

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



The Rescue

The missing boy was found in a clearing of the woods
surrounded by some wolves as if he were on fire.
How did he speak among the wolves, for hours, as he did?
Singing for his mother, he became as natural as the animal.
After school he'd strayed from a game of field grenades,
but the wolves were not unkind when they heard him sing.
His mother came and hurried with him home.
His father ran ahead and beat a path of fear.
Over his mother's woolen shoulder, he saw their coats of Spanish moss
and said: Go on; sweet wolves, when I pray awake tonight I will
pray to you.

Christine Garren¹

✧ Reflections

Rescue comes in many forms. I rescued my dogs and cats, for example, from the streets and alleys. My parents rescued me from nightmares in my childhood. The ski patrol rescued me off a slope I had no business being on. Aid workers rescue people from the rubble. A warm day in winter rescues us from bitter cold and reminds us that spring will come. My family rescued me from mental illness. The church rescues me daily from myself. God rescues us all in mysterious ways, ceaselessly, and sometimes God is a shape-shifter: dog, patrolman, mother, weather. However it happens, mercy comes eventually. In this poem, there is the feel of a fairy tale. The landscape is eerie and brimming with what feels supernatural. And the rescue is a miracle.

The writer Marilynne Robinson (author of *Lila*, *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Housekeeping*) wrote an essay for *Poetry* magazine in which she argued that "... poetry is not, in the ordinary sense, 'understood.' If it is great, it is lived with over time...interpreted again and again in its impact on language and thought and the arts, and on all those souls who are sensitive to its pleasures and sufficiencies." What a liberating philosophy on reading poetry! It's as if the burden of having to Make Meaning is lifted. I used to tell my students all the time: poetry is not meant to be heavy-going; nothing is hiding; sometimes the point is pleasure. In "The Rescue," there is a lot left to mystery: who is this boy? who has observed this scene?

¹ "The Rescue" by Christine Garren from *Afterworld*, University of Chicago Press. Used by permission of the publisher.

is this real? how did this come to be and what happened next? Christine Garren is known largely for her vast imagination, her attention to detail that is both expansive and concentrated. Her poems have been called “psychic exercises” because they tend to, as Christian Wiman explains, “exist more in the mind than in the body.” Keeping in mind what Marilynne Robinson says about understanding poetry, let’s let go of our (often obsessive) desire to beat a meaning out of the poem and take inventory of what we know, noticing first the peculiar details: fire, a game of field grenades, a path of fear. Notice that the wolves are not fearsome but “sweet” and they come with a softness in their coats of moss. Notice that there is a *singing* for his mother—not a scream, not a howl, but a song and it is the song that directs the wolves to kindness.

Notice a boy in peril, though he does not realize his danger.

Suddenly, there is something familiar about that last detail. I have seen this child before and I may even *know* this boy! I may very well *be* this child in danger who does not know enough to be afraid. I recognize this scene, you see? Suddenly, I recognize those wolves, too. Suddenly, it does not matter what a game of field grenades is, or means, but I realize that it is dangerous and that someone has made a game of danger. And I recognize the rescue, too, because I know what it feels like to be carried from peril, real or imagined, and even peril I did not know I was in. I know what it feels like to be grateful for the mystery of the rescue. That is, I have been despairing in such a way that wolves may as well have been inhabiting my house and yet somehow I did not die. Whether it was my mother’s “woolen shoulder”, or God, or a good friend, or time, or prayer—*something* rescued me.

This is what poetry can do. It moves us both outward and inward at once, expands what we know but cannot say, and gives us a way to glimpse what might otherwise remain invisible.

This poem takes a little bit of work, but it’s good work to do, I think, though we may have to relearn what it means to delight in mystery the way many of us did as children. For this kind of work, the rewards are infinite. The marriage between poetry and mystery is kin to faith, a belief in what we cannot see. One might argue that the boy in this poem symbolizes each of us, and that his danger is our own danger. The poem reads like a fable in this way and the poet has invited us to identify something of our own selves and our own lives.

☞ Other questions to consider

1. Poetry at its best wills us into finding ways to say what we cannot otherwise say, and it reveals to us what we did know we knew. If we think of the boy as a metaphor for our selves, and the wolves as a metaphor for danger, where does your imagination take you? Are you able to name the fears the wolves might be symbolizing?
2. The boy is carried on his mother’s woolen shoulder the way the lost lamb returns on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd. What do you make of this parallel gesture? It’s a familiar image to many Christians—Jesus carrying the lamb—and it might be interesting to articulate (or draw) the image you have of the mother carrying the boy. Are they

similar? Is your notion of Jesus carrying the lamb informing (even subconsciously) the way you imagine the mother as a savior?

3. One reason many of us are drawn to mathematics and science is because, especially in grade school when our interests are vulnerable and forming, there are usually “right” answers and this can feel really satisfying. (And sometimes you even get to check your work to *prove* that you’re right! What a relief!) But literature and the humanities are different, much more ambiguous, and incredibly frustrating to some who want to know whether they “got it right” or not, whether they have uncovered the meaning they believe to be hiding from them. But what if I tell you that there is nothing hiding? That everything you need to know is already there. Where are moments you find delight in the poem? Where are you frustrated? Are you able to pinpoint your frustration and name the reason? Is it because there is “too much” mystery? How much is “too much”?
4. As in real life, we don’t always get to know how things end, or what becomes of people we no longer see, nor do we get to “check our work” or be reassured that we’ve figured out everything there is to know. Many people say that this is the essence of art mimicking life—that there is uncertainty and mystery and therefore art is *true*. How do you interpret the “truth” in this poem? In other words, what about the *essence* of this poem is “true”?
5. This poem reads like a fable, kin to a parable. How do you feel about the possibility of the poet’s imagining the voice of God uttering this poem? How does the poem work as a story of Christ? Is there a Christ figure in the poem?
6. Consider the poem not as a poem, but as a prayer. How does reading it through a prayerful lens, rather than an academic one, affect your openness to it or your ability to understand it?

✧ Writing in response

1. Perhaps it is easiest to identify with the boy in danger, or even the mother who saves him. But the father plays a really interesting role in this poem, too, because all we know of him is that he “ran ahead and beat a path of fear.” Reframe this poem with an emphasis on the father. You might begin by re-titling the poem and seeing where it leads you.
2. The poem is titled “The Rescue” but it’s never clear who is rescuing whom from what. Write a reflection about this mysterious puzzle beginning with this sentence:
_____ is being rescued from _____.
3. If you could edit this poem to include another 3 lines, what would you write and where would you add these lines? If you could remove a line, what would you omit? This kind of heavy-handed “surgery” is often helpful in clarifying the essence of a poem because we are able to see more precisely what is necessary to the poem’s life.

4. Write your own poem or journal entry and title it “The Rescue.” What happens next?

✧ About the poet

Christine Garren is the author of *Afterworld*, *Among the Monarchs*, *The Piercing*, and *The Difficult Here*. She is a Los Angeles Times Book Award finalist and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship recipient.



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