

**Poems by Roxane Beth Johnson**  
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**Burden of Light**

Our church was full of whores and gamblers. The preacher taught me to pray by banging my palms together like two fish she was trying to kill. The preacher taught me to pray the way a lantern protects fire from air: by a false, caged force. Our church shook with holy-rollers and the preacher was my grandmother. Our church had scriptures written on the walls. One said Jesus said: *my yoke is easy and my burden is light*. I thought of Jesus eating a fried egg, over-easy, the yolk bright like flame. Our church was full of sinners crying: *Jesus, Jesus, Jesus*. I was possessed by mistakes and my prayers were wrong. The preacher taught me how to navigate darkness, how to travel with a burden of light.

**Week-Night Services**

The organ's flare-hued opera hummed loud  
in the small church alcove above the bar  
with its bumpy music. Our voices wound  
up being too small to drown it out by far.  
We sung of Jesus' blood with a tambourine,  
one drum, twenty voices, paper fans, bells –  
while the thump-thump of bass through the ceiling  
made rhythm that silenced our fears of hell,  
demons, white folks, Catholics, death's certain flood.  
But the music – blood of Jesus, God bless  
the child I was then – that music: *The blood*  
we sung would wash us white as snow. *Blessed*  
*assurance, Jesus is mine, Oh...* what fears.  
When I hear those drums, my heart is in my ears.

## Company

A traveling preacher comes to our house for coffee. He takes it hot and black, pours it on the saucer and sips it like that. He is the fattest man I have ever seen. We sit with him at the kitchen table. We watch him drink his coffee from a saucer. He asks, *have you got anything to eat, Sista Johnson?* My mother says, *I've got some chili and bread.* He says, *sounds good!* While she cooks, the preacher and my father talk about Jesus. The chili smells of too-salty meat and onions. The bread is warm and yeasty in the oven. *You right,* my father says to everything the preacher says. The preacher doesn't talk to me. When my mother puts the plate in front of him, he places the bread on the table. Just like that! Nothing under it, not even a napkin. He asks for butter. Momma gets the butter dish and a knife, and before she can set it down, he takes it from her. Uses the knife to scrape the half-cube into his chili. My mother stands behind him with her hands open for a moment, her fingers curved around the memory of something she lost.

## New Year's Eve All-Night Prayer Service, 1973

Hours came and left like drinkers from the bar next door. Some of us prayed with our eyes open. The moon faced another continent.

One of us, my Grandfather Deke, sang *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* as bar music pounded. He taught us perseverance amid distraction, even if you did look like a fool.

The preacher turned the lights off. I was afraid of the dark; this meant living in a worst-case scenario for an indeterminate period of time. As with all bad times, it didn't last.

For those of us who had hope, the preacher yelling *Get behind me, Satan! Get behind me Satan* —made us quiet in listening for diminishing footsteps, a crumpling of the dark.

Some grew tired. We slept and dreamed of being small animals chased in the snow. At the very last moment, a hole in the ground received us.

At dawn, someone shouted *hallelujah!* We stood up, our aching knees concentrated toward carpet.

Some of us wondered what we were there for. Some might say: we were on the look-out, in search of God. Now I know that's all it was: brilliance was our prey.

## The Great By and By

One day I'll say: I'm glad my death is over.  
I'm glad life will keep my body and slowly dissolve it,  
darken and weaken it – tea leaves soaking in water.  
I'll ask: why did I spend time thinking about death  
while I was living? It's good I could never grasp it –  
poppies can't see themselves on a California hillside.  
Today I report: the weather still displays me in its museum.  
My eternity – some kid with bloody knees playing anyway,  
gravel and flesh creating a scar.



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The poems above are excerpts from *Jubilee*, written by Roxane Beth Johnson and published by Anhinga Press, Copyright © 2006, used with permission.

Roxane Beth Johnson is the author of two books of poetry, *Jubilee* (Anhinga Press, 2006) and *Black Crow Dress* (Alice James Books, forthcoming 2012). Her poems have won many awards and have been published in literary journals nationwide, such as: The Georgia Review, Poetry Daily, Prairie Schooner, ZYZZYVA and The Pushcart Prize Anthology. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. She works as a freelance writer and editor. To learn more about Roxane and her work, please visit <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/roxane-beth-johnson>.