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Image Essay by Theresa Williams

TW's annual "Writing and Faith" issue launches next week, and these drawings hint at what's to come—the many nooks where faith abides.

The Meaning of Elvis

Andy Warhol understood the way pop culture figures become icons. His famous images of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley ironically underscore our veneration of them. Through his success, Elvis became bigger than life; at the same time, he had a very human quality. His twin brother died at birth. He was unhappy in love. He grieved deeply when his mother died. He seemed like a wandering soul in search of a purpose that remained just out of reach. And his early death made him a martyr.

My images of baby-blue Elvis highlight the double existence I imagine he must have had. Elvis was worshipped, but his success came at a high price, isolating him as time went on. As he aged, he became an oddity, laughable, obese, past his prime.

The three Elvis drawings here are part of a larger series. I started the drawings this year, after finding out that my novella *Vital Parts* had been accepted by Shebooks. I reread the story chapters, especially one titled "Blue Velvis," in which my protagonist Nora Walker considers a velvet Elvis painting given to her by her boyfriend Lenny to cover a crack in a wall of her house.

Rereading this story, I remembered again how much Elvis meant to my own mother. She collected Elvis dolls, calendars, and plates. While she was alive, I didn't think much about it. But now that she's been dead fifteen years, her love for Elvis is one of my best memories of her, even if I never understood her obsession with him.

So, I began researching the Elvis phenomenon. I discovered that many people see Elvis as almost a spiritual figure. His image, for example, is often hung on a wall right next to Jesus. To this day, people make pilgrimages to Graceland, the storied mansion where he's buried in Memphis, Tennessee.

In a 2002 article about "The Cult of 'St. Elvis,'" Bill and Donna Butler write:

Many of Elvis's fans still feel a strong personal bond with him, talking about his charisma and his 'animal magnetism.' They feel they connected with him even when they saw him on television or in a large arena: They just knew he was looking at and singing just to them.

The Butlers go on to list the Elvis shrines, Elvis sightings, Elvis impersonators, and Elvis collectibles that indicate a quasi-religious faith, although they note that "[p]robably very few of Elvis's fans would say that they are actually worshipping him."

It's clear to me that people don't worship Elvis in the same way they worship Christ. They understand that Elvis Presley is not God, but they do find solace in his music and life story. In making these images, I mean no disrespect. To disrespect Elvis would be to disrespect the good memory of my mother, and I'd never do that. I believe his life and death inspires faith in those who love him—faith that something good, no matter how imperfect, exists in the world.

Publishing Information

- ["Elvis Presley: Biography."](#) [5] *Rolling Stone* (some portions originally appeared in *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock and Roll*, Simon & Schuster, 2001).
- ["The Cult of 'St. Elvis'"](#) [6] by Bill and Donna Butler, *Vision*, Summer 2002.

Elvis and Amazing Grace

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Her e-book *Vital Parts* is forthcoming from Shebooks.

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