



On Earth As It Is

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Two Poems

Margaret Pritchard Houston

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on earth as it is

prayer as story, story as prayer

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photo by Gwendolyn Joyce Mintz

Two Poems

Margaret Pritchard Houston

Journey

I wonder sometimes
why
in that flashing instant
I agreed to this.
To the straining of ligaments
pressed
by my created creator
widening, in my blood-red womb.
To the drawing and receding
of mingled blood and water
rocking and swaying
inside my liquid body.

You rest, curled and moonlike,
rounded and pale inside me,
knowing
and unknown.
You stretch your fingers,
pat them against me,
against the close encircling of your world,
smaller than a woman's womb,
and infinite.

Soon you will draw downwards,
pulled by some unseen signal.
You will borrow my helpless body,
your portal, your entry point,
your gate between the worlds.
O little helpless unknowable –
I will show you the stars –

and you, with crossing newborn eyes,
will look at me as if to say –
yes –
I remember –
when they were invented,
springing dancing into my mind,
and I flung them forth,
burning in brightness across your mortal sky.

The Garden

And what was in my mind
in the blackened shadows of the garden,
in the shade of the cedar and the palm tree,
as I waited, doglike, in darkness,
sniffing the wind?

You would have given me charity.
Smiled, dumb as a lamb in the run.
Babbled some story or other.
I think sometimes I understood your stories.
Better than the others.
But then, you knew that.
You knew everything.
There, behind the garden walls,
as the smoke and scent of a thousand wood fires
drifted towards us from Jerusalem –
you knew.

The thought horrifies me.

When I was a child, a man in my town
stole a girl from her father's orchard.
Took her into the desert. I hid
behind the wall of our common room the day
they found her. Brought her back,
wrapped and bloodied for burial.
I hid and heard, in hushed and fascinated whispers,
what he'd done to her.
She knew for hours she was going to die.
Must have twisted to escape it, they said. Fought.

They admired that.
It is natural, after all –
to fight not for victory but for pride, to say –
I did not win but nor did I surrender.
We are Jews, you and I – is that not sometimes
the only prize we have?
Not to have been easily conquered?
You knew – and didn't fight.
I have seen that too sometimes –
when I was a zealot –
and they brought to the cross a man
too beaten to protest.
His eyes already dead,
a walking ghost.

You weren't defeated either – no, your torture
was still to come, at my instigation.
You were fired still. Alive.
I do not understand you.

I have loved you – yes, you know I have –
more than those simpering sycophants –
I could see –
sometimes –
the edges of what you meant – and oh – *I longed.*
As some men burn for liquor, I lived and died
for a momentary glimpse of What You Were.

You bastard.

Worse than a woman, who drops her veil,

and runs off laughing,
closing her door and leaving you
engorged and aching.
You had something.
Something that would last – not just –
another raving zealot
with military delusions and an obsession
with running drills in the desert, not just –
another laughing woman, who becomes,
after all, just another women, not just –
a story that is told and ended, not just –
a meal that entices and then passes, you had –
something.
You'd figured it out somehow, and gave us nothing.
But scraps and crumbs sometimes, a word, a kindness,
an encrypted puzzle, a metaphor, a quip.
And a smirk.
You patronizing fucker.
You had it. Somehow.
The thing that would never grow old.
And you held it. Taunted us. Like a boy.
who wheedles, "wanna see my cards?"
and flashes them quick like lightning,
holds them back, and giggles.
They will say
that I was afraid of being caught
with my hand in the purse. It is a lie.
And a slander that I dreamed of your body,
that body they broke and pierced – I never loved it
in an unclean way.
Or they will say that I desired
Israel's overthrow of Rome, and that –
somehow – I had not understood
that you were not a zealot.
It is false.
I knew you.
Comprehended what you were – at least,
a scrap of what you were.
That you perhaps were He.
And that He is cruel.
That we suffer, alone, and He knows why –
and does not aid us
nor enlighten.
And so I killed Him.
That is what I knew,
as I kissed you in the garden,
where the clanging soldiers waited,
and the angel of death
paused
at the bloodied doorways
and passed over.
That you betrayed me first.

Margaret Pritchard Houston is an American expat living in London. She was raised in a house where books, pretend play, poetry, and church were all encouraged, and consequently has a taste for 17th-century mysticism, Baptist hymns, Episcopalian liturgy, and finding any excuse to dress up and make believe. Her play based on the life of Alexander the Great received four-star reviews at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, despite one of the actors getting mugged on opening night, the theatre flooding, and the cast getting locked out of the rehearsal space on two separate occasions. Her poetry and fiction have been published in *Prime Number*, *Interrobang*, *The Monarch Review*, *Floorboard Review*, and *Fourth River*. She works as a Children and Youth Worker in the Church of England.

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