

Shane McCrae reimagines the life of a wounded angel

## Poetry that continues the rich literary tradition of angels and offers a new, illuminating perspective

by [Nick Ripatrazone](#) in the [May 19, 2021](#) issue



The Wounded Angel, by Hugo Simberg (Photo by Hannu Aaltonen / Finnish National Gallery)

In *The Wounded Angel*, a 1903 painting by the Finnish artist Hugo Simberg, two boys carry a young angel on a stretcher. Bent, she holds onto the rails. Her forehead is bandaged; swipes of blood mark one of her wings. Her eyes barely peek from below the bandage as she stares at her bare feet (or at the ground). The image elicits intrigue more than horror. How did she get hurt? Who gave her the snowdrops that she holds in her right hand, their white flowers drooping toward the dirt road below? Why does the boy in the back look directly at us?

Any image of an injured child, let alone an angelic one, compels empathy. But this painting is disarming for a more prosaic reason. It depicts humans caring for an angel. Shouldn't it be the other way around? Are angels not here, after all, to guard us? Mortals are in need of protection, not those closer to God.

While angels permeate popular culture, their biblical appearances are complex. Matthew describes how, right after Jesus drives the devil from the desert, "angels came and began to minister to Him" (4:11). In Mark's version of the temptation story, while Jesus "was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan," he was also among "the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him" (1:13). Matthew's version seems more logical: the angels tend to Jesus after his spiritual test. Mark's is more ambiguous and dramatic; we almost imagine the angels there with Jesus in the wilderness. They see his struggle.

[\*Sometimes I Never Suffered\*](#), the latest book by the poet Shane McCrae, enters a rich literary tradition of angels and still manages to offer a new, illuminating perspective. McCrae's ambitious work arises from a Christian perspective, one that is not wracked with doubt but steeled in wonder. In an interview published last year by *The Millions*, McCrae stated, "I find the mystery(ies) of God overpoweringly attractive—when thinking about God, one inhabits a space in which one can think forever."

McCrae's poetry occupies that space. Rather than pondering the existence of God, McCrae enters headlong into the radical nature of divine existence. His poetry mines the wild wonder of God, and he finds angels to be the most layered character. Like Jesus, they have a humanlike form. Their ubiquity in culture makes them easily dismissed—the perfect archetype, of course, for a skilled poet to reveal anew.

McCrae—who teaches poetry at Columbia University and is, like me, an editor at *Image* journal—stands in a long line of poets who write about angels. Rainer Maria Rilke's ten *Duino Elegies* were inspired by his stay in 1911-12 at Duino Castle in Italy, where he heard a voice call from the wind: "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' Orders?" Rilke knew then "that the god had spoken." That evening he wrote the first elegy in his series.

In it, Rilke's vision of angels counters the traditional Christian idea. He begins with that line from the storm but quickly turns toward danger:

and even if one of them pressed me  
suddenly to his heart: I'd be consumed  
in his more potent being. For beauty is nothing  
but the beginning of terror, which we can just barely endure,  
and while we stand in wonder it coolly disdains  
to destroy us. Every angel is terrifying.

Here terror seems like it might imply a sense of awe—perhaps we can't help but cower in terror when we are startled by divine presence.

But other work by the poet suggests a more frightening turn. In the short poem “The Angels,” Rilke writes “They all have tired mouths / And luminous, illimitable souls.” The angels “all resemble one another, / In God's garden they are silent / Like many, many intervals / In His mighty melody.” Rilke's angels are melancholy and even morose. They are troubled by very human concerns. Their silence in God's garden suggests a distance from the Divine; in being close to God, they are never touching, always distinct.

Angels' cultural ubiquity makes them the perfect archetype for a poet to reveal anew.

Angels also appear in the work of Jericho Brown, who won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. In “Prayer of the Backhanded” from Brown's first book of poems, *Please*, the narrator writes about how “the back of my daddy's hand . . . eliminated the air / Between itself and my cheek.” The poem is an elegy for his young self: “Bless / The boy who believes / His best beatings lack / Intention, the mark of the beast.” The poem builds toward the lines “God, save the man whose arm / Like an angel's invisible wing / May fly backward in fury / Whether or not his son stands near.”

The line “Like an angel's invisible wing” is a revealing choice in this context. Through this simile, Brown places the abusive father alongside a graceful being, and yet he also revises the body of the angel—and perhaps reminds us that it is often only the wings that physically separate us from those special beings.

McCrae continues this poetic tradition, pondering the duality of angels as both us and not us, divine and yet tantalizingly mortal. Our love for angels, even for McCrae, exists on the border of fear.

At the end of his 2019 book *The Gilded Auction Block*, McCrae includes an expansive poem called “The Hell Poem.” In a gesture toward the early lines of Dante’s *Inferno*, the poem’s narrator is hiking in the woods behind his apartment complex when he appears to faint. He descends to hell, where, among other oddities, “overhead I heard / Wingbeats.” What he thinks to be an angel speaks to him:

The wings you heard were my wings beating  
The feet you heard were my feet running  
I am a many in a one  
Hunting I join the sky to the earth  
As hunting I join life to death.

In reality, a demon is prodding him—a nod to the blurring of good and evil in Lucifer, the ultimate fallen angel.

McCrae’s *Sometimes I Never Suffered* places the angel at the center of his religious worldview. A “hastily assembled angel,” no less—and the recurrence of that phrase throughout the book feels a bit humorous and reflexive. The result, though, is neither satire nor parody. McCrae has created a unique and compelling poetic character whose existence offers authentic spiritual reflection.

A series of poems beginning with one called “The Hastily Assembled Angel Falls at the Beginning of the World” describes this angel’s origin. In heaven, other angels hammered him together quickly, for those angels “Had seen the creatures coming in the waves / Then covering the Earth.” Those creatures are humans, and the other angels didn’t want “to be forced / To live with them” so they decided to “Build their own angel but they hadn’t asked / Permission first.” The other angels were about to push the hastily assembled angel from heaven when they noticed that he didn’t have any wings, so they quickly made patchwork wings for him of red, white, and yellow. Despaired, the angel soon falls: “*clouds* was the last word / He heard the other angels shouting as / They shoved him” from heaven.

There’s a refreshing sense of theological play in McCrae’s approach to angels—and it reveals a sustained interest in taking faith seriously. “Theologically speaking, angels are not supposed to have free will,” he says in an interview with the *New Yorker*:

And so they're doing this thing that looks like a free decision in order to benefit themselves. But if they're angels and we take theological ideas about angels seriously, they can't be doing a free thing. God is allowing them to make this angel. God is allowing them to shove the angel out of heaven. God is allowing them to ask while they do it. And so the angels' relationship with God is a little complicated.

Throughout *Sometimes I Never Suffered*, McCrae considers a paradoxical theology of the body. Are we made in the image of God, or was Jesus in person made in the image of us? His language of "Humans being made / in the image not of God / Directly but of the angel" suggests that angels were almost an intermediary in creation.

Brian Bransfield, a priest of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia who is writing a book about angels, recently told me that he finds one of McCrae's lines particularly revealing: "and to resemble God / Is to resemble light." Bransfield first thinks of Thomas Aquinas, who in *Summa Theologica* writes that "angels are nearest to God, and resemble Him most." There is also an Augustinian echo in the angels being made light upon their creation. Elsewhere, McCrae reflects Paul Valéry's iconic poem "L'ange" when he writes that "at first the angel // Didn't see any resemblance" when "he / Saw his reflection in a pond."

Parallel to the hastily assembled angel's life among mortals, McCrae offers the surreal tale of Jim Limber—based on the real-life mixed-race adopted son of Jefferson Davis. Limber lived with Davis for a year before the Confederate president was captured. His adoption and the aftermath are the subject of much lore, and poets travel in the world of imagination. McCrae envisions Limber in the form of an angel. After Limber dies, he thinks he is only in a field. But the grass "Was giant wings it was angels' wings" that were "whipping my hands and face."

McCrae ponders the duality of angels: both us and not us, divine yet tantalizingly mortal.

"I always thought in Heaven I would be / An angel," Limber starts another poem, ending with the line: "Will I still be my body if it changes." Elsewhere he wonders if "Heaven was like my momma said it / Would be like gardens spread like blankets spread / Wide between rivers." He thinks of how they would joke about it during dinner, but now they are in heaven together, a place where "we could have white

things // And not be white.”

In heaven, Limber transcends his race and the judgments upon him for that race. Yet we sense a residual melancholy. Why would such peace require ascension?

Likewise, McCrae’s hastily assembled angel has a particular “loneliness”—but it comes with a “fascination / With human beings.” He had wandered through centuries and millennia, but “there’s // No hurry now though he was hurriedly / Once brought to being.” He resides in the confusion he once feared, “and though / He hadn’t ever really understood // His job he knew it had to do with seeing.” He saw that “everything would come / Together at the same time everything / Would fall apart and that was humans thinking // The world was meant for them and other things / Were accidental.”

The hastily assembled angel is more than entertained by our folly. He longs, like us, for a sense of understanding—for a sense of his own creator. He is, after all, a wounded angel: one whose wound was his genesis. He was flung down toward us for the explicit purpose of being with us when the other angels found us trite and unclean. The angel wonders “if he could / Have been a better angel or have done / Better the job he did if once / They’d made him the other angels had allowed // Him to meet God.”

He gets his chance in the book’s final poem, “The Ladder to Heaven.” It was a ladder “God had many times proposed / The prophets build,” and yet the prophets “never built it,” for they knew God “was testing them” while also “teasing them.”

The angel builds the ladder himself; he constructs it “all the way to Heaven.” But first he “flew back down to the bottom since he wanted / To climb it properly.” He wanted, perhaps, to climb that ladder like us: one rung at a time, with only faith guiding us toward that place beyond the clouds.

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