life will change, though
 it takes forever, checking
 each clump [of clover] for the symbolic
 leaf, [. . .]

 [. . .] was the point always
 to continue without a sign? (4–10, 16–17)

Although in the traditional position for prayer, the speaker is actually looking for a four-leaf clover, for luck, for courage, for some manifestation of God. But after searching persistently for God, she is beginning to learn that God doesn’t send signs, at least not the signs she thinks to look for, and she accepts him in his absence. Instead of second guessing God, she second guesses herself and her understanding of signs. She directly addresses God, again as the Father of “Matins” (3), although this time capitalized out of reverence and deference: “Father / as agent of my solitude, alleviate / at least my guilt”

(16–18). This prayer reveals the beginning of the speaker’s comprehension of the nature of God and how he complements her own nature—not her mythologized construct of what God expects her to be. She has abandoned metaphor and speaks directly, thus attempting to approach God as God, instead of God as tree or rose or any other thing. But even this direct address is hesitant, as she slows down her prayer with a string of the conjunction “or,” which signifies the speaker handing her fate to God as she admits his will in her life. This understanding with God is what leads to the subliminal moment of the final “Matins” (31). The sight of the sun and earth shining, “white fire / leaping from the showy mountains / and the flat road / shimmering in early morning” (2–5), prompts the speaker to exclaim

[. . .] I am ashamed
 at what I thought you were,
 distant from us, regarding us
 as an experiment [. . .]

 [. . .] Dear friend,
 dear trembling partner, what
 surprises you most in what you feel,
 earth’s radiance or your own delight?
 For me, always
 the delight is the surprise. (10–13, 16–21)

Gregerson describes *The Wild Iris* by saying, “The poet plants herself in a garden and dares the Creator to join her” (132). In this “Matins” we see the invitation as the speaker

addresses God as “dear friend” and invites him to enjoy his work with her. Pretence has momentarily been abandoned. Now we find only God’s creation and awe at God’s creation.

Heaven and Earth: The Doorway

The awe of God’s creation in the final “Matins” carries into the poem “Heaven and Earth.” Although it is not prayer, “Heaven and Earth” serves as a pivotal point, both chronologically and in the speaker’s relationship with God. Breslin points out,

The Wild Iris gains [. . .] coherence by following the progression of time, from the earliest spring to the deaths of the last flowers in autumn, just as the prayers shift, after the pivotal arrival of “Midsummer”—first mentioned in “Heaven and Earth” situated on page 32, at the exact middle of the 63-page sequence—from “Matins” to “Vespers.” (118)

Stepping outside the realm of prayer, “Heaven and Earth” gives the speaker opportunity to evaluate her relationship with and understanding of God. No longer directly addressing him, she is free to consider how her prayers have developed through the morning. She observes a physical phenomenon similar to the scene that invoked the final “Matins” (31), but observes it from a distance, through the eyes of her husband standing on the horizon:

Where one finishes, the other begins.
On top, a band of blue; underneath,
a band of green and gold, green and deep rose.
John stands at the horizon: he wants
both at once, he wants

everything at once. (1–6)

She distances herself from her prayers and God as she watches her husband, directing her attention to seeing the landscape through his eyes. Her empathy with John relieves the tension she feels between God and her. But despite her empathy and resulting similarities with John, she senses that John is distinct from her as he desires what he sees, a privilege reserved for God. Where the speaker wants God to acknowledge her, John wants to be God, in some form, and because of his desire, she is separated from John just as she is separated from God. She reflects in the poem “The Doorway”: “I wanted to stay as I was” (1). In a collection that is about the progress of the human spirit, the progression of the seasons, the growth of a garden, the moment of change comes in stillness, “still as the world is never still” (2). “The title of ‘The Doorway’ recalls the iris’s opening declaration that ‘a door’ waits at the end of it suffering in the earth,” notes Breslin. “In this poem, the speaker wishes to linger at the threshold. [. . .] Despite the midsummer illusion that ‘never again will life end,’ to move from nascency to being is to take the first step towards death” (124). Birth and death, heaven and earth: “the extremes are easy. Only / the middle is a puzzle,” a puzzle that the speaker must figure out without God. She is in the space between birth and death, as well as heaven and earth. Frank Bidart refers to this as “*stationing* the self, the soul, vertically in relation to worlds above or below it, to its past or impending future” (24). The speaker has left the doorway, and with this poem, leaves the midway point of her journey, having made the decision to continue forward, as the progression into the evening prayers, or “Vespers,” suggests.

Vespers: "Conscious in my need of you"

The speaker of the morning prayers continues in her communication with God, but with practice and time to consider what she has learned about prayer, she has become more confident, more frequent, and less formal in her address. Themes from the earlier "Matins" carry over, including praise, blame, awe, and abandonment, but she voices these themes understanding what extreme she is moving toward. She is no longer moving on blind faith.

The evening prayers begin with a test. The speaker claims, "Once I believed in you; I planted a fig tree. / [. . .] / [. . .] It was a test: if the tree lived, / it would mean you existed. // By this logic, you do not exist" ("Vespers" (36) 1, 3–5). Gregerson considers this episode to be clever blackmail: "When the fig tree predictably dies, the dare modulates to witty demotion. Are you not here Father? Perhaps you are somewhere else? [. . .] To propose that God might 'exist exclusively in warmer climates' is to bait a withholding deity: it goes without saying that God can be no God unless he is everywhere at once" (142). While the tone of this poem does begin taunting and petulant, it limits possible interpretation to simply label the incident blackmail. The speaker was looking for a miracle that she knew couldn't happen. She has experienced a miracle; she has been shown manifestations of God. Perhaps it is not so much a baiting of God as it is making sure he is still paying attention, as well as a self-imposed test of her faith. She knew the fig tree would die and "by this logic, you do not exist," and yet she continues to address God. The belief established in the morning is not gone by the evening; it is just being tested in new ways.

The second “Vespers” also challenges God’s omnipotence through the plants the speaker has been given to tend. “I must report / failure in my assignment, principally / regarding the tomato plants,” she tells God in a businesslike fashion (“Vespers” (37) 3–5). But in her mind the failure is not her fault; it is his for asking her to complete an impossible task:

[. . .] you should withhold
 the heavy rains, the cold nights that come
 so often here, while other regions get
 twelve weeks of summer. All this
 belongs to you (8–11)

After all this, however, she is just as quick to reclaim the blame and shoulder the responsibility of the plants. She details their birth, life, and death, emotionally stating,

it was my heart
 broken by the blight, the black spot so quickly
 multiplying in the rows. I doubt
 you have a heart, in our understanding of
 that term. (13–17)

This questioning of heart, of feeling, of understanding reveals the speaker’s aim in this exchange: she wants to show God the role she expects him to perform in her life. She has nurtured and watched and wept over the tomato plants and she wants someone to do the same for her. Her argument extends into the next “Vespers” (38) as she lists the services God has performed and the blessings God has given “the beasts of the field, even, / possibly, the field itself” (2–3). The speaker sees beauty and protection and affection for

“flowers, their range of feeling / so much smaller and without issue” compared to her own (6–7). “I am uniquely suited to praise you,” she claims. “Then why / torment me?” (8–10). Building off of the previous two “Vespers,” as well as the “Matins,” the speaker has learned to not only study the situation, but to question God’s handling of her life and in those questions she finds reasons for God’s distance:

[. . .] is pain
 your gift to make me
 conscious in my need of you, as though
 I must need you to worship you . (12–15)

There is some satisfaction in the conclusion that God requires more than the mere acknowledgement of him—he demands the worshipper be conscious of their needing him—but he demands this only of the speaker. God protects the daffodils by making them poisonous and allows the lambs to be ignorant of him. In her pain, she draws another conclusion—that God has abandoned her, in favor of the field which already reflects his raiment.

In the next three “Vespers,” the speaker continues to identify God everywhere—in her husband, illusions, memories—except within herself. “I don’t wonder where you are anymore,” she claims,

You’re in the garden; you’re where John is,
 in the dirt, abstracted, holding his green trowel.
 This is how he gardens: fifteen minutes of intense effort,
 fifteen minutes of ecstatic contemplation. (“Vespers” (42) 1–5)

Although she feels neglected by God, she recognizes him in the pattern of meditation and then work, contemplation and then effort. She learns it, and attempts to mimic it—
 “Sometimes / I work beside him [. . . / . . .] sometimes I watch / from the porch” (5–8)—
 but she is unable to hold onto the “peace [that] never leaves him” (10). “It rushes through
 me, / not as sustenance the flower holds / but like bright light through the bare tree”
 (8–10). Her conclusion is rather disheartening, and yet it lacks the bitterness of earlier
 prayers. Her sorrowful tone conveys an earnest desire to learn what John knows. In
 seeing how John has found God, the speaker takes heart, hoping that God has not
 completely abandoned her.

Once she recognizes God in or with John, the speaker can also recognize that God
 appears to her in “Vespers” (43). “Not / often, however. I live essentially / in darkness.
 You are perhaps training me to be / responsive to the slightest brightening”
 (2–5). With such an observation, the reader expects to be shown God in the details.
 Instead, the speaker climbs “the small hill above the wild blueberries, metaphysically /
 descending, as on all my walks [. . . / . . .] / As you anticipated, / I did not look up” (10–
 11, 14–15). But God still appears:

[. . .] So you came down to me:
 at my feet, not the wax
 leaves of the wild blueberry, but your fiery self, a whole
 pasture of fire, and beyond, the red sun neither falling
 nor rising—

I was not a child; I could take advantage of illusion. (15–20)

This moment of light, of God seemingly catering to the speaker's needs, is triumphant—Gregerson reads it as the “final resolution” for the speaker (145). But stopping at this poem and using it as a lens through which to view the entire book creates a sort of tunnel vision, a progression of poems that ultimately achieves a manifestation of God which in turn devalues the doubt so important to earlier prayers. It also leaves out “Vespers” (44), in which the speaker returns to the original Garden, takes on the original female persona of Eve. This poem moves past the illusions and allusions of the other prayer-poems. It is rooted directly in a memory of creation, a recollection of “small things, flowers / growing under the hawthorn tree, bells / of the wild scilla. Not all, but enough / to know you exist” (12–15). Despite being the memory which confirms God's existence, this recollection distances the God of the garden. “Don't turn away now,” the speaker tells him twice (2, 8). But perhaps God is right to withdraw, as this memory proposes a new theory of God's nature, one where she can again hold God accountable for her solitude and sorrows, for “who else had reason to create / mistrust between a brother and sister but the one / who profited, to whom we turned in solitude?” (15–17).

The speaker continues with this argument—that God needs her worship and companionship for his own satisfaction—in the final set of “Vespers.” At the same time, this argument is reversed as the speaker loses her companion and in the process of mourning him, deifies him, redirecting her attention and prayers from God to her companion. When we read “Love of my life, you / are lost and I am / young again” in “Vespers: Parousia” (1–3) it obliges us to reconsider the previous “Vespers” (52), the first in this last series:

I know what you planned, what you meant to do, teaching me

to love the world, making it impossible
 to turn away completely, to shut it out completely
 ever again—
 it is everywhere; when I close my eyes,
 birdsong, scent of lilac in early spring, scent of summer roses:
 you mean to take it away, each flower, each connection
 with earth—
 why would you wound me, why would you want me
 desolate in the end, unless you wanted me so starved for hope
 I would refuse to see that finally
 nothing was left to me, and would believe instead
 in the end you were left to me. (“Vespers” 52)

The loss of companion and exemplar forces the speaker to not only know and redefine God, but also know and redefine herself through that loss. It prompts her to speak: “I try to win you back, / that is the point / of the writing” (“Vespers: Parousia” 10–12).

Parousia is “the appearance of Christ in glory at the end of time; the Second Coming,” or an event comparable to the Second Coming (OED). That a poem about loss carries this word in the title implies that the “you” is not completely lost, although the speaker’s description does not allow for glory:

What a nothing you were,
 to be changed so quickly
 into an image, an odor—

you are everywhere, source
of wisdom and anguish. (24–28)

The “you” can be read as both her lost husband and God. The paradox she introduces, of being “nothing” and thus easily changed and spread everywhere, is the sign she has requested from the beginning, for God to make himself manifest in the earth. Her hands are no longer empty—even the air witnesses his presence, but it comes too late. She has seen his grandeur and felt the physicality of her husband, both momentary manifestations. She will not be consoled.

“Vespers” (55) documents the silence, the near absence of God, that haunts her mourning.

In what contempt do you hold us
to believe only loss can impress
your power on us,
the first rains of autumn shaking the white lilies—

When you go, you go absolutely,
deducting visible life from all things

but not all life,
lest we turn from you. (11–18)

The speaker struggles here to ignore God, to witness his removal from the world, but even his removal is a presence, the necessary absence for the speaker to feel a keen awareness of, now even more keen with the loss of her husband, which becomes a

symbol for the departure of God. She expresses her bitterness and sorrow as she feels the manipulation of her loss—he leaves so that she will continue to know him.

The final “Vespers” (56) addresses loss in terms of the departure of self as the speaker watches “clusters of tomatoes, stands / of late lilies” begin growing at the end of August (5–6). Inundated by the anticipation of death and loss, the speaker demands “why / start anything / so close to the end?” (8–10). The speaker wants life to continue and is frustrated by a God who allows life to begin when it will end so quickly it won’t even fulfill its purpose. Following the “Vespers” concerned with her husband’s death, she naturally considers her own life and justifies her stagnant state. If John just died, her death will follow soon enough, so why begin anything now? She defends her stance, giving voice to what she assumes are God’s thoughts: “are you thinking / I spend too much time looking ahead” (14–16). Her defensiveness eventually softens as she recognizes the beauty of life at these late stages, and she wonders:

are you saying I can
flourish, having
no hope
of enduring? Blaze of the red cheek, glory
of the open throat, white,
spotted with crimson. (19–24)

For the first time, the speaker sees the potential of God’s beauty in herself—the sublime moments in nature that she stood in awe of were at the end of the day; her life, despite coming to a close, can also end in “blaze” and “glory.”

The Wild Iris begins and begins to end with death; I say “begins to end,” because while this is the last “Vespers” (56) and human-voiced poem, there are six poems left. Three are voiced by Glück’s God—“Sunset,” “Lullaby,” and “September Twilight”—while the other three are voiced by flowers—“The Silver Lily,” “The Gold Lily,” and “The White Lilies.” God begins the end of day and season, preparing his creation to “love / silence and darkness” (“Lullaby” 14–15). The lilies sense this end. “The Silver Lily” mourns the world it leaves, while “The Gold Lily” challenges God, knowing that these words will be its last. “The White Lilies” are voiced as two lovers, a conversation Vendler describes “as one calm[ing] the fear of the other with the old paradox that temporal burial is the avenue to imaginative eternity” (21–22). This is the last poem of *The Wild Iris*, and the final stanza opens itself to several readings which in turn offer new ways to read the full narrative.

Hush, beloved. It doesn’t matter to me
 how many summers I live to return:
 this one summer we have entered eternity.
 I felt your two hands
 bury me to release its splendor. (“The White Lilies” 13–17)

While Vendler reads the exchange as the white lilies promising eternity, others read it as the unification of *The Wild Iris*’s many voices. And while there are those who, like Keniston, view it as the end of a linear narrative, I propose that it is a continuation of a cycle. Although the white lily will only live one summer, it is the result of the same burial and emerging that characterized the wild iris in the first poem. Like the procession of Matins at sunrise to Vespers at sunset, the speaker, the garden, and even God have

progressed in their understanding of their relation to each other. Where Osherow required a vigilant attention to tradition and scripture in order to fully understand God and man, Glück allows a departure that will leave each one independent but aware of the other.

“THE WORD MADE FLESH”: MORRI CREECH’S “THE TESTAMENT OF JUDAS”

Where Jacqueline Osherow imitates psalms in order to evolve her own psalmic narrative and Louise Glück uses the Biblical garden to create a space for God and Man to speak, Morri Creech directly accesses Biblical narratives in his 2001 collection *Paper Cathedrals*, re-creating and reinterpreting scriptural accounts. For example, he presents Christ’s forty days fasting in the wilderness as a triptych of “Christ’s Sermon to God from the Wilderness” and the return of Lazarus becomes the story of a man who turns his back on heaven for “the kingdom of desires” (24). Li-Young Lee’s forward describes the speaker of *Paper Cathedrals* as “an anonymous and manifold self speaking from its encounter with the beauty and terror that accompanies the numinous” (x); this “manifold self” insists upon its own omniscience, which is absolutely necessary as it has to contend with the traditionally omniscient narration of scripture in order to be a believable interpretation. This believability in Creech’s interpretation becomes essential when the speaker is no longer manifold and omniscient, but Judas Iscariot in the collection’s central twelve-poem suite “The Testament of Judas.” As he recounts the familiar narrative of Jesus Christ’s ministry, but from the perspective the disciple who betrays Christ in Gethsemane, Creech’s Judas presents a narrative that argues the necessity of knowing the humanity of Christ, as well as the traditional divinity. In order for this argument to succeed, the reader must be willing to listen to Judas, as Creech’s narrative challenges both scriptural and other interpretations of Judas Iscariot.

The story of Judas originated in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the New Testament. There Judas is always referred to in his role as betrayer, even before the act of betrayal. Matthew and Mark both suggest Judas betrayed Christ for money

(Matt. 26:14–16; Mark 14:10–11), while Luke states that Satan entered into Judas (Luke 22:3), thereby causing the betrayal. In each book, Jesus says that one will betray him. In Matthew, Judas asks if he is the one and Jesus answers that he is; however, John is the only Gospel in which Jesus addresses Judas directly, saying to him, “That thou doest, do quickly” (John 13:27). After the betrayal, Matthew records that Judas returned the money and hanged himself (Matthew 27:3–5); the account in Acts states Judas purchased a field and there he “burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1:18).

The limited and conflicting accounts of Judas in the New Testament create an ambiguity which Kim Paffenroth suggests “invited or even demanded . . . later elaborations” (1). The earliest elaborations include those by the Gnostics¹ who “revered Judas as the disciple who saw Jesus as he truly was and who acted to help Jesus by hurrying him on his way back to God” (Paffenroth xiii). Eleventh century archbishop Theophylactus proposes that “Judas, being covetous, supposed that he could both make money by betraying Christ, and yet Christ not be killed, but escape from the Jews as he often did escape” (trans. J.R. Harris, qtd. in Paffenroth 120). In this version, Judas attempts to hang himself to meet Jesus in death, but is prevented by God’s will “to reserve him for repentance or for open disgrace and shame.” A 1391 sermon by Vinzenz Ferrer elaborates on this ending, resolving ambiguities by stating that Judas wanted to repent, but could not reach Jesus in the crowd: “Since I cannot get to the feet of the master, I will approach him in my spirit at least and humbly ask him for forgiveness”

¹ The Gnostic Gospel of Judas was discovered as part of the Codex Tchacos in the 1970s in Middle Egypt. Scholars believe it was originally “composed in Greek, probably around the middle of the second century” (Meyer 11). In it Judas Iscariot “is presented as a thoroughly positive figure . . . , a role model for all those who wish to be disciples of Jesus” (Meyer 9). While this gospel does include several characteristics also found in Creech’s work and other twentieth and twenty-first century literature, its narrative should not be read as the model for these texts, as it was not published until 2006.

(trans. Klassen, qtd. in Paffenroth 121). Judas' suicide is successful, and he receives forgiveness in heaven and "enjoys salvation with all elect."

Judas' story is not always one of repentance. In the tenth-century *Voyage of St. Brendan*, Brendan encounters Judas "sitting on a rock in the middle of the sea, quite comfortable" (Paffenroth 125). Judas explains to Brendan that he has met him on his day of rest, Sunday. The rock, along with two hooks and a piece of cloth which provide him protection from the wind, represents the few good deeds Judas did in life. The other days of the week, Judas is punished by violent winds on Monday and his body being dragged, boiled, roasted, and frozen the rest of the week. Matthew Arnold and Rudyard Kipling retell the story of Judas' day of rest, although both have him sitting on an iceberg rather than a rock.

Contemporary narratives have continued to elaborate and speculate on the role of Judas. Two of the most significant in literature are Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Three Versions of Judas" and James Wright's poem "Saint Judas." The protagonist of Borges' story, Nils Runeberg, believes the nature of Judas is "one of the central mysteries of theology" (96). Following the lead of Thomas DeQuincey, a British Romantic essayist and critic, who theorized that "Not one, but all of the things attributed to Judas Iscariot are false" (qtd. in Borges 96), Runeberg argues that Judas' betrayal was not necessary and therefore not accidental: "it was a preordained fact which has its mysterious place in the economy of redemption" (96). Runeberg reasons that when Christ as the Word was made flesh, he sacrificed his eternal nature to enter an earthly state; therefore it was necessary for Judas to mirror that sacrifice by descending to a plain lower than earth—Hell. Judas did this because he was the only disciple who understood the true nature of

Christ's divinity. This is the first of Runeberg's three versions of Judas. When this version is challenged by theologians, Runeberg revises his concept of Judas: Judas "thought that happiness, like morality, is a divine attribute and should not be usurped by humans" (98); Judas therefore betrays Jesus in order to attain Hell and renounce the happiness that has been promised to him as one of the chosen disciples. Runeberg's final version of Judas is guided by Isaiah — ". . . there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men." Runeberg argues that when God descended to become man, he "chose the vilest destiny of all: He was Judas" (99). His theories rejected again by theologians and haunted by the belief that he had exposed God's secret before its time, Runeberg wanders the streets "begging at the top of his voice that he be granted the grace to join his Redeemer in Hell" (100). Through his fictional philosopher, Borges sets forth the most controversial concept of Judas, collapsing Judas and Jesus into the same being. Borges requires his reader to reconsider the traditional personae of Judas and Jesus, questioning what form God would take on earth, and how he could truly descend below all things to accomplish his mission. Creech takes a similar revisionist approach to Judas' narrative, creating a new identity for the disciple and a new argument for his actions.

The speaker of James Wright's sonnet "Saint Judas" is not an anonymous narrator, but Judas himself, after he has betrayed Christ. Wright's poem begins with Judas walking out to the field where he will kill himself, and encountering "a pack of hoodlums beating up a man" (2). In his haste to protect the man, Judas forgets what has happened that day. It isn't until he is holding the man in his arms that Judas remembers "How soldiers milled around the garden stone / And sang amusing songs; how all that

day / Their javelins measured crowds; how I alone / Bargained the proper coins, and slipped away” (5–8). Judas focuses outside of himself, on the soldiers and on the beaten man, in order to avoid the truth of what he has done. He knows that it was more than simply betraying Christ, that by doing so he has sacrificed his own salvation. Where Borges’ versions of Judas fulfill religious purposes, Wright’s Judas doesn’t realize what his betrayal was until he realizes that holding this man, saving this man, doesn’t mean anything. Judas has given up heaven.

Like Wright’s sonnet, Creech’s Judas narrates his own history; but while Wright’s Judas tells what happened after the garden, Creech’s Judas clarifies his role in the events leading up to Gethsemane. The first eleven poems are written in past tense, as Judas recites his relationship with Jesus and insists on a personal love and understanding of Jesus that none of the other disciples had, an attitude shared by both Gnostic and contemporary Judases. Where other versions of Judas theorize that he wanted to force Jesus to political action or to reveal his divinity, Creech’s Judas is concerned with preserving Jesus’ humanity, out of love for the person who Jesus is. This love leads Jesus to betray Judas, in an attempt to free the human Jesus from the God which Judas believes has begun to dominate and manipulate Jesus, forcing him into the role of Christ. The title of the opening poem, “The Word Made Flesh,” becomes the thesis of Judas’s argument as he compares the expectations of the other disciples for “fire-washed multitudes,” “flash / from the heavens,” and “chorus of hosannas” with what he saw: “only Jesus, in love with the world / even as he renounced it, swaying / like a storm-shaken reed” (2, 6–7, 8–10). When Jesus asks Judas to follow him, promising “the abundance of paradise,” Judas is persuaded—not by paradise, but by his love for a man he knows is

“dust / torn from the light, imperfect and radiant” (16–17). As Judas’s story progresses, he watches Jesus become seduced by his divine nature and purpose, yet Judas continues to insist on Jesus’ humanity. Through Judas’s perspective, Creech inverts the “Man is like God” metaphor, suggesting that not only is “God like Man,” but that “God is Man.” Grossman argues that when anything less than God is equated with God (e.g., “‘Imagination is God,’ or ‘Community is God’”), “the distinctness of the human image is eroded” (250). According to Grossman’s reasoning, when Creech’s Judas equates God to Man, both divinity and humanity disappear. Throughout the course of his twelve poems, which proceed chronologically, Judas argues that humanity and divinity cannot manifest in the same being—one will destroy the other. As he witnesses the divinity in Jesus taking over the human body, he knows he must save Jesus, declaring, “*Lord, I shall winnow / the God from the bright chaff of your body, / shall cast Him, cast Him out!*” (“At Jerusalem” 18–20). The final poem, a coda voiced by an anonymous omniscient speaker, however, establishes that to achieve salvation requires both the human and the divine, each complementing the other—something neither Judas nor Jesus seem to understand. Judas’ testament is more than a final declaration of his conviction of Jesus’ humanity and should not be confused with a final confession; “The Testament of Judas” is a record of his relationship and covenant with Jesus, while making an argument for the importance of the human, mortal experience.

While “The Word Made Flesh,” as already discussed, serves to introduce Judas and his understanding of Jesus’ humanity, the second poem, “Rites of Servitude,” establishes that Judas does recognize Jesus’ divinity. Judas struggles against a “wide current” (5), ready to give Jesus his body in baptism, accepting the position Jesus states

“my Father has called you to” (8). In recalling this experience, Judas questions the nature of grace, if it is merely an illusion or something more substantial. His answer comes at the end of the poem:

I closed my eyes, and for a moment the river
 slowed, grew still: and at once I felt
 the emptiness my body made as I was raised up,
 and he lifted me into his arms, and I believed—

I tell you: all I have felt of grace
 is that brief moment he held me there, then let me go. (15–20)

Judas completes the baptismal ordinance with the other disciples and in it senses the divine nature of the moment—the only moment he will ever experience—but rather than looking at it as the other disciples do, as an act of divine devotion, he considers it simply a rite of servitude. In this act of acknowledging and accepting God’s presence, Judas has bound himself to God. And it is not in the spirit of the moment that he finds God; it is in the moment of being physically supported by Jesus. The servitude he feels, however, is not limited to himself—there are “rites of servitude” that day, as expressed in the poem’s title. In addition to his own baptism, Judas watches Jesus perform at least eleven other baptisms. He is not concerned for his fellow disciples, but for Jesus as he accepts his role in God’s plan, thereby binding him to a course which he believes neither of them understands. When Jesus raises Judas from the water, Judas feels “the emptiness my body made as I was raised up, / and he lifted me into his arms, and I believed” (17–18). In that moment, Jesus removes Judas from the world, an experience he equates with the spirit

that is beginning to overwhelm Jesus. Judas loves the world and the physical and feels threatened by the intangibility of the spirit.

Judas's only concern for the godlike in Jesus is how it affects the physical, human Jesus. This concern takes on two forms: his attention to the physical details of Jesus, frequently dwelling on them to describe who his Jesus was, and his interpretation of Jesus' teachings as being more human than divine. The attention to physical attributes is consistent throughout the twelve poems of "The Testament of Judas," but it is heightened in "The Long Journey" as Judas and Jesus find a place to sleep under almond trees. Judas wakes to Jesus "trembling" in the cold (5). Acutely aware of Jesus' human condition, Judas offers him blanket and wheat, which are both refused because "*my Father has given me up to cold and hunger*" (11). In this situation, Judas pities and loves Jesus, emotions which are intensified by both men in their comments—Jesus singling Judas out among the disciples by saying "*more than the others, you should know*" and Judas simply remembering "I knew / he loved me" (10, 12–13)—and in their actions, with Judas holding Jesus "against the cold" (15). Despite their intimacy, however, there is the suggestion that it can't last as they huddle under the deciduous almond trees which are being "stripped [. . .] clean" by the wind (16). Reflecting back on the moment, Judas asks "How could I have known then that God / was ripening inside him?" (8–9). Judas is convinced by Jesus' attention to the physical world and his friendship with Judas that the God in Jesus is separate from the man Judas kept warm during the night. Following the baptismal rites, this poem suggests hindsight on Judas' part, as he tries to account for when God first appeared in Jesus, and tries to know when he could have first helped his friend. He knows now, he says, that "nothing is more terrible / than the love of God" (13–

14). His memories collapse under the weight of this assertion, as almost every action of Jesus is, in Judas' eyes, overwhelmed by the God inside him. Without the man, God cannot be defined, and Judas sees Jesus' divinity as threatening the very essence of who Jesus is, and because of this, every one of Jesus' acts and teachings must be read as a struggle, a competition between the man and the god.

This does not stop Judas from looking for the humanity in Jesus; in fact, it has the opposite effect as he not only insists on Jesus' humanity, he also interprets Jesus' teachings as revolving around the mortal experience. When Jesus tells Judas "A Parable," Judas understands it on his own terms. The parable Judas recalls echoes the parable of the wheat and the tares found in Matthew 13. In Matthew 13, tares are sown in a wheat field. When both tares and wheat begin to grow, servants of the man who own the field want to gather the tares, but are stopped by the owner of the field: "Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn" (Matt. 13:30). The field represents "the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 13:24), the wheat the righteous, and the tares the unrighteous. When the time comes, the righteous will be gathered and the unrighteous destroyed. In Judas' parable, Jesus tells him, "In the windswept fields of the spirit / the sun shines equally / upon ripe grain and thistle" (1-3). Using similar terms to the parable of the wheat and the tares, the image becomes one of both the righteous and the unrighteous existing within the spirit of God and being attended to by God—and consequently Jesus. Judas expands the parable to include the context in which Jesus told him the parable: they were crossing a field where "mustard grew wild" (6). The mustard seed is a symbol of both faith and the kingdom of heaven,

and doves, a symbol for the spirit, “gathered in its [the mustard tree’s] branches, / then swept the ground / to rend the bright husks of wheat” (8–10). The spirit, in the form of doves, becomes violent, rending the wheat—not separating the good from the bad, but affecting the entire field, all of humankind. With this interpretation in mind, the subsequent exchange between Jesus and Judas becomes all the more poignant:

he said, *Judas, one day my Father
shall consume these fields
until nothing remains but His kingdom.*

.....

[. . .] And when I asked him,
*Lord, is our faith the seed
that shall overtake the garden?*

he didn’t answer me, but took my hand [. . .] (17–19, 21–24)

The fields in question are not the kingdom of Heaven, but the kingdom of man: humankind. Judas believes that God will one day destroy man in favor of “His kingdom,” just as God is consuming the man in Jesus. God is a destructive, threatening force in this parable, one that Judas hopes can be countered by “our faith.” Although he doesn’t specify what his faith is in, his clear connection to Jesus suggests that while Judas doesn’t have faith in God, he does have faith in Jesus, a faith that is confirmed when Jesus takes his hand, leading him as a child. Judas has taken what Jesus “told me once” (4) and re-created the context, expanding the parable to one that shows the destruction of God and his spirit, while still affirming his devotion to Christ.

Judas sees God as consuming Jesus, and so Jesus' first miracle—turning water to wine at a wedding in Cana—infuriates Judas. After the intimate humanity of their friendship, Judas feels betrayed and struggles to forgive Jesus for succumbing to the temptation of God. Judas again refers to hindsight, demanding “How could he do it: allowing us to love him, / in the absence of knowledge, / as if he were an ordinary savior?” (2–4). The presence of the divine in Jesus separates him from the wedding party, from humanity, and consequently from the humanity in himself. When Jesus' mother asks him to perform the miracle, the simple act of raising his hand over the water further distances him as the other disciples worship. What Judas sees them worshipping, however, is not their Lord, but the act, as “Peter and the others filled their cups” with the wine (16). Judas demands, “Were we called for this, to love miracles?” (14). He is watching the man he loves be ignored for the God within him. This moment becomes the catalyst that propels Judas on his mission to save Jesus: “And I knew the price of believing / when I lifted the cup, trembling, to my lips” (20–21). In choosing to save Jesus, Judas foreshadows the event of Jesus taking the cup which holds the sins of the world. This is the first suggestion that Judas sees himself as more than a friend to Jesus—he sees himself as a savior, willing to take on the divine role, which he believes is intrusive, in order to spare Jesus the pain of being God.

When in “After Lazarus,” Jesus performs the greater miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead, Judas is not only angered by the foolishness the other disciples display, “praising his name / as if, for the first time, God appeared before them” (5–6); he is terrified as he sees in Lazarus what his Lord will become after he has risen from the dead: “His eyes seemed dazed and harrowed in the light. / Flecks of sand peppered his beard. /

How could I eat the bread those hands had broken?” (18–20). Lazarus has been deprived of his humanity, the very thing Judas seeks to preserve in Jesus. Here it is not the spirit that threatens, but the result of the spirit: “Already his face was radiant // with dying,” Judas observes (8–9), desperate to establish that the God in Jesus is a fever seething “in his flesh” (8).

Judas contrasts Jesus’ body consumed by the spirit in these poems to the one moment in Jesus’ ministry Judas believes is truly miraculous, when “the God inside him bent to his human will” (“In the House of the Lord” 14). Jesus finds money changers have overrun the temple at Jerusalem. Enraged, he cleanses the temple: “I watched as he fell upon them, / lashing his strap across the bare flesh / of men and animals scattering before him” (4–6). The act terrifies the other disciples, who flee with those in the temple, but Judas watches the destruction, convinced that the humanity in Jesus has finally dominated the divine; however, Judas describes the event in terms that connote heaven, God, and the spirit. Judas is entranced by Jesus, “stripped to the waist in rapturous violence” (3). While “rapturous” denotes the force of Jesus’ violence, it also suggests “the act of conveying a person from one place to another,” especially heaven (OED), establishing a connection between the act of cleansing the temple and Jesus’ divine role. The destruction “strew[s] the sunlight / with doves that swirled fiercely among the rafters” (10–11), an image which replicates the spirit descending in the form of a dove at Jesus’ baptism. Judas’ final description is heavy with divine connotations, as he tells how “with savage grace [Jesus] laid hands upon the temple” (15). Here the use of “grace” establishes the saving nature of Jesus’ act—although it is violent, it is necessary to the salvation of those sinners he chased from the temple. That he “laid hands upon the

temple” suggests not only the act of destroying the temple, but also an act of blessing the temple, dedicating it as an edifice housing God on earth, which again draws attention to the dual nature of Jesus as both a mortal and immortal “house.” Judas witnesses how “the Lord’s body ripened painfully with the spirit” and even in the act of the God succumbing to the human, Judas knows that the God will win (l. 8).

Judas’ resignation is evident in “Approaching the Kingdom,” as he describes the disciples speaking to Jesus “as though he lived among us” (l. 2). Jesus has distanced himself from the disciples in what Judas views as a sign of his resignation to his role. When Mary anoints the feet of Jesus, the language suggests that everyone is finally aware of the imminence of his death.

And her damp hair hung
 like a winding-sheet about him
 as she kissed his face,

 while the Lord sat there,
 not speaking—already lost
 to the sweet, overwhelming scent
 of spikenard [. . .] (15–17, 20–23)

Her hair has become a shroud around Jesus and the Lord acts as if he is already dead. The scent of spikenard overwhelms the scene, “so like / the kingdom I knew awaited us” (23–24). For Judas, the spirit overwhelms everything, although his focus is primarily Jesus and his disciples, promising a heavenly kingdom Judas rejects in favor of the

world; because of this, the anointing becomes not only a sign of death, but also one of abandonment as Jesus takes on his role as Christ and enters the kingdom.

Jesus continues to move toward the kingdom, and further away from Judas. As they enter Jerusalem with the disciples for Passover and Jesus' final week, "crowds thrilled to his name, / thrilled to *Hosanna*" (3–4). They are not thrilling to Jesus himself, but his name and the energy of Hosanna and "the God he was" (6), and because of this they don't see that "[his] eyes were full of suffering and light" (7). Judas continues to feel a privileged connection to Jesus and because of this wants to "save him [. . .] / to hold him, and to touch his human face" (12–13), even as the rest of the disciples are expecting Jesus to save them. Jesus teaches them that "*whoever hates this life / shall find the kingdom: for the ripe wheat / shall yield to the scythe and sing its praises*" (9–11). The argument Judas has been making in his testament is that life on earth, the human life, is just as important, if not more important, than the life waiting in the kingdom of God. Judas sees an imbalance, an intrusion of God in the human form of Jesus. And while his argument originates in his love for Jesus, Judas will willingly sacrifice his friend in order to save the world from God. Jesus' teaching does nothing to change Judas' mind, as Judas is convinced that Jesus is being "wrenched heavenward [. . .], wrenched / to perfection" (16–17). Jesus doesn't want to be perfect, doesn't want to leave this life for heaven, and Judas only becomes more convinced as he sees Jesus "through the dust / and sunlight" (14–15), symbols of earth and heaven, and realizes that Jesus is afraid of heaven. Judas echoes Jesus' parable of the field when he shouts out "*Lord, I shall winnow / the God from the bright chaff of your body, / shall cast Him out, cast Him out!*"

(18–20), but his words are lost in the crowd and Jesus “turn[s] his back to me, and [is] gone” (23).

When Jesus turns away from him, Judas realizes that Jesus has made his choice: “To choose against desire, to choose / austerity” (“The Lord’s Table” 1–2). This choice is marked by the name which Judas uses refer to Jesus. In the nine preceding poems, Judas calls Jesus by his name, a sign of familiarity, or by “Lord,” a sign of earthly respect. Here Judas uses the title “Christ” for the first time, acknowledging Jesus’ accepted divine calling as the Messiah or Lord’s Anointed. Judas listens as Jesus implements the sacrament, explaining that the bread is “flesh / leavened with everlasting” to the disciples (5–6). The flesh is permanently transformed by the spirit, and the spirit has irreversibly aligned itself with the body. While the others worship Christ for this, Judas watches “the almond tree / outside our window blaze with leaves, / how the late sun hung / and ripened in its branches” (11–14). The almond tree, a symbol of vigilance, is an echo from earlier poems, recalling how the relationship between Judas and Jesus has changed. In Judas’ eyes, he has remained faithful to his friend, choosing to stay out of love, rather than worship or miracle. As he shuns the disciples “weeping for their place in paradise” (10), the room grows “luminous” (15). It is unclear whether the source is Christ or the sun setting outside the window, but “for a moment, / even my empty cup was filled / with light” (16–18). Just because Judas rejects the divine nature of Christ does not mean he is immune to the spirit. In this moment he is connected to it and it serves as the catalyst to finally move Judas to act. As Christ and the others continue “in prayer and mystery” (23), Judas “left the table / to deliver him” (19–20). Just as Jesus made his choice to become the Christ, Judas has made the choice to become Jesus’ savior. In order to do so,

however, he must leave Jesus' side and act independently. This independence defines Creech's interpretation of Judas: rather than betraying Jesus for money or politics or because he was a small part of God's plan, Judas betrays out of love, and therefore empowers and ennobles his actions.

Although Judas declares his independence, he fails to recount the only independent act in his history with Jesus—his exchange with the chief priests. Instead Judas' narrative moves directly to "Gethsemene" and the last interaction between Judas and Jesus, who Judas continues to refer to as Christ. Judas finds Christ in the garden, "bent beneath the encumbrances of the spirit" (3). Although scripture relates that Christ took on the sins of humanity (Gal. 1:4, 1 John 2:2), Judas perceives it to be the spirit burdening Christ, with the word *encumbrance* suggesting more than *burden*. It connotes *Satanic temptation* and *dependency on another person for support* (OED). While nothing suggests Judas believes Christ is under the influence of Satan, he does believe God has equally tempted Christ with the promise of paradise, which Christ has transferred to the other disciples, who are dreaming "of heaven" while Christ is in the garden (6). Judas also sees Christ as dependent on the spirit, and the spirit dependent on Christ, as a means of manifesting itself.

While Christ is the main focus of Judas' narrative, the first stanza of "Gethsemene" is occupied with the garden itself. The trees in the scene are no longer almond, which represented temporary existence, but olive, representing peace and honor. Judas specifically references "the olive leaves" (2), creating an image of Christ crowned in glory as he prays—a glory that Christ believes in and that Judas wants to save Christ from. Although he begins with this image of Christ under the olive trees, what Judas

“remember[s] most / is the music of bees / swelling the grove” (11–13). The bees have been driven out of the olive branches by the smoke from the disciples’ fire “to descend among flax and weeds” (10). Judas identifies with images that mirror Christ’s atonement, with the bees symbolizing the immortal Christ descending to the mortal Jesus so that he is able to die for humanity. The bees “[gather] the dust from the blossoms” (14), and the pollen in the air overwhelms the scene, clinging to Christ. When the moment of betrayal comes, the pollen transfers from Jesus to Judas, along with the responsibility of the betrayal.

Throughout the twelve poems that comprise “The Testament of Judas,” there is evidence that Jesus knew of Judas’ plan to save Jesus before Judas did. When Judas is baptized in “Rites of Servitude,” Jesus tells him, “*today my Father has loved and chosen you*” (8). In the Gospel of Judas and other interpretations of Judas’ life, his betrayal of Jesus is seen as a calling, one necessary to complete Jesus’ mission on earth and one that requires a special understanding of Jesus. This special understanding is stated by Jesus in “The Long Journey,” when Jesus says, “*Judas, more than the others, you should know / how my Father has given me up to cold and hunger*” (10–11), and is expressed by Judas in “After Lazarus,” when he remembers, “though he never said a word, / didn’t I know what he wanted, what it meant / to be moved by something stronger than desire?” (22–24). In “A Parable,” there are signs that Jesus forgives or does not know Judas: “He knelt and scratched our names / in the hard soil” (20–21). He repeats his actions when the scribes and Pharisees bring him the woman taken in adultery. When Jesus challenges them to only condemn her if they are without sin, no one can and they leave. He then

forgives the woman, saying “Neither do I condemn thee” (John 8:11). In repeating this moment, Jesus forgives Judas before the act of betrayal.

The most significant indication that Jesus not only understands what Judas intends to do, but that he understands why, comes in the moment of betrayal: “before I could explain / how I’d come for him / he kissed me” (“Gethsemene” 17–20). Rather than following the biblical account of Judas greeting Jesus with a kiss on the cheek, Judas attempts to explain himself and in that moment, Jesus, not Judas, initiates the events that follow. Judas says, “I can tell you nothing / of the lanterned priests and soldiers, / the blade of Peter’s anger / or the mending of flesh” (29–32). Jesus, however, is covered in the pollen and transfers it to Judas; and Judas stays in the garden,

long after they’d gone
[. . .] and listened
to the stir of wings.
And I smelled the pollen,
tasted it on my lips, tasted
the perishing sweetness of his kingdom. (34–39)

These are Judas’ final words, an indictment of the kingdom Jesus claimed with his kiss. The sweetness of the kingdom is overwhelming, like the spikenard Mary used to anoint Jesus’ feet in “Approaching the Kingdom.” But where the spikenard meant death, the pollen, moved by the descending bees, symbolizes the soul’s immortality. Judas reads this immortality as suffering, expiration, deterioration, and damnation—not the damnation of hell, but the stopping of progression. What Jesus has chosen in his role as Christ and the immortality of man, Judas still reads as the ending of Jesus, as the man is

consumed by the god, and the ending of the physical world, as it becomes simply a step to achieve immortality in the kingdom of heaven.

The ending of Judas comes with decidedly less fanfare than the death of Jesus. The only poem in the series not voiced by Judas, an omniscient narrator (who interestingly speaks in italics, just like Jesus) describes Judas' death in distant terms, as "The Body of Judas," rather than the death of Judas. His body, referred to only as "it," swings "from a warped balance / of flowering redbud" (3–4). The tree stands "[in] a field, among barley and thistle" (1), an echo of the field where, Jesus told Judas in "A Parable," "the sun shines equally / upon ripe grain and thistle" (2–3). Because of that sun, Judas is facing "earthward, in shame and radiance" (5). There is the shame of betraying Jesus and his loss of reputation as a disciple, but there is also the radiance and splendor of having been a savior—but the speaker suggests that Judas acted as savior to more than just Jesus. He is "the counterweight that hoisted the God / into heaven" (10–11). His act of betrayal is just as necessary as Jesus' act of sacrifice, creating the "warped balance" on which all souls become even. Creech's Judas does not ask for our forgiveness—he does not need it. The manner in which his human act provides for Christ's divine act asserts the necessity of looking both earthward and heavenward in attaining salvation. His testament also argues that scripture is one-sided, one person's perception of God. In order to understand an individual, it is necessary to understand their relation with God, and Creech takes the most infamous of men to prove this.

FORMING AND INFORMING A CONTEMPORARY GOD IN AMERICAN POETRY

Osherow, Glück, and Creech argue for a personal assessment of God, through scripture and prayer, whether through both collective and personal experience, or through a more intimate relationship. I argue that God is central to each work, but equally as important is the speaker, proposing equality between man and God which echoes Grossman's metaphor and establishes the necessity of the individual. Osherow's speaker questions God, recounting historical and natural events to both credit and discredit his power, omniscience, and existence. Glück's demands evidence of his awareness and need of her, questioning not only his existence but her own. Creech's Judas knows Jesus and so believes he knows who God is and what God is capable of.

Both writing and reading a poem are acts which call attention to the self, whether poet, speaker, or even reader—in effect, writing and reading poetry are self-indulgent and self-reflexive acts. Devotional poetry, however, traditionally proposes to direct attention not to the self, but to God. In his analysis of seventeenth century devotional poet George Herbert, Stanley Fish observes that “by acting not in one's own, but in God's name, one transfers the responsibility and credit to him” (190). Fish considers the language, content, and form of Herbert's poetry, including perhaps Herbert's most famous poem, “The Altar.” He comes to the conclusion that “God is revealed to be responsible even for the poem's psychological occasion, the desire to praise, and is simultaneously the object and bestower of the praise” (213). Fish's argument applies to devotional poetry written by poets other than Herbert; understanding that the poetic act would draw attention to the speaker of the poem, the devotional speaker would call the reader's attention to God, the object and occasion of the poem. This can be seen in the invocation of the muse in

classical poetry, the praise of God in the Psalms, and in the deflection of attention in the work of Herbert, Donne, Milton, Hopkins, and Dickinson, as well as lesser known devotional poets.

Transferring attention from self to God is a defining characteristic of devotional poetry, and yet it is not one shared by contemporary devotional poems. Where their predecessors draw the reader's attention to God, the contemporary devotional poem is content, and even comfortable, to keep the attention on the self, in the form of speaker and reader. Osherow begins her series of psalms by wondering how to begin "a song of Jacqueline"—a line which echoes David's language. But where David's song immediately proclaims, "The heavens declare the glory of God, / the firmament tells His handiwork" (Psalm 19:1), Osherow's speaker wonders "what [. . .] do I say?" (2). The reader's attention remains with the speaker, and not on the God she is praising, as she begins to identify the glories of God's creation.

Not only are contemporary devotional poems content to let the reader's attention rest with the speaker, they are unapologetic for keeping the reader's attention from God—supposedly the very occasion for the poem's existence. Glück's vocalization of God in *The Wild Iris* is remarkable not because she has given God a voice, but because God is entirely focused on the human speaker. He is frustrated, distant, amused, attentive, but his attention is always focused on the human speaker, and therefore the reader. Glück has effectively reversed the traditional devotional mode of the speaker drawing attention to God, as God draws attention to the speaker. At the same time, her speaker does in fact speak to God, but she speaks of herself, demanding God explain her existence and his

treatment of her. God becomes a means of introducing a speaker separate from earth, what could be considered an outsider, a transcendental Other, rather than a divine being.

The idea of God as transcendental Other is contemporary poetry's answer to the more devout/earnest poetry of earlier eras. When Grossman submits that replacing God with Imagination or Community diminishes what Man is, his concern is not in maintaining a religious concept of God, but maintaining an Other separate from Man's world. Imagination is housed within Man; Community is the creation of Man. God, whether religious or merely an idea, is separate and therefore an apt comparison to understand Man's capabilities. Perhaps this is most clear in Creech's "Testament of Judas," as the argument becomes increasingly less a history of Judas and more an examination of the differences and similarities between God and Man as Judas sees them manifested in Jesus. Judas never defines exactly what God is outside of a force he sees working within the body of Jesus, and while my reading assumes the Biblical God of the New Testament, Judas is simply concerned with the inconvenience of the Other.

To read a contemporary devotional poem, we must be willing to suspend our own relation to God, regardless of whether it is one of disbelief or devotion, and recognize that God as a literary vehicle is no longer the universally acknowledged figure of the English literary canon. As literature, specifically poetry, has become more self-aware and self-indulgent, God has become one defined by the individual. What Osherow, Glück, and Creech have accomplished is not unique in the sense of a contemporary poet writing about God—several others have done this—but each has written a God unique for their purposes, and in this they have exemplified the contemporary approach to devotion.

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