

ONLY SAY THE WORD

THREE POEMS BY CLAYTON D. EMMER

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PREFACE

This fall, I was blessed with the opportunity to write poetry for my senior thesis under the supervision of Professor David Craig. The three poems printed here, which were developed with his help, are by no means finished; instead, they are works in progress, like canvases still wet with paint.

The title I have given to this collection—the title of a poem yet unwritten—refers to the Mass and to the words of the centurion in the seventh chapter of Saint Luke’s gospel. The petition “only say the word” is an expression of confidence in God’s providence; it is an act of faith. For me, writing poetry is an act of faith: When I sit down with my pen, I never know what will pour out onto the page, but I trust that, by His grace, what I write will serve somehow to give Him glory. I am often humbled by the realization that the Divine Artist, in His creative work, will often use very simple materials. May His glory be fashioned on the canvas of my poverty.

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Franciscan University of Steubenville

fiat voluntas tua

What pleases me is
freedom –
the prison key given
to each soul,
an invitation to willing captivity.

A tender soul,
making itself my captive,
captivates me
as it walks into the prison,
locks the door behind it,
eagerly,
and, reaching its arms through the iron bars,
throws the key far out of reach.

The little souls –
some are quite impulsive –
throw their keys with all their might.
They remind me of mother,
which isn't surprising...
she taught me to throw when I was a child.
From mother,
the great economist of the heart,
I learned that keys are made
to be thrown away.

Of course,
she learned it from Father.
Father was the first to lock himself in,
to throw His key away...
with His back to the door
and a grin on His face,
He launched it over His shoulder.

He was so proud of mother
when she threw away her key.
“That’s my girl,” he said.
“That’s my girl.
Have you ever seen such an arm?” he asked me.
“Where did you get such a mother, anyway?”

This business of throwing keys away –
it wasn't my idea, really,
though Father and Spirit like to say
that it all began with me.
It's a conspiracy of praise on their part,
to which I willingly submit.

Father knew what He was doing
when He invented keys,
and when He sent me among men
to show them how to throw.
For men,
throwing away a key
is not such an obvious thing to do.

Having been a man,
I understand this.

Now there are many souls
throwing their keys with eager haste
and I throw with them.
Side by side
we laugh
and throw away the keys.

Christmas Eve

This afternoon
as flakes of powder
buried the Nativity scene
in the front yard
I shovelled
a deep canyon, white
to the road.

Now dusk advances
and firelight dances back and forth
across cherry-panelled walls.
Enormous Norway branches
stretch colored constellations
across the room
above a drift of packages.

Silence is interrupted only by
the occasional shifting of glowing embers.
Looking out, I see that
my boot prints have been lost
in approaching darkness, drift and
accumulation.

Earlier today I went skiing
through the pine woods behind the slough
and through the sloping meadow.
After descending Swanson's hill,
I paused to look behind me –
above my solitary tracks
which sliced the pale earth,
motionless pines stood alone
against the grey, snow-heralding sky.
My ears grasped for the fading song of the chickadee,
but it was gone,
and the stillness enveloped me.

I felt required to remain
in the quiet,
as if the moment would last while I stood still.
But I felt my wool socks
soaked with melting snow
so I decided to move,
to return to the house and
to light the fire and
to see if the mail had come.

Now night has arrived
and the fire has burnt itself grey.
The meadow is still quiet, I imagine.

I go to bed early;
tomorrow will find the house busy.

On Fatherhood

Our son
first time in my arms
while Susan sleeps
sweat drying on her forehead.
So tired
she did so well.

He squeezes purple fists
purple veins in
tight fists,
tight,
the size of my thumb.
No sounds
just squirming.
Beautiful.

Let's sit down
sit down.
Head is resting right, I think.
Looks happy –
I wonder if his eyes will open soon...
Susan's nose on his face,
her chin too,
chin...

That noise –
the door –
Nurse's head disappears
behind closing door.
Must've been sleeping –
Susan still is.

Wonder when he'll first open his eyes
and see Dad.
I'm Dad.
Not quite ready –
a baby of a Dad
but so was mine
when I was born.

My Dad will help
he always has
like the time with the wheelbarrow –
I was eight.
Too heavy –
but Dad took one handle,
Dad.

Small fist
hitting my arm.
Don't sleep now, Dad.
Don't sleep
I won't, son
Let's take a walk in the nursery –
maybe we'll find the nurse
and ask for some coffee.