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What makes good poetry?

*Blossoms rupture and rapture the air,
All hover and hammer,
Time intensified and time intolerable,
sweetness raveling rot.*

It is now. It is not.

—Osip Mandelstam, “And I Was Alive”

I first heard “And I Was Alive” by the Russian poet [Osip Mandelstam](#) through the voice of [Christian Wiman](#), an American poet and translator of Mandelstam’s work. Wiman recites the poem during an [interview](#) with Krista Tippett, reading from his own translation in *Stolen Air: Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam*. As I listened to Wiman’s recitation, something in me jolted or sighed or did both, and I rewound the interview to listen again, and then one more time before ordering the book online.

“And I was Alive” was the last known poem Mandelstam wrote before his death in 1938. He died in a Russian forced labour camp where the last anyone saw of him he was picking through garbage. “What is this dire delight flowering fleeing always earth? What is being? What is truth?” Mandelstam may be dead, but his poetic questioning persists, reverberating and regaining life in the living voice of Wiman. I would argue that the best poetry in life does this: it demands recitation and adoption; it compels us to listen, and listen again, and then adopt the words into our own voices. In this vein, I wonder if we can think of the litanies recited in worship as good poetry, too. The Christian litanies carry the collective voice of our faith across time and generations of the Church, and it’s in our persistent recitation of them that their truth—our faith—is constantly reimagined and enlivened.

Reading and listening to poetry is integral to how I engage and imagine my own faith, and consequently, I’m curious how poetry feeds other souls in the Church. This is the central

focus of February’s issue, which turns an eye to the poets among us in the diocese and the Anglican community at large.

I’m very excited to announce the features in this issue, starting with an opening tribute to American poet-witness Carolyn Forché, written by Hannah Foulger. Hannah Foulger is the new Reporter/Writer at Large for RLN, and her tribute to Forché also serves as an introduction to Hannah’s own passions and interests as a writer. Hannah is a member of St Benedict’s table, and she’s currently living in Toronto as a student in the MFA in Creative Writing program at the University of Guelph. Look out for more contributions from her in our upcoming monthly issues!

I’m also thrilled to feature interviews with two brilliant and well-respected poets, both members of the Anglican Communion. Local poet Joanne Epp met up with me over the holidays for a socially distanced chat about her journey as a poet and her latest collection *Cattail Skyline*. Then, the English poet-priest Malcolm Guite generously gave me an hour of his time over Zoom, during which we discussed the role poetry played in the formation of his faith, and his love for the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Many of you are no stranger to another poet featured in this issue: Kyla Neufeld, former RLN Editor, graces our pages with three of her poems for communion. In her introduction, Kyla writes “We come to the communion table empty-handed, broken in our own ways. But, God meets us there with comfort, grace, and mercy.” Perhaps, God also meets us there with poetry.



Sara Krahn is the editor of Rupert's Land News.

The Church, Reimagined

GEOFFREY WOODCROFT

In 2019, General Synod strongly endorsed the development of a strategic plan for the National Church. This would be a plan fed by many focus groups across the dioceses. Rupert's Land Diocesan Council recently welcomed members of the Strategic Plan Working Group of General Synod, where national facilitators led Council in the "Reimagining the Anglican Church of Canada during a Triennium of Transition" process discussion. The leaders explained the strategic planning process thus far, including the general nature of other focus group discussions. The discussion made us aware of two things: 1) the Church is concerned with membership decline, reconciliation, anti-racism, climate action, and life in a post-colonial land; and 2) our national leadership is keenly interested in the health of the Church at the local level.

Five key focus areas were established early, identifying our desire to be a Church that...

1. invites and deepens life in Christ
2. is intentionally post-colonial and passionately inclusive
3. embraces mutual interdependence with the Indigenous church (Sacred Circle)
4. stewards God's creation and attends to the well-being of humankind
5. lives in relationship with each other in local, diocesan, national and global communities

From my perspective, the conversations were dynamic and hopeful. (You can find out more about what these conversations looked like [here](#).)

Each of the five focus areas represents a strong passion in our diocese. They are front and centre in Diocesan conversations—in our yearnings, fears and doubts. We can safely proclaim this is God's doing, to bring us to such focus in one body. What are the questions that we may now be more comfortable to ask, knowing that our fellow disciples across the land are with us?

The last two years have revealed the fragility of our corporate church; each focal point above acknowledges this, but also suggests clear disciplines to address our current issues with vigor and confidence.

To engage these issues will be a most difficult task, but that should not deter us. We have shelved past strategic plans and diocesan studies, Letting Down the Nets and Vitality and Viability to name to significant pieces. The work of the Theological Task Force, however, is a study that has born much fruit, and could conceivably bear more. In its final report, it made clear the need for Ministry Developers working among all parishes and missions to do exactly the work highlighted in the five foci. The Ministry Developers are creatures of our Diocesan Synod and Council and they are essential for the health and well-being of God's Church. As creatures of the Synod and Council, they have our promise and responsibility to steward the gifts, tools, and mechanisms necessary to ensure the success of their respective work. We have promised ourselves in ministry to God. It is now time to discuss our sustainable strategy to increase this work. Let us rally in support of our Indigenous and Diocesan Ministry Developers.



Geoffrey Woodcroft,
Bishop of Rupert's Land

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What you have heard is true: Carolyn Forché and the Poetry of Witness

HANNAH FOULGER



What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its back cord over the house.

—Carolyn Forché, [The Colonel](#)

I was twenty-one when I first read Carolyn Forché's "The Colonel" in my first year at the University of Winnipeg. The poem unravelled before me a picture of an evening at a colonel's house in El Salvador during the civil war. I devoted a whole paragraph in an essay to "the moon swung bare on its black cord over the house," outlining how it revealed certain claustrophobia on behalf of the speaker, but it was the following line that stuck with me:

"Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace."

Immediately, I remembered my "mission" trips to Nicaragua where I had seen walls like this in [Corinto](#). I had asked our hosts about them because some of the broken bottles still wore Fanta and Pepsi logos. Forché's image was so striking I called back many of the memories I had of a neighbouring country that also still bore the marks of the civil war that had impacted it only a few years before.

I would later learn that Forché is an American poet who was invited down to El Salvador by a revolutionary to witness and write about the human rights atrocities in the country. Her travels produced two of her books [The Country Between Us](#) and [Gathering the Tribes](#). Released in 2019, her memoir *What You Have Heard is True* tells the story of her experiences there and

those specific moments that influenced her poems. These experiences lead Forché to become an activist with Amnesty International.

She went on to coin the term "[Poetry of Witness](#)," which while some describe it as poetry about war, oppression, slavery, and other acts of violence, Forché in [Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness](#), says poetry becomes witness in the reading. As readers, we witness trauma through poetry. Writing like this can give us insight into the realities of war that the news does not. Poetry of the Witness allows us to understand what these acts of violence feel like and do in the minute details of life, and how some of it is done on behalf of Western interests.

The Colonel reignited what some may call a white saviour aspect of me, the need to help in some way or further the kingdom of God. What it actually did was send me back to the Bible camp where I had a brain injury two years previous, where I would then start down the path of what people now call deconstruction of my Evangelical faith into a deeper, more intellectually rigorous faith practice heavily invested in writing and art. I am also suspicious of voluntourism and think more critically about Western intervention and colonialism in the Global South. I find the root of that in Forché's writing. Her violently stark poetry shows me what an image can do, how it can reveal trauma and remind me to question my experiences and privilege. She will always be one of my teachers and guides, not only on what makes good writing, but on how writing can inspire us to act once we hold certain knowledge.



Hannah Foulger is the new Reporter/Writer at Large for *Rupert's Land News*. She is a disabled British Canadian writer and theatre artist. She is currently an MFA candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Guelph in Toronto.

RLN in Conversation with Joanne Epp



Photo: [Anthony Mark Photography](#)

Photo: [Brandon Cavilee](#)

Joanne Epp is a poet from the Canadian prairies, born and raised in Saskatchewan. Joanne has published poetry in literary journals including *The New Quarterly*, *The Antigonish Review*, and *CV2*. Her chapbook, *Crossings*, was released in 2012, followed by her first full poetry collection [Eigenheim](#). Her second collection of poetry, [Cattail Skyline](#), was published in spring 2021. Joanne currently lives with her family in Winnipeg and attends the parish of St. Margaret's Anglican Church. I met up with her in mid-December to chat about her latest book and her life as a poet. Below is a shortened and transcribed version of our conversation.

— SK

Sara Krahn: How did you get started as a poet?

Joanne Epp: We had poetry at home, though not a lot. We had *A Child's Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson. And I had an anthology of Canadian Poetry for children that

my aunt gave me for my 9th birthday. I also encountered poetry in school. So, it was always sort of there and I guess I found it attractive. I wrote my first poem at the age of 8. It was a shameless knock-off of one of the Stevenson poems in the book. I didn't write a lot as a kid, but there was a definite moment when I was about 20 when, on a day when I had written a poem I thought, yea, I want to do more of this. A bit later in my life, I realized I wanted to do it more seriously and learn how to do it better. But the "doing it better" part took some time.

SK: And what did that "doing it better" part eventually look like? Did it involve school? Mentorships? Workshops? How did that take form?

JE: Both with essays for college and with poetry, I learned writing by reading. At a certain point I started keeping a notebook where I would make notes on things I read and try to figure out what I liked and didn't like. I wanted to take a writing course, but a good friend who I looked up to discouraged it. It was his opinion

that you can't teach creative writing. So, I let that lie for a while. Much later, when I lived in Toronto, I realized I didn't agree with him, and decided to take a writing workshop. There was this thing called [The Toronto Writing Workshop](#) that offered courses. I took two of those with the same writer. And it really was a good thing, because she didn't try to mold us, but rather did what a good writing teacher does: she tried to get into the head of each of us and recommend a helpful direction for us as individual writers. I also found it helpful to finally develop a language for what I was trying to do. Because up to that point I was just working on instinct. She encouraged me to be more deliberate. For one thing, to understand the archetypes I was working with. Like instances of drawing on other literature or biblical imagery. As one of my friends said, know your cosmology. Be conscious of the sources you're drawing on.

SK: Right. It's okay to be an informed writer. I think that's great advice especially because writers are readers. We're always taking in the work of others, and it only makes us better when we pay attention to what we're taking in and draw on those voices to tease out our own. It sounds like that workshop was a very formative experience for you as a writer.

JE: Yes, it was. And shortly after we moved to Winnipeg, I joined the [Manitoba Writers' Guild](#) and applied for their mentorship program and was accepted. I worked with a mentor for five months and he pushed me in very useful ways too. I tended to be a bit vague in my writing, and he encouraged me to name whatever it is I was talking about. He thought I was too reticent. He'd always say: Just say it! Kick up a fuss! So, I hope I've taken that to heart.

SK: I'm wondering if you can speak to your writing process and how it has evolved?

JE: Hmm, good question. I think I have developed clear ideas of how to revise my own work. That came gradually although I did have a moment of enlightenment about that too. My mentor, [Laurie Block](#) helped me with that. One of the writers I like to read, Alice Major—there's

something about her work that prompted me to not just read my work for sense and meaning but for sound and rhythm. I would say I've developed more tools to listen to and edit my own work. I used to write my poems on scraps of paper and on backs of envelopes. And only when I thought they were good did I even think to write them in a notebook.

SK: I can certainly relate with that. You get some lightning of inspiration, and you want to write it down, but you don't want to draw too much attention to it just in case it's nothing that anyone should see!

JE: Yes, and maybe I was just afraid of writing bad poetry. But I think you must write bad poetry to get to the good stuff. I was rereading Anne Lamott's book [Bird by Bird](#), which is about writing. One of the first things she talks about is the importance of "shitty first drafts." You've got to just spill it out. Work and edit later; just get it all out so you've just got something to shape.

SK: That's great advice. Turning the page, a bit, you would say there's a connection between your writing and your faith. Does one inform the other?

JE: I wouldn't have said so 30 years ago, but now I would say yes. When I first started out there was a period where I was reluctant to write about anything spiritual, because I wasn't sure if it could be done well. Over the last number of years, though, I have allowed the spiritual to get into my writing. It's another example of taking my mentor's advice: If it's important, say it. There have been times, in my 21 years at the parish of St. Margaret's, where I can feel it happening. There's one poem in a chapbook that I wrote around Ash Wednesday that meditates on what liturgy does for us. The Ash Wednesday service and that cross on your forehead make you think about something you'd rather just forget. I was thinking of this while skating on the river, how there's an apparent disjunction between that sunny day skating on the river and then remembering that you are dust.

SK: One is such an experience of aliveness,

and the other is a reminder that yes, we also die. Poetry does seem to be a form serving that reminder. I think there's something other-worldly about good poetry, the experience of language in this form; but I think a good poem allows language to spill out of the poem a bit, too.

JE: Maybe there's a parallel here between poetry and liturgical language, in that they can echo beyond themselves.

SK: Can we talk a bit about your latest book of poetry, *Cattail Skyline*? Were you working with a specific theme for the book, or did themes emerge over the course of writing it?

JE: The various sections of the book started as separate sequences of poems. Eventually I realized that the themes of these various sequences did relate to one another. That's when I started thinking about it as more of a collection.

SK: Each sequence does seem very rooted in *place*. And you do cover a variety of places, from familiar scenes on the prairies all the way to Cambodia. There's so much looking and observation in your poetry; you're so attentive

to your surroundings, to the places you find yourself whether it's a creek or graveyard or Phnom Penh or Star Lake—you write as an invitation to these places but also as a warning, almost. As if, if we look too hard there's a narrowing of our gaze and in this narrowing our gaze becomes destructive. Your poem called "Minnowing" really captures this. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to read it aloud.

JE: Okay, for sure:

**They school in the shadows, their slips
of shadow following beneath,
the lake bottom rippling in sandy waves.
When they idle in the water, I reach
for the long-handled net, let it swish
toward them, then watch them
instantly shift out of reach. A test
of patience: if the net comes too close,
they dart. I keep it almost still, a lazy twitch
now and then. A quick dip and I catch
a single minnow, pull it into the air,
weightless, a flutter in my hand.
I glimpse its silver belly, its round, perfect eye.
In greenish water it was a dart of motion;
now in my cupped palm it seems
made of light, too small to house bones
and heart. I want to look closer, see
beneath its skin, but it loses breath
the longer I hold it. I dip the net
again. The bright thing swims,
regains its element, its grace.**

SK: I love that. Because you want to see the fish, be a part of the fish's experience and get close—it's that desire for closeness. But when you get too close and scoop the fish out of the water it can't breathe anymore. You must put it back; you have to let it go.

JE: Yes. I think a sort of recurring theme that comes out in the poems and is often on my mind as I write, is how things are so often out of reach. When you're trying to write about something there's only so much you can express about what you think or see, there's only so much that words can do. You can't possess it. It's there to be seen, treasured, lived in, but not



possessed. I've been writing these "place poems" for quite a while, and it was only recently that David Widdicombe gave me some tools to think about how I could connect it with faith and liturgy. He gave a couple of sermons on creation and talked about how there's plenty of evidence in the Bible that the rest of the world has a relationship with God of its own that is independent of us humans. And I found that idea really opened a window for me. I almost don't even know how to say this, but there's only so much you can see. The world will reveal itself to you if you observe, but there will always be things that remain unseen. There are creatures that will keep to themselves, that you almost see but don't. The world isn't yours. Does that make sense?

SK: It does. I see you trying to capture this sentiment in your poetry through your use of colour, too. There is so much colour in your poetry. You're so much more Emily Carr than Robert Bateman! And your colour descriptions are just magic; your attention to them makes your poetry come alive and it's quite effective. Anyone who's grown up on the prairies would have to just sigh, because so much of living on the prairies is bathing in all the different colours, whether in the skies or the fields.

JE: Yes! I grew up loving the landscape I lived in, but also conscious of the negative things people say about the prairies. About it being boring. But it ain't so! One of my earliest poems that will never see the light of day set the stage for what I would write later. It was called "Colours." I wrote it in little sections, talking about what I thought were the dominant colours of each season, how in the winter it's blue, that icy blue sky and shadows on snow, the blue you only see in those snow shadows...

SK: The way you write with the use of colours is like, a feeling of arrival. You paint the prairies as a place, as a destination—a place to arrive as oppose to just pass through. Many people think of Manitoba as a dead end or just a stop along the way, but you and I both know it's not.

I want to bring up one more slightly serious

question. Coming back to what I pointed out in that one poem "Minnowing," where I sense there's a bit of a departure in your voicing of observation as invitation, moving more towards observation as warning. There is responsibility in this kind of observation, because it risks narrowing our gaze and "the fish losing it breath." Was it your intention to be a voice of caution to the observer in the poem, and to the reader?

JE: This is an idea that came to my consciousness as I wrote. Being conscious of how we affect the world is something we can't help but think of these days. There's one way in which it's hard for me to write about, because the subject is just so huge and overwhelming. So, my approach is to go small and close, to see where the beauty is being threatened. And where we hold responsibility. I wonder if we too often think of observation as a passive activity, but we have a responsibility in the way we look at the world. I don't know if we're ever just passive bystanders—we're always stepping on something!



Three Poems

KYLA NEUFELD

One of my favourite poems is Mary Oliver's "Making the House Ready for the Lord." In it, the poem's speaker is trying to clean up her house, to make it "as shining as it should be," for a visit from God. But, she keeps running into problems: mice under the sink and squirrels in the walls. Her dilemma is that she doesn't want to kick them out of her house: "but it is the season / when they need shelter, so what shall I do?"

The speaker concludes that they've already invited God in by sharing their home with these creatures. They believe that God will visit regardless:

**"And still I believe you will
come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox,
the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-
goose, know
that really I am speaking to you whenever I say,
as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in,
Come in."**

What I love about this poem is the idea that God doesn't need us to have everything perfect; God will meet us where we are. That was the idea behind these poems. We come to the communion table empty-handed, broken in our own ways. But, God meets us there with comfort, grace, and mercy.

Home

*When we were still far off, you met
us... and you brought us home.*

Sometimes, it's the dark house
with a solitary candle
in the window, lighting up
the night, or a whistle
from the back porch,
sometimes a letter marked
with stamps that has chased me
across the globe,
or the stranger's hand I grasp
in the pew, saying
I'm here. Come home.

And there—I see You now
far in the distance, standing
on the hilltop blown red
with roses (how much sweeter
for Your crown?),
one scarred hand outstretched
in greeting, and You say
I'm here. Welcome home.



Setting the Table

We set the table
with our best
yet there's a crack
in the blue ceramic plate
a butter knife is spotted
with rust
the glasses are coated
with film from the dishwasher
and a ruby sauce stain blooms
on the crisp white table cloth

We sit and eat anyway
The wine is still
red and full
the bread heavy
on the tongue
tastes of honey

and You
God of the hummingbird
an emerald wink
of dusky wheat at harvest

paint over our cracks
with gold

broken
beautiful
complete



Bud of Mercy

I stand at the table,
hands open, awaiting
spring, awaiting the burgeoning
of flowers, pulsing thunder,
torrential rains, boulevards
bursting with green.

I await the green beginning
of my heart.

The attendant presses
the bread—fresh, soft, golden
like brown sugar—into my palm,
and it weighs nothing,
a new bud of mercy,
ready to unfurl.



Kyla Neufeld is a poet and editor who lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Treaty 1 Territory. She is currently working on her MA in Cultural Studies at the University of Winnipeg.


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Faith, Coleridge, and Poetry: An Interview with English poet Malcolm Guite

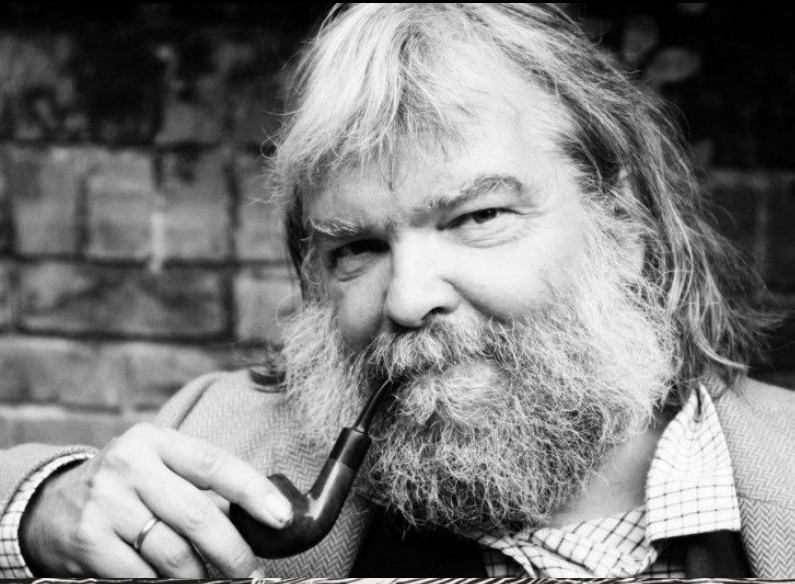


Photo: Lancia E. Smith



Image: Michael Jasmund

The poet-priest [Malcolm Guite](#) is difficult to define in such a short space. Guite is an immensely gifted poet, Anglican priest, and singer-songwriter in the rock band "Mystery Train." In the Anglican Communion, he is known and celebrated for his work [Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year](#). Guite was gracious enough to meet with me for a Zoom interview over the holidays, tuning into my Winnipeg office from his home in Cambridge, England. In the interview, Guite discusses how poetry shaped his faith, and why Samuel Taylor Coleridge should be understood as a profoundly Christian poet.

Sara Krahn: I imagine you've been asked this question many times over the course of your life, but I like to think that even the most generic questions take on new life in front of a new audience, so I'd like to ask: What was your religious or spiritual upbringing, and can you describe the moment you knew you were called to live a life of faith?

Malcolm Guite: I was fortunate to be born into a Christian household. My father was a Methodist local preacher who was quite articulate and was a man of extraordinary integrity. My mother was a Scots and came from a Presbyterian background. She is where the poetry comes from. One of her deepest influences was George McDonald who she'd read as a child. I went to Sunday School as a kid, and faith came very naturally to me; I had a strong sense of the living presence of God when I was a young child. But as a teenager, and like many teenagers I suppose, I abandoned my faith. I had a bit of a crisis in my mid-teens. At the time I was in a boarding school in England, and I was miserable and homesick and going through the first rounds of adolescent angst. I'd become convinced that this faith I'd been brought up with wasn't real anymore and I tried to do the opposite thing. I tried a very rigid scientific reductive materialism. This was, of course, in the days before Richard Dawkins, but the person who had the most reductive view was B.F. Skinner who was a behaviourist. Now,

my father was a classicist, a very educated and widely read man, he subscribed, for example, to the *Scientific American*. Yet I'd become quite convinced that in the end we're just unwinding enzymes and selfish genes, and this is a series of unplanned chemical reactions, and this is a kind of terrible irony. And this illusion of mind and personhood full of completely unsatisfiable longings—this is like a bad joke. This is absurd. At the same time, I was reading the French philosophers and should apologize, I was 16 at this point and clearly a precocious teenager—I was reading Sartre under the bed clothes! I thought of myself as both a materialist and existentialist. But I now realize that there was a deeper motivation to my attitude. I was actually haunted by God—the God I was turning my back on. And my response was to try and embrace a world view in which God didn't exist. And the worldview I tried to embrace was in fact completely deadening. So, I tried this. But I still had a poet's soul—I grew up with poetry and my mother reading me poetry before bed. I had read the Narnia books, so I was trying to clamp down on the entire imaginative side of my life to keep God out of view. But I had an epiphany. My parents took me to the house of John Keats while we were on holiday, and in Keats's house I read on the wall I read "Ode to a Nightingale." Now, you must imagine me as this bleak, lonely, and in many respects repressed adolescent. ["Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!"](#)

I read this poem and I was just transfixed by the richness of it. It's obviously a very sensual poem: the movement from the dull ache to this very ecstatic thing. And then the image at the back of the poem of these "magic encasements" opening on "perilous seas." It was as if suddenly all this repressed sense of mystery and transcendence just opened, and I was almost shaking. I read the poem again and again, and suddenly had this firm conviction that whatever else was happening to me in this room was not a chemical reaction alone, it was not just a bunch of enzymes. That even if someone could do a brain scan of me at that moment and could work out the exact pattern

of atoms moving in my brain and process the neuropathways, you would not have come to the end of it. You would no more understand what the experience of the poem was than you would understand a Mozart symphony if you watched the lines on an oscilloscope bouncing up and down but couldn't hear it. I was just completely aware of this transcendent dimension delivered entirely to me through this poem from a young man who died at the age of 26. I suddenly realized that I couldn't have a reductive account in the face of this mystery.

SK: So, John Keats opened these "magic encasements" for you, and this is where poetry found you in your life? With Keats?

MG: Yes! I had this completely transcendent experience and thought Keats was the source, so I went on to completely absorb the poetry of Keats. I wanted to be a poet because of Keats. Basically, I spent years doing the equivalent of "air guitar" to Keats, writing these very slushy sub-Keatsian lines; but I learnt a huge amount. I ended up switching my studies from Science to English, and I won a scholarship to read literature at Cambridge. By this time, I was no longer an atheist, but definitely not a believer. It was transcendent aesthetic experience through the arts that was feeding my soul. Poetry literally opened the magic encasements for me; but in the end, it was not sufficient for me to have a series of aesthetic thrills and a spirituality of individual transcendent experience which makes no demands on you or changes your relationship to your neighbour. I began to realize there's a danger in transcendence becoming the fix, that I was somehow having my cake and eating it too. I began to feel that if there was transcendence there was also a source of transcendence. At the time, I was specializing in Anglo-Saxon and Medieval literature, and this involved also reading Christian Theology. So, I began to read theology, beginning with Augustine's *Confessions*, which completely blew my mind. Augustine was a greater mind than I would ever be, and I began to think that there was something in this. Around this same

time, I was reading the book of Psalms, and while I was reading the Psalms I had a moment of complete transcendence, which was something different from the Keats moment. I was reading a Psalm aloud, when I suddenly realized that the one to which this poem was addressed was present in the room. But I had been reading as though he weren't present in the room. It was as though at one moment I was in my room at the centre, and then I suddenly felt that I wasn't in the centre at all, but what was in the centre was this holy presence. I was in that place where I felt God as utterly holy and present, that in fact I am not a thinker but a thought, and my existence is entirely dependent on the gaze of this one on whom I have turned my back. I went back to Cambridge feeling kind of haunted, and I went to the chaplain with my grievance. The chaplain said, "well you recited the Psalms blasphemously, as though God were not there. And he came when you called, but you weren't calling him." Somehow amid this experience and another one that closely followed, the penny dropped, and I realized I believed it: The one on whom we depend on chooses to be dependant and weak before us. And for the first time in my life, I felt it was okay to be human. Because God comes to us as a human. Not long after this experience I went on to become confirmed in the Anglican Church.

SK: I want to ask you about [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#). Coleridge is a poet who figures largely in your life and work. You have written on his poetic imagination in an essay in your book [Faith, Hope and Poetry](#) and then much more substantially on his vision in your 2017 book [Mariner: A Theological Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#) which you take readers on a theological voyage of Coleridge's epic ballad. You've even written a sonnet about Coleridge! Why is Coleridge such an important poet for you?

MG: I was studying Coleridge a bit at university. Like me, he was born into a Christian household. And like me, he left it for a bit and then came back to it. In his poem ["Frost at Midnight"](#) he writes:

"And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear

**The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who for eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself."**

When he says the "lovely shapes and sounds" he's referring to the entire phenomena of nature. And he's switching metaphors from the mechanistic one that he inherited, and that I inherited too, to some extent, which is the mechanistic metaphor where everything is only a thing and accounted for by equal and opposite reactions and inevitable interactions of things and forces. But [Coleridge] realized this wasn't the only way to understand things. Maybe they're not just things but also words. A word is a thing and a quantifiable bit of sound, and I could write a poem and send it to you and if you didn't know it was a poem you could do a beautiful chemical analysis of the paper and letters and come up with volumes of completely true facts about it and never know it was a poem. And when I would tell you it was a poem, you'd be shocked, and suddenly all the other facts would still be true, but you would discover what they meant. So, when Coleridge says: "So shalt we hear the lovely shapes and sounds intelligible / Of that eternal language which thy God / Utters," he means we must learn to read the world like a poem. Everything is what it is, but it is also more than what it is, it speaks of something else; it's resonant. We're living surrounded by living metaphors. Jesus is constantly using them in the parables.

SK: Coleridge's famous poem, [The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#) isn't the most uplifting poem. It's ultimately about a crime committed for no real reason other than that it could be committed. The Mariner kills the albatross, that has been serving as the ship's guide through the northern seas. And in this killing, he unleashes a nightmare into his life. It's a story of an individual's cross to bear, but also an exploration of the fallenness and loneliness of the human experience. But the poem offers an

accessible darkness and speaks with a prophetic imagination. I've often wondered if the Mariner's story would've been as powerful if Coleridge had written it as a novel. Do you think the poetic form has the power to capture certain truths that might otherwise be lost in other forms of storytelling?

MG: That's a good question. I think the poetic form opens different things in our mind and allows our imagination to function in a different way. That has to do with the incantatory and musical effect of phrases—there is the word “chant” in enchantment. About it being grim, you're right. It doesn't back down from the awfulness of life, and some of the poem's phrases remain part of the common language: “Alone, alone, always alone of the wide wide sea.” But the point about the poem is that it's about a voyage back. It's about the return and being transformed. But, it's not a glib happy ending. It's not like “I was a bad boy and then I repented and now I'm totally happy and unscarred.” That's a trivializing view of humanity. Everything we do affects us and affects us for life, the question being how redeemable our actions are. One of the most important images in scripture is Christ's invitation to Thomas to touch his wounds. Christ's wounds are still there even in the resurrection, and they're glorified, but they're not undone. To me, the turning point in the poem is where the Mariner gets to the point of absolute loneliness, and he can't bear to look anywhere, and he closes his eyes and tries to pray and can't do that either. He's trying every dimension and they're all closed, and he's utterly alone. But then, suddenly we switch the focus from the Mariner in utter despair and agony on the deck, and we look up at the moon. The Mariner looks again at the scene in the moonlight and suddenly everything is transfigured. And he sees the very water snakes that he has just cursed, and he sees them as beauty:

**“O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart
And I blessed them unaware.”**

And then here comes the turn theologically. He says:

**“The self-same moment I could pray
And from my neck so free
The albatross fell off and sank
Like lead into the sea.”**

Now he didn't learn to pray by twisting himself into some theological contortion or doing exactly what his pastors and masters had told him to do. All he did was look at the world suddenly bathed in moonlight and rejoice in it. At this point in his recovery, literally metanoia, he's not thinking about himself at all. He's entirely invested in the independent life and beauty of the other creature. He's simply blessing it. And in fact, that is the exact ritual opposite to what he did to the albatross. Because he shot it. But the transformation does not happen in a church, it happens just outside it. The wedding guest is on his way to the church, and then he gets stopped by this embarrassing street person and they have this conversation in which he discovers the true meaning of everything that could possibly go on in a church: metanoia, transfiguration, the meaning of the cross. But at no point is it put in the lips of a church pastor. The mariner says: “He prayeth best who loveth best all things both great and small.” After I'd written the book, I discovered annotations Coleridge made in the Book of Common Prayer. His annotation for the service of communion is a note that says the best and only preparation for this is to read often and on your knees the prologue to John's Gospel: “In him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” And then receive this sacrament as the whole of creation coming to God in this sacrament. It just doesn't get more inclusive than that.

Reading *Laudato Si'*: Introduction to a Lenten Study

In 2015, Pope Francis wrote the *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si'* on Care for Our Common Home, focusing on climate action and how it impacts human relationships in religion and creation. *Laudato Si'* is quickly becoming a timeless speech, appealing to religious and nonreligious alike.

In reading and rereading this critical work, certain aspects of our Christian roots are excitingly brought to light. The Pontiff's seven-year-old text on climate change and action are now more clearly proven in science, and more clearly observed in real-time. But the observations Pope Francis invites us to make are those revealing destruction of ecosystems and species, the displacement and loss of life at unprecedented rates.

Pope Francis argues that the Church must identify and come to terms with its lack of concern for those who follow us and our complicity with injustice caused by dominant global economics and greed.

The Pope teaches us that correcting climate change using the leading economic and political institutions is a doomed strategy. How can we trust the very systems that consider creation to be material commodity for human consumption? How can we trust a system that does not understand a tiny ecosystem as life-giving to the whole of creation? Francis calls for a new regime, and that regime is from the ground up.

Pope Francis draws our attention towards listening to indigenous wisdom and stories of the earth that tell of a vibrant interweaving of systems, creatures, seasons, and medicines; a vibrant collection of interdependent relationships that comprise the Creator's body – the "Body of God" as Sallie McFague put it in [A New Climate for Theology](#).

The Pontiff expresses his concern that humans need to establish more local initiatives of practice and communication for the urban

neighbourhood. Francis observes the billions of people who inhabit urban settings, but also the enormous amount of waste and loneliness that permeates urban cultures. Urban culture draws the resources of the rest of the world but returns very little. Cities are not self-sustaining. Fear, individualism, and consumerism run rampant in the urban setting.

Lastly, I hear the Pope's reckoning for Christianity, much like the excited rhetoric of Archbishop Desmond Tutu for humanity, and the quiet-yet-prophetic words of [Phyllis Tickle](#) for religion, for us to reach to one another's hearts to find God. Like St. Francis, he desires us to answer the call in our discipleship to steward creation, God's Body. Francis leaves us with an expectation that the Church we have known will need to change and shift to meet climate action where it needs to be; we need to be ready. The Church has held great power through the last 2000 years, and we have been complicit, complacent, and ignorant in the works that have devastated creation. But we are also healers, lovers and those who bless, and the Pope encourages us to share the life we have been given and do so abundantly.

Disciples, I am excited to offer you this opportunity to study together through Lent. My hope is that we can study through our local parish and deanery contexts.

God, our creator, renew and revive your church, refresh your spirit with in us, and make us ready to steward creation as you have called that from us. May your discipline be our discipline, and your love sustain and grow us upon our Lenten journey. We ask this in He who gave his life for creation, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I hope you will join me studying *Laudato Si* through Lent 2022.

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