

Christoph Keller, III  
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church  
December 24, 1996  
Christmas Eve

*I have words that would be howl'd out in the desert air, where hearing would not latch them.*

Rosse was speaking to MacDuff, Act IV, scene iii, Macbeth.

Each year's Christmas is darkened by its own, distinct calamity. Words that would be howl'd in desert air, are the lead story on the evening news. Sometimes, the bad news is collective, even national, in scope. More often, it has to do with some local family's private sorrow.

MacDuff replies to Rosse:

*What concern they? The general cause? Or is it a fee-grief, due to some single breast?*

This year, it is fee grief: a ballerina's murder. True, and perhaps all the more because Juli Busken was young, talented, and pretty, some measure of the shock reverberates throughout Arkansas and Oklahoma. As news spread among those who know the Buskens, we staggered back and gasped.

Rosse answers:

*No mind that's honest but in it shares some woe, though the main part pertains to you alone.*

To you, MacDuff. To you, Mary Jean and Bud. The words concern your daughter.

MacDuff braces for the worst.

*Quickly, let me have it . . .*

Rosse:

*Let not your ears despise my tongue for ever, which shall possess them with the heaviest sound that ever yet they heard.*

Jewel Jean Busken, 21, was murdered Friday in Norman, Oklahoma. Just now, she had completed school: University of Oklahoma, Bachelor of Fine Arts, emphasis in classical ballet.

I had been thinking of Juli Busken Saturday. We were at the Nutcracker, the matinee. Juli's mother, Mary Jean, is a colleague in the Bishop's office. One summer afternoon,

Juli danced in ensemble on our back terrace for a Wildwood benefit. She was good. Saturday, as children, snowflakes, and sugarplums pirouetted across the dreamy stage, Juli came to mind. Which parts might she have played? I wondered where to place her, not knowing of her death.

Rosse tells it:

*Your castle is surprised; your wife, and babes, savagely slaughtered.*

MacDuff cannot believe.

*All my pretty ones? Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?*

Then, in dismay and wonder:

*Did heaven look on, and would not take their part?*

Juli dropped off a friend at the Oklahoma City airport, Friday at 5:00 a.m. She was captured, and taken to a lake.

Did heaven look on, and would not take her part?

*And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots . . . and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked.* Isaiah 11: 1 and 4.

This, then, is how heaven takes our part: with Word. With Breath. Occasionally, we might look for something solid, something sharper; because, for their part, the wicked carry guns.

Just curious, I checked the French: Le Bible. The French have their way of putting things. In Isaiah 11: 4 “with breath” comes out “Du Souffle.” “Souffle,” as in “Soufflé,” as in cheese, chocolate or Grand Marnier.

*Du souffle de ses levres (from the breath of his lips) il fera mourir le mechant* (literally, “he will make to die the wicked”).

Mix in the carol: *Il est ne le divin enfant* (He is born, the divine child).

*Il est ne le divin enfant. Du souffle de ses levres il fera mourir le mechant.* He is born, the divine child. From the breath of his lips, he will slay the wicked.

Say what? Say when. Say where. Say how.

When? Already, but not yet. Where? In Kingdom come. How? By the breath of his lips, his Word.

Are you with me? Stay with me.

Souffle is noun to the verb souffler, “to puff,” whence comes the dessert, baked light and fluffy. Christmas season *is* soufflé: painstaking labor bakes airy, light concoctions out of evergreens and sugar plumbs, elves and reindeer, white lights, red balls and bows. Christmas is like that: light and pretty—but substantial in concoction, filled by the breath of God.

God knows, I know better than to throw powdered sugar on human anguish. There was a scream of terror, a squeal of tires. Juli’s parents hear that. Imagination torments them.

Luke tells of old man Simeon, on the Temple steps, eyeing the holy couple now approaching with baby Jesus. He sings to highest heaven: “Mine eyes have seen salvation.” But taking Mary’s palm in hand, he sees the cloud: “A sword will pierce your soul.”

A sword pierced Juli Busken. A knife is driven into her mother’s heart, her father’s too. If they sleep tonight, they wake up Christmas day to realize fresh the thing which has taken place.

*O Day, O Day, O Day, O hateful Day.  
O child, O child! My soul and not my child.*  
Romeo and Juliet Act IV, scene v.

Grief will not be assuaged by reassurance, I know this. Still, I cannot pretend I do not know of reassurance, and I cannot, will not fail to speak of hope.

For Christmas does hold hope for Juli Busken, and for Mary Jean and Bud. Jesus said do not, do *not*, fear the one who kills the body, but cannot kill the soul. I do not forget this: do not, cannot, will not. And, if I don’t say it, Christmas will.

No, Christmas won’t say it, she will sing it. Christmas wants to sing, always. Come what may, Christmas will not be quiet and hold her peace. From Thanksgiving, through tomorrow, she holds the spotlight and the stage. She will not be told to give it up, to sing more softly. Christmas is the eight hundred pound holiday that sits where she wants, sings when she’s ready. And when she sings, the song is *Gloria!*  
—G L O R I A—*Gloria!*

Come December 24, no calamity—fee grief, or general cause—will silence Christmas. Ready or not, she will sing and we’ll chime in.

The song begins in desert air, with only shepherds’ ears to latch them. Tongues of angels rise through starlit skies. Then, thrilling voices roll out over time. We, the

living, join our singing voices with the dead, ghosts of Christmas past who are not ghosts at all, but living, loving, singing saints.

*And one was a doctor and one was a priest and one was slain by a fierce wild beast.*

Christmas has us singing, and it doesn't matter who is alive, and who is dead.

*Break forth, O beauteous heavenly light, and usher in the morning.*

Christmas is quite the firm conductor. She insists that heaven does most certainly take our part. She brooks no objections, no ifs, ands or buts. No, Christmas is not naïve. She reads the morning papers, sees the evening news. She has the facts, Christmas. She nods that she is familiar with the darkness, in intimate detail. She knows its wickedness, and power.

She is undeterred.

Above anguished howls in desert air, she cries:

*Fear not. Unto you is born this day, a Saviour.*

Fear not. There heaven goes again. Fear not. Fear not the one who kills the body, but cannot kill the soul. Fear not. The Word, the Breath, are mightier than the sword. Fear not the darkness, for darkness cannot kill the soul that belongs to Jesus. Though it pierces heart and soul, though it raises scream of terror, the darkness cannot have the girl.

If only we could believe it! If we could but trust the Word and Breath of God as the Word and Breath of everlasting life. If only we could, then oh how we could celebrate tonight.

*The night, the night, O holy night!*

With what joy, we would rise tomorrow.

*O day, O day, O Christmas day!*

If only. Only if. Only when. Only now—inasmuch, as now, we do.