

passager

Winter 2019



UPON A MIDNIGHT CLEAR

Andrew Brown

When my children were small I felt that Christmas should be for them a time of joy, and so for them I did all that I could to be a joyous person. Now with my children grown, with no reason to hide my true feelings, I can make my confession; I've never liked Christmas. I find no joy in it at all. Christmas as I knew it as a child is for me nothing but a memory of loss. It is a memory of long hospital wards, and row after row of beds, of unguent smells mixed with the sweet, cloying odor of suppurating, burned flesh. It is a memory of faces swathed in gauze, bodies swaddled and plastered, bearing witness with arms and legs, weighted and wired in suspension, all giving account with dripping fluids to violence too supreme for me to forget.

My father was a doctor, and my mother was his assistant. He was in the army and died in December 1941. My mother then took his place in the military. In peace she had been his nurse and lab technician, but when he had been called up in 1940 for the war that was coming, she knew, I think, that her world would never be the same. By 1942 mother had taken on the administration of the largest Air Corp hospital laboratory in the country at Hunter Field in Savannah, Georgia. Her lab served the five largest military hospitals in the South, and was the clearing station for wounded air crewmen coming back from Europe.

I can remember, as anyone of my generation can, World War II when for everyone that war was the center of life. In my school, Blessed Sacrament, we collected cans, paper, string, and bits of any-

thing that might help win the war effort. A war, we were told, that was good and righteous. We believed this, and so we saved our pennies and nickels to buy war stamps, and when we had enough stamps we blotted out Hitler's or Togo's face in our stamp books, and took the books to the bank to buy a war bond. If a family had lost a son or father in the service they put a star in their window. In school we knew whose fathers were not coming home. In art class the nun would touch those of us who had a gold star in our window lightly on the head to say we were excused from making our daddy a Christmas card, though once we had to make a card for Jesus. Where it went I do not know.

One Christmas, when I was poised between childhood and reality, my mother volunteered me to be Santa's elf at the airbase hospital. My job was to go with Sergeant Pryer, the Chaplain's assistant, who dressed like Santa Claus. I don't think my mother ever thought of how my last fragile filament of belief in mystery was burned through by watching the lab staff stuff pillows around Pryer's middle so he could jolly himself out. I had my own red suit, and the plan was for the Sergeant to ride a hospital laundry cart that was fixed up with cardboard cutouts to look like a sleigh. I was his delivery boy who would go from bed to bed saying "Merry Christmas" while passing out the presents of magazines, cigarettes, and pocket books the USO had donated.

I, even then at ten, wanted to believe in Santa Claus, but it was hopeless. I'd lost my faith and wonderment, and embarrassed myself the year before at school when I'd climbed, like some little boy, into the lap of a Santa and whispered when he asked me what I wanted, "I want my daddy back."

The Santa had held me tight against him. "Of course," he said, and then he put me down, but he didn't seem so jolly anymore, and

I thought I could see his tears that reflected mine. That was it, except that Father Scott, who ran Blessed Sacrament and said the morning mass, called me to his office; and looking stern as I thought God Himself must look, he accused me of upsetting Father Marks. How could I do that, I thought? I hardly knew the man beyond the fact he taught Latin upstairs – place we younger classmen weren't allowed to go. "Boys," Father Scott said, towering over me, "should think about the feelings of others. You don't say things that will make a person feel bad. You've come very close to committing a grave sin by causing a person who cares about you to doubt the value of compassion." By then I was in tears, and I had no idea what he meant. "Little boys should ask for fire trucks," he mumbled as he dismissed me. "They should not ask for impossible things."

So I accepted that truly there was no Santa Claus. There was only Sergeant Pryer, and the wards of maimed, burned, and broken men who had made their gift to their countrymen. There was no illusion of Peace on Earth for these men to take comfort in. If comfort were to be found at all, it had to be found in reality. Of course I didn't know this man's truth then. What I knew was that in the dark hours of clear midnight on Christmas Eve, when I tiptoed to the head of the stairs, I could see my mother sitting alone with a cup of coffee wrapping presents to stuff my sister's and my stockings. And I knew then how Santa got my father's Phi Beta Kappa key. She worked slowly, and she worked with purpose. Her eyes would blink, but she worked on, and she did not sob.

That is my Christmas memory. My mother going on, like the wounded flyers, and doing what needed to be done because it was there to do. And Christmas was also the bombardier in whose lap I placed a book. He had no hands, and he had no lower jaw, but his

eyes held mine, and I saw the stump of his tongue move. What did he say? I don't know, but from his eyes I took it to be something of love.

So it is at the Christmas season that I have come to understand, and accept, that I've not mastered joy. You can only fake things for so long until you must come true; at least you must come true with yourself. If I can't feel joy, at least from loss and pain I can fashion a compassionate heart. My Christmas memories, I've found, fill me with a strange affection for the human race, and a fidelity to those who suffer, so that I can still, on a clear midnight, sing Peace on Earth, good will toward men.

FUNERAL INSTRUCTIONS

Save the date. My last act
will be to claim your Sunday afternoon.
But one day prior you'll hear the truth:
no funeral. Take the afternoon back,
here, it was yours all along.
Do something that makes you glad.
Maybe go sit in a summer field
with the tall goldenrod, and the orange butterfly
weed named for the healing god,
and the Queen Anne's lace,
which will never know my name
or of what I was capable, the grief
I could cause. As far as they know,
strewing seed in the fields
of their death, traversing their year
crowned with blossom, there's nothing
to forgive. You, too:
raise horns and hoods of fire,
ruffles of lace, slender amber
scepters where and while you can;
forgive me, if you can.
Do something that makes you glad.
Choose life for yourself
and for me, who can choose no more.

Catherine Carter

AT THE MUSEUM OF THE BOOK

Now folks, the first exhibit is a book,
the docent droned, that only we can touch
with latex gloves. So be content to look.

(Librarians had no one left to hush;
now this museum occupies their space.
The stacks are closed, and research pretty much.)

We think that size and format once were based
on folds in hand-laid sheets, producing leaves.
These letters, inked with type, would fill each face.

(Though others left us lessons to retrieve,
who'd bother reading shelves of printed texts?
So, here they're safe from all us oafs and thieves.)

Please move along; these glassed-in artifacts
are cordoned off. The printing press is next.

Ted Charnley

MORNING ACCELERANDO ON HIGHWAY 29

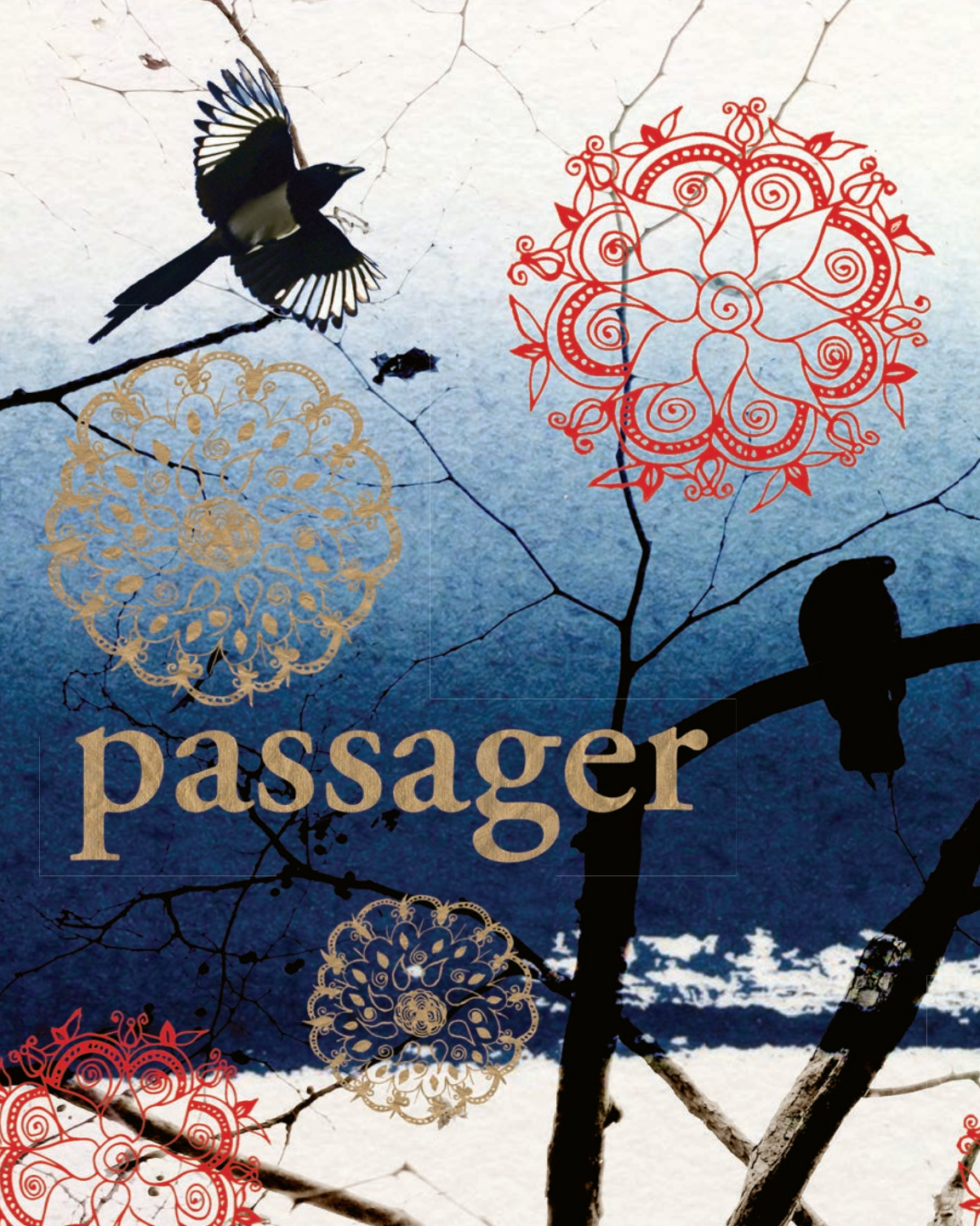
It's not my coffee only that jolts me
but your unexpected face.
What would you think, Mozart,
to see this five-foot image
of your head, its powdered wig,
on this two-lane highway
beside the other billboards?
Your distinguished image,
borrowed by an entrepreneur,
broods over Spike's Vac Shop,
Airport Shuttle, Computer Repair,
Comfort Inn. This last one
would have served you well
on the European journeys your father
tortured your childhood through.
Who knows? I may be the only car
passing with your 22nd Piano Concerto
frolicking on a well-worn CD.
Did you seem to wink at me
as I passed – this bond that we share
out here in all the heavy metal traffic?

Janice T. Moore

FLYING AT NIGHT

I was not licensed to fly nor was it night
but dusk as I taxied over the threshold
of the 3-6 runway in a little
Alabama town you've never heard of
and stood on the brakes. The four stroke grumbled
and missed, spinning the wild prop, sky fading
gradations of rose and bruise toward complete
black and the runway lights were coming up,
beguiling. A taste of Jack Daniels had cleared
my head and I sat in the cockpit watching
the light fail and didn't want profound thoughts
or deep insight. I knew what I could do
with my hands on yoke and throttle. One minute
and the runway was a stick of chewing gum,
sliding away behind me, under my wings.
Twenty more and cities slipping past me
were patches of incandescent flowers,
fragments of heaven sown in endless dark.
I navigated over Tuskegee,
thinking of heroes, those genuine men,
who give it up and never tell a soul.

Scott Ward



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