

# feast day: a lyric

*Tess Fahlgren*

---

## memorial of sts. perpetua and felicity

Daily Reading for Thursday March 7, 2019<sup>1</sup>

Reading 1, *Deuteronomy 30:15-20*

‘Look, today I am offering you life and prosperity, death and disaster.’<sup>2</sup>

If you obey the commandments of Yahweh your God, which I am laying down for you today, if you love Yahweh your God and follow his ways, if you keep his commandments, his laws and his customs, you will live and grow numerous<sup>3</sup>, and Yahweh your God will bless you in the country which you are about to enter and make your own.<sup>4</sup>

But if your heart turns away, if you refuse to listen, if you let yourself be drawn into worshipping other gods and serving them,<sup>5</sup>

I tell you today, you will most certainly perish; you will not live for long in the country which you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

Today, I call heaven and earth to witness against you: I am offering you life or death, blessing or curse.

Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live,<sup>6</sup>

in the love of Yahweh your God, obeying his voice, holding fast to him; for in this your life consists, and on this depends the length of time that you stay in the country which Yahweh swore to your ancestors<sup>7</sup> Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that he would give them.’<sup>8</sup>

---

1 Feast day of the saints Perpetua and Felicity, patron saints of cows.

2 In the year 203, Vibia Perpetua, an educated 22-year-old noblewoman still nursing her infant son, made the decision to follow the path of her mother and become a Christian, despite her pagan father’s wishes. He tried to change her mind, but when she refused he tried to claw out her eyes.

3 I was fifteen when I ran away from home. I made it to the city, five hours away from the small town where I lived, and called my parents. They made my brother come pick me up.

4 Felicity, a slave who was eight months pregnant, was arrested alongside Perpetua. The two women found themselves in a prison so crowded with people, Perpetua “had never known such darkness.”

5 Did I run away because I was sick of standing in the front pew at church, lips resolutely shut against the hymns? Was it my dad’s habit of waking me before dawn to work, or was it something even more selfish?

6 When Felicity gave birth in prison, the soldiers mocked her. They wanted to know how she would handle being torn apart by lions if the pain of childbirth was so great. They must not have known it wouldn’t be lions, but a rabid heifer who would be summoned to kill the women.

7 Last summer, while attempting to separate my father’s cows from their calves, an enormous cow – a panicked mother – ran up from behind me, stretched into a swift pirouette and kicked the front of both my legs with two black dinner-plate hooves. Later, I gazed at the purple bruises on my pale thighs and thought, *I deserved that.*

8 The rabid heifer didn’t do its job of killing the Christian noblewoman and the slave, and so they stood side-by-side to be slaughtered by men. Today, they are depicted with their arms wrapped around each other, the joint patron saints of the beast who failed to kill them. They are also the patron saints of expectant mothers, ranchers and butchers. Who’s the patron saint of paradox? Who’s the patron saint of cruelty?

## birth

I am a good daughter every ninety minutes when I talk myself off the couch at the alarm's ring. Over the tights, double-layered socks, long underwear and two long-sleeved shirts I've slept in, I pull a pair of Dad's old Wrangler jeans and canvas coveralls. I stuff my feet into knee-high lace-up pack boots and pull on two pairs of gloves. With a Scotch cap pulled down over my ears and a silk scarf around my neck, I grab a flashlight and open the door.

The night glitters. The membranes in my nose stiffen with cold. Three winter-coated cats escort me across the yard.

I am a good daughter in the breath-warmed corral, weaving through the crowded and huge bodies of expectant mothers. My white flashlight beam sweeps back and forth. I listen: they hum. Through the chorus of grunts and murmurs there is one definite voice of urgency. In the back pen, I find a black Angus girl on her side, the mountain of her body heaving as she pants, huffing silver clouds into the dark. My fingers ache from the cold. Her shining eyes watch me, the skin beneath her tail split open, speared through by thin hooved legs, soaking the frozen ground with blood.

By the time my hand is back on the doorknob, the cats have returned to the warm caves they've found in feed barrels or old saddle blankets.

Dad is sleeping in a rhythm like mine. I am a good daughter when we alternate trips into the cold so the cows aren't alone for longer than forty-five.

One calving season when I was little we camped out on Army-issue cots pushed together in the empty living room of the farmhouse, before the new tenants moved in. Moonlight poured through the windows, lighting bare walls and carpet silver. White fields expanded to the dark, distant tree line. No neighbor lights, no crawling highway. The train's roar was so loud it could have been right in the yard. Lonely, I rested my arm on the dark hill of my sleeping father's shoulder.

Now at his bedroom door I only have to say, "Dad," and he knows. He's up in an instant, clothed and out the door.

## memorial<sup>9</sup> of st. teresa of calcutta<sup>10</sup>

### Gospel

Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother<sup>11</sup>  
and his mother's<sup>12</sup> sister, Mary<sup>13</sup> the wife of Clopas,  
and Mary Magdalene.<sup>14</sup>  
When Jesus saw his mother<sup>15</sup> and the disciple there whom he loved  
he said to his mother,<sup>16</sup> "Woman, behold, your son<sup>17</sup>."  
Then he said to the disciple,  
"Behold, your mother."  
And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

---

9 September 5, when this Teresa would come home from school to an empty house, microwave ramen and sit too close to the TV.

10 Also known as Mother Teresa.\*

\*You know the one.

11 This Teresa's mother is also named Mary.

12 This Teresa's mother, named Mary, had six children, the eldest of which was a son who died very young.

13 This Teresa's mother, Mary, was happiest "with her babies inside her."

14 There is no evidence that Mary Magdalene was a sex worker, though that is the prevailing myth. She was yet another Mary who loved Jesus.

15 Mother Teresa is known for her white and blue sari, worn as a nun's habit. She worked in India with lepers and those suffering from HIV/AIDS, but believed suffering to be holy. Her work didn't aim to alleviate that suffering.

16 For nearly fifty years, this St. Teresa suffered from "a dark night of the soul," or a time when she felt no presence of God at all. She wrote, "Heaven means nothing, to me it looks like an empty place. The thought of it means nothing to me – and yet this torturing longing for God."

17 When this Teresa's nephew was born, her sister asked all of her siblings if they were Catholic or not. This Teresa's brother, Andrew, replied, "Yes." This Teresa replied, "No." They stood together at church and sang the same songs, crossed themselves in unison, and from the same chalice drank the same blood. Afterward, they went to their respective homes and lay beside their partners. Andrew became the godfather of their nephew while this Teresa wondered what it would have meant to lie, too.

## immaculate conception

Not many Black Angus bulls' genes are of a high enough quality to produce valuable calves. Because of this, cattle ranchers often use Artificial Insemination (AI), a process in which semen from a registered bull is purchased and inserted into the cow through artificial means.

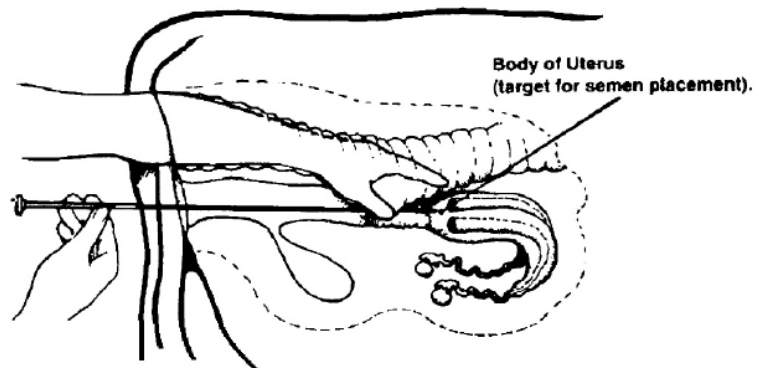
Catalogues containing hundreds of examples of quality bulls are provided by the American Bull Society (ABS), which Dad pores over to find the right sire for his calves. The glossy catalogues litter the living room, our bathroom, and my parents' bedroom.

Different bulls offer different benefits. I used to make a game of finding the best bull, with shining black fur slick against the massive hump between his shoulders, a deep chest and snub nose. A resentful glare on his magnificent face. Heavy, with a low birthweight. Good disposition and, always, the heaviest deep-black scrotum.

Dad picks his favorites, sometimes up to three, and places an order. Tubes of semen arrive in a large white tank of liquid nitrogen, which is stored in the garage. As a child, I was explicitly warned against playing with it.

## to bear children

To aid in the AI process, cattle breeders insert CIDRs<sup>18</sup> (Controlled Internal Drug Release), pronounced “ciders.” These are intravaginal progesterone inserts,<sup>19</sup> demonstrated in Fig. 2. Progesterone is released at a controlled rate into the bloodstream after insertion, which is used to synchronize estrus, or sexual receptivity. With this tool, the fertility of a female mammal can be controlled, making it possible to schedule convenient impregnation.<sup>20</sup> By synchronizing estrus, large groups of cows and heifers can be bred at the same time in a narrow window.<sup>21</sup>



---

18 From the Catholic church's *Humanae Vitae*: "... the direct interruption of the generative process ... [is] to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children."

19 Was I a bad daughter when I took myself to the clinic at sixteen? The nurse remembered administering my shots as a baby. She gave me a manila folder that I hid under the passenger seat in my car, unused ring of pills still inside. Weeks later, I came home to find the folder on the kitchen counter. My mother made me promise I'd never do it again — "it" being sex, I guess.

20 Was I a good daughter when I got another set of pills and was too afraid to take them? Was I a good daughter when I took them and was too afraid to utilize them?

21 Was I bad daughter when, as a twenty-five-year-old woman, I told the doctor at Planned Parenthood that the IUD she was about to put inside me was about an eighth of the size of the cows? It pinched somewhere unrecognizable and I nearly blacked out.

## memorial<sup>22</sup> of saint teresa<sup>23</sup> of jesus, virgin<sup>24</sup> and doctor of the church<sup>25</sup>

Brothers and sisters:

It is written that Abraham had two sons,  
one by the slave woman and the other by the freeborn woman.

The son of the slave woman was born naturally,  
the son of the freeborn through a promise.

Now this is an allegory.

These women represent two covenants.

One was from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery;  
this is Hagar.<sup>26</sup>

But the Jerusalem above is freeborn, and she is our mother.

For it is written:

Rejoice, you barren one who bore no children<sup>27</sup>;  
break forth and shout, you who were not in labor;  
for more numerous are the children of the deserted one  
than of her who has a husband.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, brothers and sisters,  
we are children not of the slave woman  
but of the freeborn woman.<sup>29</sup>

---

22 Feast Day: October 15, as the weather gets crisp and red foxes are spotted in the tall, dry grass.

23 Pendants, books, black-hooded ceramic figurines layered in dust: St. Teresa was assumed to be this Teresa's namesake.

24 This Teresa texted her Catholic mother to ask which virgin she was truly named after and learned that no one had ever known, nor cared to specify.

25 St. Teresa was born as the Catholic nations shifted from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar. They deleted all the days between the fourth and the 15th — in October of 1582 she died on one or the other. We celebrate her feast on the 15th, which is strange because St. Francis died the 3rd, so they could be feast buddies but nine fake days cropped up in between.

26 St. Teresa ran away from home at age seven with her brother Rodrigo to find martyrdom among the Moors. When this Teresa ran away to that larger city, five hours away, she did not intend to die. Both had mothers determined to raise them to be pious.

27 This Teresa's mother withheld insurance information so that she wouldn't have access to birth control.

28 This Teresa's mother had six children.

29 St. Teresa is most famous for a statue of her most pivotal spiritual experience, which occurred after a long period where she did not feel God's presence. Called Ecstasy of St. Teresa by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. About the experience that inspired the statue, she wrote, "I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it..."\*

\*St. Teresa fucked Jesus to orgasm and called it mental prayer.

## birth II

Icy wind whips across the field, dropping the wind chill temperature to forty below zero. A young cow stands against the wind instead of cuddling her newborn. Too late, Dad hauls the frozen calf into the house. He wakes me up to tell me that it wasn't my fault. He wanted to give the poor thing a few, final warm hours, he says, then drives into town for work.

In the dim light of early morning I find her flat on the floor. Utter disaster, a half-dead thing, wheezing into the stained carpet. I press my hands into the thick silken fur on her ribs and apologize. Am I a good daughter when I blow-dry a newborn's icy hooves? In middle school we had a similar situation. His frozen legs and ears resulted in deformities we thought were cute. He lived a simple life in the corral, a pet eventually, and I named him after a boy I thought was similarly cute. We ate his meat all winter.

From the basement I pull sleeping bags and blankets to stuff into the dryer. I wrap her feet in a heating pad, then lay the dryer-warmed layers over her body. When they cool I replace them with fresh layers, again and again.

She is my project for the day. I drink coffee and watch the pile of blankets breathe. Kneel on the dirty ground, rub her legs, tell her it'll be okay.

Nearly 7 o'clock at night I slide a feeding tube down her throat. Her tongue is cold and gray, eyes filmy. With a firm squeeze, a solution of water, sugar and salt slides into her belly. Shocked, she tries to stand, then collapses. Am I good daughter when I hold her frozen ear and repeat apologies?

I finally leave the house for the first time all day and an hour later Dad sends me a text to say she's died. *Would you like for me to wait until you get home before I take her body away?* I'm with my friends, texting under the table. *No, thank you.*

# memorial of saint thérèse<sup>1</sup> of the child<sup>2</sup> jesus, virgin<sup>3</sup> and doctor of the church<sup>4</sup>

## My Novena Rose Prayer

O Little Thérèse of the Child Jesus, please pick for me a rose  
from the heavenly gardens and send it to me as a message of love.<sup>5</sup>

O Little Flower of Jesus, ask God to grant the favors  
I now place with confidence in your hands.  
St. Therese, help me to always believe as you did in  
God's great love for me, so that I might imitate your "Little Way"<sup>6</sup> each day<sup>7</sup>.

Amen.

---

1 St. Thérèse of Lisieux, or The Little Flower, was born in 1873 and eventually, at the age of 24, died of tuberculosis. She is celebrated for being silent and cheerful until her death.

2 As a baby, this St. Thérèse was sent to be cared for by a wet nurse. When she was over a year old, she returned to her family but had become extremely temperamental and was prone to excessive crying. This kind of thing can happen when a baby doesn't attach very well to its mother. It can happen when a baby's mother is distant.

3 Ah ha! That's where this Teresa went wrong, but it's not a fun story to tell.

4 Feast Day: October 1, when golden bales of hay lay scattered beneath the cool blue sky and dry malted alfalfa coats your tongue.

5 St. Thérèse often experienced spiritual dryness. She wrote, "For me it is always night, always dark, black night."

6 This St. Thérèse wrote, "When I am in this state of spiritual dryness, unable to pray or to practice virtue, I look for little opportunities for the smallest trifles to please Jesus, such as a smile, a kindly word when I would rather be silent. If no such occasion offers itself, I try at least to say over and over again that I love Him." Is that unlike when this Teresa's father told her that he fights his slow spread of sadness by saying, "almost like a prayer, 'Thank you, thank you, thank you, for the capacity to see the complexities'?"

7 This Teresa's mother told her that her smile would someday save a life. She took on a scowl. People did die.

## to bear children (II)

When it comes time to breed, Dad gets some friends together to help gather the cows. They like a chance to cowboy. On horseback we find the herd and try to push them into a temporary corral Dad set up the night before.

Am I a bad daughter when the directions he yells are snatched by the wind and a handful of cows slip past me? I jerk my horse after them, kick him into a lope, muttering to myself, *Dad, I can't hear you Dad, that's not helpful, Dad.* The sun burns my scalp through the part in my hair. My horse stumbles on a rock, and a real cowboy loops the errant cattle back to the herd.

Once inside the corral, we can push the cows up the narrow alley and into the squeeze chute, which contracts and holds them in place. Dad uses a long plastic rod to insert the CIDRs, leaving thin blue plastic threads poking out from beneath their tails. The artificial insemination process is strict; they are removed seven days later - you simply yank on the thing.

## immaculate conception (II)

The cows mill around in the corral while they wait for insemination and we nest in tall grass to eat lunch. Dad made white bread and beef-roast-and-ketchup sandwiches. He insists on both buttering the bread and wrapping the sandwiches in a paper towel before plastic wrap, so they are at once dry and thick with cold butter. For the occasion we have brand name potato chips, grocery store cookies and hot coffee in a heavy Thermos. The hot white sun burns through our long-sleeved shirts and, if I take off my hat, the part in my hair. Our boots, pants and hands, like everywhere else, are coated in mud and manure.

The vet comes over from Malta and the cowboys who've been helping us shake his hand, stand a little taller. We push the cows up the alley one last time. The vet slips a thin metal rod inside each cow's vagina to deliver the mail-order semen.

I am a good daughter when I monkey on the alley, pushing with my feet and wedging my body against the metal, finding leverage to push forward cows who refuse to become pregnant.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> From *Humanae Vitae*, "Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute in the highest degree to their parents' welfare."

## memorial<sup>1</sup> of st. teresa benedicta of the cross<sup>2</sup>

### Gospel

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples  
that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly  
from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes,  
and be killed and on the third day be raised.  
Then Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him,  
“God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.”  
He turned and said to Peter,  
“Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me.”<sup>3</sup>  
You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do<sup>4</sup>.”

---

1 August 9, when the prairie has crisped to dull yellow and hot days on the lake are ruined by strong, dusty wind.

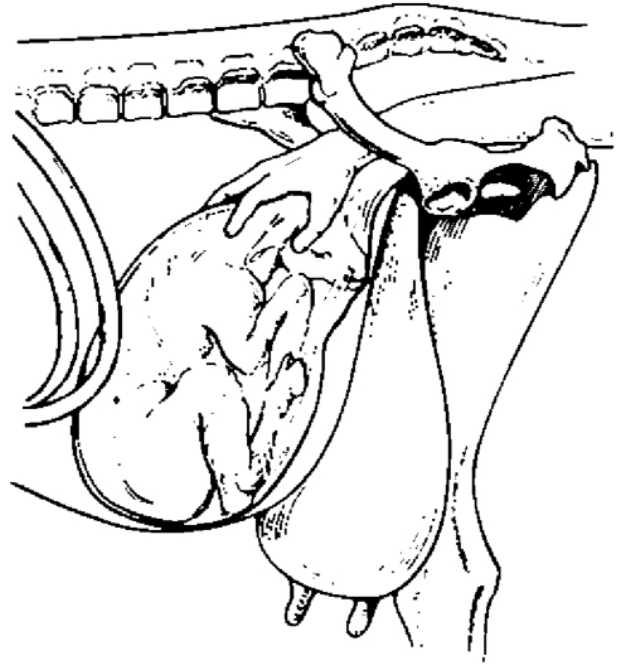
2 Born Jewish in Poland in 1891, her birth name was Edith Stein. Until her baptism in 1922, she didn't practice any religion. She wrote, “Every time I feel my powerlessness and inability to influence people directly, I become more keenly aware of the necessity of my own holocaust.”

3 Many holy people have reported a period of “spiritual dryness,” or a time when God was absent from them. Despite her escape to Catholicism, this St. Teresa was eventually killed in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

4 What does it mean to belong to any one thing? Can one write a letter of allegiance and be saved? Apparently not: apparently nothing.

## are you open

Some months after artificially inseminating the cows, we head again to pasture and, on horseback, bring them into the corral. With quiet gestures, we separate them into groups and move them up the alley. A big girl in front sees her escape and runs for it, but Dad's friend Rick is waiting and, pulling a lever above his head, slams the head gate closed around her neck. With another lever he squeezes her body tight in the metal cage. Between its red bars, the balloon of her presses through, coarse black fur hot and shining in the sun.



Dad opens a small metal gate behind her. It swings inward and hooks to the chute and blocks the cows still waiting so he can stand directly behind her. Lined up behind it the small metal gate smashed against each other, breathing heavy, are a line of 1200-pound cows. Their summer coats are smooth. They flick flies with their tails, toss their massive heads and moan, dark eyes rolling. If they smashed through that gate, my father would be crushed.

He slips his arm into a plastic glove that reaches to his armpit, lifts the cow's tail and pushes his arm deep inside her rectum. Holding his hand like a scoop, he pulls thick green manure in quick, methodical pulls. Three scoops or so and it's clean enough to push his hand back in and, palm down, feel for the skull of an unborn calf.

Most will have been bred. Those that didn't are deemed "open," meaning "not pregnant," and will be sold at auction. Goodbye.

## images

Fig. 1. Detection of pregnancy by rectal palpation redrawn from original by Arthur, et al., 1982 from (Reproduction in Cattle) 2004. (Blackwell Publishing) [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316285755\\_Reproduction\\_in\\_Cattle](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316285755_Reproduction_in_Cattle). Accessed December 9, 2020.

Fig. 2. Proper placement of insemination gun to deposit semen in the body of the uterus. (Oklahoma State University Extension) 2017. <https://extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets/artificial-insemination-for-beef-cattle.html>. Accessed December 9, 2020.