

Prayer Book
for the
New Heretic

by

COLIN POPE



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Homily after Uncovering the Scrapped Blueprints of Early Designs of Man

The story goes that a one-armed monk wheeling his squeaky cart down the sub-basement rows tripped and toppled a few millennia of Coptic parchment and scrolls like brittle, dust-caked dominos. You know the rest: the latex-gloved clean-up, the plucky tortoiseshelled academic obsessive who couldn't believe her bloodshot eyes. And we imagined with seven fingers a hand. A furred ossicone on the medial brow ridge. A tail made, apparently, of wood. The college of cardinals

later confirmed the lord's aborted plans, as well as the secret deletion of mermaids, centaurs, dinosaurs prior to the invention of organisms who could realistically wield belief. What springs to mind is that old saw Nietzsche proposed about a "God of the Gaps"; you can almost see a deity squeezed in between subatomic matrices, neglecting the reversible chalkboard and formulae in favor of blinking another pointless star into existence. Tell you what I'd do: plate our bones

in gold so by the age we know where and how to touch each other we're dinged as counterfeit coins beneath our flesh. So it's worth opening ourselves up. Or so death appears a revelation of Heavenly Beauty, how we'd position our skeletons aboveground on the edges of cliffs to desiccate and catch the sunrise in a gleaming haystack of time. I'd do away with the heart. I'd tincture the hair a chlorophyllous green. In 27 AD, the Romans of Fidenae loved murder to such a degree

they erected an amphitheatre for their gladiators out of knotted, weather-beaten timber which summarily collapsed, deleting 20,000 bloodthirsty screamers. See? We are too mortal to distinguish comedy from tragedy, intelligent from incompetent design. Laugh at the platypus if you want, but realize it could have been your king, could still be, if only its webbed foot had the strength to raise a bejeweled scepter. How would you decide the length of a life if you could contemplate forever? Opening up

your build-a-man kit to find a few pieces missing—a toe, the third eye, a purple, chevron-shaped organ to house the soul—it might be possible to overlook the bickering of multiple unfinished dimensions and focus your frustrations on where to put the spleen, on mashing the wisdom teeth sideways into the skull. Like the Germans, your resources are limited only by your ability to prioritize; World War II, they spent 2 million marks on the Krummlauf, a bent-barreled rifle that could shoot around corners.

Prayer for a Baby Trapped in a Well

The truth is the child simply crawled from one womb
into another. Chilly, static quietude: if it was scary,

this was only because the maternal lub-dub thrummed
from further off. Drills and roughnecks, stubborn earth

they call “caliche,” and a state of perpetual rescue,
just as before. Sometimes, I’ve gotten so tired of crying

its stoppage ached like a peeled nailbed.
I’ve lowered my pail and bucket by dim lamplight,

searching my dry depths for pain. Lord,
it happens to everyone; of a just-captured Indian elephant, one

Sir Emerson Tennent observed, “its violence sank
to utter prostration, and it lay on the ground uttering

choking cries, with tears trickling down its cheeks”:
this, the first proof animals could weep. Yet a few months later,

it was just a beast festooned with merry riggings,
dislodging boulders from the clutches of the dirt. I pray

we each stand again like that, on topsoil,
cooing to the Cypress leaves and spiderwebs. Fallen,

cried-out, then reassigned beyond our feeling. I pray
we trumpet not for the whipping absence behind us, but

the starlight ahead, which will trick us again
into gazing heavenward, where our hapless feet refuse to tread.

[Test Prayer When You Suspect You're Actually in a Version of Hell]

A papercut, a skinned knuckle, a toenail peeled back to a pink headstone: what does the episodic unfurling of pain have in common with death? Nothing, let's say; I'd believed the spectrum ran from fuse-blown axoaxonic ecstasy at one end to eternal, claustrophobic darkness at the other but it turns out oblivion marks its hatch dead-center, as though we from the womb might painlessly emerge into merely another amniotic suspension, afloat like a brain in a skull.

Lord, I've shaken my head and hurried under green awnings during sunshowers, I've clung to the gunwale and heaved seasickness into the ocean, guts long since empty of bile. But watch this: first I etch a hard-angled S into the iodine-yellow paint of the bathroom stall, and then another, sideways, and it's a swastika. Or this: those first two sixes in the picnic table, and the knife poised to curlicue another. If it doesn't hurt, tell me why I can make it last forever? Tell me what soul, deprived completely the foolish runnels of its viscera and nociceptors, wouldn't yawn when hurt quakes and whimpers to get away? We get stabbed with pitchforks around here lord, and there's a lot more on the line than an imp's job approval.

I could pick myself from between the devil's teeth and find a smile, I think, and maybe even grace in the steeling to soldier on through those, your death camps, your gulags. But here, when in desperate need I watch the stars as if they were actually there and wish up at the heavens for something to please offer solace against the worries and losses of my loved ones, I've begun to wonder which deity chose to divide bleeding from sadness, the harm from the harmed. I've begun to wonder if I'm praying in the wrong direction.

Testimonial (Travel Anxiety)

Fate:
the screw mounting
a stop sign to the wall
in my teenage bedroom.
That squealing when I drilled it in
like an intersection which never knew
how important it really was.
My first time on an airplane I sat next to a middle-aged woman
who'd also
never flown,
both of us alone and
avoiding a discussion of reasons we loved
being alive.
I was going home
and if she'd asked
how I got away to begin with
I wouldn't have blamed her.
But this is how adulthood happens:
you wake up one day and forget
it was a secret
how you were born,
how secrets once
threw themselves down to wait for your waking
like pennies on a sidewalk.
So gone
you can't even remember finding them.
The reason I never left
I'd say
was I didn't know I could
until
I crashed into the space where people wait
politely
for answers which never come.