

“May almighty God have mercy upon you.”

“Forgive you your sins.”

“And bring you life everlasting.”

“Amen.”

At the first Mass after my baptism he wore the chasuble and for the occasion I had had my bandages removed entirely. What did I think at the placement of the wafer upon my lips, or of the look he gave me when he saw the scars? It's odd. I heard the call again. Fire! Fire! Fire! And remembered those moments running toward the voice, the old man in pajamas throwing stones at the house. There's someone trapped up there, he shouted. We've got to get the smoke out! And I joined him, removed my overcoat, threw down my bookbag, found some stones. It was my second toss that did it, right through the large single pane. Yet the window refused to shatter, used the newly made hole to puff a derisive smoke ring into the night and announce the appearance of the woman in the Indian blanket bathrobe. What the hell you doing? she asked. My father's trapped up there! You gotta get him out! And then she was pulling me up onto the porch, instructing me in the geography of her house. Yes! That's what I thought of with the wafer on my tongue, that one last look at them both, the old man whom I was supposed to rescue standing with his daughter, the curl of a slight smile on their otherwise shapeless mouths. And I remember as I made an effort to get them out of my mind, my teeth crunched down upon the wafer. I looked at the priest's cape as he returned to the altar, at Adam and Eve dancing beneath the tree. There was a delicate flavor. And then they were gone.

POETRY / KASCHNITZ, SOTO

A Night in December
/ Marie Luise Kaschnitz

Turnip field, prune trees, river wind.
Watchmen are tracking a birth to a toolshed.
This is strictly forbidden!
Refugees belong in camps—
they have to be counted.
A shepherd, waving his staff,
made the discovery.
His dog Water signaled at the hut.

An old man said he's not the father.
Watchmen demanded to see all the papers—
the baby cried. Sheep blocked the road.
Three cars, a Porsche, Triumph and a Ferrari
pulled up. Three men stepped out
and three women, more graceful than angels.
They asked for directions. Fingering lambs.
Give us some money, the watchmen pleaded.
They gave them Dior perfume, a fur coat
and a check from the Bank of England.
The three women stood quietly,
glancing at the stars.
What about that bright one?
There was white frost.
In the hut, the little voice fell silent.
A Porsche, Triumph and a Ferrari
on a trip, humming like dragonflies.
Shepherds told the herd to move on.

Is the child dead?
Children never die.

Translated by Nicholas Kolumban

Town / Gary Soto

When you looked back
The blind whose pupils were just visible
Under a whiteness, and yet
Fading like twin stars,
Opened their hands
And you turned away.
The town smelled of tripe
Pulled from an ox
And hanging—
Smoke, fruit wrinkling
Or bearded with gnats.
The streets shone with rain.

After the rain
You wore the heat like a shirt,
You drank until your mouth
Hung open and no longer