

*David Wojahn*

## A Print of the Expulsion

This wheel turns the world: the firmament  
is various purples, reds and blues, the raiment

of God the Father also blue. Angels,  
naked, bird-winged, hover with swords of flame.

Beneath this painting Mother wept. Mother was  
possessed by spirits who died in ancient Greece,

in battle, their names a clumsy Homeric pastiche  
of ones she'd gleaned from children's picture books.

In trance her eyes would flutter, close, a cry  
would build from far beyond — or so she'd say —

until Mentorius, or Masticus, or Ajax  
Metaphorus spoke their guttural peptalks

and Mother's followers would nod, and fill  
a wicker basket with large checks. She'd fall

to her knees, writhe and twist her head, shriek  
but never mess her hair — a Holy Roller but discreet

and cunning. No, at first she'd rarely punish us. . . .

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The print: larger than life, anonymous

Sienese, c. 1520, so its cracks, miniscule  
on a gallery wall, seem to web and fill

and shadow every angel, the palms and olive trees  
set small within Eden's gates. Gold filigree

haloes an angel's avenging head, haloes  
the distant throne of God. I do not know

how much or little mother believed, but when the church  
grew too large for disciples' livingrooms, a ranch

was purchased outside Butte. Mrs. Masterman,  
renamed by Mother *Ampuna* — "Anointed One" —

for the most part raised my sister and me.  
Mother, for the most part, raised funds. You see,

The End was coming, as it always must for sects  
like ours. Like Origen, she hated sex,

apostacy, and Jews. Disciples paged  
*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, tracts

from groups with *Aryan* in their names. And yet  
our father was a Jew, and sometimes his lawyers would attempt

to win me and my sister back. By then  
we'd all moved to the ranch. Mrs. Masterman

taught us martial arts, how to fire and clean an AK-  
47 blindfolded, to give nothing but name and rank

to captors, then bite down hard on our hidden  
cyanide pills. I was twelve, Mary eleven.

Mother took to channelling from a throne,  
transmitting JFK and Charlemagne,

Savonarola, Albert Schweitzer, all of them  
forecasting rains of fire, pronouncing doom.

Bodyguards barred our way to her. The print  
got tacked to the fallout shelter wall. Only saints

of our church and beings from UFOs would survive  
the coming conflagration. At five

each afternoon came drills that sent us down  
to the bunker where we'd wait out Armageddon.

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Mary was fifteen by now, and met a boy.  
Of course the news got back to Mother, for her spies

were everywhere. And for the first time in years  
we were summoned alone to Mother's chambers,

Mary weeping, while Mother screamed the ersatz  
Bible lingo she'd come to favor — *harlot*,

*Whore of Babylon*, and so forth. *This child*  
*of thine, and thou as well, shall dwell outside*

*The Tribe*. Anachronism though: Mother beat her  
with a rubber hose. And though they cried together,

embracing like real mother, real daughter,  
it was only for a moment. Next day Father's lawyers

came to take her from the ranch. I lasted  
another year, then left too. Mother'd prophesied

the exact date of The End by then. *By going with*  
*those unclean Jews*, she said, *thou too shall perish*

*in the fire*. When The Last Days came she gathered  
twenty in the bunker. With three weeks' food they sealed

the doors, and what happened next is speculation,  
no diaries like Scott's, no tapes like Jonestown,

and I don't imagine Mother's voices reached  
any particular eloquence near the end:

Ajax Metaphorus screeching they bite down  
on the cyanide they'd hoarded for years. The children,

I suppose, were first, kissed on the foreheads and warned  
to ignore the bitter taste. And Mother, enthroned,

and I hope shaken out of her trance, by rights  
would be the last to die. An arm outstretched, she lifts

the capsule to her lips, a litter of bodies  
on the dais, like the ends of Jacobean plays.

It made headlines for a week, the network news.  
Father's lawyers made some statements to the press.

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At twenty-five, I inherited the ranch,  
six hundred gravel acres that no buyer wants.

The buildings all were razed, though Mary keeps  
a cabin where we stay a few weeks

every summer. I don't know how the print  
got there, faded, God's blue robes washed out

to a feckless gray. The wheel that turns the world  
spins colorless circles on a center mottled

and pitted as old photographs. Last August,  
walking near the trash heap that was piled

by state troopers and federal agents  
cleaning The Chosen's belongings out,

scavenging for clues to all that baffled them,  
I found the cannister — eight millimeter film,

frames of Mary, Father when he lived at home,  
Mother in a dress, an ordinary dress, like anyone's

from 1960, pearls instead of diadems.  
I'm five and clinging to her dress hem,

holding tight for hundreds of blue-gray frames  
as she steps from a car with massive fins.

I held us both this way, squinting in the mid-day sun.  
But let the earth compose our change. I threw it down.