



*Editor's note: The following two pieces by Vicki Sairs were first published as columns in **The Mobile Register**, Mobile, Alabama's daily newspaper.*

December 20, 2001

Uncontrollable mystery on a bestial floor

I read "The Magi" by W. B. Yeats last night. It is a short but pithy poem that took me straight to the wreckage of the World Trade Center.

Yeats describes his searching Magi as "the pale unsatisfied ones" whose "ancient faces like rain-beaten stones" have eyes which are "still fixed, hoping to find once more...the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor."



The Birth of Jesus, Jesus Mafa (African Gospel Mafa).

That bestial floor is, I think, a reference to Christ's birthplace, in the immediate and the larger sense. You don't need to believe the story is true to appreciate the power of its imagery—God coming to earth as a baby, God living as a human being among all of his creatures, God suffering as a human being, too.

As I imagine myself standing at Ground Zero, looking at its awfulness, I think, "What could be a better picture of the 'bestial floor' than this?" And my mind wrestles with the uncontrollable mystery that I see there.

It is hard for humans to be satisfied with God. We want to have a deity on our own terms, doing things our way. We look at Ground Zero and say, "God, why didn't you stop this?"

I stand and stare into the smoldering ruins and think about how often God's name has been invoked in these last few

months. Some people think that's good, and some people don't. Looking at this place where the dust of men and women has been mingled with the dust of fallen buildings, I can barely think at all.



Nativity by Yu Jia-de (China). Chinese ink painting, Asian Christian Art Association.

Certain things stand out in my memory: the face and voice of a young girl describing her father in front of the TV camera, hoping he might still be found alive; the awful phrase "10,000 body parts"; and the comments of Leon Wieseltier in *The New Republic*. He wrote that "if it makes sense to call on religion in times of trouble, it is not because religion abolishes spiritual pain, but because religion acknowledges spiritual pain."

That's a part of the uncontrollable mystery, isn't it? A God who knows pain, who feels it and weeps and dies? I am one of those who believe the story is true. I believe in that God, who is mysterious and cannot be controlled. I stare into the smoldering ruins of our lives together here on this earth and I think I understand why the workers set up the cross-shaped girder in the rubble.

There is a line in "The Magi" that explains why the pale unsatisfied ones are still searching: "and all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more/Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied/The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor."

I don't know why they weren't satisfied by the death and resurrection of the baby that once was worshipped. When I see Ground Zero, one of the few thoughts I can form looks like this: I need a God who is bigger than death.

The real Ground Zero is not a silent place, but the one in my mind is surrounded by stillness. Snow is falling on it, cold and white and drifting. It doesn't cover things up. It throws them into relief—the jagged lines of what remains, ruins in black, white and gray.

I want to hear the sound of God weeping, but I don't have ears for it. I want to hear baby Jesus crying, but I can't. Instead, I see what man has done and what God has allowed.

I see that cross, draped in snow now, and I think how Mary's baby grew up to die. How must she have felt, knowing her son was meant to save the world, yet having to watch him die? Die she feel like the magi in Yeats' poem?

I look at Ground Zero in my mind and I see pain and anguish and the bestial floor. I need a God who is bigger than death, who grew from baby to savior, who never turned to ashes and dust, who knows what it is to cry. I need an uncontrollably mysterious God, who knows what it's like to live down here on the bestial floor.



December 24, 1998

The Light Shines in the Darkness

The Christmas program is about to begin, and parents, family and friends settle into their seats, tucking purses under chairs and forming cages with their feet and legs, so toddlers can't escape and grab baby Jesus from the manger.

Whispered bits of conversation float around the room. The strangest one that comes to my ears has to do with a TV show on a case of cannibalism in China. I ask if it happened during one of the terrible famines, but my friend informs me that it was actually a political statement.

My first thought is: "What a thing to be thinking about just before we watch our children in the Christmas play." My second thought is self-correcting: "It couldn't be more appropriate."

When John wrote his gospel, he described Jesus with the words "in him was life, and the life was the light of men." He went on to describe the world's reaction to this: "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it."

Few things are as full of light as a Christmas program starring only children. There is light everywhere: in their eyes and smiles, dancing off the gold-foil stars of their halos, shining from a stagehand's flashlight onto a dove in the rafters of the manger scene.



*Nativity by He Qui (China). This very day in David's town your saviour was born—
Christ the Lord!*

sing "Joy to the World," and on the last verse, angels and shepherds and sweetly garbed narrators scurry behind and between our chairs to take their places up front. The sheep have floppy ears and wear black mittens, and the shepherds



Nativity by Lu Lan (China, 1993). Decorative painting, Asian Christian Art Association.

There is darkness, too, and not just the kind provided for dramatic effect. That's because the room is full of human beings, big and little, and when we're honest, we know what's in our hearts.

But back to the play. The audience stands to

sing "Joy to the World," and on the last verse, angels and shepherds and sweetly garbed narrators scurry behind and between our chairs to take their places up front. The sheep have floppy ears and wear black mittens, and the shepherds

do their part well, falling back in awe when the first angel appears.

The back-up choir of angels stands about in angelic fashion while we sing another carol and cameras flash around the room. The littlest shepherd, who is only four, hides behind the bigger boys and begins to yawn.

The angels fly away and the shepherds hurry to Bethlehem to see "this thing that has happened." After doing homage to the baby,

they run out in a mini-stampede to trade their ponchos and robes for the more august clothing of a king and his advisors.

And what advisors they are! I almost break down in delight, for there is the littlest shepherd, transformed into a royal counselor by a red cape and an amazing scarlet turban with gold trim.

This is a child who amuses the whole church; he has inherited the mantle of Resident Pip from a long line of pips in the congregation's history. Even now, as he stands in front of us looking sage and dignified beyond anything we could have imagined, there is the possibility that he's hiding his toy crossbow beneath his cape.



Vladimir Filonov, The Moscow Times

If he is, he manages to restrain himself. Perhaps it is all that light shining on him. Children are like that; they make good little reflectors of divine light.

Watching the children in this play makes me remember that light; he shines so brightly through them, with their donkey ears and curly, pipe-cleaner horns and hearts that have not yet hardened to the point of cannibalism as politics.

There is another translation for the end of the passage about Jesus' life as the light of men: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." I watch the children and think, "Yes." **BB**

Vicki Sairs is on the faculty and staff at Rosedale Bible College. She lives in London, Ohio, with her husband Reuben.