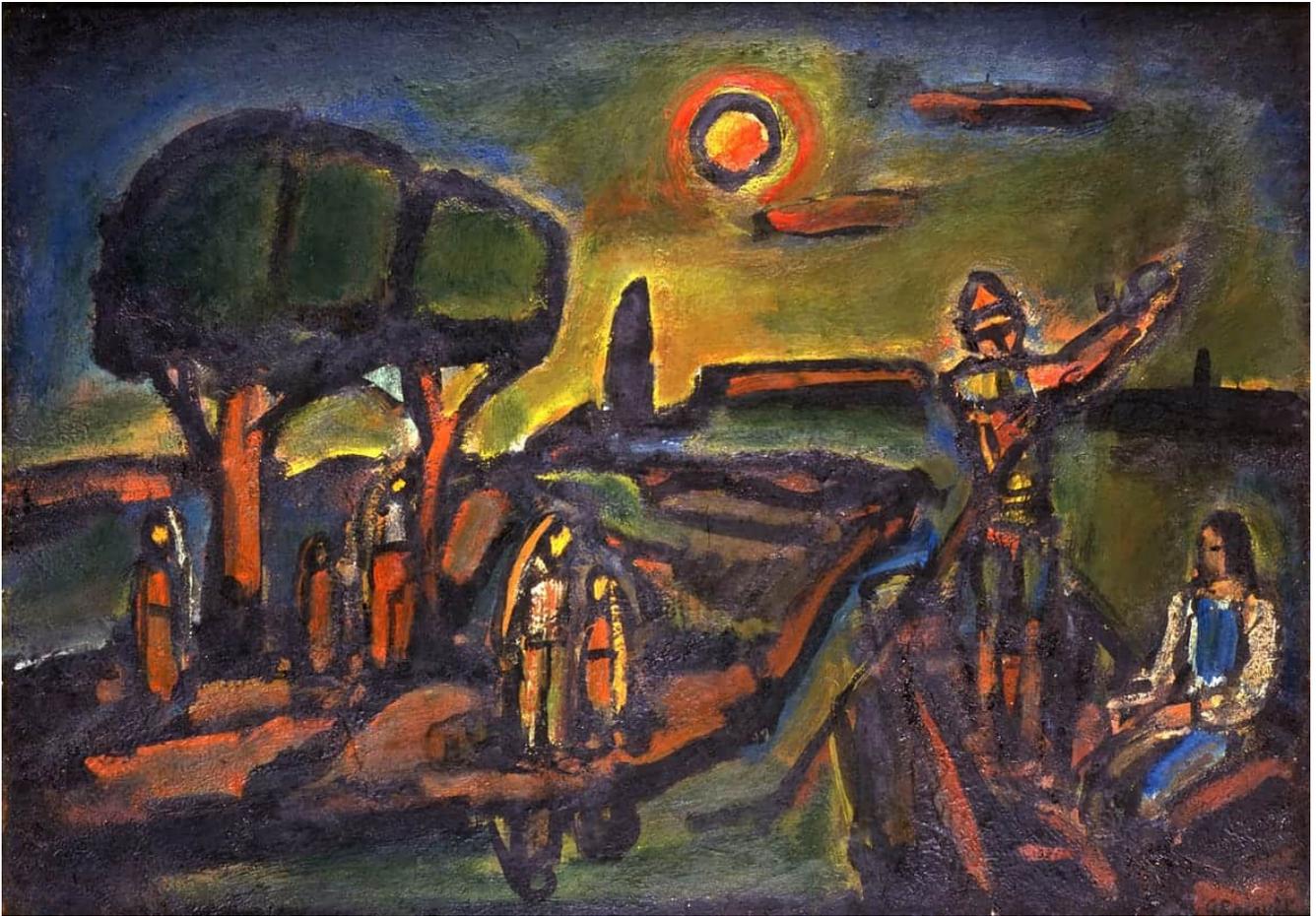


New Nonfiction from Kevin Honold: “The People of Cain”



Miserere, Au pays de la soif et de la peur (dit aussi Automne), 1948

But vnto Kain and to his offering
he had no regarde: wherefore Kain
was exceeding wroth, and his countenance fell downe.

–Genesis 4:5, Geneva Bible of 1560

From first light until long after sunset, Cain worked the land, raising mustard, wheat, and rye in crooked furrows scratched from the hard earth. When he stood from his labors in the gathering dark, the evening star mocked his fears, its

cold serenity foretokening another rainless day. In the end, all of it was lost—the shoots and the seed as well—during that first summer in the east.

Each day, while the crop withered, Cain's brother Abel led his flock to the brackish pools beyond Shinar. In so doing, he managed to keep a few sheep alive. But the animals, too, grew meager and listless.

Because of this, Cain's mother and father, Eve and Adam, despaired of their lives. They took little of the food their sons gathered with such agonizing effort: tiny fry from the dying creek, a handful of desiccated almonds, a few locusts, a bird Cain killed with a stone. Whatever the brothers could find, they brought to their parents, and Adam and Eve sat beneath the tree and wept, and the tree, watered with their tears, turned the color of gypsum. When winter arrived with bitter winds, Cain and Abel built a low shelter, and the family shivered with cold and with fear of the prowling wolves whose hunger had brought them down from the hills. Day after day, Cain stalked the desert with a sling. He brought home such small creatures as he could fell, but it was never enough.

Sometimes at night, Cain wrapped a skin about him, crawled out of the shelter, and peered west toward Eden, where he could just discern the singular splinter of gold light that was the angel's flaming sword. The angel stood sentry, without relief, night after night, season after season, and never was the sword not to be seen. At such times, Cain turned back to the shelter and lay down between his mother and his brother. During the short winter days spent hunting alone in the desert, he often daydreamed of the fruit to be had in Eden, the swollen and splitting windfall lying in untasted heaps beneath the sagging boughs. The waste sickened him.

One morning, without a word to his brother, he took the way back. At sight of Cain, the angel raised his sword of fire.

"Master," Cain said, "I do not wish to return to the garden, but only desire a palmful of fruit-seed lying beneath the trees. Here," and he took the treasure from his pouch, the gems he had found while hunting in the desert, topaz and chalcedony and sapphire. The gems shone brightly, hammered to brilliant hues by the sun. He held them out for the angel to see. "These are yours, Master, in return for a palmful of seed."

The angel lowered the sword, and Cain let slip the prize into the angel's palm.

"Wait here," the angel said, and Cain was left alone, shivering in his tattered cloak, before the open stile to paradise.

From within came the sound of falling water, trickling like starlight. In the midst of the garden, the tree of desire sighed in a breeze. To Cain's ears came the drowsy roar of an unseen lion. Something moved in the leaves near the waters, and Cain saw the bright shadow of a face turn toward him, and the breath caught in his throat.

The angel returned with a grape leaf enfolding a palmful of moist black seed, and a parting curse for the exile. Cain tucked the seed carefully into his pouch and turned back toward the east.

*

For the murder of his brother, God condemns Cain to be "a fugitive and a wanderer."

His guilt, Cain assumes, will be proclaimed by the fact of his banishment, and he protests that "anyone who meets me may kill me."

Not so! God assures him.

And Lord God put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon

him would kill him.

There comes a moment in many stories, when the future resolves in stark detail in the hero's eye, and he sits amid the wreckage of his costliest dreams, filled with regret and with sorrow for a world that will not shape itself to his desires. Perhaps such a moment had come to God .

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The poor in spirit, the addicts, the despondent; the drinkers and thieves; those who transgress by loving too much, and those who love recklessly in hopes of mitigating their loneliness; the wanderers and the demobbed soldiers in their wornout boots; those whose anger threatens to consume the earth and all the people in it: these are the children of Cain, these are the children of God. You know them when you see them. They are objects of a sympathy that is often insincere. More commonly, they are despised for their weaknesses, their wrecked lives, their ineluctable and assured oblivion.

Therefore is the world divided between the children of Abel and the children of Cain, between the good sons and daughters hopeful of salvation—those vessels of election who pledge allegiance to the law—and those marked by their refusal to be saved.

*

According to another story, written long after Cain had vanished in the Land of Nod, God assumed a human likeness and became a wanderer in the earth, seeking the very one he had cursed and banished all those years ago. But the terms of reconciliation were from the beginning tangled and obscure.

The mechanism of redemption, in the revised version, turns on a paradox: the greater the sin, the greater the forgiveness. Of the woman who anointed the rabbi's head and feet, Jesus

said, "Many sins are forgiven her, for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." Again, he asked the crowd, "Who will love his lord more? The man who is forgiven a debt of fifty shekels, or the man forgiven a debt of five hundred?"

*

The story of Cain appears in the fourth chapter of Genesis and achieved its familiar shape somewhere around the sixth century BCE. An echo is heard in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which appears centuries later in the Gospel of Luke, composed in the first century CE. The two stories from the two testaments—Cain and the Prodigal, Hebrew and Christian—though separated by half a millennium, are similar in some ways, complementary in others. Cain's brother Abel and the Prodigal's brother are both obedient to the law; the former meets his death, and the latter is wounded in his pride. Cain is set wandering; generations later, the Prodigal returns. Neither asks forgiveness, neither asks to be restored to his rights; they ask only to be suffered to live. To my mind, the Prodigal is Cain's revenant, welcomed home after many years abroad, his faults forgiven, his advent recognized as the rebirth of one long dead.

But the conclusion of life's journey will not be a joyous occasion where a pack of runaways are rewarded with the snowy albs of innocence. Not this, but a somber assembly where those who spent their days buried alive above ground will compel Him to look into their faces.

*

The time will come, the Lord will ask his prodigal son:

"In your life on earth, were you happy?"

And I'll forget it all, only remembering those

meadow paths among tall spears of grass,
and clasped against the knees of mercy I
will not respond, choked off by tears of joy.

—Ivan Bunin

The moment Judas found himself at the petitioner's bar, before the twelve elderly men arrayed on tiered benches, his courage left him. From their high places, they regarded his sudden and unexpected return with surprise, and they waited for him to explain himself. When he didn't speak, their surprise turned to suspicion. Who could predict what these agitators were capable of? But when he still could not bring himself to speak, their suspicion distilled to plain contempt, because it was clear by then what had brought the miserable man back.

Sure enough, the man produced the pouch of silver coins and held it out to them. I don't want it, he said.

You don't want it? Then give it to the poor. The collection box is beside the door. You can place it in there on your way out.

I don't want it.

Donate it to the temple, said the chief elder. Throw it in the lake. It matters little to us.

I don't want it.

He's beside himself, said a second elder.

But a third, with genial exasperation, stood with effort, placed his hands on the rail, and spoke with pity and with kindness. We are charged by the people, the elder said, with preserving the peace. If we cannot maintain peace among

ourselves, we bring the Roman authority down on our heads. The man you helped us to apprehend had turned your mind with apocalyptic fantasies and Greek metaphysics. We understand that the whole business is unpleasant, but you have regained the path of reason and did the right thing. Now you seem to regret your decision. See here now. You're a young man. You have a life ahead of you. Don't be rash.

And the chief elder, turning back to his interrupted task, said, You've been paid for a service. Our business is finished. As for the money, see thou to that.

*

Anatole France, in *The Garden of Epicurus*, tells the story of one Abbé Oegger, Senior Vicaire of the Cathedral Church of Paris. The good Abbé "could not endure the idea that Judas was in hell." The more he considered the matter, "the more baffling grew his doubts and difficulties."

Having concluded that an all-merciful God cannot be other than merciful, and that it was God's duty and obligation (his *métier*, as the German poet Heine would have it) to forgive, he prayed to God to reveal the forgiven Judas as "the chiefest masterpiece of Thy clemency." The Abbé told his bishop that God had indeed heard his prayers and that, in a vision, the priest "felt two hands laid upon his head" and that he was now "consecrated Priest of Pity, after the order of Judas."

There was precedent for this curious errand. Origen, third century theologian, had asserted that all living things would at last be reunited with God. For Origen, the idea that God would commit a soul to hell was tantamount to admitting that God could be defeated by mere human will. Gregory the Great and John Scot Erigena both affirmed that, at the final judgment, the whole world will be restored to its first perfection—including devils.

Their teachings were condemned, and so was the Abbé's. The

advocates of unconditional celestial clemency have always faced official denunciation. France relates that Oegger's "mission ended in misery and madness."

Abbé Oegger, said France, was the "last and most gentle-hearted of the Cainites."

(Please God, not the last.)

*

The simple reasoning behind the Abbé's doomed endeavor was that if Judas is forgiven, all are forgiven. Perhaps he was a bit unhinged, but I see in the Abbé's efforts the compassion of one man for a cursed and friendless soul, a lawyer working *pro deo* for a hopeless reprobate. For Oegger, it was imperative that we pardon all, even—perhaps especially—the most hopeless of all criminals: the traitors. Nothing less than the salvation of the world depended on it. To admit a limit to God's mercy was the only true heresy and the only unforgivable sin, the priest argued, with sound doctrine.

*

In grade school, one of the sisters punished students by making them kneel on the knuckles of their own hands. Years later, while reading an old story, I recalled that punishment.

"And, behold, a hand touched me," I read, and remembered three boys kneeling on their fingers on the tile, with their noses touching the wall at the front of the classroom, "which set me upon my knees and upon the palms of my hands."

Did our teachers—did the priests and nuns who devised the rules and the consequences—believe that a child could be raised toward heaven by even so much as a knuckle's breadth, through any merely human power? What, did they doubt the boundlessness of God's mercy? Did they not understand the story of Cain? Had they never read the Book of Daniel?

*

And the stone on the roadside said then,

“How heavy your steps have grown.”

And the stone said, “Will you return now

To your forgotten home?”

—Leah Goldberg

A shepherd kept watch over a mixed flock of lambs and goats that browsed among the hillside tombs, but the man walking below the hill did not see the shepherd or the goats or the tombs. In the shadow of the hill, he stormed with anger at his own gullibility, and at the arrogance of the rabbi, the one who had evilly disavowed his own mother, his own sisters! Wild talk about destroying the temple, careless talk about coming with the clouds of heaven—to judge the world! So much good will squandered, so many trusting souls disappointed. So many lives endangered.

Pride was the rabbi's avowed enemy, the man recalled bitterly. But by his own pride he is destroyed. And now the Romans, stirred to wrath, are going to destroy us all.

All that day and through the night, the man made his way through the mountains, away from the city. The next morning, exhausted, he sat beside a stream and saw, to his surprise, that he had arrived in the hills of his childhood. He recalled that, when he was very young, the river's water was cold and clear and good to drink. But the water, he was sorry to see, had grown turgid. Cast-off shoes, broken jars and sheep bones, pot handles and a stained mat now littered the once-grassy bank. The people of the villages had fouled the waters, made them unfit for any creatures but swine. This valley, he thought, once the paradise of his youth, will become a place of desolation by the time the Romans are finished, and it will

be returned to the dominion of storks. Perhaps, he thought, that will be for the best.

On the path that ran beside the stream, two sparrows alighted for a dust bath. The brief fluttering of their wings raised delicate clouds of yellow dust in the morning air. His heart grew calm, his anger cooled. The sweat on his temples dried.

When he saw the tree, now in late summer splendor, standing alone in the field beyond the stream, he recalled the summers of his youth. Then, he had often led his father's flock to rest in the tree's shade. At those times, he sat beneath the tree and wondered at the green mysteries of the day. Many birds had made their homes in the tree then, and their restless piping recalled the turning of a thousand tiny cartwheels.

Now the tree stood in a neglected tract of bean flowers and harebells. Magpies had driven the songbirds away, then departed. Only a pair of ravens stalked the edge of a dry ditch. He looked again, a little surprised to see a rope hanging loose from the tree's lowest branch. He leaned forward and peered closer, half-uncertain of what he saw.

A shepherd appeared on the road, driving his little flock with a switch. The goats passed by, but a single lamb paused to nibble the hem of his cloak, and he stroked its ear. The shepherd paused and raised his switch to the empty sky, the empty hills, and spoke with mild impatience in a language that the man had never heard before in his life. Then the shepherd walked on, and the lambs skipped away, and the man was alone once more.

He returned his gaze to the tree, and found that looking upon it made him glad, and he decided he would visit the tree again, after so many years. But not now. The tension of the previous morning—his humiliation before the elders—faded in the day's mounting heat, and there came over him a sudden and

a bone-deep weariness. He lay back and slept.

When he woke, he was not alone. A young man, whose ways and looks seemed familiar, was seated beside him. The man held a fistful of sunflower seeds, and now and then he opened his hand and picked one and chewed it as he observed the sunlit field that contained a solitary old tree. He turned his head away and spat a husk, then resumed his brown study of the day. It was then that Judas noticed the wounds in the young man's feet, and the blood.

Ravens' shadows slipped, silent as fish, over the hard ground.

Judas of Kerioth, the young man said. I have something to tell you.