

The Sword Review

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Fantasy, Science Fiction & More

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Featuring:
Winter Branches by Jane Lebak
Runner Up, 2006 Fiction Contest

Winter Branches

Jane Lebak

Please forgive me if I've in any way displeased you, Father, either by sin or by disappointing—

Oh.

That's a relief. I figured for certain I had.

Because of everything else I've managed to get wrong lately. When Gabriel summoned me before the Throne, I figured it was the end, that I was Job 4:18 personified and you'd finally had enough.

Well, you should have. It's almost two years, but I'm stuck.

No, I don't want another assignment right now. That's why I haven't presented myself before you. I'm not ready, and I'm not certain I ever will be.

I never considered the flip side of there being more joy in Heaven over the conversion of one sinner than over the lives of ninety-nine saints. What about the guardian of the one sinner who doesn't repent? Since the value of each soul is the same, is that angel destined for sadness in equal measure?

I can't shake it off. Look at me—why am I using words to talk to you, who read hearts? I spent eighty years with him, thinking like him, predicting his behavior, listening to him, and over time I adopted his responses, his habits. I see something and think, *I have to show that to William*, only now I can't.

I don't even look the same. When Gabriel summoned me, he said, "Reflection?" and when I turned, he took a step backward. Then he hugged me and wrapped his grey wings around me, and only afterward did he tell me why he'd come. While waiting, I made a duplicate of myself, and I'd want to hug me too. I'm not vibrant any longer. My hair is dusky and limp

instead of curly black, and my eyes have gone from plum-colored to robin's egg. I'm gaunt. Yes, angelic bodies are fluid, but I resemble William right before he died.

Why do you want to hear about it again? You were there. You're the only one who loved him more than I did. You know all the graces you gave, all the help I offered, all the times he resisted you, and all the reasons you eventually condemned him to Hell.

I'm not angry at you. You sent the Word and gave everything for them so he'd have all those chances he missed.

I'm not angry at me either. I've gone over it a thousand times—a thousand times a thousand—and everything I did, everything I wanted, every decision I made was the best I could. Each day for the past two years I've combed his entire life, only I can't nail down anything I could have done that would have changed the results. I keep telling myself you wouldn't condemn him because of me.

All right, so from the beginning.

Actually, I'll back up some. About three centuries ago, my friend Beacon-of-God lost the soul she was guarding, and when I sought her out weeks later, she was a shell of an angel. Her oriole wings had gone drab, and instead of her usual rose scent, she carried an air like cut grass. Beacon couldn't raise her eyes, but once I did glimpse them. They weren't orange any longer, more like watered-down apple juice. I reassured her you would do only what justice demanded, that she'd seen all the chances her charge had, and you'd wipe away her every tear. Easy enough.

Then eighty years ago, you assigned me to William. He was so sweet, so tiny. He had the cutest curls, calm chocolate eyes, and he raised his fists like a fencer when he slept. And I promised you—well, you know.

We all start unprepared, but during the early years when I only needed to protect his body, I studied the spiritual pitfalls set for the adults around him. I was shocked by the constant vigilance, by the strength of our enemies. Satan's got his Seraphim and Cherubim out there in the field, and I'm only an Angel. You give us the grace to compete, but it's relentless.

What a joy to have William! To prompt him in the split-second of a decision, to sit at night stroking his soul and telling him about you. As years passed, the light of your grace shone through him, and his body developed poise while his mind grasped concepts of incredible complexity. Someday I'd accompany him into your eternal kingdom. It was going to be wonderful.

Except it's not going to be wonderful. Eternal fire, not eternal glory. I don't want to think about it, but I can't stop. How many times did I save him from scraped knees or a banged elbow, and now it's that instead?

No, I understand it's not my fault. It was his choice. But I've wondered if maybe I shouldn't have let him put his hand in the stove, if I shouldn't have let him die of that fever at age three. You charged me to protect him, but if I'd fudged the rules, he'd have been saved, even if I was lost.

I know. It doesn't even appeal. I love you and want to be with you, Father. Nowhere else. But for a heartbeat, just after the judgment, your words still ringing in me like the last vibrations of a bell, even while Raguel was telling me how sorry he was and a dozen others were offering comfort I couldn't grasp, it occurred to me that I could curse you and go be with him—only I wouldn't ever do that—I wouldn't leave because that would put you in my position—and I don't—I couldn't do that—not to you—

I'm sorry. I need a minute.

Fifty times a day I flash back to the judgment hall, the echoing stone, the Archangel witnesses lined up beneath the rose window, the Word, the

vaulted ceilings, the 'devil's advocate'—only doing his job but unable to look me in the eyes, William's soul before you, the gold-tinged light, my hands clenching his shoulders, the futile urge to enclose him in my wings and hide him, my voice breaking when I asked for mercy and my heart breaking when William didn't, and the moment, the instant, when you said—when you pronounced—

I'm only glad the early rumors weren't true, that you'd make the guardian angel drop the soul into Hell. I couldn't have done it. And no, I don't want to know who it was. But someone did it, someone I know.

I'm sorry. I should be better than this.

Of course you've seen tears before. But you called me here to set me straight, not to have me cry again.

It's stupid. A hundred years ago I didn't have him either, and I was joyful then.

But that's why I haven't presented myself to you yet. I know if I looked into your face, you would wipe away every tear. But the only thing I have left of William is the pain, and if you take that away too, then he's really gone.

If you give the order, I'll do it.

All right. Thank you.

No, there's no way I could possibly do that. I'm sorry, but it's just—I mean, I would, but—

Okay. I'll come back on the next Sabbath, and I'll do that instead.

I love you too, Father. Please be patient.



Greetings, blessed Father. I've tried to do as you suggested and get out among the other angels.

No one knows what to say. The ones who haven't guarded are every bit as understanding as I was with Beacon. I don't blame them, but it's frustrating. The guardians are sad for me, but most have their charges safely in Heaven, and it hurts to see. William should be at my side too. The ones who are currently guarding—I couldn't bear to talk to them at all. But often I'd find I'd braced myself only to have them avoid me, as if damnation is contagious.

I was only out there for a day when I hid again. It's too raw.

I owed Beacon an apology for how I treated her, but she just hugged me. She's herself again, orange-eyed and orange-haired, rock-steady. She wanted to talk, so she escorted me to what has to be Earth's ugliest spot.

No, really, even that isn't uglier than I-95 in Stamford, with all those funnels belching out acrid clouds, the power lines marching into the distance, and shoebox buildings with their unrelenting grey walls.

Well, I'll just have to disagree with you.

Sitting on a highway sign, we talked for two days. That is, I talked. She asked questions, and that got me started, and I'm afraid I cried on her too, but she didn't shove me aside. She gave suggestions, but mostly what she did was listen. She asked what I needed. I couldn't tell her. I don't even know.

She approves of you having me check in with you every week until I feel I can report for duty, so hey, apparently you're still God and you still know what you're doing. I thought you'd be glad to hear that.

You see? Now I sound like William again.

Yesterday Beacon asked me to accompany her on an assignment, but I refused. She wasn't mad. It was nice that she thought of me.

No, I'm still not ready to do that.

Okay, that I think I can handle. Do you want me back again next Sabbath?

I love you, Father. I'm sorry this is taking so long.

Yeah, eternity is a long time, but it feels as if everyone has moved forward without me.



All honor and glory to you, my Father. Thank you for getting me through another week.

I put off seeking out Glimmer and Anne until yesterday. Even William would have been impressed with the number of excuses I made not to go, and William was the king of procrastination. Or at least he would have been if he'd ever gotten around to it.

Ha-ha, so funny. I wouldn't have made that joke eighty years ago.

I hadn't seen Anne since her judgment, nor Glimmer since William's. Anne looks the way she did as William's bride, young and whole, her eyes as quick as her smile, her clothes star-bright. I'd expected her to be as shattered as I am, but although sad, she had peace.

I should have predicted it. *Hi, I'm Reflection, William's guardian. Yes, terribly sorry for your loss too.* Long silence. Glimmer staring at me. *Um, so are you enjoying Heaven?* More silence. Me leaving.

Glimmer and I matched well in the household, and I trusted him with William's life, even as he trusted me with Anne's. There were no secrets between us, but rather millions of shared prayers and shared visions and shared jokes—but how stony he acted yesterday. No shared prayers. No laughter.

One reason it's so hard to get my feet back under me is that I didn't expect William to fail. Anne made it. William wasn't that much worse a

sinner, but lukewarm. His soul's tepidity not only did him in but lulled me into believing he had a chance.

His trajectory could have changed if he'd cared more about you, about anything, but over time the lack of 'awe and trembling' led to a lack of concern for the things of Heaven, and the lack of concern bred a lack of change, which led to a pampering of himself and a concentration on the mundane rather than the sacred

Maybe James was right when he stated that faith without works is dead. There can't be fruit if you don't fertilize the flowers.

I didn't calculate the shades of grey, was this shade darker than yesterday's, and always I could hold it up against black and say, "This is darker." Without ever slacking off, I never fully gauged the danger of his complacency: sitting on the couch instead of settling on his knees, reaching for the remote rather than the Bible. Five minutes in bed rather than five minutes in prayer. Slowly the salt lost its flavor. But which human doesn't do those things? He wasn't the worst of sinners.

He wasn't. But in the end, he wasn't a saint, either.

I— Please don't lose patience with me this time. I'll keep going in a minute.

When I knew he was dying, when he realized it too, during his last hour I reached into his heart to stir up some sparks of love only to find the ashes cold. I breathed into him. I ignited around his soul to kindle that childhood passion, but instead only ennui. I couldn't stir up sadness over those he'd leave behind. It was just William, William, William. Not, "Soon I'll be with Anne." Certainly no desire to be with his Father or the Word. Nothing whatsoever about me. Just, this. This minute. This next breath. This room,

this pillow, what will be my lunch, why is the air conditioner so noisy, and where is the nurse with my medication?

That morning on the heat-withered grass of the hospice lawn lay a heap of grey feathers, teased apart one at a time by the wind. Something had eaten a bird, leaving behind no blood, no bones. Now it seems like an omen.

Demons came, as always at a death. Sitting on the bed rail and filling the room with the scent of burning rubber, they mocked my prayers, commenting to one another that their presence was redundant, but they'd watch the show anyhow. I scattered them, but they returned after a few minutes. It wasn't William calling them back. It's just that he had nothing left to send them away.

And oh, God, now he's with them.

When will I stop feeling this way? When will I stop seeing the judgment hall every time I close my eyes, the rose window, the witnesses? I tried walking away from it. I tried being with others or diverting my attention. I tried praying. I don't want to let go, but I also don't want to hang on.

You made the pair of us to fit inside one another like a bell and a clapper. Am I going to remain silent for all eternity?

This was my chance to bear fruit for you. Something meaningful I could do, something no other could. No one could guard William but me, just as I couldn't have guarded anyone else. What a thrill to be a fruit-bearing plant! But forevermore there's no fruit, no seeds, no vineyard, no orchard. No shoots for a new plant. Not even compost from the rotten fruit.

I know. I'll get myself together in a minute. But I keep thinking of a withered fig tree thrown into the fire. And me.

But you said— Branches that don't bear fruit—

No, I don't see how I can anymore. This was my one chance.

Of course I want another chance. But you don't give two people to the same angel. What's left if that's gone?

I hate waiting and seeing. But speaking of waiting, what do you want me to do before next week?

I still can't do that. Is there anything else?

Well, then I'll show up empty-handed. As usual.

I know you love me, Father. I wish I loved you better, the way I used to.

Don't say that. Please. I couldn't bear that.



Thank you for seeing me early, Father. It's all falling apart.

I can't even talk without crying. This week has been horrible. I can't stop visualizing the judgment hall. And three of my friends got assigned as guardians.

Why are you doing this to me? Why couldn't you at least delay them for a year—would the world have changed so much in a year that those babies couldn't be born then?

The first one spontaneously bursts into song while the other two exchange delighted grins. It's just like when one of my friends was assigned within a month of me.

I can't bear to look him up now to find out how it turned out, if his charge is still alive or if he's here or if he's there. We were going to introduce our charges afterward, only now, Father, I hope they never meet.

What am I going to do? You encouraged me to get out among the other angels again, but you turned around and assigned my friends and all

but held up a mirror in front of my face. Why not just laugh at me and tell me they're blessed and I'm not?

I can't keep doing this. I want to run. I think about William until I want to forget, but then I consider what it is I'd be forgetting, and then I cry because I don't want to lose that either, and I'm just a mess. I couldn't even call Beacon for help the way she told me to. I just want it all to go away.

Aren't I supposed to be getting better? So why do things pick up for a day or two, and then I'm in the middle of singing or praying and I catch myself in a smile, and the whole façade collapses? Why do I see an Archangel and think, *Witness?* Three times this week I've spun around and thought, *Where's William?*

I spotted a demon while shadowing Beacon on Earth, and without thinking I spread my wings to shield William. The demon laughed, and I fled to Heaven. Later Beacon found me. She says those are the worst moments, when first you react and then you remember. She may be right.

Beacon recovered. She not only survived but was transformed. There's a deeper timbre to her soul now, a nurturing patience. Even her littlest gestures make others more comfortable, as she searches out ways to let them know she cares. Her heart is richer now, and she gives from its depths.

She's not so substantially different from me that I can't survive. It's the only tangible I have.

Oh, right, tangibles. Beacon wanted me to show you: it's just his keychain, a five-dollar Red Sox medallion, but it was always with him. Even when most of the paint wore off, he didn't want to replace it—said the paint would just wear off the new one too. I can't tell you how many times I helped him look for this, so after they cleaned out his house, I rescued it one

last time from the sandwich wrappers and half-eaten fruit in the trash. I keep it in my safe spot along with a few photographs and his favorite mug.

They buried him wearing his glasses. I managed to take them, but I nearly couldn't when I saw how nature had brutalized the body I'd struggled for years to protect.

When Beacon asked, I brought them all out of their safe spot, and we held them one at a time. How can an entire life be reduced to twenty dollars in trinkets? The key chain should have been you giving him the keys to the kingdom. And the glasses— He had eyes but couldn't see. And here I go again.

When is it going to get easier? You told me it would get better, but I don't see any progress.

I'm glad you do. It feels like I jumped a mile backward in the last thirty hours.

Sure, I'll still come at the regular time. I'm not certain what might change in two days, but you know I love to see you.

Well, maybe I can finally do that. I'll try.

I love you so much, Father. Thank you for seeing me early. I know it's no big deal to you, but it's big to me.



Father, an incredible thing happened!

Beacon and I were playing music when one of her friends joined us. River is guardian to a man like William. He'd gotten a sitter and taken the night off to get his head together. I remember what that used to be like— you'd have killed anyone who got in your way getting out the door, but you reach Heaven and all you can think about is heading back.

His frustration burst out when he spoke about the guy. He puts off his income tax every year and won't even file the extension until after it's due. He's racked up thousands in fines and never apologizes for how this harms his family. Before I knew it, I was telling him about William's hot-water heater, how he'd never repair the thing because "it wasn't worth it" but wouldn't replace it either because the appliance salesmen were "a bunch of thieves." So instead either he used up all the hot water and left his wife with a tepid shower, or else he sulked after his own tepid shower. For years. Remember I begged to put my sword through the hot-water heater because it was harming his soul, only you responded it wasn't the heater?

River started asking for advice, although looking at how William turned out I've no idea why anyone would take it. But he said some of my techniques had merit.

The best thing was, though, the whole time we talked, even though I'd shared a couple of anecdotes, I didn't fall apart.

I'm stunned. I didn't think that would ever happen. Not only that, but also that someone could talk about his charge and not leave me upset. Or that I'd pray for a guardian-charge pair only dwelling on what they needed and not what I'd lost.

Two days ago I was a feather's width from begging you to unCreate me, and today it looks like I made progress. I actually had a good day. I'd forgotten what those were like.

No, I didn't get to your assignment. I out-Williamed William and just put it off and off... But I'm thinking after today I can finally do it for real.



All praise, honor and glory to you, Father.

It's been okay, thanks. The beginning of the week was disappointing because I thought, having had one good day, they'd be good from then on, but there were two lousy days again. Beacon told me that's normal, that sometime soon there will be more good than bad, and eventually the bad days will be rare.

I spoke to River again, and I even went to visit. That was tough because his charge does resemble William in the sarcasm and the mannerisms, even the nasal pitch of his voice. River wanted me to critique him in action, but I think from now on I'll visit only when the man is asleep.

Two days ago, I had to escape my three very happy, very naïve newly-assigned friends, so I visited William's grave. When I arrived, I felt it immediately: an angel shedding grief. Cocooned within wings that resembled flaccid crocus petals, it was Kindness. I couldn't recognize her at first because her hair had gone platinum, chopped, and her wings had only the palest blush instead of a cardinal red.

She tried to push me off, but instead I hugged her until she cried all over me. She had the same reason I did. It's very recent for her, only a couple of days. I don't think I was even coherent at that point.

We talked. You can tell which angels have been guardians because we speak and don't just emote. It's a dividing line in the sand. But I digress.

We talked until she was talked-out, and sometimes she'd ask about William, but mostly I'd hear all about the woman she'd been guarding. We prayed together. She said it helped that I looked normal, and you know, I do. She said she felt like a freak for not presenting herself before you yet, so she asked why I still hadn't, and she was relieved when I said it takes time to be ready to give up.

She and I are traveling the same road, the same one Beacon did. So the next day I sought her out again, and she cried when I came for her because it meant someone cared. Before, she felt forgotten.

I shared about being fruitless, and she gasped because she'd been thinking the same thing.

Yes, I still feel fruitless.

Of course not! You couldn't call Beacon fruitless by any means. If I get back on my feet, it's going to be because of her.

Oh. I'll have to think about that.

Well, no, I didn't actually get around to the assignment. Maybe it's the last vestiges of William in me, but— Can I return with it tomorrow? Maybe if it's not a week-long deadline I'll buckle down and get it done.

Thank you. I love you, Father. I'm trying.



Here I am again, Father, and I did it this time.

But first, I was thinking about Beacon and fruitfulness. If she's fruitful despite losing her charge, then success or failure isn't the grand determiner.

Since you mentioned it, maybe I did minister to Kindness a bit, but anyone would have done that. It was only luck that she chose the cemetery at the same time I— Oh, right. *Luck*.

If that's the case, I "ministered" to River as well. I'm not sure it helped, but I tried.

But these things are *despite* William's damnation. Couldn't I have done both with William in Heaven? You draw good out of all situations, but that doesn't make his loss good. If only one human had ever been condemned, someone still would be able to minister to that man's guardian.

Is that what you meant when you said I'd never love you the same way—not meaning less, but that because I'm different, the way I love you will be different too? Possibly better?

The answers to my questions will keep being refined for all eternity, won't they? Or we'll at least revisit them periodically.

Anyhow, I completed your assignment.

Aloud? Well, here goes:

Dear William:

You don't know me other than when I carried your soul to the judgment hall. I'm Reflection-of-God, assigned by our Creator to guard you during your lifetime and escort you to Heaven after death, but in the end you chose your own path.

I loved you like a son, with the intensity of a spotlight. But now...

I'm sorry, Father. I guess it's always going to sneak up on me to some extent.

But now I miss you, William, and I probably always will. They're baffling choices you made, knowing the things you did. But I have to release you, to let you endure the consequences of your decisions and not let yours dictate mine forever.

I'll remember you, William, and I'll never "get over" you, but I can carry forward. I can carry the memories, the ways you've changed me, the things I learned because of you. Those

changes can transform me into a better friend to others and help me form insights into my place in creation. I can transcend the pain of your absence to grow closer to my Father. So by changing me, a part of you entered Heaven too.

"Blessings" or "Peace" wouldn't be appropriate to close this letter, so instead I'll just say goodbye. I love you.

Reflection

I figured I wouldn't get through that without crying, but now it's done. I also decided I don't want you to deliver it to him. If he could change now, I'd deliver it myself, but what good would it do?

And finally... This is tough, but the assignment's ended, and it's time to present myself before you. If you agree I'm ready. Okay, here goes.

Father, I'm returning to report completion of my assignment guarding the human soul of William Jay Sanger. Thank you for the chance to have offered you whatever service I could.

I'm glad you think so, but at the end of the day, I'm only your servant, Father, doing no more than was required.

Thank you for everything, Father—for getting me through the end of the assignment and preparing me for the next, whatever it may be. You know I love you. And no, I didn't expect that when I looked into your eyes, I'd see you too had cried for William.



Copyright 2007, *Jane Lebak*

Jane Lebak has been writing since age 3, although she's improved a bit since 1975. Her first novel *The Guardian* was published in 1994 under Jane Hamilton. She's had short fiction published in *Catfantastic IV*, *Liguorian*, and *Dragons, Knights, & Angels* (among others), and some of her nonfiction has appeared in *Chicken Soup For The Cat Lover's Soul*, *Mothering Magazine*, and *Celebrate Life*.



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Original Art - 12" x 9" colored pencil illustration on Strathmore Artagain fiber-enhanced paper.

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Specializing in colored pencil works on fiber-enhanced paper, more of the work of Michelle J.A. McIntyre can be found on her Webpage, < www.fantasyrealmcreations.com >. She creates a variety of fantasy art subject matter including dragons, unicorns, gryphons, fairies, and centaurs.



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