

Crutch

by [Sydney Lea](#) in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

Politics, our children,
Some ball team—ordinary
Palaver among old friends
At a B-plus restaurant,
Till between the soups and the blood-

Red meats I mentioned a nun.
She wanders the crack dens of bitter-
End Brooklyn, forging through places
Grown hot as embers with sin.
I needed to call it so,

Though I had no axe to grind.
She seeks “the least of these,”
For which I voiced only wonder.
And yet when one woman countered,
“Your faith’s no more than a crutch,”

A devil put cruelest things
In my head. I didn’t speak them,
Mindful of words of James:
How our tongues are harder to govern
Than bloodhorse or masted ship.

How they need to be governed no matter.
Though faith didn’t need my defense,
Believe me, that moment of choice,
My silence, didn’t come easy
To one who for years was addicted

To thought he called free, unsponsored,

Till all that freedom produced
A pair of paper slippers,
Blue robe, steel gurney with straps.
In a bright-white lockdown ward,

Librium'd, flat on his face,
He groped for the crutch of grace,
With which he has hobbled his way
From the Pit, as the Psalmist calls it,
Up to a wider place.

That seemed a choice as well:
He chose to believe in salvation.
As still I hope to choose,
Though the crack house carries on,
The pit bull snarls at his station,

Urine steams in the hallways,
Stars on high are a puzzle,
And my nun can't account for a thing.
There's none of us who can,
Wrapped in our other addictions.

Yet there's no accounting either
For what I felt this Easter:
I heard from the gospel of John
About Mary Magdalene.
Woman, why are you weeping?

So the Christ is said to have asked her
Before he named her: Mary.
To which she answered: Rabboni!
I recalled a state beyond crying,
All my tears sunk into the bedclothes.

A voice announced, It's over.
Then I felt the rush of undying.

In Hebrew, *rabboni* means teacher.
You can look it up in a book.
Does my friend believe these stories?

She doesn't. Nor I, exactly.
Not a word. Not a literal word.
I believe them inexactly,
In a way that beggars our speech.
Something taught me something.

It's no use to speak of it glibly,
There's no accounting for grace.
Why then did it prove such a battle
For me to say nothing that evening?

The tongue as I say was hot
As a coal, was keen as a sword?
I might lose it. Caustic. Unruly.
How it hates to speak of faith,
And can only speak of faith.

Which is after all merely a word.