

JENNIFER WHEELOCK

Why I Am Not a Saint

*Statistics show that saints have a higher rate of cancer than the general population.
(from a National Public Radio interview)*

Because I am incapable
of altruism, of laying
down my body as sacrifice.
Because I fear
the feel of leprosy,
the smell of human waste,
the eyes of an infant
whose father is a prisoner of war
and whose mother holds him,
weeps into his downy hair,
and thinks I can unlock the gates
of hell. Because I cannot be
a pacifist, fast to protest
O.J.'s freedom, Saddam Hussein,
genocide of Serbs, genocide of Croats,
metal pipes, knives, machine
guns, terrorists blowing up
temples. Can't refuse to raise my fist
or voice in anger. Can't bear
the long flights, witnessing
wars, protruding ribs, amputated arms,
swollen ankles, ostentatious weddings,
choirs of strained voices.

Denial sustains optimism.
No body can bear the weight
of the robes forever—the long, silken, flowing
robes. How tall one must be to carry them,

to keep them from dragging
the ground, prevent the tattered ends.