

Heart of Flesh

Literary Journal



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VERONICA MCDONALD, EDITOR

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E-mail: heartoffleshlit@gmail.com

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Cover Art: "Eternal Desire" by Shanice Reid.

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"Psalm 51" by Veronica McDonald.

Note from the Editor

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. —John 1:10-13

It amazes me daily how the Lord has chosen to work through this journal. I never dreamed that I would be a part of something where I would come into contact with such a vast array of people from around the world. Besides the United States, *Heart of Flesh* has reached people from the United Kingdom, Canada, India, Australia, Nigeria, Philippines, Ireland, China, Germany, Brazil, New Zealand, Italy, France, Kenya, Sweden, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Singapore, Israel, South Africa, Malaysia, Macedonia, Jamaica, Spain, Romania, Chile, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and more. As a result, I often receive a rich pile of literary gems to dig through—from those who know Jesus, want to know Him, or don't yet—all different and beautiful in their own unique ways.

In our sixth issue, there are a multitude of themes to explore. In these pages you'll find an exploration of doubt, faith, awe, reverence, and a desire to seek God, but also a common focus on relationships—the various interplays between people, nature, and the God who made them. Writers speak about seeing God reflected in loved ones, and experiencing nostalgia for those now gone or slipping away, who once emanated Christ's unconditional love. They talk about an ache for knowing God Himself—experiencing a hole where a relationship once existed or never was there to begin with. In their words they convey a longing to draw closer to Jesus, to find evidence of Him in the natural world, to rest in His arms in life's darker moments. Others express the frustration in attempting to shake the ones around us who can't see—to wake them up to His mercy and grace. These interactions are teased out through poetry, prose, and art, while presenting the contrast between what is in front of our eyes and what remains unseen, swirling around us in untouchable significance.

You'll also find bulgy monsters, clones, “Jesus lice,” and a talking fox.

Yet somehow all these unique imaginations pull together as different pieces of the same picture of God's unfathomable love.

I truly believe there is something in this issue for everybody, no matter your beliefs or opinions about the Creator of the world. I hope you read with an open mind, and that you allow these different pieces to speak their way into your life.

My prayer is that God gets the glory for all that touches your heart in this beautiful issue. Thank you to our wonderful and talented contributors and to our growing number of readers. You are a constant blessing.

May the God who redeems and restores be with you all.

Veronica McDonald

Editor/Founder

POETRY

Jo Taylor

Conviction*After Margaret Atwood*

All those times I was bored,
 mind wandering, wandering,
 many times out of the physical
 space which was our living room
 where he was on his knees in
 the evenings, head bent, talking
 more to the wooden floor
 than to the Heavenly Father
 he addressed, always pointing out
 his shortcomings or pouring over
 his guilt or begging for a cleansing
 to make him ivory-snow white
 I, too, bowed my head, lower,
 lower into my lap, whispering
 to myself, *enough, enough, please,*
enough. You've reminded Him
already that He knows you,
your every thought, that He's
numbered the hairs on your now balding
head. I count the carpet's hairs and the lines
in my palms and imagine the freckles
on the little finger of the one I would
one day marry. One, two, three...
forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one. Sometimes
 the prayer warrior would speak
 in a mysterious language, frightening,
 yet musical, captivating, enticing,
 like Handel's *Messiah*,
 and I would be drawn back to his voice
 of steel and see his face lifted, his arms, too,
 communing with a world of which I was not
 a part. Why do I remember the scene
 more reverentially now, see him more
 affectionately? I could not wait for the amen
 when I would shake out my leg, long asleep,

and head fast to my room to read
Pride and Prejudice. Now I long for
words of conviction and hunger for things
unseen.

What My Sister Taught Me

Take it to the limit, one more time. —The Eagles

She taught me to rumba, to pick a partner from the crowd,
to coax him to the floor, to move carefree and wild, like water
on a hot griddle, laughing all the while. She taught me to show up

and show off. To star. (Even in family photographs, she stood out,
her dark corkscrew curls, her big brown eyes, playful, inviting,
her charisma coloring the card stock.) She taught me big. Big

hair, big ideas, big heart. To climb into bed with the dying,
to stroke their faces, to caress with kisses even when the verdict
is out on the disease's power to transmit. She taught me to fancy

mustard greens and collards and Krispy Kreme and Diet Coke.
To believe in yourself when, like an exploding soda can,
the world spits and spews *no, can't, impossible, it won't happen*

and then to watch the miracle manifest itself a thousand times
in a tiny village in Africa or in the heart of a special needs
teenage son. She taught me to borrow your sister's panties

and to suffer the consequences. To croon Patsy Cline and to record
yourself in make-shift studio or at Six Flags. To commune with
The Creator on the beach when life barrels toward you,

the container heavy with loss and grief. She taught me to care and care
and then to care a little more. Because loss had opened her to love.

Jo Taylor is a retired, 35-year English teacher from Georgia. Her favorite genre to teach high school students was poetry, and today she dedicates more time to writing it. Her major themes focus on family, place, and faith. In 2021, she published her first collection of poems, *Strange Fire*.

POETRY

Annie Harpel

solace

(a monostich)

I am looking for a prayer of my own; to console and utter out loud when
I feel God has abandoned me, seeking a sign He is still present though
invisible to me.

[untitled]

for God to hear my prayers
I thought they had to be spoken aloud

it felt like He wasn't listening
eventually I was screaming

all my noise drowned out
His whispered message

nightlight

before going to bed
I turn open the blinds a bit
so, in the dark of night
when anxiety awakens me
I can see the moon
or a bright star
listen for God to whisper

“look at me, I am here, hold on”

Annie was born in Illinois, grew up in Orange County, CA and now lives in a quiet beach town along the Central Coast of CA. She is a poet, essayist, fine art photographer and artist. Her poetry has been published in local newspapers and online literary journals including *Drabble*, *Heart of Flesh*, *Impsired* and *First Literary Review – East*. She has taught poetry workshops at several county libraries and is a member of Cambria Writers Workshop. She says poetry is her raft, star, song, umbrella.

POETRY

Charles Eggerth

Prayer Before Surgery

At this point I am not profound.
I cannot begin to say how this little expedition will turn out.
I am a farm boy again, and I do not know how they get the hay in the barn,
much less why the green corn grows and dies.
You, on the other hand, know cell one from cell two,
vein ninety-four and artery one-hundred-six and thought three-thousand,
brain two-billion-six and why you put it here.
You answer all your phone calls at once
and you never miss a syllable.
Consider this a phone call.
Remember, please, those who love me.
Remember those who need you.
And remember the barefoot boy whose heart belongs to you.
Remember the blood shed on his behalf.
Take him through the river
if a crossing indeed be ordained.

The Forgotten

I

We were expendable.
We fought without a purpose,
died for a country that neither cared nor noticed.
For us no medals, parades, pretty girls;
no arms even in which to die.
We were cannon fodder.
They blew us to smithereens without a word of explanation.
Our blood cries "Why?"
from the drenched earth.

II

I did car accidents in the States
and vomited half a dozen times a week.
They were Band-Aid cases.
This war scarred, burned, ripped, smashed, mutilated, disintegrated
more young men than you
could begin to count.
Twenty high school seniors died in my arms,
holding my hand, in a month,
in some fortnights;
hundreds more slipped away without a touch, without a prayer.
There was no time for dignity.
Death came on his pale horse
and we could not bar the door,
could not stifle his raucous mocking (I hear it still).
Listen to me, please!
All this to free no-one?
All this and no reasons?
Someone will pay, someday.
I curse you, America, for giving up without quitting.

III

I knew my father's God but faintly,
till youth and a number sent me here.
And when I was sure he could not exist
he came to me in the still of a Mekong Delta night,
and I was his.
And when I asked the reasons,
he took me home and told me.
Brothers in blood, there are no human words to explain.

Charles Eggerth is a follower of Jesus Christ, often failing but always relying on grace. He believes that Christians are called to reach into other socio-economic strata, seeking to minister to physical needs so that God will open doors to deeper spiritual needs.

POETRY

Megan Ulrich

Beautiful Things

*Some things my grandmother told me before she died,
in and out of consciousness.*

My mother gave me that
rosary when I graduated from
nursing school.
I used to thumb the beads,
hidden in my scrubs,
one final prayer for the
lonely dead.

I miscarried the child
between your aunt and
your mom at a hospital in the city.
I spent all night
foraging through the blood
on the floor and in the toilet,
but I never found the body
or a name.

A week before your uncle's accident
he snuck into my room
well past bedtime
begging me to play with him,
and after much relenting,
we giggled and cuddled
and stayed up too late
and trusted too much
in the joy of tomorrow.

I didn't want your mother,
not for a while anyway,
not even after my mother
convinced me to keep her.
I never quite unclenched

my fists, so God laid her in
my arms.

There are other
beautiful things
I wanted to tell you,
I just can't remember them
anymore.

Communion

When I was young
my mother took
the three of us,
my sister, brother, and I
on weekend adventures
through the winding pass of
the mountains to visit friends
who lived at an episcopal boarding school,
tucked into the Blue Ridge.

Every time we visited
they were in some newly available
dorm or transitional housing,
with the modest furnishings you'd expect
from five people living on a schoolteacher's salary.

And yet, there was a consistency to the space,
like sacramentals, drawing me
into a dance with the divine.
Castile soap, dripping from the tip of
a repurposed olive oil infuser.
Pottery, pulled from the earth
with open palms,
fashioned with careful
fingertips and now
sitting on a peeling laminate countertop,
impregnated with hand-picked berries,
modestly offering itself as a gift.
Open windows, screened porches, and the inability
to pinpoint where the outside

ends and the inside
begins.

It's been a long time since I remembered
how the heat of the day, if you let it,
rests in the bones of this house.
A long time since I've awoken in our bed
to the sound of rain and stayed up
just to hear it fall.

Too long since I let you look at me
cradled in your arms
pulled from the earth
offering myself as a gift.

Comestible

It's easier for me to understand Heaven
without sex,
than Heaven without bread.

I don't want to leave
a negative impression,
I mean,
sex is—
well it's quite good.
It's just—

wouldn't the universe be
a little less complete
without the kneading
and eating and
breaking of
bread.

Megan Ulrich lives with her husband and three sons in a charming little town in East Tennessee. She has recently found inspiration in writing about grief and the healing that comes from sharing our brokenness with others. You can find out more about Megan at her website www.Megan-Ulrich.com.

POETRY

Casie Dodd

The Morning After the Wreck

Scraping sheets
of mud off my new vintage oxfords.
Split ends tattered like leaf bits I just pricked
from the smiles in my sweater.

Will someone walk in? It's early yet.

Staring at porcelain holding
an oversized satchel weighted
with all I could pull from the ditch. Twenty speckled
fragments to match the linoleum.

A college student's life stained the color of rust.

Some books are spotless. Cradled in hidden
folds in my purse, redeemed by blue
flannel. Class notes are streaked
with green lines left by a lawn deader than I seem to be.

A public bathroom? How did I get here?

*And it's strange how some things stay white as Easter while
others bear the mark of what should have been the end.*

Raccoon eyes webbed
to red spidery bursts. Are they mine?

The door creaks slowly open.
I hope you won't look.
But instead you say Good Morning
and I'm caught somewhere between the o's.

Casie Dodd lives in Fort Smith, Arkansas with her husband and two children. Her writing has appeared in *This Land*, *Dappled Things*, and others. She is an MFA candidate in poetry at the University of St. Thomas Houston.

Sherry Poff

Into the Water

A cool stream enfolds my waist, and my feet
sink into smooth silt of the creek bottom
as the preacher puts a steadying hand
on my back.

We've already sung *Shall We Gather
at the River*, but this is merely a wide spot
in the creek where we children
learned to float.

My big sister was the champion floater.
Hands folded neatly, eyes closed
to the sun, she gave herself
to the current.

Envious of her effortless grace, serene surrender,
I always tried too hard. My thin arms flailed,
my feet found the bottom, and I never
learned to rest.

On this Sunday afternoon, the swimming hole
becomes a place of consecration, holy trust,
as surrounding mountains ring with another song:
Nothing but the Blood

But the blood of family beats in my six-year-old heart,
and my sister's eyes are on me. Looking back,
I can't help but wonder who it was I followed
into the water.

Sherry Poff writes in and around Ooltewah, Tennessee. She holds an M.A. in writing from The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and is a member of the Chattanooga Writers' Guild. Her work has appeared in various publications including *Raconteur Review*, *Liquid Imagination*, and *Flash Nonfiction Food* (Woodhall Press).

POETRY

Jeffrey Essmann

Epiphany

The silence of the holy name
should catch us unaware,
should shift the light
to the grayish bright
of eclipse.

The lips of God
should brush our ear
as the buzz
of an August noon,
the pen freeze
on the whiting page,
and a black ant dance
(in glory)
in the corner.

And we should get up
or stay;
pray
or check our phone;
scream the mystery
into the heat
or never say another word
again.

I Asked Her How She Was

and bad she said
not good
not good at all

and i
i'm not complaining
but i

i just don't think
i'm going to be
here for long

both my sisters died this year
you know
i'm the last
i'm the only one left
i'm all alone
and i'm
i'm so afraid
i'm just afraid

thirty-four
thirty-four nieces
and nephews
i've got
and none of them call
none of them
not a one
thirty-four

and you know
you know I wouldn't do anything
to myself
i wouldn't do that
i'd never do that
but i...

thirty-four
she said again
and shook her head
and went back to her puzzle

Jeffrey Essmann is an essayist and poet living in New York. His poetry has appeared in numerous magazines and literary journals, among them *America Magazine*, *Dappled Things*, the *St. Austin Review*, *U.S. Catholic*, *The Road Not Taken*, and various venues of the Benedictine monastery with which he is an oblate. He is editor of the "Catholic Poetry Room" page on the *Integrated Catholic Life* website.

POETRY

Matthew Wiley

Jacob Kahn, Prophet

Go find the man
wandering in darkness
thinking it light.

Tell him we don't have to run.
Tell him that it won't be long.
Tell him we're young and
 we don't know and
 this, too, is a gift.

Speak for him a strange world.
Listen as his shame falls.
Look at his ugly and
 don't be afraid and
 this, too, is beautiful.

Matthew Wiley is a theologian and writer in Chicago. His work has been published in various places in print and online, but if you're looking for his other poetry you can find some in *Fathom Mag* and *Ekstasis*. You can follow him on Twitter @matthew_w_wiley.

POETRY

Sarah Tate

The Grand Dance

I wonder if anyone else can see
the stained-glass waver like water,
almost hurricane-mad,
all energy and terrible beauty
as the Spirit breathes
outside these church walls
while we sit within, hands folded
primly behind the pews, waiting
to be pre-approved for rapture.

God's shadows like to dance
against New York city bricks,
flaming lovely even in the eyes
of the world-weary people,
those passing by on the buses,
on the backs of the inky-night streets.

Yet, I wait to hear
the language of angels and cathedrals,
hidden in the waves of some lake,
cold and deep, in Minnesota.

I feel like a slouching Solomon
on some subsidiary throne,
watching every lady dance,
silver bracelets and anklets jingling,
trying to find meaning slip
between the sways of their hips.

It's a shame I can't speak angel,
or feel the Spirit shake my hand,
and yet every blade of grass bears
some semblance of my soul.
Nothing is bright and easily seen,
but I have these eyes wiped clean

from when Christ scraped
the black-muck sin from my own ribs.

And I think yes,
Grace must still be alive,
moving in a grand dance.
His curious hands push the petaled
stars and Jupiter into the evening,
while His mere breath trembles
the drops of rain on the train tracks,
slowly repairing every moving body
to Eden-shimmer again.

It would be easier to understand
the pops of a bush burning,
or have the Spirit blow open the church doors
with the sound of a great rushing wind,
but I can almost feel the grip
of Christ's hand, the ridges of His scars,
whenever I touch the firm warmth
of a sun-glowed doorknob of bronze.

Sarah Tate is currently enrolled in college pursuing a B.S. in writing. She lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia with her twin brother and parents. Sarah grew up in church, but God always seemed to be more present through the stories of the Bible and in His creation instead of in a building.

POETRY

Terri Martin Wilkins

A Space I Cannot See

My eyes yearn for a space I cannot see.

A space shrouded not by darkness,
But by brightness beyond the colors I can comprehend.
A space radiating truth so vivid
I must avert my eyes to more comfortable vistas
Before my vision version visitation of reality
Is scorched to ashes and dust.

Reality so solid it rips through my retinas
And I must enter blind into this space
Where there is no distortion.

I yearn for a space I recognize only by the shape
of the seeking that encompasses it.
A space obscured in the gloaming of grief,
The fatigue of hopes abandoned,
The perpetual weary lament of burdened love.
A space beckoning faintly past the corners of age
Into the stillness of final breath.

Mind persistently puzzling out conundrums
That can finally be resolved only from within that veiled space.
Heart stuttering out a hymn
To echo through the silent secret sacred space
Where irrevocable expectant joy awaits.

My futile eyes peering through a veil darkly,
Catching inexplicable glimpses
Of a glory that will ultimately shatter me,
Defenseless,
Into a new creation.

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

POETRY

J.F. Rains

Faith

A mustard seed of faith in fragile green
shoots through this hard-packed rationality

*and all my mountains tremble in their places
all my oceans turn their stormy faces
to the open sky and see the Son of Man,
a ghost upon the heavens.*

One small drop of infinite glows
Inside this finite shell—

*and all the depth and wideness of the universe
its limitless expanse, barren stretch of wilderness
with broken planets and debris—
they live and move and breathe inside of me.*

(A woman pregnant with the world is strange
and stranger still the mustard seed of faith
she shelters in her womb.)

Virgin Mary mother of my yes—
vessel bearing microscopic endlessness—
you teach me to believe in what exceeds my reach

the question as it tumbles down from God
(the brightly new the everlasting old
and resonant inside my fumbling mind).

My spirit has a palm, my soul an eye
and each are troubled by an empty ache
for I was made for everything I say—

for everything

Faith II

"...for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind." —James 1:6

driven and tossed
by waves my lungs
my fingers stretch
tenuously

for the unknown.
(my reach is weak
my gasp even
more so watch me

slide and move watch
me forget my
composure and
begin to drown.

ten-thousand times
a novice in
water-walking
an animal

once abused who
shrinks beneath your
open hand who
lives in opaque

prisons of thought.)
my storms my pains
are nonetheless
two-dimensional

and they recede
beneath the bigness
of air.

POETRY

Rick Hoadley

Waiting for the Kudu to Die

Stillness stalks the dry bushveld
As dusky light grows dim.
The Kudu's splendor this plain withheld,
God's majesty revealed in him.

Dree's face is grim and pale,
And Yakob says not a word.
The Jackal's eerie, ghostly wail
Is the only sound we heard.

Save the troubled breathing of the giant beast,
The heaving and panting of his bleeding chest,
We gasped as his breath faltered and ceased,
This noble Bull, supreme, above the rest.

The pale orange sun is hazy and round,
Exquisite end to a glorious day.
The mighty Kudu is on the ground;
Tis' the Hunter's time to pray.

My arrow's wound bleeds jagged and raw,
Heliocentric horns reach the sky.
Natural beauty grips me with awe,
Waiting for the Kudu to die.

In Africa the Kudu is symbolic of Life,
Man's hope to survive all that will be;
Strength and Faith endures Pain and Strife
And carries man through eternity.

The striped hide and spiral horn
Remind me of you and I;
From the moment we are born
We are waiting for the Kudu to die.

Beyond the Mist

As I gaze into the cool, gray dawn,
 I can make out silhouettes of souls eclipsed.
 I hear soft voices of those long gone,
 I think they are there—
 beyond the mist.

In the forest heart I sit my lonely post,
 where stillness and solitude are nature's gift.
 I sense the presence of a welcome ghost,
 I'm sure exists—
 beyond the mist.

As I await the stag to cross my path,
 I awaken to silence that fills my ears.
 I become aware of all that God hath,
 as my mind flies back through all the years.

I can nearly see that sunny smile,
 And all the memories that love assists,
 Beyond the clouds that stretch for miles,
 I know they are—
 beyond the mist.

How precious were those days before,
 I understand now how we are blessed.
 What I would give for just one more
 day with those—
 beyond the mist.

Rick Hoadley is a Master Instructor 8th Degree Black Belt in the martial art of Taekwondo. He is a career martial arts instructor with over 45 years of professional experience. He has copyrighted a teaching manual that has pioneered the relationship of Taekwondo to school children's academic performance. Master Hoadley is a Certified Personal Fitness Trainer, and has co-authored "The Diet" with IFBB professional Mike Horn. This is his first poetry publication.

POETRY

Katelyn J. Dixon

A Costly Ascent

ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὀνύη¹

It is no small thing to find you here,
Languishing at the ladder's end of Jacob's dream.
Long is the night, even longer the mourning;
Yet here you wait, silent as midnight—still
As the stone whose hardness is both pillow and altar.

Your hands, once lifted in prayer, now grasp
The bottom rung—hoping to be touched
By the feet of angels who pass you on their stairway.
How you wish they would pause, placing
The cool hand of blessing on the fevered brow of your longing.

In the hour before dawn, they whisper their secret:

The way up is the way down.

All along, you've been climbing
And you did not know it.
Blessed and re-named, you begin again
Rung by rung, limping towards Paradise.

¹ "The way up and the way down are one and the same." —Heraclitus

At Hand

“The Kingdom of God is at hand”
 You said, spreading your palms
 Wide enough for the hurt of the world
 To pierce them through.

Sometimes I look down at the hands you gave me—
 Small, with years of storyline crisscrossing
 Through soft pink riverbeds of skin,
 A single brown freckle marking my palm like a seed—
 And I think of You, weaving stories from words like

“sower”
 “treasure”
 “fish”
 and
 “pearl”

Planting words as flowers in the hearts of your people
 Hiding treasure in plain sight, writing in the dust;
 Catching souls like fireflies on a summer night.
 So I practice spreading my arms wide open
 To receive the whole of your earthy kingdom and I wonder
 If my hands will ever look like yours:

Scarred and holy—
 Worn, with a little
 Dirt beneath the nails.

Methodist Hospital, Room 213

Take off your shoes: this ground is holy.
 Let your feet encounter
 The coolness of this barren floor;
 Let your eyes behold
 The faintly burning fluorescence,
 The white coated walls, gleaming with indifference.

Your mother's fading
Has made of this room a thin place
Her weakened heart murmuring, hovering
Between the parting veil of this world and the next—
The air heavy laden
With the question of death.

Let your cloak of certainty fall
As you begin to apprehend
That this is the ground where angels tread.
Surely you have sensed their nearness,
Their coming and going on a staircase formed
From the flat staccatos of your prayers.

Whatever befalls,
Her life itself invites your embrace
Of the truth she has held all along:

*Surely,
The Lord was in this place
And you did not know it.*

Katelyn J. Dixon is a writer and photographer from Seattle, WA. She loves discovering beauty in unexpected places, encountering Christ in the faces of strangers, and worshipping her Maker through creativity. You can find her work online at www.katelynjdixon.com and on Instagram @tenthousandplaces.

Don Thompson

Quam Dilecta

Mocking the chrism, oil grunges the curbside. Unmistakably a crack house with plywood windows as if it were a bombed chapel.

Buyers come and go with that slow but panicky shuffle, talking to themselves about themselves, and smooth the cash crumpled in their pockets like used tissue.

None notices grubby sparrows, contented anywhere from here to an altar. Or swallows that make their homes under the eaves, habits filthier than anyone on the streets. Just look below their wretched nests.

But in flight, gathering insects to feed their young, they glitter like blue-black and burnt orange shards of stained glass.

Cauldron

Neuro-witchcraft: the hippocampus boiling a cauldron of bad memories.

Its slow fire burns deep in the temporal lobe, beyond reach—fire without smoke, but reeking of sulphur and enzymes that emit a sickly green light, the only illumination down there.

No moon delineates that landscape, though distant lightning sputters and even farther off, the murmur of weak, erratic thunder—unless it's a sorceress coughing.

An Endor you ought to avoid.

Now and then, something from the past surfaces like an aneurysm that might kill you before mercy dissolves it. And that could take years.

January 1st

The sun drops its broom early, leaving unswept the cloud debris from last night. Not lazy, but no one wants to celebrate a new year with tedious old chores.

Scraps of gilt cling to bare branches like foil from champagne bottles.

Or so you think, earthly-minded if not hung-over. But it could be light the sun left behind still glowing after dark—no more faded than gold leaf on an ancient, illuminated Psalter...

One of those verses that promise the Holy Spirit will come.

Don Thompson has been publishing poetry for over fifty years, including a dozen or so books and chapbooks. *A San Joaquín Almanac* won the Eric Hoffer Award for 2021 in the chapbook category. For more info and links to publishers, visit his website at www.don-e-thompson.com.

POETRY

Peace Nkeiruka Maduako

Days Are Coming

Days are coming,
The sun keeps rising,
Hearts are breaking,
Nobody's thinking.

Time is fast going,
Things are unfolding,
Prophecy is fulfilling,
Yet everyone's just living.

Moon is shining,
Night is coming,
Thieves are knocking,
Guns are sounding.

When you hear it,
That weeping and wailing,
Don't go asking,
You might go missing.

With some hasting
Please come running
To the mountain
Where men will be praying.

But days are coming
When there's no praying
And there's no hoping
On God to be loving.

Peace Nkeiruka Maduako is a Nigerian fiction writer and poet. She has works published on various online platforms, magazines and anthologies. Her poems are also published on her Facebook page 'PeaceGirl works.' She can be reached on email through nkeiruka2001@gmail.com or on Facebook through <https://www.facebook.com/peace.nkeiruka.56>.

POETRY

Claudia M Stanek

Craving Graves

the need for meat
pushes through trees and bushes
wanting and wishes erased by the rain
of wails and wails and wails
do you hear the echo of your captive selves?
yielding quail and quail and quail.
Please sin no more!
Fresh fallen man gathers
under the cloud, feeds
beside the fire,
craving graves.

Claudia M Stanek's work has been turned into a libretto, been part of an art exhibition, and been translated into Polish. Her poems may be found in her chapbook, *Language You Refuse to Learn*, online, and in print. She holds an MFA from Bennington College. She is a founding member of Just Poets.

POETRY

Rob Piazza

Transfer Station

Bethlehem, Connecticut

I'm about to leave for Christmas Break
after many months of thankless work
and weeks of dreary December rain——

The sky has been as colorless as ash
when suddenly the dump is suffused with light——
delicious, delectable rays of amber sun——

Manny, the garbage man, shovels trash
into dumpsters with all the graceful might
of Baryshnikov dancing *The Nutcracker Suite*,

and José in recycling crushes cans
into barrels mixed with shards of glass——
Their breath evaporates in chilly air——

Is this a part of God's majestic plan?
Perhaps the world's ministers will dare
to fight the filth that festers everywhere——

The radio delivers carols to my car
untangling my knot of nagging fears,
“*God rest ye merry gentlemen...*”

Perhaps the miraculous birth can happen here
amidst scraps of metal and broken chairs——
Maybe (can you believe it?) angels will appear——

Rob Piazza recently completed his MFA in Creative Writing at Fairfield University. He teaches literature and composition at colleges and universities in Waterbury, Connecticut. His poems have appeared in *Mystic Blue Review*, *Halcyon Days*, *Society of Classical Poets*, *Haiku Journal*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Founder's Favourites*, *The Lyric*, and *October Hill Magazine*. He serves as Poet Laureate of Litchfield.

POETRY

Daniel Wade

Isaiah*For Marc de Saverio*

Before I stuck out my tongue to receive the coal-
lump, plucked from flames by a fire-proof
hand, my lips were frozen, verging on frostbite,
tongue icebound in my palate's clenched roof:
I saw my own ruin, numb by all I'd heard.
Then, a mouthful of cinders and roving sparks
stoked me to speech; molten vowel and seething
consonant erupted to my gullet, syllable
upon smoky syllable, 'til it was time to ignite
the world, and melt it with just the Word.

Daniel Wade is a poet, playwright and novelist from Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland. His debut collection *Rapids* was published by Finishing Line Press in August of 2021, whilst his novel *A Land Without Wolves* will be published by Temple Dark Books in October of the same year.

POETRY

Sarah Law

The *Botafumeiro*

Forty kilos of charcoal and incense
swung in love's unlikely service—

the *botafumeiro*, largest of its kind
like some unwieldy dinosaur

is hefted up by staggering *tiraboleiros*
pulling on their (now synthetic) ropes

to hurl the massive thurible
along, and back, the length of the cathedral.

It drew crowds then, and now. The blistered
pilgrims trailing miles of grit and grime

are fumigated in its cleansing plume:
everyone's enveloped in the sacred prayer.

There were, of course, accidents—some fatal.
Hot coals thundered to the floor in 1937.

Catherine of Aragon, 1499, witnessed
the best: as she journeyed to marry the heir

to the English throne, the *botafumeiro*, loosed
from its moorings, flew through the *Platerios* high window

out into the wide blue sky. What
must she have thought, as its shattering ascent

left her, like us, among the shards and clouds
to struggle with the miracles of faith?

Sarah Law lives in London and is an Associate Lecturer for the Open University. She has poems in *The Windhover*, *St Katherine Review*, *America*, *Psaltery & Lyre*, *Soul-Lit*, *Heart of Flesh*, *Earth and Altar* and elsewhere. Her latest collection, [*Thérèse: Poems*](#) is published by Paraclete Press. She edits [*Amethyst Review*](#), an online journal for new writing engaging with the sacred.

POETRY

Brian J. Alvarado

the altar ego

i was born to
a mother devout and
a father to be born again—
this alone could not
salvage their union.

i worshipped the lyre
with my brother in soul
as musicians divine—
this could not nullify
his untimely cadenza.

i sat this year submerged
in a world of plagues
with my own bleeding eyes
and a throat of locusts,
unemployed, alone, and
searching earnestly for the
lessons in day-long slumbers

i could sit in hundreds
of pews across multiple
dialects and denominations
as i already have, and will,
chanting your lessons and
voicing your Passions
from the corners of altars,
or from above and out of sight
like temporary seraphim,
where we as musical vessels
of the word are instructed to
put aside our egos and paychecks,
to lead both clergy and congregant
in perfectly human harmony,
lessening the sheer inertia
in enacting these invocations

and therefore bringing them
closer to their own salvations
for that morning hour at least,
and yet i may never truly
understand these mysteries,
whether we're even meant to,
and whether we are to be
taught or tested through
these plights before it's
all no longer temporary

an open pew awaits
until then.

the 20s are about learning

how not to just find the
milk and honey, but how
not to drown in its excess,
losing much more than yourself,
but most importantly, yourself,

how to kick and weave your
once trendy longboard through
unforgiving potholes and detours,
receiving tailwinds gracefully
from the inevitable gusts of change,

how to break bread with the
husk of a host you were given
and will ultimately depart,
in time to celebrate this
insoluble blessing with others,

that angels are both beautiful
and utterly terrifying to behold,
their presence made in the very
overtones and suboctave bellows
generated by our own terrors,

and that every enduring day may be
another plank forward to building
down the walls of a battered heart
and bridging up to healthy love free
of condition nor (mid-life) crisis

Brian ([@wrdsrch](#)) writes and sings. Recent work is featured and/or forthcoming in *Thimble*, *FERAL*, *SHIFT*, *MONO.*, *Sledgehammer*, and *Versification*, among others. He holds a BA in Creative Writing from Susquehanna University. <https://brianalvarado.com/writing>

POETRY

Gretchen Gales

a·poc·a·lypse*/əˈpākəˌlɪps/***noun**

the complete final destruction of the world, as described in the biblical book of Revelation. (Oxford Dictionary)

My father's oversized Michigan State sweatshirt, my lazy go-to winter guard against the dry chill of the first snow. I open the door to a light, yet stinging breeze littered with fresh snowflakes as my dog Ernest yanks his leash in my tight grip.

No backwoods gunshots, no bleating of the neighbor's goat, no barking hunting beagles—just snowflakes going *tick tick* as they land on the polyester of my jacket. As I wait for Ernest to find his “pee-poo” spots, I look upwards and observe the gray sky encasing my white slice of earth. I admire how the snow nests itself on bare trees and hides the shriveled grass. I listen to the swirling of the wind and breathe in its sharp, fresh smell.

I too will dissolve like snow / forbear to shine.

Gretchen is the executive editor of *Quail Bell Magazine* and a secondary English teacher. Her writing and art are collected at writinggales.com.

POETRY

Anthony Butts

Iceberg Effect*—for my bride, who must've known she was dying*

Ninety percent of you had lain beneath waves
 of consciousness in the ICU on the last day
 I would see you, a sharp jerk of your body

in my direction when I told you
 that *we're together in this*: the Arctic feel

of seal flipper in place of the hand I took
 in marriage just one week prior, the eerie isotope
 of lost hope (of myth overridden by Faith: of Orpheus

and Eurydice in Christ in my own poetic
 lines rewound forward through time—

which is not linear, the circles I sensed
 you tracing for my resume paper in my sleep
 before the foreboding ambulance ride to the hospital

and the goodbye notes I was not allowed
 to see). As well as your funeral

as I was on suicide watch after our final
 earthly encounter. It was not a “scout”
 from outer space that entranced me

because you are not merely encased
 in ice; I was almost like the Titanic

before you in the eyes of others
 who cordoned us off and away from
 each other. We were not the prizefighters

they had feared; we are the prize dangling,
 together forever tethered to Heaven.

Anthony Butts has authored three books of poetry. His second book, *Little Low Heaven* (New Issues 2003) won the *Poetry Society of America's* 2004 *William Carlos Williams Award* for best book of poetry. A native Michigander, he currently resides outside Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

POETRY

Robert Funderburk

A New Life

August 1957, your fast ended
When a boy of fifteen
Gave his heart to Jesus.

All that's left is a grassy spot
And one old pine

But I'll forever remember
The little white frame church
And the altar

And that young evangelist
Who cried out to God
For the lost.

Born by coal oil lamplight in a farmhouse near Liberty, Mississippi, graduated from Louisiana State University in 1965, served as SSgt in USAFR from 1965–1971, **Robert Funderburk** now lives with his wife, Barbara, enjoying the peace of their home on fifty acres of wilderness in Olive Branch, Louisiana.

POETRY

John Savoie

In Tenebris

As the year grows old
I still wake at the same
hour, but now I drink
black coffee in the dark,
dark coffee in the murk,
even the best of books,
its broad wings still folded
in sleep, my pen stretched out
in a lingering dream,
each night a little longer,
each dawn a little slower,
as the years grow old,
this waiting on the light.

John Savoie teaches great books at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Best New Poets*, and *Poetry in Motion*.

Cathy Warner

Etta Mae's Jesus

It was mid-September when Jesus first moved in. Etta Mae remembers the day, if not the date, because the pippins were on their way to rotting, and she sent her oldest boy up the ladder with a bucket, while she held the wooden legs steady and battled back the nausea rising in her throat. It was a Friday night because she always made pie on Fridays, and it was 1960 because she was newly pregnant—for the fourth time.

They were eating dessert when Bull shot up from the table and loomed over her, yelling, “Woman, your pie ain’t fit for the chickens!” His face went purple as he glared, balling his free hand into a fist. Etta Mae stared at her aproned lap while Bull turned toward the sink, opened the cabinet under it and slammed his pie along with the plate into the trash. Then he spit and stomped out the door, screen banging hard behind him.

“Don’t mind him,” Etta Mae said, as she sent the three boys into the living room. “You go on and watch TV for a bit.”

She fished Bull’s plate from the trash and placed it on the stack of dirty dishes. She plugged the basin, ran hot water, and pressed her waist up against the porcelain rim. An empty milk glass slipped from her hands and broke. Fishing out pieces from the soapy water, she saw a thin line of pink dripping from her ring finger toward her wrist before she felt the sting of water on her cut. She dropped the broken pieces into the wastebasket atop Bull’s half-eaten pie and wrapped her hand in the dishtowel. She pressed her finger against her ribs, just above her heart, and tried to stop shaking. Bull had been so close to hitting her. This couldn’t go on.

Then came a thought—not a voice—but a question that surely hadn’t come from her: *Why are you persecuting me?*

It could only be Jesus asking, and she answered with her own thought: *I’m not persecuting you.*

But she was met with another question: *Why are you trying to poison your husband?*

Her breath caught. No one knew about the ipecac she kept behind the canned goods. She tried to explain to the Jesus-thought that it wasn't really poison, that she gave Bull just enough to bring on the stomach cramps so he would leave her alone. *I don't care what the Bible says*, she told the Jesus-thought, *I can't submit no more*.

The thought didn't say any more, but it told her, without words, to take the towel from her hand. When Etta Mae did, her cut was gone, and the towel was dry and spotless. Her scalp tingled at the sight, crawling like she had headlice. Her ears began to ring, a wave of dizziness washed through her, and then everything went still as she felt Jesus curl up at the back of her neck, just above her hairline, and fall asleep.

She poured out the ipecac that night. A month later, a train smashed Bull's truck to pieces. A policeman knocked on her door with the news. There was no crossing arm, and Bull was dead before anyone could pull him from the truck. Etta Mae didn't cry over Bull until the boys were asleep and she crawled into the bed she'd shared with Bull, sliding her hand toward the dip in the mattress where he'd slept. Jesus woke up then, and he was so sad, he weighed down her heart, reminding her of how things had been back in the early days before the first baby came. When she was all cried out, Jesus curled up again, leaving her with one last thought: *Bull, if only you'd taken a different road*.

Etta Mae bought a new Chevy wagon with the insurance payout, packed up the kids and set out West on US 50. Jesus began to stir in Carson City, a tingling that ran down Etta Mae's hands until it felt like the steering wheel was on fire, so she pulled off the road, rented an apartment, and enrolled the boys in school. She met Billy, who sold insurance, at First Methodist Church where he sang in the choir. Billy's hands and temper were so much softer than Bull's, so much softer than her own, that Etta Mae found herself down at the courthouse on April 21, 1961, marrying Billy two weeks before Bull's last baby was due.

When he brought them home from the hospital, Billy took the new baby from Etta Mae's arms, pressed the boy's cheek to his own, said, "Welcome home, son," and laid William Jr. in his bassinet. They were mostly happy for the next 30 years, until a heart attack took Billy.

He's been gone a decade, but Etta Mae still worships at the little church on Minnesota Street on Sunday mornings, looking at another baritone sitting in Billy's spot in the choir loft. Jesus loves church, even when the sermons almost put Etta Mae to sleep. He stretches down the length of her back sometimes, like he wants to float her right through the pressed tin ceiling into heaven when everybody's saying the Lord's Prayer. *I'm not flying up in church*, she has to remind Jesus as she smooths down her hair after the "amen." More than one member of the ladies' circle has whispered about Etta Mae's vanity. It's Jesus and the crawly spirit lice, not vanity, but Etta Mae doesn't see how she could possibly say so.

Even after she met Billy, it hadn't all been peach cobbler and hymn songs. Her oldest two boys, terrors of the Sunday school, moved to Vegas after high school and still had too much of Bull's temper for their own good. Over the years, Etta Mae has posted more bail bonds than she cares to recall. Her third son made a career in the Coast Guard, permanently stationed in Alaska. She hasn't seen him since Billy's funeral. And William Jr. lives in San Francisco with another man. Etta Mae calls and writes and has knitted them both rainbow hats and scarves for their special parade. But like the Jesus lice, she keeps all these goings on to herself. The ladies' circle would certainly have something to say on the subject, as they do about all subjects troubling the church.

On this Sunday, the lector read a passage of Jesus saying, "I am the vine," and Etta Mae immediately thought of the ivy hedge Bull never trimmed, how it crept over a rusty outgrown tricycle, a broken lawnmower, car parts she couldn't name, and other junk, until they became part of the hedge. And ivy-vine Jesus had crept over her old rotten life with Bull until all the memories of him were wrapped so tight with Jesus coming to her, that she couldn't have cut them apart if she tried.

Jesus came wide awake this morning when Etta Mae thought about ivy. He filled her head with arms wrapping around someone so tight that love squeezed out everything else. And the hug Jesus planted wasn't for any of Etta Mae's sons, but for Rita, a woman Etta Mae didn't always think kindly of. It wasn't a secret that Rita had run around with Spencer while her husband was dying of cancer. Now Rita was living with Spencer. Every now and then, Etta Mae came across them at the Raley's with a shopping cart too full of jug-sized booze, and his voice would remind her of Bull for an instant. The Sunday before the ivy reading, Rita, wearing a pair of too big sunglasses, sat across the aisle from Etta Mae. When they shook hands at greeting time, Rita waved at her glasses, said she had

a migraine, and managed a sheepish smile. But on this vine-morning, Rita, wearing those sunglasses again, sat down right next to Etta Mae. With only Rita's purse on the bench between them, Etta Mae could feel sadness seeping off Rita as powerful as the smell of baking pie from the oven.

After the scriptures came the sermon, and after that came the time of joys and concerns when members of the congregation asked for prayers: for victims of hurricanes and hunger if they were feeling broad minded; for weddings and births if they wanted good news on a day of too much bad; for their new car or dentures if they were the kind who prayed for such things. Often the joys and concerns dragged on so long the Sunday School kids could be heard racing through the fellowship hall toward the cookies and lemonade. Noon would come and go, and stomachs would growl as perked coffee odor wafted into the sanctuary. Every few months some parishioners would complain, and the church council would toss out ideas like returning to days of written prayer slips, or to lists of names in the bulletin, but they were always torn between minding the clock and allowing the Spirit to move as it would.

That particular Sunday, the ivy-loving Jesus, who was squarely in the spirit-moving camp, spun inside Etta Mae full force. She had never before stood up, had never asked for prayer, but Jesus pushed her out of the pew on wobbly legs as she blurted, "Jesus asked me to pray for Rita." White hot and dizzy, she held out her hand to Rita, who, to Etta Mae's surprise, took it and stood up next to her. Then Etta Mae pressed against Rita until there was no space between them from shoulder to knee, just polyester and cotton, heat and pressure. Jesus-energy flooded through Etta Mae like an electric circuit as Rita's stiff back loosened and her hard arms curled around Etta Mae, and both women pressed damp chins into each other's shoulders.

Etta Mae heard the melody of Reverend Henderson's voice, but couldn't make out words over her pounding pulse. Soon she heard rustling as the congregation circled around her and Rita. Buzzing with current, hands rested on her back and shoulders. Only their weight kept her from floating to the ceiling, as prayers jumbled with smells of shampoo, perfume, and coffee breath. Then the room went quiet except for their breath. Etta Mae opened her eyes for a moment and saw Rita's bowed head, the black eye visible in the gap behind her sunglasses. She held Rita tighter. Jesus was perfectly happy then, and he settled back down, purring like a cat in a sunny windowsill.

Finally Reverend Henderson broke the spell with a soft, “Amen.” The people slowly peeled away leaving Rita and Etta Mae in an embrace, blessing still hot on their skin.

Cathy Warner is author of *Home By Another Road*, and *Burnt Offerings*, and editor of *Poemographs*, and *Viral Verse: Poetry of the Pandemic*. Her writing has appeared in dozens of publications. She lives, writes, sells real estate, worships, and renovates homes in Western Washington. Find her at cathywarner.com.

FICTION

Ed Davis

Visitation

Today, Easter Sunday morning, 2010, I am going to see the woman who carried me in her stomach for seven and a half months, then delivered me—first, to the incubator, then to my foster mother, Mary Birdsong—and I will try to call her Mother.

The lot behind The Pines is full, and for just a moment I'm so relieved I shout, *Praise Him!*—but only in my head. I can backtrack to Trinity, wait till Sunday school is over and sneak into worship. But, as if it's on autopilot, the Lincoln pulls into an open space on the street. Closing my eyes, I again see, clear as Trinity's steeple, Jesus as he stood in the glow of the angel nightlight at the foot of my bed last Tuesday. My Lord of Hosts stood there, big as life, in his blue and maroon velvet robe—so soft!—reaching out his hand in the friendliest way.

"Your mother," the Master said. "Go to her."

I never did get back to sleep. I called Carl in Seattle on Wednesday, and my big brother agrees it would be good for me and good for her. Maybe he knows best; after all, she raised *him*.

Forgive me, Lord. All I can think of right now is how I'd be skeptical of anyone who told me they had such a vision. I blush with shame right here in my deceased husband's Towne Car, and my hands are sweaty on the wheel. *You're a selfish woman, Sophora. How can you call yourself a Christian?* But then I remember Merle saying, "The opposite of faith isn't doubt, Soph. It's certainty. When you're not certain, then you're operating on faith." Opening my eyes, I say it aloud: "I believe, Lord. Help my unbelief."

I dab my eyes with a tissue. *Oh, honey, why did you have to go before me?* I look around and see not a soul on the street before adding, "Bless you, my Barnabus. I will try to have faith today."

I stare up at the old hospital-now-nursing home. Then I haul myself out of the car, take three steps and go back. I have forgotten the donuts Carl said to take her—Carl who visits her as often as he can, considering his work took him to California; Carl who had his own vision in the rain, stink and mud of Vietnam and decided to get in touch with the little sister he'd hardly known. Bless his heart, he's stayed in touch with me ever since.

He said be sure to take her the white-powdered ones or she'll be mad. *Let her. When did she ever care about what I wanted?* All I know is she had a mental break-down in her twenties, another in her forties, hospitalization for a while, then a series of private assisted-living arrangements until Carl finally put her here. That was fourteen years ago—and this is my first visit despite living in the same West Virginia town with her. Not a soul at Trinity Methodist knows she exists. *Why not, Sophora?* That voice is Merle's, asking me now what my sweet husband never asked me in life, not after the first time when I'd screamed, cried and consigned her to the devil. Sweet Merle, raised by agnostics, who never said a bad word about anyone.

I reach out to the parking meter to steady myself. Like that, I'm back on my knees in that horrible bathroom (the only place in that house where I could be alone), crying till I thought I might pass out. It was my tenth birthday—I'd made up a story in my head that my momma, my *real* momma, would attend a birthday so important. I knew better than to let it slip, but I did, just as my foster mother slapped down in front of me a piece of her pound cake that was tougher than the cube steak she made on special occasions. She leaned down close to my ear and whispered, her breath warm and sour, "Your momma's dead as far as you're concerned."

And I hated her—not the woman who required silence and obedience and "no sniveling, ever." No, I hated the woman who put me here and never came back to get me.

Moving forward again, I take smaller steps. *Should I go back home?* But in my mind's eyes, I see my Lord's eyes, sad as that surgeon who said that awful thing to me last year. My master's hand is still outstretched, so I take it for a sign and walk on.

I enter the basement level, just like Carl said I should, and there's the sign-in book. I'm tempted to ignore it, but my big brother made a big to-do about it; "Lets them know that she's not been abandoned."

Abandoned. Well, we won't go there, will we? Mary Birdsong was no prize, but I almost never envied Carl for living with our real mother. I visited them once. Cockroaches and dust-bunnies. I knew why we were there; Mary Birdsong needed her to sign a paper. I knew my mother was signing me away, even though my guardian didn't tell me in so many words. Now I sign my name so they'll know (whoever *they* are): Sophora Brown Lawson. *Her* name, the woman upstairs. And the time: 10:17. I'll be out of here well before church starts.

Aged residents line the narrow corridor, some in wheelchairs. I imagine Carl, smiling and glad-handing like the insurance salesman that he still is, when he used to visit us every Thanksgiving, him and Merle talking business and swapping sports scores in the den while I made the meal. Now I eat out on every holiday, usually alone.

Keeping my eyes straight ahead, I follow the signs to the elevator, pleased to find the hallway so bright and clean. No one speaks to me nor I to them, though I feel their eyes on me. I imagine Jesus among lepers. They touch that maroon robe as he passes through them as he would a field of withered flowers. He neither stops nor acknowledges any individual but does smile, his blue eyes bright with purpose. *The poor, the lame, the elderly and the Alzheimered are always with you, but the Son of Man must go away.*

Then comes a voice in my head, and, sure as the world, it's Merle's, saying, "It's not the Lord that's aloof from these folks' suffering; it's *you*, Sophora Lawson." It hits me so hard that I take a breath and stop in front of a woman so slight I'm sure I could carry her up three flights. Her mouth is drawn like a purse and one side sags (stroke?). I bend and touch her arm. There's no more flesh on it than a chicken wing.

"How are you today, hon?" I ask, smiling, less like the Jesus in my head than Carl, with his actuarials and annuities. She squints at me, as if assessing, then says, her tongue working empty gums. "You're an angel!"

I blush—the last thing I want is attention, but it does please me. "Oh, sweetie, it may be Easter Sunday"—I'm aware now that I'm speaking to all the lined-up ones—"but I'm no angel, not even close."

Now she's pointing, the bluish finger trembling. "You're the angel o' death."

I stand back up so fast, I nearly knock over a tiny man with a cane in my haste to make it to the elevator without stumbling. When the bell dings for the third floor, I come to—or come back from where I’d gone for several seconds. The little woman’s “angel ‘o death” took me back to Mary Birdsong’s Apostolic Church, where I’d never been comfortable, where shouting, crying, endless testifying and what I’d call dancing went on, along with sermons shouted at the congregation about devils as real as burglars and kidnappers, demons whose only purpose was to catch you in their talons—“one slip is all they need”—and hurl you into hell for eternity. Mary Birdsong was still warm in her grave when I moved my membership to Merle’s church, where I stayed for thirteen years before finding a new home at Trinity after he died.

The hallway is empty and well-lit with prints of oil paintings on the wall: scenes of fields, barnyards, creeks, rivers and mountains—all that’s denied to these residents now. I poke my head into the lounge—empty—with a large flat-screen, games, bookcase full of books and board games. A gray-haired woman grins back from the opposite wall. I return her smile before I realize it’s my own reflection in a gilt-edged mirror.

Now the woman in the mirror is frowning, looking old as Methuselah. They are the eyes of shame, making me feel Mary Birdsong’s scolding gaze: for not paying attention, for asking too many questions, for laughing and giggling with Karen Hightower from next door. She shouted, “You girls have diarrhea of the mouth!” from the kitchen one day when we were cutting out paper-dolls in my room. Karen turned red as blood and got real quiet. I hung my head and didn’t look up for the longest time. My only friend left soon afterward and never came back. Now I close my eyes in prayer.

“Dear Heavenly Father,” I say. “Forgive me for being so selfish and ungrateful. Mary Birdsong took me in, although she was poor and had little enough to give her own two sons. Thank you for the roof over my head. We never had plenty, but we had enough.”

Not of everything. Keeping my eyes closed, I continue, trying for calmness. “And forgive me for denying all these years that the woman inside these walls is my mother. Oh, I’ve known—known and chose to mostly deny it till you came to remind me.”

But why now? Is it that I can’t otherwise call myself Christian? No. I just can’t stand to lose anybody else. I know—it doesn’t make sense if you never had them in the first place—but there it is, Lord. *You* understand.

I watch my eyes until they turn back to normal sad, or not even that—just dull, like somebody shopping for clothes for a school child. *Shall we think about the babies you never bore, Sophora, your selfishness?* But not even that old tune gets a rise from me today. Sorry, Lord, but I don't have to enjoy doing your will. (At this point in our relationship, He's heard everything and can take it.) I turn and head down the hallway, where Carl told me to go.

Standing outside her door, I stare, horrified, at the photo beneath her name. She was a stunning beauty in high school (Mary Birdsong kept those pictures to torture me, studying my face for signs of grief whenever she'd get them out). I'm considering fleeing when I hear someone coming. When I turn, I see a black woman standing in front of the next room holding a pile of linens. Feeling ridiculous, I wave at her before knocking. The loud voice from within the room startles me. "Come in!" I glance back down the hall, but the housekeeper's disappeared. Taking a deep breath, I open the door.

She sits perched on the edge of her bed, looking both better and worse than the photo: elfin, frail, shrunk. But her eyes are alight. Who or what is she waiting for?

"Hi!" She gives me a toothless, too-friendly smile—she surely doesn't recognize me. I grin back. I could so easily pretend to be somebody else, say a few words and leave. (But *He'd* know.)

"Hello, there," I reply, stalling. "How are you?"

She pats the bed beside her. Her dark eyes are alert, although Carl said they overmedicate her to the point of drooling sometimes. Not today.

After closing the door, I lower myself to the bed gently—am I afraid it'll collapse with my extra fifteen extra pounds since my hysterectomy? Insanely, I think it's *me* that might break, as if I'm inside her body. She is even frailer than the woman in the wheelchair downstairs, making me feel like a whale beside her. Her white hair is pitifully thin, showing her pink scalp, and blue veins are visible beneath the skin of her forehead. Her fingers, when she squeezes mine, are so cold that I imagine gnarly bird feet. The sunlit room is stifling. She continues to smile at me. *Okay, Jesus, you can take it from here.* Then I remember the donuts.

Reaching into my canvas bag, I pull them out. “Look what I brought you.” Her face doesn’t change—did I get the right kind? “They’re white-powdered. Carl says you like—”

She grabs the box and begins furiously tearing at it. I consider helping her but wonder if she might bite me, or growl if I did. She rips off an end panel and shakes one of the big white ovals onto the flowered lap of her smock, scattering snowy powder. Seizing it, she lifts it to her mouth and takes a huge bite, chews and swallows quickly, then takes another. She doesn’t slow down till it’s gone, and she starts on another. At first I’m shocked, then humbled. Surely sweet things are not so scarce here. Does my bringing them make them special?

I resist the urge to wipe white powder off her chin and nose. It makes me imagine her as a little girl (Mary gave me one of her baby pictures—I tore it up to spite her.) What had her life been like, really, since then? *Nervous breakdown.* Those two words, oft repeated by Mary Birdsong like something unholy, always sounded like a jail door clanging shut. I shuddered in my soul, thinking there was nothing worse. Until now. A fly on the wall above us, I see myself, heavy woman on the verge of old age. I’m seeing this place as a real hospital once again, and I see that surgeon stroking my hand, smiling as if speaking to a child. *Don’t worry; we’ll clean you out good.*

“Want one?”

My mouth is opening to say no when she thrusts a half-donut under my nose, so close I can smell the fried dough and sugar. I have not eaten a donut—or potato chip or French fry or fish stick for...I can’t recall. Her eyes flash a challenge. The disgusting thing is now so close to my mouth, I taste the sugar on my lips without licking. *Will you break bread or not?* (Jesus or Merle speaking?)

She is retreating inside herself, I see, shoulders rising ever so slightly, turtling within to the place she was before I entered. I don’t want her to go, and I see I’ve got only seconds before she’s what Carl calls “Zombieville.”

“Mmm, good,” I say and take the box, reach in and tweeze out another one of the disgusting things. She groans softly as I bring it slowly toward her mouth, but she doesn’t open for it.

"I'm Sophora Brown Lawson," I say, "your daughter. It's Easter and I want to give you this. Please eat it."

She just stares. No sign of recognition, her friendliness gone. I lower my hand to my lap. "I don't want anything from you. I've only come to—" *This ought to be good.* "I've come to show you that I'm fine, that everything is so..." *Fine? Bravo, Sophora.*

I can't say any more. My throat has turned into fever blisters. Heat blazes in my cheeks. Oh, how I wish you'd been there, I want to say, when I almost died from whooping cough or the time that nail went through my foot ("Walk it off," Mary B. said while both her boys laughed); or when I asked Larry Newcomer to the Sadie Hawkins Day dance and he just walked away. I could have used you to talk to when I got my period that day and she screamed at me for bloodying her sheets, when Karen Hightower started leaving before I did to walk to school with Jody Baker.

I have to glance away for a moment, so I won't cry. When I turn back, I see her hand slowly rising toward me. Her stare has become unnerving. I can't imagine what she sees. She begins to stroke my cheek exactly as if I were a new-born preemie, a tiny spark that might ember out completely if you breathe on it too hard. I realize I'm holding my breath and start to exhale when the door opens and there stands the housekeeper bearing her bundle of linens. Her eyes go wide, but she recovers quickly. "I'm so sorry, ma'am. I'll just come back when—"

"Please come in," I say, turning to see if the woman's presence changes anything, but my mother is just staring at me, oblivious to the interruption. I see the housekeeper's eyes take in my mother's chin and lips dusted with powder, the mangled box, her messy dress. But I will not succumb to shame. I take her cold hand between my two warm ones.

"Mama's hungry, and I'm feeding her."

"Now ain't that somethin'." Humming, the woman squeezes past and enters the bathroom. My mother's mouth opens, eyes widen. She's almost panting, trying to speak. I wait.

"Mmmmm...Mama."

My heart thumps loudly in my ears. I'm not sure I've heard it right till she says it again.

“Mama,” I whisper back then louder, not caring if the woman in the bathroom hears us.

My mother is grinning now, and we sit in friendly silence till the housekeeper has gone and I’ve given up on trying to sneak into church. *The table is laid before you now.*

She fumbles a donut out of the box, slowly reaches it to my lips. I open, she gently slides it in an inch and I bite down, detonating sugar nukes all through my mouth. I chew, swallow and am about to speak, but I never hear what I would’ve said, because she’s holding the nub of dough against my mouth again. This time my lips graze her fingers, and before she pulls back I smell (and taste) perfumed soap. And something else, something bitter, almost musky, and I find myself liking it way better than the cottony confection. I close my eyes. If her scent were liquid, I would drink it down to its dregs.

Ed Davis has immersed himself in writing and contemplative practices since retiring from college teaching. *Time of the Light*, a poetry collection, was released by Main Street Rag Press in 2013. His latest novel, *The Psalms of Israel Jones* (West Virginia University Press 2014), won the Hackney Award for an unpublished novel in 2010. Many of his stories, essays and poems have appeared in anthologies and journals such as *Leaping Clear*, *Metafore*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and *Bacopa Literary Review*. He lives with his wife in the bucolic village of Yellow Springs, Ohio, where he bikes, hikes, meditates and reads religiously.

FICTION

Kenneth Levine

Life Beats

In the labor, delivery, and recovery room (LDR), twenty-five-year-old Steve cradles Tom's tooshie with his left hand and the infant's head with his right. Face to face for the first time, Steve sees a dimple in front of his son's left ear and white bumps that look like little pimples on his forehead that have sprouted through fine, soft hair that also covers his scalp and cheeks. Nevertheless, what he enfolds in his arms is the essence of beauty. Stirred by an explosion of tenderness, a tightening bond of love, Steve blinks away a tear of happiness.

Steve's right hand discovers and caresses a diamond-shaped, soft area at the top of Tom's head. His hand lingers there, absorbing the pulsing of blood that corresponds to the baby's heartbeat, the pitter patter of their first communication. His heart rate accelerates, synchronizing to the rapid rhythm of the boy's, at 136 BPM he figures, and their hearts begin to beat as one.

Steve lifts Tom skyward. It's effortless; a five-pound dumbbell weighs more. He holds his ear against Tom's chest and listens. *Lub dub, lub dub, lub dub, lub dub*. So clear. Persistent. Beautiful. Music. The music of life. *Lub dub, lub dub, lub dub, lub dub*. He will always recollect and play this song. Tom's song.

Steve returns Tom to Helen. There in the LDR bed, in her patient gown, her hair disheveled, sweat drying on her forehead, and her eyelids heavy with exhaustion, his wife is the most beautiful woman he has ever seen. But her eyes study him, and in them he sees anger. Or is it distrust? Doubt? Inside his head he plays Tom's song, *lub dub, lub dub, lub dub, lub dub*, while he watches them together. It's a song of love. Innocence. Hope. *Lub dub, lub dub, lub dub, lub dub*. It beats away all his sins. It's a song of redemption.

Fifty-year-old Steve is part of a jazz quartet, which will start its performance in one hour. The performing art center's doors haven't

opened yet, and he sits behind his drum set, alone on the stage, on Tom's twenty-fifth birthday and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the day Steve became drug and alcohol free. It's a milestone: twenty-five years of life with a constant, steady tempo; a good life abundant with family, community, and faith, not the erratic, rushing rhythms of his drug-and-alcohol-addled past.

Steve's bandmates are probably finishing their drinks at some local bar, but their piano, saxophone, and bass stand in front of him. He doubts they use their instruments as a medium for prayer, like he uses his, but wonders if their instruments are stand-in family members to them, like his drum set is to him. Steve considers his drum set a part of his being, an extension of himself, like the music he makes with it. Each of the bass drum, floor tom, tom-toms, snare drum, and crash, ride, and hi-hat cymbals is his partner, irreplaceable and with its own unique personality, and when played individually, or in any combination, gives rise to Steve's musical voice. When Steve performs at different venues throughout New England, his relationship with his drum set and the music it creates makes the absence of Helen, Tom, and Marge—Steve and Helen's daughter, two years younger than Tom—almost bearable.

Tonight, like every other time he's seated behind his tuned and polished drum set, cymbals shining, he hears, *lub dub, lub dub, lub dub, lub dub*, inside his head. Tom's song, an ostinato in the form of a motif with a persistent rhythmic pattern: four-four time, four beats per bar, at a tempo of 136 BPM, meaning one beat every .4412 second and each bar lasting 1.7647 seconds. When the beat resounds in his bones, from skull to phalanges, he picks up the drum sticks and chooses to play Tom's song as a jazz ostinato. On each beat, he hits the ride cymbal, and, with heel up, a soft bass drum, so quietly that he feels the drum sound as a whisper against his skin more than he hears it. On each even beat, he steps on the hi-hat pedal, closing the cymbals together and creating a "chick" sound, which, if his bandmates were beside him, would keep them in time. Now he hears Miles Davis' song, *So What*, in his head, at the song's tempo of 136 BPM, the same as Tom's song, and plays along with it, taking the place of Davis' drummer, Jimmy Cobb, and adding the snare and the floor and other toms and the ride and crash cymbals to create its rhythm, with Tom's song still beating in his head and on the ride cymbal, bass drum, and hi-hat.

The sound fills the stage and reverberates throughout the building. It rises to the heavens, like a dove in ascendant flight. Whether he plays Tom's song on the drums in his garage or in a music hall, or it taps inside him, the venue transforms into a cathedral, and he's transported back to the

moment he lost himself in the matching rhythm of his and Tom's hearts, only to find himself remade and in communion with his son and God the Father of our mercies.

Seventy-five-year-old Steve lies bedbound in hospice. Cancer was discovered in his pancreas and liver and metastasized to his lungs, bones, and other organs. Tom and Marge sit in bedside vigil, observing and awaiting the inevitable, in a room very much like the room in which Steve first held newborn Tom. Both had a bed, a nightstand, a cabinet, several chairs, and an aura of expectation, the notion that the lives of the occupants who leave the room would be markedly different from those they led before they entered it. It's late afternoon, and Tom and Marge have been watching and waiting since early morning when the priest performed last rites.

Steve has spent the day in and out of consciousness under heavy sedation. When sentient, he yearns for his own demise; he had hoped to spare his children a lengthy, agonizing death watch. With mounting impatience, he longs to soothe his teary-eyed son and daughter, but the words he forms, "You've been wonderful children. I couldn't have asked for a better life than to spend it with you and your mother. Don't be sad. I'm ready to go now, whenever Christ is ready to receive me," can't find his tongue. He aches to reach out, to heal their pain with the touch of his hands, but his limbs defy his commands. He tries to arch his lips and eyebrows and narrow the upside-down crescent moons of his eyes, to change his face into a mask of comedy that conceals the visage of tragedy he thinks must be on display. He wants to demonstrate to his children that he isn't in pain, or even uncomfortable, that he's accepted his circumstance in good humor, but the paralysis that has stilled his limbs exists in his face and every other part of his body. He can't even dam the tears that begin to slide down the creases in his face. Then for the fifth time his breathing stops involuntarily, and again the shrill cry of Marge crushes the silence that fills the room, followed by his sudden gasp of air and the aftermath of rapid and deep breathing accompanied by the guttural noise of the death rattle.

Tom lays his hand on Steve's arm, and Tom's wrist at the base of his thumb comes in contact with Steve's flesh. When Steve feels the rhythm of Tom's radial pulse, he hears Tom's song, *lub dub, lub dub, lub dub, lub dub*, inside his head at the tempo of 136 BPM, not the slower pulse of his adult son. Tom's song finds Steve's heart, which races to catch up, running at full throttle, lagging behind, but gaining, reaching for that final

moment of synchronicity, of becoming one again with the newborn who made him whole and brought him to God.

Steve enjoys a sudden surge of energy. He fantasizes he might be strong enough to get out of bed and leave the hospice. But what would be gained? Helen died ten years ago, and he can't play the drums anymore because his fingers are too gnarled to hold the drumsticks. Helen and the drums—without them he's certain she wouldn't have married him, there would have been no Tom or Marge, and he wouldn't have found God. He had been inarticulate in the spoken language of love, but had wooed and charmed her, and, even before their physical consummation, entered and made love to her with the beats, tones, and cadences of his music. Now she and the drums illuminate the past, and in the present, all that matters to him, Tom and Marge, sit in the room beside him.

Tom sobs. Marge, crying too, sidles next to Tom and rests her hand on Tom's shoulder. Then she lays the side of her head on Steve's chest.

When Steve feels Marge's temporal pulse, it's an accelerant to the fire already lit in Steve's heart. Steve's heart rages, running faster, a sixteenth, then thirty-second, note behind the beat of Tom's song, *lub dub, lub dub, lub dub, lub dub*, then finally catching and running beside it, his heart opening, reaching out to newborn Tom's, and finding and luxuriating in the presence of Christ and His open arms, his heart soaring, *lub dub, lub dub, lub*.

Kenneth Levine's short stories have been published in *New Plains Review*, *Maryland Literary Review*, *Crooked Teeth Literary Magazine*, *Anak Sastra*, *Thuglit*, *Imaginaire*, *Skewed Lit*, *Angry Old Man Magazine*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, and anthologies titled *Fresh* and *Twisted*. He's the winner of a Jerry Jazz Musician short story contest.

FICTION

Isaac Fox

Enlightenment

Dr. Susan Campbell is a professor of cultural studies at Duke. She spends her days trying to teach people about each other so that they might, hopefully, learn to live together civilly.

Last night, she watched war coverage until her eyes watered and turned red, and then she got drunk and screamed at God. Screamed at Him to make us all *understand*, to let everyone know all that He knew, if that's what it would take to end the killing. And God said, *I will give you my knowledge*.

She's waking up now, and she knows how the universe was made. She knows exactly how many blades of grass are in her yard and their sizes and shapes and what they taste like to deer (there are 36 deer within five miles of her, 72 bright eyes, 72 fuzzy ears, another eight antlered skulls bleaching on the sun-pounded ground) and how Kentucky bluegrass processes nutrients and water and the species of each individual insect crawling among the grass and every dimple of the egg it emerged from and every scrap of crisp leaf and warm flesh it has eaten in its life and the chemical composition of every square inch of her house and what dying stars each of those chemicals came from and how slowly those stars erupted and how the ways their light reflected from asteroids and planets and moons changed as they aged and an exact catalogue of every life each one of them sustained. She rolls out of bed and wobbles to the bathroom. She maps the maze of pipes and drains attached to her toilet, hears the voice of the man who invented toilets, remembers every detail of his sex life. She feels like crap (which she knows the exact bacterial composition of—hers, yours, everyone's), and she doesn't know which sensations are from the hangover and which are from the knowledge.

She totters out into the living room and hears her TV, still blaring war coverage. She feels everything each victim feels as they die.

And God lets her forget.

Isaac Fox is a student at Lebanon Valley College, where he studies English and creative writing. He spends his free time reading and writing things that aren't assigned, shooting pictures, and playing the clarinet. His work has previously appeared in *Green Blotter* and *Rune Bear*. You can find him on Twitter at @IsaacFo80415188.

FICTION

Matt Hollingsworth

The Other Vincent

The members of our house church had left and Mishel and I were cleaning our apartment when my clone arrived.

I opened the door and my clone stumbled into my arms, dropping his glass bottle which clanked to the floor as he sobbed into my shoulder.

Not knowing what else to do, I hugged him back, saying, “It’s okay. Everything’s okay.” I helped him inside and sat him on the couch at the center of our modest living room. I mouthed to Mishel to close the door. We didn’t need the neighbors questioning the identical looking stranger. I held his head as he cried into my chest. He smelled like vomit and liquor.

He mumbled something.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Connie’s dead.”

It took Mishel and me nearly an hour to get the other Vincent calm. He passed out on our couch, and we covered him with a blanket. He wouldn’t say another word about Connie.

When he was asleep, Mishel said in her Spanish accent, “I’m so sorry.” She knew all about my clone—though she’d never seen him before—about the accident, about Connie. She hugged me. “I wish I knew what to say.”

“It’s been a long time.”

“She was your wife.”

“I said I’m fine!” I shook my head. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have snapped like that.” I brushed her dark hair. “I just need a minute.” She nodded understandingly and disappeared into our bedroom, leaving me with the clone.

I hadn’t seen Connie since the accident over five years ago. We were never certain what had happened. Our best guess was that the experiment had sent one of us microseconds back in time, creating temporal duplicates (which would mean we weren’t technically clones, but the word made things easier). Either way, we couldn’t determine which Vincent was the original—if one of us could even meaningfully be called the original. We knew we couldn’t go public, or we’d probably be shipped off to some government facility. One of us would have to go into hiding, start a new life. With no better option, we played a game of chess, winner take all. He went home to Connie. I left for South America. I hadn’t seen anyone from my old life since.

I sat beside the other Vincent. It was uncomfortable, staring at my own drunk, unconscious face. He was heavier than me, paler too living in Tennessee while I was in Quito, Ecuador. He looked like he hadn’t shaved in days.

I knelt to pray.

“Father—” Father, what? What was I even supposed to say? My eyes stung, and I reflexively bit my lip to keep from crying.

Connie’s dead.

“Lord Jesus, be with me.” But I felt alone.

I spent the night in the chair beside the other Vincent. The nearby window offered a beautiful view of rows of houses running up the slopes on either side of the city. I stared out, trying not to think about Connie, but eventually I gave in. I got out my phone and went to her Facebook page. Friends and family members had left posts grieving the loss, reminiscing about fond memories. She looked so much older than when I’d last seen her. Her red hair had faded grey. I couldn’t look for long.

I woke to my clone helping himself to the coffee maker while massaging his temples.

“Good morning,” he said. “Sorry about barging in on you last night. At least I think I barged in. Pretty hazy. I needed a drink before I could see you, and I got carried away.”

“Why are you here?”

He closed his eyes, exhaling. “Vincent, Connie is...”

“You told me. But why come here?”

He stared like I’d just asked the color of the sky. “Because you’re the only one who understands. Because we share memories before the accident, so I know you loved her too.” He poured a cup of coffee, spilling some onto the counter, then collapsed onto the couch beside me. “I just don’t know what I’m going to do.”

I wanted to tell him that he could leave me alone, that he couldn’t just show up whenever he wanted. But, of course, I wasn’t going to say that.

“How did it happen?” I asked.

He tapped his chest. “Heart.”

Mishel entered from the bedroom. The clone’s eyes widened.

“Hello there,” the clone said. “I’m sure you must be confused. I’m...”

“She knows.” I motioned to her. “Vincent, this is my wife, Mishel.”

“You got married again?” he asked.

“It’s been five years.”

“I know it’s just...”

We were silent for a moment.

“I’m very sorry about your wife,” Mishel said.

“Thank you,” the other Vincent said. “Where’s your shower?” His smell had been nearly making me gag, so I pointed.

When he was gone, Mishel said, “We should let him stay as long as he needs.”

“But if someone sees him...”

“We’ll say he’s your twin. Love your neighbor as yourself. And in this case, your neighbor is yourself.”

“I just remember what I was like before I came here,” I said. “Part of me was anxious to get away from him. He reflected everything I hated about myself.”

“If you could change, maybe he changed, too. Besides, he just lost his wife. And so did you.” She touched my shoulder. “It’s okay to grieve. You know I’m here for you.”

I nodded, but there were things about Connie that I wasn’t ready to discuss.

“I don’t trust him.”

“We don’t have to. We just have to love him. Try talking to him. He needs you. He wouldn’t have flown 4,000 kilometers if he didn’t.”

My clone emerged wearing my clothes. Mishel had left for work, so we were alone.

“What’s with the cross?” He motioned to my necklace.

“I became a Christian.”

He looked like I’d just said I’d become a flat-earther. “We’re scientists.”

“I know.”

He chuckled. “Fine. If that helps you deal with life.” I cringed.

I'd never been good about opening up or talking about things that didn't have graphs and hard numbers attached. But I had to try.

"Vincent, do you want to talk about Connie?" I asked.

He frowned. "She was the light of my life, the most beautiful woman I've ever met."

I fought a scowl. Those were the same empty nothings I'd used when I was trying to cover up a fight.

"You remember meeting her?" I asked.

"Sophomore year anatomy. First day."

"That monkey in lab almost bit my finger off, remember?" I said. He attempted a smile.

"I wanted to ask her out right then."

"I feel so bad for the way I treated her," I said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I constantly ignored her, putting work first. I wanted that stupid prize so badly."

"Our work was important. It could—it has—helped people."

"I know, but still. Do you remember what I—what we—said to her that night after Thanksgiving?" It was clear from his expression that he did. "I'm not saying our work wasn't important, just that we could have been a better husband."

"Speak for yourself."

"You don't regret any of the things you—we—said? We almost missed our wedding because we were busy checking the effects of radiation on moss."

"That research was more important than some ceremony."

“Was it more important than your wife? You know the thoughts we had about her. We thought she was holding us back.”

“Well maybe she was.”

I almost hit him. It was like seeing my past self. All the arrogance, that smug superiority that made me think I was Prometheus, fetching fire for the poor mortals.

“You haven’t changed a bit, have you?”

“Oh, and you have? Fly down to Ecuador and go native. Find Jesus.” He rolled his eyes. “You know, maybe I like who I am. Maybe it’s Connie who has—had—the problem, not me.”

I punched him, and he stumbled to the floor, cradling his jaw. My knuckles throbbed. I didn’t know who I hated more: him or me.

The clone glared. “So much for turn the other cheek.” He stood, spat blood onto the carpet and marched out, slamming the door behind him.

I didn’t even have time to process the anger before the phone rang. I reached for mine before realizing it was the other Vincent’s. I shouldn’t have answered, but I was so angry.

“Hello.”

“The report is in.” It was my—more accurately, my clone’s—lawyer. “The police confirmed that it was a suicide.”

I almost dropped the phone.

“What?”

“The gunshot matched up or something. I didn’t understand all the technical details, but you can come back now. Why’d you go anyway? Running just makes people look guilty.”

“So, you’re telling me that my wife committed suicide, and the police have been investigating me for murder?”

“Are you okay?”

I hung up.

The clone returned an hour later.

The moment he stepped through the door, I asked, “Did you kill Connie?” My hands were clenched into fists. The clone glanced at his phone beside me.

“Did someone call?”

“Did you kill her?”

“Of course not! Who do you think I am?” His head dipped. “She grew distant. I tried to get her to talk to me, but...”

“The lawyer said you came here to hide.”

“I came here to talk. I thought you’d understand.”

I shot to my feet. “Stop lying to me!”

He raised his hands, taking a step back. “Okay, the neighbors heard us arguing the night before, and I didn’t trust the police. But I promise, I never touched her.”

In that moment, I could have killed him. Grabbed a knife from the kitchen and stabbed him. As if killing him would kill the darkness in my own heart.

“Get out!”

“Vincent...”

“Leave!”

He left.

I sank to the floor and cried.

When Mishel got back, I told her everything.

“He drove his wife to suicide,” I said. “I would hate him except he’s me. So maybe I should hate both of us. If he could do that to her, that means I could do it to you.”

“You are a wonderful husband. You would never hurt me.”

“When he told me, I almost killed him. That’s who I am.”

She held me. “You’re a child of God. That’s who you are. Clean and forgiven.”

By the next morning, I knew what I needed to do.

It took me hours to find the clone in a small hotel near the center of the city. Even after five years, I still wasn’t used Quito’s thin air caused by the high elevation. I was breathing hard as I reached his room. I knocked and he opened the door. His jaw was swollen and bruised.

“Come to finish the job?” he asked.

“I’m sorry for hitting you and for what I said. May I come in?” He kept his eye on me but stepped aside, and we sat down across from each other.

“When I lost that chess game,” I began, “I thought my life was over. I lost my family, my work, my prestige. Everything. I contemplated suicide. But all that time God was preparing me.”

Salty tears ran down my cheeks into my mouth. “We’ve both lost her now. I wish I could have done things differently. I wish I could have apologized, but it’s too late. But it’s not too late for everything. God helped me. Maybe he can help you, too.”

“Your God wouldn’t want me.”

“Of course he would. He took me, and I am you.”

He shook his head.

“Please stay with me,” I said. “For as long as you need. I want to help you.”

“Your religion is a lie, and I don’t need help. Go away.” His expression was fixed.

“Please, Vincent, I...”

“Go away!”

I nodded. “All right.”

I walked out, and when I was in the hallway, I wept.

I wept for Connie, my wife who I loved. I wept for the darkness of my own heart, for what I was capable of. And I wept for the other Vincent.

For years, I’d thought I’d lost that chess game, but I’d won. I could have been him, ignoring Connie, neglecting her, and who knows what else.

I didn’t believe in chance anymore, but why had God worked in me and not in him? I had no answer. All I could do was rejoice in gratitude for God’s mercy and weep for the other Vincent.

Rejoice and weep.

Matt Hollingsworth is an author, freelance editor, and English tutor from Knoxville, TN. He has a short story forthcoming in an anthology from Owl Hollow Press. He enjoys discussing C. S. Lewis books and *Delighting in the Trinity* by Michael Reeves. Follow his blog at <https://jmhollingsworthblog.wordpress.com/>.

Troy Pancake

Jonas

The monster's hairs weren't really hairs at all, but its skin thinned and curved to a fine point, almost like quills. Up close, he could see the "hairs" gradually became translucent closer to the point, a feature that explained their disconcerting, ghost-like movements, edges blurry, floating in and out of reality. The skin quills were an admirable defense mechanism: they poked Jonas' hand as he zip-tied its arms around a concrete pole in the garage. He sucked in and grimaced, pulling his hand back into his other palm and hugging both right under his sternum. The initial pain subsided, and he held his hand up and saw tiny dots of blood forming all over. "Yo. Throw me the gloves. And that towel."

Andre, looking through a box on the other side of the garage, grabbed Jonas' gloves from inside the truck bed and tossed them at Jonas. The towel came next, landing at his feet, accompanied by the dig, "At your service, Lady Macbeth." Jonas rolled his eyes as he wiped his hands and stuffed the towel in his back pocket. Then, he donned the gloves and resumed his task.

The monster had eight arms, and he was afraid they'd break free, so Jonas used the entire 24-pack of ties they had bought: six ties per set of arms. Its arms were much bigger than a human's, so the ties barely fit around both of its wrists pressed together, which didn't connect to hands but three short, fat digits that resembled tentacles more than fingers. The tentacles bulged from its arm enough that the ties would hold. He hoped.

It was unconscious, they were pretty sure, although it was difficult to tell because they didn't know how (if?) it breathed. There was no inhale-exhale movement in its shoulders. Just stillness. The boys stood still for a few beats, too—Jonas holding the empty bag of zip-ties, Andre holding a loaded drill and box cutter, just in case. They had retreated to the edge of the garage. In this landscape, littered with bikes and balls and boxes, the monster's shape seemed almost to fit except for the blurred outline, like a pile of trash bags stuck between two realities.

Sitting in the truck outside of his uncle's house, Jonas picked at the decaying steering wheel; little flecks of foam dropped onto his lap. He brushed them off. Behind his seat he had tucked a small duffel bag with three guns. He tried to think about something else.

Jonas' memory was sucked backward to an image of Jared's clunker: a Ford Taurus whose passenger door didn't match the rest of the car. He zoomed in and he was watching himself replace the handle on that passenger door; then he was watching himself put peanut butter under the handle on the driver's side—another memory. That prank led him to another, and he arrived at his destination. He was in his junior science class—anatomy. Past-Jonas was carving into his pig cadaver while Ms. Almann droned instructions. He extracted a piece of intestine and was waving it in the direction of the girl behind him, when he realized Ms. Almann was quiet. She was in front of his desk. "Get out of my classroom," she said calmly, pointing toward the door. Jonas nearly argued, but changed his mind and huffed in the direction of her pointed finger. Once he made it into the hallway, Jonas wavered about what to do next. Then, the thought hurtled into his head: *she didn't tell me where to go.*

So, Jonas walked right down to Jared's French class, opened the door slightly and poked his head through. "Excuse me, uh, I just came from the office, and Jared and I need to go. Our mom called us out for an appointment." The French teacher was new, untested. She didn't hesitate to let Jared leave. Jared was two years younger than Jonas, but had been bigger than Jonas since 8th grade. Everyone thought Jared was the older brother, and Jared milked it.

After they picked up Andre, they snuck into the teacher workroom and nabbed a stack of post-it notes. Jonas' original plan had been more sinister; Jared countered with the post-its. "A perfect balance of funny and annoying," he'd said. They snuck out to the parking lot and found Ms. Almann's car. They started on the front windshield, note after note, until they ran out of blue and switched to orange. Then back to blue, and then green, yellow, green again, until Jared placed the final pink note on the rear passenger window. He turned to Jonas and Andre, who stood empty-handed, leaning against the car. "You're out already?" Jared said. "I thought you had like two more packets in your pocket." Jared tilted his head. "Ohhh," he said, dragging out the syllable and lifting his eyebrows. "So you were just gonna let me do the rest by myself?"

Jonas couldn't stop the twitch of a grin. "I mean—" he started, but was cut off as Jared lunged toward him. Jonas took off through the cars like a

running-back hitting a hole in the line. Jared chased him in and out of cars, while Andre hopped up on the post-it covered hood. The chase was their undoing. The librarian spotted them weaving in and out of cars and alerted the principal. Ten minutes later, they were back in class, and an hour after that, they were sitting silently, two desks apart, in detention.

But Jonas wasn't in detention. He was wavering between realities, past and present, thinking about the moments right before they were caught, of Jared's laugh as he caught hold of his arm and tried to pin him down. What had Jared said? Jonas strained to remember. He couldn't quite grab hold of the words, but the feeling of unrestrained joy filled him. Even now, in the grim truck, he couldn't hold back the twitch of a grin again.

Andre noticed. "What?" he asked.

Jonas flinched. It took him a few seconds to materialize in the present again. "Ah, naw, nothing. I was just thinking about something."

Andre nodded too seriously. "No dip, Sherlock."

Jonas turned his head and narrowed his eyes in a fake glare, then looked back out the front windshield, rolling a tiny piece of foam from the steering wheel in his fingers. "Ah, okay. I was just thinking about when we got busted for pranking Ms. Almann."

It was Andre's turn to grin. He let out a little laugh through his nose and shifted in his seat to lean his arm out the window.

Jonas was suddenly aware of the pressure of his body against the seat, hot like a weighted blanket. He needed to be out of the car, so he swung open the door, grabbed the top of the truck and hopped down, hot and aching. He took a few steps and swung his arms. He kicked his feet a little and exhaled, pushing out the air like he was blowing out birthday candles. He was trying to shake something, a rope wrapped around his waist, pulling him. To where, he didn't know. He felt simultaneously drawn and repelled—unsure of what the rope was or where it led. He cracked his neck, rolled his shoulders, and got back in the truck.

A few years earlier, Jonas' Uncle Mitch had taken him shooting on his family property. Uncle Mitch had brought his prize gun, a Colt Python with his initials carved into the grip. His father had given it to him when

he turned sixteen. Uncle Mitch showed it to Jonas and helped him load it. Jonas gingerly received the loaded weapon, muzzle down, like Mitch told him, and transferred it to a two-handed grip. He'd never held a gun before. His body responded to the weapon: rising heart rate, sweat intermingling with Mitch's initials on the grip, tiny tremors in his hands as he raised them to aim at the target. He lowered it back, keeping both hands tightly to the grip. For perhaps the first time, Jonas was feeling something like his own mortality. He was aware of a simple fact: a mistake now could be fatal. This fact was reinforced by the perception of a core of power radiating from the gun in his hands—a power that could determine life and death. He very nearly launched it and ran the other direction, as if he were holding a writhing, real-life version of its namesake. He was afraid, in the biblical sense.

Mitch gripped his shoulder and brushed the bottom of his chin. Jonas turned to look at him. "It's okay. You got it." Mitch helped him lift his hands again in the direction of the target, and coached him to take a breath—inhalation, exhale. Jonas obeyed, and then he pulled the trigger. His rising fear climaxed and released a cathartic thrill of exhilaration. He shot again. Both shots were wide of the target, but he didn't care. The mixture of joy and terror propelled him to continue shooting with Uncle Mitch for nearly an hour. His aim didn't improve much, but he persevered anyway. His excitement was dizzying. Eventually, Mitch signaled it was time to go, and he surrendered the weapon. It wasn't they were in the car headed home that Jonas realized the fear hadn't disappeared, only masked. A ball was lodged just below his sternum sending nervous energy out to his fidgety fingertips. It didn't dissipate until he fell asleep that night.

That same ball was there now, as his fingers tap-tap-tapped the steering wheel, a score announcing the presence of that same Colt Python, hidden twenty inches behind Jonas. Even there, out of sight, Jonas could feel its presence, like a low static hum in the absence of the radio. The power of life and death. The fear of the Lord. The merciless pull of violence.

They opened the garage, and the monster squirmed, trying to wriggle out of the restraints. It had nothing to leverage itself, so it flopped and half-rolled like a fish forgotten outside of its tank. Jonas set the duffel bag down on the floor. Andre walked over cautiously, sidestepping foot over foot, ready to run. The monster pulled and shook and spun, but the restraints held—a literal miracle. Andre, satisfied with the ties but still eyeing the monster warily, walked back toward Jonas.

“I wasn’t expecting it to be awake,” he whispered.

“Me neither,” said Jonas, removing the weapons from the duffel bag and placing them carefully on the concrete, facing the monster, whose struggle had slowed a little bit.

The monster didn’t have eyes, at least as far as either of them could tell. Jonas wondered how it saw, or if it was like a bat or some deep-sea creature with sonar. He didn’t know if it could hear either. He didn’t want it to hear him ask Andre what they were going to do with it “after,” and he definitely didn’t want it to hear Andre’s response: “I’m guessing no one will give a shit about a dead alien on the side of the road.” It didn’t flinch at this solemn pronouncement, so he assumed either it couldn’t understand them or had a really good poker face.

It was time. Ready or not.

Jonas picked up the Python, rubbing the initials on the grip. He loaded the cold bullets. He cocked the hammer as he walked toward the monster, shoes plodding on the concrete, a dull echo of executioner’s boots. Its squirming increased now, wildly flopping, trying to pull the pole from the ground. Jonas stopped right in front of the writhing figure. Wide stance. Right finger on the trigger. Left hand to steady. He raised the gun toward the bulging head, grateful he didn’t have to look into its eyes. The monster kept pulling and pulling, and suddenly swung around so quickly that Jonas had to step back and re-aim. Jonas shut his eyes. Fear rose in his chest, buoyed by hatred and grief. His eyelids were stuck, stitched together and covered with the image of Jared’s face, pale and dirty, hair matted with blood. Inhale. Exhale. In the darkness, he saw only Jared’s right hand, his only hand left, fingers curled slightly in. Jonas had found him. He’d held that hand until he couldn’t feel his own fingers. Inhale. Exhale. It was the first day of the invasion. They hadn’t known yet of the war to come. Jonas only knew the sight of Jared.

He was here, at the moment. It had been pulling him by instinct, but now all his instincts were gone. He was lost. Jonas couldn’t see anything beyond the hammer of the Python, couldn’t hear anything except his heart trying to escape his ribs. The moment ticked and ticked and ticked again, and then it was gone. He lowered the gun.

Andre was suddenly standing beside Jonas. His eyes flashed concern. “What’s wrong?” The monster wasn’t moving anymore. Jonas stood with

his mouth partly open, trying to formulate a sentence that never came. “Jonas.” Andre had his hand on Jonas’ shoulder now. “What’s wrong?”

Jonas tried to breathe, but it came out sputtering. His shoulders were shaking, tremors that reverberated into his halting words. “Wha-what kind of question is that?” Jonas said finally. “Literally everything. Everything is wrong. Look at where we are. Look at this.” He shook the gun vaguely. “Look at this.” He pointed it at the monster, who flinched. “I don’t even know what we’re doing here.” He paused. “I mean, the entire world is falling apart, and we’re, what, gonna take back our humanity by putting a couple bullets into a single, already-injured alien?”

“Those insects killed Jared.” Andre emphasized *insects* and shoved his finger into the alien’s head, who recoiled.

“Don’t talk to me about Jared. I—I know about Jared. I was right there. I was right...I was right there.” His voice petered out until *there* was barely a whisper.

Jonas couldn’t feel the grip of the gun anymore, only the mannequin hand of his dead brother that he tried to close around his own. For a moment, the garage was gone and there was only Jonas and Jared. Inhale. Exhale. He saw Jared’s eyes, flecked with dirt, unseeing, lifeless. The garage re-emerged as he felt something pulling at his arm. He instinctively pulled away and Andre came into focus again. He was reaching across him toward the Python. “I’ll do it,” he was saying, but it sounded strange, like he was speaking from another room. “I can do it,” he said again, this time his voice and his body coordinated.

Jonas shook his head and said quietly: “no.” He said it again: “no.” He kept repeating the little word, accelerating with each repetition until he paused for a moment, on the verge of a final declaration, when Andre lunged for the gun. Jonas swept his arm back, spun around and pointed it at his best friend.

The monster was struggling again now. Its arms swelled as it tried in vain to break the zip-ties. It was talking, too, maybe. It made a high-pitched sound from somewhere deep inside, almost like the whimpers of a dog, but with more force and intelligent cadence. Jonas was sure it was words, but had no idea what they were. Andre had lifted his hands and was stepping backward slowly. Jonas squeezed his eyes shut as tightly as he could and then opened them wide, eyebrows lifted, blinking rapidly. He

began to move toward the floor slowly, exhausted. He crossed his feet and set the gun beside him. He laid back and tried to think his way out.

He tried to think of some proverb to direct him, but the only proverbs that arrived were anger, sadness, guilt, and foolishness. Everyone always wanted him to do the right thing, but what is right in response to evil? The only options left are variations of evil. When brokenness rules the day, right and wrong are unknowable, buried under a hundred tons of emptiness—emptiness that now filled the corners of Jonas' mind. It wasn't the movement that brought him back as much as the sense of emptiness vanishing. The movement was Andre lunging toward the gun next to Jonas, whose body reacted while his brain tried to catch up. He half-rolled, half-jumped into Andre's moving body, colliding around his lower thighs.

Rolling over, Jonas was shocked by the sole of Andre's foot connecting with his shoulder. He recovered fast enough to grab the foot before it got away. It shook and struggled until it was joined by a fist, hurtling past Jonas' occupied hands and pounding against his hairline. He let go of the foot and blocked the second attack. Andre straightened and Jonas scrambled up onto his feet. Andre joined him and they stood across from each other like two *Mortal Kombat* fighters, panting, shifting, sniffing.

The ensuing fight was perhaps the most pitiful in history. They spent more time on the concrete floor than otherwise, a flurry of flailing arms and legs. They rolled and grunted and gasped and swung and, once, bit. After a few minutes, Andre achieved the high ground, wrestling his way atop Jonas, where he popped off a few hits anywhere he could find. He scored a direct hit that plunged Jonas' head, which had been hovering slightly above the ground, backward into the concrete.

Everything went black for a moment. When the light returned, it was blurry. Andre had already rolled off the floor beside him. Blood was spattered around Jonas' face from two small cuts, one on his lip and the other above his eye. Two boys and a monster lay on the floor of a garage, smelling of sweat and revenge. Jonas saw Andre's vague figure pull himself up and stumble over to the gun on the ground. He heard the metal slide as Andre picked it up.

The blow to his head finally dislodged the aphorism he had been searching for, but now, he wasn't sure he believed it: "Mercy triumphs over judgment." Andre didn't seem to believe it either.

The air was soft with the silence of the early morning. Andre and Jonas sat on the curb, waiting for nothing in particular. Something had settled in between them, a spiritual barrier. Jonas laid backward on the grass, his arm covering the cut on his forehead. He tried to think of something to say, but his brain was stuck, trying to budge but always clicking back into place. He couldn't read minds, so he didn't know Andre's brain was stuck too, trying to remember the word "sorry," unsure if it was true, unsure if it mattered. The mental loop Jonas was stuck in was simple. Jared's face, then the monsters, then back to Jared. Hair matted with blood. Ghostly quills, still and dripping with blue. A hand held in his, then a monster's tentacled fingers limp against the concrete floor. Jonas wanted peace, resolution, even anger or rage, but all that was gone, too. The guilt crowded everything else, except the loneliness, two twin monsters that held him captive in his own head. The loop continued, restarting over and over, until he realized he was alone.

Andre had gotten up and gone back to the garage. Jonas found him there, trying to drag the body back to the truck. It slipped along on its own blue "blood" (much thicker than human blood), but Andre still couldn't move it far on his own. Jonas put on his gloves, grabbed an arm, and pulled. They both grunted as they lifted it up into the bed. As soon as it was settled, Jonas ripped off his gloves and threw them into the yard. He rested his hands atop his head, interlocking his fingers as he circled, inhaling deeply. He kicked the tire and swore. He kicked it again, then placed his hands on the truck and lowered his head. He stayed here as Andre squatted down to his haunches. The only light was from the garage door opener.

Eventually, Andre went to get two shovels and tossed them into the truck bed alongside the alien. Jonas looked up when he heard the thud of the shovels against the truck bed.

"You want to bury it?" These were the first words Jonas had spoken to Andre since before the fight.

"I just feel like we should."

Andre drove this time. They found a place that seemed secluded enough, and got the shovels. The ground was hard, still cold. They shoveled until, hot from the work, they removed their sweatshirts and threw them onto the hood of the truck. The sun was up now, and the rays reflected off the

morning dew. The boys wiped off flecks of dirt that had stuck to their arms, clinging like hundreds of tiny ticks. The hole before them was crude and muddy, without defined corners or walls, but it was sufficient for the job. They dragged the monster into the pit and covered it, silently and without ceremony.

When they finished, Jonas walked away from Andre without looking at him. He was a boy marked by death. It was written on his heart, permanent, vast, heavy. He sat down on the grass and leaned back against a tree. On a better day, he might have visited this spot simply to enjoy its beauty, a walk in the stillness of creation. But that wasn't this day. This day, he sat, empty, among trees who shared his secret. They too had seen death but not spoken. They too had not been able to stop it. They rustled to encourage him, to speak to him the eternal truth—that he wasn't alone—but today he didn't have ears to hear. Maybe one day he would understand how many trees and angels and people have been marked this way—who walk with death's shadow in close pursuit, unable to shake it, to fix it, to forget it. Maybe one day that eternal truth would give him comfort. Today, he got up and drove home with his best friend, who also bore the mark, alone together.

Troy is a pastor and writer in Denton, TX, where he lives with his wife, Karly, and their three children. He has written an essay that appeared in *Mock Turtle Zine* and has been a contributor at KingdomDreamers.com.

FICTION

Bill Sells

I was his first

“I wish I could tell you my first impression of him. It’s lost, really. There was a song playing, or perhaps there was singing, or music at least, and I joined in. Couldn’t help it. Poured straight out of my soul. Well, it felt right, anyway.” I paused as I remembered what it must have felt like. It was too far in the past.

“Isn’t that something?” I said. “To feel it immediately? Goodness. I hadn’t thought about it in ages. Is that why you brought it up?”

“You brought it up. I asked of your earliest memories in general. So, what was your *next* impression of him?”

I had to dig deep for that one. I counted the petals on the flowers in the painting on the wall behind her desk. Cheap painting. Odd. You wouldn’t think I’d be here.

“He doted on me,” I said. “I was his first.”

“Yes. You’ve said that a few times. What does it mean to you, to be his ‘first?’”

“Well, I’ve learned a lot since those days.” I paused and looked around the room. I wasn’t going to blab it all in the first minute. Why does everything have to happen so fast? Everything of consequence, that is.

“It was fast,” I finally said.

“Fast? How so? Can you elaborate?”

Fast wasn’t the right word. ‘Overwhelming’ was better, but I couldn’t say it. I don’t even allow myself to think it. Those kinds of words should not be used for him. If I can’t utter them, then they can be left unsaid. “He had a way of making me feel like I was the only thing in the world. And then, I wasn’t.”

“Why, do you suppose that happened?”

“You’ll have to ask him.”

She smirked at that. I saw it. The corner of her mouth tilted, her cheeks puffed slightly, as her eyes beamed at the floor.

“It’s okay if you don’t believe me,” I said.

“Julius, please, I don’t judge your words. I’m a counselor. It’s the sincerity of your words that is important to me. I only weigh-in if I feel you’re avoiding something or getting off track from where you were heading. I’m here to help.”

“Yes, and you are. He hurt me, you know? God.” I said the words before I could get them back, and watched them float across the tiny throw-rug between her desk and the chaise. The rug had brown coffee stains, but their neglected presence didn’t stop her from detecting my meaning. Her head bobbed up and down on her shoulders.

“He what?”

“And my name’s not really Julius.”

She stared at me a moment.

“You’ve waited till the last two minutes of our session to share this...bomb?”

“It’s not a ‘bomb’ bomb.”

“Well, then it can wait till next time.”

“If you say so. I can’t be responsible, then.”

“What’s your real name?” It hurt her to get it from her throat. Anger vented out.

I stood and bowed. “My real name’s not important. I’m sorry. I’ll come back next Tuesday, if that’s okay.”

“No. Maybe. Responsible for what?”

“It hurt...”

“Be careful, please, mystery person, with what you say next, because if you’re not my client, which you may not be in the next minute, and you threaten someone, I will not hesitate to notify the proper authority.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything different.” I waited to make sure she wanted to hear what I had to say. “It hurt to be abandoned, you see, and what I’m not responsible for are someone else’s actions. You don’t have to worry about me. No one is in danger from me.”

Her eyes hardened. Maybe it was the mention of ‘danger.’ A woman alone in her home office with...me. I opened the door.

“Wait,” she was almost out from behind her desk. “I have twenty minutes before my next appointment. Please, continue.”

The twenty minutes had been forty minutes ago, and another knock came at the door. There had been three. She answered the first one asking for a few more minutes. She did the same on the second, and didn’t seem to notice this third one. I continued talking.

“...I had my back turned, you see, and the music was very loud. Everyone was shouting. I knew he might be there, but I didn’t turn. I regret that.”

“Really? Regret?”

“Sure. I planned it. I made it happen. The least he could have done is to let me look him in the eye before launching me out of his life.”

“What did you mean, ‘he returned?’ Returned from where?”

“He’d been with you people. So, if you can picture this...” I stood from the chaise lounge. The scene needed to be painted. “Everyone is there and when I say everyone, I don’t mean everyone, it was only a segment of all of us, but it was still a lot. Now, see, I’m facing them...”

The person outside began to pound on the door and scream. He was loud and trying to sound authoritarian. “Mrs. Thompson?! Mrs. Thompson, please!”

“May I?” I asked. Before she could respond, the door handle turned and opened to reveal the man standing in the doorway, with one hand ready to knock and the other in his pocket, which he quickly removed when he saw me.

“Where’s Mrs. Thompson?” He now placed both hands on his hips as he tried to peer around me into the room. I lowered my voice so only he could hear. His face, close to mine at first jerked back, but his feet quickly followed as he headed out the waiting area door.

“He forgot his coat,” I said, closing the door.

She looked at me, and I knew that she knew.

“What did you say to him?”

“The truth. I told him he needed to stop looking at the porn sites that reminded him of his mother. It’s just stupid.”

Now she was beside herself. It was thick in the air like sex or fear or...hunger? She really wanted to know. If she wants to know, who am I to hold it from her.

“Who are you? When you say you were his first...who is the ‘he?’”

“Don’t you know? Does it matter? I thought my words weren’t as important as their sincerity?”

She sat down. I hadn’t noticed, but she had actually hidden herself from view of her client. Okay. She should know.

“Okay, if you must...”

“Wait. I know. I think. Let me just ask this: if you could do it all over again, would you do anything differently?”

“Oh.” The word popped out of me again. She had a way of doing that like I’d never experienced with anyone before. Odd. Here. Her. Me.

“I am me,” I said. “I don’t think I can be any different than what I am. Can you?”

“That’s what’s on record, thank you, goodbye.”

Damn. Remember, you are in Hell. Remember. So that’s how the door opened. Damn. Very funny and yes, if I had to do it all over again, I’d shake it up like it deserves. You hear me? Yeah, you hear me.

Damn.

Bill Sells is a former newspaper correspondent turned children’s writer, poet, and flash-fiction something or other. He has two books on the market and stories online. He lives in Chesapeake Beach Maryland with his wife, Sue, and their three-legged dog, Jaybird.

J.F. Rains

Alaric the Fox

Alaric was the kind of fox who reinvented himself every three months. So when things didn't work out in the forest, he decided to try his luck with humans.

He stepped inside a little vegan cafe with a "help wanted" sign and took the stage (it was open mic night), and did a stirring spoken-word piece about dead crows. He was wearing patched-up jeans and a vintage polyester butterfly collar shirt open to the third button, and all the women fell in love with him.

The owner offered him a job baking vegan cookies.

He took the job, and every day after his shift he wrote poetry in his Moleskine notebook, while admirers sipped coffee and gazed at him. In particular, there was a beautiful woman named Rose who admired his poetry, his fox-ness, and everything he was and was not and all that he might become.

He liked her at first, but before long he found her annoying and not-quite-beautiful-enough and somewhat lacking in fashion-sense. He became depressed. "I need direction," he said once, to his cadre of followers, and someone suggested he see the lady upstairs.

The lady upstairs was Dr. Mary Weather, Certified Life Coach. Her office was in a tiny room above the cafe. She sat behind a cluttered desk. She wore navy slacks and a white blouse and pearl earrings and a pair of black bifocals.

"What I really want," Alaric began, "is...beauty. Specifically, I want to know a really beautiful woman. The most beautiful woman in the world. Or someone, at least, in the top ten percent."

"Wouldn't you rather know a beautiful female of your own species?" Dr. Weather asked, shuffling through 5x7s of beautiful foxes.

“Been there done that,” Alaric said.

“I see. Hm. Well, how do you plan to achieve your goal?”

“I’m not sure. That’s why I came to you.”

Dr. Weather began moving the stacks of things around on her desk, until she found a manila file folder with “How to meet a beautiful woman” written in black sharpie on the outside. She opened the file. “Here are some worksheets on confidence, empathy, social skills, emotional intelligence, getting in shape, making more money, and personal grooming...”

Alaric took the folder with the papers out of Dr. Weather’s hand and threw it across the room. The papers flew into the air in a hundred directions and came floating gently downwards.

“Well,” Dr. Weather said, “clearly you are beyond all this,” she waved her hand as if to include the entire office and its contents. Then she looked into his eyes. “There is another way.”

“Tell me,” Alaric said. “I have money.” He pulled out a wad of cash from his jeans pocket and flung it onto the desk.

“I don’t usually share this with my clients, but if you want to meet a beautiful woman, go to an art museum on a rainy day. Find a painting with a woman that you consider uncommonly beautiful. Fall asleep in front of the painting listening to Bach’s *Partita in D minor*. When you wake up, you will be in the presence of the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“This better not be a trick,” Alaric said, and he got up and walked out.

The next time it rained, he walked to the art museum with the Bach piece cued on a device that he had borrowed from Rose. He wandered up and down and back and forth and all around the museum, till he finally found the painting “Girl Combing Her Hair” by Renoir. He stared and stared at the painting, lay on a bench in front of it, closed his eyes, put the earphones in, and pressed “play.”

When he came to, he found himself sitting in the passenger seat of a loud car. There was a large woman in the driver's seat. She had long gray hair, which she wore in a braid down her back. Her face was round and pockmarked. She wore blue polyester pants with an elastic waistband and a huge purple sweatshirt. The backseat of the car was piled high with styrofoam containers, apparently filled with food. (After his three-month vegan stint, Alaric was pretty sure he smelled bird-flesh emanating from those containers).

"You must be the new volunteer Pastor Dave told me about. I'm Melba. Glad to have ya."

"Where am I?" Alaric asked.

"Melba's car. 1982 Ford Escort. Still runnin', believe it or not. We are delivering Thanksgivin' meals for the shut-ins. Some elderly, some sick, some dyin'. Some all three."

"You're not the most beautiful woman in the world," Alaric said, irritably.

Melba laughed heartily at this for a full five minutes or so, and then she said, "Your good looks ain't gonna get you to Heaven, Foxy. You better get your heart right with the Lord."

After Alaric the Fox helped Melba deliver Thanksgiving meals to shut-ins, and after he had ascertained that none of the shut-ins were the most beautiful woman in the world, and after he had devoured an entire turkey himself (plus a good amount of sweet potato casserole), he went with Melba to the First Baptist Church and had a heart-to-heart with Pastor Dave.

He got right with the Lord and was baptized that Sunday.

He received his ordination from an online seminary three weeks later, and he went back into the forest, to share the Good News.

NONFICTION

Barbara Lock

God in Spanish

“We need some good juju,” says the nurse whose name might be Lauren. She paces behind the counter at the workstation next to the mammoth copy machine, the tubes of blood collected in pink plastic bins, the boxes of thick-woven, paper face masks. Possibly-Lauren has pulled her hair back into a disciplined bun with a bright blue strip of elastic—it’s a repurposed tourniquet. “We need some good juju because all we’ve got is bad,” says Possibly-Lauren. “It’s been bad since Monday, and it’s not going to stop,” she says.

“I feel it,” I say.

“Pray for good juju,” says Possibly-Lauren. I squint at her name tag, but she undoes her ponytail and her hair cascades below her shoulders; I can’t read what the name tag says. Possibly-Lauren is a real person—we all are. We’re all where we’re supposed to be, doing what people like us do, which is thinking about death; four deaths so far today, four deaths in the first three hours of our shift.

The most recent was a woman who’d just had the fat sucked out of her back at a cosmetic center down the street. She died young, and so did the first note of the day, a young man who’d been found slumped in his apartment building—we’re not sure if he died from COVID or drugs or suicide. A couple of others are dead this morning, too, but they were both old. Numbers two and three—both skinny, brown old men. Number two bled red out of his rear. When that happens real fast, like a faucet, there’s only so much you can do. Number three died from COVID. None of them are related to each other, except in the general sense.

“It’s bad again, and I don’t think I can deal,” says Possibly-Lauren, retying her hair. “I need to spend more time with my dog,” she says. She’s placing tubes of blood into an acrylic canister to insert into the magic machine, which will whoosh the canister from the first floor, to the third, into the waiting arms of a lab technician. Possibly-Lauren beeps the red buttons and *thwap* goes the machine. “I had my psychiatrist certify my dog as an emotional support animal, and she told me she had to write that

I have anxiety—literally she’s going to diagnose me with an anxiety disorder just so that I can take my dog around with me. ‘Is that alright with you,’ she asked,” says Possibly-Lauren. She’s addressing Felix now. Felix, a nurse with intricate tattoos on his forearms, taps the computer keyboard with quick, precise movement. “Is that alright with you?” Possibly-Lauren asks again, and Felix nods his head but doesn’t look up. “I told my psychiatrist: yes, write that I have anxiety. I don’t care,” says Possibly-Lauren. “I never want to be separated from that dog. I’ll take that dog everywhere with me: on the plane; to the grocery store. I’d even bring him here to work, though he wouldn’t like the smell,” she says.

“Are you sure about that?” asks Felix. “It smells like blood in here.”

“Look at him,” says Possibly-Lauren. She takes out her phone, taps on the screen. Possibly-Lauren passes around her phone which displays a photo of the animal, a smiling black dog with symmetrical light brown spots above his eyes. It’s a four-eyed dog, the kind the Turks and Greeks employed to guard the gates of Hell, but I don’t tell her that.

“Look at his eyes.” Possibly-Lauren expands the dog’s face with her right thumb and forefinger on the touch screen. Big, liquid brown eyes ringed by tan liner and glossy black fur. “Look at him.”

“It’s a beautiful dog,” I say. “You’re very lucky.” I don’t tell her that her dog was bred to guard the gates of Hell. What if she snaps or has a meltdown or curses at me like I’m evil incarnate?

“Yes, I am lucky,” says Possibly-Lauren, but she’s not smiling. Somewhere in the distance, an alarm rings. Under my mask, I pray for good juju. Compassionate Father, through the intercession of St. Whoever Is Not Busy, please send us good juju. This is what I mouth underneath my thick paper mask.

Carmen, who works as a tech, rushes into the nurse’s station from the hall. She puts her hand on my shoulder, which makes me relax.

“There’s a GI bleeder for you,” says Carmen.

“Where?” I ask, but she just waves her hand, so I go hunting from area to area looking for the medics. But I wonder now if Carmen is confused, if she’s talking about the other guy, the patient who bled red from his rear and is dead now.

In the trauma room are two brown bodies, both skinny old men. One is already dead and I'm pretty sure his body has been counted. The other is still alive according to the beeps from the machine. There's a clot of doctors and nurses huddled around his bed staring at the funny lines on the monitor. I am alert for the sight of blood or its smell, but there isn't any.

"Where's the bleeder?" I shout into the crowd. They ignore me, all except Tanya, who's in charge. Tanya has the best hair of anyone I know—long red swirls which extend to the bottom of her spine.

"Is this one mine?" I ask Tanya, pointing to the live patient.

"No," says Tanya. "Try the main."

"Is that one old or new?" I point to the dead body in the corner. Tanya stares at me blankly. "That's death two of four, right?" I ask. "Or is it a new one?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," says Tanya, so I start sprinting back inside.

In the main, paramedics unload a smiling old lady covered in dark brown vomit from the ambulance stretcher to the hospital stretcher. Possibly-Lauren, the tech Carmen, and the nurse Felix all stand around the old lady, wiping her down with dry towels. As they swipe away the brown gunk, they reminisce about the first death of the day.

"They put a trumpet in his nose—nothing," says Carmen.

"Then they twisted his titty," says Felix.

"I can't take it anymore," says Possibly-Lauren. What's on the old lady's chest looks and smells like sewage, but it's partially digested blood. Possibly-Lauren rolls the towel into a cylinder, places it on the floor. "I can't do this much longer, guys. The bell rings and I walk away from it," she says.

"*Lo siento*," says the old lady, smiling. Possibly-Lauren rips open a packet of gauze, wipes the old lady's mouth.

"I'll put in the orders," I say.

"No te preocupes," says Possibly Lauren to the old lady, then, to Felix, who prepares a pink kidney basin with the supplies to draw blood, "What I want to do is walk right out the door and into a bar," she says.

"I haven't had a drink in a very long time," says Felix. Felix's eyes are liquid brown, his eyebrows thick and arched. The inked symbols which march up his forearms look both religious and deadly.

"Tan hermosa," says the old lady. *"Como mi hija."*

"How do you survive without alcohol?" I ask Felix. As he inserts an IV into the old lady's arm, her mouth puckers, then relaxes again.

"Xbox," says Felix, grinning. He pops on the vacutainer, sucks blood out of her arms into five plastic tubes.

An hour later, I pass by the little old lady again. She looks clean. Her face shines and her neck smells like pink soap. She clasps her wrinkled hands on her chest, sings *Dios* this and *Dios* that. Joy radiates from her body like the sun, rises from her lips, spreads out over the ceiling. Carmen does vital signs on a patient parked in the hall, sees me attending to the old lady's melody.

"What is it?" I ask. "What is she saying?"

"Do you know my name?" asks Carmen.

"Your name is Carmen," I say. "What is the GI bleeder saying?"

"It's a Catholic prayer," says Carmen, who might be smiling.

"I don't recognize it," I say. "Which one?" I want to feel Carmen's hand on my shoulder, so I lean close. She doesn't touch me this time, though I feel relaxed all the same. "What is she singing?" I ask.

"It's just a song," shrugs Carmen. She adjusts her mask for a moment, and there it is, the good juju, right there on her face, at the corner of her eyes and the corner of her lips. Feel better, says the smile. Feel like the world is alright because the world is in you. To those who overcome, I shall give to them a radiant stone, I think. But then Carmen speaks. "It's a Catholic song. It's Spanish." Carmen looks at me with great pity, says, "It's nothing you could ever understand."

Barbara Lock, an emergency physician, pursues a writing MFA at Sarah Lawrence College. She teaches Narrative Medicine at Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons. Her writing appears in *Yalobusha Review*, *Fiction International*, *New Delta Review*, and elsewhere.

Mary-Kate Corry

Outreach Day

It's a Wednesday, homeless outreach day. Once a week, the missionaries at A Simple House pair off to go into the woods and see who we can meet. The goal is pretty simple: to bring love to neglected places and to help where we can. For the five of us who live and work here in Kansas City, this is our job—to love the poor and outcast as Christ did. Not much of a business model, but it's a pretty good gig.

Gabe and I team up. I brew coffee. He packs snacks. We get in the car and pray: he for me, I for him, Amen. Gabe starts the car. He always drives—doesn't trust my driving, which is probably fair. We go to West Bottoms where Ricky and Andrea live, somewhere in the woods, right beneath the cow statue. We haven't seen them in weeks. A visit's past due.

We put on big crucifixes before leaving the car. I grab the coffee and the snacks and pray some more. I pray leaving the car, entering the woods, and navigating the trails. Jesus did tell us to pray always. But these prayers are silent, right from my heart to Him.

There is necessary risk involved in being an inner-city missionary. The motto of A Simple House says, "we are to wonderfully and radically fall upon the cross of Christ for grace and support." This isn't lip service. Whenever I enter the woods, I don't know who or what I'll encounter. I don't know if I'll be up to the task, or what that task will be. But still, I feel called to go, so I pray and hope for the best.

We arrive at Ricky's camp. It's barricaded by old box springs. A thick blanket stands in for a door. We can't see inside. "Anyone home?" I yell. We hear voices. "Come on in," one says. Gabe pushes the blanket aside.

Inside are two men. They sit on lawn chairs. Underneath them is a red, tasseled rug and underneath that, a strip of plastic turf. Ricky's got quite the setup. He's been in these woods for over a decade. Gabe and I approach the men. One man doesn't talk. The other talks a lot—murmurs, really. I've never seen them before. They must be new here, or visiting.

Kansas City's homeless population is transient. There's little difference between the visitors and residents of a camp. Both could be gone in a matter of days.

"How are you?" I ask them. The murmuring man answers.

"I'm drowning," he says. His voice slurs. Words dip in and out. He leans in his chair—first right, then left, then forward. "Can you see the water?" He gestures toward his legs. His pants are sagging, almost off. I try not to look.

"I'm a musician," he says.

I take the bait. "What do you play?"

"I rap." Unprompted, he begins free-styling. His lips move fast. His voice is low. I don't understand much, just catch a word here, there. Gabe and I listen. We bob. We smile. The other man also smiles. He also bobs. The rapping continues. And continues. Nearly ten minutes pass.

"Well man," Gabe says. The man doesn't pause. "Thanks for sharing." We back away. He's still rapping. We enter Ricky's tent. He's still rapping.

Ricky's tent is large. It sits on a raised platform and must sleep nearly eight. There's a generator outside that powers the radio and a propane stove inside for cooking and heat. Another rug, likely thrifted from a dumpster, marks the front entrance way. There's even a bookshelf, a bit dilapidated, but useful for displaying bottles and hubcaps and other found objects. The tent has two sections. Ricky is in the back one, in bed ("bed" being a sodden queen-sized mattress, also likely found in a dumpster, but still, larger than my mattress). He's groggy, just waking up. It's almost noon. Gabe pours him some coffee.

"You want sugar?" he asks.

Ricky nods. I pour. "More. More. More. Thaaaaaat's...good." I stop. I hand Ricky the cup. He takes a long sip and sighs. "That's good stuff."

Andrea appears from the covers. "Can I have some?" Gabe pours another cup. She takes it black.

We move into the front section of the tent. Ricky offers me a seat on an upended crate, but I decide to stand. I'm still aware of the men outside. Gabe sits and settles in. We talk for a while, just catching up. They've been good. We've been good. Some critters have been around the tent. Stealing their stuff, *those bandits*. Gabe and I try to empathize. We can't. There's a pause and I realize it's quiet. I look behind me.

The man has stopped rapping. He's leaning over. He fumbles around on the ground, which is covered with trash. He pulls out a pipe and lights it. The pipe is glass. Its contents are cloudy. My heart accelerates. I remember what Clark, our director, tells us before homeless ministry. *Trust your instincts. Leave if you feel unsafe.*

Do I feel unsafe? I wrestle with this question. I imagine worst case scenarios. Kansas City headlines: *Young Female Missionary Killed in Woods by Meth Addict*. The mission has to shut down. I become a cautionary tale. People wonder why I didn't leave, what I was doing there in the first place. That's one scenario. But on the other hand, there's me at the Gates of Heaven, and Jesus dividing the goats from the sheep. *Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these...*

In Joan Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer*, the fictional Central American country of Boca Grande is under siege by revolutionary *guerrilleros*. As people are being executed, the wealthy *norteamericanos* are advised to get out. The main character, Charlotte, insists on staying in vain hope of reuniting with her daughter. "You don't get any real points for staying here, Charlotte," her husband tells her before he boards a plane. "I can't seem to tell what you do get the real points for," Charlotte says, "So I guess I'll stick around here awhile." At the end of the novel, Charlotte is captured and killed by the rebels. She never reunites with her daughter.

My palms are starting to sweat. My senses are heightened. I know this feeling of adrenaline rushing, of my body preparing for fight or flight. I do feel unsafe. But is that reason enough to leave? Do I get any real points for staying here? What do I get real points for?

I try catching Gabe's eye. He's talking to Ricky, so I wait for a lag in the conversation. My neck tingles. I look behind me. The man is standing now. I angle myself towards him. He's taken up muttering again and is fishing in his pockets.

I trust my instincts.

I step on Gabe's toe, nudge him a little. He doesn't notice. How does he not notice? Ricky is still talking—something about raccoons. He's mid-sentence. I cough. "Well Ricky," I say. "Nice seeing ya. We gotta head out." Gabe looks at me. I look at him, then behind me. He gets it.

We leave the tent and walk past the men. The one still sits, silent. The other still stands. I give a curt wave. He trips on his feet. Drowning.

I look behind my back—keep looking until we're in the clear, literally. The woods end. We're out. I stop sweating, stop looking. I breathe. Gabe shakes his head. He's upset, I can tell.

"Someone's gotta help them." He spits. Gabe always spits. "Who else is gonna?"

I nod. I agree. Someone's gotta. But not me.

Mary-Kate Corry worked for four years as a missionary at A Simple House of Sts. Francis and Alphonsus where she fell in love with God, the poor, and Kansas City. She recently moved to South Bend, IN, where she fell in love with her husband, and now works as a special needs caretaker. Her writings can be found in *Notre Dame Magazine*.

Bill Vernon

Skeptics on Patrick's Stack

At the foot, although we could see only two hundred yards ahead, Laura said, "That's not a mountain, just another big hill." Our daughter, twelve years old and jaded already?

I smiled because, having seen "real" mountains on television and in movies, she'd said the same thing about mountains in West Virginia, driving through them last summer. It'd take a snow-capped County Mayo peak in July to drag an *ooh* or an *aah* from her.

"Hush," said her mother Rosha. "Your Aunt Tess told me that from on top of the holy mountain we'd be able to see the village of Mulranny, and my mom's old family home."

"It looks too muddy to be a holy mountain," Laura said. "It's been raining for hours."

Rosha glowered. "Are you trying to ruin our vacation?"

I said, "A three- or four-hour hike will be good exercise for a soccer player like you."

Rosha said, "You're part Irish. It's your heritage, too."

The girl said, "We don't even have an umbrella in case it pours again."

"God won't let that happen," I said, but gazing at the gray swirl above us, I added, "Maybe Laura has a point. We won't be able to see much through the clouds."

Guidebook in hand, Rosha stepped forward. "We won't know that until we get there."

Climbing Croagh Phadraig—St. Patrick's Mountain, translated "Patrick's Stack," nicknamed "The Reek"—we were digging into legends. There was no question about doing it. We'd only been making noises, expressing anxieties, uncertainties, and confusions. Having heard endless stories and songs describing Ireland, we felt strange actually finding the place as solid and real as our backyard. Experiential facts were adjusting our imagination.

From the parking lot, we started with an undemanding climb to a starkly white, oversize statue of Patrick on a concrete pedestal, where we paused, sightseeing you might say. My tendency throughout this trip, and perhaps theirs, too, was to search for meaning in the obvious.

The wisps of clouds swirling down closer to us reminded me of spirits that were almost touchable if we jumped. The Saint's image was familiar: bearded man, left hand holding a shepherd's staff to the ground, while raising his right hand as if blessing his flock—a common pose of Christ in pictures and statues. The idea occurred to me that Patrick could as well be ordering snakes off the island, a story derived from the fact that no serpents, except perhaps the Satanic kind, were natives. You couldn't blame Patrick for that. Snakes are, after all, much easier to deal with than demons.

Facing the uphill task remaining, I remembered how the passage to this point was easy, but also rocky, eroded, and wet. That meant that an uneven and slippery trail lay in our future. Was that a sign or a symbol? Both, I thought without telling my two companions.

From this point on, in fact, the increasing steepness of increasingly less stable surfaces for two hours of nearly constant movement demanded that we concentrate. Such an effort was primal and natural, familiar to all three of us because of our exercise routines, and it took us not only forward but also inside ourselves.

Rosha is my spelling of the Irish version of Rose. I call her that because being Irish was an important part of her identity. Though only half-Irish, she can blurt two Gaelic curses along with a few other common Irish exclamations. She couldn't or wouldn't tell me the meaning of the words though, but their emotional content was clear. She had also applied for and obtained an Irish passport as the daughter of an Irish mother, and she

frequently wore Claddagh rings, often with a Celtic cross on a necklace or pin.

Despite never kissing the Blarney stone, she'd inherited a powerful gift of gab. Her talk could dominate conversations such as the three of us had had, motoring in a rental from Limerick to Croagh Patrick. As navigator reading maps, she directed us up the western coast of Erin, through the Burren in County Clare, and through Connemara, stopping wherever curiosity overwhelmed her. I supported her search for whatever she sought, questioned few of her orders, and trusted her intentions and judgment if not completely, at least 90 percent. I did not consider her voice a Banshee cry, predicting someone's doom.

My main job was clearly defined: driving safely. I was acutely conscious that accidents happen. As pilot, I maneuvered cautiously, always keeping aware that the steering wheel was on the right and the car's proper lane was on the left. I'd heard of several visitors slipping back into American habits over here and causing tragedy on the rather narrow roads.

Continuing our climb, we entered fog, which further locked us in, limiting our ability to see much around us. As perspiration began and breathing sped up, we took occasional rests. A bit of talk occurred then, mainly checking each other's status, both physical and emotional. Hearing any doubts about reaching the top, Rosha reminded us that her father in his mid-seventies, in street shoes, suit, and overcoat, had accomplished it without a whimper.

Of course he could do that, I thought but didn't say. A product of the depression, son of strict German immigrant parents, he'd done men's work on farms in his childhood, sired the first of five children in his forties, then retired from carpentry in his seventies.

In contrast, during our first rest, Laura's father (myself) said, "Who needs a drink?"

Both ladies said they did, and eagerly looked at me.

I smiled as if teaching a sad lesson, "I ain't got none. We should've bought water bottles in that restaurant by the parking lot. As I suggested, remember?"

Rosha muttered what sounded like an Irish cuss word. Laura jabbed my nearer shoulder with a boney fist.

In the parking lot at the time, Rosha had diverted our attention from future thirst by saying, “We’ve just missed the annual pilgrimage. It’s on the last Sunday of July. This sign tells how they climb Croagh Patrick in a devotional manner. Too bad. That might’ve been fun.”

Laura said, “It doesn’t sound like fun to me. Praying all the way? Going barefoot?”

I listened while Rosha recited, not the rosary as she might have done were we pious, but other facts from her reading: particulars like the hill’s 2500-foot height, the average number of pilgrims, their stations of the cross, and the “booths” where pilgrims might quench their thirst with a pint of Guinness.

Hearing this last comment, I’d interrupted. “In fact, I have one can of that holy water, but it’s for the end of our journey.”

It was a whitish trail that led us up through the clouds, and the little we could see of the land around us seemed desert-like, without trees or many bushes. Patches of green were gorse and grass, but no shamrocks. Clear-cutting and erosion must have denuded the hillsides.

Rocks made avoiding mud easy, paving our way. But despite centuries of feet stamping them down, they were unlevel, unstable, unpredictably wet, irregularly shaped and sized.

“Be careful,” I said. “When you tire, bad decisions can hurt you. Don’t rush.”

Who could rush? With the difficult footing, the clouds thickened and their clamminess increased. Our pace slowed but exertions grew as the climb steepened. Pious pilgrims would have no doubt gone onto their knees to thank the Lord for these opportunities to suffer and gain grace. Laura and I focused on Rosha, who exercised less than we did. When boulders tempted her to sit, we coaxed her on with words of wisdom like, *Look at this as a good workout.*

But where was the top? Believing it was near, I clawed on all fours across a long, exceptionally steep area buried beneath a jumble of fist-size stones. Each step forward I seemed to slip a half-step back. I panted,

stopped often to catch my breath, and at last tripped onto level ground. There I gasped for several minutes before looking back down the hill.

Laura appeared, took my hand, and stumbled up beside me.

“Way to go,” I said.

She looked back. “Where’s Mom?”

I pointed downhill.

Rosha was a dark shadow in the mist. We waved and yelled but she didn’t glance at us. When her slow pace let her gradually solidify near us, we grabbed her arms and pulled her up.

She leaned against me and uttered something garbled. Her breathing slowed, she jerked her arms from my grip, panted, and finally said clearly, “Drink. Drink.”

I swept an arm around to indicate the summit. “Here’s what you wanted to see.”

“Not funny!” Rosha began pawing the jacket I’d sleeve-tied around my waist.

I knew what she wanted and jumped out of her reach.

She frowned. “The beer! You didn’t drink it already?”

“You mean the Guinness you don’t like?” But I took the can from my trousers’ back pocket. This was all we had to drink, and there at the summit we imbibed—mama, daughter, then me. Our communion, swallowing a quaff appropriate for St. Patrick’s mountain in Ireland.

Rosha wiped her mouth with a hanky. “Thoughts of drinking that kept me going. If it was gone before I got any, I’d have cried.”

Laura said, “It tastes awful, but at least it’s wet.”

We sat and took a few minutes to more fully recover. We should have photographed ourselves but didn't. The displaced persons from Ohio had been too tired to think of it.

Rosha shook her head. "We went through a lot to get here, but we see only fog."

I said, "We were idiots, hiking up here unprepared. We should have brought water, a snack, umbrella or slicker, and worn heavy shoes." We were all guilty of being innocent.

I think we all felt exhilaration, walking in clouds, taking stock of what was here: a patch of rocks laid out in the large rectangle, which I'd guessed from a distance might be a flower bed. A sign marked it as Saint Patrick's grave though that seemed untrue. He'd been in Ireland 1500 years ago. Also, there were a large conical pile of rocks, a cairn, and a white-washed chapel.

We filed into the building and sat in a pew. The interior was so cool, I put on my jacket. The wood seats were so soft, I closed my eyes and stretched out my legs.

Rosha nudged me. "While we're here, we should say a prayer."

So, we prayed instead of napping. Rosha led us making the sign of the cross, saying the Our Father and Hail Mary, and crossing ourselves again, which made me think of magicians waving a wand.

Then, from the dim interior of the chapel we emerged into bright sunlight. We squinted, adjusting, very surprised. The clouds had broken into irregular puffs of what I was tempted to call the Lord's breath. The country spread out below us, and on the north side was the ocean. This change in our vista might not have been miraculous, but it felt as if it were.

Atop the third highest peak in County Mayo, I saw that our road near ocean level passed through land as green as the legend, and that ashy stone walls striped the green into squares like a tartan pattern. In Clew Bay, irregularly shaped little islands in the sunlight resembled green and brown polished gems lying on blue velvet. During low tides, Rosha's grandparents and some of her mother's siblings had driven their cattle onto one of those close-to-shore islets, supplementing the family pastures.

The concentration of buildings to the east had to be Newport, so north of it somewhere was Rosha's mother's home. Farther north around the bay, according to what relatives had told us, the white shoreline marked the hamlet of Mulranny. South of it was the Cusack children's old schoolhouse in Rosgalive. A photograph of Rosha's barefoot mother there, with classmates about Laura's age, suggested a poverty beyond our knowledge. Near Rosgalive, Rosha's grandmother raised fifteen children in a stone building the size of a two-car garage. All those were tomorrow's destinations.

The sun stayed with us descending and illuminated much of what we'd missed climbing. It flared off the surfaces, suggesting a land rich in mystery, laden with what had happened there before us, and I caught myself believing that St. Patrick could in reality, as well as in legend, have fasted forty days and nights on those heights where we'd been.

Bill Vernon studied English literature, then taught it. Writing is his therapy, along with exercising outdoors and doing international folk dances. His poetry, fiction and nonfiction occasionally appear in journals and anthologies, and Five Star Mysteries published his novel *OLD TOWN*.

NONFICTION

Robert L. Jones III

Frances in the Fog

I never knew her, never spoke to her, but she was my neighbor. I laid eyes on her only once; as if through a fog, the impression of that fleeting encounter has remained with me for decades. I was a boy approaching adolescence, and by then, she was middle-aged but still striking in appearance.

Frances Farmer lived for awhile in a one-story brown house with a gabled roof at 5107 North Park Avenue in Indianapolis, Indiana. In the summer of 1961, I was eight when my family moved into a white two-story house at 5210 on the same street. She was a local celebrity, and I first became aware of her when her show, *Frances Farmer Presents*, came on the television at a friend's house. My first impression of her was that she was a boring older woman. Her show, her guests, and their topics of discussion were outside my limited sphere of interests.

It wasn't much later that this immature assumption changed. Our family was seated at the dinner table one night, and she somehow came up in conversation. My father and mother mentioned to my brothers and me that our neighbor had been a famous actress in Hollywood, that she struggled with alcoholism, and that she had once been a mental patient. When I heard those words, something fired in my young mind and echoed in my chest. With the kind of childish resolve that imagines noble and improbable things without taking action, I wanted to save Frances Farmer.

My friends and I walked past her house every weekday on our way to school. That dwelling had taken on a certain mystique after I had learned that someone famous lived there, but she was never out in her yard when we passed by. The one time that I saw her in person occurred while I was with a friend. He couldn't play until he had delivered all of his newspapers, so I tagged along to keep him company. Frances Farmer's house was on his route. When we walked into her yard, I looked expectantly at her windows, but her face did not appear. We continued up the walk to her front door. My friend laid the *Indianapolis News* on the doorstep, and we turned and took a few steps back toward the street. Then it happened.

The details are a bit fuzzy more than half a century later, but I think we heard either her voice or the sound of the front door opening. I remember looking back to get a glance at her. My impressions from seeing her on television had left me unprepared for what remained of the beauty she had once exhibited on the silver screen. Her appearance and poise were beyond my young experience, and these impressions left me in a mildly confused state. Her smile was pleasant, her voice distinctive.

“Hello, boys.”

She picked up her paper and went back into the house. The moment was over, and the shortcomings of my immature attention span quickly overcame the confusion of having seen her.

Even after her passing, Frances Farmer remains a lightning rod for conflicting accounts. On cursory examination, it seems that no two descriptions of her life, or of certain incidents in her life, read exactly the same, and certain details they report are of such a contradictory nature that not all of them can be true. Articles and blogs available on the internet have exacerbated the disparities between various biographies and even some of her quoted statements. I do not wish to dwell on these trivialities, but certain details of her life seem important to me for personal reasons.

“God Dies” by Frances Farmer appeared in *The Scholastic* on May 2, 1931. She was a senior in high school at the time, and I am impressed by the quality of writing and the density of thought this piece reveals. She wrote of feeling clean after bathing and lying down for the night, of correlating this feeling with the idea of God, and of being unable to reconcile it with the grittiness of daily living. Inequality in human suffering (a common discrepancy in any age) led her to conclude that God was useless. She expressed pride in discovering this for herself. Nobody had ever told her that belief to the contrary was a lie, but I myself never suffered that particular deprivation. By the time I was a high school student, atheism was more in vogue.

Her essay generated controversy and criticism from her elders. As a Christian and as a professional educator, I find this social phenomenon interesting. I taught at a women’s college for twenty-seven years before retiring, and I appreciate interacting with intelligent, independently thoughtful women. No matter how flawed the individual, I believe these

qualities give God and professors alike something to work with. It is impossible to be certain at present, but I think a young Frances Farmer would have been a welcome addition to my classroom and to my roster of academic advisees.

To the best of my recollection, I became a Christian during the summer of 1964 when I was eleven. My mother required my brothers and me to attend a vacation Bible school at a neighborhood church, and some things that I heard there puzzled me and challenged my conscience. Somewhere between Fifty-First and Fifty-Second streets on North Central Avenue (one block west and around the corner from my house), I made the decision one afternoon. I remember the glare of sunlight off the concrete of the sidewalk as I made my way northward, and I remember being alone.

Roughly four years later and roughly nine blocks farther south, Frances Farmer found herself in the sanctuary of Saint Joan of Arc Catholic Church at 4217 North Central Avenue after wandering in out of curiosity. Her description of what happened there is recorded in *Moments to Remember* by Candida Lund:

“It was quiet and dark, and I studied the massive altar and understood, for the first time, the power and meaning of the Crucifixion.”²

Based on my own experience, her revelation in the sanctuary of Saint Joan of Arc resonated with me when I read about it, and it resonates with me still. Frances Farmer, the controversial author of “God Dies,” actually became a Christian. I did so in full sunlight. At the moment of her epiphany, Frances was indoors and in dim lighting, but like me, she was by herself, an intelligent and thoughtfully independent human being. Such qualities transcend age, gender, and even time. Neither of us responded to a formal invitation in public. We had only the influences of truth and conscience, and we came to the same conclusion.

I grew up in a Methodist family. Frances Farmer converted to Catholicism in 1968. A heavy smoker for much of her life, she died of esophageal cancer on August 1, 1970, at the age of fifty-six.

² Lund, Candida (1980). *Moments to Remember*. Thomas More Press.

Such are my thoughts and recollections. I interpret them in retrospect with the benefit, and perhaps the disadvantage, of maturity. In my wallet there is a Medicare card which officially identifies me as old, but I still see her through the fog of boyhood memory: charming, poised, and unexpectedly beautiful to young eyes.

Hello, boys.

Yes, in some vague and implausible way, I wanted to save Frances Farmer, but in the end, it wasn't necessary. God evidently did it himself.

Robert L. Jones III is Professor Emeritus of Biology at Cottey College. His story, "Until the Bubble Pops," appeared in the March 2021 issue of *Sci Phi Journal*. He lives with his wife and his reasonably well-behaved dog in southwestern Missouri.

ART

Shanice Reid

Dry Bones Come Alive*Image courtesy of the artist.*

Eternal Desire



Image courtesy of the artist.

At the Master's Feet



Image courtesy of the artist.

Shanice Reid is a Christian, artist and writer, living in Poughkeepsie. She has a BA in Sociology and a Creative Writing Minor from SUNY New Paltz. Shanice works at a preschool as a teaching assistant. It was age three, when she was first abducted by fantastical art, literature and crafting.

ART

Jennifer Weigel

The River



Image courtesy of the artist.

Jennifer Weigel is a multi-disciplinary mixed media conceptual artist. Weigel utilizes a wide range of media to convey her ideas, including assemblage, drawing, fibers, installation, jewelry, painting, performance, photography, video and writing. Weigel's art has been exhibited nationally in all fifty states and has won numerous awards.

ART

Cesar Ceballos

The Cross with Nature and Flesh



Image courtesy of the artist.

With Christ's Salvation



Image courtesy of the artist.

Cesar Ceballos, a respected Christian artist uses colors to express the geometry and feeling of faith and hope through the power of Art. Inspired by his travels in religious pilgrimages, his watercolor and drawing techniques spark the imagination.

ART

Paul Nixon

San Damiano Corpus



Image courtesy of the artist.

Paul Nixon lives in McLeansville, North Carolina. Thirty-six years ago, he left a loving family and friends behind in Ireland to seek out his own path in life in New York. He has worked in the auto-repair industry for about thirty years, and then twenty-one years ago a miracle occurred that changed the course of his life in a profound way. Today he is a professional artist/sculptor working with a wide range of materials. One of his first public bronze sculptures was in answer to 911, when he created a life-size, fully equipped firefighter with two children for the Greensboro Fire Department. He also creates liturgical art and furnishings as well as bishops' croziers for churches all over the USA. He owes it all to God and the wonderful journey He put him on and its effect on those he worked for. www.paulnixonart.com.

ART

Cristiane Ventre Porcini

Jesus na manjedoura

Image courtesy of the artist.



Girl Looking at Jesus



Image courtesy of the artist.

Cristiane Ventre Porcini lives in Brasil. From an early age, she became interested in drawing. She graduated in Pedagogy and worked in private schools. She took some classes with plastic artist William Pereira, and received an honorable mention for canvas 'The Dancers and Couple dancing waltz.' She has illustrations published in *Innombrable Magazine* online, *Arte y Poesia* (México) and *Ecos da Palavra revista literária* (Portugal).

Searching for God?

Heart of Flesh is a literary arts journal that publishes work from both Christians and non-Christians, but we are founded in a strong love for Jesus Christ, and for our readers and contributors.

With that being said, we want to know...are you searching for something? The meaning of life? Hope? Peace?

We've been there, and we want to share with you the truth that can set you free:

God is real. He created the universe, the Earth, and everything in it (including you). He is the author of life. As your creator and designer, He knows you, your mind, and your heart. He knows everything about you. He loves you (He *is* love), and He wants a relationship with you.

Here's the problem: there is distance between us and God. This separation exists because, whether we are conscious of it or not, we choose our own way of living instead of God's way. This is called sin. Sin is choosing to say, think, or do things that are against God's will. Everyone sins, without exception, and it keeps us from drawing close to a good, pure, and perfect God. We cannot get rid of our sinfulness by our own efforts—not through religious rituals, trying to be a good person, performing good deeds, etc. But sin must be acknowledged and dealt with in order for a relationship with God to begin.

So, in order to restore the broken relationship with humanity, the Author wrote Himself into His own story...

God came into His own creation, and lived as a man. As a human, He helped us to know His character and showed us how to live. He shared in our humanity, but never sinned. After teaching people about the ways of God, He allowed Himself to be falsely accused by religious leaders and arrested by Roman soldiers, then brutally executed. He did this to make Himself a sacrifice, so that all of the sin of humanity (past, present, and future) could be placed on His shoulders and be punished once and for all.

After He died, He came back from the dead three days later. This miracle proved He had power over life and death, and validated the truth of all His teachings. He told us that whoever trusts Him will be given life—real

life—and will one day live with Him forever in a paradise untainted by the sin that corrupts our world. He made a relationship possible again. His human name is Jesus (*Yeshua* in Hebrew). Many people often refer to Jesus as their “savior” because He literally saves us from the dire consequences of sin—destruction, death, and separation from the love and goodness of God.

If you want to know the God who loves you, there’s nothing you have to *do*. You don’t have to go to church first and you don’t have to start making promises to be a good person. Just come to Him as you are, imperfections and all. Talk to Him. While you’re talking, recognize who He is. Ask Him for His forgiveness. Ask Him to take your life and make it new. And because He loves you, and because He is good, He will do just that.

BIBLE REFERENCES:

- “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” — Romans 3:23
- “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” —1 John 1:8
- “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” —Romans 5:8
- “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. —John 3:16
- “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” —Romans 6:23
- “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” —1 John 1:9
- “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” —Romans 10:9
- “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” —2 Corinthians 5:17

Want your work to appear in *Heart of Flesh*?

Our next reading period begins February 1, 2022.

Send us your best Christian-themed:

- Poetry
- Flash Fiction
- Short Fiction
- Creative Nonfiction
- Art and Photography

To subscribe and read our submission guidelines, visit our website:

HeartOfFleshLit.com

