

## Susan McCaslin

### Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

In some livable future  
I will walk in on my brave  
girl-self, trying to be perfect.

She is twelve and playing alone in her room  
with an early prototype of Barbie  
cutting paperdolls with red and blonde  
long, straight hair, perfect tiny waists.

She is too old for this game  
so the room is locked. She is reading  
her mother's guide to becoming a woman  
and her period has not come; she is behind  
all her friends. She has tons of homework  
and will turn to it soon  
for she wants perfect grades,  
so she lies in her bed memorizing  
the names and dates under the pictures  
though she has a headache and  
has just swallowed too many aspirin.

I shall hold her hands and look into her eyes  
saying, There is no Prince Charming.  
You are beautiful without drudgery  
and meant to be queenly  
but more than doll, consort or queen mother.  
Stones and stories are mixing in your blood  
and you are sorting them, you are  
Rapunzel leaving her tower  
to meet herself in the glen.  
You are writing yourself and the stories  
of women, and poems are bounding out of closets  
and file drawers and people care.  
You are about something I cannot see.  
You are Lady Poverty because you have risked  
everything and remained yourself.  
You are living off the wages of light  
which is feast, and the kingdom  
is laid out before your arms, fingers, lips.  
What you want is already spread out before you.

### Now You Are Almost Nine

You spill heavy tears when  
the knife slips on my finger.

You breathe for me  
when I am away a single night,  
then pummel my skin and remove  
your breakfast to the dining table,  
refusing to practice piano.

I love you like the palms of my hands,  
depend on our night talks absolutely  
when we rage over the bullies  
who ganged up on you and pinched your  
cheeks in first grade, calling you stupid,  
threatening to kill you if you told.

I am an ineffectual sparrow  
picking at my breast because I couldn't  
ease your way into the world.

And you say, Sometimes I believe in God, Mom,  
and sometimes I don't. And I say, That's alright,  
even adults have their days  
but Spirit is also feminine and in you anyway.  
In me? Like my bear's stuffing?  
So why didn't she protect me from the bullies?

And now your magical, soulful, pink bear  
is still alive to you  
but nobody else believes.  
And I say, I do. And you say  
No you don't. But if I ever  
stop believing and he goes the way of Santa,  
and that fake, the Easter bunny, then  
God will go too.

And your body shakes like an apple  
as the world crumbles and rebuilds itself  
a hundred times a day, while I try to insert  
the occasional consoling sound  
wondering if we could have avoided  
theism and all that baggage.

At Christmas, you announce, It's not fair,  
the baby Jesus gets all the attention.  
What's so special about him, anyway?  
Aren't all kids special? And I agree  
that's the main point of the story.