

VIA DOLOROSA  
*and*  
ADVENT WREATH  
*poems*  
E.D. WATSON

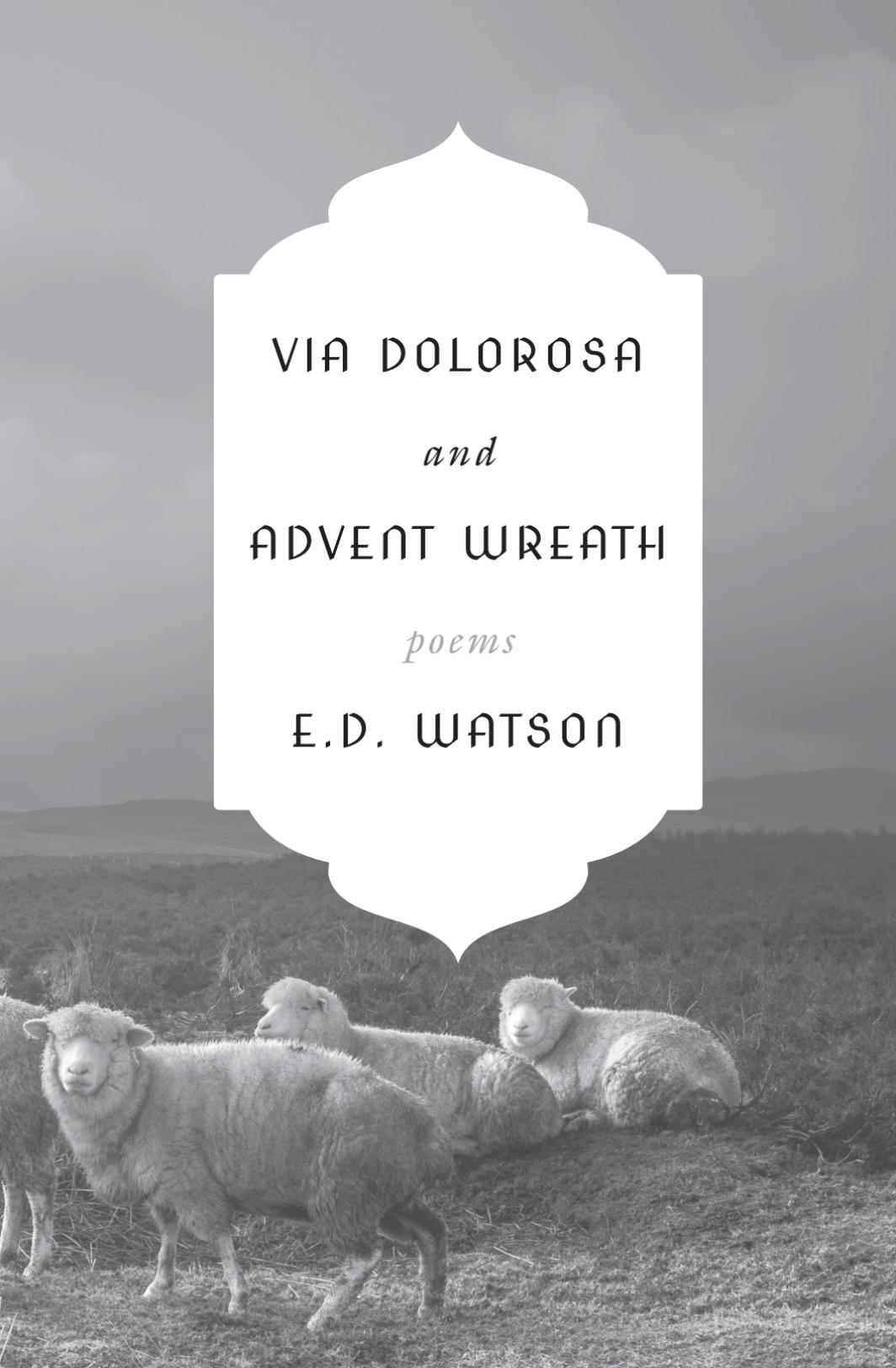






A black and white photograph of three sheep in a field. One sheep is in the foreground, facing left. Two other sheep are behind it, one looking towards the camera. The background shows rolling hills under a cloudy sky.

COW CREEK CHAPBOOK PRIZE  
PITTSBURG STATE UNIVERSITY

A black and white photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, three sheep are visible: one is standing and facing the camera, while two others are lying down behind it. The background shows a grassy field with some trees and distant hills under a cloudy sky. A large, white, decorative frame with a pointed top and bottom is centered over the image, containing the title and author's name.

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*Via Dolorosa and Advent Wreath* was the winner of the 2023 Cow Creek Chapbook Prize.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 2018, I traveled to Israel and Palestine on a religious pilgrimage even though I wasn't sure I believed in God anymore. I told myself I was going for the food and the adventure. In preparation, I tried to educate myself about the political situation in the Holy Land, and while I thought I understood what was going on there, my education didn't truly begin until I arrived. This is the story of that journey.



In Latin: *Lord We Have Come*. Drawing of graffiti carved into a stone wall in Jerusalem by a pilgrim during the fourth century, CE.



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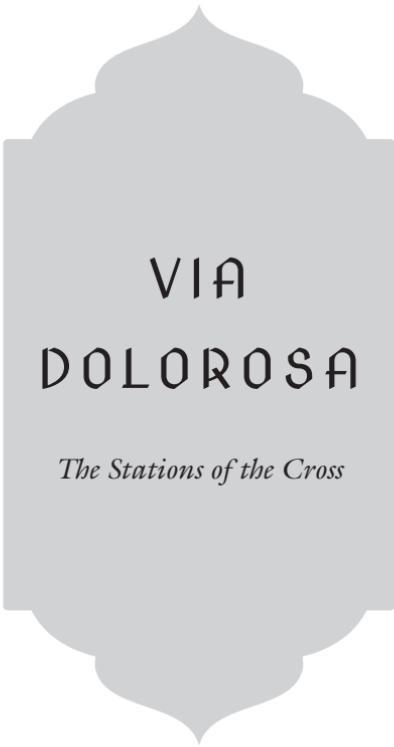
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*for the people of Palestine  
who shared so graciously with me  
their food, their endless coffee, and their stories.*

*And for the woman at the Western Wall,  
who made room for me.*





VIA  
DOLOROSA

*The Stations of the Cross*



# I. CONDEMNED

Just before dawn, we pilgrims creep  
through Old Jerusalem, ancient labyrinth  
of stone and myth. Lord we have come  
in search of a fault-line, in search of a shift.

In the center of the maze, a monolith  
called Faith, or maybe called Belief.  
Either way, I'm far from it.  
Man-eating whales? Burning shrub?

And the prophets? Madmen who ate dung,  
whose naked ranting and alleged  
foretellings ratify these Stations, ratify  
a babe in a trough, babe in the sedges.

No wonder people get religion.  
What else can you do but shoulder a cross  
through the holy city, chasing that big hush  
in *imitatio Dei*. Longing plagues us all.

We palm the cool stones, groping the wall  
of the maze, stinking of hope.  
We tread upon each other's feet, and fall.  
Some are left behind, others lifted.

## II. ECCE HOMO

When it's my turn to carry the cross  
a woman I don't know fingers my sleeve  
and looks up at me, as though I myself  
am Christ, her eyes dark with need

and also—wonder. What she sees  
is what I want most to see: God  
as lack of thunder, in disguise as me,  
God in blue jeans and sneakers—

but why me, and not that shopkeeper  
rolling a cigarette, rolling up his metal door?  
My well's no deeper, my water no sweeter  
than his. He wants his daily bread

as I want mine, and longs, like me, for bed.  
He sees these parades every day, sanctified  
faces beneath which rage unfed hungers  
not one of us knows how to satisfy—

and knows better than we do why  
we're here at dawn, muttering *Pater Noster*  
waiting for someone to die.  
“Is this He?” we ask of each ghost.

### III. KNEES + STONE

The actual street where Jesus fell  
is buried twenty feet below, our tour guide  
says, telling of a city razed and rebuilt  
over and over. I yawn. And then:

For the first time ever, I hear the *adhan*  
splitting darkness from dawn, driving doves  
and people from their dreams. White feathers  
at our feet: the cleanest things I've ever seen.

How does one fly without wings?  
Suddenly I can.  
Somewhere, a man in a minaret  
lifts me into the violet

with a voice mixed of blood and honey  
and sand, a voice like a banner in the wind.  
The guide says people sometimes fall  
in love with the men who sing the call

to prayer—a warning? I can't tell.  
I hold my breath the way one holds  
a little bird found trapped indoors.  
When the singing stops, I exhale.

## IV. WEEPING WOMAN

Woman with your face in her  
neighbor's shoulder, weeping,  
seeing your child gunned down  
over and over inside your eyes.

The first to believe,  
you saw what he'd become  
the same as any mother does:  
the best in him, a thumbprint of light.

There is no scream for this. No night  
dark enough to hide this darkness.  
Love of love of loves, your prince—  
you watched him bleed to death.

## V. SIMON THE CYRENE

There are pickpockets here, says our guide,  
veiled men with hands quick as crickets,  
mouths like quarries, eyes like knives—  
It takes a thief to know one, to know the lure

of easy money—who among us  
has not robbed God, who has not  
withheld their coins or wheat  
from the altar? Who has never

known hunger, who has not watched  
his own ribs rise from his flesh,  
each day without bread, a notch.  
We come because we are told to.

On all sides I am jostled  
by witnesses of an execution.  
They say the man had a knife  
and the guards shot him down.

In the backs of shops, revolution  
simmers, strong and bitter as the coffee  
sipped between murmurs: no restitution  
can be made to one who loses his life.

A street vendor offers me juice,  
the blood of my home, he says, fresh pressed  
by Israeli bulldozers, Israeli tanks, Israeli boots—  
taste the years in it, then tell me to care less.

He says his brother's blood was spilled  
like this. Clouds of flies swarm outside  
the butcher's stall. All we have  
is the body, so strong, so weak.

## VI. WOMAN WITH THE ISSUE

What I'll remember is the filth  
of millennia. Passages slick  
with the rot and shit of generations,  
seething with skinny cats.

In the souq flies are thick above fruit  
and sesame bread. A goat's neck is slit  
by a drain; I slip in gore,  
so like my own.

Tell me what to do I beg the sky,  
tell me how to survive the scorn  
of those who touch me and recoil,  
tell me how to transcend the pain.

I cannot stay in my quarter. Reform  
my self-disgust, sweep me, paint me  
wash me clean, fill my empty arms  
with love; I'll never be a mother.

I'm not a Good Woman, I cut off my hair,  
my parents don't want me: a wound  
that won't heal. Show me how to stand up.  
How to keep walking.

At the Western Wall, the women  
raise a song for their lost. They rock  
and pray. I want to join but don't belong.  
Then a sister steps aside, makes space.

## VII. JUDGMENT GATE

Some thought that I had fallen  
for I was kneeling in the street.  
Men and women stepped around me,  
swinging sacks of bread and meat—

a woman pulled me to my feet.  
You're blocking the way, she scolded,  
No one goes anyplace kneeling.  
Move, move, she said,

the souq's no place to pray or think.  
Look around you, the narrow way,  
If you must stop, at least stand up.  
Get up, or the police will come.

Get up, before you germinate;  
kneeling among the peels and shit  
you will begin to sprout and change  
into God knows what.

Seedling among the stones, the throng  
will trample you, get up and join the fray,  
sigh your sighs and sing your sacred songs,  
but move as we move, quick of foot.

But the street was far too wide  
for the caterpillar at my knee, safe  
for a moment from a thousand dangers,  
a thousand feet. It was God,

tiny and green, impossibly fragile  
Who asked of me a harder thing: to stop,  
to make of stillness something  
strong to house the small and good,

a wingéd-thing-to-be who sought  
a finger upon which to crawl,  
holy child carried in my hand  
to the bougainvillea on the wall.

## VIII. DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM

I traveled to the Holy Land to see if God were there  
but all I found were half-burnt cars  
behind fences strung with warning signs:  
Keep Out! The fields are filled with mines.

The fields had gone wild, Eden, guarded  
by flaming swords. No one allowed but birds.  
Innocent people die every year. Our guide  
says don't look at the tower, don't give them cause.

I traveled to the Holy Land to see if God were there  
and all I found were other people fumbling beads,  
breaking bread, pointing rifles, singing.  
I went to the Jordan, but only knee-deep.

Widows watch behind the heaps of figs,  
they see me—an American choosing  
God in my own image.  
They see me beaming,

sniffing the spices and incense: a tourist.  
What are pilgrims but seers of sights,  
buying t-shirts stamped with *Shalom*  
as though we knew its meaning.

## IX. DOMINE IVIMUS

Lord we have come to be bludgeoned.  
We have come to be enlightened.  
We have come to stand all night awaiting  
Your judgment. We have come

to the city of altars with dirty hands,  
thumbing our Psalters, our rosaries,  
bowing and crossing ourselves  
wondering all the time if You see.

We have come because we think  
we know who You are. We have come  
for Your ninety-nine names.  
We have come for bragging rights.

We come for those who haven't yet  
or never will. We come to ask questions.  
We have come on a lark. We have come  
for the wine and bread.

We came for You. We have come  
a long way and now we don't know  
what to do, but carve a cross into the wall  
or get a tattoo.

## X. STRIPPED

I have sometimes wondered  
how it might feel  
to stop being good. To shed  
my seamless robe, peel  
    off my skin, slip out of my head  
    and into—into what?  
What lies beyond  
that which our senses can guess?  
    How would all this look  
    to the mantis shrimp,  
    who sees more kinds of light?  
Would the stones  
    be stripped of their dullness  
    as dust is cleared with a puff of breath?  
Why am I trying so hard?  
I cannot do what I'm meant to do  
    unless You do it for me,  
    nor get free unless someone destroys You.  
What if all this horror is meant to  
    conceal the most beautiful things  
        like a screen on the harem window,  
        behind which lie wonders  
        no living man has known,  
        where only the dead and naked may go—

## XI. OFFERING

Soldiers with machine guns board the bus.  
They want to see our papers. My heart  
beats hot and pulpy and I think about sheep  
grazing in a minefield, not knowing,

going where they please, a little adventure,  
not smelling danger in the soil,  
only the scent of the exotic,  
next door to Eden, untasted fodder.

The soldiers move down the aisles, hats low,  
taking our passports, peering at our faces.  
Today we are lucky. Everyone has their seals  
and stamps in order. The sheep escapes.

But elsewhere, some sisters don't make it.  
They disappear in the tumble and gyre of stones  
flung up at God's floor. And it doesn't make  
the news, it doesn't sell. We are Americans,

we like our news sprinkled with red and blue sugar.  
Our president's face is on billboards here  
in Israel—now tell me that's not strange.  
On the news, they never show Israeli soldiers

boarding buses in fatigues, with your death  
at their disposal. They never show the machine.  
They show Palestinian men throwing rocks  
and bottles, like beasts stampeding.

## XII. SURRENDER

There are a lot  
of ways to quit.  
You can walk out  
over a sand dune  
and disappear. Wave  
a white flag. Stop speaking.  
Give up drinking. Change  
your number, change  
your name, shave your head.  
Make pilgrimage. Learn to sit  
until the devil himself  
is tame enough  
to eat from your hand. Or,

you can try immolation.  
You can try the cross,  
the hangman's noose.  
Any spectacle of gore  
and shame should do.  
Naked, blood boiling,  
bound to a stake, you can let go  
of what you think you know  
about God. You can  
let go of God Himself  
and let that cavernous

cracking emptiness  
echo back at you.

What happens then  
is anyone's guess.

### XIII. UNCTION

I watch the faces of the faithful,  
bending to kiss the stone where Christ  
was laid, their eyes streaming tears,  
agony and bliss like script on their brows—

and what I want to know is: How?  
I want to weep too,  
but my heart's a marble slab.  
I tell myself: Accept what is.

Here, Christ is dead as the thieves  
who hung with him. I have  
brought nothing, no belief.  
I tell myself it's fine

until I see a nun, face alight,  
from a convent in the Philippines—  
she's planned this trip for years.  
We are both here, but it's her dream.

I want that holy fire glowing in my cheeks,  
I want to hug myself as she does,  
to smile like that, fingering a rosary  
like the knuckles of some Beloved hand.

So this is what I bring You then:  
my want, the emptiness beneath my clothes,  
a place where songs should be. I bring You  
the space between my rafters, where nobody goes.

## XIV. DAYBREAK

Before the sun rises, I come.

I come while others sleep.

The cats in the dumpsters  
eye me yellowly and leap

into shadows, like gossips  
with news in their mouths,  
some tidbit of rancid meat.

We saw her, they'll say, wearing a veil.

The muezzin begins to wail.

This is who I've come to meet,  
my Beloved, singing to me from a tower,  
this love whose face I'll never see.

O Love, with whom I long to be,  
You do not touch my face, my hair,  
do not kiss my bruised and aching knees,  
but slip Your hand straight into my heart.

My Love, You Lech, You Libertine—Your art  
is seduction by sunrise, the tender snuffing  
of stars, the polished sapphire of desert dawn:  
I'm in love, pleading

for You to enter me, breathing  
my desire into the blue folds  
of Your cloak, begging you to touch me;  
Your song makes me bold.

Take me in some dark corner. Some cold  
cathedral, behind a pillar. Press your finger  
to my lips and shush me, let the dust motes scold  
us. Let them spin. O Beloved I was made for this,

that all my life I have resisted: a kiss  
to burn off all my skin. And now I succumb.  
O Beloved, You have caught me.  
O Lord I have come.





ADVENT  
WREATH



## 1. HOPE

We have hope, says the seller  
of olivewood figures, Allah sees all—  
unlike you Americans, who see  
a valiant kingdom, shining walls

and miss the irony, the raw  
truth: the once-oppressed have become  
oppressors, men who first beheld  
the Beloved and were undone,

ears that heard prophets speak, sons  
who left their fathers' fields to ravens,  
arms that dropped their scrolls for guns—  
we trust that Allah sees everything.

We trust He hears His children scream  
from Gaza; that even now His justice  
is unfolding like a child in a womb.  
He sips his coffee and says, I trust this.

## 2. LOVE

He sips his coffee and says, I trust this:  
I trust the olive trees to tell our story  
those ancient, knotty, faithful ones  
who've survived so many wars, enduring

because of or in spite of us, roots turning  
the stones of Old Jerusalem, buried deep,  
tasting the bones and rubble, the burnings.  
Trees, he says, remember long,

and remind us who we are with songs  
that sigh in their branches like a dirge  
or rattle their leaves like tambourines.  
They speak to us in sky-strange words

known only to madmen and shepherds.  
Each tree wants peace, recalling  
men who played flutes for birds,  
and wandered with their flocks of goats

from sheltering grove to sheltering grove.  
That's who we were when we first met them.  
The trees are our fathers and mothers, he says,  
they grieve when we forget them.

### 3. JOY

He says, they grieve when we forget them,  
gesturing to the figurines for sale: crèches,  
crosses, doves and carved angels,  
platters and cups for celebrants—

they were all once trees, which suggests  
we have more than one life,  
more than one try at relevance,  
more than go at being transformed.

I imagine the figurines as they were before:  
secret shapes inside the branches  
tucked among the swirling bands,  
burl and knots hinting hoof or hand-shapes.

Once alive, once rooted to the landscape  
now pruned and carved and rubbed with oil—  
I can't help but think that this is Man's fate,  
a single tree made plural into selves

cut off and counted, placed onto shelves.  
This one is Mary sent by occupiers  
to some place not her home. She bears a child,  
shivering, sweat-soaked in a cave without a fire

but, oh! In that moment, she lacks desire  
her brown face still as air, needing only  
the babe at her breast, the tree entire—  
though soon they will be refugees.

All this I see in these pruned trees:  
meaning inside of the dead wood.  
For God wastes not a single thing  
but makes of ruin something good.

## 4. PEACE

Allah brings from evil something good, he says,  
a feat beyond our own crude powers.

Adam's sons, sowers of landmines  
burning our forefathers' trees, erecting towers

where gunmen take aim and guards glower  
at the men and women and children below—  
brothers and sisters whose food they devour,  
whose water they drink. Oh you who thirst

who are unnoticed, unheard—you will ever be first  
into the Kingdom: within you is a well  
no empire may lay claim to, bubbling clear  
and cool beneath the cracked face of hell.

Oh Jerusalem, lift your horns, ring your bells!  
The kingdom has a hundred thousand gates  
and all who enter are permitted to dwell  
in peace among the olives and grapes.

The world belongs to the One Who Began It,  
not men with guns. The only way back is inwards.  
Oh Bethlehem of the occupied West Bank,  
we have hope, says the seller of olivewood figures.



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Thank you Great Spirit for Being There and also Not Being There.

Thank you ancestors for showing me the oppressor and oppressed within myself.

I carry you all in my heart.





E.D. WATSON is a poet, yoga teacher, and certified Practitioner of Poetic Medicine from Central Texas. She is the author of two collections, *Honey in the Vein*, and *Anorexorcism*, and her poems can be found in numerous journals and magazines. When she isn't writing, she leads poetry and yoga workshops, designed to release trapped language from the body to enhance healing and self-knowledge. She believes poetry is alive and well, and is for everyone.

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