

Heart of Flesh

Literary Journal



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VERONICA MCDONALD, EDITOR

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Cover Art: "Scrap Madonna with Gold Chain" by Janina Aza Karpinska

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“Humility” by Veronica McDonald (2018).

Note from the Editor

Be still and know that I am God. —Psalm 46:10

I mentioned in my last editor's note (Issue Four) that themes tend to emerge as an issue comes together. As I stated then, and believe now, these themes are often subtle, sometimes hidden under the surface of things, not always existent in every poem or story but flowing through the issue as a whole. This phenomenon is a gift to the editor and the careful reader, and like all good things, a treasure waiting for those who take the time to look beneath the surface and sense the undercurrent of things. This isn't a themed issue, but if I were hard-pressed to give Issue Five a theme I would call it "Memories and Visions."

In Issue Five's eclectic mix of styles, voices, mediums, and backgrounds, you are about to embark on a journey formed by encounters of the past and visions of the future, all shaped by the author or artist's perception of the risen Savior. As those of us who have given our lives to Christ can tell you, once you know Him, you can't look at the past and not see His hand on everything. You can't mistake the presence of sin dripping over every moment like black tar, nor the dazzling occurrences of grace. Once you know the hope of Christ, you can no longer look into the future without being thrown into a prophetic imagining of epic proportions. By simply letting your mind grapple with the possibility of a better place, a better time, you can't help but let your mind wander into a future that rises glorious like a phoenix out of the ashes of corruption (a tired cliché, I know, but, I believe, an appropriate one). Consequently, the present time becomes a place of waiting and passing glimpses— a world full of questions and plaguing doubts, peaceful moments and wake-up calls, obedience and defiance, rebellions and acts of faith with nothing firm to hold onto except the miracles of the past and God's promises for the future. Being *still* becomes the catalyst for madness for some, patience and growth for others.

You'll find all of this in Issue Five, and more.

Not everyone who contributes to *Heart of Flesh* follows Jesus as their Lord and God, but even those who don't believe have graciously allowed God and His Word to trickle into their work, and for that I am thankful. I appreciate their perspective, as well as their honest and thoughtful portrayals. As always, I'm also grateful for the wonderful, creative Christians who put their soul into their poetry, stories, and art. They are

an encouragement and inspiration to me, and to others. I hope you enjoy all of these contributors' work as much as I have.

Thank you for reading Issue Five. I pray that it is as much of a blessing to you as it has been to me.

God bless you,

Veronica McDonald

Editor/Founder

POETRY

Christine Higgins

Prayer

Say it again: *prayer*.
Hear how the sound
is like a bird opening
its wings and lifting
into the air.

Assurances sent in e-mails,
in phone calls, *we're praying*.
Prayer on your neighbor's front porch,
prayer at the bedside, down on your knees
prayer in the chapel, your family's
faith reaching all around you.

Hope delivered in all manner
of expressions, even
by non-believers,

my sister writes,
*I am holding you both
in my heart.*
My niece texts
I so, so, so wish I could be there.

Everyone in unison hoping
for you to be free from harm,
for you to manage the course from here.

The Pieta

When the World's Fair
came to the borough of Queens,
I was ten-years-old
and my parents decided
to take us there on the train.
We never went anywhere-not
a museum or a movie theatre,
or an amusement park.

My mother, although she studied art
was struck dumb by depression,
silent in the front seat of the car.
My father climbed telephone poles
for a living, a simple man,
like St. Joseph the carpenter.
He spent that hard earned money
on a Catholic education for his children.

I remember it now as if it's a movie—
an aerial shot of a young girl
in a pink shift dress
gliding along on a conveyor belt
passing in front of the Pieta, a famous
statue carved from one block of white marble.

A statue with folds and folds of fabric,
two heads, two bodies in relation—
his knees on her knees, her other hand
held out as if to ask, *What do you make
of this?* Marble made flesh and into ribs,
Christ's head thrown back,
the agony of death.

And then it was gone,
I had already passed it.
I wanted to go back,
to be lifted up once again.

Slap in the Face

Daddy, I loved your sweet devotion to me.
At a 2nd grade parent-teacher conference
in my Catholic school you saw a bulletin
board sign: Smile, God Loves You.

You said that to me on countless days
while I sheltered in your arms
sharing your head-of-the-table
captain's chair.

In high school I was scornful
of how we lived in such a tight circle—
never going anywhere, needing permission
to sneeze it seemed. I fought with Mother.
I was sullen and bitter, I saw how
nothing ever got brighter.
I was already planning my escape.

She started a harangue for anyone who
would listen, but it ended with a direct
address to you, busy making a sandwich in the kitchen:
Do you hear how she speaks to me?

She would exact her pound of flesh.
I came around the corner and made contact
with your open hand that slapped me fiercely
on my cheek, on my face—
the face of the beloved child that God made smile.

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

POETRY

Richard Wells

SUMMIT

Matt 17: 1-13

Erie, Pennsylvania,

Starbucks'
corporate living room,

Nat King Cole
providing background
in competition with
grinding coffee
and steaming milk,

I'm pondering
a biblical summit meeting:

Christ transfigured,
locked in conversation
with Moses and Elijah,

but what they're talking about –
I don't know.

At the table
next to mine

a gray-haired
heavy set
black man
has made himself at home
with crossword puzzles, newspapers,
and a brown, leather bound Bible – prominent.

I have a feeling
he'll know

and won't mind
my asking:

"Excuse me, sir, are you a student of scripture?"

"Yes."

"Jesus on the mountain;
Peter, James, and Andrew.
Jesus talking to Moses and Elijah—
what were they talking about?"

"Mathew 17," he said.

"Peter, James, and *John*," he corrected;
"Jesus was thanking them
for paving the way, and promising them
he would continue the work."

"The work? What work?"

"Redemption, son. It's all about redemption."

And that was that.

And a matter of fact;

even as Nat King Cole
lost his baby
and almost lost his mind,

even in Erie, Pennsylvania,

even at Starbucks:

It's all about

Redemption.

After a brush with the Grim Reaper at age seven, **Richard Wells** sat down at his family's Remington, and started his autobiography. In one form or another, that's what he's been writing ever since. He's published here and there in print, and on the web, and his first book, *Sideways through Zion*, has recently been published under the Embajadoras Press imprint. It can be found at all the Amazon websites, and by order at your local bookstore. Richard and his wife, Reggie Bardach, live in Seattle, WA.

POETRY

J.V. Sumpter

My Umbrella Shot Three Stories into the Air

Maybe the Rapture just happened,
and the only part of God's creation found
worthy on this college street
was my umbrella,
sucked straight up to heaven

while I'm left with arms raised,
hands empty,
a street-corner prophet
desolate in vindication.

Maybe I should have held on.

Maybe I'm supposed to follow, run
across this squelching grass,
this flooding street, dodge
this car—and that one—
ignore the blaring horns and jump/
skid onto the sidewalk just in time

to see my umbrella cartwheel
over a Walgreens roof
and fall off the edge of my world.

Maybe it's meant to lead me to you,
hero of my daydreams, man
of a thousand faces, all blurred
yet bright as headlights
streaking through a puddle.

I always knew we'd meet
like this: me rounding
the corner and crashing
into you, no unromantic
hassle of intention

to find you, but a meet-cute
adorably awkward.

And I know you'll love me
how I deserve to be loved:
with all my quirks,
my bad behavior,

and unconscious psychological
self-sabotage my therapist says
will keep me from forming real
relationships if I don't change.

But you'll love my every flaw—
all the more because
you'll have none of your own.

And here is the corner,
and a grocery bag snagged
on a sun-bleached brick
sticking out of the side of the building.

And here is my umbrella,
sad and wet and crumpled,
a drunk passed-out
in the dirty pool gurgling
from curb to gutter.

And here I am, profoundly
unsurprised to find no rapture,
and no hot, mystery man
to scoop me up and carry me away
from my predictable life,
and the only portal whooshing open for me,
Walgreens' automatic door.

Might as well go in.
Might as well get Cheetos.

American Study Abroad Students Attend Church at Harlaxton, England

They play “America the Beautiful”
and smile as we file into empty pews
which sadly never fill.

The locals, old, and we, the young,
are far outnumbered by the ghosts
whose bodies we step on each time
we walk the aisle.

The floor and walls are tiled with tombs
that hold a family each,
and I prefer that audience—they’re hushed
as I climb lectern steps and read Psalm 102.

They do not cough or blink at me
unlike the living crowd, yet they,
being dead, advance the psalm.
Perhaps we’re doing wrong at home
to keep our dead in garden beds
and not let them in church,
where they would preach
without a word.

Yet what strikes me most is not the ghosts
but the familiar scent
of welcome coffee dripped on bulletins
that read, *Please*, come again; our services
are at eight and ten.

The whitehaired Englishmen and -women here
would blend right in at home,
in Tulsa, Evansville, and everywhere
the church is dying off. They lost their sons
and come for us; their eyes, their lust, arrests
the young. They ask, *How did we lose them?*

The World Ends This Sunday at Midnight, But

the church is far from full.

At 5 AM I put on
my makeup out of habit
but as soon as I arrived at church
I found the bathroom,
washed it off.
All the morning service I keep
touching my face.

I don't hear the sermon.
I'm trying to remember
if I'm saved.

When I was eleven, I was saved and they threw me
a party. They threw me a party
so I must be saved.
I only remember the party.

The year my mother died I came to her at night
crying 'cause I wasn't sure again,
but she smoothed my hair and then ... and then ...

Now it's noon. We're eating donuts in Fellowship Hall
and I drink three cups of watery church coffee
then remember I don't drink coffee.

The worship band is playing in the corner.
Some young people are going round and lifting
people's hands into the air but I
am kneeling by a chair, flipping through a Bible
and I cannot read.

And now it's 10 PM I'm in a pew again
and the pastor's talking about love. The word
feels like cotton in my chest.
Have I ever loved?

At 11:51 the pastor tells us it's time. Get out your white,
white robes, put them on—

but I've already got mine on,
plus a spare I took.

A woman gasps,
runs out the door, and someone goes out after her,
and someone grabs that someone by the sleeve,
says, "Don't go after her!"

I press my lips together,
finger my two robes' sleeves.

J.V. Sumpter recently earned her BFA from the University of Evansville. She is an assistant editor for Kelsay Books, Thera Books, and freelance clients. She received 2020 Virginia Grabill Awards in Poetry and Nonfiction, and her most recent publications are in *Leading Edge Magazine*, *Not Deer Magazine*, and *New Welsh Review*. Visit her on Twitter @JVSReads.

Janz Duncan

Mother in Prayer

Alone. She sat alone. Body slanted, feet barely touching the cold cemented floor. Still head bowed. Eyes closed. Hands clasped, between them a well-thumbed Bible.

On the edge of the double bed once shared with Father (now deceased), her tiny 4'11" figure all but eclipsed by the hard lumpen surface she sat upon.

To her right, a wall of cupboards painted a sick yellow green. Her pretty wardrobe with mirror reflected no live thing: emptiness, nothingness, facing only an iron window frame painted a light shade of cream. The window was open, but nothing moved in the still hot air.

It was mid-afternoon. Outside it was humid hot. Inside, her northeast-facing room felt cool, like a church vestibule.

She sat like this for hours. As like a statue in its forever sleep. I wanted to call out, "Mother, are you alright?" But I would not disturb her contemplations: her prayer, her communion with God.

Even a gentle touch then would have awakened those beautiful brown eyes.

. . . But not now, for she is with God.

Author's Note: One cannot read another's mind, but Mother's faith in the Lord was invincible. I caught her many times praying silently, wrestling with the behemoth that would eventually kill her. It was Alzheimer's Disease.

Grandmother preferred chrysanthemums anyway

I hold the rose,
a many-layered confection cupped in my hand.
Dreamed a dream.

In the twilight between wakefulness and slumber, my grandmother
arose.

I see the dark wood planks polished smooth by
generations of anatomies:
mine added to those – tiny hands, small feet, and a delicate shuffling
bum.

Between the legs of a giant iron bed grandmother created a space
filled only with two – and, *maybe*, three – things: a lumpy cotton
mattress, a *kapok* pillow,
and the Siamese that some nights slept with me.

“Just for you,” she said.
They were mine.
Just for me.



I bend my head
and see one curling petal
marred by a crease.

Shadows are gathering. Will it storm?

Slashes of light filter through half-closed shutters:
they dance on grandmother’s one remaining breast – drooping pale-
white, unclothed in
tropical heat.
Why didn’t it sweat?

I lay my cheek upon that breast, absorbed in the “thud, thud” of her
heartbeat.
“Ah Mah,” I queried. “Why do petals fall?”
The thunder BANGED.

She drew me closer, swept her palm across my brow –
tenderly smoothed away
my child's beads of salt-tinted sweat.

~~~~~

I check the rose  
enclosed in my palm.  
Its fragrance is sickly sweet.

I smell her like yesterday: her essence Johnson's baby powder.

The Tok Tok man has arrived.  
“Quickly! *Kah meh lai!*” she called.  
“What's your choice?”

Rising through the purpose-made hatch in her burnished floor, a basket  
of delights.  
The steaming aroma of fish ball noodles preceded.  
“Savour them,” she said.

Small teeth bit into juicy white balls.  
Their briny-sweet spray lingers on my tongue.

~~~~~

I never saw her go:

these rose petals which
flutter
in my memories

*Let me breathe in their fragrance now
before it's too late.*

~~~~~

---

<sup>1</sup> *Hurry up, come!* (in Hokkien or Teochew)

Today, I dig out jewels –  
those larvate memories that made me.  
Twisted their locks.

*Then I recall: grandmother grew limes. And she preferred  
chrysanthemums anyway.*

## Let it rain on me

I hold an umbrella:  
stand there like a soggy scarecrow.  
The cover was not for me but for my father.

Father grew orchids. He was devoted to them.  
He loved his garden so much  
he would tend it under driving rain.

I follow Father like the proverbial puppy  
wagging its increasingly water-logged tail  
begging small crumbs of acknowledgement.

None came.

Mother shouted from the door: “Come inside!”  
Lightning strikes. Waves of thunder roll, sound streaks bouncing  
haphazardly to  
roil upon gigantic darkened clouds in ferocious skies.

I stood patiently, dripping with storm-tossed raindrops that  
pepper me like so many stone chips from Brother’s pellet gun.  
We look like drowned rats.

I try hard to hold the umbrella aloft.  
My arms are fixed like a statue’s yet tremble of their own accord.  
In my head a mantra: “Protect Dad. From the rain.”

I think of our Merlion spouting water from its mouth.

My silhouette follows Father around his garden: two stick-thin 9-year-old arms  
outstretched.

Small hands grip my flimsy child's umbrella to  
shield his sodden shorts-and-singlet-clad frame.

Mother is calling again. "Come inside!"

I cannot.

*NO! I will not forfeit this . . . this rain-drummed beat, a child's heart  
wish.*

I shake my dripping locks hard – like the cur which flings  
droplets  
casting far into the wind.

Rain shards drive stakes between us. They surround us like the bars of a  
cage.

---

---

**Janz Duncan** lives with her husband in the Lake District National Park, England where they have a Bed and Breakfast ([bownessbedandbreakfast.wordpress.com](http://bownessbedandbreakfast.wordpress.com)). During spare moments, she enjoys writing and walking with her husband and rescue Great Dane. Her work has appeared in *Trouvaille Review*, *Burgundy Balloon* and Highland Park Poetry.

POETRY

---

*Charles Eggerth*

---

**HOLIDAY LOCAL TO THE NORTH COUNTRY**

From a painting by Howard Fogg

Yes, I remember that train.  
Funny a picture should bring back  
so sharp an image from forty years ago.  
That's the Boston and Maine Christmas local to Tilton, and points  
beyond.

(I had to wait for the extra. The regular train  
was packed. Carried more people at Christmas time  
than the rest of the year put together.)  
I'd be almost willing to bet the year was 1947.  
It's still all up there in my mind;  
church steeple, red covered bridge, people sleighing.  
I'd wager they don't do that anymore.  
Pristine is too mundane a word  
to tell you how it looked, what I felt,  
what I feel now. And do you know  
what stands out the most? A conversation I had  
with an elderly fellow, white-haired,  
a gentleman (and he was) named Allison.  
I believe I could almost repeat what he said verbatim.  
Let's see:

“You wonder why the leaves fall.  
Maybe it's to clean up the countryside.  
Maybe it's to bring the snow,  
the clean, white snow.  
I have longed, God knows I've longed,  
to be that pure, that washed,  
that covered with layers of newness.  
Have you ever noticed what the first snow does to a country  
church?  
Makes you want to go in,  
I'll say that much for starters,  
makes you want to go in and pray  
to the God you know is there, or somewhere nearby.

And the mountains. The mountains in snow  
 Look newer than the morning paper.  
 Yes, that first snow redeems all of November in a hurry.  
 But then it turns dirty.  
 I know how that feels also.  
 Yes, I know exactly how that feels.  
 But the train runs through it all.  
 What do you suppose a train means?  
 I think it means that God gives gifts to men.  
 What do you think?"

I don't recollect exactly what I did think.  
 I do remember wondering if he wasn't a bit crazy.  
 I'm sure now he wasn't.  
 I'm sure now he knew more  
 than any professor in that Boston school  
 I was sent to. I recall him now  
 as one of two wise people I've known,  
 the other being your mother.  
 When you feel what he felt,  
 see in yourself what he saw,  
 you'll know what I mean.  
 Yes, that was the train ride, alright.  
 But I didn't know it for twenty years.  
 Oh well. So soon old,  
 so late smart, as you might remember your mother saying.  
 Therein lies another tale; more likely a hundred.  
 Those we'll save for after supper.  
 I think I'll hang this painting in the front room.  
 Thank you, Mr. Fogg, for the memory.

---

**Charles Eggerth** is a 68, retired mail carrier who is working for Jesus. The highlight of his existence is volunteer work with an organization in Winston-Salem called City Lights Ministry, whose goal is to get Jesus into the neighborhood by whatever means necessary. He participates every Tuesday afternoon by assembling beds in apartments for kids, the majority of whom have never slept in a bed before.

POETRY

---

*Richard Spilman*

---

**Monarchs**

In Monterey for a race  
on the old Can-Am circuit,  
we found a motel, a collection of cabins  
strewn through the trees like dice  
from a children's game.  
One big oak in the middle of it all,  
flocked with gray as if a terrible frost  
had shriveled its leaves.

Before we unpacked we went to see.  
The gray shivered, opened  
just a bit, like mussels feeding.  
Not leaves, but butterflies,  
wings closed, thousands—  
perhaps millions in trees nearby—  
gathering strength  
for the long flight to Mexico.

If faith is trust in things not seen,  
it's also what tempers  
the judgment of light-blinded eyes—  
the pupa's shroud, the child's  
tantrum—where seeing is too often  
believing. Despite the evidence,  
we knew this was death  
on a tree, a planet clothed in ash.

Still, next morning, up before dawn,  
we sat on the stoop drinking coffee,  
a salt breeze in our hair,  
the tree chiaroscuro in the glow  
of string lamps hung pole to pole.  
At dawn, the lights blinked out.  
We stayed, talked, fasted,  
while the crews packed and left.



A rustling like windblown leaves.  
A flickering of bright sparks,  
as if the tree were flowering.  
Then, in one breath, they rose,  
swirling like a shoal of schooling  
fish, paused, took shape,  
and rolled south, wave after wave,  
in a bright hosanna of flame.

---

**Richard Spilman** is the author of *In the Night Speaking* and of a chapbook, *Suspension*. His work has appeared in many journals, including Poetry, The Southern Review, Image and Ascent. Richard was born and raised in Normal, Illinois, half a block from Main Street in a house on the banks of Sugar Creek. He has spent his life both embracing and attempting to escape Normal.

POETRY

---

*Rp Verlaine*

---

**Touched by Light**

Nights  
I become  
a bird flying  
through the blind darkness  
always landing on faith's shoulder.

The church is my sanctuary  
praying not for myself  
for those misguided  
as I was for years  
I hear their silence  
and their weeping.

My childhood ended  
when Father  
handed me  
his new rifle  
I shot my first deer  
becoming a man he said.

The feel of a gun  
warped all that was good  
the frightened faces  
I drew strength from  
robbing strangers  
even friends.

In prison  
with its infused darkness  
a man of faith  
asked me to find mine.

I was saved  
in jail  
by a light  
bright enough to blind  
the evil in my soul.

## Wolves

The wolves could be heard  
most nights while I waited  
with a brand-new rifle.

They had killed  
my breed dog who was  
rare as family.

The pack circling unseen  
but I'd hear them  
devouring peace in the distance.

One night a stray  
came to my bloodless gate  
I aimed to fire.

It was young  
and the trigger  
felt like fire.

Saw its eyes  
blink twice  
with questions.

As if outside myself  
I aimed and shot  
into the sky.

Allowing it to run  
away with a mercy  
I knew not I had.

The wolves left me  
not long after that  
but remain hungry.

Ever present in dreams  
their ghosts taunt my eyes  
daring them to blink again.

---

---

**Rp Verlaine** lives and writes in New York City. He has an MFA in creative writing from City College. He taught English in New York public schools until he retired. His first volume of poetry- *Damaged by Dames & Drinking* was published in 2017 and another- *Femme Fatales Movie Starlets & Rockers* in 2018. A set of three e-books titled, *Lies From The Autobiography 1-3*, followed in years 2018 to 2020.

## Ron Riecki

---

### Ex-backalleying

No, I'm not carrion. Or despair. Or nothing, not *Nothing*, despite what my self-talk might attempt to shock me into. Or to strain. Or try to hook me into. I'm not a back alley, the end of it, weary. Because I choose not to be. Or *He* does. He, bigger than the sea. I look at the sky, numb. Awed. See, for me the numinous is all

so new. Fell. A terrible fall. Where I have tremors now. Forever. Lost. A horrible lost . . . Then, I have found Father, God. Who I'd squandered. Ignored. When He was there, in my body, and out. And the tempest attempts to make me forget the blood. But grace out-graces. And I am frantic with gratitude. For God.

### Father

My father found his mother  
dead. Drug her to the bed.  
Tucked her in. He was a child,  
didn't understand death.  
And how he shut off then.  
How he told me this, from  
the side of my bed. I could see  
Death outside my window,  
the thick shadow that is night  
owning the house, the yard.  
Later, when he shut off the light,  
I looked straight into the dark,  
how it ate the room, a kind of full-  
blank. And I spoke to the ghosts  
that had owned me then, telling them  
they must die now, again. That I believed  
in the good now. And not in the dead.

&

*Therefore we do not lose heart.*

The world is changed. This grand hour of chaos,  
but it will flame out. Crushed. And I think of hearts  
lost, collected in a box, waiting for the request, at the coat-  
check station. A heart-check girl fumbling around, extracting  
asystole, v-fib, v-tach, and, then, one beating perfectly, yours,  
ours, how belief defibrillates. What luck, to believe. Not  
'luck'. *The throne of grace*. How it lightnings to the bone.

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**Ron Riecki's** books include *My Ancestors are Reindeer Herders and I Am Melting in Extinction* (Apprentice House Press), *Posttraumatic* (Hoot 'n' Waddle), and *U.P.* (Ghost Road Press). Right now, he's listening to Kate Nash's "Pumpkin Soup."

POETRY

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*Robert Funderburk*

---

**Children**

Are listening, so  
Put a filter on your tongue  
Are watching, so  
Scrub your actions  
With soap

Some  
Have daddies who love, so  
Strangers, do not touch  
Have mothers who love more, so  
Don't, if you value your vitals  
And a pain-free life

All  
Belong to God, so  
Ponder what Christ said  
A millstone about your neck  
Cast into the depths of the sea  
Where lurks Leviathan

**Year of Jubilee**

What did we expect after 2000 years?

Angelic choirs, Satchmo on trumpet,  
Mozart at the piano, Elvis singing lead?  
Waiting for hours on stone steps  
Worn smooth by Roman sandals  
Stained by Jewish blood,  
We could almost see beyond  
The Judean Wilderness,  
Charlton Heston, his staff outstretched,  
The sea parting.

What our jaded eyes saw

Across the span of the Temple Mount  
A company of priests,  
Robed and phylactyred,  
Rushing back and forth  
In front of the Western Wall  
Blowing shofars, sounding not at all  
Like the Trump of God  
But rather the tooting  
Of a grade school Kazoo band.  
Not one scruffy dove  
Landed on anyone's shoulder.

What God saw

Jesus in the Garden,  
Sweating drops of blood,  
As he prayed for the flesh  
That encased the Messiah  
And for the souls of all mankind.  
Most brutal of deaths, the tomb  
The rising again of the Nazarene,  
Titus' destruction of Jerusalem  
In crumbled stone, fire and blood.  
The Jewish nation over the centuries  
In diaspora, ridicule, inquisition  
Death camps and crematoriums,  
Through it all, keeping Covenant with God  
"Next year in Jerusalem,"  
Who brought them together  
Once again as a nation  
Keeping Covenant with Israel

What God expects.

Keep blood Covenant  
With my Son,  
The Covenant of Calvary  
And the empty tomb.

Oh, yes. The tough one,  
"Become as little children."



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**Robert Funderburk** was born by coal oil lamplight in a farmhouse near Liberty MS; graduated from LSU (1965) and was a SSgt in the USAFR (1965-1971). He has had 17 novels, 35 poems, one chapbook and one short story published. Teaching 4- and 5-year-olds in Sunday School for the past 20 years has been a passion and blessing for him. Lives with his wife, Barbara, on 50 acres of wilderness in Olive Branch, LA.

POETRY

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*Michelle McMillan-Holifield*

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**Boldness**

“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.”  
—Acts 4:31

The blade of my fight is dull, the knife coughing  
at the thing but never cutting it, and I’m just a calamity  
waiting to happen, my cowardice so bloated  
it’s like some poisonous clam spit me out on its beach  
and now I’m baking on the sand, the gritty crystals  
pretending to be medicinal, pretending to be motherly  
but they’re just throttle-kissing me, scarfing my throat  
with a death grip so violent I end up silent, impotent,  
dried up, powerless, a splashless wave, scarfless as a destitute  
woman whose sisters have all had enough of her weakness,  
her decisionless inertia, her dry-heaving anxiety  
and I have become that thing I despise, the nerveless socket, a pocket  
full of emptiness, a woman unable to speak her convictions  
who feather-skirts around the problems, never addressing  
the thing that needs to change, who puts up that thing  
for safekeeping, for addressing later, who coddles, who is mild  
when the situation calls for backbone and interrogation, investigation,  
digging into the meat of the issue and I’m always just warming up  
when the occasion calls for passionate statements, for my beliefs  
to be laid out like unmistakable marks in the sand, and I blame it on  
everything from men to my upbringing when really I’m my first problem,  
my ground zero, the box of unsharpened pencils, the barn  
with all the tools hung up for show, tools that have never  
been taken off their nails.

## Camerawoman: Siberia

Mandarin ducklings vault from the tree's opening, from the slender pocket they've been itching to edge out of. The mother is gravity-savvy, a skilled Olympian. The babes—little anxious darlings with nubby wings—clunk, like apples from an overturned basket, onto a trampoline of leaves. We stay in the hides

(two camerawomen squirming for space) where not even our whispers can disturb the ducks. This mother courting her children through the forest to water is such a prophetic moment I'm jealous I can't film it alone. The camera only tells the animals' stories, how they flip and mingle amongst each other.

Meanwhile, we humans are out of sync off camera. You never see the agitation we feel toward the person crammed in the hide with us, how the hides are so small our elbows bone against each other

when we move, how she looks at me as if she wants to shoot me, how, at nighttime, she loads her invisible ammo into her invisible gun and fires off invisible shots while I pretend not to notice. My breathing bothers her. As does the "metallic" noise of my top eyelashes pinging

against my bottom ones. And the smell of my lip balm permeating her nerves, her veins. If we were sisters this would be laughable. Our mother would coax us out of our hide; we would emerge floundering, learning together

how to navigate the world. If we tripped each other up, it would be because we were clumsy, our feet too big for our small bodies, not because we wanted to see each other fall.

## Backyard

I want to sprout gills. Want to store myself up for the winter in the cheeks of the sea until this passes over us. If fear is a hammer, I am the house built and blown down and built and blown down. Dread has made me its home. But I am still in control of my own patch of grass. It's all I have right now. In wanderlust, I find a hummingbird nest, in a pasture of slanted branch, on the continent of tree, the planet of my backyard. Real worlds thriving although the air is laden with COVID.

In the nest, an egg. I fall in love with it. Tiny as a tooth, a little white bean in the soft mossy felt of spun web. One egg. In the last room it will ever call home. When the birdie hatches and finally fans from this nest will it feel loneliness, will its heart flicking in its petite chest churn with sadness or will it radio joy as it falls in love with everything great and big and new? May its small chipping and its wing-hum make music over the ferns, into the clover; may its music help us overcome fear, help us remember the praise we once gave.

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**Michelle McMillan-Holifield** is a recent Best of the Net and Pushcart nominee. Her work has been included in or is forthcoming in *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Nelle*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Sleet Magazine*, *Stirring*, *The Collagist*, *Whale Road Review* and *Windhover*, among others. She hopes you one day find her poetry tacked to a tree somewhere in the Alaskan Wild.

POETRY

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*Anthony Butts*

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**Papyrus**

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they  
will be called children of God*  
—Matthew 5:9 (NRSV)

Not to the rusty arms of garbage trucks  
squealing like unmistakably familiar  
birds in the five a.m. hour, when I

usually pen missives to my pastor—  
the cursive like loopy and visible

trails left by loons swooping through air—  
and certainly not to those who loathe the poetry  
of our lives: but to the occasion for verse,

the glories of our Lord showing  
through the space and time

we observe as bent arrows of light  
in flight about scientist's photos  
of black holes. Eight billion could not know

what God does, the end of what might've  
been a sentence: to cradle the weight

of the world at the base of my back  
like a global dot topped by the waywardly  
etched line that had been my spine

until it's miraculous straightening—  
the everyday Biblical happenings

hazed by the fog of mental distress  
in the form of the battlefield that was  
my life. I am the compendium of the limits

of human malady: the pages  
of my flesh splayed

so as not to betray God's wish  
for the proper Mrs. to come  
and love me. Literally, an open book:

my fiancé pours over the papyrus  
of me as if it were printed in Braille.

## The Phone Age

*So let us not grow weary in doing what is right,  
for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up*  
—Galatians 6:9 (NRSV)

Amidst fire engines and helicopters caramelizing the air,  
amidst a pandemic fossilizing our previous way of life:  
the long road home was not lost, not forsaken as my fiancé

and I await the queen-sized bed we're to be given  
by our landlord as the trees surrender

their pollen in the Louisiana winter. Another Stone Age,  
as the "Betty" and "Wilma" many believe in wander back  
into the house to watch *Breaking Bad* on one's cellphone,

we have made ourselves into cavemen  
again: a nation obsessed with meth

and "acceptable" psychopaths. Surrounded  
by living remnants of culture and civilization  
the living rhythm of my verse holds the Lord's immediacy

amidst induced indeterminacy: the pounding  
in the 3 p.m. hour more like a slow motion

shower of bullets than industry eking out  
 it's meager existence as COVID-19 saturates the air-  
 waves. What happens on school busses stays

on school busses, more like lessons  
 in disbelief as the cheddar cheese

limousines confuse our notions of self-care  
 and welfare: fantasies of basketball stardom  
 and cheerleader envy so permeating nighttime

maneuvers in the dark until the light  
 behind my lids reveals swords

of Eden turning before each eye: the background filled  
 otherwise with more light. My fiancé and I await  
 the wedding bed, knowing the only way forward

is to go back to the Word: which is outside of time,  
 as the mystery of my existence begins to make sense.

---

**Anthony Butts** is the author of *Little Low Heaven* (New Issues 2003), Winner of the *Poetry Society of America's* 2004 *William Carlos Williams Award* for best book. He is also the nephew of Florence Ballard—former member of the Supremes singing group before her suicide in 1976. Butts continues to overcome the maladies of schizophrenia, Asperger syndrome and issues with anxiety. Dr. Butts has a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri in poetry writing and is a native Detroiter currently residing in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

POETRY

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*Carol Edwards*

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**Holy Madness**

I feel like I'm going a bit mad:  
Mind practices summersaults  
And twirls and ashes, ashes we all  
Fall down, and my heartbeat  
Beats like a nagado daiko, like  
The fury road war drum  
Fury and fear and swelling in my ears

Trapped in my rib cage,  
Skin a cage, a chain, a grave  
Blood pounding sounding like  
Smothered screams, silent streams  
Capillary caves, claustrophobic cells  
Jail celled, spread restless twitches  
Itches,  
Pacing, races, fidgets

Right out the front door  
But even wasteland space doesn't  
Tame the insane stirring, subdue  
The trapped lion staring  
The sun in the face, unable to pace  
Anything but the paths she  
Already knows, the very roads  
And steps their own cage, trapped  
In the former familiar comfort  
Of suffocating tracings, habits

Suddenly crave the snow globe shake  
Of the unknown. How can I follow  
The siren song? so much distraction  
Drowns it deep until brimstone erupts  
A fiery cascade  
Burning cardboard castles –  
Sham havens, shallow joys  
Hollow loves – smashing, burning



All to cinders until lo, only the  
 Glowing ore remains, the slag  
 Dragged to crust and sealed, the molten  
 Core of salamander fire revealed  
 A still beating heart purified to fly  
 To chase the divine Melody,  
 The stars' grace, and dance the sky.

## Dandelion

Stubborn hope  
 Why are you still here?  
 Like a dandelion pushing up  
 From a jagged sunbaked concrete  
 You show your sunny face  
 In places least looked for  
 At times almost unwelcome;  
 One person's flower is another's weed.

What soil gives you root?  
 What nourishment do you find  
 That such quick springing growth  
 Should raise its golden head, its bright eyes  
 From the very heart of brackish tar  
 Unyielding as an old man's grudge?  
 It's all he's known, all that's sustained him;  
 To remove it would kill him.

Yet you keep returning  
 Your death a spray of downy wishes  
 Whisked away by careless winds  
 Yet always left behind  
 In the rich, rare compost of decayed dreams  
 The seed for more generations  
 That spend their brief days casting bright shadows  
 Over the suffocating roadway  
 Broad with good intentions.

And the dandelion, with its sunshine face  
 Replied unto me and said,

“Lookest thou unto the hills;  
Thou knowest whence thy help comes,  
From thence also comes thy hope.  
Both come from the Lord,  
Thy God and the God of thy heritage,  
The Maker of all thine eyes see:  
The heavens above, the galaxy beyond,  
Maker of me  
And Earth’s entirety.”

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**Carol Edwards** is a northern California native transplanted to southern Arizona. She lives and works in relative seclusion with her books, plants, and pets (+ husband). She writes from her imagination, her life, and her faith. Her work has appeared in *Space & Time* and *Opendoor Poetry Magazine*.

POETRY

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*Laura Anella Johnson*

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**Ash Wednesday**

*“She would of been a good woman,” the Misfit said, “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”* –Flannery O’Connor

Usually in white, our pastor wears black  
tonight, explains the words he’ll say,  
and the ashes.  
Mortality sprinkled on my head.  
Humanness, confronting death.

I’ve known it in fleeting Grandmother-with-the-Misfit moments:  
a semi bears down– it must not have brakes,  
a cancerous lump– until a medical test absolves it,  
a speedboat-driving maniac slings me and my bouncing raft–  
*I’ll fly off, crash into a moccasin nest,  
Die.*

And each time, I become a good woman,  
struggles and doubts, clear as cleansing rain  
because nothing matters but that  
the line connecting me to Him holds.

I bow slightly as he sprinkles,  
“You are ash, and to ash you will return.”

---

**Laura Anella Johnson** is the author of *Not Yet* (Kelsay Books, 2019). Her work has appeared in a range of online and print journals and anthologies, including *Blue Heron Review*, *Time of Singing*, *Literary Mama*, and *Snakeskin*. She holds an MFA from Fairfield University and teaches English/ESOL at Fayette County High School in Georgia.

POETRY

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*Richard Leach*

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## Lazarus Says How It Was

*Lord, he whom you love is ill. —John 11:3*

It was like when  
you know you  
are asleep and  
you want to wake  
up but you can't  
wake up and you  
want to move but  
you can't move  
and you want to  
cry out but your  
mouth won't open  
and then the one  
beside you calls  
your name and  
calls it again  
and you hear  
the voice and  
know the voice  
before you can  
say who it is  
or who you are  
and then you  
are awake and  
you make a small  
sound and are in  
the world again  
beside the one  
who loves you  
It was like that

---

**Richard Leach** is a poet and visual artist in Stamford, CT. His sacred poetry, words for hymns, anthems, and cantatas, has been set to music by many composers and is widely published and sung. His secular poems have appeared in print in *Rattle*, and in many online publications.

POETRY

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*Nolo Segundo*

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**The Look in Her Eyes**

No, it isn't what you think  
when I say I was enraptured  
by the look in her eyes—  
the eyes were those of a woman  
who was dying and knew she  
was dying...

I did not know her well—  
she was the wife of someone  
my wife worked with in the  
prosaic world, the world of time  
and schedules and appointments,  
the world of taxes and getting  
and spending and eating and  
sleeping and making love (for  
the lucky ones), a world filled  
with the nightly news and TV  
and a relentless social media,  
a world that both commands  
and ignores—but not the world  
this woman was soon to leave  
for, on a voyage she must  
take alone, and she knew all  
this as she lay small and quiet  
in her hospice bed—  
past speaking any more,  
not even to her old husband.

But though quiet as a mouse  
or a saint, she yet smiled, at  
all in the room it seemed,  
though when I went in turn  
to say my good-bye to this  
near-stranger, I thought,  
'She's smiling at me!' and  
then I thought, 'She looks

happy!’—but how can that be  
I wondered— until her eyes  
danced with a light I have  
never seen before in human  
eyes—it was her soul I knew  
that knew, and her soul had  
no fear, death being less than  
air, less than nothing to it—  
her soul was ready.

---

**Nolo Segundo** is the pen name of retired teacher, L.J. Carber, 74, who only became a published poet in the past 4 years, during which time he has been published online/in print in over 30 literary magazines in the US, UK, Canada, Romania, and India. Late in 2020 a trade publisher issued a paperback collection of his poems, under his pen name, with the title ‘The Enormity of Existence.’ He chose that title to reflect the awareness he has had of being both an immortal as well as a mortal being since he almost drowned in a Vermont river 50 years ago and had a near-death experience that shattered his former belief in a nihilistic-materialist (as in only matter is real) Universe. And no, his NDE was definitely NOT of the ‘white light’ sort, but then his near-drowning was not accidental; however, terrible as it was, he thanks to this day that Being–Force–Presence called God for all of it. He has been shown what many intuit: that each of us has an endless consciousness which predates birth and survives death. The problem with life is not that it is meaningless, which is the only logical conclusion to atheism, but that life, each life, has so much meaning that none of us can fully grasp it all.

*Ronnie Sirmans*

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**Parable of the Comic Strip**

Remember Bazooka bubble gum? Pink slabs wrapped  
in paper slick like the meaty side of butcher's paper?  
Bazooka Joe comics printed on the colorful shininess?  
One day as a kid when I tore off the bubble gum wrapper,  
a breeze blew it away before I could study Joe's words.

I saw it deposited down the road, and a little bird hopped  
next to it, tilting its head as if trying to figure out the joke.  
It flew off with the paper, and I imagined the bird weaving  
it into its nest, and baby birds waking, their little birdbrains  
reading the same Bazooka Joe every day with new funniness.

I considered myself kindhearted, so I tried it one day with  
my pocket-sized New Testament, its green cover too shiny  
to even pass as fake leather, and ripped out a page to share,  
letting it float down the street. No bird came to examine  
the gospel or take it to roost. I finally picked it back up,  
folded the page, and put it back where it belonged.  
And for years, out of habit I'd unfold those parables  
of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son:  
Lessons nestled on a small sheet of such thin paper.

## A Plague of Loveliness

Four ladybugs circumnavigate  
the doorknob's sun-warmed brass.  
Several others ignore gravity's pull  
as they traipse up the door's jamb,  
such a purposeful gait walking  
on six charcoal-black legs as thin  
as splinters cast from splinters.  
I knock on the door thrice and  
a few tumble like sleepy lice  
from a head heavy with woe.  
They clamber right back up,  
just like the way hope works.  
A group of ladybugs is called  
a loveliness. Such a nice crowd.  
All around, they seek, seem  
to be everywhere, on house,  
on grass and ground, so all  
stays roiling so harmlessly  
as if plagues can be tolerable  
while the locusts still slumber.

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**Ronnie Sirmans** is a digital editor at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. His poetry has appeared in *Sojourners*, Christianity Today's *The Behemoth*, *Jewish Currents*, *America: The Jesuit Review*, and elsewhere.



*Annie Harpel*

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**Song on a Sunday Morning**

gentle haze blankets the air  
sunlight  
weaves through pockets of broken fog  
highlighting golden summer hills  
birds chirp patterns of conversations  
cars line the street

everyday chores take me outside  
thoughts focused on the next task  
suddenly  
a chorus of angels  
drifted harmony  
out the church door  
across the road, up the stairs  
and into my heart

a moment of song  
broke open my heart long enough  
to let some sunlight stream in

## where is my church?

my place of worship  
is somewhere between  
walls that hold stories  
and  
wide open spaces

inside  
an altar  
to bring my prayers  
and requests to,  
where quiet beseeches meditation  
angels abound  
door to safe shelter open

outside  
ocean's roar  
heard in the echo of a seashell  
against my ear,  
grasses wave in the wind  
palette of spring wildflowers say hello  
redwoods stretch toward the sun  
tears of rain  
release

---

**Annie** was born in Illinois, grew up in Orange County, and has lived on the Central Coast of CA for eleven years. Her poetry has been published in local newspapers and online literary journals such *Drabble* and *First Literary Review – East*. She has taught poetry workshops at several county libraries.

POETRY

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*Lauren M. Davis*

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**This Thing That God Made**

Look at this thing that God made:  
this thing  
of swirling skin, hair, and wax.

Coils of flesh twisted  
and set  
into pattern  
to draw inward  
sound.

Soft golden hairs  
hold  
the dark wax  
that smells sweet  
and tacky.

Frail, movable hairs  
bend inward  
like blades  
of bentgrass.

The skin pattern  
like insect trails  
under bark  
or brainy  
Green War Coral  
at the ocean floor.

The dark wax  
is dense and gummy  
moisture,  
in a way that  
one doesn't know  
whether to leave it  
or wash it away.

The coils  
of pink skin  
lead  
into a cavern  
to where the eye  
can no longer see  
through the black:  
the coils pour  
into the head,  
to where one cannot  
and should not  
reach—  
forbidden space.

On the back, a flap  
so thin and baby—  
so weak and dear,  
soft and buoyant,  
yet it stays there, solid,  
with no one's help.

And one place is a shape  
unnamed: a rounded  
rectangle jetting out  
like a covered mountain,  
and so unlike the other  
forms.

It is something magnificent,  
a place for only  
sound to understand  
how to navigate,  
an arrangement  
no man would think  
to design: the curves too natural.

Yet, it is a thing so ugly  
and foreign,  
a dwelling I clean  
and fight to keep  
open and unimpacted,  
like much of the body.

I examine it  
in awe,  
and snip the golden hairs,  
the ones that appear  
as if  
they would grow  
into the cavern.

I clean it out,  
trying to exterminate  
the tacky smell  
and the black wax.

The dog's ear,  
the woman's body,  
the grass, the coral,  
the mountain shape,  
the cavern:  
what are these things  
that God has made?

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**Lauren M. Davis** attended the University of Southern Maine to obtain her Masters of Fine Art in Creative Writing. Work from her poetry collections *Sleeping Through the Earthquake* and *Women Bones* have appeared in numerous literary journals and an anthology. She has appeared as a genre editor for *The Stonecoast Review*, and works as a freelance writer. She was the Writer in Residence at Hypatia in the Woods in 2016. In 2017, she attended Naropa University's Summer Writing Program and was the keynote speaker for The Poet Society of Indiana. She teaches Creative Writing, English Writing, and Philosophy at Area Universities.

POETRY

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*April Ojeda*

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**Conversation on 16<sup>th</sup> & Guadalupe**

The mad woman on the sidewalk glares,  
What you looking at me for?  
I ain't no man's sugar,  
Ain't no mama's darling girl neither.  
And I ain't got no name,  
Least not one I'll tell you about.  
So don't act like you care  
Waitin' on your ride off this corner.

Lest you got some change  
To give an old woman?  
See my eyes  
They ain't what they used to be.  
And I got this pain,  
And I got to pay this doctor  
To help me out...  
You kidding me?! A twenty?  
Dollar Tree, here I come.

A tiny, crumpled thing  
Camps out near my coffee stop,  
Wants to know, You in church?  
She grins, broad and toothless.  
One thing for sure,  
Jesus coming back real soon  
Cause this place is a mess.

I ask, Why so many homeless here?  
She shrugs. Austin is a kind city.

A bus driver bellows from her open door,  
Hey you! I turn.  
Go check on that lady in the wheelchair.  
She sick? She dead?  
I go where she points.

To the sleeping wheelchair lady  
On the corner of 16th and Guadalupe:  
Are you OK?  
It's a sweltering June afternoon,  
And your shelter blanket  
Slips down to show the  
Worn ink spread across your chest.  
Better days, maybe.

I should've asked your name.  
I wanted to. But you looked  
Right through me, drifting  
On low tides of a sunless plain.

One nod, two for good measure  
And I left you on that corner.  
And I thought,  
I don't deserve my name.

Life breaks all us darling girls,  
We got that in common.  
She cold snaps, or slow roasts  
Heart, limb, hope, sanity  
Then saunters toward the red sunrise  
To wash her hands of broken glass.

But my people glued the pieces back  
And taught me how to hide the cracks  
And the worth of a name.  
Maybe you got people?  
Maybe they miss you too,  
Or maybe they did this to you.

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**April Ojeda** is a teacher and writer from the Oklahoma Panhandle. She lives in a fast-spinning world, so she writes poetry as a means of prayer and of untangling the threads of daily life. She lives with her family in West Texas and finds her greatest inspiration in the outdoors.

POETRY

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*Terri Martin Wilkins*

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**Waters**

'Let justice roll down like waters.'  
Proclaimed in unexpectant unperturbed voices  
Comfortable righteous virtuous honorable  
No reason no need to search the hidden depths  
Of denial,  
Of uncompassion,  
Of refusal to see hear understand learn.

Then justice.  
Perhaps belatedly,  
Or maybe in perfect timing,  
Rolls down.

Not an agreeable, amiable ocean wave  
To run from in joyful apprehension  
To tease our hot toes with its freshening foam.  
But a tsunami,  
Staggering us with revelation,  
Devastating us with truth,  
Scouring away complacency and pretense and negation,  
Revealing the shame of cleaving to the lies  
That comfort us in the guilt of self-satisfaction.  
Calling, insisting on recognizing sin.  
Calling, insisting on repentance.  
Calling, insisting on change.

Justice rolls down.  
Not tranquilly or humbly or respectfully,  
Not in deference to authority,  
But demanding, challenging, persistent.  
A wailing, driven lamentation,  
A thing of righteous terror  
To sweep us into a new restoration,  
Or drown us in our denial.



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**Terri Martin Wilkins** is a follower of Jesus Christ, often failing but always relying on grace. She writes from experience, grief, joy, and her responses to the world around her. While she often struggles, she continues to work on trusting God in all things.

POETRY

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Matthew J. Andrews

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## Holy Saturday

Sabbath streets: dust and stone

Bated breath of mist  
on a mountain's face

Silent prayer  
from the olive tree,  
dew amassing on branches

The vulture, asleep

Snakeskin scattered like manna

Fish flopping  
on shore, gasping  
under opening sky

In the distance: smoke and fire

A murder of crows,  
pecking at sunlight

Clouds like shredded cloth

A million tiny teeth  
gnawing at the grain

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**Matthew J. Andrews** is a private investigator and writer whose poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Orange Blossom Review*, *Funicular Magazine*, and *EcoTheo Review*, among others. His debut chapbook, *I Close My Eyes and I Almost Remember*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. He can be contacted at [matthewjandrews.com](http://matthewjandrews.com).

## *Tom Brewer*

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### **The Mounting Snow**

A silent snow fell over Westerling. White flakes, tranquil little blessings, glided to the Earth and piled one on top of the last. Tricia Langley watched the peaceful winter scene from the drafty front room of her modest home. This was the Lord's work, this snow, the white landscape proof of His brilliance. Fire popped and cracked from the hearth in the living room. The glory of God's snowfall warmed Tricia's heart.

When she was a girl, snow meant sledding with her sisters. The three of them, all bundled up in their coats and hats and scarves, raced awkwardly to Hardy Park and ran up the hill, their tiny little steps leaving tiny little tracks in the snow. They lied on aluminum trash can lids and sped headfirst to the flat, grassy area near the swing set, practically flying until they slid to a stop and, giggling, ran back up the hill. Those were the best of times, those winters when life felt wondrous and the world felt big. She only saw them on holidays now, her sisters. Cathy was in Chicago and Pat had settled in Philadelphia, but Tricia, the youngest, stayed in Westerling with her parents and her husband and her memories of those fun days in the snow.

Colored lights on her blinked on and off on the house across the street. A plastic Santa Claus waved from the front yard. In a matter of days, Tricia would spend her thirty-third Christmas in Westerling. How she loved Christmas when she was a girl. Accompanying her father, a pastor for Wednesday night service and Thursday night caroling and for delivering turkeys to the shelter on the outskirts of town. She looked forward fondly to the annual production of the Christmas story and singing "Silent Night" by candlelight on Christmas Eve. Alone in the den, the memory of the solemn voices echoing through the sanctuary put a lump in her throat.

Tricia watched her sisters depart Westerling and eventually depart the church. She grappled with her sisters' choices over the years. She cried for them. She prayed for them to come home, clasping her hands together so intensely she drew blood. She begged them to repent, to rededicate their lives to the Lord, but alas, it was for nothing. Watching the snowfall,

she wondered if she had done enough. Was the Lord was pleased with her effort to save her sisters?

Headlights crept along the suburban street. Tires crunched slowly. The snow fell and fell and fell, a serene white blanket over Creation that buried its regrets and kept its secrets. Like how much Tricia loathed Christmas.

The holiday season as a pastor's wife was worlds different than it was as a pastor's daughter. Christmas made Tricia a widow. She lost her husband to meetings with area businessmen and speeches to the VFW and presentations to the Westerling Chamber of Commerce to goose end-of-year fundraising. She lost him to rounding up coats and hats and gloves to donate to the homeless. She lost him to hours in his office, perfecting the Christmas Eve message. For a pastor's wife, Christmas meant a month of loneliness, nights spent with only the snow and her drifting thoughts. The thought gripping Tricia Langley that particular night was how differently her life would be if she had children.

#

The Langley's had been unable to conceive. That was its own disappointment, a desire the Lord withheld from Tricia for reasons she could not fathom. The couple spent years trying. Trying. The word alone darkened her mood. When people know you're trying to have a baby, that's all they want to talk to you about. And when people know you're trying to have a baby and you don't, they always say, "Well, keep trying," as if she wasn't giving it enough effort. As if she wasn't trying everything.

There was the ovulation app. The breathing techniques. Keeping up with the latest articles and research. The Mommy Blogs. The prenatal vitamins. The scheduled intimacy. The awkward and uncomfortable positions. Praying and fasting and praying some more. Not getting pregnant was a full-time job that paid in pain.

Tricia exhausted herself drumming up hope. Every period was a fresh devastation. The disappointment wrecked her. She cried hard and ugly at a moment's notice. She spent entire days in bed, alternately praying to the Lord to forgive her for whatever sins she had committed to deserve this and cursing Him at the top of her lungs, the spittle flying from her mouth, her bitterness filling the house. She reached her wits' end putting

on a brave face. Every piece of unsolicited advice lashed across her back and stung her somewhere deep inside her soul in places only God knew.

Tim made things worse. Tim was never angry. Tim never grieved. He was never down. He smiled and played Mr. Positive. He hugged her and promised her they would try again. It was like he wasn't in it with her. She wanted her husband to hurt like she hurt. He just didn't.

He left her utterly alone to carry her cross to the top of the hill and offered no help when, twenty-four days later, she was inevitably cast down to the depths of the valley.

#

Back then, back when they were trying, God taunted her with other women's pregnancies. Everywhere Tricia turned, there was a friend or a relative or a member of the congregation unexpectedly with child. She saw women at the grocery store, women wearing no wedding rings on their fingers, pressing their big, round bellies against the handles of their grocery carts. They were so lucky, these women. The Lord had seen to bless them with the gift of motherhood. But not Tricia.

What was the point of all this faith and all this duty if God was going to withhold from her the one thing she wanted most?

Then there was that stupid potluck. It was October. Tricia and Tim were in their fifteenth month of failing to have a baby. As the Lord would have it, six women from church were pregnant at the same time. They were all within three years of Tricia's age. Every Sunday morning, she hugged these women to her and told them she loved them while she swallowed her resentment. It shook Tricia to feel, at one time, such acute and contradictory emotions toward her friends, women who volunteered to make coffee and teach Sunday school. Her love for them was as real and tender as her jealousy was bitter. This was a test, Tricia told herself, a test from the Lord. She was to obey Him, to humble herself and love these women with her whole heart, no matter how much it hurt her or how hard she cried at every Instagram birth announcement. And maybe if she passed this test, He would show her His favor and give her a baby.

The greatest test came not from the Lord, but from Tim. He had the gall to suggest they throw a joint baby shower after service one Sunday. How could he be so oblivious, so blind to her heartbreak? What a cruel thing to ask. Anger flared inside of her and she wanted nothing more than to

scream at Tim, to plunge her thumbs into his eyes and blind him as the Philistines did Samson. But Tricia held her tongue. She smiled and agreed to plan the potluck because she was a preacher's wife. Ministering to women was part of the marriage pact. She had to hold up her end of the bargain.

Tricia poured everything she had into planning the party. Her anger with Tim, her frustration with her body, her disillusionment with the Lord, her jealousy and bitterness, the guilt she felt for carrying that jealousy and bitterness, her confusion, her sadness, her self-pity, and her self-loathing. Tricia directed it all at making sure the potluck baby shower was a success. She stayed awake after Tim went to sleep, cutting pink and blue cardstock into onesies until she had uniform pieces for an adorable banner. She went from store to store in search of the perfect vases for six charming tissue-paper-and-diaper bouquets. She painstakingly glued together paper invitations and curated a party playlist with an ear for pace and mood. She planned games and ordered brisket from a local barbecue restaurant.

Tricia arrived at church early the morning of the party, earlier than Tim, and decorated a large conference room so they could start the party as soon as service ended. She ducked out as the band started the closing song to confirm the tablecloths were straight, the decorations were pert, and the balloons were ebullient. The food was arranged logically—meat first, then sides, then desserts. Everything was perfect.

When the music stopped, Tricia propped open the double doors and waited. She rubbed her palms together. She would show the Lord how big she could be, how much she could love these women, how skillfully she could pass His test. Nerves danced in her stomach. She smoothed the hem of her garnet dress.

As partygoers rounded the corner, Tricia Langley clapped. "Welcome to your shower!" she shrieked. Jaws dropped and eyes widened, their faces stretching like delighted cartoons. All seven women, Tricia and the pregnant six, hugged as a group. Their bellies rubbed against her and Tricia held on for a moment longer than she should have. As if she could catch pregnancy by touch. If only.

After a couple of hours, the party began to wind down. The games had been played; the gifts had been unwrapped. Visitors had come and gone. Tricia's mind was a step ahead, considering how to tear down the room most efficiently when the event was over. She was so preoccupied that

the suggestion didn't register when it was first made, but suddenly she had the vague sense that everyone was waiting on her. Indeed, all six mommies-to-be and the few remaining guests were looking at her with expectant smiles on their faces.

A woman she didn't recognize, she must have been someone's relative, nodded and waved her hand. That's when Tricia noticed the pregnant six standing in a line in front of the cardstock onesies.

"Go on, get in there. Get in the picture," she said.

Tricia brushed her hair behind one ear and let her hand rest on the nape of her neck. She smiled with the practiced humility and charm known only to a preacher's wife.

"Oh no, I couldn't," she shook her head. "It's their special day."

"Come on, now. Don't be modest. You put all this together, now get in there with your friends."

The other women implored her to join the photo. Tricia could feel tears screaming toward her eyes. She focused her mind and halted them dead in their tracks. Tim's face flashed in her mind. If he was there, he'd remind her not to be prideful. Tricia left her seat and joined the other women. She stood there, humiliated next to those vessels of life, and smiled like it was her birthday.

"Say cheese!"

#

The persistent snow continued to fall. The bushes out front were covered in white. Tricia pulled up the baby shower photo on her phone. She looked great; thin and fit with just a hint of bicep definition. But that's not what she wanted. She wanted to look like them, round and uncomfortable and teetering on the brink of unkempt.

After the party cleared out, Tricia stayed back to clean up, kindly refusing any offer of help. Finally, it was just her. Alone. She leaned against the conference room door and locked it behind her back. Trembling, she melted to the carpet.

#

Growing up, Tricia was obsessed with Mary's obedience and faith. An angel—a marvelous, frightening creature—visits her in the middle of the night and tells her she is going to give birth to the Lord's son, mankind's savior for all eternity. What a heavy thing to drop on a teenage girl. The responsibility must have felt like an iron necklace. But Mary is full of grace. She asks the angel *how* her, but never *why* her.

She carries that baby in her belly as she crosses the desert of Jerusalem on foot—*on foot*—so she and her husband may be counted in the census in his homeland. Then in Bethlehem, she gives birth in a manger. No hospital, no epidural, no nurses. The birth was humble and dangerous, but Mary did it. What an inspiration.

Tricia continued to put herself in Mary's place when she heard the Christmas story, but in her twenties, her attention turned to the moments not recorded in the Bible. Waking up the morning after encountering the angel and wondering if it was all a dream. The anxiety she must have felt before telling Joseph the news and the argument the two of them must have had. He probably accused her of infidelity at some point. How that would have shattered her. Here she was, scared, pregnant, with the literal weight of the world on her shoulders and the one person she needs for support wants to abandon her. No wonder the Lord commanded an angel to bring Joseph in on the plan.

Mary must have felt tremendous doubt in their abilities as it dawned on her that the birth was the easy part: They were tasked with raising the living God. What pressure.

#

Tricia liked to imagine her and Tim having three children, two boys and a girl. The boys would be named Philip and Luke, and the girl they would call Ruth. In their teens, the boys would be broad and athletic, like their father. The pair would play football and lead a group of kids that performed service projects around Westerling. She could see the brothers, with no more than two years between them, raking leaves from front lawns as their elderly neighbors watched from the window with grateful smiles on their faces, or painting classrooms at Westerling Elementary, or repairing wheelchair ramps that had grown shoddy with time. Between their athletic accomplishments and their acts of service,



everywhere Tricia went people would compliment her on what wonderful young men she had raised.

The girl would be a spitting image of her momma—blond and blue-eyed—but with her father's sense of purpose and determination. A woman of faith with those qualities would be unstoppable.

Tricia and Ruth would be inseparable. They would sing songs in the car together when Ruth was a girl, each Langley woman belting out Hillsong and Phil Wickham and Taylor Swift. As Ruth would grow into a woman, she and her mother would grow closer, behaving more like best friends than mother and daughter. Tricia would sit up late with her budding beauty, and the headstrong, self-aware girl would reveal her plans to leave Westerling behind, desire smoldering in her eyes as she described her future.

Tricia imagined herself visiting the boys at the small colleges they attended on football scholarships. She and Tim would dress head-to-toe in the home team's colors and cheer the loudest when either of their sons sacked the quarterback. They would see less of Ruth. She'd be off at a west coast school—maybe Cal, maybe Stanford—studying medicine. When she did come home for Christmas and Tricia's birthday, she would confidently tell her parents and her brothers that she was going to cure Alzheimer's or cancer, and the men would laugh at her temerity, but Tricia would know what they did not know. That as sure as Christ rose from the grave, there was no stopping Ruth Langley.

Tricia saw herself holding grandchildren, her son's babies. Ruth would marry a researcher or a professor or a physicist and they would choose not to have children so they could dedicate themselves to their work. She pictured Ruth visiting her when she was an old woman, after Tim passed on. Her daughter would grab her by the hand, look her in the eye and say, "We did it, Momma. We found the cure."

In one of her darkest moments, Tricia wondered if the Lord would not give her children because of her fantasies about their lives. Was He angry at her for wanting to put them on her own path? Did He resent that she wanted certain things for them instead of putting it all in His hands? Or was it that her plans weren't good enough for Him? Maybe He wouldn't give her children because He had bigger plans for their souls, and she was going to mess it all up.

Or maybe, Tricia thought as she watched the snow pile higher, the Lord wouldn't give her children because He knows her better than she knows herself. Maybe He knows she would be a bad mother. Maybe He was sparing her pain.

#

She thought she was pregnant once. It was June, the week before Father's Day. She and Tim had failed to make a baby for twenty-seven months. Tricia was late, as late as all the magazines said she would be when it finally happened.

That Sunday morning, she watched Tim preach on the Sermon on the Mount. He was effortlessly brilliant that morning. His movements, his cadence, everything about his delivery was pitch-perfect as he brought Christ's teachings to life.

"Christ's message in Matthew Seven transcends a mere warning about false prophets. He's holding a mirror to the faithful gathered on the mountains. And today, friends, I am holding that mirror to you."

Ushers brought a pair of potted plants on stage. One plant was vibrant, with ripe red tomatoes. The other was twisted and withered. "I ask you, friends: What are the fruits of your choices? If you look at your trees objectively, what do you see?" He gestured to the healthy plant. "Are your trees lush and plentiful? Are they life-giving? Or have the desires of your heart and the words of your mouth produced thorns and thistles? Is your tree corrupt and barren?"

Tricia felt the Holy Spirit moving through her husband and expanding over the room, growing like a balloon. At the end of his sermon, after he encouraged his flock that there was hope for them no matter the fruits of their tree, he invited the band back on stage for one last song, a high note to carry the congregants into their week. He went with a modern piece about the goodness of God.

After the second chorus, just before the bridge, Tricia felt something familiar. She rushed from the sanctuary to the women's room and dashed into a stall. She leaned her back against the seafoam green stall door. Music pumped through the walls as Tricia's chest heaved. Sitting on the toilet, she reached under the hem of her dress and pulled down her underwear. Blood dotted the white cotton. Tricia sobbed under the weight of God's judgment. The worship song rang through the bathroom,

*“You’re never gonna let... Never gonna let me down...”*

#

Tricia became aware of headlights beaming down the dark street and disappearing before they passed the house. Must be Tim. Finally. He stamped the snow out of his boots in the mudroom and his zipper jingled as he slipped off his winter coat and placed it on a hook. She listened to his heavy steps against the hardwoods, grateful for those familiar noises and happy that another December night was behind them. In a few more days, she would have her husband back.

He entered the front room, a halo of positivity glowing behind him. He wrapped his enormous arms around her, enveloping her in warmth. His beard scratched against the crook of her neck. It felt like home. Tricia looked at their reflection in the window, the neighbor’s Christmas lights illuminating the shadowy window version of her and her man. They looked perfect.

Tim told her about a few new connections he had made, promising conversations with men of means who could help them lease a bigger space, shoot more videos, and develop an app so they could reach more people.

“It was a big night, Trish. I felt the hand of the Father in the room,” Tim said, his voice booming. “It was a miracle.”

Miracle. Tricia didn’t let on, but the word plunged a knife into her heart. She laid awake that night, staring at the ceiling thinking about that word. Miracle. What was a miracle anyway? Was virgin birth really a miracle? What about Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin? She was in her sixties when she became pregnant with John the Baptist. Did she think her pregnancy was a miracle? An answered prayer? Proof of God’s favor? That’s what the Bible would have her believe.

But Elizabeth was an old woman living in the desert thousands of years before indoor plumbing, modern medicine, and air conditioning. Seems more like a punishment than a gift. A sick joke, really. Most of Elizabeth’s friends were probably talking about their grandkids by then.

*Grandkids.*

Tricia sighed and rolled over. The blinds were open on the window nearest her. The snow continued to fall and fall and fall. There was no stopping it.

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**Tom Brewer** is an aspiring author who lives in Greenville, South Carolina with his wife and dogs. He works in marketing for a construction services company, and he writes fiction about the complexities of faith and societal issues.

## *Jack Harrell*

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### **Hearts Fail**

“Men’s hearts failing them for fear...”

— Luke 21:26

You wake in the morning, feeling a weight that touches your skin but not the blankets, not the pajama pants or tee-shirt you’re wearing. Light comes in through the curtained window but the room seems dim. You hear your wife breathing beside you. The weight makes it hard to turn and see. Her eyes are open but she doesn’t move. She doesn’t speak. She stares at the ceiling, at nothing. The room is the same as always—your grandmother’s armoire, its doors closed; the open closet door and the clothes hanging there; the clutter of books and papers on her nightstand by the lamp. You push against the weight to turn and check the time on your phone. It’s 10:34 AM. You went to bed at ten last night—you don’t know how you could have slept in so long.

You find it difficult to speak. But you manage to say “It’s past ten” to your wife.

She doesn’t move. After a long moment, she simply says, “Oh.”

You haven’t slept past 6:00 AM in years. Every morning you’ve gotten up for work, going to the same job. “I should be at work,” you say. But you don’t move. “I should get up.”

“Why?” your wife asks. Finally, she turns to you, slowly, as though her neck is stiff.

You look up at the ceiling. You can’t think of an answer. Minutes pass—hours, perhaps. You can’t think of anything but the weight pushing on your skin from the inside.

“What’s happening?” your wife asks.

This surprises you. You’d forgotten she was there. “I feel heavy,” you say. “I feel empty.”

Then she asks, her tone suddenly changed, “Where’s Megan?”

You remember your daughter. The thought of her comes distantly, like something you read in a book long ago. Megan is seventeen, your only child, and you love her. Her room is down the hall. She always gets up early, as early as you do, every morning. She has dance and clarinet and yearbook this year. In her Anat. and Phys. class, just a week ago, she and her lab partner, Christian, dissected a baby pig. This all comes to you at once.

“Did she go to school?” your wife asks.

“What time is it?” you ask.

Your wife turns toward you and lifts the phone still in your hand. “It’s 11:30,” she says. Then she says, “I need to find Megan.” Getting up, she makes sounds like someone lifting heavy weights. She walks slowly out of the room, wrapping a robe around her. She calls out, “Megan?”

After a long time, she comes back. Her eyes are wide as though she might be screaming, but she doesn’t make a sound. She stops in the middle of the room. “Megan’s not here,” she says. Then she says, “The front door is open.”

Somehow you rise from the bed, like a man pushing boulders off his chest. You walk with your wife to the front door, which stands wide open. Outside it’s an ordinary spring day, oddly calm and quiet. There are no cars, no sounds of people moving or doing.

Your wife’s Toyota and Megan’s Honda Civic sit in the driveway, under the carport. Megan’s car door is open. She sits at the wheel, the car engine not running. Her hands hang loosely on the steering wheel. “There she is,” your wife says. Her voice sounds like it comes from a distance.

The two of you go to Megan. Her hair is down and uncombed. She wears no makeup. This is not like her.

“Megan, honey,” your wife says, kneeling in the gap of the open car door. They embrace tiredly, burying their faces in each other’s shoulders. You stand near them and put a heavy hand on your wife’s shoulder.

“Everything is heavy,” Megan says. “I got dressed. That’s all I could do.”

Across the street you see a man lying in the grass at the park. He lays on one side, knees pulled up, arms folded over his chest like a hurt child. Over in the Hudson's driveway Mr. Hudson, a teacher at the middle school, is sitting in his car, just like Megan, sitting with the car not running.

You go to the sidewalk and see someone walking down the middle of the street, a young man moving like someone sleepwalking. You recognize his face but don't remember his name. You lift your arm, call out weakly, "What's happening?"

He stops walking and looks at you blankly. "Does it matter?" he asks.

You return to your wife and Megan and see that your daughter is crying, sobbing slowly into your wife's shoulder. "I'm trying," she is saying. "I'm trying so hard."

You walk past them, toward the house, which doesn't seem to be the same color as you remember it. At the open front door, you hear a car and you turn, your hand just touching the doorframe. The car moves very slowly, swerving lazily into a tree, bringing its slow movement to a sudden halt. The driver gets out of the car, a middle-aged, red-haired woman wearing a green nightgown and no shoes, her hair a mess. She hobbles away slowly, the car door ajar. Your wife and daughter don't move, don't speak. You turn without a word and walk into the house.

You make it to the bedroom and find the TV remote. You switch through the channels. One plays a black-and-white Western, one is fuzzy with snow, another plays a 1980s sitcom. You turn to a news channel. What you see there doesn't surprise you, though you've seen nothing like it before. The familiar newsroom is there on the screen, though the camera shot sits at an odd angle, showing television equipment that should be off camera. Two people sit at the anchor desk—a woman and a man. The woman sits in her smart anchorwoman blouse, but a lock of hair has fallen out of place. Someone walks listlessly between her and the camera. The man beside her is looking at someone off camera, his expression resigned. "I don't know why it matters," the off-camera voice says. "Why does any of it matter?" The woman puts her hands to her face and starts to softly weep.

You drop the remote, find your car keys, and walk outside. You feel you can barely move, as though the air itself is thick. Your wife is standing

under the carport now, simply standing there. Megan isn't with her. "Where's Megan?" you ask.

"She started walking. She said she had to try."

You take your wife's hand and bring her toward the car with you. She doesn't resist. You get her into the car. You are pushing to do all of this, pushing against some kind of weight on your skin, some kind of weight in your mind, in your soul. Before you get in the driver's side of the car you notice the silence—no birds chirping, no squirrels moving in the trees, no insects buzzing. The world seems the same as always, only dimmer, a delicate amalgam of stillness and horror.

You begin to drive. You find it hard to make the car go faster. You look at your own foot on the gas pedal, wondering if there's some obstruction, but everything about the mechanism seems normal.

"Where are we going?" your wife asks, speaking as if she's not really interested in the answer.

You don't respond. You drive toward 17th Street, the main thoroughfare through your part of town. You swerve around cars parked in the middle of the street, some unoccupied, others with their drivers inside, sitting and staring vacantly. You turn onto 17th and see an old man slowly crossing the street ahead of you. He's in dark sweats, a white tee-shirt, walking oddly, wearing one unlaced dress shoe with the other foot bare. He isn't watching where he's going. Right before you pass him, an oncoming car approaches at just a few miles an hour. Not suddenly at all, the car hits the man and knocks him to the pavement. You swerve to avoid hitting him with your own car, barely missing him. The other car keeps moving, creeping so slowly. You look at your wife, afraid she might have seen it. But she's staring blankly, dazed. In your rearview mirror you see the man roll over on the pavement, sit up, and put his hands to his head. You don't stop for him. You're too afraid that if you stop you might not be able to move again.

You pass the bank, where a woman is digging through her purse. Things spill from her purse—receipts, cash, credit cards, some tossed on the wind—but she keeps digging.

Your wife says your name, as though it's a question.

"I turned on the TV," you say. "Whatever it is, it's everywhere."



“All these years of living?” she says. “We kept going? We kept working and caring . . . but why? Didn’t we know it would all end?”

Before this day you got up every morning, worked hard all day and came home, exhausted, just to go through it all over again. A certain part of you always knew the futility of it—that everything you worked for would turn to dust someday, evaporate into nothing. But somehow you went on, until now. Everyone did, until now.

“I don’t understand,” she says. “Why did we do it?”

You hear something on the car radio, a voice. You turn up the volume. “Haven’t we always known it,” a sullen voice says. “Waking up, doing things, making things, not even for ourselves most of the time? Waking up and smiling because someone counted on us?” After a long pause the voice simply said, “Why?”

You push against the weight inside. It tells you to let go of the steering wheel. It tells you to lift your foot from the accelerator, let the car drift to the curb and stop forever. But you push. You grip the wheel, push on the gas pedal. You push harder and harder, wanting to give up. Then you feel it. Something changes, like pushing through a wall. The car goes faster, and the movement, the speed, begins to lift the weight inside. You push the gas pedal and go faster. The weight feels lighter. Faster still and you feel the will once more, the notion that there might come another day, a kind of living that is different than this, this dead weight of emptiness.

Of course, you know the car will run out of gas, eventually. And you don’t know what you’ll do then. But you push against the weight, mash the accelerator down. The car is moving even faster now.

At the edge of town, a woman walks toward your moving car. You swerve and barely graze her. Your wife is able to scream. In the rearview mirror you see the woman spinning to the ground. But you don’t slow down. You keep going because you have to. You’re on the edge of town now, driving 30, 40, 50 miles per hour. The faster you go the more you feel again what it was like to get up and move, to want something, even just a drink of water.

You turn to your wife, who’s not looking up at the road but staring at the floorboard of the car. You see her reach for the door handle. She pulls on the handle and leans her weight against the door, but you grab her. The pressure of the car moving 50 mph down the highway keeps the door

from opening easily. You shout her name and shake her, startling her. “Look,” you shout, “look at the road.”

You know it now, that you will keep living, and how. You smash the gas pedal to the floorboard and this time it’s easy. With your hand on your wife’s shoulder, you shake her roughly. Her head moves loosely on her neck like a rag doll’s. “Look at it,” you’re shouting. “Look at the road. Look at the world going by.”

Some kind of recognition comes into her eyes, a startled look of awakening. “Where’s Megan?” she shouts, nearly crying.

You have to keep moving. Up ahead is a crossroads, a turn lane, a widening of pavement on both sides.

“We need to find Megan,” your wife says, and you know you can do this. You can start living with this one thing to drive you.

You lean forward in your seat, slam the brakes, twist the steering wheel. The squealing of the tires and your wife’s screams blend. They keep you wanting this one thing, the first thing you’ve wanted all day—to find your daughter, save your daughter.

You don’t know how many times the car spins. It comes to a halt and the dust begins to clear. The smell of burned rubber rises from the tires skidding on the pavement. You feel the weight descending on your skin, in your gut and soul. The car’s engine has died and the only sound comes from the radio, the voices. “I do want something,” one of the voices says. “I want to know where my mom is.” A man gets out of a car parked on the road nearby. He walks toward you and you roll down the window. “My friend, Jeff?” he says, leaning into your window. “Where’s Jeff?” he asks and turns away. In the distance you hear someone calling the name “Jeanne,” over and over. People are calling for each other, you realize. But even as you sit, the weight grows stronger. You could give yourself over to it so easily.

But you don’t. You won’t. You start the car and crush the accelerator to the floor. Your wife begins to groan. “No, no, Megan,” she says and begins to cry.

“Look at the road!” you shout as the car accelerates once more—10, 20, 30, 40 mile per hour. You shake her again. “Look!”

She sits up. She wipes away tears and looks at the road.

“We’ll find Megan!” you say.

“Yes, yes,” she repeats. “Yes, okay.”

“You want her?” you shout. “You want Megan?”

“Yes,” she says. “Go.”

You feel the lightness grow, like the sun rising.

“I feel it now,” she says. “Faster.”

You drive as fast as you can, toward home, to find your precious daughter. And to live.

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**Jack Harrell** has been a fiction writer and essayist for twenty years. His second novel, *Caldera Ridge*, was published by Signature Books in 2018. He has also published a book of essays and a book of short stories, both with small presses in Utah. He teaches writing at Brigham Young University-Idaho.

FICTION

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*J.V. Sumpter*

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**My Unspoken**

My “house parents” should have been here ten minutes ago. Mr. DK waits with me to make sure I don’t dart out the office lobby and give my friends at Child Protective Services more reports to file. He keeps glancing at the clock. I swing my feet onto the chair next to me.

“Do you think putting Nair in the shampoo bottles is frowned on at the Home?” I’m trying to get used to saying “the Home” instead of “the Oklahoma Baptist Home for Girls.” I guess I could call it “the Asylum,” since it must be a place for crazy people. I mean, they’re sending *me* there. “I hope not. Shared laughter is the best way of making friends, and the Nair prank’s the only one I know.”

“Get your feet down!” Mr. DK knocks them to the floor. “And no more ridiculous stories. We’ve humored you long enough.”

“‘We’? Who is ‘we’?” But I know he means the CPS. They’re an ungrateful audience. When I first got here, I expected my story to make all the adults in the room ugly-cry. My grandma, who raised me because my mom was stupid about hiding her drugs, had a second heart attack when she found Jayda’s body in the bathroom. A deliciously tragic story, right? Sadly, hearing something like that is just an average Tuesday afternoon for Dr. Aud and her staff.

No one appreciated the gruesome picture I painted of my cousin’s suicide and its aftermath. Not even the lady I met while I was washing my hands in the bathroom. So I started embellishing my stories little. I think Dr. Aud believed the one about my grandma calling Jayda and me fat and locking us in our rooms for nine days without food, but then I ruined it.

“And – and – and,” – I paused here for effect – “and since Jayda killed herself . . . I haven’t eaten a thing!” Then I coughed and blew my nose. It sounded like a sad trumpet.

But then Dr. Aud looked up from her papers. “You have broccoli in your teeth.”

“Oh.” I looked down at my used tissue and laughed. “Haven’t brushed since then, either.”

I’ll be more careful when I tell the story to my house parents.

\* \* \*

When they arrive forty minutes late, I expect Mr. DK to chew them out. Instead, he rises from his chair, beckons me to follow, and says, “Mr. and Mrs. Jay, this is Nora Becket.”

The Jays give me the most tired smiles I’ve ever seen. I stare at them. *House parents? More like house grandparents!* The only hairs left on the man’s head are scraggly ones that seriously need to be put out of their misery, and just looking at his flyaway eyebrows makes my own eyebrows itch. His arms, though, are lanky as a teen’s, and his slumped-over posture hardly screams “authority figure.” The woman is short, and lumpy, and the skin around her jaw sags.

I thrust a hand at Mr. Jay, grasp his boney fingers, and give them one firm shake. “Um, no offense, but I hope we won’t know each other very long. Also, your eyebrows are trash.”

A pause. Then the Jays laugh, and Mrs. Jay pulls me into a stiff hug. “We hope you’ll be reunited with your family too, sweetheart, but as long as you need a place to stay, we’re happy to have you.” She pulls back, still holding my arms, and smiles at me like I’m her favorite daughter.

I smile back as sweetly as a doll. “Careful. That sounds awfully like a challenge.”

\* \* \*

The moment I step into the house, I’m hit by the sharp scent of nail polish. A skinny girl slumped on one of the couches looks up from her drying fingers, sees me, and gingerly taps the remote to pause the TV. She has more freckles than anyone I’ve seen – except maybe Jayda.

“Tammy, this is Nora.” Mr. Jay pats my shoulder. “Your new roommate.”

I search her face as the Jays round up my other “house sisters.” Her nose is sharper than Jayda’s. I relax and sit facing her. “What happened to your previous roommate? She kill herself?”

Tammy looks at me funny. “Don’t be stupid. She went home to her family.”

“Wait, that actually happens?” I feign relief. “I thought that was just a lie they put in the brochures to ease parents’ guilt about dumping off—”

The Jays are back. I nod at the girls with them and finish, “—unwanted spawn.”

That’s when I notice that one of the girls is pregnant. And she’s clearly younger than me.

“April and Madison, this is Nora,” Mr. Jay says. Then he introduces me to a Farah, a Kesi, and a Denise, and one more whose name I already forgot. But it doesn’t matter. It’s not like these people are my new bestest friends or anything.

“Wow,” I say when it seems like my turn to speak. “You guys look surprisingly normal, and only one of you is pregnant. Frankly,” I stifle a yawn, “I’m disappointed.”

The pregnant girl, April or Madison, steps toward me. Mr. Jay claps a hand on her shoulder to keep her from charging. She ignores him. “Listen here, you dumb duck —”

“You dumb . . . *duck*?” I glance at the other girls. Did she really just say that?

“We lose phone privileges if we curse,” Tammy explains.

“— I don’t know what you’re getting at with your whole ‘you guys’ thing,”

April/Madison crosses her arms, “but in case you haven’t noticed, your parents sent *you* here, too.” She looks up at Mr. Jay as if daring him to chastise her. But he’s looking at me.

“That’s where you’re wrong, pregnant-brain.” My eyes flit to the Jays; their mouths are set in hard lines. “The government sent me here.”

“So?” April/Madison points at me. “You’re here, same as us. Lose the attitude.”

“Well, now that we’ve got the hostilities out of the way,” Mrs. Jay cuts in, “we can begin learning how to behave as members of a loving family. Because as long as you girls are in my care, that’s what we’ll be. A family.” She takes out the keys to the van. “We can begin by helping Nora move her belongings into her new room. April, if you’ll lead the way . . .”

None of the girls talk to me until I stagger into the house with my arms full of bedding.

Then Tammy’s voice startles me. “Aw, she dwopped her wittle bwanky!”

I dump my stuff on the bed. Tammy hands me the blanket I sewed at a free event called Crafty Teens! at our library. Its scalloped edges and cutesy pink roses hadn’t embarrassed me before, but now the blanket looks like one a neurotic child would take everywhere.

“Thanks.” I lift the blanket up to my cheek, cuddle it, then fold it gingerly. “This was the last thing my mother made for me. Before my dad clubbed her on the head with a bat.”

\* \* \*

After I’m moved in, Mrs. Jay takes Tammy and me to the kitchen, and I have to listen to the “house rules” as we prepare dinner. Tammy washes lettuce. I press the button on top of this special bowl to spin the water off the lettuce. Each time the button is pressed, the bowl spins once, so I mash the button again and again and let Mrs. Jay’s words whirl away.

I’m silent when we hold hands around the table to say grace. I keep my eyes open, and I lock gazes with Tammy, the only other person not reciting the prayer. I feel an uncomfortable communion passing between us, so I grin and waggle my eyebrows to break the spell.

She doesn’t grin back.

When we're finally allowed to eat, I stuff my mouth with salad, lasagna, and a whipped Jell-O concoction Mrs. Jay calls Lime Fluff. I wish the food wasn't so good and so obviously homemade. I wish I didn't have to look at Mr. Jay holding Mrs. Jay's hand on the table in front of us. I wish I could get up, take my plate to the living room, and eat in front of the TV like I did at home. Or go literally anywhere else. I'm not used to sit-down meals with family, and it's making me sick. No, really; my stomach's starting to turn.

"Excuse me," I say politely as I push my chair back and stand. And retch onto the floor.

\* \* \*

I'm pretty much back to normal by the time Tammy and I have brushed our teeth and changed into our pajamas. I cross my legs on the bed opposite Tammy's, drape my blanket over my shoulders, and say, "Be honest. What's the worst part about living here?"

"Church every Sunday," she replies without a moment's pause.

"That's no problem for me. I'm a Christian." I want to kick myself. *Lamest. Lie. Ever.*

"Really?" Tammy wrinkles her nose at me. "Then why didn't you say grace?"

"It's . . . I believe prayers should be private." I try to laugh. "Just you and the Lord."

"Whatever you say," Tammy says, and she clicks off the light.

After three hours of wrestling my blankets, mashing my head against my pillow, and begging the universe to accept my firstborn child in exchange for sleep, I can't take another second of Tammy's peaceful breathing. "Hey, Tammy. Tammy. Tammy!"

A loud rustle of blankets, followed by a groan. "What."

I'm not staying in this house, with these people, a minute longer than I have to.



“What would get someone kicked out? I’m . . . worried.” I roll my eyes in the dark.

“You can get kicked out if you break the house rules. Now shut up and let me sleep.”

“But which ones? Any of them?” I wait for an answer. “Tammy? . . . Tammy?”

I get no sleep the rest of the night.

\* \* \*

I’m pouring milk into my bowl of cornflakes and wondering if the Jays pray over breakfast too when Tammy says, “Hey, Nora. If you’re a Christian, where’s your Bible?”

Panicked, I accidentally slosh some milk onto the nearest girl – Farah, I think – and when she says, “Hey, watch it!” I decide my best defense is to burst into tears.

“Lost it . . . the CPS . . . they looked, but . . .” I bite my lip and shake my head.

For a few moments, the only sounds are my quiet sobs, some muffled crunching, and the occasional ringing of a spoon against a ceramic bowl. Then April says, “Ew, she’s an ugly crier,” and Mrs. Jay shoots her a look. She walks over to me and takes the milk gallon from my hands.

“Nora, come with me,” she says. “There’s a drawer full of donated Bibles you could use.”

“No, no, no, I don’t want somebody else’s Bible,” I say. “I want *mine*!”

Mrs. Jay pauses, then says, “All right, hurry up and eat so we can get in the car.”

“What?” Am I about to be dragged into a tedious search for something that doesn’t exist?

“Just trust me,” says Mrs. Jay.

I relax when we park in front of a store called Mardel: Christian & Education. Mrs. Jay tells me we're going to place an order for a Bible with my name engraved on the cover. "Then it will really be yours, won't it?" she says. I argue, of course, but the idea of someone buying me something nice is too good to pass up.

I think of at least a dozen fake middle names and nicknames by the time we get to the counter, but there's this ginormous picture of Jesus staring at me from the wall, and I can't do it. I write my real name, *Nora Ann Becket*, and swivel the paper to the lady at the desk. She says it might take up to three weeks for the Bible to come in, but I make sure I don't leave the store emptyhanded. I get two journals, three inspirational bookmarks, seven sparkly pencils, and an eraser shaped like a whale – most of which was legally purchased by Mrs. Jay.

\* \* \*

My second night at the Home is like my first. I throw up dinner and get barely any sleep. Three nights later, I'm convinced I'm trapped in some sort of *Groundhog Day* hell. Yesterday Mrs. Jay finally excused me from family dinner. I ate alone and kept all of it down.

Now it's Sunday, and my Bible still isn't here. But it's probably a good thing that I'm taking a used one to church. Nearly every page of the book is written in, scribbled on, marked up, and highlighted over. I hope makes me look like less of a religious noob.

I hang back as we enter the main church room so I can see what others do before I'm expected to do it. But Tammy grabs my arm and pulls me to the front of the group. "Sit with me, roomie," she says, and all the red flags in the world go up. I have to get away from her.

"You don't want to sit near me," I say. "My sins might rub off on you!" I pull free of her grip, but it's too late. We're at an empty pew.

Tammy suddenly drops to one knee. She makes a complicated gesture over herself before sliding into her seat. I follow as best I can, but when I glance back at April, I can tell I'm doing something wrong. She walks straight into the pew without kneeling or anything, and so do the rest of the girls. I make a mental note to slug Tammy once we're off church property.

“Why did you genuflect?” April hisses as she scooches next to me. “Are you Catholic?”

“Yes,” I say. Catholic is Christian. Right? I turn to Tammy. “Are you Catholic, too?”

She rolls her eyes. “Sure, keep pretending to be Christian, Nora. It’s more fun for me that way.” She’s speaking just loud enough to make me want to glance around to see if people can hear, but I keep my head facing forwards. Will. Not. Turn. Will. Not. Look.

I feel Tammy lean in close and hiss, “Just know that you’re not fooling anybody. And pretending to be Christian is *easy*. I did it for years.”

\* \* \*

As soon as church is over, Tammy starts asking me Bible trivia. We’re walking with our house sisters and a dozen or so other girls to the Student Center, but fortunately no one seems to be paying us any attention. Unfortunately, Tammy notices this and starts talking louder.

“Come on, this is easy! Just *one* of the four gospels. Just name one and I’ll shut up.”

I’m not falling for this. There must be three gospels, or five, or none.

“I did not receive much religious education,” I say, slowly, “at my church at home.”

“And which denomination was that church again?” Tammy asks as the group starts filing into a building that looks like a barn. She holds the door open for me. I smile and walk past her.

“We didn’t get much religious education because there was a lack of funding,” I explain.

She follows me in. The door shuts on the person who was behind me in line, but Tammy’s not finished with me. “Churches don’t get funding; they take donations.”

“Right. Hence, the lack of *funding*,” I counter as a smiling woman approaches us.

“Hello, I’m Haven,” she says, extending a hand to me, “the leader of tenth-grade girls.”

I shake her hand. “I’m Nora. I would be in tenth grade now, but I got expelled.”

“Oh.” Haven’s smile falters. “Well, you’re still in my group. Let me introduce you to—”

“I got expelled for cutting a student’s hair off while she was asleep.” I can feel the eyes in the room draw toward me, so I keep going. “I was only going to take a lock or two for my collection, but she had such red, red hair, and the scissors made such a clean *snip-snip* sound, and—” Wait, I’m supposed to be Christian here. “And I still can’t forgive myself.”

“Have you asked God to forgive you?” Haven asks.

“Um.” I glance around but can’t find Tammy. “Of course.” I think that’s the right answer.

“Good! God doesn’t hold your sins against you, so why should you?” Haven says, and a strange feeling comes over me. Like I just noticed all the tightness in my body.

Haven waves someone over. “Kristy, come say hello to Nora! She’s joining us today.”

\* \* \*

It only takes me a few weeks to become a pro at small group. I learn that there is lemonade and donuts. I learn that Haven actually remembers what I tell her when she asks about my week and that talking to her is more fun when Tammy’s there, scratching the word *LIAR* into her Styrofoam cup. I learn that “worship” means “concert” – they even have strobe lights – and that throwing my hands in the air as I sing the words on the screen can make Tammy storm out.

But I must also be learning the stuff they’re trying to teach us, because today I answered a Bible question correctly for the first time. Tammy turned a beautiful shade of red.

When Haven takes prayer requests, I request prayers for my brother's cancer and my cat's kidneys and my possible STDs. Then I mumble, "I've also got . . . an unspoken." That's what you say when you need prayers about something so heinous or personal that you're too embarrassed to say it aloud. I request unspokens because they always make the group go tense.

As I'm sliding the Bible with my name on it into its case, Haven claps her hand on my shoulder. "You've had an unspoken the last five Sundays," she says. "Are you okay?"

The genuine concern in her eyes makes my heartbeat stutter.

"Yes, I'm okay," I lie.

Then I realize it's not a lie. I haven't missed a night of sleep in weeks – except the night Tammy was weirdly nice to me, and we stayed up binge-watching anime. I've started coming to family dinners again, and I'm proud to say it's been fifteen days since the last vomit incident. I've also become quite the cook. Last night, I made Mrs. Jay's Pork & Apples all by myself (April made the asparagus).

I realize I'm smiling like an idiot. "Actually, I'm pretty good. Great, even."

But then I'm not great. Not great at all. The following Sunday when I request an unspoken and Haven pencils *Nora – unspoken* into her little prayer book, I think, *Please don't let my mom get out of jail early. Or if she gets out, please don't let her get custody.* It takes hours for me to realize. I'm standing in the shower, I'm shaving my legs, and I wonder. Was that a prayer?

I hope not, because if it was, it proves prayers don't come true.

\* \* \*

The day before my mom comes to get me, Mrs. Jay has the girls bake me a "graduation cake." April makes sure I know that *she* did the frosting, so I ask her to pose with the cake while I take a picture of it with my phone. I've taken a lot of pictures these past few days.

For their sakes, I make myself finish the slice they give me. But then I run to the toilet, and everything comes back up. I brush my teeth quickly,

then barricade myself in my room before the tears hit. Since the bedroom door doesn't have a lock, I push the small dresser in front of it. I expect Mrs. Jay's voice and her gentle knock any minute, but there's nothing. I huddle under my blanket and slowly cry myself calm.

Then – *BANG!* I jolt up and see the door slammed against the dresser and Tammy's eye peering through the crack between them. I jump out of her line of sight.

"The Jays said to give you an hour. It's been an hour and two minutes."

"Two extra minutes? You're so generous," I say.

"I know." The door rattles against the dresser. "Now let me in!"

"No." I glance at my red, streaky face in the mirror. "I'm naked."

"You're wearing a pullover. *My* oversized pullover." A grunt, and the gap between the door and the doorframe widens slightly. "You know. The one I told you not to touch?"

I wipe my nose on its sleeve. "But it's *fuzzy!*"

Tammy wrangles her torso into the gap and braces against the doorframe. "Little help?"

"With what?" I cross my arms. "Moving the dresser so you can invade my room?"

"*Our* room," she says, "and yes, that's precisely what I meant."

So I yank the dresser toward me. The door falls open, and Tammy tumbles onto the floor.

\* \* \*

I cross my legs on the carpet and lean against the bed. "I'm not giving it back," I say.

"What?"

"The pullover. It's mine now. I'm taking it with me."

“Keep it,” says Tammy. “It’s covered in your snot.”

Then there’s silence. I become acutely aware of the headache in my temples.

“I came to tell you I hate you,” says Tammy. “Didn’t want you to leave not knowing.”

“That’s really sweet, but you didn’t have to tell me.” I hug my knees. “I knew.”

“Good,” says Tammy.

And then we’re quiet again.

“You must be excited about going to live with your mom,” says Tammy.

“Yeah, just thrilled.” I notice the tip of my blanket hanging off the bed, and I tug it down into my lap. I trace the line of stitches I had to redo like five times. “I’m so lucky to have a mom who makes things for me.”

“Hold up.” Tammy’s forehead wrinkles. “That first day. Didn’t you say she was dead?”

Did I? No, I remember – “What I said was, my dad clubbed her on the head with a bat.”

“Which . . . wasn’t true, either,” Tammy says slowly.

I snort. “Of course not!”

Tammy shakes her head. “You’re going to hell, Nora.”

I shake my head back and smile. “I’ve got Jesus now, Tammy.”

“I thought you told Mrs. Jay you wanted to get baptized because you knew she’d throw you a party. I didn’t think you were actually serious!” Tammy gets to her feet.

I hurriedly follow. “Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t know why I do anything anymore.” I run a hand through my tangled hair and sigh. “I’m going to miss this place, though.”

“Like hell you are,” says Tammy.

“I mean, I won’t miss *you*,” I grin. “But I’ll miss what I could’ve learned here. Like, stroganoff. Mrs. Jay was going to teach me how to make stroganoff.”

“I’m sure there are stroganoff tutorials on YouTube,” says Tammy.

“And April’s due soon, so I won’t get to see how loud and obnoxious a tiny human is.”

“You could always get pregnant yourself,” is Tammy’s suggestion.

“I’ll give it a few years,” I say.

“Good call,” says Tammy. Then she turns to the door. “Text me a picture of your mom’s place, okay? I need to make sure you’re not living in a meth van or something.”

“Sure thing,” I say, and who knows? I might actually do it.



## *Michelle McMillan-Holifield & Jennifer Marquez*

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### **Sook Jesus: The Vera Letters**

“One evening I went out to call the cow. I walked to the old gate and I looked up and I had the Lord on my mind. I went to say, *Sook Jersey*, and I said, *Sook Jesus*.” – Vera Jewel

Jenn, remember when we were about twelve, we sat down with Vera Jewel (or Veer Jool, as everyone called her) and recorded her stories? Back then, you donned thick-rimmed 80’s glasses. I was a short, stocky third baseman. She, our common thread, our silver-haired grandmother.

How blessed we are to have those recordings. I listen today and relish how easily and sweetly she talked about Jesus, how she’d break into old hymns, her age-worn voice lifting in falsetto but her heart: her pure heart so full. Jenn, how sweet that sound.

\*

*Ruby and Jennifer was gonna make me slide on that banana. The slip and slide. Well . . . she wet it down and I go out there and she was gone run, hit me and she take a runnin’ start. . . . Boy she run, and she let me have it and I ain’t went nowhere yet. I never did slide.*

\*

Those stories cut me to the quick, Jenn. They evoke the smell of earth, the slick slide of moss on tree roots and continuous cicadas’ churning: it is summer. You and I are standing in Vera’s front yard pretending to be Nadia Comăneci and Mary Lou Retton. Handstands and cartwheels, aerials and handsprings.

I went back to her yard years later, pressed my hands in the grass. My palm stung with prickly stickers. And I just knew: I would be forty and still missing her. Her stories are both a comfort and an ache.

\*

♪ *Reach out and touch the Lord as He goes by. He's not too busy to hear your heart's cry. He's passing by this moment. Your need He'll supply. Reach out and touch the Lord as He goes by.* ♪

*See I told you I could. Now turn this off and see what I sound like.*

\*

After we recorded her stories, we pampered her with an Oil of Olay facial. We took all the bobby pins out of her hair, brushed and repinned her soft, white mane—a bit misshapen. I like to think she loved it better that way, her little leaning tower of gray.

Years later, when I would visit her in the nursing home, I'd brush her hair; it was still soft, but so very thin.

\*

*Michelle used to come stay a lot with me when she was little. She didn't want to stay at home, sleep on her good baby bed. I just had an old baby bed with quilts. Chelle liked to sleep on them quilts and I'd rock and sing to her. I'd tie my hair up with a scarf. Michelle was big enough she'd take her hand and feel up there and see if I had that scarf on, and if I did she'd lay her head down and go to sleep.*

\*

At the nursing home, someone painted her fingernails pink.

Maybe they meant well, but she didn't wear makeup unless you and I spruced her up during her facials; she didn't accessorize. She wore my old Keds to the garden and slogged away in the heat. After seeing those pink nails, I knew she'd been too tired to protest and it would not be long.

\*

*One time I was wrapping ya'll's Christmas presents and I got ya'll a doll. . . . I had one of 'em wrapped and I turned [it] over . . . and it cried and Jennifer said, "What's that?" and I said, "It's nothing," and she said, "Something cried!"*

*I think that was the last doll I give ya'll.*

\*

Christmas 2006: I arrived at the nursing home late. I didn't want to wake her, so I held her hand for a bit. My memory contains her eyes opening to focus on me, but it's been ten years since that Christmas—I could have invented that memory, simply because I desired it to happen.

An hour after I left, she was gone.

Assuming I was the last person to be with her when she was alive is both a comfort and an ache. If I had stayed, I could have been with her in her last minutes.

\*

*I wanted to learn how to ride a bicycle. . . . And I got it started and couldn't stop and run into a man's porch and flipped over the handlebars on his porch. And I said, "Henry, if I learn to ride this bicycle, you gone buy me one?" He said, "Naw." And I said, "Here I nearly broke my neck and you not gone buy me one?"*

\*

Jenn, remember how Vera and Henry's house was so absolutely still. Their house lacked the white noise of ceiling fans or central heat and air. The only constant sound was the almost-silent liquid whirl of their little gas heater, always on, in winter and in summer. But every night the train would run on the tracks directly behind their house, so loud we'd stop talking; it was senseless to try to talk over the freight's patterned dragging, its horns like mourning geese. After the train passed, it'd take a good five minutes for our ears to purge themselves of the train's furious chugging.

Jenn, I miss those trains, their steely barks that marked time. I miss the way they dictated a brief time of not talking, where it was just us and the train's unstoppable force. I miss the ringing in my ears afterward.

\*

I miss that sticky house and Vera and Henry stirring about getting ready for bed just past dark—thick click of the kitchen light turning off, shuffle of house shoes, so old and flat, always on the verge of slipping off.

\*

She used to say to us, “God love my babies.” I never knew if that was a statement that He loved us or a directive for Him to do so.

She loved Jesus, didn’t she, Jenn? If I could have children, I would want my legacy to my grandbabies to be that I loved Jesus with everything that was in me.

\*

What I really want, Jenn, is to have her back.

\*

*♪Those that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as an eagle. They shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not faint. Teach me Lord. Teach me Lord to wait. ♪*

Chelle,

Reading your letter took me back to a time when life was simpler...maybe because that was her approach to life and being around her brought everything into focus. Even as a child, I felt a clear mind just being near her. I miss that. I miss her. Thank you for reminding me of those moments.

I remember that slip and slide. Her lack of opposition taught me a valuable life lesson— living in the moment. Not missing anything. Sure, she got her old black and white polka dotted dress wet, but that didn’t faze her. She gladly plopped down in the middle of the slide and let me barrel into her—not even budging her an inch—but she never seemed irritated, hurried, or needing to do anything else. I look back on that now and envy her. She never missed a moment with me and oh, how I wish I would have taken in more.

Yes, I remember gymnastics in her front yard. She had the good grass. No stickers. It was so thick... like the best carpet ever. Unfortunately, I also remember a hornet I landed on one time. That left quite a mark. And grandma, in her wisdom, rubbed butter on it like any wise older woman would do.

Brushing her hair was one of my favorite things, too. So unusual that her hair was that soft. Gray hair is usually so coarse, but hers was not. It was almost like silk. She was content sitting through our “makeovers”. Being the simple woman she was, I know that the pampering, makeup and hairstyling didn’t appeal to her much. But she was always willing to spend time with us. I never got the feeling that she wanted to do anything else. I envy her ability to revel in the simple moments of life that, in the end, become the most important. I find myself longing to become more like her ... or possibly I just miss her so, that I long to be with her again and brush her hair.

Just the other day I was shopping for Christmas gifts, and I looked down on the shelf and saw it. Ribbon candy! I couldn’t believe it! She loved ribbon candy. That was a staple in her house during Christmas time. She loved it and always offered me some when I went to visit during the holidays. I almost bought that ribbon candy. I should have bought it. Not because I liked the taste so much, but because she loved it.

The weekend is approaching. I think I’ll go back and grab a box. Just for her.

\*\*

When I was in college, I worked as a waitress and had closed the night before. I probably got to sleep around 2 a.m. Out of the blue, she called me mid-morning. She woke me up. I was irritated, of course. She probably felt it, although she never uttered a negative word about my short speech. That particular morning, she called with a purpose. Her voice was almost frantic. I began to worry something was wrong with her, but then she gave away her reason for calling. “Jennifer, the Devil’s gonna try to get to you. Any way he can. Don’t let him.”

Caught off guard, I replied, “I won’t mam-maw. I promise.”

She seemed content and quickly changed the subject. After our short chat, I hung up haunted by her concern. The busyness of life took over, and I forgot that conversation for quite some time. It was over a decade later

that I really understood her prophetic words. Could she have been shown some of my missteps and trials and been desperately worried I wouldn't turn back to the Lord? Our sweet Jesus only knows, but I value her warning today more than ever. Maybe because I did let the enemy get to me for a while. But thankfully, by the grace of God, I returned home. I'm sure it's because she prayed nonstop for us.

\*\*

Unlike you, I didn't visit her much once she went to the nursing home. One of my biggest regrets in life. So much more time I could have had with her. Pure idiocy on my part. She never held it against me, though. When I did go see her, she would smile and intently listen to all I shared with her. She would ask me how I was and what I had been doing. She never once asked why it had been so long since I last visited. Always eager to spend time with me. She was like Jesus in so many ways. He is always waiting to spend time with us and always eager when we return to His presence. Never making us feel guilty for taking so long. She was like that, too.

I'll never forget my last visit. Coincidentally . . . or not, it was Christmas Day 2006. It was late afternoon. Art and I went by to visit her after spending the day with my parents. Mam-maw was awake when I went in to see her. Her eyes were open, but she didn't respond verbally as she always had before. I grabbed her hand and held it. I caressed it gently, hoping to get a smile. The smile never came. She made eye contact with me and just stared intently into my eyes. I spoke to her. I told her how I'd been and what had been going on . . . just like usual. She was listening. She never looked away. She just gazed into my eyes. She was in pain. She was miserable. And I . . . was heartbroken. I hated to see her that way. I don't remember if I told her I loved her or if I kissed her. I sure hope I did. I mostly recall her painful stare. Art and I left, and we did not really speak the entire ride home.

\*\*

I have to tell you something, Chelle. I've kept it in for 10 years now and it has eaten me alive. No one knows. But I must tell you, partially because you deserve to know and partially because I need to confess. I hope you'll forgive me, Chelle. I need you.

\*\*

On the way home, I prayed. It was the most deliberate, self-less prayer I've ever prayed. What I wanted or needed at the moment took a backseat to what I knew she needed. She needed to sing those hymns again, but with our Father. She needed to dance and lift her hands before the One who breathes life into our bodies. I wanted that for her. I wanted her free from the bondage of her broken body. I loved her so that even thinking the words seemed treacherous. But I did it anyway. I prayed that the Lord would take her home.

And He did. Less than an hour after we returned home, mom called with the news that she had passed. I cried both in grief and joy. Grief for me because I, among many others, would miss her.

Oh, but joy for her. She was free. She was no longer burdened and bound by this body that meant suffering.

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♪ *"I'll fly away, oh glory  
I'll fly away in the morning  
When I die, Hallelujah by and by  
I'll fly away"* ♪

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See **Michelle McMillan-Holifield's** biography – page 40.

**Jennifer Marquez** lives in Louisiana and teaches 3<sup>rd</sup> grade math and art. As a native of Mississippi, she attended Mississippi College where she received a M.S. in Public Relations. This is her first official publication.

NONFICTION

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Charles Eggerth

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## A Better House

The houses in his dream were imaginary. Plausible, but imaginary. In a better world, they would have been built.

He had dreamed his father and uncle had houses side by side, on his grandfather's farm place. His uncle really did have a house there, by a driveway lined with boxelder, cottonwood, ash, and elm trees, but his family lived on a different farm place two hours away.

The reason for that was pretty simple. His dad and his granddad didn't get along. At least not in proximity.

What kind of houses were they? He couldn't remember. He had enough trouble remembering the thousands of houses he'd seen as a mailman. He didn't remember much about houses.

Trees were another matter. Sugar maples and red maples, so incredible in the fall, and oaks of all sorts; white, southern red, willow, black, scarlet, pin, post, blackjack; and hickories, sourwood, beech, gum, dogwood, yellow poplar. *My God!*, he felt like crying out, *you do good work! Amazing work!*

And birds—mockingbirds cursing or singing opera, vivid Johnny one note cardinals (though their songs really had more than one note—“what cheer” is one of the songs his mother remembered from Wisconsin), brown thrashers, flickers, song sparrows, Carolina and House wrens, towhees; catbirds and goldfinches in the summer; chickadees and juncos and nuthatches and white-throated sparrows in the winter.

But Colonial or Cape Cod or this-or-that or whatever? That was no big deal.

Though he knew a well-loved house when he saw it, and a neglected one—the kind where cockroaches crawl through the kitchen, where old people



sleep on mattresses on floors, where some folks don't think about a honey-do list, just the next hit or fifth-rate rendezvous.

But back to the houses in his dream, that is—did they get much attention?

Hard to tell. That was a different time. You didn't have money to put on vinyl siding, reshingle the roof, install new Anderson thermal pane windows. You were doing well to prevent a glass of January water from freezing in the upstairs bedroom, to keep the Production Credit Association goblins driving down county road A to a different place.

But there was something else about that dream—he couldn't put his finger on it. Maybe if he'd written it down...

(There is a country to which we travel when we dream. It's not the one we live in, and it reminds us of yet another—the one that calls our name in a harvest moon, Indian summer milkweed, a throng of singing trees and feathered birds on a mail route. We do not know this country. How is it that this country knows us?)

But the dream—what was it? Maybe something about his grandfather. Something about his aching heart when his oldest son had to move away. Or the oldest son's twisted gut when his father died. Or his own bloodied soul after his father and uncle drove the Piper Cub nose-first into a soybean field.

(There was another man with a broken heart. He poured it out; we heckled.)

His uncle and his father, in houses sided by side. Was he pulling them out of that two-seater Piper Cub, out of their shared plot by the line of dying spruce in the Harrison Township Cemetery?

Or any two people, conjoined, in life or death, by grief, by suffering—was this dream about them?

There had been a woman on his first mail route, a scoliotic, burdened woman with a senile and dying husband. Betty and Clarence Everhart. He remembered visiting Clarence in a nursing home, Clarence writhing in agony, remembered reading him psalms in the hospital while the man was struggling against the marauding final flood.

He remembered attending Clarence's funeral, Betty and the preacher the only two other people there, on a bitter, windy thirty-some degree day.

And then he remembered Betty, widowed, compulsive, existing in a ramshackle millhouse piled high with plastic Santa Clauses, washing her hands over and over with scalding water till they were red, dog and cat imprisoned, by her fear, in fecal squalor; speaking of the daughter, their only, that she and Clarence had lost forty-one years prior. Was this dream about the three of them? In a better house?

He didn't know. It was a crappy universe. Bad things happened. To bad people. Nobody not in that category. And yet, in the strangest of places, the love of God flowing down, flowing fiercely, flowing freely.

From women ministering to alcoholics in the streets. From churches fixing meals at the homeless shelter. From a neighbor helping another neighbor mow his lawn.

How could God care about this broken world? Well, he did. Cared a lot about it. You'd almost think he'd made it or something.

But back to those houses. He guessed they were in that other country. The one that called to you from the harvest moon, the Indian summer milkweed.

When will we find that country, anyway?

## *Jessica Hartenbower*

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### **For the Darkest of Deserts**

On Ash Wednesday, I cried for mercy. As the church entered the season of Lent, I lamented my own spiritual desert. I grieved again the perpetual feeling I can only describe as dark. I have lived here for much longer than forty days. With little hope left in my heart, Ash Wednesday reminded me that Jesus suffered a desert, too. So I cried again for mercy.

I don't know how to describe my ever-looming sadness except through jumbled metaphors and spiritual symbols of liturgical tradition. I suppose in some ways it's the outworking of the deep-rooted feelings of my unworthiness to be alive, and therefore to be loved at all, especially by the God of the universe. That type of existential insecurity doesn't leave much room for joy. There are people who have seen glimpses of my brokenness and tried to understand, to offer fragments of healing. They have been near while God has felt distant, each tangibly revealing God's character toward me when I couldn't see or feel Him on my own.

\*

My pastor, the kind and loving father I always wanted, once told me that I wasn't in touch with my emotions.

"You're suppressing her, Jess. And I want to know her so bad. Just let her out." He was so unmistakably full of gentleness and compassion in that moment. He really meant it. How could he want to know me? I don't even want to know me. There's a reason I have mastered the art of suppression, my greatest coping mechanism. I wasn't used to others trying to reach inside my sadness-induced darkness and pull me out. Maybe I don't have to stumble through the desert alone.

My Bible professor, who asks me, "Are you okay?" more than anyone, once promised, "I don't expect you to be perfect. Be honest with me about how you're feeling. I won't think any less of you." My eyes wandered over the bookshelves in his office, before settling on the floor. He too was

trying to release me from my lonely desert, to show me that he cared. But his grace fell just out of my reach.

I always shrug when he asks me “Are you gonna make it?” and with half a smile say, “I dunno,” because I truly do not know how I survived today or how I’ll outlive tomorrow.

After expressing my frustration with my lack of faith in God’s love for me—despite the fact that I can exposit God’s love theologically—he said, “Well, you exist. That’s proof that He loves you. He wants you here.” I had never thought of myself in this way, the very creation of my life as an act of love. Maybe my existence too was divinely desired.

\*

As I was leaving one of my English classes one day, another professor asked me before I escaped out the door, “How you feeling, Jess?” I don’t know what prompted this question or what exactly he was trying to ask me, but I do remember the genuine concern in his voice.

“Not great.” I ventured momentarily into honesty, trying to accept the care he was offering. “But, I’ll probably survive,” I continued, plastering positivity over the truth.

“Oh, I think you will.” He was confident in me. I was not.

“Yeah...” I hesitated. “It would just be nice if I actually enjoyed the process of survival.” I ventured again, holding my breath.

“We all go through phases of life that are more enjoyable than others,” he replied with real compassion, allowing me to exhale. I wish I would have told him that my entire life feels stuck in the less enjoyable phase and that I’m afraid I’ll never make it out. But despite my silence, this brief exchange offered a little water to my desert-dwelling soul. Maybe others do understand. Maybe I could be seen and still loved, exposed and not rejected.

\*

On Good Friday, I pondered why we name the literal darkest day in all of history “good.” In the very middle of that day, the sun stopped shining and a few hours later Jesus took his last excruciating breath as His Father abandoned him. Jesus too knows what it is like when God feels distant.

He too grieved the darkness and knew agonizing loneliness. And his desert culminated in death. But somehow the facing and experiencing of such sorrow was good.

Easter Sunday marks the end of Lent with celebration of life in Jesus' resurrection. The tomb is empty. He is risen indeed. The light shines in the darkness, and the light has won. I wish I could write here that Easter cured me, that making it to the day when death was defeated pulled me out of the darkness of my desert. But that isn't true. I know that Jesus' resurrection lets me face death without fear, but what about life? It's not that I want to die but that living feels too difficult, like I wasn't made for it. I find myself crying still for mercy, now in that empty tomb like Mary Magdalene, looking for Jesus. But he has yet to appear beside me. I have yet to hear his gentle voice say my name and pull me out of my grief. I live in that moment of in-between, in that Holy Saturday, amidst the darkness of Good Friday before the light of Easter Sunday, in a Lenten season that stretches for years rather than weeks. But I find comfort in the fact that the liturgical calendar offers space for grief, that God allows seasons of sorrow, that Jesus himself suffered the darkest of deserts too. And if all that is true, then maybe I am not uniquely broken, but simply a human who feels the depths of this life. And if Lent tells me anything, it's that Jesus understands perfectly, and he dwells with his people. Maybe that applies to me, too.

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**Jessica Hartenbower** graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English from Colorado Christian University in 2020. She enjoys reading of all kinds and hopes to communicate both truth and beauty through the means of the written word. She has also published her personal essay "Serving Size: A Fraction of Myself" in *Waymark Literary Magazine*.

NONFICTION

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*Desiree McCullough*

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## **Slick and Safe**

*I wouldn't drop my baby.*

*Intentionally, right?*

The vacuum hums in and out. Back and forth. Back and forth. My husband vacuums our tiny living room. My firstborn child is knit within my stickiness as I gaze from the balcony of our third-floor apartment.

Our dog's hair formed a mesh-like layer on the carpet that has now become intolerable. We're still in survival mode. Training our baby to sleep with background noise is not a priority. That's for later. Today, I yearn for his continued slumber because, well, I'm petrified for his waking.

This cleaning session will be over soon. He'll be safe in his crib soon.

I look down to catalog the cargo in my custody.

This ball of sweet squish  
This demanding screecher  
This nuzzle magnet  
This sustenance drainer  
is enchanting and terrifying and mine for safe keeping.

His presence emits continual sweat from every pore and boiling anxiety down to my core on this humid October afternoon in suburban Savannah. A hot dog cooked in the microwave for those extra 10 seconds you later regret. At the beep, pock-marked and deflated.

At what point will this child release me from his spell, so I can turn into a real, functioning mother? A caretaker who doesn't surrender to panic when faced with travel to exotic locales with him.

Like the grocery store.

The wooden plank edge of the balcony appears closer.

I ignore the fact that my baby is slick in my arms, and I pray for a beautiful distraction.

\* \* \*

Remember zoning out in school? Present only in hormones and teenage daydreams?

Drowning in the sea of themes from *The Count of Monte Cristo*.  
Random taps on the buttons of a graphing calculator.  
Drawn to the warmth emanating from the paper fresh off a laser jet printer.  
Concocting a plan to skip the afternoon pep rally.

One day when I was far gone, my subconscious interrupted my mind palace with an odd thought:

*What would happen if I stood on my desk and shouted or said something stupid?*

A nanosecond after that prospect, my torso rose and my devious digits buzzed.

*STOP! DON'T MOVE! You are so close! For the sake of your reputation, STAY STILL!!!*

Frozen, holding my breath, yet internally, I'm in high-alert hysteria. I'm surprised that my body has the audacity to go rogue.

*Steady, girl.*

I willed my mind and limbs into forced sedation and powerwashed the image that invaded my happy little life just moments ago: interrupting class and making myself look like an unhinged delinquent.

My marionette form sizzled under harsh classroom lighting. I coached myself through cautious, deep breaths and demanded both feet to adhere

to the ground. Catching my teacher's eye, my contorted face displayed attentiveness yet not enough to provide a sufficient answer.

At the sweet decibel level of maybe 40, my self-soothing hum turned on and eased me. This coping mechanism hid under the combative whizz of the air-conditioner. The duration of the cooling cycle was all I would give myself to ready myself.

My evaporated body softened into submission.

*Lord, just give me ten more seconds,  
and then I promise, I promise, I promise  
to cut the weird crap out.*

\* \* \*

"They overcharged me five dollars. I'm going back to the store," I announced with both the price tag and receipt held up toward my husband.

"Okay. Take your time. Browse. The kids and I will be fine here," he replied.

We were in Boise for a few days back in June and stopped at a nearby Target earlier.

After getting my five dollars back from customer service, I hit the clearance end caps and made my way to the book section. I relished in browsing without companions in tow.

Beautiful book jacket palettes.  
Flipping pages to analyze format and pacing.  
Inspecting authors' headshots and their attached bios.

Precious.

I reach for another book, "Oh, is this her sequel?"

But my hand relents, and my world quickly changes.

My stomach bubbled, my hearing clogged, my peripheral vision fuzzed in one breath.



*No, not here.*

I knew this feeling.

I was about to faint.

*Seek refuge somewhere and prop up your feet NOW!*

The countdown ticked, and I only knew zero would lead to blacking out.

*MOVE, IDIOT, MOVE!*

Begging for more time, I shuffled my semi-coherent carcass toward the store's entrance. My mind dulled and blood pressure dropped. One reminder forced its way to the surface: If I must be prone to syncope in this fallen world, I am blessed to receive a warning before I'm gone.

This gives no assurance. It just comes off as a lame superpower.

Perspiration on my forehead chilled as I attempted to test the feasibility of getting to the car in my current situation. As stars exploded in my head, I quelled the urgency to notify passing shoppers I didn't have COVID.

*Get me back to the hotel.*

*Get me back to the hotel.*

*Get me back to the hotel.*

\* \* \*

This balcony, my baby, and me.

*WHY IS THE VACUUM STILL ON?!?!*

My little one, in the hammock of his mom's salty, wet arms, soaks up the humid air through his milia-spotted nose and heaves out the vapor of baby dreams. His right arm flops away from his body. In a delicate yet swift motion, I tuck it back in with my left hand, pressing it with checked pressure.

I attempt to air out my swampy underarms.

I demand rigidity in my buckling knees.

I force my arch to disappear in my itchy feet.  
I press my back firmly against the sliding glass door.  
I feel the reverberations coming from that damn vacuum.

*I cannot break. It's not an option.*

And then, all I have left:

*God, make me a statue.  
Hold this child when I can't.*

*Or just hold me together  
as this child trusts  
his mother's  
fragile  
frame  
and  
mind.*

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**Desiree McCullough** is an occasional seminary student when she's able to balance working as a special education paraeducator, challenging her three kids in chess and backyard races, and being a weird pastor's wife. She and her family live in the Walla Walla Valley of southeastern Washington state. Find out more about her at [desireemccullough.com](http://desireemccullough.com).

## Christianna Soumakis

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### Dear Danny Middleton

It was 2013 when I met you on that mission trip to Cap Haïtien, Haiti, to build a church/school for underprivileged children. It was my first mission trip, and the first trip I ever went on without my family.

It wasn't your first mission trip, or your second, or your third. You and your wife lived in Arkansas with your many children and grandchildren: biological, adopted, and fostered. You looked a little like Santa.

I remember your voice better than your face. Like an old log, kind and crumbling. A little decadent, soft with returning its nature to the earth. Low as the ground, a quiet rumble. I remember you made a joke about our trip leader, irreverent and completely at peace with your irreverence. We laughed in surprise and delight.

Two of my fellow short-term missionaries were from my church — a guy about my own age and his father-in-law. Both Italian, loud, warm. I didn't know either of them well before, and after we rarely talked. But everyone becomes friends on a mission trip, a pilgrimage. It's called *communitas*. I read about it, years later, in Victor and Edith Turner's books on pilgrimage and anthropology. How strangers are lifted out of their worn-in contexts and stripped down, transplanted, by a common quest or goal. And in this state, they are uniquely vulnerable to friendship. Fast, intense, temporary (almost always temporary) bonds form. Naked of categories of career and class and race, their identities scrubbed down to the bare *imago dei*, barriers dissolve. *Communitas*.

We stayed on the east side of a mountain. I still don't really understand how we came to be there, or what kind of place it was, or how the connection was made between our church and the evangelist who ran the trip and the couple who owned the villa. The official story was that the couple had been out of the country for five years, in which time the mountain they owned (*they owned the mountain*) had been colonized by "squatters," who had been there long enough to lay claim to squatter's rights and escape eviction. The couple decided to educate them instead, build them a school and a church and eject them from squatterhood from

the inside out, as it were. They had a connection to Dave, the evangelist, because he was in the area drilling wells so impoverished neighborhoods could have access to clean water. Dave rounded up a contingent of untrained, eager-eyed volunteers and shipped us out.

I didn't understand; I don't understand. The people we built the school for were children. We played soccer with them and danced with them and painted their faces. They spoke Haitian Creole and called me *Blanc*, called us all *Blanc*. There used to be a feeding program but it had been discontinued. There were reasons for this. I remember them so incompletely there seems little point in repeating them. It was very hard to remember, even then, why we weren't feeding hungry children, even if the reasons really did make a lot of sense.

It was hard to remember, and hard to understand why our being there made things so much better. Hard to understand why we slept in the villa with the courtyard's gates bolted and an armed guard patrolling the perimeter all night long while on the mountain the children slept in tent cities on dirt floors. Where would Jesus have slept? They explained to me, they explained that all missions trip leaders had to carry insurance, which complicated things if something bad happened to someone in the group. Or maybe it was that the leader had to be able to more or less guarantee the group's safety, and it wasn't safe outside the villa. Maybe both. I'm not sure. It was a long time ago, and I was much younger than I am now, and the explanations seemed to have greater dexterity then, better and cleverer ways of hooking together to form a justifiable chain of logic.

I don't know what you thought of this. I never asked you. Maybe you'd been on so many mission trips, this seemed right to you. Or maybe you'd seen so much injustice, you were better at plodding through its trappings and just doing what needed to be done than I was. I don't know. You were always very quiet.

The women worked with the children and the men dug the site for the school out of the mountain alongside the other workers, the local people Dave had hired. They were being paid seven dollars a day. I asked why we didn't pay them more and they (the other leaders) explained that seven dollars a day was the average wage here for a day laborer. I was confused because the average wage obviously wasn't enough to enable the average worker to emerge from the tent cities, and they explained to me that if they paid much more than that, they wouldn't have enough money to hire people to build the school. I was confused about this, too, because the other volunteers and I had paid to be there and were working for free,

believing that the school would help these people escape economic and spiritual poverty, which might also be accomplished by offering higher wages. But I knew I didn't understand much about budgets and foreign wages and economics and digging schools out of mountains. I knew I would never have the organizational or executorial skill set to organize the educational empowering of a foreign people group. I knew no one did things perfectly. I was lucky to be here, lucky to be helping. Lucky to be living in the villa.

When we arrived that first day, I had hurt my foot. A sprain of some kind. We were Pentecostal, evangelical Christians and my fellow team members agreed to pray for my foot. In fact, they jumped at the chance. We were all about miracles, the supernatural, God's intervening in our lives. We were His children and we had a right to expect great things. God loves impossible requests. God loves doing the impossible for His children.

They prayed for my foot. Even then, things were beginning to come loose for me. Like shingles from a roof. They prayed for my foot and cold water dripped into my spirit from the places where I struggled with everything inside me to hold my faith firm, to calk it with will and love and desperation. I agreed, I did my best, I pressed my creased faith in with theirs: O God. O God. Heal my foot. It doesn't hurt so bad, it's not the most important thing in the world — but Lord, I know You know it's the most important thing in *my* world because it will mean that You see me. It will be *proof* that You see me — healing my stupid foot. O God O God O God I am going to crack into raw unsalvageable pieces if I do not sink my teeth into some evidence that You see me.

And so my random foot pain became cosmic, existential. The ache ran right up into my heart and dug in, like a porcupine's quill.

They prayed for my foot, that first night. I remember. The kind eyes, the fervency, the hope, the belief. *Stand up*, they said. *Walk. See if it's better now.*

I stood up. I walked. Was it better now? It *did* feel a little better. I felt better, yes. Praise the Lord, I was healed. A miracle!

By the time I walked back to my room, the pain was returning. It tended to lessen while I was sitting, as I had been while they prayed for me. My heart slumped against its quill. I scrambled inside myself, I rallied, I

clenched myself in brittle fists and believed with all my might, all my might, all my might.

The next day my foot still hurt, and I told them, guiltily. As though I let them down.

*No, they said. That's the devil. You have to hold onto your healing; you really were healed last night, and Satan wants to steal your victory.*

They were good people. I believe that, I believe it now. But I looked into their sincere faithful eyes and inside me proud structures rumbled, shingles flew loose. With my hands I held the sky up over my head. Trying to rescue the horizon.

Can You please just heal my foot? A miracle. You're God. I love you. Please.

All day we worked with the children. They pressed against us, touching our hair and our skin. So many, so close — once I reached out to block a crowd of them so they didn't overwhelm our face-painting table, and they pressed themselves into my arms my chest my fingers, and in the palms of my hands I could feel their bright hearts beating.

We visited orphanages. Children hitched rides on the bumper of our vehicle and our driver yelled and chased them off. Don't give them water, they told us. The children ran alongside the bus, tapping the windows, meeting my eyes, gesturing at my water bottle. *You want to help, but you'll just make it worse. They'll fight each other for the water bottle.*

I was raised to follow The Rules. Another girl gave them her water bottle and they fell back, guzzling. I couldn't tell if they were fighting. Should I have given them my water bottle? The Rules twisted like razors in my gut. Was there anything I could do here that did not shriek of moral dissonance? Was I doing something good here? Or something... else? I came to help. But my water bottle sat chilled in the van. My foot hurt.

One day I insisted on going to dig with the men. It was hard. It was hot. I was very thirsty very fast. When I went back to get a drink, that bottle of water was the ultimate physical experience, liquid enlightenment. Should I take some back for the other workers? *We don't have enough for everyone.*

Around that time, I started having trouble sleeping. Or, more accurately, I had no trouble falling asleep, but I would wake up very early, while it was still dark, and lie awake in a strange bed with strange roommates and a bathroom without a door in a villa on a mountain in a foreign country where some people owned mountains and some people chased cars for a cup of water. And my name was *Blanc*, and the dirt clung to me all day long, and my foot, my ridiculous unimportant foot went on being just that while the stars came unstuck inside me.

On the second night I got up and crept outside. It was four in the morning. Insects pumped the night full of treble and timpany.

I walked along the balcony to the stairs and came down to the courtyard with the massive locked gates, damming the villa's plenty so it didn't go sliding down the mountain. Keeping me safe. I turned away.

The east side of the house featured stone pillars and a patio that faced the sea. I came out and stood there quietly, and then I saw you.

There were two chairs, and you were sitting in one of them, quiet as a hibernating bear. You were always out there, I learned. I don't think you rested an hour in your room. You were as sleepless as God.

Around the patio went the guard with the gun, patrolling all night long. The rifle stuck out of the night, a sharper shadow. He smiled at us and waved as he made his rounds.

I remember we talked. But I don't know what we talked about, because now, so many years later, the seeds of kindness you planted in me have grown out of control, have taken over the landscape. The narrative sags toward them like a hammock around a body. I know we talked, and maybe we talked about important things, but what I think about when I think of you is how we sat in the dark. I remember we sat in the dark together and waited for the sunrise, night after night.

It makes all the difference in the world to sit *together* in the dark. And I was in such darkness. The darkness came stabbing out of my foot; it came up out of my skull into my eyes like interior ink; it exploded like an octopus from a reef, all cold tentacles, sucking, strangling. It lurked in my leaders' impoverished explanations. It hummed in the spaces between the children's heartbeats. I was beginning a long slow dissolution into questions, into shadowy psalmic valleys.

And you were with me, in that baptism. You stood watch over my soul — that is how I remember it. You never tried to help because you knew you could do nothing, could not cross the great gulf fixed between us. But by God, you sat with me, you officiated my baptism into that interminable dark night. And your voice was so low and old and steady there, in the depths, under the spinning sky, amid the questions that burst and expanded like universes. You were older than me, and you sat quietly while we looked over the city, all black and white lights curling away from the uninterrupted ocean.

And you reminded me of my grandfather, who had died only a few months ago. He used to hold me on the nights my parents went out and I cried disconsolately. He held me up with my legs weightless and dangling, tight but not too tight, and he sang: *I'll be loving you always, with a love that's true always.*

My grandfather, my Poppy. *Days may not be fair, always. That's when I'll be there, always, always...* He held onto me in a world that spun, a world that was not okay and that he had no power to resolve, lifted me beyond it on cables of love to a place where, in defiance of it all, I could fall asleep on his shoulder.

My God, I loved him. My God, I loved you.

The hours heaved and drifted over us like humpback whales, the kind that sing strange songs to guide each other, to keep connected as they travel the pathless sea. Hours like currents, pulling us forward. There was always an irrational moment when, in a panic of doubt, I wondered if the sun would rise at all. We sat so long in the night, staring at the horizon that was no horizon until suddenly — impossible to say when, even if you were paying attention — it was.

I remember that — how I would realize as I stared that all at once there was a smudge of rainbow in the east. Red at the bottom. Shifting up toward blue. Barely perceptible. But it would ripen and swell, and the night would thaw like a glacier. I would suddenly be able to see colors in the city and your face. And all that time before the sun appeared, I was looking around, thinking, *How much more light can the world contain? I could not have imagined this much light five minutes ago. How much more light can there possibly be?*

And then, after there was so much light I felt glutted with it, the sun would rise. Over the water. Coming up with authority and triumph, promises



unbroken, joy on fire, like a single note from an angel's trumpet. Over the horizon, mighty, invincible, shouting down the darkness with its radiant round syllable: *now and ever and unto ages of ages, amen.*

On some mornings, other people would come and sit with us to watch the sunrise. They took photos and chatted with us; the couple who owned the villa brought us coffee and orange juice. Everything, everyone came alive in the light.

But you sat with me in the dark. You were there when the questions examined me with the spears of their tails, when they coiled around me like eels. You sat and talked about whatever trivialities I latched onto, or you sat with me in silence, while the inquisitors beat the stars out of my faith's sky like summer fruit. You sat with me, sat with me, sat with me while the planet slid us toward the roaring inexorable sun. Until the water shone and the world filled with light — fathoms and fathoms of light it could only contain because the night had gouged gorges and canyons into the fabric of reality — great horrors of darkness — and now every scar welled with incandescence as deep as the sea.

Sometimes I'm driving to work or I wake up at two in the morning or I'm washing dishes and all at once the memory of those Cap Haïtien sunrises will flash through me like lightning. And I try again to tell myself (and you, as though you were here) everything this meant to me, as though I were trying to lance a wound. As though the current of love and joy and gratitude shining through me might split my seams open as violently as grief, or rage, if I don't treat it.

At the airport, on the last day, I didn't know how to say goodbye to you. You looked at me with your quiet eyes, patient as dawn, and you said, *You take care now, baby.* Your eyes pooled then like mine do now.

I have not seen you since.

I want you to know. I want to tell you: God saw me. He saw me, and He sent me you. And for that, I'll be loving you always.

You take care now, Danny.

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**Christianna Soumakis** is an artist and writer living and working on Long Island, New York. She has an MFA in Fine Art and writes as part of her artistic practice. When she isn't painting, drawing, or having existential crises, she's fueling her ADHD with inordinate amounts of coffee.

## *Bob Kunzinger*

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### **Offer It Up**

Walking the Camino de Santiago, the roughly five-hundred-mile pilgrim trail from France through Spain to pay homage at the tomb of the apostle St James the Greater, is a psychological and physical challenge for the strongest of minds and healthiest of bodies. On the one hand, the patience, pacing, and contemplation necessary to walk day in and day out for a month were more common traits in the 12th century, making them mental roadblocks for the average American used to a 21st century momentum. It takes several days at least to accept that every single step must be considered and carried out consciously instead of habitually.

More obvious, however, and perhaps most underestimated is the physical challenge. Most of us are not used to walking more than thirty minutes a day. On the Camino, pilgrims average more than fifteen miles a day. The problem is not the heart or muscles so much, since they tend grow stronger and adjust as the days pass, but the feet, which tend to grow more calloused and damaged. Every guidebook warns of blisters and cuts and bruises. Not one of those books, however, overestimated the damaging effects walking steep slopes can have on the toes. It was the physical effects of this pilgrimage, in fact, that made the route popular during the middle ages for priests to assign as penance. Certainly it wasn't the blisters they hoped the prospective penitent to obtain, but the graces of God for the act. The time it takes, it was determined, should be enough to shed the evil ways of the past and to physically as well as spiritually strengthen their "being." Some went, then, seeking absolution, some seeking meaning, and some seeking truth and to pay homage to the apostle. But all of them went not knowing what they were about to do to their poor feet.

The Way of St James is the third most visited pilgrim site in the Christian world behind Rome and the Holy Land. Tens of thousands of people every year walk "The Way" from various starting points throughout Europe to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, Spain, traditional resting place of the apostle and friend of Jesus.

My son and I started at the most common origin point, St Jean Pied du Port in France, and traveled what is called “the Frances Camino” named after its country of origin. We spent just over a month meeting other pilgrims and visiting churches often more than a thousand years old.

The first day out of St Jean, we crossed the Pyrenees— a distance of just over twenty miles. That night I took my shoes off to the sight of predictable blisters between toes and on my heel. I observed fellow pilgrims pricking the blisters open and draining them, washing the wounds with water, and letting them air-dry. I watched my son already doing the same and walking about as if nothing was wrong.

“How can you do that?” I asked, unable or unwilling to stand up.

“I don’t know,” my twenty-one-year-old responded. “The guidebook said to get used to it.”

So I got used to it. Night after night, week after week, I played with my feet. We never complained, but simply pointed out to each other we were aware of our own conditions. The worse they felt, the more acute our awareness. “Boy I have feet today,” I would say if the blisters acted up or the Advil hadn’t yet kicked in. A good day was when we were not conscious of the cuts until we took off our socks at night. To mention a body part while walking was to somehow gently complain. “I have calves today,” one of us might announce, particularly on rocky paths through old creek beds. At some point I took off my shoes and socks to see huge blood blisters beneath the nails on my middle toes caused by my feet jamming against the front of my shoes on miles of down-hill treks.

Finally, we arrived at the small village of Samos with its ancient Benedictine Monastery. It was a short hike from our last stop, so we ended the day early, around lunch, to be able to rest our feet and tour the grounds. At mass that night, which happened to be a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the ordination of Fr. Michael Isidoro, I could rest my feet and my mind and focus on the moment at hand as I enjoyed doing at medieval chapels along paths walked by St Francis of Assisi, Queen Isabel of Spain, and countless saints. I was able to accept the burdens of the bunions by reminding myself that others more fragile than I met the challenge, and by convincing myself that if it came without cost, if it really were so easy to cruise the Camino, it would hardly be worth doing at all. I gave thanks for getting us this far, and thanks to the good father saying mass, a man who surely has seen more bruises in his fifty years as a priest than I had in a few weeks in Spain that I should so wearily worry

about it. So after communion I promised myself and God to not mention or complain about the problems with my feet anymore but instead welcome them as my cross to bear. This is what I must carry on the Camino, I decided, suddenly feeling empowered by my acceptance of the pain. I did not yet know if I would be able to be strong enough to handle this charge, particularly since we still had hundreds of miles to go. But at that moment I knew I had to do this, to “offer it up” as my mother would say when I was young and hurt myself. It was easier then, though. That dictate always came after the fall, not while I was staring at the oncoming pain. But “offer it up” I would, literally, deciding to say a prayer each time the urge to complain or even think about my aching feet arose.

This concept seemed so obvious. The very idea to offer up in sacrifice our pleasures through denial or our pain through acceptance is very Christ-like and is meant to bring us closer to Him. Of course this made sense.

But something happened: from the moment we left the village of Samos my feet didn’t hurt anymore. I had the normal aches from walking, and I had blisters and bleeding cuts under nails, but none of them bothered me like they had before Samos, before my decree. At least not for quite some time. We walked just as far, the trails as trying as ever, but save a few days where we pushed ourselves further than we should have, it seemed that my offering was accepted after all.

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We made it all the way to Santiago and beyond to Finisterre, and then we took a train back to Pamplona where we celebrated our completion of the Camino with dinner at a café followed by mass at the Church of St Saturnin, where pilgrims have gone for a thousand years. And it was only then I realized I took the easy way out by offering up physical pain. I realized that I usually say prayers to ease the suffering of my feet, or my back, or a bad flu all the while soaking or resting or medicating myself anyway to move through instead of rising above. But how often, I wondered, do I pray for an ease to emotional suffering, to spiritual wounds. Shouldn’t the real sacrifice we offer up be the result of going without the frivolous things we want, by practicing humility, by resisting greed and gluttony? How often do we “offer up” a single prayer to ease the discomfort of a blistered soul?

So, we walked about St Saturnin, the church consecrated during the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the name of the Paton Saint of Navarra, where Bishop

Saturnin, or Cernin, baptized the first Christians in Pamplona, including St Fermin, whose name and spirit are celebrated every July during the Festival of St Fermin, also known as the Running of the Bulls. It is, in fact, the bells of St Saturnin which ring every morning during the festival to begin the runs. We were done for the day, but we decided to tour the Cathedral which dates back to the origins of the pilgrimage itself. At some point we went our own way about the Cathedral and I came to a small chapel. I stood alone looking for a place to light my last candle of the trip, to give thanks at last for seeing me through, with the Samos mass and my feet clearly on my mind, when I saw a small, dark alcove.

I peered in to see a wooden, life-like crucifix carved by Juan Bazcardo in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Christ's head, His hair and crown of thorns, hangs with more realism than any crucifix I have seen, and His torso and legs leave the impression of both His submission to the suffering and His triumph in being humanity's salvation. For decades I have studied and taught art and sculpture but never found the one example of both the physical features and the spiritual context, yet here it was.

Then I saw His feet. The thick, iron nail which had been driven through His arches and onto the cross, the blood, the excruciating pain captured by this artist four hundred years ago would not let me turn away. I thought of Samos, of the Pyrenees, of the blood blisters and the nightly tending at albergues across Spain, and I understood that I had not, in fact, any pain to offer up after all. And I cried. It is all too easy, I thought. And there at the foot of the Cross, my pilgrimage began.

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**Bob Kunzinger's** work has appeared in many publications, including *St. Anthony Messenger*, the *Washington Post*, *Kestrel*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and more, and several pieces have been noted by *Best American Essays*. He is the author of nine collections, including the critically acclaimed *Penance: Walking with the Infant*, an "Inside the Vatican" recommendation. He lives and works in Virginia.

*Anthony Butts*

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**Visionism: Of Schizophrenia & Spirituality**

My second ever “vision” lay transposed between myself and the nineteen-inch black and white television before me, sitting as a five-year-old child in my Coke bottle glasses in the year 1974. I thought nothing of it, having been witness to so many tragic events already (as I knew, even then, that we were the *true* Addams family). The vision shown hazily before me, sort of grayish and transparent, almost schematic in nature. A tiny television camera pointed back at me from within a screen.

I didn’t think of the high improbability of a camera so small it would fit inside a television, and be able to film me *through* the screen, existing in 1974. I took the vision to mean that I was under constant observation, by what or by whom I wouldn’t find out until almost four decades later when they decided that my instruction was complete. Until the age of forty-three I’d always doubted, to some extent, the existence of celestial angels on earth, but they’re here—revealing themselves when need be.

On Sunday, March 03, 2013, I was called to write an account of what I’d experienced in order to inform the world that Jesus loves us and that the Holy Spirit is still among us. My schizophrenia allowed me to waste time “reality checking” to the point of boredom. Jesus has also tested me time and again. I have sinned, and will describe those sins in depth later on, but have tried to the best of my ability to follow in the footsteps of Jesus—my personal Lord and Savior since the age of three—to the best of my knowledge. He has left a straight and narrow path for me to follow, which will only *seem* circuitous to most.

Jesus had told me, through a chorus of angels’ voices in my mind, that I’d say one thing in my life that I’d regret. I rarely received warnings this clear and straight-forward during my attempt to follow Jesus’ shining road, which was lain before me from as far back as my earliest recollection of my notion of imagery as a first language. (Jesus taught me to learn how to read most of the words in *The Detroit News* by the time I was four. I learned that imagery was a language before I could talk, I presume; I make all this known not as a braggadocio, though I’ve found that I’ve been an arrogant S.O.B. for most of my life, but to show Jesus’

power. I *had* to learn imagery and symbolism, before learning to read English, because I had to become fluent in His language for me: the visions and symbolic messages of the angels' voices which I've followed to the best of my ability.) I do regret saying those words, and I don't. The next morning, after going on a brief hiatus from Jesus' directives, I quickly quipped that my life would be so much easier if I didn't have to hear angels all the time—along with my own delusions and the never-ending stream of my own words in my mind that has plagued this schizophrenic for as far back as I can remember. Just like that, they were gone! —Jesus, the angels *and* my schizophrenic voices. All of them gone, for only the second time in my life! —the first time only having offered temporary relief. My mind was quiet for only the second time in my life! Amen!

But I was being tested again. They would return, more restrained and clearer now that I'd passed many other trials. I just wanted to be normal, though I'll never be. On March 01, Jesus had returned my emotions to me. I prayed to Him, thirty years earlier, to take them away because it seemed that all the world wanted was my demise, so I lived as an automaton for three decades. On that day, I went on a six-hour continuous tirade of joyful emotion: uttering *thank you, Lord Jesus* over five hundred times in between the lyrics of seditious songs that got me through that exile, plucked off the internet.

The next morning, I went on a five-hour self-driven think tank expedition, no different than any other day— except for the exceptional length of time on this occasion. I was set to write the greatest poem the English language had ever known, all of it committed to emotional memory (as I always would with my poetry. I never need notes now, no matter how long the poem). After completing the first three sections, I ran into a problem. God gave me an ultimatum: destroy the poem or live without emotions. He allowed me to go without emotions until I made up my mind. Poets crave fame! I used to, but it took me a mere two minutes of pacing to go straight to the computer and erase and trash everything. A few moments passed, and Jesus returned my emotions to me as He'd promised! I was not sad; I was joyous to be helpful. I have three more completed manuscripts at this point of letter-perfect verse, because I'm my own toughest critic. I asked Jesus if he wanted me to destroy everything else? His reply was *no*, that I'd shown true loyalty in doing what I did. With each passed test, Jesus speaks to me in more powerful forms of communication. I'm getting the feeling that it's about trust, and the fact that it takes a while to learn a new language—the true Heavenly tongue still, as yet, unknown to me.



After coming back from the store today, I'm prepared to discuss a miracle that anyone can validate, because it was witnessed by hordes of individuals over the past four years, just in time— because Jesus is even more than just exactly where He needs to be when He needs to be; divine coincidence seems to me to be a way to learning the language of heaven for me. Before I discuss that involved synopsis, I'll present you with the simple one which Jesus laid out for me today:

At the bus stop, here in Charlotte, I waited with my earphones on. As it turns out, I was too early and the bus turned out to be quite late. But that was because Jesus is in control of *everything*! Earlier in the day, I went on a two-hour tirade against myself and my own sins. I would clean house in the autobiography I planned to begin writing in five years. *I got on my knees to worship women who never ever showed me the slightest hint of love or even affection, but I won't get on my knees and pray to Jesus!* — I screamed, repenting as I gave it to Jesus, dropping to my knees. I said: *I don't care if I'm on a street corner, I'll drop to my knees if that's what's needed by my heart.* I, then, yelled: *I wore my bathrobe to the bar and to the supermarket to get alcohol and I'm worried about singing the name "Jesus" in front of people because I'm too shy! Screw that! I'll sing Your name anywhere.* So I did, later on at the bus stop, chanting *love—the—Lord!* in between the lyrics to my favorite song.

Eventually, I turned around to see a woman sitting on the sidewalk about thirty feet behind me, her back to me. No one else was anywhere near her— a couple playing Frisbee about thirty feet in the other direction where the bus was to eventually come from. She sat there for quite a while, but had since gotten up before I'd turned around to view her again. I was looking for direction because the song I was listening to (on a San Francisco radio station I like, on the internet phone I own) played a song about *lying on the cold, hard ground*. I thought that this meant that I should hit my knees, no matter how odd it was: not having the need to pray yet. But seeing her standing gave me the sign to not do it.

Once more, I'd turn around again for the next song, which contained the word "Heaven" in the lyrics. I blared it out, pointing to heaven with all my heart and joy at having emotions again, at having a Savior who cared enough to pull me for forty-three years— with a litany of signals like this. He is infinite in His wisdom! She was sitting again!

Now, if she had the same internet station from San Francisco on, was she *that* offended that she got off the ground because her life is *not* troubled? I didn't think so. Most likely, her butt hurt. But her timing was perfect! —because the Lord willed it.

He is in all our hearts, if we'd just recognize Him. Call out to Him, possibly, and say: *come into my heart, Lord Jesus*—as when my emotions were slow in returning. Maybe that's why He didn't grant the request right away, because He knew I'd get the meaning behind it in tying that night's events to this morning's one? Time is not linear, and only *appears* to cast a linear path on the third dimension. But let's not get into pseudoscience here! I'll save that for my poems. I'm supposed to make this account as simple to understand as possible, without being patronizing and without throwing stones: just as I've been with Jesus, most of the time. The bus would come, as I turned back around, heading around the curve up the street. Perfect.

The next example is not as personal. Any skeptic could say that I made this all up. They cannot claim this with the next example as easily, though true skeptics abound. The next example is more involved, so settle in for a moment.

When I first came to Charlotte, I was in desperate shape. I came here to live out the rest of my days in an attempt to get to the bottom of the bottle that would finally put an end to my self-imposed misery. I just lost my teaching position at a prestigious northern university. My marriage was in shambles. I had no real friends anymore. I was destitute in spirit, so much so that I carved a divided cross into a portion of the chest above my heart to show how broken I was. As a (then) afflicted schizophrenic, I felt I was the angel Gabriel. I called it the Cross of Gabriel— sacrilege for sure. Only Jesus died for us, and all our sins. There I was, using his symbol to gain fame for myself while blaming Him for all my misfortune. I must do better, from this day forth. I have much more than that to answer for, in trying to walk His path. I also thought I *was* Jesus when being admitted to the hospital (and Satan, in addition to several other religious figures).

I chanted at the television as the European Soccer Championships went on that summer of 2008. Four years later, I'd once again end up in room 911 (on Charlotte Presbyterian Hospital's psychiatric ward). The championships were on again, with Portugal marching out in their white "away" uniforms bearing my Cross of Gabriel! I almost wanted to scream, though I knew I wouldn't get through the doors—as they were in the process of releasing me with a clean bill of health. This had to mean that I was key, somehow, to some big mystery. (It's probably a small part, to no mystery at all, and I'd be fine with the man that I now am). Images and symbols, left in my path by Jesus, became easier to follow, the older I got. But so did the number of suicide attempts. I've been hospitalized at least one hundred times during the past twenty years. I would not stop

pursuing the path I was on, no matter the cost or the grand sin (which diverted me, at times). *I have to do better*, is my refrain now.

Later on that day, I saw an old high school friend from my days back in Detroit on the bus all the way down here in Charlotte, over two decades after we last had contact with each other. On this day, of all days, to see her must mean that Jesus was letting me know, beyond all doubt, that He (and not Satan or any delusion) was leading me to the day when I'd get my emotions back. I had no idea that I'd, days later, be called upon to write an account of that walk I continue to be on with Him.

The first time I was in a room 911 was at Western Psychiatric (in Pittsburgh) during the 9/11 tragedy. I would, later, write in a poem of my experiences there, thinking I'd caused it: some werewolf/transmitter for evil. I've had so many identities I've tried on. The Lord said *enough* today, or something akin to it, through the angels. He said that I'm Anthony Butts, no one else.

Just after reconnecting with my old friend, I transferred to a bus with the city serial number '911' shining in the window, heading out on the number 15 route. *Whew*, I'd thought! And, still, I tested to make sure it was Jesus. I'd been through so much hardship in my life: atrociously vicious physical abuse, seditious sexual abuse, malicious mental abuse, not to mention the abuse I'd heaped on myself in just trying to exit this world. But Jesus cared enough for a wretch like me to lead me out, so long as I tried to stay on the path. Like when the angels told me to blindly jump out of a bathroom door at CMC Randolph and yell as loud as I could while throwing my hands wildly into the air. When I did this, I discovered two passing police officers right in front of me. The always twitchy unit officers didn't even flinch, not even an eyelid, when much, much less might have gotten me wrestled to the ground at the very least!

I'd forgotten that until now. I was dallying in the kitchen, shoving chips down my throat so I could get back to the computer and keep working. But the Lord needed me to be there sooner—so the Lord, Himself, commanded me to move more quickly. Just then, a song that I love started playing on the internet radio of the computer I'm typing on. It immediately jarred my memory of the officers because this is only the second time I've been asked to move. So, others must also hear Him—appearing before me when need be. I'm so glad to know, now, that others can hear Him, too! Just now, as I've typed this, I found out, I'm not alone on earth! There are others who hear Jesus speaking to them. It's just taken me longer because of my circumstances to develop the maturity necessary to understand Him. Jesus is Lord, the vibrant Spirit alive and

speaking to us—whoever we are to be known of collectively as a group. Maybe I'll learn that in the future, but I've got a lot of growing to do.

I'm not trying to convince you for my sake, but for your own. Just lift your arms up and ask for Lord Jesus to come into your heart to guide you, and maybe He will. That's up to Him, ultimately.

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A young white woman dallied, in her black puffy coat, near the bus stop (where I was standing) for some unknown reason, conspicuously toying with the cement via her outstretched toe

for me to know what? I know now. She was my envoi,

sent from God to signal my approaching trip to an unknown paradise. At the time she was just a part of some small mystery to me—the red lipbed Taylor Swift cued up as the next song

by the deejay, unbeknownst to the audience tuning in to WILD-FM

via iHeart radio: connecting a divine lifeline from the station's home there in San Francisco to my chilly and sun-drenched ears here in Charlotte. Sitting down afterwards, never allowing the words

*lying on the cold, hard ground* to catch her out of place. She sat, for at least

ten minutes before the song, and five minutes afterwards, having walked away just scant moments before the bus would round the corner and appear within sight of my vantage point. She sat, respectfully.

She sat on cue with the universe of thought. I would later find out

that I'm truly blessed, me: Anthony Butts, in the words of Jesus Himself—clear as a bell, clichéd phrase or not. Let's rock tonight, even now more fully connected to the angel network. We are already here! —

all of us here! —awaiting Jesus' ultimate instruction. My other three poetry

manuscripts suck, compared to the feeling of having earned His blessing. Earned it, He said. A wretch like me! There is no imagery like her in my heart. I loved the way she moved, knowing intuitively that she was following

Jesus. A promise, more so than a literary piece, I will marry a woman like her!

NONFICTION

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*Niles Reddick*

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## **In the Fullness of Time**

*Based on true events.*

It was a roll of the dice whether I felt the call or felt the elbow shove of one of my friends, trying to get me saved, so we could one day ride bikes on the streets of gold in heaven. We felt nuclear war would come because we'd heard it was a toss-up whether Reagan was the anti-Christ (Ronald Wilson Reagan=666) or whether it was Gorbachev with the mark of the beast being a birthmark on his forehead. Either way, I found myself in the center aisle of the church and stumbled toward the "This Do in Remembrance of Me" table while the minister ushered me to the front pew until after the last verse of "Just as I Am" where he could show me off to the members and they could vote on my salvation. I was twelve.

A few months later, I don't know if the salvation didn't take or listening to KISS had brought demonic possession, but I sat on the back row with my saved friends, rolling spitballs from bits of the church bulletin to blow through straws to hit girls in front of us. To my amazement, an African America woman decked out in a gold dress, shoes, and hat with flowers and aided by a cane slowly wobbled to the front pew, the same one reserved for the newly saved. When the banker cupped his hand and whispered to the minister, the reverend turned red, got up, walked down from the pulpit and whispered to the old woman. She heaved herself up on the cane and started up the aisle toward the front door. Curiosity got the best of me, and I got up and went out after her to see. The old woman had disappeared. There were no cars leaving, and she wasn't on any sidewalk. I couldn't figure out where she'd gone. I assumed she'd been asked to leave and was sad. It was the first time I had thought about our Southern protestant church being segregated, like many churches were even years after integration had swept the South.

The next year, deacons questioned some of the minister's decisions, asked him to leave, and he refused at which point many of them and their families left. Relatives and friends became enemies, many people had personal problems, and I distanced myself from the church and what I believed was hypocrisy. I worked more, partied more, and explored more.

I visited other churches with friends, studied other philosophies about the world including atheism, agnosticism, Buddhism, and Native American philosophy, but none of them offered those old hymns I'd grown up singing, seeing those old choir members harmonize, and hearing those stories of faith, love, and forgiveness.

Fifteen years later, I finally returned. I felt like the prodigal son, nervous, sweaty, and who sinned my fair share. I'd heard an internal voice, maybe me or maybe God, telling me I was still forgiven and to come home. I could still hear that choir from childhood singing "Come home, Come home. Ye who are weary, come home." From the grave, they massaged a cold heart and brought memories. I found churches still somewhat segregated as I moved around the country, but I found them open to integration and sparsely populated by difference. I wondered about the old woman, if she had been an old woman, or an angel, or even Jesus come to test his flock. They failed the test then, but I felt like they might finally pass it now.

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**Niles Reddick** is author of a novel *Drifting too far from the Shore*, two collections *Reading the Coffee Grounds* and *Road Kill Art and Other Oddities*, and a novella *Lead Me Home*. His work has been featured in nineteen anthologies, twenty-one countries, and in over three hundred publications including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *PIF*, *New Reader Magazine*, *Forth Magazine*, *Citron Review*, and *The Boston Literary Magazine*.

Website: <http://nilesreddick.com/>

Twitter: [@niles\\_reddick](https://twitter.com/niles_reddick)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/niles.reddick.9>

Instagram: [nilesreddick@memphisedu](https://www.instagram.com/nilesreddick@memphisedu)

Linkedin: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/niles-reddick-0759b09b/>

## *Janina Aza Karpinska*

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### **Shell Madonna**

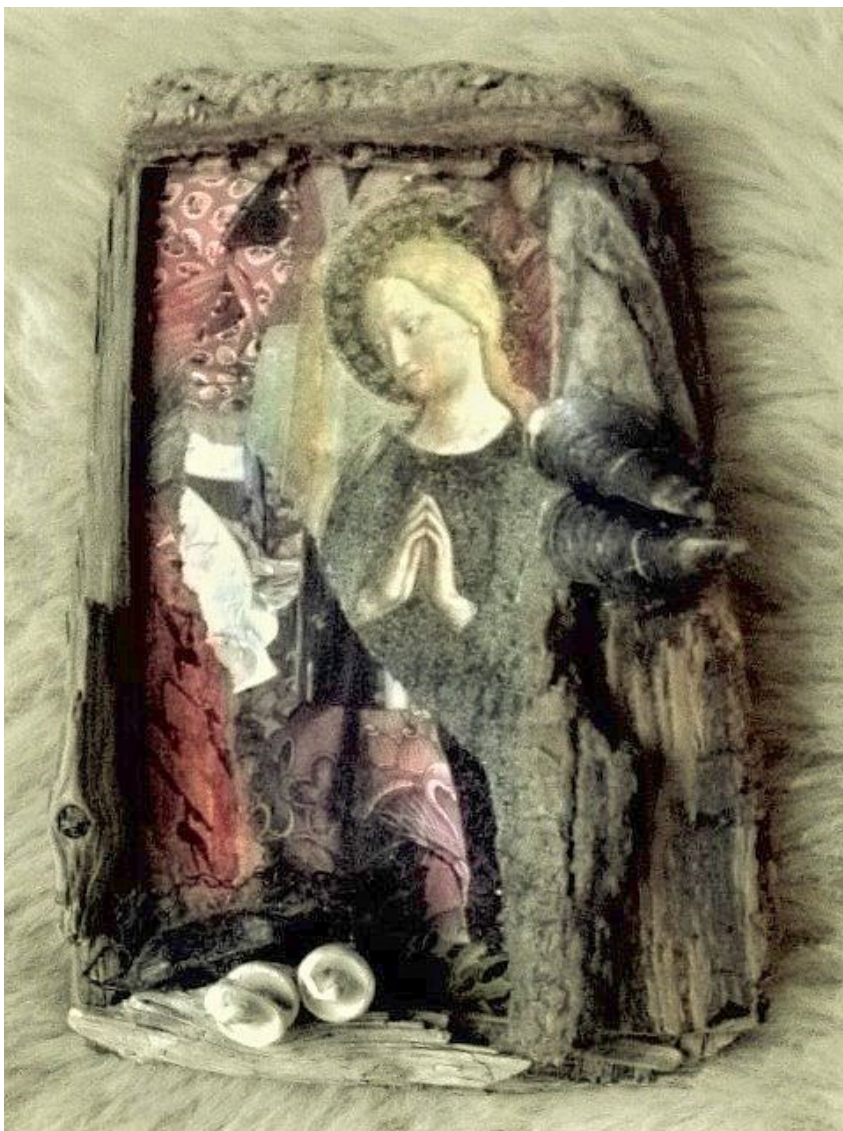


Image courtesy of the artist.



## Scrap Madonna with Gold Chain



Image courtesy of the artist.

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**Janina Aza Karpinska** is a multi-disciplinary Artist-Poet from the south coast of England. She achieved an M.A. in Creative Writing & Personal Development, with Merit, from Sussex University; winning 1st prize in the Cannon's Mouth Poetry Competition shortly after. She makes writing, journal-keeping, and artwork a daily practice that essentially keeps her connected to The Creator. Her work has appeared in several publications, including: *The Third Way* (Christian comment on Culture); the covers of *The Methodist Recorder*, and *Chichester Magazine*; *Poems in the Waiting Room*, *Ekphrastic Review*, among others. She is an active member of the Cheltenham Christian Arts Festival.

*Leslie Rochelle Owen*

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**Love Without Conditions**

Image courtesy of the artist.

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

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/aquariusrisingllc/>



## *Karina Velasco*

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### **Watercolor Jesus**



Image courtesy of the artist.

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**Karina Velasco** is an artist based in San Diego, CA. Karina works primarily with acrylic paint and has recently started experimenting with Paper Mache and Air-Dry Clay. Karina's paintings are inspired by women. She enjoys painting the cuteness and innocence of a young girl as much as the beauty and experiences of women. Her inspiration comes from personal experience, her surroundings, su gente and from her culture and its traditions. Karina's work is influenced by Latin American Art and Pop-Surrealism. Her paintings are unique, colorful and sometimes gloomy. Karina works with acrylic paint most of the time but also enjoys playing with graphite, color pencils, markers and watercolors. She recently started working with Paper Mache and Air-Dry Clay and is very excited about working in three-dimensional art.

[www.facebook.com/karivelascoART](http://www.facebook.com/karivelascoART)

IG: [@vk.artist](https://www.instagram.com/vk.artist)







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