

Praise for

# THÉRÈSE

POEMS



“A biography-in-verse that brims with beauty, pain, insight, and humility, *Thérèse* informs as it inspires. In Sarah Law’s honest and perceptive portrayals, the ‘busy stillness’ and ‘little ways’ of this Carmelite nun become a ‘petal, flaming high in Christ’s kaleidoscope.’ This is a poetry pilgrimage you’ll want to take.”

—**Marjorie Maddox**, author of *Transplant, Transport, Transubstantiation*



“Little souls, little petals, little Carmelite—the word *little* is intrinsically woven into the life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and it appears repeatedly, in all the right places, in this poetic biography of the saint. The poems enthrall by their attention to sensory detail and the underlying strength they evince. Through them we learn how Thérèse’s ‘little world blossom[ed] / under her sword’s steel.’ A deeply moving and memorable work.”

—**Sofia Starnes**, author of *The Consequence of Moonlight: Poems*



“In lyrical snapshots Sarah Law has captured the most important events in the short life of the Carmelite whom Pope Pius X called ‘the greatest saint of modern times.’ *I will come back*, she promised, and these powerful poems make her real, present, accessible: ‘she will be your sister, / with a shield, and a sword, / a rose, / and a whispered word.’”

—**Robert J. Edmonson, CJ**, translator of *The Complete Thérèse of Lisieux*



“Thérèse of Lisieux had the soul of a poet, and this life of Thérèse in poetry, inspired by the photos, reminiscences, and incidents of the saint, penetrates the depths hidden in the seeming triviality of her life and her ‘resolute littleness,’ adding fresh and new insight.”

—**Jennifer Moorcroft**, author of *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and her Sisters*



# THÉRÈSE

POEMS

SARAH LAW



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## Introduction

owards the end of her short life, a twenty-four-year-old woman came to the conclusion that ‘Everything is grace.’ Sister Thérèse had received little education and seen little of the world, and she died before the start of the twentieth century. But something about, or within, her life had led her to this lucid insight. It is difficult to identify exactly what qualities have made her such a significant figure for many, including me. This elusive quality of grace she both perceived and embodied has drawn me back over many years (far more years of life than Thérèse had herself) to look again at her life in all its resonant littleness. And because resonant littleness is such a hallmark of her life and spirituality, it seemed appropriate for me to approach Thérèse with poetry, a form that often works with littleness as a way of approaching mystery.

Marie Françoise-Thérèse Martin was born in 1873, in Alençon, Normandy, the final child and fifth surviving daughter of Louis and Zélie Martin, devout Catholics and members of the bourgeois middle class. Thérèse’s mother died when Thérèse was four. Louis moved the family to Lisieux to be nearer to his brother-in-law, Isidore Guérin, and his family. Thérèse briefly attended school but was mostly home educated. When she was nine, Thérèse’s favourite older sister, Pauline, left for the Carmelite convent in Lisieux. Four years later, her eldest sister, Marie, joined the same convent. Two years after that in 1888 Thérèse herself entered the Carmel at the age of fifteen. Her sister Céline joined the same convent in 1894 after the death of their father, bringing her camera with her.

Thérèse was an obedient, affectionate, and attentive nun. In the Carmel she developed a spirituality that was notably confident and daring rather than fearful. Her 'little way' also emphasises the value of small acts done with love and thereby imbued with meaning. She died tragically young, after months of dreadful suffering, from tuberculosis in September 1897. Because of the spiritual value placed on reparatory suffering prevalent in nineteenth-century French Catholicism, she was denied significant pain relief in these last agonising weeks. She also struggled with doubts about the existence of heaven throughout these last months of her life, finding consolation in neither faith nor hope. But within the confines of her circumstances, her will was extremely strong, and her commitment to love God and her religious sisters was remarkable. So too was her wider love for humanity and the sense she had, towards the end of her life, that after death she would continue her mission to help those on earth. However, at her death, another nun in the same community wondered whatever could be said about Thérèse, the young sister who had been so kind and quiet. Surely her obituary would be extremely brief?

In fact, her death-notice or *circulaire*, an obituary circulated among other Carmelite convents, was comprised of Thérèse's own writings, and was in effect a book-length memoir. It was found so moving that when it became available to the general public, further print-runs were needed. By 1925 Thérèse was canonised and declared 'the greatest saint of modern times' by Pope Saint Pius X. In 1997 she was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church. She is Patroness of the Missions, of France, of Russia, and of florists. Her relics have toured the world. Even in the twenty-first century, she is immensely popular among devout Catholics and beyond. In 2009 thousands of people came to pay respects to her relics when they visited various venues

## INTRODUCTION

in England; in 2019 they visited Scotland. They have toured much of the rest of the world too. There is something about Thérèse which still catches at the heart.

Her memoir has never been out of print and has been translated into many languages. As well as the three manuscripts which make up *The Story of a Soul* and Thérèse's own letters, poems and short plays, there are her purported last words recorded by her sisters, family correspondence, and witness statements for the beatification and canonisation processes. As one reads these, certain moments in Thérèse's life stand out as lucid and resonant, if not conventionally significant, and from these moments I drew many of my poems. For example, when she was a very young child, she wanted to know how everyone could be filled with God's love when so many were small and far from perfect: her older sister Pauline poured water into a tall glass and a little cup to show her that neither was fuller than the other. Another example is the 'conversion' from tearful sensitivity she felt one Christmas as a teenager. She prayed for Henri Pranzini, a condemned criminal, and was convinced that she had been given a sign of his conversion on the scaffold. Telling her beloved father she wanted to enter the Carmel, she was moved when he picked and gave her a little white flower. Then there is the daring spiritual metaphor she drew from her experience of being in a lift, or elevator, during her 1887 trip to Paris: she likened it to the undeserved uplift of divine love. Also in 1887 she begged Pope Leo XIII for permission to become a Carmelite, having been told by the Bishop that she was too young. Pauline (then Sister Agnès) tried to console her in her struggle to have her vocation recognised by suggesting she was an abandoned plaything of the child Jesus—a somewhat bittersweet analogy.

When she entered Carmel, at the age of just fifteen, the strict rules and enclosed lifestyle meant that Sister Thérèse of the Child

Jesus and of the the Holy Face (her chosen names) had to find ways of loving others and of understanding herself through further instances of littleness: of helping an elderly sister to the refectory; accepting another sister's irritating noises during prayer; finding peace and grace in chores as much as community worship, writing her poems, plays, letters, and memoir in scraps of free time, and finally enduring the physical and mental anguish of her last months. She also directed, unofficially, a small group of novices, and she wrote to a missionary priest and a seminarian, the latter of whom revealed his own fears and doubts to her. Had she been a man, she said, she would have become a priest herself. But instead she chose to become Love itself at the heart of the Church.

Perhaps the most poignant mementos of Thérèse's brief life are the photographic ones. Forty-seven photographic images survive, the early ones taken in a Lisieux photography studio. Most of them subsequent to her becoming a Carmelite were taken by Thérèse's sister Céline, including two taken after Thérèse's death. Sepia-tinted, surprisingly detailed, these photographs are all available online (at the Archives of the Carmel of Lisieux). The Darlot lens used by Céline with her box-and-tripod camera required a nine-second exposure, so while some of her photographs are perfectly posed, others are a little blurry, enhancing the candid nature of their images. They are a glimpse into a hidden world: the nuns make hay, pummel laundry, sit in meditation, make altar breads, sew during recreation. Several photographs show Thérèse playing the part of Joan of Arc, a figure she greatly admired for her active and enduring faith. One of those images fell into the hands of publicity-seeking atheist Léo Taxil, who mocked it at a Parisian meeting held in 1897, a few months before Thérèse's death. Thérèse had sent it in friendship to a fictitious young woman fabricated by Taxil.

I found the photographs fascinating and at times very moving, and poetry inspired by several of them are woven throughout this collection, although the poems themselves are not dependent for interpretation upon their photographic source. And so this collection gradually came together. For all my reading and thinking about Thérèse, I don't pretend fully to represent or understand her, but to provide glimpses of her life, especially as they have affected me. I don't pretend to understand the depths of her final suffering, or the Prioress's unwillingness to alleviate it, and some of the poems do not shy away from this. But it does not seem to me that her life and death were for nothing.

Thérèse is present in the world as a much-loved saint, and she has also appeared in contemporary poetry, although not so prominently as other saints and mystics—perhaps because her life is lacking elements of the obviously wondrous or miraculous. She features in thoughtful individual poems by Rowan Williams, Mary Ruefle, and others. She has been referenced in contemporary fiction too, particularly Ron Hansen's 1991 novel *Mariette in Ecstasy*, and Michelle Roberts's 1992 *Daughters of the House*. Thérèse has also been poignantly represented in film and play, with Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse* (1986) and Michel Pascal's 2009 one-woman play *The Story of a Soul* (which was filmed in the Lisieux Carmel with Eva Hernandez) as prime examples.

Thérèse of Lisieux is a great saint indissolubly linked with littleness, in which, when leavened by love, she found great strength. I have tried to respond to Thérèse in the 'little' medium of poetry, which for me is a way to reflect on and share her life, her resolve, and her grace.

I was very much inspired by the wonderful archive material, including photographs, biographies, primary texts, letters, and

other information at the archive web pages of the Carmel of Lisieux. I write as a poet and not as a theologian, biographer, or spiritual advisor. There are many who do this much better than I could. I've included a short additional bibliography at the end of this collection, for those interested. I've also included a brief note directly below on the other characters mentioned in these poems.

## BRIEF NOTES ON OTHER FIGURES MENTIONED



**Rose Taillé:** the peasant wet nurse who enabled Thérèse to thrive as a baby.

**Zélie Martin (Mama):** Thérèse's mother, who died of breast cancer when Thérèse was four.

**Madame Besnier:** a photographer in Lisieux.

**Louis Martin (Papa):** Thérèse's father, who developed dementia and died in 1894.

**Pauline, also Mère (Mother) Agnès of Jesus:** Thérèse's second-eldest sister, a substitute mother after Zélie's death. She entered the Carmelite Convent in 1882.

**Marie, also Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart:** Thérèse's eldest sister, who became a Carmelite nun in 1886.

**Léonie, later Sister Marie-Françoise of the Convent of the Visitation:** Thérèse's sister, troubled and difficult; older than Thérèse by ten years.

**Céline, also Sister Geneviève of the Holy Face:** Thérèse's sister, older than Thérèse by four years. Artistic, strong-willed, she entered Carmel in 1894, and, unusually, brought her camera with her.

**Pierre Mabille:** a twentieth-century surrealist writer who criticised Thérèse as a hysteric.

**Henri Pranzini:** a notorious convicted murderer. Thérèse prayed for his conversion. He unexpectedly kissed the crucifix before his execution in 1887.

**Jeanne Fleuriot:** daughter of the property owner next to the Lisieux Carmel.

**Sister Marie of the Trinity:** a young novice, near in age to, and beloved by, Thérèse.

**Sister Marie of the Eucharist ('Cousin Marie'):** Marie Guérin, Thérèse's cousin.

**Mère (Mother) Marie de Gonzague:** Prioress of the Carmel of Lisieux; aristocratic, authoritarian, and temperamental.

**Sister Marie-Madeleine of the Holy Sacrament:** a novice, of nervous disposition.

**Sister Martha:** a novice, older and less spiritually able than Thérèse.

**Sister Saint Peter:** an elderly nun at the Carmel of Lisieux.

**Sister Marie-Joseph:** a nun at the Carmel of Lisieux, little liked.

**Venerable Anne of Jesus:** a contemporary of St Teresa of Avila, she brought the Carmelite Order to France in the early seventeenth century.

**Diana Vaughan:** a young female character fabricated by atheist Léo Taxil. He claimed Diana had escaped from an abusive Masonic cult and had subsequently converted to Catholicism, writing letters and testimonies in her name. The real Diana Vaughan was actually Taxil's middle-aged secretary.

**Léo Taxil:** an antagonistic atheist who tricked Catholic believers into thinking Diana Vaughan was a real person. He revealed his hoax in April 1897. Thérèse had sent 'Diana' a holy card featuring an image of herself as Joan of Arc. Taxil mockingly displayed the image during the public revelation of his hoax.

**Dr. de Cornière:** Doctor to the Lisieux Carmel.

**L'Abbé (Father) Roulland:** a missionary priest who corresponded with Thérèse.

**L'Abbé (Father) Bellière (the unnamed seminarian in 'Brother'):** a seminarian and later a missionary priest who corresponded with Thérèse, confessing his own temptations and weakness.





## LOURDES COURTYARD



They come and go –  
the holy souls,  
to quench their thirst  
in its bright water

and in this little square  
where greenery courts  
the dry chapel walls  
a brief sunlight

finds her there,  
absent and present,  
sitting, hands in prayer  
then standing back

by the window ledge  
as though she is part  
of the sun's course, its  
moving, weightless pressure,

its fleeting warmth.

Close your eyes.

It is a busy stillness,  
all bees and honeysuckle.



# CHILDHOOD

## Photo 1 *July 1876*

She has already lost one mother  
– Rose Taillé the wet-nurse  
in her white-walled cottage,

---

19

who loved Thérèse to life –  
whose strong sap infused her  
with a taste for iron and fire.

Soon she will lose another:  
Zélie, the strict, the suffering,  
whose own brief childhood

was sad as a shroud, who prayed  
for a dutiful priest as a son;  
who will die too young.

But for now she stands  
between these two departures;  
three years old, dressed

in a stiff white frock,  
frowning at the camera's  
toy-box gloom.

Soon she will struggle  
through a flicker-book of mothers  
but here she is, caught

on a dark glass plate;  
she holds the chair leg firmly  
like a bishop's wooden staff,

and makes the long lip  
her quick *mama* interprets  
as sorrowing to come.

---

## Youngest

20



The line stops with her,  
the youngest of the girls,  
their blonde *benjamine*.

Before her, four sisters  
refract into adulthood,  
their heavy skirts sway

-ing up to the altar, and she  
stands on tiptoe to admire  
love's enfolding moments.

She dreams young of making  
her oblation—a petal, flaming high  
in Christ's kaleidoscope.

## An Offering (i)



Her older sister, Léonie,  
had her own troubles

yet learned young  
to sacrifice. Mama encouraged her  
with corks in the kitchen drawer  
—one for each victory over the self!

One day she approaches  
Céline and Thérèse  
in the garden, bearing  
her basket of childish things.  
*I've finished with these,*  
she says. *Please help*  
*yourselves.*

Céline fishes, primly,  
and brings out a ribbon,  
a button, a porcelain doll.  
*Thank you,* she says,  
after a pause.

Léonie turns to Thérèse  
*and what would you like?*

Sunlight dapples the grass.

*All of it,* says Thérèse,  
She stretches out her hands.  
*I'll take it all.*

Twenty years later  
when she was already  
starting to die,  
she remembered.

It made her smile.  
*I've never refused*  
*what God offers,* she wrote,  
*the scraps, the trials, the confines*  
*of my tiny life;*

the bitter pills,  
the hours of emptiness,  
the bad dreams,  
the *pointes de feu*,  
  
this basket of words in the night.

## A Glass Full



Thérèse, aged six, sits at the table.  
Her legs swing under the wooden chair.

She is troubled by God's grace,  
and how one can be full of him

yet smaller than a doll's house. How  
can it be fair, when some are saints,

but most are limited sinners?  
In her hand, a white-petaled aster

warms and thins against her skin.  
Pauline lifts a jug of water,

is teacher and mother, and pours  
cool blessing into cup and tumbler;

liquid shimmers at the brim of each.  
*And which is fuller? Both*, she answers,

unpeeling the flower from her palm  
and slipping it into the smaller vessel,

where it settles in its little pool  
as she wipes a spilled droplet away.