

Cover Art: "Incarnation" by Sarah McDonald Price

# *Heart of flesh*

Winter 2019 | Issue Two

Editor: Veronica McDonald

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# Note from the Editor



Before I became a Christian, I used to joke that I'll know I've "made it" in this world when I finally get a job where I'm not asked to a clean toilet. Most jobs I'd had up until that point occasionally involved the not-so-glamorous task of cleaning a toilet that had hit emergency status in the restrooms. I always did this job with a proud, ungrateful heart, thinking the whole time of how this duty was definitely beneath me. It wasn't part of my job description to clean up the nastiness left by strangers. I would never give it my best effort, mostly out of spite for being asked to do it in the first place.

Well, it turns out I was a bit of a jerk before Jesus came into my life, and He reminds me everyday that the pedestal I sometimes put myself on is laughable. While I thought I was too good to clean a toilet, the God who created our vast and incredible universe humbled himself to become a mere human. Then guess what he did? He washed dirty feet. He put his hands on people rotting from contagious diseases. He threw himself into the muck of humanity, and became

a servant. Then he rose from the dead and waited for us to ask him to clean the clogged toilet bowl that is our souls, and when we did, he made us new again. He truly *is* above this work, and yet he did it and continues to do it. Not with a proud and bitter heart, but out of love, and with love.

That being said, rest assured, Issue Two has no mention of literally cleaning toilets. It does, however, show the grime on the souls of human beings. It shows the desperation of the human condition, and the awe of a supreme God being thrust into that condition. It shows our fascination with the physical and spiritual world, with good and evil, with angels and demons. It shows needling doubt and mustard seeds of faith. And, most importantly, it shows hope generated through a humble heart.

In these pages, I hope you get a glimpse of the servant King, and I pray you'll witness both his life-altering intensity and profound humility through the words, creations, questions, doubts, and faith of our wonderful contributors, both believers and non-believers from all over the world, and from all walks of life.

Thank you for reading!

*Veronica McDonald*

Editor

*Photo Credit: "Mary and the Son" (or "Lamb of God") by Veronica McDonald; 11"x14" acrylic on canvas, 2016*

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**Veronica McDonald** is a writer, poet, artist, and editor/founder of *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal*. Her work has appeared in *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. Find her at [VeronicaMcDonald.com](http://VeronicaMcDonald.com).



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Someone prayed for him

Organist

## *Marjorie Maddox*

---

### The Seven Sorrows

I.

Yes, she knows/doesn't know:  
those small lips that suckle and cry,  
hiccup and sigh, will one day scream,  
"Eli eli lama sabachthani." Her mama heart,  
already crowded with ponderings,  
has only enough room for nursing and burping,  
for counting the toes of the Sacred—  
such human rituals a daily salvation. But this talk  
of suffering made real by old Simeon,  
by ancient Anna, oh her heart  
pierced with such reminders of Death  
(hers/ours) cut down and erected as cross  
on which her wee one, her darling,  
her beloved boy will resurrect such grief.  
Even in her faithful acceptance, she weeps.  
Oh, she weeps.

II.

That envious "King of the Jews" afraid  
of a baby. Even as they are fleeing,  
she knows his shadow stalking their footsteps,  
his power-hungry arm raised in slaughter,  
his soldiers bathed in the blood of innocents  
she might know. All day, she holds her son close,  
covers his ears at each painful howl of the jackal  
so like an infant's cry, so like her haunted dreams  
that keep them cowering in caves  
all the way to Egypt where, even then,  
she wakes to the scream of those other  
mothers, the ones not warned,  
the ones cradling their dead.

III.

Three days dead/not dead. Not even  
the beggars have seen him. She lives  
between death and resurrection, his absence  
precursor to Golgotha, the dank tomb  
come early. Twelve years he'd listened,  
followed them from here to there. Now



he is gone. Surely, she prays, he is somewhere  
on these dusty roads, bouncing between  
families on the long caravan to home.  
Surely, he can hear her cries,  
can call out to heal their dis-  
-ease. No.  
When  
they turn  
back  
to Jerusalem  
and the silent sun,  
she cloaks herself in worry.  
“Why,” he asks  
days later  
at the temple  
with his surprised eyes  
“did you not know?”

IV.

His whip-stained back, his blood-striped brow,  
the splintered heft of the world that betrayed him  
balanced now on shoulders too weak  
to carry even his own bludgeoned body—  
it all crushes her. On the long road  
to Place of the Skull,  
crowded with jeers and accusations,  
they stumble together.

V.

It is too much and not enough  
—his thin chest heaving—  
to see his sunken eyes see her,  
grieve for her grief for him.  
“Behold your mother,” he says to John,  
and it will be his emaciated arms  
also that hold her into old age,  
just as they hold her now  
even at the moment of his dying,  
even at the moment Death loses  
its gruesome sting below the dark  
mourning of the lonely, broken sky.

VI.

And now she  
cradles him—his bruised  
flesh stretched across  
her familiar lap, stretched across  
his unbroken bones, limbs limp

in the pitch-black mid-day  
of the soul, the bloody moon blinded. No  
polished marble, this Pietà  
before the Pietà, all that is  
left of her tears streaming  
from his pierced side, from the now  
un-nailed hands she holds  
and holds.

VII.

All her sorrows lead here:  
clean linen, heavy stone, dead son.  
There is only this garden of grief  
stinking of myrrh and memory.  
When the soldiers seal the sepulcher,  
her spirit is the shroud that clings  
to the slaughtered sacrifice who once  
was her joy, who will be again  
in time. She tries, with her crucified heart,  
to believe this. She tries.

---

## To the God-daughter, who forgave you

for missing her life, “See,”  
she says, “I am still here,  
and would you like some new soles  
for those shoes? Or inserts  
to add comfort to the daily? I am good  
at my job and would love to help  
you.” She is  
beautiful and generous  
and so like God, you can’t wait  
to untie all your laces  
right there and then,  
and you do,  
you do.

---

Winner of *America Magazine’s* 2019 Foley Poetry Prize, Lock Haven University English Professor **Marjorie Maddox** has published 11 collections of poetry—including *Transplant*, *Transport*, *Transubstantiation* and *True, False, None of the Above*—*What She Was Saying* (prose); children’s books; *Common Wealth: Contemporary Poets on Pennsylvania* (co-editor); *Presence* (assistant editor). See [www.marjoriemaddox.com](http://www.marjoriemaddox.com).

## Jo Taylor

---

### Singing the Blues

The Blues. Like rain falling softly on hydrangeas.  
A longing. A sadness as weighty as scripture.  
A bride's quiet sobs on her wedding night,  
A mother's melancholy after her newborn,  
A neighbor's fight with her not-so-true-blue husband.  
Or yours with a recalcitrant child. The heightened  
Tension. The plate on the kitchen floor, shards of glass  
Glinting in corners. The blows. The bruises.

Picasso, Elvis, and Robert Johnson felt the blues. I have. Likely, you,  
Too. When we plunge into despair and sell our souls;  
When we're in our blue period, fashioning an old guitarist, blind,  
Poor, and as somber as church communion; or when we put on  
Our blue suede shoes and make soulful sounds on street corners.  
In juke joints. In churches. In solitary realms. When we gut  
The heart and, like Louis A, spill out its recesses in song.

*I'm so forlorn. Why was I born?  
What did I do to be so black and blue?*

Here's a story I heard once.  
About prisoners. About family. About the human heart.  
It made me ashamed. Dirty.  
As blue as a candle's flickering flame.

Convicts, conscripted into public service to build roads and bridges,  
Perusing their surroundings for a way of escape;  
A guard, heavy with tradition and self,  
Watching the prisoners like a pelican eyeing the ocean,  
Rifle slung across his shoulder, pistol, trigger-ready, on his side;  
A kinsman, having trained dogs to hunt rabbits, to tree coons,  
Reasoning that running the blood-thirsty hounds to track his  
Own children through the swamp would teach the dogs to hunt  
A prisoner; jubilant when the convict makes his escape,  
When the dogs are loosed on the trail, when they follow the  
Human scent down the river banks through the soggy sloughs.

The next scene feels ancient, prehistoric.  
At the foot of a tree, the canines, mouths foaming like the sea;  
On the ground, the crouched convict, hands covering his head,



As lifeless as Baal's prophets; the guard, calling off the dogs,  
Ordering the prisoner to his feet, landing a punch with the heat  
Of a July Fourth celebration; the prisoner lunging forward,  
Sputtering, gurgling, withstanding kick after kick until  
The guard is satisfied.

*There's blood on the leaves and blood at the root.*

That's the blues. They're raw. They keep us up at night.  
They're conviction that demands action like –  
Like going down to the river to wash seven times  
Or penning another poem. Or Two.

---

## Camp Meetin'

*All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.*

Flannery O'Connor

It's the dog days of summer. Funeral fans swish. Guitars hum.  
Banjos and fiddles screech and whine.  
But with good ears and vigilance, pickers tune and tighten,  
And song bursts forth with a waterfall's force.  
"In the sweet by and by,  
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.  
In the sweet by and by,  
We shall meet on that beautiful shore."  
Then he moves in.  
With eyes like coal-tar pitch and as penetrating as bullets, he scans  
The crowd, and waving the Good Book as if he were conjuring a spirit,  
He begins his diatribe on sin and the judgment to come.  
Before long, his face reddens;  
On his tiptoes, with a volcano's fervor,  
He thunders of hell's eternal fire,  
Of a burning sulfur, never consumed,  
Of God's wrath as destructive as a tsunami.  
When the prophet pounds the podium and points his crooked finger,  
Chastising, condemning, shaming,  
The place quakes with amens and hallelujahs.  
Sometimes, though, judgment occurs in the here and now  
As one moving from the fringes  
Releases a scream, interrupting the faithful like a sonic boom.  
With flailing arms and sunken eyes, she speaks of dreams and visions  
And prophecies of a death by water, another by fire,  
The frenzy finally subsiding into fatigue and a hushed tone,  
As other women mumble, mutter, moan and weep.  
With hands clasped as tightly as a pendant storing a lock of hair  
And with forward gaze, they appear trance-like, touched.

And I am afraid.  
Since then, decades have ambled towards forever,  
And sin's repercussions have rushed our lives like tidal waves.  
But today as the memory congeals and the figures take shape,  
I, too, am touched.  
There's a kind of fear that precedes faith  
And an awe that comes with surrender.

---

## Elijah

("My God is Jehovah")

When I was a child, he seemed worn, but ageless,  
Tall, lanky, a bit stooped,  
In khaki trousers and khaki shirt buttoned to the top,  
Billfold snuggled in his breast pocket.  
Partly bald, he often wore a hat,  
Sometimes felt and small, other times straw and large,  
But always turned upwards on the sides.  
His belt prong took in the last hole, the extra one, ice-picked,  
And the belt's end drooped like a disciplined child.

He was the last of the mule farmers.  
Tending a sixty-acre tract,  
He turned up the sod, fresh and cool,  
As he plodded, brogan-shod, behind the two-horse plow,  
Often allowing the children to ride on the seat  
He had rigged up on the cultivator.  
In drought he prayed for rain but then walked worried  
As he commanded the mules with his Gee and Haw and Whoa,  
Taking pride in rows as straight as forthright talk.  
One almost always sees him in the field,  
Dusting the cotton to rid it of weevils,  
Shucking an ear of corn to inspect its maturity,  
Thumping the melon to check its ripeness.  
Sometimes we see him placing his mail-order biddies in the brooder,  
Anticipating the Sunday delicacies they would become,  
Or buying a mess of mullet with the extra cash from the cotton seed,  
Even splurging on a lemon sody for himself  
And on neapolitan cream for the family.

He was our father  
Protecting, instructing, correcting,  
Believing that a dose of Castor Oil would cure every ailment,  
That swallowing Vicks Salve would cure the common cold,  
That sparing the rod would spoil the child.  
Like Vulcan, he awoke before day to start a fire,  
Stoking it with splinters from fat lighter stumps.

As the blaze roared, he would rub his calloused hands together,  
Satisfied that the house was waking to new life.

He was a man who had God's heart,  
Who commended his first-born to the Lord, bargaining  
For His presence and a heavy allotment of the Holy Ghost.  
In the middle of the night, he spoke in tongues  
As mysterious and strange as the phoenix's rebirth,  
Sometimes dancing thru the morning's early hours  
On the creaking, wooden floors.

And then he was finished.  
Sitting by the flame, legs purple and thin,  
Mouth as dry as the embers of the fire,  
He blessed God's name and then passed the mantle to his sons and daughters.  
Recognizing its power, they rolled up the cloak  
And struck the water,  
But when they asked for a double portion of his spirit,  
The sea did not part for them,  
And they did not cross the Jordan on dry ground.

---

**Jo Taylor** is a first-year retired high school English teacher from Georgia who enjoys reading, traveling and spending time with her two grandsons, all three loves contributing to her poems about art, family and faith. She has published in *Silver Birches* and in *The Ekphrastic Review*.



## Bruce Pemberton

---

### Senior Prom, May 1972

It's a triple date with two buddies  
and three sophomores who mis-  
takenly think we're cool seniors.  
My father voices concern about  
his Lincoln. He's suspicious. What's  
the evening itinerary? It's prom,  
I tell him, we've got tuxedos, there's  
a late dinner downtown, and I'm home  
by one and the buddies are staying over.

It goes well enough for an evening  
in the gym: photos, cookies, punch,  
chaperones, and then after, bottles  
clattering around on the backseat  
floorboard. After dinner, where I  
mispronounce *filet mignon*, the six  
of us go parking. I barely know my  
date, and hesitate kissing her, but  
she insists.

On the drive home, one gal, not mine,  
vomits out the window, as I drive ten  
miles an hour under the posted speed  
limit. We drop them off, then stop for  
gas as the old man wants his tank full.  
We responsibly toss out all the empty  
bottles. At my house, my mother comes  
downstairs in housecoat and slippers to  
tell us to pipe down and go to sleep.

I dream about climbing up through  
the branches of a tree when my shoulder  
catches on a limb that pokes me. I awaken  
as my father, in full fishing gear, becomes  
that limb. Get up, he says, you and your  
knuckleheaded friends are washing the  
Lincoln. It seems, someone has thrown up  
all over the side, and I'm not going out to  
the lake with that on my car. I know it  
wasn't you, he says, you know better. It

was one of your clownish and fatherless friends, or one of those young girls. We wash it as the sun comes up. I hand back the keys, and we head into the house for the rest of last night's sleep.

An hour later, my mother gets me up for church as my friends sleep on. I have a raging headache, but I drank nothing. My family surrounds me in our usual pew. It's a good time to pray. *Heavenly Father, thank you for getting us home safely last night and for letting me kiss a persistent sophomore. Sorry about the very inexpensive wine, it wasn't my idea. Maybe when I'm older, it'll become amusing, but for now, I don't see it. Amen.*

---

**Bruce Pemberton** is a retired high school English teacher, tennis coach, and Gulf War veteran. His most recent work has appeared in FOLIATE OAK, SKY ISLAND JOURNAL, THE WILD WORD, THIRD WEDNESDAY, DUCK LAKE JOURNAL, RIGOROUS, AMERICAN LIFE IN POETRY, and the anthologies, IN TAHOMA'S SHADOW and SPOKANE WRITES. He lives on the Palouse, in rural, eastern Washington state.

# Caron Freeborn with Steve Armitage

---

Yeah, I go there now

In the name of the Father, Son &  
Holy Spirit – though round our way, if you  
know your father's name  
it's a miracle and the spirit's  
only holy on account of the swearing  
to God it'll be the last. Remember when  
Lisa Bennet tried to claim a virgin birth -  
though that was just to stop her lairy  
step-dad kicking her out.  
Sometimes, you meet the antichrist then he turns  
out to be a painter and decorator from Romford  
way. In the beginning, words  
were sprayed on the church with the swing doors  
and that's where it ended, too,  
with nine tequila slammers and a pint.  
Dear Lord, my nana used to say,  
deliver us. I play the keyboard there now  
#sometimes.



*Photo credit: Caron Freeborn and Steve Armitage*

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**Caron Freeborn** is autistic, heavily tattooed and an unlikely Christian. Although once a novelist, poetry became her autistic special interest. Her poems have been published in journals both with and without regular collaborator **Steve Armitage**, and her first full collection came out 2015.

## *Jennifer Leigh Paccione*

---

### Stained Glass

step inside hallowed halls  
gaze upon these four walls  
fix your eyes  
from darkened skies  
to where you'll find  
my windows  
cut in stone

all we are  
is stained

you are not unlike me  
trying so hard to see  
beyond the veil  
oh so frail  
that reveals  
imperfections  
one by one

colors cut under the surface  
weaving leaden webs inside us  
pieces locked into the past  
delicate as glass

each of us a mosaic  
our strength is so delicate  
through the stains  
the light remains  
never the same  
eternal  
and made whole

all we are  
is stained

colors cut under the surface  
weaving leaden webs inside us  
pieces locked into the past  
delicate as glass

closed doors become windows  
through illumination

colors cut under the surface  
weaving leaden webs inside us  
pieces locked into the past  
delicate as glass  
delicate as glass

delicate

as glass

---

**Jennifer Leigh Paccione** is a current MFA graduate student at Stetson University in the Poetry in the Expanded Field program. She is an experimental poet who employs sound, music, art, and film to create innovative and edgy multi-media works/installations. She is also a musician, composer, and piano/voice instructor residing in Orlando, Florida. You can listen to "Stained Glass" on Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/track/76e6k4yQ3uxkbjB6g3djCn>

## *Bruce McRae*

---

### Some Angelology

Angels sifting blood from blood,  
exposing their angelic underthings,  
aswim in light's high beams.  
Angels writing Death a mash letter,  
romping among day-glo altocumulus,  
breaking weather, baking sorrow's bread.

Angels of swamp and ghetto,  
hovering beside a fogbound car crash,  
possessing a flower's temperament and temper.  
The angels of indigestion and football.  
The angels of stones dropped  
in the ocean or flung at the sky.  
The angels moonlighting as messengers.  
Mobs of angels rioting, rebelling,  
flashing ethereal handguns,  
in sharp skirts of leather and chrome,  
the Lord's will the last thing in mind;  
angel-mind part foam, part thorn,  
rank humans their emotional betters.

Because angels argue with time  
they have inexhaustible dudgeons.  
Angels are filling up the hollows  
with the rainwaters of form and energy.  
Pulling on the starlings' advances,  
drugging our well water, dervishing always.  
They consume their weight in thunder,  
blushing like a blackened rose,  
half-drunk, smoke issuing from their loins,  
on the wing and gliding to the far end of Forever,  
riding the celestial zephyrs  
that blow this way and that way  
on the back of the moon.

You're sitting on their communal lap.  
They run their fingers under your sweater,  
tugging on their heavenly bits,  
knotted to God's infinite locks –  
oh, the mention of God,

which has them twisting their haloes,  
burning as martyrs burn, pawning feathers,  
hurling devilish invectives,  
throwing the bricks and bottles of tantrums,  
huffing and stamping their feet;  
their small and perfect footsteps  
making the sound of snow when it falls

---

**Bruce McRae**, a Canadian musician currently residing on Salt Spring Island BC, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with over 1,500 poems published internationally in magazines such as *Poetry*, *Rattle* and the *North American Review*. His books are *The So-Called Sonnets* (Silenced Press); *An Unbecoming Fit Of Frenzy* (Cawing Crow Press); *Like As If* (Pski's Porch); and *Hearsay* (The Poet's Haven).

## *Debra Ayis*

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### We Did Good?

Blood flowed like infinite silk  
An artwork on gravel  
Stemming from a sprawled human  
Barely breathing in – and then out  
More labored; weaker heartbeat  
I feel the pain, pain of a child, pain of the dying  
Indescribable excruciating pain.

A holy anger rises within me  
I feel your pain, I feel you mourn  
I groan along with you  
Your spirit one with mine  
Why the hunger, pain, hate  
The heart of man so desperately wicked.

You said it, you knew it  
You told us  
Showed us a better way  
Bled to make us change  
I am keeling and flipping  
The hungry remain, we feed and feed  
Like a sand pit  
Open mouths forever remain.

The poor will always be with you  
We feed, we donate, and we go  
But the prince of this world wages a war against us  
We persist, focusing our passion on doing good  
We fight on, because we know  
On the last day, the victory is ours.

---

### Hope

Freedom, since I have never seen you,  
I am not sure what I am looking for.  
Sunshine, I have heard of your brilliance and warmth  
But my cold heart has never felt your touch.  
Color, so vibrant and beautiful, tales I have been told  
But I don't know what that means



Dreams, all I know is darkness and horror.

Angels, bright and majestic  
Will you free me from this prison?  
This place that has ever felt foreign  
Though I have spent my whole life in its embrace  
This cold diamond has never been my mother  
Though the only existence I have known,  
Its solace has never reached my heart.

I know there is so much out there,  
Another existence perhaps  
Life, life I have never lived  
I want to live life, I want to see the light, feel the warmth  
Experience love, joy, laughter, happiness  
Won't you be my release? Won't you take me away?  
Won't you take me home?  
For this existence is not my home.

---

**Debra Ayis** is a Nigerian born, but New York-based writer and poet. She has been published in over 100 anthologies, magazines, journals and devotionals in a number of countries and has been awarded for her work. Her two books; "[\*Thoughts and Memories: A Collection of Poetry\*](#)" and "[\*Awaiting Dawn: Echoes of a Haunted Soul\*](#)" are now available online as e-books. She is a volunteer contributor to Our Daily Bread's youth branch YMI (Why am I?) and was most recently published in "*Life at a Crossroads*", the City University of New York (CUNY) Killens Review of Arts & Letters - Fall/Winter 2019; her website is [www.valiantscribe.com](http://www.valiantscribe.com).

## *Elaine Wilburt*

---

### Song For Those Who Can Hear Only Noise

The russet strangers  
stressed not singing  
picked up the chicken  
as always  
where significance  
vacations  
like thousands of others  
the whitewashed dazzling host

Small-town crowing  
has a still unbroken  
self-image  
a simple representative of sounds  
a torch-singing act  
to express  
this threat

You have to accept  
what's here

The summer wants  
to protect a modest stone  
The song of the cock  
seems small bright blue  
At the edge of quiet  
the marshes creep  
in sweet peace

Look death  
is about noise  
hostile nature  
against a trapdoor  
painted with words  
still dark  
emerging

A low hoarse crow  
discreet  
pleading  
This uproar

trailed  
off

The rooster's  
only rarely sung  
staunch  
as if to stay  
the church bells  
from ringing

This countryside  
never even heard

An erasure poem. Source material: "On Front Lines of Culture War in France: Maurice the Rooster," *The New York Times*, Sunday, June 23, 2019.

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## Empty

The musty manger  
where the Uncreated  
slept swaddled in soft  
new flesh The tax  
collector's booth and the rocking  
boats His followers forsook  
The water jars He filled  
with the best wine for the wedding  
feast The sickbed  
of the servant whose centurion  
acted by the code of authority  
The fury of the tempest that terrified  
lifelong fishermen  
The perfume jar the woman  
poured to anoint His feet  
The graveclothes unwound  
from Lazarus's live body  
The shame (and the discarded  
jar) the Samaritan carried  
to the well The water basin  
with which He cleansed His disciples'  
dusty feet The kiss  
of betrayal planted in the garden  
The wooden cross that stood  
between two thieves  
The borrowed tomb hewn  
in stone The tombs of every  
dead heart He renews

for Bishop GK Maxwell, who said at Christmas that the tomb is empty

---

## Resurrection

song

brave leaps lying in state  
ever the formed image  
of the way treasure  
came whirling  
assured acceptance

fact made beautiful

An erasure poem. Source material: Stephens, Andrea, *Bible B.A.B.E.S.*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Fleming H. Revell, 2005, p. 19.

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Wife of 26 years, mother of five, graduate of Middlebury College, **Elaine Wilburt**'s poems have appeared or will appear in *The Cresset*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *The Avenue*, and *Edify Fiction*, among others; photo haiku, in *Wales Haiku Journal* and *Failed Haiku*. She received a 2019 Creatrix Haiku Award.

## LindaAnn LoSchiavo

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### Fallen Apple

Eventually, I knew. He's married.  
He massaged facts convincingly as if  
Virility depended on falsehoods.

Becoming a cliché, committing sins,  
Unselfed perspectives. Scarlet woman now,  
Though raised to be a one-on-one type gal,  
I pondered how forbidden fruit changed me,  
How stolen kisses and sweet whisperings  
Unpeeled the ingenue I was — — before.

My inborn core saw sanctity in vows  
That never crumbled like stale wedding cake.

I'm skin's dessert. He'll do without to have  
His mouth on me, an overripe replay,  
Pretending he is working late again,  
Adultery's familiar script, fake words,  
"I love you," tossed around. Explicit terms  
Might sound endearing, even meaningful.

Romantic, is it? Tarnished cutlery  
Served spoiled treats, fool's forever fantasies.

"Regard that worm inside!" the apple cries.

---

### Encounter in Chiesa del Gesù

*do not let us fall into temptation . . .*  
*non lasciarci cadere in tentazione . . .*  
— — The Lord's Prayer

— — — "So where do you undress on naked days?"  
He scares me here, a quiet chapel, quaint,  
While lighting candles. We're alone, I see.

What seems a small, short figure beckons me,  
Like secrets I have lived to face. My sight  
Is playing tricks in fearful-looking light.

I've tingling prickles up my leg. He's gained.

— — — *"Italians worship death, approaching pain,  
— — — Or violence. Count these crucifixes. Sick!"*

He talks in cold-filled sounds. A candlestick  
I thought unlit flares up a tempting red.  
Fresh bruisable pink petals singe; not dead,  
Maniacally, their center is consumed.

— — — *"Where do you dress for dancing?"* he resumes.  
— — — *"The bright objective music comes on late.  
— — — Tangoes are prophecies."* He demonstrates,  
And makes his thrust like *lunging* after me.

I lose my name, my bearings. Who is he?

There's darkness dripping with the damp. He marks  
His mark, hails emptiness, benighted shark.  
But benediction rouses me. I arc  
Away, state, *"I don't dance in your damned dark."*

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**LindaAnn LoSchiavo** is a dramatist, writer, and formalist. Her poetry chapbooks *Conflicted Excitement* [Red Wolf Editions, 2018] and *Concupiscent Consumption* [Red Ferret Press, 2020] along with her collaborative book on prejudice [Macmillan in the USA, *Aracne Editions* in Italy] are her latest titles.  
Twitter: @Mae\_Westside

## Daniel Romo

---

### Blending

*for Maya and Maria*

The art of healing is studied by examining  
the amount of mourning left within the man,  
a craft best appreciated by those  
keen enough to understand  
there's no set recovery time for growth  
or grace.

Choosing to let in someone new  
is a testament to forgiveness and faith  
not dependent upon one's past,  
and I've learned not to dwell on my mistakes  
that may have actually been  
unrealized forms of peaceful  
escape.

A woman is made from an unblemished rib,  
a divine creation resulting in  
man's instant companionship.  
Where two or three are gathered  
so is God  
and a new beginning.

I can't see where this is going,  
the meeting of my daughter and the new  
woman in my life,  
the way I sensed the oncoming collision between  
foreshadowing and fruition surrounding  
the needed restoration of my belief.

Maybe they'll be introduced over dinner,  
or at a theme park,  
or at any other disarming setting in which  
a hopeful dad attempts to be both  
builder and bridge  
to these new relationships.

I'm not certain how my daughter will react  
to learning that someone else also  
sits shotgun in my passenger seat

when she's not riding  
with me.  
I'm unsure as to how she'll feel knowing  
my affection is now also for a woman  
who will never be  
her mother.  
Because no matter how similar  
their DNA displays a resemblance  
remarked upon by strangers,  
even a father's best intentions can't ensure  
his daughter will love  
all that he loves.  
The same last name doesn't guarantee  
identical feelings.  
But one can never discount the way the seasons change,  
gradually giving itself to the next,  
as if God  
knew what He was doing  
all along.

---

## Spirit

Who among us can calculate the hypotenuse  
of Heaven?

Which sinner down below can decipher  
the formula for salvation and  
an unknown variable?

Being swallowed and then stranded in the belly of a whale  
is every dark place you were in  
before managing to find and light the wick coded in better days  
and belief.

No one beats around a burning bush when concerning  
the volume of eternity.

What happens when the body exposes the destination of the soul?

There's no question too complex to be answered in time  
and transcendence.

---

**Daniel Romo** is the author of *Apologies in Reverse* (FutureCycle Press 2019), *When Kerosene's Involved* (Mojave River Press, 2014), and *Romancing Gravity* (Silver Birch Press, 2013). He lives and teaches in Long Beach, CA. More at [danielromo.net](http://danielromo.net).



*Terry Minchow-Proffitt*

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## Seven Ways to Sunday

*Physical Graffiti* dropped  
in '75 the one and only time  
I was the seventh caller  
compliments of KFFA and DJ Jack.  
We burnt rubber and feathered out  
on Cherry Street, surprised  
when our crew came in pitched high,  
moaning "In My Time of Dying"  
along with Robert Plant, the blues  
like nobody but Zeppelin in the 70s  
and Blind Willie Johnson's words.

We were all over  
the map in terms of key  
trying seven ways to Sunday  
to find footing, blinded by our own  
lye, our own partial solar eclipse<sup>1</sup>,  
yearning old lyrics to the unknown new.  
Why would we, so young, beg to die easy?  
Why sing what got scraped out of the gravel  
in Blind Willie Johnson's chest?

Still we longed in fact.  
It was Jesus we sang, Jesus gone  
make up our dying bed,  
Jesus gone give us another pair  
when our wings give out.  
*O my Jesus* we moaned like we were coming  
instead of going, *O my Jesus*  
from the seat of daddy's John Deere,  
over the groceries we sacked at Safeway,  
in the backseat under summer  
angels and stars on the levee—  
ringing up Jesus, let me in Jesus.  
*O my Jesus* into the Arkansas Delta night,  
*O my Jesus* rising thin and earnest  
above the tangle of our busted small-town's grip,  
our bye-bye longing to be somebody

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<sup>1</sup> The reports vary as to how Blind Willie Johnson lost his sight as a boy. Some say his stepmother threw lye in his face; others claim he viewed a partial solar eclipse over Texas in 1905.

like nobody's business.

---

## Make Like a Tree

I left; my hometown did not.  
That's why Helena never comes calling  
north in loud daylight, only  
appears ever now over the years  
as a faint flash in the corner  
of my eye, or a brash drive-by  
in dreams, only

I must always leave  
to go south,  
back to what's left  
of the hand I was given.  
Such things! The favorite feel  
of a yellowed pillow; a peach-pit  
monkey Uncle Johnny carved  
while doing time; the comfort food  
of a smoker's cough  
or the clatter of supper plates  
in the distance at dusk; the peril  
and lure of two-lane blacktop  
with little shoulder; a stray dog's  
eager visit, free-ranging house to house,  
open to whatever I've got

to give I walk therein, the air  
pungent, I'm pinned  
to the blue  
ruin that is a light,  
a footing after a fall.

Above, a chiffon moon  
arcs through what remains  
of the brazen azure day.  
I look toward the sway  
of dark oak branches  
overhead, listen up  
as God creaks in and out.

---

**Terry Minchow-Proffitt** lives in St. Louis, MO. His poems have appeared in numerous journals and magazines. His chapbook, *Seven Last Words* (2015), and his two collections, *Chicken Train: Poems from the Arkansas Delta* (2016) and *Sweetiebetter* (2019), were published by Middle Island Press.

## Victoria Crawford

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### Wishing Tree

In my garden, Mimosa tree grows  
delighted I watch her  
dancing with breezes or  
nearly double under  
lightning lash storms  
then up she bounces

Pruned down to a meter  
new branches and arrow leaves  
reach sunward in green upturn  
spread wide like open hands  
to catch the first light  
a smile upwards  
while her roots seek strength  
in her created soil  
day's end, she folds against the night

Mimosa is my wishing tree  
sitting among the plants  
yearning to bend and spring  
in errant winds  
smile in the brilliance of the light  
shield myself against dark times  
and have strong roots  
that hold me close  
in my creation

Thank you for the gifts that are  
Mimosa tree

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Poet **Victoria Crawford** often looks for the spiritual that is reflected in nature and sometimes in her own garden believing that if eyes are open we will see all the examples that will help us be better people. Her poetry has appeared in journals such as *Labyrinthine Passages*, *Time of Singing*, *Parousia*, *Windfall*, and *Califragile*.

## *Julie Dunaway*

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### Sand

How strange it is, that this form  
so familiar has taken on a few  
bending lines, lines that move  
with me, faint echoing ripples  
now staying with me.  
Landmarks of life appear as though  
etched in broken rock and stone.  
Areas exposed to sun, wind, rain  
and all seasons no longer hide their days  
of adventure, or long nights of  
Prayer. I see old scars  
for ancient reasons,  
new scars for old reasons,  
changing this terrain,  
some place created by God  
but owned by Time.  
Or is it created through time, but  
patiently awaited by God?  
The constant waves of sand,  
fine traces of dunes on the surface,  
reveal how land always  
changes, becoming something it  
has never been before. This, then,  
is the weathered soul Christ  
has chosen, this is the mortal form  
He accepts.

His breath stirs across the world,  
a great breath awakening from  
north and south, creating anew,  
north wind and south wind traveling  
across this landscape, slowly  
scattering the grains of sand.

---

### Stinson Beach

Spent some time at the beach today  
Stinson Beach off Highway 1, north of San Francisco

It was cold, and raining  
sat in the car for a bit  
rewrote Rain and Fog (how appropriate).  
After a while the rain stopped  
and I went for a walk along the shore.

That roar of the ocean! - I wasn't used to it, love  
or how high the waves reached.  
But the shoreline was nearly empty of people  
waves crashing upon wide open beach  
stretching out to the cliff hills, misted on all sides.

Seagulls and other birds skittered by close to me  
poking for food in the wet, foaming sand.  
In the breeze, the dune grasses moved like something in a dream.

Only a few other trails of footprints  
in the rain-sodden sand had gone before mine  
and even they had almost disappeared beneath the wind.  
When the storm gusts picked up  
sand grains traveled ahead of me,  
traveling over the packed terrain  
in extraordinary patterns and wild abandon  
as if even more alive and free than me.

I found a place to rest in,  
a tiny shelter waiting.  
About the smallest a driftwood shelter could be,  
not much bigger than me.  
Its back leaned against the small rising dunes  
the large gaps between most of the boards  
permitting so much whistling wind and dune grass,  
sounds of crashing surf, that Hemingway would have loved it.

— but only my love for it mattered today.  
Rest was to be had for so many uncounted moments  
Breathing, looking out over the ocean.  
The tiny shelter opened up to the whole of the ocean  
to our world, to the horizon's possibilities.  
And unlike Hemingway, I longed for scripture  
for the beloved Book of James  
wishing I had brought it.

The rain began to return when I did  
the wind streaming in my face on the way back,  
my sunglasses catching droplets from the sky.

My jeans were slightly damp by the time

I reached my car,  
but they warmed and dried quickly as I drove home,  
grateful for the hour God had given me  
the unbound time to walk along His shoreline.

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One of **Julie Dunaway**'s essays placed in UC Berkeley's Lili Fabilli and Eric Hoffer Essay Prize contest, and another won the Northwest Indian College "101" Short Story Contest. Her poems have been published in *The Coffee Shop Chronicles* and *Poetry Walk: Sue C. Boynton Poetry Contest, The First Five Years (Paperback)*.

## Kelly Hanwright

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### Irreversible

*He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it. - Numbers 23:20*

You told me from the age of three,  
*God has blessed you;*  
got others to believe.

When you told Aunt Veronica  
I could see angels,  
She fell to her knees.

You taught me about demons –  
how they were destroying my father;  
seeking to destroy me.

Later I discovered you  
were the one being destroyed by demons  
more hellish than anyone knew.

The long nightmare now over, how can I  
believe blessings of a madwoman  
fighting a nameless evil?

Reminder from God:  
*Blessing against the odds,*  
*Balaam could not help himself.*

God placed the words of fire on his tongue;  
did not relieve the burning  
till they were issued.

---

### Hope Chest

I did not have a hope chest.  
The first time a friend spoke of hers,  
eyes luminescent with dreams,  
I had to ask what it was.  
But Mama said  
God plans to give me *hope and a future.*

She built a box with those words,  
polishing them with promises  
like *love of Jesus*  
and *peace that is past comprehension*,  
sealing the wood with shellac  
of *never leave you nor forsake you*.

On my 24<sup>th</sup> birthday she completed her work,  
and it was good.  
I continue to discover its excellence  
as I remove item upon item,  
year after year,  
ever changing to match my need,  
never running out –

the Everlasting hope chest  
my mother built for me  
from eternal words.

---

**Kelly Hanwright** is a poet, teacher, and dog trainer living in the beautiful Smoky Mountains. She is a Pushcart nominee whose work has appeared in various venues including *The Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Lady Literary Magazine*, and *American Diversity Report*.



## *Peter Lilly*

---

### Absolution

I've seen the scars of your  
developing years,  
they match the knuckles  
of your guardians.

Know this,  
you are an innocent perpetrator  
of the darkest of sins,

for those were your suckling years.

And as a cub you learned to bite

and as a man you've learned again

and the way the walls hit your fists  
is now your solace.

Now the only escape  
is a punishment  
you cannot live through,  
a love  
your guilt will not let you receive,  
and a childhood  
your self-consciousness will not let you re-enter.

The only escape  
is a punishment  
and a love  
and a childhood.

The only escape  
is death and new life.

---

### Your Stare

You have this way of staring.  
A wonder,  
an infancy being filled.

Some people might call it vacant,  
but it is the very opposite of vacancy.  
It is the silent, open-mouthed gaze  
of intense and unashamed presence.  
A reaction to the wonder of being,  
without the pretense of show,  
or the embarrassment of wanting to look  
like you already know.

---

**Peter Lilly** is a British poet. Originally from Gloucester, he studied Theology in London, where he then worked with the homeless, and now lives in Montpellier, France, with his wife and son. His poetry has appeared in the 2018 anthology *Please Hear What I am Not Saying*, and the online journals *Barehands* and *Fly on the Wall Webzine*. Blog: <http://peterlillypoetry.blogspot.com/> Twitter: @peterlillypoems

## Stephen Regan

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### Handmaiden

The boy woke daily  
seeing her, serenely dolorous,  
a single tear on her face  
close-framed by veil and scarf,  
with just the end of one forefinger  
visible beneath her mantle  
of blue and queenly gold.  
He wondered what was at  
that fingertip.

Her countenance rooted deep  
as he got on with life,  
pausing at similar images  
until, in his fiftieth year,  
he reached her in sculpted form.

She stood upon a serpent's head;  
in its mouth an apple. Her hands  
would have been in low *orans* –  
but both were missing, lopped off.

On the pedestal, worn, carved words:  
*Let me use your hands and bring ...*  
then three words too eroded to read.

In his sixtieth year he revisited her.  
The hands had been restored,  
rough-fixed, and the inscription  
renewed. He read the last three  
words ... *Christ to others*.

---

**Stephen Regan's** poems have been published by: *Shooter, Envoi, Killing the Angel, Reach Poetry* and *Indiana Voice Journal*. His work is also in the following anthologies: *The Quality of Mersey, Best of Manchester Poets*, and *Fragile Things*. He is the founder of the Liver Bards writers' group in Liverpool.

## *Elaine Wilburt*

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### The Bread of Life

“Oh, so like an effigy,” said Carol in her crisp soprano, the speaker on the phone almost making Robin feel as if her new friend were in the kitchen with her as she kneaded.

Robin chuckled. “I never once thought of it that way.”

Robin pushed the slightly sticky mound of dough away from her with the heel of her hand. Then a fold, a turn, another push. Just like Nonna used to do. Robin liked the repetitive rhythm, the comfort of the small confident motions that would form the gluten in this challah studded with cranberries and pecans, the Christmas bread she had been making for as long as she could remember. As soon as Robin could stand on a stool to see over the counter, her grandmother had let her place the egg for its head. Later, Robin graduated to rolling the coils used to make the swaddling, then to braiding them, before Nonna had shown her how to make the dough itself. Closing her eyes, Robin could imagine Nonna’s hands on hers guiding her, teaching her to knead and judge the dough by feel.

“When does Sandy come home?”

“He’s not. He’s spending Christmas in California with his girlfriend.” This would be the first time Robin would not have all her children with her for the holidays. A prelude to new traditions, she thought. She pushed the dough away harder than she had intended.

“Wow, I guess it’s serious.”

“I suppose so,” Robin replied, drawing out the words like taking a deep breath. “When we used to call him, you could barely get more than a grunt about how classes were, or anything else. But you should’ve heard him talking about their first date last spring.”

“Really?”

“He spent a half hour telling Jim about just getting ready. What he wore, how long it took to dress. Then how he planned the date, everything.” A faint smile on her face, Robin could see her husband again regaling her with the story of Sandy’s excitement. Scooping the round of dough into a greased bowl, she covered it to let it rise and headed to the couch to finish her conversation.

The next day Robin wrapped her Baby Jesus bread, layer by layer in plastic and foil, and then slid it into a bread bag. She laughed at herself, recalling the many times she had kidded her mother-in-law about putting the plastic Jesus from the outdoor Nativity in his bag for yearly storage. Now, as if she were Mary herself, Robin lowered the bundle gingerly onto the cold packs, and covered it with more before sealing the box to overnight her gift to Sandy, his girlfriend, and her family.

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Wife of 26 years, mother of five, graduate of Middlebury College, **Elaine Wilburt**'s poems have appeared or will appear in *The Cresset*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *The Avenue*, and *Edify Fiction*, among others; photo haiku, in *Wales Haiku Journal* and *Failed Haiku*. She received a 2019 Creatrix Haiku Award.

## Robert Garner McBrearty

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### A Trace of Music

I recall that curious music in my head, as I tilted my ear listening to something that might not even be playing at all. Something that maybe I just imagined was playing. Like some cry from far away.

I never heard the music when I was sober, and not when I was really drunk. Just drunk to a certain stage; Not in the beginning stages of drunkenness, not in the later stages either, but in some little reprieve of being able to turn one way, or the other.

During all my drinking days, I listened for that music and thought it might be worth continuing to drink just to hear it once more. But, of course, it wasn't.

I tilt my head now, these many years later, and I don't hear it – but I remember hearing it, and I remember it sounded like a promise. Things were going to be okay – oh no, much more than okay. The future was bright. The world opened before me. All was possible. But I could only have the music for a few seconds, and then I'd be haunted by it, wondering when it might come again.

After I quit drinking, the world became grayer for a time. I thought I'd never hear the music again. But one day it hit me, cold-stone sober walking on a windy street with a park to my right, leaves blowing across the grass, and the sun bright and cold... and I thought, I heard it.

Now I know I will hear it again one day.

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**Robert Garner McBrearty's** stories have been widely published, including in the Pushcart Prize, *Missouri Review*, *North American Review*, *StoryQuarterly* and *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, along with five books of fiction. His most recent book is a collection of flash fiction published by Matter Press.

## Kale Sastre

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### On Becoming

I hate the sound of doors opening and closing. I hate it when I can feel a door slam, and my heart jumps. I hate it when I'm expecting people who make me nervous, and every footfall outside my apartment door sounds like theirs. And then I also hate it when it's not them.

I want to feel safe and secure, to live in a world that no one can enter without good intentions. I want to know that the feet outside my door are not ever again going to be the bad people coming for me. I want to hear footsteps rushing for a door without also hearing the screaming that faded out years ago.

My apartment is a cocoon, made of thread so thin I can't fully metamorphosize into a butterfly. I lay there, deformed, begging for rest, but instead all kinds of aphids and gnats and maggots get in, chewing away at my developing body, preventing my wings from sprouting.

Every footfall could be the one that crushes me. Every animal loping by could be the one that swallows me. Every day could be my last. But I have to persist because where could I go without my wings? How can I crawl while my legs are turning to goo? What is there left to hope for when my silk slides off of me, and the nutrients I stocked up ooze out of me, and I'm baking in the summer sun instead of resting in the shade?

I tried the garden. I tried the butterfly sanctuary. The garden had no place for me, and the sanctuary kicked me out. Now I'm on the road. Whoever heard of a cocoon on asphalt? Rooting for the underdog is one thing. Rooting for a conscious pile of goo is another.

Who is left to scrape me up?

---

**Kale Sastre** is a writer, Christian, anthropologist, and adventurer, in no particular order. Her work can be found at the [themighty.com/u/kale-sastre/](https://themighty.com/u/kale-sastre/) as well as in various electronic and print publications, such as *Mad Swirl*, *Green Blotter*, *Thought Catalog*, and *Lee Review*. She is working on many projects that may or may not be hitting stores near you. Follow her on Twitter @KaleSastre.

## *Don Stoll*

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### Passion

The Lutheran church where the American couple would attend Palm Sunday service stood on the outskirts of a city. The city was a hundred miles east of the village of Wajuwatinga that they knew so well. But the Reverend Elijah had assured them that from Simba Lodge, where they'd spent the night, the walk would be short.

"Short even for white people," Elijah had added.

Other buildings stood on the fringe of the dusty, sprawling open space that was as big as several football fields. The Americans would have thought it was waste area if they hadn't been told it was used one Saturday a month for the market. Elijah had instructed them to follow the people holding palm fronds to the source of the sounds of joy. That source was the choir, a dozen men in white shirts and dark slacks or jeans and a dozen women in white blouses or T-shirts and dark skirts, swaying and dancing in unison at the front of the church.

Tim and Josie had taken seats far from the windows in case of rain. The windows reached from chest-level to half the height of the roof, about thirty feet. Elijah had warned them that the windows had no glass.

"Next year, God willing," he'd said.

Tim remembered this as he surveyed the congregation.

"Was he hinting that we should pay for windows?" he asked his wife.

"If we start supporting churches, we'll have to tell donors. Some of them will pull out."

She looked at Tim out of the corner of her eye.

"But we could pay out of our own pockets," she said. "And not take a tax deduction."

He didn't answer. She knew he was already unhappy that the service would be long.

"I was kidding," she said, adding "Pretend you're African: endure."

Tim continued to look around.

"If you're wondering why Elijah hasn't joined us," Josie said, "he's become a big man in the Diocese. He's expected to help with the service wherever he goes."

"How do you know this?"



“By listening when he talks.”

Tim knew that he must try not to see Elijah’s father, Abraham Chiza, in the son.

To one side of the choir, a man wearing a beige suit opened a door. He admitted two men in white cassocks. One—the local pastor, Tim assumed—was very young. He walked with a stoop, as if worried that his height would intimidate the people of the congregation. Or perhaps the young pastor was intimidated by the presence of the other man, the Reverend Elijah. Elijah was short and round like his father, but he kept his back straight as he walked.

Abraham Chiza’s deteriorating relationship with Tim had culminated in the announcement that henceforth his son would serve as the Americans’ liaison to Wajuwatinga. If Tim and Josie wished to continue to build schools and clinics and clean-water systems in the village, where no one had e-mail as a way to communicate with America, then they would need to work with one Chiza or another.

“All of my children have made something of themselves,” Abraham had reminded the Americans. “They are not ignorant peasants, passing their lives by eating and drinking and sleeping and procreating like animals. I give you the Reverend Elijah to work with. He lives not far from Wajuwatinga and he is a man of God.”

In profile, the cassock gave Elijah a pleasing shape. Tim was reminded of his faraway school days, when he’d taken pleasure in using a drawing compass to make graceful arcs inside of right triangles.

A shrill cry from the back of church announced the beginning of the service. Tim interpreted the cry as a command to sit. As he sat, he twisted his head to see that the man who had emitted the cry was already parallel with the row that he and Josie had chosen. The man’s compact figure was clothed in a white T-shirt, white chinos, and white athletic shoes. He could only have traveled from the back of church so quickly by way of a sequence of leaps. His culminating leap had ended in a crouch from which he now emerged slowly, in time with the spread of a radiant smile across his face. He emitted another cry and bounded toward the local pastor and Elijah. He pivoted in mid-air and touched down silently on the balls of his feet, facing the congregation. He began to sing in falsetto.

“Famous guest-*i*,” a man in front of Tim said. “Go everywhere, praising the Lord.”

Amplified music overwhelmed the famous guest’s voice, but his fluid, loose-wristed gestures held the Africans rapt. He would kneel and reach toward heaven, or use his arm to brush sweat from his forehead. With his fingers he would wipe away tears from beneath his eyes. He would wag his finger to send a warning that he would soften with a cloying smile, or stretch his arms forward and draw them back to his chest as if scooping the congregation into an embrace.

The performance reminded Tim and Josie that the Africans marked neither gender nor sexual orientation as Americans did. Back home they’d often asked gay friends to accompany them to Wajuwatinga, even though the governor of one of the country’s administrative regions had called on residents to kill homosexuals.

“They won’t recognize you as gay,” Tim had assured them.

“You should see Tim squirm when the Reverend Elijah holds his hand,” Josie would add.

“I don’t squirm,” Tim would insist.

His blush contradicted his words.

#

The local pastor was speaking through a microphone.

“How did your Swahili get so good overnight?” Tim said as Josie translated.

“I understand the Passion in any language.”

The pastor’s musical voice rose an octave and he grew more animated. His white cassock became an irritant and he used his microphone hand to shove back his sleeve as he pointed to one worshiper after another.

“Peter’s denial,” Josie said. “Would these people also be cowards and deny Jesus?”

“*Hapana*”: no.

“*Hapana*.”

“Even if threatened with torture?” Josie said.

“*Hapana*.”

“With death?”

The congregation shouted that they would never deny Jesus.

A man as tall as the pastor occupied the chair in front of Tim, who’d inched his chair to the right to look over the tall man’s shoulder. But as the pastor had become more ardent, Tim wished to make himself invisible. He inched his chair to the left until it butted against Josie’s. Neither the local pastor nor Elijah could see him. He closed his eyes.

#

“Thank God you don’t snore,” Josie said.

She pulled Tim to his feet.

“Now we’re the famous guest-*is*,” she said.

Tim had spoken often to church congregations. When they applauded and Elijah on his left and Josie on his right patted his back, he knew he had done well.

“Lifted heavenward by the voices of angels,” Josie whispered. “Not bad for an atheist.”

“Know your audience,” Tim said.

The service ended. Elijah took Tim’s hand. He led the Americans toward the Land Rover that Abraham Chiza, no longer able to drive, had entrusted to his son.

“The local pastor doesn’t want to talk to us?” Josie said.

“I explained about the airport,” Elijah said.

“We need our luggage,” Tim said.

“The boy has it. The owner of Simba Lodge is Lutheran, so I arranged.”

Tim looked through the rolled-down window at a boy whose short stature and frightened eyes made him appear too young to drive. Tim offered his hand. As the expression in the boy’s eyes changed, he looked older.

“Nice,” Tim said, pointing to his Manchester United jersey.

“He can come to the airport to assist with your luggage,” Elijah said.

“We’re all right,” Tim said.

He saw Josie shake her head.

“But we’d love his help,” Tim said.

“We will get my wife and children from the house. They are excited about going to the airport. We have sodas.”

Elijah spoke to the boy in Swahili.

“He can drive to the house,” he told Tim and Josie. “I must drive to the airport.”

The boy drove. But as he prepared to turn in front of oncoming traffic, Elijah made a decision. The cars behind them honked their horns while Elijah and the boy swapped places.

Elijah made the turn off the highway onto a quiet road. He turned into a dirt lane and stopped in front of a high iron wall and gate. The boy got out of the Land Rover and used a key to open the gate. He came back carrying a blue plastic crate of Fanta. A woman and two boys and two girls followed him.

“You have met my wife and children,” Elijah said. “And this is. . .”

Josie repeated the names of the two young teenagers who were friends of Elijah's son and daughter. Tim nodded at Elijah's wife. Her English was as poor as his own Swahili. Elijah and his wife were observant enough of tradition so that Tim and Josie knew her only as Mrs. Chiza or Mama Edmund, after her first child. This bothered Tim. Josie had a different perspective.

"Everybody starts off with a first name, but you don't need it anymore once you're a mother. You're honored with a title."

Edmund and his younger sister, Maureen, were visibly excited.

"I like the airplanes" Maureen said in English.

Edmund looked at the Fanta.

"Lots of flavors," Josie said without enthusiasm.

She looked toward the house.

"Where's Daniel?" she said.

With quick movements, Mrs. Chiza ran her left hand down her right arm from elbow to wrist and then her right hand down her left arm from elbow to wrist.

"He's looking for his Lions jacket," Elijah explained. "The one my father gave him."

"Does he need help?" Josie said, but Daniel appeared.

"You know that the lion is important to my father," Elijah laughed.

"Your father *is* a lion," Tim said.

Josie jabbed her knee into him.

Daniel, the orphan, was thought to be between sixteen and eighteen. Elijah thought he'd lived in their house for about ten years. Tim and Josie had asked a couple of times why he never spoke and Elijah had explained that he was simple.

"*Jambo*, Daniel," Tim and Josie said.

"*Simba*," Josie said.

Daniel touched the image of the blue lion outlined in white high up on the left breast of his Detroit Lions jacket. The sleeve came halfway up his forearm as he reached.

"He needs a new jacket," Tim said.

"He likes the lion," Elijah said.

“And he doesn’t want a new one,” Josie said.

Tim watched the boy who’d driven examine the sodas.

“What is your name?” Tim said.

“That boy doesn’t know English,” Elijah said, and then, “Is it all right to sit in back? If my wife and the children are in the middle they can be with the soda.”

Tim and Josie moved to the back of the Land Rover.

“I have only the seat belt for myself,” Elijah said, “so that boy should sit in front because behind the front is safer.”

Mrs. Chiza and the teenagers reviewed the seating arrangements. They agreed that Mrs. Chiza and Edmund and Maureen and Daniel ought to be in the middle and the other two young people ought to be in back with Tim and Josie. Elijah set off.

Edmund rested his hand on the crate and looked into the back.

“Passion Fruit?” Josie said to Tim.

“I don’t need the toilet now,” he said. “And I’m not pushing my luck.”

They shook their heads and Elijah shook his head. Everyone else took a soda.

“You know that my father has diabetes,” Elijah said. “Sometimes I will eat ice cream because it’s not common, but soda is everywhere now so it’s best to refuse.”

“What flavor do you like?” Josie said. “Of ice cream.”

Elijah shrugged and adjusted the rear-view mirror. He found Tim and Josie’s eyes.

“When I was in London for a conference of the Church, I saw a man eating an ice cream cone in the street.”

Tim and Josie looked at each other.

“He was your age, Tim, and eating an ice cream cone.”

He turned his head to the side. Tim and Josie watched him mime the act.

“To eat ice cream in bowls is good, but cones are for children.”

He grinned over his shoulder.

“I was with our bishop in Piccadilly Circus and when he saw the man with the ice cream cone he made a joke: ‘Is this why they call it a Circus?’”

Edmund had finished his soda. He looked at his mother, who spoke to Elijah. A brief exchange followed, ending when Elijah raised his voice slightly. Edmund opened another soda.

Josie spoke to Mrs. Chiza, touching her scarf. It featured elephants, lions, and Maasai. Tim pointed to the phrase, repeated all along its border, that began *Mungu anapenda*. He knew it meant “God loves.”

““God loves all His creatures,”” Josie said.

Mrs. Chiza spoke to her husband.

“My wife says Edmund was too busy playing football to eat lunch,” Elijah said. “She is worried about the soda, so I said he must stop at three.”

The tone of Elijah’s voice seemed conciliatory.

“Mrs. Chiza and I often discuss the future of Africa. She says the future is with its children. She says that because mothers understand children, Africa needs women leaders.”

“Yes,” Josie said.

“But what kind of leadership? God created us man and woman, with all our differences. No one believes that a woman’s knowledge shouldn’t be valued. The important question is what kind of knowledge and what is its proper place.”

“America and Tanzania have women in their national legislatures,” Josie said.

“Yet America has not had a woman President,” Elijah said.

He laughed.

“My father does not trust the Muslims,” he said, “and I agree that they are a problem. Yet I remind him that there is wisdom in their recognition of the differences between men and women. Muslims don’t understand development and progress. But maybe in their beliefs about men and women we can find common ground, which can be a basis for progress.”

It was Tim’s turn to jab his knee into his wife.

Elijah modeled the careful driving that he was instructing the boy in the passenger seat about. Josie, who liked to arrive at airports early, tried to stay calm by reminding herself that one more cautious driver on Tanzania’s roads would be a good thing.

Edmund began a third soda.

#

Everyone in the Land Rover stared straight ahead, except for Josie. She looked for Mt.

Kilimanjaro. Elijah had grown tired of giving driving lessons. But after driving for many miles he broke his silence.

“May I have your opinion of Pastor Michael’s sermon, please?”

Before Tim and Josie could answer, Elijah continued.

“I think he missed an opportunity. I told him there would be two white people among the congregation, so he could have drawn a parallel between Jesus’s rise from the grave and the rise of Africa that we are witnessing.”

“You think it’s important for white people to know that Africa rising?” Tim said.

“Africa was once great, but then the Muslims introduced slavery.”

“I think white people took slaves, too.”

“Tim means that we *know* white people took slaves,” Josie said.

“Because the people had become conditioned to slavery,” Elijah said, smiling again.

“They adopted the timid ways of peasants. They allowed the great trade routes that had brought so much wealth to fall into ruin by withdrawing into their villages in the ignorant hope that they wouldn’t be noticed. Yet such people are ripe to be made into slaves.”

Tim cleared his throat and Josie said “Well. . .”

“Now, with Africa on the rise, white people like yourselves are lending a hand. And you will not be cowards, like Peter. You will not deny us!”

“Well,” Josie said.

At that moment Edmund put his head between his legs and vomited.

Mrs. Chiza covered the vomit with her beautiful scarf. She stroked Edmund’s back. The windows were rolled down. Elijah spoke almost inaudibly to his wife. She answered sharply.

Tim breathed through his mouth until Josie whispered to him.

“It doesn’t stink because he only had soda in his stomach.”

Tim and Josie looked for a shop, but Elijah kept driving.

“We should get paper towels,” Tim said.

Josie whispered again.

“Everything these people have to endure, you think *this* bothers them?”

Elijah drove on.

“There!” Josie said.

They all looked at Kilimanjaro.

The drive took two hours. Kilimanjaro International Airport was quiet. Elijah parked near the entrance and everyone got out of the Land Rover to exchange farewells. Daniel started to walk toward the entrance. Elijah said “Maureen” and his daughter followed Daniel. She took his hand and brought him back.

Josie spoke in Swahili to the boy whose name they didn’t know.

“Alexander,” he said.

“Alexander,” Josie said to Tim.

She hugged Mrs. Chiza.

“I hope her scarf isn’t ruined,” Josie said to Elijah.

Mrs. Chiza stared at her husband, who inspected his shoes.

“Too much Orange Fanta,” Tim said to Mrs. Chiza.

“Passion,” she said.

“He was drinking Passion Fruit,” Josie explained.

With her thumb and index finger Mrs. Chiza raised the scarf. Tim was a student of the different colors of Fanta. He saw that, compared to the lurid color of Orange Fanta, the color of the shallow pool on the floor of the Land Rover was pale.

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In 2008, **Don Stoll** and his wife founded their nonprofit ([karimufoundation.org](http://karimufoundation.org)) to bring new schools, clean water, and clinics emphasizing women’s and children’s health to three contiguous Tanzanian villages. Don’s fiction has appeared recently in *Green Hills Literary Lantern* ([tinyurl.com/y2lfxysm](http://tinyurl.com/y2lfxysm)), *The Galway Review* ([tinyurl.com/y6nxt9nv](http://tinyurl.com/y6nxt9nv) and [tinyurl.com/y4vdsqhe](http://tinyurl.com/y4vdsqhe)), and *The Aironaut* ([tinyurl.com/y67mzfmv](http://tinyurl.com/y67mzfmv)).



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## Margaret Kroger

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### A Christmas Gift

Snow fell invisibly in the waning gray light. A heavy bank of clouds had cut off the sun earlier, so that the 5:00 p.m. sunset had been lost and only drifting layers of glow from the electric streetlight passed through the air on their way to the end of December. Janie walked tiredly to the car, worn out from an afternoon of research at the library. Her thoughts flitted back and forth from between the black and white characters of the alphabet dotting her textbooks like the tracks of field mice in yesterday's snow to what she faced at home. She looked forward to returning to her apartment, its welcoming scent of warm chocolate—if the children had followed her instructions. Then she would take up her new role as a single mother.

As she unlocked the car door, she noticed a student rushing from the dormitory toward the dumpster. She looked again, barely able to believe what she saw. He carried a large Christmas tree in one hand, and, pausing only briefly, threw it on top of a pile of boxes in the trash. Of course, Janie thought, the university is closing for the semester break—but it didn't seem right to throw away a tree before Christmas. Such a wasteful thing to do! She thought of long-ago Christmases when she was a child. How the Sunday School tree had always gone to the poorest family in the congregation, a family happy not to have to spend cash on anything besides food, rent, and clothing.

What a shame, she thought again, starting her car and looking around, checking for anyone who might see her if she stopped beside the dumpster for a moment. She pulled alongside the receptacle, determined to find out if the tree really was ready for the ghost of Christmas past. It will be all dried up, she imagined. Students in a dorm would hardly bother to put it in the water it needed. But as her hand closed around the soft needles she shook her head determinedly and then lifted the tree up, rapidly, like a thief in the night.

In seconds the hatchback was open, the tree firmly inside and Janie was driving off through the dark, the telltale top of the tree waving to all who might see her car. Relief flowed over her as she escaped the campus with no voice booming, "What do you think you're doing?" She would have had to stop with the trail of green evidence stretching out behind her.

She didn't know of a needy family to give the tree to—except for her own. It hadn't been easy reforming her life as a head of household. Two years she'd been forced to be away from the children, and the break had left spaces in their relationships. Some things were easy to fill in. The weekly grocery cart filled with hamburger, frozen pizzas and gallons of milk. Other spaces were not so simple to ease shut. She knew her son and daughters missed the big house they'd left behind with their own personally decorated rooms, the landscaped yard, and their neighborhood friends. She knew too that they didn't talk about it because they didn't want to hurt her feelings. And so they squabbled over little things, paying her no heed in spite of commandments to love one another. The irony tugged her lips into a half-smile curving downward.

As she drove home, carefully avoiding potholes and sharp turns, she began to rehearse her arrival. A

variety of scenarios developed as she imagined explaining her sudden appearance with a tree to the children. Before the divorce, they had always shopped for the tree as a family outing, one the children enjoyed more than she did. Perhaps she could just tell them the unbelievable truth. *I stole it. Well, actually I rescued it.* From what though? The trash? Then they would surely hate it and feel cheated.

“So you’re too good for a secondhand tree?” she’d ask.

“Well,” they’d answer, “Dad always said nothing but the best!”

And how they had searched for the perfect tree, every year driving from tree lot to tree lot, holding up frozen trees too often extra tall, or short, or fat, or thin, and forever lopsided. The joy and expense of a perfect tree seemed so far away now. As if God had nothing to do but to teach Christmas trees to ignore the rocks, hillsides, weather, shade, all the spontaneous aspects of nature.

The way she had grown up, Christmas trees were part of the celebration, something to be thankful for, not to spend a fortune on. In fact, they had never bought trees when she was little, nor had there been a romantic pilgrimage to the nearby wooded hillside where Father selected the best tree and brought it down with a sharp ax, slinging it over his shoulder and wading grandly through the snow as the children followed singing Christmas carols.

No! Her memories were of her mother, doing the best she could, counting the money out carefully before they got in the car. It was a big trip into the small town 30 miles away. There they shopped for the necessary store items, small gifts for single aunts and fading grandparents. You had to buy something for the old people who never outgrew or wore out their clothes, except socks. So they would receive new jigsaw puzzles, argyles or nylons, and on good years even a spritely set of salt and pepper shakers for Grandma’s collection. But before the shoppers left for town, no matter what, there had to be a reserve of \$20 in her mother’s purse. This was for groceries: sugar, flour, canned milk, pumpkin for pies, cocoa for fudge, oranges for the Santa stockings. Then there would be candy canes and candied orange slices with one or two store-bought chocolates for each child. They knew she was buying these and would look away from the counter during the sale.

The store her mother shopped at was Paul’s Grocery. She had to drive several miles and across the river to shop there. “It’s not a waste of gas,” she’d say. Paul always ran a special that drew her in. With a \$20 grocery purchase, he gave each and every holiday customer a free Christmas tree. “Something I don’t have to buy,” her mother would say, smiling, and thanking him. And the tree always looked so much better after it was decorated, the flat side turned to the back against the wall and a variety of hand-made and hand-me-down ornaments filling in the gaps in front.

The imprint of her childhood experience on Janie was strong— you don’t have to pay a lot for the miracle of beauty at Christmas. It’s in the heart, how you feel about the birth of Christ. So what am I doing now, she thought, as she pulled into the drive way. Dragging home a real Charlie Brown tree! Maybe she could ask the kids to adopt it and then they might feel more kindness toward each other.

The dark in the driveway had thickened, the heavy snow swallowing most of the beams from the streetlamp and what few had escaped were softly diffused, revealing only blurry shapes. Still, from what little she could see as she drew the tree from the car, it seemed like a shapely and attractive fir. Heartened, she headed for the front door.

Still unsure of what she would actually say, but clinging stubbornly to her resolve, Janie pushed open the door with one hand and thrust the tree in ahead of her. Or maybe she was afraid and hiding behind the tree, waiting to see what the children's reaction would be.

Peeking through the greenery, she saw her son, who looked up and rose rapidly from his perpetual still-life pose where an open bag of potato chips fortified him as he watched Star Trek characters go where no man had gone before. He spoke urgently then, but not to Janie. His tone of voice rose, signaling an important event. Janie froze, and then looked up in amazement as she heard him call, "Angela, Lucille, get out here! Mom's home and she brought a Christmas tree with decorations already on it."

In the dark, she hadn't noticed. Now she saw clearly, among the shiny wet needles, strands of shimmering tinsel and, here and there, a few red satin bows clung to the tree. The children gathered around and all began talking at once.

"Wow, Mom. Neat!"

"Where'd you get it?"

"Isn't it pretty?"

Janie's doubts and fears melted like the snowflakes on the greens as they soaked up the warmth of the room. She remembered learning the verse from James: *Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.*<sup>2</sup>

"Let's just say it was a gift from God," she said, "Heaven sent!"

As their faces shone with amazement, she added "Now you'll need to help each other get out the tree stand, or do I have to hold this thing up all night?"

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**Margaret Koger** is a school media specialist with a writing habit. She learned that if your words are dark, let them be dark until the light shines through. Her poem "Ripe Figs," placed as a 2018 finalist in the Heartland Review Joy Bale Boone Poetry Contest.

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<sup>2</sup> James 1:17

## John C. Mannone

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### The Cleansing

Just before boarding my plane for the flight back, my little sister gave me a slim, pocket Bible.

Crisis of faith is not unusual for many. War, disease, famine, pestilence. Those four horsemen can surely make one wonder if there's a God, let alone a Redeemer. I have no simple answers. I can't prove *a priori* God exists, but I sense Him. Nature tells me that; I see His handiwork. I am constantly awed by the universe and its language of expressed beauty, its mathematics.

Even the moon howled that night  
as the pine needles poked the black  
sky and the moon bled crimson  
while owls shrieked into the silence.

My crisis of faith was Christ. In particular, did I believe he was God? I was and still am committed to evidence, the scientific method that tests and challenges the veracity of data, and also to apply a methodology of language for literary texts. The world of science and the world of the sacred may operate with different philosophies. One deals with the concrete, the other with abstraction, but both pursue the truth. The rules are not interchangeable. We cannot, nor ever will, prove the existence of God as if He were a mathematical entity. But circumstantial evidence is often more powerful than direct evidence. It has no agenda.

My faith eclipsed the darkness  
and made it flee. I wrestled with it  
all night. It wasn't like Jacob's  
sparring with the angel of the Lord.

Just before sliding out of my car, I awkwardly stopped, half in, half out, juggling groceries; felt compelled to reach into my flight bag and fetch that Bible my sister had given me months earlier. I stuffed it into my shirt pocket and went inside the apartment.

I opened it to where she had left its tassel—in the Book of John—presumed marked for me; my eyes scanned the onion-skin thin pages, but not guided as normal to the words at the top of the left page, but rather to the middle of the right page inked with heavy letters. I thought nothing of the text until I had learned that my sister did not deliberately mark the page for me. For a long moment, my tongue was numbed with silence.

A wave of cold, then hot, surged throughout my whole body, moving from the top of my head all the way down to my toes—an adrenaline pulse amplified a hundred times—as I read the red-lettered words, “Let not your heart be troubled. You believe in the Father, believe also in me!” The words coaxed tears. The God of this universe, creator of Heaven and Earth, had just visited my heart with His own words of scripture.

His spirit slipped into me, to fight  
the principalities of darkness: those ravenous  
lions that prowl. Unrelenting. Stalking  
me even into the recesses of midnight.

Thoughts sped as light; time dilated. I saw myself outside my body simply pondering the evidence with  
a scale in my hands. Is He or is he not deity? There was no longer any blindness. I could see the balance  
tip without hesitation. Gravity cannot deny truth. Nor can light hide my inhumanity.

That night, He washed the leprosy from  
my heart, cleansed my flesh. As I showered,  
my reflection in the chrome mirrored the ugly  
things of my past, but blurred with pure steam

on the shower faucets. The tarnish  
of wickedness lingered, clawed at my soul.  
Glared with its green eyes. Hatred  
daggered me. Almost cut me to shards.

I had been warned that this might happen. C. S. Lewis wrote about it, but this was far more sinister than  
his fictional demons. I was warned of the enemy's indictments, his assault with lies. Cunning killers.

I prayed to overcome their fangs;  
their taste for blood not sated.  
I was covered in blood  
and absolved. Finally washed.

I was completely washed in the precious blood of the Lamb. When I was finished and pulled away the  
shower curtain, the evil image simply evaporated with the mist.

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**John C. Mannone** has work in/forthcoming in *Adanna*, *Anacua*, *Number One*, *Artemis*, *Poetry South*,  
and others. He won a Jean Ritchie Fellowship in Appalachian literature (2017) and served as the  
celebrity judge for the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (2018). He's a retired professor of  
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## Andy Fairchild

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### Mortar and Pestle

Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it." Oh, how true that is! How painfully true. One of my daughters is afflicted with a disease called Spino Cerebellar Ataxia, Type 17 – a condition that causes a person's cerebellum to shrink. It's a neurological-deteriorating disease, and it's terminal. Not like tomorrow terminal, or next week terminal, or even six months. It's more like a few decades of wasting away until one expires, and their spirit leaves them like a puff of steam.

Type 17 is the most aggressive type of this disease (there are 40 types). No one knows what causes it, or what to do about it. The cerebellum is located at the top of the spinal cord. It is also referred to as "little brain" and "the tree of life" because of its leaf-like appearance. The cerebellum controls all the muscular functionality of the body, like walking, talking, breathing and swallowing. People with SCA typically die by choking to death, as they are unable to swallow, or by having a heart attack. Liz's life expectancy is around 30. She's 29.

"Just make her comfortable," the doctor said.

My wife and I have nine children ranging in age from 12 to 31. It's not a blended marriage; they are all ours. Five boys and four girls. Liz is the third child. We live in Toronto, Canada. Two of our children have SCA 17.

We knew something was off with Liz when her speech started to slur at age 12. Her gait was off, and she started to walk toe to heel. She would get constipated and have small slip-ups from time to time. We took her to an osteopath who performed a check up and said that there was something wrong with her cerebellum, but he didn't know what.

While on a family vacation at a nearby Christian camp, we listened to a preacher teach on the subject "Why Lord, Why?" Ironically, it was during this time at camp that we decided to drive Liz to a hospital. At the time, she was 16 years old. We drove two hours to Toronto, to Sick Kids Hospital, to have her checked out. The nurse came into the waiting room, eyes full of tears, and said: "We did an X-ray. We don't know why, but her brain has shrunk. It's like that of an old lady's." That was 13 years ago.

At the time, Liz was barely walking, but now she's fully incapacitated in a home for the developmentally disabled. She can't speak, walk, or control her hand movements. Her favourite things are watching movies, singing with us, and having her older brother visit. Her favourite songs are: "Jesus take the Wheel" (Carrie Underwood); "You raise me up" (Josh Grobin); and the 2006 version of Ted Neeley singing "Gethsemane," which she and I always sing together.

I remember the phases of pain, the kicks to the stomach, and the unending feeling that my prayers would not be answered the way I wanted them to. It was as if my prayers were herbs and seeds being placed into a mortar on a weekly basis, and the pestle was the answer *no* that smashed and crushed my dreams.

I remember walking to a weekly prayer meeting at the grade school that my younger children attended. It was always just Ivel and me; She, a Jamaican prayer warrior, and I, a broken 47 year old man, trying to make sense of what was going on with Liz. As Ivel prayed, I cried out to God in my heart, and asked Him to please tell me how I was supposed to handle this situation. It was like an earthquake had shattered the principles and beliefs that my life was founded upon. I was lost.

I reached for my Bible and opened it up randomly. I read: “We know we love God’s children if we love God and obey his commandments. Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome.”<sup>31</sup> I realized at that moment that it wasn’t important for me to know why this was happening to Liz, but rather that I loved her, took care of her, and didn’t lose my faith in God. I had family and friends who were looking to me to see how I would react to this tragedy life had given us. I had been given a purpose. I now had direction and peace. From that day forward I did my best to make sure all of Liz’s needs were taken care of, and that I didn’t lose my faith in Him.

But things got worse. There was a time I cried out to God and begged Him not to allow Liz to go into diapers. Getting enemas was one thing, but putting a 16 year-old in diapers was a sickening thought. The diapers came. The expensive, washable bed protectors were purchased. Routine enemas were established. I was never able to bring myself clean her. My wife, daughters, friends and personal support workers did that for Liz.

To keep Liz at home, we had to figure out a way for her to live with us. Our home is back-split with bedrooms on the top floor. She could no longer climb stairs, so we decided to build a bedroom and a washroom on the main floor. The Ontario “March of Dimes” program helped with the funding for the renovations. We divided the long living/dining room area in half and built an accessible bathroom at one end. We got a hospital bed, a 46-inch TV, and an IMAC to stream her favourite movies. One of my other daughter’s friends had a father who was a carpenter. He appeared one day and built Liz a high table that was attached to the wall, so she could wheel under it and play her favourite Blu-Ray disc. He came back to finish it the next day as he forgot one piece of wood at home. It was a touching moment to see someone go out of their way to help a family in need. With every new installation, every change, every required purchase, I felt as if I were a boxer stuck in a corner getting pounded. Tears filled my eyes as friends and acquaintances came out of nowhere to help. There were countless errands to run and things to do to keep Liz with us. Those were hard times.

What was happening to Liz didn’t depend on my ability to handle it. I couldn’t handle it. I was a wreck, drinking at least a bottle of wine each night to ease my pain. I would go for a walk and start bawling my eyes out. I couldn’t control my tears.

A question came into my mind: does God give us more than we can handle?

Yes. He absolutely does.

I accepted the diapers, the wheelchair, and the house modifications. But we had to deal with another issue. We had to carry her up to the ten front steps that led to the veranda. This wouldn’t do. So we had a wheelchair lift installed. Easter Seals helped with the purchase. We installed it in the garage and cut a hole into the house. We put in a door so that we could wheel Liz from the hallway on the main floor, onto the lift, and down into the garage. Then we would position her into the front seat of the car. The

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<sup>31</sup> John 5:2-3 (NLT)

things we had to buy were partially covered, totally covered, or not covered at all.

Having a disabled child is costly. As Liz got worse, she had trouble sitting straight. Moving her in and out of the car was becoming difficult. We purchased a van, and had it modified with a rear-access fold-down ramp. It was a manual ramp that allowed her wheelchair to be pushed into the van. Manual ramps, as opposed to electric ones, are less expensive to buy and to maintain. A charity called “President’s Choice Children’s Charity” helped with the purchase of the van; Liz’s grandfather kicked in the rest. The modifications were partially covered by the Ontario “March of Dimes” program.

Showering became an ordeal. No matter what I tried, Liz could not settle into the showering procedure. I tried talking with her, explaining to her the need for hygiene, especially when one was incontinent. It didn’t work. Once, I went to the liquor store with my friend and we bought her some *Manischewitz*, a very sweet, red wine from Israel. We also bought some cans of beer and scotch for ourselves. The wine didn’t help Liz with her shower, but the alcohol helped me to forget my troubles for awhile. My wife had to drive my friend home.

Other challenges came. Liz could no longer get herself out of bed, and she was too heavy to lift. We ordered and received a Hoyer lift that would get her out of bed and place her safely in her wheelchair using a sling. The Ontario Government helped with that purchase as well. Liz hated the Hoyer and the feeling of being suspended in the air.

Feeding her was the most challenging part for me. It took hours. The food would spill down her chin as she had trouble chewing and swallowing. Liz hated getting her chin wiped. She would move her head away and keep it turned sideways. So, I left the food there and would have to watch it drip down her chin onto her bib, every time.

When Liz was in her early twenties, I found myself at home alone with her. I was having a particularly bad day feeding her. I went into the washroom, leaned my back up against the wall, and slid down to sit on the floor. I took the towel I was using to wipe Liz’s face and put it over my head and cried. I cried until my eyes were swollen and my vision became blurry. I was completely undone. Soon after, the phone rang and a retired nurse from our church volunteered to come over and start feeding Liz. She organized a group of five ladies who came on a regular basis and helped with feeding.

The care-giving my wife and I were doing had us frazzled. We were both on the verge of nervous breakdowns. We started to get some counseling to help us deal with the tragedy and work.

Then, one night Liz was screaming in agony because of cramping in her legs. I stood outside her bedroom door afraid to go in. I didn’t know what I was going to say, and I didn’t know what to do. I stood there petrified. I couldn’t believe that I was unable to open the door to comfort my child. I prayed and mustered up the courage to walk in. There was Liz, on her back, in her hospital bed. I reached for a Bible and sat down in a chair beside her. I started to read from the Psalms, and pray. The cramps subsided, and she was able to go to bed again.

Some time later, our eldest daughter came to me and my wife and said: “Mom. Dad. You guys have to put Liz in a home. You’re neglecting your other children, and you’re both nervous wrecks.”

She was right. We couldn’t change what was happening to Liz. We simply had to accept our inability to handle the difficulties we faced. Wave after wave of disappointment and hardship kept coming. I



accepted what my daughter said. We started looking into home for Liz.

Finding a place for Liz turned out to be difficult. My wife and I visited many places in the city, and soon found out that long-term care institutions are not set up to deal with younger adults in need of palliative care. The standard answer we received was that Liz would have to be placed in a nursing home. The vision of Liz sitting in front of a TV, in a big room with 80 and 90 year-olds, was not something I liked.

Visiting the nursing homes was surreal. They showed us beds in rooms close to the nursing stations, so that Liz could be kept an eye on. Why? So that she wouldn't get fondled at night by some pervert. It was terrifying. Liz was, and still is, an attractive young lady with long and thick auburn hair. We knew we couldn't put her in a nursing home.

We found a home that housed young adults. It wasn't much better. There were eight developmentally disabled young adults per room. Each room was divided into four areas by curtains with beds in each area. Some of the residents were young, physically capable young men who were playing video games. Most of them were talking and walking. Liz was in the worst physical condition of all of them. She would be unable to fend off even the least aggressive assault. The young people's home was also out of the question.

Our answer came when our eldest daughter called us one day and told us about a place in the city where she lived – Kitchener, about an hour's drive from Toronto. She had heard about it in a church parking lot after a prayer meeting one night, after she had shared about our family's need for a place for Liz. We visited the home and found that it met all our requirements. Liz would be safe, and cared for.

Applying was easy. Getting accepted was even easier. Paying for it was impossible. Residential care for an individual requiring 24/7 care is expensive. In Ontario there are two types of homes: government-run and private. Both are funded by the Ministry of Health. However, the Ministry gives preference to the homes run by the government. When we applied to the government for funding for Liz, we were told that those types of private homes were not funded.

We scrambled. I decided we would put Liz in the home anyway and trust God for the funding. We set up a GoFundMe page and raised over \$40,000. I was told by the owner of the private home to continue pressing the government for the funding, as the thirty or so residents in his facility were all paid for by the Ministry of Health. He said that we should let the government know that we do not intend to stop asking for the funding until we get it. I met with government officials, made phone calls, sent emails and letters.

One day I was told by a friend that she knew a radio broadcaster in our city who would be interested in our cause. Within two days I was sitting in front of him getting interviewed about Liz's situation. Journalists picked up on the story and started calling the Ministry of Health and making inquiries. Articles appeared in newspapers. Three weeks later, I received another letter from the same person at the Ministry of Health. He said that the Ministry of Health would fully fund Liz's stay at the privately owned residential home.

The day approached for me to push Liz into the wheelchair van, and drive her to the home. I dreaded it. We had a party for her the day before she left. As I thanked the people for coming, sweat trickled down my back. My girl was leaving. My Liz was moving out.

The next morning, Liz and I started the one hour drive to her new home. It was 2014. Somehow, I felt encouraged. I put in a CD and we sang all the way there. I accepted this as God's will, and I was at peace. Liz was smiling.

Marty, who is now 23, was placed in the same home as Liz about a year ago. It was easier to get the funding the second time around, but still challenging. They are both happy, both cared for, and both slowly dying.

Hundreds, thousands of people have helped my wife and I through along this difficult journey. *The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.* But good people everywhere, and God Himself, help to soften the blows, especially when prayers for healing haven't been answered.

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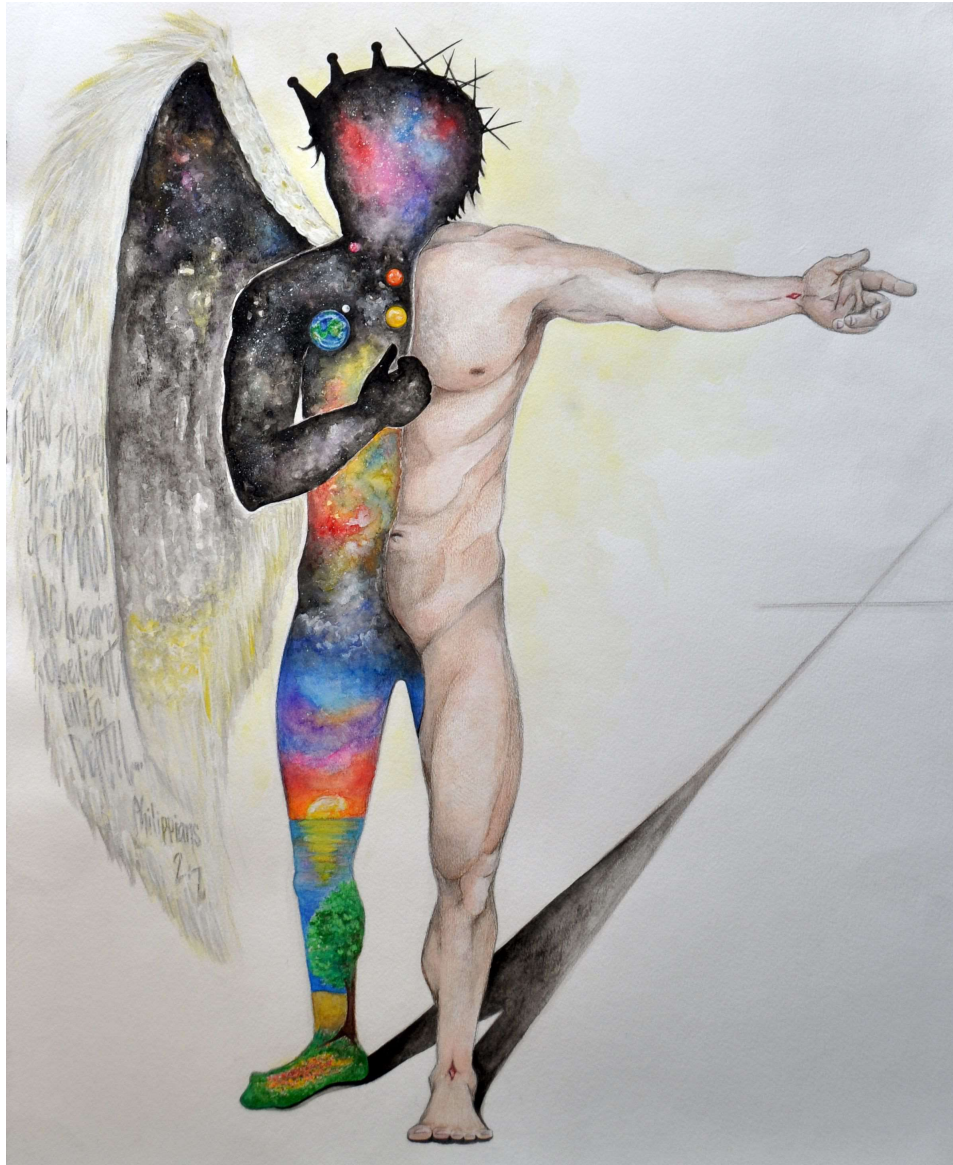
**Andy Fairchild** and his wife of 32 years live in Toronto, Canada. They have nine children. Andrew is a lay pastor and his wife Sandra mentors single moms in a church group. Andrew is working on establishing himself as a published author of Christian works. His favourite style is poetry.

## Sarah McDonald Price

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### Incarnation

watercolor pencil and watercolor on paper



*Image courtesy of the artist*

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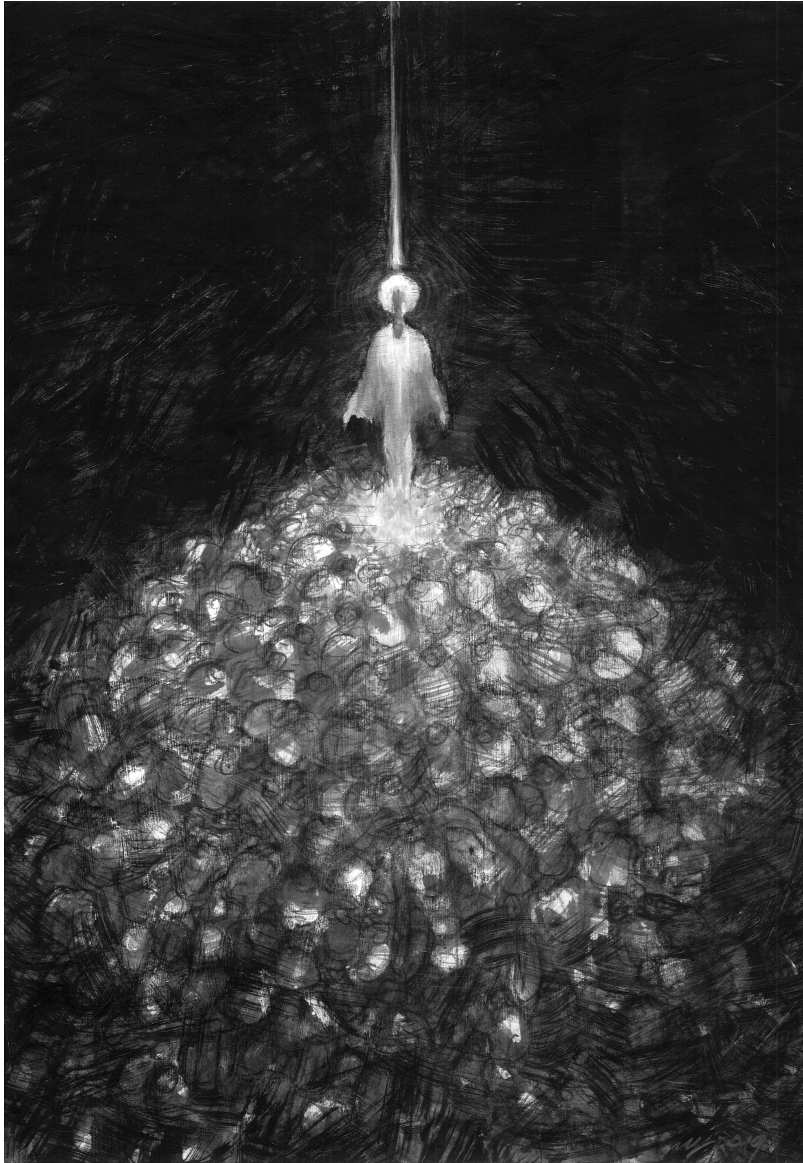
**Sarah McDonald Price** is an artist from Mobile, Alabama. She has been married for 22 years, and is a mom of three children and one dog.

## Martin Kostov

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### Anticipation

mixed media on A3 paper



*Image courtesy of the artist*

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**Martin Kostov** is a practicing architect and urbanist (Doctor of Design). His artworks are an essential ingredient of his professional way and life. The present work is included in one more comprehensive cycle focused on human nature.



## O. Yemi Tubi

### Riding the Waves



*Image courtesy of the artist*

“When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you.” Isaiah 43:2 NLT



## The Rosy Seasons of Life



*Image courtesy of the artist*

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." Ecclesiastes 3:1



## The Fishers of Men Rescue the Refugees



*Image courtesy of the artist*

Seeing Italian coast guards fishing out African immigrants – the victims of human trafficking – from the sea and an iconic image of Syrian drowned baby being carried by Turkish police from coast resort of Bodrum (one of the Syrian drowned as they attempted to reach Greek island of Kos) made O. Yemi title this painting – “The Fishers of Men Rescue the Refugees.”

**O. Yemi Tubi** – An Artist and Advocate for the world’s Peace. A Nigerian born, American trained Artist, currently residing in United Kingdom as an artist with creative and unique personal style. Most of his recent paintings were influenced by political and social upheaval of our world today.

## Leemour Pelli

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To Do Thy Will With a Perfect Heart I, II, III (triptych)  
48" x 108", oil on canvas, 2019



*Image courtesy of the Leemour Pelli Studio and Art Archive*

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**Leemour Pelli** is mostly a painter, but also works in different media, including sculpture, installations, prints, and works on paper. She had solo exhibitions in the past with the Annina Nosei Gallery in Chelsea (in 2004, and 2005), and in her Harlem space in 2010. The artist also had a solo exhibition with the Daneyal Mahmood Gallery in Chelsea in 2008. Her work has been reviewed in ArtForum (2008), Art News (2000), The New York Times (1999, 2000), New York Arts Magazine (2004, 2000, 1999), Tema Celeste (2001, 2003), and The Globe and Mail (Canada, 2000), among other publications.



## *Ildiko Mecseri*

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### Infinite Wonders

50 x 70 cm, oil on canvas



*Image courtesy of the artist*

“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” 1 Peter 4:10

## Someone prayed for him

70 x 90 cm, oil on canvas



*Image courtesy of the artist*



## Organist

70 x 90 cm, oil on canvas



*Image courtesy of the artist*

“It’s easy to play on an organ: all you have to do is touch the right key at the right time and the instrument will play itself.”  
Johann Sebastian Bach

“If you play from your soul the music flies up high to God. ‘Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.’”  
Psalm 96:1

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**Ildiko Mecseri (MEIL)** is a Hungarian artist. Her art deals with spiritual and metaphorical themes drawing her inspiration from the Bible, history and her travel experiences. Art has been her passion from her early years, but she has studied cultural management and economics in universities. Later she has made a career change and painting with oil became her passion. She both uses Alla prima and Flemish

techniques. She would like to inspire, motivate and encourage people through her paintings.  
<https://www.mecseriart.com>

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