

# Three Poems: “The Ballard of My First Communion”, “The Our Father Working-Class Riding Mower Blues”, “Duck, You Dumbass”

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## The Ballard of My First Communion

Jimmy is a public-schoolkid who comes to St. Mary’s for First Communion classes.

A parish of immigrant, working-class poor, St. Mary’s insiders don’t usually associate with public schoolers for fear of exposure to the worldly chaos of secular ideas. Or maybe we just think we’re better than them.

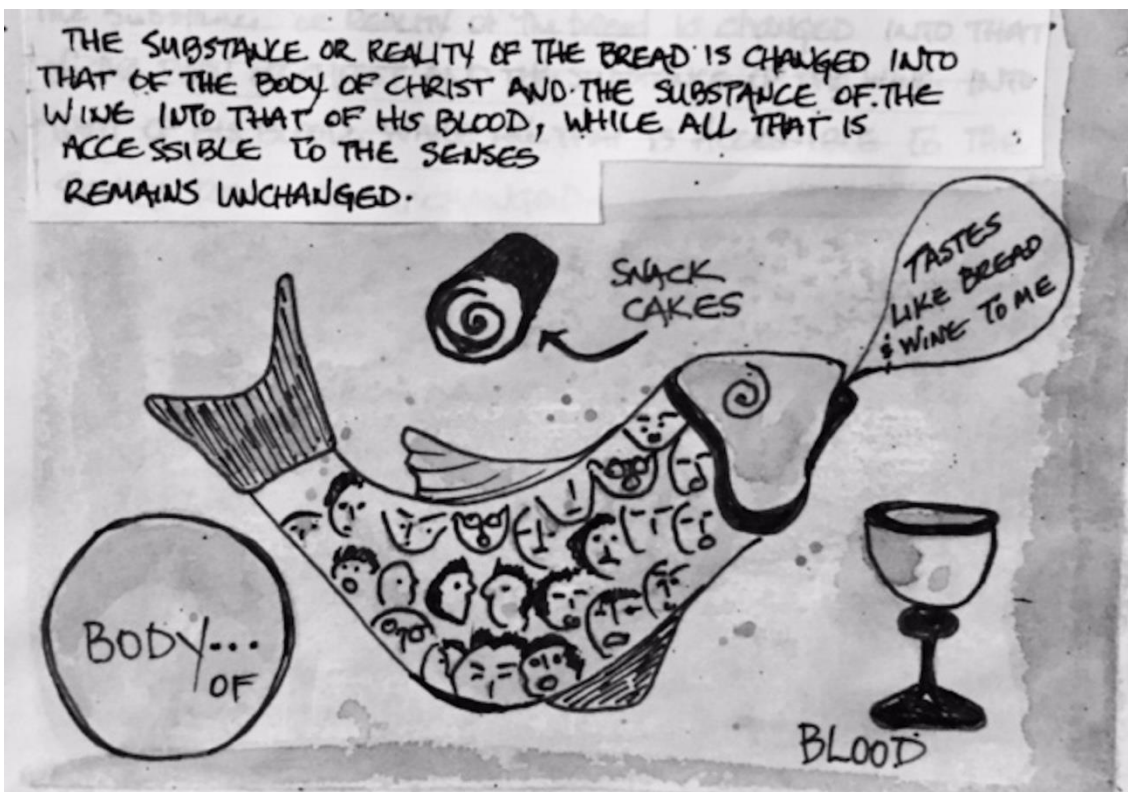
But I really like Jimmy.  
He has just a little fuzz on top of his head and is kind of pale.  
My like-blinded comrades of the Altar Boy Society for Catholic Fundamentalist Fools harass me for befriending this public-school kid who looks like a ghost.

I pray for Jimmy.  
Every day at mass I light a candle at the back of church. I have no money to leave in exchange for this invocation.  
Sometimes I leave my milk money  
but I never tell anyone what I did with my dime for fear of jinxing the candles I light for Jimmy.

The candle’s smoke carries petitions straight to heaven, so I watch.  
The smoke rises and disappears into what I am sure is God’s listening ear.  
That’s what Sister Mary Mark says.  
We call Sr. Mary Mark Zorro because of the marks she leaves on our bodies.

At First Communion, Jimmy and I make sure we are next to each other so we can compare our “body of Christ” experiences as soon as they happen.

We try convincing ourselves it’s just bread, but our imaginations flood with cannibalistic flashes of that metallic taste when you suck your own blood from a cut. We wait for the day that wafer will suddenly transform into something like a juicy piece of steak.





Jimmy says he can't pray.  
Sometimes he even refuses, which  
really pisses Zorro off.  
He tries to, to make his mom happy.  
Every time he tries, he starts laughing or cussing.  
And he can really cuss.

Jimmy often overhears his parents talking.  
His mom prays First Communion will bring a healing.  
His dad cautions her not to get her hopes up.  
Caught between death and divine intervention,  
Jimmy's parents whisper nightly behind their bedroom door.  
So, I pray and we both cuss.

Every week, the priest visits, telling us the same thing.  
"You will partake of the body and blood of Christ.  
Eating and drinking the flesh and blood of our Lord and Savior."  
Flesh and blood. Eat flesh and drink blood.  
A mantra linking us to a chain of carnivorous creatures  
brainwashed by the brand of their worship.

On First Communion Day we are in the front row.  
Boys on the right, girls on the left.  
Boys dressed in navy blue suits, white shirts, and navy ties.  
My jacket has the St. Mary's school crest on it.  
I don't want to wear it because Jimmy doesn't have the crest,  
but mom tells me I have to.  
Communion time finally arrives. Jimmy and I glance at each other.  
I step into the aisle, Jimmy right behind me.  
Kathy is first in the girl's row.  
She looks so beautiful in her white dress and veil.  
Kathy gave me my first kiss under a stairwell at St. Mary's.





We arrive at the Communion rail. Kneel side by side.  
Perfectly synchronized, like midgets getting married.  
We watch as each kid in class receives First Holy Communion  
trying desperately to see signs of transformation.  
“My mouth is so dry,” Jimmy whispers to me.  
Father John says, “Body of Christ.” Kathy whispers, “Amen.”  
I’m next. Father John looks me in the eye and says,  
“Bill, the Body of Christ.”  
“Amen Father.”

I stick my tongue out as far as I can without gagging.  
Father John smiles and places the host on my tongue.  
I quickly cross myself and head back for the pew.  
Jimmy tucks in behind me.  
I kneel, working up enough spit to  
deal with the host clinging to the roof of my mouth.  
When will I taste flesh and blood?  
When will it swell and ooze?

Jimmy begins fidgeting.  
His right hand is in his mouth and he’s trying to hide it with his left.  
Suddenly, he flicks something out on the floor.  
Oh my God, oh my God, OH MY GOD. It’s the host. It’s Jesus. Jimmy, you  
just flicked Jesus on the floor. Are you crazy?  
Jimmy, you gotta pick it up and put it back in your mouth.  
Jimmy refuses.

Jimmy, it’s the host. It’s, it’s Jesus! You flicked Jesus on the floor.  
You’re going straight to hell.  
You gotta pick that up and swallow it before it’s too late.  
You gotta pick Jesus back up off the floor and swallow him.  
Jimmy begs me to shut up.

All I can see is that small wad of host sitting on the floor beneath the kneeler and  
Jimmy burning in hell.  
Please Jimmy. Please pick Jesus up.  
You at least gotta take him home and not just leave him on the floor.  
It’s Jesus man. This is really bad.





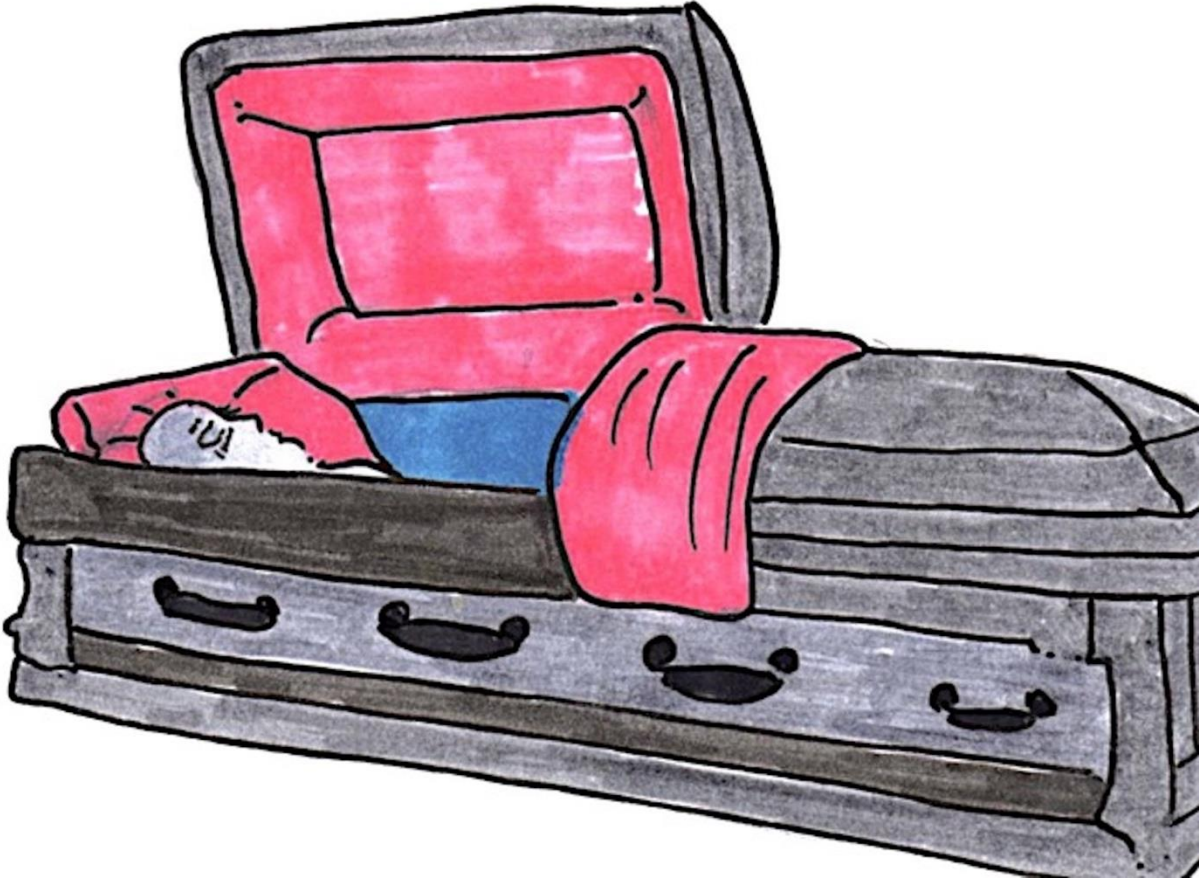


The procession out of church is a blur.  
I am unable to enjoy the parish pride washing over  
those of us who just consumed the flesh and blood of Jesus.  
Newly minted Catholic Cannibals.  
Oh my God, Jimmy. What did you do?  
I can't breathe.

As soon as we are out in the vestibule  
I duck back inside to our pew.  
There it is. The body of Christ on the floor under the kneeler. I gently  
pick it up and put it in my pocket.  
I have no idea why, or what I will do with it.  
For Jimmy's sake, I just knew I had to go back for that abandoned  
scrap of Jesus.

I put Jimmy's rejected Jesus in a small plastic box inside my National Geographic kit,  
replacing a piece of fool's gold.  
Six months later Jimmy died.  
Not because he spit Jesus on the floor.  
He died from leukemia.  
I tell my mom I want to go to the funeral home.  
I want to see Jimmy.  
I promised him I would say goodbye.

On the morning of Jimmy's funeral,  
I wear my St. Mary's blazer with the gold patch, my white shirt, navy blue pants,  
tie and shiny black shoes just as I had for First Communion.  
There's Jimmy. There's no fuzz on his head now.  
He's totally bald. He looks like a little old man, but I know it's Jimmy.  
I can tell by his hands. They look the same, just paler.  
I slip the plastic box out of my pocket.  
I remove the dried, shriveled piece of host.  
I hold it tightly in front of me so Jimmy can see it too.  
With my left hand on his shoulder, I whisper, "Body of Christ."  
"Amen," I whisper on Jimmy's behalf.



## The Our Father Working-Class Riding Mower Blues

In the absence of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Stupid little bastard who believes in heaven  
hallowed be thy lawn mower.  
Thy blades they come, thy will be done,  
with stray sticks and stones on the ground.  
Give me this day my daily lesson  
As I forgive those sticks and stones that trespass against me.  
And lead me not to another beating  
and deliver me from waiting.

Thirteen to seventeen I live to the sound of a riding mower.  
Reverberating in my ears. My head. My chest. My ribcage.  
Rattling down my spine as my knees knock toward each other.  
VVVVVvvvvvvrrrrroooooommmmmmm  
Ping-thwack, Ping-thwack as the blades  
contact a stick or stone.

Ever present.  
The soundtrack of my life.  
Louder then receding,  
circling inside my head.  
Which is why I can't hear you,  
Our Father. If indeed you're even there.

I try to find the words.  
I speak in tongues  
above the sacred drone of his mower.  
Ahdshamalblblen. Budddiskattimeoosmen.  
Ping Thwack, Ping Thwack,  
go his precious blades.

It's mowing day. I sit on the porch and wait for the hits.  
He keeps a pocket-sized notebook taped to the mower's console,  
Marking down the hits, tracking the ping-thwacking.  
Sticks and stones may break my bones but being called  
a stupid little bastard will never hurt me.

I spend the entire morning on my hands and knees,

crawling around looking for sticks and stones.  
Sticks and stones may break my bones but being called  
a stupid little bastard will never hurt me.  
Pick them up until my heart is filled with  
sticks and stones. And my mother,  
on her hands and knees picking lint and fuzz  
from the carpet. Sticks and Stones, Lint and Fuzz.  
He comes home from work covered in sawdust.  
Mom vacuums his head before he showers.  
Vacuuming Dick's head. Vacuuming the Dickhead.  
Vacuumed, showered, free of dust,  
he heads for the barn and mounts his mower.

The blade makes contact. Ping. Thwack.  
He shifts into neutral, idles in place.  
His pencil records the ding.  
The engine revs. vvvvrrrooommmm, vvvvrrrooommmm.  
Slips back into gear.  
Ping, Thwack, Ping, Thwack, Ping, Thwack.  
More waiting, always waiting. Tick, Tock, Ping, Thwack.  
He tallies the hits from his notebook. Dismounts,  
walks back to the house.

We make eye contact. His are the darkest, meanest, eyes I've ever seen.  
Eyes reflecting back a life battered by whiskey and beer.  
This alerts me to what's coming like a dog that feels the kick before  
the kick lands. First pain. Soul Pain.

I bend over and grab my ankles as instructed. I hear  
his belt release from its loops. I pray.  
In the absence of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Thwack, thwack, thwack.

## Duck, You Dumbass

Shell-shocked, cold-cocked,  
smacked upside my head.  
Early and often.  
Are men who shoot horses the same men  
who hit women and children?  
My memory fails me.

I build monuments in my yard,  
altars of acceptance to the whoosh  
of welts rising and falling.  
Shards of my fractured spirit.

I crawl beneath them for containment.  
The sting of step-dad's hairy knuckled fist  
and my brother, screaming,  
Duck, you dumbass!

### Author Bio:

**William Doan**, Ph.D. is a past president of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education and a Fellow in the College of Fellows of The American Theatre. In addition to articles in scholarly journals, Doan has co-authored three books and several plays. He has created solo performance projects at a variety of venues across the U.S., and abroad. His current work includes a large, multi-media project titled *The Anxiety Project*. Work from this project includes multiple short graphic narratives published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine/Graphic Medicine*, *Cleaver Magazine*, *Intima: The Journal of Narrative Medicine*, and *The AutoEthnographer*, as well as several award winning animated short films. He is an emeritus professor in the College of Arts and Architecture at The Pennsylvania State University where he served as the Penn State Laureate for 2019-2020.