



Charles of the Desert

A L I F E I N V E R S E

William Woolfitt



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FOR MY PARENTS
Jim and Janie Woolfitt

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Preface

I was on a Greyhound bus somewhere between Fairmont, West Virginia, and Bandera, Texas, when I first learned about Charles de Foucauld. It was the summer of 1997, I had just taken a job as a camp counselor, and I had borrowed a book at random from my church library—something to read during the two-day bus ride. The book was *The Signature of Jesus: The Call to a Life Marked by Holy Passion and Relentless Faith*, by Brennan Manning; I think that as I read it, I must have heard a still small voice, a gust of wind, a rusty gate creaking open. There was much about my new job that normally would have caused fear and worry and dread to well up in me; the camp director had told me little that would prepare me, other than that I would live in a canvas teepee without electricity, and that I needed old sneakers to wear in the Medina River. But Manning's book powerfully reassured me. I read about Abraham's journey by faith from Haran to Canaan, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's embrace of the cross and martyrdom, and Charles de Foucauld's prayer of abandonment, and I forgot to be afraid. If my life had been a barred door, a nailed crate, a bricked-over cave, then that was the summer I began to wish I could be trusting and compassionate and servant-hearted. That was the summer the light started to get in.

I also started writing poems in 1997; my first poems tended to be autobiographical, sometimes angst-ridden and confessional, possibly navel-gazing and self-indulgent. Nine years later, I started to work on the project that would become *Charles of the Desert*. I was inspired by other poets who had taken biographical turns; I was reading Madeline DeFrees's *Imaginary Ancestors*, Andrew Hudgins's *After the Lost War*, Denise Levertov's poems about Julian of Norwich and Brother Lawrence and other historical figures, and Marilyn Nelson's *Carver: a Life*. I also

chose poetry because it seemed the best vehicle to convey the expressions of prayer and penance and praise that characterize Charles de Foucauld's letters and journal entries, and because Charles collected and translated many Tuareg poems.

Once, I would have said that I was stepping away from the personal-autobiographical mode when my poems turned to the life of Charles de Foucauld; today, I am not so certain. I know that *Charles of the Desert* is a creative work that fictionalizes some details from the life of Charles de Foucauld; I also know that I may have made a version of Charles in my own image, so much so that I have tipped the scales toward autobiography all over again. Nevertheless, I hope that in some small way *Charles of the Desert* can carry on the work of Manning's *The Signature of Jesus* and de Foucauld's writings – the work of stirring the reader, calling to the heart, shaking loose and prying open, letting in the wind and the light.



In writing *Charles of the Desert*, I have relied on a number of books for facts, insights, and the occasional phrases I have borrowed or adapted. These include *Charles de Foucauld* by Jean-Jacques Antier; *Charles de Foucauld: Hermit and Explorer* by René Bazin; *Soldier of the Spirit: the Life of Charles de Foucauld* by Michel Carrouges; *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path Between Two Faiths* by Paul-Gordon Chandler; *Charles de Foucauld: Writings*, edited by Robert Ellsberg; *Desert Calling: The Story of Charles de Foucauld* by Anne Fremantle; *Charles de Foucauld* by Pierre Lyautey; and *Witness in the Desert: The Life of Charles de Foucauld* by Jean-François Six.

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Sarah Blake, Kevin Brown, Katie Carlson, Lisa Coffman, Todd Davis, Brent House, Julia Spicher Kasdorf, Rachel Marie Patterson, Joshua Robbins, Chad Schrock, and Anya Silver. Thanks to Doris Kelley, Emmylou McDaniel, and Ethan Woolfitt. And my thanks to Sara for sharing with me life and “the dizzying multiplication of all language can name or fail to name.”

I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.

—*Charles de Foucauld*

1 8 5 8 - 1 9 1 6

Charles ^{of} the Desert

A L I F E I N V E R S E



My Father as Weather Formation

◦ 1 8 6 3 ◦

Wissembourg, France

Sometimes when a man moves his mouth, breath comes out, breath that freezes in the prickly air, only breath, no sounds. Like my father driving us to the woods: me, baby sister, and mother, squeezed beside him, shivering on the seat. Sometimes I look

and look at his whip-like body, his bulging eyes that say to me he's half-lizard, his transformation incomplete. I tell my sister, *his mouth makes no words, only smoke*. My mother whispers, *chestnut, fir, mirabelle* while my father veers from tree to tree.

He presses his hand to the bark, rips a leaf, scribbles, picks a thread from his tweed coat (its sleeve scours my cheek, becomes burlap in memory), bites into a spotted plum, exposing the stone that glistens like the pig hearts I saw, on tiptoe, at the butchery.

Then his whims enslave him. He stuffs his valise with jars and papers, flees to the city. Mother blames his fever, says he'll die. I dream he eats the char-woman's lye to poison himself clean, soft jellyfish man answering his gloom. Man of fidgets

and glances, soon to appear in the clouds as beasts for me to name, and fall on his woods like snow.

My Mother as Harp Seal, as Sacristan

◦ 1 8 6 3 ◦

Wissembourg, France

In memory, she's still floating in the salted bath, warmth gone from the gritty water I ripple with my hand, her hair loose, adrift over her body. White and quivering. Ask her why she's sad again, she slides, goes under, blows bubbles. With only her mouth and nose out of the water, she says, *your brother, dead baby, you remind me, you have his name*. This I know for true: like a clump of snow from a shaken branch, he fell from her belly. In memory, spots of wet

on the floor. We had knelt that morning to give daisies and asters, to kiss the feet of the pale, poor eggshell man who hung on the church wall, his weight webbing cracks through the plaster. Ask her, *may we bring a blanket for him?* On my bureau, I still have a thumb of blistered wax, a string of dead beetles. On my bureau, she's arranging the candle and rosary. One hundred times I will myself to remember the blanket I promised; one hundred times, I forget.

The Children's Book of the Nativity

◦ 1 8 6 5 ◦

Nancy, France

Father coughs into his sleeve, lives on pastries
and rain. Mother prays to the brass-eared saint,

miscarries, loses her joy, and then her life.
We are not safe, sister. We freeze while grandfather

inspects us, are there crumbs on our mouths,
jam on my trousers, dog hairs on your gown.

Steal for me, sister. He won't see. Not the cardboard
magi or ass, not the chestnut seller or fishwife.

You snatch the gilded china baby, then trip
over grandfather's cane. The babe shatters;

grandfather sends me to the yard. I shiver,
wait for his lashes to mark me, while he quakes

like a man waiting for grief to pass.

The House of Bones

◦ 1873 ◦

Nancy, France

Grandfather filled in as my father.
We lived in a repository of Roman coins,
pinned beetles, leather-bound books
that crumbled if touched. His brood
of friends—officers, scholars, priests—
clomped from room to room, applauded

his cases of animal skulls. Under a festoon
of cobwebs, I flaunted for them my Latin.
Carp-eyes ogled. Yellow teeth flashed.
I also despised the riverbed, the shale bluffs
he loved, where he took me to dig
fossils from a moraine. Home again,

cleaning up, the spade's handle
slivered into my hand. I squealed and thrashed;
he begged me to hold still, joined needle
to lit match, eased the splinter
from my smarting flesh.
His face paled, as it did the rare times

he spoke of mother. I tried a little test:
sob, sniffle, embellish. He gave me
bed rest, mulled wine, supper on a tray.
For years after that, I could get crayons,
good meat, candy, anything I wished.
Then grandfather turned on me, decided

I must attend the Polytechnic School
and join the army, so that I could kill
the Prussians who drove us from Strasbourg.
He said that I had mother's face,
that I should grow a moustache
to disguise my womanly mouth.

Red Coals

◦ 1874 ◦

Paris, France

Grandfather hands me over to Saint Geneviève School,
the Jesuits. I fail my classes, write letters begging him
to let me come home, thirty pages or more.

The fathers freeze us all day, then gorge the stoves
with coal at bedtime, to stew us while we dream.

All the boys sweat beneath scratchy coverlets,
snug as dough in loaf pans, coverlets piled
like stones on the chest of Saint Victor.
Red-faced, I toss while I sleep, taste salt
when I lick the back of my hand.

We may not open windows, all the better to burn
the sin-inventing devils out of us. The fathers insist
they will straighten me. They apply fire, hammer,
and tongs until I take a new shape,
until I am molten, malleable, aglow.

Summer in Giverny

◦ 1874 ◦

In my idle hands, I tossed the brigantine my cousin had folded in her exact way. I was staying at my uncle's chateau that sticky summer. I was sixteen; she was almost twenty. I had watched her slender fingers as she marked, creased, and flattened the boat she'd promised to shape, and as she perfumed her ears, wrists, and neck. When I asked her to resume the Italian lessons she'd taught me the summer before, she gave me a small painting: the Sacred Heart encircled with thorns.



For my confirmation, she had given me Bossuet's *Elevation of the Soul*. Flint struck steel. My faith rose like a tongue of flame, but I had nothing to feed it. My life was all green wood.



I stole Cousin Marthe's hair ribbons. I loaded her boat with ants, set it afloat on my uncle's pond, then angled a magnifying glass, filled the boat's paper folds with wisps of fire. Why did I feel the heat, as if I was catching the sun, weak as paper when it burns? After the boat sank, I shucked off my clothes, and dove into the pond. I stayed under. I watched the alchemy of displaced water—water that clouded as my toes wiggled, sunk into the ooze, and then stirred, and stirred.

Gold Eater

◦ 1880 ◦

Pont-à-Mousson, France

Give me fruits, spoils, fats, touches, tastes.
The buds of my tongue cry for mushrooms, pungent cheese,
magic foods charmed from the dark, delights slurped
or torn with teeth. I take, and take, and take.
I take from the bent man who crept the cellar stairs
each day to riddle the champagne bottle an eighth of a turn,
nudging it upside down to settle the cloud of dead

yeast cells in its wired neck. And from a goose
in a wooden crate (so small, she could not move);
she ate forced portions, never saw the sun.
Augers slid into an airhole (drilled in the crate's lid),
slid into her beak and craw; then kernels slid down
the auger's grooves, to stuff her gut, and pillow
her liver in golden fat. And hats, brooches, furs,

these I strip from the merchant's rack for Violette,
who ripped her hem the first June night she flitted
over my sill, laughing and moon-gilt. Violette poses
while I sketch her. I like her soft and naked as a bud.
I thumb the fat of her arm, count the time
before my mark fades. When she bores me, I try
horse races, quail, grouse, and buntings by the brace,

card games, and imported cigars. Violette rigs a beggar costume that I will don to sneak away from officer duties. We shutter the windows, stuff scarves under the door-crack to banish the coming day. We stagger, topple two chairs, our bodies prodigal and blind, my hand reading her face.

Cavalry Scene

◦ 1881 ◦

Oran Province, Algeria

Enemies fire at us from the gullies of a nearby hill.
Black as a smashed toe when the tissue dies, smoke rises
in little funnels and swirls. I call on my Arabs to refresh

our bullets. No reply. I find them stretched face down
on the ground, body after body true as compass needles,
pointing to Mecca as they intone their prayers.

I scan the hill, its clumped weeds. The smoke fades;
our enemies also set aside their guns while they pray.
The sun spills liquid gold, and dips, and sways.

Quiet as a spider when it births silk,
I wish that I, too, could rest on the earth.

To Map the Land of God

◦ 1 8 8 3 ◦

Morocco

I grow sideburns. I buy robes, gowns, a yarmulke.
In the name of the Beneficent, the Merciful,
I rehearse the faltering Arabic of my alibi:
*I am Youssef Aleman, a rabbi born in Russia,
fleeing from persecutions there.*

Mardochée tugs my elbow, implores me
to let him speak. He's a genuine rabbi, bedraggled
and snuff-stained, the only guide I can afford.
He says, *forget your mapmaking dreams,
or we'll both die.*

The Koran and the Torah fill my mouth;
my teeth trip over new verbs.

Mardochée says to me, *why chance my life
for your rude wage?* He says, *snakes, fleas.*

I read: all good deeds
and acts of worship are for God.

Mardochée says, *it's not too late to change our plans
and flee the caravan, or else, like fools, let us ride
south from Tangiers on these sickly mules.* He says,
*scorching days ahead; we may die a thousand ways,
following your map of wild guesses and blanks.*

I cannot resist a land forbidden, unknown,
where Frenchmen are considered spies
and put to death, where faith is proclaimed
by the virile devotion of the Muslim man.
Rug weaver, silversmith, grower of figs, olives,
or cork; servant or slave—no matter his rank,
he ceases all motion, bows to the east
when the muezzin calls.

Mardochée says, *bandits, maggoty food,*
but like a Muslim I beseech, *peace be upon us,*
bestow favor, show the straight path.
The Rif Mountains crowd my dreams;
their jagged teeth rake the sky. I must juggle
two fruits, never drop or bruise them:
Arabic my muskmelon, Berber my pomegranate.

Villagers call us monkeys, spit at us,
hurl sharp stones and curses. I hide my notes
in my sleeves.

Mardochée says, *reconsider; we must turn back.*
I say, *not without finishing the map.*

Gourd Seeds

◦ 1 8 8 6 ◦

Paris, France

The travelogue I publish, ample material
for the nests of silverfish that nibble and corrupt.
The gold medallion I win,

would trade to know that God exists.
I grin at the rabble of acclaim, pile the showy
words, then gnaw them, suck down the marrow.

I take Marthe's little sons to a mound of pebbles,
teach them to dig shards of pottery and bone,
and steal them from her in my dreams.

I woo the topographer's daughter,
give her a small cautious kiss.
With all these nothings to adorn me,

I rooster-strut the streets of Paris,
my chest medaled, my feathers ruffed
because I possess the skill of transporting

mountains from eye to map.
Self-appeasements pour from my lips.
I clamor with the rubbish wagon

as it passes by, and resound with the carillon
of the liturgy, and chew the quick
when friends turn my doorknob again

and again; I rattle with the seeds
trapped in gourds, begging for liberty,
for soil and sun.

The Pangs of Wanting

◦ 1 8 8 6 ◦

Paris, France

I want to explore unmapped lands; meditate on deep truths;
argue with shrewd, brilliant men; make love to a woman

versed in the pieties of faith and the pleasures of the earth;
try celibacy; father able sons. To my nephews, Pierre

and Andre, I distribute my soldier and rabbi costumes:
waistcoat, plumed hat, boots, scimitar, turban, burnoose,

scabbard, blue slippers. May all the trappings of those lives
serve as their playthings. I deliver my body to the church,

though I cannot imagine what penance might relieve
these pangs of wanting. I beg Father Huvelin to direct me.

I say, *I long to have faith*. I take first communion
for the second time in my life, husk who lived as a swine.

I lift my chin. My tongue licks up the bread: a whisper
of paper on my teeth, a morsel of dust, molecule-thin.

I gulp vinegar, dark, smoky, acidic, then sweet, garnet
and carnelian, the cup reflecting the candle flame,

pelting me with stars. His torn body in my stomach,
his blood in my spit, I almost vomit; I almost sing.

At the Ruins of Pilate's Palace

◦ 1888 ◦

Jerusalem

Seeking relics, old tombs, rumors of bone,
I come to the pretorium's ruins, rubble
choked with clock-flower vines. I blow grit

from the mosaic stones where the prefect stood
the day he proclaimed that he found in Christ
no wrong, then dipped his fingers into the dish,

flung drops of water far from his spidery hands,
gave Christ to the throngs. I press my hand, groove
my skin with the grains of the paving stones.

Tether

o 1890 o

Ardèche, France

Then I practice frozen lips,
tongue of lead. I shed cravings,
peel away the encumbrances

of the body. The older monks eat
without sound; soften the swish
of robes; step with feet that feather

the earth. My spoon clatters. Phlegm
rattles my lungs. I pray that prayer
can tether me, be the cool

gray stone that dulls my rough edges
and burrs. After high mass, I turn
to chores: I pull thistles, rub the brass,

gather kindling, twine wreaths,
thresh and bundle the hay.
Small interruptions are savored.

The yipping fox. The blue rock-thrush
who pipes the same six notes.
In my free hour, I read the breviary,

nurse my sore feet, dig my thumb
between the long bones and tendons,
and remember that I am foul matter.

Automaton with Flute

◦ 1 8 9 3 ◦

Akbés, Syria

I am still a man of parts, fractions, halves,
a copper weathercock that wavers, dips
in the smallest wind. I am still Vaucanson's

fluteur automate, imitation of a living man,
cannot compress my lungs, open my lips
or sound a note, unless other hands work my bars,

levers, and bellows. My soul stays timorous,
cold, a flint that gives no sparks; my prayers
spill like gears from my unfastened mouth.