

# Heart of Flesh

*Literary Journal*



**Issue Eight | November 2022**

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**VERONICA MCDONALD, EDITOR**

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Scripture quotations have been taken from the BSB, ESV, NIV, NKJV, and TLV.

Cover Art: *Dancer* by Carl Scharwath.

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*Daniel in the Lion's Den* by Veronica McDonald, 2021. Oil pastel on paper.

## NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

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“The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him.”

—Psalm 28:7 (NIV)

Where do you draw strength? If I’m being honest, many times I think strength comes from myself—if I’m just tough enough and brave enough, then I can do all things. The Lord loves to remind me that this is so far from truth. In fact the more I try to pull up my bootstraps and take on the world alone, the more the Lord humbles me. If the everyday struggles of raising kids doesn’t remind me to rely on His strength, all He has to do is cause me to pause and remember who I was when He saved me—a short-tempered nihilist, riddled with anxiety, living with the constant nagging thought, “there is no hope,” playing through my mind day and night, like my own personal theme song. Who saved that girl and pulled her out of the dark hole she couldn’t get out of on her own? Oh yeah...right. That wasn’t me. That was you, Jesus.

There is some grief I hold in my heart from those days. Not particularly for myself, but for anyone now who is like the “old me.” Life doesn’t suddenly become perfect when you start following Jesus, but, *man*, does hope make a difference.

Each piece in Issue Eight contains traces of sorrow—something grieved, lost, misunderstood, or a meditation of our own fallen nature. But we are not left there to wallow. There is hope in these pages. There are small moments of beauty and peace carefully woven into each troubling scene. You may suffer a little with each heartache presented here, but you may also subtly learn that no one suffers alone. Our God knows pain and sacrifice. He is a loving parent who laments with his confused and hurting children. And like a good parent, He knows how to give good gifts—lasting, wonderful gifts that the world cannot give (Mt 7:11, Lk 11:13). Hope is one of those gifts, and it is always waiting for us to grab onto when we need it. If we open our eyes and listen carefully, we can witness innumerable reminders of hope surrounding us like a galaxy of our own personal stars burning small, bright, and piercing the night—all coordinated by the One who loves us. Once you come to realize these truths, it’s hard not to “rejoice

always” as Paul says (1 Thess 5:16). It’s hard not to love God and each other. I hope the work in this issue remind you of this reality. Darkness is the warning, but never the victor.

It’s tempting to turn these editor-notes into gush-sessions about how blessed I am and how good God is. Though I typically try not to bore you with my personal feelings of gratitude, I may just have to do that this time:

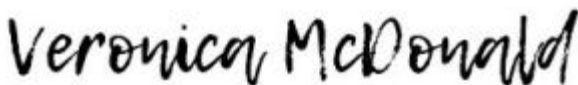
Thank you to Katie Yee, Heart of Flesh’s volunteer and reader (and proofreader) for this issue. Her thoroughness, sound judgment, and discernment made this round of submissions breeze by, and I thank her for her willingness to commit herself to the task. She is a true blessing.

Thank you to my sweet husband, who talks me off the ledge every issue, gives me time to work, and reminds me to have faith.

Thank you to those who submitted and our contributors—poets, writers, artists, and photographers from all walks of life. Each submission period I am overwhelmed by the support and kindness of those who share their talents and gifts.

Thank you to Jesus Christ, my Savior and Redeemer. The only One able to give true hope. This issue is for His glory and for the good of His kingdom.

And thank *you*, for reading Issue Eight. *Heart of Flesh* is incredibly blessed by your interest, and so am I.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Veronica McDonald". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letter of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Editor and Founder

POETRY

---

*Emma McCoy*

---

## FRUIT TREES FOR THE FEARFUL

*The third of Joel's sonnets*

He's the coolest therapist I've had yet.  
Shoots straight, no bullshit, no hollow statements  
like "Just pray through it" or "You know, I bet  
God has a good plan for this." I *hate* this.  
Joel sits us outside today, on the grass  
wordless. He says he learned quiet from Job,  
a grieving man. "So you won't go to class."  
Joel-man never asks questions. "There's no hope,"  
I reply. More quiet. The grieving kind.  
"One day," he says, "God will give you the years  
the sadness has eaten, both fruit and rind.  
You won't know what to do with all the pears  
and plums, and it'll be better than before."  
Not placating, no, but something much more.

---

**Emma McCoy** is a poet and essayist with love for the old stories. She is the assistant editor of *Whale Road Review*, co-editor of *Driftwood*, and poetry reader for the *Minison Project*. She is the author of *In Case I Live Forever* (2022), and she has poems published in places like *Flat Ink*, *Paddler Press*, and *Jupiter Review*. Catch her on Twitter: @poetrybyemma.

POETRY

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*Larry Pike*

---

## AIR PRESSURE

*—for Mickey*

This afternoon I sat close  
to a friend, in his living room,  
next to his hospital bed.  
He's pleasant company, a kind man,  
for years a coworker, vigorous until  
a few months ago. Trouble started

with mild back pain, spread to a jolt  
down a leg, advanced to a sluggish limp.  
Now he can no longer carry groceries in  
for his wife or hug his granddaughters,  
pull a blanket over his cold legs,  
wave to greet a visitor, can't

breathe without regulated rhythm  
of mechanical puffs. Luck? What  
was Lou Gehrig thinking?  
We used to joke together after  
exercise class at the Y. Now  
my friend says he's told

his minister what he wants  
said at his funeral. Until  
a hospital caseworker's arrival  
interrupted us, we were old  
men bullshitting, grousing about  
what we used to consider problems

at work, replaying great ballgames  
from seasons past, making cracks  
about guys we know, forced laughter  
punching at all that hung between

us, like weary fighters still  
pounding heavy bags. Now

I tell him, I tell him how  
wrong I think this is,  
how I pray his journey goes  
easier than he expects. I don't  
say how frightened I feel.  
He holds my eye. Though I ache

to look away, I hold his.  
He says, *I appreciate you*  
*saying that*, and draws another  
shallow artificial breath as he pictures  
himself standing again, shaking  
my hand, walking me to his door.

---

**Larry Pike** lives with his wife, Carol, in Glasgow, Kentucky. His writing has been published in a variety of publications, and he was a 2021 Best of the Net nominee. Finishing Line Press published his debut poetry collection, *Even in the Slums of Providence*, in October 2021.

POETRY

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*Terry Savoie*

---

## BENEATH A HEAVENLY BLUE MANTILLA

In the pew closest to the confessional, a mother  
rhythmically rocks side to side as she cradles her infant,  
the child in her arms seemingly lifeless as a sack of potatoes.  
Softly, she lullabies, mumbling some incompressible patois,  
the child's head held close, snuggling up in the crook of her arm  
throughout the early 6 o'clock Mass, the woman's  
heavenly blue mantilla shielding her baby's head & face.  
Following the final blessing, our thin, German-speaking nun,  
the convent & rectory's sole cook, shuffles down the side aisle,  
her rosary beads & crucifix rattling along in accompanying  
cadence with each measured step the nun takes. Seems  
sister's come to see for herself just how Baby might be faring  
on this fine May morning the Lord has given in the Virgin's special month.  
At four, I hold tightly to my mother's hand as we make our way  
to dip our fingers in holy water near the vestibule of the church  
while I do my four-year-old best version of what a good boy is  
expected to do, keeping both eyes fixed dead ahead so as not to see  
the fuss Sister's cooing makes in that very last pew.  
Yes, I knew even then those bad boys don't have the good sense not to stare.  
Today, seventy years distant, I pray again for that muddled  
woman who only had an old, arthritic nun there to comfort her,  
& I pray for that good nun who gently

stroked Baby's plastic head, practicing so very well  
her Master's command to love everyone, & I pray for that baby-  
doll fast asleep now, somewhere, cradled in the crook of Mamma's  
arm. Last of all, here's another silent prayer for that boy  
who was just beginning to unravel this world's confusions  
around what's Right & what's Wrong.

---

More than four hundred of **Terry Savoie's** poems have been published in the past four decades, including ones in *APR*, *Ploughshares*, *ACM*, *The Sonora Review*, *North American Review*, *Commonweal*, *American Journal of Poetry*, and *The Iowa Review*, as well as recent issues of *Cortland Review*, *America*, *Chiron Review*, and *Tar River Poetry*, among others.



POETRY

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*K.L. Johnston*

---

## PRAYERS OF THE RIGHTEOUS

On the Sunday after our first child's birth,  
you went to the country church up the mountain,  
wowing the tiny congregation  
with your classically trained alleluias.

They begged you to return, not knowing  
they would never see you again,  
that your bon homie was just a part  
of the upward spiral before you crashed.  
They promised to pray for you and your new family.

I wondered when you died  
if those good people kept praying  
for that odd stranger with the voice of an angel,  
who came among them and took away a fleeting hope,  
who never returned because that's the way  
you met the world, searching out praise  
and doling out disappointments.

Over the years, was it the prayers  
of those simple righteous folks  
that kept our children safe  
from your version of nurture,  
from the nature of your disease?

When you slipped away from their memories  
and their last murmuring prayers failed,  
when your glorious voice was forgotten in sorrow,  
is that when you could let go,  
and we all came to know peace?

## SECOND CALL

The first calling was  
to tend a garden.  
Next is the call to  
say yes, stretch out a  
hand or open our  
eyes, be delivered  
from our demons and  
above all things to  
be still and listen.

The second call is  
to set aside the  
tyranny of the  
urgent and come down  
from our tree, or pick  
up our bed and walk,  
to listen, listen,  
*listen* when we are  
told “go out from here  
into those lonely  
and wild places,” where  
you will be met.

---

**K.L. Johnston**’s most recent poetry is found in literary magazines including *Wild Roof Journal*, *Humana Obscura* and *Tiny Seed Journal*. She is also a contributor to the anthologies *Botany of Gaia* and *South Carolina Bards 2022*. You can find more of her work on her Facebook page, “A Written World.”

POETRY

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*Jennifer Stewart*

---

## SALVAGE

crouched at the end  
of the flower bed  
on hands and knees  
open-mouthed garbage bag black at my side  
I pick away winter's detritus:  
dun leaves, their cell structure in lacy desiccation, and spikes of brittle canes spent  
remains among the emergent, just  
purpling salvia  
uncover a sphinx moth, a sleeping beauty flushed  
wings flung wide and blushed pink  
in role reversal I the colossus  
yet reverent will ask it my riddles

summer after summer  
my grandma knelt in her flower beds  
confessing to toads, all named  
a succession of saintly Elmos  
received in belly-rubbing communion  
fiery guidance

in the limited space  
of a one-story rented duplex bordered  
site of transplanting and removal  
my older sister and I clear away into black lawn & leaf bags detritus  
startling: our grandmother's  
false teeth in unexpected places  
under a modest layer of paper towel;  
the poignant horror of dry skin shed in snowy drifts  
flaked from legs and feet at the bottom of her bedsheets;  
dirty jokes, racy riddles on scraps of paper in her handwriting  
mixed in with recipes and home remedies and bits of wisdom proverbial;  
Jack Daniel's in the closet by the front door demurely  
stashed behind a white plastic rack of shoes  
and amid all this litter  
the two of us laugh, sweaty  
lug load after load to dumpsters

order a pizza and sit on carpet in the almost empty living room  
to eat it, legs splayed and ruddy under the ceiling fan

if I hold fast to the only needful thing  
all through the night  
refuse to let go  
will I get answers  
whispered in my ear  
drawn into the dance so close, so tight  
my own trickster tactics used against me  
a new name and blessed release  
sent on my way  
limping

## THE 13<sup>TH</sup> STATION

Young man loading groceries into my trunk  
adjusts his mask,  
tells me he's anxious, so anxious  
sometimes he wants to end his life.

*Follow your heart...*  
What if it leads here?

In this time of social distancing  
how did we two go from chatting  
of spicy foods and the Scoville scale  
to confessions of despair  
spilling his guts like a sea cucumber  
to me, a stranger?

*You can be anything...*  
This child has floundered, choked  
on half-truths, taken in for a generation.

Eye-to-eye in this parking lot wilderness  
once ocean, dried to desert, asphalt gagged  
I place my small offering before him.

Unseen connections  
between image bearers

like the roots of an aspen grove:  
make a subterranean foray over there  
and we're all going to feel it.  
The less we engage,  
the less we have of You.

Lightning bolt sets York Minster's roof on fire  
liquid lead sobs from the sky  
sears the wooden Pietà  
Christ-scarred Mary  
yet the sculpted upward gestures  
of their arms beckon  
resurrection.

---

**Jennifer Stewart** ran wild across acres with imaginative sisters, Doberman Pinschers, Rhode Island Red chickens, Quarter Horses, Black Angus cattle, and occasionally, Bigfoot; now, she runs somewhat respectably through her suburban neighborhood. A teacher, poet, wife, and mother, she's finding her little way through middle life. She reviews movies [here](#).

POETRY

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*Cameron Brooks*

---

## CAMP JUDSON

Then they worshiped in rapt adoration,  
    encircling a roaring blaze ten feet tall  
and wide, and the obsidian sky  
    was sprent with sparks soaring hot  
with a hundred praises, heavenward,  
    beyond the tops of the tallest pines.

Seething I slashed every last chord  
    on my acoustic guitar like a madman  
hacking logs, but their sound was drowned  
    in the swell of voices, mellifluous voices.  
And the faces lining the circle's rim  
    were lit and lifted heavenward also,  
    and several glistened wet with tears.

## MAN UNDER AUTHORITY

*When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him. —Matthew 8:5*

Such signal devotion  
to this suffering servant

(and doubtless one of many)  
to go out, as we say, on a limb

like that — that act  
ingredient of all *bona fide*

belief, to hope without  
presumption that it will be

done as one has believed.  
*But say the word*, he said,

*and it will be so.* So, marveling,  
Christ said to him: *Go*

---

**Cameron Brooks** is an MFA candidate at Seattle Pacific University. His poems have appeared or will soon appear in *Poetry East*, *Third Wednesday*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Red Ogre Review*, *Pasque Petals*, *Ad Fontes Journal*, and elsewhere. Cameron lives in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Check out his [website](#) to learn more.

POETRY

---

*D. Walsh Gilbert*

---

MARY GETS PLUCKY & BOLD IN ASSISTED  
LIVING

Once, Mary demanded 'nice' potatoes: firm,  
     unscarred, clean of dirt. Now, she's

nourished by what's on her plate  
     whether mashed or baked.

She tried lemon-pepper cod  
     and rice-stuffed cabbage for the first time,

and grilled mahi mahi  
     which she doesn't know is dolphin.

And her tablemates tell her their stories.

\*

Each summer, the sword-leaves of day—  
     lilies find their way

past the granite boulder immovable  
     beside them. I could

cut and arrange the yellow blossoms,  
     but I can't save them overnight.

They live for the day.

\*

When I phone her room after breakfast,  
     she may choose to answer, or she may not—



bedmaking, sweater-folding, showers  
take precedence.

She has greeting cards to stack,  
and an oil painting to finish for the children.

I'll wait for her to dial back,  
settled in her red chair, more ready

to speak: *I'm fine. No need to worry.*

## MARY FACES FIREBRAND AND EMBER

We build the fire with year-old hardwood  
dried against the side of the house out of the rain  
and ready now to crisscross over sap-filled  
starters in our brass fire bowl. We've asked Mary

to join us for toasted marshmallows & cider  
under a canopy of faraway stars. Flames  
engulf the logs, though some resist—completely whole—  
and crumble gradually, soon ravished in ash & smoke  
defying gravity and rising. Mary finds rapture

in the parts unburned: a branch crooked like a knee,  
the heel of a green stick, some long-lost staples  
left after posting a 'No Trespassing' sign:  
*They're glowing red like devil-demon teeth.*

We make plans for more appointments  
to doctors she's afraid to visit—the next  
is the one who scrapes an open wound on her foot  
while skin passionately bleeds so to heal. Then, it'll be  
the dermatologist who'll scan her naked body  
for gall and blister. But, for tonight, she is

the hungry one, her marshmallow blackened & crisp.  
Its outside sloughs from its soft, sweet center  
as it suspends from an oak twig. Mary still  
has an appetite for the charcoaled imperfection—

an instinct to continue. Once full, she drops  
the stick into the fire and waits for it to disappear.

## MARY SURRENDERS

There were two of them—lamps big as boulders—  
meant to cast light, but covered in shades  
played like beach umbrellas and made of skin—  
goat skin, lamb, something unidentified  
and stretched—which kept the light  
focused downward. Mary had lugged them fresh  
from the cooled kiln of a potter. Glaze-hardened drips  
resembled stone. Bedrock of Greenwich Village  
brought home. There were two of them. Then,  
one cracked, and it couldn't be touched  
until cemented by glue, and then only gently.

*Would you allow a change? Give up on it  
as a lamp? Make it into a planter holding  
purple bougainvillea—thorned paper-flower  
with petals thin as lampshade skin?*

And Mary concedes this could be a solution—  
what had been could be something new—housing beauty,  
daylight reaching its core: what had only been dark  
could become the definition of reclamation.  
No longer left in somebody's garage. Not discarded.

---

**D. Walsh Gilbert** is the author of *Ransom*, *Once the Earth had Two Moons*, and *imagine the small bones*. Currently, she's preparing a collection about her aunt, Mary, who recently moved into an assisted-living home. She serves on the board of the non-profit, Riverwood Poetry Series, and as co-editor of *Connecticut River Review*.

POETRY

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*Catherine A. Coundjeris*

---

## ASKING FOR SIGNS

Stymied by disease and despair  
I washed the dishes in the little kitchen.  
I thought how nothing would ever be good again  
and I grew gloomier by the minute  
weighed down with depressed confusions.

Then like a drowning victim gulps air,  
spluttering on water and fearful  
I said a prayer half-heartedly:  
Show me a sign it will get better.  
I scrubbed and washed the dishes.

I didn't think I would get an answer.  
My belief was a ragged flag  
discarded and torn and of no use.  
I felt of no use as well  
as I kept washing the dishes.

A tiny hummingbird came,  
hovering over the red geraniums  
in mother's white window box  
outside the window. I scarcely  
noticed as I washed and washed.

But the hummingbird alighted  
at each flowering sepal  
persistent, perfect, passionate,  
vibrating from shoot to shoot,  
engaging my eyes and attention.

Wonderment overwhelmed me.  
I had always wanted to see a  
hummingbird up close and now

it was happening in front of me  
for such a long duration.

And then it was gone from view.  
And I returned to washing,  
washing dishes and forks and knives.  
Realizing only later what  
the tiny bird had done for me.

God willing, I will remember.

---

**Catherine's** poetry is published in literary magazines, including *Paper Dragons*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Jalmurra*, *Cholla Needles*, *Bewildering Stories*, *The Raven Review*, *Open Door Magazine*, *Stone Hill Journal*, *Honeyguide*, *Zephyr Review*, *Phare*, *Blue Bird Word*, *Life and Legends*, and *Jonah Magazine*. She also has stories published in *Proem*, *Quail Bell*, and *KeepThings* on Instagram. She has recently published an essay, "Éowyn as Light Bearer," in an anthology from Luna Press called *Not the Fellowship Dragon's Welcome*. Catherine is passionate about adult literacy and ESL learning.

POETRY

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*Chris Carstens*

---

## REAL PRESENCE

Sometimes I wish that Mass had better special effects.

When we were kids and Father lifted up the Host,  
a pair of kneeling altar boys off to the side,  
or hidden somewhere, back behind a screen,  
would shake their jingling chapel bells  
as if to say, "Wake up! It's happening right now  
and you don't want to miss it.  
Jesus is in the building."

One time, over midnight cards in college,  
a friend admitted shyly that he'd never seen the crouching altar boys  
and so he thought for years that at the point of Consecration  
bread just rang itself.

I'd like that.

These days I go to Mass about two dozen times a month,  
and every time I tell myself, today I'll pay attention,  
this time I'll keep my focus at the point of Consecration,  
and yet, at least three days in five,  
somewhere between *Lift Up Your Hearts* and  
*Our Father, Who Art in Heaven*,  
instead of moving with the Eucharistic prayers,  
my thoughts have floated off to grocery lists,  
or that time forty years ago when I forgot to call my Dad on Father's Day,  
And did I ever tell him I was sorry?  
When I come back we're shaking hands around the pew and wishing one another Peace.  
I've missed it once again.

Now, if I ran the Universe, when it was time for Consecration,  
("The Little Bang," I think we ought to call it),  
there'd be a flash of light,  
perhaps a puff of frankincense,  
emerging out of nowhere just above the altar,

or maybe, only maybe,  
 a Tesla bolt of crackling laboratory lightning  
 sizzling down from Crucifix to Chalice,  
 just like in the Bride of Frankenstein.

OK, that last might be a little much, but  
 what I'm looking for is some acknowledgement from nature  
 that the ordinary laws of time and space  
 have just been set aside.

God has to feel it when it happens.  
 He most of all.  
 And when the Host is lifted up  
 that very spot becomes the Center of the Universe  
 because that's where God is looking.

Just think about it. Jesus felt the power flow  
 when that long-bleeding woman stretched her fingers to his cloak.  
 He turned to look and asked  
 "Who touched my clothes?"

How surely must He turn, acknowledging our plea  
 to come and transform bread and wine  
 into Himself,  
 and through them,  
 transform us.

That's why I go to Mass.  
 I want to be there in the room when transubstantiation happens.  
 I want to be alert when Jesus comes into the world.

Please ring those chapel bells, and ring them loud.  
 I need to be awake.

---

**Chris Carstens** is a retired psychologist, now living in Dallas, TX. He and his wife share nine grandchildren, scattered across the country. His current poetry grows out of scripture study and prayer.

POETRY

---

*Grace Claire Przywara*

---

## I OFTEN TRY TO SOFTEN JESUS

I often try to soften Jesus—  
he who claims he came to set the world

ablaze, set like flint, burning, burning,  
bearing a sword, a whip of chords,

spit and spite and sweating blood,  
wrenching demons and setting free

men in their graves, plucking eyes,  
gnashing teeth in torture, offering flesh

for feast. Withered figs and gathered vultures,  
coming judgment, outer darkness—

*woe to you, blind guides, blind fools!*

I often try to soften Jesus—

if I'm honest, I fear the father-son resemblance  
and the price of abundant life.

---

**Grace Claire Przywara** received an English degree from the University of South Carolina. Her poetry has appeared in *Ekstasis Magazine*, *Amethyst Review*, *Kosmeo Magazine*, and *Rise Up Review*, and has placed multiple years in contests hosted by human rights organization, Rehumanize International. Grace lives in South Carolina with her husband and two sons. She can be found at [graceclairepoetry.com](http://graceclairepoetry.com).

POETRY

---

*Ryan Apple*

---

## ON LEAVING JERUSALEM

it's not the fists of  
shadow men  
running through my mind

not the mix of  
blood and gravel  
on my tip of tongue

I don't revisit  
all the steps  
set in stone that day—

look I can't answer  
how he came  
by so much cash

I didn't ask  
about the wine  
sloshing on my wounds

or if the inn  
he put me in charged  
by day or hour—

but it's the feet of  
holy men  
stepping to the side

those elite who  
never traveled  
through Samaria

the narrowed eyes  
of passersby  
interrogating still



---

**Ryan Apple** lives in Lansing, Michigan, with his wife Darcie and their six children. His first chapbook, *Stars and Sparrows Alike*, was published in November 2020 through Finishing Line Press. Ryan's work has appeared in various journals, and nine of his poems were recently featured in the Poiema Poetry Series anthology, *In a Strange Land: Introducing Ten Kingdom Poets*. Read more at [www.ryanapple.net](http://www.ryanapple.net).

POETRY

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*Kath Higgins*

---

## A KINDNESS OF RAVENS

*The ravens will feed you*

—1 Kings 17:1-6

No rain, no dew.  
Could he *mean* this?

After foretelling,  
I run and hide.

Relief to reach  
steep ravine walls.  
Pray protect me  
from sun and pursuers.

As day's heat declines,  
by the still-trickling brook  
I select my stones,  
train my eye  
on black specks  
circling.  
Willing my targets closer,  
I steady my sling  
to fulfil his plan.

A raven swoops low—  
I miss the shot.  
A small aromatic loaf  
rolls at my feet.  
A bird dives down.  
A lump of wine-red meat  
tumbles out of its talons,  
quail-like desert delivery.  
Could he mean *this*?

---

**Kath Higgins** was born in UK, worked for many years in Central Africa and has now retired to South Africa. She has worked as linguist, anthropologist and teacher and has come late to writing poetry. This is her first submission to a journal!

POETRY

---

*Ryan Helvoigt*

---

## THE STONES AND THE BREAD

“Command these stones.”

The taunt reverbs  
within the hollow  
stomach grumbling  
for bread. The daily  
need felt and furrowing  
resolve for reliance.

The devil doesn’t know  
Jesus asked for stones, for  
“Which one of you, if his son  
asks for bread  
will give him a stone?”  
How much more the heavenly  
Father granted stones.

Maybe they reminded him  
Of the task. The hearts  
too cold for life—  
Ezekiel’s breathless bones  
dry for want of every word  
coming from God’s mouth—  
stones destined for flesh.

Those stones stayed stones  
and he—the flesh—became  
the bread broken,  
handed out to hollow  
sinners seeking fullness,  
filling all who receive the command,  
“Come, buy, and eat!”

---

**Ryan Helvoigt** is a poet living in Durango, CO with her husband and two children. She holds an MDiv in Missions from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Her work has appeared in *Fathom Magazine*.

POETRY

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*Steven Searcy*

---

## THE BREAD

The bread is  
always on the table,  
always fresh,  
always within reach.

But we pound our fists, petulant,  
demanding something different.  
We scowl and pout.

Or worse, we fold our hands and lie  
that we aren't hungry,  
that we don't want anything, smiling  
to silence the incessant gnawing in our guts.

## FOLLOWING VULTURES

I completed  
the loop down the hill and  
along the creek but

I could not find  
what all the black vultures  
are circling for.

And now I must  
consider why I am not so  
diligent to search

for the sick and  
dying things in some corner  
of my own chest.

## FLY

That's me—that panicked fly  
flailing against the bathroom window,  
helplessly zizzing in a frantic attempt  
to get back to where  
I belong.

You would be happy  
to help me get free—  
you would scoop me into your hand  
and fling me gently past all the screens and panes  
into the fresh, open air,

if only I would stop  
and let you catch me.

---

**Steven Searcy** lives with his wife and three sons in Atlanta, GA, where he earns a living working as an engineer in fiber optic telecommunications. His poetry has been published in *Ekstasis Magazine*, *Reformed Journal*, *Fathom Magazine*, and *The Clayjar Review*.

POETRY

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*Bob Hicks*

---

## IN THE DARK

In the dark  
my conscience stung,  
Reminded  
of a song I'd sung:  
Delivered, strengthened, sent  
to leap a wall,  
and a bow of bronze I bent;  
Overcame a troop single-handed,  
about the armies I'd once commanded.  
[Selah]  
I long for the field again,  
long to overcome the sin  
that keeps me here  
With Bathsheba

## THE EMBERFALL

The emberfall—  
 like resplendent lightning bugs;  
 slow-floating ornaments  
 to our merriment.  
 We dance,  
 we drink,  
 we stumble happily  
 in the dusky night.  
 Tiny white ashes  
 in our blood-red wine  
 cause no alarm;  
 we drink with abandon.  
 As the thunder resounds  
 our inebriated souls feel  
 the rumble.  
 In reverence  
 we look towards the mountain  
 with its power,  
 standing apprehensively silent.  
 The rumble subsides  
 the emberfall continue  
 and we dance  
 our drunken dance of indifference.  
 More wine,  
 more laughter,  
 more uninhibited whirling and twirling,  
 stumbling though we may.  
 The wine is strong  
 the Earth is moving  
 And then  
 burning

---

**Bob Hicks** is a former Adult Ministries Pastor, now 64. He's studied literature extensively and studied in Bible College and Seminary.



POETRY

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*Alena Casey*

---

## DUST

1.

*And the Lord God formed Adam out of dust...*

and you, my man, are as much a man as he, but  
when your lips meet mine  
there is no death or dust about it.  
Nothing was ever so unlike dust  
—unremarkable particles tossed on wind—  
nothing was ever so unlike dust  
warm, strong, gentle,  
alive

2.

*...and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.*

now, your breath on my face  
is that same breath.  
O my Adam,  
breathe your life into me  
before we remember that we are dust.

---

**Alena Casey** is a poet, writer, and mother of three currently living in Nebraska. Her poetry has been published with *The Road Not Taken*, *The Society of Classical Poets*, and *The Author's Journal of Inventive Literature*, among others. She sometimes blogs at [strivingafterink.wordpress.com](http://strivingafterink.wordpress.com).

POETRY

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*Charles Eggerth*

---

## REBEL HEARTS

My love, look at the falling leaves,  
the golden, lovely, falling leaves—  
soon it will be winter.  
Soon the gray, the cold, the nether.  
So like what we've done to our love—  
killed it as surely as the winter kills leaves.  
How will we explain to our children?  
A pox on our rebel hearts—  
a plague on their damned, reprobate lusting!  
You got yours—I got even.  
What did William and Emma get?  
A lifetime of pain. Was it worth it?

My love, look at the dying leaves,  
the spiraling, desiccated, dying leaves.  
See how the late November wind hurls them to the ground,  
see how the cold and bitter rain drives them  
to oblivion, to the grave.  
We are leaves on the wind, detritus before the gale;  
pursuing fated dreams,  
selfish, loathsome, fated dreams;  
our hearts clutching their idols  
like drowning sailors clinging to a broken mizzenmast.

Who will redeem our children from the curse we have left them?

## WILDERNESS

Here are the broken-up pieces of my soul;  
here is the guilt and the past; here is the long, long list  
    of things I might have been,  
eradicated; torn to shreds, rolled into a little ball,  
washed hard and tight by the rain and the snow,  
jammed deep into the pocket of my dirty jeans.  
And here, here is the map of my life,  
showing clearly the many irretrievable hard, hard left-hand turns  
into the wilderness of what I've been and who I now am.  
Do you think it might have been different?  
Do you think, even now, a prayer remains?

---

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

POETRY

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*Nellie deVries*

---

## WHAT'S THE NAME OF THIS PLACE?

If you go to a place all alone,  
     and the sun sets on your day  
         your day of trouble  
         your day of running away from your tent-home  
     running away from your brother's rage  
         from mother's conspiring  
         from father's disappointment  
 you take your own deceiving with you  
     —the grasping at the heel  
     grasping at what you want,  
         what you think you need  
         what you think should be yours.

If you go to that place—that random place—  
     take a rock and lay your head on it.  
 Not just any rock  
     the rock that spills out living water  
     the rock of refuge, a solid rock.  
 Rest your head on that rock in that place  
     and don't grasp after  
         but receive      a dream.

Dream of a staircase  
     starting down where you are  
         lying there alone  
             cushioned in your bed of misery  
     reaching up to heaven.

Dream of angels down by you  
     bright shining angels in the night  
     where the sun has set dark on your day.  
 Angels ascending the staircase and entering the portal to heaven.

Dream of more angels  
     leaving heaven

and descending the staircase  
back down to you  
messenger traffic between earth and heaven.

Dream of the Lord  
the Lord God of Truth—Jehovah El-Emeth  
shining pure, clear, true, does-not-need-the-sun glory light over you.

He speaks.

You can't move in your dream  
you can't hide behind some goat skin that smells of the fields  
you can't stir up a stew of deception  
you can't run to a far-off country  
no grasping at heels—those heels already bruised by fang marks—  
no help at this end of the staircase.

Lie there exposed  
as lifeless as a stone pillow in some random place  
and listen.

Listen to Him speak  
of your grandfather    your father    you    your children  
your descendants  
offspring as many as the dust of the earth  
—dust you were spitting out as you traveled through the heat yesterday,  
dust that still grinds between your teeth.

He speaks and promises.

The sun rises on your day in that random place  
that is random    no more.  
You wake up and know that you are still you  
but    the pillow of stone  
is a pillar of remembrance,  
the bed of misery has turned into the house of God  
and your fear  
stirred together in a pot with awe  
feeds your worship of the Lord.

You leave through the gate of that place a new person  
with a promise to return here, where you met the Lord  
this random rock-place  
that you've named.

## FEAR/REVERE

*From the west, men will fear the name of the Lord,  
and from the rising of the sun,  
they will revere his glory. —Isaiah 59:19a*

Sun setting over the lake  
in the west  
always the west  
turning trees and docks  
and swimmers  
to black silhouettes  
all eyes tuned  
to the sun, the sun  
blazing reds and oranges  
hot pink the underside of clouds  
like gilded edging  
the Lord  
the name of the Lord

After the darkness  
after the silence of sleep  
the slow rising  
from black to deep purple  
to true colors  
the sun revealing  
from the east  
birds high in their flight  
tips of trees show it first  
sing up the sun  
the greatest to the least  
dew drops glistening on the grass  
diamond-strewn path  
revere  
his glory

---

Poems by **Nellie deVries** have appeared in *Peninsula Poets*, *VietNow*, *The 55 Project*, *Exhale*, and the anthologies *Busy Griefs*, *Raw Towns*; *Michigan Roots*; and *Adam, Eve, & the Riders of the Apocalypse*.

POETRY

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*Phil Flott*

---

## HIS FIRE

Afraid  
that if my hand enters the flame  
nerves will be burnt  
not to feel further.

I pull the metal curtain,  
shut the glass doors.  
The fire flares orange to yellow.

Away from its heat  
I am cold.  
Maybe I could  
callous fingertips to the point

they can enter fire  
deeply, briefly,  
mesh in it fully  
if only for a moment.

---

**Phil Flott** is a retired Catholic priest. Lately he has had poems in *Vita Poetica*, *Agape Review*, *Poetic Sun*, and others.

POETRY

---

*Tommy Welty*

---

## GHOST-HOUSE

You love old things, dead things,  
the crumbling country chapel

the cellar walls where green shoots grow  
through: rot-black planks, shattered  
saints in violet stained glass,  
up, over the rat burrowed pews

You climb in the pulpit, sunshine  
crowning you before a crooked cross

You wag a found, floodwarped Bible,  
shout in tongues of angels, the breath of life  
blows through the dust and carries  
the blue jays away

---

---

**Tommy** lives in Southern California with his wife, Alyssa, and their two children, Atticus and Gwendolyn, where he serves as a pastor. His poetry has appeared in *The Curator*, *Rock & Sling*, *Ekstasis*, and elsewhere.



POETRY

---

*Ellis Purdie*

---

## KNEELING BEDSIDE

In the noise of my blood, I grow weary  
of home and look for somewhere to pray.  
But in winter, finding things in the woods  
is harder, and I am less grateful, always asking  
for what takes months to return, learning  
again I cannot just sleep until spring.

I drive to Marion County, though spring  
is months away as is the worst weariness.  
I search under logs for salamanders and learn  
the lay of this land that helps me pray,  
to think of a friend with cancer and ask  
God for light to finally break in their woods.

Memory sustains: a drive through dark woods,  
an owl in the road and a snake its mainspring.  
Eyes gone gilt in headlights, a gift not asked  
for, waking me from a long day's weariness.  
I wonder now why a bird's catching prey  
is what I needed to once again learn

those same things that as a child I learned  
in the Presbyterian day school and would  
say I believe if someone asked for prayer.  
I believe it best in April, the beginning of spring,  
when all shakes off the weariness  
of winter, and the chokecherry asks

to be breathed. By the creek, snakes bask  
in the sun, and in tall grass my son studies  
the wildflowers and does not grow weary.  
We talk of rattlesnakes, in particular timbers,  
and I promise we'll hear their buttons some spring.  
On such days, it is so much easier to pray.

In Grenada County, my grandmother prayed  
in a house now dead, its contents a casket  
of a hard living from summer to spring.  
At seventeen, she ended her learning  
at the public school and promised she would  
love a cotton farmer, most prayerful when weary.

Spring should not be the only time I can pray.  
Others are more weary but have less asks.  
God, I'll learn You beside beds as I do in the woods.

## ABANDONED CHURCH IN HARRISON COUNTY

Hymn song ended beneath a steeple  
now yeared with rot. Then joists  
collapsed, bared rooms of praise,  
the kitchen on the second story  
where cabinets and stove lean  
crashed ajar. I step with caution  
off boards and tin knotted towards  
the ground. Weeds, risen through  
piled shingles, rasp my ribs as I drag  
lengths of rain gutter to woods' edge.  
Just across the road, a man washes  
his truck, glancing at me in ask,  
*What are you doing?* and I rehearse,  
*You really want to know?* He nods,  
and I tell him, *Looking for snakes.*  
He may start, certain I am a fool,  
and question why I would want  
that which we heeded into Fall,  
or share his sighting the very kind  
I search for: a racer in grave-moss  
teal, shaped with the same speed  
of water etching stone. Offering  
his hand, he may give his name  
and want mine, a church ritual  
dormant here I cannot know how  
long. Finished, I wave and step  
into my driver's side. He signals  
back. I turn the engine and watch  
him move out of the rearview's  
sight, dodging friendship for this  
day. But perhaps later, on this plot  
meant for sanctuary, adoration will  
yield brotherhood once more  
in a place both broken and God's.

---

**Ellis Purdie** is a graduate of The Center for Writers at The University of Southern Mississippi. Previous work has appeared in *Vita Poetica*, *Riveted*, *Quarter After Eight*, *New World Writing*, and *Red Rock Review*. He lives with his wife, son, and daughter in Marshall, Texas.

POETRY

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*Don Reese*

---

## SAVING

*for my father*

All my life, and it's been long enough now  
That I flatter myself I've learned a little bit,  
Touring your yard, I've seen you point to it—  
Some tiny, fringed, bent sapling, I don't know

How you spotted it among all the green,  
Hidden and pale, no doubt soon to be overrun  
If left to its own feeble devices. Instead, in  
A casual moment, you have just now seen

Potential in a tangle where only suffocation loomed,  
Just a moment's thought, a trust in possibility,  
And an old shovel, barely raised, lifted gently  
And moved, to a sunnier or dryer slope, the doomed.

What glory in this green and thriving monument  
To a steady faith that growth is the surest event.

---

The son of a Lutheran minister, **Don's** journey could be described as a scribble in the Pacific Northwest and a straight line to Albuquerque, and then to Providence, as if someone were nudged but salvaged a checkmark. Like millions of English teachers, he writes poems in quiet, fugitive moments.

POETRY

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*Natasha Bredle*

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## UNBAPTIZED

I wish I could be, I told my mother. No, wait,  
don't misunderstand. I wish I could redact  
the oath I took at ten years old, before I had the chance  
to break it. To be broken. To understand  
what reparation meant, and who provided it. I wish  
I could undo and remake the memory  
of dipping my toe into the church jacuzzi, inhaling  
the rose-scented Holy Spirit that lapped  
at my T-shirt, thinking that this was it, the box  
checked, the glory earned, and barely, briefly  
wondering why I did not feel ethereal. If only I  
had waited for the tide to turn, for my head  
to bash against the wall, for the concept of drowning  
to sink in, then the surrender of my lungs  
would have been all the more momentous. But  
the point, the prospect is long since forgone  
because I can't take it back and I have since  
stopped wishing for it all to be less simple.  
All of it, all, the being led, the falling away, the crawling  
back, was my path. To Him. No matter  
if it was momentous. The Holy Spirit now courses  
through my veins. And besides, the moment  
came. The moment has come. The moment keeps  
happening over and over again, and it will  
not stop. When I need reminding I simply  
step into the sun, spread my arms from east to west  
and look down where the moment rests in my shadow  
contentedly, in the shape of a cross.

## FAITH

Faith is a funny thing, always  
creeping up on you when you least expect it.  
And no, faith isn't the same as trust.  
Trust is stepping onto the water's surface. Faith  
is what catches you when you fall beneath.  
When, not if. What can I say? The tide  
came for me, as it does. Placid under  
white white sheets or awake in the crowded  
dark. My faith became Why? and, Why not?  
Hello! and, Hello? It feels like less of a glorification  
than a necessity, but I'm getting there, learning  
how to stay standing when the trust beneath me  
breaks. It is not flight but floating. I am  
rock solid but the hollow part of me invites  
the buoy. Trust is bringing my pieces back  
to the water over and over again. Faith is the pause  
after the flood, the brief glimpse up to the sky.  
You failed me, faith says, but so far,  
I still believe in You.

## BELIEVE ME

It sounds silly, but I needed God  
to believe in me. The way  
my mother did in elementary school,  
when she would tell me, *you can do it*  
while grasping my shoulder,  
as if her touch made physical  
the belief. Oh, Lord, how many nights  
have I knelt until carpet fibers  
etched little crosses on my knees?  
Stock still, praying for contact, hoping  
for any manifestation of Your hands, Your  
feet. My hair, loose. The perfume  
ready. The tears already falling. I ached.  
Oh, Lord, how I ached to hear  
a voice break the silence with a  
*you can do it*, or something  
of the sort. But as the silence persisted  
the fear of hearing, *it doesn't*  
*work that way* instead would cause me  
to tremble. Oh, Lord oh  
Lord, tell me how it works, then?  
It sounds silly, what I needed,  
because in truth, it was not  
a necessity. I wanted God  
to believe in me, when I needed  
to believe in Him. In the silence  
so silent, I waited for a voice  
and what I heard was this:  
a heart beating steadily into the void,  
*I can't do it. I can't do it.*  
*But surely You can.*

---

**Natasha Bredle** is a young writer based in Ohio. Her work has been featured in publications such as *Peach Mag*, *Words and Whispers*, and *The Lumiere Review*. She has received accolades from the Bennington College Young Writers Awards as well the Adroit Prizes. In addition to poetry and short fiction, she has a passion for longer works and is currently drafting a young adult novel.

POETRY

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*Brooke Stanish*

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## EPIPHANIES &amp; PANIC ATTACKS

You met me beside a bed one day, not a roadway  
as you did for saul, or an ocean wrapped in stone

for sweet david, he bending down to drink & to  
cry like me, my eyes covered in sores & drawn blinds so

through windows, no one could see me tossing my body  
toward the ceiling & then crashing on a rug by my bed

where You found me, shaking—half the world leaking from my head.

the day You told us that worry was a thing that  
not even the flowers could stand, did You understand that

i could never be as thin as one of them, their stems shifting  
without brains screaming, weaving their petals into knots?

& when You told us that these things were for the lesser creatures,  
did You know us already? seeing a girl curled over on a mat

in her room & knowing her, that she was one of them—these  
lesser ones with worlds stuffed into the corners of their chests

& is that why You came toward her & took it—  
that grim head in Your bleeding hands?



## CRAYON GOD

afraid i won't hear your voice again,  
i stuff your song into my ears—

the chapel in which i grew, the church & the steeple  
my mother taught me, weaving my fingers

so close to prayer,

darkens as your face stained with glass—  
distance quiets into shadow;

you forgot to tell us this would happen when  
we colored your face in with crayon,

religion class at 9 am, an hour we knew not enough  
to memorize the words lined beneath

your printed lips we never thought could be

so silent like a cloud fallen asleep:  
you were on a ship with your lovers—within our bodies

that still pray for your violent waking,  
for you to throw our crayons into the water, breaking

our silence & our sin.

---

**Brooke Stanish** is a poet and writer whose poetry, short stories, and essays have been accepted in *America*, *The Windhover*, *The Rectangle*, *Whale Road Review*, *Living Waters Review*, *Time of Singing*, *Green Blotter*, *Manzano Mountain Review*, *BlueHouse Journal*, *The Ricochet Review*, and other publications. Currently, she lives in Sunrise, Florida.

POETRY

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*Ron Riecki*

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## SUNDOWNING

*for Sharmila Voorakkara*

I don't know why, but I get so much more sick  
at night, a dream of my wife in the middle of  
contractions and the midwife collapsing, needing

CPR, and I press on her manubrium and the sickness  
comes, coughing me awake, to see the room that  
shows I have never been married, slaps me in

the center of my headache, and I blink up to see  
the crucifix fixed to the wall, high, flickering  
in moonlight, leaves being blown back and forth,

haunted, this chronic pain that screams that I'm  
alive and this burning, this sharp, this aching, dull,  
stabbing throbbing radiating thing is nothing in

comparison, but it's hard to accept this, so self-  
centered, so concerned with what I feel, and I  
pray, how fast a cloud could block everything,

the darkness, so immediate, the ballooning pain, and  
I pray, softer, so soft, saying it's probably best to  
either kill me or save me. And the moonlight returns.

## I FOUND THAT WHEN PEOPLE PROSELYTIZE

I want to do the opposite, something so salesman about it, a pastor pulling me aside, telling me that I was being a child by not believing, when, in my mind, I wondered how he assumed I was a non-believer, how heavily he *non*-ed me, turning me into nothing, no interest in my history, how he cornered me, his body so large, lit like a lemon in the church light, this feeling like God's so far in the distance, blown away in the wind, that this is really about him, small *h*, this man who has no idea how intimidating shadow can be, torso can be, telling me who I am and what I believe when it's wrong,

and years later I remember sitting with my grandfather, under the fireworks, and the pastor, at the hill's bottom, me watching him, and he was looking down at the ground, everyone else looking up in awe, but how he was looking down, in this sort of hunched way, and I tried to get inside his head, imagining his realizing that he should have traded all of that anger for love; all of these brocades in the sky, so spider-like, how you could watch them explode and feel nothing but fear, or you could look up and see nothing but beauty.

## (NONFICTION) NEGAUNEE

When we were young, age eight or so, we'd walk  
around the ledge of the church, it starting with

a one-foot drop, then two-, then four-, then eight-  
until it was a sixteen-foot drop, a survivable fall

if you fell the right way, but falling doesn't have  
a lot of control, the body going in any direction

it so chooses, and so we'd go slow, clinging, our  
hands pressed into the brick like it was mother's

hands, and the concentration, where nothing else  
existed in the world, so that the mines were open

again and the unemployment was reversed and  
the bars weren't all packed and our homes were

peaceful and the rivers weren't all ore-oranged  
and my grandfather was still alive, his hearing

not lost, his fingers not lost in the equipment  
that was so good at taking the ore out of the guts

of this land where we looked down and feared  
and felt our bodies plummeting down into the depths

where our fathers would submerge, earth-drowned,  
homes soot-owned, all our lives immersed in mining.

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**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). Riecki has edited eight books, including *Here* (Michigan State University Press, Independent Publisher Book Award), and *The Way North* (Wayne State University Press, Michigan Notable Book). Right now, Riecki's listening to The Bad Plus' cover of "Everybody Wants to Rule the World."

POETRY

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*Michael Pennanen*

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## E S C A P E

Fighting in Vietnam did it to him:  
the war's assault on heart and mind,  
the drugs he took to escape  
the fear, horror, drudgery...  
these and more.

When I met him many years later  
he was sitting in the back pew of my church  
ready for worship—a moment of promise  
in a church hungry for more bodies to fill its space.  
Except that he left chewing tobacco on the pew  
and was (we came to learn)  
mixed up and disturbed.

Returning weekly,  
Walter would gaze transfixed  
at the huge stained-glass window  
rising up behind the altar, towering over it.  
Did its abstract rendering of a cross  
—with the angular suggestion  
of a crown of thorns—  
somehow give him peace?

Often he was not at peace.  
At times he enjoyed a moment's respite,  
quoting scripture from memory.  
Conversations could be lucid, briefly,  
even friendly. But deeper engagement  
would reveal anxiety, distrust,  
indeed paranoia.

Yesterday Walter was found dead  
in his apartment, his surroundings  
a scene of filth, roaches, chaos.

If I could have arranged it,  
he would've died in that back pew,  
caught in the light streaming  
through the stained-glass window,  
through its cross, its crown of thorns.

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**Michael Pennanen** is a recently retired Protestant minister who has pastored several congregations and served as a hospice chaplain. He has had liturgical materials published in worship resource books, and looks for this venture called “retirement” to open up new paths for his writing.

POETRY

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*Nicole Rollender*

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## FLUNG FROM THE BODY

A dead zebra on her side—we watch YouTube—the lioness deep in the bloody belly. Cry of a bird in branches—my son looks up at the TV, in front of a wood fire—our own sudden awareness of our lives' shortness. In the distance, the other zebras watch & lower their heads to twitching, barbarous grass. Sun setting in the video, everything partly in shadows. We kiss our son's forehead. Echoes on water—of song, lamentation, caroling—your own story of surviving on earth. Far season of apples—that scent on wind of a father holding the child's hand, shuffling through leaves, back to the lighted house & cider. Sometimes, I'm sure the world has tired of me—questions arising in the heart: Who stays? Who's left behind? My son mimics the wild bird's flight in firelight with his small hands, fast wings splay—reminding me of veiled women in old churches, hands unfurling rosary beads. Who's leaving? The world may have forgotten them—but they still name my body of smoke, of fire in their prayers. The voices of the ones I love—my son calls to me, "Mama, death's so giant"—I take in these honeyed figs. We were here. Bruised. Feeding. I wonder when I'll go from the world—in rain, through fog, in hail's underbreath, pebbles skittering among the soul's ruins, between teeth & flower. Sketch of myrtle blooms climbing from my skull's dark sockets. & what will the living remember about me? Something about *persist & exist*, a low hum in the mist, something about love.

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A 2017 NJ Council on the Arts poetry fellow, **Nicole Rollender** is the author of the poetry collection, *Louder Than Everything You Love* (Five Oaks Press), and four poetry chapbooks. She has won poetry prizes from *Palette Poetry*, *Gigantic Sequins*, *CALYX Journal* and *Ruminant Magazine*. Her work appears in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Best New Poets*, *Ninth Letter*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Salt Hill Journal* and *West Branch*, among many other journals. She's managing editor at *THRUSH Poetry Journal*. Nicole holds an MFA from the Pennsylvania State University. She's also co-founder and CEO of Strand Writing Services. Visit her online: [www.nicolemrollender.com](http://www.nicolemrollender.com).

POETRY

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*Kaitlyn Newbery*

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## THE REST

In the beginning was the Word.

In the beginning was.

In the beginning

Word spoke:

*Let there be light.*

Word existed:

You are Light.

*Let there be heavens,*

proclaims the only Way.

*Let there be water;*

the Living Water pours forth.

*Let there be vegetation.*

O, Vine and Fruit and Nourisher and Nourishment.

*Let there be sun and moon—*

the Son pierces the darkness.

*Let there be sea creatures and birds;*

Our dove descended, our divider of fish.

*Let there be land animals.*

This Lion of Judah! This blameless Lamb!

*Let there be man.*

A pause.

A knowing choice.

Word became flesh first

for hands to mold and lungs to breath.

Before You became man,

You were breath and lungs and sculptor and clay.

*Let there be rest.*

You are the rest.



You are  
the rest.

You are the  
  
rest.

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**Kaitlyn Newbery** is an adjunct English professor at the University of the  
Cumberlands. She enjoys exploring questions about her faith through  
metaphors and storytelling. Her works have been published by *Agape*  
*Review*, *Calla Press*, and *Amethyst Magazine*.

POETRY

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*Rachel Michelle Collier*

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## WHITESTONE ASCENDENT

*(Revelation 2:17)*

(1)

Enter The Deepness:

where muted hues of worship flow  
 by way of sorrows tamped and set to crackling  
 towards explosion of the darkest dregs\* —

(\*bottoms of the whispered hollows  
 of the bones\*\*)

(\*\*connections fit with bellows made for  
 mellowed melodies from gold of)

— dregs. The Lord takes his pan, dips it: then He swirls  
 the filthy water, ever patient . . .

(2)

In these times, you're all nerves / He's all Word:

— wills a glint where there is none —  
 — now He gives a whooping holler —

The fuse — LIT! The flame is crawling forth —the darkness hesitates—

The sorrowed heart flings self to Deepness! Implodes on that holy impact!!  
 Inky dregs incinerate, so all of Hell flees howling!

The Lord, done with His pan, strides away, gold bar in hand,  
 whistling a tune.

(3)

*'There is calm in the depths of my strange love, Whitestone / you can rest in me.'*

(4)

Love peaceable . . . a strange calm  
down in The Deepness: where muted hues of worship  
flow freely in the trenches of depths you'll only understand  
*by leaping —*

*and sinking,*

sinking,

*lower,*

*even lower,*

past the shattered cliffs, searching for the lowest place,

where the long grasses sway, and tremble at your touchdown,  
and part to make a way, then settle round yourself —

Here you'll sit, in the calm, sure refreshment of His strength,  
tucked away beneath the churning, troubled waters overhead,

while fear is subjugated, regulated out of time    for a moment.  
Breathe : bathe.

(5)

Love, peaceable, The Deepness . . . where muted hues of worship flow . . .

Where all your griefs here congregate, then each is called by name  
and sent to exile in its time . . .

(6)

*Whitestone Ascendant*: buoyed to the surface after swirling skies clear  
   water breaks — beaming up  
   golden tongue of praise  
                         muted hues of worship blooming into brilliance . . .

## STRANGE UNBLANKETED

Some hazy, curious sound through a cracked window:  
orchestral swell — an inkling of some strange beauty. Some  
cinematic feeling stirs; some bitter air snakes through the  
room, nips the flesh beneath the blankets:

Some lazy, waking startlement: *Chooo, chooo*: the night horn,  
sounding in some low, successive flow — notes, legato, bend  
larghissimo — and at this distance; and in this coldness;  
airdrops slower, darkness still; some ten-till-dawn, just tuning  
in — and then —

heightened by some harping birds —

It blooms, brilliantly —

— beckons like some bit of magic —

. . .

This! in our tiresome world so undeserving of hope! — some  
strange thrill light, slow unblanketed . . .

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

FICTION

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*Matt Hollingsworth*

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## THE SKY IS SOLID

Once there was a child named Donovan Baylor, and Donovan was the most handsome child in all the world, and his mother would sit him in her lap on the rocking chair and tell him that he was destined for great things. She said that he could do anything he wanted and to never listen to anybody who says, “You can’t.”

And as Donovan grew up, those around him discovered that he was not only the most handsome child, but also the smartest and hardest working. He would stay up late studying for school, never once slacking, and he always got the best grades. And he never listened to those kids who called him a teacher’s pet or try-hard, or anyone who told him, “You can’t.”

And when Donovan grew up, he became a businessman like his father, and he found that he was not only the most handsome, smartest, and hardest working man in all the world, but that he also had a mind for business. He could see opportunity where others could see only failure, and he would stay up night after night planning for his next business venture. He never had time for a family (for that would only limit him), and those around him wondered if he ever slept. And still, he would never listen to anyone who discouraged him or tried to put limits on him, and especially not to anyone who told him, “You can’t.” And whenever anyone would tell him, “The sky is the limit,” he would only smile and say, “Not for me.”

And soon, Donovan was the richest man in the whole world, and his empire stretched from one horizon to the other. He had everything he could possibly want, and he lavished money on the poor, donating millions for people to get an education so that they too could be without limits.

Yet for all this success, Donovan still wasn’t satisfied. There was something more calling him. He could feel it. All his life, he knew he had to justify his existence, to prove he was worthwhile, that he could do anything. And he’d done more than anyone had ever dreamed, but it still wasn’t enough.

Then an idea came to him. A crazy, impossible idea. Just the kind of crazy and impossible idea that Donovan Baylor thought would work.

He put together a presentation and called together his investors, his board, key political figures—anyone he might need—and he explained his plan.

“As you all know, my empire has expanded from one end of the Earth to the other, and there’s no market in the world I’ve not conquered. But there’s still more I can do. Higher heights I can reach.” He motioned to the screen behind his podium where an image appeared, blueprints for a tower, impossibly tall, breaking through the sky into Heaven itself.

“Gentlemen, I propose that we build a tower, miles high, all the way to Heaven, where we can open trade negotiations with the angels and grow our business to fill the whole of creation.” Donovan was smiling, but to his surprise, the audience laughed. For all the learned people of the world knew (as had been proven) that the world is flat and the sky is solid, an impassible barrier that no one could ever cross to get to Heaven. And one by one, the investors shook their heads and left until Donovan was alone in the room with one other man, who Donovan didn’t remember inviting.

But still, Donovan wasn’t deterred. He knew better than to listen to their objections, to anyone who believed in limitations or barriers, and especially anyone who says, “You can’t.”

“It won’t work, you know,” said the other man in the room.

“I suppose you’re going to tell me Heaven is unreachable, too?” Donovan asked.

“Oh, it’s not unreachable, but the way to Heaven isn’t through a tower.”

“Then how?”

“I’ll carry you. I’ve been there, and I can take you there. You’ll never make it on your own.”

Donovan laughed. “You’re just another naysayer. Another person saying, ‘You can’t.’”

“I say neither, ‘You can’ nor ‘You can’t.’ I simply say, ‘I can.’”

Donovan shook his head. "You're crazy. And even if you were telling the truth, I wouldn't want any part of it. I've worked for everything I have, and I never take handouts."

The man looked disappointed, but left anyway.

The next day, Donovan began gathering materials for his tower. No investor believed in him, so he had to finance it from his own fortune, and he soon found himself enjoying the challenge of having to stretch his money and do what others thought impossible. For he was the most handsome, smartest, and hardest working man in the whole world, and he knew better than to doubt it.

He began construction on the tower, and soon it was the tallest building in the world. He labored on it for years, hardly thinking about anything else, but devoting every resource in his arsenal to his tower until he felt like he could touch the sky. And very soon he did, for after another year the tower reached the sky-vale, the firmament in which the stars hang fixed. It felt like stone, coarse rock.

So they'd been right, those who had told him the sky was solid, but Donovan wasn't deterred. He could do anything, and he knew better than to listen to anyone who said, "You can't." So Donovan assigned drillers to drill through the sky so that he could continue building his tower. Yet the sky-vale was tougher than he anticipated, and his strongest drills snapped, and his hammers shattered without ever cracking the rock.

Yet Donovan was undeterred. He instructed his engineers to build stronger drills and uncrackable hammers, and he assigned workers to labor, day and night, hoping to break through. But even then, only the smallest pebbles (more powder than rock) came loose from the sky.

But Donovan kept working. *It's only a matter of time*, he told himself. *I'm the most handsome, smartest, and hardest working man in all the world. Nothing can limit me.* Yet he soon found that the sky didn't care how handsome he was, nor how smart, nor how hard-working. It didn't matter how sharp of tools he constructed nor how many engineers he hired. The sky was too strong, and nothing could break through.

Decades passed, and as an old man, Donovan found his youthful optimism fading. Where it felt before like he could never fail, now it felt like he couldn't succeed. Where before he'd ignored anyone who said,



“You can’t,” now the constant drilling and hammering on the sky above was like a chorus of “You can’t, you can’t, you can’t.”

In all these years, the workers had only made a dent, hardly a foot, and Donovan knew that if the sky was thick, he wouldn’t live long enough to see his project complete.

And he found himself (though he could hardly say why) thinking of that man he’d seen so long ago in his conference room. The man who’d told him that he came from Heaven and could take Donovan there. It still seemed crazy, but one day Donovan sought him out.

He was sitting on a mountainside with a group of his followers, and Donovan approached him, nervously. Donovan didn’t expect the man to recognize him, but he did instantly, and sent away his followers so that he and Donovan could be alone.

“You said you knew the way to Heaven,” Donovan said.

“No, I said I *am* the way to Heaven.”

He stared for a moment, then said, “Please take me.”

The man motioned for Donovan to follow, and he led him to the Tower, then said, “Send your workers out. All of them. Even those drilling on the top.”

“But the drilling hasn’t stopped for 40 years,” Donovan said. But the man just stared, and Donovan relented. He grabbed his phone and gave the orders for the tower to be emptied of every single person. “Now what?”

To his surprise, the man didn’t answer. Instead, his face started to glow, becoming brighter than the sun, and clouds wrapped around him. Donovan stared, slack-jawed, his eyes burning with a wonderful, pleasant burn, and he fell to his knees, face on the ground. And behind Donovan, the tower began to shake and wobble, and it finally collapsed, as if bowing before the Man Who Came From Heaven.

Donovan didn’t feel worthy to look upon that face—as if one glimpse would fell him—but look he did, and what he saw stunned him more than that the light and the clouds and the brilliance and the fallen tower.

The Man From Heaven was smiling at him.

And suddenly, Donovan saw (though he could not say how), the whole of the sky, and he realized that the vale he was hammering at was not a couple feet thick, like he'd expected, but miles and miles thick, stretching on for what seemed like forever, and he knew that he could have labored for a thousand years and never broken through, could have expended every drill on earth and not have made it. And even if he had, beyond that barrier was another, twice as thick and three times as hard. And another beyond that and another...

And Donovan would have despaired, except that one glance at the Man Who Came From Heaven (whose face still glowed above) stopped him.

"I'm sorry," Donovan said, "for thinking I could ever do it."

"You're forgiven."

"But you'll take me?"

The Man smiled.

"Soon, my friend," he said. "I'm going away now, but I'll be back. Very soon, I'll be back, and I'll take you to where I am. And don't doubt, but know that I am coming for you." And with that, the Man lifted from the ground into the air, up and up, passing through the sky-vale like it was vapor.

And Donovan smiled. And from that day forth, he wouldn't say, "You can't" or "You can," but instead, "*HE* can."

FICTION

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*Jennifer Stewart*

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## THE EXCHANGE

From below, an unrelenting knocking upon the door breaks into her Saturday lie-in, her sanctuary of solitude. She doesn't wish to interact or be disturbed. But no one else is home. So she clutches the banister and feels every shag staircase down to see a boy, barefoot as she, standing on the front porch. Leggy limbs have a shameless running start, the trousers and shirt lagging behind, a bit demoralised. He is clothed in solemn tones of Amish plain dress; his crown of blood orange curls are live wires writhing in sacrilege by contrast. *He is, she muses, a struck match, head aflame, pinewood handle gone to cinder.* Chapped lips split in a wide grin as he introduces himself. His name might be Eli. But she's distracted by the basket of strawberries he thrusts in her direction. Her hands accept them slowly, her mind still upstairs in bed, until he explains. The berries are for letting him fish the pond. He smiles again, nods, then walks to the buggy to get his fishing pole. From the corner of her eye, she swears she sees him exit like the angel too-wonderful-to-be-named, herald of hot-head Samson, ascending on a flame of burnt offering, *Can I get a witness?* Closing the door on the fates of bass and bluegill, she enters the sunlit kitchen to clean and cut strawberries. Their sensitive red flesh baptised in a dish of water; each heart shape is rescued one by one so as not to bruise. As she prepares her feast, she wonders about those scars on his hands: *Is there a matching set under all that dust and ash on his feet?*

FICTION

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*Brooke Stanish*

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## OH, LOVER OF BETHLEHEM

*a monologue from the concubine of Judges 19*

They told me I was crazy when I confessed that I loved you—you, the man who washed donkey hooves for a living with a bowl and a cloth, gathering sweat stains on your lower back at which I couldn't help but stare as if they were not drops of sweat but stars. There are few things more intimate than this. They told me I was crazy when I confessed that I'd do anything to be near you. *Really? Even be a concubine?* one of them asked—the one you never liked, the one with blonde eyes who'd bring her husband's donkeys and hardly look at you, their hooves wrapped in earth. At first I said *No*, and then I said *Maybe*, and finally I hoped, *Well, he'd never make me. He'd want to marry me surely*, which, of course, you never did.

And that, I suppose, is the reason I left you the night you slept beside one of your wives and I paced in the kitchen because I couldn't sleep—again—and you didn't care. That night, I went to you. Your wife tangled her legs in your blanket as if stealing it, leaving your shoulders and your chest bare, covered in a sheen of dark curling hair you were just beginning to lose. Placing my hand on your shoulder, I thought it odd that I could not be the one who possessed you fully—but only in part and only when you wanted. *Andreas, can you wake up. Can you talk to me? I can't sleep.* You placed your hand on mine and turned away, nearly pulling my arm with you. The thing with desire—yours and mine—is that it begins as we all do. Desire begins small like a baby, skin still stretching and shaping itself around bones, and then, as if by magic, it leaps into a form that pushes on the walls of your insides until it breaks them entirely. And so, by your bedside, as I watched you loosen your fingers from my hand to fling your arm over the woman beside you—the woman I never liked, the one who made eyes at me when she saw me watching you in love and panic—I broke, and I ran.

And why did you follow? This is something that will never make sense to me—or my father who tried so hard to please you as if you were something more than a lover. Before you, he laid plates of food that I had never before even seen in my home, let alone eaten, and you hardly ate anything at all, picking at the insides of the bread he baked that morning and staring at me as if I myself was on your plate. With your eyes, you tricked me, but what could I say?

That night, you came to my room—the one I'd slept in since I was seven and couldn't fall asleep without saying prayers with my mother—and I thought the feeling of you was odd. It was strange how natural you seemed in my space. It was as if you had always lived in this room—with me—since I was a girl, a piece of furniture in the corner I'd forgotten because it was covered with blankets and old pieces of clothing and dust. You came toward me, wordless and moving, and I let you, hardly remembering myself. *Why did you leave?* you asked me, and as you stood there—absorbing the space of the seconds as they shook into future—your hand on the doorframe upon which my mother cataloged my growth as if my whole life could fit beneath a penciled line, you were true. *I didn't leave*, I said, hardly able to look at you because I hardly knew my meaning but was discovering it as I spoke. And as you discover your meaning, it's nearly impossible to look at another for fear they might see it before you do. *I didn't leave*, I said again, *not really, at least*. Then you took me, and the seconds that would become the future seemed to shed themselves off us, leaving us there where our lips became all that existed in a world that had become one of pure matter.

My father told us not to go, and truthfully, I didn't want to leave. Every night, I'd wait for you, sitting in the corner of my room, weaving something because I couldn't stand to sit still. Ever since I was a girl, my hands have needed something to tangle themselves in as if to remind myself that I was, in fact, a part of the world. Sometimes you'd be late, but I was never angry with you. You simply confused me. I thought that if love was real then love must be perfect—not like a circle drawn in the sand with a stick, misshapen and impossible to categorize. But when you'd place your hand on my door frame—your thumb always covering the pencil mark of the last time I grew like an unspoken metaphor—I figured that a misshapen circle was enough sometimes, if the circle were true. *What are you weaving?* you asked me though I knew you didn't care. And the knowledge of this built me—knowing that it didn't matter what I said,

only that I was saying—breathing before you again. Then I'd move toward you, brushing away the minutes with my fingers as if they were weeds that I picked to hang in your hair.

Only during those nights, with you, was time anything more than simple motion—that tunnel through which we crawl for some reason we can't seem to stop for a long enough time to actually know.

The last night we were together you told me that you would go, in the morning, and I with you. Your face leaned away from mine as if forgetting it, and your eyes flung themselves out the window as if already seeing them—your wives and the kids you taught to speak to the animals when nobody else would listen. *But Ephraim is so far*, I said, stitching my meaning, which was simply fear, into words that were too clean to hold my sense of flailing—words that were false. *Oh yes, I know*, you said, failing to sense the thing that lay beneath my question, as if my fear of distance was strictly geographical. *We'll stop on the way home, I promise*. You took the hair on my head and parted it like the seas I imagined Moses walking through so quickly, like you, walking along the skin of me. *Okay*, I said, taking your hand and pressing it down, thinking of circles and how they never turn out as you want them to when you're young, just beginning to sketch their bending, uneven curves in the sand.

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We'd been traveling, and you were tired—so tired that a sound like that of the ocean began to leap out from beneath your feet. *You can barely walk*, I said, looking over at you tugging a couple of weary donkeys and shuffling so that your sandals hardly left the ground. Swallowing your profile—your sagging eyes and your upper lip which always seemed to overshadow the bottom—I understood that thoughts of me, the feeling of them, could not revive you as thoughts of you did for my own body. I could have walked to Ephraim and back and felt as if even that was not enough, like when I pressed your hand down on my head, thinking that your touch was not enough either—I could not make you become me as I wanted. *Why don't we stop?* I asked, willing to do anything to avoid the wives with their braids and the children who looked everything like you and nothing like me. Do you understand what this could do to a woman?

The man was kind to us when we asked if perhaps he had *a place for us to stay*? His face was like that of a withering peach, and it seemed to grow weeks older as it folded to our request, saying, *Yes, yes—please. Come stay with me in Gibeah. It's been so long since I've had any guests.* He didn't ask me who I was to you, but simply dragged his eyes across mine and bowed slightly with his covered head. My father had told me about Gibeah, but I didn't say anything about it as we followed the man to his home. You were so tired, after all, and I could see it in your shoulders and your chest over which I had scattered my fingers the night before—both now encircled by sweat.

You were laying on my hair when I heard them—before you—and it hadn't even been a night. *My love, you're hurting me,* I said though smiling and not really hurting at all but simply wanting to say *my love* in the context of some trivial, necessary thing. *My love*—I wanted to drink the novelty from the phrase and make it so commonplace that it seemed to lose all meaning, and in that, gain everything. *My love*—in the kitchen, throwing grains of rice into a pot. *My love*—in the village, surrounded, you tossing me the cloth you used to clean a donkey and asking for another as I held it, like something foreign and sacred. *My love*—in an old man's home in Gibeah, tugging my hair from beneath your arm as you turned to me and grinned, softly taking it in your fingers. *My love*, was I ever something sacred to you, or was I like the water in which you doused your animals' feet—useful and transparent?

You still hadn't heard a thing when the old man knocked on the door frame, looking away from us as if to be polite—that old peach who'd soon be willing to toss his petite daughter out the window, quietly wedging himself into a corner. *It's the men,* he said, still staring out at the rest of his dark home rather than at us. Smiling at me and narrowing your eyes, as if to say *Would you look at that? Out of all the old men in Gibeah, we choose to stay with the crazy one,* you dropped my hair from your fingers and sat up. *What do you mean, the men? What do they want?* You asked this innocently, but already, I felt the hands of your question rearranging things, placing their fingers on my throat and picking at pieces of me that used to be parts of a whole. Already, I sensed the current of your question changing things as the old man looked at you with a question himself, his head tilting like a planet falling and eyes striking the place where my knees rose like mountains beneath our blanket. I sensed your question changing

things as I felt you understand the old man, finally staring down at your hands and then at my feet—passing his question on to me.

It was as if your question changed the past and Bethlehem itself—who you were within them—a man traveling backward to resurrect his lover. You let the ropes that held your donkeys fall when you saw me—doing something outside I can't even remember—and recognized that you never did know me, finally wanting to know this breath you couldn't hold.

Was it really love or was it simply possession that brought you to me, your lover in Bethlehem? I lie to myself every time I see you—like a habit carried on for so long that it's become the truth. Only sometimes does love feel like anything more than this.

*I'll go to them*, I said, knowing that you were the one they really wanted, knowing that you would not protest my offer which was really half a question, and knowing that you would've asked me anyway if I didn't say this—and I wouldn't have been able to bear it. Yes, I went out of love for you, but I also went out of fear for me. I feared the sound of your question pointed toward me—the revelation that you did not love me. A million savage men seemed like nothing compared to this. You seemed so easy as you looked at me and nodded, saying *Thank you*, which I thought odd—the fact that you could still look at me and say something so ordinary—and I thought that maybe in my attempt to avoid my fear, I laid right in it. The bed of a man who did not care.

Often I wonder, if when you discovered me, as if by chance, on the doorstep of the old man's home the morning after, you felt anything besides simple anger—the kind a child feels when one of her toys is taken and tarnished and destroyed. *My love*, you said, your voice rising like the mountain on which Moses went to speak with God—the question trailing your words, piercing the clouds. And I thought it strange how, even with my clothes hardly anything anymore, even when I was so near dying, I felt as if I myself was with Moses on Sinai, swaying before God and waiting for his hand to write something absolute not on stone but on my skin, those words from you could still inflame me. *Yes*, I said with as much strength as I imagine it took Moses to hold those pieces of rock in place as on them, God transcribed his face. And you don't even know their meaning—do you?



The old peach couldn't look at me, and neither could you, really—not for much longer than you had to as you took the cloths you brought for your donkeys' feet and wiped the bloodiest parts of my body. The old man's daughter looked at me though. The way her thin hair looped itself around her elbows and then fell as she leaned over me with warm towels and ointment that smelled like ash before finally pausing told me that I was, perhaps, dying. In her dark black-brown eyes I saw what you could never give me—understanding. *Oh sweetie*, she said, though I was years older than her, taking my head in her arms and cradling it like a baby, placing small kisses on my forehead as if I was only a baby, just being born and hardly knowing a thing—not about men who found you in Bethlehem or what the words *my love* really meant when one person understands them and the other does not. On a chair, you sat in the corner of the old man's home, staring not at me but at a piece of the floor beside me, almost seeing.

Often, I wonder how my body felt—split into 12 pieces—heavy in your hands. Did it feel as it did when it was still whole and beside you at night, in the quiet of Bethlehem? Did you kiss those parts of me when you sent them away as if you owned them, making some statement to Israel about which I couldn't care less? Did my hand, now separate from my body, feel any different than it did when knit to the rest of me? And when you held it before you sent it away, were you, for a moment, tricked? Did your fingers rise up my skin, expecting to feel a wrist and an arm, but find vapor instead?

When you watched those young men you hired take all of my parts away, did you hear my body calling backward, prying the silence open—*my love, my love, my love*—12 times over? When I died, I spoke these words to the ceiling. *My love*, I spoke, but you couldn't hear.

FICTION

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## April Bumgardner

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### ANNA OF THE TEMPLE

*Instructions for living a life:*

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished.*

*Tell about it.*

—Mary Oliver

Slightly bent, she drew her shawls loosely about her thin body. Otherwise, there was little else to belie her eighty-four years. Eighty-four years she had been on the earth, yet her eyes still sparkled. Her step was still lively. Yes, admittedly, her routine was set and her life likely appeared small, but the verve with which she arose each morning, scrubbed her face, and covered the kilometer to the temple was palpable and infectious. She greeted the same people each day on the way to the market, to deliveries, and on errands, and, of course, those who orbited the temple.

*Eighty-four years.* It was a long time to live, a long time to wait. But then, her people knew how to wait. Not always virtuously or patiently. Sometimes it was with bitterness or anger or accusation, but, oh, they could wait.

They had waited four hundred years in Egyptian slavery, their backs against hard stone or a leathery whip, their feet or knees deep in mud, their babies buried unceremoniously in watery graves or in impossibly arid spaces. They could wait. They had waited deep in exile as empire after empire owned them, brutalized them, kept them in darkness. They had waited.

But these days have felt different. It was inexplicable, really. A stirring within her. There were those who had taken to calling her a prophet. She could see things, certainly. Yet she marveled that others thought them so obscured. The glory of the Lord seemed so near, even in busy Jerusalem, even with the Romans storming about. There was beauty in the temple, in the lives of the people. She saw them. As she

passed through the courtyard, she knew who was coming to pray, to argue with a friend, to leave a tithe, to circumcise a newborn.

*Eighty-four years.*

She had married so young. Even younger than her cousin Rebecca, who was now eight years in Sheol. The seven years with Abijah were barely now in her memory. Had that young girl really been her? She remembered Abijah had carried a distinct smell, one that had comforted her at the loss of her stillborn child, but its exact scent had faded. Seven years of marriage. The Jewish number of completion, perfection. Is that why he had been taken from her? She knew how to wait. Seven times twelve is eighty-four. Twelve are the sons of Jacob. Even in her marriage and her current age, she is a daughter of Israel.

The old man Simeon, bless him, was waiting for the *consolation* of Israel. The prophet Anna, she thought, would wait for the *completion*, the perfection, of Israel.

Yes, she could wait. But even more, she could hope.

Her waiting had not left her bereft. She had her work while she waited. Her work was the prayers for her people; she tended and cared for the temple. She brought the bread to share, and sometimes, on those happiest of days, she was able to meet a new family, caress and hold a newborn. The hope of Israel lay in a new generation.

How did she know this?

It was like any other stirring in her heart. Some of them formed her prayers, and they all compelled her to watch, to keep watch.

Like Moses, who could turn his head in the desert, who from such a distance could feel more than see, that there was a bush burning which was different.

Moses had been a prophet.

And so was she, Anna of the temple.

Moses knew how to wait. Nor was his waiting passive. He had his work, his wife, his flocks. Even in the midst of his work, tending his flocks, he knew how to look. Moses turned aside.

There was a bush, burning.

And there was a voice.

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“Anna. Oh, Anna.”

Who was calling to her?

Something was peculiar in the desert. In the temple.

Here comes another new family. So young. Swaddled infant, a boy surely. Here comes another stirring within her. Such a great stirring. She was compelled to touch this family, to greet them, to turn aside and see what this great sight might be on an ordinary day of waiting in the temple.

*She* was Mary.

*He* was Joseph.

And *this*. *This one* was Immanuel. Oh! Can it be? With such a common name. *This* was Jesus. But with such a laden meaning! Could it be—the salvation of the Lord?!

In the desert, Moses sees the bush is burning.

Her own heart is aflame.

Such a voice. What might it have sounded like? Booming and resonant? Crackling and unclear? “This is holy ground.”

Such a baby. What might his future be? Resplendent? Ambitious? Or obscured? Impoverished? “This is holy firstborn.”

Moses hides his face. She cannot look away.

The shekinah of the Lord.

The shekinah of the Lord!

How did she know?

She beheld the Lord.

In the temple, Anna held God.

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**April Bumgardner** is a homeschooler and the author of *Immanuel: When God Was One of Us* and, more recently, the editor of *Emboldened by Christ: Women Writers on Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*. With a master's in Slavic Studies, April loves languages and the intersection of faith and literature. She lives in central Indiana.

FICTION

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*Kelly Duffy*

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## VISITING

I meet my gaze in the reflection of the plexiglass. The mascara stains I tried to wipe off in the car have faded into the red on my cheeks, and my once well-done ponytail is now a mess of static. I am a mess of static.

The sound of a heavy door pushing air into the room jolts me from my staring contest, and he walks in. Handcuffs. My chest flails, my cheeks flush. I shiver at the sound of metal meeting metal, coming closer to me, wrapped around the wrists of one of few men I once trusted the most in this lifetime. Any level of preparation I had for this moment is gone with my eventual exhale as the officer leads him to the seat across from me. Beyond the glass, he picks up the phone to the right, and I do the same.

I finally take my attention off the cuffs and see his face. He looks terrified of me, and I instantly feel the urge to throw the phone down and run. Run back out through the layers of security, past the mile-high gate that greeted me just minutes ago, and into the comfort of my car. I cannot leave him though, not yet.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

“I saw your pictures in the news. I read the article, I found the address, I got in the car, and I drove. I...I...” My words trail off my trembling lips and I desperately search for the right words. I need to process this, and evidently so does he. He furrows his brows and tucks his forehead into his palm, grasping at the ends of his hair. I notice then a cut tracing the curves of his knuckles, disappearing into his fingers. It is fresh, barely cared for, with hints of dried blood on its surface. I do not ask where it came from, I already know the answer. My eyes cannot help but fixate on it, like an optical illusion I’m hoping will change into something brighter. His voice breaks my trance.

“I am in the news? Now everyone knows. This...this is not how I wanted you to find out.”

A nervous laugh comes from deep inside of me.

“I find it hard to believe that you would want me, or anyone, to find out at all.”

He sighs, avoiding my glance.

“What is she saying about me, or did you just come out of the blue after God knows how long just to give me that look of disappointment? I have gotten my share of screams and threats and dirty looks so if that is the reason—”

I feel my fists slam onto the counter, and the officer looks over disapprovingly, but not surprised. I am guessing I am not the first person, or the last, to lose their temper on this side of the room.

“Why don’t you tell me what in the world you are doing here, instead of blurting out assumptions for the short time we have together?” I plead.

His eyes finally meet mine, briefly, then fall back to the table. I see the wrinkles surrounding them harden, as does his jaw. Now he is the angry one, but that much I accounted for. He always spoke his mind when a button was pushed, even in the slightest.

“Haven’t you heard? I am a monster, a demon. I am the root of all her pain, all her problems, and now I am out of the equation. It does not matter what I did or did not do. Nothing does now. Can I ask you something?”

I nod. The phone in my hand is trembling as I try to make sense of his words.

“Have I ever hurt you? Intentionally?”

I shake my head.

“Then why do you, and apparently the rest of this town, think I would ever do that to someone else?”

“I didn’t say whether I believed it or not” I try to explain. “That is not the point anymore, I just wanted to come and let you know that someone at least has faith—”

His laughter interrupts me. It is a bittersweet sight and sound, a view that I have missed for so long and never once grew tired of. A view that seems tainted now.

“What is it you think faith is going to do for me now?”

“Save you.”

He laughs again. I try not to close my eyes and let my tears escape, but they do. I fight the embarrassment that accompanies them and look up to see that his laugh, his smile, is gone. His mouth hangs open slightly, but no words come out. We stare at one another for a moment before I wipe what I hope is the last tear off my chin and take a deep breath.

“You always used to wear that cross around your neck, the one your father gave you.”

He nods.

“Why did you?”

“I don’t know, I liked it?”

“Okay then, why do you think he gave it to you?”

He sighs and begins to fidget with the phone cord. I try not to stare at the cuffs again and dodge glances around the room instead.

“He liked it? I do not know, what is the point, it is just a chain.”

I point at the handcuffs.



“Those are just chains too. The point is you chose the first one. Maybe you did just like it or it had sentimental value. I think you chose it, you wore it, because you believed in it.”

“Well, I sure don’t anymore.”

His eyes tell the whole story in that moment. I see anger fade to pain, regret turn to disappointment. His stare is past my face, past this room, into a not-so-distant memory. The one that brought him here. Both hands turn to fists, and he shakes his head. I watch his chest fall in a heavy sigh as he looks toward the officer at the door.

“You can walk away and never take a second glance at me; that is your prerogative.”

Those eyes hit mine now, and he cannot hide the gloss over them. His fists are still tight, one gripping the phone and one his neck. I see the scar on his knuckles begin to crack, break open and bleed. I see him start to break.

“I did not leave any bruises on her, but they have my name on them regardless. Maybe I did not always treat her the best, but I did not treat her the worst, yet that is what I am now known for. Where is the forgiveness, the justice? Where is the God you seem to have so much faith in as I rot in that cell?”

“He is waiting for you to stop trying to do this all on your own and admit you need his help. You have always been a stubborn man and I bet he knows you are not going to accept handouts; you are not going to accept anything you did not earn. I do not know if you earned this. But you did not earn a second chance, and he is gracious enough to give you one if you can suck up your pride and accept it. I have faith you are a better man than this, regardless of what is or is not true. He does too. Now we are just waiting for you to have that faith in yourself.”

I stare at his broken expression, study every line and every freckle. Time has been good to him on the outside at least. I am not certain I can say the same for the inside.

“Why did you come here?”

My head nods toward the tattoo on his forearm and he looks down too.

“I came because that is the pain I felt when I found out what happened, and I did not know what to do with it. I knew I had to do more than just sit with it. The needle would not stop dragging, the ache would not quit, until I parked my car outside. Until I sat down in front of you and prayed like I have never prayed before that you would just listen to me.”

He does not answer, and I do not add anymore to my sentiment. I softly kiss the palm of my hand and press it onto the glass between us. A small smile forms on his face, and he puts his palm up to meet mine. A single tear falls, but he does not try to hide it. He looks at the phone, then into my eyes.

“I am sorry.” His palm grabs at the glass and falls to the countertop.

“Time’s up.”

My eyes do not leave his as we set the phones down. The officer pulls him by the arm and stands him up, and he is forced to turn away from me. I hear the metal start to fade, and I watch his bowed head walk toward the door. He takes a final glance over his shoulder and nods before it opens, and again he is gone. Again, I stare at my reflection, but my eyes are no longer carrying the weight of the pain they walked in with. They glisten with hope, with peace, and with that in mind, I stand to leave.

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**Kelly Duffy** lives in Upstate New York. She pursued a career in nursing at a young age and has been blessed with the opportunity to help and care for others every day. Writing is her passion, along with drawing and photography. Kelly hopes the stories and poems that she shares help restore and ignite a little bit of faith in every reader.

FICTION

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*Diana Pollin*

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## RUNNING FROM MARY JANE

I ran—who wouldn't? I took the car, a beat-up Chevy SUV so dusty that you wouldn't know its original color, couldn't tell if it was black or dark blue or gray. It lurched when I turned the key and stalled. The dust of the desert settles on everything; it creeps into motors and acts like sandpaper. It covers everything as it eats its way in.

I cursed and tried again—this time I got the Chevy going. I don't know how the car was still alive, or me for that matter. It was, is, *her* car—Mary Jane's. I was, am, her husband. I turned the wheel and made for the gate. Right or left?

Running's fine, but where to when there's nothing to run to? I am out here in a no man's land which might be Hell, as in the Bible, but I am not sure which Bible; in fact, I am sure of nothing. When I was hocking encyclopedias, I read an article in one of them about some guys in a cave mistaking shadows for the real thing and it got me thinking. I mean, does looking at a neon sign in the shape of a cocktail glass really quench your thirst? Sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't. Still, the neon signs are all around, but they lead to nothing except more signs. The desert is a tricky place. It sends false signals.

The Chevy hit a bump in the dirt road, and I had to back up and go around. I hit the accelerator and the car moved like a lazy steer, but it moved. *If only I could get her onto the highway*, I told myself and I guess I was lucky because we were moving and the gate was in sight. I looked back and saw the gate and its metal arch with the word, *Pleroma*. I once asked Mary Jane what "Pleroma" meant, but she just smiled the way she always did, like she was sucking on a piece of fruit, and she told me that if I stuck around long enough, I would find out. Maybe that was her way of warning me. Night has fallen; in the desert it always falls fast.

When I said I was running away, I meant I wanted to run anywhere, provided that it was out, even if that meant driving in a circle, which

was what I ended up doing. Trouble is that when you go around in a circle, you postpone the inevitable—you just buy time. Once outside the gate, I turned north. Wherever I was going, or whatever I was going to, was a hell of lot better than what I had left. I even looked over my shoulder to make sure that the Pleroma-arch was behind me. Like I said, Mary Jane never told me what that word meant, but she never told me anything. But since coming upon the woodshed, I had an idea. The others saw what I saw in the woodshed, but the difference is the others didn't get away, and now they are skulls with eye sockets with snakes coming out of them.

Something ticked in the back seat, and I almost threw up. Not another rattler. Please God, anything but that! I slowed down. The ticking didn't stop. It was either the motor or a rattler. Today is the day of the snake. I inched my right hand into my pocket and slowly, slowly took out the Glock. I checked the back seat again and saw it was empty. I drove on, still heading north, to Vegas. I had enough gas and planned to sleep in the Chevy.

Then I got hungry with a gut-churning hunger that came upon me like there was no tomorrow. Also a rage to get drunk. I realized that I had not taken any money with me, so the Glock was going to come in handy for a holdup. Armed robbery. Never did that before. There's always a first time.

The nearest bank, 40 miles off in Clampton, was closed. Only one service station about five miles away, near enough and open all night, but Seth, the owner, was a crack shot, kept an AR at the cash register and never liked me. He'd be itchin' for an excuse. If I have to go out, it won't be because a filthy ex-veteran had a score to settle.

A 7-Eleven in the shopping center 12 miles south? I was traveling north. I put the Chevy in reverse and was about to make a U-turn when I remembered Al's bar, The Forbidden Fruit, just five short miles south, on the way to the 7-Eleven. One of the headlights had died. I drove slowly, barely making out the road. The neon signs blare out blindness; they kill even the shadows.

I had been to The Forbidden Fruit once before with Mary Jane, at the beginning of our marriage. She made a big fuss, got herself out like Elvira of the movies. Long witchy black dress with a plunging neck, eyeliner up to her hair roots, blood red lips; she had set her long black

hair so that it looked like a vampire in one of the old flicks. That woman could change from a dump to a princess in no time, but it was all for Al. I felt sidelined.

That time at his joint, Al couldn't do enough for my wife; he had been all over her, treating her like a queen, all giggly and flirty. They had filled the place with laughter. There was a drunk at the bar and there was Pearl, a frumpy blonde working the cash register, and they were hamming it up while I walked around like a little boy lost in a shopping mall. But I remembered something from that day, and that something was an ATM blinking in the corner, which was why I headed for The Forbidden Fruit. An ATM with the sign "Bethesda Bank, Las Vegas" on its screen. I thought it blinked at me that day; I thought it sent me a message that Bethesda Bank was the gift that kept on giving once I sprang loose from Mary Jane.

The Forbidden Fruit with its neon of a wine glass and snake curled around its stem came into view. I parked the Chevy; no one else was there. Good, that made it easier.

"Full moon," I said when I got out of the car. I howled like a wolf to calm my nerves. All I wanted was for Al to open up the ATM, nice and gentle, hand over the cash and forget all about me as I drove west to the coast. It was gonna be easy. Al is bald, thin, and walks with a shuffle, like he might be lame. I think his two front teeth are missing because you can hear the air rush out of his mouth when he speaks. And Pearl is a middle-aged tub of a woman. The drunk at the bar, if he is there, won't stand in my way. Easy-peasy. I got out of the car and went in.

Sure enough, Al was there, sitting at a table. He looked up at me with his black flinty eyes and threw a glance at Pearl sitting behind the cash register by the window. She nodded and smiled. Then she pulled open a drawer to make sure I got a glimpse of the pearl handle of a revolver. Lord Almighty! The woman was a mind-reader! Like Al. I looked at the blonde rat's nest on her head. She smiled again in the way that gangsters smile, like when they're telling you they know your racket. It wasn't gonna be as simple as robbing a baby. I started sweating and I sneezed because the AC was working overtime and I still wanted to bring off the hold-up. The ATM stood opposite the cash register.

Pearl smiled and said, "Let it go, son. You come to know."

I scowled because I didn't know what she was talking about. Pearl the mind-reader, wedged open the drawer a little wider to make sure I saw the revolver with her hand on it.

"Know what?" I asked growing impatient. The heat of Al's black eyes was on me, and Pearl's red-hot nails were traveling up and down the length of the drawer. I stared at the ATM, which was a mistake because I gave it all away.

Al shuffled over and put his hand on my shoulder. "Drop it, son. And sit down. You were about to do a really stupid thing."

I noticed how flat Al's face was, like a snowman's with two buttons instead of a carrot for a nose and no chin. His hand was cold and something about him made me shiver, like he was not human but someone's creation. Pearl snapped the drawer shut; I guess she knew that I wasn't going anywhere. I dropped into the chair, and Al sat down beside me—his hand gripped my forearm, and I could still feel the cold seep through the sleeve of my jacket. I looked at Pearl, and I suppose my look was sort of desperate because she beamed a kind motherly smile back at me, like I was a little lamb that had come back after straying off. The drunk at the bar farted. Pearl walked over and set down a bottle of whiskey.

"Your last, Arch," she said as she walked back to her stool at the cash register.

"Yeah, my last until the next." Arch burped.

I got the impression they were putting on the bartender-barfly number to reassure me or something. I felt Al tapping my arm. I looked down at the squiggles on the formica table, not because I was ashamed, but because I couldn't decide if he disgusted or fascinated me with his beady eyes and his chin that was not there. I guess I preferred to look at his shadow reflected on the floor.

His voice came out like a whistle. "You were set to do a dumb thing, son. Lucky I was here, an' Pearl's a crack shot. Now, I'm gonna warn you. Pearl used to do work with the circus. A clown threw an apple high...high in the air and Pearl sent up a trail of buckshot. Pow!

Applesauce! Never missed. Why, you know, son, I betcha she could hit—”

“Why are you calling me son?” I raised my head just high enough to see how his beady eyes slanted with their lids half-closed. His features seemed to disappear in a riot of flab, and when he spoke, he showed a red tongue. All I saw were his eyes.

“Night after night they reveal knowledge.” The drunk belched out at the mirror behind the bar.

“Hang on, son. Don’t you move!” Al glided over to the man at the bar. I got a look at him in the mirror. Skinny. Sunken eyes and sallow skin, like every drunk. Not a bad face. Long, fine. The type of face you see in church paintings. Long brown hair reaching his collar bone. His clothes weren’t bad either. He was wearing an Indian-style pelt jacket and a brown cowboy hat. He filled me with pity as much as Al made me ill.

“It’s alright, Arch,” Al whispered as he slid out of the chair and walked over to the drunk. “It’s alright, Arch,” he repeated. He put his arm around the drunk. “Now say what you gotta say and shut up. Say what you gotta say to our young friend here, then forever hold your peace.”

Arch took a swig from the bottle and looked at me in the mirror. Then he gave me a sad, begging smile. Pearl slipped off her stool and came over. She told the drunk, “You always had the right word for everyone when we were all together in the circus. So give it your best.”

I perked up. “You were all circus performers?”

Pearl looked straight at me. No mirror intermediary for her. Large nose, large mouth. A ton of makeup doing nothing to improve her. There was nothing flat and indefinite about the woman.

“You bet. And Arch was the ringmaster.”

“And Mary Jane?” I asked. My hunger had subsided. It’s funny how fear can cancel hunger away.

“You tell ’im, Al,” Pearl said. She had tucked the Colt in a holster and let me see it in a big way.

“He ain’t ready for it yet,” Al rejoined, sounding annoyed. “Arch is going to have his sound out, Pearl. It comes over him, like the remainders of a feast he once had. Words are all he’s got now.”

“Least I can do nowadays to get a few laughs.” Arch chuckled. Another swig. He looked at me in the mirror. In his spongy brain, he must have recollected something.

“No one is laughing at you Arch,” Pearl said soothingly. “Go to it.”

“Ok. If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand lose its skill. No one can blame me for trying. No one can blame me and...they still forgot Jerusalem and its white walls which shone like silver in the noonday sun. And its streets shaded by palms. Old men praying as the sun went down. Its women of wondrous beauty standing in doorways where jugs of cool water tempered the heat. On the hill they call Mount of Olives, when the heat of the day has fallen, you can see the Spirit rise like peacock plumes, and there are always stars in the heavens, unseen, unsullied by corrupted eyes. The wolves and the lions howl, I heard them as I blotted out the shouts of the populace. Hang ’im high. Hang ’im high and dry. I chuckled. From dust to dust. I was going to find out if it was true. If I forget you, O Jerusalem... They brought me ’fore the cops, the lawyers, the courts, and their total bullshit. A good prosecutor can convict a ham sandwich. If I forget you, O Jerusalem... And I prayed. Can’t blame me for trying, Father. I knew that it was all going to bomb, but the last demon to escape from the box was Hope. But what was I gonna tell them, Father? When I conquered the evil desert dust? What was I gonna tell them? That there’s a path in the desert, leading from Nazareth to Jerusalem?”

Arch’s head dropped on the counter. Pearl and Al looked at each other in the mirror.

“I guess every drunk comes up against his limit,” Pearl said sadly.

I got up to go. There must be other bars to hold up. All I wanted was out, but Al had other ideas.



“One minute, son. I’m not finished with you.” He shuffled back to me. To avoid looking at him, I stared at the mirror, but I heard the whistle in his voice. “Now suppose you tell me about Mary Jane and why you were running from her because, as the Lord is my witness, you were running.”

“Why should I tell you anything? Who are you to me?”

“I’m afraid, son, you got no choice.” Al said and flicked his head in the direction of Pearl. “Son, you see that Coke glass on the shelf. I’d say it’s about 15 to 20 feet from where we are sitting. Show ’im Pearl.”

I looked, and in a matter of seconds, the glass was blown to shards.

“Now, son, you’ve got some talking to do, and it’s in your interest ’cause I can help you understand, that is, if you want to listen and if your brain is nimble.”

He touched my arm; I felt the cold. I couldn’t look straight at him, so I looked at the mirror where his image appeared half hidden by the crumpled heap of Arch moving and moaning. Pearl was still there, with a smile that just was about to explode into a cackle. I took a deep breath and said, “OK, this is it. I am running for my life. I am running because I live with a rattlesnake. I am not making this up...”

“Now, hold on, son. Mary Jane’s a good woman. Remember you showed up at her place wanting yard work and she took you on. A hired man, probably with a record. Then she married you. You were chosen. Remember?”

I nodded. Al knew all about me. There was a lilting treachery in his voice. I was scared, so scared that all I could hear was my heart pounding away; but I was aware that Arch at the bar shook himself out of his stupor and was moving away, out the back door.

“Shall we let him go?” Pearl yelled across the room, but Al ignored her. He was too busy giving me the eye to eye.

“Go on, son. Like I said, you were chosen.” He hissed.

“She’s doing this to me; she’s done this to others. She’s got a woodshed way behind the house, almost in the woods. She told me never to enter. Well, today I went in and got the shock of my life. I saw the snake show. Skulls stacked up on four shelves, with wormy critters writhing inside and out of the eye sockets, the mouths with their teeth still, the holes where the ears were...”

Al touched me with his cold hand, “Time to let you in on a few things, son. You don’t know very much about Mary Jane, do you? Let’s say you got married because you thought she would take care of you. Like the others. Yes, that’s right. Those 11 others were all her husbands. And you are the twelfth. Don’t ask me how I know, I just know. Well, I’m gonna give you a little insight. Remember I said Pearl, Mary Jane, Arch, and I were all working in the circus? Now, how I read into other men’s thoughts is something that you will understand after you hear me out. See here, son. When you think of a circus, what sort of acts do you think of?”

“I don’t know.” I was growing weary.

“It’s on the tip of your tongue, son. The snake act. Billed as Maria Jehanna Snake Goddess of Thebes—you know that city in ancient Egypt? They worshipped serpents as gods, divine creatures of knowledge. Powerful magicians, those ancients, reduced to circus performers. Can change men into snakes.”

I bolted up. “And you, what were you? Pearl the Gun Lady, Arch the Ringmaster, and Mary Jane the Snake Act. What was your act in the circus? Lion tamer?”

Al laughed. “No! No! You’re not thinking far or fast enough. You’re thinking like an ordinary man. Now there, I just gave it all away.”

“Like you’re all from another planet, and...?”

“Not far nor fast enough. What you saw in Mary Jane’s outhouse were the others. The happy few which you may or may not join. I’ll let you go now, but where you go depends on you, son. Free will. Satan’s gift to Adam, dolled up as intelligence. Well, son, you got two choices. Follow your free will, which will lead you to that ATM two miles south, stuck between the shoe store and the electronic goods outlet right before

the 7-Eleven. I don't advise it, son. The Pinkerton people have already stopped there, and there are cameras. Or back to Mary Jane's. Like I said, it's up to you."

With some difficulty, he got up from his chair, as I got up from mine, but first I asked, "What's in it for you? What has she turned you into?"

We walked to the door together, and the only footfall I heard was my own. I dared not look at him, but heard his windy voice, "Do you have eyes and fail to see? Son, I'm afraid you will have to do a lot of deep thinking for yourself. I dropped a hint, but it looks like I'll have to repeat myself. Mary Jane has the power to turn men into snakes and—"

I turned away, didn't want to hear him out because I knew the answer. The flat face, the hiss, the horror. I got to the car, trembling. Got into the driver's seat and turned the key. Nearly jumped out of my skin because I wasn't alone. Arch had sneaked in; he was in the passenger's seat, and he didn't appear drunk. In a calm voice he said to me, "I needed a ride. And, son, you need me."

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As a writer, historian, and pedagogue, **Diana** travels and lives between Europe and the US. She has written three books—one novel and two non-fiction—on culture in Occupied France. Recent interests concern Christian themes for short stories. Please visit [villaaairbel1940.fr](http://villaaairbel1940.fr) for more information.

FICTION

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*Jeffrey Wald*

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## FRIGGIN' DVOŘÁK

I see you lookin' at my tats. Every splash of ink tells a tale. Take this serpent here on my right forearm. My nephew was having a rough go of it, his dad having died in that farm accident, and his mom, my sister Diane, having a real hard time getting out of bed after that. So I'd told my sister I'd take Ronnie, that's my nephew, on a bike trip.

We left Casselton about nine in the morning and hit Medora about four and a half hours later. I'd long ago taken to "roughin' it" and packed light and didn't much care for camp sites or being around people when I was trying to be out in the wild. I knew a little god forsaken dirt path, not even gravel, just outside Teddy Roosevelt Park where I could take the bike in about 15 miles, far away from everybody.

We drove in there, tossing and jumbling the whole way, little Ronnie loving every bit of it, and then I finally pulled over and we set up camp and had some beans and jerky and decided to go explore a bit.

We set off toward a little hill a way off so we could just sit there and gaze at the valley awhile. And then I heard it. Just to my left, amongst the cacti and scrub grass and little pebbly dirt. I heard it before I saw it and my body lurched and I tried to yell, but it was already too late. The gol dang rattler, brown and grey and camouflaged in that wasteland—that gol dang awful, beautiful wasteland—lashed out and bit Ronnie in the left calf. I pulled out my 9 mm then, and I shot that gol dang sonofabitch three times in the head, which solved that problem, but now I had a bigger problem, that being my nephew, little Ronnie, with a snake bite out in the gol dang wilderness.

So I grabbed him in both my arms and started running back to camp, which was still 15 miles from civilization—if you can call Medora civilization, which you probably can't, but maybe there was a doctor staying in one of those motels; and I'm thinking, God, my sis, my lil sis, my own flesh and blood, Diane, she's never getting out of bed

again. And I aim to do a little good in the world, just a smidge, and the gol dang devil comes out and rears its head at me.

Well, I'll skip to the end. Ronnie turned out ok. They airlifted him from Medora to Bismarck and gave him a shot or two of antivenom, and he didn't die, and he actually thought the whole thing was quite the adventure. Funny how kids are. But after I'd had the screaming lecture from my sister, which I took like a good brother, and said goodbye to Ronnie, I went straight to the ink shop and got this here rattler to remind me that the gol dang devil is always prowling and lurking about, ready to strike. I especially like the rattle. When I'm in a real meditative mood, which I am from time to time, I'll just sit there and stare at it, and I swear, honest to God, if I'm real quiet and real meditative, I can hear the gol dang rattle, like a maraca. Like a low hum over the whole world.

I see you looking at the mushroom cloud on my left bicep. Well, like I said, every splash of ink tells a tale. That one there included. So my best buddy Earl and I had been in a long-standing argument about whether another A-bomb would get dropped. This was in the early '80s, before the Curtain came down and all that. There was still a lot of genuine fear and hysteria over nuclear disaster. Especially if some gol dang crazed dictator in some hellhole-ish place in the Middle East or the Far East got their hands on one, all bets were off. Now, I always argued there was enough reason and commonsense left in the universe to stop nuclear warfare. Once we knew what it'd done to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, no one would ever use it again. But good ole Earl, he wasn't convinced. He said, *Haven't you ever read the Bible, buddy? There was a brother named Abel and a brother named Cain, he'd preach. One brother was good, the other bad. And do you know what happened?* he'd say time and again. *That mother-f—in' devil Cain killed his brother. And you know who founded civilization?* he'd ask. *Cain. And you know who our common parent is? Cain.*

Well, to make a long story short, Earl won the bet. Well technically I haven't lost yet, but it's inevitable. You see, Earl was gunned down in some gol dang little bar in Watford City. Watford City! He was minding his own business, chatting with a local name Denise, I think, when Denise's old guy came in fresh off parole and saw Earl standing there by his old lady and shot him, one time, point blank in the chest. Gol dang makes me want to weep even now. Earl was a good one. Here we'd survived Vietnam together and all its gol dang snakes, only

to meet the serpent again in North Dakota of all places. And that's when I knew there was no stopping it. The mushroom cloud will rise again. It's inevitable. Only a matter of time. Which is why I got this here tattoo, as a bitter, brutal reminder of that.

Gol dang it, I miss that guy. Sometimes in the middle of the night, when I wake up, dark thoughts come to me. And I try to close my eyes, to hear his voice. To remember it. His gravelly yet calm voice amidst the shouting and the cussing and machine gun fire of that forsaken place. And it's all quiet. Eerily silent. And then suddenly, BOOM! A single explosion. Like a gol dang pistol shot. Or the booming of a buffalo drum. Or could it be the solitary blast of an A-bomb? It sounds like the whole gol dang world just cracked in half. And that's scary you know. Because you know the sound I hear after? Nothing. The sound of silence.

But my favorite tattoo? That would be this one here, on my back, between my shoulder blades. You don't know who that is? Hell, world's gone to shit when you don't know who Antonín Leopold Dvořák is. How'd a scum bag, hell-raiser like me get a tattoo of the greatest composer of all time between my shoulder blades? Well, like I said, every splash of ink tells a tale. This one's no different.

So this was back in '97. Admittedly I was feeling low, lower than I'd ever felt before, because of Leslie—that sweet woman, that most woman of women, all flesh and joy and dark hair and her teeth always blazing a smile, her having been in the grave only a couple days—and that gol dang drunk driver in his F250 XLT 7.3L Powerstroke Diesel destroying all the beauty and music in the world with his gol dang engine creating hell on earth and his deciding to take eight shots of Wild Turkey and then get behind the wheel and run down Leslie—sweet, sweet Leslie, soul pure as a cloudless North Dakota night when all the stars in the galaxy are shining. Ran her down just east of Dickinson. I was low then. Way low. Deepest pit of despair and hell I'd ever been in and ever hope to be in. That kind of darkness you can't walk out of. When all the noise in the world alternates between an Iron Maiden song and soul-crushing silence. And there's only one thing to do when that happens. Get on the bike and ride.

And that's what I did. Got on the bike and rode, straight through, to the gol dang Grand Canyon. So there I was sitting on the edge of one of them grey and red rocks, my feet hanging over the side, a drop of

what felt like a mile or two immediately beneath me. I looked out over that hole, that huge hole, that almost unbelievable hole that seemed endless. And that's how I felt. That there was a gol dang Grand Canyon-sized hole in my chest. And a million laborers with a million shovels couldn't fill the hole in a million years. And that a million steps a day for a million years wouldn't get you across it.

Now I'm not saying I was thinking of jumping. Because I don't think that's something you think about. But I did start dreaming about falling. Letting myself go and falling into that deep, deep void. That nothingness. I closed my eyes and let the breeze blow over my face.

And then I heard it. Gol dang laughter right behind me. I knew immediately it was some gol dang kids, not a care in the world. And I looked back ready to glare at them. There were five of them. Three boys and two girls. I knew right away they were Europeans, you know, just by their clothes and hair and stuff, how they carried themselves. And I was just about ready to yell at them, to get the hell off my rock, you know, since it was the gol dang Grand Canyon after all and surely there were other places to have their little orgy. But right as I was opening my mouth, they turned it on. Turned him on. And it was like a lightning bolt to my soul. How to describe it? Power. That's how. It's like this guy had somehow harnessed power, had somehow reached out and bottled the power and music of thunder and the wild ocean surf and icebergs cracking into the sea and earthquakes splitting and bellowing and a heard of bison, yes, millions of them running crazy on the prairie like they used to—gol dang it, what a sound—and even the hum of being itself, of stars hanging there in the sky, and butterfly wings, silent to our ears but pitch perfect I am sure when beaten if we could but hear it, and even grass growing. Yes, even the music of grass. As if this man hadn't so much *composed* a song as written down what was already there, like a stenographer in a courtroom.

So my heart leaped, and my soul leaped, and gol dang my whole being leaped then, and I said, *What's that?* And the teeny boppers, those Euro kids, sort of looked at me funny, and then looked at each other, and didn't say anything. So I pointed at the boombox they'd set on a rock and asked again, *What is that?* And one of the kids, a dude who looked sort of like Sting, back when he was still Gordon Matthew Thomas Sumner, looked at me and said, *Eet's friggin' Dvořák, man.* And I just sat there then, taking it in, taking him in, taking in the

music—that glorious music—and I turned back around and looked back over the canyon, that rightly named Grand Canyon, only now it didn't seem so endless. Didn't seem so infinite. Gol dang, you won't believe me, but I swear to God, I felt then like one step and I'd be across it. One step and I'd be on the other side. That's how I felt then.

Later that day I road down to Flagstaff and found a parlor, and me and the guy had to go to the public library to find a picture of Dvořák, but we found it at last. Which is why I have this magnificent ink of him on my back.

Know what I like best about it? Sure, he looks kinda like a Sturgis biker, crazed half bald head like he's just taken off a do-rag, wild-ass shaggy beard, even that suit with the funny tie-thingy, looking like a five-year-old boy whose mom dressed him up for church. But none of that's it. It's his eyes. Gol dang most intense eyes I ever saw. You can't tell what he's staring at or glaring at. But whatever it is, he sees it. Sees right to its innermost core. I suppose that's how he made that gol dang beautiful music he did. By seeing so intensely, so clearly.

And that's why Dvořák sits right alongside the other most important ink in my life. The one here to the left of Leslie, and up there on the right shoulder blade the one of Earl, in his Vietnam fatigues. And this bison head, gol dang, I like that one. What a powerful beast. Down there lower on my back, Sitting Bull, majestic, magnificent, noble. And of course the Virgin, here in her starry blue mantel. And I like them all. But my favorite will always be Dvořák. Gol dang friggin' Dvořák.

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**Jeffrey Wald** is an attorney and writer. His writing has appeared in journals such as *Dappled Things*, *The Windhover*, *Touchstone*, *New Oxford Review*, *The Front Porch Republic*, *The University Bookman*, and *Genealogies of Modernity*.



FICTION

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*Joseph A Farina*

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## RELIGIOUS STUDIES

The Society of Mary of the Most Holy Rosary met each Thursday after school, at the rectory of Our Lady of Mercy Church, to pray the rosary and to clean votive candles. Kerosene and *Hail Marys* filled the air as we cleaned out old wax and inserted new candles in the red and white votive holders. All the while Mary Jane would be fingering her rosary, leading us in holy work and holy prayer.

I had joined the blessed Society to be nearer to Mary Jane, as had Gerry and John—the only other boys in the group. She of the ten gold stars for perfect daily attendance for mass and communion during the Holy Mother’s month of May. Of all the students in Sister’s grade eight class, she was closest to Sister and closest to God. She of the angora sweaters, showing pubescent roundness that made the boys nudge and the girls envious. I endured weeks of *Holy Mary, Mother of Gods*, praying for this sinner to be liked by her.

Religion, piety, and prayer lost out to the muscles and football of a high school junior. A protestant! From public school! And, though I took some comfort from my Baltimore Catechism, which claimed that he was cursed to burn forever in Hell, I knew that in my portion of the living Earth, that it was he who was blessed and I the one in the inferno.

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**Joseph A Farina** is a retired lawyer and award-winning poet, in Sarnia, Ontario, Canada. His poems have appeared in *Philadelphia Poets*, *Tower Poetry*, *The Windsor Review*, and *Tamaracks: Canadian Poetry for the 21st Century*. He has two books of poetry published, *The Cancer Chronicles* and *The Ghosts of Water Street*.

FICTION

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*Jay Simons*

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## RING AROUND THE COLLAR

*Function over form*, the priest told himself as he pulled out onto the street in his old gray Volkswagen Golf. It wasn't the nicest car he had owned, but it was functional, enabling him to run errands around town and administer the sacrament to housebound parishioners. He was obligated, of course, to be modest in his expenditures, though he had never been one for conspicuous displays anyway. The only adornment hung from the narrow neck of the rearview mirror: a plastic crucifix that suspended itself at impossible angles whenever he made a turn or ran into a rough stretch of road. On this Monday afternoon, the crucifix swayed to the left as he pulled into the parking lot of the religious supply shop. After this stop, it would be on to the grocery store.

In his mid-20s, Father Patrick was three years into the priesthood. He was of slightly above-average height and had jet-black hair that curled about his ears. He possessed a certain stoutness of frame that had made him an early pick for touch football games at the seminary. With eyes that were always smiling, his face seemed to some to broadcast simple-mindedness, though others would insist that he looked naturally benevolent—the bishop, for example, had once described his face as “positively beatific,” proclaiming him to have been born to be a man of the cloth. While just as benevolent as the next priest, he knew that appearances didn't always reflect inner truth, and he sometimes secretly resented having to live up to expectations created by forces beyond his control. Nevertheless, he tried his best to do so, and generally succeeded.

Father John, his old priest, had passed away not long after Patrick had taken his vows. When the young priest was tasked with taking his place, he had been thrilled at the prospect of serving his hometown parishioners. But when he returned as an ordained priest, it was as though he had grown a third arm. He had expected to find it advantageous to already know many of his parishioners, but he had instead discovered the discomfort of familiarity. Almost everyone was more guarded, more formal, more polite. No more unwary smiles. No more “Hey, Patrick” from his former classmates and teachers. He couldn't stand it.

As Father Patrick got out of the car, he brushed some lint from his black slacks, trying to ignore the itch enveloping his right arm. His doctor had diagnosed the rash on it as eczema and prescribed an over-the-counter corticosteroid ointment. He had instructed the priest not to scratch the area but conceded that he wouldn't be human if he didn't give in and do so every once in a while. So far, he had resisted the urge with the long-suffering grace of a saint—not out of any desire to prove the physician wrong but due to a discipline that had long upheld his sense of self-denial. He had applied the last of the ointment before leaving the rectory; it helped, but there were still times that he had to grit his teeth to keep from scratching. His long sleeves were not doing him any favors in that regard, though the gray cotton shirt was light and loose enough. His clerical collar was threaded through the shirt's downturned collar, displaying a square of white at his throat. He had left behind his too-small ankle-length Roman cassock—that garment that garnered sideways glances whenever he wore it outside of church functions. After some deliberation, he had decided against blue jeans; that, he knew, would be a bridge too far.

Father Patrick had changed out of his cassock that morning after officiating a funeral for a lapsed Catholic. He had held a mass and a graveside service at the request of the man's children, who were parishioners of his. The last of the church's candles had been burned during the mass, which is what brought the priest to stop number one: Divinity Church Supply.

At the entrance, he held the door open for an older woman whose powder-blue perm barely came up to his chest. She thanked him with a smile as she bustled inside. *Bless you*, Father Patrick mouthed in silent benediction. Save for when he bestowed signs of the cross at mass, he never made an outward show of blessing people. He did it quietly, in the privacy of his heart.

Father Patrick smiled at the pretty, red-haired clerk behind the glass counter against the wall as she welcomed the older woman. Coming in on the latter's heels, he received, in lieu of a verbal greeting, a polite nod.

*Bless you.*

In her blood-red blouse and black skirt, the clerk reminded him of Theresa, a girl he had dated in high school. They'd gone on a couple walks in the park, on one of which he had worked up the nerve to kiss her. Not long after, she had dumped him for Robbie Robertson, the

biggest goof-off in school. They had ended up getting married and moving to Los Angeles.

As Father Patrick perused the packages of long wax candles, he wondered how his life would have turned out differently if he had acted the clown instead of being the average, quiet, studious child. He wouldn't be standing in Divinity Church Supply trying to decide between a 12-pack and a 24-pack of candles, that much was certain. He might have been the one to marry Theresa. He might have been living in Los Angeles.

Selecting the smaller pack, he thought about how Robbie's life had turned out. After graduation, Robbie had continued cultivating his clownish behavior in college—probably because that's what he had been expected to do—and made a career of it. He was an up-and-coming comedian, or had been, until the day that he sat in a cramped dressing room at the back of a comedy club in California and put a bullet through his temple.

Father Patrick walked up to the counter and beamed beneficently at the clerk. Her eyes dropped, down to where he had brought the package of candles to rest awkwardly against his waist. He quickly lifted the package and handed it to her with an apologetic look. Shifting from foot to foot, she tossed it across the scanner and into a plastic bag as swiftly as if the candles had already been lit.

"Have you been having a good day?" Father Patrick tried to keep the embarrassment from his voice.

"Mmm-hmm," she replied through closed lips, avoiding eye contact as she pushed the bag toward him. When he didn't take it right away, she picked it up and held it out to him. "Here you are, Father."

"Thank you, my child," he said, taking the bag. Her eyes flickered over his, and he felt even more awkward for having called her "child." He was, after all, probably no older than she. Stepping quietly toward the exit, he wondered if he was blushing.

It was because of their closeness in age, he decided, that the "Father" had thrown him off. The appellation still felt cumbersome to him, like an appendage that had been grafted onto his body. It wasn't necessary to live, and it could, with some difficulty, be removed, but a horrible scar would be left in its place, inevitably making him appear even less human than before. It was proving difficult to get used to.

These thoughts had become more frequent during his third year as a man of the cloth. Father Patrick hated to admit it, but he was losing himself. The Patrick part was being choked out by a hand that both was and wasn't his. He wasn't prepared to die to himself; he wanted to live *and* be a priest. He was holding onto hope that he wouldn't have to sacrifice one for the other. The fact was, though, he was nearing the end of his rope.

As Father Patrick exited the store, he racked his brain trying to remember the last occasion on which he had carried on a secular conversation that consisted of anything more than a couple mechanical remarks. With his mind thus occupied, his feet failed to navigate the curb, and he lost his balance, pitching forward onto the concrete. The bag containing the pack of candles ended up beneath his knees, keeping them from scraping against the cement, though the candles cracked in half as a result. He rose to his feet, unharmed and holding a bag of broken candles. Having no desire to go back inside to purchase more, he decided that he would look for some at stop number two: the grocery store. He mentally reviewed his shopping list—candles, apples, toilet paper, anti-itch ointment. There was something else; he would surely remember it when he got there.

As he guided the gray Golf through the city streets, out of the corner of his eye, he would see the crucifix swaying with every turn he made, a reminder of who he had become. Father Patrick. It was a name that screamed not just “priest” but “Irish-Catholic priest,” though in reality, he was of English stock. His ancestors must have been rolling in their graves at his baptism. Whenever someone erroneously assumed him to be Irish, he usually remained silent. Otherwise, his good-natured correction was typically met with consternation or confusion.

Father Patrick pulled into the parking lot of Fleischman's Foodliner and found a spot one row back from the entrance of the store. When he turned off the car, the crucifix was still swaying subtly, as though its natural state were one of insensible motion. He reached up to steady it, but when he released it, it started swinging more perceptibly than before. Mildly annoyed, he slid it off the rearview mirror and placed it in the black plastic cupholder between the seats. It was a hot day, and he could feel the sweat on his neck soaking into the soft fabric of his shirt collar and threatening to stain the clerical collar beneath it. After regarding himself in the now-bare mirror for a moment, he removed the immaculate white strip and slipped it into the pocket of his slacks.

As Father Patrick got out of the car, he remembered the first time he had put on the collar. He'd had to take off the faded polka-dot tie that he had worn to his last dinner with some non-seminary friends. The collar had

felt so light by comparison, locking gently around his throat. Now, it felt bulky in his pocket, pressing unnaturally against his upper thigh as he walked, forcing him to shorten his stride. He looked like he was either limping or lugging something invisible across the parking lot.

He felt his hand at his throat. It was an unconscious action that he caught himself performing whenever he wasn't wearing his collar. He thought of it as his "throat-touching habit," which always brought to mind the nun jokes he had heard at the seminary. He suppressed a smile, remembering the one about the nuns and the blind man. The naked nuns had no idea the man was there to hang the blinds and could see just fine. There were times that he wanted to make jokes, but they never made it past his lips. People just didn't properly appreciate humor in the clergy; it was like they thought priests were somehow breaking their vow by being funny.

The automatic doors parted before Father Patrick, and cold air caressed his face in welcome, carrying the smells of produce and cardboard. Temporarily intoxicated by the sensuous press of air, he forgot about the step up just inside the entrance that elevated the floor, effectively situating the checkout stands on a platform. He stumbled, eyes widening with the rush of blood into his head as he plummeted. He caught himself with his hands, knees making brief contact with the hard floor and collar biting into his thigh.

"Watch your step, sir," he heard from the row of cashiers to his left. By the time he had hoisted himself back up and looked in that direction, all three cashiers were facing away from him, serving customers. The blonde hair piled high on the bent head of the nearest one struck him as familiar, but he continued past the registers, admonishing himself for not paying more attention. At least I wasn't carrying any candles yet, he thought.

After a brief period of wandering, Father Patrick entered an aisle containing outdoor items where, between some grilling implements and an amply stocked section of flashlights of all lengths and intensities, he found a very small selection of candles. There were four packages, each containing six pieces. He grabbed one pack and was trying to decide whether to grab another when he noticed someone standing just a few feet to his left: a long-haired man in a sleeveless shirt turning a spatula over in his hands. Father Patrick pictured the man with shorter hair, and he realized that this was someone he had gone to high school with.

"Frank! How are you?"

The man turned, surprised. Recognition dawned.

“Hey, man! I mean, Father. ‘Cause you’re a priest now, right?”

*Yes, he thought, but I’ve always been a man.*

“That’s right,” he said.

While Frank looked him up and down through slitted eyes, Father Patrick’s mind swelled with decade-old memories of when he had been just a high school kid. He began to reminisce about the time a mutual friend of theirs had brought his myna bird to school and accidentally let it out in English class.

“And Mrs. Fitzpatrick was chasing it around the room, and the whole time, it was squawking, ‘Bad dog. Bad—’”

“I remember. Hey, did you hear about Robbie?”

“Yes,” Father Patrick said, suppressing his annoyance at the interruption.

“Man, suicide. I’m sorry.”

*Why was he apologizing to me?* Father Patrick wondered.

“I’ve said some prayers for him,” Frank said. “Oh.” He caught himself. “Is that okay? I mean, considering...”

“Certainly,” Father Patrick said, hastily thrusting his priest hat back on. “There are almost always mitigating circumstances when it comes to suicide. He was a human being, after all. I think about him often, and I’ve prayed on his behalf.”

“Well, if *you* have, then it must be okay.”

Father Patrick said farewell. His arm itched as he watched Frank walk away, the spatula banging against his leg with each step. The conversation left him with a familiar empty feeling.

He limped to the end of the aisle. A bevy of Mylar balloons emblazoned with “Happy Birthday!” crowded a festive display near the bakery. He stopped. That’s what he had forgotten. He blinked rapidly against the

burning in his eyes. With the last-minute funeral that morning, and everything else, he had forgotten that today was his birthday. He'd meant to buy himself a small indulgence—a slice of cake, maybe a donut. Now, though, he had no appetite for sweets.

Father Patrick turned away and wandered through the paper goods, absentmindedly running his fingers along the top of his right arm for a few seconds before he realized what he was doing and stopped. He looked at the nearly bare shelf beside him. The store was almost out of toilet paper. He had intended to buy some, but the only brand remaining was one called Pure Heaven. He couldn't bear the thought of carrying that around the store, so he moved on.

The itch in his arm reminded Father Patrick that he was out of ointment, so he made his way to the pharmacy section. He was passing the pain relievers when he heard a thud followed by a coarse "Goddamnit!" He didn't wince, didn't react, had no impulse to chastise, chasten, or rebuke. He knew that this was something people said.

The exclamation had come from a gaunt-faced man who was now holding a broken bottle, a narrow sliver of missing plastic revealing the contents: a host of slender, circular gummy vitamins. Another man was hissing at him and furtively eyeing Father Patrick; this man the priest recognized as a former member of the Church. The first man turned to Father Patrick with a chastened look.

"I'm sorry, Father."

Father Patrick grasped at his own throat, through which, he was palpably aware, no words of reproach had passed. His thumb and index finger came away slightly damp. "I forgive you," he said, feeling chastened himself. His hand unconsciously formed a circle as he rubbed his moist fingertips together. Seeing that the men were standing beside the anti-itch ointments, he abandoned his intention to purchase some.

"Take care, Darren," he said to the cursing man's companion, adding a strained mental "Bless you."

"You too, Father," the man replied, seemingly surprised by the use of his name.

As he trudged toward the produce section, Father Patrick's arm was itching fiercely, and he fantasized about rolling his sleeve up and



vigorously rubbing a pineapple back and forth between his elbow and wrist. Instead, he allowed himself a quick scratch through his sleeve with two fingers, a single swipe in each direction. *I'll just grab some apples and then go home.*

In front of a rack holding Red Delicious apples—his favorite kind—were the only two patrons in the produce section. A bald, middle-aged man was rummaging through the apples, periodically picking one out and handing it to the woman in a beanie cap beside him for inspection.

“I don’t think I want that one,” she said to the latest offering. The man retracted it with a grunt and held out another.

As Father Patrick walked up and stood beside her, he couldn’t resist saying to her, against his better judgment, “Don’t let him tempt you, Eve.”

The man continued scouring the apples, but the woman started laughing. She turned toward Father Patrick, whose cheeks stretched into a grin. He saw the glow of his own face reflected in hers in the instant before she fixed her eyes on the source and abruptly brought a hand to her mouth to stifle her laughter. He didn’t know her; apparently, though, she recognized him.

“I’m sorry,” she sputtered.

“It’s not a sin to laugh,” Father Patrick said, his face possessed by a neutral expression.

“I know. If I’d have known—”

“If you’d have known that it was a priest making the joke, you wouldn’t have laughed at all?” he said, feeling a pang of envy for poor Robbie. The woman squirmed. “I understand,” he added, and she turned away.

He brought his hand to his neck and noticed that all the sweat had evaporated, leaving it dry and cold. With a dull smile, he departed, thinking about his bare Adam’s apple and tasting poison.

As he made his way to the front of the store, taking long, slow, painful strides, the itch reached an unwonted intensity. Casting aside his saintly restraint, he pulled up his sleeve and scratched his arm with the same fierceness with which it itched, not stopping until long after the sensation

had subsided. He expected to find that he had bloodied the appendage, but to his consternation, it looked exactly as it had that morning after the funeral. *Maybe it will leave a scar*, he mused.

He thought about the mistake the woman had made. Jesus, while divine, had also been fully human and, Father Patrick was convinced, laughed as much as the next person. If Jesus could laugh, he wondered, why can't I? And if flawed Robbie could make people laugh, why shouldn't I?

After he placed his only item, the package of candles, on the checkout counter, he got a good look at the cashier and was immediately sobered. He recognized the woman, with her high blond hair secured by a large black band, from the funeral; her father was the man they had buried earlier that day.

"Oh," she said, recognizing him. "Hi, Father."

"Hello, Renee." Father Patrick looked into her red-rimmed eyes, searching for priestly words of comfort that he hadn't already poured into her ear that morning, something other than the cliché of the deceased being in a better place. Finally, he said, "I've been thinking about your father all day," then realized the sympathy he had been feeling for the man had just shifted entirely onto his daughter. He wanted to ask her why she was working on the day of her father's funeral, but he knew that she probably didn't have a choice, pitying her all the more.

"It was a beautiful service, Father."

It had been. "Thank you," he said, ignoring the impulse to add "my child," the unspoken words echoing forcefully in his head.

He nervously discerned the drop just beyond the checkout lane out of the corner of his eye, remembering how he had fallen when entering the store. Then, he noticed that Renee was eyeing his shirt with interest. He looked down at his right arm, expecting to see blood soaking through the sleeve, but it remained unstained.

"Father, where's your collar?"

The question caught him off guard, and both hands went to his neck. He didn't know what to say to her, so he held out his arms and shrugged.

"Oh, you poor man. You've lost it, haven't you."

The pity in her voice pierced his heart like a spear, and his sympathy shifted again with a ponderous inward groan. Mere hours before, this woman had wept openly at her father's funeral. Now she was pitying *him*, sad birthday boy that he was. Was this the depths of humanity?

"You know, we have construction paper in aisle six."

Father Patrick was dumbfounded.

"Something to consider. Here you are, Father." She set the plastic Fleischman's bag holding the pack of candles on the edge of the counter. After handing him the receipt, she shut off the lamp lighting her register sign and walked toward a door on the far side of the checkout area. On it hung a laminated sign that read "Employee Lounge."

Father Patrick slowly slid the receipt into his pocket, his fingers brushing against the piece of plastic doubled up there. He removed it from his pocket and threaded it around his neck like a noose. Then, taking the bag of candles from the counter, he turned and stepped off the platform.

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## Thomas O'Connell

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### HELL IS NOSTALGIA

The young girl's fear of Heaven comes from her fear of situations that are tedious. How can you convince a child that sitting around singing eternal praises can compare with earthly passions? You are bound to embellish. That is when the cottony clouds become mattresses you are allowed to jump on, and the unfathomable uncreated creator becomes a bearded old man who fills heavenly tables with sweets and lemonade.

I cannot deny that I wonder myself. While drifting off to sleep at night, I am comforted by the notion that when I pass, a patient dog and well-stocked trout stream will be waiting for me just beyond the pearly gates.

Hell is easier to describe, what with the tales of weeping and gnashing of teeth. But I do not believe in the flames. The process of fire was given by the creator and would eternally remind me of our heavenly father, even though separated from Him. Hell must hold some torture beyond flames, which we cannot begin to comprehend. Otherwise, the torment inflicted by the continuous burning of eternal hellfire would be no worse than the bittersweet agony of smelling an envelope from some lost lover to recapture their closeness by recalling their scent.

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NONFICTION

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*D.M. Gralewski*

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BASEBALL, BOOT CAMP & BALLET:  
REFLECTIONS ON BIBLICAL WOMANHOOD,  
ALPHABETICALLY ARRANGED

**AAGPBL**

Pitcher Connie Wisniewski was selected Player of the Year (1945) in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, featured in the publication *Major League Baseball*. That season, she won 32 games, lost 11, and achieved a previously unheard of .81 ERA. The “Iron Woman” pitched and won a double-header against the Racine Belles and led the win-loss percentage (pitching) for three consecutive years. She also played on the league’s first All Star team in 1946.

Fellow ballplayer Magdalen “Mamie” Redman remembered Connie as a mentor to her and other rookies: “She got us together and coached us... She was a big star. She didn’t have to do what she did. That was the kind of person she was.”

Connie died in 1995 in Seminole, FL; she hailed from Detroit, MI. She started playing softball at 11 years old.

**BOOT CAMP**

I celebrated my twentieth birthday in basic training, preparing for Warrior Week, the pinnacle of physical readiness and applied combat skills knowledge; the transition week that trainees begin, and Airmen finish. Mid-week we took on the iconic obstacle course, a 1.5 mile-circuit of low-crawling, high-climbing, rope-swinging, log-balancing challenges. Along the way to a station with three walls of varied sizes, a drill instructor barked, “Just pick the next one available!” Turning the corner revealed a line of male trainees in front the tallest one, launching from a platform, up and over the top.

Another drill sergeant, with an unusual, bright countenance and demeanor, intercepted my heavy jog toward the shortest wall and steered me toward the middle. “You got this one!” The chasm between the platform and the wall was greater than I expected. I took a breath and a couple seconds to muster the necessary effort to squat-jump the distance

and height. I thought I would fall, but reached enough to get my arms over the top, inch up with my feet, and push my palms into the wood to get one leg over. Below, my male wingman called to me, “C’mon, female! You can do it!”

### COMING OF AGE

I grew up watching the original *Roseanne* series with my mom, which we still quote to this day. In a favorite episode from season one, pre-teen, tomboy Darlene is devastated by her first, unmistakable sign of womanhood. Roseanne finds her tossing all her sports equipment into a garbage bag.

“What are you doing? You love this stuff,” she says, retrieving a baseball and glove. Darlene laments she’s “probably going to start throwing like a girl now, anyway.”

“Definitely,” Roseanne says, “and since you got your period, you’re going to be throwing a lot harder.” Darlene ignores the banter and insists her future is not dressed in panty hose and makeup. “That’s not the kind of woman that I want to be,” she says.

“Then why are you throwing away all your stuff? These are a girl’s things, Darlene, as long as a girl uses them.”

### DEBORAH, A RESUME

“Villages were deserted in Israel, deserted, until I, Deborah, arose, a mother in Israel arose” (Judges 5:7)—a woman of flames, whose name derives from the verb *dabar* (to speak), and also means *bee*.

Judge: held court in the district between Ramah and Bethel, under the Palm of Deborah, where the sons of Israel came for counsel and verdicts.

Prophetess: delivered divine military strategy that resulted in a fatal sting for Sisera’s army, and sweet victory for Israel.

Worship Leader: sang on the day of victory, “Listen, O kings! Give ear, O rulers! I, to *Adonai* I will sing, I will sing praise to *Adonai*” (v. 3).

“—then the land had peace for forty years” (v. 31).

### ELEMENTARY P.E.

I changed schools halfway through fifth grade, but I already knew McGlinnen Elementary's dirt diamonds. My dad had brought me and my siblings there to play catch and lob easy pitches for us to practice pop flies. What I didn't know was the clique draft for the upcoming junior high season was already in full swing. On my first day I wore purple sweatpants and an oversized black t-shirt featuring my uncle's rock band, The Deadbeats. I didn't make the cut.

One spring afternoon, Mr. D took us outside for gym class. He chose two captains to build teams. He observed for a few selections, then said, "Pick *the girls* too."

Todd—a classmate with whom I shared a mutual disrespect and who probably owned the popularity line—pointed and said to his captain, "Pick Donna. At least she can hit the ball."

### FALLING SHORT

Crowdfunded TV series *The Chosen* has received wild accolades and criticism for its extra-biblical, albeit plausible, character backstories. In the episode "Unlawful," redeemed Mary Magdalene has a traumatic experience with a demoniac, which drives her to a tavern and back into her old ways. She's drunk, gambling, and taunting a man who doesn't seem to mind her sole-female presence until he plays a poor round, and she embarrasses him.

"A woman should know her place," he seethes. She fires back, "I suppose you're going to show me?" He gets up to confront her but is blocked by the bartender, allowing her to get away. Later, Simon and Matthew find her and urge her to return to the disciples' camp.

"I can't face Him..." she slurs. "He already fixed me once. I broke again."

### GRACE

The common definition of grace is God's *unmerited favor*.  
Alternate definition: the *empowering presence* of God.

### HINDRANCES

In the "Worshipping Warrior" chapter of *The Deborah Anointing*<sup>1</sup>, Michelle McClain-Walters writes, "There is a grace being released upon

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<sup>1</sup> McClain-Walters, Michelle. *The Deborah Anointing*. Charisma Media, 2015. p. 38.

women to discern and destroy the works of the true enemy of our destiny—the devil. Our problem has never been men or tradition or a glass ceiling, but the spiritual forces that motivate them. This revelation will keep us focused on the mission God has given us to destroy the works of the devil.”

The usual suspects of said spiritual forces are fear, insecurity, unworthiness, and a Jezebel spirit.

### **IVRIT (HEBREW)**

In Hebrew, nouns are classified as masculine or feminine.

*Magen* (m): shield; usually a smaller, lighter, defensive or offensive tool used in close combat.

*Tsinah* (f): shield; larger, full-body protection. Sometimes covered with spikes or other protrusions to further deflect or increase damage.

### **JEZEBEL SPIRIT**

“But the white-heteronormative-cisgender-rape culture-patriarchy, tho’!” decry womyn, spelled with a Y. These feminists and their ilk advocated for the spelling change of “women” to “womyn,” presumably an attempt to remove “men” from within the word. Interesting choice, given the fact that *Y* is the designator of the male chromosome.

### **KEVLAR IS HEAVY**

The rush-and-roll is a quick, evasive maneuver to gain ground while avoiding enemy fire. At the Master Sergeant’s command, we had to spring up from a prone position, rush a few yards, drop to the ground, and roll to one side. And again: up, rush, drop, roll to the other side. When he signaled my group to go, I miscalculated the amount of force needed to compensate for my 40 extra pounds of flak vest, helmet, M-16A rifle, and cold-weather camo. I was literally swept off my feet, and dropped flat on my back.

I lay there like a flipped turtle, teary-eyed because I was embarrassed, and embarrassed because I was teary-eyed. I took deep, sucking breaths under which I cursed my predisposition to exorcize all strong emotions this way, as the words of a female drill sergeant ricocheted in my brain: *Don’t cry. Don’t cry. It’s a sign of weakness.*

I was able to twist enough to get my hip under me, so I could turn over and push up from the ground. The Master Sergeant saw everything. He



took me aside saying, “Hey, come talk to me for a minute.” Whatever he spoke over me in tranquil encouragement to try again must’ve worked. I completed the exercise, however heavy and slow, and that set the tone for the entire day: press in, press on, press through the sweat and the tears.

When daylight waned, and I could finally shed the extra weight, I caught up with the Master Sergeant. A wise, teachable spirit would’ve asked, how do you effectively lead a team when they call you “Jon Cryer” behind your back? But I said, “Thank you for your patience. It must really suck to have chicks like me in your class.”

He answered, “You are not a *chick*. You’re an *Airman*. And this is a tough course. I’ve had grown men fall out. The important thing is, you didn’t give up.”

## LAPPIDOTH<sup>2</sup>

Judges 4:1 introduces Deborah as *isha lapidot*. There are two translations of this title. The most common in English Bibles and biblical commentaries is *wife of Lappidoth*. McClain-Walters describes Lappidoth as the prophetic picture of a Godly husband: one who helps empower his wife to use her God-given gifts and does not interfere with her God-given destiny. Although Scripture does not explicitly state this, McClain-Walters explains that Scripture calls for a man to sacrifice for his wife, which may be exemplified by the lack of details about Lappidoth; in this story, he fulfills a supporting role.

Alternatively, Rebbetzin Monique Braumberg argues that *lapidot* may be translated as a feminine noun, rather than a name, so Deborah’s title may actually be translated *woman of torches/flames*—and fire is often symbolic of passion, empowerment, refinement, and a light in the darkness.

I suspect both readings are accurate. Scripture is rife with treasures revealed in wordplay.

## MID-30S CRISIS

The aesthetic of ballet is the sense of elevation. Ballerinas seem to barely touch the floor, to float, to fly. Yet every inch from finger to toe tip is extensively trained; every movement is controlled and intentional. It takes years of extraordinary pursuit of strength, flexibility, stamina, and balance to make it look so delicate and effortless—so who in their right mind would start taking ballet at 34? Seriously, who does that? But when I met Ms. Liz, who was still teaching at 79, she said, “You’ll get better

and better, and before you know it, you'll be doing partnering and lifts and all kinds of things."

It was Davidic worship dancing that led me to ballet. It's named after King David, who danced before the altar of Adonai. Its structure and technique come from Israeli folk dancing, which is usually done in a circle, representing a border around Israel. The Davidic (or Messianic) perspective is inviting the Lord to dance in the center as we dance around Him. Davidic dancers also use arm movements, lifting in praise, bowing in worship, and swaying—a wave offering before the Lord. Our footsteps are a mixed multitude of Israeli folk and other styles, like ballet. Classical dance training is not required or necessary for Davidic worship, but ballet is so foundational and disciplined that it naturally enhances the technique and aesthetic of other styles.

In fact, ballet is what gives expressive styles like lyrical and contemporary their technique; while these styles look, and perhaps feel, more free than "rigid" ballet, it is the ballet structure that allows for the "wild abandon" aesthetic without looking like interpretative "dance" by somebody named Sunflower Rain at Burning Man. But I digress.

As I fell in love with dance worship, I desired formal lessons, like a bride preparing for her wedding day.

During a typical barre session, Ms. Liz said, "Plié and relevé. Core tight. Back straight, heart to heaven—and smile, God loves you—plié, relevé, and hold. Let go of the barre. Take your time. Focus your eyes on something big; it will help you balance."

I focused on a poster of five ballerinas from the waist down, in a v-formation. Four of them in pointe shoes and fifth position: feet turned out, heel to toe. The front ballerina is posed in fourth-crossed position—similar to fifth but more open—and she's wearing combat boots.

I'll be damned if my heart didn't burn within me. Scripture says David danced, and he was a man of war. He is a shadow-and-type of Messiah, who scripture also describes as a man of war and one who dances with shouts of joy over us. There was a shift in the spirit, strong enough to knock me off my relevé, as the identity of the worshipping warrior was revealed to me—suddenly, my entire life made sense.

### NOT NORMAL

In the episode “Daughters and Other Strangers,” Roseanne and Darlene fight about Darlene’s early acceptance to college. At first, Roseanne rejects the idea of her not-yet-17-year-old moving two hours away to Chicago, but she reconsiders, worried that she’s ruining her daughter’s future. In the meantime, Darlene claims she’s no longer interested. Roseanne doesn’t buy it, and presses her until Darlene relents. “What if I get there and find out I suck... Why can’t I just stay home like a normal kid?”

“Because as I have told you for your entire life, Darlene, you are not normal. You dress funny. You’re weird. You’re too smart for your own damn good. Face it, Darlene. You’re special. And I think you could be something great.”

### OY VEY...THE INTERNET

A recent video circulating through social media shows a pastor shouting at a co-ed group of Canadian authorities attempting to intimidate them during their Passover service. “Get out!” he screams, “Don’t come back without a warrant!” Almost every comment read something like, “Finally! Somebody standing up to these government thugs!”

Then there’s *that guy*: “Of course they sent a woman! Paul said, ‘I do not permit a woman to have authority over a man!’”

### PAS DE DEUX

Ms. Liz on ballet partnering: “Ladies, every jump starts and ends with a plié. Gentlemen, you gently push down on their waist to cue them to plié. But ladies, you have to plié and really jump! He’s going to lift you, but you have to do your part too. The deeper you plié and the higher you jump, the easier it makes it for him to lift you—and then you’ll go a lot higher!”

### QUEENING HADASSAH

The book of Esther is a riveting chess match. The Grandmaster slowly develops humble Hadassah into Queen Esther, crowned with grace and favor, making her the most powerful piece in the famous Mordechai-Haman game. The intense exchange suggests an inevitable, bleak outcome. At a pivotal moment, it appears necessary to deploy a potential queen sacrifice, as Mordechai says, “Who knows whether you have come into your royal position for such a time as this?” Esther vows to fast and pray—to fight from a position of submission—and approach King

Ahasuerus unsummoned, accepting that she may be laying down her life: “If I perish, I perish.”

But the Grandmaster lures the opponent into a trap built by his own hubris; in the endgame, the queen is face-to-face with the dark king, and *her king* protects her.

Checkmate, Satan.

## REPENTANCE IN REVISION

The original, eight-year-old draft of this essay had anti-biblical and perhaps even blasphemous sentiments. This redeemed, completed version is dedicated to the Editor: the Author and Finisher of my faith.

## SHABBAT BLESSINGS

*May Adonai make you like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah* is a typical Shabbat blessing over the young women and girls of the household. The idea being they will fruit the next generations and become matriarchs themselves. It’s a beautiful and important impartation, but (Messianic) Rabbi Eric Tokajer posits it is so much more.

In his blog commentary, “How We Should Bless Our Daughters,”<sup>2</sup> he describes Sarah as an example of women who hear from God and should be heard by their husbands; Rebekah is an example of self-determination, agreeing to marry Isaac sight unseen; Rachel and Leah are examples that “women/wives are not property to be bought and sold by men” as Jacob had to work, to sacrifice, for them.

Rabbi Tokajer concludes, “When we pray these words over our daughters, we are reminding them to never settle for being less than how G-d sees them and never settle for a man that sees them as less than how G-d sees them.”

## TEARS

Tears are not necessarily a sign of weakness or an attempt to manipulate men. Many times they are emotional and spiritual perspiration.

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<sup>2</sup> Tokajer, Eric. “How We Should Bless Our Daughters.” *Eric Tokajer*, 8 Nov. 2021, <https://www.rabbierict.com/post/how-we-should-bless-our-daughters>.

## URBAN WARFARE TRAINING

Insurgents took out my lieutenant with a pellet gun. He slumped down the wall of the concrete stronghold. As lead for Fire Team Alpha, I was next to step into LT's boots, but when the proverbial smoke cleared, the lead for Team Bravo took the head count and damage report. Whether by experience, instinct, or simple confidence, he took authority without hesitation. I wasn't even mad. The mission got completed, and my fear of failure was alleviated. We conspired after the exercise. He agreed to continue to take over should anything happen to LT again. But the second LT saw me, he lit me up. "If something happens to me, YOU'RE IN CHARGE. Not [him]. YOU."

Twenty-six-year-old me was an ungrateful, petulant child about it. Pushing-forty me gives thanks for the God-sent military men who pushed me, forward and up.

## VALOR

Another Shabbat blessing, the *Eshet Chayil* (Woman of Valor), is recited or sung from Proverbs 31 by a husband honoring his wife:

A woman of valor, who can find? Her value is far beyond rubies.  
 She is wise and discerning; strength and dignity are her clothing.  
 Her hands work willingly; she spreads out her palms to the needy.  
 A lesson of kindness is on her tongue; her children bless her.  
 Her husband also praises her: "Many daughters have excelled, but you surpass them all."  
 Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears *Adonai* will be praised.

## WHAT HE SAID

My husband-to-be told our pre-marital counselor, "She can do anything. She works, she goes to school, she takes care of our apartment, cooks"—I used to anyway. These days he's the primary on meal preparation, including packing my lunches for work.

Such spoken sentiment is rare for him. He's far more prone to acts of whimsy, like the time he customized a character in a Nordic legend-based video game: a female warrior, complete with sword and buckler. He said, "Her name is Wifey. She's a shield maiden."

## eXEGESIS

1 Peter 3:1-7 is a hard teaching. If not read carefully and contemplated prayerfully, words like "submission" and "weaker" tend to be the ones

that stick, and produce ridiculous rhetoric such as “marriage is a male construct to enslave women” or the doctrine of “barefoot and pregnant.” For some reason, the words “honor them” and “equal heirs” are far less retained, let alone recited.

Likewise are the phrases that speak of submitting to one another out of respect for Messiah, unbelieving husbands being won over by the pure, reverent conduct of their wives, and encouraging women to pursue holiness and not fear intimidation.

Humanity’s true enemy is the root of this divisive nonsense. His goal is to set men and women at odds so we are not walking in the power of our partnerships—especially within the marriage covenant. When viewed through the lens of Messiah and His Bride, our respective roles take on a deeper and prophetic significance.

### **YESHUA, THE LAST ADAM**

“Now when they came to Yeshua and saw that He was already dead...one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out” (John 19:33-34).

### **tzELAH**

The Hebrew word for “side” is *tzelah*, a feminine noun. God took from Adam’s *tzelah* to design a bride, saying, “I will make for him a suitable helper” (Genesis 2:18). The word for “helper” is *ezer*; this word is also used to describe the Lord as our help, often in the same verses where He is described as our shield and our deliverer: one who aids in battle, a rescuer who comes running in times of distress.

*Ezer* was the word He used before He formed her—before there was dinner to be made, before there were diapers to change, before the boss needed a secretary, before she tripped over the adversary—even before she was called woman, and Eve.

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NONFICTION

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*Katy Huth Jones*

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## BECOMING GRACE

My middle name is Grace. It says so on my birth certificate. I was named after my grandmother, who was a graceful and gracious woman. But no matter how hard I tried, there was nothing graceful about me for the first forty-six years of my life.

I was the awkward child, the one always picked last for team games at recess, the one who tripped over her own feet and fell off a skateboard, even while sitting on it. I missed the A honor roll because I couldn't do a cartwheel in P.E., and Grandpa's hammock wrestled me to the ground, no matter how hard I tried to balance. Do people actually *relax* in those contraptions?

Part of my gracelessness came from having serious eye troubles from the age of three. I had one of the first cornea transplants and for years wore an eye patch for "lazy eye." My depth perception was confused from a tender age. No wonder I couldn't catch a ball, and tennis and ping pong were impossible for me.

The continual awkwardness contributed to an "ugly duckling" view of myself. Even after becoming a Christian, my self-esteem was not what it should have been. To combat my lack of confidence, I turned into a "Martha" and filled my days with busyness so I could feel like I was doing enough to be judged worthy of God's grace and earn the approval of other people.

Then a cancer diagnosis at age 46 brought my crazy busy life to a screeching halt. A course of nuclear bomb-strength chemo put the aggressive lymphoma in remission, but I was a hairless shadow of myself by the end and could hardly pick up a pencil.

One of my writer friends invited me to the Tai Chi class she taught in her home studio. She said the slow, gentle movements would help me regain my strength, and she was right.

Because the form she taught has 108 movements (the Lee-modified long Yang form), it took me three years to learn it well enough to do it alone.

But what I did not understand until years later was how *much* strength and healing Tai Chi had brought to me—physically, mentally, emotionally, and even spiritually. I was so focused on getting each movement “right” that I wasn’t seeing myself accurately.

One day a new woman visited our class. The teacher had her stand beside me. By that time I was asked to substitute teach for her when she was out because I had learned the entire form well enough and could “talk it through” for the newbies. The woman gamely tried to follow along, and so I made sure to move slowly and surely to help her keep up.

At the end, she shocked me with her comment: “You are so graceful and powerful.”

Me? Graceful? Powerful? I was so shocked, all I could stammer was, “Um, thanks.”

And then I realized, it was true. While moving through the form, I was in tune with my body and mind through the flow of chi, which is the body’s electrical energy. I didn’t think about all the things I needed to be doing or how I was failing to measure up to my own unrealistic expectations; I was thinking only about the present moment in a place of stillness.

That realization led me to finally understand the simple yet profound Bible verse I had been fighting all my life: “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

Through Tai Chi, I not only found gracefulness and power in learning how to be still, but I came to better know God my Father and, finally, to accept his grace and love for me.

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**Katy Huth Jones** has been a published author since 1992, but her writing journey has taken her in many unexpected directions. Katy has survived cancer twice and since then has learned the Lee-modified long Yang form of Tai Chi well enough to teach others. She and her husband live in Fort Worth, Texas.



NONFICTION

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*Bethany Jarmul*

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## WADE IN THE WATER

\*Note: names have been changed in this essay.

I'm 11, shaking beneath the pastel sky and shy June sun, wading in cold water up to my belly button, wearing a neon orange swimsuit and goosebumps. The smell of chlorine, cut grass, and dewy earth fills my nostrils. I bite my lip and look at the small crowd gathered around the reflective water. Their eyes are on me as I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

The 20 people surrounding me are all members of our "Amen"-saying, tongues-speaking, holy-rolling, driving-out-the-devil church from the hills of West Virginia. We're here, around Pastor's backyard pool, for a baptism ceremony. Pastor, a balding, glasses-wearing man with kind eyes, leads our 40-person non-denominational church however he sees fit. Today, that means I'm to be baptized in his pool, surrounded by my family, fellow saints, and a red-and-white privacy fence.

Mom stands at the edge of the pool, smiling and holding my turquoise towel. Pastor's wife, Cheryl, stands next to her. Daddy and Pastor wade in the clear blue water, place their large hands upon my head, along the small of my back, guiding me deeper into the water.

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In the pivotal moments of my life, Pastor and Cheryl were there. At my wedding, my high school graduation party, my childhood birthday parties. Pastor dedicated me to the Lord as an infant (our alternative to infant baptism), placing his large hand upon my head and speaking scriptures over me. Me with round cheeks, round eyes, and a frilly white dress, him in his button-up shirt and khakis, the overhead lights reflecting off of his glasses and balding head.

Cheryl was in the room when my mother gave birth to me on the very same bed where I was conceived. Afterwards, she visited my parents' small rental house, held me for hours, sniffing my baby scent and rocking

me in a wooden rocking chair. “It was a tough time in the church, and you were her therapy,” Mom told me. In the photo album, the photo of Cheryl holding me is right next to the one of my grandmas holding me.

They were in my parents’ wedding—Pastor in a black suit, Cheryl in her peach-colored bridesmaid gown. They’re in my parents’ vacation photos from their young adult years—making thumbs up at the camera or sunbathing on the beach. My dad even lived in their basement for a year before he married my mom.

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I was a teenager when mom called me and my sister into the living room. “Girls, come sit down, I have something to tell you.” Her tone indicated something was wrong. Were we in trouble? Had someone died?

“There’s no easy way to tell you this, but since you’ll probably hear about it sooner or later—Pastor had an affair with Katrina.” Mom made eye contact with both of us, her forehead wrinkled.

Katrina and her husband Steve were church elders. The affair occurred more than a decade prior, and they had been keeping their secret all these years—going to barbecues with their spouses at each other’s homes, counting the offering, planning church picnics together.

All those sermons that I had digested for all those years were all tainted with lead. Unlike other pastors that I’d heard, Pastor never shared any personal stories, never gave any examples from his own life. I wondered if this was why—he was hiding his true self.

When I saw Pastor again, I stared down at my sandals and pink toenails, heart galloping like it was me who was guilty. All I could do was cling to the opposite wall, hoping he wouldn’t speak to me.

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I take a deep breath, close my eyes, focus on the water engulfing the lower half of me and on what my baptism means to me. I feel God. Feel his hand on my soul, as real as my father’s on my back.

Pastor says a quick prayer, something like: “Lord, thank you for sending your son to die on the cross. Jesus paid the price for our sins, so that we

could have a relationship with you and share in eternal life. Bless those who have made the decision to be baptized today. In Jesus' name. Amen."

"Amen" from the crowd. The twenty of our flock who have gathered hold my gaze, feel the electricity of my moment. My beliefs wait to be wrapped around me with my favorite towel.

"We baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

With one dip, one muscular extension—my immersion. I emerge above the surface, grinning and punching my fist upward toward the sky, dripping with chlorinated water and adolescent faith.

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*Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.* —John 8:32 NIV

Sometimes I wish I didn't know. Didn't know that Pastor had an affair. Didn't know that my father, who led me to Christ as a child, believes in political conspiracy theories, Biblical numerology, and "prophets" he follows on the internet. Didn't know that the evangelist I adored as a teen promotes hateful, racist propaganda.

If I strip away all of the disappointment, the confusion, the imperfect people, if I wash them off and leave them behind in the chlorinated water—what's left when I resurface? Is it a child-like faith in Jesus, who never fails me, or a drowning-in-it doubt? For now I'll just wade in it all, up to my belly button.

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**Bethany Jarmul** is a writer, editor, and poet. Her work has appeared in numerous literary magazines and been nominated for Best of the Net and Best Spiritual Literature. She earned first place in *Women On Writing's* Q2 2022 essay contest. Bethany enjoys chai lattes, nature walks, and memoirs. She lives near Pittsburgh with her family. Connect with her at [bethanyjarmul.com](http://bethanyjarmul.com) or on Twitter: [@BethanyJarmul](https://twitter.com/BethanyJarmul).

NONFICTION

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*Denise Kohlmeier*

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## LESSON LEARNED

Nobody wants Hazel. Including me.

Hazel is unattractive, with dark, prickly hairs protruding from her chin and upper lip. Her fingers are grotesquely curled, her knuckles large as walnuts. Her grey-blue eyes bulge like a frog's, and she is bent over like a broken branch.

I admit that the first time I saw Hazel, I recoiled. The old hag from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* came immediately to mind.

Nobody wants Hazel. Including me.

Hazel is impossibly slow. And not just because of her bowed legs. She reads *every* label, checks *every* expiration date. She is extremely picky. What typically takes ten minutes to usher a Guest through the food pantry, takes triple the time with Hazel.

Hazel's speech is also garbled. It often takes a repeat (or two) to understand her. And even then, you aren't quite sure you heard her correctly.

There's also an aroma around Hazel. Of sour sweat and unwashed body. Her clothes—baggy, unkempt, mismatched—carry the stench of the streets.

Nobody wants Hazel. Including me.

Funny how everyone seems to find something to do when it comes to Hazel's turn to shop. One needs to use the restroom. Another finds that an item is low and goes to stock it. Yet another says he must go find the director and tell her something and it simply cannot wait.

Nobody wants Hazel. Including me.

But I can't seem to find a fast-enough excuse this night, so I go over to Hazel and force a smile, bracing myself for the agony that awaits.

I grab a cart and usher Hazel over to the cereal section. She knows the drill, but still I remind her that she is welcome to take two boxes. Hazel contemplates the choices. There are nine varieties. One by one, she picks up each box and scans the ingredients.

*Just pick one!* I scream inside my head.

She finally decides on a box of Muesli. I place it in the grocery bag on the cart. We move to the next section.

"Do you need any peanut butter or jelly?" I ask, noting that the next Guest and fellow volunteer-shopper are right behind us.

"Tmnypresrvtifs," Hazel slurs.

I clench my fists. "Sorry, Hazel. What was that?"

She repeats herself, this time more slowly. "Too many preservatives." Then, "My tongue hasn't worked right since my stroke last year." She gives me an apologetic smile.

My fists unclench. I pull the cart forward. We're at the canned goods now. She points. "Any of those organic?"

I have no idea, but I take a look. At the very back—of course!—I find two cans of organic sweet corn. I hand them to Hazel. She studies a label, nods approvingly. Into the bag they go, a bag that contains only three items now—and we have only moved four feet.

The other Guest finally passes us. My fellow volunteer-shopper gives me a sympathetic look.

I push the cart forward, hoping to hurry Hazel along.

"Did I ever tell you I had polio when I was nine years old?" Hazel says, articulating so I can understand her.

Ah, that explains the bowed legs.

“No. I’m so sorry, Hazel. How awful.” I stop the cart. “Did you have to be put into an iron lung?”

I picture Hazel as a little girl, her tiny prepubescent body encased in one of those massive machines that has to “breathe” for her, forcing air in and out of her diseased lungs. It makes me sad to think of it.

“No,” she says, eyeing the cookies. Hazel has a sweet tooth. “But it took me three years to learn how to walk.”

Hazel’s eyes light up as they land on some Keebler Fudge Stripes. Even though Guests are allowed only one package of cookies, I slip two into Hazel’s bag. She smiles appreciatively at me.

“How did you learn to walk?” I ask, slow-stepping toward the clothing bins. I know we will be here awhile. Hazel will want to sort through each bin to look for something in her size. By the look of Hazel’s girth, she is plus size. I start to rummage, pulling out T-shirt after T-shirt.

“My mother,” Hazel articulates, taking the extra-large pink T-shirt I hand her. She shakes her head. “Pink’s for babies.”

I put the T-shirt back and rummage some more.

Hazel continues. “She was a saint. She had such patience. She massaged my legs every night after she got home from work. And she forced me to get out of bed and stand up every day so my legs would get strong. It worked. I never needed leg braces. But they’ve always been bowed.”

“So you were home by yourself?” I ask, incredulous. I can’t imagine someone that young being left alone all day, every day.

Hazel nods her frizzled gray-white head. “Well, Mother *had* to work, because my father left us when I was four years old. And there was no one else to watch me.” Hazel abandons the clothing bins. There is nothing in her size this time.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. And I truly am. I wonder at the pain and confusion Hazel must have felt as a young child growing up

fatherless. Did she ever wonder if she was the cause of his leaving? Did she question if he had ever loved her? Had she ever tried to find him? I want to ask but am not sure how deep to go with her. We're instructed as volunteer-shoppers not to be too intrusive, too nosy, to respect our Guests' privacy.

We move to the toiletry section. I grab a roll of paper towels and two toilet paper rolls and put them in her bag. Every Guest gets them whether they want them or not.

I follow Hazel to the first of five cold cases, pulling the cart behind me. Hazel opens the glass door and pulls out a package of bratwursts, which is covered in a thin film of frost. She flips it over and reads the expiration date. A heavy sigh slips through her lips. The date is a week past. She puts the brats back.

"So what did you do all day when you were alone?" I ask, as yet another Guest passes us and heads to the freezer on the other side. The fellow volunteer-shopper rolls her eyes at Hazel's back. *Slow poke*, I read in that roll.

I bristle.

"I tried to keep up with my schoolwork," Hazel says, inspecting some beef patties now. "But I fell behind and eventually gave up."

I shake my head in disbelief. "Did you ever go back to school?"

"Oh, yes. But I had to be put in the third grade, even though I was twelve." She huffs. "I hated that! So, I studied really hard and moved up quickly. I even graduated on time." Hazel beams, proud of her accomplishment.

I beam too, impressed.

I stand by as Hazel scrounges through the next case. She finds a head of lettuce that's not too wilted. She picks through the frozen vegetables and selects a bag of peas that is only a day past expiration.

We then come to the last cold case: dairy. It's stocked with single-serving containers of yogurt—peach, strawberry, and vanilla—half-

gallons of 2% milk, and cartons of cottage cheese. Hazel pulls a face and pats her abdomen. “Dairy doesn’t agree with me.”

I nod understandingly.

We’re at the end now. Done shopping. The only thing left to do is to take the cart out to the curb where the groceries will be loaded into Hazel’s car, which is a run-down Honda Civic. The back seat is crammed with all of Hazel’s life.

I hand off Hazel to our designated volunteer-car loader.

“Thank you,” Hazel says, twisting her head sideways. “It was nice talking with you.”

“You’re very welcome,” I say. “And you, too.”

I suddenly find myself wishing for more time with Hazel, wanting to know more about this extraordinary woman and her life. But as I watch her follow her cart, slow-shuffling and bent, I know I will find out more next week, when I will get Hazel all to myself.

Because nobody wants Hazel. Except me.

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**Denise Kohlmeyer** is a former journalist and the co-author of two books in the *Clues for the Clueless* series. As a freelance writer, she has been published in numerous online and print publications. Denise also earned an Honorable Mention in the 2018 Writer’s Digest Writing Contest for her story “Samaria Revisited.” You can find her at [denisekohlmeyer.com](http://denisekohlmeyer.com).



ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

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# Carl Scharwath

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## ANGEL



*Image courtesy of the artist.*

## DANCER



*Image courtesy of the artist.*

### *Artist Statement*

I use photography as a means of self-expression. The most important quality of a photograph, as in all of art, is to evoke an emotional response. I prefer to capture surrealistic moments when I can, the play of light and colors and unusual situations as they unfold. As a passionate runner, being aware of my surroundings tends to produce some surprise scenes instead of forcing an image of time with my camera. Currently I have been concentrating on collaborations with other international poets who interpret my photos with their powerful words, creating an art form that compliments each other. I am also exploring and creating works which combine my painting and photography.

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**Carl Scharwath** has appeared globally with 175+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published three poetry books and his latest book *Playground of Destiny* (Impspired Press). His two photography books were published by Praxis in Africa. His photography was also exhibited in the Mount Dora Center for the Arts gallery and The Leesburg Center for the Arts. Carl was the art editor for *Minute Magazine* (4 years), is a contributing editor for *ILA Magazine* and was nominated for The Best of the Net Award (2021.) He is also a competitive runner, and a 2<sup>nd</sup> degree black-belt in Taekwondo.



## Jason Hendrickson

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### CRUCIFIXION OF CHRIST



*Image courtesy of the artist.*

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**Jason Hendrickson** took to art at an early age. Before graduating from the University of the West Indies with a Bachelor of Arts in Visual Arts, he worked for some of his country's well-known advertising agencies and specialised in the country's many visual art forms. Mentored by some of Trinidad and Tobago's Visual Arts masters, he honed his skill in perfecting the human body and landscapes...his writing is just a wonderful addition.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

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# Lea Ervin

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## BLOOD AND WATER



*Image courtesy of the artist.*

### *Artist Description*

Over the past year, I have been painting as a way to reconcile chronic illness and spirituality. I grew up a Catholic and I left the church ten years ago. In December of 2021, I returned to the Catholic Church after the death of my grandfather. I really connected with the Divine Mercy Chaplet because of the forgiveness and mercy one receives from it. Hence, my painting “Blood and Water” is a depiction of my return and the divine mercy I received. The painting depicts the figure of a woman, clothed in the Word of God, receiving the Blood and Water offered by Jesus Christ to wash away sins of the past and anger I once held on to. The figure is decoupage with scripture/reading from my Magnificat with watercolor paints representing the blood and water.

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**Lea Ervin** is an artist, writer, and writing instructor from Oneonta, Alabama. When she is not working on paintings, grading, or writing, she is cooking, listening to vinyl records, and spending time with her husband, Brad White, and their sassy Beagle-mix, Starla Belle.



ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

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*Khosrow Mokori*

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## SUDOKOLOR



*Image courtesy of the artist.*

### *Artist Description*

*Sudokolor* is oil on canvas. The symbols on the painting represent different entities in the world with a certain order. It supposes to show how functionality in the world is the consequence of variation.

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**Khosrow Mokori** is an Iranian/Canadian citizen. He currently lives in Iran. Khosrow loves art and philosophy. He is a self-taught artist, and studied philosophy for many years.



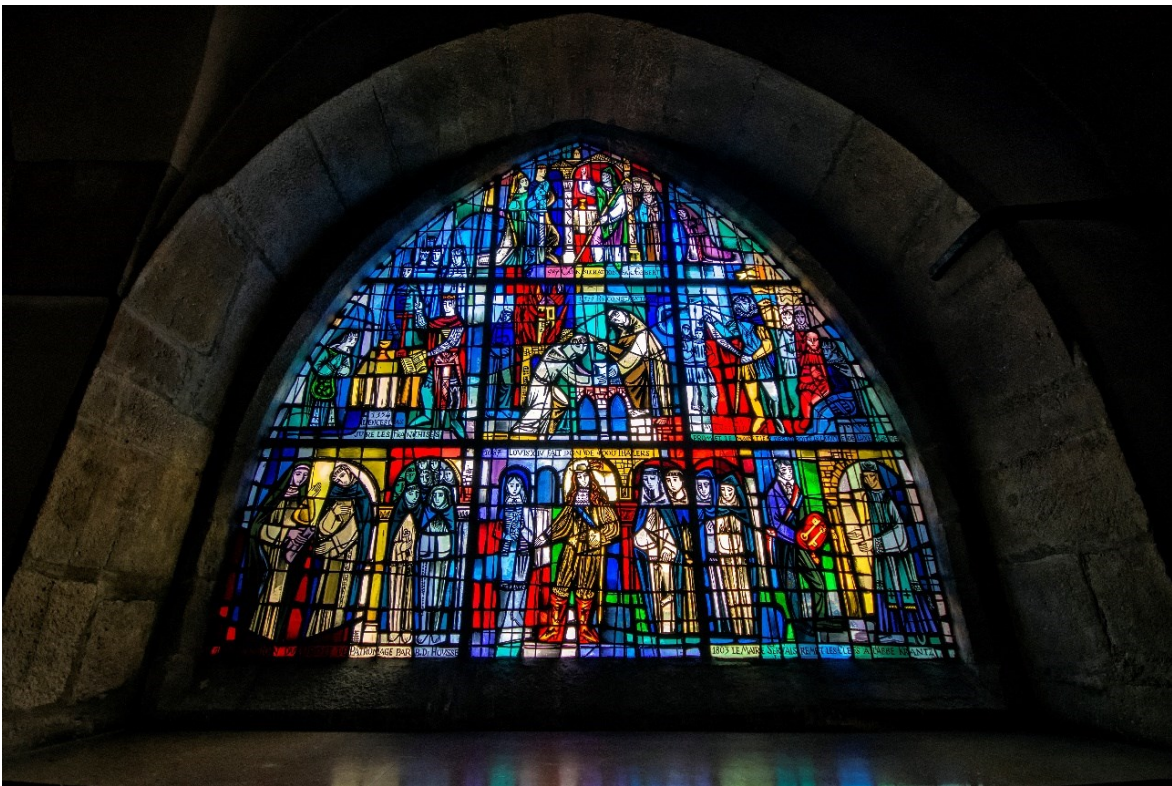
ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

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*Jeremiah Gilbert*

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## SAINT MICHAEL'S CHURCH, LUXEMBOURG



*Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.*

TEMPLO CATÓLICO DE SARCHÍ NORTE,  
SARCHÍ, COSTA RICA



*Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.*



## CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF CARMEN, GUATAPÉ, COLOMBIA



*Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.*

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**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*.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

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## Misty Morgan Dixon

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### THE FALL



*Image courtesy of the artist.*

### *Artist Statement*

The canvas is where I wrestle with my questions. I take the scriptures that I read, the messages I hear, and my own internal dialogue, and pour my paint out in an attempt to make sense of it all. Sometimes I arrive at answers, and other times the process itself sharpens or changes me in ways that no longer need clarity.

I've always used art as a way to connect with everything that is bigger than me. It is a spiritual practice for me to know God in a deeper way, as well as a way to see inside parts of myself that I cannot reach by any other means. I rely on instinct, intuition, and symbolism to speak to the observer through my work. I feel that my art has something to say to every individual, even if the words are beyond my original intention. I am a creative person made by a creator still speaking through creation. I am delighted to be a participant in that dance, even if it is in a small but meaningful way.

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Southern artist, **Misty Morgan Dixon**, has been honing her skills as a painter since she was a girl. She had formal art training throughout middle school, high school and college, and has continued to pursue education in her craft ever since. She worked for years as a professional makeup artist for well-known brands and celebrities, but settled back into focusing on her passion, which is the intersection of art, faith, and mental health. She went on to become a Certified Therapeutic Art Coach to help others use art as a tool for healing and growth. She has lived both in New Orleans and the Northshore communities for many years, and has been heavily influenced by both the vibrant and urban culture of the city and the live oak peppered countryside.

She spends her days painting in her home studio, teaching art in her community, and helping others heal through art. She is always working on a new painting collection, and every carefully curated work of art shares with its owner not only a part of Misty's talent, but also a piece of her soul. She finds true art to be therapeutic and healing, and relies both on her instinct and emotional need to create as well as fundamentals and conventional rules of design. Misty has worked in many mediums, and currently enjoys mixed media and acrylic painting on both canvas and reclaimed wood collected throughout the New Orleans area. You can find her work in various locations throughout Louisiana and Mississippi.



O. Yemi Tubi

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## THE BAIT



*Image courtesy of the artist.*

### *Artist Description*

“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” —1 Timothy 6: 9-10

As stated by the wisest and wealthiest man in the Holy Bible, King Solomon, nothing is as banal and meaningless as unhealthy love of money. The unhealthy love of money is one of the banalities of evil in our daily lives which influenced my painting—*The Bait*.

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**O. Yemi Tubi**—An artist and advocate for the world’s peace. Nigerian born, American-trained artist, and a poet, he is currently residing in the United Kingdom as an artist with a creative and unique personal style. He has exhibited his works worldwide and received numerous awards and recognitions.







## *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.

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## **Bible References (ESV):**

- “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 free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.” —Romans 6:23
- “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse 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, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come!” —2 Corinthians 5:17





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