

**Olivia Pass*****Soon Done with the Crosses*, Claude Wilkinson. Cascade Books, 2023**

Claude Wilkinson's latest book, *Soon Done with the Crosses*, contains many poems examining faith, as the title suggests, but it also has poems scrutinizing human conduct, examining race in America, giving parables, and delving into the essence and beauty of life. The poems in this volume are in various stanzas of free verse; some, like "Water Strider" and "Bonsai," are patterned poems, evoking visually the poems' subjects. Many poems reference photographs, paintings, painters, and vibrant colors, subtly hinting at Wilkinson's second career as a visual artist. His poetry collections include *Reading the Earth* (1998), winner of the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award; *Joy in the Morning* (2004), nominated for a Pulitzer Prize; *Marvelous Light* (2018); and *World without End* (2020), which was nominated for the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award. He has also been awarded the Whiting Writers' Award and the Walter E. Dakin Fellowship in Poetry from the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Wilkinson has an M.A. from the University of Memphis and has taught at Christian Brothers University, LeMoyne-Owen College, and Mississippi Valley State University. He was the first poet to be awarded the John and Renée Grisham Visiting Writer in Residence at Ole Miss. He presently conducts poetry workshops and lives in Nesbit, Mississippi.

The first poem of *Soon Done with Crosses*, "Birds that Alight on Faith," is about bearing the burdens of life here on earth. Wilkinson gives examples of plants that look fragile but are actually strong; animals, supported by seemingly delicate natural elements, that prevail; and mythological and Biblical heroes, who triumph in some way in life. This poem seems to be a prayer:

Help me also to believe in  
the leanest of saplings and twigs,  
in something as flimsy  
as a honeysuckle bloom.

He notes that Theseus had such belief when "he tackled the Minotaur." The second stanza begins in much the same way:

Help in the way I've seen  
pelicans and swans skim  
mutely onto a lake,  
thinking it solid as stone.

Then he connects that faith with St. Peter's when he "took his first steps / on stormy Gennesaret." The third and final stanza begins humbly with his asking for help for himself:

With only that thimbleful  
of aerial surety, help me  
to grasp those things  
which never collapse  
under the heft of this life.

Wilkinson, an African-American poet, includes some poignant poems about race in America. In "Posed beside the Lyceum Market Commemorating James Meredith's Enrollment at Ole Miss in 1962," the speaker shares his own university experiences — entering the University of Mississippi a quarter of a century ago and now "back as a visiting scholar." He remembers a beautiful white girl who exchanged glances with him years ago, and thinks "of the life / we couldn't have had together then, / even in someplace like France or Greece." He then recalls the time that his father was pulled over by "one of the state's finest / in blue" who asked him, "whether he thought / 'that nigger Meredith was gonna / be able to stay.'" The speaker remembers to keep his "shoulders straight, / while maybe a bit glazed, / my smile seems graciously true." That is how the poem ends, projecting his own protective but "glazed" demeanor, falsely smiling a gracious smile in the presence of the bigoted policeman.

Four of the poems in *Soon Done with the Crosses* are entitled "parables," and like some of Jesus' parables and Aesop's fables, they delightfully use animals to teach humans lessons. Humor and a lightness of spirit are often nicely intermixed in Wilkinson's parable poems. In "The Parable of the Snail" the speaker announces to the snail in the first stanza that the snail is how the speaker "ought to be — / so patiently obedient in your quest." But he goes on to say that he could simply observe the snail and not learn anything "about loving / my neighbor as myself." Furthermore, he doesn't know if the snail is thankful for the blue jays who allow the snail to live. But as the snail makes it to the top of the tool shed, "it's almost as if you believe / that it may be domed with other / long-suffering, kindred shells /

now on glittering paths of ease.” Such a patient, long struggle should be so rewarded. Likewise, Wilkinson’s “The Parable of the Cicada” compares the cicadas’ existence with that of humans. The cicadas, who have been underground for seventeen years, ascend and wonder about the existence that has been just above them. He notes that we humans could protest and complain in various ways, but the cicadas “could counter with / their own penalties of creation / with their cyclic jailing.” Then he guesses that they could say, “*You had seventeen years to get houses / in order. Now gird up your loins while / we come and shuck our darkling husks.*” The poem ends sweetly with the cicadas and humans sharing the “*treasured entitlements / of sun and warmth and light,*” reminding the reader of the simple but wonderful blessings all can enjoy together on Earth.

The final poem of the collection is “Vigil,” which bears the eponymous phrase of this volume of poetry. The speaker uses Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks* to complete his description of his nighttime angst and the crosses he bears. Unlike the speaker in “Birds that Alight on Faith,” he wishes to be done with this state, not receive help in bearing it. The first lines — “Brother to a cautious rabbit / crouching under shadows / and moonlight’s wings” — depict a nervously attentive rabbit, who is an apt parallel to the two humans who are awake in an anxious and weary state that they wish to be free of: “It’s ‘soon / I will be done with the crosses’” and will “fly away.” Like the people in Hopper’s painting, they are “snared in our own all-night café / like the two men wearing business-blue.” The poem notes that the men in the painting don’t seem to know each other and don’t to wish to. There is a woman in red in the painting, who seems as disconnected as the others. In fact, she is “so pale and loveless she looks almost dead.” Another figure in the painting is the “disinterested overseer in his uniform / the white of dove feathers.” The only truly positive element in the painting is the “shiny hope / of sparkling-clean coffee dispensers / and a vow of continuous, fluorescent / light.” Those in Wilkinson’s poem are anxiously wide awake like the nervous rabbit and Hopper’s lonely, detached individuals “in these wee hours / while the less troubled lie sleeping.” Although the specific crosses they bear are not mentioned, the reader perceives their weariness and their need to be rid of their burden. Wilkinson’s individuals seem sorely troubled in their lives here on Earth and desire to be free of their burdens and “fly away” to a blissful, immortal life.

Claude Wilkinson’s latest volume contains beautiful and wise poems that touch both the reader’s heart and intellect.