



Three Short Prose

by Tim Poland

Noah's Raven

...he sent forth a raven, which went to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth. (Genesis 8:6)

Most likely they'd quarreled, below decks in the deep hold of the gopher wood boat, disagreeing over strategy and purpose. The old drunk, dipped in the mash of a short-tempered bully of a god, agitated by the days adrift without wine, map or stars—the bird, sleek and black, talkative, with an agile mind of her own, weary of faith and the dung-thick air, ready to improvise. Mountain tops, slick with silt, already exposed above the receding waters, a place, at least, to beach the sealed boat, stretch her cramped wings. But the old drunk refused, oblivious to the rising stench of drowned bodies, waiting only for the prescribed emergence of vineyard bottomland. So the raven was released first, quickly forgotten, nearly erased, never to be mentioned again, the one-cubit window slammed shut on leather hinges. To and fro, her wings whipped the water to vapor, feathering coordinates for a new map, charting her world through wild flight, a thankless mission from which she was not intended to return. She settled on an island peak, pecked a nit from her wing, watched for the release of the more obedient dove.

The First Stone

...and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not. So when they continued asking him, he lifted himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. (John 8: 6-8)

Spittle sprayed from their lips, comingled with equal portions of hatred and desire. She watched this and saw it clearly—their mixture of loathing and longing—as she stood among them, her arms pinned behind her by the taller one as they dragged her before him. This new one squatted nonchalant on the ground, his knees pulled up to his chest, his back leaned against the wheel of a hand cart at the edge of the market square. She wondered what it was, something in the way the sun baked the stony hills outside the city, that bred these mad rabbis. His feet were caked with dust, his hair tangled and thick, his fingernails

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jagged and dirty. He sat indifferent, trailing his finger through the dirt, as the taller one shoved her closer, and they repeated their call for judgment, demanded to know if he would concur with their legacy of stones for a woman who sang her own lawless pleasure. The taller one's grip on her arms tightened, and he pressed against her backside more than necessary to affect restraint. Her eyes followed the track of the rabbi's ragged fingertip through the dirt. It might be language, though she couldn't know for certain—they had refused to teach her. His finger moved from right to left the way her father's finger had one morning long ago, tracing the tracks of inked strokes on the scroll. Her father had huffed and chased her from the room when she asked him to teach her to read. When the rabbi at last rose and spoke, she turned her gaze to the crowds milling about the center of the market, resigned now, knowing that they spoke not to her or even about her but over her—over her body, this body still humming with the heft and wet of the man they found her with, the man they permitted to flee. She was no more than a specimen to them, and she would be chased from the room again, once they'd used her for the purposes they'd already set upon. He could have said something, a firm yes or no, or spoken to the idea of the stone itself. *Let him first cast a stone at her.* He'd embarrassed them for a moment, had scratched another figure in the dirt, and said nothing to add to their understanding of her or the stone. She saw that this new one understood no more than those who held her. The stone remained in place, fixed and immutable. His eyes filled with judgment when he said he'd not judge her and then wandered out of the market square, indifferent again to her, to the actual animated flesh before him. She wondered where to turn once they dispersed and forgot her, and she knew it no longer mattered. Her body had been written on elsewhere, by others. Somewhere, sometime, in a dark corner, away from the public eyes and public voices of public display, one of them, perhaps the taller one, would read again the words inked onto the scroll of her skin and seek her out with the first stone.

Speak Plainly

Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. (John 14:5-6)

It had been a perfectly reasonable question, Thomas thought. If he were going somewhere and they were expected to follow, why not simply state the destination? Perfectly reasonable. But again, he'd trailed off, teasing them with his dreamy riddles and convoluted proverbs, refusing to offer a straight answer. He'd been that way for most of the evening. Not that Thomas hadn't seen him this

way before—they all had. While they craved knowledge and understanding, he had filled them with mystery. More than once Thomas had nearly walked away, frustrated, exasperated with the persistent evasiveness, hungry for something palpable to wrap his hands around. Most often, he would finally punctuate his maddening proverbs with something tangible, an example, something for simple men to understand. And they were simple men. Except for Judas, not a scholar among them. That blind man, Thomas remembered, could actually see afterward. It was true. Thomas had known the man before, known him as a blind man. He had yet to figure out the trick with the fish and the barley loaves. And so he had stayed, in hopes that something of the trick would eventually be revealed. Something practical. There were hungry people everywhere. To feed so many with so little would be a worthy trick to master. But tonight was different. Some spark had fired in him. Something had swung off its hinges. Thomas thought he had seen that something fire when he had stripped himself naked and knelt to wash their feet. He'd noticed nothing of their discomfort at what he was doing. He was elsewhere, of this Thomas was almost certain, for from that moment on he had launched into his inscrutable reveries and never once spoke plainly for the remainder of the evening, despite their pleas: *speakest thou plainly, and speakest no proverb*. If so much was at stake, why not answer concisely, with clarity? Mark out a clear path. Thomas had heard enough of foggy, obscure language and seen all too well how it could be twisted to ends other than might be intended. But after the episode with the towel and washing their feet, there was no reaching him. Each question elicited only more tangled knots of words, with no beginning or end from which to begin the unraveling. *Speakest thou plainly*. If they *knowest not now*, then why not tell them now rather than wait for some vague *hereafter*? How could they possibly see him if the rest of *the world seeth him no more*? Who was this *Comforter* he was sending, and why in the world could that one not come if he *go not away? A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me*. Try as Thomas might, and try he did, none of it made any sense. Made less sense the more he went on. Speak plainly. This was all that Thomas had ever expected. A simple question, asked clearly, needing only a simple, direct answer. Perfectly reasonable. *No man cometh unto the Father, but by me*. And here, in a time and a land so in need of opening the doors that it seemed he promised to open, he had closed them all, save one. It simply made no sense. Thomas stepped away from the others. He tore off a piece of the remaining bread, slumped on the floor in a corner of the room, and gnawed the bread slowly. How much more of this muddled talk he could bear, Thomas didn't know. Still, there were those two fish and five barley loaves. He'd linger with them for a few more days, but if the knowing he sought wasn't soon forthcoming in a way a simple man could understand, he could see no other choice but to walk

away at last. A merchant he knew was sailing soon for India. He might go along with him. Enough with riddles, proverbs, and vague promises.

Tim Poland works in the New River Valley near the Blue Ridge Mountains in southwestern Virginia. He's the author of a novel, *The Safety of Deeper Water* (Vandalia Press/West Virginia University Press, 2009), *Escapee* (America House, 2001), a collection of short fiction, and *Other Stones, Kinder Temples* (Pudding House, 2008), a chapbook of poems. His work has appeared widely in various literary magazines. He's the recipient of a Plattner/*Appalachian Heritage* Award (2002), and his work has been included in the Best of the Net Anthology (2007) and has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

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