

Elizabeth Alexander

## TRANSPOSITIONS

If she had died only two days earlier, Synthia Comer would have breezed her way into Heaven—not for the usual reasons (gentle disposition, exemplary behavior, etc.) but because she displayed an ardor for God, a passion without a caveat. It came out in gestures extravagant, imaginative, and illegal, such as diverting tens of thousands of dollars that she raised for the Dallas Civic Opera to Doctors Without Borders in Badghis.

Synthia was interred at Sparkman Hillcrest Memorial Park, half a mile from El Lobo Grande where, on Sunday evenings before Katharine was born, she and John had shared the *plata favorito*. A trio of angels with stringed instruments hovered over the grave. A soloist sat at a piano in a pecan tree. The angels played the Liturgy of Crystal from Messiaen’s “Quartet for the End of Time.” It was hard to tell who, if anyone, heard.

Unfortunately, Synthia had her fatal aneurysm on October 5, 2001, when Saint Peter imposed a quota of zero Americans in heaven.

God demanded an explanation.

“Americans are nothing but trouble,” Saint Peter declared. A doubt flickered in his hard blue eyes but passed away. “Moreover, even You cannot guarantee their security. Not after the bombing—”

“—What bombing?”

Saint Peter pointed God toward the visible spectrum. A radio wave passed through the divine ears. It carried the Secretary of Defense’s announcement approximately 32 hours before it was made: “Today, the President has turned to direct, overt military force to complement the economic, humanitarian, financial and diplomatic activities which are already well underway in Afghanistan.”

God saw what he had made and, behold, it was no longer good. God cried for the physical world and every living thing. His tears fell as blossoms: apricot, orange, apple, plum, dogwood, and pear. They softened the world. They cushioned Synthia’s fall.

She landed on the frayed white border of a photograph. It depicted her, facing the camera and standing parallel to a mirror in Saint Paul Hospital. She wore a turquoise robe with deep pink seashells embroidered on the bodice and sleeves. She held an infant wrapped in a yellow blanket.

Synthia positioned herself on her image. In this way, she became who she was in July of 1954.

Her memory returned, lobe by lobe, as she cradled the baby. “Katharine?” Synthia mused. But of her two children, Katharine did not seem right.

A voice from the hallway, having been foiled twice for lack of a medium, found enough air to move into Synthia’s room. *Honey*, said the voice. *We have a boy.*

“Darling!” Synthia cried. But John had taken the photograph and could not come inside.

The baby’s mouth found Synthia’s breast and sucked ferociously. “Robert,” Synthia whispered.

“baby Robert . . . oh, my God.”

Robert Samuel Comer was born with his aorta in the pulmonary artery’s place and the other way around. “Transposition of the great arteries,” the pediatric cardiologist said. In 1954 there was no treatment.

For six nights and seven days, Synthia and John held Robert—memorized him. The faint pressure of his spine in the crooks of their arms. His smooth broad forehead, violet-blue lips, and damp black curls. The sound he made, halfway between a murmur and a whimper, as though to say *I love you* and *goodbye*.

Synthia tried to locate herself and the baby in time and space if indeed, she thought, such categories applied. *You and I are matter. We have mass. We take up space. But you are dead. So I am . . . also dead?*

“Wah!” Robert cried.

A teacart rolled into the room bearing a chipped white cup and saucer and a baby bottle. Synthia reeled at the cloying scent of Earl Grey. She glared at the ceiling. “One would think,” she remarked, “that *somewhere* in the divine dispensation, there would be coffee. Strong black coffee.”

“Uh oh,” Robert said. His cheeks and lips, their deepening pinkness, moved Synthia to excuse God everything. “Where to begin?” she asked.

“Big girls,” the baby said.

“All right; big girl, that is—your sister, Katharine.”

“Big girl,” Robert repeated.

“Don’t be smart.

“When you were born, Katharine climbed to the top of the bodark apple tree and refused to come

down. At bedtime I read poems, from *Alice in Wonderland*, out the attic window.”

“Beautiful soup so rich and green,” Robert recalled.

“As for John and I—”

“—Daddy?”

Synthia nodded. “When we closed our eyes, we saw your face. So we often stayed up until the test pattern went away and the news came on.

“Bad news?”

“Not always. Good news chased bad and sometimes caught it.” Synthia paused, remembering. “The Christmas after you died, Rosa Parks was arrested. Five months later, a U.S. District Court declared the bus ordinance that she defied unconstitutional. The Supreme Court upheld the ruling.”

“I have a dream, ” Robert said.

“How do you *know*?”

They stayed in Saint Paul Hospital for eleven weeks. Synthia taught Robert to whistle, tie a clove-hitch knot, and count to ten in Japanese. She pondered her life. She wondered what, if anything, came next. Robert sensed this wondering and wailed himself blue. “Not leave, not leave, not leave!” Robert cried. He remembered being so so cold. He remembered gulping for breath, not finding breath. He remembered awakening nowhere and alone.

In those same eleven weeks, the United States dropped approximately 1,405 cluster bombs on Afghanistan. The bombs carried antipersonnel cluster bomblets, hundreds of which failed to explode on

impact and were buried as land mines in the soil. In the first five months of Operation Enduring Freedom, more than one thousand Afghan civilians were hit and killed.

Yet life went on. Marriages were arranged. Babies were born. The dead were buried. “الَّذِينَ يَسْتَجِيبُ إِيمَانًا، ” the Qur’an says. “يُرْجَعُونَ إِلَيْهِ ثُمَّ اللَّهُ يَحْيِيهِمُ وَالْمَوْتَىٰ ۗ أَلَيْسَ لَهُ بِالسَّمْعُونَ” they return.”

Saint Peter likewise believed that the dead—those who had behaved on Earth—would return to God. Saint Peter had, however, inadvertently created an imbroglio in the mechanism: When he barricaded the pearly gates against Americans, a gap in the back fence appeared. Anyone at all could gain admittance.

Saint Peter called for volunteers to mend the gap, but none came forth. Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer had aroused the opposition. She addressed Saint Peter with the same searing authority with which she testified before the Credentials Committee, on behalf of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, in 1964.

Standing tall, without crutches or cane, her left eye clear as the right, Mrs. Hamer planted herself before Saint Peter. “What are you afraid of?” she demanded. “Some kind of jihad?”

Saint Peter blushed.

“Listen here,” Mrs. Hamer continued. “What do you think any self-respecting Afghan Muslims would want with this heaven, anyhow? We got nothing to drink but living water. They got wine. We got no marrying nor being given in marriage. They got whoopee.”

A quartet of angels formed a semicircle around Mrs. Hamer.

“It’s *dry* in this heaven,” she continued. *They* got gushing waters and flowering trees.”

“Precious Lord, take my hand lead me home,” the angels sang.

“And just suppose the Muslim brothers and sisters from Afghanistan (Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia,

Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria—I mean the whole nine *yards*) *DO* want to join us?”

“Wel–ll?” the angels chorused.

“Well then, Peter, you open those pearly gates *wide*, which is what you got to do *anyhow*—for the *Americans*. *Yessir*, I mean the white ones, too.”

“When the darkness appears and the night draws near, take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.”

Saint Peter lifted his eyes unto the hills. “Regretfully, we cannot revisit our decision at this time.”

Mrs. Hamer shook him by the wings. “*Shame* on you! Who made you Pope?”

Saint Peter looked to his right, but God had flown the coop.

On December 21, 2001, at dawn, when the veils between the worlds were frayed, a woman gave birth outside Mazar. As the Afghan baby crowned, Synthia lay Robert in his crib. As the Afghan mother pushed one more time, Synthia walked, as in a dream, to the mirror and was pulled through. She emerged in a defunct bus stop, a makeshift hospital with three rooms. The air was stale and sad.

Half asleep on a fold-out cot, the Afghan mother cradled a newborn boy whose chest collapsed with each attempted breath. His lips were violet-blue; his forehead glistened.

Synthia caught her own breath. “*No*,” she moaned.

The doctor, a female obstetrician trained in Kabul, strained her ears perceiving . . . something . . . but not quite.

Synthia pulled on the doctor’s gown. “Get on with it,” she pled. “Act *fast*.” She turned toward the infant’s mother. “There is an operation now. Your boy will be all right.”

The Afghan mother opened her eyes. She saw a jinni, in deep distress, wearing a turquoise robe with

deep pink shells embroidered on the bodice and sleeves. “Lilaha va inna illaha raziun,” the young mother reminded the jinni. “My beautiful baby boy,” she murmured unawares.

“There is an operation,” the doctor remarked bitterly. “All I would need is oxygen so the baby could survive from now until surgery. All I would need is a stethoscope to monitor his heartbeat. All I would need are prostaglandin and a clean intravenous needle to inject it. . . All I would need is blood.”

At the word *blood*, three medics rolled up their sleeves. “No,” the doctor sighed. We are all anemic as it is. We cannot transfuse again for at least a fortnight.”

*BLAM . . . BuhLAP*

It could have been anything. A nihilistic echo from the battle of Tora Bora. A rupture in the truce between Uzbek and Tajik warlords Abdul Rashid (“Big D”) Dostum and Ostad (“Teacher Atta”) Muhammad. A Pashtun wedding celebration. It turned out to be an ordinary bandit who, by the time the doctor gained her bearings, had shot dead one medic and toppled the other with a pistol blow to the skull.

There was a howl so violent as splintered the lamp, gouged the Earth, and sent the bandit running. A lightning bolt, a thunderclap, a transposition. A soft unfurling from emptiness to dreams to attenuated stillness, as between the crest and trough of an ocean wave. And finally an awakening under a Himalayan cypress in a moonlit garden.

Tiny rafts floated on the breeze across a reflecting pool toward a fountain of blue light. Each raft ferried a birthday candle. A little boy counted the flames. “Ichi, ni, san, yon, go, roku . . . I forgot.” “Nana, hachi, kyuu, juu,” his daddy said.

Synthia opened her eyes and saw the face of—

“—God?”

Mrs. Hamer laughed so hard that the spreading wisteria contracted and the periwinkles telegraphed an alarm. At length she wiped her eyes with a tired cloth. “God’s not here. He’s making a new Earth. — What, *this*? This is the new Heaven. It’s almost done.”

“Almost,” Synthia repeated, “but not quite.”

Tucking her legs under her gown, Synthia leaned against the cypress, which softened to receive her like in a hug.

“Something is missing,” Synthia mused. “*Someone*.”

A howl of love gone horrible wracked the crepuscular atmosphere. The cypress stretched its roots to absorb the approaching footfalls, heavy with mortality and grief.

It was Saint Peter. All that you could discern in the moonlight were his broken wings and thick white hair. He stumbled toward the reflecting pool and knelt within earshot of a little boy who was counting flames Saint Peter could not see in a language that he did not understand.

He knew that boy, by his heart. Remembering, Saint Peter saw himself through the lens of his own pitiless gaze. He felt the boot of his contempt for mystery, the cruelty of his certainty. “Lord have mercy,” he whispered, “Christ have mercy.”

Robert toddled toward the man with the muddy robe and pulled the tassel on his cincture like a doorbell. Saint Peter gazed numbly past the child, who leaned against his bony bent knee and, reaching way up, traced a tear trail down his cheek.

The first three stars in Heaven’s first night rose side by side. Starlight changed to music when, 38

trillion kilometers above the garden, it entered a pocket of deep space that contained a medium.



Not everybody knew Beethoven. Robert tasted the *adagio cantabile* as cool sweet milk. Mrs. Hamer felt it as a warm damp poultice wrapped in a chamois cloth. Saint Peter opened himself to receive it, but a ghost from Nicaea appropriated his laryngeal nerves. “We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,” Saint Peter croaked, “begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father.”

The music wavered at the discredited confession and might have stopped altogether had it not perceived, beneath the fallen saint, the broken fisherman. Beloved and bereft of God.