

Conversation on Mount Olivet

This is Kidron Valley, something you never knew back then. What is it like to stand on old ground, and not know its history, the gravity of everything that has happened on the land, under the same sky?

You know where it begins, from where you now stand. You've walked around the Armenian Quarter, and reached the Christian Quarter. And here, from the Old City of Jerusalem, there it is—just right of the far north—one beginning amidst so many of these scriptural beginnings.

[Where should I begin reading today?]

[Which psalm, which parable, which wisdom line?]

The old man in the shop is saddened. He is speaking of better days. His lament—that many who live by love have long gone, no matter how hard it is to leave home, this Holy Land.

["The Christian desires the way of love," the old man said, with tears in his eyes.]

"The way of peace," the old man said, as he looks at you like a long-lost son. He is gazing upon foreignness, but never acknowledges it.

He only sees sameness.

In our lifelong searching.
In our thirst for faithfulness.

[I remember the Armenian seminarian in Pasadena—was he a sub-Diaconate or full Deacon? What was his discernment process like? Of the handful callings, which was the most forceful, almost deafening?]

His son is shuffling behind the counter, placing crosses in trays and boxes. These are sterling silver, beautifully made by hand. He points to the ones with the Christ figure, and says to take one of those. The crucifixes are the most striking—elaborate detailing, precise.

"Eyes on Christ always," he insists. Eyes on Christ always.

Beyond these heavysset walls and watchtowers, how far more to the Dead Sea?

Which gate will you start and end your journey on, now that you've touched the stone at Damascus Gate and Herod's Gate, then Zion Gate?

You take that right-angled turn, and out into the sun. This is Jaffa Gate, leading out into Jaffa Road, following so many pilgrims' footsteps to the port.

The port of Jaffa—
who sees Jonah pushing off from the pier?

Into the belly of the whale,
who is set to the test, only to return to shore?

There is the history of a postern gate at another doorway.

Now,
the penitent have found their way here,
how they have made their passage home—
how many have come and gone.

Soft bidding, these openings
of egress and entrance.

At New Gate, you stand beneath its distinct arch of uneven stone. At this high point,
the air is fresher, like a cool mint.

And you head back from where you came, into the Christian Quarter.

* This poem first appeared in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*.

Empty Tomb, Xiangbi Mountain

“See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.”

~ Isaiah 49:16

A good solitude with Christ upon death,
that’s the harbour of final striving.

As with Saint Ignatius of Loyola;
as with Saint Francis Xavier, alone at last.

1689, a common year when French Jesuit
Father Tekoti raised the chapel over the old tomb.

1869, a common year, the Gothic clock tower;
then, first Catholic church in Xindi village.

What do we dream the night of our death?
At path’s end, a small gate that looks out—

open sea as horizon. How endless the dreams,
how far since Saint Paul, oh Apostle of the Indies.

Did Xavier think of that night on Holy Cross,
its bow moving closer to Shangchuan?

Perhaps a prayer walk from across port,
around astern, then back up the starboard?

His palms pressed deep into each other
—flesh against flesh.

Then lifted up, facing Christ on the Cross,
palms against sundown, auburn
and aflame.

As if placed on chest—oh, Sacred Heart
—flesh against flesh,

then resurrection of body
and resting place

of life
everlasting.

* This poem first appeared in *People of Asia Journeying with Jesus: Snapshots & Reflections on the Synod on Synodality*, published by Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences Office of Social Communication (FABC-OSC).

Mangy Donkey Sestina: A Triptych Dismantled & Reconstituted

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

~ Zechariah 9:9

look, donkey
crossbanding
how far a journey
crosshatching
mercy
then crossbearing

into more crossbearing
again donkey
again mercy
crossbanding
crosshatching
another journey

another journey
crossbearing
crosshatching
where now, donkey
which crossbanding
for love of mercy

for love of mercy
and journey
crossbanding
crossbearing
forever donkey
forever crosshatching

forever crosshatching
mercy mercy mercy
upon holy donkey
upon journey
always crossbearing
always crossbanding

always crossbanding
forever crosshatching
forever crossbearing
holy holy holy mercy
holy holy holy journey
holy holy holy donkey

crossbanding mercy
crosshatching journey
crossbearing donkey

* This poem first appeared in the poetry magazine, *Voice & Verse*, in its special feature on “Crossings”.