

The Windhover

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DAVID ATHEY

Holy Land

"Let there be..." is where the old man lived, in the silent ellipsis of a hut beneath a crag with a tunnel leading to beeswax candles and earth-tone images of wild souls enchanting shadows with immovable dance..."light."

The bedraggled man was just skin and beard, merely bones and manners, and he offered tea, bread, and honey on a cedar stump. "Eat, drink..."

And for every question I had (through the night) he offered another ellipsis, the pause of infinite journey...because that was where he lived.

LAURA HOGAN

Cherith

Before you sent me down to the wadi there was that goldfinch, shining. swaying, it lingered warbled, flew away, away away to the blue mountain, each beat of wing a stop in my heart—stay stay, stay the shadow of your bird in me shifted, my love slipped the green and lilac banks of the river, beyond rushes and the reaches of my throat.

Then those days wheeled on the track, puffing, mechanical and drawn. A thousand tongues choked on salt, not bread. I turned, turned into a pillar looking for your warm yellow breast.

A drought later I forgot to remember, how you had taken yourself away from me my reshaped heart steadied, bundles and branches worn into grooves, patience uncounted.

Is that why you sent me down to Cherith, to hide me in your hands, to drink of the stream in cool deep swallows? sometimes I am afraid to touch the beauty of the emerald mossy stones, they make me ache with riparian joy

Your goldfinches alight, feed me presence and song, and it is for this your finest wheat I have longed.

HEATHER M. SURLS

Dancing Over Bones

Slow down and turn in the gate—the refugees are buried here. Right here, in this corner no one else wants because it's near the entrance, a triangle in this heart-of-the-Midwest cemetery. People who traveled thousands of miles with birth certificates and passports to countries that expelled them—they stopped here to rest, in a land not their own.

I don't know how many of them are here, because they don't all have grave markers. Even the cemetery doesn't keep track; I asked them once. But I do know that Anli lies there, perpendicular to the road. He was a Bhutanese boy, and I'm not sure how he died. I just know about him because of April.

Here she is: April Paw. She was born in a refugee camp in Thailand in 2009, daughter of Neh Meh and Klaw Reh, Karenni refugees. She died at Children's Memorial Hospital here in 2012. Yeah. Just three years old.

Come on, help me wipe the mud and grass clippings from her headstone. Her parents can't drive, so they don't visit often. Don't worry about stepping on her—I felt that way the first time, too, but she doesn't mind. Come, touch it feel the stone and put your fingers on the little engraved cross.

Let me tell you what happened to her and what happened to me.

You wouldn't have expected it: a white-pillared church filled with Burmese refugees at the funeral of a three-year-old. These kinds of things aren't supposed to happen. Three-year-olds aren't supposed to die.

I stood there with my husband, surrounded by these refugees, our neighbors. I watched April Paw's family in front of the casket, watched her 24-year-old mom. I was tired—weary with grief and pregnancy. Yes, I did expect that, but I didn't expect the timing. The timing was painfully ironic.

After the service, we snapped flags on our cars and drove with flashers on through a downpour. At the cemetery chapel—over there, see it?—Neh Meh, the mother, was one of the last to enter. She crouched near the doorway, wearing the same silver sandals that had walked hospital halls for three and a half weeks. She held a fleece blanket around her shoulders and stared into the wind.

I'm not sure who paid for the casket or if there was a fee for using the chapel. But they did tell us there would be no graveside service because there

wasn't enough money for that. I stood out there as everyone left and listened to the funeral man's diplomatic words. "I don't recommend watching the burial because it will be very industrial." I thought, *Are you telling me this mother should leave before her child is in the ground?*

After a minute a backhoe groaned around the chapel, dangling April's coffin in a concrete liner. We decided to follow, cutting across the grass. I held the hand of a little girl who, for all I knew, had seen people buried in Burma or Thailand, who may have had dozens of unsanitized memories filed away, taffeta dress and hair bow aside.

By the time we got here, April's coffin was in the hole. You could see the edge of Anli's coffin—you know, the Bhutanese boy—in the plot beside hers. The backhoe had disappeared, so as we waited, we threw handfuls of dirt onto the coffin.

A car pulled up and Neh Meh climbed out with a plastic grocery bag. She came near the open grave and threw the bag inside. It opened a little when it hit. I saw a Coke, a couple of packaged snacks, and an embroidered white dress. I don't know if that is a Karenni tradition or what, burying favorite things with the dead. But it made me cry, those snacks, and especially that dress with the tags still on it.

I'd never been to the hospital as much as I was that month before April died. Yeah, it was hard. Seeing her on a ventilator was hard, watching her gag and turn red as nurses drew coughs out of her crowded throat. I spent hours coordinating rides for Neh Meh and her husband and talking to the family about logistics and medical details. No, I don't speak their language, not a word. But they were my neighbors—what else could I do?

The worst day was when the hospital said her father should come. I got in the car and drove in the rain to pick up Klaw Reh mid-shift. He worked at a meat packing plant. Yes, those still exist—I never thought about it either until I met our neighbors—lots of them worked there because the pay was good. He met me at the employee entrance with his lunch bag, wearing heavy work boots and long pants rolled up to keep them off the floor.

There was something about that man's face. I knew he'd run from atrocities in Burma, just because he was an ethnic minority, but there was such peace, something so other-worldly in his eyes.

We found April in the pediatric ICU, wearing only a diaper. She looked like a baby doll, the way her legs were splayed apart. She was on the ventilator again—we could see her chest rise and fall with its even spitzing. About twenty wires were taped to her head, and a bolted tube came out her skull, taking blood and fluids from her brain.

The minute she saw me, Neh Meh said, "I want to go home." She was panicked; I guess running away seemed like the best option. I didn't know what to say, so I tried to buy time. I stood near April as a nurse checked her, but then I started to black out. I lay down on a couch in the waiting room, my hand over my womb. It was one of those ironic moments—while I lay there with my hand over my baby, just four weeks old, Neh Meh watched her baby's life drain away.

A few hours later, they wanted to have a meeting. Mother, father, and I sat with the doctor, a chaplain, and, finally, a couple of translators. The doctor explained that early that morning, April had been moving abnormally, so they'd done a scan that showed severe bleeding in her brain. Another diplomatic guy: he said brain damage was extensive, but they wanted to see if there was potential for healing.

Klaw Reh got bold; he wasn't going to sit there and let this American doctor fool around. "And what if she doesn't heal?" he asked through the translator. I don't remember the doctor's answer.

They were in my dreams that night, over and over. When I closed my eyes, I saw April's eyes—when the nurse spread her eyelids and shined a pen light in them, there'd been no pupil dilation or movement. They were just brown and black and dead. It's been four years now and those eyes still haunt me.

I remember lots of prayers. The Karenni have strong faith, like other minorities that have been persecuted by the Burmese government. I wish you could have visited our horseshoe of apartment buildings on a humid summer night and heard the Karen and Chin and Zomi singing hymns with the doors and windows open, or come to a prayer meeting and sat with sixty people in a tiny living room.

They prayed for April Paw from the beginning. After she was hospitalized, I went to the two-bedroom place Neh Meh, Klaw Reh, and their girls shared with Neh Meh's parents, three sisters, one brother-in-law, and a niece. I took off my sandals like they do and sat on the floor. They cover the floors with these woven plastic mats, and their homes always smell starchy and warm, like cooked rice. They don't have much furniture, but always hang things like baptism certificates and school and wedding photographs and calendars high on the walls.

I read in the Bible about a man named Jairus, who had a daughter who

died. When Jesus heard about it, he laughed. "She's not dead," he said. "She's only sleeping." On that prayer meeting night, I sat there and prayed this would be true for April Paw, some kind of resurrection. That was hard, trying to have enough faith to believe it possible, or trying to understand why all this had happened—a blood infection, then a mobile infectious cluster in a little girl's heart.

But prayers and faith don't always change things. Two days after that awful day in the ICU, the phone rang around midnight, when we were already asleep. It was the family's pastor. April wasn't sleeping; April was dead.

My husband and I sat on our bed as I tried to answer questions from the family. I'd been prepared for this; we'd talked about funeral arrangements a couple days before, but it still felt surreal, especially with the family's wails. Especially on top of that little stirring inside me—I couldn't feel my baby yet, but you know how a mama can tell without seeing or feeling.

I hung up and we prayed. How? Well, I guess it was the only thing we knew to do, kind of like instinct. Kind of like, things already didn't make sense, so how could we leave our only comfort. Then we turned off the lights and tried to sleep, which is hard when you are angry and just want to cry. Thunder rumbled deep, and somehow it was comforting, because though I didn't understand God then, I felt that he was present and that he was weeping too.

You know how when someone dies, we share memories about them? It's like swapping recipes and baseball cards—that's the best comparison I can think of. So here's my memory. It gets me every time, like her picture on the funeral pamphlet I carry in my journal.

Once April had to fast before a procedure. I was at the hospital, keeping Neh Meh company. She climbed on a chair and put a Thai movie in the DVD player to distract her daughter from her hunger. I asked her, "Do you know Thai too?" She smiled and said, "Only a little."

It was a shared room, divided by a curtain. On the other side was a boy about April's age. During our movie, a nurse came in to see him. I'm not sure why—maybe to change a bandage or give him a shot—but the boy was afraid, I could tell that. His breaths shuddered, and I couldn't see, but I imagined he was in his mother's arms. He said, "I love you, Mommy. I love you. I love you. I love you." He said it over and over, louder and stronger, like it should take away his hurt. Like love could change things. Like love could take away his pain.

Neh Meh heard the boy too, because she crawled into the hospital bed with

April and they snuggled as close as they could with her wires and monitors. She was wearing a striped gown and wispy black hair fell in her eyes. She looked up into her mama's face, and as well as she could with partial paralysis, she smiled.

After my son was born, I understood how Neh Meh must have felt when April smiled at her like that. While nursing him those first months, he looked at me in total trust, like he thought I could do anything, like he thought I could raise the dead. And that was unsettling, because I knew that wasn't true and that sometimes even God didn't.

Kids have such trust, you know—not like us, all smothered by politics and headlines. "Babies know God in the womb"—another refugee friend told me that. I want to trust that April is running on streets of gold, that the little girl laughter I've heard in my head is real. And I want my boy to always believe there's a love in this world that can raise the dead, even when everything shouts "no," even when refugee kids get to America and die.

Maybe I'll bring him here and tell him about April Paw too, just like I told you. Maybe we'll crouch here and look at this headstone and just try to figure it all out. Or maybe there won't be contradictions for him, and he'll just dance over her bones, sure that she's dancing too.

MATTHEW ROTH

Doctrine

At first it's satisfying—no use denying the fact—how good the hammer feels in the hand as the soft wood yields to the glamorous bite of the bright finish nail. Even mistakes prove opportune chances to review technique and soon smooth board abuts smooth board, though your knees are sore and your left thumb throbs from an errant blow. Who will blame you when, near the end of your task, the last nail grotesquely bends, like you, at the waist? And though you know you should pry it free, the box of nails is out of reach and the sun, all day attacking your back, won't dim. Screw that. Just swing the hammer and pound that sucker flat.

KATIE MANNING

The Book of Endings

all that remains of Second Kings

the city wall was broken

the city had become food for the people to eat

royal blood fled for fear

the city scattered bound with bronze to Babylon

honor put aside his prison clothes and ate the poorest people

an official king came and said settle down and it will go well with you

he set fire to the city

CHRISTOPHER SNOOK

These many are all ikons

The world is ornamented with ikons shining like shook foil dripping fragments of gold leaf from push carts in the public park urban nomads weeping myrrh

each body a perambulating reliquary

These many with me now are all ikons sad-eyed saints smoke-smeared and yellowing, damaged metal-clad and wax-spattered

O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek to be consoled so often

Like treasures buried in a field these many obscure, concealed some poor as God as loneliness

Everything is burning, she said

Sooner or later all come to the mountain unshod

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SALLY THOMAS's poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in *Dappled Things*, *Kindred*, *Relief*, *Ruminate*, *The Windhover*, and numerous other journals. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Fallen Water* (2015) and *Richeldis of Walsingham* (2016), both from Finishing Line Press. Recently, her poem "Deer Apples" was cited for Honorable Mention in *Ruminate*'s 2016 Janet McCabe Poetry Prize competition, while her short story, "A Noise Like a Freight Train," won *Relief Journal*'s Editor's Choice Award in Fiction for 2017.

STEVEN WINGATE's print books include the short story collection *Wifeshopping* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008) and the prose poem collection *Thirty-One Octets: Incantations and Meditations* (WordTech, 2014). His interactive memoir *daddylabyrinth* premiered in 2014 at the ArtScience Museum of Singapore, and his interactive novel *Boulderpeople* is forthcoming from Choice of Games in 2018. He is currently an associate professor of English at South Dakota State University.

The Windhover

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