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Holy Ground

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Holy Ground

by Mallery Waters

I. Holy Ground

The Phoenicians had their temples of Molech, the Mayans their ziggurats, the Hebrews the field of Beth-el, where Jacob saw angels descending from heaven to sod. Where is my holy place—soil too sacred for my feet to touch, glory so present, so bright that it blinds my eyes, where I forget what it is like to see with these rods and cones because I know what it is like to truly see?

We say that God has made His dwelling with men, we say. He dwells, but where and how, and when shall we taste His glory? Eyes veiled until the last day.

I stand beneath myriad saints, staring, smiling, gold-gilt—Catherine and John Chrysostom and Theotokos, most reverend ever-virgin Mary and mother of God—with the haunting voices chanting and the incense puffing out of the incense holder as the priest swings it like a pendulum toward the place of the Incarnate God and the icons and the faithful gathered here—for the prayers of the saints rise like incense unto heaven—and am ushered above, to another throne in another sanctuary where the living Catherine and John and Theotokos are no longer invisible but visible and join with all of creation and all of the saints in praising the Thrice-Holy: “O Gladsome Light of the holy glory of the Immortal Father, heavenly, holy, blessed Jesus Christ.”

Holy? How the senses perceive it, I cannot say, but this is holy ground. The nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide of the air can and yet can't contain it: they are thick with spices and ripples of sound and particles and waves of light. No, they are thick with presence.

Surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not.

II. On the Imago

I am God's image, we say. What does this mean? *Imago Dei*—mirroring Him in being, existence, consciousness. Christ is the image of the invisible God—through Him we see Him who cannot be seen. Perhaps in a creaturely way that's how it is with us: we are modeled after Him and so become a peek through the window, a glimpse at what we have not known and cannot fully understand.

But here I am stealing the seat of the theologian—and who am I to presume? Origen saw that we are made in God's image and likeness—*imago* and *similitudo*—far from moral similarity to the Thrice-Holy, yet in image intact, whole because of the nature of our being. If we lose the imago, we cease to be.

Someone—maybe it was Augustine—once said that fallen man is like a slug in the presence of God. I cannot say how close this hits at the truth, for I have never asked God and I only know my self—and the heart, they say, is exceedingly wicked and deceitful; who can know it? But, for all the cheerfulness of my disposition, my delight in giving to others, it seems to me that I am worse than I think. Is it that I want to imagine I am good, and I do? I have spent many hours trying to convince myself that I am bad, and it doesn't work.

Even moments when I don't believe, when I don't want to believe, when I walk in the chill beneath the stars and ruminate on Derrida, or what I think/imagine is Derrida, and decide to give up on faith for a few moments and feel more vitally alive—see the stars more brightly, feel the wind more fully—than I ever felt before, even then, I am sustained by the one I deny existence. (How can this be? Why does He sustain me then?)

I am a creature of God, we say, a being sculpted by His design and filled by His exhalation/breath with a life-giving force. (Are we humans material emanations of His immateriality? Am I now talking heresy?) I can't comprehend such dependence. Not mere reliance on another for rice and

socks and a mattress—these are acceptable realms of dependence, for my parents have always provided them—but for very being.

And if I am made as a type of another, shouldn't I seek to understand the nature of my prototype? C.S. Lewis said we are like machines designed by someone, and that we, of course, run better when we function according to the owner's manual (since a manual tells the right way to operate a machine, the way a blender or washing machine or motor scooter was designed to run), when our gears are properly oiled and our valves have only so much pressure, so to speak. But what if we are not only mechanical inventions of His but flesh-and-blood little offspring/babies that in some mystical way do and yet do not carry His genes, laughing because He laughs, yearning because He desires?

By discovering the Papa we have abandoned, we discover who we really are. That is the mystery, and that is the stumbling block. They say it is very hard for people who think they are wise to believe.

III. On the Presence of God

Sometimes God is a long way off—or it seems so to me. I am here, definite, concrete, a locus from which to experience all else. The soles of my feet press the soil, my fingers press this page, my back rests against the boards of a partially completed shed. There is a feeling of hereness—I'm a solid mass that never felt the laws of gravity so strongly as tonight.

And the sky, that layer of dust particles combing sunlight in the atmosphere (how is it that we always come back to dust?), the sky is out there, miles away out there, and I think that God must be beyond all of this—for this is a world of flesh and blood and bones, and what has it to do with things unseen?

This is a physical, tangible world. I physically feel things—leaning against the doorpost with boards of pine against my back, head resting, exerting force, and the doorpost pushing me back, according to the laws of thermodynamics. Wool scarf soft, abrasive against my cheeks.

I am a physical being—I need physical things. How can I fathom, much less interact with something not bound by matter? Never before has the world felt so real. But does feeling determine what is? Perhaps my eyes deceive, perhaps the evil demon really is craftier than we think, perhaps I am deluded.

Come back, come back, my God who advances in smoke and sound and light. Or do these things only mark, indicate your presence—you who were already there?

And this world is so real. And the trash bin holding plywood scraps and clear plastic sheeting and other such physical things wait on. They wait on.

Oh why oh why oh why can't God be real? Real like plywood in a trash can, real like something I have known of or have known.

Or is that Incarnation: the distant becoming near as Styrofoam cups full of coffee and clods of clay and red wool scarves, the immaterial becoming cells and blood vessels, flakes of dead skin and mucous membranes. What is tangible if not this?

And when that Incarnation is very far off—it was so very long ago, after all—I have these smells, sounds, symbols, icons of Virgin and Child, to remind me that the God who was not physical became physical and can truly be known.