



On Earth As It Is

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2011

## The Prayers of Saint John of the Cross

Adrian Sobol

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### Recommended Citation

Sobol, Adrian, "The Prayers of Saint John of the Cross" (2011). *On Earth As It Is*. 36.  
<https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/onearth/36>

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# on earth as it is

*prayer as story, story as prayer*

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*photo by matthew simmons*

## *The Prayers of Saint John of the Cross*

*Adrian Sobol*

Saint John of the Cross went to God to weep. His hands, he noticed, had aged. God told John, *Age is but a signpost, a ticket on the light rail to the Kingdom of Me*. It was easy for God to say, the Ageless, the Endless, the Unbound. John went to Saint Teresa for her succor and her wine, which she fermented from the blackberries growing in her garden. Soon, they were drunk and haughty. He sang a blues tune and Teresa accompanied. They recounted stories of Christmases together, of their fathers, who would argue incessantly. Fistfights were a tradition. Teresa recited Psalms and John took to blasphemy. *Blasphemy*, John wrote, *is a shoots and ladders game to God*.

He built a church for his village. It was called *La Iglesia de la Sagrada Voz*—the Church of the Sacred Voice. The voice of God was to John cacophonous, and within the four walls of his church, he housed the mouth of God. It took him a decade to build, a year to paint using only egg whites and milkweed—and three months to collect the dogs. Through the windows you could see them, rolling about, sleeping and panting and fighting. The interior was sheltered in slaver and light. The storm of a hundred hungry dogs, all wailing together, deafened many, but those who lost their hearing could finally comprehend the Immensity. The villagers left the dogs chicken bones. They collected rain for them in wooden bowls. John blessed the meals, and they all howled together, men and hounds, deep into the night, until the moon went missing behind a ripening morning.

He ate nothing but orange peels for a year and in his heart was fire. His blood would smoke when he cut himself, which he did frequently to measure time. When John was sick, the villagers sang to him. When he was epileptic, they worried about the devil and asked Teresa to exorcise him. She bathed him in salt water and licked it clean off his skin. The village came every morning to watch him rise. They collected the ash his body left in the sheets when he awoke and sprinkled it in their fields, praying for a bountiful harvest. They asked him, *What is love?* John answered, *Wheat is Love. The absence of light is Love. The unpracticed breath is Love*. The villagers pricked their hands every October and bled into a brass decanter. They told John to drink.

God came to John every night with a pen and paper. He said to John, *Write me a poem*. John asked God, *Shall it rhyme?* God whispered in his ear: *A B A B B*. John began to compose his verses, and the dogs in the church all bowed. Divinity, it is written, is the loyalty of beasts, the loyalty of brethren.

John dreamt of great wars, minor wars, and laughter. He saw photographs of his children, the babes he sired in his memory. When John made supper, he always set an extra plate. *For the Lord*, he said. When a goat-hoofed beast appeared, knocking at John's door, carrying a basket of plums, the servants were afraid to let him in. The beast asked for wine. John smiled. *There is plenty*, he said. They discussed maritime trade, the lure of the tides, and Saint Teresa's breasts (both agreed they were both beautiful). John and the beast were succinct and passionate, but never argumentative. *The devil is not your enemy; the devil is your shadow, your trapdoor back to the Almighty.*

Men came for John in the night. They chained him to their horses and dragged him through the woods. They poured icy water down his back and shouted *Heresy!* They dipped his fingers in the fire, but it would extinguish immediately. He was whipped, and he forgave them. He recited romances, tales of lovers lost and mislead, of angelic mischief and intervention. One morning, as his accusers fed on a breakfast of hardboiled eggs—eggs prepared for them by their wives and blessed by their priests—John explained to them the nature of the Lord. The men, with their newly softened eyes, dipped their irons in the fire and branded his skin. The men, before beating him, called him by name. *I love you all*, John said, *which is how God would have wanted it.*

The Lord said *Do* and John did. The Lord said *Speak*. The two spoke of grace and of insidious intent. They spoke of forgiveness and fingerprints. And when they exhausted themselves over their inability to answer that ultimate question of free will, God taught John a song. It went like this: *La Máquina, La Máquina, La Máquina, La Máquina...*

The mothers wanted decadence. They danced and asked for blessings. For each prayer, John dutifully took a candle and burned a single hair off his knuckles. The fathers asked for sons, the sons for women, the sisters for piety, the children for gold. The elders, they prayed themselves into an untethered sleep and John muttered their Last Rites with a solemn smile. Each prayer, he lit off his arm, a small piece of him, a small price for the missive to reach the unreachable.

Saint John of the Cross went to God to weep. *The world of men*, John said, *is a world of dust, of beauty, of pressed linens, of angels and birds.* He asked to be emptied, to be freed from his spirit, from his body. He wanted nothing. He wanted to be undone. John asked God for this one favor, and as he awaited the reply, he held his breath, waiting for the Lord to release it.

Adrian Sobol is inspired by the empty spaces found in the Midwest. It is a sprawling mouth and he lives in it. He runs Wicker Suit Press, a tiny, tiny chapbook imprint based in Chicago.

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