

# THE CRESSSET

*A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs*

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## Finding the Sacred in the Ordinary

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Larry Janowski. *BrotherKeeper*. Chicago: Puddin'head, 2007.

Donna Pucciani. *Chasing the Saints*. Chicago: Virtual Artists Collective, 2008.

Poetry and spirituality have long walked the same intellectual pathways, closely bonded cousins, if not quite fraternal twins. The Bible itself contains some of the world's oldest, best-known poetry. Throughout the ages, great mystics like John of the Cross and Jalaluddin Rumi, in the Sufi tradition, wrote poetry as if poems were natural heirs to a life of prayer and contemplation. Arguably the most popular poet in America today is Mary Oliver, whose explorations of nature almost always lead to meditations on the life of the spirit. Oliver's is a poetry of both the natural and metaphysical worlds, the body and the soul.

The priest-poet is also a time-honored tradition. John Donne was an Anglican clergyman, Gerard Manley Hopkins a Jesuit, and Thomas Merton a Trappist monk. Larry Janowski is a Franciscan priest from Chicago. Janowski's is one of two collections with spiritual themes to emanate from small, independent Chicago presses in the past year. The other is "Chasing the Saints" by Donna Pucciani, a public school teacher who has written two previous collections.

The books are distinct in tone and theme. Janowski writes with gritty reverence about the city. He finds moments of transcendence even in the grim daily headlines of *The Chicago Tribune*. Pucciani's book is a series of profiles and persona poems about Catholic saints. She subtitled the book "Poetic Encounters" and approaches her subjects much as a tell-all biographer might. She gives us a St. Francis with dirt under his nails, a Teresa of Avila who fears deep water and dislikes fishcakes.

Neither collection, happily, descends into the pious, sentimental, didactic or devotional tone that plagues what often passes for "religious" poetry. If either collection is "religious" at all, it is so in one of the original senses of the word: to look upon the world around us with reverence and awe. Both collections confirm my belief that much of contemporary poetry *is* spiritual. This view runs contrary to conventional wisdom and would dismay those post-modern, post-narrative writers who believe experience largely has stripped language of meaning. But the fact is, many contemporary poems uncover the sacred in the ordinary. God may merit nary a mention in these poems, but God is in them, in the details.

Chicago is Father Janowski's "City Of God" and his "Interior Castle." Its immigrants, second-and-third generation Poles and Irish, its street people, salespeople and daily commuters are his modern-day prophets. The collection's title poem relates the true story of an eight-year-old boy who witnessed his

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younger brother plummet from a window in the Ida B. Wells housing project. A group of boys had dangled the five-year-old out a fourteenth story window as punishment for refusing to steal candy. The older boy desperately races down flights of stairs to try to catch his younger brother. Two Chicago boys, the poet says “I never knew, who will not let go.”

*...falling*

*is  
like drowning...  
  
but air cares even less  
than water, lets you  
slip through  
without even a wake  
to mark your passing...*

From “BrotherKeeper”

Janowski reads the urban landscape as if it was a book of scripture. It is a reading that sometimes ends in solace, sometimes in insight but more often than not, in mystery. In the poem, “Get Your Streetwise!” (the title refers to newspaper homeless people hawk on corners for a dollar), Janowski encounters a feisty street person who accuses him of harboring a gun in his shoulder satchel.

*I  
always hold the bag like that  
don't want it to slam into people  
never touched a gun  
can turn it inside out  
spill guts on the street  
here  
look  
ungraded papers  
poetry books  
candy wrappers  
look look  
pencils  
nothing*

From “Get Your Streetwise!”

Many of his poems are odes to the city where he grew up, and where he teaches writing at Wright Community College and says Masses for a small community of Felician Sisters on the Northwest side.

*Chicago eats light, sucks it in  
like a black hole, hoards it  
like a radium dial planning  
to stay awake all night because  
light—like the grass and flesh  
we devour, decays. We  
need more. Always. But  
unlike broad green leaves  
that take their sun straight,*

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*we cannot look full on light  
and live. We need the tempering  
of angels, moons, or cities...*

From "Luminaria"

Janowski mostly shies away from poems that describe his life in a men's religious order. He explains: "St. Francis used to say, when you have an experience of God, you shouldn't talk about it because you're somehow wasting it." But there are deft references throughout the poems. He savors the hairdresser's touch washing his hair. He looks with self-mocking humor at his naked body which "no one sees ... except in the eyes off / locker room kind of glance." Those poems that do deal with his priestly life are searing and authentic. In one, he takes an unsentimental look at the vow he took to forgo sexual intimacy.

*If this is what  
it costs to hold  
at heart a hollow  
where no sparrow  
lives (nothing alive  
that needs light),*

*if this is what God  
expects from Yes,  
then it is too much  
today, although  
I pay it anyway...*

From "What Celibacy Is"

To read Janowski's poems is to gain a deeper level of seeing and believing, to arrive at a place, as Mary Oliver once described it, where one sees "through heavenly visibles to the heavenly invisibles."

**L**ike Janowski, Pucciani is a poet of the sacred in the ordinary. Her collection "Chasing the Saints" builds on the premise that what makes these men and women holy is, in many ways, their very ordinariness. Her cast of characters includes well-known luminaries: St. Michael the Archangel, St. Patrick, St. Therese of Lisieux, St. Paul, and St. Anthony. But there are lesser-knowns too, like Blessed Kateri Tekawitha, a Mohawk Indian not yet a full-fledged saint, but on her way to canonization; St. Lutgarde, a thirteenth Century Belgian monastic who levitates at prayer, and San Gennaro, patron saint of Naples. A vial of his dried blood is said to periodically liquefy and bubble up in its case.

Occasionally Pucciani steps out of ancient times into the present or near-present, as when she describes her grandmother Giuseppina's bedroom shrine to St. Therese of Lisieux.

*Black-veiled, brown-robed, with strawberry lips  
and wimberry eyes and hands full of roses,  
you stand a foot tall on the nightstand  
alongside St. Francis, a bird on his left shoulder,  
Jesus, his actual heart exposed and beating  
in arterial splendor, and Mary in chipped blue robes  
that need a good dusting...*

From "St. Therese Meets Giuseppina at the Bedroom Shrine"

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But Pucciani is at her best when she is imagining new narratives for her pious subjects. St. Jude, patron of hopeless causes, is reduced to hearing the pleas of the aged in nursing homes, who expect, well, miracles. St. Anthony, finder of lost items, has wearied of the people who can't even locate what's under their noses.

*Favorite item today:  
umbrellas—it seems to be raining everywhere  
from Hong Kong to Beirut. Yesterday: sunglasses  
especially in Australia...*

From "St. Anthony of Padua"

St. Cecilia, patroness of musicians, endures an eternal rest eternally interrupted by drummers, flutists, oboe players, and constant strains of Vivaldi, Wagner, jazz, and Motown.

*At night I leave them to their own devices  
in jazz clubs or locked in practice rooms  
drinking black coffee and running arpeggios  
into the ground. But I promise I will wake them  
in the early clear-throated morning, gargled,  
lozenged and rosined, knuckle-cracked and ready*

*to play...*

From "St. Cecilia Tells All"

Despite her flights of imagination, Pucciani does stay close to the historical record, quoting often from the saints' own writings (A final entry in St. Teresa of Avila's breviary: *Hold God, and naught shall fail thee*). Many previous poetry collections have recast narratives of the Bible. It is a wonder that the saints have not come in more often for this same type of re-envisioning. Pucciani does it with humor and aplomb. ✚

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