

# A Journey of Passion: Spirit and Horror during the Christian Holy Season

By **David A. Sylvester** | June 27, 2011



*Illustration by Laura Beckman.*

**(<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion/a#palmsunday>)\_1.**

We were gathered (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion>) in front of our church for **the Palm Sunday celebration** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#palmsunday>), full of Sunday morning cheer, waiting for the priest to arrive and begin the service. It would begin outdoors, as it does at Roman Catholic churches, and many other Christian churches, around the world. I went to one of the tables where I could pick up a palm frond to wave aloft during the procession into the church. It was the beginning of **the most sacred portion** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#sacredportion>) of the year, the climax of the Christian story.

This story has become such a commonplace of the culture that it hardly seems real any more. Like many of us, I expected to hear the familiar readings, to sing and clap at the traditional hymns, hug some friends, and then leave to resume my normal life. I expected to carry home in my pocket a fresh green palm frond woven into a cross, my salvation safely tucked away for another year. After all, aren't we commemorating the promise that Christian believers have been rescued from their sins and are destined for heaven? In spite of all the ups and downs of life, it's the story with the classic happy ending.

Or is it? Perhaps we are so familiar with it that we no longer understand it. We can hear it, sing it, talk about it — but do we live it? If we really paid attention, we might notice that this journey is shattering — but do we allow a holy shattering in our own lives? We hear that this journey begins with the illusion of triumph, travels through disaster and trauma, grief and confusion, and culminates at Pentecost with the in-flooding of a new spirit. We've been told how this spirit poured like tongues of fire into the first apostles, ordinary people who were so transformed that their human flaws became pores radiating light.



Illustration by Laura Beckman.

<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#journeyofpassionsocialsymbols>? Or do we prefer **the social symbols** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#journeyofpassionsocialsymbols>) we celebrate in words and songs, the scenes immortalized in stained glass windows?

I must admit that such questions were far from my mind last Palm Sunday when I got my palm frond and joined friends for the party atmosphere outside the church. People were laughing and hugging, showing off their best clothing, including some in a fiery red for **the liturgical color of the day** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#liturgicalcolor>), making plans for special brunches after Mass. At one end of the sidewalk, some prosperous businessmen were milling about, wearing blue pinstriped suits, white shirts, and red or blue silk ties. They argued in fun about local baseball teams or grouched about the high price of gasoline and glitches with their Internet connections. Their wives had bought new red jackets, sweaters, or in one case, a red lace shawl, for the occasion. A few young mothers rocked their infants in baby carriages and compared travel plans for the summer.

None of them had any idea this would happen. They could not, like us, turn aside from the rough, painful truth that they were forced to face. They had to recognize how cowardly, fearful, and self-centered they really were. In the long journey from Palm Sunday through Easter and then, fifty days later, Pentecost, they had to endure the collapse of their self-image and public exposure of their worst traits. They had no way of knowing that this destruction of self-pride was the only way to empty their souls enough to permit the entrance of infinite love. If they had known in advance what this sacred wounding entailed, would they have agreed to endure it? Would we? Do we really want to live through **this journey of passion** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#journeyofpassionsocialsymbols>)?

Throughout the crowd, there were conversations in Tagalog, Thai, and Swahili; the Spanish of Mexico and Central and South America; and the French of former colonies in Africa. Like the Catholic Church itself, our parish is a world parish; members speak more than forty languages and come from even more countries. One group of African women, decked out with brilliant headscarves and boubou dresses, stood like matrons in the midst of a swirl of children, hugging and nodding and laughing. The youngest children ran with excitement between their fathers' legs, chasing each other with the sacred fronds like flyswatters until an adult caught them by the arm and made them look down the road for the sign that the priest was arriving and the Mass would begin.

It was a festive time, a time of triumph. The church had undergone a renovation for the special Holy Week services. Our congregation was proud that the stained glass windows had been restored, the mosaics in the ceiling cleaned and polished, a new organ installed, and the Italian marble floors refurbished. The altar was made of handcrafted mahogany, and for the sacred text, a new silver and gold case. All we needed now was the priest to arrive and begin the ceremonies that would save us from sin and assure us of our redemption in God.

The tallest young men pushed their way to the front left end of the crowd, so that they would be among the first to greet the priest. They began to crane their necks and peer up the road off to the left. They scanned the horizon with the flats of their hands.

“What’s happening?” one asked.

“Can you see anything?” asked another.

“No, nothing.”

The spot where the road disappeared into the hills was only a blur on the horizon.

The sun was rising, the day growing hotter, and necks and foreheads became wet with perspiration. The youngest children sat down on the sidewalk, whimpering with impatience until their fathers picked them up and rocked them to sleep on their shoulders.

One young boy tugged on his father’s sleeve.

“Daddy,” he asked, “is it time for Mass yet?”

His father looked down and smiled. “Not yet,” he said.

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“There he is!” A cry erupted from those in front who had the best view of the road in the hills. “He’s coming!”

In a tremor of excitement, everyone surged forward and clogged the street. “He’s coming! He’s coming!” the cries echoed back and forth, and people pushed forward to get a glimpse.

“Make way, make way! Give him room,” ordered a tall, burly man up front with the greeters.

The crowd in the street instantly divided in half, forming a walkway down its middle; people faced each other and looked up the road, **waving the branches of palms** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#branchesofpalms>) and shouting with abandon:

**“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#blessedishe>)

Far away toward the horizon, where the road threaded its way out of the hills toward the city, a tiny figure was visible, riding on what looked like a young horse, **a colt with a robe across it** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#acoltr>). It was difficult to see, but to some in the crowd, he seemed to ride erect, a regal figure with the dignity of a ruler. Perhaps he was seven feet tall, a giant of a man, someone who could command thousands with a single word.

“What is he doing? How far away is he? Tell us what he is doing!” some called to those in front.

One businessman, unaccustomed to the sun, squinted down the road, then ripped off his suit coat and threw it across the road. “Help us, Lord!” he called out. “Our daughter is dying! Crack cocaine is killing her!”

A society woman stepped forward in high heels and laid her red lace shawl on the street and said in a strained voice, “Our son is homeless and refuses his medication.” Then she shut her eyes and gasped. “And he was such a beautiful baby!”

Two of the African women pulled off their headscarves and cast them over the road:

“Oh save us! We work two jobs and still can’t pay the rent and buy enough food for our children!”

An office worker in shirt sleeves threw his palm frond on the road and cried out:

“Every day, I wake up in such a depression that I feel dead! Restore my desire to live!”

Similar cries came from the crowd as people shed the façade of their lives and named their deepest pain. Jumping and shouting, they fanned the air with the fronds so vigorously that it seemed a wind was blowing into the city from the hills.

But he was still too far off to be visible.

The crowd doubled, then tripled in size as word spread, and people came by the busload from the regions around the city. Day laborers were there in baseball caps and sweatshirts, farmers from the valleys in their overalls and rough clothes.

“King of kings,” called out one elderly man who tended olive trees on his family plot, “the tax collectors rob us of all our harvest, and my family is starving!”

“Son of David,” shouted a man wearing torn clothes and leaning on a crutch. “My son has lost his senses and lives in the cemeteries, beating himself with stones. Cast out his demons, I beg you, every last one!”

“Messiah!” screamed a mother who had fallen to her knees even as her relatives tried to hold her back. “A soldier trampled my baby daughter with his horse and never looked back! She was only four years old and couldn’t see him coming! Restore her to life!”

“O Great Healer and Prophet!” sobbed a woman covering her misshapen face with her hands. “What was my sin that I should be born like this and forbidden to enter the city or temple? Heal me for I am dying of loneliness!”



*Illustration by Laura Beckman.*

Many in the crowd were crying now, admitting the daily cruelties they had to live with, the struggle to eke out a living in the harsh world.

And now, relief, at last!

The figure far down the road grew more distinct. It wasn't a man on a colt but someone bending forward as if under a great weight. He seemed to suffer and stumble, inching forward more and more slowly with each step.

**"He's bleeding!"** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#bleeding>) shouted one of the tallest men closest to the road. Only a few could see his battered forehead, his broken ribs that made him gasp for breath, his back shredded from lashes. He was bearing on his shoulders an instrument of death, a fiendish invention of torture.

The crowd grew quiet. "What can this mean?" a few asked in half-whispers.

There must be some mistake.

A shiver of fear ran along the street as more could see the bent figure and the blood staining his tunic. On each side, soldiers were riding along, cracking jokes, and whipping him impatiently. They were late for their noon repast and annoyed with the people interfering with their horses — **women crying and reaching out to him** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#womencrying>), companions with **ravaged wounds from dogs** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#ravagedwounds>), and the dead walking beside him, wearing the ghostly white of burial wrappings.

"Who can this be?" cried out the tallest ones in the crowd, who had seen him first. "How can this be the one we are waiting for?"

The procession was temporarily lost from view as it descended into a long dip in the road, perhaps a third of the way toward the church. After some minutes, what emerged was not a single man with companions and soldiers, but entire armies. Battalions had charged out of the fields, their horses rearing and swords flashing. Shouts pierced the air, and a large white battle flag was unfurled in the front, a flag emblazoned with a vertical bar over a horizontal, the ancient instrument of death.

**This symbol glowed and shimmered in the noon-day sun** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#symbolglowed>), as if traced in golden thread. From both sides, the armies crashed together, surging around the battle flag. The sounds of metal clashing on metal and the cries and screams of slaughter reverberated in the air, and a cloud of dark red dust arose and obscured the road from view.

At the church, the young boy asked his father:

"Daddy, is it time for Mass to begin yet?"

But his voice was lost in the sounds of battle from the distance.

### 3.

When the noise quieted and the air cleared, the armies had melded into a single unit, marching in unison past outlying villages, closer and closer to the crowd at the church. Instead of one battle standard, there were now dozens, some larger than others, flying in their whites and blues, reds and greens, all embroidered with the sign of the instrument of death. Suddenly, groups of soldiers broke away from the procession and charged into the villages along the road. The air shook with screaming and crying, and the smell of blood was like the scent of sweet wine turning rotten in the burning midday sun. Those in the crowd closest to the road saw things so unspeakable that they turned in horror, their faces blanched and their voices choked. **“They’re massacring the villagers and burning the towns!”** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#massacringvillagers>) shouted one man in disbelief. And he began to claw his way back to where his wife and children were picnicking at the far back of the crowd, oblivious to events down the road.

A towering farmer, tanned from much labor, stood as if paralyzed by the sight of the oncoming procession. Then he too turned and lunged back toward the crowd running in awkward leaps as if filled with superhuman energy. “Turn away! Do not look! You cannot bear to see what we’ve seen!”

They dared not say what they could not have imagined. The soldiers were attacking the villages and hacking to pieces anyone who would not bow to this symbol of death. In one village, parents were so desperate to remain faithful to their truth rather than be enslaved to alien gods that they were **driven to mass killing of their children and themselves** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#massacringvillagers>). Boys and girls, looking up into the eyes of their mothers and fathers holding above them knives of sacrifice before turning them on themselves, tried to fathom what kind of love was making them do such a thing.

In front of the church, pandemonium broke loose: “Run for your lives! Take up your children and flee!” The shouts reverberated throughout the crowd.

Everyone threw down their palm fronds, forgot their coats, shawls, scarves, and sweatshirts in the roadway, and dashed about, calling out for their children to come to them, children who were playing with friends away from their parents.

The armies were much closer now. Before them, they were herding not just the villagers but **hundreds of thousands of people speaking a mixture of languages** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#hundreds>) — English, French, Spanish. There were families with oxcars, teachers with long grey beards, financiers in carriages attended by servants, the wisest and richest and poorest trudging with the few possessions they could carry to flee the standards emblazoned with this instrument of death.

The soldiers trampled the fields on both sides to keep the migration moving, and the grass became as dry as tinder. Priests with tall hats rushed out into the fields and seized whole families, **threw them in cages or tied them to stakes and burned them alive** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#cages>). A tent with the emblem of the instrument of death was erected and was filled with priests and kings in their robes who watched the deaths.



Illustration by Laura Beckman.

<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#wildfires>), whole populations as far as the eye could see, speaking another set of languages — Polish, German, Lithuanian, Italian, Greek. A human stampede was racing toward the city.

What could be driving these people in such terror?

The roadway in front of the church was shaking now, the ground itself convulsing and the air thundering. The walls of the church trembled and the bells in the steeple clanged in a discord of incomprehensible notes. The armies and horsemen were now themselves in full flight and mingling pell-mell with the populations they had been attacking.

Behind them, something monstrous was advancing, something unimaginable and moving at the speed of lightning. The pounding of hooves and the shouts and screaming had become deafening; the horsemen came galloping down the street by the church. They were whipping their horses while glancing back over their shoulders. Priests and bishops were stumbling over themselves, their robes tearing at their feet, falling in the oncoming roar. They all charged into the city at once, the pursued and pursuers now indistinguishable, bishop and refugee, soldier and gray-haired teacher, businessman and farmer and financier.

Suddenly, the unseen pursuer broke into view out of the dip in the road. It was a wave of armored tanks that were surging forward and towering over the hundreds of thousands fleeing toward the city. These tanks roared along the road faster than anyone could run and crushed a path through the human sea before them. Tens of thousands of people were falling under their treads, even those carrying standards with the symbol of the instrument of death. Rivers of blood ran in the ditches along the road, and thousands were clawing at each other, frantic to escape as they ran past the church, their eyes wild and their faces frozen in masks of horror.

No one in the crowd at the church saw this. They were already in their cars, gunning their engines and driving over sidewalks and curbs to get home, where they could lock their doors and find safety. Those on foot were running, panting, sweating, leaning against walls in the side streets to catch their breath and then run again. No one was looking back to see that **wildfires had broken out in the fields**

<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#wildfires>) along the roadway where the priests had built their tents and where the armies had trampled the underbrush.

Fires were driving forward a migration that had **grown into the millions**

<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#finesgrown>),

Then there came waves of tanks and detachments of soldiers with harsh voices marching in unison. Some were carrying the flags with the sign of the instrument of death turned upside down and were jousting in mock battle. They danced and laughed and kicked at the remains of palm fronds, pinstriped coats, red lace shawls, headscarves, farmers' overalls, baseball caps, and sweatshirts. In the city, people slammed and bolted their doors against the newcomers with foreign accents who were begging for someone to take them in. When no door opened, the newcomers kept running, hoping to reach a farther, friendlier city.

It was futile. Above, squadrons of airplanes were circling and landing, and tanks were rumbling into the city like boulders racing down a mountainside. The armies of soldiers with harsh voices had already swarmed forward and were engulfing the city on both sides, unrolling barbed wire, building high walls and encircling the city faster than anyone could leave. The soldiers banged on doors with their rifle butts and forced people out of their homes into a smaller and smaller neighborhood until **they were twenty to a room** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#twentyroom>).

Squatting on the floor, lined against the walls, they were all there: churchgoers in the disheveled clothes, soldiers who had lost their uniforms, villagers who had escaped the massacres huddled with their children, financiers and their servants conferring in low voices, and even a priest and a bishop, who had cast off their robes and hats.

A businessman in shirtsleeves held the hand of his terrified wife.

“But we didn’t do anything wrong!?” she whispered to him.

“And you think we did?” snapped a villager as he glared at her.

At the far end of the room, the young boy huddled with his father.

“Daddy, is it time for Mass yet?”

“Shh...” said his father.

Anyone who could be heard asking a question was shot.

Days became months, and starvation broke out. Every day the bodies of those who had died lay along the sidewalks and in the gutters, and everyone kept thinking this madness could not last. They prayed and hoped and waited. Some of the more enterprising people found ways to climb over the walls undetected at night or slither underneath the barbed wire, sneak past the guards in watchtowers, and run into the countryside. There, one by one, they could hide in the fields, or bury themselves in stacks of hay during the day, or take refuge in the horse stables, if they paid enough to keep the owners quiet.

From a distance, they could see that the city was burning, and the cries of those trapped inside were lost in the roar of the explosions and flames. The air was thick with **the smell** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#burningflesh>) **of burning flesh and bodies putrefying in lime** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#burningflesh>) on the floors of locked railroad boxcars and mass graves covered hastily by bulldozers. At night, those who managed to escape began to find each other, brothers reuniting and occasionally a man and wife finding each other in the same gully or hillock. With suppressed groans of joy, they embraced before collapsing into tears and falling asleep until midday. Only by night was it safe enough to continue their escape.

Night after night, for what seemed like months, they walked. The city had burned, the smoke from the chimneys ceased, and its once busy streets became as silent as cemeteries. The escapees found to their surprise that their pursuers had vanished. They could take greater freedoms and travel farther and farther away. Was it possible to resume some kind of new life?

Then they heard new voices behind them. Strange noises made them peek out from their hiding places, and as in a surreal dream, they saw air-conditioned buses pulling up, and legions of young people, barely beyond high school age, descending. They were grinning from ear to ear, and walking through the fields in their white shirts and formal black slacks and skirts, each holding up a Bible with a shiny, red cover. In these Bibles, some of the words, the words to memorize, were printed in red ink. They had come a long way, from places like Nebraska and Iowa and Florida.

“Have you accepted Him as your Lord and Savior?” the young people called out. “Do you **confess with your lips and believe in your heart** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#confesslips>) that He is Lord?”

Those who were hiding left their places in the fields and haystacks and ran for the horizon. Mothers scooped up their children in their arms and ran barefoot.

“Wait! Wait!” the young people called out, running after them. “We’re here to bring you the Good News.”

**But no one listened** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#nolistened>), not even the few from the church or from the fields who had managed to escape. And certainly not those mothers who had learned how to run from generations of training. They raced away, leaping over streams like champion hurdlers, leaving behind the young people winded and panting. They fled from those Bibles with passages in red ink that dripped a trail like footprints of blood across the field.

## 4.

In a hayloft, two men had hidden themselves since their escape and were not running any more. They sat opposite each other, staring into the space before them, seeing nothing, frozen in thought, neither eating and drinking, nor sleeping.

On the third day, the older man with a long white beard cleared his throat and said:

“And to think we were waiting there by the road patiently, like cattle at the gate of a slaughterhouse. For what? Some dream of liberation? A belief in final redemption?”

The other kept silent.

“Were we fools or dreamers — or both?” he said. “Then again, who could imagine it would turn into such horror?”

The other, younger man seemed to be searching for words, but remained silent.

The question hung in the air.

**“What are you talking about?”** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#talkingabout>) a third voice said from the end of the hayloft.

The two men jumped to their feet, ready to run once more, but they saw it was only an idle farmhand leaning against the back wall of the barn, picking his teeth with a piece of straw, his arms folded as if he had woken up from a nap.

“Are you the only one around who doesn’t know what has happened?” said the younger man, as they sat back down.

“What do you mean?”

The older man spoke first:

“We were waiting for the arrival of this man who we had heard so much about. It is true we were suspicious, but the crowds were so exuberant. Who could not be moved by their pitiful cries for help? Who could not fail to hope this was the King of Kings, the one we were all hoping might relieve our suffering and oppression? But no! Instead of a king, he was only a weak imposter who allowed himself to be abused by the very tyrants we suffer from. He hardly spoke a word in his own defense and put up no resistance when they killed him. Afterward, his most fanatical followers, trying to hide their disappointment in his failure, stole his corpse from his tomb in order to make preposterous claims that he had returned to life and was walking among those who believe in him.

“That alone was tolerable, but then these believers spread false teachings throughout the world to glorify suffering and abuse, and they provoked armies to hunt us down and slaughter us in our homes and villages. Their hatred against us spread like an infection to all kinds of people, people with whom we lived in peace for centuries. Our neighbors were driven mad and herded us into ghettos and prisons, murdering us the way malicious children stamp out ants for fun. Now the few of us who are left are hiding in these fields and barns and gullies. We have a double task: to survive for the sake of our children and to teach them how to speak of a merciful and gracious God (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#merciful>), slow to anger and abundant in steadfast love and faithfulness, in a way that does not sound like an insane illusion.”

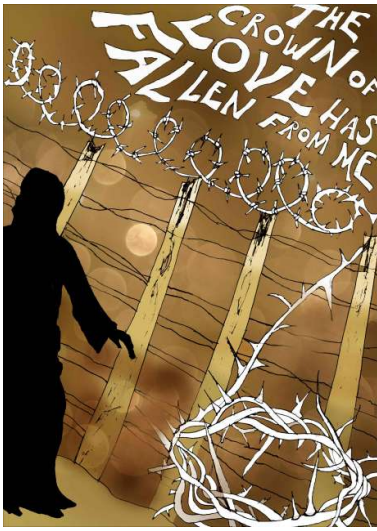


Illustration by Laura Beckman.

The younger man had struggled to speak several times but lapsed back into silence, as if inwardly arguing with himself.

The farmhand listened but said nothing.

“We certainly never expected what we got,” the younger man said finally. **“We expected he would free us from our oppressors** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#oppressors>). Instead, he was the first to die.”

He was silent for a moment, then blurted out:

“Oh my brother! Hell itself cannot contain worse than what you have experienced! **The blood of the innocents is crying out** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#innocents>) across the centuries. What can we say that would not dishonor their memory?”

“Nothing,” said the older man. He put his forehead on his arms across his knees.

**“May His great name be magnified and sanctified...”** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#magnified>) the younger man began.

The older man said nothing.

**“... in the world He created by His will...”** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#magnified>) the younger man intoned, rocking back and forth.

“I can’t say it,” the older man snapped.

“You must!” the younger man insisted. “Is it not true that all of us will, no matter how we die, have a final moment in which we can choose to praise or curse the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, before we perish in this world and enter the world to come?”

“At that moment, I will stay silent.”

“Then that is a curse by omission.”

The farmhand was leaning back on the wall, twirling a straw between his fingers, half-listening to the conversation.

“What if you had been among those millions who were murdered?” the younger man began again. “In that last moment, if you died with His name on your lips, you would join the sages who were **tortured to death and still praised God** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#tortured>) with all their soul. Would that not have been the crowning achievement of your life? Would that not have been enough?”

The younger man warmed to his speech and leaned forward even more urgently:

“Yet you did not die! You survived! If you had survived only to praise His name day after day, but had no children to teach, **would that not have been enough** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#enough>)? But you and I do have children, if not our own, then our neighbors’ children — you can hear their voices outside the walls of this refuge — and they need help knowing the truth of their existence. Is this not enough?”

“You have no right to lecture me on what is or is not enough!” the older man snapped. “You did not experience what I did. You had the luxury of a bystander, the refuge of the coward who watches and does nothing.”

At this point, the younger man lost his words again, looked around the hayloft at the farmhand, who watched him, then turned back to face the older man. “I was no bystander. You see, I was with him as he walked along the road on the colt and then as he walked to his death. I saw him as ...”

“You?!” the older man gasped. “You are one of them?!”

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“I was with him and **denied him three times** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#denied>). I was the soldier who pierced his side with a lance. I was the emperor who hunted his followers and later turned on you and drove you out. Yes, I was the king who ordered the expulsions, the soldier who ravished your villages, and the inquisitor who gave the orders for the autos-da-fé and lit the fires under the innocent. I was on the council that ordered your detentions in small ghettos and marked you with badges...”

“You?!”

“I was the politician who fed the popular frenzy to pander for votes and the priest who published thousands of intolerant tracts, fanning flames of prejudice against you. And I was destroyed, myself, in the conflagration that I had helped unleash.”

“You fiend!” the older man could scarcely believe his ears.

“Yes, it is true. I committed hideous deeds. I know too well how the madness and the lusts can sweep me up in a mob and drive me and everyone else insane, the way rabies infects a pack of dogs. But don’t blame the dogs for their rabies. And don’t blame our behavior on this man whom we followed and loved. His name was only the excuse for us to let loose **the evil inclination of our hearts** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#evil>). Wherever we went, he was already there, his spirit interfering with our crimes. He pecked at our consciences, confused us, and garbled our hateful speech. You see, to do what we did, we had to fight his presence in our very souls. We had to declare war on him.”

“And you, not he, won this battle? Then he is an illusion, and you are a fool.”

“Oh no, you are wrong. He shamed me with a single glance when I denied him and I wept and tore my clothes in inconsolable grief afterwards. He haunted me for years after I had pierced his side, and I spent my old age begging for forgiveness. He stirred the conscience of **emperors and bishops to try to control the rampaging mobs** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#emperors>), and **restrained the king from issuing his decree** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#decree>) — yes, admittedly aided by the temptation of gold but also by touching his heart — before the king weakened and gave in to evil counsel. His spirit forced **a monk to leave his monastery and risk his life** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#emperors>) to stop persecutions. He made **a young social worker risk her life to save 2,500 children** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#socialworker>) from murder and then work to reunite them with their parents after the whirlwind had passed. The spirit of this man gives us hope because he gives us new power to obey the goodness of our nature and rise above our evil inclination.”

## 5.

“Ridiculous!” shouted the older man, his fists clenched in rage. “These were insignificant flickers, moments of clarity that did nothing to divert your people from their rampage. Would you pardon a killer because he feels a pang of conscience while he swings his axe? You’ve twisted the facts into a self-congratulatory fiction. You ignore the impact of his evil teachings.”

“Answer me this,” the older man continued. “Did he not teach that, if slapped on one cheek, a person should **turn the other cheek** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#cheek>) for a second slap? Not only did you hypocrites fail to practice this, but you inflicted it on us! Once a year, on the Friday when you glorified his miserable death, you **claimed the right to slap us** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#slap>) when we had no power to strike back. You forced us to conform to teachings that you don’t practice yourselves! In this way, you reveal the emptiness of his chimerical idealism.”

“Yes, all these things have happened,” the younger man nodded. “But consider this: Don’t we have a choice in how we remember the past? We can see the events alone — or recognize the deeper truth, the inner truth. When you look back on the liberation of your people from Egypt each year, do you honor the events in the wilderness, the grumbling and rebellion, the calf made of gold and the subsequent slaughter of the idolaters? No, you honor the God who, with a **mighty hand and outstretched arm** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#arm>), brought you out of slavery into a new land to serve and worship Him. How much more powerful are actions of God than those of wayward humans! When we see only superficial facts, we are like the blind trying to understand a painting by rubbing its rough surface. When we open the eye of our heart, we see the whole image and it instantly moves our soul. Only through God can we recognize those invisible miracles that

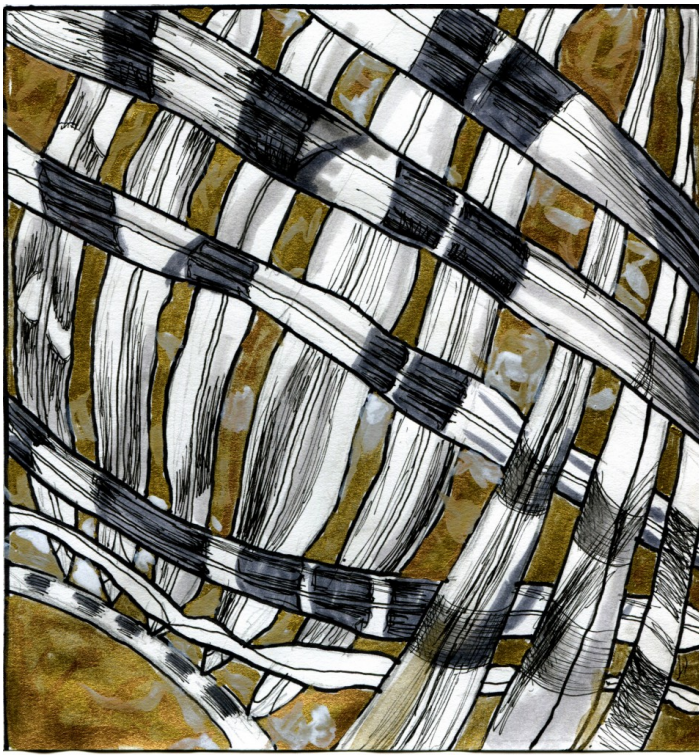


Illustration by Laura Beckman.

would guide people from the inside out, if they would accept the guidance. Our senses see only the exterior and blind us to reality, the way that **the sight of the apple appealed to the eyes of Eve** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#eve>), yet distracted her from the true meaning of her choice.”

“Exterior? Interior? More sophistry!” the older man raged. “You talk as if there is some mystical spiritual reality apart from the world around us. We who suffered the ‘exterior’ events, as you say, know your interior reality better than you do. You are monsters! You are poisoned with teachings of absurdities and impossibilities — births without sexual intercourse, magicians walking on water, water turning into wine, dead men returning to life and walking on earth. Such things cast a trance over people and block the normal functioning of the mind.”

“You know that teachings such as these describe spiritual, not physical reality. It is spiritual ignorance that turns them into absurdities and impossibilities.”

“What of this cruel delusion that a few loaves of bread can be turned into **enough to feed thousands of people** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#thousands>) through some spiritual hocus-pocus? Millions are dying of starvation and need real, physical bread, not some ethereal idea of bread.”

“That story is not about bread, but about sharing. Everyone who followed him into the hills had hidden pieces of bread in their own clothing. They only needed the confidence to share freely what they already had for the whole crowd to have enough. Then they could break free of their self-centered fears and stop hoarding what could rightfully be available for all. Yet we interpret the story as a fairy tale, and we wait to find some magical, bottomless basket rather than admit our greed and selfishness. We turn these stories into excuses to justify the crimes of our evil hearts.”

“Yes, evil hearts that learned from your texts to call us his killers!”

“We are all his killers. Every sin murders him anew!”

“And those texts that condemn us with words we never spoke: **‘His blood be on us and on our children** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#children>).”

“His blood is the **blood of reconciliation, not vengeance** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#vengeance>). May his blood be upon all of us.”

“That’s not what the mobs were screaming when they burst into our homes, raped our mothers, and **carved the crossbars of that hated instrument of death on our foreheads** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#foreheads>) between our eyes!”

The older man was now leaning and shouting at the younger man, ignoring any effort to calm him down.

“My friend,” the younger man stammered. “All these events that you mention, terrible as they are, are not the fault of the man we followed. For where do we find the living God? In the wind, the earthquake, the fire? No! Is it not written: “After the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire **a still small voice** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#voice>).”

“Yes, I hear small voices, those of the ones who suffered from such crimes!” roared the older man with a force much stronger than his age. “I acutely feel the **presence of my spiritual and physical ancestors at this moment** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#presence>). Their faces are pressed against the windows of this place, looking in, watching how I respond to your self-exculpating fictions! These still small voices were crushed not by the earthquakes and storms of nature but by you and your mobs.”

“You judge us by the worst of us.”

“The worst of us are better than the best of you.”

“Are you exempt from the temptations of evil? If you were the ones with the weapons, the power of the state, and self-rationalizing claims, don’t you think you would persecute and tyrannize? **When you did have such power, how did you behave?** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#behave>) All of us have these evil seeds that blossom in the soil of our obstinate sin, faint repentance, our lulled and enchanted minds. Isn’t this true, my brother, **mon semblable** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#mon>)?”

“Let us have this conversation in 2,000 years, and compare our record with yours.”

“**There is no simple explanation for the horror** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#horror>) of this world. **Do not lose faith in Divine retribution** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#divine>). Have faith that **this world is only a corridor into the world to come** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#corridor>). The Messiah is leading us into a world greater than this one.”

At these words, the older man flew into such a rage that he picked up a scythe leaning against the wall and swung it high over his head.



Illustration by Sayaka Merriam.

“If you are so in love with death and the next world, then I will give you the benefit of leaving this world and entering the next sooner than you expected. See if this man you claim to follow gives you visions and comfort as you experience a fate that you and your kind subjected my people to through the ages!”

The younger man scrambled backward, looked around and seized a pitchfork to defend himself.

“Hold your anger, my brother. Do not act like the murderers you denounce. I’m not worshipping suffering and death, but worship the one who held to the truth even unto death, love even in the face of hatred.”

“Don’t speak his name to me!” the older man cried out. “That’s when this all began. [Yemach shemo vezichro](https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#yemach) (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#yemach>).”

“I know this: he saved me from myself,” shouted the younger man, jumping up and shaking his fist. “And I will prove it! Look outside. [If I am right, the streams in the fields will flow backward](https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#backward) (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#backward>) at his command.”

“I’m not looking outside to please your whim,” laughed the older man in bitter mockery.

“Look around us! If I am right, the walls of this barn will incline.”

Just as he said this, the wood around them heaved and the walls began to lean in on themselves as if they were about to fall.

“These old rotten beams? Not a single one is straight.” the older man snorted.

“A voice from heaven will speak out loud to you and convince you,” said the younger man, raising his pitchfork.

“Enough!” the old man roared, his scythe high above his head and trembling with anticipation. “Even if the Almighty himself appeared before us in this hayloft, we are commanded to think for ourselves and defend what is in our hearts!”

“I am the living proof that he has the power to **turn a heart of stone into a heart of flesh!** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#flesh>),” the younger man screamed.

“That I can see!” shouted the older man, eyeing the younger man’s pitchfork.

The two glared at each other, rigid with fear and fury, waiting for the slightest movement to unleash their rage.

Knowing it was their last moment, the younger man said:

“What must the Almighty be thinking to see us here, now, enemies to the death.”

[pgbreak]

## 6.

The farmhand was sitting listening to the argument, his head turned toward the window next to him, as if he were hearing sounds beyond the barn. He picked up a blade of straw, eyed it carefully, split it with a fingernail, and blew into it. It made a buzzing sound. He frowned, broke off the tip of the straw, split it again, and blew. This time, it tooted a single clear note.

“He is weeping,” the farmhand said to himself. “He is grieving because his children have defeated him.”

He put the straw to his lips and blew the note again, then again, and kept blowing until the sound of the straw became deep and guttural, as if issuing from the center of the earth through the hollowed horn of a ram. He stopped, and a mournful silence ensued.

“You both have spoken well,” the farmhand said finally. “Does not the text teach us that **“every sound tree bears good fruit** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#fruit>), but the bad tree bears evil fruit”? We learn from this that there is no real distinction between a person’s heart and his actions. And what will happen to the tree that does not produce good fruit? As it is written, **such trees will be cut down** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#fruit>) and thrown into the fire.”

“As for those armies of soldiers and priests and bishops,” he continued, “what else does the text teach us? Does it not say that **many will cry out his name, saying, ‘He is Lord! He is Lord!’** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#lord>). They will seem to do great things and speak fine words in his name, but their works will be evil, and what will the King of Eternity do? He will close the gates of the world to come against them. Soldiers with standards, priests with robes, bishops with staffs will be astonished and say, ‘But we devoted our lives to you, spread your message, and filled the churches in your name!’ And what does the text tell us about how the King of Eternity will respond?”

The younger man lowered his pitchfork and replied:

“He will say, ‘I never knew you; **depart from me, you evildoers** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#lord>).’”

The farmhand nodded. “You are right, and these evildoers will cry out: ‘What?! How can you not know us if we preached and fought in your name and chased after people with our little red Bibles?’ What does the text tell us that King of Eternity will say?”

The younger man responded hesitantly, under the suspicious eyes of the older man:

“It is written: **‘I was naked and you did not clothe me** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#clothe>). I was hungry and you did not feed me. I was in prison and you did not visit me.”

“How they will complain and protest!” said the farmhand. “‘We never saw you naked or hungry and in prison!’ What does the text say that King will say then?”

“It is written: ‘What you did not do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did not do for me.’” the younger man said.

“And what reward will these people receive?”

“Eternal punishment,” the younger man said.

The farmhand nodded, listened for a moment, as if he was momentarily distracted by a sound far away.

“Now imagine, if this is what awaits those who failed to act to feed the hungry, or clothe the naked, or visit the imprisoned, how much worse a fate will befall those who starved the hungry until they fell into the streets and died as skeletons, stripped the naked of their clothes, and imprisoned and slaughtered them in death camps? If this befalls the person who fails to visit the guilty prisoner, how much worse will it be for those who convict and torture the innocent in the name of imperial security!”

“That’s not all. We can make deductions from what the text deliberately leaves out. It never says that the King will ask whether you said, ‘He is Lord’ or ‘*Yemach shemo vezichro*’ with your lips. It never says that he will ask in what manner you worshipped. But it does say he will ask what you did. As it is written: **‘Be doers of the word, and not hearers only.** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#hearers>).’ How many times did he say, **‘If you love me, you will obey my commandments!** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#commandments>).”

He looked sharply at the older man. “What, for you, is the greatest commandment?”

**“*Sh'ma Yis'ra'el Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.*”** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#echad>).

“And?” he asked.

**“*Vahav'tah eit Adonai Elohekha b'khol l'vav'khah uv'khol naf'sh'khah uv'khol m'odekhah.*”** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#echad>).

He turned to the younger man and asked:

“For you?”

**“It is exactly as he has said — and also to love your neighbor as yourself.”** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#neighbor>).

**“So it is for us also** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#also>),” agreed the older man.

The two men threw aside their weapons and sat down.

The farmhand leaned forward and cocked his ear as he had so often before.

“Listen!” he said. “What do you hear?”

Outside, they could still hear the roar of airplanes, the grinding of tanks, the tramp of soldiers, the cries of grieving parents, the shouts of children, the drone of liturgical recitations, the slamming of doors, the crackling of fires, the barking of dogs, the snoring of sleepers, pages turning in books, and murmuring minds thinking.

“Listen again,” the farmhand said.

They concentrated more deeply and now these noises seemed to lose their resonance. Each sound seemed to take place in a giant auditorium where the vastness of the space absorbed and silenced it. At their core, these sounds seemed hollow, empty caverns with only the ebb and flow of emptiness and fullness, grief and joy, hope and despair, like invisible subterranean rivers.

“Listen yet again,” the farmhand insisted.

Their minds relaxed, letting go of distinctions between sound and silence, and they were tumbling into a kind of hum, a sub-audible pressure vibrating with energy, like a mountain forcing its way up from the depths. It was terrifying in its power, fascinating in its beauty. It was their deepest desire and their greatest fear.

“You have listened well,” the farmhand said.

The two men opened their eyes in surprise.

“What is that?” asked the younger man.

“Heaven being born within the earth,” said the older.

“Do either of you know this process well enough to be able to judge it? Do you really know what is happening in the souls of other people if you don’t know what is happening in your own?”

Both the older and younger man looked away, in different directions, and said nothing.

Outside, it was nearly evening. The hay in the loft was still warm from the day’s heat and gave off a rich and musty smell. Their mouths were dry, their stomachs aching, and their backs itching from the straw poking through their clothes. It had been a long time since they had eaten. The farmhand stirred, obscure in the deepening shadows, and reached for his sack and walking stick.

“No, please, the hour is late,” the younger man said. **“Stay with us** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#stay>).”

The farmhand paused and pulled out a loaf of peasant bread, tore it in half, and gave a piece to each man.

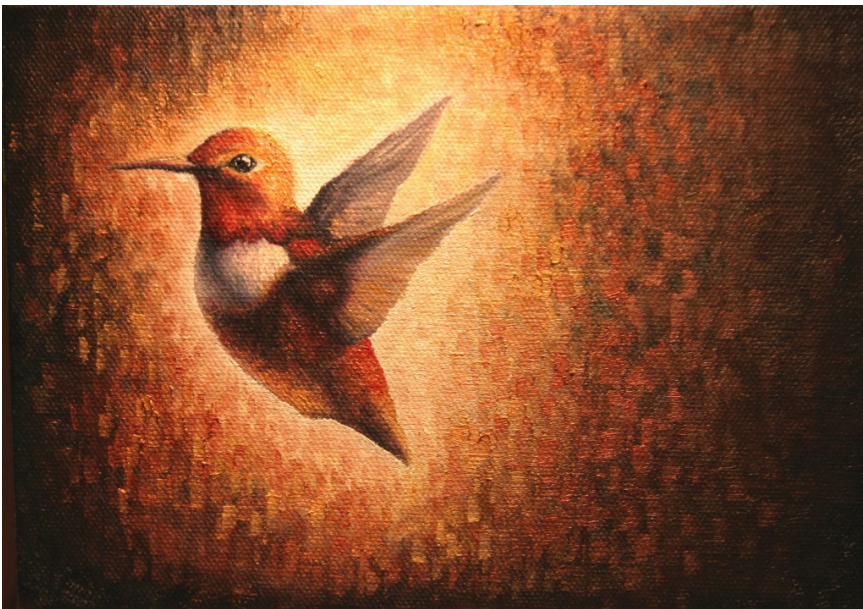
It was strong and chewy, full of seeds and grains, and they each closed their eyes and bit into it. I tasted it and fell backward into the abyss within myself, tumbling toward this place of pressure, this hum and tremble of **an infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing** (<https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/a-commentary-and-guide-to-a-journey-of-passion#suffering>).

## 7.

“Daddy, I think the Mass is over.”

I came to myself in the pew, the bread still in my mouth and my hand on my heart. My son had given me a shake. Around me, the congregation was silent, the air fresh with the scent of lilies. The priest was leaning forward to kiss the altar, and he lingered a moment. He then walked noiselessly around to its front and turned back to bow. We watched his every move. He threw his head back and thrust his arms up, his body tense as a bowstring reaching for what was far beyond the arched ceiling of tile and polished mosaics. In the hush around us, we could hear the pulsing of hearts, his, mine, and all others, the sound of humans alive in communion.

I looked down, and my son was gazing up at me with a quizzical, trusting expression in those hazel-green eyes. He too could feel it. I put my arm around him and he yawned, took my hand, and leaned against me as I drew him toward me. The priest lowered his arms, turned, and stepped forward down the center aisle to lead the recessional. At that signal, the organist hit the keys and a toccata of Bach blasted from the pipes and shook the church from floor to ceiling. The priest threw open the doors to the brilliant spring morning, turning to smile and greet the parishioners carrying their palm fronds, in their blue suits and red lace shawls, their African dresses and headscarves, their baseball caps and sweatshirts.



*Illustration by Sayaka Merriam.*

A hummingbird, iridescent in scarlet and gold, darted in through the open doors from where it had been humming and hovering in circles around the steps and sidewalk and street throughout the Mass. It had been waiting for this moment, and now, it could finally enter, finally free.

*(To return to the Summer 2011 Table of Contents, [click here \(https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/summer-2011-table-of-contents\)](https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/summer-2011-table-of-contents). For an attractively formatted, ready-to-print PDF of this article, [click here \(https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Spirit-and-Horror-during-the-Christian-Holy-Season-by-David-Sylvester.pdf\)](https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Spirit-and-Horror-during-the-Christian-Holy-Season-by-David-Sylvester.pdf).)*

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