

*P*resence  
A JOURNAL OF  
CATHOLIC  
POETRY







*Presence*  
A JOURNAL OF  
CATHOLIC  
POETRY

With its inaugural issue in 2017, *Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry* has been an independent, 501(c)3 non-profit journal since 2018. It is published annually each spring.

Subscription rates:

Single Issues—\$15 (Back Issues—\$10)

Two-year subscription—\$25

Three-year subscription—\$40

Please see [www.catholicpoetryjournal.com](http://www.catholicpoetryjournal.com)  
for mission statement, submission guidelines, rights,  
advertising rates and purchase information.

Printed by

Craftsman Printers, Inc., 535 32nd Street, Lubbock, TX 79404

[www.craftsmanprinters.com](http://www.craftsmanprinters.com)

Cover

Design: Deborah Mercer

Cover Art: Beth Shadur, *Transmutation*  
acrylic on ceramic, 6" x 5" x 3"  
courtesy of the artist  
(© Beth Shadur 2003)

Published by

Mary Ann B. Miller, Ph.D.

Department of English

Caldwell University

120 Bloomfield Ave.

Caldwell, NJ 07006

copyright © 2022 by Mary Ann B. Miller

ISBN: 978-0-9988095-5-7

ISSN: 2573-900X



# Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry

2022

## **Editor-in-Chief**

Mary Ann B. Miller

## **Associate Editor**

Lois Roma-Deeley

## **Assistant Editor**

Marjorie Maddox

## **Translations Editors**

Gregory Orfalea

Jeannine M. Pitas

## **Copy Editor**

Gloria Heffernan

## **Advisory Board**

Susanne Paola Antonetta

William Baer

Joseph A. Brown, S.J.

Paul J. Contino

Kate Daniels

Dana Gioia

Paul Mariani

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

Judith Valente

## **Social Media Marketing Manager**

Lisa Toth Salinas

## **Marketing Assistant**

Susan L. Miller

## **Undergraduate Readers**

Samantha Ashton

Jada Mentor

Ryan Naturale

Gabrielle Oliveira

Brian Prelich

Christiana Santos

We could almost be reading Beowulf until the last two lines, which introduce the spiritual element.

The book is introduced by an incisive and useful introduction by poet and scholar David Middleton. *Motherland* is Sally Thomas's first full-length collection. It is rare to find such a vibrant and persuasive voice; I am sure more books will follow.

Journals publishing **Janet McCann's** work include *Kansas Quarterly*, *Parnassus*, *Nimrod*, *Sou'wester*, *America*, *Christian Century*, *Christianity and Literature*, *New York Quarterly*, *Tendrils* and others. A 1989 NEA Creative Writing Fellowship winner, she taught at Texas A & M University from 1969 until 2015 and is now Professor Emerita. She has written six chapbooks and three full-length poetry books, most recently *The Crone at The Casino* (Lamar University Press, 2014).

***The Strangeness of the Good (Including Quarantine Notebook)*** by James Matthew Wilson (Angelico Press, 2020)

If you work in or follow any of these worlds—poetry, literature, criticism, philosophy, theology, classical education—you're aware of James Matthew Wilson, one of the universe's busiest and most prolific poets and essayists. Wilson is Professor of Humanities and Founding Director of the brand-new Master of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing at the University of St. Thomas, Houston. He's poetry editor of *Modern Age* magazine, series editor of Colosseum Books (Franciscan University of Steubenville Press), and the author of ten books, six of which are poetry. Wilson's poems and critical work appear *everywhere*, making him one of the heavy engines pulling the freight of Western literature, culture, and faith along the right track.

*The Strangeness of the Good* is Wilson's most recent poetry collection. In "Those Days of Weighted Solitude," he recalls in blank verse an autumn morning when he was younger; how much younger, we don't know. It is still dark as he eases out of the house to attend Mass.

I bore not just a sense of loneliness,  
But sorrow and remorse, and would have gone  
Alone, in any case, ashamed to share

With anyone this walk of half-belief;  
This sense of contradicting not the world,  
But rather all the world that dwelt within me.

He knows his own human brokenness. Later in the poem, we read:

Then, heading back again, down that same path,  
The Eucharist a dry taste in my mouth,  
A sting upon my brain still heating me,  
I'd wonder when this thing I had to do  
Might seem less brittle. Would there come a time  
I'd speak with golden tongue of all that glory?  
Or, it not seem a glimmer swamped by darkness?  
A time when every movement ceased to play  
At parables about some inner mood?

I did not know that there would be whole years,  
Where neither grief nor joy could pound my chest,  
And prayer came forth in one clean line of words  
That carried nothing with it but its meaning;  
The church itself seem bathed in neutral light,  
My soul insensible in its detachment.  
We do not always know when we've been blessed.

*"We do not always know when we've been blessed"* is, in many ways, the collection's theme. The miraculous—the good, true, and beautiful—lie always in our path, but we often lack the wit or will to see them.

Another poem, "Through the Water," provides the collection's title. Again, Wilson reminisces:

Far back within the mansion of our thought  
We glimpse a lintel with a door that's shut,  
And through which all our lives would seem to lead  
Though we feel powerless to say toward what.  
It is the place where all the shapes we know  
Give way to whispers and a gnawing gut.

Little by little, childhood's summer turns to winter:

When winter settles in, and our skies darken,  
We take a trampled path by pond and wood,  
And find beneath an arch of slumbering thorn  
Stray tufts of fur, a skull stripped of its hood,  
Then turn and look down through the thickening ice  
In wonder at the strangeness of the good.

What can this mean: “the strangeness of the good”? There are hints. The third section of the book is Wilson’s *Quarantine Notebook*: fifteen blank-verse narrative poems written March 15 through May 17, 2020. As much as any poem in the book, the offering for May 14, 2020, illuminates the collection’s theme and title.

My brother calls, the virus long since passed,  
And he back at his desk, as if it never  
Had knocked him out or shaken him within.  
“Do you just write about whatever happens  
Around your house or in the yard?” he asks.  
“I worked my shed into a poem last week,”  
I say, “So, yeah, I guess.” Outside my window,  
The songbirds raise a fugue of rapid twitters,  
And crows erupt with loud, shrill interjections.

.....  
This working up quotidian life to poems  
Just seems absurd to him, who for his living  
Will turn a dollar into something useful,  
Produce a thing that someone else will buy.  
His way of life depends upon his seeing  
How value can be skimmed from what was worthless,  
Or, from crude stuff, some good that others want.  
Just writing down what was already there  
Does not seem right.

Of course, that misses what  
Is actually occurring, when one takes  
The settled details of the ordinary  
And sets them rhyming one against the other.  
Or, when one takes the plain prose of the hour,  
The news report, the anecdote, the thought  
That passes through the mind while one’s out walking,  
The odd thing that one’s daughter said at breakfast,  
And straitens it until it fits in meter  
And runs in coded columns down the page.

The curtain is drawn back. Wilson describes here precisely what he does and how he sees the world: he sets ordinary things to rhyme and straitens everyday minutiae until they fit in meter. In doing so, he presents all of it as glorious miracles.

The good is strange. The strange is often good. *We do not always know when we’ve been blessed.* This is Wilson at his poetic best.



**Jane Greer** founded *Plains Poetry Journal* in 1981 and edited it for fourteen years. Her first collection of poems, *Bathsheba on the Third Day*, was published by Harry Duncan at The Cummington Press in 1986. Her second collection, *Love like a Conflagration*, was published by Lambing Press in 2020. Her next collection will be out in 2022, also from Lambing Press. She lives in North Dakota.