

Heart of Flesh

Literary Journal



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VERONICA MCDONALD, EDITOR

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Cover Art: *Angel Concrete Sculpture* by Mario Loprete, page 145.

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Adulterous Woman and Jesus by Veronica McDonald, 2021. Oil pastel on paper.

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” –Matthew 11: 28-30 (NIV)

I’m sometimes surprised by how difficult life can be. I’m not only talking about the tragic life events that can sometimes occur, but even in day-to-day normalcy, life can pile its weight on top of you, hunch you over, bend you to your limit, try to make you crack. Sometimes it’s your circumstances, and sometimes it’s just the fact that you’re tethered to a dying world and dying flesh, both of which can’t stop sinning no matter how much you want them to. Envy, anger, lust, greed...anxiety, grief, depression, loneliness, helplessness—these things have the tendency to grip us by the throat until we feel we just can’t stand it anymore. But our burdens don’t have to crush us. We may still feel them pushing down on our backs even after deciding to follow Christ, but He lets us know (He always finds ways of letting us know) that He’s there. That we are never alone. That He will be our refuge and our rest.

Each piece in this issue carries a burden—a burden that can only be lifted by One.

Our writers and artists share truth here. Truth about everyday struggles, about carrying heavy loads, about feeling deep hurts—as one of our poets reminds us, creation is groaning. But the wonderful thing is, they also share truth about the way out. While our sin curses us to suffer here, we are never left without hope. As another of our poets puts it: “There is no way out. Then he makes a way.” Some of the people in these pages cling to that truth with all they got, sometimes as they wrestle to understand it, while others let the weight of their burdens drag them deeper into sin and the way of death.

I want to thank the people who made this issue possible. First, I want to thank my husband, for being the wonderful, hardworking man he is. Also, Katie Yee, who once again was a huge help with submissions and editing, for all her hard work and for being a source of encouragement and discernment. Thank you to our readers, for your

kindness and for keeping this journal going. Lastly, I'd like to thank the writers and artists who submitted this round, especially our contributors for this issue. We are blessed every reading period with an unbelievable amount of talent, and as *Heart of Flesh* grows it's becoming harder to choose the right pieces for an issue. I think we chose some amazing work, created by some amazing people, and I'm so excited and honored to present the ninth issue of *Heart of Flesh*.

May this issue bless you, and point you to the One who blesses.

Thank you for reading.

Veronica McDonald

Veronica McDonald
Editor/Founder

POETRY

Justin Lacour

THE HOLY MOUNTAIN

I'm sorry.

I don't need to work blue.

Even the boredom
holds a little of the everlasting.

Sweat on a goth's forehead,
a wall of reassuring graffiti.

There is nothing I shall want,
except to find You in the boredom.

A Prius with a Misfits sticker
by the boarded-up tuxedo rental.

Two lizards fighting over
an empty Pringles can.

This is where my heart will
bend like a wet dandelion,

where I'll lay down my burdens
before Your wild and ancient eyes.

LITTLE JUSTIN RUNS THE VOODOO DOWN

I remember one time, a dark room,
rocking my baby daughter,
asking God to let her sleep,
so I could sleep,

and then suddenly,
in the darkness,
asking God to be able
to write again,

asking for the life
I threw away,
asking for the time back,
believing it would be given to me,

though it had been gone so long.

*

Right now is also a time:

The whole house smells like bacon.
I force my children to listen
to Miles Davis, while they
wrestle on the floor.

If there's something to say
about flowers and shadows,
how birds sound like cellphones,
I say it again only by Your mercy.

Now I know, I know how to say
even the stones are crying out for You.
I never knew what to call this feeling
before, but today, I call it grace.

*

There is sunlight through dirty windows,
my daughter asking and asking why oil and water don't mix,

when You restore what is lost,
when what is gone forever
keeps breathing in Your hands,
when all is alive to You.

OH MY, OH MY, OH MY

Waking kids for school,
I suddenly realize,
someday, I'll have to take
their bunk beds down.
They'll be too big for them,
and this makes me sad.
Their childhood will end,
and I was never perfect
or even good.
Then everything became
precious to me, and
I was pleasant
for a quarter hour,
till the noise scraped my nerves.
The noise of children.
When the kids are gone,
there's silence.
I'm not great with silence either.
It makes me anxious
because I haven't learned
to trust the silence,
to trust it more than work
and ambition,
and drinks.
The silence is Your way
of telling me
there's a love I don't have
words for yet, but
don't worry, the words will come.
The waiting is a part of You,
just as much as the voice
that will one day fill my mouth
to prove my life was not pointless;
it was good I was here.

POETRY

Robert L. Jones III

LIKE THE OX

Creation groans.

I hear it every night I spend on the river:

Hoarse croaks of frogs and herons,

Worried whining of insect society,

The flip, gurgle, and splash

Of catfish pinning their prey against the bank.

Underwater and in the trees and thickets,

Eyes wide open,

Living, conscious things are consumed.

My wife and I once interrupted

A grim couple in the woods:

A garter snake swallowing a blinking toad,

Slowly, with jaws unhinged.

Wanting to intervene,

But not knowing which side to take,

We walked away,

Confused and embarrassed,

And left them in privacy.

My rubber boots sinking in the mud,

Am I now, with baited hook,

Participating in the curse

Or merely interrupting it?

I shiver slightly

In the humid night air,

Anticipating the tug on my line,

And I long to see

The lion eating straw like the ox.

UNDER THE BOUGHS OF THE SPREADING OAK

The sun is high, and light waves dance and wiggle
Through the heat. Ghostlike, images rise from the land,
Fleeting. Everywhere, all is hot and very still.
Humidity grays the green of distant trees.

Like Abraham, he waits near the door to his dwelling
Under the boughs of the spreading oak,
Waits for angels to proclaim the birth of something new,
Something to make his ears tingle.

Would angels, in their shining,
Stand out from the mirages in the fields?
Would he recognize them should they appear?
Will the atmosphere vibrate with promise and warning?

Fanciful expectancy threatens to distort perception,
Plant the seeds of deception and disappointment,
Should he grow careless in the soothing shadow
Under the boughs of the spreading oak.

Robert L. Jones III is Professor Emeritus of Biology at Cottey College. His poems and stories have appeared in *Sci Phi Journal*, *Star*Line*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and previously in *Heart of Flesh*. He and his wife reside in southwestern Missouri.

POETRY

Anne Kundtz

LAST RITES, KISS

To Shannon, our brother-priest

Smoke from wildfires obscures low mountains
around Tonasket where Brian waits.

Hospital doors slide open wide;
the nurse leads us to a windowless room.

You, our brother-priest, know your role well;
You stand at Brian's head, unzip the body bag

to his shoulders, the black bag that holds what is left.
He gave his cornea to see in another man's body,

his tendons to help someone walk again,
his skin for the firefighters' burns, for strangers.

Gauze wrapping over his eyes, Brian's gray jaw hangs slack,
like the worst face he'd made when teasing me.

You drape the black stole around your neck,
unlatch the box that holds the fragrant oil.

I watch as you anoint him, listen to your quavering voice.
I will my legs to hold me up. *Amen*, I breathe.
The nurse also says *Amen*.

Trembling, you bend and kiss Brian's forehead.
You zip the bag closed.
We walk out into the smoke and ash.

IN THE IGNATIAN CHAPEL

at Seattle University

This is it, I tell You,
sinking into a pew.
A quiet breath answers,
in this church where
I am not a member but
am drawn like a lost bird.
Too tired for prayer
or the worries I brought.
I nod off in exhaustion.

An hour in silence,
I feel a little less shredded.
I open my eyes
to the crucifix,
Jesus hanging there,
sad and terrible,
his torso shrouded,
otherwise, all bone, thin and bare.

I understood then
that last night in Gethsemane
when he was stripped
of all that was human,
hopes, passion, will.
What remained—
spirit, body, love.
Then spirit and love,

then love.

CALLINGS

Not a voice to a thrown rider,
a burning bush,
the belly of a whale;

You call in the silhouette
of Mt. Constance backlit
in fingerpaint rays,

and sweet cola blackberries,
heavy among thorns,
pungent walnut fruit, bruised
beside yellow pansies.

I hear you in the reedy recorder,
half-heard across the dusty road
that leads to Grace.

Someone plays
note
 to
 note
as if
crossing a stream
of mossy stones

to reach the stillness
of your voice.

After 19 years, **Anne Kundtz** retired from high school teaching in the first year of Covid, 2020. Her writing is informed by her passion for her life lived across the West, her 20 years with middle and high school students, and the century-old house and the garden where she spends hours kneeling. Her poetry is published in *Ars Poetica NW*, *Counting Stars (Haiku)*, *Poems for Las Vegas*, *Under the Basho (Haibun)*, and *Poet's Choice*.

POETRY

Jennifer Stewart

BODIE /BODY/ ISLAND LIGHTHOUSE

You are the glory of God.

Ground level

standing on checkerboard tiles

peering up at a sinuous maze:

twisting black metal steps

light-stippled like a tin lantern punched.

The ranger guide tells us to stagger,

isolate

ourselves, one body

island

free floating

per flight of stairs.

You are the dwelling place of God.

Spiraling upward

in this chambered nautilus shell

slightly giddy

pause for the whitewash wall-framed view

and breeze, salty sorrow wiped

by each landing's window.

A glass ceiling of faceted crystal

crowns the exit door:

interior disorientation

plummets

and all is panoramic peace

frog chorus

and birdsong.

You are the home of God.

Welcome home.

Epilogue

More stairs.

The steep trip up and down the dune deck

out to the beach, on shifting sand

and back again

is too hard this year to try again
for you, trifecta of
brain tumor / Parkinson's / Alzheimer's.
We listen to Bono in the car
on the way home,
croon about the climb
and going crazy tonight.
Unpacking, on autopilot
I'm halted in gloom
at the bottom of basement stairs
by this body blow: the sight of that
scratched gray toolbox
you carried to your truck in darkness
before each morning, while your daughters dreamt.
Three stickers adorn its dented lid:
a smiley-face in neon yellow,
"I voted " with a waving flag,
a fistful of lightning for the IBEW Local 540.

Later today,
upstairs
I work at relocation,
empty dresser drawers,
sort through piles of
spare change / handkerchiefs / birthday cards / gag gifts
blurred photos / love notes in your distinctive hand
immersed in the levity and gravity
surrounding me in all these personal things
when
so focused, so lost
you climb the stairs here, to your old bedroom
un-be-lievable
to ask about my mom, your love of 52 years,
wife, now caregiver:
"Who is that woman? She's an imposter!"
That vein, I have
a reactive fight-flight history with
stands out on your temple.
I yell at you, and swear
words I never said to my dad's face.

Too late, after you've gone, I choose
to pull from the album of my mind
three snapshot memories:
Windblown you with your widest grin,
silhouetted in one beach house door after another
backlit by flashes
from a night ocean thunderstorm
our very first Outer Banks trip.
The rough-soft feel of your plaid flannel
workshirt in wrinkling waves against my cheek
as I lean into your shoulder.
Your fisted grip on the pickup's steering wheel
coming to my rescue
in a blizzard, Willie Nelson on the radio,
driving us home through whiteout
from each ditch
back on the road again.

Jennifer Stewart grew up running wild across acres in the Midwest. She sojourned in cities and now runs somewhat respectably through southwestern desert suburbs. A teacher, poet, wife, and mother, she's finding her little way through middle life. Her work has appeared in *Heart of Flesh* and *The Orchards*. She reviews movies here: <https://www.youtube.com/@dramajen>

POETRY

Brendan Rowland

STRAWBERRIES

The bottom bulb of my electric cross
flickers, intermittent fluorescence smearing
up Christ's raisin face—oil on oak—like a boy
mortifying his sleepover friends with a flashlight
igniting his chin. I quarter a strawberry and place three
in the tank beneath. My river turtle sinks his hooked snout
into the consubstantial flesh and I run three fingers along
the chipping varnish of the graven image. I cower before
the nail holes, but the florid grace of His vertical
fingers beckons me. The gospel condenses to
a gesture. Redemption is a kiss. My turtle
flutters his flippers against a pebble,
trying to seduce it, hoping
against hope it's alive.

ELIHU

Setting: moonshadow, south side.
 A roulette sign spins, neon and distant.
These men insert themselves in his pain.
 I clear my throat, spit off the fire escape.

“All your babble, still the dogs lick his wounds.
 I am full of words—the Spirit constrains me.”

I hand Job a shard of glazed pottery,
 facsimile Greek: naked heroes with
 frisbees and buried names.
I am likewise pinched clay
sporting five o'clock shadow.

“I won't flatter or be partial.
 If so, damn me. Now: my turn.”

These three would reason with fortune's
wheel. How can the Justifier be justified?
 I peel black paint off the railing, freeing rust.

“The wanton gods kill us flies for sport, no?
 I am young, yes, but in four generations
 I will never have been.”

These three will be erased sooner.
 I loosen my burgundy tie, light a Winston.

“We determine divine verdict
 by its ripples. Some get crucified.
 Be humble, be uncertain.”

The moon sets.
 My Apple stocks are down.

FAITH

I stray from the just dictates David delights in, like a German Shepherd straining against her tether, orbiting the galvanized eyehook screwed in the cement, reluctant as Pluto. And I cherish Lady Julian for her reverence, so I again resolve to inhabit simple piety like a beehive hut, a stone igloo cramping limbs like the perimeters of mystery, nodding at *three in one*. And while I resist religious affections or scholasticism's analytics, *I believe*, tugging the quilt of adjectives to my jugular: immortal, invisible, omnibenevolent, wise. And I believe William Blake conversed with angels in his sparse Lambeth kitchen littered with copper plates. But justice divorces good and evil, so when the Lamb with clots in his wool cracks the shrink-wrap of that encyclopedia with billions of blurbs, let him read I surrendered all. Direct my reason and passion, I'd be content with a bleacher seat in the celestial stadium, with an aluminum foil-clothed hotdog at the church's wedding reception. I believe, Lord, wrangle my unbelief, and render these clanging lines a plainsong.

Brendan Rowland, studying modern literature, lives in Westford, Massachusetts, several lots down from Edgar Allan Poe's brief residence. While writing, he sports black denim, cream-colored cat hair, and Sennheiser headphones blasting rock 'n' roll. He will begin a master's at the University of Glasgow in Fall, 2023.

POETRY

Rp Verlaine

NEAR THE EAST VILLAGE

“Jesus
 sees everything,”
 sings blind street singer
 pretty with long brown hair
 in her early twenties
 whose cardboard sign
 says she needs money
 to get home to Connecticut. I drop
 two dollars in her guitar case
 bringing her a step or two closer
 smiling while walking away
 a good deed to leverage
 the many sins. Perhaps making up
 for a previous night of debauchery
 with two gals from Scranton
 that brought more shame
 than pleasure.

“Jesus sees all you do,”
 she sings with beguiling innocence
 when this obese guy jostles me
 good, without pause, going by
 giving the blind singer, or
 her message, the finger.

Totally uncalled for.
 I’m left hoping Jesus fixes
 this cretin good.

At the very least
 a jaywalking ticket
 an STD or a bad
 rash or terrible haircut.

“Jesus knows, Jesus knows,”
 she sings. I do hope she gets home
 with Jesus keeping a watchful eye.
 Unless it’s His day off
 like it is mine.

UNDER TIN HAT

Silently
almost
his
two eyes
fragmented
fossils
a junkie
asks
to me to
anyone
where
Jesus
has gone?
For he
needs
a word
not a miracle
just a word.
I say
Amen
give a dollar
he smiles
with
missing teeth
and says
god is
good
Amen.

Rp Verlaine lives in New York City. He has an MFA in Creative Writing from City College. He taught in New York Public schools for many years. His first volume of poetry, *Damaged by Dames & Drinking*, was published in 2017 and another, *Femme Fatales Movie Starlets & Rockers*, in 2018. A set of three e-books titled *Lies From the Autobiography, vol 1-3* were published from 2018 to 2020. His latest book, *Imagined Indecencies*, was published in February of 2022. He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in poetry in 2021 and 2022.

POETRY

Donna Kathryn Kelly

THINGS THE INTERNET HAS RUINED
(HUMILITY)

The afterlife, I suppose,
Is a no-selfie zone.
And so, when all of
These people
Who fall or drown
Or are electrocuted
Each year
While staging to take
A digital image
Of themselves,
Dying for likes
In some dangerous, scenic place,
Arrive to eternity,
Above or below:
How long does it
Take them to realize that,
Though theirs was the will,
The smartphone was the device,
And they don't get to bring it along with them?

THINGS THE INTERNET HAS RUINED (INTERIORITY)

A poem inspired by the life of Mother Dolores Hart

She went from kissing Elvis
To chanting in Latin
Eight times a day
In a Benedictine convent.
Just gave it all up:
The glitz,
The glamour,
The green,
Because she received a
Call from the Agent,
The only real Agent,
Of all that is Good
And all that is Grace
And all that is Glory.
So, she cast away Hollywood
In the bloom of her youth,
And she embraced this new life,
Away from the prying cameras,
Away from the crowds,
Decades before the Internet,
Years before self-worship had become a viral thing,
At a time prior to the world having been intoxicated
By the noisy rush of blue-light images.
And maybe she knew
The future would turn into this
Ripping apart of humanity,
So that it was better to step away,
Take a pause,
Retreat into the hands of God,
To a safe place,
A certainty of place,
A place of servitude,
A life of interiority,
A prayer to the King of Kings.

Donna Kathryn Kelly's poetry has appeared in literary journals and anthologies such as *Pasque Petals*, *Southern Arizona Press*, *Oakwood*, *Snapdragon*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. In 2022, she received an Honorable Mention in the 91st Annual *Writer's Digest* Writing Competition (Non-Rhyming Poetry Category). Kelly is the author of *The Cheney Manning Series*, a collection of suspense novels about a criminal defense attorney turned amateur sleuth who investigates mysteries in the Fox River Valley area of northern Illinois. *The Cheney Manning Series* is available for purchase on Amazon.com (<https://www.amazon.com/-/e/B09NQH3J9B>). You can find out more about Kelly @[donnakathrynkelly.com](https://www.donnakathrynkelly.com).

POETRY

Janel Davis

OFFERINGS

During the dregs of February
She sneaks petitions into my bedroom

In between the tantrums and tears, she
builds her love with bold swipes
of crayon and marker on
paper rectangles
then, with blue tape and full hands
fastens them on the window
above our bed

I have grown raw by the grey days
and a daughter whose needs
are as yet so unknown
they chasm my family

That night I go out to walk
and pray
and miss a bedtime
that becomes an opera of anger

The next morning the curtains
flutter over my head
and I see them hanging—
twin peach paper hearts
crossed with rainbows

Her banner of love reaching over me.

MOURNING BAPTISM

But the anchor of hope is sunk in heaven, not on earth.
—Gregory Floyd

I have been baptized by many things—
the latest is grief
who cradles my head under water
until the joy embedded in my flesh suffocates
and floats face down beside me
where a constellation of memories and dreams ripple:
her babies, our holy-days, my kids' weddings where she will never be
in concentric circles of wavering—

This is the new death
the one where all the pathways
towards reason and happiness are flooded
and I walk into waters already drowning
wondering what part of me that is alive tonight
will be dead by mourning.

I haven't emerged yet
fluid runs thick through my hair
like amniotic liquid
and I hope to be birthed into something else—

A creature who understands joy in the suffering.

The tide rolls in and out
a drumming dirge—

And sadness is a song we often sing solo

Hope is our anchor here,
thrown up into heaven.

HIGHWAY WILDERNESS

an Advent poem

Noise travels well on highway wilderness
You haven't ambled here in awhile

The long love song of hope fulfilled—
Vehicled into the planet
on the distinct wail of this barn-baby King-boy

Lungs fill (first time for everything)
and bursts out a cry so hungry—
A stomach growl for so much more and (truth be told) milk

Wailing fists to the sky, star-clutching prizefighter
drawing back the night curtain
for every beggar-daughter son-betrayer
their proper names—You and I

The garden breathes,
her King is walking there again.

Janel Davis grew up in the Cascade foothills, spending time in the forest and also the barnacled covered beaches. She loves biking, baking bread, eating tasty food with talkative friends, and seeking out adventures with her two elementary age kids.

POETRY

Kathleen Hirsch

THE GRANDMOTHERS

Their faith was in their fingers,
fine as spindles
by the time I knew them.
On cold winter nights
by milk lamps
working the threads of their Irish pasts—
wool for the lepers in Largos,
lace for the Infant of Prague.

Both had a weakness
for votives struck to smoky hope,
those fingers of flame
that patch the gaps in dim naves;
each an intention
raised to God—
for the son lost fighting,
the daughter lost living.

I studied those prayers
made wondrous by warmth.
In their skittish flare
I learned how uncertain
honest
prayer must be—
a breath, a stitch,
nothing more,
taken in a darkened nave.

From these brief sacraments
my grandmothers turned
back to their threads,
working scarves and winter socks,
so many strands
in patterns I had no call to interpret

as anything but love—
All their lives, stitching up hearts
that would never be whole.

Did they burn all night?
Did they burn to nothing?
Did they die?
No, they never die,
the ancient mothers.
The work of their hands
sees to that.

Kathleen Hirsch, M.A., is the author of three works of nonfiction, *Songs from the Alley*, *A Home in the Heart of the City*, and *A Sabbath Life: One Woman's Search for Wholeness*. She co-edited *Mothers*, a collection of contemporary fiction. Currently, she directs the Contemplative Writing Group at Bethany House of Prayer in Arlington, MA, where she leads workshops on poetry and spiritual journaling, and teaches part-time at Boston College. Her website is: www.kathleenhirsch.com.

Sheila Dougal

SOME ANNIVERSARIES

after reading Cyndie Randall's poem, "J"¹

On his way in the Ford to the dentist off the main boulevard past the adultery where she used to work out five days a week. All those Jeeps and Chevys. No one would have or could have seen where her car was, or was it her truck there in the adultery lot? When the adultery buzzed and she went downstairs to lay on the adultery and engage in a text thread with her sister, he shook his head to get the adultery off. Those years are at the bottom of oceans under a rickety old bridge they're still trying to build. But some anniversaries the adultery gets high and the banks, though reinforced with therapy, full access to each other's devices and lots of hard conversations, start to erode and muddy its waters. Today the baseball game is out in Adultery on the other side of the valley. She says, "You don't have to go." But he refuses to give up his seat near home plate just because adultery could have a game here today too. And he sits next to her and remembers the promise he made and Hope that's stronger than the grave and adultery.

¹ Randall, Cyndie; "J." *the minnesota review*. 1 May 2022; 2022 (98): 18.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/00265667-9563653>

FOR LIFE

See the gray wolves side by side
Caressing, nuzzling for life
Walking down the darkened aisle
In the emerald forest chapel

Look, the Sandhill crane
Serenading in his best dress
Swinging his hips
While she nods and dips

See the she-beaver
Among the wetland reeds
Sending a letter
Perfumed in fallen leaves

Look, that woman
Beaming in his eyes
Not ashamed
To give their love another try

See the Man on a tree
Crying, "Why have you forsaken me?"
His blood-grain falls to the ground
See his vine sending out

Look, that Bride! Here she comes!
All the nations as one
With the wolves and the cranes
The beavers and the betrayed

Sheila lives in the low deserts of Arizona with her husband and sons. Her poetry and essays can be found at [Fathom Mag](#), [Clayjar Review](#), [The Gospel Coalition](#), [Risen Motherhood](#), [The Joyful Life Magazine](#) and other publications. You can also find her at her blog, [Cultivating Faithfulness](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#).

POETRY

Joseph A Farina

GOOD FRIDAY

blackclad nuns
 yardsticks in hand
 command attention
 on the day of Christ's crucifixion
 classrooms divided
 by gender readying to
 march to the waiting church
 where we are to pray
 the stations of the cross
 girls' heads covered
 with handkerchiefs, scarves
 or brown paper towels
 boys' shirts tucked in
 respecting the rules of
 proper dress in the house of god

within the Lenten draped church
 we begin the 14-step recreation
 of the sorrowful way of Christ's passion and death
 prayers at each station reverberate
 heads bowed one eye always on sister
 we endure the too long annual rite
 waiting waiting till the last station
 our faces showing the requisite sadness
 where we can leave respectfully in line
 the early dismissal from school
 we run home to enjoy the pleasures
 of the pagan symbols and rites of easter

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*.

POETRY

Natasha Bredle

HOW BEAUTIFUL THE FEET

Ankles twisted in a snare, metal
buckled to wood. Iron, I can only
imagine. Iron, like what fists
are supposed to be. Cold hard red hot
fists. Iron. Trapping open hands
in a helpless position. Ankles. Twisted.
Flesh raw. Toes blue. Downturned.
Dripping. Dripping red blood softly.

Once, a man called them beautiful.
A man who tore his clothes to signify
a people's defeat. The prodigal's exile.
How beautiful the feet, he said,
of the one who brings good news.
Good. A shadow draping the land
in darkness. Temple pillars shuddering.
News. A purple robe pirouetting
into a gutter. The sky opening.

For now, a strange land divides the kin.
For now, no king tears down
the high places. But the man caught
a glimpse: Ankles twisted in a snare,
metal buckled to wood. Gold, I can only
imagine. Gold soon to pave the streets
for the broken, scarred feet I can only
call beautiful.

Natasha Bredle is a young writer based in Ohio. Her work has been featured in publications such as *Words and Whispers*, *Polyphony Lit*, 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

Kara M. Angus

THE THING OF SHADOWS IS GONE

Love put you there
 hungry gaping mouth
 turning to mother's breast
 she kisses your velvety head
 soft voice harmonizing
 with the dulcet interlude
 of heaven coming down to earth

She your mother
 you her child

Love kept you there
 heart beating hard
 sending blood to the edges of your broken body
 thorns mangled amongst knotted hair
 behind the sponge is wine and gall
 darkness and light rush at each other

A scream rises in her throat
 she smooths the jagged edges down
 as she ponders and keeps watch over you
 you look down at her with tenderness

Woman your son
 a new family started
 at the foot of the cross

Mother's hands
 soothing the son of God
 God's son soothing
 the heart of a mother

You cry out
It is finished
 fractured words

that singe the air with heartbreak and hope
heaven roars in your ears
somewhere a veil is torn
the thing of shadows is gone

One day
she will ponder it all
the way crisp love
mingled with shards
of bitter grace

One day
she will whisper to another mother
*The son of my womb
crushed the head
of your mortal enemy
It is finished*

Kara M. Angus lives in West Virginia with her family. In her free time, she enjoys running, gardening, and volunteering at a local nonprofit. Her work has appeared in *Mutuality Magazine*, *The Unmooring Journal*, and *The Fallow House*. She writes regularly on Instagram @kanguswrites.

POETRY

Lory Widmer Hess

CAUGHT

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" –John 8:3-5

I'm caught in this circle,
 Unable to move,
 Bound to the earth
 Where dull stones lie.

A round of judges
 With stony eyes
 Makes me their test.
 They see no love.

I summon my voice
 To raise the cry
 Of the silent ground—
 But no words come;

I'm caught in the circle
 Of rage and fear.
 There is no way out.
 Then he makes a way,

Drawing in dust,
 Inscribing my hope
 Upon the earth's
 Unspeaking face.

The circle reverses,
 Turns inside out.

I'm the free one,
They're in the trap—

Bound to the earth
Until they can read
What he wrote: Himself
At one with our dust.

Lory Widmer Hess lives in Switzerland. Her writing has been published in *Parabola*, *Kosmos Quarterly*, *Braided Way*, *Red Letter Christians*, *Untold Volumes*, and other print and online publications, and she is currently in training as a spiritual director. She blogs about life, language, and literature at enterenchanted.com.

POETRY

Lee Kiblinger

DAWNSONGS

A rooster crows
and I cower
behind the memories
of my own deceit.

For I, too, invite
trios of crows—
the bird's hackle swells
stretches long
to shake me
and blood-red combs
tilt like hell's flames
toward the heavens.

Yet the dreaded cries,
these avian warnings,
sound an awakening,
a reminder of refuge,
of the morn and
its mercies—

Now on the steeple
the vane of
the cock's tail twirls,
catches the dove-breaths,
foretells the winds—

that seasons spin,
and birdsongs
may herald
guilt and grace
in the same breath.

RAIN

Genesis 2:6 – but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground.

You could have dribbled
dew for eternity
to green its grasslands—

Or wrapped a water canopy
around the wide expanse
and tipped—

Sonant sprinkles might
have slipped from
the tongues of angels—

Instead mizzles
bubbled from the bowels
of earth's lonely face

Softening, wetting
the sapped scapes
of time's birth—

Until you bid man
to irrigate your
wet artistry

And he bowed, thirsty,
to evaporation—
and a flooded earth.

Lee Kiblinger is a late blooming poet from Tyler, Texas, where she spends her time reading, grading essays, laughing with three teenagers, and avoiding to-do lists. Her poetry has appeared in *Calla Press*, *Agape Review*, and *Ekstasis*.

POETRY

Opeyemi Oluwayomi

THE BODY OF CHRIST

1 Corinthians 12:16

This body of ours is becoming old &
weak in its prime. Her heart had been

exposed to the aloof sway of the wind,
& her skin had wrinkled in the casual

hands of the things of the world.
Tell me, what parent would watch

her child die so young? The father
has sent his son to watch over you.

When the leg says to the eye, "I've
grown: I'm capable; I can swim the

ocean alone for a shoal of fish," &
the eye stands afar, waving to the snout,

& everyone goes their separate ways.
How then will the body receive its boon?

Opeyemi Oluwayomi is a Nigerian writer. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in *Poemify Magazine*, *Brittle Paper*, *Up-write Magazine*, *SprinNG*, *Salamander Ink* and elsewhere. In addition, he is an aspiring novel writer. Whenever he is not writing, he is probably scoring some musical piece (piano, violin, voice et al.) or reading.

POETRY

Ariana D. Den Bleyker

GOD IS IN ME & WHERE THE BOATS GO SO
OFTEN

*Look for the soul, you become soul;
hunt for the bread, you become bread;
whatever you look for, you are.*

–Rumi

The day slowly pulls the sun down
into the horizon, light filtering
through the curtains, nestling
the sun into me & there I fall,
catching sight of something quiet
& intangible, tasting light

& listening to the nothing
& everything surrounding me.
I thread through needle, work
the patchwork of myself into
the hollowed-out spot where I let God
dream for me, bring me unfailing hope,

the weight of it all a clean grace
golden & growing, the hollowness
dislodging an ache from my throat
that whirls around me. In this idle,
the sky outside becomes wilder,
turning in circles, gives meaning

to a sheet of stars hung by clothespins
illuminating my calling, my knowing
how to pay attention, how to kneel,
how to fill the hole & be blessed,
how to swallow the moonlight

where God is & all the patterns
of sky that come together
to become a gathering of me.

THE AFTERMATH OF HEALING

for Jim

& doves gather inside me,
tuck their soft wings inside my mouth,
slip over my tongue, repairing
all that's been broken,
a mix of weight & lightness,
infallible energy swelling inside
the unmistakable whisper
of my name.

& I feel it all unfold, feel
my tongue peeling off the words
caught in a darkness far too long,
body singing undauntedly,
as if silent prayer,
as if psalm,
as if speaking of endings
like beginnings I can't see.

*

& when God whispers my name
it ends no end at all—

*

I call my own name,
watch it float into the firmament,
joyful sorrow grieving,
if just for a moment,
knowing it's all been worth waiting for
& the world can no longer hold me
inside the elegance of spilled water
carrying me home.

Ariana D. Den Bleyker is a Pittsburgh native currently residing in New York's Hudson Valley where she is a wife and mother of two. When she's not writing, she's spending time with her family and every once in a while sleeps. She is the author of three collections and twenty chapbooks, among others. She is the founder and publisher of ELJ Editions, Ltd., a 501(c)(3) literary nonprofit. She hopes you'll fall in love with her words.

POETRY

Lynn Finger

WHEN THE ANGELS CAME FOR EZEKIEL

When the angels came for Ezekiel with whirling wind,
he could only listen, open to the rushing of wings and wheels.
The sky was thick with God, in one moment the veneer
torn away.

When the angels came for Ezekiel,
he knew God had carried him in the desert, no matter
how lost he felt he was.

And there was God in the still air of the room
where my father died, and a glow played across
his sharp cheekbones from underneath the shadows.
My dad had packed his bags earlier that day, as he knew
he was leaving soon.
He looked forward eagerly.

I ask the angels to sew
my renewed prayers into the fiery sky.
Every wing beat has a key
that unlocks us, and we seek into every cell of our life
for that joining.

It isn't hard to see the searing feathers
in any space you lay your eyes, when the air breaks
from asking God in.

JESUS, HOW CAN YOU LEAD ME

Jesus, how you can lead me to the broken and burnt trees
I once called a forest, and how you can show me to raise hope
from the wildfire ashes. I admit You created all my favorite words:

blue, owl, sunset, frog, forgiveness, regrowth—how can we
just be normal when Your complete compassion has rewritten
it all? I've tried to wear the sensible shoes, but with You, want

only to walk barefoot in the huge green fields outside my house,
led by Your own desire. Once the trunks were burnt and fell under,
a few hard elms edged its focus, but with the whole land open and new

shoots showing, You said to come out to play. You are wherever I go.
So I roam, and seek. It's only seconds until our home reappears around
the corner, waiting, miracle of time and fallen earth. You make it seem simple

to want to explore. The forest grows green in sunlight, expands and holds us
in timelessness, and just think of all the elk who were shy but always there
in the trees, and I sometimes glimpsed one when the time was right. I love

how You lead me. Jesus, tumbled as the days can be, when I call you, You
answer, and when You call, I'm there. Your green forest, and all it is, holds me.

AFTER YOU DIED, DAD

After you died, Dad, and were gone, I knelt by the dusty boxes
of your things that were the collection of leftovers from your life.

I found your Veteran of Foreign Wars hat. Binoculars. A silver cross.
Grey photos. And then a paper tucked into one of those old glittery

Christmas cards, a tree with angels. When I pulled out the letter, I was struck
by the first words of the one wrote to you, "To my brother in Christ."

To my brother in Christ! I had just cried out to Jesus last summer
because I had to. You were gone and I didn't know how to go on alone.

I called on Jesus to carry me, just like I had seen in that inspirational
poster on the computer in a co-worker's office years ago, with that

"one set of footprints" poem, which meant God was carrying me through
this time completely, as that's what I asked for and received. I didn't know

Dad how complete you were in Christ, and of Christ, and I grieve, why did
we keep our deep beliefs so private from each other? You aimed to live as

a grounded and ethical man, as much as possible in our current society,
and your tutoring, mentoring, and encouraging, wanting to be a blessing to

all around you, showed this. Thank you for living life so broadly and unafraid.
I know, even as you have passed, we are in Christ together, a treasure better
than anything I had been searching for in your forgotten boxes.

Lynn Finger's writings appear in *8Poems*, *Perhappened*, *Book of Matches*, *Fairy Piece*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and *ONE ART: a journal of poetry*. Her chapbook is *The Truth of Blue Horses*. She was nominated for 2021 and 2022 Best of the Net Anthology. Lynn also mentors writers in prison. Her Twitter: @sweetfirefly2.

POETRY

Maura H. Harrison

A FATHER'S WOUND

The leaving, working, and the coming home:
A father goes and daily tests the bounds
And grounds of worldly cares, commotion, chrome.
He toils his way through routine's busy sounds.
He's mapping out the obstacles—the mires,
Brambles and bogs, the easy faithless way—
And naming constellations: Legal Liars,
The Mediocre Mob, the Soulless Sway.

The naming is an endless work. However,
With atlas and the Creed, he leads the way.
When he was made a father, heart torn wide,
He knew he had an open wound forever
In need of care—a father's love that day
By day draws all the children to his side.

I'LL KNOW YOU IN THE BREAKING

A meditation on receiving Holy Communion and Luke 5:1-11

Put out a little distance
Into the lake, along the shore
Where schools of Kinneret
Throw flecks—a million silver flashes
Of sun on scale, of awe.
My love moves swift and quickly here
Among these smaller words.
Hear and partake of parable.

Put out into the deep
And lower nets, believing in
The call to try again.
Lower into the well of wells
And catch the weight of Musht,
Come take this, all of you, and eat
My words—these teeming fish
Raised from the Sea of Galilee—

That bless and break your net,
 Trust me, I'll know you in the breaking,
That bless and raise the shallows,
 Today with you in paradise,
That bless and beg you follow.
 Coming ashore, give all away.

Maura H. Harrison is a poetry student in the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program at the University of St. Thomas, Houston. She lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

POETRY

Caroline Liberatore

LET THE WICKED REST

Sunday regards me dissonant
To the call, a diametrical
Opposition to formulaic faith
And, did I mention, unsettled.

Sunday regards me dumbstruck
By the sun glitter crown adorning
My niece, snoring in my lap
As the preacher pleads endurance.

Sunday regards me disarmed
By the eyes of God in this shaky saint
And her wild voice, insistent to my resistance:
He is pleased with you.

Indeed, this is a new law:
A law that commands my face alight.

Caroline Liberatore is a poet and librarian from Northeast Ohio. In these vocational spheres, she is prompted to engage with interminglings of divine brilliance and day-to-day grittiness. Much of her poetry resides tautly in this space. Her work has appeared in publications such as *Ekstasis*, *Solum Journal*, and *Amethyst Review*.

POETRY

Kent Reichert

LIFTING THE VEIL

“In the name of the...”
He cast these words into the world
from memory,
reflexively,
a blink of the eye,
or finger touching fire.
The prayer, however,
became lost,
evaporating
like raindrops
after a summer shower,
disappearing without a sound.
Just a one-sided conversation.
But, hasn’t it always been so?

Like poems
passing through the consciousness
burnish the unknown,
an incandescent sun
illuminates stained glass.
Images spill across wooden pews
where piety and passion conflate.
“Lord I believe...”
offers only a hiatus,
a vexing grace,
manifest in ritual and sacrament.

“As a called and ordained servant...”
speaks of spiraling dogma,
creates a false milieu,
bathed in certainty
and the clarity of the unknowable.
Minds clutch the irrational,
folding it into their truth.

Where the doors close and lock.
None understand the mind of
the prodigal,
only his scars remain,
their designs drawn
from his wanderings.

Kent Reichert holds a Master's degree in Religion from Wake Forest University and a doctorate from UNC-Charlotte. A native of Southern California, he currently resides in the North Carolina piedmont. His writing has appeared in *The Dead Mule*, *The Dispatch*, *Agape Review*, *The Clayjar Review* and *New Verse News*.

POETRY

Daniel Romo

WE, TOO, ARE JUDAS

And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.

—Matthew 27:5

Was the betrayal in stabbing an omniscient back or
even fathoming it possible to do so, and just how

deep can a knife dig when the soul is the epitome of
eternity? If we're honest with ourselves, we'd admit

we've had our own moments where our equivalent
of 30 pieces of silver allowed greed to supersede our

beliefs. There are regrets and there are regrets we wish
could be do-overs where we'd resurrect our personalized

Edens, but remorse sans repentance is like stalagmite
vs. stalactite—the capacity for growing up or the act

of simply falling down, which makes me ponder when
someone testifies how long they've walked with God if

that includes the detours they've taken along the way.
Sometimes when we lack the capacity to ask for

forgiveness from the ones we've hurt, we, too, find
ourselves alone in an empty field, noose threaded

around our neck, our bodies dropping to earth in a
desperate attempt to shed the weight we are carrying,

dangling body swinging like a lifeless pendulum.

Daniel Romo is the author of *Bum Knees and Grieving Sunsets* (FlowerSong Press 2023), *Moonlighting as an Avalanche* (Tebot Bach 2021), *Apologies in Reverse* (FutureCycle Press 2019), and other books. He lives, teaches, and rides his bikes in Long Beach, CA. More at danieljromo.com.

POETRY

Ron Hickerson

1000 YEARS WITH MATTIE KEITH

I spied her there across the room
Shining like a burst of sunlight—
The auburn tips of curly brown
Hair made her look backlit, just like

Monica revealing she's an
Angel, sent by God. I want to
Go talk with her—to know her and
Figure out why her joy is so

Infectious, but I hold myself
Back. I have long been taught
Graham's rule prohibiting espoused
Men from talking with women not

Their wives. And this rule has often
Made me question my own motives.
A voice: "You just think she's hot, and
You're hoping for what she can give

Outside friendship." And thus the pure
Desire is defaced, painted
With nefarious brush strokes. Poor
Sweet summer child! You'll make it.

When I think about heaven now,
I think of all the time we'll have.
There I'll receive the grace to know
The people I wished I could've

Had the courage on earth to love.
We'll get 1000 years to tell
Our stories amid echoes of
New adventures—free from the spell

Of worry. Whisperings will fall
Quiet. Intimacy will rest in
Surety that this world's beautiful
And unshackled from our ruin.

WAVERING ON WATER

What does it feel like to walk on water? Is it as firm
As the Earth or semi-solid, wobbling around like some
1950s Jell-O dessert? Do you have to move to
Stave off sinking, like how non-Newtonian fluids lose
Their shape without force acting upon them? But I suppose it's
Not Physics that's the ruling law here. The Word approaches.
Can you feel the movement of the man walking toward you?
Do the ripples emitting from each step tickle your toes?
Will my feet get wet? After all, I won't break the surface
Tension, but my commencement unveils the demanding dance.
The rolling tide challenges my balance and pushes me
To tread on the ridge of a rising wave, like a pulsing
Tightrope. If I trip, then how will I land? Will I flop hard
Against the surface, or will it engulf me like a bed?

Ron Hickerson works in higher education where he helps students navigate the murky waters of academia. When he's not at his desk, you can find him wandering around campus, looking for the oldest trees. His previous work can be found in *The Clayjar Review* and *Foreshadow*.

POETRY

Jim Richards

MARIO, LUIGI, AND JESUS OF NAZARETH

After falling into a pit of red, leaping lava
while playing the New Super Mario Bros
on the Wii with my son, my mind wanders
as I wait my turn, to the endgame (E for everyone)
of Christ's life, his crucifixion, and reappearance
after death. In the game's teaser, he sits eating meat
in the house of Simon the Sick when a woman
breaks an alabaster box of spikenard and pours it
over his head. Press start, and a man bearing water
guides twelve players through the city's maze
to an upper room where they break bread.
The hand of the betrayer—is it Mii?—is on the table.
Iscariot's quest is a matter of hours: he eats Christ,
has his feet washed by him, sells him for silver,
arrests him with a kiss, repents, casts down
the coins in the castle, and nooses his own neck.
After sops and a hymn, taking two swords,
the characters follow a smiling star across Kedron Creek
to Olive Mountain's garden. He asks a trio
to keep watch—he knows what is coming—
while he withdraws about a stone's cast to pray,
but their lives are low and they can't stay awake,
their eyes heavy and bellies full. Some evil
and enormous weight fills his soul, and Christ
falls. His sweat is as it were great drops of blood.
The drowsy sons of Zebedee half-dream a demon
is approaching from the depths of Gethsemane
when Christ returns with his robe sopping red. *Sleep on,*
he says. Then torches, lanterns, weapons, and
Iscariot again: *Whomsoever I shall kiss, is he;*
hold him fast. Hold him fast. Just as soon
as Malchus' ear is sliced off, it's on again, repaired
by the deceiver, yet all press A to continue
with the game. Next is the level of judges and trials.

So many accusations. *Are you the Christ?*
Are you the Son of God? His reply: *Thou hast said.*
 In other words, *Word* or *Sing it, sister* or *Here we go!*
 Mostly, he holds his peace. Holds his peace. So,
 ye have heard his blasphemy. What think ye?
 Wii think to spit in his face, blindfold him,
 slap him, and tease: *Prophesy, who smote thee?*
 Simon, off-screen, watches from the servants' fire,
 his voiceover obvious, bewraying. The rooster's
 digitized cry sounds like a grown man weeping.
 Pilate's wife warns him: *Have nothing*
to do with that just man, for I suffer
in my dreams because of him. But what is truth?
 To Barabbas, a toadstool and an extra life.
 Pilate washes, the mob sings: *His blood*
be on us, and on our children. His blood be on us,
and on our children. Knighted by a whip
 laced with fragments of glass and bone, his crown
 bejeweled with rubied blood, his robe purpled,
 a limp reed in his right hand: THIS IS THE KING
 OF THE CASTLE. The father of Alex and Rufus
 help carry his beam. Women follow him
 as he moves (M for mature) skull-ward. Gaming
 all night, it is the third hour (9 a.m.) when the pitch
 of the hammer rings through flesh. The sun
 has risen. *If thou be of God, come down*
from the cross. The rest of the day is darkness, but he
 forgives and gives up the ghost before the thieves' legs
 are broken to speed their deaths. The quaking that follows
 is enough for one bright helmet to declare: *Truly,*
this was the Son of God. He with the most coins
 removes the nails or removes the hands. Life
 is a loss that makes a body heavier, but Nic and Joe
 manage to get him down, enmyrrhed, aloed, and into
 the fresh-cut vault before the game's hourglass
 flips to Sabbath mode. For two nights, tomb is temple.
 By sunrise, women with spices come and find it
 open, already cleansed. In the garden of pipes,
 where the Plumber Himself appears at last, it is first
 to his Peach, his question like a kiss: *Why weep?*
 When the eleven see him with their own eyes,
 his word is: *Peace.* But they are terrified. He earns

a honeycomb and a broiled fish. Graves open,
and vintage bodies which slept arise and walk
into the holy city. Hold him fast. He is about
to be taken up, a cloud receiving him out of sight.
Why stand ye gazing into heaven? Dad? Dad,
it's your turn. *I come quickly.* It's your turn, Dad.
Even so, on the flatscreen Luigi has come back
to life! I rub my eyes in disbelief. I thumb the cross
on my white wand, warp into the underworld,
attempt another flying leap across a pit of fire.

Jim Richards' words have been nominated for *Best New Poets*, two Pushcart Prizes, and have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Copper Nickel*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Sugar House Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Juked*, and others. He lives in eastern Idaho's Snake River valley and has received a fellowship from the Idaho Commission on the Arts.

POETRY

Mary Marie Dixon

TREE OF LIFE

*Maybe the vices, depravities and crimes are nearly always
or even always in their essence attempts to eat beauty,
to eat what one can only look at. Eve initiated this.
If she lost our humanity by eating a fruit, the reverse attitude—
looking at a fruit without eating it—must be what saves.”*
—Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*

Our journey outward
From the tree of life
Began in the bite of an apple
Our journey inward
To the tree of life
Began in the crushing of grapes

The divine to human connection
Flowing from one unseen river
Must now involve violence
Because of the misfortune in Eden

Wandering into dusk poor Adam
Could not foresee the future
In the beauty of the serpent
Poor Eve could not see the sting

Pondering this does no good
We are still listening to serpents
I forgot to mention my inclination
To want to know the future
Which is strictly God's domain

Like Eve and Adam my heart is set
On what is denied
Thinking God a tyrant for his withholding

The grapes lie under my feet
Their sweet perfume lost on my lust

But still the angel scatters
And still the angels gather
One pushing away and one pulling in
To paradise we go
Through the new tree
With spikes and thorns

..

Mary Marie Dixon, a visual artist and poet whose focus on women's and mystic spirituality centered in Great Plains' nature, has published in various venues and exhibited in galleries. She explores the creative intersection of the visual and poetic. She loves stars, sunrises, and sunsets on the open plains!

FICTION

Greg Rapier

TRAILS

Phil sipped on his Coke. Counted his chips. One black, three greens. Handful of reds. Nowhere near the five hundred he started with, but he was trending up. He could get there. If he played right.

The dealer slid a Jack and a three across the table. Gave himself a nine. The crinkled printout in Phil's wallet—which he had memorized but carried anyway—said to hit. So, he hit.

Tap, tap—another three.

Phil had a rule—no, a code—you only gamble with the wages of an employee you could fire. That way, if you lost, you'd have an out. No harm done. And if you won, you could buy your wife something nice, string it around her neck, and tell her it's not an addiction. It's math.

His wife knew he was no good at math. He was no good at lots of things. But he was good at this. Good enough to go to the casino three nights a week the past seven months, down just eight hundred bucks on the year. Good enough that the waitresses knew him by name and on Tuesdays gave him free drinks. Good enough that when he left the mountain for Cherokee Hills Casino, his wife begged him to come back.

Phil tapped the table again. Took another card. Bust.

His phone buzzed. His wife's face flashed across the screen, smiling. Fourth missed call. Like with blackjack, Phil had a strategy chart—two or three missed calls were no big deal, but once you hit four, five, six—that's when you get into trouble.

Leaving now, Phil texted. Then he took another swig of Coke and slid in his black chip. If this goes well, nobody gets fired.

Reed studied the kid—his bushy eyebrows, thick glasses. Forehead. He was short. Fat. Clueless, Reed hoped. But he didn't know.

He crinkled a square of foil into a tight ball and stuffed it into the pocket of his jeans. Reed's routine was to make sure the bathroom was locked. Check to see the stalls were empty. Then sugar the boogers. Maybe he forgot to check? No, he checked. Maybe the kid's legs were up. Maybe he was hiding. Little shit.

The kid blinked. Looked kind of dumb. There's no way he understood what he just saw. No way. But he stared anyway as if waiting for Reed to confess.

Reed wiped his nose. Sniffled.

"Any requests for campfire, kid?" he said. "What's your favorite song?"

Reed rubbed his soapy hands under the faucet. Wiped them half-dry on his jeans.

The kid said nothing.

Reed nodded goodbye then slid between the kid and the bathroom door. He tried to be discreet with the lock but it clicked anyway. Loud.

The kid's eyes widened.

"What's your name?" Reed asked.

"Matthew."

"Matthew, you seem like a cool dude—what do you say we keep this a secret? Between us guys."

Matthew squinted. "Have any money?"

Not much. Camp stipend comes the first of the month. A couple of days.

“One hundred dollars or I’ll tell.”

Matthew tugged on his sleeve like he was unsure—scared, even. Reed didn’t think Matthew would snitch, but he also knew better than to gamble with a kid. Kids are unpredictable, emotional, thoughtless. And if Matthew took money, they’d be in this together—indicted. Reed emptied his foil-free pocket. Unfurled his money clip. “How about forty-three dollars, and umm...”—he felt around his other pocket— “and this guitar pick.”

Matthew stared at the money, blank-faced.

“Please. It’s all I have,” Reed said.

The preacher at Monday’s campfire said that where your heart is your treasure is too, so Matthew thought maybe if he gave his forty-three dollars to Camila, he’d have her heart. And maybe, he thought, maybe she’d give him a kiss.

Matthew had never been kissed, but he also never had forty-three dollars. His grandma gave him a twenty when he turned nine, but forty-three? Matthew figured himself the richest kid in the whole camp. And his big brother taught him once—as he unwrapped a Double-Double from his job at In-N-Out Burger—girls like a man with money.

Camila blushed. Her friend Janie insisted she count the money, but Camila said that wasn’t necessary. She said she would have kissed Matthew anyway. But the money’s a nice touch. “Something to remember you by,” she said.

Then she took his hand and led him to the playground by the creek.

Janie held the money for safekeeping, tucking the bills beneath her armpit so nobody would see. She watched Camila and Matthew disappear into heavy shadows. Waited. Rubbed her thumb along the smooth face of the guitar pick and looked down at the shoes her dad

bought her for camp—pink and white with heels that glowed when you took a step.

Camila returned first, then Matthew, dazed. Janie handed Camila the armpit-money, the sweaty bills sticking to her fingers. She kept the guitar pick for herself because Camila forgot to ask.

Later that evening, as the counselors scavenged wood scraps for the campfire, Matthew asked to sit next to Camila. But Camila had already settled at the end of a long pew next to the other girls from her cabin.

“There’s no room here,” Janie said, slouching heavy into the bench like a rock.

“Tomorrow, maybe,” Camilla added and blew him a kiss.

That night, Camila told Janie she couldn’t bring the money home. Her mom would flip out if she saw it, and her dad would do even worse if he found out she kissed a boy.

Janie remembered how the bills felt tucked underneath her shirt—like she had a secret. Like a queen. She wanted to capture that feeling, hold onto it forever.

So when Camila asked to trade forty-three dollars for Janie’s light-up shoes, Janie agreed. She stuck the money into the left side of her bra and imagined all she could buy. She imagined plucking off the Target rack the swimsuit she couldn’t afford, and she imagined getting her nails painted French-style like at Becca’s birthday party, and she imagined kissing Tucker Rodd.

That night while the other kids slept, Janie lay in her cot, awake. She fantasized about toys, clothes, games. She fantasized about strolling to the cash register and tossing a bill onto the counter, telling her dad everything was okay, that she would pay for herself from now on. This way he wouldn’t skip a meal after shopping to make the money straight. She imagined her dad buying shoes without looking at the tags, then stooping down and wrapping her in a big hug.

And as she thought about shoes, she wondered if by trading hers away she had betrayed her dad. Not his wallet, but his heart. She knew the price of her shoes; she knew the price of all her clothes. And at \$29.99, she'd be able to buy them back plus more, maybe a meal for her dad. That would be nice. But she wondered, still, how he'd feel when she went home with bare feet.

She said all this to Camila the next morning—that she needed to break the sacred code of gift-giving and request a take-back, but Camila said their deal had no-backsies, and backsies, as everyone knows, were binding.

Janie sat alone the next campfire. Camila and Matthew sat two rows ahead—her leg wrapped behind his, feet clicking together, her light-up heels dancing to the praise-rhythm of the guitar.

The next morning, Janie flagged down one of the big kids—Sharon, a bully. Sharon had teased Janie when they were younger. Always gave Janie Indian burns and threw things at her. Always said Janie smelled like cats. Janie didn't even have cats.

Janie pulled Sharon aside. Looked around. She flashed three tens and five ones, and she told Sharon Camila stole her shoes. She needed them back.

"I'll pay extra if you make her cry," she said.

Sharon stuck out a hand, "How do I know you'll pay up?"

Janie stuffed the \$35 into the pocket with the other eight. She pressed her thumb against the guitar pick so hard she thought it would break.

"If I don't, you can beat me up...the way you used to."

Sharon grinned. "What's stopping me from doing that now?"

"The money. And I'll tell Phil."

The guitar pick slid across Phil's desk. It spun around, pointed cockeyed at Reed. Reed stammered, twisted himself into a *Thanks, I was looking for that*.

"You're fired," Phil said.

Reed tensed. Made a fist. "What did Zach say?"

"*Matthew*," Phil corrected, "was in a fight with a middle-schooler—a girl, Sharon. Protecting his girlfriend. His eye's swollen. And Camila, the girlfriend, we found her bleeding from both ankles. Blood on her shoes too. She'll be fine, though."

"But what did Matthew say?" Reed asked.

The kid was desperate. Probably thought if he was smart, he could keep his job, but Phil knew about a dozen counselors—good, Christian ones—who could take Reed's spot, no problem. You only need to know about three chords to play most praise music.

Phil had hired Reed against his wife's advice. He saw something in him—potential, maybe. And Phil was naïve enough to think that maybe if Reed lived here all summer, if he worked the campfire each night, sang praise music, and listened to sermons, then maybe his rough edges would smooth away. Maybe he'd change. Like Phil.

"We both know you weren't snorting sand," Phil said.

Reed looked away.

"I'm going to let you play tonight—high-school camp only. But I need you packed and out of here by the weekend. Do you understand?"

Reed nodded.

"I can drive you to rehab if you need it," Phil sighed. "I know a place about an hour from here."

Reed sniffled. Wiped his nose with his sleeve. "I'm good," he said. "Really."

Phil knew what that meant. “If you need anything...”—he ducked desk-level to catch Reed’s eye—“reach out. I’m mad at you, but I’m not *that* mad at you. If that makes sense. Things will work out.”

“Actually...” Reed said. “There is one thing. Maybe I can have next month’s money—like severance. I don’t have a place lined up ’til September.”

“Sorry,” Phil said. “The stipend’s an advance, and money’s tight right now. You know, church work.”

“Then what about the money from the kids? You have the guitar pick, so I’m sure you’ve got the money too.”

Phil swiveled in his chair. “I don’t think the money rightfully belongs to anyone. So, I took those thirty-five dollars, and I buried them.” He slid the guitar pick across the table. “I figure this here is enough. Maybe you’ll keep it, and you’ll learn something. Maybe when you look at it, you’ll remember there’s someone out there who loves you. Or maybe you’ll throw it away—I don’t know. But the money’s gone.”

The money wasn’t gone.

It stayed in Phil’s wallet, wrapped around his crinkled printout of blackjack odds. It stayed there until his next trip down the mountain. Phil stopped at a gas station. Fed the amalgamation of bills to the ATM. Then he went online and bought a pendant for his wife. A way of saying thank you. And I’m sorry. And I hope we can be better.

And inside that ATM, those thirty-five dollars died. They became disembodied. No souls. No face. The fibers frayed, split along the eyes of the men printed dead center. The dollars reconfigured themselves into ones and zeros. Something new. Without weight.

Phil withdrew a fresh set of bills—wrinkle-free and without history—then he returned to Cherokee Hills. No matter what, this was his last visit. No matter what. He cashed in his bills for chips and tucked his wallet back into his pocket. The blackjack printout stayed there, alone.

It became faded and tattered and old. And so did Phil's wife. And so did Phil.

Greg Rapier's work has appeared or is forthcoming in places like *Dream Pop*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Variety Pack*, and *Fathom*. He has degrees in English and Film, and is working on his doctorate in Creative Writing and Public Theology (yeah, that's a thing). He lurks on Twitter with the very factual handle: @revgregiscool.

FICTION

Margaret Beasley

GETHSEMANE

*O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.*

~ Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "No worst, there is none."

The man behind the curtain was singing again. He'd been singing when they'd brought him in early that morning. It wasn't even truly singing—more like humming. The song was stirringly familiar, yet somehow Eastman could not name it. The man was out of tune... Out of tune. Shell shock seemed to affect them all differently; he was out of tune. It was beginning to disturb Eastman. The only thing in his possession was silence—and the man was robbing him of even this.

Eastman wondered what the man looked like. He'd not seen a soul since he'd arrived, except for the doctors and nurses in the ward. He hadn't even seen his own face. But from the set expressions of the doctors, and the occasional quiet look that the newer nurses slipped when they thought he wasn't paying attention, he knew it must be awful. He'd been hit in the throat by a piece of shrapnel. At least he thought so: that was where the pain seemed to clutch at him and choke him in the night.

Eastman had been at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh since April, and the narcissus blooms were fading outside his clouded window. The boys at the Front called Craiglockhart "The Bin." He knew why: it's where the broken things went. He'd laughed about it with the rest of them then, smiled the tight smile you make when you have to, and suggested their commanding officer be sent to Craiglockhart. He knew it was a psychiatric hospital—that was part of the joke. That was the joke. Of course he'd spent the last few months trying to discover why they'd sent *him* there, and he'd come to the only possible conclusion: faulty documentation. And the unraveling hours he had spent walking through the back alleyways of his mind, asking himself why he was *really* here—well, these could

be dispelled. They were his own mind's faulty documentation. He'd told the nurses. They'd smiled. Of course they'd smiled. How many dozens of times a day they must hear, "There's been a mistake. I need to get back to my boys. There's been a terrible—a terrible..."

The man behind the curtain stopped singing. Eastman opened his eyes in surprise. The sudden silence of the room seemed to look down at him and question him: How broken? Mistake. How old? Twenty-two. How many limbs? Four. How broken? Mistake. Patient residence? Lost. Spouse? None. Patient status? Mistake.

Eastman had been trying to identify the song that the man behind the curtain had been singing for the past few hours. Of course, he was very badly out of tune. And the words were lost or substituted. It was just a melody—a tune out of tune. They were only separated by the white curtain that hung between their halves of the room. His was the first music that Eastman had heard in months; the nurses wouldn't let him listen to the phonograph. Of course the other fellows couldn't—too much for them. But he wouldn't have minded. But this stuff from behind the curtain—it was enough to drive a perfectly sound mind distracted.

Now Eastman held his breath. The room's hush pressed itself down upon him like a muzzle. He felt himself torn between two worlds of sound, hesitating. The silence demanded whether or not he was going to break the rules. These were not the rules set by the hospital, but those set by himself. He had told himself that he would not make any friends in "The Bin." This had been easy because for the first few months he was there, the room next to him had been unoccupied. But now the temptation to speak to someone—someone who wasn't paid to smile at him—someone who might not smile at him at all—was too much.

"Don't stop on my account, old man."

Nothing from behind the curtain. Maybe the man was asleep. Or dead. Eastman waited.

"Oh, I didn't," responded a friendly voice from the other side. "I just figured we'd all had enough."

Eastman felt his heart's pace quickening. "What's that tune, anyway? You're butchering it, whatever it is."

The man laughed. "*Ave Maria*. Schubert. I guess I'm tone deaf. Or *you* are."

Eastman considered this. It had been a long time since he'd heard music. Maybe he'd forgotten. Of course he could be tone deaf. He could be—but he didn't think so.

Struck with a sudden and gnawing urge, he whispered, "Would you do me a favor? Would you pull the curtain back and look at me? It's closer on your side. They won't give me a mirror, and I think the nurse did a slapdash job of a shave. Terrible service." Eastman tried to keep his voice even and relaxed to mask his own anxiety.

The room was silent for a moment.

"Right-o," came the friendly voice again. A strong hand reached beyond from the other side of the curtain and drew back their divider. It seemed to Eastman that there must be an open window on the other side of the room—one far brighter than his. A soft, warm light spilled through the opened curtain on a breath of something sweet and fresh. Eastman didn't look at the man's face yet—he couldn't bear to see what was sure to be a look of disgust ripple across his eyes and quickly settle itself into something like pity.

"You look just fine to me, Narcissus," laughed the man.

Eastman looked up quickly and caught at once the gaze of white, sightless eyes. The man's bandage had evidently slipped off, or been taken off, leaving naked the useless remnants of poisoned beauty.

"Too bad, old man," was all Eastman could think to say. At the same moment he felt a shudder of relief fall across his chest. The hand drew the curtain back in place, leaving Eastman strangely cold and alone.

The man returned to his singing—the same song—and Eastman recognized it now. He'd heard it first that night he'd gone with his mother to the symphony the day before his deployment. The soprano who'd sung it had enchanted him. She had worn a plain dress of black

velvet, adorned by a single lustrous pearl at her throat and a white rose that she held in her hand as she sang. She'd not been young, or lovely, or even particularly powerful. But he'd felt that her voice was the saddest, most beautiful thing he'd ever heard. Her music had haunted him all the way home, followed him through his dreams, and lain heavily upon his breast in the unquiet hours before daybreak. He'd almost thought he had heard it on the battlefield as well—in the crying of a shell—the moment before he'd been hit.

As Eastman lay listening, the music from behind the curtain seemed to become clearer, softer, and full of light. The man's voice grew small, and only the song itself took flight into a solitary, luminous melody. Eastman was back at the symphony, sitting next to his mother, spellbound by the soprano. But this time she was weeping. Her tears wetted the rose she held, melting into her music and making it more sorrowful, a voice of immortal tenderness. Eastman could feel the anguish of her every breath pulsing through his own body. Her tears were his tears, her sorrow, his sorrow. She seemed to hold all the joy of beauty and all the mourning of it in her song. Her eyes were the gray clouds of a storm, hung across the turbid tides of dangerous seas. She could not be consoled.

Eastman could only watch and weep for her. He could not give her comfort. Her tears covered his face—the face he knew was hideous. They stung his ravaged cheeks as they fell, washing away his last hopes of a mistake. But the music was too bright, too full, to allow anything to distract him from its movement. It seemed to have no end and no beginning—nothing but enduring, exquisite fragility.

It was dark when Eastman awoke. His first thought was that the music was gone. His second thought was that the nurse had forgotten to light his lamp that evening. He rang the bell, and shortly one of the newer nurses hurried in, apologizing. He waved an impatient hand and asked her to light the lamp on the other side of the curtain as well. The nurse gazed at him quietly, as they always did, and frowned slightly. "Are you afraid of the dark, sir?"

Eastman bit his lip. He hated being treated like a child. "No, it's for my friend on the other side. I'm sure he'd like some light, too."

The nurse's frown deepened. She looked intently into his eyes and said in a voice intended to be soothing, "That bed is empty, dear. It's

kept empty in case of an emergency. It's been empty since you arrived."

Eastman felt as though something cold and cruel were holding him by the throat. His heart beat so quickly that he feared his chest would burst.

"But you heard it—you heard the music? You must have heard it. Someone must have heard it. Oh please—please—please say you heard it! It was heaven...it was grace. Please tell me you heard it."

The nurse was younger than he'd thought at first. No older than himself. She had turned very white, and in her dark eyes he saw reflected his own fear.

"I heard no music," she whispered. A bell rang softly from a neighboring room.

"I—I heard no music," she repeated, turning toward the door as if to leave. Eastman held her hand firmly with his own.

"I tell you," she insisted, "I heard nothing." The same impatient bell tinkled. It was finished.

"Good God," she whispered, "we are far away from heaven here." She drew her hand away from his and finished her work hurriedly without looking at him.

He was alone again. And he knew not whether he was mad, or whether the world itself had suddenly been lifted from its foundations and cast into the sea. Eastman saw himself rise from his bed and follow the nurse as she closed his door. He saw himself walk softly behind her through dark hallways, awaiting the night terrors of blind men. Interminable doors stretched before him, behind each one of which burned demons, beholding in cold triumph their gasping victims. Behind each door, men with devil's faces—men who had once been fair—sobbed in lonely agonies over their shattered youth.

It was the battlefield again: the troubled breathing of strangers lying near but somehow far away. The restless, unrefreshing sleep. The waiting for an unseen foe in the gray confusion of unending twilight.

And as he drifted through these vestiges of forsaken sanity, where evil abided so manifestly, it did not seem mad to Eastman to hope that angels might also visit that place. It did not seem mad to hope that they might hover near the lost—the wanderers through the garden of Gethsemane.

Margaret Beasley lives in rural Virginia, and is Western Rite Orthodox. When she is not studying for her associate's degree, she enjoys reading WWI poetry, going for walks, and cooking. She was moved to write this story as a commemoration of her favorite WWI poets: Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who were both patients at the hospital in which "Gethsemane" is set.

Maura H. Harrison

THE FINAL SENTENCE

I never expected Death to show up wearing a gold lamé jacket, red caiman cowboy boots, and silk evening gloves. The shininess of her surfaces made me think of vitality and inspiration, not completion and conclusion. Her cloud of fireflies was also distracting, each fly hovering and blinking on-and-off in the shape of a word, with the overall effect being a staggered and syncopated coming and going of poetic thought. *Little* and *love* and *see* appeared near her neck, disappeared, and then reemerged as little sparks of *today* and *paradise* and *me* at the tips of her fingers.

Certainly, her beauty made me aware of my dullness. I was dusty and scuffed up like a pair of gardener's galoshes, forgotten and shoved into the back of a hall closet. Move me, and clods of cares crumbled around my feet. I was worn. My daily grain had been rubbed smooth by life's fine grit. Instead of sparkling, I was fading in a heavy blanket of melancholy. One bare foot lay outside my bed covers, a vane in the still air of weariness.

It was in this cocooned apathy when I first met her. I was roused by what I thought was a waking dream, the kind you catch yourself consciously orchestrating. I felt electric and alert and was fighting for my life. I was on my death bed, and the smallest bit of food or water was causing violent fits of vomiting. With the illusion of control, I forced the taste of bloody iron under my tongue and licked my lips. For some reason, there was a priest in the room, and he was trying to administer the last rites. He kept calling me "Juliana," and I kept protesting, "No, no, my name is Terrena." With all her colors and textures and fireflies, Death moved closer to the bed and leaned in close. She held my face in pillowed hands of blue satin.

"My darling Juliana, peace, peace," she said. The word *message* walked across her lower lip and was slowly inhaled into her mouth. A moment later, the almost transparent words of *maker* and *lover* drifted out of her nostrils like dry ice. She was a rippling mirage, and her gold

jacket looked like the surface of a pond when the breeze multiplies the sunlight into a thousand dancing orbs. When she crossed herself, words fell on me like drops of water so that I felt like I had been drenched with an ominous incantation.

“What are you doing?” I shrieked like someone being spit on. “What have you done? Go! For heaven’s sake, go away!” I tried to sit up and push her hands away, but instead, found myself heaving and tasting bile.

“Oh, my Juliana,” she started again while *last* and *past* shadowed her eyelids, the blurry bodies of two fluttering fireflies right before a shine. Turning to the priest, and with a gilded gesture of her arm, she drew him to us, enclosing us in a strict privacy. “Since she cannot eat or drink, lay the Host on her chest.”

The priest approached the bed. He placed a corporal over my chest then removed a pyx from the burse hanging around his neck. From it, he took out a Host and held it for a moment, lips moving in a silent prayer. Gently, he laid the Host on my chest. It sank into the corporal, passed through the blanket and my clothes, and touched my skin. A tremendous shock pulsed through my body, and I felt like I had been turned inside-out. Everything around me—the room, the priest, the woman—was pulled into my chest and compressed into a small thorny seed. At the same time, my interior world—my thoughts, my awareness, my memory—was pulled to the surface and exposed like skin. I felt the woman touch my forehead, and I imagined the word *burn* on my brow. Like bitters in a cocktail glass, I was licked by a faint and wandering blue flame. It was like being a firefly in a jar, beautiful and terrible, and the burn woke me up.

At least that is what I thought. I shook my head to loosen the cloudiness and confusion of such a nonsensical dream. I regretted this immediately and groaned as I became aware of pain in my head and in the middle of my chest. Touching my forehead, I was startled to find my head bandaged. Remembering the lady and the priest and the burning Host, I hesitated then slowly touched my chest. Through my clothes, I felt a bandage there as well. Three times I tested the bandage with the slight pressure of my fingertips. Three times I felt the pain of a tender wound.

After this, a long time passed. I thought I really was dead, but this thought began to deteriorate as I became aware of the physical weight of my breathing. It was a far-away weight, something curiously out of reach. I concluded that I had somehow been separated from my body, and so I settled my awareness into a ceiling corner of the room where I could observe my body below in the bed. I was back in the hospital room. A dry erase board on the wall noted that I, Ms. Viator, was in room number C-118. The space under “My goals for today” was left blank, and my current nurse was Custosia, extension 132.

Time was in a hyper lapse and people scurried around my body like a steady parade of ants. At this speed, their motions looked like an orchestrated ballet, a purposeful dance invisible in the normal passage of time but now amazingly revealed. I must have been cold because I was wrapped up in blankets. Even my head was wrapped so that only my sleeping face was visible. I was a moth watching its cocoon, the only still object amid a hive of hectic activity.

“Should we slow it down?” a voice asked. “Would you like to take a closer look?”

I knew it was the gold woman with the soft and fiery touch. Not seeing her anywhere, I said, “I can’t see you. Where are you?”

“My dearest Juliana. Let me help you.”

And with that, the scene below froze, and a cloud of words started to form below me near my body. *Examine* and *discern* flickered near my face and became little scalpels. Before I fully understood what was happening and before I could protest, the words landed on my eyes and commenced their surgical extraction.

I was horrified. There I lay, wrapped in a sea of white linens, and where the calm of sleep once filled my face, two eye sockets now held a deep darkness. At the edge of each black hole, rubied jewels flashed and flickered and fell, small bloody tears. And there, next to my body, the golden woman was smiling and holding my eyes in the middle of a shining paten. One rolled up to the ceiling and fixed me with a stoic gaze.

Incredulous, I said, “What could possibly have possessed you to do such a thing?”

“Juliana, please my love, don’t be alarmed. I belong to you, and you belong to me.” She paused, then looked at me as if I were an invalid. “I’m trying to help you see things more clearly so you can...”

“So I can what?” I interrupted. “How can I see without any eyes?” I paused, then continued, “Why do you keep calling me Juliana?”

“That’s your baptismal name.”

“Why did you burn my forehead?”

“My dear, that was a blessing.”

“Why did you let the priest burn my heart?”

“He did no such thing. That was your maker confirming his mark.”

I stared at her. “Talk about leaving a mark! Look what you’ve done to my face.”

“Hmm. You do have a point.”

Goldie gave my eyes a little swirl on the paten and blew on them as if to test the heat of her breath on the shining surface. She looked pleased as *contrition*, *deserving*, and *petitions* corralled my eyes into the middle of the tray.

She opened one side of her jacket, as if to check on a secret, and then carefully tipped the paten, rolling my eyes into her interior coat pocket. “Fear not, you can use my eyes for a bit.”

From my bodiless perch in the ceiling corner, I saw her satin fingertips pluck out her bloodless wandering eyes and place them on the paten. Again, she swirled the tray, filled the surface with her breath, and stirred up a swarm of words: *remember* and *bind* and *inscribe* danced with flashes of *sweet* and *cautery* and *arrive*. Satisfied, she picked up one eye at a time and pressed them into my eye sockets and then closed each eyelid with a kiss.

I was body and soul once again and too afraid to open my eyes. For a long while, I didn't. For a long while, I lay as still as possible and just listened to the room. I heard truth singing and felt the breath of a million fluttering voices on my brow.

Creator, maker, shaker, all is greater—

“Whisper, what do you think? Is she ready?”

Conceived, believed, relieved—

“I hope so. I hope to know. I hope.”

Communion, everlasting, long love-lasting—

“Sigh, what do you think?”

Hum heaven hallowed come—

“Close, she's close. She can contain, she can obtain.”

A feasting Kingdom, kissing holy victim—

“I think she still believes. We should encourage her final sentence.”

At death, on earth, a birth—

“Song, you hear her music, don't you?”

Into embrace, a resting place, deliver—

Song sighed and then whispered, “I do, I do, I do.”

Hush. Amen.

My eyes are closed, and I venture an inward peek at myself. My surfaces are shiny, my scuffs are brocade, my grain is rich. All those magnificent golden-induced words on my brow are swirling and flying toward the light. A distant song, just barely audible, reminds me of springtime in a garden. The words fly into the heat, into the warmth, into a beckoning buzz where they break into an alphabetic pile of lines and circles and arches. They all fall down, descenders and ascenders all asunder, a pile of thorns and crowns and crosses. Only one golden word remains. *Come*.

“Juliana, my dear. Can you hear me?”

I don’t answer. Not yet. I linger in the crown of thorns.

“Come, my love. He’s here.”

The mark on my chest is warm. He burns my heartbeat, and I sigh.

“You know I love you.”

Mathew Block

NUNC DIMITTIS

Simeon was in the supply closet, taking a break and eating his supper: bologna and mustard sandwiches. As was his custom, he was also reading his Bible as he ate.

Simeon had spent nearly forty years working at the school as a janitor, and he took pride in his work. He wasn't the smartest man, he was quick to say, but he knew cleaning inside out. Even so, he was getting older, and the job didn't go as smoothly as it used to. He was taking more breaks each evening, and the hours required to get everything done were growing. Worse, his eyesight was deteriorating, meaning he had to bend down to inspect his work more often than he liked.

It was his eyesight that was bothering him at the moment. He took a bite of his sandwich and brought the Bible closer to his face, reading aloud slowly: "They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory." The words came haltingly. Simeon put the book down on a cleaning cart to his side and rubbed his eyes.

"Having trouble?" The voice came from the open doorway. Simeon looked up and saw a young boy of about twelve, with dark hair and dark eyes.

"I thought everyone had gone home for the day," Simeon replied. "Sorry, I don't believe I've met you before."

"The name's Josh," the boy said. "And I think I'm the only one still here, besides you." He gestured to the open Bible. "Having trouble?" he asked again.

Simeon smiled. "My eyes don't work as good as they used to," he said. "Reading is getting a bit tricky."

Josh strode forward. “Here, let me help you,” he said, taking the Bible into his hands. He continued the story where Simeon had left off, reading Jesus’ response to the request of James and John. “To sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give,” he finished, “but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared.” He let the Bible drop a little and turned to Simeon.

The old man shook his head. “I don’t really get it,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Josh asked.

“I mean, why does he tell them no? If anyone deserves to sit by Jesus, surely it’s the disciples.”

“Oh,” said Josh. “You see, James and John want glory. They want power and prestige. But that’s not what Jesus is all about. He makes it clear a couple verses on: ‘For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.’”

Simeon nodded slowly. “Okay, I get that. But then who does Jesus have in mind when he says others will sit at his right and left? I’ve always wondered that.” He rubbed his nose and took another bite of his sandwich.

Josh smiled. “Now that’s a good question. We get the answer a few chapters later.” He flipped through the book, then traced his finger down the page. “Here we are,” he said. “‘And with him they crucify two thieves; the one on his right hand, and the other on his left.’”

Simeon started. “What?” he said. “You mean Jesus meant the robbers he was crucified with?”

Josh laughed. “Like I said, Jesus came to serve, not to be served.” He closed the book and handed it back to Simeon. “James and John were seeking glory—they wanted to be Jesus’ right and left-hand men. But Jesus had a very different idea of glory.”

They were quiet for a few moments. “You’re smart,” Simeon said at last. “I’ve been reading this book for years, and I never thought of

something like that. I don't think my pastor ever preached it that way before either."

"You ask good questions," Josh said. "That's sometimes the best place to start."

Josh visited Simeon often in the weeks that followed. Sometimes Simeon would be sweeping the floor when Josh would appear from around a corner. Or he would be emptying a garbage can when Josh would suddenly be at his side, helping him lift the heavy bag. But no matter when the boy arrived, it was not long before they stopped working to talk.

Simeon needed the breaks anyhow, he reasoned, and he was happy for the company. But they would inevitably visit longer than he planned. Sometimes hours passed as Josh read to him from the Bible or prayed with him.

The janitor knew the relationship was odd—a schoolboy teaching a man well into his sixties. But then, Simeon had never held himself to be very clever. It didn't surprise him that a child might be smarter than him. Simeon became Josh's willing pupil.

He looked forward to these afterschool lessons, but they came at a cost. A backlog of work was beginning to accumulate. He tried to move faster, but the effort was counterproductive; he tired too easily and needed to take even longer rests. "Better to go slow," he counselled himself. "You always were more of a tortoise than a hare."

He was bending over one day in the supply room, squinting to read the detergent container for his mop water when a voice from behind called his name. He turned in expectation, hoping to see his friend. Instead, he found the principal.

"Oh. Hi, Mr. Wenté," he said simply. He didn't like the man. Mr. Wenté had not been with the school long—he was the fifth principal since Simeon had begun working there, and he was easily the least friendly of the lot. He was a bald, round little man, and he had a tendency to wear his ties too short. The look was not very becoming.

“You’re doing well, I hope?” Wente asked as he walked into the room. Simeon nodded. “Good,” Wente said. He examined the shelves and continued speaking. “Let me just get to it, Simeon. I’ve noticed a certain...decline...in the quality of your work lately.”

Simeon said nothing.

“Of course, everyone has off days,” Wente carried on, still examining the stock room. “But this isn’t just a matter of days. For a couple of weeks now, I’ve been hearing complaints from the teachers—garbage cans that haven’t been emptied, floors that haven’t been swept.” He waved his hand in an indistinct way. “The whole place is a mess.”

Simeon put down the detergent container. “I know,” he said simply. “My work hasn’t been its best the last little while.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Wente interrupted, turning to face Simeon.

“I’m getting back on the right track now, though,” Simeon said after a moment. “I’ve been so tired lately. I’m sure I’ll be feeling better soon.” He smiled unconvincingly.

Suddenly Josh was at Simeon’s elbow. The janitor turned to acknowledge him, but Principal Wente just carried on. “Yes, well, see that things improve soon. The school can’t go on like this indefinitely.”

Wente walked to the door. “And Simeon,” he said, looking back, “I’m serious. If you can’t keep up with the work, we’ll have to find someone else who can.”

Simeon nodded slowly. Wente left.

Josh didn’t say anything. A minute passed, and Simeon reached down to pick up the detergent. He put it on the cleaning cart. Josh picked up the mop. They collected the remaining things they needed, then set out to clean the hallways together in silence.

“Come with me,” Josh said. “I want to show you something.”

A week had passed since the principal issued his ultimatum. Josh hadn't visited Simeon during the past several days, and his absence was both a pain and a relief. Josh had become a close friend, and Simeon missed him. But the boy was also a distraction from his real work.

The janitor had tried to catch up after Wente had confronted him, but it was difficult. His eyesight was getting worse. His energy was too soon spent. He was falling behind again, even without Josh's interruptions. He knew that his employment with the school must soon come to an end.

Josh's reappearance this evening was therefore a bright star in the darkening twilight. And so, when Josh asked, Simeon left everything to follow him.

The boy led Simeon to the carpentry shop. They padded through the sawdust to the back, where something lay hidden under an old sheet.

"Go ahead," Josh said, handing Simeon the corner. "Pull it off."

He did. Beneath the sheet lay a piece of furniture that Simeon did not recognize. But he knew at once it was a thing of art.

Its shape was a little like a chair without legs—but only a little. It had two narrow sides, with a squat base at the bottom and a sort of small lectern at the top.

But it was not the shape which surprised him most; it was the ornamentation. The woodworking was remarkable. Intricate scroll work of ivies laced the two sides, with delicate little birds—sparrows, Simeon recognized—worked into the design. The feathers of the birds were inlaid with a darker wood, accenting the rich red stain which covered the whole piece. Burned into the centre of the book rest was the silhouette of a crucifix.

Simeon ran his fingers over the wood. It felt smooth to the touch. "It's beautiful," he said at last. "But," he turned back to Josh, "what is it?"

Josh beamed. "It's a *prie-dieu*."

“A what?” Simeon asked again.

Josh laughed. “A *prie-dieu*. It’s French for ‘pray to God.’ You can kneel at it while you read your Bible and pray. Like this.” He reached down the piece of furniture and swung out its hinged bottom. It revealed a cushioned pad upon which he knelt down. Then he folded his hands on the small lectern which sat at the top. “Your Bible goes up here.” He grinned, opening his hands like a book. “Right up close to your face, so no more difficulties reading.”

Simeon was incredulous. “You mean it’s for me?”

“Of course,” Josh said as he stood up. “I made it for you.”

Simeon didn’t understand. The workmanship on this was more exquisite than anything he had ever seen. How could a boy of twelve do something like this?

“I’m a bit of an artist,” Josh said simply, answering Simeon’s unspoken question. “I like to make things.”

Simeon breathed in. “I’m almost afraid to use it,” he said.

“Don’t be,” Josh countered. “A thing like this is best appreciated in the using of it, not in admiring it from a distance. The beauty of its form mirrors the beauty of its purpose.”

Simeon did not return to work again that evening. With Josh’s help, he moved the *prie-dieu* to his storeroom. Josh left shortly afterward, but Simeon stayed for several hours more, kneeling, reading his Bible, and praying. He thanked God for Josh.

The broom dragged over the floor clumsily. Simeon stretched it out again, and a spasm shot up his back. He winced. “No good overdoing it,” he thought to himself. He glanced back at the floor and squinted. “Probably clean already. Still, I should bend down and check.”

But Simeon did not bend over. He put the broom on the cart and began pushing it back to the supply room. The halls were clean enough for

tonight. He would go home and get some sleep, he decided, and then get an early start on things tomorrow. He would catch up. He would.

He rounded the corner and stepped suddenly into chaos. What he was seeing was impossible. A mob of men and women, children and adults, were pressing in on someone, shouting, jeering, swearing. Someone threw a punch. The child—for it was a child—stepped back. There was terror in his eyes.

“Oh, God,” Simeon gasped. “It’s Josh.”

He tried to step into the crowd, to separate them from the boy, but his legs refused to move.

Principal Wentz was beside the janitor now. “Save him,” Simeon thought. The crowd parted and the principal stepped forward. He looked down at Josh. “Filthy little bastard,” he sneered. Then he struck the child in the face, sending him flying.

Pandemonium erupted. They were all on him now, students and teachers. And now Simeon saw his pastor there too, and several of his fellow church members. They beat the boy, clawed at his face, ripped his hair. Someone smacked him in the head with a baseball bat. Another stomped on his chest.

There were dozens of them, hundreds even. The faces moved too quickly; Simeon couldn’t tell one from another anymore. And suddenly Simeon was there too, striking Josh’s face again and again. He brought his foot down on his neck. He heard bone crack and laughed wildly. It was an ecstasy of blood, and he lost himself in the carnage.

When Simeon came to, a moment or an hour later, the mob was gone. He looked down at his feet. The boy was dead, battered beyond recognition. Blood pooled around him. Bits of bone and flesh covered the floor.

“Oh, God,” Simeon moaned, trembling. How could he be dead? How could someone so beautiful, so good, be dead? What was happening? What had they done to him? What had Simeon done to him?

He cradled the broken body in his arms, weeping uncontrollably. He did not know how long he knelt there holding the boy; minute passed after minute, until Simeon lost all awareness of the world around him. The world was nothing.

“Simeon!” A shout woke him from his stupor. He was still kneeling on the floor where Josh had been murdered. The blood was still there, but the body was gone.

“What are you doing, Simeon?” The words came from behind him, angry and sharp. He turned unsteadily and squinted.

It was Principal Wente.

“What are you doing?” Wente demanded again. “I’ve been watching you for a full ten minutes. You’re just sitting here, doing nothing. What are we paying you for?”

Simeon blinked, confused. Wente strode towards him, clearly furious.

“Look at that trash!” he shouted, pointing to the corner by the doorway. A chip bag and a crushed juice box lay on the floor. “I’ve had it with your laziness, Simeon. Get cleaning or get out!”

Simeon rose to his feet unsteadily, stumbling in the process. He tried to speak but nothing coherent came out. Wente thrust the cleaning cart towards him and stormed off, swearing.

Simeon felt as though he were walking through water. Every step took effort. Even his thoughts seemed sluggish. He couldn’t think. Couldn’t remember. He reached for a trash bag to go collect the garbage Wente had pointed out.

But Simeon did not pick up the bag. Instead, he took his wash bucket and knelt down where Josh had been murdered. His chest swelled with heavy sobs as he pulled the sponge across the floor again and again. This couldn’t be happening. Josh couldn’t be dead. And yet, the blood was there. The blood was there.

He spent the night scrubbing the same spot, weeping. Early the next morning, he left the school—left all his supplies on the floor, left the

bucket unemptied, left the trash by the door. His head hurt. Everything hurt. He stumbled home and exhaustion overtook him.

He returned to school two mornings later. He could barely see. His thoughts were like mud. The boy was dead. That mattered, he knew. He should do...something. But the clouds in his mind wouldn't break. There was no sun. All was dark—all shadow, all sorrow.

On his arrival, he was immediately summoned to the principal's office. Wenté sat in his chair, his face purple with barely controlled rage. "You know why you're here," he said icily once the door was closed.

Simeon heard the man as if from across a chasm. He sat down slowly and let his head droop forward.

"I've never met a lazier piece of shit in all my life," Wenté was saying. "Garbage everywhere, floors caked in filth. And that's nothing on your insubordination. I told you to pick up that pile of trash by the doors two nights ago. And what did I find yesterday? The garbage still there. Your supplies still there. You had done nothing. Nothing at all."

Simeon barely heard him. He understood the words, but they wouldn't resolve into anything meaningful.

"Look at me, Simeon."

The janitor looked up slowly towards the principal.

"We're not paying you to sit alone in your closet reading your Bible," he snapped. "We expect you to do a little work from time to time."

Why did any of this matter? Why was he listening to Wenté? The boy was dead.

Wenté continued speaking, but Simeon's gaze slid off the principal and out through the window to the playground beyond. There he saw a figure dancing several hundred yards away.

Simeon suddenly sat upright. The figure was Josh. He was laughing and smiling, waving to Simeon from across the grounds. His dark eyes flashed with joy and his hair twisted wildly in the breeze.

There was no mistake. Simeon saw him clear as anything. That was Josh. He was alive. He was alive!

Wente was still speaking. "...What I'm saying Simeon, is that you leave me no choice: we're letting you go."

Simeon was openly crying now. "Oh, thank God," he whispered. "Thank God." His eyes never left the dancing child outside.

Wente was taken aback by this response. He noticed Simeon's gaze and followed it. He looked out the window at the empty playground for a moment and then turned back to Simeon.

"Well, then," he said hesitantly, stroking his tie. "I'm...er...glad that this is satisfactory for both of us." He paused. The rage in his eyes faded as he looked at the weeping, grey haired man in front of him. "I...I know it's been a bit difficult for you as of late. I guess your age is catching up to you." He gave an awkward smile. "Maybe it's time you got some well-deserved rest."

Simeon was still crying. Wente cleared his throat. "Forget everything I just said. We'll call this your retirement, not a firing." He paused again. "Why don't you just head home. We'll, uh, we'll talk in a day or two about holding some event to mark your long service." He stood and ushered Simeon out of the office.

Simeon went out in dazed jubilation.

"Go pack up your things," Wente said kindly. "And don't forget that pulpit-thing you've got stashed away in the closet. God knows what else we'd do with it."

The janitor didn't hear him. Once the principal had retreated to his office, Simeon ran to the school doors. He raced across the playground to Josh, gathered him into his arms, and wept for joy. Tears streamed down both of their faces as they laughed.

“I don’t understand,” Simeon said at last, as the two of them stopped to catch their breath.

“No,” Josh said. “I’m sure you don’t. But come, let me explain it to you.” Josh led them to the swing set. He sat on the nearest swing, his shoes dangling above the sand, while Simeon settled on the ground by his feet. He could not take his eyes off the boy. Josh began to speak.

The principal found Simeon there hours later, slumped on the ground by the swings. His eyes were open and his mouth was fixed in an expression of terrible joy. He was dead.

Mathew Block is editor of *The Canadian Lutheran* magazine and communications manager for the International Lutheran Council. His writing, both sacred and secular, has been featured in various publications, including *First Things*, *The National Post*, *The Mythic Circle*, *Amethyst Review*, and more.

FICTION

Zee Mink

SOMETIMES THE RAIN COMES HARD

I lost my job yesterday. Today my father died. A flat tire greeted me on my old Ford pick-up...something else unexpected. I throw my coffee-stained canvas satchel into the front seat. I change the tire, climb into the cab looking straight at an old black and white photo clipped to my visor. A tiny girl clad in faded overalls and a flannel shirt was clasping the hand of a large dark-haired, smiling man. Prying myself away from comforting memories, I look out my cracked windshield, seeing evening storm clouds brewing in the New Mexico sky. I push in the clutch, shift into reverse, back out the driveway heading to see my father's serene face for the last time.

A hundred miles closer to my destination, I decide to stop for a jolt of caffeine. I am sitting on a bar stool at a hole-in-the-wall cafe between Albuquerque and El Paso, sipping on a mug of liquid energy, reflecting on what lie ahead. Sometimes the rain comes hard.

My dad was my life. He was large in stature, even larger in spirit. He was an encourager from the moment I took my first breath until he took his last. He was diagnosed with brain cancer six months ago. We researched and chose qualified doctors—we had a plan. We prayed daily for wisdom. We were hopeful. Everything seemed great, until an afternoon phone call from a voice I did not recognize. I am trying to block out her words with each slug of bitter, dark coffee.

I talked with my dad early this morning. We chatted over breakfast every morning, it was a routine we both clung to and needed. I think I needed it more. These sunrise morning soul washings got me through broken hearts, broken dreams, and broken faith. This morning we talked about my job loss and how he saw it as an opportunity. His voice held no clue he was lying on a bed in the ER. Although, he told me he loved me twice, which I thought a bit odd. Now, I know—he knew. Just like he knew when we had to say goodbye to my mother twenty years ago, another cancer victim.

Shaking my troubled head, I slide off my stool of contemplation, point my truck toward El Paso where my father will be lain next to my mother. What I didn't tell Dad this morning was I didn't lose my job, I quit. Soul washings didn't come clean today. The rain is pelting my truck, the wet is seeping into my bones. My prayers have taken a turn. I will keep my appointment with my oncologist. I know my own chemo storm will soon be brewing. Surely, sometimes the rain comes hard.

Zee writes from rural Texas, where she finds many wonderful ideas for her imaginations. She has been published in journals, anthologies, theatre presentations, newspapers, calendars and in a book of essays. She was honored to be a feature writer in *The Langdon Review: The Arts in Texas*. She is currently working on a children's story and a book of poetry.

FICTION

Noelle Wells

IN HER OWN WORDS, EVELYN

He was my brain; I was his feet. That's how we got on. His words were like pegs I could hang my heart on, his thoughts were where I could rest myself when I was tired. But his prayers! Those were the blueprints that rebuilt me into someone I could grow to love.

My first husband before Ben had no use for my words. He was an eraser, and I was a line he was slowly doing away with. This was on account of my empty womb, which he would say, never looking at me, was nothing short of an empty life. *I* was emptiness to him. He would walk through me and around me like I was a ghost he had no business in seeing. So eventually, I didn't see myself either, and my tongue became a box of old linens that was ready to be packed away. And my dreams of babies—fat, pink, and warm against me—I packed those away to. I went so far as locking the door and throwing out the key.

When my husband died suddenly, I cried buckets. The folks who came visiting thought I was grieving, but I'll tell you a secret: I wasn't, I was having spring showers! The winter that had been my life was finally over. That was the day I began to believe that God might have something better for me.

When I found Ben some years later, he looked at childless old me like I was someone complete, with hands like fruit trees and feet like good soil. He didn't mind what I didn't know how to say. He just learned to say it for me, "In the strong name of Jesus, Evelyn, Amen!" He'd kiss the top of my head, and I would get on serving him his dinner. He never covered me with his shadow like I needed to be hidden. No, his shadow was just a nice good chair I could sit on and be carried along by. Ben was good to me.

I never planned to bury two husbands. I had hoped to bury the first, but I dreaded burying the second. I had thought it would be real nice to ride up to heaven with Ben, wrapped up in the coattails of his faith.

He'd enough faith for both of us, and now I worry there is hardly enough left for one of us.

I've been alone again now for six months, and every day I have knocked on God's door and asked him his purpose in giving me more time. But all he gives me is blank answers on blank papers. And with these fingers growing stiffer by the day, what am I going to do with that! When the pastor comes visiting lately, he brings me markers. The ladies at church told him I color now. It's true, I do. He asks me how I am. I never say much, and I know it troubles him. He is young, new to this. His eyebrows strain like he is searching for lost words hidden in my eyes so he can understand something of who I am. I think I want to tell him, but it is hard to speak of being erased, to not know when it started—*was it my father or first husband?* I don't know, but maybe God's not letting me off until I do. Maybe he wants me to find that key I buried, unlock everything I put away, air out the whole sad story until I see something good in it.

Sometimes I wonder, and I am embarrassed to even think it, that I keep on because God wants me to learn how to be a brain for my feet, and to find words that could fall off my tongue like little seeds into a garden. These little seed words would make some pretty flowers grow. Maybe a child would pick them, look my way, and know they are from me. Maybe they would come my way, hug me around the waist real tight before running off. Maybe so, maybe so.

THE GOSPEL OF SKIRTS

“God intended to clothe you,” my mother would say when every skirt I wore was too short and every shirt gave opportunity for Daddy to sermonize the scandal of my neckline. “Higher up! Lower down!” he’d preach, and I’d follow, hungry for the whiff of his presence blowing in then speeding out of our home.

But she, my overshadow, hung around me like a tent. Combing through every inch of my life with her long-knuckled fingers, she catechized the patterns of me till I moved in cadence with her. “God understood,” she would say, “that the mistake of Eve was her bare skin making Adam weak to the foolishness of her indiscretion with the serpent!” She was coy, the corner of her mouth dropping when her words were so good they dripped off her lips like chocolate. “Like Bathsheba did David, and Delilah did Samson, a show of skin, and a kingdom falls!”

She, not wanting of her own sermons, would lead me deep into the lower levels of our house, chanting her platitudes like songs. We’d go down one step, the next, farther in, deeper down. “*A woman* is a basement of a well-built house. She bears the shadows like a crown!” She’d continue, arrived now under the lone lamp of her alterations room. Needles clenched between her teeth, she’d start yanking my hems another inch lower. “But!”

One, two, three more yanks!

“If the basement tries to be the main floor, the house will crumble. Civilization cannot withstand a woman out of place! You’re a stool, you’re roots, ground water, tectonic plates—Daughter, listen!”

She’d pull me to her level grabbing my chin in her palms, kneading it like dough till the lumps were smooth and blue. “The bottom dwellers will rise!” She’d hiss like some ancient witch sure of her future eminence, the low light flickering incantations of shadows across her face. She, so like a nocturnal creature, cockeyed towards the light, would straighten me back up to observe my length for error and promise, and sure enough *it* would be there shaking like a small child in the corner of my eye. She, pulling fabric scraps from her basket, would rise to meet *it*. The gentlest I ever knew her—she’d dab the tear

away. “At the last day he’ll see you covered head to toe in garments of holiness. It’ll all make sense then...that holiness hurts so much now.”

Our eyes, so rarely meeting, would try to reach to each other, but she, never done straightening and perfecting me, would fall like something hollow to the ground to continue her work. And there’d be nothing but the groan of pipes until—

Finally!

She’d clap her hand in victory as the hem of my skirt tickled the tops of my toes! She’d close her eyes like she saw it: the two of us black, blue, and clothed all over, ready before Jesus to receive our reward. “The last will be first, little girl. That I know! Amen! Don’t I know it.”

She’d run her hands down the length of her denim skirt like it was rivers headed straight to Zion. She’d rock to-and-fro, *lost to me in the fervor of her visions*, humming her hymns and savoring her prayers. “Such a little price, for such a great reward? You understand? Tell me you do.”

Her eyes like lunar eclipses would startle open. In rhythm with the tickle of fabric against my toes, I’d nod with her such that the ripples of my longest skirt were like waves slowly guiding me to beaches of glory. “Such a little price...” I’d whisper, in awe of the work of her hands: her callous, needle-pricked fingertips; her latent, hope-fogged eyes; her red hands smoothing the tempest of my skirt
Till it was
As calm
As water
On a windless day.

Noelle Wells is a writer and counselor who hails from New England but is currently residing in Middletown, PA. She lives with her husband, and three children. Noelle’s work has appeared before in *Ekstasis* and *Calla Press*. She is inspired by the works of Eli Weisel and Antoine de Saint-Exupery.

FICTION

Robert Kibble

THESE THREE REMAIN

Alice sees the church door, and as with every door for such a long time, she imagines someone standing behind it, ready to pounce. She walks on, and with an effort avoids turning to check.

Alice stands at the back, surprised how many people have fit into the small church. The heat of the afternoon gives way to an uncanny chill inside the ancient building. Somewhere under this vaulted ceiling stands her sister. At the front, probably, or the first row back. She will have planned everything to the last detail, as is her way. She will have thrown herself into organising in order to distract herself from yet another tragedy.

Alice takes a few tentative steps forward, eyes adjusting to the light inside and now able to see down the aisle. At the front lies a coffin, closed, on wooden supports. Two small bunches of flowers sit on top, one from her, one from her sister. She sent the roses, originally intending not to come in person. She didn't expect to see them on the coffin. She wouldn't have blamed her sister if she'd left them behind.

She wonders how far she should walk. There are two seats free at the back-right corner, but something propels her a few more steps forward. A couple to her right murmur something, below the level she can hear. Her legs continue to function, although her brain has stopped. Her sight is drawn toward the dark brown wooden box with the earthly remains of her mother. A mother whose final days were not filled with reminiscing about a life, but—if Jemma's middle-of-the-night email was to be believed—filled with regret.

Please come, it had said. Mum wants to make peace. She needs this. Please. She does not have long. Days, at most. Shrewsbury Ward, Wexham. Please come.

It wasn't clear which direction the forgiveness was to travel, but did that really matter, this late in the day? But that final sentence. Days.

Forgiveness, reconciliation—Alice had always taken for granted that someday things would change between them, but when it was set out like that it hit home. Jemma had said just enough, and Alice had set out, just as that storm had hit.

The flight couldn't take off until the next morning, and instead of reaching home on Saturday, Alice found herself getting a taxi to the hospital directly from the airport Sunday afternoon, rushing through the hospital to the ward as instructed, looking up at the whiteboard with a list of names, not seeing her surname there.

She ran to the desk, but she knew, somewhere, somehow, that she was too late. There was an empty room just to the side of the desk. Its bed had been stripped. A hospital mask lay on the floor at the foot of the bed. One chair was pushed up against the window. As Alice stared, she imagined Jemma, head bowed, saying a farewell that Alice could now never make.

Jemma, beloved Jemma, so beautiful inside. Always loved, always loving, always forgiving.

I'm sorry. Alice had looked up and seen a nurse, mouth opening and shutting, speaking. She nodded. There was confirmation of being too late. Alice cursed the airline, cursed the storm, cursed the taxi, although that hadn't made any difference. She began to curse Jemma too, but even now that wasn't possible. She had done so much harm already. Could she even curse her mother, now? It didn't come to her.

There was no one to curse but herself.

As normal.

As back then. As when the screaming had started.

Alice is halfway down the aisle now, and the murmurs have continued. At the front stands Jemma, one row back on the right. Unaware somehow that there has been singing, Alice notices when it abruptly stops, and the congregation sits.

Alice is left standing, halfway down the aisle, still shuffling forward. From her position now she can see a small boy to Jemma's left, and a

space where her husband would have been had he not already added to Jemma's list of tragedies. The boy, hearing the murmurs, turns.

He has tears in his eyes, but those eyes are unmistakably those of his grandmother. Alice's legs forget to take another step, and she stands, staring into her nephew's crying face. She feels tears herself, but her face remains a mask. So much water under the bridge. So much left unsaid. So much that cannot be forgiven.

Jemma now turns, and sees Alice. Her eyes are red and puffy. Below that her skin is rough, all along the right-hand side, as it has been since that day. She takes a deep breath and leans down to whisper something into the boy's ear before standing, waving a hand briefly at the vicar to pause proceedings.

Jemma shuffles past her son and takes a step out into the aisle.

Alice sees her—properly sees her—for the first time in forever. Her face. Her kind eyes, her sad puffy kind eyes, but surrounding them Alice can't bear it. She sees the saucepan. She remembers standing behind the door. She remembers being that stupid, stupid girl who thought she was being so funny.

She can't help herself. She turns and commands her legs to run. She has no place here. She does not deserve to be here. She does not deserve to say goodbye.

Her legs do not obey her. Instead they buckle. She turns away, only to be grabbed by the strong arms of her sister, keeping her upright, preventing her from running.

She has no strength. In so long she has had no strength. It has been hidden, thousands of miles away and behind a competent façade, behind the functional career and the long nights alone, but it has never gone away.

She is turned round, and led slowly to the front, where the boy shuffles sideways. She is sat down, her body squeezed between wooden upright and her sister's trembling body. A hand is raised, and the vicar begins to speak, reciting Corinthians.

And now these three remain.

Alice looks to her right, into the face of her sister, properly seeing it. Properly seeing the wrinkled skin, destroyed before its time. She remembers. The images flood back, of the bandages, of the screaming, of the creams. Of the door. Of standing behind that stupid door with her stupid idea to scare her sister. Any other day could it have been funny, or simply cruel? She would never know because that one day had been the day when Jemma had been helping their mother and had opened the parlour door for her, holding it and turning back, not letting the door fall back closed as it would normally, delaying the shout for a second, but not long enough for Alice to realise what their mother was carrying.

Alice reaches out and places a hand on Jemma's cheek. She can't help herself. She feels the rough skin. It condemns her, just as it did at home, just as it did when Jemma didn't blame her. When Jemma told her it had been an accident. When their mother told her it had been an accident. When Jemma became the better person, but their mother hadn't. Alice had seen in her eyes the blame she carried with her, all the way to her dying day. Alice could never atone, not for that. Not for that one stupid moment so long ago.

Faith, hope, and love.

Jemma places her hand on Alice's and turns to look into her eyes. Alice can see the other side of her face now, the beauty she should have been, and she can't help but cry out at the injustice of it all. So many times she blamed her mother for holding the pan wrong, although she had it in both hands. She had tried to blame Jemma, without justification. In the end she could only blame herself, and now, at the end, seeing Jemma's beautiful half-face, remembering the gradual improvements to the other half, over years of skin grafts, bandage after bandage, cream after cream, days and weeks spent in hospitals. But before that, the screams. Screams like she imagines hearing again now, but ten times worse than those coming from her own mouth.

Jemma pulls Alice's hand down from her cheek and pulls her forward, putting the scarred side of her face against hers as she draws the two of them together. Alice feels its gentle roughness against hers.

Alice pulls away. She is not deserving of this. She shouldn't have come. It isn't fair on anyone. The vicar has stopped reading. The church is waiting. She has ruined everything. Again.

Why remind your sister that you destroyed her face? Why introduce her son to the sister who disfigured his mother? Why sit metres away from a body you never had a chance to reconcile with. Why?

Alice slumps, only for Jemma to place a gentle hand under her chin and look into her face.

She wanted you to know she never blamed you. Not once. Not ever. She hoped to hold on long enough to tell you herself. But I told her about the storm. She understood. I think it was the last thing she heard. She squeezed my hand one last time after that, and then she was gone. She'd hoped to ask for your forgiveness.

My forgiveness?

She always regretted how after—well, this happened—Jemma put a hand to her cheek—she spent so much of her energy on me. She hoped some day she could make it up to you.

But I was the one...

It was an accident, Alice. Don't you see, for all these years, I'd much rather have had a sister, for all the looks. And besides, it's not done me any harm. Not in the end. Look, will you come back with me to the house? We can talk properly. Please say you will. Please say you won't disappear again.

Alice couldn't reply. She couldn't speak. She quivered. The vicar spoke again.

But the greatest of these is love.

Robert has been published in *Writers' Forum* magazine, *Transmundane Press*, *Three Drops Poetry*, *Exeter Writers' Flash Fiction* anthology, among others. You can find more of his burlings at www.philosophicalleopard.com wherein you could also discover his unhealthy love of zeppelins.

FICTION

Avery S. Campbell

THE WATCHER AND THE BOY

I had little to do but watch and had watched for a long time. I have wondered why I made an effort. All there was to hold my attention was the boy and his doomed attempts to keep his little stream in its banks.

When I grew even more indifferent, I gazed at the horizon. Unlike the boy and his little stream, which did change, all be it slowly, the backdrop never did. Just sterile plains where the short brown grass never grew taller or varied in color. So, there was nothing to do but watch.

I don't know why the boy was there or from where he came. I became aware of him one moment long ago. From atop a slight rise, there came a trickle of water. From a spring, I suppose. And then there was the boy. Like me, he watched the trickle. But, unlike me, it enthralled him.

He followed it from its source down a barely perceptible slope. It hadn't gone far, and he was already calling it a river. The *Great River* was what he called it. For what seemed an eternity, he ran from the spring to where the trickle dried up in the sand. Then back to the source and then back to the end, over and over, again and again.

Each time he reached its mouth, the *Great River* had gone a little farther down its path, and then it came to a level spot where the water began to fan out into many smaller streams. The boy was not happy with the demise of the *Great River*. He must have wanted it to go on forever. He stomped his feet. He screamed.

"No! No! No! You cannot end here!"

But the little trickle would not respond to his tantrum.

He fell to his knees. I thought he was going to cry like little boys do. But instead, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wooden stick. I had not noticed the stick before. It was just a tiny stick but large enough for the boy.

Grasping one end of the stick with both hands, he stuck the other in the center of the tiny delta, right in the sandy, muddy goo. It went in about an inch or so. Then the boy pulled in the direction the *Great River* had been flowing. The water stopped fanning out. Instead, it filled his little channel. With repeated efforts, he pulled and dug. Finally, the *Great River* began to flow again in its proper direction. And once beyond the level spot, it flowed naturally down an easy slope.

The boy sat back on his heels, unaware of his muddy pant legs. With the stick in hand, he admired his work, proud of how he had saved the *Great River*. But his self-admiration was short-lived. He looked upstream to the source to get a grand view of his mighty stream. There, while the river had spread out, a quantity of water had built up. It now overflowed its bank upstream.

He darted to his feet and dashed to the outbreaks. His stick was now flat on the ground; he pushed and scraped piles of dirt and sand where the banks of the *Great River* had been. Next, he jumped to the other side of the stream and did the same. It was a desperate battle, but soon he had dikes built on both banks of the *Great River*. Then, like before, he sat back to admire his work.

But the self-adoration never lasted long. There was always some bursting of the dikes, some premature formation of a new estuary. These brought the boy out of his revelry and into an all-out panic to control the river's flow.

The boy's mania amused me, but it quickly grew old. With the stick in hand, he would run and repair the stream or sit for short periods delighting in his work.

During one of his times of gratification, I saw him staring into the *Great River*. The surface of the water sparkled where he focused his gaze. I could see that the boy admired the reflection.

But then his smile disappeared, and his face grew stern as he became aware of something more profound than his image. It was something within the *Great River* itself. I had never paid attention to the *Great River*. I had only watched the boy, and then only because there was nothing else to watch. I'm not sure how I managed it, but suddenly I was looking deep into the *Great River*. Not that it was deep, for it was very shallow. Instead, I looked deep into the speckles that made up the *Great River*.

These specks, little particles, were not slick and wet as I supposed they would be but had a life of their own. Some broke away from the others and flowed off in new directions. The remaining particles stayed together and ran passively down the course where the boy had directed the *Great River*.

Not to say I was interested but watching the two types of particles filled some of my endless time. The boy, too, was aware of the differences. It was clear, though, that he favored the passive ones. Because of this, I rooted for the contrary specks. I would have encouraged them, too, if I could have done so.

My wanting to encourage the oppositional, rebel speckles made me more aware that I did not like the boy. He had done nothing to me, yet I thought him foolish and proud. His little game of directing the flow of the trickle had gone on long enough. It was silly and pointless. Who did he think he was, trying to control the very direction of the *Great River*!

The renegade particles sparkled more and more. They glimmered as they pushed up against the boy's dikes, overflowed the tops, and broke into the dry expanse. The boy fought back and erected mounds of dirt on both sides of the channel. It stopped the outbreak, but only temporarily. Soon the radicals threatened these mounds with overflowing. With the flood looming, he struggled to thwart the impending disaster. Higher and higher, he built the dikes. But as quickly as he had improved on them, waves would crest against their tops.

I enjoyed watching him struggle. Not because I admired his resolve but because of the utter hopelessness that would soon overcome the boy. My anticipation for that moment created my joy.

But the boy amazed me with the efficacy of his work. For all its contrary forces, the *Great River* continued to flow in the direction he wanted. Still, I thought for sure the boy, now nearly a man, would be defeated. Many times, it looked as if he had given up. Water would wildly pour over the top of a dike, and he would go to some rise above his riverbank where dejected, he would sit motionless, almost weeping. Once, he hung his head for what was a pleasingly long time to me.

I felt a smugness that I had been the one that had defeated him. I bathed in my triumph for what felt like infinity. Then I must have made some sound, or maybe I moved, which is highly unlikely. Yet the boy suddenly looked up. For the very first time, I could sense him looking right at me, which is not only improbable but impossible. He stared at me for longer than I had basked in my victory. So much so that now I could barely remember feeling smug at all. Everything changed after that.

The boy—I could not think of him as a man—continued to rule the *Great River*'s flow. Yet his attention was divided. At first, he only glanced back at me as he built his dikes and made deeper channels. Then he began to curse me. He would blame me for every outbreak of the contrary forces.

It was then that a grand idea hit upon his aging brain. He was so sure of its success that he turned towards me and, with a little sneer on his face, spoke his thought as if I were powerless to stop it.

“I will divert all the rebel specks away from my dutiful ones, far away from them all. They will no longer infect the *Great River*. It will flow the course that I want it to flow!”

He turned his eyes from me and gazed off into the sterile plains. I thought he would laugh some sinister laugh, but he did not.

While he stared away from the *Great River*, I looked, again, at the glittering specks. I had never thought that some of the particles were infecting the others. But I could now see what the boy had seen. The contrary forces in their bouncing back and forth did attract the passive specks. Infecting them, making them want to rebel. Yet the boy failed to make the converse observation. That the passive specs also attracted—infected—the oppositional ones.

When my awareness left the river and returned to the boy, he had moved. With his little stick, which had worn smooth through the years, he dug a pit some distance from the *Great River* for what seemed hours, even days, since time was so hard to measure, having only the boy and the *Great River* to watch. Then, when he was pleased, he jumped over the little stream and began to dig on the other side.

During this time, he rarely looked at me or even cursed me. Instead, I could hear slight mumbles coming from him.

The *Great River* flowed calmly during this time with few outbreaks. Left alone, the river continued to go in the direction the boy had wanted. Then suddenly, it came to some natural barrier. The river's flow stopped and began to dam up behind the obstruction. In the past, the boy would race to the bottleneck. He would dig a hole into the barrier and re-direct the flow, but his new plan had his focus. He had to rid the *Great River* of the contrary particles. With them gone, the river would flow to its appointed end.

With the two pits dug, he went to the banks of the Great River and dug sluices from the dikes to the holes. With these completed, he cut little gates into the levees. These forced lapping water to gush down towards the waiting pits. With pride of accomplishment, the boy gloated over his success of ridding the *Great River* of the contrary particles and danced and leaped for joy.

"Now, it is truly my river," he screamed at me. "There is nothing you can do about it. It will flow where I want it to and do what I want. It is no longer yours to command. It now obeys me. Only me."

He looked at me, waiting as if I would speak. As if I had something to say.

"Well, say something," he insisted. "Admit it! I have defeated you!"

But I said nothing, nor could I say anything if I wanted to speak, yet he stared at me, wanting something from me that I would not give.

"Say something! Anything! Grunt. Moan. But speak!"

But I did not. The boy's success, seconds earlier, his crowning achievement, now meant nothing to him because of my silence. It was then that he looked again at what he had done. He collapsed to his knees, beaten.

Once a mighty torrent, the *Great River* was now a muddy mess, its channel a stagnant pool. Even the spring itself stopped flowing, and I saw the boy cry for the first time. Tears were making streams of their own through the wrinkles on his old face. Wrinkles I had never noticed before this moment.

His weeping moved me unlike anything before because nothing had ever moved me. Only one thing would end his grief, and that was for the *Great River* to come back to life. For this to happen meant the passive and the contrary forces flowing together.

Something deep inside me shook. I lifted up, and when I did, the water in the pits flowed back into the channel. Again, I lifted up, and the spring sprang back to life.

The boy, not quite so disheartened and looking younger than he had just moments before, sat on his knees. He watched the *Great River* flow through both old and new channels. Channels that meandered and merged with others, combining to push the *Great River* far beyond any natural or man-made barrier and into a future unbounded.

Avery S. Campbell is a pseudonym. It is a tribute to a chopper driver who insisted the author go back to college, a retired Marine Sergeant who exemplified honor and loyalty, and a geography professor who, once, gave an encouraging word. Campbell is the author of the western fiction series *The Four Bags of Gold*, which presently includes the titles *Vengeful Riders*, *Reckoning on Bald Mountain*, and *Back from the Dead*. His story, *The Hook*, previously appeared in this publication, *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal*. Under the name Joel Walker, the author has published *The South Carolina Adventure* and *The Cottonwood Grove*.

NONFICTION

Nicole T. Walters

WHEN MEMORY BECOMES PRAYER

*Names have been changed in this essay

Body and mind unite in the moment as I am fully engaged in the task before me. It takes every piece of me to navigate the complexities of this city. My brain is on high alert, scanning for every potential hazard in my path. I eye the cracked sidewalk. Broken by a gnarled tree root, it rises to gash my sandaled toe. I cast a hurried glance toward the man sitting by the mosque repeatedly crying “Allah” in hopes of a *taka* note or two. I dodge the car honking at my rear and the bicycle rickshaw skimming my thigh.

I fight with the scarf I wear across my chest whenever I leave our flat. It slips off my shoulder, threatening to leave me exposed. *My hand. It hurts.* I wince as the cumbersome bag digs its red path deeper into my palm. I enter the flat, as feeling slowly seeps back into numb fingers, and I feel the heat I didn’t even notice before.

It’s early April—the start of summer in South Asia. Late spring storms have tiptoed upon us all week, one by one catching us by surprise. The sky appears a searing shade of blue all day, and we don’t fathom the storms upon us until the windows rattle in their frames. We’ll run to the veranda just in time to see storm clouds gather and watch the wind bend coconut palms low. Later, we’ll read newspaper stories about these Nor’westers that caught everyone off guard—including several who didn’t survive them. Though the rains are startling in their fury, they bring with them the gift of a cool breeze, making it bearable inside with a fan; it hasn’t yet reached the threshold of Hades-levels of heat that descends on the city by May.

I peel off the scarf caught between my shoulder bag and sweaty chest and laugh when I notice it is completely soaked. It’s our second summer in Bangladesh, but the recent months of bearable weather made me forget the sticky tropical heat that descends on Dhaka like a

fog and lasts for months. I'd lost sight of how amazed I could be at my ability to do what I never would have done in the United States.

These are the trivial choices we make daily. Other Westerners love to joke about them when we meet: how people back home are flabbergasted at the "sacrifices" we make living here. "You don't have air conditioning at home? Oh, I could never do that," they'd say. "You spent *how long* in a taxi?" they'd gasp when we told of the traffic that trapped us in a car for hours to cover a distance that should have taken twenty minutes.

We, too, couldn't fathom living this way before, but it feels natural now. It's just life here. Sure, hovering over squatty potties when the stomach bug arrives or eating with your hand can feel like big accomplishments. I secretly sometimes pride myself on the domestic work of hanging clothes to dry on the veranda and ironing every wrinkled piece of cloth before it can be worn again.

These minor discomforts aside, there are many aspects about life 8,000 miles from all that is familiar that truly *are* difficult. But those burdens feel too heavy to bear, so I return to the heat and the way my body feels depleted after a simple walk to the market.

If I focus there, I don't have to think about the real issues—how I found my way through culture shock and anxiety that felt so deep I was sure I would drown in its waves. Nor can I linger too long on the aching loneliness that seems like my only companion. How can I feel this utterly alone in a city so cramped that the kids press their faces against windows in the building next door, with only glass restraining them from reaching our living room? So I return to little inconveniences like mosquito nets and air so polluted you get headaches all winter. It's easier to think of the physical challenges as something we can muster the strength to overcome than to dwell on the emotional and mental drains on a strength I simply don't have.

I shuffle through the dresses hanging in my closet, trying to find something with sleeves long enough to handle the chill in the air today. My fingers stop on the thin fabric of one of my salwars, and I caress the orange and brown paisley print. I miss wearing South Asian

clothing. When we first moved back to the states, I didn't have room in my small basement apartment closet to hang them.

Though I had to stash them away in a drawer, I wore them more often then. I felt naked in shorts and tank tops after years of covering more of my skin. They never felt restrictive when I wore them in Bangladesh. Putting on the 3-piece dress of long, baggy pants, a tunic, and a scarf allowed me to shift into a South Asian identity, enabling me to fit in. When I put them on here, the vibrant colors and styles that are strange to Western eyes make me stand out, so I've stopped wearing them much. But in the bigger home we just bought, I hang them so they appear to be an option just like the rest of my clothes. I want to at least see them every day.

I long to wrap the scarf around my shoulders, but I am new to this church and people don't know my whole story. I already stand out enough as it is, the fresh face in a crowd of life-long members in the small congregation. I want to build community, to be known there, but it is best to leave my previous cross-cultural life on the shelf for now. It doesn't go away when I don't wear it on the outside. It is always there under the surface, my connection to another home that remains a two-day plane ride away. I put on the less comfortable Western dress, hiding pieces of me for today.

There's nothing wrong with praying for every decision. It's a practice of keeping the connection between us and the Divine open, of remembering that God is present and cares. There were days I used to pray for my broken computer (usually after I'd tried to fix it myself for hours and didn't know where else to turn), for success on that test, or safety on that long drive. Some days I laugh at the naivete of a girl who thought God cared if she got a parking spot close to her dorm; then there are days I wish I could go back to that kind of simple trust.

Amid life in South Asia, my thoughts are far from asking God to ease my discomfort. It's not because I don't believe God cares or is incapable of meeting every need; it's just that I know I am capable of being more inconvenienced than I imagined before and I can handle more distress than I ever let myself believe I deserved. I feel guilty asking for more.

I watch Akia chop vegetables for hours in the heat of the kitchen while she tells me about the rain that has flooded her tin and concrete house. I sit with her while she speaks casually about the fall that has kept her teenage son from working his job in construction and the uncle she visited in the hospital yesterday.

My Bangla language skills are meager, even after a year of study, but this kind and funny woman is the one person I understand almost fully. She started working in our flat the day we moved in, cooking and cleaning here, then returning home to do the same for her own family at night. It is culturally expected for foreigners to employ a house helper, but it was difficult to get used to someone else cooking our lunches and scrubbing our tile floors by hand. She is so patient with me when I don't understand a word, rephrasing it, and using simple vocabulary she knows I comprehend. She teaches me the word for every item in the kitchen, every spice and food she cooks.

The first time my family visited her at home we were still an oddity, white faces amidst a sea of brown. Neighbors popped in throughout dinner to stare at us and marvel at our inability to understand simple things, like the difference between the various words for aunt depending on if you were referring to your mother's sister, her brother's wife, or the two aunts on your father's side of the family.

By the second and third time we visited I knew enough to understand why her husband joined us for dinner but left shortly after without saying much unless he was asking us for money. When she talked about him, I often didn't understand everything she said but could catch the words "bad man," "hit," "drugs," and "steal."

We stayed for hours with crossed legs cramping, all crammed onto the bed that took up most of their single room: me, my husband and two kids, her seven-year-old daughter who spent her days in a madrasa nearby, and her son, fourteen and already a man in this society, who had left school to work in whatever day labor he could find and spent his nights staring at his smartphone or the television, checking out of life. She usually refused to sit with us, serving us dishes from her spot on the concrete floor next to the aluminum pans that held curries, rice, vegetables, and the only meat they would eat that week.

She sits in the kitchen with me and tells me all her woes but does it all with a smile as she wipes the sweat from her face with the back of her arm. She keeps on slicing ginger (*adha*, she tells me) across the razor-sharp curved blade (*repeat it, 'boti'*) that has cut her fingers enough times to form calluses.

Sometimes the feelings of shame nearly choke me. Is this something like survivors' guilt? We chose to come here to work for a non-profit and left abundance behind, but we still own an air conditioning unit that costs more than what she would make in ten months. Why was I born into a life of ease when she was born into an abusive family in a culture where her brilliant mind is not as valuable as marriage? Why her, God; why not me?

I stop with a sigh before I turn to go back up the stairs. I'm still not used to living in two stories, having what we own spread through so many rooms. I pause here on the landing between the dining room and the front entryway. I glance over at the dishes in the china cabinet that our friend Maliha bought for us, delicate white flowers on a vibrant blue background. In front of them sits the *boti* knife Akia used every day. Now it just sits on display, its sharp edge becoming dull without use. Lost in my thoughts, I am pulled into the blue hues of the painting at the foot of the stairs. I don't always stop to notice it, but I'm always taken back into another world when I do.

It is easy to romanticize Bangladesh with over two years now removed between us and our lives there. It wasn't easy; I haven't forgotten that. Yet I ache for the tropical land more than I ever thought I would. This place we'd known before evaporated while we were away. It doesn't always feel like home anymore.

I remember seeing the painting at a vendor's table, knowing I had to have it. By then we knew we were leaving the bustling city, and I was feeling nostalgic. The painting embodied the paradox of our life there in a way words could never capture: the watercolor streaks of rain, the blurry lines of the bicycle rickshaw, the palms bending in the storm.

Those streets that could be difficult to navigate on any usual day became surging rivers once the monsoon arrived. There was no choice

but to keep walking despite the dirty water that rose above our knees. I will always remember my daughter's face when the waters ripped one of her pink jelly shoes right off her foot and it drifted out of her grasp and beyond our sight. "I hate this place," she cried through tear-stained lips when she arrived home barefoot.

Yet not a summer rain goes by that I don't stand at the door and feel the breeze, longing for the way the Nor'westers startled me out of my complacency and made me gape at the magnificent power of creation. You'll often find me standing out under the open sky, just to feel the sticky warmth streaming down my cheeks. I need to remember the way the monsoon soaked deep inside me and made an indelible path to places the Georgia rains just can't reach.

The monsoon has come and gone, abandoning us to the heat of the Dhaka furnace. As the days heat up, I notice the tendency to push myself into situations that test my limits and remind me what I'm capable of. It's a visceral way of remembering the hardships. I choose to walk in the searing heat through dusty streets instead of taking a rickshaw. I eat that local food with questionable cleanliness because I don't want to miss out on the experience. I push myself to the edge of exhaustion. I want the reminders to soak into my skin, to leave a mark like the tattoo on my foot. I want to remember struggling. I want to remember overcoming.

After a year and a half of living in conditions most Americans applaud us for but we have just come to call home, we are getting ready to leave. Family obligations call us back to the land of excess. I am feeling more than a little nervous. I worry because I fear I will forget. When I return to the land of fast food and air conditioning, of two-car families and superstores, those conveniences will become normal again.

Worse, I am afraid my tendency toward spiritual amnesia will mean I forget the way these little obstacles have etched their way through my skin and onto my soul. They have chipped away at the illusions I had that my comfort matters to God.

“Why do you have this sitting out?” Maliha asks with a baffled expression furrowing her forehead. Now a few months after settling into the basement apartment, our friend from Bangladesh has come to visit us. She’d been one of our teachers at language school and then started tutoring us at home. She became a part of our little family, the Aunty our kids spent the night with and who took us to all her favorite spots in the city. She opened our eyes to the beauties hidden in the crowded streets of the most densely populated city on earth.

She pointed toward the *hari*, the aluminum pot that sat in the center of my stove. It was the same pot we used to brew cha in on our little gas burner in our Dhaka kitchen, the smell of milk tea a comforting afternoon presence in our days. I intended to use it here but found that it doesn’t work as well on our electric stove. “You have this modern kitchen,” she said, “and then this pot that belongs in a Bangladeshi village?”

Even though I don’t use it much anymore, I can’t put it away, hidden in some cabinet like the memories that are swiftly fading from my conscious mind. It reminds me of Akia, her gentle, calloused hands stirring the rice, laughing as she scoops a handful of shrimp between her teeth. I long to hear her calling *bhabi* (wife of my brother) from the other room, asking if I want to have some afternoon cha with her, though she knows the answer will always be yes.

“It reminds me,” I told my friend. “It keeps Bangladesh always on my mind when I see it.”

“Okay,” Maliha laughs skeptically. “But it’s a little strange.”

I place the cha pot gently back on the burner, lingering near the warmth for a moment. As I balance three teacups on a tray and head to the kitchen, I think of how we are longing for a break from the heavy pollution of the winter that leaves us aching daily. Everyone tells us that with the political unrest of the presidential election looming, we should leave the country for a couple of weeks. We are hoping to visit Malaysia for Christmas, but aren’t sure how we will afford it.

How can I ask God to provide money for a vacation when our friend only needs \$1,000 to build a house in his village? The cost of a few flights for us is the equivalent of a home for him. We've given Azad loans before and gifts several times. He can't seem to save any though since he is the sole provider for his parents, his little brother, and his wife's family. He makes less than \$100 a month driving a rickshaw, and we help as much as we can, but we know there are limits to what we can do culturally. We don't want our help to hurt.

He looks at us one day, gesturing at our living room that is sparsely decorated, simple, and small by American standards. It is bigger than the slum home he can barely afford. He tells us through his tears about yet another family tragedy that has befallen him. "Why?" he wails. "Why has God blessed you, and yet these things are always happening to me?"

I can't find words of comfort for him. I can only choke on my tears as I ask him if we can pray with him. I feel his body shake as he tries to hold in sobs while we lay our hands on his shoulders and ask God to be merciful to him. I want to scream that all this stuff we own isn't a blessing. Maybe it is a curse after all. Maybe it keeps us numb to what matters.

I can't pray the way I used to; I am not sure I want to anymore.

Most days all I can do is sit in the quiet and picture the faces of the people I love. Some look like me and are many miles away; some have brown skin and dark eyes and have become family, too.

I let their faces fill up my memory, their stories overflowing like water pouring out of an already full pitcher as I imagine them. Sometimes I grip a circle of wooden prayer beads tightly in my fist as I try to hold onto these images in my mind. I don't need to recount their needs to the God who already knows each hair on their heads. I hold space for these people in my heart, and I hope that God hears the groans that are deeper than the words I can't find.

Are these wordless rememberings even prayers? My earlier self would have answered no. If it didn't fit a certain formula, and couldn't be checked off a list of prayer concerns, then it didn't fit the bill.

Sitting in the darkness watching a candle flicker, I know this is what prayer looks like for me right now. I have no words. I believe God receives it as an acceptable offering, this silence and willingness to wrestle in the dark with uncertainties.

My hands hover over the rose-colored prayer beads I often hold to focus my wandering mind while I try to find the words to pray. I made them recently at a prayer workshop at the new church I am attending after our move back to Georgia. I leave them on the dresser and instead pick up the smaller, wooden beads next to them. I haven't held these in a while. I bought them at the local market where I bought my groceries in Dhaka. I loved that mingling of the sacred and secular in Bangladesh. You could buy bananas and some prayer beads, acquire bread and a prayer rug—all on the same aisle.

The untrained eye might assume the two sets of prayer beads were the same. They actually contained a different number of beads—one meant for Christian prayer and one a set of Muslim prayer beads. Though originating from different traditions, they serve the same purpose. I wrap the loop twice around my hands and fidget with the green tassel.

“It's been too long,” I whisper in shame. I've been hanging onto the memories of our short-lived experience living in Bangladesh. I didn't lose them as I dreaded I might, and yet they are frozen in time. Other than the few friends who are fortunate enough to have mobile phones and keep in touch with us on social media, we don't know what life is like these days for the neighbors we lived so close to. I haven't heard Akia's laugh once in over two years, and I can't recall its sound anymore. I wouldn't know how to pray for her current situation if I tried.

I look down at the beads, the tiny tokens of a life that feels like a dream. Has it been so long since I prayed for her? Or is each time I tenderly stop to put my hand on the cha pot sitting on my stove and think of Akia really a silent prayer I send across the miles to her, to God? Our lives were entangled for a mere moment, but the impact ripples throughout who I am, who I am still becoming.

I pull the beads that feel like tiny pebbles between my fingertips. I don't know what to ask for except that God would be gracious to her, provide for her, and give her peace. I see her in my mind, standing behind my daughter at the dressing table, lovingly taming her hair into a braid. She's frozen like that for me in my memory, always beautiful with sad eyes.

Is she the same today? I hope there is more light in her eyes now. I send all the tenderness I possess into the space between us as if it might actually change something in her situation. Maybe it will. Maybe she will think of me and be comforted, just as I think of her, and gratitude for how she changed me washes over my heart.

When I imagine the rickshaw driver in my painting to be Azad and picture he and his family healthy and well in a new home in their village, am I asking God to provide this life for him? When I slip on the scarf Maliha bought me or sit on the bench I recovered with the material from the salwar she gave me, am I united with her in prayer?

There is no separating myself from the river Delta that etched itself on my soul. The smell of cha is a memory of home. The feel of the monsoon wind on my face is inscribed on my skin. The path to the bazaar is stored in my muscle memory and I could make that walk again today. I was so afraid of forgetting Bangladesh, but that isn't a possibility. I could no more forget my own mother than I could this land that birthed the person I am now.

Dhonobad, Prabuji. Thank you, Lord, I whisper. I tuck the prayer beads away for now, but these prayers I carry with me. They never truly leave me; the Spirit whispers them anew each time a memory drifts through me.

Nicole lives in the tension between wanderlust and rootedness in Georgia, but has left parts of her heart in the Middle East and South Asia. She loves to write, study, and preach—looking for places where listening to God and learning from others lead to lives that love. Connect with her at nicoletwalters.com.

NONFICTION

Steve Adelman

SUSPENSIONS

Gravity reveals itself in the dark places. I'm seven years old and drowning in a quarry pond because I'm too hard-headed to learn how to swim. So many kids are in the water that I'm invisible even before I disappear. Through the murky green, I can barely see the tracks made by my clawing fingers in the slimy clay drop-off that got me. It's pointless: Gravity is massive, and I am tiny. Desperate now, I push off the muddy bottom and feel my right hand break the surface before I sink. Again I rise and again I descend. I'm spent. One last push as Gravity patiently waits for me. Except for her. Scarcely older than me, her hand surrounds mine, and I am lifted. With a name I'll never learn and a grasp I'll never forget, she is both a giant and an angel in this moment. She isn't stronger than Gravity; she merely understands how to work with it.

Gravity seems to depart me when needed most. I'm sixteen and just seconds away from wrapping my first car around a telephone pole because sleep was not a priority. I need Friction to prevent impact, but that requires Gravity. Only Inertia and Ice are in evidence at the moment. In the ear-ringing silence that follows an explosion of glass, shrieking sheet metal, broken roof pillars, and fracturing wood, Gravity sits beside me in the ditch, quietly unapologetic but demanding no toll.

Gravity is a teacher. I'm twenty-four and an Army Ranger Instructor, working atop a thirty-foot rappel tower. I'm also overconfident. Gravity sees my mistake and shows me how to fly. I land on my face, bounce one time, then jump to my feet. I shout that I'm alright—but because I know it, but because I want it to be so. I call this one a draw, thankful that Gravity grades on a curve.

Gravity has impeccable aim. I'm twenty-six and moving to our target's breach point. Four stories above my Army Special Operations team, a four-foot section of half-inch-thick plate glass is dislodged by our explosive door charge. Gravity guides the insanely heavy shard,

edgewise, to the top of my head. A new ballistic helmet, whose weight I've been cursing for the past hour, saves me from the fate that would have accompanied the plastic Pro-Tec I usually wear. Gravity's message is written in the stars I suddenly see.

Gravity appears to choose sides in war. I'm thirty-four and fighting my way through another ambush. The first rocket-propelled grenade streaks towards the paper-thin door of my Toyota Hilux. I catch a glimpse of the flaming red tail, but it's too fast to react to. Gravity yanks it down just before impact, forcing the Afghan mountain road to absorb the impact below me. Minutes later, I'm standing at a bend along the same rugged track, using my sniper rifle to cover the other half of my team. I think I'm out of rocket range. The RPG gunner knows I'm not. Seconds after my teammates escape the kill zone, I see another red demon coming directly at me from across the river valley. It's a meteor the size of a softball, droning like a buzz saw that grows louder with each passing millisecond. It's faster than my reflexes. I only have time to turn my head to the left and swear before impact. It's pulled low at the last second too, hammering the dirt a few feet in front of me. I disappear in a choking blast of high explosive, shape charge, rocket parts, sand, and rock. I'm still on my feet with half of my wits and some of my hearing intact.

Gravity whispers, "Move."

Gravity is ever vigilant. I'm fifty-three now and cresting a hill at 70 mph. Distracted by a shiny sign, I suddenly find the interstate traffic stopping just forty feet in front of me. We're hauling a 5,000-pound trailer behind our pickup. Two compact cars block the only lanes, flanked by a guardrail on one side and a steep drop-off on the other. I aim for both vehicles in hopes of killing neither driver. Employing every racing school, off-road course, CDL class, and evasive driving trick I've ever learned, I'm still not good enough. Gravity is though. It's a perfect straight line stop with feet to spare. My wife shakes in disbelief. Gravity just smiles. Or maybe it's not Gravity at all. Maybe it's God. Yes, I'm sure now that it's God. He's been here from the very beginning.

Steve Adelman lives in North Carolina with his wonderful family. Since retiring from the Army in 2008, he's crafted precision firearms and written for several national publications. Steve is the Rifles Editor for *Shooting Illustrated* magazine (2010-present), a graduate of Liberty University and an unabashed follower of Jesus Christ.

NONFICTION

Robert L. Jones III

WITHIN FIVE MINUTES

On the morning of December 24, 1970, my mother came into my bedroom to awaken me well before I wanted to be awakened. I was seventeen, an age when a boy's mother can do little right, and she babbled on about having slept on her stomach. This annoyed me greatly because she had interrupted my sleep to tell me how she had slept. I remember saying something along the line of, "Fine—go sleep on your stomach."

Frustrated by her inability to impress upon me the significance of that activity, she finally said, "Look."

Realizing this wasn't going to end until I complied, I sat up, opened my eyes, and directed them toward her.

"Mom, what is it?"

She turned her head from side to side.

"That's good, Mom," I mocked. "I can do that, too."

I mimicked her actions, and she smiled. She had me.

"Don't you remember my neck?"

Now I was fully awake and without a comeback.

"Oh," I responded.

"Oh," she repeated with a triumphant lilt in her voice before leaving the room.

For some reason, people tend to look upward when addressing God, and in that moment, I glanced at the ceiling as I acknowledged what I had been resisting for the last seven months.

“So it’s true,” I confessed aloud.

The entire exchange must have lasted no more than five minutes. Within those five minutes, my universe had changed. Of course I remembered my mother’s neck, and I knew where she had been the previous night.

The accident happened on June 21, 1952. My father was in the Army and stationed at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey during the Korean War, and he and my mother were returning from Washington, D. C., where he had been inquiring about the possibility of transferring to Intelligence. They were hurrying to get back to base before his leave expired. It was raining lightly.

Dad saw that the oncoming lane was clear in front of an approaching curve and decided he had time to pass a slower moving car in front of him. Once he was abreast of this car, the other driver sped up. Suddenly, a pale blue car—nearly invisible in the low light of early morning—emerged from the mist.

“I’ll never forget the sight of those headlights coming at me,” I remember my father saying as he was driving the family someplace I no longer remember.

The collision occurred off base, breaking the second cervical (C2) vertebra in my mother’s neck and dislocating it by half an inch relative to the C3 vertebra. I asked Dad how the paramedics had managed to move Mom from the site of the accident to Fort Monmouth Army Hospital without killing or paralyzing her.

“Very carefully,” he answered.

She spent, as she put it, “a long time on a cold, hard table” with sandbags placed around her head. The doctors on base were cautious and initially uncertain as to how to treat her. I don’t know exactly

when or how, but they managed to place a Thomas collar around her neck. On July 10, 1952, the Thomas collar was plastered firm, and she was transferred to Saint Albans Naval Hospital on Long Island, New York.

On July 14, her head was shaved, and Crutchfield tongs were applied to her skull. She was placed in traction. No surgical repairs had been made to her neck up to this time. On July 18, she was placed in a modified Minerva cast, still without surgical repair of the injury. Finally, on August 8, she underwent an arthrodesis (bone fusion) of her C1, C2, and C3 vertebrae.

She didn't remember the exact date they took her off traction, but she sat up for the first time since the accident on August 28, 1952. On September 4, she walked. On September 13, she left the hospital. The cast she was wearing extended from her hips to her forehead with open spaces for her face and ears, and it tilted her head sharply upward. Dad would take her on walks at night so that she could look at the stars and overhanging branches. To avoid the stares of onlookers, my parents didn't go out in daylight.

On October 9, Mom got a smaller cast that started from above her waist and lowered her head into a somewhat more natural albeit uplifted position. She was able to exchange this cast for a Thomas collar on November 11, 1952. On February 26, 1953, the collar came off for good.

On a sheet of paper torn in half, Mom printed the above litany. From these notes, various conversations with my parents, and a letter my father wrote to his father on June 30, 1952, I have gleaned the information I am now relaying. Reading the time frame gives me chills. My mother spent forty-eight days immobilized by various means with an unrepaired broken neck. That the accident, subsequent transfers, and various manipulations didn't paralyze or kill her is an extended miracle in itself.

As an ironic footnote to the preceding account, the very accident which threatened my existence also made it possible. The Army granted my father what they termed compassionate relocation, which meant that he was allowed to remain stateside during Mom's surgery and convalescence while the rest of his unit deployed to Korea. Had

he gone with them, he may or may not have survived, but that isn't the point.

I was born at the base hospital at Fort Monmouth during the summer of 1953, and I wasn't premature. Doing the math backward from the day of my birth, I have come to the inescapable conclusion that Dad wouldn't have been present to participate in my conception had he not been allowed to remain with Mom. I count myself uncommonly blessed to be alive.

Our middle daughter, now forty, came to visit us for Christmas, and we began going through old footlockers of family memorabilia. On December 26, 2022, we found photographs of my mother at different stages of her convalescence. One, taken in September of 1952, shows a side view of her in the first cast following her release from the hospital. Another shows her in the second cast, and I have a hard time looking away from this one. I'm sixty-nine looking back at my mother when she was twenty-four. She is smiling in this photograph, and her young face displays the radiance of a child.

Having taught Biology at the secondary and collegiate levels, I think a brief lesson in anatomy is in order at this point. The C1 vertebra is also called the Atlas vertebra because it supports the skull, and C2 is the Axis vertebra which enables C1 and the skull to pivot atop the rest of the neck. The surgical team which fused the first three vertebrae in my mother's neck in effect splinted C2 between its adjacent spinal neighbors, thus eliminating two joints. The surgery ended the ongoing risk of paralysis or death, but it also severely restricted the lateral motion of my mother's head.

From the time my brothers and I were young, Mom wore her hair stylishly short, and this allowed us to see a neat, vertical seam over an inch in length on the back of her neck. It wasn't ugly. It was just different enough to arouse our curiosity. Whenever we asked her what

it was, she told us it was the scar from her surgery, and she allowed us to touch it on more than one occasion.

We grew up literally and repeatedly seeing that Mom couldn't turn her head. Two examples come readily to mind. First, she was an excellent swimmer, a former lifeguard, and a water safety instructor, and while swimming the crawl stroke, she had to lift her head straight out of the water instead of breathing to the side in the normal fashion. Second, whenever she backed the car out of the garage, she had to turn her entire torso in order to see what was happening behind her.

Mom's condition was a continual part of my upbringing, which I somehow managed to forget while awaking against my will on December 24, 1970.

Yes, I knew where my mother had been. She had attended a Bible study and prayer meeting on the night of December 23, 1970. The meeting had taken place out of town, and Mom had arrived home long after I was in bed and asleep. I later asked her to describe what had happened. It was medically impossible on one hand and quite simple on the other.

She told me that people at that meeting had prayed for her, whereupon she had attempted to turn her head but without success. They had prayed for her a second time, and upon repeating the attempt, she had felt something loosen and give way. In retrospect, I understood that the whole point in her saying she had slept on her stomach was that she was able to once she could turn her head.

I also understood that what happened to Mom verified something she had been trying to persuade me to believe since May of 1970. In response to an allergy attack during my track and field season, she had suggested that I ask God to heal me. I had told her that it wasn't scientific, which was my excuse for not relinquishing that much control, and she had asked me if I believed the stories in the gospels about Jesus performing miracles and healing the sick. Begrudgingly, I had admitted that I did.

"Then why do you think He wouldn't do that now?" she had followed.

I considered myself an intellectually honest person, and this was a question that continued to bother me after she had raised it. When I saw her demonstrate the evidence of her belief in front of me the following December, I inwardly capitulated. That forgiveness of sin could result in the healing of disease seemed consistent with what I had read in the scriptures, and now I had seen an example of principle becoming reality. I have since learned that this is not always as straightforward or as easy to understand as I would like.

During her latter years, my mother told me that recent X-rays of her neck had shown that the bone fusion was still in place, yet our entire family and many friends knew that she could turn her head. In a way, this inexplicable contradiction no longer matters. Mom died of inoperable liver cancer on May 1, 2013, after suffering a number of lesser ailments associated with advancing age. She was eighty-four.

I have no satisfying spiritual interpretation for why she died the way she did, decades after being miraculously healed of a condition that was no longer life-threatening, but that miracle stands as evidence of the greatest theme in her life: faith in a personal God. In Book One of his *Summa contra Gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas wrote that divine revelation falls into two categories; one is within the reach of our rational capacity, and the other is not. At present, my mother's story seems to fall into the latter category.

Aquinas also wrote in the same book that truths which exceed our understanding are rightly revealed to us that we might strive after ideals which are above our limited sphere of existence. It is my experience that this effort improves us even when we fall short of attaining those ideals, and here I find the greatest interpretation of Mom being able to turn her head. The phenomenon had a profound effect on our entire family and on many other people besides.

It is February 3, 2023, as I complete the final draft of this account. What I witnessed within five minutes on the morning of a Christmas Eve, just over fifty-two years ago, humbled me and gave me a glimpse into the nature and character of God. It required me to raise my standards of belief and behavior, and it led me from a somewhat detached form of Christianity to faith in a Creator who involves Himself with humanity, both in this life and the life to come.



Photos are courtesy of Robert L. Jones III.

Read **Robert L. Jones III's** bio on page 15.

NONFICTION

Blake Kilgore

THE LETTER

Back in 1991, when I was eighteen, I left home for the summer to work selling educational books for the Southwestern Company. I packed clothes, a few books, a journal, a Bible, and an anthology of love notes from my girlfriend (one to be read each day of the summer) in the back of my car. I drove to Nashville, Tennessee, for training, and ultimately to Elon, North Carolina, where I was to live for the summer. Lulled by promises of the opportunity to make enough cash to pay off college in a little over ten weeks, I had unwittingly signed up to become a door-to-door book salesman.

What can I say, I was green.

Anyhow, it was brutal. I made a sale my first day, a profit of about sixty dollars, which was decent back in 1991. I sold nothing else for nearly three weeks and had to borrow money for food and rent. It took me over a month to move into the black for my troubles. Eventually I made out ok, but I never had the salesmanship or ethical ambiguity that allowed me to sell things to people that they would never use (like children's books for college-bound seniors or chemistry books for toddlers). Others sold our entire catalogue to everybody, and they did make a truckload, even if their souls paid the difference. Who knows?

Anyhow, this story is not about making money ripping people off, but about an investment of time that did pay dividends. About halfway through the summer, after two of my three door-to-door salesman roommates, also duped, quit, I had a life-changing encounter.

I worked my way street to street, evaluating the people who lived there, zeroing in on families with children. I was best at selling our children's books because I thought they were a good value. I bought three extra sets at cost to sell once I returned home. They're probably still wrapped in cellophane somewhere in my mother's attic.

Anyhow, on a particularly hot morning in late July, I passed a small home with a covered porch. Sitting on the porch was a young man enjoying his breakfast. I knew he did not have children and did not wish to disturb him, so I briskly walked past his home. But he called out, asked me to come back and sit with him at his table.

Had I eaten this morning, he asked. Usually, I skimped on breakfast so I could eat a real meal at lunch, take a long break, and read the love letter for the day. On this day I was hungry, so the prospect of a hot breakfast was grand. Surprisingly, over the course of the summer, quite a few complete strangers shared their table with me. I don't know if this would still be the case with the weird goings-on in the world today, but back then it was encouraging to encounter such hospitable folks.

I joined the gentleman, and he brought forth coffee, orange juice, eggs, toast, jam, bacon, and sausage. A real feast, especially for a starving college student far from home. We talked over the next hour while I savored the meal, and I learned that Mr. Kean was handicapped by cerebral palsy. He didn't own a car because he couldn't drive; nevertheless, he rode the bus to work each weekday and made enough money to live by himself in a house he owned. For a young kid unsure of how I was going to make it in the real world, he was inspiring.

Mr. Kean was a religious man, and we talked about faith. He told about his love for Jesus, and that he believed he only survived by the Providence of God. Far away from everything I knew, including church, I felt alone. His faith gave me hope, a sense of goodness, purity.

After an hour passed, I became restless, not because I wanted to leave, but because I didn't wish to overstay my welcome. Sensing my discomfort, Mr. Kean asked me what I had in my bag. What was I selling?

Here was this good man, who had given me breakfast, and I certainly did not wish to take a dime of his money. Plus, I didn't really think I had much that would be of any interest or use to him. I tried to dodge the question, said it didn't really matter.

But he refused my avoidance, said I was out here, away from home, working to try to make honest money, and he wanted to support me if he could. I told him about everything we had, downplaying each item of our catalogue, hoping to remain free from depriving my host of his meager funds. When I finished, he asked if I had any books for children, if I had any Christian books, and indeed, we had a collection of Bible stories for children. He asked to see my sample, and after perusing it for several minutes, asked to buy one, explaining that his mind sometimes didn't work in a very complicated way, and he had found that he enjoyed children's stories. I offered to give him the sample, but he refused, demanding to pay. I ended up charging him at cost. I grudgingly took his check, and after thanking him for such a fine breakfast and uplifting fellowship, departed.

I'd like to say that I visited him often after that and we developed a deep and abiding friendship. But I did not see Mr. Kean again. Soon I finished up my work for the summer and took the long trek back to Oklahoma and my family and girlfriend. Once back in school, I was lost in love and, to a lesser extent (much lesser), study, so I forgot all about the breakfast encounter.

February 17, 1993, I turned twenty-one. This is a little embarrassing, but I spent the day alone in a quiet house. I rented a couple of movies, had my first drink (I know, amazing—hey, I was a good Baptist), ate five roast beef sandwiches for five bucks from Arby's and treated myself to a half gallon of chocolate milk for dessert. Gross, I know. Made me sick, and I blamed it on the alcohol, which bought me several more years of easy sobriety. More importantly, I was depressed. My girlfriend had broken up with me after three years, and it was debilitating. Our campus was so small that every nook and cranny was shaded by happier times, now lost. She had a new boyfriend, who she would end up marrying. A good man, I am sure; he became a preacher. But I was in a sad state and had contemplated suicide. I was serious, had specifically planned the where and how.

But on that day, two things happened. First, against everything in my being, I reached toward my Bible lying on the windowsill, turned to the Psalms, and began to read. David's weeping prayers from his place of desperation awakened hope in me, and I struggled through the day. Then, trudging toward my mailbox, the second thing happened, a gift and a mercy—a letter.

It was from the Southwestern Company. Now, I was sick of these letters. I had been getting mail from them ever since that summer of '91. They were asking me to work again. I survived that summer, and there was no way in hell I was going back. I had gotten so many of these requests that I began trashing the letters without even reading them. But for some reason, on my twenty-first birthday, poised to foolishly end my paltry existence, I paused, opened the letter, and slowly read the contents.

It was an official-looking letter, but something was different; it informed me that the company was merely passing along a letter they had received from a customer, who was looking to contact me. Then turning the page, there it was, a handwritten letter from Mr. Kean.

Sadly, I have moved nearly twenty times since that day, and at this writing, I have not found the letter. Essentially, it was a thank you card. I had taken the time to talk, to eat breakfast, to share the morning sunshine and a good book. These things were blessings from him to me, yet he was gracious, said how much it meant, how I had lifted his soul and renewed his hope in people. His faith had been stirred and he was able to press on.

He was the one who saved me.

Some people don't believe in miracles. I have never seen the lame suddenly walk or the dead brought to life. But I will tell you that on my twenty-first birthday, when I was alone, drowning in a deep well of sorrow, hanging over the edge of the abyss, that letter from a humble and good man was a lifeline, a grace.

And for me, it was a miracle.

Blake Kilgore is the author of *Leviathan* (2021), a collection of poems that wrestle with doubt. A wanderer, he's from the South and Midwest and now the Northeast. Blake teaches history and coaches basketball during the workday, and tries his best to care for and serve his wife and four sons when he goes home. His writing is forthcoming in *Common Ground Review*, and has previously appeared in *Fare Forward*, *Vita Poetica*, *Amethyst Review*, and other fine journals.

NONFICTION

Herbert Herrero

THREE PLACES TO FIND A MAN

The horizon is diluted of its color. The overcast conceals the plains but has smeared the sky from afar. Light reaches through though on the foreground. The length of the shadow it casts suggests dawn. Boulders reveal roughened surfaces and chiseled edges. Fragments scatter.

A man is seated. His feet, barely covered by the frayed hem of the undergarment, are set firmly on the ground. Days of walking tire, form calluses, and wrap the feet with dirt. He appears unable to groom himself. His beard and hair, loose and unkempt. No furrows show on his forehead. His nose and brows are prominent, his cheeks, sunken, his chin, receding. His lips are together, absent of utterances. His skin is pale, the kind of paleness attained for lack of sleep. His hooded eyes are deep and blackened too, most likely for the same reason. He stares downward at nothing, as if loneliness has engulfed him, as if he is resigned, as if defeated and in despair. His face is weathered like the rocks that surround him.

Thin arms and hands tightly clench between his knees, enduring the cold. Hunger and thirst make one resentful and vulnerable to whispers he can only hear. There is a need to keep something together and not let go. A cloak drapes over his shoulders. Shoulders which are neither lifted nor dangled, just slightly leaning forward, a posture of resolve. Shoulders should not be deprived of the load it can carry. His confidence is diminished, but not lost. He is exhausted, but not consumed. The man is nearly wilted and wanting for replenishment. But he sits as if it is bearable.

The moonlight covered behind the thicket. Its luster lit the stone wall but could hardly get past the branches. The shrubs traced an opaque silhouette of its spines. The absence of moisture allowed only vegetation of this kind to grow. The city in the distance kept silent

underneath the faint twinkling of its stars. It was difficult to tell how deep it was into the night. But not everyone was asleep.

The shadows imposed themselves upon the secluded place and marked their veins on the dust. A gleam pierced through and struck a rock. Its slab was narrow and cold, but a suitable seat, nevertheless, for the tired and the weary. Many frequented the place, finding momentary refuge for their troubled selves. But not everyone who sought solace was comforted.

On the ground, a man lay, motionless as his surroundings. His arms extended and reached at nothing, his hands unclasped, fingers not firm, their tips on the dirt, his hair unrolled over his head, his face not seen, and his entire body fused to the earth, like a fallen tree, drawn of its will to be upright and left without recourse, but to accept its fate. His wails could not be heard even if he tried.

The evening permitted darkness to wield its emptiness. A noiseless deluge which drowns everything, and spares nothing, not even the faintest flicker. It removes all sense of dimension and direction. There is nothing in darkness, nothing to clench, nothing to embrace. The night is at its darkest when no one replies to one's cries or heeds one's call for help. A voice plunging into an abyss.

The creases on the blanket were like rippled frozen waves of the desert, folded by time. The gaps, though, were not uniform, a few were narrower than others. It flowed to the sides of the foot-high bed, took the form of the edges of the frame, and spread the length of its ends to the floor. The flat of his feet would have been exposed if it were not completely covered by the sheets. His toes were upright, pointing upward and not rotated, because his ankles were not together but placed slightly apart. The cloth between his thighs, knees, and shin sagged. He was only covered from the waist down.

His hands calmly rested on his chest but were not placed with one on top of the other. His torso was bare and slightly elevated. He is leaned against the headrest. He looked neat and clean, with his well-combed hair and groomed moustache and beard on his chin. His face showed no visible signs of tension, no scowled brows, or wrinkled forehead.

His eyelids looked naturally closed, and his lips gently pressed together.

He was not sleeping. The place was lit well enough to reveal who he was, but there was no indication where it was. He certainly suffered, as suffering is known to be a prerequisite of dying. He endured suffering, as there were witnesses to how he dealt with the pain. He was quiet all throughout his ordeal, as if he knew all along what was bound to happen. His family saw him breathe his last, but they were not able to take him or have his body cleansed.

Christ in the Wilderness is an 1870s oil on canvas painting. It was believed to be one of the most important works by Ivan Kramskoy. It depicts Jesus alone in the desert. *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane* is an 1870s work by painter Vasily Perov. It depicts Jesus praying on the night before his execution. *The Christ in the Tomb* is a rare transparent artwork authenticated as an 1840s creation by iconic artist Karl Bryullov. It depicts Jesus laid in the sepulcher.

Herbert Herrero is a 51-year-old Filipino, a fellow in the 2019 National Writers Workshop of the University of Santo Thomas. His work was included in the 39th issue of *Anak Sastra Online Literary Journal*, and the 16th Issue of the *Likhaan Journal of the University of the Philippines*.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Jeremiah Gilbert

SALT CATHEDRAL, ZIPAQUIRÁ, COLOMBIA

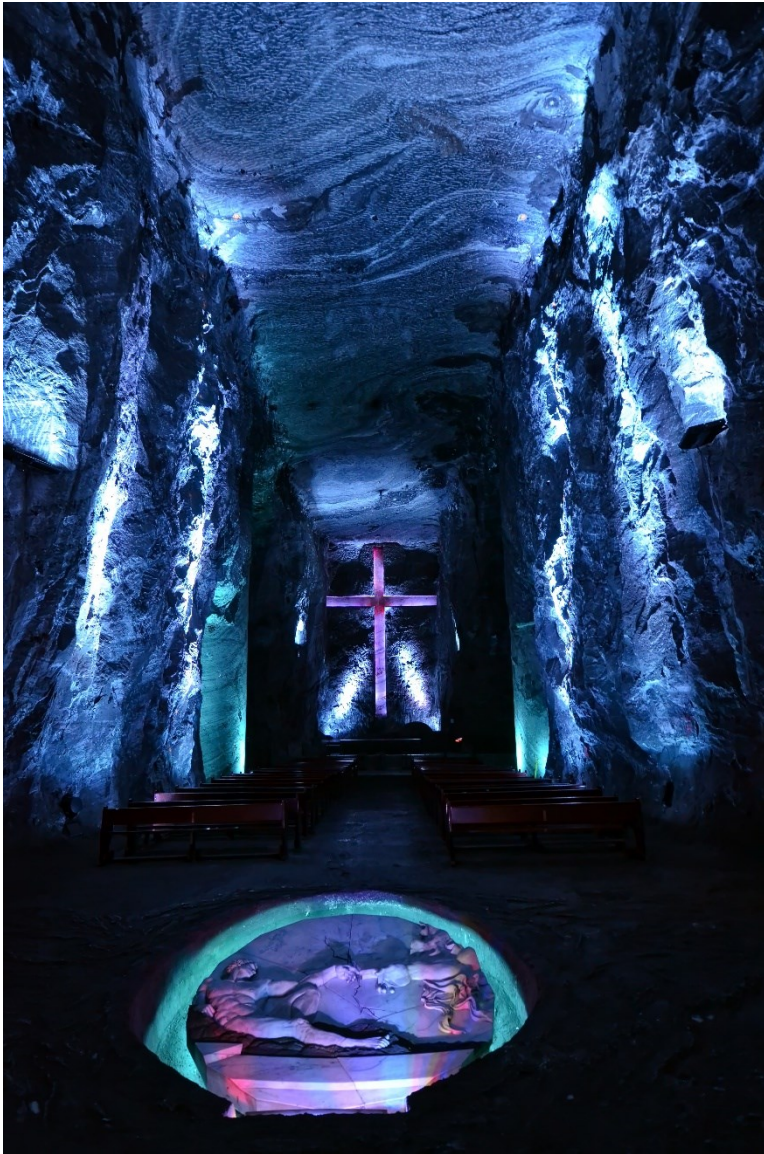
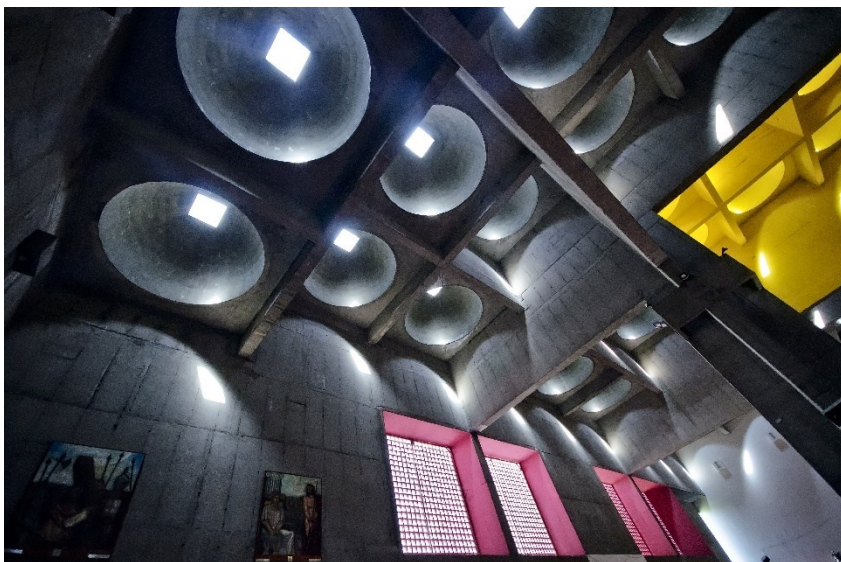


Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

CITY CHURCH, KOBLENZ, GERMANY



NEW CATHEDRAL, MANAGUA, NICARAGUA



Images courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

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

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Mario Loprete

ANGEL CONCRETE SCULPTURE



Image courtesy of the artist.

Artist Description

I created this sculpture using as a model my first toy that was given to me by my parents when I was a baby. An angel who accompanied me in life, helping me in difficulties and guiding me towards God. He stayed by her side and helped me face the most complex and difficult moments.

Artist Statement:

My name is **Mario Loprete**. I'm an Italian artist.

Painting for me is my first love. An important, pure love. Creating a painting, starting from the spasmodic research of a concept with which I want to send a message to transmit my message, it's the base of my painting. The sculpture is my lover, my artistic betrayal to the painting. That voluptuous and sensual lover that gives me different emotions, that touches prohibited cords...

In the last years, I worked exclusively on my concrete sculptures.

For my concrete sculptures I use my personal clothing. Throughout some artistic process, in which I use plaster, resin and cement, I transform them into artworks to hang. My memory, my DNA, my memories remain concreted inside, transforming the person that looks at the artworks into a type of post-modern archeologist that studies my work as they were urban artifacts.

I like to think that those who look at my sculptures created in 2020 will be able to perceive the anguish, the vulnerability, the fear that each of us has felt in front of a planetary problem that was Covid-19... under a layer of cement there are my clothes with which I lived this nefarious period. Clothes that survived Covid-19, very similar to what survived after the 2,000-year-old catastrophic eruption of Pompeii, capable of recounting man's inability to face the tragedy of broken lives and destroyed economies.

In the last five years about 400 international magazines have written about my work, turning on the spotlight on my art project, attracting the attention of important galleries and collectors. All articles are published on my account facebook <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10158608980132542&type=3>.

Irina Tall Novikova



Image courtesy of the artist.



Image courtesy of the artist.



Images courtesy of the artist.

Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

The first personal exhibition “My soul is like a wild hawk” (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology. In 2005, she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, drawing on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Irina writes fairy tales and poems, and illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, and she especially likes the image of a man—a bird—Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week.

Instagram: @ irina369tall

Instagram: @ irinanov4155

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Alexander Limarev

LONELINESS



Image courtesy of the artist.

THE SHINING CROSS



Image courtesy of the artist.

TEMPLE OF THE LORD

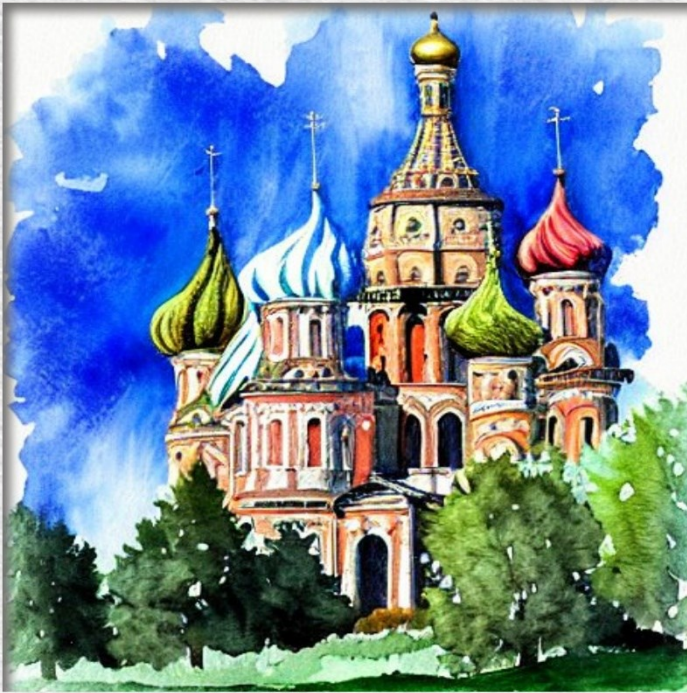


Image courtesy of the artist.

BROTHERHOOD OF SOULS AND HEARTS



Image courtesy of the artist.

Artist Statement

Artwork as viewed by **Alexander Limarev** is the way to speculate upon and explain to yourself such universal existential problems as a person's life, double standards and their influence on individuals, public loneliness, social impotence, search of God, resistance to Evil. He thinks of his artwork as inner monologues developing over a particular thought or event and thus resembling nonsense, stream of consciousness in visual art, based on paradox, absurd, broken causative-consecutive and chronological connections, reflecting discrepancy, injustice of the outer reality. However, decorative artworks are a happy exception.

Alexander Limarev, freelance artist, mail art artist, poet, visual poet and curator from Russia/Siberia. Participated in more than 1000 international projects and exhibitions. His artworks are part of private and museum collections of 72 countries. His artworks as well as poetry have been featured in various online publications including *Bukowski Erasure Poetry Anthology (Silver Birch Press)*, *Briller Magazine*, *Iconic Lit*, *Caravel Literary Arts Journal*, *Maintenant*, *The Gambler Mag*, *Tuck Magazine*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Mush/Mum Mag*, *Killer Whale Journal*, *Angry Old Man Magazine* etc.

Searching for God?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bible References (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

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

Our next reading period begins August 1, 2023.

Send us your best Christian-themed:

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

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

HeartOfFleshLit.com

