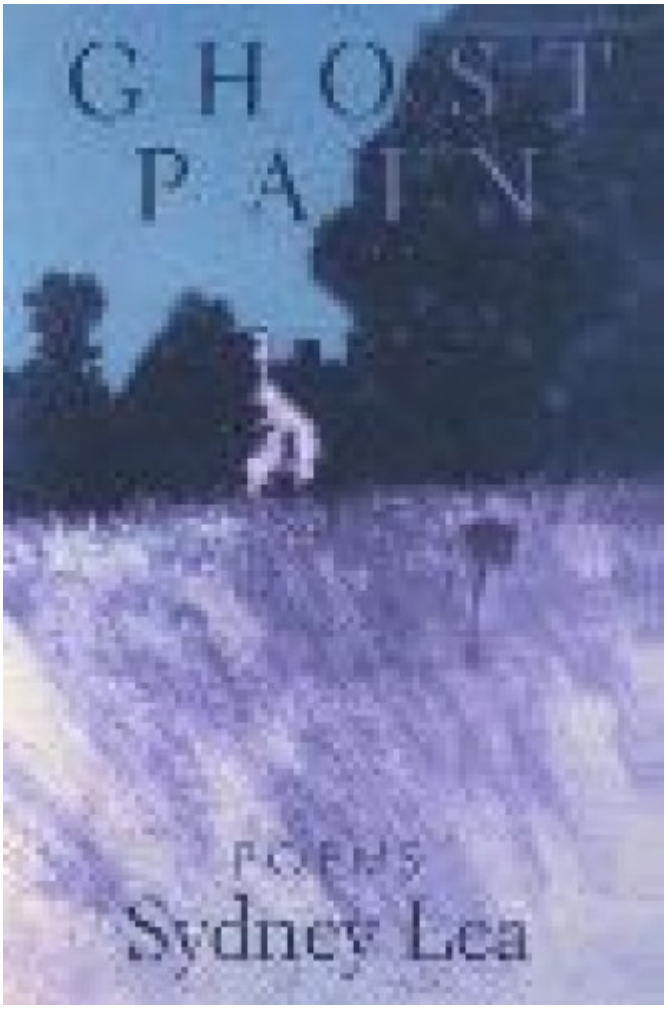
Hints of redemption

By Jill Peláez Baumgaertner in the February 21, 2006 issue

In Review



Ghost Pain

Sydney Lea
Sarabande

Deaths and Transfigurations: Poems

Paul Mariani
Paraclete

Poetry reviews appear in religious journals more rarely than poems, and poems are rare enough. This absence is not because poetry of interest to readers of these journals is in short supply. It is instead probably because, like the rest of the reading world, pastors, theologians and engaged laypersons rarely read poetry—maybe because it requires a different set of skills from reading prose, maybe because these readers choose not to embrace the indirection of metaphor, and maybe also because they have read examples of bad religious poetry that make the whole endeavor seem like a waste of time.

Even some good poetry is gaining a bad reputation these days because of certain theoretical influences that have made inaccessibility a popular trait. One recent

winner of a prestigious poetry award admits that the strongest influences on his work are Julia Kristeva, Slavoj Zizek, Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Lacan, none of whom write poetry themselves, but all of whom have left lasting imprints on literary theory. This phenomenon, of the poet grounded more in a tradition of philosophy or psychoanalysis or feminism than in the tradition of poetry and poets (one T. S. Eliot described in his admirable essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”) is, unfortunately, creating a class of poets speaking not even to each other.

Of the dozen volumes of verse that have come across my desk in the past few months, these two are the strongest and most appealing. That one of these poets, Sydney Lea, has appeared in the pages of the Christian Century over the past two years has been a matter of delight. The primary criterion for selecting poems for these pages is that they must be interesting. For a poem to capture our attention it must upset the usual ways of seeing or hearing and transform the ordinary so that it delights and surprises the reader. Poetry is an attempt to name experience, to create feeling and to express the otherwise inexpressible. It does so through images, metaphor, sound effects, rhythm and form. A poem must put the reader inside of an experience so that it is impossible for her to be just an observer. A poem must make the reader a participant in the experience. A poem must say to a reader, “Pay attention!”

In publishing Lea, we have invariably broken our guideline on length: a Lea poem is rarely under 20 lines. His poems are often torrents of words, creating longer lines and therefore longer poems, although he also uses short-lined quatrains in some of his verse. Heavy in images and strong on narrative, his poems require space; in fact, they often tell stories that catch you by surprise with their striking oddness and their pattern of shifting the topic from degeneracy to hints of redemption.

The second part of *Ghost Pain* is titled “A Man Walked Out,” with an epigraph from Psalm 40: “and He hath put a new song in my mouth.” But the journey from the first poems to the “new song” of the psalm is, in e. e. cummings’s words, “banged with terror.” A suite of ten poems, it begins in depression and fear:

> A man walked out much later into something awful
> every thing
> reminding him of some other thing
> and this each last thing and that private last other

equally laden with freight of dread And yet the dread
was not
a common or garden type

Even amidst this alarm and dread, even in spite of the man's "bodily deafness / and his longstanding other sorts of torpor," there is a small sign, maybe even a still voice, at any rate "a tiny bell . . . there to be heard it seemed heard in its minuscule clangor." Though the man cannot quite remember what that tiny bell is, he responds to it with lessening fear. In the next poem, called "666: Father of lies," he fights the devil, but once again at the end, a "delicate ringing in our man's left ear. / His tinnitus? His angelus?" Each poem in the series traces this trajectory from the knowledge of total depravity to the recognition of grace. At one point he asks, "Where did hope ever come from? Knowing the facts, / how might anyone ever opt for joy?"

His mother would go down into the earth with Speed
[their dog],
her liver large as a toilet seat, a bag
girt to her turgid flank to catch her waste.
His father would go with actual speed: infarction,
said someone to all his dazed children. The manchild
that summer

even with nightfall, even with swimmings up
of planet, star-sprawled wet with sweat and despair.
And now again. This was the tableau Forever,
which some dull teacher made him study forever.
There must be more to life, he thought back then.

The poem ends, if not with images of resurrection, then with at least the hint of a pleasant freshness in the air and the rustling of a spirit not yet recognized as holy.

A change seemed bound to come: not his mother risen
intact, not his father, his heart and innards quick,
but something. The passing of birds. More scent than
sound.

A part of the process of conversion is the conviction of guilt, and so halfway through the cycle of poems the man remembers and relives in graphic images his years of predatory behavior. All of the faces “line up on this new horizon to glare at him.” Another poem describes a moment of road rage conquered, when he for the first time through the sheer act of will simply forgives and pulls over to the side of the road. In the penultimate poem of the series the man for the first time experiences grace in its fullness:

> . . . in that moment, the man felt forgiven
> for each unpardonable word and deed,
> even the worst, which he couldn’t name.
> Everything out in the Yankee woods
> recalled the hour of its creation,
> and even dying, declared it good.

In the final poem the man walks out into the October landscape one Sunday at noon (here the familiar bells faintly chime in the distance) with the memory of the previous evening’s psalm reading in his head: “Make me to hear joy and gladness that the bones / which thou has broken may rejoice.” His prayer is on his lips: “Forgive my little postures.” And then he catches a scent of something he cannot define on a wind blowing softly to him, as if fanned by the wings of a passing hawk.

> All easy parable was gross.
> And yet the hawk was coasting now,
> with assuréd wing was fanning
> this wind that softly flew
> to him, that coursed a flank of hill on which he stood
> Selah
> he actually stood, it seemed a miracle, or poem,
> a grand ongoing one he smelt as much as felt
> and touched as much as heard—a bird retreating
> and in retreating moving
> the man thus quietly home.

So moves the holy spirit, his holy muse, nudging him toward miracle and poetry.

What Lea has accomplished in “A Man Walked Out” is terribly difficult to do. The Christian poet attempts one of the most challenging endeavors, revitalizing the language, the common language, which all of us have heard for years both in scripture and in the church. This is language which is often filled with clichés, with formula phrases, with theological lingo. It is language which has become so familiar that it is invisible. It is why at one point in the final poem in the series Lea writes:

> . . . one hadn’t known god
> (though damn the terminology)
> was all he needed till god was all he had.

Language, especially familiar language, seems almost insufficient to capture the transcendent, to reflect truth in all of its complexity. But language is what the poet has to work with, and so the poet is forced to take sometimes exaggerated, sometimes extreme steps to pierce the mundane, breaking up lines, using words in odd new contexts, relying on sound effects and packing the stanzas with sensuous images and fragments from scripture, and the common language of faith suddenly takes on new meaning through these odd juxtapositions.

For Lea and for any poet who is trying to capture religious truth in language, the poem is a miracle, a journey home for all of us who, because we are human, have at some time or other been terribly lost.

One of the epigraphs in Paul Mariani’s book is from Flannery O’Connor: “. . . if the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious, if he looks upon us as beings existing in a created order to whose laws we freely respond, then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself. His kind of fiction will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery.” Mariani penetrates stunning surfaces to get at the mystery beyond, as in “Solar Ice”:

> Father lifted the host above his head & prayed:
> a small white sun around which everything
> seemed to coalesce, cohere & choir. But
> as I raised my head, the thought
> of some old insult likewise reared

its head, and in that instant the arctic
hatred flared, shutting out my world
& spring, along with, yes, my lovely wife & sons,
a no & no & yet another no, until I caught
myself refuse the proffered gift of Love.

At once the host diminished to a tiny o:
an empty cipher, like some solar disc
imploding on itself. Only my precious
hate remained, the self-salt taste
of some old wound rubbed raw again,
a jagged O at the center of my world.
Ah, so this is hell, or some lovely ether
foretaste of it, alone at ninety north,
with darkness everywhere, & ice & ice
& ice & more ice on the way, and this
sweet abyss between myself & You.

Mariani has said elsewhere that what he is after "is discovering the imaginative possibilities of the spirituality with which I grew up, I mean my Roman Catholicism." He goes about this through creating surfaces which intensely engage the senses and then moving beyond them to the core questions: What does it mean to be human? Who is God? How can we make sense of suffering? Why does God sometimes seem so silent? Mariani is not satisfied with pat answers. He is looking for incarnational and even sacramental connections with his subject matter. The incarnation is Spirit becoming flesh, and that's what the best Christian poets must work at doing in their poetry—bringing the spirit into flesh.

In another of his poems, "Making Capital," he attends Sunday mass with his wife after six weeks of "nada, zip & zero," a dry spell in his poetry, a time when he "could not make those protean shapes sit still, though / God knows I've tried." The sermon is uninspiring, the congregation is asleep, but suddenly the poet catches a glimpse of something beyond the ordinary, flat experience of worship in a "place [in which] the Good News . . . dropped down some black hole." The shadow he sees at the altar is of Isaac carrying the wood for his own sacrifice, and this figure is transformed in an instant into Christ on the cross: one son saved, the other sacrificed in order to rise "from the stink / of death, promising to lift us with him."

I looked around
the church, knowing what I know of death: the death of
mother,
father, friends, the death of promise, of vision run
aground,
death of self, of all we might have been, death of that
ideal other,
the bitter end of all. Nada, zip . . . Except for that loop in
time, when
something gave: a blip of light across the mind's dark
eye, if you
can call it that.

That flash of insight, that glimmer of hope comes to us sometimes in fragments, the poet seems to suggest, a "loop in time," when in spite of our spiritual drought and the church's ineffective attempts to bring Christ to us, he comes anyway.

Mariani has mastered the forms of poetry. While he writes primarily in free verse, he also uses rhyme to unify his poems, he often organizes his lines into quatrains (sometimes rhymed, sometimes not), and he has a firm sense of what a poetic line can do. In short, even his free verse is disciplined; he wastes no words, and the words he chooses are appropriate and beautiful, contributing sound to sense. With "New York, Christmas Eve, 1947" he has even written a successful villanelle, a beastly difficult form because of its use of repetition of both rhymes and lines. The last three stanzas provide a glimpse:

Under the tree, in the reddish-blue glare,
a father lays train tracks in cottony snow,
while outside snow falls through the darkening air.
So much to do, the father's hands say. So much to care
for, so much to fix. And oh cries the boy, and oh
cries the little toy train, which will soon disappear.

And oh, cries the mother, in the cold kitchen out there,
though the boy thinks, No one is crying. And the snow
goes on falling through the darkening air,
on the El and the people, who will soon disappear.

Poets are also able to provide a unique angle of vision for those whose imaginations have atrophied—and what could be more important to believers than the imagination? How can we carry on a theological conversation if our senses have not been trained and our imagination is dead? In fact, it is in the imagination that faith begins. How could it possibly be otherwise? Believers believe in what cannot be seen. We accept the miraculous as fact. We must have imaginations to be people of faith.

In “How It All Worked Out” Mariani imagines himself in his shroud in a long, dark “procession toward the ivory gate.” He describes an odd, dreamlike scene he wants to flee but cannot as he approaches the gate, unsure whether “friend or foe [is] shouting for us up there in the stands.” How it all works out is with a blinding light and a flood of memory as he stands on the threshold in utter silence. Here is a poem that surely upsets the ordinary way of seeing and hearing and that drags the reader into its visceral experience of judgment and the possible absence of grace.

Paraclete Press took much care in the production and publication of *Deaths and Transfigurations*, including striking engravings by Barry Moser, winner of the American Book Award for design and illustration. That there are publishers like Paraclete and Sarabande, willing to commit precious resources to publish poetry—not the most lucrative of genres—and especially poetry that communicates truths “hidden with Christ in God” is remarkable. The poet Sherod Santos says, “It may be we’ve wandered so aimlessly, so unsure of why or where we’re going, because there’s no longer anywhere to wander to, not even the future.” Contemporary writers often reflect this sad reality, and it is helpful to point to (and to publish) the writers who grapple courageously with this dilemma, writers whose imaginations collide with the grim implications of life in a culture which has forgotten the future. The imagination and its image-making, word-creating, storytelling functions now and then afford us life-giving glimpses of the transcendent.