

*Fiction and Poetry*

# The Service

## A Life of the Virgin Mary

by Simone Kotva

## I

In God's house  
I stood  
in the temple  
my body

to be sown  
like a field  
in furrows  
of earth.

In God's house  
I bent  
asking  
the ground

tasting  
the acrid  
sweepings  
of slaughter.

Shall I  
be opened  
by this  
grace

received  
and greeted  
with  
a kiss?

Jerusalem  
reaps  
a harvest  
of rue

counts  
the signs  
for new  
arrivals

scans  
billboards  
above  
houses.

On the steps  
of the city  
a blind man  
watches.

For certain  
cause  
to leave  
this post

he marks  
the fields  
ploughed  
and sown.

To God's house  
I brought her  
temple  
to temple

a nubile  
line  
drawing  
eyes.

For God's house  
I reared her  
the temple's  
consent

a servant  
with hair  
wrapped  
in cloth.

Run  
to God's house  
the vaulted  
estate.

I am  
emptied  
of weight  
and sweetness.

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II

For this  
my trousseau  
they send  
twelve rods

from which  
I kiss  
the one  
that flowers.

Twelve rods  
for the years  
and lines  
of blood.

Come  
take this  
sign  
of love

lead me  
down  
to the place  
by the sea

make me  
the mother  
of the many  
I was shown.

The fountain  
took me  
wellspring  
and envoy

with cold  
water  
brought  
to bed.

It tinkled  
playing  
a caper  
of sound

unwrapping  
the cloth  
to fold  
and fall.

The light  
quickenened  
I rose  
and grew

stepping  
on shards  
of broken  
pitchers.

Apple  
without star  
her fruit  
is seed-less.

Bending  
doubled  
we saw her  
kneel

tell them  
she has lain  
in daylight  
with the dirt.

We saw her  
rise  
smash  
the jars

water  
mixing  
earth  
and clay.

Tell them  
she sings  
laughing  
destroying.

## III

I watch  
the flower  
bloom  
and seed

petal  
by leaf  
for a green  
fruit.

I hear  
events  
like mine  
uncanny

I rise  
and mount  
the aging  
hinny

the sun  
beating  
down  
the road.

Cousin  
wait  
he stops  
and slows.

In God's house  
the old man  
does not  
believe

this favour  
that comes  
without  
receipt.

Counts  
the days  
for words  
to loosen

this grace  
that comes  
to wreck  
and ravage.

On the steps  
the blind man  
cocks  
an ear

listens  
for a high  
pitch  
and tenor.

Stop  
feel  
the kick  
and yield

cousin  
the two  
still  
inside

running  
like horses  
down  
a track

they trade  
head-starts  
grow  
and shrink.

Stop  
feel  
my life  
laboured

for the sake  
of yours  
the younger  
one.

IV

They  
have gone  
to the house  
of bread

left  
the nephew  
to guard  
the shop.

Outside  
he sits  
and draws  
in sawdust

circles  
lines  
sceptres  
orbs

a crown  
and cloak  
spear  
and sword.

How will  
they reckon  
that  
prognosis?

Cousin  
I lay  
crouched  
saw water

and blood  
parting  
my body  
saw him

twist free  
a warm  
weight  
at my side.

In the lean-to  
I slept  
in recompense  
for grace.

Am I  
restored  
made myself  
again?

I am  
disgorged  
of the sweet  
weight.

In cities  
glory  
travels faster  
than truth

in streets  
stories  
increase  
details

because  
here  
things need  
mending.

Small things  
like sheep-pens  
big things  
like kingdoms.

On roads  
traders  
pick  
at scars

selling  
swapping  
giving  
without mercy.

## V

Carried  
to God's house  
scourge  
to temple

seedless  
apple  
without  
star.

The first  
wound  
cut  
with care

first  
and last  
scoring  
of oaths.

His black eyes  
bulge  
the mouth  
howls.

On the steps  
the blind man  
rises  
to stand.

Jerusalem  
is broken  
rent  
by a cry

a name  
peeling  
behind  
billboards.

On the steps  
the blind man  
fumbles  
and sings

for field  
and fruit  
the streets  
of Jerusalem.

Let him  
assume  
the sweet  
weight

regardless  
grace  
that wrecks  
to save.

Received  
by God's house  
destruction  
by temple.

Go  
tie the birds  
lover's nest  
with a string.

They wait  
with silver  
to redeem  
his rights

to settle  
accounts  
now  
in advance.

Go  
tell them  
the name  
I heard

the name  
that suckles  
my aching  
breasts.

VI

For this  
our sake  
the streets  
are quiet

the house  
of bread  
disgorged  
emptied

and Rachel  
mourns  
her reaching  
child.

For this  
our sake  
black eyes  
accuse.

Come  
hide us  
keep us  
out of sight

lead us  
to flee  
this requisite  
affair.

The sands  
retrace  
pathways  
stories

how once  
lead out  
lead in  
we grew

how once  
straying  
fleeing  
we shrank.

The desert  
rears him  
he crawls  
and walks

running  
to doors  
of rural  
shrines

I lift him  
to the heads  
of foreign  
gods.

There goes  
Rachel  
large  
again

how quickly  
restored  
by another  
comfort.

The city  
is sated  
Jerusalem  
rebuilds

the temple  
gleams  
the steps  
shine.

Each day  
knives cut  
a small  
piece

wearing  
the steel  
bit by bit  
to the bone.

## VII

Mother, why  
build nests  
so near  
to heaven?

In God's house  
birds  
weave  
through rafters

pigeons  
in niches  
rustling  
their feathers

a cooing  
that jumbles  
the muttered  
prayers.

Mother,  
to whom  
do they speak  
and sing?

The birds  
do not stop  
their swooping  
to listen.

In God's house  
he sits  
the temple's  
teacher

speaking  
and cocking  
his ear  
for answers.

Three days  
living  
on butcher's  
offcuts

he stays  
and hides  
leaves us  
walking.

Come, turn  
the beasts  
again  
to Jerusalem

to the gates  
and steps  
of polished  
stone.

Mother, why  
build  
like men  
not birds?

At night  
the house  
was cold  
and dark

the moon  
playing  
behind  
the clouds.

Mother  
why  
did you rush  
ahead?

I told them  
our home  
is beyond  
the vaults

I told them  
your stories  
as if  
they were mine.



VIII

Behind  
a veil  
she sits  
and smiles

her hand  
tied  
to another's  
wrist.

I would  
touch  
that knot  
and bless it

borrow  
some  
of its life  
for mine

this mother  
who bears  
the stone  
with the flesh

who laughs  
and loves  
and pours  
her vintage.

Where is  
my vagabond  
dazzling  
the crowd?

Scans  
and flicks  
his eyes  
away

turning  
one thing  
into  
another

a knack  
he picked up  
in foreign  
places.

Always late  
but still  
surrounded  
by chatter

always  
some new  
story  
to tell.

Turning  
he speaks  
like blades  
his words

turn  
and leave  
the breath  
short.

Do you  
force me  
to act  
is this

magic  
a play  
do you  
not see?

Run  
my son  
and mask  
your face

there are  
so many  
others  
to choose.

## IX

To the place  
of skulls  
I ran  
and saw

that point  
where death  
is not  
ashamed.

In the place  
of skulls  
I stood  
below

watched  
the body  
buckle  
and bend.

He is  
disgorged  
of water  
and blood

it spilled  
and made  
the earth  
a clay.

The city  
watches  
holds  
her breath

counts  
the cries  
and mans  
her gates.

On half-built  
sites  
awaiting  
orders

tarpaulin  
flaps  
in a strong  
breeze.

The steps  
of Jerusalem  
are emptied  
and quiet

its pigeons  
and soldiers  
asleep  
in the streets.

Mother  
look  
I found you  
another

son better  
than I  
a temper  
less short.

Like blades  
his words  
turn  
and speak.

But what  
am I  
without  
his weight

forced  
to walk  
into  
a lightness

forced  
to leave  
his body  
behind?

X

Where is  
my son?  
He crawls  
walks

trips  
tries  
a straight  
line

staggers  
falls  
laughs  
in the dirt.

Where is  
my son?  
Faint  
fluttering

quickenings  
leap  
of my  
consent

talking  
pointing  
black eyes  
on mine.

They come  
in groups  
of two  
or three

all told  
(but one)  
they stand  
and sing

for the heap  
of rags  
a widow  
breathing

grey  
and lined  
face  
to the wall.

They fade  
and slump  
and cease  
and snore

resting  
on a smaller  
heap  
of rags.

There  
he turns  
and speaks  
leaves

the breath  
short  
the life  
shorter.

Mother  
why  
did you stay  
behind?

I went  
ahead  
to another  
house

ribbed  
vaults  
without  
roof

tell them  
it was  
just  
as you said.

## XI

In God's house  
I stand  
my body  
a temple

closed  
to the seed  
like a sated  
furrow.

In God's house  
I rise  
touching  
the vaults

my fingers  
brushing  
a ribbed  
arch.

I am  
resolved  
ravaged  
by strength

every inch  
of skin  
covered  
in kisses.

The city  
above  
decks  
her streets

prepares  
her guards  
for this  
arrival.

Sceptres  
and orbs  
a crown  
of stars

nightly  
glinting  
ghosts  
of peace

signs  
above  
the broken  
lands.

Her arms  
a gesture  
sketched  
embrace.

To God's house  
I bring  
the temple's  
living

my arms  
an open  
frame  
of love.

For God's house  
they pray  
assent  
of the temple

hair tied  
and hidden  
wrapped  
in cloth.

Run  
depose  
the guards  
steal back

the sweet  
weight  
of your  
consent.