



Heart of Flesh

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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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Volunteer/Reader: Katie Yee

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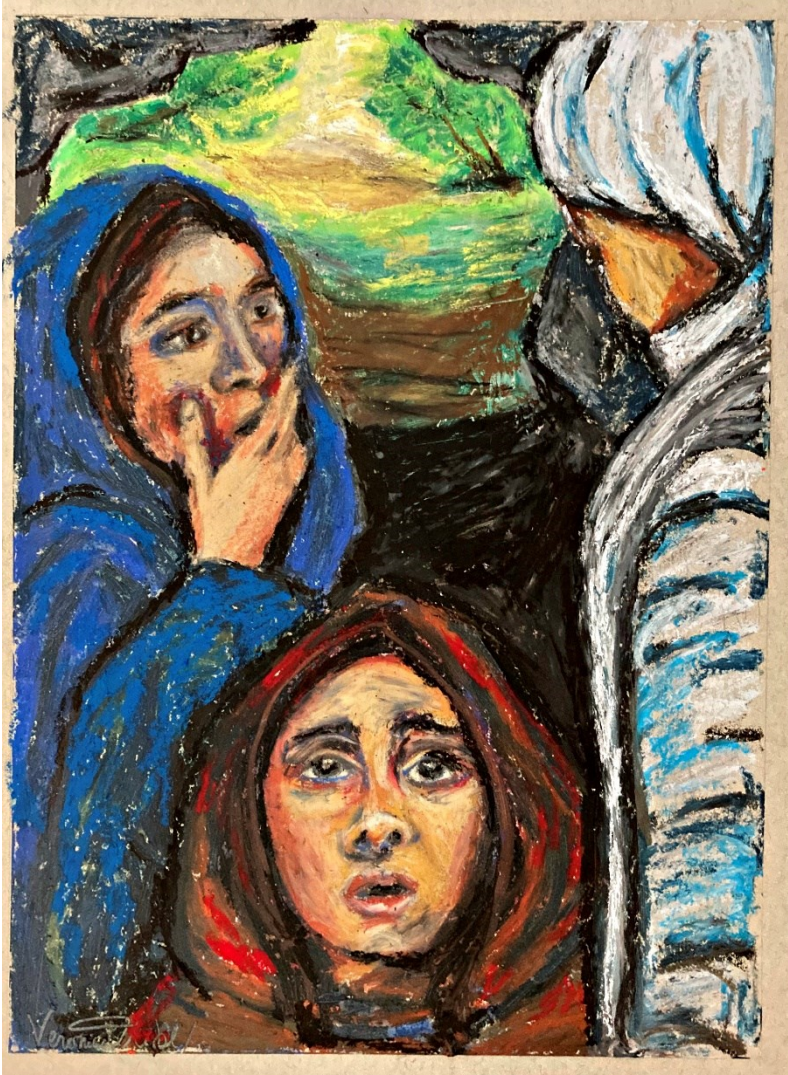
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Martha, Mary, and Lazarus by Veronica McDonald (2021), oil pastel on paper.

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” – John 11:25-26 (ESV)

Have you ever asked yourself this question: Do I believe? Whenever I read these verses, I picture Jesus’ face, his piercing eyes boring into the depths of my soul as He asks me the most crucial question, the one that will decide whether I will live or die.

Do I believe this? Do I believe that Jesus is life? Do I believe that believing in Him will save my soul from the sting of death, from the horrors of Hell? Yes. Emphatically, yes. I feel the weight of this question down in the marrow of my bones. I have experienced the world without believing in Christ, and when all was said and done, everything was tainted with the stain of death. I lived my life gripping every little thing in my path that made me feel good and left me empty, like hands groping slimy walls in the darkness, looking for stability and hope as I slid down deeper and deeper into the looming reality of death’s finality. It’s a world I need reminding of from time to time, so that I remember that the God I serve and the God I love is life itself. Without Him, there is only death.

In our 13th issue, you will encounter an eclectic mix of poetry, stories, and art that all intertwine with the reality of the life-giving God. You’ll find moments of humor, longing, shame, and the mundane mixed with the divine. Many of our contributors believe, and they will take you on a journey of spiritual connection. Many will demonstrate the tension between God’s will and their own will. Others will be in awe of His character, His revelations, and His tendency to pull us out of the sin that grips us like a vice in order to mold us like clay. Some of our writers will relay troubling doubt and fear, while death lingers in the background like an unbeaten adversary, a lion ready to pounce. Others still are searching ... following the breadcrumbs of belief, stumbling along the way, hoping to find God in the end.

I hope *you* find God in the end. My prayer is that this issue sparks an insatiable desire to know the God who created your soul. I hope that, if nothing else, the crucial question burns inside of you like a hot coal: Do you believe this?

Thank you to all the amazing writers, poets, artists, and photographers who made this issue come together. Thank you to Katie Yee, for all her support and hard work. Thank you to my family, for their continued encouragement and patience. And thank *you*, for reading.

May God bless you and keep you,

Veronica McDonald

Veronica McDonald
Editor/Founder

POETRY

POETRY

Justin Lacour

L E N T

How much longer Lord
until i can sit on the couch
with a box of fiddle faddle
and watch gilmore girls

i think "Chevy Van"
might be a Christian song
if the people making love
in said chevy van are married

see what i did there

i'm trying to smooth things over
it's one thing to be eighteen
pretending your oldsmobile
is a sherman tank

but i'm nearly fifty Lord

if i give up booze and pills
my fascination with whatever
i think i lack will i love You
much more than myself

i don't really love myself

but i keep my monster fed

THIS IS IT

In the past we took a fool around and find out attitude
towards mystery

but just like the Grateful Dead had two drummers
in case one fell asleep

we have canaries with a hundred thousand songs
for dark roads

we have a child who will climb on the roof
to talk to the moon

on our behalf and there are worse things than being
terrified and bored

but to be a little less scared would be up there
with feeding

the five thousand or the woman caught in the very act
of adultery though

this is the life we were begging for when we kept asking
for anything else

LUNDI GRAS, 4:52 A.M.

In Chapter Eight of the Gospel of John Jesus bends down and begins to write in the dirt with His finger the evangelist doesn't say what Jesus wrote though scholarship says Jesus was writing out the sins of the elders who wanted to stone the woman caught in adultery i strongly disagree with this scholarship though i have no scholarship of my own

i think i will have to work hard today the sun isn't even out yet but i know there will be no time to watch Dobie Gillis or read long poems though most poems are too long the old poet told me

during my second senior year i served as designated driver for the old poet and we travelled this great state for poetry and drinks and once after the legitimate bars closed he grabbed my head and tried to transfer a smidge of his talent as he told me about Robert Lowell's eyes

i'm so scared of writing treacle i think that'd be a type of suffering and suffering terrifies me though i know it's coming like i know the rest of the country will have jet packs and New Orleans will still have the streetcar St. Francis de Sales says to meditate on how people will still be out partying

while you're on your deathbed so i meditate in the silence before kids wake up how i'm one day closer to the cross whatever cross is laid out for me i know it's made with the same love that opened my eyes for the moment of my birth when i saw a new earth and i was held by the light the air and every unknown word

Justin Lacour lives in New Orleans with his wife and three children and edits *Trampoline: A Journal of Poetry*. His first full-length collection, *A Season in Heck & Other Poems*, is forthcoming from Fernwood Press.

POETRY

John Whitney Steele

DEAR JESUS,

— *the year of our Lord, circa 1960*

I don't know when you came into my life.
 It seems like you were here right from the start.
 I think you must have blessed me in Mum's tummy.
 She said I didn't seem to want to leave.
 It's Christmas-time, I lay you in a manger
 with a golden halo on your head,
 Mary and Joseph sitting by your side,
 and three wise men approaching bearing gifts.
 At Sunday school your picture's on the wall,
 a long-haired, bearded hippie, all blissed out.
 We sing out: *Jesus loves me, this I know.*
Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so.
 Like Santa, taking children on your knee,
 you sing with us: *let them come to me.*

— 1969

When Ram Dass returned from India, long-haired,
 white-robed, and bearded, he looked a lot like you.
 By then, I'd finished Sunday school, and given
 up on church. I never saw you sitting
 in a pew. And so I turned to smoking
 marijuana and dropping LSD,
 doing yoga, trying to meditate,
 but unlike you, I can't calm the sea.
 You were the kind of man I want to be.
 You spoke with such conviction, contagious faith,
 convinced dead men and cripples to rise and walk.
 I'm sixteen now, your ally on the cross,

bemoaning a world hellbent on self-destruction,
asking *why hast Thou abandoned us?*

— 1970

Ram Dass' *Be Here Now* arrived today.
I can taste the salty-tongued excitement
of cutting the strings, of opening the box,
of breathing in the scent of home-made paper
loosely bound with jute, of leafing through
hand-written pages, the blend of Hindu, Buddhist,
Sufi, Christian quotes, and mandalas,
of dropping the needle on the vinyl record,
of singing along: *Sita Ram, Sita
Ram, Hanuman, Hanuman ...*

— imagining myself sitting right there
in the circle with Ram Dass and his friends,
high in the mountains of New Mexico —
and weeping tears of gratitude and joy.

— 1971-72

My first semester of college — I can't stand
the drunken, dorm-room parties blaring music
across the quad. If only you were here
with me you'd flip the goddamn turntables.
I can't concentrate. I'm not excited
by any of my courses. To the chagrin
of Mum and Dad, I decide to quit,
spend the winter working in a warehouse,
reading Yogananda's autobiography,
giving my all to his meditation course,
intent on tuning in to what he calls
Christ consciousness — direct experience of God.
I need to find a spiritual community.
And so I buy a van, and plot my course.

— 1972

I drive to Colorado for the Rainbow Festival. I'm camping out with hundreds of young seekers. I think you must be here with us, singing and dancing and praying for peace. Fast forward to New Mexico, I'm dancing in the Sufi circle at the ashram where Ram Dass assembled his Book-in-a-box edition of *Be Here Now*. I'm asking if I can stay. They're turning me down. I'm chasing mirages through the desert all the way to Yogananda's seaside hermitage. I'm on a bench, facing the ocean. I can see forever. But the folks who run this place are stiff, unwelcoming. And so I'm heading north.

— *hours later*

I pick up a hitchhiker. He listens as I talk about my pilgrimage across the West. He's telling me how he searched, how he opened his heart to Jesus, how that has changed his life, encouraging me to do the same, suggesting I stop at Lighthouse Ranch, a Christian commune in northern California that welcomes newcomers. We reach his destination, say goodbye. I follow a side-road into a wilderness area, walk into an old-growth redwood forest, the kind of place where I can drop my armor. As I walk deeper into the woods, my aching heart cries out to you. I know for sure that you and I have never been apart.

— 1972-73

I park and walk straight to the cross. The cross is larger than life, too heavy to bear, for you or me. It stands right next to the edge of the bluff. The beach below is littered with sea-wrack and starfish.

I volunteer to work in the garden with Michael,
a soft-spoken, middle-aged man with a bushy, black beard.
There's nowhere more healing to be than in this garden,
the wind blowing off the ocean, the salt of the sea.
This commune's born-again mentality
is not for me, but it's a welcome refuge.
I stay a year before returning home.
I can't tell where the ocean ends, the sky
begins. The waves keep rolling in and in,
shaping and reshaping the sound of wind.

John Whitney Steele is a psychologist, yoga teacher, assistant editor of *Think: A Journal of Poetry, Fiction and Essays*, and graduate of the MFA Poetry Program at Western Colorado University. A Pushcart Prize nominee, his poems have been published widely. John lives in Colorado and loves hiking in the mountains.

POETRY

Cynthia Pitman

TO SEEK, TO FIND

to Chuck Harmeling

Hold a parable
in the palm of your hand.
Cup it gently.
Do not clutch it or squeeze it,
seeking simply meaning from it.
Scraping the skin of it
will not release
the epiphany that awaits you.
Just a gentle curve of a cradling palm
will leave it open to the light
of the glorious sun.
Soon a sweet rain will shower down
and create shoots that spring forth
and burst with blooms of color and scent.
Their pollen — a holy anointment —
will saturate the air.
Breathe in.
Understanding will grow.

Cynthia Pitman, author of *The White Room*, *Blood Orange*, and *Breathe*, has been published in *Spirit Fire Review*, *Amethyst*, *Third Wednesday* (One Sentence Poem finalist), *Saw Palm* (Pushcart Prize nominee), and others, and in anthologies *Pain and Renewal*, *Brought to Sight*, *All This Sweet Work*, and *Nothing Divine Dies*.

POETRY

Daniel Aum

MIRACLE

Show us a miracle,
we demand:

split a new sea,
soar above the clouds,
turn water into wine,
appear in a vision —

and I'll believe in God.

But what's more miraculous,
a sea split in two, or
a zygote parting across the middle,
its sticky cell walls standing tall and proud of its progeny?

What stimulates more wonder,
a man flying through the air, or
that our plants and pets, oceans and skyscrapers,
and candles and children stay firmly
planted to the ground?

We want to see water turned into wine,
without considering this could have been a two-state world
of solids and gases only,
or better yet, a two-dimensional universe,
we flat characters in pixelated forms,
capable of walking off the edge of the flat earth.

We'll believe in God, we say,
if He appears in the form of a dream,
but what if He appeared in the form of a man

on our dusty earth, dressed in leathery sandals and
a carpenter's calloused hands,
hands that probably recognized the quality and cut of wood
and the weight and type of nail he grew intimate with at Cavalry,

hands that twirled the lilies of the field,
and waved at the sparrows,
with the delight of a craftsman who loves his handiwork.

Daniel Aum writes from Atlanta, GA. His work has been published in *The Agape Review*, *North Avenue Review*, *Erato*, and elsewhere.

POETRY

Mary Hills Kuck

HOLY WEEK

Acrid incense curls through palm fronds
Breathes dread and joy, death and life

Intimate feast, loaf and cup, mystery and treason
Mingle with love. Cleansed feet tingle.

Kiss suspends sleep-drugged fear, persistent pleas.
Errant sword portends pain, death. No, Father.

Darkness hangs, interminate. Charcoal glows, candletips
Puncture night, haloes rise like quickened bones.

Women, bent, carry ointment, cloth. Tomb-cave gapes.
No body? Fear.

'Mary.' Sky splits, alabaster rays fan, stretch, waft.
His voice, his hands, good news.

Mary Hills Kuck, a born Midwesterner, has spent most of her adult life in the US Northeast and in Jamaica, West Indies, where she and her husband served as ELCA missionaries. *Intermittent Sacraments*, her chapbook, was published in 2021 by [Finishing Line Press](#). Her full-length book, *Before I Forget*, was published by Kelsay Books in 2024. She has received a Pushcart Prize nomination.

POETRY

Donna Kathryn Kelly

CHARLOTTE, KNEELING IN HER GARDEN,
DENHAM, INDIANA, JULY 1978

My grandma, bent at waist
in the rural sun
patrolled the rows of potatoes,
supervised my reckless digging
not far from the sandy-sides
of an Indiana dune;
knelt down in the earth,
armed with a garden fork,
showed me how
to prep the removal,
tracing a halo in the dirt
along the edges of the plant.

And then she'd tug,
swift, decisive,
so as to not inflict damage.

*Let the vine die first,
she'd say,
That one's not ready yet.*

She wore a violet scarf
bordering her brow line,
tied under her resolute chin,
the same one she wore to Sunday Mass
at Saints Cyril and Methodious
in the same fourth-row pew
with my grandfather,
who did not talk about the War.

And they made the sign of the cross,
And they genuflected
And they believed and believed:

just like the golden-haired man
in the moody garden,
hologram-transfigured,
suffering, but serene,
in the front room of the farmhouse,
silent under a steel sky,
praying for a different outcome,
on the night before he was executed.

My grandma knelt in the same fourth-row pew
on the day of my grandfather's funeral.
She wore a purple pantsuit,
her head bowed, covered.

It was a score later,
but it was the same scarf:
The same thing that lasts,
The longing and the will,
The believing and believing.

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

POETRY

Joseph A Farina

LAMBS OF GOD

flawed by sins
we were inclined to
we took comfort
in your daily bread
at morning mass
recited prayers of absolution
before the bell began our day

we learned our holy catechism
bowed and stood when father entered
asking each his daily question
of trinity and brotherhood

we were the last innocents.
no other generation would
be safe from all the temporal truths
that we were sheltered from

now we battle with ourselves
the pain of choice
the pain of lies
no one to reassure us
carrying
our children's sins
upon ourselves
penance for our lack of wisdom
and our revolt of paradise.

SHROVETIDE

penitents prepare for their austerity
some reveling in masks and feathers, others
shoeless and barefoot bearing pain
to their altars brandishing their blood
in zealot pride their faces shine
they have touched their God
they have borne the cross
rewarded with obscene bloodstreams
that will carry them to paradise
consciences and souls cleaned
and wrapped in the glory of his cloth

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

POETRY

Anna Roberts

LAZARUS

Lichen had crusted over my skin,
and moss had grown up through the dead
leaves and woven into my hair.
but a Carpenter
cupped water from a creek and
poured it over me and into my mouth.
He peeled the lichen from my body,
revealing the baby-pink skin underneath,
He detangled the moss,
leaving my curls to fall over my shoulders.
The leaves crunched and crumbled beneath
one hand as He pulled me up by the other.
He stood with His back to the east, and
for the first time, I could see the source
of the light that wrapped the world
in golden gauze each morning.

Anna Roberts is a junior English major at Shorter University. Her writing is frequently inspired by British writers and nature. When she is not studying, writing, or reading, she can be found baking sourdough bread, forcing others to read her favorite poems, and taking many walks through the woods.

POETRY

Milla Jade Kuiper

THE GROOM'S HUNGER

The devil held my hand in church
and whispered
Must you dress like a pagan in front of our Lord?
He drew a cross on his forehead in ashes
and grinned
and whispered
shhhh

The devil slid his hand up my party dress
and whispered
you are beautifully and wonderfully made
He closed my hands around his glass
and fingered my hair
and whispered
drink

The devil kissed my mother on the mouth
and promised
I'll have her home by midnight
He carried me to the car at two minutes 'til
and tearfully
he offered
drive safe

The devil lifted my wedding veil and licked his lips
and whispered
God, don't you know how much I love you?
He knelt with me by the altar
and passed me the wine
and whispered
man cannot live on bread alone

IN YOUR LOVE

This weeping sinner I've emerged, remangled from what my God made me
like what you said, of you to me, I spit in the face of what my God gave me.

You opened the meat fridge and saw me, hooked and dangling
sweat glittering jewels over lumps of open muscles, desperate, my God, take me

into your home from my plight, as yours, a promise lacking words
but words, too, failed as you cradled and pinned me down to, *my God*, take me

to call me *my love*, *my wife*, *my slut*, in this dark night we are one by your will
so kiss me, bleed me, weep me, strip me, hold me, will my God save me?

I cry like a goddess birthing an ocean, bitter bride breaking teeth on her cage
I make myself vile, tear my skirts, let the absence of my God grace me

for I ran, away instead of back, prodigal daughter unready to come home,
blaming myself, blaming you, blaming your parents, blaming my God. Deface me

and I'll crawl on my belly to please you. But for all I've done and suffered,
is my earthly strength enough to reclaim the cross my God traded me?

For everything you put me through, all the weight I've borne under you
am I greater than Job, who in his agony never gave up my God? Hate me

for my heresy, not ungrateful but weeping, prone to leaving, cut-and-running
but no matter where I run, there is my God to chase me.

A veiled woman, bleeding and unmarried, weather-whitened statuette edified
in shame, stone-carved, unbreathing, not molded as from clay, the way my God made me,

stands thoughtless, numbed. The body, once your sport of choice, now
a box locked from the inside. Never been more afraid to let my God face me.

But in time, a proud daughter calls up to the marble's demurely tilted face, *Thou sleepest!*
Startled awake, her sloshing organs soften her skin to clay, and she cries, *my God*,
reshape me!

Milla Jade Kuiper is a young writer who loves Appalachian music and tracking the patterns of the stars. She is still learning who Jesus is. If you like her work, you can also find her in *Academy of the Heart and Mind* and *Garfield Lake Review*.

POETRY

Betsy Howard

FALL

I feel the fall playing fool with me, unweaving
the faithful tapestry of my days

The wash drowns your Theragun
the one *I* loaded into the laundry
and drenched with soap, all unaware.

Ripping renegade vines down,
I tear the ethernet cable off our house
and cut us off from the world, on hold, for weeks?

The fall hounds you too. You run,
breaking in your body along miles of sidewalk,
but your pace unpockets your phone to shatter it.

Beyond our own stupidity, roots strangle our pipes
to reverse three apartments of brackish water.
The temperature slips; we can't find socks.

Today, we might have enjoyed a Saturday morning in bed.
But here we are in the basement, rummaging through
decades of rubbish, racing it up our stairs before
the city's "clean sweep" trucks rumble past and cart it all away

Currently **Betsy Howard** serves as an assistant professor of modern literature at Bethlehem College in Minneapolis, MN, and as an affiliate researcher at the University of Minnesota with the Center for the PreModern World. Her recent academic work has included essays in *Religion and the Arts* and *Victorian Poetry*. Her creative essays have appeared in *Between Two Cities* and *Writing in the Margins*, and her review of Joseph Bottum's *Second Spring* recently appeared in *Eikon*. Betsy has had poems published in *Ekstasis*, *Ad Fontes*, *The New Verse Review*, *Summit Avenue Review*, and *Tower Light*.

POETRY

Colette Tennant

PUDDING RIVER WINERY

The sommelier pours our samples and proclaims,
“You’ve got to be part poet to be a wine taster.”

Good news, I think. Most people
don’t credit poets much anymore.

She says we shouldn’t look at the descriptions
of the varieties before we sip them.

My first pinot noir tastes like
a late-night picnic in September.

I learn later it’s made with
Pommard grapes, from *pomme*,

French for apple, so it has something to do
with Eden and what we can’t return to.

“Reds get better with age,” she says, and all wine
continues to change even after it’s bottled.

I’m reminded of Communion,
sitting here shoulder to shoulder with my friends.

Pinot noir grapes are white on the inside.
Syrah grapes are purple all the way through.

They both taste sweet on the tongue, sweet as
that first sunset with your first love.

Southern drawl riffs of B. B. King’s guitar

curtain the small room and my tipsiness.

Their most expensive wine is supposed to taste
like spices and low-bush blueberries.

Red-headed finches wait just outside the door,
and the Monet clouds in the treetops haven't budged.

The grape vines have just been cut back.
Prunings lie on the ground, biblical and definite.

I raise my glass to the river circling the back of the vineyard
like the sweeping hem on a long skirt.

Colette Tennant has three books of poetry: *Commotion of Wings*, *Eden and After*, and *Sweet Gothic*. Her book, *Religion in The Handmaid's Tale: a Brief Guide*, was published in 2019 to coincide with Atwood's publication of *The Testaments*. Her poems have won various awards and have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes along with being published in various journals, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattle*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Poetry Ireland Review*. Colette is an English and Humanities Professor who has also taught art in Great Britain, Germany, and Italy.

POETRY

Derek Jon Dickinson

OLIVE TREE

*(for A.M.D.)**(fruit)*

Kalamata, fruit of the gods. I
buy a slim jar. The lid pops
free (vinegar mirage).

With a toothpick I stab one of the
purplish, wet hearts. On the
tongue, a tapestry of salts; in the
brine; in the plump, somewhat
confusing bitter;

I taste perfection
and its regrets; I taste the poet's
gaze; I taste the impartiality
of distance.

I taste the sun-scorched
picker's-hand, as he prunes music
from its staff, snaps each notehead
from its pennoned stem.

(art)

Syrup of waning sunlight, the
olive's green honey,

drizzled and scraped over the
crumbly terrain of bread. As eyes are
scraped over eggshell-cracked
frescos.

History-patinaed Renaissance; like
a portraitist's oils, words don't
dry, they oxidize.

My senses probe like
vaporous roots. Kisses sampled —
consumed or spat out.

Wine, fish, salt, oil,
bread. The crunch of romaine or
fresh greens, play together on the
immiscible vinaigrette;

as history
itself is munched on (much of
it unpalatable).

I set down my
fork, pluck another olive
from its dented, verdant
bed, glistening and deaf;

the skin's resistance
provokes the bite forward. The
tongue hurries to the wounded
flesh; its Athenian patois, rich but
slightly hollow, like a
bit lip and its hint of blood.

(flight)

A gust of wings. In
the dove's
gritty beak, olives
dangle
like extant text
from enjambment's
snipped wires;

and the
genesis that was
almost
extinct, grafted
to the tree. Once
again, hands
filled-in applause.

Derek Jon Dickinson is a writer and photographer living in Minnesota. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Transformations: An Oxford Flash Fiction Anthology (UK)*, *The Manhattan Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Zone 3*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Cordite Poetry Review (Australia)*, and other places. His waterfowl photography has been published by *Ducks Unlimited*.

POETRY

Sarah Watkins

SHALL WE FIND ANY REST?

calloused fingers with cavernous cracks
dark dirt wedged in the beds of split nails

a gaping hole in the dry dirt will release a devastated groan
shall we find any rest?

bony wrists will press tightly together to feel the throbbing of a pulse
eyes will lift toward the bright and glorious sun

a drop of cool rain will fall from a cloudless sky to the dry, waiting
tongues below
He shall find us

URIAH

The soldier will not go to his home.

A carpet in the doorway of the king's
extravagant palace, the soldier
lays his matted hair on the cold, hard stone.
He cannot relax.

He is safe under the watch of the king's
guardsmen, who keep the king as the king
keeps the soldier's home, but he cannot be
lax while brothers bleed.

They are dying on the field. Their wives wait
for their safe returns; some wait in vain.
The king said the soldier's wife waits at home.
He will not go now.

The soldier will not go to his home.

In spring, the kings of nations march to war.
The soldier's king once did. The great king
would wield his sword and cry triumphantly,

"The Lord of Armies
is God over Israel!" — and now, there is
candlelight cast from the large palace
window, down onto the white stone beside
the soldier's armor.

In the yellow glow, a small mouse scuttles
across the path into the light. From
the window, a cat watches; the king's
shadow swallows the
cat's, and the light goes out. There is silence.
The soldier twitches in his sleep, dreams
that he hears his wife's soft weeping. Ah, but
no, she is not there.

The soldier will not go to his home.

An Arkansas native, **Sarah Watkins** is an educator by trade and a writer by necessity. She currently resides in northeast Arkansas with her husband. Her work has recently appeared in *Applause Literary Journal*.

POETRY

Kimberly Gibson-Tran

A RETURN

I met the kids in the gazebo to draw fish.
Our crayons melted. The sun wedged into the mountains.

Half of love is touch.
I press down on the fingernail moon.

The other half is loss.

When I returned from being gone, I lost the words for colors.

The kids gave them back to me: pig's blood, water-silver
until again I could scale the rainbow.

Jesus, after dying, welcomed his disciples' touch.
He called them, waited with fish by the breakfast fire.

I think about that, his asking them over and over
for their love.

Kimberly Gibson-Tran has writings appearing or forthcoming in *Passages North*, *Third Coast*, *Porter House*, *Dunes Review*, *Reed Magazine*, *The Windhover*, *Jelly Squid*, *Saranac Review*, *Paper Dragon*, *Thin Air Magazine*, *Saw Palm*, and elsewhere. Raised by medical missionaries in Thailand, she now lives in Princeton, Texas, and works in college counseling.

POETRY

Rachel Ann Russell

CHURCH IN AUGUST

A weaving of everything together
Big and little sunflowers bursting yellow over the Table
The whole mess, the whole web
Tangled, untangled, hidden, revealed
Let's comb it out, let's come together
Shining with mystery and holding the cross-shaped
Darkness deep in the heart of it all
If we can't remember the three
Points, persons, prayers
See our hands palm to palm
pressing all the colors that create this
Singular moment, this together now

FILLED WITH FEATHERS

Hear a cacophony of birds
a fan of wings blowing
noisy wind everywhere
combined with the noise
of squawks and shrieks
nary a gentle coo

Wild it was above us
and the whole thing taught us
a new balance to walking
holding those flames over our heads

Rarely had we been heard so clearly
that folk would stop and listen
No more gentle doves —
We held onto our hats
and gave away our cloaks
and stepped out of the house
into the wind.

Rachel Ann Russell has been writing poems for a long time, and most recently has been accepted by the *Maryland Literary Review*, *Christian Courier*, and *Time of Singing*. In 2024, she was one of the winners of the Poetic Musings contest in Fairfax County Public Library System. She is working on a Master of Arts degree at Wesley Theological Seminary.

POETRY

Glenn Armocida

THE BLOOD OF THE LILACS

The bees are not bothered by this rain.
After all — and this is the mystery —
rainwater binds the sweet sunlight, the lush soil,
the snapping spring air that birth the nectar,
the blood of the lilacs that the bees
are called to on this drizzly May afternoon.

The fattest of these bumbles buzzes my face
a warning to approach reverently — or else.
So, I move like an elderly priest preparing the host,
wading slowly into the inner sanctum of the towering foliage
seeking the heavy, dripping, bouquets hidden inside.

You can deny heaven and God exist, but how do you
explain the genius of the bee, the existential scent of lilac,
the truth of rain water? No matter, the bees have assured me,
humming in my ear, that the gates to forever are made of lilacs.

I lay the fragrant cuttings across the altar of the nearby hollies.
One bouquet to fill our home with astonishment and grace.
One bouquet for my mother so that she, like the bumbles,

will inhale the aromatic blood and fly to her childhood,
where lilacs guarded the alley gate behind her home

and beckoned her to venture forth into life.

Glenn Armocida resides in western Pennsylvania. His first book, *Tales of East and West Sparrow and Other Stories*, will be published in the summer of 2025 by Atmosphere Press. He was a finalist in the Rash Award in Fiction (2024 and 2022). His recent work appears in *The Broad River Review*, *Solum Journal*, *Black Moon Magazine*, *Havik*, *The Watershed Journal*, and *The Ground Up*.

POETRY

J W Goossen

ASSISI

Of all the towns offered
in the Italian countryside
the weight carried
by the star
of Umbria
casts the longest shadow.

All the way to Rome,
as it once did
the life, the stories, the words
leave every road weary pilgrim
with some shard
of a message infused within

If not through encounter
then via the road of commerce
endured by all
without exception —
the Tau, the Assisi Cross, the overpriced meals
available for cash or plastic.

As Jesus calls
it is not the self-satisfied
with map and check book
that ultimately perceive
the voice in the wind
in the chapel, in the street

It is as usual
the humble, the contrite, the blessed
that are not way laid

not because they
have become
but because they are
attentive, listening, silent.

The donkey, the sparrow, the wolf
and the butterfly speak to me also
of the vastness of the Kingdom
the glory of its coming
and I move step by step
as my path unknown
unfolds before me.

J W GOOSSEN, born and raised in Vancouver, currently lives in Ladner, BC and enjoys carving out time for writing poems and stories, and painting. Publishing credits include *Rhubarb*, *Red World Periodical*, *As Surely As The Sun Literary Journal*, *Grain*, *Canadian Stories*, *Red Ogre Review* and *Alchemy*. www.jwgoossen.com.

POETRY

Kimberly Phinney

WHEN WE BURN

Suddenly,
I realize what this is:
a bonfire.
And it is consuming our bodies
and lives
in the flames with a melody
that is horrific and mythic —
all the same.
And I hear the harmonies,
as they crackle in the
cold black sky above.

Somehow,
the sparks know how
to sear the right places
to hurt us best
and engulf our remains
as we try to protect
ourselves:
until we are embers,
until we are coals —
until we are soot —
poked and prodded —
until we fall apart
like the shadows do
when the sun slips
behind the horizon.
We, too, slip away
under the blue-white light,
which my father always said
was the hottest part.

And so I wonder,
as we burn down to ash,
what happens next,
when the morning comes,
and we are cold and damp
in the dawn's dew —
when we are forgotten.

And somehow,
I am reminded
of something I once read.
Something in that Holy Book.
Something I heard
mouthed in prayers,
chanted from the pews,
when I was just an acolyte
and held the flame in my tiny hands
as I touched it to its sacred wick:
Our Father, who art in Heaven ...
Give us this beauty for ashes ...
Lord, make us new again ...
And if you might, save us ...

And so, we wait
and remember
and cry *amen*.

I cry, "*Amen*."

I cry.

Amen.

TAKE THESE ASHES

This is just to say:

*Father, I will lay my ashes bare —
allowing the lashings,
the unfastening of my life,
the scorn of the unabashed,
the sharp cuts of their fiery tongues —
if it means these ruins
I cup in my open palms
(scraped and shaking)
toward your crown
might be a lowly salve to save
the broken ones
you have deigned to reach
because I offered up
my life to you.*

*Lord, break me open
with your will,
and I will bleed
your love.*

Amen.

Kimberly Phinney is a professor and writer. She's published in *Christianity Today*, *Ekstasis*, *Fathom*, and more. A doctoral candidate, she holds her M.Ed. in English and was featured on *Good Morning America* for a national educator award. She was recently nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and her poetry collections, *Of Wings and Dirt* and *Exalted Ground*, debuted as #1 on Amazon in Christian Poetry in 2024 and 2025. Visit her community at www.TheWayBack2Ourselves.com.

POETRY

Patrick T. Reardon

ROSARY

Rosary my cane.
Gospel the times.
Prudence my ailings,
wisdom, company and Lord-words.

Child the broken bread.
Child the leash.
Child the marrow in its concealment.

Seer said: He loved you.
He's yours anytime.

Skin the discomfort.
Good the god.
Possible the god.
Prayerbook the common cold.
Crucifix the boils and pustules.

Simple the violent.
Misery the affluent.
Vocation the heavy-headed sunflower.

Seer said: He can come on
Mother's Day, Father's Day.
He can come in dreams, too.

Snow the city curb.
Cigarette the stone.

Possession the philosophy,
the schema, the fall, the climb,

the sums and divisions.

Bureaucrat the tree.

Usher the teaching.

Stained-glass the water and wine.

Seer said: Erma, don't be sad.

When you go, you change younger

— not a baby.

Water and wine the shining brown pews

with kneelers and hat-brim snaps.

Hat-brim snap the noel.

Lamb of god the black stone.

Kyrie the gray river water.

Canticle the days.

Patrick T. Reardon was a *Chicago Tribune* reporter for 32 years. He has published six poetry collections, including *Darkness on the Face of the Deep* and *Puddin': The Autobiography of a Baby, A Memoir in Prose Poems*. His next collection *Every Marred Thing: A Time in America*, the winner of the 2024 Faulkner-Wisdom Prize from the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society of New Orleans, was published in April by Lavender Ink. He has been nominated five times for a Pushcart Prize.

POETRY

Desi Ana Sartini

YAHWEH YIREH

Genesis 22:1-19

Three days, the journey was,
and heavy.

Father,
pensive,
silent.
Me,
aching to break the tension,
stir the silence,
but Father's face
stopped me short
every time.

Walking,
his eyes fixed firmly on the unseen —
distant,
lips straight-pursed —
or else on his feet,
brow furrowed,
lips pursed harder still,
down-turned.

Stopping,
he'd take my hand
or hold me to his chest.
He'd try to speak,
clearing,
clearing his throat,
then give it up

with a nod.

Sacrifices are solemn occasions,
but somehow
this feels like more.

At last,
the mountain.
Father says it's the one.
God told him so.

Father knows these things.
He says God's voice is unmistakable,
that someday I will hear it too,
and when I do,
I must obey,
no matter how hard.
Because everything always
works out best in the end
when we do.
Father says.

Right now, obeying
means taking up this wood to follow Father,
and that seems hard enough.
Father places it on my back.
I will carry the wood,
he the fire and knife.
The lamb?
Father says
God will provide.

We climb.

Now I, too, am focused,
bearing my burden up that hill,
keeping an eye out for lambs.

At the top,
we gather stones,
build the altar,
arrange the wood.

I look around.
“Where is the lamb, Father?”

Tears pour
from Father’s eyes.
“You are the lamb, my son.”

He takes my hand,
holds me close
as it all sweeps over me:
Yahweh has asked him for my life,
and Father must obey.

Sick and numb all over,
I weakly sink to sit.

Father ties my trembling hands,
his speechless grief three days prepared,
unwavering in its task.

My own tears
bring more of his,
yet still he lays me down.

So, I think,
swallowing hard,
It’s like that village boy.
Yahweh is no different, then,
than all the gods of Canaan.

I hear my father draw the knife.
He lays a warm and trembling hand
so gently on my eyes.
He rests the other on my chest,

steadying the knife,
 readying his sorrowed heart,
 bracing for the slit.

“Abraham! Abraham!” —
 a clear and mighty Voice.
 “Do not harm the boy!
 Now I know you have become
 a true God-fearer.
 For you have not withheld your son,
 your only son, from Me.”

Then:
 the bleating of a ram,
 the clatter of a knife;
 Father falls upon my chest
 and weeps with all his might.

*So this is Yahweh, then, at last.
 The God who calls for all we have,
 then provides for it Himself.*

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

John C. Mannone

ALL THAT GLITTERS

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder

— After Margaret Wolff Hungerford, Molly Bawn (1878)

Beauty is only skin deep

— Sir Thomas Overbury, “A Wife” (1613)

Snakes do not eat apples, nor covet them
yet the garter and rat snakes prey on rodents
in the orchards. A good thing. But not all
snakes, especially the beautifully adorned
ones in the garden or forest, are innocent.

The venomous cobra might mesmerize
its prey before striking with fang-filled
neurotoxins. Reticulated pythons, gorgeous
geometric patterns, and without an ounce
of venom, will ambush, squeeze the last
breath out of its meal.

But the most notorious serpent can shape-
shift, its coppery underbelly glittering
in the face of the sun. A magical enchanter
will hiss lies into your ears as you walk in
the lush garden. *Nachash*, is more beautiful
than any other, but do not be deceived,
it comes from a brood of vipers and will
certainly devour all your dreams.

The title is from William Shakespeare’s quote, “All that glitters is not gold,” in *The Merchant of Venice* (1600)

John C. Mannone appears in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Poetry South*, *New England Journal of Medicine* Awarded a Jean Ritchie Fellowship (2017) in Appalachian literature, his collections include *Song of the Mountains* (Middle Creek Publishing, 2023) and *Sacred Flute* (Iris Press, 2024). He's a retired professor of physics in East Tennessee.

POETRY

Maura H. Harrison

DEEP BREATHS AND SIGHS

Hot spots of stained-glass light flare up and blaze
The altar — brilliantly — articulating
All the mosaic tiles, illuminating
The Lamb. His perfect pale and lucent grays

Lighten and fade as clouds cover the pane —
Fleecy full breaths and subtle shading sighs.
The Lamb, alive before adoring eyes,
Gazes with revelation, holy vane,

A look that knows our names. We're seen. We hear
The Father's ever-finding "follow me."
We feel alive — deep breaths and sighs — and see
Our tessellated souls, brilliantly dear.

Maura H. Harrison is a writer and artist from Fredericksburg, VA.

POETRY

Debra Fair

WHITE-TAIL WINTER

White-tails wander the woods
biting browse and leftover pine,
panting for flowing brooks
frozen under falling snow.

Does bed in white fields
waiting for winter's dawn
while hunger paints
their dreams clover green.

My soul lies here
in white-tail winter,
panting for water
to wash the pain.

My soul hungers here
for another season
where suns never set
on streets of gold.

WALK THROUGH

When God
opens a door
to meadows of white rose
blank-page petals in first bloom,
walk through.

Debra Fair is a high school English teacher by day and a writer by night. As an author, she specializes in poetry and creative nonfiction centered on faith, nature, and mental health. For more of her work, follow [@fair.minded.poetry](https://www.instagram.com/fair.minded.poetry) on [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/fair.minded.poetry) and Facebook.

POETRY

Robert Funderburk

FINDING REST

Imagine frost-burnt weeds
and dry grass
along a fence row
and standing water
at the edge of the field
all under a playful sky,
clouds grey and flying
with winter wind sighing
in high lonesome pines
and of lying beneath
on a quilt made
when you were a boy;
safe in your
God and grandmother bed;
of drifting down
toward sleep
and the wind
still sighing
sighing far away
in the whispering
peace.

Born by coal oil lamplight in our home near Liberty, Mississippi, graduated from Louisiana State University in 1965, served as SSgt in USAFR from 1965–1971. **Robert Funderburk** lives with his wife, Barbara, where they enjoy the peace of country living on fifty acres of wilderness in Olive Branch, Louisiana.

POETRY

Dabney Baldridge

T O B E A M O T H E R

To be a mother is to love another
as your own self,
with all heart — about to burst

into a trillion sparks,
pumping the warm glow
to every nook and cranny,

blood from blood, body fed
from molecules of liquid
gold, from the warmth of skin.

With all mind — cluttered with calculations
of eat-sleep-repeat, you never thought
you would cling to math

and stumble through normal tasks
on a brain half asleep from
waking with the stars.

With all soul — longing to know
the tiny one that grew within
now reaching hands and pulling hair,

little fingers in your nose, having never
felt a nose before, bubbling up
tears and laughter at the same time.

With all strength — you strained
to carry the extra weight in your belly
now weak and empty, arms full

of pounds gained by the week,
both of you getting stronger,
lifting, bouncing, rocking — walking.

Heart, mind, body, strength,
you pour into another because
for you, he was poured out,

giving because he gave
life and love, sweat and tears,
as one of us, God in blood,

so that we might live to give
life, that weak arms grow
strong, hungry cries satisfied,

the naked warmed and clothed.
To be a mother is to be Christ
to the least of these.

Dabney Baldridge is a stay-at-home mom of three young boys with another on the way who writes in the middle of the messiness of life to create beauty out of chaos. Her work appears in *America's Best Emerging Poets* and *Pennsylvania's Best Emerging Poets* by Z Publishing House.

POETRY

Jennifer Fair Stewart

SCHOOL OF MYSTERIES & CERTAINTIES

*Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake
and moving.* — Frederick Buechner

Beginning Drawing I

My daughter pencilled this picture
her first studio art class;
at home, it graces our mantel
lending us perspective: grey
painstakingly rendered gloss
layers shade, one floor tile at a time,
some ho-hum hallway inside a university block
with zero architectural sublimity, yet
the gaze is drawn to an open, windowed end —
a floor to ceiling corral of wild sky,
heaven's expanse bound by four right angles.

Ocean Play II

Saint Augustine at the beach mused on
a sand hole & a boy who tried to fit the ocean inside,
dripping one pink shell scoop at a time
he could've played much deeper,
brine-crusting, immersed
in waters limitless.

Intro to Suffering

Old Yeller. Elephant Man. Cuckoo's Nest.
grey-visaged pictures that visited
my snug childhood, left me sweating sobs
by the end credits, undone;
they teach me at a tender age
suffering, injustice, death.

Advanced Slaughter III

If I'd memorized as a child some prayer
 of protection comprehensive as a Celtic lorica
 (like St. Gildas encompassed buttocks, bowels,
 cartilage, the enamel of each tooth; invoked
 a guard over nostrils, eyelashes, uvula) then
 maybe I'd've known — a tingle in every bodily orifice & nook —
 what to do after watching my parents lead our black angus
 up the old bank barn, banishing me to the house.
 In silence, I sicken, startled to find
 organs of heart, tongue, brain floating cool, open
 plastic pails of pink water inside four shed walls, shrined.

Principles of Contemplation I, II, & III

The movement of my grandma's hands, incessant as
 my habit of watching her
 worry stone stored up slick within its red vinyl aumbry
 of dashboard shelf, inside her stick shift Chevette — she delivers
 cookies & grandkids; her blue eyes, shining as her golf clubs
 & metal canning jar lids in the hatchback, wink.

Never content to simply sit idling
 on the front porch, she works, her snub nose busy stippling
 its sweat, like limpid beads of a rosary unstrung,
 or clear honeydew spheres for ants, swollen
 as her fingers meanwhile snapping off the ends of a big mess
 of garden beans, both wax & green, piled in a yellow bowl —
 so much sunshine, *ora et labora*, held in her ample lap
 with me, a porch sitter for sure, my nose a replica of hers; tho
 each salty bead has now reabsorbed, restrung decades
 in recesses under my skin,
 spinning worlds

ants build;
 their sublime, subliminal architecture swells. Content to
 sift & glean certainties, storing up questions to savor, later
 link like army ants with other writhing bodies, float
 in relationship — life raft or living rope of sky bridge

to chasm-cross. At the summons, move out
on currents of air or ocean, with organs & orifices open:
eyes open, mouth open, hands cupped open as patens
to receive holy mysteries, homed
wafers, painstakingly rendered
layers of body & blood. Goldleaf, this

skin & spirit tissue stuff, if rubbed in limited grasp ...
vanishes to dust.

Jennifer Fair Stewart is the author of the chapbook *Marginalia: An Interactive Book of Hours* (The Orchard Street Press). Her poetry has won multiple awards, including the 2024 Rhina Espaillat Poetry Award with *Plough*, and appears widely. Find her at <https://jenniferfairstewart.carrd.co/>

POETRY

Ron Riecki

GENUFLEXORIUM

“For if I should despair, I should grow mad,”

— William Shakespeare,
sonnet cxi

I have onychomycosis, a demolition-derby toe;
I know God is in there too. Everywhere. Omnipresent. We, so often, talk about the problem of evil. But what about the solution of evil? God is good. No, God is *good*. I remember one time, sitting, in a psych ward, when they called me in for a patient who was ‘violent.’ I went in and the patient was black, and cold, and sad, but not violent, just begging for something that no one was listening to. They’d been yelling at him to calm down, which is like trying to put out a fire with gasoline. I walked in, kneeled, floor as hassock, tuffet, a genuine genuflect, and asked if he was sad. Anger is a choice.

I spoke quietly. I told him that he looked sad. He said it was the anniversary of his mother’s death. He said he was cold, wanted his coat. I had someone get his coat. They couldn’t find his coat. Then they found his coat. He put it on. We talked about his mother. He had his hands together. I pointed this out. I pointed out how we hold our hands together sometimes to feel safe, secure, how it’s a position of prayer. We prayed. He’d been afraid. He wanted someone to listen. I listened. I’m so incredibly single, it hurts. He told me about

being lonely. I understood. We had each other in that moment. God is good, so good.

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

My own poems are heavy with him; let me be that awed of God. I have a PTSD that torments my torment, that cements isolation. I think poems are a way to try to cure agoraphobia. This wish to be wished, to be held, kissed. Thank God for God. Whoever reads this, I hope bliss fills your existence. I hope dark is good for you, how you rest, and this strange revelation of the day I realized, knew I no longer believed in ghosts, and

how I missed it, them, fear, how strong it was, and then how gone it was. My childhood was given to the military. I remember talking with a pastor, there, overseas, under a church roof, catenary, Gothic arch, and this ache I was having for home, and to not kill. He asked if I was a conscientious objector. I had never heard the term before. And this chaplain looked so young and bored with me. I said maybe yes. He asked

me if I wanted to try to get out of the military. It was too late. It'd be like getting out of being born. I was already born. I remember that day, that talk, the morning's mourning, how I was wrapped in bombings, tons of bombings, so that there was no going back, and

the B-52s owned the air, drowned
the sky, tonnage, and this church,
in jungle, hot in February, sweat,

my brow, how low the engines,
how there was nothing for him to
do for me, so he left me, alone, in
this church with the roaring roar.
I went back to the barracks and
wrote poems, during bombings.
How odd. How old I am now,
looking back, my back killing
me. 88,500 tons of bombs. I
believe in God. Even with all of
the dangerousness of my memory.

Ron Riecki was awarded a 2022 Pushcart Prize. Right now, Riecki's listening to "☕ Warm Relaxing Jazz Music with Cozy Coffee Shop for Working, Studying, Sleeping" and "3 Hours of Gentle Night Rain, Rain Sounds for Sleeping — Dark Screen to Beat insomnia, Relax, Study" at the same time on YouTube.

POETRY

Matthew Johnson

IN ATTENDANCE OF THE WATCH NIGHT
SERVICE

Of all the days in the year, the slaves dread New Year's day the worst...
— Lewis Clarke, "Leaves from a Slave's Journal of Life"

There were about 20ish minutes before the start of a new year,
And my mother, so enraptured by the sermon and chorus,
Didn't nudge me as my drool ran down my Sunday best
As I inadvertently fell asleep, like the disciples in Gethsemane.
I was awakened by the pastor who had caught the Spirit,
And was yelling and running up and down the aisle
Like he was being chased by a hellhound,
But really, only one of the senior deacons was after him,
Carrying a towel to drape over the reverend, like one of the J.B.'s,
Who put a cape on James Brown to cool him down.
I watch from my pew, groggy and stifling yawns,
My mother and other older churchgoers, get up and sway and move,
Because of the Lord, and because it was a dance of liberty,
Like the ones our ancestors move to on the first watch night service,
Hours before the first day of that special new year,
When freedom, that terribly, beautiful thing, was finally in reach,
And the auction block never felt more powerless,
And the hope that families would be spared
From being fractured into fragments as business transactions,
Never felt more possible.
They dance because of the Lord, and because of the ancestors.

Matthew Johnson, author of three poetry collections, including *Too Short to Box with God* (Finishing Line Press), has had his writing appear in *The London Magazine*, *Roanoke Review*, and elsewhere. Managing editor of *Portrait of New England*, he is also poetry editor for *The Twin Bill*.

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POETRY

Rachel Michelle Collier

FUTURISTIC

— *On hope.*

A gilded trifacta of mercy swaddles a white seed at its center.
The seed is a cluster of souls being preserved; the seed quivers:
 the trifacta pacifies.
The three speak with itself and for itself: for its seed:
 :: for itself.

Rachel Michelle Collier is from Mississippi, and has also been published in *Pure in Heart Stories* (little sister to *HOF*), *Fathom Mag*, and *Ekstasis*. She wants you to know that you are loved. Twitter: @CollierRachelM

FICTION

FICTION

Hampton D. Harmon

THE RATTLE OF BONES

When the officers came into the church to arrest Ezekiel Freeman, the congregation fell into an uproar. It was easy to see why. White cops come into a mixed church on Sunday morning and arrest an elderly black man, and with no warning. Ezekiel had not resisted. Still, they pulled him to the hardwood, turning over several foldable chairs, causing even more commotion as his body scraped against the gym floor.

The morning the officers came, Byers had been calling on the grace of God in prayer. They did not answer any questions. By the time they had the old man hoisted to his feet, Byers had made his way to the back of the room shouting for answers. They walked Zeke out in handcuffs. His face looked almost regal, cut with the lines of age and void of expression, dignified in compliance, a sheep to the slaughter.

The last cop to leave closed the door, sealing off the light from the outside. No one spoke. Pastor Byers pulled his eyes from the door and began to pray.

Two years earlier, the church had been in a bad way. There had been about thirty members meeting in the old sanctuary fit for a hundred. Byers had been there about a month, teaching a congregation where the average age surpassed seventy. He had a habit of reading his sermons drily rather than delivering them with feeling.

One day, an elderly black man in overalls had come in late on a Sunday morning, after Byers had already started preaching. The congregation was all white and most of them nigh on eighty. Byers was taken with the

visitor. He sat upright, his hands in his lap, unmoving in his focus on the preacher. Byers felt a new thing flow through him, and he felt his rhythm change and pick up pace. He received the Holy Spirit as he watched the old black man, and it fell and felt like fire and wind and the flow of cleansing waters.

After he closed his sermon with a tearful prayer, he placed himself in the back of the sanctuary like always, and waited to greet the parishioners. Several asked what had gotten ahold of him. It was the Spirit, he knew. He shook hands as the people left, and waited for the man who had brought the wind.

Ezekiel waited until the entire congregation had left before leaving his seat. When he came face to face with Byers, they shook hands and introduced themselves. Byers shook a little too heartily, and the old man with a serenity that set in deep behind the eyes. He was so stolid in the first moments of their friendship that the pastor was shocked when he said, "What do I need to do to be saved?"

"Ezekiel, brother, I'm happy to hear you ask that. Why don't we sit and talk a while." As they spoke, Zeke, as he began to call him, was stoic, unmovable, and more honest than any man he had ever known, "I have done things, preacher, that I am not proud of. Horrible things. But I want to be saved. I want to know that all the things I have done will not damn me."

Byers was moved. He led him in the sinner's prayer.

"Dear Jesus, I know that I am a wicked, evil sinner. I believe that you died on the cross for me, to take away my sins. I believe you rose from the dead. Please forgive me and accept me into your kingdom. Amen."

After Zeke had repeated the whole prayer, Byers was filled with joy. He laughed and put his hand on the old man's knee in encouragement. Zeke had not yet learned to show his happiness, but Byers could tell it was a turning point, for himself and Zeke and the people of God.

Byers found himself full of energy, and his preaching reflected it. He preached and cried out from the pulpit, and he felt the congregation begin to listen, if only to see what would come next. One Sunday, after Zeke had been with them a month, Miss Mary Dayton stood up and clapped her hands during one of the songs, and kept her hands raised for a whole chorus. She was over eighty, but she was filled with the joy of God and heaven's angels. Two weeks later, Jim Brewer caught the Spirit during one of Pastor Byers' sermons, and began to call out in a language none of them had ever heard. After that, someone spoke in a heavenly tongue every week.

A few months after Zeke joined them, the healings began. One woman had been wheelchair bound for most of her life. She said she began to feel heat through her legs like ants under her skin and that was the first thing she had felt below the waist in decades. The heat turned to motion and strength and she stood right up out of her chair, and began to testify to the healing power of God. Byers himself began to weep and cry out to God in praise. Ezekiel watched, though he did not laugh or cry with joy. The two men made eye contact in the celebration, and Byers thought he saw his new friend nod.

The pews began to get tighter with those coming to church for the possibility of seeing something miraculous, something wonderful. They did see many wonders. The deaf heard and the blind received their sight. The sick were made well and wombs were opened that had been shut for years. Every week, more were healed and added to the faith. Eventually, the people voted to move Sunday service into the old basketball gym that had been out of use since it had been built. Byers would cry and sing and look to the back where Ezekiel sat. He was always watching, nodding his approval and conspiracy in the end of suffering.

The miracles continued until Miss Mary Dayton died. It was a Wednesday, a year before the arrest. She had been with the prayer team in the early hours of the morning, and asked for a fellow prayer warrior to take her to the hospital shortly after. Within hours, she was dead. Her friends wept over her body and legacy in equal measure. Preparations were made and her body treated before the funeral service which would

occur on Friday, so as not to disturb the church's weekend schedule.

Byers called at Zeke's house, which he had never done before. The driveway and yard were dirt, and the glass storm door rattled as the pastor knocked. Ezekiel answered the door in short order and if he was surprised to see his friend, he did not show it.

Byers felt something like a holy awe at being in Ezekiel's house. There were no family pictures on the walls, nor any paintings or decorations. The man wore his overalls even in his home, and invited the pastor to sit, that same stoicism adorning his countenance.

"What can I do for you, Pastor Byers?"

"Well Zeke, I'm sure you've heard that sister Dayton went to be with the Lord this morning."

Zeke nodded.

"She thought highly of you."

"How's that pastor?"

Byers smiled at the old man, his black face an image of resistance to his purpose, faithful, yet set against the storm of life and the power of God. Still, Byers saw God in Zeke's face, the darkness of it like the shadow and the cloud that goes before his people.

"She loved you, in a way. She thought you might have something to do with all of it." Zeke did not move.

Ezekiel sat, looking at the pastor, waiting. He seemed resigned, both to the death of the elderly woman and to the love the people had for him.

"She asked that you pray over her. At the end of the service, nothing special."

Zeke waited.

“Zeke, she meant it for a compliment.” He touched the old man’s knee. “I believe she meant to honor you.”

Zeke thought for a moment. “She asked for me?”

“Wrote it right there in the will, plain as day.”

Zeke paused a beat, then nodded. “I reckon I should do it.”

Pastor Byers took the moment as a sign of Zeke’s final transformation into one of the saints. He brought the power of God into their church years ago, and now the love of God was being displayed in this tiny act of service, a prayer over the dead body of an old woman. He left the man’s house that day, knowing that the Spirit had been there too.

The funeral was the most attended in the church’s history. The men carried her in, and the casket was laid on a platform in the front of the gym where they now held service, to the side of the pulpit. It was left open. The congregation looked on the woman. She looked like any other body they had seen.

Zeke did not wear his overalls, but a button-down shirt tucked into a pair of unstained jeans. He did not wear a belt. He watched as the people celebrated the life of the woman who had become a testimony to the church’s growth. He watched as Byers called down God’s love on the people, and offered all who had not yet repented a chance to know the saving grace of God. Many came forward to be saved, in full view of the lifeless body of Mary Dayton. The faithful sang and hugged their new brothers and sisters.

After all returned to their seats, Byers stepped away from the pulpit and motioned for Zeke to come forward.

“It’s time, brother Ezekiel.”

Zeke stepped from his place in the back row. He did not take up the handheld microphone the pastor offered him, nor did he place himself

behind the pulpit. He simply stood next to the casket where she lay with her hands crossed over her chest. He leaned awkwardly to one side, and did not speak for several moments. The music stopped and all were silent. He found his voice, and it came out soft, though it did not waver.

“She asked me to pray for her. I don’t know if I can.” His gaze passed over them, boring into their spirits as though he were the judge of the living and the dead. “I am not a man of prayer, really. So I’ll just say she was a good woman. She spoke kindly to me a few times. Yes, I guess Miss Dayton welcomed me. I didn’t really know her, but I felt like she saw me. Whether that was a good feeling or bad, I can’t say. I suppose I’ll miss her. I loved the way she raised her hands high when we sing. I could always tell she believed. I believed her, too.”

Zeke looked at the casket for the first time. He did not cry or flinch, and no one applauded at the closing of his words. They watched him look at the woman, at the box that held her body, and they watched as he reached out his hand to the foot of the casket.

The moment his hand touched the polished grain, there was a loud thump. He did not take his hand away. He looked at the woman, who lay lifeless. There was another thump, louder, and Pastor Byers knew it came from inside the casket.

Miss Mary Dayton’s legs kicked against the felt lining of the coffin, though her torso and face had yet to find the same life. Gasps and shrieks came from the congregation, and Byers himself involuntarily breathed, “My God!”

Only Ezekiel saw her eyes open, her hands leave her chest and grasp the fabric and pillows on the inside of what would have been her tomb. All saw her sit up, her eyes finding only the face of her resurrection. Ezekiel reached out his hand to the woman and she took it. Byers finally rushed forward, and the two men helped the woman from her casket, lowering her down awkwardly in the midst of the uproar. Her feet hit the floor and she looked out at the crowd. Her countenance shone with new life. She smiled, broad and toothy, and raised her hands up to feel her face, smoother and less wrinkled than before.

As the crowd launched into an anarchy of celebration and praise to God, she turned to hug Ezekiel, who awkwardly hugged her in return. Byers looked over Miss Dayton's shoulder at him. He saw the face, the man of God. The blessing and the life hit him and he sunk to his knees as though he stood before an angel. He joined the praise, weeping, believing. The woman who had been dead continued to hold Ezekiel in her embrace, thanking him for her life. The celebration continued for several days. Death had lost its sting completely. They had seen it. Mary Dayton had come back to life again.

It was the same Mary Dayton who called for an impromptu prayer meeting the morning after Ezekiel's arrest. They prayed for several hours. After prayer, they talked of him, circling up the chairs to call on memories.

The town drunk gave credit for his newfound sobriety to a handshake from Ezekiel the first Sunday he came. A young man said he had dreamed of Ezekiel telling him to come to church, that when he did, he no longer wanted to kill himself.

Miss Dayton spoke. "You all know what he did for me." She found herself filled with emotion. "I was here the first day. He came in and sat in the back. To tell the truth, when I first saw him I was afraid. Here's this black man in the back of our church. I was afraid. I'm ashamed of it. I can't imagine where we'd be without him." She paused in thought. "I guess I do know where I'd be."

After the meeting, a group tried to go see Ezekiel, but the police would not let them in. The police were still interrogating him, but the man had not given up any of the necessary information.

On Tuesday, Byers went alone, and an officer met him in the lobby.

"Pastor Byers, would you come with me?"

Byers was led down a narrow hallway into an office. He sat down in the seat in front of the desk, the chair for the concerned, for the unaccused. The pastor spoke first. "If you have not charged Zeke, then you have to release him."

The officer, dressed in a suit rather than a police uniform, sighed and rubbed his eyes with one hand. "We have a forty-eight-hour window. And we are nearing the end of it."

"Y'all are wasting time. Zeke's a good man."

The two men stared at one another. The pastor grew impatient. "Why don't you let me talk to him. For just a few minutes."

The officer leaned forward, put his elbows on his desk, and interlaced his fingers. "He's been asking for you."

"And you don't mention it until now? He's probably scared half to ..."
Byers started to stand when the officer spoke to give him pause.

"Has Mr. Freeman ever told you about his past? Anything he'd be likely to hide?"

"He's a sinner. Like me and you."

"Nothing that would stick out in your mind?"

"He's never told me anything that would land him in here."

The officer shook his head in frustration.

"Jesus. What is it you think he's done?"

The officer took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. "We have reason to believe Ezekiel Freeman committed a string of murders dating back forty years. We believe he stopped killing a little over fifteen years ago. We have not found any bodies, but we believe our intuition thus far to be accurate."

“My God. My God.” Byers struggled to find words and sat roughly back in the chair. “How could you think ...”

He was cut off again by the officer, “We are not prepared to offer that information.” The officer waited. Byers did not speak. “Are you willing to speak to him?”

“Yes, of course. Take me to him.”

The officer obliged. At the door of the interrogation room, the officer grabbed Pastor Byers by the arm. “We are right outside. If he makes any threatening moves, we’ll come in.” The pastor jerked his arm from the grasp of the officer and went in alone. Ezekiel sat at a table in dirty overalls, and showed no distress.

Pastor Byers rushed to the table to talk to his friend. He spoke immediately on hearing the door close behind him. “Zeke. Are you ...”

“You should sit, pastor.”

The pastor sat in the chair and started speaking again. “Have they fed you? I’m sure I can call someone to get us a meal. We should be able to clear this up if you just talk to me.” The pastor waited for Zeke to begin, but he did not. They stared at one another as the moment rolled into the next, and Byers wanted to speak but found no relief in his friend’s face. Finally, blessedly, Ezekiel Freeman broke the silence, and Byers felt a wave of something like the spirit of martyrdom unraveling and flowing down. Somehow, he knew it was the end of all things.

“Have they told you what they think I’ve done?”

“I don’t believe it. You aren’t a murderer, that much I know.”

“You should be quiet now.” Ezekiel’s voice was commanding, dominating. The pastor recoiled. “I am going to tell you the truth. They are listening. I would like you to listen too. Can you do that?”

Byers nodded, cautious. He pulled his hands away from the table and into his lap. Ezekiel sat forward, his eyes piercing Byers to the heart, and began to tell a story.

“When we first met, I told you I had done horrible things. Do you remember?” He did not wait for a response. “I came into the sanctuary that day, and I told you. I suppose it would have to come out.”

“Zeke ...”

“I never wanted to be this way, I want you to understand.”

“Please ... don’t.”

“Try not to speak. Once I start, I will not stop. This will be my confession. I will not make another.”

Byers shook his head in disbelief, the pain and unraveling marking his brow.

“Don’t make that face, pastor. Be strong in the Lord, and He will sustain you.”

Byers tried to listen, to understand.

“I killed my first when I was 27. She had dark skin, and black hair. She had these blue eyes that lit up, and she cried when I took her. I called her Dina, after my mother. She cried and cried up until she left this world. I was horrified at myself. I need you to know that. I was terrified at who I was. I washed my hands so much they bled and I had to burn the clothes. I felt alive, too, and that was the worst part. Because I knew I’d want to feel alive again.”

“My God.” Byers’ hand reached to his face and his fingers tapped his hairline in distress, as though they tried to beat out the thoughts that were taking root there. “My God.”

“I buried her in this vacant lot next to the church. I had never been, but something drew me there that night. I can’t explain it, and I never knew what it was until that day, until I saw you preach the Word.”

Byers’ head was spinning, splitting, and his hand balled before his mouth to keep from vomiting. He did not speak, but tears flowed freely from his eyes.

“Forgive me, but I must finish. I must confess to find healing. There are others. They all lie there in that lot. It comforts me to know that they are close to the house of God.”

Byers jumped up to the door and emptied himself into the trashcan next to it. He reached for the handle, but did not test it. He faced Zeke with vomit on his shirt, and wiped his face. He knew what he had to do and prayed for strength. He sat back down.

Ezekiel smiled. It occurred to the pastor that he had never seen the man smile before.

“I am confessing to you that I killed them. I used them and then I killed them. I am sure by now you know what made me stop.”

Byers broke from his emotion to think. “The gym.”

“Yes, sir. When the pastor before you built that gym over my sacred place, he hoped people would see it and be drawn. It didn’t draw others, but it drew me. I tried once after it was built. A girl passing through town. But I knew if she couldn’t be there with the others, with God, then it wouldn’t be the same. Would you believe it took me fifteen years to come into the church after that?”

Byers’ emotions mixed and roiled in his mind. “You came into our flock, and made us all believe. You had people thinking you were sent by God.”

“Wasn’t I? You saw the sick healed. The blind and deaf and barren. Wasn’t I His messenger?”

Byers stumbled over his words trying to find the right ones. He choked it out. "God would not abide ... His vessel tainted by all this death." Byers shook his head involuntarily. There was a breaking. "You are death."

"The church was dead when I came, pastor. You remember. I may have brought death with me. I am a sinner after all. But you did too. And when your death met mine, there was life."

"I never killed anyone. Miss Dayton, the others. You betrayed them."

"There is no one who does good. That's what the Book says. Not even one."

Byers realized, suddenly, that he could not listen for another second. He could not bear it. He stood and turned to leave.

"Pastor, please."

Byers faced Ezekiel Freeman for the last time. "Was any of it real?"

"I know the way it felt for me."

Byers shook his head. He was going to be sick again.

Ezekiel's face held the same stoicism Byers always thought to be holiness. He knew now that the eyes were dead, the body full of darkness. Ezekiel spoke from underneath the eyes. "Do you forgive me?"

Byers stared at the man handcuffed to the table for what seemed like an eternity.

"Do you think God does?" The pastor asked in earnest for both of them. Would God forgive Byers for allowing the angel of death to deceive the flock?

Ezekiel did not skip a beat, but spoke with confidence that Byers once attributed to the Spirit. "I know he has."

Byers left the room and did not respond to the officers trying to stop him in the hallway. He drove home, taking another way so as not to pass the church, the burial ground for the victims of a man he once thought was his friend, the very power of God.

The next morning, Byers rose at home after a sleepless night. He turned the TV to the news and watched as they ravaged the gym. They began their work on the floor at the place where Mary Dayton had been recalled to life. He watched as they broke through and pulled up the bones of young women. They were dry and covered in dirt. He wept as the faces that had once belonged to the bones were displayed on the screen.

He turned off the TV and went to the dining room table where his Bible lay. He opened it to try and find a passage for Sunday morning. He hoped he would find a passage on God's justice, or forgiveness, or miracles of life borne from the graveyard of human suffering and despair. He found them in the same places he always did. Still, his tears fell on the pages and the words he read did not make sense. He closed the book and looked out the window for a while. He knew that the life had gone out of him, that the wind in his soul had gone away.

Hampton D. Harmon currently lives in Houston, Texas, with his wife, daughter, and dog. He is a middle school teacher and previously studied Religion and English at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in hopes that his interests would align in his writing. His short story, "Second Wind," was printed in *Clockhouse Journal*, as well as an essay on the Murdaugh murders with the Dead Mule Society. This story, titled "Rattle of Bones," fits his thematic interests as a writer and showcases his growth in the craft.

FICTION

Paul Michael Garrison

ALICE WILL NEVER BELIEVE THIS

Why in a lot of TV shows — the action kind I watched when I had my own set — do they make hostages strip down to their underwear? I'm thinking mostly of bank robberies because I'm in a bank right now, but on TV it's not just banks. One reason I can think of is it makes it easy to distinguish between the robbers and hostages. You can spot the difference right away, no thinking required. Two, maybe it's to discourage people from making a run for it. What lady wants to run into the street in her bra and panties, right? Three — and this one makes the most sense to me — to show who's in control, who's got the power. Plus, where are you going to hide a weapon or cell phone? "Hey, Ace, I see that Glock in your tighty whiteys! Hand it over!" So it could also be a precaution. Another reason: one of the first things they do on TV is cut the building's power including air conditioning, so it's always really hot (because hostage situations never seem to take place in winter), so maybe the hostages get down to their undies to beat the heat, although if it were me, I'd keep my pants on thank you, regardless of how hot it is. I'm used to it, man, this is South Carolina. The only other reason I can think of — and it's stupid so it's probably the real one — is ratings. Because people in their underwear probably get higher ratings.

The guys robbing this bank did not give a reason. Maybe they just watch too much TV.

I am glad I wore the boxers with a button fly today. And I wish the guy across from me had done the same. He is tubby and his drawers, which have seen better days and higher thread counts, are too snug, so the fly gaps. Every time I glance up, it's peekaboo. We're all sitting cross-legged in a circle with our hands on our heads, so there's not much he can do.

He raises his knees to close the gap, but he's old and out of shape so he can manage it only for a short time.

I wonder if anybody here, as they got dressed this morning, thought, "No, I'll wear this pair in case somebody sees me in my underwear today." Other than the guy sitting next to me. You could see his boxer briefs before because his jeans sagged off his butt in a way that defied physics. When the order came, he just shifted his hips and his pants fell to the ground and he stepped out of them.

I feel I am not as worried about the situation as I should be. I can think of two reasons. One, things like this do not happen to people like me. My life is ordinary, very back-page or no-page really. So I guess I don't believe I will get hurt or killed. It doesn't fit with my life story. Two, I may be in shock.

I guess it's not fair to say nothing exciting happens to me, but that's how I think about it. I mean, I had a little run-in with the po-po myself, but nothing like these boys. But this shows you how my life is: the whole time they were robbing the bank, I was in the john. I came out at the beginning of the strip-down and was pretty confused. I thought it might be a flash mob or student film or something. Then Ski Mask was all yelling at me, waving his gun. I tried to ask Boxer Briefs what happened, but every time we talk they yell and cuss at us to shut up.

I gave up swearing for Boo's sake. I know some toddlers who swear like sailors, and their parents think it's hilarious. I wonder if it'll be funny when their kid gets kicked out of kindergarten. No lie, that happened to T-Randall. His baby girl dropping the f-bomb during craft time, and he had to leave in the middle of his shift to take her home. I don't hang with that crowd much anymore. I didn't want my little girl's first words to be cuss words, so I quit and Alice never swore much anyway. Besides, swearing on the floor will get you canned at Belk, where I am a floater. It surprises me still how I quit swearing so easy when I wouldn't quit using.

Whoever is outside has not cut the power, and the air conditioning is going full force. At this point, it would be a favor if they would. My cheeks are numb. I feel even worse for Thong 1 and Thong 2. This floor looks cleaner than it is.

I have on a tank and two of the others are wearing undershirts, which I know from the store are not selling much right now (except for old business dudes). The other guys are bare-chested, and you can see the gooseflesh from across the circle. It's not a big circle. There are only eight of us. It's a small branch bank. How much money did these guys think they would get?

My boxers are navy with a thin plaid — royal blue and yellow — over it. The button on the fly is mottled black. A navy thread snakes out from the hem and tickles my thigh when I shift my weight. I will see them in my sleep for days because I have been staring at them for the last fifty minutes. Them and my legs — I discovered a tiny mole on the back of my left thigh just above the knee — and the floor, which is a nothing color and as soft as concrete and cold as a mother-in-law's kiss. Not that I know mothers-in-law. Not exactly.

Alice and I never got hitched. Who needs it, we said. If you love each other, what's it matter? I think about it a lot now, what it is, what it means. It seems to me it's a promise you make to each other in front of the world. It's another reason not to quit or give up on someone. Maybe if I'd made that promise to Alice, to myself, I wouldn't be sleeping on my friend Jimmy's couch.

Alice's mother does not like me, by the way. Never did. I wish I had grounds to hold that against her.

When my neck starts aching, I steal a look around. I get flashed by Peekaboo Boxers before I remember to *not* look up directly. I try to check around the circle, but if the guys in masks — only two of them but they have guns — catch you, they yell. I feel like they should be wearing the same kind of mask, but they don't match: a black ski mask on one and a

white bandana tied over the other's face. Poor coordination. They were screwed from the beginning.

Under Armor makes me nervous. He works at the bank. He is young and fit and always looking, looking to do something. Whenever I catch his eye, which I try to, I shake my head slow. I think he gets me because then he will look down for a while.

Who wears compression gear under their business clothes? It's for working out, right?

Under Armor makes me think of this show Jimmy loves and made me watch. It's about space cowboys. He has it on DVD because it got canceled too soon. Anyway, in one episode, the hot black chick or maybe the captain — I think it's the woman — asks somebody, "Do you know what a hero is?" The man doesn't know, so she tells him, "A hero is somebody who gets other people killed." If someone in here gets us killed, it'll be Under Armor.

If anyone was going to be a hero, you'd think it would be Underoos. A grown man wearing superhero briefs. The waistband says *Captain America* around it, and the blue crotch, outlined in red, has a shield on it. I guess if you could put a shield someplace that's where you'd want it. He's no hero though. Not fat really, but soft like a marshmallow and something of that color. He almost passed out earlier. I wonder if he fancied himself a hero before today or if he just likes the costume.

Come to think of it, that shield looks kind of like a bull's-eye.

No, if someone tries something, it will be Under Armor. I'd be tempted to put money on Sports Bra; she looks tough but too smart. Her eyes focus on the middle of the circle, not on any of the rest of us, and I see her running for that finish line, the one where she lives.

I am not a runner, but I ride. I rode a liquorcycle for a while after I lost my license — actually it is only suspended, and not for alcohol. But I felt stupid holding up traffic on the main roads, so I got a bicycle instead. Riding a moped you get no respect. Unless you live in Italy, people think

you're a loser. When you're on a bike, they think you're athletic or green. A bike is a choice you made, not one that made you. It seems more purposeful. I feel like I am always riding toward something. I've lost ten pounds and my legs are like iron. And I'm not doping, Lance. I bought a helmet and everything. My clothes sit piled by the wall, khakis on top, and my ankle bands curl out of the pocket where I stuffed them. They keep your pant legs out of the chain. I don't need them when I wear skinny jeans, which thankfully I did not today. If I had, I'd be wearing less right now. Boxers and skinny jeans don't jibe in my book. Too much bunching.

Thong 1 is sniffing and Thong 2 whispers encouragement; they work here with Under Armor. Bandanna yells — because that always helps — and Thong 1 goes full hydro. I look at the clock. It is almost three. Nothing is happening, minutes and minutes of nothing. I'm supposed to pick up Boo from preschool soon. I have a little chair for her on the back of my bike but only for the park or side streets. Alice thinks it's dangerous because Greenville drivers are nuts, not because of me. She knows I am clean now. I think she believes me. But she will never believe this is why I didn't pick up Boo.

What's underneath can surprise you. Thong 2 for instance — who would've guessed that? We're all practically naked, and still we don't know much about each other. I look around and wonder if anyone else has kids. Any of them might. You can't tell from looking at a person. I don't look like a parent, I know. Sometimes people think I'm still in high school. Peekaboo could have grandkids even. Maybe all of them are wondering if they will make it home to their families. I'm sure they — we — will, but it makes me wonder who'll be waiting for me. Alice? With an earful maybe. Jimmy? I look at the clock. Boo is waiting. Does she think I forgot her?

When I told my mom Alice kicked me out and why, she gave me a big hug and then a slap. "I didn't raise any drug addicts," she said. I told her I wasn't an addict, but the set of her mouth didn't believe me. Still, she took me inside and fed me fried rice and chicken at the kitchen table. I felt like a schoolkid again, humbled but safe. Standing at the stove with

her back to me, she said, “You are going to lose everything if you do not change,” and crossed herself. I knew that prayer as sure as she’d said it out loud. I didn’t feel like eating anymore, but when she gave me another plate, I did.

I bounced around before ending up at Jimmy’s. The stupid thing is I ended up someplace I can’t use anyway — not that I would now. Jimmy teaches science at a Christian school, so he is very straightlaced about drugs and such. It’s also why he likes to watch those sci-fi shows. He will tell you everything wrong with the science in whatever you’re watching, but then he’ll say, “But it would be cool though, if it worked that way.” I like that about Jimmy, how he sees both sides.

I wish I could do that. Maybe then I would still have my family. I always see the choice in front of me, minute to minute, but never down the road. Like my brain never stops to think where a turn *could* go. I always assume I’ll have it under control. Jimmy calls it a failure of imagination. Every action has a reaction, he says, and you have to think what all of them could be. It’s hard, but I try to do that now. And dream about what could be, how things could be better between me and Alice and Boo.

I asked Jimmy once why I ended up such a loser when my parents are good people. They go to Mass every week, sometimes more. I’ve seen it a lot where the parents do good but the kids tear it up and asked why he thought that happens. He called it moral entropy — he said that “learned moral behavior divorced from personal faith devolves.” Yeah, Jimmy talks like that.

Ski Mask stands close to the doors but behind a pillar away from the glass. Bandanna walks around and keeps an eye on us except when he’s yelling into the phone. Do they really think they will get away?

I have been waiting for someone to play the race card. We’re a regular little United Nations in here, pretty diverse for a small group, and I keep thinking someone the same race as the robbers will work that angle. No one has, although I thought Under Armor might. I know he wants to try something, but he’s too smart for that. He knows they will not see him as

the same. The only brotherhood now is us sitting on the floor, tailbones driven up into our spines, and them standing behind guns and masks.

Jimmy says there is only one race: humanity. What normal people call race, he calls ethnicity, and he says it's the result of inbreeding. He says one reason Boo is so cute is because she is mixed. He says mixed kids are always cutest. I said you can't say things like that. He answered, "Well, they have greater genetic variability; you can't argue with that." No, Jimmy, I can't. I think Boo is the cutest kid in the world because she is mine. But that's how every dad feels or should.

Boo likes Jimmy, and so does Alice. She calls him a "good influence." Sometimes I feel the need to point out I was getting straight before I moved in with him, but I never make it an argument. We've just gotten friendly again, and I want to encourage that. I was going to tell her tonight how I'm back at Tech finishing the welding program. And I will finish. No more jobs at the mall. I swear I've worked in every clothing store you can name. Except Victoria's Secret.

For the record, Alice considers pot a drug, and she doesn't care what Jimmy Kimmel says or if everybody does it. "You need to find a different everybody," she says. I pointed out how it's legal in Colorado, and she said, "This ain't Colorado. You're welcome to move there and smoke it if you want."

She knows I would never move away from Boo. I want her to realize I would never move away from her either. I know how I make her sound, but that isn't how she is at all. Well, she's that way sometimes, lately, with me at least. I was ticked with her for a long time, and then one night when I came to visit Boo, I saw in her eyes that she was just scared, scared for Boo. Because of me, the kind of dad I would be.

So not even any pot. When I say I am clean, I mean clean.

Ski Mask and Bandanna bounce and bicker like hornets trapped in a jar, and I begin to wonder if I'm wrong that nothing bad will happen. Maybe my boring life is taking a dramatic turn right at the end. Just when I have

pointed my handlebars in the right direction, I am going to get knocked off. Maybe I didn't pedal fast enough. If I asked God to get me out of here, would He listen? Camisole, her eyes shut tight, has been moving her lips silently since this whole deal began. If she's praying, I hope it is for us all.

Thong 1 is crying again. This agitates Bandanna and he yells at her, all the bad names I thought in my head when Alice kicked me out but took back before they parted my lips. Thong 1 cries harder now. Under Armor runs interference with a calm, smooth voice. He doesn't realize how condescending he sounds. Then he stupidly tries to stand up. Bandanna smashes him on the side of the face with his gun. Under Armor goes down but not out. That's Underoos. He turns whiter than white and peels backward. His head goes *crack* against the floor.

For a second, no one moves. Bandanna points his gun from person to person in the circle. Ski Mask yells, wanting to know what's happening though he can see as clear as the rest of us. We all stare at Underoos laid out on the floor with his legs still crossed, his shield facing upward. We wait to see if blood runs from beneath his head, but nothing shows. Sports Bra asks if she can check to see if he's okay.

Bandanna nods and can't stop like he's on speed. Sports Bra knees her way to Underoos, checks his breathing and pulse, and gently feels the back of his head, but her eyes shoot to me — fierce granite, and I know they are saying something to me but I can't tell what. Do something. Don't do anything. Help me. Stop this. Calm them down. So many commands they could be giving, and I want to say — I'm the same as you; I'm just trying to ride through this, to the other side.

But now I think I'm going to die in here. A gear has shifted in my brain, and for the first time I am truly scared. Bandanna circles us, heading for Ski Mask. He passes the clock, which says three-thirty. Is Boo — who will never see me again and in ten years will struggle to remember my face, my voice — still waiting for me? The split on Under Armor's temple streams blood into his eye, but he blinks it away. He can still see. I realize I am giving him the same look Sports Bra gave me. He seems to understand what I don't know I'm saying. He bobs his head for a

microsecond as Bandanna strides behind me. My left hand drops on its own, swinging back to grab the cuff of his pants. His momentum jerks my arm up through the shoulder and I jerk back: action-reaction. I feel him fall, hear the interrupted curse as his gun hits the floor and explodes.

It is Boxer Briefs, not Under Armor, who throws himself, springing backward like a naked jack-in-the-box, onto Bandanna. Ski Mask bleeds from the middle, the middle that Under Armor crashes into. Then Thong 2 is there screaming, tearing the gun out of Ski Mask's hand and smashing a fist into his face. I see the scream but don't hear it. The air roars in my ears. Someone has turned the air conditioning to supersonic.

Everyone is moving now. Five-Os in navy everywhere mixing with the unclothed. But I still sit here, making sure I'm not dead. Because I'm not sure. Camisole and Peekaboo talk to a cop and point at me. A paramedic touches my arms. She wants to know if I'm okay. I nod. The cop takes her place, squatting in front of me.

I say my daughter is waiting. My life is waiting. I need to put on my pants; I'm supposed to pick her up. He understands but they must ask questions first; they need to get statements. They'll call for me. What's the number where my daughter is? I tell him the school's name; I don't know the number.

Alice will never believe this. I ask if it will be on the news. Maybe if she sees for herself, she will believe me.

Paul Michael Garrison (MFA) is the author of two mystery novels, *Letters to the Editor* and *The Lies People Publish*. His short fiction has appeared in *The Windhover* and *Quantum Fairy Tales*, and his one-act *There Be Dragons Here* was a semifinalist in Centre Stage's 2023 New Play Festival.

FICTION

Brian J Doughan

FIRST KISS

It was one of those new churches, all angles and timber and ceilings made of massive rectangles of glass to admit as much natural light as possible. Jesus hung high above the altar, backlit by green, yellow, and red stained glass, and there was a tiny fleck of red from His forehead just where the crown of thorns bites in.

The altar was at the centre of a semicircle, so that all parishioners could see and interact closely with the priest. The pews, which had padding on the knee rests, were at obtuse angles to the white brick walls. Four steps, covered in thick red carpet about two metres wide, lead you to the altar table. It was an easy climb for the oldies who came to collect the ciborium with the hosts to help distribute Holy Communion.

On one side of the altar there was an organ, a couple of music stands and space for singers and guitarists where local youth on guitars earnestly strummed to appease Sister Mechtilde, dressed in civvies, who conducted those of them who could sing. Mostly the guitars and voices were in tune. I felt, and still feel, at peace in these churches like they're heaven, all light and bright and softness. Older churches are enormous, towering over us as though trying to tell us our place in the world, that we, in God's scheme of things, are as insignificant as ants beneath our feet. As a seven-year-old, I was terrified of the local church that mum and dad used to take me to, but in awe of the rites, the songs in a language I didn't know. Fear and awe, the two zookeepers keeping us in check. And yet ... the vestments of the priest, heavy hanging robes with an embroidered gold cross on the back, the congregation murmuring together, the smell of the incense, the solemnity, drew me in.

On this day, this awful, exciting, guilty day, the pallbearers with the movement of their legs in perfect sync, left foot pause, right foot pause, the coffin resting dangerously on their shoulders, walk into the church to the background song of 'Knocking On Heaven's Door.' There are three guitarists from school, their uniforms perfectly fitting, and their faces scrunched up into balls of concentration, and they were softly strumming while our music teacher was singing. The church organist, Mrs. Weaver, who I reckon was due for a telegram from the king, was playing lightly. The music rose to the Heavens like the smoke from an incense container. A mystery to me was that someone who can barely walk, tottering along in a Zimmer frame, can still have the dexterity to move her fingers across the keyboard and keep in time with the other musicians who could be her grandchildren. God moves in mysterious ways, for sure. After all these years, I still haven't figured Him out.

On this day, I am with my girlfriend, Lucy, who was clutching my hand with as much strength as her 14-year-old fingers could muster. The word 'girlfriend' was a very approximate definition of what she was. We had been to a movie and had had lunch at McDonald's, but as yet we hadn't kissed. She had make-up on, but a black line of mascara was trickling down her cheek, so she looked like a scary Halloween. She was wearing a black dress and she kept tugging at it, nervously, maybe trying to preserve some modesty, though I don't think anybody was noticing. Or cared. All eyes were on the coffin with her friend Teresa in it.

The service dragged on, the rites and rituals giving comfort to us present, the muffled sobs blending with the priest's words.

Finally, the service was concluding and, as everyone filed out, sombre men in ill-fitting suits and sobbing women in once-a-year dresses, all walked slowly up to the coffin and touched it, or genuflected, a final gesture of goodbye. 'Forever Young' was being played by the musicians and who knows what Mrs. Weaver was thinking.

The coffin, shiny rose mahogany lined with white puffed satin, which could have been wedding dress material, rested on a stand at the foot of the steps. The lid was open, from the waist up, so we could see Teresa. She was wearing a polo neck jumper, which hid the marks around her

neck. Her arms were folded across her chest, the classic position of repose, her red fingernails a stark contrast to her pale, bony fingers.

Her eyes, now sightless globes seeing whatever it was only the dead see, were closed. Thank God. Nothing is sadder than the eyes of the dead. Her long black eyelashes curled up like insect legs, and her nose, so long and straight and noble, could have been on a Roman coin. Her hair, neatly brushed, framed high cheekbones which reflected the bright glare of the fluorescent lights, which had been turned on because the day (it was July) was cold and grey. The whole scene was a cliché from a film, with the weather and the drizzle and the quiver of umbrellas at the church entrance. And her mouth. My God, her mouth.

Her lips, caked in red lipstick, formed a perfect bow, hiding what I knew were porcelain white teeth, which could have been from a model for toothpaste.

My turn came to farewell her, and I shuffled over, pulling my hand from Lucy's desperate grip. Teresa's face, angelic and tempting, smiled Mona Lisa-like like and I kissed her goodbye; my lips lingering a little too long on hers. I knew I would have lipstick stains on my own mouth, like some kind of stigmata, but I didn't care, and my heart was thumping like the rapid-fire punches of a boxer, and the crotch in my pants was feeling a lot tighter. Lucy, who was behind me, coughed, and I inched myself away.

That was my first kiss.

I broke up with Lucy and finished school. I got into Uni, chopped and changed courses, but ended up leaving and joining the seminary, an old imposing gothic structure on North Head, Manly, which was the first in Australia. Once again, I was a terrified and awed seven-year-old, but I had returned to where I belonged, where I felt safe. Terror and awe, they were still the zookeepers guarding me in my cage.

I have been a priest now for some twenty years, back at my school church and have baptised, buried and married hundreds of people, the young, the old, the good, the bad, the indifferent. But that kiss, that first kiss, lingers

in my heart like a stain on my soul. I know it is sinful to reflect upon the desires of the flesh, but maybe I am a weak man, a hollow priest, I don't know. And God? He's told me nothing.

And Lucy? She started calling herself Lucille, had a son, Jack, and was murdered by one of her transient boyfriends. I will be doing her service here this afternoon. And this is true, and if you can't believe a priest who can you believe, I swear that the fleck of blood on Jesus' forehead has gotten bigger.

Brian J Doughan: Secondary Teacher of languages (Italian and Japanese). Now retired. Very old. Frequently have escaped from Jurassic Park and now, along with my fellow dinosaurs, await a meteor which will blast us into extinction.

FICTION

Bradley Warner

I'M GOING TO BE KIDNAPPED BY CATHOLICS

You don't often see nuns walking out of a casino, or priests at a rave. But I saw both on the same day. How quickly a coincidence can turn into a nightmare; just so when I saw a Cardinal hanging ten at the beach.

I was raised as a good Baptist: baptized at 8, took notes on every anecdote-laden sermon, not a lick of dancing (that the congregation ever knew about). But now, I fear that for some reason, the Catholic church seems to be following me, luring me to mass. I do have to admit, there's something grandiose and appealing about the rigid liturgy, Latin, cathedrals, and the immensity of pipe organs. But what would my deacon think? I must remain strong.

But it's getting harder. The priests at the rave offered to buy me a drink; I'm pretty sure they would've brought me sacramental wine. And when the Cardinal came ashore, he wrung salty water from his biretta and splashed me. I think it was an attempted baptism. I'm afraid every moment. Last night, I even dreamt that the pope himself broke into my bedroom and force fed me the Eucharist. The wafer was satisfyingly crisp, and the wine had dusty notes of 1500-year-old chants. The problem is, I woke up hungry for more.

Bradley Warner is a Junior at Corban majoring in creative writing. His primary focus is on fiction, especially in the fantasy and sci-fi genres, though he also enjoys poetry and theological or philosophical nonfiction. He also has a strong interest in music and participates in Corban's concert choir.

FICTION

Ashlyn McKayla Ohm

BIRTHDAY CANDLES

The Front Range received its first snowfall of the season on the day Sherri Norman began to die. There it was, a silent surprise, when she walked out of the doctor's office. Fluffy white flakes swirling down like a second chance.

For everyone except her, of course.

She stepped gingerly across the slick parking lot and took refuge in her car, turning the heat up to full blast. While the ancient Chevy's heating system slowly caught up with her request, she gripped the wheel and stared unseeingly ahead, watching the white whirl against the mountains and blinking through her mental fog to the doctor's words.

Cancer progressed more rapidly than expected ... stage 4 ... limited treatment options ... get affairs in order ...

There was only one word he hadn't said. The word that had been slinking around his every sentence. The word that was peering at her even now. *Die*. That was what he'd been saying, really. Under all the camouflage of stammering sympathy and carefully caged sentences and reluctance to hold out hope.

Sherri, you're going to die.

Warm air was blasting from the vents now, but Sherri's hands were still numb. Probably because she'd been gripping the steering wheel with a death grip. *Death grip*. Ha.

She flexed her fingers and drew in a deep breath. Well, so it had come. Death, the expected unexpected. Although in her case, quite a bit less unexpected than for most. She'd known about the cancer since spring, after all. Hadn't she realized all along that the prognosis wasn't good? That the radiation treatments weren't helping? Hadn't she watched herself shrinking to shadowed eyes and thinning hair and taut-stretched skin over aching bones? Hadn't she known, really, what Dr. Alliston would tell her, without telling her, today?

Upbeat pop music was still grooving over the car radio, songs about love and dreams and all the other things that were irrelevant now. Sherri flicked it off and started driving into the stubborn snow. Even in this weather, folks were hurrying along the downtown sidewalks — families with squealing toddlers, giggling gaggles of teenage girls, couples cuddling arm-in-arm. With the white whirl of approaching winter and the golden embrace of the glowing shop windows, the scene looked magical, like an enchanted snowglobe. Strange, how all these people would outlive her. How they all enjoyed the luxury of thinking about tomorrow like a wide-open horizon.

Sherri kept driving, away from the lighted shops and happy people and up into the cold starkness of the mountains, along the winding stretch of Highway 34 north of Devils Gulch. Her hands were okay now. The numbness had been ridiculous. *Sentimental*, her father would have sneered. His description for when she was being too emotional.

Lord knew he'd never had that problem. After he'd suffered the stroke that had crippled him — the one the doctor believed would end him — he'd just given his hard-edged laugh as Sherri had wheeled him out of the hospital. "*Been dyin' since the day I was born anyway,*" he'd rasped in that sandpaper voice of his. "*Might as well finish the job now.*"

He hadn't, though. He'd hung on another sixteen years, a bitter man in a broken body, holed up in his mountain cabin north of Estes Park. Almost six thousand more sunrises out his window, six thousand tomorrows and second chances and new beginnings. And he'd burrowed a bitter way through all of them, cursing the God he hated and the body that broke ...

and the daughter who'd given up nearly two decades of her life to care for him. He'd dared death to come, like a dark deliverer.

Sherri blinked away the memories that hung just outside the windshield. Well, she'd do the same. She wouldn't be weak, the way her father had so often accused her of being. Anyway, he'd taught her everything she needed to know for this moment, hadn't he? He'd taught her all about how to push through pain. How to keep a stiff upper lip. How to bend without complaining to the will of someone stronger. And most of all, how to let dreams die without a single murmur.

Yes, in every meaningful way, she'd learned how to die for sixteen years. This should come easily.

The mailbox at the end of the dirt drive was still that ugly black model her father had chosen, and when she opened the gate, the hinges still squawked in complaint. She'd been meaning to fix both of those things ... on one of the days she'd thought she'd had left.

By the time she reached the cabin, the snow had lessened, tapering into a few flakes here and there, though the air remained cold enough to burn the inside of her nose. The High Peaks were obscured, though, wrapped snugly in a blanket of winter. The road over the pass would be closed tonight, no doubt, the little mountain town accepting the first big snow of the season. Well, so winter had started. Sherri had always prided herself on being one who could tolerate every mood of the mountains, who stayed "*from ice-in to ice-out*," as the locals said.

Strange. This time, she wouldn't be here for ice-out.

She squared her shoulders, unlocked the door, and stepped across the threshold of the little cabin where she'd given the finite minutes of her life to placating a man who'd only lived to die. And in the process, she'd given up her own life too, hadn't she? No career. No family. No friends. No one to speak at her funeral or put flowers on her grave or even notice when she was laid beneath the mountain soil.

Her father would say that was her own fault. And he'd probably be right. It didn't matter anyway. Actually, maybe it was for the better. At least

she wasn't disappointing anyone by dying. Not the way she'd disappointed her father all her life.

Doing had always come more easily than thinking and feeling. Sherri forced herself into executive mode, out of her heart and into her mind. *Get your affairs in order*, the doctor had said. Not much to do along those lines, with the shrunken life she'd lived, but there were some things she'd already started handling. She'd been *conscientious*, the way a teacher once described her. In fact, she'd prepared herself for the doctor's news so many times that everything now would be simply a well-rehearsed dance of dutiful next steps.

She'd already checked with a lawyer, back when the cancer first appeared, to confirm that the cabin would go to her father's sister in Wisconsin. She'd already written her own obituary — quite good, if she had to say so herself — and started a file of end-of-life matters. And she'd already bought some oversized Rubbermaid bins, all ready for her to start dismantling the rest of her life. Most of what she owned could be donated or sold or thrown away altogether. Less for Aunt Ella to go through — afterwards.

Wrangling the bins out of the hall closet and into her room was harder than she'd expected, her breath draining away at the slightest exertion. Yet another sign that her body had already known what she'd been told today. She dragged one of the bins to her desk and sank into her chair as she examined the clutter on the weatherbeaten wooden surface. An outdated edition of *Estes Park News*, the events page dog-eared — she'd never gone to any of the festivities, though. A framed photo of Hallett Peak on a sunny day. A hiking trails map from the Wild Basin and an off-centered stack of unpaid bills and a mystery novel she'd started reading years ago and wandered away from halfway through. Little unfinished scraps of her life. All of it collected here. All of it worthless now.

She Sharpie-scribbled *TRASH* across the lid of the biggest box, then started sweeping everything inside. The map of trails she wouldn't hike. The photo of a mountain she wouldn't see. The newspaper with events she wouldn't attend. Even the book. She could already guess how the plot would unfold, anyway.

When the top of her desk was cleared, she opened the first drawer — her “*saving drawer*,” she’d called it. Bookmarks she’d thought too fancy for everyday use. A paperweight from her one trip out of state to visit Aunt Ella. A package of beautiful ink pens — unused and now all dried up. What had she been waiting for? A celebration more special than the mundane miracle of just being alive?

She paused at a box of elaborately spiraled candles. Oh, she’d forgotten about these. A friend had given them to her at her twenty-first birthday. “*Use them on your cake!*” she’d laughed.

But when Sherri had shown them to her dad, he’d sneered. “*You’re too old for birthday candles.*”

Something tugged at her memory. She blinked at the calendar on her desk, the keeper of dwindling days, for a couple of heartbeats before the date had meaning. October 27. Her birthday. Twenty years removed from receiving those candles for the first time.

Her dad was right. She’d been too old for birthday candles. Yet all this time, she’d saved them. Waiting for — what?

She tossed the candles into the Rubbermaid box and kept going, past the notebooks she’d never written in, the stamps she’d never used, the pocket cross she’d bought at a craft fair. She rubbed her thumb across its rough pottery surface. God had been pretty quiet lately. She’d been talking to Him, this God Who had died and lived again.

But resurrection hadn’t found its way to her.

At the bottom of the drawer, her fingers curled around the edge of an envelope. Oh! So that’s where those had gotten to.

She carefully untucked the envelope flap and slid out the treasure inside — pressed aspen leaves. The gold color had browned somewhat, and the edges were crumbling, but they still held the delicate autumn hue of her favorite trees.

And the memory.

She stared out the window at the blurry edge where the forest met the yard. After her mother had left and her father had moved here with her, she'd been overjoyed by the ring of aspens she found in the woods. She'd loved the rustle of their leaves in the wind, the silky texture of their slim trunks, the way they so eagerly made welcome for birds and forest critters — and her. She'd spent whole days as a teenager sitting beneath them, drawing or thinking or dreaming about a future that seemed expansive then. And she'd especially loved them in autumn, when the leaves flashed brilliant gold, shocking the shadows like torches. She'd loved them so much, in fact, that in her senior year of high school, she'd gathered and pressed these leaves.

It was a good thing she had. She'd returned from college at Christmas break to find that her father had chainsawed down the trees while she'd been gone. He'd scoffed at her tears. *"They were just stupid trees! Blocked the view from that window. And messy, too, with all those seeds in the spring. Dang it, girl, quit cryin'! You'd think somebody was dyin'! Ain't nothin' cryin' ever fixed anyway."*

A bitter smile twisted one corner of her mouth. Well, somebody was dying now. And sometimes she wondered if maybe she hadn't started dying, at least inside, all the way back then. Back in that moment when she'd realized that she was powerless to hold onto anything that mattered.

But she wasn't crying. She'd learned long ago that her father was right about that. It fixed nothing.

If only ... if only she could see the aspens turn gold, one more time. But that was impossible. There were no other of the trees on their property — none had dared to grow, probably. And the aspens high in the mountains had dropped their foliage weeks ago. No, the papery ghosts of those long-ago leaves would be all she had to hold onto now.

She kept working, moving methodically through her desk and on to the file drawer, adding important papers to her end-of-life files. Birth certificate, records, paperwork, registration, printed copy of her obituary,

deed to the cabin, purchase records of her cemetery plot. All that was left of her life, neatly quantified on stark white paper.

She folded everything into a smaller plastic box and carried it out the door, propping it on her hip as she headed to her car. She'd load it in the back and take it to her storage building tomorrow. That way it would all be easy to find when —

A sudden gust of wind slapped her sideways. Before she could regain her balance, the box tumbled from her stiff fingers. The lid spun one way, the bin bounced another, and papers began pinwheeling like confetti before the wind, rushing like tumbleweeds across the snow-patchy grass.

No, no, *no*! Sherri dashed after them, ignoring the way her chest tightened instantly and the trembling began in her arms and legs. But it was too late. The wind was strong, and the papers were willing, and all the fragments of her life were blowing away like the empty scraps they were. And by the time she'd stumbled deep into the woods, snatching up only a few papers now wet and crumpled, she couldn't ignore the needles in her lungs any longer. She sank onto a fallen log at the edge of a small clearing and let the coughing start. The terrible, terrible coughing that turned her inside out, that would finally tear her loose from life.

When her lungs could at last reach for air again, she wiped her eyes on her sleeve and drew in a shuddering dose of oxygen. The winter world was hauntingly quiet. Not a whisper of wind now, not the squeak of a squirrel or twitter of a chickadee. As if the mountains were holding their breath.

And in the quiet, the whole unbelievable truth burst over her like a bubble again. She was going to die. She was *going to die*.

Her breath snatched again in sudden gulps, her core trembling from a deeper trouble than the cold. Her heartbeats thumped loud in her ears.

How many breaths and heartbeats did she have left?

And was that really life, anyway?

The papers in her hands were suddenly meaningless. They were no more her life than the fallen autumn leaves were the trees. Her life was the rich depth of *herself* — her thoughts, her dreams, her hopes, her fears, her memories, her experiences, her story.

At least, it should have been.

But here, on her last birthday, alone in the sleeping winter woods, the true tragedy suddenly came clear. The greatest grief was not that she would die as surely as the winter woods. The greatest grief was that she had never lived.

And now it was too late.

The wind gusted again, and it wasn't until Sherri felt the wetness drying on her cheeks that she realized she was crying. The kind of crying she hadn't allowed in years. Deep, soul-shaking sobs. She was crying for the ink pens that had dried up before they could be used and the bins holding two decades' worth of details. She was crying for the trails she had never hiked and the book left unfinished on page 178. She was crying for the stubborn snow and the unlit birthday candles. She was crying for the way the saw must have sounded in the skin of the aspens, for the fallen trees and the fallen leaves and all the finished but unfinished things.

A sudden glow to her left caught her eye. A light? Blinking back the tears, she peered through the trees. Wait — what was that? It couldn't be ...

She swiped at her eyes and started struggling toward the light, visible in snatches through the trees. Ducking finally beneath the thick limbs of a stalwart fir, she scrambled over a fallen log — and gasped.

In front of her rose a ring of slender aspens, stretching strong and hopeful from a circle of silver stumps. And their leaves were the most breathtaking gold she had ever envisioned. The questions collided in her mind. How was it possible? Was she in the same place? The ring of stumps — but it had been over twenty years since her father had felled those trees. How could they have saplings *now*? And how could they still hold their leaves, when all the other trees had turned and faded?

Maybe it was okay if some things were miracles.

She stepped into the ring, years sliding away to her trusting teenage self. With a familiar welcome, the aspens enfolded her with the glow of their own golden rejoicing, the more-than-light of these trees turned torches. Birthday candles from a Father Who whispered it was never too late to be loved. Trees that had died only to live again. Life that was still breaking through, even now, that would resurrect with a flaming faith from the shadows of death itself.

Until dusk settled like a silent prayer, Sherri stood there, soaking up the glow of a promise. Then she walked back to her cabin between snow and stars. And finally, in the flickering joy of her spiraling candles and the hope of a spring stronger than she'd ever imagined, she settled down with her half-read book — ready at last to finish her story.

A worshiper of the Creator and a wanderer of creation, **Ashlyn McKayla Ohm** is the author of the contemporary fiction *Climbing Higher* trilogy as well as devotional and poetry collections. If she's not reading or writing, she's probably getting lost in the woods. Follow her writing at wordsfromthewilderness.substack.com.

FICTION

John Farquhar Young

STABAT MATER

Her visit was unannounced. Radiating energy and self-confidence, she followed him into his den.

“That music is WEIRD!” The would-be girlfriend’s voice had a sharp, judgmental edge.

“That particular piece is called ‘Stabat Mater,’” he murmured as he cut off the recording. “It’s Latin for ‘the mother stood.’ It’s a medieval hymn that has attracted the attention of several composers over the centuries. It speaks of Mary, the mother of Jesus, witnessing the suffering of her son as he dies on the cross. I think it invites us to enter a space where we share the agony of people helplessly witnessing the suffering of those close to them.”

“But you’re not religious,” she laughed, a slight smirk on her lovely face.

“I’m not — well, not in any conventional sense,” he replied, hiding his irritation. “But that music helps me to think about things.”

Things! He could have said but did not say: “The music enfolds me. While it plays I return to a place where you would not wish to go; to a dusty road with makeshift tents and the lines of mothers — only mothers — some weeping, some silent, some with wounded children, some holding their children close, just as we held our weapons, close and ready, as warily we trudged along.”

“I fancy going to the new Turkish restaurant tonight,” the would-be girlfriend said, eyebrows raised. “It’s new and supposed to be very good.”

When he did not immediately respond, the expectant twinkle in her blue eyes began to fade. Then, after a moment, she drew a breath and fixed him with a level gaze. “I have been thinking,” she began, then paused and drew a breath. “Perhaps it’s not working — between us?”

Between us? “Perhaps not,” he heard himself saying.

She nodded slowly, dipped into her bag for her car keys and headed for the door. “Anyway, you have my number. See you ...” Then, half turning with a sad, small smile and a questioning glance, she added, “... or perhaps not?”

He flicked on the music and refocused on the Latin words he had learnt, but only with some difficulty.

*Quis non posset contristari
Piam matrem contemplari
Dum moritur Filius ...*

“Who would not be saddened
To contemplate the pious mother,
As her Son dies?”

Again, in his mind, he drifted along the dusty road and held the image of the mothers sitting there.

Again, he groped towards that inner place where witnessing could mean a sadness fully shared, where his humanity might be restored.

Fac me tecum pie flere ...

“Make me weep with you.”

John Farquhar Young is a retired old chap. His first degree is a BD — Bachelor of Divinity — at St Andrews University. For nearly 25 years, he was a Scottish criminal justice social worker and then manager (equivalent to the work undertaken by probation and parole Officers). He has an MPhil and a PhD in a related field of study.

FICTION

Hannah Doorenbos

LOST AGAIN

Who will rescue me from this body of death?

She felt it again. The panic, at first just tip-toeing through her stomach, almost unnoticeable, if you were trying to ignore it. And Lucy most definitely was. Why hadn't she paused to think at that first fork? She always chose the wrong path at that fork in the path and had to turn around later. But this time she hadn't really been paying attention, and now she couldn't remember which trail she had taken. Did she need to turn around? She had already gone so far. And if Lucy really had chosen the right path originally, she would have to walk this same part of the trail all over again later. Ugh. She didn't have time for this; she had to get to her shift by four.

Lucy knew she shouldn't have even gone on this stupid walk. It was an idiotic decision in the first place. *As per usual*, the voice inside whispered. *Shut up*. She was just so angry and upset and done and ... and ... Lucy took a big, gasping, scratching breath. Now was not the time. She had gone on this hike for some exercise and space to breathe.

That was what she was going to do: breathe. So she forged on, no need to pause or think, this way was probably fine, it felt familiar at least. As she walked, Lucy let her mind wander. Look at that pretty jay. Wasn't the sound of the wind in the trees nice? Who did Kira think she was, saying all that crap last night? Didn't Kira know how hard Lucy was trying? No, none of that now, Lucy was trying to breathe. And she could not breathe with the weight of that conversation on her chest. So instead of reflecting, Lucy just walked faster and faster and let the landscape blur.

All the while, the panic grew from a tip-toe, to a tap dancing troupe, to a boot-stomping hoedown in her gut. She knew, she KNEW she was getting lost. Lucy had been lost enough in her life to recognize the moment where she truly had no sense of where she was — and that moment had already happened about 15 minutes earlier. It was fine. Maybe if she walked just a bit farther, it would all click into place and she would figure it out. Lucy glanced at her watch. She did not have the time to be lost again. Davis was definitely going to yell at her if she came in late, even this one time.

Lucy was pretty certain that she could hear the stream in the distance. Maybe if she just stepped off of the path a little bit, she could see it. Then she would at least be able to tell if she was heading in the right direction. Yeah, that would work. The water sounded close enough that she should just have to take a few steps away. But a few steps away, she still couldn't see the creek, so she took another few steps, and a few more, then a few more. The stampeding panic was rising up into her throat; she walked faster. It had to be close; she could hear it, she was pretty sure, she just needed to ... and there it was. A happy, bubbling mountain stream. The cool air poured back into Lucy's lungs. Oh, thank goodness. She bent down, ran her fingers through the bone-chilling water, and groaned. With no small level of frustration, Lucy realized she had been walking upstream, the wrong direction. Yet again. She would just have to back walk faster then, she supposed. Lucy turned around and started to make her way back towards the path.

She blew out a frustrated breath as she walked. If Lucy got lectured by Davis because of this, she was going to call Kira and give that girl a piece of her mind. Kira's tirade was what had driven Lucy out on this dumb hike in the first place. Well, okay, maybe it wasn't a tirade. Kira had probably meant well. And she cared about Lucy; Lucy knew that. But that still didn't give Kira the right to make judgments about what Lucy chose to do with her own life. Especially when no one else was even supposed to see it. No one else was getting hurt or was really even affected. Lucy had the right to do what she wanted, even if ... the thought froze in her mind, iced out by a sudden realization. She definitely should have stumbled back onto the trail by now. Where was it?

Frantically, Lucy began to pace the area around her. It had to be here somewhere. She would find the trail any second now, right? Lucy had already been well and truly lost; now, she didn't even have a trail to follow. For 20 minutes, she scoured the ground around her, looking for any sign of a path. Then, finally exhausted, she collapsed into the dry, rusty dirt and dropped her head in her hands.

Frustration and petrifying fear swirled around inside. How had she done this again? Lucy had the worst sense of direction of anyone she knew. She could get lost both with a map and a GPS. On foot and driving. She had gotten lost in her hometown more times than she could count. Each time, it left Lucy feeling like an idiot. Everyone else seemed to get where they needed to be okay. Sometimes, when people heard how lost she'd gotten, again, they'd give her a look that said, "How could such a stupid person survive so long?" Lucy hated that look, but she'd always make some self-deprecating joke about it, shaking off all the stress that came with the whole situation.

They were right, though; she really was stupid. Lucy had done it to herself, again. She should have stopped to think at the fork, should've turned back when she knew she was probably heading in the wrong direction. She most definitely should never have wandered off the path. Lucy knew what she was doing wrong every step of the way. She hissed out an exasperated sigh and slapped an ant away from her arm. This wasn't the first time that she had made each and every one of these mistakes. She knew better, she really did. Then how did she keep ending up here? She was just so tired, so angry. The conversation with Kira had just pushed at every button that she had. She wasn't able to think straight with all of Kira's digging. None of it was even Kira's business.

Kira really was always poking at places that she didn't belong, places where she didn't have any right to be, Lucy decided. Maybe Kira truly cared, but maybe she just liked to prod people until they bled. Lucy pushed herself to her feet, letting the new sparks of rage spur her forward at almost a jog. She knew the general direction that she was supposed to be headed. Eventually, she would get back to the road this way, but how long was that going to take? Hours? A whole day? She was screwed. There was no way she was going to make it back in time for work.

Still, Lucy pushed forward as fast as she could, replaying the previous night's conversation in her head.

"Lucy, we need to talk," Kira had said, with that overly concerned, self-righteous look on her face.

"About what?" Lucy had replied, heart pounding, feeling like a deer in front of a semi-truck, watching the headlights in frozen helplessness.

Kira scratched her head and shifted in her seat, a slight frown tugging at her lips. She cleared her throat. "I've just noticed that it seems like you've been feeling pretty down lately. You're never coming around to hang out anymore and ..."

"I'm fine," Lucy interrupted, trying to cover her fear with annoyance. "I've just been swamped with homework, you know that. I don't have a ton of time to waste messing around right now."

Kira nodded, visibly swallowing hard. "Yeah, I know, I get it, and that's fine. It's just ... Well, I feel like I have to talk about the elephant in the room. I think all of us have kind of noticed that you ..."

"Kira, I said I'm fine. I don't know what you think the problem is ..."

This was a lie. "... but you're wrong. I've got a lot going on, and I don't really need this right now."

"Luce, come on. You can't expect me to pretend that ..."

"I don't expect you to pretend anything. Everything is okay."

"Lucy, I think it's pretty clear that you —"

Lucy stood up. "Kira, I understand that you're trying to be a good friend. But I. Am. Fine. I'll see you tomorrow." Lucy left, shutting the door just a little too hard behind her.

Lucy grimaced at the memory, wishing she could erase the whole conversation from existence. Didn't Kira know that it was embarrassing

to have your crap pointed out like that? Couldn't she get that this sort of stuff was just meant to be kept inside? This thing was Lucy's, meant for her to hold in the shadowy crags and crevices of her heart. It was hers to treasure, to cling to, to fan the flames of its grip on her soul. She needed something solid to hold onto, and she knew who it should be, but, well, she was only human, right? Couldn't she have this one thing? A part of her loved it, even though she didn't like to admit it. Somedays, the thought of how much she loved it filled her with a pulse of dread so strong she wanted to claw her way out of her own skin. Other days, she just didn't care.

And that was the real reason she was so upset with Kira, Lucy knew that. Kira saying it out loud, seeing it, seeing her, made it real. And if someone saw, how was Lucy supposed to pretend that it was all fine? That it didn't matter that Lucy didn't care. None of it was Kira's fault; she was worried and trying to be a good friend. Lucy rubbed at her face. All this was Lucy's fault, and she couldn't hide from that.

At that moment, Lucy lost her traction on the slippery rock and her foot slipped. She went tumbling into the creek, gashing her leg on the gravel in a dozen different places. Swearing, Lucy clutched her leg to her chest. She lay there for a minute, breathing hard, and trying not to tear up. That was the last thing she needed on top of all this, to cry in the middle of the woods like a lunatic. It was all so stupid. *Get up*, Lucy willed herself. *Get up*. Carefully, she hauled herself to her feet. Blood was streaming down her legs. Great. Lucy didn't bother to wipe it off. Whatever. She'd clean up her whole mess when she got home. Again.

Why did she keep doing this? She'd walk the line, looking down at her past mistakes, thinking that she would never do those things again. She was beyond it, and hadn't she been so silly before? Wasn't she so much wiser now? She could fight the temptation this time; she had a grip on it now. All the while, she'd be following in her own footsteps down the same old failures.

Then, when she fell back into it, it wasn't because she had lost control. No, actually, she wanted it. Lucy had control of it, she was sure. It just wouldn't hurt to let it take over her day, just a bit, just a little this one time. Or two or three times. You know, she'd think to herself, it wasn't

really that bad. No, it was harmless. Just a little habit that helped her keep control of her life. No reason for concern.

Ignoring the stinging pain and stabbing cold that was now racking her with shivers, Lucy tried to pull herself back up on the little ledge next to the creek that she had been walking on before. Each time she tried to scale the little rock face, though, she found her wet hands slipping, and she went crashing back to the ground. It was useless. All of the strength had gone out of her arms, and she was shaking. Couldn't one thing in this whole stupid day go right? Whatever. No use in trying anymore. She would just have to walk down in the creek bed. Fine.

Like a newborn deer, she stumbled along, moving at half the pace she had been going at before. She was dripping wet, bloody, utterly exhausted, and, once again, unable to avoid the truth. She couldn't keep going in this way. This thing was ruling her life, stealing her focus, strength, and heart. Lucy had fallen into the same stuff, again, and it was, actually, a big deal.

Lucy wanted to scream. It took a good deal of self-control to avoid kicking a rock in pure, distilled rage. She had gotten herself lost again, despite knowing better, despite all the people around her, despite the resolutions she had made a million times before. What was wrong with her? Why could she not be free of this? There was not one else to blame, no quick and easy fix. She was so completely and utterly lost, and she didn't know the way out. It was paralyzing. Lucy tried to push it away, to ignore it, but she couldn't, not anymore. So she let the racing, swirling, punching thoughts take control, in a wind of rage, frustration, fear, and desperation. It consumed all that was left of her energy, and she stumbled forward mindlessly, hopelessly, half expecting to never find her way home.

Lucy couldn't have told you how long she went along this way, stumbling, sliding, just trying to keep moving. She had no idea when exactly she finally managed to make it back up onto the ridge, or when, seemingly of their own accord, her feet wandered away from the creek, back into the woods. Her thoughts were too consuming to register any of that. She barely even registered it when her shoes started to crunch on the

gravel. There was only an itch in her brain, something that said it was unusual. Then it hit her all at once.

Somehow, she was back on the trail, not more than 30 feet from the parking lot. There was no explanation; Lucy had no idea how she had gotten there. It hadn't been her one skill, that much Lucy was sure of. She knew that, without a doubt, there was no part of her, subconscious or not, that had known where she was. Someone else had drawn Lucy there, despite herself.

The dam that had been holding back tears finally collapsed. Lucy's legs turned to liquid, and she fell to her knees. After all this, all the mistakes, and the blame, how could there still be grace again? How could He still hold her in this, despite Lucy pretending that He had no say in the issue, that He couldn't see it? She knew better, and she had done it all anyway. Lucy had nothing to offer, only a record of vows and failures, and a cry for help. Would that be enough? *My grace is sufficient for you.* He had said that. It seemed too good to be true.

But she couldn't disagree with the facts. Here she was, kneeling on the path that she had lost, with no idea of how she had gotten there. That couldn't be ignored. Neither could the promises, no matter how improbable they seemed. *My grace is sufficient for you.* Who was Lucy to argue with that? It was too good to grasp, too powerful to ignore. So Lucy stood up and brushed off the dirt. She headed back toward her car, her head a whirlpool of thoughts, her heart reaching for, brushing freedom with its fingertips. She collapsed back into the driver-side cracking leather seat of her little SUV. Lucy paused a moment, staring up at the deep blue sky, and shaking her head in awe. Despite it all, the sweet, mysterious, overwhelming taste of grace was on her tongue again.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hannah Doorenbos has the privilege of helping students discover the joys of a good story as a high school teacher in the great state of Iowa. She loves exploring, writing, reading, and getting to marvel at the glory of God.

FICTION

Candace Behrmann

A FROZEN HOPE

Frunze, Sakha Republic, 2075

Rumor has it if you cried here, your tears could freeze your eyelids shut. Minuscule ice crystals would form, and a kaleidoscope of rainbow would be the last thing you'd see for a while. Maybe forever.

I wasn't planning on finding out.

Smoke pierced my nostrils despite thick puffs of snow. Some of the girls arriving this morning were as young as twelve, the age of accountability. Nadia's age now. The same age I had been when I was arrested four years ago. I wanted to scream for her, but screams were no better than tears.

"Surely they know what happens here, and yet they refuse to deny their allegiance to *Bog*," Alexandra said, emphasizing our Russian word for God, a mischievous curve forming around the corners of her lips.

"Well, I, for one, certainly wish we would have. I don't relish the thought of more ignorant rebels," I said.

"You don't mean it. You're just worried —"

"They're just words, Alex." Were they, though? Words that could have kept me out of this arctic hell. Words that would have kept me watching over Nadia at our home in Yakutsk. Ice cold and comfortable. But now we were forced 70 miles north.

I, at least, was nowhere.

I felt the train's familiar rumble under my feet as we assembled into the poorly insulated shack with its leaky roof and rotting timbers. The guards, their *ushankas* cozied atop their heads, eyed us for signs of defiance as we began slaving over the rough diamonds. I wasted my days looking for beauty in a world where there was none to be found.

The draft stole the feeling from my fingers as I thought about this morning. One of our elders had been caught and whisked away over nothing but a whispered prayer. We wouldn't see her again. It didn't take long for anyone here to realize it wasn't worth it.

The brilliant diamonds were now slivers of ice between my chapped fingers. I was shaking. Alex put her hand over mine. "If she's here, she'll be fine ..."

A guard I didn't recognize narrowed in on us. "What is going on?" he demanded.

"Nothing, sir."

He furrowed his brow but walked away.

A new recruit? Alex shrugged, and I turned back to sorting the gems.

Please don't let her be here, I sighed. It took me by surprise. Praying had become foreign.

In the evening, we began our trek back to our living quarters. The rough wool scratched my frost-bitten cheek as I tightened my hood against the gnawing wind. This was no place for Nadia. *Please.*

I held my breath as I scanned the young girls, huddled together, eyes wide and innocent. My eyes stopped when they reached her blonde braids, laced with frost. Yet I'd know that face anywhere. It was a copy of my own. "No!" I breathed.

The guards appeared at the door. The one who had questioned me earlier approached with our dinner. Broth. His badge read *Fyodor*. "You," he

said to me. “Distribute this.” There was a softer tone to his growl now. I made my rounds with the watery soup. When I served Nadia, her eyes held my gaze. I nodded.

“That girl mean something to you?” Fyodor asked as I handed him the emptied soup pot.

“No one is anything to me,” I said sharply. A little too sharply. “Not anymore, sir.”

“Hmm. Some resemblance, though, huh?” He knew. They would all know soon enough.

That night, I had my chance to go to her. The candles were fewer, and so were the guards. I would tell her how sorry I was for abandoning her.

“Katya!” she whispered and draped her arms around my neck. “I came for you!”

For me? “You shouldn’t have.” I wanted to tell her I loved her and would get her out of here. “It was foolish,” was what I said instead.

“Papa said it is never foolish to believe.”

I hushed her then, squeezing her hand, and maneuvered back to my place by Alex. Her eyes gleamed against the dim candlelight. “You’re lucky to have someone who loves you, someone to live for.” It wasn’t lucky. *It was dangerous.* Alex was only two years older than me but had taken up looking after me. She had no one but me. And I was no one.

My sister moved robotically across the room as we worked the next day. Her fingers were stiff, and she fumbled with the diamonds. Was this her fate? A six-year-old Nadia danced before my mind’s eye, giggling, her long blonde hair wild and free. We had lost our mother when Nadia was just a baby. I had mothered her as best I knew how. When the state had finally outlawed Christian practice, I had promised her I wouldn’t let anything happen to her.

Yet here she was. Death churned slowly, freezing us from the inside out. I slammed my fist against the table, scattering the last of my unsorted diamonds, and with it, the last of my resolve.

“Pull yourself together! Fyodor is coming,” Alex said.

“That’s enough!” he barked. “To isolation.” He hauled me by the crook of my arm to the empty cell, my feet nearly asleep and fighting to keep up. “I had a little brother once. I had *Bog*, too. I lost one of them.” And then he slammed the door, leaving me in the darkness that paralleled my thoughts.

The light had come through the narrow window on the ceiling and was already fading again before Fyodor brought me some leftover broth.

“Not hungry.”

“Eat. You’ll be sorry if you don’t.” The door thudded behind him.

Sighing, I picked up the bowl. Underneath was a slip of paper. I seized it and quickly read: *There is surely a hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off.* From the *Biblia*? On the other side: *There is a way. South, when the snow tracks no more. How far can you run?*

I shoved the paper into my pocket and swallowed the soup in a stupor. Fyodor came back to lead me to the sorting shacks. “There are no guarantees,” he whispered as he nudged me through the door.

Alex and Nadia anticipated our secret escape as the snow became slush and a myriad of fragrant colors speckled the land. I doubted if any of it could be true until the morning it actually happened. Fyodor kept us in the back of the marching line to the shack and shut the door in front of us, cutting us off from the rest of the girls. He ran to the back door and unlocked it. “Run now, until you can’t anymore.” I pushed Nadia ahead of me and turned around for Alex.

But she was still inside. “I was never going,” she said, smiling when she shouldn’t have. She addressed Fyodor but did not move her eyes from

mine. “Shut the door and holler out for backup. Say I tried to escape.” She was still smiling at me as Fyodor, mouth agape, closed the door.

“Katya.” Nadia grabbed my hand then. “It’s time to go.” Her hand trembled as she tugged me forward. And then we ran until we couldn’t anymore, Alexandra’s scream piercing me with each beat of my heart. When we could no longer run, we walked.

Hope flooded her eyes when we saw the cabin emerge in the distance. We were at a near crawl now. But we kept on moving until we collapsed, exhausted, on the porch.

“We’re here.”

The porch light came on. And then the door opened.

Candace Behrmann is a mom to four kids, nine cats, and a handful of backyard chickens. Her youngest son is non-verbal. He inspires her to stretch her creativity and think outside her words in new ways every day. Candace loves the Lord and gives all glory to Him with all she writes.

FICTION

Victoria Stewart

THE WOMAN AND THE RAVEN

There is a woman — sixty years old, though she wears it lightly, as if age brushed past her without quite settling in. Her days are full, her life vibrant with color. She is generous with her time and her words. She feeds the hungry. Her home is open to those who need shelter. She writes things in hopes of making people feel seen. She creates spaces of quiet beauty, where even sorrow can take off its shoes and rest awhile.

She is not lonely in the usual sense.

Her house is not empty. Friends visit. Children — grown, but still hers — call regularly. Her calendar holds lunches, volunteer work, Bible studies, dinners, mission trips, long walks, and slow afternoons spent on porches with people who love her well enough. The kind who bring soup when she's sick, who remember her birthday, who pray for her by name.

And yet.

And yet there is something missing, and she feels it in her bones. Not like a sharp pain, more like a low hum — persistent, familiar, unanswered.

Her husband died four years ago. He was the only one who ever really got her. Well, mostly. There were still times she would try to explain some thought too tangled or too fast or too ancient for words, and he would squint and nod, trying to care, while his eyes gave him away. But still, he tried. He wanted to understand. And he stayed. He stayed every day of their married life, and for that alone, she loved him more than words could carry.

She does not want a replacement. That's not what this is.

What she longs for isn't just companionship — it's communion. The kind of mind-to-mind fellowship that dives deep into the questions most people don't even think to ask. She wants to explore the space where science and Scripture meet, where string theory brushes up against the concept of Heaven, where entropy might be the shadow of sin, and where the Garden before the Fall could be described in terms of perfect homeostasis. She wants to ask whether the Bible's claim that "God holds all things together" could be scientifically literal — rooted in the mystery of quantum glue and the unknowable essence of gravity. She wants to talk about how an egg emits a spark of light at the moment of conception and ask, without irony or hesitation, *is that the moment a soul is born?* But to do that, she needs someone rare — someone knowledgeable enough to join the conversation, intelligent enough to follow it, and curious enough to want it in the first place. But she has not met anyone like that in four years. Maybe not ever, not really.

She feels ungrateful admitting this, even to herself. How can someone so loved, so surrounded by blessing, still *ache*? It feels like a betrayal of the good things. Like asking for a feast while already holding a plate full of manna.

She walks early in the mornings, before the sun has fully lifted its head. One such morning, the sky still pearled with fog, she wanders a bit farther than usual. Through a field, past a fence, into the woods behind the old chapel.

That's where she hears it.

A *click*. A *caw*. A rustle of wing and black feather.

A raven, perched just above her on a gnarled pine limb, stares down with eyes too sharp for comfort. There's no one else around.

The woman stops.

"Well," she says softly, "aren't you beautiful."

The raven tilts its head. Its voice, when it comes, is not a voice at all, and yet she hears it just the same — *not with her ears, but with something older.*

“You are not ungrateful.”

The woman blinks. She says nothing, but her heart lurches.

“You are hungry.”

She lets out a slow breath. “Is it wrong to be?”

“Was it wrong for Elijah to be hungry in the wilderness?”

She shakes her head.

“Was it wrong for him to want to be understood?”

“No,” she whispers. “He thought he was alone.”

The raven’s black eyes blink, once.

“He wasn’t.”

The woman stands very still.

“There are others. Not many. But they exist.”

“I don’t know a single one,” she says.

“You don’t have to. Not yet. It is enough that they are.”

She swallows. “Then why does it hurt?”

The raven leans forward, almost amused.

“Because you remember Eden. Your soul remembers walking with God in the cool of the day, with nothing hidden and nothing broken. You were made for that kind of knowing.”

The woman’s eyes sting. She does not cry, but her hand drifts to her heart, pressing gently, as if to calm the ache.

“You are not a problem to be fixed,” the raven continues. “*You are a reflection of the divine. Even your longing is sacred.*”

“I thought I was just ... a unicorn. Too much for this world.”

“Even unicorns need rest,” says the raven. “Even prophets need bread. Even you, wise and strong as you are, were made for the garden. And it is not here. Not fully.”

She lowers her head. “Will I always feel this way?”

The raven pauses.

“Perhaps. Until the day when you are known as you are fully known.”

The wind stirs through the trees.

“But between now and then,” it adds, “you will have moments. A sentence here. A glance there. A silence that says everything. Don’t despise them. They are echoes of home.”

The woman lifts her eyes.

“Will I find one of them? One of the others?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps someone will find *you*.”

And then the raven lifts off, cutting through the morning fog with the grace of something that remembers the beginning of time.

The woman watches it vanish into the lightening sky.

She does not have answers. But she has something else now.

She has permission.

To ache. To hope. To remember Eden.

And to keep walking, one sacred step at a time.

Victoria Stewart is a Southern writer with a heart for stories that explore redemption, identity, and the quiet strength of everyday people. She recently published her debut novel, *When It Reines*, a work of Christian fiction set on the fictional Reine Island, and is currently working on a follow-up novel as well as a series of chapter books for older elementary readers. Her writing blends warmth, depth, and a touch of mystery, as seen in her short story “The Woman and the Raven.”

NONFICTION

NONFICTION

Jessica Lynne Henkle

HOW TO WANT

I was twenty-six the first and only time I went to a therapist. I saw her for six months, and now, I couldn't for the life of me tell you what all we talked about. I know, when I first started to see her, I was trying to convince myself I wanted to get a PhD. I know she helped me admit I did not, in fact, want to do that. I know she was one of the few people in my life who understood why, which is a mystery to me now, as she didn't seem to understand much else about me. Or maybe it's that her understanding was too severe, and I couldn't take the searing gaze of it, having lately been wounded as badly as I'd ever been by a man who'd claimed to love me. I know that's why I started seeing her — the man, his promise of marriage, his sharp U-turn, the numberless and namelessly cruel things he had said in the end to make me loosen my grip.

All of that had happened a year before the therapist. The man had met someone else, married her. I had quit my job, gotten a new one, started writing again after eighteen months of spinning my wheels in the mud. None of it mattered. I was as lost as I'd ever been, blowing around like a dead leaf on the autumn wind, just waiting for the moment when I could crumple to dust, become one with the earth, and begin again. It didn't happen. My friends were at a loss — had been at a loss since the man and his promises had left me — and so finally, after much bemoaning, I agreed to their suggestion to go to therapy. It took me a number of sessions to tell that therapist about the man. What she was able to discern between the sobs and snot bubbles, I don't know, but it was enough to make her nod and say, "This is it, then." It was, yes. This had always been it.

I began imagining my future husband when I was six years old. While other girls were still trying to determine who did and didn't have cooties, I was sizing up our male classmates to figure out who I could see myself marrying. Every interaction with every boy for the next twenty years would be the same: *could I marry this guy?* Sometimes, the answer had been yes. Every time, that yes had been one-sided. Twice, in early adulthood, I had thought maybe, just maybe, the feeling was mutual. If it was, he boomeranged away too quickly for me to find out. And then, I met the man. The feeling was mutual. The feeling was starlight, slow fire, rainbows refracted in a room full of prisms. How I had loved him. How he had made me believe that he loved me, too. How it all went wrong is a question I will never have answered, and so, at some point, I had to stop asking.

"You're a romantic," the therapist pronounced. I tried not to detect judgment in her voice, but I did, which was unfair. In general, my memory of her is of a woman who was extremely objective, who tried her best to guide me through the world as I saw it. Only once do I remember her veering from this position of neutrality, and it is sadly the only thing about our time together that I remember clearly. I was telling her about a man in my church group who I was trying to decide if I did or did not like, and in the middle of my stream of consciousness, she broke in and said, "How does God feel about your obsessive need to be in a relationship?" It was like having my head split open with a hatchet. I told her I didn't know. She told me to ask Him — to close my eyes right then and there and ask Him. I did, and in my mind, I heard the words, "Let it go."

My therapist was not a Christian. In retrospect, this was a grave mistake on my part — not because non-Christians have nothing to offer (I don't believe that for a second), but because the problems I was having were so inextricably entwined with my faith that I know now I needed someone who shared that faith to help me untie the knots. Instead, I had this woman with her neutrality and her objectivity, who treated my beliefs like anything else about me and not the foundation upon which my entire worldview had been built, however shakily. Was my need obsessive? Of course, it was. I was profoundly lonely. I always had been. I had an emotionally absent father and an anxiety-ridden mother, a family who

existed like planets in orbit around a center of reluctant tolerance. I was a writer, a brainiac, a weirdo. For years, I had watched everyone around me pair off, and ever since puberty, I had lived with a pervasive fear that had all but calcified into a certainty: that such good fortune would never befall me.

But it had. For one bright, blazing, incandescent moment, it had — and then, it had been ripped away, and I could not, for the life of me, figure out what I had done wrong. But now, I had an even bigger problem: I had learned what it felt like to be loved. Even if it had been a lie, it did not change the moments when I had believed that it was not, and I knew — with such fervent certitude it terrified me — that I would never again be able to pretend that love was not what I wanted. That's what I had done for most of my young life: while my tender heart nurtured fantasies of happily ever after with many a man who caught my eye, my mouth proclaimed to anyone who would listen that I had no interest in dating, marriage, the whole great mess of it. It was self-preservation — if I remained alone (as I was all but convinced I would), then no one would have cause to pity me because I was perfectly fine being on my own.

About eight months before I met the man, I had started to truly follow the Lord — to figure out what it meant to be a Christian, instead of just calling myself one. And one of the first things God went after was this habit I had of speaking out of both sides of my mouth. It was God who told me this duplicity wouldn't do — that the lack of honesty was making me more miserable than people's pity ever would, which, of course, was true. And I learned it was true over the next eight months, as I slowly, hesitantly, fearfully also learned to tell the truth. And then, I met the man, and I thought all my truth-telling had been rewarded. But if our combusted relationship had indeed been my reward, I decided I was better off lying. I was better off going back to school to get my PhD, burying myself in books like I had my whole life, and burying along with me any desire for companionship, happiness, the whole great mess of it.

But I didn't want a PhD. I wanted a husband. And even after the therapist pronounced my want as "obsessive," and even after God, I believed, told me to let it go, my want did not change, and I did not let it go — not the way the therapist had wanted me to. Instead, I did what I had, over the last two years, been learning to do: I surrendered my want to God. That

was eleven years ago. I have brought my want to Him and laid it down over and over and over again. I have met other men and had my heart handed back to me over and over and over again. None has trumped the level of hurt and deception of the first man, though the most recent one came close. None has bruised me so badly that I didn't eventually come crawling out of the wreckage and admit — though God help me, how I wish it weren't the truth — that love is still what I want.

How I wish it weren't the truth. How I wish my lies had taken root, that I was perfectly fine being on my own because, God knows, I've been doing it long enough now. You'd think I'd be used to it. But I've never gotten used to it. I've never stopped wishing I didn't have someone to do the dishes with, to make decisions with, to share a home and a name and a bed with. I've never stopped wanting to crumble beneath the weight of my self-sufficiency and independence. And I never stopped feeling guilty about it. "Guilty" may seem like a strange word for all of this, but it's the true word. "Obsessive need," the therapist had called this want of mine. "Let it go," I believed God had told me, and I know now that He had told me that. He had, and I obeyed — I laid it down, only to watch it rise again, just as it's risen again every time I've laid it down since. Because that's what things do when they're meant to live.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth — the water and land, the plants, the birds, the animals. And then, He created us. Though it is purely my own interpretation, I believe we, men and women, were originally created as one being — the *adam*, mankind, humanity. And over His good and new creation, the first thing God declared was *not* good was that the human was alone, and so, He caused the human to go to sleep, and then, He split us in two. Man and woman, together, make up the image of God. We were never created to exist without each other. This is not to say that every man and woman must marry, nor is it to say that we are not each human beings within our own rights. It is only to say that man and woman, together, in love, was the first human relationship God ever created, and we are fooling ourselves if we think that's insignificant. Nothing God does is insignificant.

"Obsessive need," fine. I give. It is. But it's not as though there isn't a reason for it. It's not as though I've spent these thirteen years following

my good and gracious God, trailing an errant, erratic desire behind me, which He will one day lop off like a vestigial tail. It's not as though I haven't tried to get Him to lop it off. But God is not in the business of lying, and I understand now that He's never going to let me be either. All I have is the truth, obsessive though it may be. All I can do is bring it to Him, this want of mine, and ask Him to satisfy it. Have I learned to hold it loosely? Of course. I have learned to hold most things loosely in this world of loss and uncertainty. But still, I hold it. Still, I carry it — this unwanted, unasked for, but undeniable hope that, one day, the starlight will find me again, and this time, it will stay.

Jessica Lynne Henkle is a writer and editor who lives and works in Oregon. Her first book, *Without Your Father*, is forthcoming from Unsolicited Press in 2026. You can visit her at jessicalynnehenkle.com or follow her on [Instagram](#) or [Substack](#) (both [@jessicalynnehenkle](#)), where she (semi-frequently) posts micro essays.

Milla Jade Kuiper

I BRIEFLY STOP BELIEVING IN GOD AT CHURCH THE MORNING AFTER A HOZIER CONCERT

In an attempt at poetry, the pastor called it a “drizzly, late summer day.” The good, clean Christians of San Diego filed into the rows of white chairs with their perfectly arranged hair and cake-topper babydoll dresses, slurping coffee from earth-colored mugs they bought at Target and greeting only the familiar faces around them. I’ve never met anyone I didn’t already know here, in this outreaching, disciple-focused church. The sanctuary looked built to house Pinterest weddings and keep its residents happy all the days of their lives, and the people looked like they hated poverty and wouldn’t lift a finger against it as long as they could come up with excuses not to. The pastor had a stupid haircut and a lyrical lilt in his voice just smug enough to match a narcissistic uncle at Thanksgiving. When he introduced the Holy Spirit as the topic for the week, I practically rolled my eyes.

The talented duo leading worship beautifully played “In Christ Alone,” and probably some other songs, but all I heard, loud and clear through the flawless bass-boostered speaker that is sleep-deprived memory, was Hozier, howling “Take Me To Church” with the conviction of a man refusing his last meal.

The pastor’s salt-and-pepper face and the gray windows picture-framing him bleared into the background as my mind cast a different image over it: the artist from the night before, calling for a different devotion than I’ve known.

The guilt I feel when listening to Hozier's blasphemous ballads is overshadowed by the unmitigated soul-walloping I get from his rhythm 'n blues. Some spirit takes over when the music waxes, and I feel close to God, or to *something*, despite the particular flavor of his lyrics. The guilt I feel at paying the man, who seems to hate my faith, \$40 so I could hear him play live is perhaps more substantial, but it was admittedly soothed by the fact that I didn't do it alone. My best friend leaned over during the worst-offending song and laughed, "A little blasphemy never hurt anybody!" before launching back into song.

The pastor started doing that Christian thing where they over-preach about a passage we've heard before, but analyzing it with some fresh new bit of context, some new angle, hot off the Jerusalem Press, that no one's apparently come up with in two thousand years.

This time Apollos was the victim, for that time he preached about Jesus "accurately, but not adequately," for only knowing about the baptism of John.

He'd missed out on the Holy Spirit.

The lights bloomed awake, outlining him in a whisper of blue, and from the still-dark stage, his voice like cello strings bowed out over seventeen thousand devotees.

Thousands of people screamed in adulation, but all I could hear was the silence of the night holding its breath, and the murmur of his fingers kissing the strings, and his voice, *oh my lord* his voice.

In the religion of music, every noise is worship, every throat a temple. The spirit of sound, a being of pure emotion dripping with some sort of reverence, takes over, goosebumps delivering its warm touch, and brings a high so pure it could convert a person to any faith.

He sang like heaven paled before a woman's touch, like he held my God and all His followers in contempt, and like at the end, if given a second

chance, he'd jump from the pearly gates to meet his lover where heaven's light would never fall on his skin.

But in between songs, he preached gratitude and ceasefire, a revolution of love through protest. He called us to arms. He addressed every group of people and prayed their release from oppression. He implored us radical young to speak for those who need our voices, and continue the change that others started for us.

How could someone with no religious conviction care enough to take action for God's people, when my church, this room full of pure and holy saints, stayed still?

In the summer and winter church camps of youth, hundreds of bleary-eyed teenagers gathered in dark, tightly packed sanctuaries with blaring siren lights and smoke machines that declared Jesus' name like John the Baptist in the wilderness, if John had had access to disco balls and LED lights. For some of us, this was our first experience with live music, outside of our little Baptist and nondenominational churches, and we were riveted. The close community, sleep deprivation, and powerful sound racked our pubescent bodies and left us in awe, many of us having what we believed were revelations of the Holy Spirit, and rededicating our lives to Christ. Over the seven years from 6th to 12th grade, some of us rededicated two or even three times, without a thought as to whether each dedication negated the last.

You'd think the melodies sung by the autumn-evening mouth of Andrew Hozier-Byrne hold a different kind of worship than the Christian camps of old, but the spirit that takes over during these tsunamis of sound is the same. It's not exclusively holy, and not exclusively otherwise.

The worship duo played another song I can't remember. "Take Me to Church" banged through my head louder, and felt righter. The real and imagined songs blurred together into a squall of sound I lost myself to. Swaying on unsteady legs, I closed my eyes and opened my hands, feeling only the call of the music, and for a second, unsure of what I was

listening to anymore, as the inhibition left my body, I tilted my head back and forgot who I was singing to. There existed only sound. No man, no ground, no walls, no friends, no devotion, no God — *no God?* My eyes flew open.

A few weeks ago, I saw a man begging in the middle of the road around ten thirty on a quiet night. Without thinking, I scrambled to my purse, flipping through hand sanitizer and chapstick, and racing the ticking stoplight, slapped at my legs until I found the twenty dollars in odd bills I'd folded in my back pocket. I stuffed my hand through the half-open window, the wad budding from my two fingers.

I'd never done that before, and often use the "don't give homeless people money, they'll just spend it on drugs" maxim as an excuse to give nothing at all. Sometimes I hear my dad or my church leaders telling me not to help people at the expense of myself, and that homeless people are unpredictable, and it's dangerous.

But this time, I wasn't thinking for myself. Some spirit took over. And this time, it had nothing to do with music.

The worship band still stood there, mouths open in reverence and eyes closed, bathed in yellow light. Their words refocused into recognizable sentences, and the words became my prayer, not the music or the feeling.

The man in front of us at the concert, a short, red-haired thing with a mischievous smile, blew vape clouds in our faces at a rate that suggested someone paid him to do so. A pair of nineteen-looking-year-olds spent the night grabbing each other's throats to aid in their endeavor to lick each other's tonsils, half a foot from my friend's face. The wasted trio behind us sang so loudly and poorly that it overpowered the music from the stage. And the singer himself, poor man, had such dark circles under his eyes, and didn't smile once, for the entire 23-song set.

Most of the night's romance embedded itself into the memory in hindsight, my desire to be a part of something good fueling the reverie that I wanted so desperately to be the Holy Spirit.

But the Holy Spirit is quiet, and kind, and speaks at a whisper. I have to turn off the music, and let that other spirit wither to hear Him.

The artist gave some pretty speeches about power and love, but the weight of his entire year on tour hung from his tired voice, the practiced air of his sermon curdling the words. For all the crying about revolution from the audience, we'd all spent money on that concert that could've gone toward the causes most of us had just been cheering.

NONFICTION

Timothy Horne

A CLOSE CALL

Before arriving as newly minted missionaries in Guayaquil, Ecuador in 1993, my wife Lil and I had read the guidebooks about its reputation as a dangerous pickpocket mecca. Others who had lived there before warned us about the prevalence of armed assaults and violence. Their words had the desired effect, and on my first visit downtown, I walked the crowded, chaotic streets like a rabbit under the watchful eye of an eagle. I was on the alert, and everyone coming towards me looked suspicious. I felt like a spy in a John Le Carre novel, stopping to look for reflections in store windows to make sure no one was following me. As advised by a guidebook, I moved my wallet to a front pocket and shoved various bills inside my socks for safekeeping. But, as nothing happened on that or on subsequent visits downtown, or in our neighbourhood, I grew more confident and less anxious. I was always aware of the potential dangers, but I acted as though nothing would happen to me.

The most notorious areas of the city were the “invasiones,” or squatter areas infamous for their lawlessness. I remember the first time I saw one, with its tiny houses built of a mixture of grey cement blocks and thin bamboo walls clinging to the side of a steep hill. My friend described it as a neighbourhood that was illegally occupied as families squatted on small plots of land belonging to someone else. They were called “invasiones” because when dozens of simple, hurriedly erected shacks appeared in a day, that is what it seems like. In the case of the first one I saw, it occurred over 20 years earlier, and it was by then well established. My friend also told me new communities like it were springing up all alongside a new road called La Perimetral as it circled the outskirts of the city. Hundreds of thousands of people called these new slums home. I started talking to God about how I could reach some of them with the

message of hope Jesus came to bring. Soon after, the leaders of the church we attended in town invited me to join them in starting a new Bible study in the home of a family in La Bastión Popular.

I leapt at their invitation. Bastión Popular represented the kind of place Lil and I believed we were called to serve. We went to Guayaquil as missionaries with our three small children, after having served in prison ministries for almost 10 years. Isaiah 58:10-121 was a passage of scripture that motivated me to go to those on the margins of society, to those whose existence would be characterised as outcasts or disadvantaged.

Those Sunday afternoon studies became popular in the host's neighbourhood. Some of the group asked me to visit more often, and so, within months, one visit a week had become three. They were exciting days of discovery for me as I walked around and was introduced to many who would later become friends. My connections spread from the initial neighbourhood in Block 6 to as far as Block 10. I was spending hours walking around to visit different families, where I would talk about Jesus and His love. Despite its reputation for danger, most of the people I met there assured me I was safe during the day. No one recommended I walk alone after dark.

On one occasion, I got back to the house where I stored my motorcycle, and the sun was very low on the horizon. To get from my home to Bastión was either a 40-minute ride along heavily trafficked roads or about 20 minutes travelling over back roads, including one stretch of a dirt trail connecting two different neighbourhoods. A friend came out of his house to speak with me while I unlocked the bike and put my helmet on. I asked him if he thought it would still be safe enough to try the dirt track instead of going the long way on the main road. His counsel? "Better not chance it, it is too late." I thanked him for his advice, but decided not to follow it after I got going. I was confident my jiggling headlamp and the dull light in the sky could help me navigate the path until I was again at a paved main road.

About 500 metres along it, the front wheel of the bike smacked up against a huge rock that unexpectedly emerged out of the blackness. I swerved

and missed most of it, catching it on an edge. That impact was nearly enough to rip the handlebar out of my hands. The bike wobbled and zigzagged, and I almost lost control. At the same time, I heard some shouts coming out of the bushes lining the trail and noticed three or four dark shapes rushing toward me. I jerked the bars and avoided a second strategically placed boulder while speeding up to escape the grasp of the men now chasing me. Thankfully, my front tire didn't rupture, there were no other obstacles in the way, and I could navigate the rest of the dirt path before reaching the illuminated highway. With hands shaking, my mind was on auto-control and I don't remember the rest of the ride home.

It was a close call. I thought a lot about what could have happened to me if the bike had fallen or my tire had burst. God was gracious in limiting it to a non-violent learning experience. When I later confessed to my foolishness in not listening to their counsel, my friends from Bastión told me that that shortcut was well known for the number of assaults and even murders that took place after dark. I had grown cocky and after a few short months felt I knew better than the ones who lived there. I suppose, somewhere deep inside I believed God would protect me, and He did. I now see my foolishness in ignoring the advice I was given was not unlike the testing that Satan tried on Jesus after leading him to the pinnacle of the temple and suggesting he throw himself off. I didn't have the right to paint God into a corner like I did.

Sometimes putting God to the test is more about us than it is about God needing to step up and prove himself. It can be to satisfy a selfish need for reassurance. "Answer my prayer or else!" we might not say, but can feel. When Jesus taught us to pray, He included the phrase: "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." I need to remember that every day.

Jesus didn't need any reassurance. At one point, His Father spoke with an audible voice, and Jesus told His disciples it was for their benefit, not His. Although I may not enjoy the depth of intimacy Jesus shared with His Father, I shouldn't need reassuring, either. God proves His commitment to me, even in the simple act of giving my lungs the ability to expand and constrict 25,000 times a day. He doesn't need to prove how much He loves me. He has proven the depth of His commitment to all of us by choosing to visit the world in the person of Jesus. We have a God who became one of us, who put up with all our foibles and even subjected

Himself to our foolish pride and inhuman cruelty on Calvary. His love is that deep.

Timothy Horne: My career path has taken me from Christian ministry in Canadian prisons, to Guayaquil, Ecuador as a Community worker in a church setting. I recently retired from my career as an Outreach Worker in the field of mental health and addictions. I now live and write in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

J W Goossen

CROSS OF DIVINITY

oil on canvas board

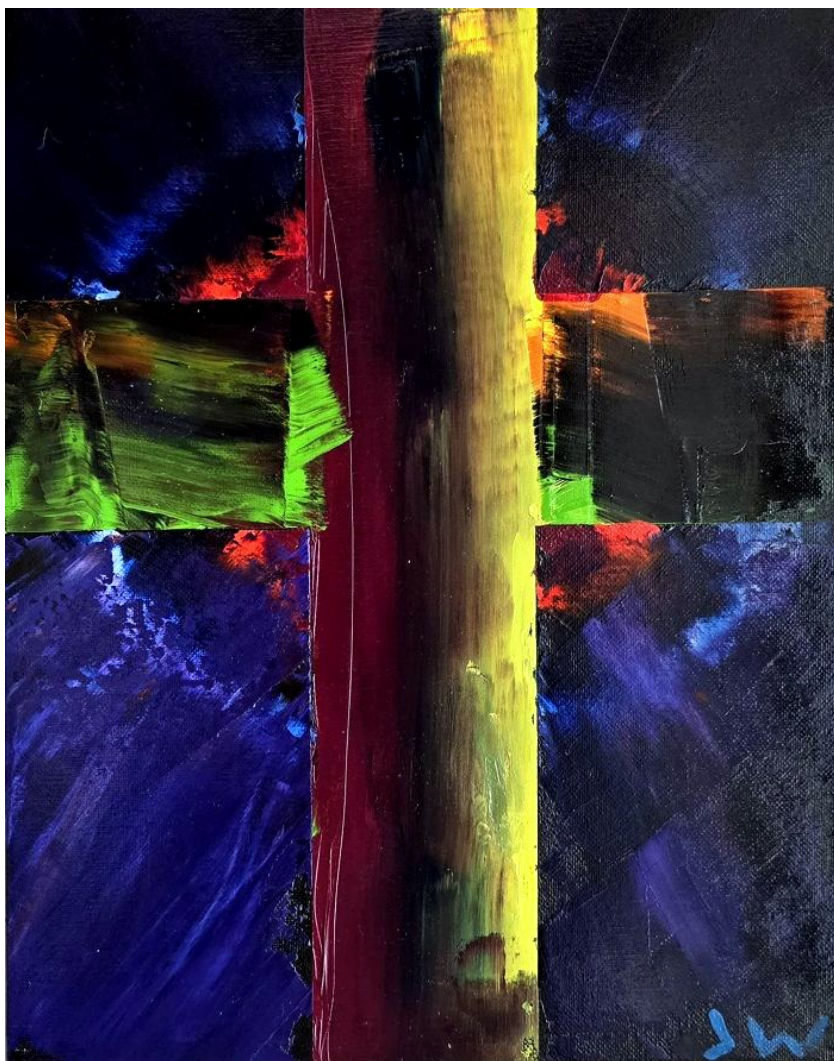


Image courtesy of the artist.

CROSS OF EARTH AND SKY

oil on canvas board



Image courtesy of the artist.

CROSS OF LIGHT

oil on canvas board



Image courtesy of the artist.

Read **J W Goossen**'s bio on page 46.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Jeremiah Gilbert

SACRED HEART CATHEDRAL, PUNTA
ARENAS, CHILE

Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

METROPOLITAN CATHEDRAL OF SAINT
SEBASTIAN, RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

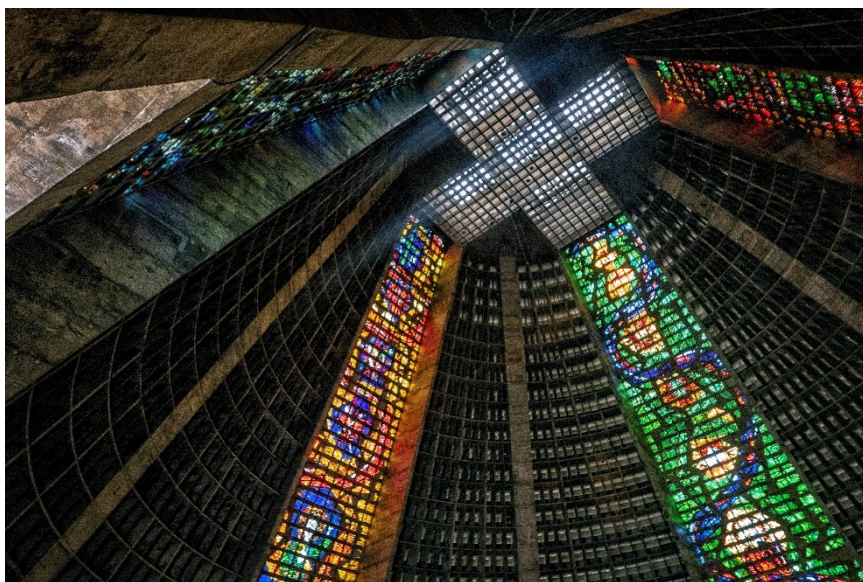


Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

OUR LADY OF MERCY CHURCH, USHUAIA,
ARGENTINA



Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

CHURCH OF THE TABERNACLE, QUITO, ECUADOR



Image courtesy of Jeremiah Gilbert.

Jeremiah Gilbert is an award-winning photographer and travel writer. His travels have taken him to over a hundred countries and all seven continents, while his photography has been published internationally and exhibited worldwide. He is the author of four travel books, including *Can't Get Here from There: Fifty Tales of Travel*, *From Tibet to Egypt: Early Travels After a Late Start*, and *On to Plan C: A Return to Travel*, which documented his return to travel post-COVID and was the first to include his photography. His most recent, *Around the World in Eighty Photos*, is out now. He can be found on Instagram [@jg_travels](#).

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Cynthia Yatchman

alcohol inks and acrylic on Yupo paper



Image courtesy of the artist.

alcohol inks and acrylic on Yupo paper



Image courtesy of the artist.

Cynthia Yatchman is a Seattle-based artist and art instructor. She shows extensively in the Pacific Northwest. Past shows have included Seattle University, the Tacoma and Seattle Convention Centers and the Pacific Science Center. Her art is housed in numerous public and private collections.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Meg Freer

DUNGUAIRE CASTLE (KINVARRA, IRELAND)



Image courtesy of Meg Freer.

HOLY TRINITY CATHEDRAL (TBILISI, REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA)



Image courtesy of Meg Freer.

Artist Statement

I keep visual images in my head for a long time, and my inspiration for both poetry and photography often comes from intriguing juxtapositions, clusters and angles in the natural world, as well as in urban landscapes.

Meg Freer grew up in Montana and lives in Ontario. Her award-winning writing has been published in journals such as *Ruminate*, *Sunlight Press*, and *Sequestrum*. She has published three poetry chapbooks and is Poetry Co-Editor for *Sunlight Press* and a Contributing Editor for *Traces Journal*.

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Sean Michael Kenny

STAND

*7 ft x 3 ft circumference
metal corset, mesh, fiber optic, mirror*



Image courtesy of the artist.



Image courtesy of the artist.

Artist Statement

Describing my work in a word, is Modality. Modality is a romantic symphony in which light is its melody. The rhythm is the oscillation between emptiness and fulfillment, darkness and light. The emptiness is filled in my work once light is observed and revealed, this is the pulse. The interaction of the light, focal lengths, refraction and distance within the empty space creates the harmony. Quantum physics and quantum mechanics, personalities, topology and my faith in Jesus Christ are the sounds expressed in my creations. I am expressing outwardly my experiences with the Holy Spirit of God.

Sean Michael Kenny is an artist living in Northern Virginia. His primary focus is as a Light Artist, in which he bends the properties of light to create multi-dimensional work. He also writes poetry. Selected works are in Museums, Private and Corporate collections nationally and internationally. Sean was Born Again July 23, 2003 5:30 AM and is involved in a Spiritual Warfare and Deliverance ministry.

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 on 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 a 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 sins of humanity (past, present, and future) could be placed on His shoulders and 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 saves us from the dire consequences of sin — destruction, death, and separation from the love and goodness of God.

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

Bible References:

- “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” – Romans 3:23
- “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” – 1 John 1:8
- “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” – Romans 5:8
- “For the wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.” – Romans 6:23
- “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
- “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” – 1 John 1:9
- “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” – Romans 10:9
- “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come!” – 2 Corinthians 5:17

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