

Introduction
to Norbert Krapf's *Catholic Boy Blues*
by Matthew Fox

The poet Derek Walcott, in accepting the Nobel Prize for poetry in 1992, declared that “the fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world in spite of history.” This powerful statement reminds us of the darkness that so much history contains—the wars, the injustices, the mistakes, the crimes, the malfeasance, the lies. History tempts us to give up on life. Poetry (and other art forms) are that gift from the gods that allows us to endure, to heal and to thrive in spite of history.

Lately, first in the Roman Catholic Church, and in the football hierarchy of Penn State University, one shadow side of history, the rape and abuse of children and the cover up by powers that be, has been making headlines and telling us things about ourselves and our institutions that we prefer not to hear. Denial reigns. Adulthood rules when institutional ego and reputation take precedence over the safety of children whether that institution is a university or a church. In this book, from an acclaimed poet laureate, we hear the truth that burns through denial and we pray once again that the truth will make us free.

After armies of lawyers and (somewhat) contrite bishops and football coaches and in-denial popes there cometh the poet. A poet-victim to tell the truth, sing the truth, speak the truth, gather the truth with facts and heart and the only weapons victims have ever possessed—the truth-telling that alone leads to redemption, prevention, healing and ultimately compassion and forgiveness.

These poems tell what a steep price the soul pays for childhood abuse. How many years (over fifty in the present poet's life) of keeping the secret; how much damage was done in the poet's family and in other families, he keeps asking. What a price a community pays as well. A close-knit German Catholic community no less. Former Pope Benedict XVI would have done well to take a retreat immediately with these poems in hand and read and pray these poems and then tell the world why his all-powerful office of the Holy Inquisition, responsible for wayward clergy, did not end child abuse by priests some of whom, such as the infamous Father Maciel, were so highly favored by his boss, Pope John Paul II, whom he worked to canonize. And, while he is at it, let Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) tell the world why his office kept the lights on late at night to beat upon holy and hard-working theologians but kept mum on perverse pedophile priests.

In these poems the poet speaks the truth not just about the *facts* but also about the *feelings*. The stories. The broken lives. The betrayals. The friends and others also abused. The hypocrisy. The religious hypocrisy. The spiritual hypocrisy. The losses. The anger. The sadness. The grief. The distance traveled from religion, from church, from oneself.

The probing here of the depth of passion and loss (what the mystics call the “Via Negativa”) is profound. And universal. All grief speaks this way. All grief is angry and wild, sad and sorry, mute and silent, even secret. But not forever. Breakthrough is so needed. Breakout is so important. This book is a breakout book. The truth must be spoken (not just adjudicated, not just financially reimbursed through fines in civil court). This is why Walt Whitman can say “The true Son of God comes singing his song.” The

Jesus story reminds all men and women that the truer we be sons and daughters of God, the surer we will be crucified. Innocent boys, like the innocent Christ, wanted only to love life and explore it fully and, with an overly naïve and trusting parish community and sister and parents, were befuddled by the adult lies, the religious lies going on. They are, sadly, still going on. The church is not reforming or even trying to reform itself. Quite the opposite, it has slid (and even rushed) backward into a defensive mode again of superiority “beyond which there is no salvation,” a mode of authoritarianism that condemns the whistle blower, the prophet, the thinker as trouble-maker. The church is what it is, unfortunately.

But the poems live. They are organic and truthful. They speak the truth more loudly than sermons and rituals and papal bulls; more appropriately than fancy colored vestments and rote readings from holy books. They reach to the soul, to the heart, to the Spirit. They bear the mark of authentic preaching of salvation and of a living Christ of compassion.

They are the door and the holy gate that open wide to light and Spirit. The author learned, of necessity, how to live and love and heal and work outside the dead walls of a decaying church and the wounded parameters of his broken soul. It is amazing that he has led the fruitful life he has as a college professor, as a poet, as a husband and a father of two adopted children. William Jay Smith, former U.S. Poet Laureate, commented on Norbert Krapf’s poetry for a blurb used on the back cover of his prose memoir, *The Ripest Moments: A Southern Indiana Childhood*, this way. “Not since Theodore Roethke has any poet handled so successfully the subject of youth and adolescence.” How is it possible that a person can tell his childhood story so successfully in prose and poetry while leaving out the truths that are alive in the present book? What does this say about the strength of the man? What does it say about the strength of our species, that we can keep on keeping on? This collection of poems fills out the memoir of a loving but wounded childhood. It is what Meister Eckhart called “a denial of denial.” That is what breakthrough is all about.

The poet tells us the secrets he has learned about life not only in this book but in his many other volumes, such as the retrospective *Bloodroot: Indiana Poems* and *Sweet Sister Moon*, that sing numinously of the wonders of the land, its creatures, its trees and seasons, its animals and soil. Listen to his praise of the Indiana woods: “My father loved to go hunting in the woods. Later I understood that what he loved most about hunting was the serenity and the calm palpable in the earliest hours of the morning when, with the slightest hint of light dawning behind the outline of trees, the natural world begins to awaken and sing. Or in the evening when a hush settles over the forest, darkness begins to descend, and the silence expands....every time I went on one of those holiday hunts with the Schroeder clan, I had the feeling that time was suspended and we were all part of something that went way beyond us, beyond our time, and maybe even beyond our place....I begged and prayed for time to stand still and the day to never end” (209, 228). Or this poem, “The Figure in the Landscape,” to the goddess in nature:

I found my goddess
in the lay of the land
I love, in the curves
of her rolling hills,

the rise and spread of trees in her woods,
in the tangle of weeds and wildflowers
that grow lush
in her fallow fields,
in the way she opens herself to rain
and accepts the snow
and swells and heaves
in the hot sun.

Without such praise (what the mystics call the “Via Positiva”), I believe, the prophet’s soul would not have survived long enough to sing these blues, these lamentations. The Via Positiva holds the Via Negativa as Rilke taught us when he said: “Walk your walk of lament on a path of praise.” The praise, let us be clear, is decidedly *not* a praise of the church institution or its ruling class so busy covering up and denying its own sins and hypocrisy. It is not a praise of history. The praise is for *creation* and the heart and mind behind it. The praise is for the Creator.

The poet’s many songs of praise reveal how resilient the human soul is. For forty years Norbert Krapf has been recognized as a praise poet, one who championed the beauty and blessing of his native Indiana soil and landscape and habitat and eco-magic and small towns. It will be startling to many what he reveals in these poems, that in the midst of so much beauty there was also moral carnage going on—in the name of religion no less—and that it took him fifty years just to come to grips with it all. Amidst all the light of growing up in the green mid-west, there was also massive shadow. But see it he does. And in doing so he carries out the deep vocation of the artist: To tell the truth, the beautiful truths and the painful truths.

We learn in this collection, and from a statement in the Foreword, how rich a healing aid the poet received when he discovered the blues while a graduate student in the late 1960s at Notre Dame. Thus Mr. Blues, whom the victim-survivor discovers within himself while confronting his pain, plays a significant role in this book, entering periodically like a Greek chorus or like the sage elder that he is, counseling balance and patience with the healing process. This collection is a tribute to the power of music and the blues in particular to help us stay true to the truths that the Via Negativa and the Dark Night want to teach us.

The thirteenth century Beguine mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg reminded us that in life we drink two kinds of wine—the white wine of joy and the red wine of suffering—and that “until we have drunk deeply of both we have not lived. “ White wine has dominated the author’s previous poetry, but not exclusively. In *Blue-Eyed Grass: Poems of Germany*, he has written of the darkness of World War II and the Holocaust and confronts the realities of the red wine that is part of his German heritage. He has also written about a racial incident from his college years in “Fire and Ice,” a poem that received the Lucille Medwick Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America, and a cycle about the Miami Indians, including the slaughter of innocent women, children, and elders referred to in history books as “The Battle of the Mississinewa.” The life of the man and his work of poetry unveils for all who read it an observer not only of the pain of life but of the wonder and beauty and gratuity of it all. One almost wonders if the pain the poet suffered as a child was not a sort of initiation into a shamanistic vocation such as Walt Whitman or David Palladin underwent that allowed

them to live in two worlds at once, the visible and the curtained world, as well as the two worlds of the Via Positiva and the Via Negativa. Is it possible that the poet's pain, so thrust into his memory against his will as a youth, was also a kind of wild fire that set him off to college, heavy drinking during those same summers while working in his hometown, so near the scene of the abuse, and on to the New York area, out of nature's bosom and beyond into heavy searching for the good, searching for a reason to live and to love and to work and to parent and to sing of blessing?

In making this deep journey the poet comes around to being a healing shaman. For these poems are not his but all of ours. Now we can all make the journey with the anawim, the dispossessed, those without a voice, the abused, whether or not we have been there ourselves. And, as Meister Eckhart tells us, "a healing life is a good life." Thank you for your noble priesthood, your deeper shaman, mister poet.

This book sings more of the kingdom of God than of the institution of church. It speaks of truth and justice, of moral outrage and the experience of nothingness, of compassion and forgiveness, and it challenges institutional powers that obfuscate and betray and interfere with truth telling. The true Son of God comes preaching the Kingdom of God. At this time in history, the Kingdom of God needs more than ever to take precedence over the institutions of religion whether of church or of football. And so we celebrate the courage and the years it took to remember and to write this book. Out of this remembrance and out of this courage, healing is sure to happen.

William Carlos Williams says that "it is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there." Today there are men and women all around the globe who are part of the news of child abuse. This collection of poems, this deep journey into the dark night of the abused soul, can prevent further death and lift some of the misery of the horrible experience of child abuse. These poems invite us to *pray the news*, not just react to it or respond to it with lawyers, media and financial compensation. It takes us to the real hurt, the unspeakable pain by daring to speak the truths that only the soul knows. It will rank, along with the work of John of the Cross, as a truthful telling of what a dark night means as well as what it has to teach us and what the news is telling us. But we owe it to ourselves to read it in the context of the poet's other works, his praise poems, of the blessing that life and existence are and that no one can snuff out.

—Matthew Fox
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