

SCOTT NOEL

Jan's Garden in July, 2018
Oil on canvas, 68 x 64 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JORY POST

Sweet Jesus

At one year old, the boy had not yet learned to crawl in what was considered to be the developmentally appropriate time frame. What his grandmother was always quick to add when the boy's parents showed concern about the perceived delay was that her grandson had not yet *chosen* to crawl. "It has nothing to do with ability or delay. It has everything to do with choice." Naturally though, the parents worried, because of the nurse who told them the umbilical cord had been briefly wrapped around the boy's neck at birth.

The boy would sit in the middle of the floor, in his crib, or in his high chair and though not facially expressive, would lift his head up to the ceiling, sideways toward the rays of sunlight shafting through the slits in the windows, raise his hand and turn his fingers, and watch the shadows roll. His parents would frown, his grandmother would smile and nod.

At two, the boy was crawling some, usually to find the splash of sunlight on the mahogany floor, but had not yet walked. While the parents flipped through their shelf of child development books, reading up on the definition and symptoms of autism, what it meant to be on the spectrum, the grandmother would sit on the floor next to the boy, her knee touching his, knitting a scarf or a sweater, and tell the parents, "When he needs to be somewhere that matters, he'll walk."

When he turned four, the parents were convinced, partly by their own fears and research and partly by their doctors, that the boy might be sensitive to gluten and casein, so they radically changed the family's eating habits. The grandmother nodded in approval of this development and often brought the family homemade dishes comprised wholly of high-nutrient plant-based ingredients, like the eggplant lasagna the boy loved and the chickpea muffins made with sunflower seeds and maca powder and just a taste of vanilla.

It was during one of the grandmother's home-cooked healthy meals that something changed in the boy. Up to this point, he had never spoken, not even a "ma" or a "pa." There had been an increasing variety of sounds—squeals at his dog, grunts when he couldn't pick up a piece of food, howls when he needed some attention—but no words. After three bites of butternut curry soup, he threw his hands up and placed them on top of his head and said, "That's good soup." His parents sat with lips wide in bewilderment. The

grandmother nodded, took another spoonful herself, and said, “Why, thank you. I’ll bet you like the hint of nutmeg and cayenne.” The boy lifted the bowl to his mouth and drank what was left.

The doctors, and therefore the parents, attributed what they liked to call “the miracle” to the boy’s gluten- and casein-free diet. The grandmother rolled her eyes and kept quiet.

Although the boy was still mostly an observer, paying attention to everything he saw and heard, dancing with the shadows whenever the sun was up, when he did choose to speak, his extensive vocabulary amazed everyone. It was as if he had recorded and stored every word he had ever heard from his parents, his grandmother, announcers and actors on TV, therapists, preschool teachers, and other kids in an enormous database buried away in his brain.

The nature of his therapy also changed. Up until this point, he had been inundated with daily sessions dominated by occupational therapists, speech therapists, physical therapists. Now, because they thought he was an odd strain of genius, some sort of savant who was like a knowledge sponge, the new barrage of therapists assigned to him was comprised of psychologists. Unlike their predecessors, they were not there to help the boy, but rather to have him help them, help them to understand the nature of his brain, his gift, the miracle, some untapped geology of the brain not previously mined.

Now that the boy was no longer considered abnormal or special in a negative sense, but rather abnormal and special in a positive sense, his activities were less restricted. The parents allowed the grandmother to take him to her home out on Ocean Street Extension, past the Elks Lodge and Oakwood Cemetery, where he could sit on her front porch and look across at the green pastures on the other side. When his grandmother told him it was called Pogonip, he asked what it meant, so she opened her iPad and they looked it up together. *Pogonip*—“a dense winter fog containing frozen particles formed in deep mountain valleys of the western U.S.”

“Have you ever seen the fog in Pogonip, Grandma?” This was the first question he had ever asked anyone. She beamed. “Yes! Right over there, in that little valley below the ridge. Mostly in February. It’s usually cold, sometimes as low as thirty-two degrees.”

“What’s a degree?” She taught him everything she knew. They would make the short drive to UC Santa Cruz’s McHenry Library, stopping on the side of the road to view the Pogonip expanse and cityscape. “Who was Henry Cowell?” “What do people do at a university?” They drove past the churches on High Street. “What’s a church?” “Tell me about religion.” “What is God?”

The parents knew that the boy was surpassing them in ways uncommon for a five-year-old, and while it made them proud, it was also troublesome. What was most disturbing was the boy’s answer to their more generalized questions, as they learned how to better probe, such as, “What did Grandma Rose teach you today?”

The boy lowered his eyelids. “She taught me how to close my eyes and open my soul. She taught me how to see people in other places, places far away from here, and to speak to them without using words.” The parents looked at each other while the boy’s eyes were still closed.

“What are you teaching our son?” the parents asked the grandmother when she came for Saturday dinner.

“I’m not teaching my grandson much of anything. He, however, is teaching me plenty.”

“What about this speaking to people in other places nonsense?”

“It’s certainly not nonsense. Would you like to close your eyes and try?”

On one of their outings to McHenry, the boy stopped in front of an archive room full of colorful posters and books and record albums, words on the windows.

“What’s that say, Grandma?”

“It says ‘The Grateful Dead.’”

She explained about the band, about their cult status, a little bit about Jerry Garcia. The conversation had confused the boy, now that he understood the definition of *grateful*. The combination of *grateful* with *dead* was odd and made him stay awake at night, staring at the ceiling wondering about who would be grateful about death and why.

He saw the sliver of light between his bedroom door and the frame grow as his mother opened it to check on him. “You’re still awake.” She sat on his bed. “What are you thinking?” He told her about the Grateful Dead and Jerry Garcia and the cult and the archive room at UC Santa Cruz.

When the mother went back to her room and told the father what she had discussed with the boy, they both

stared at the ceiling and couldn’t sleep, vowed to keep a watchful eye on Grandma and their son.

A couple of weeks before Christmas, the boy told his parents that Grandma was taking him to a memorial service for a friend on Saturday.

“Do you know what a memorial service is?” asked the father.

“It’s when someone dies and people come to celebrate the person’s life.”

When they pulled into the parking lot, Grandma read him the sign that said First- and Second-Time Visitors Only. The ten parking spots were close to the building. “It’s like if you were handicapped,” Grandma said.

The boy said, “Are first- or second-time visitors handicapped?”

Grandma smiled. “Well, some would think so.”

“But if you’re a third-time visitor you aren’t handicapped anymore?”

“I don’t know about that, but you do have to walk farther.”

The huge room was full of chairs and people, three very large screens like the ones in the Nickelodeon where Grandma had taken him to see movies, a stage full of musicians playing their instruments. On the screens were pictures of a woman sitting on a rock at the beach.

Most of the three-hundred-plus seats were already full, but they found two near the back. When they sat, the boy pointed at the screen closest to them. “Is that your friend who died?”

“It’s a photo of the woman who died, yes. When she was younger. Before she got sick with cancer.”

“Do people always die when they get sick with cancer?”

Before she had time to formulate an answer, a pastor climbed up to the podium and began speaking.

“Welcome to the celebration of the life of Linda Jensen.”

Grandma had been to one other memorial at this church. She knew this service would last well over two hours and would test her in more ways than she was comfortable being tested these days. But she had chosen not to prepare the boy, instead wanting him to experience it for himself. She knew about the marketing techniques using death to recruit, to increase their flock, to always be on a mission to enlighten others. She was not so unlike them in that respect, believing that enlightenment was a good thing, knowing that the process of enlightening her

grandson and likewise being enlightened by him was how they both grew, how the world’s consciousness grew. The difference was in one’s definition of *enlightenment*.

The pastor was the first of many speakers. Before he turned the podium over to the second speaker, he had invoked Jesus fifteen times, God ten times, Linda’s name once. This would not be a learning experience for her, although the first time had been. She had paid close attention to every word spoken and had been fascinated by what they believed, how they lived their lives, how every facet was God driven. This time she knew better but wanted her grandson to know more, more about the life-and-death thing he was already questioning, more about the God-and-Jesus thing. More about everything that made people who they are, made the world what it is, the mix of this and that. She would get through this day, this ceremony with him, deal with the inevitable questions he’d put forth, because soon enough, given the current state of the news and activities throughout the world, she’d have to field his queries about the difference between Christians and Muslims and Buddhists and everything else.

When the next speaker, a close friend of Linda’s, took the podium, the boy’s eyes closed. He didn’t snore, didn’t move. Grandma smiled, wished she could do the same. She didn’t even know Linda Jensen. She’d read about the memorial in the *Sentinel*’s online obituaries and decided this would be the best opportunity for their Saturday field trip.

But she didn’t close her eyes. She paid attention to this woman named Linda who had left this earth a couple of weeks earlier. She sounded like a wonderful person, the word most often used about her was that she was an *encourager*. How nice, the grandmother thought, to be remembered like that, though she knew it wouldn’t happen with her. It was true, she could be frumpy and incorrigible to others who refused to think and open their minds, and ironically would close her own. But with her grandson, being an encourager was a good description.

Linda’s husband spoke of how he would wake up in the middle of the night and find her missing from the bed. He’d search the house and eventually see her kneeling in front of a couch, a fireplace, a picture on a wall, praying. In the morning, she’d tell him that God came to her in the night with a calling, her “assignments from above,” and

they were regular, persistent, insistent. At first, he had been skeptical, until in subsequent days they would hear from the people who had been the focus of Linda's prayers that in fact they had felt Linda's presence during the times she had been praying for them. Grandma nodded.

More friends spoke, a brother-in-law, the sons, colleagues, more pastors. Hundreds of small bundles of Kleenex had been tossed underneath chairs throughout the hall, and hundreds of people bent over and picked them up, slid open the cellophane wrappers, wiped tears, blew noses.

The final speaker, the main pastor of the church, stepped to the podium and spent forty-five minutes speaking very little of Linda. He talked mostly about Jesus and His resurrection and how those who had taken Jesus into their hearts would resurrect with Him, would be joined together with Jesus and Linda and all their other loved ones, if they would only take Him into *their* hearts. And the pastor invited everyone in the audience who had not yet done so to do so now, to come up at the end of the memorial and join him.

Grandma smiled. *And we'll give you a two-visit pass for prime parking spots.*

When the pastor said, "Amen, please join us now for refreshments," and stepped away from the podium, the boy opened his eyes, not tired. Grandma took him by the hand and they walked to the lobby. Dozens of folks were uncovering dessert trays and fruit plates, pouring cups of coffee and sodas, encouraging folks to feed themselves, to rejoice. The boy let go of Grandma's hand and walked down the row of tables, looking at the foods his parents would never let him eat: chocolate chip cookies, pumpkin pie, lemon bars. At the far end, he saw a huge cake, covered in frosting. A woman in a red-checkered dress was putting slices on paper plates. He ran up to the table and watched her cut. Grandma stayed back.

"What is this?" asked the boy.

The woman reached with her free hand to rub his hair. She leaned down to bring her face closer to his. "This, my young man, is what I call Sweet Jesus. If you take one bite, you'll be hooked for life, know what God has in store for you."

"What's in it?"

"Well, it's actually a butterscotch roll-up cake. Do you know about butterscotch?"

The boy shook his head.

"Second best thing God put on this earth. Unsalted butter, dark brown sugar, heavy cream. Some vanilla, and a dash of salt, and just a touch of Labrot & Graham whiskey, but not enough to do anybody any harm."

Later at home, when being grilled by his parents about the memorial, he told them he had tasted Sweet Jesus. They were more upset about the ingredients of the butterscotch cake than they would have been if he had taken to religion.

The grandmother had told the parents the boy slept through the service. When the parents asked the boy, he said, "No. I was wide awake the whole time. I closed my eyes to get closer to Linda's soul. Those people are crazy, though. They think it's only about God and Jesus. It's way more."

Jory Post likes to play games, solve puzzles, and write in code. He plays pinochle with his family on Sunday nights, three-cushion billiards whenever he can find a table and a partner who loves the geometry and physics of cue balls on felt, Words with Friends and Scrabble online with his mom and friends, and poker, having taken first place in a World Series of Poker tournament at Harveys Lake Tahoe in 2004. Whether writing plays, short stories, poetry, unfinished novels, or grant proposals, Post relishes unraveling the mystery of word combinations that propel stories forward to their inevitable and surprising end points. He is the cofounder and managing editor of *phren-Z* online literary magazine and Santa Cruz Writes. His work has been published in *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Porter Gulch Review*, *Epiphany*, and *Red Wheelbarrow*. As JoKa Press, he and his wife, Karen Wallace, create handmade books, assemblages, and other art projects that combine words with found and fabricated objects.

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The Garden in June, 2018

Oil on canvas, 40 x 86 in



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