WHAT THE DAY GIVES IS FAITHFULNESS:
FOUR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN POETS

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A packet of poetry books I recently received has reminded me how religious, in the sense of deeply spiritual, some of our contemporary poets are. In this essay I invite the four most accomplished of the group into each other’s company. This is a company of the faithful, that is, four poets faithful to their spiritual desires, doubts, fears, denials, and commitments.

Spiritual poets with a sense of cultural world, readership, and message are almost by definition orphic in the sense that an orphic voice seeks or possesses the power to arrest attention and change attitudes and behavior within the poet and in listeners, power to transcend even our mortality, and, in the face of failures, personal trauma, and wider disasters, to offer something like prophecy. If one stays inside this definition, Higashi, an Irish-American junior college English instructor married to a man with the genius for creating and developing firms of the kind that NASDAQ follows, is the most programmatically orphic of the four. But her Orpheus,
while seeking to change the world, and suffering numerous wounds in its rescue attempts, is a Catholic pilgrim who finds healing and who seems ready at book's end really to change the world. Throughout, moreover, it should be underscored, her Orpheus is unmistakably a female voice with a feminist mission under Marian blessing and encouragement. Yet the Mary of her poems and homilies is not a fourth member of a godhead as supposed by certain Jews, Protestants, and Catholics, but another name for and particular manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Thus the orphic voice is mentored by Mary as a shekinah, as it were, of a female and feminist divine spirit.

Higashi’s rather traditional and unpretentious lyrical verse is fueled by personal damage, a woman’s (and wife’s) anger and exasperation, and a love of God, the Church, the discipline of prayer and poetry as prayer, the sacred, art, archetypes, Jung, Hopkins, Basho, birds at the feeder, household pets, sisters in solidarity, environmentalism, peacemaking, and restoration. The oppressors are several: obtusely authoritarian and abusive men, obtuse and paternalistic husband, Freud, academic cynicism and preciously cultivated bitterness, existentialism (vide her caricatures and demonization of Camus and Sartre), American popular culture, addictions, religious doctrinalism and theological disputes, and unmitigated anger.

Let me hasten to add that these lists are drawn more from her prose homilies than her poems. The arrangement of Blue Wings is unusual, to say the least. “This little volume,” Higashi writes, “recounts my own spiritual journey and the poems that came to me along the way” (30). With few exceptions, the reader is presented with prose on the left page and poetry on the right – occasionally the prose spills over to the page opposite or poetry appears with prose on either page. The prose consists of journal-like entries offered as confession, personal opinion, and admonitions for the reader. When Higashi sent her poems to the editors, they recommended that “I also share my life experiences with my readers along with my poetry. . . . They pointed out the longing that people are experiencing now for peace in their own families and the hunger for creativity and spiritual growth” (14). Although arranged so as to provide a spiritual chronicle that moves from anger and pain to healing and renewed sense of mission, the recitatives cannot begin to match or do justice to the poems offered as arias but unfortunately pinned like clothes on a line. Why did her editors not believe enough in the poems, which she gives her readers “as prayers”? Why did they request that the poems be folded into a personal prose chronicle of short and longish entries, some of them uninteresting, some reminiscent of nineteenth-century advice manuals for young women or men, some