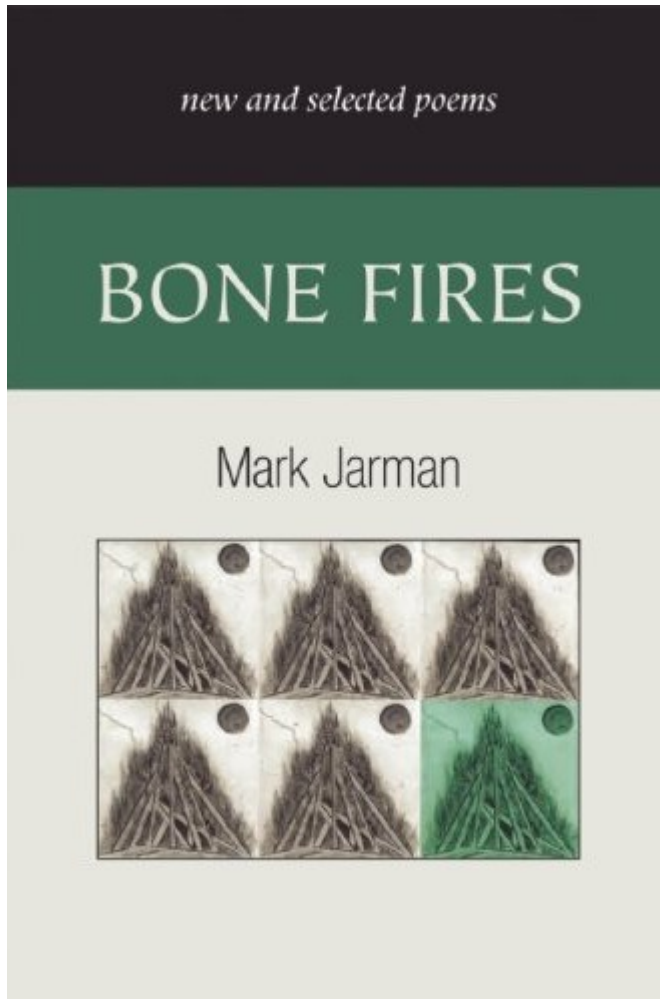


# The tug of a prayer chain

By [Katherine Willis Pershey](#)

June 17, 2011

## In Review



## Bone Fires

by Mark Jarman  
Sarabande

Last spring I helped the church

I was in the process of leaving prepare for its 100th anniversary celebration. One of my tasks was to track down contact information for the people on the invitation list. It wasn't exactly what I went to seminary to do, but I'm a librarian's daughter and otherwise generally disposed to exemplary web-searching skills.

One of the people on my list

was Mark Jarman, the son of a former pastor. He stood out, even on a list that included a fair share of interesting people: he's a poet who teaches English at Vanderbilt University. I was slightly disappointed, though not surprised, when the news came that he would not be attending the homecoming weekend.

I probably would have forgotten

about Jarman if not for a trinity of coincidences that unfolded one week a year later. A member of the church sent me a copy of "The Prayer Chain," a poem from Jarman's 2011 collection *Bone Fires*.

A friend unaware of my church connection to Jarman sent me a link to another poem of his featured on Writers Almanac.

Then my new local public

library set up its National Poetry Month display by the circulation desk. I stopped by to stock up on Dora videos and Berenstain Bears books for my three-year-old, and I was delighted and bemused to happen upon *Bone Fires*.

It's a lovely collection of

poetry. Of course, I could no more dispassionately critique it than I could my own mother's memoir. I am altogether too close to one of Jarman's occasional subjects: South Bay Christian Church.

"The Prayer Chain" even

name-drops the church. The poem is a meditation on the mystery and efficacy of that string of borderline gossipy phone calls congregations initiate when one of their members is sick or injured. "You might shrug/ At this quaint belief and its presumption," Jarman writes, "Unless you'd felt, as they each had, its tug."

I've not only felt the tug of a prayer chain; I have tugged on and been tugged by *that very prayer chain*. Some of the same church ladies peopled it during my tenure as in 1961, when Jarman's mother paused during her dishwashing to cast on a new row of prayers. The joyful news of my daughter's birth was conveyed through that rustproof chain.

"In Church With Hart Crane"

takes place within the church's sanctuary. The young Jarman reads Crane's poems during a church service--"knowing God could see/ And so could my father speaking in the pulpit." The poem isn't just about that pulpit; it's about the relationship between father and son, between scripture and poetry, between an aspiring writer and the chastened poet he became. But as one who inhabited that sanctuary for a season, I'm undone by these words:

There  
was a sea beyond  
The  
holy space behind my father's back,  
Beyond  
the baptistry that cupped its portion,  
Unsalty,  
tepid, blessed to rinse off sin.

It was a revelation to learn that the humble little pulpit in that scrappy, loving church has been honored by a poet's ink. Before I was a preacher, I was an aspiring writer of poems. I always sensed that there were poems to be written about the people and place I served, though I also sensed that I wasn't the one to write them.

I wish every congregation could have a Mark Jarman in its midst, because a poet's tithe of attention and language is as valuable as the widow's mite. *Bone Fires*--with its meditations on faith and doubt, hope and silence, and the sacred and desecrated fragments of God's world--is a gift to the whole church and the whole creation.