

JOSEPH BATHANTI

Coach Wheeler Tapes My Ankles

My ankles bled from the hasty razor.
At my feet Coach Wheeler assumed office,
bowed his head, ripped off his hound's-tooth blazer,
and softly sang *Panis Angelicus*.

I gazed down on his Parris Island
special, short-sleeved white shirt, fake black necktie,
roll of adhesive in his giant hand.
He played pro football, a Marine DI.

He tore the tape with his snowy false teeth:
the first span to spat me, vertical strap
like a stirrup, shin to shaved shin, beneath
my heels. Then cross-hatching the chrismed wrap,

he braced my swaddled feet against his chest—
a footwisher anointing his catechist.

The Cold War

Fourth grade, the year I had Miss Manso,
the pretty lay teacher,
I sat next to the window
and watched dogs mate on Flavel Street.

Miss Manso lived on Apple Avenue.
She neither beat nor insulted me,
so in secret I loved her.
She could have been a movie star

like Patricia Neal
in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.
Men like Michael Rennie
rented rooms in our neighbourhood.

The psychic Jeanne Dixon predicted children
would be kidnapped by angels;
there were passages in Saint John's *Apocalypse*
describing our assumption:

*Then I saw heaven opened,
and there was a white horse!*
I prayed to be spirited off
by the firmament, far

from the furnace of nuns.
A space race was on.
Castro: the monster. In Cuba
swam a Bay of Pigs. Khrushchev

vowed to bury us. Idolators,
we worshipped Kennedy.
Those dogs on Flavel Street knew what was coming:

woozy gaits, maudlin sidelong glances.

Like drunkards,
they were the dogs of drunkards.
Their keening prelude that heralded,
then subsumed, the Air Raid siren—

stupid heads thrown back as they yowled.
We'd finally been called to answer.
The Russians were coming to collect.
This time it was real.

We rose by rote from our desks,
and placed perpendicular to our lips,
as we'd been taught, index fingers
vowing us to silence—

no matter what might happen.
We'd seen the pictures.
We knew about Radio Free Europe.
At the snap of Miss Manso's fingers,

I linked hands with my partner, Tommy Cervone,
and followed her from the room, behind
marching queues of the other seven grades,
led by black-shrouded nuns,

snowy bibs like sickles sliced across their breasts.
Down past Our Lady's alcove
where she mooned placid, blue
and beautiful—almost drugged,

flashing back
(The Annunciation had blown her mind)—
between the milk machine
and janitor's snow plow.

To the school basement bomb shelter,
the condemned haunted bowling alley.
Beneath long lunch tables we crouched,
fingers stitched to our lips,

siren and curs wailing,
the nuns unstrapping colossal
rosaries from their hips—
like *West Side Story*—

readying for the seige,
chanting *Hail Marys*. Druidic.
The elite. In their martyrdom,
they'd take down hordes.

We were to pray silently for the Communists,
our separated brethren.
That's how we would save ourselves—
by bartering with God

for a niche in the hereafter.
The explosion would kill everyone.
I looked out from under my table;
all I could see was Miss Manso's skirt.

Black, it fell just below her knees.
Her legs so white. She wore black
orthopaedic shoes.
Deformed.

I knew I'd never marry her.
The Communists had hold of her mind.
They had asked her to denounce God.
On the cellar crucifix suffered the Christ

who had foretold to the syllable
the twentieth century.
I felt so sorry for Him:
the cross-hairs of zero hour,

thief in the night.
Such brilliance.
The darkening schoolyard
whispered His name in Litany.

He looked straight at me,
and I knew it was okay.
He'd been playing possum all along.
I disengaged my hand from Tommy's.

His eyes were closed.
He held his breath, praying
like a little priest, fist against his chest,
giving himself Extreme Unction.

Perhaps the bomb had dropped.
My other hand still gagging me,
I reached out and touched
Miss Manso's leg.

JOSEPH BATHANTI is the author of ten books. His latest is *Restoring Sacred Art*, winner of the 2010 Roanoke Chowan Award, given annually by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association for best book of poems in a given year. He teaches at Appalachian State University.