



Art by Julie Lonneman



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I walk every day. When my husband comes with me, he longs for a new path, an undiscovered route. But I always go east on Columbia Street and turn north on Wood Avenue. I walk until I reach Boddington Park, where I turn west and then south and come home down Alamo Avenue. I watch my neighborhood through the seasons, the trees budding, then flowering, then bare, then frosted with snow. I watch the lawn ornaments as they are set out and changed, the pumpkins giving way to reindeer and then rabbits and then July red, white and blue.

I have been watching one yard on Alamo. From time to time, a new grave appears in the bark mulch bordering the sidewalk. A hand-lettered, headstone-shaped, plywood sign marks each small mound. The writing tells me the grave keeper is a child, just mastering the art of printing and almost ready to go on to cursive. Until recently each sign read:

RIP

Bird

Died of

Murder

Then a rodent's grave appeared. The mouse too, it seems, had "Died of Murder." Perhaps at the paws of a cat?

Last week, I noticed something about the memorials. No more new corpses, but an addendum to the epitaphs. After the phrase "Died of," the inscriber had drawn a small insert sign, like an arrow, and had written, slanting up and to the right, the word "cereal." By my count, five birds and one mouse in our neighborhood have been dispatched at the hands of a cereal killer.

I would never know about the drama unfolding on the lawn three blocks north of my own if I did not walk and observe the same couple of miles each day. I am grateful to get to know the life all about me. I see the wooden storks planted in the grass, announcing the arrival of a new son or daughter. I see the oxygen therapist's car parked in an elderly neighbor's drive and know that his asthma is worse. I pass Marsha walking her dog and get the news of her children and grandchildren.

By walking and looking and listening in my neighborhood, I become a part of it, even as I wonder, a bit nervously, about my young neighbor's precocity.

When I set out on my familiar walk I often think about the liturgy, and how I also love its well-worn paths. We come forward for the Blessing of the Throats on the Feast of St. Blaise. Some of my friends wonder if this ancient practice doesn't reek of superstition. I don't know that it is any more superstitious than our costly devotion to vitamins and homeopathic droplets and sprays of Flu-Be-Gone. I know that is right and good that I would acknowledge the Maker and Keeper of my throat and, indeed, my whole body, and that I would ask for God's protection. I know that baring my throat before another makes me vulnerable, all that thin and pulsing flesh exposed and unguarded. It is a ritual act I have come to value. No more shielding of the jugular, I think, for it and all belongs to God.

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This year, only three days will pass before we are once again baring ourselves before one another. On Ash Wednesday, we receive the mark of our first and final belonging, the sign of the cross. Year after year after year we stand and wait as the ashes are smeared on our foreheads, now down, now across, revealing the truth of who, and whose, we are. We come forward to hear our true names and our true calling: Cross-bearer.

And I think of Jesus' posture as he bore his own cross. I think of him bent double and sweating, his muscles cramped and aching. I think of his hands wrapped around the wood. If he holds onto the cross, he is unable to fend off the blows or wipe away the spit. He must choose: To protect his thin and pulsing flesh, or to carry his cross.

Now that I am older, I often find specks of burnt palm caught in the deep wrinkles of my forehead on Ash Wednesday night. I scrub to dislodge them. I work to be free of the ashes, all the while knowing that I will walk forward the next year and the next to receive them again.

Walk a way often enough and you will come to know a place, and who lives there, and who you are in it.

Editor's note: This reflection was originally published in the February 2008 issue of [*Celebration*](#). Sign up to receive [**daily Lenten reflections**](#).

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