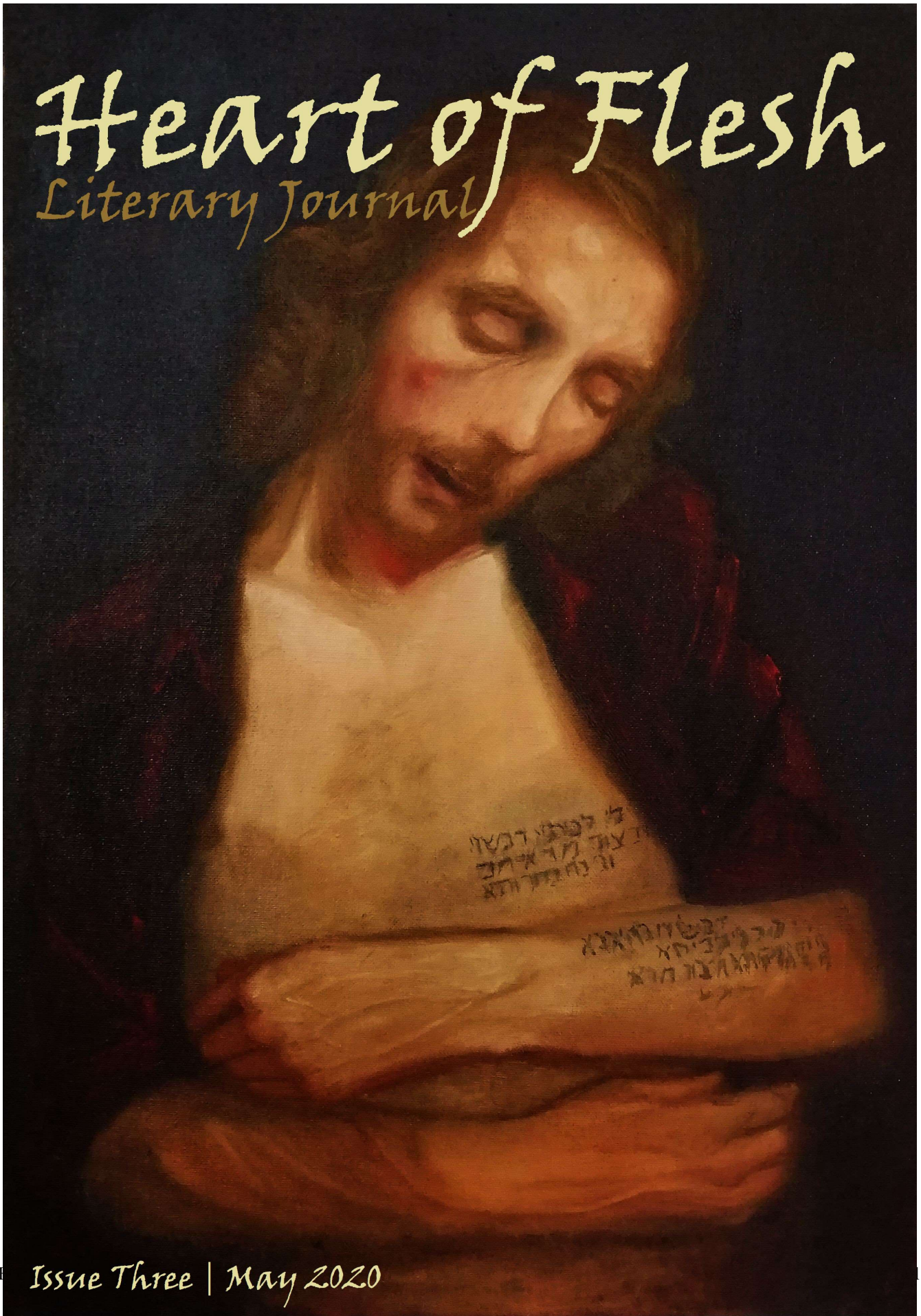


# Heart of Flesh

Literary Journal



Issue Three | May 2020

# Heart of Flesh

May 2020 | Issue Three

Editor: Veronica McDonald

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Cover Art: "Noe sleeping" by Segolene Haehnsen Kan



# Note from the Editor

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*"I will never leave you nor forsake you" by Veronica McDonald. 7 x 9 in. oil on canvas, 2020.*

I was tempted not to mention anything about COVID-19 in this editor's note. Over the past month I've heard the phrase "uncertain times" more often than I can count, and sometimes we all need a break from the news and daily reminders that the world is falling apart in one way or another. This time of social-distancing and self-quarantining has been a breeding ground for worry, fear, depression, and anxiety as many of us face difficulties and significant life changes.

But, then I remembered we also need to be reminded of the unexpected blessings. Many meaningless distractions have been removed. Time has slowed down as many activities have been put on hold. Families are forced to draw closer together. We're yearning for the freedoms and relationships we often took for granted. We all appreciate toilet paper and hand sanitizer a lot more.

In all seriousness, this time has caused many to think about life in ways they may not have otherwise. Namely, is there a God? And if there is, what does all this mean?

Another question that I encourage you, the reader, to ask yourself during this time of reflection is: what about Jesus? Who is He? What is it about Jesus?

Though you won't receive a direct answer about the character of Jesus here (I recommend reading the New Testament for that), you will find a space that explores the emotions, doubts, and certainties surrounding Christ. Maybe you've felt that Christianity doesn't call to you, or that it doesn't fit who you are. That you feel more alive in rejecting Christ than accepting Him (see Hannah Melin's nonfiction story "[My Ancestors Must Have Been Beasts](#)"). Maybe Christianity feels like something foul, and foreign. Something that rubs against the grain of everything you know about life (check out DT Richards's "[It's Only a Second You're Down](#)"). Maybe it makes you nostalgic for stain glass, for rosaries, for Mary, for a mother figure instead of a supposed all-knowing Father. Maybe Christianity makes you think of your upbringing, of youth groups and church camp and a simpler time before life became complicated (read Diane Vogel Ferri's nonfiction piece "[Come By Here](#)"). Maybe it seems like a beautiful lie, symbolizing some unnamed goodness in the background to guard your mind when encountering the evil, death, and meaninglessness of the world.

And maybe, just maybe, Christianity to you means truth. A light in the fog. Something clear, crisp, and more real than the real world. A life-changing, soul-altering reality that makes everything around you more alive. As a former Catholic (who still has a love for Catholics) turned atheist, turned agnostic, turned born-again, burning-heart Christian, I am fascinated by the way Jesus interacts with and influences the secular world. As a literature lover, I have a passion for reading the struggle and discovery between God and man through poetry, prose, and art. That's why *Heart of Flesh* exists and it's why I am thankful for the different voices and perspectives of the wonderful contributors (both believers and non-believers) of our third issue.

I will end this note by saying I pray that this issue sparks something in you. I hope that it plants a seed in your heart, or creates a yearning for the one that lingers in the background waiting for you to discover Him. And if to you these times seems painfully uncertain, I leave you with one certainty, one of God's promises, first given to the Israelites, but then placed in the hearts of those adopted into the family of God:

*fear not, for I am with you;  
be not dismayed, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
I will uphold you with my righteous right  
hand. (Isaiah 41:10)*

God bless you, and I hope you enjoy the third issue of *Heart of Flesh*.

*Veronica McDonald*

Editor

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**Veronica McDonald** is a writer, poet, artist, and editor/founder of *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Lost Pen Magazine*, *Inwood Indiana Press*, *Jersey Devil Press*, *Five on the Fifth*, and *Gingerbread House Literary Magazine*, among others. She became a born-again Christian in July 2016 when Jesus saved her from anxiety, depression, and a nihilistic worldview. Learn more about her work at [VeronicaMcDonald.com](http://VeronicaMcDonald.com).



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# Christine Higgins

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## The Bridegroom of My Soul

I am eight years old. I will wear a white dress with a scratchy gauze crinoline to hold the skirt out like a ballerina's. I will wear white socks and white patent leather shoes. I will wear a veil that cascades lace down to my shoulders. I have a shiny white box pocketbook with flowers under plastic. The pocketbook is just big enough to hold my first Sunday missal. On the inside cover of the missal is a picture of white Jesus with long soft brown hair like a hippie.

We practice the procession. We practice moving out of our row to the middle aisle, up to the altar for a magical bit of wafer, and then back into the row from the other side, heads bowed, hands clasped together in prayer. I love practicing because I love trying to move reverently, fervently, not like the boys who clamber like goats knocking the wooden seats with their shoes. Each time we practice the procession, Sister Hyacinth plays the Communion Song that says Jesus is the bridegroom of my soul.

When you're lonely and you're chubby and you feel a little thrill about Jimmy who wears his communion shoes every day, you think because he's a maverick, not because the family can only afford one pair of shoes, you want someone to accept you even though everyone knows you're lazy, and you could be doing so much more.

I am going to be His, *no more by sin to grieve Him, or fly His sweet control*. I am going to fall into bed that night finally cared for, watched over, protected.

## Tending

My sister, the newly graduated nurse,  
came home for just one day—  
because she was already done  
with our family and that house. my mother?  
She handed my baby brother to me  
and said: this is how you change him  
this is how you test the temperature  
of his bottled milk  
this is how you burp him  
this is how you bathe him.

And then she was gone.

I kissed the bottom of his feet.  
I put him in fresh clothes



and held him close to my chest.  
It was instinct to nurture him.  
I was the one who, after a night  
of teenage drinking, got up with him—  
the bedroom where we slept still spinning.  
My mother lay in the other twin bed  
with her body facing the wall.

I was only fifteen.  
I tried to soothe myself  
with Boone's Farm Wine  
and making out at beach parties  
with nameless boys, trying  
for a life that was my own.

When my mother said  
she wanted to kill herself,  
threatened to take the pills  
stockpiled in the cabinet,

I flung myself on her,  
*You can't do that*, I pleaded.  
*You can't do that*.

I wanted to run away, too,  
but how could I?  
I was tending,  
learning a love I didn't yet know.

Hold the baby close,  
stand guard  
at the heart's broken door.

## Tenderness

After our daughter's death  
we needed something to tend,  
so we became gardeners.

Every day now, even in winter,  
we go out to see what's developing,  
or needs our attention.

When our daughter was small  
all we had in the yard was one tree  
with a swing and a place for her to dig

with old spoons from the kitchen drawer.

Now that we have time to dig  
and prune and nurture, it's  
growing up around us—  
vegetable beds, wisteria climbing the fence,  
pink tulips opening,  
seeming to reach for our embrace.

As spring arrives, what we love  
is finding all the newness—  
the first hurrah of forsythia,  
the cone of a grape hyacinth,  
the heart-shaped lilac leaves.

We love the sense of on-going-ness,  
how most everything returns  
year after year.

---

**Christine Higgins** is the author of the full-length collection, *Hallow* (Cherry Grove, 2020). Her latest chapbook, *Hello Darling*, was the second-place winner in the 2019 Poetry Box competition. Her work has appeared in *Pequod*, *America*, *Windhover*, *Nagautuck River Review*, and *PMS (poemmemoirstory)*. She is the recipient of two Maryland State Arts Council Awards for both poetry and non-fiction. Higgins is a McDowell Colony Fellow and a graduate of The Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars.

# Sarah Law

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## Two poems from *One Hundred Lost Letters*<sup>1</sup>

### 1

To sit in the choir, in silence – the mouth full of silence, the hands open, palms up; silence pouring down. Silence casts harmonics in the body – ears veiled from word and world. The night office is pooled in solemn hush. But silence is not dark: it is more like a mist; the plume of a breath in a background of snow. Silence is a white haze blooming over water. I sit in my stall. My soul unfurls along life's ticking river.

\*

He accepts our worship, the ribbed patterns of our days. Like chapels, each is made for light to pour through glass and gaps. Light shines like eternity into time's interstices (we souls gathered inside). My sister makes her photographic negatives; each face is a smudge surprised by a halo – so a structure only serves to frame an unearned grace. Such is my thought, my confessor. Through loosening our gaze, we find this picture hidden in plain sight. It is everywhere and cannot be pinned down.

\*

For half the day there is no sun. For half a life, perhaps, a soul must dwell without it. Where then is the grace? In a candle's kiss – all light reduced to a flickering aureole. I have seen with my own eyes how the sun's flame shines from one dark wick.

\*

At Matins I saw that our God is not a god of reckoning. He does not care to count our debts and failings. Love is so much gold ink spilled across the ledger.

\*

Last night I dreamt I was a bird with petals for feathers. I took off from the window ledge and flew towards the sun, shedding myself utterly.

### 2

If heaven is a fortune, I will spend it –  
scatter God's infinite matter like water,

let it shower down and quench  
the parched world. If heaven is a flower

---

<sup>1</sup> an ongoing project in which reflects on the lost letters sent by St Therese of Lisieux, 1873-97, to her confessor.



I will cast its petals over your wounds,  
the satin-soft touch of my fingers  
  
pattering their letters like a teacher  
on her unseeing student; our lives  
  
are full of love's winged currency, and I  
will show you a face made dear with dew.

## Grace Drifts Down Like Dust

Grace drifts down like dust  
over the soul's rough rocks,

settles in its crevices, scintilla  
where even the light is blocked –

grace like fine flour sifting through  
a grille to the lumpen heart.

I sit in the back pew (sunshine shears  
into the evening church) and see

that motes are always falling –  
each particle is gentler than confetti,

hallowing the human, the unready;  
its glinting traces bless us unawares.

Grace is manna for an outpost life,  
is unconditional and borderless –

there is only the reception of its calling,  
all I can do is raise my empty hands.

---

**Sarah Law** lives in London, UK, and is a tutor for the Open University. With work in *America*, *The Windhover*, *Saint Katherine Review*, and *Presence* among other journals, her next collection, *Thérèse: Poems*, is forthcoming from Paraclete Press. She edits [Amethyst Review](#), an online journal for new writing engaging with the sacred.

# Diane Vogel Ferri

---

## Libera Me, Salva Me

*libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna in die illa tremenda*

There is a time for running up the fire escape  
with scorched lungs, teardrops on fire,

wordless in the calamity of yourself,  
unable to call for help in your wrong-way escape,

a time for graffiti on your skin, platform boots  
to make you seem taller, piercing yourself for decoration,

stomping to the music, writing your grievance lists,  
believing in something owed, something deserved.

~

Then there is a time to be delivered, liberated  
from yourself, for understanding you are not the only one,

you are nothing really, your complaints are the wind,  
your power nonexistent, you don't know anyone else's truth,

you are the spokesperson of nothing, just a smudge of existence  
until the time to move heaven and earth to unveil your eyes,

light the dark, deliver a flame of liberation in  
your human being.

---

**Diane Vogel Ferri** is a teacher, poet, and writer living in Solon, Ohio. Her essays have been published in *Scene Magazine*, *Cleveland Stories*, *Cleveland Christmas Memories*, *Raven's Perch*, and by Cleveland State University among others. Her poems can be found in numerous journals such as *Plainsongs*, *Rubbertop Review*, and *Poet Lore*. Her chapbook, *Liquid Rubies*, was published by Pudding House. *The Volume of Our Incongruity* was published by Finishing Line Press. She has done many poetry readings locally. Her novel, *The Desire Path* can be found on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Diane's essay, "I Will Sing for You" was featured at the Cleveland Humanities Festival in 2018. A former teacher, she holds an M.Ed from Cleveland State University. She has an Author Page on Facebook for current news and is a founding member of Literary Cleveland.

# Oluwafemi Babasola

---

## carry me

i have bathed and swam in the miraculous.  
i have tasted raw your love and care

but this, Lord take away:  
this time i'm a mountain, standing for you,  
in a moment trials and troubles have weathered me  
into a smouldering plain, and i'm wondering why

my cross be laced with thorns,  
my path be home to thorns,  
and i'm scrambling for faith like a toddler tossed to sea.

this too:  
my mind is a room dirtier than my body,  
pushing me to take a bite of the forbidden.  
how do I hold this burning?  
teach me to say no to these free meals, even when  
my loins long to dine.

maybe my mind needs your touch.  
maybe my eyes are open like eve's already.  
maybe i'm just a man with the feelings of men.

the drawings and paintings of your  
daughters on the walls of my mind scare me:  
my mind has touched everywhere and everything sacred.

and i seem lost like a canoe without a paddle on the sea.  
pray for me like you prayed for Peter.  
carry me like you carried Peter after he fell again and again.  
carry me even if my falls are like the dust of the earth.

---

**Oluwafemi Babasola** is a Nigerian poet and writer. He believes man must cling to hope, even if it's all he has. His poems have appeared on *Bravearts Africa*, *Praxis Magonline*, *Kreative Diadem*, *Kalahari Review*, *The Rising Phoenix Review*, *Tuck Magazine*, *African Writer*, *Parousia* and *Nantygreens*. He lives in Osogbo, Nigeria. You can follow him on Twitter [@babasola10on10](https://twitter.com/babasola10on10).



# Karina Lutz

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## Ash Wednesday

“Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood.”  
—T.S. Eliot

Mom, you taught me to give up my pillow for Lent.  
The crick in my neck a question mark:  
why believe we are meant to create new pain to transcend?  
So much already braces this world against itself:  
children killed by children, torturers  
intentional and ignorant, absentee parents,  
us prodigal parents, neglectful as we indulge  
in our own suffering, and heaping more suffering upon that  
in confusion over the glimmer under those bushels:

that to acknowledge pain may redeem us.

To acknowledge, not to create: to choose what is, bearing lightly.  
For life is suffering, and life is good.

Today I give up the residual belief  
that we need to resist our harmless comforts,  
that to be selfless is to take on avoidable suffering,  
another bad exegesis of cross to shoulder.

The best things to give up  
are what harms us, the bad habits, the addictions,  
the beliefs that bind  
and blind,  
the bushels of stored suffering,  
saved for a transformative day,  
saved for this transformative season  
when sky and earth  
grumble towards, burst towards  
each other.

So here it is Ash Wednesday, and we are supposed  
to make ourselves miserable, yet joy keeps pouring through  
at the news you chose to let go  
of grasping at pain

My joy pours to you as you choose instead

the creaking open,  
the crashing down that is healing,  
the splitting open like a fully ripe fruit  
that is healing.

The old temple crashes down around us,  
as we stand and gaze unhurt  
at a splendorous sky uncovered.  
May a few pillars remain,  
sacred ruins, later to point us back toward this light,

to remind us:  
Loss is sometimes good.

Here, love who made me,  
rest your head on my pillow.  
To give up is not to suffer  
if we give up the causes of our suffering.

The test is joy.

“Ash Wednesday” was previously published in *Post-Catholic Midrashim* (2019: Finishing Line Press).

## **What a fragile earth it is without a God. What a violent one it is with one.**

Both camps, those who see only one god, far above,  
and those who see only earth,  
project their particular fragility and wrath.

For Cartesian ecologists earth’s movements are just facts of physics  
and all its life is as tenuous as a hypothesis;  
nothing like the world of Noah, as he mourned over the side of the ark  
(tears abetting the rising sea).

Wrath:  
for if God is all-powerful and perfect, and I, the angry sinner,  
then these floods, eruptions, and quakes must be  
His intent to harm me.

Fragility:  
for if a god, with all such contradictions, cannot exist,  
and no One holds the intention to keep this ‘delicate’ ecology  
together, and we oafish humans keep stomping through, trampling rare species  
without feeling a thing through our thick rubber soles,

then earth's elegant creation is but an exquisite accident,  
and our bodies but seashells to be battered empty by sand and rock and wave.

Our own evolution appears as the fatal flaw  
to undo all life's fine balances and adaptations,

as if entropy trumps order every time,  
as if order is not the very nature of chaos,  
as if there could be no intelligence greater than our own,  
no creativity inherent in being...

No doubt Noah did a little science on the sly:  
taxonomy a perk of fulfilling the command.  
And no doubt an unconscious faith keeps  
scientists afloat as they count new species,  
still not having found two of everything.

Or our tears would again abet the rising seas.

"What a fragile earth it is without a God./What a violent one it is with one." was previously published in *Post-Catholic Midrashim* (2019: Finishing Line Press).

## Anticipating the *Akedah* moment

May I listen for truth  
the critical moments between emptiness and idea  
between idea and choice  
between choice and doing  
between doing and continuing to do—  
each machination of manifestation  
all along the continuum of creation  
in awe of the known and the unknown:  
Amen.

---

**Karina Lutz** worked as a sustainable energy advocate for three decades, and as an editor, reporter, and magazine publisher. She teaches yoga, sustainability, deep ecology, and writing, and tends a permaculture farm at her intentional community, Listening Tree. Her books, *Preliminary Visions* and *Post-Catholic Midrashim*, can be found through <https://karinalutz.wordpress.com> .

# Jo Taylor

---

## For Your Glory

In 1976 I rebelled. I cut my hair. Perfect timing, I reasoned. My sisters and I were to travel to the Southwest with you, and they would help me lessen the blow, for you adhered fast to your conviction that a woman's tresses are her glory. Anxious, I arose early to wash and style my hair, now wild and uncooperative as if it were rebelling, too. I brushed and sprayed and parted and teased. Nothing worked. Shocks sprang from my head like the Red Sea recoiling to its banks. In a tizzy, I arrived at the airport just in time to board the plane, rehearsing the defense I would deliver you. But no speech. Not from me, not from you. Just your acknowledgment of my sin. *You had such purty hair.*

Years later you lie on the table, features set, hard and cold in the warm, pulsating light. In silence, your daughters prepare you for your return to Mother Earth, the youngest brushing your long silk strands, glossy-black and silver-streaked, for what seems an eternity, stroking as if fearing she will forget the feel, finally surrendering the hallowed moment to the other who parts the hair and meticulously plaits one side and then the other, at last fusing two braids swathed at the nape of your neck. With moves as deliberate and delicate as spun glass, she crimps a tiny finger-wave at your forehead and secures it with simple flat pins the way you had planted them a lifetime. The honor is complete. Sunbeams swaddle you, and glory shines all around.

## Flakhelfer<sup>1</sup>

Over the years I have heard fragments, how at fifteen,

---

<sup>1</sup> Soldier; Hitler's youth

the Beast conscripted your class into the air defense  
of his lair, how you admired the Allies' tight formation  
over your capital city, their bravery in the hail  
of shrapnel, how you collected metal, war's trappings,  
your souvenirs.

I heard how you and your comrades strayed  
from your squadron, how, in fear-thick air,  
your heart constricted when you eyed the enemy,  
but how they bandaged your wounds, and at war's end,  
released you with directions home. I see you,  
legs as swollen and heavy as water balloons,  
holding fast to survival, arriving to discover a mother's  
self-immolation, sisters' hard faces, and rubble.

I learned how guilt through the years had suffocated  
you like an umbilical cord strangling a newborn, how  
you wrestled with your complicity in nations' atrocities,  
and how at St. Michael's, where the Beast's Moonlight  
Sonata had unleashed decades-deep destruction,<sup>2</sup>  
you experienced your own blitz, emerging from the  
cathedral's ruins a new creation with a faith as strong  
as war's rhetoric, having acknowledged Man's propensity  
for evil.

Sometimes I look at your time-ravaged frame and consider  
how determined Memory is, directing mortar shells  
and flares to disturb night's rest, displaying tanks  
and air power as day dawns, reeling the horror like  
newly-discovered black and white film. But on this day  
as light advances, you hear another Moonlight Sonata.  
You jump and turn and dart and glide to the master's  
baton. You're a child. Home once more. *Quasi  
una fantasia.*

---

**Jo Taylor** is a retired, 35-year English teacher from Georgia. Her favorite genre to teach high school students was poetry, and today she dedicates more time to writing it, her major themes focused on family, place, and faith. She says she feels compelled to write, to give testimony to the past and to her heritage. She has been published in *The Ekphrastic Review*, in *Silver Birch Press* and in *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal*.

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<sup>2</sup> Operation Moonlight Sonata: The name of the Nazi military operation which pounded Coventry, England in November, 1940

## Cameron Morse

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### *Evade*

My two-year-old unearths in the garage  
the dual suspension aluminum  
scooters Dad picked up for us as kids  
at a recovery sales outlet.

No trace of the brand name  
*Evade* on the internet, I call the toll-free  
number stickered to the handlebars  
for a free manual. An auto insurance  
representative answers. Where the sticker  
prohibits scootering at night, I recall  
the church night Noah Cash and Adam  
Wilson disappeared on our scooters,  
rattling along the woodsy two-lane  
to a now derelict Casey's where the two boys  
could perform the stunts  
the sticker forbids. The former  
of these childhood ghosts recently committed  
Facebook suicide and closed the only  
window I had into his life as an Alaskan  
fisherman with an apartment in New Orleans.  
When my little rubber wheel snags,  
my boyhood tumbles in pain-filled  
hysterical laughter. My younger brother wants  
to know what games Dad was good at,  
what restaurants he frequented. I email the old guy  
on his 65th birthday about the coronavirus,  
factories closing in Yantai, where he lives  
with his new family called Spirits, called  
Loneliness, in the asylum of his own certainties.

### **Born in Sin**

Day three snowbound stir-crazy with my two-year-old  
leaves me speechlessly maimed, begging  
the dripping eaves for a way  
out of this war of shouting no, no, no,



shouting stop, before he overturns the chair,  
the table, the floor lamp.  
I would pray to God but settle for the old dog  
before me, Augustine, squinting  
in sunlight.

I wasn't always naughty.  
Yesterday while a second snow shook down  
the clouded glass door during afternoon  
naps, I watched my seven-year-old self in a collared shirt  
on video at the little league pizza party, sitting  
downwind from four empty chairs, caressing my participant trophy.

A pelt of snow draped over the gable  
ticks off the resounding sheets of slush below. I address the old dog.  
I ask my own shadow cast like a placemat  
over the charcoal gills of the condenser. *From the caresses  
of my nursery and jests of my friends* I proceed  
to this, Augustine, *so small a boy and so great a sinner.*

Why?

When it's as if every molecule in my body were vibrating  
with a desire to be like those boys. I glance  
at the recorder, then return my dark eyes to the jouncing jerseys  
of my teammates. *To love, and be loved.*

---

**Cameron Morse** was diagnosed with a glioblastoma in 2014. With a 14.6 month life expectancy, he entered the Creative Writing Program at the University of Missouri—Kansas City and, in 2018, graduated with an M.F.A. His poems have been published in numerous magazines, including *New Letters*, *Bridge Eight*, *Portland Review* and *South Dakota Review*. His first poetry collection, *Fall Risk*, won Glass Lyre Press's 2018 Best Book Award. His latest is *Baldy* (Spartan Press, 2020). He lives with his wife Lili and two children in Blue Springs, Missouri, where he serves as poetry editor for *Harbor Review*. For more information, check out his [Facebook page](#) or [website](#).

# Gerard Sarnat

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## SEASONALS

### **i. (Semi) Greetings**

A winter solstice  
mid-nonenarian's  
half full of superb  
long holiday cheer  
blending alternate quiet  
and family time.

### **ii. Christmas Morning**

Each plum biscuit bit's  
so very gummy yummy  
inside my tummy.

### **iii. Sobriety**

Soon fatal disease  
just diagnosed: upside's can  
fall off the wagon.

## **During Week Post Christmas: Staying On “As If” Basis With God<sup>1</sup>**

Our son's wife and one daughter's husband have Christian mothers  
which these days is somewhat unremarkable  
unless your partner's parents  
were Orthodox Jews.  
You'd think facts both kids love their spouses who are good moms  
would make all the difference... but arriving  
in each house where Xmas  
trees remain prominent  
takes a bit of luster off trying to celebrate Hanukkah with grandkids  
but we plough through it without much trouble.  
For me that's not too hard  
since Jesus was so cool.

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<sup>1</sup> riffing off phrase in Peter Schjeldahl's extraordinary "77 Sunset Me" in 23Dec19 *New Yorker*

# REFLECTING ON CHINA'S ONCE ONE-CHILD NATION

i. A Chinese grandpa'd  
celebrate my having all  
six grandkids as boys.

ii. Most Village Family  
Planners sterilize/abort  
'bout sixty thousand.

Abandoned newborns  
got picked up by garbage men  
well as bus drivers

for orphanages  
trafficking to desperate  
rich Americans.

When I saw preserved  
fetuses it felt like they  
were my own children.

iii. Becoming a dad  
was almost like giving birth  
to my memories.

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**Gerard Sarnat MD's** won prizes and authored *HOMELESS CHRONICLES* (2010), *Disputes*, *17s*, *Melting Ice King* (2016); and been published by *Review Berlin*, *Gargoyle*, *Oberlin*, *Brown*, *Stanford*, *Pomona*, *Harvard*, *Main Street Rag*, *New Delta Review*, *Free State Review*, *American Journal Of Poetry*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Brooklyn Review*, *LA Review*, *San Francisco Magazine*, *San Antonio Review*, *Texas Review*, *New York Times* plus *Mount Analogue* which selected *KADDISH* for distribution nationwide Inauguration Day. [gerardsarnat.com](http://gerardsarnat.com)

# Joris Soeding

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## Holy Thursday

I can't recall the last time I prayed the rosary  
stumbling on parts with many white, plastic beads  
cross swaying in front of the pew  
intricate knots in the wood, lines like squiggled threes  
plane arrivals lulled after ten  
wood creaks from the confessional or car keys of others  
wonder what the fifty-seven are praying  
some for a few minutes, some for an hour  
walking backwards from the altar  
the burning candelabras and gold circle

I used to say the Hail Mary each week  
after school Wednesdays, Fridays, during weekend soccer games  
looked for her statue to motion to me  
a vocation to priesthood  
her face, hands to move  
being alone, like this, at the seminary in Cheshire, Connecticut  
silent retreat unless we were in the field  
playing amidst woods, a dirt road  
talking of *The Shining* book, music  
ZZ Top's Greatest Hits cassette in my black walkman

how the little things change  
time and what takes precedence  
my children, nine and six  
their years ahead, decisions, families  
I look back at the women I've loved  
still here and who is not  
places known well and the return  
again with the statues, their shadows  
subtle hum of lights, a motorcycle, and the five of us remaining  
red candles and the last supper  
what is lost and what is gained

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**Joris Soeding's** most recent collections of poetry are *Forty* (*Rinky Dink Press*, 2019) and *Home in Nine Moons* (*Clare Songbirds Publishing House*, 2018). He is a 7th/8th grade Social Studies teacher in Chicago, where he resides with his wife, son, and daughter.

# Anna Jensen

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## Me

I am no island  
though I seek the solace of uncomplicated solitude  
and stand as a colossus to my own independence  
I am created connected,  
entwined,  
communal.

I may prefer that you remain unsullied  
untroubled  
unpolluted  
by the struggle that is sometimes me,  
but I am placed beside you  
so you perhaps will  
care watchfully  
love prayerfully  
stand firmly.

And then when you through valleys wander  
bring I to remembrance that,  
I am no island.

I am not always the centre of the storm that swirls  
or the reason for the rage that roars,  
but rather I am placed beside you  
for just a reason  
and a season  
as this;  
that I may care watchfully  
pray lovingly  
stand securely.

I truly am no island  
I am we  
You and me  
Mine and yours  
Caring, loving, praying, standing  
Remaining.

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**Anna Jensen** is a British ex-pat who has lived in South Africa for a little over twenty years. She lives with her husband and two teenage children on the east coast, a few miles north of the city of Durban.

Anna's first book 'The Outskirts of His Glory' was published in May 2019. The book is a Christian devotional and poetry collection. Anna continues to write poetry and devotionals for a variety of publications, including her own blog.

You can find Anna at [www.annajensen.co.uk](http://www.annajensen.co.uk) or email [hello@annajensen.co.za](mailto:hello@annajensen.co.za)



# Nnadi Samuel

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## **My Body as a Book of Bible Stories**

a bat lies cold in the ark on the pulpit sitting on the grave inside of me.  
moonlight wasted it, like Noah forgot her in a recent flood.  
the roof of my body snows more than the winter here in Florida.

a foreigner boarded a part of me & begged half his refund.  
the last Frisian girl who dated me grew stone-cold and blu.  
nothing escapes the weather forecast aired on my bones.  
even me, i dread to stop by what is left of myself.

but life is worthless around here if you cannot tiptoe into what house your breath,  
to loot snows for the world.

before now i was an ark cross-dressed in a synagogue of red,  
the Israelites did not sell their brothers to gain the ten commandments in me.

i am forever indebted to the wood i am made of,  
the scroll that holds God's commandment & every other christian house left inside of me.

## **As Catholics, We Do Not Adopt God in the Right Fabric**

As a Catholic, i melt each time we are asked to offer each other the sign of peace.

i'd prefer a righteous hug to gifting strangers with handshakes.  
i do not want to be the one responsible for ruining the birthmark incensed on a catechist's paws, in the  
name of Palm Sunday.

my palms are twice as harsh the turfs grown on the barren acre ridging on our Bishop's brainbox.  
i do not say this timidly,  
i made them so.

coarse enough to rear the holy communion close to my jaws,  
because its fluff still spreads through my tongue like wildfire.

it is our youth's harvest today.  
the chaplain says our burnt offerings do not char plain to adopt God in the right fabric.  
he says, to deworm God in a global warming, you do not even need to overcook the sky.

the liquid cross nominated on my forehead bears me witness,  
i do not dissolve to make my blood covenant in Christ potent.  
the clergy says we are not gay in most sunday school manuals,  
we are only cross dressers, hastily abluted on every rosary that necks virgin Mary in between  
it's thighs.

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**Nnadi Samuel** is a 20 year old graduate of English & literature from the University of Benin. His works are previously published in *libretto magazine*, *Ace world Publishers*, *Artifact magazine* and a piece title "My girlfriend says she would die in a street lamp" forthcoming in *Jams & Sand magazine*. If he is not writing, you can find him reading out memes on Facebook @ Samuel Samba.

# Adesina Ajala

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## The Manner of Love

Love unfolded His arms,  
felt the grit of the cross,  
nails alighting, breaking into  
His palms in the rage of  
a hammer.

Love unbolted His heart to the faintest knock,  
like the ground parted under Korah's, Dathan's  
and Abiram's feet.  
He said: *Truly I say to you, today  
you shall be with Me in Paradise.*  
And the penitent thief found home,  
mercy blushing at the door; welcoming.

Love was betrayed, yet trailed His traitor  
to the shore of Tiberias—  
A threadbare heart needed stitches of love, asked,  
*Do you love me?*

Love lit our lost hearts lucidly when asked,  
*Teacher, which is the greatest  
commandment in the Law?* He responded,  
1a— *Love the Lord your God with all your heart.*  
1b— *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

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**Adesina Ajala** shares his time between treating sick children and creative writing. His works have featured on *The Wild Word*, *The Quills*, *Featiler Rays*, *Eboquills* and elsewhere. He was co-winner TSWF Writers Prize (2018), winner Freedom Voices Poetry Writing Prize (2019) and winner Splendors of Dawn Poetry Foundation (January, 2020).

# Linda McCullough Moore

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## free will

This woman, who does not believe God made the world, does not believe God even is, believes he handcrafted evil, whether in a flash of pique or in a sawdust dusted workshop or a cauldron used for making stardust Tuesday morning. I refuse to inquire. I do not ask, now why would God do that? It is evil to ask when asking asks stupidity to take the mic, make oral argument. Instead I say, nice sweater. It matters so to her. Are those new shoes? See here's the thing. Two minutes after God created Adam one minute after God created Eve, he let rip and thundered, Let there be free will. If he sounds angry, well no wonder. He doesn't have to wonder what the new folk will make of choice. Let Adam flex his digits, flick the spider. Let new Eve prevaricate, see Adam smile, hear Eve sigh, pleased. You wake up on a Saturday and realize you can sleep till noon. You hop out of bed. I call it agency I can do whatever I want. There was no need at all for God to manufacture evil. The morning that he made the world, he quick decided on the buffalo, but let the whole idea of robots go.

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**Linda McCullough Moore** is the author of a novel, two story collections, including *An Episode of Grace*, and a book of essays, *The Book of Not so Common Prayer*, and hundreds of poems and short stories. [www.lindamcculloughmoore.com](http://www.lindamcculloughmoore.com)

# Phyllis Hemann

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## Redemption

When a fish separates  
from water,

it's body whips back  
and forth, convulses  
desperate to find liquid.

I'm pretty sure, I look  
like this from above.

I watch the fish flailing  
and wonder: *should I  
show it the way?*

Will it follow? Understand? Resent  
not discovering water on its own  
after trying with every fiber and nerve  
in its being?

Or will I return to it, a husk dried  
mere inches from mercy.

---

**Phyllis Hemann** writes and teaches in Arkansas. She holds a M.F.A. from Antioch University Los Angeles and B.A.'s from University of Arkansas at Little Rock and St. Gregory's University. Her work has appeared in newspapers, journals and anthologies. She is the author of *THE INVISIBLE HEROINE* (Finishing Line Press). Find her online at [phyllishemann.com](http://phyllishemann.com).

# John Tuttle

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## Selfish Mirage

What if I told you,  
“You gave shape to the mirage”?  
And you could subdue it  
For it has been  
A compilation of mind and heart  
Yours to be sure  
Where you could not face yourself  
The truth behind  
A door  
Locked  
The key  
Residing in your pocket.

It was you  
Who watered the weed  
Carved this graven image  
An icon  
Built on illusions  
Transparent but obscured  
Till neither you nor I  
Could see through  
And you hurt yourself  
When I took leave  
Because you believed  
In fantasies.

---

**John Tuttle** is a Catholic writer and creative. He’s had poetry published previously or in forthcoming installments of *Crepe & Penn*, *Ariel Chart*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *The Good Men Project*, *Lit Up*, *Poetry in Form*, etc.. His articles have been published by *Christian Post*, *CiRCE Institute*, *Tekton Ministries*, *Culture Wars*, *Grotto Network*, and elsewhere.

# Craig Dobson

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## When Angels Speak

they talk like paramedics:  
comforting, professional,  
but direct, wanting answers.

Drawn to your greed for  
their experience and skill,  
nevertheless they must know  
what they're dealing with –

what illness or condition,  
what accident or crime  
decreed a pavement's precipice  
or the cliff edge of a soiled bed

to be the theatre of epiphany  
from whose front row you  
watch them perform the deft  
and touching show of all they need.

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**Craig Dobson's** had poems and short stories published in several UK and European magazines. He's working towards his first collection of poetry.



# John C. Mannone

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## Morning of the Fourth Day

On my windshield frost, a galaxy  
spins its crystal arms, ice fingers  
branch with their own kind of suns,  
reflects the starburst glare of dawn.  
I imagine crystal palaces beyond  
the glass—silent, unseen, yet felt  
and not cold, its glow, transparent  
coming from the other side of heaven.

## Feeding the Hungry

### I.

Soup kitchens are always crowded  
with the hungry, and on certain days,  
dressed as best as they could with  
what they got on their backs,  
they'd shuffle in through the doors;  
someone would greet them, show  
them to their seats. The air was foul  
but the fresh odor of prayers was like  
ladled soup in white bowls filling  
the air with salty savor. Someone  
would give the word, and the quiet  
cook in the kitchen broke the bread,  
poured out red wine for the special  
celebration that Easter, as in so many  
other churches.

### II.

This past week at a sandwich shop,  
a man with a clean smile helped me  
clear the trash off my table. I smiled  
back, thanked him. Then he paused,  
made his calculated move to beg me  
for money. Awkward. And his stench  
betrayed his homelessness. It gagged

me. Quickly I searched for the change  
in my heart, but I found nothing  
in my pockets. I was sick to my stomach  
as he walked away because I knew  
I stunk more in my Lord's nostrils.

### III.

We were all invited to a wedding  
supper, but instructed to leave  
our dirty clothes at the door,  
to put on the clean, fresh garments  
of praise (our filthy rags  
of self-righteousness should be burned)  
and our feet washed  
with the Word leaving a fragrance  
of brotherly love. We the hungry.

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**John C. Mannone** has poems appearing/accepted in the 2020 Antarctic Poetry Exhibition, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Menteur*, and others. His poetry won the Impressions of Appalachia Creative Arts Contest (2020). He was awarded a Jean Ritchie Fellowship (2017) in Appalachian literature. A retired physics professor, he lives near Knoxville, Tennessee. <http://jcmannone.wordpress.com>

# Sarah Law

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## A flash from *One Hundred Lost Letters*<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes fake flowers are a kindness; *mock* the description is gentle; *mock* as a verb has a bittersweet sting. I arrange tissue lilies and cornflowers around the Child's feet; himself an imitation of our living Divinity. An old sister comes up shaking her head. She thinks to scold me for causing her fever.

I seek to save her dignity and pluck three petals from their paper cluster. "So clever, what we can make these days." I give her my best smile.

She responds with a brief bloom of friendship. Its scent remains with me; I scrunch up my sacrificed tokens.

The cloister walk's flagstones are dappled with grace.

---

**Sarah Law** lives in London, UK, and is a tutor for the Open University. With work in *America*, *The Windhover*, *Saint Katherine Review*, and *Presence* among other journals, her next collection, *Thérèse: Poems*, is forthcoming from Paraclete Press. She edits [Amethyst Review](#), an online journal for new writing engaging with the sacred.

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<sup>1</sup> an ongoing fragmentary project in which reflects on the lost letters of St Therese of Lisieux, 1873-97, to her confessor.

# DT Richards

## It's Only a Second You're Down

Jamey Chu got baptized on a Thursday night. It just worked out that way. Pastor Dorking said he had already planned a special service with lunch the coming Sunday, and he said couldn't really have the pool open, not with lunch. Jamey accepted he do a Thursday baptism. "Prayer service is a good time to get baptized," Pastor Dorking had assured her, enveloping his large, thick hands around hers.

Thursday evening Leanne brought Jamey to a little room in the basement of the small gospel church. It contained only an old, metal-frame bed. Jamey had seen the room before, but had never been in it. The baptismal pool lay to their left, nestled almost as an afterthought just off the hallway. Leanne brought a set of old white cotton clothes on her arm.

"Just change, and wait here." Leanne's voice floated light and airy, unattached to anything, the way people's voices are when dealing with delicate topics. "We'll let you know when it's time to come out." She placed the baptismal clothes the bed and shut the door behind her.

Through the ceiling, Jamie could hear the congregation singing in the prayer service. She couldn't recognize the song. It might have been something they sang only before baptisms. Or it might just have been the way the ceiling muffled and distorted everything that passed through it.

The light bulb overhead had an old frosted shade. The ceiling itself was dotted with mold stains. The wooden panels down the wall opposite her had started to peel at the joints. Someone had tried to hold back the decay by putting up rails of plastic strip. Jamey wondered who normally used this room. Was it reserved for baptisms? Or for the elderly members to rest?

She flipped through the clothes Leanne had left. She no longer felt as confident about her decision as she had when talking to Pastor Dorking. Too much had happened in between. Her boyfriend Alex had acted very strangely about the whole event. Her mother's last words, just before Jamey slammed the front door of the house, still rattled in her brain. The cursing had all been in Cantonese, and the Cantonese part of her brain spit back. But its words were as muffled and distorted as the sounds of the congregation above.

Jamey started to unbutton her blouse. "I've made my choice forever..." The lyrics to the old hymn dribbled off her lips as buttery as lies. Fear of losing face was now what kept her from running away.

"Lord, come help me here," she whispered. "Ma says I'm disgracing my ancestors, Alex doesn't care. I don't know why I told him I was ready." She began unzipping her long blue skirt. "You know I gave my heart to You, and I confess You as my Lord. I confess with my mouth. You are my Lord. *Jyun gau ngor...*"

Words faded into motions of her mouth, neither English nor Cantonese. Jamey had now stripped to her

underclothes. She folded her cream blouse and blue skirt carefully and laid them on the stained mattress beside her. She still felt as if she were only trying to save face with God, telling him what she thought he wanted to hear. She could not make her words penetrate the catacomb of feelings that lay underneath. She didn't know how to roll away the stone, to lift out those doubts that didn't have any form or word, to box each one in a prayer language God could hear.

When she saw the baptismal clothes draped on Leanne's arms, she had worried they would be less than decent. But, on her, they hung loosely and chastely. They seemed content in their own chunky form, hiding both the form of her body and the conflict within.

Only her feet were naked. She had not planned ahead: the nail on the third toe of her left foot needed clipping. Her baby toes splayed embarrassingly wide and flat from a childhood of flip-flops.

She could hear Deputy Pastor Cawley run water in the pool next door. "He'll be doing the baptism," Leanne had told her, "him and Sister Doak's daughter. Remember to hold your nose when he dips you backwards. And don't breathe 'til you're up. Don't worry, dear. It's only a second or two you're down."

Jamey sat at the edge of the bed. She placed her hands in her lap, the fingers of one hand wrapping the fingers of the other, and her two thumbs side by side, ready to hold her nose. She was vaguely aware that the gesture demanded joss sticks sticking up from between those thumbs and the sweet, oily smell of incense rising from the sticks.

A sudden memory overwhelmed her, one of being much smaller, kneeling in front of the altar at her parent's temple in Hok Yuen. She remembered reciting prayers for her ancestors. The edge of the altar, with its gold railing, would have been just the distance to the far wall: perhaps that was what made it so vivid. She would have joss sticks in her hands, and would be waving them.

Jamey lifted her hands to slide the bangs of her hair behind her ears. The simple, unconscious action broke the image's spell. She thought about invoking a prayer, but she could not find the will to say anything. The image was so much more a part of her than the Christian imagery she had been lathing over her psyche, like white American icing, for the last year.

"I'm lost," she said, not to God or to anyone in particular.

Leanne tapped on the door. The congregation was now outside, crooning a quiet, sad song, a capella. She found the dirge, in its own curious way, very welcoming.

Leanne tapped on the door. "Jamey. Are you ready?"

Jamey stood up. After one last glance at the peeling wall where the altar had been, she turned to the door.

"I'm ready," she said.

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**DT Richards** is the writing name of a Canadian writer currently living and working in Singapore, where he teaches game design and programming. He's been published in several Christian anthologies, and has had his work praised in many secular journals. You can read some of his fiction for free at [dtrichards.wordpress.com](http://dtrichards.wordpress.com).

# Madeline Mysko

## Mothers

They'd been on the interstate for two hours when Ted began to feel drowsy. "I can't keep my eyes open," he said. "I hate driving in the afternoon."

"Carbohydrates," Augusta said grimly. "You had two pieces of cake. All that icing."

There was an exit coming up, but it was a shame, because both the children were asleep in the back, and a stop would surely wake them. Buddy was teething, running a low-grade fever. Four year-old Laura had just celebrated her birthday at Granny and Pop Pop's. For the first hour of the trip she had whined for her new doll. Ted had inadvertently packed it in the trunk.

They took the exit, which ended at a stoplight. A truck pulled up behind them, squealing its brakes, and two motorcycles roared by on the shoulder. Laura yawned and whined. "Mommy, when will we be home?"

Buddy woke up crying.

"Well, it was nice while it lasted," Augusta said.

Directly ahead was a small restaurant with too many cars on the lot, and across the road from that, a gas station. No fast food places.

It was Ted's idea to try the restaurant—an early dinner, and they'd still be home in plenty of time to get the kids in bed by eight. Augusta was all for getting out of the car, but didn't like the greasy look of the restaurant, all those cars, and the unusual number of motorcycles. Laura was whining that she had to go to the bathroom.

Augusta sighed and unbuckled Buddy from his car seat. "If we have to wait for a table, let's just use the bathrooms and get back on the road."

The interior of the restaurant was yellow—dull yellow curtains at the windows, dusty yellow plastic daffodils in the planters by the door. A tired-looking hostess appeared with a stack of menus. "Table for four," she said, as though it were an imperative, and led them across the packed little dining room toward a table in the far corner. In the light from the window, Augusta could see a large wet swirl that covered only the middle of their table. There were crumbs on the seats.

"We'll need a booster and a high chair," Augusta said.

The hostess pressed her lips together and listlessly scanned the room. "I think maybe all the high chairs we got are being used right now. I'll see what I can find."

“I have to go to the bathroom, Mommy,” Laura said again, more urgently.

“You take her to the bathroom and I’ll see to the high chair,” Ted said, taking Buddy from Augusta’s arms. “Here Buddy, come sit with Daddy. The lady will get you a chair.”

The bathroom was about what Augusta had expected—damp floor, overflowing trashcan, sickening strawberry air-freshener. She wreathed the toilet seat with paper, and sat Laura down. Afterwards she held her up at the sink so she could wash her hands. There were no paper towels. She used a towelette from her purse.

When they got back to the table, Buddy was already in the high chair—an old-fashioned one with a metal tray. The waitress, a large woman in a mustard-colored uniform, was slapping at the tray with a wet rag while Ted held Buddy’s fists out of the way. Augusta noticed that they hadn’t buckled him in.

“Oh, there you are,” Ted said. “I ordered iced tea for you, and milk for Laura, OK?” He handed Augusta a menu.

The waitress smiled.

“You know he’s not buckled into that chair,” Augusta said.

“I don’t think he’s going anywhere,” Ted said. But immediately Buddy began to squirm around and got one foot up on the seat.

“See what I mean?”

Ted ducked underneath to investigate. “I don’t see a strap—no wait, here it is. But it looks like it’s broken off.”

“Let me see,” the waitress said. As she squatted beside Ted, Buddy looked down at her head and the big, purple hair clip. They managed to buckle the strap over his legs. In the meantime, Augusta got out another towelette and wiped Buddy’s hands and the tray.

“Not an inch to spare, but he’s in there good and snug,” Ted declared, slipping behind a menu.

The waitress reached a hand up to adjust the hair clip. Her name-tag read Darla.

“I hope his circulation’s not cut off,” Augusta said.

“He’s just fine, ma’am.” The waitress wasn’t smiling any more. She proceeded to reel off the day’s specials.

They ordered. The waitress went off to be snapped up by the kitchen doors.

“Why do you always have to put it that way, Augusta?” Ted said. “Do you think I deliberately left that strap just hanging there?”



“No. I think you forgot. You always forget.”

“I do not always forget.”

“All right, you don’t always forget. But one time is all you need to have him on the floor.”

“Come, on. I’m sitting right here looking at him.”

The waitress returned with a basket of rolls. “Here, honey,” she said to Laura, withdrawing a small box of crayons from her apron. “Maybe you’d like to color on your place mat.”

“How nice,” Augusta said. “What do you say, Laura?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” The waitress smiled, but only at Laura, before turning on her heel.

Ted took a bite of a roll. “Good,” he said. “Fresh. Want one?”

Augusta shook her head.

Both the children were content now, Laura drawing on the placemat, Buddy blowing bubbles of drool. Augusta stretched and looked around. Except for the four motorcycle types in black leather, there were mostly families in the dining room. She counted three high chairs, including Buddy’s. “You know,” she said, “this place isn’t half bad.”

The words were barely out of her mouth when the hostess appeared and dealt three menus on the next table over. Three people sat down: two bony young men in T-shirts and jeans, and an older woman—their mother, Augusta decided—in a bulging orange dress. Someone had a strong body odor. The woman took out a cigarette and placed it between her lips.

The waitress named Darla arrived. “I’m sorry,” she said to the woman, more kindly than Augusta expected. “Smoking isn’t allowed.”

“Oh, I know that, hon,” the woman said. “I wasn’t gonna light it.”

The waitress spun around. “Everything all right over here?” she asked with a smile for Ted.

Ted beamed at her over his roll. “Everything’s fine.”

“Okay then,” she said, turning back to the other table. “What can I get you folks?”

“I think I’ll have the hotdog,” the first son said.

“A hotdog again?” the mother said. “You’re gonna turn into a hotdog one of these days.” Her thin gray hair was pulled into a ponytail, which pointed to the frayed label poking up from the yoke of her dress. “I can just see it,” she went on in a gravelly voice. “One of these days I turn back the covers to get this boy out of bed and bingo, there’s this hotdog staring up at me.”

The entire table laughed. The waitress laughed with them.

“Ma! For christ’s sake, let’s order,” said the second son, punching her lightly on her pale, fleshy arm.

“Yeah, Ma,” the first said, “order.”

“I believe I’ll have a hotdog,” the mother said. The waitress was still laughing as she hurried away.

“Thank you, Darla,” the mother called after her.

Their dinners arrived. There was the usual shuffling around of plates and cutting up food for the children. Augusta methodically mashed some peas into the potatoes and spooned them into Buddy’s mouth. She saw that Laura was mesmerized by the goings-on at the next table. “Eat your dinner, Laura,” she said. “Try your applesauce. It’s really good.”

“Mommy?” Laura said loud and clear. “Is that man going to turn into a hotdog?”

Ted laughed. They laughed at the other table, too.

Augusta leveled off a spoonful and shoveled it into Buddy’s open mouth. “No,” she said. “The lady was only teasing.”

The mother at the other table scooted her chair around. “Will you look at these two pretty babies!” she said. “Hello, sweeties.”

“Hello,” Laura said.

The sons ducked their heads like embarrassed teenagers, though they were considerably older than that.

The mother was taken with Buddy. “Look at this pretty boy,” she crooned. “Couldn’t you just eat him up?” She winked at Laura. “Don’t worry, honey. I wouldn’t really eat him. That’s just something mamas say about to sweet little babies. Don’t your mama say she could eat you up sometimes?”

“No,” Laura said flatly.

Suddenly Buddy was arching his back, straining against the safety straps. Augusta fished in her bag, and came up with a teething biscuit. Buddy took the biscuit and settled down to gum it.

The woman turned back to her own table then, to her own sons.

Augusta ate her salad, gazing out the window at the cars on the parking lot and the straggly row of shrubs beyond. It wasn’t yet six o’clock, but already the light was going.

Ted was drawing a picture of a dog for Laura on her placemat.

“Make his eyes green, Daddy,” Laura said.

The green crayon was on the floor. Augusta reached down to retrieve it, and was just coming up from under the table, when Ted leaped from his seat.

Buddy was slowly and silently retching.

“He’s choking on the goddamned biscuit,” Ted said.

They had to get him out of the high chair. Augusta dropped to her knees and fumbled with the strap. She couldn’t find the short end of it. Ted grabbed Buddy under the arms and pulled.

“No! Wait, Ted!” Augusta cried, looking up, around the tray. “It’s still caught.”

With each retch, Buddy turned a shade grayer.

Now one of the sons from the other table was there on the floor beside Augusta. Deftly, miraculously, he undid the strap. Ted pulled Buddy from the chair, flipped him over and slapped his back. “Come on,” he said, his voice high-pitched, not his own. “Come on, Buddy.”

Buddy no longer retched.

Augusta grabbed him. But once she had him, couldn’t think what to do. *Heimlich*—it was just a word, useless. She put a finger into her baby’s mouth, and was terrified to feel nothing there, nothing to grab, and his little mouth so slack.

*What is it? . . . 911 . . . Yes, I called. . .* Laura shrieking, *Mommy, Mommy.*

The gravelly voice of the mother at the other table cut through. “Give him to me. I know what to do.” She had already slipped a hand under Buddy’s head.

Augusta let him go. He rolled against the other mother’s breasts.

The mother laid Buddy on his back across her knees. Once, twice, three times she thrust her fingers against the sailboat appliqué on the front of his overalls. Something came out of his mouth. He was vomiting, coughing. Confidently, as though she were working in the kitchen, the woman turned him on his side and scooped the stuff from his mouth with two fingers and wiped it onto the edge of the table. She lifted him up. And now he was crying.

She held him out to Augusta. “Here you go, Mama, ” she said, smiling crookedly. “All better.”

Augusta seized him, pressing her face against his head. She rocked him with her whole body. It felt as though his cries were coming from her own mouth. She closed her eyes and saw the woman’s fingers pressing against the little sailboat. She opened her eyes and said, “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me.” She was standing between her sons now, the three of them holding hands, as though they were about to say grace.

“You saved his life.”

“It was God’s will. God’s will I was here, I mean.” The woman let go of her sons’ hands and sat down heavily. “Jesus. Where’s my cigarette?”

“Here you go,” the one son said, taking one from his pocket. “Shit. You got the whole damned pack if you want.” She put it between her lips and let it hang there.

The other people returned to their tables. Someone was wiping up the floor. The waitress named Darla was holding Laura in her arms, because Ted was sitting at the table with his face in his hands. And now the ambulance lights were flashing through the front windows, probing the dining room. By then Buddy had settled down to sucking his thumb. He looked no different from any other baby boy at the end of a long day.

No, Augusta told the paramedics, she didn’t want Buddy to go to the hospital. Everything was fine now. She promised she would call their own pediatrician the minute they got home. They weren’t far from home, maybe only an hour’s drive.

When at last the paramedics left, Ted seemed to recover. He took Laura’s placemat to the other table and asked the woman and her sons for their names and an address. Augusta watched him write it all down in blue crayon, next to the dog he had drawn. The mother’s name was Sally Burdock. Her sons were Christian and Carl. They lived in Virginia Beach.

They all stood up, all seriousness. Ted shook their hands. Then he hugged the mother, harder than Augusta had ever seen him hug his own mother. All the while Augusta stood to the side, rocking Buddy.

When Ted let her go, Sally Burdock came over to Augusta. She rested a hand lightly on Buddy’s head, like a priestess administering a blessing. Her hand was small and square, the nails torn. “Beautiful little sweetie,” she said. “And what’s his name?”

“Robert. But we call him Buddy.”

“Buddy.”

Suddenly Buddy popped his thumb from his mouth to smile. Augusta felt it in her breasts.

Sally Burdock held out her arms to him.

Augusta pretended not to notice. She shifted Buddy quickly on her hip, and looked over her shoulder, as though she had lost sight of something important. The crayons on the table—she swept them into her bag.

Sally Burdock dropped her arms.

Ted was waving goodbye now, taking Laura by the hand, leading her across the room.

The sons had already sat down at their table. “Ma,” the one said.

“Goodbye,” Sally Burdock said.

Buddy waved, pumping his arm up and down.

“Goodbye,” Augusta murmured, her lips in Buddy’s hair, which smelled of baby shampoo and also something foreign now—cigarette smoke, or something darker she didn’t want to name.

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# Hannah Melin

## My Ancestors Must Have Been Beasts

Sometimes I feel my ancestors must have been beasts. When I dig into that cording in my gut that drags out in a twisting line across oceans and centuries, it seems impossible that I share a core with gentlefolk in layers of well-ironed wool or ship captains in starched overcoats with finely trimmed facial hair. I try to picture myself in their lantern-lit homes, but the walls feel claustrophobic and the petticoats feel itchy and I can't catch a full breath in a laced-up corset. No, these people were not my ancestors.

I think about the lunatics of Victoria's England, running wild on the moors, the ones who gave lunacy its name. London's lycanthropes: tearing off buckled boots to feel the marsh squish between their bare toes, whooping and hollering and howling at the moon which hangs so low over that mist-covered island country. Those trapped in stone-walled asylums thrash themselves against the bricks, banging their shoulder harder and harder against their cell and rattling their chains, crying out to their pack-brothers on the surface world above.

When I wake up in the middle of the night, I throw a thin robe around my naked self and tiptoe through the house. I open the door of my suburban home and step out onto the wet grass. Goosebumps run up my legs and a shiver crawls through my gut as the cold dewdrops sink into my pale skin, wrinkling my toes. I breathe in heavy through my mouth to taste the water in the air. There's a sweetness to it, like the cloying half-taste on the back of the tongue after I swallow a mouthful of honey. It tastes clean.

When I see the moon shining full and heavy, like an overripe fruit that promises deep red juice if I could just sink my teeth into it, the twisted rope in my gut tugs my fingers towards my car keys. There's a whisper that tells me to chase the moon as far as the roads go, and when I reach the end of the pavement, leave the car behind and chase it further into the woods, chase it over the rocks and through the brush and into the dark. I could run faster on all fours, it whispers. I go back inside and try unsuccessfully to fall asleep.

When I look at the back of my hands, paper-pale in the winter, thin scars from rosebush scrapes and cat scratches so visible over the indigo threading of veins, I try and imagine them darker. I know that the darkest skin that stretched across their knuckles must have been tanned dark by a heavy-hanging southeastern sun and that the calloused, tan fingers were just as likely to have wrapped around a whip as they were the handles of a gardener's shears.

My fingers refuse to form one shape for too long. They fiddle and fidget and fight with each other, clasping and releasing. The finger next to the decade-broken pinky pops and unpopps, making a dull noise where the knuckle bones jam and scrape against each other. When my mind untethers, they twist themselves into language, spelling out letter by letter phrases and words overheard or half-remembered. It's rare I even use the sign language I learned years ago and rarer that I make an effort to study it, but my fingers always remember it, taking it of their own volition the moment I am distracted enough to set them free and let them speak.

My fingers twist and flex and writhe like earthworms after a storm, bleached pale by moonlight. I try to imagine my ancestors holding their hands like marble-white statues, clasping them still in prayer. My fingertips feel chilled when I picture it and the harder I try to hold my hands still the more they tremble. My knucklebones ache when I force them into the shapes logic says their ancestors held, the muscles tight, until I allow my hands to fall into the shape they want. They curve in on themselves and dig into warm, shallow dirt with joy. The winter swathe of pale across the back of them turns summer-dark and darker still, warmed by the sun and stained by the blackberries they used to dye their daughter's dresses. They must have been strong, clever hands with fingers that swept cobwebs from their face as they walked deeper into the red cypress woods. They dragged up jalap flowers by its roots and broke apart rotted logs to gather autumn skullcaps. They ground herbs and oils into a poultice that must be applied on the night of the new moon, or else not again for another two months.

When I walk through the right kind woods, the ones where summer boils the humid air and Spanish moss sways above like a thousand hanged men, my hands drag across the tops of leaves. I knock the warm puddles of rainwater off of elephant ears and tickle at the Velcro of lichens on rough bark. I crouch to draw patterns in the dirt: long, curving symbols that twist around like an ouroboros. My fingers skip over poison ivy without me remembering what the plant's leaf is shaped like. They trace around holes in tree trunks where brightly-coloured beetles crawl from moments after my touch leaves. The hand that does not touch twitches and flexes and writes in the air, spelling out words in the language I taught it once. My fingers speak at my side, spelling out V-O-O-D-O-O and H-O-O-D-O-O and W-I-T-C-H-W-O-M-A-N.

Sometimes, I manage to notice one of the whitewashed steeples around me as more than set dressing. Churches are easy to ignore; life in the South means they're everywhere, none of them more distinct than the other. When I find myself recognizing the high windows as a place of significance, I try to imagine my ancestors sitting in pews. There's French Catholic, on my grandfather's side. How could my ancestors walk the streets below the towering forces of cathedrals and not feel the presence of God? I wonder if they woke hours before dawn to bake bread before they funneled into a small farm-town church, or if they tied silk scarves over their heads and joined hundreds on their city-street parsonage towards the great doors of Notre Dame?

But in my family, we never met my grandfather's brothers. I know he spoke French, but the only French word shared in our home was our name for him: Pepere. There was a rosary and a crucifix that hung on the wall of my grandparent's room, but I cannot remember anyone pointing them out to me, cannot remember anyone telling me the story of a bleeding Bethlehemian who seemed to be impossible to kill. I know these objects were there, but the stories were absent.

Instead, my family told me stories about my grandmother's side. My Amma was born in Iceland, I was told. It is a land that freezes over in every spot it can and where it can't, molten rock bubbles just below the surface. There are huldufolk in the hills, Hannah, they told me. Fairies and elves that build homes in the solidified lava, threading white wildflowers into braids of long, green grass. There are trolls in the mountains of Iceland, I was told, and the trolls are the mountains. They rumble across the lavafields at night, but if they are not hidden in their caves before the sun rises, they become the stone itself.

My grandmother wore a thin gold chain with a cross around her neck, but she showed me a three-inch-high statue of a bearded man holding a geometric hammer. She placed it in my hand so I could feel the carved stone myself and told me I was holding the God of Storms. I repeated his name after her. No,

Hannah-mein, she corrected, Oh-deen-sun, and I repeated until I could mimic the accented syllables.

I sit in the back of a parking lot of a church and think about going in. The weave in my gut pulls my fingers towards the steering wheel, pulls me away from the doors. I try to picture clean white walls beside polished wooden pews but the smell of fresh paint gives me a headache. The voice in my gut whispers heathen, heathen.

I read about Ragnar's Siege of Paris. With one hundred and twenty Viking ships, Ragnar Lodbrok took the city for all it was worth. With five thousand men, Ragnar strode through the streets, pillaging and ransacking. He spilled blood on church steps and ripped filigree from the temple walls. He wasn't driven out; the French king paid them a ransom and they sailed back up the Seine with all of the gold and silver and women they desired.

I try and listen to the hum of my blood, the stirring mixture from my grandparent's grandparent's grandparents. It should be a fifty-fifty divide, a parental split, but I read about Ragnar's Seige of Paris and the wild thrum in my veins does not hesitate to take a side.

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**Hannah Melin** is a writer working out of Dallas, Texas. She studied Creative Writing at the University of Central Florida where she worked as the Fiction Editor for *The Cypress Dome* literary magazine. After undergrad, she worked as a literacy teacher for the Peace Corps on islands throughout the Eastern Caribbean.

Her nonfiction work has been featured in Missouri's *Big Muddy* literary magazine and her fiction has been published in *Monkeybicycle* and *The Metaworker*.



# *Diane Vogel Ferri*

## **Come By Here**

Pastor Bob rented a school bus and once year our lives were at the mercy of his erratic navigating of the yellow beast. The joyride took us from our flat northern suburb to the hills of central Ohio. We knew we were getting close to camp when the road relentlessly twisted and curved and forty teenagers began screaming and falling out of their seats. Pastor Bob was on a mission to deposit us at camp in record time every year—safety be damned—we had the prayers of an entire congregation covering us.

We weren't afraid, because we were stupid teenagers, and we looked forward to this parentless week all year. Besides that, our spiritual guru was like an affectionate and kooky uncle whom we all adored. He truly would give anyone the shirt off of his back, but no one would want it because you could smell his sweat-soaked clothing from yards away. His inability to tame his sweat glands was some type of medical condition, so it wasn't his fault, but we tried our best to avoid his affectionate hugs.

The camp was set firmly into a steep hillside and you were either climbing a hill or sliding down a hill. Fighting gravity all day was exhausting. The dark, dusty cabins were at the top of a hill and a beautiful thousand-acre meandering lake was at the bottom of the dirt path. Tree roots serving as makeshift steps and branches to grasp were the only reason you didn't take a dangerous tumble moving from one activity to another. Prehistoric rock slabs stacked like enormous pancakes were scattered throughout the surrounding forest. A chapel nestled in the woods was made completely of wood—the benches, the podium, the large cross, where, each morning we sat solemnly under a canopy of oak trees and listened to the day's message given by one of our pastors.

There had been no improvements on this church-owned camp for decades. (It certainly wasn't accessible to anyone not able-bodied.) We didn't care about the lack of conveniences because it was the best week of summer—the most fun you could have in the 70s—or so we thought from our limited perspective. In addition to the wacky fun that can only happen with clergy, adult volunteers and camp staff watching over you day and night, those days formed the person I was to become for the rest of my life.

One disappointing year I got my period the week of camp. No swimming in the heavenly waters for me. No one had introduced me to tampons, or they weren't readily available back then, I'm not sure. Even though I was naive and unworldly I did have a boyfriend that year.

“Why can't you go swimming?” He asked repeatedly. I shivered as he moved closer, speaking into my ear. Of course, what he really wanted was to see me in a bathing suit. He'd probably waited all year for that, too. (In my very early teens I had developed overly large breasts for my five-foot-two frame.)

“You know!” I would shyly reply.

“Know what?” He apparently had not paid attention in our abbreviated sixth grade sex ed class.

“I can't tell you. Just believe me.” I whispered, red-faced. But it ruined portions of my precious week as

I tended to my biological needs instead of swimming and boating (anticipating being dunked by a boat full of rowdy boys.) My boyfriend never did figure it out.

To most of us the week of camp was an adventure in freedom, but in reality we were all on a short chain. The adults were ministers, their wives, and fun-loving volunteers who liked kids. Each day's activities were planned down to the minute: bible study, serious small group discussions, chapel, singing practice, and campfire each night. During mid-afternoon free time you had to choose an area to play in, not just wander around getting into mischief. Most everyone preferred the vast, blue lake where you could swim or sail in tiny boats. The lake's various inlets and hideaways helped you imagine you were exploring and out of reach.

The youth group had introduced drums, guitars and contemporary music into church services. My boyfriend, Doug, was not only the cutest boy at camp, he was also the drummer. What could be more attractive to a fourteen year-old girl? He had curly brown hair and dimples. He was funny and popular, and he was mine. I knew next to nothing about sex but my body was tingling in new places every time I laid eyes on him. So camp was not just a place to become a better Christian, but a place to learn how to sneak off behind a cabin and possibly steal a kiss.

I cannot emphasize enough how sheltered my life had been or how little I knew about my own body. The confluence of hormones and a great desire to be a good Christian girl was quite a conundrum. I came from a happy home in a quaint village so small you could walk to church and school—picture Mayberry. Access to information about sexuality was very limited and my mother was not comfortable with the topic, although my womanly body was of great concern to her. When we shopped for bathing suits I would usually come home with a matronly one-piece suit fashioned with as much material as possible.

At home I was very happy, but I took every chance to get out of the house to see my boyfriend and feel those tingles again. A week at camp, away from the suspicious eyes of my mother, was exhilarating to say the least. I was constantly torn between being the good girl my faith called on me to be and the bad girl I couldn't help being when I watched Doug bang out his frustrations on those drums.

Midnight walks in the woods were a large group activity, but it was dark enough to manage a few kisses. We never went further than that, but it created quite a romance that dramatically ended when he and his parents moved to New Mexico the following year. We declared our undying love, and although that love was never consummated, I later conceded that God had probably saved me from teenage motherhood by banishing him to another state.

June can be a very rainy month in Ohio and sometimes we were cooped up in musty cabins for our studies instead of draped across enormous rocks in the sunshine. There are still moments after a summer storm when I can smell the wet dirt and the sweetness of sycamore trees just as it had smelled at camp. I remember kids slowly emerging from soggy cabins in the morning, slogging across muddy paths to get to breakfast in the main hall. Morning meals were sometimes silent after late night rowdiness in cabins, but sleeping in was not allowed. Weary counselors looked like they might be regretting spending their vacation days with juveniles. By lunchtime everyone was fully operative and food might fly past your face at any moment—possibly the worst behavior of the week.

The song, *Kumbaya* (come by here) had been recorded by Joan Baez in 1962 and by The Seekers in 1963, among other recordings. The word *kumbaya* was not synonymous with a corny, overly sentimental

moment, as it is now. It simply appealed to God to come and meet our human needs.

I played my cheap Suzuki guitar at the nightly lakeside campfire and we sang it quite earnestly, among other songs of faith like *Michael Row the Boat Ashore*, and thrilling new songs from *Godspell*. It was an emotional time of day for all of the campers, especially when we would get to the verse, *someone's crying Lord, kumbaya*, because there was always someone crying. There was something intimate about the fire-lit faces of your friends and the water lapping at the shore. We wearily confessed our faith and love for each other. The last night of camp was a tear-fest of promises to be friends forever and proclamations of how our lives had been changed by living together for a week and growing in our faith. It was free therapy for adolescent angst and I recall it with genuine fondness.

Many of the campers were friends of church members. Without exception they would get caught up in the loving atmosphere. My church became a safe place for young people with unhappy homes. Church camp had the power to alter a lonely life and forge lifelong friendships. It reined in the untethered emotions and energy of young teens and provided them with a Christian identity as well as a set of moral guideline to try to live by. The adults guiding us were sincerely loving and non-judgmental. When the term *What would Jesus do?* became popular I realized that the leaders who had influenced me had been the ultimate examples of WWJD.

After a death-defying bus ride back home on Saturday we would take over the entire Sunday morning service with testimonies and songs we had learned. There were also light-hearted skits we had practiced all week at camp. Parents were often taken aback by their children's enthusiastic statements of faith and many times it was the catalyst for a while family to become active in the church.

My camp experience was so significant that, as an adult, I became a counselor and spent vacation time there with my own little children in tow. There was nothing I wanted more than for my son and daughter to be a part of the blissful days of church camp. But, by the time I was a counselor things had changed. Teenagers were much more worldly and bold. We discovered boys and girls alone in cabins together, some were uncooperative with the rules and activities, there were fights and arguments. It was disheartening. By the time my own children were teens it was a completely different experience for them. My punk rock daughter was humiliated by a rigid adult for her clothing choices and camp became a negative memory for her. My son was apathetic about going, which broke my heart.

The very term Christian has become something unrecognizable to me in this country. It has no resemblance to the joy I had growing up in a small Methodist church in Ohio. Everyone was welcome there. Everyone was loved, accepted, and included. Our interactions with the adults were marked by humility and kindness, not exclusion, rigid rules and judgment.

The simplicity of those years is striking now. We needed nothing but each other, some musical instruments, and the clothing in our suitcases, to have a glorious week together. We had no connection to the outside world or electronics of any kind. We were truly happy. I wonder if such innocence even exists now. In recent years, through social media, I have reconnected with many campers from those years and it is like we are in a special club of enduring memories, not just of the camp, but of the sincerely caring adults who inspired the rest of our lives.

On Sunday morning campers and families would join together the brilliantly white New England style sanctuary, and the youth would conclude the service by making a large circle around the congregation, hold hands, and sing a favorite song called "Pass it On." I wanted to do that then, and I still do.

**Diane Vogel Ferri** is a teacher, poet, and writer living in Solon, Ohio. Her essays have been published in *Scene Magazine*, *Cleveland Stories*, *Cleveland Christmas Memories*, *Raven's Perch*, and by Cleveland State University among others. Her poems can be found in numerous journals such as *Plainsongs*, *Rubbertop Review*, and *Poet Lore*. Her chapbook, *Liquid Rubies*, was published by Pudding House. *The Volume of Our Incongruity* was published by Finishing Line Press. She has done many poetry readings locally. Her novel, *The Desire Path* can be found on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Diane's essay, "I Will Sing for You" was featured at the Cleveland Humanities Festival in 2018. A former teacher, she holds an M.Ed from Cleveland State University. She has an Author Page on Facebook for current news and is a founding member of Literary Cleveland.

# Margaret Koger



*Photo of Margaret Koger, 1st grade. Image courtesy of the author.*

## The Dress

Shortly before I was born, a 1944 film starring Judy Garland and Fred Astaire popularized Irving Berlin's 1933 song "Easter Parade." I don't remember seeing the movie, but by the time I was seven, I knew I'd had a new dress every Easter of my life. My older sisters and I loved to sing about wearing a bonnet—with all the frills upon on it—that could make us into the grandest ladies in the Easter Parade.

Mother made sure that our Easter celebrations combined the Biblical story with suitable spring icons—colorfully died eggs along with special baskets to put them in as we scrambled to find them in the yard. While bonnets were old fashioned by then, our new dresses, hats, and shoes combined to add excitement to the celebration. After all we'd outgrown our old winter clothes and they'd soon be too warm anyway. But new dresses and shoes for three girls cost a lot of money.

If I'd been older than seven that year, I might have noticed how Easter Sunday was coming up soon and that there'd been none of the usual preparations: shopping, measuring, and sewing. So it came as a complete surprise when Mother called me in from my outdoor play to tell me some news. When she looked around to make sure we no one else could hear what she had to say, I knew something was up.

"We can't afford a new dress for you this year," she said. The sadness in her eyes and the hush of her voice told me how distressed she felt. Naturally, it hurt me that my mother felt so distraught and possibly even ashamed. So after considering the situation, I waited until I was alone and rummaged around in the fabric drawer hoping to find some forgotten dress material. Voila! I discovered a sizeable piece of bright blue "polished" cotton. It was new to me and did not match anything else in the drawer.

I skipped with joy and ran to Mother. "You could use this!" I exclaimed.

"It's not enough for a dress," she answered, looking at it with surprise.

I nodded my head and went slowly out to play again. I'd set up an imaginary house by lining out sticks and stones under the apricot tree and my dog had been commandeered to be my husband. I had him wearing a kerchief for a tie and I had to fix his breakfast so he could get to work. Sometime a little later Mother called me in and showed me a piece of white organdy that she thought would look nice pieced together with the blue. The bodice and upper skirt of the dress would be blue, and the sleeves, lower skirt and sash—full and tied in a bow in the back—would be white. I loved the plan and I had complete confidence that a very special dress would be mine to wear come Easter Sunday.

Now you may not be familiar with the fabric called polished cotton. In the 1950s, long before the days

of polyester and spandex, a main concern in buying fabric was that it be guaranteed not to shrink and to be colorfast so it would not fade or bleed onto other items in the wash. The satiny finish of polished cotton was meant to add spice to décor items such as curtains and accent pillows, things that rarely needed to be washed. How the shiny blue remnant strayed into our fabric drawer remains a mystery to this day, and it's no wonder that Mother didn't know it wouldn't be colorfast.

When she finally called me in to try the dress on, it was beautiful. I practically danced with joy, swishing the skirt and twirling in front of the mirror to see the wide bow at the back of the waist. I was ready for Easter, but Mother wasn't. She worried that the fabric, after lying around for who knows how long, might not be clean, so she washed the dress.

Once again I was called in from my pursuit of the imaginary. Sitting at the sewing machine with tears in her eyes, Mother showed me how the dress had dried to a motley smear of blue and white patches. Nothing shiny was left. "I should have washed the fabric before I sewed it," she cried. "Now there's no way you can wear it."

"Of course I can," I exclaimed. "Really it looks fine, it's just different. I love it and no one will care how it's blue and white all over. It just doesn't look like it used to!" I was determined to wear the dress because I wasn't about to let Mother give up on it. She'd worked hard sewing it, and besides, there were very few occasions when I didn't get my own way if I held out long enough. I'd keep the pressure up as long as I had to.

I should tell you that we attended the First Methodist Church in a small city some 20 miles from where we lived, even though gas money was tight. The church architecture was Greek Revival with wide sweeping front steps, a pillared entry, and curved mahogany pews inside. The rumble of the huge pipe organ thrilled Dad and gave Mother a headache, adding to the stress of her shyness, as she forced herself to be socially active. The church exemplified awe and contrasted sharply with our small community and its farms. So even though a mother's love has very few boundaries, the faded dress represented a sizeable threat to Mother's well-being. And she couldn't exactly explain her fears to a seven year old.

Mother expected the women in the congregation to be nice about my blotchy dress while we were in the sanctuary, but she worried that they would start whispering, "Did you see the little McArthur girl's dress?" when we all gathered in the church basement for coffee or juice and cookies. And then the next Sunday, and the next, the humiliating dress would be uppermost in their minds. There might even be smirks and giggles behind our backs.

I was too in love with the dress to even imagine what could be wrong with wearing it, so I did my best to change Mother's mind. Day after day, I'd stop and pat the dress as it lay abandoned on the sewing machine and then I would pick it up and spin around with a sad look on my face. I took every chance I got to repeat how much I loved the dress until Mother finally said "Alright, but you can only wear it once." And so it came be that I sat proudly in the front pew of the church with the other children in their store-bought Easter finery and sang "The Lord Has Risen Indeed," believing that He had also given me a talented and wonderful mother.

Shortly after Easter the dress disappeared from my closet. When I asked Mother about it, she only shrugged. As you know, pride causes many hurt feelings and when the dress went missing, I began to rethink my actions. I felt ashamed and a little guilty. Before that Easter I never would have dreamed that a dress could cause so much heartache. I'd had my fun at Mother's expense. As time went by, however, I

thought of the dress as being something like Jacob's coat of many colors and I reminded myself to remember how much trouble it had caused Jacob and his whole family. My dress had become a teaching on the hazards of being stubborn and demanding. How wonderful to learn the lesson of 1 Peter 5:5 *Clothe yourself with humility* as an unforgettable Easter message.

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**Margaret Koger** lives in Boise, Idaho and received her M. A. from Boise State University. Before retirement, she taught in the public schools specializing in creative writing and library services. Her poetry appears in numerous journals including *Tiny Seeds Literary Journal*, *Forbidden Peak*, *Déraciné* and *Gravitas*.

# Meg LeDuc

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## Lighting Peace

On the Second Sunday of Advent 2019, the Sunday we light the Candle of Peace, Pastor Ara invites people to the rail to pray, saying, “If you are broken today, God promises to give you shalom—peace—to restore everything in your life to its proper order.”

In Messiah’s sanctuary, a white-vaulted room with gleaming oak pews and a stained-glass window of a dark-eyed Jesus leading a luminous flock, people of all ages—black, white, and brown—join in the Lord’s Prayer before taking Holy Communion: “May Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven...”

Pastor Ara tells us that it is God’s will that the Christ Child be born in each of us, afresh, today.

And then we join in the breaking of the bread, the sharing of the cup.

“My Shalom,” I pray, taking the wafer and the grape juice onto my tongue, “bind up my brokenness.”

I need peace. In this Advent season, in the pell-mell of this life of mine with bipolar disorder, I am deeply bewildered: What am I meant to do? Where am I meant to work? What should I be spending my time on?

I don’t know anything except this man—my husband Tim—this moment. Not one moment into the future. And the past stretches back and back, a wasteland. I refuse to travel there.

Tim is excited about saving for a house. I want to have a baby—and am terrified of having a baby. I don’t know what the future holds.

Ambition torments me. To have a full-time job. To make more money. To contribute, so that Tim and I can afford a house more quickly. But I think all these knives would turn into so many doves and fly away, if only I held a baby in my arms.

Bind up my brokenness, Lord. In this Advent season, we wait for a baby, a baby who will change everything.

And I don’t want to wait much longer.

Tim panicked when I said I “want to get started next month, in January.” He assumed I meant trying to get pregnant in January.

I leaned back and laughed. “Honey, I don’t want you to knock me up in January!”

That cracked him up—with relief.



We had this very unromantic conversation on Friday, our date night. I was dressed up, in the yellow, orange and navy-striped dress I bought in San Francisco, a form-fitting wrap dress. I *felt* attractive—I knew the woman in the mirror was beautiful.

We sat at our favorite sushi restaurant, at the corner table, a guitar duo setting up microphones and an amplifier opposite. People chatted under twinkling Christmas lights that glowed against a lustrous tin ceiling, as waitresses served steaming dishes of rice and fish.

In a low voice that I hoped didn't reach other diners, I explained to Tim that first, we have to undergo genetic testing; two, I have to wean off whatever medications my doctors tell me to stop; and lastly, I need to get my IUD removed, and it might be some time before I am fertile after it is removed.

It was this process I wanted to start.

Tim blinked rapidly a few times.

“We will have to time this, so it works with moving into the house.”

We both paused and did the math in our heads.

“We were planning to move in early summer, right?” I asked. “I was hoping for a pregnancy in the fall.”

“But what if you get pregnant right away?” Tim asked.

My husband seems to think that a nurse midwife will remove the IUD and bam! I will get pregnant. I worry that my body will be far less cooperative.

“Somehow, I think it might take a long time. I am 36, you have to remember,” I replied.

“Oh,” Tim said. “You never know.” He grinned. “I might have special powers.”

I laughed. “You never know.” I paused. “What I am really excited about is our appointment on Tuesday.”

Tim smiled at me and reached for my hand. “I know, babe.”

On Tuesday, Tim and I are scheduled for a consult with a specialist in OB/GYN and psychiatry in Ann Arbor, at the University of Michigan, where I went to college. I am hoping—desperately—that the specialist will tell us that my medication regimen is safe for pregnancy. Above all, I hope the specialist will confirm that I can remain on Saphris, the medication that restored me after a break with reality four years ago.

I stroked his hand with mine and gaze at him tenderly. “I think Michigan Medicine will give us a good answer on Tuesday. I am optimistic.”

I said this—and yet, for all my bravado, I need comfort—a quieting of the heart. In this Advent season, I need peace.

Now, today, the Sunday before our appointment, Pastor Ara invites a family to light the Candle of Peace.

They gather around the Advent candles—the tall, white Christ Candle in the center—an older woman in a denim hat with a brim, a young woman she introduced as her niece, and her daughter. A little boy and a little girl—grandchildren—huddle around the women’s knees. Together, this little unorthodox group makes a family—and, it suddenly strikes me, as its members gather around the Advent candles, a family that is pleasing in God’s eyes.

The niece is tall and painfully thin—no more than a teenager really—clad in a purple dress with sleeves extending to her brown wrists, a bright green skirt falling to her ankles and a head covering adorned with emerald and royal purple sequins, the colors of an Indian peacock.

Tossing her sequined head back, she exclaims in a loud voice as she reads the words of the Gospel of Luke: “...every valley shall be *filled in!* And every hill and mountain be made *low!* The crooked ways shall be made *straight!* And the rough ways *smooth!*”

“Amen!” rings out from the congregation.

We sense she is on fire for Jesus.

We catch fire, too.

The oldest woman takes the microphone back and finishes reading, in a low voice: “And all humanity will see God’s salvation.”

They struggle to light the candles—Pastor Ara is rising to help—until, finally, with an exasperated huff, the young woman grabs the red match lighter from her aunt and clicks it over and over, hard. She strikes a flame, first lights the Candle of Hope, second the Candle of Peace, then shoos the little ones back down to their seats, all in a jiffy.

And then, just like that, it is over: The lighting of the Candle of Peace.

Jesus, our shalom, our peace, descends to us by way of an earthly family—a family that doesn’t quite fit.

Any family of mine wouldn’t quite fit either. But I am convinced—it would be pleasing in God’s eye.

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On Tuesday morning, the day of our appointment, my peace shatters. I wake from a nightmare —blurred images of my nieces, my brother David’s children, and something about them going away to college. All I know is that they are at risk—going away to college is dangerous. The phrase, spoken by Dave, “ACE inhibitor abuse.” I wake from the dream, at 5:45 a.m., convinced that it means something, tells me something.

A secret. A clue.

When I wake, I Google “ACE inhibitor abuse.” ACE inhibitors, I discover, are blood-pressure

medications, sometimes used to treat migraines. My mom used to suffer from migraines.

Suddenly, in a flash, I connect dots, dots that aren't there to be connected—my mom abused ACE inhibitors while she was pregnant with me. That's why I am so messed up.

I huddle on the couch, staring into the darkness outside. The whole world crashes down around me. Who can I trust besides Tim? My family kept a terrible secret from me.

Are my parents trustworthy? Has everyone been lying to me all along? What else have they been lying about? Suddenly I am terrified.

But as the light gradually strengthens outside, as Tim runs his fingers lightly down my spine as he slides onto the couch beside me, I begin to relax.

“This is paranoia, Meg,” I whisper to myself.

At 8:30 a.m., winter sun now pouring into our living room, I text my psychiatrist and tell her I am having paranoid thoughts. She doesn't immediately respond, but I take an extra 5 mg of Saphris anyway. As it dissolves under my tongue, chemical calm flows through my blood.

Afterwards, I clamber onto our basement treadmill and walk briskly for 20 minutes as Kelly Clarkson's “What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger” pulsates in my ears. Exercise always helps, even small doses.

At 9:30 a.m., I call my mom.

“Mom, I had a strange dream last night,” I tell her, as I stretch in the sunlight on our living room couch. “It made me have strange thoughts.”

I describe the dream and the resultant paranoid thoughts.

“Oh, Meggie,” she says softly. “Don't you see? The dream was about you.”

“What do you mean?” I twist our nubby afghan between my fingers.

“You are going to college today. And today you might—or might not—get answers about how your medications will affect a baby. The dream was about you, honey. It had nothing to do with me.”

“These thoughts were so scary, Mom,” I start to cry. “I wasn't sure who to trust except Tim for about two hours this morning.”

“This is a big day, Meggie. You may get a lot of questions answered today. And then again, you might not.”

I sit up. My voice shakes. “It took me back to the break with reality, Mom.”

“But you have recovered, sweetheart. And the most important thing about your recovery was that eventually you let go of the delusions and you opened your hands to receive good things. But first, you

had to let go of the delusions.”

I take a deep, calming breath. Peace is slowly returning. “Yes, and I think the ability to open my hands was a God-thing.”

“I think so, too, Meggie. But you did it. You did it yourself.”

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“Molly will be conducting the interview, if that is all right with you, Margaret,” Dr. Tran says, crossing his right leg over his knee and resting his folded hands on his thigh.

Dr. Duy Tran, the resident psychiatrist, is young, younger than me it seems—a delicate, slim, black-haired, brown-skinned man, dressed in a tie and khakis. With him is a dark-haired, broad-faced medical student in her mid-to-late-twenties.

Tim and I have followed them down a hall of the Rachel Upjohn Depression Center, part of the University of Michigan’s Medical Campus, to a small, nondescript room. We sit on a couch, facing Dr. Tran, while Molly sits kitty-corner.

Molly starts out gently enough: “First, how are you doing today?”

But then she begins matter-of-factly taking a history: diagnosis, symptoms, hospitalizations. Suicide attempts.

“Suicide attempts blur in my mind,” I say, shifting in my chair. “I really have no idea how many times I’ve attempted suicide. Multiple times. The memories are hazy.”

In my own ears, I sound crazy. Will Dr. Tran tell me I am unfit to be a mother?

“And how did you attempt suicide?”

“I overdosed.”

Tim reaches for my hand.

I describe the break with reality in 2015-2016, and Molly works to understand what exactly happened.

“So, you thought your grandmother was a queen?”

“Yes.”

“And that implies that you yourself were royalty, too.”

“Yes.” I shift again.

About an hour into the interview, there is a knock on the door. A burly, black-haired man in a white lab coat enters the small, crowded room, instantly making it much smaller.

“I’m Dr. Juan Gomez, the attending physician here. I’m supervising Dr. Tran.” He turns to Dr. Tran. “And who do we have here?”

“This is Margaret LeDuc. She is consulting us to see if her medications would be safe in pregnancy.”

“And you, sir?” Dr. Gomez addresses Tim. “Are you any relation?”

Tim pauses a split second. “Uh, her husband.”

“Oh, wonderful!” Dr. Gomez claps his big hands. “Not many spouses come, you know.”

Dr. Gomez pulls up a chair beside Dr. Tran, sits with his beefy legs splayed outward, one hand on the edge of the chair. “So, tell me what you were saying about Mrs. LeDuc’s case before I came in.”

“Margaret has been diagnosed with Bipolar I Disorder, PTSD and an anxiety disorder. She is taking these medications—you can see—Saphris, Vraylar, Topamax...” Dr. Tran indicates his chart. Dr. Gomez leans over the other doctor’s shoulder.

“Saphris has been essential, according to Margaret, of restoring her to stability after what seems like a pretty clear episode of bipolar mania with psychotic features in 2015-16.”

“Saphris, Saphris... always reminds me of the saffron my wife cooks with,” Dr. Gomez comments, rubbing his fingers together as if pinching spice.

Tim and I laugh, the tension in the room suddenly eased.

Dr. Tran continues, explaining that Topamax, one of my mood stabilizers, would put a fetus at an elevated risk of a cleft palate. Another of my medications, Klonopin, an anxiety medication, is recommended against in the first trimester by the FDA.

Two other medications—Vraylar and Viibryd, a mood stabilizer and an antidepressant—wouldn’t harm a fetus, but are simply, as Dr. Tran puts it, “too much.”

“For the health of the fetus, we would like to see you on the lowest number of medications you possibly need to go forward with a pregnancy,” Dr. Tran says.

He recommends eliminating all four medications from my regimen—slowly, over time.

“Yes,” Dr. Gomez agrees, “Mrs. LeDuc is on another antidepressant, isn’t she? Pristiq? Her psychiatrist could maximize the Pristiq and eliminate the Viibryd entirely.”

Dr. Gomez leans back and addresses me directly, his tone suddenly very serious.

“Ma’am, it is very important for you to know, and I can’t stress this enough—it is our duty as doctors to stress this—that very, very little is known about Saphris and pregnancy. It is so new that there is no information, no studies.”

He keeps his deep, Spaniel-brown eyes focused on me as he continues.

“I will tell you that the class of medications Saphris is in has been found to be safe. But nothing is known about that particular drug. It is a risk you will have to discuss with your husband, with your medical provider. We can neither advise against nor recommend.”

I can feel the tears trickling down my cheeks.

He leans forward, speaks very softly, “And I will tell you that there are other ways to be a mother. I myself am a father to two beautiful adopted boys.”

The tears run faster.

“You would make a great mom. I can tell. I can tell just by looking at you.”

“Thank you,” I manage. I wipe my eyes. Tim rubs my shoulder.

“But why are you crying?” He leans back, raises his voice and beams at me. “There are women in our hospital who give birth and they are on all these medications, and they have beautiful, beautiful babies! It does happen. We are just telling you that there is a risk.”

“There is a risk.”

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After the appointment, Tim and I head for my workplace’s annual Christmas party, north of Detroit, about an hour and a half drive away. I am charged with shooting the event and can’t miss it, much as I would like. I stowed my camera bag in the hatchback all day.

We order sandwiches to go at Subway. As Tim steers east on M-14, he and I both dribble dressing on our clothes.

“Shit!” Tim curses, veering slightly as honey Dijon spatters onto his khakis.

I grab his sandwich. He straightens the car. I hand him napkins; I mop oily spots on my own clothes.

“Do we have time to run home and change?” Tim asks me, rubbing at the dressing on his pants.

I try to say, “Let’s check, babe,” but all of a sudden, I bust into sobs. Huddling in the seat besides Tim, I cry great, hiccuping gulps.

“Sweetie!” Tim exclaims, glancing over at me. “What’s wrong? Was it the consult?”

I gasp for air before I can answer. It is several moments before I can speak.

“As-much-as-I-want-a-baby-Tim,” I cry, “I’m-scared.”

“Oh, babe...” Tim murmurs. “What are you scared of, Meg?”

“Too many medication changes,” I manage.

Tim glances over at me, his brown eyes warm. “Are you scared so many medication changes will destabilize you?”

I cry harder. “Y-e-e-e-e-s-s-s!”

Through tears, I hand the sandwich back to Tim. He looks at it, then puts it back in Subway bag and shoves it behind the seat.

Finally, I say, “Tim, I know it’s expensive, but—what do you think about adoption?”

Tim touches my cheek. “Babe, if you are worried that this is too much, then that’s what we’ll do.”

As we drive north, pulling off I-275 onto M-10, I crouch low in my seat, my hand pressed against my abdomen, and say to myself, over and over, “I would be a good mom.” The tears stream silently down my cheeks.

Steering through traffic, Tim browses music on his stereo, presses “Play.”

Suddenly, the first bars of our song float through the Equinox, the track we hummed on our honeymoon, on long drives across the Arizona desert as the sun set in flaming pinks and crimsons under amethyst skies: Hootie & The Blowfish’s “Hold My Hand.”

*With a little love and some tenderness  
We'll walk upon the water  
We'll rise above this mess...  
'Cause I've got a hand for you  
I've got a hand for you...  
Hold my hand  
I want to hold your hand...  
I want to love you the best that I can*

Tim reaches over and takes my hand.

“We’re going to be O.K., babe,” he says. “I love you.”

I look over at him and try to smile through my tears. “I know it, sweetie. I love you, too.”

I want to love this man the best that I can. I know—I know—I must remain healthy, for him, for myself.

But in everyday life, does anyone walk on water? Does anyone ever truly rise above this mess? I feel as if the equivalent of walking on water will have to happen for me to bring a baby into this world—a real-life, honest-to-goodness miracle. My messed-up mind refuses to cooperate with my yearning heart, my aching body.

Nevertheless, miracles are God’s purview—he has gotten me this far. There is nothing to do but trust.

Snowflakes spin through the air, riding the winter winds that gust against the Equinox. We drive north—to a party, a Christmas party. Tim continues to hold my hand as music sounds amidst the snow. Slowly, I allow my body to relax into the notes, into my husband's touch.

It is Advent. We wait for a baby, a baby who will change everything. But how exactly this baby will get here, that—that is God's mystery.

And, for the moment, as I stare into the whirling white, I am at peace with mystery.

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**Meg LeDuc** graduated from the University of Michigan with a B.A. in English. She served as a staff writer for a daily newspaper, winning a 2014 Michigan Press Association Award. She will be published in *American Writers Review* and the *International Human Rights Art Festival* magazine and is working on a memoir. Visit her website at [www.megleduc.com](http://www.megleduc.com)

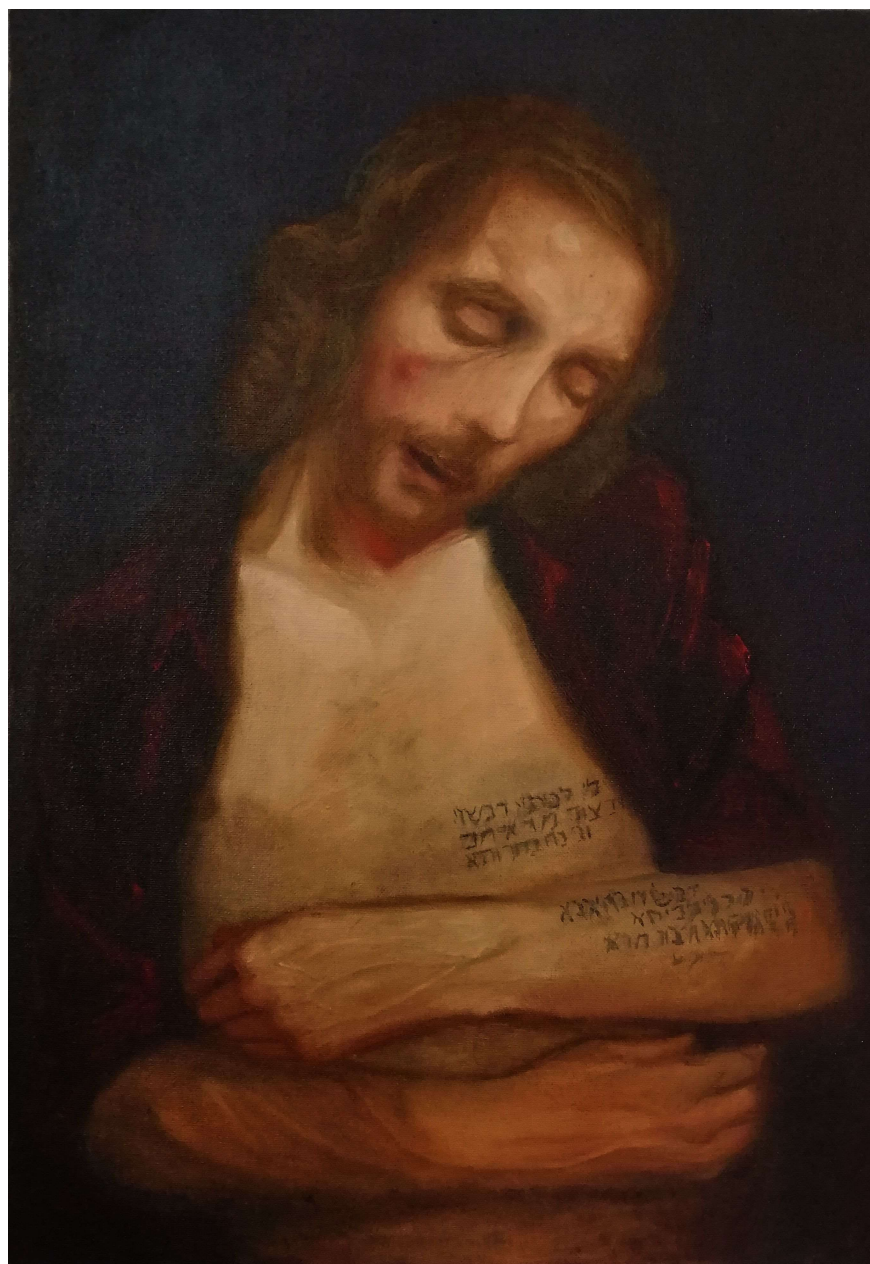


# Segolene Haehnsen Kan

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## Noe sleeping

Oil on canvas  
50 x 70 cm  
2020



*Image courtesy of the artist.*

## Smoke on the water

Diptych, oil on canvas  
200 x 120 cm  
2018



*Image courtesy of the artist.*

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**Segolene Haehnsen Kan** is a french painter, she was graduated from the Beaux Arts de Paris in 2013. She lives and works in Paris. Used to paint landscapes, she also shares an obsession for the figure of the Christ.

# Hua Huang

## A mural about Jesus and a worker like a pious prayer



*Image courtesy of Hua Huang.*



## Entrance of Sacré-Cœur Cathedral



*Image courtesy of Hua Huang.*

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**Hua Huang**, photographer, Chinese based in Athens, Greece.



# Leslie Rochelle Owen

## Effulgent Christ



*Image courtesy of Leslie Rochelle Owen.*

**Leslie Rochelle Owen** is a Midwestern photographer, with a strong penchant for preserving the beauty of the world via the art of photography. Her hobbies include: traveling, scrapbooking, painting, drawing, traveling, cooking, and spending time with her two adorable fur-babies, Donkey and Freya.

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# Susana López

## La Morte: Out of Work



*Image courtesy of Susana López.*

## La Morte: Cartiera



*Image courtesy of Susana López.*



## La Morte: City Time



*Image courtesy of Susana López.*

**Susana López** is a visual artist from Gijón, Spain. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts (Painting) and a PhD, both from the University of Barcelona. Her subjects are taken from, and inspired by, personal experiences in the city and her daily life. Susana tries to communicate through her pictures the history, architecture, consumerism and even immigration patterns of a city. She seeks to reveal these from a distance that reflects an objective and striking honesty. Her work is in private and public collections and is been shown in solo and group exhibitions in Spain and abroad. She recently took part in Venice Biennale, at the Cervantes Institute in Sofia, 1aSpace in Hong Kong, The Other Art Fair in London, PointB in Brooklyn, NY or Woman Made Gallery in Chicago.

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