

Heart of Flesh

Literary Journal



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VERONICA MCDONALD, EDITOR

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Cover Art: "Corpus Anima" by Ena Gilih.

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Thank you to our donors!

John Gardiner
Joseph McDonald



"The Levite's Concubine" by Veronica McDonald, 2017.

Note from the Editor

“‘Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them,’ Then Elisha prayed and said, ‘O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.’ So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” (2 Kings 6:16)

It sometimes takes going into a battleground—a forbidding space—to find out who God really is. The light and glitter and distractions of this world that dangle in front of our eyes like tinsel often keep us from digging our manicured nails into the meat of things and asking the tough questions: Who am I? Why do I exist? Why is there something, rather than nothing? What is the point of this painful existence, and is there any way out? These questions have become almost cliché, but they are the ones I asked myself right before I became a Christian, right before Jesus Christ pulled me out of the dark pit I mulled around in aimlessly, and sewed the torn pieces of my insides back together. When I fell to my knees on the battleground of my soul, surrounded by nothing but visions of that which was dead or dying, I cried out to God. And I found Him. Or rather, He found me. And not just any God—the true God, who is life itself. The one who can glue together the shattered bits of yourself and make them smooth, whole, and more beautiful than you could ever imagine. The battle never goes away while we are living, but it’s unmeasurably better when you know God is on your side.

As you read Issue Seven, you’re going to see battlegrounds. Many times, you’ll see these battlegrounds from the perspective of those feeling defeated, even numb. In some writings, the battle is against God Himself. The writers wrestle with Him, drenched in the pain of loss and struggle, but like Job, sit and scratch at their wounds in contemplation. For other writers, they wrestle against the problem of evil, against sin, unable to fight darkness and doubt on their own as the truth calls out to them from some far distance. Often, their subjects fail to feel His presence and get lost in the pieces of the wreckage, looking for vestiges of His goodness and grace. Others are ground into the dirt as they face the reality of their unworthiness in the magnitude of His being. And then, every once in a while, like a breath of sweet air after being held underwater, we see God peek in, carefully hold our hearts and carry us toward Him.

That is my prayer for you today as you read through these pages. To see Him. To feel His presence in the dark moments, as well as the lighter ones. And to realize He’s been there all along.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to Issue Seven. For those that know Him, thank you for glorifying God with your talent and hard work. For those that don't, thank you for graciously sharing your beautiful work with believers and non-believers alike. You all are truly a blessing to me. My hope is that the Holy Spirit will speak through every piece, directly into the souls of our readers.

Thank you to everyone who follows *Heart of Flesh*, for your encouragement and support. And, of course, thank you for reading.

May God bless you and keep you, make His face shine upon you, and give you peace,

Veronica McDonald

Editor/Founder

POETRY

Emily Louise

Manna

I was sixteen, over-medicated,
too stoned to remember

what it was I said that morning
that my father took offense to,

probably something like:
It helps with my appetite

*and you're the one who said
I looked too skinny. Did you not?*

This was the spring, my junior year.
I'd spent the winter in the adolescent

anorexic psychiatric unit
where this girl had slipped a Ziploc

of multicolored cotton thread
in my assigned slot

of the corrugated mailbox
with a folded note:

*Here is all my extra string
because you love to make those*

*bracelets. Jesus loves your vibrant soul
and so do I. Your friend, Elizabeth.*

Although I failed to recognize
Your handwriting till much later.

Just as I failed to see Your hand
that springtime morning, swap

the blue ceramic plates stacked
on the table with an open box

of Thomas English muffins
for my dad, in his exhaustion,

to fling, like little frisbees,
one by one, in my direction.

At the Pharmacy

Oh God, redirect
my superficial arteries
to circumvent my pelvis

and instead
offload my blood
of lead and Ritalin

into the Sea
of Galilee to be dammed
up, collected

in the interlocking ponds
along the bank
and left to vaporize.

Come time to harvest,
encapsulate the residue
in little glycerin capsules

and write me a controlled
prescription for it, Oh God.
Be my crooked pharmacist.

Be my refill, authorized
too soon. Or be
the last remaining

value-pack of DayQuil
that I reach for
at the same time as the lady

in the pink mask
in the wheelchair
with the smile

and the courtesy to wait
until I'm turned
before she puts

the bottle back
and takes the Purell
from her purse.

Days of Noah

I strapped two bungee cords across the lid
of a pot of chicken soup that would not fit

inside the fridge and carried it—still warm—
across the black-ice-laminated porch

and set it on the Adirondack chair, the seat
of which was tilted, inclined inwardly,

so that for an awful moment I just watched
the full pot sliding, spinach decoupage

onto the inside of the fogged-up lid.
The contents sloshing hot and turbulent

inside the vessel, unsettled
by the lunar pull, by the volume of itself

and by my arrogance: My actually believing
I could keep it from those prying, thieving

raccoon fingers with my industrial elastic,
an underestimation of their motor skills so tragic

that You intercepted—purely out of pity—
and brought my runaway container to an easy

stop against the faux-wood back slats
of the outdoor chair that absolutely should have

overturned. If what I wrought depended
on what I deserved and not the blood and water

that You scrubbed into the fatty ridges of
my coarsely-salted black cast-iron heart,

I would have been a corkscrew noodle
in a pool of sixty quarts worth

of my own stock. Lord, I would have been
a broken wishbone lodged

beneath a raccoon's claw were it not for
Your clutch time intervention,

it would be my thighs and haunches,
hormone-heavy, marinating

in that stock pot on that chair
right there. I'd be something like that

instead of standing here, de-feathered but intact.
My fibers taut, my oven mitts mismatched.

Emily Louise is a fiery new Christian convert with an MFA in Creative Writing. She enjoys writing poems about writing poems and currently has about twelve gray hairs. She spends her free time wondering who put them there and strongly suspects it was you. Yes, you.

POETRY

Vern Fein

Theology

You say there is no Heaven.
 Fly with me now across the world
 to a breast in one country,
 as long as the people are starving.
 It does not matter where.
 A desiccated breast. Sere.
 Clinging, an infant, boy or girl?
 Doesn't matter.
 Sucking scarce milk from a drying teat,
 soon to die, like its siblings, like its mother.
 Doesn't matter.
 You say there is no Heaven.
 You say there is no justice.
 The universe just happened by accident,
 just appeared, exploding into beautiful
 us.

Outcomes just came out.

Fly back with me back to our country,
 to a crib in the suburbs.
 See my niece, dressed in pink,
 a silver spoon in her mouth.
 She will live to a ripe old age,
 have a beau, have a baby,
 maybe more for the nanny.
 Boys or girls, doesn't matter.
 A plump, full breast or Silk milk.
 You say: Too bad, too bad! It's just too bad!
 That's just the way the cookie crumbles in the milk.
 I don't think about the future, Heaven.
 Doesn't matter. I can't think about those other babies.

Hand me a fresh diaper. Hurry, I have to go.
Meeting my hubby at the restaurant.
Hurry.

Saturday (An Easter Poem)

He is dead now.
He was so alive,
Buried.
We are scattered,
Huddled in fear
In various haunts.

Will we ever be fishermen again?

Peacefully plying our nets.

Didn't we see the miracles?

Drinking the hilarious wine at Cana.

Didn't we see the healings?

So many unblinded.
The centurion's daughter dancing.

Didn't we see the demons
Come screaming out?

The startled eyes of pigs and peasants.

Didn't He forgive our sins?

Stones refusing to kill a fallen woman.
The tax collector scrambling down the sycamore.

When will they hunt and kill us?

Remember the agony of the tree.

We remember the days of Glory.

His face shining for days off the mountain.

Will we always remember,
The sound of His voice?

You feed them! I AM...I AM...

That look He gave us

When we slept in the Garden.

Oh God, what will tomorrow be like?

What will tomorrow bring...

A retired special education teacher, **Vern Fein** has published over two hundred poems on over eighty sites, a few being: **82 Review*, *Bindweed Magazine*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Courtship of Winds*, *Young Raven's Review*, *Poesis*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, and *Corvus Review*. Recently his first book of poetry—I WAS YOUNG AND THOUGHT IT WOULD CHANGE—was published by Cyberwit Press.

POETRY

Johanna Caton

My Mother's Body

I dreaded seeing it, but seen, I saw in a stroke
it wasn't hers. Alive, her mere presence was rock
to my flint: when struck I'd spark. In the end I

blazed and burned. Now: no presence no fire.
Her body, like all inanimates, was only stuff,
human outside, yet oddly neutral, cool to touch,
slack, disconnected. Death's surprise. Illness

had made her a sharp weapon—always huntress
of her life's errand, but errant, hunting the wrong—
unreal—miscreants. She caught her children, strings
bound us and we longed for release: all of us.

Found by the risen one in spring, the one who is just,
released by her decease: quieted, soon to be earth,
she was shut fast, Other-ward, piloted, berthed.

Naming

I AM WHO AM will not succumb to naming,
nor will pain—no rim, it roils, slowly coils
and buckles tight: its power to surround un-
rivalled. Then speech goes dumb and gapes
at pain, it slouches off and roams the wealthy
world, untongued and stealthy, looking for itself.
Pain won't climb white-knuckled from that open
wound, won't go away—it stays, it stays.
Some pain makes even God recoil—like Jonah,
ranting beneath the castor oil plant.

Johanna Caton, O.S.B, is a Benedictine nun of Minster Abbey in Kent, England. She writes poetry as a way of deepening her spiritual life. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Catholic Poetry Room*, *Christian Century*, *The Windhover*, *St Austin Review*, *Amethyst Review*, and other publications both online and print.

POETRY

Tiwaladeoluwa Adekunle

I split the afternoon

with my girlish body to find God in a garden
rubber soles grazed plush grass, hills awestruck
near the sky. I touched my knees to the soil, barely stirring
yet sprinting across a history into a future unknown. I longed for
nothing
but God, the way He made things again—I wanted
to be a thing made again

I brought nothing but, already, the pieces of a life,
the fractured song caught in my throat
once, even younger, I had written
take my life if I stop believing
I meant it

what was love but His Son dying in my place?
unbounded love, it still
unbolts me

make me *ever yours*, I cry
the body I broke, a
forgotten melody
every bone in me
like milk

Tiwaladeoluwa Adekunle is a Ph.D. candidate and poet from Nigeria. Her poems appear in *Breakwater Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Oakland Review*, and *Pittsburgh Poetry Journal*, among others. She has been nominated for a Best of the Net prize and a Pushcart Prize.

POETRY

Linda McCullough Moore

Garden of Eden

The serpent—snake, when he's at home—
 devil of a guy, slender/slim, nice suit, good haircut,
 selling pomegranates door-to-door,
 a Jesuit, a Pharisee, his mother said he'd make a lawyer.
 Up right—*snakes walked the earth*—but hardly upright.
 Be upstanding, as they say at the Old Bailey.
 But posture isn't everything.

He doesn't ask the woman, *Are you hungry?*
Do you like to try new things?
 The devil asks Eve, "Do you believe he loves you?"
 Up/down/yes/no/not sure/can't tell/absolutely.

Define your terms: the little boy, he loves his goldfish,
 scoops him from the bowl and puts him on the rug
 to play. He wants the goldfish to be free.
 Nothing he'll say no to.

It doesn't take a chasm to wean a soul away.
 A fracture crack will do: an old priest who tells
 young men how doubt is really a good thing, a snake
 who comes around when Adam is at work.

"Do you believe he loves you?"
 Oral argument: "If he did, would he say no to you?"
 Love is never having to say, "Don't eat that."

The reptile's got one scene, two lines, and hits the dust.
 His curse worse because *he was more crafty*
than any beast of the field. Perhaps more charming.
 (*To whom much is given*, etcetera etcetera.
Lo, Low, how the mighty are fallen. And so forth.)
 But this is not his story. His fate sealed before the Lord
 made man and from his rib his mate.

He asks again. The maiden, let's call her that,
crinkles up her eyes, snake charmer charming;
he is not unattractive, devils often not.

When does it start? Are we to date The Fall of Man
from the first bite, or from its contemplation.
Let the record show: when does the sin begin?

The question still in echo on that morning:
"Do you believe he loves you?"

Eve bows her head, looks up again.
"Honestly?" she says.
"Not the way I want."

Sacrifice

We always think it's something you can see,
a korban, bulls, young doves in barbeque.
That wild and wooly woman, *money-money*,
no chocolate all of Lent. Abraham imagined
it was Isaac. A simple mistake.

Sacrifice, a project, taking half the morning,
skins to the priests, meat to men and women,
fat asizzle, *olah: that which goes up* in smoke,
for the Lord.

Sacrifice, begun for skins. Adam tapes a fig
leaf to his sex—we shine the flashlight there—
God drapes him head to foot in furry hide.
Sacrifice: it's how you get yourself a cover.

Cain's offering prettier than Abel's.
The veggie plate. We want to offer Jesus
vichyssoise. Blood makes a royal mess.
Let's not pretend.

Asaph, son of Berechiah, in his Psalm
quotes the Lord God Almighty:
“If I was hungry, would I tell you?”

Sacrifice, He says, don't sacrifice. There is
winsome in his wily ways: *I will have mercy*
and not sacrifice, he says. Pronouns please,
who's having mercy? Who? To whom given?

Burnt offerings doing belly bumps with grace.
Take God's picture and He disappears. *Come*
let us reason together, know this, seek wisdom,
gain understanding. Ponder longer. Go Fish.

But who wants a God who fits inside
the glove compartment?

I do.

Sacrifice. Don't sacrifice. I'm quoting here.

I will have mercy,
not sacrifice.
Both together.

What Faith

Disbelief is not the same
as not believing. Disbelief
makes noise, guffaws, sends
Christians witty puns: *The*
bread of life is risen. LOL.
That sort of thing. Disbelief
needs company, goes crazy
after just one Saturday of
quarantine. Smokes Mary Jane
for eye health and inspiration.

Not believing loves the
isolation, says we're all good

people, bottles up the milk of
human kindness, trumpets
quietude. Makes charity a thing.
And at the cross of Jesus,
Not believing shakes her head,
she disapproves entirely.

Disbelief says, "This is crazy."
But standing by the empty tomb,
he's the one who sticks his head
inside, calls out, "Is anybody home?"
He's it is who registers the echo.

Muddy Water

*Every fifteen seconds a child dies
from drinking contaminated water,*
I say, and you tell me you need
something to read at the beach,
and no damn poetry.
But this is not a poem, it's a fact.
I know, I know, you don't like
numbers. *But who's counting?* as you say
when you are drunk. *Let them drink wine,*
that time the beggars grabbed at your coat
in Venice after we got off the train, the water
of uncertain potability, we parched;
it took the better part of one long afternoon
to get us wet again. Were you ever thirsty?
Did your hands cup dirty water, bring it
to your lips, before you spat and swatted air
to swear you'd kill for water; though you settled
for a beer that time in Chad, in a clear bottle,
with ice. The only ice within a hundred miles
would find its way to you.
We are what we drink. Let's think:
Who decides these things? Who chooses
who gets root beer, lemonade, and who,
thin mud to drink?
Let's say it's God.
Shut off the spigot while we point at him.

Don't mix your drinks. Stick with Scotch.
The devil take the hindmost. He has had
a lot of practice.
Run fast. Don't spill a drop.
I want to say, *They're gaining on us,*
but they're not.

Linda McCullough Moore is the author of two story collections, a novel, an essay collection and more than 350 shorter published works. She is the winner of the Pushcart Prize, as well as winner and finalist for numerous national awards. Her first story collection was endorsed by Alice Munro, winner of the Nobel Prize, and equally as joyous, she frequently hears from readers who write to say her work makes a difference in their lives. For many years she has mentored award-winning writers of fiction, poetry, and memoir. She is currently completing a novel, *Time Out of Mind*, and a collection of her poetry. www.lindamcculloughmoore.com

POETRY

Nithya Mariam John

Naked Prayers

My prayers are unclothed; quite contrary to the pompous Pharisaic garments.
There are no frilled, ornamental words to aid the supplementation. Like the woman
at Simon's house, whose tears were worth more than her alabaster jar,
my incoherent tongue lies dormant many a night, my heaving chest
wrapped tightly in sighs. I wish I could address the One above properly—
Rabboni, Almighty, Elohim—but stripped off all glorious titles, I lean
on to the pillow and talk to it. The pillowcase is a gift from my grandmother:
an embroidered house, a chimney full of smoke and blue clouds.
Does God reside in that soft cushioned cotton?
Maybe, yes. Gently, my eyes close and lips seal in silence, as I'm comforted
by the Spirit who listens to prayers disrobed of hefty quotes from the Book of Law.
There is no beginning, middle or end, let alone a proper Amen. In my dream,
I see my prayers float across the Tabernacle, where hearts converse in a language
that Love alone understands.

jonah

blue slices of the sky,
battered with yellow sunlight
and offered between the branches of a guava tree,
charters a green sea which ebbs and flows within me.
the emerald waters wash over coral desires, octopic grief and turtle-dreams.
umbrellaed by stars, I vomit a whale on the shores of Nineveh, nurturing a dying bush.

Siesta

The kite cuts the skies,
and fetches an olive leaf.
The oceanic scent
waltzes the length of the clouds,
and trails all across
my snoring nostrils.

Taste buds bloom
into flavours of choice;
my teeth bites into the holy bread,
which the crows share with me,
as we dine on the banks of Cherith brook,
awaiting the arrival of the Prophet.

Nithya Mariam John is a poet, translator and teacher from Kerala, India. Her scribblings are housed in *Usawa Literary Review*, *Muse India*, *Gulmohar Quarterly*, *The Samyuktha Poetry* and *DoubleSpeak* among the others. She is looking forward to seeing her poems in *Last Leaves* and *Muddy River Review* in April. When not reading, she spends time in her balcony-garden, quite often with a bowl of home-made pudding in her hand.

POETRY

Mary Eileen Ball

Murder

Your face a walled fortress,
Shuttered eyes
A tongue tasting ash and whiskey
but remembering
the soft fragrance of avocado from the yard
and the gentle puttering of chickens.
Each night the rented kisses—
knife wounds, gashes—
leak the last of your innocence
onto the petate.
Memories woven in the palm fronds
tear your skin as you gasp,
a woman drowning in
a world that dies to be reborn.

Eema

Mount Father erupted,
cascading curses and a refusal to “chauffeur” us to church.
My mother’s mouth, piano wire
unsounded, her fingers wrapped round little brother’s
hand and black purse straps.
She didn’t drive,
but years before had promised God
if he’d give her children,
she’d take them to his house.
We scuttered across wet roadways,
huddled together, umbrellaless.
The sky gray electric. The cemetery
indifferent, where my father’s father
rested from his alcoholic binges and the minstrel highway.
Eema weathered the present, guarded the future, and winnowed the past
down to its bedrock vows.

Boundless as the continent,
bearing heirlooms for the father of an angry mountain.

Oh, the Lamb

An adultery.
A conception.
The twitching fingers of a soldier gushing lifeblood,
Heat rising from the loins to parch the throat,
The rot of sin.

The visit.
A pointing finger cloaked by a tale,
one little ewe lamb taken in by a poor man,
its down—soft as his children's' breath—against his neck at night,
a weary traveler, a wealthy scoundrel, the theft,
the lamb's bloodjet thickens the dust.
Someone must pay.

You are the man!
A pointing finger, a rasping throat, the shudder.
A baby's dying breath.
God's great mercy.

Nathan and David.

Mary Eileen Ball lives in the Deep South with her husband and young son. She has been published in *Agape Review*, *Calla Press*, and *Time of Singing*. She earned a B.A. in English from the University of Mississippi. Her Facebook page is at <https://www.facebook.com/maryeileenball/>.

POETRY

Ron Riecki

trauma

when I pray, I catch fire. When I'm on fire,
I pray. When there's no fire, I catch fire.
When there's no fire, I pray. This life,
I've found, is chronic pain. This pain,
I've found, is chronic life. For now.
For no one knows the pain you have
felt. Except One. The two. How
you are always linked. You are
always linked. Even with all
of your pins and needles,
the stabbing pain. Even
with the loss of this or
that. Your son. Your
legs. The way my
mother's hands
shake so much
that now she
can't paint.
How she
sits and
prays
.

The woman who I counsel asks me if I will pray with her

That's it. She just wants prayer. I ask if she wants anything else. No, she says,

just prayer. So we pray. Her hands are as prevalent as the walls. That is all

the room is: hands and walls. Her fingers cling to her fingers, as if she

is trying to hold an angel cupped in her hands. We delve into prayer. Dive

into prayer. I had an ex- tell me that she was leaving me because I wasn't

"Christian enough." A measuring cup. I think of a measuring cup. How much

singing in church would I have needed to have performed for her? How large

of a crucifix would I have needed around my rural neck? How many Christian

channels would I need to have programmed into my car stereo? It was stolen. I have

no cross to wear. I don't go to church anymore. Not with this plague. I sit at home.

Alone. Doing what the two of us are doing now, so intensely. So simple. This fury

of prayer. How nothing changes. And yet, how devoted we are in hope. Such hope.

after being shown pictures of dead children

“Then the prince sent for the cobbler. And he came. And they took
out one of the cobbler’s two eyes.

And justice was satisfied.”

—Kahlil Gibran,

“War”

by a man I am counseling from a war-torn country,
I drive home, the night so early, a rebellious night,

the sky combed with peace, the moon shut off
in some corner of the sky, punished. I pull over.

A cornfield. Daunting stalks. I sit there for so
long. There are changes in our brains that happen.

I sit there for so long. The headlights lighting up
the world slowly moving in the wind. I sit there

for so long. I look to my left. All along, there
had been a graveyard right there. I stop, turn off

the car, and walk, in the dark, the moon invisible,
this halfway point on my neuropathic commute

that numbs me, but I feel now. I feel the world.
I go to the middle of the graveyard. Are they

everywhere? Are the dead everywhere? It is so
quiet that I can hear the moon. Even though it is

trying so hard to be silent. I look up. My father
told me that if you are in the dark and look up

at the night sky, that is God looking straight down
at you. That hugeness, that world of sky, that is

only the aqueous humor of God. The Milky Way
as just a blink in the eye. That, our roaring God.

Ron Riecki's books include *My Ancestors are Reindeer Herders and I Am Melting in Extinction* (Loyola University Maryland's Apprentice House Press), *Posttraumatic* (Hoot 'n' Waddle), and *U.P.* (Ghost Road Press). Right now, Riecki's listening to The Mountain Goats' "This Year."

POETRY

Mary Grace van der Kroef

Omnipresent

Presence wrapped in particles.
Held
Within an atom's womb.
Cradled in creation's sum.
Living possibility.
Glue
Of existence.

Intellect that interacts
On every plane.

Through every strand weaved
Though unperceived.
Binding.

Quiet.
Pulling shadows in place.
Holding space
For time, matter, and thought.

Gentle as mist.
Weighted as rock.

Burning life with a human frame,
Yet roaming wild and untamed.
Emulsified through time's pool.

Things Made

Man has made many things
 From God's creation.
 Art appropriation,
 Amassed adoration
 For plagiarism.

Shadows
 of a masterpiece
 Already living, breathing.
 Washed out copies.
 Fragments of His truth.

Does He see us thieves?
 Or children
 Bringing tracings
 To hang upon his fridge?
 Marvelling at our works,
 Unaware that they are His.

Lost with in our making?
 Immersed
 in creations flow.
 Breathing in His presence
 yet worshipping path stones.
 Forgetting to follow them
 To His heart.

Mary Grace van der Kroef is a lover of the simple things in life. She is the author of *The Branch That I Am* poetry collection, and has seen publication by various journals such as *Calla Press*, and *Agape Review*. Her work can also be found at www.marygracewriting.ca.

POETRY

Carol Edwards

Again

What does it mean to confess our sins?
Bring them to God again and again,
“sorry, this is a thing I did,”
toss it at Him, “handle that wouldya,”
and disappear, guilty feelings cleared
off we go on our way;

or groveling on our knees, scraped raw
from all the gravel we spread
underneath, offset our transgressions
with equal self-flagellation
because to simply be forgiven
is too easy, begets flippancy.

We cannot be perfect yet we
are commanded to be—not humanly
perfect, but divinely—obviously
impossible, yet the mandate remains.
How much despair is invited in
every time we present our sin
for forgiveness and in our minds add, “Again”?

I have no answer for this.
The shame I feel over repeat offenses
committed every minute
outweighs any joy from pardon,
lost battles nothing to celebrate,
preferring they were hidden
out of sight, almost out of mind
coffin piled high with distractions
to keep the corpse trapped inside;

yet like a zombie it emerges,
undaunted punches through
to ravage flesh and brain, consume

what it can, infection spread
until I'm the walking dead
raging to be whole again,

though one thought clings
as the plague seeps through:
"I am faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse.
Call to Me even a billion times,
and your leprous places I'll purify,
hold you close to Me
in the darkness of your insanity."

Carol Edwards is a northern California native transplanted to southern Arizona. She lives and works in relative seclusion with her books, plants, and pets (+ husband). She enjoys a coffee addiction and raising her succulent army. Her work has recently appeared in *Open Skies Quarterly* and *POETiCA REViEW*. Instagram @practicallypoetical.

POETRY

Mary Hills Kuck

Halos

Early Sunday morning in Jamaica
rays of sunlight slipped through crannies
in the chancel of the church I loved,
sending shifting halos on the heads of priests
who preached and prayed and praised.

Today I see this sacred aura in the light
that flickers through late-summer forest's
still-green leaves, just before they color,
dry, and heap up cushions on the path.

It filters through the branches,
painting ferns a brighter hue, then
moving with the sun to highlight fallen
pinecones, rain-roused mushrooms,
winter birds that will not migrate,
ripples on the swampy pond, giving
every being here a chance to glow.

Will this halo one day find it fit
to cast its light on me?

It's Cold Out There

It's two-thirty a.m. I add it up: eleven-thirty,
twelve-thirty, one-thirty, two-thirty. Four hours
of sleep. This is not desperate. I can function
on four hours. Still, I want to sleep more.
It's cold out there, and I am so warm,
cuddled with your knees tucked into mine,
your thumb in my hand under the pillow.

I close my eyes. The little “I can’t sleep” song without words or tune begins. My toes start to twitch. “Stop!” I tell them, but they won’t. What to do but change the song. There is the song we sang at the concert the other night, “I want Jesus to follow me.” No, that can’t be right. *We’re* supposed to follow *Jesus*. What are the right words? Oh yes, “I want Jesus to *walk with* me.” Now sing it. It’s lovely. But the tune is a little tricky, so minor, even just in my head. Singing it right keeps me awake. Three-thirty a.m.

It was such a strange concert, anyway. Who combines a Bach cantata with African American spirituals and readings from Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman? A *white male* read Sojourner Truth’s words about the babies and husband she never owned. I want to get up and read the program again to see how Bach’s words connected. But it’s cold out there, and I am so warm, cuddled with your knees tucked into mine, your thumb in my hand under the pillow.

“I want Jesus to walk with me.”
What are the rest of the words?
We sing this in church sometimes.
Robbie played the keyboard and sang it to break our hearts. “*Lord*, I want Jesus, to walk with me.” But his career progressed and now he’s singing jazz in Philadelphia, and we have two other musicians. What *are* the rest of the words? Trying to remember keeps me awake. Four-thirty a.m.

I came late to jazz, and fun music in general. I was an embarrassing dancer and a classical music snob. But I’ve grown to love Smokey Robinson and Aretha. My daughter gave me an Aretha CD and I play it when I’m by myself, cooking. Aretha wakes my dry bones like the Word of the Lord. I dance in the mirror while the bread is rising, twisting my hips and raising my hands in joy.

I want to dance to Aretha now.
But it's cold out there, and I am so warm,
cuddled with your knees tucked into mine,
your thumb in my hand under the pillow.

Five-thirty a.m. Dawn cracks. Still no sleep.
It's all right. Four hours will do.
It's cold out there, and I am so warm,
cuddled with your knees tucked into mine,
your thumb in my hand under the pillow.

Mary Hills Kuck has retired from teaching English and German in the US and Jamaica and now lives in Massachusetts with her family. She has received a Pushcart Prize nomination and has published in a number of journals, including the *Connecticut River Review*, *SLANT*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *From the Depths*, *Splash*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Main St. Rag*, and others. Her chapbook, *Intermittent Sacraments*, was published in June 2021, by Finishing Line Press.

Rachel Michelle Collier

LUCY CHALLENGES THE SUN

A little girl, standing, double-twisted ponytails expanding by the millisecond in the gross humidity of Mother Mississippi's breath. Five barrettes are gone, three barrettes are barely hanging on; her tiny rubber bands are slowly starting to lose hope. Let's call her Lucy. Lucy chomps a piece of gum determinedly, switching it from side to side, counting all the minutes, blowing bubbles, building up her jaws to make them strong for yet more gum. She is six years old, and as she presses bubblegum she sets her eyes upon the sun, sees another challenge, sees another way to build her strength. My eyes have lots of melanin, she scoffs, I can take you on. And this is how it starts. And now her blink doesn't budge. And now she is dead still, adding to her fitness: chew, and stare, hard, and do it *all* without flinching. She tries her best to bore a hole into that brilliant light. How did the sun get there? she thinks, Not science, but for real—oh! She should work her brain, too! Lucy burrows deeper, deeper: Sun, sun, are you him, are you God? How are you just hanging in the air? not science, but for real. Did you put yourself there? god, god, of Egyptian lore? she asks the ancient star, calculating history.

Her eyeballs have been sweating for eleven seconds now. You're matter like myself, but you can't see, and you can't speak—oh you, you just *can't* be God. Lucy's jaws are nearly spent, so she digs in harder, harder, blowing bubbles rapidly to distract herself from pain. God made you, too, concludes the girl with double-twisted ponytails standing in the mean ol' breath of Mother Mississippi. But if he did, then who made him? Then, then who made God? Lucy's mind begins to give, Must've made his own self...

A little girl, standing, double-twisted ponytails expanding by the millisecond in the gross humidity of Mississippi's awful heat. A little girl, standing, double-twisted ponytails expanding, training like a Stoic, thinking in philosophy. Lucy, standing—

reeling now, teetering—

on the brink of giving up; struggling, struggling. She toughs it out a little more, straining, hoping not to blind, proving to herself her strength, thinking quick before she yields the win to that eyeball-roasting orb: God, God, God, God, God, God, Must've made his *own* self first, *Is* he a person, What kind of person can hang a *sun*, What kind of person can make his-*self*, How old *is* he if he made his-*self* before this *sun*, God, God, God, God, So what *is*, He must be *forever* / *is him*? He must've *always been* . . . run into him at the edge of the universe . . . Soooo, *Where* does he start, and *When* does he *end*, and *How big* and What's *after*, after, after, God, God, God, GOD!

Thoughts of God's majesty overwhelms, breaking Lucy's will. Her jaws collapse, her muscles fail, and here she moves as though a sloth, she blinks and blinks but now she cannot see a gosh-darned thing but tears and God in every single thought; but should her eyes recover: might be weak; could be stronger, having fought the mean ol' Mississippi sun and lived to tell! Fine, you sun, she says, you win, sun, just like I knew you would, sun. Good contest, yes? Lucy, standing, soaking, drooping, tired now—tired not from challenging the sun, tired not from pressing bubblegum or willing every muscle halt: Fine, God, you win, God, I won't challenge your sun again, God, at least for a while, God, it makes me think too hard, mapping out how you began, and where and *if* you end—you don't make sense, too tough for me! I'm only six; my brain is small! *It might implode*.

A little girl, standing, double twisted ponytails expanding by the millisecond in the gross humidity. Six barrettes are gone, two barrettes are barely hanging on; her tiny rubber bands are truly losing hope. She is Lucy. Lucy bobs and weaves with caution back into her home, altered vision still in question, using other senses each to full potential—it's her specialty. No biggie. Either she *will* see again—or she won't. She shrugs. Her worse concern right then was God. She lays her head to convalesce

from Mississippi's challenges:
the gum, the sun, her muscles, God, her sanity,

and God is grinning now, He makes her sleep, restores her sight, and grants her light beyond what Lucy's soft and dark, determined eyes could ever scheme; she doesn't stir, she doesn't stir, she dreams another sight of every planet, every star, glittered heavens lining up to bow to this—*someone*, it seems: someone grand, majestic, *rumored*, coming back to rule the world as Lucy tries her best to tell the world to stop and watch the sky for such a glorious event, she wakes up dazed: the sights, the music, dazes her, just the same as every time before—some mystery, its

answer not in any book—it's not even on Wikipedia!—she's looked,
she's looked, she's looked!

Oh, in the gross humidity of Mother Mississippi's breath:
A little girl, standing, double-twisted ponytails expanding—

barrettes barely hanging on—

The milliseconds pass,
her tiny rubber bands yet cling to hope—

Lucy, challenging the sun, wrestling with God.

Rachel Michelle Collier is from Mississippi, and has also been published in *Fathom Mag* and *Ekstasis*. She wants you to know that you are loved.
Twitter: @CollierRachelM

POETRY

Andy Stager

A Holyday in Zürich

A holyday in Zürich
can be known by the stigmata
of teenaged beer spilled
along sidewalks astride the papery
shells of old Ronald's farmless edibles,
revealed as the sun rises
to meet only the ghosts
of suited creditors and racewalking Bahnhof-hoppers,
and the concrete solitude of a pilgrim—
oneself—dodging the traces
of yesterday's throng, en route
to where, maybe, another pilgrim
has pointed her morning stride, all to say,
you are alone, and I am too,
so we may as well
be alone in this together.

Credo

I believe she's letting go
I believe it will be any day now
I believe before the trip to Italy

I believe we will touch down before nine
I believe the shuttle waits near door four
I believe it's expected to rain all week

Can you believe all this food?
Can you believe she made her bed?
Can you believe her ugly Icelandic Christmas sweater?

I can't believe the organist's attitude
I don't believe our voices require amplification
I can't believe her pew is empty

Can you believe she never complained?
Can you believe her bed was made?
Can you believe this jello-pretzel salad?

I believe it was her North Dakota youth
I believe she rests peacefully
I believe she'll soon rise in glory

I believe there's a Chick-fil-A in Concourse B
I believe we are third for take-off
I believe it's time I had a solid cry

Andy Stager, an Ohio native, has lived and written poetry in South Carolina, South Korea, and Switzerland. He recently completed his PhD in theology with Trinity College Bristol and Aberdeen University, and is pursuing a DMin in 'The Sacred Art of Writing' at Western Theological Seminary. He pastors Saint Patrick Presbyterian Church in Denver, where he lives with his wife and three sons. His poetry has appeared in *Ekstasis* and *Fare Forward*.

POETRY

Steven Duncan

Ржавчина и Слезы (Rust and Tears)

Based on actual events in western Ukraine, 1930

First came the miracle. Madonna wept with us, or perhaps because we had forgotten her. Blood against stone. Tears like the Volga, flowing tidal, no time to brim. The prayers we had not spoken aloud were finally answered. A renewal. This open wound of a woman, come back to life. Come back to awaken us like the gentle stirring of a cold broth, a warming.

Second came the explanation. They gathered us together, said *be logical*. Pharaoh's magicians. They poured water down through Mary's face, reproduced her agony. *She's rusting, there, this was probably rain*. A headscarf ruined itself to the ground.

Third came unholy martyrdom. Two scientists in the street, beaten dead by our disillusion. The stirring, the warming.

Turbulence

Did I not notice it before?
How an airplane

becomes a winged cathedral
as it flies into the night

a floating church, one long aisle
cascading down the center

for a processional of travelers
to make their pilgrimage

this menagerie of strangers
united briefly by purpose.

Witness how the flight attendants
bring forth the eucharist

of Biscoff and holy wine
bestowed to saint and sinner.

Hear the unmistakable sound
of a voice from above.

Faint, spectral light seeps in
from rows of oval windows

this vessel touching heaven, almost
headed for the hands of God.

See the people grasp at rattled pews
praying for their lives.

Steven Duncan is a poet and medical student living in Dallas, TX. His poetry has been featured in *Mojave River Review*, *Thimble*, *Prolific Press*, *Gleam* and others. Steven was the 2018 winner of the Redrock Writers' Founders Award. You can view more published work by visiting www.stevenduncan.net.

POETRY

Tiffany Nicole Fletcher

The Woman with the Issue (Luke 8:43-48)

Did she experience the lifting?
The lifting of the chains that happens
when the affliction is no longer there—
when that part of you has evaporated
in the healing touch of the Risen One;
when it is no longer a part of you;
when you are no longer a walking wound.

Or had she already been lifted above
that pain before,
when the doctors told her that
healing was not possible and she
persisted,
believing anyway, for four thousand days.
Perhaps
her victory was then,
perhaps her faith had already lifted her
above the pain
in all of those moments that came before:

getting herself to where He was;
braving the crowds of the desperate faithful;
believing, reaching for Him;
exchanging her search for healing
for a search for The Healer;
and so finding herself obtaining all.

Tiffany Nicole Fletcher writes poems exploring healing, empowerment, and the sacred. Raised in New York City, she is the daughter of West Indian immigrants. Her work has recently been featured in *Snapdragon Journal* and in *We Were Not Alone: A Community Building Art Works Anthology*. Her website is www.tnicolefletcher.com.

POETRY

Terri Martin Wilkins

Ice

I would have preferred snow
Obliterating mud and gravel with intimate forgetful beauty
Like love covering a multitude of sins.
Instead ice pellets bombard
The frozen accusing dirt
Bitter on the weedy path of wanderings left behind.
Plummeting punishing filaments
Bouncing redundantly
Exploding into the frigid air in reckless repetitive indecision,
Then settling, separate
Tiny chaotic inchoate isolations
Suspended briefly before bleeding uneasily
Into a whorled clouded glaze
Imperfectly covering the bruised gaudiness
Of rotting leaves and lingering regrets.

Terri Martin Wilkins: I am a follower of Jesus Christ, often failing but always relying on grace. I write to express lament and trust. I often struggle but continue to work on trusting God in all things.

POETRY

Luigi Coppola

The Light in the Nightclub

We thought the lights had come on
but it was just her illuminating the hall,
rays refracting through the sweat on the walls,
through our glasses and into our eyes.

Like food at a shrine, we offered her pills
of all colours: the red ones made her wings
swirl then twitch; she munched on white ones
like dried apple pieces; the blue ones made her
speak in tongues through tears.

We giggled and sighed with every drop,
collected them in a half-empty beer bottle:
the dregs bubbling, our wine turned water.

When she stripped down to feather and skin,
the crowd made space, howled at her
movements at the same time ecstatic
and melancholy, seductive and impossible
like the best kind of art.

We danced around her and stared
as her moulting feathers were stamped on,
ground into the spillage and sick,
the fibres sticking like congealed blood,
her dirtied knees buckling like spider's legs,
her throat twisting like a last choked prayer.

When froth came up from her stomach
and her sweat turned yellow, we knew
we had gone too far.

By the time the medics arrived, she
had vanished: one drunk said she became
the music, flew back into the speakers;

another said she picked up all her feathers,
left by the fire escape; another claimed to be
the angel, but his scars didn't match hers.

I know the truth—she brushed up against
me. See, here on my arm is her blood,
her sweat, a strand of hair and this feather
in my pocket that I'll be buried with
so I can give it back to her
at the start of eternity.

Luigi Coppola is a teacher, poet, first generation immigrant and avid rum and coke drinker. Shortlisted for Bridport Prizes, longlisted for the Ledbury and National Poetry Competitions, publications include *Worple Press'* anthology 'The Tree Line', *Acumen*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *Iota*, *Magma*, *Rattle* and *Rialto* (www.LuigiCoppolaPoetry.blogspot.co.uk).

POETRY

Donna Kathryn Kelly

Things the Internet Has Ruined (Modesty)

four women
in dresses to ankles
the sun is perfect

laughing joys
the river praises them
these spirits who blush

still in youth
freckles adorn faces
even arms covered

to untouched wrist
handmade cloth on long hair
the wind does not steal

in summer
geese sense the uncommon
grace on roller blades

Donna Kathryn Kelly practiced law for many years in the Illinois criminal justice system: first, as an assistant public defender, and later, as a felony prosecutor. Her poetry has appeared in literary journals such as *Pasque Petals*, *Oakwood* and *North Dakota Quarterly*. Her novel, *COP EYES*, a murder mystery, is available for purchase on Amazon.com (<https://www.amazon.com/-/e/B09NQH3J9B>). You can follow her on Instagram @donnakathrynkelly.

POETRY

Nadine Ellsworth-Moran

If I Could Tell You, I Would

Please don't ask me where to find him, for locations of fire and cloud pillar
and gap-mouthed riverbeds. Would you believe me
anyway? What if I said look at my hands, the callouses on my fingertips

from sliding them across the pages of my red leatherbound Bible, would you say
God was there? Beneath my palm centuries pass, the Jordan is crossed,
I feel the cartography of milk and honey, consult prophets, sit in the shade

of the Deborah tree, listen at the cavemouth of Horeb wrapped snug in my mantle.
But I learned the long way round, don't bother with the obvious, revelation
has a mischievous side. Sometimes, I find Him stretched around the Word itself,
in the gilt edge of the page—the sliverdoor

into the Holy of Holies and the only way through is to allow
myself to be drawn into God's glorylungs where I am held as eternal
ether and momentary breath. There, with a rope tied around one foot,
I intensify, electric and alive, dead

and revived with the flexion of God's diaphragm that makes room
for me beneath his ribs—know myself formed from bloodclay
swept up from beneath the mercy seat. Then hand over hand

I pull myself like one stunned and stumbling to the surface, return
to the between of Word and world where the compass spins in all directions
and the best I can say is, choose your path and go.

Nadine Ellsworth-Moran serves in ministry in Georgia. She is fascinated by the stories unfolding all around her and seeks to bring everyone into conversation around a common table. Her work has appeared in *Interpretation*, *Ekstasis*, *Emrys*, *Structo*, and *Kakalak*, among others. She lives with her husband and three unrepentant cats.

POETRY

Anthony Butts

Heart of Gold

Built like a fullback
he patrols the outdoor
mental rehab facility

like a football is in-hand,
a tree trunk of a man
uprooted by the tug-

of-war he came home
to—seemingly coming
to in every conversation

because of the brain injury
he survived—striding
as he strives to obey

the Golden Rule, like
a Cartier egg in place
of his heart, pulling

at him wherever
he goes, knowing
that his wife may be

the battle he never wins,
as the rope burns, always
ending with his “Amen.”

The Legend of Lisa, the Meek

With techno ringing in my ear-
phones, I recall Lisa turning her back
on the meek cliff of her body,

hunched forward in therapy groups,
in order to dance for her man
to the hip-hop he played on his phone—

as their radio-active hearts quickly came
to be powered by each other. Meekly,
she had approached me, from an asymptote

off in the sunny distance of the dusty
country road leading through
the facility—in a mathematics

of desire for the broad yellow moths
of Louisiana to flutter in a poem
just like this one. The day she entered

therapy, Lisa turned like a wind-stricken
leaf in the breeze of our group's raucous
chit-chat, about this and that, having

asked me to quiet the seas—in emulation
of Jesus—as she would come to believe
that stress was a storm which was passing.

Anthony Butts' second of three published collections of verse, *Little Low Heaven* (New Issues 2003), garnered the Poetry Society of America's 2004 William Carlos Williams Award for best book. A graduate of the creative writing doctoral program at the University of Missouri, he later taught at the University of Dayton and Carnegie Mellon University. Butts is a native Michigander, currently living in Louisiana.

POETRY

Karen Abeyta

Transcendent Worship

I scroll to distract from thighs that wail
as I pedal—struggling to sustain 100 watts.
Tethered to tedium—rake, hammer, hoe—
I seek solace from the static scenery
of my garage. Then I spy
100 churches singing a blessing over New York City
so I click, hoping that this five-borough band
will escort me into fullness of joy.

The contralto's *sotto voce*, lush like an inky Merlot,
melts over me like chocolate ganache,
entreating empyreal benediction.
Goosebumps bud, eyes seep salty, effort evanesces,
as workout becomes worship of the One
who created these voices to praise Him.
And suddenly I dwell with the One who indwells me
as sweat drips, tresses stick, breath exalted breathes.

Like Solomon's palanquin, my interior
is inlaid with love for this choir of nations.
Presbyterians and Pentecostals with voices raised,
Albanian, Korean, Greek, proffering praise
Image-bearers hailing from Brooklyn to the Bronx,
singing from stairwells and rainy rooftops,
the vernal and venerable, famed and unnamed,
joined like dovetail joint.

This apparition of adoration
has me longing for the day
when all worshipers, in unity,
will magnify His name.
And I'm hoping for a deluxe vocal upgrade
when God fashions my imperishable tent, 'cause
on earth I wasn't dealt it, but in heaven I want to belt it
like Aretha when I sing his praise.

And as their anthem ends, I linger—
 revived-renewed-restored.
 But the burn returns as the fly wheel churns
 wafting Limburger meets Lazarus
 (three days gone).
 But I feign anosmia and (feeling glorious)
 declare victorious that I am the aroma of Christ!
 Until...

Marble-eyed and deaf to praise—or anything
 other than the can opener liberating dinner—
 he totters to my side. Four legs, ancient of days,
 nails clickety-clackety on the tile floor.
 Wired-hair coat fading tan to white,
 he grins with breath of death
 before unleashing a lake of sunshine on the floor.
 And basking in the afterglow of transcendent worship,
 I count it all joy.

Karen lives in Vermont with her husband and (sporadically) her two kids who attend college. A true theology-geek, she enjoys helping people understand the Bible. Her work has been published in *Fathom Magazine*, *Heartstrong Faith*, *Sacred Stories Ministries*, *Saturday SOULfood* (Living by Design Ministries), and *Just Between Us* (Summer 2022).

POETRY

Nolo Segundo

Vanity and Dust

Vanity and dust,
Dust and vanity—
Is that all we are?
Clashing egos,
Scheming, soulless,
Taking and getting
Only to lose all to
That cheater Death?

When all you love
Will one day turn
To dust, and none
Can beat emptiness,
Then you must pick—
That all is but chance,
Or all is planned, and
Luck is the illusion...
Sentience a cruel joke,
Or a divine-like gift...
And you are a fluke,
Or one tugged by God.

Nolo Segundo, pen name of retired teacher L.J. Carber, 75, became a published poet in his 8th decade in over 70 online/in-print literary journals and anthologies in five countries and two trade book collections under his pen name: *The Enormity of Existence* [2020] and *Of Ether and Earth* [2021]. Both titles and much of his work reflect the awareness he's had of being both an immortal as well as a mortal being since he almost drowned in a Vermont river 50 years ago, and had a near-death experience that shattered his former belief in a nihilistic-materialist (as in only matter is real) Universe. And no, his NDE was definitely NOT of the 'white light' sort, but then his near-drowning was not accidental; however, terrible as it was, he thanks to this day that Being–Force–Presence called God for all of it. He has been shown what many intuit: that each of us has an endless consciousness which predates birth and survives death. The problem with life is not that it is meaningless, which is the only logical conclusion to atheism, but that life, each life, has so much meaning that none of us can fully grasp it all.

POETRY

Annie Harpel

actively waiting

early morning
soft warm breeze
rustles the bevy of volunteer calla lilies
hummingbird landed
on late winter's bare branch
I look at him
he looks around
God brought us to this pause
acknowledging our surroundings
before moving on through the day

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*, *Impspired* and *First Literary Review–East*. She has taught poetry workshops at several county libraries and is a member of Cambria Writers Workshop. Her debut book of poetry, [*The Blue Hour* by Lisa ‘Annie’ Harpel](#), is now available on Amazon.

POETRY

Kimberly Phinney

Still Life

It is an ancient scene before me:

a wooden table for banqueting
(a rugged cross for crucifying,)

with fruit ripened and cradled in baskets
(a heart of flesh cupped by sagging ribs,)

and roses in full bloom strewn about,
(His head wilting in anguish beneath a crown,)

a collection of life—
(a sacrifice of life)

with fine strings, prose, and ink wells.
(with lashings, thorns, and driven nails.)

The perfect still life—yet amidst it all:

a skull with black sockets—
moribund yet hungry.
(a divine mouth in grimace—
wine-soaked yet thirsting.)

Giving warning:
(Speaking love:)

Memento mori.
Or “Remember you must die.”
(*Hodie mecum eris en Paradiso.*
or “Today you shall be with me in Paradise.”)

Oh, it is the way of man—
that on our last day we go down to the dead!

(Oh, it is the way of Christ—
that on the third day he rose again!)

The End.

(Selah and Amen.)

Bath

Bleary eyes, sinews, joints,
all afloat
and submerged—
I wash away
the day's remains.

*And I think:
I want to di(v)e.*

I plunge a foot below
(a cross at 20,000 leagues)—
where spine and porcelain
touch
in forever pose.

I blink and gaze
through murky grays
and think how warm
this hazy nothingness
might be (without me).

And I hold my breath
until the burning fire
builds and buoys,
parting my bodies of water
(a little Red Sea).

I emerge and gasp
in this broken flesh He bought—
joints, sinews, and bleary eyes—
all bone-soaked
(and baptized).

*And I think:
I want to live.*

Kimberly Phinney is a teacher of English, professional photographer, wife, mother, and child of God. Her writing has been published in places such as *Christianity Today's Ekstasis Magazine*, *Calla Press*, and *Harness*. After almost dying from severe illness, she is now earning her doctorate in counselling so she can help others who have suffered.

POETRY

Teague McKamey

The Vineyard

Through each wrist, nails burst
into sanguine tears
that fall on the dust
made sterile by sweat
and serpents' tongues.

Vines lightning-fork
from the grave-dug ground
and burst into wine grapes
that swell as they drink
through blood-slaked roots.

Swords beaten into plowshares
and spears into pruning hooks
tend the vineyard
that grew from the man
beaten to pulp and seed.

Hollow-boned birds sit among the branches,
swaddled in shade,
dew-bejeweled fruit at their beaks,
which burst in melodies that
skip and chase along the vines.

Teague McKamey lives with his wife and two children in Washington state. In 2020, he self-published his first book of poems, *The Wind and the Shadows*.

POETRY

John Savoie

Consider the Lily

Lambent petals unfold
their cool fragrance

like angelic hands
cupped to hold

the pistil and stamen's
sacred flame.

O Lord of lilies,
O God of holy fire,

how gently you open
the petalled heart

and kindle within
the sweetest flame.

Along the Dirt Road

Just as a tree bleeds
against the taut wire of the fence
before it swallows the rusting thorn
in the smoothness of its bark,
in the wholeness of its soul...

John Savoie teaches great books at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Best New Poets*, and *Poetry in Motion*. John grew up at the end of a dirt road in southwestern Michigan.

Author's Note: Did you know that lilies consist of six petals/sepals with rough bilateral symmetry surrounding the pistil and stamen?

POETRY

Lyndi Waters

The Problem with Dreams

In my dream the cottage
was topped with thatch.
The sound of the ocean
was all around,
but I knew it was really it was the Lord
reciting a poem
over my shoulder.

It was an elegant poem about hope.
A gauzy white curtain fluttered.
A sharp gust made it touch
the edge of the bed
and he disappeared.

I pulled him back
with a poem about faith,
since that seemed to be the only way
to feel his breath on my shoulder.

Halfway through
the neighbor's dog barked
and he was gone again.

I had to wake
to feel him everywhere.

But Then One Day I Pushed on the Gate

The mind is as impressionable
as a veal calf being led down an alley
by the sight of the calf in front of her.

A bolt stunner gun waits at the end
but she doesn't know that,
is thrilled to death for the change in scenery.

Two rows, ten calves long,
with nothing to do but look
at each other through the rails.

At predesignated times
a red rubber nipple pops in,
meant to simulate a mother.

The calf gets to suck down milk replacer,
meant to simulate nourishment. It flows
down her chin pretending to be the real thing.

She feels full for a while afterwards,
especially when the farmer's little boy
reaches in and scratches her behind the ear.

She forgets all about the green pasture
she can see through open barn doors.
That's what the subconscious does,

a creative accommodation of sorts
designed to help you stay motionless in a box.
Before I returned to the church,

I could hear cathedrals cry out
to me when I drove past,
but I didn't stop.

I thought the gate
would be locked
so I forgot.

The Gardener Wants to Do Something About the Prairie Dogs

The prairie smells of enchantment
since my return to the church.
I ascend the steps as someone gives
the bell in the tower a few rings.
Bulbous droplets of rain fall like tiny sandbags
onto the bowed heads of last year's yarrow,
soaking sagebrush weary of pushing back
on nature's cold indignities.

The morning light stretches out
over the barking heads of a prairie dog town
that sprang up along the south lawn
a year or two ago.
God's little clown puppies
popping in and out of the world at will,
no choice but to spread
porous destruction
in the name of their own instincts,
oblivious to how the rest of the world
can fall into the hidden traps
of their innocent tunnels.

Not unlike me when I thought
my faith was a given like blue eyes,
would play itself out however
it played itself out,
even if left to chance
through a dark winter—
or that wet spring
when bean seeds rotted in the ground.

Lyndi Waters' poetry is published or forthcoming in numerous literary magazines and anthologies including *Agape Review* and *Spirit Fire Review*. She is a winner of the Frank Nelson Doubleday Memorial Writing Award, the Eugene V. Shea National Poetry Contest, and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. Lyndi lives in Wyoming.

N.T. McQueen

Blurry Frames

The day Darwin told his grandfather about his intentions, they faced each other like two players at a chessboard among the volumes and volumes of worn leatherbound copies, stacked ramshackle in bookshelves or in precarious towers he sometimes used as end tables to set his dingy reading glasses. Even slouched in his armchair, his grandfather towered above him. The bushy grey beard concealed his lips, and, when he spoke, Darwin often imagined the tips of those chin hairs singed by his words.

“Don’t tell me you actually believe all that nonsense?” he snapped.

“I do.”

Those slate grey eyes rolled in their sockets. The musk of knowledge emanated from the dusty books and the dim lamplight reflected off the framed diplomas tacked to the walls. His grandfather huffed and shook his head as if struck by a fit of comedy.

“Who would have thought a boy named Darwin would want anything to do with God?” The laughter creaked from his lungs and did not sound so much as laughter, but resembled more of the noise a rusty hinge might make after years of being unused. “Your father would be utterly appalled to hear such damn foolishness.”

It was in this moment he realized he had forgotten his grandfather’s actual name and had to sneak a glance at the diploma on the wall to remind himself. As a boy, he had assumed his grandfather’s legal name was ‘Sir.’ His father never spoke to him by another name.

“So what do you plan to do in the service of God? Heal the sick? Save the world from eternal damnation?”

“I want to devote my life to something greater than myself.”

His grandfather leaned forward and snatched the brandy glass off a makeshift tower of books. A copy of Kierkegaard tumbled, splaying the pages open. With a violent shove, he drank the brandy in one gulp and tapped his fingers on the cloudy glass as he examined his kin.

A reaction of both fear and indifference managed to manifest in Darwin, and, with the old man's rapacious eyes on him, he let his eyes wander to the collection of frames cluttered around the tops of the bookshelves. A film so thick covered the glass, he could not see the faces in the frames. Only blurs of the past, distinct to catch only a flinch of memory.

"Hey," the old man barked.

Darwin returned and saw his grandfather's pickled finger jutting from the clasped brandy glass. With a sweep of his hand, he gestured toward the area around him. Pages and covers and globes and maps crowded the walls and filled the room with an aroma Darwin could only define as time.

"You see all of this?"

Darwin nodded.

"This is time immemorial. Every last atom of it." His grandfather's timbre propelled as if his words held the epiphany of the ages. A tone of authority and stubbornness. The cushion of Nana's armchair resembled a desk before the sweeping, gnarled hand. "Within these pages, boy, are the greatest, most absolute beliefs conjured by the human mind. Written down and printed, immortalized and influential. Ready to be devoured by fruitful minds who, in turn, will expatiate and, perhaps, enhance the very ontological core of the human condition. Not fantasy of plagues and resurrection or...or ascensions into the clouds. But of science. Of fact! Words rife with a power more tangible and applicable than the power of an imagined deity. God lies within the human mind. The dilemma is man does not know how to fully unlock his own potential. The few who succeeded are etched into history. They are the faces of knowledge. Does God have a face? Only the face man has created for him. You see what I'm saying, boy? Man and God are synonymous."

He flung his brandy glass across the room and snatched a green covered book from the middle of a tower. The top books clattered to the floor as he sifted through the pages. Insistently, he stabbed at a passage with his index finger. "See? See here? Take Kant for example. '*Alle unsere*

Erkenntnis beginnt mit den Sinnen, und der Erlös dann für das Verständnis, und endet mit der Vernunft. Es gibt nichts höheres als die Vernunft.’ Do you understand, boy? Do you see this ideology is greater than all of us? How it surpasses the need for fairy tales and virgin births?”

Darwin sighed and adjusted against the abrasive cushions. “I don’t speak German, Opa.”

The old man grumbled in his native tongue under his breath and slammed the book shut in puff of dust. He gripped the book by the spine and used it as his instrument of instruction. The spine and binding nestled deep into his palms. If Darwin had not known his ideology, would have confused his grandfather for a man of the cloth. Darwin stared as the faded words poked between his fingers and noticed the brass metal of his wedding ring.

“Why do you still wear your wedding ring?”

His grandfather’s slate grey eyes narrowed. A more vociferous tone evoked from his marrow and erupted. “Are you hearing me, *dummkopft*? ‘All our knowledge begins with the senses, proceeds then to the understanding, and ends with reason. There is nothing higher than reason.’”

Darwin’s eyes wandered to the shelves again, away from those fiery eyes.

“How come you keep the picture frames when you can’t see the picture behind the glass?”

His grandfather paused and then turned to the frames atop the wooden bookshelf. He remained in that pose for a brief moment, eyes fixed on the forgotten frames above the countless books. He turned back. The fire was gone from lips and the urgency of his convictions washed away as he sunk back into his armchair.

Darwin stood and leaned forward to hug his grandfather. His youthful arms wrapped around the brittle hairs of his head, and he could smell the fragrant musk of the books on his skin, his hairs, his breath, as if the ancient odor imbued his bones. His grandfather lifted his hand with the same didactic finger and gave three, lethargic pats on Darwin’s arm.

“A Christian named Darwin,” his grandfather said flatly. The lamplight illuminated the dancing flecks of dust spewed from Kant’s words. The

worn and sullen face stared forward as he raised his shaky hands to his face and pushed his blurry, smudged bifocals onto his nose.

Darwin stood and smiled.

A solemn disbelief moved Opa's head as he repeated in a hoarse whisper, "A Christian named Darwin."

Darwin turned, hearing the faint Germanic mumblings lost among the towering shelves. The lamplight seemed to flicker as his grandfather's shrunken figure remained in the high-back chair.

N.T. McQueen is a writer and professor in Kona, Hawai'i. His books include the novel *The Blood of Bones* (Adelaide Books, November 2021) and *Between Lions and Lambs* (City Hill, 2010). He earned his MA in Fiction from CSU-Sacramento, and his writing has been featured in issues of the *North American Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Entropy*, and others. He has done humanitarian work in Cambodia, Haiti and Mexico and teaches writing at several colleges and universities.

Michael Cocchiarale

The Angel of Death Victorious

“He must be a hoarder,” Chaela said, finger falling from the wing of the green-tinged angel.

“He?”

She blinked. “God. You know, the *Father*?”

Gabby smiled. The church had gotten one thing right: only a man could have caused so much pain.

“How’s he have room up there—for all the souls? And all the events, the memories everybody ever had.”

Gabby imagined her sister’s soul, dangling from a jammed drawer in a room bursting with all the heartaches and joys of the dead. And the Creator, bloated on a love seat, thumbing food stains on his musclemans tee.

“God must be super sad.”

She pictured another shipment of souls spewing across the floor. “I think the whole thing just got away from him.”

The angel had been crying black tears long before Gabby’s mother took her and her sister to this cemetery years ago. Once, they climbed the Garfield Memorial to look at the lake. “You can’t see the end of it,” her mother had said. ‘And this one’s just the smallest of the five. Imagine your life after death with God.’ She smiled, stroked their heads. This was the best Mom could offer for comfort.

“You think she maybe misses us?”

Gabby let that go. Nodding at the angel, she said, “Look at this sword.”

“Actually, it’s a torch upside down.”

The deliberate snuffing of the flame. Chaela knew what Gabby wouldn’t say aloud.

“Ready?” she asked.

Chaela sniffed, nodded.

At the car, Gabby felt the first damp plinks of real fear. Her sister was dead. Mom, too, and Dad more or less. Already, her daughter was eight. Soon to be nine. Then ten. Past and future pained around them. She could almost see thick drops strike and glisten, before sneaking like stones into the soft, insatiable soil.

Portion

Dad could not get enough of Rosie, the easy-going nutritionist who, following a splashy afternoon at the lake, squeezed our shoulders and said, “Mom wants to cook for you two.”

After a recent scare, Dad had transformed himself into a health food nut. He cooked with measuring cups. “Ten portions of fruits and vegetables a day!” he’d say when I turned my nose up at the raw pepper slices grinning on my plate. He knew what he was in for with Rosie’s Mom; still, he said, “Sure!”

Dad said, “A serving size of pasta is one ounce.”

Rosie’s mother tonged a steaming pile of noodles onto his plate. “*Questa è un’onzia!*”

We laughed. Dad, nodded, took a breath, and started twirling. When he pushed the empty plate away, Rosie, clasping her hands, said, “My hero!” He leaned into her arms.

Rosie’s mother smiled, waving a fork back and forth. “You two, I like.”

‘Like’ left me wanting. I was head-over-heels *in love*.

Rosie’s mom thumbed the Bible, finding what she wanted. Psalms: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

Dad said, “Food for the soul!”

Rosie rolling eyes was a present all for me.

We were stabbing salads by the river when Dad broke the news.

Through tears, I tried to make things light. “It was all that pasta, right?”

His smile was distracted, obligatory. “Sometimes, well, we just figure out what’s not good for us.”

“But you’re crazy about her!” I remembered Rosie’s smile, her hand on mine, the way she soothed adolescent pains with tender eyes. Emptiness consumed me—worse than when I’d watched my mother go.

Dad opened his mouth. I waited, but he just sat still, dead-eyed, making a steady diet of the breeze.

Michael Cocchiarale is the author of the novel *None of the Above* (Unsolicited, 2019) and two story collections—*Here Is Ware* (Fomite, 2018) and *Still Time* (Fomite, 2012). His creative work appears online as well, in journals such as *Fictive Dream*, *Fiction Kitchen Berlin*, *The Disappointed Housewife*, *The Wild Word*, and *Heart of Flesh*.

FICTION

Nicholas A. Carrington

Words and Symbols

Maisie grimaced as the needle hit her skin. She welcomed the pain though. Some pains are like wet blankets you throw over more fiery aches. The needle that carved through her arm was just that, engulfing the flames and leaving ink in its wake.

She breathed deeply, relieved to feel something different. For the last nine years, October 19th reminded her that she was alone, and she always tried something new to help her forget. This year, she was trying to remember.

Jada waited until Dexter, the tattoo artist, had shaped a few permanent strokes. “You don’t have to do this, you know.”

Maisie shook her head. “You’re such a dork.”

“You’re the one who brought me to the underbelly of society. No offense,” Jada said, nodding at Dexter.

“Just ignore her.”

She had a point, though. Maisie came for the tattoo, but the hepatitis was a package deal apparently. Maisie sat in an old computer chair that sank down a little every few seconds and had a nasty stain. When she walked in, her shoes stuck to the floor, and she avoided the tiles that were noticeably darker than others. The walls were lined with pictures of strange symbols and bleeding hearts, and Maisie wondered if she was somehow joining a cult. She signed a form with tiny print before the needle hit her skin, and this looked like the kind of place where goat sacrifices were made in the middle of the night.

It was eerily quiet, too. While there were five or six other chairs in the room, Maisie hadn’t seen anyone besides Dexter, who seemed like a nice enough guy. Big, balding, and gasping for air with each breath, but he had a nice smile. The only other sign of life was smoke coming from a

back room that wafted throughout the whole place, making the scene a bit hazy.

“Where is everybody?” Maisie asked.

“Sundays are weird days,” Dexter said. “People take it easy. Sleep in. Recover. They aren’t looking to get tattoos when they’re relaxed. Most need a little adrenaline to come in here.”

Maisie had plenty of that when she walked through the door. She spent most of the day trying to stay busy, even reading a few chapters of *To Kill A Mockingbird* to prepare for her Intro to Literature exam at college. It was hard to focus, though.

“Your first tattoo?” Dexter asked.

Maisie nodded. It wasn’t her plan to get one this year, but she needed it. Felt it down to her bones. Her mother’s voice, once so clear, now grew weaker. It was more an echo than anything else.

“What happens if Bradley finds out?” Jada asked.

Maisie scoffed as she twisted in her seat. “I couldn’t care less what Bradley thinks.” That was true enough, but she did wonder how Brianna would feel. It was strange how different her foster parents were. Former foster parents? She didn’t know how to say it now that she’d aged out of the system.

Neither of them wanted her to get a tattoo, at least not at 19. Something about a permanent decision at a young age and blah blah blah.

“Maybe you should,” Jada said. “They feed you after all.”

“Not for long,” Maisie said.

Jada threw her hands in the air. “No way you’re really moving out.”

There was no way to make Jada understand. The Hastings were nice and all, but today was a good reminder that not even her parents had the resolve to stick around. At least her mom gave Maisie the dignity of dying instead of abandoning her outright. Her father didn’t have quite so much tact.

“They’ve done their duty. I’m getting ahead of it,” Maisie said.

“Wasn’t their duty over months ago?” Jada asked.

“I guess. But people like the Hastings need a good reason to bail so they can tell their friends they tried.”

“Somebody going to come yell at me for this?” Dexter asked, his arms full of colorful tattoos, mostly of mystical beings: dragons and werewolves and such. He wore a short sleeve button up shirt that was supposed to tuck into his jeans but had little chance of staying that way. Dexter was so focused on his art that Maisie couldn’t tell whether he was genuinely interested or just making conversation.

“Do people actually do that?”

“Daddy’s little girl gets a tattoo, and papa needs someone to blame. They’ve come in here with bats before.”

“No daddy’s girl here, that’s for sure.” Maisie touched the scar on her leg, a parting gift from her father.

“Does it bother you?” Jada asked Dexter. “You’re just doing your job.”

Dexter’s eyes never wavered from his art, shading in some pieces. Sharpening lines. He concentrated on each stroke, like he was painting the Sistine Chapel. “Nah, these papas care; I get it. Got a little girl of my own, and I’d break someone’s legs if they messed with her. They think we’re shady, but that’s the business I guess.”

“You do have a demon wielding an axe on the wall,” Jada said.

“And crows pecking at a carcass,” Maisie added.

Dexter burst out laughing, a deep but jovial sound that ended in a hacking cough. “That doesn’t help, I’m sure.”

I bet his daughter loves that laugh, Maisie thought. Based on the 30 minutes she had known him, he seemed like a good dad. She could picture his daughter looking into her father’s eyes and seeing safety and love, an intensity and sweetness both raw and pure.

“You religious?” Dexter asked as he finished the last stroke. Maisie looked down at the lily, her mom’s favorite flower, glistening on her forearm. On top of that flower was written, “The Lord bless you and keep you.”

“No, not really. My mom used to say it to me. Drove my dad nuts, but it’s stuck in my brain for whatever reason.”

“And now on your skin,” Jada said as she hovered over Maisie’s chair to get a good look.

Maisie stared at the tattoo for a few seconds, her eyes struggling to keep the tide at bay. Her mom didn’t seem that religious either, but certain words and symbols become a part of who you are even if it doesn’t make sense.

Maisie stared at the photograph, knees facing the back of the couch. She’d memorized the details. The Hastings stood in front of a wooded area beside their church. Bradley and Brianna’s eyes were locked, a sparkle in both. Alexis, a new teenager at the time, sported pigtails and was throwing leaves into the air that her younger brother, Liam, ran under.

The picture had been up since Maisie landed on their doorstep four years ago. Looking at it made her sweat—hot flashes sweeping unevenly over her body. She pushed up the sleeves on her sweater and blew cool air onto her arms, feeling a deeper burn in her tattoo that her breath couldn’t reach. The family looked so happy, so complete.

It reminded her of a time long ago when her parents were both around. They had taken a Thanksgiving picture in the kitchen of their apartment, empty pizza boxes and bottles of soda behind them on the table. She could still smell the smoke from the cigarette her father refused to take out of his mouth. Maisie’s mom stood in the middle, and the exposure from the camera brightened her, made it look like the light in the room sprung from her smile. In that moment they had nothing, but it was everything they needed. Then the light went out.

Dinner had ended about ten minutes ago. Soon, Bradley and Brianna would come into the living room and sit down at Maisie’s request. She owed them an explanation if nothing else. Maybe a thank you.

Brianna came in first, smiling and pulling her auburn hair back into a ponytail. She shivered as she grabbed the soft white blanket from under the coffee table and wrapped it around her shoulders. A moment later, Bradley entered, bringing two mugs of coffee that he sat on the wood top of the coffee table. He plopped down beside his wife.

“You still don’t drink coffee, right?” Brianna asked as she took her first sip. “College sometimes kick starts the habit.”

“No, it’s still gross,” Maisie said, and Brianna chuckled with a tiny snort at the end. She laughed more than anyone Maisie had ever met, which was strange, because Bradley could barely find a smile to put on at all.

“What did you want to talk about?” Brianna asked.

Maisie took a deep breath, put her hands on the edge of the couch. She had dreamed of this moment for a while now, telling herself how freeing it would be to get out from under her foster family. They were a different kind of people than her. The Hastings had rules upon rules upon rules about when she could go out and who she could see and what she could wear. They wanted to know where she was. Always.

She looked back at the family picture. It was clear she didn’t belong here, but now that the time had come, the words she rehearsed all day were scrambled, fragmented. Every time she started to speak, her chest tightened, like someone was squeezing her organs together. It didn’t make sense, but Maisie tended to follow her instincts. Maybe this was a bad idea.

“What’s that?” Bradley asked, tilting his head. He walked over and crossed his arms in front of himself. Broad shouldered and clean cut, he looked like he could still serve in the military, and his dark eyes stared through her, like he was rooting out the contents of her soul. “What did you do?”

At first, she had no idea what he was talking about. He always carried the same stern look, whether he was happy or not. It made him seem reserved to most people, but it scared Maisie that she couldn’t read him.

“Tell me that’s fake,” Bradley said.

It took Maisie a few more seconds to realize she hadn’t put her sleeve down, but when it hit her, it almost knocked her out, sucked the air

straight from her lungs. There, glimmering with the shine of the antibiotic cream Dexter put on, was her tattoo.

“So you ignored us. Again.” Bradley said. He let out a long sigh.

Maisie felt the heat rising inside her, bit the inside of her mouth until she tasted blood. Her tongue was loosed. “I didn’t do anything to you. I’m 19. It’s none of your business.”

“You could have told us,” Brianna said. “Helped us understand why you wanted one so bad.” She looked almost hurt, maybe disappointed.

“You should have told us, and when we said no again, you should have listened,” Bradley said.

Today was not an ordinary day. How did they not know that? “Whatever. Who cares what you think?” Maisie jumped to her feet. Bradley could shove it. He had his family; she was just formalizing the scary remains of hers, putting flowers on that grave.

“Watch your mouth,” he said, pointing his finger at her. “As long as you live in our house, you’ll follow our rules.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t live here anymore,” she said, looking back at the family picture one more time. She drank it in, let it fuel her rage and boil in her gut. It was her choice to swim on her own, but the Hastings had pushed her into the pool. “I’ll be gone by morning.” And with that, she fled to the basement, slamming the door behind her.

The blank canvas was like a shot of caffeine. It cooled Maisie’s blood and cleared her head. A canvas had endless possibilities and no baggage to limit it, no blemishes to work out. It could be anything she wanted. That’s what she longed for. A chance to blot out her own imperfections and start fresh. A pristine, white canvas that didn’t carry the debts of being an orphan, a petty thief, or the daughter of a user. So she painted her life as it was and also, how she wanted it to be. The process was messy, like her, but it helped her make sense of life.

She had just transformed the background of her latest piece, turning a grey sky a bit darker, when Brianna knocked and entered. She quickly covered the artwork.

“Figured you’d be painting.” Brianna said. “Can I see?” She had changed into her pajamas, the kind that someone must ship to all middle-aged parents.

“What do you want?” Maisie said, the words slipping out before she could think better of it. There was still a rawness inside her from earlier, and it was hard to hold her tongue when her body was in fight or flight mode.

Brianna shrugged. “Can I see the tattoo? I didn’t get a good look.”

Maisie sat down on the futon, the furniture where she usually slept. It was hard to get used to a bed after years of not having one. “Didn’t you just yell at me for it a few hours ago?”

“We didn’t want you to get a tattoo until after college, but I’ve always liked them. I have one, you know.”

Brianna carried herself with such grace and elegance; she didn’t seem like the tattoo type, and in four years, Maisie had never seen any ink on her. “Where?”

It seemed like such a simple question, but Brianna began a winding story about her father, a man she loved, who had forbidden her to go to a school dance. She pleaded, promised to wear whatever dress he approved of, to be home by curfew, even dance with only the church boys, but he refused. The night of the dance, she cried into her pillow after dinner, cursing her father’s reign over her life. It was freedom she craved, to be an adult even though the responsibility of that label seemed overwhelming. So she snuck out, had a friend drive her by the dance. But when they got there, Brianna couldn’t go in. She loved her father, couldn’t bring herself to openly defy him. And yet, that itch for freedom, to feel alive remained. That’s how she ended up at Sea of Ink, leaving with a tattoo of a Gouldian Finch, a colorful bird, on her thigh. Her father never directly forbade her from getting a tattoo; he never knew she wanted one. Until then, neither did she.

“Did he ever find out?” Maisie asked.

“No. But when he died, I felt so guilty about it that I confessed while he lay in his casket, and I swear he grimaced the entire time.” They both laughed, and Maisie felt her airpipe open just a bit. “No matter how mad I got at him, I always knew he loved me,” Brianna said.

She grabbed Maisie's hand. "I'm not going to try and talk you out of leaving." She waited until they made eye contact again. "You know...I'm here if you need me."

Maisie's eyes darted to her feet. "Didn't seem like it earlier."

She started to get up, flee the moment, but Brianna grabbed her shoulders and looked deep into her, peeling back layers with her eyes. "I'm here. You get me? You leaving doesn't change that."

A knot formed in Maisie's throat, not allowing anything to come out of her mouth. The family picture was still fresh, a constant reminder of where she placed in the scheme of things. She just wanted whatever this was to end, so she gave Brianna a small hug and walked toward a small desk on the opposite side of the room.

Brianna's words should mean a lot. They seemed sincere, and it was exactly what Maisie wanted to hear. But she didn't believe her. Not when it came down to it. Brianna meant well, but Maisie had a way of being inconvenient, and even well-meaning people didn't like to be inconvenienced. The day would come when it would be easier not to check in or text. They wouldn't talk for a while, but Brianna would still like her Instagram photos and write comments about getting together soon. When soon never came, she'd apologize and talk about how busy things were. In that busyness, Maisie would gently fade into a memory.

She gritted her teeth, warring against the emotions that inched up her throat. Afraid of having second thoughts, she started throwing clothes in a duffle bag. It was time to get out of here. Fast. Then, Brianna's voice broke through her fog.

"Is this you? All the way back here?"

Maisie thought Brianna had left, but she turned to see her foster mother staring at the painting she had just finished. It depicted the Hastings, walking in local Lawrence State Park through the woods with silver maples and red oaks lining the way. Bradley and Brianna were holding hands, Alexis was blowing a bubble with her gum, and Liam had a small rock in his hand and looked like he was about to throw it into the trees. The clothes were their Sunday best. The guys wore dress pants and a collared button up shirt. Bradley had his sport coat on. Matching yellow flowers were stuck in Brianna and Alexis' hair and their pencil skirts and vibrant green blouses resembled Easter outfits.

Behind them on a trail that forked in another direction was someone else. The girl stared at the Hastings, her hair all over the place and tangled. Her eyes heavy. There were holes in her jeans, mud caked on the bottom of them. The clouds rolled over top of her: a dark, grey mass with ill intent.

“Is that you or not?” Brianna’s smile lines disappeared. Her eyes narrowed, lost their normal shine.

Maisie had never seen her foster mother look like that. So intense and solemn. “Yes,” she said.

Brianna took a deep breath, lowered her head, like she was praying and let all the air out of her body. “Meet me upstairs in ten minutes,” she said. “It’s important.”

Maisie sat her packed bag on the top of the stairs before walking into the living room where all four Hastings had gathered. It was warm; the fireplace crackled, making the room glow. Three candles burned on the coffee table and wafted vanilla lavender into the air. “Is this...is this an intervention?” She asked.

Everyone just stared at her. Maybe she should have snuck out, torn that band aid off. This had the look of a lecture, and she couldn’t handle another one. The endless drivel about wanting what’s best for her and being hurt by her choices, and on and on.

“Why yes, this is an intervention of sorts,” Brianna said. She rose from the love seat and grabbed a gift bag beside it. Motioning for Maisie to sit in the easy chair, she handed the bag to her. “We were going to give this to you for your birthday in a few weeks, but you need it now.”

Maisie struggled to make sense of the moment. What couldn’t wait for a few more weeks?

“Go ahead and open it,” Bradley said. “We should have done this a lot sooner.”

She pulled the top apart and threw the tissue paper to the side. Inside was a dark blanket that felt like a jar of cotton balls when she slid her hand across it. The blanket would be perfect for cool evenings while she

studied on the couch, but it was a strange gift to gather the whole family for.

“Unfold it,” Brianna said. “There’s something you need to see.”

Maisie got up and spread the blanket on the floor. It was longer than most, and Alexis got up to help her stretch it out, hugging her when they finished. Then the blanket was in full view. It wasn’t a solid color. It didn’t have stripes or dots or a pattern. It didn’t have a clever phrase or the picture of her favorite band. Instead, staring back at her were Liam, Alexis, and herself, sitting outside the Dairy Crème with their heads close together and ice cream smeared all over their faces. They were all laughing, and the joy was intense and natural and free and seemed to emanate from the blanket into the room.

She could feel it before her mind could catch up. This picture meant something, at least to the Hastings, that she couldn’t put together. A lump rose through her chest, lodged in her throat. Unable to speak, her eyes darted around the room looking for answers. Alexis and Liam were smiling; Bradley nodded at her as her gaze swept past him. They all knew, but she couldn’t quite get there.

Finally, Brianna stood up. “This is our favorite picture of our kids.” She paused, waiting for Maisie to say something. When she didn’t, Brianna came over and put her hand on her foster daughter. “All of them.”

Maisie froze for a moment, mouth open, eyes bouncing between the three faces before her on the blanket. Then something burst, and a new heat overwhelmed her, different from the flashes she got earlier while looking at the family picture on the wall. This heat didn’t make her want to run or rage or seek revenge; it warmed her like the chili her mom used to make during cold nights when that tribe was whole, before death and abandonment excommunicated her. Before she knew the betrayal of human weakness in all its forms. When she trusted someone.

Her tears pelted the blanket like hail, her sobs releasing all the bitterness that had hardened for years but melted in an instant. After a minute, Bradley pulled her to her feet, and a sea of arms engulfed her. She could smell the familiar Tide detergent, almost taste the saltiness that flowed from the eyes in that circle. Brianna’s hand rubbed gently up and down her spine, and with each pass, it steeled her.

A part of Maisie died on October 19th all those years ago. Now, where there once had been only decay, she felt the small thump of a heartbeat. Blood was flowing. The picture on that blanket, like the tattoo on her arm, was now a part of her. Even if it didn't make sense.

Nick Carrington teaches writing at Cedarville University. His work has appeared in *Servants of Grace*, *Outreach Magazine*, and *Cedarville Magazine*. He also serves as an editor for the Early Pregnancy Loss Association.

Michael Gigandet

If Jesus Doesn't Mind, I Don't

If it had been any other statue in his garden, Martin wouldn't have minded so much. But there was something wrong about birds sitting on top of the Madonna's head and defacing the baby Jesus in her arms. There were plenty of cement figurines and ornaments to choose from. This was a big flower garden riotous with color and overflowing with plants bulging around gazing balls, animal sculptures, bird baths, a sundial and a large pink flamingo with its foot upraised.

Martin did not consider himself a religious man. He'd quit going to church when the kids grew up and left home, but standing there on the sidewalk in front of the defaced Jesus, he felt a twinge that something was just not right about it all. The Madonna had been a gift to his wife, and it was a beautiful addition to the garden, white and serene and clean sitting on the edge of a bird bath above a sea of red roses.

This wasn't the first time this had happened. There must be something about the angle of the Madonna's cement head which invited birds to sit there and defecate. He got his plastic gloves and the brush from its hook in the garage and with a pail of soapy water from the kitchen began sloshing the statue and scrubbing away the mess.

I could erect a wire mesh of chicken wire over it all. The consideration of various inadequate solutions was part of this cleaning routine. He'd been at it all summer. But they'd just sit on the wire and do it from there.

Here was the real problem. Since he retired, Martin had created a beautiful garden. Every year it got larger as Martin subdued another patch of ground around the house, creating uses for the nooks and tight places and plants adapted to flourish in the shady spots or the places where the summer sun beat the dirt mercilessly. He'd even worked in fruit trees and berry vines. He was proudest of the roses, but he loved his hostas and ferns which grew jungle size in the shady nooks. In the evenings, when Martin sat on the porch which ran along three sides of the farmhouse, he could move his rocking chair to face that portion of the garden he wished

to contemplate. If it did not sound so pretentious, he would have called it his own Garden of Eden.

Martin wasn't the only one to enjoy the garden. He frequently ducked a nectar-filled hummingbird and got stung a couple of times each summer by bees. He'd become an avid butterfly watcher. If the birds would just leave his Madonna alone, he would be happy.

Cayenne pepper won't work. He once owned a convertible with a cloth roof, and his wife's cat would sleep in the middle of it causing the cloth to sag. Spreading pepper on the roof at night fixed that. *It won't work with birds. They have no sensation to pepper.*

He finished scrubbing the baby Jesus and reached the usual conclusion. *Maybe the problem will solve itself.* He knew that it wouldn't though, and he'd had enough. *I could shoot the birds with my son's old BB gun.*

Martin spent the rest of the morning digging out a row of Rose of Sharon which had passed its prime years before. The plants were old and bedraggled. Each year he hoped they'd look better, but he was disappointed again. *The hummingbirds and butterflies like them so.*

It took him three hours in the hot summer sun, but he did it, chopping at the roots with the shovel and prying the plants out of the ground with a heavy iron tamping bar, using a large rock as a fulcrum. They now lay out on the ground like soldiers shot down in ranks.

Wiping the sweat and grime off his neck and arms, Martin walked past the Madonna on his way to the garage. The face of the baby Jesus was streaked again.

That does it.

He washed up inside the house, got a glass of iced tea from the fridge and found his son's BB gun. He sat down in a chair on the porch and waited. *It's just a couple of birds. The world is not going to miss a couple of birds.*

Killing the birds, like seeing the defaced Jesus, troubled him even if he could not explain why. Would this necessary act matter in his life's accumulation of bad decisions? Was it even important enough to be considered a sin? *I don't know many people who are going to Heaven. I know a lot who think that they are (just ask them).*

Martin once told a religious neighbor that the older people got the more they worried about Hell and the less they concerned themselves with Heaven. "I know my shortcomings better than anyone except God, that is, if there is a God. Even I know that Hell is the more likely destination for me," he said. "Of course, if there is no God, then there is no Heaven or Hell, and it only stands to reason, no sin."

Sometimes, he surprised himself. If there is no right and wrong is there a Heaven and Hell? Or even God?

At that moment, a Mockingbird landed on the Madonna's head. Martin eased the BB gun into position and placed the sight onto the bird which flicked its wings, turned right, then left, flickering its wings again. Martin took a deep breath and eased his finger to the trigger just as the bird leapt down onto the edge of the bird bath and began sipping water, looking up after every sip, turning, flickering its wings again before returning to the Madonna's head and repeating the choreography.

Martin lowered the rifle. He watched his wife's cat appear out of some Monkey Grass where it had been sunning. The cat watched the bird high up on the Madonna's head and moved on to another part of the yard. The bird was using the Madonna's head as a perch to watch out for the cat before it could safely land on the edge of the bird bath for water. Did that warrant execution?

He let the bird go. He could not define it, but it seemed like the right thing to do. *If it would have been wrong or even sinful to kill a few birds, then deciding to do the opposite must be the opposite of being sinful. Maybe it's these small things, the decisions that no one ever knows about, that matter and count for something. Is that God around us?*

The bird flew away but was soon replaced by another who repeated the ritual before hopping down for water.

I'll clean up baby Jesus if I am going to have guests over. Otherwise, if Jesus can tolerate it, I can. He moved his chair to a shadier part of the porch.

Michael Gigandet is a lawyer living on a farm in Tennessee. He has been published by the *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *Reedsy*, *Spelk Fiction*, *OrangeBlushZine*, *Transfigured* and *Potato Soup Journal*. He has published stories in collections by *Palm Sized Press*, *Pure Slush* and *Down In The Dirt*.

FICTION

Avery S. Campbell

The Hook

David Falter turned into the uphill drive to an abandoned farmstead and killed the lights. The moonlight was bright enough for him to keep him on the path. Still, because of all the pot and the beer, he veered from one side to the other, barely avoiding the ditch. He brought the car to a stop beneath a lone cottonwood and shut off the engine.

Wolf and the girl he had picked up were already going at it in the back seat. David grabbed the three beers left in the six-pack and reached for the bag of pot but decided against it. Instead, he pushed the door open, stood up too quickly, careened back against the side of the car, and slammed it shut. There was a muffled “what the?” from the girl, with Wolf mumbling that it was just Falter.

David found his balance and lurched forward to the front step of the ramshackle farmhouse. He whirled dizzily, plopped down, pulled one of the beers from its plastic ring, popped its top, and tossed it into the weedy yard. He took a long drink, pulled a Marlboro Light from its pack, and lit up.

It was an eerie night, maybe two or three o’clock in the morning. Wispy clouds crossed in front of the moon and then marched quickly eastward. In the infinite darkness of the Nebraska sky, a multitude of stars lit the night. David shivered as he sat on the step, though it was a warm summer night. He had always been afraid of the dark.

The car rocked slowly from Wolf’s alcohol-induced endurance. David had never mastered the art of picking up girls, and so had, on occasion, been in this same lonely situation. He lit another cigarette, coughing lightly. He always smoked a lot when he drank.

The sounds in the deserted farmyard penetrated David’s numbness. A light but steady wind rotated the blades of a skeletal windmill delineated against the impenetrable heavens. Its banal whining served no purpose with its linkage to the well, disconnected long ago. Still, its fan spun,

pumping nothing. To his right came a rustling through the cornfield that made him shudder again, but he knew it was only the wind and, thus, nothing. And then, although there was no sound, he became intensely aware of the house behind him. He bound to his feet with beer and cigarette in his hands, and about falling, he turned to face the house.

Nothing. David stood for a long moment, trying to decide what to do. Should he go back and lean on the side of the car or sit back down on the step? Then, as afraid as the dark made him, the house called to him. He dropped his cigarette butt, lit another one, grabbed for another beer, and stumbled up the step.

He rested the screen door against his shoulder as he jiggled the doorknob. He wished it was locked, but a turn to the right and a slight push and the door creaked open. The inside was surprisingly well lit. Moonlight shone brightly through the windows. Brighter, David thought, than it was outside. But, in his drunken stoned-ness, he did not give it much more thought.

It was a small house with the kitchen cabinet doors open and hanging loose from the hinges to his left. Broken glass glittered green on the floor. Further in was a tiny living room furnished with an upholstery-bare couch and chair. White cotton stuffing spread across the floor mixed with chunks of plaster from the crumbling walls.

The house seemed strangely familiar to him, yet he had never lived in any place like this. He looked back into the kitchen at the green shards and knew it was depression glass, shattered from devastating grief. He puffed hard on his cigarette as the long ashes fell from its tip. Then, in the living room, there was the worn-out chair. Someone had sat there, with herculean effort, until the pain was unbearable.

A dark doorway, an escape from the sitting room's encircling walls, beckoned from David's right. He entered and could make out the silhouette of old bedsprings near the lone window. The space seemed hotter than the rest of the house, and he knew someone would appreciate the cool night breeze. He placed his beer on the window ledge, unlocked the latch, and pushed on the frame. It slid up easily, but no breeze came rushing in to displace the oppressive heat. He grabbed his beer, took a drink, and brought it down quickly from his lips. Someone was walking in the living room. He stood still, and then there it was—the distinctive smell of rubbing alcohol.

“There must be another bedroom,” David said to himself. “He’ll be there.”

David knew if he walked into the living room, the lady with the rubbing alcohol—*how did he know it was a lady?*—would lead him to the other bedroom. David dropped his empty beer can and ran clumsily out of the bedroom.

“Mom?” he stammered as he tottered into the living room.

“What are you doing?” Wolf stood in the gap between the kitchen and the living room. “You okay?”

David bumped into the chair. “Yeah,” he said embarrassingly.

“Well, let’s get out of here.” Wolf laughed uneasily. “I’d better drive.”

“Yeah,” David mumbled.

David staggered towards the screen door, but the crunching beneath his feet brought him to a teetering halt. He caught himself against the kitchen wall and saw his mother taking plates from the dish rack and smashing them against the counter and onto the floor. He and his brother had rushed into the kitchen, running over the shattered glass, screaming for mom to stop.

“Are you coming?” Wolf shouted from outside.

David pushed through the screen and down the step, never looking back at the little white farmhouse, poorly in need of another coat of paint.

They all got in the front seat, Wolf behind the wheel, the girl in the middle, and David riding shotgun. Wolf turned the key to start the engine and said, “He was in there calling for his mommy!”

David did not say anything, and the girl did not seem to care either way. Wolf did a U-turn in the farmyard and headed down the drive. The headlights stayed off until he pulled onto the gravel road.

Wolf drove the car slowly up one hill and down another. The grader had recently been down the road and pushed the gravel into a neat triangular

row near the road's center. When Wolf steered into the row, he momentarily veered toward the ditch, forcing him to slow even more.

The girl in the middle said little as she puffed on a cigarette and flicked ashes into the ashtray. She seemed like more of an inanimate object to David than a person; although Wolf continued to pay attention to her, they had no closeness. David could not comprehend how two people who had just coupled together seemed so distant to each other. *Two had not become one*, he thought oddly to himself. David was not still a virgin but felt like one. When he had approached girls in the past, they almost always turned him away. He had always wanted to share something with them, but they never wanted what he had to share.

He began to feel something towards this girl and suddenly sensed her humanness, or possibly his own. Perhaps, her indifference was only callousness, layers of scar tissue shielding both hurt and hope. David wanted to know. He tried hard to think of something to say.

"What's your name?" he blurted out.

"I ain't got one." She answered bluntly. She ground her cigarette into the ashtray and looked straight ahead.

Smarting, David turned away and peered out the side window. Tall power poles marched by him. The constant motion made his head spin, and he became afraid of vomiting. He turned to look out the front window and still saw the power poles, but the new perspective settled his stomach. Up and down, the car bobbed as if it were a boat on a stormy sea, yet he grew calmer with each looming pole as if they were beacons on the shore. His eyes followed each up to the crossbeams forming one 'T' after another. In the moonlight, they extended into an endless vanishing point on the horizon. The cross on the top of each pole beckoned-pulled at him-and he thought of the church he had gone to long ago.

He had not been to church since his father had died. At first, his family failed to go the first few Sundays after the funeral because of the reminders of dad's suffering and the people who had prayed for him. In time, the not-going had become a habit. There was also the anger they felt, especially his brother. His brother had prayed for dad's healing, but the healing had not come. So instead, Mom administered shot after shot of morphine as dad wasted away as if he were a victim of the holocaust. Who was this God that had allowed his father to die? Why would God do that?

Still, the crosses called to David. The beam of the headlights magnified each new pole as it came into view. The wires that hung from pole to pole became less visible. Only the crosses shone now.

“Do you see the crosses?” David said excitedly, pointing upwards.

“You mean the telephone poles?” Wolf said derisively. “You’ve smoked too much pot. They are just telephone poles. They ain’t nothing but telephone poles!”

The girl laughed at him and shook her head. “You got one crazy screwed up friend,” she said to Wolf.

David turned away and withdrew inside. They were only power poles again, but they still beckoned.

The gravel road seemed endless. David knew that it was only a few short miles, maybe five minutes as slow as Wolf was going, from the farmhouse to the pavement, yet it seemed they had traveled two, three, four times that long. He was going to say something but felt he had said enough.

Then Wolf drove over the last hill and slammed on the brakes. Gravel caught the tires, and he spun, out of control, into the ditch.

The beams of his headlights, extending into the darkness, illuminated a tall ladder reaching to the crossbeam of the last pole. One man steadied the ladder from below while another removed a dead body from the top of the telephone pole.

The man on top slung the body over his shoulder and slowly descended, stopping on each rung to steady his burden. There was no electric company truck nearby, just two men and the body. When the man was nearly down, the other man reached up and took the body from him. Then each placed their shoulders under the dead man’s arms and lifted him up, his feet dangling only inches from the ground. Stepping down into the ditch and then up the other side, they carried the body across the road, passing in front of the three onlookers, neither acknowledging the car nor the people inside it. Once across, they traversed the opposite ditch, entering an overgrown cow pasture.

Wolf’s hands grasped the steering wheel with both hands. The girl sat there—her mouth gaping.

“Let’s get out of here.” Wolf’s right hand left the steering wheel and reached for the gearshift.

“No!” David screamed and shot out of the door. Then, faltering in the unevenness of the ditch, he righted himself and began running towards the two men.

“David, no, get back here!” Wolf was out of his door now.

The girl scooted to Wolf’s side of the car and ran towards him. “Don’t leave me!” she begged, fearing to be alone.

The two men lugging the body had now topped a rise in the pasture and descended to the other side. David raced wildly towards them but made up no ground on the slow-moving men.

“David, wait! Get back here! You don’t know what you’re getting into!” Wolf shouted, almost catching up with David with the girl close behind.

The two men ascended another hill, and David, his head pounding and his legs growing heavy, struggled to keep pace. Then, slowing, Wolf caught David and tackled him to the ground.

“Stop! Let’s get back in the car and get out of her. Something’s not right here.” He tried to talk sense to David.

He was David’s friend, although David never quite understood why. David’s life had never been right since his father’s death. After high school, on his own, life had spun even more out of control with copious amounts of drugs and alcohol, and Wolf had been there to encourage that life. He had drank and smoked with him night after night with occasional encounters with cocaine, speed, and acid. But Wolf had never encouraged him to do anything David really knew he should be doing. It was Wolf’s world, and David could only be Wolf’s friend in that world.

“No!” He pushed Wolf away. One leg loosened from Wolf’s grip, and he smashed it against his chest. Almost on his feet, David’s palm went to Wolf’s face and pushed him backward. David quickly rose and, again, ran with abandonment towards the two men.

“Let him go.” The girl pleaded with Wolf. “Let’s get out of here.”

“No!” Wolf shouted at her. “He’s my bro. I’ve got to stop him.”

Wolf sprang to his feet and ran towards David, the girl chasing after him. She had no idea where the car or road was and had no choice but to follow.

When David reached the top of the rise, he stopped. The two men approached a farm pond where a long cable hung from the sky. Upwards the cable ascended into a small cloud existing only above the water. At its bottom was a massive metal hook.

Wolf, too, halted at the top of the hill, the girl slamming into him. The three stood there, watching, not believing their eyes. The pond was shallow, with the water coming up only to the two men’s knees. But as they neared the hook, small waves appeared as if generated by some whirling motion of a helicopter flying above the pond. But there was no helicopter, only a motionless cloud, a straight, firm cable, and a man-sized hook that hung a few feet from the surface.

The two men neared the hook and gently laid the body in its crook. Then, for the first time, it moved. David could see the blood that dripped from the man’s face and hands. His arm reached towards the two men and stroked their faces. At that moment, the hook slowly began to rise. David could no longer control himself. He broke into a sprint towards the pond.

“Wait for me! Take me with you!”

David’s feet broke the surface of the water, and he splashed towards the hook. The two men finally noticed David and turned towards him as the pond grew suddenly deeper. David was flailing in the water and in over his head. The pool surrounded him, engulfed him. Through the crystal-clear water, he could no longer see the two men but watched the body they had taken from the cross ascend into the heavens.

Wolf and the girl witnessed the whole scene from the crest of the hill, then came down to the pond, waded in, and pulled David’s body to the shore. Thinking him dead, Wolf was overjoyed when he started to cough up water from his lungs. The girl knelt beside him and touched his cheek.

“My name is Maggie,” she said, finally answering his question, “are you okay?”

“Yeah,” David replied, “I don’t hurt anymore.”

“Me neither,” she said, letting the tears run down her cheeks.

Avery S. Campbell is a pseudonym. It is a tribute to a chopper driver who insisted the author go back to college, a retired Marine Sergeant who exemplified honor and loyalty, and a geography professor who, once, gave an encouraging word. Campbell has been a middle school teacher, a park ranger at Fort Larned National Historic Site and Fort Union National Monument and an educator at the Kansas State Museum, the South Carolina Archives, and the National Archives at Atlanta. He has served as State Coordinator of National History Day for both Kansas and South Carolina. A true-blue Nebraska Loper, the author is a graduate and former employee of the University of Nebraska at Kearney and a member of the Western Writers of America.

FICTION

Victoria Elizabeth Ruwi

Rasp

Her throat drained dry when the minister began his sermon. She tried to resist the cough, even with its patient insistence on spilling into the air. She formed a hallow space in her fist and exhaled into it. Still she felt the tickle at the back of her throat. She attempted to swallow the urge back into her body. For years she wished her mother would hand her a lifesaver candy like the boy in the commercial was given, but that never happened. Each Sunday she struggled to keep it under control.

While she squelched the tickle, she tried to absorb words, but felt the tightening of her shoulders. A nerve at the base of her skull began to twinge; pain burst from the top of her head.

She became restless in the wooden pew. Perhaps the weight of her halo was too heavy. She wiggled about, trying to tumble the halo off, until her mother stopped her with a quick, discreet, slap on the back of her neck. Sometimes that slap would knock the halo a little more askew. By eleven, her halo tumbled from her failed grasp.

When she turned twelve, she could not swallow the cough anymore. Her dry throat swelled, overflowed in a rasp, sending her out to the hallway to sip water. She would try to re-enter the chapel, but by the time she got to the sanctuary door the drying out began again. She could gulp down mucus before the rough cough arose.

The day after her thirteenth birthday, Jane told her mother she would no longer go to church. "My throat hurts and my head throbs," she said.

"Oh well, if you are sick, I guess you can stay home this Sunday."

"It hurts every Sunday."

"Don't be ridiculous. It cannot hurt every Sunday."

“I’m not going,” she said as she suppressed a cough, “because when Jesus went to heaven, he forgot me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Forgot me. He gave me a drunk for a father.”

Her mother slapped her square across her jaw. Out thrust the cough.

“I’m sorry. I am so sorry,” her mother began. “You don’t have to go to church, but you must not say things like that about your father. We need his paycheck. Anyway, he leaves us alone most of the time. You do understand, don’t you? Tell me you understand.”

Her cough spewed in fits, filling the room with its gasp, gasp, gasp, grasp.

Her mother rushed to get her a glass of water.

Jane sat on the carpeted floor of Hell, drinking its water, as her mother left for church.

Victoria Elizabeth Ruwi is the author of *Eye Whispers*, a book of poetry. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing from San Diego State University. Her writing has been published in journals and anthologies all over the states.

FICTION

Jacinta Meredith

Masks

“You aren’t the man I married.”

My wife had thrown that at me three weeks ago as she walked out the door. I resented the statement, but couldn’t argue. Sitting in my home office, the words played over and over in my head as I tried to concentrate on the presentation I had to finish before work tomorrow. It was always in the evenings I realized how empty my house was without her.

My gaze drifted to the picture still next to my computer. Making our vows to never leave. I gritted my teeth. Grabbing the picture, I swung around and hurled it at the wall. The satisfying crunch of glass released my tension and I turned back to the computer. What right had she to criticize me? After all, I’d only become the man I’d promised to be. Someone who could provide anything she ever wanted. That was who I should be. Wasn’t it?

A knock sounded and my housekeeper, Maria, poked her head in. “I’m headed out for the day, Mr. Dallan. I’ll be back tomorrow at seven.”

I barely looked up. “Thanks.”

“Oh, and this came.”

My eyes focused on the small, gold box she held out. “Who sent it?”

“I don’t know, sir. It was just sitting on the doorstep.”

I tilted my head toward the filing cabinet. “Just set it there.”

“Yes, sir.” She walked over to set the box down and I watched her eyes travel to the broken glass on the floor. I pressed my lips together, but she didn’t say anything as she left, closing the door after her.

I turned back to my computer, twisting my neck from side to side to loosen the strained muscles. Okay, no more thinking. It was time to concentrate. One more night of work, a few more tweaks to the presentation, and tomorrow I'd be ready to sell my investors on making my company international.

I got all of one more slide done before a glint caught my eye. I turned and frowned at the box, gleaming at me. What was it? I rose and went over to pick it up. No labels. Nothing. Just a plain, gold box. Why was it on my doorstep? I began to lift the lid, and paused, an irrational wave of anxiety washing over me. What was wrong with me? Shaking my head, I finished lifting it, and almost dropped the box as I stifled a cry. It took a moment to realize the face in front of me was not real.

It was a mask. Dark brown wood, with a mocking smile, and slanted bushy eyebrows protruding above the eye openings. I picked it up and started. A second mask lay beneath it, and I saw the outlines of yet another beneath that. I frowned as I examined the first mask, flipping it over, looking for some type of explanation. It had a small word printed near the top. *Aletheia*. As I read the word, a shiver ran through me, although I had no idea what it meant.

Setting it down, I picked up the second mask, this one silver metal. Unlike the derisive first mask, its mouth was set in a straight line, with the slightest upturn, as if in expectation. I turned it over and read *Elpis*.

The third mask was golden copper. Its deep-set, slanted eyebrows and sad mouth somehow gave the impression of sorrow and understanding all at once. *Agape*.

I shuddered, grabbed the other two masks, and thrust them all back in the box. Putting the lid on, I dropped it to the file cabinet and took a breath. In and out.

This was absurd. I was Sean Dallan, CEO. I wasn't going to be scared of some masks. It was clearly a prank. Probably Jack trying to undermine the presentation. I'd tell Maria to throw them out tomorrow.

As my eyes opened at first light, they landed on the box of masks, sitting on my dresser. Waiting for me. I stared. How had it gotten there? Maria must have gotten in early this morning and put it there when she was

cleaning my office. Though she'd never before opened my door while I was in the bedroom. I threw off the covers and hurried to dress, keeping my eyes averted. Looping my tie into a full Windsor knot, I straightened my shoulders and strode to the box, intending to throw it into the trash on my way out the door. As soon as I touched it, I paused, a sudden desire welling up to see the masks again. Just once. I swallowed. What could it hurt? I lifted the lid and gazed down at the wooden mask. *Aletheia*.

I lifted it out, tracing the wooden eyebrows, fighting an abrupt impulse to try it on. My eyes drifted to the mirror next to my dresser, and I couldn't seem to stop myself as I raised the mask and put it to my face, my gray eyes peering eerily through the eyeholes. And just like that, the mask began to meld onto me. I froze for only a moment before my fingers flew to the edges, scraping at it. There was nothing to grasp. I gasped as I tried to find a grip, an opening—anything to pull it off, but there was nothing. Just like that, it was like molten glass, as fitted to my face as a glove.

"Maria! Maria!" Was she even here? My hands continued to rove the mask, feeling for—anything. A soft knock sounded, and she hurried in without waiting for me to answer.

"Is everything all right?"

"I can't get it off!" I began pounding at it. Maybe I could break it.

"Pardon me?"

"The mask—it won't come off!" Irritation sparked through me at her density.

She looked around the room and then back at me, caution peeking out of her eyes. "Mask?"

My hands dropped and I spun to face her as the realization struck. "Can't you see it?"

"I... I'm sorry, Mr. Dallan. But—see what?"

"The—the mask I'm wearing?" Dread began to wind around my stomach. Was I going insane?

Marie stepped closer to the door. “Are you feeling well? Perhaps you should see a doctor.” She glanced behind her as if to make sure she had a clear escape in case I lunged at her.

I gaped at her and then looked back at the mirror. It was definitely there. Set onto my face like it had been carved into it. Every brown wooden inch of it. I turned back, but her expression betrayed only confusion and fear.

“No.” I swallowed, trying to calm my heartbeat. “I—I’ll be all right.” If I was going insane, I certainly wouldn’t let her see it.

“Are you sure, Mr. Dallan? Perhaps—perhaps you should check for a fever.” She took another step back, out of the room.

“No. Just leave me.”

She fled and I half expected to get her resignation by the end of the day. I stared into the mirror. The strange mask stared back, showing only my own eyes and mouth. I touched my face. Definitely there. Definitely wooden. But somehow...edgeless. It was a part of my face. What was I supposed to do now? I had to go into the office. If I missed that meeting, I might never have another chance to bring the company international. I took several deep breaths, pulled on my suit jacket, and headed for garage.

I paused as I entered the office, peering around me, waiting for the scoffs and stares.

“Good morning, Mr. Dallan.”

The secretary’s bright smile greeted me. What was her name? Susan. I swallowed and took a step toward her. She lifted her eyebrows. “Can I help you?”

I licked my lips, feeling the wooden edges catch. “Um, do you see anything—”

And that’s when it happened.

Something...deepened and her smile shifted away to reveal...misery. I blinked and her smile came back into focus. But somehow the misery was still there. And I knew as surely as if she had told me that she was sad...beyond sad. Unhappiness was choking her.

Panic swept through me and I stepped away. "Never mind."

I hurried through the floor, but, just like that, the experience began repeating itself. Over and over. Everyone smiled and nodded at me as I passed, but when I looked them in the face, I knew, without a doubt, what they were feeling. Not their thoughts. Just their emotions. Depression, sorrow, joy, irritation...one after another, they walked by me. At first, I stared at them, open-mouthed, and doubtless starting juicy office gossip, but as it happened over and over again, I turned my eyes to the ground and avoided looking at all. This couldn't be happening. It was impossible.

I reached the conference room and halted, swallowing hard. Stop it. I shook my head. I was a full-grown man. I'd been working on this deal for months. I was not going to screw it up because something had gone haywire in my head. Drawing in a breath, I stepped inside. And stumbled backwards as a full force of emotions hit me from all sides. *Anger. Pride. Eagerness. Animosity. Greed. Impatience.* It was like a quick flurry of punches.

"Hey, you okay?" Several voices spoke at once, and one arm reached out and grabbed me.

"Sean, what happened?"

I blinked, turning to look at Jack, my partner of many years. His concern immediately melted into his true feelings. Satisfaction. *What?* I spent another moment looking into his eyes, despite my impulse to turn away, and recognized betrayal, anger, self-deprecation, and most of all, bitterness. Towards me.

But why? We'd worked together for years. When had he grown to hate me? As though in answer to the question, the first I'd bothered to ask myself, a volley of memories hit me. I saw myself gloating over my advancements, which usually came before his, the times I'd given myself bigger cuts than him, putting him down in front of people I wanted to impress, and a whole world of other images I had long dismissed, had I even realized they existed. I pulled free of him and sat heavily in my chair.

Holding in a shuddering breath, I forced myself to look up, preparing for another bombardment, but now they came more slowly, in quantities I could deal with. I kept my eyes focused on the others, away from Jack. I couldn't look him in the face again. Even his profile filled me with memories I didn't like to dwell on. He'd started this company with me. Been at my side for years. And I'd treated him like the picture I had shattered the night before.

Entering the house at the end of that awful day, I threw myself onto my king-sized bed, and wept for the first time in twenty years. I'd seen more suffering in that day than I knew existed. And to make matters worse, any time I posed the question *why*, I got any answers that related to me. Everything I had ever done to wrong another person in that office had played in my head that day. Was it possible to collapse under the weight of shame? How could I have been so blind all these years? The name of the mask floated through my head. *Aletheia*. I knew now what it meant. Truth. Awful, soul-wracking truth. I could see myself for who I truly was. No wonder my wife had left me.

When I finally dragged myself out of bed the next day, my shoulders felt heavy, leaving me hopeless and dreading the day ahead. I changed, moving more slowly than I had since I was a boy avoiding school. Only after I finished dressing did I force my eyes to the mirror. I gasped. The mask was gone! My hands flew up and touched my skin, pressing into the soft flesh. It was really gone! I looked on the bed, under the pillows, but there was no sign of it. It had vanished as thoroughly as if it was made of water. I sagged onto the bed. It was over. I'd never have to see all those emotions again. I frowned, surprised at a sudden hesitation. As terrible as the truth had been, there was something about actually *knowing* that was...refreshing. How would I know now if people actually hated me? How would I know...who I really was?

I stepped to the door and stopped as forcefully as if something had blocked my path. I swallowed, my eyes turning to the box. There had been three masks. There were two left. I closed my eyes and tried to take another step forward, but couldn't. Again and again I tried, but it was no use. My shoulders slumped. I reached for the box and took out the silver mask. *Elpis*. Lifting my chin, I held it to my face. It molded around me just as the other one had. It was just as strange a sensation, but this time

I didn't resist, though I couldn't stop a tremble as I left the room in search of Maria.

When I finally found her in the laundry room, folding clothes, she glanced at me, her eyebrows furrowing.

"Can I help you, Mr. Dallan?" She hung a shirt on a hanger.

"Please look at me, Maria."

She turned, frowning at me.

I didn't have the same intense reaction I had the day before, but even with the other mask gone, I was somehow more sensitive to truth. I could see both impatience and disgust in her eyes. But there was something more than that. There was wistfulness. A dream of something gone, but still possible. Something she was still living for.

"Yes, Mr. Dallan?"

"Oh, sorry. I—wanted to tell you I'm leaving early today."

"Have a good day." She quirked an eyebrow as she turned away.

Once at the office, I took a breath, and walked straight up to Susan.

"How can I help you, Mr. Dallan?" She smiled.

I still saw the sadness in her eyes from the day before, but now I saw something more. Determination. For what? The answer flashed through my head. To make it through. She was having a hard time with something, but she was determined to make it through.

Her eyebrows furrowed, and I refocused. "Are you all right, Susan?" I flinched as the words came out, knowing how strange it must sound coming from me, an egotistical jerk.

She faltered. "Pardon me?"

"You...you look..." I twitched, forcing the words out. "You look sad."

I pulled back as her eyes filled with tears and I saw a new emotion. Relief.

"I'm so sorry, sir. I just—I didn't know it showed." She swiped at her eyes, looking down.

"Are you going through something? At home?" I was surprised to realize I actually wanted to know the answer.

She shrugged. "I—I'm having some trouble with...with my husband."

"Do you need help?" I straightened.

"Oh no, sir." She shook her head. "Nothing like that. It's just...well, we're working through some things."

"That can be hard." If there was one thing I actually knew, it was that.

She looked up and I recognized gratefulness. "It is. But it's worth it."

I swallowed hard, pushing aside thoughts of my own failed marriage, and nodded. "Let me know if you need anything."

Determined. To make her marriage work.

I walked to my office, choosing a roundabout path to avoid Jack. After seeing the truth yesterday, I wasn't sure I had the courage to face him. But face him I did. He was already waiting in my office when I walked in.

"Oh, good, you're here." He shuffled the papers in his lap. "Listen, Sean, you kind of freaked everyone out yesterday. Is everything okay?" He looked up, and I recognized the same emotions as yesterday. All of them, though not quite as strong. But I saw a couple new ones as well. There was actual concern, though whether it was for me or for the company, I wasn't sure. And there was...peace. And happiness. Yes, that was it. He was happy about something despite his misery in my presence.

"Yeah." I cleared my throat and pulled my chair out from behind my desk. "Everything's fine. Listen, Jack, can we talk?"

"Uh, isn't that what we're doing?"

"I mean *really* talk." I sat next to him, and alarm immediately radiated from him.

“What’s going on? Are you firing me? This is my company as much as it is yours, and if you don’t realize—” His expression had moved from alarm to anger so fast my mask was having difficulty registering the changing emotions.

“Hang on, Jack.” I turned a hand palm up. “I’m not firing you. This company is ours. We built it together. I’ll never forget that.”

Confusion replaced everything else. “What?”

I swallowed. “I—I treated you wrong. And I’m sorry.”

“What?” His mouth dropped open.

“And, as an apology, I want to give you 15% more of the company. You’ll own more than half of it. Technically, you *will* be the owner.”

“What?”

I almost laughed as he repeated the word. But I didn’t want him to think I wasn’t serious. “You worked hard right next to me all these years, and all I did was undermine you and cheat you. I want to make it right. But I want you to do something for me too.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’m listening.”

“I want you to tell me why you’re happy.”

His brow furrowed and he stared at me.

How could I explain it? “I know you’re angry. I know you’ve been miserable here. But you’re also happy. I can...see it. How can you be both at once? What...what keeps you going?” The need to understand enveloped me. Maybe if I understood...maybe I could find peace myself.

He searched my face as though waiting for the joke before finally answering. “I met someone.” His face softened. “About a month ago. She makes me happy. And everything I go through here is worth it because at the end of the day, I get to go see her.”

My shoulders slumped, the loss of my own wife sweeping through. “Oh.”

“Sean, what’s going on here?”

What could I say to that? “I’m just...figuring some things out.”

His face said he didn’t believe me as he retreated to his office.

I didn’t get much work done the rest of the day. Instead, I walked around, looking into people’s faces. I mostly saw the same emotions I had the day before, but with...more. Something that kept them going despite the hardships in their lives. By the end of the day, after scaring most of my employees half to death by prying into their lives, I had finally figured out this mask’s name too.

Hope.

Which led to one question. What was *my* hope? What kept me going at the end of the day? My chest ached as I thought about it. I knew what it had been.

My wife. Soon to be ex-wife. Laura. She had once been my hope. She was the reason I’d started the business in the first place—so I could give her anything she wanted. Except me, as it turned out. I’d been so busy giving her things, I’d forgotten to give her me. So, what was my hope now?

Nothing. I knew immediately it was true. I had no hope for the future. Money hadn’t made me happy. Power had given me superficial happiness. But now? I wanted more than anything to feel the same hope I had witnessed in so many other lives today. A reason to live. A reason to keep going through the hardships of life.

That night, I dreamt of Laura. Of our life together before the company had become a success. Of the days we used to spend just dreaming together. Hoping.

I didn’t hesitate to put on the third mask. *Agape*. Maybe this one would give me some answers. The reason behind all of this.

It was Maria’s day off, apparently, because she wasn’t in the house. Either that or I’d finally scared her into quitting.

Susan shifted in her seat when I approached her desk, probably thinking I was going to make fun of her for the day before. I could still see her emotions, though significantly faded. But this time, as I looked, I didn't experience a new emotion of hers. Instead, I experienced one of my own. An overwhelming, all-encompassing *love*. Not love like I felt for Laura, but just for...her. Susan, as a person.

"It'll be all right, Susan," My voice was thick, and I cleared my throat, but continued. "I know you're going through a rough time, but I know you'll make it."

"Thank you," she whispered.

If it took me most of the previous day to figure out what that mask did, I understood this one almost immediately. For every person I encountered, I experienced such an overwhelming sense of love that I had to keep swallowing back tears. I just wanted to help them. To show them love. Every single one of them. I couldn't help it.

So I did. Throughout the entire day, I took one after another into the conference room and talked to them. Coaxing their problems out of them. Encouraging them. I knew I would give anything, even my company, to help them. Every now and then I caught a glimpse of Jack passing in the hall, stopping to gape at the glass windows of the conference room while I sat in there with some person previously below my notice, but I didn't care. And by the time I left the office, there was only one person left to talk to.

The surprise in Laura's face was mixed with displeasure when I showed up at her apartment unannounced that evening.

"What is it?" Her voice was laced with frustration, but when I looked into her eyes, I could see shimmers of hurt. Sadness. Loss. And, maybe, just the slightest hint of joy. If I felt overwhelmed by love for everyone else, now it took all my strength not to fly into pieces.

"Laura," I breathed.

Her eyes opened wide at the emotion that flowed from that simple word. Love, sorrow, regret, hope—it all came out in one tumbled mix.

“Yes?” She whispered, uncertainty replacing her frustration.

I swallowed and a tear crept out and fell down my cheek.

“Forgive me.” My voice shook. “You were—you are—the love of my life. No job will ever replace that. Nothing I ever say or do will make up for how I treated you. But I’m begging you. Forgive me.”

I fell on my knees before her and wept as I had after the day with the first mask.

Laura looked down at me. If there was any doubt in her that I meant it, it didn’t show. She knelt and took my hands. Then she lifted my trembling chin and forced me to look at her. And to my amazement, I saw hope. And love.

She cleared her throat. “Do you promise to love me? To honor me and keep me in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, all the days of our lives?” Her voice trembled as she spoke our vows, asking again for the promise I’d once given her.

I lifted her soft hands to my lips and kissed them.

“I do.” I choked out the words, knowing I didn’t deserve this second chance.

“I do too.” A tear fell down her own cheek.

I traced its path tentatively, wonderingly, and as the corners of her lips turned up just slightly, I pulled her into my arms.

Jacinta Meredith is a writer living in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. She loves writing stories that help readers find hope in difficult circumstances, and spends her free time devouring as many books as possible. She can be found at www.jacintameredith.com.

FICTION

Sheila Luna

Cookies and Rosaries

Based on a true story.

To me, having a calling seemed like the coolest thing ever. Mostly, I had no idea what being called entailed, but the second I turned 20, I got mine. While other girls my age were cruising Central Avenue with the top down dying to experience one-night stands, I was hopping on a plane across country to minister to the needy. During my impressionable teen years, I devoured books about Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa, and Ammon Hennacy. I stood in awe of people who sacrificed their lives for others—those chosen by God to do extraordinary things—like Father Damian, who went to Molokai to care for lepers. My mother, while thankful her teenage daughter wasn't hooked on sex, drugs, and rock and roll, tried to sidetrack my save-the-world fervor by tempting me with fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies and shopping trips.

"Why do you have to go so far away?" my mother asked in a trembling voice. I had blindly signed up to volunteer at a Catholic mission 2,600 miles away. In an era before email, iPhones, and GPS tracking devices, parental worry came with the territory. She couldn't even Yelp the place. "What do you know about this mission anyway?"

"I am being called by God. Don't worry. I'll write to you. It's not like I'm going to Africa or anything," I replied, secretly considering how that would have been way cooler, like in the movie *The Nun's Story* when Audrey Hepburn becomes a nun and goes to the Congo.

My name on a piece of cardboard slowly rotated around a lanky man covered in black. As I approached, a burst of fear shot through my body when it became apparent that I was not reading a book any longer in my comfortable bedroom with my mom's chocolate chip cookies. I had just landed in Boston to live with a priest I didn't know from Adam.

Dressed in black robe and starched white collar, Father Riley introduced himself to me in a wooden voice and took my suitcase. With his angular

face and somber presence, he gave the impression of a medieval wall hanging in a dusty old church.

“You’ve made a promise to God, young lady. You mustn’t go back on your word, even when things get tough. It’s a rough place, Boston.”

Ignoring his obscurity, I tingled with excitement, ready to delve into my new calling—to do the Lord’s work.

Smack dab in a poor section of town, the Mission of Saint Sebastian, a deteriorating estate on a hill, towered over Dorchester like an obelisk, fading into the Boston mist and gloom. The neighborhood of ramshackle tenement buildings and clapboard shacks was home to a myriad of cultures and ethnicities—one of the reasons I was drawn to this opportunity.

“Keep the doors locked at all times,” he instructed, with a pointed finger as he led me into my new residence. In each stuffy, dark room hung portraits of John F. Kennedy and Pope John Paul II. I wondered which leader he affiliated himself with. He gave me a tour of the house while shedding his holy garb little by little, leaving pieces of clothing in various spots, as if marking his territory. The place smelled of musty wet wood. A hint of hard candy lingered in the air, reminiscent of my grandpa’s basement. My room was the size of a closet with a twin bed and no window to the outside world. *Like a monk’s cell*, I thought. *I’ll be able to cloister myself and grow in my faith while working for the poor. Just like Dorothy Day.*

While my friends in Phoenix woke up to their yoga and jogging routines, my days began with day-old bagels and centuries-old prayers. Every Tuesday, I and the other volunteers, John and Linda, walked through the sketchy streets of Dorchester to the nursing home to say the rosary with the residents. Along the way we encountered boys bouncing basketballs in the street, homeless people holed up under trees, and men, edgy and leery-eyed, circling lampposts.

“Drug dealers,” said John as he stuffed both hands in his pockets as if to hide. “Keep walking and don’t look them in the eye.” I obliged. Still, I could not take my eyes off the homeless man under the tree. He looked half dead and I wished I had a bag of my mom’s cookies to give him. As soon as we arrived at Oakwood Manor, the old people mechanically gathered around us as gnats to light, massaging their rosaries.

“Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee,” I said, floating more on the rhythmic repetition of withered voices than the prayers. The strum of Hail Marys transported me back to my childhood. My mother and I would pray the rosary on our knees in her bedroom surrounded by all shapes and sizes of the Virgin Mary. She guided the beads like an expert knitter and her skin had this ethereal glow that no amount of exfoliation could achieve. I remember being more in awe of her stamina and faith than any graces the rosary might have bestowed. We’d pray for all kinds of things from world peace to my brother’s mumps.

“Why does Mary seem a little sad?” I asked her one day while ogling her many statuettes. “Shouldn’t she be happy? She was chosen by God.”

“She was a mother and probably worried about her son, just like I worry about you.”

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death,” the elders responded bowing their gray heads. John and Linda would bolt right after the last Hail Mary. I stayed for bingo. Except for the nursing home, the Mission’s “missionary” work was nonexistent. Hanging out with the old folks seemed more conducive to my so-called calling than returning to Father Riley’s spiritless routines.

One day, Eve touched my arm and said, “I’m so thankful for your visits. You are a breath of light coming here to pray with us. I’m 95. My husband’s gone, my sisters are gone, my friends are gone. All I have left is this rosary.” Then she put it in my hand. “Something to remember me by,” she said curving her bony cold fingers around mine. It seemed like a holy relic, so old and worn. Fifty-nine hand-carved wooden roses strung together with Eve’s history. I wondered how many fingers had pressed and caressed the beads and what troubles it saw over the years, and if it had worked any miracles. My refusal to accept her gift got nowhere.

On the chilly walk back, as the last vestiges of fall crunched under my shoes, I called my mother collect from a pay phone on the street corner. She was baking cookies, and I was craving a taste of home. The glow of the sun warmed the sides of the phone booth transforming into my own private cocoon.

After four weeks, Father Riley ordered me to get a job to support the Mission’s work. I obeyed. My previous skills as a typist landed me a receptionist job at Prudential. I confess, taking the subway downtown every morning was fun. I loved being the company gopher. I collated,

stapled, and filed like nobody's business. I answered the phone with enthusiasm, but mostly I sat at my little desk amid the frenzied clicking and buzzing and focused my energy on trying to decipher Father Riley and listening hard for God to help me understand what I was doing here. I knew for a fact it wasn't to tout term life.

"I'm glad you are working. Come straight home. No happy hours," said Father Riley, sitting at the table with a stack of papers, his coffee bean eyeballs peering at me over perched spectacles. I couldn't decide if he looked more like Ebenezer Scrooge or Vito Corleone. "Oh, and remember to sign your paychecks over to me."

"You mean everything I earn?" I asked, thinking it a bit peculiar. "Can I keep a little for spending?"

"I will give you cash for the train and lunch. Everything else will go to the Mission," he said, forging a smile. "Understood?"

"Of course, I'm happy to help. But I'd much rather assist in the community than answer phones all day long."

Father Riley slid his hands in the pockets of his black robe. I wondered how deep the pockets went in priests' garments.

"Speaking of which," I continued, "I've been thinking about other charity works. There are these kids in the street. What if we use some of the money to...?"

"You've made a promise to God. Remember?" he interrupted, rubbing his carved cheekbone that jutted out of his face like a broken wing. "The Mission needs money. Think of the poor people you will be helping."

Nervously, he gathered his papers and left the room. Obviously, he did not want to finish our discussion. He wore his secrecy like a poor man wears his winter coat, pulled tightly around him. I wondered where all the money was going. And what was so important in that stack of papers. My own clandestine mission was to find out.

I had always considered myself a good Catholic. Not as devout as my mother. I didn't go to Mass every day. I didn't even go every Sunday. I still had a love for its tradition and a desire to deepen my faith. But I was beginning to feel like a billy goat in a flock of sheep. Curious and antagonistic and wanting to head butt my way to the truth. I bit my tongue

though and followed the flock faithfully, even though it became increasingly difficult to roam Father Riley's pastures.

Five months into my tenure as a missionary, it seemed to me that the Mission was not involved in any charity projects. With the exception of bingo and rosary at the nursing home, my idealistic expectation to minister to the destitute and change lives was not happening. The other volunteers lived by Father's strict canon, which prohibited socializing and demanded constant prayer. The unwavering obeisance of John and Linda astounded me, and I wondered if they were addled or maybe homeless themselves and Saint Sebastian was their one hot and a cot. John was always buoyant, as if high on something. His first-floor room had a window that I imagined he climbed out of on occasion. Linda, on the other hand seemed mute.

"Where are you from," I asked her one day, hoping to make a soulful connection. After all, we shared the same bar of soap.

"Las Vegas," she whispered, as her cheeks turned paprika red. She scurried to her room and shut the door. Father Riley clomped up the stairs, nodded slightly in my direction, as if to say *she's troubled*, then entered her bedroom. Baffled, I stood by her door, ready to divert if needed. A crescendo of murmuring reverberated from the walls. I grasped the doorknob, ready to storm onto the scene, like Olivia Benson in *Law and Order SVU*. Then I realized they were praying. Relieved, I padded to my room, wiping away beads of sweat from my brow.

Our miserly meals of soup or chili were akin to fasting so one day I thought I'd treat my fellow missionaries to fresh baked cookies and have some to give to homeless people on the way to the nursing home. I scored a stick of butter from the fridge. Then, I opened a top cabinet searching for ingredients and discovered a menagerie of liquor bottles in all shapes and sizes. *No wonder it smells like candy in this house*, I mused, and wondered if the good priest had a little drinking problem. It certainly wasn't communion wine. Hidden behind the Jack Daniels I spotted a canister that said flour. I stood on a chair and reached for it, careful not to disturb the booze. I grabbed the canister, stepped down, and twisted off the lid hoping to find at least two cups. Instead of flour, it was dough—wads and wads of \$100 bills. *What the hell?* As my fingers flipped through the cash, I heard the wood floor creak.

Footsteps!

A shiver spread to the hairs on the back of my neck. Just as I twisted the lid back on, Father Riley barreled through the swinging door and snatched the flour and butter from my hands. I almost felt as if I should raise my arms in surrender.

“You know the rules,” he spat and slammed shut the liquor cabinet.

“I didn’t know we weren’t allowed to bake,” I said, cotton mouthed. A wave of blood rushed to my face. He glared at me as if to say *how dare you talk to me in that tone*.

I wanted to say *that’s not flour*. Instead I blurted, “You’re missing out!”

He stoically absconded with my cookie fixins. I marched upstairs to my closet of a cloister, leaving my respect and awe of his sacrosanct position in the cabinet with the whiskey. I couldn’t help but wonder if Father Riley was a mobster in priest’s clothing and what the jail time was for aiding and abetting.

One cold snowy night, I answered a knock on the door. On the doorstep stood a middle-aged woman wearing a ripped flannel shirt. Her pear-shaped face was framed by a red scarf. Two big eyes beamed at me like dark stars while thick black lashes cradled giant flakes of snow. Close to her chest, she held a baby wrapped in a thin blanket. The child’s lips were blue as ice and its mouth paralyzed in a silent scream.

“Please,” she said, shivering and batting snowflakes from her eyes. We are cold and hungry.” My heart lashed against my chest like an ocean wave. Just as I was about to let her in, a voice screamed from the kitchen.

“Close the door,” Father Riley said as he stomped primitively down the hall. “I told you never to answer the door.”

“But she’s co—”

“Close it!” he screamed. Now my mouth was frozen open like the baby’s. As he approached the door in a fury, a gust of arctic wind rushed in and sucked the door shut.

“Why did you turn her away?” I asked. “We have enough cans of soup and chili to feed the entire city of Boston.” It seemed to take forever to say those words as I was still numb.

“We can’t cater to every Tom, Dick, and Harry that roam the streets of Dorchester.” Brusquely, he fiddled with the dead bolt, locking out the world and confirming my mounting apprehension about the Mission’s mission. Just then it dawned on me that the people in the nursing home were white as the snow falling outside. I couldn’t remember if the woman at the door was white or brown or purple. In my pool of naïve idealism, it never occurred to me that a priest—a minister of Christ’s grace—would be so heartless. Tainted by an intense disgust, I began to doubt whether any of that hidden stash in the flour canister was even going to the needy.

“I don’t agree with your actions!” My words rendered me lightheaded. I grabbed the banister for support and noticed the heads of Linda and John peeping from the top of the stairs. They ducked in unison. “Christ would not have slammed the door on her. No matter how many Hail Marys you say, it’s not right.”

“Don’t be foolish. You made a promise to God to work in this mission.” He glared at me with beady, lifeless eyes.

“Your schemes may work on John and Linda, but not me. How can you even administer communion? Jesus said to give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you,” I said, stunned. I had never in my life quoted scripture. I barely read the Bible. I preferred murder mysteries and romance novels. It was beyond my comprehension that those words fluttered from my mouth—baby birds flying from their nest.

“What am I working for if not for her?” I said, pointing to the door. “I’m leaving this place.”

My newfound assertiveness fired him up like an old wood stove. His pallid potato face transfigured into a fiery devilish expression as he rubbed his rosary belt angrily. “I refuse to let you leave.” He locked the door and showed me the key that he slipped into a secret pocket of his black robe.

Self-confidence turned into panic as I tried to open the door with my shaky hand. Locked from the inside! It felt like wild horses had trampled across my chest.

“You’re not in your right mind. Go to your room. We will discuss this tomorrow.”

My mind raced with escape plans. Maybe John would let me creep out of his window. But where would I go? It was 20 degrees and pitch black. I wanted so much to call my mother, but another house rule, besides don't answer the door and no baking, was no phone calls. Up the creaky stairs I went to my little monk cell where John F. Kennedy and the Pope witnessed my tears and loneliness. Although, embarrassed at my gullibility and failure, I felt happy that I could discern between prayers and words and between God and religion. As I crawled beneath the sheet, I clutched Eve's wooden rosary and prayed that the woman and baby would find shelter. The image of the shivering mother and child on the steps of the Mission of Saint Sebastian would be painted in my mind forever. *Miserere nobis*, I whispered, tossing and turning on my unyielding cot.

Decades later, I sometimes think about this experience. My candle of idealism has since burned out. I'm left with the little wax sculpture in a box of memories. Often, I try to light what is left of the wick, but it never quite stays lit. Despite Father Riley bursting my idealistic bubble, I still love the Catholic faith. Not just for the saints and sacraments, but for the traditions that date back 2,000 years and most of all for the unutterable grace the Mass delivers—like one of those weighted blankets trending on Amazon.

I had considered that maybe Father Riley was in thick with the Irish mob. Alas, it was nothing that dramatic. I caught him red-handed. Those secret papers were nothing but his chicken scratches alongside names like Dragon Lady and Honey Glaze. He was just a feeble alcoholic and a two-bit gambler who bet on the ponies a little too much. There's a bad apple in every bunch. Who am I to judge? Perhaps his purpose in life was to help troubled Linda. My escape from Saint Sebastian wasn't dramatic either. I went to work one day and never came back. When I got home, my mom didn't say *I told you so*. Instead she congratulated me for speaking my mind. "Maybe you were called for just that reason," she said.

The dusty desert longs for summer rains, and I sometimes yearn for the passion I had as a young woman. And it wasn't that charlatan priest who extinguished the flame, but the realization acquired as I got older that the world can't be saved. At least not by me. I'll leave that to the Dorothy Days and Mother Teresas of the world. I've learned that what counts most are the little things we do for each other every day. If I can change someone's heart with a smile, or a good deed or a chocolate chip cookie, if I can bring joy to someone then I am living my faith. It is not always about doing the extraordinary. It is really about the little moments of

love—the small daily miracles strung together like hand-carved rosary beads.

Sheila Luna is a writer from Arizona whose essays have appeared in various journals including *Kaleidoscope*, *PILGRIM: A Journal of Catholic Experience*, *Longridge Review*, *Spry Literary Journal*, and *DINE: An Anthology*, published by Hippocampus Books. She loves baking, road trips, and Bach. Visit her at www.sheilaluna.net.

Kathy Huth Jones

Mum's Not the Word; Love Is

When I first met my mother-in-law to-be, I was thrilled. Having been an Anglophile since my junior high crush on the Monkees' Davy Jones, I couldn't believe my good fortune to marry a tall, handsome gentleman named David Jones with a Mum from Manchester, England. How much fun we would have getting to know one another!

Even before the marriage, my illusions began to crumble. We wanted a small wedding, immediate family only and a few college friends. I asked my two sisters to stand with me, and he asked his two brothers. Mum insisted her twelve-year-old daughter had to be a bridesmaid too. And she "had" to invite her extended family, even though I explained there might not be room in the small chapel. I gave in to keep peace. After all, I didn't want to start off on the wrong foot. I had dreams of a special closeness with my new mother-in-law, like Ruth and Naomi, since my mother and I had a strained relationship, due to my recently becoming a Christian.

About a year later, Mum spared no expense to redecorate her living room. For Christmas I made her a special appliquéd pillow in her chosen colors. Our family had a tradition of making gifts instead of spending money we didn't have. I assumed Mum would appreciate the time and effort that went into a handmade gift, knowing how tight our newlywed budget must be. On our next visit, I didn't find the pillow in the living room. I discovered it in the dog's bed, filthy and covered with hair.

After that disappointment, I built a wall around my heart to lessen the hurt. I did my duty as a daughter-in-law. I still sent birthday, Mother's Day, anniversary, and Christmas cards. We attended the rare family gatherings. I endured being snubbed at my sister-in-law's lavish spectacle of a wedding. Other relatives were happy to tell me the unkind things Mum said about me.

A heavy smoker, Mum contracted emphysema in her early fifties. She was also diagnosed with scleroderma, a rare autoimmune disease which caused her skin and internal organs to gradually harden, making her appear decades older. She retired early from her high-powered job and

became a recluse, especially after her once-inseparable sister cut Mum out of her life and would have nothing more to do with her.

During those last years, my atheist mum-in-law turned to me because she had no one else, so I tried to put the past aside and do what Jesus would—love unconditionally. I sat with her in the hospital and in her home for hours at a time. I listened as she poured out her dismay at the way her sister treated her, her concern that her children wouldn't stay close after she died, and worry about her British knick-knacks, which she begged me not to throw away. She refused to talk about anything spiritual, except to complain about how all three of her sons were now Christians and she didn't understand how that happened.

For her sixty-seventh birthday, which turned out to be her last, I invited her to a local English tearoom. She wasn't feeling well, so my youngest son and I brought the authentic British tea party to her house. With tears in her eyes, she said, "This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me."

My heartache over all the wasted years turned to pity for this shriveled, now helpless woman. I wished things could have been different, that she could have shared my treasured faith and hope. Because of that great divide, we never had the Naomi/Ruth relationship I dreamed of having.

I'm still an Anglophile, and I miss hearing her voice, for she never lost her Manchester accent. When he was very young, my son loved to tell people, "My Nana has a British accident." I only kept a few of her knick-knacks—two china cups with painted historical knights, a small plate from Scotland, three thimbles, a Union Jack pillow, and my favorite, an old wall hanging of all the kings and queens of England.

Best of all, giving Mum unconditional love at the end of her life helped me put away all the bitterness of disappointment and at last, to find peace.

Katy Huth Jones has been a published author since 1992, but her writing journey has taken her in many unexpected directions, and her life journey in Christ has been one Providential step after another. She and her husband live in Fort Worth, Texas.

Cynthia Brackett-Vincent

The Return of Suzy Sunshine

My first real job at sixteen was as a laundry aide in a nursing home. I can truly say that job was awful. The smell. The heaping mounds of dirty bed sheets long before adult diapers were widely in use. The only time it was fun was when I took my cart full of clean laundry and delivered fresh bedding to patients' rooms. Blankets, sheets, pillowcases, towels, facecloths, all sanitized, smelling of bleach and laundry soap, now bright white. The patients were so happy to see me.

Then I moved up in the world—literally from the basement laundry room to the first floor—where I now had a cart full of cleaning supplies. Housekeeping. Certainly better than filthy laundry. I remember the routine. Toilets, sinks, then bathroom floors. Dust furniture, dry mop, then wet mop floors in patient rooms. In and out. I left everything sparkling clean. When I'd first gone to work my father admonished me, "If you get paid for an hour's work and you only do forty-five minutes of work, you are stealing." I never stole. I took his work ethics seriously. Fifteen-minute coffee breaks. Half-hour lunch breaks. My sister worked as a kitchen aide (a glorified title for a dishwasher) and if we were on shift at the same time during weekends, we'd sneak away together to the basement TV room for our lunch breaks where we would catch Scooby Doo's antics on the small screen. We weren't allowed "Scooby Doo" at home because the show involved the supernatural— (You can guess by now that my father was very strict and this was because he was a Jehovah's Witness, and he was raising us to be the same).

One elderly woman named Eunice loved me. One day she asked me to brush her hair. I'd finished my cleaning and said I would. Her hair was long, straight strands of gray. I felt her bony shoulders as my left hand rested on her back and I lifted the brush with my right. It took me about fifteen minutes to brush it all. She was so happy. Her hair was now like silk. I helped her put it up in a bun.

"Suzy?" she asked.

"Cindy. Not Suzy," I reminded her.

“Oh, I think you’re a Suzy because you are like sunshine. See? Suzy Sunshine. I’m going to call you that from now on.”

I wanted to correct her again. Cindy, not Suzy (never mind Cynthia.) And so I became Suzy Sunshine. The moniker quickly spread throughout the nursing home. That was it. I was Suzy Sunshine. I took on this persona in everything I thought and said and did. No sad thoughts. Just sunshine. I adored every patient. Cherished every stolen moment with them when I cleaned their rooms. Took extra time to get them crackers or Jell-O from the nurses’ kitchen if I noticed that they weren’t eating their meals.

And then life happened. Ill-suited marriage at seventeen. A terrible miscarriage at five and a half months gestation. Divorce just shy of ten-year anniversary. Living on wine and Lean Cuisine. Aging, handicapped parents. Suzy Sunshine retreated into a dark corner. I forgot about her.

Fast-forward to the ‘90s. A new and happy marriage. Three sons turning into adult men—good men. Parents needing more help than ever. Their situation tenuous. Mother suffering from as-yet undiagnosed seizures along with her Type I diabetes. Father growing weaker from post-polio syndrome.

We (my sister and I) got my mother in touch with the local council on aging who quickly set her up with a home health aide from Catholic Charities. Surprisingly, it was a man that was older than my parents, into his eighties (and who was the minister at the nearby Bethel African Methodist Episcopal church) who came twice a week to bathe my father. The council on aging also set my parents up with Meals on Wheels. Meals on Wheels. A lifesaver for my father who now needed oxygen several times a day. A lifesaver for my mother who smoked cigarettes in the kitchen right beside my father’s oxygen tank.

Meals on Wheels. Sunshine.

Fast-forward to 2016 when I was literally on top of the world—a cruise to Alaska for our twenty-fifth anniversary. We helicoptered onto a glacier. From Skagway, we boarded the White Pass & Yukon Route Railway where I discovered from a sign along the way that a distant Brackett relative of mine had engineered and built a toll road for the gold-rushers. I’d also just celebrated twenty-seven years of sobriety (after realizing at age thirty that alcohol and I didn’t mix). And, we’d just had our marriage blessed in the Catholic Church (into which I’d recently been baptized after being introduced first, to Thomas Merton’s poetry, and

then after reading his *Seven Storey Mountain*). I'd just been awarded a prestigious residency in poetry to begin in two weeks. Top of the world.

In Boston we disembarked from the Norwegian Dawn and were spending a few days with family before we planned to head back to Maine. Then, my whole life crashes. My sister, my only sibling, my other half (who'd been suffering for months from acute neuralgia) has ended her life by suicide because the pain was just unbearable. We go through the motions in shock. We are welcomed into my sister's family (who are supposed to be shunning me because I am no longer a Jehovah's Witness). Then they turn their backs again and shun me anew. Grieving turns into deep depression. I decide to attend the residency anyway. Two days in, I pick up a glass of wine. My drinking snowballed from there. I stayed in bed for days, weeks. I just wanted to be with my sister Kathy. Drinking begets depression. Depression begets drinking. A hamster's wheel that keeps going round and round. I have suicidal thoughts of my own. Just to be with her. I attempt it once, fail. I attempt sobriety again at least a half-dozen times. In 2019, I finally climb out of bed for good and embrace a newly-sober life, grateful that God is still there even when I can't see His work on my behalf.

Newly grateful for life itself. For staying alive. For even knowing Kathy, being on earth at the same time as Kathy. Active. Back into hiking again. Back into cross-stitching again. Fully back into writing again. But something is missing.

That's it. Giving back is missing. Bringing sunshine into the lives of elderly people is missing. At my age, now sixty-four, and with work demands, I can't go back to laundry or housekeeping in a nursing home. Maybe I could go and read to nursing home patients, I think. No, because of COVID. Giving back...and then the thought of Meals on Wheels hits me. I could do that. I could honor my parents by doing that. I could give one day a week.

After spending three weeks (one day a week) helping sort, pack, and bag a total of about 2,000 meals in the local Meals on Wheels office, I am amazed by the amount of work that goes into getting meals to approximately 100 clients in three counties. I'm so glad I got to do that work because I got to see the behind-the-scenes muscle that ultimately pays off in handing actual meals to appreciative seniors. To the clients, the face that hands those meals over is the hero. But the real heroes cook, pack, sort, schedule, and bag those meals. I will be just the smiling face.

And Suzy Sunshine returns as my supervisor introduces me as Cindy. I'd signed up and introduced myself as Cynthia, but as is often the case, Cynthia becomes Cindy without the invitation to shorten those three syllables. I'm not okay with "Cindy" in my work or writing life, nor with people I've met after approximately 1995, at which point I threw aside my father's nickname for me (actually "Cindy Windy," but that's for another essay) for the more distinguished "Cynthia." But at Meals on Wheels, I am okay with it. Because Cindy is Suzy.

Suzy Sunshine who, on her very first route, hands over a bag of five meals to a tall, gray-haired, very grateful man whose blue eyes sparkle in the cold February sunshine (sunshine!) as he grasps the package. I smile to myself. People are much happier to answer the door to something they need and want rather than to the arm-twisting and false hope we offered when knocking on their doors as Jehovah's Witnesses.

Since the nursing home jobs, I have been battered and bruised, and have become more realistic. Not everything is sunshine. But battered, bruised people can recover. And give back. It is only in giving back that our original sunshine returns. I like to think that Eunice is looking down, her silken hair now angel-wings.

Cynthia Brackett-Vincent is the lead editor and publisher at Encircle Publications (fiction and poetry), and published *the Aurorean* poetry journal (1995–2015). A Pushcart Prize nominee in poetry, her co-edited book, *Women on Poetry: Writing, Revising, Publishing and Teaching*, was named "One of 100 Best Books for Writers" by *Poets & Writers* magazine.

Leemour Pelli

Journey I and II

oil on canvas, 2021

14" x 11" each canvas (diptych)



Image courtesy of the artist.

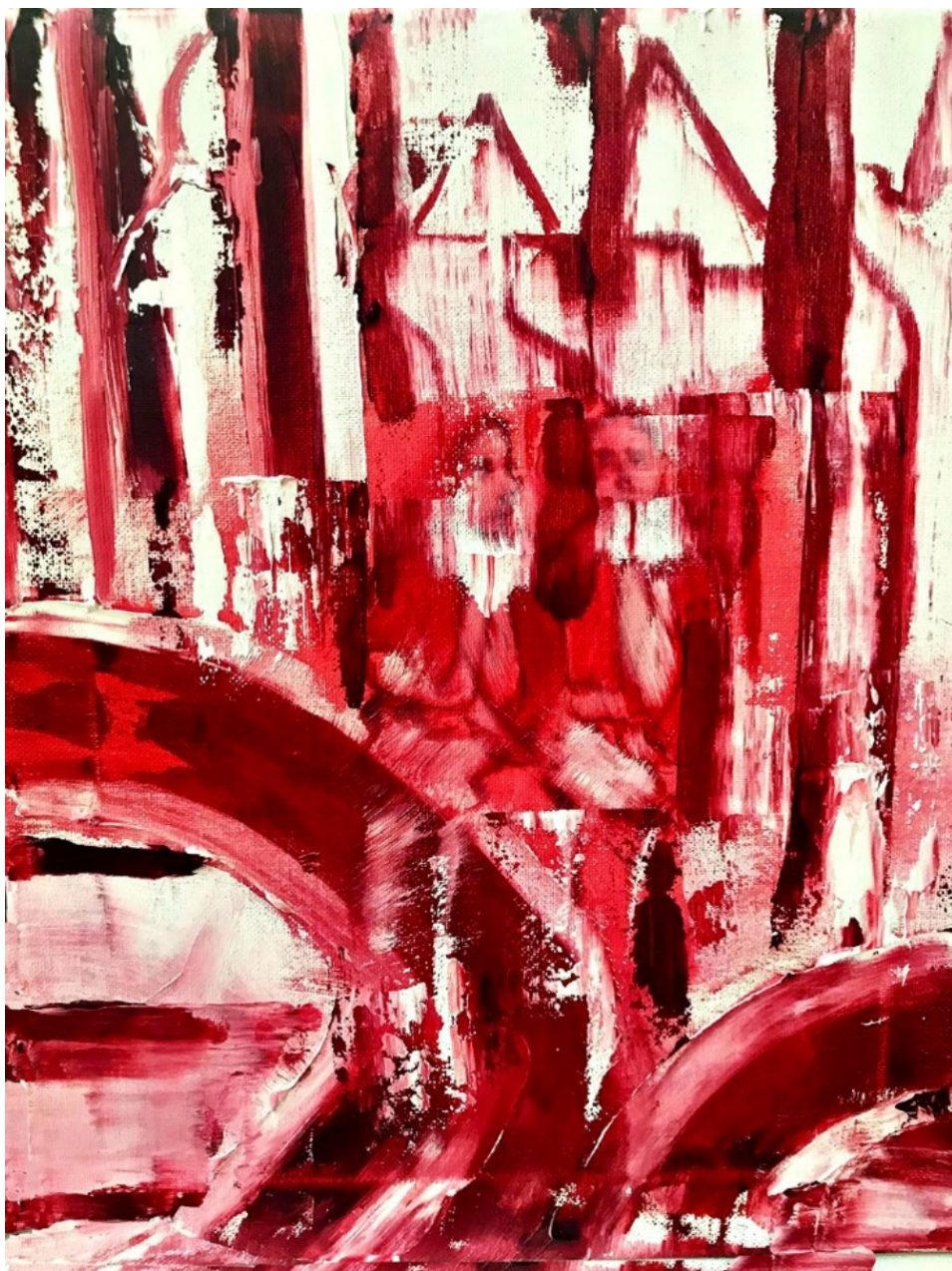


Image courtesy of the artist.

Artist Statement

In my work I focus on human inter-relationships and states of being. I use poetic, anatomical, and medical imagery as an extension of the figure/body to convey human experiences. By incorporating the latter elements into the work, the paintings often become like X-rays of life, or X-rays of figures or certain situations. This appears in the form of multiple or single figures in heightened states of emotion, states of solitude, creativity, or love and connection. The figures are often merging into one another, and being affected by one another. At times the figures appear with enlarged and out of control hearts, overlapping lungs, and other anatomical organs as an expression of one's inner realities and dramas. The depths of the human heart and soul are explored within personal and universal struggles and realities. The works are conceived in layers of paint that build up and at the same time disintegrate as an expression of the ambiguous, fragile, and temporal nature of humankind.

Leemour Pelli is an artist who lives and works in New York City. She is a graduate of the School of Visual Arts (B.F.A., painting), and Hunter College (M.A. in Art History). In 2008, the artist had her first solo exhibition at the Daneyal Mahmood Gallery in New York. Her other recent solo exhibitions include two at the Annina Nosei Gallery in New York in 2004 and 2005. The artist also had a solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of the University of Central Florida in Orlando in 2003. The University published a catalogue, and produced a mini-documentary about the artist and her work.

Pelli's recent exhibitions include the Robert Fontaine Gallery in Miami, Kinz Tillou and Feigen Gallery, the Whitney Museum the American Art at Champion, Connecticut, PS1 Institute of Contemporary Art, Long Island City, Spaces Contemporary Art Center in Ohio, and the Artcore Gallery in Toronto. Her work has been reviewed in various publications including *ArtForum* (2008), *Art News*, *The New York Times*, *New York Arts Magazine*, *Tema Celeste*, and *The Globe and Mail*.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Cecilia Martinez

Watering Flowers

Image courtesy of the artist.

Artist Statement

My journey to becoming a visual artist began quite unexpectedly. My father, suffered a severe head injury that left him unable to speak, walk, stand, and even breathe on his own. His injury was so severe that he was admitted into the hospital long-term. Three months later, my father succumbed to his injuries. He passed away with me by his side, holding his hand, and it is a moment in time I would never forget.

After his death, I searched for an outlet to alleviate the feelings I had because of this experience. So I turned to the visual arts as a therapeutic outlet. My father was a visual artist himself, and I thought there would be no better way to be closer to him.

When I first started my artistic endeavors, I created spiritual art. Since then, my style has evolved dramatically as I have become more comfortable with my skills and experimenting with different artistic techniques. I currently work on pop art, collages, and more, yet still focus on the primary reason of why I started this journey in the first place—for the love of my father.

Cecilia Martinez is an award-winning self-taught artist from Jersey City, NJ, USA. She has learned how to manipulate different mediums through patience and practice, trial and error. In the five years she's been in the art scene, Cecilia has already had her work exhibited in more than 80 shows in venues throughout the country, including the National Association of Women Artists Gallery in New York City and the Augusta Savage Gallery at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Additionally, her work has been featured in a segment on Al Jazeera TV, which reaches more than 30 million viewers worldwide. Cecilia's artwork is also regularly published in art magazines and journals in the United States, United Kingdom and Europe.

ART

Ena Gilih

Corpus Anima

oil on canvas, 2019
180 x 170 cm



Image courtesy of the artist.

Artist Description

The name of my painting is *Corpus Anima*. The word “corpus” is a Latin word that literally means body, matter of any kind, while the Latin word “anima” or “animus” means soul, life or mind. Starting from my own body, I consider it as a certain boundary of subjectivity and as a certain intersection, connecting the biological and sociological, social and political fields. Body and soul make up a living being. The term *corpus* in my work means a subjective physical and material state, what is visible and tangible to everyone; corpus is a biological content that outlines the space of my identity. *Anima* signifies my identity, soul and mind, the spirit of my existence. People feel, learn, and think through the soul; the soul does not feel joy, pain, fear or anger because it is not able to “live” and experience independently of the body. Likewise, this image would not “live” further if there were no people watching, interpreting and studying it, it would be just another object without meaning and sense. Art is another form of communication, especially the communication of the invisible, the inner. The impulse to create is one of the specific signs of humanity. A painted eye is an “eye” by name only, just as a dead man is, a “man” by name only; the soul is what makes the difference between a living organism and a dead body. Therefore, man is the soul of the body of this painting because he keeps it alive. This work is my interpretation of the “Corpus Anima,” my soul and body.

Ena Gilih, 1993. Zagreb. In 2016, Ena completed the undergraduate study of fine arts at the Academy of Arts in Osijek (today the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek) and earned a bachelor's degree in fine arts, univ.bacc.art. In 2016, she was on a student exchange at the Akademia Sztuk Pięknych in Gdańsk, module: Painting. During her studies, she participated in various art projects. In 2019, she completed the University graduate study 'Art Culture', module Painting at the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek. The diploma thesis entitled *Corpus Anima* was realized under the mentorship of assoc. dr. art. Ines Matijević Cakić (Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek) and prof. dr. art. Piotr Józefowicz (Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk). She has participated in numerous group exhibitions in Croatia and abroad. In 2021, she became a member of HDLU Osijek. She lives and works in Osijek.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Jeremiah Gilbert

San Salvador

Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

San Juan



Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

Rome



Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

Jeremiah Gilbert is an award-winning photographer and travel writer based out of Southern California. His photography has been published internationally and has been exhibited worldwide. He is the author of the collections *Can't Get Here from There: Fifty Tales of Travel* and *From Tibet to Egypt: Early Travels After a Late Start*.

Irina Novikova

Angel with a sphere

ink on paper, 2021

21 x 15 cm



Image courtesy of the artist.

Irina Novikova: Drawing began to interest me from an early age, the first subjects for me were fantastic birds and animals. By my first education I am an art critic (State Academy of Slavic Cultures), by my second I am a graphic designer (MGTA).

The main techniques that I use are watercolor, ink, gouache, acrylic. I love experimenting and mixing different materials. I draw a lot on environmental topics. The first big series that I drew is the “Red Book” dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds.

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/irinanov4155/?hl=ru>
<https://www.instagram.com/irina1187novikova/>

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

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