



Complete within herself

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**Saint Marina
Saint Scholastica**

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Saint Marina

A woman disguised as a monk, accused of fathering the child of an innkeeper's daughter. She was punished for this "sin" by being sent to live outside the monastery gates for some years before returning. Her sex was discovered only after her death.

I. Why did I turn myself into a man?

They ask me that – all those young
women kneeling in the chapel
by my reliquary. Through the rattle
of censer chains, through the aves sung

at evensong, they make up stories.
"A young man you loved? A romance?
A handsome saint who wouldn't glance
at you – a lover meshed in the glories

of God? And you could not bear to part
from him. You shaped vows with your lips,
distilled your tears to worship,
hid your sex along with your heart."

Other maids make other tales of me.
How I must have loathed the distaff
twisting, the empty women's chaff
and clothed myself in breeches, gallantly.

Or some, looking neither left nor right,
but straight down into their hands
ask, "Why a monastery? Did it stand
surety for you? Was it flight

from some disturbing passion? Did you
feel you were a man in other ways?
The stories rise and cluster in the nave,
dissolve in murmurs. None of them is true.

*They don't believe me when I say it wasn't
anything so simple or so complicated.
Not everything is shaped
by the flesh between our thighs*

*There are
other things – the cool stink of water
in a leather cup after labour in the fields.
The vellum silence of a line of gold
shaping into flowers, into fruit.*

All this piling up of stones. Male here.
Female over there. It didn't matter
to me. I ate meat when I could get it,
or porridge, sat straining
over the hole to the cess-pit.
Slept. Worked. It was enough
to fill a life, enough to stuff
under a pillow at night
and dream about.

But still they press. *Why?*
Why? Until in irritation I might say
"Yes. I didn't want to be
with women in their whispering gowns.
They disturbed my peace."

But that's not it, really. It was
just the place life took me
– a square, dark, silent person
who sat listening to
a dry, distant thunder.

II Childhood

Oh, yes, all those infant saints
and tales of holy precocity.
Miracle babies who wouldn't taint
their lips with food on Friday

or tiny girls who lisped, dove-eyed
and devout, to visiting bishops –
offering themselves as little brides
of Christ, young communion cups.

*The fact is, I recall
little of my childhood. Nor can
anyone else. My mother died young.*

*In the single memory of her I clasp
like a saint's finger-bone in a casket,
I am sitting, elevated, in a wooden chair
Somewhere, to my left, a fire
and my hands full with a cup
of sweet milk. My mother's hand nearby,
steadying. I feel it is worth all my small life
to keep the milk unspilled.*

The monastery always there
at my shoulder, a paved courtyard
behind high walls, a well in the centre.

My father in his grief retired there,
took me too – for lack of anywhere else
to put me. Pretended I was a boy.

That suited me well enough. The place
was safe. I liked the smell of stables
and the incense and the sour bite of wine
held to my lips in a metal cup.
It helped to take away the sad taste
of milk.

III. When I heard God

This at least was granted me.
No lightning. No heaven opened radiantly,
no revelation of gems, no choired stairs
of coral and chrysoprase ascending to the stars.
No mounting song, no angels' rapture, no bliss
of seraphim.

I did not pray for visions such as this
while bent, stroking ink on the holy pages,
following the curve, the indivisible edges
of the great letter "O".
And my eyes were never opened so.

*It came as a voice that spoke my name
intimately, at my shoulder. My
name. The one my mother called me by*

Only my name. God's voice said nothing
else. No commandments. But
as I raised my head from my work
I knew

that I was
growing, thrusting
down
into soil,
driving a tap root
down
to ground water
drawing up sap
to hold within
my body.

I had become green vessel, trunk of tree
leading to the wander of branches.
From me came the grained articulation
of the wooden bench, the curved shaft
and iridescent, interlacing barbules
of the feather pen, the flourish of letters
on the shaped page.

It was a great blessing. I held the memory
inside myself, as if it were a child
in its sac of liquid. It moved and stirred
within me, all my life.

IV. The false accusation

Sex, again. There's no escaping its clutch
in all the stories that tumble and cling
around me, like sparrows twittering
in the marshy gloom that fills the church.

You might expect that I'd have laughed aloud.
But my first reaction was surprise –
a crazy instant of believing in her lie,
as she swung her finger at me, in the crowd

that gawked in the courtyard of the monastery.
She cowered from her father's rough threat
and raised arm. Cried, "Him! Him!" The abbot
looked relieved. The others looked curiously

at me. And I wondered for a moment who I was.
As though part of me had dried up, blown
off by the rough, warm wind. As though a stone
flung by a blind hand had left me dazed.

*Up to that instant
I had no
connection with her.
All she needed at that moment
was some – any – other.
They could not let her be complete
within herself.*

She died in childbirth, and the infant with her.
When I heard, I felt an unexpected pang – almost
as if, indeed, I'd lost a son.

V. The discovery

At last, death. Ordinary as water
drying on the paving stones
where I fell. A gasp and a going away.

Later, wrapping me for burial, they discovered
what I had almost forgotten. That fold of flesh,
that soft labial buckle by which I should have been
fastened somewhere else.

Gasps, then! A novice sent scampering
for the abbot, while the brothers waited with
their basins and shroud linen, wondering
desperately – how could they have knelt
or sat or laboured beside me
all those years and not known? It rocked
some central tenet of the faith they held.

The abbot sweeping in. The cloth delicately drawn
aside. The bent heads, the murmuring.
The potential for scandal summed up
in one irritated command. "No one
must know."

*Of course the story sifted
through the monastery walls.
Ownerless, drifting thistledown
sprouting in strange places
until they began to call on me as saint.*

The wonder of it was –
not that I was so blessed or
so holy. Simply
that I was in the wrong place.

VI. Inside the reliquary

My bones. A white assortment.
The curved, clubbed femur, the carpels
like ivory game-pieces, the round orbit
of eye-bone. A cask a little bigger
than a cutlery drawer, that holds only
dry things now.

This: my gift back to the church,
which needs such stones to build on –
enough of earth to rise from
the great, swamping sea-coast.

What the church gave me:
a thimbleful of liquid to hold
in my flesh as a breast holds milk.
Water enough to fill
a cup, a quill, a human soul.
It was all I asked. It was
enough.

Saint Scholastica

Twin sister of Saint Benedict of Nursia, who founded the abbey of Monte Cassino on the site of Apollo's temple in the sixth century and wrote the famous rule for monastic life.

Vespers

The evening meal is set
on the table – dark bread a breviary
over which we bow our heads. And then you are set
on leaving.

Benedict, my brother, my twin,
I ask you again to stay. There is a dark bread
rising in me, and rats gnaw it. Only a crust of time
is left on my plate. Grant me a wafer of yours,
one last night's communion.

How often have we met here, once a year,
halfway between our houses of religion,
to debate holy questions? Tonight, I crave
homelier things. To recollect
our whole-milk days in Nursia.

Won't that gentle name
tempt you to stay?

Remember us – children,
twinned in our self-contained games?
Like apple pips, enclosed
in tough, translucent walls.

Remember
how father would cut apples with his knife
for us to share? So sharp a blade
that when you held the halves together
the join was invisible.
And how he scolded when you wouldn't
leave the knife alone.

Oh, Benedict, you are hard. Whatever your rule
lays down as an edge, there are times
to lay it aside.

*I pray,
send evidence that this
is one such time.*



Don't sulk.
You make me feel I got my way
with a child's tantrum. But I can't
make storms. It wasn't me who set
trees gnashing and the thunder growling.

Where is your peace? If God
has willed this weather, your abbey
won't capsize into sin with you gone
one night. Nor will any accuse you
of immorality with an old sister,
her neck wrapped in more shawls
than a sick giraffe.

Yes, that's more like your laugh.

Compline

This is the hour to stir the fire
and empty compline's cupboard
of prayers. The woods draw in. Branches
flog these faithful walls. Ancient trees
invoke the dark.

No, there's no-one out there.
The country people still avoid this place at night.
They call it sacred to the lady of beasts.

Oh, Benedict, it just takes time. You can't
excise the old beliefs like cancer. It's more
like being a gardener, watching how
the weeds come up, pinching them back.
Making a space for the true crop.

For even though you pulled Apollo's altar
down and built your chapel there, even though
converts sing your psalms and bless you
throughout the countryside ...

Yes, I know
they're the Lord's psalms, Benedict,
not yours ...

still, folk will braid their superstitions
with their new beliefs, like the branches
interleaved around this hut.
When you describe for them the 'bright armour
of obedience,' they cannot help
but think of the old god's breastplate
and sun-gilt arrows.

*Apollo had a sister too. His
twin, Artemis. Lady of the Beasts.
Folk still reverence her through all
this wild and mountainous region.
Virgin with her silver bow, huntress
and guardian of all pregnant creatures.*

*I am pregnant with death.
Succour me.*

Vigiliae

The mid night prayers. Words
suddenly heavy. Narrow bedshelves
stand against the wall like biers.
Thanks be, I will not lie on one
tonight.

I have discovered I am afraid
of death. Absurdly
frightened. Do you know why?
I imagine my bones lying
paralyzed.
Desperate
to be re-joined.

Like an unstrung bow.
Or a marionette waiting
for the strings of resurrection.

This ugly thought weights
my soul down. And now death
waits so close.



Your words have a comfortable taste.
You were well named, Benedict – good-speaking.

Yes, you've helped. Don't look so worried.
I won't go to my coffin like a panicked pagan.
Won't disgrace the faith.

But keep the words coming. Tell me,
since only the loaf of bread and I
will ever know the answer, what do you
fear?

Oh, don't be pious. God may
lend you courage. But he's not general
anaesthetic, a numb drug for doctors
of doctrine to prescribe. We're meant to be afraid,
sometimes, of the dark beyond the walls
the empty shelf, the knocking of fleshless
bones.

*It's flesh you fear, I think.
Women's flesh. The twin
you cannot peel away.*

*Although certainly you've tried.
Only men may live in your
thorn-rimmed community.
Even my nuns and I a danger
sequestered at an antiseptic distance.*

I always wondered who she was – the girl
whose memory frenzied you so much,
when you stripped and rolled your body
in thorns and nettles . . .

. . . Why did I mention that?
I hardly know. A mind often
leaps sideways like game
startled in a thicket . . .

You say you were never again
troubled in that way. But you will never
tell me her name.

Lauds

Now come the prayers that lead to birdsong.
The wind, dropped
at last to its knees,
touches its lips to rain-heavy leaves.

This is the office of the day I love
most. It is a doubled benediction
that you are here to praise with me,
along with fruitful trees
and all cedars, mountains and all hills.

On this psalm-sweet morning,
I need to tell you
 brother
 twin
how I love you.

When you ran away, remember? A boy
yearning for ineffable perfection, slight
and ardent as a divining rod -- when you ran
away, I was bereft.
The quiver of ideas we shared
rattled empty without you . . .

. . . Yes, I know you had to go . . .

but still I felt abandoned,
 lost
as if tethered with pleasant beasts.

Love comes at a cost. Sometimes the price
is a gap in our lives, a space
in what might have been.

I have lain with no man, Benedict,
since we were coupled in the womb.
Will lie with none until your bones
come to wait in the same stone anteroom.

*Was that a gap left empty, or a room I needed?
The virgin who drives off lovers
builds her own house in the grove*

In a whole life, no other face
carved the same dear place in my heart.

... What am I saying, brother?

Only that
we are twins and I love you.
And for that love, have followed
as closely as I could, your footsteps
down the passages where God
cuts his inexplicable way.



Now. Give me the viaticum, the farewell
leaf of flour and water on my tongue.
Then go back to your monks.

Know that my love goes with you
always – a daily bread. A faint, green
heart-shaped thread
traced around the apple's core and seen
only when the whole is cut
apart.

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The Hawthorne Society of Arts and Letters is a small nonprofit association committed to encouraging the creative arts, primarily in the community of Greater Victoria, but elsewhere when appropriate.

The Society mounts monthly readings of poetry and short fiction by writers in its locality and Reference West publishes the text of these readings as chapbooks. To date it has published more than 85 of these books and two have received the bp Nichol Memorial Chapbook Award. Annually, the Society presents the Ivy Mickelson Award for Continuing Service to the Literary and Artistic Community of Greater Victoria. This award is given to honour the memory of Victoria's famous bookseller, Ivy Mickelson.

The Society also provides the Hawthorne Poetry Award in an annual competition, the winner of the competition receiving a money prize and the publication of the winning manuscript as a chapbook.

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Alice Major emigrated from Scotland as a child and now works as a freelance writer in Edmonton. Her first poetry collection, *Time Travels Light*, was published in 1992. Her novel, *The Chinese Mirror*, published by Stoddart, won the fourth Alberta Writing for Youth Competition.