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December at Zion

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Newberry: December at Zion

DECEMBER AT ZION

BY

JACOB NEWBERRY

This morning I am awake before the strays have begun to wail. They cry like panhandlers every morning in the moments after sunrise. They will forget me when I leave.

I am in Gethsemane by dawn. I stand near the front of the church for a Tuesday mass, but I am turned toward the back, looking at the rose-colored window of the Church of All Nations. The scene is Christ's betrayal. I am alone in this service with three priests.

A woman arrives, places her heavy bag on a pew in the back. She seems too old to kneel, yet she hurries to the front to receive her blessing. She cries out almost imperceptibly, *Son of God!* And it is as though the doors to all the temples of Judea have been opened. The color of rose fills the space beside the altar where she kneels.

I stand in the entryway to the church before I leave. I look west, where there are children walking in

the shadow of the Mount of Olives. They follow a path that takes them out across the Kidron Valley, a path toward the apartment complexes that spring up from the land outside the city walls like tamarisks in June.

The Lion's Gate stands open from across the valley. And in the north, there is Zion reaching out as from the arched back of the sky.

At Zion I find only parking lots. I want to dig my hands into the earth, to hold them in the ground like many seeds. If I leave them in the soil at Zion, they will spread throughout the earth and cross the sea. But here the land is painted lines, a hardened ocean of sand and shells.

There was a time when the prophet stood outside the city gates, when he called to the people of Jerusalem: *Bring forth the bones of the kings of Judah.* When I find a corner of the mountain that is unpaved and reach my hands into

the dirt. I remember his words. I
say quietly to Zion: *These are your
bones.*

I gather the land in a plastic
bag; my hands are stained for hours.
I go back toward the city and pass
through the Messiah Gate, where a
boy offers camel rides for ten shek-
els. He is enormous, this creature.
I think he must be older than the
child who pulls his reins, and yet he
returns calmly to his place beneath
the outstretched fronds of the Judah
palm when he is asked. I turn to see
Zion again as I pass through the
Messiah Gate: surely my hands have
crossed the sea.