

## POETRY

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Jonathan Fletcher

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### **My Uncle's Still in Vietnam**

I'll never know who my Uncle Mack was until  
he comes back from Vietnam, and for now,  
he's resting easily beneath the small plot  
he carefully picked at All Saints Cemetery.

When he emerges from the foreign foliage that  
swallowed so many of his buddies, I'll learn  
why he smoked a pack of Lucky Strikes a  
day, refused to eat at Vietnamese restaurants.

When he returns, viny bits of Vietnam atop his  
uniform, I'll know not to ask him if he saw an  
F-100D drop napalm on some verdant village,  
jungle canopies drenched with Agent Orange.

I'll also know not to ask what he and his VFW  
buddies joked about, cried about, at Post 3792  
until he dies yet again and, burying him, I  
weep, mourn all I wished to know yet didn't.

## Touched by God

*Lord, you have probed me, you know me: you know when I sit and stand...Behind and before[,] you encircle me...From your presence, where can I flee?*

Psalm 139:1-2a, 5a, 7b (NABRE)

### Omniscience

My abuser, the priest of our parish, a friend of my family, knew me well yet misused that knowledge: gifted me models of my favorite planes, asked for favors in return, each bigger than the last. Scared to say no, I feared him, as though he were all-knowing, I, his mere creation.

### Omnibenevolence

On Sunday mornings, when alone with me in the sacristy, he fondled me over my alb, assured me touch is never wrong. Since I, like the other altar servers, had been raised to trust the Church, to treat clergy like the all-good God, I dared never bear witness against him.

### Omnipotence

The almighty force in my life, he not once showed a sign of contrition, never publicly confessed his sins, instead threatened me with blame and shame. So, I told not a soul of his transgressions, terrified of his God-like wrath, his control over my body and thoughts.

## Omnipresence

Even when he was nowhere near, years after he'd died, I still sensed his presence, all he did to me, does to me still, difficult to forgive, impossible to forget. Each sin of his against me an unwanted yet indelible part of my life, felt in body and spirit, as if the touch of God.

### Missing Gideon

My hotel stays never felt complete without  
a keycard that failed on the first attempt.  
Or a thermostat that either chilled the  
room or warmed it until it was hot.  
Never in-between. Or a Gideon Bible  
I'd find inside the drawer of the  
beside table. Who said I needed God?

Most times, I'd frown, shake my head, roll  
my eyes, and shut the drawer. *No, thank  
you, Gideon!* But I'd sometimes pick  
up the hardback book. The thinnest paper  
I've ever felt. Cover imprinted, lettered  
in gold: HOLY BIBLE top and center,  
PLACED BY THE GIDEONS bottom-right.

Sometimes I'd even leaf through the pages,  
pause at a random verse. The line might  
speak to me: *Christ died for the ungodly.*  
Most times, though, it did not: *you  
will eat the fruit of the womb, the  
flesh of the sons and daughters  
the Lord your God has given you.*

Though certain no omniscience laid within,  
I grew used to the Good Book beside me,  
drew comfort from its presence. As I saw  
it less and less, finally no more, I came to  
miss it, wondered where it went. A pearly

hotel perhaps, where guests need never  
check out. No rooms for nonbelievers.

## **The Amazons**

I didn't know my mother was sick until she started  
to lose her hair and weight, energy and strength,  
and the white-coated oracles foresaw tragedy,  
prophesied that she had less than a year to live.

I didn't know my mother was an Amazon until she  
girded on pale green cotton armor, collarless, tied  
at the open back with twilled tape, snaps along  
the sleeves, a pair of treaded socks for boots.

I didn't know there existed clans of Amazons until  
my mother banded with warriors like her—all ill,  
some bald, some helmeted in headscarves, but  
bound as one, united against a common enemy.

I didn't know Amazons shed tears until my mother  
lost her breast and a sister-in-arms, all the while  
scared for us, for me, afraid I'd be left a  
casualty, too: deprived of mother, warrior.

I didn't know Amazons derived their strength from  
a pink totem until they returned and rallied, fewer  
and thinner, but still one, marching in matching  
pink breastplates, pink totems pinned in front.

I didn't know love could heal Amazons until I saw  
my warrior recover with mine, regrow her hair,  
regain her energy, strength, and weight,  
outlive a prophecy, and prove the oracles wrong.

**Weedkiller**

I sometimes feel as though our only connection,  
Uncle Mack, is the chemical company,  
Monsanto: the manufacturer of the  
herbicide I use to exterminate  
my weeds, the defoliant that denuded  
Vietnam's jungles of their leaves.  
Eventually, it also poisoned you.

As I pump the sprayer, aim the nozzle, squeeze  
the trigger, I wonder if this feels anything  
like how it felt for you to reload and shoot.  
Doubtful. My backpack of solution is nothing  
like a rucksack, my sprayer nothing like  
an M16. Roundup pales compared to Agent  
Orange. I never got called a "baby-killer."

Though I want them gone, it's often painful for  
me to watch the weeds brown and shrivel,  
shrink to their stalks, which then twist  
and wither. In a few weeks, where  
they once grew, there will be  
only earth. But in sixth months,  
they'll return. You, however, never will.

## **Crèche**

Every Christmas I return to my mother's home and help her set up and display her beloved, well-preserved nativity set.

The walls and roof of the stable are made of authentic wood, real moss is glued to the bark, yet all the other parts are artificial, clearly constructed from plastic and polymer, even the most important characters:

A conspicuous hook bears the weight of the angel. The heads of the Holy Family are large for their bodies, the faces of the shepherds unrealistically cherubic. Worse, the pedestals jut from their feet. Still, I sometimes study the pieces, try to see more than poor imitations, but mostly, the figurines look fake to me, sadly have since adolescence.



## Cub

In the woods, I feared not coyotes, wolves, or bears  
but what our Scout Den, all father-son pairs except  
us, thought and said about you, O mother, and me.  
I heard the other cubs snicker as we struggled to  
pitch our tent: misassembled the aluminum poles,  
mismatched our mess of metal to the grommets.

At those times, I wished you were my absent father,  
that he, like the dads of the den, already knew how  
to place the plastic stakes, strike the steel hammer.  
As our cubmaster and his son taught our den to fish,  
we tried to keep up with the rapid pair, instead lost  
to the lake our hooked bait, tangled our fishing line.

Like our submerged and writhing worm, I wriggled  
my body. I prayed: *Please don't let the other cubs  
see; as it is, they gossip, say my father swam away.*  
O, how I wished to plunge into the dark, cold water  
with the shoals of fish, prove to our den that I, like  
a hatched fry, needed no mother to help me swim!

Only when grown, the father to my own litter, did I  
regret pawing away your hands as a cub, did I then  
understand your instinct to nurture with embrace.  
Only then as well did I know that of den you would  
have growled and clawed to protect us most, did I  
learn that in sleuths of bears mothers raise the cubs.

### **Before Redbox and Netflix**

When BLOCKBUSTER was still around, I measured my age by the shelves of the store: once taller than me, then later my height, later still shorter, my changes in movie choices gauges of growth, too: *Gladiator* for *Fern Gully*, *Varsity Blues* for *The Sandlot*. But my mother never seemed to age. Nor did the stars of her picks in film.

She always stuck with Stewart and Hepburn, Peck and Bacall, all long gone, like her. In the store, she'd gently remind me: *Only two*. As I browsed the KIDS films, I tried to guess the classics she'd choose, the mismatched movie nights our rentals would make: *Free Willy* and *The Philadelphia Story*, *Homeward Bound* and *Designing Woman*.

Every so often, one of the video tapes stuck in our VCR, which spit out chewed-up ribbon, tangled like bows on giftwrapped presents. Movie night ruined. Except it wasn't. Like the spools of a cassette, we still had each other. We do still: my memories of us old yet durable, like a VHS tape, rewound and replayed, rewound and replayed.

## About the Poet

Originally from San Antonio, Texas, Jonathan Fletcher currently resides in New York City, where he is pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing in Poetry at Columbia University's School of the Arts. He has been published in *Arts Alive San Antonio*, *Clips and Pages*, *Door is a Jar*, *FlowerSong Press*, *Lone Stars*, *OneBlackBoyLikeThat Review*, *riverSedge*, *The Thing Itself*, *TEJASCOVIDO*, *Unlikely Stories Mark V*, *Voices de la Luna*, *Waco WordFest*. His work has also been featured at the Briscoe Western Art Museum.