

Heart of Flesh

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VERONICA MCDONALD, EDITOR
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HEART OF FLESH LITERARY JOURNAL

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Veronica McDonald

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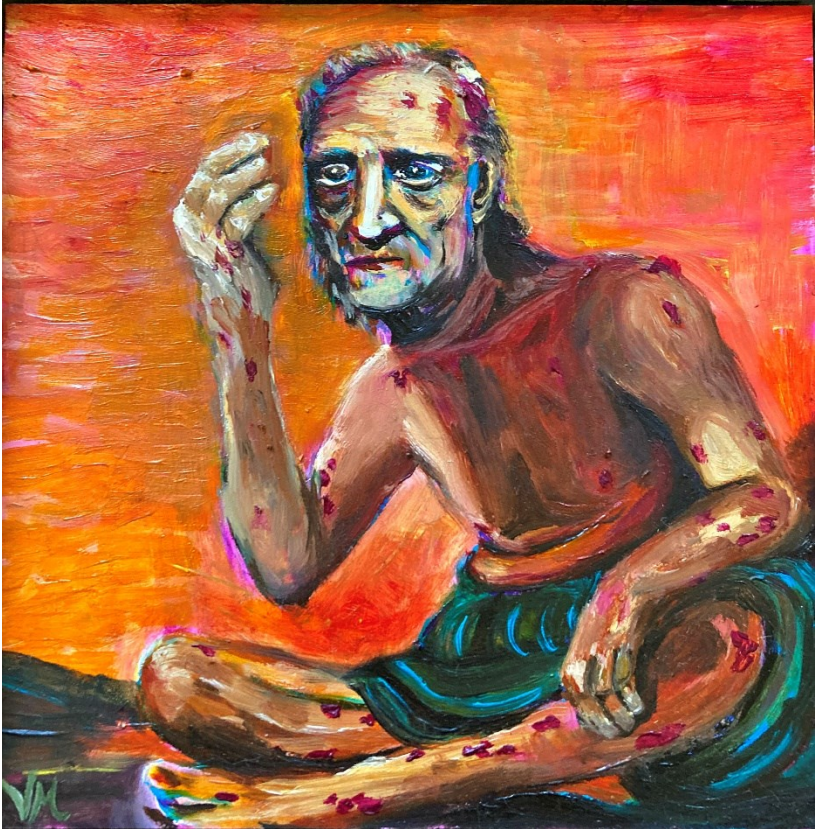
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Job by Veronica McDonald (2024), acrylic on Gesso board.

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

“We love because he first loved us.” —1 John 4:19

I want to begin our 11th issue by saying, God loves you.

I know what you’re thinking: that sounds so cliché. Like something written on a frayed scrap of cardboard and carried meaninglessly through busy streets. When you read the words, they feel like stale air—weightless, lacking, and unprofound. But once you understand who God is, what love is, and who you are, “God loves you” is a statement that can radically turn your life upside down. As one of our poets describes it, once you experience the saving power of God’s love “The constrictions in your chest loosen, / Fervent rivers flow together, / vivify the dead ocean. / Worms in your head die, / you pass them.”¹ This is no light matter. This is no “well-meaning parent holding your hand and affirming all your life choices” kind of love—this is a “you are dead in your sins, and I’m going to bring you back to life” kind of love. This is a “you are groping in rotten muck at the bottom of a dark pit, and I’m going to pull you out and show you how to live” kind of love. This is a serious love, brought to you by the Being who invented the universe and created your soul.

The clearer you see God for who He is, the clearer you can see yourself. You’ve failed Him (we all have). You’re a selfish little sinner (we all are). But the good news is, He still loves you. He’s waiting for you. And if you call on Jesus, look for Him, seek Him with your whole heart, you’ll find Him—and all the love that comes with Him. This former atheist can attest to that.

In Issue 11, you’ll witness many of our writers and artists encounter divine love. They’ll accept it, fear it, reject it, flirt with it, and look at it with a skeptical side-eye. Through their different styles and stories, I hope you’ll see that God’s love carries *weight*. I hope you’ll see that

¹ “After You Believe” by Phil Flott, page 17.

when He loves you, He is restoring you—no matter how painfully—to Himself. He is working in you for your ultimate good and His purposes. Accepting His love does not mean a perfect life, but it does mean that you are held—dragged, humbled, and molded like clay. And with that painful shaping comes joy, rest ... and peace. With the rejection of His love comes nothing but emptiness. *God loves you*. I pray that Issue 11 walks you through that experience with the proper intensity of such a statement.

Thank you to the writers, poets, artists, and photographers who contributed their beautiful work to this issue. I am extremely blessed to be a steward of your fine work. Thank you to Katie Yee for her consistent hard work and thoroughness when reading through submissions and issue drafts, even during busy seasons of life. Thank you to my husband and family for their continuous encouragement and support. Thank you, Jesus, for revealing Yourself to me when I sought you and for loving me.

And, of course, thank *you* for reading *Heart of Flesh*. I hope this issue speaks into your life and glorifies the God who loves us.

Veronica McDonald

Veronica McDonald
Editor/Founder

POETRY

Nicole Bird

THE LIGHT

I heard singing last night
Our Father, who art in Heaven
so far away it sounded
like a whistle in my ear
coaxing me awake.

No, they weren't singing.

Hallowed be thy name,
Hollywood.

I shuffled to the window
saw candles burning
in their hands,
a circle of people surrounding
an above ground pool.

Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done

In the middle of the night in Hollywood,
my fellow citizens would demand
immediate cessation of all faith-related activities,
belief far too clamorous for the denizens—
housed and unhoused alike.

A smiling woman with curly hair
approached the water.
After a deep breath,
two men helped her

submerge
until she disappeared
and all I heard was
a splash—

*Give us this day
Our daily bread*

tears melded with moisture on her face.
A pastor held her,
She looked new
or maybe just wet.

And forgive us our trespasses

This pool must be a gag.
An art installation, the brainchild
of a cheekily named improv troupe, soon
they would yell “and scene,”
disband, taking their pool set design
back to Sherman Oaks.

But no, they were looking for something—
whatever that woman got
that made her smile
look like light.

REVENGE OF THE NIGHT BAPTIZERS

There's a reason it never rains in Hollywood:
it didn't ask to be clean.

I watch them from my brick-fringed window.
My empty stomach growls
loud enough to dwarf their prayers,
having last been fed at lunch
with a seven-dollar In-n-Out combo.

*Whoever dwells in the shelter
Of the Most High
Will rest in the shadow of
The Almighty.*

I stomp back to bed,
contemplate filing a noise complaint.
Bemoan their words,
their corporeal etching of prayer
in this lone clearing covered
with patchy grass off Hollywood Boulevard,
beg them to stop, plead with them—
I can't sleep through your faith.

*I will say of the Lord, He
Is my refuge and my
Fortress
My God, in whom I trust.*

Water sloshes,
someone being immersed and made new.
I turn back to the couch,
too tired to get into bed,
too achy to accept comfort.

I'm left with wind whistling over a hollow bottle,
nothing to do except withstand their prayers.

Nicole's work has appeared in the *Angel City Review*, *Monadnock Underground*, and *Granfalloon*, among others. Her writing has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and she's currently revising a poetry collection about Los Angeles. You can read more about Nicole at nicolebirdthewriter.com.

POETRY

Casey Mills

I CAN FEEL IT

the children screamed behind smoky walls of sparkler spit
we shuffled on the outskirts, warning, encouraging
feeding off their warmth and delight
joy a form of thanksgiving
the Lord adores most

deep in my pocket I can feel the message God sent
oily chunk of binder paper, folded over and over
and over again, I can feel it burning with the joy-screams
flung up as spent sparkles
rain to the ground

SACRED, SCARED

where cotton meets skin
at the top of your hip
my hand often settles,
holding you to sleep

much I didn't have time to share
some I couldn't bear to reveal
as your breath slows, here come dreams,
crossing bridges wet with rain

when this grows tiresome
I turn away and begin to touch
all the thoughts I've kept as my own,
sacred friends, sacred enemies

GUT - PUNCHED

never thought I needed forgiveness
until it came like a gut punch
forcing me to drop all the pretty things
I'd been carrying towards salvation

as treasures erupted in shards at my feet
I stood there empty-handed
and realized never had my hands
been so free to pray

to give thanks, to glorify, to ask
wading deeper into rivers of humility
pulling ribbons of holy love from my chest
and sending them twisting toward the sky

Casey Mills writes poems early in the morning before his kids and the sun wake up. He has poetry appearing or forthcoming in *Ekstasis*, *Amethyst Review*, and *Solid Food Press*.

POETRY

Phil Flott

AFTER YOU BELIEVE

The constrictions in your chest loosen,
Fervent rivers flow together,
vivify the dead ocean.

Worms in your head die.
You pass them.

Muscles re-knit to tendons, to bone.
You heave stones like Samson,
wrestle bears like David.

Others place confidence in you,
ask you to tend their sheep, too.
Why not?
That is your purpose,
in life your kaleidoscope.

DIP THE TIP OF HIS FINGER IN WATER

It moves stale like the acid
from digested sugar.

When I swallow,
sinus mucous is the only wet I know.

The cracks in my tongue burn
like alcohol on a tenderized face.

I would take even one drop of coffee,
The scald of steam rising from it.
Anything wet—the lubrication
from my used car oil
could moisten my tongue.

The osmosis from this little good
would disappear;
the water would dance
as if on a hot iron.

More than my always drying flesh,
one atom of your plentiful water
would relieve the bleak desert in my head that pounds
like four sledgehammers on a steel beam,

would take the tension from my spine,
now always pleading up,

at least for a split flash of time.
Father Abraham.

Phil Flott is a retired carpenter who became a priest but is now retired from that also. He loves the fact that so many magazines publish works glorifying the Lord Jesus.

POETRY

Julia McMullen

TO BE THE WIFE OF JOB

Face slack with shock
not even the cattle spared
not even the wheat of the fields ...

I beg him to curse God,
return to dust—
which hisses like snakes
around my feet, circling,
deadly,

I beg Job to die, for sackcloth
to be his shroud,
so my suffering might be complete,
and when his skin grows red
with boils, my bitterness
strikes him, my lips spit words
like darts—
God cannot be treating him unjustly.

I become the accuser; my finger weakly
pointing, until all I can do
is put my face to the dusty ground
and weep.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

I weep at the table,
blood trickles down
from the cup
my clumsy hands
knocked over.
I look for a rag
to blot the red
that seeps
into the cracks on my floor.

I do not wish the dark stain
to flood the creases
of my fingers,
so I am careful as I clean,
but the cloth
stays white,
and the cup refills,
brimming with life.

I look to You,
Your hand holds
the gleaming glass,
offers me a drink.
I part my lips
And bow my head.

GOLEM

There came a stirring
in the cosmic dust.
Vast gusts of solemn air
moved earth and water
and it was there that clay
wrapped itself about bone,
and the Universe thought
for a moment.

A great celestial inspiration
moved through
the crude depiction,
spending itself on blood
and breath, roaring through
awakened synapses. Nerves sparked
furiously as eyes blinked
and nostrils opened
to fill lungs with first breath.

Julia McMullen is a poet from the Midwest, where she lives with her husband and young children. Her work has previously appeared in *Foreshadow Magazine*, *The Way Back to Ourselves*, and *Solid Food Press*.

POETRY

Nelson Okeke

NORTHERN MARTYRS

Will the blades cut deeper than
our sunken hopes of survival

before our loud whispers are heard?
Yet, we dance and wiggle our bodies

to the rhythm of the heavenly beat
beholding royalty as our last drop

of blood hits the bitten dust beneath us.

It started as one, two,
three random victims

till I lost count
like I ever really had the numbers

of the heads that rolled as we
danced and wiggled our bodies

to the rhythm of an earthly loss
the beat of a heavenly gain.

We see the Father, we unite with Him
every night we are plucked.

Nelson Okeke is a poet and medical doctor who lives in the North Central part of Nigeria. His work has appeared/is forthcoming on *Poet's Choice*, *Words of the Lamb*, *Writers Space Africa* and *Time of Singing*. He founded a Christian online poetry platform in 2019, and he has edited two poetry anthologies; *God Poems* (Volumes 1 & 2). He is passionate about God, writing and medicine. He is happily married to his beautiful and loving wife, Kateanah.

POETRY

Carol Edwards

WE ASKED FOR SIGNS

the shadow of us follows Him
gaping mouths a ravening clamor, rapacious
hearts a toxic mist gripping the world;

He exists in all Times, all Places—
as He walked dust and rock, Glory
in His miracles, were we reaching from

the future to touch the hem
of His clothes, for the Power to go out
from Him into us, to heal our hemorrhaging?

ichor splattered on trails, pavements, ocean
waves, the universe soaks in our Darkness,
the sun unable to conquer such insatiable beasts,

our fangs stained with the residue of
a billion souls, a billion sins, no physic strong enough
to purge the rot, galaxies groaning with pleas

for deliverance.

Carol Edwards is a northern California native transplanted to southern Arizona. Her poetry has been published in myriad anthologies, print and online periodicals, and blogs. Her debut poetry collection, *The World Eats Love*, released April 25, 2023, from The Ravens Quoth Press. Follow her on IG [@practicallypoetical](#), Twitter/FB [@practicallypoet](#) www.practicallypoetical.wordpress.com.

POETRY

Marisa Jade

AFTER BEING DISCHARGED FROM THE
HOSPITAL, I GET A SURPRISE IN THE MAIL

Seven days of work missed
& I'm in the hospital

I ask my mother to dye my hair black for my birthday
but I am cursed instead
cursed with the blessing of blindness & ugliness
was it a curse? & if so, who?
who gave it to me?
was it for me?

*

One night, I stay the night at the
Lehigh Regional Medical Center
& I'm gifted with a visitation
a visitation from my grandmother
who gently placed a red rosary above my head
asking God to bless me with better sight (insight?)
later that night
I ask for prayers
I receive prayers from my father
in my sleep
I receive prayers from my grandmother
I receive prayers from my aunts
I receive prayers from God
yet my eye shuts tighter
were they half-hearted?

*

Though God does not present me with a vision (this time)
 he presents me with written text
 the kind that does not need ink or paper
 yet still has the same sharp stinging effect as a serpent's tongue
 All my beloved companions
 the ones that live so closely to my heart
 yet live so far away
 call me *ugly*
 call my mother's eggs *rotten*
 call my deformity *terrible*
"Hey, rash face"
 my boss told me at work today

If I am cursed
 then I shall pass it on to these vipers
 To name them Toadstool
 To name them Hollywood Undead
 To name them Horse's Hart

They say that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder
 but I cannot see

*

I flip open John 9:25 & I am reminded of the story of
 Jesus & the blind man:

*"I don't know whether he is a sinner," the man replied.
 "But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!"*

*

On Saturday morning
 I was awakened by my mother
 who spent the night with me
 & brought me McDonald's breakfast
 I was gifted with another visitation
 one from one of the nurses Rebekah

& another from Dr. Saba

Dr. Saba remarks,

"Oh my gosh, you can see me with both of your eyes!"

I laugh

Later that morning

I am discharged from the hospital

so I give the staff members a proper goodbye

I bless the Lehigh Regional Medical Center with a farewell

I thank the nurses for taking care of me

I thank the doctors for their wonderful hospitality &

I thank God for staying by my (bed)side throughout it all

A voice rings in my brain

Was it my own?

Jesus?

God?

It rang:

"I was once blind, but now I can see!"

I wrote that down on the whiteboard

where I wrote many blessings

"May God be with you all!

God bless you all!"

*

The Wednesday after being discharged

was the day I received my blessing

a thank you note from the hospital

It read:

"We hope you are feeling better after your hospital stay.

It was an honor to care for you & our goal is to

always provide you with exceptional care."

An honor?

Marisa Jade is a recent graduate from Florida SouthWestern State College. She aspires to become an independent self-published author. Her works have recently appeared in *Livina Press*, *The Chamber Magazine*, & *Heart of Flesh*. You can find her in real life with her nose stuck in a book or on Instagram ([@mj_poems](#)) where she channels many voices through storytelling.

POETRY

Diane Vogel Ferri

SURRENDER

God, hold this breathing body
you resurrected with the morning star,

settle into my shoulder, unclench my neck
while my head breaks like glass.

The same anchor of neurons
that deplete and diminish also

propel my lungs, my arteries
pulsing like mountain streams,

sinews linked and vital
in a brilliant mystery.

What did Jesus do in agony of body
but acquiesce like a guileless lamb,

forgive the thieves, abandon the world,
arise again with the morning star.

HIRAETH

Welsh: longing for a time that can never be recreated.

Sundays were quiet. I could hear God
and God didn't mind that I stole lilacs

and daffodils to give to my mom and
grandma on the way home from school.

I didn't know the backyard wasn't a
vast forest or why dad scoured the yard

for tiny toads before cutting the grass
with his hand mower. March was the

windy month for kite flying, and cicadas
screamed when it was time to go back to school.

We burned the yellow beech leaves in ditches
and filled our lungs with memories. It snowed

all winter and every day after school we'd pull
our sleds down to the pump-house hill, trudging

back in the twilight covered in crusts of ice to do
our homework at the kitchen table before dinner.

No one believes that God used to speak to me.
Sundays were quiet. Everything was special.

Diane Vogel Ferri's full-length poetry book is *Everything is Rising*. Her latest novel is *No Life But This: A Novel of Emily Warren Roebling*. Her essays have been published in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Scene Magazine*, and *Yellow Arrow Journal*, among others. Her poems can be found in numerous journals. Her previous publications are *Liquid Rubies* (poetry), *The Volume of Our Incongruity* (poetry), and *The Desire Path* (novel). Her poem, "For You," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Best of the Net prize.

POETRY

Kelsi Folsom

ONCE A WILD ANIMAL

I spend the day driven by the next time
 I get to rest my aching legs
 prop my throbbing ankles up on the couch
 fuzzy blanket pulled up to my waist

feeling safe and cared for now
 like I have permission:

to not be enough
 to be incorrect
 to be bone-tired.

Seated on the settee by the windowpane open
 screen breathing with a whoosh that doesn't come from me.

to be alone and unimportant
 to be unproductive
 to remember

this machine of need-meeting was once a wild animal
 Nourished by the streams and trees
 that played with Adam and Eve,

They're not finished
 and neither am I
 being held in the womb of wilderness
 the body of God whose
 aim of love is unpredictable yet automatic.

to be a creature modern culture can't contain
 to be a woman whose feet look more like roots
 absorbing the praises of God from the ground
 where the grass greens everlasting witness
 that I need to lie down.

SWINGSETS

Maybe it's the rhythm
the predictable back and forth
whoosh and *thwack* as the
seat catches in my hand
that comforts the stability
I don't have at home.

Maybe that's not true
or maybe just unfair
but my hand knows
with my eyes closed
exactly when my son
will swing back and
Pause
 half a second held
in the breadth of my
ready spread palm,

No magnet but the pull
of timing and intimacy
even trust because
I have not left where I stand.

And if I stay long enough
the work will change its mind
and become rest, change
its mind and become belonging
to this moment

quiet

honest

prayer.

Kelsi Folsom is the author of three poetry collections, including *Breaking the Jar* (Finishing Line Press, 2022), and has work published in *Ekstasis*, *Wayfare Magazine*, *Anabaptist World*, *The Clayjar Review*, *Coffee and Crumbs*, and elsewhere. She enjoys hiking with her family, performing live, and getting lost in a good book. Find her on Instagram [@kelsifolsom](https://www.instagram.com/kelsifolsom).

POETRY

Mary Katharine Parks Workinger

CRYING LIKE GULLS FOR WHAT IS OURS

“Love is patient and kind and costly and inconvenient and often confused with other things.” —Mother Alicia Hager

And sure, God’s love is fair.
I know I won’t be cheated
of whatever portion
a girl (of my relative merit)
has coming to her.

But not content with this
I dig a foot into the twist
along this shore
and —raucous, red-mouthed
cry at God to toss a crust

delight

which unlike love cannot be confused
with other things.

After completing her graduate work at the University of Michigan, **Mary Katharine Parks Workinger** began a 35-year editing career. Her poetry has appeared in *The Feast*, *The MacGuffin*, and the *Grand Valley Review*. She’s currently leader of the Community of the Arts ministry, St. John’s Episcopal Church, Grand Haven, Michigan.

POETRY

*Alex M. Frankel*AFTER AN INVITATION TO MY BAPTISM, THE
SILENCE OF LORIE AND ANNETTE*cf. Luke 14:15-24*

I set the day and invite many.
 Carlton says "I'm on chemo pills and 10 a.m. is early."
 Lucy says "I'm a hundred and six, I can't move."
 Brian says "I bought a horse and need to visit him."
 I get mad and invite the local cleaning lady.
 I invite a chef from the loneliness center.
 I invite two drunks from my HOA.
 And they all have good excuses.
 It's like trying to recruit mourners for my father's funeral.
 My grumpy, adulterous, wicked dad.
 I tried his geriatrician, his nephrologist, his rheumatologist,
 Urologist oncologist dermatologist gastroenterologist,
 Ten empty chairs the day of the burial.
 Just the cantor chanting, me with a eulogy.
 My father, who spent a hundred thousand on my bar mitzvah,
 The first to tell me about gentile lore:
 "No one walks on water, such craziness!"
 Will the pews be empty then?
 I write to Lorie who posts eighty times a day on Facebook.
 How thoughtfully she drools over celebrities,
 Screams for social justice and calls everyone "my Loves."
 From Lorie the silence is steady, grandiose, monumental.
 On a whim, I write to Annette,
 Her mother was a fundamentalist who neglected her
 And so Annette's silence is fraught and anarchic,
 It grows, seeks to devour the landscape.
 From my balcony, I submit to the silence.
 But train horns clash in the valley.
 Down in El Sereno, the tattered screech of a rooster.

CLEANSE THOU ME FROM SECRET FAULTS

My cleaning lady misread a note I left her
 And gave all my clothes to charity.
 So I went to Dress for Less
 And bought a cheap new wardrobe.
 Then I walked up and down my hill
 Listening to C.S. Lewis on the Psalms
 Wishing some of his talent could rub off on me
 When I make a speech the day of my baptism.
 The pastor said my first draft looked long-winded
 Though I'm paraphrasing, he would not say "long-winded."
 The last thing you want is to put people to sleep
 Early on a Sunday in a church.
 At the top of my hill, I ran into L.A.'s poet laureate
 Who lives around the corner,
 Sometimes she calls me "Michael" and other times
 "Thomas" or "Randy," she makes an angry face
 If one does not bow down to her, because after all
 She is the winning poet of a key town.
 But what would Lewis or the psalmist say
 About a writer who demands genuflection?
 No one bows before Pastor Andy, who is a Lutheran
 And does not insist anyone pay homage.
 I once saw a woman kneel before L.A.'s archbishop
 A man of more majestic rank than even a poet laureate.
 In the film *Luther*, Martin the monk
 Prostrates himself elaborately before an exalted cleric
 Even after he's nailed his theses to the door,
 Perhaps our poet laureate would remember my name
 If I prostrated myself before her, but I wouldn't bet on it.
 This time Madam Laureate called me "Harold"
 And her scowl indicated *Okay now please move on.*
 The bargain clothes felt comfortable on the hill
 And amply fit my station in the pecking order.
 I wondered about my clothes and who owns them now
 And if I should deduct three hundred dollars

From my cleaning lady's pay.
Would she still speak to me and clean up after me?
She's nearly eighty and has only caused one little fire
And two small floods, is that so bad?
My friends say I should let her go, find someone else.
I ought to pray about this, turn it over,
I ought to rejoice for all the needy
Who now enjoy my clothes,
I ought to be grateful I'm no poet laureate
But a rank-and-file dude in the Lord's vineyard
Who gets on with his work without much fanfare.
What would I do if everyone paid attention?
It might go to my head.

Alex M. Frankel, who sometimes publishes under the name Alejo Rovira Goldner, left Spain in the 1990s to settle in Southern California where he hosts the Second Sunday Poetry Series and leads writing workshops. His first collection, *Birth Mother Mercy*, appeared in 2013.

POETRY

Mischa Willett

HOLD UP

Is this an allergic
thing or a preference
cafeteria guy asks
about my mushroom
rejection—and we have
a long, I mean long
for a cafeteria line—
conversation about how
him too, although he’s
coming around having had
them prepared a particular
way and fresh, fresh
is key, he tells me
whole spooning them
onto my plate anyway
and I don’t have the heart
to point it out so I smile
and say thanks. Then he tells
me he doesn’t like seafood
either—I almost leave;
there’s people behind me,
but stay and tell him
about Dover Sole
in Boscastle Harbor
in Cornwall, how
it changed not my life
but my mind about fish
anyway and he thanks me
and I take my tray of mushrooms

over to the table and say grace
and we both mean it.

Mischa Willett is the author of *The Elegy Beta* and *Phases* and editor of Philip James Bailey's *Festus*. His poems, essays, translations, and academic articles appear in a wide range of venues. He teaches English at Seattle Pacific University. More information can be found at www.mischawillett.com.

POETRY

Shane Schick

FLATLAY

The toe of a white Common Projects sneaker
and the heel of another cuddle in the bottom
of the frame, atop a grey cashmere sweater.
A bottle of Tom Ford cologne rests nearby,
next to a watch with a mesh, metallic band.
The wrist of the sweater's long right sleeve
is resting where the wearer's heart would be.
I somehow can't get enough of looking
at these flatlays, as photographers call them,
with subjects styled to be shot from above.
Perfect to showcase fashion and food,
the well-organized contents of a suitcase
or the carefully careless strewing of
pens, glasses, notepad and coffee cup
surrounding a closed MacBook on a desk.
I scroll through one such image after another
next to my wife, her long legs across my lap
as she holds open the book she's reading,
the TV's remote control waiting patiently
beside her on the edge of the couch cushion.
Both of us believe that God is ever-present.
We barely move. We never once look up.

THE WORLD TONIGHT

You're on the air now
except there isn't a camera in your face
and a yellow light shines instead of a red one blinking.

The woods are quiet and almost empty,
just your body language broadcasting
constantly to a small but significant audience.

You're on the scene
and in the newsroom at the same time,
with nothing to report other than updates

about the same ongoing tragedies,
a traffic analysis that won't get anyone anywhere,
plus a storm warning you hope is inaccurate.

TV anchors prefer to end on a happy story,
called a "bright" —something fun about an animal or a kid.
But this is the kind of day it's been. And so it goes,

you whisper, standing at the top of the hour
with God listening so closely
it's like you clipped a lavalier mic to your shirt.

Shane Schick has had poems published in *Poetry for Ephesians*, *Amethyst Review* and many other journals. He lives with his wife, an Anglican priest, in Whitby, Ont. More: ShaneSchick.com/Poetry. Twitter: [@Shane Schick](https://twitter.com/Shane_Schick)

POETRY

Enobong O'wunmi

FULL HANDS

Full hands, hands are full. She hums, tapping toes to the beat.
Her thumb bears the weight of her yummy, cuddly baby
On another finger, a humongous fork stirs the stew on fire
On her index finger hangs the froth milk jug
ready to pour some tea for the oldies
In her right palm are toast, bacon, cheese, and tomatoes
Breakfast must be on time; bumble bees leave for crèche.
Like a dutiful waiter, she waits on everyone
She looks through the homework books,
cleans up every day's mess in a second,
reads a Bible story, says a prayer to the oldies
tucks them under duvets,
till they drip, drop spittle and boogers.
She sings and cuddles Ms. Teensy-weensy,
until milk knocks the baby to sleep.
Mama drinks the dregs and eats the crumbs.
Tired! she yawns. Her body sags, her eyes dance.
"Thank you, Lord" She falls into bed like a sack
Tomorrow is another day.

Enobong O'wunmi is a poet and storyteller. She has written several poems and short stories featured on her blog abcdaysofbeingapenwoman.com. Her first collection of poems, *Berrily In Love with Words*, was published in March 2024. She is a wife and mother of two lovely girls.

You can find Enobong at www.enobongowunmi.com (still under construction) or email her at thewriter@enobongowunmi.com or enybeeskiosk@gmail.com.

POETRY

Ryan Keating

—WATCHING MY SON LEAD WORSHIP
TONIGHT FOR THE FIRST TIME—

He has the beauty in him
That comes from seeing God
Even when he cannot see that he has seen—
Selah
A chorus and the wonder in his tone
That cannot be resolved
Though he may still try at the end of lines
And long years to come.
The words of a prayer, his grip
On the microphone and a reflection
On the world around him—
Beholding in his face and a guitar
The well-pleased Father's love,
The café lights that cast no shadow
On his blonde hair glowing
And the beginning of a new song.

Ryan Keating is a writer, teacher, and pastor on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. His work can be found in publications such as *Saint Katherine Review*, *Ekstasis Magazine*, *Amethyst Review*, *Macrina Magazine*, *Fathom*, *Fare Forward*, *Roi Fainéant*, and *Funicular*. His chapbook, *A Dance In Medias Res*, is now available from Wipf and Stock.

POETRY

Marshall Cunningham

ARKANSAS SIRENS

Birdsong hymns, road-rattle psalms
along dirt trails beneath long
canopied trees. Pines used for boxes
and oaks for tire swings. Steeples hidden
in the boughs for all the squirrels to see.
Bells, chiming bells, the voice of noon
time sun speaking his sermon among
the sloped slumped ridges of congregation.
A lazy nation, in hesitation, to leave
their leafy shade for the valleys clear
and harvests full of followers falling
upon their knees. Hark! See the stars
when the sunset bleeds to night. Wonder
beneath them why the world calls, speaks holy
words when you step outside your door.
A benevolent benediction.
Singing softly to our senses.

Marshall Cunningham is a Christian writer from Conway, Arkansas. He recently graduated from the University of Central Arkansas with a Bachelors in English and Creative Writing alongside a minor in Honors Interdisciplinary Studies. Marshall's been a lifelong writer, and has committed his life to writing, publishing, and selling Christian fiction through his up-and-coming businesses.

POETRY

Danielle Page

LIQUID LIGHT OF MINE

Turn, twirl, do whatever
 On the banks of Pirate Cove, ocean
 Tune surrounds the sky, swirls
 In the sand as tambourines sway
 Drop ego, shame, free from chains
 Out, out in the world at last.

Turn eyes upward, seeing straight
 Onwards, tripping on sweet love.
 Tunes, electric, ignite a movement
 In spirits, casting strange colors—
 Dropouts, artists, pacifists,
 Outcasts fill and create sanctuaries.

Turning tides, these fountains of youth,
 On more than any high could describe
 Tuned to a radical who spoke
 In parables of birds, virgins, and yeast
 Dropped truth like nukes and
 Outlasted any fad, claiming God for us.

Danielle Page is a truth-teller and editor of the *Clayjar Review*. When she's not reading, she's scribbling in her journal or taking a hike. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Whale Road Review*, *Calla Press*, *As Surely as the Sun Rises*, *The Amethyst Review*, and *Ekstasis Magazine*.

POETRY

Michael Lyle

THEY DIDN'T KNOW HOW HUNGRY THEY
WERE

until their neighbors
were handed the fish
and soft round loaves

lips flecked white
with tender flesh
teeth tearing bread

and his followers
burdened by baskets
heavy with freshness

spilling bounty
on the ground

nearly trampled underfoot
the truth

there'd always
be enough

Michael Lyle is the author of the poetry chapbook, *The Everywhere of Light*, and his poems have appeared widely, including *Atlanta Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Crannóg*, *The Hollins Critic*, *Plainsongs* and *Poetry East*. He lives in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains after careers as a TV Producer/Director, an English teacher and an ordained minister.
<http://www.michaellylewriter.com>

Tim Gavin

DIVINE PROPERTY: FARMER'S PRAYER IN
CERCA, HAITI

I lift these rocks and pray I remain strong;
I pray the rainy season brings forth crops; I
pray my cows grow fat and goats multiply;
I pray my chickens produce eggs; my child
Finds a prosperous spouse with land and house.
I pray skies open, close to my liking
and that my hands can pull roots of weeds straight
from the ground and make room for my own bean
and yam seeds; I pray the sun looms
over my part of the plain and evil
spirits flee and run off a cliff like hoards
of wild swine; I pray likewise for neighbors
to deliver steaming pots of coffee
and potatoes and boiled goat and warm
milk and sugar cane and I pray for rest
and reprieve so I can once again say
So long and moan and sigh at the new moon.

Tim Gavin is an Episcopal priest serving as a school chaplain and interim rector at a church. His book, *A Radical Beginning: a Reflection on the Prayer of St. Francis*, was recently released by Olympia Publisher, London, England. He is also the author of a chapbook entitled *Lyrice from the Central Plateau* released by Prolific Press in 2018. His poetry and articles have appeared in *The Anglican Theological Review*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Grow Christians*, *Plough*, *Poetry South*, and other journals.

POETRY

Craig Dobson

CHAPEL

Twenty-five years after I first went back
I remember again the Chapel's tiny order:
the low tide ridges of dark wooden pews,
their cast of hymn books and kneelers,
the altar's Last Supper reproduction
I didn't know as a boy was by Leonardo,
beside which the lectern rose, from where
the Head would speak six days a week,
the Reverend on a Sunday.

Blue carpet strip on dark wood herringbone,
white tall walls and, on each side of the crucifix,
leaded windows framing an old-walled lawn
which spread westwards, widening towards
the large oak tree under which, on summer
afternoons, Miss would read us our favourite
books when we were in the youngest class.
Beyond its shade began the lake and woods
where we could play when we were older.
Further still, ran the busy road that marked
the border of our world.

At Christmas, we'd stand and sing
'O Come All Ye Faithful' in Latin—
near shouted its exoticism in our excitement—
watching for the snow that never showed
beyond the golden cross and the fresco's
faded, outstretched hands.

That's what I remember about going back:
the surprising cliché of a shrunken world,
a marble dream I pocketed as I walked out—
a lost miniature that spun on till now,
when something in its spreading view,
those delicate hands, the echo of that Latin shout,
broke it open once again.

Craig's had poems and short stories published in several UK, US and European magazines. He lives and works in the UK.

POETRY

Terrance Owens

AN OLD TESTAMENT

We had been goofing off during the rosary,
and so, for penance, as Grandpa called it,
we were each to fill a trash bag
with the apples that had fallen
from the decrepit tree in his backyard.

But the ones that had dropped from the tree
were breached and gooey.
The whole yard was grimy with apple mash.

We kicked through the mushy remains
and then had a better idea
and started shaking the branches
to fill our bags with the fullest fruit.

But when the apples fell from the branches,
they uttered open, rotten and hollow already
and chock full of wasps that streamed
from the busted seams
like sin
while we screamed our parents' names hollow.

Inside the house, Grandpa was finishing his rosary:
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit

Outside, the neighbor's Doberman, Thunder,
barked its namesake through the chain link
terror of our faces as we scrambled.

As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be.

I saw Joey kneel among the swarm,
arms in the air, calling it a life lived well-enough,
until he couldn't take the pain any longer
and turned to run with us.

World without end. Amen.

Our black bags abandoned
like bodies in the croaking summer grass,
we fled down the street, swatting
and pulling at our clothes, the wasps
hemmed into our shirts and hair,
chanting their tiny gospel
all through our lives:

the trespasses,
the years,
the burning wheel of our fathers
coming round and round again.

Terrance Owens has had poems appear in *Quarterly West*, *PANK*, *The Adirondack Review*, and *Lake Effect*, among others. He has an MFA from Eastern Washington University. He lives in Seoul, South Korea.

POETRY

Agaigbe Uhembansha

THE EXECUTIVE DRIVERS

You drive not for convenience.
 Not even because you've learnt to drive.
 You drive to show you've owned a car
 To sell in the worship arena

Like you sell marriages,
 Brands and businesses;
 Like you share fliers along with offering
 Envelopes

And invite people to grace your birthday
 Parties.
 Instead of pointing towards the Saviour,
 You point at your business venues
 And logos.

You lead converts to plazas
 Than to the Lamb,
 You shout breakthroughs and testimonies
 More than hallelujah and altar calls,

You read louder, the lines on fliers
 Than the verses in the book of reference,

As if you too didn't make out the day
 of the Lord, the overhanging day.

Agaigbe Uhembansha lives and writes from Abuja, Nigeria. His work has appeared in *Parcham*, *ArtsLounge*, *Poetry.com*, *Fictionette*, *MockingOwl*, *GlobeSoup*, *Panoply*, and elsewhere.

POETRY

Desi Ana Sartini

HERE I AM

Here I am, Lord.

I have brought the sacrifice—
split the heifer, goat, and ram;
arranged the dove and pigeon.

Where are You?

Hours waste away.
The smell of blood
and open flesh
settles in.

Flies descend,
but not You.

Where did You go?

The sun sinks low.
The day wanes.
Still no sign.

Lord,
I have done all You asked,
and waited all day.
Now I'm fending off vultures.

Where are You?

Drowsiness falls;
I drift into the black.

*So shall it be.
Four hundred years they shall wait,
in silence,
surrounded by vultures,
waiting for the day
when the sins of the land are complete.*

I shake myself awake
only to find
blackness dark as sleep.

Night has come.

Flame and smoke
burst to life,
scattering the darkness,
and passing through the pieces
in pledge
of the Land Between the Rivers,
though it be long
in the coming.

Desi Ana Sartini writes from SE Asia, where she has immersed herself in language. She studies Malay literature by day, Hebrew poetry by night, and cake-making on the weekends. You can read more of her work at www.breathanddust.com.

POETRY

Dana Ryan

THIRST

Hannah wept,
her mouth full of sand
and dry as an empty tomb.
Eli, obviously,
never thirsted like this,
excusing her salt and
aphonic laments
on strong drink, as if liquor
could quench the flame of a
burning womb.

Had I been at the temple
that day I would have tasted
her cracked, arid lips
rounding vowels and consonants
in a desert of speechless grief.
I would have felt
how her eyes swallowed children
with hungry glances
then avoided them like fire.

And I would have kissed
that ignorant old priest for giving
her a cup of hope
because she, so parched from sorrow,
desperately needed a drink.

Dana writes from Southern California, where she also takes photos of flowers and people and other beautiful things. Her work can be found in *The Clayjar Review* and *The Rabbit Room*.

POETRY

Lorette C. Luzajic

AMBERGRIS

definition: (/ˈæmbərgriːs/ or /ˈæmbərgrɪs/; Latin: ambra grisea; Old French: ambre gris)—solid waxy secretions produced in bile ducts of whales; whale vomit; possessing a marine and fecal scent; some acquire musky, sweet, balsam scent that is highly prized by perfumiers.

The endless dark, the wide blue deep. Jonah's once bronze body is spook pale and puny, soaked through to skin and bones. He shivers. He forgets the dream that drowned him, the grace that spat him back on the shore. He does not recall the secrets of Nimh, or Ninevah. It will all come back to him slowly, unspooling in the days to come, the whirlpool terrors, the seaweed, the baleen dreams. How he tried to run from God, boarding a boat going anywhere at Jaffa's port, and found himself in the belly of the beast. Made it back for the reckoning, became accountable, became a light on the path. We all do it: we flee for Tarshish in our minds, try to hide, outrun truth. We end up the same way, heaved ashore from the whale's cavern, if we are lucky. Another chance to resume the tasks we are assigned. To get things right, to be transformed.

WINTER LIGHT

Even Sunday, the city is a frenzy. All scowl and growl, eyes cast low. January's slush and freeze fresh, slick and slippery. The banshee winds spooking shrill through skyrise corridors. Still, you are standing. Still here to count the day a blessing. This time last year, it was possible, likely even, that you would die.

Still fragile, you watch carefully for ice patches in the parking lot of St. Seraphim of Sarov Orthodox Cathedral. The church is half empty, but your heart is full of mystery as prayer fills the room. The Christmas trees and poinsettia remind you of the reason. On every wall, icon paintings of saints and intricate vines, dusty pinks and rusty reds. Ancient symbols and acronyms like ciphers. A cloud of warm frankincense. The rites here are as indecipherable to you as the Cyrillic on vellum, an unfamiliar choreography.

It is the dancing light from bouquets of beeswax candles, slender stalks bundled at either side of the altar. It is magical how it flickers against the gold leaf of Mary's halo: *Theotokos*, and the elaborate inlaid gold framing the icons that are doors between the narthex and the nave. There was a time when you were outraged by such ornaments, when some people went hungry, but today you think about the woman washing Christ's feet with rare perfumes. *The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have Me.* Gold is a gift, like life, and beauty is profound and rare. A taste of heaven. In this space, it belongs to everyone. The whole city can step inside to pray and partake of it. This gift of life.

You do not know that in these traditions, gold symbolizes purity, the unperishable, the precious, or that it reflects the eternal light, but you feel something of it in its glow. The lowly manger, the splendor of glory, two different aspects of the same winter light.

The Divine Liturgy: men in white and gold cloaks and crosses, with candle sticks, dikirion and trikirion, glowing the unwaning light of

God. Their ecstatic, mournful incantations meld with myrrh and balsam, rich and sweet as angels in the honeyed air.

Lorette C. Luzajic reads, writes, publishes, edits, and teaches small fictions and prose poetry. Her work has been published in hundreds of journals, taught in schools and workshops including on Manitoulin Island and in Egypt, and translated into Urdu and Spanish. She was selected for Best Small Fictions 2023. She has been nominated several times each for Best Small Fictions, Best Microfictions, Best of the Net, the Pushcart Prize, and Best American Food Writing. She has been shortlisted for Bath Flash Fiction and The Lascaux Review awards. Her collections include *The Rope Artist*, *The Neon Rosary*, *Pretty Time Machine* and *Winter in June*. Lorette is the founding editor of *The Ekphrastic Review*, a journal of literature inspired by art, running for almost nine years, and the brand-new prose poetry journal, *The Mackinaw*. Lorette is also an award-winning mixed media artist, with collectors in more than 40 countries so far.

POETRY

Joshua T. Baylis

UNQUENCHABLE

Ignited out of winter's ashen dark
Come fiery tulips, bursting daffodils,
Magnolias aflame, that bud, break, spark
The grey—As harmonising birdsong trills,
With bees abuzz about the blossom whirring,
The babbling brook of living water swells—
These all in union speak of something stirring;
Each song and petal heralds, hastens, tells
Of bright hope coming, growing, soon unfurled,
Unstoppable and all-encompassing
As dawn that fills and fires and warms the world—
The ancient certainty of newborn Spring,
Vibrant, verdant, fragrant, firm and true:
Unquenchably, all things shall be made new.

Joshua T. Baylis lives in Oxfordshire, UK, and writes about the symbolism of the seasons and the expansive power of nature upon the soul. A physicist by background, he works in research support and has previously been a church-based ministry trainee.

FICTION

Ryan Gutierrez

THANK YOU

Today is the day.

How appropriate that it should fall on my 18th birthday.

Today I am what the old world would have considered a man. An adult.

To be honest, I don't feel any different from yesterday ... you know, except for the understanding of today's impending doom.

I am the youngest person on Earth. At least as far as I know. I would assume that if my parents managed to hide me, others are probably out there. Living in the woods and mountains like my parents and me.

A bit over 18 years ago, the Sovereign United Nations made childbirth illegal. They deemed it cruel to raise children in this environment. I find it almost impossible to understand. The end of the world was staring them in the face. The inevitable destruction of Earth loomed. Instead of fighting, the world collectively gave up. Instead of seeking solutions. Instead of using the last 18 years to find a way off-world, they legislated the death of our race. The only billionaire trying to colonize other worlds was imprisoned, his wealth re-distributed. I bet people loved the stimulus check.

Sure, there was opposition at first. My mom and dad both fought in The Resistance, at least until my mom found out she was pregnant. The forced abortions were in full swing by then ... so they ran. I guess we ran.

I was only 5 years old when my parents explained that life was precious because it was short. Possibly very short. They assured me they would do everything possible to give me a good life. A happy life.

I cried all night. My 5-year-old brain panicked trying to wrap itself around the fact that I was not going to be forever. That they weren't either.

I was 8 years old the first time one of them apologized to me. It was Dad. He had just broken his foot hunting. Mom had to go out instead. I went to check on him, take him a cup of water. That's when he did it. I'll never forget his words.

"I'm so sorry, Adam." His voice was monotonous. Devoid of any emotion.

"Sorry for what, Dad?"

"I'm sorry we brought you into this mess. We thought there was hope. We should've let them ..."

He never finished the sentence, but I knew what was left unsaid. That night I cried too, but silently. I tried not to make a fuss. That night, my father regretted my life.

My mom apologized to me too once I was older, but it was different. She never hoped they had taken me. She apologized for letting hope die. She apologized for her generation's weakness and cowardice.

I was 10 years old the first time Dad took me hunting. We had practiced archery since I was barely able to walk, but I had never shot an animal. I remember the turkey falling from the low branch it had managed to climb. Dad took me over to it.

“Life is precious, Adam. All life. Our Creator gave us dominion over animals like this so that we may feed ourselves. We should be grateful to Him and the animals.”

We stood over the turkey as it gurgled weakly, flapping its wings at us.

“We don’t want it to suffer.”

A swift swing of his knife disconnected the bird’s long neck from its body.

“Is that why they did it?” I asked.

Dad was silent. He didn’t ask for clarification. He didn’t need to.

“Yes.”

“Then why?”

I saw anger flash across his eyes for a split-second before pain took its place.

“Life is precious, son. We don’t let it suffer because its purpose right now is to feed us. We let you suffer and struggle. We brought you here, son, because your purpose is to experience. To live, to hurt, to laugh, to cry, to love. To be.”

I grabbed the turkey by the feet and hugged my father.

I can see a pinprick of white light now. Ripping through existence, deep over the horizon.

I remember stargazing with Mom and Dad. We would make our own constellations, tracing the shapes across the sky with our fingers.

I remember Mom holding my hand all night the time I caught some sort of infection. She muttered prayers, trying to see if God wanted to make a deal while I flew through the cosmos, courtesy of my fever.

I remember Dad walking up the hill, a week after he had left, mud made of dirt and blood plastering his legs. A plastic bag with azithromycin under his arm.

His eyes were boring into infinity, and then he saw me. I was still there. Life returned to him immediately.

I remember Mom's sweet voice singing songs whose artists I will never remember. My mother's voice was the only way I knew them. The only way I wanted them.

"La Vie En Rose." "Yesterday." "Wonderful World."

She sang "Love of My Life" the day Dad died.

We don't know what did it. We just know he started getting tired. Weaker.

That was the second time he apologized to me. Funny enough, his second apology was for his first.

"I'm not sorry, son. You are the greatest thing I ever did. You are the best decision I ever made."

We buried him with his favorite tree as a marker. We sang songs and shared memories of him, retold his dumb jokes, all as we took turns with the shovel. I did my best to extend each of my turns, establishing my new role as the hard worker, the protector. Trying to make Dad proud.

It's a second sun now. Like what Dad said Tatooine had in the *Star Wars* stories he would tell me to help me sleep. I wish he were here to see it. Is that selfish?

I took good care of Mom. I hunted, maintained and added to the garden. I even made improvements on the old man's designs. I think he would have been proud.

Mom is here now. She's holding my hand. I can't see her. The light is far too bright, but I feel her skin. It's grown so thin. I'm glad I won't see her get old, truly old.

She begins to speak.

"Adam ... I'm ... I'm so ... so—"

"Thank you," I interrupt. "Thank you for letting me live. For letting me feel the rain. For letting me hear you sing. For letting me meet Dad. For letting me know his stories. Thank you for letting me know what it's like to hurt. For letting me know the relief when the pain goes away ..."

She's kissing my hand now and I know she must feel the scorching heat like I do.

"Thank you for loving me. For giving me a chance to love you and Dad back."

She's hugging me now.

I can smell the rosemary oil in her hair.

"Thank you for ..."

Ryan Gutierrez is a 33-year-old literature teacher, associate pastor, husband and father. He lives in Texas with his wife, two daughters, and their five cats. Ryan has been writing for most of his life and published a novel, entitled *Scars in Time*, in 2019.

Robert L. Jones III

AT THE HEAD OF EVERY STREET

Though she was wearing something other than that long-sleeved, silver gown flowing down to her ankles, it had to be her. Roy Patterson recollected some lines from her routine at the street festival:

“I call aloud in the street ... at the gates of the city ... come out from among those who hate knowledge, those who reject my advice ...”

As best he could recall, her monologue had proceeded in that general direction. Now she was pulling open the door to a bar half a block ahead. Quickening his pace, Roy reached the door, reopened it, and followed her in. The place was dimly lit despite the lateness of the hour, strange environs indeed for a teetotaler. His eyes did a nervous one-eighty around the room, and then he spotted her.

Though dressed casually in jeans, T-shirt, and tennis shoes, she was an arrestingly elegant beauty. Roy had the impression that anything would look stylish on her. Wavy, auburn hair cascaded onto her shoulders and framed a face of bold lines yet soft femininity. Her nose, her chin, and her lower jaw were attractively prominent, and her cheeks were firm. The musculature of her arms was graceful, the width of her shoulders in perfect proportion. She had sensitive, long-fingered hands that skillfully cradled a glass containing some kind of clear, light brown liquid. Even on a barstool, her physique was statuesque.

He walked toward her with an uncertain gait. She turned her head at his approach and examined him with calm, skeptical eyes. An attractive hint of collarbone peeked above the neckline of her shirt.

“... I ... hope I’m not inconveniencing you ... but I saw your performance this afternoon. I thought it was ... *convincing* ...”

The woman seated at the bar raised her eyebrows with the air of a performer who knew her effort had been anything but that.

“... and I hoped I might ...”

A brusque voice interrupted him. “You can’t loiter in here without buying something, pal. What’ll it be?”

“... That ... might be a problem ...” Roy answered with a conciliatory gesture. “You see ... I don’t drink ...”

“Then what’re you doing here?” the bartender snapped.

“It’s okay, Steve,” the woman intervened. “I’m curious. Let him buy me a drink.”

She had a wide, hungry mouth with well-formed teeth, all in perfect alignment. Roy’s heart was pounding faster and harder. Every social instinct told him to jump up and run away, but her blue-gray eyes held him like those of a python immobilizing a mouse. When she opened her mouth in a cynical smile, she appeared ready to swallow him whole.

“What’s your name?”

“Roy ... Roy Patterson.”

“Roy, you can call me Wisdom, but for all you know, I’m a gold ring in the snout of a pig.”

“I ... wouldn’t say ...”

She leaned toward him until he flinched.

“You look like a Sunday school type, Roy. What passage did I just quote?”

“Proverbs ... closer to the beginning than the end,” he estimated.

“That’s too broad a target. You don’t get any points for that.”

Motioning to the bartender, she placed her order.

“Another whiskey sour, Steve. It’s on Roy.”

Wisdom tilted her head upward and knocked back the remaining contents of her glass.

“Eleven twenty-two,” she resumed. “Specificity, Roy. It’s all in the numbers. Now what do you want?”

“... Aside from *meeting* you, I’m ... not sure I want anything ...”

“That’s another bad answer. Everybody wants something.”

“... Well,” he began indecisively, “... I suppose I could do with a good conversation.”

She pulled back, sat up straight, and appraised him through half-lowered eyelids.

“Don’t try to pick me up. I’m too much for most men to handle.”

“... You ... have my assurances ...”

This brought a different kind of smile to her face.

“You’re a man.”

“That doesn’t mean ...”

“No, you don’t get it,” she interrupted. “It takes more than the right anatomy to be a man. There are men, and there are animals with language. The animals care only about basic needs and base desires. They have no appreciation for metaphysics. Do you like metaphysics, Roy?”

“... I, uh, *do* ... perhaps a little too much ...”

“Then that makes you a man, and I’ll talk to you. I don’t talk to animals.”

Taken aback by her assertive manner, he hedged.

“As long as I’m not intruding ...”

“Nonsense. You’re buying my drinks.”

He should have thought about the impossibility of what he wanted, but he only nodded. Wisdom downed the whiskey sour Steve had brought her, and she waved her glass for a refill. Steve took it promptly and brought it back full while keeping his eyes on Roy.

“If you decide to fall off the wagon, don’t try to keep up with her.”

The sour disappeared with alarming rapidity, and Wisdom savagely slammed her glass on the bar. Somehow, it didn’t break.

“Roy, you’re an outlier, a real anachronism.”

“... I’ve ... been told that ...”

She gripped his forearm forcefully.

“I *like* anachronisms.”

Things got more ragged after that. Wisdom finally succeeded in breaking one glass by throwing it onto the floor, and then she wreaked

havoc on two barstools. She was swaying on her feet with her hand on a third when Roy placed a calming hand on her shoulder.

“Wisdom ... please ...”

She relaxed into a slouched, swaybacked posture and swiveled to face him.

“It’s you again. You’re cute.”

Roy looked nervously at Steve. Why hadn’t the bartender or anyone else tried to stop her?

“... I’ll ... pay for the damages.”

“You don’t have to do that. She always makes good once she sobers up.”

“... I’d like to,” Roy insisted.

Steve shrugged.

“I keep extra stools and glasses in the back, and we order replacements every month or so. We get paid. Manufacturers and retailers get paid. She’s good for the economy, but if it’s that important to you, go ahead.”

He paused and thought for a few seconds before continuing.

“If you’re with her the next time this happens, it’s generally safer to wait till she’s done.”

Roy nodded reflexively and reached for his wallet.

“... So ... you never throw her out ... never press charges?”

“What for? She’s a steady customer, and she has her principles. She stays away from the bottles and windows.”

As Roy opened his wallet, Wisdom placed her hands on either side and forced it shut. Her eyes were remarkably clear.

“I sober up quickly. The drinks are on you. The damages are on me. How much do I owe you, Steve?”

The bartender did a quick calculation and told her. In what must have been a familiar ritual, he held out his hand while she rummaged through her handbag and began dropping silver dollars — *clink, clink, clink* — into his upturned palm.

“Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for I am more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with me.”

She cast a sharp eye on Roy.

“That’s chapter eight, verses ten and eleven, if you’re interested. Steve here cares more about the money. Steve, can I read you or what?”

“Like the proverbial book, Miss Wisdom.”

“Now that’s what I like—a complete lack of pretense—and he’s a good listener. Pay for the drinks, Roy.”

Opening his wallet again, Roy complied, and Wisdom slipped her hand through his arm and pushed him out the door. When they hit the sidewalk, she pulled him to a stop and put her hands on his shoulders.

“You’re a man, Roy.”

“... I’m ... a *confused* one, then ... why do you ...”

“I do it because I’m angry,” she interrupted for the third time that evening. “Who listens anymore?”

“Well ... I’m trying, but what if it had been someone else, someone with base desires, as you put it?”

She slid her hands down to his upper arms and gave them a tight squeeze.

“Then he wouldn’t have gotten this close. I already told you I don’t talk to animals.”

He lowered his head, and she released him then leaned forward in the manner of one drunk giving advice to another.

“I really *am* Wisdom.”

Gently, she patted his head.

“I need to go now. It’s been a long time since I tied one on with Liberty, and I need to find her.”

She turned and began walking away, steady on her feet. Almost involuntarily, he reached after her but avoided making contact.

“Will I see you again?” he called in a tone of near desperation.

“Those who seek me find me,” she replied over her shoulder. “That’s eight seventeen.”

“Where? Back there?”

He was pointing toward the bar.

“That’s not the best place, Roy,” she answered in a fading voice without turning to look. “You can find me at the head of every street, wherever the paths cross.”

She walked to the nearest corner and crossed the street. A bus passed between her and where Roy was standing, and after the few seconds it took to get out of the way, she was no longer in view. Roy walked to the corner and looked in all directions. Aside from himself, not a soul moved along the sidewalks of either street. Surely she had not gone so far as to disappear. It occurred to him that she might live in a nearby building, but he intuitively understood that this was not the case. Simply, inexplicably, she was gone.

Roy walks a lot these days. Now and again, he finds Wisdom, sometimes when he least expects it but always where she told him she would be. There are many streets, many intersections of many paths. When the two friends meet, they step into a quiet café—if one is nearby—for words, coffee, and whatever on the menu looks appealing. Their communication has grown easier with familiarity, and they speak of many things: ethics, metaphysics, the nature of reality, and such.

All he wants is a good conversation, something he can apply to honorable living, anything to keep him from becoming an animal. Despite or due to the maturation of their relationship, there is one respect in which it remains unchanged. Roy always buys, and that suits Wisdom just fine.

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FICTION

Hannah Grace Greer

THE CANDLE

The thick bars stood from ceiling to floor in the cell. There was no glinting from the metal bars, for they were not made of silver, aluminum, steel, or anything reflective. The bars were a dull black metal that neither rusted nor bent, no matter the force you hit them with. The space was solely darkness—emptiness, like that of a cave, where if one didn't know the space as one who lived there, it was merely an unknown. There were no guards stationed near the cells of the prison. There didn't need to be, for the prisoners maintained their own prisons soon enough after they were placed there.

The door of the cell being opened sounded throughout the cavernous space. It was just the clanging of heavy metal, but in the absence of sound, it sounded more like a sudden bang. A young girl was led into one of the rooms of the prison. "I think this one is empty," the guard said. The girl looked at him, as she walked slowly past the cell's doorway. It wasn't in her plans to attempt escape right now. He looked like mud, like something off. It was as if his muddy eyes, hair, skin, and every single part of him was the same color, monotone in a sense that felt unnatural. Thankfully, he and others like him were only in control of the prison and not any outside government although there were times and places where they held more power.

He pointed towards the far-left corner and said, "Toilet." The only reason she could make him out was the single tall candle he carried, on one of those antique-like holders. It seemed to be made of a cast iron. The girl gazed towards where he pointed but couldn't make out anything. And then he reached out, his palm facing upwards towards her, and said, "Candle. Although you won't have it for very long." He began to laugh, loudly—cruelly—in a way that made her feel unease.

He wiggled his fingers around the candle holder in a way that felt creepy, and she knew if she grabbed it out of his palm, she'd have to touch him. She didn't want to touch him. The girl took a few steps backward, going deeper into the cell, and pointed, "Place it on the floor for me." He did what she asked, although he seemed annoyed. When he shut the cell door, the door of the cell disappeared, merely becoming synonymous with all the other bars that created the cell itself. She grabbed her candle off the ground, and it was then, that he smiled big and wide.

"Bye-bye now. It won't be long until that candle burns out and all of us hear your screams." She watched him walk away, his figure melting into the dark emptiness. She tried not to feel the fear she knew was his intent for her. Once the girl knew he was gone, she began going towards the back of the space. Even with the candle, there weren't many discernable features she could see. The floor was a dark smooth stone like that of a slate and the wall seemed similar. The girl also knew, however, that someone else was in this cell with her. There weren't any noises to alert her of that, but she knew because she had dreamed it.

"Hello? Is anybody there?" she asked, quietly, although she knew her voice resonated loudly. The girl heard a small shifting sound in the corner, and if everything else weren't so silent she would've missed it. She slowly walked towards the noise and saw her. The woman was curled in the corner. Her dress had clearly once been white but was now a dirty brown, with large holes and tearing at the seams and edges. The woman was older too, far older than the girl. The girl wasn't sure how to approach, but she went towards the woman, sat down on the slate close by, and waited. Eventually, the silence would break.

As the girl waited, she watched the candle's flame lengthen and shorten repeatedly. It was the only light in the small space, and she didn't know how long she had stared at it when the woman finally spoke. The woman first shifted, turning her face towards the light, her face casted in horizontal shadow. She squinted at it with barely

opened eyes. The woman's eyes quickly closed from the brightness as she spoke: "The candle ... can you move it? It's hurting my eyes." The girl moved it further away but still close by to where they were.

"The guard ..." the girl began saying in her curiosity and anxiety. "He said once the candle goes out, I'll scream?"

"The candle is your hope manifested in wax and fire. Once it is gone and nothing else is visible, prisoners scream and cry for hours, and then stay silent until they die."

"But you're speaking to me now."

The woman merely turned over, her eyelids still closed, and said in an almost whisper, "My candle burned out some time ago. It might've been months or years."

The girl didn't know how to reply, and the silence extended for at least half an hour. As the girl's eyes grew heavy, she crawled towards the back wall and fell asleep slowly. The guard had brought her in at nighttime when she was already tired. In a place like this, the girl guessed one of the only things to do was sleep on the hard ground, her forearms a makeshift pillow. The girl's body shivered throughout the night as she felt coldness wash over her arms and legs.

The girl awoke to the sound of someone eating something delicately. There weren't any loud sounds of munching, but the sound of a spoon against a bowl was loud enough to wake her out of the light sleep. When the girl opened her eyes, she noticed her candle close by, just as tall as it was before, and that gave her peace. She also noticed a bowl close to her, with a wooden spoon sticking out of it. It looked like porridge, a tan mass of some kind of bland grain.

The girl sat up and grabbed the bowl, cradling it in her palms, and then tasted it. It tasted like the worst porridge, oatmeal, or whatever the girl had ever eaten. It was watery and without any taste at all. The

girl made faces as she ate. She didn't want to eat it really, but she didn't know when her next meal would come, and she was hungry.

The woman noticed the girl's expressions of disgust and her louder eating noises and said quietly, "You get used to it."

"And have you gotten used to it?"

"It's not worth it to focus on things I'll never have or see again."

The two of them had many conversations like that if you could call them conversations. They didn't find comfort in one another like one might think, mostly because when the girl would initiate speaking, it often led to the continuation of silence. The girl learned early on: the woman didn't like answering many questions about herself. So when the silence came or was maintained, or the conversation ended, the girl never took it personally or felt awkward. There was one moment though when the woman did reveal more about herself, breaking out of the pattern of the typical silences.

"How did you end up here?" The girl asked her out of curiosity. She guessed there was about a twenty percent chance the woman would answer, but in complete honesty, she was growing bored from her now-quiet existence. The only thing that stimulated her were her conversations and her thoughts. The girl could already tell she had been in the cell for several days. Although there were no windows, the routine of two small flavorless meals a day gave her some vague sense of time. The only person the girl saw was the woman. Unlike what the girl thought initially, food just appeared and reappeared as if by magic, the girl guessed derived from a kitchen somewhere. The guards didn't come around again.

"My father had just died when they came. I should've known that they were coming ... many of us had been rounded up and sent here. It was worse enough losing the last person in this world that loved me, but to end up here too? It surprises me some days I'm not dead already."

“How do you know no one else loves you?” The girl recognized the woman’s pain, knew it in a familiar sense for the girl’s mother had died in childbirth and her father several years after. The girl also knew though that those who often felt unloved failed to recognize how loved they were. That they failed to recognize that even if everyone left them, God still loved them, whether they believed or not. The girl didn’t expect a response when the woman spoke.

“Look around you.” The woman slashed her hand in the air. “Has anyone come for me?”

“And if anyone would?”

The woman turned away at the girl’s question in disbelief and hopelessness, and their conversation was over.

It was a few days after the conversation when the girl noticed the woman staring at her while she prayed. Normally, the girl prayed when she knew everyone was asleep, when she could never be seen. It felt more private and sacred in that way, but on this day, it was evident the woman woke up from something. The girl ignored her staring and continued her tear-coated whispers. She spoke them so lowly with a quiver in her voice. The girl knew, though, no human would be able to make out what she was saying.

“*God,*

I do not know how long I’ve been here or how much longer I can keep staying. At night, it’s all cold—not once have I dreamed, not once have I slept peacefully. Am I ever going to get out of here? Am I ever going to get through to her or was it all just a mistake? Please ... please fill me with the strength to keep going. Please comfort me in the darkness. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

—In Jesus’s name, I pray, Amen.”

The girl stopped whispering and turned to face the woman. She wasn’t sure if the woman knew what she was doing. The girl didn’t pray like those of old did, on their knees with their hands clasped. That felt

more regimented to her, and to the girl, prayer was more about the heart than anything else. Position of the body, clothing—all those things didn't matter in her personal belief; what truly mattered was if the prayer was honest, even if it wasn't perfect.

The girl had a feeling that the woman would say something, so she waited. As she did, she stared at her candle. The candle had lost some of its height a day ago. Piles of wax now gathered at the base, with threads having dripped down. This was something that made her anxious, but the girl was relieved it was still lit.

“What were you doing?” the woman asked the girl, although the girl had a feeling the woman already knew.

“Praying.”

“Do you do that a lot?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Do you feel something?”

“It eases me, but it's also connection.”

“Connection?”

“Relationship.” The girl was beginning to realize this was the longest conversation she had had so far with the woman. The woman only seemed confused by her answer, so the girl decided to elaborate. “Prayer is a relationship; without it, there's a lack of connection helping to maintain faith.”

“Hmmm.”

“Do you pray?”

“No ... I haven't prayed for a really long time.”

“Why haven’t you?”

“Because ... I don’t think anyone heard me.” The woman turned away for a few moments and then kept speaking. “I didn’t feel anything. I felt nothing.”

“Do you think God’s presence is limited to when we can feel it ... to when we know? Getting chills one day, crying, feeling a comforting presence after?” The woman didn’t seem like she was going to respond so the girl kept going. “There’s a saying—just because we can’t see it or feel it, doesn’t mean it’s not happening.”

Sometimes the silence felt loud. It was hard not to overthink or wonder how words were received. The days passed quickly after that conversation. The candle remained at its weakened height as time wore on. It was hard for the girl to not doubt, but each night she prayed, albeit not the same prayer, and it helped her keep going. When she gave into her anxiety deeply, her hands began to shake, and her breaths beat heavily. One of the only thoughts that eased her was that God would be hearing her prayers. He was with her, even if there were no signs of Him.

The girl wasn’t sure how many days she had been in the prison thus far. She probably should’ve been counting the days on the wall, like she had read in books growing up. Even if she had thought of the idea earlier though, it wouldn’t have mattered. There were no rocks around to make any marks.

It was also hard not to feel lonely. Although the woman was there, they barely spoke. At first, the girl assumed it was because the woman didn’t want to speak about herself, but now she was beginning to think it was because she was used to the silence. If one felt silence for so long, would they even crave the noise anymore?

The girl spent most of her time in thought thinking about what she missed. She missed the people of her town, the ones who waved or left her food when she was sick. She also missed those moments at

night when she would go outside, lie down in the wildflower field, and stare up at the stars. She liked to imagine what shapes she could make with them, how she could find meaning in their figures.

It was when she was deep in thought that the same guard came by. He didn't make loud sounds or anything as he approached, but she felt something watching her, and when she looked over, he was there, behind the bars. The girl was far away enough from the woman, as was her candle, that she doubted he was aware she wasn't alone in the cell.

"What's the holdup?" the guard asked her while he began scrapping his sharp nails on the bars, creating a screeching sound that echoed across the entire prison. "We've all been waiting." The girl had the feeling he was making the sound on purpose, maybe to scare, maybe to annoy. She wasn't sure; either way, she didn't really care. He was out there, and she was in here.

"Well, you're gonna be waiting even longer." As the girl said this, she noticed the woman moving out of the corner of her eye. She hoped he couldn't see her.

The guard seemed annoyed at what she said, maybe even irritated. He continued his screeching. "It won't be much longer ...," he said in a sing-song voice, "until your candle goes out. We know this. You know it too."

The girl waved him away and didn't reply. His bully routine didn't scare her; she had been here long enough. He lurked around the cell for a while. The girl didn't know how long he was there, maybe an hour or two until he finally left. Before he left, he told her: "The last person that was in that cell of yours? I made her doubt, and I'll make you doubt too." The girl ignored his words and noticed her candle was still at the same height when her second meal of the day came.

The woman crept closer to where the girl was, not yet eating, and looked at her, still squinting. The girl could finally make out that the

woman had hazel eyes. The woman asked the girl: “So how did you end up here? You never said.”

The girl was quiet for a few minutes. She wasn’t sure if she should answer, but she also knew if she did, she didn’t want to lie either. “I gave myself up to them—came right up to the gates of the prison. They didn’t capture me from my home.”

The woman was noticeably confused. “Why ... why would you do that?”

“I came for you.”

“For me?” The woman pushed backwards into her corner. “No, no ... Are you delusional?”

The girl knew it wouldn’t make sense to most people, but she knew what she was led to do, what she felt called to do by God. She had been called to do other things before—small things like speaking into specific people’s lives she had dreamed of—but nothing as big as this. The girl crept towards the woman and grabbed one of her hands, she could tell the woman was scared.

“We can get out of here ...,” the girl began saying softly, “if you just have a small seed worth of faith.” The woman pulled her hand away, shook her head no, turned in the other direction, and began shaking. “I saw you in my dreams. I saw your hopeless silences and your unmoving body. I was dreaming of you for months before I came. I came for you, *Bethany*. I couldn’t turn you away. I couldn’t after seeing your pain. God never forgot you, and he sent me to bring you back.” The girl vividly remembered all those nights she woke after seeing Bethany’s hopelessness in her sleep. She remembered first hearing Bethany’s name spoken in her mind and being told to go to her. She even remembered seeing the moment Bethany’s hope shattered when the candle went out, and she endlessly cried.

Bethany finally saw her, fully without squinting, with tears pouring out of her eyes. “Why?”

“God loves all His children. And even if they go away from Him, it doesn’t mean that love ends. The love never fades ... no matter the past, present, or future, and He will make efforts to bring back those that have gone away.” The girl reached out her hand and said, “Bethany, take my hand, come with me, and let’s leave this place.”

Bethany’s eyes were glassy as she hesitantly took the girl’s hand.

“Close your eyes,” the girl said. “We aren’t meant to be here. We aren’t meant to be under perpetual silence and dark.” As the girl was speaking, her candlelight connected to the blinding light now radiating from Bethany’s and the girl’s chests. The lights merged and grew in brightness, illuminating the entire space. Grass and little white flowers grew under their feet. Bethany and the girl opened their eyes to see an expansive vineyard.

Even though the grass had grown beneath their feet, there was still a line between cell and vineyard even though the trellises were in sight. Bethany and the girl slowly stepped over the boundary, and all that remained of the cell disappeared.

The sun looked down upon the rows of green in harmony, making the green leaves glisten with energy. Bethany and the girl walked through the fields and touched the grapes that were hanging, plump with juice. The smell was fragrant, newly moistened soil and the sweet scent of grapevine flowers.

The girl noticed a sourdough loaf and one glass of wine laid out on a cloth-covered barrel. The girl ripped out two large chunks of bread and dipped them into the wine, and they both prayed together. The girl handed one of the pieces to Bethany and said, “Let us remember, that He is the vine, and we are the branches; cut off from Him we can do nothing.” After the two ate the sweet-wine soaked pieces of bread,

they returned home, never to see the prison again. They met back at the vineyard every so often, each one bringing a candle.

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FICTION

Audrey Laine Streb

A FLOWER IN THE THICKET

It is the first time I've been outside in months. The birds squawk and howl as my neighbor runs a freight train over his grass. My lawn, on the other hand, has grown into a matted thicket of weeds, which have been burned into crisp spider legs by the southern sun. I shrug about it all and sip my unsweetened coffee. My grandson doesn't know how I drink it this way. He comes by weekly to do the dishes and judge me.

"Grandma, I still can't believe you put no sugar at *all* in your coffee," he told me, a smirk on his lips.

"I still can't believe you think you're drinking coffee. It's just dessert when it's filled 98 percent with creamer," I snipped. "Besides, it's healthier plain."

"I don't see how drinking something so bitter could possibly be healthy."

The statement took the air out of my lungs. He said it with bright eyes, no double meaning intended. I knew it wasn't an attack on my character, but I still stopped our exchange right there, returning to the book I was pretending to read. That's just what I do now. I stare at the pages, seeing how the words curve, black ink distorting the innocence of the white page.

My mind drifts to the day my flag of faded purple and translucent stars was last lowered to half-mast. My husband had just put it down in honor of 9/11.

“Don’t put it back up, Harold.” I had whispered the next morning, “A horror happens every day.” He had frowned, but obeyed, nonetheless. I think that was the first and last time he did. He died that week from an instant heart attack.

I hear the bouncy steps of my grandson on the creaking porch. I peer up to see a red hibiscus being offered to me. Harold’s favorite flower. I could hardly believe that my gruff army man with a propensity toward swearing in church and a hatred of frilly things had a favorite flower. But he’d said it reminded him of our honeymoon in Hawaii.

“Where’d you find that?”

“In your lawn.” He smiles.

“*That* lawn?”

He hums in response. I know he doesn’t know. He doesn’t know that this was Harold’s flower, and that is the lawn where things go to die, not where hibiscus breed. My vision goes even cloudier than it is normally as I thank him. My chest fills with a foreign feeling of weightlessness and light as I realize that I am truly thankful. A horror may happen every day, but a flower also grows. If this thing of beauty could come from rot, then maybe the stain of ink on a page could be beautiful, and maybe I could be whole again.

That evening the lawn is still overgrown and my coffee is still bitter, but the flag that was once half-mast now waves again.

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FICTION

Morgan Want

THE HEALING OF THE BLEEDING WOMAN

The worst part was the smell. Of course, the pain was bad as well, but the smell was how people could tell I was unclean. My illness started when I was fourteen, one year after my first blood flow. There might have been signs it was coming—my monthly flows were always unpredictable—but my condition truly announced itself while I was helping my imma and sisters prepare dinner one night.

I felt a trickle down my thighs, and immediately took my hands off the bread I'd been preparing, and stepped back.

“Danita?” one of my sisters said. “Are you well?”

Imma turned to look at me, then noticed the small but growing red stain on my robe. She glanced at the bread, and sighed. According to the law, I would be unclean for at least seven days, while my blood flow lasted. The bread would have to be thrown out, and there was no time to replace it before Abba came home.

“I’m sorry, Imma,” I muttered. “I’ll get rid of it.”

“Do it quickly,” Imma said. “Then change out of that robe and find someplace to sit, out of the way.”

I obeyed, settling on a straw mat on the other side of the room. Anything I sat or lay on during my flow would become unclean as well, so I had to be mindful during that time. Anyone who sat or lay where I had would be made unclean until evening.

When Abba came home that evening and saw me sitting alone in the corner, he smiled and brought over a plate of raisin cakes.

“There will be a pair of turtle doves waiting for you when you’re done,” he said, before joining Imma and my sisters at the table.

If my blood flow lasted longer than a week, as it often seemed to, I would have to buy either two pigeons or two turtle doves to sacrifice another seven days after its end. I would not be permitted to attend synagogue or enter Adonai’s presence until then.

Two weeks passed, and my blood flow continued. I ruined two more robes and a set of linens that had to be replaced, and I had such severe cramps it felt as if my entrails were being ground on a mortar stone.

Imma gave me a musty smelling bag of perfume.

“I’m sure your blood flow will end soon,” she told me. “Longer flows are sometimes common in girls your age, but for now, I thought you could wear this on a cord around your neck to ... well ... hide the smell.”

I tried not to wrinkle my nose. “Thank you, Imma.”

She nodded. There was a crease between her brows that seemed to get deeper the longer I bled.

I started hearing her and Abba whispering together at night when they thought I was asleep. I lay on the pallet Imma made me—in a separate room from my sisters, of course—straining to hear what they were saying, but I could only make out my name, nothing more. The last time I heard my parents whispering like that was before my oldest sister’s betrothal, but I doubted they were discussing potential marriage arrangements for me.

When I received my first blood flow, the year prior, Imma told me that I had become a woman, fit to marry and bear children. But no man could lie with his wife during her monthly time without

becoming unclean himself, and I certainly couldn't bear children in my current state.

I finally learned what my parents were actually talking about a few weeks later when I continued to bleed. Abba took me aside one morning before he left for synagogue. It was the first conversation we'd had alone in over a month.

"Now, tell me the truth, Danita," he said. "Have you committed some sin you're afraid to tell your imma and me about? I swear to you, we will not be angry if you have, but we must know if we are to help you."

"No, Abba," I said.

A similar thought had already occurred to me. Surely I'd done something to greatly displease Adonai for Him to cast me out of His presence for so long, but I could not think what. And He wouldn't tell me Himself, no matter how much I prayed.

"Well, I'll make a sin offering on your behalf," Abba said. "Just in case."

He reached out to pat my hand but stopped himself.

Abba's offering must not have worked, because I bled through another month. Then Imma took me to my physician appointment.

The physician was young, with sparkling dark eyes and curly brown hair. A friend of the family had recommended him, saying he'd been educated in the Greek's medicine, like many of the best physicians. I found him quite pleasing—handsome, even—until he started asking me questions about my blood flow. When did it begin? How heavy was it? What was the pain like? I stammered through each one and wished Adonai would command the earth to open up and swallow me. Meanwhile, Imma's eyes slowly slid down to look at the floor. Not even Abba knew such personal details.

“Danita,” he said, once the examination was finally over. “I believe I know what’s happened to you. You see, a woman’s temperament—her body’s natural state—should be cool and moist, but yours has somehow grown too wet. What we must do is remove the excess moisture.”

I envisioned wringing out a soaked sponge.

“Spend as much time as you can sunbathing. Try to eat only thin, warm food, such as broth and gruel, and if you see no improvement within a week’s time, return to me for bloodletting.”

I wasn’t sure how making me bleed more was supposed to help me, but I returned to him the next week, just as he said, sunburnt and starved for solid food. I was so weakened after the bloodletting that Imma had to support me on the walk home. I couldn’t remember the last time she’d touched me—that anyone had touched me gently—and I resisted the urge to rest my head on her shoulder as she half-carried me through the streets.

The next physician she took me to was an older man, with gray streaks in his beard, and he was horrified to learn that I’d been bled. He said such treatment went against all medical wisdom.

“It is very lucky that you’ve come to me now,” he said. “Another bloodletting could have drained the life out of you.”

He did like my last physician’s idea of sunbathing and eating warm food though, and advised me to continue doing both. For his treatment, I was to lie as still as possible in a cool dark room with my feet elevated and my arms and legs bound tight to my sides, “to compress the blood flow,” while Imma and my sisters laid sea sponges soaked in vinegar on my face and limbs.

We did as he ordered, and I could barely feel my arms or legs after a few hours. Imma helped me stand once we were done, and the first

thing we saw, once I was up, was a dark red stain on the back of my robe.

“To think there will be no dinner tonight because we’ve made ourselves unclean for nothing,” Imma mumbled.

I wasn’t sure if she knew I could hear her or not.

I saw several more physicians over the next few years. Some prescribed potions made from herbs and grains. One tasted as though it contained tree dust, which, I later learned, was because it did. Nothing helped though. There were some times when I thought my flow even increased after their treatments.

Imma stopped going with me to my visits, after a point. It was impossible to keep my illness a secret from the neighbors, and I think it embarrassed her, walking through their whispers and stares every few weeks.

Some of the neighborhood children began a game where they’d walk in my footsteps and see who could get the closest to me without touching me. Most of the time, I pretended I didn’t notice them, but there was one day when I heard a boy snickering just behind my shoulder.

I turned around and slapped him across the mouth, as hard as I could. For a moment we just stood there, him staring at me and me staring at my hand; then he screamed. From the sound of it, you would have thought I’d tried to gouge out his eye. Another boy a few years older than him—his brother, I assumed—ran out of his house, saw us together, and turned crimson. He ran up to me and struck me full in the face. I hit the ground before I even felt the pain. Or the fresh blood trickling down my chin.

“You are a wicked, sinful woman!” he screamed, standing over me. “You should not even be allowed to live among us, spreading your filth!”

No one stepped forward to argue with him.

Shortly after this incident, my parents used part of my dowry to buy a separate house for me. I couldn't resent them for it; it was difficult, living in the same house as someone who could spread her impurity to you with one careless touch, or by sitting on the wrong chair or cushion. Besides, I knew my dowry would never be good for anything else.

My new house was small, but it was on the outskirts of town, away from many people. If I stood at one of the windows though, I could see travelers coming in and out of town. My sisters came by to visit me sometimes too, of course, and they usually brought their children, for they were all married by then. They'd stand outside my doorstep, holding their children as they tried to wriggle out of their arms. I wondered what it would be like to get to hold them too, or better yet, to hold a child of my own. To feel life grow inside of me, instead of the pain of sickness.

Sometimes I'd hear doves or pigeons cooing in the trees in my yard and think about the birds at the altar, whose blood could make me clean. I had stopped speaking to Adonai.

Abba died a few years after I moved out of his house. Imma came to me after with the rest of my dowry, and the little inheritance he could afford to give me.

"I'm sorry I can't give you more," Imma said. "But, well, the physician appointments are expensive enough, and with the added cost of your house—"

"It's alright, Imma," I said. "I understand."

And I did understand. She was buying her way out of my life, out of my problems. I clutched the little purse she gave me, as a beggar clutched a loaf of bread.

I increased my appointments after that until they were almost every other day. I no longer believed any physician could heal me, and kept seeing them more from habit by then, so I could still feel like I was doing something to help myself. Besides, I rarely had anything else to see or do.

When both my dowry and inheritance started to run low, I took to begging outside my house. I began to take more notice of the people who came in and out of the town, catching snippets of their conversations. It was almost like having visitors. That was how I started to hear stories about a man from Nazareth. A holy man, apparently. Someone, people said, who could be the Messiah.

At first, I barely paid attention to these rumors. Many men had claimed to be the Messiah before, and they always turned out to be no holier than I was. But then the stories became strange. It was said he commanded a crippled man to stand up and walk and drove a legion of demons out of another, with only a few words. That he had the power to forgive sins. That he was on his way towards my town.

I found myself thinking that if he could command these other ailments to leave people, how difficult would it be for him to order my illness away? It was silly. I had no proof any of the stories about him were true. Trusting in rumors I never would have listened to in normal circumstances was foolish. But I had nothing left to try.

Since this man—Jesus was his name—was a traveler, I assumed he and his followers would have to come through the town's market for supplies during his visit. Perhaps I could run into him there. I spent whole days sitting in corners and under stairways, where I could watch for him without being seen.

“Yahweh,” I prayed, using Adonai’s sacred name. “Please let me find him. Please, have mercy on me, and let me have this chance to be healed.”

It felt awkward to pray again, after not doing it for so long, like trying to converse with a friend I hadn’t seen in years, but I was too afraid of missing Jesus not to try to ask Adonai for help. I realized how purposeless I’d been the last twelve years, going to physicians and trying new treatments I knew wouldn’t help me. I’d been as listless as a leaf that falls in a stream, flaking to pieces as it floats from one current to the next, still believing the next one might push it towards the shore. But rising each day, taking my vigil, and watching for Jesus and his followers, wasn’t just something to do to pass the time.

I began to think of my healing as less of a possibility and more of a matter of time. Perhaps this was what hope felt like? No, not hope. Assurance.

On the day he finally came, I would have known Jesus even if I hadn’t spent weeks watching for him. Not so much because of his appearance; actually, he wasn’t really much to look at. His robes were dingy and faded from travel, and his beard needed trimming. It wasn’t at all how I pictured the Messiah, but I knew him because of the large crowd that was gathered around him.

So many people surrounded him and were focused on him that, for the first time in years, no one stared at me or tried to avoid me.

I jumped up from the corner I sat in and began to yell as loud as I could: “Jesus! Stop, please! I need to speak to you! Wait!”

But the crowd swallowed my voice. He didn’t so much as turn to look at me. I wouldn’t be able to elbow my way towards him with so many people around; as it was, I could barely see the top of his head.

“What if,” I thought, “he did hear me, but he doesn’t want to acknowledge me because of my uncleanness, like everybody else.”

The thought made my stomach churn.

I couldn't miss my opportunity to be healed. I couldn't. But perhaps Jesus didn't need to see or speak to me at all to hear me. If he truly were a holy man, like people said, just touching him would be enough to heal me, even if it were only the edge of his garments.

I couldn't push through the crowd standing up, but if I got down on my hands and knees, I could crawl through it. The crowd was so thick that nobody reacted as I crawled over people's feet and weaved between their legs—for all they knew, the person next to them could have just stepped on their foot—but I did have to be careful not to trip anyone.

Someone stepped on my right hand, and I cried out as I felt my fingers pop. Pain sliced through my hand and down my wrist. I pulled my hand back and looked at it; my fingers were red and bent at an odd angle. My stomach lurched. I couldn't stop moving though; Jesus was still walking away.

I balled my hand into a fist and tried not to look down at it and kept my weight on my elbow. I hadn't lost sight of Jesus. I could see the edge of his robe swaying as he walked. My fingers still throbbed, and I kept losing my balance and falling. I dragged myself forward and reached for his garment. I was nearly there.

My arm strained as I stretched it as far as I could. I only had to reach a little further. Someone nearly kicked me in the head, but I ducked just in time. It was almost over. Just a little further, and my suffering would be over.

My fingertips brushed the edge of his robe, and a little puff of dust went up.

I collapsed, but not from pain. Actually, I didn't feel any pain, not in my arm, and not in my abdomen. I looked down at my hand and flexed my fingers. They were straight and pale.

Something inside me felt different too, although I could not say what. It was as if another part of me that was crooked had suddenly been straightened out again. Swallowing, I reached down under my robe and felt my thighs. They were dry.

“Who has touched me?”

I suddenly realized that the crowd had gone still because Jesus had stopped moving.

“Who has touched me?”

It was he who asked the question. Fear clawed at my chest now, but he couldn't have known that I had touched his garment.

A second, rougher voice said, “Master, you see the crowd pressing all around you. How can you ask, ‘Who has touched me?’”

“Someone has touched me.”

The certainty in his voice made me tremble. He did know, and why not? He truly was all that people claimed, a holy man. The Messiah. If he could heal someone without speaking to them, he could know who and where I was. He was giving me a chance to come forward.

“I did, Lord,” I squeaked.

My legs shook too hard for me to stand, and I fell down in front of him.

“Forgive me,” I begged. “For the past twelve years, I’ve been ill, and always bleeding. I heard of all the people you healed, and hoped you might heal me ...”

He would be unclean until evening, because of me. How many other people could he have healed or ministered to in that time? I hadn't even considered it.

What would he say to me? Would he yell at me? Hit me, like the boy in the street, all those years ago? I squeezed my eyes shut and waited for the blow.

A hand touched mine, and I opened my eyes. He had knelt and was clasping both my hands. I stared at them. The feeling was warmer than I remembered. His hands were gentle but rough. Calloused.

He smiled at me, the way a host at a banquet would smile for a long-awaited guest. It was as if he were glad to see me, even though we'd never met.

“Daughter,” he said.

My breath hitched. When was the last time anyone called me their daughter?

“Your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

Warmth spread through me, as he helped me to my feet. For the first time in twelve years, I truly did feel at peace.

Morgan Want is a former journalist whose microfiction has previously been published by *Vine Leaves Press*. She is currently at work on her debut novel. Her short fiction, writing progress, and devotionals can be seen on her Instagram page [@wantmorgan](https://www.instagram.com/wantmorgan).

FICTION

Tom Funk

UNHOLY GHOST

Why do they call this stuff discovery? Litigation, the law pros said, is about the search for truth. OK, so—truth? This crap’s a waste of time. I read a three-paragraph police report, pick out the names of the witnesses, and relist them under “Potential Witnesses the State May Call to Testify.” Any high schooler could have told you that without this form, but the rules say we gotta list them. So we do.

Then I scribble “None, investigation continues” in the answer box to the other four questions. Truth be told, there wasn’t much investigation to begin with and there sure ain’t gonna be any continuing. But this is the search for truth, so we lie about continuing to look for it. That just covers our backside in the event we forget to put somebody’s name down.

Answering overdue discovery was not my favorite way to spend a Friday night. I owed Sinkler a favor, he covered my call when I had the “flu,” so here I sat.

It wasn’t really Friday night. It was ten after four, and in this joint they don’t lock the doors ’til 4:30. Everybody else had already headed out. It was just me, Mary Alice Snickton, the world’s most compliant legal assistant, and this stack of forty-five case files teetering on the brink of falling into my lap. Why we haven’t gone to e-filing is a question some stiff in accounting will have to explain to St. Peter. Meanwhile, I lived in fear of an early burial under paperwork.

It was then that Mary Alice announced a “defendant” was in the lobby. Most of the time I would have told Mary Alice to have her hit the bricks, but weighing the thought of plowing through forty-four more

discovery forms against listening to the pleas from one more miscreant, I let curiosity get the best of me.

When she rounded the metal bookcase separating me from Mary Alice, I could tell this would be interesting. The woman was thin and short. I thought she was tiptoeing 'til I looked down and saw how high her heels were. She stared so wide-eyed you would have thought she'd seen a ghost, which it turns out, wasn't too far from what I was about to hear. Her smile was broad and exposed a mouth full of crooked yellow teeth, but there was no self-consciousness about her for that or anything else. She greeted me like I was her long-lost friend from high school. It was obvious high school had been a long time ago. She sat her gold sequined purse down and threw back her curly, over-gelled hair. She sat and crossed her bone-thin legs. I noted the silver sequins on her heels clashed with the gold of the purse.

She leaned forward and placed one set of press-on nails to her chest. "I'm Barbara Jean Thornwhistle, hun, pleased to meet you. So sorry it's under these circumstances. All my friends call me Babs, but you don't have to ... What's your name, honey?"

I tried to gather my wits and recover from the glare glinting off the sequins on her purse catching the sunlight that was beaming in from my office window.

"Ah, well, it's Farmington ... Ben Farmington. Assistant State's Attorney for Gillett County."

She tossed her head back again, trying to move the saturated bangs off her forehead, but they remained plastered there.

"Your lovely assistant says you're the prosecutor against me. Is that true, dear?" she inquired gap-mouthed.

I flipped open the file before me and glanced over the charges. "Yes, you've got one count of shoplifting a loaf of bread from the Piggly-Wiggly over on McBride. What can I do for you?" I continued, hoping

she noticed the teetering pile of discovery files and would get to the point.

“I know this looks terrible, hun. I never thought I’d find myself sitting across from a prosecutor’s desk having to explain myself. I do hope you’ll indulge me. I’ve come to believe that this terrible situation in which I find myself is not of my own doing.”

Before I could answer she had bent her reddened face towards the purse and dug into the bag, retrieving a wad of tissue that looked previously used but was called into service again to staunch the flow of tears that had erupted.

I breathed a sigh of resignation. My plans of getting out anytime soon had just disappeared. “Go ahead,” I mumbled.

“I don’t know if you recognize the name *Thornwhistle*, but until recently I was married to the Reverend Phillip Johnny Bob Thornwhistle, pastor of the Gillett Holy Ghost Revival Center and host of the *Revive Us Again* program on AngelAirwave.com?” She raised her oversized eyebrows in expectation.

“Uh ... not sure I’ve seen that one,” I mumbled.

She batted her eyes and shook her head in disappointment. “Well, that’s OK. It’s not on TV anymore because Phil, who I call the Reverend, fell into sin with his secretary and let the Devil convince him it was OK to empty out the ministry bank account and take her on a mission trip to Cancun!”

She paused, staring wide-eyed, letting her mouth drop open again, apparently waiting for a response. I was determined not to give one, thinking that would only delay the end of this. Instead, I stared stone-faced straight ahead, keeping my prosecutorial objectivity intact, and waited for her to continue.

“The ministry Board of Directors, being the good men of God that they are, took control of all the accounts, and suspended Phil’s access.

“Unfortunately, it cut off the only access I had to any income. The Reverend and I had agreed it would be best for me to stay home and raise our girls, and since his first book released, it was the Lord’s will that I didn’t have to work outside of our home. That seemed like such a blessing to our girls having their momma there 24/7 and all. When Philista, our youngest, went off to college there wasn’t any reason for me to go back into the marketplace, the books having sold so well and the Lord blessing us so greatly with the TV ministry and all. Phil said, ‘just keep staying home and doing your charity work,’ which I’ve been involved with down in Mexico. Little did I know he was taking Stevie Dawn Phelps down there. That’s his secretary, you know.”

She paused, waiting for me to recover from the presumed overwhelming shock. But the only thing overwhelming me was the feeling that I’d be trapped here with that mountainous stack of discovery ’til the clock struck midnight.

“Sorry about your marital issues, but what’s that got to do with these charges?” I flatly stated.

“Well, dear, my point is Phil left me high and dry. I mean I had the Lord to lean on, and He never left my side, praise be, but I had nothing to live on. I hadn’t worked for years and what I knew was ministry. But half of our supporters thought I musta been in on the scam and weren’t gonna give a dime to any church that I was a part of. So I didn’t really have a place to go.”

She paused and stared at me, fishing for something to help gauge how much sympathy had been generated by her tale, but I wasn’t about to loosen the stoic freeze frame I had locked my face in to. It was my best bet of ending this as early as possible.

With a slight sigh, she continued. “I had thoughts of applying for a secretarial position, seein’s how I’d done that back in the day before

I met Phillip. But then it occurred to me that it would make it impossible for me to get down to Mexico when it was time for our semi-annual charity visits. That's where my heart was. So I just kept up my contacts with those good folks down there and used up the savings that Phil hadn't pilfered outta our bank account. It wasn't long before that dried up.

"I didn't want to go beggin' to the government, but what could I do? But I still couldn't make ends meet. It's not easy to go from havin' six figures available to living on the government minimum.

"Well, long story short, there was too much month and not enough check for Babs! ... Know what I mean? Hun, when you're used to Hello Fresh or the local Chinese place delivering your meals daily, it just ain't easy to get used to having to scan the weekly shopper for coupons!

"Anyways, when I got back from my trip to help the little orphans down in Cancun, I found I was way short. August's got thirty-one days. I hadn't eaten for the last four of them. I just decided I had to go to the store. That's when ole Satan gotta hold of me. There's a reason he's the "father of lies," 'cause he told me a whopper! Had me convinced that if I'd just name the meal of my choice, the Lord was gonna provide one of His saints to buy me a bag of groceries! So I threw on my Crocs, grabbed my purse, and fired up the Corolla, and even though the tank was about past the big E, I made the parking lot, thinking I should take it as a sign of the Lord's blessing.

"I ain't one to get too greedy, so I told the Lord I'd settle for a ham 'n' cheese. You can look at that video they got of me, and all you're gonna see is a three-dollar package of Oscar Mayer sliced ham and a small package of Kraft American cheese. I had a five-dollar bill put back for emergencies, and I figured I could get the ham 'n' cheese with that, and the Lord's people would provide bread and maybe some mayo.

“But, hunny, there are twenty-four aisles in that store, and I went through every last one of them, praying and shouting inside my head that the next corner I turned was gonna reveal an elder or a deacon waiting with a big smile and a twenty. Turned out it was all a lie straight from the pit! The Lord had not given me a word! I was led by that growl in the pit of my bowels to think He was gonna provide, but all he provided was disappointment, and more stomach acid than I could handle.

“I had a vision of that ham ’n’ cheese on a piece of pumpernickel. I could taste it as I wheeled the cart past the bakery, smelling all that fresh baked dough, the fancy high-end breads, as I kept my eye straight on the discount bin. Surely, I thought, there would be somebody offering to lend me even a dollar or two to take home some stale, half-squashed white bread. But no! The Deceiver worked it so I was alone in the aisle, just me and all that Sunbeam.

“Well, I fought the urge hard, but ole Scratch was bound to make me do his bidding. He put a powerful notion in me that I could fit one of them smaller loaves inside this purse,” she said, quickly grabbing the sequined handbag and shaking it towards me.

“I shouted ‘No! Get thee behind me!’ And I turned to walk away from that discount bin, when suddenly I felt this dark wave of blackness overtake me. My mind went blank, and my vision got so cloudy everything was just a blur. I felt icy hands lift me from the floor and next thing I know’d I was floating over to the bin! He didn’t set me down gentle neither; he throwed me smack up against that bin. I had to grab the side to keep from falling into it. My hand landed right on a loaf of \$1.49 Sunbeam, and next thing I knew I stuffed it into my bag.

“I barely got my bag zipped when I looked up and seen that youngster with the pimply face and apron look at me with his jaw dropped open. The next thing I knew he was runnin’ off to get his manager, and she wasn’t even polite about making me open up my bag. There it sat—

one loaf of Sunbeam right next to my extra set a nails and my little pocket New Testament.”

Hoping I could bring this melodrama towards its conclusion, I sat up suddenly and interrupted. “So you admit you took the bread?” I blurted before she could get another word in.

“Oh, hunny,” she continued, her plaintive eyes staring into mine, “I ain’t gonna lie about it. It was my hand that stuffed that loaf in my bag. But Ben, what you gotta see is that it wasn’t my idea to take it! It was that ole demon that was guidin’ my hand! I was so weak from hunger I couldn’t resist him. If I’d a had an ounce of strength in my bones, hun, you gotta know I’d a fought him off. But I was just so weak, and that ham ’n’ cheese was gonna taste so good, and he was so bound and determined to get me to sin he lifted me up and threw me inta that bin!”

The tears were coming fast and furious, and she put that overused Kleenex back to work. I sat back in my chair and tried my best to keep the smirk off my face. As she gathered her composure, I composed a response I thought was neutral enough not to offend and yet got my rather obvious point across.

“Ms. Thornwhistle, what forces beyond this world might have been working on you when you put that loaf of bread in your purse is nothing I can really give any consideration to. In my job, I have to consider what your part in this situation was, and in terms of the human involvement in this situation, I think you just told me that you were the only human involved in the theft of the Sunbeam. Is that a fair assessment?”

She wiped what was left of her eyeliner from below her eyes and gathered up the Kleenex for one colossal blow. “I guess you’re tellin’ me that the fact that Satan overpowered me and made me take that loaf ain’t gonna make any difference? I grabbed it, so I’m guilty? Is that it?”

“I’m afraid so, ma’am,” I mumbled.

“Well, guess I shoulda expected that No offense, but y’all just don’t know the power of Satan.” She shook her head and grimaced as she stood. “Thank you kindly for your time, Mr. Farmington I just hope you never have to struggle with the Prince of Darkness the way I have.”

“I sure hope not, ma’am,” I responded. She nodded and kept walking past my cubicle.

After she disappeared, I had thoughts of telling Mary Alice what I’d just heard. After all, it’s not every day you hear “the devil made me do it” as a defense.

Instead, I resolved to get back to the stack of discovery files hovering on the verge of collapse on the edge of my desk. But after filling out two forms, I found myself still lost in the story I’d just heard. Opening the Thornwhistle file, I found a flash drive sitting in a plastic sandwich bag. It was marked “Piggly-Wiggly in-store video.”

Why not? I asked myself. Might as well take a look. I popped the flash drive into my PC tower and waited for the video to start.

I was treated to a grainy screen full of horizontal lines that suddenly morphed into a shot of an aisle in a grocery store, soundless but clear enough that I could see a bin with the Sunbeam logo at the end of it. As I watched, a woman in a pink sundress with a gold sequined handbag and Crocs pushed a near-empty cart. It was obviously Ms. Thornwhistle. She appeared to be talking to herself.

Then, suddenly she bent over, hands on the cart, the back of her head bowing toward the ground. I thought I saw her legs begin to quiver. It was then that the horizontal lines began to reemerge and shoot across the middle of the screen, blocking my view of Ms. Thornwhistle, save for her legs from the knee down and her feet. I slid my hand across to my mouse and tried to adjust the screen.

As I did, it looked like Ms. Thornwhistle's legs and feet suddenly just disappeared, and the screen went so bright I could see nothing but a grainy yellowness, sort of like what you see happen in those old atomic explosion films. Then the flash of grainy yellow slowly disappeared and the horizontal lines were left, blocking the view of most of the screen.

I blinked from the brightness of the flash, and when I readjusted my eyes, the horizontal lines faded and left me with a clear view of the aisle again. Now Ms. Thornwhistle was flush against the Sunbeam bin, bent over the side of it like she'd tried to jump in. As she pushed off from the bin, she stood up and stuffed a small loaf of bread in her handbag.

I sat mouth agape from what I had seen.

My ears picked up the click of Mary Alice's heels. She smiled as she poked her head around the corner. "See you Monday, Ben, I'm going home," she said.

"Just a sec!" I nervously blurted, pulling the flash drive from its port and stuffing it back in the bag. "I'll walk you out."

"I thought you had a bunch of discovery to get out. Did you get all that done?" she queried.

"Nah," I replied, "I need to get outta here. It'll wait."

Tom Funk is a retired judge, having served in the state court of Illinois. He presently practices law on a part-time basis as a pro bono volunteer attorney for a legal aid organization. He has been published in *Spitball*, *Altarwork*, *Cowboy Jamboree*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, and *Mystery Tribune*.

FICTION

James A. Tweedie

MARTY

I was fly fishing high mountain streams and lakes on the east side of the Sierra Nevada.

When I'm camping, I get lonely because there's not much to do by myself when it gets dark. So if there's a café or bar nearby, I'll usually spend a few hours nursing a beer and shooting the bull with whoever's willing to talk.

This particular night I headed over to an old way station called Dick's Place. The bar was dimly lit and nearly empty, but even that was going to be better than staring at the inside of a tent for four hours waiting to fall asleep.

Other than the bartender, the only other person in the place was a young man with a few wispy strands of whiskers on his chin and a tangled snarl of blonde hair frizzing down the back of his head. His long-sleeved wool shirt seemed a bit much given that the outside temperature had been in the mid-eighties all afternoon.

Since I was looking for a conversation, I took a chance and sat down on the stool next to his.

"Hey," I said.

He did not acknowledge the greeting.

Whatever, I thought to myself as I ordered a draft.

For a moment, the man buried his face into his arms.

When he raised his head, he looked at me with two sad eyes and said, “Hey.”

“What are you doing out here?” I asked, hoping he’d open up and have something interesting to share.

“I’m stringing high-power electric lines across Nevada,” he said. “Or I was ...”

He paused as if trying to decide whether to go on or not.

“My partner touched a hot wire three days ago,” he said with his ice-blue eyes fixed on mine. “He was three feet away from me, and he just shriveled up like an old dried-up banana peel and hung there, swaying in the breeze with his safety harness still clipped to the tower.”

Sometimes people need to talk things out, so I gave a nod to let him know that if he wanted to keep talking, I was willing to listen.

“So,” he added, “I’m on paid leave until the power company sends me a new partner.”

“Can I buy you a beer?” I asked, noticing his glass was empty.

Instead of giving an answer, his face brightened with the hint of a smile.

“Have you ever spent an entire night lying on your back watching the stars drift across the sky?” he asked.

“No,” I answered honestly. “I’ve never done that.”

“Let’s do it,” he said. “Let’s do it for Marty.”

So we did. We spent the night silently watching the stars until the dawn hid them from our eyes.

“Thank you,” was all he said, as he rose to his feet and walked away.

I had never thought of the night sky as being alive until that night.
And ever since, whenever I look up at the stars, I remember Marty.

James A. Tweedie has lived in California, Utah, Scotland, Australia, Hawaii, and (presently) Long Beach, Washington. He has published six novels, four collections of poetry, and one collection of short stories with Dunecrest Press. His award-winning stories and poetry have appeared nationally and internationally in both online and print media.

FICTION

Emily Babbitt

BREAD OF HEAVEN

For the first time in three years, Mar's loafers clicked up the stone steps of St. Paul's Episcopal Church alone.

The wrought-iron door thundered shut as she stepped into the narthex and grabbed a liturgy booklet with a shaking hand. Taking a deep breath, she crept into the sanctuary and took a seat in one of the stiff wooden pews about halfway down the aisle.

Candles crackled from the altar painted Caribbean blue and decorated with gold stars. The thick, honeyed aroma of beeswax filled the room, and she fixed her gaze on the flames dancing on either side of the wooden communion table. Blinking a few times, she cleared the tears forming in her stormy gray eyes.

Inhale for four seconds. Hold for four. Exhale for four. Hold for four. Inhale ... She clasped her hands and focused on her breath. Her wedding ring slid freely between her knuckles, and she clenched her hands tighter so it wouldn't tumble to the floor and roll beneath one of the pews.

Two months. It had been two months since she'd come to church, and she wasn't ready for a Sunday morning quite yet. An evening prayer service was the most she could handle—there were fewer people, it was quieter, and there was no singing.

She couldn't sing. Not yet. Struggling through the liturgy would be challenging enough.

A black-cloaked harpist sat to the left of the altar, her instrument leaned against her shoulder, ready to play. She raised her hands to the

strings and brushed her fingers through them, filling the auditorium with a silken melody.

Mar sat back in the pew, pressing her spine against the sturdy wood. Her brow softened as the music washed over her. Footsteps echoed up the aisle, and she cracked an eye to find an older woman in an oversized coat shuffling into a pew to her right. There were fewer than a dozen parishioners in the sanctuary capable of holding at least a couple hundred. Every whisper, cough, and movement echoed through the cavernous, wood-ceilinged hall and grated against her ears like an emery board. She'd come to find silence. Peace. Not to hear Ms. Fletcher rooting through her handbag for a peppermint, unwrapping the candy, and tonguing the mint in her saggy cheek.

Mar squeezed her hands a little tighter, her knuckles whitening.

Silence. She needed silence for prayer. For contemplation.

Things should have been quiet over the past two months, but it felt like everyone in her life was determined to keep her away from herself. Unexpected visits from Mom and her in-laws, evening phone calls from her college friends, and voicemails ... so many goddamn voicemails ... She turned off her phone one night, just for a break, but Mom showed up on her porch less than two hours later, pounding on the door with both fists and screaming her name.

They didn't want her to be alone, but their coddling was a constant reminder that Landon was dead. That she was a widow.

A bell tolled. Mar stood along with the other parishioners dotted throughout the pews. She opened the liturgy booklet and followed along, her mouth whispering the words. Her heart begging for mercy.

They'd only been married for seven months when he passed. Soon, she'd be a widow longer than she'd been a wife.

Her stomach twisted as she lowered the kneeler and positioned herself on the padded rail. Two months ago, Landon had kneeled next to her, his muscular arm brushing against hers and sending bursts of heat down her spine.

Her heart ached from the memory. Ached from the emptiness in the pew. In her home. In her bed. She sucked a breath and squeezed her eyes shut as Father Steven read the first Scripture from his seat at the altar.

“Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums,” Father Steven declared in his clear, crisp voice. “A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’” The final words of Scripture echoed through the sanctuary and faded to silence. Ms. Fletcher’s peppermint squelched against her cheek, standing Mar’s arm hairs on end.

Everything Mar had was ripped away the day Landon passed. Her family and friends had been dragging her along, keeping her on life support as she mourned. She didn’t have anything left to give, not emotionally anyway. Did this make her worse than the rich who contributed out of their abundance?

Her knees shook as they stood in preparation for the Eucharist. Mother Kathryn prayed with her withered face turned to the arched ceiling, asking God to ready their hearts and thanking him for Christ’s sacrifice. They shared the Lord’s Prayer together, the words rolling off Mar’s tongue from memory as they had the past twenty years.

A tear dripped down her cheek when Father Steven broke the bread. The snap of the hardtack rippled through the auditorium. The priest stretched his arms toward the congregants, welcoming them to the

communion table as he began reciting the invitation—a call to those with great faith and those with misgivings. A call to everyone who desired the Lord, regardless of their good deeds or transgressions. Mar had heard it hundreds of times, but she'd never been the person with little faith, the person who had failed. He ended with a promise—anyone who desired the Lord would meet Him when they took the bread and the wine. The body and blood of Christ.

She stepped out of the pew and approached the altar, her heart hammering. The usual warmth of her husband in her shadow was absent, leaving her back cold and exposed, but she pressed forward, leaning into the words of the invitation. Believing she would meet the Lord at the communion table and experience the peace she'd been clawing for since Landon's death.

She stepped up to Father Steven with her hands outstretched, and he placed the wafer in her palms, no larger than the copper coins the widow had put into the treasury. “The body of Christ. The bread of heaven.” He offered her a soft smile, blue eyes glistening.

“Amen.” She placed it on her tongue.

Mother Kathryn held the wine, the sleeves of her vestment draped like crisp, white wings. “The blood of Christ. The cup of salvation.”

Mar gripped the base of the silver chalice and brought it to her lips to take a sip and dissolve the bread.

She didn't have anything to give, but she'd shown up. She set aside her grief long enough to come to church, and that had to be worth something.

She returned to her pew, mouth watering from the tartness of the grapes, but her stomach was warm. Full. Satisfied for the first time in weeks.

Emily Babbitt is a Central Virginia author and copywriter who muses over family, spirituality, and belonging. Her work has been published in literary journals, including *Jimson Weed*, *Calla Press*, and *TeenInk*. When she's not writing, Emily enjoys exploring different faith traditions and spending time with her husband and dog. Learn more about Emily and her work at EmilyBabbitt.com.

NONFICTION

Angela Townsend

FORGET ME NOT

I do not remember elegantly.

When I remember Mari, I think of a sleepover game far more anxious than any Truth or Dare. The stakes were high. Staring at the ceiling under Jem and the Holograms sleeping bags, we determined nothing short of the ownership of America.

I can't fathom how we invented this domestic version of Risk, but one wakeful slumber party after another, we took turns claiming states as our personal possessions. We were eight-year-old colonialists. We were Laura Ingalls Wilder with an acquisitive streak. We were stressed out about the whole thing, but we couldn't stop.

Wisconsin was Mari's because she had cousins there. I let it go easily; the state was a faceless cheese wheel. The peppery squiggle of New Jersey shimmied into my pile, land of my uncle and Bruce Springsteen. The mysterious Midwest was negotiable, an Iowa as good as an Ohio.

But armies massed on Idaho's gooseneck. Why two second-graders in a New York suburb should breathe fire over the land of taters, I shall never know. But we were vexed to own Idaho, willing to trade away jaunty Maine or even coppery Arizona for the state that came with its own long handle.

When I remember Mari, I think of writing, the precocious passion that united and divided us. We would laugh until pretzel salt shot out our noses when coming up with stories. Before our age reached two digits, we had assembled a hundred imaginary companions, dwarves and centaurs and Finnish princesses (Finland was nearly as enchanted as

Idaho). We called them the International House of Baked Beans, a congress of which we were proud and protective. We made up stories on the swing set, bonding and elbowing each other all at once. We made each other better writers and teacup-sized comedians, but that's usually not what I remember.

I remember coming up with a song as my swing shot higher and higher. If my life depended on it, I could not tell you where this came from, but I swear on my last tater tot it was my invention:

Pies, pies, pies by the dozen

Pies, pies, pies in your hair

Pies, pies, pies, you can see them in your sleep

Pies, pies, pies are everywhere!

It had a Vaudeville patter and a finger-licking absurdity, and the entire fifth grade soon sang it across the playground. I remember feeling as proud as if I'd won a Pulitzer.

I remember the day Mari threw pie in my face.

Our paisley-scarved teacher regularly read excerpts of our assignments aloud, no doubt to encourage creativity and spur us on in courage and whimsy. She grinned like a grandmother the day she shared "a memorable gem from our own Mari. It's a delight. This ditty will be in your heads all week!"

She proceeded to sing "Pies."

I felt as though I was choking on every blueberry since Eden. I didn't say anything. I didn't forget.

Three years later, we wrote for Mr. Fulham, a white-capped tower of a man who compared me to Anaïs Nin before I knew what he meant. He was breathless over my eighth-grade prose, presenting me with *Bird by Bird* and *The Elements of Style* at Christmas. I remember my ego expanding at a greater rate than the universe itself. I remember

my father's concern about Mr. Fulham, which made it more intoxicating. The world could keep Idaho. I was going to be a writer.

The Everest of eighth-grade writing was the Budget Project, an exercise in financial prudence wrapped in storytelling. We were each randomly assigned a family structure and income, tasked with staying solvent and adding pizzazz. Spreadsheets and narratives were due just before the class trip to Washington, D.C., a place neither Mari nor I had ever been inclined to claim.

While the hooligan boys snickered over plans to ferry their families in rickshaws so they could afford Corvettes, I gave the Budget Project my breath and blood. My children, Caroline and Noah, would grow up with wonder that laughed at luxury. We would be poor and kind, library volunteers who put every meteor shower on our calendar. We would read the Beatitudes aloud. We would keep our Dodge Neon beyond its expiration date and pick up trash while singing original songs. We would commune with finches and fairies and nursing home residents.

Two days after I handed in my masterwork, Mr. Fulham took my arm in the hallway. "Angela. Today you're in for a treat."

I remember his eyes as blue as the planet. I remember expecting an ultimate affirmation. I remember his wonder that laughed at my ego.

"I'm going to read you all Mari's assignment. It is some of the finest writing I have ever experienced."

I remember thinking his red nose looked like an angry potato. I remember my eyes filling with tears. I remember inventing a hypoglycemic event so I could get out of class that day.

I can't say that this was the turning point, but high school cranked distance between Mari and me. She dropped off her stories somewhere between Iowa and Ohio, closing her word processor

without regret. Hers would be a world of bodies and pre-pre-law, as she bewitched boyfriends and ruled Mock Trial.

I wrote on, gangly and single and married to my PC. I helmed the school newspaper until the faculty advisor coaxed me to “dumb it down; this is the *Weekly Bushman*, not the *Paris Review*.” I quit with panache. I attempted to launch a district-wide literary journal. I forgot the butter of wonder and choked on my mashed ego.

We both made our way. Mari now prosecutes; I write PR for a cat sanctuary. She has New York. I have New Jersey. When Facebook suggests her as my friend, I violently shut my laptop.

I wish this was not what I remember about Mari. I wish time turned my pride as farcical as farfalle, a word that used to make two little girls giggle. I wish I weren't sneaking home snacks for my ego even now, parting your lips for pistachios like the *Paris Review* comment. I wish I could be as free as the Finnish trolls and potato pixies in the International House of Baked Beans.

I wish my story told a great story, the only story worth reading aloud.

I have heard it sung on the swing sets, but seldom in my own voice. It is the memory that chases children all the way back to dawn, even when it is buried under burlap or bravado. It would remember Mari Kramer as God's little girl, zealous to catch the drips of improbable days. It would see her cloud of tangerine hair and be mindful of her angels, whispering promises and poetry even when her two ears battled over states and strategy.

It would see my own sticky hands, greedy to be held, fully capable of reaching directly into the pie.

I wish I remembered only enough to love.

I am neither angel nor Anaïs Nin, only a storyteller whose key still gets stuck in second grade. My only hope is that I will be remembered more elegantly than I remember.

I am comforted by the bearded youths who scrawled the Psalms, Middle Eastern meaning-gluttons who would understand my desire to command territory. People think the Bible is lilac and law-abiding, but the Psalm brats will shut you down. Good King David and his fellow poets ask God to smash their enemies' infants. They roll on the floor like cats in heat, howling that darkness is their only companion. They throw rotten tubers at the Almighty, brazen against the brassy sky.

And after that, they ask God to remember them.

“Remember me.” Over and again, David and the nameless, needy children demand it. “Remember me.”

This strikes me as dangerous, foolish. It would be appropriate if God should answer, “Thank you for the reminder. As a matter of fact, you have been a massive mandala of swirling sandy sins. Please proceed to the nearest Gehenna. Gnashing of teeth begins at 7:00 p.m. sharp.”

God should remember the Psalm brats like I remember Mari. I should remember what the Psalm brats didn't forget.

God remembers elegantly, which is to say outrageously. “Remember me” means “pet me like a kitten.” “Remember me” means “cherish your child.” “Remember me” means “forget ‘Pies’ and the *Paris Review* and today's thirty tantrums.”

“Remember me” really means “remember Yourself.”

And God remembers. And the state of the Psalmist changes color. And mercy erases state lines.

And all the livid letters turn back into words.

I remember Mari's face, and I remember that she grew up to be an advocate. We both parse words for truth. We are both still afraid of being holograms. We are both proud and protective, Psalms and bombs in aging little-girl bodies.

Angela Townsend is the Development Director at Tabby's Place: a Cat Sanctuary. She graduated from Princeton Seminary and Vassar College. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Arts & Letters*, *Paris Lit Up*, *The Penn Review*, and *The Westchester Review*, among others. She is a Best Spiritual Literature nominee.

NONFICTION

Tiffany Farr

FATHER-DAUGHTER DANCE

You

didn't realize that you'd begin this essay talking about Grandma's Boy from 2013. But alas, here you are. You couldn't remember his real name even if someone promised to pay you. You only remember this:

Y'all had been college naptime buddies for a while (that's the polite way to say it). It was around Christmas, or close enough to where both of you were sitting on the floor in your freshman dorm bedroom and he was helping wrap Christmas presents. He said something about his grandma, and *BAM!* The nickname Grandma's Boy commenced. To be honest, how does one go so long sleeping with someone and not knowing their name? It gets to a point of no return. The no return where y'all get in bed, turning off the lone overhead light keeping you out of the darkness. You're done wrapping Christmas presents for your family, friends, and even the apology gift to your roommate who all semester you'd asked more than once to "leave the room" or "don't come around tonight" because of some nicknamed boy whose name you didn't bother to learn.

Weeks later, when you're in the CVS bathroom stall, peeing on a stick because you can't stand the waiting till you get home, you're more ashamed that if you're pregnant, you wouldn't even know Grandma's Boy's name when you tell him, "*Congratulations, you're going to be a dad!*"

Slow

and steady is the pace of your heart after your hair is freshly washed, suds sopping up the past few days where you received the worst news of your life to date. It's 2019. The first thing you did after the news was schedule the hair appointment. Some black girl rituals always work. The psychiatrist was a black woman. She was all black and bold and beautiful and cut to the chase when she read your new identity: *Diagnostic Code 296.89, F31.89.*

Dance

was what the boy who cheated on you wanted to do. And you both did, together. In your tiny apartment, on the beige carpeted floor. You could feel the shag between your toes to this day if you tried. You managed not to sleep with him, yet. You were trying out the whole "only if he's my boyfriend" thing because, at this time, God's Word hadn't performed open surgery on your heart. The truth is, you've wanted to stop having sex for a while. God was truly in your life now, no longer as far away as you'd pushed Him. Yet, it's been difficult to stop having sex. You can't understand why sex feels like a high you can't stop seeking. You didn't find out that your newly minted boyfriend was cheating on you until the night after you've given in and slept with him. You found out while you were driving to y'all's Waffle House date. His real girl from Michigan, his hometown, had to call you up on Facebook Messenger because she saw your "In a Relationship with Othello" post. Yes, that was his name. You can't make this stuff up! His *real* girlfriend knew something was wrong. She said she "just knew it." Before this moment in time, before the guts of her story spilled out and she told you everything, you and he had already made plans to go to an STD testing clinic after your Waffle House date. You know, "just to be safe." By this point, you don't care about the boy. As someone who's gotten clam before, you ask if she has any sexually transmitted diseases or infections. That still, small voice is very loud in your ear. She says, "Well, I have HPV. But he knew this!" Again, you couldn't make these things up if you tried. All that rings in your mind is: *He knew this.* It's February 2015.

With

all cards on the table, you're honest with your mother. It's 2018. You lay it all on the line 7,000 feet in the clouds. You're on an airplane, and you can't shake it. Your racing and pacing brain is now remembering how, in 2013, your mother pinned your body to the bed and choked you out once you yelled to her: "*You're mean!*" She later said she "saw something in your eyes." Your brain is still running and picks up the conclusion that she thought she saw a demon in you. You pay for the \$10 Wi-Fi to look up the history of exorcism, Scriptures, and anything that you can reference where someone is delivered from a demon by a person choking it out of them.

When you can't find the line or verse, you're shaking with tears, blurring the phone screen as you type up an email pouring out your pain. You're not angry, just sad. You send it to her. Then you can rest; after sending it off, you delete it from your Sent Folder so you don't have to remember being vulnerable. By the time the plane touches down, and you're away, her response is already in the Inbox. She makes comments about knowing you've been mad at her and that you've never forgiven her. Statements that aren't true or the point. But then, the freedom comes when she says that she knows you weren't possessed, "it was just a phrase of reference."

This is what freed you: knowing that when she saw you, she didn't truly see a demon there. That when she looked at you, she still saw her little girl, even if pinned underneath her grip.

No

more tears have been shed over the symptoms that used to follow you like a shadow, all while you never knew. In 2022, you were freed from the diagnosis. In 2023, you called out to God, confessed, and received freedom from the trauma of the memories. You entered a season of Gladness.

Music

from the fueling of the Holy Spirit is what you hear in your soul when you wake up and release it out of your mouth. Peace penetrates your renewed mind. It's 2024. God is your Father who has always loved you. You're a prodigal that He's kept His arms open wide for. The symptoms of bipolar disorder that plagued you are not the sum of your story. They're barely even a portion now. When hypersexuality was ruining your life and hypomania plagued you. Before your family relationships were restored—and they are restored. When you reeked with depression, unbathed for days. He still saw you and wrapped you in His arms for a dance. A swaying and sidestepping with His daughter, whom He views as pure and worthy. All His.

Tiffany loves to travel and collect rocks and postcards along the way. She currently lives in Arizona with her sassy chihuahua, Maria. Her work has appeared in *Microfiction Monday Magazine* and is forthcoming in the international literary magazine *Tears in the Fence*.

NONFICTION

Lev Raphael

ARE WE MADE OF DREAMS?

It was a typical gray Michigan mid-October day, and that night my dream was anything but colorless:

I'm rushing around sky blue hospital corridors and there aren't any windows or a seat for me. Everyone is saving a seat for someone else, either by spreading a jacket across it, an arm across the back, or piling up with knapsacks and messenger bags. Nobody smiles.

And then I'm down in the crowded lobby, and there's some light behind me so there must finally be a window, right? I'm sitting, no longer anxious, and not far off there's a tall man with his back to me who's in conversation with someone I can't see. This other man reverently says, "Lord!," and the man with his back to me moves slowly to the exit. He's solid and tall, with glowing, long red hair.

I know exactly who he is, and I'm thrilled. He turns, holds a long finger to his lips, and his kind, strong eyes ask me not to make a fuss. When he leaves, the glow I feel in the dream is so incandescent that it wakes me up: *That was Jesus!* I think, grinning. *He was in my dream.*

But why? I'm Jewish.

The next night I dream I'm in one of those brightly colored trams somewhere in Germany listening carefully for the announcement of *die nächste Straßenbahnhaltestelle*, the next stop, because though my German is good, I sometimes mishear announcements over loudspeakers.

There's no scenery of note as we rumble along, and I'm minding my own business when suddenly Daniel Craig is in the seat opposite me,

smiling, wearing a sky blue cable-stitch crewneck sweater that matches his eyes. And he glows the way he did in *Casino Royale*.

Startled, I ask him “*Aber was machen Sie denn da?*” What on earth are you doing here?

His smile deepens, crinkling those traffic-stopping eyes, and I wake up.

My German teacher is impressed the next day when I tell her about the tram. It’s my first-ever dream in that language, which she says means that I’m starting to think in German, a sure sign of major progress. Plus she’s a fan of Craig’s James Bond movies and pretends to be annoyed at him having joined me in a dream and never visiting her.

Without knowing about the Jesus dream, she says, “So interesting that you dreamt of a *bond*, no? What do you think it means?”

Nights pass as I wait for an answer.

Lev Raphael is a first-generation American who has been writing stories since second grade and is living his childhood dream of being an author. He escaped academia many years ago to write full time and has reviewed books for the *Washington Post* and the *Detroit Free Press*.

NONFICTION

Jennifer Baker

ENOUGH

Like many of you, our congregation celebrates Communion on the first Sunday of every month. This week we chose to use those little plastic cups that come prefilled with the “bread and cup.” As I was moving my journal to the seat beside me, I felt the hot slice that only a paper cut can deliver in such agonizing slow motion. The trickle of blood was just coming to the surface as the pastor, my husband, quoted from Hebrews 9:22, “Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins.”

The oddity of the moment wasn’t lost on me. As I sat there looking at my fingertip-sized drop of blood, waiting for the body and blood to be passed around, that verse spoke to me. I was struck with a thought. Could not a single drop of Jesus’s blood have been enough to have redeemed mankind? Perhaps “just enough” shedding of blood could have occurred that didn’t require so much? It confounds my mind to think, His power was so great that it took a brief touch of His garment to heal the woman who suffered twelve years of affliction. His breath and word alone healed across miles of desert for the Centurion’s daughter. Surely the shedding of blood didn’t require every last drop unto death? But that is exactly the requirement of sacrifice. It is all or nothing. It required that He surrender all. It requires that we surrender all.

Romans 12:1-2 says to, “present your bodies a living sacrifice”² and “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”³ This New Testament sacrifice doesn’t require the shedding of blood, Jesus did that for us once and for all. However, being a living sacrifice daily requires our

² KJV.

³ NIV.

all. The Father desires our heart, mind, and spirit fully surrendered to Him.

I ponder here that many Christians would like to give a fingertip-size time or finance and call it sacrifice. Sometimes I have given “just enough” until it stretched me to the limit of what I could sacrifice, without faith becoming an uncomfortable necessity. That too was not sacrifice; I was still in control. In control of my time, my money, my remote control, my screen time, and well, you fill in the blank. Becoming a living sacrifice requires that I surrender all to Jesus, trusting that He works all things out for my good and for His glory.

I have worshipped in Holy Communion countless times; always focused on the remembrance of what Christ did for us on the cross. It is because of His sacrifice that mine is even possible. I can never thank Him enough for the cross and the empty tomb. This paper cut is already fading away, but even now I know that every future one will remind me what was required, and what is still desired. Every last drop.

Jennifer Baker is an author and musician. She has played in music festivals from Seattle to Maine, writing and co-writing many original songs along the road. She was published in *The Boats Against the Current*, *The Dirigible Balloon*, and *The Wildlife Activist* journals as well as authoring her own book, *Lessons Along the Riverbed*. You can follow her on Facebook: [AuthorJenniferBaker](#) and on Twitter [@FrostGlassPoet](#).

NONFICTION

Angie Brady

WAITING ON AN ANGEL

Friday, 7:31 p.m.

Two women recline side by side in the bed. Mimi is drifting in and out of dreams—dreams of a life well spent, a life well loved. Their heads are pressed lightly against each other, gray and white hair curling around each other and tickling the other's forehead, but their hands are more firmly intertwined. Silence often reigns, with conversation and noise filtering in from the rest of the crowded house, from people waiting their turn to sit with her, wait with her, be with her when the end does finally come. But for now, the two women just sit, one with a rattling breath and the other with even inhales that sometimes turn shaky on the exhale.

Saturday, 10:53 a.m.

Her grandson lies along the floor of the hallway, head propped on one hand and a book laid out in front of him. His fingers follow the words as he reads aloud, reading to the toddler sitting in rapture on the other side of the book. The toddler is equally enthralled by this grown-up second cousin as he is by the bright colors on the pages. When the man makes a silly face, the toddler's sudden laughter echoes around the hallway and through the open doorway. The joyful noise reverberates around the room where Mimi lies propped up on her bed, mouth agape as her body fights for oxygen. And if you look closely, you might see her mouth twitch into the facsimile of a smile.

Saturday, 4:27 p.m.

There's a crowd in her room, formed after she opened her eyes for the first time in hours. No words were spoken, as the group may have hoped, and her breath continues to make irregular noises as it fights her dying body. First one voice and then another begins to

sing “Amazing Grace.” The melody is slow, and the words swell as quiet voices are raised. The room is small, but it is full of bodies and heat and voices and something inexplicable. The music, made up of off-key vocals and an oxygen machine that no one properly hears anymore, is so close an embodiment of love that it almost shimmers in the air. If on occasion one person or another cannot sing a few lines, if their throat closes over the words, it only adds to the melody. And Mimi must be in awe of the love they all weave around her because even after the last verse is sung and prayers are said, her breath struggles on, keeping her body here even if she cannot manage a smile anymore.

Saturday, 9:15 p.m.

The dining room table has, by some miracle, been cleared of all the food that it carried throughout the day. Instead, cards scatter the wooden surface. Three grandchildren and one daughter play a game that takes little effort, a game that Mimi has tweaked and passed into the family’s lore. The TV plays quietly while another daughter lies on the couch, futilely trying to close her eyes and get some rest. “We thought maybe she wanted to be left alone,” one of them comments, almost in jest, but not quite. Every few minutes one or another of the card players leans back, cranes their neck, and checks if her chest is still rising and falling. Always for a moment, there is fear—fear that she actually has gone. But then there quickly follows an ache. Because this sweet 89-year-old woman is ready to meet her Maker and this body is holding her back from what she has been waiting for her whole life.

Sunday, 1:15 a.m.

A calm descends in the small hours of the night, only allowed in now that the moon is high and everyone else is asleep. This is the time she chooses to wake. She has never been one for an audience, and in death she is no different. One last breath pushes out of her failing body, and now, now, now. Now she can see the light, and she finds the peace she’d never once doubted would carry her away.

Angie Brady lives, loves, and writes in NEPA with her husband and son. She primarily writes short pieces of fiction and creative nonfiction.

Bob Smith

MATTHEW 9:19

acrylic on canvas



Image courtesy of the artist.

JOHN 19:30 (IT IS FINISHED)

acrylic on canvas

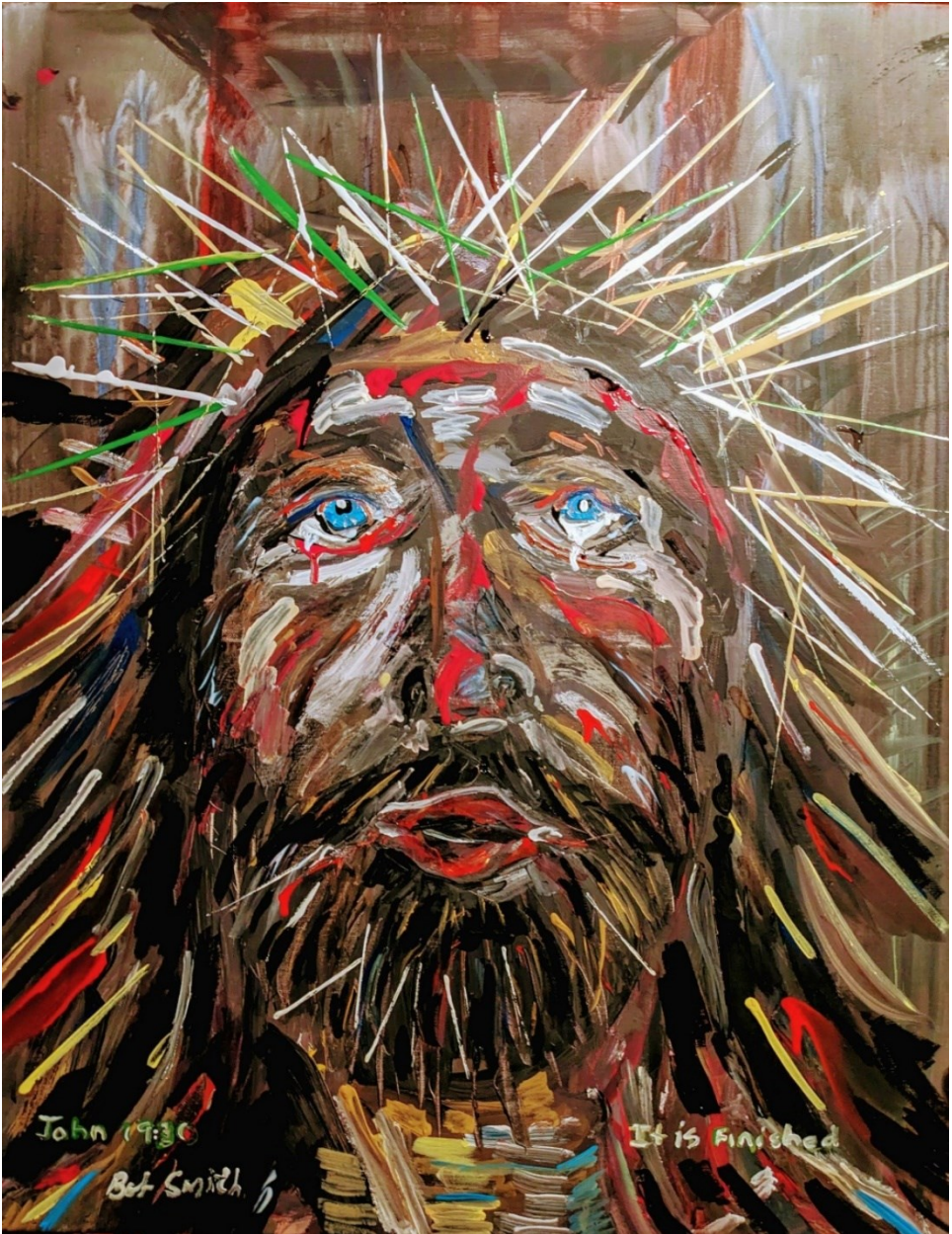


Image courtesy of the artist.

MARK 4:21
acrylic on canvas



Image courtesy of the artist.

REVELATION 22:7*acrylic on canvas*

Image courtesy of the artist.

Bob Smith: Resident of Williamstown, in Southern New Jersey. Just feel blessed to be alive. God is good and continually proves his love. Married 40 years in June to the love of my life Cheryl. I am blessed to have a 32-year-old son Bud and two wonderful grandchildren, Asher and Gage. My paintings are based on scripture and prayerfully painted.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Irina Tall (Novikova)

MARY AND JESUS

mixed media (mascara, gel pen, red liner)

10×15 cm



Image 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, and draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was *The Red Book*, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. She writes fairy tales and poems and illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces—she especially likes the image of a man—a bird—Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in magazines: *Gupsophila*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, *Little Literary Living Room*, and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection *The 50 Best Short Stories*, and her poem was published in the collection of poetry, *The wonders of winter*.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Will Blackburn

THE BEAUTIFIED ASH

acrylic on canvas



Image courtesy of the artist.

Artist Description of *The Beautified Ash*

In 2020, I dreamt of angels hovering in the sky overhead, pouring some substance on me. They spoke to me too, but I'd forgotten what they said. Afterward, I correlated this verse with my dream: *“To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.”* —Isaiah 61:3

Artist Statement

All of my art is deeply personal to me. In it, I showcase my barrage of emotions and my most profound experiences, often set in alternate worlds. My utmost desire is for others to see what I see, to feel what I feel, through this transparent vehicle of paint—soul to soul, heart to heart—it is my sole connection to society.

Will Blackburn is a 24-year-old self-taught artist from the tiny town of Arcanum, Ohio. He has been creating nearly non-stop ever since he heard a voice tell him he was made to create in the fall of 2020.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

James A. Tweedie

DEAD SEA SUNRISE FROM MASADA, ISRAEL



Image courtesy of James A. Tweedie.

BEE AND LILY, CHARTRES CATHEDRAL,
CHARTRES, FRANCE



Image courtesy of James A. Tweedie.

ROUEN CATHEDRAL, ROUEN, FRANCE

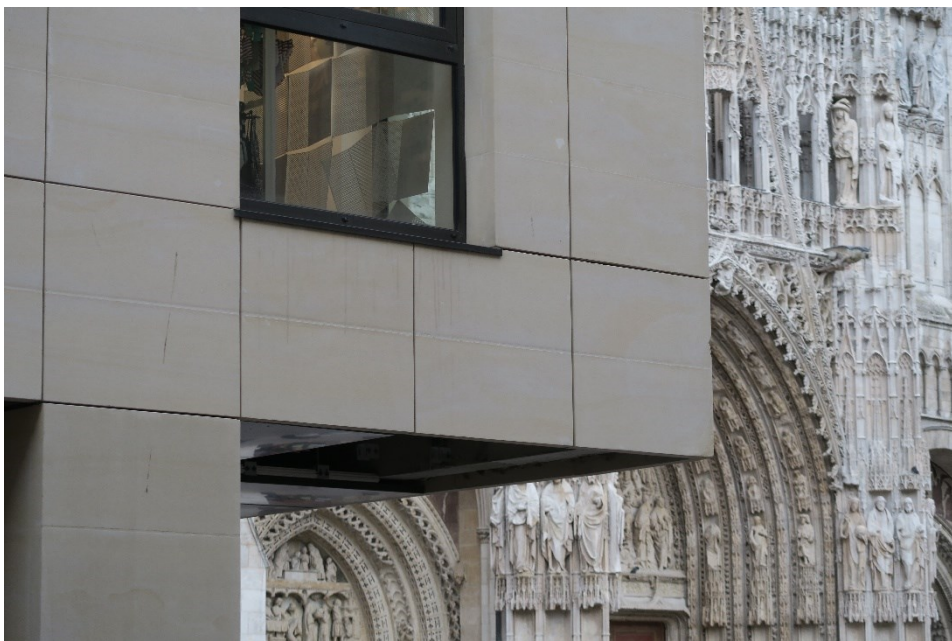


Image courtesy of James A. Tweedie.

LAUNDE ABBEY CHAPEL, 12TH CENTURY,
EAST NORTON, LEICESTERSHIRE, ENGLAND



Image courtesy of James A. Tweedie.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Jeremiah Gilbert

MASTHUGG CHURCH (GOTHENBURG,
SWEDEN)



Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

CHURCH OF OUR SAVIOUR (QAQORTOQ,
GREENLAND)



Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

CHURCH OF HALLGRÍMUR (REYKJAVÍK,
ICELAND)



Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

SAKSUN CHURCH (STREYMOY, FAROE ISLAND)



Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

Jeremiah Gilbert is an award-winning photographer and travel writer. He is the author of three travel books, including *Can't Get Here from There: Fifty Tales of Travel* and *From Tibet to Egypt: Early Travels After a Late Start*. His most recent, *On to Plan C*, documents his return to travel in a post-pandemic world and is the first to include his photography.

Are you 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, 2024.

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

